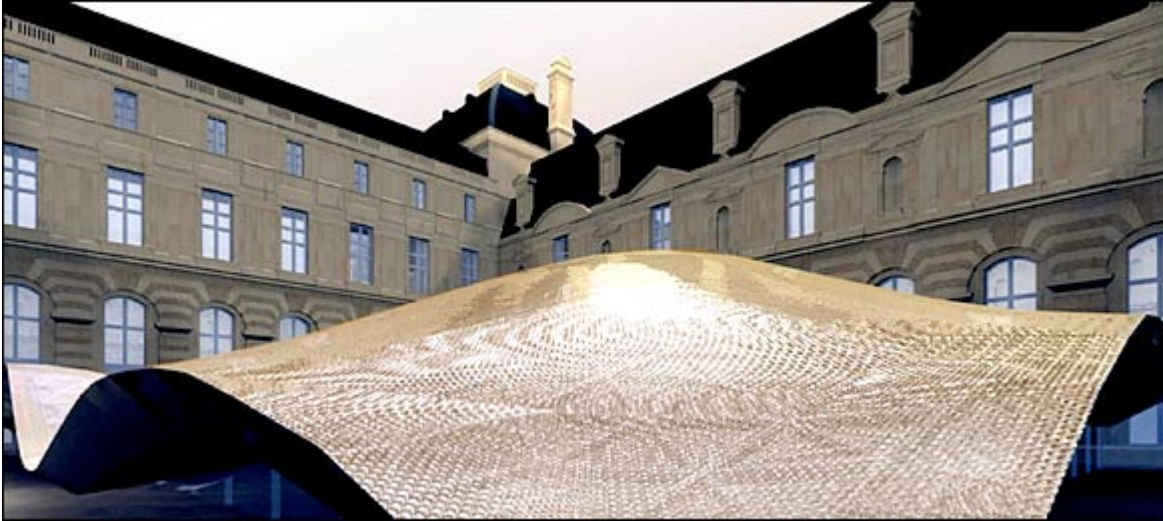


Louvre Gets \$20 Million for New Islamic Wing



A model shows how the design, by Mario Bellini and Rudy Ricciotti, will fit the new Islamic wing in the Louvre's Visconti courtyard.

By **JOHN TAGLIABUE**

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PARIS, July 27 - In the largest gift ever to the world's largest museum, a Saudi prince agreed on Tuesday to donate \$20 million to the construction of a wing for the Louvre's vast collection of Islamic art.

With considerable fanfare, the prince, Walid bin Talal, signed a donation agreement at the foot of the grand marble staircase leading to the Louvre's "Winged Victory" statue, with the French culture minister, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, and the president of the Louvre, Henri Loyrette, looking on.

The gift reflects France's complex relations with the Islamic world and a widening belief here that after 9/11, an increased appreciation of Islamic art can help bridge a cultural divide.

Without mentioning the recent terrorist bombings in London or the war in Iraq, where British troops are stationed along with American forces, Prince Walid said that "relations between Europe and the Islamic world are going through a turbulent period."

The new wing, he said, "will assist in the understanding of the true meaning of Islam, a religion of humanity, forgiveness and acceptance of other cultures."

"We should thank France," he said, "not France us."

The design for the new wing, unveiled at the ceremony, would involve covering much of the Louvre's Cour Visconti, a neo-Classical courtyard, with a contemporary sail-like roof made up of small glass disks. Officials put the total cost of the wing, by the architects Mario Bellini and Rudy Ricciotti, at \$67 million and predicted it would open in 2009.

Accepting the prince's \$20 million gift, Mr. Donnedieu de Vabres said the Louvre was no longer just a museum. "It is by now an essential instrument for the dialogue of cultures and the preservation of their diversities," he said.

"In a world where violence expresses itself individually and collectively," he added, "where hate erupts and imposes its expression of terror, you dare to affirm the conviction that is yours - that is ours - that the dialogue of peoples and cultures, the richness of patrimonies, the values of sharing are the responses of intelligence to the bitter experience of conflicts."

Three of the collection's most valuable and unusual pieces were on display on the table where Prince Walid signed the donation document: a delicate 10th-century ivory box from Córdoba, Spain; a 14th-century vase from Granada; and a 14th-century bronze platter made in Egypt or Syria for the Sultan of Yemen.

Prince Walid later paid a visit to President Jacques Chirac. In a statement released after their meeting, Mr. Chirac said he was "particularly attached" to the Islamic art project because it would give "the exceptional collection of the Louvre the exposition space that it merits."

Mr. Chirac proposed the creation of a new Islamic department for the Louvre three years ago to underline, as he said then, "the essential contribution of Islamic civilizations to our culture." The idea that an increased appreciation of Islamic art can serve as a cultural bridge to minority communities in France, many of them Muslim, has since gained wide currency in French cultural circles.

Prince Walid is less well known in France as a benefactor of the arts than as a shrewd businessman. He has a 17 percent stake in EuroDisney, the company that runs the Disneyland Paris resort outside the city. And he is owner, through the Kingdom Holding Company, of several of the city's most luxurious hotels, including the George V, on the street of the same name.

Though his EuroDisney investment has been less fruitful, the prince gained a reputation for financial acumen by investing in Citicorp, a predecessor of the current Citigroup, when its stock was depressed in 1991. Today he is Citigroup's largest single shareholder, and his personal fortune is estimated at \$23.7 billion.

The prince has a reputation beyond the Middle East as something of a political reformer. A nephew of King Fahd, and of Crown Prince Abdullah, Saudi Arabia's day-to-day ruler, Prince Walid is one of scores of grandsons of Saudi Arabia's founder, King Abdel Aziz. In the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, he proposed democratic elections in Saudi Arabia when few in his family would broach such a project publicly. He is a benefactor to the needy in the Muslim world and donates consistently to the Palestinian cause.