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Islam's cultural legacy

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YOU may have heard M. Nasir's song Andalusia, which depicts the greatness of Islamic civilisation, especially during the Ottoman period.

The thrust of the song is the songwriter-singer's desire to see the grandeur of Andalusia, a symbol of successful infusion of religion into lifestyle, replicated in modern times.

If you're not a music fan, you might have heard or read of the Ottoman empire and Al-Andalusia, a country now known as Spain.

The Ottoman Empire, however, is not the only example of Islam's effect on various civilisations and nations.

The religion's influence can be found in Europe, the Middle East, China, India and Southeast Asia.

One aspect which Islam significantly made an impact on was aesthetic values, and this was more than just the architecture of mosques or prayer quarters.

If you want evidence of this, visit the recently opened Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, located at Jalan Lembah Perdana, near the Pusat Islam and National Mosque, in Kuala Lumpur.

The museum, launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Dec 12, houses artifacts that represent Islam in different countries.

"We are not fully complete yet. Parts of the building are still being touched up, while more artifacts are being brought in. They were either acquired, sponsored, loaned to us or on exchange," said Saadah Shaikh Mahmood, the museum's marketing and communications director.

However, the museum holds much promise, and if everything goes as planned, it will be one of KL's popular attractions.

The four-level museum is imposing. It covers 22,000 square metres and includes the "infinite space" concept, one of the many elements of Islamic arts.

At the staircase which leads to the main entrance, you will spot the museum's gateway, which resembles an iwan that greets you at an Iranian mosque.

The iwan is constructed, or rather, designed and installed by Iranian craftsmen, and the calligraphy and illumination on it are intricate and delightful.

Saadah said experts from across the world had a hand in designing the museum.

The five domes in the building, for instance, were hand-crafted by masters from Uzbekistan and Iran.

Four of the domes can be seen from the outside while one is inverted (this represents the concept of looking into one's self before getting to know others and the Creator) and can be viewed from the inside.

The path for the display area was also well thought-out. At the start, you'll be introduced to a hall of replica mosques from across the world.

The mosques range from the Al-Aqsa Mosque of Jerusalem to the Tengkeru Mosque in Malacca.

The mosques are different, but there are common denominators that unite them.

"It's only apt to start with the mosque as that's where the arts started," Saadah said.

Then, there are exhibits of pottery and ceramics, weapons, ornaments and functional objects.

Among the display items are Malaysian artifacts and those from Bosnia, China and Iran. In one corner, you can view some of the Sultan of Brunei's collection.

There are also calligraphy works. Like the mosques, countries would have a "say" in the outlook of their art.

One of the main attractions here is the Shahnama Manuscript (Book of Kings), a Persian epic composed by poet Firdawsi in 1010 AD.

The main interest of the manuscript is its illustration, or miniature paintings, which "defy" the popular notion that Islamic arts do not support figurative paintings.

Another "must see" is The Ottoman Room, which depicts a house from that period.

The room is funded by Standard Chartered Bank.

Saadah said: "We are still looking for other forms of funding to help us realise our goals."

To date, sponsors which have helped the museum include Malaysia Airlines, Malaysian Industrial Development Fund and Permodalan Nasional Bhd.

The funds would help the museum's operation and acquisition of artifacts.

The museum, based on an idea mooted by Dr Mahathir, was undertaken by Yayasan Albukhary, and managed as a non-profit organisation.

At the end of the day, the museum would hopefully help people understand Islam as a way of life, apart from a religion.

Saadah said the number of visitors was gradually increasing, although work was still in progress.

"Everything is expected to be ready by early March. Our target then is to attract 1.5 million visitors during the first year," she said.

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