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Theodore Van Loan

# Multiple Temporalities and the Scene of Time: A Pair of Wooden Doors at the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo

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**Abstract** Art objects are staged and stage themselves in ways that express various types of time and duration. The pair of wooden doors from the Fatimid period discussed in this chapter are staged in a way that make the layered and fragmented condition of temporality central to the experience of seeing them. This chapter unpacks these layers. It includes discussion of epigraphic and stylistic dating, practices of conservation and display, and the visual impact of physical fatigue. All together these layers constitute a dynamic and fluid scene with the object as both an active participant and passive recipient in their constitution.

**Keywords** Temporality; Materiality; Islamic Art; Ornament; Museum Display

Doors inhabit an unstable mode of existence. They are static fixtures within built space, but lack the permanence possessed by structural form. They are liable to be dismantled, fragmented, or otherwise modified (► **Detail**). The doors ordered between 996–1021 A.D. by the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim for al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo are no exception. The set was removed from al-Azhar circa 1903 to become one of the first holdings of the new “House of Arab Antiquities,” later known as the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (Mostafa 1961, 1–3; O’Kane 2012, 8–11; Sayour 2017). Like some of the many examples of Fatimid woodwork that have survived in modern collections, and *in situ*, the doors overtly show their wear. These fatigued surfaces open up a scene of time, one that is arrested, but never entirely stilled, by museum display. Despite the stasis conferred by methods and technologies of conservation, photographic documentation, among other means, these two doors flit between multiple temporal modes and chronologies.

This short study will examine the roles of time, duration, and visual perception (► **Visuality**) as they pertain to the doors both within their current setting in the Museum of Islamic Art, and in the cultural milieu at the time of their commissioning. In so doing, it will engage questions of epistemological limitations of museum display, the conceptual variable of time, and how it relates to (re)constructing the past lives of objects.

Each of these doors, made of Turkish pine and measuring 3.25 meters high and 1 meter wide, are composed of essentially two parts: an undergirding body and seven carved inset panels (Bloom 2007, 63–65; O’Kane 2012, 78; Sayour 2017). Each panel is inserted into the door frame either horizontally on its own or is vertically paired with another. Each also has a corresponding counterpart symmetrically placed on the other door. The top horizontally placed panels on each door contain an inscription rendered in floriated Kufic script, a style common to the Fatimid period where the designs of certain letters carry vegetal embellishments. The translation, responsible for the date attribution, is as follows: “Our master, commander of the faithful, the Imām al-Ḥākīm bi-amr Allāh, blessings of God be upon him, and upon his pure ancestors and his descendants” (Van Berchem 1903, 630).

The panels below the inscription carry a variety of different types of vegetal and geometric ornament all characteristic of the Fatimid period, with a decorative repertoire developed from Coptic and Tulunid visual traditions (Contadini 1998, 111–113). The two sets of vertical panels that straddle the horizontal midpoints of the doors are carved in what is called the “Beveled Style.” This term, used most conventionally to describe Abbasid era stuccowork in Iraq, refers to the smooth and contoured carving employed in the rendering of the tendrils in these panels (Bloom and Blair 2009, 280).

It is impossible to know where exactly these doors would have been situated in al-Azhar. The mosque complex has undergone much modification since the Fatimid period, and none of the original entrances have



Figure 1: *Pair of carved wooden doors*. 996–1021 A.D. Turkish Pine, height 325 cm, width 200 cm. Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art, inv. 551.

been preserved (Bloom 2007, 65). However, the size of the doors and the dedicatory inscription to the Fatimid Caliph would perhaps indicate that they were intended for the main entrance or another similar and visually prominent place. Today, they are installed in Gallery 4 of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (O’Kane 2012, 78).<sup>1</sup> As seen in an image of the gallery, the leaves are mounted straddling a doorway between exhibition halls, presumably in an effort to mimic their original context. According to the 1961 *Short Guide* to the museum, the doors were situated in a comparably transitional space; as framing the entrance to “Hall 6,” then reserved exclusively for woodwork (Mostafa 1961, 36).

Probably the most noticeable feature of the doors is their advanced state of wear and fatigue. This fatigue is by no means consistent; there appears to be a great deal of variation between the panels. The two at the very top, which carry the inscription, are the best preserved of the entire set. Below these are four iterations of ‘beveled-style’ compositions, and each has been worn down to a different degree. The panel on the far left appears to be almost flat, while that on the far right retains deep contours. Something similar occurs in the lower set of vertical panels across the two doors. In between these two sets, the horizontal panels with inscribed rotated squares are missing pieces: a small corner piece in the lower right of the left-side panel, and both corners of the right-side panel. The bottom horizontal panels on both sides are also very worn down, however, the panel on the right to a much greater extent.

These marks of fatigue, by and large, define the contemporary viewing experience of these doors. The missing pieces in the two centrally located horizontal panels show us the method by which they are put together and, in turn, give us a new perception of each panel’s relationship to the door frame; that they are, in a sense, impermanent fixtures upon it. In fact, when we look at some comparative examples of Fatimid woodwork, we see that one cannot necessarily assume that the doors and the carved panels are contemporaneous, as in the case of the doors of the Fakahani Mosque in Cairo, where the panels were dated to the Fatimid period and the doors to the eighteenth century (Bloom 2008, 240). With respect to these doors, there is no evidence that they are not contemporaneous with the panels. However, at the experiential level, a disjuncture is created; a visual suggestion is made by the variable wear of the panels that they might not be of the same time and/or place. While this disjuncture occurs as a result of the formal characteristics of the doors, their placement within a museum context only supplements this element of temporal instability.

Within the Museum of Islamic Art, this instability is reinforced by the presence of other pieces of woodwork that have become detached from

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1 It is important to note that the museum has undergone further restoration and has reopened since suffering damage from a nearby car-bomb attack in January 2014.

their respective doors—their original settings. Several such examples exist in the collection that would have originally been mounted in doors (O’Kane 2012, 48). Moreover, these pieces are currently displayed in galleries nearby where the doors are installed. For the museum viewer, a kind of cognitive operation takes place whereby the visual harmony of the doors disintegrates, as each panel is also thought of as a discrete object, as well as part of a whole.

Most obviously the variable fatigue distributed across the panels of the doors serves as an index of use. It tells the viewer that these doors were at one level, simply furniture, vulnerable to the elements and the whims of their viewership. When taken into the confines of a museum collection, they are brought into a world of, perhaps, more disinterested viewing, one where their past status as objects of use becomes secondary to their placement within stylistic chronologies, as was articulated above with terms such as ‘beveled style’ and ‘floriated Kufic,’ and their dating attribution based upon the foundation inscription.

Thus, there are three different conceptions of time operating upon the doors: the absolute attribution to the reign of Caliph al-Hakim from the inscription, the stylistic markers that point to the doors’ inclusion into the chronologically broader category of ‘Fatimid woodwork,’ and finally their worn-down and eroded panels as markers of sustained use over time. It is only within the museum space that the trans-temporal condition of the doors becomes readily perceivable. Each mode of temporality is layered upon the doors by different means, and all project their temporality in different ways.

The inscription, a dedication to the Caliph al-Hakim, is of a type commonly found on Fatimid monuments. It was composed at a time when public text was one of the primary ways in which rulership was visually articulated (Bierman 1998). Not only did the inscription serve to praise the ruler, but it also cemented his authority as a religious figure. The inscription serves as an explicit temporal marker, inextricably linking the production of the doors to the time of the reign of al-Hakim. This was an attribution that would later gain additional charge for modern art historians, as it could serve as a benchmark, whereby other objects lacking inscriptions could be dated on the basis of formal comparison. It is in this way that objects with foundation inscriptions attained an authoritative status within the museum context.

‘Stylistic time’ is not, of course, inherent to the object but generated through the correspondence between the door panel’s formal traits and those traits that are thought to exemplify a given period of artistic production. In the case of Islamic art, these time periods are most often defined by political dynasties. In this case, these include the aforementioned ‘beveled style’ and ‘floriated Kufic’ script, both of which are associated with Fatimid period woodwork. It is important to note that the function of form here is a diagnostic one that enables the placement of the doors in their proper chronological position. Indeed, we can think of form in a linguistic sense,

just as Gülru Necipoğlu does, speaking of the “semiotics of ornament” in her study of a Timurid-period scroll used by architects for pattern-making, where given designs and patterns on buildings came to signify the dynastic powers that patronized them (Necipoğlu 1995, 217–223).

The physical fatigue upon the doors, as mentioned above, is an indexical marker of use and the passage of time. The visual impact of this fatigue is central to understanding the experiential dimension of the doors but is next to irrelevant in the establishment of temporal attribution and, thus, its meaning within the museum collection. It is this ambivalence toward the physical nature of the object, and the tension created by this ambivalence that defines its ontological existence within the museum (► **Resilience**). The source of this tension is the lack of relevance that one’s visual experience of the doors has for its museological classification. Its wall label places it within the Fatimid period, while its appearance implies a sustained history of use over time that subverts its attribution to being of *one time*. Yet, these signs of wear legitimate the doors as being of an authentic past, though one that requires a label to name (► **Heritage**).

Within museum studies, art objects tend to be interpreted along semiotic lines. In defining the art object in the museum as “*simultaneously referential and differential*,” Donald Preziosi refers to the museum object as it is staged both in relation to other objects within a given collection, and in relation to its maker and cultural sources (Preziosi 2006, 53). Both of these relations, oscillating in the mind of the viewer, are connected to multiple temporalities; chronological, stylistic, and indexical traces of cultural pasts. This case demonstrates the necessity of taking into account the experiential dimension as one considers how time is layered and coalesced around the museum object.

## Figure

Fig. 1: Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo © Museum With No Frontiers/Discover Islamic Art.

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