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Challenges and opportunities: Teaching, studying, and curating Islamic art and architecture in Canada

Gül Kale

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Challenges and opportunities: Teaching, studying, and curating Islamic art and architecture in Canada

Guest-edited by Gül Kale

Scholars who work on Islamic art and architecture know very well the challenges of pursuing their work while supporting new research in this field in Canada. In the educational context, the gaps in students' earlier learning regarding world cultures, despite Canada's "multicultural" image, often creates obstacles ahead of introducing advanced studies on Islamic art and architecture in the university curriculum. Moreover, the scarcity of specific fellowships in universities and museums to support the study of Islamic art and architecture causes difficulties in recruiting students and supporting future scholars in this field, particularly on international and graduate levels. The lack of scholarly networks and associations in Canada to advance studies on Islamic art and architecture in a sustained manner also makes it difficult for scholars to engage in academic exchange within a diverse society in a geographically scattered area. These and many other issues mentioned below, both on individual and institutional levels, often make it challenging for scholars to sustain as well as support the research, teaching, and curating of Islamic art in Canadian universities and museums.

Therefore, this polemics section is conceptualized as an inquiry into the current state of teaching, studying, and curating Islamic art and architecture in Canada in order to open a venue for scholarly exchanges while triggering new discussions on the topic within the broader academic and museum worlds. Scholars have been invited to discuss their unique efforts in major universities and museums, which have developed programs in teaching and curating Islamic art and architecture over the last decades. The contributors reflect on how this specific

Gül Kale is Assistant Professor of Architectural History and Theory at Carleton University.
—gul.kale@carleton.ca

field is taught, displayed, curated, and researched in Canadian institutes. What are the challenges they faced and how did they produce productive and informative solutions within their respective contexts? Their reflections on various issues provide an opportunity to reconsider not only the reception of artwork and images, but also the perception of Islamicate societies by students, scholars, and the public in Canada.

In her essay on the "challenges, pitfalls, and opportunities" in the museum realm, Fahmida Suleyman reassesses the ways in which the Royal Ontario Museum's (ROM) gallery of the Islamic World might have a greater impact on the museum audience by being made more accessible through new architectural arrangements and curatorial decisions. Suleyman argues that the spatial limits caused by the new wing's crystal-like form, which houses the Islamic art collection, makes it challenging to introduce new experiences in the gallery. She further discusses how the juxtaposition of diverse periods under specific themes could lead to a reductive approach towards the diverse cultural and artistic practices of these societies. This consideration is crucial to surpass essentialist and generalizing approaches to Islamic art, not only in the museum space or within public discourses, but also in the wider academic world, which relies on museum collections both for scholarship and teaching on cross-cultural and comparative topics.

Ruba Kana'an examines museum practices in relation to students' learning experiences of Islamic art in educational contexts, focusing on the challenges and opportunities in using online museum collections for teaching purposes. Kana'an looks at the changing perceptions of Islamic art by students based on "website architecture and affordances" while considering the ways in which instructors can introduce a "transformative" rather than a "transmittive" teaching experience. As she notes, the pandemic brought forth the need to use online museum collections more productively and creatively. Thus, she points at four challenging areas to reassess. First, she mentions how museum websites reinforce colonial systems of classification by limiting the geographical scope of "Islamic art" to the Middle East while associating "Islamic art" merely with Muslims, neglecting the pluralistic and global scale of arts produced by Islamicate societies for centuries. Second, many museum websites give different names to their collections covering "Islamic art." Third, websites rely on diverse architectures, which lead to diverse learning experiences such as finding specific objects in the collections. And finally, they use different taxonomies and styles for object labels. One of the challenges in the record of the object on the websites derives from the fact that there are many Islamic art works that are anonymous. Whereas this system of labelling, without relying on the artists' names, resists Eurocentric notions of evaluating artworks, it also leads to challenges in teaching students, who are inclined to associate this omission with a lesser value of art compared to their European counterparts.

The challenge of using Eurocentric models to teach topics that question longstanding stereotypes of Islamic art based on such models is discussed by Marcus Milwright in his essay looking at the "destruction of art." The destruction of art, particularly due to the atrocities of ISIS against many ancient archeological sites in the Middle East, has introduced one of the biggest challenges in the preservation of artistic heritage. Based on a course he designed to explore these issues, Millwright argues that providing historical and cultural contexts to students to understand the motivations behind these destructive acts is crucial to resist simplistic explanations of Islamic art and culture. Rather than seeing such destruction as the result of a timeless ban on images in Islam, students must be introduced to diverse perspectives related to the use or against the use of images in religious and secular contexts,

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not only in the Islamic but also in Jewish and Christian communities, where the legitimacy of the image has also been an ongoing issue. While it is a complex subject for students as well as scholars due to the dichotomies it creates, approaching the topic by expanding the scope with a comparative approach, and with a sensitivity towards diverse periods and traditions, can turn the topic of "the destruction of art" in course content and class discussions into a thought-provoking learning experience.

The issue of teaching Islamic art and architecture in a cross-cultural context forms the basis of Saygin Salgirli's essay on "multi-culturalism and Islamicate arts." It looks at the challenges of teaching the art and architecture of historic multicultural societies in today's societies like Canada. Acknowledging the anachronistic implications of the term "multicultural," Salgirli uses this term to question the perception of a mythical Islamic history associated with the peaceful coexistence of diverse communities under various states throughout centuries. Rather than presenting a single perspective, exploring Islamic art and architecture through attention to historical contexts introduce a more nuanced picture of the past with its complexities. Likewise, teaching cross-cultural connections and encounters in pre-modern multicultural societies while considering the ways in which multiple users perceived Islamic art/architecture may prevent students from reading Islamic art with a single generalizing lens, surpassing binary oppositions such as Muslim/Christian or European/Middle Eastern.

This polemics section is conceptualized to open up new discussions on how art and architectural history, taught and studied in the Canadian academic world, can be more inclusive and critical regarding world cultures. Additionally, however, many insights presented by the authors aim to disclose how seemingly diverse cultures can be brought closer, though courses on Islamic art and architecture, by evoking awareness in students and promoting critical and creative engagement with global societies and their traditions. This consideration also underscores the important role of the humanities and the arts in educating students with ethical responsibilities towards our shared world and with cultural sensitivity for diversity, inclusion, and equity in Canada. ¶