Review Essay

AROUND THE WORLD IN RELIGION AND THE ARTS: DEFINING THE STUDY OF ISLAMIC ART

JOHN G. RENARD
Saint Louis University


Thanks to the work of a growing number of serious scholars of art history, the study of “Islamic” art and architecture is no longer in its infancy. It is, however, still relatively young as academic specializations go. One persistent question, particularly relevant to readers of this journal, still arises when one dives into this vast subject. What is Islamic about “Islamic” art, and how does one distinguish, if at all, between religious and cultural influences when interpreting the visual sources? Several decades back, a very influential historian of Islamic civilization, Marshall Hodgson, defined a set of terms that will be useful in this context. He began by identifying “Islam” as the religious tradition whose sources are the Qur’an and the Hadith (sayings attributed to Muhammad) and related exegetical literature and whose further elaboration encompasses a host of religious institutions and themes, including Shari’a law with its ritual and ethical prescriptions as well as mystical and hagiographical traditions. He then proposed the term “Islamdom” as a way of referring to the network of social, historical, and cultural contexts in which Islam has been, and continues to be, a dominant influence. Finally, Hodgson coined the adjective “Islamicate” to refer to the myriad cultural products of individuals and groups living within the various orbits of Islamdom, including, for example, poetry, literary criticism, historiography, and political theory—as well as architecture and the visual arts (Hodgson 1: 58).

Seyyed Hussein Nasr offers a further set of distinctions that will be useful here as well. “Religious” applies to works of art and architecture whose themes are explicitly “Islamic,” and “sacred” applies to religious works whose function is central to the practice of the religious tradition of Islam (Nasr passim). So, combining the two sets of distinctions, one might call Islamic any product of explicitly religious concern and action whose function is explicitly religious. On the other hand, the term Islamicate better describes works of literature and art produced within societies deeply shaped by the presence of Islam but whose function is not explicitly sacred and whose content is not clearly religious. In short: within the global social phenomenon of Islamdom, the religious tradition called Islam has generated explicitly religious artifacts worthy of the adjective