



“Islamicizing” A Euro/American Curriculum

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Abstract: A curriculum revision task that seems compelling in 2011, ten years after 9/11/2001, is “Islamicizing” my part in an art history and General Education liberal arts curriculum. Standard art history survey texts include historical sections on Islamic visual traditions but decline to integrate new information on the ways in which medieval Islamic scholars contributed to the foundation of the 15th and 16th century Renaissances in Europe, or the ways in which global trade and cultural contact influenced the appearance of visual art of that time and region, and in later centuries. Recent re-evaluators of Islamic cultural contributions make a strong case for a re-definition of “Renaissance” in terms of Islamic impetus. Early Islamic scholars’ claim that faith and reason could co-exist without undue tension, a claim taken up by liberal medieval scholars in Europe, laid a foundation of Renaissance secularization and Humanism. Recent acknowledgment of long-standing European and American anti-Islamic bias makes it problematic to continue considering Muslims as simply “accidental custodians” of Greek and Roman wisdom and culture. Classroom discussion of influential scientific, medical, philosophical and cultural contributions of Islamic scholars, as well as the borrowing by Italian painters from imported Islamic textiles, ceramics, metalwork and Arabic script, is essential to construct a more accurate picture of European/Middle Eastern exchange. Work by contemporary Islamic artists can also help reveal current issues in an evolving Middle Eastern setting, in regard to contemporary Islamic theology and practice and Euro/American political and cultural interrelations. There is much to be gained from an honest, less defensively charged reexamination of Near Eastern cultural contributions and realities.

The curriculum revision task that seems most compelling to me in 2011, ten years after 9/11/2001, and after gender, race and post-colonial studies have helped decolonize the content of my courses, is “Islamicizing” my part in an art and General Education liberal arts curriculum.

I teach the Renaissance to Modern part of an art history survey, to art majors and to students earning General Education credit in the arts, along with more advanced art history courses. The standard art history survey text that I use, by Marilyn Stokstad

and Michael Cothren, as well as others in common use, include historical sections on Islamic visual traditions but decline to integrate new information on the ways in which medieval Islamic scholars contributed to the foundation of the 15th and 16th century Renaissances in Europe, or the ways in which global trade and cultural contact influenced the appearance of visual art of that time and region, and later. This oversight has led me to introduce Renaissance Humanism and image production by venturing outside the required text for a

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more satisfying, more historically accurate version. Like many academics I have indicated to students over the past decades the “orientalist” gaze in European and American visual traditions, for example, in the paintings of Eugene Delacroix or Jean-Leon Gerome, and brought attention to contemporary Islamic artists living in the United States, yet a redefinition of “Renaissance” seemed at hand, based on the growing research in various fields of study.

A most compelling case for a re-definition of “Renaissance” in terms of early Islamic impetus comes from Jonathan Lyons’ *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (2010) and from the work of Jerry Brotton, published in 2003 and 2006. Each scholar has focused on Mediterranean cultural exchange in the Medieval or Renaissance periods, Lyons calling attention to medieval philosophy, theology and science, Brotton to objects received in Italy in global trade and visible in paintings of the era. No doubt many 20th century Islamic scholars have long asserted a key Arab/Berber role in the transformation of European civilization, mostly to deaf ears. Lyons, as well as Mark Graham who published *How Islam Created the Modern World* in 2006, brings attention to the predominance of Euro/American hegemony in the writing of standard Renaissance history.

Lyons contends that early Islamic scholars’ claim that faith and reason could co-exist without undue tension laid the foundation of Renaissance secularization and Humanism. This intellectual compromise between theology and a scientific interest in the natural world was disseminated in Medieval Europe, he points out, by liberal European scholars such as Adelard of Bath who wrote, “Of course God rules the universe. But we may and should enquire into the natural world. The Arabs teach us that.”¹

Lyons traces the formation of medieval European anti-Muslim propaganda from 1009 onward, in relation to the sacking of

Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulcher by Muslims and European millennial fears. From that point on Muslim civilization was identified in the minds of many Europeans with cruelty, deception and sexual deviancy,² much as it has been until recently and continues to be in the minds of some. I ask students in my courses to enumerate Muslim stereotypes they have encountered and generally find them familiar with the following: all Muslims as oil rich, as fanatics and terrorists, overly enamored of female belly dancers, living in one big desert in the Middle East, living in medieval times, unable to adapt to the current world, and oppressive to women, among others.

In introducing students to the notion that contact with the Near Eastern Islamic world laid the ground work for Renaissance renewals in Italy and Northern Europe, I point out that until the late 20th century Muslims were considered “accidental custodians” of Greek and Roman wisdom and culture, with ancient texts by Aristotle and Plato, among others, and passed them down to Italians in Arabic language.³ European and American scholars have begrudged or denied Muslims the intellectual innovation and scientific discovery that is their due and assumed that Muslims simply passed on ancient knowledge via Arabic copies of ancient texts, ancient knowledge that acted as a catalyst for a great revival of art, literature and learning in Europe beginning in the 14th century.

To ground my assertions I introduce students to some of the scientific and philosophical advances that issued from centers such as Baghdad, Antioch and Toledo, and familiarize them with the work of several

¹ Margaret Gibson. “Adelard of Bath,” in *Adelard of Bath: An English Scientist and Arabist of the Early Twelfth Century*, Charles Burnett, ed. (London: Warburg Institute, 1987), p. 14.

² Jonathan Lyons. *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), pp.49-50.

³ Mark A. Graham. *How Islam Created the Modern World* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2006) p. 75.

Muslim scholars dating from the 8th century onward. Muslim scholars from that era have been long familiar figures in the academic world, yet their contributions have been until recently undeservedly undervalued.

First I show students a map charting active trade routes during the late medieval era to demonstrate the breadth of contact among European and Middle Eastern and West Asian polities. The map underscores my description of the Baghdad House of Wisdom, a center for intellectual study with scholars brought from around the near globe and active from the 9th to the 13th centuries. One such scholar is al-Khwarizm (c. 780-c. 850), a Persian mathematician and astronomer whose work on arithmetic, algebra, the astrolabe and Arabic numerals strongly influenced Europe. The second is Avicenna (Ab Al Sn, born in Persia, now Uzbekistan, 980-1037), whose *Canon of Medicine* was a standard text in many European medieval universities, and who is known for the discovery of contagious and sexually transmitted diseases, evidence-based medicine and randomized controlled trials, among other discoveries. The medical science and discoveries of Avicenna seem each time to stun students, who assume that those same discoveries were made in the 20th century in Europe or the United States. Third is Averroes (Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd, born in Cordoba, 1126-1198) who extended Aristotle's work on logic, and argued persuasively to liberal Europeans like Adelard of Bath that there is no conflict between philosophy and religion; he made innovative contributions to medicine, celestial mechanics and psychology. The class is fascinated to find Averroes represented in Raphael's Vatican fresco *The School of Athens* among a large group of ancient intellectuals and innovators. Last is Geber (Abu Musa Jabir Ibn Hayyan, born in Seville, c. 721-c. 815) generally considered in America and Europe as the father of chemistry, and who influenced Jewish, Islamic and Christian astronomers. My ordering of these scholars has less to do with chronology than my own

sense of the weight of their innovations and a teaching strategy that builds emphasis over the four. They do not exhaust the list of early Islamic scholar innovators, but seem a good place to start familiarizing students with some of these creative historical figures.

A rather startling new awareness for my students, the majority of whom come from Christian family backgrounds, is the demonstration of pseudo-kufic script in the haloes of Mary and Christ in Italian Renaissance paintings. Without understanding Arabic script, Renaissance painters responded to the geometric interlacing and supple cursive style in kufic lettering as a decorative feature enhancing the golden discs around the figures' heads. Such script appeared in Italy boldly enlarged in a wide band surrounding the center of imported brass trays, highly polished enough to suggest a luminous halo, and elegant enough for use behind the heads of the most sacred religious figureheads of the era. Gentile da Fabriano's golden and maroon *Madonna and Child* (c. 1422, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.) serves an example of this usage in my class lecture. The fact that Renaissance artists found no religious contradiction in borrowing from Islamic stylized script seems for students a mind-opening model for the possibility of divining no cultural or religious contradiction at present, post 9/11.

Items from Mediterranean luxury trade played a key role in the holy family's elevation to elite aristocratic consumer. Ceramic jars, imported from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, appeared in Italian paintings of the 15th century. These decorative objects are seen on cupboard shelves or tables in Italian paintings, signaling the elite status of Mary in an Annunciation or other religious scene. In Filippino Lippi's *The Annunciation* (1482, Museo Civico, San Gimignano) the jar in the small cupboard above and behind Mary was probably used in its place of origin for aromatics, sweet meats, or medicinal herbs.⁴

Italian Renaissance religious paintings also demonstrate multiple artists' borrowing from Middle Eastern textiles and textile decoration. Sumptuously embroidered edgings of Mary and Christ's garments show the strong appeal of imported and elaborately floral textile designs, as in Gentile da Fabriano's work mentioned above and in *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (possibly by Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431–1506, National Gallery, Washington D.C.) The Islamic ceremonial tent in the painting also reflects an elite borrowing for purposes of enhancing Judith's status as well as, perhaps, an attempt at some measure of historical accuracy for a Middle Eastern scene described in the *Old Testament*. Yet it is the Islamic carpet that strikes the highest note of elite status for Mary and Christ, as well as for the upper crust of Renaissance society in Italian portraits. Andrea Mantegna's *San Zeno Altarpiece* (1457-60, San Zeno, Verona) shows mother and child in an elaborate setting fit for king and queen, with Mary's feet resting on an Anatolian carpet.⁵ In the 16th century, portraits of Italian luminaries featured other imported and treasured carpets as well, for example in Sebastiano del Piombo's *Cardinal Bandinello Sauli* (1516, National Gallery, Washington, D. C.), where the cardinal rests his hand on a thickly piled Islamic carpet covering the table before him, carpet sharing the deep red coloration of his own hierarchical clerical attire. Middle Eastern carpets of similar origin appear in early 18th century American group portraits in a conscious styling after Renaissance and later examples. John Smibert's *The Bermuda Group* (1729-1731, Yale University Art Gallery) and Robert Feke's *Isaac Royall and His Family* (1741, Harvard Law School, Harvard University) are the most prominent exam-

⁴ See Rosamond E. Mack. *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) for a lengthy discussion of this and other borrowings.

⁵ *Ibid.*

ples of this self-consciously Europeanizing practice.

Some of the most explicit Islamic stereotypes are visualized and already well known in the paintings by Eugene Delacroix, Dominique Ingres and French academics of the nineteenth century. Arab fighters engage to the death; women lounge indolently, with opium pipe nearby, in never visited (by European men) yet imagined North African harems; ruthless Ottoman executioners sever heads inches from viewers with blood trickling toward them, as in Henri Regnault's, *Execution without Judgment under the Moorish Kings of Granada* (1870, Musee d'Orsay, Paris).

In the realm of the present contemporary and globalized art environment, I use work by Islamic artists who consciously engage in an aesthetic dialogue with Amero/European stereotypes in a variety of media and others who express some of the contradictions felt as person of faith in our globalized world. I have presented these in my seminars on race, gender and class, as well as on issues in contemporary art. The artists I choose engage in overt polemics, to suit the construction of my seminars. Yet a few international exhibitions outside the region of the Middle East and northern Africa have presented a far wider range of contemporary Islamic art in various media. In 2006 the British Museum mounted an exhibition entitled *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, with a theme of artists adapting Arabic script to their own contemporary aesthetic needs. In early 2011 the Bank of Brazil Cultural Centre in Sao Paulo sponsored *Islam: Art and Civilization* which spanned from the 8th to 21st centuries. Also in April of 2011 the Michael Berger Gallery in Pittsburg mounted *Dis[Locating] Culture: Contemporary Islamic Art in America*.

In my course on issues in contemporary art I have presented work by Todd Drake, an American native who has embarked on a photographic project instigating photographic self-portraits of Islamic immigrants settled in North Carolina. These, he hopes,

will contribute to the dismantling of stereotypes by showing the American public the diverse and non-threatening faces of their neighbors.⁶ *Halona*, from this series, (see figure 1) shows a girl by that name posing wistfully next to a wooden school desk; having felt the sting of bias at school, she now learns solitarily at a computer rather than sit among her classmates at a conventional school desk.



Figure 1. Todd Drake, *Halona*, from Muslim self-portrait series, 2008.
© Todd Drake. Image used by permission.

Shadi Ghadirian, an Iranian photographer living in Iran but exhibiting internationally, expresses, on the other hand, some of the contractions that women face in Iran today, contradictions between tradition and the modernity of a globalized world. Her *Qajar Series*, executed between 1998 and 2001 (see figure 2), imitates studio portraits of women dressed in a nineteenth-century Qajar style, and posed for mostly by the artist's friends and family. Ghadirian consciously borrows from painted backgrounds found in photographic studios of that period, yet creates cultural dissonances by subtly and stylishly adding a contemporary items such as a newspaper or a Pepsi-Cola can. The visual effect can catapult an observer into a cascade of puzzlement, doubt and intrigue in sorting out the impli-

⁶ See www.unc.academia.edu/ToddDrake for a short description of this project.

cations of the juxtaposition for an Islamic woman in contemporary Iranian society.⁷



Figure 2. Shadi Ghadirian, #4, from *Qajar Series*, 1998.
© Shadi Ghadirian. Image used by permission.

Lalla Essaydi's large scale harem photographs, recently exhibited in New York where she lives, examine the historical role of the Muslim woman. She has photographed women in traditionally tiled and carved harem architecture and she explained regarding that work: "The physical harem is the dangerous frontier where sacred law and pleasure collide. This is not the harem of the Western Orientalist imagination, an anxiety-free place of euphoria and the absence of constraints, where the word 'harem' has lost its dangerous edge. My harem is based on the historical reality, rather than the artistic images of the West—

⁷ Work by Ghadirian may be viewed at the Saatchi Gallery website: www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/shadi_ghadirian.htm?section_name=unveiled.

an idyllic, lustful dream of sexually available women, uninhibited by the moral constraints of 19th Century Europe.”⁸ Essaydi grew up in Morocco and lived for a time in Saudi Arabia before settling in New York City.

Perhaps the most celebrated Muslim artist in the United States and Europe is the Persian video artist Shirin Neshat. Her video series addresses, without overt polemics, some of the complexities of the social, political and psychological dimensions of contemporary Islamic women's experience. A DVD of her *Women without Men* by IndiePix Films was recently released in February of this year.

My current students are often startled by a discussion of Middle Eastern Islamic innovation, not having heard any of the material before in another course, and seem open to a reevaluation of Middle Eastern cultures, perhaps in light of a greater temporal distance from 9/11. While I teach in the field of visual culture history, art historical images can be useful in other non-visual fields as documents and as trappings of myth, as catalysts for classroom discussions of anti-Islamic bias, past and present, and are readily available on the internet. Medieval Islamic scholars made contributions to almost every field of endeavor, yielding opportunities for similar and academic field-based discussion. Contemporary Islamic artists' works can offer opportunities to focus on the complex aesthetics of Arabic script, of diverse strategies of image construction, of contemporary political and social issues, here and in the Middle East, and reveal issues of Islamic identity here and abroad.

My students also gain, I believe, from a short outlining of types of resistance to a revision of Renaissance history—for example, the discounting of any medieval Islamic

cultural renaissance since it was not followed by industrialization or a “modern” nation state. Like others in various academic fields, I warn them against lumping all Middle Eastern cultures into a homogeneous unit, whether Islamic or otherwise, since cultural, religious, and ethnic traditions can vary significantly from region to region. There is much to be gained by all from an honest, less defensively charged reexamination of Near Eastern cultural contributions and cultural realities.

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⁸ See the posting at the Houk Gallery website where the exhibition took place in late 2010 to early 2011: www.houkgallery.com/exhibitions/2010-11-04_lalla-essaydi/.