Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu and the formation of the field of Islamic art in the United States

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The historiography of Islamic art has been the topic of several recent publications. While these studies have outlined the biographies and contributions of some of the most important scholars, collectors, and dealers to shape the field, a more critical assessment of the contribution and impact of those figures is still needed. One of the names often mentioned in such discussions but never explored in depth is that of Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu (1896-1949) (figure 1). He was the first professor of Islamic art in the United States and the founder and editor of *Ars Islamica* (published 1934-51), the first academic journal dedicated solely to the history of Islamic art. His contributions to the field, however, extend far beyond these two significant accomplishments. During his twenty years in the United States (1929-49) Ağa-Oğlu was a pioneer, establishing Islamic art history as an academic discipline through his work as a scholar, teacher, curator, and editor. This article will first discuss Ağa-Oğlu’s early life and training, and his career in the United States, followed by an account of his major unpublished work, the *Corpus of Islamic Metalwork*, which is housed today in the archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, in Washington DC.

Figure 1. Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu, University of Michigan Faculty and Staff Portrait Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.


Early career and the Detroit Institute of Arts

Born to Turkish parents in 1896 in Yerevan, Armenia, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu received his early education at the Classical Russian Gymnasium. From 1912 to 1916 he studied history, philosophy, and languages at the Oriental department of the University of Moscow and graduated with a degree of Doctor of Letters. By that time Ağa-Oğlu had already developed a strong interest in the arts of Islam and he spent the next five years travelling to Central Asia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia. In 1921 he resumed his studies at Istanbul University, where he met Halil Edhem Eldem (1861-1938), scholar and deputy director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum in Istanbul, who was to be instrumental in Ağa-Oğlu’s career in the museums of Turkey. Together, they sketched a formative programme for Ağa-Oğlu to spend the following four years in Germany and Austria, where he would study with the founding figures of the field. As a result, in 1922 Ağa-Oğlu went to Berlin and studied Near Eastern art and archaeology with Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948) and Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933). At the University of Jena he also worked on classical and early Christian archaeology and Western art and aesthetics. From 1924 to 1926 Ağa-Oğlu studied under Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941) at the University of Vienna, where he obtained his doctoral degree in Turkish architecture. Upon his return to Turkey in 1927, Ağa-Oğlu first served as the curator of the Çinili Kiosk in the precinct of the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul. He then became the acting director of the Evkaf Museum, while simultaneously holding a position at the University of Istanbul as professor of Islamic Art.

3 Halil Edhem Eldem was a pioneer in Islamic art history and archaeology in Turkey who specialized in Islamic numismatics and inscriptions in Turkish and Arabic. He had collaborated with Max van Berchem on the Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum (1894 onwards). He also served as the deputy director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum in Istanbul from 1910 to 1931, succeeding his elder brother Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910), the prominent intellectual, archaeologist and painter, in the role. For more information, see L.A. Mayer, ‘In Memoriam: Halil Edhem Eldem (1861-1938)’, Ars Islamica, 6(2), 1939, 198-201; Stephen Vernoit, ‘Islamic Art and Architecture 1850-1950’, in Vernoit, Discovering Islamic Art, 26.


5 The establishment of Islamic art museum collections as such in the Ottoman Empire dates back to the late nineteenth century and coincides with the emergence of parallel collections in Europe. Due to the acquisitive European interest in both classical antiquities and Islamic art objects, the Ottoman state took precautions to safeguard material national heritage from looting, by moving important objects from provincial religious sites to Istanbul. The Islamic collection was stored in the Imperial Museum, thus becoming the first collection of Islamic Art of the Ottoman Empire, and was exhibited in the Çinili Kiosk. In 1914 the Evkaf Museum, or the Museum of Islamic Foundations, was established in the Süleymaniye complex to house the Islamic art collections of the Empire, and in 1925 this collection took its current name, the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts. For more information see Nazan Ölçer, ‘The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts’, in Ahmet Erçuğ et al., In Pursuit of Excellence: Works of Art from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul: Ahmet Erçuğ, 1994, vii-xxviii; Wendy Shaw, Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Ottoman Empire, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

The North American chapter of Ağa-Oğlu’s life began at the end of the decade. In 1929, he was asked to serve as the first curator of Near Eastern art at the Detroit Institute of Arts, which position he accepted. Other than Maurice S. Dimand (1892-1986), who had begun working at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1923, and Rudolf Meyer Riefstahl (1880-1936), who had arrived in the USA in 1915 and was appointed professor at New York University in 1924, Ağa-Oğlu was the only trained specialist in Islamic art in the United States. He seemed to have been ideally suited for the position. The end of the nineteenth century had seen the emergence of Islamic art history and archaeology as an academic discipline in Europe, with Germany and Austria as the major centres. Scholars such as Max van Berchem (1863-1921), Friedrich Sarre (1865-1945), and Herzfeld had shaped the emerging field and Ağa-Oğlu was a product of the same German-speaking school, thus situating him at the vanguard of the emerging field. Like other early European scholars of Islamic art, Ağa-Oğlu also had a background in philology, an essential qualification for Orientalist intellectuals. From infancy he spoke Turkish, Persian, and Russian; he went on to learn Arabic, English, German, French, Greek, and Latin. Ağa-Oğlu also had direct experience of Islamic cultures, which set him quite apart from most of his European contemporaries. In addition to his extensive travels in the region, his curatorial position in Turkey had given him unprecedented access to the collections in the newly-formed Turkish Republic.

In the 1920s the Detroit Institute of Arts was a small municipal museum with a collection of mostly European and American Art, until the appointment of William R. Valentiner changed the face of the institution. A German art historian, Valentiner served as director from 1924 to 1945 and his tenure is regarded a golden era in the history of the Detroit Institute, and one which gave the museum’s collection its encyclopaedic character. Among the many experts whom Valentiner invited to build a world-class collection, in the model of a universal survey museum, was Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu. He was appointed curator from 1929 to 1938, and from 1933 to 1938 he simultaneously held a teaching position at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

At the time of Ağa-Oğlu’s arrival the only works from the Middle East held in the Detroit Institute were ‘a number of antiquities from legally excavated sites’, which the museum had received through subscribing to the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1889, and some 10,000 objects, or rather ‘curiosities’, donated by Frederick K. Stearns in 1890. A pharmaceutical manufacturer in Detroit, Stearns had travelled to Egypt and the Far East and returned with mummies, coffins, amulets, and mosaic fragments galore. Although extensive, his gift was regarded by the museum as a

10 Richard Ettinghausen, ‘In Memoriam: Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948)’, Ars Islamica, 35-6, 1951, 263.
14 Peck, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 40.
means ‘to fill the space’ as there was not as yet a ‘complete agreement on the mission’ of the museum with regards to its collections. 15

In order to bring attention to the arts of the Islamic world, Ağa-Oğlu organized an exhibition entitled A Loan Exhibition of Mohammedan Decorative Arts, held at the Detroit Institute from October to November 1930. 16 The exhibition included manuscripts, ceramics, glass, metalwork, ivory, wood, stucco, and textiles, including some that were unpublished and others that had never been exhibited in the USA, sourced from private collectors and dealers such as Georges Demotte, Hagop Kevorkian, Parish-Watson and Company, and the Duveen Brothers, to name but a few. On 1 November 1930 The Art Digest called it ‘the first exhibition in this country to assemble all branches of Islamic art into a single comprehensive group’. 17 Running concurrently with the exhibition, the Institute also organized an installation of photographs of the architectural monuments of India, Iran, Central Asia, Turkey, and Egypt and a further exhibition dedicated to the Detroit Institute’s own collection of Islamic textile fragments from the eleventh to twelfth centuries. 18

The exhibition was accompanied by a select catalogue which lists 171 objects, but The Art Digest review mentions that the Demotte loans alone numbered 222 paintings, in addition to a further fifty pieces from other private collections representing ‘Islamic miniature painting in all its schools’. The total number of pieces included in the exhibition is not known, but must have been considerable. 19 Ağa-Oğlu’s exhibition, held only one year after his arrival, represents one of the first and largest of its kind in the United States. To achieve this he must have familiarized himself in a remarkably short period with the available collections in the United States, and enjoyed strong relationships that were forged extraordinarily quickly with other institutions, collectors, and dealers. The Detroit exhibition is even more historically significant as it preceded the International Exhibition of Persian Art held in 1931 at Burlington House in London. Ağa-Oğlu must have arranged the timing of the Detroit Institute exhibition accordingly, for he was also a member of the selection committee for the London exhibition. 20 The arrangement actually brought with it additional benefits for the Institute: works intended for Burlington House came to Detroit first, and the Institute also lent six works to London. The New York Times proudly announced ‘Americans lend treasures of art,’ and named the Detroit Institute – among other institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Fogg Museum of Harvard – as major lenders to the Burlington House exhibition. 21

The 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art was another landmark in Ağa-Oğlu’s career. At the accompanying symposium he announced a discovery concerning the preface to the Bahram Mirza Album in the Topkapı Palace Museum,

15 Peck, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 41.
16 Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu, Catalogue of A Loan Exhibition of Mohammedan Decorative Arts, Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1930.
17 ‘Detroit Museum Shows Precious Art of Islam’, The Art Digest, 5, 1 November 1930, 11.
which had not been translated before. Characterized as ‘a discovery which some believe will alter the study of Persian art’, the preface was, in fact, a history of Persian painting written in Persian in 1544 by Dust Muhammad, a document that would form the cornerstone of countless subsequent studies of Persian manuscript painting.  

Although both *The New York Times* and the authors of the seminal monograph *Persian Miniature Painting* (1933) reported that Ağa-Oğlu was planning to publish the preface, he did not complete this project.  

Ağa-Oğlu’s 1930 exhibition played a critical role in the growth of the Islamic collections at the Detroit Institute. Some of the loaned objects were acquired for the permanent collection, and the Institute continued to acquire Islamic works through purchases and gifts. In the early 1930s, however, the Depression took its toll on Detroit. The annual report of 1930 announced that the budget for the museum had diminished from $454,175 in 1929 to $227,290 in 1930, a drop of almost fifty percent. During the same year, only twelve objects were purchased and four were gifted, including two bookbindings donated by Ağa-Oğlu himself.  

1931 seems to have been a better year: in this period the Institute acquired fifteen pieces of Iranian metalwork, dating from eighth to the fourteenth centuries, and twenty-four ceramic objects from Iran. With the steady growth of the collections, additional gallery space was also allotted to Islamic arts in 1931.  

During his tenure at the Detroit Institute, Ağa-Oğlu used the *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit* to publish recent acquisitions of Islamic art. Between 1929 and 1938 he contributed thirteen articles to the *Bulletin*, while during the same period Adele Coulin Weibel published articles on Islamic textiles, thus giving greater prominence to the Institute’s Islamic art collections. Ağa-Oğlu and Weibel also organized regular public lectures on the arts of Islam and invited renowned specialists such as Sir E. Denison Ross, the director of the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London, who spoke on ‘Persian poetry in relation to Persian miniatures’ in December 1931.  

**Professorship at the University of Michigan 1933-1938**  
The continuous economic stricures of the early 1930s led to the abandonment of the publication of the *Bulletin* in May 1932. When publication resumed in October 1934 the *Bulletin* announced that, in order to safeguard the positions of its staff, the  

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24 The *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit* of February 1931 mentions that three pieces remained in the museum’s permanent collection after the *Mohammedan Decorative Arts* exhibition. One such example is a fourteenth-century Syrian bottle, formerly in the Spitzer collection in Vienna. For more information on these pieces see *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit*, December 1930 and February 1931, as well as Ağa-Oğlu, ‘Important Glass Bottle of the Fourteenth Century’, and ‘A Rhages Bowl with a Representation of an Historical Legend’, *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit*, December 1930, 25-7 and 31-2 respectively.  
25 *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit*, February 1931, 46, 58, 60.  
Institute had decided to implement a plan proposed by Valentiner and had sent both Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu and Benjamin March (curator of Far Eastern Art) to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, to serve as professors of Islamic art and Far Eastern art respectively.28 Thus, Ağa-Oğlu and March each came to hold a dual position at both the Detroit Institute and the University of Michigan, starting from the beginning of the academic year in 1933 and lasting until the former resigned from the University on 30 June 1938 and the latter died in December 1934.

This plan coincided with the University of Michigan’s receipt of a grant of $20,000 given annually for a period of five years, from 1928 onwards, by the Carnegie Corporation. This grant was intended for the promotion of education in the history of fine arts. While a division of Fine Arts was established at the University of Michigan in 1929, graduate work in Asian art history was only introduced to the University with the appointments of Ağa-Oğlu and March to the faculty.29 Thus, the University of Michigan became ‘the first institution in the United States to establish a chair of the history of Islamic art and to have a special unit devoted to its study’.30 Titled ‘The Research Seminary in Islamic Art’, the unit had an ambitious programme which included lectures and seminars in addition to publication and research activities. Ağa-Oğlu oversaw the programme with the help of Isabel Hubbard, an assistant curator at the University of Michigan.31

The Research Seminary in Islamic Art was probably initially seen as an experimental programme, and Ağa-Oğlu’s title at the University of Michigan was, at first, ‘Freer Fellow and Lecturer of Oriental Art’.32 The proposed plan for the first two years, from 1933 to 1935, was to develop a curriculum particularly ‘designed for advanced students who were interested in future museum work or in teaching’, but it was also to offer ‘a unique opportunity for students of fine arts and Oriental civilizations to round out their programs of study’. General courses were drawn up, including ‘the history of Islamic architecture and the decorative arts such as carpets, pottery, and glass’.33 As this model was still operating successfully two years after its initial implementation, in May 1935 the Research Seminary was recognized as a part of the division of Fine Arts by the University of Michigan’s board of regents.

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28 ‘Staff Changes’, Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit, October 1934, 14; Peck, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 193.
31 Hubbard Haight, ‘The Research Seminary’.
32 In his will of 1918, Charles Lang Freer, while bequeathing his private collection to the American nation, which would become the Freer Gallery of Art, also reserved a special fund to be given to the regents of the University of Michigan to be used for scholarly work for the advancement of knowledge and appreciation of ‘Oriental’ art through research and publications. The Freer Fund was first used by the University of Michigan for the appointment of Ağa-Oğlu and March as research fellows. The fund, which was used from 1934 for the support of the publication of Ars Islamica (1934-51), would bring the Freer Gallery of Art and the University of Michigan together for a joint project that still continues: the publication of the journal Ars Orientalis (1954-present), the successor of Ars Islamica. For more information, see John A. Pope, ‘The Freer Gallery of Art’, Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C., 69-70, 1969/1970, 380-98; President’s Report to the Board of Regents for the academic year 1932-1933, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1933, 167.
33 Hubbard Haight, ‘The Research Seminary’.
Under this new arrangement, Ağa-Oğlu was promoted to the position of Associate Professor of the history of Islamic art.\footnote{Hubbard Haight, ‘The Research Seminary’.} In his first semester, Ağa-Oğlu taught a survey course entitled ‘Introduction to the History of Islamic Art’, in which six graduate students, whose identities are not known, enrolled, along with one senior student and several visitors. University records indicate that interest in the field increased gradually, and by the 1936-7 academic year the Research Seminary offered five lecture courses and five seminars with a series of eight lectures by ‘the members of the faculty in their own special fields of Near Eastern culture’.\footnote{Hubbard Haight, ‘The Research Seminary’.} In 1940 there were twenty-two students, and the first PhD degree was conferred that year.\footnote{Hubbard Haight, ‘The Research Seminary’.} By that time, however, Ağa-Oğlu had resigned from his post and had been succeeded by Richard Ettinghausen, who probably supervised the work of the programme’s first PhD candidate. Still, it was Ağa-Oğlu who had succeeded in establishing the programme within five years of his arrival on the faculty and who had transformed the Research Seminary into the premier programme in the USA for training Islamic art historians.\footnote{As early as 1935 the Research Seminary was elected as an honorary member to the Institut d’archéologie et d’histoire de l’art – a branch of the Institut international de coopération intellectuelle – giving proof of the recognition it received in those years. Hubbard Haight, ‘the Research Seminary’.}

The partnership of the Detroit Institute and the Research Seminary at the University of Michigan is of particular note for the field of Islamic art history, since both institutions shared a ‘common policy of developing the study of Near Eastern Art’.\footnote{Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit, 15(5), February 1936, 64.} The collection of the Detroit Institute provided the material for both teaching and research at the University. In the academic year of 1934-5, a university extension course on Islamic art was delivered at the museum, and the exhibition Persian Miniatures – held at the Institute in the spring of 1936 – complemented the coursework of the Research Seminary.\footnote{Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit, 15(5), February 1936, 64.} University records also mention that the Research Seminary organized a loan exhibition of Islamic art in the Alumni Memorial Hall of the University in the academic year of 1935-6, in addition to a number of smaller exhibitions drawn from the University’s own collections of Islamic woodwork, and Islamic and Coptic textiles and pottery.\footnote{The President’s Report to the Board of Regents for the academic year 1935-1936, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1936, 244; Hubbard Haight, ‘The Research Seminary’.}
Another of Ağa-Oğlu’s far-reaching initiatives, implemented while he was still at Ann Arbor, was *Ars Islamica*. First published in January 1934, *Ars Islamica* was the first and only journal dedicated to the study of Islamic art history at that time. The first issue was ‘a joint enterprise’ of the Detroit Institute and the University, but with the second issue the University took up full responsibility for publication.\(^{41}\)

Ağa-Oğlu served as the editor of the journal from 1934 until 1937. The first issue announced that the journal’s principal aim was ‘to promote an interest in the study of Islamic art’, by creating an academic arena for the discussion of various problems concerning the historical and artistic development of the arts and crafts in Islamic countries. The magazine, it may be noted, will take a neutral position and will not represent or support any one point of view. Its pages will be open to comments on problematic questions interpreted from contrasted points of view, since the publishers are of the opinion that only by following this policy can the magazine be of service in advancing its cause.\(^{42}\)

This special emphasis on the journal’s desire to draw upon and bring together diverse points-of-view on the field is particularly significant when one considers that the early twentieth century was a time when there certainly were lively debates surrounding the nature of Islamic art.\(^{43}\)

Within a short time, *Ars Islamica* had accomplished its aim and was recognized as a serious academic endeavour, both in the USA and elsewhere. Already in 1935 *The Bulletin of the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology* wrote that ‘[Ars Islamica] has set for itself an ambitious program and a high standard … it is handsomely printed and the illustrations are of excellent quality. It will bear favorable comparison with any journal of art published anywhere and it is a satisfaction to see America taking an active part in Near Eastern studies.’\(^{44}\) Other publications, including *Artibus Asiae*, *The New York Times*, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, and *Bulletin de l’Office international des instituts d’archéologie et d’histoire de l’art*, also praised *Ars Islamica*’s contribution to the field in those years.\(^{45}\)

The University of Michigan was especially keen to underscore the journal’s international scope and diversity. A report on the University’s activities mentions the special edition of *Ars Islamica* which was produced on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the University of Michigan in 1937 and included thirty-five articles, among which fourteen were from American scholars and the rest were by scholars representing thirteen different countries.\(^{46}\) The make-up of the consultative committee of the journal also echoed this international approach, for it naturally included many prominent scholars based both in the United States and outside North America, such as Dimand, Edhem Eldem, Herzfeld, Riefstahl, Sarre,

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\(^{41}\) *The President’s Report to the Board of Regents for the academic year 1933-1934*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1934, 250.


\(^{43}\) Blair and Bloom, ‘The Mirage of Islamic Art’, 155.

\(^{44}\) Quoted in *The President’s Report 1935-1936*, 243.

\(^{45}\) Cited in *The President’s Report 1933-1936*, 243-4.

\(^{46}\) *The President’s Report to the Board of Regents for the academic year 1936-1937*, Ann Arbor, MI: 1937, 285.
Strzygowski, Laurence Binyon, Albert Gabriel, Ernst Kühnel, and Gaston Wiet. Scholars from other related fields were also invited to serve on the consultative committee: these included John G. Winter, professor of Latin and head of the division of Fine Arts at University of Michigan; Alexander G. Ruthven, professor of zoology and president of the University; Ananda Coomaraswamy, the prominent scholar of Indian art; John E. Lodge, expert on Japanese and Chinese art and director of the Freer Gallery; and William Valentiner, expert on Dutch art and director of the Detroit Institute.

In the mid-1930s the University of Michigan began to diversify its student body. While introducing new regional studies to its curriculum, it also aimed to attract international students to the United States. Following the success of the Barbour scholarships established by Levi L. Barbour in 1917, which offered stipends to students from Far Eastern countries, attention turned to the Middle East. In his 1935-6 report, Raleigh Nelson, the Dean of Students at the University of Michigan, emphasized the importance of having a diverse student body in Michigan and praised Ağa-Oğlu’s instrumental role in arranging scholarships with Middle Eastern governments.

As a result of a visit to Persia by Dr. Mehmet Ağaoğlu of the Division of Fine Arts, the Regents provided additional scholarships as follows: The Board established two tuition scholarships, in the field of fine arts, for each of the following countries: Persia, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt, with the understanding that there shall be no more than two scholars from each country in any one year and that the scholarship shall be available to undergraduates only. It is understood that the governments of these countries will send specially qualified students.

It was in 1934, on the occasion of the millennium of the poet Firdawsi’s birth, that Ağaoğlu represented both the University of Michigan and the Detroit Institute at the celebrations in Tehran, and presented the paper ‘About a manuscript of Nizami’s Khusraw wa Shirin in the Freer Gallery in Washington’ at the International Congress of Orientalists. During the trip, which lasted from August to November 1934, Ağaoğlu also travelled extensively in Iran and the surrounding region and visited the University’s excavation sites in Seleucia and Karanis. His lengthy trip included the following locations: Jaffa, Jerusalem, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Kirmanshah, Hamadan, Qazvin, Tehran, Nishapur, Mashhad, Tus, Qom, Isfahan, Persepolis, Shiraz, Bushehr, Cairo and Karanis. It was also at this time that the University of Michigan offered two full-tuition scholarships to the Society for the Preservation of National Monuments of Iran. The importance of this agreement cannot be overemphasized, for it laid the foundations for future collaborations.

48 President’s Report to the Board of Regents for the academic year 1934-1935, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1935, 12.
between the University of Michigan and fellow academic institutions in the Middle East, in this case Iran.

The following year Ağa-Oğlu published *Persian Bookbindings of the Fifteenth Century*, becoming the first author in a new series of works published by the division of Fine Arts at the University of Michigan.51 His publication was met with great enthusiasm and scholarly reviews appeared in German, French, Turkish, and English art historical journals.52 Reviewers agreed on the significance of this publication, one of the first works published on this important subject. Only two earlier studies on Islamic bookbinding had been published and neither of these included examples from fifteenth-century Iran.53 Furthermore, Ağa-Oğlu’s study focused on the collections of the Istanbul museums, which were largely unknown to scholars at the time, and thus brought the material in Istanbul to public attention through new and original scholarship.

The preliminary research for Ağa-Oğlu’s second book, *Safawid Rugs and Textiles: The Collection of the Shrine of Imam ʿAli at Al-Najaf* (1941), was conducted during his extensive travels of 1934.54 As access to the shrine was prohibited to non-Muslims, Ağa-Oğlu was the first Islamic art historian to visit it; he was granted permission to study and photograph its collections for a full week.55 The book was published in 1941 and received the American Institute of Graphic Arts’ Fifty Books of the Year Award for its artistic and technical excellence. The winning group of fifty titles were selected from 631 entries submitted to the competition, and were exhibited at the New York Public Library.56

Before his resignation from the University of Michigan and the Detroit Institute, Ağa-Oğlu was involved in one more major Islamic art exhibition, held at the M.H. De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco.57 This exhibition of Islamic art in 1937 brought together 266 works from eighteen public and twenty-nine private collections in the United States and Europe. Ağa-Oğlu was invited by Walter Heil (figure 2), who had left the Detroit Institute to become director of the De Young Museum,58 to organize the exhibition. As the first of its kind on the west coast of the USA, the exhibition received unanimous praise for its assemblage of such a diverse group of objects. According to the March 1937 *Art Digest*,

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The De Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, known to visitors for several decades as a musty mausoleum of stuffed animals, ‘buckeye’ paintings and dusty Americana, has through the efforts of Dr. Walter Heil, the director, undergone a metamorphosis. WPA construction work on two big wings of the museum building has now been completed and the modernized galleries have just been officially opened with an imposing loan exhibition of Islamic – or in popular parlance Mohammedan – art.59

This statement is very significant, for it also works as a metaphor for the career of Ağa-Oğlu in the United States. From 1929 to 1938 he brought his knowledge and expertise to a perhaps unlikely place in the United States, an institution which showed an academic interest in Islamic art history yet neither had the collections nor the experience to carry out such an undertaking. Ağa-Oğlu played a major role not only in raising an interest in Islamic art but also in strengthening the reputation of both the Detroit Institute and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor by supporting this burgeoning field. In an article outlining the De Young Exhibition, Ağa-Oğlu describes the field of Islamic art and his personal aims for it as follows:

At the present time Islamic art is one of the least considered if not practically neglected chapters in art history. Its study is not fully appreciated by many college art departments while museums, with a few exceptions, do not have a systematic collection of its monuments. Consequently the general public still considers the art of the Islamic countries of minor significance in comparison with the arts of Western Europe or Eastern Asia … the exhibition [at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum] is the first of its kind ever held in the western part of this country and it is hoped that it will create a true understanding of one of the most profound artistic achievements in the cultural history of the old world. Thus the principal motive in presenting this exhibition is educational rather than for scholarly research.60

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On 30 June 1938 Ağa-Oğlu resigned from his post at the University.\textsuperscript{61} Although he remained on the staff list of the Detroit Institute as honorary curator of Near Eastern art for the following few months, by the end of 1938 he was no longer associated with any institution. The exact reasons for his sudden resignation and retreat into semi-obscurity until 1948, when he was hired by the Textile Museum in Washington DC, are unknown and constitute a fascinating puzzle.

**Final years and the *Corpus of Islamic Metalwork, 1938-1949***

During this ten-year hiatus Ağa-Oğlu published several articles as well as his book on the Najaf collections. However, according to obituaries written by Weibel (curator of textiles at the Detroit Institute) and Maurice S. Dimand (curator at the Metropolitan Museum in New York), for much of this period he was devoting himself to the *Corpus of Islamic Metalwork*, a twelve-volume work that was never to be completed.\textsuperscript{62} Ağa-Oğlu’s notes for this project are, today, housed at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, in Washington DC. Stored in seven boxes, Ağa-Oğlu’s loose-leaf notes comprise his manuscript of the first part of the first volume – which was the only completed section at the time of his death – as well as the object entries and reference notes for the remaining volumes and unsorted photographs of Islamic metalwork, textiles and paintings, in addition to mine maps of the Middle East that he created specifically for the *Corpus*.\textsuperscript{63}

With this extraordinarily ambitious project, Ağa-Oğlu aimed to bring together the metalwork of the Islamic world from the seventh to the eighteenth centuries and to cover the vast geography of Islamic lands, from India to Spain. The study was also to include sections on the metalwork of the pre-Islamic period, and Venetian metalwork influenced by the arts of Islam.\textsuperscript{64} In the ‘Memorandum on the “Corpus of Islamic Metalwork”’, posthumously published in *Ars Islamica* in 1951, Ağa-Oğlu provided an outline for each of the twelve volumes, along with a description of the overall scope of the work, which was to cover ‘geographical, historical, social, economic, metallurgical, technological, terminological, epigraphic, iconographic, and stylistic aspects of metalwork’, treating these ‘in broad relation to other branches of Islamic decorative arts, as well as to Near Eastern art in general’.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{61} ‘Appendix I: Changes in the Staff 1937-38’, *President’s Report to the Board of Regents for the academic year 1937-1938*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 368.


\textsuperscript{63} Ağa-Oğlu’s notes on the *Corpus of Islamic Metalwork* are stored in three boxes, numbered 1, 2 and 3; the fourth and fifth boxes are unsorted photographs of Islamic artworks. The sixth box contains the maps which Ağa-Oğlu created to indicate the location of the metal mines in the Middle East, and the seventh contains the full text of the first part of the first volume of the *Corpus of Islamic Metalwork*.

Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu’s papers have been archived in the order in which Ağa-Oğlu left them. In a letter to Dr. John Pope (then the acting director of the Freer Gallery of Art) dated 2 November 1959, Dorothy Ağa-Oğlu, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu’s widow, writes that ‘I have never gone over it, since there was very little I could have done about re-arranging it anyway, so all the material is just as he [Ağa-Oğlu] left it.’ Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Papers Accession Folder, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives.

\textsuperscript{64} Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu, ‘Memorandum on the “Corpus of Islamic Metalwork”’, *Ars Islamica*, 15/16, 1951, 133-5.

\textsuperscript{65} Ağa-Oğlu, ‘Memorandum on the Corpus’, 133.
In the foreword (figure 3) to the first part of the first volume, ‘Introduction to the History of Metalwork,’ Ağa-Oğlu describes his motivations for this remarkably ambitious undertaking:

After almost a century of preliminary research work in the field of Islamic art, the time is ripe for the students to pass from generalities into specific considerations of various branches of the artistic creation of Islamic people, and devote their interests in presenting monographic works dealing with respective subjects not only as descriptive catalogues but rather based on broader scope by considering geographical, historical, social, economic, technical and stylistic aspects of the development.66

The full text of this first section of the Corpus is a historical survey of mines and modern observations, the trade in raw metals, precious and base metals, alloys, technical processes and their terminology, and a glossary of metal objects in medieval Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.67 In this sole completed section, Ağa-Oğlu presents the material he gathered from ‘the Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Armenian, Chinese, Greek, Latin, and other Western historical, geographical, scientific, and linguistic source material of the fourth to the seventeenth centuries.’68 At the time, this was indeed a new and highly original approach to the subject. As Ağa-Oğlu rightly points out, literary sources had not been adequately integrated into earlier art historical research in Islamic art history, and the Corpus was his means of rectifying this.69 Apparently, the amount of information he had gathered from these sources exceeded his expectations and therefore he decided to dedicate a volume to the findings:

Islamic art has hitherto been elaborated upon, with minor exceptions, without any considerations of literary sources … The material extracted from literary works is of such importance and scope that I am induced to begin the publication of the Corpus with an introductory volume (in two parts) in which this material will be presented and discussed.70

The second section of the first volume of the Corpus, where Ağa-Oğlu was planning to give historical accounts of the pre-Islamic and Islamic metalwork from the fourth to the seventeenth centuries, was not completed. Ağa-Oğlu’s notes on this section list all the authors whose works he wished to include in this part of the study. Since his notes are composed of references from the listed authors without

66 Box 1, folder: volume I, part 1D (some folders are titled part 1A, 1B etc), ‘Alloys, Their Terminology and Metallurgy’.
67 Box 1 contains the drafts and notes for this section, and the final draft of the manuscript is stored in box 7.
68 Ağa-Oğlu, ‘Memorandum on the Corpus’, 133.
69 Ağa-Oğlu first discussed the importance of literary sources for research in Islamic art history at the Princeton University Bicentennial Conference on Near Eastern Culture and Society in 1947. He stated that ‘one of the most negative aspects of our studies is that the immense body of literary sources, with very few exceptions, has not been fully utilized.’ Ağa-Oğlu, ‘Remarks on the Character of Islamic Art’, The Art Bulletin, 36, September 1954, 175.
70 Ağa-Oğlu, ‘Memorandum on the Corpus’, 133.
any outlines or drafts of essays, it is difficult to assess in what capacity he was going to use this information.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{71} Box 1, folders: volume I, part 2A; part 2B; part 2C; part 2D; part 2E; part 2F; part 2G and part 2H.
Volumes two to eleven were intended to be a comprehensive catalogue of objects, with photographs and line drawings, each dedicated to a different period and dynasty with a preface, historical introduction and bibliography. These volumes were to be entitled ‘Metalwork of Sasanian Iran’; ‘Early Turkish Metalwork’; ‘Early Islamic Metalwork’; ‘Metalwork of the Seljuk Period in Iran, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Syria’; ‘Metalwork of the Mamluk Period in Syria and Egypt and of the Rasulids of Yemen’; ‘Metalwork of the Golden Horde’; ‘Iranian Metalwork of the Ilkhanid, Timurid and Safavid Periods’; ‘Turkish Metalwork of the Fourteenth through the Seventeenth Centuries’; ‘Metalwork of the Maghrib, Islamic Spain and Sicily’; and ‘Metalwork of Islamic India’ respectively.

The projected twelfth volume, which Ağa-Oğlu termed the ‘Systemic Catalogue of Metalwork from all Islamic Countries and Centuries’, would probably have brought together all of the thematic threads and object types covered under different regions and periods in the preceding volumes to give a broader synthetic history of Islamic metalwork. For this volume, Ağa-Oğlu organized his notes according to types, and they are categorized as follows: architectural metals (doors and gates); arms and armour; basins; bottles; pitchers; bowls; cups; boxes; buckets; cauldrons; candlesticks; coins; dishes; ewers; inkwells; jewellery; lamps; lanterns; chandeliers; dated metals; mirrors; miscellaneous (door plaques, door knockers, keys, padlocks, window gratings, appliqués, buckles, braziers, suspension ‘eggs’, drums, bells, spoons, and weights); mortars; pen boxes; plates; stands; trays; vases; astronomical material; and paleographical material. Each folder includes catalogue entries on individual objects from various collections around the world (figures 4, 5, 6), at times accompanied by ‘line drawings for the purpose of comparative and iconographic studies’. These entries illustrate Ağa-Oğlu’s methodology: he was not merely listing the objects, but was also interested in their taxonomy and stylistic similarities and/or differences.

One further subject that Ağa-Oğlu researched for the Corpus but did not include in his outline in the ‘Memorandum’ was a list of Islamic metalworkers: his notes include a long chronology of identified figures, whose names he must have gathered through his epigraphic studies of the objects (figure 7).

For the Corpus, Ağa-Oğlu was planning to cover all known metal objects from the Islamic world and had made a list of the collections in which these were located: sixty-three museums, thirty-six private collections and eleven dealers from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States; and twelve religious institutions in Europe and the Middle East. The unprecedented scope of this project and the author’s deep knowledge of the field are emphatically evident in the sheer scale of

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72 This is how Ağa-Oğlu outlined the project in ‘Memorandum on the Corpus’, 134-5. In fact, Ağa-Oğlu’s notes in the archives of the Freer/Sackler Galleries only contain folders devoted to the following categories: ‘Metalwork of Sasanian Iran’; ‘Early Turkish Metalwork’; ‘Metalwork of the Mamluk Period in Syria and Egypt and of the Rasulids of Yemen’; ‘Metalwork of the Golden Horde’; ‘Turkish Metalwork of the Fourteenth through the Seventeenth Centuries’; and ‘Metalwork of the Maghrib, Islamic Spain and Sicily’. Thus, ‘Early Islamic Metalwork’, ‘Metalwork of the Seljuk Period in Iran, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Syria’, ‘Iranian Metalwork of the Ilkhanid, Timurid and Safavid Periods’ and ‘Metalwork of Islamic India’ had not been realized at the time of his death.


74 Related folders are stored in boxes 2 and 3.

75 Ağa-Oğlu, ‘Memorandum on the Corpus’, 133.

76 Box 3, folder: ‘Artists’.
this data-gathering.\textsuperscript{77} The Corpus was an astonishingly ambitious undertaking in its stylistic, historical, geographic range and scope, and it is interesting to note that such a study has never been attempted since. Had it been completed, it would have represented a groundbreaking contribution to the study of Islamic art. Information on Ağa-Oğlu’s life and career from the years 1938 to 1947 is scant but his correspondence with George Hewitt Myers, the founder of the Textile Museum in Washington DC, offers a glimpse into his final years. Following Myers’ invitation, Ağa-Oğlu enthusiastically accepted the position of carpet consultant at the Textile Museum, effective 1 February 1948, suggesting that he was eager to return to the museum world.\textsuperscript{78} At the Textile Museum he was responsible from writing a catalogue on carpets in the collection, as well as organizing an exhibition on the so-called ‘Dragon carpet’ group.\textsuperscript{79} Held from 18 October to 19 November 1948, that exhibition drew on the holdings of American public and private collections. Myers’ initial offer to Ağa-Oğlu was a temporary post of a year or so: if the first catalogue was well received, he was to start work on a series of catalogues on the collections of the Textile Museum.\textsuperscript{80} However, the first catalogue was ultimately to be left unfinished due to his premature death.

The last letters written by Ağa-Oğlu that are contained in the Textile Museum archives are dated June 1949 and thus written only a few weeks before he died. From these we learn that Ağa-Oğlu had received a job offer from the Farouk the First University in Alexandria, Egypt.\textsuperscript{81} Not having been told that he had been diagnosed with cancer,\textsuperscript{82} Ağa-Oğlu sent an enthusiastic response to Professor Alan J.B. Wace of Farouk University, accepting the position of professor of Islamic art and archaeology for the following year.\textsuperscript{83} His plan was to complete the carpet catalogue for the Textile Museum over the summer, and then to spend a semester or two teaching and doing research in Egypt, which would thus allow enough time for both Ağa-Oğlu and Myers to gauge the reception of the first catalogue.\textsuperscript{84}

Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu’s untimely death on 4 July 1949 cut short the second phase of his brilliant career. Had he lived, he would have left an irreplaceable mark on the study of Islamic Art with his Corpus of Islamic Metalwork. However, Ağa-Oğlu’s accomplishments are no less significant than his ambitious unfinished project. He played a pivotal role in establishing the new discipline of Islamic art history in the United States, in both the academic and museum worlds.

\textsuperscript{77} Box 3, folder: ‘Corpus of the Islamic Metalwork Correspondence’.
\textsuperscript{78} Ağa-Oğlu sent a number of letters following up Myers’ offer to prepare a carpet catalogue for the Textile Museum. The Textile Museum, Washington DC, George Hewitt Myers Archives, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Correspondences, letters dated 4 June 1947, 16 October 1947, and 30 November 1947.
\textsuperscript{80} The Textile Museum, Washington DC, George Hewitt Myers Archives, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Correspondences, letter from Hewitt Myers to Ağa-Oğlu dated 19 April 1948.
\textsuperscript{81} The Textile Museum, Washington DC, George Hewitt Myers Archives, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Correspondences, letter from Professor Alan J.B. Wace to Ağa-Oğlu dated 4 June 1949.
\textsuperscript{82} The Textile Museum, Washington DC, George Hewitt Myers Archives, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Correspondences, letter from Dorothy Ağa-Oğlu to Hewitt Myers dated 20 June 1949 with an attachment of her letter to Professor Alan J.B. Wace dated 20 June 1949.
\textsuperscript{83} The Textile Museum, Washington DC, George Hewitt Myers Archives, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Correspondences, letter from Ağa-Oğlu to Professor Alan J.B. Wace dated 19 June 1949.
\textsuperscript{84} The Textile Museum, Washington DC, George Hewitt Myers Archives, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Correspondences, letter from Ağa-Oğlu to Hewitt Myers dated 11 June 1949.
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Figure 5. Catalogue entry, ‘Mirror’, back page, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Papers, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Gift of Dorothy Ağa-Oğlu, 1959.
Figure 7. First page of the List of Metalworkers, Mehmet Ağa-Oğlu Papers, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Gift of Dorothy Ağa-Oğlu, 1959.
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