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The Power of Museums to Challenge Islamic Arts

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, museums worldwide have been either reorganizing or creating ex nihilo galleries dedicated to Islamic art. The craze for this type of art has been attributed by the press and scholars as a response to modern day political and social tensions. Thus, the majority of such galleries exhibiting Islamic art have been considered, at least in Western press reviews or political discourses, as being agents acting as “bridges between cultures,” meaning the Western and the Islamic. Often, this fad for Islamic art has been linked to the 9/11 Islamist attack and the desire to portray an opposing face of Islam and Muslims through the display of art. A contrario, this doctoral dissertation examines and deconstructs the assumption that this revamping of Islamic art is solely motivated as a political response. By analysing the present-day posturing of Islamic art as a *longue durée* process, this dissertation hypothesises that Islamic art today is anchored in shifts occurring in the fields of art history and in efforts of these museums to de-Europeanize their perspectives. The “*événement monstre*” of 9/11 is therefore considered as just one cog in the wheel in the evolving place of Islamic art in western galleries.

The conclusions offered herein in are drawn on the analysis of specific case studies carried out in the Département des Arts de l’Islam at the Musée du Louvre, the Albukhary Foundation Islamic World Gallery at the British Museum, and the

are now showing the connections, exchanges, and transfers through objects displayed while inviting people from communities to participate in the process.

However, this research demonstrates that instead of “deconstructing the myths of Islamic art” through “remediations” of the history of Islamic art, a new otherness is being created. While seeking to destabilize the canons, the legacy of the 19th century discipline of Islamic art history and of the museum’s classification renders impossible a rupture with a European gaze. Thus, this dissertation underlines the developments, the efforts, as well as the risks and even the failures of museum policies towards the exhibitions of Islamic art. Museums while being aware of the burden of the past, are also navigating the challenges to move away from this, in their treatment of Islamic art in the first quarter of the 21st century.