BENAKI MUSEUM
A GUIDE TO THE MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART
A FEW DAYS BEFORE the inauguration of the Olympic Games in Athens in the summer of 2004, the Museum of Islamic Art opened its doors to the public for the first time, thanks to the persistent efforts of all those who work at the Benaki Museum.

The proximity of these two events was no coincidence. The people of Greece understood that the Olympic Games was a great festival not only of sport but also of culture; an opportunity for men and women from all over the world to pay a practical tribute to principles and values which were born here and which subsequently embraced the entire planet—moderation, harmony, and humanism; and a chance to promote an alternative approach which recognises the innate quality of man and endorses it in priority to divisions based on sex, race, religion or political beliefs, and which places competition above conflict, friendly rivalry above hostility and respect above bigotry and fanaticism.

In this context the Museum of Islamic Art plays a vital role. It brings us into contact with the art, the aesthetics and the products of one of the major civilisations of human history; a civilisation which has made outstanding contributions to the progress of mankind in the form of leading scholars, great philosophers, major writers and poets, and unique architecture and works of art; a civilisation with which Greece, at the crossroads between East and West, has had a many-sided dialogue, influencing and being influenced in its turn.

Above all, an examination of the Museum’s exhibits will remind us that the quest for beauty and the sublime, for harmony and refinement, is a characteristic of human art which transcends the frontiers of time and place. It reminds us that, above and beyond our petty differences, mankind shares common anxieties, common aspirations and common dreams for the future.

At the present time understanding, recognition, and respect for others, both cross-culturally and within each individual society, have become ever more urgent imperatives, as they alone provide a foundation and a context for optimistic speculation on the future of mankind.

With this end in view any genuine attempt at a dialogue between cultures, such as is now magnificently exemplified by the Benaki Museum’s establishment of a Museum of Islamic Art, demands our commendation and our support. It is my fondest hope that not only Greeks, but also foreign visitors, will take the Museum to their hearts, as an educational and cultural institution which fills an important gap and confers notable distinction on our country.

Kostas Karamanlis
Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic
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GREECE'S GEOGRAPHIC POSITION has been a crucial factor in determining
the major role played by Hellenism throughout a historical period extending
from remotest antiquity to the expiration of the Byzantine era. It occupies an
exceptionally advantageous location on the map, at a point where Europe
meets Asia and where the North greets the southern winds from Africa. This
no doubt explains Greece's sense of familiarity with its neighbours, and
especially its conspicuous acceptance of the racial and cultural individualities
of the Other: independently of the friendly or hostile relations which developed
from time to time, and of sometimes radical differences of social conviction
and religious belief, the channels of communication never became obstructed.
Nor did the position change during the post-Byzantine era of foreign occupation
and in the years after the independence of the modern Greek state, in any place
where diaspora Hellenism was welcomed and able to flourish.

During this lengthy process the importance of hospitality became established
as an unchanging value in the Greek consciousness, and as a reciprocal mark
of gratitude for the reception which the Greeks had encountered in distant
countries. This was the background against which the now-debated idea of
cosmopolitanism was formed, reflecting the sense of ease which the Greeks
always felt as equal citizens of a world which was one and undivided. But
foreigners also received a warm welcome in a land which was unshadowed by
the spectre of xenophobia and the shame of racism. For Greece, friendly and
accessible to others, was permeated with an understanding of the conditions
which lay behind the emigration of its own people.

The laws of balance and the norms which must one day become established
as the regulators of a harmonious ecumenical equilibrium have long been
respected by our country, and Greece is fully conscious of its debt to the
fruitful exchange of ideas which nurtured its cultural tradition and also of the
deeper significance of culture in general. It is an indisputable fact that the
only absolute measure of man's humanity, the only means of demonstrating
the internal unity of a fragmented whole, lies in the ecumenical dimension
of culture. As a unique, common instrument of expression, culture draws
together and unites the many idioms with their disparate intellectual and
aesthetic characteristics, creating a globalisation of a different order and
dynamic to that based on economic interests, which engenders in an often
capricious foreign policy, explosive antagonisms and an artfully created climate of general suspicion.

The auspicious prospects for the European future and the Olympic dimension of the Greek present inspired the Benaki Museum to send yet another message of fraternity and friendship to the world of culture. This time the message was specifically directed to the culture of Islam on the occasion of the inauguration of the new museum which Greece dedicated to it on 28 July 2004. It is a message of sincerity and optimism. Despite the unpropitious circumstances of the present moment, I have no doubt that it will find the proper recipients and meet with the appropriate response. It was no coincidence that its transmission coincided with the 50th anniversary of the death of Antonis Benakis, a visionary to whom the Benaki Museum owes its very existence.

Antigias Delvarrias
DIRECTOR, BENAKI MUSEUM

3. Inlaid marble floor from a Cretan mansion. 17th c.
THE BENAKI MUSEUM’S ISLAMIC ART COLLECTIONS are among the most important in the world; they cover thirteen centuries of creativity and contain many works of outstanding quality and unique historical significance. It is no coincidence that they were initiated in Alexandria in the last decades of the 19th century by Antonis Benakis (1873-1954), a benefactor of Greece in innumerable ways. The remarkable clarity of vision and the infallible aesthetic judgment of the Museum’s founder enabled him to grasp the importance of Islamic civilization at a timely moment, and to appreciate its role in the history of the wider Mediterranean region, its links with the Greco-Roman tradition and regular contacts with Byzantium, and its contribution to the formulation of new ideas which have enriched the cultural reserves of mankind. It is no exaggeration to say that he even perceived the ecumenical dimension which the future of our era has placed in the Islamic world.

Alexandria was at that time one of the most celebrated cosmopolitan centres of the Mediterranean and the most Europeanised of the cities of Egypt: treasures flowed into its markets from all over the world, primarily from the countries of the East, and they attracted the attention of the prosperous expatriate Greek community. The Museum’s collections certainly owe much to the opportunities thereby arising—often in the form of items of impressive quality—and also to the unlimited resources accessible to Antonis Benakis from the thriving family businesses. Two other factors played an equally decisive role, however: Benakis’ infallible instinct and eye, which had been the product of a highly cultivated personal taste, and his genuine interest [as opposed to mere specialised knowledge, which had been strengthened by his close association with many distinguished and highly regarded scholars of Islamic culture. Even though documentary evidence may be lacking, I would venture to suggest that the idea of donating the collection began to form at this time, becoming finally crystallised after his permanent move to Athens in 1926. It comes as no surprise that Benakis himself sponsored the establishment of a university chair of Arabic Literature in Egypt, something which did not exist in Greece until 1985, and then not in Athens but in the new University of Crete.

When the Benaki Museum was inaugurated in Athens on 22 April 1931 the visitor would have found the Islamic collections spread over two rooms on the ground floor and one on the first: a selection of North African embroidery was
exhibited together with similar fabrics from Greece, and the gold jewellery was located in the "treasury" next to other precious items, without regard to geographical or historical context. Objects were at that time arranged according to type and category of material, so that the main emphasis was placed on practical usage. In order to make the fullest use of space all available surfaces were exploited: cabinets formed impenetrable barriers all along the visitor's route, and the showcases containing fabrics and wooden and ceramic ornamentation often reached up to the ceiling. The resulting congestion both of people and of exhibits was aggravated by the large number of important new donations which had soon begun to supplement the original nucleus of the collections.

The works of Islamic art contributed to the Museum from 1930 to the present day not only filled several gaps in the material, but also strengthened numerically many of the existing stylistic categories. The result was to stimulate scholarly curiosity and to encourage more detailed study: examples include the authoritative work on early Islamic ceramics by Helen Philon, published in 1980, and the equally authoritative catalogue of Ottoman ceramics by John Carswell, which will soon, I hope, appear. I have therefore felt it my absolute duty to mention below by name, however cursorily, all those who have contributed to the enrichment of the Museum's Islamic collections.

Not surprisingly, in the context of the Foundation's adoption in 1974 of a decentralisation programme which aimed at the gradual establishment of a series of autonomous branches of the Museum, the decision was taken to segregate and rehouse the Islamic collections. One reason for this was the pressing need to display them in a more contemporary fashion, far removed from the model of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. The need to project the autonomous character and the individuality of Islamic art, emphasising both its historic and its artistic significance, was no less an imperative than had been the radical reorganisation of the Greek collections, finally achieved in 2000 with the completion of the extensions made to the neo-classical building which housed the main Benaki Museum.

Segregation of the Islamic collections was desirable, not only because of their intrinsic importance and the fact that they constituted one of the Museum's most valuable assets, but also because of the age-old links between Greece and the countries where that culture had flourished. These links, whose character has oscillated between positive and negative according to the prevailing historical circumstances, were forged through continuous commercial and economic exchanges, through cultural and artistic encounters, and through confrontations which were sometimes hostile and sometimes friendly, eventually resulting in the present sympathetic attitude of the Greek people to the sufferings of the Arab world in general. Indeed I would say that the spirit behind the creation of an independent museum with these aims can be most aptly described as the response of internationalism to the threat of "globalisation".

The realisation of my dream of creating for the institution which I serve an independent museum dedicated to Islamic culture can largely be credited to Irini Kaliga (1912-2000), the daughter of Antonis Benakis, who when President of the Board of Trustees was always a forceful champion of new ideas during a period which was not particularly well disposed to radical change. But it is quite possible that it would have remained a dream if the then President of the Foundation, Lambros Eftaxias (1905-1996), had not solved the problem of housing the museum by the gift of two late neo-classical buildings dating from the turn of the 19th century in the historic area of Kerameikos.

The architectural study made by Pavlos Kaligas, Paraskevi Gogoros, Anna Papastergiou and Giorgios Sparis for the unification of the buildings and the remodelling of their interior, together with the static and engineering surveys, took care to respect the planning specifications of this conservation area as regards the preservation and restoration of the exterior facades.

There can be little doubt that the Benaki Museum would have been unable to shoulder the burden of the vast expense involved if the works had not been included in the programme to upgrade the historic centre of Athens initiated by the Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works, thanks to the personal interest shown by the Minister at the time, Kostas Laliotis. Yet it is also beyond question that the construction which began in 1997 would have been completed much earlier were it not for the discovery of a large section of the ancient city's fortifications, 5.6 metres in height, during work on the foundations of the building. The painstaking excavations of the Ministry of Culture's Archaeological Service, headed by Ioanna Tsrigioti-Drakotou and supervised by Liana Parlama, which necessitated a series of adjustments to the plans so that the findings could be incorporated harmoniously within the museum area, lasted more than a year. The delays
and the consequent additional expenditure were faced stoically by the Museum’s Trustees, encouraged by exceptional cooperation displayed by the Ministry of National Economy and the Organisation for the Promotion of Hellenic Civilization under the guidance of the then Junior Minister Christos Pachtas and the then President Evgenios Yannakopoulos respectively. The completion of the building work under the project manager Kostas Papa-

yannis in October 2003 coincided with the final settlement of the plans for the exhibition space which had begun two years earlier.

Preparing the exhibits to be suitably housed in their new location was a task which took much time and effort. It also required the full commitment and sympathetic cooperation of a whole world of people, to whom I owe infinite gratitude. I would first mention Anna Ballian and Mina Moralou who were responsible for researching and studying the material, checking the inventories and revising the entries, with the assistance of Anna Mytilinaiou and Maria Sardi. I am also very grateful to Mohammad Panahili for interpreting the Arabic, Persian and Ottoman inscriptions, to Jo Papoutsaki for writing the historical texts and annotating the maps, to Spyros Delvorrias for photographing the collections, and to Dora Pikoni for data processing. Their work was of course preceded by the clearing, conservation and restoration of the material under the general supervision of Stergios Siasinopoulos and the constant attention of groups of regular and temporary colleagues with varying specialities, whose names are listed below. I must specifically mention the invaluable and painstaking contribution made by Manolis Blazakis, without which the problems which arose during the work could never have been solved.

A crucial contribution to the museum’s presentation of the unbroken continuity of Islamic culture came from two overseas institutions. The Victoria and Albert Museum generously made a loan of material to cover the total absence of 17th-century Safavid ceramics from Iran, while the response of the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum of Lisbon was particularly inspiring, for without them it is doubtful that we could have reconstructed the impressive decorative panel of 16th-century Iznik tiles from the summer palace at Edirne.

A number of recent donations, which have allowed painting to be adequately represented in the collection, should be mentioned here. And I must of course also emphasise the constant encouragement of the Board of Trustees of the Museum, not only through their moral support but also through their efforts to secure the necessary funds to obtain certain significant works from abroad.
I should add, without false modesty, that the design, the selection of material, the organisation of the varied groups of objects, the aesthetics of the presentation, the choice of colour for the accompanying material, the lighting and the planning of visitor flow are not the work of interior designers, decorators and museologists. This was not because I do not have confidence in specialist skills, but because I believe that museums should be the creation of those who share an understanding of their needs, who comprehend the special message they have to offer and who have participated in the struggle to realise their objectives.

At the inauguration of the Museum of Islamic Art on 29 July 2004, shortly before the opening of the Olympic Games in Athens, the Prime Minister, Kostas Karamanlis, paid homage to the value of intercultural understanding. His address rightly drew attention to the connection between the establishment of the new museum and “the precious and many-faceted contribution” made by Antonis Benakis, the 50th anniversary of whose death we were also commemorating at that time.

Angelos Delivorrias
DIRECTOR, BENAKI MUSEUM

DONORS OF WORKS OF ISLAMIC ART FROM 1930 TO 2006

A SECTION OF A RAMPART, preserved to a height of 5.6 metres or 13 courses of masonry, was uncovered during the excavation of the foundations of the museum building. This new rampart was erected in the 4th century BC in front of the Themistoclean wall of 479 BC in order to strengthen the defences of Athens against an impending Macedonian attack.

On the outside of the rampart there was discovered a trench about 9 metres wide, together with its retaining wall, which was built of large stone blocks interspersed with smaller, irregular stones. After the fortifications were destroyed by the Romans, the trench was filled in with debris from the rampart, and mainly from the city’s ruins which had been cleared in the 1st century AD.

A limited width of the 4th-century peripheral road was found on the inside of the rampart. This road encircled the city between the Themistoclean wall and the rampart, and linked the various suburbs. On its surface can be seen the ruts made by carriage wheels.

The Themistoclean wall and the rampart protected Athens until 86 BC, when the Roman general Sulla entered the city and sacked it. Athens remained virtually without defences until the middle of the 3rd century AD, when the emergence of the Goths and the Herulians prompted the emperor Valerian to repair and strengthen the ancient defensive enclosure, using a variety of building materials, for the most part blocks of marble from the ruined monuments. A memorial stele dating from the last quarter of the 5th century BC was discovered in the small section of Valerian’s wall which was revealed during the excavations: it originated in the nearby Dipylon cemetery, the burial place of prominent Athenians as well as of ordinary soldiers who had died fighting for their city.

Ioanna Tsirigati-Drakoutou
ARCHAEOLOGIST