

For a panel discussion: Islamic Art, Religion and History
Nasher Museum at Duke, Sept. 26, 2013
(In conjunction with the exhibit, Doris Duke's Shangri La: Architecture, Landscape, and Islamic Art)

A Spanish–Moorish–Persian–Indian Complex

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The Doris Duke collection is most often referred to as a collection of Islamic art, but perhaps Duke herself was more accurate when she referred to Shangri La and its art collection as "a Spanish–Moorish–Persian–Indian complex." What is Islamic art? What makes it "Islamic"? Does the term cover everything made by and for Muslims, whether secular or religious? How about work by non–Muslims for Muslim patrons, or the other way around?

In order to think about some of these questions, let's first look at some jewelry and other luxury items that Duke purchased while on her trips to India. All of these pieces are from Mughal India, though the necklace is from the colonial period after the last Mughal emperor had been deposed and sent into exile. They're clearly in what is identified as the Mughal style, which characterized courtly life during the time of the great Muslim rulers from Babur through Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan (Taj Mahal), and Aurangzeb. While the empire declined as the British colonial regime gradually took precedence, the courtly style continued beyond the last emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was exiled to Burma after the failed Mutiny of 1857.

While the complex designs and lavish use of gold and gemstones clearly were favored by the elites of the court, is the Muslim identity of the rulers of the time enough to make these pieces “Islamic”? The Mughal courts were always a mix of the Persianized Mongol invaders and their Rajput allies, who were non-Muslim. Furthermore, any one of these pieces could have been made by Hindu craftsman, for Muslim as well as Hindu elites. The rosewater sprinkler does have a repeating, regular pattern in the placement of its jewels, reminiscent of geometry; and the rock crystal covered bowl could be said to have a tree-of-life design, which is a common motif in Islamic Art, but also in Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist art as well. This spectacular necklace from the late 19th/early 20th century is typical of the gold and gemstone jewelry favored in the Mughal courts. While there is clearly a style in all of these objects that is easy to identify as Mughal, does it make these pieces necessarily “Islamic”?

Let’s look at another piece. Duke’s painting of the woman with the cat is from the Qajar period in Iran covering 1785 until 1925. This was a time when painters had been exposed to western painting and portraiture and had started to use oil on canvas rather than the traditional gouache-like paints on paper. This change in medium in itself would have had major effects on style. The painting is much larger than its early antecedents, about 64 by 34 inches. While parts of the painting are decidedly two-dimensional, there are suggestions of depth and perspective in the drapery, in the shading in the figure, and in the use of the arched frame. Although the colorful patterning in the clothing, the

rug, and the background wall suggest to us what we automatically think of as “Islamic”, is there anything about this painting that associates it intrinsically with Islam?

From where did the term Islamic Art originate, and how do we now use it? It was probably in the late nineteenth century that European art historians turned their attention to the field that would eventually become known as Islamic art. Initially identified with the arts and decorative creations of the Arabs, Turks, Persians, and other peoples of the Near East, this classification of art ended up emphasizing the category of religion – specifically Islam – as its defining feature.¹ This amounted to colonizers describing the art and culture of conquered peoples from a huge range of diverse geographies, ethnicities, languages, styles, and aesthetic sensibilities, by reducing them to one essentialized “Other”.

Later, this was aided and abetted from another angle by the so-called Perennialist Philosophers—people like Rene Guenon and Frithjof Schuon—who insisted on the primacy of religion in the development of culture. This was not understood only in an Islamic context, but also in Christian, Buddhist, and other religious traditions as well. Their idea is that all learning, art, and culture springs from an un-changing Truth that expresses itself through particular spiritual or religious orientations. So on one hand we have colonialist thinkers reducing all of visual culture in Muslim majority regions to what they call

¹ Carl Ernst, unpublished paper.

“Islamic” art; and on the other hand, Perennialists essentializing all of visual culture in Islamic lands and claiming its intrinsic connection to Islam.

Let me be clear. Certainly there is an “Islamic Art” and there are beautiful examples in Doris Duke’s Shangri La collection. The mihrabs are prime examples, used originally as the orienting point for ritual prayer. Many of the other objects in the Duke collection contain Qur’anic quotations in Arabic calligraphy as well as geometrical and vegetal patterns that embody Islamic metaphysical principles, as Abdullah Antepeli has just talked about.

And yet, why is it that everything from mosque installations to women’s opulent jewelry is all lumped together under the moniker of Islamic Art? When we think of Christian Art, we think of icons, ritual objects, and relics from churches and cathedrals. I can’t think of a single “Christian Art Museum”, unless you consider collections housed in churches. Instead, we have museums of European art, Northern Italian art, Finnish Art, Folk art, and so on. Within all of these types of collections there may be pieces that can be construed as Christian. But we don’t reduce the material residues of complicated lives that are collected in these museums to just the category of religion. These collections depict the rich and multi-faceted lives of people of other eras. This is perhaps why the new redesigned collection at the the Metropolitan Museum has dropped the word “Islamic” from its name and is now the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.

Why does this naming matter? After all, we use “Islamic Art” as a sort of shorthand that defines an aesthetic that we do recognize as having some coherence. Furthermore, Muslims can be justifiably proud of their personal identification with a beautiful visual language that is so widely celebrated. And yet, there are consequences to the wholesale use of this term, especially in today’s political atmosphere. This reductionist naming adds to the pernicious notion that Muslims, unlike any other people, are only motivated by religion; that they are not subject to the same desires, loves and wishes of all other people. This plays into extremist ideology on all sides, and it enables our continuing ignorance of Muslim majority cultures and our lack of personal relationship with Muslims in our midst.

We need to rethink these definitions, so it is timely that the Doris Duke collection is finally accessible to the public. Duke was a person who probably didn’t know a lot about Islam per se, but certainly had a deep emotional, intellectual, and creative engagement with an aesthetic identified with Muslim majority cultures and civilizations. Her personal engagement is not unique, but a continuation of centuries of aesthetic mixing and appreciation between cultures. How different is Duke’s “Spanish–Moorish–Persian–Indian complex” from the palaces of the Christian kings of Andalus after the Reconquista, who continued to embrace the aesthetics of their Muslim predecessors? Or of the Hindu workmen who used bits of destroyed temples while building the Mughal Qutab Minar complex near Delhi? Or of the Rajput princes adoption of Mughal

Styles in their courts in India? Instead of restricting our notions of the visual culture from Muslim majority countries by overly tying it to the word Islamic, perhaps we should think about the multiple ways in which Muslim cultures have nourished and engaged both Muslims as well as non-Muslims like Doris Duke.