

# MUSEUM ISLAM

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What would you like to see in an exhibition on Islam? I asked this question to a warden in one of Britain's prominent museums. The warden had worked within the institution for decades, guarding the artworks, speaking to visitors, navigating the public that visit the collections, so their institutional memory of the museum was profound; and also occupied the space as a Muslim. Yet, when asked this question, the warden said they wished to see an exhibition that would really explore 'Islam' and 'Art', as this was something the warden had yet to see in all their time working on the exhibition floor. Why did this answer surprise me? Was it the fact that the museum in question had a reference point of Islam in its recent history? Since the 2000s, there had been two exhibitions in which Islam was heavily, explicitly referenced. Yet, this staff member, with their daily experience on the gallery floor, over decades, as a Muslim, voiced that they had not seen a show that explored Islam.

It speaks volumes to the way museums have versed themselves in presenting on Islam, yet, seemingly an Islam that is far removed from the Muslims that practice it as their faith – as their worldview. What and who have been cast as the experts of the museum logic of Islam? Are the historical actors who have helped define and continue to inform the Islam of the museum, ignorant to the Islam of Muslims? The British Museum's long serving curator, Venetia Porter, in her latest title as curator of Islamic and Contemporary Middle East art, speaks of the term 'Islamic Art' as 'very reductive'. She emphasises that the term 'was created by western scholars and to a certain extent we are stuck with that now'. Porter is speaking about her 2021 curated exhibition at the British Museum, 'Reflections: Contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa' – that a categorising focus on the geographical elements allows for 'more flexibility' rather than using this idea of 'Islamic art'.

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This overt resignation of 'Islamic art' being a problematic category, from an institutional dialect may seem like some serious decolonial street cred. But to then confidently use something like geographical location as being a solution to the problem is at the heart of these consistent phases of orientalisising orientalism that has been flourishing in museums over the last few decades. In fact, it is representative of an institutionalised spin-cycle that has sought to continuously attempt to re-energise the framing of 'Islam' in the museum over the last century, but largely creating stagnation, instead. The displays and framings of today are hardly different to that of the early twentieth century, when 'Islamic art' in the museum grew its confidence as a category. It is always pushed and pulled between re-inventions of focus on 'geography' or the 'pre-modern' then back to 'geography'. Porter's own space that she occupies in the British Museum has seen discursive changes, from once called the Department of Oriental, to the Department of Asia – but how do these discursive shifts really impact or innovate on the framing of Islam in the museum? Is 'Islam' in the museum just one long continued dance with the spectre of Islam in relation to the Christian/Secular worldview? The very worldview that formed this idea of the museum as an authoritative societal meaning-making and cultural compartmenting organism.

These attempted re-articulations or acknowledgments of the problematics of 'Islam' in the museum, by the museum, seems in hyperdrive in recent years. I really felt the frustration in Raha Rafii's recent lament on what she called the 'repackaging' of orientalism by modern museum curatorial cultures. Citing another British Museum show, 'Inspired by the East: how the Islamic world influenced Western art', she observes how the show, which literally opens with a quote from Edward Said, goes on to present an exhibition that emphasises 'orientalism as artistic exchange and benign observation of domestic and religious life rather than as the justifying ideology of violent European colonialism and expansion'. It is acknowledging orientalism on the museum's terms. It is situated in a museum professionalism that has become a Jannat-ul-Firdaus of liberal conscious clearing. A space that has become entrenched in the language of inclusion, yet still holding histories and current realities of exclusion – the museum as a vestige for the dominant culture.

I remember visiting this exhibition after Jumma in 2018. Walking into the dimly lit exhibition space, I felt hyper-minoritised as I was surrounded by a packed visitor cross-section that did not feel a semblance of familiarity in comparison to the mosque I had just come from. I heard well-trodden comments in upper-crust dialects such as ‘what a beautiful vase’ that I am sure has been uttered in every exhibition about ‘Islam’ in museums over the last two centuries. I felt my experience in this space was situated closer to the objects on display, not with the visitors. It made me think: why am I, as a Muslim, feeling uncomfortable in this exhibition supposedly on the cultural influence of Islam, yet the dominant culture is comfortable? There were rave reviews of this show from institutional press voices, with Jonathan Jones calling it ‘a glorious show Boris Johnson really ought to see’.

It is the logic that this framing of the cultural value of the so-called ‘Islamic’ past is as rich as our European histories, and thus will relinquish any prejudice of ‘Islam’ being a backward or lesser reference point, from someone like the once-prime minister. It is an exhibition in a museum that can alleviate this, rather than meeting any ‘Muslim’, in the present, in the everyday. In the logics of this culture, the mosque I had just come from was the space of the ignorant Muslims while the museum is showing the light of the enlightened Muslim. The logic of the museum has produced a confidence that can boldly claim that they are pioneering the reframing of problematics, without reflecting on the very way that the knowledge producers and values that structures validating knowledge production in the museum are themselves part of the problematic. We have exhibition, projects, and museum practice consistently finding footing that is put forward as the latest expansion and innovation in re-invigorating the framing of Islam. We even had the Victoria & Albert Museum taking a faux ‘British mosque’ to be put on display for the 2021 Venice Architectural Biennale, with institutional pride in the fact that it is including British Islam in its category of ‘Islamic art and culture’.

Yet, take a step back and look at whether these innovations are critically expanding the conceptual realm of what Islam has come to represent in the museum. It is largely all re-inventions of the orientalist exhibits that put Islam in the grip of the museum in the first place. Wendy M. K. Shaw, author of *What is Islamic Art?* points explicitly at the narrow modes of constructing meaning that museum knowledge and categorisations rely

upon – of a Eurocentric display culture of post-Enlightenment attributes. In this structure of meaning making, ‘Islam’ falls to a consistent pattern of being presented to ‘learn about’ a ‘culture’ rather than ‘learn from’ a ‘culture’. This creates re-inventions, without looking to bring in different epistemological roots, different approaches to meaning making and/or storytelling – it just creates a consistent ‘discovery’ culture. It is then forever the ‘other’, forever the ‘orient’, forever the Muhammad in the Mist for the curatorial class to present – in all its exoticism, danger, and anti-modern romanticism. Forever holding the power of categorisation, what may seem like inclusive museum practice to take a faux mosque to Venice, in fact is also an act of positioning the ‘British Muslim’ into the lens of their exotic Muhammadan today. What difference is it in the display of the faux British mosque in Venice to the ‘Muhammadan’ pavilions at the 1851 Great Exhibition?

This push for ‘repackaging orientalism’ may seem like a trend that is a natural part of the continuous wave of new museology that made Foucault and Bourdieu father figures in their reflexivity. A wave that has found itself in a twenty-first century museum matrix as a liberal self-digesting culture that capitalises on activist trends whilst still entrenched in inequalities, exclusions and established canon formation cultures. There is such fine work happening across museums, with innovation and challenge to dominant cultures ripe through the presence of those with skillsets that look to histories outside the museums walls as much as within, who bring positive disruption. But all too often this falls secondary to the narrative control of post-Enlightenment categorisation and rituals of experience that the structure of these institutions has baked into its functionality. In this point, there is a particular texture to the way framings of ‘Islam’ has been stagnated – that is in the way religion and belief itself was ejected or reformatted by the museum, and in the unreflective, without criticism sacralisation of secularism that still haunts the museums walls as an ever present.

When Shaw speaks to museums going beyond their own epistemes in the context of Islam, she suggests that meaning making should be drawn from expertise of the Qur’an, Hadith, and all aspects of theology, culture, and the lived experiences people have with ‘Islam’, its material cultures and its intangible, everyday significances in their lives. What would it look like for an Imam, Shiekh, or Mufti to curate a show at the V&A or the British

Museum? This is a radical proposition for the museum space, whose formation is tied to the reformatting of religion and belief into rational categorisations in relation to a colonial structuring of the world. More specifically, in how the museums foundational modes of meaning making and structuring the world represented a European synergy between the Christian worldview to a secular civilising world view. For instance, icons of the Church were literally placed in the new categorised space of the museum, alongside the expanding enterprise of constructing categories of cultures, communities, and beliefs of the 'other'.

For most of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the display of 'Muhammadans' in the museum categorisations were largely geographical – related to the region, to the orient, to specific place and time. If we take Britain for instance, the nineteenth century saw collated exhibitions of largely private collections put into public display such as 1854 'The Oriental and Turkish Exhibition' at St Georges Gallery in Knightsbridge. Speaking in the context of The British Museum's non-categorisation of 'Islam' in the nineteenth century, Rachel Ward says it's curatorship 'saw the Islamic realm as both a geographic and cultural buffer between Europe, Asia and Africa and as a bridge linking the artistic achievements of antiquity with renaissance Europe'. It was utilised in this chronological sense of progress, a modernity of colonial restructuring.

From the turn of the century, something begins to emerge. Exhibitions with the central focus and tie being 'Islam', being 'Muhammadan art' came about across Europe – for instance in London, you have the Whitechapel Gallery's 1908 show 'Muhammad Art and Life' and in Munich, the monumental 1910 show 'Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art and Life'. Eva-Maria Troelenberg has provided vital assessment of the latter, in what is arguably the most significant major announcement within exhibition and museum cultures that a category of 'Islam' emerges as the defining categorical tie – diffusing geographical identities and presenting an essence of an art, a craft, a cultural existence that is linked through a belief system, from historic materials through current craft and cultural object and experience.

Troelenberg makes a particular observation of the use of the word 'Masterpieces' in the exhibitions title. The curatorial motivations of this exhibition came from an increasing trend amongst orientalist scholars at the time of turning to anti-modernists positions, romanticising the past

and lamenting the industrial futures. In the current terminology we can even say they had decolonial re-orientation motivations. The use of the word 'Masterpiece' was a specific challenge to the authorities of canonical knowledge production within museums, in which the 'Masterpiece' was designated to art and artefact in the European tradition. The masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci, for example, bring into the museum a liminal space that holds the tensions and smoothness in handover of shared power between a Christianised worldview and the secular civilising worldview. The motivations of the Munich 1910 show were to highlight that there are different histories as important as that of Europe, that masterpieces existed in the histories and presents of 'Muhammadan cultures' yet were tainted by tradition shattering modernity. Yet, Troelenberg presents an argument that by bringing in this broad, cross-geographical, cross-cultural plethora of material cultures (vases to paintings) around this idea of 'masterpiece' it also brought this concept of 'Islam' into the very framework that had brought the icon from the church into the art museum. De-godded while retaining a renewed societal-cultural value.

And so 'Islamic Art' was born and a framing of 'Islam' museumified. A framing that then brought a few generations of experts and continues too. An expertise that exists within the dominant culture logics and flexes of the museum. A flex that has created a museum professional that is largely homogenous in terms of the backgrounds and cultures that occupy its space. A professionalism often in institutions that even today struggles in deep desperation to come to terms with itself being an exclusive space. No matter how inclusive in language it attempts to be. Report after report, book after book, over the last few decades have created this versed language of inclusion, where 'diversity' is talked about non-stop, yet, museums are some of the most un-diverse workplaces in the societies they find themselves in. The name of a department may change from the department of orientalism to the department of Asia – but the skills, experience, and dominant culture within these spaces largely has remained in many ways enshrined – drawing from the very same epistemological trough that 'Islam' in the museum found its framing within. So, when Shaw speaks of expanding the values of knowledge that contribute to the framing and bring in different epistemes, the shutters often come down. If for instance, traditional and practiced expertise and insight on Qur'an or

Hadith are to be brought into the way museums hold 'Islam', this could mean for the neo-orientalist profession, a reality shattering nightmare in which the 'Muhammadan in the Mist' appears in a curatorial meeting. The fear of no alcohol at the private view or the Qur'an being read over the interpretation label of that Qur'an on display.

But who are the traditional Muslim scholars and voices that can be brought in? It is a testament to the power of the museum, that 'Islamic Art' now also exists as a category within Muslim lives, societies, and everyday cultures – a concept in many ways drawn from this very same framing of what the museum decided in the early twentieth century. The Munich 1910 show is not just reflective of what is still the 'Islam' in museum – but is also now the anchor of what constitutes 'creative' expression within Muslim spaces. Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, we perform calligraphies and architectures, holding a nostalgia for the golden age of an 'Islam'. With secular embassies (art galleries) and euro-categorisations centres (museums) across the world, the sparsity of Islamic thought in thinking about creative expression, or even conceptualising 'art' outside of the power of these spaces, emphasizes the domain of seized power on the framing of 'Islam' and its material cultures. The pre-modern, the geographical, the distant – the Muhammadan's in the Mist. It is this seized power of meaning making and structuring the world that should be at the centre of museum practice in any attempt to reorientate framings.

The power of the museums seized territory of being the authority of 'Islam' as art or material cultures today can be further seen in the proliferation of European museum brands and structures being imported and present within the skyrocketing skylines of the gulf states. The most symbolic example being the Louvre brand of museum being imported into Abu Dhabi. In fact, all excursions into art, from biennales to ground zero museum builds take the blueprint of meaning making and cultural value from the very mechanisms that forged Muhammadans to exist in the Mist of modernity. It follows a tradition of Islamicate money investing in European museums, to pursue the showcase of a culture and history that *needs* to be valued by the West. From the oil money that made the 1976 'World of Islam Festival' a reality, to the recent Albukhary patronage at the British Museum or Jameel Foundation support of 'Islamic Arts' at the

V&A. Whilst all have facilitated incredibly important work and continue to do so – are they really making the museum work in a different logic to re-considering their framing of Islam? Or is it investing in continuing its authority on structuring what constitutes its framing of ‘Islam’?

If the fundamental aspects of ‘Islam’ in European museums either flit between the historical pre-modern or as a cultural ‘other’ – not of Europe but to be admired with value through European thought – then, it is no surprise that an incongruent reality that unfurls the museumified ‘Islam’ is the attempt (and lack of) in bringing the presence of ‘Islam’ in Europe into the frame. Both historic and present. The Albukhary display of the ‘Islamic World’ in the British Museum, is not where you find King Offa’s coin inscribed with a faux shahada, often cited as one of the earliest Islamic reference points in Britain. In fact, most museums with ‘Islamic’ collections or displays today, do not have any room for Islamic presence, practice and realities that allow Islam to be present outside of geographical or chronological distance.

There is an interesting observation to make on the V&A’s recent display of a ‘British Mosque’ at Venice – as the entire piece exists as a ‘special project’. Rather than sitting in their categorical section ‘Islamic art and design’ it sits in contemporary architecture – and the discursive framing of the exhibition is one which ‘contemporary multiculturalism through three adapted mosque spaces’. This explicit engagement with acknowledges through the museum, an Islam that exists beyond geographical or chronological distance, is a disrupting act. But by detaching it from the very heart of categorical boundaries in the museum – detaching it from the space of ‘Islamic art and design’ and exceptionalising it for an exploration on multiculturalism. It mirrors the very same dynamics that birthed ‘Islamic art’. I wonder where this exhibition would be displayed in the permanent collection galleries of the V&A once it is done in Venice – could it be placed in the Jameel Gallery? I doubt it, unless pushed to think beyond its current categorisation culture. The constantly re-aligning perspectives to attempt new ways of displaying/framing ‘Islam’ is ripe, but as discussed, each time always without critical reflection on the very basis that the museum functions as a meaning making organism of Westernese. The rest, then the West; the futures of the West is the future of Islam. It is a contestation Yasir Morsi asks of the museum, that ‘do they need to explain



the East through a western lens to make the former's achievement legitimate through the language of the dominant?

Morsi asks this question after visiting Melbourne's 'Islamic Museum of Australia', opened in 2010 to attempt to make relevant the reverence of Islamic civilisations and their presence in relation to Australia. Museums across Europe, the United States, and Australia, in a post-9/11 context, and with the Euro-crucifixion of multiculturalism on a cross made of the 'Muslim question', saw great energies pour into attempting to find purpose in the conversation. Exhibitions, new display wings and even new museums emerging to challenge narratives of Islam being incongruent to the values of liberalism, the values of civility. Yet, just as the original formulation for what motivated 'Islam' to be framed in the museum – the *decolonial* challenge to European canonisation by saying 'Muhammadans' can create masterpieces too – it creates a formulation that for Islam to be accepted, it must be ordered within the meaning-making comforts of the museum. Rather than turn to a critical reflection on the meaning, it remains just a recycled approach for continuity. To find an inclusive place that feels like a liberal achievement of welcoming the Muhammadan into the realm of study, the lucky realm of being organised by the West.

Morsi uses a Nietzschean musing that put forward two cosmological ways of structuring the world – the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Apollonian represents 'the desire for symmetry, the rational order, teleology and optimism'. The Dionysian is 'the wilderness, drunkenness and our sense of letting go, of abandoning ourselves to the unknown'. It is the realm of the ignorant to the enlightened. Morsi takes these cosmologies and argues that the museum is engaged in presenting an Apollonian 'Islam' – structured and ordered into post-Enlightenment meaning makings and as a by-product, intentional or not, it casts the Islam in the world and in the realities of people's experiences as Dionysian – a spectre in the wilderness.

It is hard not to approach any museum framing that references 'Islam' from anything other than a starting point of suspicion. No matter how many times Said's orientalism is referenced or claims that the problematics of 'Islamic art' are being acknowledged – the formula of meaning-making that the framing emerged from is still very much in place. So, what do we look to do? Is there any possibility of the museum being a space that reflects and relinquishes authority in its meaning-making by bringing in

different experiences, and realities into its space? The starting point for any possibility of this, is for the logic and professionalism of the museum to relinquish its Apollonian aspirations using Morsi's analogy. It must cast itself as a space for Dionysian cosmology – unfurling itself to be an uncontrollable challenge to its rationalist sensibilities that lock itself, its structures, and its professionalisms to always work within parameters. In this Dionysian Museum, the facilitation and support of new ways of meaning-making can be prioritised – new experiences and even professionalism can be brought in. A structure of re-orientation can truly begin, and an Islam unbound by time and geography can begin to be engaged with. This would mean that the dominant culture of that space, the professionals who maintain Apollonian authority would be made to feel out of place, in a confusion without the reference points they need for comfort. But why would the dominant culture cast itself into the wilderness that it has assigned for the 'other' – with its specially designated place for the 'Muhammadan'? Perhaps it needs to be forced.