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# PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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## “RETURNING FROM DISTANT JOURNEYS”: ON THE HISTORY OF GATHERING THE MUSLIM COLLECTIONS OF MAE RAS (NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST). I [1]

A museum is a grandiose “three-dimensional encyclopaedia” of countries and peoples, traditions and religions. The invaluable ethnographic, anthropological and archaeological collections kept at the Museum are some of the fullest and most interesting in the world. They number around two million items, reflect the full diversity of the cultures of the New and Old Worlds, and are a part of the cultural heritage of all mankind.

But what are the Islamic collections of the *Kunstkamera*? And can they be called treasures, if their modest charm pales, for example, before the great treasures of the Hermitage, the younger relative of our Museum?

Spreading together with the Arab conquests from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, Islamic culture is a unique phenomenon, despite the local features which are recognisable at first glance. Islam rejects the separation of religious and secular, which is characteristic for Christianity (render unto God what is God's, and unto Caesar what is Caesar's), putting its imprint on the material world, created by man as a mixture of general and particular. It is not for no reason that scholars who towed the party line in the Soviet era, who tried to divide religious and ethnic for good, were opposed to the very concept of an Islamic, or Arab-Muslim culture, which academic I. Iu. Krachkovskii and his pupils never rejected [2].

Ethnographic treasures are not the gold or gems of the *Golkondā* or the Great Mughals, not the unique treasures of unmatched masters, but the domestic evidence of daily life from birth to death, which has been preserved by descendents and scholars. The value of ethnographic treasures is above all in the richness of information that they contain. In order to make items speak, it is very important to have evidence about who, used them, where, when and how, reflected in the museum description, and also visual material — drawings, models, printed folk drawings, engravings and prints, and photographs kept in the illustration funds of the Museum.

The personality of the collector has enormous importance to assess this evidence. Before the October revolution, the names of collectors and donors were indicated on the exhibit of our Museum with “special inscriptions on a red background” [3]. In Soviet times, they were not made public, because among them was the executed poet N. S. Gumilëv (the collector of the Ethiopian collections), members of the house of the Romanovs, Tsarist grandees, generals and admirals, diplomats and officials. Some items requisitioned by the Bolsheviks were sent to the *Kunstkamera* from the Expert commission and other institutes. People who sold ethnographic items to our Museum often concealed their names, to avoid the attention of the punitive bodies. Historical justice forces us to give proper attention to collectors of Islamic ethnographic treasures.

These MAE collections are not united in a single whole, but are categorised in several departments — ethnography of the peoples of South and Southwest Asia, ethnography of the peoples of Africa, the M. V. Lomonosov Museum, and also ethnography of the peoples of Central Asia, the peoples of South and Southeast Asia, and the peoples of the Caucasus. The collections of South and Southeast Asia (Dungans, Malays etc.) remain outside the scope of our description, while the collections of the Central Asia Department will be discussed in the special article to be published in our journal.

The Middle East collections of MAE RAS formed over almost the entire history of the first Russian general access museum and accumulated a series of wonderful monuments connected with the traditional culture of the Middle and Near East. The history of the formation of this collection, like the history of individual exhibits, is closely linked with the history of Russia's relations with countries in the region, with the history of scientific expeditions, diplomatic and trade journeys to the Muslim East [4].

The “oriental vector” of the policies of Peter the Great, and later of Catherine the Great [5], the wars of