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Islamic Art and the Museum. Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century

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ern secularism reasserted its spatial dominance on Siler City.

The introduction and postscript make a strong case for the significance of regionalism on secularism and, more broadly, they convincingly show how useful the secular and secularism are for studies of American religion. However, I ended the book still a bit unclear on the difference between the religious and the secular. At times it seemed spatial; the religious happened in or near churches. And other times it seemed doctrinal; the religious might be in the world but was not of the world. More clarification on the distinction would have been helpful but might be impossible. Seales does inform us on page 1 that southern secularism is “elusive”. The book also could be strengthened by a clearer sense of chronology.

Change over time is painted in fairly broad brushstrokes with flashpoints of detail. This might be due to lack of sources but it leaves gaps in the narrative. For all the emphasis on Confederate soldiers’ sacrifice in early iterations of the Fourth of July parade, the book’s lack of discussion of World War II or the Vietnam War is noticeable and could have offered some comparison. These complaints aside, *The Secular Spectacle* is theoretically insightful and full of interesting narrative. For his ethnographic research in particular and for the book as a whole, Seales should be commended. The book will be a helpful and important addition to the library of any historian of religion in America, those interested in religion and space, and scholars of lived religion.

islamic art and the museum. approaches to art and archaeology of the muslim world in the twenty-first century

Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf. 2013
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This volume is a collection of papers presented at the conference “Layers of Islamic Art and the Museum Context” held in Berlin in 2010, and as such is something of a snapshot of a work in progress. The question of layers, themes, and complexity in museums is amply addressed by the editors’ identification of further, interrelated “themes” concepts or indeed questions addressed by the conference—object and concept, Islamic art or material culture, and meaning and audience. These they distill into two fundamental and seemingly simple questions: what is an object, and how should objects be displayed?

At the heart of this volume are the papers by Weber, by Gerbich, Kamel, and Lanwerd, and by Gerbich which focus on the redevelopment of the Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum. Stefan Weber revealingly tells us that

he often finds it difficult “to connect objects in galleries back to their geographies and places of origin or to link them to the culture-historical realities of the past” (28). Whether he is talking of the Pergamon specifically or museums in general is unclear, but what is clear is his belief that museums of art “often do not allow for a wider and deeper understanding of the objects and their underlying cultural framework” (28). More than once in this book Dr. Weber notes the apparent contradiction to be found in many museum displays of “Islamic art”. For example, from what is ostensibly the first visitor survey at the Museum für Islamische Kunst carried out in 2009, it is noted that “almost in opposition to museum practices that focus exclusively on the object, its provenance and its condition” visitors were much more likely to want to know about “specific contexts and relations, about the geography the history, the politics and the societies of the world that the objects are supposed to represent” (12). This contrast between what scholars, academics, and museum professionals think the public want to see/learn about the Islamic world and what the public actually want to see/learn has been highlighted before (Heath 2007, 145—155). Although beyond the scope of this review, such questions of agency concerning representing Islam within a museum context and how this might be achieved have been addressed elsewhere (e.g. Gerbich, Kamel, and Lanwerd in the same volume; Kamel and Gerbich 2014; Parker Heath 2014a, 2014b).

A key element of the Museum für Islamische Kunst’s redevelopment detailed here is the project undertaken by Gerbich et al., “The Museological Laboratory. On Curating Arts and

Cultures from Islamic-influenced Countries.” It has been central to the regeneration of the museological landscape of Berlin, and underpinning this project is the belief that a purely aesthetic presentation of art, and hence the art of Islam, must evolve to include the diverse social and political contexts of its production (202). The project’s goal, to enhance permanent exhibition and display strategies, draws on research from a number of fields and formative work with potential visitors, as well as museological practice from around the world.

The final paper from those involved in the museum reorganization/redesign is Christine Gerbich’s discussion of the results of the visitor survey conducted in 2009. It is difficult to see why it was placed at the end of the book. For me, the findings of the survey would perhaps have been more effective as a starting point for both the conference and the book. As it is, there are examples in the survey findings of the fundamental problems which face museum teams in their struggle to “represent Islam.” Amongst these, and as was noted above, is the stark contrast between curatorial and visitor expectations, and the concomitant poor understanding and retention of the information provided. That there are such problems and that they are not limited is demonstrated in the chapter outlining the redevelopment of the Jameel Gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum by Juliette Fritsch. Formative work with visitors surprised staff when the expected levels of knowledge among all groups showed a lack of understanding of key terms and phrases used in the gallery (196), a finding much like that found by Gerbich in this volume and which I have found in a range of museums in Britain (Heath 2007).

Recalling for a moment Weber’s statement regarding his difficulty in “connecting” with objects in galleries, is it any wonder then that visitors without the specialized knowledge of a museum director strive unsuccessfully to make sense of displays of Islamic art? What Weber calls a “proven system” has also “remained imperious to visitors” (303). So what is this system which both enables and hinders visitors? It is clearly shown within the two sections of the book “Foundation and Change” and “Examples from the Museum World”. Here we see images of galleries from Europe and North America which appear to show an almost universal style in displaying Islamic art, with which I am sure most readers of this book will be familiar. Within these displays there are of course labels and panels which “inform” the visitor, and their character is reproduced for the reader. From the label word

count (in the article by Mary McWilliams, 163) to the technical detailing of ceramics (in Ladan Akbarnia’s contribution, 238 and that of McWilliams, 168) and the non-translation of epigraphy (Akbarnia, 241) these are the devices employed in Weber’s “proven system” critiqued elsewhere (e.g. Heath 2007) and have been singularly unsuccessful in informing the visitor.

Whilst the title of this volume privileges the art of Islam there is much more about the issues and questions of Islam, art, and museums to be found here, from the political to the professional and on to the public. There is both implicit and explicit acknowledgement of the impact of 9/11 on museums. The editors suggest that “museums have become increasingly important forums for public interest in Muslim cultures” (11) and “Global conditions of politics, society, and culture pose new questions to museums in general and to those of Islamic art in particular” (12). Lorenz Korn also cites it as one of a series of events which, in effect, demand scholars “explain current phenomena of “Islamic” societies and of “Muslim” attitudes from wider contexts of the relevant culture and its history” (87).

The key word here is “relevant”. Whatever style, content, or context museums choose to represent Islam, Muslims, their pasts, presents, and futures, and their cultures, it needs to be relevant to its consumers, whoever they are. Difficult as it is to create exhibitions for such a heterogeneous audience, this is the challenge facing museums around the world. This book is a first step on the journey and one which should be supported.

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