

“The Hard Desire to Last”¹: Stories of Continuity. Contemporary art and Collection of Islamic Art

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Rachid Koraichi, *Path of Roses* (1995-2005), Ankara, Turquia e outros lugares.

¹ “Le dur désir de durer” is a line of a poetry of Paul Eluard taken again by Mohammed

Abstract

In the last thirty years, Islam understood as Islamic civilization has been, in many ways, increasingly associated with the notion of contemporary art. For example, many great museums in the world include works from their collection of contemporary art from the Middle East into their collection of historical Islamic art. This association between contemporary art and Islamic art led to the notion of *Contemporary Islamic Art*, which is grounded in the idea of permanence of Islamic art. Thus Islamic art can be seen “as the anachronism of a medieval art that never died” (Amy Goldin) and it is ascribed a transhistoric character: art, produced today in Muslim countries or by artists linked to Islam by their place of birth or by ascendancy, is thought to prolong Islamic art today. This interpretation is also founded on the idea of permanence of the Islamic civilization and on an a-historical conception of time. This paper will analyze this alternative conception of Islamic art’s periodization studying the case of the British Museum and relating it to the discourse of various non-western art historians and authors. The issue at stake goes beyond the artistic field: this revival of Islamic art is a means to establish through art the *cultural continuity* of the Islamic civilization.

Keywords: Islamic art. Contemporary. Anachronism. British Museum.

Resumo

Nos últimos trinta anos, o Islã, entendido como civilização islâmica, tem sido, em vários sentidos, crescentemente associado à noção de arte contemporânea. Por exemplo, muitos grandes museus no mundo incluem, em suas coleções de arte islâmica histórica, trabalhos pertencentes a suas coleções de arte contemporânea originárias do Oriente Médio. Essa associação entre arte contemporânea e arte islâmica levou à noção de *Arte Islâmica Contemporânea*, que se baseia na ideia de permanência da arte islâmica. Assim, a arte islâmica pode ser vista como um “um anacronismo de uma arte medieval que nunca morreu” (Amy Goldin) e recebe a atribuição de um caráter trans-histórico: arte, produzida hoje em países muçulmanos ou por artistas ligados ao Islã por seus lugares de nascimento ou por ascendência, é compreendida como prolongamento da arte islâmica hoje. Essa interpretação também funda-se na ideia de permanência da civilização islâmica e em uma concepção a-histórica do tempo. Esse artigo analisará essa concepção alternativa de periodização da arte islâmica estudando o caso do *British Museum* e relacionando-a ao discurso de vários historiadores e autores não-ocidentais. O tema em questão vai além do campo da arte: esse renascimento da arte islâmica é um meio de estabelecer, através da arte, a *continuidade cultural* da civilização islâmica.

Palavras-chave: Arte Islâmica. Contemporâneo. Anacronismo. British Museum.

In 1992, in an article entitled “The Status of Islamic Art in the Twentieth Century,” the Jordanian artist and art historian, Wijdan Ali, defined most clearly both historically, and to a certain extent aesthetically, what was to be understood by the term “Islamic art,” regarding which, she wrote:

The phrase ‘Islamic art’ tends to conjure up images of ornate metalwork, intricately woven textiles and rugs, ceramics with calligraphic decoration and stylized floral designs, delicately trimmed glass ware, colorful Iranian miniatures illustrating poetic verses, and animated Turkish albums testifying to the feats of illustrious sultans. The creation of this kind of *classical Islamic art* falls between the Umayyad dynasty in the seventh century and the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, a span of thirteen centuries during which empires rose and fell in an area that today extends from Africa to Southeast Asia. They represent a sequence of civilizations distinguished by their unity but also by the diversity of their rich and varied heritage. (ALI, 1992, p 186, my emphasis)

At the end of this article, the author wonders about contemporary art production in Muslim countries and argues that the artists aspire to the establishment of “an artistic identity” that would be able to implement “new formulas for *modern Islamic art*” (ALI, 1992, p 188, my emphasis).

In 1991, one year before the publication of this article, the British Museum organized an exhibition entitled *Collecting the 20th Century*. The aim of this exhibition was to present the museum’s collections of objects from the 20th century and to explain its acquisition policy,² which therefore also concerned the generic category “contemporary art”.

² As pointed out by Frances Carey in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, this policy is not new: “From its foundation in 1753 as the first national museum in the world to be both public and secular, the British Museum has always included contemporary

It was Jessica Rawson, Keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the time, who was to present the collection of contemporary art of the “Islamic World” section in the department. In the catalogue, she states that the use of Arabic writing was the common denominator in the constitution of this collection, whose works were to be exhibited successively within the John Addis gallery, which groups together all of the museum’s Islamic art objects. Rawson introduced the collection in the following way:

Islamic art as such was really a court art which came to an end in the mid-nineteenth century. Thereafter the work produced from the Islamic world has been very much conditioned by national divisions but although it can no longer be given a generic name, many of the artists represented, whether Iraqi, Algerian, Lebanese, or Iranian, show a continuing interest in that aspect of their visual culture which binds Muslims together, Arabic writing. (RAWSON, 1991, p. 39)

If, like Ali, Rawson considers first that “Islamic art” is historically dated, unlike her, Rawson did not yet see any “generic name” that could be substituted for it and consequently considers it appropriate to introduce these contemporary works in the John Addis gallery, which unites, I underline, the museum’s Islamic objects of art.

Even if the term “modern Islamic art” is not used by the British Museum, the interpretation that it gives to these contemporary works has numerous similarities with the discursive characteristics linked to the notion and the problems that it poses³.

artifacts”. It is more its media coverage which is a novelty. Cf. Frances Carey, “Introduction”, *Collecting the 20th Century*, Edited by Frances Carey, published for the Trustees of the British Museum. London, British Museum Press, 1991, p.6.

³ These authors use either “modern Islamic Art” or “Contemporary Islamic Art” as if they were synonymous.

In this paper, I will consider more closely this interpretation on the part of the British Museum, firstly by historicizing it, by showing what it owes to the history of the formation of its collection of classical Islamic art (and also how it is distanced from this); and then, by presenting what the central point of this interpretation implies, namely, the interpretation of the use of Arabic writing by contemporary artists as being the continuity of the tradition of Islamic calligraphy. After having presented this choice and its implications, I will briefly try to show how it matches with the conception of History and Islamic art's periodization based on the idea of permanence of Islamic art developed in discourses of various non-western art historians and authors.

“Islamism, not an easy matter”: History of the Islamic objects of art at the British Museum. From the collection of objects to the constitution of a gallery “of Islamic art”.

The John Addis Gallery of the British Museum – the embodiment of a longstanding wish to create a permanent gallery for Islam at the British Museum – was inaugurated in June 1989. It was named after John Addis, British diplomat, Sinologist, collector (1914-1983), and trustee of the British Museum from 1977 until his death, when he gave a gift to the British Museum⁴. There is no evidence of any contemporary work having been exhibited at the time of the gallery's opening in 1989, but what is certain is that in 1991 certain contemporary works were already being exhibited

⁴ The collection of this gallery, however, includes no object coming from the collection of Chinese porcelain that John Addis donated to the museum. This is what Michael Rogers (the Deputy Keeper of Oriental Antiquities in the British Museum, in charge of the new John Addis Islamic Gallery) underlined upon the gallery's opening in 1989: “It is just his money which made it possible”. Cf. “Michael Rogers – Keeper of the Culture of Islam”, Interview. *Eastern Art Report*, 16-30 May 1989, p. 13.

there, including the one I show you here, one of the very first works acquired by the museum and shown in the museum in 1991. It is entitled *The Heart of Sincerity*, a silkscreen on paper, dated 1978 by Ahmed Mustafa.

To recount the story of this gallery is in fact to recount two stories that preceded it: firstly, that relating to the presence of these contemporary works, from their acquisition up to their presentation in the John Addis Gallery; and secondly, that relating to the Islamic objects of art, some of which were present in various collections of the British Museum at its creation in 1753, while others were acquired (often through donations) throughout the 19th century. In what follows, therefore, we are to consider these two stories to understand the role of the 19th and 20th centuries in defining the interpretation proposed by the British Museum of these contemporary works, and so bring out the historical specificity of this interpretation.

It was from the early 1980s, under the new policy of acquisition of works established by Sir David Wilson, Director of the British Museum from 1977 to 1991, that contemporary works created by artists living in Muslim countries (Iran, Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia, etc.), or born in one of these countries but living in Great Britain, the United States or else in France (etc.), were acquired by the museum with a view to forming a collection of contemporary art from the Middle East. This collection, as evidenced in a statement made by Venetia Porter, curator at the British Museum, was established in relation to the notion of “Islamic art,” even if there was no permanent gallery for Islamic art at the British Museum at the beginning of the 1980s. Porter writes:

Faced with the increasing mass of work produced by modern artists from all over the Middle East, it was decided to limit the collection to Works which had some connection with the museum's collection of classical Islamic art. In this way a thread of continuity with the past could be demonstrated. This conservative approach meant that more abstract Works, in an international style, were avoided. Instead, a collection of Works centering on Arabic calligraphy was built up. (PORTER, 1992, p. 25)

Through the importance thus accorded to the notion of continuity with the past, this can in fact be seen as a means of prolonging this notion of "Islamic art." Porter admits that "the term 'Islamic' art is now difficult to justify in the context of modern art" (PORTER, 1992, p. 25) but nonetheless considers it legitimate to consider the use of Arabic lettering by these modern artists as a form of continuity of classic Islamic art. The difficulty of naming the collection, which was nevertheless in the course of formation *by and according to* this "conservative" policy of acquisition — as well as the prudence associated with the term "Islamic" in the current presentation of the John Addis Gallery on the museum's Web site — is shown in the following:

The John Addis Gallery—7th Century AD—Present: the term 'Islamic' is used in Room 34 to define the culture of peoples living in lands where the dominant religion is Islam. The displays explore Islamic faith, art, calligraphy and science, and Islam's prominence amongst world cultures.⁵

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http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/galleries/middle_east/room_34_the_islamic_world.aspx

Recall the remarks of Augustus Wollaston Franks, curator at the British Museum from 1851 to 1896 and to whom the museum owes the existence of its collection of classical Islamic art⁶.

Indeed, all such attention, whether concerning the definition of the term “Islamic” or bearing witness to the difficulty of employing the term “Islamic” in a solely religious sense,⁷ recall these remarks of Franks, who was opposed to the presentation of Islamic objects of art in the gallery dedicated to religions (other than Christianity). He was to concede only in 1893 in admitting the difficulties that he met in exhibiting these objects. On this subject, he wrote:

In arranging the illustrations of Religions in the Second Northern Gallery, I thought it desirable to make a Small exhibition to illustrate *Islamism, not an easy matter*. I have placed there a very fine woven sacred flag with the sword of Ali which I happened to possess. (...). It seems to me, however, that a Koran would be indispensable. (WARD, 1997, p. 273, my emphasis)

It is to be noted that even today it is an open Koran that first greets the visitor to the John Addis Gallery.

During Franks’ tenure at the British Museum the Islamic art objects were exhibited in different galleries depending on their medium and did not constitute a collection of Islamic art as such. They were presented next

⁶ “It is no exaggeration to claim that without Franks the British Museum would be unlikely to have an Islamic collection at all. It was he who persuaded the authorities, against considerable opposition, that the material was worth collecting.” Cf. Rachel Ward, “Augustus Wollaston Franks and the Display of Islamic Art at the British Museum”, in Stephen Vernoit (ed.), *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*. London, New York, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000, p. 113.

⁷ Oleg Grabar opts for a ‘conventional’ usage of this term: “The adjective ‘Islamic’ should not be taken seriously in its literal sense. It is a conventional term to cover a broadly defined cultural entity over many centuries and the faith of Islam is only one aspect of that entity.” Cf. Oleg Grabar, “The Aesthetics of Islamic Art”, (first published in 1993), *Islamic Art and Beyond. Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, volume III, 2006, p. 335.

to European objects of contemporary production. Franks considered the Islamic objects of art as objects relating to both a specific geographic zone and a particular culture. He therefore implicitly attributed to them a status of intermediary forms between Europe, Asia and Africa, but also, as material traces of the Middle Ages, between Antiquity and the European Renaissance. As a result, the British Museum's collection of Islamic art was not consciously constituted for itself, but rather for what it made possible to understand of the historic evolution of European artistic forms.⁸

However, in what follows, I briefly present some similarities between the conception that Franks had of this collection of Islamic art objects and the current interpretation of the British Museum of the contemporary works included in the gallery dedicated to Islam.

In Franks' lifetime, Islamic art objects were either inserted in the galleries of the museum's ethnographic section, or else in those of the medieval section (these two sections formed one single department at that time) precisely as is the case today of some of these contemporary works that are to be found in both the John Addis Gallery of Islamic Art and the Sainsbury Gallery bringing together, according to medium, the collections of the former Department of Ethnography, which disappeared in 2004 to be replaced by the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas (the disciplinary distinction having been replaced by the geographic distinction).

Moreover, in Franks' time, the Islamic art objects were above all perceived as decorative art, a perception that continues to the present day.

⁸ Cf. "Franks' particular interest lay in the Relationship between the decorative arts of the medieval Islamic world and Renaissance Europe." (WARD, 1997)

Indeed, in the display introducing “The Contemporary World” of the John Addis gallery, the works chosen for exhibition are those of Khalid Ben Slimane (ceramic plates, vases). In this other example, it is not the work itself that recalls the forms of decorative art, but its presentation on exhibition and the commentary that accompanies it, bearing witness to a purely formal reading of the work. Here then are some metal figurines that constitute a part of the work of Rachid Koraichi, entitled *Path of Roses*, and presented in the Sainsbury Gallery in the same display case as these iron weapons. The wall label reads: “*Calligraphic figures from the Path of Roses*, Rachid Koraichi, Algeria, 2001, Painted steel—The Path of Roses pays homage to the 13th-century Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din al-Rumi who made a physical and spiritual journey across North Africa and the Mediterranean to Qonya, in Turkey. The human forms of the metal sculptures share a similarity with the throwing knives above, and with the artists who created them.”

The final item that I would like to put forward in this historiographic rapprochement: In 1893, while Franks was preparing his exhibition of Islamic art in the gallery dedicated to religions, he opted for the criterion of function/use: “I have two metal standard tops for religious processions; two Darvish bowls carved in Seychelles nuts, and I propose adding a selection of stone and other amulets.” (WARD, 1997, p. 273) Today, the criterion linked to a religious function still determines the presentation of contemporary works in the John Addis Islamic Gallery. This is indeed the case of this work by the Tunisian artist Khaled Ben Slimane, *Invocations*, which is presented thus: “In parts of Africa even today children learn to write the Qur’an on boards (*lawh*) which are then wiped clean with water, which then becomes holy water. Ben Slimane has

taken the traditional form and transformed it. The green leak repeats the word *Allah*.”

In this way, just as for Franks, these objects/works are “art documents” since they permit to introduce elements of History and Anthropology. In 1855, three years after the creation of the South Kensington Museum, renamed the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1899, Franks defined the policy of acquisition of decorative art implemented by the British Museum, in order to distinguish its collections from those of the new museum in South Kensington. Franks then specified that these works must be “not only good of their kind, but which have on them a date, the name of the artist or *some interesting historical association with... documents* on the several branches of art to which they belong.”(apud WARD, 1997, p. 111, my emphasis)

Despite these similarities, Rachel Ward expresses herself firmly on the John Addis gallery at the end of an article titled “Augustus Wollaston Franks and the Display of Islamic Art at the British Museum.” In this way, having deplored the fact that the grouping of Islamic art objects is for the purpose of representing the material culture of a broad ensemble of countries and different political entities, she writes: “The John Addis Islamic Gallery is now unique in the British Museum for defining its contents by religion. The label ‘Islamic’ is misleading as most of the objects are secular in function and iconography, and they often have more in common with Italy than any other Islamic country.” (WARD, 1997, p. 116) What is perhaps true for the ancient works is certainly true for the contemporary works that the gallery exhibits. However, my argument here concerns another issue. What concerns me is to show that the term “Islamic” as understood in the John Addis gallery, and contrary to what

Ward claims, is not a “religious” term, not even a cultural one, but rather a term relating to civilization. What is put forward by the appellation ‘The John Addis Islamic Gallery’ is in reality the notion of “Islamic civilization,” which is not presented as ending with the fall of the Ottoman empire (let us recall here the temporal limits that this gallery sets for itself: “7th Century AD to the Present;” let us also note that if we attempt to explore the collections of the British Museum on its Website via the link “by culture” in the “Highlights” section, we find nothing on Islam⁹). The interpretation advanced by the British Museum about its collection of contemporary art from the Middle East confirms this reactivation of the notion of “Islamic civilization.” This is possible because the use of Arabic writing by certain contemporary artists can be associated with the art of calligraphy of past Islamic civilization, and thus suggests the continuity of a tradition. After all, it is by this criterion that the British Museum selects its contemporary works of art. This use today prolongs outmoded definitions of Islamic art. The interpretation reaffirms the link between Art, History, and Islam and seems to turn around, without contradicting, another statement made by Wijdan Ali: “As long as there is Islam there will always be Islamic art.”(ALI, 1998) Consequently, for as long as there are works of “Islamic art,” it can be supposed that Islam, understood as “Islamic civilization,” will endure. Few years earlier, James W Allan, curator at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, curiously said a similar formula: «For Islamic art is not dead, and as long as Islam remains, so will Islamic art» (ERMES, 1992, p. 10).

These quotes are nonetheless problematic in that they suggest the existence of an “Islamic essence”. The Islamic Civilization is, according to

⁹ http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/cultures_index.aspx.

the Director General of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Isesco), Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri:

A civilization whose sustainability is matched the sustainability of life on earth. Islamic civilization draws its substance in the eternal principles of Islam. It is, therefore, a particular civilization, braving the ravages of time, remains forever alive.

Therefore as long as there would be "the eternal precepts of Islam," there would be an Islamic civilization.

These discourses on Art and Islam concord to imply a sense of duration that corresponds in its effect to this definition of Bergson: "The duration is the continuous progress of the past that gnaws at the future and that swells going forward."¹⁰ (MÉTALNIKOV, 1938, p. 108). That sense of duration is developed by "a piling up of the past on the past." ("l'amoncellement du passé sur le passé"). These discourses also share the same concept of permanence that relies on a cyclical conception of history as theorized by the British historian Arnold Toynbee.

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¹⁰ «la durée est le progrès continu du passé qui ronge l'avenir et qui gonfle en avançant.»

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