

What is “Islamic” Art?

Revealing what is ‘Islamic’ in Islamic art, Wendy M. K. Shaw explores the perception of arts, including painting, music, and geometry through the discursive sphere of historical Islam including the Qur’an, Hadith, Sufism, philosophy, and poetry. Emphasis on the experience of reception over the context of production enables a new approach, not only to Islam and its arts, but also as a decolonizing model for global approaches to art history.

Shaw combines a concise introduction to Islamic intellectual history with a critique of the modern, secular, and European premises of disciplinary art history. Her meticulous interpretations of intertextual themes span antique philosophies, core religious and theological texts, and prominent prose and poetry in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu that circulated across regions of Islamic hegemony from the eleventh century to the colonial and post-colonial contexts of the modern Middle East.

Wendy M. K. Shaw is Professor of the Art History of Islamic Cultures at the Free University Berlin. Her work explores the historiographic, intellectual, institutional, and physical impact of modernity, colonialism, and identity on the arts in regions of Islamic hegemony, with a particular focus on the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. She is the author of *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (2003), and *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (2011).

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47465-8 — What is 'Islamic' Art?
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What is “Islamic” Art?

Between Religion and Perception

WENDY M. K. SHAW

Freie Universität Berlin



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108474658
DOI: 10.1017/9781108622967

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shaw, Wendy M. K., 1970– author.

Title: What is “Islamic” art? : between religion and perception / Wendy M.K. Shaw.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019014540 | ISBN 9781108474658 (alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Islamic art.

Classification: LCC N6260 .S56 2019 | DDC 709.17/67–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019014540>

ISBN 978-1-108-47465-8 Hardback

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It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked.¹

– Karl Marx (1818–1883), A Contribution to the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1843

My heart can take on
 any form:
 a meadow for gazelles,
 a cloister for monks,
 For the idols, sacred ground,
 Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,
 the tables of the Torah,
 the scrolls of the Quran.

I profess the religion of love;
 Wherever its caravan turns along the way,
 that is the belief,
 the faith I keep.²

– ibn Arabi (1165–1240), *Stations of Desire*

... perplexity prevails, certainty is hard to come by, and there is no assurance of attaining the object of inquiry. How strong, in addition to all this, is the excuse for the truth to be confused, and how manifest is the proof that certainty is difficult to achieve! For the truths are obscure, the ends hidden, the doubts manifold, the minds turbid, the reasonings various; the premises are gleaned from the senses, and the senses (which are our tools) are not immune from error.³

– ibn al-Haytham (965–1040), Preface to *The Optics*

¹ Marx, 1973: 243. ² Sells, 2000: 72–73. ³ Sabra, 1989: 3.

Cambridge University Press
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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47465-8 — What is 'Islamic' Art?
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Preface

Research often begins by asking one question and ends up answering another. This book began as an exploration of the image in Islam. It ended up exploring how one might relinquish concepts like the image and art to conceive of perception through an Islam, often overshadowed by politics, essential to a sense of emotive knowledge that emerges through engagement with the arts.⁴

Instead of defining the image, art, or religion, this book asks:

What is art if the primary sensory organ is neither eyes nor ears, but the heart?

Where are the boundaries between the senses as we take in the world?

What is art if dreams and visions are as real as materiality?

How can art make-present, and not just re-present?

Exploration of these questions has led me to diverse texts. For me, the measure of my arguments has been the interconnections between disparate elements that corroborate surprising connections and unravel unforeseen ideas. It has been a hard book to stop researching, because so many sources and scholarly works connect to it. This exploration has fascinated me through the work of scholars in a multitude of disciplines who have delved into archives and painstakingly translated manuscripts to assemble the crumbs of the past discarded on the table of history into satisfying meals of narrative. I contribute to this telling of stories in recognition that it is only by building upon each other's expression and experience, admiring in collaboration and respectful in dissent, that we can build the civil discourse that constitutes a pluralistic, dynamic, and peaceful planet.

I thank colleagues, friends, and students for their support in making this book come to fruition. I have often wished to be able to talk with my doctoral advisor, Renie Bierman, who passed away during its writing. A compassionate teacher, she was a cornerstone for my critical thought. I also write in memory of my late father, Stanford J. Shaw, for being a model of diligent research and writing, and also simply for being a kind

⁴ Asani, 2018: xiv.

and loving person. I also thank my mother, Ayşe Ezel Kural Shaw, for combining erudition, passion, and love of teaching while raising me to take my intellectual independence and authority as a woman as a matter of course. I would like to thank the support of my mentor–colleague–friends Ayşe Batur, Zeynep Çelik, Victoria Holbrook, Ruth Mas, Gülru Necipoğlu, Raphaele Praesinger, Nasser Rabbat, Nadim Sarrouh, and Margaret Shortle. I am grateful to Birgit Krawetz, Birgit Meyer, Stephennie Mulder, and Terje Stordelen for their thoughtful commentary on earlier drafts and chapters of this work, to Sarah Cresap Johnson for her assistance with the last stages of the manuscript, and my editors Maria Marsh, Ruth Boyes, Mary Starkey, and Atifa Jiwa at Cambridge University Press for their thoughtful, constructive, and diligent support. Finally, I thank the light of my heart, my daughter Z.E.A., who showed patience beyond her years in giving me time to work instead of joining her in play. Her love, curiosity, and expressions of pride in her mother have energized and inspired me.

Note on Transcultural Communication

This book uses simple Latin script transliterations of names and words originally written in Arabic script in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, or Urdu. The philological legacy informing much of Islamic studies has normalized transliteration using extensive diacritical marks specific to standardized renditions of each language. Such standardized transliterations cannot capture the diversity of pronunciation in diverse times, regions, and dialects. While useful for language learners, diacritics can be off-putting for a non-specialist reader. By avoiding diacritics and transliterating into common English, this book does not aim to guide accurate pronunciation so much as to familiarize the unfamiliar in what is, for better or worse, the lingua franca of our era.

Since modern Turkish uses Latin script, I have included its modified lettering in proper names: ş = sh; ç = ch; c = g as in “gym”; ı = i as in “girl”; ğ is silent, eliding flanking vowels.

I have also included (where necessary) the use of ‘ in proper names and terms, indicating a glottal stop, which can be approximated by stopping rather than eliding successive letters. Thus Sa’di is not read “saadi” but Sa di, with a brief pause in the middle. In full transcription, different apostrophes indicate different letters, but this convention is complex for the reader not versed in Arabic and is not followed in this text.

The letters v and w are indicated by the same letter in Arabic script but pronounced differently in different languages. Where Persian/Turkish is the dominant use, I have used “v”; when the word stems from Arabic, I have used “w.”

Many Arabic and Persian words are included in parenthesis to facilitate further investigation of concepts and histories mentioned without extensive analysis in this study.

Similarly enhancing accessibility, dates are not cited through the Islamic (*hijri*) calendar, but through that of the Common Era (CE). All dates are CE, unless indicated as BCE (Before Common Era).

European-style surnames have only become widespread in the regions discussed in this book during the last century. Thus reference by last name, and indexing, is often misleading. To take honorifics or place names as

though they were last names does not fit many cultural norms. To simplify name references, I have not found a satisfying alternative to following established conventions for referring to people in English, but hereby note this as misleading.

For example, in Arabic, people were often described by their given names, modified by the name of the father, son, or daughter, as well as honorifics of allegiance expressed as servitude. Thus the name Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim ibn ‘Abd Manaf al-Quraishi means Muhammad, father of al-Qasim, son of Abdallah, son of servant-of-al-Muttalib son of Hashim son of servant-of-Manaf of the Quraish tribe. That’s a bit long, so this book refers to him as the Prophet Muhammad.

There are no capital letters in Arabic script, so I have used lower case to indicate auxiliary words (the and son of) next to main names (e.g. ibn Arabi), except when capitalization is required by English punctuation.

In Persian, a proper name is often followed by an identifying location. Thus Jalal al-Din Rumi means Splendor of the Faith, of Rum (Anatolia). Thus calling him “Rumi,” as is common in the West, only indicates where he was from and is not his name. Most followers call him by the patronymic “Mevlana” (our master). Sometimes, however, an epithet does become shortened to a single word. Thus one can safely call Farid al-Din Attar (savior of the faith, perfumer) simply as Attar.

Honorifics such as *Ağa* (Ottoman), *Agha* (Persian), and *Khan* more or less mean “sir.” They are often associated with proper names, but should not be mistaken for surnames except when used as such in the modern era. Similar honorifics in this book include *Amir* (Leader), *Qadi* (Judge), *Shah* (King) and *Sultan* (King).

Early Islamic scholars who gained fame according to Latinized names, like Ibn al-Haytham, known as Alhazen, are referred to in the original variant unless discussed in a European context.

Published translations are gratefully acknowledged in the reference section. Translations from works in French, German, and Turkish are mine. I have chosen to feature literature that is available in Western languages, but often insufficiently analyzed in the plurality of its meanings. The corpus of historical literature that has not been translated, republished in the past century, or critically discussed in any language is vast, leaving us moderns with imperfect access to the thought-worlds of the past.

Spellings quoted from other texts have been left as in the original.

Recognizing that this book will be read by people of multiple intellectual, linguistic, and faith cultures, I have done my best to introduce figures,

dates, and define terms the first time that they occur. Thus terms relating to the history of religion and to critical methodology are generally defined in the earlier portions of the text. When sections are read independently, readers should refer to these definitions.

For ease of viewing, extraneous elements of manuscript pages have been cropped in image reproductions accompanying this text.

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