Unsettling Notions of “Islamic Art” and the “Other”:

Representations of Islamic Cultures
in Contemporary Art in North America and the Middle East

by

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Abstract

Islamic art is a diverse field, but it is commonly miscategorized and undervalued as a result of Western bias in both historical and contemporary contexts. As a response to this limitation in the scholarly study of Islamic Art, the following study analyzes the impacts of the history of Orientalism on museum spaces and contemporary artists, the propensity for culturally appropriating and self-appropriating trends among insider/outsider Islamicate artists, and the ways in which artists utilize and challenge Orientalist ideologies, and it further explores artistic responsibility in relation to cultural representation. This study unsettles the legacies of imperialism and Islamophobia that have propagated one-dimensional readings of Islamic art(s). It challenges inapplicable distinctions of “secular” and “religious,” probing the field’s 1,400-year history and exploring historical Islamic art and architecture, focusing on overlapping religious and cultural aspects and the incorporation of traditions from pre-Islamic, Indigenous, prior, and neighbouring cultures. Utilizing Edward Said’s Orientalism, it discusses Orientalist tropes represented in 19th and 20th century Orientalist paintings and explores how those ideologies have evolved into Islamophobic representations in modern Western popular culture and news media. Then, the overview of museum spaces and the imperialist legacies that underpin them connects the role of the museum space as gatekeeper to the art world with the motivation for artists to culturally appropriate or self-appropriate Islamic cultures to gain access to the art world. Through archival data analysis and fieldwork, the study compares case studies of artists Sandow Birk, M.C. Escher, Abdulnasser Gharem, Shirin Neshat, Jamelie Hassan, Sarah Al Abdali, Colleen Wolstenholme, Ajlan Gharem, Moath Alofi, and Nasser Al Salem. Ultimately, then I argue, cultural appropriation and self-appropriation of Islamic cultures are used by Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic context artists alike. Moreover, artists do capitalize on Orientalist
expressions, but they also utilize opportunities to challenge these Western-biased representations and develop innovative ways to represent Islamic cultures. Throughout this study, I also draw on my own experiences as a female, Saudi, Muslim artist, and as such, this study is also a decolonial project. These conclusions lay the groundwork for future research on decolonization, issues of cultural appropriation in art, and further definition and interpretation of Islamic art as a valuable, influential field in its own right.
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Introduction

In 2013, I visited the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) with my husband. By then, we had been living in Canada for four years, and I was pursuing graduate studies in Toronto; I would later go on to begin my Ph.D. in Cultural Studies at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. As a visual artist in Saudi Arabia and a native Arabic speaker, I had developed an artistic as well as a personal interest in cultural representation in art. During this visit, as in many other art experiences I have had outside the country in which I was born, I looked for myself, and more broadly, for my culture in the art galleries that I visited. Specifically, I was looking for representations of Islamic culture(s) in the art on display. At the NGC, I found only one artwork exhibited that visibly engaged with Islamic culture(s)—miniature sculptural figures of veiled Muslim women by Canadian artist Colleen Wolstenholme. On the artwork label displayed next to the piece, a brief artist biography was offered, stating Wolstenholme was born in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, in 1963. This information, along with Wolstenholme’s Anglo-Saxon settler-sounding name, caused me to question her understandings and representations of Islamic culture(s). Through my growth as an artist and academic, positions of representation—an artist’s or institution’s—became increasingly interesting and important to me as a Saudi-born and Muslim-identifying scholar and visual artist living abroad in Canada. These experiences went on to inform the basis of my doctoral research project, of which Wolstenholme’s art serves as a case study, which I discuss in chapter 5. The following research, then, is an academic reflection of these explorations, critiques, and critical imaginings on how Islamic culture(s) are represented in contemporary art practices and institutions in both Western and non-Western contexts, from an insider-outsider perspective as someone who studies and contributes to visual arts and culture.
Context and Purpose of this Study

This research emerges from the central concern of how Islamic cultures and identities are depicted in contemporary art. The field of “Islamic art” has often been historicized as originating as a spiritual practice and form of expression for people who lived in Muslim regions and communities; this is outlined in Chapter 1.\(^1\) However, as multiple art historians have noted, what popular culture and the international art world largely consider “contemporary Islamic art” differs from these origins and cultural histories and reflects more secularized and modern-inflicted representative/representational practices that are more reflective of Western imaginaries.\(^2\) For example, in the “RE-IMAGE-N” Vancouver Biennale (2018–2020), artist Ajlan Ghareem’s artwork titled *Paradise Has Many Gates* portrays a mosque, created using barbed-wire fencing that resembles a cage, and portrays Islam as a “trap” rather than focusing on the mosque’s significance within the context of Muslim religiosity, cultures, and societies.\(^3\) Such a Westernized interpretation of Islamic identities and cultures, especially coming from a cultural “insider,” raises many questions and thus calls for scholarly analysis and engagement. To that end, this study explores the transformation in the art world’s understanding and classification of “Islamic art,” the complexities of classifying “Islamic art,” and ultimately, the challenges for

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aesthetic movements, terminologies, and artists to be conceptualized—if at all possible—in relation to their origins.

In the current global political and social climate of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hostility, Muslim identities and cultures are frequently hijacked, misrepresented, appropriated, and manipulated for political means. As political scientist Rochelle Terman explains, “US media outlets […] reinforce general stereotypes of Muslims as uncivilized, barbaric, and a threat to Western values.”⁴ Events like 9/11, the Iranian Revolution (1979), the Gulf Wars (1990–1991 and 2003–2011), and the Trump presidency have shaped global perceptions of Muslim identities and propagated stereotypes of Islamic cultures. This broader social and historical context underlies the importance of this study. In many instances, art imitates or responds to life or reflects real-world realities and issues, and Islamic arts are no exception. The ways in which artists choose to depict Islamic cultures, art institutions’ selections of which artists to display, and the art itself all reflect our global society’s struggle to accurately portray, interpret, and understand Islam, both as a religion and diverse set of cultures. This study discusses the influence of globally pervasive Muslim stereotypes and misrepresentations of Islamic cultures on contemporary Islamic arts and artists producing within this field. It contributes broadly to the field of art research. It builds and examines connections between the elements of cultural appropriation, representation, and the ways in which historical and contemporary Orientalism are affecting how artists think and perceive themselves. Through the combination of these areas of research, it also explores artistic challenges to maintain integrity against a backdrop of a potentially engrained Orientalist logic. These connections offer a meaningful contribution to the

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study of representation within art research. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of colonial views of Islamic identities, the differences in depictions of Islamic arts by artists functioning within Islamic contexts as opposed to artists not functioning within Islamic contexts, and the responsibility of artists to uphold cultural integrity when representing cultures in their art.

Research Gap and Contributions

Before delving into the intricacies of this research, I briefly contextualize this discussion by explaining this study’s understanding of the term “Islamic arts,” which I further explain and expand upon in the section entitled “Key Terms” below. The term “Islamic art,” which scholars and participants in the art field typically use to refer to this field, is limited, and the unpacking of this term by scholars is frequently contradictory. The term prompts a plethora of questions, including: (1) Is Islamic art confined to works that display devotional themes and that are made for devotional purposes? (2) Does Islamic art also include art created by people living in Muslim societies? (3) Does the artist being Muslim automatically make their art “Islamic?” (4) Can non-Muslims make Islamic art?

These questions only begin to scratch the surface of the broader inquiry of my study, but the problematic nature of the term becomes apparent in asking these questions. I acknowledge the complexities of defining the term, and I myself have experienced the embedded cultural preconceptions and biases inherent in trying to define the field throughout my own academic study and my own practice as an artist. For instance, when I began my study, I utilized categories to organize some of my interlocutors, which included labels such as “practicing Muslim,”

“cultural Muslim,” and “non-Muslim” artists. Very soon, I found that these terms are limiting and fail to capture the complexities of cultures and identities under which art production and practice unfolds, and I determined that “artists functioning within Islamic contexts” and “artists not functioning within Islamic contexts,” though still not ideal, are more productive phrasings for this study’s purposes. I unpack the categories I initially selected in the research design section, as this is a helpful starting point for exploring the problematic nature of defining “Islamic art.”

First, focusing on the issue of defining “Islamic art,” I approach Islamic arts and its field of study from the perspective that it is simultaneously specific, yet diverse. It is a unique blend of religion and culture best described by Marshall Hodgson’s term “Islamicate,” which refers to the Islamic and non-Islamic cultural, social, and economic influences that surround and inform religion itself, beyond Islamic law and theology.  

Religion and culture are interrelated, and the complex, diverse nature of this field of art reflects that intermingling in terms of motivation, meaning, and purpose. As such, I define this field by the term “Islamic art(s)” in an attempt to acknowledge and capture the diverse nature of the artists and works represented within it. I refer to the entities that represent the subject matter for this field as Islamic culture(s) and identities. These interpretations underpin the analysis of the study and will be further unpacked in this introduction.

In the past few decades, research related to the issue of “decolonizing” art history has gained traction. This is a diverse area of research that emphasizes the need for dynamic perspectives and interpretations of art. Designer and researcher Matthew Kiem explains that “the imperative here is not so much to defend the singular or ahistorical ‘truth’ of ‘decolonizing design’ but, rather, to design meaningful material-symbolic change that is neither pacified nor

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disabled by the colonial designs of academy.”⁷ Although decolonization of art history has become a popular topic of research, there is a timely need to add to this study and more deeply explore the issue in relation to Islamic arts. Recognizing the opportunities in expanding research on this topic, in an Association for Art History article, Islamic arts historian Deniz Türker argues the need for more studies to address the decolonization of Islamic arts, expressing that efforts to question the definitions and parameters of fields such as this create nuanced discussions and understandings.⁸ Adding to this discussion, politics and sociology professor Sami Zubaida argues the need to look beyond the lens of Western thought to challenge problematic categorizations, like that of “Islamic art,” questioning what exactly about “Muslim cultures, beliefs, and institutions”⁹ are so unique and foreign that they require their own “special study and understanding.”¹⁰ Moreover, English literature professor Danielle Haque asserts the need to move beyond binary thinking that categorizes Islamic arts based on notions of “secular” and “religious,” pointing out that these rigid categories simplify and reduce Islamic arts to a Western perspective.¹¹ In response to this need to reframe and reimagine the field of Islamic arts, art history professor Wendy Shaw makes significant ground in decolonizing art research, imagining art beyond the colonial frame by focusing instead on the subjective experience of perception and audience reception.¹²

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¹⁰ Sami Zubaida, Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East, 10.
My study seeks to expand this discussion by adding to the growing body of literature on decolonization research on Islamic arts. Currently, the most common research on representation of cultures and identities in Islamic arts focuses on issues related to the dichotomous, Western-biased nature of religious and secular approaches, which I engage in the “Key Terms” section below and throughout the remainder of this chapter. To my knowledge at the time of this study, research has only begun to scratch the surface of the issue of Islamic identities in art from a postcolonial or critical feminist perspective.¹³ Scholars have stressed the need for more research to engage in the decolonization of Islamic arts, and this study is a response to that call to action.¹⁴ Specifically, it contributes to the field by further problematizing Western-centric definitions of Islamic arts, and it explores the impact of Orientalist legacies and modern Islamophobia on contemporary artistic representations of Islamic identities and cultures. It does so by reviewing the complex, overlapping sociohistorical, cultural, and religious contexts of Islamic arts throughout history (chapter 1) and exploring how Orientalist theory (chapter 2) enables scholarly examination of the colonial ideologies and biases impacting the contemporary art world and museum spaces (chapter 3), stressing further the need to decolonize these fields. As such, one line of inquiry that this project examines is the question of cultural appropriation in Islamic arts, and it considers the extent to which artists have a responsibility to represent culture in their art with integrity. Within this discussion, I also unpack concepts of self-appropriation and self-Orientalism. As chapter 3 outlines, appropriation of Islamic cultures is rarely acknowledged or given attention by academics and popular media due to deeply ingrained Western understandings of these cultures. Although there is a shortage of Islamic arts research on the practice of cultural appropriation in art related to Islamic cultures, some scholars, such as Francine Giese, Mercedes


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Volait, Ariane Varela Braga, and Wendy Shaw have studied appropriation of Islamicate cultures in terms of architectural design, fashion, and art, among other spheres. Therefore, this study adds to growing scholarly and artistic discussions by engaging in case study analysis of artists who have not been studied by Western academics (Sarah Al Abdali, Abdulnasser Gharem, Ajlan Gharem, Moath Alofi, Nasser Al Salem) along with artists who have been studied (Sandow Birk, M.C. Escher, Shirin Neshat, Jamelie Hassan, Colleen Wolstenholme) but not in the context of cultural appropriation or in the broader context of Orientalist legacies in Islamic arts. Additionally, chapter 5’s analysis of artists using historical Islamic artistic and cultural themes of the veil, the mosque, and calligraphy adds to existing research by exploring contemporary artistic representations of these themes and the extent to which artists are engaging in or challenging the Orientalist ideologies discussed in chapter 2.

Finally, as both a Muslim woman and a visual artist, I bring a critical perspective to this field of research, as my methodology section below further discusses. I also add to the ongoing discussion of how to conceptualize Islamic arts by approaching the issue with my own understanding of what it means for art to be “Islamic.” Decolonization scholarship calls for non-Western art and artists to speak for themselves. Thus, as a Saudi female artist, who has resided in North America and currently lives in Saudi Arabia, I bring a unique voice and experience, which this project reflects.

15. Francine Giese, Mercedes Volait, and Ariane Varela Braga, À l’orientale: Collecting, Displaying and Appropriating Islamic Art and Architecture in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (Boston: Brill, 2019); Wendy M. K. Shaw, What is ‘Islamic Art’?
Key Terms and Issues

To accurately and thoroughly problematize representations of identities and cultures in Islamic arts, it is first necessary to define and discuss some key issues related to this topic. Defining these terms and how I use them in this study is key to understanding the scope of this research. How does one define Islamic arts? Is any art made by someone of Muslim cultural, spiritual, or geographic background automatically “Islamic?” Should people outside Muslim cultures represent the religion, cultures, and Islamic ways of life?

Islamic Art

Scholars have been attempting to answer the question of what it means for art to be “Islamic.” Oleg Grabar’s The Formation of Islamic Art, developed from a lecture series, is a formative work that attempted to answer this and many related questions. This work poses an important question regarding whether at the time of the formation of Islamic civilization there occurred some elements of doctrine that directly or indirectly affected the arts, and whether these elements, if they existed, were of sufficient magnitude and originality to impose a unique direction to Islamic art.

This inquiry provokes an important call to research the accuracy of perceiving Islamic arts as a unified field or category at all. These questions are critical in challenging scholars to engage in research regarding the definition and understanding of these arts. As referenced by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, I must acknowledge that although Grabar’s work has provoked important questions and prompted increased scholarly interest in inquiry into this field, his essays have

received some criticism for their “selective […] use of sources” and casual thinking.\textsuperscript{18} However, Blair and Bloom do not agree with this criticism and emphasize that Grabar’s work is a critical jumping-off point for the study of Islamic arts.\textsuperscript{19} Given the complexities of defining art that gleams inspiration from an entire culture, this study understands that there is no such thing as Islamic art in its historical or contemporary iteration, just as there is no such thing as a homogenous “Islamic culture.” Rather, just as the term “Islamic culture” encompasses a diverse set of cultures, there are also many types of Islamic arts. Blair and Bloom disagree with the common definition of Islamic art as

\begin{quote}
‘The art made by artists or artisans whose religion was Islam, for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for purposes that are restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting.’\textsuperscript{20} It therefore encompasses much, if not most, of the art produced over fourteen centuries in the ‘Islamic lands,’ usually defined as the arid belt covering much of West Asia but stretching from the Atlantic coast of North Africa and Spain on the west to the steppes of Central Asia and the Indian Ocean on the east.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Along with Blair and Bloom, many art scholars reject this Western-centric definition and contend that Islamic arts, like Islamic cultures, are many, multiple, varied, and diverse, which Chapter 1 of this study further discusses.\textsuperscript{22} An understanding of this diversity is essential in order to approach representations of Muslims and Islamic cultures, as this study does. With the diversity of the types of arts considered “Islamic,” the very notion that there is such a thing as a singular, stable, homogenous category called Islamic art is problematic; as such, this study looks

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Blair and Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art,” 172. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Blair and Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art.” \\
\textsuperscript{21} Blair and Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art,” 152. \\
\end{flushleft}
at representations of and related to Islamic culture(s) within contemporary art, rather than looking at Islamic art. Again, this study builds on Marshall Hodgson’s term “Islamicate,” which does not confine art to Islamic religious expressions; rather, it refers to a vast civilization with common cultural traditions encompassing interrelated and complex traits of religion that exist across cultural, social, political, and economic spheres. It does not seek to define Islamic art as a unified aesthetic or practice but rather problematizes this popular desire and notion of many Western scholars and museum spaces. Instead, it recognizes it as a diverse field representing a diverse civilization of heterogeneous cultures with common influences and pre-Islamic roots; this reflects the approach of scholars like Blair and Bloom. In fact, what we think of today as Islamic art has been defined by modern projections, looking back from a Western viewpoint; as Islam spread geographically, it adopted architectural styles and features of local cultures into its fold, which over time came to be understood as “Islamic.” Thus, the idea of Islamic art has always been in flux and has transformed over time. To combat the Western bias inherent in this construct and to explore Islamic arts with their complex historical roots in mind, this study understands Islamic arts as broadly encompassing artistic expressions related to diverse, multifaceted Muslim cultures, as scholars such as Sheila Blair, Jonathan Bloom, and Gülru Necipoğlu do. Chapter 1 engages in a discussion of how more scholars have perceived and defined Islamic arts throughout history to provide further historical context to this issue.

23. This was first discussed in Oleg Grabar, The Formation of Islamic Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).
Islamic-Context and Non-Islamic-Context Identities

For the purposes of this study, then, this research compares different artists who engage with Islamic religious and cultural subject matter broadly and their individual subject positions. When I began this study, I organized the artists that are featured in this project within the categories of “practicing Muslims,” “cultural Muslims,” and “non-Muslims” to analyze how these different groups are able to represent Islamic cultures. However, as my research progressed, I realized these limiting labels positioned my analysis within the same misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the very issue this study is challenging. Specifically, these categories approach artistic representation from a purely religious perspective with slight acknowledgement of cultural influence; the use of these categories fails to recognize the complex impacts of social class, gender, and other aspects of identity that inform artists’ production and art reception. As such, these categories quickly proved to be limiting lines of analysis. As I further reflected upon this issue, the categories of “artists functioning within Islamic contexts” and “artists not functioning within Islamic contexts” developed as perhaps more generative for the nature of my project. I acknowledge that these categories are still not comprehensive or without faults, as there will always be limits in analysis of identity, influences, motivations, and a multitude of other elements that impact artistic expression, but I believe these categories more broadly situate artists and allow for more room to analyze these complexities.

I define “artists functioning within Islamic contexts” as artists who identify with Islamicate identities; they might be Arab, non-Arab, Muslim, non-Muslim, Arab citizens, or immigrants, but their common characteristic is that they are functioning from an Islamicate perspective shared by Muslim-majority civilizations (borrowing Hodgson’s terminology). I define “artists not functioning within Islamic contexts” as those who do not come from an
Islamicate perspective and are typically outsiders to the faith, culture, and society, but who are nonetheless making Islamicate arts. As a clear-cut example, a white, female, non-Muslim artist born and residing in Canada would fall within this latter category. For simplification and brevity, the remainder of this study will refer to these categories as “Islamic-context artists” and “non-Islamic-context artists.” I acknowledge that these categories are imperfect and the lines separating them are blurry, but within the limits of current terminology and interpretations, they broaden the boundaries of analysis for the purposes of this project.

**Cultural Appropriation and Integrity**

This study analyzes representations of cultures and identities within the frame of artistic integrity. This term is also subjective and problematic, but more appropriately captures the issues at the heart of this study’s exploration of responsibility in cultural representation than terms like “authentic” or “traditional.” I have gleaned my approach to this term from Professor Jin Di’s notion of integrity in literary translation as maintaining “fidelity to the original.”26 Adapting this interpretation, I understand artistic integrity in the context of this study as including representations of Islamic cultures and identities that do not play into stereotypes or Western frames of reference for commercial success or financial gains. This process is challenging to untangle, and this study further opens the conversation up by exploring representation from a position of integrity, comparing contemporary Islamic arts by a variety of artists functioning in diverse contexts. Specifically, artistic “fidelity to the original” will be discussed in chapter 4’s case studies by the absence of cultural appropriation (as defined briefly below) and in chapter 5’s case studies as an absence of the Orientalist tropes chapter 2 engages.

Furthermore, this research uses the categories of “Islamic-context artists” and “non-Islamic-context artists” and the notion of “integrity” to explore insider/outsider representational differences among artists in the field of contemporary Islamic arts. The study also then engages with questions of cultural appropriation and the politics of representation or self-representation, especially in an era of Islamophobia. Cultural appropriation, which I discuss in further detail in chapter 4, is a pervasive issue that often offends, exploits, or misrepresents marginalized groups in society.27 This study looks at the role of cultural appropriation in influencing representations in Islamic arts. My understanding of cultural appropriation has been informed by the definition of cultural appropriation put forward by Patti Lenard and Peter Balint, who understand it as an inappropriate adoption of culture with “the existence of a power imbalance between the cultural appropriator and those from whom the practice or symbol is appropriated; and the presence of profit that accrues to the appropriator,”28 with additional factors for consideration, including knowledge of the act by the appropriator and significant outcry against the act.29 I qualify that, for this study, as academics have not yet researched many of the selected artists that I discuss in this study, this outcry does not need to be universal or even international in nature, but considered in the sense that the media, academics, and the cultural communities being appropriated are challenging the act and expressing some offense. Including the issue of cultural appropriation is critical to this study because it has a direct impact on the choices of cultural representations artists make. In particular, as chapter 3 explores, colonial legacies and Orientalist ideologies shape art-world standards and museum choices in terms of how fields like Islamic arts are categorized and exhibited, and which artists and artworks they exhibit. In turn, as gatekeepers

to the global art world, artists making contemporary Islamic arts often feel pressure to culturally appropriate Islamic cultures to align their art with Western norms in order to gain access to the art world and achieve commercial success.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

To engage with the aforementioned areas of inquiry, this study seeks to complicate the colonial legacy of Islamic visual cultures and its studies, and it aims to enrich understandings of cultural production and representation from a critical feminist and postcolonial approach. To consider the representation of Islamic cultures by artists who are both implicated in and removed from Islamic cultures, I use a cultural studies approach, which allows for interdisciplinary readings and analyses of cultural production and representation.\(^{30}\) Within this broad field of cultural studies and analyses, the approach and methods of postcolonial and feminist theory offer particular relevance to the ways in which my study considers alternative practices and frameworks in which critical representations related to Islamic cultures are and continue to be made. As an artist with lived experiences in both Middle Eastern and Western societies, and therefore an artist who embodies both “insider” and “outsider” narratives, these methodological approaches nuance cultural and self-analyses and readings of diverse kinds of representations often contained under the term “Islamic art(s).” Within these complex suites of study and practice are unique contributions from scholars, activists, and practitioners who have for decades modelled other ways of being, seeing, and relating to the world. This directly pertains to questions of representation, and in particular, questions of contested cross-cultural politics, as Indigenous and feminist scholars and artists and their anti- and decolonial critiques have long

shown us. For my project, I draw and build on these important legacies and continued bodies of work to think through different ways in which Middle Eastern and Islamic cultures are represented and misrepresented in contemporary art.

Specifically, the field of postcolonial studies gleans from Indigenous, anti-colonial, and decolonial practices and discourses. At the forefront of my project is the field and notion of Orientalism, introduced by cultural studies scholar Edward Said, which offers important critiques of Eurocentrism and its representational fantasies. This is relevant to insider (Islamic-context) and outsider (non-Islamic-context) artists and institutions who work with Islamic-related content or amid explicitly geographic or familial Islamic contexts. I draw on Said’s Orientalist theory and critiques to unsettle popular representations in art that include Islamic symbols like the veil or mosque, which evoke sentiments of the “exotic” or inferior. I am also influenced by Indigenous and decolonial scholars and artists who argue for critical self-representation as an important strategy for gaining (more) agency in the arts, which informs my own practice as an artist who seeks to resist colonial and Orientalist tropes that have proliferated the arts. As discussed in chapter 3, cultural appropriation is a prevalent issue in Islamic arts; Orientalist logic often perpetuates artistic representations of stereotypes, oversimplification of identity and culture, and general homogenization.

Exploring these theoretical underpinnings in more depth, Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s influential book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* reminds us that “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and

31. Islam is not only practiced or culturally relevant in the Middle East; it is a prevalent global reality with far-reaching impacts. It is equally important to note that not all people who live in or come from the Middle East are Muslim. However, due to limitations of scope and my own familiarity with Middle Eastern artists and my lived experience as a Middle Eastern artist, the case studies in chapters 4 and 5 that discuss Islamic-context artists will focus primarily on Middle Eastern artists, with M.C. Escher being the one exception.
33. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What Is (the Wrong of) Cultural Appropriation?”
colonialism,” as it was the “collective memory [and fantasies] of imperialism that were and have been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West.” As chapter 3 further explores, this occurred through traditional archival collecting, museum, and representational practices. To challenge and contrast this biased practice, alternative narratives have developed, reflecting methods to resist these tendencies, wherein counter-memory, counter-movements, and counter-practices have the potential to disrupt popular discourse. Today, settler-diasporic and Indigenous artists and cultural workers continue to be at the forefront of decolonizing the arts. Their works, critiques, and demands have made clear the ways in which “the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form […] reproduce[s] the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend.” As Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard argues, “when we begin to collectively redirect our struggles […] towards a resurgent politics of recognition premised on self-actualization, direct action, and the resurgence of cultural practices that are attentive to the subjective and structural composition of settler-colonial power,” we can enable political and creative alternatives to recognition. In this way, much of the critical work I call for (and practice as an artist) can be described as what Coulthard articulates as engagement in a reverse method of translation, which constitutes a kind of refusal.

35. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1
The field of feminist studies offers another important framework through which to approach an understanding of refusal and difference, and to challenge the limitations of colonial, Orientalist, and Islamophobic stereotypes and their impact on/of cultural representations. Rather than view something as a stable category, approach, or way of being, doing, or knowing, feminism as a far-reaching discursive field and framework argues for multiple, messy, and at times, contested and overlapping ways of studying and approaching an issue. In the same way, I have already emphasized the fact that there is no singular reality as “Islamic art” as a category or movement; rather, there are many different interpretations of what relates to and is entailed by the term “Islamic art(s).” Feminist scholars like Sara Ahmed, amina wadud, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sumi Cho, Leslie McCall, and others emphasize critical, multifarious, and intersectional analyses, which reflect the complex and nuanced realities of our lives.40 Similarly, I bring these critical lenses to the ways in which I approach the study and representation of Islamic cultures as both an academic and an Islamic-context artist. Specifically, Indigenous scholar Clare Land argues that it is intersectionality that supports the notion of an interconnected web of social interactions, in which power relations intersect to enable individuals and peoples to understand themselves and their identities in terms of privilege and subordination.41 And so, collectively, these methods and methodological approaches enable me to complicate static/singular


understandings and representations of Islam and Islamic cultures, especially when I engage with my case studies in chapters 4 and 5.

**Methodology**

*Research Questions and Scope*

My research investigates the critical issue of Islamic identities and contemporary cultural representation and production of Islamic material culture. The multitude of elements at play, including Islamic insider/outsider identities, interactions with and responses to Orientalism, cultural appropriation, and artistic responsibility, require a variety of enquiries. To analyze this complex, multifaceted problem, my research aims to explore the following key questions:

1. How does the history of Orientalism impact contemporary artists creating art referencing Islamic practices and cultures, as well as the museum spaces exhibiting their art?
2. To what extent are artists functioning from an Islamic context displaying cultural appropriation or Orientalist ideologies in their art as compared to artists functioning outside an Islamic context?
3. To what extent do artists have a responsibility to demonstrate artistic integrity in their representations of culture?

*Research Methods*

I use contemporary case studies that draw on fieldwork analysis—other artists’ works and their sites of presentation—to explore the continued relevance of spirituality and religion and the impacts of external framing (Orientalism) regarding questions of Islamic artistic representation.
in the contemporary context. To do this, I employ a mixed methods approach to my collection and analysis of data, presented here as case studies in chapters 4 and 5.

Archival Data Collection and Analysis and Fieldwork

Between 2013 and 2019, I collected data through online research, exploring sources like the V&A Jameel Prize website, the Saudi Art Council catalogues and website, the Gharem Studio archive, and the Edge of Arabia archives and publications. Specifically, I searched art websites and archives (2015–2020) to find artwork produced by a selection of Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists.\(^{42}\) I selected work from these artists based partly on availability of analysis and research from art scholars and critics. However, I also selected artists whose works had not undergone wide scholarly analysis, taking this study as an opportunity to widen the discussion on contemporary Islamic arts and its producers. In addition, I searched art websites and archives (2015–2020) to find artwork incorporating themes of the veil, mosque, and calligraphy, and representations of utilizations and challenges to Orientalist tropes.\(^ {43}\) To select


cases that fall within this study’s research scope, I made thematic notes, targeting relevant words such as “Orientalist,” “colonial,” “feminist,” “veil,” “mosque,” “calligraphy,” and “contemporary.”

I also collected data in the form of fieldwork notes by experiencing art in person (2013–2019) at institutions such as the Aga Khan Museum (Toronto); the National Gallery of Canada Museum (Ottawa); the Vancouver Biennale; the Misk Art Institute (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia); the Ithra Museum (Dhahran, Saudi Arabia); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Athr Gallery (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia); the Hafez Gallery (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia); the Museum of Contemporary Art (Toronto); and the Museum of Modern Art (New York). Using these sources enabled me to explore a variety of Islamic artworks to acquire a broad sense of the museum and curatorial worlds. During my fieldwork, I kept a detailed journal of notes, again, based on the themes outlined above that are relevant to this study, which I draw from throughout my study.

To analyze the data, I engage in a qualitative analysis of archival data to examine case studies. Specifically, I draw from artistic and scholarly critiques, as well as my own cultural studies background and insight as an Arab, native-Arabic-speaking, female, Muslim artist, to

compare representation in these artworks. I also use the postcolonial and critical feminist frameworks discussed above to critically examine the ways in which the selected artists are depicting Islamic cultures and identities in their art. In chapter 4, I use archival data from the websites and exhibitions listed above to examine differences in Islamic-context artists’ and non-Islamic-context artists’ representations of cultures and identities in Islamic arts. I explore these various forms of archival data to explore similarities and differences in case study comparisons of non-Islamic-context artists (Sandow Birk and M.C. Escher) and Islamic-context artists (Abdulnasser Gharem, Sarah Al Abdali, Jamelie Hassan, and Shirin Neshat).

In chapter 5, I also used archival data to identify themes of the veil, mosque, and calligraphy to engage in additional case study comparisons to examine artists (Colleen Wolstenholme and Ajlan Gharem) who I contend often utilize Orientalist tendencies in their representations, as opposed to artists (Moath Alofi and Nasser Al Salem) who are challenging Orientalist representations of Islamic cultures and identities. I selected case studies based on artists’ prominence—or lack thereof in some cases to further develop this field of inquiry—in scholarly research as well as their fit for the categories under study. I also chose case studies of Saudi artists with whom I am professionally connected, and as such, have a degree of understanding of the context of their work as well as a knowledge of Saudi art communities’ reception of their work. I selected the themes because of their prominence in historical arts (architecture and calligraphy) and popular, loaded symbolism of Islamic cultures (veil). Following this comparative case study analysis, I explore artistic responsibility in representing cultures and identities in Islamic arts.
Outline of Study

This study engages in cultural analysis to explore the question and complications of representations of Islamic identities and cultures in contemporary art. Chapter 1 addresses the question of what the field of Islamic arts is by drawing from historical examples of Islamic artistic expressions across time and space, considering examples primarily, though not exclusively, from the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman periods. This chapter specifically explores diverse developments of architecture, calligraphy, and paintings, as these are the modes of expression I explore in my analysis of Orientalism in chapter 2 (paintings) and in my contemporary case studies in chapters 4 and 5 (architecture and calligraphy). Of course, Islamic material culture is vast, and mediums such as ceramics and textiles are significant, but they are outside the limited scope of this study. There are multiple other geographic contexts, types of visual culture, and examples throughout the expansive history of Islamic arts, but the examples included are representative of the specific areas of analysis of this study, namely Orientalism and cultural appropriation. This chapter provides a historical overview of Islamic arts and the various shifts and overlaps between its religious and sociohistorical origins and the continued overlap in the contemporary context. The chapter goes on to identify the ways in which Islamic arts should be conceptualized and classified differently from other religious arts and introduces the discussion of the current scholarly division between religious and secular interpretations of Islamic arts. As such, this chapter highlights that though “Islamic art” exists as a classification system in museum and art galleries, there is generally no coherent body of work or cultural production that can be easily identified as “Islamic art” because the Muslim world has always been diverse and heterogeneous.
Chapter 2 provides a review of current literature that aims to examine this field of study’s conceptual backdrop, namely Orientalism. It explores research related to the history of Orientalism and colonial legacies, the theory of Orientalism as developed by Edward Said, along with critiques of that ground-breaking theory to defend and situate my application of Orientalist theory in this study. I engage with Orientalist tropes that largely emerged by reviewing paintings and photography from the height of the Orientalist period (19th–20th centuries). The tropes I consider include the lustful Arab oppressor, the inferior Arab, the rich prince, the terrorist villain, harem women, and the oppressed Muslim woman/the exotic unknown; I also consider how these tropes have informed stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in popular culture. I then explore the relationship between Orientalist paintings, their “othering” tropes, and the perpetuation of those tropes along with Islamophobia as a modern transformation of Orientalism. Overviewing the Orientalist ideologies of “othering” that underpin the field of Oriental studies by Europeans highlights how modern interpretations of Islamic arts (explored in chapter 3) do not align with or reflect the complexities of Islamic arts history as discussed in chapter 1. The chapter concludes by discussing the gendered nature of Islamophobia and by signalling one way in which these Orientalist worldviews are sustained, which is in the emergence of the museum and art institutions, a topic further explored in chapter 3.

Chapter 3 engages in a discussion of museum studies. It explores the role of museums and art institutions in society in general as a mechanism for education and cultural exchange. It also outlines the role of art institutions as a legitimizing force for artists in the global art world and discusses the relationship between colonialism and museum spaces, and the ways in which legacies of colonial looting and Orientalist ideologies continue to impact these spaces. This discussion then highlights how the world of Islamic arts has been categorized and imposed by
external actors, who have drawn the boundaries of civilizational art production and continue to sustain it through limited Orientalist frameworks. Describing how Islamic arts are currently exhibited and some of the decolonial efforts undertaken to rectify issues of misrepresentation and “othering,” this chapter builds on discussions of art history, Islamic arts categorizations, and Orientalist legacies as outlined in chapter 1 and chapter 2 by further contextualizing the impact of these legacies on representations of Islamic cultures and identities in museum spaces. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Orientalist legacies are inherent in museum history, along with how museum spaces act as gatekeepers, shape art world expectations, and facilitate artistic cultural appropriation and self-appropriation for artists to gain entry to this world. The resulting motivations for Islamic-context artists to culturally appropriate impact representations of Islamic cultures and identities, which is the focus of case studies in chapter 4 and chapter 5.

Chapter 4 and chapter 5 are the main substantive chapters of this dissertation. Chapter 4 begins by explaining the categorization of groups of artists (Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists) who create art relating to Islamic subject matter to evaluate differences in representations of Islamic cultures and identities. Through the discussion of case studies of artists, such as Sandow Birk, M.C. Escher, Shirin Neshat, Abdulnasser Gharem, Jamelie Hassan, and Sarah Al Abdali, the study finds that artists within both categories display elements that represent Islamic cultures and identities through practices of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation. The subsequent analysis includes a discussion of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation within each case study that situates the pervasive, deeply ingrained influence of colonial/Orientalist frameworks on both people coming from Islamic contexts and those who are not, which were surveyed in chapter 2. However, the revelations of this discussion also highlight
that artists in both categories are making efforts to represent Islamic cultures and identities from a place of artistic integrity, demonstrating that this is not an either/or issue.

Chapter 5 continues with an examination of case studies of artists such as Colleen Wolstenholme, Ajlan Gharem, Moath Alofi, and Nasser Al Salem, who challenge and utilize Orientalist logic through themes of the veil, mosque, and calligraphy. Analysis of these case studies demonstrates how Islamic themes of veil, mosque, and calligraphy can be used in ways that both perpetuate and challenge Orientalist views. I analyze all case studies across chapter 5, bringing in further comparison to those discussed in chapter 4. I then engage in a discussion of the issues of artistic responsibility and personal gains, highlighting artistic social responsibility in terms of art’s real-world impacts and concluding that artists do have some level of responsibility in terms of their creative intentionality.

The concluding chapter summarizes my broader study. In the case studies of Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists, I find that these categories or identity labels have little to no connection to representation of Islamic cultures and identities based on non-Islamic vs. Islamic perspectives; identities are multidimensional. However, cultural appropriation is a factor impacting cultural forms of representation by artists in both categories. It also describes how the case study comparison of artists’ Orientalist or non-Orientalist framing shows that artists can use the identifiable Islamic symbols of the veil, mosque, and calligraphy to both utilize and challenge Orientalist thinking. The chapter concludes by solidifying the study’s significance in the field of Islamic arts research and discussing limitations of the study, primarily in terms of number of case studies and the problematic nature of terminologies, and providing suggestions for future research, including opportunities for interviewing some of the artists analyzed throughout the study. It also calls for the need to further decolonize art studies broadly.
Chapter 1: History of Islamic Art

Introduction

Islamic arts is an intriguing, diverse field that vastly spans both time and space. The concept of “Islamic art,” which is commonly used by scholars and art institutions, is itself a modern construct influenced by Orientalist perceptions, as this chapter and the next illustrate. To begin to understand the complexities in categorizing and perceiving Islamic arts, as well as artistic responsibility in representational integrity, this chapter outlines a selective history of Islamic arts for the purposes of this study. The overview is intended to situate the chapter’s latter discussion regarding rigid, binary categorizations of Islamic arts in the contemporary context, which I discuss in the section entitled “Current Approaches to Framing Identity in Islamic Arts”; I also aim to provide background for the ways in which current binary divisions of interpretation and categorization are influenced by Orientalist ideologies that separate the field from its multifaceted historical contexts.

Usually, in scholarly discussions of art history, “Islamic art” is framed as encompassing an impressive 1,400 years, spanning from the Umayyad Caliphate (Baghdad) in 661 CE to the Safavid (Persia), Mughal (South Asia), and Ottoman (Anatolia) Empires in the 16th to the 20th centuries. Although many types of art and forms of expressions have been utilized in Islamic arts throughout history and across vast geographies of Islamic empires, the limited scope of this study had led me to focus on select time periods in Islamic arts history, such as the early Umayyad Empire, the Safavid Empire, and the Mughal Empire, as well as a discussion of
cultural exchange during the Ottoman Empire.¹ Inclusion of this historical overview is intended as necessary context to understand how the field of Islamic arts has changed over time and how that evolution has subsequently misaligned with contemporary interpretations and perceptions of this broad field of study, especially for the contemporary artists that I engage in chapters 4 and 5. Further, this context provides a framework to examine how and why Islamic arts are situated and viewed in the contemporary art world. This is not intended to be an exhaustive study of Islamic art history, as that is beyond the scope of this chapter, and in fact, this study alone. However, this chapter uses select examples across history and geographies of Islamic cultures and forms of artistic expression to (1) show the relationship of Islamic arts to overlapping religious and cultural expressions as an important historical precedent, (2) explore how trends of religious, cultural, and political fusion in historical Islamic arts have continued in pre-modern, modern, and post-modern contexts, and (3) begin to investigate the inapplicable, binary framing of Islamic arts as secular or religious. These discussions provide essential background to further contextualize chapter 2’s exploration of the role of Orientalism in Islamic arts and chapter 3’s discussion of museum studies.

A Brief History of Islamic Arts and Interpretations

According to Islamic studies art scholars like Sheila Blair and Johnathan Bloom, Islamic arts proliferated alongside the expansion of Islam across what we today call the Middle East.² The

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¹ In Arabic, the Ottoman Empire is known as khalifat e usmania. For background on the origins of the Ottoman Caliphate, see Mehmet Fuat Köprülü, The Origins of the Ottoman Empire (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).
latter geographical imaginary is itself a product of colonial construction. Islamic arts were a political, cultural, and social tool expediently employed to inspire spiritual reflection and practice; these modes and styles of representation facilitated ways to uniquely reflect the (rising) religion and to unite viewers and worshippers through mutual recognition and a recognition of Allah (God), in a tradition—similar to the period of Christian iconoclasm that dominated the reign of Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717–741 CE)—that prohibits depictions or icons of God. The Qur’an 5:92 states, “You who believe, intoxicants and gambling, idolatrous practices, and [divining with] arrows are repugnant acts—Satan’s doing—shun them so that you may prosper.” However, in some contradiction to this tradition of aniconism, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is said to have protected a painting of Jesus and Mary in the Ka’ba. I further explore the history of aniconism in the discussion of paintings later in this chapter. Practices of aniconism provide one explanation for why calligraphy (Figure 1) and geometric design (Figure 2) have featured prominently throughout Islamic arts history.

3. The idea of the Middle East emerged, as a product of imperial and colonial projects by colonial forces like the British and France. Specifically, through the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, Britain and France distributed the Arab provinces of the former Ottoman Empire to comprise what we now think of today as the “Middle East.” More information on this colonial project and construction of the “Middle East” in relation to Western Europe can be found in Malcolm Yapp, The Making of the Modern Near East 1792–1923 (New York: Routledge, 1987).
Figure 1. Leaf from the Blue Qur’an showing Sura 30: 28–32. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 2. Mihrab (Prayer Niche). Mosaic, 1354-55 CE. Iran, Isfahan. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This section delves into the religious and cultural origins of the field of Islamic arts and the complex ways in which these spheres overlap—even though they are often viewed as dichotomous, mutually exclusive concepts, as will be further discussed below—in contemporary art and historical analysis. In addition to discussions on early Islamic arts, such as that produced during the Umayyad period (661–750 CE), this history largely focuses on art produced during the Safavid (1501–1722 CE) and Mughal (1526–1857 CE) Empires. I also include some examples of art from the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923 CE) to explore overlap of styles and themes, as well as examples of cultural exchange across geographies. I have chosen to focus on art during these periods because the years 1501–1722, which span periods of both the Safavid and Mughal (as well as Ottoman) dynasties, are at times regarded as the golden age of Islamic art. Although the idea of a “golden age” is itself a Western construct based on ethnocentric ideas of good or advanced art, the art produced during these periods is an important subject of study in this field. Contemporary artists continue to draw from the traditions of calligraphy, architecture, and painting developed and expanded upon during these times, and as such, the art of these empires is significant in the context of Islamic arts’ history and evolution through to contemporary trends. The combination of sociopolitical, historical, religious, and cultural elements expressed through art as Islamic civilizations spread, interacted with one another and other cultures, and consolidated power in these periods reveals the complexities of modern definitions and interpretations of what characterizes “Islamic art.” In the following sections, I engage with some expressions of Islamic arts throughout history, particularly (1) architecture and sacred spaces, (2) calligraphy, and (3) paintings.

Architectural Expressions of Art

In Muslim societies, architectural sites were practical spaces, but they were also meant to symbolize sacred spaces beyond this realm. These spaces were deemed to imbue baraka (spiritual presence) in some ways, such as through the interment of holy figures like the Prophet Muhammad and wali (saints) in Sufism or imams (religious leaders) in Shi‘ism. Societies commonly used mosques as spaces for communal gathering, prayer, wedding ceremonies, political courts, and planning for war. The Arabic language reflects the multipurpose nature of these structures: masjid is a word for mosque that means a place of prostration, and jami‘e is often interpreted as “originally refer[ing] to the physical place in which people gather.” These architectural spaces were also monuments to holy figures and mystical sites; they were not necessarily art for art’s sake, but rather a reflection of one’s place in the world—a world that centred on the ultimate, Allah. Islamic architectural designs, such as mosques and shrines, are rich with religious significance and cultural connectivity. As such, these spaces exemplify the overlapping nature of religion and culture throughout Islamic art history. This section provides examples that showcase the ways in which Islamic architecture has evolved over the centuries, but also the ways in which these architectural developments were informed by local regional art before the advent of Islam in many of these geographies. Thus, these examples of Islamic arts and architecture—as conceptualized through modern frames—emerged through a process of transmission and transformation over time.

12. Mosques often served as spaces where rulers would host foreign officials, and historically, rulers of Islamic empires would even reside in or very near mosques. These spaces demonstrated political strength and power. For more information, see Hope Collins, “The Mosque as a Political, Economic, and Social Institution.”
Examples of Classical Islamic Architecture

Islamic architectural traditions date back to the 7th and 8th centuries. The famous Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Figure 3) is an early example of Islamic architecture. As a precursor to modern mosques, this shrine and monument commemorates a significant historical and mystical event in the Muslim tradition. The Dome of the Rock is an important holy site, as Muslims widely believe the rock is constructed around the location of the Prophet’s *isra* (Night Journey) and subsequent *miʿraj*, in which he ascended to heaven. This religious structure adheres to the Qur’anic principle of aniconism, which has varying interpretations and schools of thought, some of which only oppose figural representations in prayer houses and three-dimensional representations. Still, the structure incorporates Coptic, Sassanian, and Byzantine elements in its decorative styling and serves as an early example of influences from outside emerging Islamic civilizations.  

For example, it borrows from Byzantine mosaic techniques and aesthetics as inspiration for its vegetal motifs. The Dome of the Rock emphasizes geometric relationships in its architectural design. Architect Doron Chen notes that this architectural structure incorporates multiple shapes, including octagons, squares, and circles.

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The Dome of the Rock also sets a religious precedent in Islamic artwork by using elements to play with “color, texture, light, and shadow to create celestial environments that attempt to transcend the dimensions of earthly geometry and space.” This early, and arguably most significant, work of art and architectural achievement provides the religious foundations on which later Islamic artworks build. Still, the purpose of the Dome’s construction is debatable. Nasser Rabbat explains that the structure serves no obvious purpose other than that of pure commemoration, and the motivations for its construction remain unclear and contested. Scholars such as Oleg Grabar and Nasser Rabbat view the Dome as a historically political statement to convey Umayyad power throughout the region. Rabbat notes that Umayyad caliph

‘Abd al-Malik’s (646–705 CE) choice to build “a highly visible dome on a site celebrated in the past by David and Solomon and sanctified in the present by Islam […] symbolized [his] political aspirations, and balanced his monarchical inclinations and religious convictions.”20 In one interpretation, selecting the site of construction as the location where Jewish and Christian religious traditions believe Abraham agreed to sacrifice Isaac may be understood as a political statement that served to establish the city as a religious centre for surrounding societies as well as to situate Islam as the sovereign ruling authority in Jerusalem.21 In terms of political symbolism in architecture, the gold covering selected for the dome signified the dominance of Islam and the ruling empire; gold was a precious material signifying power and prestige.22 This edifice represented a political claim to dominance for the growing Muslim empire as well as the beginnings of establishing a defined, identifiable culture in the region. Even in modern times, the Dome of the Rock is viewed as both a space for religious devotional practices and commemoration and a cultural icon used in advertisements, restaurant pamphlets, and brochures to attract tourists and economic benefit.23 It is a sacred space of both spiritual, cultural, and political significance for numerous societies.

The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus (Figure 4), one of the first examples of a Christian church that was repurposed to a mosque, displays traditional domes and minarets used in Islamic arts.24 This structure drew inspiration from local, pre-Islamic styles; for example, the height of the dome was a common feature of pre-Islamic palaces of “southern Arabia, such as Ghumdan,

the famed pre-Islamic palace at San’a’ in the Yemen.”

25 Even some of the pre-Islamic church materials were retained for the Umayyad Mosque, and many pre-Islamic architectural features, such as vine ornamentation, were incorporated in the mosque, which was designed by Coptic craftsmen.26 Moreover, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey (Figures 5 and 6) exemplifies the shifts of early architectural spaces between religious and cultural purposes, which often overlapped.27 The Hagia Sophia has a long history of religious crossover and transformation in its relationship between religious and more “secular” functions. Built by Emperor Justinian between 532 and 537 CE, the structure has evolved in function from an Eastern Christian cathedral to a significant Islamic mosque after Ottoman conquest in 1453 to a museum in the 1930s. In 2020, the structure was transformed back into a mosque at the decree of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan with the understanding that “Christian icons and mosaics would not be damaged.”28 Specifically, a 9th-century mosaic of Mary and Jesus remains in the Hagia Sophia and is currently covered by a cloth.29 These examples of architectural developments from Palestine, Syria, Yemen, and Turkey show that the concept of “Islamic art” was never stable, at least not in architecture. Rather, these sacred spaces changed over time, were frequently

repurposed for political gain, and borrowed from cultures and practices of the new regions that Islam spread to as it developed.

Figure 4. Great Mosque of Damascus. Photo. Damascus, Syria, Metropolitan Museum of Art.\(^{30}\)

Figure 5. Hagia Sophia. Photo. Istanbul, Turkey, Metropolitan Museum of Art.\(^{31}\)

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Established Sufi shrines, dating back to approximately the 9th century—although rudimentary, non-descript tombs were constructed earlier, as the practice of venerating these holy figures emerged slowly—also serve as examples of Islamic architectural developments that were informed by the devotional and cultural expressions of the regions into which Islam spread. Sufi spaces like the *ribāt*/*khānaqāh* were spaces of learning, hospitality, libraries, mosques, and much more. One feature of these broader landscapes were Sufi shrines, dedicated as memorialization of a deceased teacher, who was revered as saintly because of her or his spiritual proximity to the divine.

35. These structures were lodges or gathering spaces for adherents to Sufism. For more information on Sufi spaces and practices, see Alexandre Papas, ed., *Sufi Institutions* (Boston: Brill, 2020).
Architecturally, Sufi tombs are often comprised of “a cube chamber topped by a hemispherical dome,”36 which is a pre-Islamic “funerary structure found in Sasanian Iran and Balochistan.”37 They also typically have muqarnas (vaulted ornamentation) and incorporate arches, domes, red sandstone, brickwork, gardens, and calligraphic inscriptions, frequently borrowing from non-Islamic architectural traditions.38 These shrines are sacred places where holy figures—non-holy figures were buried differently—are buried and commemorated, and many Muslims perform pilgrimages to these graves to be in close proximity to saints, who they believe to have achieved union with God.39 Many Muslims perceive these sacred spaces as places of healing of worldly wounds.40 Practices of pilgrimages and ritual activities to shrines, be it for Sufi teachers or Shi’a imams and family members of the Prophet Muhammad are not without controversy. The ziyara (visitation to venerated places) has sparked debates among theologians and legal scholars, some of whom, from a Salafi fundamentalist perspective, express concern about

the propriety of praying directly to the dead, and of seeking intercession on behalf of oneself or others; whether it is allowed to make physical contact with a grave; and the maximum height to which a grave can be erected without becoming an idol.41

Opposition to the practice of ziyara stems from the 13th century, during which time, medieval Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE) called for the legal condemnation of grave visitation. Even though Ibn Taymiyya himself was a Sufi, he was critical of some aspects of Sufi

38. Samina Quraeshi et al., Sacred Spaces.”
40. Iftikhar Ahmed Charan et al., “Culture and Religious Perspective.”
devotional practices.\(^4^2\) In contemporary times, the Saudi government has prohibited veneration of shrines, viewing such practices as a form of idol worship, and some extremist Salafi Muslim groups have demolished shrines and gravesites around the Middle East.\(^4^3\) Some acts of destruction include the 1994 destruction of the grave of a local saint in Aden, Yemen; the grave of the Prophet Muhammad’s mother, Amina bint Wahb, in al-Abwa, Saudi Arabia; the grave of Muslim scholar Ja’far al-Sadiq (d. 765 CE) in Medina; and the grave of the Prophet Muhammad’s wife, Khadija, in Mecca.\(^4^4\)

Despite these theological controversies, shrines have historically been places of social, cultural, and religious significance. Jannat al-Baqi in Medina (Figure 7), the graveyard near the Prophet Muhammad’s burial site, is arguably the most famous commemorative space, with Muslims commonly making pilgrimages there to honour the Prophet Muhammad.\(^4^5\) Before its destruction in the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries, following early Islamic architectural practices, a magnificent domed edifice stood above the cemetery.\(^4^6\) Since its destruction, no architecture has been constructed above the cemetery, but it continues to be a sacred space visited by many Muslims.

Another, much later, important burial site for local devotees and pilgrims includes the 14\(^{th}\) century Shrine of Shaykh Safi al-Din Ishaq in Azerbaijan (Figure 8).\(^4^7\) This shrine includes a complex of buildings to serve devotees as well as for prayer, storage, and cooking.\(^4^8\) The complex that contains the shrine includes spaces for spiritual and ritual practice with commercial

\(^{4^2}\) Ondrej Baranek and Pavel Tupek, “From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction.”
\(^{4^3}\) Ondrej Baranek and Pavel Tupek, “From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction.”
\(^{4^4}\) Ondrej Baranek and Pavel Tupek, “From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction.”
\(^{4^5}\) Sophia Rose Arjana, Pilgrimage in Islam.
\(^{4^6}\) Ondrej Baranek and Pavel Tupek, “From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction.”
\(^{4^8}\) Sheila Canby, “Sufis, Shahs, and Shi’s: Shrines of the Safavids, 1500-1650 CE.”
and cultural exchange, showcasing the site as both a spiritual and devotional site but also one of social and economic activities. The tomb includes architectural forms, such as domes and calligraphic decorations. As a social gathering site and place of worship and commemoration, this shrine is an early example of Islamic architecture that was designed for both religious and non-religious purposes, and shrines have tended to share its architectural styles, and incorporate Arabic calligraphy, a central sarcophagus, arches, minarets, colourful mosaics, domes, and arabesque decoration.

Some buildings of the shrine are constructed primarily with “baked bricks and gypsum,” incorporating local materials similar to other buildings such as the Ilkhanid Palace (13th century CE). Iranian traditions of incorporating bricks and ornamental brickwork date at least as far back as the pre-Islamic Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE). Moreover, these building materials of baked bricks and gypsum were used in modern-day Yemen in buildings such as the Al-Abbas Mosque (12th century CE) as well as for ancient tombs in modern-day Haft Tepe, Iran, demonstrating the wide-ranging use of these materials as well as their pre-Islamic origins.

52. Kishwar Rizvi, *Transformations in Early Safavid Architecture*, 64.
Figure 7. Jannat al-Baqi. Photo: Md iet, May 7, 2011. Medina, Saudi Arabia.57

Figure 8. Sheikh Safi Mausoleum (Tower of Allah). Photo: Adam Jones, June 5, 2012. Ardabil, Iranian Azerbaijan.58

These examples of early architectural developments demonstrate that while buildings like mosques and shrines were designed with devotional purposes and meanings in mind, spirituality and ritual utility were not their only purpose. In addition to serving religious purposes, these spaces were often gathering sites for diverse cultures as well as political expressions of power and dominance, and they continue to act as such today. Moreover, their adoption and adaptation of local architectural designs and traditions validates Grabar’s assertion that “a constant feature of Islamic art and architecture [is that] as Muslim culture established itself in new areas, it took over local traditions and modified them according to its own formal and liturgical habits and practices.”

**Safavid Empire**

The Safavid Empire (1501–1736 CE) saw the construction of multiple marvels of what is considered to represent Islamic architecture. Still, much of what has defined the Safavid Empire’s contributions have themselves been a mixture of Indigenous architectural traditions with expanding notions of Islamic ones. Often interpreted as a product of Timurid (1370–1506 CE) traditions and styles, Safavid architecture also developed from pre-Islamic and largely Persian roots. For example, the spherical design of rooftop domes originated in early forms from Iran’s Achaemenid (550–330 BCE) and Parthian (247 BCE–224 CE) dynasties, and Zoroastrian cosmological principles embedded in Persian ideologies and reflected in pre-Islamic

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architecture\textsuperscript{62} influenced Safavid architectural expressions of paradise. Moreover, Safavids built on the Muslim Seljuk capital of Isfahan, using original Seljuk constructions as an “archetype” for the reimagined city.\textsuperscript{63} The “entire scheme of the [Shah] square, its principles and surrounding compartments; the mosques, the bazaars and the palaces, resembled the pattern of the Old [Seljuk arrangement].”\textsuperscript{64} As a means of showing political and cultural dominance in relation to the Ottoman Empire and surrounding regional powers, the Safavid Empire constructed Iranian cities in its own image and conception of power and religion; as such, Safavid architecture reflects a transformation in conceptions of Persian identity, religious thought and alignment, and political configuration.\textsuperscript{65} In fact, Safavid buildings, whether religious in function or otherwise, were frequently constructed as symbols of an emerging, dominant nation and developing identity within the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{66} Thus, cultural and political motivations and pre-Islamic architectural influences played an important role in Safavid architectural designs, which today are categorized as “Islamic art.”

In addition to these cultural roots, Safavid architecture was defined particularly by a Shi‘a theological and philosophical perspective and Persian cultural influences. The Shah Mosque (1611–1629 CE) (Figure 9) models the tradition of and emphasis on geometric configurations and mathematical symbolism. Specifically, demonstrating the Safavid roots in mystical Islam, the design of this mosque includes a four-\textit{iwan} (rectangular courtyard space) format,\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{63} Farideh Hooshangi, “Isfahan, City of Paradise,” 4.
\textsuperscript{64} Farideh Hooshangi, “Isfahan, City of Paradise,” 26.
\textsuperscript{67} “The architectural unit \textit{iwan} consists of an empty vaulted space enclosed on three sides and open to a courtyard or central space on the fourth.” Ali Uzay Peker, “The Monumental Iwan: A Symbolic Space or a Functional Device?” \textit{Meta Journal of the Faculty of Architecture} 11, no. 1–2 (1991): 5.
establishing a precedent of emphasis on the courtyard the mosque faces. This architectural arrangement represents an attempt at “recreating Paradise on earth” as well as an expression of “dynastic supremacy and the role of the ruler as cosmocreator.” The Shah Mosque is adorned with mosaic tiles comprised of seven colours along with inscriptions in calligraphic design to symbolize the Islamic faith and convey religious principles from the Qur’an. Scholars believe that the iwan courtyard was used for residential and educational purposes in addition to functioning as a space for prayer. Therefore, the application of this structure in the Shah Mosque suggests the mosque’s use as a community gathering space as well as a religious space.

Figure 9. Shah Mosque. Photo: Bernard Gagnon, October 29, 2016. Isfahan, Iran.

Religious symbolism is prevalent throughout Safavid architectural designs. The Lotfollah Mosque (Figure 10), for example, uses openings between the mosque’s dome and base to facilitate natural light\(^76\) to create the appearance that “the dome is floating in the air from the inner view.”\(^77\) This design can be interpreted to “symbolize the mysterious existence of the last Imam, which is somewhere between heaven and earth.”\(^78\) Additionally, the Shiite principle of *taghiye* (interpreted as illusion in defense of faith) is expressed in architectural manifestations, such as in the Imam (Shah) Mosque (Figure 11) in Naghshe-Jahan square’s illusory manner of designing minarets in varying places to create the view that they are either close to or distant from each other, depending on perspective.\(^79\) Architectural historian Henri Stierlin notes that mosque gardens in the Safavid period—as well as before and after—convey the Qur’anic symbol of paradise.\(^80\) Thus, in addition to cultural considerations, religious motivations are important considerations of Safavid architectural spaces.

![Lotfollah Mosque](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior_of_the_Sheikh_Lotfollah_Mosque_2.jpg)

Figure 10. Lotfollah Mosque. Photo: Amirhossein Ahmadpour, October 1, 2018. Isfahan, Iran.\(^81\)

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Some Sufi shrines are also common representations of Safavid architecture. In terms of architectural design, Safavid shrines continued the Timurid shrine practices of decorative tiling and domes, which drew from earlier Indigenous traditions. Safavid shrines, therefore, offer one representation of “a continuous Iranian architectural tradition from the Great Saljuqs to the time of the Safavids.” Sufi shrines incorporated architectural elements, such as domed tombs to mark graves, iwan courtyards, brightly coloured mosaics, and elaborate floral and arabesque patterns. These shrines “inhabit a vital position in the cultural and social as well as religious and culture life of rituals, Saints, traditional belief, sounds, trance, dance, music in ethnic

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healing, and spiritual illness/disease.” In this way, the shrine represented a spiritual space of faith and piety, but also a gathering site for both Muslims and non-Muslims to engage in celebrations of shared existence. Blair notes that shrines typically included spaces adjacent to the tombs that “could serve various kinds of communal gatherings, from strictly religious Friday prayer to Sufi-inspired recitations and dancing” and also provided accommodation for residents as well as transient pilgrims and travellers; as such, they were also sites of economy and business. Moreover, Muslims are not the only group that reveres and celebrates Sufi saints, as a wide range of non-Muslims also venerate these figures, and shrines have served, and continue to serve, as a spiritual place of gathering and acceptance regardless of religious affiliation. Thus, these spaces tend to blend purposes of religious practice, social formation, and cultural exchange.

The Sheikh Safi al-din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble in Iran (Figure 12) is comprised of “a library, a mosque, a school, mausolea, a cistern, a hospital, kitchens, a bakery and some offices.” Construction of this shrine began in the early 16th century. The space includes a path to the shrine, which is “divided into seven segments, which mirror the seven stages of Sufi mysticism, separated by eight gates, which represent the eight attitudes of Sufism.” Many buildings of the ensemble are adorned with colourful tiling, which has origins in Iranian and Timurid architectural traditions and continued to evolve and grow in popularity during the

Safavid era. The “tall structures and wide openings” of these buildings draws on these popular Ilkhanid and Timurid features, which also have origins in local architectural traditions. Depictions of Chinese dragons also show a Chinese architectural influence on the decoration of buildings in the ensemble. In addition to being influenced by earlier Timurid and local styles, as well as contemporary ones, the ensemble created a “pioneering style” with its own unique features. The buildings are adorned with “mural paintings, illumination, calligraphy, and splendid decorative elements such as various types of coloured and faience tiles, plasterwork, stalactite work, wood engraving, wood inlay, and knotting work.” Some buildings are designed with unique niches, which housed a vast collection of chinaware and ceramic art. Moreover, “the integrity, conformity and unity of different sections in Sheikh Safi complex is unprecedented.” The symbolism of architectural layout and buildings within the complex that served more social and cultural purposes demonstrates a unique fusion of secular and religious themes. This example shows that even buildings designed as devotional sites also served as cultural, social, and political spaces. These were, and continue to be, sites of community gathering and symbols of culture with the potential to both unite and divide. I further explore the modern continuation of this fusion in relation to Sufism—of which there are multiple types—as

well as the current state of Sufism in modern-day Iran in the section entitled “Contemporary Interplay between Religious and Secular Expressions” towards the end of this chapter.

Figure 12. Sheikh Safi al-din Khānegāh and Shrine Ensemble. Photo: Reza Khanbabaei, February 19, 2019. Aradabil, Iran.100

Furthermore, miniatures during the Safavid era drew from pre-Islamic practices and represent a multiplicity of meanings and purposes. For example, paintings of human figures on Isfahan bathhouses often portrayed people engaging in daily activities of society and human living, including hunting and bathing.101 As bathhouses themselves symbolized spaces of spiritual purification, inclusion of decorative paintings depicting social and cultural themes situates these spaces as an intersection between religious and social functions.102 Palaces during the Safavid period also frequently depicted human figures in their art. For example, as was common by this period, the Chihil Sutun palace (1647 CE) (Figure 13) in Isfahan is adorned with wall art that depicts themes ranging from royal feasts, hunting, and romance to battles with

Mughals and Uzbeks and scenes of royal gatherings. This art shows blends of European, traditional Persian, and Indian styles. These figural representations defy the theological rule of aniconism, and instead, emphasize themes of cultural and political dominance and capture the ways in which trade and economic networks and travel between various regions, such as Europe, also led to the exchange of aesthetic practices.

Figure 13. Chihil Sutun palace. Fresco: 1647 CE. Isfahan, Iran.

Mughal Empire

The Mughal Empire (1526–1857 CE), which spans modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, continued and built on Safavid traditions, growing ideas of Islamic traditions and localized practices, all of which influenced Mughal art and architecture. Even the materials Mughal architects used were a result of geographical availability and Indigenous traditions, such as

Hindu traditions and cultures. Mughal Emperor Humayun’s tomb in Delhi (Figure 14) “echoes some earlier Indian Muslim structures in its use of red sandstone, the building material so common in the Rajasthan desert that villagers there still use it in place of non-existent wood for fencing.” In another example of continued architectural traditions from Indigenous societies through to the Mughal Empire, The Red Fort (1639–1648 CE) in Delhi (Figure 15), originally known as the fortress-palace of Shahjahanbad, was erected near the center of the old city, with its ruins stripped of materials for construction. As one example of the Mughals’ shared practices with Safavids, the 16th-century Mughal Sher Mandal pavilion (Figure 16) built by Emperor Humayun (d. 1556) and the Safavid Guldasta pavilion share noticeable similarities. The Sher Mandal blends a myriad of elements, styles, and themes from different origins, deriving local imperial features that were based on Hindu architectural traditions. In fact, the Mughal Sher Mandal and the Safavid Guldasta pavilion share common roots in Timurid architectural styles, which is evidenced by their similarities. Notably, “the architectural form of both pavilions can be considered as offshoots of a late fifteenth-century development in the design of centrally planned polygons,” exhibited by the Timurid Namakdan pavilion (Figure 17). Mughal architecture is, in part, an expression and celebration of its Timurid roots; it also draws from Hindu, Persian, and Turco-Mongol traditions, and it gleans inspiration from Sasanian.

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112. Farshid Emami, “Royal Assemblies and Imperial Libraries,” 73.
114. Gülru Necipoğlu, “Framing the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Palaces,” 313.
651 CE) styles as sources of architectural motivation. Mughal architecture used these cultural roots as a foundation to construct impressive expressions of religion, culture, and political dominance.

Figure 14. Humayun’s Tomb. Photo: Isha Gupta, January 12, 2020. Delhi, India.

Figure 15. Red Fort. Photo: January 12, 2020. Delhi, India.

115. Gülru Necipoğlu, “Framing the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Palaces,” 313.
Further, the Taj Mahal (Figure 18) is an extraordinary representation of Mughal architectural prowess that blends cultural and religious purposes, incorporates geometric traditions with domes and squares, and represents the Persian garden of paradise.\(^\text{120}\) Scholars


have noted that, though the Taj Mahal is interpreted as a monument and expression of Shah Jahan’s love for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, multiple facets of its design, including the marble mausoleum’s “allusions to paradise,” suggest it is conceivably “a symbolic replica of the heavenly Throne of God.” However, it is not an official Muslim sacred space in that it is a site for communal prayers. In this space, culture and religion combine to create a spiritual and communal space for individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds.

Figure 18. Taj Mahal. Photo: Joel Godwin, May 22, 2007. Agra, India.

Additionally, Mughal mosques’ implementation of “color, shape, volume, texture, and designs” utilize Islamic symbolic expressions of peace and obedience. The Masjid Wazir Khan (1642, Lahore, Pakistan) (Figure 19) and Maryam Zamani Mosque (1614, Lahore, Pakistan) (Figure 20) use domes, arches, and spatial configurations, which were common features of Islamic architecture over time and space, in a symbolic representation of inherent universal harmony and unity. Many of these architectural sites were informed by local and vernacular non-Muslim designs and practices, namely materials that were incorporated into Muslim practices. Specifically, the Masjid Wazir Khan incorporates Persian symbolism with figural representations of cypress trees, conveying an inclusion of diverse cultures and traditions.

Figure 19. Masjid Wazir Khan. Photo: Moiz Ismaili, March 25, 2016. Lahore, Pakistan.

Sufi spaces are another example of important architectural structures that capture the sacred ethos of Islamic religious practices and devotion. Throughout the Mughal rule, visiting shrines of saints was an established sociocultural and ritual norm. Sufi shrines served as spaces of connection between heavenly and earthly existence, where Muslims and non-Muslims would seek guidance and blessings from God through ritualistic prayer, dance, chanting, and other mystical practices. In addition to their religious and spiritual significance, Sufi shrines provided spaces that were inclusive and open, and that facilitated cultural exchanges, acting as a connecting point for local beliefs and traditions with Islamic practices. In addition to their work of converting non-Muslims, Sufi saints themselves “played
an important part in organizing communities, as spiritual leaders and advocates of peace and social justice in society.”

As an extension of these spiritual leaders, their shrines have lived on and continue to spread their unifying message, traditionally meaningful to a religious pluralistic audience that includes Hindus and Sikhs. Additionally, Mughal rulers often visited shrines, offered patronage, and carried out renovations. This reflects the rulers’ use of the shrines’ pre-established religious and cultural significance as a tool for legitimizing political power through the continuation of unifying traditions. South Asian shrines have historically served as centres for education and community spaces for free food (langar)—though this practice is formally associated with the Sikh temple, where the food served is vegetarian, as opposed to langars associated with some mosques and shrines, where meat is also served—as well as spiritual spaces.

Scholar and artist Samina Quraeshi notes that Sufi saints in South Asia are celebrated and venerated by non-Muslims. The shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (1236 CE) (Figure 21) in Ajmer, Rajasthan, regularly attracts “Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Christian [followers], who believe that baraka, or divine grace, and spiritual power linger around the tomb.” The shrine incorporates local materials in its use of red sandstone as well as the common regional symbolism of the lotus flower, which has roots in Hindu, Buddhist, and even ancient religions, adorning its dome.

139. Samina Quraeshi et al., Sacred Spaces, 28.
As observed through the aforementioned examples, it would be challenging to disentangle Islamic art and architecture (especially mosques and shrines) from their religious underpinnings. Historically, Islamic architecture has incorporated a variety of symbols that have profound meaning to the Muslim faith. The dome itself is a central feature of Islamic architecture, which transcendentally symbolizes the sky and indicates that the divine is present. Islamic buildings throughout history, and in the present day, are known as communal, for the living as well as the dead, and use colour, light, and water to symbolize different aspects of spirituality. Specifically, water reflects nature, light represents the notion of heavenly

wisdom, and colour often signifies unification and harmonious singularity. Stemming from Persian belief in the seven colours of spirituality, colours in Islam have their own specific representations. For example, green is a very significant colour in Islam and is commonly thought to instill happiness, calm, and feelings of joyfulness; it is referenced multiple times in the Qur’an, including 76:21, 55:76, and 18:31. Geometric applications in Islamic architecture also possess spiritual and theological significance. Art historians have noted that geometrical shapes represent cosmic dimensions reflected in the construction of sacred buildings—central in Islamic philosophical and mystical thought, which informed architectural developments. Others have emphasized that sacred geometry is a powerful tool in architecture to create balances and facilitate a match between heaven and earth; this is one reason that Muslim scholars were interested in sciences, medicine, and math.

Though the religious grounding and central role of Islamic architecture is undeniable, as this section has described, culture is also a critical element in the formation and expression of architectural spaces. Conquering groups often used existing architectural spaces or built on pre-Islamic traditions and styles of preceding empires, conferring religious significance and engineering new meaning as a display of dominance and authority. For example, Gülru Necipoğlu acknowledges that Sinan, a royal architect in the Ottoman Empire (d. 1588 CE), would use “carefully selected, highly legible Qur’anic inscriptions in mosque constructions as a

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means to promote the religious and political supremacy of the Ottomans.”

This interplay between religious grounding, political motivation, and sociocultural influence and purpose, along with local traditions, also permeates the art of calligraphy.

Calligraphy

Classical Calligraphic Traditions

The importance of calligraphy in Islamic arts cannot be overstated. Sheila Blair notes that “writing in Arabic script became a, if not the, main theme in Islamic visual culture.” Partly as a product of the principle of aniconism, writing down the word of God in elegant script became a significant expression and artistic representation of Islamic civilizations. In terms of its origins, “the Islamic tradition [of calligraphy] developed out of local precedents, for in both the ancient Near East and the classical world, inscriptions had long been used to decorate the walls and facades of buildings as well as other monuments.” Due to the belief that Arabic acted as the most appropriate vehicle for God’s word, continuing and expanding on this tradition facilitated a unified sense of identity throughout the Muslim world. In a religious sense, manuscripts emerged as a way to convey God’s beauty through “divine revelation, [and…] the sacredness of the scripture led to its transcription manually in a beautiful hand.” In a more social and economic sense, the introduction through trade of paper as a replacement for parchment in the Abbasid Caliphate prompted an explosion of literary development and

155. Sheila S. Blair, Islamic Calligraphy, 3.
156. Sheila S. Blair, Islamic Calligraphy, 23.
creativity across a wide array of subjects, including theology, literature, and sciences. As a tool for religious expression and education, calligraphy follows the Qur’anic teaching that writing serves an important function in differentiating humans from other living creatures. Additionally, writing spread across the Muslim world as a quest for knowledge and the preservation of knowledge as well as a way to display political and sociocultural power, religious belief, and political legitimacy. Through common forms of writing, empires such as the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal used calligraphy in manuscripts as a form of widely circulated cultural exchange and an artistic expression of political power. Doris Behrens-Abouseif explains that in societies in Islamic regions, Qur’anic text “frequently appear[s] on politically charged objects, such as coinage, to emphas[i]ze the secular and religious authority invested in the caliph in the early medieval period.” Moreover, rulers in the Timurid, Mamluk, and other periods frequently trained as calligraphers and supported calligraphy as a demonstration of sophistication and advancement. Thus, calligraphy has a long history of manifesting both political and religious symbolism.

In the Umayyad period, “Arabic began to replace local languages […] to become the language of religion, government, commerce, literature, and science, [and to become] a distinguishing characteristic of Islamic civilization.” Kufic script, defined by its square,
angular, geometric form, grew in prominence during this period. Its geometric style was particularly conducive to stone inscription, and as such, early Islamic societies commonly used it for architectural decoration. From this starting point, Arabic calligraphy developed into many new forms, such as naskhi in the 9th century, which used a rounded form of script and acted as the roots of most of the later forms of Arabic calligraphy. Script styles developed to serve specific purposes, and this cursive, elongated style of script was frequently used by government officials and scholars. Another form of script, thuluth, was popularly used for “ornamental inscription, [and is a cursive style that] is written by a letter that draws a thickness of one third of the diameter of the pen.” This style originated during the Umayyad Caliphate but did not reach its full development until the latter part of the 9th century. From these early calligraphic styles, many others developed throughout the Muslim world, and were often used for different types of manuscripts or ornamentations. In their own way, all originate from conceptions of Arabic script as a sacred vessel of the Divine made known.

Additionally, around the 11th century, through the expansion of Islamic empires by military conquests, religious preaching—primarily by Sufis—and the spread of literary culture, Arabic began rudimentary blending with Farsi, Hindi, Turkish, and local dialects such as Hindvi. These influences facilitated the development of the Urdu dialect and a common

Arabic script during the Mughal era. As such, cultural blending directly led to an Arabic influence on Urdu—and Persian or Indo-Persian—creating a “heterogenous dialect.” Cultural blending resulted in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, and other languages using the same script with varying styles and configurations. Therefore, from these examples, it becomes clear that early on, calligraphy developed as a religious and spiritual symbol and means of expression, as well as a mechanism for cultural unification and exchange in which languages from diverse cultures and lands blended together. This fusion and transformation of other languages further demonstrates how the field of Islamic arts has been defined from a contemporary perspective, as these developments in language and calligraphy reveal transformative realities of aesthetic cultural productions of local cultures and emerging civilizations blending with one another. Next, I turn to a discussion of the expansion specifically, of Arabic calligraphy in more detail.

**Safavid Empire**

The Safavid Empire also continued and expanded on the tradition of calligraphy as a sacred and aesthetic form of Islamic expression. Safavid rulers placed enormous importance on calligraphy, implementing inscriptions with religious themes “above portals, corners of main and secondary verandas (the bodies of balconies), Chakads, gussets above balconies, dome’s crater and base, mosque Mihrab and bodies of minarets.” During this period, calligraphy was often aesthetically applied for religious purposes, decorating covers of copies of the Qur’an, while

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figural designs began to be used on coverings of literary works such as Persian epic narratives and poems. Artists of this period also used arabesque motifs, designs which were intertwined or seamlessly repeated to represent the infinite nature of God. It was during this time that the *nasta’liq* elegant, flowing style of calligraphy developed and emerged as the prominent form, with scholars estimating that “75 per cent of everything written in Persia from the mid-fifteenth century was done in this script.”

Although the spiritual connotations of Safavid calligraphy and its use in depicting religious principles of the Qur’an are evident, it is also relevant that the Safavid Empire used calligraphy and paintings, which included images, to solidify cultural and political dominance and to convey rulers’ power and prosperity. Under Safavid rule, the imposition of Shi’ism—one of the two major sects of Islam, premised on political differences—as the official religion “affected the choice of texts calligraphed, as new prayers and poems to ‘Ali and the Shi’ite imams were added to the traditional repertory of Koran and hadith.” Thus, political changes discernably influenced the field of calligraphy. The Safavid Empire oversaw an explosion of art, and rulers showed great support for art as both a means of religious expression and a demonstration of their strength and cultural dominance in the region. Political, religious, and cultural circumstances impacted the development and expression of calligraphy during the Safavid period, and as such, categorizations of Islamic arts of “secular” vs. “religious” are modern, Western interpretations of Islamic arts history that are inapplicable; calligraphy during

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this time period further demonstrates that inapplicability. Again, the problem of definition and
categorization reveals itself, as calligraphy of this period evolved as a continuation and
incorporation of pre-Islamic, local traditions.

**Mughal Empire**

Calligraphy was also highly valued and further developed during the Mughal period. The Taj
Mahal, for example, is decorated with calligraphy of written passages from the Qur’an, further
associating it with the religion of Islam. The *nasta’liq* style continued to grow in prominence and
was commonly used in shrines and mosques.\(^{182}\) Specifically, this calligraphic form stylistically
emphasizes individual letters in terms of their specific, purposeful relationship with one
another\(^ {183}\) and serves as a spiritual expression of celestial beauty.\(^ {184}\) During this period,
calligraphic texts often appeared in perforated cartouches, enabling light to filter through the
patterns.\(^ {185}\) Mughal calligraphy built on Safavid traditions, such as the *nasta’liq* style, and was
used to adorn works of literature accompanied by paintings, as well as structures like mosques
and shrines that were deeply associated with the Islamic faith. In terms of calligraphy’s
significance in works of literature, “the albums (muraqqa’āt) [depicting imperial themes and]
assembled for Jahangir and his sons Shah Jahan and Dara Shikoh (1615–59) present the two arts
[of painting and calligraphy] as close siblings, with each folio bearing specimens of calligraphy
on one side and paintings on the other.”\(^ {186}\) Thus, during the Mughal period, calligraphy served as

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185. Stephen Vernoit, ed. *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850–1950* (London and
186. Yael Rice, “Between the Brush and the Pen: On the Intertwined Histories of Mughal Painting and Calligraphy,”
a tool for expressions of important themes of imperial power and culture as well as faith and devotional piety. This shows once more the inapplicability of the term “secular” as a means of dividing cultural art from religious art, and the inaccuracy in making such a distinction. As discussed in the previous two periods, in its earliest stages, Arabic calligraphy developed from local traditions and styles, which changed over time and into the Mughal era, further rendering “Islamic art” a limited, one-dimensional term that fails to capture the sociohistorical contexts of cultural blending and diversity as expressed through art. As Islam spread, it drew from pre-Islamic practices and infused spiritual meaning into calligraphic art.

**Paintings**

In addition to architecture and calligraphy, paintings (primarily manuscript illuminations, temperas, and frescos) have also held a place of prominence throughout the history of Islamic arts. Islamic paintings have historically been—and continue to be—largely shaped by the principle of aniconism, which prohibits representations of the divine in art. As previously described, the Qur’an and other religious texts reference opposition to figural depictions. For example, a “ḥadīth narrated in Ṣahīḥ al-Bukhārī […] states that] Allah, Most High said: ‘And who is more unjust than those who try to create the likeness of My creation?’”

Following this and similar proclamations against images of idols in religious texts, many Muslims view illustration of any type of living image—unless on a utilitarian object like a dagger, flask, or vase—as an idolatrous practice, representing the unforgivable sin of *shirk* (engaging in idolatrous or polytheistic practices). However, questioning the authenticity of *Ahādīth* (teachings of the

Prophet Muhammad), among various interpretative traditions in Islam, some adherents to Sufism do not view figurative illustrations as strictly prohibited in the Islamic faith. This is not a practice specific only to Sufis; Muslims lack consensus regarding interpretations of aniconism. Shi‘a traditions also have a rich devotional and aesthetic culture of figures, especially of the Prophet Muhammad and his family, such as Ali and Fatima and their sons, Hasan and Hussein. Demonstrating the transformation of the issue over time, early depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, dating from the early 14th century, represent him without concealing his face, while later depictions from the 15th century on typically portray the Prophet Muhammad with a flame or halo around his face or a veil covering his face. This change in figural portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad provide insight into the shifts in Muslim views on aniconism and over time—specifically Shi‘a in this context, as views on aniconism vary among different sects of Muslims.

Grabar notes that explanations for aniconism extend beyond religious and spiritual belief, as they also include underlying historical and political foundations. He contends that decisions regarding figural representation, or lack thereof, were to some extent an attempt to cultivate a cultural identity in relation to dominant Christian and Byzantine cultures; using calligraphy as an alternative form of religious and political portrayal serves as a religious and cultural expression, proclaiming the centrality of the Islamic faith. Also noteworthy is that figural representations were almost always two-dimensional and included utilitarian objects, such as ceramics, as

192. Oleg Grabar, “From the Icon to Aniconism,” 52.
opposed to spiritual ones.\textsuperscript{193} As such, religious, historical, and political contexts have shaped the practice of aniconism in Islamic arts. Chapter 5’s exploration of artistic responsibility further discusses the continued conversations and controversies, which have real-world consequences, surrounding the issue of aniconism.

In further contradiction to the principle of aniconism, early Islamic paintings, friezes, and bas reliefs used figural depictions. Demonstrating roots in pre-Islamic art, paintings dated to the 8\textsuperscript{th} or 9\textsuperscript{th} century CE “were done on lavishly decorated, gold-edged paper and used eastern Turkic Buddhist types for their idealized representations of human beings.”\textsuperscript{194} Paintings done during the Umayyad period also often depicted images of living figures.\textsuperscript{195} For example, the Umayyad Palace near present-day Amman, Jordan, is adorned with a series of paintings that depict the palace’s craftsmen and builders.\textsuperscript{196} These paintings have been interpreted as expressions of royal rhetoric that portray Umayyad rulers as great, glorious builders.\textsuperscript{197} Islamic arts scholar Hana Taragan interprets the paintings’ depictions of builders and rulers as following a narrative that draws from traditions linking architectural construction to a blend of political prestige and spiritual primacy.\textsuperscript{198} Though these paintings are culturally significant in representations of Umayyad rule and practices, they also bear religious significance in their association with royalty as representations of Godly power.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{195} Terry Allen, “Aniconism and Figural Representation in Islamic Art.”
\item \textsuperscript{197} Hana Taragan, “Constructing a Visual Rhetoric.”
\item \textsuperscript{198} Hana Taragan, “Constructing a Visual Rhetoric,” 150.
\end{itemize}
Moreover, the Umayyad Mosque, or the Great Mosque of Damascus, is adorned with paintings of Paradise (Figure 22), symbolized as a garden comprised of pavilions. The mosaics throughout the mosque represent a “proclamation of the end of the world and the explosion of the beautiful nature of the earth to prepare access to eternal fire or to a world that is even more beautiful.” These depictions of paradise demonstrate piety along with imperial dominance. Humanities professor Finbarr Barry Flood has argued that the creators of the mosaics built on Byzantine iconographic styles and adapted them to Islam, once more showing the extent to which Islamic arts are influenced by existing styles as well as pre-Islamic traditions. Although the majority of the mosaics of the Great Mosque serve as early examples of aniconism, depicting images of nature rather than living figures, one image acts against this principle in its portrayal of two men inside a ship. Other painting practices prior to the 13th century followed strict avoidance of subject matter that depicted living figures, particularly in mosques. Representing this trend, Umayyad caliph Umar ibn Abdulaziz (r. 717–720 CE) is said to have “come across a picture in a bathroom, which he had it subbed out adding, ‘If I could only find out who painted, I would have him well beaten’.”

199. Oleg Grabar, “From the Icon to Aniconism,” 50.
200. Oleg Grabar, “From the Icon to Aniconism,” 51.
201. Oleg Grabar, “From the Icon to Aniconism,” 51.
The human figures portrayed in the ship were subsequently defaced by iconoclasts.
The creation of paintings in the form of wall frescoes, temperas, and bas reliefs was also a prominent artistic practice before, and in 12th century Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and the Mughal Empire. Furthermore, some of these paintings did indeed include depictions of living beings. Artist and art historian Wijdan Ali notes that portrayals of the Prophet Muhammad were prevalent and popular in the Ottoman Empire, as well as throughout the history of the Persian Empire. One example of this is the Miʿrāj image from 1539–43 CE, depicting the Prophet Muhammad veiled. In the 13th century, an official ban on living images was established by the faqih, al-Nawawi, (Islamic, Sunni jurist, Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī - d. 1277),

who stated that “the painting of a picture of any living thing [plants are not included] is strictly prohibited and is one of the great sins […] because it implies a likeness to the creative activity of God.”207 Despite this ban, which was not applied in the Shi’a tradition, the Safavid and Mughal Empires were known for their depictions of humans and animals. Again, these decisions to include figural representations in art may suggest an attempt to compete with contemporaneous cultures and empires (powers) using similar forms of representation.208 Additionally, manuscripts throughout the Muslim world, stemming from medieval times, used utilitarian figural representations of the human body, such as depictions of caesarian sections, to study and teach anatomy for medical purposes and advancements.209 As such, the principle of aniconism was not always followed or implemented, and political, cultural, and scientific motivations situate uses of figural representations within their appropriate contexts. These overlapping influences and motivations continue through the Safavid period as well and explore the ever-evolving nature of religious and cultural traditions in painting over time.

Safavid Empire

Painting in the form of book illustrations, drawings, and portraits was popular during the Safavid Empire. For example, art curator Maurice Dimand notes that “the paintings by Aka Riza of young men with large turbans, one of which is signed, reveal the sophistication typical of the Safavid school.”210 In a blend of calligraphic and painting styles, artists practicing zoomorphic calligraphy manipulated written words into images of animals and human faces.211 One example

208. Oleg Grabar, “From the Icon to Aniconism.”
211. Sheila S. Blair, Islamic Calligraphy, 449.
of this style is a “splendid figure of a lion done in thuluth letters set against a brilliant blue
ground decorated with delicate arabesque scroll punctuated with red, white, and green flowers,
[with text containing] the famous prayer to ‘Ali known as the Nad ‘Ali.”212 This painting is
infused with religious connotations; the lion is a common symbol of ‘Ali, Muhammad’s son-in-
law—the figure from which the Safavid Empire would draw their lineage and authority—and the
script is of an important Islamic prayer.213 Moreover, miraj namas, stories of the Prophet
Muhammad’s ascension, were popular in the Safavid era and were commonly illustrated, thus
providing another example of religious/devotional paintings during this time.214

In addition to depictions of religious/devotional themes, paintings during this time also
depicted non-religious themes. Safavid painter Riza-i-Abbasi often depicted love scenes in his
paintings and drawings of young men of no noble or religious significance.215 Safavid Shah
Tahmasp “studied painting and calligraphy [and] commissioned a Shah-nama [a practice
common to Safavids, Ottomans, Mughals and others], which contemporaries and later
connoisseurs have regarded as the single most beautiful illustrated manuscript produced under
Safavid patronage.”216 With approximately 258 ornate illustrations, including “The Combat of
Rustam and Ashkabus” (Figure 23), this epic depicts lavish images of battle scenes, imperial
enthronements, diplomatic negotiations, war councils, death and violence, and slayings of
mythical monsters.217 The reasons for the commissioning of this work and the nature of the
included depictions are arguably political in nature. For context, the Safavids were experiencing

212. Sheila S. Blair, Islamic Calligraphy, 449.
214. Christiane J. Gruber and Frederick Stephen Colby, eds., The Prophet’s Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters
    with the Islamic Mi’rāj Tales (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).
215. Maurice Dimand, “An Exhibition of Islamic and Indian Paintings.”
territorial conflicts, particularly with the Mughal Empire, along with recent defeats by the Ottomans; as such, it is plausible that this work was commissioned as a deliberate sign of patriotism and unified power. This manuscript could also “have been intended as a celebration […] of the new dynasty, ordered by its founder when he had at last (in his own eyes) achieved political stability.” The depictions of imperial exploits and celebration of royalty convey a clear message of political, and perhaps, cultural supremacy, a pattern that was also evident with art and architectural developments of the Mughal Empire. As is also the case in the Mughal era, paintings were commonly created under the direction of and with the monetary support of rulers. Through workshop exchanges, the creation of these impressively decorated manuscripts helped to disseminate a cultural aesthetic that was shared by a broad range of the literate public: not just the political elite, but prosperous merchants and others who patronized or purchased illustrated Persian poetical classics, reinvigorating a Persianate cultural identity shared by the Persian-speaking elite in [Mā Warā’ an-Nahr] and Mughal India. Therefore, the subject matter of and motivation behind these works is often not solely religious; rather, it provides a view of the culture, society, and political circumstances of the time.

Mughal Empire

Mughal painting developed from the traditions of Persian miniatures and local Indian styles and included portraits as well as “visual records of [Mughal Kings], [which] recorded their prowess as animal slayers, or depicted them in the great dynastic ceremonies of marriages.”

Mughal Empire painters often copied European styles to create ornate illustrations of landscapes, and their paintings also included ornate miniature portraits. During his rule, Jahangir (d. 1627) commissioned paintings of plants and animals as well as literary works such as the Razmnama,


226. Maurice Dimand, “An Exhibition of Islamic and Indian Paintings,” 89.
and these books typically contained lavishly depicted paintings and calligraphy samples.\(^{227}\)

Moreover, Mughal paintings were influenced by Safavid and Ottoman styles and themes through the circulation of books that contained decorative illustrations.\(^{228}\) As evidence of the interactions that inspired artistic influence, the library at the Topkapi Museum contains a collection of literary works and other texts produced and discovered as a result of Ottoman–Safavid diplomatic relations, exchanges, and conflicts between the empires.\(^{229}\) As further evidence of influence from Safavid and other cultures, Mughal Emperor Humayun (d. 1556 CE) developed the Mughal painting style “by inviting two Safavid artists, whom he met while seeking aid from Shah Tahmasp at Qazvin in 1544 [back to his realm].”\(^{230}\) Hindu content was also often incorporated in Mughal paintings, and “‘The Battle between Two Groups of Ascetics,’ probably [depicts] a conflict between Vaishnavites and Saivites, the devotees of the two principal Hindu deities, Vishnu and Shiva.”\(^{231}\) Another example of the subject matter portrayed in Mughal painting is *Prince Akbar Presents a Painting to Humayun in a Tree-House* (Figure 24), which depicts figures of emperors among the tree branches\(^{232}\) and pays homage to Mughal emperor Akbar’s father, Humayun. This subject matter is historical in nature\(^{233}\) and could be interpreted as depicting Humayun’s arrival in Delhi after his victory over Delhi sultan Sikander Shah Suri (d. 1555).\(^{234}\) This scene conveys an imperial focus on painting as an expression of power and respect for tradition and cultural heritage. These examples illustrate the common portrayal of


\(^{229}\) Ankita Choudhary, “Books as Objects of Exchange,” 76.


\(^{233}\) Milo Cleveland Beach, *Early Mughal Painting*, 9.

\(^{234}\) Milo Cleveland Beach, *Early Mughal Painting*, 9.
political and cultural themes in Mughal paintings (miniatures, manuscript illuminations, frescoes, and so on, as these were not oil paintings most commonly recalled from a Western perspective); a respect for and continuation of Safavid traditions; as well as influences from religions and pictorial styles outside of Islam. Such examples show both overlap in cultural and religious purposes and meaning as well as incorporation of pre-Islamic and intercultural styles and themes into contemporary conceptions of “Islamic art.”

Figure 24. Prince Akbar Presents a Painting to Humayun in a Tree-House. Photo: Abd al-Samad, February 27, 2005. Golestan Palace Library, Tehran.235

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This discussion of paintings throughout the history of Islamic arts has revealed the multiplicity of meanings and purposes of this art form. Paintings were influenced by pre-Islamic traditions and often continued and expanded upon them throughout different empires, including figural representations in geographic contexts beyond the Safavid and Mughal Empires. These paintings did not always follow theological principles, such as that of aniconism. In fact, they served both religious and secular purposes and often represented symbols of political and cultural power and prestige. Further revealing the complexities of defining “Islamic art,” paintings were created both by Muslims and non-Muslims, and often for Muslims and non-Muslims. The variations of meanings, contexts, and traditions in these paintings speak to the diverse nature of Islamic arts. Moreover, this overview has shown that “Islamic art” is really a modern Western construct that fails to capture the extent to which these works of art and architecture have been informed by cultures and traditions that existed before—as well as the assimilations after—the arrival of “Islam” as a religious, social, cultural, and political movement; this is seen in the examples of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, the Shrine of Shaykh Safi al-Din Ishaq, Mughal miniatures, and the development of Arabic calligraphy, among many others. Moreover, this observed overlap between culture and religion, as well as the incorporation of traditions and styles of other cultures (complicating clear-cut definitions and categorizations of “Islamic art”), persists in contemporary art, as explored below.

Continuing Multifaceted Purposes and Developments in Contemporary Islamic Arts

In A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture, Anneka Lenssen and Sarah Rogers assert that contemporary art “currently represents a field of exchange that cuts across any single cultural or
historical precedent, forcing the articulation of alternative affinities and differences.”

Contemporary art (like all art) is infused with a multiplicity of meanings and interactions and is shaped by a variety of contexts. We have seen this play out historically in this chapter’s exploration of religious and secular themes throughout Islamic history and the complicated picture of what it means for art to have “Islamic” characteristics. Many examples listed above illustrate that Islamic arts have depicted secular and sacred themes and also utilitarian contexts—as these were not seen as separate realities of existence—such as royal grandeur, animals, plants, and common people to an extent, and this has varied in different time periods. Even themes from other religions and cultures have influenced Islamic arts throughout history, such as Hinduism and Indian culture in the Mughal era or Zoroastrianism in Safavid eras. Additionally, as they were instructed by Mughal rulers, Mughal court painters like Kesu Das, Manohar Basawan, and Kesu Khurd incorporated “elements from contemporary European painting and renaissance periods, [C]hristian[…] myths and legends.” Thus, though historically, Islamic devotional themes have been prominent and have guided and dominated subjects and styles throughout Islamic arts history, the parameters of Islamic arts were often not historically confined by a sense of “Islamic-ness.” As the above examples indicate, they were far more fluid and transformative than homogeneous, and all of this was commissioned, suggesting political motivations.

In recent decades, Islamic arts have experienced a shift from historical styles and forms of expression to more modern methods of cultural and religious expressions and themes. For example, the Valiasr Mosque in Tehran (Figure 25) challenges common characteristics of

mosque architecture, leaving out what may be deemed as classic elements like the dome and minaret. Instead, it positions itself as an important gathering place in the centre of the city, adapting to its surroundings of educational institutions, bookstores, and theatres.\(^{239}\) Additionally, as I discuss further in chapter 5, the award-winning Bait Ur Rouf Mosque in Dhaka, Bangladesh, (2012) (Figure 26) uses innovative design elements, electing not to use domes or minarets, and instead, incorporating local materials, such as terracotta bricks.\(^{240}\) As another example, artist Mohammed Ehsai produces artwork of Arabic symbols and scripts, using “calligraphic compositions [to] reference religious texts [like the St. Petersburg Muraqqa]\(^{241}\) that were designed to be seen and not read, thus blurring the boundaries between abstraction and calligraphy.”\(^{242}\) Venetia Porter observes that some artists in the Islamic arts field use calligraphy to engage with the political issues of our time.\(^{243}\) As an example, the 1952 overthrow of Egypt’s King Farouk resulted in a focus on “the ethnicity of Egyptians [and] their role as Muslims and Arabs, [which impacted] the course of modern Egyptian art: figural representation was abandoned in the art schools […] and […] there was instead much concentration on geometry and on Arabic calligraphy.”\(^{244}\) The motivations and forms of calligraphy and sacred spaces may change, but artists’ use of calligraphy as a means of political and cultural expression persists in contemporary art.


\(^{241}\) ‘Imād Al-Ḥasanī, The St. Petersburg Muraqqa’: Album of Indian and Persian Miniatures from the 16th Through the 18th Century and Specimens of Persian Calligraphy (Milan: Leonardo Arte, 1996). The St. Petersburg Muraqqa’ is an example of the types of text Mohammed Ehsai references in his work, though it is not purely religious but contains many miniatures of religious subject matter.


\(^{244}\) Venetia Porter, Word into Art, 18.
Sufi shrines discussed throughout this chapter serve as a prime example of a surviving trend in which Islamic arts have embraced both religious and cultural expressions.\textsuperscript{247} Today, the


\textsuperscript{246} Bait Ur Rouf Mosque, August 7, 2018, Wikimedia Commons, accessed February 11, 2021, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AF%E0%A6%BC%E0%A6%A4%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%B0_%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%89%E0%A6%AB_%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%A6.jpg.

\textsuperscript{247} For more information on the role of Sufi architecture in bridging the gap between secular culture and religion in Islamic societies, see Samina Quraeshi et al., \textit{Sacred Spaces: A Journey with the Sufis of the Indus} (Boston: Peabody Museum Press, 2010).
shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (d. 1752 CE) (Figure 27) in Bhit Shah, Pakistan, serves as a gathering place for spiritual seekers of all faiths and is surrounded by a bazaar with “flower markets, garlands of money and flowers, scribes writing letters and contracts, teachers giving various kinds of instruction, people selling replicas of the shrine,” and other representations of commercial and cultural life. In the Sindh region of Pakistan, residents widely believe in the unity professed in “the Sufi concept of Wahdat-ul Wajud about the existence of One and all creation being a reflection or an image of that existence of One God.” These shrines have also taken on political significance in modern times. As a contemporary example, the tomb of Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini (Shi’a sect of Islam) (Figure 28) serves as a space for commemoration in honour of Khomeini as well as the Iranian Revolution he inspired. The government-commissioned shrine was designed by architect Muhammad Tehrani and includes some recognizable Muslim shrine elements such as minarets, a golden dome, and courtyards; it holds both religious and political significance. It is both a gathering point of religious pilgrimage and a political symbol, serving as a representation of religious and national significance and identity. The tomb is located next to a cemetery in which soldiers who fought in the Iran–Iraq war are buried, creating an explicit political association.

249. Interview: Dr. Tehmina Mufti, at her residence in Jamshoro, January 2016, quoted in Masooma Mohib Shakir, “Reconstructing the Sufi Shrine,” 64.
251. Kishwar Rizvi, “Religious Icon and National Symbol.”
Though Sufi beliefs are still prominent and integral to Iran, and it is estimated that 65 percent of Shi’a Muslims throughout the country regularly visit Sufi shrines,254 Sufis in Iran are victims of targeted government oppression and discrimination.255 These sites have become the centre of violence, as extremist groups have often targeted them for theological reasons. Because of disagreement over saint veneration that unfolds at shrines and the practice of ziyara and other practices viewed as incompatible with Islam, “zealous Muslims have targeted Sufi shrines throughout the Muslim world.”256 Throughout the Middle East, Sufis are frequently the target of extremist groups, and Sufi shrines and places of worship have been destroyed, with Sufism often being banned.257 As another example of the shrines’ continued political significance, the Pakistani state incorporates the cultural traditions and heritage of these shrines in its definition of religious meaning and significance.258 Sufi cultural traditions also extend beyond the aforementioned geographical locations; for example, the Pennsylvania shrine of Sri Lankan Tamil teacher M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986)259 (Figure 29) represents how Sufi shrines are an important expression of Islamic faith and practice, even in North America. With “architectural similarity to the Taj Mahal,”260 the shrine “plays a role in the maintenance of community unity and cohesion.”261 Thus, Sufi shrines remain holy but contentious spaces that hold deep religious, cultural, and political significance and that continue to transform as they

enter new geographies, such as the United States. Still, they remain central to Islamic and Muslim culture and life, and their architectural features maintain continuities from the past, while transforming in their local contexts as these spaces expand beyond Muslim geographies.

Figure 27. Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. Photo: Shahbaz Saf, July 18, 2015. Bhit Shah, Pakistan.262

Figure 28. Tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini. Photo: January 30, 2019. Tehran, Iran. Wikimedia Commons.263

Although many examples illustrated throughout this section demonstrate that contemporary Islamic arts exist at the nexus of secular works and cultural expressions, some artists remain firmly dedicated to a religious focus in their art. For example, Ahmed Moustafa, creator of calligraphy works such as *The Orbits of Praise* and *Remembrance and Gratitude*, derives his work from Qur’anic texts and uses art as an expression of his pursuit of Godly wisdom and perfection. Thus, though modern portrayals of Islamic religion and cultures have become prevalent as critiques as well as endorsements, as has been the case historically, the broad field of Islamic arts still holds space and value for works of religious significance and meaning. In many ways, it can be seen as both a continuity and rupture from past precedents, as Islamic arts were utilized across various spheres of Muslim society for various purposes. At the same time, notions of secular and sacred, as we understand them today, did not operate

historically in Islam and are a projection of Western frames of reference. Contemporary forms of art and architecture have continued to interweave cultural, religious, and political symbolism and purposes.

**Challenges to and Uses of the Term “Islamic Art”**

Some researchers suggest that the issue of potential misrepresentation of Islamic arts does not seem to be as widely applied to other cultural art categories and forms, such as “Christian art,” which is restricted to religious themes. Due to media representations and prevalent homogenized views of Islamic identities and cultures, it is challenging to separate Islam from the complex cultural and modern contexts with which it is connected. As such, pieces that are thought to represent “Islamic” arts and cultures—*without any connection to historical or contemporary devotional practice*—continue to be considered “Islamic” by their sheer geographic association with Islamic cultures, such as those of the Middle East and Muslim-majority regions. For instance, in many of the museums I have visited around the world, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, objects like weapons and jewellery used by individuals for personal use within the Islamic context—and also used by non-Islamic leaders with similar examples in other contexts—with no relation to devotional practice, are often deemed “Islamic.” Thus, “despite its name, the academic field of Islamic art[s] has only a tenuous and problematic relationship with the religion

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266. This continued focus on religion, as well as the blending of religious and secular themes, is partly a result of historical Islamic societies having no notion of “secularity.” In fact, secularism is a Western concept being imposed on Islamic societies as a mechanism for interpretation. In Islamic societies, religion and culture were inseparable, and that reality spilled over into art. In contemporary Islamic art, this connection and tradition persists. See Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).


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of Islam,” explain Blair and Bloom, “while some Islamic art[s] may have been made by Muslims for purposes of the faith, much of it was not.” Framing Islamic arts as artworks that are associated with the devotional practices of those who belong to the faith is not necessarily true today for what many consider Islamic arts, nor does it provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse elements and meanings enveloped in these works. Again, this field combines elements of religion and diverse cultures along with pre-Islamic traditions. Thus, the term and notion of “Islamic arts” continues to be reflective of cultural, not just spiritual, associations. In part, the significance of Islamic arts transcends territorial boundaries and religious affiliations because, historically, government and religion have been inexorably linked.

As previously referenced, the term “Islamicate,” introduced by historian Marshall Hodgson, refers to the networks, spheres, and worldview, such as culture, that surrounds the religion itself and is not limited to religious law and practice alone. In recent decades, it has become increasingly used in arts and culture to refer to contemporary practices without religious association in relation to “Islamic” visual cultures, which include influences of non-Muslim traditions and cultures, especially acquired through trade. Art historian Oleg Grabar adds to this perspective, arguing that “works of art demonstrably made by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be studied as works of Islamic art.” He explains:

There is, for instance, a Jewish Islamic art, since large Jewish communities lived within the predominantly Muslim world, and representative examples of this Jewish art have been included in a book on Arab painting. There is also a Christian Islamic art, most easily illustrated by metalwork from the Fertile Crescent in the thirteenth century but known elsewhere as well, for instance in the complex development of Coptic art in Egypt after the seventh century.

As a result, Islamic arts as a field is not conceived or even practically comparable to “Christian art” or “Buddhist art,” within the Western Judeo-Christian context.\textsuperscript{273} Indeed, artists who are from the Middle East, or are Muslim, produce secularized, stereotypical “Islamic” artworks, as do white North American artists, and major art institutions in both North America and the Middle East classify these kinds of artists and artworks under the same umbrella. One of the reasons for the difference in definition between “Islamic art” and “Christian art,” as mentioned earlier, is that the study of art history as an academic field emerged from Western discourses and constructed terminologies, as the next two chapters situate. This includes both European scholarship and Islamic scholarship from the Western diaspora. However, as art historian David Summers argues, popular Western approaches to interpretations of art lack consideration of arts from areas outside the West.\textsuperscript{274} Arguably, the issue of cultural representation in Islamic arts is not shared with other religious art; it is a problem unique to Islamic arts. To counter this limited viewpoint and scholarship, my project considers multiple, and at times contested, terminologies and approaches to explore contemporary Islamic arts. In this way, I draw from multiple disciplinary perspectives and combine diverse theoretical frameworks in the remainder of this study.

“Islamic arts” is not some abstract entity somehow unaffected by other art. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the art of Islamic cultures is influenced by pre-Islamic and ancient cultures and incorporates pre-existing architecture and artistic concepts from other religions. However, Islamic arts has its own agency as well; it is not only influenced, but influences—it transforms other cultural and aesthetic productions. For example, art historian and curator

\textsuperscript{273} Oleg Grabar, \textit{The Formation of Islamic Art}. 2–3.

Markus Brüderlin points out that Arabic calligraphy and arabesque styles have had an impact on the Western modern art field, which often emphasizes abstract subjects and styles. Therefore, scholars and art critics often overlook the reality that the Islamic arts field is not just devotional or contemporarily modelled on Western secular norms; rather, it has its own agency and has played a transformative role within the broader art world. It is not simply a category of art that is acted upon; it acts in its own right and plays a role in shaping the field of contemporary art.

**Current Approaches to the Issue of Framing Identity in Islamic Arts**

The most immediate challenge to addressing questions of defining and representing Islamic cultures and Islamic arts is problematizing the idea of who gets to define a field of cultural practice, production, and art, alongside who creates the language(s) we use to define and describe these cultural outputs. Central to this is the critical realization and explicit acknowledgement that predominant concepts and understandings of art, both historically and contemporarily, emerge from Western epistemologies, frameworks, and discourses that position the West as the centre and thus the authority and standard. This means that academic and popular understandings of art often come from a white-centric, settler-colonial bias that operates and informs local, national, and international discourses and perceptions of aesthetics. This problem forms the basis of the Orientalist theory discussed in chapter 2. Moreover, media portrayals of Islamic cultures and their tendency to represent a narrowed view of Islamic

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identities as homogenous facilitates a widespread monolithic view of what it means to be Muslim.

The issue of representation of cultures and identities in Islamic arts is complex, and scholars continue to grapple with this challenge. The category “Islamic art” itself and its devotional interpretations, in particular, suggest a direct relationship with religious or spiritual subject matter. As the historical discussion in the first half of this chapter has outlined, the history of this field is somewhat forged in that context. As such, many scholars and art critics argue that Islamic arts should represent and reflect the religion from which they derive inspiration. However, though spiritual and religious considerations may be a point of origin for this field of art, geographical, cultural, and sociopolitical impacts have also played a prominent role in its development.

Furthermore, not all people who identify with Islamic cultures and identities are practicing Muslims. Should this art not be representative of them as well? These are some of the reasons a counter-narrative has developed, with scholars arguing for a more non-devotional approach to understanding Islamic arts—focusing on cultural and sociopolitical meanings and functions rather than purely devotional purposes and interpretations—and its requirements for cultural and identity representation. As discussed further below, the secular approach favours interpretations grounded in societal norms and perceptions; adherents of this approach might suggest that it offers more flexibility and room for evolution in appropriate forms of representation (though the inherent Western bias and historical contexts render the term

277. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Islamic Art and Spirituality; Mustafizur Rahman, “Mughal Calligraphy.”
inaccurate and inapplicable). To situate this study as an alternate approach, I outline below the debate surrounding these prominent framing devices.

Islamic arts scholars like Ismail Al-Faruqi, Sheila Blair, and Jonathan Bloom have stressed that the field of Islamic arts, particularly historically, needs to be understood in a religious and spiritual context—where relevant, but Blair and Bloom agree with Grabar in active resistance of purely religious interpretations—in order to more accurately account for its culturally specific meanings.279 Islamic arts have largely maintained the traditions of their historical religious and cultural origins and have adapted them to modern Islamic cultural expressions as well as Western-informed themes found in contemporary art. This perceived secularization of Islamic arts has caused a backlash from artists and scholars who conceptualize art as “Islamic” only when it is associated with religion and serves as a religious expression. As discussed, the tradition and field of Islamic calligraphy was largely incorporated for the purpose of recording and writing the Qur’an, 280 Islam’s foremost religious text. This was because Muslims at the time realized that the sacred words of Allah and the Arabic language were far too precious and intimate for all eyes to readily see. And so, calligraphers manifested their devotion and worship in creating the most beautifully stylized fonts worthy of portraying the divine word of Allah, as a simple font would not suffice.281 One thread that informs the basis of this interpretative act and subsequent artistic creation is Islamic traditionalism. Some adherents of traditionalism view art “as an expression of a perennial truth that stands in stark opposition to the dividing forces of modernity and secularity.”282 As such, traditionalists perceive contemporary

280. Notably, reading and writing of the Qur’an is only formal worship when devotees use the Arabic language.
Islamic arts as not belonging to the field of Islamic arts at all because this form of art has been diluted and corrupted by “the vulgarity of secular modernity.”²⁸³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one key figure in this line of thought. In this way, traditionalist views of representation in art hinge on religious expressions and the tradition of Islam (versus modernity, which lacks these truths).

Religious studies professor Oludamini Ogunnaike explains that “Islamic arts render the invisible divine visible, and it is through imagination that we can perceive the mysteries of transcendent divine unity immanent in these sensory forms.”²⁸⁴ In contradiction to this study’s Islamicate conception of this field, Islamic studies scholar Mustafizur Rahman, referring specifically to Mughal calligraphy, notes that “philosophy and principles of all Islamic arts are deeply embedded in the basic tenets of the religion; the most fundamental of which is the idea of one God [and] the uncompromisingly abstract nature of God.”²⁸⁵ Such an interpretation suggests a flawed view that art is “Islamic” only if it is devotional or spiritual in nature.

Binary conceptions of Islamic arts as religious or secular leads to limited categorizations and understandings of the field.²⁸⁶ The concept of secularism is complex and includes a wide range of scholarship, which this study will not be able to fully address. Still, Islamic art is often positioned against secular art. One way that I understand secularism is as a Christian-centric European/Western construct. For example, scholars Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pelligrini describe secularism as:

central to the Enlightenment narrative in which reason progressively frees itself from the bonds of religion and in so doing liberates humanity. This narrative poses religion as a regressive force in the world, one that in its dogmatism is not amenable to change, dialogue, or nonviolent conflict resolution. This Enlightenment narrative separates secularism from religion and through this separation claims that secularism, like reason,

is universal (in contrast to the particularities of religion). However, this narrative also places secularism in a particular historical tradition, one that is located in Europe and grows out of Christianity.  

Scholars such as cultural anthropologist Talal Asad explain that concepts of religion and secularity are intertwined in the human psyche as well as in their historical development. Asad explains that this dichotomous framing conceptualizes “the secular” as rational, tolerant, and progressive and “the religious” as non-rational, divisive, and primitive. As the historical discussion in this chapter has explored, such binary, rigid categories fail to account for the overlapping nature of secular and religious elements throughout Islamic history in terms of politics, social norms, and cultural and religious expressions such as those observed in art. Islamic arts developed over complex, diverse histories out of local, pre-Islamic traditions along with intercultural exchanges, with blended cultural and religious implications. Separating secular art from religious art, if it were even truly possible to do, removes the context within which Islamic arts developed and imposes an interpretation that devotional art is primitive or a relic confined to a religious context.

Further, unlike in other societal contexts, in Islamic political history, there is no theological separation between religion and government, complicating the notion of secularism in Islamic arts as the framing device does not reflect the reality of how these artistic modes and expressions developed historically. Thus, applying the label of “secular” as a way to understand and categorize Islamic arts by emphasizing cultural themes in contrast to religious ones fails to

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288. Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular, 23.
289. Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular.
recognize the overlapping nature of secular and religious, as well as the bias inherent in that framing as one that was imposed as a result of colonialism.

The notion of secularism produces real consequences as both a modern justification to police minorities—such as the ban on veils in France, which is specifically an intercultural issue—and historical mechanisms for controlling non-Christian societies, which reveals the complex nature of the secular framework and its imposition on Muslims and non-Christian societies as a neutral system. In the art world, proponents of the secular perspective typically focus on aesthetics or Islamic cultures from a more Eurocentric point of view. Grabar, for example, argues that being a Muslim is not a necessary requirement for producing Islamic arts.\textsuperscript{290} This secular framework, then, would interpret even contemporary art with religious subject matter to be separated from religious intent; rather, it is reflective of society and culture.

Many scholars, particularly Shaw, believe:

By maintaining such a strong distinction between secular and sacred, discourses such as these have conceptualized Islamic art[s] as something that can be viewed but not understood, as though an inherently esoteric Islam were communicated by heritage acquired through osmosis rather than rational education.\textsuperscript{291}

Related to this point of religious genesis is the “spiritualization” of Islamic arts. For example, “the classification and discussion of Islamic art[s] as a bisected entity, divided into the secular and the sacred, is in fact a Western paradigm rooted in the history of rivalries between the papacy and royal/noble classes.”\textsuperscript{292} Moreover, in a historical account of religious/secular art purposes and meanings, “sixteenth-century historian and official Mustafa Ali”\textsuperscript{293} wrote:

\textsuperscript{290} Oleg Grabar, \textit{The Formation of Islamic Art}.
To build masjids and mosques in the well-developed and prosperous seat of government and likewise to construct convents or madrasas in a famous capital are not pious deeds performed to acquire merit in God’s sight. Every wise and intelligent man knows that these are pious deeds performed in order to accomplish being a leader and to make a good reputation.294

Given this overlap between religious, secular, and political purposes and expressions (with art and architecture often used as a good governance or public opinion strategy), does it then follow that this binary construct should be accepted as a suitable paradigm for the arts of the Muslim worlds? Shalem questions, “Shouldn’t this paradigm be examined in each geographical area and time-span before the dual notion of sacred versus secular is applied to the interpretation of Islamic art?”295 Given the fluid nature of culture and religion throughout the history of Islamic arts, as we have seen throughout this chapter, these rigid categories seem ineffective in capturing the true nature of this field of art. In addition to classifications of religious versus secular, the issue of division of art according to geography, materials, and time is expounded further in chapter 3. This prompts a critical question: Should we maintain these types of divisive and colonial classifications in our interpretations of Islamic arts?296

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined some of the diverse, expansive history of Islamic arts, especially by focusing on the development of Islamic arts within some Muslim societies. It has explored the transformation of Islamic art forms and cultural productions from historical, religious, and cultural expressions to modern imaginaries, drawing from examples of classical periods, such as the Umayyad dynasty and pre-modern empires like the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman.

296. Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’?”
Specifically, this chapter has considered examples of architecture, calligraphy and print, and painting, along with Islamic utility and understandings of these mediums; “Islamic art” and “secularism” have been shown to be inaccurate, Western-biased terms that fail to capture Islamic arts’ complexities. Though often not reflected by narrow interpretations, Islamic arts are varied and dynamic. Like all forms of religious and civilizational art, the field has changed over time; it has transformed and has been transforming into new geographies that this religious, cultural, and political tradition known as Islam has entered. For example, modern mosques, such as the Valiasr Mosque in Tehran, which leaves out classic elements like the dome and minaret, continue the traditions of these sacred spaces while adapting them to contemporary designs and modern needs. This is reflective of the way in which these spaces have evolved throughout the history of Islamic arts. Additionally, Arabic calligraphy developed out of pre-Islamic traditions and influenced the development of script in other languages, such as Urdu and Persian, which use the same script. Historically, it served political, cultural, and religious purposes and developed as a prominent art form out of both religious considerations, such as that of aniconism, as well as aesthetic appreciation. Intermingling influences and calligraphic uses continue into contemporary art as well, with the principles of calligraphy and geometric styles influencing modern abstract art as well as manifesting in contemporary political and cultural messaging, as will be further explored in chapters 4 and 5.

The chapter has also surveyed the various academic discussions related to what constitutes Islamic arts by some academics, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ismail Al-Faruqi, and how they understand Islamic arts as serving religious and spiritual purposes, and importantly, those who frequently push back against these binary conceptualizations, such as Wendy Shaw, Oleg Grabar, Nasser Rabbat, Gülru Necipoğlu, Avinoam Shalem, Sheila Blair,
and Jonathan Bloom. Scholars, art critics, and artists most commonly perceive and interpret Islamic arts from a religious, historically grounded lens or a secular, more culturally informed lens, which has led to deep challenges in the categorization and labeling of Islamic arts. Curiously, and largely due to the modern impacts of stereotypes, particularly as it has been defined by the onslaught of imperialism and resulting Orientalist tropes and the modern instantiation of Islamophobia—the topic of the next chapter—“Islamic arts” is not judged by the same diverse standards as the arts of other religions or cultures. This discussion of the history, evolution, current interpretations, and complex nature of what it means for art to be Islamic serves as the foundation for this study and helps to situate chapter 2’s discussion on Orientalism and chapter 3’s discussion on museum studies.
Chapter 2: Orientalism in the Making of Islamic Arts and the Global Art World

Introduction

Western conceptions of the East as other are grounded in a complicated history of colonialism and imperialism. This historical legacy has perpetuated binary conceptualizations and depictions of East and West that have endured into the 21st century. Today the political climate in the United States and other Western countries mirrors and reflects these ideologies through expressions of increasingly intensified Islamophobia. A *Washington Post* article from March 2019 documented the history of Islamophobic and racist comments made by Donald Trump over the past 10 years,1 all of which uphold notions of Muslims hating America and being the West’s number one threat. These kinds of deliberate misunderstandings and racist logics are pervasive even in Canada, which is internationally regarded as a “tolerant,” multicultural country. These perceptions have not been confined to the sociopolitical realm. Rather, they have extended to creative spheres within which Orientalist ideologies have spread in a feedback loop; they impact both insider and outsider cultural representations in Islamic arts, and in turn, Islamic arts affirm and perpetuate that same Orientalist mindset.

The previous chapter introduced the history of Islamic arts, the continued contemporary overlap of cultural and sacred themes, and the often inappropriate and culturally inaccurate frames, such as “secular” and “religious,” that scholars use to categorize the field. This chapter builds on this discussion by exploring the ways in which Orientalism and Islamophobia inform

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the construction and categorization of Islamic arts and influence interpretations and production of art in this field, whether these interpretations and productions are from artists themselves or curators of museum spaces. To analyze the relationship between Orientalism and contemporary Islamic arts, this chapter outlines the imperialist and colonial period of Orientalist Studies (19th–20th centuries) as developed by Europeans and the critique of this scholarly, literary, and artistic production as contained in Edward Said’s ground-breaking theory of Orientalism. Limitations of Said’s theory of Orientalism will also be discussed. In particular, this chapter examines the art produced during Orientalist periods under discussion by Said’s study and the tropes that emerged in the European imagination of the “Orient.” I especially consider some common tendencies found in the depiction of the “Orient” by Europeans as they relate to the Arab and Muslim world. These themes include male tropes of the lustful Arab oppressor, the inferior Arab, the rich prince, and the terrorist villain, as well as female tropes of harem women and the oppressed Muslim woman/the exotic unknown. Thereafter, the chapter explores Islamic arts as a means of reflecting and perpetuating common Orientalist tropes and Islamophobia (in Western news media and popular culture) as a modern offshoot of Orientalism. I argue that Orientalist ideologies depicted in Orientalist paintings persist in modern Western popular culture and news media. Exploring these contexts then helps situate the discussion of museum studies in chapter 3. Moreover, exploration of these issues sets up Orientalism as a lens for analyzing cultural representation in contemporary art. As such, this chapter forms the foundation for the analysis of how these “othering” ideologies continue to impact Islamic arts today in chapters 4 and 5.


Edward Said (1935–2003) was a Palestinian-American and professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He is widely considered to be the founder of the academic field of post-colonial studies and was an outspoken critic of American foreign policy in the Middle East. For more information on Said, see Joseph Massad, “The Intellectual Life of Edward Said,” Journal of Palestine Studies 33, no. 3 (2004): 7–22, doi: 10.1525/jps.2004.33.3.007.
Orientalist History: The Legacy of Colonialism and Imperialism

The spread of imperialism to the East by empires such as the British and French defined Eastern and Western perceptions of the self and the other. The European period of imperialism and colonialism was one of extensive global expansion of Western power. Notably, “from 1815 to 1914 European direct colonial dominion expanded from about 35 percent of the earth's surface to about 85 percent of it.” 3 From the 18th century on, the Ottoman Empire, which had spanned much of the Eastern hemisphere, was threatened by Western powers, specifically France and Great Britain, which sought to dominate Ottoman territories to advance their imperial interests and consolidate power. 4 The “Middle East,” as we know it today, was constructed through the imperialist division of territories as a result of World War I. Through the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was covertly created during World War I to divide former Ottoman Empire provinces between Great Britain and France, European powers drew the borders that determined the territories that make up the Middle East. 5

Many of these imperial projects and colonial constructions of the Middle East were rooted in Christian empires’ perception of Islam, for instance, in how it informed the Crusades during medieval periods. During these periods, Islam was understood and portrayed as a pagan or heretical religion and the antithesis of Christianity. 6 During the Middle Ages, the Christian West (i.e., Britain, France, Italy) viewed the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) “as the disseminator of a false Revelation, [and] he became as well the epitome of lechery, debauchery, sodomy, and a

whole battery of assorted treacheries, all of which derived ‘logically’ from his doctrinal impostures.”⁷ Exemplifying this view, Dante Alighieri’s famous 14th-century epic poem *Inferno* locates the Prophet Muhammed in the eighth circle of hell for his “treachery.”⁸ These perceptions influenced the scholarly study of the colonized regions by the colonizers, such as through travelogues, literature, and art; this came to be known as Orientalist studies. In response to this trend, scholar Edward Said developed a theory of Orientalism to critique the premises of the study of the Orient by Europeans who colonized and controlled these regions.⁹ Orientalist ideologies were reflected in studies produced by the colonizers, which reflect European beliefs of cultural superiority. Scholar Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm reiterates that Orientalism

> is the natural product of an ancient and almost irresistible European bent of mind to misrepresent the realities of other cultures, peoples, and their languages, in favor of Occidental self-affirmation, domination and ascendency.¹⁰

There were some instances when imperialist views of the East did not go unchallenged. For example, British Member of Parliament J.M. Robertson questioned this position of superiority, asking politician Alfred Balfour, “What right have you to take up these airs of superiority with regard to people whom you choose to call Oriental?”¹¹ Still, these challenges to the notion of the inferior, barbaric Orient were the exception to the perceptions that European colonizers used to justify their rule. English and cultural studies professor Patrick Brantlinger points out that that these widely held imperialist ideologies legitimized and garnered support for the British

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Empire’s expansion.\textsuperscript{12} The territorial expansion was tied to political, cultural, and religious understandings of European superiority.

Scholarship on the constructed, imagined, and politicized Orient developed and became a prominent subject of inquiry during the imperialist period. These frames informed philosophy, history, science, linguistics, literary studies, and much more. Edward Said notes:

During the nineteenth century the field increased enormously in prestige, as did also the reputation and influence of such institutions as the Société asiatique, the Royal Asiatic Society, the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, and the American Oriental Society. With the growth of these societies went also an increase, all across Europe, in the number of professorships in Oriental studies; consequently there was an expansion in the available means for disseminating Orientalism. Orientalist periodicals, beginning with the \textit{Fundgraben des Orients} (1809), multiplied the quantity of knowledge as well as the number of specialties.\textsuperscript{13}

By the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, imperial rule in the Middle East had faded, and the scholarly field of Oriental studies continued to gain traction as an area of inquiry in the academic world, continuing to inform fields like archaeology, anthropology, religious studies, and art studies. The nature of this scholarship and its arguable reflection of larger societal views of the East and West in general has sparked theoretical debates regarding how non-Western societies should be studied and conceptualized.

\textit{Edward Said and Orientalism}

As asserted by postcolonial scholar Edward Said, Orientalism is defined as the study of Eastern societies by the Western world, which has created romanticized and biased, Eurocentric images of Middle Eastern, East Asian, and African cultures and worlds, which are perceived as seemingly far-away cultures.\textsuperscript{14} As it relates to Islamic cultures, Khaled Beydoun explains that

\textsuperscript{13} Edward Said, \textit{Orientalism}, 43.
\textsuperscript{14} Edward Said, \textit{Orientalism}.
this theory “illustrated the extensive history and complex process by which Islam and its adherents were […] constructed and cast as inferior and subhuman, unassimilable and savage, violent and warmongering.”¹⁵ Under this construction of the world, Western Europe was the birthplace of modernity and civilization, perceiving itself as the ideal civilizational standard—which has created continued binary ways of thinking—while the Orient (anything that was not the West or Christianity) was seen as backwards, uncivilized, barbaric, and regressive.¹⁶

Orientalism views Oriental studies as an intellectual project of imperialist ideologies that position East against West and frame interpretations of the East as lacking modernity and progress, which the West represents. Said further explains Orientalist theory as the acceptance in the West of “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on.”¹⁷ Gender studies scholar Daphne Grace explains, “Said’s formulation of ‘Orientalism’ refers to the imperialist discourse in which cultures make representations of foreign cultures to master or in some ways control them.”¹⁸ She elucidates that such interpretations and representations were forged in and solidified the essentialist ideologies inherent in a European culture that positioned itself as ruler to the non-European ruled.¹⁹ Consequently, Orientalism’s rise to prominence as the predominant Western perspective parallels the spread of industrialization, as technological advances in travel and mobility allowed

artists and scholars to travel to distant places and reaffirm these binary and problematic worldviews through their literary and artistic productions.

In the 19th through 20th centuries, according to Said’s theory of Orientalism, European artists, writers, and historians alike all began to take up Orientalist logics in their work. As such, Orientalist theory contends that their repertoires consisted of images of cross-cultural encounters based on the fantasies and desires of Orientalist artists and European cultures. Orientalist imaginaries were repeated across a range of artistic forms of expression like poetry, literature, music, and the visual arts, as I discuss further below. Said describes these repetitions as entirely inaccurate, as they worked to position Islam and Muslims collectively as something exotic—the “marvels of the east.” As the section below on Orientalist paintings explores, Orientalist imaginaries constructed a land that is a “mysterious place full of secrets and monsters,” portraying people and scenes of cultural exoticism and “otherness.” Although this study utilizes Orientalist theory to understand modern representations of Islamic cultures and identities in art, to be transparent about the theory’s positive and negative attributes, I first engage some of the critiques of Said’s theory of Orientalism before turning to examples of tropes and imaginaries found in European artistic productions on the Orient.

Critiques of Said’s Theory of Orientalism

Said’s ground-breaking study on Orientalism has gained widespread traction in the academic world. Still, at the same time, the theory of Orientalism has also faced criticism. To defend my

application of Said’s theory of Orientalism, as well as to acknowledge its limitations, I briefly discuss some criticisms of the theory, including the hegemonic/monolithic critique, the origins of prejudice critique, the Oriental agency critique, and the counter-interpretations critique.

One of the primary criticisms of Said’s theory of Orientalism is that it is at times too general and that it fails to consider studies of the East or other regions within specific contexts. Critics have observed that “Said largely omitted periods prior to Bonaparte’s expedition in Egypt in 1798 and provided a monolithic and hegemonic version of Orientalism as transportable and translatable to any given time and place.”25 Robert Irwin explains that “Said’s work created sets of oppositional historical figures that have rendered invisible a particular intellectual climate in which ‘Orientalism was and is a subset of Western scholarship in general.’”26 Critics such as Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm, Saree Makdisi, and Daniel O’Quinn point out that Orientalist theory removes the context of study, and as such, takes for granted the existence of colonial power dynamics and “othering” types of relationships.

According to other scholars, Said’s theory also assumes that all imperial actions and relationships were negative, and some argue that this assumption leads the theory itself to engage in “othering” and essentialization of the field it is critiquing.27 Critics of this vein, therefore, argue that imperialism does not always colour global interactions, and not all cultural scholarship views the subject of study through the frame of “other.”28 For example, Siraj Ahmed argues that scholars frequently overlook or misinterpret more culturally autonomous commentary on the East by Enlightenment thinkers, positioning the theory of Orientalism as engaging in hindsight

cherry-picking to make sense of this period of study.  

Specifically, Ahmed points to the existence of counter-movements and counter-narratives during the Enlightenment, exemplified by thinkers and writers like Jeremy Bentham, which pushed back on notions of European superiority and perceived colonialism as morally abhorrent. Thus, this argument purports that not all scholars studying the Orient have done so through an imperialist frame. Critics have also pointed out that dichotomies between European selves and non-European others fail to consider that sections of the English population, similar to colonial subjects, were themselves waiting to be Occidentalyzed and civilized. In this way, the argument follows, ideologies of superiority were not only applied to Eastern “others,” but also towards the West’s own populations; therefore, is Orientalism to blame for this mindset, or is something else at play? Are relationships of power in terms of economics perhaps more impactful than Orientalist prejudices? Ultimately, both can be true; “othering” and prejudice are interrelated with classism and economic exploitation, and this combination of economics and civilizational superiority plays out both internally in Europe and externally. Internally, superiority mindsets and “othering” justify holding the lower classes down, while externally, “othering” and prejudice by way of Orientalism justify imperial conquest and economic exploitation.

Another criticism of the theory of Orientalism is that the prejudice inherent in the study of the Orient (and other cultures) is not only a product of imperial/colonial relationships. Instead, this bias predates the imperial period. Exploring some early manifestations of this bias, in his *Images of Islam in Eighteenth-Century Writings* (1996), Ahmad Gunny analyzes “the
representations of Islam and Muslims in eighteenth-century Europe (particularly France) in the context of the genealogy and reinforcement through variations of Western cultural prejudices against Islam dating back to the Crusades.”

Moreover, Eitan Bar-Yosef’s (2005) *The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799–1917*, discusses how the widespread nature of 17th-century views of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as an “imposter” demonstrate the existence of these ideologies before the Oriental period and before the emergence of Oriental studies, suggesting that Said’s theory of Orientalism is a misreading of history. This aforementioned Western view of Islam as antithetical to Christianity is a phenomenon that inspired prejudice and “othering” well before the imperial era; in fact, Christianity has always been defensive against Islam, viewing it (and Judaism as well) as an attack on its foundational principles. Therefore, criticisms of this nature contend that the prejudice that leads to “othering” in Oriental studies is not a function of the imperialist period and related power dynamics; rather, it is the result of a much longer and more complex history of biased interactions. Although Said does not deny this more complicated historical development, his emphasis on the imperialist period is arguably limited.

Additionally, scholars have argued that Orientalism is flawed because it removes agency of the cultures under study. Notably, the colonized East greatly impacted the West as well. Rebecca Carol Johnson, Richard Maxwell, and Katie Trumpener argue in “The Arabian Nights, Arab-European Literary Influence, and the Lineages of the Novel”—which is itself a biased title given that the source work is entitled *One Thousand and One Nights*—that

34. Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, & Jews*.
36. *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* (London: Penguin Classics, 1973). There are multiple versions of this collection of stories, dating back to as early as the 10th century CE.
the influence of the ‘[O]riental tale’ can be found at the center of British canonical writing, exemplified by the experimental narratives of Laurence Sterne. Giving ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Oriental’ a formative role in the emergence of canonical literary genres, these scholars suggest alternative histories of European canonical literature and of the relationship between Europe and Asia.\textsuperscript{37}

Additionally, Daniel O’Quinn asserts “the political significance of plays representing empire on the London stage as projections of metropolitan anxiety concerning the transfer of political, financial, and moral corruption from the colony to the metropolis.”\textsuperscript{38} This interpretation suggests that people living in European imperialist countries were concerned about the effects interactions with colonized countries would have on their societies. These Oriental societies, then, have agency—overlooked by the theory of Orientalism by Said—to impact Western societies in some contexts as well. Philosophy professor Sadik Al-Azm also points out that Eastern societies often used similar dominant ideologies to understand the West that Said’s Orientalist theory criticizes of Westerners.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, this counterargument contends that Eastern societies are not merely victims of Western-centric study; they have their own understanding of the self and the other, and that did not begin with Western scholarship.

A final critique of Said’s theory of Orientalism is that other elements have played a significant role in perceptions of cultures under study. In particular, representations of the Orient have been influenced by other factors, “such as medical and anthropological classifications of race, psychoanalytic versions of sexuality, and capitalist and Marxist constructions of class.”\textsuperscript{40} In her work \textit{India Inscribed}, Kate Teltcher purports that “eighteenth-century representations of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse.”
\end{itemize}
India (in parliamentary debates, histories, travel accounts, and missionary letters, as well as novels, poetry, and illustrations) need not be read as manifestations of colonial power but rather as moments of unsettled cultural confidence.” This approach suggests that European cultures may have been representing other cultures because of internalized feelings of inferiority or power instability. Additionally, Ashok Malhotra notes that developments of literary and other forms of art were deeply impacted by portrayals of Eastern societies, such as those in India, and that, specifically, visions of India were presented in a grandiose, exaggerated fashion because of the economic concerns of stage productions in bringing in audiences interested in extravagant shows, and these production decisions had little to do with cultural bias. This line of criticism maintains that cultural representations of the Orient have been impacted by forces other than imperialism, such as changes in creative fields, though this is difficult to compartmentalize when Oriental cultures were under imperial control.

Certainly not all forms of cultural studies share the issue of imperial power dynamics, but many do. Orientalism does not apply in every situation, and many factors contribute to Western views of the East, and specifically for the purpose of my study, Islamic societies. However, the existence of multiple factors does not negate the fact that Orientalist ideology, and its deep entanglement with imperialism, is a significant one that continues to inform many global structural systems, including the art world, as my case studies in chapters 4 and 5 explore.

Although Eastern societies may practice “othering” like the West, “othering” from this direction has not produced the same level of pervasive impacts; superiority theories are void of force when

not backed by power and money, and the West has a long history of using its power to exploit, dominate, and oppress non-Western societies. The power imbalances and imperialist ideologies revealed through the theory of Orientalism proposed by Said are relevant and still productive to engage, especially in the global art world and the diverse spaces in which it exists (i.e., museums and art galleries). As I discuss below, art has a long history of applying Orientalist rationale in depictions of Eastern cultures. The cultures and traditions under examination had agency and their own history prior to the beginning of imperialism, as indicated in chapter 1, and which my case studies in chapters 4 and 5 also explore in contemporary art. Specifically examining visual art production, employing the theory of Orientalism provides a helpful way of understanding different Islamic representations in art and the broader structural imbalances that have led to inequitable representations of Islamic arts in historical and contemporary contexts. For this study, it is generative to examine the continued influence of narrow and one-dimensional ideologies at play in representations of self and other in Islamic arts that stem from a legacy of the historical encounter and relationship defined under colonial periods.

**Orientalist Paintings**

In light of the analysis provided by Said in his study of the role of art and literature in informing the idea of the Orient, in the artistic field, artists, critics, and scholars are often susceptible to approaching cultural subject matter through an Orientalist paradigm rather than an Islamicate framework. Orientalist approaches in academia partly stem from colonial education projects that mandated what was taught in colonized societies; the curriculum was based on imperial

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45. Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art?’”
systems that emphasized Western superiority and framed scholarly inquiry from a Eurocentric perspective.\footnote{46. J. A. Mangan, ed., ‘Benefits Bestowed?’ Education and British Imperialism (New York: Manchester University Press, 1988).} These colonial education systems have legacies that spill over into all areas of society, including art.\footnote{47. J. A. Mangan, ed., ‘Benefits Bestowed?’} Shaw explains that “the practice of using art to represent broader culture continues to the present day, as do perceptions of the Islamic ‘other’ as something that is radically different from the West.”\footnote{48. Wendy M. K. Shaw, “The Islam in Islamic Art History: Secularism and Public Discourse,” Journal of Art Historiography, no. 6 (2012): 1.} However, other to what? To whiteness? To the white artist’s gaze and brushstroke? How is the norm defined and understood?

Historically, the concept of the Orient—a Western creation—was visible in Renaissance (c. 1300–1600 CE) and Baroque (c. 1600–1750 CE) works, as figures in supposed Middle Eastern attire appeared in select works by artists like Giovanni Bellini (d. 1516 CE), Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (d. 1669 CE), and others. This practice continued and intensified among modern art’s Impressionist and later Expressionist movements, wherein Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and East Asian representations within Orientalist paintings dominated the 19th and 20th centuries. The production of “Orientalist paintings” was popularized by Western artists like Eugène Delacroix (d. 1863) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (d. 1904), who depicted their colonial travels or touristic fantasies of “the East” through an explicit Western gaze and Orientalist imaginary of Western superiority. Many Western travellers visited the new European colonies and recorded the scenes they saw by painting them. This is true, for example, for the Ottoman Empire, which maintained important trade networks with Western Europe because of its geographical proximity. Early Orientalist paintings were created to publicize and support French imperialism, displaying the East as a backward place that was barbaric and in need of enlightenment by the
French. As such, the broader political context of colonialism defined the multiple forms of cultural production regarding Arab/Muslim representation in the Orientalist paintings of the 19th and 20th centuries. One can trace the role of fine art in establishing the current ways of visual representations of Arabs and Muslims historically back to Orientalist paintings.

The advent of photography in the 19th century facilitated a surge of travel photography, as the medium became more accessible. The development of travel photography and tourism greatly influenced Orientalist paintings, which attempted to imitate the photograph’s ability to realistically capture a scene to make the audience feel present in that scene. During the height of the Orientalist period of the 19th and 20th centuries, art commonly reflected imperialist ideologies of superiority and othering, and the resulting depictions of Middle Eastern cultures acted as a mechanism for confirming and legitimizing Western views of the East. Islamophobia, a modern iteration of Orientalism that will be further discussed in the latter part of this chapter, continues to rely on these tropes in a perpetuation of common stereotypes against global Islamic communities. The following discussion of select Orientalist tropes in paintings and the influence of those tropes on modern Islamophobic stereotyping in popular culture contextualizes the contemporary artistic representations of Islamic cultures presented in chapters 4 and 5.

Orientalist Male Tropes

First, I discuss male-related Orientalist tropes of Orientalist paintings of the 19th and 20th centuries that are now circulated in media, culture, and popular culture. I briefly introduce these tropes to contextualize the preconceptions that are attached to Arabs and Muslims in the West and to show how, in our contemporary contexts, these perceptions are informing the ways in

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50. Dorothy Kosinski, The Artist and the Camera (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1999).
which Arab and Muslim communities understand their own cultures. It is important to note that these are only some of the tropes that directly relate to the subject of my thesis; there are many other tropes that are not mentioned here due to space limitations.

The Lustful Arab Oppressor

One painting that exemplifies the trope of the lustful Arab is Giulio Rosati’s *Picking the Favorite* (1880) (Figure 30). In this painting, a seemingly wealthy Arab man is depicted viewing naked women at a slave market. A man is disrobing them to reveal their naked bodies so that the purchaser can select the slave he likes best. Artists have often used nudity to symbolize disempowerment; this portrayal connotes humiliation and victimization of its subjects. Although the Orientalist painter is depicting the victimization of women specifically at the hands of Arab men, the painter’s gaze is also an act of victimization and oppression from which he absolves himself by focusing on the sins of the Arab male. A similar scene is depicted in Otto Pliny’s *The Slave Market* (1910) (Figure 31), in which women are stripped naked in the desert, surrounded by camels and Arab men who are choosing which slave to purchase. Nochlin notes that these portrayals of “masculine power over feminine nakedness” are not purely representative of the Arab man’s oppression of women; they also signify the white man’s domination of the East. Specifically, “these largely imagined depictions of nude and semi-nude women in private spaces, ‘in a state of pleasing vulnerability,’ was a means for the painter (who safely resides outside of the field of observation) to assert the balance of colonial power on the

Orient of his imagination.” Thus, in portraying the Arab man as lustful, oppressive, and “other,” the white European man placed himself in a position of moral superiority (as he would never display such blatant lasciviousness), granting himself access to the Arab man’s private world and enjoying the very forbidden sensuality he is appearing to condemn.

Figure 30. Picking the Favourite (detail). Oil on canvas: Giulio Rosati, 1880.

In a less-than-subtle example of this trope, Jean-Léon Gérôme’s famous *The Snake Charmer* (1879) (Figure 32) portrays a young boy, nude and with a python wrapped around him, performing in the street while spectators watch. The background is filled with Arabic calligraphy and geometric ornamentation, making the scene visibly “Oriental.” Said used this particular painting for the cover of his *Orientalism* book, representing it as the epitome of Orientalist fantasies of the Middle East.\(^{56}\) English and cultural studies professor Jenna Mead notes that “this image has come to stand for the fetishi[z]ing of the Other, the East, the homoerotic, the spectatorial and the imperialist versions of the Orient.”\(^{57}\) It removes the artist from the scene, as he views the spectators viewing the sensual spectacle. Gérôme portrays the young street performer as an object of visual enjoyment for the Arab male spectators dominating the scene.

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with their gaze. However, it is the white artist controlling this scene, “bringing the Oriental world into being”\(^{58}\) in accordance with his fantasies and his imperialist propensity for domination.

Figure 32. *The Snake Charmer*. Oil on canvas: Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1879.\(^ {59}\)

As a justification for imperialism, many depictions of slave markets and harems lay at the forefront as subjects in artists’ paintings, emphasizing the mistreatment of Muslim women by Muslim men. This is one of the first circulated and formed tropes regarding Arab/Muslim men. The Muslim/Arab man is portrayed in Orientalist paintings usually surrounded by his many woman slaves as they collectively try to please his desires. If the Arab man is not with his harem, he is probably found in the slave market examining his next female slave (*jariyah*) to purchase or at his courtyard accepting a female slave as a gift, as seen in the above examples. This popular portrayal of the Arab as lustful and on a constant quest to fulfill his sexual desires is a well-established trope that positions the Arab man with nothing else to do but find ways to feed his desires. This automatically positions the Arab man as a patriarchal oppressor of women, with

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often more than one “wife” or woman by his side, stripping their agency away from them as he strips away their clothes. The Arab man is in control of all women in his household, and he silences them and positions them as merely pleasing objects. These are a few examples of paintings that demonstrate the “lustful Arab oppressor” trope, which manifests in modern popular culture.

In Hollywood, the same lustful man is on a quest to feed his desires in the West and with white women. For example, in the movie Cannonball 2 (1984), Jamie Farr plays an infatuated Arab Sheikh lusting over white American women. Furthermore, Sex in the City 2 (2010) is filled with such instances that uphold almost all Orientalist tropes in this section, but one specifically occurs when lead character Carrie bares her leg out of her abaya (cloak) to attract and successfully stop a taxi driver in Abu Dhabi (Figure 33) after many unsuccessful attempts to hail one in her full hijab (cover, headscarf) and burka (full face covering). Jack Shaheen observes that “filmmakers did not create the stereotype, but inherited and embellished Europe’s pre-existing Arab caricatures.”

Hollywood has frequently depicted Arab and Arab-American men as “sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery.” Shaheen describes how the trope of the lustful Arab oppressor comes to life in “Cannon’s Allan Quatermain and the Lost City of Gold (1987) […] in how it] presents sleazy Arabs trying to rape the blonde heroine.” He notes that Hollywood seems to be unable to restrain itself from portraying Arabs as greasy, sex-driven caricatures. As an earlier example of popular culture’s fascination with the lustful Arab

62. Jack Shaheen, Reel Bad Arabs, 42.
oppressor, in *Abbot and Costello in the Foreign Legion* (1950), the protagonists visit an auction block in Algeria, during which, one of the men “ponders whether he can purchase slave girls for $1.25 down and $1.00 a month.” As another example, *Abdulla the Great* (1956) depicts an Arab king surrounded by “‘bought’ women, and belly dancers,” who “repeatedly moves to sleep with Ronnie […], a European model [who spends the film] running from Abdulla.” At one point in this movie, King Abdulla even tries to rape the European woman, admitting, “You are a beautiful devil sent to destroy me. If only Allah would give me strength,” demonstrating the stereotypical view of the Arab as powerless to his desires, inherently lustful and inferior.

Political science professor As’ad Abukhalil observes how, post 9/11, “all manners of Muslim political behavior [have] become reduced to expressions of sexual frustration and […] the desire to engage in limitless and guilt-free sex in paradise.” Consistent with this stereotype, Western popular culture frequently depicts “Arab Muslims as […] lecherous, oily sheikhs.” These portrayals of lustful Arab men and their sexually driven interactions with other women convey the influence of Orientalist paintings that detail this trope and the contemporary perpetuation of that stereotype.

The Inferior Arab

Orientalist paintings often used Arab male inferiority as their subject matter. This trope is based on the definition of a superior Western society in relation to an inferior Eastern one. As demonstrated in the imperialist history of the Middle East, this representation served to justify imperial rule over inferior victims, who needed saving and guidance. Ferencz Eisenhut’s *An Oriental School* (1885) (Figure 34) portrays this trope through its depiction of an Arab instructor teaching male students, several of whom are lying down, partially nude, and appear to be distracted. This portrayal seemingly suggests an educational environment in which Arab men struggle to pay attention and have little interest in learning. Author and art researcher Nancy Lyons suggests that one interpretation of this painting is that the instructor is a poor educator, and thus represents the idea that Arab men are intellectually inferior. Moreover, Eugene Pavy’s *An Oriental Bazaar* (1886) (Figure 35) depicts an underdeveloped, “primitive” landscape in

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which men gather in a marketplace. The presence of a donkey, worn buildings, and dusty roads represents this culture and its people as inferior and underdeveloped.

Figure 34. *An Oriental School*. Oil on canvas: Ferencz Eisenhut, 1885. Nottingham City Museums & Galleries, Art UK.\(^{72}\)

Figure 35. *An Oriental Bazaar*. Oil on canvas: Eugene Pavy, 1886. Dundee Art Galleries and Museum Collection, Art UK.\(^{73}\)

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Furthermore, paintings like Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1834) (Figure 36), as well as its formative versions, display Western criticism and even repulsion of Arab social norms, depicted as inferior in this painting with women relaxing, separated in their own quarters from men.\(^74\) In another example, Théodore Chassériau’s *Arab Chiefs Challenging Each Other to Single Combat under the Ramparts of a City* (1852) (Figure 37) portrays Oriental societies as having primitive forms of rule that engage in uncivilized, violent conflict rather than progressive diplomatic solutions.\(^75\) These paintings exemplify Nochlin’s observation that “Orientalist painting depicts a world of timeless customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were drastically altering Western society at the time.”\(^76\) These portrayals represent the underpinnings of Western ideological perceptions that primitivism in general is a natural feature of Middle Eastern/Muslim societies.\(^77\)


\(^76\) Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” 122.

\(^77\) Isra Ali, “The Harem Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century Orientalist Paintings,” 34.
Figure 36. *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. Oil on canvas: Eugène Delacroix, 1834.⁷⁸

Figure 37. *Arab Chiefs Challenging Each Other to Single Combat under the Ramparts of a City*. Oil on canvas: Théodore Chassériau, 1852. Musée d’Orsay, Museum Syndicate.⁷⁹


This trope persists in the present day, as the Arab (especially the Arab man) is often portrayed as intellectually and physically inferior to his Western counterpart. Islam is often viewed as an inferior religion that is barbaric and savage and is against progress and modernization (epitomized by the West), and the Arab man is representative of all of Islam. The Arab man is often portrayed as uneducated and stuck in barbaric traditions. He is a fool, accidentally blowing himself up or holding the gun backward to shoot at himself instead of the enemy. While these ideas are common in older silent movies, such as Fatima (1897) and One Arabian Night (1920), more recent examples include True Lies (1994) and Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). Worse yet, Muslims and Arabs are portrayed as always falling into the same unintelligent mistakes, unable to progress or move away from this position, demonstrating what Gertrude Bell describes as “in all the centuries [having] bought no wisdom from experience.”

Popular culture frequently portrays Arab men as “primitive, brutal, violent, [and] unfeeling.” Scholars like Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber acknowledge that Hollywood plays a role in weaving together “meanings of Islam as […] barbaric.” Hollywood has a long history of depicting Arabs through this repetitive framework. Notably, “many Arab characters can be found in the earlier Hollywood films and, unsurprisingly, they were [portrayed as] uncivilized lunatics.” For example, Flame over India (1957) shows barbaric, inferior Muslims attacking civilized Westerners. As another example, in Abbott and

82. Rabab Abdulhadi et al., eds., Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 311.
Costello Meet the Mummy (1955), “Egyptian policemen [are portrayed] acting as buffoons,” and a conniving cult is easily brought down by two silly Western characters, emphasizing the depth of Arab ineptitude. Shaheen describes popular culture as projecting these portrayals of Arab cultures (and other non-Western cultures) as filled with inferior people, lacking in morality and incapable of self-governance.

The Rich Prince

Another common trope in Orientalist painting is the emphasis on wealthy Middle Eastern men. Based on imperialist logic, one could interpret the fascination with this theme as an attempt to understand why inferior Arabs are able to amass wealth in these underdeveloped societies. One example is Gustave Boulanger’s Le Harem du Palais (1877) (Figure 38), which depicts a lavish scene of wealthy Arab men surrounded by female servants in an ornately decorated palace courtyard. Another example is Rudolf Ernst’s The Palace Guard (Awaiting an Audience) (1892), portraying a palace guard in lavish clothing standing in front of an ornate background. These are two paintings that display the Orientalist fascination with wealthy Arab men. Said notes that such paintings—along with other mediums of Orientalist stereotyping such as books—portray Arab men as “camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization.”

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85. Jack Shaheen, Reel Bad Arabs, 97.
Moreover, representations of wealth during the Oriental period served the fantasy of an imperial motivation for “imported luxury […] and] conspicuous consumption.” These representations convey underlying Western fascinations with “class and nobility.” Delacroix’s *Moulay-Abd-el-Rahman, Sultan of Morocco* (1845) (Figure 39) depicts a perceptibly powerful sultan on horseback, elevated above the crowd gathered below him. His elevated status contextualized within a “primitive” backdrop of a desert land conveys the message that “these people have let their treasures sink into decay.” This portrayal—which exemplifies a collective trend in Orientalist paintings that constructs the East in limited, narrow, and predictable ways—serves as an ideological representation of Oriental societies and Arab men possessing vast wealth, but who, unlike their Western superiors, are unable to harness this wealth to develop

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their societies; they are simply too backwards (in their army, weapons, clothing, form of governance, and so on) and primitive to know what to do with it.

![Image](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Sultan_of_Morocco_and_his_Entourage.jpg)

Figure 39. *Moulay-Abd-el-Rahman, Sultan of Morocco*. Oil on canvas: Eugène Delacroix, 1845.92

In contemporary popular culture, the Arab/Muslim man is often portrayed as a rich prince or sheikh, who lavishly spends money without consideration. He is often depicted riding on a camel or horse, sporting an unruly beard, and displaying bad hygiene. Mainstream Western media emphasizes these socioeconomic stereotypes; as cultural studies professor Maytha Alhassan argues, “portraying them as childlike imbeciles too uncivilized to know how to responsibly use the black gold under their tribal barbarian feet.”93

One scene of a movie I grew up watching comes to mind as including most of the tropes mentioned above. The character of Mr. Habib in *Father of the Bride 2* (1996) is a character

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written into the movie, but who plays no significant role in the movie or plot; it is as if he were added simply to bash Arabs/Muslims as a form of comic relief. He speaks faux-gibberish Arabic, spends money lavishly, often makes wrong decisions, and constantly quiets his wife whenever she speaks. This problematic character sums up many of the portrayals of Arab and Muslim men in Western media. Jack Shaheen notes that criticism of the film’s portrayal of Middle Eastern culture received a response from actor Terrence Beasor, who condescendingly argued that “stereotypes are a ‘time-honored tradition,’ and ‘not based on racial or gender bias.’”94 This actor’s response epitomizes the acceptance—and, at times, even celebration—of Arab stereotyping and racial stereotyping in general and their placement in popular culture media for comedic relief. It reveals a sense of comfort Western audiences might feel when viewing these familiar portrayals, as if their consistency and repetition make them true and confirm Western-centric notions of cultural superiority. Shaheen quotes Joseph Boskin, professor of history and African American studies, who explains that “‘A stereotype is… staggeringly tenacious in its hold over rational thinking’ and ‘gains its force by repetitive play.’”95 Shaheen further explains this issue by quoting Walter Lippman, writer and political commentator, who states:

The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences […] are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those perceptions… govern deeply the whole process of perception.96

These representations matter. Shaheen points to another example of this stereotyping in the movie Club Paradise (1986), which “features a Muslim who craves only money. Concerned

neither with the environment nor people, the mute, white-robed sheikh threatens to ruin a
Caribbean paradise by building factories, high-rise condos, and even a hideous Arabian
palace.”97 Shaheen notes that Arab men are frequently portrayed in popular culture as “money-
grubbing caricatures.”98 He cites Douglass Kellner and Michael Ryan’s *Camera Politica* (1988)
in acknowledgement of the common “‘racist portrayal of Arabs’ as greedy capitalists ‘in
corporate conspiracy films.’”99 Thus, the perception of the Middle Eastern man as the rich prince
lives on today. Just imagine if all Americans were depicted as Donald Trump in his grandiose
Trump Tower with his predilection towards women—would the common American be accepting
of this representation or identify with it?

The Terrorist Villain

Although the modern concept of terrorism did not exist in the Orientalist period, Orientalist
paintings did frequently invoke the trope of the violent, aggressive, and barbaric Arab, which is a
precursor to the terrorist stereotype. Professor of philosophy and religion Sophia Rose Arjana
asserts that Orientalist imagery portrayed Muslims as “cruel and violent,”100 imagined in these
depictions as “monsters.”101 As an expression of the Western view of the East as violent, chaotic,
uncivilized, and barbaric, paintings often represented the Middle Eastern world as hostile and
unstable. For example, Delacroix’s *Massacre at Chios* (1824) (Figure 40) depicts an Ottoman
attack on the Greeks during the Greek War for Independence. The painting shows “a group of
wretched Greek captives clinging together in despair and fear as they are surrounded by

Turkish soldiers [...] an Ottoman officer, riding a white stallion, brutally seizes a half-naked woman, while another woman pleads for him to stop. As art professor Jon Green notes, the Greeks had committed similar atrocities during this war, and so this painting depicts a double standard that conceives the Oriental as a violent savage. Similarly, Delacroix’s *The Fanatics of Tangier* (1838) (Figure 41) conveys a chaotic, violent scene in North Africa. In this painting, crowds of men are gathered outside and appear to be riled up and violent. When questioned about the meaning of his painting, Delacroix explained:

> At certain times of year, [these fanatics...] meet outside towns; then, their enthusiasm excited by prayers and wild cries, they enter into a veritable state of intoxication, and, spreading through the streets, perform a thousand contortions and even dangerous acts.

Delacroix’s depiction of religious rituals of the Aissaouan brotherhood—a Sufi group—conveys a Western perception of unfamiliar practices that the artist is grappling with. He is trying to understand this exotic oddity, emphasizing the extremeness and strangeness of these rituals in the painting.

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103. Jon D. Green, “Scenes from the Massacres at Chios.”
Figure 40. Massacre at Chios. Oil on canvas: Eugène Delacroix, 1824.¹⁰⁶

Figure 41. The Fanatics of Tangiers. Oil on canvas: Eugène Delacroix, 1838.¹⁰⁷

In another example, Filippo Baratti’s *The Prisoner* (1883) portrays racialized men relaxing in front of their white prisoner, casually enjoying having him at their mercy, showing the Orientalist trend of depicting Arab men as having “an active propensity for violence.” In a graphic depiction of Oriental violence, Henri Regnault’s (d. 1871) *Execution without Judgement under the Caliphs of Grenada* (1870) (Figure 42) portrays a bloody decapitation of a victim slain at the hands of a ruthless executioner. The executioner is dark-skinned, so presumably African, has prominent muscles, is barefoot, and is wearing a toga-like robe. His physique and attire all give the impression that he is “primitive”—even animal-like—and his size in comparison to the rest of the painting makes him appear to tower over his victim. All of these characteristics send the message that this man—along with his society—is violent, brutal, primitive, tyrannical, and should be feared. Nochlin notes that the image is meant to invoke terror in the audience at the brutal act of a heartless, faceless, inhuman executioner. These “strange and exotic punishments [and] hideous tortures” hypocritically portray the Arab, racialized man and Oriental societies as barbaric and violent in contrast to the West, when in actuality, guillotine executions were still used in France into the 20th century, and the death penalty is still legal in some states in the United States today. As such, representations of the other as inherently violent and inhumane served as a non-reality-based justification for imperial invasion and a superior West that is above such violence. In sum, these paintings represent the popular trope of the violent Arab man—a precursor to and influence on modern Western perceptions of Middle Eastern men as terrorists.

The negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims as barbaric and dangerous has long been an overused trope inside and outside Islamic cultures. Today, many movies from Hollywood and Arabic cinema and media alike contribute to the complex character of the Arab terrorist. From Egyptian movies starring Adel Emam as a terrorist (1994) to the American series *Homeland* (itself based on an Israeli series) constantly depicting Muslims as terrorists and the enemy, this is a deeply rooted trope in the minds of the East and West. Scholar Julijana Nicha describes how, in the following movies:


For example, in *The Sheik* (1921), the sheikh is presented as “a thief, a killer and a charlatan.” Although I grew up in Saudi Arabia, I attended a Western-style school and was exposed broadly to “Western” popular culture. One example was Disney—in particular, Disney movies—which depicted my culture in what felt like strange, unfamiliar ways to me as a young girl. Now I view these portrayals as problematic, especially when read through academic scholarship, which has critically interrogated the white, colonial, and Islamophobic representations of Islamic cultures in Disney. For instance, in his article “Animated Racism,” Jack Shaheen points out that *Aladdin* (1992) “effectively slanders the heritage of 300,000,000 Arabs” and goes on to assert that “the celluloid caricatures of Aladdin effectively reinforce the media image of Arab terrorists and religious fanatics.” In fact, it was Shaheen himself who persuaded Disney to alter *Aladdin’s* highly offensive lyrics in the first scene in the movie. This image continues to become more complex as the political climate changes. Evelyn Alsultany, a leading expert on Muslim representation in the US media, notes that beyond the lyrics of the main song, *Aladdin* still has many problems with its representation of Middle Eastern cultures, including the depiction of “bad Arabs” as ugly and with foreign accents and “good Arabs” as possessing European features.

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117. In the opening song of the movie, “Arabian Nights,” the first verse originally read:
   “Oh, I come from a land
   From a faraway place
   Where the camels roam
   Where they cut off your ear
   If they don’t like your face
   It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.”
   Shaheen’s protest of these lyrics in the *Los Angeles Times* convinced Disney to remove the lines “Where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face.” Although Disney chose to keep the “barbaric” reference, this was still an important victory. For more information, see 117. Jack Shaheen, “Aladdin Animated Racism,” *Cinéaste* 20, no. 1 (1993): 49, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41687300.
and white American accents. Alsultany notes that even when popular culture attempts to portray Arab men as “good,” stereotypes of violence and terrorism are still employed, such as instances in which “a patriotic Arab or Muslim American, an Arab or Muslim […] is willing to help the United States fight terrorism.” Building on a long tradition of Hollywood stereotyping, Western movies continue to portray Arabs as “violent characters that seem to use Islam as a justification for their acts of mass destruction, [and] this may cause the public to form judgmental and negative opinions of Arabs, Arab-Americans, and Islam.” Similar to historical Orientalist paintings, contemporary popular cultural stereotypes also conflate “Arab-ness” with “Islamic-ness,” despite the fact that Muslims exist across diverse racial, geographical, and cultural communities. For instance, in this vein, African American or Black Muslims globally are erased when such stereotypes persist and flatten Islamic identity to Arab or South Asian identity; in reality, the largest population of Muslims is geographically located in Southeast Asia in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia. These examples demonstrate the continuity of Orientalist portrayals of the Middle Eastern man as violent and barbaric through to modern portrayals of this man as a violent terrorist.

**Orientalist Female Tropes**

Cultural studies scholar Maytha Alhassen says, “The Muslim woman exists in a familiar patriarchal binary of saint/sinner—transformed by Orientalism into subjugated/subordinate. She is both silent and overexposed, invisible and hyper-visible, a perpetual handmaiden serving the violent agenda of her oppressive […] partner.” Cultural studies scholar Isra Ali links the

120. Yasmeen Elayan, “Stereotypes of Arab and Arab-Americans, 52.
artistic and historical emphasis on gendered stereotypes and representations of Islamic cultures, specifically, to the depiction of gender inequality of Muslim women in the present day. She argues that the misrepresentation and mistreatment of and towards women have long served colonial projects. Claims of primitivism or rape by Muslim men are used as justification for acts of invasion and colonization; these are instead framed as progressive acts designed to rescue, tame, or improve the cultures considered and depicted as lesser than them. Ali explains that Western artists’ work perpetuated themes of white entitlement and colonial power through scenes of male dominance within lavish harems—intimate spaces reflective of the “mystery” the white gaze saw and depicted of non-white cultures. In this regard, it is important to note that Orientalism has also been a gendered enterprise. The following categories of tropes explore this gendered use of Orientalist symbols and colonial logics, which depicted and continue to depict Muslim women as oppressed subjects and how these gendered tropes are maintained in contemporary Islamophobia. These Orientalist perceptions are largely centered on the tropes of “harem women,” and “the oppressed Muslim woman and the exotic unknown.”

Harem Women

The harem woman is usually lying around to please a master, often depicted nude or in revealing clothing. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Grande Odalisque* (1814) (Figure 43) depicts a nude woman reclined in an erotic position in an exotic environment. This odalisque’s proud display of her body is representative of the Orientalist view of Middle Eastern women as sexual objects.

Similarly, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *The Turkish Bath* (1862) (Figure 44) provides a voyeuristic view of dozens of nude Turkish women around a pool. Conveying its explicit sexual theme, “the main element of eroticism in the painting focuses on two women, one of whom is caressing the breast of another sitting next to her.”126 These paintings, and many others, convey a broad, historical impulse to portray women as sexual beings or objects. Such paintings exemplify the Orientalist “othering” and specifically the objectification of Middle Eastern women, who were viewed largely as sexual servants to Arab men. Significantly, the concept of the odalisque—a subject of fascination among Orientalist painters—itsel itself is one construed by Europeans as female sex slaves or concubine mistresses kept in “harems,” which were dedicated spaces for women to serve and please men. Ultimately, artists erased the original meaning of “odalisque” and replaced it with Orientalist interpretations to fit within that construct. This term originally applied to “a young personal chambermaid to the women of a household at the lowest possible socioeconomic station”127 in Turkish society. Although odalisques sometimes changed their role to become concubines, this Orientalist transformation of the term changes its more common meaning and manipulates it to fit Western perceptions and constructs. Even acknowledging the grain of accuracy in the Orientalist conception of the odalisque does not negate the choice of misogynistic focus and representation of Islamic cultures. The interpretation of and emphasis placed on the harem perpetuates hetero-patriarchal values in which all Muslim women are perceived as less than men and thus in service to them.

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Western artists were drawn to these ideals of hypersexualized spaces and their power relations, which ultimately upheld and reinforced colonial values of the East as “other.” Again, these are paintings of Europeans’ imagination and perceived experience of these other cultures.


They represent the Orientalist view that Eastern women were particularly inferior to Western men; “they were part of the goods of empire, the living rewards that white men could, if they wish to, reap.”

Fascination with the harem woman has survived into modern times and continues to be a popular topic of exploration in popular culture. Western popular culture frequently depicts Middle Eastern women as “belly dancers, harem maidens and obsequious domestics.” In *Aladdin*’s (1992) portrayal of the main female character, Jasmine, the movie “focus[es] chiefly on her sexual fascination to appeal to the male’s lasciviousness […] in […] a continuation or rather a renewal of the past conceptualization of the notion of the harem.” In this movie, several scenes show the leading character, Aladdin, with three harem girls usually dancing around him.

These ideas of the Arab woman’s role to dance and please men represent an established trope that children are also exposed to when watching television from a young age. Shaheen also notes the use of this trope in *Abbott and Costello in the Foreign Legion* (1950), which flaunts “scantily clad slave girls and dancing harem maidens.” Zeiny argues that “many men in the West may still smile upon hearing the term ‘harem’ for which the only description is the fascination that the harem has excited in their imagination generated by the Oriental paintings and photography.” Modern television shows draw from this Western fantasy of the hypersexual, submissive Oriental woman. For example, communications professor Rachel Dubrofsky argues that the popular reality show *The Bachelor* (2002–ongoing as of 2021) utilizes

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Oriental themes and scenery to create a sexually charged atmosphere. She notes that the décor of the set mimics stereotypical harem scenery, with deep red carpets and tapestries, gardens leading to other secret spaces, and luxurious furniture that evokes a perception of sensuality. The scenery acts as a backdrop that sets the mood of a show with the primary theme of a man surrounded by women seeking to please him and gain his favour, and ultimately to be “chosen” as the winner of his affection. The very premise of this show would plausibly evoke images of the Oriental harem in the Western mind, and the production plays on those ingrained associations between the East and hypersexualized women to further sexualize the spectacle. In a literary example, William Hughes’ book *The Old Man and the Harem: I Will Always Love You* (2011) is charged with overlapping tropes of the sexualized harem woman and the oppressed Muslim woman. Filled with Middle Eastern stereotypes, this novel tells the tale of a retired American man who settles in Afghanistan, ends up saving a group of Muslim women from their male oppressors, and falls in love. This book exemplifies how the trope of the harem woman is deeply entangled with another common and popular framing of the Arab and Muslim woman as an oppressed woman, which the study further discusses below.

**The Oppressed Muslim Woman and the Exotic Unknown**

Orientalist painters frequently used the subject of the Muslim woman’s perceived oppression and exoticism in their paintings. These painters were intrigued by the veil, which they interpreted as a symbol of both women’s oppression and exoticism. William Holman Hunt’s *The Lantern*

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136 Rachel E. Dubrofsky, “*The Bachelor.*”
137. Rachel E. Dubrofsky, “*The Bachelor.*”
Maker’s Courtship (1854–1860) (Figure 45) depicts a lantern maker attempting to touch his fiancée’s face through her veil, which was observed by some to be a forbidden practice before weddings. This scene suggests the painter’s interest in the mystery of what he cannot view beneath the woman’s veil—an expression of exotic fantasy. It also highlights a perception of Oriental female oppression through its male subject reaching out to touch what he desires as if the female object has no choice but to succumb to his will. Hunt himself describes his fascination with this exotic world, explaining, “I had found escape from the affectations of civili[z]ed life. Nature presented itself in its unsophisticated and simple grace, and life reappeared as in its earliest stages.”

The artist’s fascination with the “exotic unknown” manifests in his portrayal of gendered interactions in his painting.

Figure 45. The Lantern Maker’s Courtship. Oil on canvas: William Holman Hunt, 1854–1860.

In another example of the Orientalists’ mystification with the oppressed, exotic “Oriental” woman, photography exhibits during the Oriental period feature pictures of unveiled Middle Eastern/Arab women. For example, Malek Alloula’s book *The Colonial Harem* (1986) includes a collection of photographs of Algerian women taken during the colonial period to depict colonial obsession with the veil and oppression through forced removal. One photograph in this collection, “Algeria: Dance of the Veil,” shows a belly dancer lifting her veil to convey an “authentic” expression of Algerian culture. However, the costume would have been selected by the photographer and the pose staged “to create an exotic and seductive image” that corresponded with European fantasies. As another example, Marc Garanger’s photography series entitled *Femmes Algériennes* (1960) (Figure 46), which was originally conducted for colonial identification purposes, featured images of Algerian women “who were forced to unveil in front of the camera by colonial European authorities.” These photographs display women with visible expressions of fear and anger, so much so that Garanger described these women as “firing at him with their eyes” during the sessions. Photography series such as these were intended to unveil Middle Eastern women—expose them to reveal the hidden nature of their exoticism. In another instance of representing the Oriental woman as oppressed and objectified, Walter Charles Horsley’s (d. 1934) *Women and an Old Man in Harem* (1883) depicts an old man in a turban, relaxing next to women who are ready to serve him. The painting suggests the subjugation of young, innocent women to the whims of old, powerful men; it also provides a representative foil of the Orient against the West, depicting the Western perception of

146. “Algerian ID Photos,” para. 2.
Oriental men as old and weak in contrast to the strong Western man.\textsuperscript{147} Again, a duality of oppression is happening here, with the artist portraying the oppression of Oriental women at the hands of Oriental men along with the subtext of the domination of the Oriental man by the Western man. Such paintings and photography series, Salhi notes “turn the difference into hierarchy; it highlights the difference between ‘self’ and ‘Other’ in terms of hegemonic power relations.”\textsuperscript{148}

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Figure 46. Femmes Algériennes. Photo: Marc Garanger, 1960. ResearchGate.\textsuperscript{149}}
\end{figure}

Contemporary Islamic arts and visual culture continue to bolster notions of gendered cultural difference based on Western superiority, as evidenced by increasing representations of Middle Eastern women as oppressed subjects such as through prevalent symbols like the hijab or veil, which one of chapter 5’s case studies analyzes.\textsuperscript{150} In this case, the Middle Eastern woman is

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\textsuperscript{147} Zahra Sadat Ismailinejad, “Orientalist Paintings and Said Orientalism,” 74.
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represented as veiled and hyper-victimized—an image which works to contrast it to the Western woman’s “freedom” and thus assumed superiority. The woman behind the hijab and burqa, who is supposedly “in need of saving,”¹⁵¹ allows for a particular Western gaze to determine the visual dynamics at play: gendered Orientalism, imperialism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. Gayatri Spivak’s ground-breaking exploration of philosophy, colonial history, psychology, and other subjects in “Can the Subaltern Speak” points to the issue of “othering” in colonizer/colonized relationships through the now famous phrase that “White men are saving brown women from brown men.”¹⁵² This succinct point raises the question of agency—particularly women’s agency—in a postcolonial West that frequently uses women’s oppression in the Global South to justify conquest and exploitation. In the 21st century, the veil has become the symbol that commonly engenders these biased and politically motivated misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Muslim women—one that requires them to be stripped of their agency and exist as subjugated objects. I return to this critical point further in my discussion of the veil and its contemporary purposes in chapter 5.

This trope of oppression and exoticism includes many representations that are related to each other, and it is by far the most circulated and popular imagery evoked when discussing Arab/Muslim women. Whether it be in the news, media, movies, or art, oppression and Muslim women are often two sides of one coin. In popular culture, Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber have asserted that books, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s The Caged Virgin (2006)¹⁵³ and Infidel: My Life (2007)¹⁵⁴ portray the prevalent stereotype of Muslim women as victims:

¹⁵¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Need Saving? 46.
The Muslim woman is chained to a harem lattice being beaten, raped, murdered for honor, or fill in your choice of oppression here by the Muslim father, husband, imam, or fill in your choice of harem master, while Islam, the tribe, her society, and so on look on approvingly.\textsuperscript{155}

As a former Muslim born in Somalia, Ali arguably uses her insider or “native” status to capitalize on these Western perceptions of Muslim identity for personal gains—an identity that often appeals to far-right conservative Westerners. Shaheen describes how Muslim women on television are frequently portrayed as “shapeless bundles of black, a homogeneous sea of covered, ululating women, trekking behind their unshaven mates,”\textsuperscript{156} and the Muslim woman “is completely covered and stripped of her voice […] and free will.”\textsuperscript{157} Moreover, Western popular culture perpetuates the Orientalist trope of Muslim women as exotic, portraying them “as over-dressed, mysterious humans who do not mind being oppressed.”\textsuperscript{158} In terms of visual culture and cultural studies, it was the 1966 film \textit{Battle of Algiers} in which images of the hijab began to notably shift in popular culture. Here we see an evolution in interpretation from the veiled Muslim woman as merely victimized or sexualized, as this film portrays her as an active participant in terrorism.\textsuperscript{159} We return to how popular media and culture continue to use this portrayal of Muslim women as violent co-conspirators in the section on “Gendered Islamophobia” below.

The topic of the veil and Muslim women’s oppression continues to dominate headlines and news media globally, though the ways in which the veil has been portrayed has transformed

\textsuperscript{155}Rabab Abdulhadi et al., eds., \textit{Arab and Arab American Feminisms}, 111–112.
over time. Still, as ideas of feminism continue to be restrictively understood as a Western development, the West continues to use the platform of liberation of Muslim women, especially from the burqa or hijab, as a point of feminist and secular agenda. Revealing the pervasive nature of these mentalities, the burqa/hijab has recently been banned in parts of Western Europe and in Canada, where in 2019, Quebec’s new minister responsible for the status of women, Isabelle Charest, called the hijab a symbol of oppression. Evelyn Alsultany observes that through portrayals in the media and headlines, such as “Lifting the Veil” and “Unveiling Freedom,” “pity for the oppressed Muslim woman has been strategically used to advance US imperialism. This highly mediated evocation of outrage for the plight of the oppressed Muslim woman inspires support of US interventions in Arab and Muslim countries.” Moreover, this engineered sympathy for oppressed Muslim women serves to demonstrate why Muslim men do not deserve sympathy, and therefore, it is fine for them to suffer inhumane conditions in prisons like Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib. It seems like everyone has an opinion about what a Muslim woman should or should not wear, stripping away her agency and choice. This reality is a continuation of the colonial mindset Spivak describes, noting:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.

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Although no singular Muslim woman can represent the deep diversity of these identities, the slave-like harem women and the oppressed woman behind the veil were a central subject in Orientalist paintings. The oppressed hijabi (veiled) woman is now the central subject in the imaginations of producers and consumers of Western popular culture and, as case studies in chapters 4 and 5 explore, in many contemporary artworks from both the East and West.

**Islamophobia as Contemporary Transformation of Orientalism**

Islamophobia is a modern iteration of Orientalism that continues its Western-centric ideologies of “other.” While Orientalism frames anything other than the West as “the Orient” or “other,” Islamophobia specifically focuses on targeted discrimination of anyone perceived to be Muslim. Specifically, “Orientalism spawned the corollary view that Muslims were a monolithic racial or ethnic bloc, imagined in the narrow form of an Arab or Middle Eastern.”

Anthropologist Nazia Kazi locates modern Islamophobia’s roots in Orientalist othering, which renders “the Arab and Muslim world […] exotic, irrational, and barbaric. In short, it is everything ‘we’ imagine ourselves not to be.”

She argues the need “to see Islamophobia not simply as individual acts of prejudice or bigotry, but as an overarching system of white supremacy.” Modern Islamophobia is not confined to stereotyping and attacks on adherents of the Islamic faith; rather, it equates Arabs with Muslims, demonstrating that “Islamophobia is in the eye of the beholder.” In this way, Islamophobic sentiments are not merely a matter of hatred towards a religion, but an embedded us-versus-them mentality that demonizes people of brown skin—specifically, those viewed to be Middle Eastern. Thus, it is a form of racism. Kazi perceives Islamophobia as “a

fixture of our political and economic systems.” Conceptualizing Islamophobia in this way reveals the legacy of imperialism in its modern iteration as a tool to justify exploitative practices and political expressions of superiority.

Using the theory of Orientalism as a frame of reference for contemporary Islamophobia, an interesting distinction Edward Said makes is that European (specifically French and British) Orientalism is different from American Orientalism. Europeans had direct experiences in the East through colonization; this is different from American Orientalism, in which perceptions were based on indirect encounters. Beydoun explains that “while the architects of Orientalism were European, […] the United States had to follow in the footsteps of Europe and establish itself as the mirror opposite of the Muslim world.” This brand of Orientalism is “a phenomenon that lives on today and steers how politicians, journalists, and everyday citizens think about Muslims and frame Islam, [and] it is the root system that gave rise to and drives Islamophobia.”

As such, the legacy of Orientalism has naturally led to the Islamophobic perceptions and ideologies predominant in America today. So, how did we get here?

Although 9/11 has spurred the recent intensification of Islamophobia in America, this is not a new phenomenon. Beydoun reminds us that Donald Trump’s recent “Muslim ban” echoes the legal practice “more than two centuries before [through which] Muslims were statutorily barred from becoming American citizens [as they were] deemed threatening to and unassimilable within American values and society.” More recently, the creation of the state of Israel has

170. Nazia Kazi, Islamophobia, Race, and Global Politics, 14.
173. Khaled A. Beydoun, American Islamophobia, 55.

Beydoun notes that Muslims were “prohibited from becoming US citizens from 1790 through 1944,” 47.
facilitated further vilification of Palestinians, and consequently, has perpetuated Islamophobia in the West.\textsuperscript{175} Other global events in the Middle East have also increased Islamophobic sentiments. During the Iranian Revolution (1979), which was called the Islamic Revolution in the popular media, images of the revolution were frequently broadcast on American television and other media, such as \textit{Time} magazine’s cover page of Ayatollah Khomeini.\textsuperscript{176} Events like the Iranian hostage crisis presented an extremely negative representation of Muslims, creating the impression that Islam is a violent, mysterious, or threatening religion.\textsuperscript{177} The subsequent events of the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, and later the events of 9/11, have dramatically influenced how the West views Arabs and Muslims.\textsuperscript{178}

When trying to understand the political climate of the world post 9/11, medievalist scholar Bruce Holsinger draws our attention to how the War on Terror relates to and resembles the Crusades,\textsuperscript{179} returning popular discourse to medievalist terminology once again. It is evident that “9/11 undeniably functioned as a prolific generator of new Manichaean allegories, of dualisms rooted in self-consciously medieval rhetorics of crusade, religious fundamentalism, and divine right,”\textsuperscript{180} dividing the world into two sides fighting in a new set of Crusades, but on a global scale. Similarly, Middle Eastern studies scholar Deepa Kumar acknowledges how the conversation has narrowed down to an Orientalist perspective, stating that “since the events of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{175} Edward Said, \textit{Orientalism}.
\bibitem{178} Evelyn Alsultany, “Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11.”
\bibitem{179} The Crusades were a series of religious wars between Christians and Muslims between 1095 and 1492, initiated by Christian powers to reclaim holy sites from Islamic territories.
\end{thebibliography}
9/11, the range of debate on issues pertaining to Muslims or Islam has narrowed to a point where Orientalist modes of thought are once again dominant.”\textsuperscript{181} She points out that “Orientalist logic, expressed in the form of Islamophobia, has once again become naturalized, akin to ‘commonsense.’”\textsuperscript{182} In her research, “Framing Islam: The Resurgence of Orientalism during the Bush II Era,”\textsuperscript{183} she identifies five distinct Orientalist modes that have been deployed to represent Muslims/Arabs post 9/11: (1) Islam is a monolithic religion. (2) Islam is a uniquely sexist religion. (3) The “Muslim mind” is incapable of rationality and science. (4) Islam is inherently violent. (5) The West spreads democracy, whereas Islam spawns terrorism.\textsuperscript{184}

In my subsequent chapters, I discuss and provide examples of how this post 9/11 Orientalist ideology has found its way into modes of contemporary artistic representation of Muslims and Islamic cultures both from within the Muslim culture and from outside of it.

Islamophobia, as rooted in the history of Orientalism and its biased ideology, increasingly perpetuates the perception that Muslim cultures and those who live within them need “saving.” Now, in the era of post-Trumpism, xenophobia has significantly furthered the demonization of brown bodies and Muslim countries and emboldened racist, “othering” sentiments; these are perceived as normative ideas to hold in public spheres.\textsuperscript{185} According to Arabic literature scholar Kate Zebiri, Orientalist concepts are used to understand and interpret Islam and Muslims in order to construct the historical narrative of Europe [as] having “a long history of conflict with Islamic polities.”\textsuperscript{186} This directly serves the continuation of historical views that have been popularized

\textsuperscript{182} Deepa Kumar, “Framing Islam,” 255.
\textsuperscript{183} Deepa Kumar, “Framing Islam.”
\textsuperscript{184} Deepa Kumar, “Framing Islam,” abstract.
throughout the West about the Middle East as extremely fraught and tumultuous, both historically and contemporarily, particularly as a result of the Iranian Revolution and the Gulf Wars (1990–1991 and 2003–2011). Following these events, and later the 9/11 attacks, which solidified and amplified Islamophobic discourse, Western media and international news outlets became the primary means by which Orientalist concepts have been propagated. These media interpretations and representations work to reinforce particular concepts in the minds of the West, continuing to link the words “terrorism” and “oppression” to Islam and Muslims, making it increasingly difficult to separate these linkages in today’s tense climate of biased and “fake news” reporting, especially in the United States.  

As political scientist Rochelle Terman explains, US media outlets “cast Muslim societies as distinctly misogynistic which reinforce[s] stereotypes of Muslims generally as uncivilized, barbaric and a cultural threat to Western values.” Islamophobia, particularly “structural Islamophobia, [which is] the fear and suspicion of Muslims on the part of government institutions and actors,” as Beydoun Khaled outlines in his study, then, serves to maintain that barrier between the “civilized” Western world in contrast to the “barbaric” East. As we see in the case study chapters 4 and 5, Muslims themselves often play into and reinforce these ideologies.

**Gendered Islamophobia**

As we saw above, Orientalist tropes are particularly gendered, and modern Islamophobia is also a “gendered” construct. Islamic studies scholar Juliane Hammer notes that “everything we study and encounter is in fact gendered [and is impacted by] socially and historically constructed and

negotiated gender roles.”  

Some scholars suggest that Muslim women today face stereotypical judgments more often than men, as the practice of wearing the hijab marks them as Muslims, especially in the West, and thus makes them more susceptible to Islamophobic violence and assault.  

Daphne Grace argues that “the erroneous (and imperialistic) depiction of the ‘East’ as a realm of the exotic, the seductive, and the mystical is nowhere more clearly seen than in the trope of the veil.”  

In particular, the aforementioned Orientalist paintings and photographs show the Western fascination with the veil and the mystery of the woman beneath it. Accordingly, my research considers the complex connotations of Islamic symbols and visual culture, such as representations of the veil and other tropes, which I engage in specific gendered, symbolic contexts in chapter 5.  

This fascination with the veil and the mysterious nature of Muslim women is also utilized by Western news and media outlets, which have exploited and appropriated visible signifiers of difference, and which continuously use oppressed Muslim women in popular media to emphasize difference and othering. Termen explains that “one of the most insidious aspects of orientalism concerns representations of gender relations, or what is referred to as gendered Orientalism.”  

In her 2017 research of over 1400 articles spanning 35 years of New York Times and Washington Post reporting about women abroad, Termen found that “Muslim women are more likely to make the news if they live in a country that discriminates against them” and that “news media tend to frame reporting about women in Muslim societies around the specific issue

of women’s rights and gender discrimination, at the expense of other issues.” Sociologist Nancy Lindisfarne argues that these popular Western, gendered views directly fuel the international war on terrorism, explaining that “photos of women in burkas, their faces hidden behind embroidered lace grilles, their bodies enveloped in gathered rayon cloth were a striking feature of US and UK propaganda in the lead-up to the recent Afghan War.” For example, the 1985 National Geographic photograph “Afghan Girl” (Figure 47) portrays a refugee girl looking into the camera as a vulnerable object and—for Western audiences with preconceived notions of Middle Eastern women as being oppressed—conveys her victimization and begs the spectator for help. The girl’s green eyes are striking, and the details around her veiled head are blurry, making her veil appear to cover more of her and be more conservative than it actually is. Western governments have used this image, and similar ones crafted since, to garner support for human rights campaigns and to justify imperial interventions such as the Soviet–Afghan War in the 1980s and the War on Terror. Scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod—whose work I engage more in chapters 4 and 5—have argued that liberating the woman behind the burqa is one of the main motives behind the war in Afghanistan. This reinforces all the paradigms discussed earlier of the West as more “civilized,” always dictating who needs to be freed, who is oppressed and “who needs saving,” and echoes similar themes found in Orientalist paintings of the 19th and 20th centuries and further.

198. Wendy S. Hesford, Rhetorics.
199. Wendy S. Hesford, Rhetorics.
200. Nancy Lindisfarne, “Starting from Below”; Lila Abu-Lughod, Do Muslim Women Need Saving?
In popular culture, the stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed persists. Sophia Rose Arjana notes that “the identity of Muslim women seem[s] to be singularly reduced to the hijab—an article of clothing that is simultaneously exploited and fetishized, commodified and penalized.” Arjana observes that in comics, for example, the veil “is often, but not always, an important part of the Muslim superhero’s identity.” This is exemplified in Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000) in which—with complete disregard for veiling complexities like the advantage of class, economic status, education, and access—Muslim girls and women are portrayed as “unhappy, oppressed, and often veiled.” This is now also being challenged in today’s popular culture, especially as Muslim superheroes like Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel, who first appeared in a 2014 Marvel comic series, are portraying complex and nuanced dimensions of

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Muslim women’s experiences, precisely because Muslim women are writing these stories and characters.  

Although we often find ourselves grouped into false stereotypes of being submissive, weak, and silenced, it is important to note that the conversation of the oppressed Muslim woman has shifted since the events of 9/11, and another layer of nuance has been added. Because the practice of veiling makes women visibly Muslim, they are marked as a threat. They are perceived as foreign, other, and/or terrorist. Muslim women are in charge of breeding mini terrorists and helping their terrorist husbands carry out terrorist attacks. In an attempt to reconcile the trope of oppressed Muslim women and the more recent notion of the female Muslim terrorist, scholars have noted the emergence of a paradigm in which culture and religion are to blame for this female violence. Through this lens, US feminists, in particular, have conceptualized these women as “victims of an abusive patriarchal Arab culture that drives them to destroy themselves and others.” This evolving notion of the Muslim terrorist woman can be seen in the movie American Sniper (2014). In the last scene, a Muslim woman hands her son an RKG grenade and directs him to run towards the American troops to kill them. Both the mother and son are killed by the American Sniper, played by Bradley Cooper; after she is killed, the soldier next to him calls her a “fucking evil bitch.” This direct association in mainstream culture between the veil, Muslim women and children, and terrorism exemplifies the ways in which these ideas are still evident in the consciousness of the West and the East alike.

206. Rabab Abdulhadi et al., eds., Arab and Arab American Feminisms.
207. Rabab Abdulhadi et al., eds., Arab and Arab American Feminisms, 33.
The stereotype of the Muslim female terrorist has in recent years become entangled with Islamic jihadist movements, namely ISIS. Scholar Amanda Spencer notes that “ISIS actively recruits women for a variety of reasons, including growing their population and membership, and creating media attention.”\textsuperscript{209} This problem does have implications in the West as well. Research shows that by 2015, more than “550 Muslim women from Western countries have joined ISIS and moved to its proclaimed ‘Caliphate’ in Syria and Iraq.”\textsuperscript{210} ISIS leaders have increasingly recognized that “the media [has] found reporting on the involvement of women in terrorism irresistible,”\textsuperscript{211} and has used the female terrorist trope to “produce […] sensational, international media attention”\textsuperscript{212} as a recruitment tool. Still, these media portrayals and research often fail to acknowledge that “most ISIS women were homemakers—mothers and wives, versus gun slinging members of ISIS.”\textsuperscript{213} ISIS recruitment of women in Islamic terror groups are a reality, but this reality is not as prevalent as the media portrays. This phenomenon has been portrayed out of context with the truth, obscuring the magnitude and complexities of the problem for media sensationalism and Western sociopolitical motivations. Simplifying complex issues related to gender and culture is a common feature of gendered Islamophobia in its many forms. Muslim women’s visibility as Muslims makes them subject to the brunt of discrimination, which stems from Islamophobic stereotypes that conform to Western relational narratives and imperial justifications.

\textsuperscript{211} Anita Perešin, “Fatal Attraction,” 78.
\textsuperscript{212} Anita Perešin, “Fatal Attraction,” 78.
Conclusion

This overview of Orientalist theory and application has considered how Orientalist tropes related to Middle Eastern cultures were expressed and further solidified through Orientalist art. The tropes depicted in this period permeate current popular culture and Western media through modern expressions of Islamophobia, which have continued in line with as well as mutated from their Orientalist and pre-Orientalist origins. This exploration of literature surrounding the history of Orientalism and Islamophobia has highlighted how Orientalist and Islamophobic logics have shaped Western—and even Middle Eastern—conceptions of Middle Eastern and Muslim cultures. These Orientalist ideologies and the ways in which they continue to be perpetuated through cultural representations in contemporary art, contextualize the case study analysis of chapters 4 and 5.

Specifically, this chapter introduced Orientalism and its deep entanglement with imperialism and violence against the non-European world. This moment of encounter led to the creation of Oriental studies, which Edward Said examines and critiques—in terms of its reductive, “othering” focus and emphasis on imperialist gender perspectives, among other shortcomings—as a continuation of Orientalist ideologies. I outlined some criticisms of Said’s Orientalist theory to acknowledge its shortcomings and defend my use of the theory in this study as an effective tool for interpreting trends in cultural representation among contemporary artists making art with Islamic themes. To create connections for contemporary artistic representations, I explored some major tropes in Orientalist paintings, including the lustful Arab oppressor, the inferior Arab, the rich prince, and the terrorist villain, as well as female tropes of harem women and the oppressed Muslim woman/the exotic unknown. I then explored how these tropes and related ideologies continue to inform portrayals of Muslims in Western popular culture, delving
into the complexities and imperialist motivations of gendered Islamophobia experienced by Muslim women.

In Chapter 3, I explore the prevalent creation, interpretation, and display of Islamic arts within the frame of Orientalist tropes that this chapter has introduced, such as the Arab man as lustful, violent, and hypersexualized or the Arab woman as oppressed, sexual, and exotic. I explore how this has led many art critics, museums, and other major players in the art world to measure the value of this field of art and to understand it solely in the position of other to Western art. This study contributes to the growing scholarly body of research regarding Orientalism and its impact on representations of Islamic cultures and identities in Islamic arts. The next chapter, chapter 3, then brings the significance of both chapter 1 and chapter 2 together to consider the space of museums and the ways in which the study and reconceptualization of Islamic arts can help decolonize museum spaces and galleries. This discussion is followed by chapter 4 and 5, in which I discuss contemporary artists. For instance, chapter 4’s case study analysis of Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists explores these issues of differing forms of representation and the impacts of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation on those depictions.
Chapter 3: The Issue of Cultural Appropriation and the Need for
Decolonizing the Museum Space

Introduction

Museums, art institutions, and other creative spaces, such as galleries, serve as realms for the aesthetic appreciation and celebration of the creative human spirit. People gather in these places to view works of beauty or works that evoke affective responses and questions about different aspects of meaning in life. They are also spaces of learning, knowledge, and cultural exchange, and institutions which affirm or reaffirm worldviews, ideas, values, morals, and knowledge. Exhibits often focus on particular cultures and societies. In some contexts, such as museums and art galleries, visitors frequently enter these spaces to gain insight and learn about the self and other through encounters with art and material culture. Through this function, these spaces play an important role in educating people about other cultures, and in their role as disseminators of knowledge, they legitimize representations and interpretations of cultures with the artists and works they choose to exhibit. The decision to exhibit certain works and artists and not others is itself an enactment of power and can be political. As a platform for the public to learn about cultures, museum spaces play a critical role in determining how Islamic arts are defined and represented, and to some extent, how the public perceives Islamic cultures through art. The history of museum spaces rests upon imperial and colonial histories and consequent Orientalist ideologies, which were discussed in chapter 2. These relationships have resulted in the historical displacement (or biased/inaccurate categorizations) of the field of Islamic arts within the art world, which often remove them from their sociohistorical contexts, as explored in chapter 1. The residue of these Orientalist ideologies has endured and continues to impact the position of Islamic arts within the contemporary art world as well as decisions regarding which artists are
selected for display. Moreover, these decisions often compel artists to create work that aligns with public—often Western-biased—expectations, leading them to appropriate or self-appropriate Islamic cultures to gain access to museum spaces and the Western art world.

Given this important role, this chapter contextualizes the artists and art explored in chapters 4 and 5 by discussing the complexities of these spaces and their influence on artistic production. It explores the history of colonial looting that has shaped museum spaces as a grounding for the museum world’s interpretations and treatment of Islamic arts today. It then turns to a discussion of how museum spaces situate the Islamic art world and how the field has largely been displaced within the broader art world by way of geographical classifications and imagined temporalities. The following sections situate the role of museum spaces within a contemporary context and investigate the ways in which the Orientalist and Islamophobic ideologies that inform the historical development of these spaces continue to impact contemporary displays of Islamic arts. The chapter then describes some efforts museum spaces have made to decolonize the field for more autonomous representation of Islamic arts and reiterates that while these efforts are a step in the right direction, more reflection and continued efforts are needed. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the role museum spaces play in shaping artistic production and cultural representation, by introducing concepts of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation, and by describing their relationship with art. I argue that museum spaces have been defined according to European and imperialist perceptions of the world, and this biased conceptualization continues to impact art selections and display choices. Moreover, museums act as gatekeepers to the art world, and ingrained Orientalist “othering” and imperialist legacies influence artists to culturally appropriate or self-appropriate Islamic cultures in their work to gain access to the art world. Through these discussions, this chapter highlights
the continued impact of Orientalist legacies on museum spaces and their positioning of Islamic arts and serves as the backdrop for the case studies in chapters 4 and 5, which engage specific artists and the exhibition of their work.

**The Complexities of Museum Spaces**

Museum expert John Simmons argues that “the history of museums is really the history of how humans organize and classify the world as they navigate through life using objects.”  

Humans began collecting objects as early as when they evolved to walk on two feet, but a museum is not defined solely as housing a collection of objects. In its modern iteration, the museum is an entity charged with the preservation of public items of human significance. The incorporation of objects into museums, whether by museums acquiring them or choosing to exhibit them, infuses these objects with a specific meaning, and that meaning evolves based on an interrelated multiplicity of contexts, including but not limited to historical, cultural, social, geopolitical, religious, and economic factors. Even the ways in which museums choose to display objects in relation to other objects imbues them with meaning and narrative bias. It is important to critically analyze this bias, as museums are generally viewed as sources of truth about the world and human existence throughout history; they are trusted sources of neutrality, however flawed that public perception may be.

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So, how did these spaces first emerge, and how have they evolved in their contemporary iterations? Some scholarship highlights that the act of memorialization or the act of collecting dates back to 6000 to 8000 BCE from ancient Mesopotamian, and later, ancient Egyptian civilizations, which collected and traded items, such as weaponry, pottery, and jewelry that they viewed as expressions of symbolic cultural significance.\(^7\) The first documented case of what modern society would consider a form of museum is the collection of Egypt’s Tuthmosis III (1504–1450 BCE), which included “art, antiques, flora, and fauna from Asia,”\(^8\) and other objects he acquired from enemies by means of war, which he then catalogued for public knowledge.\(^9\) From this point, curatorial spaces as sites of preservation of artifacts for varying purposes evolved throughout history. In the Middle Ages, from around 800 CE, European “travelers, pilgrims, merchants, and soldiers”\(^10\) began actively collecting objects from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia to be housed privately and then, gradually, in libraries and institutions.\(^11\) But collections of objects for private enjoyment and public display were not solely a Western phenomenon. During the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750 CE), public libraries (many of which were located in mosques) were established and spread throughout the Muslim world to disseminate knowledge of Qur’anic texts as well as Western literary works.\(^12\) In another early example of collection and preservation of texts and material cultures, the Fatimid Empire (909–1171 CE) established libraries, such as the Fatimid library in Cairo, with vast collections of books on a multitude of topics including history, art, literature, science, and much more.\(^13\) Even

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further back, the Library of Alexandria (2nd–3rd century BCE) housed a vast collection of books, served as a space for learning and exchange of knowledge, and was one feature of an ancient museum. These traditions of collection and display continued to evolve throughout history.

Considering the evolution of collection and display of items beyond ancient and medieval civilizations, the Enlightenment era of the 17th and 18th centuries prompted an emphasis on scientific inquiry into the relationship between humans and their material world; this led to an escalation of interest in examining objects from civilizations around the world. From then, collections expanded and became more available and accessible for public viewing. John Simmons notes that “as the modern museum emerged from the Renaissance cabinets of curiosities, collections became more specialized, eventually diverging into many types that […] can be grouped into three broad categories: art, history, and science museums.” In the 1600s, museums began springing up around Europe and North America as collections of various catalogues, and the British Museum, which holds a prominent status as a respected modern museum, opened to the public in 1759. By the 19th century, modern museums began to open worldwide, which of course coincided with European imperial expansion, which I discuss below. These expansions resulted in exhibitions and world fairs, where various forms of material culture were exhibited. Among the exhibitions were racialized peoples, who were viewed as subhuman or even members of another species altogether, and were exhibited as

exotic creatures. Specifically, Black and Indigenous peoples were caged and placed in exhibits for viewing by Western audiences.  

As museum spaces have evolved, they have come to act as a modern critical player in the art world, one which plays a significant role in both representing and defining cultures. As such, these spaces have the capacity to both perpetuate and challenge Orientalist tropes and pervasive forms of cultural representation in art. Below, I outline the colonial history of museums and the influence that this history has had on representations of Islamic arts and cultures within these spaces. I recognize that the histories of museum and exhibition spaces are far more complicated, but my interest here is specifically the relationship between such spaces and Islamic arts. This historical overview investigates how colonialism and the resulting Orientalist ideologies have influenced museum spaces’ conceptualization of Islamic arts, often imagining them from a Western frame, and removing them from their sociohistorical and cultural contexts explored through chapter 1’s discussion of Islamic arts history and scholarly framing of the field.

The History of Colonial Looting

The history of museum spaces is entangled with colonial looting in that these spaces have provided a platform for the display of “permanently imprisoned or enslaved artworks from vassal continents.” From their origins, museum spaces and curatorial practitioners have largely been attributed as the keepers of “cabinets of curiosities” from centuries ago, when they would acquire

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and amass unique objects from their colonial conquests, travels, and imperialist ventures.\textsuperscript{21} Colonial expeditions would often loot “their non-European enemies and display […] the loot in museum showcases as scientific specimens or hallowed artworks.”\textsuperscript{22} Acknowledging the legacy of looting, Cultural studies professor Dele Layiwola asserts that “colonized objects [put] out of place as a result of looting […] need to be rethought indigenously, rather than as products of Western museums.”\textsuperscript{23} Looting of art, artifacts and other important objects has a history that dates back to at least the Roman Empire,\textsuperscript{24} and it was a common practice during the conquests of Arab/Muslim armies,\textsuperscript{25} as well as during the Western imperial age of the 18\textsuperscript{th} to 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. Contemporary Western museums continue to proudly display this loot.

One contemporary display of the products of such looting is the British Museum’s 2015 exhibition entitled “Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilization,” which displays Aboriginal objects acquired during the British occupation of Australia in which the British massacred Aboriginal peoples between the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{26} In another quite famous example of looting and display, the Elgin Marbles were obtained as treasures from the Parthenon in modern-day Greece by British official Lord Elgin.\textsuperscript{27} As modern-day Greece was under Ottoman rule at the time, the sultan agreed to let Elgin view the marbles and make molds of them, and under this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Staffan Lundén, “Displaying Loot: The Benin Objects and the British Museum,” PhD. diss., (Gothenburg University, 2016), 3.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 34.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Geoffrey Robertson, \textit{Who Owns History?: Elgin’s Loot and the Case for Returning Plundered Treasure} (London: Biteback, 2019).
\item \textsuperscript{27} Geoffrey Robertson, \textit{Who Owns History}? 
\end{itemize}
pretense, Elgin accessed the historic relics and brought them back to the West, where they are currently displayed at the British Museum. The justification for keeping the Marbles is that the British Museum is superior to Greece in its ability to preserve these artifacts. In an example of colonial looting in the Middle East, European “robberies of archaeological sites first began during the Ottoman regime and after the First World War, and then amplified with ancient artefacts being shipped from the French mandated territories of Lebanon and Syria and the British region of Iraq to Europe.” Such looting was often carried out under the “pretext of protecting and preserving cultural heritage,” and colonial reports suggest that archaeologists “did not deem the Iraqis capable of or interested in working on their own archaeological matters.” Additionally, during British occupation in Benin, British soldiers plundered an enormous collection of objects. A large number of these objects made their way to Western museums; “the British Museum’s collection of Benin loot comprises around 700 objects, making this museum the possessor of the world’s largest collection of Benin loot.” Reflective of the exploitative ideologies involved in looting and display, as discussed in chapter 2, wealthy European painters like Delacroix and Gérôme would travel to faraway places and paint their exotic trophies. Meant to reflect their wealth, power and so-called “knowledge,” early archives, collections, mechanisms of display, and Orientalist landscapes and imaginaries are thus symbolic of white settler impulses of extraction, spatial organization, and logics of possession. They

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29. Geoffrey Robertson, *Who Owns History?*
embody entitlement in their authority to take objects of cultural significance from other lands and display them for examination of and education about the oddities supposedly represented in these cultural “others.” The ideologies that play out and have been informed by colonial looting have deeply impacted the ways in which Islamic arts have been represented and defined within museum spaces.

Islamic Arts in Museum Spaces

When the British Museum opened in 1759, it already possessed the earliest-known collections of Islamic arts, which increased throughout the 19th century and emphasized displays of “manuscripts, manuscript illustrations, metalwork, and ceramics.”36 In the 19th and early 20th centuries, art historians made efforts to inform museums of the value and nature of arts from the Muslim world in terms of their social and historical contexts and as a focal point of global art history.37 However, towards the middle of the 20th century and into the 21st century, museum spaces began to push Islamic arts to the periphery of the art world as artifacts that do not conform to Western artistic norms.38 The Kaiser-Friedrich Museum of Berlin’s exhibition Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art (1910)—a title which in itself is pejorative for its use of “Muhammadan”—presented Islamic arts as an exotic spectacle that drew from Orientalist motifs and conceived of these arts as stemming from a unified culture and religion.39 Focusing on “masterpieces” from this civilization, the exhibition framed the artworks within Western conceptions and standards of art. Following this exhibition, museums across the West began

37. Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art.”
38. Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art.”
categorizing Islamic arts by region and time and prioritizing “masterpieces” from royal courts, largely distancing these works from their social, cultural, and historical origins and contexts.\textsuperscript{40}

In contemporary study, the secular vs. sacred debate discussed in chapter 1 is one example of an approach scholars have taken to define and understand both historical and contemporary Islamic arts. However, other ways of categorizing Islamic arts have similar shortcomings in that they define the field too narrowly, too broadly, or purely from a Western perspective. As this chapter situates, these Orientalist perspectives and legacies inform the representations of Islamic cultures in the exhibition space, museum, and art world more broadly. Orientalist-informed understandings and interpretations of Islamic cultures and identities, along with their global propagation and popularization, have shaped artistic views and facilitated the displacement of Islamic arts within the contemporary global art world. Islamic arts instructor Mohammed Hanash notes that, historically, “the discipline [of Islamic arts has been] coloured by Orientalists’ notions, opinions, conceptualizations and analyses, which were frequently biased against the recognition of Islamic art’s authenticity and richness as a source of new knowledge.”\textsuperscript{41} Notably, Hanash theoretically views “Islamic art” “as a subject of archaeological study and treats its evolution as part of the historical study of art in the broader sense.”\textsuperscript{42} Thus, like this study, Hanash recognizes that Islamic art is dynamic and has its own cultural and historical contexts.\textsuperscript{43} Speaking specifically to Orientalist bias, Hanash acknowledges that “time and place were, in fact, the two variables that left the greatest impact on Orientalists’ suppositions regarding the degree to which Islamic art was authentic, or borrowed from

\textsuperscript{40} Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art.”
\textsuperscript{42} Idham Mohammmed Hanash, \textit{The Theory of Islamic Art}, 2.
\textsuperscript{43} Idham Mohammmed Hanash, \textit{The Theory of Islamic Art}. 

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Sassanid, Byzantine, Jewish and Christian sources." This legacy of Orientalist bias has facilitated the displacement or subjectivity of Islamic arts, with resulting mis-categorizations, largely based on geography, art classification, and historical period.

**Geography as a Method of Categorizing Islamic Arts**

Grounded in the history of colonial looting and Orientalist ideologies that position Islamic arts as intrinsically different from Western arts, the art world frequently applies historical and contemporary conceptions of geography as a mechanism to simplify the complexities of defining and displaying Islamic arts. Referencing a popular definition of Islamic arts provided by Oleg Grabar, art curator Fereshteh Daftari categorizes Islamic arts as art which is created “in and/or for areas and times dominated by Muslim rulers and populations.” Using geography as a basis for categorization is a prevailing strategy for viewing Islamic arts within the contemporary art world. In fact, “recent exhibitions have focused on this location-based criterion to form regional subcategories, an example of which was the widely publicized exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery ‘Unveiled: Modern Art from the Middle East’, London, 2009.”

Some art scholars and historians view geographical categorizations as a logical approach to addressing the complexities of cultivating a unified definition of Islamic arts. For example, Pourjavady’s three-volume set of books on Iranian arts spans a vast period and covers numerous subcategories of art, but is limited by defining its geographical scope as the area of present-day Iran. Understanding and defining historical art in Islamic contexts could be problematic

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44. Idham Mohammed Hanash, *The Theory of Islamic Art*, 51.
47. Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art.”
because “the political boundaries created by imperialism and colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries scarcely conform to historical circumstances.”48 These types of geographical constructs often lead to an exclusion of artwork produced outside modern national borders. Additionally, Grabar argues that the field of Islamic arts is studied regionally because of scholars who support nationalist thinking, leading to scholars also complicating the definitions of Islamic arts outside the colonialist perspective.49 This sense of nationalism affects the categorization and display of Islamic arts, and some scholars, such as art education and art history professor Nada Shabout, argue that a distinction should be made between Arab art and Islamic art.50 Bias towards a nationalist or cultural framework complicates the defining of Islamic arts, requiring us to think about art within the popular imagination historically in addition to contemporarily. However, the same is often true for most “national” orientations as they sought to look for a pre-Islamic past (e.g., in Egypt and the pre-pharaonic past).

Imagined Temporalities in the Classification of Islamic Art in a Global Era

Orientalist ideologies have also led to the classification of Islamic artwork within Western-defined notions of art classification; this is another mechanism through which Islamic arts have been displaced or mispositioned in the contemporary global art world. The contemporary art world’s struggle to understand what makes art “Islamic” has often led to its minimization as a field of study. Canonical art history texts widely used and cited in North America and globally have dedicated little attention and nuance to what they categorized as “Islamic art”—often representing it as a footnote or afterthought rather than a robust area of practice and study. For

instance, well-known encyclopedic volumes like H. W. Janson’s *History of Art* features a mere 16 pages dedicated to Islamic arts within an 856-page volume.\(^51\) Similarly, *Art History* by Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren is 1198 pages in length with only 29 pages dedicated to Islamic arts, and *The Visual Arts: A History* by Hugh Honour and John Fleming is 960 pages in length, with only 20 pages dedicated to Islamic arts.\(^52\) In many cases, these short sections include discussions of Islamic arts as related to Orientalist imaginaries of Islam as other by typically focusing on Islamic arts in terms of its relationship to Western art.

Art history scholar Iftikhar Dadi links the “globalization” of modern art to the 19\(^{th}\) century, which largely paralleled the rise of Eurocentric Orientalist imaginaries. He goes on to mention that conceptions of modern art are based on the idea that it should be “decisively separate”\(^53\) from the mundane, “possessing no use value,”\(^54\) but reliant on its creators’ “observation and contemplation.”\(^55\) He adds that because Islamic art did not historically strive to depict three-dimensional or classical figuration and other Renaissance representational principles, it was conceptualized as decoration and ornamentation on daily objects, and as such, was inappropriately placed in the applied arts category and not the fine arts category according to biased Western artistic standards.\(^56\) In the 19\(^{th}\) century, art historians applied the “crafts” stigma to Islamic arts, and though decolonization work is beginning to challenge it, this stigma has endured.\(^57\) This classification caused the denigration of Islamic art to a “lowly place within the


\(^{53}\) Iftikhar Dadi, “Reflections on the Conception of Modern and Contemporary Islamic Art,” 73.

\(^{54}\) Iftikhar Dadi, “Reflections on the Conception of Modern and Contemporary Islamic Art,” 73.

\(^{55}\) Iftikhar Dadi, “Reflections on the Conception of Modern and Contemporary Islamic Art,” 73.

\(^{56}\) Iftikhar Dadi, “Reflections on the Conception of Modern and Contemporary Islamic Art” 73.

\(^{57}\) Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art?’”
historical narrative of minor arts in European art history,” 58 with the result that many artworks that should have been comparatively viewed as masterpieces were instead classified as primitive products of craftsmanship, and as such, have been exhibited in history museums. 59 Exemplifying the Eurocentric orientation of art studies, “the field that is still defined in European and North American art history by the label ‘minor arts’ is necessarily invalid in the context of the arts of Islam, and the distinction between major and minor itself of little utility.” 60 As outlined in chapters 1 and 2, the concept of “Islamic art” itself was created during the colonial era and is a product of Orientalist perceptions, which were further affirmed and instituted in spaces such as museums.

Western conceptions of a singular modernity continue to influence the art world’s appreciation of non-Western art. For example, at the 2009 opening of the National Museum in Baghdad, writer and art critic Reiner Luyken described an ancient Islamic artwork as “a carved duck made of stone, a piece to marvel at, which looks as if it was made by Henry Moore.” 61 This comparison of an ancient Islamic work (by an unnamed artist) to that of a mid-20th century English artist exemplifies the art world’s displacement of Islamic arts as a classification to be viewed from a Western context and its failure to acknowledge it as a field of art in its own right.

Art historian Gülru Necipoğlu identifies another problem with the historicization of Islamic arts, explaining that Islamic architectural masterpieces such as the Taj Mahal and Selimiye Mosque were “anachronistically medievalised” 62 by placing them in the Middle Ages rather than in the correct chronological order, as both were contemporaries of Renaissance and

58. Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art?’” 17.
60. Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art?’” 8.
Baroque practices. She argues that “the denial of Islamic art’s coevalness with post-medieval Western European art manifests itself in surveys through the omission of artworks produced after 1700 or 1800.” This decision suggests that European perspectives on Islamic arts are based on double standards, which implies that the “classical Mediterranean artistic heritage [that was part of] medieval Islamic art” becomes the “exclusive preserve of Europe after the Renaissance.”

This is an example of another form of misrepresentation, in addition to colonial and modern secular categorizations of Islamic arts that solely focus on aesthetics rather than spirituality or the functionality of such sacred practices to Islamic worship and tradition.

Shalem has also identified a form of temporal displacement focused on the “forcible compression of both Islamic and Byzantine arts within a specific span of time that corresponds and harmonizes with the grand history of Western artistic evolution, positioning both merely as stations on the inexorable path to the Italian Renaissance.” This categorization also undermines a long and complex Islamic cultural timeline that spans across multiple continents and centuries. Challenges to this common use of temporal constraints to the categorization of Islamic arts suggest that “a time-specific approach may […] be convenient for categorizing most of the vast history of Islamic art, but [it] appears to only work to a historical extent.” Temporal classifications of Islamic arts have been juxtaposed with the West’s view of itself as the standard of modernity. Thus, “Islamic art was set back in time. Any continuity was regarded as an adherence to tradition and no space was given for other, modified versions of modernity.”

Temporally based conceptualizations of Islamic arts often work within Islamic arts definitions.

68. Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art?’” 17.
that contextualize these arts using the past tense, suggesting that these are relics of history that have no bearing on or need for contemporary expressions in the modern world.\textsuperscript{69}

The 2012 “Arts of Islam” exhibition at the Louvre is one example of a chronological approach to interpreting and categorizing Islamic arts. This exhibition included over 2,500 works of Islamic arts from the 7\textsuperscript{th} to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and the galleries were organized into four chronological sections as a means of differentiating types of Islamic arts.\textsuperscript{70} This type of approach falls prey to the same issues described in the discussion above on geographic categorizations; the shifting nature of “Islamic” territories over time will lead to the inevitable exclusion of some significant pieces, as territories have changed and overlapped throughout history. Another chronological approach is to divide Islamic arts by dynasties. One example of dynastic forms of exhibition is the exhibition mounted by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris “on the arts of the Fatimids, Shi’i rulers of parts of North Africa, Egypt and Syria from 909 to 1171.”\textsuperscript{71} In addition, scholar and cultural strategist Klas Grinnell identifies “the British Museum’s now-closed John Addis Gallery of Islamic art, [in which] a total of 47 Islamic dynasties were mentioned”\textsuperscript{72} as another example of dynastic categorizations. He argues that “for many historical representations, dynasties are not sufficient categories to capture the possible meaning [of the objects],”\textsuperscript{73} and that these framing devices for Islamic arts fail to “point to gender or class relations, or to other social dynamics that might be of equal historical interest.”\textsuperscript{74} Although this method of categorization avoids the problem of modern political boundaries, the dynastic focus typically

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} Sara Choudhrey and Ania Bobrowicz, “Shifting Boundaries,” 5.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art” 160.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Klas Grinell, “Labeling Islam,” 37.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Klas Grinell, “Labeling Islam,” 38.
\end{itemize}
leads to an emphasis on “masterpieces, treasures, and jewels” 75 favoured by rulers to the
displacement of more purely religious art. 76 Additionally, scholarly and artistic preference for
certain types or periods of art can lead to the exclusion of art from particular periods based on the
Western art world’s changing preferences. In these ways, relying on time to understand and
classify historical Islamic arts creates a scenario in which a multitude of artworks are overlooked
or excluded from the discussion by the contemporary global art world. This practice of exclusion
is not just unique to Islamic arts but also applies to Indigenous art and art from the African
continent—essentially, art from anywhere but Europe or “the West.” 77 These Orientalist-based
interpretations of Islamic arts, which are frequently measured based on inaccurate art form
classification, geography, and time, have displaced Islamic arts within the contemporary art
world. Hanash points out that the
archaeological, historical and documentary studies of Islamic art and artefacts are
important for their ability to demonstrate the cultural value of works of Islamic art and
artefacts based on the time periods to which they have been dated; however, such studies
devote little if any attention to such works’ aesthetic and artistic value. 78

These problematic trends in Islamic arts display point to the bias of categorizing classical or pre-
modem Islamic arts in an anthropological sense, as historical objects rather than works of art. 79
Hanash challenges Orientalism’s contemporary influence, arguing that “overall, the Islamic arts
come together in the symbolic expression of Muslim artists’ experience of the divine oneness in
a manner that transcends regional and geographical disparities.” 80 Furthermore, Shalem
acknowledges that “categorizing visual concepts in terms of geography or even spans of time, let

78. Idham Mohammmed Hanash, The Theory of Islamic Art, 3.
80. Idham Mohammmed Hanash, The Theory of Islamic Art, 34.
alone nationality or race, does not even provide the proper adjectives let alone respond to the challenges which global Islamic art presents.”\textsuperscript{81} These scholarly analyses effectively outline the problematic nature of geographical, Western-centric, and chronological classifications of Islamic arts and provide some context for the need to decolonize museum spaces. Having contextualized bias and common miscategorizations in framing historical Islamic arts, in the following section, I further situate this need for decolonization and the relevance of artistic cultural representations by looking at the role of these spaces in the contemporary art world.

**The Role of Museums in the Contemporary Art World**

Museums are understood as “a vehicle for the display of objects or a space for telling a story.”\textsuperscript{82} While other museological models have emerged, the Eurocentrism of the art world at large remains the same. Museum studies scholar Staffan Lundén sums up the continuing bias of Western museums, stating that through ethnographic displays,

> the other is described, analyzed, visualized, and explained by, and for, the self, whereas the self – the museums and curators who create the representations of others and the museumgoers who look at these represented others – remains unproblematised, unseen, unspoken, and unaccountable. Hence, whatever amount of respect and admiration the display communicates about the non-Westerner, her or his traditions, thoughts, habits, or artworks, it serves to confirm the normality of the Westerner.\textsuperscript{83}

This bias is important because, as museum studies scholar Carol Duncan writes, museum spaces are, in fact, spaces of “ritual,” which, points to their authoritative and validating function(s).\textsuperscript{84}

These are political and affective spaces, which depend on a relationality. As scholar Stacey Douglas underscores, “Modern museology is predicated on an encyclopedic desire—and

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\item \textsuperscript{81} Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art?’” 14.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Staffan Lundén, “Displaying Loot,” 5.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
\end{itemize}
conviction that it is possible—to observe and know[,]”\textsuperscript{85} which relates to the “politics of comfort”\textsuperscript{86} and the desire and entitlement to know, which have long motivated the white settler-colonial project. Because art institutions continue to represent powerful cultural spaces that replicate nationalist(ic) values through their acts of inclusion and display, it is crucial to consider their motives for display, such as aesthetics vs. critical meaning. While exhibitions and collections continue to diversify by displaying art by artists relating to Islamic cultures, some of them are predominantly doing so through a purely aesthetic desire, displaying artworks that uphold stereotypical representations of Islamic cultures. With this trend, the gap between historical and contextual meanings of Islamic arts and their (mis)understandings produced by museums continues to increase, as art institutions have adopted and relied on a predominantly homogenous visual approach.

Certainly, curators play a central role in making artworks and artists known and seen, as do art institutions (like museums), publications, and events. Within the formalized, professional art world(s) that I explore primarily in Canada and Saudi Arabia in chapters 4 and 5, it is important to note that, most often, artists are invited to exhibit by curators, within major institutions or among prominent collections. Thus, curators maintain power in defining the museum and curatorial spaces. This reflects a dynamic of invitation, wherein there is less agency for artists to self-determine their exhibition opportunities and kinds of visibility in the arts. Former museum director Laura Raicovich asserts that the role of the museum “director is as political as the art”\textsuperscript{87} they choose to represent. As such, these museum gatekeepers play a key


\textsuperscript{86} Sara Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) 123.

role in their selections of art and the ways in which this chosen art represents culture. Thus, there are several tiers and actors who maintain hierarchy and inscribe power in the political spaces of museums and galleries.

Significantly, “the environments of civic institutions such as museums have the ability to cultivate dialogue, engaging as civic agents to promote general public discourse on such issues as the changing concepts of race, ethnicity, politics, and culture,” Ellyn Walker explains. The spaces in which art is displayed, through selection and promotion, have the power to impact the knowledge and understanding—both in perpetuation of error and fact—of a wide audience. The question of audience extends to multiple display contexts, such as public art galleries and museums, which are often funded by the government and governed by powerful art collectors. This means that these institutions, in turn, play a cultural, educational, and touristic role, and they also cater to political trends and the preferences of the collectors. For instance, many visitors to national galleries like the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa are tourists (both Canadian and international) as well as local Canadian citizens since the Gallery is in the nation’s capital (Ottawa) and explicitly positioned as reflecting all of Canada. This relationship is not benign, as tourists—and others visiting the museum for the purpose of education—are institutionally regarded as “good citizens” who “actively” engage in learning more about cultures. In addition to tourists, schools and other youth and educational groups often visit museums, reflecting the shared public understanding of the museum as a site of learning. Museums are thus regarded as trustworthy locations for knowledge dissemination; yet they continue to display and perpetuate cultural inaccuracies and stereotypes and reinforce binary categories that were constructed during the period of Orientalism, which the museumgoers

88. Ellyn Walker, “Curatorial Contestations: Challenging Institutional Modes of Inclusion in the Arts through Curatorial Position(s) and Practice(s),” PhD. diss., (Cultural Studies program, Queen's University, 2020), 4.
passively consume. As such, when young students and international tourists are exposed to (mis)representations of Islamic cultures in spaces believed to house and represent official narratives, they become seduced by and also implicated in the perpetuation of such myths. The section below explores the ways in which these prominent museum narratives have been largely shaped by Orientalist and Islamophobic histories.

The Impact of Orientalist and Islamophobic Histories on Contemporary Museum Spaces

The legacy of colonial looting and the exploitation that underpins this legacy continues to impact contemporary museum spaces—although some corrective impulses have taken hold, as the section below entitled “Decolonizing Museum and Art Gallery Spaces” explores. As Canadian curatorial scholar Jen Budney argues, “It is important for those of us who work in these fields to see where such structures of thought or process may be at work in our own practices and institutions—indeed, how we may be consciously or unconsciously replicating Orientalist fantasies of Western superiority.”89 Former director of the Queens Museum in New York, Laura Raicovich, tweeted in 2017, “Neutrality is a fiction,”90 reflecting the role of museums as political spaces that are not unaffected by their histories and environments. Exemplifying the impact of colonial legacy on contemporary museums, “consumable, secular perspectives on modern Muslim identity and its cultural manifestations, or on political ‘hot’ topics such as veiling, may be privileged to the detriment of artworks informed by deeper understandings of faith and its bearings on contemporary life.”91 Orientalism and Western bias continue to impact curators’ and

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other museum experts’ choices of design and representation in exhibiting both historical and contemporary Islamic artworks.

Even institutional attempts to enact more culturally and historically accurate and representative exhibits can fall short and succumb to the Western bias they are striving to avoid. For example, as a reflection of the political climate, the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art closed its “Islamic Art” galleries two years after the 9/11 events.\textsuperscript{92} When the exhibit reopened eight years later, the museum made efforts to correct the problems involved in its previous categorization, in part, by renaming the gallery “The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia.”\textsuperscript{93} As Met director Thomas Campbell explains, this reimagining recognizes “that the monumentality of Islam did not create a single, monolithic artistic expression, but instead connected a vast cultural expanse through centuries of change and influence.”\textsuperscript{94} However, this effort to be more inclusive and represent a wider variety of Islamic arts still arguably falls short on several accounts. Nasser Rabbat notes that the gallery is still inaccurate in its historical representation of geography as “Spain/Al-Andalus” is absent, and the history of Islam continues to not be fully captured or accurately represented due to the gallery’s emphasis on geography and time.\textsuperscript{95} Significantly, “the artworks and objects displayed in the new galleries evince more common traits—formal, aesthetic, functional, and, yes, religious—than they do differences predicated on specific locales or nations.”\textsuperscript{96} These geographical and temporal forms of division signify a continuation of Orientalist notions of the Islamic cultures and arts as

\textsuperscript{93} Carol Bier, “Reframing Islamic Art,” 1.
\textsuperscript{96} Nasser Rabbat, “What’s in a Name?” 78.
“other,” defined within simplified Western categorical constructs. Furthermore, Islamic arts historian Carol Bier observes that “although Colonialism and its impact on the arts is addressed in the Safavid, Qajar, and Mughal galleries, the absence of anything contemporary remains unacknowledged.” Here, Islamic arts are portrayed as an exhibit of history and legacy of long-gone civilizations and not as a living and dynamic, contemporary expression. So, while the Met’s effort to create an exhibit that decolonizes Islamic arts is certainly a step in the right direction, it falls short on several counts and requires more critical evaluation of the influence of Western ideologies on this diverse field of art.

Orientalist images and imaginaries continue to be perpetuated in museum displays both globally and in the Middle East. For example, “The Lure of the East” (2008–2009), a major exhibition presented at the Tate Museum in London that included over 120 paintings by British Orientalist painters from private collections, also toured in the Middle East. This exhibition included paintings depicting slave markets in works by Jean-Léon Gérôme and Frederick Lewis, as well as harems through works such as Frederic Leighton’s Odalisque (1862). Even its name evokes images of the “exotic” Oriental lands the Orientalist painters depicted. These examples demonstrate the influence Orientalism and modern Islamophobia still hold as well as how difficult it can be, even for museums and institutions that are trying, to break free from Orientalist, Western-centric perspectives and biases that are so structurally embedded into their institutional spaces as a whole.

Decolonizing Museum and Art Gallery Spaces

The explicit nationalistic and colonial function of the museum refuses its neutrality. Therefore, it is important to consider the public and cultural impact(s) of national art institutions that exhibit and collect culturally misrepresentative art to intra- and extra-national audiences. In particular, we must consider the harmful impressions such curatorial or institutionally framed misrepresentations elicit. There is a growing recognition in the art community “that unspoken colonial legacies had for too long upheld and promulgated white privilege.” Art history professor Priyanka Basu explains that effective decolonization in museum spaces “requires creating spaces to learn from and it must allow the subjects of colonization/decolonization and others historically underrepresented to ‘appear.’” These artworks and artists have their own stories to tell, but the Western-dominated art world must stop telling their stories on their behalf so that art from other cultures can speak over the noise (examples will follow in chapters 4 and 5). Additionally, art history professor David Bindman stresses the need to view art within its historical context rather than national notions centred around the self; for example, “those working on the Italian Renaissance need to be aware of connections with the Ottoman empire.” He argues that these types of decolonization efforts are socially significant and that there exists a “need to investigate the visual construction of other peoples, for it plays a decisive role in naturalizing ideas of difference that can result in social action.” As legitimizers of cultural representation, through decolonization, museum spaces have real potential to challenge Orientalist ideologies and to begin chipping away at intercultural “othering.”

100. Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 9.
102. Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 17.
103. Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 17.
Art history professor Tim Barringer asserts that “a key to moving ahead is to diversify the voices at the heart of the discipline,”\(^{104}\) referencing the frequency of museums having only one curator or “expert” for culturally focused exhibits and the fact that these experts are often white cultural outsiders. These trends have the potential to minimize underrepresented voices and to restrict cultural representations to monolithic, Western-oriented perspectives. Still, I would be remiss not to mention that there is (some) critical artwork being made by Muslim/Arab artists and exhibited by curators, as well as some exceptional counter-institutions. In fact, I consider myself one of these visual artists whose work resists representing and replicating such Western-based cultural norms—both inside and outside the Middle East—through the production of nuanced, culturally complex, and inter-textual artworks. To explore the progress that has been made and to situate the work that still needs to be done—work this study is actively undertaking—I spend some time discussing museums and exhibits that have recognized the value in and have made impressive progress towards decolonizing Islamic arts.

A 2006 exhibition curated by Fereshteh Daftari at the Met in New York entitled “Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking” displayed Islamic arts in a “non-stereotypical”\(^{105}\) nature, including pieces made by Muslims and non-Muslims from a variety of countries around the world, and with both spiritual associations and subjects simply focusing on “Islamic aesthetics.”\(^{106}\) For example, Shirazeh Houshiary’s painting *Fine Frenzy* (2004) “transform[s] a word that she writes on the canvas with a pencil into marks that dissolve into formless

\(^{104}\) Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, “Decolonizing Art History,” 12.


abstractions."¹⁰⁷ Houshiary has explained that the script in the painting is Arabic, “but the identity of the text is not divulged.”¹⁰⁸ Analyzing the piece, Fereshteh Daftari explains that “the kind of thinking in which form or outer appearance is understood as a veil hiding a deeper reality is something Houshiary shares with mystics.”¹⁰⁹ This use of indecipherable Arabic text is purposeful, intended to express outward perception versus hidden meaning, which is different in intentionality from what we observe in the case study of Shirin Neshat in chapter 4.

Another example of challenges to Orientalist framing of Islamic arts in this same exhibit is Mona Hatoum’s Prayer Mat (1995), which uses Islamic imagery of the carpet, but is not intended as an explicit reference to religion or ethnicity.¹¹⁰ However, in current times, the title of the work will most definitely elude an off-the-street spectator, and they would likely not interpret the work as non-religious. Although intention is important here, as Hatoum has explicitly stated that she intended this piece to be ambiguous and that her cultural background or “‘nationality’ [are neither] straightforward [nor] important in the final analysis of the work,”¹¹¹ disconnect and biased interpretations are challenging to prevent, given the religious imagery. This carpet, “made of upward-pointing brass pins,”¹¹² with a compass in the middle could be interpreted as Hatoum’s efforts to find her place in the world within the context of her personal experience of exile from Lebanon, born to parents who were exiles from Palestine. Combining clashing styles of minimalism and Marcel Duchamp’s (d. 1968) ready-mades, she uses Islamic aesthetics and

¹¹² Fereshteh Daftari, Without Boundary, 17.
contemporary European styles to challenge her own position in the world. Edward Said describes Hatoum’s art as “the presentation of identity as unable to identify with itself, but nevertheless grappling the notion (perhaps only the ghost) of identity to itself.” Thus, exhibition of Hatoum’s *Prayer Mat* is an example—though admittedly still with interpretive pitfalls—of a decolonizing effort to display Islamicate artworks that define themselves rather than relying on Orientalist ideologies for a source of identity or meaning.

As another example of counteraction to colonial influence, although the aforementioned “Lure of the East” exhibit primarily displayed Orientalist art with stereotypical themes, such as the lazy Arab and the seductive harem woman (see chapter 2), it did also include a unique perspective in the form of a female artist Henriette Browne, whose *Visite (Intérieur de Harem, Constantinople, 1860)* depicted the harem as a social and familial realm. As Browne was the only artist in this exhibit who was actually granted access to a harem on her travels, her familial interpretation of the harem stands in stark contrast to the other artists’ sexual interpretations and speaks to the extent to which these paintings were a portrayal of European fantasies intended for European audiences rather than reflections of reality. Relatedly, art historian Thisaranie Herath explains that “it was only with [the] emergence of female travelers and artists that Europe was afforded a brief glimpse into the source of their fantasies.” Notably, Western female travellers did not resolve stereotypes related to Islamic cultures, as Barbara Hodgson’s account of female travellers during the 17th to 19th centuries details Western women’s role in perpetuating

negative representations related to gendered customs and hygiene. Still, the inclusion of Browne in this exhibit represents a step towards displaying more diverse forms of Islamic cultural representations and correcting persisting Orientalist and Islamophobic bias.

The Albukhary Gallery in the British Museum is another example of an exhibit designed with an explicit focus on the decolonization of Islamic arts in museum spaces. To really understand visitors’ expectations and ways to improve their conceptualizations and displays of Islamic arts, the British Museum engaged in numerous focus groups held in 2015 and 2017, which included a broad cross-section of museum visitors. These focus groups helped inform the museum’s display decisions, and the designers of the gallery expressed the goal of conveying “the idea that ‘the Islamic world is not linked to a specific time or place, but rather to a wider concept of contexts significantly impacted by the presence of Islam as a faith, political system or culture.’” Although the gallery maintains a chronological dynastic organization of objects, it also emphasizes different aspects of culture, ranging from court society to everyday life. It makes efforts to convey the historical origins of styles, as in the demonstration of “the presence of Chinese-inspired elements [through the] juxtaposition of two objects in a single case: an Ilkhanid ‘Sultanabad’ ceramic jar and a Mamluk mosque lamp, both decorated with lotus patterns.” The gallery also acknowledges its relationship with the colonial past through the inclusion of “a case called ‘Object histories’ [which describes] how objects entered the

collection.” In response to the museum’s decision to position the gallery in a central location, Muslims in the focus groups expressed that “The fact that we are going to have more space, in the front, makes us feel significant, that we are valued as Muslims,” demonstrating the significance of these considerations.

The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, which opened in 2014, serves as a productive example of decolonization of Islamic arts from Western categories. The museum’s website describes the museum as “North America’s first museum dedicated exclusively to Islamic arts,” and states that it “presents and collects art from historically significant Muslim civilizations as well as contemporary Muslim communities and diasporas around the world.” Here, the museum is actively challenging ideas of “Islamic” geographies by thinking and programming expansively when it comes to Islamic arts, especially in the diaspora. It also provides learning programs for cross-cultural exchange.

The design of the museum itself incorporates historically familiar Islamic styles and designs. With a courtyard in the centre and positioning to expose all sides of the building to the sun to incorporate natural light, the design is reminiscent of historical mosques discussed in chapter 1, such as the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque constructed during the Safavid Empire. The galleries and exhibitions themselves “are not separate rooms, but one large space,” showing no bias towards empires, time periods, geographies, or media, and conveying both the continuity and evolution of Islamic arts and architectural practices through history. Exhibitions in the museum include “written explanations

of cultural influence and interaction,” acknowledging overlapping cultural and religious purposes and connectivity and the dynamic nature of Islamic arts through history. Moreover, Islamic art historian Ruba Kana’an is “a founding member of the AKM’s leadership team and [from 2011 to 2017] worked closely with the museum’s Islamic art collection,” providing valuable insight into opportunities for the museum to be culturally reflective and to exhibit art with autonomous cultural representation and decolonization efforts in mind. Thus, with informed leadership, incorporation of the historical and contemporary, acknowledgement of artworks’ origins and cultural influences, considerations of the overlapping nature of time and geographies, and even architectural design, the Aga Khan Museum represents a model effort to decolonize museum spaces and present Islamic arts as an autonomous and complex, living field.

The evolution of the incorporation of sacred art at the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Istanbul provides an example of decolonization efforts in a non-Western museum. Though sacred objects were always included at the museum, until 2012, they were loosely incorporated as works of cultural heritage. Prior to the installation of the Sacred Arts Gallery in 2012, “the museum displays were based on material or dynastic typologies, and presented from a secular perspective [and…] displayed without their religious meanings.” To rectify this lack of context regarding the original purposes of these objects, the museum developed the Sacred Arts Gallery as a “thematic gallery, which emphasi[zes] the spiritual features of the objects” and reimagines and presents these relics as having overlapping “secular and sacred” significance.

The creation of this gallery is thus another example of a step towards the process of decolonizing Islamic arts in museum spaces; the museum rejects colonial ideologies that lead to perceptions of sacred objects as merely cultural and acknowledges the relics’ relationship between interconnected cultural and spiritual spheres, thus allowing the objects to reclaim their history.

Despite these positive counteractions, it is clear that the term “Islamic art” continues to be widely defined and interpreted through an Orientalist framework, and museum spaces, which serve as inherently touristic, nationalistic, and historical spaces, are often influenced by deeply imbedded colonial legacies and worldviews. While the examples above represent a break from traditional perceptions of Islamic arts from the art world’s gatekeepers, they currently remain the exception rather than the norm, and this norm directly impacts artistic production, as I discuss below.

**Museum Spaces and Cultural Appropriation**

Broadly, as this chapter has outlined, museum spaces function as disseminators of art and central points of global artistic exchange and discussion. They confer legitimacy upon the art and artists they choose to display and act as gatekeepers to the world the artists seek to enter. The resulting imbalance of power inherent in this relationship between museum spaces and artists necessitates that artists produce art in ways that align with the norms, standards, expectations, and even aspirations of these institutions. In a tangible example of this issue, a 2017 article in the *National Post* titled “Toronto gallery cancels an exhibit of white artist’s paintings over complaints of cultural appropriation”\(^{136}\) describes settler Canadian artist Amanda PL’s art exhibition and

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initiates the question of appropriation. PL’s exhibition was cancelled in Toronto after multiple critics, scholars, artists, and cultural workers called out her blatant appropriation of the Woodland painting style innovated decades earlier by Anishinaabe artists like Norval Morrisseau and others. The article states that “the problem for many is that she’s white,” and therefore, she does not belong to the culture she was borrowing the style from. The gallery even gave PL the opportunity to display different types of art, but she rejected the offer. PL has the freedom from scrutiny to create Indigenous art privately if she chooses to, but once the art is displayed publicly, that is when questions of appropriation, profit, and intent are raised. PL’s artwork and the response to it demonstrate “renewed debate over who has the right to use and profit from specific customs” and raises a number of important questions when one is representing a people or culture that one does not belong to—a theme that is prevalent in my own case studies discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Is it acceptable to borrow and benefit from other cultures, especially ones you are not part of or have not studied? This section delves into these issues and describes the importance of power dynamics and context in determining when such borrowing is problematic.

The history of Orientalism and contemporary Islamophobia is a key factor in the cultural appropriation—by both cultural “insiders” and “outsiders”—commonly seen in Islamic arts. The pervasive legacy of colonialism, imperialism, and related Orientalist ideologies that have shaped the positioning of Islamic arts within the art world also impacts the artists themselves. It follows that these circumstances influence, and arguably limit, the types of art artists can produce if their
goal includes success in the art world. As such, the pervasive nature of the Orientalist ideologies explored in chapter 2 often leads artists making Islamic arts to engage in practices of cultural appropriation (if they are not from Islamic contexts) or self-appropriation (or self-orientalization if they are from Islamic contexts) to produce art that both serves their own aspirations and meets the expectations of the public and the museum spaces serving the public. Therefore, to contextualize the cultural appropriation and Orientalist practices of artists within the case studies discussed in chapters 4 and 5, I conclude this chapter by introducing the concepts of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation and by discussing their relationship to artistic representation.

Discussions of cultural appropriation have become the norm in our contemporary context, especially on spaces such as social media. The issue is a complex one. Art historian Deborah Root has defined cultural appropriation as the adoption of different aspects of a culture without consent from the majority of people of that culture. There exists a long historical controversy over the issue of cultural appropriation and one that rests upon broader systematic injustices between communities that are doing the “appropriating” and those that are “appropriated.” Complicating the issue further, there are power dynamics at play here in that non-white cultures can generally adopt the artistic norms of powerful white cultures, but not the other way around, and sacred religious concepts remain an issue of appropriation both ways.

Philosophy professor James Young argues that “cultural appropriation is often profoundly offensive because it reveals something insiders regard as sacred,” and chapter 4 explores how this disregard for the sacred plays out in the case study of Sandow Birk. This

reasoning suggests that the taking and manipulation of an important symbol or element of a
culture is an act of desecration. It separates the symbol from its original purpose and meaning
and molds it to serve another culture. Scholars Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint argue that
two “conditions must be present to define an act of cultural appropriation: the presence of
significant contestation around the act of appropriation, and the presence of knowledge (or
culpable ignorance) in the act of appropriation.”142 This study primarily applies Lenard and
Balint’s conception that cultural appropriation involves “the existence of a power imbalance
between the cultural appropriator and those from whom the practice or symbol is appropriated;
and the presence of profit that accrues to the appropriator.”143 While power imbalance and profit
are the most important indicators of appropriation for this study, I also consider the roles of
significant outcry and the appropriator’s knowledge of the act.

Cultural appropriation is a pervasive issue, and its complexities bear consideration in
relation to artistic responsibility. I must first qualify that Islam, as a religion, spans the globe and
reaches across a diversity of cultures, regions, and traditions over a period of 15 centuries. Its
racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity makes determining cultural appropriation challenging,
especially when the Islamic cultures are so deeply intertwined with religion. It is, therefore,
challenging to claim that a white Canadian woman, for example, wearing the hijab (headscarf) is
an appropriation of Muslim cultures as she is herself Muslim, though coming from a different
cultural and racial context. Of course, context matters, but the fusion of religion and culture and
the impossibility of disentangling them makes this act one of religious appreciation and
expression; here, it is more about religion than culture. There is knowledge with no intent to

142. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” Ethnicities 20, no. 2
143. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 333.
offend, significant outcry is extremely unlikely, and there is no profit to be gained. Therefore, I would classify this example as one of appreciation and self-expression rather than appropriation.

In contrast, a white, Western, Muslim convert—or non-Muslim—modelling a hijab or other symbol of Muslim culture in a fashion show would be an example of cultural appropriation. There is a power imbalance between the cultures (i.e., white non-Muslim woman), there is a motivation for profit, knowledge of the sacred aspects of the objects, and a potential for significant outcry. This has played out in the real world, with Dolce & Gabbana releasing its first hijab series in 2016, in which it used white, non-Muslim models to market the product.\textsuperscript{144} Islamic studies student and writer Ruqaiya Haris explains:

> In the context of global Islamophobia, there is something that makes me feel quite uneasy seeing a towering white woman praised for looking glamorous in the same clothing that often leaves Muslim women perceived as ‘extremist’ and puts them at risk of being attacked or even criminalised in some western societies.\textsuperscript{145}

Haris eloquently describes the power imbalance inherent in this marketing and fashion choice. There is also an issue of profitability, a knowledge of the cultural importance of the objects (presumably research would have been done by the company to produce versions of this clothing that conform with Muslim-world cultural norms), and the existence of numerous articles outlining the potential issues of cultural appropriation related to the production and marketing of the clothing indicates some significant outcry.\textsuperscript{146} This fashion production and use of white, non-

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\textsuperscript{145} Ruqaiya Haris, “D&G’s Hijab Range is Aimed at People Like Me,” para. 5.

Muslim models in particular embodies the issues of cultural appropriation. Again, this perpetuates injustices already experienced by racialized communities.

The Sikh community has also been impacted by similar offensive acts of cultural appropriation. For example, in 2018, Gucci modelled Sikh turbans “as part of Milan fashion week.”\footnote{“Gucci Accused of Culturally Appropriating Sikh Turban,” \textit{Al Jazeera}, February 23, 2018, para. 3, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/2/23/gucci-accused-of-culturally-appropriating-sikh-turban.} In this example, Gucci used white, mostly European models to market a sacred symbol of the Sikh faith.\footnote{“Gucci Accused of Culturally Appropriating Sikh Turban.”} As in the previous example of modelling hijabs, power dynamics and profit are clearly at play here. Moreover, Gucci would have surely engaged in research in its design, and backlash from similar campaigns would suggest the company would have been aware of the potentially offensive nature of this decision. Gucci’s modelling of the Sikh turban prompted a significant outcry from the global Sikh community. A British Sikh broadcaster succinctly explains the offense in his following statement: “While Gucci sends white models down the catwalk wearing turbans, a Sikh environmentalist has his turban ripped off outside parliament in a hate attack.”\footnote{“Gucci Accused of Culturally Appropriating Sikh Turban,” para. 16.} Their sacred attire is being marketed and tokenized as fashion, while their bodies are being attacked. Thus, the modelling of Sikh turbans by white models is an egregious example of cultural appropriation, especially in light of the systematic violence against South Asian bodies.

Globalization has rapidly spread Western culture and norms, as well as longstanding Orientalist ideologies, to Muslim societies. As these societies have become familiarized with these ideas and values, they have become popularized, and to an extent, blended with Islamic cultures. Edward Said argues that Western values play a dominant role in the Arab and Muslim
Relatedly, there has been an offshoot of this debate regarding the potential for cultural appropriation to become so normalized, that even the culture being appropriated begins to reimagine itself through that appropriated frame. Is it possible, then, that Western views of Islamic cultures and identities can influence Muslim views of their own culture and the self?

Sociological studies have indeed found that “people and their sociocultural worlds are not separate from one another. Instead, they require each other and complete one another.” Following this line of argument, a culture inundated with Orientalist perceptions and imagery could unconsciously integrate those perceptions into its own cultural understanding of self or *self-orientalize* or *self-appropriate*. Moreover, philosophy professor Justo Serrano Zamora argues that “members of [marginalized] groups often lack the necessary symbolic resources or categories for developing a collective voice capable of reflecting their own social experience.” Always living in the shadow of a dominant—in this case, Western—culture, subordinated groups often struggle to carve out their own place in social institutions. Scholar Richard Rogers expresses the idea of appropriation by way of cultural dominance, explaining that “cultural dominance implies a relative lack of choice about whether or not to appropriate on the part of the ‘receiving’ culture because of the ‘sending’ culture’s greater political, cultural, economic, and/or military power.” Although Rogers suggests that this “imposition of the dominant culture onto the subordinated cultures [does not constitute…] appropriation by members of subordinated

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cultures,” the resulting need for members of subordinated cultures to conform to the dominant cultures’ norms and ideologies facilitates self-appropriative practices.

As a clarifying example of this study’s interpretation of self-appropriation, the symbols of the harem and belly dancing have found their way into the ways in which Arabs choose to represent one aspect of their own culture in popular culture and the media. This is seen in an advertisement for Maghrabi optics (a Saudi Arabian optics company) on the MBC channel, the most watched TV channel in the Arab world in May 2019. Here, a group of women are dancing to “Oriental” tunes (recognizable as Middle Eastern by the instrumentation, musical scales, and rhythms used) at the beginning of the advertisement as the narrator explains what constitutes the Arab collective identity. This example reveals the importance of context and power dynamics. The women in the advertisement can celebrate aspects of their culture as an act of appreciation and cultural self-expression, but the problem lies with the advertising company itself, which is playing into Western notions of identity to create an appealing image that sells. Here, there exists a power imbalance between the Western cultural norms the company is appealing to, motivation for profit, and an implicit awareness of the culture the advertisement is self-appropriating. I acknowledge that no significant outcry occurred over this advertisement, and this is a complicated example to untangle. The MBC channel, as the most watched TV channel in the Arab world, is legitimizing in itself, making it less likely that viewers would question cultural representations. Moreover, the company enlisted popular social media “influencers” to take part in the advertising campaign, arguably overshadowing the problematic themes of the advertisement. The message of “Arab identity” would resonate with a lot of viewers, and the

average viewer might not pick up on the representational issues or be educated on the history that informs these types of representations. While there was no outcry, the history of Orientalism suggests that criticism of the advertisement was certainly warranted, and it is not enough to disqualify this example from being self-appropriative. The existence of the power imbalance, profit, and awareness on the part of the company is enough to classify this advertisement as self-appropriating.

Self-appropriation, like cultural appropriation more broadly, is a complicated concept to dissect, as it is arguable that an “insider” to a culture has the right and credibility to represent their culture in any way they choose, and that would be “authentic.” However, particularly in terms of Islamic cultures, the concept of self-Orientalism as a mode of self-appropriation has gained traction. Arab American National Museum researcher Matthew Stiffler defines self-Orientalism as comprising the “ways that Arab Americans have strategically deployed Orientalist imagery and rhetoric as a representational practice within liberal multiculturalism.”¹⁵⁷ He argues that “Arab Americans have resorted to self-Orientalism to secure their place in the US multicultural arena as ‘authentic’ others.”¹⁵⁸ Of course, one should also consider that self-Orientalism is about survival in “foreign” cultural lands and spaces, and artists may perceive it as their only choice to feel at home. Further problematizing these forms of expression, Rogers points out that “the imposition of [dominant] culture [is] made possible by disproportionate access to resources and modes of power.”¹⁵⁹ Within the context of this study, these arguments would suggest that some artists (discussed in chapters 4 and 5) might be influenced by self-appropriation, perhaps propelled by peer pressure, as a way to gain acceptance in the art world.

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Jaber Stiffler, “Consuming Orientalism,” 111.
¹⁵⁹ Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation,” 480.
Lenard and Balint argue that “the dangers of cultural appropriation are perhaps strongest in the arts.”\textsuperscript{160} Another school of thought purports that cultural appropriation may yield desirable artistic value. For example, Young acknowledges that “artists who engage in cultural appropriation may produce works of considerable aesthetic merit.”\textsuperscript{161} Furthermore, applications of cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation can be difficult to untangle. All art is influenced by something, so drawing the line between appropriation and influence is plausibly challenging. Film, gender studies, and feminist research scholar Janice Hladki notes that many artists, critics, and art scholars also contend that attempts to avoid cultural appropriation may hamper critical artistic freedom.\textsuperscript{162} Still, others take issue with the concept of using cultural appropriation in art for financial gain. Lenard and Balint explain that “profit makes appropriation much more morally problematic. It is not just that something of relative value is being used, but that it is used to make new value that goes directly to the appropriator.”\textsuperscript{163} Others in the art world have built on that idea, arguing that monetary gain is, in fact, the primary purpose of cultural appropriation. Artist Joane Cardinal-Schubert asserts that “money […] is what appropriating is about. Whether the issue is land or art or iconography or ceremonial [traditions] the focus of the deprivation is money. Something to be gained by imitation, copying, stealing.”\textsuperscript{164} Again, power dynamics and context are important. An artist functioning within Islamic contexts making an oil painting with figural representations does not constitute cultural appropriation because the artist is the subordinated entity in this power dynamic, and the context is one of adopting prevalent

\textsuperscript{160} Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 347.
\textsuperscript{163} Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 345.
artistic styles of the primarily Western art world. This debate underscores the complexities of the ethics—legality is a separate issue—and the appropriateness of cultural appropriation in art; these themes will appear in the next two chapters when we engage with our case studies to further explore some of these complex questions.

The controversy around these paintings and the subjects raised are ones that should be raised and applied to white artists engaging in creating art from cultures that they are not a part of. Unfortunately, I find that, more often than not, there is little concern for cultural appropriation against the Islamic communities. Is it because the Muslim world has become so used to being represented by others that it is now normalized or normal for others to visually misrepresent it? Does this lead to an environment in which artists have an incentive to culturally appropriate their own culture by utilizing popular misrepresentations and narratives, adding a level of authenticity as an “insider” and arguably, for personal gains? The subsequent chapters raise more questions about the problematic nature and occurrences of Islamic cultural appropriation by further exploring these issues of appropriation and self-appropriation within the case study analyses of representation in Islamic arts.

Conclusion

Museums and art institutions are spaces of public learning and cross-cultural exchange. They have the potential and responsibility to educate audiences and correct common misconceptions about diverse cultures throughout our world. As legitimizing forces in the art world, the way they represent culture matters. This chapter has introduced some of the history of the museum space, its complexities, and how colonial and imperial histories of looting and display have influenced ingrained contemporary manifestations of Islamophobia and Orientalism in museum curation and
conceptualizations of Islamic arts. Specifically, informed by Orientalist and Islamophobic frameworks, museum spaces interpret Islamic arts through a Western lens. This bias has led to the historical and contemporary miscategorization or displacement of Islamic arts, commonly in terms of geographical or time-based classifications that overlook overlapping histories and cultures and often fail to acknowledge the influence of cultural exchanges on Islamic arts and the evolution of this dynamic, diverse field over time.

The work to decolonize and correct cultural misrepresentations starts with museum spaces, along with curators and the educational institutions that train them, which are primarily based in Europe and North America. These institutions have begun making efforts to decolonize spaces and to position Islamic arts in closer accordance with their sociohistorical origins and contexts, but there is much room for greater progress. And progress is vital, as the representations of Islamic arts within these spaces engineer a propensity for artists to culturally appropriate or self-appropriate to gain access to the art world, as access is more likely if artists’ work meets the expectations of museum audiences. To maintain popularity and relevance, museums are obliged to display art that conforms with the art that museumgoers want to see, and given the ingrained Western “othering” tropes of Islamic cultures, museumgoers commonly want and expect to see these cultural stereotypes represented in art. As such, it is plausible that for their work to be selected for display, artists must also conform to these stereotypical cultural representations, leading them to appropriate or self-appropriate Islamic cultures. The history of Orientalism and contemporary Islamophobia plays a significant role in the cultural appropriation commonly represented through Islamic arts. This chapter engaged with issues of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation by exploring how they relate to artistic representation and how a long historical controversy over the issue still exists today. Museum spaces, curators, and
artists are all confronted with the issue of cultural appropriation and the complexities of the ethics and appropriateness of it in the art world. As an example of this issue, this chapter explored the artistic appropriation of Indigenous art by Amanda PL to capitalize on cultural expressions of a marginalized group of people, and chapters 4 and 5 add further examples to this discussion through examples of appropriation by Colleen Wolstenholme (and others) as well as self-appropriation by Abdulnasser Gharem (and others). This is further complicated by the concept of using cultural appropriation in art for financial gain, as chapter 5 touches on. I concluded the chapter by underscoring the importance of investigating cultural appropriation specifically in relation to the field of Islamic arts.

We will see how this legacy of Orientalism and Islamophobia—and its impact on cultural appropriation and self-appropriation—plays out in museum choices regarding displays of contemporary artists and Islamic artworks in chapter 4 and chapter 5. Although some museums and curators have attempted to decolonize and exhibit Islamic arts in ways that celebrate the field in its own right, there is still a long way to go, and the authority and legitimizing nature of these spaces directly impact artists in their methods and themes of expression. Chapters 4 and 5 delve further into the impacts of museum standards and norms—which this chapter has described in relation to their colonial and imperialist histories and corresponding Orientalist ideologies—on artists producing art within the field of Islamic arts. With Islamophobia on the rise post-9/11, post-Donald Trump, and Brexit, perhaps now more than ever it is important for all aspects of the art world and all educational spaces to consider a paradigm shift.
Chapter 4: Case Studies on Islamic Representation and Orientalist Themes in Contemporary Art

Introduction

Working within the Saudi art world, I have come face to face with the problematic nature of contemporary artistic representations of Islamic identities and cultures. For instance, Gharem Studio, located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and founded in 2013, defines itself as being “dedicated to encouraging individual thought and self-expression with artists across the Muslim world.”¹ This is objectively a worthy mission that I fully appreciate. However, in my interactions with artists receiving mentorship at the studio, the limited actualization of this goal became evident. Specifically, in teaching and encouraging up-and-coming Muslim artists to be successful, with global opportunities, the studio, whether explicitly or implicitly, instills the notion of utilizing Western views of Islam—as violent, sexually regressive, oppressive, and backward—as a catalyst to success. Although I certainly appreciate the studio’s intentions in providing valuable mentorship and career guidance to Saudi artists, this approach encourages what I understand as self-appropriation to the detriment of cultural representations that allow Islamic cultures to speak for themselves and define themselves on their own terms. On the other hand, my interactions with Saudi artists like Sarah Al Abdali have enabled me to see a sharp contrast between artists applying Western (and arguably personal gains) mindsets, seemingly encouraged by Gharem Studio, as opposed to artists endeavouring to free their art from Western ideological influences. This stark contrast of cultural representations by artists functioning similarly within Islamic contexts brings up questions of influence in terms not only of cultural context, but also of the

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intersection of cultural identity, religion, gender, class, and so many other elements of identity and integrity. Working within this art world, it is truly these experiences of conflicting mindsets and perceived motivations that alerted me to the need for research to examine this issue more deeply and to begin the work of uncovering the role of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation in artistic expressions of Islamic cultures. Comparing artistic representations of Islamic cultures in both this chapter and chapter 5 also provides an opportunity to raise further questions regarding the intersectional nature of identity and how those elements play out in art and its practice.

As previous chapters have highlighted, artists functioning in Islamic contexts have produced a multitude of artworks that have encompassed a variety of themes and a diverse set of styles. Contemporary artists have built upon this legacy and are continuing to break new ground and present new ways to creatively represent Islamic identities and cultures. The debate on what constitutes Islamic arts is ongoing, and in their efforts to contribute to this field, artists both within and outside Islamic contexts are influenced by deeply embedded—and often Western-centric—conceptions of what it means to come from Islamic contexts. Those conceptions influence art and often lead to depictions of Islamic identities and cultures that are shaped by differing interpretations and understandings, sometimes through cultural appropriation, self-appropriation, and Orientalism. This chapter explores these issues through a comparative case study analysis, arguing that such issues impact both Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists alike. I introduced these categories in the introductory chapter of this study but will return to them again below.

This chapter begins by describing the relevance of analyzing contemporary representations of Islamic identities and cultures and the rationale for choosing the categorizing
of artists under analysis, namely Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists. It then examines issues related to identities and cultures embodied by producers of art by comparing case studies of non-Islamic-context artists (Sandow Birk and Maurits Cornelis Escher) and Islamic-context artists (Abdunasser Gharem, Shirin Neshat, Jamelie Hassan, and Sarah Al Abdali) in their approaches to Islamic artistic representation. The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of these artists, looking specifically at the role of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation in their art. Ultimately, this analysis tests my assumption that cultural appropriation, a concept introduced in the previous chapter (chapter 3), impacts the artistic expressions of both Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists. It furthers the latter argument by signalling to broader issues than just cultural appropriation, notably, ones that pertain to power and privilege. In discussing these artists’ access to museum spaces and the relationship between that access, power, and depictions of culture, the chapter problematizes artistic consumption. It specifically raises issues surrounding the diverse possibilities in interpretations of artistic cultural representations, including those that yield perceptions of cultures as autonomous, and of cultures in stereotypical terms that rely on other frames of reference (primarily Western) for understanding.

**Cultural Representations in Contemporary Islamic Art**

Applying the categories of Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists enables productive comparisons in representations of Islamic cultures by artists with diverse relationships with Muslim cultures. Analyzing artists within these varied contexts provides insights into how interactions specifically with Islamic cultures might cause representations to diverge or converge. Moreover, using these categories allows for analysis and comparison of
how practices of cultural appropriation impact artists functioning within different contexts and how those practices can manifest in their art.

Contemporary Islamic arts remain as broad and varied as they have been historically. Representations of Islamic cultures and identities are unique and personal but are also shaped by Western-centric views and expectations that envelop the art world. Therefore, I have selected case studies based on artists who represent a wide spectrum of producers, including those who centre their Muslim identity and come from these cultural or ethnic or national contexts, and those who are situated outside Islamic contexts. These cases demonstrate the extent to which different relationships with Islam and its cultures, or social locations and experiences, impact artistic representations. Comparing differences in representations among these categories also reveals the influence of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation in relation to artistic attempts to engage in representations of Islamic identities and cultures. Although not all artists are explicitly intending to represent identity or culture in their art, Western practices of “othering” and Islamophobia influence Western spectators to view contemporary Islamic artists as representatives of their cultures and their art as extensions of that representation. An analysis of the differences and similarities between artists’ representations of Islamic cultures within these categories of Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists has the potential to convey the extent to which “insider/outsider” perspectives align and differ.

Furthermore, analyzing these representations within the context of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation both reveals the influence of “othering” as a Western practice and begins to explore the relationship between artistic responsibility, personal gains, and cultural representations. This is a timely issue as the legacy of Orientalism continues to promote stereotypical images of Islamic societies through contemporary Islamophobia, as discussed in
chapter 2. Thus, the exploration of these issues in this chapter through tangible case studies of artists and their productions captures the significance of the histories introduced in the previous chapters and the complexities of artistic productions in contemporary contexts. In addition to my experience and observation of self-appropriation in the Saudi art context, during my time living in Canada, I noticed that my culture was continuously misrepresented by cultural stereotypes and portrayed as subservient to Western values and thought. For instance, as I discuss in chapter 5, Colleen Wolstenholme’s depiction of veiled, oppressed Muslim women in *Triad* (2005) caught my attention as an example of a stereotypical cultural representation. Additionally, through my studies, I was introduced to Sandow Birk’s *American Qur’an* (2009–2016), discussed below, which alarmed me in its portrayal of the Qur’an as being somehow connected with modern terrorism. I frequently encountered representations of Muslim and Middle Eastern cultures within national museums, art galleries, publications, the media, and public spaces that portrayed Muslim women as submissive to men, as forced into arranged marriages, or as confined by the hijab. These representations have widespread and long-lasting sociopolitical implications; as such, analyzing the ways in which contemporary artists are using the creative sphere to represent Islamic cultures and identities is a highly relevant and important undertaking and a necessary decolonial exercise.

*Non-Islamic-Context Artists*

Political science professor Elizabeth Shakman Hurd argues that “modern Western identity is dependent on its appropriation of an Islamic other.”² Particularly post-9/11, but even well before, Western, non-Muslim artists have continued the Western artistic fascination with Islamic

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cultures displayed by Orientalist artists, and this fascination has evolved in modern political and cultural contexts and manifested in varying forms of Islamic cultural representations. A few examples include artists, such as the anonymous Princess Hijab and Colleen Wolstenholme, who use the veil as a symbol in their art; Sandow Birk, who uses everyday, mundane, representational imagery and the Qur’an itself; and Richard Henry Deacon and Maurits Cornelis (M.C.) Escher (d. 1972), who incorporate geometric patterns in the style of historical Islamic arts. Non-Islamic-context artists often produce within the grey area between appropriation and appreciation, and the following case studies of Sandow Birk and M.C. Escher explore some different types of Islamic cultural representations depicted by such artists.

Sandow Birk (USA)

Sandow Birk is a California-based artist and winner of many international awards and grants, such as the Guggenheim Fellowship (1995), City of Los Angeles (COLA) Individual Artist Fellowship (2001), and the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (2007). His practice involves mixed media, painting, and installation art. Birk has an extensive body of work and is

3. Fascination with “the Orient” is not just limited to Islamic cultures. For example, Europeans also developed a fascination with Japan, China, and other Eastern cultures, manifesting in Chinoiserie, Japonisme, Turquerie, and the use of African sculpture in the formation of modern art. These fascinations manifested in a variety of ways, including appropriation of fashion and pottery. For more information, see Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2013); John Walter De Gruchy, Orienting Arthur Waley (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2003); Nebahat Acivoğlu, Turquerie and the Politics of Representation, 1728–1876 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011); James O. Young, Cultural Appropriation and the Arts (London: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2010).

4. Princess Hijab is an anonymous street artist in France who uses graffiti to add black veils to figures (often in advertisements) around Paris. Though her identity is unknown, her non-identification as Muslim positions her at least somewhat in a Western, non-Islamic context. See her interview in Angelique Chrisafis, “Cornered – Princess Hijab, Paris’s Elusive Graffiti Artist,” The Guardian, November 10, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/nov/11/princess-hijab-paris-graffiti-artist#:~:text=She%20won%27t%20say%20if,slight%20broadness%20to%20her%20shoulders.


widely exhibited and collected in America and Europe in prominent institutions like the Met, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Warhol Museum, and many others. He often collaborates with his wife, visual artist Elyse Pignolet, as co-producers on projects such as the woodblock print *American Procession* (2018).^7^

Birk created an original handmade illustration of each page of the Qur’an, and each page has been sold separately as prints. In addition, digital images of all the pages have been bound together in a book he calls *American Qur’an*, available on Amazon and in bookstores. This practice goes against the integrity of the sacred text on multiple levels. Aside from disregarding the holy nature of calligraphy, as discussed in chapter 1, it disregards the history of Qur’anic manuscript culture, in which the sacred texts of the Qur’an were intended to be viewed and read as a whole. Separation, display, and sale of the text by the page—sometimes a single *surah* (chapter) is divided—removes the meaning and context of the messages. Historically and contemporarily, when the text becomes unreadable, some Muslims dispose of the Qur’an—through burial, burning, and other forms of destruction—to prevent “distorting [of] the message.”^8^ It is particularly because of this example—it is an explicit reference to the most sacred Islamic religious text, and as such, intentionally positions itself as a representation of Islamic identity—that I include Birk in my discussion to contrast Escher as a non-Islamic-context artist discussed below.

Birk’s *American Qur’an* (2009–2016) is easily accessible to a wide audience through a YouTube video recording of a talk that he gave at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in

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2016, where he discussed the work in close detail. As an artist, I was initially attracted to how aesthetically bold the pages appear as highly detailed textual images. The colours are eye-catching in their comic-like appearance, and the work draws the viewer in, evoking curiosity as to the relationship between the intriguing images and the calligraphy-like graffiti. Images of large airplanes, people gathered with their heads bowed around a police car, doctors fervently operating on a patient, and many others elicit provocative questions: What do the depictions of American life have in common with the primary Islamic text? Why are the scenes so deliberately portrayed? Do the messages in the Qur’anic verses match the symbolism of the pictures they are juxtaposed with? What important message is the artist trying to convey? What affective responses is he trying to provoke?

In this work, Birk reproduces the entire Qur’an using new illustrations of “everyday” America that aesthetically follow “Americana” artistic styles. It resembles works by famous American artists like Norman Rockwell (d. 1978), Grant Wood (d. 1942), and Anna Mary Robertson (d. 1961) in aesthetics. Birk’s illustrative artwork gives the viewer a slice of what “American”—primarily working class—culture is comprised of (scenes of people camping, men working at a slaughterhouse, a skate park, to name just a few). Every single page of the book has a new scene to explore, and these scenes are placed inside illuminated borders that mimic the patterns of actual historical Qur’an manuscripts, such as the Blue Qur’an (see Figure 1 in chapter

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10. Norman Rockwell was a 20th century American painter and illustrator who used vibrant colours to portray images reflective of American identity and culture. For more information, see Laura Claridge, Norman Rockwell: A Life (New York: Random House, 2001).
11. Grant Wood was a 20th century American painter who focused on American Gothic themes of the American Midwest. For more information, see John Duggleby, Artist in Overalls: The Life of Grant Wood (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996).
12. Anna Mary Robertson (Grandma Moses) was a 20th century American folk artist who painted rural American landscapes and depictions of rural American life. For more information, see Karal Ann Marling, Designs on the Heart: The Homemade Art of Grandma Moses (Boston: Harvard College, 2006).
1), with a surviving page showing borders of gold, geometrical ornamentation, although not all Qur’ans had formal margins.\textsuperscript{13} As mentioned on his website, he illuminates his pages while “following traditional guidelines as to the colors of inks, the formatting of the pages, the size of margins and the illuminations of page headings and medallions marking verses and passages.”\textsuperscript{14} However, Birk uses contemporary materials like watercolours and pencils, not “traditional” techniques for making miniatures; historically, the colours and inks for Islamic miniatures were made by grinding materials from the local environment to make unique pigments that would not fade.\textsuperscript{15} Birk then rewrites every word from Arabic into an English translation. When discussing the calligraphy chosen to write his version of the Qur’an, Birk states that he chose “hand-lettered calligraphy us[ing] an American tradition of writing – that of the street letters of urban graffiti that [I find] around [my] Los Angeles neighborho[ud].”\textsuperscript{16} Birk notes that the elaborate artwork took over nine years to finish.\textsuperscript{17} In another contradiction to following “traditional guidelines,” Qur’anic calligraphy can only be attempted in a state of ablution, and it is unlikely Birk performed this sacred ritual as he does not mention it.

Birk is unaware of, or perhaps disregards, Qur’anic culture and history; thus, \textit{American Qur’an} reveals the artist’s lack of knowledge of colonial history when deciding to illustrate the 464 highly detailed and stylized pages of the Qur’an, while going against principles of aniconism and the integrity of the text. Birk’s substitution of graffiti in place of calligraphy ignores the devotional aspect of this work entirely, and this is a significant omission. Although chapter 1

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} The Blue Qur’an is decorated with striking blue and gold calligraphy and is widely believed to have been designed during the 10th century Fatimid period, but some scholars, such as Alain George, argue it is from the earlier Abbasid period. See Alain George, “Calligraphy, Colour and Light in the Blue Qur’an,” \textit{Journal of Qur’anic Studies} 11, no. 1 (2009): 75–125, doi: 10.3366/E146535910900059X.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Sandow Birk, “American Qur’an,” para. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Sandow Birk, “American Qur’an.”
\end{itemize}
outlined the historical use of calligraphy in Islamic societies for cultural exchange and political expression, calligraphy in the Qur’an, is used to deliver sacred messages in Arabic as God’s chosen language of revelation.\textsuperscript{18} Although one could argue that Birk has a right to his own narrative and contextualization of the Qur’an for his own culture and society, knowledge (\textit{ilm}) is key here. Birk has the right to his own interpretation, of course, but since he decided to put his work in the public domain, the viewers have also had a right to critique his methods and interpretations. The Qur’an is infused with references to the value and importance of knowledge; in fact, the first word Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad was the command of \textit{iqra} (Read or recite!).\textsuperscript{19} The quest for knowledge and the desire to learn in pursuit of deeper understanding are central in the Qur’an and have informed many aspects of Muslim societies—as well as non-Muslim societies—historically and at present.

Does Birk, as a Western, white, non-Muslim artist, have the foundational Qur’anic knowledge to produce a modern interpretation of the text (through his drawings) for a Western audience that upholds its integrity? Although trying to prove “authenticity” or lack thereof of Islamic religion and cultures is problematic (and at times impossible) and not something this study seeks to do, artistic intent matters in this case. On Birk’s website, he states that one purpose of the project was to convey the universality of the Qur’an by “hand-transcri[bing] the entire Qur’an according to historic Islamic traditions.”\textsuperscript{20} From Birk’s perspective, what exactly are “Islamic traditions?” From where does he draw his knowledge on these subjects? He states that his education and research on the Qur’an stems from his travels over a decade “extensively

\textsuperscript{18} Sheila S. Blair, \textit{Islamic Calligraphy} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). Arabic also serves the function of carrying out the Qur’anic principles surrounding the sacred nature of writing.


\textsuperscript{20} Sandow Birk, “American Qur’an,” para. 1.
through the Islamic world,” including Morocco and mosques in “Africa” as well as studying at
the Institut du Monde Arab in Paris during a three-month residency and at the Chester Beatty
Library in Dublin, Ireland.21 From the information the artist provides, his education seems
focused on art rather than on Qur’anic studies. Moreover, Birk himself states that he “produced
an authentic version of the Qur’an.”22 But how can he make this claim when he did not study the
history of the Qur’an or any of its other complexities from a Muslim perspective? Moreover, the
artist does not explain which particular traditions of calligraphy or Qur’anic study he draws
from. Neglecting to specify what is meant by “authentic” and what is meant by “traditions,” he
seems to reduce Islam to his personal definition.

The common view in Western Islamic scholarship that the Qur’an is largely an imitation
of Christianity, specifically the Old Testament, further renders Birk’s work problematic; he
attempts to make the Qur’an relatable to a Western audience by framing it within Western
culture, just as Western scholars often frame the Qur’an within Christian interpretations and
preconceptions.23 In addition to curiosity sparked by his travels, Birk states that he “spent from
2001 to 2004 studying the complexities of Christianity by dynamically translating Dante
Alighieri’s Divine Comedy (with Marcus Sanders) into a contemporary vernacular,”24 and that
study led him to question whether Christianity and Islam are really that different. This thought
process and motivation suggest that Birk is approaching the Qur’an as a spiritual seeker,
conflating religious traditions as a goal of universalism, and in doing so, erases some key
theological differences. In presenting an artistic commentary on the Qur’an and trying to make it

22. “Sandow Birk: American Qur’an,” Catharine Clark Gallery, June 2015, 2,
23. Ismail Albayrak, “Qur’anic Narrative and Isrā’īliyyāt in Western Scholarship and in Classical Exegesis,” PhD
accessible to the West, he fails to recognize the significance or privilege with which he is doing it, particularly in light of the history of Orientalism and Islamophobia, as discussed in chapter 2.\textsuperscript{25} In these ways, Birk’s representation of the Qur’an parallels culturally appropriative tendencies consistent with Orientalist perceptions of the Qur’an and Islamic cultures as other to the West; they are some exotic curiosity that needs to be translated and understood through a Western body and mind. Islam needs to be made legible to the Western reader.

Birk has also described the motivation for this project as stemming from the desire to create a text that challenges common prejudices about Muslims and Islamic cultures.\textsuperscript{26} He hoped to show that American culture is compatible with Islamic religion and cultures.\textsuperscript{27} However, several images in the work evoke associations with prejudices that could cause offense for some Muslims. For example, Birk’s image behind the text of \textit{surah} 3:86–3:116, which discusses following God’s laws as proclaimed by Abraham, depicts an American slaughterhouse in which pig carcasses appear to be strung up.\textsuperscript{28} As the text describes how followers of Abraham have ignored God’s laws (including food prohibitions) and have resorted to quibbling among themselves over particulars, Birk appears to be relating the text to Western treatment and consumption of animals. However, contemporary context matters here, and hate crimes and prejudice against Muslims are rampant. Thus, given the context, Birk’s use of such images is more likely to affirm prejudices than challenge them.

In defense of Birk’s interpretations, creative writing professor and public intellectual Reza Aslan, who is a controversial voice in the field of religious studies scholarship and a public

voice as a native Muslim, asserted that Birk’s motivations are not political, and that he is “simply inserting himself as an artist in a thousand-year-old artistic tradition and, like all artists do, adding to that tradition in his own unique way, from his own unique perspective.” However, Birk makes larger claims of cultural exchange by “making sense” of Islam for an American audience. Birk has noted that, though he was initially worried about a backlash from the Muslim community over his piece, the project has been generally well received by Muslim Americans.

Art critics have noted that “Birk’s show produced no considerable dissent from any Muslim groups or individuals.” However, many Muslims have objected to cultural and religious representations in this project, starting with Birk’s choice to use a copyright-free translation of the Qur’an written by an English clergyman named John Meadow Rodwell in 1861. This translation is regarded as an Orientalist interpretation and translation of the Qur’an in terms of both time period and ideology. Birk even acknowledges the problematic nature of the translation he selected, expressing, “Everyone is bummed that I used it, because it’s not very good and it was done by the British colonizers when they were in Egypt […] It’s biased, and it has little quirky things.” There are many copyright-free translations Birk could have used that follow more representative translation practices. Thus, through this choice of translation, colonial perspectives underpin Birk’s art from the beginning. Further, historical Qur’anic manuscripts did

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not include figural images as this goes against the principle of aniconism, as described in chapter 1.\(^{35}\) As such, Birk’s figural representations in *American Qur’an* ignore this tradition and the significance many Muslims place on this principle. Muslim religious leader Mohammad Qureshi of the Islamic Center of Southern California spoke out about the project, arguing that “The Koran is accessible the way it is [, and…] it’s been accessible for 1,400 years.”\(^{36}\) Moreover, Usman Madha, the director of public relations at the King Fahad Mosque in Culver City, expressed that “there is no such thing as an American Koran, or European Koran, or Asian Koran,” challenging Birk’s notion that the Qur’an needs to be understood within different cultural contexts. In the same way there is no Saudi Arabian Bible or Chinese Torah, the Qur’an as a religious text is not intended for a specific civilization or culture; its purpose is to spread the word of God to all humans. So, although Birk’s *American Qur’an* has enjoyed some acclaim both inside (Aslan provides one example) and outside Muslim communities, it has also been met with some critique and controversy.

Particularly controversial are Birk’s literal interpretations of some of the Qur’anic texts applied to Western life. In one specific section, a chapter page entitled *Smoke* shows an illustration of the 9/11 events with smoke from the Twin Towers filling the background sky amid people panicking in the foreground. The illustration is used to visualize a passage from the Qur’anic verse (44:10) that reflects the “day when the sky will bring forth a smoke which will overwhelm the people.”\(^{38}\) Through the illustration, Birk highlights connections between the terrorist attacks and religious text that are extracted out of their original context of meanings.

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fact, the Old Testament makes very similar apocalyptic declarations, such as in Joel 2:30–32, which states, “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”

Lack of comparison and misinterpretation of the text can be seen to position the Qur’an as an underpinning doctrine of terrorism and extremism and broadcast it as an American understanding of the religious text, which is Islamophobic. Birk’s paintings Westernize and often misinterpret verses or chapters of the Qur’an and many other aspects of the religion and cultures, particularly in their focus on violence.

*American Qur’an* was conceived and completed during a time when Islamic scrutiny and Islamophobia were and continue to be rife. As advanced by Lila Abu-Lughod, Muslims adorn news bulletins in a negative light due to terrorist activities across the globe, insurgency in several regions in Africa and Asia, and the war in Iraq. Such events have drawn far-reaching interest in Islamic teachings, especially related to assumptions that the Qur’an advocates terrorism, violence, and maltreatment of women. Using images of the 9/11 attacks, war zones in the Middle East, prisons, and other violent imagery, Birk capitalizes on this interest through his art, and it is now sold as a book on Amazon (currently priced at 21.98 USD) and other popular websites, blurring the line between art and mass-produced commodity. Birk is not Muslim, yet one can argue that he is appropriating Islam in a post-9/11 world to make sense of the attacks; however, through the associations he makes with Qur’anic verses, he deliberately misrepresents Islam along the way. Although he may have intended his depiction of the 9/11 attacks as a backdrop to

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Qur’anic verses to be a challenge to Islamophobic perceptions of violent, extremist Muslims—which he implies in his statement that he “had met many wonderful people [in Islamic locales…] and was appalled at hearing so many negative reports about Islam”\textsuperscript{42}—this presentation recalls associations between Islam and terrorism that could further perpetuate that stereotype. Moreover, the very mindset that Muslims need to be humanized or made relatable reveals an implicit Islamophobic perception that Muslims are “different,” that this difference needs to be somehow neutralized by promoting the notion of a common humanity, and perhaps the difference needs to be meditated or translated for non-Muslims by non-Muslims. Winegar describes this problem by explaining:

When art is used to show Middle Easterners’ humanity or to advance certain views of Islam, a very particular and politicized “bridge of understanding” is created that obfuscates, and perhaps refuses, other understandings which might be less comfortable to America’s secular cultural elites.\textsuperscript{43}

Essentially, in attempting to “humanize” Islamic religion and cultures through \textit{American Qur’an}, one could interpret Birk’s work as implying that there is something inherently different or perceptibly “inhuman” about this religion and these cultures that needs to be explored so that Western societies can understand that they are, in fact, human after all. This process of “othering” conveys an ingrained Islamophobia that, as we saw in chapter 2, is a modern iteration of Orientalism. For example, it bears asking: if Birk had decorated the Bible in a similar way, with graffiti and images of land dispossession, slaughterhouses, people surrounding police cars, residential schools, clergy crimes against children, and so forth, would that make it an “American” Bible? More pointedly, if he had decorated the Bible with Arabic calligraphy,

Qur’anic designs, and images relating to Islamic cultures, would that make it a Middle Eastern or Arab or Saudi Bible? Would the narrative and reception politics change further if this work were made by a racialized artist?

Despite these issues of cultural and religious representation, many universities, art museums, and galleries have invited Birk to deliver public talks. It is noteworthy that Reza Aslan, introduced above, wrote the preface of Birk’s *American Qur’an*, portraying the work positively and showing his support of the piece. Although Aslan provides some thoughtful analysis in his preface, here his participation in Birk’s project is tenuous. His participation exemplifies the complexity of this issue, and not even Muslims agree on interpretations of the work; rather, in addition to the legacy of Orientalism, culture and location play an important role in how audiences view and perceive it, and that applies to both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Another artwork by Birk called *The Ninety-Nine Names of God* (2008) is a collaboration with his wife, Elyse Pignolet. His website describes the work as

a series of five drawings, done in collaboration […that] depict each of the airports involved in the September 11th attacks – the three airports from which the four flights departed and the two airports which were the intended destinations of the flights. The departure gates of the airports are labelled with the ‘99 Most Perfect Names of God’ from the Hadith.

The artwork makes a direct correlation between the 9/11 attacks, the airplanes and airports used, and the 99 names of Allah, which are an extremely prominent collection of names with expanding spiritual and intimate significance to some Muslims. The 99 names of Allah or God’s most beautiful names (*Asma ul allah al husna*) are found in the Qur’an as well as the Prophet

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44. Some of these institutions and universities include the Asian Art Museum (San Francisco, March 26, 2016); Stanford University (January 23, 2012); Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (Oregon, January 19, 2017); UC Berkeley (California, October 22, 2018); University of Michigan (March 28, 2016).
Muhammad’s sayings known as the *hadith*, and learning them is a sacred, central aspect of the Muslim faith and ritual practice.\(^{47}\) God’s 99 names serve as a sacred prayer in which Muslims use the *tasbih* (prayer beads) to recite them, meditating upon their meaning.\(^{48}\) As such, the 99 names of Allah hold deep, sacred, and religious significance in Muslim religious and cultural expressions.

Here, Birk disregards the sacred spirituality and religious importance of the 99 names of Allah by appropriating their religious and cultural significance. Birk disrespects the authority of the texts in terms of how the names are intended to be printed by underscoring it like any other text, mistakenly illustrating names in Arabic, where originally all forms of the Arabic letters are to be written connected to each other, like cursive handwriting. This happens because most standard Western computer software does not support Arabic, separating the letters from each other instead of connecting them. This is how Birk wrote the names, representative of a lack of culturally specific knowledge or critical research into the language, the tradition, and its spiritual significance. Instead of revering Islamic texts and holding them in great respect, as an outsider to the culture and religion, Birk casually uses his artistic skills underpinned by Western-centric perspectives to appropriate the names through illustration in his artwork. The latent connections between holy Arabic words and a horrifying act of violence makes positive subjective interpretations unlikely for the casual viewer. *Art and Culture Texas* magazine describes Birk’s *The Ninety-Nine Names of God* as an artistic reminder “that God was there too – at each of those airports, at each of the gates”\(^{49}\) where the violence of 9/11 was carried out. This review suggests


that the terrorist acts contradict the principles of Islamic faith, which is a positive observation. However, does this intention match the interpretations of the average Western spectator? Connecting the sacred principle of the 99 names of Allah with the 9/11 attacks appropriates values of the Islamic faith and removes them from their context to explain violence. Given the current ground realities and Islamophobic ideologies so ingrained in Western consciousness, drawing a connection between sacred messaging and terror more likely further solidifies that connection for a Western audience rather than leading them to question it.

Birk’s direct claim to others’ cultures and their linguistic traditions through making art reveals the ways in which Orientalist perceptions of Muslim culture persist to this day. His appropriation of these cultures and linguistic traditions parallels the Orientalist paintings discussed in chapter 2, such as Jean-Léon Gérôme’s The Snake Charmer (1879), which is filled with recognizable Islamic ornamentation and tiling as well as Arabic script. However, there is some difference in these examples in that the presumable intent of the Western powers that commissioned Gérôme’s work was exoticization, during a context of literal imperialism, whereas Birk’s self-identified intent—regardless of unhelpful outcome—is to increase cultural understanding. His supporters could interpret Birk as participating in “good” Orientalism—which promotes “positive” stereotypes of non-Western cultures, such as “the faithful caregiver, the warm-hearted prostitute, the docile Lotus Blossom, the humorous sidekick, and the model minority” but in his attempt to stereotype in a positive way. But “good” or “bad,” positive or negative, he is still stereotyping, and he is still utilizing Orientalist imagery and expressions of othering. Historically, artists of this subject position have dominated historical art canons.

50. This notion of Orientalism with positive intentions is described in Jane Naomi Iwamura, Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
representative of the real need to diversify and decolonize the ways in which visual art is codified. Given this issue, how do we vet non-Muslim production of Islamic texts or art? Or should such vetting even happen? Should we even consider Birk’s art to fall within the category of “Islamic arts,” or does it represent simply mediocre, repetitive, and mass-produced commerce? The study further explores these questions by juxtaposing this case study with that of Escher below. Of equal concern are the Muslim curators, museums, and media that perpetuate these kinds of appropriating and exploitative practices (as discussed in chapter 3). Thus, framing Islamic arts from a Western cultural viewpoint often results in artists like Birk appropriating sacred and spiritual meanings, and separating them from their specific visual aesthetics and sociohistorical as well as sacred contexts. As we saw in chapter 1, the Islamic faith has no definitive separation between church and state, which is one reason why the notions of secular and sacred continually overlap throughout historical and contemporary arts.\(^{52}\) Many scholars, particularly Wendy Shaw, as well as Gülru Necipoğlu, believe that

> by maintaining such a strong distinction between secular and sacred, discourses such as these have conceptualized Islamic art as something that can be viewed but not understood, as though an inherently esoteric Islam were communicated by heritage acquired through osmosis rather than rational education.\(^{53}\)

This upholds the notion that if curators and artists do not pay critical attention to content, specifically, the spiritual content or cultural origins of where they are borrowing their inspiration from, these misappropriations and misunderstandings proliferate, pointing to the need to decolonize museum spaces and diversify curators. On the other hand, one could argue that artists


and scholars should be responsible and accountable to their sources of inspiration. With the example of Birk, we see firsthand how art can borrow from another culture and, in turn, potentially disregard its values and sacred meanings, which could lead to more harm for members of the culture and communities under representation. Both American Qur’an and The Ninety-Nine Names of God seem to reduce Islamic cultures to Islamic religion, stereotyping these complex, dynamic cultures as being solely defined by religion, or projecting the extreme beliefs and violent actions of a few as representative of the whole tradition. Terrorism and violence in the name of religion are not unique to followers of Islam, nor are they carried out solely for religious purposes. Thus, ignoring these complexities, Birk achieves the opposite of his stated intentions related to cultural understanding by drawing close connections between Islamic identity and acts of terror. Birk uses “the divine word” so that Western audiences can “understand” Islamic faith and cultures, but in doing so, he arguably misrepresents it to achieve his goals. The extent of misrepresentation is observable in the way Birk connects sacred text to profane imagery, interpreting the Qur’anic text to serve his means. The aforementioned use of the pig slaughterhouse in connection to the Qur’anic prohibition of eating pork, as well as the imagery of the Twin Towers burning on 9/11 in relation to judgment, are some examples of these culturally insensitive associations.

Is it accurate to refer to Birk’s art as culturally appropriative? Looking at the Lenard and Balint definition, introduced in the previous chapter, one can ask whether there is a power imbalance between the appropriator and the culture he is appropriating.54 Birk, as a white, American, non-Muslim male, is coming from a position of power and privilege in relation to Islamic religion and cultures. Particularly within the context of post 9/11 Islamophobia and

conflicts between the United States and Middle Eastern countries, Birk is situated within a culture that has actively exploited the societies he seeks to represent. Does the appropriator profit from using the other culture in his work? Birk’s motivation to create these works in a post-9/11 Western world that is deeply interested in the “Islamic other” and the threat of terrorism suggests that he is capitalizing on cultural fears. As already stated, making his American Qur’an widely available in the form of a book (commodity) shows that profit is of interest to him.

In a lecture Birk gave on the American Qur’an, he jokingly notes as his closing statement: “It’s available now at bookstores near you.” The latter statement signals to the commodification of his art and thus his economic gain from the project. As Lenard and Balint ask, has there been “significant contestation around the act of appropriation?” The answer here falls within a bit of a liminal area; prominent voices in the Muslim community, such as Reza Aslan, have supported the work. In addition to Aslan, art historian Iftikhar Dadi, whom I engaged in chapters 1 and 3, inexplicably—given his views on Neshat, as will be discussed later—showed support for Birk’s work by writing an essay praising it, describing it as a “sincere attempt to understand the role of Islam and Muslims in modern-day America.” Although Dadi provides insightful analysis on many issues related to contemporary Islamic arts, as noted in his recognition of Western bias in exhibit choices related to Islamic arts in museum spaces, his endorsement of Birk’s project highlights some of the diverging and inconsistent opinions even among scholars of Islamic art. I engage Dadi later for his more nuanced analysis of Shirin Neshat, but his support of Birk overlooks critical issues, as I have highlighted above. Though

55. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?”
57. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 332.
these scholars have shown support for the project, it is not with a lack of awareness that it may be controversial, although Dadi provides an exception in that his preface acknowledges no controversy or potential misinterpretations.\textsuperscript{59} In his introduction to the book, Aslan acknowledges that “this book might surprise some readers,”\textsuperscript{60} while religious studies scholar Zareena Grewal states in her introduction to the book that “his project might strike readers as controversial and politically challenging.”\textsuperscript{61} She also suggests that many readers would not enjoy the work and would find it strange, but for her, “reading it is a thought-provoking and enjoyable experience, but not exactly a religious one.”\textsuperscript{62} Though Grewal suggests that the book might help some American Muslims come to terms with the prejudice they face and feel more comfortable expressing their religious beliefs by awakening them to the compatibility of Islam with modern American life, she also contends that many Muslims may find it distasteful, signalling to the potential diverse responses by Muslims themselves to Birk’s project.\textsuperscript{63}

Moreover, Eleana Del Rio, owner of the Culver City Gallery, one of the galleries that exhibited \textit{American Qur’an}, stated, “We’re very concerned about repercussions from the Muslim community.”\textsuperscript{64} As previously stated, Muslim religious leader Mohammad Qureshi of the Islamic Center of Southern California objected to \textit{American Qur’an} and even refused to look at it.\textsuperscript{65} These examples demonstrate significant contestation, though interpretations have been mixed, which is arguably the case for all art. It is also notable that, according to Birk, Middle Eastern

\textsuperscript{59} Iftikhar Dadi, “The Aesthetics of the \textit{American Qur’an} Project.”
\textsuperscript{60} Reza Aslan, “Preface,” ix.
\textsuperscript{61} Zareena Grewal, “How to Read over Sandow Birk’s Shoulder: An American Muslim’s Notes on the \textit{American Qur’an},” in Sandow Birk, \textit{American Qur’an} (New York: Liveright, 2015), xi.
\textsuperscript{62} Zareena Grewal, “How to Read over Sandow Birk’s Shoulder,” xvii.
\textsuperscript{63} Zareena Grewal, “How to Read over Sandow Birk’s Shoulder,” xvii.
museum spaces have not exhibited his work, suggesting either that his artworks are not noteworthy or that they may be interpreted as offensive; it is unclear. Finally, what about the “presence of knowledge (or culpable ignorance) in the act of appropriation?” Birk has frequently expressed concern over negative reactions to his work from Muslims. As previously mentioned, he recognizes the Orientalist bias in the translation of the Qur’an he chose to use. This acknowledgement shows that Birk is aware of at least some of the potentially problematic aspects of his work, suggesting some awareness of limitations in his work, but he does not equate this translation issue as complicity in the cultural appropriation of Muslim cultures or religious traditions; neither does he signal his own position vis-à-vis his art and/or his subject matter.

In sum, Birk’s artistic imagining of different aspects of Islamic cultures and the Qur’an as text could be said to misappropriate and confound Muslim cultures through themes and symbols familiar to the West. However, museums and the global art world are largely not resisting such art, as seen in this case study. Birk, in particular, is widely exhibited and collected by major art institutions such as the Met, the Andy Warhol Museum, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Art institutes that support and show such cultural art and artists reinforce colonial narratives. More work needs to be done in the art world and scholarly field to hold art establishments, galleries, and collectives accountable to the narratives they are reproducing by promoting such art, funding it, and exhibiting it. The following case study on M.C. Escher explores different types of non-Islamic-context artists’ representations of Islamic identities and cultures as well as the role of museum spaces in navigating these representations.

67. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 332.
68. Jori Finkel, “‘Personal Meditations’ on the Koran.”
Maurits Cornelis (M.C.) Escher and the Use of “Islamic” Architecture

M.C. Escher (d. 1972) was a Dutch graphic artist known for his work with patterns, illusions, and perspective. He studied graphic arts at the Haarlem School for Architecture and Decorative Arts. Travelling through Italy and Spain, he developed an interest in landscapes and buildings, and upon visits to the Alhambra in Spain, he became inspired to take up tiling. His work is varied, ranging from book illustrations, carpet designs, murals, and more, and he is known for his experimentation with “architecture, perspective and impossible spaces.” Although Escher is not contemporary, his work is recent enough to provide a generative case study of art with Islamic themes. His Western, non-Muslim perspective combined with his appreciation for Islamic architectural design traditions have led me to include him in this study.

Escher described the tiling and geometric patterns of the Alhambra as his “richest source of inspiration.” The spiritual significance in these patterns, as well as their mathematical ingenuity, fascinated him and prompted him to begin incorporating principles of Islamic arts in his work. In addition to his personal appreciation for the mathematical patterns he discovered in Islamic architecture, Escher was also inspired by the work of George Pólya (d. 1985), a prominent mathematician influenced by the mathematical elements of Islamic architectural designs.

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74. S. Jan Abas, “Islamic Patterns: The Spark in Escher’s Genius.”
Escher’s *Circle Limit* series (1958–1960) exemplifies his use of mathematical principles and the manifestation of Islamic architectural inspiration in his art. This series of four woodcuts applies geometric design, principles of symmetry, perspective, and figural representation to produce a visible expression of the concept of infinity. These woodcuts share similar design characteristics, and I focus on *Circle Limit III* (Figure 48) as it is lauded for its aesthetic beauty and has been widely analyzed for its themes, subjects, and geometrical ingenuity.

![Figure 48. Circle Limit III. Woodcut: M.C. Escher, 1959. Artnet.](http://www.artnet.com/artists/m-c-escher/circle-limit-iii-434-a-xnNOi1pHjHNWDDyfB0fjr_Q2)

*Circle Limit III* is comprised of fish patterns. Escher uses geometric shapes and symmetry to create a flowing design that utilizes geometric principles and distance, contained within a

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circle in which the figures appear to be stretching out into infinity.\textsuperscript{79} He primarily uses octagons, symmetrical and non-symmetrical applications of colour, along with the gap-free tessellation style to facilitate this perception.\textsuperscript{80} The concept of the circle and geometric expressions of infinity are significant principles found in Islamic arts and are central to the expression of spirituality in Islamic arts. Specifically, \textit{tawhid} (absolute monotheism) represents the essence of Islamic faith, which emphasizes divine unity and the unique perfection of God; Allah is never-ending—infinitive.\textsuperscript{81} Islamic arts scholar Lois Lamya explains that this central tenet of Islam is expressed in art “through the creation of a repeated, stylized and abstraction that gave an intuition by the process of thinking, feeling and responding of the Muslim’s view of God.”\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Tawhid} is typically portrayed in art through geometry, symmetrical repetitions, and abstract motifs.\textsuperscript{83} Artists often employ circular patterns to represent infinity, as the circle is a perfect visual representation of the infinite nature of God, which creates order and unity in the universe.\textsuperscript{84} Building on these central Islamic tenets, Escher sought to “capture infinity in a finite space.”\textsuperscript{85} In accordance with Islamic spiritual and cultural principles, Escher believed that “repetitive patterns indicated a higher source of knowledge that existed before mankind.”\textsuperscript{86} In his art, and in this work in particular, Escher expresses his appreciation for and alignment with Islamic architectural and geometric styles.

\textsuperscript{79} Douglas Dunham, “The Family of ‘Circle Limit III.’”
\textsuperscript{80} Douglas Dunham, “The Family of ‘Circle Limit III.’”
\textsuperscript{83} Siti Raihana Binti Anur, “Aesthetic Formation of Art.”
\textsuperscript{86} Faith Gelgi, “The Influence of Islamic Art on M.C. Escher,” para. 16.
This example, along with statements from Escher, show a deep appreciation for Islamic arts and the extent to which Escher used Islamic artistic elements for inspiration. Nevertheless, one still wonders if Escher’s engagement with Islamic features of arts is a form of cultural appropriation. In describing Islamic arts, Escher laments:

What a pity it is that Islam did not permit [artists] to make ‘graven images.’ They always restricted themselves, in their massed tiles, to designs of an abstract geometrical type. Not one single Moorish artist, to the best of my knowledge, ever made so bold (or maybe the idea never occurred to him) as to use concrete, recognizable, naturalistically conceived figures of fish, birds, reptiles or human beings as elements [of their tessellations].

How do we reconcile this statement, which suggests that Escher was unaware of the complexities of aniconism? It indicates that he did not know that living figures were commonly depicted in Islamic arts or the full significance of the very spiritual representations and geometric forms he depicted with appreciation. Does his depictions of fish in this work suggest a lack of respect for Islamic artistic traditions? Is he appropriating the cultures, and are such forms of appropriation a regurgitation of Orientalist tropes? To explore some of the answers to this question, we must first understand what Escher truly meant to convey with his above statement and whether it contradicts his other statements of appreciation for Islamic artistic traditions.

Artist S. Jan Abas notes that Escher was “lyrical about the [Islamic] non-figural geometric shapes, the regularity and the special constraints […] he himself saw something spiritual and beyond the human world in the very same attributes [as Islamic artists].” Abas also explains that this quotation is frequently taken out of context, and that Escher clarified this view, describing how he learned from a Muslim acquaintance that the Qur’an does not explicitly proscribe figural representation in art. Escher says:

89. S. Jan Abas, “Islamic Patterns: The Spark in Escher’s Genius.”
The laws of the phenomena around us—order, regularity, cyclical repetitions, and renewals—have assumed greater and greater importance for me. The awareness of their presence gives me peace and provides me with support. I try in my prints to testify that we live in a beautiful and orderly world, and not in a formless chaos, as it sometimes seems.  

Although Escher is not specifically referencing Islamic artistic traditions or Islamic cultures here, he is expressing admiration for and belief in principles of Islamic faith that, as this study has thus far explored, are commonly represented through Islamic arts and architecture. Still, the question remains: Did Escher appropriate Islamic cultures in his art, or did he draw inspiration from Islamic design and techniques and transform them into his own context, as has historically been the case?

As a Dutch, white, male, non-Muslim artist, Escher came from a Eurocentric and Christian context—identities that afforded him privilege—and all the while, he was depicting other cultures. Moreover, he directly profited from using these Islamic artistic design traditions in his own art. Strictly speaking, as a non-Muslim, his positionality vis-à-vis his subject matter fulfilled Lenard and Balint’s conceptual framework of what cultural appropriation looks like, as there was the existence of a power imbalance and profit for the appropriator. However, this alone is a rather simplistic interpretation. Analyzing Escher more thoroughly, there has not been “significant contestation around the act of appropriation;” Escher is lauded as being influenced by Islamic arts and is interpreted by art scholars and artists alike as using his art to pay homage to those traditions. His work has been exhibited globally for decades, and I am unaware of any significant or visible cultural backlash. As for “knowledge (or culpable ignorance) in the act of

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91. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 332.
92. Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 332.
appropriation,\textsuperscript{94} this is difficult to show definitively, but Escher’s statement that he reached out to a Muslim acquaintance to clarify the principle of aniconism, along with his regard for the Islamic geometrical traditions and visits to the Alhambra, suggest an intent to educate himself. He gleaned much from the techniques used in Islamic contexts in Muslim Spain; this distinguishes him from Birk, who is not invested in technique (i.e., geometric patterns or tilework) as much as extracting content (i.e., Qur’an or Names of Allah) out of context. After the exploration of all case studies, I directly compare Escher to the other non-Islamic-context artist, Sandow Birk, as well as the Islamic-context artists to further engage with differences in cultural representation and factors of cultural appropriation. The case studies below further engage issues related to cultural appropriation by exploring contemporary Islamic-context artists.

\textit{Islamic-Context Artists}

Beginning in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century and continuing into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, contemporary Islamic arts have grown in popularity, both inside and outside Muslim-majority countries. Emerging art scenes in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Morocco, and other Muslim-majority countries have prompted the opening of exhibitions, non-profit studios, and contemporary museum displays of Islamic arts across the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{95} These artists and their works have also become prominent as a type of “niche” category within the broader art world, but as artist Rasheed Araeen observes, the Western-dominated art world accepts the other on the basis that it “is allowed to express itself only so long as it speaks of its own otherness.”\textsuperscript{96} Thus, in the West, Islamic-context artists often

\textsuperscript{94} Patti Tamara Lenard and Peter Balint, “What is (the wrong of) cultural appropriation?” 332.
serve as translators of Islamic cultures, gaining access to the art world by representing their cultures in ways that appeal to preconceived Western ideologies regarding this cultural “other,” that is, by serving as “native” voices or insiders. 97 Arts and art history professors Rui Oliveira Lopes, Guiila Lamoni, and Margarida Brito Alves also acknowledge that Muslim cultural insiders—which this study has labelled as Islamic-context artists—frequently do engage in such self-appropriative expression to fit with global contemporary art trends, while others challenge those practices by incorporating motifs and aesthetics of historical Islamic arts.98 For this study, self-appropriative expressions are those that define Islamic cultures and identities from a Western viewpoint, using familiar motifs and imagery—which have come to represent Islamophobic stereotypes—and reducing Islamic cultures and artistic practices as being meaningful only by virtue of the Western gaze. The following case studies of Islamic-context artists Abdulnasser Gharem, Shirin Neshat, Jamelie Hassan, and Sarah Al Abdali explore the diverse forms of representation applied by artists functioning within Islamic contexts as well as the relationship between self-appropriation and representations of Islamic identities and cultures.

Abdulnasser Gharem (Saudi Arabia)

Working in Riyadh, Saudi contemporary visual artist Abdulnasser Gharem (born in 1973 in the small town of Khamis Mushait), is the founder of Gharem Studio and the co-founder of the art collective Edge of Arabia. As a visual artist, Gharem works primarily in mixed media, sculpture and installation; he has exhibited widely in the Middle East as well as Europe and the United States at such renowned institutions as LACMA (Los Angeles, USA), Sharja Art Museum

(Sharja, UAE), and Palazzo Franchetti (Venice, Italy). Galleries frequently present his work as conceptually representing his heritage, while also commenting on modern political and social issues, particularly those related to Islamic cultures and religion.99 The Ayaam Gallery in Dubai describes his work as representing “themes of control and authority […] as well as a desire to preserve and respect the history upon which traditional art is built.”100

Gharem is often described as one of the highest-selling Middle Eastern artists by Western media,101 and he also is frequently identified as having been a classmate of two of the 9/11 hijackers.102 Regularly featured in the media and internationally renowned art publications, Gharem’s name evokes immediate identification with the 9/11 events and frequently draws attention to his incidental proximity to “terror.” An interview with Gharem in The Guardian newspaper in 2015 states, “He [is] now on a mission to lure the young away from terrorism.”103 This quotation gives the impression to Western audiences that all Saudi youth will either become terrorists or will be saved by “heroic” folks like Gharem, who turn instead to art. These instances create binary and lacklustre representations of Muslims and Arabs, as discussed in chapter 2’s discussion of Orientalism and Islamophobia. This kind of narrow reading is not benign, as Gharem confirms later in the interview, stressing, “We need to invest in these young people before ISIS does.”104 This statement bears no subtlety in its reflection of a kind of saviour complex played by the celebrity artist and the Western world’s acceptance of these artists, albeit

100. “Abdulnasser Gharem,” Ayyam Gallery, para. 1.
on their terms, in the art world. Gharem elaborates in the interview, explaining, “My idea is to help [Saudi youth] find their path and not introduce themselves as a sacrifice in jihad. I want them to look around and develop their humanity.” Here, he problematically links “humanity” to artistic production and his role as their redeemer from terrorism. Terrorism is a global issue and not one that is unique to Islam or Muslims, so if Gharem’s concern about terrorism is genuine, why not focus on terrorism or violence as a global issue that is not limited to Muslim-majority countries, rather than trying to “save” Saudi youth by encouraging them to find their “humanity?”

Since art as an aesthetic form is subjective, a few pieces of information like the title of the piece, the title of the exhibition, the name, nationality, religion, and age of the artist are significant tools that viewers use to discern art in museums. For Gharem’s first solo show in the USA, held at The Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2017, the Los Angeles Times used this title to write about the exhibition: “At LACMA, the horror of 9/11 through the eyes of a Muslim artist who found a different path.” This statement suggests a strong directive for a viewer to think that all Muslims are on the path to terror, except those who find art or some other alternative, since it reinforces what they may have consumed in popular culture and the news media (see chapter 2). Here we see how the coverage of Islam and Muslims in the media aligns with the Orientalist tropes and self-appropriative conceptions that the artist arguably engages with; this, in turn, reaffirms global popular representations of Muslims and Arabs in the media, such as those of Arab men and violence as discussed in chapter 2. It also captures how museum spaces exhibiting this art make choices that represent art through a particular ideology, and in

turn, perpetuate that same ideology, demonstrating the need for a critical decolonizing of these spaces.

Frequently using Islamic symbols like crescents and mosque domes depicted in large sculptures and installations, Gharem and his work began receiving increased international attention following the auctioning of his sculpture *Message/Messenger* (2010) at Christie’s Dubai auction house in 2011. It was expected to be sold for between $70,000 and $100,000 US, but it was actually released to an Iranian collector for $842,500 US, making him the highest-selling living Arab artist.107 Similar pieces in this collection continue to be exhibited in international exhibitions, reflective of its continued traction among both Western and Muslim-majority audiences, especially in light of increased interest in Saudi and Middle Eastern art post-9/11.108 Comprised of a three-meter-wide wooden dome that is veneered with copper and embellished with arabesques and Arabic calligraphy, *Message/Messenger* features the Qur’anic verse 1:6, “Guide us to the Straight Path” decorated on the dome, which is propped up on one side by a crescent moon—similar to those found on the top of mosque minarets.

The use of a familiar cultural image, the dome, borrows some aesthetic elements from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as discussed in chapter 1. It is lifted on one side by the crescent and balances on its rim on the other side. The crescent, which is traditionally placed on top of a dome, is now placed on the floor and has a golden rope attached to it, which allows the installation to resemble a trap box-like structure. Once the rope is pulled, the dome quickly collapses, trapping whomever or whatever is in it (in this case, it is a stuffed white dove). As

described on the Gharem Studio website, “the viewer is drawn in by the promise of peace and spiritual salvation, but when we least expect it – the leviathan of organized religion envelops the viewer, and we can no longer see the light.”109 However, the viewer may not relate the work to all organized religion, and instead, attribute it to Islam alone, due to the similarities and elements used that directly link this work to Islam only (Qur’anic verses, crescent and aesthetics). Here, it is hard not to see the direct criticism of Islam this art piece is (not subtly) hinting at through a double meaning, asking whether the dove is the “bait” or the “victim.”110 Both interpretations suggest that the artist is falling into representing religion, and specifically Islam, as a trap; it traps what metaphorically represents peace, purity, and love. In this way, he abides by and reinforces the Western views of how Islam can attract purity and trap it, luring in unsuspecting victims. Although critique of one’s own culture and religion are acts of self-exploration and self-reflection that could understandably lend themselves to expression in art, the problem here is twofold: (1) Gharem is playing into Western Islamophobic views that Islam is wholly an oppressive, violent religion, which reinforces the Orientalist trope of the violent Arab man; and (2) his art is not being publicly scrutinized from within the culture. I explore these issues more in depth in an examination of self-appropriation at the end of Gharem’s case study below.

Works such as Message/Messenger demonstrate the challenges in preserving cultural histories and identities in ways that express culturally accurate views and norms when art is being used to appease Western assumptions about Islam and the Middle East in order to gain access to the art world and subsequently draw international fame and fortune, as suggested by the

high price for which the artwork sold. Representing an issue that chapter 5 more thoroughly explores, Gharem and other similar artists are largely catering to the international market and what that international market wants to see and buy.

Looking at the cultural, Western-biased nature of his art, Gharem’s international, and in particular, Western success supports Jessica Winegar’s argument that “through the selection of certain kinds of [art of this type and] cultural production from the Middle East, and by the process of naming these as ‘good’ art, certain Middle Easterners are allowed into the fold of humankind, but, importantly, others are not.”

In this way, Saudi art like Gharem’s can be understood as perpetuating Western views about Middle Eastern cultures; these artworks show what the Western viewer wants to see, rather than representing the diverse realities of the Islamic world. Winegar elaborates more directly on this implication on contemporary art discourses, arguing:

> by selecting particular forms of cultural production from a larger and extremely diverse field, and labeling them [as] ‘Middle Eastern art’ or ‘Islamic art,’ this representational exercise reproduces, as Orientalist representations do, a one-to-one homogenizing correlation between region, culture, history, and religion.

This link here to Said’s theory of Orientalism is relevant, as it recalls art’s long history of misrepresenting the Middle East through constructed imaginaries, as chapters 2 and 3 situated. Winegar’s scholarship is valuable to my critique of Gharem and other artists’ perpetuation of cultural tropes and imperial hierarchies, as this kind of appropriating practice, observed in Message/Messenger and Pause (discussed below), hinders the advancement of accurate cultural understandings, and instead, perpetuates Islamophobic and Orientalist tropes. Scholar Driss Ridouani notes, “Whether they are televised or printed, it is not surprising that Western media

reports maintain a constant distorted image of Arabs and Muslims. Fabricated stereotypes of Islam are omnipresent in Western media through all means of communication.”

Gharem’s work conforms to these distorted views, and his playing into Western stereotypes could be one explanation for why his work has been so well-received across international borders, being exhibited in solo and group exhibitions all over North America and Europe far more than that of most Saudi Arabian artists. It is arguable that his work is even more popular in the West than it is in his homeland even though that is where his studio is currently based. Still, in a 2013 interview, Gharem stated that though the Saudi public was largely critical of his art in the beginning, they are beginning to warm up to his expressions of visual art and cultural issues. Although this growing popularity and the sale of his art to an Iranian collector show that his works are relevant to Saudi Arabian and Middle Eastern society, this favourable reception is at least somewhat influenced by self-appropriative themes—of Islam as a trap and Muslim-majority societies as regressive and inferior to the West—that continue to gain traction as perceptions Saudi citizens hold of themselves, along with desires of Saudi artists, and perhaps the public, to be viewed as “modern” or “globalist.” Official critiques of Gharem’s work are not readily available in art reviews or academic publications, but evidence of this Western-centric mindset comes from Gharem himself in his statement, in reference to his colleagues in the army, that “once they knew that my work was being celebrated in the West, whatever its content, it did not make me less deserving of their respect, it made them respect me more, as it is the default position of many

people in [t]his part of the world to crave the approval of the West.” His reasoning suggests an awareness of benefits of self-appropriation to conform to Western expectations, while approval of artistic productions by the West (as art “experts”) is the goal of artists from his cultural location.

Another example of Gharem’s work, Pause (2014), serves as the same title for Gharem’s first solo show held at the LACMA museum (Los Angeles, USA) (2017). Created in 2016, Pause depicts New York’s Twin Towers surrounded by smoke—the same image ingrained in the public’s minds from the 9/11 attacks. Gharem’s image is printed on top of a collection of Arabic and English rubber letter stamps, so that when you step back from the work to take a broader look, you see the “pause” symbol as it would appear on a TV remote. In describing his intentions in making this work, Gharem explains, “The world was going crazy, and I wanted people to calm down and think about themselves and their ideas and what happened — [to] just stop and think.” The exhibition catalogue describes Gharem as deeply “absorb[ing] the notion of pause into his work as an occasion to examine certain universal dichotomies that lead one to choosing his or her path in life.” However, what universal dichotomies exist between the East and the West? Surely, terrorism, or “saving” oneself from terrorism, is not a universal experience—nor is it a common experience of Saudi or Middle Eastern culture. Rather, it speaks to Western perceptions of Muslims and Islamic cultures; as referenced by LACMA’s “Pause” exhibition catalogue, much of Gharem’s work “takes on a new meaning once transplanted to American

Choosing to display an immediately identifiable, provocative image at a Western exhibition, the artist conceivably has an idea of what his audience expects.

Another reading of this piece is that reality is digital and that the only possible control we have of the perpetual media cycle is through that media cycle—i.e., clicking a remote control. More literally, Gharem has used the digital symbol for pause—a pair of parallel solid rectangles—as a visual metaphor for the Twin Towers. In this monumental work, two silvery rectangles seem like “ghostly after–images as we pause to blink our eyes in disbelief,” describe Linda Komaroff and Sandra Williams in the catalogue for his LACMA exhibition. Linda Komaroff, curator of LACMA’s Art of the Middle East, argues that this work “forces [audiences] to look beyond the West.” Furthermore, art history scholar Tracey Hilden argues that “Gharem helps to introduce new forms of living as his artworks force the viewer to reexamine social issues in their own lives.” These interpretations view Gharem’s work as challenging the West/East divide as well as inspiring audiences to reflect on their own social roles.

Through an awareness of Orientalist influence, other interpretations of this work bring into question the notion of the “universal,” reflected by essentialist Western understandings of a homogenous Eastern culture, which does not exist. For instance, how can viewers step back and consider this image as “universally representative” when it depicts a Western event devoid of nuance and other contexts/perspectives? It seems peculiar that Gharem asks people to stop and

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120. Linda Komaroff and Sandra Williams, “Abdulnasser Gharem: Pause,” 5.
think about 9/11 in the USA 16 years after it happened. But then again, this is the type of art that some Americans want to see from Saudi Arabia—art and artists whose work confirms Western popular media’s view that all Saudis/Arabs are terrorists, except for the ones who are saved. In this way, one can contend that Gharem engages in self-appropriation by upholding the colonial project, as his images of the Twin Towers, airplanes, and airports feed into the hypervisibility and over-representation of violent Muslim/Arab stereotypes. This work, along with In Transit (discussed below) share themes with Birk’s The Ninety-Nine Names of God; they both depict or even conflate the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in relation to Islam and its cultures. I further discuss these associations in the case studies analysis at the end of the chapter.

Gharem’s video work Aniconism (2015) directly challenges the complex religious and cultural practices of aniconism that were outlined in chapter 1. Though Muslim views on aniconism are varied, and the practice of aniconism is a contested principle, the artist presents the concept here as an absolute norm in Muslim-majority cultures. This artwork is a video installation that shows artists at Gharem Studio painting images of a nude female mannequin. Gharem advertises this work as being the first instance of art students drawing a nude female model in Saudi Arabia. He emphasizes that in order to smuggle the mannequin in, it had to be dismantled and shipped to Saudi Arabia in pieces. Given the history of aniconism and its religious traditions and complexities, as well as the modern instances of violence surrounding figural representations, he intends this work to be provocative. Making it even more controversial, the word “Pussy” is written on tape that covers the genital area of the

mannequin. This representation of the principle of aniconism both has shock value in its engagement with women’s bodies and sexuality and caters to Western perceptions of Muslim censorship and the exotic, backward nature of forbidding figural representations, especially in the context of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the artist’s representation and stated motivations are particularly sensational as mannequins exist in Saudi Arabia, and many shops use them to display clothing. Therefore, Gharem’s explanation that he had to ship mannequin pieces in separate boxes from another country is performative for a Western audience, portraying Saudi culture as strict and regressive (or not modern sexually), and is not based in reality. It specifically plays on and reinforces Islamophobic notions that Arabs are so sexually repressed that he had to ship in nude mannequins from less-oppressive countries. This act engages and perpetuates Western views of these cultures’ repressed sexuality as represented in Orientalist paintings of veiled women, such as William Holman Hunt’s The Lantern Maker’s Courtship (1854–1857); in modern Western popular culture, such as in Sex in the City 2; and in Western news media reports centered around veiling and other perceived “backward” practices with regard to sexuality and gender norms. There are also gender dynamics at play here, as there are only male artists in the video and accompanying images. Would a female artist have been allowed to exhibit this work? Moreover, if Gharem had depicted a male model with all female artists instead, would these gender dynamics not have aligned more strongly with the sexual “progress” he purports to support?

Another interesting artwork that was included in the LACMA exhibition was In Transit from 2013. The catalogue explains:

in this print, [Gharem] overlays a simple image of an airplane and runway with a geometric pattern borrowed from mosaic tile work, which [alludes to] the Muslim profession of faith [Allah]. Similar to his iconic stamp paintings, but rendered as a print, a

second mosaic-like layer is formed by numerous small letters, some of which form fragmented quotes, shown in reverse and in English and Arabic. The quotes are drawn from former President George W. Bush’s famous “War on Terror” speech, tying the enigmatic image to contemporary politics [that center the West and decenter the rest of the world]. As with many of his works, the immediacy of this artwork conceals its multiple layers of meaning.\(^{125}\)

The grouping together of these disparate elements (the airplane, the word Allah, Islamic ornamentation and geometry, and Bush’s War on Terror speech) is provocative, as it would plausibly be challenging for the average LACMA visitor to understand that this is a critique of the connection between Muslims and terrorism. Rather, if anything, such artworks more easily directly confirm the associations between Islam and terrorism instead of unsettling them, without recognizing or commenting on the prevalence of Western violence against Muslim-majority countries—the US invasion in Iraq (2003–2011) is estimated to have resulted in approximately 200,000 civilian casualties.\(^{126}\) As the “pause” symbol can be understood poetically as an occasion for taking more time to breathe and reflect, it can also can be read as an “equals” sign which directly equates disparate things—i.e., Muslim male youths = emergent terrorists. Indeed, there are intentionally many ways to read the symbols within Gharem’s work, and this ambiguity allows viewers (Western and Middle Eastern alike) to construct their own interpretations of the work based on ongoing local and global interpretations of the East. Gharem’s artwork continues to be collected by prominent museums, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, LACMA, and the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Culture and Information.\(^{127}\) He was recently chosen to participate in the 2019 Art Basel alongside 74 other renowned and emerging artists from all over the world.

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127. It is unclear which artworks of Abdulnasser Gharem’s the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Culture and Information has. Its website (https://www.moc.gov.sa/en) does not specify, and Gharem did not respond when I contacted him for clarification.
Gharem’s work is objectively popular, primarily with Western audiences, but does his art meet the criteria for cultural self-appropriation? A power imbalance seems to exist between the culture of Western audiences he is largely exhibiting to and his own culture. Moreover, Gharem’s background and position within Saudi society further complicate his cultural representations. His artistic representations come from a particular position of status and experiences, which like all artists, informs his perspective and does not reflect the views or concerns of all Muslims or Saudis. Motivation of profit is there but is admittedly complex in Gharem’s case. It is frequently discussed and applauded that he donated the profits from his *Message/Messenger* sale to the Edge of Arabia art initiative, and when questioned about his donation, Gharem stated, “When I think about money, I get exasperated.”\(^{128}\) He has also expressed disdain for the very notion of profits, stressing that “I guess what I did with the proceeds sums up how I felt about it. I was of course happy that people liked my work, but I never wanted it to become all about the ‘market’ and money, etc.”\(^{129}\) However, the CULTURUNNERS tour of the US also partnered with Gharem Studio, which also then benefitted from government sponsorship.\(^{130}\) Even if the artist is not personally keeping all profits, he is benefitting from them through funding his arts initiatives. Further, online listings for his work range in price from around 5,000 CAD to 307,000 CAD.\(^{131}\) Motivation for profit cannot be discounted, and it is also a factor related to the question of significant backlash. Although Gharem is often discussed unfavourably in the Saudi art circles I am a part of, in response to his work’s Western-oriented, self-appropriative themes, there has been no significant

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public outcry regarding his work. To examine why that is, one must acknowledge his talent as an artist as well as his position at the forefront of Saudi contemporary art.

The Edge of Arabia and Gharem Studio are breaking ground in the Saudi art world, and they are paving the way for new artists. Support for the arts and cultural tourism are ways to strengthen the economy, in the Saudi public’s view. So, why bite the hand that feeds it? Though backlash against Gharem’s art is not unfolding publicly, it is happening internally, and I am aware of this backlash because I am part of these art circles. Moreover, widespread exhibitions of his work by museum spaces in Muslim-majority countries and in the West are legitimizing the work, creating another barrier to challenging its Orientalist perpetuations, from an insider, nonetheless. The question remains then whether the artist has knowledge about the potential issues of appropriation in his work? In an interview, he states that “it is only those who are ignorant – or have not educated themselves about their own culture, much less the culture and art in the wider world that are the zealots when it comes to censorship.”\textsuperscript{132} Here, in addition to suggesting that anyone opposing his artwork is uneducated and ignorant, Gharem acknowledges that his work may be culturally controversial. He also recognizes the tastes and expectations of the global (largely Western-centric) art world, suggesting overall that there needs to be some sophistication in approaching and understanding his productions, whether these interpretations are from a Western and/or Muslim viewer. Such awareness and consideration of Western expectations are not unique to Gharem, and the case study below paves the way for comparison with another Islamic-context artist who is widely popular in the global art world, and who uses similar themes in her art.

\textsuperscript{132} Laura Stewart, “A Message to the West,” para. 11.
Shirin Neshat (Iran/New York)

One of internationally best-known contemporary artists who works within Islamic and Muslim cultural themes is Shirin Neshat. Born in Iran, Neshat is based in New York City and describes herself as living in the United States in a “self-imposed exile.” She is widely written about, exhibited, and collected all over the world, including at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, the Venice Biennale, and hundreds of other major art institutions globally. As such, it is fair to say that she is one of the most prominent artists when it comes to the representation of Muslim women. Neshat started to make art in the 1980s with photography, and she has since evolved to include mixed media and video installations.

Neshat is perhaps best-known for her work *Women of Allah* (1994) (Figures 49 & 50), a photographic series that includes black and white images of various women veiled in chadors, with Farsi poetry inscribed onto their faces and hands, often holding weapons (specifically, guns). The poetry itself provides important context. As an example, one poem inscribed on a veiled woman’s hand in a photograph labeled *Untitled* (1996) (Figure 51) in the *Women of Allah* series includes influential Iranian female poet Forough Farrokhzad’s (d. 1967) poem, entitled “I Feel Sorry for the Garden,” which reads:

> No one is thinking about the flowers.  
> No one is thinking about the fish.  
> No one wants to believe that the garden is dying,  
> that the garden is slowly forgetting its green moments.  

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Curator Fereshteh Daftari describes the inscribed poem as a metaphor for women as well as for Iran. With the translated text, the spectator can more readily understand that Neshat is commenting on Iranian heritage and the role of women in those societies; it is both a celebration of Iranian women and a lament of how violence has overtaken them, their natural beauty, and power. These words in combination with the imagery evoke a powerful feeling of importance of the unspoken wisdom of the veiled woman with her hand over her lips. So, how does this image, and others like it within the series, come across to Western audiences?


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Figure 50. *Women of Allah, Faceless.* Photo: Shirin Neshat, 1994.\(^{137}\)

Figure 51. *Women of Allah, Untitled.* Photo: Shirin Neshat, 1996.\(^{138}\)

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The Washington Post states that with the series, “Neshat set out to subvert the Western stereotype of powerless Muslim women. By adding the Persian texts, which come from poetry by contemporary female Iranian writers, Neshat gave her protagonists a voice.” But what percentage of museum visitors in the locations she has exhibited understand Farsi and recognize its script as using a different language from Arabic, and how many of them have access to the “voice” that Neshat gave to her protagonists? Due to the ingrained Orientalist imagery and stereotypes in the West, explored in chapter 2, audiences are likely to relate the veiled women to imaginaries reflected in tropes of the oppressed woman and the exotic unknown. This imagery fits with chapter 2’s analysis of the veil as a symbol of female, Muslim oppression as well as its modern Islamophobic associations with terrorists who are women, as explored in media fascination with the veil, ISIS recruitment of women, and popular culture depictions of female terrorists in movies such as American Sniper (2014).

In this way, the experiences of Muslim women in Iran is a unique and complex one. Western photographers and media outlets became fascinated with Islam, visually and culturally, in the 1970s, and they especially encountered the veiled Muslim woman during the wake of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In addition, the Iraq–Iran war in the 1980s and the holding of the American hostages for 444 days from 1979 to 1981 contributed to the prevalence in the Western media of images of Iranian women armed with rifles. Linking this to art history, Moore explains that like “an Orientalist imaginary, [its subject matter] appears to be evoked through the partial concealment of the woman’s face. The passivity and timelessness of the sculptural forms,
and the highly stylized nature of the images, [are] exacerbated by […] ‘decorative’ script.”

All of these mentioned elements construct images that replicate colonial depictions of the oppressed Muslim woman depicted in chapter 2’s Orientalist paintings, such as William Holman Hunt’s *The Lantern Maker’s Courtship* (1854–1857) and Walter Charles Horsley’s *Women and an Old Man in Harem* (1883). Neshat’s portrayals of Muslim women as veiled, holding weapons, and looking directly at the spectator harkens back to Orientalist imagery of the mysterious veiled woman and attempts to understand her exotic nature. The veil is deeply political as both a colonial and modern-day tool for justifying Western invasion of Eastern lands to free the oppressed woman. Even Neshat’s use of photography evokes connections to the Orientalist *Algerian ID* photography series, in which women were forced to unveil for colonial administrative purposes. Just like the colonized women, Neshat’s subjects look directly at us, challenging the spectator in some way. Whereas in the Algerian photographs, the women are unveiled as a form of oppression, Neshat veils the women in her photographs, conceivably as a form of empowerment. However, given the politics of the veil and the Orientalist ideologies surrounding it that are deeply ingrained in the Western psyche, empowerment is unlikely to be the Western viewers’ interpretation here. Much like in Orientalist art, these veiled women evoke associations of oppression and subjugation. Adding modern flare with the violent weapon imagery, the Muslim women in Neshat’s photographs are now simultaneously hyper-victimized and violent (terrorists) in a modern context.

These historical impulses reflect a continued practice and interest in Muslim and Islamic women as subjects of art. In some ways, it can be argued that Neshat’s international fame, professional recognition, and commercial success are a result of the fact that she plays into

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cultural tropes and misnomers around Islam in her work to appeal to a Western gaze and, thus, appetite. Neshat describes her work as the direct opposite of this notion, saying, “I am blown away by the West’s misunderstanding of Islamic values and culture.” An interviewer gleaned from her descriptions that her art, in fact, “addresses the failing of Western feminism to appreciate the nuances of women’s lives under Sharia law in Iran.” However, in interview questions discussing power dynamics or misinterpretations of her work, Neshat seems evasive and unwilling to consider her art’s potential perpetuation of, rather than challenging, of stereotypes of Iranian women, arguing that she uses politically charged objects like the chador (cloak or overcoat) because they are aesthetically pleasing. The chador has a complicated history. During the Iranian Revolution, women used it as a form of protest and a symbol of support for Ayatollah Khomeini and resistance against the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah (who ruled Iran from 1941 until being ousted by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, and who is commonly known as the last shah of Iran), as well as the foreign incursion that he supported, such as from the United States. But thereafter, the chador and mandatory headscarf laws in the new Islamic Republic of Iran served as both a unifying symbol and as a form of protest against the government, especially by some Iranian women who refused to wear them as an act of resistance. Given this historical context, Neshat may well have envisioned her creative subjects and their veils as symbols of independence and rebellion. However, these complex relationships to the chador and veiling exist at the nexus of religious, political, and gendered

For more information on the political nature of the chador and veiling, see Faegheh Shirazi, The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003).
tensions and are not obvious to all viewers of Neshat’s work. Given its political symbolism, Neshat’s justification is simplistic; can the issues involved in all controversial, potentially exploitative, problematic art be waved away on the grounds that it is enjoyable to look at?

Her work, and specifically her body of photographic work, can be seen as promoting misconceptions that the Western media circulated at the time of the Iranian Revolution, but generally of the veil, which has received—and continues to receive—obsessive attention. Her use of the hijab in her work plays into the idea of the Muslim woman’s lack of agency and positions the veiled Muslim woman as the perpetual victim in need of saving, as explored by anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak (see chapter 2). Neshat, however, states that her art is about empowerment and giving women a voice. It might be expected that, as an Iranian woman herself, Neshat would feel compelled to give Muslim women more complexity in their representations, and that is why it is especially critical to consider whom her work serves despite her intentions. It is here is that Neshat’s identity and positionality may come into play. Neshat has said, “I tend to be very global in thinking, I belong to the world.” The dual nature of Neshat’s background as both Western and an exiled—self-imposed—Iranian gives her a unique “insider/outsider” voice, but also validates and authorizes her cultural representations in whatever form she may choose, seemingly without consideration for negative implications of her productions. Although some Muslim women may find empowerment and cultural identification with her work, some interview studies have observed that Muslim women are concerned about being characterized and defined in terms of

“otherness.” Neshat’s experiences and representations are particular to her experiences, but the challenge is not to present them as universal to all Iranian women. In this vein, Neshat’s work can be interpreted as promoting ingrained views of one-dimensional otherness to a Western audience. Some scholars articulate that Neshat “has brilliantly tethered the proscribed Iranian women to stereotypes and separated her Occidental/Oriental self from them.” In this way, her work—and the identity that accompanies it—serves the desires of Eurocentric cultures, institutions, and audiences, and her continued personal and financial benefit. As a counterargument to this interpretation that Neshat is practicing self-appropriation, art critic Carly Butler views Neshat’s art as an exploration of women’s experience in Iran and the ambivalent nature of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Iranian society. This interpretation suggests that Neshat is not simply playing into Orientalist tropes as a means of acquiring artistic success; rather, she is offering a nuanced interpretation of Islamic identities that takes into account modern issues, such as women’s experiences with violence and the challenges of navigating veiling customs and preferences.

It is critical to consider that, like many artists working in the West, Neshat is making work for a Western audience, as evidenced by her continuous redeployment of Muslim, and specifically Iranian, cultural tropes. Scholar Christina Stefanski observes that between 1992 and 2018, “her art was only twice exhibited in Iran,” with 179 shows in Europe and 123 in the USA. In light of this, there are two prominent factors at play here: appropriation and self-

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promotion. This has larger ramifications, and art historian Adair Routhwaite explains, “Neshat and her art [are] notoriously open to critiques that she creates a stable, binary image of Muslim women’s identity that invites conservative appropriation and supports her own vested interests,” which have now modelled lucrative practices to other Middle Eastern artists who seek international recognition and remuneration, which is a complex problem. Neshat’s artwork has been critically analyzed by art historians and visual culture scholars including Adair Routhwaite, Iftikhar Dadi, Lindsay Moore, and many more, who primarily critique and explore—and at times, contest interpretations of—the potential binary conceptualizations of gender and culture propagated by her work. But while her work has been criticized, her influence on emerging Muslim artists, who may be influenced to turn to using cultural tropes and fall into self-Orientalism, has not been. This is a very timely and critical topic that needs to be discussed, as both galleries and museums locally and internationally have been supporting, collecting, and exhibiting these upcoming artists.

Neshat’s series *Women of Allah* (1994) has toured the world and is still being exhibited and continuously referenced as an insider’s true representation of Iranian women’s experiences, and as an extension, of all Muslim women’s experiences. When interviewed about the work, Neshat often talks about how this series portrays Iranian Muslim women as rebellious and strong through the words scribed on their faces, hands, and feet.156 In this way, Neshat claims that she gives voice to silent women; however, as mentioned before, Neshat, admittedly a talented artist, has been exhibiting internationally to a predominantly Western audience, and as such, this work

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is meant for Western spectators, who likely cannot read Farsi.\textsuperscript{157} Christina Stefanski observes that for Western audiences who are typically unable to differentiate between Arabic and Farsi, “the meaning of the Farsi words which are misinterpreted as calligraphy become meaningless.”\textsuperscript{158} When the main viewer has no access to the work’s central language, then there exists a significant disconnect from the artist’s intention and the artwork’s effects. Moreover, even for Iranian spectators, the text is largely incomprehensible because the handwriting is frequently illegible.\textsuperscript{159} Because of this, it seems that Women of Allah does not serve its prescribed purpose, as without translated explanations or legible representations of the poetry or other calligraphic texts, the work remains largely unknowable. When questioned about the issue of translation, Neshat has explained that “You have to keep in mind the context in which this work was made. I had no art career; I was not thinking about the audience since I didn’t have any; I was making this work for myself.”\textsuperscript{160} Although this explanation may have justified the choice to not translate the text at the beginning of Neshat’s career, it is unclear why she has not resolved this issue since, particularly as the controversy and misunderstandings surrounding the work would be largely resolved if translations were provided. Is Neshat benefitting from the controversy? From the misunderstandings? From the mysterious, never fully knowable nature of the art? And here another important concern emerges: if the intention of the artwork is not explicitly delivered, other interpretations start to emerge in the consciousness of the viewer, which are informed by popular stereotypes and misconceptions. Can such disconnects ever be prevented? Should such reception of art be the concern of an artist?

\textsuperscript{157} Shadi Sheybani, “Women of Allah.”
\textsuperscript{158} Christina Stefanski, “The Use of Neo-Orientalist Female Representations,” 29.
\textsuperscript{159} Christina Stefanski, “The Use of Neo-Orientalist Female Representations.”
Art scholar Mojgan Khosravi notes that “for a Western audience, Neshat’s consistent use of the Muslim veil, illegible and untranslated Persian calligraphy, and guns symbolizes Islam’s violence and degeneracy; additionally, these elements position the Muslim woman as a subaltern entity in an archaic society.” Though this work was created before the renewed Islamophobia prompted by 9/11, the veil’s role as an ongoing contested symbol of Eurocentric and Islamophobic conversations predates this event. Thus, Neshat’s reliance on the veil in her art recalls Islamophobic messaging that was prevalent before the 21st century, but it takes on new, more harmful meaning in post-9/11 Western imaginaries. Still, as mentioned above, the chador and veil have a particular role in the political and cultural context that Neshat is situated within. Further, as mentioned in chapter 2’s discussion of gendered Orientalist tropes, women with weapons are increasingly represented in Hollywood and Western media post-9/11 as a threat or danger. Displaying the series Women of Allah post-9/11 adds a different layer of meanings and offers alternative readings that do not specifically relate to the Iranian Revolution but that might include suturing the veiled and armed woman directly to terrorism. Neshat benefits from the macabre thrill of this new interpretation to new audiences but does not comment on this new, negative reading of her work. Prior to 9/11, Neshat offered a defense of her work in light of negative interpretations, stating that “the nature of my work is ambiguous, so it draws a wide range of responses.” Western and European art institutions continue to promote uncritical perspectives on the Middle East from both insiders and outsiders. Through both their exhibition and collection, many art institutions sanctify and popularize these works despite the works’ lack of cultural agency, for some. Although many artists like Neshat are not as popular in their own home countries as abroad, the fact that their professional recognition and fame becomes so

heightened in the West is telling of a cultural disconnect between their birth cultures and economic desires. It also signals the continued role of the Western art world in legitimizing “good” non-Western art.

Neshat was raised by non-religious parents in Iran, who sent her to a Catholic boarding school and then to the United States at the age of 17 to complete her university degree. She currently resides in the US under what she calls self-imposed exile.\textsuperscript{163} Given this unusual position, how does Neshat identify as and represent Muslim women? Can we consider Neshat an insider or representative of all Muslim and/or Iranian women’s experiences? Sociologist Joane Nagel states that “one’s ethnic identity is a composite of the view one has of oneself as well as the views held by others about one’s ethnic identity.”\textsuperscript{164} Thus, it is plausible that although Neshat has spent most of her life in New York City and was educated there, she stresses the Iranian aspect of her identity, though accurate, to take advantage of that position and to perform as a self-proclaimed insider, which is an enactment of agency for her as an artist who is Iranian. This identity adds a layer of authenticity to her work by crafting a persona that guides the audience to a collective understanding of her ethnic background. Neshat herself has expressed that “as an Iranian, ‘an artist like myself finds herself in the position of being the voice, the speaker of my people…art is our weapon, culture is a form of resistance.’”\textsuperscript{165} Her gendered Iranian identity gains Neshat access to the art world as an important Muslim voice and a perceived insider in her depictions of Islamic identities and cultures. Again, these cultural representations are specific to Neshat, but Western practices of othering and Islamophobia promote interpretations—by a


\textsuperscript{165} Imogen Hamilton-Jones, “Women of Allah,” para. 2.
predominantly Western audience—of these representations as universally applicable, conflating them with the experiences and perceptions of all Iranian/Muslim women.

Further, the context of the chador matters here. In addition to its political context within Iranian history and culture, it is also a meaningful symbol of differentiation among Muslim-majority countries. For example, black chadors are traditional in Iran and are almost always worn outside; during the Iranian Revolution, women would wear colourful chadors in protest of the government dress-code mandates. 166 Customs around body covering differ throughout Muslim-majority countries and continue to evolve over time. Women across these regions choose not to veil—for example, in Kuwait and Bahrain, an observable, large percentage of women do not veil—and brightly coloured veils, abayas, and hijabs are popular in many countries, including Saudi Arabia. 167 At the same time, throughout the late 20th century and into the 21st century, revealing campaigns have emerged as a form of personal expression and political identity in celebration of faith as well as a response and/or resistance to Westernization. 168

Although a small number of Neshat’s women in her Women of Allah series are wearing white chadors, the vast majority are wearing black chadors, and all of the women holding weapons are depicted in this clothing. If the artist’s message is one of rebellion in the context of the Iranian Revolution, why did she choose black chadors (and on the rare occasion, a white one) for her subjects, omitting the role of colourful chadors as a symbol of rebellion? Neshat is, of course, free to make this artistic choice, but the series is a political commentary, and again, it is important to consider the audience. The black veil is specifically used as imagery to depict

Muslim oppression in the West. It is highly identifiable in this political context. As such, Iranian artist Barbad Golshiri argues that through her use of the black chador and other identifiable symbols of “Muslim-ness,” Neshat participates in the “aestheticization of stereotypes [by] support[ing] the constructed mass by attributing to it an ethnic, geographic, cultural, or political reality to homogenize diversity and difference.”¹⁶⁹ In addition to the problematic, complex nature of such themes, symbols, and implicit messaging in Neshat’s art, through her success, she has also paved the way for other artists to follow this trend.

The example of Neshat in the current study also points to how Muslim/Arab artists are inspired by her, creating work within similar boundaries and themes, and therefore falling into self-appropriative practices themselves. Three artists of note who follow Neshat’s practice are Lalla Essaydi (Morocco), Manal Al Dowayan (Saudi Arabia), and Nouf Alhimiary (Saudi Arabia; see Figure 52), who may be understood as “imitators.” Essaydi is a Moroccan-born artist, now living in the United States, who has a background in painting but who works primarily with photography. She deliberately appropriates Orientalist imagery of the veil, odalisque, and harem in her art to challenge Western perceptions of Islamic cultures, while exploring her own nomadic identity.¹⁷⁰ She exhibits internationally and is active in both Muslim-majority countries and in the West, but she primarily exhibits in the United States and Western Europe.¹⁷¹ Neshat has been cited as having a significant influence on her work, and like Neshat, the artist inscribes on her subjects “intentionally indecipherable calligraphic script.”¹⁷² Although Essaydi is the best-known of these “imitator” artists, I briefly mention a couple more examples to

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¹⁶⁹. Barbad Golshiri, “For They Know What They Do Know,” para. 32–33.
convey the extent to which Neshat has sparked a new generation of “chador artists,” who capitalize on popular Orientalist themes.¹⁷³

Figure 52. Converging Territories #24. Photo: Czech Traveller, 2015. Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi.¹⁷⁴

Manal Al Dowayan is a Saudi Arabian artist, who works with photography and other media. She is “nomadic,” dividing her time between London, Dharan, Nepal, and Dubai. Her work addresses issues related to gender and national identity in Saudi Arabia, and her photography series Look beyond the Veil (2005) in particular uses Orientalist imagery of the veil, portraying women as exotic and mysterious.¹⁷⁵ She also exhibits internationally and has been exhibited on multiple Edge of Arabia tours.¹⁷⁶ Finally, Nouf Alhimiary is a Saudi Arabian female artist living in London, who works in photography and other forms of media.¹⁷⁷ She has also exhibited across Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and in the United States, and has

¹⁷³. Barbad Golshiri, “For They Know What They Do Know,” para. 34.
exhibited on Edge of Arabia tours.\textsuperscript{178} Her work explores themes of gender identity in Saudi Arabia as well as transnational Muslim identity, and she frequently uses veiled women decorated with calligraphy, evoking Orientalist and Islamophobic imagery, even though her stated intention is to challenge those ideologies.\textsuperscript{179}

These artists, particularly Essaydi, likely would push back on interpretations of their art as self-Orientalizing or self-appropriative; for example, Essaydi states that her art “invite[s] viewers to resist stereotypes.”\textsuperscript{180} However, an overwhelming majority of her models are young and in shape, with bodies that can be easily sexualized, which leads one to question which stereotypes Essaydi calls on viewers to resist; body positivity does not seem to be one of them. Moreover, her art focuses on veiling and images that seem to evoke or follow Orientalist depictions of the harem to convey the “controlling pressure exerted by men in Arab culture,”\textsuperscript{181} thus directly utilizing Orientalist themes in an act of self-appropriation. Although these three artists are each very different, as they come from different backgrounds, are of different ages, and have worked according to different timelines, they all use the same colonial visual binaries as Neshat, and one could interpret them as lacking in originality in their imitations. When it comes to representations of Muslim/Arab women by Muslim women, a trend emerges. It should also be noted that these women do not currently veil, though veiling is a personal, cultural, and/or religious choice that varies from region to region and from woman to woman. Still, the veil

\textsuperscript{181} “Refuting Orientalism: Lalla Essaydi,” 4.
serves as their central item in their production. Although Islam comprises different schools of thought when it comes to covering or veiling (per modesty)—some choose to cover their hair, others their face, and some choose not to cover at all—it is hard not to notice that the subjects in these artists’ works are almost always veiled, evoking Orientalist imagery explored in chapter 2’s paintings, such as William Holman Hunt’s *The Lantern Maker’s Courtship* (1854–1857). This choice of portrayal creates a representation of the other that does not necessarily look like the majority of Muslim women or reflect their values. Arguably, the veiling of the women in the artworks is crucial to their success, for if we were to unveil any of the women in the artworks, it would make them not visibly Muslim, and thus they would not be as critical or interesting to the target audience as the veiled woman. The use of veiling for immediate identification of women as Muslim is supported by chapter 2’s discussion on gendered Islamophobia, in which scholars like Daphne Grace and Juliane Hammer position Muslim women as more susceptible to stereotyping and Islamophobia because the practice of wearing the hijab makes them more visibly Muslim than men.

These representations have real-world significance, exemplified by recent political tensions between Saudi Arabia and Canada; these were sparked by Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland’s social media tweets to the Saudi Arabian government on August 2, 2018, which “called for the [immediate] release of several women’s rights activists campaigning for the male guardianship system to be abolished who were detained as part of an apparent crackdown on dissent.”¹⁸² Saudi Arabia did not take that tweet lightly; it responded by “freezing all new trade with Canada and expelling its ambassador over its ‘interference’ in the kingdom’s domestic affairs.”¹⁸³ Following

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¹⁸³ “Rahaf Mohammed,” para. 21.
these events, on January 11, 2019, Canada welcomed Rahaf Mohammad, an 18-year-old female
from Saudi Arabia who had fled Saudi Arabia and her family to seek asylum and was accepted
as a refugee in Canada. In an interview with the BBC, Rahaf stated, “We are treated as an object,
like a slave,”184 and further explained, “I wanted to tell people my story and about what happens
to Saudi women.”185 This incident sparked a chain of media reports in the US and Canada about
the status of women and the experience of Rahaf in Saudi Arabia. Although there are women in
Saudi Arabia who are treated poorly and face abuse, this is also the case in countries outside
Saudi Arabia and the Middle East (including those in the West). In particular, discrimination
against and mistreatment of Muslim women persists in the West, as evidenced, for example, in
chapter 2’s discussion of the widespread ban of the hijab and other forms of covering in France,
Quebec, and other places in the West. The personal narrative Rahaf provides is vastly
generalized and simplified, as seen in the US news article stating that “Rahaf may not be Harriet
Tubman, but she was certainly a slave who got away and is now free. She is one of dozens,
perhaps hundreds of Saudi slaves that made it to freedom by escaping the country many of its
citizens call a prison.”186 Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland, the same person who tweeted at the
Saudi government four months earlier, was at the airport in Toronto to welcome Rahaf into
Canada, calling her “a brave new Canadian.”187 These are extreme, overt cases of Western
stereotyping of the veiled victim and of Arab women, but they reveal prevalent underlying
prejudices and misperceptions. Young Muslim and Middle Eastern men are often portrayed by

184. “Rahaf Mohammed,” para. 5.
185. “Rahaf Mohammed,” para. 5.
187. “‘A Brave New Canadian': Freeland Welcomes Saudi Teen Granted Asylum after Fleeing Family,” National
arrives-in-toronto.
the Western media as misogynists and patriarchal menaces, while the women they control need to be saved by Western, white saviours, as Lila Abu-Lughod’s analysis in chapter 1 so aptly explains. Artistic associations with Islamic cultures and violence serve to confirm the accuracy of these views, ignoring the complexities of the political and cultural symbolism and events surrounding the veil.

Again, just as Islamic culture is not monolithic, Muslims like Neshat and Gharem present diverse interpretations of Islamic cultures in their art. Some of these representations lean on Orientalist tropes and self-appropriate for acceptance in the art world, while others, as described below, are more critical of these tropes and strive for different portrayals of Arab and Muslim cultures. Given this overview of Neshat and her art, and her audience’s propensity to view it as universal rather than as a particular perspective, is it accurate to interpret her art as culturally appropriating? Looking at the definition by Patti Lenard and Peter Balint used in this study, there is a power imbalance between the culture Neshat is exhibiting to and her own. In her case, there are layers of complexities involved in the power dynamics. As an artist in exile, or self-proclaimed nomadic artist, Neshat portrays herself as both an insider and outsider, giving her a perceived freedom of expression free from accountability, as she presumably understands and represents both worlds. Similar to Gharem, she brands herself as a unique, rebellious voice, using her identity and the power of her persona to challenge cultural misperceptions and stereotypes. That brand gives her expression a power that, on the surface, frees her from responsibility of audience interpretations or misinterpretations. Moreover, Neshat directly profits from her self-appropriation. As Golshiri observes, “The veil has become the easiest way for an artist to promote his/her work.”

188. Barbad Golshiri, “For They Know What They Do Know,” para 44.
her work for around 119,000 CAD and higher.\textsuperscript{189} It is also undeniable that Neshat is aware of accusations of appropriation; she has expressed knowledge of her role as representing her culture, and she embraces that image.\textsuperscript{190} Moreover, Neshat has frequently expressed knowledge of the Iranian Revolution and the cultures she is representing and producing for, as well as an awareness of criticisms over her decision not to translate the text in her photographs.\textsuperscript{191} She conveys a deep awareness of Orientalism and its relationship to her work in her statement that “Muslim women are ‘the sexiest women on the planet’ because their veils are seductive and mysterious.”\textsuperscript{192} There has also been significant backlash against Neshat’s portrayals of Iranian women. She has faced multiple accusations of self-Orientalizing, self-appropriating, and profiting from using Orientalist imagery from academic, media, and art-world sources.\textsuperscript{193}

These questions have also resulted in inconsistent interpretations and analysis, even from scholars who examine such artwork. For instance, Dadi, from whom I draw in my discussion of Islamic art, is an artist, academic, and curator. As mentioned in the Sandow Birk case study, he supports Birk with his favourable analysis of \textit{American Qur’an} in the book’s introduction; he has also provided insightful scholarship and criticized Neshat’s work as re-Orientalizing through her imagery of the veil and illegible calligraphy.\textsuperscript{194} Although Dadi shows clear inconsistency in his positions on cultural representations by Islamic artists, in his analysis of Neshat, he astutely identifies her reliance on Orientalism.


\textsuperscript{190} Imogen Hamilton-Jones, “Women of Allah.”

\textsuperscript{191} Shadi Sheybani, “Women of Allah.”

\textsuperscript{192} Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game,” 670.


Although most of this criticism has been Western-based, there is less opportunity for criticism of her art in Iran or other Muslim-majority countries, as she so rarely exhibits there. From this complex context, one could interpret Neshat’s art as self-appropriative. Moreover, the complicated, overlapping nature of her identity obscures and even acts as a justification for that appropriation. I further explore the relationship between gendered representations of Islamic cultures and identities and cultural appropriation through the case studies of additional woman, Islamic-context artists, below.

Jamelie Hassan (Canada)

As a senior-career artist of Lebanese background, Hassan has produced work that has been widely exhibited and collected both across and outside Canada—in China, Germany, Cuba, the United States, the United Kingdom, Mexico, and many other countries. Hassan has also lectured all over the world from Jordan to India to Finland and has studied and trained in Rome at the Academy of Fine Arts, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Beirut, Lebanon, and at the University of Mustansiriya in Baghdad, Iraq.

In 2001, she was recognized with the Governor General’s Award for Visual Arts in Canada, which is arguably the most prestigious award a Canadian artist could ever receive on a national level. Hassan’s “interdisciplinary works incorporate ceramic, painting, video, photography, text and other media and explore personal and public histories” as well as “the subjection of women, colonialism, racism and political

conflict,” through which, for over four decades now, she has consistently merged art and activism in her work. A child of Lebanese immigrants, Hassan was raised in an Arabic-speaking household in Canada, where she continues to work and live today.

Hassan incorporates political commentary and social activism in her art, and she expresses her view that art and museum spaces have political implications in the following anecdote:

I went into the National Gallery, and was anxiously staring at Desaparecidos, and the security guard came up to me and he said, ‘It’s okay, it’s politics.’ Not art, it’s politics. And I had this great sigh of relief. And I left the gallery thinking, okay, that piece is going to speak, it's going to continue to remind and have this significant location to speak from in the institution. It’s not being absorbed by the institution.

In her words above, Hassan demonstrates the reality that museums are inherently politicized and nationalistic spaces, a reality that we have come to see from chapter 3 is long and complex. For her, activism and art are intertwined. As such, “[t]hroughout her career, Hassan has maintained that artists have a responsibility to address the important issues of their time,” as stated in the catalogue for her major retrospective exhibition “Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words” (2010). Critic Julian Jason Haladyn expands on how Hassan approaches her work, explaining it as “an expression of Hassan’s own unique vision of belief as lived, of believing as nothing less than a willingness to create one’s own time and place in the world.” Hassan refuses the popular use of Islamic tropes in her work by engaging with the diversity of symbols

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and forms around her. Cultural Studies scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes that Hassan “is not merely nostalgic about [her family’s] place of origin, she sees it as a place in the history of the present, not just in the history of her own displaced migration.” Hassan’s combination of traditional and contemporary cultural artifacts enables her a rich visual language in which to raise cross-references, contestations, and provocations.

In particular, Hassan’s *Nur* (2014), which translates as “light” and is one of the 99 names of Allah, installation for the Great Mosque of Xi’an—China’s largest and one of its earliest mosques, which now operates as a library—draws upon the mosque as a complex cross-cultural and international symbol. On the interior side of the mosque’s two main entry doors are traditional Egyptian glass mosque lamps added by Hassan, as if they were part of the building’s original design, though they originate from contemporary Cairo. “Their presence, like a little visual gift, subtly contrasts with the traditional Chinese architecture on the outside of the structure and the more modern features of the library’s interior space,” describes Julian Jason Haladyn. This incorporation of multiple cultures and modern innovative style is consistent with the cultural blending, fusion of innovation with local designs, and combination of cultural and sacred purposes throughout the history of Islamic architecture, as explored in chapter 1 (Hagia Sophia and Sufi shrines are two examples discussed).

Within the small library, viewers make Hassan’s *Nur* present as they view the repeated calligraphic forms across the domed ceiling amid an environment of academic study. Because of this site-specificity, a purely aesthetic experience of the installation is impossible, as it is intended to be viewed within a larger context. However, Haladyn explains, “even the act of

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seeing it is not enough: as like the Qur’anic text it envisions, Hassan’s work reveals its meaning when a person experiences it.” Moreover, “Nur actively invites people, even those of us who cannot read the Arabic script, to share in the possibility of knowledge that depends on a willingness to seek knowledge.” In this example, Hassan situates her artwork within a mosque, showing its functionality and value to diverse communities, including religious, spiritual, and scholastic ones. Notably, Hassan’s reference to one of God’s 99 names and her use of the work as an invitation to experience personal spirituality and reflection contrasts with Birk’s The Ninety-Nine Names of God, in which he parallels the sacred names with violence and terrorism. Additional works by Hassan use calligraphy and other mnemonic device; for example, The Copyist (1995) (Figure 53) features a museological presentation of ceramic fragments, a woman’s slippers, and Arabic script.

In an interview, Hassan describes the motivations behind the work as feminist, explaining, “I was inspired by a woman calligrapher who copied manuscripts in the attic of her home while she cared for her baby, one foot on the cradle, the other, transcribing Arabic.” In modern sensibilities, what is normally regarded as a man’s job in the Middle East is here contested through the contributions of women, both the woman calligrapher and Hassan herself as artist. Hassan’s representations of culture through the observer’s experience as well as through depictions of everyday Muslims stand in contrast to Orientalist stereotypes. Feminist philosophy professor Amy Mullin asserts that Hassan’s work, as seen in The Copyist, “stimulates awareness of the multiplicity of socio-identities and of our expectations that identities be either ‘foreign’ or


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our own, and not both simultaneously.” As such, Hassan’s art serves as a critique to East/West “othering” binaries. Through works like Nur and The Copyist, Hassan offers her own perspective on the relationship between identity and cultural heritage, challenging misperceptions about Middle Eastern cultures and allowing spectators to develop their own perspectives by creating art outside Orientalist frames.

Hassan openly embraces politics in her art and explores issues related to intercultural perceptions. With this interplay of culture and politics, could one interpret her art as culturally appropriating? Although Hassan is internationally renowned and has exhibited in Muslim-majority countries, the vast majority of her exhibits have been in the West, and in Canada in particular. Therefore, there exists a power imbalance between her intended audience and the cultures she is representing in her art, though this is not to say that Muslims and those from the

Figure 53. The Copyist. Mixed media installation: Jamelie Hassan, 1995.

Middle East don’t exist as diasporic communities in Canada. Moreover, she is a well-known, successful career artist, and certainly profits from her work. However, it does not appear that the ways in which she represents identities and cultures act in the service of profit. Unlike Neshat and her imitators, she does not market herself as an artist in exile or as nomadic, and she does not use stereotypical symbols like the veil to portray her subjects as Muslim or Middle Eastern or Arab; rather, she identifies perceptions of herself as “being defined by a system of absences.”

This understanding of self and relationship to other positions her as belonging to neither world, rather than as having a unique “insider/outsider” perspective, which absolves her of accountability. Therefore, though Hassan certainly profits, self-appropriation is not the driving force of her profit. In terms of awareness of complexities of cultural representation and issues surrounding appropriation, the artist explicitly references her awareness of Orientalism and has even had multiple conversations with Edward Said to get his thoughts on its persisting impacts. Hassan also states an appreciation for critiques of museum displays, showing support for decolonization efforts, and she has agreed with an interviewer’s sentiment that “There’s a shocking unwillingness on the part of so many people not to acknowledge what is actually being said, the politics of things; people just want to gloss over it and say that’s beautiful and that’s all it is.”

Unlike Neshat’s art, Hassan’s work is not about aesthetics; she deeply considers the politics of her art and the history of Orientalism in her expressions. Through her exhibition *Orientalism & Ephemera* (2006–2009 across Canada), Hassan challenged Western audiences to consider the impacts of Orientalism in everyday life and the politics of those “othering”

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dynamics.\footnote{218} In terms of reception, thus far I have found no evidence for significant backlash against Hassan or her art. Demonstrating her regard, for decades, she has been invited to participate in countless lectures, curatorial projects, and group exhibitions.\footnote{219} Her deep research and understanding of Orientalism have given her the foundation to challenge Orientalist representations of Islamic identities and cultures. Other contemporary artists portray similar critical approaches to Hassan and seek to break out of the confinement of cultural representation that conforms to Western norms. Below, we explore how a Saudi-based, female artist represents her culture.

Sarah Al Abdali (Saudi Arabia)

Sarah Al Abdali is a Saudi artist, born in Jeddah, who is considered one of Saudi Arabia’s first street artists.\footnote{220} She comes from a graphic design background and is actively engaged in the public art scene.\footnote{221} Al Abdali’s appreciation and celebration of her Hijazi\footnote{222} (western region of Saudi Arabia) background is a common theme in her art, and she explains that her art “reflects my longtime interest in both history and politics and seeks to spread awareness of issues that play a central role in shaping everyday social life.”\footnote{223} She describes her inspiration as stemming from family photographs of “everyday life before the wave of materialism, consumerism, and...
high-rise buildings took over the Saudi landscape in the 1960s, permanently altering the socio-cultural landscape of the Hijaz.” Through personal interactions with Sarah Al Abdali, as we travel in the same circles in the Saudi Arabian art world, I am aware that she identifies as a practicing Muslim. Her respect for Islamic religious artistic traditions, interest in innovation, celebration of her cultural background, and engagement with Saudi social issues all inform her representational expressions in her art. The combination of her religious identification, gender, cultural background, and art focus all make her unique to other artists included in this study.

I was first introduced to Sarah Al Abdali’s work through her early street art in Jeddah’s historic district, which she began in 2011. For this series of works, Al Abdali created unique stencils, which she transferred to the outdoor wall of a deteriorating building. The stencilled graffiti image features a sign with an arrow pointing towards the “Holy City of Makkah.”

Within the upper left corner of the stencilled image, a few skyscrapers can be seen. Conventional destination boards directing to Makkah (Mecca) normally have a black cube in that same corner, meant to represent the holy Ka’ba, which is located inside the Great Mosque, and is viewed by Muslims as the most sacred place on Earth. However, in recent years, the Saudi government has initiated massive urbanization projects, which include the construction of numerous skyscrapers. For example, the Abraj Al Bait Towers in Mecca (2012) stand at over 600 meters high and are comprised of hotels, shopping malls, museums, and prayer rooms.

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227. For more information on the Ka’ba and other Islamic religious practices, see Tariq Ramadan, Introduction to Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
Tower, which is set to be completed in 2024, is designed to reach a height of 1,000 meters and will become the world’s tallest building. These tall and dense architectural additions inevitably alter the skyline of the ancient Holy City, which now looks closer to a gentrified, metropolitan one. Al Abdali’s artwork is very subtle, yet daring, as it reflects the artist’s critiques of the increasing urbanization and re-gentrification of Islamic holy sites for Saudi capitalist gain. This is both risky and brave, given the circumstances and her position as a Saudi female artist working in Saudi Arabia, where gender equality is complicated. For example, it is the custom in Saudi Arabia for a woman to have a male guardian from whom she must seek permission to work, continue her education, and engage in social activities, although since 2020, this practice has been disappearing. Additionally, in 2018, the government lifted the prohibition on women driving, which should increase women’s mobility and access to social and economic opportunities, and women can now legally require passports without a guardian’s permission; they are, however, still not allowed to marry without guardian consent.

So, in light of the evolving social position of Saudi women, although Al Abdali’s work is arguably courageous, it is important to note that the tradition of graffiti and its unsigned style affords a level of anonymity to the work, as only those who are familiar with the artist would recognize it as hers.

In 2019, I visited Al Abdali’s first solo show, The Simorgh Always Rises, at one of Jeddah’s historical district houses, Bayt Al Sharbatly. Within the exhibit, my attention was

233. The simorgh is typically translated as “phoenix,” and is a magical bird prevalent in ancient Iranian mythology and is also present as a holy symbol in Hinduism and in Islam as often representative of medicine and healing. For instance, it has mystical significance in Sufism, and is found in tales like Attar’s Conference of the Birds. It is a symbol often used in art of the Safavid period. For more information on the simorgh, see Richard Foltz, Animals in
immediately drawn towards a glimmering and reflective installation piece in the centre of the room, called Al Tabariyat. Made of gouache and gold leaf on wood, Al Abdali’s work features a shadow box display that replicates old Hijazi-style windows known as roshan. Here, through Al Abdali’s window, the viewer can see three females wearing traditional Hijazi headscarves, their clothes embellished with gold leaf in repetitive designs. In the exhibition catalogue, the artist describes this work as follows:

A tribute to the women of Hejaz: Al-Tabariyat refers to a family known for their scholarly excellence in historic Makkah. Many women descending from this family have contributed to the Makkan social and economic landscape. Commissioning charitable trusts, water fountains and traditional schools, these women marked their presence in the Hejaz and the Islamic lands. They have taught many influential scholars, historians, and linguists, as they have been taught by prominent scholars and thinkers such as Ibn Khaldoun and Ibn Arafa. Quraysh Al Tabariya (1610), for instance, was a well-recognized figure in Hejazi society in her time, who has taught many men and women. She has contributed to the science of hadith and sharia law, preserving and continuing both sciences. And is considered to be one of the most influential women in the history of Makkah.234

Al Abdali’s description of her work conveys a deep appreciation for her cultural background that has nothing to do with Western stereotypes or understandings of Islamic identities. Instead, through her artwork, Al Abdali shines a light on a narrative we do not usually see when Muslim women are the subject of contemporary art: Muslim women as teachers, scholars, and philanthropists—as successful women who actively contribute to the betterment of their society

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235. Ibn Khaldoun (d. 1406 CE) was a prominent Islamic scholar, historian, Sufi mystic, and philosopher and is generally regarded as the greatest intellectual ever to have appeared in the Arab world.” Robert Irwin, Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), description.
Ibn Arafa (d. 1401 CE) was an Islamic jurist, who interpreted Qur’anic text, focusing primarily on legal aspects. For more information, see Ahmed Fekry Ibrahim, Pragmatism in Islamic Law: A Social and Intellectual History (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015).
with agency and dignity. This work reflects the rich history of how women have always been an integral part of the Muslim community and have mixed with men, taught them, as well as learned with and from them. These representations break free from Western stereotypes and imaginings of Muslim women, which are embodied in the themes of the harem woman and the oppressed Muslim woman in the Orientalist paintings described in chapter 2. Through her work, Al Abdali presents women as strong, autonomous cultural guides rather than oppressed, victimized, hypersexual beings lacking in agency.

In her artist statement, Al Abdali expresses a view of herself as the caretaker of the Hijaz region’s culture, preserving it from decades of ideological and urban transformation. She is what I would consider a cultural “insider,” usually enriching her artwork with a process of oral history and research. Many of her artworks tell stories and keep the history of the region alive. She does not give voice to or empower the subjects of her artwork; she simply illustrates the power and voice they inherently possess to make it possible and visible for everyone to appreciate. Specifically, Al Tabariyat depicts three women, side-on, in poses that portray confidence and a humble pride. Unlike Neshat’s Women of Allah, she does not define the women with inscribed messages to insert her own interpretation of them, and the side-on view suggests that these women are not seeking “audience” approval; rather, they are purposed with cultural integrity. Furthermore, in a world of rapid change due to globalization, gentrification, and capitalism, many cultures and their histories are being undervalued and forgotten. Although current contemporary female artists do not represent the first generation of politically and socially motivated visual artists—for example, Lebanese-born artist and writer Etel Adnan (born in 1925 and still living as of 2021) created art as a visual expression of culture and political

critique, and Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum (born in 1952 and still living as of 2021) explores political and social issues through her art—the formation of official art galleries in Saudi Arabia in the 21st century along with increased government funding for culture and the arts have helped pave the way for a new generation, specifically in the Saudi art world. Within this environment of increasing support and opportunities for exhibiting art, Al Abdali builds on artistic traditions, making important work that records history and visualizes realities in which women of her region have thrived. Her work realizes and depicts that change of perception might be attributed to the shift of human interpretations of religion and political settings. Art history professor Sabrina de Turk comments that Al Abdali explores “themes surrounding the conflicts between religion, heritage, and development in the country.” Moreover, de Turk asserts that Al Abdali “taps into another theme that is becoming prominent in the work of contemporary Arab artists, particularly women artists, who are reflecting in their works the loss of traditional material culture and social structures.” Thus, her art raises important messages for us to understand within the culture and for others to understand about Muslim women and Middle Eastern cultures.

Notably, Al Abdali’s work has been viewed locally in Saudi Arabia and internationally at RHIZOMA in the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) and #COMETOGETHER by Edge of Arabia East London (2012). She continues to create and share her narratives of a side of the Muslim/Arab woman that many are not exposed to—one that does not start with her inability to drive or how she is forced to cover her face. Although Al Abdali’s work does not often make headlines and

241. Sabrina de Turk, Street Art in the Middle East, 188.
has yet to make international news, it nevertheless critically contributes to complex conversations around cultural representation, especially for Muslim cultures and women.

Is there an argument to be made that Al Abdali’s work engages in self-appropriation? Does her work fit within practices of self-appropriation in which members of a subordinated culture are “forced” to conform to the dominant culture’s norms and ideologies to be successful, and as such, struggle to express their own cultural voice? This does not seem to be the case for Al Abdali, as she has not resorted to using Orientalist themes to acquire fame or success. Her works focus on cultural expression, without using Western, reductive ideologies to explain or represent her own culture. Unlike Neshat, she does not visually connect Muslim women with violence or link veiling with female oppression. Her art celebrates Islamic cultural heritage, and although she has not made international news, Al Abdali’s art has been exhibited in Western Europe, showing that she has been somewhat successful while refraining from playing into Western stereotypes. The inclusion of her art in Western exhibitions also shows a positive step forward in museum decolonization and a recognition that there is space for more diverse Muslim, female voices in the art world.

Comparative Analysis

The variety of case studies explored in this chapter has revealed a complexity of representations of Islamic identities and cultures both between and within categories of Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists. Looking first at non-Islamic-context artists, Sandow Birk and M.C. Escher present differing motivations and intentions in their depictions of culture in their work.
art. Birk uses sacred Islamic text and principles in his *American Qur’an* and *The Ninety-Nine Names of God* in a self-expressed attempt to facilitate greater understanding between Muslim and American cultures. In doing so, he depicts Muslims as “others,” a different group from Americans and a homogenous entity. Using the 9/11 events as his context and motivation for his works, he engages in cultural appropriation, drawing upon Orientalist ideologies and modern Islamophobic stereotypes to associate Muslims with violence in ways that are familiar to the Western audiences to whom he is presenting. Birk’s identity as a white, American, non-Muslim male complicates his call for cultural understanding, when considering that he made no documented effort to study or understand the sacred religious and cultural principles he borrows from for his art. M.C. Escher provides an interesting contrast to Birk, as he advertised no intention to improve cultural perceptions, and he expressed no political motives for his work. Rather, he developed a deep appreciation for Islamic architectural aesthetics and the mathematical principles embedded in their religious meaning. As a white, European, non-Muslim male, Escher came from a similar “outsider” position like Birk, but he used this position to educate himself and made efforts to learn from Muslims and mathematicians regarding concepts of aniconism and infinity and techniques employed in Islamic Spain. His *Circle Limit* series channels his inspiration from Islamic arts and architecture to depict sacred principles and what one could even interpret as a representation of Islamic conceptions of the afterlife. Thus, though Birk and Escher share similar surface-level identity characteristics, and other characteristics like economic class and nationality also warrant consideration, their representations of culture are vastly different, and this does not seem to result explicitly from identity. Rather, motivations in terms of profit and fame appear to be different. Escher spent time studying and learning the value and symbolic complexities of the cultures he borrowed from,
whereas Birk only educated himself on aesthetics and relies on familiar stereotypes in his representations.

The case studies of the Islamic-context artists show the same level of variety and complexities as the non-Islamic-context artists. For example, the case studies of Sarah Al Abdali and Abdulnasser Gharem demonstrate two distinct examples of viewing and representing Islamic cultures, identities, and politics from the specific context of contemporary Saudi Arabia. Both artists are Saudi Muslims, but these affiliations do not automatically lead them to represent their culture in a unified way. While Al Abdali’s selected works, such as *Al Tabariyat*, focus on representations of the development of a Saudi city and women within Saudi culture, as a direct subversion of popular misperceptions and misrepresentations of Muslim women, Gharem’s selected works, such as *Pause* and *Message/Messenger*, focus on associations between Muslims, terrorism, and Islamic faith, when in reality, there is no more association between Islam and terrorism than there is between the US, Israel, or Western white supremacists and terrorism. Although the subjective nature of art renders the possibility for different interpretations of how Islamic cultures are represented in these works, the differences in focus on events and aspects related to Muslim identity reveal a divergence in these artists’ perceptions of what is important when considering these identities and cultures. For one, audience and Western reception seems to differ between these two Saudi artists, as does their gender, which may implicate and direct some of their works that they produce. The differences in these representational choices also convey the complexities of attempting to assign monolithic meaning to Islamic cultures and identities, specifically one that is based on a Saudi-Arab Muslim identity.

Shirin Neshat’s case study provides an entry into “insider/outsider” artistic representations of Islamic cultures. Her art speaks primarily to a Western audience, and she
capitalizes on familiar Orientalist imagery of the veil, Muslim women’s oppression and exoticism, and Muslim violence to represent Islamic cultures to her audience. Neshat elects not to translate the important messages in Women of Allah that convey the meaning she says she intends, leaving the images open to interpretations that, due to Orientalist/Islamophobic realities, would confirm and perpetuate prejudice and misperception. Although Neshat’s use of Farsi and the revealed meaning of the images by reading it would indicate that her audience is Iranian, she is exhibiting in the West, and primarily Western audiences are consuming her art, with perhaps Iranians in diasporic contexts. If translations were provided, the art would be more accessible and could be less likely to be mired by prejudiced interpretations. However, in not translating the art for non-Farsi readers (or making it legible for Farsi readers), Neshat uses the resulting misinterpretations to her advantage. The women in her photographs are veiled, mysterious, violent, and assumed to be Arab because of the untranslated writing that appears as Arabic to most Western spectators. She has gained international fame through her use of exoticism, which is “the representation and production of ideological commodities and symbolizing parts of a culture for consumption by those consumers who wish to reinforce their identical positive identities by way of stigmatizing others.”

By evoking familiar prejudicial images, Neshat and Gharem produce similar representations of Islamic identities and cultures. They specifically brand themselves as subversive insiders. Neshat markets herself as an artist in exile, empowering women by rebelling against the censorship of her home country and giving them a voice denied them by the Iranian government, a very particular experience relevant to her. Gharem markets himself as a classmate of 9/11 terrorists who uses his art to rebel against the oppressive Saudi government and paves the way for young artists to do the same, saving them from terrorism.

243. Barbad Golshiri, “For They Know Not What They Do,” para. 49.
Their “insider” identities legitimize their representations of culture, and their use of Orientalist imagery and ideologies speaks to their Western audiences and popularizes their art. They self-appropriate through “othering” that confirms familiar Western understandings of self and other identities.

How does gender impact these representations? It changes the nature of power dynamics and interpretation of art, but it does not in itself lead to similar cultural representations, as we have already seen with Birk and Escher. Shirin Neshat, Jamelie Hassan, and Sarah Al Abdali are all female, Islamic-context artists, but they represent Islamic cultures and Islamic women very differently. Neshat’s *Women of Allah* uses Orientalist imagery that exoticizes the Muslim “other,” while Hassan’s *The Copyist* and Al Abdali’s *Al Tabariyat* refrain from speaking to Western bias and focus their representations inward, on cultural heritage. While Neshat’s work purports to give women a voice, it removes the volume and meaning in that voice by not translating the script. In the same way, she provides a readily available template of interpretation for Western audiences, allowing them to transfer a Western voice onto the Muslim women. Conversely, both Hassan and Al Abdali produce representations that do not depend on the Western gaze. Their art and their women speak for themselves, allowing their cultures to speak for themselves in the process. These artists’ female identity gives them the power to define Muslim women through their representations. While Neshat defines her women by their veiling, Al Abdali’s women in *Al Tabariyat* are veiled, but the veiling is not the central theme in the work; the message is not that they are veiled but that they are teachers. Moreover, Hassan has studied Orientalism, lectures about it, and through exhibits like *Orientalism & Ephemera*, she challenges biased ideologies and refuses to incorporate that imagery in her work.
Through comparing these case studies, it is apparent that identities are complex and there are layers of motivations that lead to divergent representations of culture, self, and other. Regional experiences, such as the Iranian-American and Lebanese-Canadian gendered experiences, inform the art produced by these artists. Still, not only are these artists’ modes of production diverse, their audience and how their art is consumed is also an important factor in the production of art. The demands of the market align to encourage an environment in which artists benefit from producing art that fits with Western expectations. The Orientalist ideologies portrayed in the paintings discussed in chapter 2 are ingrained in the Western psyche, and museum spaces have yet to fully break free from the legacies of colonialism and Orientalist thought that have shaped them. As such, culturally appropriating or self-appropriating Orientalist tropes, such as the oppressed Muslim woman, the exotic unknown, and the violent terrorist, along with the symbols that represent those tropes, such as the veil or 9/11 imagery, are an easier route to global success than representing cultures without using those ideologies. Further, the use of these narrow tropes and imageries are not limited only to non-Islamic artists, but also exist in the artistic productions of Islamic-context artists, while art productions that subvert these tropes and imageries were found in Islamic-context and non-Islamic-context artists as well.

Conclusion

The case studies of Islamic-context and non-Islamic-context artists explored in this chapter reveal a complicated picture of variations in Islamic artists’ representations of Islamic cultures and identities, showing that artists coming from both Islamic and non-Islamic contexts have the propensity for cultural appropriation. This chapter has also explored the impetus for artists to appropriate Islamic cultures as stemming from a need to appeal to the deeply ingrained
Orientalist ideologies of their Western audiences to gain access to the art world to which museum spaces hold the key. Specifically, the Sandow Birk case study provided an example of a non-Islamic-context artist who culturally appropriates sacred religious and cultural elements to capitalize on Western perceptions. M.C. Escher was also a non-Islamic-context artist, but his case study tells a story of cultural appreciation and representing the beauties of Islamic identities and cultures rather than catering to and perpetuating Western stereotypes. Abdulnasser Gharem’s case study explored an Islamic-context artist who appeals to Western stereotypes of Muslims but who is also popular in Saudi Arabia, showing that cultural appropriation is so prevalent that such biased representations can be well received in the cultures being appropriated. Moreover, Gharem’s high-profile support adds another layer of complexity to the power dynamics involved in representation. The Shirin Neshat case study presented an Islamic-context artist who uses her “insider/outsider,” “exiled” identity to self-appropriate in line with Western expectations of the veiled, oppressed Muslim woman. She has achieved significant popularity throughout the West. Jamelie Hassan’s case study presented artistic expressions from an Islamic-context artist who leans on themes of identity and cultural heritage, just as Neshat does, but in contrast to Neshat and Gharem, she tackles the issues of Orientalism with an explicit refusal not to engage with those themes, choosing not to self-appropriate with an active awareness of what that looks like artistically and historically. The final case study of Islamic-context artist, Sarah Al Abdali, demonstrates a fusion of modern political commentary with an appreciation for cultural heritage, depicting Muslim women as empowered cultural leaders, thus not falling in line with Orientalist ideologies and self-appropriative practices. Although all of these artists, to some degree, are producing art for Western consumption (and some for consumption in Muslim-majority countries as well), they respond to that reality with different types of cultural representations,
impacted by complex layers of identity in terms of gender, economic status, popularity, insider/outsider status, religious affiliation, and many other hidden dynamics. In providing more examples of Islamic representation, these case studies have further contextualized and problematized who gets to determine what constitutes cultural appropriation as well as the complexities in deciphering it.

Moreover, artistic and scholarly interpretations of the artworks discussed here suggest a propensity for a variety of both devotionally focused and culturally focused contemporary portrayals of Islamic societies by Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists alike. Within both categories of selected artists’ relationship to Islamic contexts, artists demonstrate artistic representations of cultures and identities influenced by Orientalist ideologies which appropriate and self-appropriate Islamic cultures in a perpetuation of Islamophobic stereotypes. However, these case studies also reveal that artists within each category are, by their own acknowledgement, often striving to represent Islamic cultures in ways they view as free from Orientalist indoctrination. Sometimes they succeed, but this chapter has also shown how their shortcomings in interpretation of identities in relation to their cultural and religious contexts play into and reproduce Orientalist tropes. As demonstrated, intended or unintended cultural appropriation and self-appropriation play a major role in these representational missteps. The complexities of representation explored in these case studies provoke a variety of questions: (1) Who gets to decide what cultural appropriation and self-appropriation look like when there is no homogenous sense of what constitutes Islamic or Muslim identity? (2) Do cultural “insiders” have an artistic responsibility in their portrayals of cultures, or is it acceptable for them to benefit from misperceptions and stereotypes? (3) Does gender make certain forms of representation more palatable and others less so? (4) Do museum spaces have a responsibility to recognize
cultural appropriation, and if so, how should they address it? To further explore the complexities of contemporary portrayals of Islamic cultures and identities in art, in the final substantive chapter, I examine case studies of artists who are utilizing and challenging Orientalist principles by looking at representations through specific categories of the veil, the mosque, and calligraphy.
Chapter 5: Case Studies of Orientalism in Contemporary Islamic Arts

Introduction

Contemporary artists strive to find new ways to express Islamic cultures and identities in their art. These expressions, though nuanced and informed by modern contexts, often use familiar cultural themes to convey their message. As discussed in chapter 4, Islamic artists continue to be influenced by the history of Orientalist art, and the legacy of Orientalist ideologies frequently permeates their art and leads to expressions of appropriation and self-appropriation. Some artists utilize these ideologies in their depictions of culture—possibly for personal gain—while others seek to challenge these ideologies and perceive themselves as having a responsibility to portray Islamic cultures and identities in their own right, free from Western bias. All these issues play a substantial role in shaping definitions and perceptions of Islamic arts today, and more broadly, how art forms in Islamic milieus present themselves contemporarily. As such, this chapter engages in a case study analysis of artistic utilizations of and challenges to Orientalism within the recognizable—and somewhat clichéd—Islamic themes of the veil, the mosque, and calligraphy. I use these categories because, as chapters 1, 2, and 4 discussed, the veil is a symbol of Islamic cultures that has both cultural and religious connotations, was appropriated in Orientalist paintings, and continues to be a signifier of being Muslim, and a Muslim woman, in many modern Western imaginaries. Additionally, chapter 1 situated the mosque and calligraphy as common modes of architectural and artistic production throughout Islamic arts history. As such, analyzing their continued use in art sheds further light on the impacts of Orientalism on the global art world. I then explore the debates surrounding the issues of artistic responsibility and personal gains and the ways in which these issues impact Islamic arts. Overall, the chapter interrogates the assumption that contemporary artists functioning in both Islamic and non-
Islamic contexts often use the same identifiable Islamic themes of the veil, mosque, and calligraphy to both reaffirm and challenge Orientalist ideologies, exploring the persisting influence of Orientalist legacies as well as efforts artists and the art world are making to decolonize artistic cultural representations. To probe these contemporary interactions with Orientalist themes, the chapter specifically engages with Canadian artist Colleen Wolstenholme and the theme of the veil, with Saudi artists Ajlan Gharem and Moath Alofi and the theme of the mosque, and with Saudi artist Nasser Al Salem and the theme of calligraphy. The chapter finds that artists work within themes of the veil, the mosque, and calligraphy to capitalize on Orientalist imaginaries as well as to challenge them. Through its examination of artistic responsibility and personal gains, it also uncovers the complexities of these considerations and stresses the need to further contextualize such interrelated issues in the field of Islamic arts, acknowledging that there is no simple resolution.

**Exploration of Themes**

Over the past 1,400 years and more, Islam (in its varied expressions) has spread globally. As Islam gained traction, common shared symbols like the veil, the mosque, and Arabic calligraphy proliferated, transforming as the tradition was transmitted. As described in chapter 1, mosques like the Shah Mosque in Iran served as important spaces of religious and political significance. Though not strictly a mosque, the Dome of the Rock represents an early religious/cultural space that provided a symbol of cultural unity and identity. Moreover, calligraphy (as described in chapter 1) has been used historically to write the Qur’an as well as to decorate poems, epic novels, sacred spaces, non-religious buildings, and government products, such as coins. Artists from within and without Islamic cultures continue to deploy these images, symbols, and
traditions in visual representations of Muslims and of Islamic faith and cultures, ranging from the early days of Orientalist paintings in European and Western art history (chapter 2) to contemporary art practices of artists and museums (chapter 3) displaying their works today. These symbols are used both to subvert and support distorted understandings and misrepresentations. Use of symbols for such misrepresentations can be striking in their blatant perpetuation of Orientalist and Islamophobic imagery, and the following case study of Colleen Wolstenholme explores a contemporary utilization of Orientalist ideologies through the symbol of the veil.

**The Veil**

As discussed in chapter 2, the veil has long been culturally, socially, and politically charged as a garment and religious symbol/cultural attire. From its popular Western misconceptualization as a sign of Islamic oppression and misogyny to a model of self-empowerment, agency, and liberation, the garment envelops all these meanings at once. Noting the failure of Western perceptions to capture these multilayered meanings, Islamic Arts scholar Valerie Behiery explains:

> The sign of the veil in mainstream Western culture assumes a historical and geographical continuity to both the form and the meaning of the garment. That its constructed fixedness ignores the diversity in the nomenclature, practices, and meanings of veiling both historically and geographically underlines the problematic nature of the veil as a site of analysis.¹

Consistent with these analyses, many visual associations with the veil or veiled subject represent singular, limited, and inaccurate understandings of it, which largely stem from colonial

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perspectives or Eurocentric gaze. These limited understandings are expressed through contemporary artistic production from both within and outside Islamic cultures.

Despite common Western misconceptions, throughout history, the veil has acted as a symbol that holds multiple and complex meanings. These meanings are further informed by local cultures and regions, as much as women’s agency and, at times, lack thereof. Scarves and veils were prominent in numerous cultures before the origination of Islam, and they still play the same role in many religions today, such as in various traditions within Judaism and Christianity. As Islam spread, it incorporated local veiling customs and shaped veiling practices among diverse cultures. Both in pre-Islamic and Islamic contexts, the veil was tied to social status. As scholar Jennifer Sands explains, in some historical instances, “veiling was seen as power and prestige; only those who were privileged were able to wear a veil.” This practice continues today, as Fatima Mernissi observes in an ethnographic study,

the seclusion of women, which to Western eyes is a source of oppression, is seen by many Muslim women as a source of pride. The traditional women interviewed all perceived seclusion as prestigious. In rural Morocco seclusion is considered the privilege of women married to rich men.

Throughout the Middle East, certain types of veils (or veiling in general) are viewed as symbols of lower-class status as well. Author Daphne Grace also describes how cultures perceive and incorporate the veil differently, and its signification of class status varies among cultures.

Veiling is, therefore, commonly an expression of socioeconomic status with a diversity of

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meanings and purposes in Middle Eastern cultures, while it can connotate other realities in other Muslim-majority contexts.

In addition to expressing status, in contemporary expressions, women in Islamic societies wear the veil for a variety of reasons. Some of those reasons include religious observance, cultural affiliation, political statement, and simple convenience. As Arab and Islamic studies professor Sahar Amer explains, veiling is not explicitly required by the Qur’an; only practices of modesty, which are required of men as much as women, are expected. These scriptural and subsequent legal prescriptions have led to varied understanding of the religious injunction of modesty and thus veiling, some more forceful than others. Rather than following oppressive rules, women often choose to wear the veil to express religious and cultural identities as well as to even challenge types of veiling that might be considered oppressive due to lack of choice.

There exists no consensus in Muslim communities regarding faith-based veiling norms, and Muslim scholars continue the ongoing debate over the principles surrounding veiling in the Qur’an, ones that reflect pre-modern debates.

Moreover, Amer notes that in Middle Eastern cultures, veiling is often “considered a sign of modernity and fashion.” As an aspect of fashion, then, it is a way for women to express themselves and their culture and has become an expensive commodity and market. For instance, the cost to purchase items for covering can be staggering, with genuine pashminas, for example, costing hundreds or even thousands of US dollars. Western cultures, however, often lack knowledge of the diverse and complex veiling practices and their histories; as such, they are

8. Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*
9. Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*
susceptible to perceiving the veil only as a representation of female oppression, danger, and even the global rise of fundamentalist Islam. This narrative fails to understand that outside oppressive societies, which are the exception rather than the norm, women actively choose to veil or unveil, and they most often do so as a thoughtful act of autonomous individual and cultural expression and religious practice. In fact, Amer argues that “whether veiling denotes sexuality and eroticism, oppression and subordination, or threat and radicalism, it seems clear that these meanings have been created as a way of justifying Euro-American imperial projects and of coming to terms with a distinct foreign culture.”

In a study in which several Muslim women were interviewed regarding their veiling practices, women explained their reasons for veiling or not veiling. One respondent explained, “I chose to wear it myself after I studied Islam and thought it was a beautiful way to express my love for my religion and nothing more.” Another explained:

I am a Muslim woman, and I have never worn a veil, nor has my mother or her sisters. This has not been out of any societal pressure, […] but because while we are devoted to Islam, we believe that God exists on the inside and not in outward symbols that are too often thwarted and perverted by political interests.

Another respondent, in describing why she does not wear the veil, expressed that “For me, it’s a personal decision, and I think those who decide to wear the veil should have their decision respected. Telling Muslim women to take off their veil excludes them and prevents assimilation.” These select responses demonstrate that Muslim women commonly perceive veiling as a choice. However, forced veiling is also a reality that some Muslim women

12. Sahar Amer, What is Veiling?
experience, with men in their family as well as mothers or aunts sometimes enforcing these veiling practices; this is comparable to forced unveiling by non-Muslim nation states or actors. Veiling has also been coopted by nation states for broader political agendas, as seen in the contexts of Turkey and Iran. However, diminishing the veil to a symbol of oppression is reductive, and the veil’s forced use is only a limited part of this story. In fact, as we saw with the Orientalist unveiling photography exhibits in chapter 2, societal pressures—from the West or otherwise—for women to unveil are themselves highly oppressive. In modern times, we see this play out with selective and wholesale bans of the hijab and burqa in places like Quebec and France, as discussed in chapter 2.

Some Muslim, Arab, and Western artists, as well as the Western media, often overlook—or intentionally ignore—the complexities of and choice involved in the veil. Instead, they often appropriate the Orientalist tropes identified by depicting the veil as a homogenous symbol of Muslim women’s oppression, lack of agency, authority, or mobility—all of which are debatable and highly dependent on geography, culture, religion, and socioeconomic factors. As scholars such as social scientist Lila Abu-Lughod argue, the West’s limited understanding of women’s rights in the Muslim world is extremely biased and frequently perpetuated by portrayals of Islamic exoticism and women’s oppression in Orientalist paintings, as discussed in chapter 2. These misperceptions are also legitimized by contemporary “insider” artists like Shirin Neshat, discussed in chapter 4, who depict the veil in ways that align with Western views of the veil as exotic and oppressive.¹⁷ This is largely reflective of some of the West’s media strategy, which focuses on global issues of gender rights and violence that are strategically far away instead of taking responsibility for its own local cultures of misogyny, rape, domestic violence, and gender

discrimination. This one-sided narrative upholds colonial and gendered Orientalist perspectives about both Middle Eastern and Muslim cultures and “Islamic arts.” Negative Muslim representational tropes around the hijab have been taken up by Western artists, including Colleen Wolstenholme (Canada), whom I discuss below. In this example, I explore how artistic production by non-Islamic-context artists that show representations of Muslim women as oppressed directly perpetuate colonial and patriarchal stereotypes of the East. Similarly, many of the art galleries, exhibitions, and museums that showcase these artworks, such as the National Gallery of Canada’s collection of Wolstenholme’s works, also uphold these inaccurate narratives, legitimize them, and communicate them to national audiences. When such art is exhibited in the West, it does not reflect an accurate picture of the diversity and complexity of the hijab or Muslim women, but rather confirms assumptions that the East is a patriarchal society where women need “saving.”

This misconstruction and dissemination of negative stereotypes about Islamic cultures ultimately prohibit artists as well as art critics from pursuing actual lived experiences of Muslim women in their areas of scholarship and research creation around the hijab and the diverse roles of women in Islamic cultures. As this narrative of the veil and Muslim women aligns with the one presented by the media, these institutional representations reinforce prevailing singular views of the veil.

*Colleen Wolstenholme (Canada)*

First introduced to artist Colleen Wolstenholme’s work on a family visit to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 2013, I was surprised to see figurines of Afghani women on display, as Muslim cultures are rarely represented in North American museums. On the wall beside

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Wolstenholme’s works was an artwork label with identifying information, stating, “Triad (2005), Colleen Wolstenholme” (Figure 54). Made of white plaster, Wolstenholme’s work featured three smaller-than-life-sized figures of standing women covered in Afghan burkas— which cover the entire body and face— each woman facing away from the others. I wondered, why are they so small? Their size was almost childlike as if the women under the burkas were children. Was this meant to reflect a societal view of women from Afghanistan as lesser beings? It was impossible for me in that moment to know the artist’s true intentions. However, I was stirred to find out more.

Figure 54. Triad. Sculpture: Colleen Wolstenholme, 2005. National Gallery of Canada.

During my research, I came across Canadian art critic Virginia MacDonnell Eichhorn’s essay on Wolstenholme’s work, in which she describes the artist’s motivations for the work Triad:

Wolstenholme created three burqa-clad women who are slightly smaller than life-size. The figures are placed in a circular arrangement but are facing away from one

19. Though it has become a Western symbol for Muslim women’s oppression, the burka has a long, complex history that began before forced covering under oppressive, extremist rule like the Taliban in Afghanistan. As Lila Abu-Lughod notes, the burka has long been a form of covering in local societies like the Pashtun region, the subcontinent, and Southwest Asia. It is a complex symbol with many meanings, often including the separate spheres of men and women and the respect for women’s role in the home. For more information, see Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Muslim Woman: The Power of Images and the Danger of Pity,” Lettre Internationale 12 (2006): 1–9, https://sdsuwriting.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/90622340/Abu-Lughod_Eurozine_The%20Muslim%20woman.pdf.
another. There is a disconnect between them and their reluctance to look toward each other for support, creating a strong atmosphere of isolation. We cannot help but wonder at the source of isolation. Is it shame? Is it reluctance to admit the need for another’s help? Is it fear of breaking out of imposed boundaries and expectations? The figures in Triad are vulnerable and helpless, imprisoned within the plaster folds of their burqas, unable to progress or move. They are incapacitated.  

Here, Eichhorn equates Wolstenholme’s work as a commentary on Muslim women’s incapacitation and an assumption that they, as Muslim women, are isolated and unable to ask each other for help. Throughout Islamic history, there has been a long tradition of female solidarity. Female Muslim leaders in early Muslim societies, such as the wives and daughters of the Prophet Muhammad, brought women together on a regular basis, leading the community and cultivating unity and sisterhood. This tradition has been kept alive since the early days of Islam and continues to this day.

Given the context of where this artwork is exhibited—in the nation’s capital to a massive international audience—it is plausibly easy for viewers to draw Eurocentric assumptions about a specific garment that carries complex histories that are not shown alongside it. Because of this, Wolstenholme’s work perpetuates stereotypical symbols and thus understandings of the Muslim woman as someone who is oppressed or powerless, especially in comparison to the artist making the work and the audience viewing it at the NGC. Wolstenholme’s Western representation of these figures enables Virginia MacDonnell Eichhorn to review the artwork as something that is revolutionary. In doing so, both the artist and critic discard alternative readings of the veil, and

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instead reinforce the popular colonial and Orientalist view of it from an outsider’s perspective. They take an Islamic cultural mode of practice and place it in a Western symbolic context to bring it closer to the dominant paradigm of understanding the seclusion of women visually, while whitewashing, quite literally, its meanings. This reflects a lack of critical research by both the artist and the reviewer, and in turn, the institution’s ultimate ambivalence and thus complicity in misreading and misrepresenting one complex aspect of Islamic cultures. Through this portrayal, Wolstenholme “sees the practice of veiling women on one hand, and their over-sexualization in Western popular culture on the other, as two sides to the same coin.”

Muslim feminists have made similar observations in terms of the problematic nature of both uncovering and “denuding” the female body. Further, Wolstenholme’s kind of misreading is not dissimilar to the ways in which white feminism has erased, and continues to erase, the experiences of Muslim women—many of whom are women of colour—an issue Black and Indigenous feminist scholars have written about for decades, and continue to write about today.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that others have interpreted Wolstenholme’s work differently. For example, in a study on subversive identity explored by ESL students during a visit to the National Gallery of Canada, Nahid, a Middle Eastern female, undergraduate art student, explained that she found *Triad* to be a positive representation of Islamic culture. She expressed that “They introduce our religion in a nice way… They introduce it in a good way,”

with a white colour, like angels.”

Thus, this art student perceives the piece as a positive introduction of Islam to a Western audience. Moreover, art critic Ray Cronin problematically argues that Wolstenholme’s “interest is in exposing the forms of coercion that limit women’s possibilities and circumscribe their potential for action,” and her use of the figural objects in Triad act as “a powerful means of countering the objectification of women.” This interpretation, though flawed in its surface-level analysis and shortsighted narrative, suggests an intention to challenge society’s hyper-sexualization of women by covering these female figures entirely. In this light, the work could be interpreted as challenging the Orientalist trope of sexualized Eastern women—Cronin serves as an example of these interpretations happening in the art world. However, it would be challenging to construct an argument against interpretation of this piece’s depiction of Muslim women’s oppression. Whether the artist intended Triad to be a renunciation of the patriarchy and Muslim oppression or an acknowledgement that oppression takes many forms, the result is the same—Muslim women appear as voiceless, oppressed figures without autonomy or even clear identity.

Another of Wolstenholme’s works was also on view within the same exhibition: an installation comprised of pills meant to represent antidepressants, called Spill (2003). The fact that two of Wolstenholme’s works are shown within the very same exhibition space suggests a relation or discussion between the pieces—a contextualized association by proximity and authorship. Indeed, her artist statements reveal that the works are about women as the main victims of social conformity and how particularly for Western women, antidepressants are often overprescribed and/or overconsumed in order to conform to normal social standards of women’s

behaviour. One can understand how the artist relates anti-depression pills and the burka to each other, as Western women sometimes take antidepressants to conform with society (although mental health and the need for medication are very real), and in her opinion, Muslim women wear the hijab or burka to conform with their society. However, this comparison promotes a one-sided narrative that is popular in the West, which is that the hijab or burka can only be one thing: oppressive. This artwork undermines the fact that there are women who choose to be covered; removing a woman’s agency and choice from the conversation is a form of patriarchy, one that repeats colonial power imbalances, which then further perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes regarding Middle Eastern women. Interrogating the meaning in this comparison between pharmaceuticals, womanhood, and Islamic cultures is especially relevant in light of increasing bans on the hijab across Canada and internationally.

I am particularly interested in the context in which the works Triad and Spill are produced: a white Canadian artist depicts Muslim women in burkas and antidepressants in the same art space, portraying both as systems of dominance and experiences which dull the senses and suppress the liberation of women. Wolstenholme compares the sedation caused by antidepressants to the way in which Muslim women behind the Afghan burka are thought to be “trapped;” this is an extension of an Orientalist mindset that views Middle Eastern women as oppressed objects. The work is powerful because many Western viewers may relate to some of the issues expressed in Spill and transfer those emotions to Triad, assuming that Muslim women are similarly struggling with pain or sorrow by wearing the burka. As explored in chapter 3, the

34. Ray Cronin, “Representing Women: Colleen Wolstenholme’s ‘Triad.’”
museum’s colonial history and continued “othering” leads it to these misinformed representations of Muslim women as oppressed. The museum also has an interest in presenting these stereotypical representations as they conform with audience stereotypes, and in conforming with these expectations, as trusted institutions and perceived cultural authorities, they legitimize and perpetuate misrepresentations of non-Western cultures.

It is also interesting to note that Wolstenholme chose to use the Afghan burka for her artwork, since this is a kind of hijab that is extremely politically charged in the West. The artist has directly stated that *Triad* is partly a response to a documentary about a Taliban execution of three Afghan women in 2001.35 Adding to Lila Abu-Lughod’s analysis of justifications for the War on Terror,36 feminist scholar Daphne Grace explains that “the ‘liberation’ of the woman behind the grilled *burqa* [was] one of the pretexts for the bombing of Afghanistan; this focus on [the] oppressed veiled woman disguised the US’s previous financial and political support of the Taliban and continuing US interests in central Asia.”37 The media began to portray the war in Afghanistan as a righteous war by virtue of the West’s concern to save women, and as British journalist Polly Toynbee wrote, “the burka became the ‘battle flag’ and ‘shorthand moral justification’ for the war in Afghanistan.”38 There already existed a politicized context in which Wolstenholme could approach making her work because this work was created around the time of the US war on Afghanistan.39 However, the representational and cultural narratives she takes

35. Ray Cronin, “Representing Women.”
39. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*?
up are problematically infused with colonial ideologies, as they are based on Western assumptions of the Middle East (represented here by Afghanistan). The veil continues to be a prominent symbol of women’s oppression throughout Wolstenholme’s larger body of work, as seen in her sculptural installation of miniature veiled figurines entitled *Suffrage* (2005), collected by the National Gallery and exhibited in various sites.

Today, within the Canadian context, there are many Muslim Canadian women artists producing art that could be displayed, which provide more generative and compelling work; one example is Jamelie Hassan, an internationally renowned artist discussed in chapter 4. Why is it that an “outsider’s” representation of another culture is displayed rather than that of a Muslim woman artist? This display choice exemplifies the issues of cultural appropriation discussed in chapter 3 and further explored in chapter 4, in which non-Islamic context artists capitalize on misrepresentations of Islamic cultures that conform to ingrained Western Islamophobic stereotypes. Drawing on Orientalist tropes of the oppressed Muslim woman and the exotic unknown, Wolstenholme appropriates Islamic cultures to create interest in her work, and by displaying it, museums themselves engage in cultural appropriation and legitimize it. Wolstenholme’s cultural appropriation of the Muslim veil and Islamic cultures is similar to chapter 4’s case study exploring Shirin Neshat’s self-appropriation in the use of the chador. Both artists’ uses of the veil evoke immediate associations between the depicted subjects, Islamic cultures and religion, and inevitably in our modern, Islamophobic context, Muslim women’s oppression and the perceived backwardness of Islamic cultures. Wolstenholme’s representation of the veil also juxtaposes chapter 4’s case study analysis of Sarah Al Abdali’s portrayal in *Al Tabariyat* of veiled women as keepers of cultural heritage, who are not defined by the veils they
wear. Wolstenholme’s women are defined by their covering. They do not speak for themselves; their veils speak for them.

This is a reoccurring type of danger, in which the veiled Muslim woman’s story is represented by self-identified feminists (especially white), critical artists, and prestigious institutions instead of giving platform to insiders of these traditions to represent themselves. Thus, not just the creation but also the exhibiting of such work in prominent locations like the National Gallery adds to the complexity of Western understandings of veiled women. As discussed in chapter 3, museums and galleries are political spaces, and as the face of the art world as well as highly regarded authorities of learning and culture, representational choices—here, related to the veil and views of Muslim women’s identity—have sociopolitical meanings and implications. Specifically, Daphne Grace describes the stakes of cross-cultural misrepresentation:

While social scientists discuss its cultural significance and argue over the meaning of its expansion into Western cultures, and the media spreads fear about the Islamic threat, Western feminists locate the veil as emblematic of an oppressed minority within patriarchal structures. From this perspective, the veil is seen as symbolic of the suppression and exploitation of the ‘Oriental’ woman both by man and, conversely, by the gaze of the Western colonializing and neo-imperialist world powers.40

In this regard, it seems difficult to imagine the representational trope of “oppressed Muslim women” will disappear anytime soon. As scholar Leila Ahmed explains, “It is still even today a rare week when some issue or other relating to women, Islam, and/or the hijab or burka does not make headlines in Western media.”41 As such, artworks and art exhibitions related to the oppression of Muslim women will continue to generate headlines due to the trope’s politically

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charged context and moralizing narrative in which Western and European nations and artworks are portrayed as superior. These dynamics appear in many artists’ works, including from within the Middle Eastern diaspora (see Shirin Neshat’s case study in chapter 4) as well as in the Western-oriented Orientalist paintings discussed in chapter 2. The following case studies explore some examples of themes beyond the veil, such as the mosque.

The Mosque

The mosque, as the primary religious building for the Muslim community, is an iconic representation of Islamic cultures, faith, arts, and community. This includes its architectural elements, such as domes, minarets, and the crescent moon that is usually placed on top of its domes or minarets—although not always, as will be discussed below. These spaces and apparatuses also include a sonic reality, as they include the sonorous recitation of the Qur’an and the call to prayer (azan). For some Muslims, symbols of mosques evoke a familiar visual: a prominent Islamic space in which Muslim communities gather five times a day. Architecture professor Ozayr Saloojee describes how the mosque is “the heart of the community—a gathering place for congregational prayer, for solitude, for celebrations both festive and melancholy.”

Although this modern community is predominantly male-based in terms of required attendance in Muslim-majority countries, the overview of the history of Islamic

architecture in chapter 2 describes how mosques have often incorporated public spaces, such as
schools and kitchens, into their design and functionality, while in diasporic contexts, such as
Western Europe or North America, new mosque spaces confirm to the realities of their new
landscapes. Mosques are sacred spaces, not just in a religious sense, but as centres of community
life. Moreover, contemporary mosques have experimented with variations in construction and
have sometimes abandoned historical symbolism in favour of new approaches. For example, as
referenced in chapter 1, the Bait Ur Rouf Mosque (Dhaka, Bangladesh) (Figure 27) designed by
female architect Marina Tabassum and completed in 2012, uses innovative design elements and
aesthetics. Specifically, “the Mosque was raised on a plinth on a site axis creating a 13-degree
angle with the qibla direction, which called for innovation in the layout.”44 To accommodate its
design, a cylinder was inserted into a square so that the prayer hall is facing the correct direction,
and the prayer hall is supported by eight columns.45 There are no recognizable mosque symbols,
such as domes or minarets, but the structure uses local bricks and materials to produce porous
walls that let in natural light and aesthetics that fit in with the local environment.46 Recipient of
the 2014–2016 Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the mosque is both a spiritual space and a
communal space in which children play, and locals gather to seek refuge from the heat.47 Thus,
modern mosques can be innovative in design and function while maintaining their evolving
cultural and religious purposes.

Mosques overtly mark Muslim geography in diasporic (or non-Muslim-majority) areas.
For many in the West, the mosque has become a charged symbol and place where violence is

44. Aga Khan Award for Architecture, “Bait Ur Rouf Mosque,” accessed January 21, 2021, para. 1,
45. Aga Khan Award for Architecture, “Bait Ur Rouf Mosque.”
46. Aga Khan Award for Architecture, “Bait Ur Rouf Mosque.”
expected. The mosque is often at the centre of Islamophobic hate crimes and acts of violence that have increased both in Canada and internationally, such as the 2017 terrorist mass shooting at the Quebec mosque and the 2019 terrorist mass shooting in two New Zealand mosques. Middle Eastern studies scholar Hope Collins asserts that “anti-Islamic sentiment has [often] been directed at the mosque as the physical embodiment of Islam.”\(^48\) As a striking example, the 2010 plans to construct an Islamic mosque and cultural centre three blocks from the former World Trade Center sparked enormous controversy.\(^49\) Though the mosque was designed as a community center with a restaurant, a library, a gym, and many other amenities, many construed this proposed structure as a symbol of Islam’s conquest of the United States on 9/11.\(^50\) In reference to the proposed construction, Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin tweeted, “Ground Zero Mosque supporters: doesn’t it stab you in the heart, as it does ours throughout the heartland?”\(^51\) This sentiment and the surrounding controversy that ultimately halted the original project—later reimagined and developed as condominiums, a museum, and community space\(^52\)—conveys the Islamophobic perceptions related to the mosque as a symbol. In sum, the mosque is a complex, culturally loaded symbol with many different significations and functions, but most especially in diasporic contexts, such as North America. The following case studies of Ajlan Gharem and Moath Alofi capture how contemporary artists are using this symbol in innovative and subversive ways.


\(^{50}\) Hope Collins, “The Mosque.”

\(^{51}\) Hope Collins, “The Mosque.”

Ajlan Gharem (Saudi Arabia)

Established in 1998 in collaboration with the Vancouver City Parks Board,53 the Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit organization that exhibits art in public spaces through open-air exhibits that attract millions of people.54 It creates opportunities for public engagement and communal learning through the display of multidisciplinary artworks. Like the National Gallery, the Biennale is a publicly funded event and colonial project—it has been around for more than 150 years. Beginning as a World’s Fair, Biennales feature major free-standing public exhibits that were originally intended to reflect particular nations, and later, countries. The art Biennale continues to play a major role in the art worlds at both the national and international level.

In the context of Vancouver, many international artists of note have been exhibited in the Vancouver Biennale, including Ai Weiwei (China), Dennis Oppenheim (USA), OSGEMEOS (Brazil), and Michel Goulet (Canada). In its fourth edition, the Vancouver Biennale theme for 2019 was “re-IMAGE-n” in which international artists were invited to discuss contemporary issues like natural resources, refugee crises, and nationalism. Some of the artists included were Ishmael Randall Weeks (Peru), Makoto Azuma (Japan), Patricia Piccinini (Australia), and Ajlan Gharem (Saudi Arabia), to name a few. The Biennale was co-curated by Marcello Dantas and Jeffery Uslip in addition to a team of advisors from different countries around the world. The funding for their activities came largely from government grants, corporate sponsorship, and philanthropic donations. As such, the Biennale represents a respected venue for the display of important art, and is, therefore, a legitimizing institution. For this reason, the Vancouver Biennale’s choice to include artwork depicting a fenced mosque, understanding that the

54. “Vancouver Biennale.”
architecture of the mosque is directly linked to Islam and Muslims, in a large-scale installation that attracts millions of visitors yearly, has important ramifications. Significantly, this event, like most biennales, lasts for two years, offering many opportunities for Canadians and tourists to Canada to view it.

Ajlan Gharem is a 32-year-old multidisciplinary artist born in the small town of Khamis Mushait in Saudi Arabia. He is the co-founder of Gharem Studio in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, along with his brother, artist Abdulnasser Gharem (discussed in chapter 4). Ajlan Gharem has exhibited his work since 2014, with most of his exhibitions happening in the United States. Although Ajlan Gharem has a body of photographic work that “explores how Saudis articulate their culture amidst globalization and the shift in power dynamics over time and across generations,” and much of his work admittedly captures the multiplicity of Muslim identities, his most famous work, described below, is the one that he is known for and the one that he promotes and discusses the most. His featured artwork in the 2018–2020 Vancouver Biennale, Paradise Has Many Gates (Figure 55), was notably the opening installation of the Biennale’s fourth edition and offers a pertinent case study for my research around Orientalist representations of Islamic cultures, both inside and outside their geographies.

56. “Ajlangharem,” Instagram, accessed February 9, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/ajlangharem/?hl=en. Instagram is used here to refer to Gharem’s body of work as his website is no longer available at the time of this reference.
Figure 55. Paradise Has Many Gates. Structure of plexiglass, aluminum, rolled steel, paint, electric lights: Ajlan Gharem, 2015. Vancouver Biennale.57

Ajlan Gharem’s installation, Paradise Has Many Gates, for the “re-IMAGE-n” Biennale is comprised of a mini mosque or a musala. This specific form of prayer space is a functionalist prayer room that would usually be found in places that do not have a full mosque. They are found scattered on the sides of highways, particularly on the sides of the highway connecting the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina; they have also been constructed in North America, such as in international airports or local neighbourhood shops. Ajlan Gharem’s installation is made of chain-linked fencing that creates one large cage-like structure; there is no separate room or section for women in this small musala. On the ground, lines of prayer rugs are placed towards the direction of Mecca (qibla). The re-created mosque features a minaret and a dome with

crescents on top. The minaret has speakers attached to it to broadcast the call to prayer; at sunset, as in most mosques in Saudi Arabia, the minaret is illuminated in green, signalling the time for sunset (Maghrib) prayer. There is also a chandelier hanging in the center of the mosque from the dome; this is usually how chandeliers are hung in full-scale mosques, such as in Ottoman mosques—roadside musalas do not usually have elaborate chandeliers like this one. Moreover, the prayer rugs, which make up the floor of Gharem’s mosque, symbolize the physicality of prayer, “mediating between the material and the spiritual.”58 The prayer rug is traditionally used for both individual and communal purposes in the Muslim call to prayer five times a day, signifying its deeply sacred meaning and function. Creating this cage-like structure, calling it a mosque, and placing it in the middle of a park in Vancouver invites open-ended engagement without any kind of intellectual, cultural, or artistic grounding. Gharem references one of his motivations for the piece as being Guantanamo Bay, but he does not elaborate on why or what exact association he is trying to make.59 When deconstructing the material elements of this artwork in relationship to penology, one can plausibly see a relation to the infamous cages that contain prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, where over 133 Saudi citizens have been kept and tortured since 2002.60 Relating the mosque to this infamous prison is deeply political and evocative, given the horrific treatment of prisoners, who are detained without trial on suspicion of terrorist activities—recalling the Orientalist trope of the violent Arab terrorist, described in chapter 2—and inhumane torture tactics such as waterboarding, food deprivation, and religious

harassment. There are many interpretations one can take from such an artwork in the general sense, let alone in the specific case of Gharem’s mosque—which was originally constructed in the Saudi desert, as further described below—for the Biennale.

In an interview with the Saudi Gazette, Gharem says, “It is an Islamic, holy and social design which looks like a mosque. This work may trigger a feeling of being locked and anxious because of its framework.” Here, Gharem grossly understates his structure’s likeness to a mosque—its characteristics easily constitute a mosque, and Muslims have used it for prayer. Again, Gharem also vaguely references the cages of Guantanamo Bay, explaining that the mosque makes the audience “start to think about so many things happening around us, like […] Guantanamo, and after that the refugees issues, and after that the kids in cages in the United States.” Associating such negative emotions and connotations with a sacred and holy place of communal worship and prayer suggests that people are trapped in Islam and are “weak victims” and “criminals,” thereby deserving of their own entrapment. Additionally, this type of chain-linked fencing resembles animal cages, where animals are kept, fed, and bred. Both interpretations hold connotations that depict Islam—and arguably Islamic cultures in general—as oppressive, inferior, and backward, harkening back to chapter 2’s discussion of the tropes relating to Arab inferiority and primitiveness portrayed in Orientalist paintings.

However, Gharem states that he envisioned a different meaning when he created this piece. He explains that he created this work partly as a statement on the current state of the refugee

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crisis and the issue of Islamophobia.\textsuperscript{64} Gharem notes that while many people perceived the mosque made out of a cage as an insult to Islam, the work “is not religious.”\textsuperscript{65} Instead, he argues, “It’s about the religiosity, how we are practi[s]ing it. It’s the ideology.”\textsuperscript{66} At the same time, in a 2015 video advertising the project, Gharem states that “the mosque is a conduit for the symbolic power wielded by all those above the unwitting individual.”\textsuperscript{67} This statement suggests a direct association with the mosque and abuse of power rather than a critique of all organized religion. This specific use of the mosque and holy Islamic imagery contradicts Gharem’s statement that the work is “global, and it’s not just about Islam,”\textsuperscript{68} and that he used a mosque because “I’m Muslim, and I can’t use a church.”\textsuperscript{69} How can it be argued that the mosque is not religious, at least for a Western audience? And given this clear correlation and use of Islamic mosque imagery, how is the work not religious—and specific to Islam—in nature? Generalizing the work in terms of religiosity broadly and not Islam specifically is even more problematic in light of the surrounding Muslim community in Texas using the mosque as a functional prayer space when it was installed in Houston’s Station Museum of Contemporary Art in 2016.\textsuperscript{70} With this practice, the installation is no longer simply art, but a place of worship specifically for Muslims.

\textsuperscript{66} Janet Smith, “Saudi Artist Seeks to Bring Cultures Together,” para. 6.
\textsuperscript{67} Ajlan Gharem, “Paradise Has Many Gates,” YouTube Video, 1:34, October 25, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auwPmsqsS6Q.
\textsuperscript{69} Jonathan Curiel, “The Surrealism of Saudi Arabian Contemporary Art,” para. 11.
Gharem explains that this sculpture is a statement that Islam is not other to different cultures and is an acknowledgement that all cultures have many gates to happiness open to them.\(^{71}\) Again, he also notes that in addition to bringing up images of the unjust imprisonment of Middle Easterners at Guantanamo Bay, the chain-link structure references the caging of refugee children.\(^{72}\) However, these connections are not always so clear. How is the unjust imprisonment of innocent refugees related to a sacred religious space like the mosque? The only clues provided are from Ajlan Gharem, who explains that the structure is transparent and “you can see everything, but you are still locked in a cage.”\(^{73}\) How is this explanation applicable, as Guantanamo is an impregnable structure with no way to move in and out? The organizers of the Biennale describe the installation as examining “the role of religious belief and the power struggle between religious constraint and democratic freedom.”\(^{74}\) These statements suggest that Islamic extremism is trapping societies in ideologies that facilitate oppression and block progress. There are certainly other ways Gharem could have framed this work with messaging that does not rely on Islamophobic stereotyping. For example, given the mosque’s holy nature and its history of serving as a safe haven for homeless people, refugees, and others, would it not be more accurate for Gharem to conceptualize the space as the only place people are safe?\(^{75}\) However, mosques have also been used to harbour terrorists,\(^{76}\) raising the question: are people on the outside meant to be protected from those inside, or is it the other way around?

\(^{71}\) Janet Smith, “Saudi Artist Seeks to Bring Cultures Together.”
\(^{72}\) Janet Smith, “Saudi Artist Seeks to Bring Cultures Together.”
\(^{73}\) “Ajlan Gharem,” Vancouver Biennale, 1:38.
\(^{75}\) Daniella Talmon-Heller, \textit{Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria: Mosques, Cemeteries and Sermons Under the Zangids and Ayyūbids (1146–1260)} (Boston: Brill, 2007).
Art critics and the media have described Gharem’s work as challenging Islamophobic stereotypes and as a social critique of current crises perpetuated by religious extremism and cultural “othering.” The Biennale description of the piece explains that the mosque invites “Muslims and non-Muslim alike, to see through what traditionally divides us and look toward creating experiences that will unite us.” But how is a cage-like representation of a religion unifying? Does this expression not merely reinforce cultural stereotyping by engaging in “othering” and portraying Islam as a cage in which Muslims are trapped? With some viewers inside the mosque and other viewers outside, the work is not unifying, but both metaphorically and physically divisive. Further, as Vancouver Biennale founder and president Barrie Mowatt describes in an interview with The Art Newspaper, Gharem’s installation in the event is “representative of how a work’s intention and meaning can change with its location and the politics of the time.” This slippery subjectivity is exactly why this work carries with it dangerous cross-cultural risks that can perpetuate Orientalist ideologies and solidify Islamophobic perceptions. Notably, Gharem’s work has not been widely well received in his home country of Saudi Arabia. For example, in an interview, he explains that he originally set up the mosque structure “an hour’s drive outside of Riyadh,” and “when he later shared an image of the piece on social media, it ignited a heated reaction he had not anticipated.” Specifically, Gharem explains that the work “was pulled from two public appearances as it sparked outrage on

social media.”82 He describes that “people started saying ‘This is a mosque made of fences. It’s like a cage,’ [and that] ‘It was posted on everyone’s account, everywhere — when I opened my timeline all I could see were pictures of the mosque with people saying something bad, or something good. That’s why I was afraid.’”83 The specific responses are inaccessible as Gharem removed the original posts from social media, suggesting that the comments were quite negative and potentially threatening. As a Saudi, I find this unsurprising, as mosques are particularly sacred in Saudi Arabia, with—among other sacred mosques and locales—Mecca being home to the Holy Mosque, where many Muslims make their yearly pilgrimage (hajj).84 Mosques are sacred religious and cultural spaces, so Gharem’s use of prison/cage imagery to represent the mosque is offensive—perhaps even blasphemous—especially within the Saudi context.

In this case study, we are faced with two issues: one is the issue of the work’s creation and the other is the issue of its display. Depicting the mosque—a central sacred space for many Muslim communities and cultures—as a prison, or even a cage for animals or refugee victims, draws associations between Islam as a whole as a trapped and backward tradition and those who practice it as similarly trapped and backward, evoking Orientalist tropes of the Arab man as inferior and violent and the Arab woman as trapped, in need of saving, as discussed in chapter 2. If Muslims are willingly choosing entrapment, logic follows that they lack the intellect to know better; a superior culture needs to save them. The imagery of people outside the mosque taking photographs of people inside reinforces a view of those in the mosque—easily imagined as practicing Muslims—as being part of the exhibit; they are the exotic creatures that evoked so

much curiosity for Orientalist painters and their audiences. Gharem himself stresses that “the audience [is] the important part of this piece [… and] they make it alive.”85 Thus, another question arises: do the people inside the mosque become temporarily part of the exhibit? Recalling that the installation has been used for prayer, do the practicing Muslims observing their religion in this cage become represented as curious spectacles to be studied? Moreover, the interpretation of this artwork as representing Muslims as caged animals evokes Orientalist imagery of Islamic societies as violent, uncivilized, and in need of outside control. In Gharem’s artist statement on the piece, he explains:

The mosque evokes multiple meanings and feelings; the generational divide between young and old, the designation of sacred space and its meaning within different cultures, the role of religious belief and our search for new knowledge and ways of living, the power struggle between religious constraint and democratic freedom.86

Again, one can reasonably assume these are not the conclusions Western viewers (or Saudi viewers, based on negative feedback in Saudi Arabia) draw—the immediate associations of the work are of Islam as a cage and an oppressive religion, and these associations perpetuate Western perceptions that lead to and justify Islamophobia. Further, Gharem does not explain his reasoning or defend his positioning of Islam. Though Gharem’s stated intentions suggest a motivation to challenge Orientalist thinking, his use of symbols that equate Islamic cultures to a prison feed into deep-rooted Orientalist imagery of “Oriental” civilizations and people being trapped in primitivity and unalterable backwardness, and as such, one can argue that he utilizes Orientalist tropes to convey his message—a utilization that more likely results in negative interpretations regarding Islamic cultures, religion, and identities. Therefore, through the connotations produced from depicting the mosque as a cage, Gharem engages in self-

Orientalism. Exposure to media and general misconceptions that link Islam to terrorism have arguably played a role in shaping this artwork. Significantly, as an insider, first as an Arab and then as a Muslim, he adds a level of trust that legitimizes the connections between mosques and cages. For instance, many will believe that if he is a Muslim from Saudi Arabia, then he is an “insider,” and if he believes that mosques are like jails, then who can question his authority as a native speaker?

When it comes to the issue of display, it is notable that curators Barrie Mowat, Marcello Dantas, Jeffrey Uslip, Zarina Laalo, and others selected this Saudi art to represent its relationship with the religion, cultures, and Saudi Muslims, specifically in light of the recent tensions between the two countries. Moreover, the catalogue for the exhibit refrains from acknowledging the work’s controversial aspects, and the curators do not reference any negative reception. The mosque is undeniably a charged symbol. The display of this installment comes at a rather precarious global movement of hostility against Muslims in global Western contexts. In the Western world, mosques are sites wherein violence seems to increasingly occur. While living in Canada for more than eight years, overlapping with this research, I saw firsthand the violence Islamophobia and white supremacy cause in mass shootings and massacres experienced by mosques in nearby Quebec (January 27, 2019), as well as across the US. Thus, Gharem’s vague descriptions of the mosque in relation to oppressive religiosity, Guantanamo Bay, refugees in cages, and democracy make his intentions unclear and evoke the Orientalist ideologies of Western superiority and “othering” that have the real potential to perpetuate Islamophobic sentiments—sentiments that clearly resulted in backlash when his work was displayed in Saudi Arabia. This is not an unreasonable concern in the light of increased Islamophobia and related hate crimes. For many of the park’s visitors, this might be their first-ever interaction with a
mosque. Thus, when entering the chain-link mosque, the negative feelings evoked will align perfectly with previous misconceptions engraved in the subconscious from media exposures and enduring Orientalist ideologies.

Moreover, the setting of the exhibit within a Western context facilitates an emotive sense of “othering.” The multicultural, diverse audience gets a taste of what it is like to literally be in a religious cage and to then just step outside of it to be once again in free Canada. In that sense, the spectator personally experiences the entrapment of Islamic cultures and is then immediately reminded that their reality is different from the reality the “others” of these cultures are living. They experience the exoticism firsthand for a brief moment and then step back out into the real world with a troubling feeling of security and freedom in relation to this oppressive space they have just experienced. The Canadian government’s involvement in this exhibition acts as a stamp of approval on the artwork chosen for display. As such, the chain-link mosque is legitimized as a valid representation of Islam and Muslim cultures to the millions of viewers who annually attend.

*Moath Alofi (Medina, Saudi Arabia)*

In contrast to the Ajlan Gharem case study, which depicts the utilization of Orientalism (specifically self-Orientalism in this case) in Islamic arts, this next case study explores an Islamic-context artist using the same mosque theme to challenge Orientalist ideologies. Moath Alofi is an artist, researcher, and traveller based in Medina, Saudi Arabia, which according to some Muslims, is where the second Holy Mosque of Islam is located. Alofi explores the Medina region in his work, researching and documenting historical and archaeological findings.
throughout its areas through documentary and landscape photography.\textsuperscript{87} He is the founder of the Erth team, an aerial photography team that is “on a mission to document Saudi heritage”\textsuperscript{88} and he is also the founder of Al-Mthba Studio in Medina, which offers “artistic mentorship, gallery management and curation consultation in matters related to the holy city of Medina, Saudi Arabia, and the greater Medina region.”\textsuperscript{89}

In Alofi’s art, he documents the region of Medina through landscape photographs of landmarks. In his photographs, he also documents the social norms and behaviours of people who visit, interact, and shift these landmarks, engaging in a range of photographic locations, from taking aerial photographs of volcanic rock formations around the borders of Medina city titled \textit{People of Pangaea} to the series of photographs \textit{The Last Tashahud}, in which he documents a series of \textit{musalas} or mini-mosques on the sides of the highway leading to Medina. Each \textit{musala} in this ongoing series is unique, made of different materials like wood, brick plaster, and metal sheets, complete with mini minarets with a crescent on top. On his website, Alofi describes the work as follows:

\begin{quote}
A photographic series that captures desolated mosques scattered along the winding roads leading to the holy city of Medina, Saudi Arabia, it documents mosques built by philanthropists hoping to offer a haven for travelers, both of whom seek to reap the sacramental rewards of these structures. Alofi is interested in the different understandings of a house of worship highlighting the structures’ anachronism, as understandings of such holy spaces differ in contemporary times, and how these houses of worship are mostly familiar to travelers and the occasional passerby.\textsuperscript{90}
\end{quote}

These specific structures are unique to Saudi Arabia and are frequently found on the sides of the highways leading to both Mecca and Medina. In his artist statement, Alofi notes that many of these structures have been built by philanthropists seeking heavenly deeds from Allah—reflective of their spiritual significance. Furthermore, while the musala previously acted as a rest stop for travelers, the increase of modern-day gas stations and service centres has caused these structures to become abandoned, and some have disappeared. Nevertheless, many still exist as a reminder of what they once were—temporal, sacred places of rest on one’s journey to the Holy Mosque in Mecca, which is centered around the ka’ba—a holy space in Islam, where many Muslims travel for hajj. Alofi’s photographic series captures their purpose and enduring legacy.

What immediately attracted me to these images was the striking resemblance and contrast between them and Ajlan Gharem’s chain-link mosque Paradise Has Many Gates. Both of the mosques—those photographed by Alofi, as well as the one constructed by Gharem—depict relatively inexpensive, low-budget structures that are meant to transform the space encapsulated within them into a sacred realm of worship and prayer. However, this differs greatly from the opulent decoration and ornamentation of many mosques found across the world today in both historic and present-day contexts, as these are spaces that are transitionary and have a specific utility. In Alofi’s case, the mosques are photographed in their place of origin—Saudi Arabia—where people interacting with them know exactly what these structures are, who created them, and why they were created. There is comfort and familiarity in them, whereas Ajlan Gharem’s chain-link version evokes internal hostility and unease. The presence of Alofi’s mosques is a part

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of that landscape and is recognized as a cultural element of the region and its people. So even if these mosques were created with low-budget materials, these materials do not alter the meanings or intentions behind their creation. The choice of materials used in this case is based on availability and cost efficiency. With Gharem’s work, once the mosque is moved from its original landscape and made available for people to interact with, it works to disregard its main function and history, many meanings shift, and a new understanding of the space is created. Conversely, Alofi’s photograph series retains integrity in terms of the mosques’ purpose by capturing them as they are and allowing them to speak for themselves, free from modern influence and consequent unintended interpretation. Thus, this goal speaks to the medium of his art (i.e., photography) as well.

This relationship between location and object is interesting in both artworks, and both show how the shift in location can alter the meaning of the artwork and the experiences one has with the structure. Notably, in the same way that Orientalist paintings and photographs of models were often staged to depict fantasies, as described in chapter 2, Orientalist photographers would selectively photograph landscapes to build a picture of the “Oriental” world that would meet Western needs and expectations, to convey notions of the uncivilized and primitive.94 Thus, by photographing the mosques, Alofi participates in preserving the unique identity, history, and architecture of the region. His images work to display the uniqueness of this structure and its cultural meanings and understandings in the space it was created for and intended to exist in. This unique iteration of a collection of mosques that exists in his own city allows a larger audience to see these structures, and by being exposed to his photographs, they get a glimpse of

that region’s culture. Thus, *The Last Tashahud*[^95] uses the mosque symbol in a way that challenges Orientalist ideologies by refusing to employ or even subtly allude to Orientalist tropes, such as the terrorist villain or related Islamophobic views of Islam as oppressive. Standing on its own merit, it preserves Islamic identities and cultures on its own terms, removed from Western manipulations of what it means to be Muslim in contrast to Ajlan Gharem’s chain-link mosque in its reflection of a reductive imagery of Islam as a prison and Muslims as violent as well as Abdulnasser Gharem’s dome-like trap in its use of mosque imagery to represent Islam as oppressive and Muslims as unwitting victims. In capturing the sacred spaces in their place of origin and presenting them as a piece of heritage to be celebrated, in contrast to the Gharem brothers, Alofi enables the spaces to have their own agency.

Notably, museums both in the Middle East and the West have exhibited *The Last Tashahud* and other photography series by Alofi. The Saudi Arabian Misk Art Institute notes that “throughout his artistic career, Moath has exhibited works in Jeddah, Riyadh, Dammam, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, London, Paris, [Brussels,] Moscow, New Mexico, Utah, Seoul, and Davos.”[^96] In fact, *The Last Tashahud* was displayed as part of the “Our Land” exhibition at the Amelie A. Wallace Gallery in New York. Anthony Hamboussi, curator of “Our Land,” designed this exhibition as a corrective statement to the Brooklyn Museum’s “This Place,” which is a collection of photographs by Western artists who depicted a “misleadingly peaceful view of a brutal occupation”[^97] by Israel in Palestine. Given the aforementioned history of Orientalist

[^95]: The *tashahhud* is the portion of Muslim prayer in which the believer “renews their intention in prayer as being for God alone” and acknowledges the blessings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Nora Zaki, “A Thick Description of Islamic Ritual Prayer,” 9, accessed February 26, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/25968956/A_thick_description_of_Islamic_ritual_prayer.


landscape photography, the purpose of this exhibition is “to reclaim the genre of landscape photography from its colonialist and Orientalist origins and to allow photographers from the region to tell their home countries’ stories as they see them.” Although, museums that have chosen to exhibit Alofi’s photography series—and series with similar anti-Orientalist aims—have been small and largely only locally known as well as primarily based in the Middle East. Thus, so far, mainstream museums have not legitimized Alofi’s work in an act that would condone the anti-Orientalist sentiments and Islamic representations it comprises.

These case studies of Ajlan Gharem and Moath Alofi present artistic representations of the mosque with two vastly different media, interpretations, and motivations. Gharem’s chain-link mosque is provocative and capitalizes on deeply embedded Orientalist and Islamophobic perceptions of Islam, arguably using this violent imagery in an act of self-Orientalization that immediately draws attention to his work. In contrast, Alofi’s photographic portrayal of sacred spaces relays an appreciation for religious and cultural heritage that does not draw on Orientalist ideologies or Western perceptions of Islam to convey its message. As such, Alofi’s work challenges Orientalist legacies and maintains artistic integrity by enabling the mosques and the cultures to represent themselves, whereas Gharem’s work lacks integrity in its utilization of Western bias and caters to Western expectations while consequently removing agency from the religion and cultures his work represents. The following theme of calligraphy further explores another example of contemporary artistic interactions with Orientalist ideologies.

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Arabic Calligraphy

This category includes Arabic calligraphy, texts, and fonts, as well as the ornamentation styles associated with them, such as arabesque patterns. Historically, these ornamentations would be used to illuminate borders of Qur’anic manuscripts, including floral and geometric ornamentation design, each encompassing its own spiritual connotations and significance. These elements would also embellish non-religious objects like the ceramics, weapons, and rugs of the Islamicate world. Anthony Welch, professor of Islamic art, notes that throughout the history of Islam, “Arabic script has been the foremost symbol of the Muslim world […] and… forms of the Arabic script [have] permeated almost all areas of the culture.”99 Welch also acknowledges that “there is a close relationship between Islam and the Arabic script.”100 Specifically, Arabic is the language of the Qur’an and therefore holds such importance because it is the language of Islamic worship; if the Qur’an is recited or read in any other language, it is no longer formal worship. Thus, Arabic script and surrounding ornamentation have deep historical connections to the religion and cultures of Islam.

Contemporary artists use calligraphic fonts and ornamentations as visual markers of the Islamic faith in their artworks similar to the ornamentation in Orientalist paintings discussed in chapter 2, such as Jean-Léon Gérôme’s The Snake Charmer (1879). The case study discussed in chapter 4 of Jamelie Hassan and her use of calligraphy in The Copyist to depict life in modern Islamic societies illustrates the continued relevance of Arabic calligraphy as a representation of Islamic cultures. In modern times, Arabic calligraphy has taken on negative connotations and associations, particularly of a direct link to Islam, in the imagination of those in the West. Author

100. Anthony Welch, “Islamic Calligraphy,” 158.
Sufyan bin Uzayr observes that “in the United States, a common manifestation of Islamophobia is an adverse reaction to the Arabic language.” As one of example of this, a teacher in Virginia assigned homework asking students to copy some Arabic calligraphy, and the assignment was immediately met with an angry backlash from parents who “felt it was an attempt to convert their kids to Islam.” Arabic script is strongly associated with Islam and Middle Eastern cultures, and Islamic artists continue to build on its use in art throughout Islamic history. Working within the theme of calligraphy can be a powerful tool for representing Islamic cultures, and the following case study of Nasser Al Salem explores representations by depicting cultural and religious norms and meanings that are different from Western expectations and stereotypes.

**Nasser Al Salem (Saudi Arabia)**

Born in Mecca, Nasser Al Salem currently resides in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Al Salem’s art focuses on the Arabic script, making him both an artist and a calligrapher. Al Salem “pushes the boundaries of this age-old Islamic art by re-inventing it in non-conventional mixed media forms and by exploring its conceptual potential.” Although Al Salem follows the tradition of calligraphy in that his art is devotional in nature, “his artworks shed light on verses and concepts

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103. Arabic script is often at the centre of cases regarding potential cultural appropriation. In 2019, there was backlash against Nike from some Muslim communities for its shoe design that included a logo at the bottom that some perceive to include the word “Allah” in Arabic script. Nike has argued any resemblance is unintentional and coincidental, but this case shows the strong connection between even Arabic-looking script and Islam/the Middle East for Muslims as well as non-Muslims. See Lindsay Lowe, “Nike Air Max Shoe Logo Called ‘Offensive’ to Muslims for Allah-like Design,” *Today*, January 29, 2019, [https://www.today.com/style/nike-air-max-shoe-logo-called-offensive-muslims-allah-like-design-t147626](https://www.today.com/style/nike-air-max-shoe-logo-called-offensive-muslims-allah-like-design-t147626).
that lie outside the mainstream.”  

Al Salem’s artwork is well-known, and he has produced multiple works of art that have been displayed globally.

Al Salem’s And What If the Circle Disappeared (2015) (Figure 56) is an artistic “study on the use of the circle throughout history in relation to traditions of calligraphy.” This calligraphic work on silkscreen print questions what the effect would be on Islamic cultures if the circle never existed. As in Islam, the circle is implemented as a mechanism for “social ordering,” the artist uses calligraphy “as a vehicle for exploring social and religious questions.” Al Salem also explores philosophical questions regarding religion, society, and life in his calligraphic work entitled Guide Us upon the Straight Path (2013) (Figure 57). It is a mixed media work comprised of a 15-second video on a medical screen, accompanied by the ECG printout on paper in Arabic calligraphic style. This work, quoting from the Qur’an 1:6, depicts calligraphy in the shape of a heartbeat as shown on a heartbeat monitor. One interpretation of this work is that “the use of the heartbeat resonates with the knowledge that whilst we have life, we can ask for guidance and forgiveness until that very heartbeat is extinguished.” The artist utilizes contrasting colours of light and dark to convey an emphasis on critical life choices we face as we strive to follow the Straight Path. The use of calligraphy and the selection of the Qur’anic verse in this piece stand in stark contrast to Abdulnasser Gharem’s Message/Messenger artwork discussed in chapter 4. Specifically, Al Salem’s work relays the message of the continued relevance of being guided by God in modern life, while

105. “Nasser Al Salem,” Edge of Arabia, para. 5.
Gharem’s piece uses the same verse as decoration on a trap-like dome to suggest religion—Islam in particular—as oppressive. Thus, these works use the same verse but to vastly different effect, with Abdulnasser Gharem’s work conveying the idea that Islam is a trap to be escaped from and Al Salem’s work celebrating the opportunity to call on God for guidance and clarity. Al Salem uses the contemporary concept of the heartbeat monitor as a modern angle on familiar religious ideas. He accomplishes this without leaning on Western constructs to convey his message.

Figure 56. And What If the Circle Disappeared. Silkscreen print: Nasser Al Salem, 2015. Art Basel from Athr.  

In these examples of Al Salem’s work, he uses what could be understood as traditional Islamic themes of Arabic calligraphy to represent Islamic cultures with a contemporary spin. He does not use the script to evoke associations with terrorism, as we saw in Sandow Birk’s American version of Arabic in chapter 4 and with Shirin Neshat’s Farsi (presumed by Western audiences to be Arabic but in fact Farsi) in relation to violence. He does not use imagery connected with Orientalist or modern Islamophobic themes; in fact, his work does not overtly express any relation to Western concepts or cultures at all. Instead, these works stand on their own, acting as representations of Islamic religion and cultures that are independent from outside influence or considerations. Art historian Lina Kattan observes that while contemporary Saudi art is characterized by “the high-level of conceptuality and the noticeable influence of Western art techniques, Al Salem has always been interested in the conceptuality of the Arabic alphabet and its compositional configuration.” As such, Kattan asserts that his “reliance on Arabic

script continues to affirm his Saudi cultural heritage and Islamic Identity.”

His art is “innovative, dynamic, and challenging to modern-day stereotypes,” and it celebrates Arabic language and cultural heritage while also striving to correct misrepresentation in Islamic arts. The artist states, “[I] hope that my messages have a spiritual or historical significance for everyone.”

Al Salem’s refusal to rely on Western constructs to define his art presents an inherent challenge to “othering” and Orientalism—it seeks to solely reflect and express “self.”

Significantly, Al Salem’s artwork has become world-renowned on its own merit, without using Orientalist tropes to gain the art world’s acceptance. For example, his work *Zamzam* (2010) was featured and ultimately acquired by the British Museum. *Zamzam* (often translated as “stop flowing”) has religious and cultural significance in Saudi Arabia and the broader Muslim world. Zamzam is a well inside the Great Mosque of Mecca, with origins dating back to Abraham and provided by God as sacred, life-giving water in the surrounding desert. Al Salem’s work *Zamzam* “echoes universal ways of reading” in its design to be read from all directions. In 2019, Al Salem celebrated his first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom at the Delfina Foundation in London. LACMA exhibited *Guide Us upon the Straight Path* (2013) as well as *God Is Alive, He Shall Not Die* (2012) (Figure 58). His work has also been displayed in numerous exhibitions at Saudi Arabia’s Athr Gallery, such as *And It Remains* (2012). He has also been featured in the Edge of Arabia (2014–2019) tour throughout the United States. He was even shortlisted in 2013 for the Victoria and Albert Museum’s prestigious Jameel Prize, which is

114. Lina M. Kattan, “Sustaining Cultural Identity, 211.
“an international award for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition.”¹¹⁹ This global display of Al Salem’s art demonstrates his popularity and acceptance within the contemporary art world. As gatekeepers to the art world, museums’ acceptance of this work represents an important step in legitimizing Islamic arts as expression of self rather than reflection of other and in challenging Orientalist tropes that often dominate Islamic arts.

Figure 58. *God Is Alive, He Shall Not Die*. Neon in infinity box: Nasser Al Salem, 2012. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.¹²⁰

In consideration of self-Orientalizing tendencies among Islamic-context artists, Al Salem presents a productive case. As an artist who has exhibited widely and achieved some internationally acclaim, profit is once more an element in this case. In terms of offense, there has

been no backlash against his art and no accusations or criticism related to cultural appropriation. With acclaim and exhibitions in both Muslim-majority countries and Western countries, there is no clear power imbalance here; Al Salem is an “insider,” who is not representing Western notions of Islamic cultures or identities in his work. In fact, the artist explicitly states that he intends his work to have meaning for everyone.\textsuperscript{121} Al Salem exhibits knowledge of his subject matter, through a recognition of its religious meaning and cultural importance and dedication to researching the topics he explores in his work.\textsuperscript{122} Moreover, the artist states, “I feel a much greater sense of responsibility in the significance of the messages that I impart. I consider myself an ambassador for my country.”\textsuperscript{123} Al Salem displays a strong recognition for the role he plays as a cultural insider, and his work expresses themes and ideals with cultural and religious value that do not seek outside, Western definition. Thus, his art is subversive and pushes back against self-appropriating and self-Orientalizing tendencies.

**The Veil, Mosque, and Calligraphy Used as Subversion and Submission**

The case studies of Colleen Wolstenholme, Ajlan Gharem, Moath Alofi, and Nasser Al Salem examined in this chapter have explored how contemporary artists continue to use culturally relevant and recognizable Islamic themes of the veil, the mosque, and calligraphy in their art. All of these artists have referenced some version of improving cultural understanding, making anti-colonial statements, provoking reflection on Islamophobia or creating dialogue about gender as part of their motivation for their artwork. However, intent does not always match outcome as the

\textsuperscript{121} “Nasser Al Salem,” Edge of Arabia, description.
discussion on artistic responsibility further explores below. Many of these artists have created art that utilizes and reinforces Orientalist ideologies rather than challenging them. For instance, Wolstenholme’s Western feminist work portrays Muslim women as oppressed—feeding into Orientalist tropes of reducing Muslim and racialized women to one-dimensional beings, while it also feeds into the stereotype of women as victims who need saving. Her depiction of Muslim women as veiled, one-dimensional figures the size of children seems to replicate Orientalist tropes that represent Muslim women as oppressed and exotic. Their bodies are covered, concealing them and making them appear mysterious, and the women are turned away from one another, appearing as helpless victims with no one to reach out to for salvation. They are the mysterious, unknowable victims so familiar to Western (and non-Western) audiences from Orientalist paintings, ingrained Orientalist ideologies, and pervasive Islamophobia. Similar to Neshat’s veiled, hostile women and Birk’s American Qur’an, Wolstenholme uses politically charged, familiar imagery and perceptions to create intrigue.

Further, Ajlan Gharem’s use of a chain-link mosque to create a space for cultural dialogue and reflection recalls associations between Islam and prisons and serves to confirm Islamophobic perceptions. Incorporating chain-link material and structure into a representation of a sacred, culturally meaningful space expresses Western perceptions of Islam as oppressive. In using imagery with multilayered symbols, including oppression, feeling trapped, being imprisoned, being unclean, poverty, victimhood, helplessness, and many other potential interpretations, Ajlan Gharem recalls Orientalist tropes of Muslims as helpless, backward, primitive, and “other.” In doing so, he both draws from Orientalist ideologies and reaffirms them. Implied by Ajlan Gharem through the representation and his aforementioned statements, the people in the mosque are trapped, helpless, and worse than that, they have walked into the
cage of their own will. Like the Arabs in Orientalist paintings, they choose their own ruin, trapped in a backward society and religion with no hope of escape. As a cultural insider and Muslim, Ajlan Gharem confirms these misperceptions for Western audiences, utilizing Orientalist imagery to create intrigue and provoke, and he perpetuates Orientalist ideologies in the process.

In the other case studies, Alofi and Al Salem refrain from using symbols that are often connected with Orientalism or Islamophobic imagery. Thus, these artists produce art that challenges Orientalism and stands on its own as an expression of Islamic cultures and identities. Alofi uses photography, just as Neshat does, to capture aspects of culture and society, but he uses this medium very differently. While Neshat uses Orientalist imagery, such as veiling and violence, and creates art that strongly resembles Orientalist photography series, Alofi does not use Orientalist imagery or tropes to convey his message. Instead, he captures the essence of musalas in their place of origin, celebrating their cultural significance. While it could be argued that both artists create art that is subversive, Alofi’s representations evoke a sense of pride and a call to reclaim culture, whereas Neshat’s representations evoke pity and fear. Alofi’s choice to not use Orientalist imagery may make his art less marketable, but it enables Islamic cultures to represent themselves free from Western preconceptions and framing. Moreover, Al Salem’s calligraphy work makes his art recognizable as “Islamic,” as the script is legible unless explicitly intended not to be—unlike Neshat’s—and it makes its own statements and questions surrounding cultural and religious meaning without incorporating Orientalist tropes to make its point. Al Salem’s art innovates with modern methods and designs, but it asks questions and provokes conversations of its own accord, related to the continuing significance of linguistic and cultural Islamic traditions along with the meaning of life choices in relation to religion, and not relying
on Orientalist, Western-biased understandings of Islamic identities and cultures as its frame of reference. In doing so, the art would not necessarily lead Western audiences to critique or contemplate the perceived shortcomings of Islamic cultures at all; rather, by not marking his art as other through familiar stereotypical tropes, in a symbolic sense, the artist removes the “Islamic” label from his art, allowing it to represent itself as exactly what it is—art. It may be art stemming from a specific cultural perspective and commenting on issues of particular cultures, but the audience is free to interpret without imposed symbols and imagery that immediately lead to stereotyping and “othering.” Undeniably, art is subjective, and as discussed in the case studies, these works can be interpreted in a variety of ways. But it is that very subjectivity that necessitates that artists take a step back from their work and reflect on potential interpretations and impacts that might be counter to their intentions. As such, I turn to exploring the extent to which artists have a responsibility to be accurate and intentional and to create with integrity when representing culture in their art.

Artistic Responsibility and Personal Gains

The case studies analyzed in this chapter (Colleen Wolstenholme, Ajlan Gharem, Moath Alofi, and Nasser Al Salem) as well as in chapter 4 (Sandow Birk, M.C. Escher, Abdulnasser Gharem, Shirin Neshat, Jamelie Hassan, and Sarah Al Abdali) have shown that artistic representations of culture can often be problematic and complex to navigate, which then raises the following questions: Do artists have a responsibility to consider the ramifications of their art on cultural representation? Or is art first and foremost a commodity, and as such, should artists primarily be concerned with creating a product that will sell and bring them acclaim? What is the role of art as social or cultural commentary? What is the role and authority of the artist? I further unpack this
issue below by discussing differing viewpoints on the debate regarding artistic responsibility and personal gains. I have split this discussion into two sections. The first section explores the issue of artistic responsibility, while the second engages the issue of personal gains. Both sections provide a general overview of each issue in the wider art world before delving into the specifics of responsibility and personal gains as they relate to Islamic arts. Before I begin this exploration, I must acknowledge that this discussion on artistic responsibility, personal gains, and free speech in particular is a vast topic with wide-ranging scholarship. The aim of this section—and this study more broadly—is not to comprehensively cover these issues and arrive at conclusive answers; rather, its objective is to introduce these conversations within the broader context of the discussed case studies to further unsettle interactions between artistic intent, production, and responsibility, particularly as these relate to Islamic art production.

Arguments Surrounding Artistic Responsibility

Artists hold an important position in society as storytellers of culture and society, and at times as moral agents, social justice advocates, and reflectors or challengers of societal views and norms. Throughout history, they have created art that reflects values, politics, and day-to-day realities of the societies they represent in their work. I only reference a couple of examples, as instances of these interactions are extensive. Pablo Picasso’s (d. 1973) *Guernica* (1937) (Figure 59) comments on the horrors of war and the destruction of the lives of ordinary people in the context of the Spanish Civil War, drawing further attention to the suffering of civilians and reflecting their pain.\(^\text{124}\) In a similar protest, Francisco Goya’s (d. 1828) *Disasters of War* (1810–1820)

\(^{124}\) Ian Patterson, *Guernica and Total War* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007).
(Figure 60) print series comments on the horrors of early 19th-century violence in Europe.\footnote{125} More recently, American visual artist Barbara Kruger, practicing since the 1980s, has used photography to comment on the issues of modern consumerism, identity, power, and sexuality.\footnote{126} Abdulnasser Gharem, Ajlan Gharem, Shirin Neshat, Sarah Al Abdali, Nasser Al Salem, Colleen Wolstenholme, and Jamelie Hassan also produce artworks that reflect and comment on societal issues. When we study history, we often use art in the form of painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, music, and so on to understand a society’s culture, religion, and what may have been meaningful to those living within that society. In short, art tells the story of a people and gives us a glimpse into how they lived and why, but it also provides alternative narratives and offers speculative futures of hope.\footnote{127} This is not just a historical endeavour. As we saw with Middle Eastern empires in chapter 1, societies often used art in their own time to display dominance, cultural prowess or to convey to other cultures who they are and what values they hold. Art is a cultural exchange, a conversation among different societies. So, it would seem reasonable to expect artists to bear responsibility when representing cultures.

\footnote{127}{Afrofuturistic art is one example of artistic attempts at imagining potential futures and alternative histories. This art examines relationships between history, science, science fiction, and technology, expressing African diasporic communities’ ingenuity, evolution, and self-definition. For more information on Afrofuturism, see Ytasha L. Womack, Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013).}
Philosopher Camillo Mac Bica argues that artists have a moral duty to avoid “artistic endeavors which exploit, oppress, and abuse human beings.” In the most direct sense, this relates to the question of whether photographers and journalists have a responsibility to prevent

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harm they might be observing, for example, during war; morally, do they take the picture documenting violence or attempt to save the victim? Unless artists are directly oppressing humans, as in the Orientalist photography series in which photographers were complicit in the French government’s forced unveiling of women, there is some grey area for debate regarding that moral duty. It could also be argued, for example, that artists who portray societies or individuals in stereotypical or prejudiced ways are facilitating oppression indirectly by reproducing those images for an audience to consume. Art inspires, and in extreme circumstances, it is plausible that derogatory art or art that promotes negative associations could even lead to hate crimes. Mac Bica contends that artists have a responsibility to educate themselves so that they can participate in social and political engagement from an informed position. Similarly, artist Nina Fraser believes that “artists are responsible for unearthing the truth.” In part, artists are interpreters of lived reality, and they identify nuanced and complex experiences that may be hidden or marginalized by mainstream views and relay meaning back to the world. Conversely, cultural populists, who have recently been critiqued for—among other things—their narrow, simplified analysis, view the artist as “minimally responsible for determining the impact of their work,” as their art is simply a reflection of “struggles over meaning and representation within various groups in society.” Connections between cultural populism and capitalism will be further discussed in the section below on personal gains. Some scholars point out that it is not the artist alone that is responsible for representation; rather, they

133. Cultural populists are perceived as promoting cultural division and exploitation for personal gain, as defined and explored in Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992).
are involved in “a complex set of dynamics between audience expectations and shifting identifications.” However, a focus on audience expectations neglects to recognize the role of the artist in also shaping expectations and identifications. Instead, artists should be encouraged “to confront the range of social roles they may be expected to fulfill” so as to prevent the fomentation of “the role of the arts in social and cultural reproduction and oppression.”

When considering cultural representation in art and the debate surrounding cultural representation, the concept of artistic responsibility reveals multiple complexities. Writer Oscar Schwartz describes how artists have “used appropriation to challenge traditional notions of originality and often approached art as an ethically weightless space, where transgressive ideas could be explored without consequence.” This aligns with analysis in chapter 4 of Neshat’s use of untranslated Farsi and veiled women with guns, recalling familiar stereotypes without regard for consequence. The description also parallels Birk’s use of sacred text in *American Qur’an* to explore cultural differences, and Abdulnasser Gharem and Ajlan Gharem’s use of Islamic religious symbolism in provocative, offensive ways under the premise of sparking cultural exchanges. As Schwartz alludes to, these artists may very well be intending to challenge norms and ideas, but their methods, imagery, and depictions evoke interpretations that act counter to that presumed intention. And, as discussed in chapter 3, due to the power dynamics involved in museum spaces and choices of display, artists often have motivations for these portrayals that are outside those of pure artistic expression, such as career and acclaim. As described by Schwartz, writer Maisha Johnson further defines this issue, explaining that through

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cultural appropriation, “the artist perpetuates an unjust power dynamic through their creative practice,” and that artists are in a position to “profit from what they take while the oppressed group gets nothing.” Schwartz argues that artists have a moral obligation to cultural sensitivity and acknowledgement that art is produced within a certain social context. Some scholars, such as Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández, have articulated that artists are in a position to cross institutional boundaries, and as such, their role is “to challenge institutional boundaries operating in abstract ways.” Moreover, describing his discussions with Indonesian artist Abdul Djalil Pirous, anthropologist Kenneth George explores “the relationship between the artist and his audience as mediated by a painting; and [...] the artist’s effort to align his art and the way that he has lived with God’s will.” He argues that “No society, no religion, is without visual culture, and so we should expect everyday ethics and ethical life to be caught up in the visual,” suggesting that ethics are involved in artistic endeavours. As such, artists have an ethical responsibility to consider the impacts of their art. These assertions acknowledge that artists are in a unique position of privilege, and as conveyers, interpreters, and challengers of culture and society, they have an obligation to confront stereotypes and challenge prevailing misconceptions and representations.

There are multiple philosophical debates surrounding the issue of artistic responsibility, and this study’s analysis of selected case studies supports an emphasis on artistic intentionality. An important part of the creative process is determination of intentions for the work and then the

execution of producing art that aligns with those intentions.\textsuperscript{147} Still, as philosophy professor K.E. Gover observes, artists are often unaware of the meaning of their work until it is finished.\textsuperscript{148} Upon completion, however, the artist should plausibly have a full understanding of their intention in creating the piece and the meanings it holds, and in putting their art out into the world, they give it their stamp of approval. Art professor Carol Becker argues that when an artwork’s reception is controversial and has implications for issues of racism and other social issues, its meaning and the artist’s responsibility must be considered within the context of our world and its social climate; in failing to comment on a work’s controversy or negative impacts, the artist becomes complicit in those impacts.\textsuperscript{149} Chapter 4’s discussion of Neshat’s refusal to acknowledge the Orientalist ideologies potentially conveyed and perpetuated by Women of Allah is an example of this complicity.

Aside from the complexities of intentionality and reception, we must also consider artistic responsibility as it relates to the concept of free speech. For example, writer and artist Elizabeth Badurina argues that artists do not “have a social responsibility to please the public's sense of right and wrong when writing, creating or otherwise expressing [themselves].”\textsuperscript{150} She suggests that art captures a moment and a feeling for an individual or society, and whether the concepts involved are negative, positive or otherwise, artists have the right to freely express their creativity without censorship or redress; rather, it is society’s responsibility to educate the public.\textsuperscript{151} However, are there or should there be limits to free speech in art? Carole Baker argues

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\textsuperscript{148} K. E. Gover, Art and Authority.
\textsuperscript{151} Elizabeth Badurina, “The Arts & Social Responsibility.”
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that “human expression can only be free when it does not deny its own humanity,”\(^\text{152}\) and denial of ethics can quickly turn “‘freedom’ into tyranny.”\(^\text{153}\) Some art instructors argue that free speech and expression do have limits and suggest that artists need to learn to be responsible to the communities and cultures in which they live and to be sensitive to members of their audience.\(^\text{154}\) Perhaps free speech is not a sufficient justification for all offensive art or art that misrepresents in ways that could condone further oppression or marginalization of sensitive groups. It is an important aspect of artistic creation, but its use as a catchall excuse for work that is harmful or insensitive sets a precedent that could potentially damage the integrity of art by tainting the field with shock-value works that manufacture controversy for fame.

This debate surrounding the importance of artistic responsibility holds significant implications for Islamic arts. In a blatant example of artistic irresponsibility, the Danish *Bomb in a Turban* (2005) cartoon, which depicts the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in a turban shaped like a bomb, sparked enormous backlash from Muslim communities, with reactions ranging from hurt and offense to outrage.\(^\text{155}\) Although this cartoon is unlikely to be considered an example of Islamic arts in terms of acceptance by the art world, it is certainly art that impacts Muslims. Baker observes that reactions

reflected the pain of a community whose shared imagination—their identity—had been utterly dismissed, and the pain was only compounded by the subsequent defense of this dismissal by appeals to the cartoonist’s and publisher’s freedom of speech.\(^\text{156}\)


\(^{153}\) Carole Baker, “Must We Mean What We Make?” 1.


\(^{155}\) Carole Baker, “Must We Mean What We Make?”

\(^{156}\) Carole Baker, “Must We Mean What We Make?” 9.
This depiction reflects Orientalist tropes of Islamic cultures as violent and uncivilized and reproduces Islamophobic stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists. The artist shows a lack of responsibility in their representation of Islamic culture and identity, and in doing so, sparked profound hurt and horrific violence.\(^{157}\) Notably, these cartoons are lacking in artistic merit and only received attention because they depicted the Prophet Muhammad as a means to provoke and incite controversy, and perhaps elicit some publicity. As always, there are multiple interpretations of art, and these cartoons serve as a prime example. As a response to the controversy, protests, and violence the images elicited, the editors who chose to publish the images in the notoriously conservative *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper explained that the images were intended as a satirical comment on free speech and censorship related to depictions of the Prophet Muhammad.\(^{158}\) Although an argument can be made that the images provide a satirical take on extremist Muslim destruction of images and censorship of figural expressions, the hate speech element of these images is undeniable; the content of the images is Islamophobic, particularly in the context of the post-9/11 anti-Islamic atmosphere in the West.\(^{159}\) Although these details and analyses are certainly not exhaustive, this example demonstrates that free speech can and should have limits in consideration of intent to harm and actual outcomes of harm, while debate about when free speech crosses the threshold into hate speech is a tenuous and debated discourse.\(^{160}\) In contrast to this harmful representation of Islam as violent and


oppressive, and by proxy, of Muslims as violent terrorists, Nasser Al Salem, whose art we explored earlier in this chapter, explains that rigorous research into religious messages and texts is his responsibility, and he is proud to “introduce new concepts—religious and social”\(^{161}\) to his audience. As discussed in chapter 4, artist Jamelie Hassan also perceives that artists have a responsibility to address critical contemporary issues, and she commonly uses art to engage in social activism related to important issues in Islamic societies.\(^{162}\)

In addition to Islamic artists acknowledging social responsibility in cultural representation, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s decision to transform its Islamic arts gallery ten years after 9/11 indicates an acknowledgement of responsibility taken by an art institution as well. The museum pursued this change in a self-expression of responsibility to “humanize” Islamic societies—a reflection of accordance with philosophical notions of social responsibility as well as a reaction to postcolonial politics.\(^{163}\) Curators of the museum have explained that the aim of this renovation was “to educate the public on a foreign culture”\(^{164}\) in an attempt to challenge existing stereotypes and provide a more accurate representation of Islamic culture and identity.\(^{165}\) Although the success of this renovation is debatable, it does represent an institutional acknowledgement of responsibility to accurately reflect and educate the public on Islamic cultures. The case studies discussed in this chapter have illuminated how intended or unintended associations with Islamic cultural representation can play into or challenge deep-rooted Orientalist thinking. The example of the Danish cartoon reveals the very real impact of

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artistically irresponsible representations on Islamic societies and Muslim people. In a similar vein, Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) provides a comparable example of questions regarding artistic responsibility, intent, and free speech. This fictional novel is about two Indian-born Muslim men living in England, who become victims of a terrorist plane hijacking; the novel involves sub-plots of dreams and visions in which characters are transformed into an angel and the devil, among other religiously centred experiences.166 The provocative title itself is considered by many Muslims to be heretical and blasphemous.167 It is a reference to an alleged Qur’anic verse, which was withdrawn and does not form part of the Qur’an, in which the Prophet Muhammad references three pre-Islamic goddesses. This controversial revelation was later interpreted to be relayed to the Prophet Muhammad by the Devil.168

In Muslim-majority countries in particular, the fictional novel—based on real religious principles and historical circumstances—provides an alternative history of Islam and the life of a character based on the Prophet Muhammad.169 Rushdie expresses his intent as a commentary on migration and the hybrid identities of immigrants in Europe, and he defends his literature on the basis of free speech and an argument against the taboos of commenting on Islam and its historical contexts.170 He argues that the book is not religious in nature, nor is not about Islam,171 but its publication resulted in widespread bans, protests, and calls for Rushdie’s execution; one

168. In the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula, specifically in Mecca, the Arabs used to pray to three prominent goddesses, Allat (goddess of war), Al-Uzza (goddess of might), and Manat (goddess of fate). The Prophet Muhammad’s referencing of these goddesses was considered to go against the central Islamic principle of monotheism, and the Prophet Muhammad later explained that he had been tricked by the Devil into making statements related to the goddesses. These verses are therefore often referred to as “satanic verses.” For more information, see F.V. Winnett, “The Daughters of Allah,” *The Muslim World* 30, no. 2 (1940): 113–130, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1940.tb00436.x.
call for execution came from Ayatollah Khomeini himself, who issued a fatwa or Islamic legal ruling against Rushdie. These examples—along with many others—depict a complex picture in which artists and art institutions do have some level of accountability when portraying cultures, Islamic or otherwise, as their depictions can reinforce or unsettle stereotypes and constructs, which can translate to real-world actions that impact societies in meaningfully harmful or healing ways.

*Arguments Surrounding Personal Gains*

Although artists do act in some capacity as ambassadors of culture, creating art is also simply how they make a living. Although they are creators, what they create is still a product to be bought and sold. In this way, art is a commodity, and an artist’s success depends on their ability to make a product that will be popular enough to make them money. Moreover, in order to be successful in the wider art world (beyond a local art scene), artists must appease the gatekeepers of that world—the museums and art institutions. To win the opportunity to exhibit their art where it will be seen and they have the chance to profit, artists are compelled to make art that falls within the spectrum of accepted norms and concepts and that satisfies popular taste. Moreover, to gain attention, artists have an interest in creating art that will start conversations. As described above, the Danish cartoon controversy and Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* are examples of art that were intended as provocative, and so received widespread attention and discussion. As such, making art that touches on controversial or sensitive issues can be lucrative. So, given the


173. The controversy surrounding the anti-Semitic nature and intent behind *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) film is another example of complex interactions between intent, free speech, and hate speech. Negative interpretations of the film included blasphemy in the marketing of Jesus’ death and the anti-Semitic undertones of the message, among others. For more information, see Paula Fredriksen, ed., *On the Passion of the Christ* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).
economic considerations that go into art creation, is it fair to expect artists to be burdened by social responsibility? Are institutions also responsible for the art they select and present? And is the public also responsible for the art they expect and the ways in which the audience shapes market demands?

In today’s widespread capitalist economy, it is conceivable that some artists, largely motivated by money and fame, aim to produce artworks that are widely appealing to the public. Artistic value is commonly equated with monetary value, and the notion of celebrity is gaining prominence within the art world. Art researchers point out that “popular art is not art that has attempted and failed to be ‘real’ art but art which operates within the confines of popular,” and as such, “art needs to obey the rules of capitalist system and adapt to the ‘society of spectacle’ in order to keep its accessibility and social relevance.” One role of the artist is that of entertainer, and as with all entertainers, success depends upon growing a fan base. Artists quickly find out that if they do not adhere to current tastes and expectations in their work, they will find it challenging to access the platforms required—in this case, art institutions—to build a fan base. There are exceptions to the rule, as some artists are surely interested only in art for art’s sake, but in the context of this study, those exceptions do not bear consideration as these artists are unlikely to gain enough recognition to become part of cultural conversations. Usually,

then, “the work of artists is part of the cycle in a web of production and consumption.”  

As an example, advertiser and art collector Charles Saatchi’s infamous contemporary art collection and gallery cemented the modern importance of art’s marketability. His prominent position in the contemporary art world, as well as in the stock market, developed the Saatchi brand as an art authority with immense influence. Artists have a strong motivation to conform to Saatchi’s market-based expectations, as artists affiliated with Saatchi and his collection have “started earning enormous sums, rising to the status of pop stars.” Congruent with this market-based reality, cultural populists—as previously referenced—argue that if artists do not produce art that conforms to the audience’s representational expectations, they are not able to engage “in the process of mass consumption.” Ultimately, the audience chooses which artists accurately reflect their representations, and consequently, which art is profitable. In this sense, the personal gains motivation is arguably not always negative; rather, the motivation to create art for the public interest might encourage artists to make artwork that inspires cultural discussions that could spark greater understanding through social dialogue. Therefore, while the motivation for personal gains creates an environment in which artists are likely to fall prey to popular stereotyping, I acknowledge that even resulting problematic cultural representations have the potential to facilitate increased awareness of underlying prejudice.

In terms of Islamic arts, the issue of personal gains is important because the public’s “preferences, likes and needs are vastly influenced and manipulated by the mass media and marketing.”183 Case studies throughout this chapter and chapter 4 have provided examples of how artists in the Islamic arts field can find success and establish celebrity by producing art with themes that are publicly popular. Abdulnasser Gharem’s *Message/Messenger* sold for nearly a million dollars—he directly profited from using Orientalist tropes familiar to and popular with Western audiences, portraying Islam as a trap. Similarly, Shirin Neshat earned widespread recognition and international fame from her portrayal of veiled Muslim women holding weapons in *Women of Allah* (1994). Western artists Collen Wolstenholme and Sandow Birk have also benefitted from their stereotypical portrayals of Islamic cultures. Although art institutions are making greater efforts to decolonize art, artists are still benefitting from creating art that utilizes enduring themes of Orientalism and contemporary Islamophobia, which portray Muslims in negative ways.

Western audiences—as well as Middle Eastern audiences, through global popular culture and media portrayals reinforcing Western-centric notions of their identity—have been indoctrinated with stereotypes of Islamic cultures. It can be read that these artists are willingly participating in representing and disseminating these tropes for personal and commercial gains, as they are acutely aware of the art world’s tastes and colonial desires and know that only certain kinds of representative art practices of/from the Middle East will most likely be displayed and praised. This is because many local and national galleries act as “gatekeepers,” personally determining what gets exported to the West in biennials or international exhibitions and what is worthy of extra-national and global attention. Art is how artists make a living, and it is in their

best interest to create art that will sell. Even when artists aim to challenge Orientalist tropes and stereotypes, financial gain is almost always a consideration. The necessity to consider if art will sell inevitably results in depictions of Islamic cultures and identities that hold contemporary relevance. Society determines that relevance, and currently, with Western art institutions acting as the gatekeepers of the art world, audiences influencing the demands of the market continue to confirm that Islamophobic representations in art are not only relevant, but expected and lucrative.

**Conclusion**

Orientalism, as biased perceptions of “othering” that stem from colonial and imperial histories, is a deeply ingrained societal framework that continues to permeate representations of Islam and Muslim cultures and identities in art. Contemporary artists producing art related to Islamic religion and cultures continue to use themes of the veil, the mosque, and calligraphy that are integral to Islamic cultures. Building on these historically rooted cultural themes, artists have the opportunity to challenge Orientalist tropes that endure and shape perceptions of Middle Eastern cultures and those who identify as Muslim. The case studies of Moath Alofi and Nasser Al Salem exemplify the work of artists who are striving to challenge Orientalist tropes that continue to influence artistic representations of culture in Islamic arts. Though by most interpretations, these artists are successfully conveying a counter-narrative to Orientalist ideologies, art is subjective, and artists are simply not capable of predicting every possible interpretation or outcome of their work. The case studies of Colleen Wolstenholme and Ajlan Gharem demonstrate that even with the best of (stated) intentions, artists can be influenced by deeply embedded Orientalist conceptions and even reflect these in expressions of self-Orientalism.
Deciphering and considering the ways in which Islamic arts can perpetuate Orientalist thinking is important because Islamophobia is a pervasive issue in society. Whether desired or not, artists play a critical role in interpreting culture and reflecting those interpretations back to the public. Through cultural representations in their art, they create a dialogue that can legitimize Islamophobic perceptions or reframe inaccurate perceptions of Islamic identities and cultures. I acknowledge that artists make and sell art for financial benefit; therefore, art is in this sense an undeniable commodity. However, in their roles as storytellers, conveyers of culture, and social commentators, artists have a responsibility not to harm. Free speech has limits, and artists are not immune from those limitations or separate from the humanity they portray. In their positions of power, they have a social responsibility to consider the impacts of their work. No, they cannot control the audience, but they can critically analyze their own work to evaluate their intentions and assess whether the product matches the intent. They can respond to criticism or acknowledge potential misinterpretations or offense when these issues arise. Such responses can, in themselves, create meaningful dialogue. Artistic expression and representation can have real-world consequences, as is observable through the lingering influence of Orientalist portrayals of “Oriental” cultures in contemporary art and perceptions of the “other.” Art is not separate from society, and representations are not benign; the Charlie Hebdo cartoon case is a striking example of how art can inspire people to act, in this case violently. Artists who continue to utilize Orientalist imagery rely on familiar stereotypes that have been ingrained through repetition, as described in the discussion of Orientalism in chapter 2. In doing so, they give these stereotypes their mark of approval, perpetuate them, and solidify them in the minds of spectators, who already view them as an unquestionable matter of fact. Like any other person who makes a harmful statement or uses a platform to spread misinformation or prejudice, artists are
accountable for the messages their art conveys, and as powerful voices of society and its values, they must be held accountable when their art causes potential harm.

My own artmaking has enabled me to reflect on these broader responsibilities as an artist, provoking in me the realization that artists are responsible for the implications of their cultural representations, and that they do have a responsibility as they hold much power. When they are using a culture or elements from that culture to produce and sell art, artists are accountable to that culture and the ways in which their art portrays it. Artists have a platform to be agents of change as well as maintainers of the status quo, and they have an obligation as members of society who are in positions of power to consider the impacts of their art. Representations and misrepresentations of culture can have real-world consequences.
Conclusion

Overview of Study
As a Muslim, Middle Eastern, female artist who grew up in Saudi Arabia and lived in Canada for nearly a decade, I have been privileged with the unique opportunity to view and engage Islamic arts and cultures from both a Middle Eastern and Western perspective. Experiencing a different view of my culture, as represented through art in Canadian museums, prompted my interest in exploring variations in artistic representations of Islamic cultures and identities. My keen awareness of Islamophobia and how that has been presented to me through popular culture and my experiences as a Muslim, an artist, and an art scholar inspired me to investigate the relationship between historical Orientalist tropes and the ways in which they have persisted through modern Islamophobic perceptions that spill over into art and are, in turn, perpetuated through art. Using case study analysis and my own experiences of art across these diverse regions, this study has explored the impacts of Orientalism on contemporary depictions of Islamic cultures, the complexities of cultural representation in museum spaces, the differences in representation of Islamic cultures by Islamic-context artists and non-Islamic-context artists, the roles of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation, and the responsibility of artists to represent culture with integrity. Overall, the study signalled to the complexities of defining “Islamic art” and those who produce it, as well as the extent to which legacies of imperialism and colonialism have produced pervasive and long-lasting ideologies that continue to impact modern representations and perceptions of Islamic cultures and identities. Moreover, by utilizing Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, this study linked imperialist ideologies in common tropes of Orientalist paintings of the 19th and 20th centuries to modern Islamophobic representations—often within gendered constructs—that influence broader society and the art world alike. The study observed
that Orientalist ideologies continue to dominate and define museum spaces, creating a global art culture that encourages artists producing Islamicate art to represent Islamic identities and cultures with culturally appropriative themes that evoke imagery of familiar Western misconceptions and bias. Ultimately, the case study analyses of contemporary Islamic-context and non-Islamic-context artists concluded that artists from diverse contexts are equally susceptible to pressures to culturally appropriate or self-appropriate. Some artists give in to these pressures to access acclaim in the Western-biased art world, but others use their platform and voice as an opportunity to challenge Orientalist ideologies and participate in the decolonization of the Islamic arts field. These varying interpretations and representations of culture signal to the diversity of this field as well as the need to further unpack the continuing impact of Orientalist legacies on art production and the conceptualization of Islamic arts more broadly.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 introduced the history of Islamic arts and the current debates of categorization and ongoing debates about what it means for art to be “Islamic.” It engaged common scholarly interpretations of Islamic arts as being either “secular” or “religious,” capturing how Islamic arts have existed in cultures where such divisions never existed. Through a cursory exploration of Islamic arts and architecture from early Islamic periods, such as the Umayyad, through the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Empires, the chapter demonstrated that Islamic art historically did not exist in binary frames of secular or sacred. This overview of Islamic arts history showed a consistent overlap of religion and culture, for example, in mosques that served—and continue to serve—as religious and cultural spaces for communities to gather. This discussion also revealed how the arts and architecture of the Muslim world incorporate and build from pre-
Islamic, local, Indigenous trends and traditions, using local building materials and styles. For example, the Mughal Empire’s Masjid Wazir Khan Mosque incorporated local South Asian traditions through its representations of cypress trees, following Persian traditions. The chapter also described how contemporary arts draw from historical overlapping cultural and religious styles, themes, and subjects, incorporating meanings and visuals of the current era, as in the example of the Bait Ur Rouf Mosque in Dhaka, Bangladesh, designed as a sacred place that fits modern needs—just as Islamic arts have done throughout their impressive 1,400-year history. These discussions demonstrated that what the global art world conceptualizes as “Islamic art” has been defined by a modern, typically Western, perspective that does not align with the complex reality that this field of art has been ever-changing. Other religious arts, such as “Christian art” and “Jewish art” do not fall prey to the same categorization processes as Islamic arts does. Islamic arts is not always or even predominantly devotional; as Islam spread, it incorporated the artistic traditions of the Indigenous cultures it enveloped. Thus, Islamic art is a unique fusion of culture and religion incompatible with constructs of the contemporary Western art world, as it crosses vast geographies, cultures, languages, and time.

The Western bias in framing Islamic arts is not confined to binary and inapplicable conceptualizations of secular and religious and is further informed by ideologies depicted in Orientalist art, as chapter 2 discussed. Chapter 2 provided an overview of colonial history, showing how legacies of colonialism and imperialism have impacted Western perceptions of Islamic civilizations and peoples as “other.” It went on to describe how these perceptions and related ideologies have influenced modern studies and understandings of “Oriental” societies, prompting scholar Edward Said to develop the theory of Orientalism as a critique of biased tendencies in Oriental Studies produced by European imperialists. The theory of Orientalism
argues that Western scholars—and societies in general—perceive and interpret “Oriental” or as backward, primitive, exotic, and strange. Such understandings of the non-Western world have also provided imperial justifications for invasion and conquest through the perspective that the people of these underdeveloped societies need saving by the European, Christian man. The chapter situated how these Orientalist ideologies and prejudices are then depicted in and perpetuated by Orientalist paintings and photography of the 19th and 20th centuries. Within these paintings, common tropes of representing Middle Eastern societies are portrayed. For example, the “lustful Arab oppressor” trope is depicted in Giulio Rosati’s *Picking the Favorite* (1880); the “inferior Arab” trope is depicted in *An Oriental Bazaar* (1886); the “rich prince” trope is depicted in Gustave Boulanger’s *Le Harem du Palais* (1877); the “terrorist villain” trope is depicted in Delacroix’s *Massacre at Chios* (1824); the “harem women” trope is depicted in Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Grande Odalisque* (1814); and the “oppressed Muslim woman and the exotic unknown trope” is depicted in William Holman Hunt’s *The Lantern Maker’s Courtship* (1854–1857). Discussing these and similar examples of Orientalist paintings, chapter 2 connects the Orientalist tropes in the paintings to the continuation and perpetuation of those ideologies in modern Western popular culture, with examples of stereotyping in movies such as *Abdulla the Great* (1956), *Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *Aladdin* (1992). Modern Islamophobic is then an iteration of Orientalism, which is expressed and perpetuated by Western media. Some examples of these continuing Orientalist ideologies in the media include *National Geographic*’s 1985 “Afghan Girl” campaign and news media headlines like “Lifting the Veil” and “Unveiling Freedom.” Chapter 2 contextualized the persistence of Orientalist ideologies, the aforementioned themes or tropes through which these ideologies are expressed or manifest, and the real-world—often violent—consequences of these legacies. The context
provided in this chapter set the scene for further analysis of Orientalism and Islamophobia in modern society and how these ideologies play out in the contemporary global art world, both in museum spaces and in artistic expressions of Islamic cultures and identities.

Further situating the pervasive influence of Orientalist ideologies in the contemporary art world, chapter 3 provided an overview of museum studies and the need to further decolonize museum spaces. The legacy of colonial looting continues to influence how these spaces perceive and display Islamic arts as well as the art of other cultures. As legitimizing spaces of learning and perceived authorities on culture, through choices of selection and display, museum spaces play an important role in how cultures are both represented and perceived. In this regard, artistic, curatorial, and institutional interventions to display—ones that critically inform viewers of intentionality, site-specificity, or context—can help to bridge differences of interpretation to some degree. While we must acknowledge that an artist’s intentions, like those of the curator or institution, might differ from their resultant display actions, the slippage that occurs between intent and effect can also be revealing. For instance, while a museum’s intention may be to offer the public a different (cultural) perspective than has historically been the norm, or for art to act as a bridge of intercultural understanding, this is more often than not unsuccessful due to the classist and white-centric biases of the art field. “Othering” ideologies of pervasive Orientalism frequently influence museums to display Islamic arts based on inaccurate, Western-biased categorizations in terms of geography and time period. These continued shortcomings reveal the need for further efforts to understand the role of colonial legacies and to decolonize these spaces. Moreover, as gatekeepers to the art world, museum spaces act as external influences on artistic production, creating motivation for artists to appropriate or self-appropriate cultures to align with audience and market expectations. Producing representations of culture that conform to
prevailing (usually Western) preconceptions and stereotypes makes it more likely for artists to be selected for museum space exhibits to access financial benefits and acclaim, and in the field of Islamic arts, this typically means representing cultures through familiar Orientalist tropes.

Although some museums and curators are making attempts to decolonize Islamic arts, one example being the 2006 Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art exhibit entitled “Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking,” in which artworks are displayed together based on aesthetic categories rather than being grouped by geography or secular/religious divisions. This exhibit represents a step in the right direction and provokes questions regarding what other kinds of steps museum spaces can take to further decolonize the field. The British Museum’s Albukhary Gallery provides a display that acknowledges its colonial history by describing how it acquired the objects in the gallery. This is one helpful, simple approach to decolonization that museum spaces can implement to begin acknowledging bias.

In chapter 4, I compared examples of cultural representation among non-Islamic-context artists Sandow Birk and M.C. Escher and Islamic-context artists Abdulnasser Gharem, Shirin Neshat, Jamelie Hassan, and Sarah Al Abdali. Using these categories to compare representations enabled this study’s exploration of the impacts of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation on portrayals of Islamic cultures and identities in art, as well as factors in addition to functioning within or outside of Islamic contexts, such as gender, nationality, and social standing, that might impact choices in cultural representation. Non-Islamic-context artists Sandow Birk and M.C. Escher engage in vastly different types of representations. Birk’s *American Qur’an*, for example, appropriates the primary sacred text of Islam, applying a Western interpretation and engaging in “othering” to make the work understood. In setting out to make a Qur’an that people in the West can understand—though the Qur’an is not meant for a single culture and arguably needs no
nationally based interpretation—he failed to educate himself on the sacred nature and history of the text. In contrast, M.C. Escher studied and gained an appreciation for Islamic architecture and geometric principles. He educated himself on the beauty of these aesthetics and symbols and channelled his appreciation into his own artistic expressions of those elements. Both artists are white, Western, and male, but the difference in their representations of Islamic cultures seems to stem from differing intentions. Birk sought to show how Western and Islamic cultures are similar, thus inherently viewing the cultural exchange from an “othering” perspective and a need to “humanize.” Conversely, Escher intended to show appreciation for Islamic cultures, and he educated himself and sought out Muslim perspectives to clarify religious elements of Islamic arts he did not fully understand. These two case studies suggest that non-Islamic context artists do not necessarily produce similar representations of Islamic cultures and identities; rather, they create varied representations that have the potential to be either culturally appropriative or to show cultural appreciation.

A similar observation came to light in chapter 4’s analysis of Islamic-context artists. Sarah Al Abdali and Abdulnasser Gharem use their art to portray Muslim (Saudi, specifically) cultures in strikingly different ways. Al Abdali’s feminist celebration of Hijazi women’s historic economic and social contributions in *Al Tabariyat* presents Middle Eastern women as strong, valued, and vital to the lives of their communities. It does not rely on or reference Western conceptions of Middle Eastern female identity as oppressed or hypersexualized; it simply represents this group of women as they historically were—important contributors to their society who acted with agency and dignity. As such, Al Abdali does not fall into the trap of self-appropriation in her art. In contrast, Abdulnasser Gharem’s *Message/Messenger* sculpture portrays the religion of Islam as a violent trap. The trapping mechanism of the work combined
with the use of the “Guide us to the Straight Path” Qur’anic verse presents an image of Islamic cultures as oppressive and of Middle Eastern peoples as oppressed, with a tendency towards violence and foolishness. Thus, Gharem’s representational approach and use of Orientalist ideologies of Islamic cultures as backward and violent leads him to self-appropriate and differs from Al Abdali’s approach of cultural autonomy.

However, in comparing Abdulnasser Gharem to Islamic-context artist Shirin Neshat, similar methods of cultural representation are also revealed in this category. Like Gharem’s art, Neshat’s Women of Allah uses familiar stereotypes to represent its subjects, portraying Muslim women as politically rebellious, oppressed, and exotic. Both artists rely on Western-oriented branding—Neshat as an artist in exile and Gharem as a classmate of 9/11 terrorists—to appeal to Western audiences. Both artists use imagery that references imagery or tropes of Orientalist art. Neshat’s women look directly at the audience in the same manner of Orientalist photography series such as Marc Garanger’s Femmes Algériennes (1960); Neshat uses the imagery of Garanger’s defiant subjects to the opposite effect of evoking associations of defiant violence and aggression rather than defiant empowerment. Gharem’s use of imagery that evokes feelings of Islam as a trap or Muslims as terrorists is reminiscent of Orientalist imagery of violent Arabs and Muslims living in oppressive civilizations. Neshat and Gharem use their status as insiders to connect with their audiences and reaffirm limited perceptions of the cultures they represent, and museum spaces globally display their works, legitimizing their cultural representations. Artists Jamelie Hassan and Shirin Neshat are both female, Islamic-context artists who present different representations of Islamic cultures and identities. Hassan’s The Copyist, a feminist work, portrays the contributions of a female calligrapher as a representative of Islamic cultures, whereas Neshat’s Women of Allah portrays Muslim women as violent extremists who have no
voice of their own; the words they want to speak have been inscribed on their skin instead. Hassan’s work depicts a historical scene that enables women and cultures to speak for themselves, while Neshat self-appropriates Western themes of female oppression and Islamic violence, removing her subjects’ voice and letting them be defined by Western norms and expectations. Thus, chapter 4’s comparison of non-Islamic context artists and Islamic-context artists suggested that Western notions of what it means to belong to Islamic cultures has the potential to impact all artists regardless of their religious or cultural affiliation; the pervasive and enduring nature of Orientalist views of Islamic cultures has created conditions under which all artists can fall prey to cultural appropriation or self-appropriation. However, these case studies also demonstrate that religious or cultural affiliation does not bind an artist to particular expressions of artistic representation, as some Islamic-context and non-Islamic-context artists in this study depict Islamic cultures without relying on Western-centric perceptions. In addition to showing that identities are complex and that being an “insider” or “outsider” does not automatically lead to similar cultural representations, these results reveal the long-lasting impact of Orientalist ideologies and their continuing influence on representations of Islamic cultures and identities in contemporary art. These analyses found that Orientalist ideologies are so pervasive that Western and Middle Eastern artists—and presumably audiences—alike can identify with them.

Chapter 5’s case study analysis explored the ways in which, through symbols of the veil, the mosque, and calligraphy, contemporary artists are both utilizing and challenging Orientalist ideologies in their representations of Islamic cultures and identities. Colleen Wolstenholme’s use of the veil as a Western feminist work in Triad exemplifies the utilization of the Orientalist trope of the oppressed Muslim woman and the exotic unknown to represent these other cultures from a
Western frame of reference. Her women are covered, turned away from one another, isolated, hopeless—they need a Western saviour. Additionally, Ajlan Gharem’s representation of Islamic cultures as oppressive and the Islamic faith as a trap in the chain-link mosque of Paradise Has Many Gates shows self-Orientalism at work. His “insider” status legitimizes these representations, perpetuating Orientalist and modern Islamophobic perceptions that Muslims are fools, who willingly walk into Islam’s trap with no hope of escape. Both artists use familiar Orientalist tropes to connect with their audience and draw immediate attention to their art. Conversely, Moath Alofi’s depictions of roadside musalas celebrate Middle Eastern heritage free from the Western gaze, and Nasser Al Salem’s adaptation of traditional Arabic calligraphy to modern styles and representations conveys the dynamic nature of Islamic cultures and artistic expressions—consistent with chapter 1’s discussion of Islamic arts and architecture through history—while also retaining the integrity in their meaning. As a concluding thought on the case studies explored in both chapter 4 and chapter 5, these examples demonstrate that, as they have been historically, contemporary Islamic arts are imbued with overlapping meanings and shifts between secular and sacred; Islamic arts—like the cultures they represent—are dynamic and continue to evolve. Moreover, the case studies in both chapters reveal the pervasive, thriving nature of Orientalist ideologies in our global society and how artists are often compelled to incorporate these ideologies into their art to gain access to the art world. Conversely, many artists have explicit intentions to challenge these unhelpful, prejudiced representations, and many are able to do so successfully.

Chapter 5 also engaged in an important discussion of artistic responsibility and personal gains. The study’s exploration of the interplay between ethics, artists’ social responsibility, the necessities of creating art that will allow artists access to the art world, and considerations of
personal gains reveals the complexities of these issues and the need to engage them further. Art is a commodity and a livelihood, and as such, personal gains cannot be ignored. However, the ways artists represent cultures have a real power to influence audiences’ perceptions of culture and identity, and therefore, they have a social responsibility and accountability in their representations. Sarah Al Abdali’s street art, which critiques the capitalist urbanization of Islamic holy sites, is one example that demonstrates how artists can comment on social issues while upholding their artistic responsibility in cultural representations. This discussion of artistic responsibility also revealed the complexities of disentangling artistic intention with audience interpretation. Although the artist cannot predict how their audience will perceive and understand their work, and therefore accountability to interpretation is questionable, they are accountable to self-reflection, understanding their own intention in creation, and ensuring that their intention is reflected in their art. Moreover, through the examples of the Danish cartoon controversy and Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, this discussion expanded on persisting questions regarding free speech in art, suggesting that free speech has limits and is not a justification for hate speech.

**Significance to Islamic Arts Field**

This exploration of representations of Islamic cultures and identities in contemporary Islamic arts is timely and signals to important gaps in current research. First, it contributes to the field by further problematizing Western-centric definitions of Islamic arts, exploring the imperial and colonial legacies that have facilitated a Western bias in how scholars and practitioners inaccurately conceptualize the field. It responds to Orientalist research, applying postcolonial and feminist theories to further decolonize the art field in general and the field of Islamic arts specifically. Examining histories of colonial looting and how they continue to impact
categorizations of Islamic art—such bias applies to other categories of non-Western art as well—in museum spaces adds to the conversation about the role of museum spaces in decolonizing the field and in increasing inclusion for art and artists that do not conform to prevailing and biased Western standards and expectations. Moreover, it discusses the roles of Orientalism, self-Orientalism, cultural appropriation, and self-appropriation in Islamic arts, showing both how prevalent these practices are as well as how an artist’s cultural or religious affiliations do not necessarily lead to the same types of cultural representation. The study also provides insight into how Western perspectives on Middle Eastern and Muslim cultures and expressions of Islamophobia have permeated these cultures and impacted their own perceptions of self, such as those of being sexually repressed, regressive, and violent. Further, analyzing case studies of artists who have undergone little to no scholarly exploration, such as Sandow Birk, Abdulnasser Gharem, Ajlan Gharem, Sarah Al Abdali, Colleen Wolstenholme, Moath Alofi, and Nasser Al Salem, facilitates greater understanding of the roles of Orientalism and cultural appropriation in contemporary Islamic arts as well as future opportunities to build on this analysis.

Finally, analyzing these issues from my perspective has added a unique voice to this conversation. Significantly, my identity as a Muslim, Saudi, female artist uniquely positions me to use my experiences and reflections of myself as an artist and my own art to consider issues of representation, appropriation, integrity, and artistic responsibility. As one example of my artistic focus and approach, *Visual Verses: From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form* (2013) is a body of work I made upon moving from my hometown of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia to Toronto, Canada in 2011 to begin a graduate program in visual studies. I was interested in the idea of visualizing the Qur’an in ways that moved beyond “traditional” calligraphic depictions and symbolic references, such as those described in greater detail in previous chapters, while
bringing into conversation the religious significance of Qur’anic texts without exploiting them, reducing their teachings, or undermining the sacred cultural modes of representation and rules surrounding aniconism. Through daily explorations with sound techniques and works in my art studio, I came up with a process of visualizing sound waves and transferring them from a sonorous universe to a visual one. This process resulted in an abstracted visual representation of Qur’anic verse, combing modern artistic methods to represent the sacred and cultural meanings.

Through artmaking, I have the opportunity to explore myself and the ways in which my culture is adapting and evolving in the modern world. As I have engaged in this process, I have developed my own understanding of artistic responsibility and the complexities of Islamic cultural representation. I believe close study and self-reflexivity are imperative to artistic integrity and accurate/responsible cultural representations regardless of the maker’s background. My art uses contemporary methods to represent religious principles of Islamic cultures, introspection, and consideration for subjective interpretations. I intentionally avoid Western themes and exterior notions of what it means to be Muslim in my art. Though the motivation for personal gains must not be ignored, artists do have a responsibility as representatives of culture and mediators of cross-cultural dialogue to consider potential subjective interpretations of their work and to question whether those align with their intentions. Through my art, I experience and express spirituality, and in no way do I want that expression to be tainted by inaccurate representations of my culture that feed into Orientalist interpretations of Islamic identity. Through introspection and education, I believe it is possible for artists to both be commercially successful and represent Islamic cultures in ways that challenge Islamophobic prejudice. Thus, my unique position as a cultural “insider” and “outsider,” an academic, and a Saudi visual artist...
adds a new perspective which furthers the discussion of Islamic art from a non-Western perspective.

*Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

This study contains limitations. Primarily, these limitations include the issue of my positionality and the number and types of case studies. As a Saudi, female artist, I have brought my distinct perspective to this study in my analysis of case studies and issues related to Orientalism, Islamophobia, cultural appropriation, and artistic responsibility in Islamic arts. Though I have made efforts to consider a variety of academic opinions and divergent perspectives, incorporation of more voices and perspectives would add weight to this analysis. Even with careful consideration of different interpretations of case studies and the issues explored in this study, my gender, nationality, religion, profession, socioeconomic status, and many other facets of my identity and experience will impact my analysis. I want to reiterate that Middle Eastern cultures or Islamic arts are not monolithic, but diverse and ever evolving. Though I believe my voice brings a critical perspective to this issue, I acknowledge that it is one voice, and that other perspectives are needed to broaden this conversation.

One way to address this singularity in analysis is for future research to incorporate more voices. For example, I suggest that researchers develop their methods by engaging in interview or focus group studies regarding Islamic cultures and arts, with a diverse sample of Muslim and non-Muslim populations and by interviewing artists themselves. These studies should select male and female participants from Islamic contexts and non-Islamic contexts, as well as from artistic and non-artistic backgrounds, and from a variety of Muslim-majority and Western countries. These participants should also be diverse in their socioeconomic backgrounds. Such studies
could present questions regarding Islamic cultures, what types of artistic representations display integrity, represent excellence in execution and merit in conception, or are situated outside Western frames and interpretations of Islamic artworks, and the artists’ responsibility in cultural representations. This research would serve a variety of purposes: to further understand differing viewpoints on Islamic cultures and how art can best represent them, to explore perspectives on artistic responsibility, to better understand how facets of a person’s identity can create different interpretations of art and culture, and to probe the extent to which audience interpretations of art diverge from artists’ intentions. Further clarifying artists’ intentions provides another research opportunity. Expanding on the field visits of this research to a more comprehensive ethnographic exploration, an interview study of the artists included in this study regarding their views on Orientalism and its relationship to their art could elucidate their intentions in terms of cultural representation, which I hope to pursue in future iterations of my scholarship.

Another important limitation of this study involves the case studies themselves. Due to constraints of time and availability of information, I never aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of all contemporary Islamic arts. Rather, the selected case studies provide a few relevant examples of Islamic-context and non-Islamic-context artists. Although these examples are varied, I do believe the number and variety of case studies could be expanded to provide an even more well-rounded analysis and understanding of current trends and impacts of Orientalism, Islamophobia, and cultural appropriation in the field, and this is a helpful opportunity for future research. For instance, a similar future project could consider South Asian or North African Islamic arts. In addition to the number and variety of cases, another limitation of this study is the lack of existence of academic analysis for certain case studies, such as those of Sarah Al Abdali and Moath Alofi. I have addressed this limitation by including case studies, such those of M.C.
Escher, Jamelie Hassan, and Shirin Neshat, who have many academic articles and books written about them. I have also taken this lack of research as an opportunity to add new interpretations of under-researched artists to the scholarship. However, inclusion of more case studies in future research would address this issue further. Another academic artist’s perspective on more contemporary case studies of art would add another useful layer of interpretation.

Finally, I call on future researchers to expand on this study and continue to explore the issues surrounding representation in Islamic arts and decolonizing the art field more broadly. This study has provoked several questions that require further consideration: (1) Who gets to decide what constitutes self-appropriation? (2) In consideration of the complicating elements of cultural appropriation and self-appropriation in the context of Islamic arts, how can artistic integrity be measured? (3) Are artists responsible for considering the impact of their art? (4) Is it ethically acceptable for artists to focus on personal gains, free of social accountability? (5) What steps can curators and other institutional authorities take to further decolonize museum spaces? This study has furthered the conversation surrounding new ways to define and conceptualize Islamic arts, including an Islamicate framework, further decolonization of museum spaces, and resisting Orientalist-based, Islamophobic tropes in contemporary art. It has demonstrated the powerful impact the legacies of Orientalism and colonialism have on contemporary art. Islamophobia, as a modern iteration of Orientalism, influences Islamic arts, and as such, often perpetuates real-world stereotypes with real-world consequences. As artists continue to evaluate their own responsibility and role in society, it is critical that researchers expand this conversation on how to decolonize the arts so that cultures are represented on their own merit and not in terms of what they mean as other to the West. In this way, the art world can lead the way in cultural
dialogue and healing. It has the opportunity to wield its power to challenge Orientalism and Islamophobia instead of acting on their behalf.
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