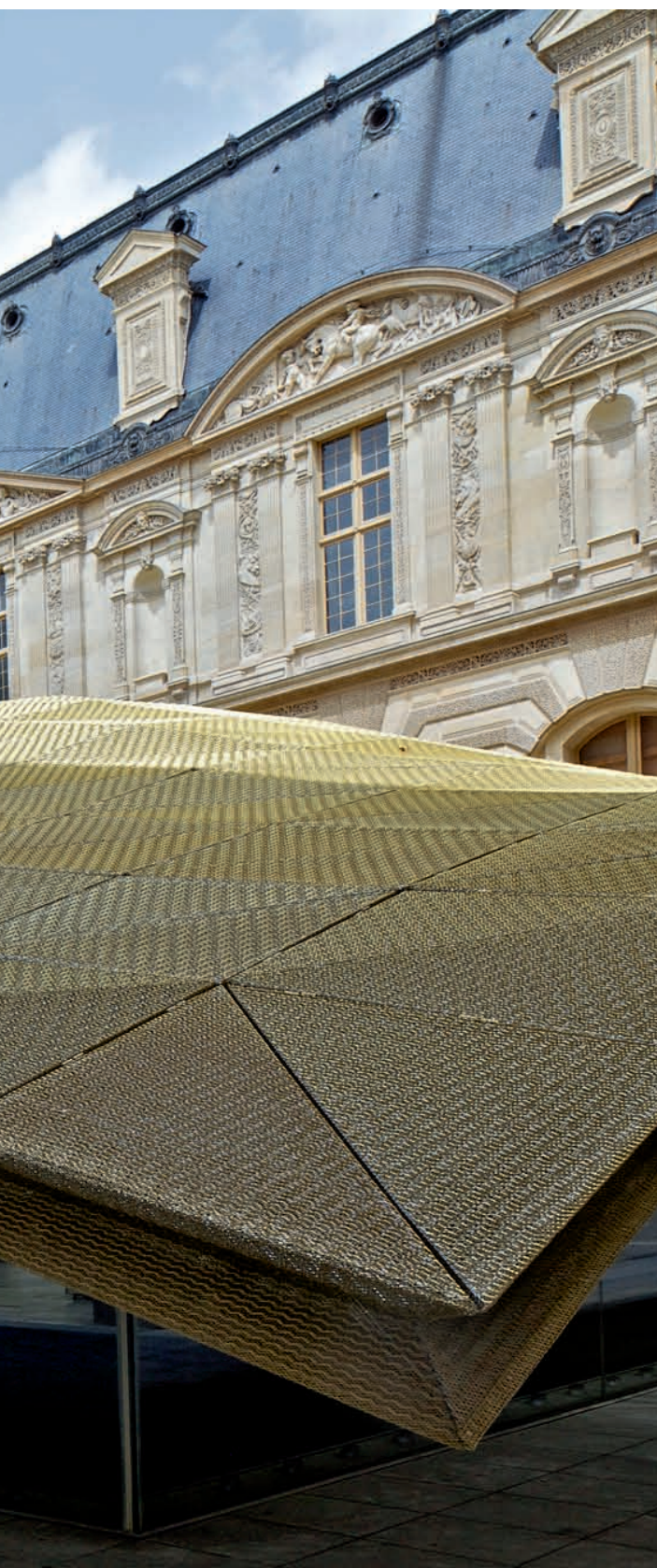


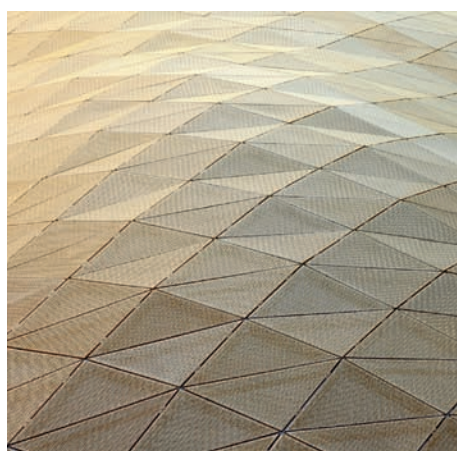


The Louvre lifts the veil

By Brent Gregston



Paris' pre-eminent museum now has a magnificent Islamic art wing



A mysterious veil of gold and glass now floats permanently over a courtyard in the Louvre. Beneath it are priceless works of Islamic art, many of them now revealed for the first time to the public gaze. The Louvre's Islamic collection is one of the world's richest, with pieces created over 13 centuries on three continents.

The avant-garde exhibition space, the work of architects Mario Bellini and Rudy Ricciotti, is the most daring addition to the Louvre since IM Pei's glass pyramid 20 years ago. The shimmering, undulating roof is a mesh canopy of 2,350 golden triangles held aloft by eight slanting pillars. It has been compared to a sail, handkerchief, flying carpet, Bedouin tent or dragonfly's wing. But Architect Mario Bellini insists it's really like "an enormous veil, suspended in the wind." Stepping beneath the veil takes the visitor on a "trip," he says because "many of the pieces come from buildings from another part of the world entirely and were taken off in bits."

The journey takes you deep beneath the historical façades through two levels, one of them used for objects sensitive to light. It begins with pieces from the dawn of Islam and continues through to the 19th century, stretching across the planet from Islamic Spain to Mughal-era India. Maps detail the rise and fall of every Muslim empire.

"Ibn Khaldun was our guide in putting together this exhibition," says Sophie



Makariou, head of the Islamic Arts Department. “He reviewed the history of the Islamic world with the aim of writing a universal history. He was a creator of the historical scenario we wanted to put on display.”

There are 3,000 works from the Louvre’s collection of 15,000, and 3,400 artifacts on permanent loan from the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. The Louvre’s trove of Islamic art, long neglected, includes ceramics, glassware and carpets, miniatures, sculpted ivory and inlaid metalwork. There are stunning bits of architecture like a vaulted stone porch from the court of the Mamluk kings and a bright red-and-blue wall of Ottoman tiles. A remarkable number of objects have never been exhibited.

The opening of the Islamic wing is a reminder

that the Louvre, founded by the French revolutionary government in 1793, has always aspired to be a universal museum. Enlightenment philosophers dreamed it, and Napoleon tried to build it: an institution documenting the story of human culture in a single building.

“The Louvre was created as an encyclopedic museum and a big chapter lacking in that was Islamic art,” notes Henri Loyrette, director of the Louvre museum. “You can’t understand parts of our entire collection without engaging with Islamic art...We also want to show that it is part of our history and how an object is transmitted from one civilization to another.”

With the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, in 2015, that ideal will give birth to an entirely new museum in the Middle East.

