



Muslim Voices

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**Conference**

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Possibilities and Limitations”**

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# **Cultural Awareness in a Time of Crisis**

## **Note by Founder and Director of the NYU Center for Dialogues: Professor Mustapha Tlili**

This introductory essay is a product of the New York University Center for Dialogues. It was conceptualized collectively by an academic advisory team working in consultation with Mustapha Tlili, Founder and Director of the NYU Center for Dialogues, and was drafted by Richard Bulliet, Professor of History, Columbia University. The advisory team included: Jon W. Anderson, Chair, Anthropology Department, Catholic University; Margaret Ayers, President, Robert Sterling Clark Foundation; Rachel Cooper, Director for Cultural Programs and Performing Arts, Asia Society; Dale Eickelman, Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations, Dartmouth College; Bruce Lawrence, Professor of Islamic Studies, Duke University; Samina Quraeshi, Harvard University Fellow; Phillip Schuyler, Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology, University of Washington; Anthony Shay, specialist in traditional dance, Los Angeles; Eleanor Skimin, Humanities Manager, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Andrea L. Stanton, Assistant Director, NYU Center for Dialogues.

The NYU Center for Dialogues is solely responsible for the content of this background paper, which is intended as a survey of the historical developments that shaped the arts of the Muslim world, as well as a presentation of various artistic genres. The purpose of the essay is to serve as a springboard for further discussion on these subjects at the conference on “Bridging the Divide Through Arts and Ideas: Possibilities and Limitations” organized by the Center as part of the “Muslim Voices: Arts and Ideas” initiative. The essay should not be understood as a comprehensive treatment.

The Center has endeavored to make this essay as objective as possible, with content and analysis grounded in current scholarship.

Please make reference to the New York University Center for Dialogues when quoting from the paper.

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## **CULTURAL AWARENESS IN A TIME OF CRISIS**

### ***Introduction***

Most Americans knew next to nothing about Islam before the image of Ayatollah Khomeini exploded onto their television screens at the start of the Iranian Revolution in 1978. Between then and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, awareness of Islam grew, though few people, including news reporters and key government officials, understood the crucial differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites, secularists and observant practitioners, Arabs and Persians, or sometimes even African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims from South Asia or the Arab world. After 9/11, awareness of Islam again intensified, but the psychological impact of the attacks channeled the new feeling of urgency away from religion and culture and toward questions of war, terrorism, and homeland security. Today almost every American has learned something about Islam, but mostly through the distorting lens of fear at home and ongoing crisis in the Muslim world.

This is not unusual. Peace and harmony combined with geographic and cultural remoteness usually foster ignorance and lack of interest. Consider, for example, America's general lack of interest in Scandinavia. Crises, on the other hand, typically stimulate interest. Postwar Japan was of scant interest to Americans in the 1950s and 1960s when memories of World War II were still fresh and Japanese industry was popularly associated with flimsy imitations of Western goods. But when Japan began to challenge America's global economic leadership in the 1970s, Americans suddenly became eager to read about their new rival. Businessmen read books on Japanese management techniques, and the general public made

James Clavell's *Shogun* (1975) a bestseller and a hit television miniseries. But they also found fascination in darker views of Japan, like that presented in the Michael Douglas film *Black Rain* (1989).

The same is true of earlier confrontations with Muslim societies. The Crusades awakened a dormant European interest in Islam. Advocates and veterans of those "holy wars" supplied heavily biased images of infidel Saracens that satisfied that interest and convinced most Europeans that the Muslims were a perpetual menace. The same thing happened again when the Ottoman Empire advanced militarily into Eastern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Frightened Christians wanted to know how "the Turk" had become so powerful, and this stimulated a multitude of publications from sophisticated analyses of the structure of the Ottoman government and army, to hysterical sermons, both Catholic and Protestant, calling for new crusades.

Our current period of crisis differs from these earlier confrontations in one aspect in particular. The Muslims who defended themselves against the crusading European invaders in the twelfth century and who fought to extend the empire of the Ottoman sultans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries knew next to nothing about Christian Europe. But today, American culture, and Western culture more generally, have been making headway in the Muslim world and influencing cultural values and institutions there for many decades. Because of this, the current crisis is radically asymmetrical, particularly at the cultural level. Many Muslims have long considered the impingement of Western culture on their own traditions a crisis. The most militant among them condemn every type of cultural import, from rap music and satellite television to wearing neckties and dispensing with female head coverings. Thus, if very few Americans knew much about the culture of the Muslim world before 1978, the opposite situation

prevailed on the other side of the cultural divide. Few Muslims in any country were immune to the cultural impact of movies, television shows, and popular music coming from Europe and America, and few could ignore the inexorable replacement of domestic manufactures with Western or Western-style products in the marketplace.

Whether the impressions conveyed by the entertainment media or by the spread of American business franchises accurately reflect Western culture, or present it in the best light, is of concern for policy makers and diplomats charged with projecting an accurate and appealing American image abroad. But the problem these officials face in trying to improve international understanding of the American people and their culture during a period when American political and military actions are widely seen as aggressive and implicitly anti-Muslim is quite different from the problem of trying to counteract, in this country, a pervasive and growing litany of charges that Islam is an undifferentiated terrorist leviathan defined by oppression of women, amputation of hands, rigid imposition of benighted puritanical regulations, and hatred of the success and superiority of the West. In fact, the global faith community of Islam embraces an astonishing diversity of religious, artistic, and institutional cultures that bear no resemblance to the degrading stereotypes that have gained circulation since 9/11. But how are Americans supposed to realize this?

### ***Changing impressions: Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas***

*Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas* consists of a ten-day series of cultural performances, exhibitions, and scholarly conversations in New York City under the aegis of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Asia Society, and New York University's Center for Dialogues: Islam-U.S.-the West. The initiative celebrates the extraordinary range of artistic expression in the Muslim World, bringing together Muslim artists, curators, scholars, and public speakers from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East – as well as North America. Performances range from the traditional – calligraphy, storytelling, and Sufi chanting – to the contemporary – video installations, Arabic hip-hop, and political cartoons –allowing New York and, more broadly, American audiences the opportunity to experience and learn about the cultural diversity and multiple perspectives that characterize the Muslim world, both in the past and today.

*Muslim Voices* has been conceived of quite differently from its most noteworthy predecessor, the World of Islam Festival held in Britain in 1976. Against the background of a crisis in oil prices that had increasingly disturbed the lives of ordinary people from 1973 onward (and the harsh caricaturing of Arab “oil sheiks” then rampant in popular culture), the festival described itself as “a unique cultural event . . . in concept and in scale . . . No less than an attempt to present one civilization—in all its depth and variety—to another.”<sup>1</sup> It was an outstanding collaboration between museums, universities, and performance centers and had the salutary effect of making its audiences aware of the rich cultural depth and historical importance of Islam as a world civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> *Saudi Aramco World*, 27/3 (May/June, 1976), p. 2.

But softening the Arab government leaders' suddenly scandalous reputation for greed and lavish expenditure by displaying indisputable evidence of a historically rich Muslim culture was less of a challenge than the one we face today. A skeptical and frightened American public is told by today's media that the heads of state of Muslim countries are their allies in the struggle against international terrorism. Yet the public is still suspicious of Muslims more generally. What is needed, and what *Muslim Voices* seeks to provide, is a clear demonstration that the creative leaders of Muslim societies throughout the world bear no similarity to the cave-dwelling preachers of jihad whose slightest communiqué is erroneously treated by the news media as a fundamental expression of Islamic faith.

Though *Muslim Voices* shares with the Festival of Islam a deep appreciation for the historical antecedents of today's Muslim societies, the emphasis of today's initiative is less on Islam's past grandeur than on the contemporary artistic sensibilities of Muslim peoples around the world. It seems to be difficult for Americans who have come to fear Muslims—as opposed to simply resenting the high cost of gasoline as in the 1970s—to remember or believe that at some time in the past, Islam may have had a rich culture that produced artistic masterworks and made original contributions to science, medicine, and philosophy. Difficult but possible. By comparison, violent expostulations by self-proclaimed leaders like Osama bin Laden, terrorist attacks against civilians in a score of different countries, and a widespread, and in many ways understandable, Muslim reluctance to accept American military actions as measured and rational responses to a legitimate security crisis make it much harder for many Westerners to accept the Muslim communities of today as normal groups of people, concerned, like everyone else, for their families, their livelihoods, their cultural values, and their identities.



Ironically, the proponents of terrorism in the Muslim world, despite their hollow claim that they are speaking in the name of Islam, are almost without exception wedded to the most stultifying minority interpretations of Islamic tradition. Aside from chanting the Qur'an, reciting poetry, and listening to unaccompanied male voices sing militant songs, there is scarcely any manifestation of art and creativity that they find religiously acceptable. They tolerate no photographs, no television, no movies, no musical performances, no dance, no theater, no female personages, and certainly no freedom of oral or written expression.

Thus the artistic world of Islam stands as an open refutation of the absolutist religious philosophy that triggered today's crisis. This will be all the more true when artists and performers from the Muslim world present their uncensored creative visions to audiences of Muslims and non-Muslims in New York City, the cultural capital of the West, and there find an enthusiastic response. Every round of applause bestowed on a Muslim performer by a New York audience strikes at not just the negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims so prevalent in American culture, but also at the perception within the Muslim world that Western ignorance and hostility—Islamophobia, in short—is paving the way for a triumph of obscurantism and rigidity.

*Muslim Voices* has high aspirations. It seeks not just to expose American audiences to brilliant examples of contemporary Muslim creative culture, but beyond that, to reaffirm the value of artistic exchange as a means of lessening fears, building intercultural bridges, and blunting the force of arguments that pit a "global war on terror" against "Islamic jihad" as the only path to the future.

## **THE ARTS OF ISLAM IN THE EYES OF THE WEST: A HISTORICAL VIEW**

Around the time of the American Revolution, the historian Edward Gibbon penned one of the most commonly quoted lines about relations between Islam and the West. He wrote that if the Frankish king Charles Martel had succumbed to Saracen invaders at the Battle of Tours in 732, “Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pupils might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.”<sup>2</sup> The appeal of this quotation has been its combination of exoticism and succinctness in encapsulating an apparent truism of European history: struggle between Europeans and Muslims is and always has been inevitable, and the consequence of European defeat in the struggle would be cultural annihilation and inundation by Islam.

People who share Gibbon’s apocalyptic vision commonly cite a long list of Crusades against the Saracens and a similar series of Ottoman forays into eastern Europe, the latter culminating, symbolically, not just in the occupation of more and more Christian land but in sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683, in which Christian defenders reenacted the heroic role of Charles Martel’s Franks in holding back the Muslim tide. But Gibbon’s followers fail to observe that Muslim rule did not normally result in the annihilation of peoples and cultures, any more than Crusader rule in the Holy Land resulted in the destruction of Muslim society there. To be sure, when Muslims and non-Muslims have lived together, harmony is not an inevitable outcome. At its best, however, cohabitation has worked quite well, as is demonstrated in accounts of the era of Muslim rule in Spain, the long period of peaceful relations between Muslims and Confucianists in China, and twelve centuries of generally peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange (660-1860) between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East.

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<sup>2</sup> Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, New York: Bradley, nd, vol. V, p. 423.

Sadly, Gibbon-esque grand narratives of religiously based cultural hatred have a vividness that sometimes overshadows, in the popular memory, the myriad instances of cohabitation, mutual respect, and cultural exchange that would flesh out an honest and balanced account of Islam and the West.

***Cultural exchanges: viewing history through gifts and commerce***

A more benign grand narrative that highlights rather than buries these facts is sorely needed in today's climate of religious animosity. Fortunately, there are a wealth of materials that support a retelling of history in which there is a continual flow of cultural influences between European society and the Muslim world, and a joint exploration of a common heritage from classical antiquity. The debt owed by European philosophers, theologians, and scientists to translations of books from Arabic into Latin has been abundantly studied, though sadly it is often misrepresented as purely a transmission of Greek lore from the Hellenistic era with little or no mention of the important additions, refinements, and intellectual breakthroughs made by Muslim scholars.

***Gift exchanges: Harun al-Rashid and Charlemagne***

Less known are the many instances in which cultural and artistic goods have passed back and forth between Muslim and Christian lands. Consequently, the few instances that have found their way into the common historical narrative appear anomalous, or even amusing. The earliest of these is the exchange of embassies and gifts between Charlemagne and Harun al-Rashid, the Abbasid caliph, in 798. What made this exchange memorable to later historians was the delivery of an elephant in 801 to Charlemagne's capital in Aachen.

However, the elephant was not the only gift from the caliph. He also sent a carved ivory horn, a golden tray and pitcher, two tall and intricately engraved brass candlesticks, perfumes, a chess set, some lengths of fine cloth, and a tent and robe of honor bearing the words "There is no God but God." Finally, there was a water clock in which 12 metal balls sounded the hour by falling on a cymbal, and 12 carved horsemen emerged from little windows and paraded. Historians of Islamic art easily recognize each of these items as representative of the high cultural standards of the Baghdad caliphate, and some of the items—the tray and pitcher, possibly chess pieces, the carved ivory, and the robe of honor—still survive in European museums.

Though this episode is usually cited as an oddity, it was not an isolated instance of the exchange of embassies and gifts. Charlemagne's great-great-granddaughter, Bertha, the daughter of Lothair II, repeated her famous forebear's actions when she sent an embassy to the Abbasid caliph al-Muktafi in 906. Her letter, preserved in an Arabic manuscript compiled less than a century later, describes her as "Queen of all the Franks" and relates that "a friendship took place between [her] and the King of Ifriqiyah [Muslim Tunisia]." Despite this friendship, a Tunisian ship fell to her navy in battle and a man named 'Ali, one of 150 captives, entered her court and stayed for seven years. Through 'Ali she learned that:

There is friendship between you [the caliph] and the Byzantine king who resides in Constantinople. But my armies are far greater than his, and my kingdom is larger, and my authority covers twenty-four kingdoms, the language of each of which being different from that next to it. The great city of Rome lies within my kingdom, thanks to God. ['Ali] told me good things about you that filled my heart in regard to your state of affairs. I do request God to support me in winning

your friendship and peace between us for as many years as you wish. The [final] decision in this is yours. A settlement of peace is something that had never been requested by any member of my family, or my relatives, or the like of us.<sup>3</sup>

The text goes on to list the gifts Queen Bertha's ambassador, who was none other than the Tunisian 'Ali, was charged to deliver to the caliph: fifty swords, fifty shields, fifty Frankish spears, twenty garments woven with gold, twenty pieces of cloth made of sea wool (*i.e.*, fibers from the shells of *pinna nobilis*, a Mediterranean bivalve; also known as "sea byssus" or "byssus silk"), twenty male slaves, twenty female slaves, ten large dogs, seven falcons, three birds that sniff out poison, and beads to remove spearheads and arrowheads from wounds. This list contrasts sharply with the artistic manufactures that Harun al-Rashid sent to Charlemagne and thereby symbolizes the great disparity between the refined arts of the Muslim realm and the much less sophisticated military courts of Western Europe. The two lists together further demonstrate that embassies and gift exchanges were very elaborate affairs involving scores of people, as they continued to be through the following centuries.

### ***Gift exchanges: Venice and the Ottoman Empire***

Even at peak periods of military confrontation the exchange of gifts across contested frontiers was commonplace. Venice in particular was a Christian state repeatedly in confrontation with the Ottoman Empire. Yet during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, Venetian records mention scores of gift exchanges in both directions, particularly in the period 1520-1566 when Suleyman the Magnificent ruled in Istanbul. As Stefano Carboni relates in his

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<sup>3</sup> Ghada Hijjawi Qaddumi, *A Medieval Islamic Book of Gifts and Treasures*, doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1990, p. 69.

book *Moments of Vision*, “This is also the period that marks the closest proximity in artistic production between Venice and the Ottomans or, better, that denotes a peculiar vogue in Venice for ‘Oriental’ patterns.”<sup>4</sup> As in earlier times, the most desired products were those of the highest artistic value, whether a portrait of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror by the Venetian artist Gentile Bellini on the one side, or luxurious silk brocades and velvets on the other. Nor was the flow of fine Islamic goods limited to exchanges with the Ottomans. In 1603, an embassy sent to Venice by the Safavid ruler of Iran, Shah ‘Abbas I, gave to the Doge a selection of very fine carpets crafted from silk and silver-wrapped thread.

To this day the tradition of gift exchanges continues, a recent example being Saudi King Abdullah’s presentation of a heavy gold necklace and medallion—the King Abdulaziz Order of Merit—to President George W. Bush in 2008. (Although, in all likelihood, the necklace was produced by Italian rather than Saudi jewelers.)

### ***Commerce: coins, jewelry, and other goods***

Though the gifts of ambassadors and rulers often included exquisite examples of artistic production, they frequently ended up in palace treasuries, or in royal menageries, as was the case not only with Charlemagne’s elephant, but also with a polar bear brought to Baghdad by European ambassadors in the thirteenth century for presentation to the caliph al-Mustansir (1226-1242). The more common mode of making the arts and crafts of Muslim societies known to a wider world was through commerce. This involved not only the goods being traded, but also the moneys used in the exchange. Tens of thousands of Muslim coins stamped with elaborate

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<sup>4</sup> Stefano Carboni, “Moments of Vision: Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797,” in *Venice and the Islamic World: 828-1797*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 28.

Arabic inscriptions have been found in Scandinavia and Poland, where they were often perforated, strung, and used as jewelry. Many Christian authorities, starting with King Offa of England in the eighth century and proceeding through various twelfth and thirteenth century rulers in Castile, Aragon, Norman Sicily, and Georgia, not to mention the Bishop of Maguelone in southern France, issued coins with Arabic inscriptions, sometimes with the words changed to convey Christian meanings, and sometimes not.<sup>5</sup> Though numismatists usually presume that these issues were intended for trade with Muslims, this has never been proven. But whether or not this was the case, it is apparent that the Arabic script was at that time a clear signifier of wealth and luxury, showing up not only on Christian coinage, but also on imported textiles used in European churches and sumptuous furnishings depicted by European artists in prosperous Italian and Dutch households.

The goods that arrived in Europe through normal commercial exchange ran the aesthetic gamut from fine textiles, glassware, carved ivory, metalwork, and ceramic vessels at the high end; through exotic spices transshipped through the Middle East; to basic commodities like sugar, paper, cotton goods, and, from the fifteenth century on, coffee. The measure of their appreciation was a wave of borrowing of a material variety that swept southern Europe from the twelfth century onward.

Venetians adopted sophisticated ceramic and glassmaking techniques and began to grow sugar on the Mediterranean islands that made up part of their seaborne empire.<sup>6</sup> Cotton farming and weaving spread from Syria to Northern Italy. Paper mills gave Europe its own source of

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<sup>5</sup> For a sensible discussion of the King Offa dinar in the context of other Arabic script issues, see: [www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMH-AQ-offa.htm](http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/bmh/BMH-AQ-offa.htm)

<sup>6</sup> For extensive discussions of a variety of borrowed styles and practices see Rosamond E. Mack, *From Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; and *Venice and the Islamic World: 828-1797*, op. cit.

cheap writing materials just in time for the Gutenberg revolution. In short, alongside the well-known translation movement that restored Europe to its Greek heritage by way of Arabic intermediaries, there was a massive flow of lifestyle innovations from the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean to the northern shore. The arts and styles of Muslim lands became so commonplace in major metropolitan centers that their point of origin lost any importance.

Further rounds of commerce affected different parts of Europe, particularly after 1600 and the advent of joint stock companies. High quality goods from the Muslim world—Persian rugs, Indian calicoes, Damascene swords—found ready markets even as European military and political force was making certain Muslim lands subject to imperialist control. European builders similarly benefited from a growing, if often imprecise, familiarity with Islamic architecture.

### *Commerce: twentieth-century changes*

Not until the twentieth century, with the burgeoning of the Industrial Revolution, did Europeans begin to turn away from fine imports from Muslim lands. Though the capitalist need to expand the markets for industrial goods on a worldwide scale eventually spelled the demise of most high-quality craft production, both for domestic consumption and for export, the Muslim reputation for exquisite cultural products continued. However, it became increasingly tinged with exoticism as a succession of international fairs and expositions beginning with Great Britain's Crystal Palace Exposition of 1851, which included an exhibit from India, familiarized European consumers with images of "Eastern" products, often in artificially contrived "native" settings.



While these historical patterns of gift-giving and cultural exchange could be elaborated further, they point to a clear conclusion: despite the marvels of worldwide travel and communication, educated and prosperous Europeans and Americans today, are less familiar with the artistic traditions and current cultural standards of the world's various Muslim societies than their social counterparts were during almost any one of the first thirteen centuries of cultural contact. Today's Americans and European tourists visit Muslim countries and buy souvenirs, but the items they buy are usually mediocre imitations of the artisanal production of the past, not works by artists who are considered within those societies to be great talents. That is to say, a Western tourist in Iran is more likely to acquire a shabby knock-off of a Persian miniature painting than a canvas by a contemporary Iranian oil painter. By the same token, despite the electronic techniques that have revolutionized the production and distribution of cultural performances, familiarity with Muslim music, theater, and dance has generally decreased.

## **CREATIVE LIVES UNDER CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES**

The history of art cannot be separated from the history of patronage of the arts. However, patronage must be seen as involving ordinary consumers with a taste for beauty and not just rulers and august cultural institutions. It must also be recognized that some creative efforts have more to do with individual expression, whether spiritual or worldly, than with any market, though this sort of individuality is less marked in pre-modern times than over the past two centuries. Historians sometimes sort out different creative contexts by distinguishing between “fine arts” and “minor arts” or “crafts,” between “secular” and “sacred” objectives, and between personal expression and market-oriented production. Unfortunately, from the perspective of Euro-American exposure to the artistic cultures of the Muslim world, these distinctions are not particularly helpful. An Anatolian silk rug or an Iranian ceramic bowl originally produced for sale to ordinary homeowners may end up in an exhibit, hundreds of years later, in a major European or American museum, or sell at auction in London for much more money than an oil painting by an early twentieth century Turkish artist striving for individual expression. Similarly, an amulet or talisman in a finely tooled silver case, originally created to ward off evil, may be used today as expensive jewelry in New York or Paris. This can also apply to performance arts. A Sufi dance that originated as a religious ritual, and that still conveys spiritual meaning to those who participate in it, may become simply a cultural exhibit when performed on a European or American stage. In short, the world of patronage that surrounds a cultural artifact or performance at the time of its creation may differ considerably from the world of patronage that transfers that artifact or performance from its native land to a Western audience.

Yet despite the fact that the ways in which Westerners have become familiar with Islamic

art throughout the centuries do not directly reflect the creative or commercial environments in which the art was produced, nevertheless, over the past century, the forms of creative output and the practical aspects of creative life in the Muslim world have tended to converge with the realities of trans-cultural marketing and exposure. At the most mundane level, this is seen in the transformation of artisans in such crafts as pottery, leatherwork, and metalwork from producers for a local consumer market to producers for a tourist or export market, as mentioned above. In a different vein, this convergence can be seen in the adoption and adaptation of Western literary forms, artistic styles, and modes of expression, *e.g.*, novels or motion pictures, by creative individuals who are acutely aware of the different impact their work may have on international as opposed to national or regional audiences. Changes in the lives and working conditions of Muslim artists cannot be ignored when considering how their work has been received in the West, both long ago and today.

Envisioning the lifestyles and creative environments of Muslim artists at different periods can be a useful exercise insofar as the work produced by these artists, as received or encountered by Europeans and Americans, has shaped and continues to shape the West's shifting image of the Islamic world as an arena of cultural expression. There are five basic periods that illustrate the changes in creative lifestyles that took place historically: 1) the ninth century, when the Abbasid caliphate based in Baghdad still represented a unified Islamic empire; 2) the fourteenth century, in which the Islamic world settled into a more stable social and economic pattern following the wrenching dislocations brought about by the Mongol invasions of Genghis Khan and his grandson Hulagu (which in turn came on the heels of decades of economic disarray, Turkish invasion, and Crusader warfare); 3) the late eighteenth century when most Muslims came under the political and economic control of European imperialists but had still not felt the impact of the

Industrial Revolution; 4) the late nineteenth - early twentieth century, when the phenomenon of industrialization in Europe and America was having its strongest economic and political impact; and 5) the contemporary world of the twenty-first century.

### *Early Muslim Society*

By the ninth century, the shock of the Arab conquests was long past, and a welter of conquered peoples and countries had been incorporated into an empire with a more or less centralized government but with great cultural differences from region to region. Most of the people living under the rule of the Muslim Caliph were still non-Muslims—principally Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians—since the process of conversion to Islam took centuries rather than decades. It should be kept in mind that, at the time of the conquest, Arabic as a language had been confined to the Arabian Peninsula and the desert inland areas of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. Thus the words of the Quran were unintelligible to the vast majority of the conquered peoples, and communication with the new ruling elite, including the dissemination of information about their religion, was difficult until new generations of bilingual Muslims, largely the product of intermarriage between Arabs and non-Arabs, came of age.

To the extent that creative cultural expression related specifically to Islam and to Muslims, therefore, it was largely experienced by people who were either associated with Arab power centers, like the city of Baghdad, or with urban Muslim communities that were in commercial contact with those power centers. Christians in Egypt, in other words, continued to produce textiles with the distinctive patterns and images of the Coptic church, and Zoroastrians in Iran composed many of their most important religious treatises in the Middle Persian language. Other Iranians, who were converts to Islam, were learning to read Arabic and, by the

end of the century, adapting the Arabic writing system to the Persian language. The totality of cultural expression, in other words, cannot be characterized as Islamic. It was rather an amalgam of customs, styles, and techniques aimed at consumer markets of varying religious, ethnic, and linguistic identity.

The continuation of allegiances to the styles and practices of non-Muslim religions makes it difficult for scholars today to define what precisely constituted Islamic art. Nevertheless, elements of a distinctively Muslim lifestyle and material culture did slowly emerge. Arabic calligraphy, architectural ornamentation techniques based on the designs of Abbasid palaces, elegant glazed pottery incorporating Arabic calligraphic motifs, and clothing styles based on the plain linen or cotton recommended by the traditions of Muhammad (instead of the silk brocades preferred before the Arab conquests) spread from the Muslim power centers and gradually gained wide popularity. In short, the ninth century was a period that saw the waning of many local, pre-Islamic cultural forms and their slow replacement by styles and practices preferred by the growing Muslim communities. Yet there was certainly no cultural uniformity, and common economic and institutional features across the vast expanse of the caliphate were few indeed.

Artisans who sold their goods to local buyers either repeated or adapted styles inherited from earlier times. They knew little about the lives and professional practices of their counterparts in other regions. The textiles woven by Coptic Christians in Egypt were not exported to Iran, nor did the elaborate silver plates patterned on pre-Islamic Sasanid Iranian models find buyers in Egypt. Only in the major political centers—Baghdad itself or provincial capitals like Tunis, Fustat (later called Cairo), Damascus, Isfahan, Nishapur, and Bukhara—did the patronage of Muslim rulers and courtiers foster a robust creative climate. Physicians, scientists, translators (from Greek, Sanskrit, and Middle Persian), poets, writers, legal scholars,

and merchants selling religiously neutral or explicitly Muslim luxury goods flocked to these centers. According to one interpretation, this court-centered culture made the ninth century a sort of Golden Age of Islam. But another viewpoint, based on the fact that Muslims were still a minority in most areas, recognizes that there was still great diversity of culture and social forms within the lands of the caliphate, and that despite the political dominion of the caliphs, Islam was not yet a dominant cultural marker.

In concrete terms, descriptions survive of slave-girls in Baghdad who could perform vast repertoires of songs while playing musical instruments. Though sometimes pejoratively portrayed as prostitutes or concubines, there is no reason to doubt their skills or deny them a central role in the preservation and development of musical traditions in a Muslim environment. In this respect, they deserve to be mentioned alongside court musicians and poets (including members of ruling families), as contributing to newly forming Muslim traditions of music and dance. Separating creative artists at the top of the social scale from those closer to the bottom can make analytical sense if one is interested primarily in patronage. After all, a rich man who purchased a skilled singing girl to entertain his household differed profoundly from a prince who decided to compose songs for the lute. But from the point of view of the development of Muslim music, it is hard to distinguish contributions made by performers of high social status from those made by slaves.

By the same token, potters in Nishapur who dipped broad shallow dishes in a thin wash of white clay and then decorated the pristine surface with ornate Arabic calligraphy were of low social status and would not even have been considered artists in their own time. Yet, the wares they produced are today coveted by major museums and private collectors of Islamic art. The same can be said of the weavers, dyers, and embroiderers who produced the elegant fabrics that

were the mainstay of the Muslim ambassadors and traders who maintained occasional contact with Christian Europe; or of the lowly stucco workers and wood carvers who pioneered the art of the arabesque in the ornaments they devised for the walls of palaces and doors of mosques. Only at the highest social levels do there exist records identifying individual patronage, for instance, a purse of gold coins paid to a poet singing the praises of a caliph, or the commission paid for a translation of a work of Greek philosophy. As a consequence, the role of patronage in the formative stages of Islamic art —Arab vs. non-Arab, elite vs. commoner, new convert vs. longstanding Muslim—remains obscure.

### ***The Post-Mongol Muslim World***

By the fourteenth century, the social and economic context of cultural production had changed dramatically. Urban markets had come to be organized in similar fashion throughout the lands of the caliphate. Goods of similar type were typically sold in adjoining stores, and production was increasingly organized by guilds. The function of the guilds to ensure equal business opportunity for all members fostered a conservatism in style and technique that persisted for generations. Diversity of regional styles continued, but characteristics identified as “Muslim” – such as shape-concealing, draped male and female garment designs, narrow streets and covered bazaars, the ornamental use of Arabic calligraphy and interlaced arabesque patterns, and domes, archways, and minarets in architecture -- conveyed a greater sense of cultural homogeneity and provided markers of Muslim identity in lands such as Anatolia, India, Southeast Asia, China, and West Africa where Muslim communities were then in their early phases of growth.

Though the preponderance of artistic goods that came to the notice of European buyers or

collectors were crafted by guild-oriented artisans who were not seen in their own society to be “artists,” more and more of the highest quality products carried the names of their creators. Expression of individualism in cultural production was particularly noteworthy in fields like miniature painting, which by the end of the century was reaching a peak of excellence in Iran and Afghanistan. But the names of artists also began to appear in ceramics, metalwork, calligraphy, and rug-making. Poets, who had always been the elite among writers, sometimes included their own names in the closing lines of their verses. In comparative terms, it may well be that this sort of artistic self-consciousness arose slightly earlier in the Muslim world than it did in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The fourteenth century also saw an increasing intrusion of creative artistry and individualized expression into the field of religion. Many of the Sufi brotherhoods that grew during this period institutionalized the use of poetry recitation, singing, dancing, and the playing of musical instruments in their rituals. This raises a question as to whether religion simply became a new venue for artistic expression during this period -- another source of patronage, so to speak -- or whether artists began to give greater play to their own spirituality. By and large, despite charges by certain legalistic religious authorities that some Sufis were charlatans, there is little evidence that Sufi singing, dancing, and poetry writing constituted performances for hire comparable to the paintings, sculpture, and choral music commissioned by popes and bishops in Europe. The ambiguity between individual, spiritually-motivated art and art created for the marketplace continued to mark Muslim societies through the following centuries.

A final aspect of cultural production by Muslims in the fourteenth century relates to the new lands into which Islam was then expanding. In the ninth century, the process by which a congeries of pre-Islamic cultural tastes and practices evolved toward something that would

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<sup>7</sup> See for comparison the work of Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.



eventually warrant the term “Islamic art” was still inchoate. Would the spectacular spiral minaret constructed at a caliph’s command at Samarra in Iraq become a model for later towers of faith? No. But nobody could have presumed that at the time it was built. Would the caliphally-sponsored *tiraz* style of plain linen or cotton fabric ornamented with a band of silk calligraphy set a permanent standard for elite Muslim clothing? No. But converts to Islam who then wore the plain garments to signal their membership in the Muslim community did not know that the silk brocades of the pre-Islamic period would return to popularity and gain religious acceptance by the year 1000. No one could tell where Muslim tastes were headed. The arabesque was one of the few developments of that earlier era that persisted through the centuries.

By contrast, in the fourteenth century, Muslims everywhere recognized certain markers of Muslim cultural identity and patronized the creative craftsmen who produced them. Pottery, metalwork, manuscript production, architecture, clothing styles, Quran chanting, calligraphy, and many other features of daily life and religious ritual, all rooted in the old heartlands of the caliphate, had become integral parts of a Muslim cultural complex that spread afar as the frontiers of the faith expanded geographically. Yet this same expansion exposed new Muslim communities—combinations of immigrant (and sometimes invading) Muslims and local converts in lands that Islam did not deeply penetrate until after the year 1000—to cultural influences that had never before been seriously encountered. On the religious frontiers from West Africa to Indonesia, cultural encounters began to produce works of combined influence, such as Sufi poetry with heavily Hindu imagery; shadow plays in which Muslim audiences followed the adventures of Indian religious figures like Rama and Sita; architectural forms that blended West African building techniques with the templates of the mosque and minaret; Indonesian devotional manuscripts illustrated with pre-Islamic images of *naga* serpents; and Arabic

calligraphy in China that uncannily calls to mind Chinese ideographic characters.

Thus the Muslim cultural world of the fourteenth century encompassed a mix of stable and fairly uniform styles and practices in the old caliphal center, and new and dynamic trends in outlying areas where these styles and practices encountered other cultural traditions. In a sense, what was being experienced on the periphery of Islam in the fourteenth century was a replay of what had been experienced in Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia in the ninth century, namely, the challenge of discovering within a complex of differing and competing cultural forms some combination that could be popularly accepted as appropriate for a community of Muslims. What was different in the fourteenth century, however, was that the creative community of the ninth century had had no template for “Islamic art,” whereas in the fourteenth century, that template existed; and this made circumstances ripe for the development of the eclectic artistic forms and practices that are still manifest in the world of Islam today.

### *The Early Modern Muslim World*

By the late eighteenth century, the peripheral regions of the Muslim world were increasingly falling under the sway of European imperial regimes even as the old caliphal core, incorporated into the weakening Ottoman Empire or the weak royal regimes in Iran and Afghanistan, continued to stand against European encroachment. Artistic creators in these territories, still working within guild traditions, slowly evolved new styles, although a pervasive economic weakness dating (in most places) from the late seventeenth century, had lowered the levels of patronage that fostered outstanding works of art, architecture, poetry, and scientific inquiry only a century and a half earlier. It is widely acknowledged that the royal portraits and flower arrangements painted under the Qajar dynasty in Iran fell aesthetically short of the elegant

miniatures of the Safavid court painters of the seventeenth century, and the eighteenth century mosques of Istanbul do not rival the great edifices of the Ottoman heyday. Comparison of late eighteenth century and early seventeenth century productions in a variety of fields betrays a growing, though sometimes quite lively, provincialism.

The story in the peripheral lands penetrated by European imperialism was different. Personnel working for European trading companies or imperial administrations in a variety of countries—Dutch in Java, English and French in India, Portuguese in various Indian Ocean ports—acquired a taste for exotic manufactures and artworks. European patronage opened new perspectives for craft producers in areas where the guild system was less comprehensive than in Ottoman and Persian territories. Works from these outlying areas that found their way into international trade increasingly “represented” Islamic art despite local variances from the styles that in earlier eras had imparted a special cachet to the art forms of the central Islamic lands. This helped fuel still-existing tensions between Muslim cultural articulations emanating from the Middle East and those from other Muslim regions. To this day, surveys of Islamic art contain little or no mention of wooden mosque architecture from Malaysia and Uzbekistan or Arabic calligraphy from China and Sulawesi. Yet these cultural forms were flowering at a time when the arts of the Ottoman, Arab, and Persian lands were losing some of their dynamism.

### ***The Muslim World in 1900***

By the late nineteenth century, the world of the fourteenth century artist, craftsman, and performer was rapidly disappearing in the central lands of Islam. Guilds were dying out as new producing and marketing institutions characterized by exchange with the imperialist Western powers reoriented the economies of Muslim lands. Though an increasing number of Muslim

lands had come under direct rule by European imperialists, and many of the Ottoman provinces in the Balkans had rebelled and acquired Christian regimes, this had not initially undermined their artistic and cultural vitality. Local demand for performers, artists, and crafts had remained strong, and some of the handful of Europeans who administered their countries' overseas possessions continued to exhibit a taste for local luxuries. European museums and libraries testify to avid collecting of art and artifacts by administrators and officials professionally occupied in colonial Muslim lands. Moreover, although common European tastes were often satisfied by goods of lower quality and price, an increasing flow of goods from Muslim lands to Europe led to the development of new markets there. Purely touristic craft production was still on the horizon, but the degeneration of standards that eventually became associated with such craftsmanship was not far off.

It was the industrialization brought about by imperialist powers, rather than imperialism itself, that destroyed the livelihoods of local cultural producers. For instance, European and American factories produced goods like machine-made carpets that were cheaper and more abundant than hand-knotted imports from Turkey, Iran, and India. While the quality of the machine-made product was naturally inferior, the new goods were offered at a price that made them more accessible to a wider range of consumers, and they gradually took the place of local, hand-made products. Plastics came to replace pottery; aluminum pans drove copper containers from the market. By the middle of the twentieth century, the spread of Western entertainment media, and the inventions that they depended on -- the phonograph, radio, and motion picture projector -- had inaugurated a wave of cultural influence that would quickly lead to a large-scale rejection of traditional arts and aesthetic standards in many Muslim societies.

### *The Muslim World Today*

The world of the modern-day Muslim creative artist has undergone a seismic reorientation. Even as the craftsman's livelihood was disappearing -- to be sustained in most places only by a low-quality tourist trade or government-sponsored programs to preserve dying traditions -- creative individuals were adapting to a new world of artistic possibilities. Some learned new literary and artistic forms. Novelists, some of them writing in European as well as traditional Muslim languages, began to overshadow poets, who for many centuries had been the literary elite. Portrait and landscape painters graduating from newly created academies of fine arts initially imitated European styles, which appealed to a small local market of Westernized collectors but seemed remote from Islamic artistic traditions. Eventually, however, they would delve into their cultural past for idioms that would make their works more distinctive and appealing to an international market. For instance, a painter in Bahrain produces canvases that are reminiscent of New York School of abstract expressionism but also contain shapes and impressions suggestive of the life of the local *sug*. Another artist in Iran makes extravagant use of Persian calligraphy while depicting orientalist scenes deriving from European fantasies of the Arabian Nights.

The shadow puppet and folk theater traditions that were still alive in 1800 had largely died out in Turkey, Iran, and Malaysia by the turn of the twentieth century. They were replaced first by Western-style theater companies, and then by filmmakers whose work in recent decades has garnered international acclaim. An Iranian film like "Kandahar," directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf and released in 2001, admits a purely political interpretation that sees it as revealing the negative face of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but also a Sufi interpretation that follows its protagonist on a journey—the original title of the film was "Journey to Kandahar"—from

death, to life, to enlightenment.

In music, Western instruments, compositional styles, and performance techniques have found receptive Islamic audiences at the popular level. Fusion styles combining Western sounds and rhythms with aspects of Muslim tradition abound in a number of Muslim countries, as well as among Muslims living in the United States or Europe.

To be sure, wealthy patrons can still commission and collect traditional artistic products. A poet with an oeuvre consisting solely of works in praise of the Shi'ite imams, for example, can still live a comfortable life enjoying the patronage of the pious rich in a country like Kuwait. But other artists have come to recognize newer sources of patronage. Magazines and newspapers offered new venues not just for editors and writers, but also for calligraphers, cartoonists and photographers. Here and there, an impresario would bring a theater or dance company into being, despite inherited taboos, particularly on public performances by women. Women themselves have become cultural pioneers as publishers and writers and increasingly challenge long-standing patterns of male domination. And television has opened the new vistas for cultural variety in the Muslim world as it has elsewhere.

Of course, these changes have not happened evenly across all Muslim lands. Turkey and Egypt were in the forefront of cultural transitions in the early twentieth century, while imperialist regimes in countries like India, Algeria, and Indonesia tended to be wary of new forms and venues of artistic expression that might challenge their hegemony. Wariness also surfaced in religious circles, though Sufi attitudes often proved more flexible and creative than those of religious judges and jurists. The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of several regimes that have tried unsuccessfully to suppress satellite television reception and interdict the smuggling of videotapes and DVDs deemed religiously or morally unacceptable.

In general, however, Muslim writers, artists, and performers everywhere have been deluged with western styles, manufactures, modes of communication, and forms of entertainment under political and economic conditions that have placed immense leverage in the hands of those who were most willing and able to adapt to western hegemony. Their responses laid the groundwork for understanding the rich array of Islamic cultural expression in the world today, and also established new patterns of life and professional practice for artistically creative individuals in every Muslim land. At the same time, they created a wide array of new institutional forms—museums, ministries of culture, broadcasting authorities, publishing companies, and cultural marketers—that would reshape the character of patronage in the world of the Islamic arts.

## **THE ARTS OF ISLAM: A BRIEF HISTORY**

Cultural developments that span fourteen centuries, scores of countries, and currently touch upon the lives of well over a billion people cannot be encapsulated in a few pages. Time and space, language and ethnicity, class and gender, genre and style all contribute a range of achievements that defy easy summary. In order to place the components of an arts festival into a meaningful historical context for an American audience, this brief account will track the development of the following art forms in the Islamic world:

- A. Poetry and Song
- B. Quranic Chant
- C. Calligraphy
- D. Belles Lettres

E. Music and Dance

F. Theater

G. Painting, Sculpture, and Design

H. Architecture

Though the average American is more likely to have had some exposure to Muslim visual arts, we will begin with the literary arts because they are the ones most deeply associated with the origins of the faith. So widely accepted is the general belief that Islamic societies are theologically opposed to depictions of living beings, that even knowledgeable people sometimes declare that the greatest arts of Islam are all verbal, or at most calligraphic or abstract in visual expression. This bias toward the verbal is sometimes attributed to the oral origin of the Quran, which is understood by Muslims to be God's holy word. Others attribute it to the nomadic nature of Arab society in pre-Islamic times, in which poetry was, according to surviving documents, the sole recognized expression of the creative imagination. In either case, the visual forms that eventually became part of "Islamic art" are usually assumed to derive from forms that pre-existed in the lands that came under caliphal rule in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Since the fledgling state of archaeology in Saudi Arabia makes it difficult to reconstruct with any certainty the visual and social environment of Mecca and Medina in the time of the Prophet, we can only guess at any connections that might once have linked these locations with the architectural or ornamental traditions of earlier Arabian societies, that of Himyar in Yemen to the south, or that of the Nabataeans in Jordan to the north, or for that matter any other regional culture. It seems beyond question, however, that dance and song animated both settled and nomadic Arab societies of that time, as they still do in some tribal areas. These precursors of the song and dance traditions that have been collected in the field in modern times must be



considered as underlying, to some extent, the poetic production that is recorded in early sources. One indication of this is that the holy cities of Mecca and Medina became the locus for the composition of wine songs during the first century of the caliphate, though these were disapproved of by pious Muslims.

### ***A. Poetry and Song***

So far as can be judged from surviving examples, Arabic poetry of the period before and shortly after the advent of the Quran—assuming this to be an Arabian document that was essentially completed in its current form by roughly 670<sup>8</sup>—seldom dealt with religious matters. Unlike the Quran, poetry of this era was metrical; but like the Quran, it used mono-rhymes to give unity to a succession of verses. Pre-Islamic odes became highly important in the eyes of early Muslims because they provided clues for understanding the words and phrases in the Quran in the context of their usage at that time.

Considering this poetry as a reflection of life in its era, rather than as a source for linguistic study, we can conclude that the society of Muslims in the middle decades of the seventh century valued poems including: evocations of desert and tribal life, praise of heroes and their deeds, panegyrics extolling leaders and patrons, expressions of mourning, satirical or derisive attacks on enemies, and, for some, drinking songs. The “new poetry” of the early Abbasid period (late eighth century) added love poems, “indecent” poems, and exaltations of

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<sup>8</sup> Scholarly debate on this assumption is lively and acrimonious, with some scholars in the West arguing for the Quran being a collection of spiritual literary fragments brought together a century and a half later by unknown compilers in Iraq. For a brief and temperate presentation of the pros and cons of this theory, see Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, London: Blackwell, 2003.

poetic idiosyncrasy. It also increasingly departed from the ode structure.

Thus, despite being the most acclaimed art of the Arabian Peninsula, Arabic poetry did not, for the most part, center on Islam as a faith – at least during the first two centuries of the religion. Eventually, more strictly religious poetry did come to be written, but the study of Arabic literature has not generally ranked the later, religiously-oriented poetry on as high a plane as earlier works. Nevertheless, poetry commands enormous respect in all Arab societies down to the present day, and it is commonplace for prominent individuals from all walks of life, including, most notoriously, Osama bin Laden, to turn their hand to poetic composition.

It must not be lost sight of that in the earliest period of Islam, much of this poetry was sung. One of the most extensive early compendia of poetry, compiled by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, was called the *Kitab al-Aghani*, or “Book of Songs.” And when one thinks of song, one must further keep in mind that many of the foremost singers of the early era were slave women. Al-Jahiz, in his *Epistle on Singing-Girls* written in the early Abbasid period, says that high-priced slave girls knew thousands of songs.<sup>9</sup> It is also apparent that their singing was accompanied by musical instruments. The distinction between the poet, assumed to be free and respectable (despite certain notorious exceptions), and the singing girl who could be bought and sold provides an early example of the ambiguous relationship between singing, playing musical instruments, and composing poetry.

Throughout the following centuries, poets tended to be lauded and rewarded by patrons while singers and musicians were often relegated to a demimonde of social outcasts. One early indication of this is the condemnation of musical instruments in the sayings (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad, e.g., “from among my followers there will be some people who will

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<sup>9</sup> See the translation by A. F. L. Beeston, Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1980.

consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk, the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful.”<sup>10</sup> There are also many historical examples of religious zealots who publicly broke musical instruments in display of their puritanical feelings.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, other thinkers of the day took no moral issue with music. For instance, the Arab philosopher Abu Yusuf al-Kindi (d. 873) wrote fifteen treatises on music theory and displayed great knowledge of the Greek tradition of musical writing.

Arabic poetry was joined over the centuries by poetry in the other languages spoken in the various Muslim societies, though many non-Arabs continued to compose in Arabic. Persian poetry emerged in the tenth century, Turkish poetry in the fourteenth, and Urdu poetry in the eighteenth. In Muslim Spain, whose musical practices influenced the Christian cultures of southern Europe, poems were composed that mixed Arabic with the local Romance dialect. In the centuries since, numerous other languages of the Muslim world, from Maltese to Somali, have served as vehicles for poetry. Though some Arabic poetic forms continued to be used in these other languages, new forms arose as well, including love lyrics (*ghazals*), quatrains (*ruba'iyat*), and folk epics celebrating legendary figures from the Islamic past.

Just as with Arabic, these other poetic traditions address a wide variety of subjects (panegyrics, satire, love songs, etc.), but they also sometimes manifest a particular emphasis on Islam as seen through the sensibility of Sufis. It is ironic, given the conventional emphasis on Arabic as the language of Islam, that any historical anthology of religious poetry from across the Islamic world would have a higher representation of non-Arabic than of Arabic verse. The fourteenth-century Persian poet, Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose verses enjoy enormous

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<sup>10</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih*, volume 7, book 69, number 494.

<sup>11</sup> For numerous examples, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

popularity in English translation, exemplifies the preeminence of non-Arabs in composing religious verse. Given the wide variety of languages, verse forms, and subject matter, it is difficult to arrive at a summary appraisal of poetry and song in Muslim societies. Moreover, songwriting departed substantially from poetry in the twentieth century under the influence of new styles and instrumentation derived from Western sources. Today, for example, rap music is composed and performed in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Swahili, Malay, and other languages predominantly spoken by Muslims. As Muslim poetry and song continue to head in new directions, the weight of fourteen centuries of devotion to this art form suggests that it will long continue to be appreciated by Muslims in almost all regions and social settings.

### ***B. Quranic Chant***

While the chanting of the Quran (*tajwid*) is unquestionably a Muslim religious practice with very early beginnings, it is important to note its resemblances to Sephardic, Armenian, and Eastern Orthodox chanting traditions. It is likely that Quranic chant began in efforts to imitate the sound of other liturgies. Be that as it may, the chanting of the Quran became one of the few standardized artistic expressions of Islam across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. While there are several recognized schools or styles, all require classical Arabic pronunciation, and there are fixed rules for how specific letters are to be pronounced.

Though it is true that most of the world's Muslims, who are not Arabic speakers, do not understand all of the words of the Quran when they are chanted, the same thing holds true for the Latin, Sanskrit, or Hebrew chants in the rituals of other faiths. Thus it is necessary to regard chant-listening as a spiritual and social experience, and not primarily a means of communicating

precise meaning. Today, Quranic chant can be commonly heard on radio and television, especially during religious festivals or holidays, and in some countries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, official government events often open with some chanted passages.

Chant instruction -- both voice training and interpretation of cantillation marks -- has experienced a modern revival across the Muslim world, particularly in non-Arabic-speaking lands, which testifies to its function as a pan-Muslim experience. Several countries now hold annual competitions,<sup>12</sup> and famous reciters, like the Egyptian Abd al-Basit (1927-1988), are known throughout the Muslim world with examples of their art being readily accessible on YouTube.<sup>13</sup>

### ***C. Calligraphy***

The Arabic script has become the hallmark of most Muslim societies, regardless of language, in the same way that Hebrew script historically accompanied Judaism around the world, no matter what vernacular a Jewish community might speak. But Arabic calligraphy stands out in comparison with other calligraphic traditions in its flexibility of form, from squared off mosaic to hyper-cursive *nasta'liq* and *shekasteh*, and its application to almost every decorative purpose. The evolution and variety of the bookhands that provide the main vehicle for the transmission of written knowledge is paralleled by that of numismatic, architectural, and ornamental scripts where legibility is not the primary intent. The earliest versions of the Arabic script on parchment and papyrus, which date to the first decades after the death of the Prophet

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Lois al-Faruqi, "Qur'ān Reciters in Competition in Kuala Lumpur," *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1987), pp. 221-228.

<sup>13</sup> For a good example of his recitation, go to [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeG8Vz7y2PE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeG8Vz7y2PE).

Muhammad in 632, are difficult to read, especially since most scribes felt it unnecessary to represent short vowels. During that period, documents and records emanating from Muslim rulers newly installed in the lands conquered by the Arab armies were commonly written in Greek or some other established administrative language. Muslim coins minted in Iran, for example, retained inscriptions in Middle Persian.

However, in the early Abbasid caliphate, that is to say, from the late eighth century onward, the shapes and conventions for writing in Arabic script became more standardized, and this led to Arabic calligraphy bonding with Muslim identity far more firmly than any writing tradition other than the Chinese. It can be argued, in fact, that the Arabic script became more strongly associated with Islam than the Arabic language itself. That is, even illiterate people who could not understand either spoken or written Arabic knew immediately when they were in a Muslim environment when they saw the Arabic script prominently displayed. This distinctive function of the Arabic script continues to the present day.

The history of Arabic calligraphy, like that of poetry, displays significant variations over time and space. But schooling in script for the literate elite was established very early as a basic skill—indeed, an art for the most highly skilled—and often became a sine qua non of social or professional advancement. By the time of the Ottoman Empire, each branch of government utilized its own distinctive calligraphic style, and apprentice bureaucrats went through a lengthy period of preparing rough drafts of documents before being entrusted with producing final drafts. Scholars who have been schooled in the reading of Arabic scripts can often identify at a glance the geographic origin or time period of a book or inscription. In parts of the world far from the Middle East, the adaptation of Arabic script to a local language often becomes a hallmark of the expansion of Islam. In Southeast Asia, for example, the Jawi (from the island of Java) version of

the Arabic script first appeared in the early fourteenth century; despite the general adoption of Roman characters in the twentieth century, it continues to be used for ritual purposes in some parts of Malaysia and Indonesia up to the present day.

Nevertheless, there are some Muslim societies that do not use the Arabic script. In some cases, this is because another script had been well established before the extension of Islam into the region, as is the case in Bangladesh where the Bengali language is written in a script that is identical to that of India's largely Hindu province of Bengal. In other cases, the disuse of the Arabic script was the result of pressure from non-Muslim imperialist powers, notably Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, which forced their Muslim subjects to use the Cyrillic (or occasionally the Roman) alphabet. The Republic of Turkey stands out as the one Muslim country that adopted the Roman alphabet for nationalistic reasons in 1931.

Alphabet choice and styles of script acquired special importance with the advent of printing. After a now mostly forgotten period between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries, in which woodblocks and tin plates—called *tarsh* in Arabic—were used to print Arabic script, there was almost no printing done by Muslims until the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> When the printing press did reach the Muslim world, printers used both conventional European typesetting and the lithographic printing process pioneered in Austria by Alois Senefelder (1771-1834). Though Europeans exploited the flexibility of lithographic printing primarily to produce pictures, Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia produced complete books. Since the shapes and styles of Arabic calligraphy could be readily transferred to a lithographic stone, printing did not degrade the fluidity and elegance of handwriting as it did in Europe. This contributed significantly to the

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<sup>14</sup> A notable exception is a short-lived press operated in Istanbul by Ibrahim Müteferrika (1674-1745) between 1729 and 1743. In addition, European presses did occasionally print an Arabic Quran or texts intended for the use of Christian Arabs.

retention of calligraphy as an art form in the contemporary Muslim world, while the once artistic handwriting styles of Europe largely disappeared. It might be noted that the replacement of the Arabic script with Roman or Cyrillic characters has led to a parallel decline in the importance of artistic calligraphy in the countries affected.

#### ***D. Belles Lettres***

The Arabic word *adab* designates a broad category of writing roughly equivalent to the idea of *belles lettres*. That is to say, it signifies a studious concern with literary style regardless of subject matter. Prior to the transfer of western literary forms into the Muslim world in modern times, prose fiction played a relatively small role in *adab*. Religious, philosophical, historical, biographical, satirical, and scientific writings, on the other hand, often displayed the author's conscious concern with literary style. From the tenth century onward, the preoccupation with style often took the form of couching prefatory remarks, or even entire texts, in rhymed prose, a style of writing attributed to Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani (969-1008). Other stylistic devices included rapid and diverting changes of topic and tone, and frequent introductions of poetry into works of prose.

Various forms of *adab* originated in Arabic in the early Abbasid period, but they spread over time to other languages. The common denominator among the forms was a conscious concern for style, which also marked the writer as a member of a class that was not just literate, but highly schooled in literary composition. The connection between the words *adab* (spelled with long a's), meaning "literature," and *adabiya*, meaning "polite manners," highlights the degree to which skill at composition came to be a mark of refinement. In Ottoman times, for



example, it was commonplace for members of the governmental and literary elite to be adept in composing poetry and prose in three languages, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, which differ linguistically to a greater degree than do European languages like English, Italian, and Russian.

In modern times, the tradition of elegant writing has been adapted to the novel and short story forms, which now dominate literary production. Though modern taste often militates against the stylistic artificiality associated with classical *adab*, creative prose writing by Islamic authors continues to attract attention, both within the Muslim world and internationally. Prose fiction in Muslim languages varies thematically from popular historical novels in Urdu, to the incisive social and political vignettes of Pramoedya Ananta Toer in Indonesian, to the multi-layered symbolism of the Turkish Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk. Yet, there has been strong resistance to considering the colloquial Arabic of common people a suitable vehicle for literary creativity. Some Arab authors have experimented with colloquial composition, but none has produced something generally accepted as a masterwork.

### ***E. Music and Dance***

In dance, as in other areas of creativity among Muslims, social attitudes were often carried over from pre-Islamic societies like Byzantium and Sasanid Iran. In fact, the Empress Theodora had once been a public entertainer, and because in Roman society it was forbidden for members of the elite classes to marry public performers, Justinian had to seek a special dispensation from his predecessor and uncle, Justin, in order to marry her. But not all of the considerable imperial propaganda machinery of the Byzantine Empire was able to erase the stain,

and Procopius in his *Secret History* spread many colorful, and off-color, stories of Theodora's sexual activities.

Today, many apologists for the low status of dancers, actors, and musicians in Iran attempt to portray pre-Islamic Iran as a society that gave royal patronage to artists, even housing them at court as Louis XIV did.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, for many years, Medjid Rezvani's book on theater and dance in Iran was the only one available on the subject; thus, some serious scholars like ethnomusicologist Amnon Shiloah, accepted Rezvani's fantasy of a classical dance tradition with formal rules and training that was performed in secret and "guarded, right up to our own times, the rules of the classical dance, even if a few old dancers are the only repositories of them."<sup>16</sup> This led Shiloah to conclude the following: "From the scattered information we possess, however, it emerges that alongside non-professional dancing, a well-defined form of sophisticated dance did exist. The latter probably referred to the glorious pre-Islamic Iranian dance with its codified rules and aesthetics . . ."<sup>17</sup> However no evidence survives to demonstrate that any such classical dance tradition existed or that artists and entertainers were regarded any more highly in Sasanid Iran and Byzantium than in the Islamic world of the Middle East and Central Asia.

That the low position of dancers and other performing artists in the Middle East and Central Asia is a result of the continuance of earlier societal attitudes in those regions is considerably strengthened when one looks at the high position of classical dancers and musicians in the Javanese courts. In Java, by way of contrast to the position of Middle Eastern and Central

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<sup>15</sup> See Medjid Rezvani, *Le Theatre et la Danse en Iran*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam: A Socio-Cultural Study*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995, p. 137.

Asian dancers and musicians, Muslim royal courts, continuing and adapting pre-Islamic attitudes, did indeed lavishly support classical dancers and musicians.

In response to the high priority and popularity of the performing arts in the West, many 20<sup>th</sup> century governments, including Egypt, Turkey, pre-Revolutionary Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Tunisia, formed national dance companies for touring purposes. These companies frequently created fantasy visions of their respective nation states to correspond to Western images of the Orient.<sup>18</sup>

Steps were taken to ensure that the dancers, culled for the first time from the middle classes, did not suffer from the traditionally poor reputation of professional dancers. These actions did not always succeed. All dancers, whether ballerinas in Cairo or Istanbul, or members of folk troupes in national companies, can regale listeners with the horrified reactions of friends and family when it became known that they have followed the profession of dancer.<sup>19</sup> Lotfollah Mansouri, a well-known Iranian artistic director of the San Francisco Opera, recently told an audience of his father disowning him, calling him a *raqqas* (dancer), and of his father refusing to speak to him for years, despite his international celebrity, because he followed the disreputable profession of music.

As for music, classical forms (which differ from country to country) have often been granted official status by the state, thereby denying more popular forms of music access to state-supported media such as radio and television. Classical musicians frequently supported efforts to exclude other musicians from public performances by denigrating popular music forms as

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<sup>18</sup> See two works by Anthony Shay, *Choreophobia: Solo Improvised Dance in the Iranian World*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999; and *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, NESTA Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002.

corrupting, establishing false hierarchies of permissible and impermissible genres of music, and attempting to imbue classical music with spirituality in order to bolster their societal positions at the expense of others.<sup>20</sup> The well-known “Arabesque debate” in Turkey, which involves conservative opposition to popular, working class songs influenced by Arab melodies, is another example of the contestation of musical genres.<sup>21</sup>

Though the playing of musical instruments to accompany songs appears very early in the historical record of Muslim societies, dance makes a comparatively late arrival. When dance finally does appear, it is associated most strongly with Sufism. Some Sufi masters placed dance forms at the center of their ritual practices, and by the fifteenth century the theme of dancing Sufis, intoxicated by love of God, became common in miniature paintings from Iran and India. Other Muslim religious leaders, however, particularly among the non-Sufis, eschewed both dance and song, considering them distractions from true religious devotion.

This does not mean that dance was always associated with Sufism, or even with the religious life. The important role of court-sponsored music and dance in Indonesia has already been mentioned. In certain other regions, tribal customs involved dancing by groups of men or women. Moreover, traditional popular festivals held for centuries from Morocco to Egypt to India are known to have included dance groups, sometimes involving men dressed as women. Dance played a role in private life as well. In Iran, female dancers are a favorite theme in paintings of the Qajar era (late eighteenth - nineteenth centuries), and women of elevated social status sometimes danced for the entertainment of female friends.

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<sup>20</sup> See Jean During et al., *The Art of Persian Music*, Washington, DC: Mage, 1991. Also Sasan Fatemi, 2005. “La musique légère urbaine dans la culture iranienne: Réflexions sur les notions de classique et populaire.” Unpublished dissertation. Université Paris X-Nanterre, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Stokes, *The Arabesque Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

## *F. Theater*

Perhaps the last art form to find an expression under Islam was theater. Neither the ancient Greek theatrical tradition, which was closely bound to the rituals of the city-state, nor the narrative pageantry of the various Christian communities of the Middle East seems to have spurred Muslim imitations. Among Shi'ite Muslims, however, a desire to commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, al-Husain ibn 'Ali, in 680, eventually gave rise to what is sometimes referred to as a Muslim "Passion Play." Actors took the roles of al-Husain and his various family members, and also the roles of the villains who killed them at the behest of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiya. Mourning processions held at the beginning of the year in the Muslim religious calendar date back to at least the tenth century, but full-scale theatrical renditions of the tragedy, known as *ta'ziyeh*, did not take shape until the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

Though Sunni Islam did not develop a counterpart tradition of religious performance, more secular forms of theater appeared in Turkish areas (including in Iran) and in Southeast Asia. In the latter region, shadow puppets acting out stories from pre-Islamic sources like the *Ramayana* became highly popular. Shadow plays also gained popularity under Turkish rulers in Egypt and Turkey. Colored, translucent figures and stage sets, all cut out of stiff leather, were pressed against a white cloth and illuminated from behind. The puppeteer manipulated the figures, which were on the ends of sticks and at the same time provided the voices of the various characters. Typically, a wise-cracking scalawag named Karagöz, or Blackeye, engaged in

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<sup>22</sup> For a detailed history see Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, New York: New York University Press, 1979.

elaborate bantering confrontations with his more sober counterpart Hacivat. Other stock characters, such as an Arab, an Armenian, a Jew, or a Muslim bully, would also appear. The Karagöz performances, as they were collectively called, held up a mirror to the social foibles of Ottoman popular society.<sup>23</sup> At the same time another type of popular theater, called *orta oyunu* (literally, “middle play”), developed with live performers instead of puppeteers. All of these forms were designed to appeal to a broad public and to children, and stand in sharp contrast to the Shi‘ite Passion Play.

Although the theatrical form was not as strong in Muslim tradition, theatrical performances based on European models appeared in a number of Middle Eastern cities in the nineteenth century. But whereas Muslim playwrights have still not achieved the degree of acceptance accorded many Muslim novelists and short story writers, the development of the cinema in the Muslim world has brought forth a number of internationally-acclaimed directors including Atif Yilmaz and Yilmaz Güney (Turkey), Yousef Chahine and Salah Abu Seif (Egypt), and Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Iran).

### ***G. Painting, Sculpture, and Design***

The debate over what makes an art “Islamic” has most frequently been framed in terms of the visual arts. The Arab-ruled societies of the first two centuries of Islam were mostly populated by non-Muslims. Arabs and early converts to Islam may well have been the foremost contributors to the literary arts and calligraphy, but most craft production and building construction was carried out by non-Muslims or, by the late ninth century, by non-Arab converts

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<sup>23</sup> Metin And, *Karagöz: Turkish Shadow Theatre*, Istanbul: Dost Yayinlari, 1975.

to Islam who often had skills and styles that pre-dated their conversion. Images dating to the first two centuries include mosaics of cities and trees at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the wall paintings of kings and female bathers preserved in desert palaces built for the Umayyad caliphs, and the depictions of royalty on coins produced before the changeover to purely calligraphic designs in the eighth century. In each case, the “Muslim” art is influenced by earlier styles and techniques.

Nevertheless, over time, certain religious beliefs can be said to have impacted the development of visual art forms. Historians commonly cite the religious bias—sometimes misinterpreted as an absolute prohibition—against representations of living beings to explain a preference for geometric and arabesque decorative motifs, particularly in the ornamentation of religious buildings. The early eighth century decision to remove the image of the caliph from all coinage and replace it with calligraphy containing his name, title, and selected Quranic quotations is cited as a case in point. However, the turning away from images of living beings was not consistent or absolute, and figurative representations had again become common by the beginning of the tenth century.

Ceramics loom large in the early history of Islamic art because they survive more abundantly than works on parchment or paper. By the ninth century, a distinctive style emerged in Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia, featuring Arabic calligraphy against a plain background. The words are often difficult to read, and non-Arab converts to Islam may not have understood the writing. Nevertheless, they bought these ornamental plates to demonstrate their adherence to the new religion. After a century or so of popularity, however, competing styles emerged, at least in Iran. Many of the new designs reproduced plant, animal, and human images characteristic of the pre-Islamic period. Men wearing the loose trousers and brocade tunics of the pre-Muslim

aristocratic class are shown hunting on horseback or feasting. Both of these themes recall the images on silver plates produced under the Sasanid dynasty before the Arab conquest.<sup>24</sup> In the eleventh century, both of these styles disappeared, but by the thirteenth century, new figurative styles showing influences arriving from China by way of the Central Asian Silk Road became common in Iran.

Nor is Iran the only place where figurative imagery persisted. Carved ivory boxes made in Egypt, Sicily, and Muslim Spain during the ninth through eleventh centuries display a wide variety of human and animal images, often set within arabesque framing patterns. Furthermore, after the Normans wrested Sicily from its Muslim rulers in the eleventh century, they employed Muslim artists to decorate their palaces with figurative images that are clearly based on Muslim models.

The technique of making paper, originally developed in China, appeared in Muslim Central Asia in the eighth century and rapidly spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Initially, paper was a scarce commodity produced in small sizes.<sup>25</sup> Although production increased over time, the small original size of individual sheets of paper contributed to the development of miniature painting, which became the paramount expression of Islamic visual art from the thirteenth century onward. Miniature painting also displays clear stylistic influences from China, for instance in the appearance of rocks, trees, and clouds, and sometimes the Asian facial features of human figures. Miniature painting was practiced in almost every Muslim society from India to Spain, but it reached its most sophisticated expression in the East, including

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<sup>24</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, "Pottery Styles and Social Status in Medieval Khurasan," in A. Bernard Knapp, ed., *Archaeology, Annales, and Ethnohistory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 75-82.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Bloom, *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.



the Mongol, Timurid, Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal schools of painting.

Larger-scale paintings were also produced in some areas. The Chehel Sutun palace constructed in Isfahan in the seventeenth century is noted for wall paintings that show the impact of European styles. Some Muslim painters were evidently willing to experiment with figurative images from a variety of cultures. Sculpture in the round was not common in Muslim societies. However, all sorts of surfaces came to be used for painted or inscribed decorative display, including metal plates and lamps, pen cases, and book-bindings.

Across the Islamic world, while some styles of rugs and fabrics incorporated floral, animal, and human imagery, geometric designs have remained most common down to the present day. Some of these designs include traditional pre-Islamic, non-Arab patterns, while others reveal the identities of weavers or designers as members of particular tribal groups. A substantial market for imported rugs sprung up in early modern Europe. At present, there continues to be a significant Western demand for rugs of artistic quality made in Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan.

## ***H. Architecture***

Students of the architectural history of Muslim lands sometimes focus on particular periods or regions, while others divide their studies by building types, tracing the separate histories of the mosque, the palace, the *madrassa* (college or seminary), the fortress, and the *suaq* or bazaar.<sup>26</sup> Each of these building types has its own chronological and stylistic markers. Some of these histories show how a particular style spread within the Muslim world; for instance, the

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<sup>26</sup> These are respectively the Arabic and Persian words for “market.”

“Samarra” style of surface decoration, developed for a temporary caliphal capital in ninth century Iraq, was manifested soon thereafter in eastern Iranian stuccowork or Egyptian woodwork. Sometimes, these histories show an openness to distant cultural influences, such as the square North African minarets that hint at sub-Saharan forms, or the Anatolian tomb towers derived from Central Asian models. Other times, they exhibit a creative melding of pre-Islamic and Islamic forms, whether in the re-use of Roman columns in the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain, of stonework from Hindu temples in many Indian mosques, or in motifs from Armenian stone architecture in eastern Anatolian buildings.

Across the Islamic world, from at least the eighth century onward, mosques, minarets, and open or covered markets became the most visible markers of Islamic social life. This is particularly true in places where the disappearance of wheeled vehicles from the Middle Eastern and North African transportation system during the centuries immediately preceding the rise of Islam had given rise to labyrinthine networks of narrow streets.<sup>27</sup> Urban space scaled to pedestrian movement, with the distribution of goods within neighborhoods performed by porters and pack animals, struck European travelers as a distinctive aspect of Islamic society from the seventeenth century onward. This gave rise in the 1960s to a scholarly debate over whether the “Islamic city” had been shaped by religious doctrine, and was negligent of the public needs of a civil society. More often than not, this theory proved not to reflect the reality of Islamic urban life, particularly when geographically peripheral regions like Indonesia and West Africa were taken into account. Moreover, some Muslim cities did incorporate large public spaces, such as the Royal Square (*Maidan-e Shah*) in Isfahan or the Djemaa el Fna market in Marrakesh, while others featured grand thoroughfares like the long avenue connecting the Sultan’s palace with the

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<sup>27</sup> For the story of this development see Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972.

city walls in Istanbul. However, instances of urban planning were more likely to focus on gardens and complexes of buildings centered around mosques or palaces, rather than checkerboard street layouts or uniform building codes that had once been a feature of Roman urbanism and reemerged in Europe in recent centuries.

The infiltration of architectural forms from the West in modern times fits unevenly into this highly diverse pattern with clear influence in some situations and very little in others. For example, although European baroque forms did have an impact on a few Ottoman mosques, like the eighteenth century Nur-u Osmaniye in Istanbul, the influence of Europe is much more easily discerned in entirely new structural types, such as railroad stations, and in efforts to reconfigure urban space to accommodate modern transportation systems and concepts of what a city should be. Plans to “modernize” Muslim cities proliferated in the nineteenth century, sometimes in the form of “modern” cities being built alongside “traditional” cities, as happened in North Africa under French imperial control, and sometimes under the aegis of modernizing Muslim leaders, such as the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, which favored broad avenues and traffic circles. Most of these plans never got off the drawing board or were not fully realized.

In the present age, the desire for historical preservation competes with the need for innovation in architectural projects throughout the Muslim world. Given the impact that built environments have on local inhabitants and visitors alike, there may today be no area of creative endeavor that is as crucial as architecture to the definition of what is or is not “Islamic.” The fact that major building projects in Muslim countries are often designed by non-Muslims from outside the Muslim world rather than by Muslim architects highlights this problem. Since 1978, the Aga Khan Awards for Architecture have focused international attention on the both the preservation of historic Islamic architecture and the importance of new design initiatives

incorporating aspects of that heritage. Meanwhile, the fast-growing new cities of Saudi Arabia and the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf do not always place such value on architecture as an expression of Muslim heritage and aesthetics.

## **ISLAMIC ART TODAY**

This brief survey of the creative culture of Muslim societies strongly supports the conclusion that Islamic art has been characterized by diversity and openness to fresh ideas for a span of over fourteen centuries. But while this diversity has remained a constant, the lives of contemporary Muslim artists and performers differ profoundly from those of their predecessors. Guild systems have disappeared. Patronage has passed from rulers and prosperous citizens -- who lived (for the most part) within a Muslim universe of discourse -- to a global market economy in which the value of Muslim art and other cultural wares is established by dealers in Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere, while Muslim consumers are increasingly attracted to cultural goods produced outside their societies.

To be sure, local artisans and performers in more or less isolated areas still respond to local tastes, but change is pervasive. The enormous Djemaa el Fna market in Marrakesh caters to tourists, but also features entertainment and products that appeal primarily to local consumers. A rural fair in conservative Kelantan province in Malaysia may include both traditional shadow plays and arcade video games. And in Islamabad, Pakistan or Amman, Jordan, it is easier to find a T-shirt decorated with English slogans and corporate logos than one bearing Urdu or Arabic writing.

How does today's Muslim artist or performer negotiate the complexities of the creative

life? For writers, including screenwriters and dramatists, deciding what language to write in may be a challenge. Some North African novelists write only in French; others prefer Arabic. Some write in both. South Asian Muslims may choose between English and Urdu or Bengali. Whatever choice is made involves evaluating not only the readership at which the work is aimed, but also other factors, such as avoiding censorship or acquiring an international reputation. Muslim winners of the Nobel Prize for literature -- Egypt's Naguib Mahfouz and Turkey's Orhan Pamuk -- both earned their distinction with works originally written in their native tongues. But despite their international fame, both encountered criticism within their own countries for opinions expressed in their work. Salman Rushdie, on the other hand, achieved fame for works written in English, one of which, *Satanic Verses*, became the focus of popular outrage in many Muslim countries because of allegations that he defamed the Prophet Muhammad and his family. On the other hand, *Grimus*, his seldom-read first novel, is a science-fiction tinged retelling of the famous Sufi tale of *The Conference of the Birds* by Farid al-Din Attar.

Visual artists face similar challenges. Some, like the Iranian painter Mahmoud Farshchian, adapt traditional motifs drawn from miniature painting to the tastes of international buyers and émigrés from their homelands. Others, such as Muhammad al-Turki -- the designer of Baghdad's Shaheed ("Martyr") Monument, dedicated to the soldiers killed in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) -- have devoted their talents to projects expressive of the ideologies of the leaders of their countries. And in some cases, Muslim rulers have called on non-Muslim foreigners to advance their aesthetic agendas. A case in point is a victory arch consisting of two hands gripping crossed swords that Saddam Hussein commissioned for the entrance to a military parade ground. He gave a photograph of his own hands and forearms to the German company, H+H Metalform, which built the monument, to use as a model.

Instrumental music and dance, being free from the problems of linguistic translation, may not pose quite such clear-cut issues with respect to catering to specific audiences. Nevertheless, recording contracts, tours, and participation in a growing number of national and international festivals and arts competitions challenge performers and impresarios in ways that bear little resemblance to the artistic life of only a century ago. Clearly, cinema and television are relatively new forums for artistic expression, and therefore have little to do with artistic traditions of many centuries ago.

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the complexities of the cultural scene in the Muslim world today, *Muslim Voices* could only have come together through the collaboration of many institutions, notably the Brooklyn Academy of Music, The Asia Society, and New York University's Center for Dialogues: Islam-U.S.-The West. Many people with a remarkable array of skills and backgrounds were involved in selecting participants, designing events, and finding funding for the enterprise. Yet, the festival can, at best, only provide a glimpse of the great cultural variety and creative talents to be found in Muslim societies across the globe. It is the hope of the organizers that this glimpse will whet the West's appetite for more exposure to the best artists that the Muslim world has to offer. If this hope should be realized in the years to come, a growing cultural familiarity between non-Muslims and Muslims will surely help combat the ignorant misconceptions about the Muslim world that have prevailed since the tragedy of 9/11, and allay fears and mistrust on both sides of the cultural divide.

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