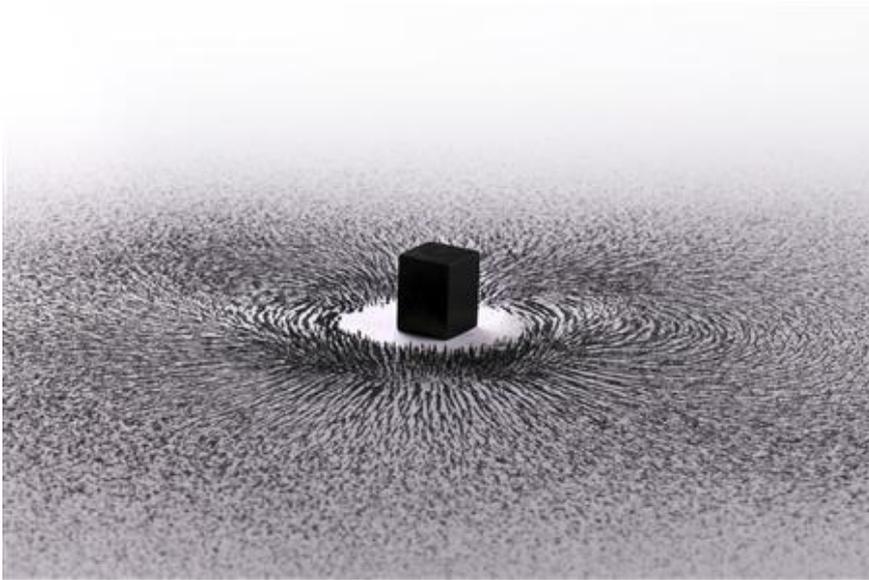


British Museum Haj show seeks to explain Islamic ritual to non-Muslims and Muslims



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Billed as the first major exhibition devoted to the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, "Hajj: journey at the heart of Islam" at the British Museum aims to lift the veil on a ritual that is a mystery to many in the non-Muslim world.

Curators also said they hoped the show, which runs from January 26-April 15 at the London venue, would be visited by Muslims as well as non-Muslims who are not allowed to join the haj.

"People who don't believe in the religion of Islam aren't allowed (on the haj) and therefore know very little, but you'd be surprised how little Muslims know about the history of the haj also," said Qaisra Khan, co-curator of the exhibition.

"For me personally it's been a huge learning curve over the past two years," she told Reuters. "In terms of the mystery surrounding the haj, I think we try and break the back of that in this exhibition so you learn a lot more about something you can't witness."

Pakistan-born Khan believed that its message of peace was particularly important because the outside world's image of the Middle East had been associated in recent years with violence and upheaval.

"If you look at the last five years, even if not the last 12 months, there is a lot about Islam and the Middle East in the press and it doesn't always get good press as we know.

"I think what the exhibition does is to talk about the one facet of Islam we don't know much about and that it's very much about peace."

The show takes visitors on a journey that starts with how Muslims prepare for the pilgrimage, including settling outstanding debts and asking for the forgiveness of others.

Many pilgrims also make wills before they depart, reflecting the belief that they should be prepared for the possibility they may not return home.

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The exhibition traces some of the main routes Muslims have followed over the centuries to get to Mecca, including from Kufa, Cairo and Damascus, and seeks to explain some of the rituals associated with the haj.

It features recorded accounts of what the journey meant to Muslims around the world and includes loaned items from Saudi Arabia such as a "sitara" which covers the door of the Kaaba, the cube-shaped building at the centre of the Grand Mosque around which pilgrims must walk.

All Muslims who are physically able are required to perform the haj at least once, as one of the five pillars of Islam.

The British Museum displays the kinds of clothes pilgrims are expected to wear and the souvenirs they bring back.

One section showcases contemporary artists' interpretations of the haj, including Saudi Ahmed Mater's "Magnetism," in which tens of thousands of tiny iron filings form patterns around a central magnet that represents the Kaaba.

Among the individual tales told is that of Evelyn Cobbold, who wrote that she was the first European woman to take part in the haj.

Although never formally converted to Islam, she had long considered herself a Muslim and was granted permission to go on the pilgrimage in 1933.

Another Briton who earned considerable fame for his involvement in the haj was Richard Francis Burton, a 19th century soldier and explorer who disguised himself as an Afghan doctor and Sufi dervish in order to avoid detection.

He joined an Egyptian caravan to Mecca in 1853 and, despite several close scrapes, returned unscathed and wrote an account of his adventures in "A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Meccah."

Mike Collett-White