

Introduction | From Islamic Art to Perceptual Culture

Early one summer evening in Istanbul over a decade ago, as the evening darkness filtered through an electric blue sky, I was walking down a hill toward the Bosphorus. I looked up and saw a dome above me, as though in a mosque. The pattern quickly resolved into the overlapping branches and delicate leaves of an acacia tree. It then shifted back into a dome, and back again into a tree. I realized: pattern is not abstraction, but representation. The difference comes from me. My imaginary image of 'a tree', seen in profile from a distance, did not match my experience of treeness, looking up, bewildered by the dancing geometries of lights between its shades. There is nothing more realistic about the picture of a tree seen from far away than the geometry in a tiled dome. They represent the same object. Differently.

Several years later, visiting my other former home, I took my four-year-old daughter to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I happily described the serenity of the Buddha and Shiva Nataraja's dance of creation and destruction. I thought she might find the medieval European section boring, so I ushered her through.

She stopped in the middle of the gallery. "Mommy . . ." she asked, "why are there so many naked men with their arms out?"

I laughed: the sheer impossibility of thinking *that*. "Sweetheart, that's not such a good story for children," I said. Not wanting her to conclude that so many people we know, followers of the largest religion in the world, believe the rather peculiar story of a violent God killing his own son, I kept silent. I immediately realized that my answer was bizarre. Of course, it is a *perfectly fine* story for children. For centuries, Christian children everywhere have learned the story of the Crucifixion with no greater trauma than all the other children learning about all the other violent deities.

I imagined looking at these paintings without already knowing what they mean. The Crucifixion is so inextricable from hegemonic Western cultures that the body of Christ depicted on the cross instantly metamorphoses into a symbol. We are incapable of seeing the (near)-naked-man-with-his-arms-stretched-out that my daughter saw. Repeatedly witnessing

the Crucifixion, we unconsciously reinforce our participation in an established cultural frame – whether or not we profess Christian faith.

In contrast, when we enter an exhibit of art from a less familiar culture, our gaze remains as naïve as that of a child. We look at the world through the filter of what we know. This not only risks misrepresenting the unfamiliar, it also prevents us from stretching our own horizons by encountering something new. Instead of opening ourselves to growing through the incorporation of difference, we force difference into the straitjacket of our imagination.

This limitation emerges through a double translation intrinsic to art history: first, that of European premodern cultures into modern frameworks; and secondly, that of other cultures through the resulting Euronormative category called art. The past, along with the other, becomes the blind spot of art history. What would it all look like if we were to position ourselves at one of these blind spots and apprehend the world through an alternative code?

This book explores this possibility from one such vantage point, that of Islam. It conceives of Islam not through the modern distinction between religion and culture, but as a self-referential interplay of interwoven discourses, rituals, and beliefs moving across space and time. It proposes that:

Islamic art emerges not from production, but from reception.
Islam abides not in the object, but in the subject.
Yet the subject of this Islam need not be Muslim.
And the object can be material or imaginary; visual, sonic, or verbal.
Its analytical frame need not be limited by either art or history.
Transcending this frame, it can talk back to Western art history.
In doing so, it dislocates disciplinary premises of center and periphery.

This book comes to these propositions by analyzing discussions of perception in texts that have circulated widely across regions of Islamic hegemony, more casually called the 'Islamic world.' These include the Quran, the foundational text of Islam believed by Muslims to transcribe the divine word, and the *Hadith*, the record of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. The interpretation of these texts grounds the dialogical practice known as Islamic law (*Sharia*). Yet Islam exceeds legal discourses. It emerges as well through the interaction of interpretive and philosophical texts elaborating faith engaging with multiple previous, neighboring, and intertwined cultures, and disseminated through ritual, poetry, music, geometry, and painting. The ideas about perception woven through them suggest that the questions that we ask through frameworks of religion, art, and history often veil Islamic culture in the name of revealing it. This not only alters dominant understandings of

Islam and its arts, but also destabilizes some premises of disciplinary art history that claim global methodological utility.

0.1 Can Art Be Islamic?

The noblest rescript with which the scribes of the workshop of prayer adorn the album of composition and novelty, and the most subtle picture with which the depicors of the gallery of intrinsic meaning decorate the assemblies of creativity and invention, is praise of the Creator, by whose pen are scriben sublime letters and exalted forms. In accordance with the dictum, “The pen dried up with what would be until Doomsday,” the coalesced forms and dispersed shapes of the archetypes were hidden in the recesses of the unseen in accordance with the dictum, “I was a hidden treasure.”

Then, in accordance with the words, “I wanted to be known, so I created creation in order to be known,” he snatched with the fingers of destiny the veil of non-existence from the countenance of being, and with the hand of mercy and the pen, which was “the first thing God created.” He painted [them] masterfully on the canvas of being.¹

Penned in 1544 by the manuscript painter Dust Muhammad (d. 1564), these paragraphs initiate the preface to an album of calligraphy and painting prepared under the powerful cultural patron, the Safavid prince Bahram Mirza (1517–1549). Dust Muhammad was in a unique position to record the discourses surrounding this endeavor. Trained in the studio of the illustrious manuscript painter Kamal ul-Din Behzad (c.1450–1535), who honed his creative powers at the court of the Timurid sultan Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469–1506), Dust Muhammad worked under the patronage of the Safavid shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576) and later under the Mughal emperor Humayun (r. 1530–1540; 1555–1556). The album later entered the imperial library of the Ottoman dynasty (1398–1923) in Constantinople, underscoring the longevity of its value.

This preface ensconces a genealogy of calligraphers and painters among stories articulating the human creative impulse in relationship with the divine. It frames human creativity as part of the workshop of prayer that adorns all of creation, referred to as the album of composition. Human creativity praises God through devotional emulation. The contents of the album reveal the intrinsic meaning of the world by articulating the creative force in which we partake, a divinity within and without us. Listing

¹ Thackston, 2000: 4.

generations of creators, Dust Muhammad considers how people learned, but not what they produced; how their personal excellence translated into great works, but not what constituted the greatness of their works.

What, exactly, is such a text? Such prefaces have provided extraordinary sources for more detailed understandings of Persian painting in the field of Islamic art history since their rediscovery, translation, and analysis since the mid-twentieth century.² Yet to read these sources only through a disciplinary framework limits their broader implications for our apprehension of the historical cultures of Islam. The spiritual framing of an album of exquisite human reflections on God's creation – calligraphic and painted panels that we moderns categorize as art – was not merely the thought of a single individual. The preface celebrates a cultural attitude shared by artists and patrons penned by an artist whose work engaged with four major Islamic dynasties. Although it cannot represent an imaginary, homogeneous Islam, it reflects an attitude articulated in numerous ways, in many languages, in many formats – poetic and prose, theological and popular – that persisted from the ninth into the twentieth century. Such a text informs, but does not fit within, the frame of art history, a modern disciplinary tool for the apprehension of special things.

This text is one of many sources this book explores in order to discover that which is not art history: an attitude pervasive in the historical Islamic world (but neither unique to nor universal within it), propagated through its discourses, and all too often erased through the imposition of modern ways of thinking and knowing about the past. Not mandated by scripture, this attitude informed texts reflecting both theological and worldly concerns. For its participants, such an attitude must have felt natural. It was never expressed as a theory of art, because 'art' was not a concept intrinsic to it. Engaging creativity in relation to the divine, this attitude enabled and justified the essence of what it means to be human. Dust Muhammad articulates this by quoting a poem:

When a man is ignorant in his being, he cannot
 be called human simply because of his form.
 O God, I am that handful of dust that previously
 was void of my form and conduct.
 Since you gave me human form first, make me
 share intrinsically in humanity.³

² Minorsky, 1959; Roxburgh, 2001: 135–6; Akın-Kıvanç, 2011. ³ Thackston, 2000: 5.

This understanding of the dependence of human creativity on the divine, the glory of the world and its material traps, meanders through Islamic discourses. This book weaves a theory from these paths: a theory of perception engaging with but not bound by art or history; a theory of Islam between theology and culture. A theory of an attitude that once was so natural that the need to describe it emerges only from an external space requiring translation. What we conceive as 'art' plays one part in this broader framework.

Art history rarely addresses this attitude, because its methods rarely engage with Islam. Investigating the worldly interests of beautiful objects, it leaves religion to the theologians. But is such a distinction between the godly and the worldly useful in historical cultures? The secularist thesis underlying art history – that culture exists separate from faith – limits our awareness of an attitude, such as that exemplified above, different from our own. Art history can match objects with makers, reconstruct unknown pasts, illustrate networks of success and achievement, set the boundaries between commonality and distinction, and trace paths of communication. It maps a system of value across a system of time. Yet framing the unfamiliar through categories that seem natural to our modern environments cannot bridge the gap of alterity. To engage with culture, we have to leave many of our premises outside the analytical door, and let the speech of the unknown build its own house within our universe.

The absence of religion from art history pertains not only to Islamic art, but to the genesis of its modern methods during an era of secularization. While the discipline has multiple origins, its modern theorization emerges in mid-eighteenth-century Europe within broader discourses of rationalism and secularization, the rise of capitalism, the shift from aristocratic to republican government, and a growing consciousness of the world as a space of resources and conquest. The modern concept of 'art' reflects an expansion in the function of painting and sculpture from the conveyance of meaning, often related to worship, to one signaling broader forces, whether those of history, identity, or the market.⁴ The emergence of 'aesthetics' as a measure of 'art' reflects a presumptive distinction between intellectual and sensory knowledge through modern European terminologies. The hierarchy that modern subjects establish between the cognitive order of logic and the lower sensory order of aesthetics solidified in *Aesthetica* (1750) by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). This informed the influential *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) by

⁴ Shiner, 2001.

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Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), which describes the proper observer as necessarily distanced and disinterested. This enables him to generalize his taste and behave *as if* his position is universal, precluding the potential naturalness of any other attitude.

This position of disinterest enabled the new institution of the museum to streamline mass engagements with art. The proliferation of museums in the nineteenth century altered art in its relationships with the public, class, and identity.⁵ While some understood museums as enabling a revolutionary redistribution of symbolic wealth from elites to the nascent nation, others perceived a violent erasure of living culture in the name of preservation.⁶ The museum gave each object a proper place in relation to other objects, and gave each viewer a proper relationship with objects and with each other. Sensory experience of objects became reduced to sight, as display required smell, taste, touch, and sound to recede into the viewer's imagination.

The philosophy of Gottfried Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) enshrined the shift in the modern apprehension of objects from sensory perception to intellectual cognition. The intrinsic meaning of the object retreated as it became a sign of pure Spirit, traversing time and civilizations. For Hegel, the loss of localized meaning in art functioned as a laudable indication of teleological progress from the material expression of religion to rationalist self-awareness idealized through the French Revolution.⁷ He described this distinction as a cornerstone of modernity, in which reflection on art, rather than art itself, conferred meaning.

The peculiar manner of the production of art and its works no longer completely fill our highest need; we have progressed too far to still be able to venerate and pray to works of art; the impression they make on us is of a more reflective kind, and what they arouse in us still requires a higher touchstone and has to prove itself in a different manner. Thought and reflection have overtaken the fine arts.⁸

For Hegel, the shift from worship to analysis, or practice to theory, signified progress from body to mind. The modern preference for measurable information about objects over discussion of their communicative capacity reflects the hierarchy of rationalism over sensation underpinning disciplinary art history. The expectation of progress frames styles, artists, and/or cultures as developing progressively one from the next, as if artists are more interested in sublating precedents than in engaging with multiple contexts in the present tense. Although subsequent art-historical empiricism often

⁵ Gilks, 2012. ⁶ Maleuvre, 2001: 2, 13. ⁷ Dale, 2014: 200–201; Vilchez, 2017: 2.

⁸ Harries, 1974: 689.

distances itself from Hegelianism, the discipline's maintenance of the object as a metonym for collective culture, its dependence on periodization and distinct civilizations, and its engagement with art on a reified historical trajectory reflects the persistence of underlying Hegelian premises.⁹

The modern idea of art displaced objects from a religious system of meaning to a secular one. Instead of functioning within a holistic, multi-media, multisensory environment, objects became paradigmatic of broader narratives, often geared toward the collective identity of the nation-state and a hierarchy of civilizations. Sequentialized, objects could serve as teleological visual markers of progress. Framed as history rather than inheritance, the art object signaled two contradictory frameworks: collective identity and a disjunction from modernity.

Yet secular vocabularies of art often obscure premises inherited from the hegemony of Western European Christianity. Just because one removes words such as 'Christian' or 'God' from the discussion of art does not mean that the naturalized habits established through the religious contexts with which art was long associated suddenly disappear. Instead, they permeate our secular discourse of art. Consider, for example, how images of Christ engage with a viewer. For an Eastern Orthodox Christian, a representation of Christ Pantocrator functions through its investment with divine presence. The painting brings the divine into communication with the believer; the divine looks at us. In contrast, for a post-Renaissance Western European Christian, an image of the Crucifixion enables the viewer to witness the divine. Whereas the former icon embodies presence, the latter uses conventions of realism, such as perspective, foreshortening, and shading to represent a presence that is elsewhere – it makes the absent deceptively present. Both of these representational systems function in religious contexts. Yet only the second set of conventions of representational naturalism persist as norms in hegemonic, secular art history. This is hardly surprising, as art history developed in Western Europe, where norms established under Western European Christianity feel entirely natural – so natural, in fact, that they seem universal. This naturalization has enabled a vocabulary of the image specific to the history of Western European Christianity to become normative for understanding all sorts of images, erasing the conceptual histories underlying the aesthetic practices of other cultures, whether Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, or anything else. The universalization of a local experience only reinforces a parochialism always already blind to the possibility of difference. Religion

⁹ Elkins, 1988; Gaiger, 2011.

becomes defined as a set of precepts or beliefs to which one rationally adheres, ignoring how religion functions as well as a mode of being-in-the-world informed by faith.

Similarly, much as objects designed for purposes of worship eschew religion to enter a discourse of art, the rituals of respect encountered in the museum – silence, circumambulation, and meditation – perpetuate a sacral aura in the episteme of knowledge rather than faith.¹⁰ The preference for sight obviates touch, speech, song, anointing, feeding, carrying, or any other engagement with the object. Art gains secular sacrality through its disembodiment from the subject.¹¹ Reflecting on the treatment of Raphael's Sistine Madonna as artwork rather than altarpiece, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) theorized the conflation of modernity with Christianity as the *Entgötterung* ('de-godization' or 'removal of the gods').

This expression does not mean the mere doing away with the gods, gross atheism. The loss of the gods is a twofold process. On the one hand, the world picture is Christianized in as much as the cause of the world is posited as infinite, unconditional, absolute. On the other hand, Christendom transforms Christian doctrine into a worldview (the Christian world view), and in that way makes itself up to date.¹²

This universalization of (Western European) Christian values became normative under the aegis of secularization precisely as Europe became a global hegemonic power, reinscribing the Christian as 'Western', and transforming missionary zeal into modernization through Westernization.¹³

The repurposing of altarpieces as art helped translate the rhetorical frame of Christian visual culture into the secular discourse of art history. The valorization of the representational image establishes a normative relationship between the viewer on one side of the image and reality that is always necessarily elsewhere. Representational meaning becomes equated with semiotic interpretation, such that elements in an image constitute textual signs. Signifying potential reinforces a hierarchy of 'art' over 'craft.' The artist gains status as the inspired, ingenious mediator of culture, decoded through the seemingly objective mediation of a distanced critic anointed with special access to truth.

The shift in emphasis from artistic genius to objects as cultural signifiers took place through the work of Alois Riegl (1858–1905). Literalizing the Hegelian paradigm of the 'Spirit' of 'civilization' progressing Westward, his

¹⁰ Duncan, 1995. ¹¹ Gualdrini, 2013. ¹² Heidegger, 1977: 116–117.

¹³ Makdisi, 1997; Mas, 2015.

thought liberated form from context. Objects thus became independent markers of history. In contrast to earlier pattern books essentializing regional practices through static stylistic taxonomy, such as the *Grammar of Ornament* (1856) by Owen Jones (1809–1874), Riegl examined diachronic stylistic change to trace the development, interaction, and decline of cultures through a Hegelian dialectic. Focusing on establishing complete sequences of objects, he eschewed the association of works with contemporary texts. Rather, he suggested that a complete sequence could exceed the analysis of any single example to function as a measurable, scientific record of how a people produce the world through their will-to-art (*Kunstwollen*), representing their collective apprehension of the world (*Weltanschauung*). Disassociating form from function or context, his method required a holistic understanding of cultures. Emphasizing trans-temporal and trans-geographic imperialism over nationalism, his 1893 work *Stilfragen* (Questions of Style) recognized Islamic ornament as a central link in his quest to establish a linear trajectory of art from ancient Egypt to modern Europe. As the idea of *Kunstwollen* developed in the early to mid-twentieth century, it became a means of apprehending a people's collective psychology – a means of determining the internal structuring principles of individual artists as externalized artistic expressions of culture.¹⁴

After World War II, the 'Western' art-historical tradition came to include pre-Christian traditions mapped onto a hermetically sealed, teleological Hegelian historiography in which the 'Spirit' of civilization moved ever Westward – Mesopotamia, Egypt, and ancient Greece – rendering everybody else external to history.¹⁵ The 'Western' expanded from the Christian paradigm to the 'Judeo-Christian', a nineteenth-century term justifying racialized Protestant supremacy in Europe recycled in anti-fascist discourse of late 1930s North America to assimilate Jews into 'Western' societies.¹⁶ Yet when we discuss the 'Western' artistic tradition, the Jewish is as absent as the Islamic – indeed, a common yet inaccurate presumption asserts that the second commandment precludes the existence of Jewish art.¹⁷ Through this enforced absence, the category 'Western' seamlessly secularizes the history of art in the Western European Christian tradition as a cultural norm.

This elision reflects the incorporation of religious prejudice into Enlightenment thought. In the Middle Ages, Judaism was regularly

¹⁴ Elsner, 2006: 761. ¹⁵ Nelson, 1997.

¹⁶ Silk, 1984: 66; Nathan and Topolski, 2016; Brodtkin, 1998. ¹⁷ Bland, 2000.

personified as Synagogia, symbolized as a woman blindfolded to signify the dogmatic adherence to scripture attributed to the Jewish inability to see the light of Christianity. Although distancing himself from religion, Kant perpetuated this attribution of dogmatism to Judaism as underlying the absence of the image: the sublimity of Jewish reason undermined the distancing mechanism of the image to achieve objectivity.¹⁸ Thus the image prohibition exceeds an aesthetic or even cultural critique of the Abrahamic other, instead circumscribing Jewish engagement in reasoned thought. Representational art stands for the possibility of being fully human. Such denunciations of Judaism have since been transferred to Islam, accused of an 'image prohibition' – even in an era when realism is not the primary measure of art, and even though images proliferate in Islamic cultures. Like Judaism, Islam stands accused not simply of lacking pictures, but of associated nefarious qualities: an absence of reason, antiquated beliefs, and the subjugation of women through their supposed 'invisibility' under the veil. A predilection for violence against images, such as the destruction of the Bamyán Buddhas or statues at the Mosul Museum, has become metonymic for supposed Islamic hostility toward civilization itself.¹⁹

Through these processes, what we call 'Western art' is 'European Christian art' by a new name. This category includes all sensory objects following regimens of representation foregrounding the naturalistic image that developed under the cultural aegis of European Christianity. It includes all art that conceptually responds to the Western artistic tradition, even when it does not bear any overt connection to religion and including the era of modernism, which innovates in breaking against these implicitly Christian traditions that we call Western. It does not have to be religious; it simply engages with or against norms established under a religious episteme.

Art history has developed its paradigms through the analysis of Western art that might be better termed Christianate, underscoring the modern transposition of premises informed by European Christianity as culture which permeate secular Western societies and which often serve as a measure for the assimilation of those designated as other.²⁰ Generously

¹⁸ Mack, 2013: 153. ¹⁹ Shaw, 2015.

²⁰ This neologism draws on Marshall Hodgson's much-debated term "Islamicate," proposed through the posthumous 1974 publication of *The Venture of Islam*, to distinguish cultural artifacts and practices shared by multiple religious persuasions from properly religious, 'Islamic' ones. For a discussion of the problems of this terminology, see Ahmed, 2015: 157, 444–450.