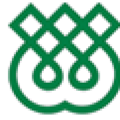

The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Title: ***Whose Memory? Re-thinking Orientalist and Occidental Conceptualisations of 'Islamic Art'***

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Abstract: In this reflective piece the author utilises a quote by cultural historian James Clifford to deconstruct the orientalist bias in museums when curating exhibitions of 'Islamic Art'. He asks important questions about the generic term 'Islamic art,' and how narrow or broad this is in scope. Within this context, the author also reflects on the omission of Ismaili arts and what it would mean if they were included.

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Whose Memory? Re-thinking Orientalist and Occidental Conceptualisations of 'Islamic Art'.

Professor Karim H.Karim

This is an edited version of an article that was written for the IIS Alumni Newsletter 2012.

ABSTRACT

In this reflective piece the author utilises a quote by cultural historian James Clifford to deconstruct the orientalist bias in museums when curating exhibitions of 'Islamic Art'. He asks important questions about the generic term 'Islamic art,' and how narrow or broad this is in scope. Within this context, the author also reflects on the omission of Ismaili arts and what it would mean if they were included.

The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art's expanded 'Islamic galleries' carries spectacular displays of calligraphy, miniatures, glassware, rock crystal, woodwork, metal artefacts and jewellery from various periods. However, following many decades of viewing such exhibitions, and especially in anticipation of the opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, one ponders on the choices made by curators and the cumulative impact this has on visitors.

The cultural historian James Clifford has noted that:

> *What is at stake is something more than conventional museum programmes of community education and 'outreach'. Current developments question the very status of museums as historical-cultural theatres of memory. Whose memory? For what purposes? (Clifford, 1993, 72)*

Even though Clifford wrote this two decades ago, most displays of the art produced in Muslim-majority lands reflect long-standing orientalist museological tendencies, categorising objects according to period, geographic location or the ruling dynasty in whose territories they were produced or found (Said, 1978). The perspectives and memories of these societies' common people are rarely reflected.

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Exhibitions of beautifully painted miniature illustrations, skilful calligraphic renditions, delicately carved wood, glass and rock crystal, silken *tiraz* tapestries, brass objects finely inlaid with ivory and silver, and filigreed gold jewellery have been dazzling museum visitors in various parts of the world. Galleries usually map out artefacts from specific times and places in sectioned spaces, rarely displaying pluralistic interactions between peoples. In this, they depict the plurality, that is, diversity of Muslim cultures – but not necessarily their pluralism (i.e., inter-group engagement).

These displays primarily exhibit elite arts rather than the materials related to the lives of people who are outside the circles of power. Innovative exhibitions and museum programmes that are centred on the latter rather than the elites are able to portray more effectively the social phenomena occurring in broader society. This is demonstrated in the permanent display of Malaysia's Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, which exhibits local religious and cultural life through artefacts and old photographs.

However, the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur, the country's capital, conforms to the dominant mode of displaying primarily the elite arts, which – to use the cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy's words – plays 'occidental rationality at its own game' (Gilroy, 1993, 38) rather than re-thinking the received discourses of presenting one's cultural heritage.

Rarely does one hear an analysis of the commonly used term 'Islamic Art'. Is it meant to denote that all artefacts categorised as such are of a religious nature, i.e., related to Islamic worship or theology? We know this would not be correct since many of the materials in displays of 'Islamic art' depict various non-religious aspects of life. Does the term then refer to the artists, implying that they were all Muslim? We also know that this was often not the case; for example, many craftsmen who contributed to the building of mosques and *madrasa*s in India were Hindu. Does 'Islamic art' refer to a Muslim cultural ethos? If that is true, how then should we view the artefacts like the 13th -14th century d'Arenberg basin in the British Museum's collection, which is described as an 'example of Islamic art with Christian subject matter' portraying 'the resurrection of Lazarus' (Cardini, 2012, 141)?

Apart from objects from the Fatimid period, artistic materials related to Ismailis almost never appear in major public exhibitions. If judged only from the perspective of 'high art' produced under court patronage, it would be difficult to identify many Ismaili artefacts worthy of placement in museums. The relentless persecution and marginalisation of the post-Fatimid community over many centuries weakened its organisational structures, and the creative output by Ismailis in Syria, Iran, Badakhshan and India under these circumstances was largely of a folk nature.

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Nonetheless, it constitutes the transnational community's heritage of more than 800 years. This legacy, along with the art, architecture, literature and music developed in the diasporic regions of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, eastern Asia, Europe and North America in more recent times, bears the most tangible communal memories of contemporary Ismailis.

The picture that would emerge from including imaginative displays of Ismaili folk art of the last few centuries in museum exhibits would have the possibility of presenting a dynamic and topical understanding of this contemporary Muslim group. It would help to uncover some of the roots of the current resurgence of the community that is engaging in a unique Islamic interaction with modernity.

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