

METHODS TO GLOBAL ART HISTORIES

MUSEUMS AND THE ISLAMICATE

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Introduction

Current theorizations of modern art reveal the dominance of colonial and imperial epistemological structures within art history: the exclusion of multiple sites of modernity and the entrenchment of binaries that relegate non-western aesthetic languages as offshoots to dominant western art movements. While studies of globalization and diaspora have challenged the authority of nation-state identities and rigid cultural categorization, art histories are still written through centre-periphery models that maintain Euro-American exceptionalism. How, then, can world art histories productively be written in a way that dismantles the centre-periphery binary that maintains such colonial structures?¹ Art history as a discipline is currently undergoing a radical transformation that accounts for transnational connections in the global art world and challenges eurocentric historiographies currently in place.² As art historian Ming Tiampo argues:

Articulating a World Art History is one of the most urgent issues facing art historians today, in both the academy and the museum. However, most attempts face a double bind: ambitious global narratives lack specificity and historical rigor, while precise micro-histories neglect range and the conceptual importance of rethinking larger art historical narratives.³

For any such global narrative to take place, art historians and critics are first faced with unpacking and identifying the baggage associated with the western canon, and the pitfalls associated with the entire system of cultural appraisal. The canon, defined as a body of works traditionally considered to be the most significant and, therefore, the most worthy of study, has been lately theorized as a mechanism of oppression, a guardian of privilege, and a vehicle for exclusion.⁴ As art historian Anna Brzyski states in the introduction to *Partisan Canons*, art history has been structurally committed to the idea of tradition.⁵ Brzyski and fellow contributors question where canons are formed, by whom, and how they are maintained, illuminating that until recently, such questions have largely been ignored and accepted as unproblematic. Within art history, this works side by side with the development of “world art studies”. As Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme argue, it is through a combined

global and multidisciplinary approach that world art studies are creating a new framework in the study of art. John Onians, a professor of art history at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom, first introduced the concept of world art studies in 1996. He suggested that this new field of study be not only global in orientation, but also multidisciplinary in approach.⁶ Within the mapping of world art studies, postcolonial theory can be seen as a useful approach, which is particularly concerned with the impact of colonialism and its aftermath on art and culture.⁷

To problematize and advance these framings, this article is informed by the approaches of comparative transnationalisms, notions of “worlding”,⁸ and the limits of current art historical models. I aim to address the following concerns: what does decolonizing the study and writing of art history look like? How can anti-colonial research be spotlighted, rather than existing as peripheral engagements with dominant (and eurocentric) modes of representation and discourse? Understanding that knowledge production is one of the major sites in which imperialism operates and exercises its power, how can we decolonize the structural limits that currently condition knowledge production? I argue that to globalize is not simply to mention or pay lip service to other locales within the history of art. Globalizing and decentring histories needs to be more integrative, and incorporate fully the histories of multiple locales in order to examine how they speak to one another and engage with each other in terms of their own relationships to power and representation.

I introduce the notion of the *Islamicate*, which I contend is a useful museological and art historical framework, to critique epistemologies of knowledge production and dissemination within museums. As a case study, the Islamicate brings together global narratives and world art studies and is meant to be one instance where world art history as a theoretical and disciplinary shift can be put into praxis, and global studies of art history can then be theorized in its application within both the academy and the museum. Overall, the Islamicate is only one possible case study, and one possible kind of answer to some of the methodological problems facing global art histories. This is a case study rooted in practice, and it has immediate practical implications for the museum and for the academy.⁹

To foreground the need for such methodology,

⁷ As I situate my research within the broader disciplinary literature, I do not ignore that this discussion has already been taking place among Islamic art scholars. The limits of the term ‘Islamic art’ and the questioning of its effectiveness as an artistic category or cultural signifier has been debated within the field. Instead, my research is aligned with scholarship on global art histories and studies on colonial/multiple modernities. I do this purposefully as I find it important to have these methodological debates with the wider discipline and not only between scholars of Islamic art. I position myself with these theories in order to shift the discussion to instead focus on colonial borders, nation-state identities, and the maintenance of colonial boundaries. This is a way of bringing critical race theory in productive dialogue with art history as a discipline, and advancing questions and theorization of Islamic art to account for wider methodological concerns, and not only be confined within the study of Arab, Islamic, or Middle Eastern art.

⁸ Ming Tiampo first introduced me to this term in a public lecture, where she delivered a paper exploring new ways of implementing and developing world art histories. The concept of “worlding” is also inspired by the work of Heidegger, Pheng Cheah’s work on world literature and cosmopolitanism, and Sonal Khullar’s research on worldly affiliations within Indian artistic practices. See: Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016; Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990*, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015.

⁹ The goal is not to replace one grand narrative with another, nor is it to introduce a stable definition or guideline for what constitutes the Islamicate. I do not believe in neatly demarcating the parameters of what constitutes and does not constitute Islamic art, or what cultures and nation-state identities should be a part of the Islamicate. Such guidelines, I feel, foreclose the very possibilities that a framework like the Islamicate can offer, and these restrictions can lead to reproducing the very disciplinary limitations I aim to combat. Instead, I wish to open up the linguistic and methodological frameworks within art history in order to offer an alternative approach to discourse art histories within a global turn. It is more important that this framework allows for the incorporation of diasporic identities that do not fit neatly in nation-state identities, and complicate the borders that define these identities.

¹ The groundwork for this paper was inspired by a collaborative project with Victoria Nolte and a panel we chaired for the College Art Association. At the 106th CAA annual conference, which took place in Los Angeles in 2018, we prepared a panel focusing on diaspora and global art history. Working through these complex issues of globalization with scholars of world art, global art studies, and diasporic art stimulated the way I theorize global narratives and diaspora studies in my own work.

² Scholars such as Terry Smith, Paul Wood, Elaine O’Brien, Anna Brzyski, James Elkins, and Ming Tiampo, amongst others, aim to complicate the narratives of global art histories and determine a historical narrative that does not “other” non-western art as periphery and derivative of the European canon.

³ Ming Tiampo, *Decentering Paris*. Carleton University, unpublished manuscript, 2014.

⁴ Anna Brzyski, *Partisan Canons*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 1.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶ John Onians, ‘World Art Studies and the Need for a New Natural History of Art’, in: *The Art Bulletin* 78:2 (1996), pp. 206–209.

it is important to stress that museum exhibitions are sites of knowledge production. Unfortunately, museum structures themselves can limit the ways cultural exchanges are displayed and curated. Museums are frequently organized into region-specific departments, such as Asian, Islamic Middle East, South and South-East Asian, or Near East.¹⁰ The epistemologies underlying these separations materialize at the thematic level of exhibition curating. Colonial borders are maintained and complex histories are dissolved, flattened, or ignored, and countries then vie for representation and inclusion. An instance of contention would be deciding whether to include Iranian art in an exhibition of Arab art, or works from Turkish artists. The same is true for the difficult decision to include Indian art alongside Chinese art, which share a continent but have vastly different geo-cultural traditions. For instance, which department could then fit a nation like Kurdistan within its geographic-based structure? With colonial borders separating Kurdistan and making it part of Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, how can the art and history of Kurdistan exist both within a department of a museum, and thematically within exhibitions? When asking such questions, departmental structures in museums become an unspecific way of grouping and organizing cultures, bound by colonial categories and nation-state borders that limit their representation and lateral connections. It is through these lateral connections that, I argue, post-colonial narratives can take place, and links of colonial histories and pasts are then created in a productive fashion that reveals the ways in which boundaries and borders are maintained. These questions outline the problems and gaps within current museum models, and the need to explore the practical application of different museological approaches that bring postcolonial inquiry and critical race theory in further dialogue with museum studies.

It is important to question the very politics of naming and identification, for the sheer inclusion of such histories within the history of art is a newer development. The study of the visual arts from cultures with an oral tradition rather than a textual tradition like in Africa, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and the Americas was at first left mainly to cultural anthropologists. It is during the second half of the twentieth century that art historians increasingly examined these art forms. Art historians “doing field work” adopted the methods and approaches of anthropologists to a large extent, and their work tended not to be published in mainstream art historical journals.¹¹ Because of this struggle, it is vital that frameworks like the Islamicate be adopted in museum models institutionally and not only at the thematic discretion of individual curators, for the risk is too high to fall back within the boundaries already drawn in the sand by the disciplinary and institutional structures historically upheld and currently in place.

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One example is the Asian Art department at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Like in other institutions, “the collections of the Asian Department are very broad in terms of chronology, geography and media. They cover a period of more than 5000 years, from 3,500 BC to the present day, and a huge region that encompasses China, Korea and Japan, South-East Asia, from Burma to Indonesia, Pakistan, India and the other countries of South Asia, Central Asia, from Tibet to the Caspian Sea and the Middle East.” ‘Asian Department’, accessed through: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/asian-department/>, on 14 April 2018.

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Wilfried Van Damme, ‘Introducing World Art Studies’, in: Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008, p. 55.

The Islamicate: Shifting Representation

In 1974, historian Marshall G.S. Hodgson posthumously published *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, and coined the term ‘Islamicate’ as a way of opening up the borders posed by modern scholarship. I argue the same borders can be seen in current museum structures, both institutionally and thematically within exhibitions. First, Hodgson identifies the issue in using the term ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamic’ in unspecific ways. He argues that it has become common in modern scholarship to use the terms ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamic’ too casually, signifying both the religion itself and the overall society and culture historically associated with the religion. Hodgson stresses that “one can speak of ‘Islamic literature’, of ‘Islamic art’, of ‘Islamic philosophy’, even of ‘Islamic despotism’, but in such a sequence one is speaking less and less of something that expresses Islam as a faith.”¹²

Underlying museum structures are colonial epistemologies of knowledge that are predicated on suppressive colonial borders and eurocentric imperial connections to culture, and this leads to museum departments structured around geo-political borders. Exhibition themes that result from such structures often lead to overarching representation of the ‘Arab Islamic World.’¹³ For this reason, I would like to look to Hodgson’s terminology of the *Islamicate* as being a way of reimagining the parameters in which art from these areas of the world are theorized, organized, and exhibited. Hodgson states:

For this, I have used the adjective ‘Islamicate’. I thus restrict the term ‘Islam’ to the *religion* of the Muslims, not using that term for the far more general phenomena, the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions [...] The adjective ‘Islamic’, correspondingly, must be restricted to ‘of or pertaining to’ Islam *in the proper, the religious, sense*, and of this it will be harder to persuade some. When I speak of ‘Islamic literature’ I am referring only to more or less ‘religious’ literature, not to secular wine songs, just as when one speaks of Christian literature one does not refer to all the literature produced in Christendom. When I speak of ‘Islamic art’ I imply some sort of distinction between the architecture of mosques on the one hand, and the miniatures illustrating a medical handbook on the other — even though there is admittedly no sharp boundary between.¹⁴

I propose a reading into the Islamicate that can foster new meanings to not only ‘Islamic art’ but art from other regions of the world that share colonial histories and are linked intermittently in various ways. The ‘Islamicate’ therefore refers not directly to the religion of Islam itself, but to the social and cultural complexities historically associated with Islam, Muslims, and is inclusive of non-Muslims living within the same region.¹⁵ This means that the Islamicate is not confined to describing the art of Islamic culture, Islamic people, or even Islam itself. It is necessarily inclusive of a number of populations who are

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Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 57.

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Instances of these generalities can be seen in exhibitions like the permanent collection display *Arts of the Islamic World* at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC.

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Marshall Hodgson, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 58–59 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵

Ibid., p. 59.

not Muslim and the many layers of cultural and historical contributions over the centuries, particularly from Christians and Jews.

I assert that the Islamicate as a framework can serve as a way of restructuring the current museum model that focuses on nation-state identities, and that it provides a useful example of how world art studies can be implemented institutionally. In productively dissolving the borders that hold rich cultural histories between rigidly defined temporal boundaries, we can create interesting dialogues in exhibitions that could be supported structurally at the museums' level of organization, and their organization of culture. These semantics are not trivial, and as critical race theorist Rinaldo Walcott argues, "the politics of naming, in a very specific way, is central to the governmentality of heritage as it frames exactly how one officially belongs to the nation."¹⁶ This methodology provides a way to further our understandings of colonial histories, and the ways in which nation-states can be re-imagined and re-contextualized in post-colonial ways. Therefore, as a case study the Islamicate acts as a common thread that can help pose instances of clarification, mediation, and sometimes complication.¹⁷ In thinking of the Islamicate as a curatorial and museological tool, one needs to ask: how would current exhibitions on the Middle East change if they were Islamicate in intention? What different narratives could be told if the Islamicate was the central mode or organization? How would thematic exhibitions then change if the Islamicate was institutionalized within museum departments and official mandates?

Curator of the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates and president of the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF), Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, has experienced similar struggles analogue to the politics of naming while curating art from the Middle East. In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Qasimi says:

A lot of [western] institutions visit and scout and do research and find interesting work [...] But there's this problem with packaging artists into one geographical definition... Is it Middle East to what? Or is it Middle East, not Africa? Or if you are Middle East, are you including other countries like Turkey and Iran? Or if you're looking Arab-wide, then you have to include North Africa because that's also Arab. Then Sudan is also Arab.¹⁸

At a public lecture in Toronto,¹⁹ I had the opportunity to ask Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi the very concerns raised in this article, and she suggested that thematic representations that incorporate many geographic regions might be most productive. I think Qasimi's statement above is indicative of the barriers that might prohibit such thematic exhibitions from taking place,

¹⁶ Rinaldo Walcott, 'Caribbean Pop Culture in Canada: Or, the Impossibility of Belonging to the Nation', in: *Small Axe* 5:1 (2001), p. 128.

¹⁷ I would like to note that the curatorial program at the Aga Khan Museum of Islamic Art in Toronto, Canada is starting to move in this direction. With their permanent collection of historic Islamic art spanning the Muslim presence in Spain, Turkey, and Hindustan (the North and West of the Indian subcontinent), Islamic history is being reconceived and retold in ways that illustrate colonial borders and encounters productively. While the word 'Islamicate' does not appear anywhere in the galleries of the permanent collection, it becomes clear the value of re-conceptualizing the ways histories and cultures are organized and grouped in museums, and the narrative histories these exhibition groupings permit.

¹⁸ James Adams, 'Taking a look into the Arab art world', in: *The Globe and Mail*, 8 November, 2015. Accessed through: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/taking-a-look-into-the-arab-art-world/article27156762/> on 6 January, 2018.

¹⁹ 10th Annual Eva Holtby Lecture on Contemporary Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum. Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi lecture on 'Art and Culture in the Gulf', November 10, 2015.

especially when institutional models still seek to package artists into one geographical definition. In fact, the need for more specific language becomes clear when analysing the terminology used by the Sharjah Art Museum. 'Arab Art' is used to describe their collection rather than terms like 'Islamic' or 'Middle Eastern', thus allowing for possibilities (and a museological framework) to include art that is not bound by Islam per se. Being one of the rare instances where a museum actively uses the tactical designation of 'Arab Art' to define its collection, this illustrates the consideration of these issues and gives the museum room to exhibit artists from the Gulf regions while also including artists from around the Middle East and North Africa. This is in line with scholars re-defining the very limits of such terminology, as art historian Nada Shabout outlines in her essay within the volume *In New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*. Shabout distinguishes between 'Arab art' and 'Islamic art': "Arab Art [...] I loosely define as adhering to an aesthetic formula that is modern and distinct from that of Islamic Art, and that embraces a plurality of experiments and visions united by a conscious negotiation of cultural elements."²⁰ For Shabout, the difference between Arab and Islamic art lies in modernity, and the aesthetics associated with modern art rather than a more historic Islamic art tradition. While a step in the right direction, the terminology of 'Arab' or 'Middle Eastern' can still fall short when compared to the Islamicate. This is because the geopolitical designations of using the 'Middle East' or the cultural designations of using 'Arab' would fail as measures of adequate "worlding" and also lack in providing the lateral connections needed within global art histories. Aside from the Sharjah Art Museum and its specific collections, when it comes to broader theoretical concerns neither 'Arab' or 'Middle Eastern' would be inclusive of regions like South East Asia or India. The value of bringing these regions into dialogue is clear, and is reflected in the coinage of the MENASA region (Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia) in cultural studies. Here, the Islamicate would provide a framework where the MENASA could be engaged with productively, and possibly account for more geographic spheres that this ever-extending acronym might benefit from.²¹

Arguably the majority of 'Islamic art' collections in the West are too broadly labelled, and often exhibit Middle Eastern or Arab art, including Christian art from those regions. According to Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, world art studies as a discipline calls for scholarly attention to the interculturalization within the arts. This refers to the artistic influences that are exerted by one culture or tradition onto another, or the mutual artistic cross-fertilization that takes place between two or more sites of study.²² Traditionally the concept of interculturalization, or transculturation, has had a legacy of encompassing only one-way traffic of cultural

²⁰ Nada Shabout, 'Contemporaneity Art in the Arab World', in: Nada Shabout (ed.), *In New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*, London: TransGlobe Publishing, 2011, p. 16.

²¹ At the University of Toronto art history symposium, which took place on March 9th 2018, art historian Iftikhar Dadi cautioned against throwing away old terminology that we deem insufficient, and instead he finds it more productive to push current language to hold new meanings. I would like to stress that the Islamicate is not meant to provide a new word or definition. Rather, I push the terminology that was already coined by Hodgson in 1974 to better encompass the complexity of Islamic art, and test the limits of current disciplinary language and its effect on knowledge production within museums in order to better theorize the incompatibilities that rigid geography-based methodologies pose in studying diasporic and transnational identities.

²² Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans (eds), *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008.

encounter that has become attached to initial concepts of acculturation. With the mislabelled “Islamic art” collections hindering these connections, the Islamicate transcends nation-state and arbitrary colonial borders to better elucidate a potentially two-way process of cultural exchanges, in this case specifically artistic exchanges, and the complex histories that can arise at these intersections. Scholars of global art histories, such as Steven Nelson, Reiko Tomii, Iftikhar Dadi, Sonal Khullar, and even world literature scholar Pheng Cheah, have also articulated the need for these issues of geography to be addressed, some fearing that such strong geographic anchors work to disallow a broader art-historical record based in materials and practices.²³

Lateral Connections: Local-to-Local

The case study examined in this section illustrates what the Islamicate can look like within museum exhibitions and scholarship, and shows how the Islamicate reinforces and provides a solid example for the disciplinary shift in global art histories. It does so in its facilitation of lateral connections between locales, and its complication of the questions of geography within art history. These lateral, local-to-local connections not only wrest art history away from nationalist frameworks, but they also have the potential of eclipsing eurocentrism. In his chapter of *Art History: In the Wake of the Global Turn*, art historian Steven Nelson writes about a conference panel at the Clark Art Institute in November 2011 dedicated to these pressing issues. He explains how panellists of this conference on the ‘global turn’ of art history asked whether current geographic categories — Africa, Eastern Europe, West Asia — still held meaning. The scholars of the roundtable wondered whether there were other kinds of formations that would enhance and push forward art historical inquiry. They asked: how might one theorize geography? What might be the role of art and art history (academic as well as curatorial practice) in doing such work? Do we have the tools to describe what’s going on in the world?²⁴ In fact, the conference and its working groups seemed dedicated to discussing a new order of shifting away from geographic boundaries within the study of art history, and how this method of inquiry could be feasible. To this day, scholars of global art histories are still grappling with the same concerns. It is through these issues and positioning of my research that I consider the case study of the Islamicate to be a demonstrable exercise in pushing the limits and boundaries of these questions and concerns.

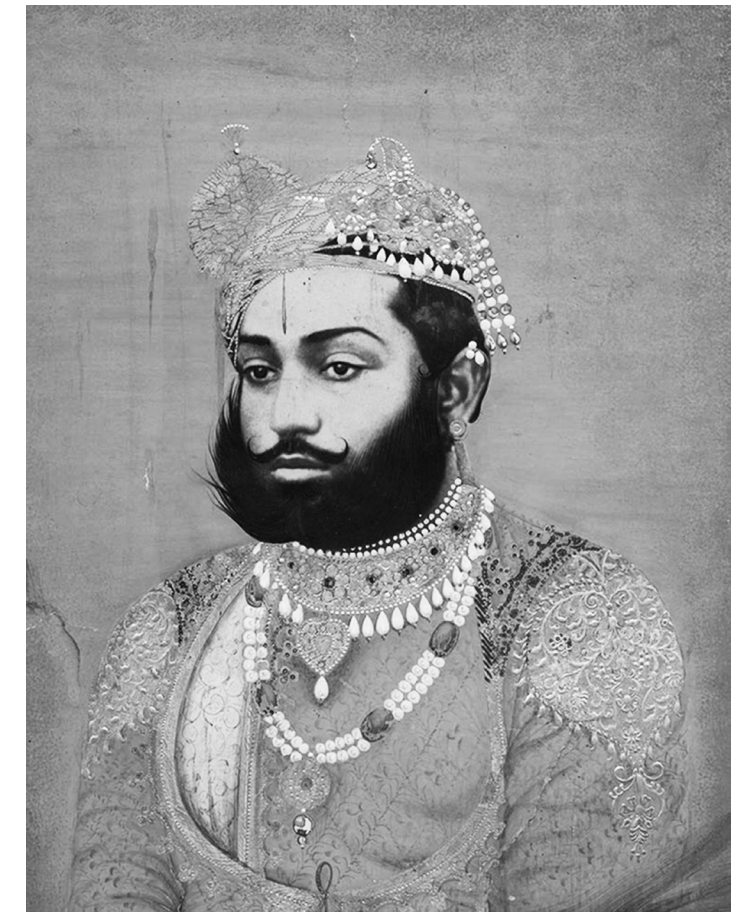
In terms of methods, it is imperative to explore the praxis of re-thinking about art history in a global context while still paying rigorous attention to the local. A risk of global theorizations is the rise of an uncritical world art history, and its effect on both comparative work and research that focuses on the local. It is with these concerns in mind that the Islamicate is applied as an art historical model both attentively and self-reflexively. I build on the research of scholars like Reiko Tomii, an art historian who values making connections and finding resonances between artists from different geographic regions around the

²³ Steven Nelson, ‘Conversation Without Borders’, in: Jill H. Casid and Aruna D’Souza, *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, p. 85.
²⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

→ fig. 1 [Nar]ayan Sinha, Unknown painter, *Portrait of Sir Venkat Raman Ramanuj Prasad Singh, Maharaja of Rewa (1876-1918)*, ca. 1895. Opaque watercolour and gold leaf on gelatine silver printing-out paper print, 31.5 × 25 cm. Rajasthan, India.

world. As she locates similarities between Japanese artists and non-Japanese artists, she impressively links the artists’ local practices to the global narrative and illuminates the fundamentally “similar yet dissimilar” characteristics of their work.²⁵ Therefore, to quantify the uses of such global measures and their querying of geographic boundaries within art history, it is important to discuss the complications of the local within this globalization to avoid a reduction of theoretical concerns.

As a way of incorporating the local within a globalizing methodology and theory like the Islamicate, I suggest shifting focus to a case study, the exhibition *Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs* that worked towards a transcultural history of photography. Taking place at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada in 2012, art historian and curator of South Asian Art and Culture at the ROM, Dr. Deepali Dewan curated this thoughtful show. Focusing on hand-painted photography, the exhibition catalogue explains that such methods were “introduced in the latter half of the nineteenth century, at a time when the world was seemingly getting smaller through ever-increasing trade, travel, and tourism, [and] painted photographs gave colour to black-and-white images of a changing world and new ways of being.”²⁶ As the exhibition traces the evolution of painted photographs in India from the 1860s to the 2000s, the catalogue “explores photographic history in India and in Europe to show how Indian painted photographs fit into both local and transcultural practices of photographic manipulation.”²⁷ (fig. 1)



²⁵ Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016, p. 12.

²⁶ Deepali Dewan and Olga Zotova, *Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs*, Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum Press, 2011. This catalogue accompanies an exhibition of the same title, *Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs*, held at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) from June 4, 2011 to June 17, 2012. The cited text appears on the dust jacket of the catalogue and is likely the broader exhibition text. The catalogue itself is more specific and is comprised of two coherent essays, one dealing with the history and development of the painted photograph in India and the other with the study of the use of colour in the manipulation of these images.

²⁷ Ibid.



←fig. 2 Unknown photographer, *The Old Geizira Bridge in Egypt*, ca. 1880. Hand tinted silver gelatine photograph.

It is here that I wonder how the exhibition would have changed if it was Islamicate in intention. With a transcultural historiography of photography being an objective of the show, what types of histories could have been brought to the fore if hand-painted photography were examined within other “similar yet dissimilar” locales as well? Take for instance hand-painted photography in Egypt. (fig. 2) The Middle East played a critical role in the development of photography both as a new technology and as an art form. Many European photographers travelled to the Middle East to amass portfolios of Egyptian antiquity, sites of holy lands, and the exotic Other, making the region one of the principle training grounds for the early practice of photography.²⁸ What could the development of the photographic medium in a site such as Egypt offer to the development of photography in India? With Egypt being colonized by the French in 1798, and later enduring British occupation in 1882, colonialism and its interlocutors could be seen as a powerful link between the vastly different regions. While India has had a longer and more vexed relationship with colonization, being imperially under Dutch, Danish, French, British, and Portuguese rules, India was under British rule during the period photography was invented and developed. Therefore, the technological development of photography during

²⁸ Behdad Ali and Luke Gartlan, *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2013, p. 1.

these same periods could help outline another historiography: one of photography's involvements with colonial expansion and capitalism. If there had been a small component of the exhibition or catalogue to discuss hand-painted photography in Egypt, then ruptures would have been made within traditional histories and understandings of photography. The relationship between hand-painted photography in India, Egypt, and the capitalism that closely followed the colonial European travellers seeking such photographs, I contend, could have created new dimensions within this history of photography. Philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the term “comparison in extremis” as referring to a comparative analysis that focuses on situations of extreme violence as a way of revealing underlying structures of power.²⁹ In fact, Spivak coined this term in an explicit critique of comparative studies (which is a major discourse in the discipline of area studies) in order to foster a close reading that is enabled by the deep knowledge of language, culture, and history. Therefore, “comparison in extremis” is a form of comparison that teases out, stresses, or performs differences (including epistemological differences), and the theory emerges out of a context of unacknowledged suffering and the invisibility of subaltern identities.³⁰ Using the comparison of colonial histories between Egypt and India as an example, the Islamicate therefore fosters this close reading and the “comparison in extremis” illustrates how European travellers purchased hand-painted photographs of the pyramids and of local populations in Cairo that fed into a highly orientalized vision of the Middle East. These then have strong connections to the history of image making in India and their own colonial ties to the British Empire.

Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme have outlined that there are three fundamental topics that warrant attention once we start looking at the visual arts across time and place: the first concern is the origins of art, the second topic is intercultural comparison, and the third is the cross-fertilization of artistic tradition between cultures.³¹ As illustrated through this exhibition, the Islamicate provides a way of operationalizing world art studies, as it becomes a methodology to address each one of these concerns. The capitalist function of photography comes to the fore and provides a fuller picture of hand-painted photography and its origins. The intercultural comparison between Egypt and India, however controversial, opens up a range of fundamental questions concerning the place and role of visual arts within the history of colonialism. Finally, the cross-fertilization that occurs because of colonial expansion and the very transportability of photographs leads to discussions about artistic exchanges between cultures, and removes the invention and development of photography from its often-eurocentric bubble. Therefore, the strategic inclusion of different, but closely related locales,

²⁹ Gayatri Spivak, ‘Rethinking Comparativism’, in: *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 475.

³⁰ In 1988 Gayatri Spivak published her influential essay ‘Can The Subaltern Speak?’ The term ‘subaltern’ designates the populations which are socially, politically, and geographically outside of dominant and hegemonic power structures. The essay contends that western academic thinking is produced in order to support western economic interests. Spivak holds that knowledge is never innocent and that it expresses the interests of its producers. For Spivak, knowledge is like any other commodity that holds imbalanced power dynamics between the global south and global north. Gayatri Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

³¹ Wilfried Van Damme, op. cit. (note 11), pp. 27-29.

illustrates a history of hand-painted photography that then becomes deeply enmeshed in issues of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. As literary theorist Walter Mignolo advocates for a decolonial methodology of comparison that focuses on the colonial matrix of power that shapes the production of knowledge, the Islamicate does just that.³² The exhibition's aim of developing a more robust transcultural history of photography would have been well supported by globalizing methodologies like the Islamicate, and a more global art historical narrative could have been developed through the study of hand painted photographs in Egypt.

It is important to note that I do not wish to remove the study of a specific locale, nor do I wish to homogenize or group together all histories and temporalities. As scholars Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman question how constructive comparison, or relational thinking, can be used productively to rethink history in postcolonial and global contexts, they find value in exploring new special modes of analysis based on networks, interrelations and circulations.³³ I do believe that an exhibition of painted photography in India, like that of Dewan's, has great value. I simply wish to test the types of knowledge that can be expanded upon and produced when the geography-based structures of museums are seen as hindering rather than fostering lateral connections.

I should also clarify that I do not think that the conceptual framework of the exhibition in question needs to be changed from exhibiting Indian hand-painted photographs to being an exhibition on Indian *and* Egyptian hand-painted photographs. I think that the inclusion of another locale such as Cairo can happen productively in an exhibition that is solely about Indian photography, for instance. Such inclusions may happen as ruptures throughout an exhibition, incorporated as a part of exhibition texts, and used within public programming. As historian Sebastian Conrad argues in his book, *What is Global History?*, global and world historians cannot *simply* focus on the links and connections. Instead, Conrad explains how "connections need to be embedded in processes of structural transformation."³⁴ His concept of integration goes beyond connectedness, and stresses that global history is not a history of globalization. Rather, it focuses on the degree to which world regions were integrated into global systems, and the relative material, cultural, and political impacts of their relationships to global structures. Therefore, studies and exhibitions of specific locales should certainly still exist, but imagining the complexity of that narrative when structured in relation to the colonial and imperial history of another locale could add dimensions to an art history that would have gotten buried through more traditional curatorial practices and art historical writing that is built along limited geographic boundaries. Through this integration of global systems, new art historical accounts become uncovered and complicate the eurocentric canon that has been complicit in excluding such narratives from traditional historiography.

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Walter Mignolo, 'On Comparison: Who is Comparing What and Why?', in: Rita Felski and Susan Friedman (eds), *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, p. 6.

³³

Ibid., p. 1.

³⁴

Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016, pp. 64–65.

De-problematizing the Islamicate

Oppositional views against more globalized narratives and de-centred approaches to the history of art are worried about the disciplinary implications of disrupting the status quo. As scholars have argued, it is this exact worry that keeps the centre-periphery dynamic within the discipline.³⁵ With the west's political and economic power being greatly undermined within art history, a common avoidance of these global narratives insists upon the incapability of the eurocentrism of art history. As art historian Aruna D'Souza points out, with this mentality, eurocentrism becomes a policing structure, a maintenance strategy that reproduces its perimeter by insisting that one cannot participate in art history meaningfully without simply contributing to its ideological boundaries that are inherently eurocentric.³⁶ It is because of the too readily dismissed ideas of de-centring and de-canonizing that I find it necessary to de-problematize a methodology like the Islamicate. In thinking through the limitations of such ideas throughout this analysis, I contend that other theories that work with concepts of global art histories will be better equipped to develop and build on one another and create an incontestable argument for other postcolonial frameworks.

This analysis has outlined the pitfalls of thematic exhibitions when museum departments are organized too rigidly around geographic and often colonial borders. It becomes clear that an uncritical global system of cultural organization is not the answer, and has the potential to reinforce the eurocentrism present within art historical canons and traditional historiographies. In returning to museums and their either non-specific or too-narrowly geographic categories, I then ask: where would the Islamicate fit in between these two oppositional museum structures? Would the Islamicate function as another geographic category alongside Asian Art, Indian Art, and African Art? Could the Islamicate function productively alongside, or alternately, instead of, these geography-based structures as a way of providing possibility and flexibility for the cultures that do not fit so neatly within constructed colonial borders? I have outlined the problems and gaps within the current museum and art historical models, and future scholarship needs to explore the practical application of other critical museological approaches that bring critical race theory and postcolonialism in further dialogue with museum studies.

³⁵

The research of Kobena Mercer, Steven Nelson, Paul Dave-Mukherji, David J. Roxbergh, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Jill Casid, Aruna D'Souza, and others.

³⁶

Aruna D'Souza, 'Introduction', in: Jill H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza, *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, p. XV.

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