

CURATOR'S CORNER

Presenting Islamic Art: Reflections on Old and New Museum Displays

Patricia Blessing
Pomona College

Abstract

This essay presents a reflection on a selection of collections of Islamic art in Europe and the Middle East, focusing on new installations that emerged in the last decade. While various approaches have been discussed in the context of new installations, chronological narratives still prevail. Perhaps, these are indeed the best way to introduce audiences unfamiliar with the material to its complex historical and cultural contexts. The overarching goal of many of these displays may be to create positive public engagement with Islamic art in a global context where Islam is often associated with war and destruction.

Keywords: Islamic art, museums, collecting, historiography, art and politics

Over the last ten years, several collections of Islamic art in major museums around the globe were presented in new display forms. (Pace the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I will use the term “Islamic Art” throughout.) The global nature of this phenomenon is worth a detailed list: new displays were opened at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York](#) in 2011,¹ the Louvre in Paris in 2012,² the [Victoria and Albert Museum in London](#) in 2008, the [Ashmolean Museum in Oxford](#) in 2009, and the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art ([Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi](#)) in Istanbul in 2015. [The British Museum](#) is currently [installing new galleries](#), to be opened in fall 2018. The [Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin](#) is scheduled to move to a new space in the Pergamon Museum as [part of the structure's large-scale overhaul](#), to be completed by 2025. The history of the collection is discussed

¹ David Roxburgh, “The New Galleries for ‘The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia,’ Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,” *Art Bulletin* 94, no. 4 (December 2012): 643–46.

² David Roxburgh, “‘Open Sesame!’ David J. Roxburgh on the Musée du Louvre’s Galleries of Islamic Art,” *Art Forum* 51, no. 5 (January 2013): 61–64; Nancy Demerdash, “Review: ‘Arts de l’Islam’ at the Musée du Louvre,” *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 2, no. 1 (January 2013): 226–30.

in the catalog of an exhibition about collector and museum director Friedrich Sarre (1865–1945), held at the museum in winter 2015.³ The [Los Angeles County Museum of Islamic Art](#) is working on a major refurbishment of the collection spaces while some of its objects are on a traveling exhibition. The Keir Collection became a long-term loan to the [Dallas Museum of Art](#) in 2014. Additionally, new museums that opened in the last decade include the [Aga Khan Museum in Toronto](#) and the [Museum of Islamic Art in Doha](#).

Clearly, a mounting interest in transforming displays of Islamic art that involves curators, supporting donors for the specific projects listed above, and perhaps increasing public engagement have put the field front and center in major museums. How this translates into a better public understanding of the historical and cultural heritage of the Islamic world remains to be seen for decades to come. Moreover, the ways in which museum displays have evolved is also a reflection of developments in the field of Islamic art history that seek both a greater dialogue with art history as a larger discipline, and an increased awareness and discussion of the methodological challenges that mark the study of Islamic art.⁴ Beyond the world of specialized conferences and scholarship, Islamic art often hits the spotlight in relation to political events: Remember the [debate about the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005](#), and the related discussion after the [deadly attack on the offices of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo](#) in 2015? While the latter event is a tragedy, the resulting journalistic discussion of whether or not figural art in general and depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in particular are licit in Islam quite missed the point. As Christiane Gruber poignantly showed in several essays following the Charlie Hebdo attack, attitudes toward these issues within the Islamic world changed over time and across regions.⁵ The contemporary view, if anything, reflects the iconoclasm (in the broadest sense, as it also includes the destruction of shrines considered anathema) in a present-day mode of Islam influenced by attitudes that emerged in the context of Wahhabism in the late nineteenth century.⁶ Once thoroughly absorbed by

³ Julia Gonnella and Jens Kröger, eds., *Wie die islamische Kunst nach Berlin kam: Der Sammler und Museumsdirektor Friedrich Sarre (1865–1945)* (Berlin: Reimer and Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2015).

⁴ Zeynep Çelik, ed., “Roundtable: Studying Visual Culture,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 3 (August 2013): 585–88.

⁵ Christiane Gruber, “The Koran Does Not Forbid Images of the Prophet,” *Newsweek*, 9 January 2015, <https://goo.gl/JniWhA>.

⁶ Christiane Gruber, “How the ‘Ban’ on Images of the Prophet Muhammad Came to Be,” *Newsweek*, 19 January 2015, <https://goo.gl/PSRm7h>.

the (Western) general public, such ideas led to the proclaimed astonishment at a Saudi prince's supposed purchase of the painting *Salvator Mundi*, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. The report turned out to be false, as the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism [emerged as the buyer](#), and in any case, the astonishment at a Muslim patron being interested in a painting with Christian subject matter needs to be held in check, and seen within the context of historical attitudes in Islam towards Christian scripture, Christianity, and Christian religious art, as Gruber notes.⁷

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on museum displays of Islamic art, in order to put them into perspective with the larger context outlined above. The following reflections are in part based on a blog post I published January 2016 as an entry for the Society of Architectural Historians.⁸ While in that piece I focused on collections in France, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom, I have expanded my essay to include further collections visited in the meantime. Considering the large number of collections of Islamic art that have emerged or been refurbished on a global scale, I of course do not claim to offer a full discussion of each example. At the same time, it is apt to bring together these collections and their displays in a discussion that focuses on the ways in which museums currently engage in a dialogue that evolves around the public presentation of Islamic art. These ideas are also connected to the ways in which the same objects are reflected in the classroom, in that museum studies constitutes a central part of many art history curricula.

In Rome, the [Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale](#) is home to one of the largest collections of Islamic art in Italy. Currently, a debate is ongoing as to whether the museum will have to move from its current home in the Palazzo Brancaccio.⁹ In addition to Islamic art, the collection also has a strong focus on East Asia, including China, Japan, and Korea; the building itself is worth a visit, too. Among the Islamic objects are finds from the excavations at Ghazni, Afghanistan, the capital of the Ghaznavid dynasty that ruled over present-day Afghanistan, northeastern Iran, and northern India from the late tenth to the mid-twelfth centuries. Excavations at the sites were conducted by the now-defunct [Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente](#) (ISIAO) in the late 1950s and 1960s. The excavations mostly investigated the palace of Ghaznavid sultan

⁷ Christiane Gruber, "What Would a Muslim Want with a Portrait of Christ?" *Newsweek*, 23 December 2017, <https://goo.gl/4aBRD6>.

⁸ Patricia Blessing, "Mirrors of the Orient: Exhibitions of Islamic Art in Europe," *Society of Architectural Historians Blog*, 4 January 2016, <https://goo.gl/9Nd6Qn>.

⁹ Mariachristina Ferraioli, "Il Museo d'arte Orientale di Roma si trasferisce all'EUR. Le polemiche sulla 'presunta' chiusura," *Artribune*, 1 November 2017, <https://goo.gl/facpJn>.

Masud III (r. 1099–1115); major finds include carved marble panels that served as wall decoration.¹⁰

The [David Collection in Copenhagen](#) is located in the townhouse of collector, C.L. David (1887–1960) and an adjacent building. While the focus of the collection is on Islamic art,¹¹ it also holds seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painting, furniture, and sculptures. The Islamic collection is presented chronologically, with a separate room for fakes that explains the relationship between forgeries and the art market, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art ([Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi, TIEM](#)) in Istanbul, located in the İbrahim Pasha Palace adjacent to the Hippodrome reopened in summer 2015. While in the early twentieth century the museum was initially housed in the Çinili Köşk on the premises of Topkapi Palace, its collection of objects soon outgrew that structure.¹² Many of the collection's objects were removed from mosques around the Ottoman Empire for safe-keeping as such pieces increasingly disappeared into the international art market over the course of the nineteenth century. Although in part stolen in the 1960s, rather than the nineteenth century, [the thirteenth-century doors](#) of the Great Mosque of Cizre in southeastern Anatolia are a case in point. One of the dragon-shaped door knockers eventually ended up in the David Collection in Copenhagen ([inv. no. 38/1973](#)). The doors and the second knocker are now on view in Istanbul, where the objects were taken in 1976.¹³ The arrangement of the exhibition remains chronological, as it was before the renovation, with the exception of large carpets that are shown together in a room large enough to display them. A new room was added to display Qur'an manuscripts and relics of the Prophet

¹⁰ Roberta Giunta, "Islamic Ghazni: An ISIAO Archaeological Project in Afghanistan: A Preliminary Report (July 2004–June 2005)," *East and West* 55, no. 1/4 (December 2005): 473–84; Alessio Bombaci, "Summary report on the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan. Introduction to the Excavations at Ghazni," *East and West* 10, no. 1/2 (March–June 1959): 3–22.

¹¹ Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, eds., *Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen* (Chestnut Hill, MA and Chicago: McMullen Museum of Art, 2006).

¹² On the early history of the collection, see: Ethem Eldem, "The Genesis of the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts," in *The Art of the Qur'an: Treasures from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts*, eds. Massumeh Farhad and Simon Rettig (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2016), 118–39.

¹³ Z. Kenan Bilici, "Bronze Door-knockers of Cizre Great Mosque: A New Example," in *Ēran ud Anērān: Studies Presented to Boris Il'ich Marshak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, eds. Matteo Compareti, Paola Raffetta, and Gianroberto Scarzia (Venice: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2006). First published online in 2003, the electronic version can be accessed here: <https://goo.gl/7Mxw1U>.

Muhammad, in a space that evokes the relic treasury of Topkapı Palace. While the latter is a historical collection, the curatorial value of the new room at TIEM is certainly questionable. Fortunately, this approach of conflating Islamic art and religion has not extended to the rest of the exhibition.

The [Louvre in Paris](#) opened its new permanent exhibition of Islamic art in the Fall of 2012.¹⁴ A courtyard received a new roof, and two floors of exhibition space were built into it. On the upper floor, light flows through the roof while the lower floor is quite dark since it lacks natural light. The narrative is largely chronological, beginning with early Islam on the first floor. Thematic sections address calligraphy and the influence of Chinese ceramics on the early Islamic production of decorative objects. The lower level is more complex to navigate, as the sequence in which objects are to be viewed is not obvious due to the arrangement of the exhibition. The narrative is again largely chronological spanning over two rooms, yet with the earlier objects displayed in a back room accessible only by crossing through the early modern section. Short videos about production processes—of, for instance, ceramics and inlaid metalwork—are worth taking the time to watch as they explain complex techniques in simple terms. These would be useful for professors of Islamic art history, as it is often a challenge to track down such materials for use in the classroom, if they are available at all. The *in situ* educational materials serve as a reminder that museum knowledge still remains hard to convey in classroom settings.

In addition to these major museum sites, Islamic objects appear in collections such as the [Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum](#) in Braunschweig, Germany, that holds Ottoman ceramics and a fifteenth-century Timurid metal tankard, among other objects in a wide-ranging collection assembled by the local dukes.¹⁵ The medieval collection of the same museum, located in another building near the cathedral, is home to a chasuble made of fourteenth-century Mamluk silk. Such objects of course abound in church treasuries and collections derived from them across Europe and while they don't raise the same questions as the large collections just discussed, I always enjoy running into them. In Yerevan, the [Matenadaran](#)—the national library *cum* treasury of medieval manuscripts—also holds a range of Islamic materials. A selection is shown in an exhibition room on the first floor that gets much less attention than the exhibit of medieval Armenian manuscripts upstairs where groups gather around manuscripts such as the tenth-century

¹⁴ Demerdash, “Review,” 226–30; Roxburgh, ““Open Sesame!””

¹⁵ Joachim Gierlichs and Annette Hagedorn, eds., *Islamic Art in Germany* (Mainz Am Rhein: P. Von Zabern, 2004), 69–70.

Etchmiadzin Gospel.¹⁶ The Islamic collection contains Persian documents and manuscripts from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, including an Ilkhanid *ferman* and a number of Safavid documents relating to the city of Yerevan.¹⁷

What do these collections have in common? Certainly, the kinds of objects they show but also, in the case of the large museums, the techniques sought to present Islamic art in a global context. As Kishwar Rizvi suggested in her essay on the importance of teaching Islamic art in the present moment, it is impossible to avoid the present day when discussing objects from geographies that have been the arena of war and contention for large parts of the last century.¹⁸ Much is to be gained from a presentation that works to shift public imaginations of Islam subtly, through a historical and cultural lens, while also highlighting the political contexts in which sites and objects were created, moved, transformed, and sometimes destroyed. As Rizvi notes, it can be hard to do so, yet as educators dedicated to teaching the cultures of the Islamic world, and as scholars of Islamic art, we cannot avoid it.

¹⁶ Sirarpie Der Nersessian, "The Date of the Initial Miniatures of the Etchmiadzin Gospel," *The Art Bulletin* 15, no. 4 (December 1933): 327–60.

¹⁷ Armen Tokatlian, *Persian Treasures in Erevan: A Selection of Manuscripts from the Matenadaran Collection* (Gand: Snoeck, 2013).

¹⁸ Kishwar Rizvi, "It's Harder Than Ever to Teach Islamic Art — But Never More Important," *The Washington Post*, 6 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/xLoDmH>.