

Gülru Necipoğlu, 'The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches', originally published in Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum*, London: Saqi Books, 2012

### **Abstract**

The article examines the shift in the field, since the 1970s, from a predominant focus on the early period of Islamic art and architecture in the 'central zone' of the Fertile Crescent to a broader chronological and geographical scope. This shift has contributed, among other things, to a change of emphasis from artistic unity to variety, accompanied by an increasing diversification of concepts and approaches including dynastic, regional, media-based, textual, theoretical, critical, and historiographical inquiries. The article seeks to address the unresolved methodological tensions arising from the expanded scope of the field, along with concomitant anxieties over the fragmentation of its traditional 'universalism'. It begins by outlining the premises of still prevalent approaches inherited from the construction of the field during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a field rooted in the entangled legacies of Orientalism, nationalism, and dilletantism. The article then reviews recent statements on the state and future of the field before turning to personal reflections on challenges posed by its expanding horizons and its relationship to the Museum.

### **Bio**

Gülru Necipoğlu has been Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Director of the Aga Khan Program of Islamic Architecture at the Department of History of Art and Architecture in Harvard University since 1993, where she earned her PhD in 1986. She specializes in the medieval and early modern periods, with a particular focus on the Mediterranean basin and the Eastern Islamic lands. She is the editor of *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* and *Supplements to Muqarnas*. Her books include *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace* (1991); *The Topkapi Scroll, Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (1995); and *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire* (2005). Her critical interests encompass many subjects, including methodological and historiographical issues in modern constructions of the field of Islamic art.

### **Keywords**

historiography and construction of the field of Islamic Art; inherited discourses of Orientalism, nationalism and dilletantism; future of the Islamic field; Pergamon Museum; layers of meaning in museum objects

# The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches\*

Gülru Necipoğlu

My paper examines the shift in the field of “Islamic Art” since the 1970s, from a focus on the “early period” in the “central zone” of the Islamic lands, to a broader chronological and geographical scope.<sup>1</sup> This shift has contributed to a notable change of emphasis from artistic unity to variety. Whereas the typical question asked before the 1970s was “What is Islamic about Islamic art?”, inquiries thereafter began to foreground diversity, hybridity, and intercultural exchange. This shift has been accompanied by a diversification of concepts and approaches. Often characterised by interdisciplinary frameworks and a close engagement with written sources, avenues of research are increasingly emphasising contextual factors ranging from questions of agency (of patrons, artists, or ecology) and modes of artistic creation and reception, to socio-political, religio-cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the production of meaning and value. This contextualising trend has also promoted the historicisation of concepts of aesthetics, visuality, spatiality, and materiality. More recently, “thing theory” has started to bring the phenomenology of objects to the centre of art historical inquiry, thereby counterbalancing the “power of images” with the “potency of the object.” The first part of my paper outlines the traditional approaches we have inherited from the construction of the field of Islamic art during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The second part comments on some reviews on the state of the Islamic field, before I turn to my own reflections on its expanding horizons. The concluding third part addresses the layers of meaning in museum objects and the question “Islamic Art or Material Culture?”.

Let us begin, then, with the early historiography of the field, a topic that has turned into a subject of inquiry in its own right. Several overviews have situated the birth of the field of Islamic art at the interstices of Oriental studies, epigraphy, archaeology, museology, the art market, and art history. The approaches that emerged at that time can be correlated, in my view, with the entangled legacies of three paradigms that are still prevalent in our day, namely, Orientalism, nationalism, and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an adapted version of a keynote lecture delivered on 14 January 2010 at the workshop *Layers of Islamic Art and the Museum Context*, organized by Stefan Weber and held at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. It revisits parts of another keynote address delivered at the First Biennial Symposium of the Historians of Islamic Art Association (HIAA), held at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Titled *Reflections on the Birth and Growth of the Field Called Islamic Art*, the address was delivered on 17 October 2008, on the second day of the symposium, dedicated to the theme “Unity and Variety Once More: Time, Place, Material.” On that occasion, I revisited the familiar trope of “unity and variety,” with personal reflections on the birth and growth of the field known as “Islamic Art.” In the current paper I reframe some of those reflections by taking into consideration the dimension of museology.

dilettantism.<sup>2</sup> Although it is not so easy to disentangle the intertwined discourses of these approaches, I shall briefly consider each of them separately.

The basic connection between Orientalist discourses and the very constitution of the field of Islamic art has come under scrutiny since the publication of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* in 1978.<sup>3</sup> That was the year before I started my graduate studies at the Aga Khan Program of Islamic Architecture in Harvard University, upon completing a BA in Medieval and Renaissance art history. The Orientalist connection is apparent in Banister Fletcher's famous "Tree of Architecture" and in the table of contents of most surveys of world art [fig. 1]. Their common denominator is the essentialist representation of the Islamic visual tradition from a Eurocentric Orientalist perspective, based on a grand East-West divide. This perspective is rooted in the nineteenth-century classification of Islamic art as an offshoot of the shared late antique artistic heritage of Europe, which after fusing Byzantine and Sasanian elements became transformed into an exotic non-Western tradition, particularly notable for its aniconism and its decorative impulses.

The essentialisation of "Saracenic" architecture as a "non-historical style," permanently fixed in a medieval past, finds its unforgettable visual expression in Fletcher's family tree, in which it is grouped with other non-Western styles, including Chinese, Japanese, and Central American. According to him, these styles emphasise "decorative schemes, unlike those of Europe which have progressed by the successive solution of constructive problems."<sup>4</sup> Hence, the non-progressing, decorative "Saracenic style" (to which Fletcher also refers as "Mahometan") and its timeless companions stand in stark contrast to the historically evolving, dynamic Western architectural heritage. Only the latter culminates in Modernism because modernity is denied to the "others" of the Euro-American artistic tradition.

Most survey books of world art perpetuate this nineteenth-century taxonomy by classifying the whole Islamic visual heritage, spanning nearly a millennium and a half, as an essentially medieval tradition that is often accompanied by early Christian and Byzantine art.<sup>5</sup> Robert Nelson has observed that Byzantine art was subjected to a similar Orientalist classification, as the eastern predecessor of Western medieval art, even though both traditions evolved simultaneously until the 1453 fall of

<sup>2</sup> Vernoit, Stephen, "Islamic Art and Architecture: An Overview of Scholarship and Collecting, c. 1850-c. 1950", *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850 – 1950*, Stephen Vernoit ed., London 2000, pp. 1–61; Bozdoğan, Sibel and Necipoğlu, Gülru, "Entangled Discourses: Scrutinizing Orientalist and Nationalist Legacies in the Architectural Historiography of the 'Lands of Rum'", *Muqarnas* vol. 24, 2007, pp. 1–6. Also see other articles in the same volume edited by myself and Bozdoğan, a special issue on the proceedings of our symposium "Historiography and Ideology: Architectural Heritage of the 'Lands of Rum'", conceptualised in 2002 and held in 2006 at Harvard University with a generous grant from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva.

<sup>3</sup> Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York 1978. For a recent critique of Said's book, see Irwin, Robert, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents*, Woodstock & New York 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Cited from Fletcher, Sir Banister, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method for the Student, Craftsman, and Amateur*, 9th ed., New York and London 1924, iii, p. 784. The Tree appeared in numerous editions of this popular work between 1896 and 1961: see Nalbantoğlu, Gülsüm Baydar, "Toward Postcolonial Openings: Rereading Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture*", *Assemblage*, vol. 35, 1998, pp. 6–17.

<sup>5</sup> The medievalisation of Islam in surveys of world art is discussed in Necipoğlu, Gülru, "Creation of a National Genius: Sinan and the Historiography of 'Classical' Ottoman Architecture", *Muqarnas*, vol. 24, 2007, pp. 141–42.

Constantinople and beyond. In survey books, Byzantine art is routinely followed by Islamic art, both of them spatially mediating between the East and West and temporally relegated to the transition between the late antique and early medieval past. After this transitional interlude, the grand narrative returns back to medieval Europe and resumes with the uninterrupted evolution of the Western tradition up to the present.<sup>6</sup>

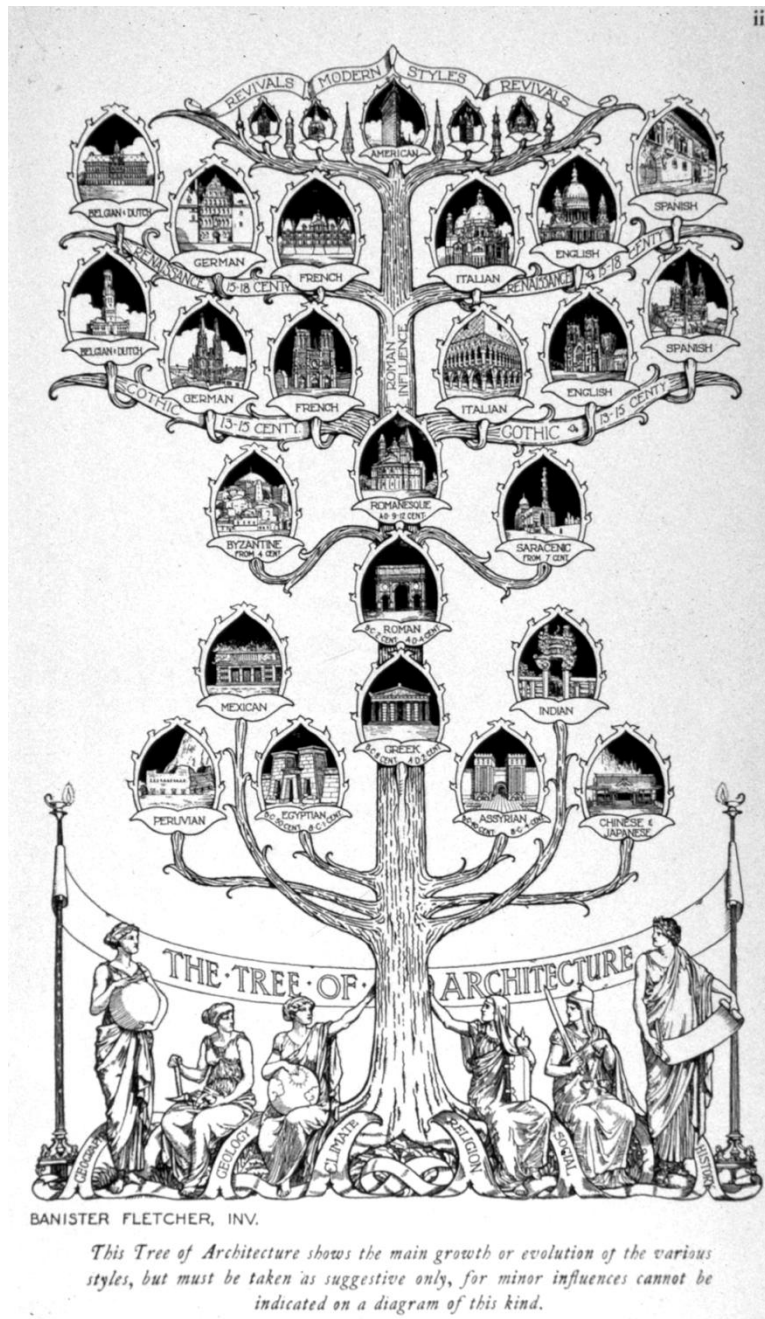


Figure 1 "The Tree of Architecture" (After Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, New York and London 1924, p. iii)

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, Robert, "The Map of Art History," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 79, no. 1, pp. 28–40; and "Living on the Byzantine Borders of Western Art," *Gesta*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 3–11.

The denial of Islamic art's coevalness with post-medieval Western European art manifests itself in surveys through the omission of artworks produced after 1700 or 1800. Moreover, masterpieces from the early modern period, like the Selimiye mosque in Edirne (1569–75) or the Taj Mahal in Agra (1632–64), are anachronistically medievalised through their inclusion in a generic chapter on the Middle Ages, instead of appearing where they chronologically belong, that is, in the Renaissance and Baroque periods respectively (a non-inclusive periodisation based on European styles). With a few exceptions, survey books either overlook, or dismiss as uninventive, the dialogue of Ottoman mosques with the Romano-Byzantine tradition, which was concurrently being reinterpreted in early modern Italy. This double standard reflects the presumption that the classical Mediterranean artistic heritage, once shared with medieval Islamic art, becomes the exclusive preserve of Europe after the Renaissance.<sup>7</sup>

The medievalisation of Islamic art is also deeply rooted in the self-definition of the field itself from the time of its inception. This brings us back to the Orientalist paradigm, with its holistic conception of Islamic art, within which European scholars were the first to classify the bewildering diversity of pre-modern visual cultures in the Islamic lands. A perennial problem implicit in this concept is that of a dubious universalism, ambiguously attributed to the common denominator of religion or religious culture. The preoccupation with an essentialised Muslim identity privileged formative origins over processes of historical development and stressed artistic unity over diversity. The early medieval period in the heartland of the Fertile Crescent was posited as a “classical moment” when the norms of typically Islamic art supposedly became fixed in the Abbasid milieu around the ninth century, which text-based Oriental studies had singled out as the “golden age” of Muslim civilisation. This in turn, led to the ranking of artworks from later periods and outlying regions as less original derivatives of formerly established prototypes.

The desire to retrospectively impose unity on the diversity of Islamic visual cultures was accompanied by another lasting legacy of Orientalism: the tendency to account for variety not in terms of complex socio-historical and artistic processes but by timeless ethno-national categories with racial overtones. These a-historical categories doubly essentialised the holistic notion of Islamic art as a monolithic entity with subtle variations, partitioned into regional “schools” reflecting supposedly innate national character traits, such as Arabian, Moresque, Persian, Turkish, and Indian. Echoing the Hegelian concept of artistic styles as embodiments of national “spirit” or “genius,” an example of this hierarchical classification is seen in *The Grammar of Ornament*, in which Owen Jones ranked the so-called Arabian and Moresque idioms above all others, characterising the rest as inferior and derivative mixed styles [fig. 2].<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Necipoğlu, “Historiography of ‘Classical’ Ottoman Architecture,” pp. 141–42. Noting that Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire were conflated in the European imagination, Nelson writes: “On the one hand Byzantium and Islam are seen as relevant chapters in the rise of the West; on the other hand they function as foils for that history and thus must be isolated from the principal story” of world art, “written from the vantage point of Western Europe and America.” See his “Byzantine Borders of Western Art,” pp. 5, 8. The medievalisation of Cairo is analysed in Sanders, Paula, *Creating Medieval Cairo: Empire, Religion, and Architectural Preservation in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, Cairo and New York 2008; and AlSayyad, Nezar, Irene A. Bierman, Rabbat, Nasser eds., *Making Cairo Medieval*, Lanham, Md. 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, Owen, *The Grammar of Ornament*, London 1856.





Figure 2 (A-E): Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, (London 1856)

Due to their Indo-European, Aryan pedigree, the Persian and Indo-Persian schools were eventually ranked above those of the Semitic Arabs and nomadic Turks. In this artistic hierarchy of peoples, coloured by European colonial ambitions in the disintegrating territories of the Ottoman and Mughal Empires, the Turks came to occupy the lowest position. The avidly collected and emulated artefacts of the Ottomans were therefore ironically labelled in museums as Persian or Turco-Persian.<sup>9</sup> Arthur Upham Pope's 1931 *Introduction to Persian Art*, for instance, stereotyped the Seljuq Turks as "lacking in the graces of civilisation" and a "barbaric race" unacquainted with the arts. The same bias subsequently became integrated into the master narrative of Pope's multivolume *Survey of Persian Art*, with its construction of a timeless Persian creative genius, sustained over the millennia despite invasions by nomadic Turks and Mongols.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Vernoit, *Discovering Islamic Art*, pp. 6–7, 19, 22, 101–4; Rémi Labrusse ed., *Purs Décor? Arts de l'Islam, regards du XIXe siècle. Collections des Arts Décoratifs*, Paris 2007, 234–36, 276–93.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Rizvi, Kishwar, "Art History and the Nation: Arthur Upham Pope and the Discourse of 'Persian Art'" *Muqarnas*, vol. 24, 2007, p. 56; Pope, Arthur Upham and Ackerman, Phyllis eds., *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, London and New York 1938–39.

In short, the attempt to explain the unity and variety of Islamic art through a combination of pan-Islamic and national character traits, either exalting or disparaging the artistic sensibilities of particular peoples, constitutes two sides of the same Orientalist coin. Both sides of the coin have done injustice to the cultural complexity of Islamic lands ruled by multiethnic, multilinguistic, and multiconfessional polities prior to the advent of modern nations. The ethnicised aesthetic judgments of European publications often became mirrored in the nationalist narratives of native scholars in predominantly Muslim geographies, alongside pan-Islamic discourses on the timeless unity of the arts.

Let us turn, then, to the second major paradigm in the field of Islamic art: that of nationalism, which takes modern nations as its starting point in the construction of diachronic geographical continuities in the arts from a teleological perspective. An early example of this approach is Celal Esad Arseven's book on *Turkish Art* from its ancient central Asian origins to the present, published in Istanbul in 1928, soon after the founding of the modern Republic of Turkey. Arseven rejects the universal concept of "Islamic art" as tantamount to classifying the whole Western tradition as "Christian art." Nevertheless, he adopts precisely the same essentialist categories introduced in European publications to demonstrate the distinctive "national character" of Turkish art, which "in Europe is falsely considered a servile imitation of Persian, Arab and Byzantine Art." Arseven's ethnocentric nationalist perspective owed a great deal to the efforts of German and Austro-Hungarian art historians to promote the undervalued field of Turkish art at the turn of the twentieth century, when strong political alliances joined together these multinational empires that would collapse soon after the First World War. The Austrian historian of Islamic art, Ernst Diez, who founded the art history department of Istanbul University, wrote a similar textbook in 1946 titled *Turkish Art from the Beginning to the Present*, in which he lamented the lack of a multivolume work comparable to that of Pope's *Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (1938–39).<sup>11</sup>

Both native and foreign authors, then, jointly contributed to the development of Orientalist and nationalist scholarship, which also emerged in Egypt and other modern nation states with an Islamic visual patrimony. This phenomenon challenges the false dichotomy set up in some overviews of the field, which claim that while Western scholars have put forward a universal notion of Islamic art, their parochial native counterparts in Muslim countries have tended to proceed along narrow, national lines. A recent challenge to that claim is the proliferation of universal museums of Islamic art in the Gulf region and elsewhere, with their proud appropriation of the pan-Islamic artistic heritage as a symbol of national or communal prestige. Discourses on the timeless unity of the arts have also been adopted since the late nineteenth century by Islamic revivalist or traditionalist groups in different countries.<sup>12</sup>

The third paradigm, which I referred to as dilettantism, encompasses the enthusiasm for Islamic art that was heightened with the taste for romanticism, exoticism, and eclecticism among "amateurs," including artists, architects, collectors,

<sup>11</sup> For Arseven and Diez, see Necipoğlu, "Historiography of 'Classical' Ottoman Architecture," pp. 161–63, 167–73. Pope's book is cited in no. 10 above.

<sup>12</sup> An Egyptian national perspective is presented in Creswell, K. A. C., *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 2 vols., Oxford 1952–60. This false dichotomy is analysed in Bozdoğan and Necipoğlu, "Entangled Discourses," p. 1.



art dealers and travellers.<sup>13</sup> Its still vibrant legacy is that of art appreciation, based on sensual delight and formal aesthetic criteria that transcend historical or religio-cultural explanations. This approach overlaps with the popular view that Islamic art is predominantly decorative and hence devoid of meaning or contextual specificity.<sup>14</sup> The nineteenth-century aestheticisation of the Islamic visual tradition facilitated its adoption as a neutral transcultural model for the industrial arts and architectural design. The abstract values of Islamic art and calligraphy have also been and continue to be a source of inspiration for modern artists from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. The current art historical interest in cross-cultural aesthetics and visual autonomy may add new levels of theoretical sophistication to purely aesthetic evaluations of Islamic art, which continue to prosper and sometimes resonate with neo-Orientalist orientations.

Since the legacies of the three paradigms I have outlined are still alive, they inform present debates on the state of the field of Islamic art addressed in the second part of my paper. Richard Ettinghausen and Oleg Grabar, the two pioneers of Islamic art history in the United States, were among the first to write essays on the state of the field, observing its growth and the inevitable emergence of specialised subfields. Written in 1951 and 1976 respectively, both essays were titled “Islamic Art and Archaeology.” Ettinghausen and Grabar agreed on two agendas: first, that the field could not remain insular from the study of pre-Islamic and contemporary cultures; and second, the need to analyse written primary sources to move beyond formal considerations to wider aspects of meaning and cultural context.<sup>15</sup>

Grabar’s thoughtful opening essay in the first volume of *Muqarnas*, which he founded in 1983, acknowledged that the overall picture of the field was not as cosy as previously imagined. This essay, titled “Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art,” dropped archaeology from the name of the field, thereby signalling the growing prominence of art historical methodologies in the United States. The essay also acknowledged the unmanageable and ever-expanding scope of the field of Islamic art, spanning all continents and all periods including contemporary times, which no single person could hope to control anymore. Criticising the conceptual pitfalls of survey books of Islamic art, characterised by unfounded generalisations and the omission of the last three centuries, Grabar admitted that we do not possess an acceptable framework for defining the whole range of this artistic tradition. He also noted the traditional bias of focusing on the early centuries of Islam, with its concomitant

<sup>13</sup> The milieu of dilettantes, amateurs, and “Islamophiles” is brilliantly contextualised in Labrusse, *Purs Décors?* and Volait, Mercedes, *Fous du Caire: Excentriques, architectes & amateurs d’art en Égypte, 1867–1914*, Guarnizo 2009.

<sup>14</sup> A recent exhibition adopting this purely visual, decontextualised approach is Sheila S. Blair Bloom and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Cosmophilia: Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen*, Chestnut Hill, MA: 2006. Another exhibition in 2007, on the arts of Islam in the collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, preferred a contextualising approach that questioned the nineteenth-century European concept of a purely decorative Islamic visual culture: see Labrusse, *Purs Décors?*.

<sup>15</sup> Ettinghausen had been a museum assistant who participated in the installation of Islamic collections at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin before immigrating to the United States. Ettinghausen, Richard, “Islamic Art and Archaeology”, *Near Eastern Culture and Society*, T. Cuyler Young ed., Princeton, N.J. 1951, pp. 17–47; Grabar, Oleg, “Islamic Art and Archaeology”, *The Study of the Middle East*, Leonard Binder ed., New York 1976, pp. 229–63.

emphasis on the Arab world, and speculated that the increasing concentration of research on later periods, featuring richer written sources in diverse languages, was bound to further sharpen an awareness of regional and temporal differences. In his usual enthusiasm, he greeted the expanding scope of the field as a positive development: "Traditional scholarship need not necessarily despair. It can, on the contrary, be a healthy sign that the field of Islamic art should be broken up into subdivisions... Unfortunately this diversification of competence and learning so taken for granted in biology or physics disappoints the expectations of those who, for whatever reason, seek knowledge in Islamic art."<sup>16</sup>

Such a disappointment was, in fact, voiced in the most recent comprehensive essay on the state of the field by Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair. Published in *Art Bulletin* in 2003, it was provocatively titled "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field." This essay exposed the growing internal tensions of the Islamic field, arising from differences of approach on which the authors made their preferences rather clear. While acknowledging that "Islamic art" as an umbrella term poses inevitable problems, particularly for later periods, Blair and Bloom did not critique the premises of the field's canon, but rather lamented the obstacles facing its preservation.<sup>17</sup> That canon has recently been consolidated by a flurry of survey books on Islamic art and architecture published since the 1990s, several of them written by Blair and Bloom, who also edited the monumental Islamic entries in the *Dictionary of Art*. Their "Mirage" essay therefore seems permeated with canonical anxieties, reflecting a concern to protect and control the field's all-embracing framework, which is the very basis of the traditional survey as a genre. Needless to say, the same framework also informs universal museums of Islamic art that complement surveys by "visualising" the canonical narratives of art history for the general public, a subject to which I shall return later.<sup>18</sup>

Blair and Bloom highlight the issue of unity and variety as a central problem of the field in the first two subtitles under which publications are analysed, namely, "universalism" and "regions." A preference is expressed for the "universalist

<sup>16</sup> Grabar, Oleg, "Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art", *Muqarnas*, vol. 1, 1983, pp. 1–14, cited from pp. 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> Blair, Sheila S. and Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field", *Art Bulletin* vol. 85, no. 1, pp. 152–84, esp. pp. 171–78. Shorter but more critical articles challenging the canon of the field include Rabbat, Nasser, "Islamic Art as a Field of Historical Inquiry", *AD Architectural Design* vol. 74, no. 6, pp. 18–23; Flood, Barry, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art", *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, Elizabeth C. Mansfield ed., New York 2007, pp. 31–53. I would like to thank Sibel Bozdoğan for sharing with me the draft of her unpublished review of "The Mirage of Islamic Art," when we critiqued some of its arguments in our joint essay, "Entangled Discourses," pp. 2, 5 (n. 3, 7, 9), 6 (n. 13, 15).

<sup>18</sup> Accessibility to the public through surveys and general books providing the "larger picture," which publishers want to sell to a broader audience, are prioritised in Blair and Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art," pp. 164, 175, 177. Modern global surveys of art history are defined as "popular codifiers and guardians of the canon...those curious unions of aesthetics, pedagogy, and commerce," in Nelson, "Byzantine Borders of Western Art," p. 4. Recent surveys of Islamic art include Brend, Barbara, *Islamic Art*, Cambridge, MA 1991; Blair, Sheila S. and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800*, New Haven, CT 1994; Blair, Sheila S. and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Islamic Arts*, London 1997; Irwin, Robert, *Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture and the Literary World*, New York 1997; Hillenbrand, Robert, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 1999; Hattstein, Marcus and Peter Delius, *Islam: Art and Architecture*, Cologne 2000; Ettinghausen, Richard, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Medina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650–1250*, New Haven, CT 2001. Also see Islamic entries edited by Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Dictionary of Art*, New York 1996.

approach” adopted in comprehensive survey books, an approach that “sees all the arts produced by Muslims everywhere as reflecting the universal verities of Islam, just as God’s ineffable unity encompasses the infinite diversity of his creation.” This unproblematised religious definition of Islamic art, characterised by unity in variety, comes close to the neo-Orientalist perspective promoted in publications connected with the 1976 “World of Islam Festival” in London, from which the mystical Sufi dimension had been subtracted.<sup>19</sup> Such a definition overlooks the fact that neither the producers nor the consumers of what is known as Islamic art were entirely Muslim.

Blair and Bloom express in their essay a nostalgia for the traditional unity of what has grown to be a frustratingly “unwieldy” field since the 1970s. This longing for the uncomplicated simplicity of inherited frameworks entails a fear of fragmentation. According to the authors, the growing scope and diversity of the discipline of Islamic art is enriching but turns us into centipedes “with many feet in many fields” and ultimately “threatens to pull our field apart so that there will be nothing left at all.”<sup>20</sup> Defining themselves as medievalists, Blair and Bloom accept the by now canonical expansion of the field beyond 1500 since the 1990s, but firmly resist a further broadening of scope after 1800.<sup>21</sup> They also tend to marginalise new interpretive and theoretical approaches as trendy or subjective, given their stated preference for “traditional methods.”<sup>22</sup>

A final point in the “Mirage” essay that I would like to consider is the description of the field as unwieldy and the remark that “‘Islamic art’ is a poor name for an ill-defined subject.”<sup>23</sup> Is Islamic art indeed a mirage? And how unwieldy a field

<sup>19</sup> Blair and Bloom, “Mirage of Islamic Art”, pp. 158-60. The “World of Islam Festival” was, in fact, taken as a model in the “Cosmophilia” exhibition curated by Blair and Bloom, where objects were grouped ahistorically according to “four themes of decoration” (figures, writing, geometry, vegetation and the arabesque); “hybrids” formed a fifth category. The exhibition catalogue explains that this approach is based on the fourfold taxonomy of the exhibition *The Arts of Islam*, held in 1976 at the Haywood Gallery, London, whose catalogue preface proposed to “define the essential character of Islamic art”, see *Cosmophilia*, 13. For a critique of this neo-Orientalist approach, see Necipoğlu “L’idée de décor dans les régimes de visualité islamiques,” Labrusse, ed., *Purs Decors?*, pp. 10, 21 (n. 4). The wider phenomenon of neo-Orientalism is analysed in Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, London and New York 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Blair and Bloom, “Mirage of Islamic Art”, p. 178; see also pp. 156–58, 175–76.

<sup>21</sup> Blair and Bloom, pp. 174-76. According to the authors, the field expanded gradually to include “later periods and peripheral regions” in the 1990s, prior to which historians of Islamic art were trained as medievalists, p. 174. They reductively attribute the interest in “moving away from the remote early regions in the central Arab lands that were once the staple of courses on Islamic art toward more recent periods and regions” to a search for heritage by “newly assimilated and immigrant students,” which threatens to transform “the study of Islamic art, once a branch of the humanistic study of art history open to all, into one of many fields of area or ethnic studies, sometimes organised along national or ethnic lines,” pp. 174-76. Flood traces the colonial origins of excluding art produced after 1800 from the canon of Islamic art, mentioning the opposition of Blair and Bloom to the expansion of that canon, along with the differing perspectives of other scholars including himself. See Flood, “From the Prophet to Postmodernism?” pp. 31–47, 52 n. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Blair and Bloom, “Mirage of Islamic Art”, pp. 169, 174. The authors express skepticism about “polemical explanations” of calligraphy in terms of political and religious factors (pp. 168–69); the “current fashion to privilege the text over the work of art itself,” which requires “fancy footwork” to link written and visual sources (p. 171); “sectarian interpretations” that “often tell us more about the investigator than the investigated” (pp. 173–74, 168–69); and “theoretical approaches popular in other fields of art history,” which may supplement “traditional methods” but “must begin with a thorough knowledge of the works of art themselves and the circumstances under which they were produced” (p. 174).

<sup>23</sup> Blair and Bloom, p. 174.

is it anyway? As the authors rightly observe, before the field was invented by European scholars, there was no indigenous tradition in the Islamic lands of studying Islamic art in holistic fashion. However, by the same token one can argue that there was no indigenous tradition in Christendom for studying Western art as an all-encompassing field before the emergence of the modern discipline of art history in nineteenth-century Europe, which soon thereafter flourished in the Islamic lands. The absence of a totalising concept of Islamic art before the modern era is therefore *not* a peculiarity of our own field. At least its invention is not more peculiar than the mirage of Western art, a category that was invented around the same time, along with its subordinate non-Western subfields. The ambiguous appellation “Islamic Art” is indeed misleading, even though no satisfactory alternative has emerged. However, there seems to be a general consensus that the diverse and multifaceted visual cultures grouped under this problematic rubric do belong together in many ways, whether one prefers to stress unity, variety, or a combination of both, conveniently fulfilled by the trope of “unity in variety.” In this respect, too, Islamic art is not too different from Western art, an equally unwieldy subject with an unsatisfactory label that many have disowned without fashioning a better substitute.<sup>24</sup>

The chronological span and geographical extent of Islamic art is as vast as that of the Western tradition, which was never limited to Europe – given its ancient Near Eastern roots, its spread over three continents in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and its expansion to the Americas and other regions in the colonial era. Islamic art is often considered unique because it is not confined to a region, a dynasty, a nation, an ethnic group, a period, or a style.<sup>25</sup> But in all these respects it resembles Western art which, like Islamic art, is not a self-evident entity but a constructed category based on cultural or civilisational identification. The point I am trying to make is that we should perhaps recognise the peculiarity of repeated attempts to provide particularistic definitions of “what is Islamic art,” a question that equally complex fields like Western art do not feel obliged to address.

The analogy with Western art is especially relevant for coming to terms with the unwieldiness of the Islamic field, which is inevitably compartmentalised into subfields and brings with it a comparable need to both specialise and generalise. Since most Islamicists who occupy the increasing number of academic and museum positions in the United States have been trained as generalists, in addition to pursuing their own specialisations, I see no growing danger in the field’s fragmentation, given that it was never unified to begin with. The expansion of Islamic art history into a loosely interconnected, multifocal, and multivocal arena of inquiry is, in my opinion, the mark of the increasing maturation of a truly stimulating youthful field, rather than the symptom of an unruly discipline in crisis. I think a forward-looking starting point is to frame current debates within a critique of the canon itself, a critique capable of

<sup>24</sup> For the “Western canon” debates, see the special issue “Rethinking the Canon,” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 78, no. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Islamic art is most easily defined by what it is not, “neither a region, nor a period, nor a school, nor a movement, nor a dynasty, but the visual culture of a place and time when the people (or at least their leaders) espoused a particular religion,” according to Blair and Bloom, “Mirage of Islamic Art”, p. 153. The field of Islamic art is often viewed “as a curious anomaly because...it is neither a period nor a style, it is not restricted to one country or region.” Blair and Bloom, p. 155. A variant of this definition of Islamic art is provided by Oleg Grabar in “Islamic Art, I. Definitions,” *Dictionary of Art* (1996) 15, p. 99.

accommodating both traditional and revisionist approaches. The publication *Islamic Art and the Museum* presents an ideal opportunity to critically reflect on the founding narratives of the field and the premises within which it operates. Since I consider it well worth preserving the broadly constituted field called Islamic art, it is in a constructive and self-reflexive spirit that I shall propose three initial practical steps, which are deceptively simple and may partly help to alleviate present frustrations. The first step is to start thinking of Islamic art as a multicultural “civilisational” category, just like Western art, instead of reifying it as the art of a religion or religious culture propagated by ethnologised peoples. The second step is to rethink the canon, and the third step is remapping the field through chronological structuring principles.<sup>26</sup>

Based on over two decades of teaching Islamic art and architecture, I feel that there is a need to expand the scope of the canon to include regions and periods traditionally excluded from survey books and museums that claim to be universal. Imagining creative ways of incorporating such excluded areas as East and Southeast Asia, or sub-Saharan and West Africa into the canon would contribute to a fuller understanding of the global interconnectivity of pre-modern Islamic visual cultures, with their diverse fusions of trans-regional and regional elements. Such a perspective would furthermore intersect with the current stress on global connections, addressed in a recent survey of world architecture organised along a timeline model and in revisionist studies of Roman and Renaissance art.<sup>27</sup> This trend is informed by postcolonial and post-modern critiques of Eurocentrism that have propelled a shift from the former totalising conception of cultures as self-contained unified wholes to a new emphasis on diversity, permeable cultural boundaries, and cosmopolitanism. Moreover, the stress on connectivity and mobility resonates with multidisciplinary discussions concerning the global interactions of the contemporary world: discussions to which pre-modern Islamic art has much to contribute, given its dialogical exchanges with the arts of Europe, Asia and Africa, and more recently America. Furthermore, the rising international interest in modern and contemporary art, whether it is labelled Islamic or not, promises to provide fresh perspectives on the nature of modernity, the global, and the local.

My third proposal is to reconfigure the chronology of Islamic art with an aim to more clearly delineate its historicity and contextuality. Given the ahistorical and essentialist categories around which the field was initially constructed, its chronology is often vaguely defined in terms of early, middle, and late periods, or other equally vague terms. Periodisation becomes even murkier if the temporal scope of the field is extended beyond 1800, the cut off date in most survey books and museums. Surveys generally organise information chronologically in terms of geographical or dynastic frameworks, or a combination of both. An alternative could be a more neutral slicing of

<sup>26</sup> For rethinking the canon, see Bozdoğan and Necipoğlu, “Entangled Discourses”, pp. 1–2; Flood, “From the Prophet to Postmodernism?”, pp. 44–47; Çelik, Zeynep, “Colonialism, Orientalism, and the Canon”, *Art Bulletin*, vol. 78, no. 2, pp. 202–5.

<sup>27</sup> Ching, Francis D.K., Mark M. Jarzombek, and Vikramaditya Prakash, *A Global History of Architecture*, Hoboken, NJ 2007; Hingley, Richard, *Globalizing Roman Culture: Unity, Diversity and Empire*, London and New York 2005; MacLean, Gerald ed., *Re-Orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East*, London 2005; Jardine, Lisa and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West*, Ithaca, NY 2000; Howard, Deborah, *Venice & the East: The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture 1100–1500*, New Haven, CT and London 2000.

the field that is based neither on regions nor on dynasties, categories that tend to be collapsed with modern national geographies and ethnic identities.

One of several possibilities is to subdivide the field into chronological slices, with each slice constituting a relatively coherent time zone, spanning three to four centuries, that comprises specific configurations of regions and polities extending throughout the Islamic lands. Combining temporal with spatial, socio-cultural, and artistic dimensions, these time zones could generate synchronic “geohistories” of Islamic art.<sup>28</sup> Such a perspective would counterbalance the predominance of diachronic approaches that have constructed geographical continuities from ancient times to the present within modern national territories by deliberately masking ruptures and intercultural artistic exchanges, both internal and external. Periodisation may therefore increase the dialogue between “separate enclaves” of scholarship that rarely communicate with each other according to a recent assessment of the field by Grabar, which underscores the need to “improve contacts between many sub-fields of study or regions.”<sup>29</sup> From a practical point of view, establishing more clearly defined periods may act as an antidote to the field’s perceived tendency toward dispersal by officially acknowledging that no single person can claim equal proficiency in every period. Without necessarily giving up the need to generalise, this acknowledgment would validate each period as equally significant and “normalise” the field along with its ongoing non-canonical practices.

The four time zones I have in mind constitute a highly flexible matrix, with chronologically and geographically fluid boundaries, modifiable with plus or minus fifty years. I deliberately named them according to common categories coined for Western history, because I do not believe that the Islamic lands were immersed in different time zones of their own.<sup>30</sup> Such an elastic scheme would facilitate a more effective integration of the Islamic field into coeval periods of global art history from which it has been excluded. The scheme I am proposing can also promote more rigorously historicised investigations of the field’s own specific internal dynamics, cutting across regional, dynastic, and media-based inquiries that are, needless to say, crucial and indispensable.

The first time zone, between ca. 650 and ca. 1050, corresponds to the late antique and early medieval periods. It is characterised by a transition from the universal caliphates of the Umayyads and Abbasids to the three competing regional caliphates of the late Abbasids, Spanish Umayyads, and Fatimids, with their similar yet distinguishable artistic orientations and cultural politics. The second time zone, from ca. 1050 to ca. 1450, encompasses the medieval and late medieval periods, which saw

<sup>28</sup> For the problems of periodisation, especially with the expansion of art history to a global dimension, and the preference for a “geohistory” combining time and space, see DaCosta Kaufmann, Thomas, “Malaise dans la périodisation”, *Perspective* 4, 2008, pp. 597–601. See other essays in this volume, dedicated to the subject “La périodisation en histoire de l’art”, which was published shortly after my keynote address in Philadelphia and testifies to a revival of interest in concepts of periodisation. The chronology of Islamic art, with its problematic omission of the modern period, is discussed in Volait, Mercedes, “L’art islamique et la problématique de périodisation”, pp. 783–86.

<sup>29</sup> Grabar, Oleg, “What Should One Know about Islamic Art?”, *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43, *Islamic Arts* (Spring 2003), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Fabian, Johannes, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York 1983. For the presumption of a long medieval era in Iran, see Morgan, David, *Medieval Persia, 1040–1797*, New York 1988.

the incorporation of India, Anatolia, and the Balkans into the Islamic domains that became increasingly fragmented into smaller polities, including the Taifas, as well as Berber, Turkic and Kurdish dynasties. While the first half of this time zone features such developments as the so-called Sunni revival under the aegis of the late Abbasid caliphate and the rise of Sufism, its second half is marked by the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258, which constitutes a major turning point. The post-Mongol era initiates a greater cultural and linguistic divide between the Turco-Iranian domains in the east, which absorbed new artistic inputs from China, and the refined Arab courts of the west that resisted the wave of chinoiserie along with other innovations in favour of developing their own distinctive visual idioms. The third period, between ca. 1450 and ca. 1800, corresponds to the early modern era, marked by the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the fall of Nasrid Granada in 1492, together with the rise of Western Europe that triggered more intense patterns of cross-cultural exchange. This period begins with a multiplicity of dynastic court cultures and culminates in the three grand empires of the Safavids, the Ottomans and the Mughals, which coexisted with smaller polities (such as the Saadian dynasty with its African extensions, the Uzbeks in Central Asia, and various other regional powers in Gujarat, Borneo or Java, just to name a few), each of them cultivating their own artistic self-definition and sense of place. Characterised by a growing predominance of court workshops and scriptoria, named artists and architects who emerge from anonymity, and unprecedented types of written sources that reflect a new artistic self-consciousness and individualism, this period carries notable signs of early modernity. The last time zone, from around 1800 to the present, encompasses the modern and contemporary periods. Precipitating the break up of Islamic empires and the emergence of nation states, this is an era of interrelated “isms” such as colonialism, orientalism, occidentalism, nationalism, revivalism, modernism, and postmodernism.

This scheme of periodisation is equally compatible with alternative models, comprising periods named after paradigmatic internal shifts in Islamic history, or time zones subdivided into smaller chronological units.<sup>31</sup> Periodisation is a complex tool with evident limits and somewhat arbitrary. Because it may vary according to vantage point, I recognise the need for elasticity and do not insist on a single canonical model. What I am insisting on, however, is a foregrounding of periodisation to counteract the tenacity of ahistorical and essentialist approaches to Islamic art.<sup>32</sup> The matrix of time

<sup>31</sup> For instance, in a co-edited two-volume anthology, to be published by Finbarr Barry Flood and myself in the Blackwell Companions to Art History series, we have adapted the traditional divide of ca. 1250 to a more nuanced periodisation. Volume I. From the Prophet to the Mongols: 1) The Early Caliphates, Umayyads and the end of Late Antiquity (650-750); 2) Abbasids and the Universal Caliphate (750-900); 3) Fragmentation and the Rival Caliphates of Cordoba, Cairo, and Baghdad (900-1050); 4) "City States" and the later Baghdad Caliphate (1050-1250); Volume II. From the Mongols to Modernism: 1) "Global" Empires and the World System (1250-1450); 2) Early Modern Empires and their Neighbors (1450-1650); 3) Modernity, Empire, Colony, and Nation (1650-1950); 4) Islam, Art, and the Contemporary (1950 to the present). For another scheme of periodisation, see my "Shifting Paradigms in the Palatial Architecture of the Pre-Modern Islamic World", *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 23, 1993, pp. 3-27.

<sup>32</sup> Differing criteria for schemes of periodisation in art history, including political, cultural, and artistic, are discussed in *Perspective* 4 (2008). According to Henri Zerner, periodisation is necessary if one declares oneself to be an art historian; it implies discontinuity and thus poses questions of continuity and change; see his remarks on pp. 622–25. A. Beyer points out that in describing a period, the numerals of dates are less ideological than styles, artistic movements, and words, p. 625. Given the lack of artistic or cultural phenomena

zones proposed above seeks to dissolve the common view that one can posit the existence of a unified “Islamic civilisation and art” until 1250, but not in the post-Mongol era when “it becomes more difficult to speak of any single Islamic art.”<sup>33</sup> From my perspective, it is rather questionable that a single unified Islamic art existed in any period, not even in the formative period so profoundly analysed in Grabar’s seminal book, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, which inspired my conversion to this field.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, each of the time zones I have outlined calls for its own “period study,” analysing the changing modalities of human and nonhuman agency as well as successive processes of formation over the ages. Within every time zone, the reconfigured constellations of Islamic visual cultures can be conceptualised as interlinked networks of communication, with shifting urban centres of artistic production (whether princely or not) in which elements of unity and diversity are self-consciously negotiated and historically reformulated.

Let us now turn to the final section of my paper on layers of meaning in the museum context. The project Stefan Weber presented for the “re-conventionalisation” of the Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin is highly compatible with my periodisation scheme, given that the organisation of objects according to urban centres and subthemes will be guided by a chronology of four distinct periods. This organisational concept is preferable, in my view, to a rigid succession of dynasties treated as hermetically sealed entities and to the rising popularity of thematic schemes (like the basic common denominators of Islamic art or types of decoration) which find their counterparts in some general survey books of the field.<sup>35</sup> Thematic displays of Western art are also becoming fashionable in museums that nuance or abandon chronological presentations, a pragmatic trend that prioritises public accessibility and considers periodisation as no longer the best manner in which to permit comprehension and appreciation of artworks. Pan-Islamic thematic displays recently embraced in several museum installations and temporary exhibitions are particularly problematic because they reinforce stereotypes about the essential “character” or “spirit” of Islamic art transcending time and space. The present instrumentalisation of Islamic art as a “cultural ambassador” to improve the negative image of Islam has promoted neo-Orientalism and didacticism in public forums. To some extent, Ettinghausen predicted this phenomenon in 1951, when he noted that Islamic art can have a special significance for the Muslim world: “Since this is its one cultural achievement widely accepted and admired by the West, a rededication to it can

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that unified the whole Islamic world at any point, flexible time zones correlated with major political shifts seem to me an appropriate “internal” criterion for periodisation, not incompatible with the semi-autonomy of forms. This choice is not meant to represent a “top-down” model privileging royal patronage, but rather to delineate a nexus of changing socio-political frameworks for material cultures, within which artistic production and consumption were organised in both courtly and urban settings.

<sup>33</sup> Blair and Bloom, “Mirage of Islamic Art”, pp. 172, 174. A similar view is presented by Oleg Grabar in “Islamic Art, I. Introduction”, p. 101.

<sup>34</sup> Grabar, Oleg, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven, CT and London 1973; revised and enlarged edition published in 1987.

<sup>35</sup> The four periods proposed by Weber are: 1) Age of Caliphs and Late Antiquity, 5th–10th century; 2) Age of Sultans, 10th–15th century; 3) Sultans, Shahs, and Moghuls 16th–18th century; 4) Age of the Steam Engine, 18th–early 20th century. An example of a survey book combining dynastic and geographical chapters with thematic ones is Hattstein and Delius, *Islam: Art and Architecture*.



compensate the East to a certain degree for its scientific and technological retardation, something which neither the oil fields, nor strategic location can achieve. Be that as it may, there has been and still is no better ambassador of good will than art.”<sup>36</sup> For the purposes of this publication, then, the crux of the matter is the danger of a growing gap between the simplistic populist messages preferred in some exhibitions (permanent or temporary) and the complex contextual interpretations favoured by academic scholarship.

Being less familiar with the evolving collections of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, I will comment on the redesigning of the Islamic north wing at the Pergamon Museum as part of the restructuring of Berlin’s Museum Island. This ambitious project has implications for how the layers of meaning in displayed Islamic objects are going to be framed within a larger narrative of world art. As Donald Preziosi notes, in universal museums, the art object’s meaning is simultaneously construed as self-referential and as an episode or station along a teleological path of historical evolution.<sup>37</sup> The emphasis of Stephan Weber’s “re-conventionalisation” project on artistic transformations over time and space is crucial given the persisting view that Islamic art remained relatively static and unchanging. This traditional view is, in fact, encoded in the position given in the early twentieth century to Islamic art within the grand narrative of Berlin’s Museum Island, a position that strikingly recalls its counterparts in survey books of world art and in Fletcher’s “Tree of Architecture” [fig. 1]. That teleological grand narrative will become additionally amplified by the “Archaeological Promenade” that is going to integrate the island’s museums into a “homogenous entity”: an “arcadia of art on the Spree,” mapping the relationship between the cultures of humankind on the world stage [fig. 3].<sup>38</sup>

The initial historicist conception of the Museum Island will thus become restaged according to the contemporary global vision of the world, within which Europe itself is presently engaged in a restructuring process. This process includes the reunification of Germany, whose reunited art collections are to be displayed on the island that aspires to become the “biggest universal museum in the world” in the heart of Europe by 2024.<sup>39</sup> The “Archaeological Promenade” axially culminates with

<sup>36</sup> Ettinghausen, “Islamic Art and Archaeology”, p. 147. Examples of thematic displays, accompanied by dynastic-cum-geographical schemes, include the Islamic art museums in Doha and Cairo, and the redesigned Islamic galleries of the Louvre Museum. For new thematic approaches to Western art, such as the medieval rooms in the British Museum, see the comment of Élisabeth Taburet-Delahaye, *Perspective* 4 (2008), p. 636. Critical reviews analysing the current instrumentalisation of Islamic art include Ferguson, Coco, “Islamic Art at a Crossroads”, *Bidoun: Arts and Culture from the Middle East*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 52–55; and Roxburgh, David J., “After Munich: Reflections on Recent Exhibitions”, *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition “Meisterwerke Muhammedanischer Kunst” Reconsidered*, Avinoam Shalem and Andrea Lermer eds., Leiden 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Preziosi, Donald, “In the Temple of Entelechy: The Museum as Evidentiary Artifact”, *The Formation of National Collections of Art and Archaeology*, Gwendolyn Wright ed., Hanover and London 1996, pp. 166–67.

<sup>38</sup> For the Bode Museum, the “Master Plan” for the Museum Island, and the “Archaeological Promenade,” see Wedel, Carola ed., *The Bode Museum: Treasure Vault of the Kings*, Berlin: 2006, pp. 7–8, 55–58; Tesar, Heinz, *Wege zum Masterplan / Planungsgruppe Museumsinsel Berlin; David Chipperfield Architects, Heinz Tesar, Hilmer & Sattler und Oswald Mathias Ungers* [Übersetzungen: Steffen Walter] (Berlin 2000); Lepik, Andreas ed., *Masterplan Museumsinsel Berlin: Ein europäisches Projekt*, Berlin 2000.

<sup>39</sup> In 2024, “when the individual museums have been connected to one another by the Archaeological Promenade...the vision Friedrich Wilhelm IV had in 1840 of creating a ‘free city for art and knowledge’ will become reality. 6,000 years of human history will be on view in just one square kilometer in the middle of

European art, exhibited in the domed Bode Museum, the “head structure” of the museum complex at the northern tip of the island. The Islamic wing at the Pergamon Museum occupies an intermediary spatio-temporal position between ancient archaeology and the Bode Museum’s late antique-medieval collections, thereby evoking the mediating role traditionally prescribed to early Islamic art as a bridge between East and West.

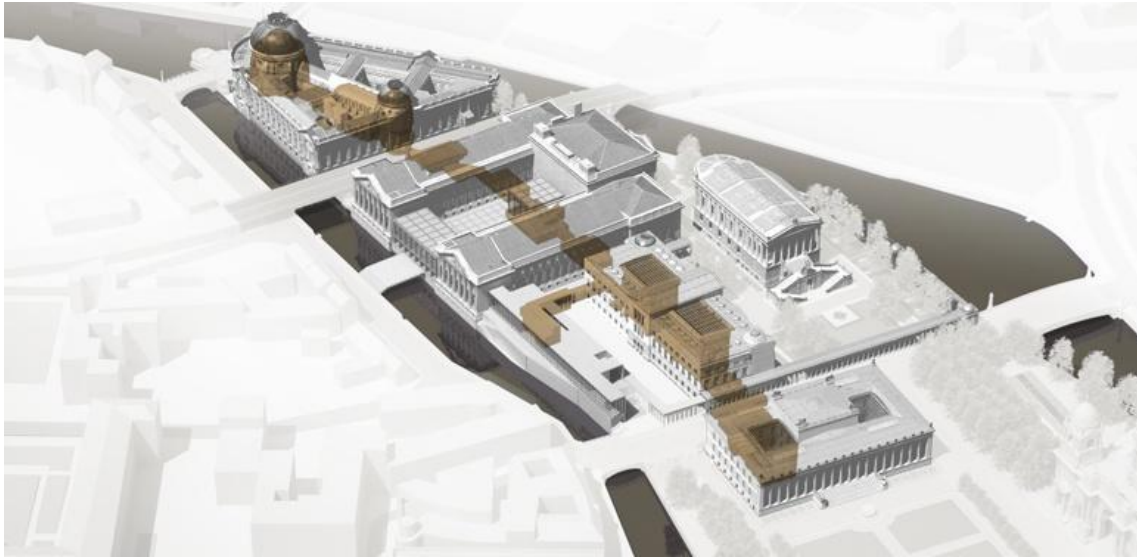


Figure 3 The Future Berlin Museum Island, an “Arcadia of art on the Spree”: the axial passageway or “Archaeological Promenade”

This intermediate position was precisely the role assigned to “Islamic civilisation” by Carl Becker, the renowned Orientalist scholar and Prussian minister of culture who institutionalised Islamic Studies in Germany before passing away in 1933, soon after the inauguration of the Pergamon Museum. Becker’s paradigm of civilisations integrated Islam into Europe, but only as the “central link” of world history. He was a pioneer in acknowledging the shared Hellenistic roots of Islam and Christendom during the medieval period. Nevertheless Becker regarded Renaissance humanism as a major cultural break between Western Europe and its Islamic neighbours, a Eurocentric binary opposition that has been revised in recent studies attempting to “reorient” the Renaissance.<sup>40</sup>

Becker’s medievalising perspective is echoed in the Islamic collection of the Pergamon Museum, inaugurated in 1932, after being housed at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum (now the Bode Museum) since 1904 [fig. 4]. The collection focused primarily

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Berlin.” See Wedel, *Bode Museum*: pp. 7–8, 58. The role of German imperialism and cultural politics in the creation of the Museum Island is analysed in Gaetgens, Thomas W., “The Museum Island in Berlin”, in *The Formation of National Collections*, pp. 53–77. “Many German intellectuals considered it their calling to administer the cultural heritage of humankind”, p. 74.

<sup>40</sup> In his hierarchical ranking of civilisations Becker placed Islam below Europe but above Africa, as the “middle link” of world history and the “mediator” between East and West. See Haridi, Alexander, *Das Paradigma der ‘islamischen Zivilisation’ – oder die Begründung der deutschen Islamwissenschaft durch Carl Heinrich Becker (1876–1933)* (Würzburg 2005); Marchand, Suzanne L., *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 361–67. For studies that “reorient” the Renaissance, see n. 27 above.

on the origins and development of early Islamic civilisation from Sasanian to late antique and medieval times. It is noteworthy that Becker repeatedly encouraged Ernst Herzfeld to support his own dating of Mshatta as an Umayyad palace in order to demonstrate how early Islamic art perpetuated late antique traditions.<sup>41</sup> As is well known, the museum director Wilhelm von Bode intended to create what he called an “early Arab and Persian collection,” grouped around the Mshatta façade, to trace the distinctive evolution of Islamic ornament, whose rich beginnings he recognised on that façade. It is therefore not surprising that the Islamic collections, which grew in scope over time, downplayed the post-medieval empires of the Safavids, the Ottomans, and particularly the Mughals. The arts of these empires were first and foremost represented by spectacular carpets: the favourites of Bode and his eminent successors.<sup>42</sup>



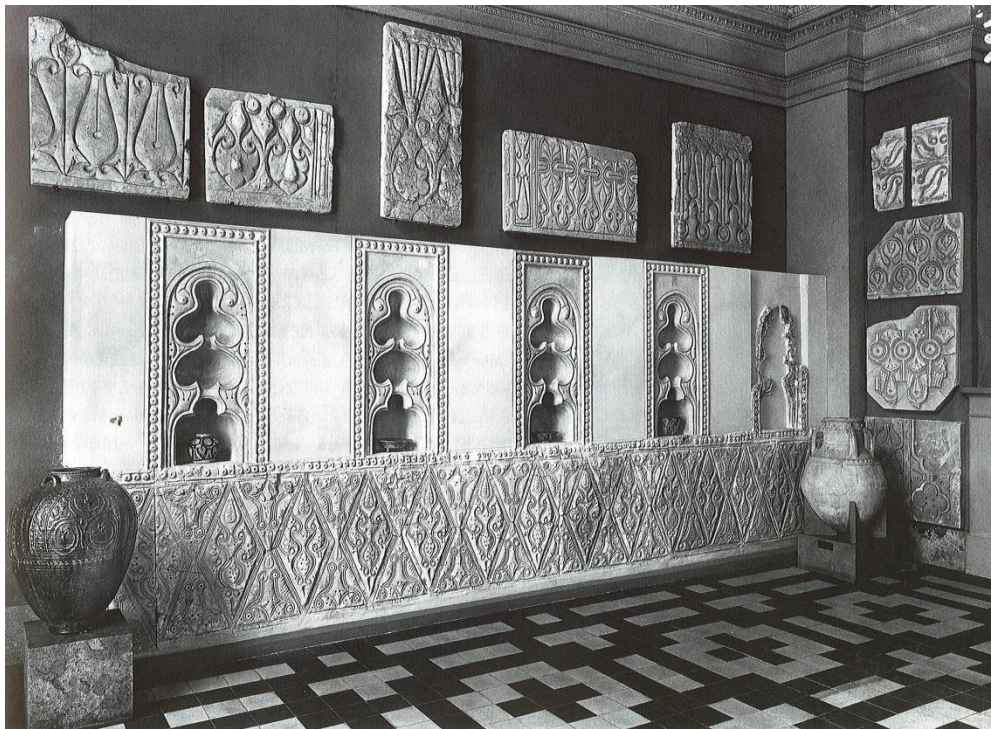
The Mshatta Façade in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, 1904, in room 211

<sup>41</sup> Herzfeld’s ground-breaking 1909 article, “Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-Problem,” appeared in the first volume of Becker’s new periodical, *Der Islam*. It responded to Becker’s urging that Herzfeld support from an art historical perspective his own reservation about Josef Strzygowski’s attribution of Mshatta to the Ghassanids (5th-6th century). The 1910 review by Becker of Strzygowski’s work on Mshatta, which appeared in the second volume of *Der Islam*, made the following declaration: “Today, no one who works on Oriental medieval art or culture can afford not to take a position regarding Mshatta.” See Leisten, Thomas, “Mshatta, Samarra, and al-Hira: Ernst Herzfeld’s Theories Concerning the Development of the Hira-style Revisited”, *Ernst Herzfeld and the Development of Near Eastern Studies, 1900-1950*, Ann C. Gunter and Stefan R. Hauser, eds, Leiden 2005, pp. 371–76. For the *Kolonialpolitik* of German archaeological expeditions in the Ottoman Empire and heated diplomatic negotiations surrounding the transfer of the Mshatta façade to Berlin, see Marchand, Suzanne L., *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970*, Princeton, NJ 2003, pp. 188–307, especially pp. 203–7.

<sup>42</sup> For the Islamic collection, see the earliest guidebook: *Staatliche Museen in Berlin, Führer durch die Islamische Kunstabteilung*, Berlin 1933. Brisch, Klaus, “Wilhelm von Bode und sein Verhältnis zur islamischen und ostasiatischen Kunst”, *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, vol. 38, 1996, pp. 33–48, cited on pp. 37, 41. Brisch explains that Bode wanted to create in Dahlem a separate Museum for Asiatic Art that would include Islamic collections; it was against his vision that the Mshatta façade was moved to the Pergamon Museum in 1932. Unlike Bode, who preferred to connect Islamic art with Asia, Becker insisted on its link with Europe. That justified its position on the Museum Island where it is presently located. See also Marchand, *German Orientalism*, pp. 397–98; Kröger, Jens, “Vom Sammeln islamischer Kunst zum Museum für Islamische Kunst”, *Islamische Kunst in Berliner Sammlungen*, Jens Kröger and Désirée Heiden eds., Berlin 2004, pp. 32–55.



Stuccoes from Ktesiphon



Reconstruction of a stucco wall from  
Samarra in room 14 of the Kaiser Friedrich  
Museum



Collection in 1918-32



Second Persian hall with Safavid art



Figure 4 (A-F): Pergamon Museum in 1932

Early displays in the Kaiser Wilhelm and Pergamon Museums (after Jens Kröger ed., *Islamische Kunst in Berliner Sammlungen*, Berlin 2004, figs. 20, 22, 29, 98, 100, 137 )

A more representative spectrum of objects associated with the three empires might perhaps be borrowed from the Kunstgewerbe Museum or other Berlin collections to highlight the ongoing artistic innovations and cosmopolitanism of the early modern era (including objects inspired by those of Europe or produced for the European market, and even works commissioned from European artists, such as Sultan Mehmed II's portrait medals). This would partly counterbalance the asymmetrical priority given in the Museum of Islamic Art to the late antique and medieval periods. I am particularly thinking of Persianate narrative paintings, pottery, architectural tiles and silk textiles with floral design concepts marked by an unprecedented touch of naturalism, which proved so inspirational to the Arts and Crafts and the Art Nouveau movements. A splendid example of this new floral aesthetic is the celebrated Aleppo Room, commissioned by a Christian broker (*simsār*) and bearing the dates 1600–1601 and 1603, which statistics single out as the most visited possession of the Museum of Islamic Art, even surpassing the Mshatta façade in popularity [fig. 5]. Its incorporation of Christian figural scenes and psalms reveals how non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire shared the same collective language of

architectural ornament, which in this case is semiotically distinguished by distinctive markers of identity.<sup>43</sup>

A unique characteristic of the Pergamon Museum is its captivating use of monumental architectural fragments to contextualise smaller archaeological finds and decorative portable objects. The arts of the book and figural painting were therefore underrepresented, with the exception of pages from Mughal albums and sporadic later acquisitions formerly displayed in the Aleppo Room, which is now inaccessible behind a transparent screen [fig. 5].



Figure 5 (A-B): Aleppo Room in 1938



Aleppo Room

<sup>43</sup> Gonnella, Julia and Jens Kröger, eds., *Angels, Peonies, and Fabulous Creatures: The Aleppo Room in Berlin*, Münster 2008. A comparable sharing of visual language, differentiated through subtle markers of confessional identity, in medieval Iberia is analysed in Dodds, Jerrilyn, Maria Menocal and Abigail Krasner, *Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture*, New Haven, CT 2008.

In contrast, the Aga Khan Museum collection is dominated by manuscripts and has no carpets at all, which reflects differing collecting priorities, partly informed by what is available on the contemporary art market. Ultimately, the Pergamon Museum's truly impressive Islamic collection – characterised by its emphasis on architecture, archaeology, and ornament – testifies to the role of its famous early directors as taste-makers. Wilhelm von Bode, Friedrich Sarre, Ernst Kühnel, and Kurt Erdmann shaped the museum's future orientations by actively constructing the canons of the emerging field of Islamic art history and archaeology through collecting, museum-sponsored excavations, and object-based publications.<sup>44</sup> The museum's new display strategies can profitably highlight this fascinating historiographical dimension, which constitutes one of the many layers of meaning embodied in the biographies of Islamic objects that will be recontextualised in it. Such a strategy would critically acknowledge that recontextualisations in museums always depend on previous decontextualisations. This is especially true for works of architecture that have been transformed into art objects: monumental stage sets, abstracted from their original spatial and urban settings.

The brochure to the workshop "Layers of Islamic Art and the Museum Context" stressed the need to contextualise museum objects both aesthetically and according to the "biography and social life of things." That, in turn, raises the broader question of "Islamic Art or Material Culture?" around which the second day of the workshop was organised. The question mark implies an either/or proposition. Since this might suggest that there was no concept of art in the pre-modern Islamic world, the question should perhaps be rephrased as "Islamic art *and* material culture?" Islamic texts emphasising the mental dimension of artistic creation and visual perception accord a considerably high stature to skilled craftsmanship, without clearly defined boundaries between the arts and crafts.<sup>45</sup> However, this was also the case with medieval Christian art in Europe and Byzantium. Referring to these three artistic traditions, Alois Riegl noted in his *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* that "even in the West, the large pioneering achievements at least until the twelfth century belonged not to sculpture or painting but to architecture and to the crafts."<sup>46</sup> It was not until the sixteenth century that Vasari codified the Italian Renaissance distinction between the "applied arts" and the "fine arts" (comprising architecture, sculpture, and painting). Practitioners of the fine arts rose in social and intellectual status because of the importance of "ideas" in their work, expressed through design. Hence, the fine arts came to be classified as the arts of design (*disegno*).

The post-Renaissance distinction between fine and applied arts found no counterpart in the Islamic lands, where architecture continued to be the predominant monumental art form, orchestrating the applied arts in the manner of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork). I believe, however, that the proliferation of court scriptoria (*naqqāshkhāna* or *kitābkhāna*) in the eastern Islamic world after the fourteenth century resulted in a comparable rising prestige of design, as in Renaissance

<sup>44</sup> For the history of the Museum of Islamic Art, see essays in Kröger and Heiden, *Islamische Kunst in Berliner Sammlungen*; and Gierlich, Joachim and Anette Hagedorn eds., *Islamic Art in Germany*, Mainz am Rhein 2004, pp. 49–53.

<sup>45</sup> Necipoğlu, "L'idée de décor dans les régimes de visibilité islamiques", pp. 10–23.

<sup>46</sup> Riegl, Alois, *Late Roman Art Industry*, Rolf Winkes, trans., Rome 1985, p. 229.



Europe. In these scriptoriums, calligraphers and painter-decorators specialising in the arts of the book prepared designs on paper for multiple media, as well as directly ornamenting buildings and objects [fig. 6]. Among the richest collections of such ornamental designs on paper are those of the famous Diez Albums, transferred from the Ottoman imperial library to the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, selected examples of which might be borrowed for the new displays of Islamic art at the Pergamon Museum.



Figure 6 (A-B): Designs on paper for diverse media from Timurid-Turkmen and Ottoman albums, late 15<sup>th</sup> century

This post-Mongol design revolution was paralleled by the emergence in the sixteenth century of a specialised Safavid and Ottoman literature on the visual arts,

which exemplifies the self-conscious articulation of concepts of high art, as well as regional and temporal stylistic differences. Such Persian and Ottoman Turkish texts include prefaces of calligraphy and painting albums, biographies of calligraphers and painters, as well as biographical treatises and autobiographies of famous royal architects like Sinan. Artists' names also begin to appear more frequently in the biographies of poets and scholars, contradicting the widespread assumption that they were generally uneducated and illiterate. This assumption is further complicated by the fact that many painter-decorators were at the same time calligraphers.<sup>47</sup> The emergence of centralised court workshops, on the other hand, finds a parallel in early modern European and East Asian courts, a parallel that destabilises the monolithic alterity of Islamic art.

Despite these notable early modern developments, however, the Islamic lands continued to foreground "object culture" more than "image culture." Hence, Islamic art and architecture provide fertile ground for the current interest in material culture, objecthood, and thingness. As for the multiple meanings of portable objects, including illuminated manuscripts and albums, recent art historical studies have explored inventive subjects such as collecting and exhibiting, gift exchange, conspicuous consumption, trade and cross-cultural dialogues, and the circulation and translation of artefacts. The dynamics between human subjects and inanimate objects that mutually constitute one another are also being examined, along with forays into "thing theory" and the semiotics of ornament. The topic of gift exchange and diplomacy, in particular, is a rich venue of research that can bridge the museum, art history, and social history. An exemplary study of gifts and treasures was the Freer-Sackler Museum's 2009 exhibition, titled *The Tsars and the East*, which presented "diplomatic biographies" of Safavid and Ottoman objects preserved at the Kremlin treasury, lavish objects that were imitated in Moscow's royal workshops. Other studies by historians, art historians and museum curators alike have analysed texts (like the eleventh-century *Book of Gifts and Rarities*), archival documents, and visual sources that provide insights into what was valued, treasured and exchanged.<sup>48</sup>

My own ongoing research along these lines examines unpublished fifteenth- and sixteenth-century inventories of objects and manuscripts that belonged to the Topkapı Palace's imperial treasury-cum-library. I aim to assess the categories according to which things were assigned value and ordered in this particular building, dating from the 1460s, which is the earliest surviving example of an Islamic *Schatzkammer* incorporating a royal library.<sup>49</sup> Comparing these palace treasury inventories, which reflect international tastes, to the inheritance records of men and women from different social strata can reveal concepts of decorum (appropriateness) that informed the relative value of objects as markers of status and identity. Codes of

<sup>47</sup> Some of these sources are discussed in Necipoğlu, "L'idée de décor dans les régimes de visualité islamiques", pp. 10-23. Also see Roxburgh, David J., *Prefacing the Image: The Writing of Art History in Sixteenth-Century Iran*, Leiden: 2001; Howard Crane and Esra Akin trans., with preface by Gülru Necipoğlu, *Sinan's Autobiographies: Five Sixteenth-Century Texts* (Leiden 2006).

<sup>48</sup> *The Tsars and the East: Gifts from Turkey and Iran in the Moscow Kremlin*, Washington D.C.: 2009; *Book of Gifts and Rarities (Kitāb al-Hadāya wa al-Tuhaf)*, Ghada al-Hijawi al-Qaddumi, trans., Cambridge, MA 1996.

<sup>49</sup> For this building and a brief summary of some inventories, see Necipoğlu, Gülru, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, Cambridge, MA 1991, pp. 133-41.

decorum are elaborated in Mustafa 'Ali's late sixteenth-century books of etiquette, rooted in the Aristotelian notion of magnificence shared with early modern Europe, and in sumptuary laws and *firman*s. The classification of artefacts as "superior," "medium," and "low" in Ottoman documents also indicates the stratified ranking of prestige objects according to criteria other than purely aesthetic pleasure, including materiality, quality, and rarity.<sup>50</sup> A comparable hierarchical valuation system was deployed for the relative ranking of manuscripts in the Mughal imperial library, which is hardly even considered in modern aestheticising museum displays.<sup>51</sup> Such decontextualised displays privilege the transcultural qualities of Islamic objects over their latent role as bearers of meaning, a universalising tendency that is coloured by the modernist concept of visual autonomy.

To conclude, neither architectural monuments, nor portable luxury goods produced in courtly or commercial urban workshops of the Islamic lands were meant for display in museums as self-referential *objets d'art* or masterpieces. Instead, they were often seen *en masse* and experienced in particular settings or rituals that framed their signification process. The functionality, materiality, and "thingness" of portable objects – often exchanged as gifts and commodities – meant that their semantic horizons were largely dependent on context. Their interaction in specific settings with the gendered bodies of users or viewers activated multiple narratives and meanings. The question I would like to end with is *whether* and *how* these layers of meaning can be communicated to the diverse audiences of the museum.

<sup>50</sup> Tietze, Andreas, "Mustafa 'Ali on Luxury and the Status Symbols of Ottoman Gentlemen", *Studia turcologica memoriae Alexii Bombaci dicata*, Aldo Galotta and Ugo Marazzi eds., Naples: 1982, pp. 577–90. See also the chapter on codes of decorum in Necipoğlu, Gülru, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, London and Princeton, NJ 2005, pp. 115–24.

<sup>51</sup> Seyller, John, "The Inspection and Valuation of Manuscripts in the Imperial Mughal Library", *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 57, pp. 3-4, 1997, pp. 243-49.