

Islamic Art and the Museum

Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber, Gerhard Wolf

The first years of the twenty-first century have witnessed an impressive re-evaluation of Islamic art and archaeology. Most of the larger collections of Islamic art have been or still are undergoing reorganisation: the continuous redevelopment of the extensive collections of the Hermitage; in 2004 the Benaki Museum in Athens opened its Islamic art section; since 2006 the Jameel Gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum shines in new splendour; the breathtaking architecture of I.M. Pei accommodates the newly established Museum of Islamic Art in Doha; and the box of treasures that is the David Collection in Copenhagen reopened its doors after extensive renovation work in the summer of 2009. The reopening of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo – the world’s oldest museum of Islamic art – with beautifully designed galleries took place in 2010. The remodelling of the largest collection in the United States, in the spacious galleries of “Arts of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (October 2011) will be followed by the spectacular new galleries of the Louvre’s Islamic section (scheduled for 2012) – both will set new benchmarks. Smaller collections, such as the new installation of an Islamic Art Gallery at the Musée du Cinquanteenaire in Brussels, the reinstallation of the Detroit Institute of Arts or the remaking of the Islamic Galleries of the Brooklyn Museum, follow this trend. Interestingly the reconceptions do follow their own logic, like the upcoming establishment of an elegant museum for the Aga Khan Collection in Toronto, which is based on the long-established plan to turn the excellent collection into its own institution. The relocation and expansion of the Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin – scheduled for 2019 while the collection remains open – is an outcome of the reunification of Germany and the subsequent remodelling of the Museum Island.

While museums and galleries become increasingly important forums for public interest in Muslim cultures, there has been little discussion about content or categories of order and their new role in the light of modern museology, museum pedagogy and new approaches in other fields of knowledge. This is also true to a certain degree for the contextual research on objects of Islamic art. What are the stories embedded in objects and how are they to be told?

Global conditions of politics, society and culture pose new questions to museums in general and to those for Islamic art in particular. The idea of the museum and the concept of art history were born in nineteenth-century Europe and, since then, have been translated, adopted and developed worldwide. The relationship between Europe and other regions of the world, however, has changed considerably with the process of decolonisation. Nation states with distinct and strong institutional cultures have arisen and continue to evolve. At the same time new forms of communication, an increasing mobility of capital, ideas, products and people diffuse the autonomy of the nation state, and also as a consequence, notions of national or regional culture or historical narratives. In several places museums try to address the challenges of a new globalised world with reconceptualisations and with attempts to overcome the traditional distinction between categories of European and non-European art museums and ethnographic collections by addressing entanglements, movements and the plurality of any society in more appropriate ways. The presence of a growing number of Muslims in Europe and North America presents museums of Islamic art – whether they will or no – with new duties and responsibilities. But countries with a Muslim majority also face challenges resulting from a renewed interest in the artistic heritage of the past and from the translation of concepts, models and notions, such as art history or the idea of the museum, into their own contexts. Visitors everywhere go to museums not only to gaze at objects from a distant past, as the unknown, the beautiful or the exotic, but also to find answers to today's questions. This became clear in Berlin with the Museum of Islamic Art's first visitor survey. Visitors expressed their wish to learn more about specific contexts and relations, about the geography, the history, the politics and the societies of the world that the objects are supposed to represent. There is also a strong desire to learn more about the religion of Islam itself. The results of this survey stand almost in opposition to museum practices that focus exclusively on the object, on its provenance and its physical condition. Questions of context and religion, however, often have priority for the visitor. As a public institution the museum must react to these demands. Questions of social, cultural and political contexts require new ways of museological presentation of Islamic art objects. Apart from the classical tasks of a museum that lie in the documentation, research, preservation and presentation of the collection, new challenges lie in the mediation of the cultural heritage of Muslim societies from late antiquity to today, in art, architecture and archaeology. Presenting Islamic art in an appropriate way must take into consideration the limits of our collections and concepts as well as questions that are not deduced from the collection itself, but that are brought to the museum by the public and by new scholarly paradigms. In Berlin, the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art is geographically focused on the Near East and historically appended to antiquity. This is a unique situation because it allows one to perceive the culture and art of Islam within the framework of a common Mediterranean heritage. The current permanent exhibition ends in the eighteenth century and is unconnected to any other region of neighbouring or Islamicate societies. Visitors and new approaches in

scholarship remind one to think about new fields and areas of collection, such as the arts of the “peripheries” of the Islamicate worlds. The majority of Muslims live in countries outside the Near East, in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan or Malaysia, and their histories and cultures had and have a central role in the Islamicate world of the past and in the present. Only a few museums include objects from these countries in their collections (Kjeld von Folsach’s activities at the David Collection in Copenhagen are an exception). Objects and research on objects from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have not been part of the traditional scope of collections of Islamic art, because the period itself traditionally has been perceived as a period of decline or decadence, which produced objects that were seen only as deviations from the “original” or “authentic” character of Islamic art as such. Meanwhile, artefacts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been integrated into many collections (but still not accepted by everyone). Just recently, a discussion has begun as to whether modern and contemporary art should be part of the collection policy of museums of Islamic art, or rather if they should be addressed in the context of museums and collections of modern and contemporary art. Venetia Porter at the British Museum, Linda Komaroff from the Los Angeles County Museum, Layla Diba at the Brooklyn Museum and, recently, Tim Stanley at the Victoria and Albert Museum have already started to experiment with the integration of contemporary art – to a certain extent and in different ways – into their collections and exhibitions.

It is impossible today to talk about a homogeneous field of Islamic art and the Islamic museum. This is especially true for the function of our collections *vis-à-vis* an interested public. There is an increasing demand from audiences to discover and understand the artistic and cultural legacy of Muslim societies in their variety, plurality, and in relation to their other historical legacies and regions. What role do museums of Islamic art and archaeology play here and how can museums, as custodians of this legacy, play an active role in communicating with the different audiences from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds? The answer to this question is very much connected to the concept of Islamic art itself, the interpretation of objects and – as a logical consequence – to the way they are represented. While discussing Islamic art and the institutional traditions of Islamic art museums, one may recall from the very beginning that these institutional traditions – unlike their objects – are relatively new. Notions and ideas of “art and beauty” in museums, too, generally do not derive from the cultural background of the objects on display, but rather from the framework of European academic and museum traditions that were embedded in a particular narrative of historical progress that located the birth of civilisation in the East but its end and future in Europe. These traditions are reflected in the meta-structure of collections and displays, based on provenance of archaeological sites or related to themes of production, dynasty or material properties. But much has changed in the last five decades. New comprehensive survey books were written and new professorships for Islamic art and archaeology were founded, especially in the USA. While there is still much to do to sort through and conduct preliminary

research on the tremendous amount of material that exists, research on a contextual level is getting stronger, increasingly addressing issues such as production and usage of objects, markets and social aspects, their meaning and value for the respective societies, as well as affiliations with other objects in different spheres of life – what may be roughly summed up as the “biography of things”, the “social life of things” or the “concert of things”. Finally, in recent years, interest in the crosscultural connections of Islamic art is rising steadily. Which role does Islamic art take in connection with other research fields looking into the cultural history of the Middle East or adjacent areas? How is the plurality of Islamicate societies – which historically and in the present also include Christians, Jews, Hindus and other religious faiths or belief systems, or in cases where Muslims are themselves a minority – reflected in the conceptualisation of Islamic art, in the collection and its contextualisation? How can objects of a mixed composition or shared history be integrated into the collection and into the discipline of Islamic art?

While the discussion on the academic tradition is more or less academic, it takes on a direct social-political meaning when it turns to museums. What is the content of the research that we present and convey in publicly accessible collections? What stories are to be told and which concepts should be applied? On the level of education and interpretation, didactic concepts are probably determined by two key questions: who does one want to reach and what does one want to communicate? What strategy is necessary in order to open up and convey the meanings of objects – however we define them? What is technically feasible and reasonable for the public(s)? Where can different audiences be met and provided with diverse information, and how can one tempt visitors to engage with objects to ignite the processes of thinking and questioning?

This volume is based on the conference “Layers of Islamic Art and the Museum Context” that was held in Berlin from 13 to 16 January 2010 in a cooperation between the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the Staatliche Museen Berlin/Museum für Islamische Kunst (Museum of Islamic Art), and “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe” (EUME), a research programme initiated by the Berlin–Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and since 2011 continued by the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien. The conference, initially, was planned as a small workshop to discuss concepts for the reorganisation of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin and the plans for the Museum of Islamic Art in Toronto. From that starting point we drew on the Aga Khan network and on the expertise of colleagues from Berlin and throughout Germany in the fields of the history of Islamic art. The cooperation with EUME allowed us to draw upon its extended scholarly network and to include more perspectives from social history or cultural anthropology. We were positively surprised by the scope of interest in our venture, and within a short time, the workshop grew into a conference that has proved to be an exceptional experience for everyone who participated in terms of the variety of perspectives and contributions, the enthusiasm and the ideas of scholars from different fields, various locations and different

generations. In the end, of course – as with any conference – we could only invite a limited number of colleagues to present their approaches and thoughts and do not pretend to have represented the entire field. A proper survey of museums of Islamic art would have been the argument for another conference.¹

The conference addressed three main themes: the relationship between “Object and Concept”, the question of “Islamic Art or Material Culture” and that of “Meaning and Audience”. Our focus regarding the first topic was a critical evaluation of the field as such and of the ways objects assume meaning in relation to their (changing) contexts. As simple as this question might seem, quickly the discussion revealed that scholars of Islamic art do have quite various understandings of what an object is and what it stands for. Scholars from other fields of Middle Eastern studies, or the humanities in general, added new perspectives and contextualisations. In fact, objects hold (or change) their qualities regardless of the different academic classifications and traditions that are followed in researching them. What can Islamic art historians learn from other fields, and how can Islamic art feed the academic discourse beyond its own discussions? How are objects or groups of objects to be conceptualised within the dialogue of the various subdisciplines of art history and of cultural anthropology? The second theme focused on the practice of displaying and communicating Islamic art in the museum. How can the aesthetic dimension and the historical contextualisation of objects be negotiated in the museum display; how can their artisticity, inherent technical skills (as a form of knowledge), their historical functions and agency in general be evoked or presented? What do we want to get across (and know) about objects; how can we make things “speak” in the museum? And, finally, to whom do “we” show them and to whom do we talk or wish to inform? This question formed the third section of the conference for which we invited experts who focused on the audiences of museums of Islamic art.

In short, discussions circled around two main questions – what is an object and how should objects be displayed – simple questions that developed enormous dynamics and led to intensive debate. Do we do justice to “Islamic” artefacts if they are treated in a similar way to objects in Western art museums? And if so, does this reflect our notion of art today or has that changed? Is art the only notion to apply? What do the objects that we are dealing with represent; what functions and meanings did they have in the societies that “owned” them? And how can one unfold their layers of meaning both in an academic and a museum context? What are the intrinsic aesthetic values?

Questions regarding the status of technical excellence, artistic genius, materiality, age, cultural and social significance and practice, changing concepts of aesthetics and beauty (for a multiplicity of contemporary or historical eyes) were formulated and discussed – without developing into a common understanding. If there was a common consensus, then it was acceptance of the plurality of thoughts and concepts. As in the “concert of things”, this volume presents multiple and diverging voices that correspond, but do not always agree with each other. Needless to say every voice stands first for its own vocalist.

The present book documents this plurality of visions; its contributions take the debates of the conference into account and develop the positions discussed there a step further. The book is also the fruit of a cooperation between four institutions, beyond the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin: the abovementioned Aga Khan Trust and EUME project; and for the publication, the Art History Institute in Florence (Max-Planck-Institut) joined the project as a further partner, a research institute concerned with the study of the cultural and artistic heritage of the Mediterranean area from a crosscultural perspective and the promoter of a fellowship programme “Connecting Art Histories in the Museum” in collaboration with the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, which elaborates new methods of carrying out research in the museum context.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who participated in the conference, the contributors to this book, Martin Hager (Berlin) for his enormous patience and very professional management of the editorial process, Yasser Alwan (Egypt) for the English editing, Katrin Kaptain from the office of EUME at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin for all her organisational skills, care and kind patience with us, and Christa Kienapfel, Miriam Kühn, Katharina Müller, and Daniel Smith from the Museum of Islamic Art for their wonderful help in organising the conference.

The conference has been co-funded by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and – through funds from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation – by the research programme “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe”. The publication of the proceedings is realised through funds from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut) and “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe” which is funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, and now is part of the Forum Transregionale Studien Berlin.

Notes

Introduction

- 1 Thus we were missing many close colleagues, among others Julian Raby and Massumeh Farhad from the Freer and Sackler Gallery in Washington; Sophie Makariou and her team with their innovative approach at the Louvre; Tim Stanley, Mariam Rosser-Owen and Moya Carey from the V&A in London; Sheila Canby and Nevina Haidar and their team from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; Linda Komaroff from the Los Angeles County Museum; Karin Ådahl from the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm; Nazan Ölçer at the Sabancı, the representatives of the Türk ve İslam Müzesi, Topkapı-Sarayı Müzesi and the museums connected to the Koç-Family like the Pera Müzesi or Hülya Bilgi from the small pearl of the Sadberg Hanım Müzesi; Shaikha Hussa with her long experience in Kuwait (Dar al-Athar al-Islamiya) and Mina Moraitar from the beautiful Benaki Museum in Athens and our colleagues from Brussels and Lisbon.

1. The Role of the Museum in the Study and Knowledge of Islamic Art

- 1 The exhibition *Taswir – Pictorial Mappings of Islam and Modernity* (5 November 2009 to 18 January 2010 at the Martin Gropius Bau) was curated by Almut Sh. Bruckstein Çoruh and Hendrik Budde.
- 2 Herzfeld, Ernst, “Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-Problem”, *Der Islam* 1 (1910), 27–63, 105–144.
- 3 The exhibition *The Song of the World – Iranian Safavid Art, 1501–1736* (5 October 2007 to 7 January 2008) was curated by Souren Melikian-Chirvani.

2. A Concert of Things:

Thoughts on Objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context

- 1 In his discussion on the newly opened galleries of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum, New York (1974). Grabar, Oleg, “Islamic Art and Beyond”, *Vol. III, Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, Hampshire, 2006, p. 16; chapter 2 is a reprint of Oleg Grabar, “An Art of the Object”, *Artforum* 14 (March 1976), pp. 36–43. See also Komaroff, Linda, “Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art”, *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000), p. 4.
- 2 See Christine Gerbich, in this volume.
- 3 This general critique is, of course, not applicable to all museums of Islamic art, and certainly not to the same extent. In the last two decades there have been enormous efforts to elaborate exhibition approaches. However, in general, this critique accounts for the exhibition concepts of the second half of the twentieth century. Without being comprehensive, I will name a few examples of museum approaches in the following pages. The process of making museums of Islamic art is not yet that well documented or researched. Next to the history of our museum, by far the best documented example of a recent re-making of an Islamic art gallery is the Jameel Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum, cf. Crill, Rosemary and Tim Stanley eds, *The Making of the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London/New York, (2004); “Jameel’s Gift: The New Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London”, *HALI* no. 147 (2006), pp. 29–33, cf. footnote