A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture
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A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture

Volume I
From the Prophet to the Mongols

Edited by
Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu
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10.1 Map of East Africa showing sites mentioned in the text 251
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Map of commonly cited cities.
Source: Map prepared by C. Scott Walker, Harvard Map Collection.
Introduction to Both Volumes of *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*
Frameworks of Islamic Art and Architectural History: Concepts, Approaches, and Historiographies

Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu

The Rationale for the Two Volumes of *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*

In a short article published about 50 years ago, the historian S.D. Goitein made an impassioned plea for the notion of a singular Islamic history to be abandoned in favor of a more fragmented approach that obviated “the danger of abstracting a general picture of Islam which never was a historic reality.” Goitein argued the need for periodization to recognize a diversity obscured by the assumption that “continuity” could be equated with “uniformity.” Suggesting that it was “only the European prejudice or legend of the immovable East as well as insufficient familiarity with the sources, which induced people to take Islamic civilization as a single unit stretching with only insignificant variations” from the time of the Prophet to the present, Goitein was confident that identifying this problem would open the way to a closer and fuller examination of each period. Recognizing the presence of “definitely distinct phases,” yet rejecting an alternative taxonomic division along dynastic lines, he proposed to divide Islamic history into four major periods that constituted “organic units” ranging in time from the year 500 to the present, periods that corresponded to four distinct “civilizational” epochs. Even though Goitein admitted that periodization is most valuable when one is aware of its “limited validity,” this did not necessarily diminish its value. In fact, rather than
a merely didactic device he regarded periodization as nothing less than a “scientific prerequisite.”

The specific scheme proposed by Goitein has its problems, to which we shall return below, and the proposal was largely ignored by subsequent scholarship. Nevertheless, the issue that he sought to address, whose solution was to be found “along the lines of periodization,” has haunted the study of Islamic art and architecture since its inception as a uniform field in the late nineteenth century. Until today, almost every survey book begins with a paradoxical attempt to deconstruct the term itself. The problem of where to locate Islamic art stems, at least in part, from the peculiarities of an invented rubric that must accommodate a vast array of artistic production spanning nearly 1400 years and straddling all continents. Moreover, if artistic appreciation fulfills some of the cultural functions of religious adulation, then the position of Islamic art is particularly fraught, with the qualifying adjective caught between a religious and cultural-civilizational identification. The resulting ambivalence is reflected not only in the lengthy apologias that accompany its use but also in the tendency to oscillate between media-based and dynastic taxonomies with ethnic or regional parameters.

Many of these qualities were manifest in a myriad of new survey books of Islamic art and architecture in English published in the United States and Europe between 1991 and 2009. The artifacts, manuscripts, and monuments imaged and represented within these texts show a remarkable coherence in terms of their chronological and geographical range, a coherence evident in the repetitious appearance of certain object types and even specific canonical works. Through consistencies in their inclusions and exclusions, these surveys may be seen as constituting and consolidating a canon, an “imagined community” of select monuments and objects that define the relatively new field of Islamic art history. There is for example a balance between architecture, painting, and the so-called minor arts, an emphasis on elite artistic production rather than material culture more generally, and on the central Islamic lands at the expense of the Islamic West (Maghrib), Sub-Saharan Africa, East and Southeast Asia. The works illustrated are those most readily accessible to European and American scholars, and they generally exclude from the canon any art produced in the Islamic world after about 1800; in effect, the end of Islamic art is made coincident with the advent of modernity. This exclusion reflects notions of authenticity that ignore the dynamic and heterogeneous constitution of “Islamic” cultures, while producing them as a foil through which the modern emerges as a distinctly European phenomenon.

The boom in survey books on Islamic art and architecture over the past two decades has certainly done much to popularize the field and to provide much-needed basic teaching tools while satisfying an ever growing market. Yet despite their usefulness, survey texts are inevitably marked by idiosyncratic choices, inclusions, and omissions that shape their treatment of the material that they cover. Moreover, as the consistency with which they terminate the narrative of Islamic art at 1800 suggests, they often reinforce rather than engage critically with some
of the historical peculiarities of the field. While acknowledging that the term “Islamic art” poses certain problems, survey books seek to consolidate its all-embracing framework and conspicuously shy away from criticizing the premises of the field’s canon, which is the very basis of the traditional survey as a genre; to quote one critic, art historical surveys are often “popular codifiers and guardians of the canon … curious unions of aesthetics, pedagogy, and commerce.”5 The same framework informs allegedly “universal” collections of Islamic art in museums that complement survey books by visualizing the canonical narratives of art history for the general public, despite the contingencies that inevitably structure collecting practices.6

Noting these problems, many of us have felt the additional need for a type of intermediary text bridging the gap between the summary treatment permitted by the genre of the survey text and the more specialist preserve of the academic article and monograph. That need has been reiterated time and again by our students and in conversations with colleagues, both in our own and in other fields. Our two volumes directly respond to this perceived need.

The Companion volumes are envisaged as a collaborative project for remapping a relatively young and exponentially expanding field in an accessible format, while at the same time pushing the limits of existing scholarship in ways that we consider both desirable and productive. Although the importance of general surveys for pedagogical and reference purposes cannot be denied, what moves any art historical field forward is transformative studies that introduce new information, unknown visual and written sources, innovative interpretations, and critical perspectives. In the Islamic field, too, introductory surveys and more in-depth studies accessible to a wider audience need to inform one another in an ongoing dialogue. Consequently, in addition to introducing new approaches to canonical subjects and newly commissioned work on neglected regions and topics, the two volumes of A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture scrutinize some of the idiosyncrasies of the field.

The essays we have commissioned aimed to provide an opportunity for scholars to revisit and rethink subjects on which they have written in the past, with a view to articulating the wider significance of their research for a broader audience, while at the same time reassessing traditional wisdom in their historiography and proposing possible future directions. Equally, several of the essays included in the volumes represent innovative collaborative and comparative approaches to topics that are usually treated as discrete and distinct but which we believe could benefit from such experimental collaboration, in keeping with our broader objective of establishing lateral connections across the field. Others introduce regions and topics not usually covered in canonical histories of Islamic art and architecture.

Recent global events have galvanized interest in the themes and issues addressed by the essays in both Companion volumes, whose potential audience extends well beyond the Islamic field. We envisage that the volumes will provide an appealing source of information to a general educated audience, students, as well as