

ORIENTATIONS

The magazine for collectors and connoisseurs of Asian art

JUNE 2016 | US\$18/€14/£11/HK\$105

Namgyal Monastery: Part II, Books and Stupas
Multiples in Chinese Painting
Rangrigtse Temple, Charang
Lingnan School Painting
An Yixing Brushpot
Ceramic Cartography
The Scanned Buddha



Does 'Islamic Art' Exist in East Asia? A Critical Commentary on the State of Asian Art Research

Among the nomenclatures of non-Western art history—such as East Asian, South Asian and Southeast Asian, there is one, non-geographically categorized term in this field: 'Islamic art'. While the term sounds like a religiously unified category, would it be appropriate to use it in tandem with East Asia?

In March, the Centre for the Study of Islamic Culture at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) hosted an ambitious international conference titled 'Islamic Arts in Intercultural Perspective'. In conjunction with a workshop on the musico-ethnography of Islam in China jointly organized by the School

of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London and the University of Oxford, the event brought together some twenty speakers from Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the US with diverse academic backgrounds. It showcased an interdisciplinary approach to the study of architecture, calligraphy, portable

objects and music that can be at best classified as Sino-Islamic (or Chinese Islamic) arts. While celebrating one of the centre's initiatives in the foundation of Islamic studies in the Chinese cultural domain, this scholarly forum raised a question as to the title and scope of the discipline that is widely but misleadingly termed 'Islamic art'.

The term gradually took shape in parallel with the emergence of modernism and nationalism across the Middle East, particularly Turkey and Iran, as well as the establishment of the Arab states in former Ottoman territories in the early 20th century. With attempts to recategorize the arts of the Middle East according to major ethnic groups in the region based on 19th century European classifications (for example 'Turkish', 'Arab' and 'Persian'), adjectives such as 'Muhammadan' (lit., 'followers of the Prophet Muhammad'; however, this term is now considered a misnomer) began to replace the three ethno-racial categories so as to group the art and architecture of the Middle East after the Hijra (622 CE or, broadly, the 7th century) under a single umbrella term. After a brief period of the application of the contentious term 'Muhammadan art', a new taxonomical category—Islam—was introduced by the historians of European art from the inter-war period to the end of World War II so as to give 'Islamic art' a false sense of one secular, cultural unit.

Since then, 'Islamic art' has been used in a generic sense to describe manuscript paintings, portable objects, buildings and archaeological sites from the Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East from the 7th

century onward, regardless of the religious background of patrons and craftsmen, and regardless of physical location and actual usage in religious or secular environments. In other words, Islamic art history was developed as a branch of European art history or a reflection of 19th century 'Orientalism'. Perhaps because of this particular view of the term 'Islamic art', it took nearly a half century until the Muslim-occupied lands of Iberia and South Asia were incorporated into the major narratives of Islamic art history in text books and scholarly monographs. Similarly, 19th century Eurocentric approaches to the art of the non-Western world served to create a distorted hierarchy within the history of Islamic art. While the modern art history of the Islamic world suffered from neglect, the great medieval Islamic dynasties were favourably viewed as something equivalent to European Renaissance courts, thus enjoying a privileged status in the major discourse of Islamic art history. Although research interests in the arts of later Islamic dynasties, such as the Ottoman Arab lands and Qajar Iran, have increased significantly over the past few decades, Islamic art history as a whole is still yet to be thoroughly reconsidered.

Because of this complex art-historiographical background, the term 'Islamic art' was never considered to be appropriately used in the context of East Asian art history, which was based on the 'golden triangle' of China, Japan and Korea—with China at the top (see the author's introductory essay in *Orientations*, April 2013, 'New Perspectives on the Arts of East Asia and

Beyond', pp. 46–47). This triangle was essentially formed within another triangle of polytheistic social systems that dominated the region, namely Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Clearly, there was and still is no room for foreign-born monotheistic ideas to be incorporated into the art-historical psyche of East Asia.

Consequently, despite its early introduction to West Central Asia and southern China through Muslim merchants from South and West Asia, Islam as an integral culture of East Asia was for a long time forgotten. As reflected in a number of stimulating discussions at the CUHK conference, however, Islamic art in East Asia no longer holds the status of 'the other' in the context of East Asian art history. Yet because it does not belong to any defined stylistic category, it cannot be discussed under the well-established stream of art-historical narratives: even so-called 'global' art history does not fit comfortably in the naming of the field itself.

In spite of several unanswered questions, especially regarding methodology, participants at the CUHK conference were unanimous on one point: Islamic art did and indeed does exist in East Asia. Our next agenda would be to prove this convincingly outside our small scholarly circle.

Yuka Kadoi

The 'International Conference on Islamic Arts in Intercultural Perspective in Conjunction with Workshop of Ethnographies on Islam in China' took place at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on 4–5 March 2016. (For details, see www.cuhk.edu.hk/rih/csic)