

The Islam in Islamic art history: secularism and public discourse

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In 1951, Richard Ettinghausen, one of the founding fathers of the discipline of Islamic art history in the United States, explained,

Muslim art can also have a special significance for the Muslim world of today. Since this is its one cultural achievement widely accepted and admired by the West, a rededication to it can compensate the East to a certain degree for its scientific and technological retardation, something which neither the oil fields nor strategic location can achieve. Be that as it may, there has been and still is no better ambassador of good will than art. If these considerations are more widely understood, Muslim art and its study will have an important role to play in the future.¹

Attitudes towards cultural diversity have become less patronizing over the decades, particularly among those who study cultures that are not their own. Nonetheless, historical objects from the Islamic world continue to be called upon regularly to reduce intercultural tensions in the contemporary world in a manner that often elides differences between past and present, religion and culture, geography and religion. This conjoining of art historical meaning with contemporary social function is not only an inevitable means through which the humanities often justify their funding and position within a broader public sphere, it also reflects the sociopolitical contexts in which all academic work, from the classical philology critiqued in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) onwards, has been and continues to be conducted, underwritten and disseminated. While the rhetoric of civilizational hierarchies and alterity revealed in the words of Ettinghausen may have become socially unacceptable in the interim, the practice of using art to represent broader culture continues to the present day, as do perceptions of the Islamic 'other' as something that is radically different from the West.

Survey exhibitions produce an apparently holistic vision of 'Islam,' most often glorifying the dynastic, or sometimes problematizing pan-regionalism through an emphasis on specific examples. Such exhibitions often offer a counterpoint to presumed contemporary prejudices through a sensory appeal to the splendour of

* Many thanks are given for the extensive, challenging, and tireless engagement of the editors in the revisions to this essay.

¹ Richard Ettinghausen, 'Islamic Art and Archaeology,' in T. Cuyler Young, ed., *Near Eastern Culture and Society: A Symposium on the Meeting of East and West*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951, 47.

Islamic civilization.² In attempting to resolve the present through narratives of the past, such exhibits not only fail to correct presumed contemporary prejudices (associations with terror, patriarchy, authoritarianism and so forth), but in fact enhance them by reflecting the glories of 'Islamic' culture as part of a bygone golden age, or by suggesting that the appropriate environment for religion (and in particular Islam) rests in the past rather than in the present. Through an aesthetic measure based on regional practices that are framed as unadulterated, timeless, or authentic, the emphasis typically placed on form over content in such displays has also enhanced the association of the term 'Islamic' in artistic contexts with the era before colonial interaction with Europe, thus taking the Islamic world up to around 1800 – the implicit assumption being that the increasingly 'hybrid' arts generated through Westernization proclaim the secularization of modernity. Thus movement away from aesthetic forms designated as 'Islamic' has come to signal a presumed modern movement away from Islamic theological and intellectual discourses. This in turn implies a metanarrative of triumphal secularism and constructs a gross division between the Islam of art and the Islam of Muslims. Rather than being represented, Islam as a contemporary faith becomes the subaltern of Islam as a historical culture.

Despite well-meaning and well-informed scholarly and museological intentions, Islamic art history has had limited success as a good ambassador for Islam. Rather than suggesting that it should not be expected to take on this public role and cannot responsibly make such an attempt, or that the problem should be avoided by jettisoning the term 'Islam' from the name 'Islamic art history', this paper proposes the following. First, in order to function as a critical humanistic discipline, Islamic art history must engage in a self-conscious critique of the historiographic problems of its nomenclature in relation to its own sociopolitical contexts. Second, the field should, wholeheartedly and with critical self-awareness, take on the public and political role that has been foisted upon it by sociopolitical imperatives that will be discussed below.

This paper engages these challenges by exploring the means through which the historiography of Islamic art history has established conceptual parameters that limit the ability of Islamic art to engage with broader understandings of Islamic culture in the contemporary world. The first and longest section of the paper sets out the problem through a selective discussion of current expositional strategies of Islamic art history, addressing the problems of terminology in surveys and exhibitions that have recently attempted to meet these challenges. The second section compares competing analytical methodologies in the early historiography of Islamic art history which have constructed the dominant secular gaze implicit in the 'Islam-as-culture' approach, and analyzes how this approach has enhanced the perceived alterity of Islam by defining Islamic art primarily in terms of points of difference from Western perceptual codes. The third section then suggests the contingent nature of this segregation of culture and religion by examining the parallel redefinition of Islam under both 'Orientalist' and Islamic revivalist epistememes of the nineteenth century. The fourth section considers expressions of this

² For a broader discussion of this exhibition typology, see David J. Roxburgh, 'After Munich: Reflections on Recent Exhibitions', in Avinoam Shalem and Andrea Lerner, eds, *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, 362.

continued disassociation in academic and exhibition practices from the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, the fifth section suggests how engagement with – rather than elision of – these historiographic parameters might enable an alternative model for questioning premises of alterity within the public sphere, not only serving against the ghettoization of Islam and its arts, but also facilitating the de-ethnocentrization of contemporary art historical and artistic practice.

I. 'Islam' vs 'Islam': conflicting parameters of an 'unwieldy' field

Although it was possible in 1951 for a scholar like Richard Ettinghausen to move unselfconsciously between the terms 'Islamic', 'Near Eastern', and 'Muslim', in recent years the distinction between such cultural, regional, and religious terms has led to increasing caution in discussing a field which Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom so aptly recognized as having become 'unwieldy'.³ The problematic nomenclature of 'Islamic art' has been met with two primary modes of solution, both of which attempt to avoid the problem of 'Islam' by redefining terminology: first, the consideration of 'Islam' as culture rather than religion; and second, the fragmentation of the category into regional and temporal terms. The persistence of the field of 'Islamic art history', however, suggests some kind of concordance that might be more accurately served by complicating, rather than avoiding, this term that herds together so much diversity. The following passages will attempt a non-comprehensive exploration of various ways in which the term 'Islam' has been approached in art historical scholarship: that is, in general discussions of the field by its practitioners, in specialist scholarship, and under recent reconsideration.

General discussions of the field of study

From its early twentieth-century beginnings, when it was associated exclusively with design and aesthetic pleasure rather than interpretive meaning, through mid-twentieth century tropes of sociopolitical contextualization and iconographic unity, and into the early twenty-first century emphasis on carefully contextualized specialist studies, the Islam of Islamic art history has largely functioned as an externalized label placed on a field of objects that are associated through apparent visual and cultural affinities. As Blair and Bloom explain, '[w]hile some Islamic art may have been made by Muslims for purposes of faith, much of it was not. A mosque or a copy of the Koran clearly fits everybody's definition of Islamic art, but what about a twelfth-century Syrian bronze canteen inlaid with Arabic inscriptions and Christian scenes?'⁴ This approach distinguishes between 'Islam' as a potentially productive factor in objects expressly involved in religious expression, and 'Islam' as denoting a cultural realm from which material culture of various kinds may emerge. Dominant art historical models tend to mediate this opposition through an appeal to a shared aesthetics framed through culture rather than the intellectual or aesthetic parameters of Islam. Thus, while the category of religious Islam is temporally and geographically vast, that of cultural Islam – which forms the boundaries of Islamic art history as currently conceived – becomes in this example

³ Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 'The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field', *The Art Bulletin*, 85(1), 2003, 152-84.

⁴ Blair and Bloom, 'Unwieldy Field', 152.

limited by the aesthetic relatives of the Syrian bronze canteen. What remains to be examined is not only whether the binary distinction between the Qur'an and the canteen is indeed valid, but also what surplus meaning emerges in this disciplinary assertion. The second section of the present essay thus contends that this distinction establishes 'Islam' as a cultural field to be understood in secular rather than religious terms, segregating culturally intrinsic modes of viewing that are informed by the temporally and geographically variable religious/ theological/ philosophical/ literary discourses of 'Islam' from the art historical interpretations offered in surveys and museums.

In limiting Islamic aesthetics to formal qualities, this approach has also limited the ability of Islamic objects to function as 'art': that is, as a mode of cultural production distinguished from other visual cultural forms through its expression of meaning beyond the visual, whether that meaning is conceptual or narrative. As Blair and Bloom continue, 'Much of what many historians of Islamic art normally study – inlaid metalwares, luster ceramics, enameled glass, brocaded textiles, and knotted carpets – is not the typical purview of the historian of Western art, who generally considers such handicrafts to be "minor" or "decorative" arts compared with the "nobler" arts of architecture, painting, and sculpture'.⁵ Extending such issues of categorization to the museum context, Oleg Grabar points to the museum's isolation of works from contexts and its dependence on so-called masterpieces to justify display. He asks,

can one appropriately talk of 'works of art' when dozens, if not hundreds, of similar objects are involved? ... The predominance of industrial arts over single works of art, the apparent requirement of a physical context, the practical usefulness of almost all objects, suggest that anthropological rather than art-historical methods are more appropriate for analysis.⁶

As with Blair and Bloom, the categories delineating art are derived, however self-consciously, from the notion of art as it was constructed in modern Europe – a classificatory system which may indeed be just as problematic in relation to European works made before the epistemological shifts of the modern era as it is to non-European products.⁷

Within this framework, what distinguishes the so-called 'higher arts' from the supposed 'handicrafts' are the discourses that equip them with meaning. Meaning emerges through two intertwined practices: it is actively produced through the artist's creation and exposition of the work in question, and it is passively induced through the cultural capital of recipients.⁸ Art historical interpretation privileges the first kind of meaning. When we go to a museum and view, for example, an Annunciation scene, a museum label might provide information relating this specific painting to various broader contexts (biographical, stylistic, social, political,

⁵ Blair and Bloom, 'Unwieldy Field', 153.

⁶ Oleg Grabar, 'An Art of the Object', *Artforum*, 14, 1976, 36-43, reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art, Volume III*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, 15, 16.

⁷ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, 80-83.

⁸ Stuart Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*, Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973.

and so forth). It may provide iconographic information about how to interpret the signs within an image (lilies as signs of purity, for example). But in such contexts the museum does not usually take on the task of telling us on the most basic levels how we should look at the painting: that an image is a representation of something else, real or unreal; that it uses various stylistic devices (perspective, colour contrast, shading) in order to achieve this purpose; that it can tell a story; that this story in particular has an enormous resonance related to faith; that this faith persists within extraordinarily diverse expressions across time and place. These absent narratives function more or less smoothly when the cultural capital of the viewer fills in for such omissions; that is, as long as the culture of production coincides (to some extent) with the culture of reception. When this is not the case, however, the viewer does not approach the work as a spectatorial blank slate, but with expectations that are informed by his or her existing cultural capital.⁹

Viewed from this critical perspective, Islamic art history examines art from societies dominated by Islam, but does so largely through epistemological structures grounded in Western modes of perception. This context is evident not only in the assumption that the field is peripheral to the main story of Western art, but also in the very terms through which objects speak and are discussed. As Grabar admits,

The views and opinions which are expressed [by Grabar himself] 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 that neither the traditional nor the contemporary Muslim cultures have so far provided the kind of intellectual and verbal framework which facilitated the perception of Chinese or Japanese art for those who are outside the culture ... For the time being, we have no choice but to understand the Muslim tradition of art from the outside ...¹⁰

Thus establishing a necessary binary between inside and outside – the Muslim who does not (cannot?) articulate vision and the Western observer who articulates what he or she cannot understand – Grabar establishes Islam and art history as mutually, and perhaps irredeemably, alien.

Such ethnocentrism is reflected in various common assumptions about Islamic art that no amount of art historical explication seems to set at rest. For example, the frequent assertion of the ‘Islamic prohibition of the image’ – a trope that is apparently resistant to all art historical analysis pointing out that no such overarching prohibition exists in any foundational Islamic sources – reveals less about how Islamic art functions than it does about the image normativity of the spectator. Likewise, the use of terms like ‘ornament’ or ‘decorative’ situates Islamic objects within inappropriate oppositions between representation and abstraction, meaning and decoration, or depth and flatness, all of which binaries are rooted in

⁹ As Nasser Rabbat observes, ‘Western art history also engendered a hegemonic structure in the Foucauldian sense; that is, it discursively controlled the intricate network of epistemological and cultural conventions that produced and used art historical knowledge’ (Nasser Rabbat, ‘Islamic Art at a Crossroad?’ in Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum*, London: Saqi Books, 2012 [forthcoming]). See also Robert Hillenbrand, ‘Studying Islamic Architecture: Challenges and Perspectives,’ *Architectural History*, 46, 2003, 1-18.

¹⁰ Grabar, ‘An Art of the Object’, reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 248.

western visual practices. At the same time, adjectives such as 'exquisite' and 'splendour', frequently used to describe objects of Islamic art displayed in museums, suggest associations with a mythical East more than they associate works with any culturally intrinsic meaning. When nothing else can be said about it, Islamic art is – even today – supposed to dazzle its viewer into pleasure, mimicking the imagined pleasures of the harem, the bazaar, or other adventures in *A Thousand and One Nights*.¹¹

Even when considering undisputedly religious art, leading scholars in the field have expressed reticence in engaging in religious interpretations. The emphasis on religion as functioning iconographically, emerging from understandings of visuality that have been developed in the Christian tradition, has led to a certain blindness in the art historical interpretations of Islamic religious visual forms. Thus Estelle Whelan points out that, '[b]ecause Islam has produced no decorative cycles incorporating a religious iconography centered on the life of Muhammad, modern scholars may have underestimated the power of symbolism related to his person.'¹² Similarly, Christiane Gruber notes that

even though methodological tools from western art history have been adopted to explore traditions of icon-making and depictions of the sacred in a variety of cultures, these have rarely been utilized to examine the practice of making and viewing pictures in an Islamic context, due to the prevalent belief that traditions of 'religious iconography' simply do not exist in Islamic artistic practices.¹³

Where did these difficulties with religious Islamic art originate? While reflecting, perhaps, the attitude of an earlier generation, the comments of important patriarchs of the field suggests the environment in which many current art historians developed their craft. In his discussion of religious paintings within Eleanor Sims' magisterial survey of Persian manuscript painting, Ernst J. Grube points out that 'this "hidden" form of religious Islamic art is far more frequent than has generally been recognized, but it is a phenomenon almost totally inaccessible to the non-Persian reader or the non-Muslim; or to anybody not initiated into the subtleties of Sufism ...'.¹⁴ Such reluctance to interpret recalls, with surprising concordance, the revivalist Damascene scholar Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866-1914). Al-Qasimi denigrates the allegorical interpretation of the Qur'an made by Ibn 'Arabi (the twelfth-century theologian and mystic whose writings form the core of

¹¹ Roxburgh, 'After Munich', 366.

¹² Estelle Whelan, 'The Origins of the Mihrab Mujawwaf: A Reinterpretation', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 18(2), 1986, 215.

¹³ Christiane Gruber, 'Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nur*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting', *Muqarnas*, 26, 2009, 232. Likewise, in his critique of the emphasis placed upon origins and political agency in interpretations of the meaning of the Dome of the Rock, Samer Akkach points out that the emphasis on 'the Cartesian subject-object binary that views the processes of understanding as an autonomous subject, confronting and coming to terms with the outside world seen as a set of autonomous objects' has limited the range of art historical interpretive frameworks. Samer Akkach, 'The Poetics of Concealment: Al-Nablusi's Encounter with the Dome of the Rock', *Muqarnas*, 22, 2005, 110-27.

¹⁴ Ernst J. Grube, 'Religious Painting in the Islamic Period', in Eleanor Sims, Boris I. Marshak and Ernst J. Grube, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, 133.

many Sufi traditions), arguing that Ibn 'Arabi's interpretations were heretical, and segregating them from his own sound theology and jurisprudence. Unable to reconcile this contradiction, Qasimi, like Grube, ultimately recommends that mystical writings are too complicated to be approached by the uninitiated.¹⁵ Thus Grube's reflection on the possibility of interpretation is inadvertently positioned in line with modern Islamic revivalist movements which largely reject the interpretive traditions that developed over the course of Islamic civilization.

Similarly, in his introduction to Persian manuscript painting, Grabar considers the 'temptations' of interpreting the tradition through a poetic method rooted in literary tropes derived from 'mystical' Islam, briefly glossing literary examples that would support such an endeavour. However, he soon recoils from such interpretation, asserting that the princely patrons who supported the arts would hardly have condoned such mysticism and would instead have favoured painting as an expression of an idealized princely life. Rather than considering that the patrons who patronized poetry and the arts were often also patrons to both religious scholars ('*ulama*) and Sufis, and that '*ulama* and princes alike were often adherents of Sufi orders, he instead appears to imagine the elites of bygone eras in the guise of the Islamic world's modern secular elites. Although Grabar begins his discussion with a caution against the prejudices implicit in interpreting painting as 'mystical, magical, and esoteric', he concludes in even more orientaling terms by describing the paintings as resembling 'traces of a fairyland, done to preserve its memory within this world'.¹⁶ Both Grube and Grabar limit their examination of religious art in manuscript painting to the depiction of patently religious subjects, such as the Ka'ba and the Night Journey of the Prophet, rather than examining the possible religious implications of a broader range of visual tropes in both painting and in literature.¹⁷ By maintaining such a strong distinction between secular and sacred, discourses such as these have conceptualized Islamic art as something that can be viewed but not understood, as though an inherently esoteric Islam were communicated by heritage acquired through osmosis rather than rational education.

¹⁵ Itzchak Weismann, 'Between Sufi Reformism and Modernist Rationalism: A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafiyya from the Damascene Angle', *Die Welt des Islams*, 41(2), July 2001, 220.

¹⁶ Oleg Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000, 141-4.

¹⁷ While examples are too numerous to list here, one instance might be the interpretation of the image of the beloved primarily through the trope of romance (conceived, perhaps subconsciously, from the popular tropes of *A Thousand and One Nights* through which the West first encountered dominant images of Islamic sensuality in the much-mythologized harem), rather than through the metaphor of theophany that emerges from the mystic poetry informing these paintings. See Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam: And the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat (1465-1535)*, Paris: Flammarion, 2005, 18. While (as will be broached in section three of this essay) modern understandings of Islam often exclude Sufism, it would be difficult to maintain this segregation for the era of high Islamic classicism in the world in which Persian-language poetry suffused with Sufi thought and paintings emerging from their narratives were leading forms of high culture. What appears as 'secular' imagery of romance and wealth acts in part, if not primarily, as what Gruber terms 'an effective medium for the stimulation of affective piety, thus functioning as a meditative or devotional image', even if the subject of the painting is not directly liturgical (Gruber, 'Between Logos and Light', 232). For an extended discussion of this example, see Wendy M.K. Shaw, 'Fortress of Form, Robber of Consciousness: Between the Beloved and Her Veil in Islamic Art', in Raphael Preisinger, ed., *The Semantics of Vision: Art Production and Visual Cultures in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout: Brepol Publishing, forthcoming.

Scholarly approaches to Islamic art history

In tandem with the general interpretive trends outlined above, most current methodologies in Islamic art history either continue to emphasize historical over hermeneutic issues, or, in maintaining a narrow object of study, avoid addressing the place of a given work or context within the broader field that we might term 'Islam'. At the risk of over-generalization, one might broadly divide the field (excluding survey and exhibition texts) into six approaches, noting that these are often combined in the work of individual scholars. First, a descriptive categorical approach emphasizing materiality and sometimes also connoisseurship which, equating scholarly knowledge with positively verifiable information, avoids speculative interpretation.¹⁸ Second, an iconographic approach which deciphers works in terms of semiotic elements (whether decorative, calligraphic or architectural) for contemporary audiences who have been made foreign to the historic art object through both geography and time.¹⁹ Third, urbanist architectural analysis that began with classificatory surveys and identification of the essential elements of Islamic cities: this area has subsequently developed as a means of interpreting political power and dynastic identity, and has been accompanied by a growing interest in the experience of minorities and lower classes that has been made possible through Islamic archaeology.²⁰ Fourth, a dynastic approach that emphasizes local political expression over trans-cultural meaning.²¹ Fifth, close readings of the texts that surround visual works, in particular manuscripts.²² And finally, the increasingly common regionally defined studies of art, art institutions, and architecture, from discrete geographic regions and temporal periods.²³

Closely affiliated with the early interpretations of Islamic art presented in Western exhibitions, the first of these approaches may have relatively few scholarly adherents today, but is supported in museum contexts where aestheticizing display methodologies with little accompanying text emphasize communion of the visitor with the object over its mediation through contextualizing information (such as that provided on wall labels and other intermediary audiovisual materials). In line with this approach, Oliver Watson has argued for a descriptive or connoisseurial project

¹⁸ For example, Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

¹⁹ For example see the articles in Bernard O'Kane, ed., *The Iconography of Islamic Art. Studies in Honour of Robert Hillenbrand*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

²⁰ For discussion of this methodology see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, 'The Islamic City—Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19(2), 1987, 155-76; Zeynep Çelik, 'New Approaches to the "Non-Western" City', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 58(3), 1999, 374-81.

²¹ For example, Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992; Sheila Canby, *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, London: British Museum Press, 2009.

²² For example, Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll: geometry and ornament in Islamic architecture, Topkapi Palace Museum Library MS H. 1956*, Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1995; Finbarr B. Flood, *Piety and Politics in the Early Indian Mosque*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Persis Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

²³ For example, Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007; Wendy M.K. Shaw, *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011; Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs*, New York: Prestel Publishing, 2010.

in which the object's significance emerges more from social context than from object legibility and where 'there are in general no precise meanings, but simply ranges of motifs accepted as appropriate and whose only meaning, if anything, is a most generalized feel-good factor — a meaning derived from its use rather than its content.'²⁴ While this may not reflect dominant scholarly methodologies, it does reflect the effects of splendour that are produced in museum displays.

In contrast, the iconographic method has dominated the field since the 1950s. This model understands a primary purpose of art history as the decoding of originary meaning and its exposition for viewers displaced from the subject position, and thereby the cultural capital, of the original audience. In reaction to this, while Watson critiques the premise that motifs are necessarily meaningful, Samer Akkach critiques the hierarchy of meaning implicit in the search for origins, arguing instead for the recognition of a development of meaning over time and in concert with broader cultural intertextuality.²⁵ Expanding the iconographic approach to encompass the sociopolitical sphere (especially in the 1970s), both urbanist and dynastic approaches to Islamic art similarly emphasize linear temporal change, geographic influence, and political agents as the primary producers of meaning. All three of these methods often emphasize positivist approaches to uncovering secular modes of meaning. Even in cases where the sought-for meaning engages faith, scholars often relate such meaning more closely to sociopolitical signage than to modes of perception, either as intended or produced through use and engaged with active practices of faith.

The increasingly dominant method of interpreting objects through close textual contextualization has made great strides in filling in intellectual substrates beneath Islamic 'splendour'. However, its necessarily narrow focus on individual works often relies on the specialist knowledge of the reader to relate the specific works at hand to the intersection of religion and culture. While the differential between academic research and popular venues such as the museum poses relatively few problems when the context of production and the cultural capital of the viewer overlap, where this is not the case – as with nearly all modern viewers of historic Islamic art, whether Muslim or not – some bridge is necessary to mediate between the meanings borne out of close readings and those offered to the contemporary subject who stands outside of the academic context. Just as importantly, the focus on texts that are immediately associated with visual works (such as epigraphy on a particular building, or the narrative connected with a particular manuscript painting) rarely considers the broader intertextual and intermedial cultural tropes through which a contemporary viewer would have perceived his or her visual world.²⁶ The scholarly avoidance of generalization makes it difficult to apply narrow textual analysis to the construction of a broadly 'Islamic' spectator position for the general exhibition viewer – one which indeed might not be perfectly accurate, but which may yet offer a corrective for the Euro-normative cultural capital of perception and the biases about Islam that many visitors bring to an exhibition held in the Western world.

²⁴ Oliver Watson, review of Bernard O'Kane, ed., *The Iconography of Islamic Art*, in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 18(2), 2007, 229–30.

²⁵ Akkach, 'Poetics of Concealment', 120.

²⁶ For examples that do consider this aspect, see Necipoğlu, *Topkapi Scroll*; Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam*.

The longstanding consignment of Islamic art history to the era before various cultural changes that occurred in the context of Western political and cultural hegemony – a cutoff point located roughly around 1800 – began to lift in the 2000s. The last decade has seen an increase in the number of publications about modern and contemporary issues in Islamic art, as well as a greater number of academic art historical positions that allow for modern non-Western and Islamic specializations. The segregation of the pre-modern from the modern has been founded on the premise that the transition to forms inspired by Western models signals a broader adoption of Western cultural norms, therefore affiliating Western-style art with triumphant secular modernization. However, as Muslim societies continue to negotiate multiple and often conflicted relationships between elite and popular culture, religious and secular expression, and the delineation of tradition and heritage, so it becomes increasingly apparent that cultural production, including artistic production, should be considered in terms of intercultural negotiation, translation, adaptation, and reinterpretation, rather than solely as the vehicle of hegemonic domination. As will be discussed in the final section of this paper, thinking about art through the context of shifting intellectual discourses, rather than through one of formal periodization, complicates the divide between Islamic art and its inheritors, making the boundary between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ far more difficult to trace and segregate.

In the face of widespread generalizations about Islam that limit it to origins and orthodoxy, Islamic art history could use the variety of Islamic subjectivities expressed in Islamic societies to engage discussion of intrinsic, variegated, and mutually referential discourses of indissoluble religious and cultural meanings. Rather than segregating culture and religion in their consideration of Islamic art, public interfaces of the field can use the above specialist approaches to do far more than simply examine individual works, dynasties, places, or texts. They hold the potential to open a door to understanding Islam as a substantive conceptual substrate through which to understand the multiple subjectivities of the Islamic world, past and present.

Recent reconsideration: placing ‘Islam’ under erasure?

Despite this potential means of engaging with the contemporary politics of Islam and representation, recent attempts to address the problematic nomenclature of ‘Islamic art’ have often chosen to avoid the problem by eliminating the term. Indeed, the term ‘Islamic art’ has met with numerous legitimate objections: the reduction of culture to religion; the anachronization and homogenization of cultural practices across time and space; the exclusion of the complex ethnic and religious contributors to cultures under Islamic rule; and the erasure of the study of the modern in cultures affiliated with Islam. Nonetheless, certain unwieldy alternatives proposed for the term ‘Islamic art’ – notably by the Association for the Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA), and at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, in the newly opened ‘Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia’ – point to the persistence of the geographic range indicated through the term ‘Islamic’. Building on the geographies traditionally associated with the central lands of Islam (and continuing to exclude Southeast Asia, as well as globalized Islam in the West), this new nomenclature retains the legacy of ‘Islamic art history’ while aiming to erase

the religious essentialization and exclusionism of the region implicit in the word 'Islamic'. However, in the absence of this prehistory, to what extent is this grouping justified? To what extent do artists or scholars of these regions work cross-regionally, or have more in common with each other than with those of other regions? To what extent does the geographicization of a gallery title shift an ideology of religious essentialism to a different ideology of political regionalism, artificially segregating the Middle East from other regions engaged in post-colonial and global cultural dynamism? If the traditional grouping of Islamic art history is thus maintained even in regionalized translation, why place the term under erasure?

With regard to the Metropolitan galleries, Nasser Rabbat suggests that, '[i]n undertaking its ambitious redesign, the museum set itself the task of contributing to the effort to rehumanize "Islam" after the attacks of 9/11 without appearing too didactic and without losing sight of the main objective—which is to show art, not elucidate a beleaguered religion.'²⁷ The efficacy of such a project flounders from the start with the erasure of the very term to be redeemed. The failure to formulate effectively an alternative metanarrative, for even the most sophisticated audiences, is perhaps best illustrated in Peter Schjeldahl's review of the new Metropolitan Museum galleries in *The New Yorker*. Caught between tropes of splendour and historicism that have been summoned in order to give meaning to the works on display, Schjeldahl indicates little awareness of any intellectual substrate within the aesthetic broadly subsumed as 'Islamic,' despite the name change. Reiterating the long-standing opposition between East and West, he offers that 'to grasp Islamic aesthetics, Westerners must upend their sense of ornamentation as a minor art. Certain ambient pleasures merge with sanctity in Muslim styles'.²⁸ Thus associated with pleasure, the works underscore a secular interpretive framework in that they are assumed 'to run afoul of iconoclastic Muslim doctrine'. Furthermore, despite the clear disparity between the classical history featured in the exhibit (and summarized in the article) and contemporary politics, 'the coincidental timing of the new wing's debut invites each of us to a personal Arab Spring'. Thus a pure aestheticization of Islamic art, removed from any contemporary cultural contexts, and situated in a historicist dynastic context, is made to collide with an aesthetic romanticization of political upheaval against dictatorships with long histories of Western support.

If, however, the exhibit aims to familiarize the viewer with the Islamic world, it apparently only does so through reaffirming the essential distance between East and West:

The Islamic wing affords adventures in difference. It made me acutely conscious of myself as European-American—a latter-day scion of the Renaissance wedding of Greek and Roman with Judeo-Christian traditions. It did this by reversing my sense of Islam as a topic of study: rather abruptly, Islam seemed to be scrutinizing me.²⁹

²⁷ Nasser Rabbat, 'What's in a name: Nasser Rabbat on the New Islamic Galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art', *Artforum*, 50(8), January 2012, 75-8 [<http://artforum.com/inprint/id=29813> accessed 03.04.12].

²⁸ Peter Schjeldahl, 'Old and New: the Reopening of the Islamic wing at the Met,' *The New Yorker*, 7 November 2011, 88-9.

²⁹ Schjeldahl, 'Old and New', 89.

Thus the exhibition of Islamic art becomes not a means of understanding another culture, but of reaffirming a form of cultural narcissism in which the collective self, replete with a complex heritage, is set against the simplified alterity in which it takes its pleasure – and in which the possibility of a shared Judeo-Christian-Graeco-Roman heritage is necessarily nowhere to be found. Although Schjeldahl suggests an Islamic agent that might scrutinize the visitor, that agent is afforded no present tense, no intellectual content, no cultural context, and above all no embodiment in a real live Muslim: this Islam that views the West might best be understood as the overdetermined void against which ‘the West’ can confirm its own unitary identity.

More than reflecting any particular failure of either the reviewer or the exhibition, however, the themes of the review – favouring beauty over meaning; approaching contemporary politics through historicism; understanding Islam as a unitary frame (despite the regionalism of the new departmental name); and using pleasure as a stage-set for the viewer’s Oriental fantasy – repeat the very tropes that the elimination of the term ‘Islam’ from the title of the galleries was supposed to repair. The name may change, but both the visual connectivity of the objects and the essentialist biases towards them remain. Answering the question of the apparent aesthetic similarities of Islamic art across wide swathes of time and space solely through the materiality of cultural exchange (as suggested through the provision of dynastic histories with no other hermeneutic keys) downplays the complex networks of literary, philosophical, or theological culture that served the classical Islamic world. This denial of religious textual contexts could be argued to produce a no less essentializing de-intellectualization of historic Islamic culture(s) than is engendered by the blanket category of ‘Islam’.

Called upon to act as an agent of cross-cultural communication and a corrective to misunderstanding, the field of Islamic art has, through the epistemological structure built by its historiography, refracted Islam through a secular lens and weakened the capability of Islamic art to bespeak intellectual processes of religion as expressed through art. Not only does this model of discourse support Western hegemonic norms of understanding other visual cultural traditions through denatured aestheticized tropes that are set in opposition to religion as a static realm absent of creativity, it also fails to contradict modern fundamentalist understandings of Islam which have downplayed the cultural traditions emerging after the integration of Classical Greek philosophy into Islamic culture, during the fifth-sixth centuries after the Hijra, as not properly religious. Islam has thus been reduced to a static regression to origins. Conversely, to propose religiosity as (at least partially) informing the spectatorial position within which Islam has engaged with visual culture calls up a Muslim voice from the past: the voice of a subject who may have commissioned, made or used this object, but whose interpretive world has been made subaltern through both the practices of Western art history and of modern Islam. To imagine such a viewer as radically different from any modern viewer, Muslim or not, challenges the idea that Islam can serve as an essentially atemporal category that grants an essentializing perceptive affinity to members of any religious, ethnic, regional, (or even academic!) tribe. This exposition of a historically, culturally, and literarily variegated – but nonetheless religious – Islam stands against the essentialization of Islam at the core of both Orientalist and fundamentalist practice, threatening the very opposition between East and West

which underpins so many contemporary political and economic stalemates and conflicts.

Rather than engaging with the complexities of Islam, the new, even more 'unwieldy' regionalist labels in a sense revert to the original geographic/ethnic terms under which the art of the Islamic lands was categorized in the late nineteenth century, when art historians first began to collect and reflect on the material culture of the East under the rubric of art.³⁰ What caused the first shift from regional to religious terminology, what meanings did this shifting terminology engender, and how can examining the discipline historiographically enable us to re-evaluate contemporary approaches to themes of Islam within Islamic art history?

II. Discourses of secularization in Islamic art history

The art historical term 'Islamic' emerged from the late nineteenth century onwards as a means of bringing together a wide range of objects in various types of collections. In the Ottoman Empire the term 'Fine Islamic Arts' (*Sanayi-i Nefise-i Islami*) was employed as early as 1889, in the founding documents of the Ottoman Imperial Museum, before any major European exhibitions or museums had employed the label 'Islamic art'. Its use in the Ottoman context probably served as a corrective to the term 'Muhammadan art' that was current in Europe, and underscored the broad territorial breadth from which the Ottoman Imperial Museum had culled its collections. In this way the collection matched the imperial ambitions of the reigning Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876-1908), who sought to emphasize his role as caliph over all of Islam, even as the empire's territories waned.³¹ Similarly, the frequent use of the term 'Musulman' at exhibitions held in both Paris and Algeria between 1893 and 1907, in lieu of 'Oriental' or the regional terms used more often elsewhere in Europe at the time, underscores French imperial ambition to lead in the understanding of Islam and the development of a properly modern, civilized, and colonial Islamic world.³²

From Lavoix to Munich 1910

Although the emergence of Islamic art as a field can easily be traced to the Romantic early modern interest in the exotic Orient as imagined through *A Thousand and One Nights* (beginning with Antoine Galland's early eighteenth-century French translations) and travel literature, the advent of scientific study of the art of the Islamic world dates to the late nineteenth century, bringing together the older discipline of philological Orientalism with the neophyte discipline of art history. From the earliest texts on Islamic art, a focus on the material and representational hierarchies specific to Western tradition – favouring architecture, painting, and sculpture over so-called decorative arts, and underscoring the importance of representational verisimilitude as an aesthetic goal – coloured the categorization of the material culture of the Islamic world as art.

³⁰ Blair and Bloom, 'Unwieldy Field', 153.

³¹ Mustafa Cezar, *Sanatta Batiya Açilis ve Osman Hamdi*, Istanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Egitim, Spor ve Saglik Vakfi, 1995, 548.

³² Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, 20.

This is clearly exemplified in an influential article published in 1875 by Henri-Michel Lavoix (1820-92), keeper of coins and medals at the Louvre and a specialist in Arab coins, which proposes a central contradiction between Islam and art. Lavoix begins by pointing out the absence of Qur'anic restrictions on representation; he then cites a Hadith associating creation with human hubris, suggesting that this text established a broad Islamic ban on images. The rest of the article frames the subsequent frequency of representational and figural art in Islam through a discourse emphasizing transgression over interpretive difference. Lavoix considers Islam at once as a religion strongly influenced by the more developed civilization of Byzantium, and as devolving within the first century of its formation – not only in relation to the prohibition of images, but also in relation to numerous other Qur'anic sanctions such as those on wealth and wine:

It must be said, one honours Islamism excessively with the blind submission of its followers to the desires of Muhammad and the precepts of the Qur'an. The truth is that Muslims do not conform their habits and their tastes to the law of the prophet except where it does not encounter excessive resistance to their passions and pleasures ... One reads in the Qur'an: 'Certainly the fire of hell will thunder like the roar of camels in the stomach of someone who drinks from golden or silver chalices.' One knows the prodigious luxury of dishes, ewers, and the vases of the most precious metals that the sultans and emirs deployed in their palaces. If the first caliphs, the companions of Muhammad, had taken his austere life as their model, if their virtues recalled his virtues, their poverty his poverty, the successors to the caliphate would have not delayed abandoning such examples. Even before the first century hegira, the charity of Abou Bakr [and] the humility of Ali were no more than a tradition without force that found no imitator.³³

Thus defined as an oxymoron in relation to Islamic orthodoxy, art comes to represent the inherent degeneracy of Islam. This presumed contradiction between Islam and its arts functions within a far broader nineteenth-century Christian discourse of Islam as a false religion. Within this model, then, Islamic art cannot be religious, not only because it 'fails' to represent theological subjects such as the godhead in the manner understood through a Christian framework, but also because Islam and the image itself are perceived to be inherently opposed. As such, Islam as a religion is immediately left out of the discourse of art, and instead the culture of Islam – a culture which is implicitly or even explicitly assumed to have degenerated and let go of its own religious ideal, and thereby to have become secularized – becomes the lens through which to understand Islamic art.

³³ Il faut le dire, on fait trop d'honneur à l'islamisme de la soumission aveugle de ses adeptes aux volontés de Mahomet et aux préceptes du Koran. La vérité est que les musulmans ne conformèrent leurs habitudes et leurs goûts à la loi de prophète qu'autant que celle-ci n'opposa pas une résistance trop grande à leurs plaisirs même... Si les premiers califes, les compagnons de Mahomet, avaient pris pour exemple à leur propre vie la vie austère du prophète, si leurs vertus rappelaient ses vertus, leur pauvreté sa pauvreté, les successeurs au califat ne tardèrent pas à abandonner de tels modèles. Avant la fin du 1er siècle de l'hégire, la charité d'Abou-Bekr, l'humilité d'Aly n'étaient plus qu'une tradition sans force qui ne rencontrait aucun imitateur. (Henri Lavoix, 'Les arts musulmans: de l'emploi des figures', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1875, 100.)

While the notion of Islam as a false and degenerate religion has certainly lost its currency among modern scholars, the 'problem' of the image as constructed in the early historiography of the field remains a point of contention. In recent times, this has most famously been manifest among Muslims who, in response to the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy, declared the forbidden image as one of the primary tenets of the religion, in effect adopting Orientalist discourses that can at best be understood as grossly simplistic and at worst as ethnocentric and racist, within the rubric of Islamic fundamentalism. The problem is not, of course, that modern Islamic art historians have not attempted to correct this misconception as early as Thomas Arnold's 1928 *Painting in Islam*, but that perennial resuscitation of the issue reflects an ongoing misalignment between Western assumptions about art and Islamic practices.³⁴ Thus, Grabar proposes that '[t]here are important topics in the history of art for which Islamic art does not provide useful or major evidence; such would be the representation of the human body or even the portrayal of nature, although within the study of Islamic art both are quite fascinating.'³⁵ On the contrary, it is precisely the art historical assumptions delineating the premises of 'representation' and 'nature' that studies examining less ethnocentric epistemologies have sought to address in recent years.³⁶

The views of Lavoix were popularized through citation in the two-volume *Manuel d'art musulman* published in 1907 in Paris, with the first volume by the architect Henri Saladin dedicated to architecture, and the second by Gaston Migeon, keeper of art objects at the Louvre, dedicated to plastic and industrial arts. The distinction between architecture and the so-called minor arts already emphasized a formal approach to the field, applying categorical distinctions rooted in medium with no consideration for the contiguity of media suggested in many Islamic literary discussions of materiality.³⁷ Saladin and Migeon's work represented the first attempt to produce a compendium enabling the comparison of

all the monuments which cover, from Spain to China, immense countries, and which are not part of a deceased civilization, but more of a civilization, or rather a social state, that is still alive and well, especially from the religious perspective; one could say that Islam has only retreated in Europe, and that in Asia and Africa, Muslims have lost neither their expansive force nor their proselytizing drive.³⁸

³⁴ Thomas Arnold, *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928 (reprint ed. New York: Dover, 1965); K.A.C. Creswell, 'The Lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam', *Ars Islamica*, 1946, 159-66; Finbarr B. Flood, 'Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum', *The Art Bulletin*, 84(4), 2002, 641-59; Silvia Naef, *Y a-t-il une "question de l'image" en Islam?*, Paris: Teraedre, 2004.

³⁵ Oleg Grabar, 'The Story of the Portraits of the Prophet Muhammad', *Studia Islamica*, 6, 2003, 9-38, vi-ix.

³⁶ For example, Necipoğlu, *Topkapi Scroll*; Gruber, 'From Logos to Light'; David J. Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image: The Writing Art History in Sixteenth-Century Iran*, Leiden: Brill, 2001; Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam*; Samer Akkash, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005.

³⁷ Necipoğlu, *Topkapi Scroll*, 185.

³⁸ Aucun ouvrage d'ensemble n'a encore, en effet, embrassé l'étude détaillée et la comparaison de tous ces monuments qui couvrent, de l'Espagne à la Chine, des pays immenses, et qui sont dus non pas à une civilisation morte, mais à une civilisation ou plutôt à un état social encore bien vivant, puisqu'au point de vue religieux on peut dire que l'Islam n'a reculé encore qu'en Europe, et qu'en Asie et en

While Saladin thus acknowledges the vibrant and indeed religious aspect of the *Manuel's* objects of study, his subsequent prioritization of stylistic development within geographic parameters associated with dominant ethnicities or empires underscores a proto-national conceptualization of Islamic art with little consideration of the cultural interchange that also informed the production of art, architecture, and meaning within the Islamic realm.³⁹ Labelling styles that are distinguished by region as the five 'schools' (Syro-Egyptian, Maghribi, Persian, Ottoman, and Indian), Saladin apparently conflates an intrinsic organizational trope of Islam – the four juridical schools of Sunni Islam plus a fifth Shi'i interpretive 'school' – with an extrinsic, stylistic categorization, although it is not clear if this is done consciously. In so doing, he implicitly elides the cultural interplay at work in the development and persistence of these juridical schools, which had varying levels of impact on culture (including the visual arts) across the time and geography of Islam via *madrassa* education systems, and replaces it with a geo-temporally based system of equivalent regions. This taxonomy is further subdivided through the application of uniform categories of religious, civil, and military architecture within each school, each of which would in turn be addressed through the study of elements, materials, structure, decoration, and composition.⁴⁰ Again, the epistemology applied to material culture obscures the nature of many architectural structures in the Islamic world that formed parts of foundations (*waqf*) with inextricable religious, political, and economic functions. In effect, the art historical epistemology imposed through the *Manuel* undermines culturally determined epistemologies that informed the objects it purported to study.

Thus conceptualizing religion as a fixed entity preceding rather than being produced through cultural processes (including the arts), and at best tangentially related to visual expression, Islamic art history came to represent a sequence of cultural moments grounded more in fixed geographies and political histories than in the abstract ebb and flow of pan-ethnic intellectual discourse. Parallel to Talal Asad's argument that 'the ideology of political representation in liberal democracies makes it difficult if not impossible to represent Muslims as Muslims,' this ideology of art historical taxonomy made it impossible to represent Islamic art as Islamic.⁴¹ Just as the mathematical notion of equality that is central to democracy contradicts the consideration of a minority as a unit subject to special protection, so the notion of equitability between individual units of information, dispersed across a civilization that is designated as Islamic and yet is also divorced from the interplay of its identities, segregates the Islam of art history. In art history, 'Islam' becomes a historicized civilizational category distinct from that of living production, in effect producing a universal Islam in a manner that never existed in the absence of the epistemologies of positive classification that aimed to define it.

Afrique, les musulmans n'ont perdu ni leur force d'expansion, ni leur ardeur au prosélytisme. (Henri Saladin, *Manuel d'art musulman: vol. I, l'architecture*, Paris: Librairie Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1907, vii.)

³⁹ Saladin, *Manuel*, 3-4.

⁴⁰ Saladin, *Manuel*, 5. For a similar organizational strategy in contemporary practice, see Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

⁴¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, 173.

This historicization of Islam was enhanced by disinterest in its relationship with modernity. As Saladin explains,

Fortunately Islam still lives at our doorstep. Since the fifteenth century, it has not really evolved. Pushed back by occidental expansion, it folded back on itself, retaining its ancient social, religious, and artistic customs. Unwavering in its traditional life, it allowed the slow collapse of the splendid debris of its past. When we read *A Thousand and One Nights*, we discover traces almost literally describing everyday life that one observes today in Muslim cities. Even today, the European invasion of Istanbul, Cairo, or Tunis has not changed either the character or the appearance of Muslim quarters. One could illustrate the pages of the famous work I just cited with photographic views taken today in the streets, bazaars, the squares, of most contemporary Muslim cities.⁴²

The idea of illustrating a fourteenth-century narrative with contemporary photographs not only emphasized the exoticism of the East in radical alterity to the modern West (which could only access its own past through disciplines like art history), it also enhanced the perceived authenticity of Saladin's use of photographs in his text – one of the important innovations indicated in the introduction.⁴³ Flattened in Orientalist time beyond a pre-modern pale, this uniform culture was nonetheless seen as exhibiting extensive originality and variety grounded not in Islam, but in its absorption of neighbouring cultural legacies:

Muslim civilization, which many different peoples have worked on, is not purely Arab. It is also, following the models which have inspired it and the milieu where it has grown up, Greek, Persian, Syrian, Egyptian, Spanish, and Hindu; but if one looks at it as a whole, one cannot deny that, without hitherto being precisely defined until now, that of the Arabs was not the greatest. With many different elements, melted into a homogenous amalgam, they knew how to give birth to a civilization that carries the mark of their genius ...⁴⁴

Saladin then summarizes the early history of Islamic conquest, indicating that the primary characteristic of this period was a system differentiating between

⁴² Heureusement l'islam est encore vivant à nos portes. Depuis le xve siècle, il n'a pour ainsi dire plus évolué. Refoulé par l'expansion occidentale, il s'est replié sur lui-même, gardant ses vieilles coutumes sociales, religieuses et artistiques. Inébranlable dans sa vie traditionnelle, il laisse crouler lentement les splendides débris de son passé. Lorsque nous lisons les *Mille et une Nuits*, nous retrouvons retracés presque littéralement les tableaux de la vie quotidienne que l'on observe de nos jours dans les villes musulmanes. Même à Stamboul, au Caire, à Tunis, l'envahissement européen n'a pas changé le caractère ni l'aspect des quartiers musulmans. On pourrait illustrer les pages de l'ouvrage célèbre que je viens de citer avec des vues photographiques prises aujourd'hui dans les rues, les bazars, les places, de bien des villes musulmanes contemporaines. (Saladin, *Manuel*, 8.)

⁴³ Saladin, *Manuel*, xiii.

⁴⁴ La civilisation musulmane, à laquelle ont travaillé tant de peuples différents, n'est pas purement arabe. Elle est aussi, suivant les modèles dont elle s'est inspirée et les milieux où elle a grandi, grecque, persane, syrienne, égyptienne, espagnole, indoue: mais s'il faut faire la part de tous, on ne peut nier que, sans avoir été jamais exactement définie jusque'ici, celle des Arabes ne soit la plus grande. De tant d'éléments divers, fondus en un amalgame homogène, ils ont su faire naître une civilisation qui porte la marque de leur génie. (Saladin, *Manuel*, 9.)

believers, the Muslim religious caste that ‘combatted, prayed, collected taxes, and governed’, and ‘infidel subjects or *reaya* who worked and paid. This fundamental distinction’, he continues, ‘allows one to comprehend how the Arabs, without an art of their own, brought, through the universal imposition of programmes, an evolution in art, quite brisk and accented, but impregnated in each country with a local sense.’⁴⁵ This emphasis on influences received from both West and East reflected the idea of Islam, identified solely through a narrative of origins with the culturally-disparaged Arabs, as a carrier civilization with little intrinsic essence constructed through its own cultural and intellectual production.⁴⁶ The incorrect distinction drawn between Muslims as a ruling class and non-Muslim commoners (*reaya* or *rayah* indicated all commoners, regardless of faith) implied that not only was Islamic art non-Islamic in its adoption of local cultures, it also derived from non-Muslim local creators. As Nuha Khoury discusses, the search for formal sources of meaning outside of Islam, based on the assumed absence of visual culture in the Arab world, has often persisted into modern studies.⁴⁷

Saladin’s introductory comments on his difficulties in finding documentary support for architectural examples of comparable quality suggest the extent to which the available material was forcibly made uniform in his text in order to accord with pre-existing notions of canonicity. This was presumably seen as necessary to facilitate comparison and enable the construction of a cohesive field of study – a field apparently created in part through the methodological *a priori* assumptions of art history. Similarly, the classificatory system found in the second volume of the *Manuel*, which segregates materials in descending order of their presumed artistic value (manuscript-painting; stone, marble, stucco, funerary, and fountain sculpture; mosaic; carved wood; ivory; goldwork and jewellery; coins; tooled leather; bronzes and irons; arms and armour; ceramics; enamelled glass; rock crystal and engraved stone; textiles; and carpets), precludes any intrinsic discourse of intermediality or aesthetics. The absence of any category for calligraphy in this list underscores a gap between Islamic aesthetics, which place a high value on written form, and the palaeographic approach to writing undertaken by Orientalist scholars.⁴⁸ As in later works, religion is discussed only as a limit on the presumed apogee of artistic production, veristic painting.

Just as Saladin and Migeon’s work served as a seminal textual survey of Islamic art, the 1910 Munich exhibition of *Die Meisterwerke Muhammedanischer Kunst* played a key role in cementing the secular categorization of the field and the scope of objects, regions, and interests which this designated. Eschewing the crowded,

⁴⁵ 1° Les *moslim* ou croyants, caste religieuse et guerrière qui combattait, priaient, percevait les impôts et gouvernait; 2° Les sujets infidèles ou *raïas* qui travaillaient et payaient. Cette distinction fondamentale permet de comprendre comment les Arabes n’ayant pas d’art propre ont amené en imposant partout des programmes presque uniformes, une évolution dans l’art, assez brusque et accentuée, mais imprégnée dans chaque pays d’une saveur locale. (Saladin, *Manuel*, 9.)

⁴⁶ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 169.

⁴⁷ Nuha N.N. Khoury, ‘The Dome of the Rock, the Ka’ba, and Ghumdan: Arab Myths and Umayyad Monuments,’ *Muqarnas*, 10, 1993, 57-65.

⁴⁸ As Blair and Bloom (‘Unwieldy Field’, 168-9) point out, relatively recent studies on calligraphy by Whelan, Tabbaa, Bierman and Blair have aimed to bridge this gap in earlier art historical approaches. However, the critique that is given of the studies by Tabbaa and Bierman reveals a conservative approach to the sociopolitical questions that Blair and Bloom see as appropriate for discursive address within the field.

Thousand and One Nights flavour of previous trade exhibitions and world fairs, the Munich exhibition sought to elevate objects above service as exemplars for ethnographic or historical study by rendering them as art. Curators promoted an 'artistic-reverential' attitude towards the works by limiting textual information and organizing works by medium, placing the works well apart from each other so that each could be contemplated independently. The attitude of reverence was enhanced by the exhibition of carpets on the floor, in one room consciously evoking the atmosphere of a mosque. Not only did the aesthetic emphasis of the exhibition coincide with a contemporary interest in Islamic art as a source for design, but it also served to justify its presence in a Western context in which the 'object faces its beholder as pure exhibit'.⁴⁹

This attitude reframed the value of accessible objects, shifting their status from things that could be purchased in order to recreate an imaginary Orient to rare finds that had been acquired through great adventure and hardship by the exhibition curator, Friedrich Sarre – who wrote of his experiences in published travel journals, *Kunstchronik*, and newspapers:

There are, almost everywhere, even in small places, people who occupy themselves with antiquities, which, if not expressly forbidden, are generally under state control in most Oriental lands and therefore exist outside of public space. I remember several mysterious late-night visits that I had to undertake to this end. Decades of friendly relations with particular people proved themselves particularly fruitful: such as a Romanian whom I met in Persia ...⁵⁰

Just as world fairs had exoticized the Orient through stagecraft, the aestheticization of objects as rarities further exoticized their place of origin as a mysterious and unknown source for objects that could, in the museum context, function as pure art tamed from its distant origins.⁵¹

Massignon and the Atomistic paradigm

Alternatives to this model of secularization through formal aestheticization emerged not through indigenous objections, but again through the Orientalist compilation of Islamic knowledge. In the 1921 article, 'Les méthodes de réalisation artistique des peuples de l'islam', published in *Syria*, the journal of the new Institut Français du Proche Orient (founded in 1920), Louis Massignon (1883-1962) asserts that Islamic

⁴⁹ Eva-Maria Troelenberg, 'Munich 1910 and the Image of Islamic Art', in Lerner and Shalem, *After One Hundred Years*, 38; Roxburgh, 'After Munich', 362-5; see also Troelenberg's article in the present volume.

⁵⁰ Daneben gibt es fast überall, auch an kleineren Orten, Leute, die sich unter der Hand mit Antiquitätenhandel beschäftigen, der, wenn auch nicht ganz verboten, doch in gewissem Sinne in den meisten orientalischen Ländern unter staatlicher Kontrolle steht und deshalb vielfach unter Ausschluss der Öffentlichkeit stattfindet. Ich erinnere mich an manchen geheimnisvollen nächtlichen Besuch, den ich zu diesem Zweck habe unternehmen müssen. Jahrzehntelange freundschaftliche Beziehungen zu einzelnen Persönlichkeiten erwiesen sich als besonders ergebnisreich, so die zu einem Rumänen, den ich in Persien kennenlernte. (Friedrich Sarre, 'Von Sammeln im Orient', *Franfurter Zeitung*, April 1932, 282-3.)

⁵¹ Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992; John M. Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

art is not constituted 'at all through foreign influence, but that Muslim conceptions of art derive their fundamental postulates from Muslim metaphysics.'⁵² He offers two factual critiques and an alternative methodology for approaching the arts of Islam. The article first explores the perception of Islamic art through the trope of lack – a trope still repeated today in recurring discussions of the prohibition of the image, the absence of representation, or the proscription of women from public space – and how this conception emerged through very basic ethnocentric epistemological assumptions. He reviews the fallacy of the prohibition of representation offered by Lavoix and repeated by Migeon by examining the Hadith from which the discussion of the legitimacy of representation emerges, noting that the prohibition is best understood as 'a restriction, not a negation, that aims at idolatry and not at art itself'.⁵³ Rather than understanding the subsequent failure to follow these rules as a sign of weak religious faith and materialism, Massignon suggests that the avoidance of idolatry has fostered an alternative ontology of representation in Islam. 'The Muslim does not want to be fooled by art because, for him, even the world, which is infinitely more beautiful than all artworks, is nothing but an automaton of which God pulls the strings'.⁵⁴

Thus, rather than situating Islamic art as emerging out of a series of influences, received from East and West and enabled through the assumed poverty of the nomadic Arab culture in which Islam emerged, Massignon offers that Islamic art

derives from a theory of the universe; the theory of representation of the world that all Muslim philosophers not influenced by Greece stubbornly maintained, the dogmatic theory of Muslim theology. This theory is that, in the world, there are no forms in themselves, there are no figures in themselves, only God is permanent ... there is no duration (durability) in Muslim theology, there are only instants and even these instants do not have a necessary order ... they are discontinuous and reversible if it pleases God.

There are no forms and no figures ... it is possible to show how much this very particular theology, which affirms divine omnipotence over all the material out of which creatures are made, conditioned the development of mathematics in Islam ...⁵⁵

⁵² '... nous verrons que ce n'est pas du tout par une influence étrangère, mais que les conceptions musulmanes de l'art dérivent des postulats fondamentaux de la métaphysique musulmane.' (Louis Massignon, 'Les Méthodes de réalisation artistique des peuples de l'Islam,' *Syria*, 2(2), 1921, 50.)

⁵³ 'C'est une *restriction*, non une *négation*, que cela vise l'idolâtrie et non pas l'art lui-même.' (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 49.)

⁵⁴ 'Le musulman ne veut pas être dupé de l'art, parce que, pour lui, le monde lui-même, qui est infiniment plus beau que toutes les oeuvres d'art, n'est qu'une mécanique dont Dieu tire les ficelles.' (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 50.)

⁵⁵ L'art musulman dérive d'une théorie de l'univers; c'est la théorie de la représentation du monde que tous les philosophes musulmans orthodoxes non influencés par la Grèce ont soutenus mordicus, la théorie dogmatique de la théologie musulmane. Cette théorie est que, dans le monde, il n'y a pas de formes en soi, il n'y a pas de figures en soi, Dieu seul est permanent... Il n'y a pas de durée dans la théologie musulmane, il n'y a que des instants n'ont même pas un ordre de succession nécessaire... il n'y a pas que des suites d'instants, et ces suites d'instants sont discontinues et réversibles s'il plaît à Dieu... Il n'y a pas de formes et il n'y a pas de figures... il est possible de démontrer combien cette théologie très particulière, que affirme l'omnipotence divine sur tout le matériel dont sont faites les

While this assertion of Ash'arite atomism as universal in Islam reflects the wider tendency of much early scholarship to view Islam from within a single theological perspective – a problem which contemporary Islamic art historians often rightly recognize as a potential barrier to the construction of a properly 'Islamic' theoretical model for perception – methodologically it indicates an otherwise unacknowledged need for Islamic art to be conceptualized through an epistemology grounded not simply in formal or even secular/historical terms, but in meanings rooted in Islam itself.⁵⁶

Even from a scientific perspective, nature does not exist for them, but is simply an arbitrary series of events which have no duration, and even, in art, we will see how this negation of permanence of figure and form is precisely the principle which we, who have visited Muslim countries, have felt with confusion, without ability to define in rational and coordinated terms.⁵⁷

For Massignon, the solution to this sense of confusion was to introduce an epistemology of analysis rooted in an Islamic ontology of the object that, for Western perception, 'underscores change', as opposed to the rationalist aspect of Hellenic thought with which modern Western civilization affiliated itself.⁵⁸ He roots his structure in two Hadith that emphasize the perpetual change of matter, and proposes an examination of art through the same perceptual structure as would be used for comprehending music or poetry, recognizing the intermediality of poetic discourse as a potential source for broader Islamic aesthetics in which the senses are not segregated.⁵⁹ Thus Massignon understands the 'malleable, humble, shallow' nature of Islamic architecture through the metaphor of a floating garment that serves the function of a backdrop and a space of reflection, in which the intersection of geometric forms precludes the fixity of any single form and thus provides a visual counterpart to the infinite changeability of the material universe.⁶⁰

From architecture, Massignon moves to a consideration of the garden as an interior space of conscious artifice in opposition to nature, as opposed to the perspectival view of constructed nature that constitutes the Western garden. Instead of considering painting and sculpture, which he bars from being 'properly' Islamic categories because of their proximity to Western premises of naturalism and

créatures, a conditionnée le développement des mathématiques en Islam ... (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 50-1.)

⁵⁶ For a historiographic account of how Ash'arism came to be understood as dominating eleventh century Islamic orthodoxy, see George Makdisi, 'Ash'ari and the As'arites in Islamic Religious History I', *Studia Islamica*, 17, 1962, 37-80; for a discussion of how this view has affected interpretation in Islamic art history, see Yasser Tabbaa, 'The Muqarnas Dome: Its Origin and Meaning', *Muqarnas*, 3, 1985, 61-74.

⁵⁷ La nature, pour eux, n'existe pas, mais est simplement une série arbitraire d'accidents d'atomes qui n'ont pas de durée, de même, en art, nous verrons que cette négation de la permanence de la figure et de la forme est précisément le principe de cette caractéristique que tant d'entre nous, qui ont visité les pays musulmans, ont sentie confusément, sans pouvoir la définir en termes raisonnées et coordonnées. (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 51.)

⁵⁸ 'C'est un art qui nous soulignera le changement.' (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 52.)

⁵⁹ Necipoğlu, *Topkapi Scroll*, 185.

⁶⁰ 'l'art musulman préfère se servir d'une matière malléable, humble, sans épaisseur, comme un vêtement flottant, comme un métal fusible.' (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 149.)

perspective, he focuses instead on what he designates as the 'arts of colour', which range from carpets to manuscript painting.⁶¹ Following his brief examination of material culture, Massignon then moves to examine music, which he similarly defines in opposition to Western norms as a system eschewing notes in favour of spaces, and thus a system of modalities, parallel to the absence of vowels in Arabic orthography or the limited palette in Islamic carpets.

In his concluding remarks, Massignon's choice of a parable from the controversial tenth-century Sufi Mansur al-Hallaj underscores both the advantages and the limitations of his approach to Islamic art. Although al-Hallaj was executed as a heretic, Massignon cites his teachings as a means through which to understand how 'the directional idea of this Muslim art is to rise above forms, not permitting the adulation of images, but to go through them towards He who makes them move as through a magic lantern, as in a theatre of shadows, [He] who is the only permanent "he who remains", as is told to us on innumerable Islamic tombstones'.⁶²

While Massignon's presentation of a singular idiosyncratic interpretation of Islam as capable of informing the entirety of Islamic art certainly casts his interpretation with the Orientalist norms of his era, his essential intervention in the practice of Islamic art history remains relevant for the modern field. In societies where theology often informs cultural production – such that the Qur'an describes its authority through poetic aesthetics, and poetry often references passages of the Qur'an – or in which disciplines like theology, philosophy, and poetry can be difficult to disentangle (as in the work of even such disparate thinkers as Jami and Ibn 'Arabi), any understanding of the arts needs to take into consideration the possibility of the reflection and production of meaning through theologically-informed parameters. These may well alter the ontological and epistemological structure of the interpretive field.⁶³ As Massignon indicates, this would mean questioning the very nature of the underlying concepts – such as form, representation, and temporality – that constitute the basic units of art historical investigation as it has developed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe.

As has already been shown, this has not been the dominant trend in Islamic art historical studies. One reason for this has been the modern definition of Islam through two parallel practices which will now be discussed: that of Orientalist study, and that of revivalist Islamism.

III. Orientalism, Islamism, and the modern rationalization of Islam

The persistent segregation of culture and theology in Islamic art historical studies has not only suited the prevailing understandings of Islam produced through Western scholarship from the nineteenth century onwards. Somewhat paradoxically, it also reflects increasingly strict interpretations of Islam established by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islamic revivalists. Both of these apparently disparate schools of thought have in fact favoured religion as origin over religion as practice, explicitly denigrating variants of practice such as Sufism as standing outside of a

⁶¹ 'les arts de la couleur'. (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 151.)

⁶² L'idée directrice de cet art musulman est de hausser au delà vers Celui qui les fait bouger comme dans une lanterne magique, comme dans un théâtre d'ombres, qui est le seul permanent: « howa el Bâqi » nous disent les innombrables pierres tombales de l'Islam. (Massignon, 'Les Méthodes', 160.)

⁶³ Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Beauty in Arabic Culture*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999.

narrowed definition of Islam, and also redefining the arts as part of cultural production rather than religious practice. Thus the consideration of art as separate from theology cannot simply be understood as a case of Western Orientalist bias, but also as fully suiting the interests of Islamic groups interested in narrowing the definition of Islam in accord with the modern growth of fundamentalism. This section provides a brief overview of the nineteenth-century historiographies of Islamic studies and of modern Islamic revivalist movements as they coincided with and framed the growth of Islamic art history. It then examines how the coincident definitions of Islam that were produced within the Islamic world through revivalism, and outside of it through positivist Orientalism, further supported the exclusion of religious interpretive models for art historical analysis which consequently developed under a strong secularist paradigm.

In Europe, nineteenth-century scientific interest in Islam, undertaken by figures such as Silvester de Sacy (1758-1838), grounded its investigations around the discovery of a 'general grammar' of cultural practices, positing religion as having static and essential principles that were not subject to interpretive variance.⁶⁴ In the early nineteenth century, within the glow of Hegelian thought, religious sciences in the Germanic sphere (which were also to be so influential in the early development of Islamic art history) became increasingly geared towards the search for an original religion (*Urreligion*), while Islamic and Jewish studies developed along separate paths rooted in the philological study of culture. During the same era, the study of 'mythology' became separated from the rationalized science of religion, which was schematized through the epistemological model offered by linguistics. Thus, as with the nineteenth-century philological diachronic study of language, religious studies emphasized religion as stemming from an idealized origin, considering all later practice as aberrant from the original model. This emphasis on origins, located in primary texts – in the case of Islam, the Qur'an and the Hadith – historicized the study of Islam, moving it away from the study of discursive meaning in favour of the study of origins. With the developing nationalist equation of ethnicity with language, the idea of 'linguistic tribes' became a metaphor for 'cultural tribes' that migrated, branched, and diluted the original expression of cultural identity. By the early nineteenth century, 'historical criticism was no longer something emerging from a text so much as a reconstruction of the genealogical derivation of a text. This radicalized the separation being drawn between religion as a principle and as a historical text. Religion was freed of history, inasmuch as history itself only offered the hermeneutical underpinnings for religious experience as a sense of experiencing transcendence. Canonical texts were thus excused from historical critique'.⁶⁵

This situation had a profound impact on the development of Islamic studies in the early twentieth century. The paradigmatic example would be the first philologically academic translations of the Qur'an, undertaken by Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921); in keeping with Biblical scholarship of the era, Goldziher favoured

⁶⁴ Reinhard Schulze, 'Islamwissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft', *Troeltsch Studien*, 2, 2010, 90.

⁶⁵ Historische Kritik wurde nicht mehr an einem Sachverhalt, also an einem Text selbst geübt, sondern zum Prinzip der genealogischen Herleitung eines Textes erkoren. Dies radikalisierte die Trennung zwischen Religion als Prinzip und Religion als Text und Geschichte ... Dies wurde noch dadurch befördert, daß Theologen wie Schleiermacher das Wesen der Religion jenseits des Textes als hermeneutische Erkenntnis beschrieben. (Schulze, 'Islamwissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft', 96.)

historical and cultural over spiritual or perceptual analyses of the Qur'an.⁶⁶ Thus aligned, Qur'anic studies increasingly distinguished between doctrine as expressed in original texts such as the Qur'an and the Hadith, and practices that were part and parcel of the cultural plenitude of the Islamic world, including Sufistic, regional, and folk practices, all of which can be syncretic.

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century but gaining speed a century later, revivalist movements in Islam (loosely referred to as Wahhabism and Salafism) produced a similar reconceptualization of Islam. Responding to a perceived laxity in Islamic practice as manifested through Sufism, and denying the power both of *ijtihad* (interpretive practice from textual sources) and *taqlid* (imitation of authorities in their succession from the time of the Prophet), the mid-eighteenth century thinker Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab conceived of the Qur'an as consisting solely of its unambiguous verses, and thus not requiring interpretation. Instead, he proposed a strict code of behaviour through which to distinguish Muslims from non-believers, and his teachings spread with the empowerment of the Wahhabi Saud clan.

In contrast to the pre-modern regressive revivalism of the Wahhabi movement, the nineteenth-century religious thinkers later grouped as Salafi (meaning 'school of the forefathers') promoted a progressive revivalism in response to and through the intellectual structure of modernity. Inspirational for many fundamentalist leaders, the Salafi movement has had a profound effect on twentieth-century Islam, and thus an understanding of the political and modernizing framework of its emergence is essential to understanding how modern 'Islam' has come to define its parameters as a religious practice. Modern Islamist thought, such as that of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), emphasized a rational approach to religion to compete with the rationalism of modern education. Inspired by their own educations in modern Ottoman institutions, leading thinkers turned away from the more mystical approaches to Islam in which they had been versed (in particular that of Ibn 'Arabi), and towards rationalist interpretive traditions (notably the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya), some of which had only recently come to light through the development of modern libraries as part of modern Ottoman bureaucratization. Coinciding with Ottoman attempts to control religious offices through the appointment of Sufi shaykhs, oppositional Islamists in the empire increasingly denigrated Sufism as heretical, a view that corroborated their search for 'true' Islam in its early centuries.⁶⁷

While subsequent fundamentalist movements, such as those inspired by the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) or the Iranian 'Ali Shari'ati (1933-77), retained the revivalist response against modern/Western incursion (whether enacted by colonial powers or by local Westernizing/secularizing elites), they often did so with a complex combination of Western positivist methodologies and Islamic interpretive frameworks. Revivalism became a means of imagining an ideal origin that preceded the incursion of the West, so much so that shared heritage, such as Greek

⁶⁶ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'Introduction', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 9.

⁶⁷ Itzhak Weismann, 'Between Sufi Reformism and Modernist Rationalism – A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafiyya from the Damascene Angle,' *Die Welt des Islams*, 41(2), July 2001, 206-37; Henri Lauzière, 'The Construction of *Salafiyya*: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42, 2010, 369-89.

philosophy, was reinscribed as Western and foreign, and thus condemned. Thus in contemporary revivalist thought, all analytical methodologies that emerged through the living generation of Islam across time are understood as representing the degeneration of an Islamic law (Shari‘a) tied to origins and imagined as fixed. Such a view not only complements Orientalist views of a timeless Orient and a positivist, readily defined Islam, but also limits the geographic scope of the Islamic world to the Arabian peninsula of its foundation, before its supposed contamination by Turks and Persians, and later by Southeast Asians, Indonesians and Malaysians, and even in the contemporary world by European adherents.⁶⁸ A great deal of Islamic art, of course, comes from the world beyond the Arabian peninsula and after the era of the Sunni revival; and much of this material can only be interpreted through the complex discourses of Sufism and regional interpretations of Islamic practice. If, as is suggested in both Orientalist and revivalist definitions of Islam, this Islam is defined as inherently corrupt, excluded from ‘proper’ Islam, then there can indeed be no properly ‘Islamic’ art.

IV. Secularist and faith-based approaches in modern Islamic art history

During the twentieth century, two primary approaches have aimed to mediate this disjunction between the ‘Islam’ of orthodoxy and the ‘Islam’ of art. On the one hand, increasingly secular methodologies that coincided with the ‘secularization thesis’ of modern anthropology addressed formal, political, and sociological questions that rarely touched upon issues of perception or aesthetic meaning.⁶⁹ On the other hand, broadly ‘faith-based’ approaches in the 1970s attempted to reunite Islam and art through very generalized, dehistoricized understandings of Islam and Sufism. This section will examine the strengths and shortcomings of each of these approaches.

With the increasing number of archaeological explorations that took place in the early twentieth century (and paused during the 1939-45 war), scholars of Islamic art came to focus on architecture and objects categorized through archaeological schemes of dating rather than more art historical issues pertaining to style, form or aesthetics. More pertinent to the conceptual framework of Islamic art history, however, was the training and background of certain key scholars. For most central European scholars, such as Joseph Strzygowski (1862-1941) and Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948), the objective in studying Islamic art was less to understand intrinsic meanings and changes than to establish theories about the origins of European art.⁷⁰ Already peripheral to the primary narrative of Western art history, it was the stylistic aspects of new finds which interested leading art historians such as Herzfeld and Strzygowski in their promotion of the ‘Orient’ as holding the key to the origins of European artistic decline from Late Antiquity, a decline perceived to have transpired in the Middle Ages.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Tamara Albertini, ‘The Seductiveness of Certainty: The Destruction of Islam’s Intellectual Legacy by the Fundamentalists’, *Philosophy East and West*, 53(4), 2003, 455-70; Jorgen S. Nielsen, ed., *Sharia as Discourse*, London: Ashgate, 2010.

⁶⁹ See William H. Swatos, Jr, and Kevin J. Christiano, ‘Secularization Theory: the Course of a Concept’, *Sociology of Religion*, 60(3), 1999, 209-28.

⁷⁰ Robert Hillenbrand, ‘Creswell and Contemporary European Scholarship’, *Muqarnas*, 8, 1991, 23-35.

⁷¹ As Rabbat points out, ‘This determinedly divisive and not a little racist theory of a separate and rather inferior Oriental lineage formed the conceptual backbone for numerous future studies on

As the discipline matured and cultural relativism gained priority in the twentieth century, the Eurocentrism embedded in disciplinary questions shifted. As Grabar, the most prominent voice within anglophone Islamic art history in the second half of the twentieth century, reminisced,

Those among us, in the 1950s and 1960s, who specialized in the art of Asia or Africa were for the most part trained in Western art. We more or less accepted as a truth that the linear progression of Italian art from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth was paradigmatic of all artistic developments, but we believed, at least in retrospect, that the establishment of Italian art of the Renaissance and Baroque periods as a paradigm was merely an accident of educational circumstances and that other circumstances would have given this privilege to Sung or Mughal art. The day would come, some of us thought, when introductions to the history of art would be based on any artistic tradition and when African sculpture or Persian miniatures would help us to understand Bernini and Titian. This expectation was not realized, but the assumption that led to it – for instance that an attribution to Rembrandt requires the same method as one to Sultan Muhammad – still remain, thereby implying a universal history or universal approach to the history of art.⁷²

As the second half of the century progressed, the growing trend towards interpreting objects in terms of historical contextualization, rather than primarily formal properties, was reflected in the 1965 reorganization of the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷³ In 1972, Grabar pointed to the need for more work in theories of visual perception to inform the language through which Islamic art objects might be analyzed:⁷⁴

Artistic creativity must never seek to compete with the divine will, and thus, on the one hand, must *avoid* any resemblance to the fleeting world of perceived living things and, on the other, must demonstrate *ceaselessly* that 'things' are *never* what they seem to be ... Instead, the artist can either compose *totally arbitrary* designs which mask the physical reality of an object or a building, or else suggest a variety of metaphors for the divine ... Whatever variations occur, an 'Islamic' explanation would be that a system of beliefs so intimately tied to the regulation of daily life permeated the ethos of patrons and artists to the extent that they *instinctively* sought to express the unreality of the tangible, if not at times the awesome permanence of God through the transitory nothingness of man and nature.⁷⁵

Islamic art and architecture and reoriented the field away from investigating the continuous connections with other, Westerly traditions of art and architecture ...' Rabbat, 'Islamic Art at a Crossroad?', n.p.

⁷² Grabar, 'On the Universality of the History of Art,' *Art Journal*, 42(4), 1982, 281-3, reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 33.

⁷³ Ernst J. Grube, 'The Galleries of Islamic Art,' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 23(6), 1965, 197.

⁷⁴ Grabar, 'History of Art and History of Literature: Some Random Thoughts', *New Literary History*, 3, 1972, 559-68, reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 11.

⁷⁵ Grabar, 'An Art of the Object', reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 26-27; italics mine.

Yet Grabar has tended, on the whole, to favour secularist approaches. He offers three major interpretive modes – Islamic (although he often seems to avoid direct engagement with this model, as demonstrated above), princely, and urban-populist – for Islamic art, discussing in each case the absence of self-reflexive discourses within the Islamic world pertinent for artistic analysis. Asserting a relationship between courtly life and the sensuousness of Islamic art which becomes, in the tradition inherited from Orientalism, its salient aesthetic, Grabar proposes that, '[a]ltogether, it is possible to consider Islamic art as primarily secular and thus explain the ease with which its motifs were transmitted to other cultures or adopted by alien rulers, like the Turkish military or Mongol princes'.⁷⁶

The secular approaches exemplified in some of Grabar's writings reinforce Western paradigms. On the one hand, the concerns Grabar cites – the transmission of forms, particularly to foreign cultures – echo the extrinsic interests of an earlier generation of scholars seeking the roots of art histories associated with the West. On the other, this notion of foreignness, particularly as applied to Turks, Mongols, and by implication probably also to Iranians, asserts the idea of Islam as authentically located only in its origins. This not only echoes the trope of decline through cultural mixing that was suggested by Lavoix, but asserts the prominence of ethnic over religious and formal over intellectual categories in the production of culture.

Perhaps most interesting among Grabar's categories of appreciation is the 'private' mode of understanding Islamic art, in which he acknowledges the possibility that art might enable religious contemplation. However, he finds that it would be a 'more complex cultural decision to limit the available means and functions of visual expression, thereby compelling the elaboration of forms for private, individualized experience. It is possibly for this very reason,' he adds, 'that the Muslim world has not provided us with many statements about its own aesthetic judgments.'⁷⁷ On the contrary, as Grabar's own research indicates, Islamic literature and theology provides a plethora of nuanced discussions about the visual, the role of the image in the real and imaginary world, and so on.⁷⁸ The problem of letting the Islamic world 'speak for itself' emerges less from the paucity of sources, than from the range of expressions permitted to be understood as sources within modern disciplinary categories, such as the distinction between the factual truth of an archival document and the expressive language of poetry.

Yet modern efforts to correct Eurocentric shortcomings have often been equally limited by Eurocentric epistemologies. The most integrated attempt to represent Islamic art from a perspective understood as Islamic was the World of Islam Festival staged in London in 1976, offering a wide variety of events and exhibitions with the ambition of reframing Western notions of Islamic culture.⁷⁹ While not all of the planned events were realized, those that were – in particular the exhibition of Islamic art held at the Hayward Gallery – provided the broadest public display of Islamic art since the Munich exhibition of 1910. The aim of this and other exhibits was to counteract the dominant Eurocentric models through which Islamic art was generally understood by underscoring the essence of Islamic art along lines comparable with

⁷⁶ Grabar, 'An Art of the Object', reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 27.

⁷⁷ Grabar, 'An Art of the Object', reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 29.

⁷⁸ For example, Grabar, 'Portraits of the Prophet Muhammad'.

⁷⁹ J.D. Latham, Robin Bidwell and Frank Taylor, 'The World of Islam Festival Program', *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 1975, 94-9.

those suggested in Massignon's 1921 articles. However, the exhibition neither escaped from the secularist epistemologies of earlier art historical models nor provided any intrinsic, non-descriptive intellectual underpinnings through which to convincingly support claims for Islamic art as a 'manifestation of the unity of Islam'.⁸⁰

Basil Gray's introduction to the exhibition catalogue from the 1976 Hayward Gallery exhibition reiterated the longstanding interest in 'influences' through a triumphal narrative of Islamic expansion, proposing that the overarching power of the Qur'an provided a new linguistic and thereby cultural framework that dominated the entire Islamic world. While he pointed out that 'a principal aim of the organizers of this exhibition has been to illustrate [a continuing tendency to community of artistic language throughout the Islamic world] and to seek to identify and demonstrate the essential unities within its varied expressions', the approach taken by the exhibition relied solely on formal rather than conceptual considerations of visuality. Thus he traced the same developmental story of Islamic art as was already current, countering the common assumption of *horror vacui* with the equally unsupported assertion that '[t]his is far too negative an approach; there must have been a positive delight in exploring the variations or combinations in a not very large corpus of motifs which do not seem to have had symbolic meaning...'⁸¹

Titus Burckhardt went further in crediting the 1976 exhibition with imparting insight into an authentic world of Islam. Contrasting a unitary Islamic worldview with a binary Christian one, he explains:

In the world of Islam this separation of life into a religious sphere and a profane one does not exist: the Koran is both a spiritual and social law. We speak now of an Islamic world which is still intact, not fractured by European interference, of the very world which has produced the works of art which we admire in this exhibition ... This means that Islam represents a total order which involves all the planes of human existence, the body as well as the soul, and which decides naturally the place which each art occupies and the role it will play in the spiritual and physical equilibrium of the *Dar al Islam* ... It is by conforming to a certain hierarchy of values that the arts are integrated in Islam, and that they become Islamic art, whatever the source of their diverse elements may be.⁸²

Such an understanding of Islam was heavily mediated through the universal spirituality and mysticism manifest in the Perennialist philosophy which informed Burckhardt's own approach to Islam.⁸³ Disenchanted with post-Enlightenment rationalism, Perennial philosophy had emerged as a Catholic movement in mid-nineteenth century France. However, many of its adherents sought the teachings of other traditions as alternatives to modernism, and were particularly attracted by what they understood as the unitary vision of Islam. This universalist model was in

⁸⁰ John Sabini, 'The World of Islam: Its Legacy', *Saudi Aramco World Magazine*, May/June 1976, 7.

⁸¹ Basil Gray, 'Introduction to the Exhibition,' in Dalu Jones and George Michell, eds, *The Arts of Islam*, London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976, 24-25.

⁸² Titus Burckhardt, 'Introduction to Islamic Art,' in Jones and Michell, *The Arts of Islam*, 31.

⁸³ Carl W. Ernst, 'Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy, and Islamic Studies (review article)', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, 28(2), 1994, 176-81; Akkach, *Cosmology*, 4-13.

large part a product of the widespread modern desire for grand overarching definitions, a predilection shared not only by the Sufi figures from whom the Perennialists assembled their universalized Eastern mysticism, but also by the doctrinal emphasis of both Orientalists and fundamentalists. The resulting emphasis placed by Burckhardt on a timeless, anti-historicist Islam proved doubly damaging for the Islamic understanding of art history that the exhibition purported to provide: it dismissed modernity from any relationship with Islam, and it provided little or no documentation for the sweeping assertions made about the unitary nature of Islam. Like those of Gray, Burckhardt's observations about the nature of Islam as expressed in Islamic art emerged from formal observations of the visual world, with no consideration given to the extensive theological, literary, and philosophical legacy of the Islamic world that could have potentially supported those assertions or given them nuance. The very universalism through which Perennialist philosophy aimed to offer spiritualism to the modern world precluded a contextualized approach specific to Islam; instead, it produced Islam in broad categories that could interface with still broader understandings of universal spirituality.

The declaration of absolute Islamic singularity patently contradicted the immediately apparent diversity of Islam, both as a practice and as a historical phenomenon. As Grabar rightly objected, 'It is foolish, illogical and historically incorrect to talk of a single Islamic artistic expression. A culture of thirteen centuries which extended from Spain to Indonesia is not now and was not in the past a monolith, and to every generalization there are dozens of exceptions'.⁸⁴ While he acknowledged the possibility of integrating religious considerations with those of art, what he perceived as the failure of such attempts has limited the appeal of alternative Islamic approaches.⁸⁵ Similarly dismissing the possibility of faith-based interpretation offered in the Hayward Gallery thesis, Gülru Necipoğlu reasserts the secular terms of Islamic art historical practice by seeking a solution to the temporo-geographical limitations at work in the field today through a new pan-cultural periodization paralleling those of Western art history (late antique/early-medieval; medieval/late-medieval; early modern; and modern/contemporary).⁸⁶ Yet the problem may not have been with the idea of understanding Islamic art through Islamic exposition so much as the specifically Perennialist approach to Islam that underwrote the interpretations offered through the festival, including the most prominent texts by Burckhardt and by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the philosopher of Islamic science.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Grabar, 'What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?', *Art and Archaeology Research Papers*, 9, 1976, 1-3, reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 247.

⁸⁵ From Grabar, 'History of Art and History of Literature: Some Random Thoughts', reprinted in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, 14): 'A few recent exceptions by the Iranian architect Nader Ardalan and by the Swiss convert to Islam Titus Burckhardt have, in spite of considerable eloquence and many fascinating and cogent observations, fallen off the mark by over-emphasizing mystical esotericism or ethnically defined vernacular forms which cannot possibly have been sources of inspiration for centuries, and more importantly, which derive from judgments and interpretations of Islamic culture rather than from analysis of its monuments.'

⁸⁶ Gülru Necipoğlu, 'The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches', in Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum*, London: Saqi Books, 2012.

⁸⁷ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, tr. Peter Hobson, London: Islamic Festival Trust Ltd, 1976; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Science: an illustrated study*, London: World of Islam, 1976. As

Ironically, the timeless unity that Burckhardt asserted for Islamic art emerges from the same type of formal comparisons as those made by early Islamic art historians. 'Nobody,' he asserted, 'will deny the unity of Islamic art, either in time or space; it is far too evident.' Whereas art historians attributed this formal similarity to secular tropes of influence and political expression, Burckhardt took a precisely opposite route, attributing it instead to what he calls the 'intellectual vision' inherent in Islamic art which moves beyond scientific reason towards comprehension of the doctrine of divine unity.⁸⁸ Yet his interpretation of unity (*al-tawhid*) bears no relationship with the complex theological and philosophical discussions that not only underwrite the concept's history within Islamic mysticism, but also complicate its meaning into something that might better be termed unity within diversity, or a unity that comprehends diversity.⁸⁹

While the reduction of Islamic intellectual traditions to a pan-religious mysticism undermined the 1976 attempt to interpret Islamic art through religious meaning, this does not mean that all such attempts are similarly doomed. Indeed, some of Burckhardt's critiques of Islamic art historical practice – particularly the search for meaning in origins and in the authorial intent of elite patrons, rather than as ascribed through practice and through the integration of the visual world with discursive traditions as they emerge over time – suggest valid alternatives for the kinds of questions Islamic art historical practice might add to its repertoire, offering as it could a non-Eurocentric spectatorial position in the explication of material cultures of the Islamic world.⁹⁰

V. Integrating Islam into Islamic art: from scholarship to contemporary art

Islamic art history stands in a unique disciplinary position to complicate understandings of Islam. Rather than avoiding engagement with the diverse complexity of Islam, it could signal the mediation of historical cultures in the contemporary world. In contrast to the definition of religion projected from within the faith – which, like all ideologies, often erases its own historicity and specificity in the projection of absolute doctrinal truth – the very diversity of the material culture of the Islamic world, from its origins to the present, speaks eloquently of the diversity of Islamic culture and practice. Rather than situating this diversity in purely formal terms and concurrently underscoring the formal differences between

Ernst points out in his review of the relationship between Perennialism and Islamic studies, the Perennialist 'rejection of historicism poses a difficulty for most Islamicists, whether humanists or social scientists. If the premise of the Perennial Philosophy is conceded, then much of the apparatus of modern scholarship, admittedly a product of the Enlightenment, stands condemned'. (Ernst, 'Traditionalism, the Perennial Philosophy', 181.)

⁸⁸ Burckhardt, 'Perennial Values', 132.

⁸⁹ As Necipoğlu has observed, 'the attempt to explain the unity and variety of Islamic art through a combination of pan-Islamic and national character traits, either exalting or disparaging the artistic sensibilities of particular peoples, constitutes two sides of the same Orientalist coin'. Necipoğlu, 'The Concept of Islamic Art', n.p.; Roxburgh, 'After Munich', 376. On the term 'unity in diversity', see the article by Avinoam Shalem in the present volume.

⁹⁰ For example, Akkach, *Cosmology*, 2005; Pedram Khosronejad, ed., *Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Pious Devotion in Shi'i Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2011; and Christiane Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One: The Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, forthcoming.

the art of the Islamic world and that of the West, Islamic art history can offer a conceptual understanding of this difference that could ultimately challenge spectatorial assumptions about the nature of truth, perception, art, and culture. In doing so, the field can function in parallel with other fields of art history: not simply through periodization as suggested by Necipoğlu, but as a conceptual tradition on and against which contemporary cultural production can draw inspiration. Having traced the opposition between secular and religious meanings implicit in the historiography of Islamic art history, this concluding section looks to various sources and approaches that might provide the inspiration for an expanded understanding of the discipline.

The first step in this endeavour would be to revise the distinction between culture and religion and thereby reconsider the definition of Islam itself. Far from being circumscribed by doctrine, Islam, like any religion, informs and is informed by its own internal discourses, including both religious practice and cultural production.⁹¹ Thus Islam is not constituted solely in its 'fundamentals' and their doctrinal interpretations, but is enacted within cultural products that can alter how those fundamentals are understood within any given context.⁹²

Although regionally and historically variant, Islam nonetheless has a cohesive character that enables its identification – not as a fixed entity, but as a factor within a wide variety of contexts. The frequent repetition of tropes related to the visual across a wide range of what we might term 'genres' of Islamic texts – literary, historical, and religious – suggest a broad discursive realm in which ideas about representation circulated outside the doctrinal concerns of intellectuals well-versed in officially sanctioned Islamic theology.⁹³ Likewise, our contemporary inability to satisfactorily label medieval thinkers of the Islamic world, including Ibn 'Arabi, al-Ghazali, or Jami, as theologians, philosophers, or mystics suggests an interwoven

⁹¹ As Talal Asad has noted in his critique of Clifford Geertz's influential model of religion as a cultural system (which segregates religion as internalized faith from culture in a manner akin to the dominant models of Islamic art history outlined in this essay), religious and social phenomena inform one another as both change together across time, geography, and context. Talal Asad, 'Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz', *Man*, 18(2), 1983, 251.

⁹² For example, even though the text of the Qur'an remains stable, the mode of its reception changes in light not only of texts that explain it directly, as in *taswir*, but also through texts that reference it indirectly and implicitly. For example, while the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha appears in the Qur'an, its intertextual reading depends not only on the earlier Biblical reference, but on the theologian Jami's extrapolation of the short Qur'anic reference in his long poem. The artist Bihzad's interpolation of other poems in his painting of this subject underscores the intertextual reading of the visual product, which becomes in turn a mode of interpreting scripture (Barry, *Figurative art in medieval Islam*, 204-14). Such examples appear in everyday life as well: walking over a glass floor in the recently installed Weaponry Section at the Topkapı Palace Museum, the designer joked that I was clearly not possessed by the devil. It took me a moment to understand his reference to the Qur'anic story of Solomon and Bilqis, analyzed as expressive of Islamic aesthetics by Gonzalez; our environment in effect carried a religious meaning not because of its content, but because of a shared mode of viewing rooted in religious heritage. Thus a fixed reading of religion through the Qur'an as a foundational text becomes improbable; rather, it 'floats' within ever-changing intertextual interpretations. See also Akkach, 'Poetics of Concealment'.

⁹³ For example, consider the trope of the mirror as it becomes a conceptual device emerging from the Qur'an and Hadith, intertwined with Neoplatonism, and expressed in poetry by various authors for several centuries (Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Chicago: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004, 96). Such literary tropes may provide clues as to how people might have conceptualized visual experience within Islamic cultural discourse.

culture in which intellectual activity was not partitioned off between worldly and sacred spheres. Following Michel Foucault's argument that religious doctrine itself functions as discourse, Islam thus conceived is not a rigid historical, regional, cultural, or temporal construct, but a fluid discourse that weaves between such constructs, informs them, and is informed by them.⁹⁴ In a world in which the secularism thesis seems to have been a short-lived byproduct of twentieth-century modernism, Islam needs to be understood as a central informative parameter of pan-ethnic cultural production, not only in historical but also in modern contexts.⁹⁵

Indeed, a significant array of scholarly work in Islamic art history over the past two decades has foregrounded the textual analysis of philosophical/religious/interpretive meaning in Islamic visual culture. To cite a few important works: *The Topkapi Scroll* (1995) sees Necipoğlu analyze pattern through Islamic literature and philosophy; in *Prefacing the Image* (2001), David Roxburgh considers the idea of the image expressed in Dust Muhammad's introduction to an album compiled in sixteenth-century Iran; Michael Barry in *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam* (2005) examines the relationship between literature and theology in Islamic representation; in *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam* (2005), Akkach examines pre-modern visuality through a lucid explication of Islamic cosmology; and in *Wonder, Image and Cosmos in Medieval Islam* (2011), Persis Berlekamp considers the religious function of the image in Islam. Such works point to an important basis of knowledge through which new texts and hopefully also exhibitions for general audiences can, in future, produce a nuanced understanding of Islam as a complex and flexible intellectual discourse woven in and out of various temporal, geographical, cultural, and political contexts.

The expansion of this approach to include relatively introductory narratives, such as those provided in survey volumes and exhibitions, would serve to integrate the study of Islamic art into the field of art history not simply as a politically correct mode of multi-ethnic inclusion, but as part of the conceptual inquiry into the nature of art-historically pertinent issues like visuality, representation, mimesis, and materiality. In a historical perspective, the presentation of Islam as an intellectual field in which artistic expression is different from that of the West, but is nonetheless related through shared heritage, would provide recognition not simply of formal differences that alienate Islamic culture from European art forms, but also of the varied expression of shared religious and philosophical roots between Islam and the West. Far from foreign, Islamic culture – as a religious culture – is inseparable from its intercourse with the Greek philosophical and the Judeo-Christian religious legacies. These relationships emerge clearly in any discussion of its theological debates, and are reflected in artistic traditions. This is not to say that

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, 226.

⁹⁵ Converse to the argument proposed by Leaman, who proposes understanding Islamic philosophy as secular discourse rather than as solely religious because it is Islamic, the problem appears to lie in the ready separation of theology from what we, as modern subjects, conceive as separate disciplines such as art history, science, and so forth (Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics*, 2). Recent work on literary reception in various Islamic contexts may provide more detailed information on the construction of such discursive frames. For example, see Samir M. Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past*, Chicago: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010; Bert Fagner, *Die Persophonie: Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens*, Berlin: Klaus-Schwarz-Verlag, 1999.

every work by an artist from the Islamic world is necessarily bounded by the parameters of religion, but rather that in many contexts, Islam needs to be considered as an important intellectual source of meaning for artist and audience alike.

Similarly, rather than appending modern and contemporary art of the Islamic world as an incongruous addition to an aesthetically unified, historically-bounded field, the conceptualization of Islamic art through its intellectual rather than its formal framework would enable scholars to query the epistemically reinforced distinctions between modernity and tradition, or secularism and Islam. The common exclusion of arts after 1800 from Islamic art history is based on two assumptions. First, that a shift towards Western modalities of expression necessarily meant that new forms were serving the same functions that they performed in the West. And second, that the broader cultural phenomenon of Westernization/modernization, including official policies of secularization in Islamic countries, erased Islamic discourse among practitioners of non-traditional arts. This perception has been reinforced as younger generations, particularly in secular countries like Turkey, have had more limited access to the intellectual traditions of Islam. Broadly speaking, conservatives have tended towards revivalist understandings of religion and culture that precluded making arts associated with the West, while secularists often reconceptualized Islamic forms as national or traditional symbols with little access to their complex hermeneutic legacies.

Yet as Islam has encountered historical and historiographic change, modern intellectuals and artists in the Islamic world have often continued to engage with Islam – as religion, tradition, and discourse, even if artistic modalities changed. If, as implicitly proposed in the unwieldy name of the Association for the Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey, Islam is no longer a unifying factor in the modern and contemporary world, then why not look at non-Western art without these regional boundaries drawn along implicit religious lines? To what extent should we consider modern and contemporary Turkish art, for example, as segregated from that of the Balkans, or that of Pakistan from India, or Azerbaijan from Armenia, or Jordan from Israel, if not for differences that emerge through majority religious affiliations, some of which are expressed in shared iconographies, such as references to veiling?

By unmooring Islam from its fixity and addressing its negotiation with such phenomena as postcolonialism, secularism, and modernization, modern art of Muslim majority regions becomes more than a convenient appellation for the modern art of various nation-states. Rather, it could thus function as an acknowledgement that the arts of these areas, like other regions addressing postcolonial issues of cultural hegemony and adaptation, have indeed negotiated between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism. This should not imply that all arts of modernity in Islamic cultures are purely 'Islamic' in an essentialist or literally religious sense, but that if we think of Islamic art as an intellectual rather than a formal construct, then it becomes difficult to use simply formal parameters to delineate the point when the soul of Islam has conclusively departed the body of art.

Just as contemporary artists can establish a broader lexicon of practice through increased familiarity with the intellectual legacy of Islam, so too can Islamic art historians consider the diverse methodological possibilities that emerge from comparisons of the Islamic philosophical legacy with that of modern Western

philosophy (which underwrites much of contemporary art historical analysis). While stylistically outmoded, Henry Corbin's innovative reassessment of Islamic philosophy as having engaged in far more than simply preserving texts for European scholastics enabled him to examine similarities between the thought of the twelfth-century Islamic mystic Suhrawardi and Martin Heidegger.⁹⁶ In a more contemporary discursive mode, Ian Almond compares the thought of the thirteenth-century philosopher Ibn 'Arabi with that of Jacques Derrida.⁹⁷ With more direct interest in Islamic art, Valérie Gonzalez and Laura Marks have drawn extensive comparisons between Islamic aesthetics and post-structuralist thought which would bear further, and more nuanced, exploration.⁹⁸ Far from simply a formal resemblance, the philosophical similarities between Islamic philosophy and post-structuralism apparently emerge from shared philosophical roots. Thus methodologies rooted in post-structuralism, and refracted through Islamic philosophical lenses, might prove a more appropriate model than the Enlightenment-inspired positivist parameters that continue to dominate the scientific premises of Islamic art historical interpretation.

As art historians come to view the art of the rest, like the art of the West, as a complex interplay of intellectual as well as formal signs, they release new conceptual foundations through and against which contemporary artists can build meaning. Artists from regions associated with Islam, who often use a conceptual syntax of artistic traditions with a vocabulary of cultural signs first developed in the West, are already able, like all their global counterparts, to access alternative conceptual modes through which to play between form and ideas. The incorporation of the theoretical underpinnings of Islamic art history as an integral part of its study provides a wider intellectual substrate through and against which these and other artists of the contemporary global order can produce art. Adding to existing modes of Islamic art historical discourse by conceptualizing the theological and philosophical parameters of the Islamic tradition does not simply affect how we think of Islamic art as history or as art, but also raises key philosophical questions about the nature of form and representation pertinent to a wide range of contemporary art historical, cultural and artistic practices beyond the straightjacket of any cultural formation, be it geographical, Islamic, modern, or Western.

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⁹⁶ Hermann Landolt, 'Henry Corbin, 1903-1978: Between Philosophy and Orientalism', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 119(3), 1999, 484-90.

⁹⁷ Ian Almond, *Sufism and deconstruction: a comparative study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi*, London: Routledge, 2004.

⁹⁸ Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001; Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.