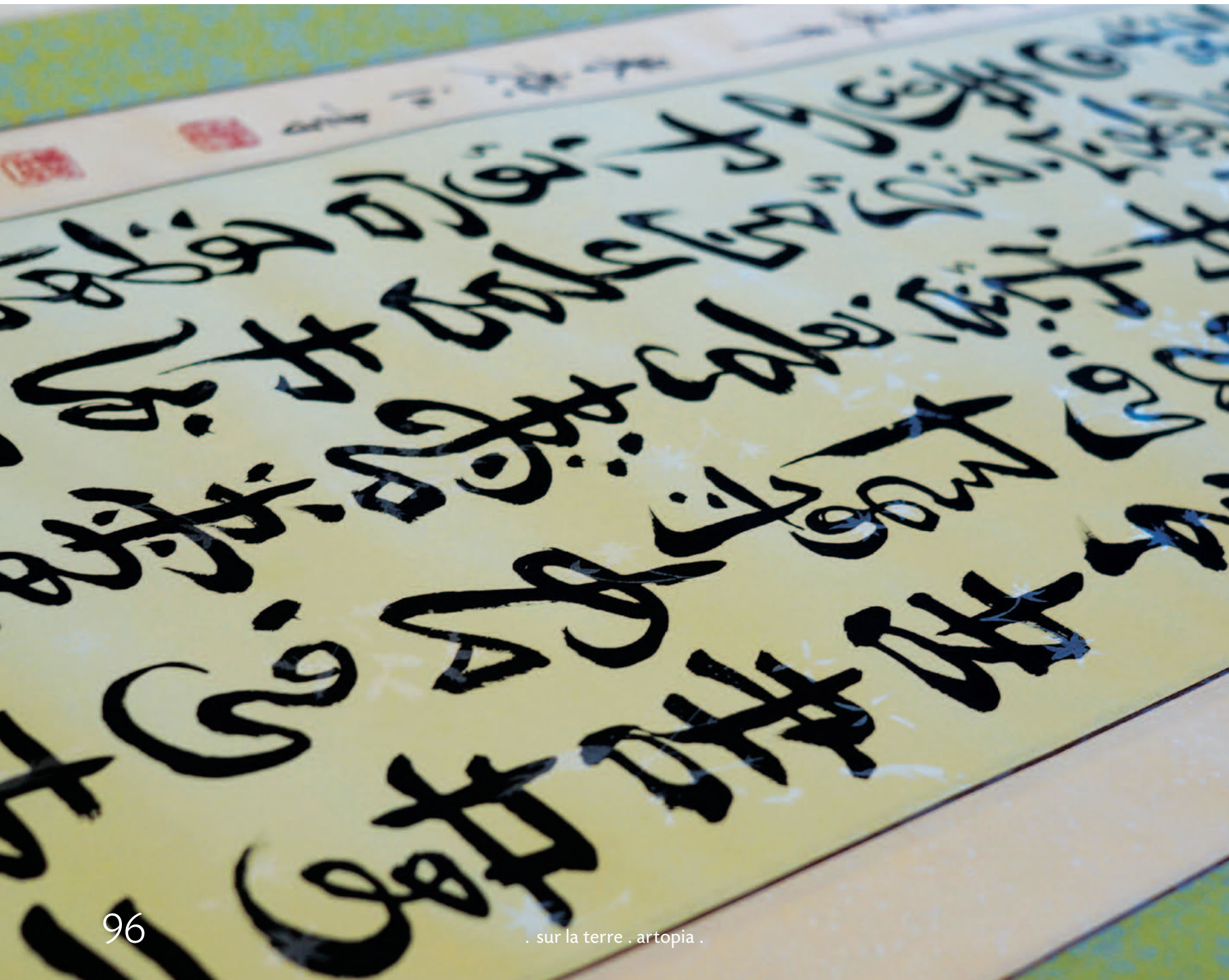

OH, QANADA!

THE STATE OF QATAR AND MCGILL
UNIVERSITY HOST AN EDUCATION IN THE
DIVERSITY OF ISLAMIC ARTS.



At first glance, the casual observer may not immediately see a definitive link between Qatar and Canada, but it is a bond that has quietly been growing ever stronger, particularly over the past few years. Admittedly, this partnership has, at least in the public eye, taken the form of business ventures, with Qatar Airways' opening of direct flights between Doha and Montreal being the paramount and most well-known example.

However, as formerly Doha-based, currently Montreal-bound Senior Editor Steven Paugh recently discovered during his straddle between the countries, Qatar and Canada's diplomatic ties are growing both ever more intimate and intricate, with a keener focus on the mutual sharing and appreciation of each other's culture, showcasing Qatar's increasingly ubiquitous position on the global stage as a discriminating international purveyor of Arab arts and culture to the world.

It came as something of a surprise to us both when my wife, herself once a curator at Doha's own Museum of Islamic Art, found out a year ago that the State of Qatar would begin providing significant funding to the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, where she now studies as a PhD student. Of course, this was more a shock of coincidence than one of principle.

It is, after all, public knowledge that the Gulf state has been expanding its scope within the arts community, not only within its own borders (as you will see in the other arts-driven projects we highlight within this very issue) but also internationally. Still, while we remarked on our shared orbit with international giants and made jokes that centred around, "You can take the expat away from Doha, but you can't take Doha away from the expat," we quietly wondered why, when and how this union came to its most fortuitous fruition.

Perhaps surprisingly, before 2011, there had never been a Qatari ambassador to The Great White North. Being that both nations carry considerable cache and international clout, however, that was bound to change. And so it did in the spring of that year, when His Excellency Salem Al-Shafi was honoured with the inaugural appointment. Ambassador Al-Shafi quickly proved that he is not the kind of man to sit on his laurels.

"Upon my arrival here in Canada," the ambassador told me in an exclusive *Sur la Terre* interview, "I immediately embarked on a challenging and exciting journey of cementing the bridges that connect the people of Qatar





with the people of Canada, which involved following up on the social, economic, political and educational aspects of the friendly relationship between the two countries.”

Indeed, the interaction between Qatar, Canada and their peoples has been and remains uniquely strong. According to the ambassador, there are more than 6,000 Canadians currently living or working in Qatar, coupled with an impressive group of leading institutions and organisations, from the College of the North Atlantic and the University of Calgary School of Nursing to the Qatar Gas LNG tankers, which deliver natural gas to Canada through Repsol to St. John’s Canaport terminal in New Brunswick. Of course, this is a partnership that is built on more than just business.

“I believe,” said the ambassador, “that the similarities we Qataris share with our Canadian friends outnumber any differences. Both our people have close aspirations towards progress and prosperity, and share a strong commitment towards human rights, tolerance, multiculturalism and towards assisting other nations in their time of need.

“These factors, joined by a strong determination of both governments to strengthen bilateral relations and further coordinate international efforts to promote peace and stability around the world, have been constantly at the core of the relations between Qatar and Canada.”



Powerful words befitting his office, perhaps, but ones that he has very quickly proven to be more than just lip service.

Within a year of his appointment, on March 26, 2012, the very first Qatari Ambassador to Canada proved that bilateral commitment by offering, on behalf of his government, McGill’s Institute of Islamic Studies a generous funding package of CAD \$1.25 million. But the question remains ... why McGill? It begins, as all studies do, with a perspective that comes grounded in history. In other words, this eventual partnership was simply a matter of *time* ... and inevitability.

McGill’s prestigious Institute of Islamic Studies (ISL) was first founded in 1952 as an academic entity dedicated to the study and applied understanding of Islamic culture throughout history. By

integrating a diverse student body and faculty of both Muslims and non-Muslims, the Institute has, throughout its existence, reached out to the world in a way almost identical to that which the ambassador spoke of earlier.

Now in its 60th year, it continues to bridge the divide between cultures by affording not only its students, but the entire population of its mother city, Montreal, with a host of programmes, events and otherwise academic and cultural pursuits. These showcase not a “clash” of civilisations - a terribly divisive turn of phrase - but rather an appreciation, a reconciling of one within the other. Such an academic body with its storied lineage proved too enticing a model for the ambassador and his home nation to pass up:

“In Qatar, we believe in the integration of cultures and civilisations and reject the concepts of their conflict. We believe that Islam has represented itself in world history as a religion,

culture and civilisation that has positively contributed towards our modern world and its heritage. Hence, supporting the McGill Institute’s programmes and events that study a wide spectrum of issues associated with Islam, whether in terms of theology, languages, philosophy, science, astronomy, arts or calligraphy, allow further understanding of Islam, its past and its continuous contributions, but also contribute towards interfaith dialogue, which my country strongly advocates.



“McGill University’s Institute of Islamic Studies enjoys a worldwide recognition,” the ambassador continued, “and as one of the leading institutes in the field of Islamic studies, it was an inevitable attraction, to which the Government of Qatar envisioned the merits of providing a contribution to support the institute, as part of its numerous international contributions that are provided annually in support of science and research around the globe.”

So it was, in his words, that a shared vision of knowledge and education would provide the key to meeting the challenges of a changing world and contribute to the well-being and coexistence of peoples, and the two formidable world players entered into an equally robust and mutually-beneficial partnership. But what exactly would that union yield?





Hard-lined skeptics might immediately jump to the argument that such funding comes with its own price; a caveat, perhaps, that the Institute would be forced to garner its funding-driven events and lectures calendar with lessons solely based on the Gulf. In actual fact, however, the allocation has funded an impressively diverse set of events, which thus far have succeeded in fostering a widely-sweeping, yet cohesive appreciation of Islam's vast cultural breadth.

The first events to benefit from the State of Qatar's grant centred around the *sound* of Islam. Invited to the Institute as a visiting Musician-in-Residence for 10 days in October 2012, Dr. A.J. Racy not only brought a background as a distinguished performer and composer renowned on the world stage, but also with academic chops as the Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

His free workshops, concert and successful public lecture, "Art and Ecstasy in Arab Music," culminated in a celebration of both sound and substance. Joined by Souhail Kaspar, a famed percussionist best known for recording the song "Desert Rose" with Sting, Dr. Racy delighted all in attendance with a symphony of history, culture and of course, the resounding tonal notes that so often thread them together.

Further showing the diversity inherent in the funded programmes, the Institute also presented another night of music, this hosted by the Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia, HE Dienne H. Moehario, who, with the Schulich School of Music, held a workshop, reception and concert, all of which celebrated the 60th anniversary of Indonesia-Canada diplomatic relations. Replete with a company of dancers and musicians from the Indonesian Institute of Art, Yogyakarta, and the Indonesian Gondang Orchestra, this free-to-the-public series was a waltz through time and culture that simply would not have been possible without Qatar's funding.

There followed a series of events that verged on the slightly more academic, yet no less fascinating and beautiful. Curated by Adam Gacek, former Head of the Islamic Studies Library and Research Assistant, RASI Project. "Strokes and Hairlines: Elegant Writing and its Place in Muslim Book Culture" is an intriguing and pervasive exhibition that taps into the rich manuscript collections of the McGill Library. Analysing both literally and thematically the calligraphic sweep of influence enjoyed by the Arabic language's written aesthetic, which stretched from the Maghreb to India, the exhibit includes everything from parchment from Qur'ans produced in the early Abbasid period (9-10 centuries) to the delicate writing implements used by its practitioners.

This celebration of the written word was further focused with some of Islam's most gorgeous and long-lasting artistry: calligraphy. The Institute first welcomed famed Turkish master calligrapher, Dr. Hilal Kazan, whose book, *Female Calligraphers Past and Present and Art Patronage in Ottoman Court in the 16th Century*, reshaped the modern idea of women's





involvement within the historical context of calligraphy. Dr. Kazan was then followed by a familiar face to regular *Sur la Terre* readers.

A long-time, dear friend of our humble publication and regular visitor to Doha, the renowned master of Arabic calligraphy and current lecturer on Arabic calligraphy at the Islamic College in Zhen Zhou, China and the Zaytuna Institute in California, Haji Noor Deen Mi Guang Jiang first appeared within the pages of *SLT* in June 2009, where he spoke with us at length about the history of Islam, Arabic calligraphy and the culture of both within his homeland of China.

We were fortunate enough to have a special piece commissioned for the article, and as anyone in *Sur la Terre* Towers will tell you, his unique style, which mixes traditional Chinese calligraphy with that of the Arab world, is nothing short of stunning, and still finds itself in a hallowed position on our walls. His lecture via the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill, Sini Calligraphy - "Arabic Calligraphy in the Chinese Tradition", was nothing short of engrossing, a captivation matched only by his magnetic personality and gentle effervescence.

Having attended several of these events myself, I can assure both you and His Excellency the Ambassador himself that the funding provided by the State of Qatar to institutions such as this is being spent with excellent, enthusiastic and elucidatory purpose. It is good to know that while other nations consolidate their declining wealth by cutting programmes like that which McGill's Institute enjoys, Qatar still stands as a beacon, lighting the way to a world of continuing cultural appreciation, both domestically and internationally.

A Few More Questions with the first Qatari Ambassador to Canada, His Excellency Salem Al-Shafi

Obviously Qatar has invested millions in creating an arts culture within its own borders, but why is it important for the state to establish that presence within the arts scene outside of the country itself?

Qatar's role and contributions are not confined to its borders, as my government has constantly adopted policies of strong engagement within the international community, whether in terms of mediation, conflict resolution or providing

humanitarian assistance and participating in relief efforts. Furthermore, Qatar has continuously provided generous contributions globally to support research and education, as well as undertaking genuine initiatives such as the most recent "Educate A Child," which was introduced last November by HH Sheikha Moza, Consort of His Highness the Emir of Qatar, and was aimed towards assisting 61 million children around the world who are missing out on basic education.



What was it like being named the first ambassador from Qatar to Canada? That must have been a daunting undertaking.

It was a great honour to be entrusted with this task and a privilege to have the opportunity to serve Qatar in a country as beautiful and important as Canada. Yet, much has to be achieved to grasp the possibilities and invest in the wide opportunities that would bring the two countries closer together. However, I have been fortunate to receive candid support from the Government and people of Canada towards facilitating my mission.

Finally, and on a more personal note, what do you like best about Canada, and what do you miss most about home?

I would say the friendly warm Canadians first, and secondly, the lovely scenery that this country provides from its east to its west shores. Though, I wouldn't mind a milder winter next year. As for home, once you leave it, you miss every single detail that reminds you of it.