Reframing Islamic Art for the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT The celebrated Islamic galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York reopened in 2011 as “Galleries for the Art of Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.” Other major collections of Islamic art have been reorganized and reinstalled in Berlin, Cairo, Cleveland, Copenhagen, Detroit, Kuwait, London, Los Angeles, Paris, and Singapore, and new museums of Islamic art have been established in Doha, Qatar; Honolulu, Hawaii; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Sharjah, U.A.E. In addition, the first museum in North America dedicated to Islamic art recently opened in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. This article explores this global phenomenon, identifying it as both a literal and conceptual “reframing of Islamic art for the 21st century,” setting the world stage for new developments in cultural understanding.

Keywords: Islamic art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Art of Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia”

Introduction

Initial impetus for this article came with the long-awaited reopening of the celebrated Islamic art galleries of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in late 2011, under the rubric “Galleries for the Art of Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” (fig. 1). This effort represents not only a physical reframing of works long held in storage and after conservation treatments, but also a conceptual reframing of how to present Islamic art in a globalized world, specifically in New York City. Closed for eight years since 2003, the new galleries replace those that were new in 1975, when they were first established as dedicated galleries of Islamic art (fig. 2). The new name bears special significance for its deconstruction of a Western European category (Islamic art), by articulating both diversity and complexity in accommodating Arab lands by ethnic identity, Turkey and Iran as political entities today that represent historically the much larger Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire, Central Asia as a regional designation, and Later South Asia as a temporal reference to a geographic region. According to the Met’s director, Thomas P. Campbell, “The opening of these… galleries underscores [the Museum’s] mission as an encyclopedic museum and provides a unique opportunity to convey the grandeur and complexity of Islamic art and culture at a pivotal moment in world history.”
But the reframing of Islamic holdings at The Metropolitan also fits into a much broader phenomenon of the conceptual reframing of Islamic art during the past decade and a half, in places as far distant from one another as Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, Toronto in Canada, Honolulu in Hawaii, and Doha in Qatar, where new museums of Islamic art have recently been established. Many other major collections of Islamic art have been reorganized and reopened in Berlin, Copenhagen, London, Paris, and Singapore, in each instance reflecting a reconceptualization of the subject pertinent to local interests in consideration of a comprehensive subject. Within the United States, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California (LACMA) has more than doubled the size of its Islamic holdings with acquisition of the Madina Collection, which positions it now as having the most significant holdings of Islamic art west of the Mississippi River. And within the United States, it is one of only a few museums that have embarked upon collecting contemporary Islamic art. The Cleveland Museum of Art has reinstalled its Islamic holdings, as has the Detroit Institute of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Meanwhile, in Baltimore, Maryland, the renamed Walters Art Museum (formerly the Walters Art Gallery), initiated a monumental digitization project, presenting online its major collection of Islamic manuscripts – books in their entirety as opposed to dispersed pages of illustrations – in a manner that makes these works far more accessible and to a much broader audience than through an exhibition. And the very first museum in North America dedicated to Islamic art, The Aga Khan Museum, has opened in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, its architecture and landscape reflecting its Islamic heritage.

All of this is significant on many levels and its meaning continues to evolve in an increasingly complex global environment. It is a phenomenon of the past fifteen years (2002-17) that has not been adequately recognized. Associated with the numerous openings of new museums of Islamic art, and with the reorganization and reopening of older collections, there has been a rebranding of museums as well as a reassessment of the role of museums in education, a redefining of their audiences.
and a dramatic increase internationally in public programs and performances presenting cultural aspects of a globally diverse Islamic heritage and living traditions. In addition this reframing has generated an amazing breadth of new publications that are richly illustrated, deeper and more engaging temporary exhibitions, and a plethora of on-line resources and activities designed to stimulate broader public engagement with Islam’s many and diverse forms of cultural expression historically and in the present. Curiously, the magnitude and breadth of these developments constitutes an exceedingly positive narrative about Islamic lands and their historically significant cultural production of visual arts and architecture, that runs on a parallel track but remains distinctly unconnected to the narrative regarding Islam in Western news media, which remains so often entirely negative.

The Center for Race & Gender at the University of California-Berkeley has characterized the impact of this stigmatizing of Islam by the media, demonizing Muslims in the US, parts of Europe, and around the world as a globalized “other.”

Concurrently, with the establishment and reopening of collections of Islamic art, the parameters of the presentation of Islamic art and the paradigms in which it is studied have shifted in several new directions, in part, a reaction to the representation of Islam in news media. A few examples will suffice in identifying these directions before considering the particular circumstances that define each of these new or renewed institutions presenting arts of the Islamic world to diverse audiences. At the Metropolitan Museum’s Opening, two groups performed ecstatic music drawing upon Sufi traditions, culturally blended locally but from widely separated parts of the Islamic world, a qawwali group from Pakistan (fig. 3), and a troupe of Gnaoua dancers and musicians from southern Morocco, with strong connections to peoples from south of the Sahara in Africa. The double billing not only complemented the breadth of art in the galleries, but also presented new forms of music and cultural exposure to New York audiences, acknowledging historic and more recent patterns of immigration and extending the reach of the museum to the city’s increasingly
multi-national population. In Berlin, too, there is a much greater emphasis in programming that draws from and is intended to attract local resident Muslim audiences, and attempts to address the cultural interests of Muslim communities who are now perceived as constituents of the newly reinstalled collections from West Germany reunited in the Museum of Islamic art at the Pergamon Museum on Museum Island. In Doha, Qatar, there is recognition of the challenges of meeting the seemingly contradictory needs of foreign residents, who comprise a majority of the population, and those of Qataris, while at the same time raising the level of appreciation and awareness of a shared Islamic heritage that transcends cultural differences. Chairperson of the Qatar Museums Authority, H. E. Sheikha Al Mayassa emphasizes, “We are changing our culture from within, but at the same time we are reconnecting with our traditions.” The approaches taken in Qatar have involved critical reassessments of museum education, management, and exhibition development. Among several of the Gulf states, collections of Islamic art have assumed a role that is part of grander efforts of Arab nation-building and Islamic identity formation. And in many locales throughout the world, there is evidence of a far greater emphasis on exciting public programs and performances, and thematic exhibitions that address a much more nuanced expression of the history, splendor, and complexity of Islamic art, locally, and across cultural boundaries, than had been addressed in the installations of previous decades.

Local and Particular Circumstances: Collecting and Exhibiting Islamic Art at The Met

This article seeks to elucidate one aspect of this global phenomenon, with a particular focus on local circumstances; that is, what has uniquely motivated the historical and contemporary acquisition and display of collections of Islamic art at individual institutions. This effort, in part, will illuminate contextually the significance of the Met’s new galleries in New York, but it will also focus in a comparative manner on an understudied trajectory that we are witnessing as we move into the mid-21st century in an increasingly complex world. This article offers a broad and critical perspective, parallel to other articles that have similarly considered aspects of this phenomenon. Other studies that have attempted to address related questions defining Islamic art. This concern has raised a topic that has generated many questions deserving of deeper analysis and interpretation against the backdrop of an intensity of news media that seems to counter the very possibility of there even being Islamic art.

The reinstallation of the Islamic galleries at the Met is the first major reopening of Islamic art there since 1975 (fig. 2). In 1975 I was a graduate student across the street at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, and became the lucky intern appointed for the preparation of the Islamic Galleries, which involved extensive research on individual objects, and the writing of wall texts and object labels for ceramics, glass, and textiles from periods before the Mongol conquests of the 13th century. That experience served as the foundation for my curatorial training and laid the basis for my research, documentation, and interpretation of Islamic art for years to come. Among the many innovations in methods and materials of display and

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lighting at the time, what was new in that installation were the prismatic forms of the cases (fig. 2), designed by Manuel Keene, which played with the theme of modularity within a hexagonal grid that was so prevalent in classical Islamic art, lending an ambience that was culturally relevant. Objects were grouped together by material and arranged chronologically, and despite the oft cited contrasts with the current installation (2011), the galleries of the Umayyad and Abbassid periods were somewhat similarly arranged with a separate focus on the finds from the Met’s excavations at Nishapur. Cultural context was addressed in a small publication, representing the scholarship of several authors.

Today, the fifteen new galleries devoted to the “Arts of Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia,” still pertain administratively to the Department of Islamic Art that has retained its name. The galleries are arranged in two tiers around the upper level of an interior court, effectively screened from the lower level of the atrium by means of lathe-turned wooden mashrabiyya, which the Met commissioned from wood-workers in Cairo (fig. 4a).

The gallery space is expansive, substantially enlarged from its previous incarnation, and the permanent collections augmented with more recent acquisitions. The display setting is enhanced by several brilliant architectural installations, including the commission of marble columns and capitals, and an arcade, in a Late Antique style appropriate to the context of the earliest Islamic art (fig. 5). Greeting the visitor upon entering the new galleries, this stunning architectural feature forms a backdrop to the entry gallery, calling into question pre-existing assumptions as to what is Islamic. Another provocative setting is a contemporary Moroccan court, built around the Met’s holdings of slender marble columns, possibly from the Alhambra (fig. 6). The courtyard, in an Andalusian style, reflects ongoing craft traditions in Morocco. Artisans were brought from Fez, where they continue to practice this tradition. Bringing materials and traditional tools, the artisans carved the stucco and assembled the wood and ceramic elements on site in the Met’s galleries, a process documented in video that is available on-line as well as in the galleries.
galleries that pertain to the Met’s excavations at Nishapur now focus more on documenting the early scientific explorations (1935-40; 1947-48) and include on site photographs that correlate with the installation of architectural stuccos set in context. Although there is less emphasis on objects retrieved, small finds, glass and ceramics are displayed in wall cases.\textsuperscript{23}

Figure 5 (left) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Commissioned architectural installation of Late Antique/Early Islamic arches, columns, and capitols (2011).

Figure 6 (right) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Architectural installation of Moroccan court, built by craftsmen from Fez, commissioned (2011).

The galleries are definitely improved in layout and flow with respect to the historical development of regional styles; the groupings of objects are culturally appropriate and beautifully displayed, setting new standards. They are visually splendid, well lit, and elegant in their expression of cultural diversity. Far more than in the past, there is an effort to convey the complexity of Islamic histories of expansion, conquests, dynasties, cultural influences, regional styles, and patronage of the arts and architecture. Groupings of objects are not just visually compelling but culturally relevant. The placement of objects conveys additional cultural information. Take for example, the functionally appropriate presentation of architectural features set high up on walls, in contrast to large ceramic storage vessels set upon the floor (fig. 4b), and small containers, drinking and serving vessels displayed at table height. Books are placed in long horizontal cases set at an angle below individually framed pages from manuscripts, with grouping of paintings by region and style that together extend the possibilities of learning by looking. Subtle architectural features such as the Timurid-style arched entryway frame prospects for the museum visitor, giving a privileged gaze, lending ambiance to the display of objects with a sense of context that is at once both cultural and spatial (fig. 4a-b). The view from the arch to the focal point of a mihrab (fig. 4b) provides axiality in the gallery that is sensitive
to cultural context, although the mihrab is not oriented on qibla, as is appropriate given its placement in a museum.

The Ottoman gallery offers a stunning display that provides insight into the stylistic consistency of court ateliers, relating Iznik ceramics to monumental silk textiles that are full loom widths, as well as to imperial carpets, metalwork and painting. The placement of the historic Damascus Room, a qa’a from the early 18th century, is situated by historical relevance just off the Ottoman gallery. One jarring juxtaposition is that of the Mudejar carved wooden ceiling with geometric interlacing, from Spain in the 16th century under Christian dominion, set above the gallery in which carpets are displayed from many different Islamic lands (fig. 7). The sitting works reasonably well visually, however, where a Mamluk carpet with geometric patterning is placed beneath the ceiling, but nowhere is the relationship (or lack thereof) explained.

Figure. 7. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Carpets and Spanish carved ceiling © Walter Denny, 2011.

In a nearby gallery some monumental carpets are set flat upon platforms, while others hang as backdrops for viewing objects. Some objects are selected for treatment as “art,” set out for our delectation, taken out of context, but this older style of display is thankfully minimized within the newly installed galleries. The more suitable contextual approach reflects an impact of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and sensitivity to post-Colonial frames of mind. And the physical connection through an open doorway to the gallery of European Orientalist paintings is a significant step in acknowledging cultural connections too often neglected.

The Met is not an ethnographic museum, nor does it have ethnographic displays; nor is it an anthropological, archaeological or natural history museum. It is an art museum, whose collections represent the collecting tastes and history of the United States (as determined by curators, Boards of Trustees, collectors, and dealers). In the broad context of Europe and the “West” [not the “Wild West”] – visual culture is paramount, but the challenge today is one of authenticity. The display of
the arts of “Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” is expressive of whose culture? Whose values? How can we present the arts of “other” cultures with integrity and with respect to original cultural contexts? It is the challenge of any museum to confront and counter the “out-of-context” nature of a museum, yet to remain relevant in a secondary transcultural context, namely, that of a museum.

In contrast to a Contemporary Art Museum or a Museum of Modern Art, both of which to a certain extent generally exhibit what is meant to be exhibited, to be seen by a contemporary public for whom the art was produced, the Metropolitan Museum’s collection of Islamic art is distinctly different in intent. Although the collection was formed over a period of more than a century, it covers thirteen centuries (7th–19th centuries), and many of the works were intended for use, or intended to be seen only by a select few patrons of the arts, namely members of a variety of princely or imperial courts.

The Metropolitan Museum was founded in 1870, “to be located in the City of New York, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction.”25 This statement of purpose guided the Museum for more than a century; in September 2000, the Trustees of the Museum reaffirmed it, supplemented with a new mission statement:

*The mission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art is to collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality, all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards.*

The Met’s engagement today seeks to avoid identity politics; it appears to me to be admirably ecumenical and cosmopolitan in its approach. It attempts to be inclusive, without advancing any single sectarian perspective. It certainly strives to promote an appreciation of the richly textured history of Islamic art and the diversity of cultures and the complexity of the patterns of the movements of peoples through trade, travel, conquest, and courts. It risks (and fails at) being “all things to all people,” and undoubtedly, those whose ideological stance precludes a tolerant appreciation of pluralism and diversity likely will not view it favorably. Despite its earlier history and reputation as an elite institution, the Met today tries hard not to be elitist, seeking to attract broader and more diverse audiences. The transition from former director Philippe de Montebello to current director, Tom Campbell, demarcates this redirection. Campbell seeks broad digital engagement, evident in development of the Met’s website and its recent revision, and expanded educational programming, including musical performances as mentioned above, which draw capacity attendance, often from new, younger, and more diverse audiences.

Amidst all that is new and good, what is missing among the Met’s new galleries of Islamic art? Geographically, there is still a preponderance of art from the historically central Islamic lands of the Arab world (including Morocco and Spain), and Iran, which indeed reflect the Met’s history of collecting. This reinstallation extends to Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent. But lacking is any representation of Sub-Saharan Africa, or Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. North Africa is represented only by Egypt and Morocco. Ethnically, many cultural and linguistic
groups of Islamic lands are not included; despite the “the broadest spectrum of human achievement” as stated in the Mission, emphasis remains focused on arts of the court and highest levels of court patronage. The visual heritage of nomadic populations of the Islamic world is restricted to tribal weavings, displayed within the rotation schedule in the gallery beneath the Spanish wood ceiling. The arts of non-Muslim peoples within the Islamic world are underrepresented. The profound influence of Western art on the arts of central Islamic lands, in the forms of landscape painting, portraiture, sculpture, and fashion is barely touched upon. Although Colonialism and its impact on the arts is addressed in the Safavid, Qajar, and Mughal galleries, the absence of anything contemporary remains unacknowledged. To the Met’s credit, however, contemporary Islamic art has been augmented through the occasional installation of temporary exhibitions. Entirely absent is an explanation of mathematics underpinning so much of traditional Islamic art.26 Strangely, there is only one map, outside the entrance to the galleries, and nowhere is the term “Arab lands” explained for the general public.

The Met took its time in preparing for the reopening of the Islamic galleries in 2011. Navina Haidar is the curatorial staff person who had both the stamina and the vision to see this project through many disruptions in the continuity of staff; eventually, Sheila Canby was engaged as head of the Islamic department and her sensitive managerial skills drew upon the continued leadership of Haidar to see the project through to completion. The expanded approach to audience development and educational offerings reflects an intensive planning process. They worked with several rounds of focus groups and teams to determine priorities and instituted many new means of attracting and addressing diverse audiences that are local, national, and international.27 Curators, conservators, educators, historians, and consultants, as well as the Museum’s administration, carefully reconsidered what might be called “the terms of engagement” to reframe – both literally and conceptually – the ways by which Islamic art can be presented, meeting challenges unique to audience needs in the 21st century in New York City, while also taking into account an international presence and public. Various means of access to the works on view include audio-visual displays in the galleries and an interactive audio tour that is not narrative, but determined by a viewer’s choice and selection of objects. The selections include many voices, different perspectives, even different European and Middle Eastern accents, but these, too, contribute to a distinctly nuanced presentation of a multifaceted subject drawing upon the expertise of curators, conservators, architects, and historians. The inclusion of the ezan, call to prayer, musical compositions and recitations of poetry provide context and convey additional dimensions of cultural forms of expression to those that are visual. The sensitive selection of wall colors, case fabric and lighting, paper and typeface for object labels, and documentary photographs of architecture and topography all contribute to an aura that is culturally appropriate – refined, elegant, sensual and effective – for the presentation of works of art from Islamic lands to American audiences and foreign visitors. Flooring of marble, limestone, and sandstone sourced from local quarries in Turkey, Egypt, India and elsewhere, also adds a significant visual component that contributes to the visitors’ experience, as do the glass ceiling lamps in the Mamluk gallery (fabricated in Brooklyn, NY), and the Mamluk-style carved wooden doors (commissioned in Cairo) at the entry to the Kevorkian Gallery.
Local and Particular Circumstances: New Museums of Islamic Art

The Metropolitan Museum’s Islamic collection represents a collecting history that spans well over a century, influenced by the decisions of many individuals, including various donors, connoisseurs, Boards of Trustees, and a sequence of curators who contributed their curatorial vision to assembling the collection and offering interpretations of the materials acquired by the museum. In contrast, several newer museums dedicated to the display of Islamic art reflect the decisions of one or two visionary individuals, admittedly often with the guidance of confidential advisors, curators, dealers, and connoisseurs. In the case of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah in Kuwait, established in 1983, the Al-Sabah Collection represents the vision of Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah Ahmed al-Sabah and his wife, Sheikha Hussah Sabah al Salem al Sabah. Inspired during the time Sheikh Nasser was a student in Jerusalem in the 1960s, this private collection has expanded steadily under the astute and visionary eye of Sheikha Hussah, working with a dedicated team of American advisors who guided the transformation from collection to national museum. Similarly, for the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar, established in 2008, advisors were brought...
in who were trained in Western methodologies and museology. There, acquisition represents a hierarchical model of management, with decisions remaining within the domain of members of the ruling family. The collections of the museums of Islamic art in both Kuwait and Doha reflect a relatively rapid approach to acquisitions, through purchases at auctions and the art market, in comparison to that of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, whose collecting history reflects an additive process with participation on many levels, including curators, donors, dealers, and Trustees, and the annual reporting of purchases and donations required by the museum’s legal status, acting in public trust. A brief overview of five new museums of Islamic art around the world, established in cities where none existed previously, provides insight into the distinctly local circumstances that have contributed to the development of each of these collections and institutions.

Kuala Lumpur, Islamic Arts Museum (1998)

One of the earliest new museums of Islamic art to open after the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah of the Kuwait National Museum was the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, located in Kuala Lumpur, which opened in a dedicated building in 1998, designed in a contemporary Islamic style that exhibits Persianate architectural influences. The workforce included laborers and artisans from Iran and Uzbekistan, but it is not clear that this is what lay behind the architectural design. The galleries are housed in a vast open area, “inspiring a sense of continuity embodied in the Islamic spirit.”

It remains Southeast Asia’s largest Museum of Islamic art. Its collections offer a broad selection of works from around the world; the display also includes one of the world’s largest scale models of the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, a pilgrimage destination and focal point for Muslims from around the world. A quotation from the Director, Syed Mohd Albukhary, highlights the issue of reestablishing a sense of heritage, as reflected in many new museum collections – “Different parts of the Islamic world are buying back their heritage. The Middle East in particular has seen a phenomenal growth of interest…”

Responding in part to the competition within the art market, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia has focused on its local population, giving attention to the artistic heritage of the Malay peninsula, China, and India, areas traditionally underrepresented in other museums of Islamic art.

Honolulu, Doris Duke’s Shangri La (2002)

When Doris Duke died in 1993, that she was a major collector of Islamic art was virtually unknown. She had been collecting, quietly, for a period of six decades through dealers and trusted confidents, beginning with purchases made while on her honeymoon in 1935. She continued to acquire by many means, including personal commissions in Morocco and India, purchases in Damascus, and through the intervention of dealers in Iran and Egypt, as well as at auctions and estate sales, to suit her personal taste. She built her stunning mid-century Modern home in Honolulu, which she named Shangri La, in part to accommodate the installation of her commissions and collections (fig. 9). According to the terms of her will, the buildings and their collections were designated a museum. Shangri La opened to the public for tours in 2002, operated as a cultural property under the auspices of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art (DDFIA), with expanded programming in 2004 to include scholarly and artistic residencies. There is ongoing development of programs, performances, films, and exhibitions, often in collaboration with the Honolulu Art Museum and other partnering institutions. The foundation, based in New
York City with a mission to promote the study and understanding of Islamic arts and cultures, supports the use of arts and media nationally to enhance Americans’ understanding of Muslim societies, and Islamic arts and cultures.

Figure 9. Pavilion at Doris Duke’s Shangri La, Honolulu, Hawaii (built 1936; museum opened 2002).

Doha, Museum of Islamic Art (2008)

Designing architecture that reflects a global heritage, international doyen of modern architecture, I.M. Pei was coaxed out of retirement to design an edifice that resides on its own island (fig. 10). The iconic building is minimalist in its surface treatment, and filled with space and light; the interior space is so grand, that each object seems precious just by its scale. Pei was sensitive in his selection of materials and forms, quoting from an Islamic heritage in monumental architecture; in particular, he seems to have been inspired by the Mamluk sabil in the courtyard of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, with its inherent minimalism of surfaces and intersecting planes (fig. 11).


Figure 11 (right). Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt. Interior courtyard (9th century CE) with domed sabil (Mamluk period, late 13th century).
As elsewhere in the Gulf, one of the challenges for museums in Qatar is a high percentage of foreign residents, and a local population that is perceived as needing grounding in what museums can offer. This challenge is recognized as an opportunity, being addressed admirably by the Qatar Museums Authority, responsible for planning and implementing the highest museological standards in Qatar’s many new museums, and with a strong emphasis on education, reflected in the recent opening of a new Education Wing.

Still, one might ask what an ostensibly comprehensive Museum of Islamic Art, built on Western models of collecting, is doing in Qatar, one of several countries of the Gulf with a local artistic heritage of pearls, accoutrements for falconry, and Badu weaving traditions? The answer only partially fits within the larger context of cultural heritage preservation, including the vernacular architecture of forts and towers, and a built environment that includes wells, settlements and markets, and early rock carvings. A quotation from the Qatar Museums chairperson, H. E. Sheikhha Al Mayassa, nicely captures the goals of this broad cultural endeavor, “We are changing our culture from within, but at the same time we are reconnecting with our traditions.”

Even more broadly, collecting Islamic art in the Gulf reflects an effort to construct identity on a global stage, described as “nation-building and the formation of national identity,” a process that is admirably addressed in several recent conferences and collaborative publications.

Sharjah, Museum of Islamic Civilization (2008) and Sharjah Art Museum (1997)

In the emirate of Sharjah, in an old building that had been a suq, or indoor market, the Museum of Islamic Civilization opened in 2008. Its ground floor is devoted to objects associated with faith and practice, and a gallery in which replicas of historical scientific models and instruments are displayed, deriving from the collection of Fuat Sezgin at the Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science in Frankfurt. In the central corridor is a splendid display of Arab and Islamic coins, primary sources that document significant details of history, dynasties, politics, and calligraphy, including an outstanding collection of Umayyad and Abbasid gold dinars and silver dirhems. Upstairs a sequence of galleries explores the historical development of arts of the Islamic world from the 7th century to the present, with a central focus on arts of the Gulf and local traditions, including preservation of historic forts in the region. Although the collection of Islamic art displayed is quite small and not especially remarkable (metalwork, arms and armor, ceramics, paper and parchment, ceramics, stone, wood, textiles and garments), it is brilliantly set within a curriculum that includes explanation of technologies addressed at a deeper level than in other exhibitions of Islamic art; for example, in the textiles section, there is discussion of fibers, dyes, and fabrication, addressing several textile technologies including weaving. And there are provocative displays of cultural interactions that address the reception of Islamic art in Europe, questions of Orientalism, the role of auction houses and collectors, as well as travelers, and the role of trade, as for example, in tea. A contextual component in the contemporary section addresses interactions with contemporary artists, architects, and calligraphers, which also represents a departure and advancement beyond more standard museum presentations. The contemporary field is now dramatically expanded in a new wing of the Sharjah Art Museum that houses a Museum of Arabic Contemporary Art, located in an old quarter of the city near the
Corniche. The Sharjah Art Museum was the first dedicated art museum in the Gulf, and today is the centerpiece of a vibrant arts scene, inspired and sustained in part by the Sharjah International Arts Biennial.


The newest museum of Islamic art, and the first in North America, The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Ontario, aims to “offer unique insights and new perspectives into Islamic civilizations and the cultural threads that weave through history binding us all together.” According to His Highness the Aga Khan, “My hope is that the Museum will be a centre of education and of learning, and that it will act as a catalyst for mutual understanding and tolerance.” An international team was assembled with a charge to “build an institution around an existing collection,” that had been assembled by the Aga Khan and members of his family.

The Aga Khan Museum was designed by the architect, Fumihiko Maki, who won the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1993. It draws upon traditional Islamic themes of light as a medium, the materiality of forms, and has an interior courtyard. The exterior references the tradition of formal gardens with reflecting pools, designed by landscape architect, Vladimir Djurovic. Both the architecture of the museum and its landscape reflect an Islamic heritage, appropriate to the Isma’ili community. Within the museum one of the ground floor galleries is a reconstruction of one room from the home of the late Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan at Bellerive, in which he displayed Islamic ceramics; the Bellerive Room today has the original carved wood display cases with his personal collection.

**Local and Particular: Collecting and Exhibiting Islamic Art**

These new museums of Islamic art, and the reinstallation of The Met’s exemplary collection, however, are not isolated examples of a 21st century phenomenon. Many older museums with established holdings of Islamic art have also reorganized their collections and reopened after years of renovation. A brief description of newly reframed installations of Islamic art in Berlin, Cairo, Cleveland, Copenhagen, Detroit, Kuwait, London, Paris, and Singapore addresses the distinctly local and particular factors that contributed to patterns of collecting and aspects of exhibiting Islamic art in each of these cities with their unique institutions. To consider this phenomenon globally provides a perspective on reframing Islamic art for the 21st century.

**Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art (2010/2017)**

The very first purpose-built Museum of Islamic Art dates from 1903 (fig. 12). It is a palatial concrete structure, the second building in Egypt made of concrete. It remains one of the largest museums of Islamic art, with more than 100,000 objects (mostly in storage). Its newly renovated galleries reopened in 2010, accommodating approximately 2500 objects. In 2014 the building was damaged by a car bomb; after receiving strong international financial support and expertise for restoration, it recently reopened again (20 January 2017) with the addition of new galleries of Islamic coins and armor. Although it claims objects from around the world, there is a distinct emphasis on works produced in Egypt, particularly glass, woodwork, and manuscripts of the Mamluk period.
Berlin: Museum für Islamische Kunst / Museum of Islamic Art (in progress)

In the decades following the Second World War and the division of Germany and city of Berlin into eastern and western sectors, a new Museum for Islamic Art was established in West Berlin in suburban Dahlem. Only after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 (more than four decades after the conclusion of the war) were the collections of West Berlin re-integrated with those of the much older Pergamon Museum on Museum Island in the former eastern sector, built in the early 20th century (1910-30). The process of re-integration continues at present, having gone on now for more than two decades, with sequential openings spanning period of several years. Still central to the new Museum of Islamic Art are the monumental remains of an early Islamic palace in Mshatta, from Jordan, a gift to the museum from the Ottoman Sultan Abdelhamid II. But new to the reinstallation of the collections is the recognition of new audiences, reflecting the changing demographics of a reunited Germany. Not only has reunification made Berlin once again a cosmopolitan city, but the population of Germany has swelled with guest workers and immigrants from many Muslim-majority countries. This impact has had multiple effects on exhibits, displays and programming, as well as on scholarship. An “Objects in Transfer” project in cooperation with the Free University (Freie Universität) explores the migration of objects across continents, and the sharing of visual motifs, forms, and craft techniques across cultures. Challenging our notions of cultural boundaries, the current exhibition “Trans-cultural Relations, Global Biographies – Islamic Art?” blurs distinctions about what is – and what is not -- Islamic art.


The Victoria & Albert Museum was initially founded as the Museum of Manufactures after the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, to support and encourage excellence in art and design, part of a movement to counter the new tendencies of proc-
esses of industrialization. Then it became the South Kensington Museum, and was renamed for Queen Victoria and her consort in 1899.

It was initially established for the purpose of instilling among the British a sense of good design, in the context of industrialization and its profound impact on design in the production of industrial goods. With collections acquired from throughout the world – mainly areas of the British Empire and cultural sphere – the museum’s holdings were organized by medium, and only recently reorganized in cultural and historical/chronological categories. In 2001 an Asian Department was created, bringing together the Indian and South-East Asian and East Asian collections with the V&A holdings of material from the Middle East with a view towards developing “a coherent strategy.”46 Today the Victoria & Albert Museum displays approximately four hundred objects of Islamic art, described as dating from the “great days of the Islamic caliphate of the 8th and 9th centuries to the years preceding the First World War.”47

Described as art of the Islamic Middle East and North Africa, it is displayed in the newly established Jameel Gallery, which opened in 2006 with funding from the Jameel foundation.48

The V&A had been a destination where those of us trained as curators were sent at one time or another in our early careers to peruse the collections, pulling out drawer after drawer, to learn about ceramics, or textiles, glass, or metalwork. Today materials are displayed in several different sections of the museum, and there have been several temporary exhibitions focused on both historical and contemporary aspects of Islamic art. A centerpiece of the collection remains the famous Ardebil Carpet that was originally one of a pair of carpets, dated by its inscription to mid-16th century Iran during the reign of Shah Tahmasp, founder of the Safavid dynasty. It was acquired in 1893, its acquisition promoted by William Morris (1834-1896), a leader of the British Arts & Crafts movement. A new initiative of the V&A, organized in partnership with Art Jameel, is the Jameel Prize, first awarded in 2009. Highlighting contemporary art and design, its intent promotes exploration of the “relationship between Islamic traditions of art, craft, and design and contemporary work as part of a wider debate about Islamic culture and its role today.”49

Copenhagen, The David Collection (2009)

The David Collection in Copenhagen was reinstalled in 2009 and is recognized as the largest Islamic art collection in Scandinavia. Founded by C. L. David, a prominent lawyer who left his art collections to posterity, the museum is located in a renovated building that had been David’s residence.50 He established the C. L. David Foundation and Collection in 1945, which has administered the museum since his death in 1960, significantly expanding the collections through acquisitions by purchase, including major works of Islamic art from Spain to India, dating from the 8th century through the 19th century. Funds are provided by the endowment left by the founder. The works are organized with three perspectives: chronological and geographic organization, material, and cultural context, with a view towards aesthetic delight and engaging the hearts and minds of Danes and a broader public.51 The David Collection publishes a journal and supports an active program of scholarly research and publication.
Kuwait, *Dar al-Athar Al-Islamiyya* (ongoing)

A relatively older museum in the Gulf, the *Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya* in Kuwait was established in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, comprising the Al-Sabah collection. Inspired by Sheikh Nasser al-Sabah Ahmed al-Sabah’s studies in Jerusalem in the 1960s, the private collection of the Sheikh led to the establishment of the museum in 1983; its holdings have expanded steadily under the astute and visionary eye of Sheikha Hûsâsah Sabah al Salem al Sabah, working with confidents and trusted dealers. Comprising the largest part of the Kuwait National Museum, the collection was looted during Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. According to Sheikha Hussah, most of the works stolen at the time were taken to Baghdad, but they have since been returned. It was scheduled for reopening in 2012, but the building project is still underway. More efforts today are expended on cultural programming and loans from the collection.\textsuperscript{52}


When I first visited the *Asian Civilizations Museum* in Singapore in 2005, it had a gallery of Islamic art that focused on Islam within the context of West Asia, treating it as one of three monotheistic faith traditions, each of which emerged in the Middle East. But only Islam was treated in depth, augmented by objects, and garments, relevant to its lived practice in Southeast Asia. Last year when I visited, the galleries had been transformed, now presenting the arts of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Islam as expressive of the religions of Asia in a comparative manner.\textsuperscript{53} Two themes intertwine; the first is the simultaneous co-existence of these different faith traditions within the geography of South Asia, and the movement of religions from West to East, in particular from India to China, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia.

Istanbul, *Topkapi Palace Museum and the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts*

In Istanbul, Turkey, the imperial collections of the Ottoman Empire are housed in the historical Topkapi Palace that was built in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century shortly after the conquest of the city by Mehmet II. Located strategically at the confluence of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus and formerly the residence of the Ottoman sultans, in Republican Turkey Topkapi Palace became a sprawling museum, with objects displayed in original architectural contexts. Worthy of numerous visits, its collections represent the extent of the Ottoman Empire, including its treasury, archives, manuscripts, calligraphy, wardrobe, kitchenware, official portraits, and sacred relics, but it does not attempt to portray a comprehensive view of the global sweep of Islamic art.\textsuperscript{54} Not far distant is the *Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts*, housed in a 16\textsuperscript{th} century palace of the grand vizier of Sultan Süleyman. Facing the ancient Hippodrome, this museum houses collections of imperial carpets, tiles, and calligraphy, but it also has extensive ethnographic displays of Turkish cultural traditions, including those of nomadic groups within the population.

Paris, *Louvre (2012) and the Institut du monde Arabe*

With more than 17,500 objects, today the Islamic holdings of the Louvre in Paris are globally recognized as one of the largest and finest collections in the world; the galleries reopened in 2012, reorganized and integrated with collections from the Museum of Decorative Arts.\textsuperscript{55} Major Arab donors from Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Ku-
wait, and Oman, as well as the Republic of Azarbaijan and the Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute, are acknowledged in publication of the collection that coincided with its reopening, indicating a public recognition of new audiences and sources of support. Both the catalogue and the exhibition are organized chronologically and by material, with clustered cultural groupings of calligraphy and inscriptions, metalwork, ceramic tiles, carved and inlaid wood, and carpets.

Offering yet another model for museums of Islamic art is the Institut du monde arabe in Paris; the smallest of Mitterand’s “Grands Projets,” intended to symbolize France’s central role at the end of the 20th century in the world economy, art and politics. It is a modern building designed by architect Jean Nouvel. Today it has become a dynamic institution devoted to exploring the relationship of Arab culture with France, offering many public programs and exhibitions, with restaurants, galleries, a library and a bookstore.

**Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2002; 2015)**

Of major museums in the United States, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) was a latecomer to collecting Islamic art, beginning in earnest in the early 1970s. Acquisition of the Madina Collection in 2002, made possible in large part by a generous gift from longtime benefactor and Trustee Camilla Chandler Frost doubled LACMA’s holdings of Islamic art. One hundred and fifty objects are featured in a recent publication of the collection, and an on-line gallery guide is now available, organized chronologically. More recently, LACMA has taken a leadership role in collecting works of contemporary artists with roots in the Middle East, calling this “Islamic Art Now” in an exhibition first installed in 2015.

**Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art**

The collection of Islamic art at the Cleveland Museum of Art is small but stunning, representing the highest levels of craftsmanship and quality of materials. Most of the nearly 200 works of art, including ceramic, metalwork, glass, and works on paper and parchment, were made between the 8th and 17th centuries in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey. Book illustrations (miniature paintings) with pictorial narratives are among the most significant holdings. In addition, the textile collection of about 450 works ranks among the finest in the world; administratively, these pertain to the Textiles Department. A new publication by curator L. W. Mackie, places this significant Islamic textile collection into a global historical context. Historically, Islamic textiles were luxury goods and symbols of status, wealth, and power at imperial courts from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans. Such textiles set new standards of beauty and technological advancement; they also generated wealth through trade among urban centers.

**Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts (2007)**

Since reopening in 2007, arts of the Islamic world have been subsumed within the Arts of Asia at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The reinstallation of the Islamic galleries was part of a larger reorganization, designed to sustain the museum financially. The collection numbers several thousand works produced in Asia, of which those from the Middle East (ancient and Islamic), including North Africa and Spain, com-
prise approximately 1300 objects, about a third of all Asian holdings. Arts of the Islamic world are treated in historical and cultural contexts, acknowledging global connections. The collection is presented with an emphasis on commercial and cultural exchange, identifying the Middle East as a nexus linking trade routes across Asia, as well as to Europe and Africa. Collecting in these fields in Detroit began towards the end of the 19th century and is ongoing. Among the most significant holdings of the DIA are textiles, and in particular, inscribed textiles from Egypt, but also other Islamic textiles. These materials were carefully analyzed and published early on, setting new standards at the time for the documentation of textiles, and explaining their cultural, historical, and technological significance even when fragmentary. Despite the large Arab-American population in and around Detroit since the early 20th century, there is little focus on interaction with this community of Arab Christians and Muslims, but a new Arab American National Museum has recently opened in nearby Dearborn, Michigan.

Conclusions: Reframing Islamic Art for the 21st Century

Today, we are well into the 21st century; the events of September 11, 2001, in New York City and elsewhere, launched the United States into this century with a jolt that struck chords around the world. With the ensuing wars, terrorism, violent extremism, and the production of Islamophobia in Europe and the US, it is indeed significant that these many new endeavors to reframe Islamic art globally represent a grand recognition of the need to redefine a historically complex and culturally diverse set of aesthetic expressions that derive from many different cultural traditions. These collections are regionally distinct, reflecting the particulars of local histories and patterns of collecting. That the galleries for the “Arts of Arab lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia” opened in New York City is deeply meaningful locally, as they offer a powerful statement of the transcendent values of culture as expressed through the arts, which should resonate with many different cultural traditions. Coincidentally, the reframing of Islamic art in New York offered two side benefits: The galleries once again reintroduced beauty to the landscape that is art, an absence that we have endured both in museum installations in recent decades, as well as in contemporary art movements. And the galleries strengthened The Metropolitan Museum in its primary role as an educational institution. Within the broader global context of new museums of Islamic art, and the reframing of Islamic art for the 21st century, we have numerous expressions of hopeful possibilities for new dialogues, and shifting perspectives that may foster cross-cultural understanding and generate respect for one another. Multiple perspectives allow for differences. But people need to come with open minds and open hearts, eager to listen and willing to learn, not so fast to criticize or be dismissive, and to emerge from an abyss of ignorance about the arts and their capacity to engender understanding: The more you look, the more you see; the more you see, the more you may understand. The conversations – and the learning – will happen, taking place in many forms and diverse forums outside the museum. From these renewed engagements, we may all derive benefit – gaining new perspectives that foster respect – thanks to the extraordinary collaborative efforts undertaken with both public and private support in so many locations throughout the world, and the cooperation of many teams working together and learning from each other. The phenomenon of “reframing Islamic art for the 21st century” is among the strongest statements of optimism I have seen in our current world.
A turning point in the collecting and exhibiting of Islamic art was hinted at in the late 20th century by Oleg Grabar, considered by many to be the doyen of Islamic art scholarship. He said at the time, “the artistic experience of the Muslim world in over 1400 years is too rich, too varied, and too complex to lend itself to a single message, a single voice, or a single explanation.” Veering away from earlier Orientalist approaches that considered a monolithic and unified essentialist vision, new museums of Islamic art, and the newly reopened older collections of Islamic art, now present a nuanced and more accurate display of diversity and complexity than any previous installation. What remains an interesting paradox, however, is that on the whole, Islamic art as a category is an Orientalist construction that continues to serve each of these institutions, but it is as foreign a concept to contemporary Muslims as it would have been to Muslims in any historical context, other than Orientalist, and still foreign to practitioners of any other faith tradition considering the “other.” For the category itself is temporally expansive and spatially broad, yet offers us as museum-goers a privileged view today of the arts of courts and empires, merchants and caravans, of many different original cultural contexts from a particular point-of-view. The movement of objects, peoples, arts, technology, and ideas, have had broad cultural impact that continue to inform our vision as well as our interpretations of cultural influences, interactions, and the transmission of ideas. The choices that lie behind both collecting and exhibiting are particular to each locale, the peculiarities of each institution’s leadership and management, and the narratives that we seek to put forward; each institution and its collecting history, along with its organizing of exhibitions, lends perspective to our globalized world and our understanding of its historical development.

Building upon the past decade and a half, and the phenomenon of reframing Islamic art for the 21st century, it seems that we may have now entered a new phase of research, education, and museum construction, with an expanded reframing that is broader than art, addressing cultural histories not previously explored in art museums. The National Arab American Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, is but one example cited above. But this category now also encompasses the National Museum of African American History and Culture that is part of the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, and a public recognition of a longer history of Muslims within the United States who were brought as slaves from Africa. It also encompasses new approaches to subjects long neglected, such as that of the National Museum of Slavery in Doha, addressing slave trade within the Arab world. Scholarship is broadened to consider aspects of cultural destruction, as well as to explore new horizons the visions for which derive from the traditional study of Islamic art and its ongoing impact today on exhibitions. Several recent exhibitions with publications identify new categories in the study of Islamic art. Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired by Traditional Islamic Art offers a perspective on engaging tradition today that leads to a reconsideration of traditional Islamic art, defining an algorithmic aesthetic of pattern that spread throughout the Islamic world of the 9th – 12th centuries. Pearls on a String: Artists, Patrons, and Poets at the Great Islamic Courts addresses the complex networks of relationships and the role of social circles within the context of artistic patronage. Sultans of Deccan India, 1500–1700: Opulence and Fantasy presented new interpretations of Deccani styles of architecture, painting, and other arts, reflecting cultural interactions with neighboring regions and artistic traditions, in-
cluding the Mughals to the north, which emerged through recent scholarship advanced at an international symposium held in 2008 and subsequently published.71 Such examples provide ample evidence for the continued advancement of scholarship and understanding of the complexity and diversity of Islamic art throughout the world, offering challenges and opportunities that continue to inspire research, and the processes of collecting and exhibition development for the benefit of humanity.

Notes and References

1 An initial version of this article was delivered as a lecture at The Hillside Club in Berkeley, California, on 7 November 2011. That version has been revised and updated to include new openings and reopenings through January 2017.
3 See Appendix 1 for a chronological sequence of openings and reopenings of collections of Islamic art, listed with each museum’s website.
7 Some of the issues associated with this phenomenon are discussed in a book of compiled essays, based on a conference in Berlin held in 2010 that began as a collaborative venture of the Pergamon Museum (Berlin) and the Aga Khan Museum (Toronto) to address planning for these two museums: Islamic Art and the Museum, ed. B. Junod et al (2012) contains thirty essays that explore this subject from diverse perspectives. A shift in focus from acquisition and the development of collections aimed at connoisseurs to educational services broadly defined for the public is discussed by S. Weil (1999), “From Being about something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum,” Daedalus 128/3, pp. 229-58. A further shift today suggests targeted outreach to specific audiences with an emphasis on diversity.
8 Chronology of recent openings and reopenings of major collections of Islamic art are included in the text and notes below, with associated websites also listed.
9 See, for example, the restrictive frames of media coverage as analyzed by M. Jiwa, “Five Media Pillars of Islam,” James F. Veninga Lecture on Religion and Politics, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMMgJnpb7BM (accessed 21 January 2017).
11 In April 2016, we hosted colleagues from several institutions in the San Francisco Bay Area at the Center for Islamic Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley to open a conversation on “Negotiating Cultural Boundaries Today in the Study and Teaching of Islamic Art.”
13 “Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point” is a new program in which refugees serve as guides to the museum--http://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/collection-research/research-cooperation/multaka.html

20 “Building the Moroccan Court,”


22 In the audio guide, this gallery is described cryptically by Chief Curator, Sheila Canby, as a “grand gallery that brings us up to the Ottomans,” and the object label for the ceiling is difficult to locate.


36 Sharjah Museum of Arabic Contemporary Art (2016), Modern and Contemporary Arab Art: From the Collection of the Sharjah Art Museum


60 http://www.clevelandart.org/art/departments/islamic-art


64 A. C. Weibel (1952), Two Thousand Years of Textiles: The Figured Textiles of Europe and the Near East (New York: Pantheon and Detroit Institute of Arts).


67 http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/doha-slavery-museum-confronts-past-to-help-qatars-shape-future


69 C. Bier (2017), *Reverberating Echoes: Contemporary Art Inspired by Traditional Islamic Art* (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union).
