

# Feeling uncomfortable in the nineteenth century

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The philosophical traveller, sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact travelling in time; he is exploring the past; every step he makes is the passage of an age.

Joseph-Marie Degérando<sup>1</sup>

But Aunt Neunzehn – perhaps drab, but crafty, like Balzac's *Cousine Bette* – is much too important to be slighted, even if her boastfulness and her bad taste make us squeamish.

Suzanne Marchand<sup>2</sup>

The excision of the nineteenth century from the master-narrative of Islamic art has been noted before now.<sup>3</sup> Its absence, as Finbarr Barry Flood has observed, is most quantitatively evident in the group of English-language survey texts of Islamic art that came out in the 1990s, none of which make significant inclusion of material dated later than 1800, and some of which venture little further than 1650.<sup>4</sup> Of course these survey texts were not, like wicked aunts in a fairytale, bent on banishing a

\* Some of the research for this essay was conducted while I was a postdoctoral fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh in 2011, and I would like thank the Institute for its support and my colleagues there for their stimulating discussion in the seminar I gave on this topic. I also thank the participants of the AKPIA graduate seminar 'Where does the field of Islamic art and architecture stand today?' held at MIT in November 2010, for their feedback on an earlier version of these ideas.

<sup>1</sup> *The Observation of Savage Peoples*, tr. F.C.T. Moore, London: Routledge, 1969 [1800], 63.

<sup>2</sup> 'Forum: The Long Nineteenth Century', *German History*, 26(1), 2008, 74.

<sup>3</sup> The fullest exploration of the absent nineteenth century to date is to be found in Finbarr Barry Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art', in Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, London: Routledge, 2007, 31-53. Much of the thinking behind the present essay was done before I had read Flood's piece and, while many of our conclusions are similar, we have, I think, arrived at these by somewhat different routes. The present study is, like Flood's, concerned primarily with studies written in English. A (largely unintentional) British thread runs through many of the examples and contexts discussed in this article, perhaps a reminder that the anglophone world of Islamic art scholarship is not monolithic. It should be noted from the start that this essay will not engage in debates about the naming of this subject area, and uses the conventional label 'Islamic art' in full awareness of the problems surrounding this term.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brend, *Islamic Art*, London: British Museum Press, 1991; Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1500–1800*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995 (1st ed. 1994); Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair, *Islamic Arts*, London: Phaidon, 1997; Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art*, London: Laurence King, 1997; Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999. The further major survey text published during this period – Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, 2nd ed., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001 – is not included in discussion as its timeframe naturally excludes the nineteenth century.

nineteenth century that had been previously flourishing within the academic study of Islamic art. They embody larger currents of Islamic art history, and act as both symptom and support of a disciplinary structure that has not yet found a satisfactory means of approach to the arts of the century in which it was born. Whether the rejection of the nineteenth century is acknowledged or speaks solely through absence, the *Urnarrative* that emerges from these texts, as well as from other writings on Islamic art and from many museum displays, clearly demonstrates that there is not yet perceived to be a significant or secure place for the nineteenth century in the overarching story of Islamic art. Two recent scholarly publications have raised the profile of the nineteenth century – Stephen Vernoit’s 1997 catalogue of the Khalili Collection’s nineteenth-century holdings, *Occidentalism: Islamic Art in the Nineteenth Century*,<sup>5</sup> and a 2006 collection of papers edited by the same author and Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Tradition, Innovation and Eclecticism*<sup>6</sup> – but not to the point where it is commonly incorporated into teaching or survey exhibition models. Rather than the triumphant march towards a glorious, multifaceted and – significantly – secular modernity that underpins many survey texts of the history of art as a whole, the master-narrative of Islamic art currently ends with a whimper somewhere in the colonial period.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, instead of a teleological narrative of progress, the survey model for Islamic art tends to follow a distinctly organicist pattern that is also notable for its employment of dynastic categories: early growth (Umayyad and early ‘Abbasid periods); maturity and blossoming (multiple medieval dynasties); peaking and ultimately overripening (the early modern empires); and finally decay and death (the advent of modernity in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the colonial programme). One outcome of this framework is that twentieth-century and contemporary art from the Islamic world necessarily inhabits a category that is entirely distinct from the historical material: the near-total occlusion of the nineteenth century has legitimized the creation of a completely separate model for looking at artistic production located after the apparent rupture delivered by modernity. In scholarly terms it has wrought, as Sussan Babaie suggests, ‘a postmodernism without its relevant modernism’.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, an inescapable implication of this organicist structure is the location of vigour and authenticity in the early and medieval periods, far from the creeping taint of the colonial project that was judged to be so lethal to Islamic art, and by extension presumably also prior to the advent of an increasingly globalized world order in the early modern period. As has been noted elsewhere, this originary emphasis in Islamic art history has a striking parallel in the revivalist Islamic

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Vernoit, *Occidentalism: Islamic Art in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit, eds, *Islamic Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Tradition, Innovation and Eclecticism*, Leiden: Brill, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> And this is only in the texts dedicated to Islamic art. On the position of Islamic art within general surveys of the history of art, where it is most commonly restricted entirely to the medieval period, see Robert Nelson, ‘The Map of Art History’, *The Art Bulletin*, 79(1), 1997, 37-8; and Flood, ‘Prophet’, 31-2.

<sup>8</sup> Sussan Babaie, ‘Locating the “Modern” in Islamic Arts’, *Getty Research Journal*, 3, 2011, 136.

movements of the nineteenth century that gave rise to some of today's incarnations of fundamentalist Islam.<sup>9</sup> It has almost certainly also provided inadvertent support in Western discourse and elsewhere for characterizations of the Islamic world as both a retrograde zone and, paradoxically, one with its glory days lying firmly behind it; to this end, it becomes critical that the absent nineteenth century and concurrent medievalization of the institutional model of Islamic art be more generally addressed.

This essay, then, stands as a short study of two different types of discomfort generated by the nineteenth century in Islamic art history. First, it surveys the uncomfortable position of the nineteenth-century material itself, in the absence of any real place for it within the dominant narrative of Islamic art in spite of its significant presence in many museum holdings. Second, it will explore some of the uncomfortable intellectual legacies of the nineteenth-century crucible in which Islamic art history was founded, and the ways in which these have perhaps contributed to the ongoing rejection of the art of that century.

Before embarking on the passage to the nineteenth century, it is worth noting briefly the distinct distaste towards for that era that is also to be found in other areas of the humanities. It was not for nothing that Meike Bal termed the Victorian era the 'bad conscience' of the late twentieth century, a prognosis that shows only the first signs of lessening as the twenty-first century advances.<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Marchand, in her boisterous yet thoughtful essay, 'Embarrassed by the Nineteenth Century', has outlined some of that century's image problems within European historical studies. She identifies the historical subjects that the European nineteenth century has long been credited with inventing – liberalism, class, bourgeois culture, secularism – as being precisely those that now raise a blush, seeming both gauche and self-satisfied, as well as sometimes unfairly claimed for the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> These subjects are particularly disquieting when set alongside the justly rising profile of studies in imperialism and national identity. At the same time, shifts felt within the humanities as a whole mean that the great era of recorded figures – of quantities imported and exported, of miles of railroad and telegraph wire – now requires a different set of conceptualizations, one that is less concerned with empirical methodologies and more in keeping with current interests in identities and experiences. Marchand herself, while clearly sympathetic to these developments, is critical of the squeamishness that has led to scholarly flight from certain types of 'bigger picture' research in nineteenth-century studies: with tongue only partly in cheek, she observes that 'every generation gets the nineteenth century they deserve – if this is true, then we have certainly become a morose bunch, with racial prejudice our only real political issue and our cultural visions suspended, largely, between the trivial and the terrifying'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See section three of the article by Wendy Shaw in the present volume.

<sup>10</sup> Meike Bal, 'Telling, Showing, Showing Off', *Critical Inquiry*, 18(3), 1992, 561.

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Marchand, 'Embarrassed by the Nineteenth Century', in Bernard Cook *et al.*, eds, *The Consortium on Revolutionary Europe 1750-1850, Selected Papers 2002*, Gainesville, FL: Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution, Florida State University, 2002, 1-16.

<sup>12</sup> Marchand, 'Embarrassed', 9.

As Marchand paints it, Europe's nineteenth century is embarrassing because it is overstuffed with data, far too pleased with itself, and perhaps also too proximate – 'an overcrowded closet, crammed with machines, bureaucrats, and corsets, whose door one shudders to open'.<sup>13</sup> What horrors, then, are we afraid of finding in the nineteenth-century closet of Islamic art history?

### Qajar art in and out of the canon

While Flood has utilized the art of the Qajar dynasty in Iran (c. 1785-1925), in particular Qajar painting, as an exemplar with which to query the position of nineteenth-century arts in the popular story of Islamic art, it is in fact the art of Qajar Iran that currently comes closer than any other body of material to transgressing the disciplinary exclusion of nineteenth-century art, and as such it should be regarded as more or less exceptional. It is true, as Flood says, that nineteenth-century European reactions to Qajar oil painting were frequently hostile, and notably scornful of what was seen as the failed assimilation of contemporary European forms into Iranian artistic traditions.<sup>14</sup> However, there were other forms of painting practised in Qajar Iran, and some of these were greeted more favourably by European commentators. The writing of Robert Murdoch Smith (1835-1900), a principal figure in the formation of the collections of Iranian art in what are now the Victoria and Albert Museum and National Museum of Scotland,<sup>15</sup> evinced as early as 1876 a pronounced interest in certain painting traditions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Iran:

The best paintings in Persia are those on a miniature scale on papier-mâché writing cases, (Kalemdans), and book-cases, and small wooden boxes, of which some excellent specimens may be seen in the [South Kensington, now Victoria and Albert] museum collection ... The figures on the kalamdan of Mohtemed (No. 763'76) are all excellent portraits by the artist Ismail (1830) ... Another, with a picture of the Virgin and Child, is by the artist Nadjef.

<sup>13</sup> Marchand, 'Embarrassed', 1.

<sup>14</sup> Flood, 'Prophet', 35-7. In Vernoit's reading of these criticisms, for Qajar artists (and artists from Islamic lands more generally) 'to win acceptance in the domain of fine art', they 'would have to learn Western conventions' (Vernoit, *Occidentalism*, 12). At the same time, Flood has pointed out that contemporary European criticisms of Qajar painting and nineteenth-century Islamic art in general often implicitly or explicitly bemoaned the adoption of European conventions and motifs, implicating them as a sign of the loss of authenticity and the decline of tradition. In the context of the industrial arts, a related complaint is to be found in the frustrations of Alfred Bel, author of *Les industries de la céramique à Fès* (Algiers and Paris: Jules Carbonel and A. Leroux, 1918) who rails against the early twentieth-century potters of Morocco for creating works geared towards the tourist trade and abandoning the finer traditions of their craft in order to make more lucrative pastiche wares (quoted in André Boukobza, *La Poterie Marocaine*, Casablanca: Alpha, 1974, 49).

<sup>15</sup> See Jennifer Scarce, 'Travels with Telegraph and Tiles in Persia: from the Private Papers of Major-General Sir Robert Murdoch Smith', *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*, 1973, 70-9; Leonard Helfgott, 'Carpet Collecting in Iran, 1873-1883: Robert Murdoch Smith and the Formation of the Modern Persian Carpet Industry', *Muqarnas*, 7, 1990, 171-81; and Tomoko Masuya, 'Persian Tiles on European Walls: Collecting Ilkhanid Tiles in Nineteenth-Century Europe', *Ars Orientalis*, 30, 2000, 39-54.

The originals of these and other figures are to be found in the paintings in the palaces of Ispahan, by Dutch and Italian artists in the time of Shah Abbas.

... In portraits the Persian artists have a remarkable power of catching a likeness and they also excel in flower painting, of which several specimens may be seen in the museum. In fact art in Persia is essentially art as applied to manufactures.<sup>16</sup>

Murdoch Smith does not, apparently, find fault with the copying of earlier European models, but it is notable that his praise is limited to painting on a miniature scale as applied to objects of use – an artform popular with tourists visiting Iran today, and perhaps more readily assimilated by nineteenth-century European observers because of its resemblance in scale if not style to the manuscript painting traditions of Iran that were already held in some esteem in Europe. Vernoit has presented Murdoch Smith's statement that 'art in Persia is essentially art as applied to manufactures' as a dismissal of Iranian art.<sup>17</sup> While the assumption that any posited connection with 'manufactures' is pejorative may be tenable elsewhere in nineteenth-century European writings on Islamic art, in the context of Murdoch Smith's immediately preceding remarks (and in his role as an acquisitions agent for the world's foremost museum of applied arts) I would suggest that his is a more positive stance towards the applied arts of Iran than Vernoit has proposed. Murdoch Smith was not a design theorist, but a military man who had dabbled in archaeology and was interested in live craft traditions, and in creating an export taste for them: 'manufactures' need not be read in this instance as a value-judgement. This complicates our picture of European receptions of Islamic art, and is a reminder that multiple models of reception should always be considered.

Murdoch Smith's judgement against the large oil paintings of Qajar Iran is, however, less positive: he observes that they are 'very poor especially as regards the drawing. The large pictures in the museum, chiefly of women, were bought, not for any interest they might have from an artistic point of view, but rather as illustrations of costumes, national types, etc.'<sup>18</sup> Thus, in a surprising inversion of the standard European hierarchy of the arts, the lacquerwork and enamel paintings are art, while the oil paintings are ethnographic material.

In spite of those earlier reservations about the oil paintings, a sizeable body of anglophone scholarship on Qajar painting was generated from the mid-twentieth century onwards: studies on Qajar oil painting, lacquerwork and enamels by Basil Robinson, the earliest published in 1950,<sup>19</sup> and the 1972 volume by S.J. Falk based

<sup>16</sup> Robert Murdoch Smith, R.E., *Persian Art (South Kensington Museum Art Handbook)*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1876, 41-2.

<sup>17</sup> Vernoit, *Occidentalism*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Murdoch Smith, *Persian Art*, 41-2.

<sup>19</sup> Basil W. Robinson, 'The Royal Gifts of Fath 'Ali Shah', *Apollo*, 52, 1950, 66-8; 'The Court Painters of Fath 'Ali Shah', *Eretz-Israel*, 7, 1963, 94-105; 'A Lacquer Mirror-Case of 1854', *Iran*, 5, 1967, 1-6; 'Qajar Painted Enamels', in Ralph Pinder-Wilson, ed., *Paintings from Islamic Lands*, Oxford: Cassirer, 1969, 187-204; 'Persian Lacquer in the Bern Historical Museum', *Iran*, 8, 1970, 47-50; 'A Royal Qajar Enamel', *Iran*,

around the former Amery collection of Qajar paintings (which had passed into the possession of the Iranian ruling family in 1969) brought imperial Qajar portraiture and genre scenes to greater prominence.<sup>20</sup> The 1998-9 international exhibition and two accompanying scholarly catalogues, edited and written by Layla S. Diba with Maryam Ekhtiar<sup>21</sup> and Julian Raby,<sup>22</sup> were hugely significant and firmly established Qajar painting in the Western scholarly and collecting worlds, but interest in this area did not come out of nowhere. These publications also had the inevitable effect of further raising the market profile of such material, a process that had begun decades earlier following the publication of Robinson and Falk's studies.<sup>23</sup>

As Flood notes, the significance that has thus been accorded to Qajar painting in recent years is reflected in its postscriptive position in some of the survey texts of Islamic art: Qajar paintings, in both oils and lacquerwork, appear in the epilogue of Bloom and Blair's 1997 Phaidon book, where they serve as an illustration of the ability of nineteenth-century artists in the Islamic world to engage with the artistic legacies of their own heritage and the artistic practices of Europe simultaneously.<sup>24</sup> Qajar painting also represents the only major nineteenth-century inclusion in Brend's *Islamic Art*, framed within a chapter entitled 'Fervour, Opulence and Decline: Iran under the Safavids and the Qajars'.<sup>25</sup>

However, other materials from Qajar Iran have also been coming under scrutiny for some time, with an emphasis on figural imagery and a particular focus on the historicizing interpretation of narrative scenes drawn from earlier Iranian literature and history: works by Jennifer Scarce are particularly relevant,<sup>26</sup> as are the

10, 1972, 25-30; 'Persian Royal Portraiture and the Qajars', in Clifford Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand, eds, *Qajar Iran: Political, Social and Cultural Change*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983, 291-311. Robinson notes that in his early research he employed Sh. Y. Amiranashvili, *Iranskaya stankovaya zhivopis* [Iranian oil painting], Tbilisi, 1940 ('Qajar Paintings: A Personal Reminiscence', in Layla S. Diba with Maryam Ekhtiar, eds, *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch 1785-1925*, New York and London: Brooklyn Museum of Art and I.B. Tauris, 1998, 12).

<sup>20</sup> S.J. Falk, *Qajar Paintings: Persian Oil Paintings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, London: Faber & Faber, Sotheby Parke-Bernet, 1972. See also J. Tabaroff and Layla Soudavar Diba, 'A Nineteenth Century Isfahan Painting', in *Akten des VII Internationalen Kongresses für Iranische Kunst und Archaeologie: München, 7-10 September 1976*, Berlin: D. Reimer, 1979, 628-34.

<sup>21</sup> Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*.

<sup>22</sup> Julian Raby, *Qajar Portraits*, London: Azimuth Editions, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson notes that his own 1964 study of the paintings of Fath 'Ali Shah coincided with (and was presumably partially responsible for) a significant escalation in the market value of Qajar oil paintings (Robinson, 'Qajar Paintings', 13).

<sup>24</sup> Flood, 'Prophet', 35; Bloom and Blair, *Islamic Arts*, 418-9.

<sup>25</sup> Brend, *Islamic Art*, 159, 166-8.

<sup>26</sup> Jennifer M. Scarce, 'Ali Mohammad Isfahani, Tilemaker of Tehran', *Oriental Art*, 22(3), 1976, 278-88; 'The Tile Decoration of the Gulistan Palace at Tehran – An Introductory Survey', in *Akten des VII Internationalen Kongresses für Iranische Kunst und Archaeologie: München, 7-10 September 1976*, Berlin: D. Reimer, 1979, 634-41; 'Yusuf and Zulaikha – Tilework Images of Passion', in James W. Allan, ed., *Islamic Art in the Ashmolean Museum, Part 2*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 63-84; 'Some Interpretations of Religious and Popular Culture in Qajar Tilework', in Robert Gleave, ed., *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran*, London: Routledge, 2005, 429-48; 'Ancestral Themes in the Art of Qajar Iran, 1785-1925', in Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit, *19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 231-56. On religious imagery in Qajar tilework, see also S.R. Peterson, 'Painted Tiles at the Takieh Mu'avinul-Mulk (Kirmanshah)', in *Akten des VII*

recent contributions by Willem Floor<sup>27</sup> and Ulrich Marzolph.<sup>28</sup> Themes of continuity and revivalism have also been eloquently traced through the Pahlavi period of twentieth-century Iran in recent scholarship, providing a point of conceptual intersection between Qajar art and Iranian modernism.<sup>29</sup> An important recent addition to the canon of Qajar art scholarship is the comprehensive catalogue published in 2010 for an exhibition that aimed to gather together all of the Qajar materials in Hungarian collections.<sup>30</sup> By encompassing a multitude of different forms of cultural production, at many social levels, this volume opens up new vistas in the artistic production of Qajar Iran and has the potential to precipitate movement away from a model that is currently predicated overwhelmingly on the art of the elite.

It is not by accident that the medium of nineteenth-century Iranian art that is currently most widely recognized in both scholarly and collecting circles is imperial oil painting, and to a lesser degree – and often in part through its ability to function as a miniature counterpart to oil painting – lacquerwork. Representational art that hails from an elite context, executed in a format derived from European traditions (the framed panel portrait executed in oils on canvas), apparently proves to be the most readily embraceable artistic product of the nineteenth-century Islamic world. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is due in large part to its employment of models of artistic production that can be successfully treated with methodologies derived from the study of European art: in earlier times, connoisseurial practice concerning the establishment of individual hands, and more recently, the iconography of power and social status as expressed in large-scale elite portraiture. Intriguingly, students who could apparently accept the pictorial conventions of fourteenth-century Iranian ceramic decoration without question have commented on the weirdness of Qajar painting: it seems to present them with something *unheimlich* in its marriage of a medium and format that they recognize from European models of portraiture with a representational mode that they suddenly

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*Internationalen Kongresses für Iranische Kunst und Archaeologie: München, 7–10 September 1976*, Berlin: D. Reimer, 1979, 618-28.

<sup>27</sup> Willem Floor, 'Art (*Naqqashi*) and Artists (*Naqqashan*) in Qajar Persia', *Muqarnas*, 16, 1999, 129-58; *Wall Paintings in Qajar Iran*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Ulrich Marzolph, 'Bahram Gur's Spectacular Marksmanship and the Art of Illustration in Qajar Lithographed Books', in Carole Hillenbrand, ed., *Studies in Honour of Clifford Edmund Bosworth, 2: The Sultan's Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, 331-47; *Narrative Illustration in Persian Lithographed Books*, Leiden: Brill, 2001; 'Illustrated Persian Lithographic Editions of the Shahnama', *Edebiyat*, 13(2), 2002, 177-98; 'The Lithographed Kalilah wa Dimnah: Illustrations to Tales from the Anvar-i Suhayli and Kalilah wa Dimnah Tradition in Lithographed Editions of the Qajar Period', *Islamic Art*, 6, 2009, 181-213. See also Basil W. Robinson, 'The Tehran Nizami of 1848 and other Qajar Lithographed Books', in Jennifer Scarce, ed., *Islam in the Balkans: Persian Art and Culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Edinburgh: Royal Scottish Museum, 1979, 61-74.

<sup>29</sup> See the work of Talinn Grigor, particularly *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs*, New York: Periscope, 2009; and a recent article by Keelan Overton, 'From Pahlavi Isfahan to Pacific Shangri La: Reviving, Restoring and Reinventing Safavid Aesthetics, ca. 1920–40', *West 86<sup>th</sup>: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, 19(1), 2012, 61-87.

<sup>30</sup> Ivan Szántó and Béla Kelényi, eds, *Artisans at the Crossroads: Persian Arts of the Qajar Period (1796-1925)*, Budapest: Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts, 2010.

feel ill-equipped to negotiate. It goes without saying that this quality makes Qajar art an extremely useful point of entry for teaching students about the colonial programme and cross-cultural currents in artmaking; hence, presumably, its utility in the survey text.

It must also be noted that in the apparently greater disciplinary comfort with Iranian arts over those of other nineteenth-century Islamic states, there is a distant but still discomfiting echo of the primacy afforded to the arts of Iran in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship – a disciplinary feature that ultimately had its roots in nineteenth-century European racial theories concerning the superiority of Aryans.<sup>31</sup> The distorting power of this hierarchical model is amply demonstrated by Murdoch Smith:

Persia is in all probability the country from which the Arabs derived the arts afterwards developed by them in Spain and elsewhere. The successors and followers of Mahomed were after all but rude Bedouins, who gradually acquired culture from contact with the more refined countries which they overran ... It is far from improbable that even the Alhambra itself was chiefly the work of Persians, who stood to the Arabs in much the same relation that the Greeks did to the Romans.<sup>32</sup>

Of the fifteen articles in *Islamic Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* that present close studies of buildings or artworks, five are concerned with Iranian material.<sup>33</sup> This is not to suggest that there is anything sinister in this make-up, but rather that the longstanding focus placed on Iranian art has inevitably led to a fuller picture for that area, and hence a more plausible and sympathetic case can be made for the scholarly existence of a nineteenth century in Iranian art than has to date been argued for other areas of the Islamic world.

### The nineteenth century beyond Iran

Leaving the Qajar material to one side, what else from the nineteenth century has been permitted an even partial place in the grand narrative of Islamic art? In the first instance it will be instructive to look to the survey texts of Islamic art history again, using them to gauge the status of nineteenth-century material around the start of the present century. Robert Hillenbrand and Robert Irwin do not discuss nineteenth-

<sup>31</sup> On the racial hierarchy imposed upon Islamic art production from the mid-nineteenth century, which put the art of Iranians at the top of the scale and that of Turks at the bottom, see Stephen Vernoit, 'Islamic Art and Architecture: An Overview of Scholarship and Collecting, c. 1850-1950', in Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Murdoch Smith, *Persian Art*, 3-4.

<sup>33</sup> They are grouped together in the volume: see the works by Scarce, Ekhtiar, Diba, Soucek and Watson in Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit, *19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 231-362.

century art in their books;<sup>34</sup> nor does Brend, beyond the Qajar painting traditions described above. Only Blair and Bloom's texts formally articulate the disciplinary discomfort with the nineteenth century and in so doing they include more material from the era than is to be found elsewhere. Taking the two survey texts by these last authors together, the spectrum of nineteenth-century art that they present (which is obviously not intended to be exhaustive) includes a number of suggestive tropes that are also reflected in other sources, indicating their apparently burgeoning significance for the field as a whole. The longer chapter found in Blair and Bloom's *1250–1800* volume begins with discussion of the impact of historical Islamic arts on European artistic production and the historiographic circumstances of the growing European audience for Islamic art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; similar ideas are also covered very briefly by Irwin.<sup>35</sup> In more recent scholarship, increasing interest in the impact of Islamic arts on European manufactures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been most fully realized to date in the 2007 exhibition and catalogue *Purs Décors? Arts de l'Islam, regards du XIXe siècle*.<sup>36</sup> Rémi Labrusse has also discussed extensively the mobilizing effect of Islamic art on a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European modernist painters.<sup>37</sup>

Such discussions are directly concerned with historical Islamic art as agent in nineteenth-century European practice. What of nineteenth-century material from the Islamic world? Returning to Blair and Bloom, we find an eclectic collection. Ottomanizing and Europeanizing strains in architecture and art are exemplified by the mosque of Muhammad 'Ali in Cairo, the architectural works of Krikor, Garabed and Nigoğos Balyan in Istanbul, and the painting of Osman Hamdi, whose work in oils also appears in other texts as the paradigm for exploring European-Ottoman relations in art practice.<sup>38</sup> Synthetic revival styles found in various architectural traditions, in Iranian ceramics and to a certain extent in carpet production,<sup>39</sup> as well as the more directly replicatory portable arts of the Mamluk revival, also feature.

Increasing interest in revival styles suggests that this may form the next major subject to broach the disciplinary rejection of nineteenth-century materials. Architecture has led the way in this case.<sup>40</sup> Recent works by Mercedes Volait and

<sup>34</sup> As Hillenbrand notes in his introduction, his survey text purposefully operates in broad brushstrokes, and '[s]pecialists will have to console themselves with the thought that this book was not written with them in mind' (Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, 9). The same can obviously be said of the other survey texts.

<sup>35</sup> Blair and Bloom, *Art and Architecture of Islam, 1250-1800*, 303-14; Irwin, *Islamic Art*, 238-9.

<sup>36</sup> Rémi Labrusse, ed., *Purs Décors? Arts de l'Islam, regards du XIXe siècle*, Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2007

<sup>37</sup> See, most recently, the catalogue edited by Rémi Labrusse, *Islamophilies: L'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam*, Paris: Somogy, 2011, which accompanied the exhibition *Le génie de l'Orient* held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, 2 April-4 July 2011.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Silvia Naef, 'Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and its Relation to the Artistic Past', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 43, 2003, 164.

<sup>39</sup> A recent study by Martin Rudner has added to understanding of revivals in twentieth-century carpet production: 'The Modernization of Iran and the Development of the Persian Carpet Industry: The Neo-classical Era in the Persian Carpet Industry, 1925-45', *Iranian Studies*, 44(1), 2011, 49-76.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Ilbert and Mercedes Volait, 'Neo-Arabic Renaissance in Egypt, 1870-1930', *MIMAR*, 13, 1984, 26-34; Mohammad al-Asad, 'The Re-invention of Tradition: Neo-Islamic Architecture in Cairo', *Akten des XXVIII International Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin: AkademieVerlag, 1992, 425-36;

Paula Sanders in particular have been instrumental in tracing the location of authenticity in the medieval era – specifically the Mamluk period – within the urban development of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Cairo, demonstrating that this served certain indigenous protagonists as well as the more widely recognized colonial British and Ottoman interests.<sup>41</sup> A thorough study of the Mamluk revival objects created in Egypt in the nineteenth century and increasingly popular on the collectors' market today has not yet been undertaken, although Vernoit's *Occidentalism* contains an extremely useful chapter on this subject, positing that it was the publication in 1877 of A.C.T.E. Prisse d'Avennes' *L'art arabe d'après les monuments du Kaire depuis le VIIe siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe*<sup>42</sup> that acted as catalyst for the production of Mamluk revival objects.<sup>43</sup>

It is, then, a tale of borrowings, of dressing up in each other's clothes, and in old clothes, that emerges in the very fragmentary story of the nineteenth century as told in Islamic art history around the turn of the present century. Qajar painting, Occidentalizing and revival styles, and Orientalizing art in Europe comprise the main themes. In terms of the delivery of a narrative, all of these are notably useful subjects for helping audiences visualize the colonial programme and its artistic outcomes in fairly direct ways, and it is surely in part for their didactic value and capacity to act as a form of cultural exemplar that such themes have been singled out for attention. The overall impression generated is one of a taxonomic collapse, with previously discrete categories suddenly and promiscuously running into one another, and this presents a major key to explaining the disciplinary avoidance of the nineteenth century. The legacies of post-Enlightenment taxonomic systems will be discussed further below; first, there are more recent inclusions to be surveyed in the nineteenth-century landscape.

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Mohammad al-Asad, 'The Mosque of al-Rifa'î in Cairo', *Muqarnas*, 10, 1993, 108-24; Nasser Rabbat, 'The Formation of the Neo-Mamluk Style in Modern Egypt', in Martha Pollack, ed., *The Education of the Architect: Historiography, Urbanism and the Growth of Architectural Knowledge*, Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1997, 363-83; Nezar Alsayyad, Irene Bierman and Nasser Rabbat, eds, *Making Cairo Medieval*, Oxford: Lexington, 2005; Mercedes Volait, *Architectes et architectures de l'Égypte moderne (1830-1950): genèse et essor d'une expertise locale*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005; Mercedes Volait, 'Appropriating Orientalism: Saber Sabri's Mamluk Revivals in Late-Nineteenth-Century Cairo', in Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit, *Islamic Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 131-55; Paula Sanders, *Creating Medieval Cairo: Empire, Religion, and Architectural Preservation in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2008; Mercedes Volait, *Fous du Caire: Excentriques, architectes et amateurs d'art en Égypte, 1863-1914*, Paris: Archange Minotaure, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Paula Sanders, 'The Victorian Invention of Medieval Cairo: A Case Study in Medievalism and the Construction of the East', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 37(2), 2003, 179-98; Paula Sanders, *Creating Medieval Cairo*, 41-5; Mercedes Volait, 'Retentissements et relais locaux de la "médiévalisation" du Caire (1867-1933)', in Bernard Heyberger and Chantal Verdeil, eds, *Hommes de l'entre deux. Parcours individuels et portraits de groupes de la frontière de la Méditerranée (XVIe-XXe siècle)*, Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2009 [[http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/65/27/94/PDF/Volait\\_retentissements\\_et\\_relais\\_locaux.pdf](http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/65/27/94/PDF/Volait_retentissements_et_relais_locaux.pdf) accessed 16.05.2012].

<sup>42</sup> Paris: Morel et Cie, 1877.

<sup>43</sup> Vernoit, *Occidentalism*, 228-49; see also Stefan Heidemann, 'Late Ottoman Doorknockers from Syria', in Annette Hagedorn and Avinoam Shalem, eds, *Facts and Artefacts: Art in the Islamic World, Festschrift for Jens Kröger on his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 153-84.

In the years that have passed since the publication of the canonical English-language survey texts of the 1990s, how, if at all, has the status of nineteenth-century Islamic art changed? The two major scholarly publications already mentioned – Vernoit's *Occidentalism*, which appeared concurrently with some of the survey texts, and Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit's *Islamic Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* – have certainly shed some welcome light on this most maligned of centuries. But in order to look at its position in the field more generally, and to bring things up to the minute, a rather crude but nonetheless useful means of assessing the current shape of Islamic art history's metanarrative is to consult the scholarly canon's ritzy cousin – the collectors' market. Architecture cannot really be represented in this context, or only in fragmentary form; as for the rest, everything that can be moved can be sold at auction. The mutual interdependence of the canon of the market and that of scholarship is something that should perhaps be more frequently foregrounded in Islamic art history, where it tends to be discussed in historical terms only. The relationship between the two can be traced in one direction through the increased prominence and market value of pieces that can be associated with the latest high-profile scholarly publications, but the impact of market forces on scholarship is also enacted through the 'discovery' of new objects when they surface for sale, as well as dependence upon the lavish publications of some private collections.

A brief look at recent Sotheby's and Christie's sale catalogues for the biannual London 'sale weeks' of Islamic art would indicate that, in addition to the long-term rise in the popularity of Qajar painting and latterly Qajar figural tile work, there are various other signs that the embargo on the nineteenth century is not quite supported by the collectors' market.<sup>44</sup> However, many of these are special cases that are not (yet) fully embraced by the scholarly canon. The market for carpets has long followed a separate set of rules and material in this medium that comes from the nineteenth century is frequently classed in sale contexts as fine, old, and even antique – a reminder if ever there was one that temporal classifications for art, with all their implied values, shift from one framework to the next.<sup>45</sup> Like carpets, weapons and jewellery – mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – have appeared in large quantities at sales for many years but have never formed a major focus within Islamic art history, tending instead to fall under the purview of very precise media specializations. Similarly, the common separation of the art of Muslim India from the rest of Islamic art history means that the considerable body of scholarship on late Mughal and Company Painting, another reasonably frequent presence in salerooms, is generally claimed by the history of Indian rather than Islamic art.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> The London salerooms are the acknowledged epicentre of the Islamic art trade, with Sotheby's and Christie's representing the biggest, most important and most publicly accessible of these; this very brief look to the market is based on recent sale catalogues from those auction houses.

<sup>45</sup> On the peculiar disciplinary position occupied by carpets see the article by Yuka Kadoi in the present volume.

<sup>46</sup> Two major catalogues solidified the scholarly presence of company painting in the later twentieth century: Stuart Cary Welch, *Room for Wonder: Indian Court Painting during the British Period*, New York:

An interesting recent phenomenon is the increasingly common sight of *kiswa* textiles, fragments of the *hizam* and other artefacts from the Ka'ba in salerooms, most of which date from the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Recent purchases of this material by major private collectors suggest that Ka'ba artefacts are coming to form part of the collectors' canon, in some cases as part of a strategic exercise in collecting,<sup>47</sup> and the Hajj exhibition held at the British Museum in 2012 has provided a major public forum for this subject in Europe.<sup>48</sup> Such materials certainly carry the aura of sanctity, but their interest in many public museum contexts in Europe and North America is undoubtedly semi-ethnographic – an idea to which I will return below.

Continuing to look to the saleroom as bellwether, by far the most striking exception to the exclusion of the nineteenth century is to be found in the medium most frequently harnessed to demonstrate continuity in Islamic art: calligraphy. In the London sale week of April 2012 a nineteenth-century calligraphic sample from Turkey estimated at £2,000–£3,000 was sold for £115,250, the biggest single take at Christie's *Islamic and Indian Works on Paper*.<sup>49</sup> In Sotheby's Islamic sale of the same week there were, in addition to various nineteenth-century manuscripts from Ottoman Turkey (mostly Qur'ans, although copies of the *Dala'il al-khayrat* also keep appearing), five nineteenth-century single-page calligraphic works and roundels also from Ottoman Turkey, as well as two from the twentieth century and two from the twenty-first century.<sup>50</sup> As far as the collectors' market is concerned it seems that calligraphy, and probably calligraphy alone, is capable of – and perhaps desirable for – demonstrating a continuous narrative thread throughout the history of Islamic art and into the present day. Vernoit has observed that this may in part be due to calligraphy's ability to sidestep the 'decline' narrative applied to other Islamic arts, because there is no European equivalent with which it can be compared and it has thus been able to continue on its own path without the disruption of Western norms and forms.<sup>51</sup> This is echoed in a quote from the late nineteenth-century Shirazi scholar Fursat al-Dawla: 'calligraphy, unlike the other arts that have undergone

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American Federation for Arts, 1978; Mildred Archer, *Company Paintings: Indian Paintings of the British Period*, London: V&A Publishing, 1992.

<sup>47</sup> The collector Nasser D. Khalili recently discussed his decision to start purchasing Ka'ba textiles and articles relating to Mecca and Medina in an interview in *The Financial Times*, 12 May 2012, 5: "There are 1.6bn people following the faith of Islam. I realised that no one was representing the core and anchor of that religion, and so I took it upon myself to buy everything that was available," says Khalili, 66. "I have been doing this quietly for a long time. I never tell anyone what I am doing".

<sup>48</sup> Venetia Porter, 'Textiles of Mecca and Medina', in Venetia Porter, ed., *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*, London: British Museum Press, 2012, 256–65.

<sup>49</sup> The piece was signed by the calligrapher Yesari Zadeh Mustafa 'Izzet and dated 1262 H (1846–7 CE): Christie's, *Islamic and Indian Works on Paper*, 23 April 2012, lot 92.

<sup>50</sup> Sotheby's, *Arts of the Islamic World*, 25 April 2012, lots 452, 458, 459, 463, 464 (nineteenth-century calligraphy); 460, 462 (twentieth-century calligraphy); 466, 467 (twenty-first century calligraphy); 428, 431, 434, 447 437, 439, 444, 445, 446 (nineteenth-century Ottoman manuscripts).

<sup>51</sup> Vernoit, *Occidentalism*, 14.

significant changes, has remained faithful to the strict rules of the canon since the beginning of time and will always continue to do so'.<sup>52</sup>

Barbara Brend, writing in 1991, observed that:

The two arts which remain most creative in the late twentieth century are ... architecture and calligraphy. Though these may be devoted to secular purposes, and have been so in the past, they are the arts most closely associated with the Muslim religion. The conclusion must therefore be that some parts of Islamic art have fallen away, leaving a Muslim core.<sup>53</sup>

The image of 'falling away' is interesting in its location of authenticity in a Muslim 'core'. However, as Silvia Naef and others have shown, the use of Arabic script, if not calligraphy, in the work of some twentieth-century painters was part of the conscious creation of an identifiably Arab modernity in art rather than solely the continuation of a religiously informed tradition.<sup>54</sup> While traditional calligraphic practices continue, and modernist calligraphy (as exemplified for international audiences by artists such as Hassan Massoudy) remains extremely popular in public and private collections, the special historical position of calligraphy has also led the way towards a strikingly prominent place for script and calligraphy within ethnoculturally defined dealers' categories of modern and contemporary Islamic art. The primacy of calligraphy in Islamic lands is an enormously useful narrative in this context – it is a recognized artistic tradition of the highest order and thus can be cited as evidence of civilizational achievement, while still retaining its glamorous and reassuring 'Otherness' for the many Western buyers active in this area of the market. It is hard to avoid the impression that calligraphic aesthetics, and script as a whole, are desired and encouraged by the mechanics of the international art market to function as a universalized symbol of Islam in contemporary art practice.<sup>55</sup>

In a didactic context, the placement of contemporary works by artists from Islamic lands that make prominent reference to calligraphic practices alongside historical calligraphy and inscriptions makes a similarly questionable, if well-intentioned, claim for universality. The work of an artist such as Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937) is presumed to render decontextualized historical material relevant and accessible to a contemporary audience in the 'multicultural' model of museum display, supposedly achieving this through its combination of a demonstrable modernity with an identifiably 'Islamic' mode of expression, as in the juxtaposition of a Tanavoli sculpture with Ilkhanid and Qajar inscriptive tiles in the 'Artistic

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Maryam Ekhtiar, 'Innovation and Revivalism in Later Persian Calligraphy: The Visual Family of Shiraz', in Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit, *19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 268.

<sup>53</sup> Brend, *Islamic Art*, 232.

<sup>54</sup> On the *hurufiyya* of the 1960s and 70s, see Naef, 'Reexploring', 168-71. This was not without its critics: the art critic Mohammad Khadda suggested that superficial uses of Arabic script in art ran the risk of self-exoticization. Naef, 'Reexploring', 170-1.

<sup>55</sup> See Babaie, 'Locating the Modern', 136. Lest my cynicism about the art market become too depressing, see the same article, 141-3, where Babaie presents a more upbeat interpretation of some calligraphically-informed practices.

Legacies' gallery on the fifth floor of the National Museum of Scotland. In this case the nineteenth century is present in the guise of the Qajar tiles, permitting a posited historical continuity to be presented to audiences and further underscoring the special status of calligraphic practice.

### What's so wrong with the nineteenth century?

Certain aspects of nineteenth-century production, then, are granted recognition in the larger field of Islamic art history, but much of the material from the period barely registers at present, let alone provides any sort of competition in scholarly terms for the fêted products of, say, tenth-century Iraq or fifteenth-century Egypt. So what is it that keeps the nineteenth century in abeyance? I will here outline five propositions that I suggest have contributed to its rejection from the master-narrative; none of these, it should be noted, are adequate reasons for failing to address the nineteenth century.

Proposition one: *there's too much of it*. As Robinson has observed:

The bane of Qajar painting and the cause of much of the derision and contempt in which it was formerly held is that too much of it has survived. No doubt many bad paintings were produced in Timurid and Safavid times, but time has eliminated nearly all of them and left us, for the most part, only works of quality.<sup>56</sup>

Robinson goes to the heart of one of the problems faced by nineteenth-century material within the field as currently conceived. It is hard to argue for the existence of a canon of masterpieces – something which Islamic art historians have long felt the need to claim for earlier periods – in the case of a century from which so much material of one sort or another has survived, unfiltered by the passage of time or the discriminatory agendas of collectors. And if one is to apply the received standards of good taste that have historically formed such a critical component of collecting practice in the field, much of the material from the nineteenth century is going to be found wanting, to say the least.<sup>57</sup>

Which leads to proposition two: *it's bad*. At heart, this is surely the main image problem faced by many nineteenth-century arts, and not just in the Islamic world. The much-vaunted decline of tradition, the changes wrought by industrialization, the 'hybrid' styles and sometimes startling or incongruous borrowings that speak of a rapidly globalizing world and the mobility of people, objects, images and information on a scale that had never before been imagined: in

<sup>56</sup> Basil W. Robinson, 'Personal Reminiscence', 13.

<sup>57</sup> On the need to demonstrate 'good taste' in elite European collections of Islamic art around the turn of the twentieth century, see David J. Roxburgh, 'Au Bonheur des Amateurs: Collecting and Exhibiting Islamic Art, ca. 1880-1910', *Ars Orientalis*, 30, 2000, 9-38.

all of these there are sources of horror for the fastidious aesthete.<sup>58</sup> There are two types of badness under question, which cannot be fully separated from each other: the technically poor, and the ugly. The former failure can be assessed more or less objectively; the latter cannot. Oliver Watson has made illuminating observations about the technical poverty of some of the Iranian ceramics made in the nineteenth century,<sup>59</sup> and the squeamishness of much of the treatment of nineteenth-century material centres on the often-justified perception that it is technically sub-par. This should not in itself present a problem for the intrepid researcher, but there are conservation issues related to material quality in some media: anecdotal evidence from museum curators has described the rapid disintegration of some nineteenth-century works on paper, for example. As for ugliness, this is doubtless true in some cases, but in others it is undeniable that a nineteenth-century provenance has acted as a barrier to the perception of value of all kinds, including beauty. Much more importantly, the subjects of art history should not have to be judged beautiful in order to be interesting or valid. Mistakes, flaws, eccentricities and out-and-out badness all represent means by which the contexts and processes of making can be exposed and explored. And unlovely material has certain advantages: one seldom encounters the ugly in the same state of weariness and irritability that can be engendered by the lengthy encomia surrounding the more exquisite components of the canon.

The larger question here, though, is not one of value judgements, but of how the material from the nineteenth century has been and should be classified, and how we are actually asking it to perform for us. Proposition three: *no one knows whether it is art or not*. Much of the material from the nineteenth-century Islamic world that is now held in museum collections – and there is a lot of it – was collected primarily as ethnographic material, not as art. That is, it was envisioned as a means of illustrating the lifestyles and practices of another culture to a European audience. This has engendered an extremely odd position: the distinction between ‘art’ and ‘ethnographic material’ has not been successfully resolved in general, and is notably strained in the products of the nineteenth century in the Islamic world. Elsewhere I have made the case for regarding nineteenth-century Moroccan ceramics – a corpus that seems to balance somewhere between ethnographic exemplar and industrial art – as a means of exploring evolving artistic practices in a complex milieu of colonial agendas, traditional practices and a changing economic structure.<sup>60</sup> Within the present essay, the illustrative case of the Qajar oil paintings in the Victoria and

<sup>58</sup> For an illuminating discussion of mobility and its effects on taxonomic structures, see the introduction to Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and the Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, 1-14.

<sup>59</sup> Oliver Watson, ‘Almost Hilariously Bad: Iranian Pottery in the Nineteenth Century’, in Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoi, *19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 333-62.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret S. Graves, ‘Visual Culture as Historical Document: Sir John Drummond Hay and the Nineteenth-Century Moroccan Pottery in the National Museum of Scotland’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 36(1), 2009, 93-124. While some of the eighty-four pieces of nineteenth-century Moroccan pottery held by the National Museum of Scotland were on display in recent years, I believe all are now in permanent storage following the Museum’s recent refurbishment.

Albert Museum has already been outlined: regarded by their nineteenth-century purchaser as having purely ethnographic value, the same paintings are now apparently accepted as art. Did time simply need to elapse to turn them into art?

Hence proposition four: *it's not old enough*. As Meike Bal has argued, in the collection of art from those civilizations that have been designated as 'historical', such as Buddhism (and, by inference, Islam), the nineteenth century represents a low moment. '[L]ow because the moment of making coincides with the moment of acquisition: the nineteenth century. This temporal coincidence deprives the artifact of historical patina and scarcity, requirements for high artistic status'.<sup>61</sup> Obviously, as time progresses and the moment of creation recedes, the object gains 'history' and some of the audience/collector discomfort is eroded. In scholarly terms, there is also a pervasive sense that temporal distance can be equated with objectivity.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, proposition five: *it's messy*. That is, the taxonomic collapse brought about by the 'hybrid' creations of the new world order of colonialism and industrialization leaves the classificatory structures employed for earlier periods largely redundant, and in so doing it has the potential to expose the ideological assumptions underpinning the disciplinary project of Islamic art history. Flood has observed that certain rhetoric concerning the cultural changes wrought by contemporary globalization reveals a nostalgia for an imagined past order 'in which people and things once had their proper places'; the same could be said for Islamic art history's avoidance of the nineteenth century.<sup>63</sup> As Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit have observed, the 'Islamic' label has been tacitly abandoned in most research on the arts of the nineteenth century – as have dynastic labels in many cases where the nominal ruler of the country was in reality subjugated to a European power – to be replaced by frameworks of national identity. The 'hybrid and degenerate' arts of this period frequently confound simple classification.<sup>64</sup> It is the question of taxonomy that I wish to address in the second part of this paper, looking specifically to the relationship between post-Enlightenment taxonomical structures and the medievalization of Islamic art.

## Time and taxonomy

*Time and the Other* (1983), the seminal work of Johannes Fabian, provides a powerful point of entry to the medievalization of Islamic art and culture, yet has rarely been discussed at any length in relation to this topic. Fabian's polemic was directed towards the synopticism of anthropology – 'the urge to visualize a great multitude of pieces of information as orderly arrangements, systems and *tableaux*' – and the absorption of time into its tabular system which gave rise to the denial of coevalness

<sup>61</sup> Bal, 'Telling, Showing', 566.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, rev. ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983], 30.

<sup>63</sup> Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit, 'Foreword', in Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit, *19<sup>th</sup> Century*, ix-x.

to the subjects of its study.<sup>65</sup> However, his critique is also peculiarly applicable to the field of art history as currently constructed, particularly in its relationships with the various categories of 'non-Western' art that include Islamic art, and it will be instructive to examine his text in some detail.

In Fabian's argument, the secularization of time that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became linked to transformations in the idea of travel that occurred more or less simultaneously, leading to a conception of ethnographic time – the time of the 'Other', in Fabian's terms<sup>66</sup> – that ultimately equated difference with spatial and temporal distance. To elaborate on this: where once the Judeo-Christian concept of time as medium of sacred history had held sway in European discourse, the scientific developments of the Enlightenment were followed by the establishment of the exponentially longer *durée* of geological and subsequently evolutionary time as part of a 'universal history' that was in the process of being synthesized. Meanwhile, in the eighteenth century the science of travel was both institutionalized and temporalized. The scientific traveller, replacing an earlier genre of tales of travel, was now seen as completing gaps in a larger classificatory system of knowledge of the world.<sup>67</sup> Critically, this system was frequently imagined to progress through time as well as space: in Degérando's *The Observation of Savage Peoples* of 1800 we see an early expression of the belief that through studying other races, the European observer could come to understand the past of his own.<sup>68</sup> Emerging classificatory models of race and place were further complicated by the various pseudoscientific theories of social evolution that gained increasing currency following the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859. These bastardizations of Darwin's theory of natural selection, echoes of which can still be felt today, centred on the erroneous ideas that time will necessarily accomplish evolution, and that human cultures pass through set stages on the way to a pre-ordained state of civilization.<sup>69</sup>

Within this academic milieu, posits Fabian, the nascent discipline of anthropology provided the colonial enterprise with an intellectual justification: it gave to political and economic imperatives the legitimizing concept of evolutionary time as a measure of cultural development. 'It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time – some upstream, others downstream.'<sup>70</sup> Anthropology, then, was codified as a 'science of other men in another Time ... whose referent has

<sup>65</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 118, 147.

<sup>66</sup> Fabian's debt to Edward Said is freely acknowledged: see Fabian, *Time and the Other*, xliii.

<sup>67</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 2, 7-8.

<sup>68</sup> To continue the epigraph to this article: 'Those unknown islands that [the philosophical traveller] reaches are for him the cradle of human society. Those peoples whom our ignorant vanity scorns are displayed to him as ancient and majestic monuments of the origin of ages: monuments infinitely more worthy of our admiration and respect than those famous pyramids vaunted by the banks of the Nile. They witness only the frivolous ambition and the passing power of some individuals whose names have scarcely come down to us, but the others recreate for us the state of our own ancestors, and the earliest history of the world.' (Degérando, *Savage Peoples*, 63.)

<sup>69</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 13-15.

<sup>70</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 17.

been removed from the present of the speaking/writing subject'.<sup>71</sup> The object of study is denied the possibility of being coeval with the one who studies.

Stereotypically, this is envisaged as being enacted by placing the present of the 'tribal' subjects of anthropology 'downstream' from that of the observer. But it is also possible to argue that a more complex employment of this framework has contributed to the medievalization of Islamic cultural history. By designating what is perceived to be the high point of a subject culture as some time in the past – in this case, a loosely defined medieval period – European scholarly frameworks can acknowledge that there was once a point when that culture was coeval with their own (thus according it 'historical' status rather than the ahistorical present given to tribal societies), but by denying recognition of its achievements following that point, the same frameworks construct two contradictory positions for the subject culture simultaneously. On the one hand, the subject culture is permitted access to the present in the guise of a diminished, degenerated or declining state: 'Islam was once a great medieval culture'. But at the same time this construct also freezes the subject culture into a temporal position in the past, pejoratively equated with a point in Europe's own history: hence, 'Islam is a medieval culture'. The disciplinary construction of Islamic art history, with its exaltation of the medieval and denial of the modern, has validated the first of these *topoi*, and in so doing has surely inadvertently contributed to the propagation of the second. This point will be revisited below.

At this juncture it is also necessary to consider a related treatment of the time of subject cultures, prevalent in nineteenth-century travel writings. This is the unfavourable comparison of the present with the past. This rhetorical device can be seen in a number of proto-anthropological travel writings and is perhaps most consistently to be found in writings on the Islamic world from the nineteenth century. It is also notable that this trope is most commonly articulated through discussion of architectural monuments.<sup>72</sup> Constantin François Volney, in *Les ruines, ou, Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1791), sets an important early precedent for this device through his extensive temporal contrasts between the imagined past of Egypt and Syria and the dilapidations of the late eighteenth-century present:

After three days' travel in barren solitude, and having passed through a valley filled with grottoes and tombs, my eyes were suddenly struck, on leaving this valley and entering a plain, with a most astonishing scene of ruins. It consisted of a countless multitude of superb columns standing erect; and which, like the avenues of our parks, extended in regular files farther than the eye could reach. Among these columns magnificent edifices were observable; some entire, others in a state half demolished. The ground was

<sup>71</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 143.

<sup>72</sup> It calls to mind Erika Naginski's argument that periodization can act as 'critical scaffolding used to erect the artifact as the concrete sign of historical duration' (Erika Naginski, 'Riegl, Archaeology, and the Periodization of Culture', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 40, 2001, 136).

covered on all sides with fragments of similar buildings, cornices, capitals, shafts, entablatures, and pilasters, all constructed of a marble of admirable whiteness and exquisite workmanship. After a walk of three quarters of an hour along these ruins, I entered the inclosure [sic] of a vast edifice which had formerly been a temple dedicated to the sun; and I accepted the hospitality of some poor Arabian peasants, who had established their huts in the very area of the temple. Here I resolved for some days to remain, that I might contemplate, at leisure, the beauty of so many stupendous works ... The view of an illustrious city deserted, the remembrance of past times, their comparison with the present state of things, all combined to raise my heart to a strain of sublime meditations.<sup>73</sup>

While Volney's vanished golden age was located in the pre-Islamic period, later writers who were perhaps more directly engaged with the Islamic cultures they visited tended to move it forward to a medieval moment. Passages bemoaning contemporary degeneration from an earlier high-point of civilization occur frequently in nineteenth-century travel writings on North Africa, a subject I have discussed elsewhere and of which it will suffice to include only one example – and this from an author who was unusually well disposed towards Morocco and its inhabitants:

Strange that a people like the Moors, still brave, so fine in type, ardent in faith, sober in habit, and apparently ... so like what they were externally, when they shook Europe, should have fallen into such absolute decay. Literature, art, science, everything is forgotten; architecture is but a base copy of their old styles ...<sup>74</sup>

In wielding the past as a stick with which to beat the present, writings of this stamp reveal that the correct perspective for understanding the relationship between past and present is that of the European traveller. 'It is a superior knowledge, for it is not shared by the Orientals caught in the present of their cities, either deserted or dilapidating, or overpopulated and putrid'.<sup>75</sup> But even more significantly, to paraphrase Fabian, the posited authenticity of the past serves here to denounce an

<sup>73</sup> Constantin François Volney, *The Ruins: or A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, facs. ed. tr. James Marshall, Otley, Yorkshire: Woodstock Books, 2000 [1811], 2-3.

<sup>74</sup> R.B. Cunningham Graham, *Moghreb-el-Aksa: A Journey in Morocco*, reprint ed., London: William Heinemann, 1928 [1898], 175. For further discussion see Margaret S. Graves, "'A Certain Barbaric Originality': Moroccan Pottery as Viewed by British Travel Writers of the Nineteenth Century', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 12(4), 2007, 501-16. Related ruminations on the Orient's glorious and long-vanished past can be found in the literature surrounding the Alhambra, that most accessible of Islamic monuments for nineteenth-century Europeans: See Graves, 'Barbaric Originality', 503-4; on the imagined Alhambra and 'staged authenticity' see Marie-Sofie Lundström, 'Experiencing the Alhambra, an Illusive Site of Oriental Otherness', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 1(1), 2012, 83-106.

<sup>75</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 10.

inauthentic present, made plain in the *topos* of degenerative architectural copying that is cited by Cunningham Graham.<sup>76</sup>

Ultimately, the post-Enlightenment classificatory model that Fabian describes, with taught knowledge becoming arranged, orderly knowledge, easily visualized and tabulated in spatial terms, depends upon the maintenance of discrete categories.<sup>77</sup> Correspondingly, within such a system clear diagnostic features, by which material can be organized and attributed, become privileged over ambiguity or idiosyncrasy. The pursuit of purity in taxonomical categories, and even the very act of naming those categories, builds in a conservative bias to such models of learning.<sup>78</sup> The failure to recognize and incorporate most of the 'hybrid and degenerate' materials of the nineteenth century has stemmed from both an ideological standpoint that has functioned to keep the Islamic world located in the past, and from disciplinary anxieties over the maintenance of a taxonomical structure that was initially encoded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at which point such materials could not be recognized as subjects of historical study.

### The 'non-West', art historical time and the survey model

It is also possible that the nineteenth century is inadmissible to the canon in part because it exposes the ethnographic endeavour that formed part of the discipline's foundations. While the philological basis of Islamic art history has been widely discussed, the anthropological and ethnographic aspects of the endeavour are less often cited. And yet in the latter-day imperatives that require Islamic art to explicate Islamic culture to general audiences, there is a distinct echo of the ethnographical and ethnological agendas that informed the formation of many museum collections.<sup>79</sup> Ironically, by failing to address the very materials that were gathered as 'ethnographic' in the nineteenth century, Islamic art history has created for itself an overarching classificatory model that aligns it with precisely the structures of ethnography that are being critiqued by Fabian: the ensuing medievalization of Islamic art has denied the possibility of coevalness to Islamic culture thus viewed.

Donald Preziosi has highlighted, in radical terms, the ethnological aspects of art history's role as an instrument for the propagation of a universalist Enlightenment vision in which all of its 'imagined spaces' of global art production

<sup>76</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 11.

<sup>77</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 120-1.

<sup>78</sup> See further discussion in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, rev. ed., London: Routledge, 2002 [1966], 45-6.

<sup>79</sup> See Mercedes Volait, 'De l'anthropologie physique à "l'ethnographie artistique": Gustave Le Bon et sa *Civilisation des Arabes* (1884)', *Histoire de l'art*, 60, 2007, 101-11. On the philological bases of Islamic art history in German scholarship in particular, see Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, chapter 9. On 'anthropological' approaches in the work of Josef Strzygowski in particular, see Suzanne Marchand, 'The Rhetoric of Artefacts and the Decline of Classical Humanism: the Case of Josef Strzygowski', *History and Theory*, 33(4), 1994, 106-30, and Rémi Labrusse, 'Délires anthropologiques: Josef Strzygowski face à Alois Riegl', in *Histoire de l'art et anthropologie* (conference proceedings), Paris: INHA and musée du quai Branly, 2009 [<http://actesbranly.revues.org/268> accessed 22.05.2012].

lead to 'the modernity of a European present'.<sup>80</sup> Within the near-infinite archive offered by a universal art history, every object and image would be labelled and located in just such a classificatory system as was imagined and critiqued by Fabian, capable of being cross-referenced as part of a gigantic project of seeing and knowing. The Hegelian model of art as a means by which the individual 'genius' of a society or culture would thus be made manifest, with every exhibition 'sustained by the willed fiction' that its component parts somehow 'constitute a "representational" universe, as signs or surrogates of their (individual, national, racial, gendered etc.) authors.'<sup>81</sup>

The most spectacularly overt manifestations of this 'panoptical'<sup>82</sup> arrangement of cultures were, (in)famously, the International Exhibitions and World's Fairs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these colossal settings, the global hegemony of the West could be articulated through the arrangement and decoration of discrete pavilions and settings showcasing various nations and their products, creating a representational world ordered through carefully framed panoramas and perspectives.<sup>83</sup> Such arrangements naturally fed directly into, and were in turn directly informed by, academic ethnology, cementing a spatio-temporal arrangement of cultures that saw, amongst other things, Europe's picturing of its own medieval past interlinked with and made equivalent to an imagined colonial Orient.

While this imposed relationship between the medieval and the 'Oriental' had its roots in eighteenth-century European developments in the picturesque, antiquarianism and early romanticism, a pronounced colonial agenda came to adhere to such seemingly innocent borrowings. This was most fully realized in the immersive recreations of colonial and medieval settings seen in various International Exhibitions, particularly the medieval European street scenes that were frequently paralleled by an equivalent 'Oriental' street scene elsewhere in the same exhibition, such as the famous Cairo Street at the 1889 Paris *Exposition Universelle*.<sup>84</sup> This 'set' was so popular it went on to become a feature of some World's Fairs in the United States.<sup>85</sup> Within these kitsch, theatrical environments the desire to

<sup>80</sup> Donald Preziosi, 'The Museum of What You Shall Have Been', in AlSayed *et al.*, *Making Cairo Medieval*, 126-7.

<sup>81</sup> Preziosi, 'What You Shall Have Been', 127.

<sup>82</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, London: Routledge, 1995.

<sup>83</sup> See Timothy Mitchell, 'Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order', in Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, reprinted in Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 455-72; and Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*, Berkeley: UC Press, 1992.

<sup>84</sup> See Mercedes Volait, 'La rue du Caire', in Myriam Bacha, ed., *Les Expositions Universelles à Paris, de 1855 à 1937*, Paris: Action artistique de la Ville de Paris, 2005, 131-4.

<sup>85</sup> John M. Ganim, 'Medievalism and Orientalism at the World's Fairs', *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: international review of English studies*, 38, 2002, 179-90. Meanwhile, in Great Britain, an image of Queen Victoria progressing through the exhibits of the 1886 South Kensington exhibition sets up a visual faceoff between the medieval and the oriental: on the left is the Gwalior gateway, a monument constructed for the occasion and intended to demonstrate the skill of Indian craftsmen. Facing it is a

picture a pre-Industrial society was created not only in the image of medieval Europe, but also across the image of the colonized countries, denying the changes that had been and were being wrought by the forces of modernity. The relationship between the Cairo street scenes of the International Exhibitions and the medievalization of the urban image of the city of Cairo through the actions of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe and others has been explored at length by Sanders and constitutes the best-documented example of this relationship between real and represented medievalisms in the nineteenth-century Islamic world.<sup>86</sup>

Within the discipline of art history, a comparison of the temporal 'characters' allocated to the various non-Western cultures that have come under the discipline's purview is illuminating of the art history's ethnological biases. In his analysis of non-Western material in the early years of *The Burlington Magazine* Colin Rhodes has pointed out that both Islamic art and pre-Columbian pottery were perceived as being the products of 'historical civilisations' that could therefore be accepted into the pages of the *Burlington* in a way that 'tribal' arts – viewed as both ahistorical and pre-civilizational – could not.<sup>87</sup> '[Islamic and Peruvian objects] were amenable to ratification in European high culture by virtue of their perception as objects from a relatively high cultural context, *situated in the past* [italics mine].'<sup>88</sup> 'Pre-modern' and 'elite' therefore comprise the two key signifiers of Islamic art in this context.<sup>89</sup>

Chinese, Japanese and to a certain extent Indian arts occupy a slightly different position in early volumes of the *Burlington*: regarded as achievements of high civilizations, they are frequently credited with a sense of timeless spirituality, and prestige was brought to Chinese art in particular by the much-vaunted long history of sophisticated critical approaches to art and artmaking that had existed in that region.<sup>90</sup> This raises an interesting question: if Islamic art history has accepted and indeed been complicit in its institutional placement in the medieval period and the excision of its modernity, what about other non-Western artistic traditions? Both

gothic stage-set representing medieval London, while Yeomen of the guard and Indian craftsmen line the pathway. See Jeffrey L. Spear, 'A South Kensington Gateway from Gwalior to Nowhere', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 48(4), 2008, 911-21.

<sup>86</sup> Paula Sanders, *Creating Medieval Cairo*.

<sup>87</sup> It should be noted that the distinction between the 'historic' civilizations of Europe (and Islam and Byzantium – just) and the 'static' societies that produce 'ethnographic' art was still standing and made explicit in the 1991 fourth edition of Janson's *History of Art*, although the Janson text has since undergone many transformations (Robert Nelson, 'The Map of Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, 79[1], 1997, 35).

<sup>88</sup> Colin Rhodes, 'Burlington Primitive: Non-European Art in the Burlington Magazine before 1930', *The Burlington Magazine*, 146(1211), 2004, 98.

<sup>89</sup> The historicization of Islamic art for the *Burlington's* readership is underscored in the review of the Munich 1910 exhibition by Roger Fry, which focuses in part on the relationship between Sasanian and early Islamic art and the impact of this artistic output on the formation of European medieval art. Roger Fry, 'The Munich Exhibition of Mohammedan Art – I', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 17(89), 1910, 283-5, 288-90. See also Basil Gray's review of Islamic art coverage during the first half of the twentieth century in the same journal, 'Islamic Art in the Burlington', *The Burlington Magazine*, 128(1000), 1986, 484-7.

<sup>90</sup> Rhodes, 'Burlington Primitive', 101, 103.

Byzantine and pre-Columbian art have obvious end dates to provide a *terminus ante quem*, with the latter furnished in its very nomenclature with a sixteenth-century point at which to pass the baton to Latin American art. What of Chinese art, which may be the mostly widely taught of the non-Western traditions in Europe and North America? The revised editions of Mary Tregear's *Chinese Art* (1997) and Craig Clunas' *Art in China* (2009), and Thorp and Vinograd's *Chinese Art and Culture* (2001), all start in the Neolithic period and end in the late twentieth or twenty-first centuries.<sup>91</sup> This concerted effort towards a single-volume super-survey certainly suggests that Chinese art history does not have the same fraught relationship with its own modernity that characterizes Islamic art history.

Ultimately, all survey models necessarily function by stripping out alterity, contradictions and complications, and compressing a huge subject area into a very streamlined story that can be easily navigated. These are probably the only means by which the survey of Islamic art as currently conceived can be taught to an audience of undergraduate students who, in the general education traditions of the United States in particular, may well have no background in art history, let alone Middle Eastern studies.<sup>92</sup> While it has utility in the delivery of an introductory body of material, and may be of use to students as a 'soft' way of meeting global cultures credit requirements or the like, there are obvious problems with the survey method. In the first instance, the field is far too big for any one individual to master – a point which has been made many times before now, and which need not in itself present a problem.<sup>93</sup> Why *should* anyone be expected to command something so vast and heterogeneous? Yet institutional expectation continues to dictate that it must be mastered, if only in a fairly superficial way, in order to be taught and exhibited as a survey. Public dissemination of a subject conceived at this scale leaves the mediator little choice but to move as simply as possible through the centuries, most commonly using dynasties as the building blocks with which to construct an edifice of Islamic art. There are other ways of slicing up the pie – regions, media, individual rulers or monuments have all been suggested<sup>94</sup> – but the end result is the same. The scale of the endeavour has engendered a synoptical model for Islamic art history.

But there is another issue involved, with more profound implications: it is not just the geographical and temporal range of material across which Islamic art history is expected to deliver that presents a problem, but also the type of information that it is required to explicate for its audiences. Islamic art is frequently called upon to speak for Islam itself, and for Islamic culture generally – a

<sup>91</sup> Mary Tregear, *Chinese Art*, rev. ed., London: Thames & Hudson, 1997; Robert L. Thorp and Richard Ellis Vinograd, *Chinese Art and Culture*, New York: Harry Abrams, 2001; Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>92</sup> It is notable that the survey of Islamic art as exemplified by the English-language textbooks under discussion does not, even allowing for the very small number of institutions in the United Kingdom that teach Islamic art, seem to have the same presence in the United Kingdom as it does in the United States; presumably this is a result of the more specialized nature of undergraduate degrees in the United Kingdom system.

<sup>93</sup> Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 'The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field', *The Art Bulletin*, 85(1), 2003, 175.

<sup>94</sup> Blair and Bloom, 'Mirage'.

problematic circumstance that has been explored in depth elsewhere.<sup>95</sup> The cultural capital of most students and museum-going members of the public in Europe and North America is unlikely to coincide much, if at all, with that of the makers of the material that is being presented to them in such contexts, and that of Muslim audiences may coincide only slightly more than does that of non-Muslims.<sup>96</sup> Institutional presentations of Islamic art and architecture are therefore required to invest considerable amounts of time in establishing tenets of faith and theological perspectives, as well as general social circumstances and political and economic history. In this ethno-historical arc, artistic material is often called upon first and foremost to function as a form of evidence of historical, religious and social truths, a practice that some of Islamic art history's practitioners are more comfortable with than others. This 'evidentiary' bias can leave very little space sometimes for the discussion of art as *art* – that is, as an autonomous creation capable of carrying something more than the sum of its formal qualities or the imprint of general historical circumstances, made by a person or group of people who worked in a specific environment at a specific time and made a series of critical and practical decisions (however mechanical these may or may not have been) about how the final object should look and feel.

Alongside certain philological biases built into the disciplinary makeup of Islamic art history – a subject which does not always know whether it belongs in art history or area studies – this has perhaps contributed to the field's relative reluctance to explore some of the developments taking place in the broader field of art history, as well as its adherence in some contexts to methodologies that have long been abandoned or augmented in other areas of art history (such as connoisseurship or formalist analysis), and its frequent insistence on the primacy of textual evidence over the cerebral and material processes of artmaking as extrapolated from the artwork itself.

### Crude medievalisms

All of the discomfort with the nineteenth century that has been laid out in this article could be regarded as a fairly cosy and inconsequential academic foible, if it were not for the fact that Islamic art history is hereby complicit in the denial of modernity to the Islamic world in popular discourse. The insidious characterization of the Islamic world as developmentally, culturally and socially retrograde to the point of being 'medieval' can be observed in a great number of public forums, to say

<sup>95</sup> See Flood, 'Prophet', 38-44; Jessica Winegar, 'The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 81(3), 2008, 651-81; David J. Roxburgh, 'After Munich: Reflections on Recent Exhibitions', in Andrea Lerner and Avinoam Shalem, eds, *After One Hundred Years: the 1910 Exhibition 'Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst' Reconsidered*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, 377-82; and the article by Wendy Shaw in the present volume.

<sup>96</sup> See some of the responses from Muslim audiences visiting museum displays of Islamic art in British museums recorded in Ian A. Heath, *The Representation of Islam in British Museums*, 2 vols, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2004, vol. 2.

nothing of the appearance of these terms in informal contexts.<sup>97</sup> To give but one example, the invocation of the Crusades in rhetoric employed by both the American right and Islamic fundamentalist groups has been highlighted by Geraldine Heng, who observes that overoptimistic investment in teaching students and public audiences about the glories of medieval Islamic civilization may not be the best way to address this phenomenon.<sup>98</sup>

An illustrative case study of the medievalization of the Islamic world in popular culture, deliberately culled from a context unrelated to terrorism or war, is provided by the front-page headline from *The Daily Mirror*, a British tabloid newspaper. The issue in question is dated 3 December 2010. The story itself was relatively benign: a bid made by England to act as host nation of the FIFA world cup in 2018 had failed, and host status for the 2018 and 2022 events had instead been awarded to those celebrated footballing nations, Russia and Qatar. The news was, unsurprisingly, greeted with much gnashing of teeth in England (and a certain amount of *Schadenfreude* in the rest of the United Kingdom). On the *Mirror's* cover, superimposed over an image of Russian banknotes fluttering past the world cup and an inset of footballer David Beckham wiping tears from his eyes, was the word 'SOLD' in large red type, accompanied by the following:

RUSSIA, a Mafia state rotten to the core with corruption  
 QATAR, a medieval kingdom with no freedom of speech  
 Both are swimming in oil money  
 How on earth did they persuade the dodgy fatcats of Fifa to give them the  
 World Cup?

Thus, in the ill-humour of the moment, Russia is corrupt but Qatar is medieval. It's a medieval kingdom, no less; a rather surprising term of denigration in a country whose full name is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and where people are generally proud, albeit in a rather abstract way, of their national past. Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear from the context that 'medieval kingdom' is an insult here. There is also a subtle distinction drawn in the juxtaposition of the 'active' and crafty wickedness of Russia, via the corrupting agency of gangsters, with the 'passive' backwardness Qatar's purportedly medieval and implicitly feudal state. The accompanying article did not expand directly on the qualities of Qatar that supposedly identified it as such. But the fact that such characterizations are unthinking or lowbrow doesn't mean we can afford to ignore them. The very unthinkingness of the response that apparently instinctively seeks to cast Islamic countries and societies as medieval – a particularly ironic assertion in the case of Qatar, given how recently it emerged as an independent political entity and major economic force – illustrates the wide reach of this derogatory *topos*. Daily

<sup>97</sup> A former co-worker once told me he had read somewhere that 'the thing about Islamic countries is they're a thousand years behind us', and I am surely not the only person to have encountered this kind of allochronic assertion concerning the Islamic world.

<sup>98</sup> Geraldine Heng, 'Holy War Redux: the Crusades, Futures of the Past, and Strategic Logic in the "Clash" of Religions', *PMLA Journal of the Modern Languages Association*, May 2011, 422-31.

circulation of the *Mirror* averaged 1,113,440 in December 2010.<sup>99</sup> *The Daily Mail*, another British tabloid with a considerably wider circulation and one of the most visited news websites in the English-speaking world,<sup>100</sup> has frequently wheeled out medievalism as part of its rhetoric in coverage of Muslim relations in the United Kingdom.<sup>101</sup>

As described earlier in this paper, the denial of modernity that is inherent in the disciplinary construction of Islamic art as a medieval (or at latest early modern) phenomenon has delivered a double bind to the Islamic world that it studies. On the one hand that world is created as a declined culture and failed modernity, but on the other it is placed temporally behind the West, thrown back into the pejoratively 'medieval' position encapsulated in the *Mirror* headline. The inescapable discourse of 'art as evidence of advancement and humanity' described by Jessica Winegar means that whether or not it should be the case, artistic production is now and will be in the future called upon to speak in some way for Islamic culture.<sup>102</sup> In the current absence of any real space for complex, messy modernity in the master-narrative of Islamic art, a questionable and free-floating global postmodernity is left to convince audiences of some community of time in the present.

Against this backdrop, I would argue that the disciplinary stock of the nineteenth century is rising. There are four reasons for this. First, and most simply, the nineteenth century is getting further away and therefore easier to see in some sort of totality (and so – back to the taxonomic drawing board!). Second, as the academic field of Islamic art history continues to expand rapidly, with ever-increasing numbers of practitioners, the purview of scholarship is also expanding to include subjects of study that were once perceived as rather *infra dig*. Third, and less tangibly, changing moods in scholarship in the humanities have created a climate that is far more sympathetic to 'hybrid', ambiguous or otherwise non-canonical material than was once the case; these same shifts in timbre are also generating a greater interest in and sensitivity to the complexities of Middle Eastern-European relations throughout the colonial enterprise. Fourth, the market boom in Islamic art has prompted collectors of all sorts to broaden their horizons. A buoyant market pulls up the things around it by association, and nineteenth-century material has probably become interesting to collectors in part through its connections with an established canon of pre-modern Islamic material, however

<sup>99</sup> James Robinson, 'ABCs: Daily newspaper sales hit by winter freeze', *guardian.co.uk*, Friday 14 January 2011 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jan/14/abcs-december-2010> accessed 14.05.2012].

<sup>100</sup> Brian Wheeler, 'How the Daily Mail stormed the US', *BBC News Magazine*, 27 January 2012 [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-16746785> accessed 16.05.2012]. The formula is fairly simple: celebrity gossip and pictures of women in bikinis have proved a powerful lure for readers on both sides of the Atlantic, while long headlines packed with common search terms give stories high placement in internet search engine results.

<sup>101</sup> To give one recent and illustrative example: Leon Watson, 'Muslim fanatics who called for execution of gays and wanted to set up a "medieval state" under Sharia law in Derby are jailed for up to two years', *Mail Online*, 10 February 2012 [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2099397/Muslim-fanatics-called-execution-gays-wanted-set-medieval-state-Sharia-law-Derby-jailed.html> accessed 16.05.2012].

<sup>102</sup> Winegar, 'Art, Islam', 656.

slightly those links may be supported by current scholarly models. At the same time, as prices have skyrocketed for medieval and early modern material, collectors outside the cadre of the ultra wealthy have begun to look to other areas in which to establish themselves. For all of these reasons, the nineteenth century is set to make an increasing impact in the field. To close with one more choice phrase from Marchand, 'if we cannot escape our embarrassment, we can at least learn to use it constructively'.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Marchand, 'Embarrassed', 1.