

LIFE & TIMES ART



Will the *Jalur Gemilang* be flying high with this reverse colonialism in London?

ALTHOUGH an announcement was made several weeks ago, I've been waiting for the cascade of local interest in an announcement from the British Museum. Normally, not even the feeblest ripple from the museum's mighty press machine will reach the shores of Malaysia. I imagined this might be the exception, but so far it hasn't been.

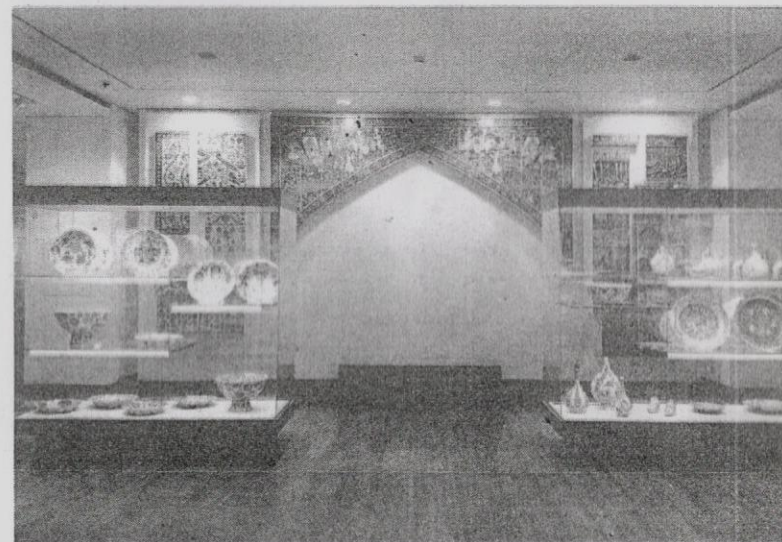
Despite the announcement being covered by media around the world, Malaysia remains indifferent to Islamic art. More newsworthy is a decapitation or the destruction of an ancient city that most readers have never heard of. When the Albukhary name, which is somewhat better known in Malaysia than the city of Nimrud, is mentioned in the same breath as an exercise that turns Islamic art into an emissary of a rich culture, the

A gift for Islamic art



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aware of it. A lot more people will become aware of the Albukhary name when the new gallery is created. The British Museum is the second most visited in the world, after the Louvre. If one excluded visitors whose interest extends no further than a glimpse of the Mona Lisa, the London contender would be Number One in the world ranking



The British Museum art gallery is due for an upgrade. The Iznik ceramics on display are the same type that was loaned to the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

news doesn't travel much further than the *Malaysian Insider*.

Any combination of the Yayasan Albukhary and the British Museum makes for an unprecedented milestone on the Malaysians road to developed cultural status. When these two entities united recently to create a new showpiece of Islamic art, it was big enough news to warrant a sound bite out from a British government minister.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Sajid Javid, was unstinting in his praise: "On behalf of Her Majesty's Government I would like to extend heartfelt thanks to the Albukhary Foundation for this generous donation to the British Museum... Donations like these help ensure our great cultural institutions maintain their reputation as some of the best and most exciting in the world."

Comments like these are to be treasured in the run-up to an election. It's also worth noting the prioritisation of his portfolio. His Malaysian counterpart is Minister of Tourism (first) and Culture (second). Sport gets its own ministry here, shared with Youth, and doesn't need to be bundled up with anything worthy but boring, such as culture.

It's not clear how much the Albukhary Foundation is contributing to the British Museum, but the gesture puts Malaysia in the same league as

household names like Samsung, BP and Hyundai. This comes at a time when corporates are pulling out of the sponsorship race in countries such as the UK, and being replaced by smaller amounts from a larger number of "partners".

Old ideas of corporate social responsibility are being overtaken. However, the Albukhary message is most definitely not from the corporate image mill. There is no subliminal nagging to buy an Albukhary smartphone or fully loaded motor vehicle.

The vision is much bigger than that. The mission to highlight Islamic culture's achievements is aligned more with individuals such as Prince Alwaleed of Saudi Arabia, who made a massive contribution to the Louvre's acclaimed new Islamic wing.

The Albukhary connection with the British Museum is extensive. A longish-term loan of numerous Iznik ceramics to the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia a few years ago proved to be a jewel that was not as appreciated as it could have been. These supreme examples of the ceramicists art from 16th and 17th century Turkey were perhaps the most valuable works of art ever shown in Malaysia.

In the typical manner of the British Museum's soon-to-retire director, Neil MacGregor, the loan was made with the minimum of fuss and the maximum of goodwill. KL was at the centre of the world's cultural map, although few were

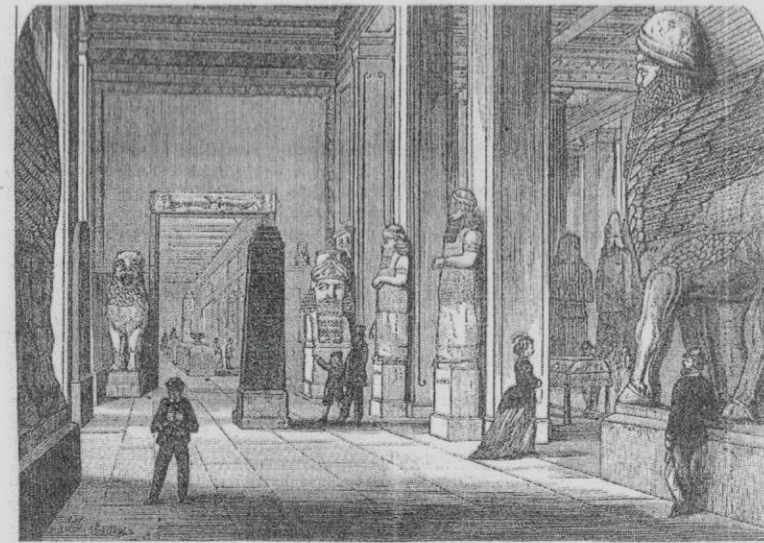
Number one in the world rankings. An increasing number of visitors are drawn to art of the Islamic world, although the most popular galleries are ancient Greece and Egypt. Fortunately, parts of Nimrud were also in the British Museum's safekeeping long before the Islamic State nihilists destroyed the original site of that civilisation.

The new Islamic galleries will be ready in 2018, which is considerably faster work than many other leading museums. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, closed its Islamic galleries for renovation soon after 9/11, which was seen by some as a conspiracy, and didn't reopen them until many years later.

Best of all at the British Museum, there will be a strong presence of Islamic art from Southeast Asia, something that this writer is always hoping to see more of at the grander – and stuffie – institutions. China's Muslims will also receive the attention that their sizeable contribution deserves.

Making space for the new gallery will be accomplished by joining two historic galleries, with the uninspiring names of Rooms 42-45. These are currently closed. Visitors will be able to understand the interplay of objects relating to Byzantium, the Vikings, the Crusades and Islamic Spain

They can also see the impact of Islam on western art, moving on



THE NINEVEH GALLERY.

In 1878, colossal statues from Nimrud were an exciting new attraction at the British Museum. Now that the original city has been ransacked, they're an invaluable record.

through galleries dedicated to the most famous Islamic empires: the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals. Not left out will be the relationship with Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Zoroastrian and other adjacent cultures.

Neil MacGregor has received many important acts of benevolence in his long tenure, but he seemed especially impressed on this occasion. "This generous gift from the Albukhary Foundation makes it possible for us to completely redisplay one of the world's most important Islamic collections.

These new galleries will allow us to present our collection in the context of world cultures exploring the history, complexity and diversity of Islamic cultures across the world from Sub Saharan Africa to Malaysia and Indonesia."

So, if all goes wrong here, and Malaysia ends up like Nimrud, at least something will be preserved in Bloomsbury.

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