
“Contesting the Conceptual Categories ‘Islamic Civilization, Art or Masterpiece: A Reflection on the Problem’”

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Abstract

Together with a few recent publications a number of the online Journal of Art Historiography (June 6, 2012) dedicated to “Islamic Art Historiography” offers a glimpse at the debates that since roughly a decade stir up Islamic art studies as they are practiced in the West. These debates concern the conceptual framework used to both investigate and show in public institutions the material dealt with in this field of research, traditionally designated by the attributive adjective “Islamic”. Many consider the latter a misnomer. The underlying objection is that any cultural instance generically labeled with this adjective constitutes a fallacious category that does not reflect much more complex realities. Yet, the contested word remains widely used in spite of the invention of an alternative, the term “Islamicate”. This paper examines this phenomenon of epistemological agitation symptomatic of the rather newly constructed field of Islamic art history. The analysis of the 10th century epigraphic wares produced under the patronage of the Iranian dynasty of the Samanids will support the argumentation.

Keywords: Islamic culture, art, art history, epistemology, methodology, concepts of Islamic art studies

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ARTICLE

In the scholarship of countries with an Islamic history and a society in majority Muslim the acceptance of the conceptual categories of “Islamic art, culture or civilization” sharply contrasts with the unresolved methodological tensions arising from their use in Western academic milieus. In the latter, since several years the attributive adjective “Islamic” has been fiercely contested. Three main reasons underlie this contestation. The first is that there exists a real difficulty- and this difficulty concerns the art historians of all horizons- in grasping and arguing in proper analytical terms the involvement of the Islamic faith in the conceptualization, constitution and consumption or experience of artworks, objects like architecture, that are not obviously religious. Therefore for many experts the term “Islamic” appears essentializing.

The second reason resides in the historical fact that Islam does not form a unified religious-cultural entity. It is shaped not only by sectarian divisions but also by the variegated local pre-Islamic lore of the lands on which it has spread. Based on this fact, some consider the terminology in question reductionist.

The third reason is that Islamic polities of the past as well as of the present include non-Muslim minorities that did or do participate in the construction of the Islamic cultures. This pluralistic aspect of the history of Islam, many think, is not properly represented by the overarching adjective “Islamic”.

In order to remedy this situation in 1978

the American historian Marshall Hodgson invented the substituting word “Islamicate” in his landmark book *The Venture of Islam*.¹ Yet, if for some this locution “Islamicate” appears more inclusive and so more suitable to describe the cosmopolitan Islamic cultures, as if the adjective “Islamic” did not convey these amplified significations, this alternative did not succeed in suppressing the overall dissatisfaction with the terminology at disposal. While “Islamicate” is often enough preferred to “Islamic” in certain academic or institutional frameworks, it does not really solve the problem. Ultimately, in the scholarly literature both locutions “Islamicate” and “Islamic” turn out to signify more or less the same thing, forming, to my opinion, a semantic equivalence of little help as far as the aforementioned terminological issue is concerned. Moreover, in the institutional networks of the Muslim world itself this word “Islamicate” has been mainly ignored. As a result, despite the lively debate the contested “Islamic” designation remains widely employed in a discipline still consensually labeled “Islamic art history” in the East and West alike, as no unanimously convincing alternative has been found.

As a practitioner of this discipline educated and living in the West, these issues naturally affect me and force me to think about them critically. The invitation to participate in *Kimiya-ye-Honar’s* present number gives me the opportunity to comment this epistemological disputation and to propose my own view on it; an appropriate

opportunity indeed as this journal is published and read in Iran, a region pivotal to one of the most impressive artistic developments in the Muslim world of both the past and the present.

I will begin my discussion informally, just by making an intuitive remark. Although as far as I know no attention has been paid to it, I find puzzling this contrast between the overall comfort in the Muslim world and the dominant discomfort in the Western world regarding the acknowledgment of the trope of “Islamic art” and related terminology in historical-cultural studies. Could it be that scholars from or educated in these two regions have a different understanding or approach to this trope?

I straightforwardly stipulate that, at countercurrent of this scholarly mainstream in the West, I am not that uncomfortable with the employment of the categories “Islamic art, culture or civilization” as long as long an epistemic backdrop of sustainable definitions or propositions of definition is solidly established. I would add, however, that I also fully understand and subscribe to the necessary enterprise of questioning the parameters of research, never to be taken for granted and definite. My position will appear clearly in the following critique of some of the key arguments that feed these debates.

A look at the latest account of Islamic art historiography in the online *Journal of Art Historiography* will buttress my pondering² In the 6 June 2012 number “Islamic Art Historiography”, the prologue to the series of essays is lyrically titled: “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’? A plea

for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam”³. Noticeably again, little has significantly changed roughly three years after this publication that is supposed to represent the field’s state of affairs and provide future research directions. Like in the past, the contemporary historical practice on the arts of Islam still refers to the same terms and categories, invariably relying on the linguistic binomial “Islamic”/“Islamicate” despite the efforts to avoid them and to replace them, when possible, by geographical or geopolitical ipseitic terms.

Owing to the expected introducing function of any prologue, this text enunciates what is posited as an indispensable presupposition anyone ought to bear in mind in this field of studies: that is that Islamic art, civilization, culture or any phenomenon generically labeled with this generic word constitute fallacious categories. For by not taking into account the rich and complex realities of the ground, these categories project an Islam that does not exist, “an imaginary Islam”. The point is made through a radical pronouncement the scholar/journalist Arnold Hottinger made in a book written in 2008.⁴ In this prologue one may read:

“He [Hottinger] argued correctly that it is pure fiction to speak about Islam using one sole, monolithic and global term. Moreover he added that in the desire to see in the wide-ranging and diverse ‘worlds of Islam’ a homogenous sphere called ‘Islam’ is simply an abstract cognitive notion, which, as with any general concept, has its sole origin in the

mind of the person who creates this concept or theory.”⁵

This idea that the Islam presented in the scholarship is pure fabrication, a construction of the mind, obviously stems from post-colonial criticism and its centrepiece, Edward Said’s famous book “Orientalism”.⁶ It bears the deep anxieties the failure of the colonial misrepresentations has engendered in the post-colonial psyche. Moreover, it is true that the history of the discipline of Islamic art history is marked by contradictory subjective discourses either secularizing or spiritualizing the material in excess, let alone the persisting inadequate or outmoded methodology on which they rely too often. Consequently, in the historiography the Islam in the arts of Islamic lands somehow got lost or became an elusive nebulosity. For want of a better critical measure to confront this problematic state of affairs, an important part of the scholars’ community simply resorted to a convenient but questionable confinement of the Islamic dimension in art to the exclusive sphere of things with an obvious devotional or sacred function.

However, several counterarguments enable to deconstruct these various ideas and attitudes. The strict circumscription of Islam to religious objects presents the serious shortcoming of circumventing the issue instead of bringing forth a sustainable solution. In terms of research pragmatics, this avoidance amounts to a pure limitation stifling the principle of interpretive proposition or conjecture one may adopt in facing elusive processes of

visual expression of the faith difficult or even sometimes impossible to prove. This necessarily entails the undesirable effect of narrowing the possibilities of advancing the study, let alone the avoiding measure borders censorship when certain scholars presented it as a requisite.

Furthermore, in many cases this restrictive approach conceals a disquieting denial: the denial that potential, latent, hidden or simply not immediately visible faith-related elements might be an integral component of the aesthetic and capital of cognitivity of non-religious artworks in terms of functionality. Such a truncated conception of the arts in Islam wrongly imposes on this material a clear-cut divide between the secular and the religious or the profane and the sacred that works well for the arts in the West or other cultural areas but does not apply to Islamic visual forms. Although we are yet to satisfactorily define the precise workings of this conceptual duality in Islamic aesthetic context, by now the experts tend to agree upon the fact that it does not similarly structure the Western and the Islamic artistic domain. And yet, this view illogically continues to be promoted and even dominates the field in spite of the recent arousing of disagreement with it.

I certainly completely disagree with it, as I am strongly in favor of a return to the investigation of the spiritual dimensions in the arts of Islam not directly related to the function of worshipping, but with the aid of the most updated critical tools. A very brief historical account of the discipline is necessary here.





Picture 1 Samanid ware with calligraphic décor, 10th century, Historic Iran, Nishapur. Reza Abbasi Museum, Tehran. Detail of foliated Kufic inscription, Great Mosque, Isfahan. Photographs by Shakiba Sharifian.

In the past, a whole generation of reputed scholars like Seyed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, Ernest Renan or Annemarie Schimmel- to name just a few- who were emphatically experts in philosophy, spiritualities and mysticism, attempted to read Islamic artistic creation in the light of their studies. Partly due to, on the one hand, problems of art historical methodology and, on the other hand, the suspicion that their personal spiritual feelings and inclinations interfered with their scientific reasoning, these thinkers' findings overall were put under some form of reservation by another pool of scholars led by Oleg Grabar, more inclined toward a historical approach. Emphasizing the notion of a

rational practice of art history, this movement has fashioned a certain type of analytical discourse about the Islamic productions pervaded by systematic secularization. While indeed there is nothing but normal in this fluctuation of views signalling the remarkable amplitude of the quest to acquire knowledge on Islamic visual culture, it is time to revisit this field's epistemology marred by newly entrenched certitudes and questionable routines of practice.

To go back to the issue of the separation between religious and non-religious art in Islam, I align myself with several art historians who more recently have questioned this phenomenon of the secularization



Picture 2 Samanid ware with calligraphic décor, 10th century, Historic Iran, Nishapur. Abbasid Quranic folio. Photographs: Public domain.

of the hermeneutic discourse, like Barry Flood, Christiane Gruber or Wendy Shaw. For example, in her essay in the same aforementioned journal of historiography, “The Islam in Islamic art history: secularism and public discourse”, Shaw advocates: “... a more nuanced understanding of ‘Islam’ within Islamic art studies, questioning the binary divide between culture and religion...”⁷

Indeed, in Islamic artistic culture the boundary between the religious and the secular is versatily blurred, often entangled in an unsolved hyperdialectics, if not totally erased.⁸ To illustrate this fact more often intuitively sensed than explicated, I will discuss a concrete example from the Iranian

artistic tradition: the 10th-century Samanid ceramic wares bearing Kufic inscriptions.

These Samanid objects conspicuously challenge this notion embedded in the Western vision of art in general that non-devotional or profane artefacts cannot prompt a spiritual-mystic experience.⁹ Due to their practical nature these objects, like many other ceramic works in global cultures, belong to the broad category of utilitarian artefacts, be they modest tools or luxurious and highly refined commodities. Their ontological status is therefore a priori primarily of profane order. In addition, their decorative inscriptions rarely deliver an open religious message or only remotely allude to a religious semantic

repertoire. They most frequently draw from a wide range of vernacular philosophical-poetic references, from popular wisdom, generalizing ethical predicaments and aphorisms, to simple eulogies and blessings.

And yet, their astounding aesthetic elevates these wares from the ordinary ontological status of a pleasant commodity to that of an extraordinary artistic expression. This remark is a lucid observation, not the subjective product of my own decontextualizing and interpretive appreciation of these admirable objects. The process of aesthetic elevation and transfiguration I am talking about is the objective result of an act of utter significance that the objects' design accomplishes on its own. This act can be concisely described in the following manner.

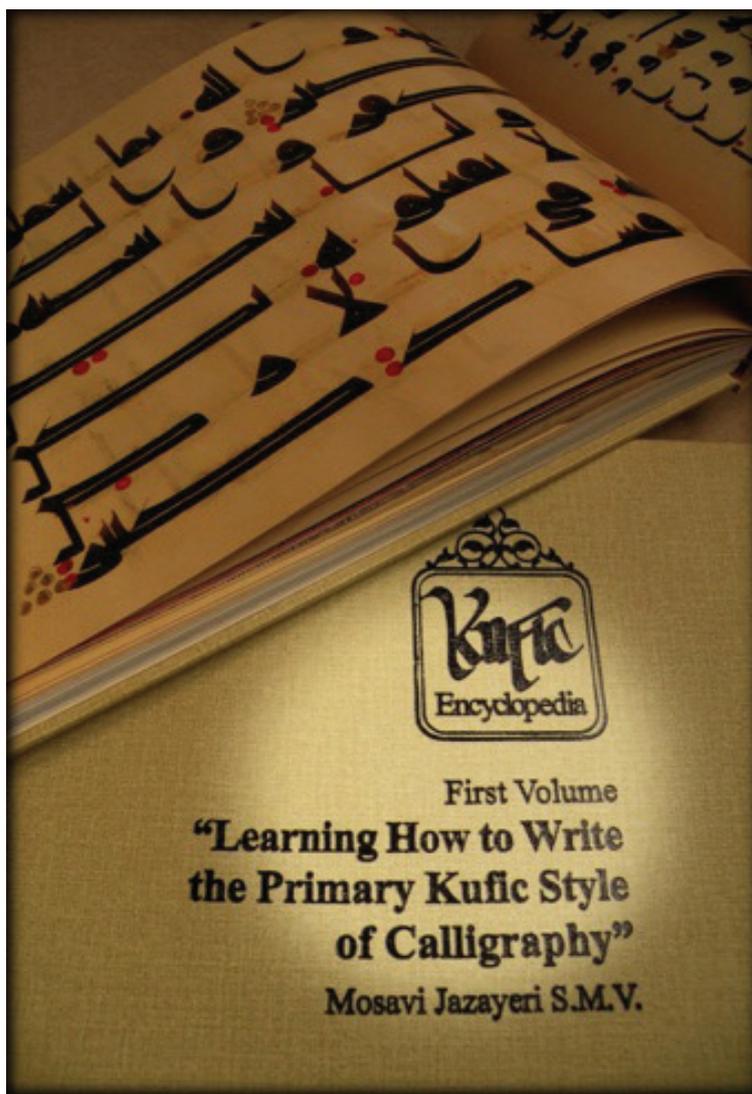
The minimalist and usually perfectly executed black and white Kufic calligraphy decorating the wares' modest body of clay establishes a striking visual parallel between them and the Qur'ans copied with the same calligraphic style in the same period throughout the Abbasid Caliphate. There cannot be any doubt that the calligraphers who applied these transfixing writings on the artefacts' surface were aware of this similitude and by inference of the correlation of meaning it engenders. Consequently, they surely had a high sense of the sacredness or sacred connotation of their artistic gesture, even though in these cases they were not strictly speaking engaged in religious art making.

Similarly, the perceptive experience these Samanid wares must have induced in

the beholder's mind undoubtedly included recalling the visuality of these splendid Qur'ans. It can be asserted that these artefacts operated a kind of fusion between the two types of object's phenomenology, a fusion out of which inevitably a semantic-semiotic intersection occurred. We may denominate this complex process at work in the Samanid art of epigraphic wares "an aesthetic phenomenology of remembrance", an extension in the ceramic materiality of the effect of visual dhikr that the sole sight of the awesome Kufic Quranic pages produces prior to the actual act of reading.

This is also the very same experience that the contemporary Iranian artist calligrapher S.M. Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri, living and working in Tehran, re-translates through his double practice of creatively re-copying Kufic specimens of medieval Qur'ans and re-fashioning Samanid epigraphic wares. Vahid's skilful manipulation of the Kufic script and modern artistic media turns these old models into new creations.

If only for all the reasons stated above, the Samanid artifacts characteristically unsettle the double conceptual parameter of the religious and the secular, to not say they render it quasi-irrelevant. Although they do not constitute sacred objects, classifying them in the register of profane products appears reductive to the extent of misrepresentation. They definitely fall under the sign of Islam as altogether a logocentric metaphysics built upon God's last revelatory speech and a faith-based way of life regulated both spiritually



Picture 3
Book cover of one of the numerous publications on Vahid’s calligraphic works.

and pragmatically. Therefore, I argue, the Samanid wares stimulate or even enact the sacred reverence for writing even when their decorative writing is not sacred in the sense that it does not discursively refer to religion or the Qur’an. The calligraphic decoration does refer to the Divine Revelation visually, through its aesthetic that more than a means of providing the recipient object with utter beauty constitutes a cognitive-intellective path leading the beholder to experience some form of spiritual awakening or dhikr.

In conclusion, the Samanid wares prove the validity of the conceptual category of “Islamic art” understood in its most expansive sense, beyond the sharp divide secular/religious, profane/sacred so deceptively familiar to the art historians active in the Western world.

It should be noted, in addition, that these ceramics offer just one example among many arts of the Islamic world that operate according to an aesthetic system and a phenomenology analogous to those just described. The critical-aesthetic analysis of calligraphies

on various media, book painting, ornament and architectural designs could shed light on similar perceptual workings and processes of meaning production. It thereby could unravel the full scope of significances the so decried terminology “Islamic art, culture, aesthetic”, etc, actually conveys.

This last observation leads me to further revisit this terminological issue. Based on this demonstration I think that the notions of “Islam” and “Islamic” applied to the investigation of the arts in lands with an Islamic history are by no means monolithic, reductionist, essentializing, or imaginary as Hottinger claimed. The true problem resides in certain interpretations of these words’ semantic field on which this sharp dichotomy secular/religious has been inappropriately imposed and superimposed. And here I put aside the legitimate yet sometimes overwhelming compulsion to redeem and correct the unacceptable Orientalistic distortions that yields to excessive deconstructions such as Hottinger’s. I will not discuss this latter thorny point in these pages, but it certainly deserves a reflection.¹⁰

Put in an objective historical perspective, the adjective “Islamic” as well as the reference to “Islam” in linguistic expressions like “Islamic art or aesthetic” possess inherently the capacity to signify both what the cultures marked by an Islamic history share with one another, in a word their convergences, and their divergences, diversity and distinctions, even their patterns of conflict. Above all, while encompassing these variegated complexities,

the trope of Islam points to an indisputable essence, that of a logocentric metaphysics explicated in an indisputable single scripture, the Qur’an, indisputably shared by all Muslims united. This particular metaphysics has informed the making of art in the areas in the orbit of Islam, regardless of the religious or profane nature of the artworks. “Islam” thus understood constitutes in cultural-artistic terminology the equivalent of the monomial in mathematics that is a polynomial in one term. This means that in scientific-academic terms, independently of any particular theological, ideological or doctrinal approach one may harbor, the designations “Islam” and “Islamic” signify and refer to objective facts of history. They do not exclude “the many” from “the one” and vice versa; the one being the Quranic revelation and the distinct mode of world-apprehension it created, and the many consisting of the plural interpretations and adaptations of this revelation in diverse geocultural spaces as well as the incorporation in these spaces of the non-Islamic and the pre-Islamic. In sum, based on these definitions, the words “Islam” and “Islamic” implicitly acknowledge that historically the one is in the many and that the many revolves around the one.

That is what Hodgson had in mind when he proposed “Islamicate” as an alternative to “Islamic”, ultimately producing an equivalence as previously observed. However, it is worth underlining that the celebrated scholar took inspiration from the Western lexicon that, in the framework of epistemological issues

regarding European cultural history, created the attributive adjective “Italianate”. This expression “Italianate” aimed to distinguish the “Italian” cultural-artistic objects produced in the Italic Peninsula in certain periods from those created in areas located outside it, yet impacted by its culture and legacy. Thus, the dual denomination “Italian”/“Italianate” constitutes a reliable hermeneutic tool as it rests upon solid geographical-periodical criteria. “Italianate” unambiguously designates derived products bearing the double feature of local non-Italian and borrowed Italian heritages, as opposed to the original products from the Italic Peninsula.

According to the same logic, the creation of the terms “Persianate” and “Iranicate”, as opposed to “Persian” and “Iranian”, makes perfect sense. However, by contrast “Islamicate” as a substitute to “Islamic” does not. For initially “Islamicate” is not meant to designate derived products from original Islamic models in areas external to the political-cultural orbit of Islam, but rather to denominate inclusively things produced within it, based on the assumption that the term “Islam” or “Islamic” does not possess this all-embracing semantic property.

To pursue the reasoning, now we can see why “Islamicate” is a locution misused but not a misnomer. Actually, it very well serves the purpose of classifying objects derived, interpreted after or inspired by Islamic models. More precisely, it concerns works produced in locations outside the world of Islam though in contact with it, or in lands

that used to be under Islamic dominance but later joined other cultural powers while preserving reminiscences of its legacy. For example, the adjective “Islamicate” fits the case of “Mudejar culture” in Christian Spain of the medieval and early Modern period and in Latin America. It does so as well for any art form or cultural instance bearing interpretative signs of Islamic aesthetics that we could loosely label “Neo-Islamic” or “Islamicizing” such as the “Turqueries” in Modern Europe or the “Alhambresque” style of design in Victorian Britain. We may safely consider these instances “Islamicate derived products”.

To close this discussion with just a few words, I would suggest to come to terms with the dispute about the appellations “Islamic art, culture, civilizations, etc,” through a serene admittance of their validity under the condition of a proper use in analytical and scientific context. By proper use I mean that when employed in a statement or title, these locutions’ significations should adequately fit the whole wording’s semantics without entailing simplification, shortcoming or unsettling ambiguity. After all, is not it what we do with any single word when we write?

Endnotes

1. Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
2. *Journal of Art Historiography*, “Islamic Art Historiography”. (<https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-6-june-2012-2/>); Eva

Troelenberg, "Islamic Art and the Invention of the 'Masterpiece': Approaches in Early Twentieth-Century Scholarship", in *Islamic Art and the Museum, Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stephan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, London: Saqi Books, 2013, p. 183-188.

3. "Islamic Art Historiography" (6-AS/1)

4. Arnold Hottinger, *Die Länder des Islam. Geschichte, Traditionen und der Einbruch der Moderne*, Zurich: NZZ-Verlag, 2008.

5. "Islamic Art Historiography" (6-AS/1)

6. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

7. "Islamic Art Historiography" (6-WS/1)

8. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has famously invented this term "hyperdialectics" to describe an intense dialectical process by which dialectics produces the most profound and

challenging meaning.

9. See the short study of these wares in Oya Pancaroglu, *Perpetual Glory, Medieval Islamic Ceramics from the Harvey B. Plotnick Collection*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 63-70; and my own inquiries in Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, London and New York: IBTauris Publishers, 2001, p. 94-110. See also my very recent commentary on these ceramics in "The Soul of Kufic Calligraphy in S.M. Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri's Ceramic Art", in the art catalogue of S.M. *Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri, Ceramics*, Tehran, 2015.

10. Actually I discuss this issue of the Orientalist disfigurations in the scholarship on Islamic art throughout my book, Valerie Gonzalez, *Aesthetic Hybridity in Mughal Painting, 1526-1658*, Ashgate Publishing, Series Transculturalisms, 1400-1700, October/November 2015.