

# Aga Khan Museum: Islamic art finds home in Canada

By Nikhat Ahmed

With hopes to introduce a new landmark to the North American art scene, His Highness The Aga Khan is currently working on plans to build a unique museum in Toronto. When completed, The Aga Khan Museum will be the first one of its kind in the English speaking world entirely devoted to the acquisition, preservation and display of Islamic art.

"Insofar as civilisations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in teaching the two worlds to understand, respect and appreciate each other," said the Aga Khan during a speech made at the Louvre in Paris, France last October.

Stressing the need to address the "clash of ignorance" that faces the world today, The Aga Khan hopes to promote understanding between the East and West through Islamic art.

"The Aga Khan Museum is indeed a unique project," says Mohamed Manji, President of His Highness Prince Aga Khan Shia Imami Ismaili Council for Canada. "This space will provide an opportunity towards bridging the gulf of knowledge that exists between Muslim and Western cultures." Manji points out that in recent years there have been numerous attempts to improve understanding of Muslim civilizations, but concerted long-term efforts require institu-



tions to make them sustainable.

"Over the past 5 decades, through his enlightened leadership, His Highness has established numerous institutions, known as the Aga Khan Development Network

(<http://www.akdn.org>) to improve the quality of life of people in the developing world and to promote better understanding of Islam globally. The Aga Khan Museum will be one such educational institution," he says.

"Through its programmes and exhibitions, it will promote the knowledge and understanding of the enormous contribution Muslims have made to human society in the fields of science, medicine, architecture, music and literature. It will tell the story of the historical deep-rooted relationships between

Muslims and other cultures."

Through the use of both permanent and temporary exhibitions, the museum will showcase diverse intellectual, cultural, artistic and religious traditions of Muslim communities, over time and continents.

The new space will aim to appeal to an international audience as well as students, teachers, families and researchers with a display of some of the world's most important masterpieces of Islamic art. Among these are the famous miniatures and manuscripts from the collection of the late Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan and his wife Princess Catherine as well as artifacts in stone, wood, ivory and glass, metalwork, ceramics, rare works on paper and parchment. Spanning over one thousand years in history, visitors will be

treated to an overview of the artistic accomplishments of Muslim civilisations from the Iberian Peninsula to China. "Some European audiences have already been given a taste of what to expect," remarks Manji. "There was so much excitement and interest that I have no doubt that the museum, when it opens in Toronto, will generate the same level of interest from all sectors of the population both in Canada and the United States." Over the past year, selected exhibits were displayed in London, Paris and Lisbon. Leading up the opening, several more cities, including Toledo, Berlin and Moscow, will also play host to some of the pieces.

The fundamental goal of the project, therefore, is to educate the world about the pluralistic nature of Islam and dispel myths that are often portrayed in the media. "Islam is in reality an open-minded, tolerant faith capable of adopting other people's cultures and languages and making them its own," explains the Aga Khan. He hopes the new space will not only build tolerance between Muslims and Non-Muslims, but also bring together Muslims from different religious interpretations and ethnic backgrounds. Manji believes Canada is the perfect place to build that foundation of understanding and hopes all Canadians will play a part in this endeavor. "On the international stage, Canada is widely known for its pluralism. This museum will give our country one more reason to celebrate our individual differences and also help start some important conversations with the West about the many things we have in common."

The Aga Khan has stated that choosing Canada, and specifically Toronto as the museum's home, was a strategic move. He notes there is a large Muslim population living in Canada and the USA, but there is no art or culture institution devoted to enhancing public knowledge of Muslim civilizations. He would like the initiative to become a source of pride and identity for all.

Located on a 17-acre site on Wynford Drive near the intersection of the Don Valley Parkway and Eglinton Avenue, the 10,000 square meter building will be surrounded by a landscaped public park. Designed by renowned Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, the museum will house a large auditorium for lecture, film and concert programmes. There will be a café, restaurant and a library offering direct access to specialised documentation and information from virtual sources.

The park, designed by award winning landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic, will be a key feature of the space. In order for visitors to fully experience the beauty of the expansive gardens, many of the parking spaces will be underground.

For more information on The Aga Khan, Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, a community of 15 million individuals in over 25 countries worldwide. Visit the website:

<http://www.TheIsmaili.org>

The Ismaili Community is currently commemorating the Aga Khan's 50 years of leadership (Imamat) or Golden Jubilee.

## Canadian girl Dilshaan Panjwani answers SOS

By Jamal Shahid

ISLAMABAD – When your whole world has fallen apart, a few gifts – colour pencils, sketch books and board games – can make a big difference. But Dilshaan Panjwani wants to give the SOS children in Rawalpindi something more. She wants to give them hope. "And that's what they need. I want to tell them those children abroad, especially Pakistani children, care," said the 15-year-old who is dedicated to the compelling needs of the orphans and changing their lives.

When Dilshaan was 12, she was more than saddened by a trip to the H-11 camp for the earthquake victims in 2005. From her sadness sprung the idea to try to help orphans. Since then she has been returning to Pakistan every year to help little children in need. "It was a time that made me realize that I have a lot to be grateful for all the gifts life has given me in Canada. What I saw touched my heart and I knew I had to do something about it," said the 11th grade student of Branksome Hall

School in Toronto Canada. Eager to get out there, Dilshaan packed her bags and returned to Islamabad with \$1,100 she had managed to raise through a fund-raiser for children in the SOS – a parent to the orphans and home to the homeless.

Bringing some of her cousins on board to volunteer, Dilshaan spent four days with the orphaned children in SOS Rawalpindi. "They were a fun group, with stacks of energy and there were hardly dull moments around them," she said.

The idea was to strengthen unity of children worldwide, encourage good hygiene and education, open doors of friendship, to emphasise the value and importance of education, and above all, boost their self-esteem, she said. All the time Dilshaan spent with the SOS children she told them about the importance of basic hygiene practices, nutrition, exercises, besides engaging them in arts and crafts, story telling sessions and picnic and sports. During these activities, the student created cards with various art supplies.

These cards were sent to the chil-

dren's donors.

Throughout the arts and crafts activity, the students were individually taken to a hand painting station, where each student had their hand painted and put their handprint on a poster. The students also signed their names next to their handprint. "The board with all the handprints hangs in the SOS orphanage auditorium," Dilshaan said, adding: "We found that the children especially enjoyed making cards. It was a way for them to express their creativity and gratitude to their donors in a structured activity. The volunteers assisted many

of the students and taught them new art techniques with scissors and glues, etc. The students also enjoyed the hand painting activity as this was a part of their identity to stay at SOS Rawalpindi. Dilshaan donated the \$1,100, a little contribution that would go into education.

"It's the greatest thing children will have," she said. "If my project makes a difference in the life of a child, I will feel rewarded," she said, hoping that her endeavours would inspire other children around the world. "That is fulfillment in life. We are blessed more than the people we help and we find our purpose. It is smiles on children's faces that I'll remember the most," Dilshaan said a day before her flight back home to Canada. – **Daily Dawn, Pakistan.**

(Editor's note: Branksome Hall's all-rounded, honour roll student Dilshaan Panjwani's humanitarian, community



Dilshaan presenting a cheque to Mrs. Nasim Muzaffar of SOS Rawalpindi recently.

and leadership initiatives symbolize the spirit of love, sacrifice and service. In March 2006, Dilshaan and her sister Dilnoor organized an art workshop for Pakistani children affected by the devastating earthquake, with the aim of instilling hope and healing emotional trauma. In the summer of 2007 and 2008, Dilshaan and her sister Dilzayn organized educational, health promotion and fun activities at the SOS Children's Village, Rawalpindi. Dilshaan is on the school's basketball, badminton, and tennis teams, member of student council, student life committee, grade representative, and head of the Duke of Edinburgh Award. She recently participated as a SSUNS delegate in Montreal. She has sung the Canadian, American and Pakistani anthems at numerous multicultural events here and abroad. Dilshaan's laurels include 2003 Ontario Volunteer Services Award, 2005 Canada Day Youth Award, and United Way's 2006 Get in the Way Award.)



Dilshaan, Dilzayn and the team of volunteers for SOS project

## Reflections

### The sayings of Hazrat Ali AS

1. When this world favors somebody, it lends him the attributes, and surpassing merits of others and when it turns its face away from him it snatches away even his own excellences and fame.
2. Live amongst people in such a manner that if you die they weep over you and if you are alive they crave for your company.
3. If you overpower your enemy, then pardon him by way of thankfulness to Allah, for being able to subdue him.
4. Unfortunate is he who cannot gain a few sincere friends during his life and more unfortunate is the one who has gained them and then lost them (through his deeds).
5. When some blessings come to you, do not drive them away through thanklessness.
6. He who is deserted by friends and relatives will often find help and sympathy from strangers.
7. Every person who is tempted to go astray, does not deserve punishment.
8. Our affairs are attached to the destiny decreed by Allah, even our best plans may lead us to destruction.
9. One who rushes madly after inordinate desire, runs the risk of encountering destruction and death.
10. Overlook and forgive the weaknesses of the generous people because if they fall down, Allah will help them.
11. Failures are often the results of timidity and fears; disappointments are the results of bashfulness.