Art and Islam in South Africa: A Reflection

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I have developed a ritual as a traveller, in every big city I visit, of going to the Islamic Art sections of its museums. In October 1999 I visited an exhibit of ancient 'Ikat' silks in the Art Institute of Chicago. These textiles, produced by Muslim and Jewish weavers of Central Asia, were used for clothing and trade. The Ikat silks were made using a very specific technology of dyeing and weaving. They have a pearly lustre and a slightly blurred effect, called *abr* from the Persian word signifying 'cloud', arising from complex, highly coloured patterns and their singular method of weaving (Thurman, 1999). The results are startlingly beautiful.

Looking at art is not something I do often in the course of my academic research. Since I am interested in media images of Islam in South Africa, I spend many hours paging through old newspapers in the South African National Library. After looking at many decades of newspaper coverage, I started to discern patterns in the images and stories I found. However, it took me a long time to recognize what I was *not* seeing. While reading international newspapers, I found a candidate for what was missing: an awareness of the complexity, depth and variety of human practices and motivations that one finds in art. What coverage of art and Islam was available? I found it notable that in European and American media, celebratory stories about the exquisite beauty of carpets, architecture, clothing, jewellery, and music produced in various Muslim societies appears frequently on the arts pages, in some ways providing a counterpoint to, yet not supplanting, the ferociously stereotyped Arabs which populated the front pages.

On the other hand, the sense of Islamic art as objects from past eras of sovereigns seemed to confirm a lingering notion of the decadence of the East. Moreover, in references on opulent monarchs, it contradicts what Ziauddin Sardar called the "deeply democratic spirit to creativity in Islam". To Shamil Jeppie of the Historical Studies Department at UCT, the contemporary fascination with Islamic art is also related to the niche market for Asian and 'Oriental' art, which is elitist and very profitable. Major museum exhibitions of Islamic art often coincide with the selling

season at Sotheby's and Christie's in London and New York. The centrality of London and a few centres in the United States to the scholarship and sale of Islamic art is also a legacy of colonialism. In fact, the holdings of many museums are swollen by artefacts taken from the cultures that produced them.

So, while I took pleasure in their descriptions of little-seen forms of art, I noted that many articles on art showed a somewhat disembodied interest in objects that seemed to have little to do with the people who produced them. In fact, it has long been possible in the West to pay attention to Islamic art while remaining almost immune to knowledge of the complex realities of people who are Muslim. Notably, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, scholars who work on Islamic art in the West have been attempting to speak differently, to show that it is not the case that 'the Muslim world has no culture or civilization, no arts or literature or even opportunities for recreation; [nor] that Muslims apparently have nothing better to do that sit about hating others' (Hussein, 2001). Art may be a route toward an interiority that subverts the solipsism that has sometimes characterized discussions of Islamic art.

In South Africa, what connects art and Islam? As reflected in the media, art and Islam seem to have little to do with each other.

Walking into art

In the Great Mosque of the Ummayid dynasty at Cordoba, with its soaring columns and vaulted interior, in the palace of Alhambra and its elaborate and infinitely patterned mosaics and tiles, where is the *centre*, and where the *end point* of space? To enter these spaces means to enter a definitively different perspective in relation to art, and sacredness.

Since 1996, with the start of the Pagad story, images of the Masjidul Quds, in Gatesville near Cape Town, have become an icon for conflict in the South African media. This view is always from outside, the result of a cursory gaze. However, in describing the experience of entering Masjidul Quds, Soraya Abdulatief, a feminist scholar and news media specialist, provides an alternative vision of the significance of the mosque. It is, she says, a place of great beauty, a beauty capable of changing consciousness. She points particularly to the exquisite detail on the ceiling of the

mosque, the ornate mouldings of the stone pillars, its serene blue dome – and through these details, the creation of spiritual space within the building. Amid such artistry, and the tranquillity it establishes, 'your spirit is actually nourished'.

She notes that similar mouldings created by local artisans can be found in the homes of many Muslim people in Cape Town. To Abdulatief, the attention paid to the beauty of mosques even in poorer Muslim communities 'signals an expression of love and the depth and complexity that exists within the people.' This is very important, she feels. She points out that too often conflict is the main theme which Muslim people see in their lives. There are, of course, very real questions about land, space, identity and belief that face Muslim communities. Yet, 'every time that it's resurrected it confirms the Muslim idea that they are under attack.' Attack and defence are too narrow a pattern on which to build our lives, she suggests. 'It keeps the beauty and complexity on the inside. On the outside people just see us defending ourselves'. Abdulatief suggests that art can help us to see beyond the dichotomies that have shaped our sense of ourselves and our history.

A Muslim artist described studying art for three years in the 1970s. 'And for three years, my father was unhappy.' The owner of Amlay Museum in Simon's Town, Mrs Zainab Davidson, laments that in Cape Town those with 'bygelofies' (superstitions) are holding in check the talents of others. Commenting on this phenomenon, Abdulkader Tayob of the University of Cape Town, notes that 'many Muslims in South Africa know about art only through a sense of prohibition'. As a result, there are great constraints on Muslim artists. The perceived prohibitions range from a total rejection of figural art, to a distinction between form and content, which considers the intention behind the work.

There is evidence of some debate about the topic. Dr Cassiem D'Arcy, who writes a regular column on art for the *Muslim Views*, has for many years articulated a more expansive view of art in the Muslim community. He ascribes the power of prohibitions to South African Muslims' isolation from cross-currents in Eastern and Western art in the aftermath of slavery. They focussed on securing the 'basics of the faith.' As a result, many Muslims came to believe that 'all art was bad'. This was sustained by 'a very conservative clerical attitude'. Since that time, however, there

has been a 'paradigm shift'. New policies about art at the Bo-kaap Museum, Islamia College and smaller madrassas seem to confirm a shift in attitudes. Dr D'Arcy's art column, cited by almost all the people I interviewed, is given much credit for the shift. He himself believes that changes have come about in part, because 'younger clergy have been exposed to life in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia'. In part, it was the effect of the 1994 exhibition, 'Muslim Artists of the Western Cape', held at the South African National Gallery and co-ordinated by the late Achmat Davids, Sheikh Seraj Hendricks and Dr D'Arcy himself, as part of the Sheikh Yusuf Tri-Centenary Celebration. This successful event celebrated the contribution of Muslim artists to South Africa, and brought large numbers of Muslim people into the National Gallery. Zainab Davidson of Amlay House is happy to see that the 'bigots' no longer control the discussion about art.

While some people have a sense of what it isn't, what *is* Islamic art? Dr D'Arcy notes that 'many people of the Cape think that calligraphy is the only Islamic art. Yet that is only one small facet of art. In fact, Muslims have an intensely rich culture'. It may well be that the knotty problem that underlies art is what is the relation of 'art by Muslims' to 'Islamic art'. Shamil Jeppie contests the unreflective use of the term 'Islamic'. 'Ninety percent of the time, the word should be in inverted commas', he notes. When he lived in Egypt, Jeppie says, he was exposed to a vibrant and innovative artistic culture. In countries of the Middle East, knowledge of Islamic pasts seems to enable rather than constrain the development of new artistic forms, as well as elaborations of earlier ones. There is, for instance, a history of figural art in Islam, as 9th century Ummayid dynasty buildings show. Even calligraphy itself is not a static art. The extraordinary artistic acuity evident in calligraphy, or what the critic Rose Issa calls the 'choreography of letters', is the result of evolving techniques and ethics in composition. Contemporary calligraphy takes this intricate philosophy of proportion and repetition, in which the size of a single dot in relation to the alif is the fundamental basis of the aesthetic, and crafts riveting new forms. In contrast, 'Islamic art as conceived here is interesting, but highly problematic', notes Jeppie. Instead of openness, 'we have a lot of settled debates.'

To Dr D'Arcy, Islamic art is *all art produced by Muslims*. He recognizes that this means a range as broad as the geographies that separate practitioners of the faith, and

for him, that fact should be embraced. To him, 'only Orientalists put things in niches'. He believes that the categorization of Islamic art as found in museum collections in the West sustains the Orientalist fascination with an inscrutable East.

Another perspective on Islamic art is that of Fadiel Arnold, a teacher who started art classes at Islamia College. His Sufi-inspired approach envisions art as joy, tranquillity and balance. He believes that arts in Islam reflect the unity of God, and love for beauty. In this view, artists 'project themselves into the ultimate, not where they are at this moment'. He feels that linking art with culture is a remnant of Western thinking. As a result, 'art should not reflect on hardships, but transcend them.'

However, in a divided country and world, others argue strongly that art has a different role. In contrast to Arnold, they believe that art offers avenues for the contemplation of urgent, contemporary problems too. The Capetonian poet Rustum Kozain points to the resonant oral poetry of Palestinian migrants in creating a sense of their history and present. He observes that 'secular themes do not make writers less Muslim.' In pointing out that even established artistic practices continue to evolve and change, Shamil Jeppie reminds us to avoid 'settled debates' when it comes to art. Kozain's award-winning poetry deals with subjects that may not meet Arnold's criteria, and takes as its ambit the power to re-envision history and place. Though he feels his work can speak most fully to a Muslim audience, he does not aim to limit its appeal to them.

These healthy kinds of discussions are taking on the deadening legacy of prohibitions. Yet, a complete transformation remains elusive. There is a lingering sense that one 'cannot *comfortably* call oneself an artist', concludes Soraya Abdulatief. 'It's a slow process', acknowledges Dr D'Arcy. Tayob concurs. 'One cannot underestimate the extent of prohibitions. A lot of people are still driven by this'. As a result, reservations and self-censorship remain. Nonetheless, the positive developments reinforce the need for more attention, and specific funding of art institutions and programmes. Organic practices may sustain art through difficult periods, but for art to flourish, it needs to be nourished and honoured in strongly supported cultural institutions.

I had never visited the South African National Gallery (SANG) in search of an Islamic art section. I knew it did not have one. However, when I did visit the SANG while researching this article, I learned that Fatima February's work was among the first by a Muslim artist acquired by the SANG. I was shown around the gallery by Ms. February, who is also its Education Officer, and runs workshops for people who may never otherwise walk into a gallery.

The National Gallery thus has very modest holdings in Muslim art, and no acquisitions budget to meet larger ambitions. Yet, modest holdings and even the growing debate among artists do not reflect the full story of art in the Muslim community. If it is not evident in these sites, art is being actively produced elsewhere. I turned again to the lessons of the Ikat exhibition. These textiles were produced as an ordinary part of people's lives, deeply integrated into their other activities. Thus to look for art only in museums may be to look in the wrong place.

Where should one look for art? Perhaps in plain sight. "Our premier art is food,' says Jeppie. 'Food in South Africa is constantly invented and reinvented.' However, like other arts, food (and clothing) too is vulnerable to pressure and neglect. Many aspects of Muslim culinary arts, its practices as well as memories, are vanishing. Dr Sean Fields, the director of the Centre for Popular Memory at UCT, thinks that this is a topic requiring urgent research, and is planning a project which studies this marginalized art.

What does art mean to people? Dr D'Arcy describes it as both 'a joy and as something integral to one's life'. For Rustum Kozain art is a way of knowing both the self, and others. Its significance is both emotional and educational. For me, the lessons of art are ongoing. My visit to the Ikat exhibition taught me to view art in a profoundly new way. I learned this partly from the 78-year old man who accompanied me to the museum and whose supple and deeply respectful knowledge of the silks vastly expanded my pleasure in their arresting, lustrous patterns. Reflecting on their play of repetition and colour allowed the people who had made them to become fully present. For me, one of the great benefits of art is its demonstration of the connectedness between people. The art of Muslim people has

benefited incalculably from others, and Muslim artists, as well as non-Muslim ones in Muslim cultures, have contributed incomparably to the world.

I learned the value of art, not because of the setting -- I know there is a limited value in marching dutifully through a gallery or museum -- not because it was in an international city, not because I was seeing objects I might never see the like of again, though contemplating the textures of those silks gave me a wordless sense of pleasure. I believe one may find truths about oneself and the world wherever one looks for art. I did not come to my new insights about art in the museum. I came to them, I realized, when the art became a part of me.

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