Shifting Boundaries: How to Make Sense of Islamic Art

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There has been little change to definitions offered for the term "Islamic art" in the last 40 years. Alongside literary definitions, readers are presented with visual examples and sub-categories to help understand what the term might be applied to. With discussion on the understanding of Islamic art continuing to present day, we look to why ambiguity still exists. In searching for an answer we review some of the most popular definitions cited in recent literature, with a number of examples referring back to the writings of Oleg Grabar in 1973 - a time when Islamic culture was still predominantly associated with Muslim lands. We also examine some of the influences on sub-categorisation within Islamic art based on these definitions and consider the validity of these in light of the contemporary Islamic art scene in places such as Britain, where there is a large and growing Muslim diaspora. We ask, who is in the position to determine whether an artwork is "Islamic?" The artist, curator, or historian? Finally, we aim to clarify ambiguities surrounding the term "Islamic art" whilst also proposing a contemporary understanding of existing definitions in light of the views from all stakeholders, including those whose views are yet to be documented – the artists.

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Introduction

The term 'Islamic art' is probably amongst the few terms in the art world that is least well defined. Various definitions for this term have been proposed by historians of art, archaeologists, artists, curators and collectors who are considered stakeholders in Islamic art. Islamic art historians such as the prolific Oleg Grabar (d.2011), and present day experts Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom have provided academic descriptions of what constitutes Islamic art (Blair and Bloom 2009), whilst curators such as Fereshteh Daftari explain what it may not be by looking beyond the obvious traits of religion or ethnicity (2006). The variety of definitions available naturally leads to a quest for clarity. Surprisingly, there is no singular or absolute definition that applies to all examples of Islamic art, past and present, and in searching for one you may be left wondering if it exists at all. To further complicate matters, unlike its religious counterparts, such as Christian or Buddhist art, Islamic art is not necessarily a religious art, as it does not directly represent the religion of Islam using literal icons or depictions of key figures from the religion, nor does it solely focus on religious subjects.

The general problem with sourcing a suitable definition for Islamic art is exemplified when searching for the keywords: "define: Islamic art" on Google which presents a list of results headed by a snippet of a Wikipedia article:

> Islamic art encompasses the visual arts produced from the 7th century onwards by people who lived within the territory that was inhabited by or ruled by culturally Islamic populations... (Google 2014)

Upon clicking through to the Wikipedia page, the sentence continues "It is thus a very difficult art to define…" (Wikipedia, 2014). The impression here is that the difficulty in defining Islamic art has now traversed beyond scholarly realms, where the discussion on the matter has been debated for some time. A number of papers dating back to the 1970s highlight this same problem where the shifting boundaries of the term are indicated by the titles: *What makes Islamic art Islamic?* (Grabar 1976), *Islamic or Not* (Daftari 2006), *What do we mean when we say Islamic art?* (Shalem 2012).

Defining 'Islamic Art'

Due to the unclear, and in some cases out-dated, definitions it becomes necessary to clarify what is meant by the term Islamic art and how it has been defined by some of the stakeholders identified above, if at all. Once this has been achieved, further understanding of the nature and development of contemporary Islamic art can also be sought. Few of the aforementioned papers result in definitive clarification; instead

the authors conclude that ambiguity still resides within the study of the field of Islamic art, calling for answers to further questions, such as what is meant by this term in light of changes to the global Islamic culture and the relevance of artists' backgrounds when producing contemporary artworks (Daftari, 2006). It is therefore important to look to the source of these issues, and ask how we can measure the effectiveness of a definition.

The purpose of a definition is to provide the exact meaning of a word by way of a description (Oxford Dictionary of English 2010). It should then be possible to identify an example of what the definition applies to. Figure 1, a tiled Moroccan fountain, serves as a common example of Islamic art (Google 2014).

Figure 1: Geometric Tiled Fountain in Fez, Morocco.
Source(s): Photograph by David Wade.

In order to determine if this has been achieved for the term Islamic art the most logical approach would be to look at the use and understanding of the term by firstly breaking it down to the component adjective and noun of which it is formed. Although 'art' as a term in itself is generally accepted to hold subjective understandings, it is still a relatively well-understood word. This is determined by a search within some of the most popular British dictionaries and a number of popular online resources[1]. The results show that the term 'art' is described across most, if not all, sources in a consistent manner using very similar collections of nouns and adjectives.

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[1] A review of the following sources was conducted: Oxford Dictionary of English, Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary, Dictionary.com 2014, and Collins Online Dictionary.

> Art: the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. (Oxford Dictionary of English 2010)

The second, and more contended word 'Islamic' (when coupled with 'art'), implies a connection to the religious faith of Islam, of which it is an adjective. Again, most dictionary sources explain this adjective using similar descriptions; 'Islamic' being indicative of a link to the religion of Islam. As to whether that connection is a spiritual one, a literal one, or a cultural one requires further examination and is possibly why the debates continue.

In search for answers we look to those who have paved the way in the study of Islamic art thus far. Blair and Bloom, art historians specialising in this field, have discussed the subject at some length in a variety of publications. One of their more recent papers *The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the study of an Unwieldy Field* (2004), identifies the many factors contributing to the study of Islamic art from a variety of considered perspectives. However, if the title of their article is not suggestive enough of the presence of complications, then the inclusion of the phrase "Islamic art, however it may be defined" and "Islamic art – what it may or may not be" on a further two occasions within the paper does not provide the reader with much assurance of a definitive conclusion. Nonetheless, Blair and Bloom provide a definition produced for the *Dictionary of Art*, which was subsequently used for the *Grove Encyclopaedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*:

> Islamic art is generally held to be "the art made by artists or artisans whose religion was Islam, for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for purposes that are restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting." It therefore encompasses much, if not most, of the art produced over fourteen centuries in the "Islamic lands"... (Blair and Bloom 2009)

The use of the phrase "generally held to be…" in this definition conveys the presence of flexibility but also possible exceptions in fulfilling the criteria it sets down. It therefore makes room for allowances where an artwork or artist may fall outside of the description they provide. This definition is not dissimilar to the definition offered by Grabar in his very popular book entitled *The Formation of Islamic Art*, published in 1973, which is being extensively cited to this day[2]. Within this publication Grabar specifically addresses the nature of the word 'Islamic' saying:

> It refers to a culture or civilisation in which the majority of the population or at least the ruling element profess the faith of Islam. In this fashion Islamic art is different in kind from Chinese art, Spanish art, or the art of the Steppes, for there is no Islamic land or Islamic people. (Grabar, 1973, 2)

This description was first published over forty years ago and could be assumed to be out-dated, yet the popularity of the publication makes Grabar's work an enduring contribution to the study and understanding of Islamic art for both students and scholars. Similarly, Barbara Brend in 1992 - one of the few authors who has not shied away from stating a definition in a concise manner – described Islamic art as "the art produced for rulers or populations of Islamic culture". The disadvantage of this conciseness, however, is that it makes the definition more restrictive with only two possible criteria: either the art is/was produced for a ruler or for a population living amongst or within an Islamic culture, and most likely to be Muslim (a follower of the religion of Islam). However, Brend is careful not to say 'Muslim' as she notes that not all residents and, therefore, artists of majority Muslim lands were/are Muslim (Brend 2010, 10). Again, as recently as 2005, Fereshteh Daftari, in *Islamic or Not*, quoted Grabar with the little-changed

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[2] 332 times according to the Google Scholar website.

definition: "art made in and/or for areas and times dominated by Muslim rulers and populations"[3]. There is, therefore, little reason to disclaim Grabar's earlier definition based on the passing of time alone. But perhaps there are reasons to examine these definitions in further detail to ascertain their suitability in a contemporary context.

Identifying Islamic art

Looking at these popular, and therefore, representative, definitions closely, a pattern begins to emerge regarding how an Islamic artwork may be identified. In describing what complies with these definitions of Islamic art a set of criteria are established. The three criteria commonly found in definitions of Islamic art are 1) the identification of the location in which an artwork was made, 2) the time or era in which it was made, and 3) the presence of an Islamic culture in the form of a Muslim population or a Muslim ruler/patron at the location in which it was made. By exploring these three criteria further we can begin to see a relationship between definitions and the role they play in the formation of categories within the general field of Islamic art for purposes of both study and curation. The first criterion of the location in which an artwork is made comes as no surprise. The faith of Islam emerged from the city of Makkah, Saudi Arabia, and spread to a vast number of lands over the course of 1400 years. This time span is usually inclusive of the period from which the faith of Islam emerged in the 7th century when the Prophethood of Muhammad 🕌 was revealed, and ends with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (the last of the Islamic dynasties) in early 20th century. Although Grabar points out that there is no 'Islamic land', nor 'Islamic people', there are a number of lands where Islam became the prevailing faith followed by the majority of the population. Recent exhibitions have focused on this location-based criterion to form regional sub-categories, an example of which was the widely publicised exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery '*Unveiled: Modern Art from the Middle East*', London, 2009.

The second criterion of the time in which an artwork was made is usually specific to the 1400 year span of the Islamic Empire which, at its height, spread to Europe as well as North Africa, most of the Middle East and parts of South Asia (Blair and Bloom 1999). Examples of Islamic art explored in relation to this time period include '*The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art: from the Seventh to the Fifteenth Centuries*' (Ali 1997), and '*Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*' (Ettinghausen, Grabar and Jenkins 2001). Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the Islamic Empire as it appeared from circa 632 AD to 750 AD.

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[3] Oleg Grabar, in a personal communication with Daftari, in 2005. See Islamic or Not, Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006. p.10-27
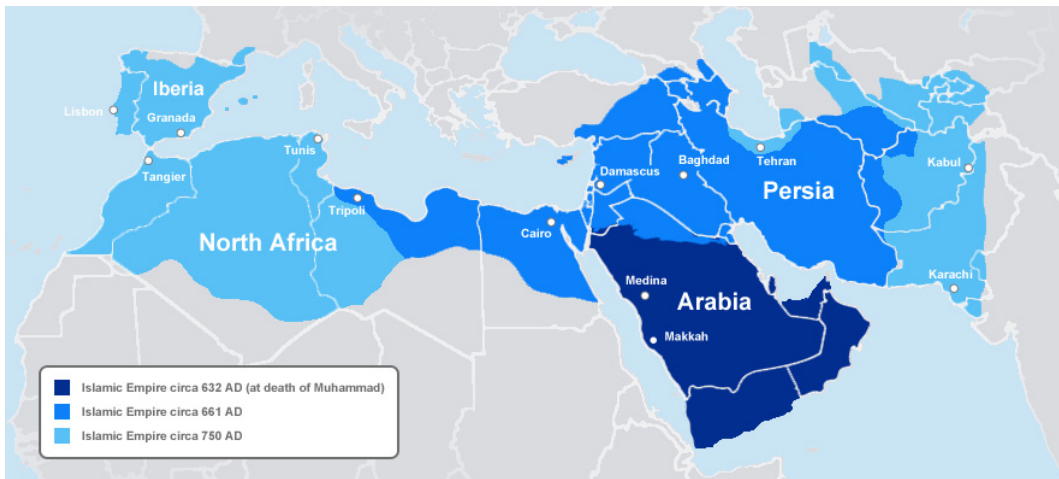
Figure 2 - Snapshot of Islamic Empire circa 750 AD

Combining knowledge of location and time in which an artwork was made, allows for identification of the third criterion: whether it was produced within the context of an Islamic culture with either the presence of a majority Muslim population or a Muslim ruler/patron in that region. This combination also leads to another form of categorization, that of Islamic dynasties. These can be considered cultures in themselves as some dynasties held strong links to specific regions, even after spreading to newly acquired lands. This again is a very popular category within the field of Islamic art history, used in many sources to organise the centuries of artefacts that emerged from various regions within the Islamic Empire into more manageable sub-topics and chapters (Brend 1991). However, one of the shortcomings of time-based and dynastic categorisations is that it does not always allow for a clear chronology. There are examples of dynasties overlapping in the timeline of Islamic history, such as the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman empires, which at one point all coincided, albeit in different locations within the vast Islamic Empire. This form of categorisation is also restricted to historical and traditional forms of Islamic art, providing little relevance to contemporary examples produced post 1923, when the Ottoman region became the new Republic of Turkey. It has not gone unnoticed that definitions of Islamic art make use of words such as "was", or "lived in", implying that Islamic art belongs to a bygone era. Some have called this phenomenon the end of the timeline, the 'death' of Islamic art, as emphasised by Finbarr Barry Flood in his 2007 paper *From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art* in what he calls the "linear trajectory". Flood states the problem is apparent but ignored by a number of authors of recent surveys on the subject[4].

There are few cases where modern Islamic art is looked at in focus, for example, by the Jordanian curator and researcher Wijdan Ali, in *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Ali 1997), but these are exceptions rather than the norm. In the 2006 compilation of previously published essays and musings, Grabar too identified this phenomenon. Referring to his previous essays, he pointed out that the articles within the publication were concerned primarily with the arts and literature prior to 1900, justifying this as follows: "a coherent historical perspective is difficult to establish for contemporary art and it is particularly easy to pick up the exception rather than the norm in the mass of available documents." (Grabar 2006). A time-specific approach may, therefore, be convenient for categorising most of the vast history of Islamic art, but appears to only work to a historical extent. Thus far, all three forms of sub-

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[4] See note 5 of Flood's paper *From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art, 2007*

categorisation point to only a regional and therefore cultural connection between Islamic art and the religion of Islam.

Regardless of the varying forms of sub-categorisation within Islamic art and the many regional cultures it was formed of, a shared aesthetic style can be seen throughout most examples of Islamic art, both in books and in public spaces such as museums and galleries. Similarities in the appearance of Islamic artworks can be seen through the use of common forms of ornamentation consisting of the following three decorative elements: calligraphy, arabesque and geometric patterns (Ali 1998). A combination of the three can be seen in Figure 3.
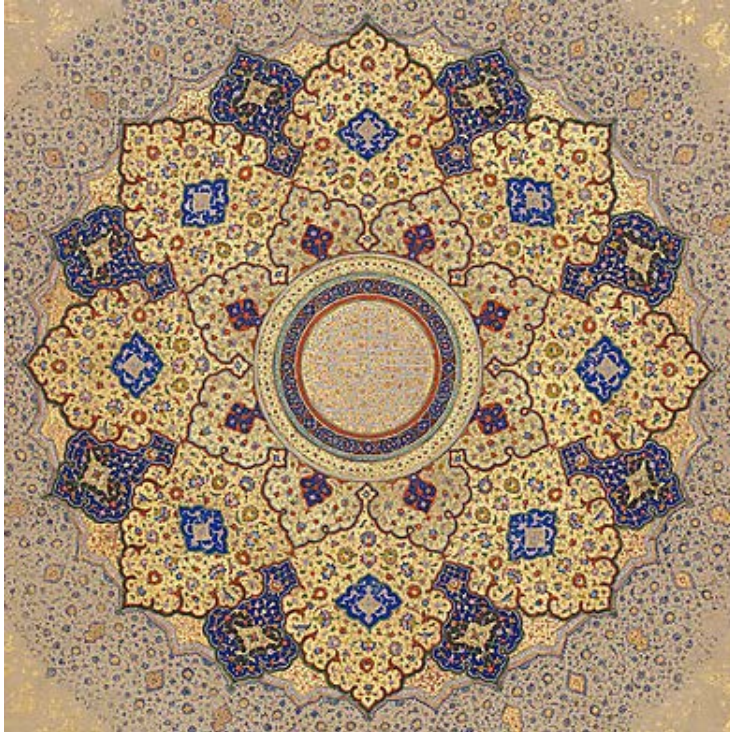

Figure 3 - Folio from the Shah Jahan Album, India ca. 1630–40
Source(s): The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Collection Online.

However, what is apparent is that this approach to identifying Islamic art, by way of visual criteria, is absent from the majority of definitions cited in academia. This is in contrast to the definitions of general 'art' discussed earlier, where examples hint towards at least the mediums if not final forms that artworks can take. Interestingly, identification of common mediums or materials is not absent from most general books on the subject of Islamic art. Rather, whole chapters are dedicated to the likes of the art of ceramics, glassware, metalwork and book illumination, etc., most of which feature at least one of the three recognisable decorative elements of calligraphy, geometric or arabesque patterns. In fact, the burgeoning collections and catalogues in museums across the world with galleries of Islamic art would suggest that objects identified as 'Islamic' can be recognised by physical characteristics alone. Many authors even itemise decorative ornamentation to include a fourth element, that of miniature painting alongside calligraphy, arabesque and geometric patterns, (Ali 1998, 37). If this visually identified mix of characteristics and mediums is as prevalent as suggested, incorporating this within academic definitions of Islamic art may well alleviate some of the ambiguity surrounding recognition and categorisation of Islamic artworks.

Despite the formation of categories based on the criteria of location, time and the presence of a Muslim patron/ruler or population, there is one category that is not addressed by these, one that forms a more inclusive category based on the concept of 'Unity in Diversity'. The presence of 'unity' discussed by Ali in *What is Islamic Art?* (Ali 1998, 5), allows many different examples of art to come under the umbrella of Islamic art. It is said to be the binding spiritual link that transcends time and place, making Islamic art identifiable beyond just its physical characteristics. Unlike the criteria of time and location, this element of spiritual 'unity' makes a stronger link between the art and religion of Islam and appeals to the idea of unity amongst the global Muslim community. This 'unity' is, therefore, also very closely related to the criteria of the presence of a Muslim population or a Muslim ruler/patron. Unity in Islamic art is also said to be a representation of the Unity of God by way of tying all the acts of Islamic artistic production together.

> This unity is best expressed in Arabic by the doctrine of *tawhid* which, in theological terms, is the Oneness of God. In Islamic art, it means the unity of the entire Islamic world under the oneness of culture. (Ali 1998, 15).

The concept of Unity in Islamic art is also supported by Seyyed Hussain Nasr, professor of Islamic studies and philosophy. Nasr is possibly the strongest supporter of the presence of a spiritual link between the Islamic artist and The Creator (God). This comes as no surprise considering Nasr's deep study of Islamic philosophy and Sufism. Sufism favours representational symbolic art forms (both visual and performance based), as they are said to be expressions of devotion and allow the act of making art to become a means of achieving spiritualism, therefore providing the artist with a divine purpose.

> To grasp fully the significance of Islamic art is to become aware that it is an aspect of the Islamic revelation, a casting of the Divine Realities (haqā'iq) upon the plane of material manifestation in order to carry man upon the wings of its liberating beauty to his original abode of Divine Proximity. (Nasr 1987)

However, Blair and Bloom are somewhat sceptical of adopting this all-embracing 'Universalist' approach, as it would be all too easy to assume an intangible criterion for assigning something as belonging to Islamic art using just this one aspect (Blair and Bloom 2004, 158). Avinoam Shalem, too, is openly critical of this type of grouping, hailing the concept a 'myth'. Shalem is not in favour of explaining similarities in styles and aesthetics of Islamic art across time and region with what would be a simple notion. He claims it would lead to the ignoring of further reasons for their occurrences. Instead, Shalem provides examples of where the term 'unity' was first introduced within the context of Islamic studies by G.E von Grunebaum, for the title of his paper *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization* in 1955. The term later evolved to be used in further instances, such as *Unity in Diversity* for the title of the 26th International congress of the History of Art in Washington DC in 1986 (Shalem 2012). The suggestion here is that the concept of 'Unity' in Islamic art is not timeless at all but is rather an invention of the West in line with its art historical approach of distinguishing one type of culture and its derivative art from another.

Classification of Islamic Art

Unsurprisingly, classification of Islamic art and its sub-categories has been greatly influenced by approaches taken outside of its own field of study. Categorisation of art in the West is not a new concept, but has only fairly recently been applied to Islamic art from an academic and pre-dominantly Western perspective (Shalem 2012). A rise in interest in the Middle-Eastern region (the Orient) coincided with increased travel and archaeological explorations in the post-colonial era between the 19th and 20th centuries (Blair 2012). Indeed, even the term 'Islamic art' is said to be the invention of the modern western

art historian, having been used by Europeans (the Occidents) for the first time in the 1860s (Daftari 2006, 10). Furthermore, early terms used by Western historians included 'Saracenic' (Blair and Bloom 2004, 153) and 'Muhammadan' art (Pope 1925)5. Naturally, with the depiction of 'other' cultures comes comparisons, if not for means of identifying one from the other, then to at least bring some form of relation between the two (King 1999). It was the introduction of the wares brought back from the East into the hands and interests of the West, which produced a necessity amongst writers and historians to classify these new items. However, unlike the colourful and rich depictions of the 'Orient' seen through artistic scenes (Figure 4), not all descriptions of 'Oriental' culture were of a positive nature (Said 1978).
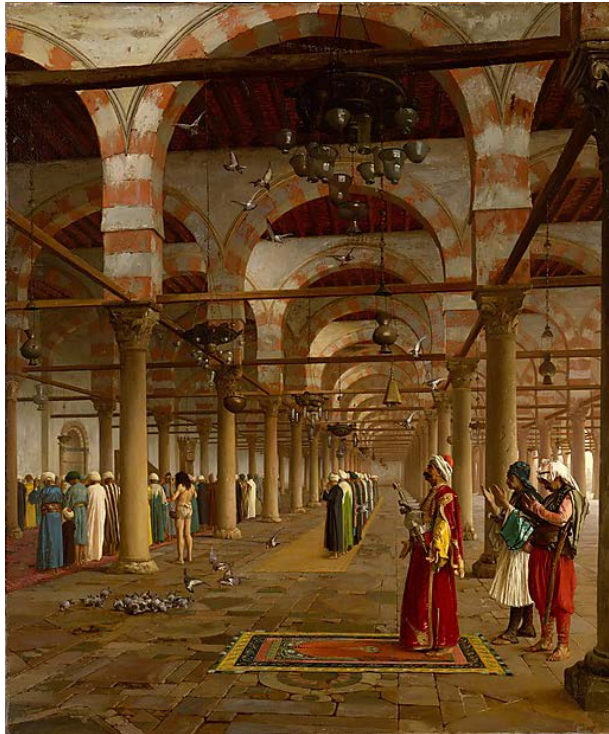

Figure 4 - Prayer in the Mosque, Oil on Canvas, Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1871.
Source(s): The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Collection Online.

'Orientalism', a term coined by post-colonial theorist Edward Said, is said to be the effect of Western bias in the portrayal of cultures and societies of the East. Said asserts that the cause of Orientalism is deeply rooted within the Western historical approach to sharing knowledge of the 'other':

> …a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on. (Said 1978)

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[5] An exhibition was held in Munich in 1910 entitled *Masterpeices of Muhammadan Art.* See Ernst Kühnel, 'Die Ausstellung Mohammedanischer Kunst München 1910', Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst, 5, 1910, 209 - 251

Based on the concept of orientalism, perceptions of Eastern (non-Western) cultures and their creative output are presented as not being of a comparable nature to that of the West. However, in opposition of this view, historian of imperialism John M MacKenzie, asserts that the effects of Orientalism were greatly exaggerated by Said. Instead a reasonable exchange of knowledge between East and West led to influential developments within Western art. The work of artists, such as William Morris who was famous for his support of the English arts and crafts movement, was spurred on by commercial trade and events showcasing Eastern themed products (MacKenzie 1995, 62). Yet, Morris' artwork, although influenced by and similar in appearance to Islamic floral and geometric patterns, is not classified as 'Islamic' nor 'Eastern' art.

The assignation of the label 'Islamic art' to modern day artists and artworks is highlighted by Fereshteh Daftari in the exhibition she curated at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art entitled *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, New York, 2006. Artists exhibiting in the show had some link to what is termed the 'Islamic' world by birth, ethnicity or faith, but most of the featured artists reside or work in the West. It was highlighted that some of these artists had previously been exhibited as 'Islamic' artists. It was also noted that the subject of many of the pieces was not necessarily 'Islamic', if at all. Some art was even created by non-Muslims using typically 'Islamic' aesthetics such as Arabic calligraphy, and mediums such as Persian carpets. The selection intentionally highlighted the non-stereotypical nature that art and artists can take in the non-western contemporary art scene.

In the article *Islamic or Not* published in the catalogue for the above exhibition, Daftari brings focus to the modernist art practices prevalent in the exhibited artworks (Daftari 2006). She argues that what is mistakenly believed to be contemporary Islamic art should in fact be considered alongside Western modern art, as the work being produced by both the featured artists and those known as Western modern artists is very similar. In this case the curator speaks for and on behalf of the artists, but one wonders whose is the final word in declaring the 'type' an artwork is? After all, what determines allocation of artwork to general categories such as 'modern' or 'contemporary' in both the East and West? Whose perspective is most relevant from amongst the stakeholders - the art historian's, the curator's, or the artist's? Before we can answer this we may first need to resolve the question of whether definitions of Islamic art should be governed by the need to categorise artworks based on existing criteria or let these be governed by physical characteristics shared by the artworks? It seems almost an eternal cycle where we return to the subject of historically established rules on classification recognised in the West and whether these are preferred merely because they have become the recognised norm. There is no doubt that distinctive artworks have been produced within predominantly Muslim lands for centuries, however, prior to these lands being discovered by the West, there was little evidence to suggest a desire or need for classifying artworks by locals for the sake of study. Islamic artworks were traditionally recognised for the skill with which they were made, the materials used, or the patron who commissioned them. Even the act of distinguishing between handicraft and fine art is a modern Western notion conveniently applied to traditional examples of Islamic art (Ali 1998).

Shalem recognises the influence of western art history on the study of Islamic art and calls for change, a complete "rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam" (Shalem 2012). He highlights that both the orientalist and occidentalist perspectives are too 'binary'; they are biased on either side and do not provide the centralised approach that would be ideal for documenting and studying subjects like Islamic art within the wider field of art history. Shalem's call for a 'rewriting' is an important one as it may have a resounding effect on how Islamic art, as a subject, is approached by all stakeholders. If Shalem's call were taken up, it may well provide the opportunity to seek and incorporate the views of artists in order to form a basis for further interpretations of Islamic art. We may find that including conceptual, theological and physical characteristics are of more relevance to contemporary applications of the term 'Islamic art' as opposed to the established traditional criteria.

The Muslim Diaspora

An important trait of Islamic art which may influence its understanding and relate it closely to concerns highlighted by Daftari, is the context within which the contemporary artist works. These contexts have included the artists' place of birth, nationality, ethnicity and of course their religion. The nature of the Muslim community has experienced much change since the end of the Islamic Empire. Spreading globally, Muslim communities have now also established themselves in non-Muslim lands. Of the estimated 63.7 million UK population, Muslims account for approximately 2.7 million (ONS 2011). However, there are pockets of Muslim communities within particular cities that make up a larger proportion of the population. In London, for example, the Muslim population is 12.5%, a significantly larger proportion than in the rest of the country (ONS 2011). The British Muslim community is also the most ethnically diverse of all religious groups in the UK (ONS 2011) and is, therefore, made up of a vast number of world cultures. However, the binding culture of Islam allows for representation in the arts through this theme – making Islamic art a viable category. In light of the make-up of these transnational but growing Muslim populations, facilitation of representation of the community through Islamic art is hoped to also follow a proportional growth. However, with the ambiguity surrounding the term Islamic art and who is an Islamic artist, it would seem that identification of artists and artworks that represent the Muslim community may also be faced with difficulty. Must the artist be a Muslim and profess this? Must the artwork comply with either the academic or visual criteria identified above? Or must the artwork address an Islamic subject?

It would also be difficult to prove that 'unity' from a spiritual perspective applies to all artists producing Islamic artworks if they are, for example, non-Muslim or possibly even just lacking an intended spiritual connection to the faith of Islam. The artworks produced by non-Muslim artists, such as Richard Henry's Decagon Table in Figure 5, resemble and even appear identical to antiquities of Islamic art. Yet, the only way the work would fulfil some of the criteria we have identified in definitions of Islamic art is through the visual recognition of decorative ornamentation and the appeal the artworks hold within Muslim communities. In favour of the latter, it could be argued that these works are made for the 'Muslim' patron in a contemporary sense, where the patron is the Muslim community, as opposed to a ruler. Regardless of these exceptions, it may be the case that only the artist is in a position to declare if their work is 'Islamic' or not and state whether the connection between their artwork and Islam is a spiritual, literal or cultural one.

Figure 5 – Decagon Table, oak with tile mosaic, Richard Henry, 2001.
Source(s): Photograph by Richard Henry.

The Shifting Boundary

We have established through this paper that there are strong relationships between definitions of Islamic art and the criteria used to categorise this type of art. Most of these definitions have included descriptions of time, place and the presence of Muslims, leading to approaches taken for categorisation of Islamic art by time-period, region and dynasty. We have found little inclusion of visual characteristics shared by Islamic artworks in the many examples of definitions of Islamic art, where the criteria has been focussed mostly on the context of the artist as opposed to the artwork they produce. As definitions form the foundation upon which a subject is understood, it is important that all perspectives are considered from the earliest stage of studying the subject, thus ensuring any outcome is true to the subject; in this case, curation and labelling of Islamic artworks. If Islamic art is still not definitively understood or clarified at a scholarly level, then a 'rewriting' of Islamic art history may be of benefit to all related branches of the subject, including study and curation (Shalem 2012).

The sources we have looked to present the views of art historians and curators but we are yet to find an extensive study of the Islamic artists' view on how their work is defined and curated. With examples of exhibited artworks that fall outside of pre-defined notions of Islamic art, and which, contrary to the statements of the artists themselves, were termed by some as examples of Islamic art, the value of seeking the views of artists becomes more apparent (Daftari 2006). It is, therefore, hoped that the ambiguity of understanding Islamic art be addressed by opening up the subject to the perspective of the artists. By seeking and documenting the views of one of the key stakeholders, we may discover that including visual characteristics of Islamic artworks within definitions provides more clarity on the subject. This approach

may even leave the door open to more flexibility for inclusion of artworks within Islamic art. Finally, it is also hoped that further work on this topic will help determine if the established methods for identifying and categorising Islamic art are still applicable today and if need be, consider how definitions might be re-interpreted to accommodate artworks in the shifting nature of the global Muslim diaspora.

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