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A dialogue of cultures

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"THE trouble with museums," lamented a donor to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, tongue-in-cheek, "is that they're so good to us, before we know it, three of our Picassos are hanging in their galleries!"

Perhaps Malaysia's Islamic Arts Museum will enjoy the same success with the collection of Germany's ambassador to Malaysia, Dr Norbert Heinrich Holl. Part of the collection - which includes copies of the Holy Quran and fragments of Quranic text - is on loan to the museum for the duration of Holl's tour of duty in Malaysia.

Officiating at the unveiling of these artefacts at the museum on March 23, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar referred to American political scientist Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations*, in which the author opined that future global conflict would be rooted in a clash of civilisations.

In 1996, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad discussed this with Germany's President during the latter's state visit to Malaysia.

"Meetings at think-tank level were initiated," explained Syed Hamid, "with a view to a dialogue between civilisations. The intention is to seek common ground through communication, to avoid discord arising from misunderstanding."

The first conference of this nature took place in 1998 in Berlin. A dialogue of civilisations is also on the agenda for the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Kuala Lumpur from June 27 to June 30.

What prompted the ambassador's urge to collect?

"He who is not an artist', so the saying goes, "becomes a collector'; I am told that this is due to a yearning for immortality.

"That is not my ambition," smiles Holl, 64. "But there is an element of vanity involved!

"I am a student of the Arabic language, you see. And students of Arabic are members of an elite 'club' - few Europeans have any knowledge of the language.

"Collecting these items, too, is something most Westerners do not do ... which, again, gains one entrance to a prestigious group."

A fascination with Arabic has gripped Holl for decades. Entering the Foreign Service at 28, he applied to be posted to an Arab country to study the language. It was not until eight years later, however, that his dream was realised, and he enrolled at the Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies in the Lebanese village of Shemlan, east of Beirut.

"It is entirely possible that Arabic is the world's only modern language to be rooted in just ONE document - the Quran - which, through the centuries, has changed not one iota.

"The text of the earliest Qurans is identical to that of contemporary Qurans, and modern Arabic grammar corresponds to that of the Quran.

"Contemporary Arabic is a language on three levels. There is the level of spoken dialect, which differs from, say, Jordan to Algeria; above it is the level of written, everyday Arabic - the Arabic of the newspapers, for example; and there is the level of classical Arabic - the language of the Quran."

Holl's love affair with Arabic led him to a study of the Quran, which resulted in an appreciation of Quranic texts, manuscripts and fragments of verse - which, ultimately, gave birth to his collection.

"This is a wonderful collection," said Dr Mandana Barkeshli, museum head

of curatorial affairs. "It spans numerous countries, and numerous periods. Exhibits include fragments of text written in the early kufic script - mashq - which date from the second year of the hijrah (the eighth century AD); and entire Qurans from the 18th century.

"Items also originate in India, Afghanistan, Persia, Morocco ... one may compare calligraphic styles, materials - paper and ink, for example."

A 'dialogue of cultures', said Barkeshli, also exists within the collection - in Persian pottery influenced by China; and in Qurans from Afghanistan and Kashmir illuminated in the Persian style.

"Culture," said museum director Syed Mohamad Albukhary, "has always played a role in creating a dialogue between races and religions.

"And an appreciation of the arts," he added, "transcends cultural, racial and religious barriers."