

## ARTS OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD IN THE LOUVRE: EXPERIENCING THE NEW GALLERIES

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I confess to more than a little hubris in venturing to write on this subject. But the occasion of the opening of the stunning new galleries for the Louvre's magnificent collection of the arts of the Islamic world seemed too important to pass by. What follows are some first impressions, based on an all too brief few hours in those galleries a few days after their formal opening in September of this year and on a reading of the catalogue published for the occasion. To do full justice to the material would take time and expertise of another order.

The exhibition actually combines two collections – that of the Louvre and that of the Musée des Arts décoratifs – comprising together what has long been known as one of the most comprehensive assemblages of Islamic art anywhere. Yet it was only less than a decade ago that the Louvre finally got around to creating a separate curatorial department for the arts of Islam. The old, cramped galleries hardly did justice to the material, but the challenge was to carve out new space in ways that accommodated the historic

(below) Fig. 1. View from the entrance to the new Islamic galleries.

(right) Fig. 2. View of the lower gallery, where a display of important carpets occupies center stage.



architecture of the building. The solution represents the most radical architectural addition to the museum since the installation of I. M. Pei's glass pyramid in the central courtyard. Architects Rudy Ricciotti, Mario Bellini and Renaud Piérard designed totally new galleries on two levels occupying the formerly empty space of the Visconti courtyard. The upper (ground) level rests under an undulating translucent roof that is, perhaps, reminiscent of a nomadic tent, open to the sides so that one sees the lower walls and windows of the historic building (Fig. 1). Below this, underground, is an even larger space housing the largest part of the collection. A virtue of the new arrangement is its easy access to other parts of the Louvre collections which help one to situate Islamic arts in a broader context, notably the newly opened permanent displays of the arts of the Mediterranean world in late Antiquity. If there is a drawback to the new design, it lies primarily in the fact that the flood of light from the sides into the upper gallery reflects off the display cases and can make it very difficult to view their contents. One wonders whether in fact it may not be necessary to add some side curtains, even if this then will undercut the architectural concept of connecting the new and old spaces of the museum.

The galleries' virtues include first of all their spaciousness – much more of this outstanding material now is on permanent display than ever before. The openness of the space, especially on the lower level, allows for visual contextualization across time, geography and medium (Figs. 2, 3). The art has a chance to "breathe," and for certain of the displays its positioning can to a degree replicate that which





(above) Fig. 3. View in the lower gallery.

(right) Fig. 4. A reconstructed wall of Iznik tiles as they might have appeared in an Ottoman mosque.

one would have experienced at the sites for which the works were first created. In particular this is true for the reconstruction of how Iznik tiles would have been placed on the wall of an Ottoman mosque (Fig. 4), though to place selections of individual smaller tiles way up on other walls, as has been done here for other sites without regard to where the tiles originally had been positioned, can have the opposite impact of making them difficult to see and appreciate. One of the most striking accomplishments of the new installation was the



(right) Fig. 5. A composite image showing the Mamluk porch ceiling from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

(below) Fig. 6. View of the "Phoenix mosaic" floor from Daphne, a suburb of Antioch [Antakya] on the Orontes River, Turkey, 6<sup>th</sup> century CE (Inv. no. AGER, Ma 3442).



technically challenging mounting of an elaborately carved 15<sup>th</sup>-century entrance corridor's ceiling dome from Cairo. As the covering of a passage between two gallery spaces it functions in the same way it would have in its original setting (Fig. 5). Of particular value in the architectural design of the gallery is the fact that one can look down, as from a balcony, on the impressive display of floor mosaics of late Antiquity from the Near East, which occupy the space adjoining the Islamic art on the lower level (Fig. 6). Given the extent of these mosaics, a view from above is really essential for their full appreciation, and





Fig. 7. Objects in case no. 22A (*"The Iranian World and its Borders: From the East of Iran to Central Asia, 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries"*), where the general description indicates altogether too vaguely: *"The objects unearthed in these regions attest to the homogeneity of productions in an area encompassing eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. They illustrate a common material culture..."* Clockwise from upper left, inventory nos. MAO 434, MAO 830, MAO 402, MAO 415, MAO 1256, MAO 1248.

of course their proximity serves as a vivid reminder of the fact that this art was part of the heritage of the world of early Islam.

The old Islamic galleries at the Louvre were organized in a conventional way by chronology and geographical/political region. In the new display, while to a degree there is a chronological sequence, and there are at least some sections where material is grouped by the geography of where it was produced

(Fig. 7), there are as well many thematic sections, exploring techniques, particular elements of style or subject matter, illustrating patterns of patronage that cut across periods, and so on (Fig. 8). Of particular importance in the material grouped by geography are the finds made at Susa in southwestern Iran, famous for the French excavations of the ancient Mesopotamian and Achaemenid levels (major displays of this early material may be found in the Ancient Near East galleries), but less well known for

Fig. 8. Objects illustrating how literary subjects make their way into the visual arts of ceramics used for architectural decoration, the three examples all from Iran at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and depicting Bahram Gur and his slave girl Azade, an episode from the epic *Shahnama*. Left to right, inventory nos. MAO 256/3, 431, and 1221.





Fig. 9. A stucco frieze from the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, found at Susa (MAO S. 1843). The photo is a composite of several images. For a fuller appreciation of early Islamic stucco, one needs to see the examples from Samarra, housed in Berlin, and visit the few sites (notably the congregational mosque in Nain, Iran), where there still is a substantial amount in situ.

the abundant Islamic period finds which now receive their due in several of the displays here (Fig. 9). While the cases are numbered sequentially, that does not necessarily mean that there is thematic continuity from one to the next; it seems unlikely that most viewers would in any event follow the numbered sequence. Significantly, there seems to have been a conscious effort to avoid making distinctions between “secular” and “religious” art, an approach which in fact is quite appropriate where so much of the material we think of as “Islamic” in fact has no explicit religious content.

Major captioning is in French, English and Spanish, but the majority of the specific item captions are only in French. While I did not use it, I understand that the audio guide is still rather limited in the number of items it covers, but perhaps it will be re-designed to include much more material. Increasingly I appreciate the virtues of audio guides, since they permit one

to look at the art and not be distracted by straining to read printed text, and it is possible in the audio guides to have varying levels of detail as options for those wanting more of an in-depth treatment than that printed on most captions.

The Louvre has been a pioneer among museums in producing audio-visual material, its website being one of the first to provide extensive selections of key objects with more than the usual perfunctory captioning information. It was possible too to do a “walk-through”

of the old Islamic galleries on-line, examining the individual contents of each display case. One can hope that a fully illustrated feature such as this will become available for the new Islamic galleries.

Apart from what may eventually be on the website, the museum has provided in the new galleries some video displays, though more is needed here. One of them offers an overview of political history (focussing, somewhat oddly, on the institution of slave soldiers in the Islamic world). In a corner of the lower gallery is a circular “learning center” with seats and several interactive monitors on which one can explore literature and famous writers across the Islamic centuries (Fig. 10). On an adjoining wall, but with no proper seating in front of it, is a continuous video projection (in French) illustrating from works of art the multiplicity of religious traditions in the Islamic world, this perhaps the most explicit nod in the exhibits to contemporary concerns about multiculturalism. Particularly informative is the video display next to the installation of the Cairo entrance dome. In it we learn a lot about provenance and restoration, if less about the artistic connections and style.

The catalogue published in conjunction with the opening of the new galleries is in its own right a stunning achievement in its conceptualization and visually (the latter, thanks to superb photography and production values). Nearly three decades ago, the noted specialist on Islamic art Oleg Grabar (to whom the current catalogue is dedicated) wrote, “A catalogue is true to its most obvious *raison d’être* when it reflects most forcefully, most intelligently, and most beautifully the peculiarities of a given collection, not an arbitrarily extracted group of artifacts.”<sup>1</sup> This certainly is the case here, where there is substantial emphasis on the history of the Louvre collections, and, insofar as the book lays out a history of the art, it is told through the lens of the many gems the museum has acquired. Grabar also suggested that there is a



Fig. 10. Viewing the interactive monitors in the “study” area.



need too for other kinds of catalogues, thematic in organization and interpretive in emphasis.

It would seem that Sophie Makariou and her collaborators at least *tried* here to balance these several approaches, a balance which is reflected as well in the organization of the material in the gallery space. That is, each historic period is introduced by a fairly conventional introductory section laying out the context of political developments (some superb color maps, also available in the gallery in a video display, illustrate the complex changes over time) and then summarizing the distinctive developments in the arts in that period. Next come subject essays, whose generic topics recur for each of the following chronological eras represented in the later sections of the book. As she suggests, readers who want to explore such topics as architectural decoration, calligraphy, or some of the key urban environments which were centers of artistic production can link those sections and postpone reading material in between. Indeed, to read the book straight through does not provide a coherent narrative, as there is a lot of movement back and forth chronologically, geographically and thematically. After the introductory essays to each section, there is a “florilegium” highlighting individual “masterpieces” and whose essays are a kind of “history of the object.” That is, they build around a particular work a narrative which may at one point emphasize provenance and history, at another style or technique, and in general invite the reader to explore wider connections. Authors seem to have had considerable leeway in their essays to develop a particular emphasis, but this then sometimes leads to odd results. An example is in the discussion of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century painted reproductions of the famous Umayyad Mosque mosaics in Damascus (Fig. 11),

important, yes, for information on the state of some of the mosaics before later unsuccessful “restorations.” In focussing on the circumstances of the paintings’ production, the essay (pp. 80–84) glosses over why the mosaics themselves are so important and totally ignores the disputed question of what they may have meant for Caliph al-Walid and his artists.

The overall effect of the approach in the catalogue is to suggest that the arts of the Islamic world are many and varied and that one should not be thinking of “Islamic art” as some kind of unified entity informed in the first instance by religious precepts. Appropriate as that is, the book will disappoint those who hope to find in it a coherent discussion of what Islamic art may or may not be. As Grabar has written, “...The artistic experience of the Muslim world in over 1,400 years is too rich, too varied, and too complex to lend itself to a single message, a single voice, or a single explanation. No one person can master its intricacies with the accuracy and commitment it deserves, and it would be a betrayal of its history to limit it to one formal system or to one set of explanations.”<sup>2</sup> Precisely for this reason, it would have been appropriate, given the dedication of the book to Grabar (and the fact that up until his death a year ago he had been a consultant on the new installation for the Louvre), had the catalogue included an essay by him addressing that challenge, since he thought so long and creatively about it.<sup>3</sup> If this catalogue falls short then, it is in the interpretive realm.

Of course to say that is a bit unfair: Grabar himself probably would have agreed that the fault, if so it be, is inherent in the genre of “collection catalogue.” Its audience is a general one which probably will find the material challenging enough as it is. Despite all the advances in the scholarly analysis of Islamic art since

Grabar wrote, one comes away with the impression that little progress has been made in hugely important subjects — for example, the classification and technical analysis of ceramics that still all too vaguely are provenanced as being from “northeastern Iran or Central Asia.” As Grabar recognized, a catalogue such as this is can hardly be expected to break new ground.

The essays try to contextualize individual pieces with reference



Fig. 11. Paintings made in 1929 of the early 8<sup>th</sup>-century mosaics on the walls of the gallery in the northern courtyard of the Umayyad congregational mosque, Damascus. Inventory nos. MAO 2074 etc.

to analogous examples or to the original settings in which the objects were located, but generally without providing any comparative visual material. Perhaps it would be too much to expect the inclusion of even small photographs of comparable material in other museums' collections. However, in cases where the discussion involves developments such as the emergence of the "beveled" style in early stucco and wood carving (Fig. 12) or focuses on particular influences (for example, Chinese design in ceramics) (Fig. 13), being able to see the comparative material would have been hugely helpful to those being introduced here to Islamic art. In fact it is impossible to appreciate fully the creativity of the artists and craftsmen of the Islamic world without seeing such comparisons. One might wish as well that some comparative examples of the art itself had been included alongside the Islamic pieces in the displays.



(left) Fig. 12. Carved wooden panel with a "bird-flower," late 9<sup>th</sup>-early 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, Egypt (Inv. No. OA 6023).

(above) Fig. 14. Dado in the tomb chamber of Abd al-Samid at Natanz, showing where the cross- and star-shaped tile mosaic once was, surmounted by a frieze of larger lustre-ware tiles with a Quranic inscription. Photo taken in 2010.

I suppose it is a truism to say that a visit to the Louvre (or any other major museum) can feel like jumping into the deep end of a pool without being able to swim. Certainly the size and scope of the Louvre's Islamic collection require multiple visits – there is no quick fix. Ideally a visitor might first absorb what is in this catalogue, but few will afford it (at 39 euros it is really a bargain) and even fewer would carry its 3 plus kilos

in unwieldy large format into the galleries. Perhaps much of its content can eventually be transferred to the audio guide and put on the website. Those who do not read French can access at least part of the collection in print and in English via the catalogue produced for the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Istanbul, which hosted an exhibition of the Safavid, Ottoman and Mughal material at a time when the galleries in Paris had been closed for the remodeling.<sup>4</sup>



There certainly are gaps the museum might fill by some additional captioning and interactive displays in the galleries, though to do so always will run the risk of distracting from viewing the art itself. Thinking just about ceramic tiles, in which the collection is particularly rich, there really is insufficient information to appreciate their placement and context, and, where we know or are pretty sure of the buildings from which they came, the significance of those sites. Granted, I say this from a particular personal perspective, having visited some of the stunning examples of Ottoman mosques still resplendant with their Iznik tiles, and seen Takht-i Suleyman and the Natanz shrine of Abd al-Samad in Iran, where, alas, there is nothing left of this ceramic glory *in situ* on the interiors (Fig. 14). The reconstructed wall of Ottoman tiles in the Louvre

Fig. 13. Dish with a peony design, based on Chinese "blue-and-white" porcelains, Iran, late 15<sup>th</sup>-early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Inv. no. MAO 710).





Fig. 15. Iznik tile panels on the balcony walls of the Mosque of Ahmed I (1609–17) (“The Blue Mosque”), Istanbul. As the Louvre’s display illustrates in separate sets of panels, there was a noted decline in the quality of Iznik tile production in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The section in the left image here is undoubtedly inferior to that on the right, whose high quality tiles were made originally for placement in the Topkapı Saray palace in the 1570s and 1580s. The tiling of an entire wall as shown here is a good parallel to the reconstructed panels displayed in the Louvre, whereas the image from the Piyale Pasha Mosque in Istanbul on p. 348 of the catalogue shows only a tiled mihrab and frieze, albeit in the mosque from which the Louvre’s tiled tympanum (Inv. OA 7509) supposedly comes.

display comes closest to what is desirable here, though to explain the component parts and lay them out on the wall still falls short of giving a sense of context (cf. Fig. 15). The two Iranian sites have at least brief treatments in the catalogue (pp. 244–46 and 248–50, the latter including Sheila Blair’s stunning picture of the muqarnas cupola at Natanz, but no illustration of the still magnificent tiled façade. Yet there are only cryptic captions in the gallery. One of the most evocative pieces in the whole collection is the Safavid tile garden (Paradise?) scene (in the catalogue, pp. 344–46) (Fig. 16), one of several such examples in

museums outside of Iran.<sup>5</sup> For contextualization in a Safavid garden setting, the Louvre catalogue has a picture of the exterior of the Chihil Sutun pavilion in Isfahan, but does not show any of its paintings, which include analogous images (Figs. 17a, b). Examples

Fig. 16. Persian garden scene, Safavid period, mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (Inv. no. OA 3340). Such garden scenes abound in Persian miniatures of the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.



(below) Fig. 17a, b. a) A painted panel in the main hall of the Chihil Sutun, placed below the large scenes depicting key moments of Safavid history. While the pavilion was erected and first decorated in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, following a disastrous fire it was re-painted in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the painting supposedly reproducing faithfully the original designs. b) Other rooms in the building also contain painted garden scenes such as that on this lunette, whose date may be uncertain. Photos taken in 2010.



such as these sites, which can suggest a wide range of connections with other parts of the collection, invite special treatment, not the least of which might be interactive three-dimensional computerized reconstructions of some of the architectural spaces and their decoration to display alongside the actual tiles.

The most sustained essay in the catalogue is the final section of some 80 pages devoted to the arts of the book, intended as a way of pulling together some of the threads concerning the essence of Islamic arts. In her introduction to the catalogue, Sophie Makariou alerts the reader that a similarly expansive treatment of the arts of the book will not be found in the galleries – there, the display of manuscripts is very limited, given the need to protect them against deterioration. So, unlike in the case of, say, ceramics, the arts of the book will be regularly rotated.

All the more reason, for those who can be in Paris, to return again and again to visit the new Islamic galleries. Many of the pieces are familiar friends, which have long been chosen as the very best examples to illustrate the history of Islamic arts. But now one can really appreciate the depth of the collection and make new acquaintances, all in one of the most inviting museum spaces ever created. The administrators, curators, architects and sponsors (the principal donor was the Alwaleed bin Talal Foundation) all deserve accolades.

## Notes

1. Oleg Grabar, "On Catalogues, Exhibitions, and Complete Works," *Muqarnas* 4 (1987), p. 5.

2. Oleg Grabar, "Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art," *Muqarnas* 1 (1983), p. 12.

3. Inter alia, see Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Pr., 1987), Ch. 1.

4. *Istanbul, Isfahan, Delhi. 3 Capitals of Islamic Art. Masterpieces from the Louvre Collection* (Istanbul: Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi, 2008).

5. As the catalogue indicates, the Metropolitan Museum in New York has three panels, Rogers Fund acq. nos. 039a-c; there is one in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Inv. no. 139: 1 to 4 - 1891). All these can be viewed online on the respective websites. Another, detached panel, on display in the Chihil Sutun, apparently is a modern reproduction (see *Les Arts*, p. 509, n. 11 in the section on the Louvre panel), although there is some evidence that the decor of the pavilion originally may have included such ceramic panels.