

As Houston is scheduled to host ISNA's 55th Annual Convention this September, we are introducing a six-part series highlighting the city's uniqueness through interviews with extraordinary Houstonians and exploring various aspects of life in the country's fourth largest city. This article, the third piece in this series, focuses on Houston's Islamic Arts Society.



Art: A Unique Form of Da'wah

A group of Houston-area Muslims are reaching out to the general public through their art

BY SAMAN ESSA

“ART IS THE BEST form of da'wah,” says Dr. Khawaja Azimuddin, president of the Islamic Arts Society (IAS; www.islamicartsociety.com), “because anyone, Muslims and non-Muslims, can appreciate art.” Azimuddin, one of the few board certified colon and rectal surgeons practicing in North Houston, is also a calligraphist who displays his art on ceramic glazed tiles.

The non-profit Houston-

based IAS seeks to build bridges between the city's Muslim community and its neighbors through a unique lens — art! The organization began in 2014 when a group of enthusiastic, art-loving Houstonians recognized there was a local interest in Islamic art.

The local Pearl Fincher Museum invited Azimuddin, who had taken an interest in tile and ceramic art during a trip to New Mexico in 2001, to provide a small sample of Arabic art at

its exhibit of Islamic Art. At that event he met his fellow co-founders of what would soon become the IAS. Around the same time, Azimuddin displayed the murals he had created at his local masjid, Masjid Al-Salam (better known as Champion's Masjid). Feeling that this would be a great time to invite a few other artists to showcase their work, it turned into the first Islamic Arts Festival. Advertised only through word of mouth and Facebook, it drew over 400 people.

Last year's event was held in late November. The fourth festival to be held at Champion's Masjid, it attracted over 900 people and over 50 artists from across the country. One reason for its popularity is the scarcity of art forums devoted exclusively to Islamic art. In fact, this is one of the main reasons why Azimuddin and his colleagues continue to organize it.

Upon my arrival at 10 a.m., the event was already bustling with people! The parking lot was lined with halal food trucks, booths set up and manned by local Islamic organizations to advertise their latest events and stalls selling clothes and jewelry.

The masjid's basketball/gym arena, now serving as a temporary art gallery, featured Muslims artists from across the city and even some from other states. A red carpet was rolled out in a square-like layout, which visitors were asked to follow. Paintings hung from each wall, bringing color and life to the now-unrecognizable gym.

To some, Islamic art may seem rather mundane. In fact, even I thought — foolishly, as it turned out — that I would only see calligraphy with Allah's names or paintings of landscapes with mosques in the background. I soon realized how wrong I was.

Sadaf Saleem carved Allah's name into metal gates and wooden doors. Some used clocks as their medium and etched Arabic calligraphy into the background. One artist employed laser cutters to create geometric patterns in lanterns, and a photographer showcased her photos of unique masjids from across America and around the world.

Samar Babar presented her artwork on a “canvas” of tree trunk slices. Some artists applied their talent to jewelry and created unique pieces related to

PRINCIPAL POSITION

K-8 Private School in
East Lansing, Michigan

Employment Opportunity
2018- 2019 Academic Year

Contact: Dr. Janine Sinno at:
janine_sinno@yahoo.com
or Dr. Mohammad Khalil at:
khalilmsu@gmail.com
(517) 332-3700

Basic Duties: Serve as the chief instructional leader of the school. Work in cooperation and coordination with the School Committee and the Islamic Center (upon occasion) to manage all affairs of the day to day operation of the school in accordance with the SC policies and procedures.

- Communicate regularly and effectively with parents and community
- Work with faculty, support staff, parents and students from diverse multicultural backgrounds
- Communicate effectively orally and in writing
- Curriculum development and MStep testing coordination with state and local ISD
- Work with the Advanced Accreditation Agency to maintain continuous improvement at GLIS
- Analyze school achievement data and lead staff in using the data to support student achievement
- Recruitment of teachers and staff
- Help develop the school budget and manage the school finances within that budget
- Help with the annual school fundraising
- Collect tuition and maintain record of tuition payments
- Keep record of all financial transactions conducted by the principal and school staff
- Conduct observations of instructional practices and follow-up with feedback
- Manage the school budget with the support of the school treasurer to support GLIS instructional goals
- Oversee the coordination of extracurricular activities and the after school program (i.e. tutoring program and clubs)
- Set up and oversee morning assembly
- Develop the school calendar and class schedule
- Revise and maintain report cards
- Interpret, apply and explain rules, policies and procedures to faculty, staff, parents, and students
- Oversee the publication of an annual school yearbook
- Obtain volunteers to help with school activities
- Develop emergency lock-down and evacuation plans
- Develop clear lines of communication and hierarchy within the school

Preferred Qualifications:

- Master's Degree in Educational Administration or its equivalent in experience
- Teaching credentials and a minimum of five years teaching experience
- Experience as a principal, vice-principal, department chair, or university professor
- Knowledgeable in the Islamic religion
- Practicing Muslim

Islam, while others displayed handmade cards or printed mugs, shirts and magnets with graphic designs. The festival also dedicated a few tables to students who attend Houston's Islamic schools to showcase their artwork.

parts: outreach and small group events. As part of outreach, members go to local libraries and set up a display in an art cabinet. Their target audience is open-minded individuals, who are drawn to libraries because they enjoy gaining

ART MAKES PEOPLE CURIOUS ABOUT ISLAM IN A WAY THAT CANNOT BE REPLICATED IN OTHER WAYS OF DA'WAH.

Swaleha Khanzada, inspired by quotes from the Prophet (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) and Ali (*'alayhi wa rahmat*), paints Islamic folk art. Houston-based Hina Chaudhry utilizes glitter, gems, stones and glass to give a glitzy feel to her paintings. Parvana Ali, who works with paisleys, draws from Slovak, Persian and Azerbaijani sources as inspiration. Hedaya Kelani creates pieces of artwork from old books.

When graphic artist Riyadh Ghosheh, who attended with his artist wife Badira Farrah, was asked to identify his favorite art technique, he replied, "For me, it's not about the tool. It's about the message." He views art was a form of da'wah because this unique medium enables him to show people how beautiful Islam is through beautiful pieces of art.

During the interactive sessions, visitors could request something to be written in calligraphy or watch a live demonstration how the Turkish marbling technique known as *ebru* helps create a piece of art. Stations set up in the middle of the exhibition encouraged kids to "Paint with the Artist" and learn techniques from the artists themselves.


Shaheen Rahman, artist and IAS co-curator, employs *ebru* in her paintings. She recently exhibited her work in Houston's City Hall and was recognized by Mayor Sylvester Turner. Although the majority of those paintings did not survive Hurricane Harvey, she was able to salvage and display a few pieces at the event. When asked what she liked most about painting, Rahman responded, "In art, some things are on the surface, like the object of the artwork. But some things, like the meaning, are hidden, and folded into the artwork itself."

Azimuddin splits IAS events into two

new knowledge. IAS also holds a library demonstration day, during which artists will demonstrate Arabic calligraphy, *ebru*, or henna. These art displays move to a new library every month. After nearly four years of existence, IAS has been showcased in nearly every local library and now hopes to expand this event to libraries nationwide.

The society's second set of events are held when companies, universities or groups contact IAS to bring its members' art to them. In the past, IAS has collaborated with the University of Houston, Texas A&M University and companies for Diversity Day.

Rahman, Azimuddin and the rest of their team hope to solidify their financial stability before expanding their traveling library art cabinet display and successful festival to other cities. "In America," Azimuddin says, "people understand and appreciate art. The best way to build bridges is through art. When you talk about politics, culture, ethnicity ... you may not find common ground. When you hand out CDs or pamphlets about Islam, sometimes it turns them away from something that we all find beautiful [Islam]. So for me, art is the best form of da'wah. When you show people art and talk about it, people are impressed by the translation of some of the Arabic calligraphy." Art makes people curious about Islam in a way that cannot be replicated in other ways of da'wah.

IAS members, who have displayed their artwork at ICNA conventions, hope to bring their artwork and live demonstrations to this year's ISNA convention — to be held in Houston. 

Saman Essa, who is majoring in psychology and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Houston, plans to become a psychologist with a focus on immigrant and refugee populations in the U.S.