

**Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art  
and Archaeology of the Muslim World  
in the Twenty-First Century**

*Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber, and Gerhard Wolf, eds.  
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This volume contains an impressive number of essays by authors from diverse backgrounds. What the title does not indicate is the reason for this publication – the conference “Layers of Islamic Art and the Museum Context” (held in Berlin during January 13-16, 2010) in cooperation with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, and the “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe” (EUME). The EUME is a Berlin-based research program initiated by the Brandenburg Academy of Science, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and the Forum Transregionale Studien. This publication drew upon the expertise of the Aga Khan Network and experts in Germany because it was originally to be a workshop focused on the reorganization of Berlin’s Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) as well as a study for Toronto’s Museum of Islamic Art, which will open this year and house the Aga Khan’s personal collection.

The forum offers a certain diversity of voices regarding issues in general (the display of Islamic art around the world) and specific to the MIA at the Pergamon Museum. Its twenty-nine essays are divided into five sections: “In-

roduction,” “Representation of Islamic Art,” “Context and Aesthetics,” “Foundation and Change,” and “Examples from the Museum World.” The analysis clearly moves from the most general in the beginning to the most specific in the last section.

The first section, “Introduction,” has two essays, one by the Stephen Weber (director, the Pergamon Museum), which focuses on the MIA, and the other one by the late Oleg Grabar, a pioneer of Islamic art history in the United States. Grabar’s essay appropriately sets up the volume by reflecting upon the museum’s role in the study of Islamic art and contemplating the imperative that museums must establish new connections with universities in research centers. Weber follows up with a paper on the role of Islamic artworks placed in the museum context and their agencies: the layered meaning of the object, museum order, museum team, and visitor.

The second section, “Representation of Islamic Art,” is also front loaded with leading experts in Islamic art and architecture – Gulru Necipoğlu and Nasser Rabbat – both of whom posit provocative ideas regarding the historical evolution of the understanding and role of Islamic art. Papers by Lorenz Korn and Kirsten Scheid, respectively, reflect on Necipoğlu and Rabbat’s papers. The section ends with Vera Berger’s discussion of the problematic name of Berlin’s Museum of Islamic Art. This section relies heavily on Necipoğlu and Rabbat, both of whom are not only authorities on the subject but also very prominent and respected in the field, so much so that their articles here are cross-referenced by many of the other contributors.

The following section, “Context and Aesthetics,” offers seven papers by Avinoam Shalem, Christian Sassmannshausen, Gudrun Krämer, Beshara Doumani, Munir Fakher Eldin, Martina Muller-Wiener, and Julia Gonnella. Topics discussed range from the life, or anima, of an object (Shalem), to the relevance of everyday objects (Sassmannshausen), self-proclaimed “diletante” ideas that the museum has to attract people before educating them (Krämer), the layered history of objects including modern “discovery” and movement (Doumani), the story of a guarded sacred object in the small Syrian town of Fakher Eldin, and a “new way” of looking at Kublen’s essay “Shape of Time” to conceive of art and history as separate from cultural history (Muller-Wiener). The section ends with Gonnella’s response to Necipoğlu’s paper, which consists of deliberations on reshaping the term “Islamic Art Museum” to “Islamic Culture Museum.” Individual papers present some interesting ideas, but even with references to other papers in the collection the section sometimes seems to stray and become convoluted with theory about theory.

The fourth section, "Foundation and Change," includes seven papers by Mary McWilliams, Jens Kröger, Eva Troelenberg, Juliette Fritsch, Christine Gerbich with Susan Kamel and Susanne Lanwerd, Seif El-Rashidi, and Miriam Kuhn. On the whole, it is an insightful collection that complements the others. McWilliams begins with a report from twelve curators in the United States, with assessments and experiences of exhibiting Islamic art. Kröger follows with a brief history of the collection and display of Islamic art in Germany and the evolutionary process that led to the current innovations at the MIA. Troelenberg questions the validity of the concept of "masterpiece" touted by western museums regarding Islamic art – essentially as it relates to promoting the museum's image rather than furthering the understanding of the material culture. Fritsch's piece on the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jameel Gallery (London) should have been included in the final section due to its descriptive and analytical look at the gallery's evolution. Fritsch discusses the constantly evolving exhibition of material as regards naming and organization based on qualitative "personal meaning mapping," which includes not only changes in the display of materials but also the instigation of interactive activities, such as storytelling workshops and the "Jameel prize for contemporary Islamic Art."

Gerbich, Kamel, and Lanwerd examine the research initiatives of the "Museological Laboratory" in relation to the Berlin collection. El-Rashidi discusses public engagement regarding the development of concepts for Cairo's Museum of Islamic Art. Kuhn rounds out the section with her look at "traditional" versus "reformed" museum models and reflects on several papers in the volume. She concludes that research should be done by museum staff members in cooperation with institutions.

The final section, "Examples from the Museum World," includes eight papers by Kjeld von Folsach, Ladan Akbarnia, Oliver Watson, Anton Pritula, Fahmida Suleman, Benoît Junod, Stefan Weber, and Christine Gerbich. They cover, respectively, Copenhagen's David Collection, the Brooklyn Museum's "Arts of the Islamic World" galleries, Doha's Museum of Islamic Art, the Hermitage Museum's Islamic Art collection, the British Museum's Islamic Art collection, and Toronto's Aga Khan Museum. The last two papers focus on the MIA. It is perhaps this section that deserved the most focus, as it is what the volume's title promises. After 225 pages of text reflecting on the general and abstract issues of what "Islamic art" is and what a museum should or could be, the specific discussion of leading collections of Islamic art is finally presented.

The thoughtful and reflective consideration of collection display discussed by von Folsach, Akbarnia, and Suleman (the David Collection, the Brooklyn

Museum's galleries, and the British Museum) demonstrated ideas and experiments with changing the artworks' organization for the benefit of visitors and research with critical revelations of problems and successes. Pritula discussed the potentials and limitations of displaying Islamic art in a historical location (the Hermitage) that is itself a historical artifact, especially with the existing interior decoration. Junod's discussion of Toronto's yet-to-be-opened Aga Khan Museum and the travelling exhibition of its contents for a full two years in nine different European cities demonstrates the very forward-thinking, experimental, and dynamic approach to the potential of displaying important Islamic artifacts.

The hubris of those papers that consider the problematic issues encountered and successful moves made as a result of conscious study, survey, and research stand in sharp contrast to Watson's rather ostentatious paper on Doha's Museum of Islamic Art. Watson posits that with a large, signature building, the "old-fashioned" display of masterpiece artifacts organized without any consideration for narrative, user integration, or any kind of research is all that is needed, along with high-tech devices that help users navigate the collections. He goes so far to say that even supportive label/text for artifacts should be completely minimized. He believes that the museum is successful because 20 percent of the Qatari population – just over 200,000 people – visited it during the first year. That may be a certain type of success, but it certainly counters every notion discussed in the volume. The Aga Khan Museum's travelling exhibition of objects alone garnered 500,000 visitors in two-and-a-half years.

The final section's structure requires far more development. Each author competently describes the specific museum with which he/she was involved with varying degrees of critical reflection. However, the inconsistency of the images provided prevents any kind of comprehensive or critical reflection on the topic. For example, several papers provide plans of the buildings to explain how the collections are arranged, whereas others simply provide decontextualized images of the displays or artifacts. In addition, as the volume starts strongly with leading voices in the field (*viz.*, Grabar, Necipoğlu, and Rabbat) contemplating the issues, it should have ended with a reflective conclusion rather than abruptly with Gerbich's paper describing the research for the MIA.

For those who have visited Islamic art collections in museums, it is interesting and important to understand that there is an ongoing global dialogue, at least among historians and curators, regarding the methodologies of displaying Islamic art and the potential for greater cultural understanding and cooperation with other institutions. However, like many frustrating museum

displays, this volume contains many “jewels” of thought and research that are frustratingly organized in such a manner that even the most optimistic or ardent of readers become lost before the volume’s crux: the actual museum case studies. Sharper editing, the removal of repetitive text, and more focus on the actual case studies would have made for a far more useful and relevant text for the general enthusiast and the specialist scholar.

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