Art That’s Not Just for True Believers

By HOLLAND COTTER

“Colligem,” from Turkey. In this cutout, words are laid out in the shape of a lion.

BOSTON — The Mughal gardens of Kashmir, now half-ruined, were conceived as a terraced architecture of motion and light. Water from the Himalayas ran in hand-dug channels across their terraces, in sluices along staircases, up into fountains, down into pools. At every stage the vast aquatic circulatory system reflected light, cycles of seasons, days and nights.

Such images came to mind when I visited “Cosmophilia: Islamic Art From the David Collection, Copenhagen” at the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College. Partly this was because some of the work on view is of Mughal date, but it was more because of the vivacity the show projects. Words ripple across the surface of paper. Cut-glass bowls glow from within. In a wall hanging, a courtly beauty wearing a patterned gown woven from silver-wrapped thread lifts a flower to her face and smiles.

I’m mixing fact with fancy, but Islamic art is all about ambiguity, starting with its name. Strictly speaking, only one type of art object is exclusively and universally Islamic: a hand-copied Koran. Believed to embody the word of God as given to the prophet Muhammad, the book defines the religion of Islam. Its text cannot be changed. Earthly life is everything that flits, flows and unravels around it.
And just how precious that inconstant life is can be judged by all the other kinds of art — ceramics, brocades, carpets, ivories, metalwares, illuminated manuscripts, religious and secular — made in Islamic cultures from Iraq to Africa, from China to Spain.

"Velvet With Standing Woman," 17th century, from India or Iran.

Politics aside — if politics can be set aside, given the escalating cycles of fear and resentment on both sides of a West-Islam divide — variety and geographic dispersal might partly explain why the art of the Islamic world remains so remote from Western audiences and literally hard to see. The McMullen exhibition is one of very few loan shows of "classical" Islamic material — that is, dating before 1800 — to appear in the United States in the past year, even as Islam itself is front-page news.

Other distancing factors are sometimes proposed, some true, some not.

True: Much of the art of the Islamic world is made for practical use and challenges Western distinctions between fine art and design. Not true: All art of the Islamic world is religious; in reality most is secular. Also not true: The human figure, the mainstay of Western art, is prohibited by Islam. It is routinely eliminated only in public religious contexts, and not always then, if you consider the portraits of Sufi saints found in shrines throughout modern cities in Africa.

The show has plenty of figures. Turbaned scholars schmooze in a pink-tiled garden in an early-17th-century manuscript painting from Isfahan. A plump couple snuggle cheek-to-cheek on a Persian bowl. And there's that smiling woman with the flower and the ornamental gown.

Yet over all, ornament dominates. It may be the one common element on which a broad, multicultural definition of Islamic art can be based. That at least is the argument of the McMullen show — "Cosmophilia" means "love of ornament" — organized by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, who teach Islamic art both at Boston College and at Virginia Commonwealth University, and who negotiated the loan of 125 pieces from the C. L. David Collection, a small Danish museum with an outstanding Islamic collection.

Their theme is hardly new. Other museums have addressed it; the scholarly literature is substantial. But it is well worth re-exploring, for the insights they add to the subject and as an opportunity to demonstrate yet again how phenomenally beautiful this art is.

For an orthodox Muslim, that beauty will lie primarily, even exclusively, in a section of the show devoted to calligraphy, the crown of aesthetic achievement if the written text is a sacred one. And even the small sampling here is evidence of how high and diverse that achievement can be.
From Tunisia comes a single page from a magnificent 10th-century Koran copied in gold on a midnight-blue ground. A Koranic verse stitched on a Yemeni textile trembles and spikes like the trace of an encehologram. A page from a Central Asian Koran, the largest ever known, is the size of a big-screen TV. Originally it measured more than six feet across, and even severely trimmed it’s impressive, with its left-tilting characters as reedy and tall as autumn grass. Here charismatic language becomes an icon.

It also becomes too stretched and embellished to be fully readable. Some of the most exquisitely stylized Korans basically functioned as prompt books for recitations by users who knew the sacred text by heart. And unreadability carried a certain value of its own: it pushed writing toward the realm of pure ornament, which is where most of the rest of Islamic art resides.

One section of the show concentrates on a few of the infinite variations possible in geometric patterning. Pieced together from hundreds of small rectilinear units, a 17th-century inlaid wooden door is also an expanding universe of stellar forms. The effect is at once optically and intellectually bracing, as you try to puzzle out the logic of patterns that keep zooming you into, and back from, deep space.

Elsewhere curvilinear motifs are zanily animated. A repeated pattern of concentric google-eye circles and snaky stripes turns a swatch of Ottoman velvet into a comic-opera version of a hero’s leopard-skin mantle. The same stripes, in gleaming cherry-red pairs, also float on the surface of a white glazed jug, like lipstick stains on a handkerchief.

A species of artificial organicism is the basis of the Islamic decorative element known in the West as the arabesque, with its continuous, sourceless extensions of leafing and blossoming stem and vine twining like kudzu over every imaginable surface. It cascades over carpets, surges around carved ivory boxes, sprays across the tiled exteriors of buildings, turning the world into a vegetation-choked paradise.

For all its quasi-naturalism, though, the arabesque is a resolutely un-Western form. We like our art to go somewhere, do something, then stop doing it. Action without direction or resolution is monotonous, dead. But Islamic ornament operates on a different wavelength, one attuned to — though by no means restricted to — circulation as direction, stasis as purpose.

In a 17th-century Kashmiri garden you get some immediate sense of this dynamic because you’re in the middle of it: man-made patterns echo larger cyclical patterns of seasonal and historical change. But you can get a sense of it in the museum too if you know what you’re looking for, object by object: the suggestion of the world as a continuous, light-catchinng fabric, ever on the loom, and always hiding something ineffable behind it: space, time, God, life energy, call it what you will. Art lets us give it a definitive shape, even if we give it different names.

“Cosmophilia: Islamic Art From the David Collection, Copenhagen” is at the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, through Dec. 31. It travels to the Alfred and David Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Feb. 1 to May 20.