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The Power of Museums to Challenge Islamic Arts

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, museums worldwide have been either reorganizing or creating *ex nihilo* galleries dedicated to Islamic art. The craze for this type of art has been attributed by the press and scholars as a response to modern day political and social tensions. Thus, the majority of such galleries exhibiting Islamic art have been considered, at least in Western press reviews or political discourses, as being agents acting as “bridges between cultures,” meaning the *Western* and the *Islamic*. Often, this fad for Islamic art has been linked to the 9/11 Islamist attack and the desire to portray an opposing face of Islam and Muslims through the display of art. *A contrario*, this doctoral dissertation examines and deconstructs the assumption that this revamping of Islamic art is solely motivated as a political response. By analysing the present-day posturing of Islamic art as a *longue durée* process, this dissertation hypothesises that Islamic art today is anchored in shifts occurring in the fields of art history and in efforts of these museums to de-Europeanize their perspectives. The “*événement monstre*” of 9/11 is therefore considered as just one cog in the wheel in the evolving place of Islamic art in western galleries.

The conclusions offered herein in are drawn on the analysis of specific case studies carried out in the *Département des Arts de l'Islam* at the *Musée du Louvre*, the Albukhary Foundation Islamic World Gallery at the British Museum, and the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* in Berlin which as part of the Pergamon Museum has been revamped over the last two decades. Applying the methodological approach of “*penser par cas*” allowed the results of this research to be applied to other museums. This dissertation intends to compare the different approaches developed by similar institutions – this was possible due to the scope of the museum collections, their “universality”, and their importance in the development of the field of Islamic art history and its exhibition. Through the transnational comparison carried out, this dissertation critically assesses the power of museums to redefine Islamic art, thus examining the role of museums not only in and for society, but also for theoretical disciplines. Created in the 19th century by Europeans, some questions raised are how has the shift from a Eurocentric to a global or even transcultural history of art affected museums and their exhibition of Islamic art? Furthermore, in line with the theories developed by the new museology and the awareness of the existence of a multicultural society, how are museums reconsidering the potential representation of this heritage? Thus, from the perspective of society to the world of research, how are these debates and new theoretical perspectives developing in relationship with the impact of post-colonial studies on the display of Islamic art? And can museums be agents of change, offering new approaches to art and its collection and its exhibition?

At first glance, the aestheticized display of Islamic art in museums can appear disconnected from shifts and debates in research. However, looking more closely at the choices of objects exhibited and narratives offered, and the programmes developed in and outside the walls of museums, has revealed much more intentionally involved and experimental approaches. Beyond political influences, it has been concluded that Islamic art is being redefined through its involvement and interaction with societies, communities, and contemporary artists. Museums appear to be questioning the relevance of the place of Islamic art in European society, going beyond the distinction between “the West and the Rest”, and

are now showing the connections, exchanges, and transfers through objects displayed while inviting people from communities to participate in the process.

However, this research demonstrates that instead of “deconstructing the myths of Islamic art” through “remediations” of the history of Islamic art, a new otherness is being created. While seeking to destabilize the canons, the legacy of the 19th century discipline of Islamic art history and of the museum’s classification renders impossible a rupture with a European gaze. Thus, this dissertation underlines the developments, the efforts, as well as the risks and even the failures of museum policies towards the exhibitions of Islamic art. Museums while being aware of the burden of the past, are also navigating the challenges to move away from this, in their treatment of Islamic art in the first quarter of the 21st century.