

# Thinking Islamic Art

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## Part 1: Critical Summary and Response

**Avinoam Shalem, "Dangerous Claims: On the 'Othering' of Islamic Art History and how it operates within Global Art History," *Kritische Berichte* 40 (2012): 69- 86.**

**In this essay, Prof. Shalem writes about his experiences teaching about Islamic art and he makes a strong argument about how Islamic art should fit into the broader discipline of art history. Write a critical summary and response to his argument. What points does he make and what evidence does he use to support them? How does he define the nature of Islamic art history, would he like to see it changed, and if so, how? These are the types of questions you should be considering in your summary. In your response, engage with his argument. Do you agree? If so, why? Do you disagree? Why and based on what reasons and/or evidence? And finally, do you have questions about what he is saying?**

In the first half of Professor Shalem's article, he introduces us to how Islamic Art History has been treated mainly in the context of global art. Islamic Art was "*used to explain in a more intricate and ... global context the production of art in the West*"(70). In other words, it was treated as nonmainstream in contrast to mainstream Western Art History in global art because of the Eurocentric view prevalent at that time. The diversity under the name of Islamic Art did not get recognized at that time. However, in the 2000s, a change has occurred. The art history of the Islamic World has gained more attention. Along with that, art historians have started to evaluate the diversity in Islamic Art. For the reason of that change, he says "*digital images and their dissemination through new digital media were at the core of the scholarly discussion*"(77) and explains that looking back arts and art history through digital media helped Islamic Art and its history to gain reevaluation. However, it is not fully clarified by him why Art of specifically Islamic World turned to be the one that got reevaluated. I believe exploring the reasons for this

movement deeper is important for the other fields of art history that have been overlooked and that seek to be re-evaluated in a new context.

Although he takes the movement in having Islamic Art History as a part of global art history positively, he warns the danger of Islamic Art History being used by Western art historians to "*revitalize their field of research by looking at these Muslim geographies*"(78) and calls out this approach *Neo-Orientalists*. I am neutral to this point of his. From the historical background that "*Islamic art was regarded ... as a deformation, a distortion of classical art*"(76), on one hand, it is understandable for me that he asks for the scholastic respect to the newly developed standpoint of Islamic Art History in a global art context. On the other hand, I believe that, in order to actively introduce new findings and ideas in academic research, it can still be encouraged for the art historians to conduct comparative research and have the interpretation from a variety of different angles. Indeed, he says "*this notion of changing one's point of view ... impels new ideas and novel interpretations for art historians' narrative traditions*"(80). This should include introducing both the interpretation of Islamic Art History from European art historians and the interpretation of European Art History from Islamic art historians in a mutually respected way. Hence, rather than defending the field of the expertise obstinately, utilizing different perspectives to advance research with respects can be promoted more for the enhancement of art history research. In addition, he warns about "*excessive interest in the Mediterranean Basin as a cultural phenomenon and as a paradigmatic model for global art*"(78) by *Neo-Orientalists*. I agree with this point. Many things have been going on at the same time in different places on the earth, the record of which is history. Focusing on one

place too much might cause a lack of focus on the other, which can lead to a biased understanding of art history.

Given these changes in the standpoint of Islamic Art history in a global art context, in the second half of the essay, he discusses the future of art history. He points out that the future of art history research lies in *“defining new cross sections and linkages between aesthetic notions and motifs in different spaces rather than accumulating similar motifs.”* (80) and discourages to just collect similar looking objects from the different time period for finding similarities among them. I agree with his argument. As mentioned earlier, history is a compilation of people’s lives and interactions at different places through time. I believe that understanding the geographical connection of people and culture at one point of time in history, in addition to the chronological history, deepens our understanding of art history as a whole.

Lastly, he mentions the social network platform as another place where people interact with each other. Before the appearance of this new technology, the definition of global was limited within the real places on the earth. Because of this appearance of a completely new virtual place where people around the globe can interact, art historians are required to redefine what global art history means. The line between the different fields of art history is getting blurred because of this new space. Does *“globe”* include the virtual space on the Internet? Which fields of art history do memes fall under? Those are the questions yet to be answered and waiting to be explored by art historians.

## Part 2: Reorienting a work of art

In class, we have followed a “history of Islamic art” that focuses on Islamic cultures largely in isolation from other cultures. For this second part of the assignment, choose one of the images, objects, or monuments that we have examined in class and write about how it might be reoriented within a broader context. For example, how might a mosque be compared with more recent church architecture, such as the All Saints Episcopal church on the corner of College Avenue and Drew Street? Or how does a plaster cast of architectural geometric decoration function in a University art collection—and how should it function? Or, how might the illustration from a Shahnameh compare with a page from a graphic novel? Though you are not required to do a direct comparison between two works of art, as these suggestions might imply, I do want you to think about how the study of these works of art can impact how you look at, question, and understand your more immediate surroundings.



Learning has been helping me notice rules that go on in my life that otherwise would not be noticed at all. One such thing is the close study of the illustration from a Shahnameh. When compared with an image above from the comic book "*The Amazing Spiderman*", it introduces me to the underlying rules and efforts that have been carried throughout time by illustrations in books to accomplish the roles as a visual storyteller.

The very noticeable part of Shahnameh's illustration is the person in the center. The person shows one's back and steps on the frame, which makes readers feel that they are looking over the person's shoulder at what is happening. This has an effect of making readers feel that they are observing the situation in person. When you look at the illustration from the comic book, this effort is also made as well. In the frame on the right bottom corner, you can only see the head of the Spiderman and the background sky. This lets readers feel they are right next to the Spiderman and they are directly talked by the Spiderman closely. Both illustrations simulate the readers' view in a limited space of the frames and pull readers into the stories.

Another characteristic of Shahnameh's illustration is an effort to distinguish the characters' situation through the layout in the frame. Ardashir, the one who captured Ardavan, is positioned on the upper left and Ardavan, the one who got captured is positioned on the lower right. Ardashir is located on the visually upper position than Ardavan from readers' view, which allows readers to think Ardashir is someone who has a higher status than Ardavn who seems to have a lower status. In the top frame of the Spiderman comic, you can observe that the Superman is positioned slightly upper than the Spiderman. Readers can tell visually, even without reading the speech bubbles, that the Spiderman may be outnumbered to the

Superman. These usages of the layout that two illustrations have in common deliver the readers additional information about the stories.

Furthermore, in Shahnameh's illustration, the faces of the characters are clearly distinguishable and readers can tell the emotion of them. For example, Ardashir's widely opened eyes say that he is angry and Ardavan's tilted head and eyebrows make him look sad and embarrassed. In the illustration from the Spiderman, you cannot quite see both characters' face because they wear masks. Yet, because of the nature of cartoons, you can easily know the characters' emotions by reading the text in speech bubbles. Both illustrations use unique methods to deliver the characters' feelings to the readers.

All in all, these illustrational characteristics are for pulling the readers into the stories. The illustrations carry the role of a good facilitator for readers to the stories. The pictures among words in books carry this mission throughout time. To sum up, the study of the Shahnameh illustration made me recognize the role of daily objects around me and realize the fact that the efforts that each object carry and the rules that they follow for accomplishing the role have not been quite changed for a long time.

### **Works Cited**

Shalem, A. (2012). *Dangerous claims: On the 〈Othering〉 of Islamic art history and how it operates within global art history*. 40. 69-86.