

# Rediscovering objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe

Review of:

*Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by Isabelle Dolezalek and Mattia Guidetti, *Studies in Art Historiography*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 188pp, 53 B/W Illustrations, £120, ISBN 9780367609474.

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The volume *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, edited by Isabelle Dolezalek and Mattia Guidetti, starts with an explicit claim to break new ground in the realm of historiographic scholarship. It seeks to identify the age of Enlightenment as an understudied part of intellectual history as far as the understanding of Islamic or Islamicate cultures is concerned. At the same time, in their introduction the editors underline the contemporary relevance of this undertaking: they explain how the framework of this volume takes its cue from the contemporary identitarian question of whether or to what extent Islam is considered as part of Europe. According to them, a persisting binary which puts Christian and Muslim cultures against each other in common culturalist perception leaves little place for the fact that '(...) people, thoughts and objects from Islamic lands have formed an integral part of European culture for centuries'.<sup>1</sup> Against this background, the central hypothesis of the volume claims that the 'Long Eighteenth-Century' as a 'distinctive period that shaped national and European identities'<sup>2</sup> has led to a rediscovery of Islamic objects which is significant on two levels: 'We hope (...) that these reflections may form part of broader discourses on [European] cultural heritage by casting a new light on the history of scholarship, notably Islamic art history, and on the history of perception and belonging, of "Europeanness" and "Otherness", which resonate deeply with current societal concerns.'<sup>3</sup>

The editors acknowledge explicitly that they are Medievalists who are writing about the eighteenth century in order to bridge this gap between pre-modern history and modern and contemporary historiography. In this sense, it seems appropriate to declare that this review is written from a somewhat different angle, by a scholar who became a Modernist via critical cross-cultural historiographies and object-biographies in the realm of Islamic art history. Taking its cue from a summary of the book's contents, the following review will therefore

<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Dolezalek, Mattia Guidetti, eds, *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, *Studies in Art Historiography*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Dolezalek and Guidetti, *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Dolezalek and Guidetti, *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, 9-10.

focus mostly on two issues: firstly, the historiographic claim made in the volume, and secondly, the object-based approach signalled in the concept of *rediscovering objects* which figures prominently in the title.

### **Interpretation, Agency and Object?**

Apart from the methodologically ambitious introduction, the volume consists of six chapters subdivided into the three categories *Changing Perspectives*, *Protagonists*, and *Whose Heritage?*. These categories may result from the need to organize a diverse range of papers which were originally presented in the conference *Heritage revisited: Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, organized by Dolezalek and Guidetti in 2018. At first glance, these categorical sections appear systematically somewhat interchangeable in relation to the chapters they contain. Yet, this division does indicate the strong historiographic and epistemic ambition of the volume, addressing the interplay between interpretation, agency and object.

The first thematic chapter, 'Changing Perceptions of Middle Eastern Objects and Cultures in Eighteenth-Century Europe' by Anna Contadini is a wide-ranging article which puts European perceptions of Islamic cultures in historical context, almost in the sense of a survey.<sup>4</sup> The Mongol invasions and the Ottoman expansion appear as main benchmarks for this rich text which mirrors Contadini's eminent expertise for the arts of Islam and their circulation and perception across the Mediterranean. In this chapter, the reader encounters the well-known accounts by Chardin and Kaempfer, and is reminded of visual representations of the East in Venetian painting, as well as Melchior Lorick's renditions of Constantinople. Contadini makes a clear distinction between mediated experience and direct observation, the latter of which she sees emerging particularly in the sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> This qualitative development in the perception process is what leads through the 'Renaissance and post-Renaissance'<sup>6</sup> periods up to the Enlightenment. Like the overall book, the chapter seems to use enlightenment and The Long Eighteenth-Century as synonymous and central terms. It thus follows a path of periodization organized along the lines of Western historiographic traditions. The problems of this practice for Islamic art history in relation to the larger field of art history have been expounded – yet never fully resolved – in earlier historiographic writing.<sup>7</sup>

In Contadini's narrative, Enlightenment encounters between Europe and Islamic worlds mostly unfold through the history of collections. With examples ranging from collectors such as Luigi Ferdinando Morosini to John Sloane, she points to the nexus between collecting, intellectual curiosity and scholarship, resulting in a steady, multifaceted growth of knowledge about Islamic culture in

<sup>4</sup> Anna Contadini, 'Changing Perceptions of Middle Eastern Objects and Cultures in Eighteenth-Century Europe' in *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 23-54pp.

<sup>5</sup> Contadini, 'Changing Perceptions', 25.

<sup>6</sup> Contadini, 'Changing Perceptions', 24.

<sup>7</sup> See. e.g. Avinoam Shalem's considerations in 'Hille, Pfisterer, Shalem: Wozu Renaissance. Drei Positionen aus dem Institut für Kunstgeschichte der LMU München' In: *kunsttexte.de: kritische Texte und Bilder zur Geschichte der Kunst*, 2, April 2014, 10pp.

Europe. Altogether, the text jumps chronologically and conceptually between different types of collecting, between publications and philological projects as well as between different nations pre- and post-1500. The guiding thread which holds all of it together corresponds to the one the editors have also defined for the overall volume: it is the reading of inscriptions, as an epistemic instance where philology and material culture come together. The central example for this is the famous *Pisa Griffin*, which has been the subject of important previous work by Contadini: the *Griffin* had seen a long history of interpretation since at least the sixteenth century, most of them aligning with Christian or Classicist interpretations, placing the object's origin in antiquity. The first proper reading of the *Griffin's* Kufic inscriptions was only undertaken in 1829, by the Roman professor of Oriental languages Michelangelo Lanci. This reading established the Arab and Medieval provenance of the piece and opened a gateway for new interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Contadini's conclusion remains somewhat undecided about the role of enlightenment thinking for 'changing perspectives' on Islamic cultures: do we see mostly continuity with Renaissance philology, or does the increasing engagement with material culture really constitute a qualitatively new dimension? This is indeed a question to carry along for the reader as she ventures further into the book.

Mattia Guidetti's chapter 'Reading Ottoman Banners in the State of the Church'<sup>9</sup> deals with Ottoman textiles donated to the *Holy House of Loreto* after the liberation of Vienna from the Ottoman-Turkish siege in 1683: 'The banner of Loreto, as well as a similar banner sent to Pope Innocent XI (1611-89) in Rome and a slightly less important exemplar now kept in Urbino will be discussed in the following with respect to their reception in various publications from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.'<sup>10</sup> Guidetti argues that these publications can be considered proto-art-historical sources. The chapter intelligently interrelates the fate of these textiles and their historiography, starting from the immediate context of their donation. Guidetti's method is a close reading of seventeenth-century sources which reflect a merging interest in both written and visual culture. A case in point here is a leaflet printed in Rome in 1683 which provides translations of one of the banner's inscriptions along with a description in Italian language. This description is not only very object-oriented in that it speaks about composition and material. Its text is also combined with a drawing of the banner, which is included in a full-page illustration in the essay.<sup>11</sup> Guidetti provides a thorough discussion of the qualities, translation problems and inconsistencies of this textual-visual representation, and he recognizes to what extent such a leaflet was of course an element of papal propaganda and literary genre reflecting the triumph over the Ottomans. However, he claims that such publications 'inaugurated a new approach towards Islamic material culture'.<sup>12</sup> He also emphasizes the importance of expertise. Who would be

<sup>8</sup> Contadini, 'Changing Perceptions', 36-37.

<sup>9</sup> Mattia Guidetti, 'Reading Ottoman Banners in the State of the Church', in *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 55-74pp.

<sup>10</sup> Guidetti, 'Reading Ottoman Banners', 56.

<sup>11</sup> See Guidetti, 'Reading Ottoman Banners', 58.

<sup>12</sup> Guidetti, 'Reading Ottoman Banners', 59.

able to read such inscriptions in the first place?<sup>13</sup> Here is where we encounter an interesting group of protagonists in this entire historiographic complex: the Assemani family, of Lebanese-Maronite origin, whose members were important figures in the early modern Mediterranean as they filled eminent academic positions as lecturers of Oriental languages at different Italian universities. They were repeatedly involved in the reading of such inscriptions.

Guidetti concludes his chapter with an interesting thought on different object categories: 'In contrast to the elaborate and refined objects that ended up in European churches and court treasuries because of their precious material or exquisite technique, the *raison d'être* of Ottoman banners in Europe was to bear witness to the power of the European military against the threat posed by the Ottomans.'<sup>14</sup> The particular political dimension of such objects, thus Guidetti's implication, lead to an increasingly methodological approach towards them, seizing the intellectual rigor of the Enlightenment period, but ultimately breaking ground for later developments in the discipline of Islamic art history.

Isabelle Dolezalek's chapter 'Oluf Gerhard Tychsen. Orientalist and Object Interpreter in Rostock', opens the second section of the book, *Protagonists*.<sup>15</sup> Tychsen, active in the second half of the eighteenth century as a professor of Oriental languages at the Universities of Bützow and Rostock, pursued a classical career in theology and language studies. He mastered a range of Near Eastern languages and applied this competence to the deciphering of inscriptions on numismatic and other objects, including the *Vienna coronation mantle* of the Holy Roman Empire and the *cathedra of San Pietro di Castello* in Venice. This cathedra, bearing an inscription which Tychsen for the first time correctly identified as Quranic, features prominently in Dolezalek's chapter: it is not the object itself which is rediscovered here, but its meaning and attribution to Islamic culture through antiquarian methods. Dolezalek is not only interested in how this happens, but also in the larger scholarly interactions it triggers: 'In tracing Tychsen's contribution to the decipherment of the inscriptions on these objects and his attempts to localise their provenance, this paper aims to shed light on the methods and media of scholarly interchange at the time.'<sup>16</sup> It is in this context that we encounter the Assemani family again: after his publication of the cathedra's inscription, Tychsen ventures into an exchange with Simon Assemani, whose great-uncle Joseph had been involved in the reading of the Turkish-Ottoman banners discussed in the previous chapter. Joseph had also provided a biblical interpretation of the Venice cathedra inscription several decades earlier. While both Tychsen and the older Assemani had worked merely from illustrations of the cathedra, the younger Assemani, generally agreeing with the Quranic interpretation, had seen the piece itself. He thus argued from an epistemically different angle when he contested some of Tychsen's conclusions. The exchange of letters between these two scholars are thus indeed an interesting

<sup>13</sup> See Guidetti, 'Reading Ottoman Banners', 64.

<sup>14</sup> Guidetti, 'Reading Ottoman Banners', 68.

<sup>15</sup> Isabelle Dolezalek, 'Oluf Gerhard Tychsen. Orientalist and Object Interpreter in Rostock' in *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 77-100pp.

<sup>16</sup> Dolezalek, 'Oluf Gerhard Tychsen.', 79.

example for the development and methodological range of scholarship that lead from a more papery, source-based approach to one that took the immediate agency of the object into account. Dolezalek observes this 'progressive engagement with the objects themselves'<sup>17</sup> very carefully and describes it as '(...) an important development, heralding the emergence of Islamic art history in the following century.'<sup>18</sup> This is a compelling, but also a risky hypothesis. What the chapter describes does altogether not depart very far from common antiquarian practices. Tychsen's discipline is shaped by philological scrutiny and seems less interested in iconography, aesthetics or function. As Dolezalek points out herself, even if drawings become increasingly important media of cultural exchange, '[t]he decisive factor in the rediscovery of objects in the eighteenth century, as it can be understood from the insight into Tychsen's work, was the decipherment of their inscriptions.'<sup>19</sup> In the conclusion to her chapter, ambitiously called 'Conceptions of Self and Other'<sup>20</sup>, she arrives at a reading of this historiographic development as progressive, anticipating modern art historical methods. At the same time, she points out the problems of such an antiquarian classification system that focuses on origins and places of production, and therefore obscures other layers in the rich and long object-biographies of Islamic artefacts in Europe.

The following chapter 'Beyond Manuscripts. Maronite Christians as Object Interpreters in Early Modern Europe' by Tobias Mörike is arguably among the most original and theoretically most ambitious ones of the volume.<sup>21</sup> Its aim and subject build upon the previous two chapters, as Mörike sets out '(...) to highlight the role of travellers and scholars from the Levant in the classification, identification and organisation of Islamicate objects in European collections during the eighteenth century'.<sup>22</sup> The chapter thus zooms in on the essential role of Maronites and other Arab Christians who already made important supporting appearances in Guidetti's and Dolezalek's chapters. Historiographically, those scholars have mostly been considered as protagonists of church history. They have not been properly looked at within the context of art history or cultural heritage so far, as a concise historiographic account makes abundantly clear.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the Assemani family, we encounter Habisci Spaada, working in Gotha after 1727 and Miguel Casiri, a Maronite from Tripoli who was involved in the early iterations of the *Antigüedades Arabes de España*. Casiri was also to play an important role in the reading of the inscription of the so-called *Pamplona Casket*, a box made of ivory briefly after 1000 AD in the Caliphate of Cordoba. Today kept in the Navarre Museum in Pamplona, this object once belonged to the Benedictine monastery of San Salvador de Leyre and later the Cathedral of Pamplona where it was used as a relic container. It features a Kufic inscription which runs prominently around its rim. Casiri

<sup>17</sup> Dolezalek, 'Oluf Gerhard Tychsen.', 83.

<sup>18</sup> Dolezalek, 'Oluf Gerhard Tychsen.', 83.

<sup>19</sup> Dolezalek, 'Oluf Gerhard Tychsen.', 92.

<sup>20</sup> Dolezalek, 'Oluf Gerhard Tychsen.', 92.

<sup>21</sup> Tobias Mörike, 'Beyond Manuscripts. Maronite Christians as Object Interpreters in Early Modern Europe' in *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 101-121pp.

<sup>22</sup> Mörike, 'Beyond Manuscripts.', 101.

<sup>23</sup> Mörike, 'Beyond Manuscripts.', 101-102.

deciphered this inscription in 1773. Mörike shows in detail how the (partly mistaken) reading of this object-text may have been shaped by philological and political factors.<sup>24</sup> In any case, the existence of a translation created a new dimension of mobility for the casket – even if it did not travel itself, its inscription, once copied and translated, started to circulate among scholars across Europe.<sup>25</sup> As Mörike argues, ‘In Bruno Latour’s terms, the “circulating reference” adaptable to the process of investigation was created with Casiri’s help. His reading of epigraphy stands as a bridge between reading a monument by its inscriptions and understanding an object or an architectural site as a source itself.’<sup>26</sup> This theoretical observation might have provided a systematic link to existing historiographies in (Islamic) art history that have indeed seized the paradigms of actor-network theory within a larger ‘object turn’.<sup>27</sup> However, in this essay, the reference remains rather fleeting. In the conclusion to this chapter, Mörike opens another pathway to relevant gaps in historiographic research, as he points out how the work of Maronite ‘object-brokers’<sup>28</sup> such as Casiri or the Assemanis was marginalized and eclipsed by Orientalist projects such as those by Emile Prisse d’Avennes. At this point, the reader has encountered various members of the Assemani family as well as other Middle Eastern scholars so frequently that one wonders why no distinct chapter was dedicated to them in the volume, as a means to decentre and complicate its largely European vantage point.

Carine Juvin’s chapter ‘The “Baptistère de Saint Louis”. The Making of a “Historical Monument”’ (p. 125-143) opens the volume’s last subcategory under the heading ‘Whose Heritage?’<sup>29</sup> The inlaid basin known as the *Baptistère de St Louis* is among the most famous canonical pieces of Islamic art. Presented prominently in the Louvre’s Islamic collection today, it originates from the first half of the fourteenth century AD and was made by the craftsman Muhammad Ibn al-Zayn in Mamluk Egypt or Syria. Such elaborate brassware pieces circulated as luxury objects in and beyond the Mediterranean during the Medieval period. It is not entirely clear when and how the basin arrived in France, but it was kept in the Sainte-Chapelle of Vincennes since at least the fifteenth century and was used as a baptismal font for French dauphins. The vessel is decorated with an elaborate iconographic program and several inscriptions. Juvin’s chapter presents an overview of references to this famous piece throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the context of the French Revolution, and with its impact on French Orientalism. Juvin’s chapter is a classic example of an object-biography. It draws on fundamental research by the Islamic art historian David Storm Rice<sup>30</sup> as well as on recent work by Jean Chapelot.

<sup>24</sup> Mörike, ‘Beyond Manuscripts.’, 109.

<sup>25</sup> Mörike, ‘Beyond Manuscripts.’, 109.

<sup>26</sup> Mörike, ‘Beyond Manuscripts.’, 109.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. Anna Bigelow ed., *Islam through Objects*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021; Margaret Graves, *Arts of Allusion: Object, Ornament, and Architecture in Medieval Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Mörike, ‘Beyond Manuscripts.’, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Carine Juvin, ‘The “Baptistère de Saint Louis”. The Making of a “Historical Monument”’ in *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 125-143pp.

<sup>30</sup> David Storm Rice, *Le Baptistère de Saint Louis*, Paris 1951.

The latter wrote about the basin as a historian of Vincennes rather than as an Islamic art historian.<sup>31</sup> As this research shows, the eighteenth century indeed saw an intensified interest in the vessel, whose historical origins were unknown at the time. In the early 1790s, the antiquarian and head of the Cabinet des Médailles Aubin-Louis Millin de Grandmaison dedicated four pages of description to this object, complemented by two plates of drawings executed by Jean-Francois Garneray, a student of Jacques-Louis David. Millin established the association with St. Louis and even discussed a possible earlier origin, thus anachronistically connecting the piece to Charlemagne.<sup>32</sup> This seems exemplary for a historiography which was guided by big (Western) names and Classicist reference frames rather than by knowledge about globally circulating material cultures. Altogether, the increased interest for such objects which arose during the eighteenth century reveals the Baptistère as exemplary part of an ‘ambivalent Medieval heritage’<sup>33</sup> whose origin and further fate remain entangled between Arabic and European histories.

The final chapter of the volume, Miriam Cera Brea’s ‘Nuestros árabes’? The Rediscovery of Spanish Islamic Architecture from an Enlightened Gaze’, takes its cue from the contemporary debate about the status of the mosque-cathedral of Cordoba.<sup>34</sup> Should this monument, founded under Muslim rule in Al-Andalus, and converted by way of inserting a cathedral into its structure after the Reconquista, be a property of the Catholic Church? The author argues that the roots of this question lie in the period of Enlightenment which sought a new relation between Europe and its Islamic heritage. Al-Andalus and its monuments featured as an important lieu de mémoire in this regard. The chapter thus claims to provide an Enlightenment pre-history to the much-debated Convivencia narrative (and its contestants). This concept of Convivencia was mainly coined during the twentieth century by the historian Américo Castro y Quesada. It assumes that modern Iberian identity was strongly shaped by the Muslim presence in Al-Andalus and its aftermath: was Iberian identity born out of a struggle against, or out of productive coexistence with Islam? The central case of the Mosque of Cordoba is presented as an example for the ‘solid evidence of a country’s degree of development’<sup>35</sup> that can be found in architecture. Indeed, the history of the Mosque of Cordoba and its appropriation and architectural adaptation after the Christian Reconquista is a case in point. Here it is presented within the framework of modern Spanish nation building, which picks up in the eighteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Cera Brea shows how an interest in the legacies of Al-Andalus was incited first by the ‘foreign gaze’<sup>37</sup> of travellers, and then taken up (and also disputed) by the rising internal national discourse, culminating in the

<sup>31</sup> Jean Chapelot: Un objet d’exception: le baptistère de Saint Louis, de la Sainte-Chapelle de Vincennes au département des arts de l’Islam du musée du Louvre, in: *Bulletin de la Société des amis de Vincennes*, 58, 2007, 5-25.

<sup>32</sup> Carine Juvin, ‘The “Baptistère de Saint Louis”’, 129.

<sup>33</sup> Carine Juvin, ‘The “Baptistère de Saint Louis”’, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Miriam Cera Brea, ‘Nuestros árabes’? The Rediscovery of Spanish Islamic Architecture from an Enlightened Gaze’ in *Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe*, New York and London: Routledge 2022, 144-169pp.

<sup>35</sup> Cera Brea, ‘Nuestros árabes’?, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Cera Brea, ‘Nuestros árabes’?, 145.

<sup>37</sup> Cera Brea, ‘Nuestros árabes’?, 148-149.

early nineteenth-century publication of the *Antigüedades Arabes de España*, a national survey of monuments. This 'progressive inclusion of Spanish Islamic culture into wider Spanish and European history'<sup>38</sup> led to more rigorous terminologies and historiographies, ultimately also paving the way for the nineteenth-century's Orientalist ambivalent admiration, which may be one of the root causes for the persisting 'grip of ideological controversy'<sup>39</sup> surrounding this heritage.

Each of these chapters provides the reader with very relevant – and sometimes highly specific – historiographic insights on the perception and indeed intellectual re-discovery of the arts of Islam on the verge of modern academic scholarship. The volume tells its story in an object-driven way, focusing on some of the most famous icons of European-Muslim encounter: a set of Ottoman banners, the *mantle of Roger of Sicily*, the *Cathedral of San Pietro di Castello*, the *Pamplona Casket*, the *Baptistère de Saint Louis*, the *Pisa Griffin*, the *Mosque of Cordoba*. Each of these examples could be understood as a border-object circulating across geographical space, and/or changing its meaning throughout historical time.<sup>40</sup> It is an intelligent editorial decision to read this triangulation between objects, time, and place through the lens of exemplary academic protagonists and embedded in (trans-)national concepts of heritage. Ultimately, the main question remains: does this approach really reveal the 18th century as a decisive and hitherto overlooked turning point for the historiography of the arts of Islam?

#### **A Historiography of Text and/or Image?**

Over roughly the last two decades, Islamic art history has produced a large body of critical historiography of the field itself, investigating and questioning its subjects, motives and methods. Much of this work has taken its cue from Oleg Grabar's famous remark that the notion of Islamic art was rather a result of Western collecting and scholarship practices, subjecting cultural products from Islamic lands to often ill-fitting categories of Eurocentric institutions and disciplines. Indeed, this indicates the many cross-cultural complications which characterize the study of the arts of Islam. Many scholars dealing with this heritage have thus focused on the intersections of Islamic art history with practices of collections, exhibitions and museums.<sup>41</sup> These intersections mostly materialized in the late nineteenth century and then shaped the discipline further throughout the twentieth century until today. Within this field, some approaches have dealt with the agencies of particular

<sup>38</sup> Cera Brea, "Nuestros árabes'?", 160.

<sup>39</sup> Cera Brea, "Nuestros árabes'?", 161.

<sup>40</sup> Sabine Du Crest, 'Objets frontière. De la modification au nomadisme', in: *Objets nomades*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020, 158-167.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Stephen Vernoit, *Discovering Islamic Art: scholars, collectors and collections, 1850-1950*, London: Tauris, 2000, 232pp; Avinoam Shalem and Andrea Lerner, *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "meisterwerke Muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, 456pp; Rémi Labrusse, *Islamophilies: L'Europe moderne et les arts de l'Islam - Le génie de l'Orient*, Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2011, 399pp; Benoît Junod/Georges Khalil/Gerhard Wolf/Stefan Weber, *Islamic Art in the Museum Context. Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Saqi Books, 2013, 401pp.



scholars,<sup>42</sup> with regional focus areas,<sup>43</sup> or with the specific conditions of writing Islamic art history through either architecture or object-histories.<sup>44</sup> In recent years, the gaze has become increasingly interdisciplinary, including connections to other fields which are less area- and more concept bound, such as heritage studies.<sup>45</sup> Other approaches have dealt with the category of time and periodization in general, critically questioning the place assigned to the arts of Islam within a linear art history which tended to privilege the moment and place of production and origin over the further trajectory of any given artwork.<sup>46</sup> These studies have shed light on an Orientalist legacy which has largely detached the notion of Islamic art from modernity for a long time.<sup>47</sup> Only more recently have the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries become a valid subject-area in Islamic art history.<sup>48</sup>

Dolezalek's and Guidetti's volume is a valuable and innovative contribution within this wider field, as it does indeed identify a gap of historiographic knowledge, particularly considering the important transitional phase of the eighteenth century. However, this choice also means that the volume ultimately centres Europe as the geographical and historical vantage point. In spite of its object-driven approach, it ultimately also foregrounds two primary analytical categories of European cultural historical scholarship: language and periodization. Alexander Bevilacqua's *The Republic of Arabic Letters. Islam and the European Enlightenment* is an important point of reference throughout the volume.<sup>49</sup> Dolezalek and Guidetti claim that their work is to be considered complimentary to Bevilacqua's focus on written sources. Yet, the reading and interpretation of inscriptions obviously has guided their choice of examples – most of the time, they are dealing with objects which are also written sources, and whose reading remains the key to their understanding. In this respect, the book reveals a rift which is not often addressed directly, but which remains central to the self-understanding of the field of Islamic art history – maybe particularly in European knowledge cultures where the distinctive features of modern art histories mean a clear departure from philologist approaches: is the object at the centre, or the text? It is one of the

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. Yuka Kadoi's work on Arthur Upham Pope: *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, Leiden: Brill academic Pub, 2016, 368pp.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Rosser-Owen, 'Mediterraneanism. How to incorporate Islamic Art into an emerging Field', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, June 2012, 6pp.; Gülru Necipoğlu, *Muqarnas, Volume 24, History and Ideology: Architectural Heritage of the "Lands of Rum"*, Leiden: Brill 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Moya Carey, Margaret S. Graves, 'Islamic Art Historiography', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, June 2012. This volume can stand exemplarily for a cross-section of a first, very productive engagement with the historiography of the arts of Islam.

<sup>45</sup> Katarzyna Puzon, Sharon MacDonald and Mirjam Shatanawi, eds, *Islam and Heritage in Europe. Pasts, Presents and Future Possibilities*, London: Routledge 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Avinoam Shalem, 'Histories of belonging and George Kubler's prime object', *Getty Research Journal*, 3, 2011, 14pp.

<sup>47</sup> Finbarr Barry Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New world Orders and the End of Islamic art', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, June 2012.

<sup>48</sup> Nebahat Avcioglu, Finbarr Barry Flood, eds, *Ars Orientalis. Globalizing Cultures: Art and Mobility in the Eighteenth Century*, 39, March 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Bevilacqua, *Republic of Arab Letters. Islam and the European Enlightenment*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018.

strengths of Dolezalek's and Guidetti's volumes that it shows in great detail how Enlightenment thinking has involved around the notion of the written word, even when dealing with objects. The question is, however, to what extent this can be really seen as an innovative and substantial rupture for understanding the entire historiography of the arts of Islam, as the volume claims. At least from the early twentieth century onwards, this question of object or text was of eminent importance for the formation of Islamic art history as field distinct from philological Orientalist traditions. This does not mean that philological and linguistic knowledge became obsolete at this point, but it was one – and not the central – factor for the interpretation of art and cultural heritage. Scholars like Max van Berchem demonstrated this in the early twentieth century, and met strong opposition from an older current of text-based Orientalist antiquarianism.<sup>50</sup> Against this background, it does not seem entirely convincing to me to describe the eighteenth century as such a decisive pathbreaker towards modern methods and categories. This is even more valid as the volume in many places evolves somewhat uncritically around the notion of the Enlightenment as a kind of 'Golden Age' of knowledge production. In other contexts of cross-cultural art history and heritage studies, such affirmative conventions of periodization have been critically expounded in recent years.<sup>51</sup> Altogether, 'Rediscovering Objects' thus leads to at least two conclusions: firstly, the historiography of Islamic art remains a field with open queries and uncharted territories. Some of them have been identified and opened up very productively here. Secondly, not every understudied part of historiography reveals pathbreaking ruptures – some also lead us to a more nuanced understanding of the slow and complex development of intellectual history.

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<sup>50</sup> Eva-Maria Troelenberg, *Eine Ausstellung wird besichtigt. Die Münchner «Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst» 1910 in kultur- und wissenschaftsgeschichtlicher Perspektive*, Peter Lang Ltd. International Academic Publishers 2011, esp. 284-303.

<sup>51</sup> See e.g. Yao-Fen You, Tamalia Alisjahbana, Karina Corrigan, Femke Diercks, 'A Curatorial Roundtable Revisiting Asia in Amsterdam. JHNA Conversations 2', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 14.1. Winter 2021.