A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture

Volume I
From the Prophet to the Mongols

Edited by Finbarr Barry Flood and Gürlu Necipoğlu

WILEY Blackwell
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Notes on Contributors

Professor **James W. Allan** spent most of his career in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, initially as the curator responsible for the Islamic collection, and latterly as Keeper of Eastern Art. He established the teaching of Islamic Art in the University, and has published books and articles on Islamic metalwork, ceramics, glass, and architecture. He has now retired, but continues to lecture and research.

**Glaire D. Anderson** is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. Publications include *The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia: Aristocratic Estates and Court Culture in Umayyad Córdoba* (2013) and the edited volume *Revisiting al-Andalus: Perspectives on the Material Culture of Islamic Iberia and Beyond* (2007), co-edited with Mariam Rosser-Owen.

**Abigail Balbale** is Assistant Professor at Bard Graduate Center in New York City. Her research focuses on the cultural history of Islamic Iberia and North Africa. She is currently working on a book tentatively entitled “Wolf King of Glorious Memory: Religion, Culture and Authority in Ibn Mardanish’s al-Andalus.”

**Anna Contadini** is Professor of the History of Islamic Art and Head of the School of Arts, SOAS, University of London. She is Director of the “Treasures of SOAS” and of the “Griffin and Lion” projects, and a member of the Centre for Iranian Studies at the London Middle East Institute. She was a Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at the Chester Beatty Library, and Lecturer in Islamic Art at Trinity College, Dublin. Her publications include: *Fatimid Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum* (1998); *A World of Beasts: A Thirteenth-Century Illustrated Arabic Book on Animals (The Kitāb Na’īt al-Ḥayawān) in the Ibn Bakhšāhī Tradition* (2012); “Facets of Light: The Case of Rock Crystals,” in *God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. Light in Islamic Art and Culture* (2015); “Threads of Ornament in the Style World of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries,” in *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local* (2016); “Text and Image on Middle Eastern Objects: The Palmer Cup in Context,” in *A Rothschild Renaissance: A New Look at the Waddesdon Bequest in the British Museum* (2017).
Howard Crane is Professor of Near Eastern Art and Archaeology in the Department of History of Art at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio. His books include Risâle-i Mi'mariyye: An Early-Seventeenth-century Ottoman Treatise on Architecture (1987), The Garden of the Mosques: Hafiz Hüseyin Al-Ayransarayi’s Guide to the Muslim Monuments of Ottoman Istanbul (2000), and (with Esra Akın) Sinan’s Autobiographies: Five Sixteenth-Century Texts (2006).


Finbarr Barry Flood is William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of the Humanities at the Institute of Fine Arts and Department of Art History, New York University. He publishes on late antiquity, Islamic architectural history and historiography, transcultural dimensions of Islamic art, image theory, museology, and Orientalism. His books include The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture (2000), and Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter (2009), awarded the 2011 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Prize of the Association for Asian Studies.

Alain George is IM Pei Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at the University of Oxford. In 2010, he was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Prize. His main fields of research are Qur’anic calligraphy, the arts of the book in Islam, and the art and architecture of the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. His publications include The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy (2010).

Mattia Guidetti is university assistant in Islamic Art at the University of Vienna. His research interests focus on the role of Christian churches in the development of early Islamic sacred places. He has published on this theme in the monograph In the Shadow of the Church: The Building of Mosques in Early Medieval Syria (2016) as well as in Muqarnas (2009) and the Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (2013).

Eva R. Hoffman is on the faculty of the Department of Art History at Tufts University. She edited the anthology Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World (2007). Currently, she is writing a book on the art of the medieval Mediterranean as a space of visual and cultural exchange.

Mark Horton is Professor in Archaeology at the University of Bristol. He has worked on the East African coast since 1980, and has conducted excavations at the important site of Shanga, on Zanzibar and Pemba, in the Kilwa archipelago, the Comoros, and Madagascar.

Ruba Kana’an is an independent scholar whose research and publications focus on the confluence between art and law in Muslim contexts and the relationship between artist and patron in medieval societies. She has published various articles on metalwork and architecture exploring legal texts as sources for material culture, context and historiography. Between 2008–2011 she was Chair of Islamic Studies at York University, Toronto. Most recently, 2011–2017, she was Head of Education and Scholarly Programs at the Aga Khan Museum.
Lev A. Kapitaikin gained a DPhil in Islamic Art and Architecture from Oxford University (2011). His doctoral thesis was dedicated to the twelfth-century Islamic and Christian paintings of the ceilings of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo. He teaches Islamic arts at the Art History Department of Tel Aviv University. His research focuses on visual and cultural intersections of Islam and Christianity in the Mediterranean, particularly among southern Italy and Sicily, Egypt, the Maghrib and Spain.

Lorenz Korn is Professor of Islamic Art and Archaeology at the Oriental Institute, University of Bamberg (Germany). His research interest focuses on the architecture and architectural decoration of the regions between Egypt and Central Asia, from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, on Arabic epigraphy and Khurasanian metalwork.

Marcus Milwright is Professor of Islamic Art and Archaeology at the University of Victoria, Canada. He is the author of studies dealing with aspects of Islamic material and visual culture including An Introduction to Islamic Archaeology (2010). He is co-editor of Brill’s Arts and Archaeology of the Islamic World series.

Güçlü Necipoğlu is Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art at the Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University. She publishes on architecture and architectural practice, aesthetics of ornament and figural representation, cross-cultural exchanges, and Islamic art historiography. Her books include Architecture, Ceremonial and Power: The Topkapı Palace (1991); The Topkapı Scroll, Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture (1995), which won the Albert Hourani and Spiro Kostoff awards; and The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire (2005), winner of the Fuat Köprülü award and the Albert Hourani honorable mention award. She edits the journal Muqarnas and Supplements to Muqarnas.

Alastair Northedge is Professor of Islamic Art and Archaeology at Université de Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne). He has worked in Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, and conducted projects at Amman in Jordan, Ana in Iraq, and Samarra. He is author of Studies on Roman and Islamic Amman, joint author of Excavations at Ana, and published the Historical Topography of Samarra in 2005. The second volume of the project at Samarra, the Archaeological Atlas of Samarra, was published in 2015. His current project is on the medieval city of Dehistan in Turkmenistan.

Oya Pancaroğlu is Professor in the Department of History at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University in 2000. Her research in medieval Islamic art and architectural history spans the subjects of figural representation, ceramic production, and sacred sites.

Venetia Porter is a curator of Islamic and Modern Middle Eastern art at the British Museum. She curated the Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam at the British Museum (2012) and edited the accompanying catalogue and with Liana Saif The Hajj: Collected Essays (2013). Her other publications include Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets at the British Museum (2011).

Jennifer Pruitt is Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Publications include “Method in Madness: Reconsidering Church Destructions in the Fatimid Era,” Muqarnas (2013) and “The Miracle of Muqattam: Moving a Mountain to Build a Church in the Early Fatimid Caliphate (969–995),” in Sacred Precincts: Non-Muslim

Scott Redford is Nasser D. Khalili Professor of Islamic Art and Archaeology in the Department of Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. He specializes in the art, architecture, and archaeology of medieval Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean. His Legends of Authority: The 1215 Seljuk Inscriptions of Sinop Citadel, Turkey was published in 2014.

Liana Saif is British Academy postdoctoral fellow at St Cross College in the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on the history of Islamic natural philosophy and occult thought and the intercultural exchange of esoteric ideas between the Islamic world and the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. She worked as the curator of the Hajj Legacy Project in the British Museum in 2013. Her book Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Thought was published in 2015.

Emilie Savage-Smith recently retired as Professor of the History of Islamic Science at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. She has received a Senior Investigator Award from the Wellcome Trust to organize a team to undertake the translation of the thirteenth-century history of medicine by Ibn Abi Usaybiʿa. Her most recent publication is (with co-author Y. Rapoport) An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The “Book of Curiosities” (2014).

Avinoam Shalem is the Riggio Professor of Islamic Art at Columbia University and a Professor Fellow at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence – Max Planck Institute. His main field of interest is in medieval artistic interactions in the Mediterranean basin, medieval aesthetics, and the historiography of the field.

Hsueh-man Shen is Associate Professor: Ehrenkranz Chair in World Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Her research interests focus primarily on the art and archaeology of pre-modern China, especially the period from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. She is the curator of the 2006–2007 exhibition Gilded Splendor: Treasures of China’s Liao Empire (907–1125), and editor and co-author of the research catalogue accompanying the exhibition. She is also consultant and co-organizer of the Getty exhibition Cave Temples of Dunhuang: Buddhist Art on China’s Silk Road (2016).

Jochen Sokoly received his doctorate in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford. He has been a research fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Dr. Sokoly has worked as a UNESCO curatorial consultant for the Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum, Kuwait where he is preparing the publication of the museum’s collection of early Islamic inscribed textiles. He teaches art history and was formerly Gallery Director at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar.

Yasser Tabbaa works at the juncture of Islamic architecture, social history, religion, and aesthetics. His previous books and articles have investigated meaning and intentionality in
medieval Islamic architecture and ornament. He has written an introductory book on Najaf (2014), and is currently preparing a book on Shi'i shrine architecture.

**Luke Treadwell** is the University Lecturer in Islamic Numismatics, Oriental Institute, Oxford University and Curator of Islamic Coins, Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum. His interests include early Islamic visual culture, the history of the Iranian *intermezzo*, and the Islamic silver flow to the northern lands (ninth–tenth centuries *ce*).

**Oliver Watson**, after a career in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and in the Museum of Islamic Art, Qatar, now teaches at the University of Oxford. He specializes in ceramic history.
This project has been long in the making and we are grateful to all of those who agreed to contribute to it. In addition to the authors, we would like to express our gratitude to Pınar Gökpinar for help with the logistics of communication and planning. We are also grateful to Scott Walker for his generous assistance with cartography and maps. A particular debt is owed to Sarah Fergusson, our able and efficient assistant for most of the duration of the project. We would also like to thank Tessa Hanford and Felicity Marsh for their patient care with the process of production. Finally, thanks are due to Jayne Fargnoli for initiating the project and steering it through various vicissitudes.
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 reevaluating 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