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The Religious Plot in Museums or the Lack Thereof: The Case of Islamic Art Display

Valerie Gonzalez

Department of History of Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, London WC1H 0XG, UK; vg13@soas.ac.uk

Abstract: During the last decade, the curation of Islamic art and artifacts has been crossed by tensions at both the theoretical and practical level. Not only has it been continuously grappling with the Orientalist legacy, but it has also been operating in a global contemporaneity affected by multiple conflicts engendering a misperception of Muslims and Islam by non-Muslims. With this heavy background, this curation has been pursuing three main objectives: educating the public, decolonizing the museum, and reaching out to the Muslim communities and refugees living in non-Muslim societies. However, in the West, which remains worldly influential in the domain of heritage management, the first two objectives drove curators to engage in problematic practices, most notably the suppression of what we may call the "religious plot" in the exhibits' narrative. Moreover, while the educational impulse led to a secular didactic scholasticism erected as the supreme exhibitory norm, the decolonizing enterprise took on an ideological turn in the form of a neo-postcolonial discourse at odds with a reality that has considerably changed since the seventies. Contesting the "being Islamic" of the material curated, this discourse separates religion from culture, thus relegating the faith to a theme among other multiple themes in the museum displays. That this state of affairs is problematic appears in crude light as, in the last decade, a new Muslim-led curatorship has been challenging this secularist curatorial politics. Re-centering Islam in the representational emplotment regarding Islamic culture in the exhibitory space and experimenting in the installations' design to this effect, this curatorship, this essay's author believes, holds the future of Islamic museology.

Keywords: Islamic material religion; Islamic museology; museal phenomenology; Islamic art scholarship; display philosophy; postcoloniality

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1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, Islamic art and artifacts have gained in global visibility thanks to momentous refurbishments of galleries in historic institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) in New York or the Louvre Museum in Paris, and to a multiplication of new museums like the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, and the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada.[1] This is, as we know, the latest global development of a history of collecting and display that began in colonial Europe (see Rico 2019, pp. 148–63; Shaw 2003; Vernoit 2000). This essay does not aim to retrace this museology's developmental trajectory, amply discussed in the ever-growing museum studies (Macdonald 2006; Messias Carbonell 2012; Rey 2019a, pp. 250–52; Rey 2019b; Rey 2022, pp. 183–96; Junod et al. 2012; Bier 2017, pp. 1–25; Exell 2017; Exell and Wakefield 2016). Instead, it examines some problems raised by the contemporary curation of Islamic material culture that are less discussed in the literature, if at all. Most relevantly, in relation to this special edition's theme, it addresses the central question that Heba Nayel Barakat, the head curator of the new Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, aptly posed in a recent conference: "Representation of faith in Islamic galleries: where do we go wrong?" (Nayel Barakat 2017, pp. 34–35). This question explicitly underscores a problem, namely the deficient religious plot or mode of emplotment on the subject of the sacred in the display of Islamic art and artifacts. To

discuss this problem, above all one must bear in mind the intellectual context of Islamic museology.

2. General Background of Islamic Museology

The Eurocentric post-Enlightenment epistemology of global cultural production based on the divide of the religious versus the secular has been dominating since the beginning of the scholarship and curatorship concerned with the Islamic arts and artifacts. This development, however, had been accompanied in the twentieth century by an intellectual counter-current whose adherents, called "Perennialists", comprised famous Muslim and Muslim converts like Louis Massignon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Titus Burckhardt. These Perennialists, as well as their heirs in the twenty-first century, have been consistently claiming that art and faith are indissociable in Islam and that, therefore, aesthetic materialities constitute an instrument of piety regardless of the context of the objects' function, religious or non-religious (see for example Wazeri 2020, pp. 1–6; Hassanpour Loumer 2014, pp. 474–81; Kassam 2006, pp. 5–7). These two antagonistic strands of thought subtend this problem of the representation of the faith in Islamic art curation signaled by Heba Nayel Barakat that interests us, although this curation is also shaped by a variety of other important factors of conjunctural order.

Today, several socio-political elements frame the installation of Islamic art and artifacts in museums: lingering postcolonial concerns, ongoing conflicts and unrest in the Middle East and Africa, global violence committed in the name of Islam, and waves of refugees involving a significant influx of Muslim populations in the Euro-American and Australian space.[2] In this difficult framework, curators and museum critics have been pursuing essentially three objectives: the decolonization of Islamic museology; educating the public and thwarting the negative perception of Muslims the mentioned painful events generate among non-Muslims; and reaching out to the Muslim communities and refugees living among non-Muslim societies (Grinell 2014; Shatanawi 2012b, p. 55; Brown and Mairesse 2018, pp. 525–39). As Rebecca Bridgman remarks about one of the earliest existing Quranic manuscripts kept at the University of Birmingham, "it contributes to the understanding of the display of "Islamic" objects that have historical importance, but which are also central to the faith of many people in the UK and beyond".[3] Similarly, Kimberly Masteller, curator at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, which holds a sizeable Islamic collection, reports a change of "focus towards increasing the institution's engagement with visitors and the community, demonstrated by its new strategic plan and mission statement: "Where the Power of Art Meets the Spirit of Community"" (Masteller 2020, p. 147). The museum critic Klas Grinell calls this empathy-oriented social-political approach to Islamic museology "soteriology" (Grinell 2019a, pp. 123–37). A note about this concept of soteriology, as Grinell employs it, is necessary given its primal meaning related to spiritual doctrines of salvation.

From the viewpoint of the religious plot under observation, it appears that in his critique's framework Grinell downplays this primal religious meaning of soteriology. More exactly, he secularizes the concept as he turns it into a moral-ethical principle serving to re-build, through the institutional representation of Islamic culture, the broken relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Western societies. At the cultural plane, this break's multiple causes past and present in this relationship include the legacy of the colonial rationale of civilizational hegemony and epistemology, and the colonialists' looting of the colonized' s heritage. In view of this complex problematic, soteriology refers more to a redemptive logic of reparation of political-sociological nature than to any form of spiritual salvation, even though it points to the religious identity of the different communities involved in the said relationship. Consequently, while the topic of the sacred in Islamic museology is not central to Grinell's critique, his soteriological emplotment, in the secular sense of reparation, nevertheless constitutes a parameter to heed for discussing the deficient religious plot in question. And so too are the two other following parameters of the curatorial practice.

3. Postcoloniality and the Western Concept of the Museum

The Western hegemonistic narrative of global cultures in both art history and museum display is of primal importance in the twentieth-century postcolonial criticism. In the last decade, which saw the rise of a renewed decolonizing current in the cultural studies, Islamic art historians have been re-formulating this criticism of the past century in a neo-postcolonial discourse targeting the art historical practice's Eurocentric parameters, the post-Enlightenment concept of the museum, and the distorting representation of Islamic culture it has led to produce in the twentieth century. However, theoretically exhausted and rehashing ideas from the seventies, this discourse has turned into a pure rhetoric detached from a reality that since then has significantly changed.[4] In 2019 for example, one may read this statement by Wendy M.K. Shaw: "Art history is a fortress of form, the museum its trap. It robs our consciousness by offering objects as substitutes for concepts".[5] Overlooking the absurdity of opposing concepts to objects in museal context and of denying material products the capacity of awakening consciousness, there is no doubt that, would the museum truly be a robber of our thoughts, it would have disappeared by now. Museums are not only multiplying everywhere as pivotal places of cultural construct and social activities but, crucially, the Muslim curatorship and patronage play no small part in this phenomenon. In addition to the spectacular museums recently built in the Muslim world such as the Islamic Art Museum in Doha, the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization in the United Arab Emirates, and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, the creation of smaller "Muslim-led museums," to use Virginia Rey's expression, also forms a steady global trend (Rey 2019a, p. 252; Rey 2019b; Rico 2019, pp. 148–63). In Australia, for instance, the showcasing of Islamic artistic culture thrives in the unique framework of the local religious-cultural cosmopolitanism. As Sam Bowker explains, "Two major institutions [The Art Gallery in South Australia and Charles Sturt University] explore revised representations of, and relations between, South-East Asian, Islamic and Indigenous Australian visual cultures to create a distinctive Australian vision of Islamic art" (Bowker 2017, p. 47).

Clearly, what was initially a Western cultural instrument implementing Western imperialist visions of the global artworld has turned into a borderless institution to the service of this artworld itself. Curating teams also have become largely transnational. Therefore, criticizing today the post-Enlightenment concept of the museum and returning incessantly to the colonial history of collecting and display appear to me seldom useful. More relevant is a re-examination of the museum's workings in global contemporaneity, notably by paying attention to this institution's ontology as a highly malleable and most efficient cultural tool that enables, and not prevents, the insertion of religious plots in the exhibitory scenography's narrative. Besides, it is worth recalling that, although a post-Enlightenment creation, the museum only re-conceptualized the age-old global institution of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting objects in sacred or profane and private or public spaces. Booties, treasures, and other rarities or valuables accumulated by the elites and governing classes in all cultures pre-date the modern European art collection (Kreps 2006, pp. 457–71). Like the latter, the former promoted stories underpinned by specific interests of whatever nature, political, religious or otherwise. In Islam, royal treasures exhibited on special occasions and ceremonial gift exchanges have a long well-documented history (al-Hijjawi al-Qaddumi 1996).

Nonetheless, what is unique to the post-Enlightenment museum and distinguishes it from the relics' chamber, the palace treasure room, the church treasury and other cabinets des curiosities resides in its principled "neutrality," positing the exhibitory space as an unsegregated institution suitable for any type of representational phenomenology, including a fortiori the phenomenology of the sacred. "Neutrality" indeed, not "secularity," is what empowers and inscribes in duration the institution of the museum, as neutrality neutralizes the binarity that secularity implicates in its opposition to and exclusion of sacrality. In other words, the museum is neutral because, contrary to the common view of it as a typical post-Enlightenment secular institution, it does not exclude sacrality and does

not exclusively produce "secular rituals" of spectatorship, to appropriate Carol Duncan's famous words (Duncan 1991, p. 88). Yet, firmly holding this view theorized in the nineties, the said neo-postcolonial discourse in Islamic art history continues to nurture the idea that the museum can only offer a de-spiritualizing, even fetishizing some say, frame of viewing decontextualized religious Islamic objects.[6] A fresh critical analysis will prove that this is an outdated theory and that the institution of the museum authorizes the development of very efficient religious plots in the open semantic of its space.

4. The Question of the Sacred in the Museum

In the general context of museological studies represented by ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology), some critics recently questioned this old certitude that a genuine religious expression has no place in museums (ICOFOM Studies Series 2019). I will push further this questioning by arguing that, due to its open and neutral ontology, the museum does have the capacity to foster both sacrality and spirituality in its space. To begin with the deconstruction of Duncan's theory, let us imagine a non-believer going to the Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, in Rome, in order to see Caravaggio's paintings for pure aesthetic enjoyment (Figure 1). Although the artworks deliver their religious narrative in their original Roman Christian context, this visitor indisputably engages in a "secular ritual" all the same. Conversely, a Catholic faithful encountering Velasquez's painting of Christ on the cross in the Prado Museum, in Madrid, or a Buddhist beholder of the Pensive Bodhisattvas in the National Museum of Korea, in Seoul, do perceive religiously the religious imagery, regardless of the non-religious frame of viewing (Figures 2 and 3). Thus, the adherents to these faiths re-enact "a spiritual ritual" in the non-religious context of the museum. This means three things.



Figure 1. Caravaggio paintings, 17th century. Church of San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, Italy. Photo in public domain.



Figure 2. Christ Crucified, Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, 1632. Photo: Bernardo Pérez, public domain. From *El País*, 31 Janvier 2013, "Velázquez made in China". Chinese artists came to the museum to copy masterpieces of its collection. The copies were subsequently put on a show in Beijing. On the photo is "Li Wendong, de 40 años, entró por primera vez al Prado en 2004. Desde entonces admiró "El Cristo" de Velázquez". (https://elpais.com/cultura/2013/01/27/album/1359245069_373345.html#foto_gal_4) (accessed on 8 March 2022).



Figure 3. "A Room of Quiet Contemplation", two Pensive Bodhisattvas, Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE-668 CE). National Museum of Korea, Seoul. Photo from The Korean JoongAng Daily, 1 February 2022. Photo in public domain.

First, secularity and sacrality reside as much in the beholder's mind as in the exhibitory space itself that, by inference, does not necessarily determine the nature of the experience of devotional objects. This said, obviously this experience takes on a particular cathartic

character and a variable level of intensity depending on the exhibitory space's institutional genre, be it a place of worship, an art center or else.

Second, religious artworks and artifacts have a mighty and indestructible agency of their own, even though undoubtedly they lose an important layer of meaning through the process of displacement from their original context to the museum space (Figure 4). Wendy M.K. Shaw misses this crucial point when she asserts, "the museum saved devotional objects, but in doing so it secularized them". (Shaw 2002, p. 144) While meanings performatively given to artifacts during religious rituals indeed get lost in the decontextualizing acts of collecting and displaying, the religious values and significations embedded in their material forms do not. Displaced in art galleries, mihrabs covered with Quranic calligraphies and sculpted and painted altarpieces do not become secular objects (Figure 5). Even in the cases of decontextualized items whose meaning depends quasi-exclusively on performing rituals like many African animist artifacts or the "yad," the pointer employed to read the Torah in Jewish ceremonies, these artifacts' past use leaves a spiritual trace or an aura of spirituality sticking to them that can be construed as an active force against secularization. Consequently, in the museum decontextualization does not equate secularization, thus leaving entirely possible the re-building of the religious plot in this institution's framework.

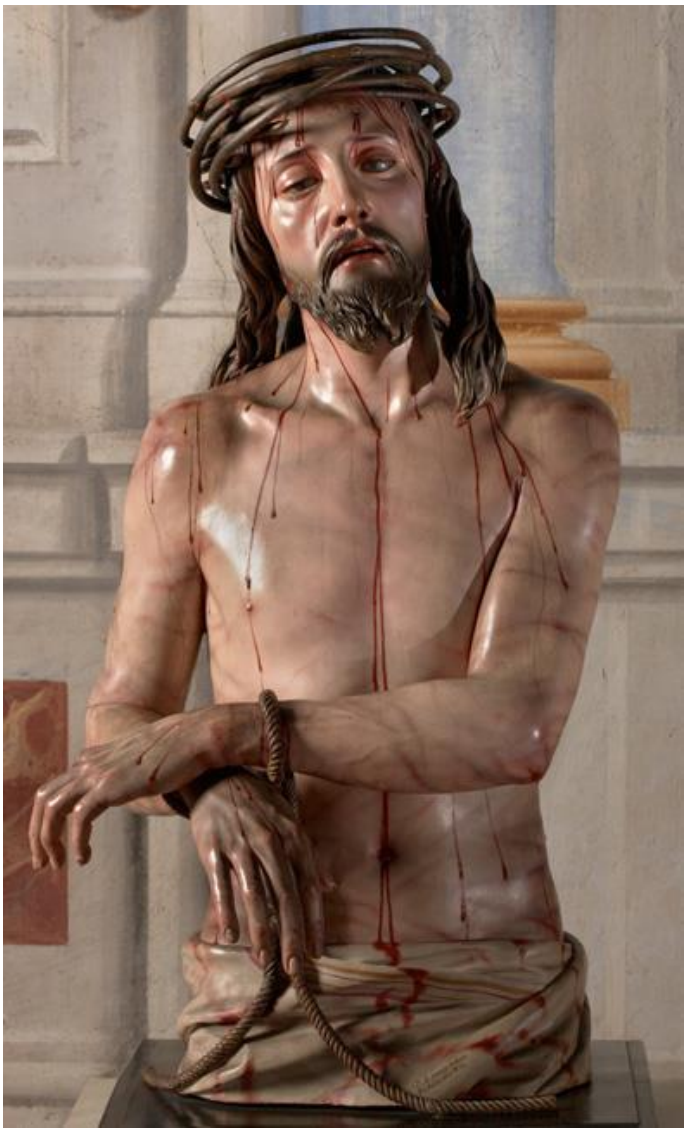


Figure 4. Christ as the Man of Sorrows, by Pedro de Mena, 1673. Convento de las Descalzas Reales, Madrid © 2009 Photo Gonzalo de la Serna. Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid.



Figure 5. Stone inscribed with the name of the Khwarazmshah Jalal al-Din Mangubirti, and engraved with a representation of mihrab, with Quranic inscriptions. Nishapur, Historic Iran, 1230. Albukhary Gallery, British Museum. Photo of the author.

Third, the museum does offer an alternative environment for decontextualized devotional objects to be appreciated as producers of spiritual experience. This is due to this institution's intrinsic conceptual functioning, independently of its historical instrumental-

ization in the post-Enlightenment context of suppression of the religious in public affairs in which it was invented. The terms of this functioning are the following.

As the product of a pure ideal, the museum functions upon a double process of de-semantization and re-semantization of its space that allows the re-staging of works uprooted from their civilizational milieu to be a totally free and open act.[7] The only condition for this to work is neutrality. The fact that, for historical-cultural reasons, post-Enlightenment thought construed total freedom as the triumph of reason over religion does not alter this unique conceptual structure of the museum beyond binarities and civilizational determinism. A museum can be a museum of anything, science, cinema, torture or … religion for that matter, precisely because it is primarily the museum of nothing, a space in the blank region of neutrality to be semantized at will.[8] It can foster plays of binarities, mix them up in ambiguous settings, or enclose them in sharply contoured domains in an infinite range of configuring possibilities. The secularizing plot constitutes only one of these possibilities, like its opposite, the sacralizing emplotment and the staging of theological aesthetics. A look at some examples of installations will demonstrate these semantizing properties of the museum.

Nefertiti's bust in the Neues Museum in Berlin illustrates the sacralizing power of the museum, thanks to a well-crafted scenography (Figure 6). Appearing like a goddess in the middle of a wide empty perimeter, the queen's image is bathed in a heavenly light seemingly pouring out of a pierced dome high above it, in dramatic contrast with the surrounding penumbra. To be noted, this process of sacralization relies more on the Westerners' modern view of this valued archaeological object in their possession and their romanticized perception of the figure it represents than on the historical certitude that the latter indeed possessed a divine status in the Egyptian pharaonic context.



Figure 6. Nefertiti bust, Neues Museum, Berlin. Photo in public domain.

For a more ambiguous case, one may ponder under different angles the Cloister Museum in New York. Does it produce a secularized, religious, or neutral history-archeology-

based narrative of medieval Christian art? As for a frankly religious scenography, two extraordinary exhibitions demonstrate the art of what can be called "the theological emplotment" in the museum: the new permanent installation of the two aforementioned Pensive Bodhisattvas entitled "A Room of Quiet Contemplation", which opened in 2021 in the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, and "The Sacred Made Real, Spanish Painting and Sculpture, 1600–1700," held at the National Gallery in London in 2009–2010.[9] (Figures 3 and 7). While the former radically innovates with the creation of a wide awe-inspiring immersive spatiality filled with subtle sacral references such as the evocation of the nocturnal firmament by a dark ceiling lit with tiny lamps, the latter consisted of, in Adrian Searle's words in *The Guardian*, "a show of painted space and real space, real light and painted shadows, ruined flesh and immaculate drapery, miraculous paintings and sculpted, morbid miseries" (Searle 2009) (Figures 8–10). Dealing with the representation of one of the Abrahamic monotheistic cultures, this National gallery exhibit will serve as a model in the subsequent discussion on the Islamic art displays; it therefore deserves further attention.

In the National Gallery's poignant spiritual atmosphere, the Catholic masterpieces irradiated intensely with this tortured religious numen the Spanish artists had lodged in their aesthetic materiality palpitating and bleeding like a living organism. Believing and non-believing visitors alike could mightily feel this numinous force, thanks to a carefully calibrated light and object phenomenology whereby artworks appeared irregularly placed and subtly lit in chiaroscuro. As Searle noted when he visited the show, "whatever one believes, or whatever belief one feels estranged from. Painted or sculpted, these are real presences. I left devastated and deeply moved".[10] The intention though, the "big idea" as Klas Grinell would say, was not to mimic the religious phenomenology of the churches and monasteries from which the artworks where momentarily extracted, but to expose the latter's inner power of seizing the faithful's soul and impregnating them with the Catholic creed (Grinell 2020, p. 30). By no means contrived, the scenography was true to Spain's Baroque religious materialism.[11] It just laid it bare, crude, pure, and undisturbed by the usual multitude of interferences produced in the place of worship.



Figure 7. Installation shot of the Sacred Made Real exhibition at National Gallery, Courtesy of the National Gallery.



Figure 8. Vestibule leading to the entrance to "A Room of Quiet Contemplation". Photos from The Korean JoongAng Daily, 1 February 2022. Photos in public domain.

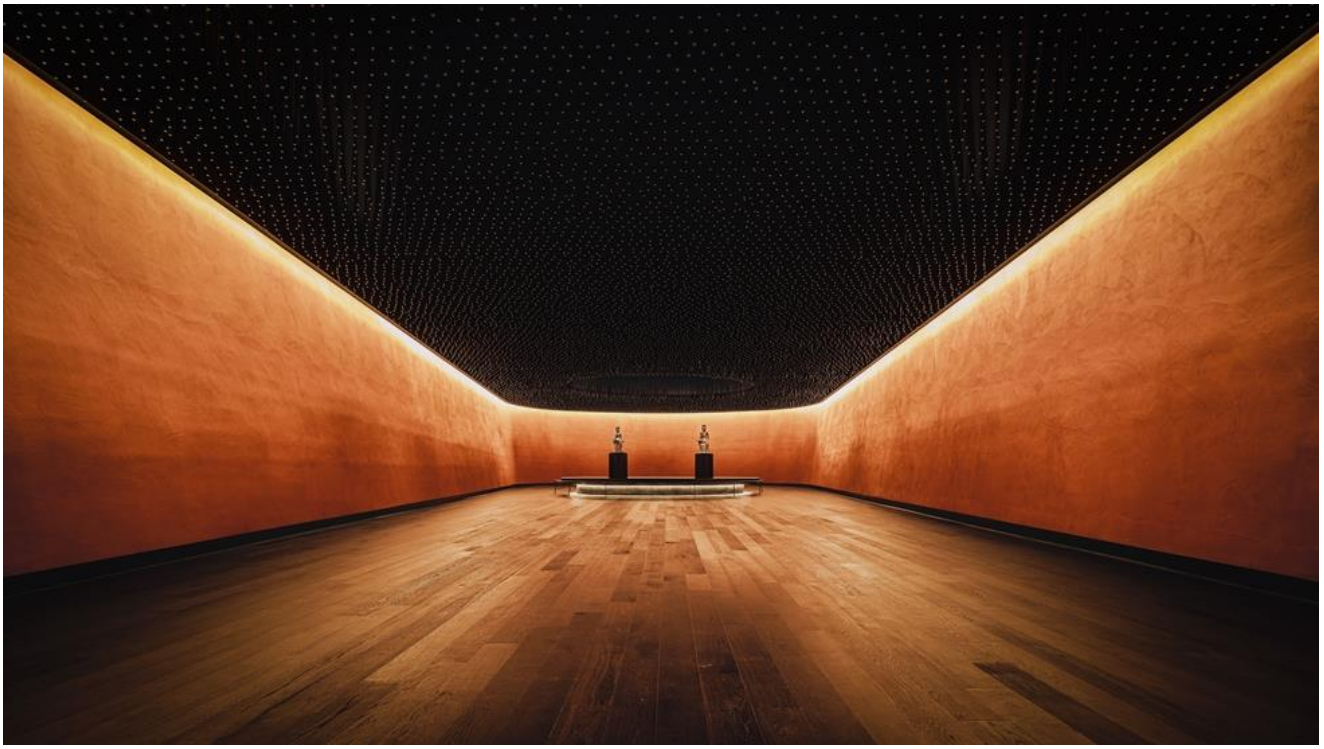


Figure 9. View from the entrance unto "A Room of Quiet Contemplation". Photos from The Korean JoongAng Daily, 1 February 2022. Photos in public domain.



Figure 10. View from the rear of "A Room of Quiet Contemplation". Photos from The Korean JoongAng Daily, 1 February 2022. Photos in public domain.

Consequently, if a spiritual encounter in the museum like this one obviously does not possess the same character as the religious anagnorisis in the temple, nevertheless both frameworks share the compound of dramaturgy, affect, and cognitivity that stimulates the experience of the sacred.

5. From the Critique of the Museum to the Critique of the Curatorship

Islamic museology past and present builds upon this post-Enlightenment museum as precisely that: a neutral space open to any possibility of semantization. For this very reason the museum is a great invention. It is therefore time, it seems to me, to close the postcolonial chapter about this institution as a problematic Western legacy for the contemporary display of non-Western material culture, and instead to reflect about efficient methods of installing in relation to both the nature of the objects curated and the always evolving context of their viewing. Similarly, questioning the validity of the museological pragmatic parameters as part of this legacy, which are still globally applied and flexible enough to be manipulated as desired, should be replaced by an unrestrained critique of the curatorship itself. Fully conscious of the curatorial practice's European history, which has become common knowledge, and of its stakes in contemporaneity, curators are now solely responsible for any repetition of past mistakes or for any failure to update their working method. In this respect, the aforementioned neo-postcolonial rhetoric does little to address the numerous issues affecting many Islamic art installations in the West such as the pre-eminence of the historical-archaeological rationale over other accounts, the stifling of religious narratives, the overemphasis on didacticism, and the often ill-managed phenomenology of the scenographies.[12] In view of this re-problematization of Islamic museology, a major question to scrutinize is that of categories and its corollary, the question of the religious narrative pattern.

6. Are Islamic Art and Artifacts "Islamic"?

The question of category in Islamic museology revolves around the generic notion of "being Islamic" that was applied to Islamic art and culture in the early stages of European art history and museology. The said neo-postcolonial discourse questions the validity of this notion on the basis that it essentializes the material thus labelled by presenting it uniformly religious and culturally unified.[13] Yet, scholars and curators continue to use it, sometimes in alternation with the term "Islamicate" that some think better represents Islamic pluralism.[14] This conceptual contestation has yielded to a separation of religion and culture in both Islamic museology and art history as they are practiced in the West. Only works with an obvious pious function are studied or displayed in relation to the faith. More than that, in the museum the cultural dominates the religious, which is then relegated to a second plane. A striking example of this epistemic positioning in the curatorial practice is the removal of the term "Islamic" from the labelling of the re-installed Islamic collections of the MET in 2011, problematically re-named "The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia". This gesture signals the removal of the religious plot as an articulated sense-giver in the installations' scenography.

To cite another example, in her review of the redesigning of the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Istanbul, Patricia Blessing writes: "A new room was added to display Qur'an manuscripts and relics of the Prophet Muhammad, in a space that evokes the relic treasury of Topkapi 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"(Blessing 2018, p. 151). Curiously, Blessing does not provide any argument to support these statements.

However, this terminological debate has no currency in the Muslim world itself. Reflecting the dichotomic scholarly situation evoked earlier, which is rooted in the double antagonistic trend of the Perennialists versus the secularists, in this part of the globe sponsors and curators serenely label "Islamic" museums and galleries holding collections of Islamic material culture at large. Thus, not only history repeats itself, but now, with the diversification and globalization of the museological phenomenon it has more far-reaching consequences. If, like the Perennialists in the past the present Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and curators seeking to valorize spirituality in the epistemology of Islamic material culture hardly collide with the Western secularist mainstream, the latter' s orthodoxy, in all its aspects, remains consequentially prevalent. The following aspect in particular is to be underscored.

The secularist orthodoxy considers as essentialist the detection of faith-based principles of unity beyond regional and sectarian differentiation. The thought that the scholarship issued by Muslim people from the culture, which seeks to unravel these principles, might deliver some form of truth to heed in the said category debate is not even contemplated. As a result, Muslim scholars and curators operating outside the Western academic-curatorial circles not only receive little attention, but also, in the light of these circles' view they appear guilty of the said intellectual crime of essentialism. But can these academics in the West continue to be deaf to these Muslim voices? Any issue of methodology this Muslim scholarship may have is beside the point. This two track-configuration of the cultural discourse only indicates a serious problem, so that one may wonder: does not this so called "decolonizing" enterprise today ironically bear the signs of some form of neo-colonialism? It is at best ideological. In a rare courageous article, Nadia Ali argues:

> "Any critical work that does not fit into the current orthodoxy or into some dubious notions of 'ethics' is framed as 'essentializing'. This is indeed a clever way to shut down the discussion by trumping up a series of false moral charges. I can go further. I also suspect that the post-colonialist allergy to 'essentialism' is equally myopic. With respect to my own case, the truth is that I am an equal 'essentializer'". (Ali 2020, note 123, p. 221)

Fortunately, Ali is not alone to react to this imposed orthodoxy. She represents a Western counter-current that, in epistemic tune with the perennial revival in the Muslim world, subscribes to what Shahab Ahmed eloquently terms "the importance of being Islamic" in his opus magnum *What is Islam?*.[15] This counter-current apprehends the notions of Islam and the Islamic as inclusive, not exclusive, of the pre-Islamic and minority cultures that contributed to the Muslim world's civilizational shaping. Thus understood, these notions pointedly refer to the foundational fact that the Qur'an, the hadiths, and the Kaaba in Mecca form the spiritual-material nucleus around which gravitate Muslim lives past and present throughout the globe, regardless of any form of differentiation. As Ahmed puts it, being Muslim is "a mode of being with God, of identifying, experiencing, and living with the values and meaning of Divine Truth" (Ahmed 2015, p. 38). The terms "Islam" and "Islamic" thus designate not only a faith, but also a way of life engulfing all domains of human activities, without any exclusion. By extension, arguing that this Islamic mode of being informs the creative processes and gives meaning to Islamic art, subscribers to this counter-current fully endorse the labelling "Islamic art and culture".

Moreover, this endorsement equally relies on the solid evidence provided by the art itself. For example, while in his book Ahmed cogently unravels the Islamic meaning of some Persian paintings with no apparent religious iconography, in an article of mine I demonstrate the spiritual aesthetic of the Samanid ceramics with calligraphic decoration (Ahmed 2015, pp. 408–30; Gonzalez 2016, pp. 9–12). Another case in point is the monumental Egyptian door that was installed at the entrance of the Shangri La Museum of Islamic Art culture and Design in Honolulu, Hawaii. Ornated with arabesques in pierced metal applique, this wooden door imitates the design of a Quranic manuscript's leather cover. In a video made when he stayed in the museum as a scholar in residence, Wheeler Thackston translates in English the Arabic calligraphic program containing Quranic inscriptions and eulogies to God.[16] In doing so, Thackston highlights the role of Islamic piety in Muslims' everyday domestic life evidenced by this piece. Yet again, let us imagine that a Christian or a Jewish craftsman participated in the making of this door, and that a non-Muslim customer bought or commissioned a similar item for their own house out of aesthetic appreciation. Would that make of this door a less Islamic or a questionably Muslim artifact? Clearly the answer is negative, as the property of being Islamic resides in the work's aesthetic materiality.

In sum, in my view, the conceptual contestation in question is a faux problem that obstructs the real interrogations raised by "the being Islamic" of Islamic art and artifacts. In pure scholarly terms, the fundamental question is not to know whether these objects are Islamic or not, but to understand how "the Islamic" operates in the pluralistic Muslim artworld in all its Sunni and Shi'i forms throughout history. On the museal terrain, it concerns the possible manners of translating efficiently this being Islamic of the objects in the visual space of display, like the National gallery's exhibition had magnificently translated the theological aesthetic of the Spanish Catholic sculptures and paintings. However, that is not all. Eclipsed by this faux problem, the conflation of the two distinct categories of "Islamic art" and "the art of the Muslim world" generates another confusion that has yet to be clarified.

Interfaith Hybridization in the Muslim Artworld

While Islamic art is Islamic art and nothing else, the art of the Muslim world includes both Islamic and non-Islamic artistic traditions, whether it is Buddhist and Hindu art in Muslim-majority Indonesia, Hindu and Jain art in the Mughal empire, Christian and Jewish art in Al-Andalus, etc. Coexisting within the same cultural sphere, these varied religious materialisms cross-fertilized and produced another category: the category of Islamic hybrid forms. These forms are not always easy to define as they may belong to yet two other distinct sub-categories: "the newly created hybrid Islamic art" and "the pre-or non-Islamic art repurposed for Muslim use". Heba Nayel Barakat underscores this problem of categorization acutely posed by the pluralistic Malaysian artistic culture she curates: "in

a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) faces many challenges when attempting to incorporate 'faith' as a component in curating collections".[17]

One may observe this phenomenon of religious hybridization in the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, opened in 2018 in the British Museum, which showcases this world in the light of its internal and external connections with non-Muslim cultures. However, in this gallery the combination of cumulative installations and mixed ethnographic-historical narratives, in addition conceptualized by an ambivalent approach to the theme of spirituality, does not help viewers to grasp these ontological complexities (Figures 11 and 12). This thorny issue of the religious plot in the exhibitory space epitomized in the British gallery, together with the category problem, affects more broadly the great historic museums and galleries of Islamic art.



Figure 11. View of the displays in enfilade. The Albukhary Gallery, British Museum. Photos of the author.



Figure 12. Close up of an archaeological display. The Albukhary Gallery, British Museum. Photos of the author.

7. Religious Introversion in the Traditional Islamic Art Displays

As Nadia Ali writes, "One may wonder what is left when the new generations of historians of Islamic art rejected Herzfeld's search for influences and dismissed Massignon's spiritual model as essentialist or dogmatic. New models affirm their basis in claims of objectivity, factualism, textualism, and historical contextualization, in which the most impressionistic interpretations have come to replace bolder grand narratives" (Ali 2020, p. 222). This well described epistemic structure of the studies mirrors that of the curation of the great historic collections of Islamic art, which indicates the consequential fusion of genre between curatorship and scholarship. Before elaborating on this fusion, a brief note about these collections is necessary.

The first world-class public collections of Islamic art since the inception of Islamic museology are mostly located in the Euro-American zone, except for a few in the Muslim world such as the old museums of Islamic art in Cairo and Istanbul. Today, the curatorial politics implemented in these paradigmatic historic institutions, be they the MET, the British Museum or the Louvre, continue to influence the manner newer museums present their

collections.[18] This politics basically promotes one dominant model of display, which became normative since the twentieth century. Historical chronology, dynastic succession, topology of regions and medium taxonomy constitute this model's principles. The difference of priority between these organizational principles from one museum to the other does not affect the underlying overarching historical-contextual narrative common to all these institutions. I call this established museology "traditional display," as opposed to the more experimental forms of Islamic art installation that recently emerged.

Owing to the control the Western mainstream of Islamic art history exerts on this area curatorship, the traditional displays bespeak the same introversion, sometimes on the verge of aversion, of religion that characterizes the studies. The latter indeed restrict the epistemic access to the sphere of the sacred to the obviously devotional objects and religious buildings, thus treating religious art and architecture separately from the rest of Islamic material culture.[19] In the traditional displays in question, this introversion is perceptible in the reduction of the religious narrative to an understated evocation with the aid of a few devotional objects among a variety of historical-cultural themes disconnected from the faith such as craftmanship, book painting, stylistic and medium topology, the transregional trade of objects, etc. (Figure 13). Telling of this approach and echoing Patricia Blessing's aforementioned view, Venetia Porter and William Greenwood explain the Albukhary Gallery's project in these terms: "While making it clear that this is not a gallery about religion (a frequently made assumption), we address aspects of faith, including the sacred place of Jerusalem within the three monotheistic religions" (Porter and Greenwood 2020, p. 112). Precisely, this very idea that we should not assume that a gallery presenting the Muslim artworld necessarily foregrounds the theme of faith, as if this was something to fear, just shows the extent of the problem. In response to the latter, Nayel Barakat aptly stated, "Addressing diverse groups and applying the analytical scientific approach of Islamic art historians by analyzing, categorizing, and tracing the development and continuation of artistic trends stops short of comprehending or admitting 'faith' as a component of such art" (Nayel Barakat 2017, p. 34).



Figure 13. View of the gallery of "The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia", Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo in public domain.

This selective attitude to the Islamic creed in the traditional museums appears evident in the Albukhary Gallery. For example, more space is given to, and emphasis placed on, the coffee industry than to the representation of the Islamic piety (Figures 14–16). The glass box dedicated to "belief and practice" appears particularly confined and pitifully played down by comparison to the coffee-themed installation in which a large panel displays an assortment of coffee bags. The re-installations of the MET's collections constitute another conspicuous evidence of this anti-religious pattern. In this regard, a blog by Sharon Kitchens narrating her experience of these re-installations and featuring an interview of Navina Haidar, the Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah Curator, is worth reporting (Kitchens 2020).



Figure 14. View of the showcasing box "Belief and Piety" in the Albukhary Gallery, British Museum. Photos of the author.



Figure 15. View of the showcasing box "Brewing and Serving" in the Albukhary Gallery, British Museum. Photos of the author.



Figure 16. The coffee bags' display. The Albukhary Gallery, British Museum. Photos of the author.

A Blogger's Experience in the MET's Islamic Galleries

In the blog's introduction, Kitchens' s general impressions hint that her experience did not include the understanding of Islam or of the objects' spiritual dimension: "The modern Middle East that's in the news is characterized by conflict, geopolitics, and the political economy of oil. Yet in the MET's galleries I can travel back through history to a world of poets and craftspeople" (Figure 17). Instead, these impressions signal the fulfilment

of the museum's secular soteriological agenda through the awe inspired by the historical scope and artistic finesse of the iconic American collection. As the curator Navina Haidar underlines, "One challenge is to overcome the perceptions and politics of the moment and take a view of history and art history in a more educated way". In the interview like in the blogger's own report, Islam is only the name given to these phenomena as the blog ends with a "**TIP:** Wondering what the word Islam means or how artists in the Islamic world worked? Visit the MET's Frequently Asked Questions web page".



Figure 17. View of the gallery of "The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia", Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo in public domain.

Haidar's responses to Kitchens' s questions reveal yet another aspect of this problem of religious introversion. While Porter, Greenwood and Blessing assert a secularist viewpoint on Islamic art display taken as granted on certain scholarly grounds, Haidar's explanations betray the sub-conscious anxieties of someone from within the culture caught between her profound awareness of the Islamic spiritual source of the art she curates and her submission to the neo-postcolonialist orthodoxy. She thus confesses informally to Kitchens that "the inspiration of Islam itself gives a lot of power and meaning to works of art. Especially in the calligraphic tradition, which is a highpoint always". Although Haidar does not define this "Islam itself," by mentioning the ubiquitous presence of calligraphy she clearly implies that there exist powerful forces of unification in the Muslim artworld. Yet, for some reason, she follows this orthodoxy's rules in her curatorial practice. As she expounds the installations' underpinnings, what I see as the fundamental piece of truth she had just told Kitchens disappears in the normative historical discourse filled with menaces against any unifying principle: "One route through the galleries offers a chronological view, tracing the evolution of art from the dawn of Islam in the middle east through its spread to Europe and India. However, if the visitor chooses to walk through the galleries in any other direction, they will experience the spaces in a more regional way, focused on important centers and the patronage of ruling dynasties. As a result, Islamic tradition is not presented as an essentialized monolith to represent a single idea, but a constellation of cultures and art forms brought together in communication and shared exchange".

The interview finally concludes on this thought: "Ms. Haidar hopes visitors gain an appreciation of art and history and a sense of the inspiration that Islam has provided to artists and patrons everywhere". But how can this be possibly achieved without giving the public a sense of the Islamic faith as the shaper of this Muslim visual culture in view? And how exactly is this secularist vision of this culture materially translated in these traditional displays?

8. "Secular Scholasticism" of the Narratives and Conservative Installation Design

From Berlin, New York, to Copenhagen, the traditional Islamic displays present uniformly the same overreaching cultural-historical narratives promoting a de-spiritualizing encyclopedic notion of cultural richness. This notion expresses itself in a standardized visual allure of the installations, which are often filled up with objects to maximum capacity and invariably loaded with densely written text boxes and historical and technical explanatory panels (Figures 11–17). Most notably, the religious content of the culture dilutes itself in these extensive explanations. Here and there, a few highlighted masterpieces meant to pinpoint a particular artistic achievement appear isolated rather than enhanced in the cluttered and frequently eclectic rooms. Moreover, although the artworks in the miscellanea of material astound by their beauty and the new neat frames and high-tech lighting please the eye, this type of arrangement echoes in the museum the compilations of data and evidences cherished in the Islamic art studies (Figure 18). Among these compilations of objects, the beautiful immersive reconstitutions of Syrian domestic interiors in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin and the MET, and the recreated Moroccan patio commissioned to Moroccan craftsmen by the latter's curators definitely stand out. However, these installations do not suffice to make these displays any less outdatedly didactic and predominantly secularist.



Figure 18. Gallery of Islamic art, Louvre, Paris. Photo: © M. Bellini—R. Ricciotti/Musée du Louvre © 2012 Musée du Louvre/Philippe Ruault.

Moreover, this didactic feature entails an inadequate phenomenology of perception in the museum. Instead of engaging an appreciation-based participatory reception revelatory of the faith the objects represent, these iconic museums overall produce a phenomenology of perception conditioning viewers to assimilate passively as much historical information as possible, for the greatest pleasure of the mainstream academic spectatorship. It is a "most informative and just plain beautiful summation of Islamic material culture over fifteen centuries", said a satisfied scholar on social media after visiting the overpacked Albukhary Gallery which, within two rooms, aims to cover Islamic visual culture in all its aspects, from the medieval period to the contemporary era.[20] Indeed, what can only be described as the hubristic transference of the "scholastic" preoccupations and speculations of the Islamic art historians sitting at their desks in the museum's social space may only satisfy scholars themselves. As if lay visitors could possibly follow the Borgesian meanders of academic knowledge. Even with the most beautiful artifacts in view, semantically convoluted or complicated installations fall short of efficacity if we deign to consider that scholars form only a small portion of the museum's public at large. As Klas Grinell observes in thinking about spectatorship from an unsegregated viewpoint, "different logics of categorisation are intertwined in a way that makes exhibition narratives very complex".[21] Therefore, following up on Grinell and its concept of the "big idea," successful displays actually require simpler structures of semantization in response to the visitors' infinitely varied background and structures of beholding.

However, this requirement of semantic simplification goes hand in hand with the necessity of a skillful space and object phenomenology re-attributing the main power of communication to the works themselves. The impressive scenography of the two Pensive Bodhisattvas in Seoul and the National gallery's exhibition of Spanish Baroque art are exemplary in this respect. They most successfully induce(d) an experience of the material without overloading the space with artworks, and without the aid of overlength explanatory labels dispatched everywhere in the exhibition room. Instead, this experience is/was possible as visitors are/were plunged in a sacral immersive atmosphere that enable(d) them to relate spiritually or emotionally to the artworks and to dialogue silently with them.

To cite another installation of similar high caliber, the display of menorahs at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem equally discards scholasticism and privileges object and space phenomenology, for an optimally cognitive and affective albeit non-didactic reception. In this museum, a wall features suspended cases lit from the inside like multiple luminescent cabinets, each containing menorahs from different countries. Astutely placed in a disorderly manner, the cabinets seem to pop out randomly from the wall's surface where the name of the provenance locations appears discretely written in pale letters. Without being explanatory, this poetic installation fulfills most efficiently the double semantic-aesthetic mission of asserting the religious symbolism of the candelabra used in Jewish rituals, and of unraveling the inexhaustive artistic versatility of its form.

Having these most creative religious exhibits in mind, the conservative secularist scholastic model pressingly raises the question of how precisely it inserts Islam and the Islamic in its encyclopedic complexities, as obviously the religious plot cannot be eliminated.

Islam as a Theme among Other Themes

"Faith offers an important dimension and an added value in curating exhibitions," says Nayel Barakat about Islamic curation in general (Nayel Barakat 2017, pp. 34–35). I would add that any exhibit of Islamic material culture for whatever representational purpose, historical, archaeological, ethnographic or aesthetic, requires at least to place them in a meaningful Muslim perspective. Means of shaping this perspective in the museum are plentiful. They may consist of an introductory scenography marking a strong point of semantic entry, like in the renovated Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo in which panels explaining in detail the religion appear on the foreground albeit at a proper distance of the well-spaced out installations, and/or a consistent thread of meaning throughout the galleries. The latter objective, for example, is achieved through an eloquent choice of

room labels in the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, with one room named after the first Righteous Caliph Abu Bakr and another one after the Muslim scientist Ibn Al-Haytham. Needless to say, the kind of idiosyncratic elements of décor one finds frequently in the traditional displays in the form of a mocked Middle Eastern profiled arcade, or of *masharabiya* panels inserted in walls, do not fulfil this requirement of situating the objects in the Islamic spiritual domain (Figure 17).

As a general rule, owing to their historicizing exhibitory philosophy and principled introversion of religion, the traditional displays fall short of providing what qualifies as a genuine Islamic framework. The latest of these displays to date, the Albukhary Gallery, is again a perfect case for discussing this issue. To locate its collection in the Muslim world at its title indicates, the gallery employs two devices: customized *masharabiyat* like in the MET, and a diptych presenting a fragment of calligraphy and a mihrab pertinently placed before the installations (Figure 19). This diptych does put the collection in religious perspective. Yet, it appears minimalist by comparison with the rest of the overloaded installations. The condensed visual semiosis it delivers may therefore only superficially settle in the non-Muslim visitors' mind, as most of them do not know the profound signification of the mihrab and calligraphy in Islam. In effect, the contrast is such that the attention is quickly absorbed in the displays' jigsaw puzzle of historical, archaeological, and ethnographic plots in which Islamic spirituality constitutes only one among numerous narrative pieces. How can visitors possibly connect the dots between a nineteenth-century Soudanese lyre belonging to the age-old local African culture and Soudan's Islamic religious materialism, just after encountering medieval pieces of Shi'i piety in Iran and archaeological findings from a given Middle Eastern site, all being showcased in densely loaded boxes put in tight conjunction?[22]

Most problematically, to non-specialists this multidirectionality of the displays' emplotment can only communicate an ambiguous conception of the Muslim world in which Islam appears decentered, thereby giving the subliminal message that this world is not as Islamic as one might think it is. In thus decentering Islam in its own cultural realm, the Albukhary Gallery is ultimately seldom different from the other traditional displays lacking a proper Islamic semantic anchorage; an anchorage, it must be underscored, that by no means diminishes the chiefly contributive agency of the non-Muslim traditions in the Islamic cultural area. In this respect, however, the MET's re-installations are even more radically de-centering. As Sharon Kitchens's blog indicates, the scholastic separation of religion and culture takes place right at the galleries' entrance where "visitors are greeted with a map showing the major artistic centers represented in the collection of the Galleries.". This map is undeniably a useful tool. But strategically positioned as the first thing the public encounters and naturally prehends as the installations' narrative foundation, it designs a secularist polycentric façade of a cultural space that, in the Muslim reality, is religiously mapped and monocentric.

The Muslim world indeed revolves around the one single holy center of the Kaaba in Mecca, the *qibla* and direction of prayer toward which mosques and many old public buildings, palaces and cities are oriented. Today like yesterday, this Islamic axis mundi structures the Muslim universe engulfing all lands on earth; and Muslim believers do view this universe thus structured wherever they live and whatever the branch of Islam they belong to. Moreover, this horizontal mundane organization centered on the visible Kaaba has an unseen vertical metaphysical extension that, from Mecca, reaches two cosmological points: the heavens on one side, and the strata bellow the earth's surface on the other side. This supranatural organization engenders a cosmogonic mise-en-abyme producing multiple qiblas-Kaabas. As Simon O'Meara underscores in his illuminating book on the Meccan sanctuary, "Muslims are known as 'the people of the *qibla*' (*ahl al-qibla*)" (O'Meara 2020, p. 1). It is this Islamic cosmogony and the faith in the Quran that unite all the regions flatly listed in the MET galleries' label that otherwise would not make any sense.



Figure 19. View from the entrance to the Albukhary Gallery, British Museum. Photo of the author.

On the same track of thought, one may then cognize the anomaly of putting this cosmogony and the Islamic faith into the spotlight only in temporary thematic events, as in the case of the memorable exhibitions "Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam," held at the British Museum in 2012, and "Longing for Mecca" at the Tropenmuseum in 2019–2020.[23] This anomaly, characterizing the mainstream Islamic museology in the West, takes on

further relief as the new Muslim-led museums do posit the Islamic cosmogony and faith as the pivot of their installations. The latter includes, for example, rooms dedicated to the hajj and the Kaaba in the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, a compelling exhibit of models of mosques from all over the world in both the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia and the Islamic collection in the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, or the relics' display appropriately accompanied by audio Quranic recitations in the Topkapi Palace Museum (Figures 20–23).[24]

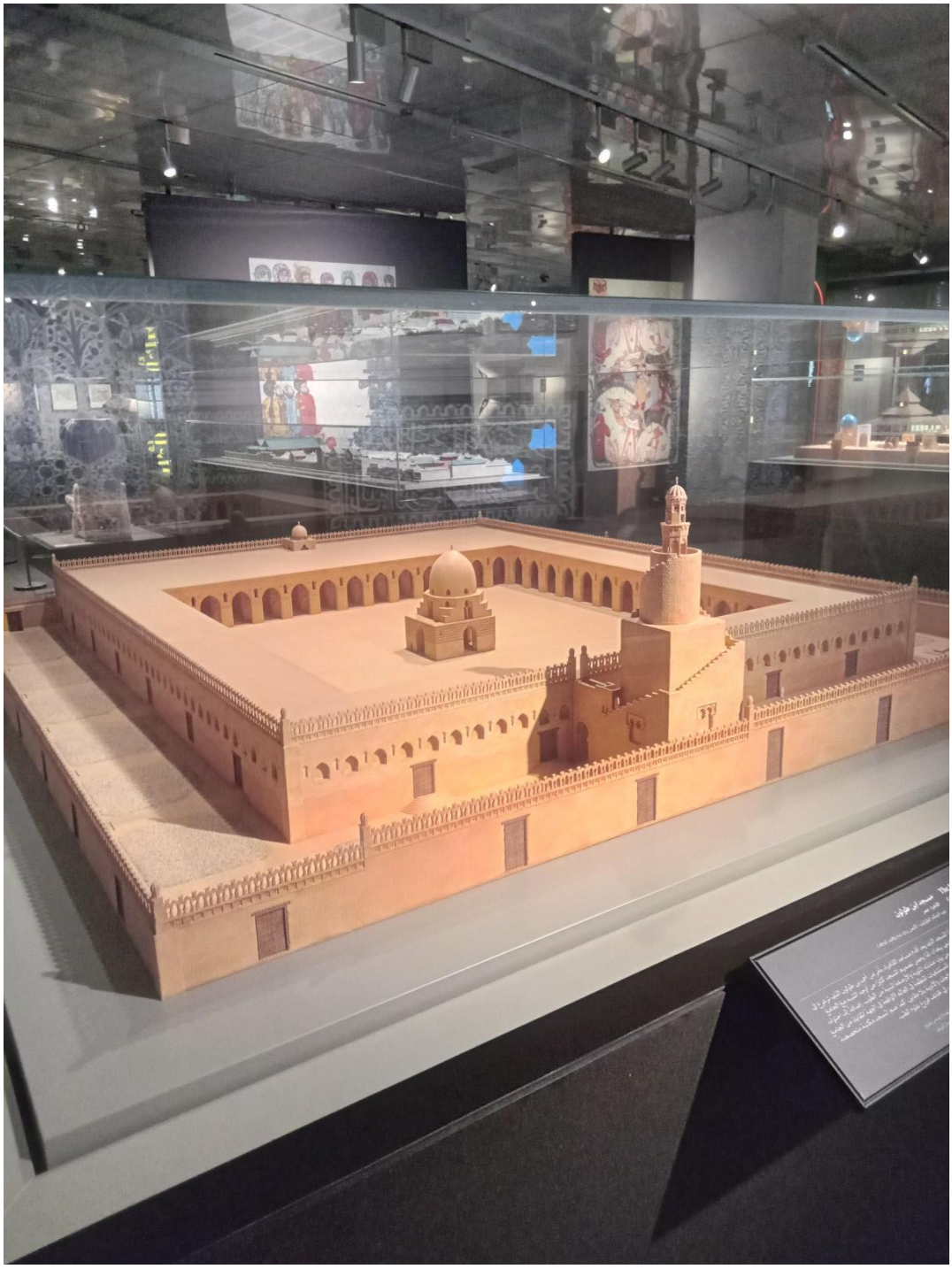


Figure 20. The collection of Islamic art in the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Model of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt. Photo of the author.



Figure 21. The collection of Islamic art in the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Model of mosque in Xinjian, China. Photo of the author.



Figure 22. The collection of Islamic art in the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Model of the mosque complex of Po-i-Kalyan, Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Photo of the author.



Figure 23. The collection of Islamic art in the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Model reconstituting the original mosque and house of the Prophet, Medina, Arabia. Photo of the author.

9. Epilogue: The Future Resides in the New Muslim Museology

Although the power of the secularist mainstream Islamic museology is still globally felt, the new Islamic museums in and outside the Muslim world offer a much desirable alternative to the religion-averse traditional displays, some of these museums being located in the rich Gulf region. Yet, how just preposterous is this statement some Westerners made in response to the museal development in Qatar: "There is no heritage in Qatar"! (Exell and Rico 2013, pp. 670–85) First and foremost, in all its diversity of exhibitory philosophy, this dynamic and refreshingly experimental global Muslim-led museology re-attributes to Islam its due place in the museum. Be it the gallery of Islamic civilization at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha or the florilegium of smaller institutions created throughout the world, the new museum of Islamic art and artifacts finally gives us, the masses of spectators, the opportunity to enjoy what we have

been longing for, namely a cultural immersion in which we may learn and appreciate Muslim culture in all its diverse aspects without ever losing sight of the faith that bore it.

Not specifically Islamic but containing a substantial Islamic material, the positively grandiose National Museum of Qatar in Doha also deserves a mention. At the avant-garde of design installation thanks to its hyper efficient use of multimedia technology and to the interdisciplinary team of cultural practitioners employed at its creation, this museum constitutes a formidable model for future projects of Islamic art display (Figure 24).[25] Heeding the issue of budget, it must be said that it is always possible to use, as this museum does, films animating walls for both storytelling and fashioning atmospheres, to increase the role of sound and space, and to play with the illusionist tricks of images and photography in order to enrich or complete the objects' phenomenology. In conclusion, what is basically needed, alongside understanding the all-embracing power of the faith in Islamic culture, is creativity and the loosening of the mainstream secularist scholarship's yoke on the curatorial practice.

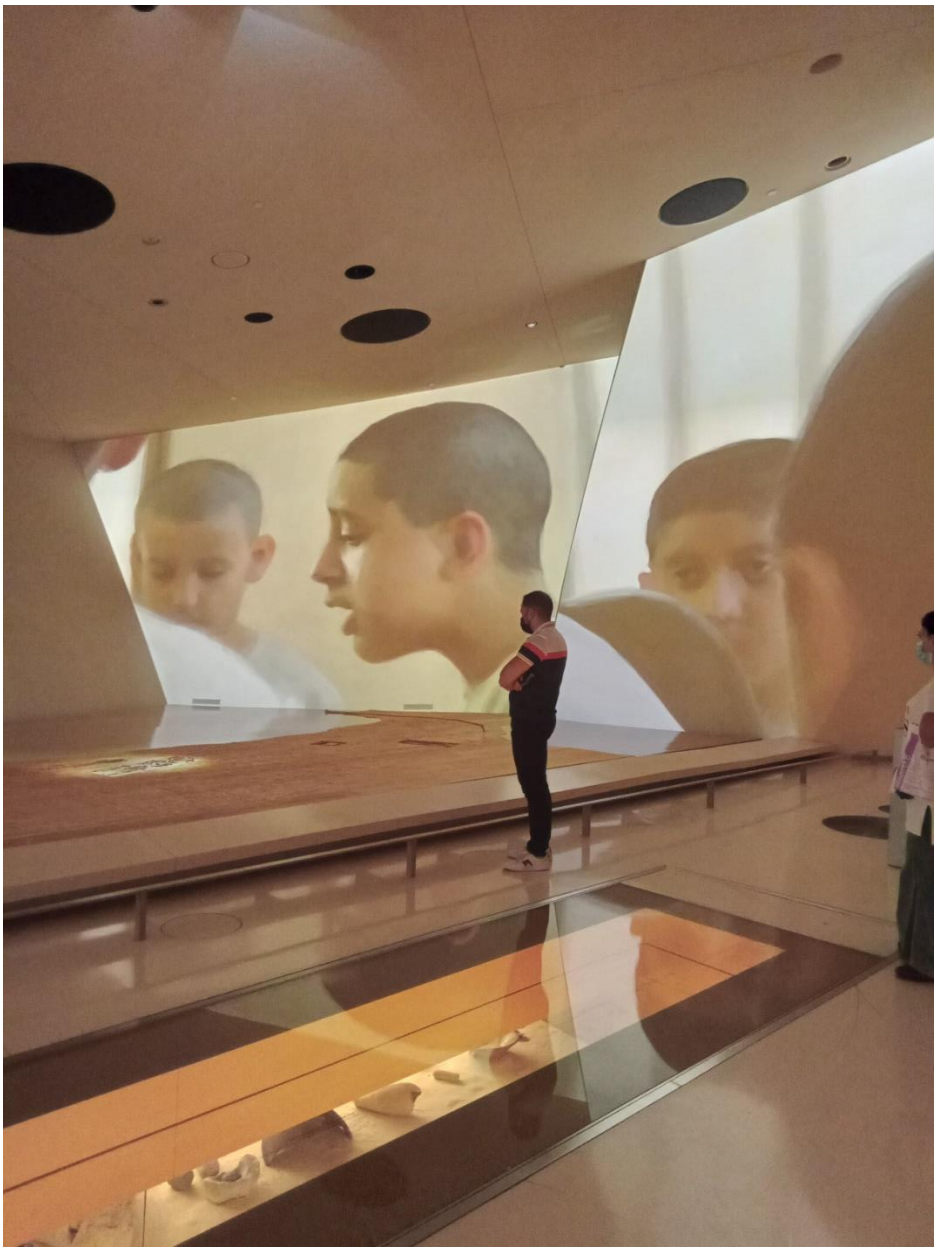


Figure 24. Youngsters reciting the Qur'an, National Museum of Qatar, Doha. Photo of the author.

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Notes

1 For terminological clarity, art and artifacts form two distinct categories that belong to the broad ensemble of things called "material culture". While all artworks are artifacts, namely objects created for a certain function with certain skills or a certain artistry, the reverse is not true. Unlike artifacts, artworks present a scope of meaning and cognitivity beyond functional efficacy, possess a metaphysical and affective dimension, and express deep thoughts either articulated by a high level of aesthetic research and experiment or as the result of a long history of these researching and experimenting processes. The ontological line separating art from artifacts is, however, mobile and often blurred.

2 This issue has been discussed in a variety of publications: in the paragraph entitled "Social-historical Background of Islamic Art Curation," in (Gonzalez 2018; Demerdash-Fatemi 2020, pp. 15–30; Shatanawi 2012a, pp. 177–92; Grinell et al. 2019, pp. 370–71).

3 Rebecca Bridgman in the booklet of the conference, *From Malacca to Manchester* 20. See also (Weber 2018, pp. 237–61; Grinell et al. 2019, pp. 370–71).

4 The state of affairs of the studies and curation of non-Western material cultures obviously varies depending on the areas concerned. This discussion deals only with the Islamic scholarship and curatorship. For an updated reflection on post-colonialism thought, see (Gandhi 2019).

5 (Shaw 2019, p. 221). See my review of this problematic book in (Gonzalez 2020).

6 Wendy M.K. Shaw holds firmly this view. See (Shaw 2002, pp. 133–55).

7 See the account from the museum's inception in the aftermath of the French Revolution up to nowadays by (Exell 2017, pp. 49–64).

8 A remarkable installation proving this malleability of the museum, "Exposing the Public," was conceptualized and is discussed by (Bal 2006, pp. 525–42).

9 See https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/the-sacred-made-real and https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/11/11/culture/koreanHeritage/pensive-bodhisattva-national-museum-of-korea-pensive-bodhisattva/20211111160231358.html (accessed on 8 March 2022). See also my references to some powerful religious installations in East Asian museums, in particular in Korea, in (Gonzalez 2018). This article critiques some key museums and galleries of Islamic art.

10 (Searle 2009). My own critical description is based on my visit of this show.

11 Here the term "materialism" refers to the recent trend of religious studies that emphasizes the role of objects and materiality in the exercise of piety.

12 I discuss some of these issues in "Islamic Art Curation in Perspective".

13 See the introduction and articles in the online (*Journal of Art Historiography* 2012), "Islamic Art Historiography," and (Lanwerd 2012, p. 206). For a critique of this view see (Ahmed 2015; Gonzalez 2016, pp. 5–14).

14 This term "Islamicate" was famously coined by Marshall Hogdson, in (Hogdson 1974).

15 (Ahmed 2015). A sample of this scholarship also includes (O'Meara 2020; Shatanawi 2014; Akkach 2005; Gonzalez 2001, 2019; Elias 2012).

16 See the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWkyF02YdA4 (accessed on 8 March 2022).

17 Heba Nayel Barakat in the booklet of the conference, *From Malacca to Manchester* p. 34. Mirjam Shatanawi faced similar challenges when she curated and studied the similarly Islamic eclectic collections of the ethnographic Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, ranging from historic and colonial-era artifacts, household items, to popular art and contemporary creations from South East Asia, the Middle East, to Africa and the Caribbean. See (Shatanawi 2014).

18 The literature dealing with this museology is plentiful. See for example, (Rey 2019a, 2019b, 2022; Blessing 2018; Bier 2017).

19 I wish to mention but not to discuss the issue of the representation of Prophet Muhammad in museums that ensued the infamous cartoons affair. For this topic, see (Grinell 2019b, pp. 1–13).

[20] Nasser Rabbat on Twitter, https://twitter.com/nayelshafei/status/1089659395519205376 (accessed on 8 March 2022). See also (Rabbat 2012), https://www.artforum.com/print/201201/the-new-islamic-art-galleries-at-the-metropolitan-museum-of-art-29813 (accessed on 8 March 2022), and (Porter and Greenwood 2020).

[21] (Grinell 2020, p. 31). It must be noted that, in their writings, curators of Islamic art often theorize against didacticism and narrative complexity in the museum, and thereby assert the benefit of the objects' phenomenology. However, they do not follow suit in their practice, as Grinell demonstrates in his sharp critique of the renovated Museum of Islamic art in Berlin in this same article, pp. 38–41.

[22] About this Soudanese lyre, see https://islamicworld.britishmuseum.org/collection/EAF40250/ (accessed on 8 March 2022).

[23] See the accounts on these exhbitions by (Porter and Abdel Haleem 2012; Tamimi Arab 2020, pp. 1–4).

[24] About these new Islamic museums see: (Trevathan 2020, pp. 119–33); and (*Mirrors of Beauty, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia Guide* 2020; Rey 2019a, 2019b; Shaw 2010, pp. 129–31). About the Museum of Islamic art in Doha, see my critique in (Gonzalez 2018). For a collection of concisely critical essays on the museums in Qatar and the Arabian Peninsula, see the (*Journal of Arabian Studies* 2017).

[25] See the report on this museum by (Junker 2020), in this website: https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/off-the-screen-and-off-the-charts-at-qatar-s-newest-museum-20200220-p542qz (accessed on 8 March 2022).

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