

What do we mean when we say 'Islamic art'?

A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam

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In a book published in 2008, Arnold Hottinger provocatively asserted that as far as the Western stance toward Islam is concerned, Islam does not exist.¹ He argued correctly that it is pure fiction to speak about Islam using one sole, monolithic and global term. Moreover, he added that the desire to see in the wide-ranging and diverse 'worlds of Islam' a homogenous sphere called Islam is simply an abstract cognitive notion, which, as with any general concept, has its sole origin in the mind of the person who creates this concept or theory. It is quite clear, then, that Hottinger, like many other scholars of Islamic studies, developed his ideas in the critical 'Post-Edwardian Era'; that is, the period following the death of Edward Said in 2003, in which renewed discussion has taken place around his renowned book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978.²

The 'imaginary Orient', as termed by Linda Nochlin in 1983,³ is not restricted to Western literature but impinges on many other fields and is undoubtedly rooted in the history of European thought, especially in the construction of the image of its major 'Other' and the creation of its own historical narrative. And yet, this critical notion can and should also be applied to the field of art history in general, and to the construction of the field of Islamic art history within the larger discipline of Western art history in particular. To be more precise, what this brief analysis intends is to begin a discussion on the history of 'Oriental' art and artistic production within the critical framework of Orientalism, or, more broadly, within the framework of colonial and postcolonial studies; and, at the same time, to

¹ Arnold Hottinger, *Die Länder des Islam. Geschichte, Traditionen und der Einbruch der Moderne*, Zurich: NZZ-Verlag, 2008.

² The term 'Post-Edwardian' is my own and refers particularly to the debates that have surrounded the question of Orientalism since Said's death in September 2003. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; Edward W. Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', in Francis Barker *et al.*, eds, *Literature, Politics and Theory, Papers from the Essex Conference 1976–1984*, London and New York: Methuen, 1986; Asaf Hussein *et al.*, eds, *Orientalism, Islam and Islamists*, Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1984. See also Armando Salvatore, 'Beyond Orientalism? Max Weber and the Displacement of "Essentialism" in the Study of Islam', *Arabica*, 43, 1996, 457-85; Alexander L. Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000; Touraj Atabaki, *Beyond Essentialism: Who Writes Whose Past in the Middle East and Central Asia?*, Amsterdam: Aksant, 2003; Birgit Schäbler, 'Riding the Turns: Edward Said's Buch *Orientalism* als Erfolgsgeschichte', in Burkhard Schnepel, Gunnar Brands and Hanne Schöning, eds, *Orient – Orientalistik – Orientalismus. Geschichte und Aktualität einer Debatte*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011, 279-302.

³ Linda Nochlin, 'The Imaginary Orient', *Art in America*, 71, May 1983, 118-31.

contribute to the ongoing vital discourse on the creation and definition of the term 'Islamic art history' as a scientific field within the wider discipline of art history.⁴

Colonial and postcolonial perspectives

Orientalism, as Said termed it almost half a century ago, is a methodological approach of a critical nature, which in the first place adjusts our skewed understanding of the Orient as filtered through European eyes. Its strong critique, not to say condemnation, of the Eurocentric view should be compulsory reading in any academic discourse relating to the study of Asia – 'the Orient' – and should form part of the introductory chapter of any general book on Islamic art. The benefits of this would be tremendous, as it would stimulate an enhanced, more accurate picture of that immense area formerly known as 'the Orient' and would allow for the reassessment of Eurocentric modes of thought and their re-positioning in a more comparative frame of scholarly assessment. It is true that the academic trend for a more critical model in the teaching of 'Orientalist' subjects is in fact ongoing, but academia is still far from any final emancipation from fundamental, deep-rooted perceptions and prejudices concerning the East, with commentators still propounding blatant anachronisms, and the continued dominance of such tropes as the East-West binary paradigm of writing and interpreting history, and the prevailing Western, linear theory of the evolution of cultures which clearly frames progress as running from the East to the West.

The best example for this last notion is perhaps the still-prevailing theory of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who says in his *Philosophy of Universal History*: 'Universal history goes from East to West. Europe is absolutely the end of universal history. Asia is the beginning.'⁵ Moreover, as Dussel has argued, alongside this Western proclamation of an exclusively East-West direction of cultural development, which manifestly excludes Africa and Latin America from the history of civilization, Asia – (i.e. 'the Orient') – is defined as if in a primordial state of childhood and infantile underdevelopment, whereas Europe is placed on the summit of evolution and maturity, ultimately aiming at the sole hegemony of the 'New World'.⁶ It is beyond the scope of this article to speculate and reassess this Hegelian theory and its influence on the birth of the myth of modernity in Europe, to say nothing of the justifications it provides for capitalist theories and other aggressive actions involving the submission and 'cultivation' of any non-European entity and especially Islam. But it must be noted that the Hegelian mode of thought and any other theories that operate within the confines of indexical order and taxonomy, including the concept of globalization today, are also 'systematic

⁴ See the recent publications on this issue by the present author: Avinoam Shalem, 'Über die Notwendigkeit, zeitgenössisch zu sein: Die islamische Kunst im Schatten der europäischen Kunstgeschichte', in Schnepel *et al.*, *Orient – Orientalistik – Orientalismus*, 245–64; and 'Dangerous Claims: On the "Othering" of Islamic Art History and how it Operates within Global Art History', to be published in *Kritische Berichte*, special issue, Matthias Bruhn and Elke Werner, eds, *Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften*, 40(2), 2012 (forthcoming).

⁵ This citation of Hegel is taken from Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity*, tr. Michel D. Barber, New York: Continuum, 1995, 20.

⁶ Dussel, *Invention of the Americas*, chapter 1: 'Eurocentrism', mainly 19–26; see also Enrique Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)', *Boundary 2*, 20(3), 1993, 65–76.

patterns of authority, of control and evaluation, and hence of inclusion and exclusion by *real or perceived others*.⁷

Recently, several studies on Occidentalism have proposed to work as a corrective force in line with Said's critical message. But because these studies are often focused on another imagined perspective, that of the East looking to and at the West, they quite often fall into the trap of Eurocentrism. Moreover, they belong no less to the Eurocentric tradition than do Orientalist constructs, for they take it for granted that the East looks west and made the West its great 'Other', whereas the medieval Islamic world looked both west and east and even towards Africa.⁸

Other concepts and schemes for writing history and art history today, especially those that aim at a global perspective and a world history viewpoint, are not guilty of imposing any such linearity or cyclical mode of interpretation but still face the very real challenges inherent in writing a global history.⁹ The first and most critical issue in the writing of global history concerns the scholar's departure from the idea of centre and periphery. This concept has been one of the most important scientific systems for explaining, in art history for example, modalities and changes in style. In a Eurocentric art-historical approach, scholars have taken it for granted that the birth of any mainstream style or fashion and any innovative moment is usually to be positioned in the radiating centre of cultural power that reaches the periphery with its 'rays of influence'. The margins seem then only to echo artistic creations that are produced and invented in the centres, and within this model, capital sites of power play the major role in dictating the style and modes of visual presentations. The best example with which to illustrate this notion within the writings on the history of Islamic art concerns the creation of 'Abbasid Baghdad by al-Mansur in 762 as a perfect round city, the navel of the whole empire, and the royal city of Samarra founded shortly thereafter in 836 by al-Mu'tasim, from which the novel 'bevelled style' was spread.¹⁰ The same principle can be applied to the

⁷ See Jan Blommaert, *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 38.

⁸ For a critical approach to the culturalist idea of Occidentalism, see Akeel Bilgrami, 'Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment', *Critical Inquiry*, 32, 2006, 381-411. See also Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism*, London: Atlantic Books, 2004. For a critical approach to Eurocentrism, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000; Vassilis Lambropoulos, *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993; Samir Amin, *L'Eurocentrisme: critique d'une idéologie*, Paris: Anthropos, 1988; Samir Amin, *Global History: A View from the South*, Bangalore: Books for Change, 2011; Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, tr. S. Lester, South Bend, IN: Saint Augustine's Press, 2002; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Eurocentrism and Art History? Universal History and the Historiography of the Arts before Winckelmann', in Wessel Reinink and Jeroen Stumpel, eds, *Memory and Oblivion*, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999, 35-42.

⁹ For the global debate in art history, see James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?*, New York and London: Routledge, 2007; Irene Below and Beatrice von Bismarck, eds, *Globalisierung Hierarchisierung: Kulturellen Dominanzen in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*, Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2005; Ulrich Pfisterer, 'Origins and Principles of World Art History – 1900 (and 2000)', in Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds, *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008, 69-89; Hans Belting, Emanuel Araújo and Andrea Buddensieg, eds, *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009.

¹⁰ The myth of the round city of Baghdad has recently been discussed in a Masters dissertation: see Christoph Knüttel, *Bagdad – Die „Runde Stadt“ des Kalifen al-Mansur: Historische Realität oder literarische Fiktion?*, unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Munich, 2008. For the bevelled style of

proposed existence of a 'school of Baghdad' within thirteenth-century book painting, and the belief that Baghdad must be the radiating centre of Arab painting.¹¹

In short, the whole process of artistic production, transfer and evaluation thus envisaged posits the centre as a source of metropolitan example, artistic inspiration and imitation, and as a paradigmatic tool. But because works produced in many of the so-called 'marginal' areas expose the fact that it is often the margin that takes the leading aesthetic role and even imposes on the artistic production of the so-called centres and principal capitals, this paradigm should undoubtedly be revisited. Here I would like to call the reader's attention to the frequent discussion of Fatimid-styled Sicily under Norman hegemony as a so-called marginal space of the Muslim world. Such liminality cannot possibly be maintained when one comes to map the cultural and artistic sites of the Mediterranean basin in the twelfth century. The role taken by Norman Sicily in the distribution of Fatimid styles of artistic production is enormous and seldom acknowledged. Moreover, Norman-Fatimid styles seem to have profoundly influenced Arab art in other production-zones all around the Mediterranean basin.¹² This new vision of the periphery as artistic wellspring supplying the centre challenges conventional ways of thinking and disrupts the traditional hierarchies of power that are necessary to the construction of 'Us' and 'the Other'. Moreover, history seems rather to indicate a situation of many centres and varied peripheries which are all organized in a complex matrix of connections. Parallel temporalities are expected in this new networked system, and the formerly static character of art history, in which works of art were first and foremost anchored to and identified by one specific place of origin, is replaced by the mobility of artistic materials, things and ideas.¹³ These

Samarra and the idea of a radiating style in Islamic art see Richard Ettinghausen, 'The "Beveled Style" in the Post-Samarra Period', in George C. Miles, ed., *Archaeologia Orientalia im Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld*, Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin, 1952, 72-83; Richard Ettinghausen, 'Originality and Conformity in Islamic Art', in Amin Banani and Speros Vryonis, Jr., eds, *Individualism and Conformity in Classical Islam (Fifth Giorgio Levi della Vida Biennial Conference, 1975)*, Wiesbaden: Undena, 1977, 83-114.

¹¹ Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting*, Geneva: Skira, 1962; Thomas Arnold, *Painting in Islam*, New York: Dover, 1965. For a discussion of Baghdad in the context of manuscript illustration and the transmission of knowledge prior to the thirteenth century, see Eva Hoffman, *The Emergence of Illustration in Arabic Manuscripts: Classical Legacy and Islamic Transformation*, unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, 1982. See especially the discussion on 'Centers of Manuscript Illustration', in which Hoffman suggests that the emergence of provincial cultural centres that 'diminished the unrivalled cultural dominance maintained by Baghdad since the ninth century' was due to the disintegration of the 'Abbasid caliphate and the declining power of the city of Baghdad in 935 CE (117-26). See also E. Blochet, *Musulman Painting, XIIth-XVIIth century*, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975, mainly chapter 7, 31-7.

¹² See mainly the excellent discussion by William Tronzo, 'Regarding Norman Sicily: art, identity and court culture in the later middle ages', in *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 35, 2003/2004, Munich: Hirmer, 2005, 101-14; see also William Tronzo, 'Byzantine Court Culture from the Point of View of Norman Sicily: The Case of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo', in Henry Maguire, ed., *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1977, 101-14.

¹³ Network discourse is firmly interwoven with capitalism – an extremely complicated cultural system in which commodities have played a major role. See Werner Sombart, *Luxury and Capitalism*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, New York: Routledge, 1981; Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce*, New York: Harper & Row, 1982; Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, esp. chapter 1, 'Objects, Exchange, Anthropology', 7-34; and Bruno Latour, 'Von der Realpolitik zur Dingpolitik oder

recent developments in the field of art history force us, as Islamic art historians, to reconsider the story of Islamic art within the discipline of art history.¹⁴

In order to assess the position of Islamic art within the field of art history, the first step required is the mapping of Islamic art. This notion has been recently taken up by several art historians, especially those expert in the histories of geographical areas defined as provincial, regional, border-zoned, or generally termed as non-European. Within the scholarly realm of Byzantine art studies – a discipline that is experiencing, to some extent, concerns about its status within art history that are comparable to those being experienced in Islamic art – Anthony Cutler and Rob Nelson have called our attention recently to the mapping of Byzantine art.¹⁵ It seems that as far as both Islamic and Byzantine art are concerned a clear art-historical stance can be detected: namely, the tendency towards a provincialization which aims to present these fields as the ultimate missing links for explaining the evolution of Western art. This tendency has resulted in the omission of these arenas from any autonomous account of aesthetic evolution or even of any genuine creativity, unless the latter can be directly linked with or be shown to initiate the birth of a novel Western artistic language. Additionally, this concept has brought about the forcible compression of both Islamic and Byzantine arts within a specific span of time that corresponds and harmonizes with the grand history of Western artistic evolution, positioning both merely as stations on the inexorable path to the Italian Renaissance. Several articles by Oleg Grabar, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom address the complexity of Islamic art history, and recently Finbarr Barry Flood has touched upon the question of mapping this field.¹⁶ However, their approaches, critical and enlightened as they are, are either somewhat over-restricted

wie man Dinge öffentlich macht', in Peter Weibel, ed., *Dingpolitik. Atmosphären der Demokratie*, exhib. cat. ZKM Museum für Neue Kunst Karlsruhe, Berlin: Merve, 2005. Of course, the phenomenon of tourism, which is clearly also bound to capitalism, has contributed to the emergence of theoretical thoughts on the networks of migrating objects. See Alexandra Karentzos, Alma-Elisa Kittner and Julia Reuter, eds, *Topologies of Travel*, online publication of Trier University Library, 2010 [http://ubt.opus.hbz-nrw.de/volltexte/2010/565/pdf/Topologien_des_Reisens.pdf accessed 30.04.2012]. On cultural mobility see Stephen Greenblatt *et al.*, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

¹⁴ On the ramifications of the idea of mobility in interpreting and discussing Islamic art works, see Avinoam Shalem, 'Histories of Belonging and George Kubler's Prime Object', *Getty Research Journal*, 3, 2011, 1-14.

¹⁵ Anthony Cutler, 'The Pathos of Distance: Byzantium in the Gaze of Renaissance Europe and Modern Scholarship', in Claire Farago, ed., *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1450–1650*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995, 23-45; Rob Nelson, 'Living on the Byzantine Borders of Western Art', *Gesta*, 35(1), 1996, 3-11; Rob Nelson, 'The Map of Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, 79(1), 1997, 28-40 (in which Islamic art is also discussed).

¹⁶ Oleg Grabar, 'Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art', *Muqarnas*, 1, 1983, 1-14; Oleg Grabar, 'The Study of Islamic Art: Sources and Promises', *Journal of the David Collection*, 1, 2003, 9-22; 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), March 2003, 152-84; 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; for Islamic architecture, see Robert Hillenbrand, 'Studying Islamic Architecture: Challenges and Perspectives', *Architectural History*, 46, 2003, 1–18; Nasser Rabbat, 'Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Enquiry', *AD Architectural Design*, 74(6), 2004, 18-23. The mapping of Islamic art within the field of art history and the specific approach of Islamic art historians to their own field were addressed by the present author in a lecture held in the Deutsche Orientalisten Tagung in Freiburg in September 2007: Avinoam Shalem, 'On the Importance of Being Contemporary'. See also Avinoam Shalem, 'Über die Notwendigkeit'.

by discussing Islamic art as though divorced from its general art-historical context, or else perhaps too dismissive of Eurocentric art historians' attitudes towards and evaluations of the field of Islamic art. Thus a call for a sincere process of self-criticism on the part of any Islamic art historian studying the historiography of this field, and for the very rewriting of the history of Islamic art, would seem essential. First, however, it is necessary to discuss several specific stumbling blocks that substantially hamper the writing of the history of Islamic art as an integral part of art history. For the sake of brevity, only a select few will be mentioned.

Islamic art history and the problems of terminology

The first problem that faces any attempt to integrate Islamic material into the wider field of art history stems from the complexity of the term 'Islamic'. Though clearly referring to the religion of Islam, this term aspires, especially in the academic, learned and secular sphere, to encompass the entire cultural breadth of Muslim societies, rather than restricting itself to religious contexts.¹⁷ Grabar already articulated this problematic issue in 1978:

In its classical centuries, before the major impact of the West, Islamic art *can* be seen primarily as the art of a culture with any number of regional and temporal subcultures within it. What I mean by 'culture' in this context is a broader series of very varied impulses and needs – social, intellectual, ecological, climatic, political, and of course religious – which were sufficiently constant over the centuries to explain the relationship to each other of such diverse attributes of monuments ... All these creations, one can argue, must be seen and understood primarily as expressions of, so to speak, an anthropologically defined culture, tied together perhaps by the faith of Islam, but not any more so than, let us say, Versailles and a Russian icon are related by being products of a Christian world.¹⁸

And yet, almost any survey book on Islamic art takes it for granted that the birth of Islamic art begins, for example, with the Prophet Muhammad or the cult around the holy Ka'ba in Mecca. In this respect the authors of these general books on Islamic art primarily associate aesthetic phenomena in the Islamic regions with a religious rather than cultural genesis. It is no wonder, therefore, that the first chapter in *Die Kunst des Islam* in the Propyläen Kunstgeschichte series (1990) provides the reader with a relatively long introduction on the creation and expansion of the world religion of Islam and the biography of Muhammad.¹⁹ Alfred Renz even opens his book on the history of Islamic art with the *Shahada*.²⁰ The opening chapters in books on Islamic art need to be revised. These first chapters

¹⁷ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973, 1-18; Oleg Grabar, 'What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?', *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*, 9, 1976, 1-3; Oleg Grabar, 'Islamic Art: Art of a Culture or art of a Faith', *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*, 11, 1978, 1-6. See also the recently published book by Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

¹⁸ Oleg Grabar, 'Islamic Art: Art of a Culture or art of a Faith', 1.

¹⁹ Janine Sourdel-Thomine and Bertold Spuler, *Die Kunst des Islam*, Berlin: Propyläen, 1990, 17.

²⁰ Alfred Renz, *Geschichte und Stätten des Islam von Spanien bis Indien*, Munich: Prestel, 1977, 15.

should define the starting moment or era for the birth of Islamic art, a sort of *Stunde Null* ('zero hour'), which will be classified by artistic and aesthetic parameters. Should one look to the artistic context of Saudi Arabia and Yemen of Late Antiquity in an attempt to see when and in what context the art of Islam was born? Perhaps one should even shift in time to the period preceding the Prophet and focus on the formerly Christian environments of modern-day Saudi Arabia. There one might find oneself defining, on aesthetic criteria, the birth of Islamic art from the womb, so to speak, of Christian art, similar to the birth of Christian art in Late Antiquity from Jewish art.²¹ Or, for example, one might focus on the age of the Iconoclastic Controversy as a starting point for defining a new route of visual expression.²² What is needed is a search for the moment of the birth of a new aesthetic language rather than the birth of a prophet or a new creed. And that would perhaps be a better introductory chapter for any future general book on Islamic art.

Related to this posited point of religious genesis is the 'spiritualization' of Islamic art. The classification and discussion of Islamic art as a bisected entity, divided into the secular and the sacred, is in fact a Western paradigm rooted in the history of rivalries between the papacy and royal/noble classes.²³ Does it then follow that it should also be accepted as a suitable paradigm for the art of the Islamic worlds? Shouldn't this paradigm be examined in each geographical area and time-span before the dual notion of sacred versus secular is applied to the interpretation of Islamic art?²⁴

The artificial dichotomy of sacred and secular is not the only imposed form of classificatory system to be found in Islamic art history. The division of arts according to materials – the manner in which to this very day the so-called 'minor' or 'decorative' arts are divided – is an art-historical notion deeply rooted in the antiquarian mind.²⁵ Should we maintain this division in Islamic art? This is a crucial question as the art of the object plays a major role in Islamic art, one similar in status

²¹ See for example the excellent exhibition catalogue *Roads of Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, Paris: Somogy Art Publishers, 2010.

²² Several articles on archaeology in Saudi Arabia might pave the way for thinking differently about the birth of Islamic art. See for example Hugh Kennedy, 'Islam' in G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar, eds, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, 219-37; Jamie Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley, eds, *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991; see also the classic article on the Iconoclastic Controversy, Patricia Crone, 'Islam, Judaeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2, 1980, 39-95.

²³ For a discussion of this topic in medieval art, see Alicia Walker and Amanda Luyster, 'Mapping the Heavens and Treading the Earth: Negotiating Secular and Sacred in Medieval Art', in Alicia Walker and Amanda Luyster, eds, *Negotiating Secular and Sacred in Medieval Art: Christian, Islamic and Buddhist*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009, 1-16.

²⁴ See the article by Wendy Shaw in the present volume for an extensive examination of this subject.

²⁵ This topic is beyond the scope of this article. But when examining the definition of Islamic artefacts as 'decorative', it should be emphasized that the role played by Western collectors, most of them upper-middle class and educated, is very significant. See Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000, especially the article of Oleg Grabar, 'The Implications of Collecting Islamic Art', 194-200; see also Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit, eds, *Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation, and Eclecticism*, Leiden: Brill, 2006; Andrea Lerner and Avinoam Shalem, *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition 'Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst' Reconsidered*, Leiden: Brill, 2010.

to that of monumental art in the West.²⁶ Moreover, the Western division of the visual arts into the specific categories of architecture, sculpture and painting follows the Hegelian systematization of the visual arts. Should Islamic art historians also accept this classification? Could the visual world of Islam suggest other classificatory systems for its varied arts? Calligraphy of course comes to mind as a special case, but 'objectography', or perhaps 'objectology' or even 'artefacture', might be another.²⁷ Thus, the field that is still defined in European and North American art history by the label 'minor arts' is necessarily invalid in the context of the arts of Islam, and the distinction between major and minor itself of little utility. Medieval literary sources of the Islamic world clearly demonstrate the great esteem in which artefacts were held. One of the best examples is the *Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf* ('Book of Gifts and Rarities'), a late eleventh-century treatise ascribed to the Qadi al-Rashid Ibn al-Zubayr, and an amazing source of information on the narratives of famous objects from the period immediately preceding Islam up until the Fatimid era.²⁸ In this text, the objects are treated by the author as living creatures, with biographies which could be told as their personal histories. This approach suggests a totally different attitude towards the social meaning and function of objects in the world of Islam as compared with the medieval sources that discuss objects in the Latin West. One might even say that the history of Muslim communities is told through the narratives of artefacts.²⁹ It is possible that the sensitivity and competence that enabled medieval Muslims to consider objects as if they were individuals has its roots in *wasf* literature (*wasf* literally meaning 'description'), especially the *wasf* texts of the ninth-century 'Abbasids.³⁰ Yet reading other medieval Arab sources, one is amazed by the wide interest in objects and the high aesthetic consciousness of the medieval beholder of artefacts: to name just one example, the *Book of Misers* by al-Jahiz furnishes many more examples of this phenomenon.³¹ The inscriptions incised and carved into

²⁶ The very recent exhibition *Gifts of the Sultan*, curated by Linda Komaroff, suggests a turning point in the study of the art of the object and its importance in Muslim social and religious contexts. See *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

²⁷ The term objectology has been suggested by the present author in discussions of the representation of Islamic objects in European painting: Avinoam Shalem, 'Things that Matter: The Case of an Astrolabe in Filippino Lippi's *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi in Florence', *Annali*, 62, 2002, 219-20; Avinoam Shalem, 'The Portraiture of Objects: A Note on Representations of Islamic Objects in European Paintings of the 14th-16th centuries', in Michele Bernardini *et al.*, eds, *Europa e Islam tra secoli XIV-XVI*, Naples: Istituto universitario orientale, 2002, 497-521. The art of the object in Islam had already been emphasized by Grabar in the 1970s: see Oleg Grabar, 'An Art of the Object', *Artforum*, 14, 1976, 36-43.

²⁸ Al-Qadi al-Rashid ibn al-Zubayr, *Kitab al-Dhakha'ir wa'l-Tuhaf*, ed. Muhammad Hamidullah, Kuwait: 1959. For English translation and commentaries see Ghada al-Hijawi al-Qaddumi, *Book of Gifts and Rarities, Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1996.

²⁹ The only medieval tract which could – to some extent – be compared with the *Book of Gifts and Rarities* is the twelfth-century text of Abbot Suger, *de Administratione*. See Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger, on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979. See also *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the Time of Abbot Suger (1122-1151)*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981; Peter Kidson, 'Panofsky, Suger and St. Denis', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 50, 1987, 1-17.

³⁰ In the ninth century, during the 'Abbasid period, a new type of poetry emerged that made description of one object the sole or central subject of a poem. See 'Wasf', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

³¹ See al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-bukhala'*, ed. Taha al-Hajari, Cairo: 1958; see also Oleg Grabar, 'Silks, Pots and Jugs: Al-Jahiz and Objects of Common Use', in Bernard O'Kane, ed., *The Iconography of Islamic Art: Studies in Honour of Robert Hillenbrand*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 197-200.

diverse Islamic objects, in which the objects speak to the beholder, and the particular metaphors used in Arabic poetry in which the materials, colours and shapes of artefacts are understood as bearing meanings, suggest that the specific field which we today call iconography was not limited in medieval Islam to the meaning of images, but also encompassed the material aspects of artefacts, such as substance, colour and shape.³²

Untenable paradigms

The aforementioned positions and paradigms that have imposed upon practising art historians clearly demonstrate that a comprehensive revision is needed in order to explore the proper canons for evaluating and classifying the arts of the Islamic world. Grabar considered this problematic issue apologetically, bringing it to the reader's attention in the preface of his discussion on the character of Islamic art: '[t]he views and opinions which are here expressed were developed as a Western observer sought to understand an art. They do not derive from a Muslim experience, and it is indeed a problem faced by nearly all scholars in the field ...'³³ But, as Grabar adds: '[i]n all likelihood there are many more examples of aesthetic and artistic judgments within the tradition than have been recognized so far. There certainly was a whole vocabulary for visual forms which is as yet undetected ...'³⁴ Grabar rightly calls on the art historians of the field to build a new vocabulary and terminology for the arts of Islam. There is certainly a need for the establishment of a visual theory that is profoundly rooted within the culture-specific frameworks pertinent to the field of Islamic studies, as well as the need for the cautious use of any imported understanding.

Indeed, one of the most harmful ideas developed by historians of Islamic art is the myth of the unity of Islamic art. This idea of unity creates a paradigm for understanding Islamic art that primarily serves to explain similarities between different artistic products. It therefore provides an easy solution for quite intriguing and remarkably specific cases of parallelism in the history of the art of Islam. Within the 'unity' thesis, style and aesthetic language became amoeba-like, amorphic, and are no longer necessarily considered to be the product of a culture that occupies a specific span of time and a specific space, i.e. a particular *Zeitgeist*. Moreover, within the 'unity' model styles could, it seems, be easily transferred across space and time. This projected meta-similitude in Islamic art seems to put together different objects that are not only assigned to different regions but also differ in time, thus creating what is often termed 'unity in diversity'. More importantly, this stance means that similitude in aesthetic vocabulary between different regions can be explained away very simply on the basis of unity, and other potential reasons for visual similarities are oftentimes ignored. Should we not rewrite and critically discuss the history of the thesis of unity in Islamic art?

³² For this meaning of materials in the medieval Latin West, see the excellent study by Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien*, Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1994. For speaking objects in Islam, see Avinoam Shalem, 'If Objects Could Speak', in Jürgen Wassim Frembgen, ed., *The Aura of the Alif*, Munich: Prestel, 2010, 127-147.

³³ Oleg Grabar, 'What Makes Islamic Art Islamic', reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, vol. 3, *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006, 1.

³⁴ Grabar, 'What Makes Islamic Art Islamic', 1.

To take this a little further: the notion of unity was, in the earliest uses of the term, primarily associated with the religion of Islam rather than its art. Thus the monolithic projection of Islam was used and abused by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, serving as religious and political propaganda. For example, if we are to look at the writings of Jacob Burckhardt, the 'father' of art history, we will find the trope of unity, which was in his view also linked to simplicity, used in reference to Muslim religion:

This aridity, this dreary uniformity of Islam, which is so terribly limited on the religious side, probably did more harm than good to culture, if only because it rendered the peoples affected by it quite incapable of going over to another culture. Its simplicity much facilitated its expansion, but was marked by that extreme exclusiveness which is a feature of all rigid monotheism, while the wretched Koran stood, and still stands, in the way of any political and legal growth. Law remained half priestly.³⁵

And, as far as Islamic art is concerned, he adds:

In the visual arts, architecture alone developed, firstly through Persian builders and subsequently with the help of Byzantine and any other styles which lay to hand. Sculpture and painting were practically non-existent, because the decree of the Koran was not only observed but carried far beyond its letter. What the intellect forfeited in these circumstances may be left to the imagination.³⁶

The first passage demonstrates the general and prevailing view that Islam as a religion had gained its popularity through its simplicity, as if unity and global identity were easily built on the basis of simple monotheistic ideology. I will not go into detail in elucidating or interpreting Burckhardt's particular position on Islam and the Qur'an – though some traces of missionary zeal might well be detected in the writing of the son of a priest of the Christian Reformed Church in Basel – but his reflections on the visual arts of Islam, in which he completely ignores the existence of painting or sculpture, clearly demonstrate his ignorance in this field.

³⁵ 'Der Islam, der eine so furchtbar kurze Religion ist, ist mit dieser seiner Trockenheit und trostlosen Einfachheit der Kultur wohl vorwiegend eher schädlich als nützlich gewesen, und wäre es auch nur, weil er die betreffenden Völker gänzlich unfähig macht, zu einer andern Kultur überzugehen. Die Einfachheit erleichterte sehr seine Verbreitung, war aber mit derjenigen höchsten Einseitigkeit verbunden, welche der starre Monotheismus bedingt, und aller politischen und Rechtsentwicklung stand und steht der elende Koran entgegen; das Recht bleibt halbgeistlich.' Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtlichen Betrachtungen*, Stuttgart: Kröner, 1978, 100. The book was first originally published approximately eight years after Burckhardt's death in 1905. English translation from Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*, tr. James Hastings Nichols, New York: Pantheon, 1964, 187.

³⁶ 'In der bildenden Kunst ist nur die Architektur ausgebildet, zuerst durch persische Baumeister, dann mit Benützung des byzantinischen und überhaupt jedes vorgefundenen Stiles und Materials. Skulptur und Malerei existieren so gut wie gar nicht, weil man die Vorschrift des Korans nicht nur innehielt, sondern weit über den Wortlaut übertrieb. Was dabei der Geist überhaupt einbüßte, läßt sich denken.' Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtlichen Betrachtungen*, 101–2; English translation: Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom*, 189.

It is true that one should understand Burckhardt's thoughts, opinions, and even polemical verdicts on Islamic art in the historical context of nineteenth-century Europe, and yet it must be admitted that even today – and of this I can assure you, being constantly confronted with similar thoughts expressed by colleagues or students – belief in the clichés of the supposed unity of Islam and Islam's widespread iconoclastic stance is pervasive.

But the notion of 'unity' seems to surface even in the writings of Islamic art historians. In 1962 Ernst Kühnel wrote:

The common ground of religious denomination in the world of Islam had a stronger influence on cultural achievements than it had in the Christian world. This common ground created a bridge among different races, conventions and habits of varied lands and dictated a remarkable and clear unity. The meaning and importance of the Qur'an on matters that go beyond the religious sphere and even merge into all queries concerning daily life were pivotal for the process of the alignment. With the autarchy of the Arabic script, a canonized volume was accepted which held together the whole Islamic world and formed the basic factor for each art production.³⁷

Richard Ettinghausen, writing contemporaneously across the Atlantic, is more careful when expressing similar ideas in which aesthetic phenomena are explained on the basis of a meta-unity. In an article published in a volume titled *Unity and Diversity in Muslim Civilization*, he says:

The unique character of Muslim art is a commonly known fact, which is experienced even by people who know hardly anything about this civilization ... Yet, in spite of the apparent uniform character of Islamic art, everybody who becomes familiar with its various aspects realizes more and more the tremendous variety in the different regions and even in the changing periods within a single territory ... What is actually more intriguing, yet more difficult to establish than this general state of diversity, are the various factors which, through interaction and integration, constantly helped to reinforce the strongly felt universal aspect of Muslim art.³⁸

But even Muslim scholars have tended to propagate the unity of Islamic art, mainly for the purpose of establishing a unified Islamic collective consciousness and identity. Al-Faruqi says:

³⁷ 'Die Gemeinsamkeit des religiösen Bekenntnisses hat im Islam stärker als in der christlichen Welt auf die kulturellen Leistungen der Völker eingewirkt; sie hat Rassenunterschiede überbrückt und Sitten und Gebräuche der verschiedenen Länder in eine erstaunlich klare und einheitliche Richtung gezwungen. Entscheidend für den Prozess der Angleichung war die Bedeutung des Koran über Dinge des Glaubens hinaus für alle Lebensfragen. Mit der Alleinherrschaft der arabischen Schrift wurde ein Band geschlossen, das die ganze islamische Welt zusammenhielt und einen wesentlichen Faktor bei jeglichem Kunstschaffen bildete.' Ernst Kühnel, *Die Kunst des Islam*, Stuttgart: Kröners, 1962, 9.

³⁸ Richard Ettinghausen, 'Interaction and Integration in Islamic Art', in G.E. von Grunebaum, ed., *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, 107-8.

It is idle to dispute the unity of Islamic art. Although the historians will recognize a large variety of motifs, of materials, of styles differentiated geographically or chronologically, the overwhelming fact of all Islamic art is its unity of purpose and form. From Cordova to Mindanao, the arts of these lands once converted to Islam betrayed the same constitutive characteristics, avoidance of naturalism, of characterization and development; and preference for stylization, for formalism generative of movement, for timelessness.³⁹

It is quite interesting to follow several other scholars heralding the unity of Islam and to identify how this idea at times merges perfectly with the concept of *tawhid*, the fundamental idea of Oneness in monotheism which, in the case of Islam, claims Allah as the One (*al-Wahid*).⁴⁰ But as far as the art of Islam is concerned, the purported unity appears as a projection – a 'strongly felt universal aspect', as Ettinghausen says. Islamic art is rather a mixture of different cultures and the adaptation of different styles and aesthetic notions with no thoughts of a unified formation. So should one simply argue for diversity? And by this I mean diversity, and not diversity in unity.

Indeed it is rather interesting to trace the appearance of the concept 'diversity in unity' or 'unity in diversity' in the field of Islamic art. The Library of Congress provides us with approximately 360 book titles using this phrase and its variations. It must be emphasized that the craze for using this particular idiom in book titles appeared in the 1950s. It was employed mainly for books discussing social issues of contemporary Western societies at that time. To the best of my knowledge, this idiom first appeared in the context of Islamic studies in 1955, in Grunebaum's *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*.⁴¹ But it is likely that the title gained its popularity in 1986 at the 26th International Congress of the History of Art in Washington DC, appropriately titled 'World Art: Themes of Unity in Diversity'. It is no wonder that a mere year later a variation of the phrase appeared as the title of an exhibition on Islamic art: *Variety in Unity* was held between 26 January and 26 February 1987 in the Bayan Palace in Kuwait.⁴²

Nonetheless, arguing for diversity is no easy task, as the predilection for finding unity in Islamic art is strongly interconnected with fin-de-siècle Western desires to expose and codify the *Geist* ('spirit') and essence of Islamic art. Suzanne Marchand has clearly demonstrated in her article on the popularization of the 'Orient' in German intellectual contexts at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries that there existed a strong desire to control the huge glut of new archaeological material emanating from Middle East countries, something which academics were unable at the time to assimilate. For this reason, the region

³⁹ Ismail R. al-Faruqi, 'Islam and Art', *Studia Islamica*, 37, 1973, 6.

⁴⁰ See Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, 'Muslim Art', in Charles Malik, ed., *God and Man in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Beirut: American University of Beirut Publications, 1972, 121; Titus Burckhardt, 'Perennial values in Islamic Art', in Malik, *God and Man*, 131; Titus Burckhardt, 'Grundlagen der islamischen Kunst', in *Vom Wesen heiliger Kunst in der Weltreligionen*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Auum, 1990, 143-71; Lois Lamya al-Faruqi, 'Islam and Aesthetic Expression', in Salem Azzam, ed., *Islam and Contemporary Society*, London and New York: Longman, 1982, 191-212.

⁴¹ See footnote 38.

⁴² A catalogue was published: see Ghada Hijjawi Qaddumi, *Variety in Unity: A Special Exhibition on the Occasion of the Fifth Islamic Summit in Kuwait*, Kuwait: Dar al-Athar, 1987.

was either popularized or understood in a simplified way in which one coherent vein of interpretation was given to the whole.⁴³ This was then hidden under the term *Geist*, as if the core and the authentic character had been exposed. Of course the use of the word *Geist* also served in European debates concerning the preservation of the Romantic spirit in the age of mass production. In this complex matrix, Islamic art was thus defined as a field and was assigned its own *Geist*.

It might then be suggested that the myth of a monolithic Islam – and, as a consequence, the creation of the encompassing term of 'Islamic art' – is rooted in traditional Eurocentric patterns of thought concerning 'Us' and 'the Other'. This dialectic seems to give birth to a monolithic Islamic world, characterized particularly by a religious definition that is juxtaposed against the emergence of secularism and the Enlightenment in Europe. This binary provides, then, a clear distinction between what a Western Eurocentric perspective of the day termed as a progressive and rational secular Western world, and the regressive and still scholastically-led Islamic world. Islam was the great other religion confronting Christian Europe and was then, as sometimes today, tainted with dark adjectives referring to a sealed, stagnant and bygone world. Was Islam then the new Dark Ages for Enlightenment Europe, similar to the role the medieval world occupied at the birth of the Renaissance?⁴⁴

This monolithic thesis cries out for revision today. It is true that the field of Islamic art history rapidly and vigorously excretes essentialist terminologies such as 'Islam' and 'the Orient' from its own academic jargon, and, as a result, is in a constant search for more subtle and yet further differentiating terms. This academic anxiety has given birth to other terms such as 'Islamicate', and has pressed art historians to 'break' the field of 'Islam' into subfields, for which the debates surrounding the new name for the Islamic galleries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York bear witness.⁴⁵ Moreover, together with the 'anti-essentialist' camp in Islamic Studies,⁴⁶ Islamic art historians have been obliged to abandon their common operating model of 'diversity in unity'. Since the idea of unity can no longer be taken for granted, they have been left only with the notion of diversity. This means that the whole field of Islamic art history is now deconstructed, as if in a postmodern manner, and that its present fragmentary character is forcing

⁴³ Suzanne Marchand, 'Popularizing the Orient in Fin de Siècle Germany', *Intellectual History Review*, 17(2), 2002, 175-200.

⁴⁴ See also Saurabh Dube on the medieval as a concept that opposes the modern: Dube, 'Introduction: Enchantments of Modernity', *Enduring Enchantments: A special issue of South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(4), 2002, 730-7. See also John M. Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

⁴⁵ See Nasser Rabbat, 'What's in a Name', *Artforum*, January 2012 [<http://artforum.com/inprint/id=29813> accessed 21.03.2012]. Michael J. Lewis, 'Islam by Any Other Name', *New Criterion*, December 2011 [<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Islam-by-any-other-name-7225> accessed 21.03.2012]; Jörg Häntzschel, 'Nicht jede Glaskaraffe hat religiöse Bedeutung: Umbenannt, umgebaut: Die "islamische" Kunst im Metropolitan Museum in New York in völlig neuer Präsentation', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Monday 21 November 2011, 12.

⁴⁶ For the voices against essentialism, see Armando Salvatore, 'Beyond Orientalism? Max Weber and the Displacement of "Essentialism" in the Study of Islam', *Arabica*, 43, 1996, 457-85; Touraj Atabaki, 'Beyond Essentialism: Who Writes Whose Past in the Middle East and Central Asia?', Amsterdam, 2003, inaugural Lecture by Dr Touraj Atabaki, Professor of the Social History of the Middle East and Central Asia in the University of Amsterdam, delivered on Friday, 13 December 2002 [<http://atabaki.nl/upload/Beyond%20Essentialism.pdf> accessed 21.03.2012].

confrontation with the crucial question of how to deal with these bits and pieces of the, for example, 'medieval Islamic' arts, across an area which stretches from Cordoba to Karakorum.

Perhaps we should adopt Craig Clunas' recent reservations and suggestions from the introduction to his book on Chinese art: hesitant to use the term 'Chinese art', he prefers to term his subject area the 'arts of China'.⁴⁷ A change in formulation, which frames the visual cultures of Islam as 'the arts of the lands of Islam' might be therefore a partial solution for the problematic term 'Islamic art'. However, the question of the modern and contemporary arts of the Muslim diaspora and exile would remain open.⁴⁸

And yet, categorizing visual concepts in terms of geography or even spans of time, let alone nationality or race, does not even provide the proper adjectives let alone respond to the challenges which global Islamic art presents. Moreover, I would also argue that the concept of the *Zeitgeist*, restricted to a specific space and time, must also be discredited. There is a need, so it would seem, for a new cognitive category to emerge from the varied powers and particular characters of each studied area that deals with perceptual patterns and processes of visual interpretation.

Dangerous parameters

As indicated above, today it would appear that Islamic art historians have tended to direct their main attacks and critical investigations on the whole term 'Islamic art'. Necessary as these interrogations are, it would also be beneficial to revise specific definitions of the character of Islamic art and to rethink the categories used for its aesthetic evaluation. Hence, a wide range of art historians are currently in search of visual evidence to suggest that 'Islamic art' is an imagined terminology, as Hottinger mentioned above, a product of Western thought. It is thus the imagined Islamic art with its Western codes of aesthetics that is being dismantled piece by piece. In addition, several parameters of Western art clearly impinge upon the field of Islamic art history and determine its status, a phenomenon that continues up until the present day. The term 'Classical' (both with a capital letter and without), for example, with all its associations, has played a critical role in dictating the evaluation of Islamic art and architecture as a whole, as well as particular media such as miniature painting.⁴⁹ No wonder then that Umayyad art, invariably regarded as a specific branch of Classical art – be it in Syria or even later in al-Andalus – has both suffered and benefited from this view. On the one hand, it provided historians of European art with an explanation for the continuity of classical architecture traditions in Europe and in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean basin, aiding in the creation of a sound narrative for the age of the Renaissance. Architectural monuments like the Umayyad Mosque of Cordoba or the Great Mosque of Kairouan were thus the mediators of Classical traditions in the dark age of medieval Europe. But on the other hand, while arguing for the death of the Classical era in the waning days of Late Antiquity, the same monuments were

⁴⁷ Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 9-12.

⁴⁸ On the possible division of the field of Islamic art, see Oleg Grabar, 'What Should One Know About Islamic Art', *Res*, 43, 2003, 9.

⁴⁹ See the article by Christiane Gruber in the present volume.

employed to illustrate the degeneration of Classical aesthetics. Within this model other artistic practices, such as Persian manuscript painting or 'Abbasid mural decoration, most often ranked as non-canonical within the wider field of art history in spite of their predominance within the master-narrative of Islamic art, were at best classified by experts of European art under the formalist rubric of ornamentalism or joy for the eye, and the potentially symbolic power of their imagery was simply ignored. Discussing the new style of painting formed in the schools of Tabriz and Isfahan between 1550-1580, Blochet explicitly invokes the same concept of Classical decadence. He writes:

The process by which the norms of the Roman style of the Early Empire were corrupted and reduced to these summary forms, is exactly the same process as that which, in Persia, in the schools of Tabriz (Tauris) and Ispahan between 1550 and 1580 did, in the same way and through the same errors, completely corrupt the precious style of the illustrations made at Tabriz and Kazwin, in the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁵⁰

'Renaissance' is another term that has done great harm to our field. The Italian Renaissance as a model for the rediscovery of the culture of the past, the human cognition of anachronistic styles of past eras and the rebirth of a humanistic tradition, has invariably served as a Western model for the refutation of Islam. The common and provocative question of art historians specializing in the European Renaissance exemplifies this. 'Why did Islamic art never have a Renaissance similar to our own?' is one of the arguments repeatedly employed to suggest that Muslim societies operate within the confines of an unbroken and essentially medieval tradition. But who has the right to claim renaissance? And, unlike the Latin West, the medieval Islamic world never lost the so-called Classical tradition.⁵¹

'Perspective' is another paradigm that not only claims an absolute Western ownership but also was and is used to evaluate Islamic painting. The most vulgar question I have encountered relating to perspective was as follows: 'If you (Islam) claim to have all the scientific background on optics and science that enabled us (the West) to invent perspective, why have you not invented it?' In spite of its crudeness of phrasing, it is time this question was answered – and it should not be left solely in the hands of historians of European art.⁵²

Mimesis is almost, if not totally, the ethos of Western visual culture. Insofar as the faithful rendering of nature has become paramount in the arts of the West, Islamic art is condemned by this measure to be either iconoclastic or ornamental. Should one not look to other visual modes of representation in the worlds of Islam? Perhaps the widespread use of poetic metaphors might help one to rethink mimesis

⁵⁰ Blochet, *Musulman Painting*, 32.

⁵¹ This anecdote is based on a polemical discussion that took place in Munich, in the Hanns Seidel Foundation, several years ago, in which Hans-Peter Raddatz, a German Orientalist and journalist, used this argument in his talk. For Islamic art in the shadow of the Renaissance, see Avinoam Shalem, 'Über die Notwendigkeit', especially 247-51.

⁵² I mainly refer to Hans Belting's book, *Florenz und Bagdad: Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 2008; see esp. 23-66. This book aims to discuss Islamic art in the context of the transfer of knowledge on optics and mathematics, the invention of scientific perspective and its global biography.

in Islam. And I am not referring here only to the famous and perhaps earliest simile in the Qur'an, namely *Surat al-Nur*, the Light Verse (sura 24:35), in which Allah's light is 'as a niche wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as it were a shining star ...', but also to the amazing analogy made between man and object in a poem inscribed on an unpublished twelfth-century Iranian vase recently excavated in Jerusalem. The inscription appears just around its neck, below the upper part of its handle. It reads: 'this vase, like me, was a moaning lover arrested in the curls of his beauty, [and] this handle that you see on the vase's neck was his hand resting on the neck of his lover.' This metaphor, as well as many others similarly inscribed on works of art, might suggest another model of 'mimesis' in the arts of Islam.⁵³

Moreover, the remarkable discussion of *Surat al-Nur* by the medieval polymath al-Ghazali in his *Mishkat al-anwar* ('The Niche of Lights') might just stimulate new ideas for the establishment of visual theories in medieval Islam that go beyond mimesis. Al-Ghazali is troubled by the fact that light is a phenomenon and therefore a relative feature:

Here the word light indicates a phenomenon. Now a phenomenon, or appearance, is a relative term, for a thing necessarily appears to, or is concealed from, something other than itself; and thus its appearance and its non-appearance are both relative. Further, its appearance and its non-appearance are relative to perceptive faculties; and of these the most powerful and the most conspicuous, in the opinion of the Many, are the senses, one of which is the sense of sight.⁵⁴

Ghazali goes on to develop an entire theoretical structure built on the contradiction between the 'eye' and the 'intelligent eye' for characterizing modes of seeing. This method enables him to classify the idea of light into several categories of hierarchical order, from a phenomenological level to a spiritual and mystical one.⁵⁵ Operating in two different worlds, the 'sensual' and the 'intelligential', as defined by Ghazali,⁵⁶ provide another way of understanding the phenomenological world and its relation to the sacred.⁵⁷

⁵³ On 'speaking' objects see Avinoam Shalem, 'If Objects Could Speak'; Hana Taragan, 'The "Speaking" Inkwell from Khurasan: Object as "World" in Iranian Medieval Metalwork', *Muqarnas*, 22, 2005, 29-44; see also the chapter on the black pen in Orhan Pamuk, *Der Blick aus meinem Fenster*, Munich: Carl Hanser, 2006, 167-75; Sheila Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1998; for inscriptions on western medieval artefacts, see Gertrud Blaschitz, 'Schrift auf Objekten', in Horst Wenzel, Wilfried Seipel and Gotthart Wunberg, eds, *Die Verschriftlichung der Welt*, Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2000, 145-79.

⁵⁴ *Al-Ghazzali's Mishkat al-anwar* ('The Niche for Lights'), trans. W.H.T. Gairdner, 3rd ed., New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1991, 45-6.

⁵⁵ On this sura and al-Ghazali's interpretation see Avinoam Shalem, 'Verbildlichung Allahs: Für eine andere Bildtheorie', in Eckhard Leuschner and Mark R. Hesslinger, eds, *Das Bild Gottes in Judentum, Christentum und Islam: Vom Alten Testament bis zum Karikaturenstreit*, Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2009, 81-92.

⁵⁶ See for example, Ghazali, *Mishkat al-Anwar*, 69.

⁵⁷ Richard Ettinghausen, 'Al-Ghazzali on Beauty', in K. Bharatna Iyer, ed., *Art and Thought, Issued in Honour of Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, London: Luzac, 1947, 160-5. See also several articles that refer to this subject in Christoph J. Bürgel and Alma Giese, eds, *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit, Festschrift für Annemarie Schimmel zum 7. April 1992*, New York: Peter Lang, 1994.

The myth of Western modernism as a secular, progressive and individual democratic form of life is the last point that must be mentioned in this context.⁵⁸ In claiming modernity as a Western phenomenon, art histories have defined Islamic art in the twentieth century as traditional, folklorist, religious and even as an art that no longer exists. Islamic art was set back in time. Any continuity was regarded as an adherence to tradition and no space was given for other, modified versions of modernity.⁵⁹ In fact, it was invariably in the nineteenth century, with the beginning of the industrial revolution, that the stigma of 'crafts' was given to any non-European (and occasionally East European) art. Thus Islamic art was assigned its lowly place within the historical narrative of minor arts in European art history. As a result, many art objects deserving of the status of 'masterpieces' (*Meisterwerke*) were instead classified as traditional, as products of local craftsmanship, and were thus exhibited in ethnographic museums.⁶⁰ This opposition of modernity and Islam has maintained its cogency up to the present day and may appear in any public or even scholarly debate on Islam and modernism or Islam and democracy today. Yet it should be stressed that concomitantly, in the *fin de siècle*, a more complex scenario seems to have been taking place between the 'Orient' and the rupture of modernity. With the advance of scholarly Orientalism in Europe, especially in the late nineteenth century, artists, scholars and intellectuals alike discovered disturbing parallels between modernism and the Orient, with artists such as Franz Marc, Henri Matisse and Paul Klee studying Islamic designs and finding in them surfaces of desirable abstraction.⁶¹ This troubling duality has been handled in various different ways, in full accord with the diverse geo-social and political ideologies of the twentieth century in the West. And this is despite the common and prevalent supposition that with the definition of modernity as an exclusively Western invention, and the establishment of abstract art as one of the supreme modern Western modes of artistic expression, the 'Orient' and the world of Islam lost its

⁵⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, tr. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

⁵⁹ The literature on this topic is too vast to include in this article. For the nineteenth century see in particular Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit, *Islamic Art in the 19th Century*; see also the recent discussion by Isenstadt and Rizvi in the introduction to their co-edited book: Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi, eds, *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008, 3-36. See also Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism'; and Avinoam Shalem, 'The 1910 Exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* Revisited', in Lerner and Shalem, *After One Hundred Years*, 3-15. For the impact of modernism on the field of Islamic art see Shalem, 'Über die Notwendigkeit', esp. 257-61.

⁶⁰ Even the Munich exhibition of 1910, whose title *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* clearly demonstrated the desire of its curators – mainly Bode, Sarre and Kühnel – to correct this error, is in fact still bounded in its ideology to the specific segregated space given to Islamic art in Europe. On this exhibition see Friedrich Sarre and Fredrik R. Martin, eds, *Die Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst in München 1910*, Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1912, 3 vols; Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992; David J. Roxburgh, 'Au Bonheur des Amateurs: Collecting and Exhibiting Islamic Art, ca. 1880–1910', *Ars Orientalis*, 30, 2000, 9-38. The exhibition of 1910 in Munich is very well discussed in Eva-Maria Troelenberg, *Eine Ausstellung wird besichtigt. Die Münchner 'Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst' 1910 in kultur- und wissenschaftsgeschichtlicher Perspektive*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010, and in Troelenberg's article in the present volume; see also the various articles in Lerner and Shalem, *After 100 Years*.

⁶¹ See mainly Rémi Labrusse, 'Révélation, selon Matisse; selon Klee', in Rémi Labrusse, *Islamophilie: L'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam*, Paris: Somogy, 2011, 287-315.

intellectual attraction in the West. The ambiguity that is presented by Islamic art, that of being apparently both modern and backward at the same time, stands as a challenge to the age of modernism, seeming to challenge the Western mind even today.⁶² The complexity of modernity in the cultural spaces of both the East and the West should be researched further in order to avoid over-simplification when interpreting the twentieth century. A comparative rather than a hierarchical system of creating meaning is necessary to evaluate modernities on both sides of the globe, and new parallel narratives for the history of modern civilization need to be written.

Notwithstanding, the truth is that modernity still influences and dictates our aesthetic appreciation of non-Western art. This phenomenon can be traced up to the very moment of writing this article. For example, while writing about the re-opening of the National Museum in Baghdad in July 2009, Reiner Luyken describes one of the antique objects on display with the words: '[t]here is a carved duck made of stone, a piece to marvel at, which looks as if it was made by Henry Moore.'⁶³

Let me end this appeal for the rewriting of the history of Islamic arts with, rather than answers, a few brief questions. In short, does Islamic art exist beyond the framework of Western art history? Do the arts of Islam need to be discussed and interpreted within visual theories relatable to the field of Islamic studies? And, lastly, how should one rewrite the visual history of these arts?

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⁶² In addition to the famous 1910 exhibition in Munich which made it clear that Islamic art could 'serve as an inspiration and open up new directions for modern art', an exhibition held in Fondation Beyler in Basel in 2001, *Ornament und Abstraktion*, and several other exhibitions on Islamic ornament and calligraphy and modern and contemporary art including *Die Macht des Ornament* (Orangerie of the Belvédère, Vienna, 2009), *Taswir: Islamische Bildwelten und Moderne* (Martin Goupius Bau, Berlin, 2009) and *The Future of Tradition* (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2010), have addressed the complex relationship between modernism and non-European aesthetic traditions. See also Markus Brüderlin, ed., *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002; Fereshteh Daftari, ed., *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, New York: Museum of Modern of Art, 2006; Venetia Porter, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, London: British Museum Press, 2006; Jolanda Drexler, 'Unerwartet / Unexpected. Von der islamischen Kunst zur zeitgenössischen Kunst', *Kunstforum*, 205, November 2005, 336-7; and Chris Dercon, Leon Krempel and Avinoam Shalem, eds, *The Future of Tradition: The Tradition of Future*, Haus der Kunst, Munich: Prestel, 2010.

⁶³ 'Es gibt wie von Henry Moore gemeißelte Entensteine aus dem sumerischen Reich zu bewundern ...' Reiner Luyken, 'Der Raub, den es nie gab', *Die Zeit*, 16 July 2009, 42.