

Multiculturalism and Islamicate Arts

Saygin Salgirli

On the first day of 2022, the world of Ottoman studies woke up with the explosion of an unexpected bomb. It came in the seemingly benign shape of a tweet. Arriving with the screen-shot of an outdated article, severely critiqued and buried a long time ago, the tweet claimed that the Ottoman *millet* system was the best solution to the problems facing contemporary multicultural societies. The article accompanying the tweet argued for the presence of a *millet* system, by which, since the beginning of their history, the Ottomans divided their subjects into autonomous self-governing communities (*millet*) based on their religions. Yet, as the specialist respondents to the tweet underlined, no such system existed before the nineteenth century, and even when *millet* became part of the Ottoman legal vocabulary, what it designated owed more to the French *régime des cultes* system of classification than to any past Ottoman or Islamicate practice. In fact, the introduction of the *millet* system in the nineteenth century intended to eliminate earlier religion-based discriminations, and had a program to grant equal citizenship rights to all Ottomans, while recognizing religious differences.¹ I have no intention to further this discussion, but it presents a good case to initiate another discussion; on the issues of teaching the art and architecture of historical multicultural societies in a contemporary multicultural society, such as Canada. Note that I am using the term “multicultural” while acknowledging its anachronism, simply to avoid the cumbersome repetition of “multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-lingual.” The *millet* system tweet is pertinent to this discussion, because underlying its assumptions is a nostalgia for an imaginary golden age that

Saygin Salgirli is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory at the University of British Columbia.
—saygin.salgirli@ubc.ca

has repeatedly resurfaced in the historiography of Islamic Arts (broadly defined). Although each such resurfacing has received immediate methodological and empirical amendment, the notion of a golden age still has strong resonances among the students. Therefore, a brief historical sketch is necessary.

I am a strong opponent of teleological history (and of the fetishization of beginnings and origins), but it is important to pinpoint certain markers. Perhaps, art historically, the most powerful golden-age term that has had direct relevance to Islamic Arts is *convivencia* (coexistence/co-living). In his monumental book, *The Spaniards* (1948), Américo Castro elaborated in extensive detail the times of harmonious life and cultural exchange among the Jews, Muslims and Christians of Iberia, prior to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Admittedly, Castro's medieval Iberia was overtly romanticized and too perfect to be true, but he was a Spanish republican in exile, writing against the fascist regime of Francisco Franco, who had transformed St. James into the fascist icon of "the Moor Slayer" (*matá-moros*).² Hence, although historians and art historians of medieval Iberia recognized the problems inherent in *convivencia* shortly after the term became widely applied (early 1990s), their responses came as respectful revisions, rather than harsh critiques.³ Meanwhile, William Tronzo was nuancing another potential candidate for a golden age of multiculturalism: Norman Sicily.⁴ He meticulously dissected the Cappella Palatina of Roger II to reveal a complex architectural assemblage, where the artistic presence of different cultures could not be explained away as the product of a now-lost age of tolerance.

The ripple effects of *convivencia* reached the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean (and beyond) with full force in the early 2000s, in the shape of cultural encounter and exchange. The process was as political-ly motivated as Castro's work, but this time cautions were in place, and there was no room for romanticized long-

ings. Based on a significant part of the papers presented at a symposium held in April 2003 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Campaign, Robert Ousterhout and D. Fairchild Ruggles edited a special issue for *Gesta* under the theme "Encounters with Islam: The Medieval Mediterranean Experience—Art, Material Culture, and Cultural Interchange." Both the symposium and the special issue were responses to 9/11 and the subsequent growth of Islamophobia that particularly culminated with the US invasion of Iraq.⁵ Yet, Ousterhout and Ruggles were careful not to paint an overly rosy picture of medieval experiences. Their goal was to present the visual and material evidence that interactions among the various religious communities of the medieval Mediterranean were too multi-faceted to be reduced to a tale of continuous hostilities.

The sensitivities that Ousterhout and Ruggles expressed have had a solid presence in the sub-fields of pre-Ottoman and Ottoman art and architectural history, too. Just to name a few directly relevant scholars, Oya Pancaroglu, Suzan Yalman, Scott Redford, Suna Çağaptay, Çiğdem Kafesçioğlu, and Gülrü Necipoğlu have been framing their arguments with attention to historical context, without any allusion to a past golden age of all-peaceful coexistence, and with a care to avoid any supra-historical generalizations of past experiences of artistic and architectural exchange. When Pancaroglu discussed the cross-cultural mobility of the dragon-slayer image in medieval Anatolia, she refrained from any claim of an absolute amity among the peoples of Anatolia and, more recently, Necipoğlu firmly grounded her discussion of the visual cosmopolitanism of Mehmed II's court in the historicity and the political motivations of the period.⁶

Given this historiography, what happens when you walk into a multicultural classroom in present-day Canada, where the expectations (and perhaps, the hopes) of the students are closer to the opposite edge of the spectrum: that of a rosy *convivencia*. It is true that they have not yet

1. On this, see Aylin Kocumyan, "The Miller System and the Challenge of Other Confessional Models, 1856–1865," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2017): 59–85, and the notes for further bibliography.
2. Barbara Abou-El-Haj, "Producing the Route of St. James: The Camino de Santiago in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Medievalia* 36 (2015/2016): 59 and notes.
3. For instance, Vivian B. Mann, Jerrilyn D. Dodds, and Thomas F. Glick, eds., *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in medieval Spain* (New York: G. Braziller in association with the Jewish Museum, 1992); *The Art of Medieval Spain: A.D. 500–1200* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993); and somewhat stronger in David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
4. William Tronzo, *The Cultures of his Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
5. Robert Ousterhout and D. Fairchild Ruggles, "Encounters with Islam: The Medieval Mediterranean Experience—Art, Material Culture, and Cultural Interchange," *Gesta* 43, no. 2 (2004): 83–85, and the rest of the issue.
6. Oya Pancaroglu, "The Itinerant Dragon-Slayer: Forging Paths of Image and Identity in Medieval Anatolia," *Gesta* 43, no. 2 (2004): 15–164; and Gülrü Necipoğlu, "Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversions with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Court," *Muqarnas* 29 (2012): 1–81.

learned this history, but the problem is not merely pedagogical—it is not limited to an absence of sufficient knowledge. It runs deeper than that. In my experience, I have not yet encountered a single student who professed even a discreet Islamophobic sentiment. Instead, what I have observed was this: Those who do not come from a Muslim heritage (broadly defined) are too sensitive to critically comment on the arts of a culture that they do not see theirs. Those who come from a Muslim heritage (broadly defined), on the other hand, enthusiastically and uncritically praise the arts of a culture that they embrace as theirs. Then, these two opposing assumed positions, that of the absolute outsiders and the absolute insiders, surprisingly meet at the golden age imaginary of some kind of a *vivençia*, without any prior knowledge of the term or its implications. What unites the assumed outsiders and the assumed insiders is frustration. The frustration arising from the struggle to include, and the frustration arising from the struggle to be included. What is lacking in such a union is criticality, which is the quintessential component of any academic environment.

The task of the instructor, in that respect, is not simply the transmission of the relevant information to correct the two opposing positions, but to provide the necessary tools for critical evaluation. The first step is unpacking the term “culture.” Why perceive Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as distinct homogenous cultures with clearly defined boundaries, and then awe at works of art that display their permeability? Does not the amazement rise from the initial premise that sees culture as a closed set? Eva Hoffman’s studies are very useful in demonstrating the problems with such retrospective attributions of contemporary assumptions to the past.⁷ Once the students realize that our current understandings of difference are not necessarily applicable to medieval Islamic societies, the first problem of overlaying the present upon the past is severed.

The second step logically follows from the first, and questions how differences worked in the past. For instance, it is now well established that Muslim and Christian manuscript and metalwork artists in medieval West Asia and North Africa made up a relatively integrated community, working either in the same workshops, or in close proximity to one another. The same was also true for masons, and in the case of the Ottoman Empire, as late as the eighteenth century, the majority of the masons and chief masons employed in mosque constructions were Greek Christians.⁸ That being the case, styles, motifs, and techniques were commonly shared, because, regardless of religious differences, artists on the one hand, and masons on the other, were members of the same professional and social class. In other words, what a modern eye might perceive as difference was easily bypassed by membership to the same class. However, would these people have had a similar relationship with the ruling elites of their respective societies, where ascribed status determined one’s position in the social hierarchy? Similarly, when the tax collector came and asked for the non-Muslim tax (*jizya*) from a Christian artist, could religious differences have dissolved so easily? Therefore, in past Islamic societies, differences and coexistence operated in multiple dimensions and cannot be reduced to religious categories.

Third and final step focuses on encounters, not between various religious groups (or cultures), but between works of art and their audiences. The question is simple: What happens to an image in each of its encounters with different audiences? Portable objects, particularly ceramics produced in Port St. Symeon in Antioch (twelfth–thirteenth century), are perfect vehicles to explore this question. Port St. Symeon ceramics were commercially produced, and their clientele was socially diverse and geographically dispersed, with the Genoese and the Pisans as major purchasers. Some of the ceramics had neutral floral and animal figures, but others were painted with

7. Eva R. Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century,” *Art History* 24, no. 1 (2001): 17–50.; and Eva R. Hoffman, “Christian-Islamic Encounters on Thirteenth-Century Ayyubid Metalwork: Local Culture, Authenticity, and Memory,” *gesta* 43, no. 2 (2004): 129–142.

8. Ünver Rüstem, *Ottoman Baroque: The Architectural Refashioning of Eighteenth-Century Istanbul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 171–220.

9. Eva R. Hoffman and Scott Redford, “Transculturation in the Eastern Mediterranean,” in Finbar Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu, eds., *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture, Volume 1* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 405–430.

images of seated or standing cup-holders. The latter were common iconographic features of royal and princely commissioned works, and appeared on manuscripts, ceramics, metalworks and stucco reliefs. Yet, a good number of the Port St. Symeon examples were clearly produced for much more modest clients.⁹ So, what happens to the image of a seated cup-holder when it is held and contemplated by a cobbler? Given that a cobbler was very unlikely to have servants, who would have cleaned that bowl in a medieval patriarchal household but one of the women of the household, perhaps the cobbler's wife? What would have happened to the seated cup-holder, when she was holding the bowl and cleaning it? Or, what if the cobbler was wealthy enough to own a slave, and it was he or her who was cleaning the bowl? Hence, the multiple audiences of medieval Islamic arts were diversified across geography, class, and gender, and when art is concerned, encounters did not only take place between different religions (or cultures).

The three steps that I have summarized here are closely integrated, and they do not necessarily need to follow the above order. Needless to say, they also do not correspond to a definite formula. Nonetheless, the methodology has so far worked for me. By the end of the sixth week, most of my students are able to understand that contemporary multiculturalism in Canada cannot be conflated with the historical experiences of Islamic societies, especially when those experiences are imagined in a non-existent golden age. Further, they are able to see that culture, when reduced to religion and seen as a closed homogeneous set, is not an adequate category for discussing Islamic Arts. More importantly, they are able to recognize that inclusion does not require the uncritical appreciation of Islamic Arts (for whichever reason). Instead, it requires paying the due respect by studying, analyzing, and discussing Islamic Arts critically and diligently, as one would do for European and North American art. ¶