

# ABSTRACTS

## "EXPLORING THE FRONTIERS OF ISLAMIC ART AND ARCHITECTURE "

A symposium organized by The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT

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### **Jamal J. Elias**

Associate Professor of Religion, Amherst College

#### **"On Wings of Diesel: Spiritual Space and Religious Imagination in Pakistani Truck Decoration"**

This paper explores the importance of visual representation and perception in popular Islamic life by focusing on the figural and textual decorations on Pakistani trucks and buses. Relying on slides to illustrate his examples, the author attempts to go beyond basic characterizations of Islamic religious art (e.g. whether or not it is intended for ritual use, and whether or not it depicts specific people) and attempts to make suggestions regarding the role of iconography in Islamic religious life.

By focusing on the use of obvious and not-so-obvious religious imagery, he will illustrate the variety of decorations used and attempt to categorize the decorations both by medium as well as by religious significance. The latter categorization is central to the purpose of the paper, since truck and bus decoration incorporates both obvious religious symbolism and culturally charged symbols which have strong religious resonances.

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### **Finbarr Barry Flood**

CASVA, National Gallery of Art , Washington DC.

#### **"Refiguring Iconoclasm: Image Mutilation and Aesthetic Innovation in the Indo-Ghurid Mosque"**

Many of the congregational mosques built in the wake of the Ghurid conquest of north India in the last decades of the twelfth century make extensive use of richly-carved components from Hindu and Jain temples. The images with which these elements were originally carved are frequently mutilated. As a result, it has been taken as axiomatic that these mosques bear witness to the culturally determined expression of a monolithic iconoclasm. The privileging of (primarily Arabic and Persian) historical narratives with their often lurid tales of 'idol destruction', over detailed studies of the monuments themselves, has served to reinforce this impression. The question of figural representation has thus assumed a paradigmatic role in both academic discourse and the popular

imagination, figuring the apparent incommensurability of two distinct cultural traditions.

Based largely on empirical evidence, this paper seeks to challenge such a reductive approach to the treatment of the image in early Indo-Muslim religious architecture. It argues that both the use of spolia and the treatment of the image provide insights into the construction and projection of a hybrid visual identity. In doing so, it considers the relationship between the iconoclastic practices witnessed in the Indo-Ghurid mosques and the aniconic style of an indigenous mosque tradition that predates the Ghurid conquest. It highlights a close relationship between the nature of what is represented on reused material and the treatment of the representation in secondary contexts, and considers the possibility that some of the images featured on reused material assumed a talismanic or apotropaic function in such contexts. Taking issue with the vision of a monolithic iconoclasm conjured in both medieval and secondary sources, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the monuments themselves reveal a complex range of responses to the image, ranging from mutilation to emulation.

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## **Oleg Grabar**

Professor Emeritus, School of Historical Studies, Institute of Advance Study, Princeton, NJ

Aga Khan Professor Emeritus, Harvard University

### **"What Should One Know About Islamic Art"**

This paper starts with two assumptions. One is that everything is worth being studied and being known by any claimant to culture in the 21st century. The second one is that it is not possible to become even superficially acquainted with everything. A resolution of the dilemma may reside in making thoughtful rather than accidental choices in whatever should be considered essential about a history or the products of a culture. The audience I am imagining is that of educated men and women everywhere, primarily academics and professionals. They are divided between those who belong to Islamic culture and those who do not and one question is whether the same knowledge should be assumed for both groups or whether there are restricted topics, perhaps topics that acquire a different slant in one group or the other.

There is, first of all, a cluster of monuments which could be called "universal masterpieces" because of their intrinsic qualities or intellectual and historical values: Dome of the Rock, Taj Mahal, Safavid Isfahan, Sinan, Safavid painting, medieval ceramics, textiles, etc... A second category would be intellectual problems of universal significance for which Islamic art provides significant examples: attitudes toward representation, abstraction, geometry, writing as art, trade in and exchanges of objects, construction of sacred or pious spaces. A third category consists in historical moments of crucial significance for the history

of mankind in which the Muslim world played a major role: the end of Late Antiquity with interesting extensions into India, Southeast Asia, and Africa; 15-17th centuries and the great empires. The paper would elaborate on these points and, especially, elicit reactions for the eventual writing of an essay for RES.

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## **Michael W. Meister**

Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Professor, University of Pennsylvania

### **"Crossing Lines: Architecture in Early Islamic South Asia"**

"Why the earliest consistent group of Islamic mausoleums should appear in tenth-century Iran is not altogether clear. Dynastic pretensions, worshipping the burial places of Ali, and attempts to attach a Muslim meaning to traditional holy sites must all have played a part in a phenomenon [of the mausoleum] which may have spread westward...." (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987)

"Indian Islam seems to have been essentially a holy-man Islam. These migrants in the Hindu environment acquired an aura of holiness, and it was this which attracted Indians to them.... there is an essential distinction between the way in which the genuine Sufi approached a saint's tomb and the practice of the people. The mystic ... find[s] in the material symbol an aid to meditation. But the popular belief is that the saint's soul lingers about his tomb.... At such places his intercession can be sought." ( Trimmington, 1971)

The architecture of early Islamic South Asia shows in clear material terms multiple layers of reception, local marking, and subversion. That local aspects of construction and ornament were incorporated into early Islamic monuments as practice is increasingly accepted, but the substantive incorporation of local beliefs has hardly been studied. Both Hindu and Muslim monuments from early Islamic Pakistan suggest that such an issue should be raised.

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## **Nasser O. Rabbat**

Aga Khan Professor, MIT

### **"The Dialogic Dimension in Umayyad Iconography"**

In the seventh century C.E., an Umayyad elite, proud of its Arabic heritage and incipient Islamic identity, established the center of its empire in Bilad al-Sham (the Roman Oriens or Holy Land). There, they encountered several stratified artistic traditions -some flourishing, others obsolescent, some interrelated, others isolated- to which they reacted in a variety of ways. They ignored or overlooked those too remote in time or too dissimilar in faith for them to know much about their cultures, but were open to the traditions close to them in time, space, language, and ethnic kinship.

The architecture the Umayyads patronized, as has been repeatedly and persuasively argued by many scholars, vigorously and unabashedly synthesized elements from many of these traditions to create some of the greatest masterpieces of Islamic architecture of all times. Less often mentioned is how much that architecture was consciously shaped by the dialogic process promoted by the Umayyads as a way to selectively endow their budding artistic and architectural culture with historical continuity, territorial rootedness, and the ability to compete with extant traditions. Not only the architectural forms and decorative schemes but also the evolving aesthetic preferences and iconographic repertoire of the Umayyads were informed by that dialogic tendency.

This presentation analyzes one outstanding instance of that dialogue: the decoration of the Great Mosque of Damascus built between 706 and 715. It argues that the variety of techniques displayed in the mosque convey different but carefully orchestrated messages. Some can be explained from within the late-antique Mediterranean koiné, to which the architecture of the mosque also belongs. Others can be elucidated from within the political context of the time, the overall role of the developing Islamic ideology, and the Umayyad's long-term program of imperial consolidation and Arabization. But the whole can only be understood as a purposeful dialogue in which the Umayyads engaged the artistic traditions of Bilad al-Sham to fashion their own iconography.

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## **Cynthia Robinson**

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### **"'Mudejar' Revisited: Muqaddima to the Reconstruction of Perception, Devotion and Experience at the Mudejar Convent of Clarisas, Tordesillas, Spain (14th C.)"**

This presentation marks the official beginning of a [very] new project for me; in many ways, it engages themes which are central to a book which I have recently finished, *In Praise of Song: the Making of Courtly Culture in al-Andalus and Provence, 1005-1135 A.D.* (Forthcoming, Brill Academic Press), but brings them into the complex cultural context of the "mudéjar" society and visual culture of the Christian kingdom of Castilla during the middle-to-late 14th century A.D. Central to both the previous study and the present project is the issue of meaning in nonfigural ornament, one which has yet to be resolved to the satisfaction of the community of historians of Islamic art, and whose engagement has been even more limited on the part of "Christian" medievalists. My argument in the first study centers around ornamental program of the Zaragoza palace known to scholarship as the Aljafería, built during the third quarter of the 11th century A.D.: through a meticulous reconstruction of what I refer to as the building's "context of use," it was possible to establish very specific significations for its forms. These significations could be engaged by the palace's elite public on several levels; in

one of its manifestations, the ornamental program functioned as a vehicle for spiritual contemplation and ascent, to be achieved through the use of vision. Corroboration for this argument is found in both the poetry and philosophical writings of certain of the palace's habitués, such as Ibn al-Sîd al-Batalyawsî. Interestingly, and pertinent to the issues to be explored in the present study, the Aljafería was given, shortly following Zaragoza's [re-]conquest by Christian forces in 1118 A.D., to a group of monks headed by an abbot from the monastery of La Grasse, in southwestern France, with which one of Alfonso's brothers was connected. The processes through which the palace may have been altered and/or engaged by its new public still represent something of a missing link, but of importance to the present study is the fact that, already beginning in the first half of the 12th century A.D., spaces with such programs of ornament as that of the Aljafería were considered, or rendered, appropriate to the needs of a Christian monastic establishment.

The convent of Clarisas [members of the Second, or female, order founded after the principles of St. Francis of Assisi] established at Tordesillas [prov. Valladolid, Spain] during the middle decades of the 14th century received its initial endowment, including the palace and attending structures in which it was to be founded, from the illegitimate daughters of Pedro I "El Cruel" of Castille and his publicly acknowledged lover, María de Padilla. The palace, as well as the structures which were added and/or altered once it had been established as a convent, belong to the art historical category of "mudéjar": the term is a problematic one for many, and its exact definition and applicability in the wide variety of cases in which it is used is far from uncontested. In the case of Tordesillas, along with numerous structures dating to approximately the same period, in art historical terms the word's use is justified by the "Islamic" characteristics exhibited by both structure and ornamental program.

"Mudéjar" art, as is well known, existed throughout the Iberian peninsula, and experienced something of a vogue during the 14th century; in fact, several prominent historians of Spanish architecture have viewed this style as the only truly "Spanish" one. These monuments are traditionally studied in terms of regional schools, each defined by a list of characteristics; major questions in the field appear still to revolve around the hegemony of one school [Aragonese, Sevillan, Toledan] over another in any given moment or monument, and the exchange of influences between them. None of the extant scholarship approaches these monuments individually, or in terms of the potentially specific significance they or their programs of ornament may have held for their public[s]: it appears to be tacitly assumed that "mudéjar" ornament is without significance, either for its Christian patrons or for a potentially Muslim viewer, and that it lacks any referent other than its own sumptuousness; thus the issue is not raised in the scholarship.

I am not convinced by the prevailing "truisms" concerning mudéjar, and the present project will seek to reconstruct, through the use and evaluation of a wide

variety of sources, "Perception, Devotion and Experience at the Mudéjar Convent of Clarisas at Tordesillas." My presentation will, in a sense, constitute a map for the project, and an exploration of the various sources which I, at present, believe to be pertinent. Comments and suggestions are most welcome-indeed, they are solicited.

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## **Pricilla Soucek**

Havok Kevorkian Professor of Islamic Art, New York University

### **"Looking East, Looking West: The Timurids and Ming China"**

Discussions of artistic and cultural relations between the Iranian world and China have focused mainly on the Ilkhanid-Yuan connections during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and have laid particular stress on the impact of Chinese pictorial modes on book paintings produced in Iran. This emphasis has obscured the fact that links continued, and even in some respects intensified, during the first half of the fifteenth century when China was under control of the Ming Dynasty and Iran was ruled by the Timurids.

This paper will investigate the degree to which Ming/Timurid connections represent a continuation of relations established during the Yuan/Ilkhanid period and to what extent they constitute a new phase in the interaction of Iran and China. Iranian-Chinese links will also be compared with those that existed between China and the Mediterranean region-particularly Egypt- during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Materials used to establish and define the interconnections of China and the Near East include ceramics from both regions as well as textiles from China and the arts of the book from the Near East.