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Longing for Mecca

Exhibitions

It's a fact that the Netherlands is home to almost 1 million Muslims, about time then for an exhibition dealing with the journey of a lifetime: the hajj towards Mecca.

By Cassandra Pizzey /asdf 12-09-2013

The Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde (National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden offers the backdrop for Kossmann.dejong's latest exhibition design entitled Longing for Mecca, The Pilgrim's Journey. This exhibition – adapted from the same-name exhibit at the British Museum in London – looks at the highlight of almost every Muslim's life, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In every able-bodied Muslim's life comes a point when he or she must take a journey to Saudi-Arabia, to Mecca and Medina, a pilgrimage together with hundreds of thousands of like-minded worshippers. Longing for Mecca takes the visitor on a similar journey, from preparations, to rites of passage and traditions. Hundreds of objects from the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, international museums and personal items from the Islamic community act as a guide through this impressive exhibition.

Kossmann.dejong were approached to design the exhibition for the museum. Although the show was originally presented in London, this exhibition is geared towards the Dutch audience. The show takes visitors through a number of rooms, simulating the steps taken by a Muslim before, during and after his or her journey. "We want the visitor to be surprised when entering each new area," says Kossmann.dejong. "To become part of the story."

One of the rooms certainly engages the visitor and puts them right in the centre of the story as they find themselves in the centre of a swirling mass of people. We have arrived at the Ka'ba (the sacred building towards which all Muslims face during prayer) and see how crowds of people are taking the tawaf in which they must circle this black cube seven times. A film shows us how each ritual is performed and what a Muslim must go through to complete the hajj.

Light, colour and film play a huge part in this exhibition in addition to the impressive collection items. One room makes one instantly feel humble as dark shadows are cast over intricate, hand-embroidered carpets in vibrant gold and black. Another wants to make you take off your shoes as a sign of respect, almost afraid to tread on the carpets.

We asked Kossmann.dejong a few questions about the exhibition:

Why was it important this exhibition came to the Netherlands?

"Because the hajj is an important part of Dutch culture and something that hasn't been explored on this scale in a museum before. It's an interesting and intriguing subject, one that has many different sides and is lends itself to this kind of narrative exhibition. It was a challenge to create an exhibition about religion that is also accessible to a wider audience; a subject such as this needs to be accurately portrayed."

Can you tell us how the exhibition was adapted from the British Museum?

"Kossmann.dejong created an entirely new design for the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde as the exhibition needed to fit the space offered by the museum and be relevant for a Dutch audience. The items on show are from various museum collections including that of the British Museum and international institutions. Also, a collection day was hosted on which local Leiden Muslims could loan their personal hajj souvenirs to the museum. We used them to present a colourful bazar in the space dedicated to 'souvenirs and homecoming'."

Is there any one part of the exhibition that deserves extra attention?

"We're satisfied with the exhibition as a whole I think. All the steps taken by pilgrims have been turned into a linear narrative and each one of the spaces has the right mood and make you feel as though you're experiencing this journey too. It would be great if visitors are left with a clear idea of the hajj, recognize themselves in the exhibition or feel swept along on the journey of the pilgrim and immersed in another world, depending on their knowledge of Islam."

Photography: Thijs Wolzak

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