

# A History of the Hajj in Ten Objects

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Besides Professor Nasser D. Khalili's unrivalled Islamic Art collection, his *Hajj and the Art of Pilgrimage* collection contains approximately 3,000 objects, including over 250 textiles associated with Makkah and Madinah and many other objects which together provide a comprehensive overview of the religious, spiritual, cultural and artistic aspects of the Hajj. Professor Khalili and the (then)

Director of the British Museum Dr Neil McGregor were the visionaries behind the 2012 blockbuster exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* at the British Museum in London. Indeed, at the occasion of the opening the exhibition the Dr McGregor said, 'It would have been impossible to tell that story without those great works of art from David's collection'. Combined, the Khalili Hajj Collection is the largest of its kind outside the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul, and is being researched and catalogued in a multi-volume series of publications by the world's leading experts on the Hajj, led by Professor Khalili. In this article, Professor Khalili uses art from this breath-taking collection to tell the story of the world's most phenomenal religious event.

*"Proclaim the Pilgrimage to all people. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of swift mount, emerging from every deep mountain pass" (Quran: 22:27)*

**H**ajj is the annual pilgrimage to the sacred city of Makkah, the holiest city in Islam and the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Every year Muslims from around the world arrive in Saudi Arabia and perform a series of

elaborate rites which take place during five days of Dhu'l-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Islamic calendar. Hajj begins with a visit to the Kaaba and culminates on the Plain of Arafat a short distance away. Pilgrimage to Makkah is one of the five Pillars of Islam and Muslims wherever they are must perform it at least once in their lifetimes, if they are able.

Since the advent of Islam, Hajj has been one of the most remarkable religious gatherings in the world, although until recent times, one that has been largely unknown to the Western world. Non-Muslims have always been strictly forbidden entry to Makkah, so there has historically been little understanding of the deeper meaning of Hajj, its rituals and their spiritual and visual significance.

This pilgrimage has been performed uninterrupted since the 7th century and during the season of Hajj, Makkah is witness to one of the largest congregations of people at any given place and time, with some three million Muslims converging towards it from the four corners of the earth.

In Islamic history, it is Abraham of the Old Testament who plays a significant role as the restorer of a monotheistic faith that would centre about a sacred building in the barren valley of 'Bacca' or Makkah as it later became known. According to Islamic tradition, upon Divine command, the family of Abraham were instructed to travel to a barren valley. His son Ishmael and the boy's mother Hagar would travel to this wilderness alone and later Abraham received the command from God to build a sanctuary there.

A very early reference to 'Bacca' in the Bible, in the Psalms of David 84:6, confers blessings upon those: "...who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Bacca".

This being an indication that perhaps this site was still one of veneration and visitation long after Abraham had established it as a place of monotheistic belief. Later the same word is used in the Quran (3:96) to describe it as "a blessed place; a source of guidance for all

people". More so than this however, in the Quran, Abraham was instructed specifically to make this place a point of pilgrimage and sanctuary, a place of peace. *"We showed Abraham the site of the House, saying 'do not assign partners to Me. Purify My House for those who circle around it, those who stand to pray, and those who bow and prostrate themselves."* (Quran: 22:26)

Abraham then becomes central in raising up this sacred building called the Kaaba in Makkah as a centre of pilgrimage and making it into a place of pure monotheistic belief and a focal point of the worship of One God. Abraham becomes *Ibrahim Khalil Allah* ﷺ – the most cherished friend of God – and for this reason scholars have rightly called Makkah the City of Abraham.

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What Abraham started, many centuries later Prophet Muhammad affirms and Muslims have been performing what we know as Hajj since 732 – the year of Prophet Muhammad's death and his first and last officiating of Hajj rituals in what is called the Farewell Pilgrimage. The well-known sermon delivered during this Hajj was the moment at which the Prophet Muhammad completed his message taking leave from the community. He delivered a clear message to all regarding their new commitments and above all abolished a number of pre-Islamic customs, placing the foundation of a new beginning.

The pilgrimage then, has been prescribed on Muslims as detailed by the Prophet Muhammad, and this injunction in the Quran has encouraged Muslims to at least once in their lifetimes aspire to visit the Kaaba. Nearly 1400 years later, the monotheistic platform established by Abraham becomes the thread which holds together this ideal with the establishment of Prophet Muhammad's message. It is this thread which motivates Muslims to travel to Makkah today.

Obedying the command set down in the Quran in 624 for Muslims to face Makkah in prayer (changing the direction from Jerusalem) established a new consciousness for the early Muslims that Makkah was indeed the absolute heart of Islam. Since, Muslims all over the world have faced Makkah five times a day for prayer although for Muslims who are thousands of miles away finding this sacred direction (*qibla*) may have been a challenge. More challenging still is the prospect of pilgrims travelling to Makkah on foot and not losing their way.

From early on Muslims were using sophisticated instruments to determine locations and directions for this journey. We know that pilgrim caravans travelling on foot would be accompanied by a *Miqati* who was responsible for announcing the hour when prayer was due *en route*. He had to indicate the correct orientation of Makkah also, so that the ritual prayer was conducted properly.

Naser-e Khusraw in 1050 wrote, *"Whoever wants to go to Makkah from Egypt must go East"* and it is with this advice he travels to Makkah via the great city of Cairo. This very early account informs us that we may either travel 15 days through the desert or approximately 23 days by sea. Certainly before the 19th century and the modern age of travel, the pilgrims' journey would have been long and perilous and there is no lack of traveller's accounts which inform us so. Ibn Battuta for instance tells us:

2. Section from a cover of the *Maqam Ibrahim*, a stone with the imprints of the feet of Abraham, made it is believed, when he was building the Kaaba. Cairo, late 19th century 200 x 125cm



1. Silver and silver-gilt metal and thread embroidered panel from the hizam (or belt) of the Kaaba. The text consists of a Quranic verse that mentions Bacca and Abraham. Makkah, early 20th century 90 x 590cm





*“Halfway lies the valley of Ukhaidir, which might be more aptly named Valley of Hell. One year the hajjis suffered terribly in this place, for the samoom [poison wind] began blowing, their waterskins dried up, and the price of a drink rose to a thousand dinars. Both seller and buyer perished....”*

Pilgrims from the Arab world would have joined these great caravans, ‘cities on the move’ as Richard Burton described them, which set out from the main cities across the Islamic world and included pilgrims from much further afield. Three caravans are particularly well known: from Egypt, from Damascus and from Baghdad. However, it was the caravan from Cairo which crossed the Sinai Peninsula which ignited the imagination of so many European observers: *“Seven thousand souls on foot, on horseback, in litters, or bestriding the splendid camels of Syria”*, Burton observed.

The head of the caravan, the Amir Al Hajj was the official in charge of the pilgrims and their safety and along with him was a generous retinue, including judges, bakers and vets. On the way there were caravansaries and watering holes which would provide the travellers with much needed refreshment, rest, safety from attack and shelter from heat. From the 13th century, the Egyptian caravan was demarcated with the Mahmal: a wooden palanquin covered with an exquisitely decorated textile which balanced upon an equally decorated (and pampered) camel. As well as being a beacon of colour and a symbol of anticipated blessings, the Mahmal was primarily a symbol of political sovereignty. First the Mamluks (1250–1517) and later the Ottoman Sultans (from their conquest of Egypt in 1517–1923) would use this and the accompanying new Kiswah (the cloth which was placed over the Kaaba) to emphasise their role as sovereigns protectors of the two Holy Sanctuaries.

The Mahmal would leave the city with great pomp and celebration; well-wishers would touch it to obtain blessings, whilst others would revel in the sight itself. The Mahmal then would formally accompany the pilgrims along the perilous journey which lay ahead. These pious travellers would follow in whatever transport they could afford with the knowledge that they may never see their loved ones again. Indeed Ibn Batutta at the age of 22 who left Tangier in 1325 for Makkah, was saddened immensely at having to leave his parents at the time of his departure, not knowing if he would see them again.

Arriving in Makkah, the sanctuary that God had commanded it to be through Abraham, must have been a shocking sight for early pilgrims, many of whom would never have seen depictions of the Kaaba before. From written records we know that virtually all travellers who visited Makkah were deeply inspired by this place. In 1807 Ali Bey Al Abassi wrote his moving account at seeing the Kaaba for the first time:

*“...the Kaaba, or House of God, covered with the black cloth from top to bottom and surrounded with a circle of lamps or lanterns; the hour; the silence of the night; and this man speaking in a solemn tone, as if he had been inspired; all served to form an imposing picture, which will never be effaced from my memory.”*

Before arriving in Makkah, pilgrims don the ihram garments, two pieces of unstitched white cloth for men and a long robe and head

covering for women. The concept of ihram however, is much more than just clothing; it is also a state of mind. The pilgrim must enter this state of mind in order for the *ihram* to have spiritual significance and for this reason pilgrims renounce all mundane pleasures.

Entering Makkah in *ihram*, pilgrims would have been presented with the sight of the Kaaba being circumambulated (*Tawaf*) by hundreds and today millions of pilgrims. The Kaaba is a stone structure, roughly cuboid, which stands in the middle of the courtyard of this great mosque, the Masjid al-Haram. Embedded in its eastern corner is the Black Stone (*al-Hajar al-Aswad*), which pilgrims must try to touch or salute whilst circling the Kaaba seven times. There are many legends surrounding this black stone which is probably a meteorite, however it is revered by Muslims as Prophet Muhammad revered it – as a part of the building erected by Abraham.

The structure is simple and at approximately eight meters square it is humble in size. This compares strangely to the architectural resplendence of other religious buildings; however, it is this very humility which calls into account the centuries of praise for its unparalleled dignity. For of course, the Kaaba is not a temple like any other; it is the alignment of both the physicality and spirituality of Islam.

It was a custom before the advent of Islam that the Kaaba would be dressed with a covering. The first to do so is believed to be the Yemeni King As'ad bin Karb who some 200 years before Islam draped its walls with fine Yemeni fabrics. Almost every year since, the Kaaba has been

3. A Brass-mounted Qibla Compass with depictions of the sanctuaries at Makkah, Madinah and Jerusalem. Istanbul, 18th century; 20.2 x 18cm (overall) 10 x 7cm (painted area)



Bag for the key of the Kaaba - Turkey or Egypt, dated ah 1137 (ad 1724–5) Green silk, embroidered in silver-gilt wire over padding



5. Panoramic view of the city of Makkah

Muhammad Abdallah, whose grandfather, Mazar Ali Khan was court painter to the Mughal ruler Bahadur Shah II, was commissioned by the Sharif of Makkah to depict the Holy City. It is the earliest known accurate eyewitness record of the city.

Makkah, circa 1845AD

62.8 x 88cm





dressed in the Kiswah during the Hajj season. A significant number of textiles for the Kaaba, the mosque and also for Madinah (the second holiest city of Islam and the resting place of the Prophet Muhammad), from the 16th century onwards have survived, renewed regularly by the rulers who governed the region.

When the textiles were replaced, the old ones were divided and distributed out to pilgrims. This was carried out by the Bani Shayba, whose role as custodians and key holders of the Kaaba was confirmed by a verse in the Quran (4:58) and a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (*a hadith*): “Take the key, O Bani Talha, eternally up to the Day of Resurrection, and it will not be taken from you unless by an unjust, oppressive tyrant.”

Today craftsmen in Makkah spend approximately one year, using a combination of modern technology and ancient craftsmanship, to produce the iconic gold on black Kiswah of Saudi Arabia. Usually, the new cloth is ready two months before Hajj and contains 700 kg of silk and 120 kg of golden and silver thread.

In the state of ihram and having completed seven circuits of *Tawaf* around the Kaaba, pilgrims continue the initial rituals at Makkah with *sa'i*, the running between the hillocks of Safa and Marwa. This recalls Hagar who, having been left in Makkah, ran this course in search of water to quench the thirst of her son Ishmael. It was at this moment that the well of Zamzam was discovered at the child's feet. It is the family of Abraham that the start of Hajj commemorates and it is Hagar who pilgrims emulate in this 3.15 kilometre passing.

Indeed, the existence of the sanctuary which developed around the Kaaba and especially the spring of Zamzam may have been in part why Makkah became such an important place of visitation, although for Muslims the benefits of Zamzam are not only that it quenches the thirst. A saying of the Prophet Muhammad states that it is “beneficial for whatever aim it has been drunk for”, and many use the water for spiritual healing as well as in burial rites. Zamzam has been the source of water for pilgrims visiting Makkah ever since and today the King Abdullah Zamzam Water Factory produces approximately 200,000 bottles of water a day.

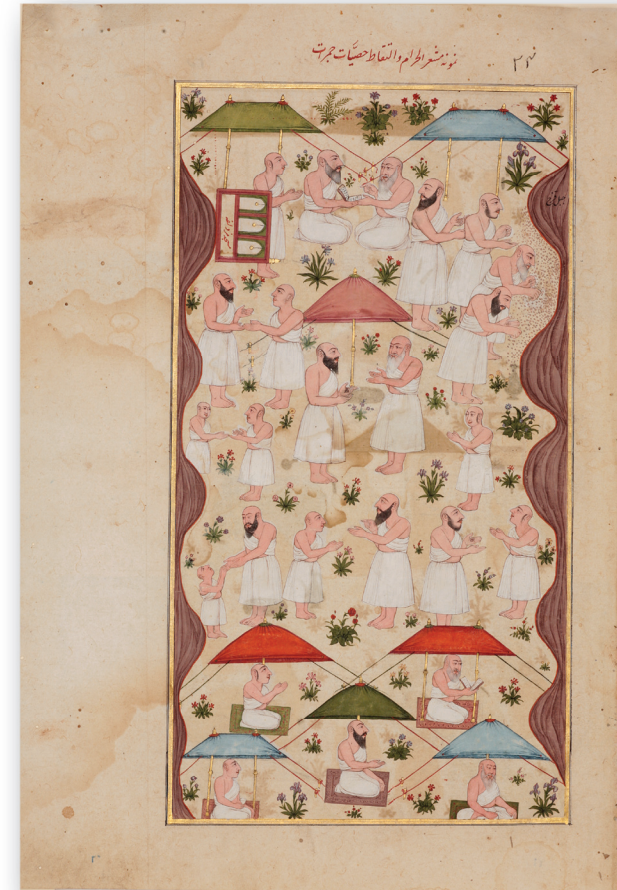
Upon leaving the Masjid al Haram, the Hajj rituals continue with visits to sacred locations around Makkah: Mina, Arafat and Muzdalifa. It is at Arafat that the faithful partake of the ‘standing’ (*Wuquf*) the culmination but not the end of the Hajj. This simple act of standing on the plain of Arafat facing Makkah marks the most important ritual of Hajj. If pilgrims are delayed and do not arrive there in time, their Hajj will be null and void. Arafat has at its heart a history which Islamic belief places before Abraham. Muslims believe that it is here that Adam, separated after the Fall, was reunited with Eve.

Following further rituals at Muzdalifa and Mina, the Hajj is complete. The pilgrim is adorned with a new title: Hajji for a man and Hajja for a woman, and the pilgrims would be free to travel. Many would return home, but most would prepare for the 450km journey to Madinah, the City of the Prophet.

Inspired by the intensity of Hajj and before the advent of photography and moving images, returning pilgrims had

not much other than their stories and memories to share with their families and communities, so over time there developed not only a vibrant tradition of written accounts but a rich artistic output inspired by this great gathering and with Makkah at its heart. This output took many forms – educational, evocative and sometimes fanciful, but the skill and dedication given to these works must have been a beacon to those who could never go. They are a testament today of the visual history of Hajj.

**6. Sitarah (or curtain) for the door of the Kaaba, ordered by the Ottoman Sultan Abdulmajid I. Heavily embroidered in silver and gilded silver wire, this was by far the most elaborate part of the Kiswah and was replaced annually. Cairo, dated 1849–50AD 519 x 278cm**



**7. The ritual of collecting pebbles at Muzdalifa; pilgrims in the town of Mina, being shaved, making sacrifices and casting pebbles. This day corresponds to 'Id al-Adha on 10 dhu'l-Hijjah, the feast commemorating the Sacrifice of Abraham. from a copy of Safi ibn Vali's Anis al-Hujjaj ('Pilgrims' Companion'). Gujarat, India, circa 1677–80AD 33 x 23cm (page)**

Historically, knowledge of these rituals has been made accessible to pilgrims through special manuals or guide books, generally known as *Manasik*, that explained the complicated but necessary steps which had to be performed in a specific order and at specific dates for the Hajj to be completed correctly. Only a few of these manuals are illustrated but an exception is the *Anis al-Hujjaj* ('Pilgrims' Companion') of Safi ibn Vali who performed his Hajj in 1676–7. A *Manasik* in many ways, this manuscript, which includes 18 illustrations, gives advice to the reader on all aspects of the journey from South Asia, including which ships to choose, how to stay healthy, the places to visit, the rituals to be observed and the people one is likely to encounter. His pilgrimage was made possible through the financial help of Zib al-Nisa, a daughter of the Mughal emperor Awrangzeb (r.1658–1707), for whom he had written a commentary on the Quran.

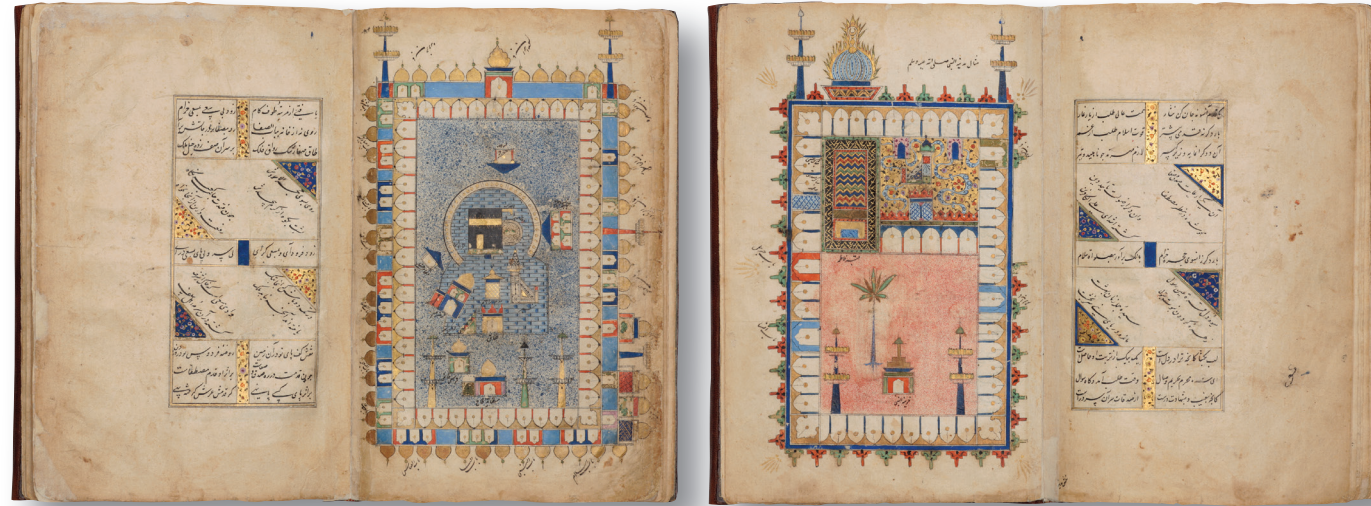
Another exception is the *Kitab Futuh al-Haramayn* ('Revelations of the two Sanctuaries') of Muhyi Lari. The text of this early 16th-century guide book is accompanied by numerous colourful stylised

representations of the various stations of pilgrimage and sacred places to visit in the vicinity of Makkah and Madinah. Many of the copies which have survived were produced in Makkah.

The advent of photography in the mid-19th century is of great importance to the history of the Hajj; for the first time the pilgrimage and the holy cities could be precisely and realistically documented. The earliest images of Makkah and Madinah were taken by the Egyptian photographer Sadiq Bey in 1880 and 1881. Other pioneering figures in the field include Christian Snouck Hurgronje, the first European photographer; and the Makkan doctor that he instructed, Al Sayyid 'Abd Al Ghaffar; and Ibrahim Rif'at Pasha and Muhammad 'Ali Sa'udi, both of whom were officials of the Egyptian pilgrim caravan in early 20th century. Photography became the platform from which the modern world would come to see Hajj in detail.

It is within this ever-widening sphere that artists have begun to experiment with their interpretation of Hajj. One such work is 'Magnetism' an installation by Ahmed Mater, one of Saudi





8. Views of the Holy Sanctuary in Makkah (left) and the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah (right), from a copy of the *Kitab Futuh al-Haramayn* of Muhyi Lari, a handbook for pilgrims to Makkah and Madinah Makkah, 1582 21.6 x 13.9cm (page)



9. Pilgrims at 'Arafat; albumen print signed Sadiq Bey, 1880 Muhammad Sadiq Bey (1832–1902)AD was an Egyptian army engineer and surveyor and the first person to take photographs of the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah and the Hajj. 15.5 x 22cm

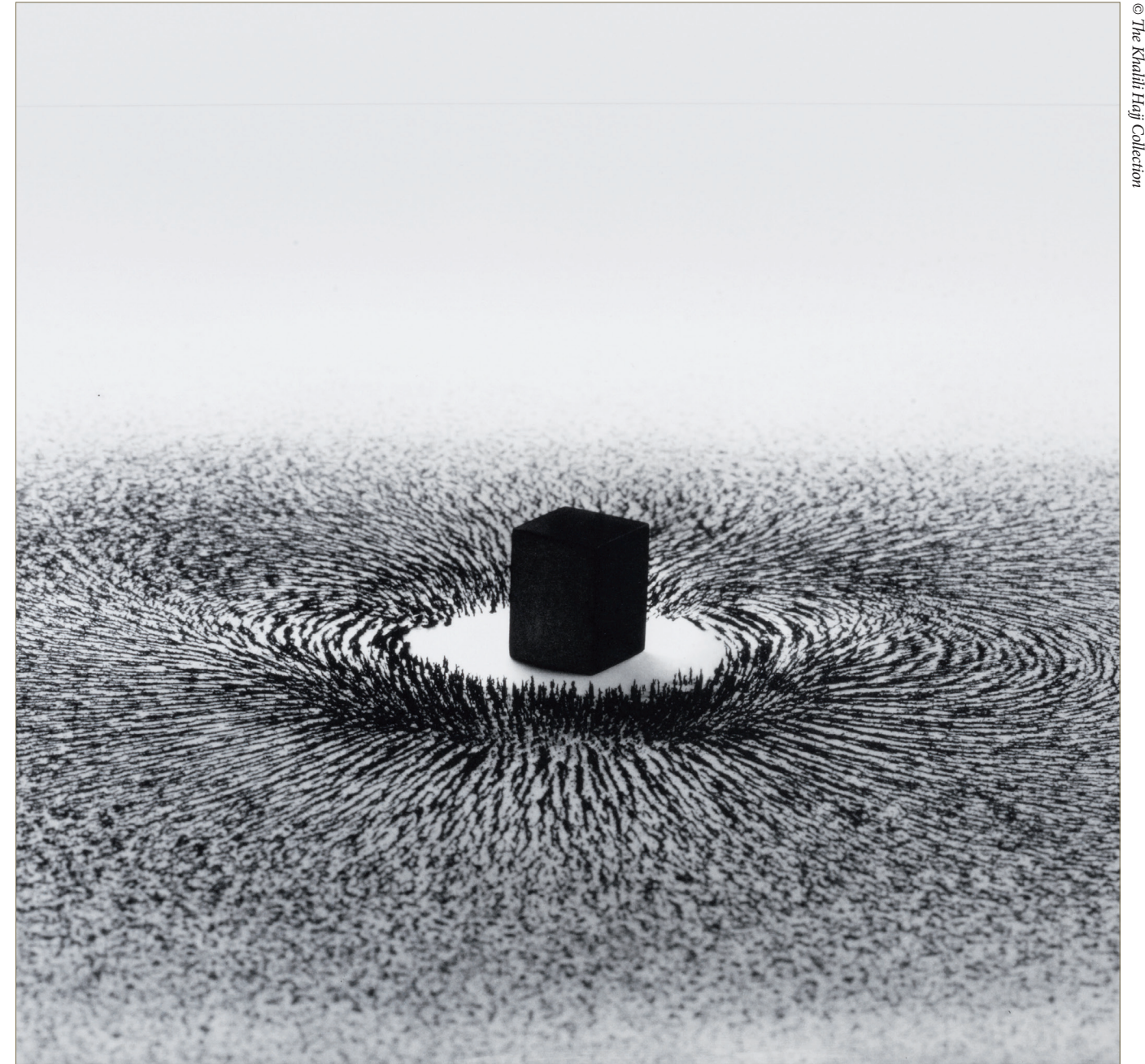
Arabia's most talented artists – which evokes the spirit of Hajj in its powerful symbolism.

Hajj is a great gathering of human beings. Dressed in their white ritual garments, the pilgrims stand shoulder to shoulder, toe to toe, equal before God, regardless of sect, race, gender, wealth or rank: this is Islam at its most harmonious and pure. In addition, the set

rituals of Hajj – which take place over five days – recall episodes from the life of Abraham and his son Ishmael which are shared by more than one religion.

*"The first House [of worship] to be established for people was the one at Makkah. It is a blessed place; a source of guidance for all people"* (Quran: 3:96)

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10. *Magnetism III*, by Ahmed Mater "The idea is simple and, like its central element, forcefully attractive... [Matar's] circumambulating whirl of metallic filings mirrors in miniature the concentric tawaf of the pilgrims and their sevenfold circling of the Kaaba". Tim Mckintosh-Smith Photogravure; 2012 42 x 63cm