

First stone laid for Louvre's Islamic art gallery

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Saudi Arabian Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Bin Abdul aziz Al Saud, front left, and French president Nicolas Sarkozy, front right, places a map of the Louvre museum's future Islamic art department inside its first stone on Wednesday, July 16, 2008 in Paris, during a ceremony marking the launch of the works. In the background, from left to right, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's wife, Princess Ameera, Spiritual leader of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims the Aga Khan and French Culture minister Christine Albanel. (AP Photo/ Ercic Feferberg, Pool)

By GAELLE FAURE
Associated Press Writer

PARIS (AP) - The first stone was laid Wednesday at the Louvre's new Arts of Islam gallery, the first major modern architectural addition to the museum since its famed glass pyramid was built in the 1980s.

President Nicolas Sarkozy and a major donor for the project, Saudi Arabian Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, took part in the ceremony to start work on the addition, which includes a shimmering glass wave hanging over a 19th-century courtyard. The project's architects say it resembles a cloud or a flying carpet.

The wing, expected to open in 2010, will display a vast collection of Islamic art from the seventh to the 19th century.

At the groundbreaking ceremony, Sarkozy spoke of the need for dialogue between the West and the Middle East.

This gallery "will be the chance for all French and foreign visitors to the Louvre to see that Islam is progress, science, refinement, modernity, and that fanaticism in the name of Islam is to flout Islam," Sarkozy said.

The Louvre made a historic partnership with a country in the Muslim world when it announced its project for a Louvre Abu Dhabi museum in the United Arab Emirates last year.

"With Abu Dhabi, French museums are exporting, and here today it is Islam that is coming to the heart of France," French Culture Minister Christine Albanel said.

The gallery's construction, which will cost \$100 million, will be led by French architect Rudy Ricciotti and Italian colleague Mario Bellini. The light-filled ground level, under the wave, will host sturdier artworks, while a second underground level will shelter delicate items such as manuscripts and carpets.

Ricciotti said the project was not inspired by the Louvre's pyramid, designed by I.M. Pei and completed in 1989.

"Here we're in a much more intimate approach, less symbolic, less monumental," he said.

The construction will not alter or hide the historic facades of the Visconti courtyard, located at the heart of the Louvre's south wing.

The Saudi donor, who is the grandson of the country's founding king, is one of the richest men in the world, ranked 13th by Forbes in 2007. His investments span the globe. In France, he invested in Disneyland Paris and owns the capital's historic Georges V hotel. In 2005, he donated the initial \$26.9 million toward the Louvre's latest project, making him the single largest individual benefactor.

Other major contributors include the oil company Total and Lafarge, the world's largest cement maker, which both have interests in Saudi Arabia. The French state is supplying \$31.8 million, while smaller amounts will come from Oman, Kuwait and Azerbaijan.

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