

---

## RELIGIOUS ART AT THE NEW LOUVRE IN

### ABU DHABI

**Aldona Piwko\***

*Polish Senior College of Theology and Humanities in Podkowa Leśna, ul. Jana Pawła II 39, 05-807, Podkowa Leśna, Poland*

(Received 21 February 2020, revised 4 April 2020)

---

#### **Abstract**

The paper is an analysis of the Universal Religions Gallery in a modern museum on the Arabian Peninsula, called the New Louvre Abu Dhabi. Museum designed by French architect Jean Nouvel and built on an artificial island. Among the numerous galleries presenting the cultural heritage of humanity, one was dedicated to religions. It exhibits works of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, as well as Buddhist and Hindu artists. The creators of the exhibition also exhibit sacred texts of great religious traditions, among which are the historic Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an. An interesting part of the article is the latest history of the world's most expensive painting of Leonardo da Vinci, bought by an Arab prince. The museum is a sign of peaceful, respectful and sensitive coexistence of various religions and cultures.

*Keywords:* Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism

---

#### **1. Introduction**

This paper addresses issues that are of interest to religion and culture sciences. The goal is to try to answer questions about the perception of figural religious art in the Muslim tradition. Is there a place in conservative Islam to display images of Christian saints and gods present in Eastern religions, mainly Hindu and Buddhist? Is creating a gallery of religious art just a way to make a profit? Is presenting exhibits of religious traditions other than Islam a real pursuit of interreligious and intercultural dialogue? The research problems raised have already been the subject of many scientific publications. However, this article only focuses on the New Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi.

Islam imposes an obligation on man to do God's will unconditionally. The Qur'an teaches: "Truly, I am God! There is no God but me!" (20.14) [1]. So everything that man does must be in harmony with Allah's dictates. This almost slave obedience to the authority of the Creator, caused many problems for the creators of culture, significantly limiting the possibilities of artistic expression. Muslims had to find a compromise that allowed them to be in harmony with religion and at the same time to create their own art. Classical Muslim culture did

---

\*E-mail: [aldonapiwko@tlen.pl](mailto:aldonapiwko@tlen.pl)

not allow any images to be created, and creativity was perceived sceptically and reluctantly. Undoubtedly, iconoclasm contributed to this approach to artists' creations. The origin of the ban on the representation of people and animals in Muslim art is not entirely known. At least two sources are revealed in her history. The first points to Mohammed as the author of this prohibition. Early Muslim tradition, written in Hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim, ascribes to Mohammed the following instruction ascribes to Mohammed the following instruction: "Woe to him who painted a living being! On the day of final judgment, the persons he introduced will come out of the grave to demand a soul for him. Then the man, unable to give his life to his work, will burn in eternal flames ... So beware of presenting God or man and paint only trees, flowers and inanimate objects." [2, 3]

Christianity is the second source. The ban on worshiping images of saints arose in both religious traditions: in Christianity and Islam at a similar time. Iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire was introduced at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The reason was the then popular monastic movements, popularizing the cult of sacred images. Monks, commonly Egyptian and Syrian, gained popularity among the population, were distinguished by the supervision of the image and power over the Byzantine community. Such practice threatened the privileged position of the emperor. Therefore, subsequent emperors: Leon III and Constantine V, fought against the cult of images. In Christianity, these disputes ended. However, the Muslim world saw in the cult of images a danger to faith [4]. In 721 Caliph Jazid II announced an edict ordering the destruction of paintings in all Christian temples of the Umayyad Caliphate. An interesting fact, however, is that this edict did not concern Muslims. It should also be emphasized that caliph Abd al-Malik, while implementing the administrative reform of the state, including the monetary system, ordered to remove the image of the ruler from the coins. This also indicates the rather early existence of the iconoclassical movement in Islam [5]. However, regardless of who took over from whom the ban on the depiction of persons and animals in art, both religions had different grounds for this prohibition. In Christianity, political considerations were the basis, while in Islam theology became the foundation. It should be emphasized here that there is no provision in the Qur'an regarding the prohibition of presenting human figures or painting portraits. The prohibitions contained in the Holy Book apply only to figures of idols whose worship is contrary to the principles of monotheism: "... What are the statues you bow to? They said: 'We found our fathers worshiping them'. He said: 'You and your fathers were certainly in a clear error!'" (21.52-54)

Nevertheless, Muslim iconoclasm has been in force since the 8<sup>th</sup> century until today. Over the centuries, it has also spread to other secular fields of art, imposing a ban on the depiction of persons and animals in the works of painters, graphic artists and other artists. This restriction is assessed in religious and moral categories. Sharia teaches about the punishment at the Last Judgment for the creators of figures and paintings. On this Day, the artist will be asked to give life to all his creatures, and the lack of this opportunity, because only God is the giver

and master of life, will expose the earthly creator as a fraudster and one who reaches for divine power [6].

The Qur'an teaches: "God is the Creator of all things and He is the guardian of all things" (39.62). The fundamental teaching regarding the validity of this prohibition is emphasized in this verse. Islam does not allow the possibility of competing with God in creating human or animal characters. According to Islamic science, only the Creator himself can call living beings, and no man should do this, for imitating Allah is one of the biggest sins in Islam. Among godly Muslims, there is also a widespread belief that angels do not enter houses with statues.

In view of the above religious principles binding in Islam, the approach of the United Arab Emirates sheikhs to collecting religious works and displaying them in the New Louvre Museum Abu Dhabi appears extremely interesting. This article will analyse the establishment of a museum modelled on the Paris Louvre, with a particular focus on the Universal Religions Gallery exhibition presented at the facility.

## **2. Analysis**

### ***2.1. The New Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum***

The New Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi was built in the city's cultural district on the island of Saadiyat. The architect of the modern building is Jean Nouvel from France, who has numerous projects combining different cultures in his artistic output. In the past, he designed The Arab World Institute in Paris, and is also the architect of the Qatar National Museum, inspired by the desert rose [7]. The centre of the New Louvre idea is an eight-layer 'floating' dome made of steel that covers the open exhibition space. Weighing 7.5 thousand tons, the dome is decorated with 7850 stars, the largest of which measures 13 meters. The diameter of the dome is 180 meters and was placed 36 meters above the ground. Light is an extremely important element of the entire project. It reaches the interior of the building through the openwork vault, the Sun's rays reflect off the surface of the internal channels, casting irregular reflections on the white walls of the museum [8].

The building covers an area of 24,000 square meters, of which 1/3 is occupied by galleries. Thus, the facility is the largest art museum on the Arabian Peninsula. The facility describes itself as a centre of art and civilization, and in a special way its activities aim to bridge the gap between the arts of East and West. The implementation of the project to build a new Louvre in the United Arab Emirates required the consent of the French Parliament, which was obtained on October 9, 2007. For 30 years of using the Louvre brand, the Arabs paid \$ 1.3 billion. In addition, thanks to this agreement they will be able to borrow works from France and display them in Abu Dhabi [9].

The construction of the museum began on May 26, 2009, which was attended by Prince of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi Muhammad ibn Zayad Al Nahyan and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The museum's opening date has been postponed several times, which was related to the economic and financial transformation of the Emirate. Ultimately, the museum was launched on November 11, 2017, in which the President of France Emmanuel Macron and his wife and sheikhs took part: Crown Prince of the emirate Abu Dhabi Muhammad ibn Zayad Al Nahyan and prime minister of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Dubai Muhammad ibn Rashid al-Maktum [10].

## ***2.2. Universal Religions Gallery***

Migrations of the Muslim population to Europe and terrorist attacks inspired by the religion of Islam, make Christians afraid of Muslims. Islamophobia is increasing with non-Muslim societies. That is why the Universal Religion Gallery presented in the Emirate New Louvre appears as a new opening in the relationship between Muslims and denominations of other religions. Exhibits of Jewish, Christian, Buddhist and Muslim art stand side by side in the showcases, becoming thus a practical and sophisticated interreligious dialogue, a skier to every visitor of the facility, without any dependence on religious beliefs.

The fourth gallery of the New Louvre presents various artefacts related to broadly understood religious traditions. In addition to exhibits representing monotheistic religions, there are also objects belonging to African animism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Therefore, you can admire monumental architectural elements, such as: the thirteenth century terracotta sandstone frieze, originating from Indian Rajasthan, depicting carved fragments of the Koran and Romanesque stone columns from the twelfth century church in France.

Noteworthy are the unique exhibits in the gallery, which are synonymous with individual religious traditions. The gallery displays a 14<sup>th</sup> century mosque lamp from the Mameluk Empire. Olive mosque lamps are a characteristic element of the decor of many Muslim places of prayer. They were made mainly in Egyptian Cairo and Syrian Aleppo and Damascus. A typical lamp is 40 cm high, with a wide open neck, sloping shoulders, on which chain holders were placed, towards a bulky belly located on a high, massive foot. Lamps were richly decorated with various techniques: contoured with enamel, gold-plated, and calligraphy placed. Despite the use of electric lighting, they still remain in use [11]. Noteworthy is also a fragment of the famous manuscript exhibited in the museum, dating from the period between 800 and 1000, called the Blue Qur'an. The manuscript owes its name to dark-blue coloured parchment, on which it was written in gold ink, and the letters are decorated with dark brown contours. The origin of this one of the oldest manuscripts containing the Qur'an message remains the subject of numerous scientific studies. It is assumed that the Blue Qur'an (Arabic: al-Mushaf al-Azraq) is the Tunisian Qur'an of the Fatimids, prepared for the Great Mosque in Kairouan. The manuscript is considered the most famous work of Muslim calligraphy, probably for this reason often referred

to as the most unusual and luxurious manuscript ever created [12]. The work was written using the Kufic font, which makes it very difficult to read. The letters were redrawn so that each line was the same length, and elements characteristic of individual letters were omitted. The whole gives visual beauty, but causes difficulties in the reception of the text. The use of stained parchment by the Arabs was not uncommon. To this day, there are many manuscripts written on yellow vellum. However, blue stained parchment is unique in the world. The four parts of the Blue Qur'an, exhibited at the New Louvre, are a private exhibit hitherto in the collection of the Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi.

The part showing the Christian tradition includes a 13<sup>th</sup> century French stained glass window depicting the life of a Christian saint, a sculpture of the Virgin Mary with the Child also from France, as well as a life-size figure of Jesus Christ. A sixteenth-century painted sculpture, entitled *Christ showing his wounds*, was made of wood and probably comes from Germany or Austria. It depicts the Saviour dressed in a crown of thorns and a loincloth, arms raised, showing the world the signs of the crucifixion. The presented statue is accompanied by an explanation: the sculpture triumphantly celebrates the incarnation of the Christian God at a time when individual piety was modelled on the figure and beliefs of Jesus Christ. The unveiling of the sculpture of Jesus Christ and the Blue Qur'an cards, which are new exhibits at the New Louvre Museum, were made by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of the Mosque of Al-Azhar Ahmad Mohamad Ahmad al-Tayab. This event aimed to build positive intercultural and interfaith relations, while the exhibits presenting two different religious traditions are a platform for discussion and testify to openness to cultural dialogue. Pope Francis made an apostolic journey to the United Arab Emirates from 3 to 5 February, 2019. The slogan of the 27<sup>th</sup> Pope Francis's foreign pilgrimage was *Make me an instrument of Your peace*. It was the first apostolic visit of the head of the Catholic Church in the United Arab Emirates and the Arabian Peninsula in history [13].

### **2.3. *Salvator Mundi - Saviour of the World***

The most important work of the Universal Religions Gallery was to be the most expensive painting in the world, by Leonardo da Vinci, entitled *Salvator Mundi*. This oil painting, painted on a wooden board in the years 1506-1513, measuring 45.4 cm by 65.6 cm, depicts Jesus with his right hand raised for blessing. In his left hand, the figure holds a glass ball, symbolizing the world. The image of Jesus is dressed in traditional red-blue robes, symbolizing martyrdom and royal power. The picture was painted for King Louis XII of France. After the death of the ruler, the work was given to the order in Nantes, and then repeatedly changed owners and place of residence. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Sotheby's auction house sold the painting for 45 pounds. After further resale, *Salvator Mundi* went to the Russian Dimitr Rybolovlev, who put the work on auction in New York. On November 15, 2017, the painting was sold for \$ 450 million to an anonymous buyer.

Big interest in the picture has caused a lot of controversy. The first is the buyer person. Shortly after the auction at the Christie's house, it was revealed that the buyer is the Saudi prince Badr ibn Abdullah, who is currently the Minister of Culture in Saudi Arabia, acting on the orders of the successor to the Saudi throne - Prince Muhammad ibn Salman ibn Abd al-Aziz Al-Su'ud. The painting depicts Jesus, so it is wondering why a Muslim bought the work. Incidentally, it should be added that in Saudi Arabia there is a very strict Islamic trend, called Wahhabism. Of course, the argument for buying the masterpiece Leonardo's work could have been the economic aspect and capital investment, as well as the desire to have a private image that is unique on a global scale. The new owner *Salvator Mundi* announced that the painting will be exhibited at the New Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi. The ceremonial unveiling and presentation of the work was scheduled for November 11, 2018, on the first anniversary of the opening of the museum, but this event was cancelled, without providing details. Experts point to several reasons for this. The first is the mysterious disappearance of the image, because no one has seen the work since the auction. Scientists fear that the portrait of Jesus the Saviour of the World may have been damaged or even destroyed. In media reports about the work, information was given that it was on a luxury yacht belonging to the Saudi royal family, sailing in the Mediterranean. Conservator of monuments Dianne Dwyer Modestini, asked the New Louvre Museum in Abu Dhabi for information about the painting, but received a short answer that the image is in good hands [14]. Probably, the owner of the painting from Saudi Arabia does not want to transfer the work to a museum in Abu Dhabi, because in the city of Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia, a modern cultural institution is being built. Undoubtedly the owner will want to present the work in his own country.

Another reason for the mysterious disappearance of the work is to question its authenticity. In 2011, four Italian art historians issued an expert opinion stating that the painting *Salvator Mundi* came from the brush of Leonardo da Vinci, not his student Giovanni Boltraffia, as previously thought. This was indicated by elements of the picture, characteristic of the work of Master Leonard, such as the representation of the hand of Jesus raised in a gesture of blessing, as well as the pigments used by the painter. However, the book by the critic of Ben Lewis's play, *The Last Leonardo*, is not without significance, in which the author conducts a kind of private investigation, highlighting doubts about the authenticity of the work, to conclude that *Salvator Mundi* is "a Leonardo for our time, a post-truth Leonardo" [15].

#### **2.4. Holy Books**

The creators of the museum define it as a bridge connecting different cultures and religions, aimed at promoting balance and acceptance of diversity. Religions, in the roof dimension, lead the population in various ways to achieve eternal happiness. These words are particularly illustrated by the installation consisting of the Holy Books of monotheistic traditions. Side by side are open

copies of the Jewish Torah, Christian Bible and the Muslim Qur'an, which symbolizes openness to modern man and the message they contain to everyone. The Qur'an presented at the exhibition comes from Syrian Damascus from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Its cards were richly decorated with blue and gold ink, and the text was written in stylized Arabic script. The content was additionally enriched with geometric decorations. The rich decorations of the Qur'an cards are intended to introduce the reader to the content and message of the Holy Book. The two-volume gothic Bible, dated to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, comes from France. The work is an example of the highest artistic work. The even calligraphic Gothic script shows the extraordinary artistry of a copyist. The whole is supplemented with illustrations showing episodes from the lives of people of the Bible. Just looking at the book, the reader feels contact with holiness. The third book is the Jewish Torah, in a leather binding, from Yemeni Sana, whose creation was determined for 1498.

### ***2.5. Buddhism and Hinduism***

The gallery also includes exhibits belonging to polytheistic religions. The museum's collection includes a 12<sup>th</sup> century Buddha statue from Nepal, as well as a Chinese ancient marble Buddha head. Also noteworthy is the reproduction of the statuette of the sitting Bodhisattva of Compassion Guanyin, whose original is dated at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Standing Bodhisattva Maytreia from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries originating in Pakistan. At the beginning of our era, a new category of beings, called Bodhisattvas, was introduced into Buddhism. They are beings who seek to enter full nirvana, but for altruistic reasons, they consciously delay entry into this state until they release other beings. The abandonment of one's own enlightenment has a didactic nature in Buddhism, because it illustrates the importance of altruism over one's own achievements [16]. In iconography, Bodhisattvas are portrayed as princes.

Undoubtedly, attention should be drawn by the lost wax method 86 cm statue of Dancing Shiva, a Hindu deity. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world that over a billion people profess. Its ultimate goal is to attain the state of moksha, and therefore liberation. Indian beliefs also have an extremely rich culture, bringing together numerous works of literature, art and architecture. An important element of beliefs is the highly developed symbolism contained in the images of deities. Shiva is a deity responsible for creation and destruction at the same time, therefore in the exhibit of Dancing Shiva one should see a drum in his right hand with the help of which the rhythm of the creation of the Universe is struck, and in his left hand a flame, which is a destructive element [17].

### **3. Conclusions**

The pursuit of affluent Arab states to consolidate their position on the international arena, especially in view of the changes taking place in the management of fuels such as oil and natural gas, significantly contributes to the

opening to other, often significantly different and distant cultures, carrying a different mentality, sensitivity and thinking. The example of the New Louvre in Abu Dhabi museum has become not only the justification of modern man's architectural capabilities, but also the implementation of a complex project that requires significant financial outlays from investors. It is also, and perhaps above all, proof of peaceful, respectful and sensitive coexistence of different religions and cultures side by side. The Universal Religions Gallery along with its exhibits have become a clear symbol of the openness of the conservative rulers of the Abu Dhabi emirate, attached to the centuries-old tradition of Islam.

It should be emphasized that Islam in the Arabian Peninsula is orthodox. Attachment to the ancestors' tradition is an element of ethnic identity. Therefore, the creation of a religious art gallery in the museum, which presents non-Muslim works, is undoubtedly proof of the openness of the United Arab Emirates community to a different cultural sensitivity. In its teaching, Islam emphasizes truthfulness and superiority over other religions, including monotheistic ones. However, the exhibition of the Holy Books, exhibited in the museum, is an expression of the equality of religion and truth that they bring to their believers in the world. It should be noted that the multitude of religions in the world is consistent with the teaching of the Qur'an, which says that the existence of different religions is related to God's will.

However, one should not forget that the opening of a modern museum is included in economic terms. The United Arab Emirates are interested in travel destination for tourists from various cultural circles, which is why a modern museum with non-standard exhibitions will undoubtedly become mandatory on the map of objects to visit. Exhibiting works of art depicting the Christian, Buddhist and Hindu religions is an expression of changes taking place among Muslims. Perhaps this gallery will become the reason for the creation of profits from the rights of believers of religions other than Islam in the contacts of the Arabian Peninsula. To the extent that Christians still have to deal with numerous adversities and persecution.

## References

- [1] \*\*\*, *Koran, z języka arabskiego przełożył i komentarzem opatrzył Józef Bielawski (Qur'an, translated from Arabic and commentary by Józef Bielawski)*, PiW, Warszawa, 2007, 974.
- [2] T. Arnold, *Painting in Islam*, Dower Publication Inc., New York, 1965, 5.
- [3] J. Bielawski, *Książka w świecie islamu (Book in the world of Islam)*, Ossolineum, Warszawa, 1961, 175-176.
- [4] A. Stachowski, *Historia powszechna. Od upadku cesarstwa rzymskiego do ekspansji islamu. Karol Wielki (Universal history. From the fall of the Roman Empire to the expansion of Islam. Charlemagne)*, Agora, Warszawa, 2007, 453.
- [5] J. Danecki, *Kultura i sztuka islamu Islamic culture and art*, Elipsa, Warszawa, 2003, 121.
- [6] R. Ettinghausen, O. Grabar and M. Jenkins-Madina, *Sztuka i architektura islamu 650-1250 (Islamic art and architecture 650-1250)*, Dialog, Warszawa, 2007, 6.
- [7] M.I. Al-Hammadi, *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, 3(1) (2016) 1-2.

- [8] K. Ryż, *Nowoczesne Budownictwo Inżynieryjne*, **51(6)** (2013) 67.
- [9] S. Babuchowski, *Gość Niedzielny*, **8(2)** (2018) 84-86.
- [10] \*\*\*, *Louvre Abu Dhabi a new cultural landmark for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, opens to the public on 11 November*, Museum, Abu Dhabi, 2017, 3-5.
- [11] S. Blair and J. Bloom, *Sztuka i architektura islamu 1250-1800 (Islamic art and architecture 1250-1800)*, Dialog, Warszawa, 2012, 109.
- [12] J. Bloom, *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, **3(54)** (1986) 59-61.
- [13] \*\*\*, *L'Osservatore Romano*, **2(410)** (2019) 4-12.
- [14] M. Daley, *Authentication in Art*, **6(11)** (2018) 1-7.
- [15] B. Lewis, *The Last Leonardo*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2019, 338.
- [16] M. D'Onza Chiodo, *Buddyzm (Buddhism)*, WAM, Kraków, 2002, 71-75.
- [17] M. Kudelska, *Hinduizm (Hinduism)*, WAM, Kraków, 2006, 153-155.