

# Transcultural Mobility: Cosmopolitan Artefacts, Artists, and Intellectuals across the Global Muslim World

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This thematic issue features four different aspects of the transcultural journeys of artefacts, artists, and intellectuals across the wider Muslim world. Spanning the Muslim heartlands of South Asia and the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa across the Mediterranean Sea) to their peripheral territories in Europe and East Asia, each essay casts a critical eye over the perceived religious and stylistic homogeneity of Muslim material culture, both in pre-modern and modern times, and seeks to reappraise its cosmopolitan characteristics. In so doing, this issue demonstrates the pivotal role of transcultural mobility to the emergence of visual and material remains in Muslim-majority societies across the globe, from art and contemporary written sources to the voyages and transcultural encounters of painters and architects themselves. Each mode of representation—textual, material, and mental—illustrates a specific aspect of mobility, interwoven with the geographical routes and trajectories taken by the objects, images, and ideas.

The focus of this issue emerges from other generative work on Muslim cultural mobilities. In *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*, Seema Alavi brilliantly traces the network of South Asian intellectuals with Muslim backgrounds in the later period of British rule in India.<sup>1</sup> Although the main focus of Alavi's study is the political engagement of such intellectuals with the reformed imperial order at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, each of the stories recounts the awakening of a cosmopolitan sensibility and religious identity among Muslims—modern on the one hand and traditional on the other. By employing the notion of “On the Move” —moving from one place to another, physically and mentally—Alavi pioneers a de-centralized narrative of Muslim political participation in the age of empire without perpetuating the national narratives of modern nations that emerged in the MENA region and Asia, especially after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century.

Another account of Muslim cosmopolitanism published shortly thereafter, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective*

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1 Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

by Khairudin Aljunied, takes us to the eastern side of the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> Aljunied's study provides a contemporary trans-national insight into Muslim pluralistic practices across three countries in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia), to pin down the distinctive religio-cultural adaptability and permeability of each place. One of the case studies explored in this work is a transcultural account of mosque architecture, which Aljunied sees as epitomizing globalization in Southeast Asia. Over the course of Islamization—that is to say, the spread of Islam as a religious and cultural phenomenon, which began in the region on a much larger scale than before around the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries—Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian structural and decorative idioms were adapted, and the design and construction of sites for Muslim worship were infused with Dutch and British colonial visual elements, thus allowing these sites to transcend their limited regional contexts.<sup>3</sup> Looking at mosque architecture in Southeast Asia through a transcultural lens allows us to avoid confining the subject to the “Indo-Saracenic” framework that dominated the architectural landscape of the Indian Subcontinent since the colonial period.<sup>4</sup>

While there are, therefore, important accounts of the cosmopolitan characteristics of the material remains of Muslim religious structures, further attempts need to be made to synthesize these studies into a broader paradigm of Muslim mobility, and, above all, to expand the chronological and geographical coverage of such endeavors. In the wake of the global turn at the beginning of the twenty-first century, mobility studies has become a key component in the formation of contemporary socio-political theories, especially with respect to migration.<sup>5</sup> Taken onboard as an integral part of the process of decolonization of the disciplines in the twenty-first century, the mobility perspective was subsequently applied to socio-anthropological studies, not only with regard to human movement but also the movement of cultural artefacts.<sup>6</sup> The latter, it should be noted, was not the sole purview of visual theorists: Art historians,

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2 Khairudin Aljunied, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Southeast Asian Islam in Comparative Perspective* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

3 Aljunied, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, 24–49. For a recent study on Islamization, see Andrew C. S. Peacock, ed., *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

4 For a recent reassessment of Indo-Saracenic architecture, see Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash, ed., *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling, and Architecture in British India and Ceylon* (London: Routledge, 2007).

5 Cf. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38, no. 2 (2006): 207–226. I thank the JTS editorial office for drawing my attention to this study.

6 Stephen Greenblatt, with Ines Županov, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, Heike Paul, Pál Nyíri, and Frederike Pannewick, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

with their customary solid training in texts (i.e., philology), materials (i.e., archaeology), or theory (i.e., philosophy), in researching the non-Western world of pre-modern times, especially the MENA region and Asia, had already begun to implement transcultural mobility perspectives to widen the research horizon of the Muslim material world.<sup>7</sup> Although most scholars who had initially been trained as art historians of the pre-modern Muslim world were previously considered to belong to a niche area of art history or Oriental studies, their endeavors were in fact undertaken in parallel with scholars who essentially entered the field of non-western art from Euro-American standpoints, particularly writing on the Italian Renaissance.<sup>8</sup> The work of these specialists in pre-modern Muslim art thus brought a transcultural approach to mobility into the academic mainstream, and set a new standard for the art history of the pre-modern world. Since the mid-2010s, the conceptual framework of transculturality, as represented by critical notions such as “circulation” and “entanglement,” has become widely implemented among historians of Western and non-Western contexts alike, theoretically driven by work on visual arts.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, however, there has been a perplexing countertrend in contemporary scholarship on non-Western art that seeks to renew the binary, colonialist parameters of “reception,” “appropriation,” and “comparison,” and organizes global art production around implicitly superior Western norms, discounting the very notion of a global art history worthy of the name beyond the Euro-American.<sup>10</sup>

Against this backdrop, this thematic issue gathers essays from a wide cross-section of research within the overarching theme of “transcultural mobility,” seeking to foreground the cosmopolitan dimensions of the visual and material culture of the global Muslim world. In the first essay, Nikolaos Vryzidis embarks upon a philological and visual investigation into the trans-religiosity of the Byzantine and Ottoman cultural spheres in the Balkans and

7 Most notably Avinoam Shalem, *The Oliphant: Islamic Objects in Historical Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2004) and Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie: The Art of Mongol Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

8 See Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300–1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Hans Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad: Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2009), translated into English in 2011 as Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

9 See Monica Juneja, “Circulation and Beyond—The Trajectories of Vision in Early Modern Eurasia,” in *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, ed. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel (London: Routledge, 2016), 59–78; and Alva Noë, *The Entanglement: How Art and Philosophy Make Us What We Are* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

10 For a particularly salient criticism of this trend, see John Clark, “Comparativism from Inside and Outside: Not Only a Matter of Viewpoint,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 17 (December 2017): 1–14.

Anatolia, with the aim of elucidating how the term “Persian” was conceived, and to what extent its connotations changed over time. Utilizing a variety of visual sources, with particular reference to the materiality and portability of textiles, this essay discusses the diverse semiotic variations of the term “Persian”—as opposed to Ottoman, Islam, or Muslim—and shows how the notion was explored and often exploited by the Byzantines, as well as the Seljuks in Anatolia and beyond, for socio-political and religio-economical ends. Breaking new ground in the study of both Orthodox Christian and Muslim material culture, Vryzidis offers original insights into the complex cultural matrix of this region, covering the period from Late Antiquity to Modern Greece. Through its focus on the Persian cultural lands (or world), this study throws light on a yet unexplored area of transculturation, that of textile-weaving in the Mediterranean region.<sup>11</sup>

Focusing on the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Alberto Saviello analyzes Mughal cosmopolitanism through the lens of Christian–Muslim visual dialogues, with particular reference to the iconographic circulation of the Madonna and Child from the Mediterranean sphere to the Indian Ocean. While this imagery and its socio-anthropological context have already been well studied, for the first time, this essay casts a critical eye on the meaning of this imagery for a Muslim audience and the creative implementations of non-Muslim artists to meet the aesthetic expectations of their Mughal patrons. The geographical and methodological reach of this study allows for a novel apprehension of the subject that reaches beyond prior transcultural scholarship, making it a welcome contribution to the field of Christian and Muslim arts in Asia. Furthermore, this study is not only a testament to the historical fact that sacred images could cross any religious boundaries, but also an evocation of the ongoing image debate in Islam and aniconism, especially pertaining to the Prophet Muhammad—a topic which remains largely misunderstood.<sup>12</sup>

My own contribution to this issue seeks to analyze Okakura Tenshin’s views of Islam, while re-contextualizing the emergence of a binary geographical designation for a distant, if not inferior, cultural zone, as opposed to a rapidly modernizing insular country in the Asia Pacific, similar to that of the West’s Orient—namely, Japan’s Orient.<sup>13</sup> Despite an abundance of scholarship on this influential

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11 Nikolaos Vryzidis, ed., *The Hidden Life of Textiles in the Medieval and Early Modern Mediterranean: Contexts and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Islamic, Latinate, and Eastern Christian Worlds* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

12 Cf. Alberto Saviello, *Imaginationen des Islam: Bildliche Darstellungen des Propheten Mohammed im west-europäischen Buchdruck bis ins 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015). More recently, see Christiane Gruber, ed., *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and across the World* (London: Gingko, 2019).

13 See Stefan Tanaka, *Japan’s Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), a fundamental research monograph that is extensively reviewed in my own contribution.

cultural theorist, whose name is inextricably linked to the rise of pan-Asianism across Asia, Okakura's epistemological encounter with Abrahamic religions, particularly Islam, has not yet been investigated. This essay unpacks decisive consequences of Westernization in Asia, not only as a crucial transition to modernity, but as a critical juncture of transculturation during which the larger part of Asia struggled to bring together disparate socio-religious standards that had existed for centuries and to fit them within shared cultural norms, so as to make sense for wide swathes of the entire continent and adjoining islands, from Japan to India, in the age of growing anti-colonial sentiment. I argue that Buddhism was apotheosized as a symbol of reunited Asia at the expense of marginalizing Islam, illustrating the limits of Okakura's pan-Asianist vision and his reliance on Western-Christian norms for evaluating religions and civilizations across the world. This study emerges from my ongoing historiographical investigation into the writing of non-Western art history in the twentieth century, which has sought to put forward a particularly transcultural and de-nationalized understanding of visual culture.<sup>14</sup>

Concluding this issue's investigations into the richness of Muslim visual and material remains across Asia and Europe, Simone Wille offers an insightful study of the trajectories of Zahoor ul Akhlaq. A pivotal artist in South Asia in the late twentieth century, Akhlaq traveled prolifically, frequently crossing and negotiating religio-cultural boundaries. Placing focus on Akhlaq's travels rather than his professional career, this essay brings much-needed attention to a Pakistani artist who had an immense impact on the aesthetics and pedagogical landscape of modern and contemporary South Asia. Having assembled archival sources on Akhlaq's life, Wille deftly situates artists from the non-Western world within a broader transnational framework, one of the core methodological imperatives of transcultural studies, making for a welcome addition to scholarship on the visual art of South Asia.

Taken together, the four essays in this thematic issue offer an insightful view of the ebbs and flows of transcultural interactions across different cultural spheres from the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, from medieval to modern times. In so doing, these four essays make a significant contribution to the study of cultural mobility and Muslim cosmopolitanism.

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14 For an extensive study on a historiography of non-Western art in the twentieth century, with the focus on Persian art, see my forthcoming monograph, provisionally entitled "Aesthetica Persica: The History and Historiography of Persian Art," under contract with Edinburgh University Press.