



Figure 1: Installation view, photographs/mixed media, National Museum of Al Ain/ Abu Dhabi, after 1973.

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Constellations of Memory and Representation: A Lunar Sample Display in Al Ain, Abu Dhabi

Abstract This chapter looks at a wall display which was on view since the 1970s in Abu Dhabi's first national museum in the oasis town of Al Ain. Created in the aftermath of the United Arab Emirate's independence, this display combined traditional visual topoi of the Arab Peninsula with photographic and material testimonies of modernization and progress. Its historical narrative, presented as an almost 'Warburgian' image atlas, thus comprises a long history ranging from pre-Islamic times to the contemporary age of space exploration. As such, it represents a dynamic constellation of history which goes beyond the binary notions of tradition versus progress or the 'global' versus the 'local' which are often prevalent in Orientalist discourses. At the same time, it represents the region's entanglement with the fossil-driven economies of the late twentieth century.

Keywords United Arab Emirates, National Museums, Photography, Orientalism, Space

A prominent part of the display in the main hall of the National Museum of Abu Dhabi in the oasis town of Al Ain consists of a wall featuring a remarkable mixed-media installation. It combines images of the region with a moon rock sample collected during NASA's Apollo 17 mission, which was conducted shortly after the opening of the museum in the early 1970s. Wide to the point of being panoramic, the wall that frames this display invokes a simplified version of traditional local architecture, mirroring the type of façade that can be found in many fortresses throughout the eastern parts of the Arabian peninsula and in the old Al Jahili fort of Al Ain, which once had served as a temporary home for the museum collections. This simple clay-built type of structure is characterized by crenellated exterior walls with protruding towers or buttresses. In a highly stylized interpretation of such models, the brown-veneer display wall inside the museum is horizontally framed by a cream-colored dado and top frieze and vertically structured by a symmetrical sequence of staggered wall sections. This results in a wall composition of upright rectangular fields graded against each other all in all translating architecture into a picture surface.¹ Each of the wall sections features five to six sizable black-and-white photographs showing landscapes or generic scenes of everyday life in Abu Dhabi.

According to the short captions written in Arabic and English, the photographs mostly date from the 1960s. In them, seemingly timeless representations of deserts, oases, and camel caravans alternate with obvious manifestations of modernity or contemporaneity such as infrastructural facilities (a school, a postal office), or modern means of transportation (cars and tire tracks in the sand). While not free from nostalgia, the photographs, taken in a reportage-like style, thus go beyond the common tropes of Orientalist image-making (Nochlin 1983) in that they link traditional notions to a de facto modern texture of Abu Dhabi.

Despite all efforts, it has been impossible thus far to conclusively identify the author of the photographs.² Regardless of this, the photo archive presented on the museum wall is to be considered part of a larger movement characterized by the documentation of changing topographies, social conditions, and heritage concepts on the Arabian Peninsula. This movement emerged in the wake of the oil boom and the ensuing economic and cultural changes around the mid-twentieth century. Hence, the photographs can be seen as an integral part of the visual language of Arab

1 In terms of method and aesthetics, this mode of presentation appears related to dioramic display cases such as those in the Hall of Asian Peoples in the Natural History Museum of New York, opened in 1980, whose effect oscillates between the neo-Orientalist and the postmodern (Bal 1992).

2 I thank Westrey Page who tapped a number of important hints and sources to resolve this issue that, in general, illuminated the cultural genesis of the museum. The fact that they did not materialize in a clear answer concerning authorship can be considered exemplary for the problems we often face when dealing with objects beyond the usual art historical canon with its clear-cut lineages and catalogues raisonnées.

modernity. Both local photographers and travelers were involved in these photographic endeavors (see e.g. Pitt Rivers Museum 2011; Rashid 1997).

The photographs at the Al Ain museum are a fundamental component of the institution's narrative: they mirror the decade just before the opening of the museum in its present state in 1971. The founding of the National Museum in its current location was taken as a signal for establishing other museums throughout the Arab Emirates and may be considered an important element in the pre-history for the more recent museum and heritage 'boom' in this part of the world (Exell and Rico 2014; Nayadi 2011). It was certainly no accident that the opening of the Al Ain Museum coincided with the date the Emirates gained independence from British dominion. The period around the mid-twentieth century leading up to this caesura was crucial for the modernization of the region (see e.g. Hindelang 2016). The increasing exploitation of fossil fuels and infrastructural investments brought with them an interest in archaeological excavations and the role of cultural heritage for modern Arab identities—an interest that, as the example of this museum shows, extends as far back as the pre-Islamic period (Jahiliyya). The site of Al Ain had primarily gained attention in this context for being the location of several prehistoric burial mounds. Consequently, the earliest artefacts in the museum collection are from the Neolithic period. Yet, as the photographs show, the institution also, from the outset, looked at contemporary culture and modern means of representation. As Mohammed Amer Al Nayadi, the Director of Historical Environment at the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, explains, the museum holds a large archive of documentary photographs that serve as a memory device for local traditions and vernacular life (2011, 33)—and that likely were the source for the wall installation.

What is most interesting about the museum display, however, is that its narrative does not confine itself to the dichotomy of the global and the local, tradition and modernization, but goes a decisive step further. At the center of the wall installation, marking the location where the gateway of the historical fort it references would be, is a white surface that formally seems to be both central to and distinct from the entire structure. This surface, framed in dark brown, contains a small display case featuring a basalt stone sample collected on the Apollo 17 mission. Embedded in a translucent acrylic sphere, the fragment is mounted on a wooden plaque along with a small flag of the UAE and captions in Arabic and English, which inform the viewer about the journeys of both objects. The first caption, referring to the flag, describes the political framework, stating that it "was carried to the Moon aboard Spacecraft America during the Apollo XVII mission, December 7–19, 1972. Presented to the people of the UNITED ARAB EMIRATES From the people of the United States of America. RICHARD NIXON 1973". The second caption tells us: "This fragment is a portion of a rock from the Taurus Littrow Valley of the Moon. It is given as a symbol of the unity of human endeavor and carries with it the hope of the American people for a world at peace." The commemorative plaque is one of many:

All American states and territories as well as 135 states worldwide received a fragment of the moon rock mounted, framed and captioned in largely the same way (Wikipedia 2017; Office of Inspector General 2011, 17).

As hinted at by the date, 1973, this very prominent presentation of the lunar sample in Al Ain was likely a slightly later addition to the original layout of the museum, deliberately giving the piece pride of place over other diplomatic gifts. This assumption is further supported by a set of color photographs surrounding the lunar sample display. Arranged in a pyramid pattern, these include photos of the Apollo 17 crew right next to the showcase and, above it, images of planets, among them the famous “blue marble” shot, the first full view of the earth from outer space, taken during the Apollo 17 mission (Bredenkamp 2011). The uppermost row of images, however, is dedicated to the space shuttle Discovery, specifically to Discovery’s fifth flight in June 1985. The local significance of this mission is made clear by the central image, the one sitting at the top of the pyramid. It portrays two astronauts in bright blue NASA spacesuits. The two men can be identified as Sultan Salman al Saud and Abdulmohsem al Bassam. Al Saud is a member of the Saudi royal family and was the first Muslim astronaut, while al Bassam was his back-up. Al Saud participated in the Discovery mission as a so-called “payload specialist”. Apart from his responsibilities as a crew member, he executed experiments and took photographs of the Arabian Peninsula from the space shuttle, which were then used for scientific purposes (Spacefacts 2016).

It would be interesting to read this historical moment of the first Muslim entering outer space against the long history of astronomy, astrology, and related traditions in Islamic culture, beginning with the idea of the meteoric origin of the black stone embedded in the Ka’aba in Mecca, and the reading of the stars, which both technically and metaphorically was an important cultural technique in many centers of Islamic civilization since the middle ages (King 2012). For the purpose of this short essay, however, I would like to focus on the immediate contemporary frame of reference provided by the display at the National Museum of Al Ain. As a whole, the presentation spells out an Arab identity between past, present and future, or between memory-making and contemporary representation. This identity-building function is reflected in the museum’s motto, written over the entrance: “Whoever has no past has neither present nor future.” Of course, this claim attributed to Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, emir of Abu Dhabi and first president of the independent UAE, may seem like your typical universalist truism that is to be expected from heads of states when asked to coin a motto for their national museum—just as the peaceful mission statement linked to the lunar rock sample is a staple of political rhetoric.

However, considering that the museum was founded at a crucial moment in history when the Arab Emirates gained political independence, this almost post-Warburgian combination of photo archives on a museum wall does, in fact, articulate the link between past, present, and future in a significant way. The Emirates sought to define their position within

a world order increasingly informed by an accelerating economy that was driven, not least, by the exploitation of fossil fuels, the most important resource of the region. On a global scale, the expansive, progress-oriented spirit of the age manifested itself probably most strikingly in the conquest of outer space, which was not just a technical challenge but also a continuation of the imperial age, a powerful symbol for competing agencies and power-relations. This is usually described within the framework of ideological competition on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain, where the achievements of astronautics and space technology were translated into important cultural codes and signs within rivaling philosophies of history. The generosity NASA exhibits in providing and permitting the use of images from its lunar missions is, to this day, illustrative of the degree to which these endeavors were entrenched in the representation of political agencies and power constellations (**►Constellations**) of the late modern period (Tietenberg and Weddigen 2009, 4).

As our example shows, it is interesting to also consider the positions in between the two large geopolitical “blocks” that shaped the landscape before 1989: The museum display from the 1970s–1980s demonstrates how a rapidly emerging country such as the UAE, with its small and hitherto peripheral and colonized territory, but with enormous economic potential, defined its place in the world by responding not just to modern techniques of representation such as museum display and photography, but also to certain cultural and political codes. In the particular context of Abu Dhabi, this creates a juxtaposition or combination of two grand narratives, both of them spelled out in a relation between space and time. One is the traditional notion of the desert, associated with liberty, endlessness as well as timelessness, and the lure of the seemingly impenetrable (Bevis 2010). Those Orientalist clichés (**►Orientalism**) are already challenged, however, by the black-and-white photographs in the display, which show deserts and oases as theatres of contemporaneity, connected to the modern world. In this context, the second narrative, the modern penetration of outer space, is therefore not a counter-narrative, but rather an almost typological analogy, a more-than-plausible linking of local Arab history to contemporary world history, and to visions for the future.

The result is not lost in a mere imitation of representational codes and media—rather, the museum display described above establishes the visual and iconographic syntax of a contact zone that speaks to the conditions of local history, its current changes at a particular point in history and its potentials for the future. As such, it might be considered an example of resilient identity-building (**►Resilience**) at the moment of independence. From today’s point of view, it has become apparent that such a position was susceptible to the enticements of teleological progressivism. Looking at the results of the “oil boom” that was to follow, with all its political and social implications, one might ask when and where ensuing developments in the Persian Gulf region reached a critical dialectic between resilient development and hyper-progressive economic growth.

On the whole, this brief case study aimed to provide insight into what might be understood as a basic constellation of modernity on the path to globalization: Spelled out between local Arab history and the universalism of an emerging “world culture,” the narrative of the museum display registers far more than merely a process of “Westernization” through museum or technology (►East/West). Rather, it testifies to progressive transculturalism as well as the challenges and continuing asymmetries of cultural and economic globalization.

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Figure

Fig. 1: Photo: Eva-Maria Troelenberg, 2013.

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