What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’?  
A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam

Avinoam Shalem

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

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.  

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.’ 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’. 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


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.

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

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Christoph Knüttel, Baghdad – Die „Runde Stadt“ des Kalifen al-Mansur: Historische Realität oder literarische Fiktion?, unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Munich, 2008.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


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

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

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


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.
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to that of monumental art in the West. 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.


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.

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.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{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 …’\textsuperscript{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 …’\textsuperscript{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?


\textsuperscript{34} Grabar, ‘What Makes Islamic Art Islamic’, 1.
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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.


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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:


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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

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. 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?

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. Moreover, together with the ‘anti-essentialist’ camp in Islamic Studies, 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

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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’.

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.

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. 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

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49 See the article by Christiane Gruber in the present volume.
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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 Isphahan 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 ‘intelligent’, as defined by Ghazali,\(^{56}\) provide another way of understanding the phenomenological world and its relation to the sacred.\(^{57}\)


\(^{56}\) See for example, Ghazali, *Mishkat al-Anwar*, 69.

Avinoam Shalem  What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’?

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. 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. 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. 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. 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 adherence to tradition and no space was given for other, modified versions of modernity.


59 The literature on this topic is too vast to include in this article. For the nineteenth century see in particular Behrens-Abouseif and Vernooij, 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 Lermer 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.


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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