The Museum of Arab Art in Cairo (1869–2014): A Disoriented Heritage?

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In 1869, the Khedive Ismail (r. 1863–1879) founded a national museum in Cairo to coincide with the lavish ceremonies of the inauguration of the Suez Canal. This museum did not have a name or collection at the time; but in 1881, it became the National Museum of Arab Art (dar al-athar al-arabyia) after a circle of European connoisseurs salvaged and stored artifacts from Cairo’s Islamic monuments. It was renamed the Museum of Islamic Art (mathaf al-funnun al-islamyia) in 1952 at the time of the Arab nationalist revolution headed by Gamal Abdel-Nasser. After remaining closed for almost a decade, the museum was finally re-inaugurated in 2010.

The museum is unique because of its location in the land of Orientalism.¹ This location questions the reciprocity of the East–West relation of Orientalism: can displaying Arab art in an Arab country constitute an “oriental” answer to Orientalism? Beginning with the idea that the museum is a place of representations, I will analyze how this institution reflects, confronts, and contests the very definition of Arab art and its evolution as Islamic art. I will also examine how the collection was constituted and displayed, in order to highlight how the conceptualization of the Museum of Arab Art in 1881 influenced the Museum of Islamic Art in 2010.

Orientalism and Display

The concept of ‘Arab art’ needs to be deconstructed to fully grasp the nature of an Orientalist institution in the Middle East. The meaning of the words themselves have evolved considerably during the period covered by this article. The term Arab art was coined at the 1878 Exposition Universelle in Paris.

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¹ I consider ‘Orientalism’ to be the study of the Orient, i.e. the East from Spain to China, as it was named in the 19th century. I also use the word in reference to Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) and its denunciation of the discipline.
at the Galerie Orientale at Trocadero, along with ‘Persian’ and ‘Turk’ arts—categories that stressed racial definitions of these arts. The 1893 Exposition des Arts Musulmans in Paris inaugurated a broader and transversal definition of the arts from the land “ruled by the law of Islam.” This definition was confirmed by the 1903 exhibition in Paris, which can be considered the foundation of Islamic art history as a discipline. Its development is witnessed by the 1910 exhibition Meisterwerk muhammedanischer Kunst in Munich, where the artifacts displayed were the same as in Paris, but the display aimed at breaking with the Orientalist schemes.

The current study should be seen against the background of the debates on the historiography of Islamic art history that developed after 1990, at a moment when the discipline was celebrating its centennial. This coincided with the renovation of museums of Islamic art around the world—in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. Two trends emerged in the dialogue with the works of Edward Said. The first was led by Rémi Labrusse (1998) and David R. Roxburgh (2000) and leaned towards European collectionism. Both their works contextualized the discovery of Islamic art within a history of taste and of private and public collections. They demonstrated that at the turn of the 19th century, the taste for Oriental arts (Japanese, Chinese, Islamic) was closely associated with a type of activism in favor of artistic modernity. Labrusse highlighted how Paris was a center of Orientalism where the taste as well as knowledge of Islamic art could develop.

The second trend, embodied in the works of Zeynep Çelik (1992), Stephen Vernoit (2000), and Mercedes Volait (2009), aimed to study the invention of the academic field of Islamic art and assessed the taste for the Orient within the domain of Orientalism. In line with the work of Said, this way of conceiving the historiography of Islamic art tended to absorb the specific field of Islamic

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4 Friedrich Sarre, the organizer of the 1910 Exhibition in Munich, confessed to Ernst Herzfeld that he “… discovered much more artifacts in Paris than in the Orient” (quoted in Labrusse, op. cit., 1997, p. 275).
5 Zeynep Çelik, Displaying the Orient: Displaying the Orient in the Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Stephen Vernoit (ed.) Discovering Islamic