

Dar Al Athar

Western crusaders to play important role in narrative

'Jerusalem' exhibition to unravel various cultural traditions

By Cinatra Fernandes
Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, April 14: Dr Barbara D. Boehm, Curator in the Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shared a preview of the forthcoming exhibition "Jerusalem in the Middle Ages" to the audience at Al Amricani Cultural Centre, as part of the Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah's 20th cultural season.

The exhibition to be held in September 2016 at the Metropolitan Museum, curated by Boehm and Melanie Holcomb will demonstrate the vital role that the Holy City played in the creation of medieval works of art. Medieval maps and diagrams of the Holy Land will bear witness to the impact of both theology and pilgrimage and the role of key patrons in shaping the city will be fully explored. The exhibition will include metalwork and glass vessels that pair Islamic technique and Christian subjects demonstrating the shared aesthetic of patrons from both traditions. She also informed that the longing for Jerusalem expressed in works of art will attest to the inspiration that the Holy City had even on artists working at great distances from it.

Dr Boehm is the Director of the Curatorial Studies programme jointly administered by the museum and the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU. She has co-authored prize winning scholarly catalogues for the exhibitions she has organised, or co-organised, at the Metropolitan Museum and at the Cloisters.

Dr Boehm shared that from today's vantage point, the city of Jerusalem often seems destined to host unending, unrelenting conflict from the three Abrahamic religions, noting that sectarian conflict is sadly the easiest of tales to tell. She pointed out that Jerusalem's history was more nuanced in the Middle Ages i.e. from 1000-1400 as it was home to more cultures, faiths and languages than in any period. At that time Jerusalem was the setting for both productive co-existence and the backdrop for strife.

Complexity

But through times of peace and war the city did not cease to inspire art, great beauty and fascinating complexity. She informed that the exhibition will explore the ways in which multiple competitive and complementary religious traditions fuelled by an almost universal preoccupation with the single sacred place gave rise to one of the most creative periods.

Medieval Jerusalem was truly international attracting people from all corners, from Scandinavia and Spain to present day China. Images of pilgrimages show that patrons and artists, poets and scholars from Islamic, Christian and Jewish traditions alike, focussed their attention on this city, praising its magic, endowing its sacred buildings and creating luxury goods for its residents. This artistic richness was particularly in evidence in the period identified and in the wake of natural and political disasters that lay waste to the great buildings and even the wall of Jerusalem. It was then fuelled by the fierce battles of the crusades. Once the crusaders were driven out, the city was promoted as a spiritual and scholarly centre.

The exhibition will feature between 200 to 225 works in a wide range of media from jewelled reliquaries to evocative architectural fragments, from colourful enamelled glass to richly painted manuscripts, from exquisite jewellery to intricately carved ivory.

The art is culturally diverse and steadfastly defies easy categorisation, she remarked. There are Hebrew manuscripts that draw on Christian visual tradition; there are Christian illuminations of Hebrew scripture. Armenian manuscripts were brought to Jerusalem from Egypt and Ethiopian manuscripts were sent by the king of that land to the Holy City. The monastery of the Holy Cross was controlled sometimes by Georgians, sometimes Armenians, Greeks, Jacobites, and Nestorians. Metalwork with Christian subjects was created for Muslim patrons, and metalwork with Muslim subjects was acquired by Christians; there are marble slabs carved with Arabic and Latin inscriptions.

As works of art from the Holy Land are today dispersed throughout the world, the exhibition will display objects from about 60 lenders in over a dozen countries, from major museum collections in Europe and museums of the Middle East, to other unexpected places which are sometimes difficult to access like private collections in religious communities. Many promised works are kept in closed treasuries or hidden storerooms, she said, revealing that a significant number have never before been lent and most have never

been seen side by side. Moreover, some have not left Jerusalem since the Middle Ages. The project also benefits from the Metropolitan Museum's own collections.

To bring the city to life, the galleries will be augmented by large scale photographs. "Perhaps no city is more photographed than Jerusalem and yet stock photography curiously neglects the many medieval monuments that enrich the city," she pointed out.

She shared that no exhibition has attempted to unravel the various cultural traditions and aesthetic strands that made medieval Jerusalem a magnet for patrons. These crucial years have barely received a nod with sweeping exhibitions devoted to 3,000 years of the city's history that seem to leap from the second temple to the advent of Zionism. "A number of previous exhibitions have focussed extensively on the crusades reinforcing a problematic assertion that the arrival of Western warriors was the driving force in the region historically and aesthetically and moreover implying that such militaristic interventions are somehow worthy of nostalgia. Meanwhile the meaningful medieval Islamic contribution to its history has gone virtually unnoticed. Exhibitions devoted to Fatimid or Mamluk art have overlooked Jerusalem's artistic heritage because the city was not a political capital," she added.

She believes that all of these approaches to the political history of the period or the academic compartmentalisation that separates works of arts by faith tradition have suppressed the overlapping histories, points of contact and complexity that this city engendered.

While Western crusaders will play an important role in the narrative, Dr Boehm assures that they will stand in a rich range of perspectives, all of which are important in understanding the special character of this city. There was more to medieval Jerusalem, than just east meets west. "We find there both



(Top): Dr Barbara Boehm at the Al Amricani Cultural Centre (Above): DAI Director and co-founder Sheikha Hussah Sabah Al-Saleem Al-Sabah remarks during the Q and A session.



(Top): Opening ceremony of the exhibition, (Above): Rakusho explaining the techniques used with gold and silver leaf

Universe ... an inspiration

Japanese Embassy and NCCAL open Hiroto Rakusho exhibition

By Dina Naser
Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, April 14: The Japanese Embassy in Kuwait in coordination with the National Council of Arts and Letters (NCCAL) held the opening ceremony for the Hiroto Rakusho exhibition in the Foonon Hall in Dhahiyat Abdullah Al-Salem, in the presence of his Excellency the Ambassador of Japan to Kuwait, Toshihiro Tsujihara, and other officials, for the first time in the Middle East.

Rakusho, a renowned artist within Japan and in the US, uses traditional techniques in a modern style, utilizing gold leaf, a material thinner than paper created by hammering gold into fragile sheets.

During the opening ceremony, Hiroto held short demonstrations on the uses of gold leaf on different textiles and even on skin. He demonstrated how "The leaf is sensitive to heat, even the heat from your hand can shape it" allowing observers to mould the gold with their hands.

His collection, on display until April 16 showcases an array of the technique of using gold leaf in the traditional 'Nishijin' art form on an array of different mediums from classical paintings to material and plastic.

Rakusho's exhibition follows the theme of 'the universe' which he states is his inspiration: "In 'Galaxy' I was playing with heat and the gold to bring out colours that are like the galaxy. There is heat and there is cold."

Ambassador Tsujihara praised the NCCAL for collaborating with the artist to bring Japanese culture to Kuwait.

"I came here in Kuwait 3 years ago. I always noticed that there were not many chances for us to introduce our traditional culture, so since I came

here I have been looking for the chance to bring the Japanese art and culture to Kuwait. It took one whole year to realize this dream." said the Ambassador.

In his collection on display are clothing designed with gold leaf patterns, imprinted discs representing various stages of the moon and other celestial masses through the contemporary use of gold and silver leaf, embellished 'washi' paper entitled 'Wind and Thunder Gods' - a reproduction of the founder of Rimpay syle Toawaraya Sotatsu's 'Fujin Raijin', as well as his original framed pictures.

Ambassador Tsujihara hopes local citizens and residents will enjoy the exhibition: "I would like many Kuwaitis and many people to come to see our traditional cultures."

Rakusho believes he was fated to take up this line of work: "I was born into a world of gold and silver, Japanese washi paper and Indian ink, a world where polished crafts and beauty were taken to the absolute limit. I was surrounded by all of these. I tried every so often to leave it all behind, but every time the 'Nishijin' in me grew and expanded."

Born in Kyoto in 1962, Rakusho originally studied under his father, Jisaku Nishiyama, winner of the City of Kyoto Award for Outstanding Technical Contribution to Traditional Handicrafts. In 1997, Rakusho himself was certified by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry as a Master of Traditional Handicrafts. Working to broaden the appeal of metal leaf design as an art form, he has collaborated with artists of various genres both in Japan and abroad. He has held three solo shows, two in Kyoto museums and one in New York. His visit to Kuwait marks his first exhibition outside of Japan and the US.

harmonious and dissonant voices and this was a feature that no visitor of the period failed to notice", she commented.

By broadening the focus beyond the crusades, the exhibition realigns chronological boundaries that have constrained our understanding of the city, she informed. The crusaders campaign was only one iteration of the renewed focus on the city that inspired members of many faith communities. Jerusalem was a vibrant cultural centre well before crusader knights scaled its walls thanks to its proximity to important Fatimid political centres as well as vibrant Jewish communities. From the turn of the 11th century to the end of the 14th, the city teemed with locals and tourists, new arrivals and long timers, merchants and artists, soldiers and scholars, all of whom contributed to shape the city and its art.

Specific

The exhibition will examine specific factors that made medieval Jerusalem an exceptional source for artistic inspiration, with five distinct sections focussed on the themes of pluralism of the city, cultural exchange through trade and tourism, the sanctity of Jerusalem, patrons of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem, at the gates of heaven.

The pluralism of the city was repeatedly noted in the chronicles of the time. Present day visitors will be astonished by the numerous distinctive alphabets and the different languages of prayer. Jerusalem described as a city of three faiths, a formulation that sadly underestimates its religious complexity. "No religion was in fact monolithic and in the Middle Ages, as now, the city's artistic culture benefitted from the distinct perspectives and rivalries that emerged from various sects", she stated.

Cultural exchange through trade and tourism thrived even in the face of war. Dr Boehm shed light on the importance of the Holy Land in the global market in

the Middle Ages, alluding to the discovery of over 2,000 Fatimid gold coins off the coast of Caesarea. Jerusalem was a thriving urban centre catering to both residents and pilgrims; travellers to the city regularly remarked upon its splendid domed bazaars thriving with wares of every kind. "While peace was fragile and uneasy, business was pragmatic", she asserted.

Holiness is the most salient feature of Jerusalem and so the exhibition in its third section will focus on the sanctity of Jerusalem, both shared and contested, focussing on iconic monuments and their layered history and shared spaces. "Many works of art mimic the features of the city notably its prominent gates and domes," Dr Boehm informed.

The fourth section, patrons of Jerusalem will celebrate the cities great patrons and introduce visitors to great men and women who altered the aesthetic landscape of the city and the art produced there.

The final section of the exhibition will explore the widespread and persistent longing for Jerusalem and the end of days. The longing for Jerusalem as a earthly and heavenly home is theme common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam and some of the most exquisite objects of the Middle Ages ranging from gilded sensors to manuscripts were inspired by the city on the hill. It is a particularly rich area to explore artistic and intellectual interactions fuelled by shared fascination of the city's architecture and intensified by yearning from afar, she said.

She concluded her preview by emphasizing that people around the world who come to view the exhibition will bring with them their own beliefs, their own memories, their own sense of what distinguishes the city, what makes it sacred and what makes it theirs. She hopes that the exhibition will affirm and confound expectations, and leave them in turn with a new lustrous image of Jerusalem.

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'Arab women successful in running businesses, projects'

CAIRO, April 14, (KUNA): Arab women have made their marks felt in running businesses, investment and financial firms, and stock markets, said head of the Kuwait Association for the Ideal Family Sheikh Fariha Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Tuesday.

Speaking here at the opening of a joint Arab investment conference, she noted that Arab women are capable of competing in the marketplace and successfully run businesses and projects.

She said that the investment confer-

ence is being held at a time when there should be review of approaches to small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) in the Arab world with the emphasis on learning from the experiences of advanced countries in that regard, with the ultimate goal of diversifying personal income, fighting poverty, and unemployment.

She thanked organizer of the conference, the Arab Women Investors Union, for choosing here as the "Ambassador of Arab Investments." This choice was made due to her

efforts in patronizing Arab investments on both social and economic levels.

The conference aims to attract Arab investors abroad and encourage them to transfer their investments to the region. It also strives to create an industrial partnership between Arab female and male investors in cooperation with international experts.

The conference also seeks to discuss, among other things, providing bigger opportunities for women to play a key role in developing and protecting the environment and Arab heritage.

It also tackles the Arab-African Trade Bridges initiative for development and the UN's program on the protection against the hazards of natural disasters and their impact on investment projects.

The conference is being held from April 14 to 17 in both Cairo and Sharm El Sheikh, under the sponsorship of the Arab League, the Council of Arab Economic Unity and a number of Egyptian ministries and organizations.