

Framing Islam at the World of Islam Festival, London, 1976

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Abstract

This article focuses on a neglected historical example where contemporary museological framings of Islam in Europe were established—the World of Islam Festival in London, 1976. The material consulted consists of the publications and materials from the Festival Trust, media coverage and academic discussions of the Festival. These are analyzed from a frame theory perspective. The Festival is situated in a very specific historical period after the advent of Gulf oil money, but before the resurgence of Islam and the Iranian revolution. It was framed by the traditionalist perspective of Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and in large part funded by the United Arab Emirates. It is argued that what might at first appear to be a festival celebrating the presence of Muslims in modern Britain acted to stabilize a dichotomy between Islam and modernity that is still dominant in museological framings of Islam in Europe.

Keywords

World of Islam Festival – museums – Islamic art – cultural heritage – traditionalism – 1970s

1 Aims and Introduction

The 1976 World of Islam Festival in Britain is certain to be regarded in retrospect as an important milestone in the relations between Islam and Christianity. The effect that it has had in awakening Europeans to the significance of Islamic civilization is already apparent.

Thus wrote Peter Mansfield in *The Contemporary Review* as the Festival closed on the last of June 1976.¹ This prediction turned out to be wrong, as the Festival can hardly be said to have had any lasting impact on “the relations between Islam and Christianity”. The political reframing of Islam since the 1970s has overshadowed the presentation of Islamic beauty with images of Islamic violence.² But within the narrower museum sector, the patterns of the World of Islam Festival are still visible in the way many major exhibitions frame Islam.

The aim of this article is to set out and analyze what is most probably the largest ever presentation of Islamic material culture in a Western country—the 1976 World of Islam Festival in London and the UK. It was a major event in the history of (representations of) Islam in Europe. The few previous studies of the Festival have mainly focused on its importance for the establishment of the contemporary Islamic arts scene, but this article concentrates on its impact on museological framings of Islam. Via a presentation of the Festival’s trustees, curators, exhibitions, conferences, talks and publications, and its reception in newspapers, magazines and academia, the article proposes that the Festival by and large framed Islam as an historic civilization outside of modernity, even in the contemporary arts section.

Besides being so large, the Festival is also interesting because of its particular location in time and space. It was held in the capital city of what in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was the largest Muslim Empire, in the years between the 1973 “oil crisis” and the 1979 Iranian revolution and the rise of global political Islam. It was a time after the demise of late-nineteenth-century Muslim peril propaganda and before the rise of modern post-Cold War Islamophobia. Islam was still largely viewed as a quaint remnant of a traditional way of life that it was assumed would disappear in the ongoing modernization of the world.³ The planning had already begun in 1971, which meant that the increased revenues flowing to Arab oil producers did not create the Festival, but expanded its budget and size.

1 Mansfield, Peter, “Muslims meet in London”, *The Contemporary Review* (July 1976), pp. 20-23.

2 Yaqin, Amina, and Morey, Peter, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

3 Aydin, Cemil, *The Idea of a Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Inkeles, Alex, and Smith, David H., *Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

Many of the senior curators of the major Islamic collections in European museums either participated in or were influenced by the Festival's exhibitions.⁴ In the history of European exhibiting of Islamic art, it was the first to eclipse the legendary Munich exhibition of Islamic art in 1910.⁵ The explicit aim of the World of Islam Festival was to "promote knowledge, appreciation and understanding of the Muslim world".⁶ This article will argue that the Festival's framing of the Muslim world did not really include contemporary British Muslims, and further that Islam was framed as a fundamental other to modernity, which implicitly excluded Muslims from a modern British identity.⁷

The vast literature on Islamophobia and representations of Islam in the West totally neglects these museum representations.⁸ If the history of representations of Islam in Europe is to be made more accurate—and more complex, the World of Islam Festival and later museum representations should be considered. This article is a first step in that direction.

2 Theoretical Frame

In order to analyze the representation of Islam at the World of Islam Festival, this article makes use of framing theory. The concept of framing covers the various aspects of representation: a) being a representative (in German this aspect is called *vertretung*; for this kind of representation to be legitimate the representative must be selected in a democratic fashion by those represented, and the selected representative should voice the concerns of those she represents);⁹ b) to represent can also mean to exhibit, describe or interpret

4 Q&A panel at "Re-visiting the World of Islam Festival", 25 April 2016, SOAS, London. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hxv5hfaJS7I> (accessed 16 November, 2017).

5 Lermer, Andrea, and Shalem, Avinoam (eds), *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Flood, Finbarr Barry, "From the Prophet to postmodernism? New world orders and the end of Islamic art", in *Making Art History. A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 31-53.

6 Duncan, Alistair, "The World of Islam Festival Trust", *Arab-British Trade Magazine* (May 1981).

7 Green, Todd, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

8 Fekete, Liz, *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 2009); Allen, Chris, *Islamophobia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), Green, *Fear of Islam*.

9 Ankersmit Frank R., *Political Representation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

something (*darstellung*), to re-present, that is, to make it present again;¹⁰ c) a representation may also be a mental idea, image or understanding of an object or phenomenon (*vorstellung*; legitimate mental representations should correspond with known facts and circumstances).¹¹

Frames include all three aspects of representation and function to organize experience and guide action.¹² Frames may take the form of mentalities, ideologies, structures, institutions, artefacts or behaviour.¹³ A critical frame analysis starts by a “mapping of the different ways in which an issue is framed”, looking for generalizations and ways that the institutional and ideological frames produce not only exclusions and discriminations but also inclusions.¹⁴ In this article, this is combined with a more phenomenological-hermeneutical perspective showing that, if a cultural phenomenon is not framed as an intelligible life, it will not be recognizable, and thus not gain social or political recognition.¹⁵

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- 10 Hartley, George, *The Abyss of Representation: Marxism and the Postmodern Sublime* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Bal, Mieke, “The last frontier: Migratory culture and video”, in *The International Handbook of Museum Studies*, vol 4: *Museum Transformations*, Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips (eds) (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 415–438.
- 11 Ankersmit Frank R., *Historical Representation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- 12 Snow, David A., “Frame”, in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*, George Ritzer and Ryan J. Michael (eds) (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), p. 235.
- 13 Goffman, Erving, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston MA: Northeastern University Press, 1974).
- 14 Verloo, Mieke, and Lombardo, Emanuela, “Contested gender equality and policy variety in Europe: Introducing a critical frame analysis approach”, in *Multiple Meanings of Gender Equality: A Critical Frame Analysis of Gender Policies in Europe*, Mieke Verloo (ed.) (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), pp. 31–42; Larsson, Göran, and Spielhaus, Riem, “Narratives of inclusion and exclusions: The study of Islam and Muslims in Europe as part of European studies”, *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 2:2 (2013), pp. 105–113.
- 15 Winter, Nicholas J.G., *Dangerous Frames: How Ideas about Race and Gender Shape Public Opinion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Ricoeur, Paul, *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2004); Butler, Judith, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009); Bedorf, Thomas, *Verkennende Anerkennung: Über Identität und Politik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010); Grinell, Klas, “Challenging normality: Museums in/as public space”, in *Museums and Truth*, Annette Fromm, Viv Golding and Per B. Rekdal (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 169–188.

3 The World of Islam Festival

Inspired by a meeting with Mahmud Mirza, a traditional musician from India, the architect Paul Keeler, of the Centre for Advanced Creative Study in London, who was to become the initiator of the World of Islam Festival, set about producing an exhibition on “the Mughal way of life”. Keeler’s interest in Islam grew from the 1960s pop scene and the widespread fascination for Indian music and spirituality that grew up in this milieu. In contrast to the mainstream of this counter-culture, Keeler developed his interests towards Islam rather than Hinduism.¹⁶ His deepened engagement with Islamic traditions led on to a first, and much smaller, Festival of Islam in London in 1971, which aimed “to celebrate the unity of the Islamic world”. Here the whirling Mevlevi dervishes from Konya made their first appearance in Europe.¹⁷ In 1975, Keeler converted to Islam and adopted the name Ahmed Paul Keeler.¹⁸

The effort to present Islamic art from a religious rather than secular arts perspective was both novel and potentially controversial. Keeler’s specific understanding of an Islamic point of view was heavily influenced by Western anti-modernism and a Romantic understanding of art. It turned out to be less transforming for the established secular framing of Islamic art than other efforts to allow room for a religious understanding of it would probably have been.¹⁹ What turned out to be the most visible and lasting change to the museological framing of Islam was the Festival’s inclusion of contemporary Islamic art.²⁰

The Festival was held mainly in London, with events spread throughout Britain. Queen Elizabeth II opened the Festival at a ceremony in which the Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan and Abd al-Halim Mahmud, shaykh at al-Azhar in Cairo, also took part. It was a presentation of Islam on a scale that had never been seen before or since in a major Western city. The World of

16 Keeler, Ahmed Paul, lecture at “Re-visiting the World of Islam Festival”, 25 April 2016, SOAS, London. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4WB2ibqdYM> (accessed 16 November 2017); and Oliver, Paul, *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014).

17 Keeler, “Re-visiting the World of Islam Festival”; Lamborn Wilson, Peter, “The World of Islam”, *Sophia Perennis*, 2:2 (1976), 105-116, p. 107.

18 Withnall, Adam, “What it’s like to convert to Islam—when everyone thinks you’re a terrorist”, *The Independent*, 20 February, 2016.

19 Grinell, Klas, “Art as an escape from secularity: The Maryamiyya case”, *PARSE Journal*, 6 (2017), pp. 72-91.

20 Lenssen, Anneka, “Muslims to take over the Institute for Contemporary Art: The 1976 World of Islam Festival”, *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* (2008), pp. 40-7.

Islam Festival was not a festival of the carnivalesque type one might connect with the early 1970s, but a scholarly series of museum presentations.

3.1 *Funding and Organization*

The World of Islam Festival was financed mainly by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). According to the Festival secretary, Alistair Duncan, the UAE government contributed £1.25 million, and governments of six other Muslim countries gave a total of £600,000.²¹ Christa Salamandra states that

although underwritten by a British Treasury bond, most of the festival's funding came in fact from the UAE government, which contributed 80 percent of the total £2,250,000 cost. After the festival, donations from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, the Islamic Solidarity Fund and the Arab Bank supported the World of Islam Festival Trust's continuance.²²

Salamandra thus says that the UAE contributed £1.8 million. John Sabini, writing for *Aramco World* about the ongoing Festival, said the total budget was £4 million, which was raised with backing from 32 different Muslim nations.²³ Even if it is hard to get any clear record of the exact figures it seems uncontested that most of the funding came from the Arabian Peninsula.

The availability of these funds had, of course, to do with the advent of oil money, but it was also due to the support of the British Arts Council and a very well connected group of people who stood behind the Festival. The World of Islam Festival Trust was set up in 1973 by Sir Harold Beeley, H.E. Mohamed Mahdi al-Tajir, Lord Caradon, Mr F. Clive-Ross, Mr J.-B. Knight-Smith, Sir Anthony Nutting and Sir John Richmond. In 1982-3, the Trust was taken in under the umbrella of the al-Tajir Trust, run by the trustee Mohamed Mahdi al-Tajir, which is still active and produces exhibitions and publications in the UK. Al-Tajir is a Bahraini business man based in the UK. In 1971, he was appointed the first UAE ambassador to the UK and remained in that position until 1987.²⁴ The

21 Duncan, Alistair, "Some thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival—London 1976", in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 10:3 (1976), pp. 172-174; Mansfield, "Muslims meet in London", p. 20; Sedgwick, Mark, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004), p. 315.

22 Salamandra, Christa, "Cultural construction: The Gulf and Arab London", in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, Paul Dresch and James Piscatori (eds.) (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 73-95, p. 76.

23 Sabini, John, "The world of Islam: Its festival", *Saudi Aramco World*, 27:3 (May/June 1976), 2-4, p. 3.

24 Bower, Tom, *Fayed: The Unauthorized Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

original chair, Sir Harold Beeley, was an historian and diplomat, and a former British ambassador to Egypt.²⁵ Lord Caradon, Hugh Mackintosh Foot, was a former colonial administrator who had served as British delegate to the United Nations in the 1960s.²⁶ Sir Anthony Nutting was also a British diplomat, as well as a Conservative Party politician and a founding member of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding.²⁷ Sir John Richmond was another former British ambassador, to Kuwait and Sudan. In 1966, he had retired and joined the department of Islamic Studies at the University of Durham.²⁸

The high-level diplomatic-political frame of the Trust is thus clear, as is the deep knowledge and familiarity of the trustees with the Arab world and Islam. The closest connection with traditionalism came via Francis Clive-Ross, a publisher and writer. He started out as an editor of the spiritualist journal *Light* and in 1963 became founding editor of *Tomorrow*, in 1967 renamed *Studies in Comparative Religion*, the first English-language journal on traditionalism, to which Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Seyyed Hossein Nasr were recurring contributors.²⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr organized the Festival's exhibition of Islamic science and technology at the Science Museum, Martin Lings curated the exhibition of Islamic manuscripts and calligraphy at the British Library, and Titus Burckhardt oversaw the Islamic arts exhibition at the Haywood Gallery.³⁰

The Trust was made up of a group of men of the British Empire who had probably been educated within an Orientalist and imperialist context that resonated with the essentialism (and focus on timeless principles derived from religious texts) of the traditionalist frame, even if colonial Orientalism does not necessarily embrace the consequent traditionalist anti-modernism. This is a question that to some degree challenges Edward Said's monolithic presentation of Orientalist discourse as being in the service of imperialism, and also opens a window for contact with anti-modernist Islamism.³¹ The Gulf

25 Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, p. 168.

26 Flint, Peter B., "Lord Caradon: Britain's delegate to the UN in 1960s, is dead at 82", *New York Times*, 7 September 1990.

27 Nicolson, Nigel, "Anthony Nutting", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 298-9.

28 *Who's Who 1990* (London: A & C Black, 1990), p. 1533.

29 <http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/Public/journalinfo/default.aspx> (accessed 17 November 2017).

30 Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, p. 168.

31 Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient; with a New Afterword*, (London: Penguin, 1995); Oldmeadow, Harry, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western*

funding of the Festival most probably owes its explanation to a complex and even implicit mix of these factors but, without further research, this is mere speculation.

3.2 *Content*

A wide range of scholars and institutions from around the world participated in the realization of the Festival's activities. Half a million visitors were estimated to have attended its various exhibitions. More than 6,000 objects from 250 public and private collections in 30 countries were exhibited. A further one million people viewed the six-part *The Traditional World of Islam* documentary television series, shown weekly by the BBC at 8.30 pm in April and May. Over 160 public lectures were delivered at more than 80 British educational institutions, and the Trust set out to sponsor more than 20 scholarly publications.³² In the end, many of the announced publications and events never actually materialized due to problems in the Festival Trust's governance.³³ Even so, the World of Islam Festival proved "a watershed for the Islamic art trade", and set a new paradigm for contemporary Islamic art as a field and a market for modern artists working with classical Islamic elements that have also become prominent in contemporary museum exhibitions.³⁴

Even if most of the Festival was focused on art and elite culture, there were exceptions: at the Museum of Mankind, the exhibition "Nomad and city" "reproduces a full-scale Bedouin encampment as well as a street of shops and houses to help explain the interwoven relationship of nomad and city in the Muslim world".³⁵

The list of exhibitions included, in London, "Art of Islam" at the Hayward Gallery, "Science and technology in Islam" at the Science Museum, "Koranic

Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004), pp. 16-19; Dabashi, Hamid, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 101-2.

32 Duncan, "Some thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival"; Sabini, "World of Islam: Festival"; Salamandra, "Cultural construction". The BBC series can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAX4F7fesME> (accessed 16 November 2017).

33 Grabar, Oleg, "Geometry and ideology: The Festival of Islam and the study of Islamic art", in *Islamic Art and Beyond*, vol. 3: *Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), p. 49.

34 Salamandra, "Cultural construction", p. 76, Abdallah, Monia, "World of Islam Festival (Londres 1976): Naissance d'un nouveau paradigme pour les arts de l'islam", *RACAR: Revue d'Art Canadienne*, 39:1 (2014), pp. 1-10.

35 Sabini, John, "The world of Islam: Its nomads, its cities", *Saudi Aramco World*, 27:3 (May/June 1976), 24-7, p. 25.

manuscripts” at the King’s Library in the British Museum, “Music” at the Horniman Museum, “Persian metalwork” at the Victoria and Albert Museum, “Art of the Hausa” at the Commonwealth Institute, “Paintings from the Muslim courts of India” at the British Museum, “Nomad and city (Sana’a)” at the Museum of Mankind, and “The Islamic arts of war” at the Artillery Museum, Woolwich, as well as “Rugs of the Qashqa’i” at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, “Kirman carpets” at the Mappin Art Gallery, Manchester, “Decorative art of 19th-century Iran” at the Royal Museum, Edinburgh, and “Islamic themes in European art” at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.³⁶ Apart from the museums that put on exhibitions, the Architectural Association, the Royal Albert Hall and the Royal Festival Hall in London also took part and housed events and many major British universities participated in the event.³⁷

The Islamic Council of Europe cooperated with the King Abd al-Aziz University in Jeddah in organizing the first International Islamic Conference in Europe as part of the Festival’s program. The opening of the conference attracted over 20,000 participants to the Royal Albert Hall, most of whom could not get a seat.

The opening speech was given by Prince Muhammad ibn Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who stressed that

what is important at this critical junction is that the real focus of attention should be on the message of Islam, on the vision of man and society that Islam gives, for all aspects of Islamic culture are but manifestations of this reality.³⁸

It thus seems that Wahhabi and traditionalist interests could agree upon an abstract presentation of the vision of Islam. In the World of Islam Festival, traditionalism contributed with the esoteric message and orthodox supporters gave financial contributions. This abstract and unified framing of the Festival’s Islam did not dwell on the syncretic and the heterodox, or on the patriarchy and feudalism present in the production of Islamic art. The frame set in the World of Islam Festival thus provided a smooth continuation for the perspective of “the essentially Western European, para-academic climate of wealthy men and women in which works of Islamic art had been collected and studied”,³⁹ where

36 Sabini, “World of Islam: Festival”, pp. 3-4.

37 Sabini, “World of Islam: Festival”, p. 4.

38 Sabini, “The world of Islam: A conference at Albert Hall”, 27:3 (May/June 1976), 5.

39 Grabar, Oleg, “The role of the museum in the study and knowledge of Islamic art”, in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the*

“the contextual-cultural dimensions of objects are not well communicated”.⁴⁰ This is one explanation for the continuing inability of the museological framings of Islam to engage with contemporary perspectives on material culture and museum studies.⁴¹

The Festival’s express aim was to educate the audience and promote understanding and the exhibitions were all arranged to show the unity of Islam.⁴² The understanding they sought to promote was thus more directed towards a timeless and remote civilization of Islam, rather than toward the close to 700,000 Muslims living in the UK at the time.⁴³ Even if British Muslims were not in focus for the Trust’s work, the Festival’s representation of Islam implicitly framed them as non-modern and incompatible with contemporary British everyday life, and the only mention they received in the coverage of the Festival was as potential representatives of fundamentalist lack of respect for the arts.⁴⁴ The sentiments and arguments that lay behind the critique alluded to would be worthy of deeper investigation.

According to Alistair Duncan, the secretary of the Festival Trust, a factor that led them to seek a pan-Islamic appeal and to concentrate “on the mainstream of the religious inspiration and evolution of Islamic culture” was the fact that “one of our necessary objectives was to keep politics out of the Festival, but at the same time to enlist the support and aid of governments”.⁴⁵ Keeping “politics” out is, of course, always a political act, and most often a conservative one in that it accepts the dominant ways of defining what is and is not political.⁴⁶ Treating understanding as a non-political concept risks framing it as a narrow and idealized tokenism disconnected from political concepts such as solidarity

Twenty-first Century, Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf (eds) (London: Saqi, 2012), pp. 17-27, p. 18.

40 Weber, Stefan, “A concert of things: Thoughts on objects of Islamic art in the museum context”, in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-first Century*, Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf (eds) (London: Saqi, 2012), pp. 28-53. p. 28.

41 Grinell, Klas, “The frames of Islamicate art: Representations of the cultural heritage of Islamdom” in *Uses of heritage: then, now and tomorrow*, Tomas Nilson (ed) (Halmstad: Halmstad University Press, forthcoming).

42 Duncan, “Some thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival”.

43 Ansari, Humayun, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004).

44 Betts, Paul, “The new Arabian Nights”, *Financial Times*, 28 February 1976, p. 11.

45 Duncan, “Some thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival”, p. 172.

46 Butler, Judith, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 78.

or redistribution and manages “the demands for recognition and difference of marginal groups in ways that leave intact the forces that marginalize them”.⁴⁷ The idea of a mainstream non-political pan-Islam was also more novel and politically charged than was apparent at the time. The first idea of pan-Islamic unity was formulated mainly within the British Empire in the inter-war period, and the second was just taking off, with Saudi Arabia as one of the most eager contestants for leadership.⁴⁸

Secretary Duncan had strong ties to the traditionalists and, in his view, Islam was, as for Keeler, a traditional civilization whose splendor was now “jeopardized by Western technology”.⁴⁹ Duncan used almost half of his presentation of the Festival in *Studies in Comparative Religion* to tirades against modern materialism and fragmentation. Another substantial part of his “Thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival—London 1976” is dedicated to descriptions of the prominent persons who visited the Festival, with special focus on Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and Her Imperial Majesty, the Empress of Iran, who “added to the regal elegance of the opening ceremonies”.⁵⁰ His thoughts can be summarized as admiration of royals and contempt for modernity.

3.3 Media Coverage

Newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *The Observer*, *The Illustrated London News* and *The Sunday Times* all gave major coverage to the Festival.⁵¹ “Religion and writing are the twin pillars that sustain

47 Bennett, Tony, “Thinking (within) museums: From exhibitionary complex to governmental assemblage”, in *The International Handbook of Museum Studies*, vol 1: *Museum Theory* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 3-20.

48 Aydin, *Idea of a Muslim World*, pp. 133-72.

49 Duncan, “Some thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival”, p. 173.

50 Duncan, “Some thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival”, p. 174.

51 Betts, “New Arabian Nights”, p. 11; Feaver, William, “Absorbing arabesques”, *The Observer*, 11 April 1976, p. 32; Fiddick, Peter, “Review: The World of Islam Festival”, *The Guardian*, 21 July 1976, p. 8; Gaunt, William, “The gorgeous East”, *The Times*, 21 April 1976, p. 12; Hodgkin, E.C., “The attitudes of Islam”, *Illustrated London News*, 1 May 1976; Hourani, Albert, “The common language of Islam”, *The Observer*, 16 May 1976; Howard, Philip, “Lessons of Islam’s conflict with Byzantium”, *The Times*, 31 May 1976, p. 3; Hutt, Antony, “The broad scope of the Festival”, *Financial Times*, 6 April 1976, p. 24; Michell, George, “Seeing many facets on the fringe of the festival programme”, *The Times*, 2 April 1976, p. VIII; Michell, George, “More on Islam”, *Financial Times*, 18 June 1976, p. 19; Norman, Geraldine, “Getting into the rhythm of Islam”, *The Times*, 17 April 1976, p. 10; Packer, William, “The history and art of Islam”, *Financial Times*, 18 May 1976, p. 3; Tisdall, Caroline, “The World of Islam”, *The Guardian*, 8 April 1976, p. 11.

it [Islam]—a single pillar really, for they are formed from the sacred rock of the Koran. As faith and literature this is totally alien to us”, wrote Sir Michael Vincent Levey in the *Times Literary Supplement*.⁵² Still, Levey sees Nasr’s exhibition on Islamic science as a welcome remainder that Islam is not “as some Western enthusiasts seem eager to propose, one long mind-blowing meditation, lost in a maze of infinite patterns”⁵³—a quite astounding testimony to the very different public framing of Islam that the World of Islam Festival was set in, compared with today’s strong framing of Muslims as a racialized essential identity and Islam as an inherently violent religion.⁵⁴

The oil embargo and price shock of 1973 did produce negative stereotypes of Arabs, but they were seldom even referred to as Muslims and Islam did not figure as an explanatory category with regard to the behavior of the OPEC states.⁵⁵ Nowhere in all the coverage of the Festival is Islam discussed as a threat to the West, and the understanding sought is never aimed at countering an image of Islam as a violent religion. Today, these worries are legion, and most exhibitions of Islam explicitly aim to disprove them. We have thus witnessed an almost total reframing of the aims of exhibitions that still look very much the same.⁵⁶

The Financial Times reported on how “personality clashes between top Arab diplomats” hampered fund raising, as well as on the difficulties of raising international loans and insurance. They also reported that the British Muslim community “expressed misgivings since many belong to strict religious sects with fundamentalist doubts of one kind and the other”.⁵⁷ This is the only report on any connection with the broader community of British Muslims that I have found in the material covering the Festival. No newspaper seems to have been interested in following this local angle. It seems that the “World of Islam” was almost by definition something outside—an Other. The board of trustees also had their networks with elites in the Arab world rather than in British Muslim contexts.

52 Levey, Michael Vincent, Sir, “The twin pillars of Islam”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 April 1976, p. 518.

53 Levey, “Twin pillars of Islam”, p. 518.

54 Yaqin and Morey, *Framing Muslims*.

55 See for example, Jenkins A.E., “The oil crisis: This time the wolf is here”, *Foreign Affairs*, 51 (1973), 462-90, and Jackson, Nancy Beth, “Gulf Arabs: From caricatures to image managers”, in *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, Susan Dente Ross and Paul Martin Lester (eds) (London: Praeger, 2011), pp. 337-49.

56 Berg, Magnus, and Grinell, Klas, *Musealt islam* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei Akademiska, 2018).

57 Betts, “New Arabian Nights”, p. 11.

The art magazines *Apollo* and *The Connoisseur* published thematic issues on Islamic art. *The Connoisseur* reviewed nine of the exhibitions. Almost half of the seven pages allocated to the reviews are devoted to Indian miniature paintings, which are described as “immediately attractive”.⁵⁸ It is noted that the art of Muslim India is seen as somewhat peripheral in Islamic art and is thus excluded from the Titus Burckhardt’s major “The art of Islam” exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. Overall, the reviews are mostly descriptive and try to give some explanations of the contexts of the objects displayed. Islam is represented as a vibrant and diverse (but past) civilization that produced impressive artifacts.⁵⁹ In the April edition of *Apollo* the collectors’ side of the Festival is very visible through all the advertising space taken up by galleries and auction houses that took the opportunity to use the focus on Islamic art. In the editorial section, more space is dedicated to “the sale-room” than to “round the galleries”.⁶⁰ *Vogue*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Time Out* and *Times Literary Supplement* also covered Islamic themes for the first time, and almost every major publisher produced at least one title that season related to the world of Islam.⁶¹

The American Muslim Peter Lamborn Wilson, who reviewed the Festival publications in the Iranian journal *Sophia Perennis*, founded by Hossein Nasr, describes the perspective of the Festival as fitting into the context—where Paul Keeler had first gotten the inspiration for the Festival—of Western seekers for an Eastern spiritual Path who had hitherto developed their ideas mainly in relation to India and the Far East, to Hinduism and Buddhism.⁶² Lamborn

58 “Galleries: The World of Islam Festival”, *The Connoisseur*, 191:770 (1976), 317-23.

59 “Galleries: the World of Islam Festival”.

60 Gray, Basil, “The essence of Islamic art”, pp. 262-269; Beckwith, John, “The influence of Islamic art on Western Medieval art”, pp. 270-281; Pinder-Wilson, Ralph, “Elegance and ornament in Islamic glass”, pp. 282-285; Melikian-Chirvani, A.S., “Iranian metal-work”, pp. 286-291; Beattie, May H., “The present position of carpet studies”, pp. 292-295; Crowe, Yolanda, “The Islamic potter and China”, pp. 296-301; Blunt, William, “The Persian garden under Islam”, pp. 302-306; Rogers, Michael, “The stones of Barquq: Building materials and architectural decoration in late fourteenth-century Cairo”, pp. 307-313; Zozaya, Juan, “The fine arts in caliphal Spain”, pp. 314-317; Robinson, B.W., “Persian paintings in Bond street”, pp. 318-322; Mullaly, Helen, “Around the galleries: Mainly Islamic”, pp. 327-328; Jones, Dalula, “A notable collection of Islamic art”, pp. 333-334,—all in *Apollo: The Magazine of the Arts* (April, 1976).

61 Michell, “Seeing many facets”; Sabini, “World of Islam: Festival”, p. 4.

62 Lamborn Wilson, Peter, “The World of Islam”.

Wilson himself was very much part of this context, even if of a more American and anarchic brand.⁶³

As noted above, the Festival was estimated to have had 500,000 visitors, and over 1 million viewers watched the BBC documentary series.⁶⁴ The impact was by any standard significant. However, this potential for a positive coverage of Islamic culture and religiosity was soon replaced by increasingly frequent images of Islam as a fanatical and violent religion, entering center stage in British and European public spheres with the Rushdie affair of 1989.⁶⁵

3.4 *Scholarly Reception*

Islamic art scholar Oleg Grabar, in an article with the critical title “Geometry and ideology”, argues that the Festival’s efforts towards presenting a timeless pan-Islamic perspective served to set Islamic art apart from other arts and thus denied its historicity and regional variations. Instead, all the focus was on portraying it as an art form governed by a few esoteric and timeless principles.⁶⁶ Monia Abdallah highlights the Festival as a foundation for the contemporary paradigm of Islamic art that is similarly focused on cultural continuity within a homogeneous and Arab-centered Islamic civilization.⁶⁷ Art historian Anneka Lenssen has argued that the “Islamic Week” held at Christie’s and Sotheby’s auction houses was paradigmatic in creating a market for a particular contemporary and still dominant Islamic art of a mystical and formal model centered on abstract unity.⁶⁸ Lamborn Wilson saw it as a cutting edge “analysis of the relation between Islamic esoterism and Islamic art”, which he consistently referred to in the singular.⁶⁹ Simply put, the academic study of Islamic art has followed Grabar, while museums have continued within the frame strengthened by the Festival.⁷⁰ This has led to a growing split between new and historicizing perspectives developed in research and the continuous singular display of Islamic art in museums, which Gülru Necipoglu argues is partly the result of the influence from conservative Muslim sponsors.⁷¹ This museological framing

63 Knight, Michael Muhammad, *William S. Burroughs vs. the Qur’an* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012).

64 Duncan, “Some thoughts upon the World of Islam Festival”, p. 173.

65 Yaqin and Morey, *Framing Muslims*.

66 Grabar, “Geometry and ideology”, p. 50.

67 Abdallah, Monia, “Naissance d’un nouveau paradigme”.

68 Lenssen, “Muslims to take over”.

69 Lamborn Wilson, “World of Islam”, p. 110.

70 Shaw, Wendy M.K., “The Islam in Islamic art history: Secularism and public discourse”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6 (2012), pp. 1-34.

71 Necipoglu, Gülru, “Reflections on thirty years of *Muqarnas*”, *Muqarnas*, 30 (2013), 1-12.

of Islamic art as an ahistorical and abstracting category has blended well with the older framing of Islamic art objects as masterpieces from a lost civilization.⁷²

4 Traditionalism at the World of Islam Festival

In the words of the Festival Trust's chairman, Harold Beeley, the explicit desire of the Festival was "to present the World of Islam from the Islamic viewpoint and to reveal to Western man the true nature of Islam and the principles of Islamic civilization".⁷³ Islam was understood as a religion as well as a civilization, and it was thought to contain a truth carried by certain principles. The perspective dominant in the Festival administration was quite specific, maybe even peculiar, and it is at some odds with how Islam is often understood today, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.⁷⁴ It strengthened an already influential Western understanding of Islamic art, as well as a more general secular museological tendency to present vast cultures and religions from one perceived "true" viewpoint. But it also relied on a theosophist understanding of Islam. The traditionalist perspective that incorporated all this was carried by the Festival's most influential curators and writers, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt and Martin Lings.⁷⁵ Connecting them was their common spiritual master Frithjof Schuon. Lamborn Wilson stated that "if there could be said to be a single man who stands for, and indeed to a large extent inspired the *batin* [inner meaning] of the Festival, it is Frithjof Schuon". Lamborn Wilson also calls the book *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, published by the Festival Trust, "the heart of the heart" of the festival.⁷⁶ At the fortieth anniversary symposium held at SOAS in 2016, the director Paul Keeler stressed the importance

72 Leaman, Oliver, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Troelenberg, Eva, "Islamic art and the invention of the 'masterpiece': Approaches in early twentieth-century scholarship", in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-first Century*, Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf (eds) (London: Saqi, 2012), pp. 183-8; Necipoglu, "Reflections on thirty years of *Muqarnas*".

73 Beeley, Harold, "The World of Islam Festival", *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 1:2 (1975), p. 51.

74 Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic art history", pp. 27-30.

75 Hill, Donald R. "Model engineering: Review of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Science*", *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 April 1976; Grabar, "Geometry and ideology"; Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, p. 168; Grinnell, "Art as an escape".

76 Lamborn Wilson, "World of Islam", p. 108.

of Titus Burckhardt and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and their vision of Islamic unity for creating this “glorious feast of Beauty” aimed at the refinement of the soul.⁷⁷

Paul Keeler announced the coming Festival in an article in *The Times* in the spring of 1975. “The ignorance concerning the Islamic world is almost total”, Keeler said. But he saw signs of a cultural awakening in the West and predicted that it could be as important as the Renaissance had been in Italy. Against a future world “covered with concrete from Las Vegas to Peking”, Keeler posits the world of Islam as an intact civilization where “unity and equilibrium has always been paramount”, building on Titus Burckhardt’s traditionalist understanding of Islamic architecture. He paints an idealized picture, stating that “no civilization has developed the city way of life better”, and complains that “the genius of the Islamic concept of urban living is little recognized in the West”. There is no mention of any living Muslim or of the actual living conditions prevalent in the world of Islam at the time. Instead, Keeler ends with a prediction that “Islamic culture and civilization will be for the modern world as new and startling a discovery as the Greco-Roman world was for the Italians”.⁷⁸ To realize this representation of the “unity of Islam”, Keeler brought in the leading traditionalist scholars who shared his a-historical focus on Islam’s esoteric cultural essence. As noted above, this was a novel and clear challenge to previous representational frames for Islamic art. But traditional museum framings merged very smoothly with traditionalism and ended up supporting the existing division between Islam and the modern West.⁷⁹

4.1 *The Genealogy of World of Islam Festival Traditionalism*

Traditionalism emerged from nineteenth-century Catholic resistance to secularism, and the Theosophical Society’s interest in the esoteric in Eastern traditions. It was developed by Ananda Coomaraswamy, who from 1932 until his death in 1947 articulated what he called a *philosophia perennis*. In his private library in Boston, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who was a physics student at MIT, became acquainted with the traditionalist works of René Guénon, Schuon and Burckhardt in the early 1950s.⁸⁰ Together with Coomaraswamy, René Guénon can be said to be the founder of modern traditionalism. Guénon had embraced

77 Keeler, lecture at “Re-visiting the World of Islam Festival”.

78 All the quotations in this section are from Keeler, Paul, “Example of Islam attracts West”, *The Times*, 20 March 1975.

79 Grinell, “Art as an escape”.

80 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, “An intellectual autobiography”, in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone Jr (eds) (Chicago, IL: Open Court. 2001), pp. 3-86; Sedgwick. *Against the Modern World*, p. 154.

Islam in 1912 and in 1930 he moved to Egypt, where he joined the Shadiliyya Sufi order. Frithjof Schuon became a sheikh (leader) in the related Alawiyya Sufi order in the 1940s, and in the late 1960s he renamed it the Maryamiyya in response to a strong vision of the Virgin Mary. The present sheikh of the Maryamiyya is Seyyed Hossein Nasr.⁸¹

4.2 *Traditionalism and Islamic Art*

Art is not a mere aesthetic pleasure or an expression of any specific and localized culture. As Nasr states in the opening of his book accompanying the exhibition on Islamic science:

before being concerned with doing and making, Islam is most of all concerned with what man is or rather with how man can become what he really is in his profoundest and primordial nature (*fitrah*), namely, a theomorphic being created to reflect the Divine in all Its Majesty and Beauty.⁸²

According to Nasr, Burckhardt “had been the first in the West to expound seriously the inner meaning of Islamic art”.⁸³

Nasr also wrote a preface to Frithjof Schuon’s *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, which was released in 1976 by the World of Islam Festival publishing company. Nasr starts by saying that “Schuon has stated truths which were never expounded directly in writing before” and goes on to call Schuon an “unparalleled master”.⁸⁴ Schuon has very little to say about art, but in a footnote he states that

The Arab character and powerful originality of Muslim art is sometimes denied on the pretext that it is composed of borrowings, which, to the very relative extent to which it may be admitted, is altogether irrelevant. On the one hand, Muslim art—even Persian, Turkish or Indian—is profoundly Arab because it is Islam that determines it; on the other, this art

81 Ernst. Carl W., “Traditionalism, the perennial philosophy, and Islamic studies: A review article”, *Middle Eastern Studies Association Bulletin*, 28:2 (1994), pp. 176-181; Grinell, “Art as an escape”.

82 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976), p. 3.

83 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, and Jahanbegloo, Ramin, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Oxford: Praeger, 2010), p. 236.

84 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, “Preface”, in Schoun, Frithjof, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976), pp. i-xii.

is perfectly original and cannot be otherwise, since whatever its model, it arises out of an intrinsic orthodoxy and thus from a heavenly inspiration.⁸⁵

Schuon finds Truth in tradition and explicates it in an undoubting theosophical frame of reference that is totally disconnected from the circumstances of the contemporary world of Islam. The potential openings for discussions about the shifting religious and aesthetic meanings of Islamic art objects for different Muslims were trumped by the assured monolithic insight of the traditionalist curators and scholars.⁸⁶

The catalogues written by Burckhardt, Lings and Nasr are all concerned with abstract principles and metaphysical grounds. Their interpretations of objects are always related to a true traditional wisdom, the *philosophia perennis*, as an opposite to the destructive intrusion of the Modern West.⁸⁷ As Grabar shows, there is little variation in their interpretations and it is easy for the reader to feel insecure and unsophisticated when trying to grasp the deep and perennial metaphysical truths that the traditionalist writers distill from the objects on display. The level of abstraction is always kept high. Burckhardt argues that art should be “typified by beauty” and dismisses modern discussions of functions by stating that “certain functions owe their existence to man’s decadence”.⁸⁸

In Burckhardt’s book *The Art of Islam*, which accompanied the Festival exhibition of the same name, there is next to no social context for art. Even if the organization of the book is chronological, there is no historical narrative. Each subject is approached in accordance with the subtitle “language and meaning”. The few references to history that are made lead to conclusions such as: “Umayyad ostentation was unable to suffocate the spirit of poverty inherent in Islam; in what followed, Islam was able to achieve a perfect balance between beauty—which is itself richness—and simplicity”.⁸⁹ It is clear that most of the Festival’s displays of Islamic art do not belong to cultural history and the effort to present the lives of concrete people in a certain society. Wendy Shaw argues that “the timeless unity that Burckhardt asserted for Islamic art emerges from the same type of formal comparisons as those made by early Islamic art historians”.⁹⁰

85 Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, p. 35.

86 Grinell, “Art as an escape”.

87 Hill, “Model engineering”.

88 Burckhardt, Titus, *The Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976), p. 141.

89 Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, p. 20.

90 Shaw, “The Islam in Islamic art history”, p. 30.

Apart from the exhibition catalogues, the Festival also published an introductory book, *The Creed of Islam* by Abdel Haleem Mahmud, from the al-Azhar in Cairo, which in many ways is a traditional Sunni introduction to the faith. Here too the ahistoricity of Islam is stressed: "It is self-evident that Islam must exist entirely independent of the constructions of space and time, and no two persons would differ about its basis, for its essential principles would gain nothing but acceptance and submission from all souls".⁹¹

Schuon, Nasr, Burckhardt and Lings were all deeply critical of the way their perceived traditional connection between art and contemplation had been lost with modernity, including by most Muslims. The understanding sought in the Festival was therefore directed towards an abstract and lost tradition, rather to the British citizens who lived their lives in relation to Muslim beliefs and traditions.

5 The Ongoing Framing of Muslims

The traditionalist separation between essential principles and lost Muslim splendor on the one hand, and contemporary Muslim populations in Europe on the other has persisted in many museological framings of Islam in Europe.⁹² As Mirjam Shatanawi has argued, instead of promoting the understanding and tolerance museums work for, such exhibitions may instead reinforce "the proposition of a contrast between contemporary Islam (stagnant and intolerant) and early Islam (advanced and tolerant), which informs much of global politics".⁹³

My analysis thus points to a conclusion that differs somewhat from Mark Sedgwick's statement:

The festival generated considerable favorable publicity for 'traditional' Islam, to judge from the British newspapers of the time, but its impact was soon lost in the general reaction to the Islamic revolution in Iran,

91 Mahmud, Abdel Haleem, *The Creed of Islam* (London: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1978), p. 16.

92 Paine, Crispin, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 19. Berg and Grinell, *Museum Islam*.

93 Shatanawi, Mirjam, "Curating against dissent: Museums and the public debate on Islam", in *Political and Cultural Representations of Muslims: Islam in the Plural*, Christopher Flood, Stephen Hutchings, Galina Miazhevich and Henri Nickels (eds) (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 177-92, p. 179.

a reaction that did not focus on Ayatollah Khomeini's mystical leanings and poetry.⁹⁴

Even if the positive reception of “traditional” Islam has disappeared from the public sphere, the Festival strengthened the established frame for the exhibiting of Islamic material culture and found a new source of funding for it.

The positive interest in Islamic spirituality expressed in the Festival has become more explicitly attached to the label “Sufism” and has stayed on as an undercurrent in Britain and the broader West. English-language Sufi literature is still very much colored by the traditionalists' selection, translation and presentation. Carl Ernst calls this “one of the least well known aspects of the rejection of Western modernism”.⁹⁵ The impact of traditionalism is, of course, not due solely to the World of Islam Festival. The Festival was one manifestation of its influence, and an important institutionalization of it.⁹⁶ Traditionalism relies on a Romantic construction of mythical origins that frames Islam as an esoteric and traditional Wisdom, rather than as the faith of fellow European citizens. This makes it ill prepared to fill the role as a gateway to understanding living Muslims or Islam's role in contemporary Europe.⁹⁷

There were a few instances in the Festival program where other perspectives did shine through. The chairman of the International Islamic Conference, Salem Azzam, stressed that there were more than 25 million Muslims living in Europe, making Islam the second largest religion on the continent. The Islamic Council of Europe, he said, faced two major tasks. The first was the preservation and promotion of the religious and cultural life of the Muslims of Europe. The second was the development of a better understanding of Islam and Muslim culture in the West. There is no indication as to what he thought about the Festival's exhibitions and programs. Like many others, he seemed to be happy with the attention given to Islam. This is also a common perspective: a positive presentation of any Islamic theme is most often interpreted as a contribution to tolerance and understanding. This is how many reviewers saw the Festival—as an opportunity to counter exoticism and stereotypes. It is more complicated than that.

94 Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, p. 168.

95 Ernst, “Traditionalism”, p. 176.

96 Rabbat, Nasser, “What is Islamic architecture anyway?”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6 (2012), 1-15, pp. 5-6.

97 Grinell, Klas, “Islam—ein Aspekt zeitgenössiger Weltkultur”, in *Experimentierfeld Museums: Internationale Perspektiven auf Museum, Islam und Inklusion*, Christine Gerbich and Susan Kamel (eds) (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014).

6 The Last Frame

As this article has shown, the framing of Islam as an opposite to the Modern West was promoted in the biggest ever representation of Islamic cultural heritage in the West, the World of Islam Festival in London 1976.

A traditionalist focus on the esoteric and perennial message of Islam was promoted as a frame for fostering understanding of Islam. The curators and producers of the Festival, in all its positive interest in religiosity, framed Islam as a unitary alternative, a closed and monolithic civilization, standing in opposition to modernity. On a structural level, their representation of Islam and modernity fits into the dichotomous “clash of civilizations” frame that informs both Jihadist terrorists and the “War on Terror”. This did not necessarily produce recognition and empowerment for British Muslims. They were framed, and were never asked how they would like to portray their beliefs and everyday practices. The lack of attention given to how Islam was actually communicated beyond the celebratory references to tolerance in the opening speeches has made it possible for museum displays to continue in the same vein.

As Crispin Paine has argued, it is always easier for curators to turn to official religion, since trying to find out what people actually do with their faith requires new collecting and research that will also inevitably show up the many different and competing calls for recognition within any faith group. This traditional, if not traditionalist, acceptance of reified official religions continues to put the focus on a perceived esoteric core of Islam. Not only does this belittle the richness, historicity and inconstancy of Islam, but it also explains why museums seldom problematize the phenomena that the concept of religion really frames.⁹⁸

In order to secure support and funding, the World of Islam Festival Trust wanted to keep politics out. This created another political frame that continues to have repercussions on how Islam and Muslims in Europe are represented in museums. What might at first have appeared to be a festival celebrating the inclusion of Muslims in Europe in fact and instead stabilized an a-modern representation of Islam that is still dominant in museological framings of Islam in Europe. This might be one explanation for the ease with which many recent museum exhibitions of Islam have worked with Saudi or Gulf funding.

98 Paine, *Religious Objects*, pp. 22, 106.