

Persophilia and technocracy: carpets in the World of Islam Festival, 1976

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Introduction¹

In the hands of a group of foundational scholars including Lessing, Riegl, Bode, Pope, Erdmann and Ettinghausen,² and through seminal exhibitions such as those held in Vienna in 1891, Munich in 1910, and London in 1931,³ carpet studies played a central role during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the creation of Persian art history as an academic discipline in the West.⁴

Recent research has sought to deconstruct the historical and aesthetic narrative of the carpets of South, Central and West Asian built by these early European and North American scholars, and the ideas about presentation and exhibition associated with it.⁵ It has reflected, amongst other topics, on the

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² Julius Lessing (1843-1908), Alois Riegl (1858-1905), Wilhelm von Bode (1845-1902), Arthur Upham Pope (1881-1969), Kurt Erdmann (1901-1964), Richard Ettinghausen (1906-1979).

³ *Oriental Carpets in the K.K. Handels-Museum*, Vienna, 1891, curator Riegl; *Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art*, Munich, 1910, curator Friedrich Sarre; *International Exhibition of Persian Art*, London, 1931, curator Pope.

⁴ The formation of Islamic art history across the range of media has an extensive historiography, summarised in Moya Carey and Margaret Graves, 'Introduction: The Historiography of Islamic Art and Architecture, 2012', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, June 2012, 1-15. The formation of Iranian art history across the range of media is summarised in Yuka Kadoi and Ivan Szanto, 'Introduction: Why Persian Art Needs to be Studied and Collected', in Kadoi and Szanto, *The Shaping of Persian Art: Collections and Interpretations of the Art of Islamic Iran and Central Asia*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 2-30.

⁵ Including Dorothy Armstrong, 'Inventing the Ardabil Carpet: The Appropriation and Transformation of a Persian Artifact', *Iran: The Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, 58:3, November 2018, 1-21; Moya Carey, *Persian Art: Collecting the Arts of Iran for the V&A*, London: V&A Publishing, 2017, 173-227; Yuka Kadoi ed, *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016; Barbara Karl, 'Carpets and Empire: The 1891 Exhibition at the Handelsmuseum in Vienna' in F.Giese and Varela Barga, *A L'Orientale: Collecting, Displaying and Appropriating Islamic Art and Architecture in the 19th and early 20th Centuries*, Leiden: Brill, 2020, 111-123; Cailah Jackson, 'Persian Carpets and the South Kensington Museum: Design, Scholarship and Collecting in Late 19th Century Britain', *Journal of Design History*, 30, September 2016, 265-281; Avinoam Shalem, 'Multivalent Paradigms of Interpretation and the Aura or Anima of the Object' in Benoit Junod, Georges

relationship between that foundational narrative and colonial agendas, the distortions inherent in the idea of the masterpiece when applied to what are usually known as oriental carpets, the tension between transcultural mobility of ideas and artifacts and the allocation of carpets within increasingly bounded nation-state histories, and the impact of the convergence of the scholarly and the commercial on the study of carpets.⁶

This article builds on the methodologies and agendas of this recent historiographical work, but looks at a later historical moment, the 1970s. Then, as in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the formation of ideas of Iran and Islam through the agency of carpet studies was clearly visible. It explores this process through two exhibitions held in 1976 under the umbrella of the UK-wide World of Islam Festival; the Festival's flagship survey exhibition *Arts of Islam* held at the Hayward Gallery, London, and a specialist exhibition *Carpets of Central Persia* held at the Mappin Gallery in Sheffield and the Birmingham City Art Gallery.⁷ The article explores the dialogue between the carpets in these two exhibitions and the Festival's broader cultural, geopolitical and economic objectives.

The exhibitions offered two starkly different perspectives on carpets, and on their geographies and cultures of making. *Arts of Islam* looked back to the traditional colonial-period narrative of oriental carpets, with its pronounced Persophilia, whereas *Carpets of Central Persia* introduced a technocratic reading focused on techniques of weaving. I argue that whilst the visibility of carpets in the Festival reinvented carpet studies in the short term, its exhibitions failed to offer a sustainable forward path for the study of oriental carpets. Rather they reinforced already anachronistic ideas about the role of Iran in the material culture of South, Central and West Asia,⁸ and intensified the focus on the narrow question of provenience, the place and date of making, in the study of carpets.

Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the 21st Century*, London: Saqi Books, 2012, 101-116; Denise-Marie Treece, 'Through the Renaissance Frame: Carpets and the Beginnings of "Islamic Art" in Nineteenth Century Vienna and Berlin', *Textile Museum Journal, Washington*, 2017; Eva-Maria Troelenberg, 'Regarding the Exhibition: The Munich Exhibition "Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art" (1910) and its Scholarly Position', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, June 2012.

⁶ For a recent study of transculturalism and the mobility of Persian carpets, see Yuka Kadoi, 'Carpets on the move: Modern trajectories of Persian woven treasures', in *The Seas and the Mobility of Islamic Art*, ed. Rhada Dalal, Sean E. Roberts and Jochen A. Soloky, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021, 218-33 and 308-9.

⁷ This article draws on the Beattie Archive, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the Arts Council of Great Britain Archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the V&A Archives, the Royal Academy Archives, all London.

⁸ For a wide-ranging discussion of the history of Persophilia across cultural media and its impact in Iran as well as elsewhere, see Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture and the Global Scene*, Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015.

The World of Islam Festival 1976

The World of Islam Festival, held across the UK in 1976, was an unprecedented initiative to raise the profile of Muslim culture. The Festival was placed historically in a complex interplay of Persian imperial power, oil politics, and British interventions in the Middle East and South Asia. Despite this complexity there was a willingness in 1976 to open Britain to a deeper knowledge of Muslim art and thought. By 1979 this had changed. The Iranian Revolution, and the subsequent crisis of international relations and rise of fundamentalism transformed the popular perception of Iran and of Islam more broadly. At a fortieth anniversary celebration of the Festival held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 2016,⁹ a panel discussion amongst Festival curators agreed that such an initiative would be unlikely to take place under the circumstances which then prevailed.

However, in 1976, the opportunity was still available. Organised by Muslim and non-Muslim specialists in Islamic art, culture and thought, and with the financial support of international Muslim communities, the Festival was a celebration of the cultural richness of Muslim civilisation. Its extensive programme included a BBC TV series, performances of poetry and music, publications on Islamic art,¹⁰ religion, philosophy, and science, a schools' programme, and major exhibitions in London and in the UK provinces.¹¹ The BBC series was entitled *The Traditional World of Islam*. Grinell describes the appeal to tradition as a core value of the Festival, seeing it as an effort 'to stabilize a dichotomy between Islam and modernity', which he interprets as a remnant of colonialist othering of the East.¹² The situation was however more complex, as the Sufi scholars involved in the Festival also appealed to tradition, in search for unchanging truths amidst the conflict and instability they associated with modernity.¹³

The centrepiece of the Festival was the *Arts of Islam* exhibition, displaying objects across media, geographies and time at the Arts Council of Great Britain's main exhibition space, the Hayward Gallery, London. The gallery, opened in 1968, had been built as part of Britain's attempt to assert cultural power during the decline of its empire, and the decision to use it indicates the soft-power significance of both the exhibition and Festival for the UK.

⁹ SOAS conference 'Revisiting the 1976 World of Islam Festival', London: School of Oriental and African Studies, Spring 2016 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hxv5hfaJS7I> >

¹⁰ This article goes on to discuss how 'Islamic art' was understood in the 1970s.

¹¹ For planned events and publications see 'The World of Islam Festival', *Journal of the British Institute of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1:1, 1974.

¹² Klas Grinell, 'Framing Islam at the World of Islam Festival', *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 7, 2018, 73.

¹³ For example, Titus Burckhardt and Martin Lings, whose role in the exhibitions in the Festival is discussed later, and Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who were key to the Festival's publications programme. They were followers of the Perennialist school of philosophy, which believed in a common origin for spiritual truth. They themselves practised Sufism.

The Festival was organised against a dangerous political background in the Middle East. Arrangements made in the region by former colonial powers after the Second World War had exacerbated existing ethnic, religious and territorial divergences, resulting in both Arab versus Israeli and Palestinian versus Israeli conflicts.¹⁴ In the late 1960s and early 1970s there were a series of Arab-Israeli wars, and guerrilla action in Europe and the US around the issue of Palestine, with bombings, hijackings, assassinations, sieges and kidnapping in the US and Europe.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the pressures which ultimately brought about the Iranian revolution in 1979 were already in play, and only a few months after the Festival, in January 1977, opposition to the Shah began to come into the open.

The dangers were also economic. In response to the West's military support for Israel during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the Arab members of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC, restricted supplies of oil to the West.¹⁶ This oil embargo contributed to economic depression in the US and UK,¹⁷ and the inflation and economic uncertainty it created in Iran was a contributory factor to the growing political instability there.¹⁸ The combination of traditional and guerrilla warfare, energy politics and economic manoeuvres refocused the West on its relations with Muslim-majority states of the Middle East and South Asia, including its important but increasingly fragile ally, Iran.

In Britain, another set of events with long historical roots was playing out.¹⁹ Between around 1920 and 1947, The British Empire contained more than half the Muslims of the world.²⁰ The British Commonwealth, set up to replace the colonial model after the Second World War, made possible immigration from former colonies into the UK. The 1960s and 1970s saw a period of rapid increase in immigration from South Asia in particular, peaking in the early 1970s. The partition of India and Pakistan after the withdrawal of British colonial rule in 1947 was still unsettling society, and in the early 1970s South Asia suffered both civil wars and conflict between Pakistan and India. Many of the South Asians arriving in the UK during this troubled period described themselves as Muslim. Britain consequently experienced a greater physical and cultural presence of Islam, materialised for instance in a surge of mosque-building.²¹ Alongside this demographic and cultural

¹⁴ Avi Shlaim 'The origins of the Arab-Israeli wars', in Ngaire Woods, *Explaining International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 219-234.

¹⁵ Fawaz Gerges, *The Superpowers and The Middle East: Regional and International Politics 1955-1967*, Oxford: Westview Press, 1994, 205-251.

¹⁶ Iran was a member of OPEC but did not participate in the oil embargo.

¹⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, *The State of Emergency: Britain, 1970-74*, London: Allen Lane, 2010, kindle location 4892.

¹⁸ Farzeen Nasri, 'Iranian Studies and the Iranian Revolution', *World Politics*, 35:4, July 1983, 607-630.

¹⁹ Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800*, London: Hurst, 2018.

²⁰ Francis Robinson, 'The British Empire and the Muslim World', in Judith Brown and Roger Louis, *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Vol IV: The Twentieth Century*, Oxford: OUP, 1999, (398-420) 398.

²¹ Shahed Saleem, *The British Mosque: An Architectural and Social History*, London: Historic England, 2018.

change appeared a more extreme edge in what was called at the time race-relations.²²

The Festival of Islam was in part a soft power initiative in response to these shifts. It was a high-stakes one for all concerned. From the Muslim perspective, a sympathetic UK government would have been a prize, then as now, on the issue of Palestine. The Festival offered the opportunity to show a united Muslim front, involving participants from the largely Sunni United Arab Emirates and largely Shia Iran, OPEC members and non-OPEC members, secular governments like Turkey, and religiously conservative governments like Saudi. For the newly-formed UAE, which provided a significant amount of the finance for the Festival,²³ and whose constituent states had become independent from Britain as recently as 1971, it was an opportunity to strengthen ties with a former colonial power from which it still sought support in matters of defence.²⁴ For Iran it was an opportunity to demonstrate its close relationship with what was still a major western power.

As plans for the Festival began to be made, there was strong interest amongst the Islamic countries whose art was to be displayed. Paul Keeler, the Festival's director, expressed anxiety about what he perceived as a loss of control by the organising bodies in London.

The need to establish the general lines of the exhibition is a matter of some urgency as word has gone around the Middle East and the various countries are busy developing ideas of their own about the nature of the enterprise.²⁵

The significance of the 1976 Festival to Middle Eastern governments is highlighted by the agreement of the Turkish government to temporarily rescind its law against the lending of art works for exhibitions, so that it could participate. The fact that this step was taken by then-secular Turkey is a reminder that the story of the Festival was not only about Islamic cultural and religious richness, but also about Middle-Eastern political and military resurgence.

The soft power potential for the UK was equally significant. The Festival reached out to the increasing number of Muslims in the UK at a time when bridges were required between diverse groups in its population. Cultural understanding seemed a good tool. Meanwhile, Britain needed influence in an oil economy increasingly dominated by Muslim states. These pressing realities were reflected in the speech made by Queen Elizabeth II at the opening of the Hayward exhibition

²² Sandbrook, *Age of Emergency*, location 6542. What Sandbrook calls 'the first race-related murder' of a Pakistani in London occurred in 1970.

²³ Christa Salamandra, 'Cultural Construction, the Gulf and Arab London' in Paul Dresch and James Piscatori, *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2005, 73-96.

²⁴ Abdulla Omran Taryam, *The Establishment of the United Arab Emirates 1950-85*, London: Routledge, 2019.

²⁵ Joanna Drew (Arts Council Administrator) to Norbert Lynton (Chair of the Arts Council of GB Exhibitions Committee), 25 February 1974, Minute on Private Meeting between Basil Grey, Titus Burckhardt and Paul Keeler, Box 5, World of Islam Festival Archive, Arts Council GB Archives, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

'The need for mutual understanding between nations has become more urgent and never has the prospect been more full of scope and challenge'.²⁶ Embodying this intention, alongside the Queen sat the Empress of Iran, Farah Diba Pahlavi,²⁷ His Excellency Sayed Mohammed Mahdi al Tajr, Ambassador in London of the United Arab Emirates, and Abd al-Halim Mahmud, Shaykh at al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, the highest authority in Sunni Islamic thought.

The announcement of the planned Festival was not universally welcomed. Writing in the influential London Daily Telegraph in March 1975, Donald Watt spoke for many:

What we are in for is clearly a public relations-inspired exercise in cultural propaganda aimed at saturating the market. Its sheer scale alone raises issues as to how far institutions such as the British Museum, the Arts Council, the Hayward Gallery, or the BBC, which are supported by public money, ought to lend their facilities for this purpose.²⁸

Watt articulated an anxiety that the Festival was a pro-Palestinian political exercise, and that Muslim participants in the Festival would hijack western scholarship on the Islamic world, replacing it instead with an Islamic perspective on Islamic culture.

The Festival's finance of between £2.25 and £4 million, about £13 to £25 million today, did indeed come from Muslim institutions,²⁹ and its governance structure was weighted towards Arab and Palestinian sympathisers within the British establishment.³⁰ But, although there was heavier involvement of Muslim thinkers in other areas of the Festival, the academic committee for exhibitions drew heavily on British scholars from the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the two British institutions most closely associated with the collecting and

²⁶ Speech script, *Arts of Islam* exhibition opening folder, World of Islam Festival Archives, Arts Council of Great Britain Archives, Victoria and Albert Museum, MA/1/W2995.

²⁷ In 1976 Empress Farah opened the Iranian Carpet Museum in Teheran, which she had sponsored. The opening of the museum the same year as the Festival may be unconnected. The building of the new museum and formation of the collection seem to have lain partly in the desire to preserve what was perceived as a threatened part of Iranian cultural heritage, and partly in the ill-fated 2,500-year anniversary celebrations of the Persian empire in the early 1970s. The opulent celebration in Persepolis in 1971 is regarded as a contributory factor to the deposition of the Shah in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

²⁸ Donald Watt, 'Festival Full of Eastern Promise: Donald Watt suspects the motives of an Arab propaganda exercise now being launched', *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 1975, 9.

²⁹ Christa Salamandra, 'Cultural Construction, the Gulf and Arab London' in Paul Dresch and James Piscatori, *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2005 (73-96) 76.

³⁰ Members of the original World of Islam Festival Trust governing body: Sir Harold Beeley (chair), former ambassador to Egypt, His Excellency Mohamed Mahdi al-Tajir (vice-chair), UAE ambassador to the UK, Lord Caradon, former British delegate to the United Nations, Francis Clive-Ross, founding editor of *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Sir Anthony Nutting, diplomat and politician, founder of Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding, Sir John Richmond, former British Ambassador to Kuwait and Sudan.

codification practices of the colonial era. Of the eleven members of the committee recorded in the UK Arts Council's archives of the Festival, only three members of the committee came from other backgrounds and there were only two Muslims, both European converts, in the mix.³¹ The Telegraph journalist need not have worried about an overthrow in these shows of western readings of Islamic Art. However, the Festival offered British and European scholars an opportunity for a reset in their own thinking about Islamic material culture. The extent to which this opportunity was taken continues to be a subject of controversy.

The Arts of Islam exhibition

The exhibition committee for *Arts of Islam* was chaired by Basil Gray, formerly head of the British Museum's Oriental Department. He had been on the selection committee for the highly influential *International Exhibition of Persian Art* held at the Royal Academy's Burlington House in 1931.³² Curated by Arthur Upham Pope, under the patronage of King George V and Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran, this was itself an earlier soft-power initiative at a time of oil crisis, as the Shah threatened to nationalise the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.³³

Gray provided a link to an earlier generation of scholars of Islamic art, with their focus on the unique masterpiece as the perspective through which to view the material culture of the Islamic world.³⁴ In the early meetings which formed the intellectual direction of *Arts of Islam*, Gray put this attitude at the centre of the discussion, reminding the committee of the need to choose 'the excellent not the representative', and stressing that 'the exhibition was to be of Islamic art, and not of the lands of Islam'.³⁵ An understanding of a diverse material culture in its past and present contexts of making and use was not what Gray believed the exhibition should try to achieve. Rather, he sought 'to define the essential character of Islamic art, to trace out the elements [...] by which we seek to identify the Islamic creative

³¹ Committee members included Basil Grey (1904-1989), Keeper of Eastern Art, British Museum; Martin Lings, also known as Abu Bakr Siraj al-Din (1905-2005), Keeper of Oriental Books and Manuscripts, British Museum; Ralph Pinder-Wilson (1919-2008), Deputy Keeper Oriental Antiquities, British Museum; Basil Robinson (1919-2005), Keeper Emeritus, Victoria and Albert Museum; Donald King, Keeper of Textiles, Victoria and Albert Museum; Robert Skelton, Assistant Keeper, Indian Section, Victoria and Albert Museum; Titus Burckhardt also known as Ibrahim Izz al-Din (1908-1984), art historian and philosopher; David Sylvester (1924-2001), art historian; Edmund de Unger (1924-2001), entrepreneur and collector. See *Arts of Islam* exhibition committee minutes, WoI Festival Archives, V&A, MA/1/W2995.

³² *Handbook: International Exhibition of Persian Art*, London: Royal Academy, 1931, vii.
<<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/exhibition-catalogue/1931-international-exhibition-of-persian-art>>

³³ Laurence Lockhart, 'Emergence of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company', in Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, 316-322.

³⁴ Eva-Maria Troelenberg, "'The Most Important Branch of Muhammedan Art": Munich 1910 and the early 20th Century Image of Persian Art' in Kadoi and Szanto, *The Shaping of Persian Art*, 237-254; Troelenberg, 'Regarding the Exhibition', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, 2012.

³⁵ *Arts of Islam* committee minutes, March 24, 1974, WoI Festival Archives, V&A, MA/1/W2995.

spirit'.³⁶ Gray's words closely echo the direction of the Munich exhibition of 1910, and of Pope's evocation in *A New Survey of Persian Art*, of 'the Persian genius for pure design [...] guided by an unfailing intellectual clarity which is characteristic of the Persian spirit.'³⁷

These essentialising descriptions spring from the long western tradition of othering the East, treating it as a single monolithic entity defined by its distinction from the West,³⁸ but also from the influence of the Sufi committee members such as Titus Burckhardt and Martin Lings, with their faith in the idea of a single essential truth. In *Arts of Islam*, the 'excellent', 'representative' and the 'essential spirit' would be defined by the all-male, all-European committee. When asked if they needed travel expenses, there was a joint agreement that travel to look at collections in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Islamic world would not be necessary. The committee had already decided to exhibit a conservative western canon of well-known artifacts.³⁹

Carpets in *Arts of Islam*

Expertise in carpets on the *Arts of Islam* exhibition committee was high, included Donald King, Keeper of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Edmund de Unger, creator of the Kier Collection with its exceptional group of Asian carpets, and David Sylvester, curator of the 1972 Arts Council exhibition *Carpets from the Collection of Joseph V. McMullan*.⁴⁰ Chairman Basil Grey had delivered lectures on Persian carpets alongside Pope and the V&A's C.E.C Tattersall during the *International Persian Exhibition* in 1931.⁴¹

A mixture of connoisseurs and scholars, the committee members were heirs to the German-Austrian and Anglo-American tradition of carpet studies which began with Riegl and Bode at the end of the nineteenth century and continued through to Pope, Erdmann and Ettinghausen in the early to mid-twentieth centuries. Their expertise was in a European and North American construct of South, Central and West Asian carpets developed during the colonial period and materialised in landmark exhibitions containing elite carpets, such as Pope's *International Exhibition of Persian Art* in London in 1931, Sarre's *Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art* in Munich in 1910, and Riegl's *Oriental Carpets* at the Handelsmuseum, Vienna in 1891.

There were, however, alternative voices. Titus Burckhardt was UNESCO advisor for the preservation of Fez, and curator of an exhibition about Fez in the Festival. However, as a member of the committee overseeing the overall direction of the Festival's exhibitions, he took an intellectual lead, drawing on his own lived experience as a Muslim convert and scholar of Muslim spirituality, and as a leading

³⁶ Minutes, March 24, 1974, MA/1/W2995.

³⁷ Arthur Upham Pope, *A Survey of Persian Art, from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938, vol. xi, 2258-9.

³⁸ See for example Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

³⁹ Minutes, March 24, 1974, MA/1/W2995.

⁴⁰ Minutes, March 24, 1974, MA/1/W2995.

⁴¹ *International Exhibition of Persian Art 1931*, V&A Archives, MA/35/114.

interpreter of the meaning of Islamic art. Burckhardt argued that the Festival and the individual exhibitions within it should demonstrate the interaction between élite and demotic traditions in Islamic material culture, and between the historic and the contemporary. David Sylvester's initial plan for the carpet section followed Burckhardt's lead, aiming to include carpets from a range of current and historic socio-economic environments; élite workshops and court ateliers, commercial workshops, village and nomadic looms, and to create a conversation amongst them.⁴² Other voices prevailed, and despite Sylvester's and Burckhardt's intentions, the forty-four carpets in *Arts of Islam* did not demonstrate this dialectic, nor give insight into context of making or use. Rather they were a group of fabulously beautiful, mostly perfect and complete, high-status art objects, revered in the West since the nineteenth century.

Thirteen of the forty-four carpets belonged to a super-élite group from sixteenth and seventeenth century Safavid dynasty Iran. In their choices, the *Arts of Islam* curators closely followed Pope's *International Exhibition of Persian Art* in 1931. Both exhibitions included the Poldi Pezzoli hunting carpet, the Schwarzenberg paradise park carpet and the Coronation carpet.⁴³ Consequently there was an unbroken connection from *Arts of Islam* back to early western carpet studies at the beginning of the twentieth century. A further four of the thirteen Safavid carpets in *Arts of Islam* were sumptuous and showy silk and precious metal-brocaded 'Polonaise' carpets, produced in Kashan or Isfahan in seventeenth century Iran for an aristocratic European market.⁴⁴ Here again the *Arts of Islam* curators followed Pope's reading of the history of carpets. Pope had used the promise of 'the finest silk, gold and silver' Polonaise carpets as an incentive to persuade the Royal Academy to mount his *International Exhibition of Persian Art*.⁴⁵ Polonaise carpets were made for consumers in the West, preserved in western collections, and displayed in high-profile western exhibitions, creating an echo chamber of western perspectives.

An important part of the narrative constructed about South, Central and West Asian carpets in Europe and North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is that these early Safavid carpets are the best in the world. The claim is the centrepiece of Pope's section on carpet-weaving in *A Survey of Persian Art*.⁴⁶

This world verdict on Persian carpets as the finest that have been made is amply sustained. In this medium Persia has suffered no rivalry [...] the great carpet that is shared between the Cathedral of Cracow and the Musée des

⁴² *Arts of Islam* committee minutes, March 24, 1974, WoI Festival Archive, V&A, MA/1/W2995.

⁴³ *Arts of Islam* exhibition catalogue, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976. Schwarzenberg carpet, catalogue number 59, currently in the Museum of Islamic art in Qatar; Coronation carpet, cat. no. 60, currently in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Poldi Pezzoli hunting carpet, cat. no. 58, remains in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan.

⁴⁴ Polonaise carpets, *Arts of Islam* catalogue, 1976, cat. nos. 63 to 66.

⁴⁵ *International Exhibition of Persian Art 1931*, 27 February 1930, V&A Archives, MA/35/114.

⁴⁶ See Yuka Kadoi, 'Arthur Upham Pope and his "research methods in Muhammedan art": Persian carpets', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, 2012, 1-12.

Arts Decoratifs, Paris, the Anhalt, and the Ardabil carpets are quite unapproached by anything to which they can be compared.⁴⁷

Safavid carpets are indeed thrilling objects of great accomplishment and beauty, but there are thrilling carpets which come from other places and other times, and not exclusively from élite ateliers. The European and North American narrative that sixteenth and seventeenth century Safavid carpets are an eternal peak of carpet art is doing other work. The impact of nineteenth century racial and linguistic theory on the creation of an idea of Iranian exceptionalism is well-established, as is its consequence for the emergence of Islamic art historiography.⁴⁸ By the time of the Munich exhibition of 1910 it was accepted as fact that Persian art was the most important branch of Islamic art, and that the peak of Persian art was well-represented by sixteenth century Safavid carpets.⁴⁹ By the 1930s, when Pope made the comments quoted above, they had achieved a place at the top of the western hierarchy of carpets from which they have not been removed. Whilst early Ottoman and Mughal carpets were also part of the élite western canon, they were less highly regarded than early Safavid carpets. It seems likely that this was at least partly a result of the more complex and conflicted resonance of their places of production during the formative period of carpet studies from the mid-nineteenth century; the Mughals and Ottomans participated in nineteenth and early twentieth century politics and armed conflicts amongst western colonialists in a way that the Safavid Empire, extinct since the early eighteenth century, no longer could.⁵⁰

Arts of Islam reinforced rather than challenged or explored this perspective. The choice of exhibits and the strong statement made by Donald King in his introduction to the exhibition's textiles in the *Arts of Islam* catalogue, that 'Persian carpets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represent the summit in the design and weaving of carpets' perpetuated the almost fetishistic focus on this group of carpets in European and North American carpet scholarship since the nineteenth century.

This Persophilia distorted the narrative of Turkish carpets in *Arts of Islam*. The twenty Turkish carpets in the exhibition were mostly sixteenth and seventeenth century products of workshops under Ottoman court influence such as those at Ushak.⁵¹ In 1922 V&A curators A.F.Kendrick and C.E.C.Tatersall suggested that such carpets should be regarded as Iranian, claiming that 'Persian influence in Asia Minor prevailed to such a degree that it almost becomes a question whether the best carpets made there should properly be called Turkish'.⁵² Alongside these Ottoman

⁴⁷ Pope, *Survey*, vol. xi, 2258-9.

⁴⁸ Kadoi and Szanto, 'Introduction: Why Persian Art Needs to be Studied and Collected', in Kadoi and Szanto, *The Shaping of Persian Art*, 2-30.

⁴⁹ Troelenberg, "'The Most Important Branch of Muhammedan Art'", in Kadoi and Szanto, *The Shaping of Persian Art*, 237-254.

⁵⁰ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty*, London: Bloomsbury, 2006; Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans*, New York, Basic Books, 2015.

⁵¹ Ushak carpets, *Arts of Islam*, 1976, catalogue numbers 43-50.

⁵² A.F.Kendrick and CEC Tatersall, *Hand-woven Carpets, Oriental and European*, London, 1922, 43.

court carpets and some high-quality export carpets for the European market, were a set of Turkish carpets whose prestige derives from their great age and their representation in fifteenth century European paintings.⁵³ They were named for those painters, Lotto, Holbein, Memling, Ghirlandaio, in a decisive act of cultural appropriation which situated Turkish carpets within a Renaissance frame.⁵⁴ Turkish carpets in *Arts of Islam* were consequently positioned either as part of European or Persian cultural heritage. The exhibition's exclusive focus on early, urban and courtly production in Turkey seems particularly perverse given the past and present strength of village and nomadic carpet-weaving in Anatolia.⁵⁵ Such carpets would have made the dialogue between popular and élite proposed by Sylvester and Burckhardt both possible and fruitful but were excluded.

Similarly, the great tradition of Indian carpet weaving, with its exceptional dyes, materials and craftsmanship, and its innovative design techniques, was both marginalised and Persianised. It was represented by only four examples and an apologetic note in the catalogue explaining that the tradition was too rich to be handled in a general exhibition.⁵⁶ The examples again closely followed Pope's choices in 1931,⁵⁷ when he had repeatedly described them as an offshoot of the Safavid Iranian tradition.⁵⁸

All the carpets in *Arts of Islam* were of distinguished aesthetic quality and exceptional craftsmanship, but they did not take advantage of the opportunity offered for a reset of the discussion of Islamic carpets. Instead, the exhibition reinforced a century-old set of racially inflected ideas about the cultural dominance of Iran in the material culture of West and Central Asia, and of the privileging of 'masterpieces' presumed to be unique art works produced in élite, possibly royal, studios. It positioned its carpets as frozen in an Islamic past, rather than as participants in vibrant ongoing biographies of making, trade, use, collecting and display, or as part of a continuous weaving practice through to the present day. This 'denial of contemporaneity', the assumption that only the West can be modern, is recognisable as an expression of coloniality and othering.⁵⁹ In 1976, a time of economic and social stress, the playing out of the long-term consequences of colonial adventures and the realignment of global power structures, the carpets in *Arts of Islam* attempted to offer reassurance that the cultural judgements and values of the colonial period still prevailed.

⁵³ 'Painter' carpets, *Arts of Islam*, 1976, catalogue numbers 37-42.

⁵⁴ Troelenberg, 'Regarding the Exhibition', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, 2012; Treece, 'Through the Renaissance Frame', *Textile Museum Journal*, 2017.

⁵⁵ Walter Denny and Sumru Belger Kody, *The Classic Tradition in Anatolian Carpets*, Washington: The Textile Museum, 2002.

⁵⁶ *Arts of Islam* catalogue, 1976, 71.

⁵⁷ For example, Twin Cranes carpet, *Arts of Islam*, 1976, catalogue number 98, now in the MAK, Vienna.

⁵⁸ *International Exhibition of Persian Art 1931*, V&A Archives, MA/35/114.

⁵⁹ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 37-71; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Post-Colonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 43.

An alternative reading of carpets in the Festival of Islam: *Carpets of Central Persia*

Arts of Islam was not the only account of carpets in the Festival. Textiles were found across a number of exhibitions,⁶⁰ but carpets were again the particular focus of *Carpets of Central Persia*, held at the Mappin Gallery, Sheffield and later at the Birmingham City Art Gallery. This exhibition offered an alternative narrative.

The choice of sites for the exhibition is as significant as the choice of the Arts Council's prestigious Hayward Gallery for the display of a traditional western consensus on Islamic art in *Arts of Islam*. Sheffield and Birmingham had some of the highest density muslim populations in the UK.⁶¹ Their red-brick universities explored the intersects between material cultural and anthropology, sociology, and economics, providing supportive environments for new perspectives.⁶²

Meanwhile, the curator of *Carpets of Central Persia*, Dr May Beattie, had a very different profile to the members of the UK arts establishment populating the *Arts of Islam* exhibition committee. An independent scholar of carpets, with a previous career as a research scientist, she had spent decades in fieldwork with weavers and systematic analysis of the weaving structures of carpets, building an encyclopaedic knowledge of rugs from South, Central and West Asia.⁶³ Beattie had also won a reputation as the conscience of the carpet commentariat in the UK and US, repeatedly resisting requests to authenticate carpets whose commercial value she believed was inflated.⁶⁴

In a dozen years, Beattie curated three important exhibitions of carpets. *The Rug in Islamic Art* in 1964, at Temple Newsam House, Leeds, brought together élite Asian carpets in private collections in Britain, many displayed for the first time. In 1972 she co-curated *Islamic Carpets from the Collection of Joseph V. McMullan* at the Hayward Gallery. The exhibition drew attention to workshop, village and nomadic carpets from that great collection, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The third in the series was *Carpets of Central Persia*, at the Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, and the City Museum, Birmingham, organised as part of the World of Islam Festival in 1976.

Beattie had deep-rooted relationships with some of the Festival's important actors. She had worked with *Arts of Islam* exhibition committee member David Sylvester and Arts Council Director of Exhibitions, Norbert Lynton, to manage the complexities of the McMullan exhibition. When Lynton and his deputy director Joanna Drew faced the huge challenge of overseeing the exhibitions planned for the World of Islam Festival, they turned to May Beattie, the safe pair of hands who

⁶⁰ For instance, the *Qashqai of Iran* at the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, and *The Bedouin* at the Museum of Mankind, London.

⁶¹ Ceri Peach and Tahir Abbas, *Britain's Muslim Population*, London: Zed Books, 2005.

⁶² For example, Birmingham University's Professor Stuart Hall established the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies during this period.

⁶³ This work is documented in the Beattie Archives, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University.

⁶⁴ Dorothy Armstrong, 'Mrs Beattie and Mr Getty: A carpet controversy', lecture to Oxford Asian Textiles Group, 26 August 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OlqbB-4XUks>>

Lynton believed had rescued the MacMullan exhibition.⁶⁵ Discussions about a carpet exhibition in Sheffield began in January 1973, and Beattie shrewdly recognised that the World of Islam Festival could provide her with the finance, infrastructure and as it turned out, benign intellectual neglect, to carry out a major study of weaving technique and structure in carpets. Her archives do not reveal whether she was aware that in doing so she was about to undermine the fragile structure of western carpet knowledge.

Ornament versus technique: destabilising the western practice of carpet studies

Since the late nineteenth century, the most important historic and aesthetic approach to carpets had been the analysis of ornament; the study of motifs, patterns and designs through time, and their potential meaning. The great nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars of carpets all used this tool. Whilst some of these early scholars had direct access to carpet collections that we still find awe-inspiring,⁶⁶ much early analysis was based on the only record available, black and white photographs. This turned a carpet into a cartoon, and reemphasised the importance of design over palette, materials or technique of weaving.

Ornamental analysis was framed by nineteenth century ethnographic, evolutionary and aesthetic theory. Alois Riegl's influential work on *Kunstwollen*, and the development of the arabesque, is an important example of this.⁶⁷ He proposed that particular places and times were drawn to particular types of design, which developed towards an identifiable peak.⁶⁸ As designs moved or were copied over time, they decayed.⁶⁹ This idea of degradation meshed well with a widely-held late nineteenth and early twentieth-century belief that once-great eastern cultures had become decadent.⁷⁰ In carpet design, decay was believed to follow an identifiable sequence; smooth curves transformed into a series of angles, designs simplified by adding symmetry, then re-ordered into easily-memorised repeating units. The

⁶⁵ Norbert Lynton to May Beattie, September 6, 1972, Beattie Archive, Ref 18, 327, Ashmolean Museum Oxford

⁶⁶ For example, Riegl was curator of the carpet collection now at MAK, Vienna, and Bode established the collection now at Berlin's Pergamon Museum.

⁶⁷ Jas Elsner, 'From Empirical Evidence to the Big Picture: some Reflections on Riegl's Concept of *Kunstwollen*', *Critical Enquiry*, Summer 2006, 741-766; Finbarr Barry Flood, 'The Flaw in the Carpet: Disjunctive Continuities and Riegl's Arabesque', in Gulru Necipoglu and Alina Payne, *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 82-93; Dorothy Armstrong, 'What is an Oriental Carpet?', unpublished PhD thesis, London: Royal College of Art, 2019, 173-188.

⁶⁸ Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen*, Berlin: G. Siemens, 1893.

⁶⁹ For an example of Riegl's use of decay as an analytical tool see Alois Riegl, 'The Carpets', in Caspar Purdon Clarke, *Oriental Carpets: The Catalogue of the 1891 Exhibition at the Handels-Museum, Vienna*, London: South Kensington Museum, 1892, plates XII, XCI, XCII.

⁷⁰ Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empires: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 401.

stages in this teleological approach to design were then linked, often through scant historical records, to places and dates of production.⁷¹

As early as Riegl's Vienna exhibition of 1891 the suggestion had been made that weaving technique might be a more accurate technique of carpet attribution than design.⁷² However, the practice of technical analysis faced many difficulties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; problems in travelling to see enough carpets to enable technical comparison, the lack of necessary skills amongst carpet specialists and of a shared vocabulary for cross-referencing. Despite the efforts of German scholar Siegfried Troll to create a system for technical analysis in the 1920s, little progress was made.⁷³

Beattie acknowledged that she benefitted from the conditions of the later twentieth century, with its ease of travel and improved photographic technologies, which finally permitted systematic work on weaving techniques across many communities and carpets.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the widespread pivot towards technology which occurred after the Second World War provided her with a framing for her carpet studies.⁷⁵ But she was also personally particularly well-equipped to carry out such work. As a research scientist she was skilled in the construction of experiments, the recording and analysis of data, the recognition of patterns and anomalies. These factors determined her technocratic methodology. Her analysis sheets, laboratory records of the many decisions a weaver makes in the construction of a carpet, demonstrate it in action (figure 1).

The image shows a handwritten analysis sheet for a sixteenth-century Safavid hunting carpet. The sheet is filled with dense, handwritten notes and printed text, organized into sections for technical details, materials, and color analysis. The text is dense and includes various abbreviations and symbols.

Figure 1: May Beattie, analysis sheet for sixteenth century Safavid hunting carpet, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan
(May Beattie Archive, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

⁷¹ For an example see Wilhelm von Bode and Ernst Kuhnel, in *Antique Rugs from the Near East*, Berlin: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1958, 93-95 (first published 1901).

⁷² May Beattie, Royal Asiatic Society lecture, March 1974, Beattie Archive, Ref 46.

⁷³ R. Neugebauer and Siegfried Troll, *Orientalische Teppichkunde (Oriental Carpet Science)*, Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1923.

⁷⁴ Beattie, Royal Asiatic Society lecture, March 1974, Beattie Archive, Ref 46.

⁷⁵ C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959.

During her decades of fieldwork from the 1950s onwards, Beattie became convinced that weavers were conservative about technique, sticking to local practices. She took the opposite view about design, believing that motifs and patterns were widely shared along trading and nomadic routes. Why then, she asked, did scholars of carpets favour the use of wandering designs as the basis of understanding relationships between carpets and places, rather than using enduring shared techniques?⁷⁶ As discussions began in 1973 on an exhibition under the protective umbrella of the World of Islam Festival, she saw her opportunity to challenge the long-standing preoccupation with ornament, focusing instead on weaving technique.

The vase-technique: disrupting the western narrative of oriental carpets

Beattie had a perplexing case-study in mind as the centrepiece of her exhibition. During the early 1970s, she had catalogued and published the private collection of wealthy industrialist Heini Thyssen Bornemisza.⁷⁷ The collection contained a famous example of each of two important groups, animal and vase carpets, both woven in Iran during the sixteenth and seventeenth century zenith of its carpet-making. The groups were each named after their designs, the first animals on complex foliage, the second floral lattice designs reminiscent of flowers in vases. Animal carpets were regarded by nineteenth and twentieth century European and North American carpet scholars and collectors as some of the most elevated aesthetic productions of the peak of carpet production in Safavid Iran, whilst vase-design carpets from the same geography and period were less prestigious. Arthur Upham Pope articulated this in the 1930s, damning vase-design carpets with faint praise as ‘useful, heavy domestic textiles’, whilst praising animal carpets as a world-leading art-form.⁷⁸ Studying the Thyssen-Bornemisza examples with the minute attention to structure which was central to her practice, May Beattie found that they shared the same weaving technique. This sharing of technique might have been unsurprising if the structure had been simple and common, and spread across many centres of production, but in fact it was complex and unusual.

The basic structure of a patterned pile carpet is straightforward. Lengthways warps are strung on a loom under tension, and short pieces of wool, called knots but really loops, are placed around the warp threads to make a colourful pattern and a velvety pile. Widthways weft threads are interwoven with the warps across the loom to secure the knots and create the stable structure of the textile. There are many variations on this. The weaving technique associated with vase-design carpets, and consequently called the vase-technique, contained a group of variations which added up to a significant adaptation of the standard structure of a pile carpet. It had been long-recognised that the vase-technique was unusual, but in her Thyssen-Bornemisza work, Beattie defined it precisely:

⁷⁶ Beattie, lectures, Beattie Archive, Ref 40, 65-180.

⁷⁷ May Beattie, *The Thyssen Bornemisza Collection of Oriental Rugs*, Ticino: The Thyssen Bornemisza Collection, 1972

⁷⁸ Pope, *Survey*, vol. xi, 2260-61.

Lengthways structural cotton warps on two levels rather than one, three widthways wefts between each row of knots, weft one and three tightly tensioned wool which separate the warps into two levels, weft two loosely-tensioned silk which passes back and forth between the two levels of warps, and holds them together.⁷⁹

This idiosyncratic weaving structure was expected in the Thyssen-Bornemisza vase-design carpet. Its association with floral lattice 'vase' carpets was well known and was indeed the reason it was called the vase-technique, but it was surprising to find it in the collection's more prestigious animal carpet.

Beattie suggested that if vase-design carpets and animal carpets shared the same complex and unusual weaving technique, whatever their iconographic and reputational differences, they likely were made in the same place. At a meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society in March 1974, she made a confident and strong assertion of her conclusions.

I hope I have said enough to show that the great designs of the Vase technique were works of creative genius [...] If therefore they [rugs sharing the Vase weaving technique] are from one area, one must conclude that it was one of the greatest if not *the* greatest carpet weaving area in all Persia. I believe these rugs came from Kerman.⁸⁰

The controversial nature of this assertion in the carpet community should not be underestimated and it was not readily accepted by the members of the Royal Asiatic Society. The discomfort was more than a squabble amongst connoisseurs. The exceptional status of early Safavid animal carpets was a foundational belief of carpet-studies, and their place of making had been much debated by the founding fathers of the discipline.⁸¹ By suggesting that weaving technique, rather than design, should be the primary tool for establishing the provenience of the revered animal carpets, and proposing their close relationship with the humbler vase-design carpets, Beattie not only directly challenged Pope's relative evaluation of them, but began a broader process of unsettling the fragile western hierarchy of carpets which had been built up since the nineteenth century, and in which there were enormous vested commercial and intellectual interests. She had begun to unpick the Iranian exceptionalism which declared a set of early Safavid carpets the best in the world, by challenging western preferences which included animal carpets in that set but not vase-design carpets from the same period and geography. Unusually, Beattie wrote a detailed, at times verbatim, note on the meeting, evoking the sometimes-painful introduction of new thinking into the intimate, spiky and self-policing world of carpet specialists.⁸²

⁷⁹ Beattie, *Thyssen Bornemisza Collection*, Ticino: 1972,12

⁸⁰ Beattie, March 1974, Beattie Archive, Ref 46, 84.

⁸¹ Ernst Kuhnelt suggested Kazvin, Pope suggested Yazd or Kerman, Kurt Erdmann suggested Kashan.

⁸² Beattie, 1974, Beattie Archive, Ref 61b, 989.

Furthermore, her insistence on the centrality of weaving technique again almost inadvertently challenged the long-standing gendering of western carpet studies. Tallin Grigor describes the roots of this:

Persian art historiography was formulated in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century by men who saw themselves as the instigators of change. Modernity and progress were premised upon exclusivist paradigms that, from the outset, barred women from its agencies and narratives.⁸³

Grigor's case-study is Phyllis Ackerman, Pope's life-partner and collaborator on *A New Survey of Persian Art*. Ackerman was the recognised technical expert on textiles in the partnership, and this expertise helped marginalise her. Pope was regarded as the scholar and aesthetic judge; she was the technician. This pattern persists through to more recent times. The distinguished work of female textile curators with deep technical skill has sometimes been defined within the category of the structural, whilst publishers and museums have often preferred to entrust the creation of a holistic narrative, the high ground in scholarship, to male writers.⁸⁴ When May Beattie offered a toolkit of structural analysis as the basis for a new understanding of carpets, she not only disturbed the western hierarchy of carpets, but undermined the male ownership of the narrative.⁸⁵ She put an analysis of practice in place of what even in the hands of highly regarded scholars such as Kurt Erdmann, could result in the use of fragments of history, ideology, taste and desire to create an orientalist textile dreamtime.⁸⁶ She helped move both female scholars and female weavers closer to the centre of the story.

Carpets of Central Persia: the exhibition as experiment

Beattie's solution to the scepticism of the members of the Royal Asiatic Society was to greatly expand her database of carpets woven using the vase-technique. The narrative of her Festival of Islam exhibition, *Carpets of Central Persia*, would be based on the equivalent of a major scientific study, not a small sample like that used in her Thyssen Bornemisza catalogue. From 1974 to 1976 she undertook an extensive investigation of international collections, public, private and commercial, to identify examples of vase-technique carpets.⁸⁷ Like an experiment, her exhibition was organised around two research questions; 'Is technique of weaving the most important determinant of the relationships between carpets, rather than design?'

⁸³ Tallin Grigor 'Gendered Politics of Persian Art: Pope and his Partner', in Yuka Kadoi, *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017, 48.

⁸⁴ For example, Ernst Kühnel and Louise Bellinger, *Cairene Rugs 15th to 17th Centuries, and Others Technically Related*, Washington DC: Textile Museum, 1957.

⁸⁵ An extensive historiography exists of the marginalisation of the female in the histories of art and craft, see for example Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London: Routledge, 1981. See also Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, and the riposte from Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

⁸⁶ See Erdmann's description of the pre-history of Safavid carpets in Erdmann, *Oriental Carpets: An Account of their History*, Fishguard, Wales: Crosby Press, 1976, 29.

⁸⁷ Beattie, Beattie Archive, Ref. 61b.

and 'Could we authoritatively associate a group of carpets with a place of making through their weaving technique despite the diversity of their designs?'.⁸⁸ She stressed that *Carpets of Central Persia* was a study exhibition, focused on one group of carpets united by the technique used to weave them, rather than by geography, chronology, design or cultural assumptions, and that the purpose of the exhibition was to open a debate, rather than to demonstrate an existing ideology.⁸⁹ In all these respects, Beattie challenged the practice of carpet studies since the nineteenth century.

However, *Carpets of Central Persia* was not only a scientifically structured analysis of a group of carpets and fragments which shared an unusual weaving technique, but also a physically materialised exhibition containing sixty-two carpets and fragments, more in total than in the *Arts of Islam* exhibition. In this also Beattie was an innovator, explaining that:

Condition has not been a prime consideration in selection [...] evidence is more likely to be found among tattered remains than among the handsome, well-preserved carpets which museums and exhibition organisers understandably prefer to present to the public.⁹⁰

She thus introduced a fundamental shift in thinking about the display of carpets, literally fragmenting the consensus that the appropriate response to historic carpets is to gaze in awe at a whole perfect example. Her objective was scientific, but she unlocked an area of our response to rugs. Fragments help us make a personal and intimate connection with a rug and its weavers. We see the carpet's construction as it unravels, and can imagine the skill, labour and artistic vision of its makers. By choosing the fragment as the unit of analysis, rather than the whole carpet, she created a liberating imaginative provisionality for visitors to the exhibition, suggesting they be curious rather than awed. Museums of the period occasionally displayed fragments, for instance of rare and prized Mamluk or Safavid carpets, but the main focus was on whole carpets. Now, museums and exhibitions of carpets all over the world display fragments with pride, exploring their connections with histories of making, transcultural developments of design and technique, and geopolitics. A striking example of this last can be seen in Berlin's Pergamon Museum, where a burnt fragment of a carpet destroyed during the 1945 bombing of Berlin is displayed in a vitrine. A button releases the sulphuric smell of the explosives which destroyed it.

The exhibition also offered an aesthetic shock. Vase-design carpets, with their floral lattices, are characteristically many metres long and wide, and although their motifs are sometimes large, the overall effect in looking at a whole vase carpet is the balanced complexity we expect of an Iranian carpet. When instead of looking at a six metre by four metre carpet, we look at a metre-squared fragment, we see

⁸⁸ May Beattie, Jenny Housego and A.H.Morton, 'Vase Technique Carpets and Kerman', *Oriental Art*, 23:4, 1977 (455-471), 455.

⁸⁹ May Beattie, *Carpets of Central Persia* catalogue, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 15-18.

⁹⁰ Beattie, *Carpets of Central Persia* catalogue, 17.

surreally large blossoms, which evoke an almost nightmarish level of fecundity. The effect is visceral.

The impact of the *Carpets of Central Persia* exhibition

Despite earlier debates, Beattie's approach in *Carpets of Central Persia* was found compelling. Ten years after the exhibition, leading carpet specialist Michael Franses remembered it as 'one of the greatest contributions to rug studies'.⁹¹ When in 1992, the editor of the journal *Islamic Art* commented 'Structural analysis more and more accompanies the study of woven and knotted fabrics',⁹² Beattie's battle for a focus on weaving technique would seem to have been won. She built a platform for other scholars, for instance, Sumru Belger Kody's and Walter Denny's insights into how the geometry of the loom dictates design, and Louise Mackie and Jon Thompson's technique-led history of Turkmen carpets. She brought weavers into a story from which they had often been absent, basing many of her conclusions about historic carpets on the technical practices of contemporary weavers. Meanwhile, whilst it can be argued that she side-stepped the explicit political and ideological agenda of the Festival, she was far from unaware of it. In the small number of photographs she took of the opening of *Carpets of Central Persia*, several were of the visits of Middle Eastern and South Asian families to the exhibition.⁹³

But Beattie's insights in *Carpets of Central Persia* had their limitations. She strayed only a short distance from the territory of traditional European and North American carpet studies. Her major experiment was yet again focused on sixteenth and seventeenth century Safavid carpets, what I have called a fetish of western carpets studies, rather than a broader canon or new set of examples. Furthermore, her rigorous work, scientific insight, and creativity of thought was dedicated to securing accuracy in the relationship of carpets one to another. She perpetuated a model of thinking inherited from the nineteenth century's love of taxonomies, aiming to place boundaries around groups of carpets, rather than reflecting the continuous exchange involved in the biographies of these mobile transcultural artifacts.

Ultimately her work was in the service of accurate provenience, the date and place of making of an artifact. This is important of course to scholars, but equally important to the large commercial market for Asian carpets. Beattie had arguably ended up in a *huit clos*, creating taxonomies and provenience in the service of carpet dealers and collectors, rather than moving into a broader consideration of carpets in their contexts of making, trading, use and meaning. Twenty-five years after *Carpets of Central Persia*, leading scholar Oleg Grabar, describing the contribution of collectors to scholarship, wrote damningly:

A special case should be made for rug collectors, who, more often than not,

⁹¹ Michael Franses to May Beattie, 28 February 1986. Stapled inside Beattie's catalogue of *The Thyssen Bornemisza Collection*, Beattie Library, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

⁹² *The Carpets and Textiles of Iran: New Perspectives in Research*, *Iranian Studies*, 25, 1/2, 1992, 148

⁹³ For example, May Beattie Archive, Ashmolean Museum, photograph 21a_029.

are not interested in other things than their knots and kilims, and whose contribution to cultural history has been almost nil.⁹⁴

It can be argued that Beattie was an important agent in creating this perception, and in the consequent and continuing marginalisation of carpet studies in the academy.

The complex questions Beattie surfaced about weavers and their relationships with design and technique were innovative. Her intervention helped replace the long-standing assumption in carpet studies of the stability of ornamental habits, with a view of ornament as fluid across time, space and media. The dominating assumption in carpet studies now is Beattie's belief that weavers are more conservative about technique than design. This has become a new orthodoxy, although one that is itself challenged by the long history of technical exchange across Eurasia. Analysis of weaving-technique has become another tool in the western scholarly programme to pin down these slippery artifacts. Historian of decoloniality Walter Mignolo has said ironically, 'As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture [and] Anglo-Americans have science.'⁹⁵ Beattie's technical and analytical approach shifted the discussion of carpets from colonial-period narratives and gave them a place within a scientific frame of reference, but as Mignolo suggests, she thereby absorbed them into yet another western intellectual construct.

Conclusion: the impact of the World of Islam Festival on carpet studies

The World of Islam Festival helped re-ignite interest in carpets in the Anglophone world. The biennial International Conference on Oriental Carpets was first held alongside the Festival, and *Hali*, the globally dominant carpets periodical, was published for the first time in 1979. The Festival's energising effect continued into the early 1980s, with exhibitions such as *Eastern Carpets in the Western World* at the Hayward Gallery in 1983, pairing up Asian carpets with the Renaissance paintings representing them, and *Carpets from the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia* at the Barbican, focusing on their socio-economic environments of production.⁹⁶ Oral accounts of the Festival's carpets from visitors, often previously unfamiliar with these carpets, are strongly enthusiastic.⁹⁷

However, the contribution of the Festival to scholarly carpet studies and the place of carpets in Islamic and Iranian art history was more problematic. Whilst *Carpets of Central Persia* was innovative, it unsettled rather than fundamentally changed the prevailing focus on provenience and on Safavid carpets. Meanwhile, the Festival's flagship exhibition, *Arts of Islam*, brought little new thinking to carpets.

⁹⁴ Oleg Grabar 'The Implications of Collecting Islamic Art', in Stephen Vernoit, *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*, London: IB Tauris, 2000 (194-200), 198.

⁹⁵ Walter Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26:7-8, 2009 (1-23), 1.

⁹⁶ *Eastern Carpets in the Western World* curated by David Sylvester and Donald King, alumni of the World of Islam Festival. *Carpets from the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia* curated by Jon Thompson.

⁹⁷ Author's interviews.

It conformed closely to the colonial-era narrative of carpet studies which developed in Europe in the later nineteenth century and was energetically reinforced by Pope in the 1930s. Its choices and catalogue replicated the Persian exceptionalism underlying nineteenth and early twentieth century western thinking on Islamic carpets. Across media, *Arts of Islam* perpetuated the approach initiated in *Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art* in 1910 and reflected in the *International Exhibition of Persian Art* in 1931, representing Islamic material culture as a series of masterpieces expressing a unified aesthetic which existed primarily in the past.⁹⁸ At a time of deep geopolitical and cultural stress, in its presentation and choice of objects, including its carpets, *Arts of Islam* attempted to identify eternal artistic truths, but at the same time offered a reassurance that the values of the colonial period endured.

In this it was already out of step with scholarly thinking. At the time of the Festival, Oleg Grabar voiced anxieties about the exhibition's narrative. Acknowledging 'the subtle, wilful, slow-burning directions' of such exhibitions, he challenged the claim made by *Arts of Islam* of the basic unity of Islamic civilisation past and present and criticised its unwillingness to deal with historical or geographical complexities in favour of an 'untested schema' that all Islamic material culture cohered around three themes of the geometric, the vegetal and the calligraphic.⁹⁹ Forty years later Oliver Watson was equally critical, judging that it would be difficult now to mount such a 'reductionist and essentialising' account of Islamic material culture.¹⁰⁰ Watson pointed out that Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published just two years after *Arts of Islam* in 1978, with its critique of western scholarship of the kind materialised in the exhibition, opened a new dialogue on the representation of Islam. On the other hand, Monia Abdullah sees the 1976 experiment as ultimately progressive, proposing that the conservative impact of *Arts of Islam* was countered by the strong presence of the contemporary and of geographical and historical complexity in the Festival more broadly.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, it was not until the twenty-first century that the multiplicity and diversity of Islamic perspectives and the importance of the recent and contemporary began to be fully acknowledged in museum displays and exhibitions.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Barry D. Wood, "'A Great Symphony of Pure Form": The 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art and Its Influence', *Ars Orientalis*, 30, 2000, 113-130. Finbarr Barry Flood, 'From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art', in Elizabeth Mansfield, *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, London: Routledge, 2007, 31-53.

⁹⁹ Oleg Grabar, 'Geometry and Ideology: The Festival of Islam and the Study of Islamic Art', in Farhad Kazemi and R.D. McChesney, *A Way Prepared: Essays on Islamic Culture in Honour of Richard Bayly Winder*, New York and London: New York University Press, 1988 (145-52), 148.

¹⁰⁰ 'Revisiting the 1976 World of Islam Festival', London: School of Oriental and African Studies, Spring 2016.

< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hxv5hfaJS7I> >

¹⁰¹ Monia Abdallah, 'World of Islam Festival (Londres 1976): Naissance d'un nouveau paradigme pour les arts de l'Islam', *Canadian Art Review*, 39:1, 2014, 1-10.

¹⁰² Gulru Necipoglu, 'The concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches', in Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, *Islamic Art*

Meanwhile, *Arts of Islam* consolidated a tendency that had existed as far back as 1931 and the *International Exhibition of Persian Art* to use Islamic material culture as an acceptable ambassador of Islam in periods of geopolitical or economic stress. In 1929, the Shah threatened to change the ownership structure of Anglo-Persian oil; in 1973 the oil embargo had demonstrated that OPEC could seriously damage western economies. This ambassadorial role has become embedded in museum displays of Islamic material culture. During the post 9/11 redesign of the V&A's Islamic gallery, for instance, the use of Islam's material culture to mediate negative ideas of Islam in the West was an explicit objective in the curatorial strategy.¹⁰³ Recent scholarship points out that this transactional role separates Islamic material culture from its spiritual, geopolitical and socio-economic realities.¹⁰⁴

Ideas of Islam went through one of their periodic western reframings only a few years after the Festival, with the Iranian Revolution in 1979. It is possible that the chilling effect on western perceptions of this major upheaval in the global order contributed to the failure of the Festival's ambition to create a permanent infrastructure to foster understanding of Islamic thought, culture and religion.¹⁰⁵ However, despite its ultimate waning away, and the many controversies surrounding it, the Festival deserves to be remembered as an exceptional attempt at cross-cultural understanding, which in some of its publications and exhibitions pushed forward thinking in Islamic studies, and in the case of its carpets, unsettled gendered colonial-era thinking, and brought the work and skill of the weaver to the fore.

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and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century, London: Saqi Books, 2012, 58-75; Ladan Akbarnia and Venetia Porter, 'Rethinking Islamic Art at the British Museum', *Apollo*, 29 October, 2018. <<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/rethinking-islamic-art-at-the-british-museum>>

¹⁰³ Jameel Gallery Curatorial Strategy Document, V&A Archives, MAP 61/11/5 6567.

¹⁰⁴ Necipoglu, 'The Concept of Islamic Art', 58-75.

¹⁰⁵ Alastair Duncan ed, *World of Islam Festival Trust: The First Ten Years*, London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1984