

Marcus Milwright and Evanthia Baboula, eds.  
*Made for the Eye of One Who Sees: Canadian Contributions to the Study of Islamic Art*

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/ Tammer El-Sheikh /

Marcus Milwright and Evanthia Baboula's edited volume *Made for the Eye of One Who Sees: Canadian Contributions to the Study of Islamic Art* will be welcomed by researchers and students alike. With generous, high-quality colour illustrations, lengthy quotations from fascinating medieval and early modern sources, and the incisive use of a range of methods in the discipline, from iconography/iconology to formal analysis, reception analysis, institutional criticism, and occasionally post-colonial studies, the book provides newer students to the field with a view of its richness and the diversity of its objects of study and specialists with indications of the direction and parameters of new research. Although it is not acknowledged by the editors, the title of the book, drawn from famed thirteenth-century mystic Sufi poet Rumi reflects a pride of place given in many of the chapters to what the historian Albert Hourani called the "path of the mystics" in Islam.<sup>1</sup> The book makes good on the promise of the subtitle, treated more explicitly in the introduction, of tracking the Canadian contribution to a global field of study, and suggesting the distinctiveness of that contribution. As Milwright and Baboula note, Canadian

research on Islamic art, archeology, and architecture is well-positioned within a university system that increasingly supports "global citizenship" and "equity, diversity, and inclusion" in its strategic plans (15).

As a teaching tool, the collection of essays will be useful for more advanced seminars in Islamic art history which are not, in Canadian universities, as common as introductory courses. Nevertheless, its thematic organization provides a model for undergraduate pedagogy through its inclusion of contemporary artworks, and sections on "Material and Visual Culture" and "The Production and Reception of Islamic Art in Modern Times." The first two sections, "Reading Architecture" and "Archeological Research," feature objects from the Early, Middle, and Late periods of Islamic art history (between the seventh and the nineteenth centuries). Standard introductory books like Robert Hillenbrand's and Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair's conclude their histories around the year 1800 and thus do not engage modern and contemporary materials and critical perspectives.<sup>2</sup> While this volume's chronological presentation of a history of Islamic art and architecture is accessible for newer students, its later chapters challenge the usual geographic, dynastic, and medium-specific rubrics of surveys in the field. This more academic challenge goes hand-in-hand with the book's implicit celebration of Islamic culture, and its insistence on the creative evolution of the tradition in the fraught post-9/11 era.

In what follows, I'll focus on two critical issues in the book. The first concerns what the editors call an "eclecticism" in the sample of scholarly studies which, upon closer examination, reveals particular "regions and dynastic periods" that are "more densely researched than others" (11). I have alluded to the prominence of "mystical" Sufi beliefs and practices in the studies. There is also a preponderance of studies of Persianate and Mughal materials in the book. Hourani's alternate "path of reason," taken by Muslim philosophers, scientists, and physicians and associated with Sunni Islam, is eclipsed somewhat, as are the art and architecture of the central and western Islamic world.<sup>3</sup> The book favours the margins of the faith and its heterodox traditions, and the art and architectural history of South and Southwest Asia, and focuses less on the Sunnism of most Muslim-majority countries. The danger of

privileging mysticism is that the more sober, orthodox, and rationalist strains of Islamic thought and culture fall from view because they do not fulfill an expectation of Islam's exoticism and essential difference from the West. The focus, in any case, honours the legacy of a Canadian "pioneer in the field," as the editors call Anthony Welch in their acknowledgments section, with his specializations in Iranian and Mughal painting, and the art and architecture of the Sultanate in India (xiv).

The second issue concerns a sharp break between historical and modern/contemporary studies and perspectives in the book. While the first three sections deal mostly with materials from the history of Islam between its founding in the seventh century and the twilight of its last great Empire in the nineteenth century, the final section on "The Production and Reception of Islamic Art in Modern Times" is responsive to contemporary realities of the Muslim world, parsing those realities with critical methods. While the editors mention the war in Syria and the so-called "Arab Spring" in their introduction to set an immediate historical context for the book and an agenda of "cultural preservation" in the face of grave threats, current geopolitics are not taken up in its more historical sections (3–4). It may be too much to expect historical researchers to reflect on the implications of their work in the present, but given the post-9/11 climate and the ongoing rise of Islamophobia, such reflections are needed. The book's examples of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, curating, and artmaking toward the end are helpful in this regard. But throughout the book we are given ample cause for celebration of a tradition that is very often vilified in the mainstream media. This is one of the volume's major, if underemphasized strengths.

The first section of the book includes four studies in "Reading Architecture" of the Islamic world. The case studies are, for the most part, buildings from Lahore and Delhi in the Mughal Empire and the Sultanate period. Sufism in these cases provides the studies with vital doctrinal background, however the monuments under consideration are shown by the authors to reflect the intercultural, cosmopolitan, and inter-religious nature of the early Islamic world in South Asia and elsewhere. The first two chapters, by Alexander Townson on Jordan's Mshatta façade (743–44), and by Erica Cruikshank

Dodd on Lahore's Wazir Khan Masjid (1635) are distinguished by their analysis of the ritual and visual experience of these buildings. The Mshatta frieze's tangle of geometric, vegetal, and zoological ornament is "read" by Townson though Gertrude Bell's encounter with it in 1900, as well as several scholars' more technical views, and, importantly, the imagined Umayyad subject's view, to make a point about its dynamism and narrative qualities—despite the absence of a unified iconographic program. Cruikshank Dodd's more strictly epigraphic "read" of the Lahore Masjid similarly pays close attention to the meaning of the building for those who pass through its gate to the prayer hall, and then back out into the profane world of the bazaar and commerce, which is shown to be continuous with the building's sacred precincts.

These two studies, as the editors note, are primarily concerned with the meanings given in Islamic buildings for their users. The section's remaining two studies, by Hussein Keshani on the Bara Bateshewala Mahal (1603–1604) in Mughal Delhi, and by the pioneer of Islamic art history in Canada, Anthony Welch, on the Mosques of Firuz Shah (r. 1351–88), also in Delhi but from its Sultanate period (1206–1526), are rather trained on matters of patronage and attribution. In both, detailed biographies of colorful historical figures bring the buildings to life. Keshani's study of a garden-house in the vicinity of Emperor Humayun's iconic tomb makes careful use of textual sources, manuscript paintings, and architectural features to give an account of a highly innovative hybrid building (between garden, tomb, and residence) patronized by Shahzadah Khanam (b. 1569), the wife of Mizra Muzaffar Husayn (d. 1603–1604). As he notes in his conclusion, this instance of domestic architecture patronized by "a woman of the extended Mughal imperial family" is a significant finding (91). The special appeal of the study for feminist art historians who wish to revise and displace the many narratives of great male Mughal Emperors is clear by the end of the chapter.

The second section of the book, on "Archeological Research," illuminates the empirical roots of so much scholarship on Islamic art and architectural history, providing a sense of the physical evidence used to justify interpretations, periodization, and provenance in the field. The section includes two papers focused on the Canadian

Archeological Mission of the Royal Ontario Museum to the ancient city of Zabid in Yemen. These chapters, by Ingrid Hehmeyer and Edward Keall, indicate the stamp of the ROM upon the entire book. Indeed, *Made for the Eye of One Who Sees* opens with a gorgeous sampling of “Treasures from the Islamic World at the ROM,” testifying to the Museum’s essential role as patron, publisher, and research institute for Canadian scholars in the field. We learn from Hehmeyer about the need for the ROM’s Mission to balance archeological evidence against often biased textual sources, and from Keall about the likely transmission, via ceramic vessels and pipes, of Yemeni Sufi social practices in Zabid’s Ottoman garrisons; from Milwright about the communities responsible for drainage pipe manufacture across the Middle East; and from Mason about the petrography and iconography of lead-glazed ceramics from a Monastery in Syria. The attention to materials in these chapters is compelling – perhaps most compelling where materials are given a corrective power, as they are in Hehmeyer’s chapter. There we see how the Ayyubid historian al-Khazraji’s remarks on the “malevolence” of a Rasulid governor of Zabid are contested by archeological findings that show prosperity rather than decline under the Rasulids (161).

Critical views of this archeological research might draw attention to its focus on religious minorities in the Islamic world: we learn, after all, of ceramics in a *Christian* Syrian Monastery in this section; of ritual uses of “coffee and smokes” for Yemeni *Sufis*; and of the “confessionally specific” *Jewish* practice of ceramic drainage-pipe-making across the Middle East, in cities like “Acre (Israel)” (203–204). As Edward Said and others have noted, interested uses of archeological findings in the Middle East are important to consider in the evaluation of Zionist and Palestinian claims to land in historical Palestine.<sup>4</sup> Milwright’s findings are not here in question, but a note on the possible uses and abuses of such evidence of Jewish presence and industry in cities such as Acre, a majority Palestinian city before 1948 which was swiftly occupied during the establishment of the State of Israel, would cast a critical light on this section. While Hehmeyer alerts us in her chapter to the need to identify biases in the historical record, ideological uses of

archeological findings now seem equally worthy of our attention.

The book’s third and fourth sections, on “Material and Visual Culture” and on “The Production and Reception of Islamic Art in Modern Times,” offer the most to students and researchers working outside of the specialized field of Islamic art and architectural history.

The first chapter of the third section by Fahmida Suleman, current Senior Curator of the ROM’s Islamic World collections, offers a careful analysis of the iconography and ceremonial use of the giraffe in Fatimid Egypt (909–1171), in mosaics, ceramics and fascinating textual sources such as a fourteenth-century illustration of *Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence* by the cosmographer Zakaria al-Qazwini (d. 1283). We learn that the mythical view of this creature as a hybrid leopard-camel was abandoned over time in Arabic texts and replaced by a more zoologically accurate description, accounting for its increasingly naturalistic rendering. Building on scholarship on the politics of Fatimid iconography, Suleman also shows how the giraffe, between its appearance in ceremonials and on ceramics, appealed to both elites and the wider urban classes (246).

The remaining three chapters in the section deal with Persianate material culture. Equally impressive in the rigor of their analyses, they also point ahead to contemporary concerns across the Islamic world. In Lisa Golombek’s study of “Syrian blossoms” or iconographic transformations in a collection of Persian ceramics at the ROM, we learn about the effects of Chinese production upon workshops in the Islamic world, and about the seventeenth and eighteenth-century roots of the “fate of local manufacturing throughout the Middle East under the new dynamics of expanding globalized competition” (269). The last two chapters in the section, while dealing with historical objects, allude to contemporary artistic and literary perceptions of them. The contemporary Iranian sculptor Parviz Tanavoli explores “The Stone Lions of Isfahan” and their traditional Shi’a symbolism of heroism. And Karin Ruhrdanz’s “Princes, Wine, and Animated Nature: Tabriz Painting Around 1500” leads us into the details of several mysterious images of youthful aristocrats and grooms with their horses, dating and attributing the works based on their presentation of conical

hats and slender, ephebic male figures. The chapter lingers in the sixteenth century but ends with a note of admiration for the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk's contemporary literary capture of the "mood and invitation to contemplation" in the pictures—of their evocation of "the hum of the forest, the world's lament" (299). These allusions to the present are vital, as they push past the customary end-point of most histories of Islamic art in the nineteenth century to insist on the continual growth and transformation of the tradition. As well, in line with the methodological challenge implied by the section heading, these studies of "Material and Visual Culture" break down the discipline's stubborn distinctions between fine art and craft, and between the mediums of painting, ceramics, mosaics, and drawing. One gets the sense, in this section, of the growth and transformation of a tradition over time and into the present, and of the power of highly mobile motifs (of giraffes, lions, blossoms, and grooms) in stimulating such growth.

In the fourth and final section of the book on the modern/contemporary reception of Islamic art, we are alerted to critical issues within and adjacent to the field that might be read back into the more historical studies. The book's immediate institutional context in Canada is called to mind in Bitu Pourvash's study of the history of the ROM's Islamic collection. The Western and European investment in the region so carefully studied by Said and postcolonial critics who followed in his wake emerges as a subtext in the book after reading Mark Antliff's paper on Matisse's heroizing Orientalist work *Standing Riffian* (1912). The emphasis on particular regions and dynasties across the book is conspicuous after reading Patricia Bentley and Zulfikar Hirji's paper on "The Dialogic Exhibition" of historical African Islamic material culture and the work of four contemporary artists (Jamelie Hassan, Hamid Kachmar, Alia Toor, and Tim Whiten). The attention given to a textile from Burkina Faso in Bentley and Hirji's chapter and the exhibition upon which it reflects, loudly proclaim the field's need to account for objects and traditions from sub-Saharan Africa in the postcolonial era. Finally, Laura U. Marks's chapter on "Process Thinking for Islamic Art and Media Art" makes provocative claims about the way in which artists like Mounir Fatmi and Jalal Toufic update an Islamic aesthetics of "performative

abstraction" or aniconism by strategically "withdrawing" representations of the divine from their work, and interrogating a visual culture of pixels, images of Muslims and Arab wars, and pornography (383). Although these works are not illustrated in Marks's chapter, their discussion reminds the reader of the kind of imagery that saturates contemporary mass media representations of the Islamic world and accounts for popular fears of it in the West.

By way of conclusion, some insights are worth emphasizing from Pourvash's history of the ROM's Islamic collection and from Bentley and Hirji's paper on their exhibition *Magic Squares* at the Textile Museum of Canada. Pourvash takes care to describe the network of collectors and patrons that enabled the founding of the Museum under the leadership of its first Director, the archeologist Charles Trick Currelly (1876–1957). The ROM's Islamic collection, which includes many of the featured objects in the book, was made possible at first through Currelly's access to "cheap Islamic artifacts" in Cairo's old souk *Khan al-Khalili*, and then through a key British collaborator and Egyptologist, David Hornblower (1864–1951), stationed within the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior in the first decades of the twentieth century—before Egyptian independence (313–16). This history of a prominent Canadian cultural institution, then, overlaps with a colonial history of the British "protectorate" in Egypt. What Pourvash calls the more "specialized approach" to Islamic art at the ROM after the late 60s tends to neglect the colonial cultural politics that provided its own objects of study. Such perspectives can be found elsewhere in the field of Islamic art history: in the past, in the present, and even in this book. As I have argued, this volume's more specialist and historical chapters do not take account of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, artmaking, and curation that bear a critical relationship to the field.

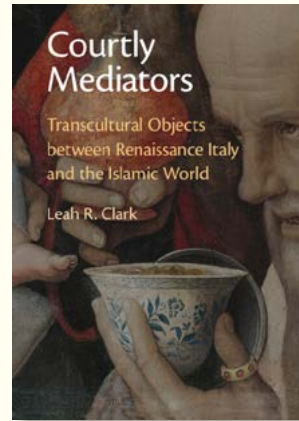
In Bentley and Hirji's paper, we are shown precisely what such scholarship, artmaking, and curation can do to loosen the boundaries—disciplinary, geographical, religious, and historical—that hold sway in the field and make it possible for researchers to tidily separate their work from the geopolitics of Islam in the twenty-first century. Bentley and Hirji issue a challenge with their

exhibition and in their paper to histories of Islamic art that exclude Africa, boldly leaning into such geopolitics. They offer insights, as well, about the curatorial duty of community consultation in their remarks on the ROM's own efforts to controversially curate African art in its exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* (1990). Most importantly, Hirji develops a concept of “intracultural dialogue” that troubles the “reified” categories of “Islamic Art,” “Black Africa,” and the “Islamic World,” insisting on the complexity of global cultural flows, and the radical diversity of tastes, knowledge, affiliations, bodies, and opinions within these traditions and areas and not just between them (364–65).

While the fine detail and evidentiary force of the early chapters leaves no doubt about the rigor of scholarship in Islamic art, architecture, and archeology, it is these last steps taken in the book—from the collector and connoisseur's field in Currelley's time to the specialist study of Islamic art after the 60s and, finally, to a critical account of its reception and curatorial framing now—that distinguishes this volume.

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- 1 Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 57–59.
- 2 Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021); Jonathan M. Bloom and Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Arts* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).
- 3 Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 59–62.
- 4 Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (London: Vintage Books, 1980), 86. Also see Samuel Nelson Gilbert, “Israeli Land Claims: Archeology and Ideology,” *Al Jazeera*, November 16, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/11/16/israeli-land-claims-archaeology-and-ideology>.



Leah R. Clark  
*Courtly Mediators: Transcultural Objects between Renaissance Italy and the Islamic World*  
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/ Cynthia Fang /

Leah Clark's *Courtly Mediators: Transcultural Objects between Renaissance Italy and the Islamic World* compellingly argues that the circulation of objects—facilitated by interactions in early modern courtly domestic spaces—inform sensual and material memories and experiences. Clark's book presents a new perspective on courts in Italy, positioning Naples as a nexus of exchange in which agents, material goods, and objects played active roles. By exploring the importance of diplomatic negotiation, trade, and encounters with material cultures, Clark introduces a transformative methodological framework that situates Italian courts within a larger global intersection of connection and interchange. The “courtly mediators,” such as ceramic drug jars, aromatics, Mamluk metalware, and Chinese porcelain, reveal the interconnectedness of people, materials, and things, resisting the idea of “pure” or authentic cultural traditions and products (8). Clark's argument is substantiated by extensive archival evidence and the book offers valuable theoretical and methodological insights, applicable to studies of early modern art and material culture.

Expanding on her expertise on the collection of Eleonora d'Aragona, the Duchess of Ferrara, Clark focuses on the