

## Remembering the 1983 Opening of Kuwait's National Museum of Islamic Art

Imagine my excitement and surprise when out of the blue I received an invitation to the festivities surrounding the opening of Kuwait's National Museum of Islamic Art, including a first-class air ticket, from a generous benefactor that I had never met – Sheikh Nasser Saba al-Ahmed. At the time I was working as an archaeological advisor to the National Museum, Sana'a. I had helped Dr Marilyn Jenkins and her partner, Professor Ma'an Medina the previous summer when they had visited Yemen and I had understood that Marilyn was fully engaged in the Kuwait museum project and had come to Yemen on a fact-finding mission. As usual I was only too happy to share my enthusiasm for all things Yemeni, never envisaging that their 'thank you' would be an invitation to the Kuwait opening.

Towards the end of that February I left for Kuwait – a city that I had last visited in December 1969, by road from Baghdad – then a must go to destination for shopping, as Baghdad's supermarket shelves were sparsely stocked. By 1983 the cityscape had changed and I found myself in a modern metropolis. The next few days were fully occupied with a whirlwind of events, receptions, lunches, dinners, the opening itself and a boat trip to visit archaeological sites on the island of Failaka – here the distant boom of heavy mortars were a constant reminder of the devastating Iran Iraq war continuing not so far away as we were all enjoying ourselves.

The whole occasion was an extraordinary platform for meeting all the experts in the field of Islamic art – especially for someone so firmly rooted in archaeology. I confess to having worked for several seasons in the Umayyad levels on the Amman citadel, but the finds were mundane every day wares – certainly not of museum quality. One guest who stuck in my mind was George Scanlon, famed for his work at Fustat, but also a professor at AUC. I vowed then that if I ever found myself living in Cairo I would sign up to do an MA with him. Which is precisely what happened 6 years later, so I could claim my venture into the Islamic world is all down to Sheikh Nasser!

The museum was breath taking, with state of the art showcases and displays. A far cry from our makeshift displays back in Sana'a. I learned that Sheikh Nasser had generously loaned part of this relatively new collection, largely acquired from western art markets, Egypt, Syria and India, to the state – this was the first Islamic museum in Arabia. Sheikh Nasser and his wife, Sheikha Husa were determined to make it a centre of learning and established a research library too. Entrance to the museum was free to all. I was in awe of this generosity and farsightedness. Not since the Festival of Islam exhibition at the Hayward had I seen such a magnificent collection of Islamic Art – but this wasn't a temporary display, it was permanent and something for the state to build on. Over the years I have observed a remarkable output of publications from Kuwait, all thanks to Sheikh Nasser and Sheikha Husa. We are all indebted to their generosity and foresight. Their model has encouraged other Gulf states to follow in their footsteps. I will never forget my brief sojourn in Kuwait and thank Sheikh Nasser for sharing his passion for Islamic art, may he rest in peace.

Rosalind Wade Haddon, PhD  
Research Associate SOAS, University of London