RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Kana'an, R. (2022). Reflections on Teaching with Online Museum Collections: Challenges and Opportunities. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *47*(1), 81–85. https://doi.org/10.7202/1091824ar

Reflections on Teaching with Online Museum Collections: Challenges and Opportunities

Ruba Kana'an

During the frantic efforts to prepare for a full move to remote and online learning in the spring and summer of 2020, the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching and learning specialists at the Robert Gillespie Academic Skills Centre at the University of Toronto Mississauga provided many helpful workshops and webinars on distant teaching and best practices. They also offered an array of support programs and initiatives as well as lists of tried-and-tested dos and don'ts. But perhaps the statement that had the most impact on me was a reminder that "when you teach online keep in mind that your aim is to provide a transformative teaching experience, not a transmittive one." While seemingly obvious—considering that our students are at times much more adept at finding content using digital sources than are we—this statement inspired me to reconsider the ways in which I prepared for and taught a 200-level survey course in Islamic art. The challenge I posed for myself was to use the abundance of excellent museum websites and digital resources on Islamic art to engage students in the online setting and create innovative and transformative classes and assignments.   I should note that the pandemic year was not the first time I had undertaken teaching online or developed online courses and content. In 2008, I was commissioned by Oxford University's Department for Continuing Education to develop an online course in Islamic art.[1] The course was asynchronous and taught fully online, and there was an excellent technical and program support team to guide me through the process. While most of the digital sources available during that time have been updated or replaced with more advanced ones, the structural and background thinking

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and design that the technical team prompted me to undertake before I provided any course content remain invaluable. Later, in 2013–14, I led the development of a museum multimedia and audio app for the Aga Khan Museum, working with the renowned development and production company Antenna International.[2] The Antenna team brought to the project a vast experience in developing storytelling and multimedia products for some of the world's most famous museums and art collections. Through them I experienced first-hand the importance of understanding the background architecture of any online source to achieve the desired pathways to content. What those two experiences taught me is that one had to be familiar with the affordances of an online resource to get the most out of it. While as specialists we develop an intuitive familiarity with a museum website that we use for our own research and teaching purposes, here, I am going to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of using them for teaching undergraduates.

I'll limit my reflections here to four areas of challenges that I observed while teaching introductory and survey courses of Islamic art though online museum collections. I will also suggest learning opportunities:
· Museum websites use different geographical (mis)representations of "Islamic Art";
· Museum websites have different names for "Islamic Art" collections;
· Museum websites have different architectures and different affordances;
· Museum websites use different taxonomies and styles for object labels.

First Challenge: the geographical (mis)representation of "Islamic Art"
The geographical focus of the academic teaching of Islamic art and its representation in online exhibitions and museum collections follow a colonial system of classification that is predominantly focused on the Middle East—broadly defined as the Arab world including North Africa, Turkey, Iran, and parts of central Asia. The problem with this definition is that this so-called "centre" of artistic production is home to around a quarter of world Muslims only and therefore it excludes the arts produced by most Muslims (who live in Africa, and South and Southeast Asia, not the Middle East).[3] The origins of this system of peripheralization are the racial and ethnic categories of Orientalist scholarship on Islam and Muslims and its perceived hierarchy of people and their artistic production. In addition, this geographic focus that clearly reflects a European colonial gaze is increasingly confusing for students and museum visitors in Canada where the experience of Islam and Muslims is global and pluralistic, extending well beyond the confines of the Middle East.

While this is a challenge that anyone teaching or exhibiting Islamic art grapples with, usually using protracted disclaimers to explain why "Islamic Art" is not really about Islam or Muslims, it also provides teaching opportunities. For example, I presented students with maps showing the geographic and demographic distribution of world Muslim populations as well as maps of concentration patterns of Muslims around the world and compared those maps to the geographic regions that are represented in Islamic art textbooks and online museum collections. This enabled students to visualize the discrepancy, or bias, in representation and provided them with an opportunity to engage with, ask questions about, and critique the colonial heritage that underpins museums and their collections. This is a very timely issue for those of us teaching in North America and makes teaching Islamic art more relevant to our students and part of the broader discourse on decolonization.

1. Islamic Art and Architecture (online) Department of Continuing Education, University of Oxford, https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/islamic-art-and-architecture-online.

2. Aga Khan Museum App (released in 2015, removed from App Store in 2016), https://appadvice.com/app/aga-khan-museum/964282669.

3. For an outline of the demographics and distribution of Muslim populations, see the Pew Research Centre's *Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the US and around the world*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/.

Like the discrepancy in museum representation of what constitutes "Islamic Art," the names used for galleries, museums, and online museum collection showcasing "Islamic Art" are also inconsistent. The last twenty years saw the building of new specialized museums of "Islamic Art" and the re-installation of "Islamic Art" galleries in a substantial number of major international museums. This includes—to name a few—the Department of Islamic Art Galleries at the Louvre in Paris (2012), the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World at the British Museum in London (2018), The Galleries of the Arts of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2011), the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar (2008), and the Museum of Islamic art at the Pergamon in Berlin (scheduled for 2025). Here in Canada the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) re-installed its Wirth Gallery of the Middle East in 2008 and the Aga Khan Museum was inaugurated in 2014. Each of the close to twenty new installations worldwide is accompanied by a public-facing website with high-quality images and accessible information about the collection as well as a selection of its prized objects. The information provided for each art object is based on scholarly curatorial research that is filtered to the public by media and communication specialists thus making it both accessible and a wonderful resource for undergraduate teaching.

The challenge of teaching with this incredibly rich resource is that this broad range of names makes it more difficult for undergraduates, for whom this may be the first time encountering "Islamic Art," to navigate and find the right gallery or collection in a museum. One cannot just assign students a reading or research assignment from the "Islamic art" gallery or collection of any museum as, in many cases, students may struggle to find the right website. The magnificent collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York with its encyclopedic breadth, exceptionally rich online object captions and catalogue entries, and the contextual essays in the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, is a good example. While offering rich teaching resources, the Met's search engine yields different results if students search by the name of the gallery, or by entering "Islamic Art," "Islamic art collection," or "department of Islamic art." Simply entering the name of the gallery into the search engine, as students tend to do, often proves difficult and frustrating for them. However, it also provides opportunities to explore name-making practices and ask questions about "what's in a name?" perhaps reflecting on the role of politics, funding, and hegemonic knowledge practices in naming art institutions and, by extension, what gets to be exhibited and why.

Third Challenge: Museum websites have different architectures and different affordances

Finding the right pathway to "Islamic Art" in a museum website highlights the role of broader museum priorities in the website's design and development. While this current generation of websites offer a range of interactive and audience-friendly options with good quality images and discussions, there is no single (or simple) way in which students can be guided to explore and use an online museum collection. Any online museum collection is part of the larger architecture of the museum website as a whole and follows the institution's own internal logic. Website developers work with teams of museum professionals including curatorial, communication, education, finance, and operation specialists to develop the overall site. The pedagogical role of the collection website is one of many often-competing priorities. So, how can we use these websites without resorting to supplying students with a list of direct links to desired objects or webpages?

Over the last two years, I realized that using the affordances of the architecture of museum websites pro-

vides new ways for developing learning opportunities and creative assignments for undergraduates. It also provides opportunities for students to use their strength and confidence in navigating digital sources to engage with the often unfamiliar "non-Western" course content. For example, at the beginning of the term students (individual or in groups) can be assigned to explore two museum websites and find two comparable objects (say, a tenth-century Nishapur ceramic bowl) then reflect on the pathways they followed to find the objects and the information about them, from the main museum website to the object webpage. They can also be asked to note the institutional name and stated mission as well as gallery name and its place in the website menu. Students are then asked to digitally share their findings with the group. Not only do students feel empowered in owning and sharing their digital explorations, but they also become exposed to a variety of classification rubrics (stylistic, dynastic, thematic, etc.) and website architectures.

Fourth challenge: Museum websites use different taxonomies and styles for labels and webpages

In addition to the different pathways to finding objects in museum websites, one of the most challenging areas for teaching with a museum online collection is the webpage of the object itself. This page is usually based on the museum record of the object, and therefore, it is specific to that museum—often excessively so, from a pedagogical standpoint. Each record represents the public face of a collection management database whose contents are the collective work of multiple generations of that museum's researchers, curators, conservators, and collection managers. Here again, the affordances of a museum collection database are not specific to Islamic art but rather represent its broader use throughout the museum. Invariably, the database's "menu items" of naming, dating, taxonomies,

and referencing reflect the hegemonic practices of western European and North American art.

For example, most Islamic art works are anonymous, with a few signed and some attributed to specific artists. To avoid confusion, most online collections of Islamic art do not include the attributed names under an "artist" menu heading but rather they are included in the broader interpretative caption about the object, and in a few cases under the general rubric "inscriptions" or "find out more." The omission of the menu heading "artist" from many "Islamic art" websites can be understood as an admirable act of resistance to the hegemonic art practices, definitions, and assumptions. However, it creates challenges in undergraduate teaching. For many students, the omission of the name of the artist is (mis)understood as a sign of the lack of importance of the object, thus reinforcing the hierarchical superiority of Western vs. non-Western art (and modern and contemporary vs. medieval).

These museum webpage practices generate an array of different object information formats known in the museum world as labels, captions, or tombstones. Keeping in mind that this information is not designed for undergraduate teaching, it still provides great opportunities to enable students to understand the basics of art historical writing and interpretation. A basic object webpage can provide a rich learning tool for adequate formal description as well as a source for developing glossaries of specialized terms and art techniques. In addition, most recent webpages include iconographic analysis and short interpretative essays, at times including catalogue entries from recent exhibitions. Comparing object webpages from different museums enforces the student's learning of the differences between description vs. interpretation in art historical writing, a necessary skill in media literacy more broadly.

In summary, over the past few years I observed various student approaches to online museum websites that range from the grab-and-go mentality that unwittingly captures the content presented on the webpage to the more discerning and probing approach of students who strive to navigate the discrepancies they note between the websites they encounter. Both approaches deliver subject content and introduce students to "Islamic Art." Yet the learning outcomes between the two approaches cannot be more different. While a few years ago I tended to use these websites as an alternative to a textbook that provides students with accessible content, I am now convinced that they afford us a greater opportunity to give students exploratory experiences and more lasting learning outcomes. Such engagements with museum websites and the exploration of their affordances give students opportunities to grapple with broader current issues such as media literacy, hegemonic knowledge, and decolonization. Pedagogically, using online museum collection in teaching undergraduate courses gives students agency in the learning process and enables them to learn by doing—and I believe it is more fun, too. ¶