

great curiosity from both foreign and French tourists," said Eric Delpont.

The screen system is made up of 240 motor controlled diaphragms that filter the light entering the building in a similar way to medieval -mushrabbiya wooden window coverings found in Islamic architecture to create shade and privacy.

As you walk into the lobby of the Institute, there is a play of light and shadow created by the building's many glass walls, floor-to-ceiling windows and a transparent elevator shaft. This futuristic steel and glass construction has hosted many large temporary exhibitions on the art, history and science of the Arab world. Indeed the clear, light space easily lends itself to complex and colourful transformations. The new thematic exhibition concept is a shift in French museum tradition, and it suits IMA. It has also been very welcome among regular museum visitors in France.

On the forecourt, I ask visitors what they think of the new IMA museum space: "I love coming to the IMA anyway," says a Parisian photographer. "The architecture, the light and space are very calming and meditative. The new galleries will encourage a new way of thinking about the Middle East."

"The Arab world is often lumped together," explains her friend, "People say, 'You are from Morocco, you must know something about Egypt!' but this way people will realize that Moroccan traditions and history are different from those in Egypt, Iraq, or the Gulf, for example. This new museum shows great progress!"

IMA was granted the official title 'Musée de France' in January 2011, which means that not only is the museum officially recognized by the French legal system, but that the conservation and restoration of the building and the care of the institute's collection became an official state duty. It also means that it is easier for IMA to borrow artefacts for its exhibitions and displays from other French or international museums and private collections. This must have played an important role as IMA set about furnishing its new museum. The permanent exhibition includes objects from the Louvre and the Quai Branly museums; museums and private collections in Syrian, Jordan, and Tunisia and in the Lebanon; as well as the Bahrain National Museum.

Another similarity to Islamic architecture is the outside 'sahn' or courtyard; with geometric paving that echoes the design of the façade. Since 1987, the courtyard has regularly housed tents and pavilions for separate shows, markets and events. In 2011, the French fashion house Chanel gifted 'Mobile Art' - a futuristic, pod-like structure, to the Institute. It was designed by Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid.

Mobile Art is another good reason to visit IMA now. Intended as a contemporary celebration of Chanel's visual language and its notorious symbol - the quilted handbag - Mobile Art is also a travelling art show. It can be taken apart, transported and re-assembled rapidly; it is lightweight, durable and can withstand the passage of thousands of visitors. Mobile Art was first unveiled at the Venice Biennale 2007. It was a great success and from the forecourt of IMA, it is clear why: the shape of Mobile Art is ultra modern and at the same time, organic. Its rounded, fluid shape complements the strong metal lines of Nouvel's IMA building. The result is strangely eerie. The cocoon-like gallery space is made up of partitions of fibre reinforced plastic and PVC, each no wider than 225 cm. These wind around an inner, naturally-lit courtyard. The spectator's natural impulse is to explore this curving capsule and see what is inside.

After its launch in Venice, 20 contemporary artists, each inspired in some way by the Chanel handbag, were invited to show their work within the pavilion, which was dismantled and then reassembled in Hong Kong, Tokyo and New York. It included work by French artists Daniel Buren, Pierre & Gilles and Sophie Calle, American photographer David Laundy, Chinese filmmaker Yan Fudong and Yoko Ono.

When Chanel offered the pavilion to IMA, it was to preserve Hadid's inspiring design and also to be used as an exhibition space to show work by contemporary artists from Arab countries. So far, the space has been used to showcase Zaha Hadid's own architectural career (April to October 2011) and then work by the winners of the Jameel Prize for Contemporary Art of Islamic Inspiration (December 2011-February 2012). Mobile Art's next exhibition, due this month, will focus on Algerian designers, to coincide with the country's 50th year of Independence. In the autumn, the pavilion will host a large exhibition by contemporary Arab artists to celebrate IMA's 25th birthday - there is a lot to celebrate!

IMA must be at the top of your list of sights to visit in Paris.

*For the Arab World Institute's programme of events, please visit www.imarabe.org
Sophie Kazan*

