

## Avinoam Shalem, ed. *Constructing the Image of Muhammad in Europe*

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Review of

Shalem, Avinoam, ed. 2013. *Constructing the Image of Muhammad in Europe*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.

With contributions by Michelina Di Cesare, Heather Coffey, and Alberto Saviello, 2013.

Pp. v + 160. 24 illustrations, bibliography, picture credits, index, paperback, ISBN 978-3-11-030082-6, \$56 US.

*Constructing the Image of Muhammad in Europe* is part of an interdisciplinary project conducted by Avinoam Shalem that offers an in-depth examination of the visual representation of the Prophet Muhammad in the West. Through detailed analyses of images and textual sources spanning the period from the 12th to the 19th century, this publication aims to shed light on the various strategies employed in the process of constructing the image of the Prophet in specific moments and contexts of European history. Not only does it reveal the continuous popular interest in the iconography of the Prophet since Christianity first confronted Islam, but it also discloses the considerable variety of visions that have shaped his image in Europe. The reader will thus appreciate the accurate descriptions of the visual material that unveil the successive transformations and redefinitions of the figure of the Prophet throughout the centuries.

Another important aspect of this publication is the emphasis by the authors on the particular relationship between the images and the text. The multiple and ambiguous interactions of the illustrations with the textual narrative of the works are examined in view of their resonance both with Christian and Islamic literary traditions. This approach provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the ambivalent attitude toward the figure of Muhammad, alternatively depicted as a false prophet, an impostor, a worshipped idol, or the Antichrist.

More significant perhaps is the analysis of various representations in connection with specific contemporary events in Europe—such as the Crusades, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Romantic movement of the 19th century—thus bringing to the fore the politicization

of the image of the Prophet. While Michelina Di Cesare addresses the medieval era through the examination of the depiction of the Prophet in illuminations and manuscripts in different literary genres, Heather Coffey explores images of Muhammad in illuminated manuscripts and monumental wall paintings inspired by Dante's *Divina Comedia*. As for Alberto Saviello, he focuses on the biographical scenes or portraits of Muhammad in woodcuts and engravings published in the printed press and therefore enabling a broader diffusion of the image of the Prophet to a wider public in Europe.

The merit of this work resides both in the fact that it fills a gap by covering a hitherto understudied subject and that it offers a nuanced perspective on the question of visual representations and Islam. While some researchers may regret the brevity of the book in view of the vast subject covered, they will be compensated with the succinct examples of different paradigms as well as the detailed references and bibliography that will provide valuable landmarks and material to pursue research in this area.

Overall, this book constitutes a significant backdrop to a better appreciation of the perception of Islam in the West. In light of the recent debate about the image of the Prophet Muhammad in Western media, it presents a welcome alternative to the perpetual “East” versus “West” deadlock by providing a novel and accurate insight into the ambivalence and complexity of intercultural perceptions in defining the “other.”