Global Trends in Modern and Contemporary Islamic Art

Edited by
Rui Oliveira Lopes, Giulia Lamoni, Margarida Brito Alves
CENTRO DE INVESTIGAÇÃO E
ESTUDOS EM BELAS-ARTES

SECCÃO DE CIÊNCIAS DA ARTE E DO
PATRIMÔNIO FRANCISCO DE HOLANDA
Art in a Global Perspective is a programme initiated by Rui Oliveira Lopes in 2011 at the Artistic Studies Research Centre (CIEBA), Faculty of Fine Arts University of Lisbon (FBAUL). The programme is committed to the development of creative and academic research projects in the field of Artistic Studies, History of Art, Museum Studies, and Curatorial Practices related with the artistic and cultural interactions between cultures throughout time. As part of the programme Art in a Global Perspective, the Global Art Monograph Series presents recent academic research into all aspects related with artistic interactions between cultures, taking a wide range of approaches in the field of History of Art, Global Art, Geography of Art, and Transcultural Studies. The series publishes monographic works and collected essays on a specific theme. Volumes are designed to be of interest to researchers, teachers, and graduate students.
Global Trends in Modern and Contemporary Islamic Art
This book is the result of a joint project organized by the Artistic Studies Research Centre, Faculty of Fine Arts – University of Lisbon (CIEBA/FBAUL), the Institute for History of Art, New University of Lisbon (IHA-FCSH/UNL), and the Portuguese Catholic University (UCP).

On the side of CIEBA/FBAUL the project is integrated in the research area Art in a Global Perspective, coordinated by Rui Oliveira Lopes (PhD / Postdoctoral Research Fellow FCT/CIEBA-FBAUL), with the aim to establish a network of relationships between critical art histories, and to examine how globalization transforms contemporary art and culture.

On the side of IHA-FCSH/UNL the project is part of the agenda of the research line Transnational Perspectives on contemporary Art, associated to the contemporary Art Studies (CAST) group, coordinated by Margarida Brito Alves (PhD/FCSH-UNL Associate Professor), which is committed to the critical exploration of contemporary artistic practices, theories and discourses produced in Portugal, but also in other geographical and cultural contexts.
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Rui Oliveira Lopes (CIEBA/FBAUL)
Editor-in-Chief of the Global Art Monograph Series
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Foreword
Global trends in modern and contemporary ‘Islamic’ art

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In recent years, the attention given to modern and contemporary ‘Islamic’ art has been increasing significantly among curators, art dealers, art critics, and collectors; they are mostly interested in the arts produced by artists who draw their inspiration from their cultural roots, artistic imagery and their diasporic discourses in the context of (dis)location within non-Islamic countries. Since the late 1980s, the ongoing processes of globalisation and aesthetic pluralisation conveyed a broad geographical area for contemporary ‘Islamic’ art, encompassing many different countries around the world, including the ones beyond the main concentration of Muslim populations located in Southeast Asia, in the Middle East, in Central Asia, and in North Africa. The artistic integration arising upon the processes of globalization and the diaspora of artists from countries shaped by Islam into Europe and the Americas resulted in a repurposing of ‘Islamic’ art, through the use of new media and the incorporation of extraneous elements against the dilution of their own cultural and artistic traditions.

One of the key questions about the art produced in countries and regions that have a majority Muslim population and by artists that migrated to or were raised in non-Islamic countries is how to label such art. The main issue is the definition of boundaries between classical Islamic art, which spans from the Umayyad dynasty in the seventh century to the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, and the modern & contemporary art produced in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries. While the former – recognized by ornate metalwork, intricate décor of woven textiles, ceramics designed with geometric patterns and Arabic calligraphy, Iranian miniatures and Turkish albums – tends to conjure artworks shaped by Islamic historical-cultural traditions, the latter is more related to an a-historical conception of time and place, informed by the global contours of post-modern culture and society. Therefore, the link between the terms ‘modern’ / ‘contemporary’ and ‘Islamic art’ has been controversial not only among scholars and art historians, but also awkward to many of the artists who refuse to be labelled by curators, art critics and dealers as ‘Islamic artists’ simply due to their place of birth or their ascendency and frequently ignoring the fact that some of these artists are not even Muslims.

Although many artists have been claiming the reconstruction or reappropriation of their own culture by removing Islam and other traditional
elements from its historical location and religiously defined traditions to fit the international trends of contemporary art, others have been promoting a historical continuum between the past and present of Islamic arts by constantly revisiting the motifs, styles, traditional ornaments, and including the religious meanings of classical Islamic art, which highlights the unity of Islam beyond cultural diversity around the globe.

In addition, the negotiation of cultural difference taking place in the artistic practice, in and beyond the countries shaped by Islamic traditions, explores individual notions of cultural and historical reappropriation in diasporic experiences, giving place to the idea of artistic (dis)location.

The pluralism of the contemporary art discourse in the Islamic world, which encompasses nearly thirty-three countries in Southeast Asia, Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa and the artists living in the diaspora, demonstrates the great need to examine the traits of negotiation between artistic practice and cultural difference, between the local and global contemporary art discourses, between cultural continuum and geographical dislocation, between anthropological inquiry and cultural promotion.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century is associated with the attention that European modernist artists paid to new sentiments, bright colours and sharp patterns informed by the colonial utopias in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, known as Orientalism. In the nineteenth century, precursors of modern art, such as Ingres, Rosati, Gauguin and Van Gogh refined European taste for Orientalism by borrowing and reinventing the imagery of Middle Eastern, North African and Asian societies to depict realistic scenes of Islamic architecture, carpet patterns, furnishings, costumes, along with idealized harem scenes with semi-nude luxuriant odalisques and scenes of daily-life including the street markets in Cairo and other exotic places. The effectiveness of Orientalism remained undiminished in the early twentieth century, particularly in the works of Renoir, Matisse, Paul Klee, and Kandinsky, driven by the bright colours and energetic brushwork to structure pictorial composition.

On the other hand, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cultural hegemony imposed by European colonialism in Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Syria and Iraq was strengthened
through the reduction of non-Western arts to a 'non-art' or purely as an ornamental artefact. Progressively, the establishment of western-style fine art schools contributed significantly to the formation of modernist movements in Cairo, Beirut, Baghdad, and Algiers. From the 1910s to the 1960s, western style figurative representation and, more rarely, abstract compositions combined with the local character became the signature of modern art in Arab countries, noticing an absence of the 'Islamic' and religious identity in the artistic practice. It wasn’t until the 1960s that western influence of modern art began to emerge in the Arabian Peninsula through the introduction of western art in the Gulf and through the development of an educational system of scholarships to study art in Europe, as it previously happened in North Africa.

Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 1970s many artists that previously formed part of the western-style modern art groups gradually focused more attention on a modernization of the aesthetics of calligraphy, a major artistic expression in the Islamic tradition. However, this new trend was not an exploratory reconciliation with the Islamic tradition, but rather a technical exercise to explore the gesture, the abstraction, and a basic form of composition inspired by elements of their own culture, apart from the modern western art language.

Western trends of modern art were also projected in the art scene in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, where many Belgian, German and Dutch artists established themselves and remained for part of their lives. Indonesian artists such as S. Sudjojono, Affandi, Agus Djaya, Henk Ngantung, and Hendra Gunawan blended European modern style with the character of the land and the people of Indonesia that have seduced European artists. Through the foundation of PERSAGI – Association of Indonesia Drawing Specialists, in 1938, and SIM – Young Indonesian Artists, in 1946, these artists played an important role in the formation of modern Indonesian art.

Rather than appropriating the 'Islamic' traditions, modern art in South and Southeast Asia mirrored the cultural roots of those civilizations, juxtaposing western art with popular culture and folk art, depicting the daily life of indigenous people and urban trends, and emphasising local traditions and handicrafts.
Since the late 1980s the art scene in countries shaped by Islamic traditions witnessed a burst of artistic activity, expressing a renovated and realistic vision of local culture, promoting the region as a modern and cosmopolitan place. A new generation of artists from a wide range of Islamic countries brought to light an inspiring, innovative, attractive, and sometimes provocative, controversial and persuasive discourse through the use of various media, such as photography, filmmaking, painting, installation, ceramics, digital art, video, and sculpture. Among the various artistic approaches, the individual signature of these artists prompts a contemporary remediation of traditional arts, one example being the use of Arabic script embedded in mixed media formats, and explores the social iniquities, the revolutionary movements, and the human rights violations.

The geography of art has changed drastically since the late 1980s with the emergence of globalisation. Since then, contemporary art was no longer defined, exhibited, criticised, or acquired according to the agency of a specific place. The art world is now scattered into new art worlds established in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, China, India, Latin America through newly founded biennials, art markets, museums, galleries, and festivals.

While major collective exhibitions of 'Islamic' art or Middle Eastern contemporary artists have been noticeable and growing in Europe and the United States in recent years, at this very moment the contemporary art scenes in Saudi Arabia, in Iran, in the United Arab Emirates, in Morocco, Malaysia and Indonesia have been remarkably sprouting with the opening of major contemporary art museums and the development of major art festivals, such as the Jeddah Art Week, “21,39”, Marrakech Biennale, The International Art Festival of Resistance and Abu Dhabi Art Fair, just to name a few.

Lastly, foundations and non-profit social enterprises have been committed to reaching new and global audiences for contemporary ‘Islamic’ art and promoting a broad platform for exchange and dialogue, particularly between the Middle East and the western world. Founded in 2003 by Ahmed Mater, Stephen Stapleton and Abdulnasser Gharem, the Edge of Arabia has been improving the understanding of Saudi Arabian and Middle Eastern contemporary art through exhibitions, publications and public programming.
Facing this new and global perspective in the art world that emerged in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the fine art auctions and private sales of contemporary art from the Islamic world have been increasing fast and significantly in recent years.

The aim of this book, resulting from an academic meeting held at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon in November 2014, is to examine the negotiation between modern and contemporary art from countries shaped by Islamic traditions and the western world, to discuss the notions of 'contemporary Islamic art', to observe how contemporary artists respond to Islamic art and culture in their own work and how Islamic art is exhibited in the context of contemporary museum practice in its purpose to engage an educational relationship with the audience and to assess the impact of media and biennials in the promotion of modern and contemporary 'Islamic' art.

This book does not claim to present a comprehensive perspective on this subject, but solely to make available a set of contributions to the ongoing study of contemporary Islamic art.
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