

Catching up on Islamic Art

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The V&A's Jameel Gallery and its centrepiece, the Ardabil Carpet c1539-40, commissioned as one of a pair by Shah Tahmasp of Iran

Art museums are scrambling to attract more audiences for Islamic art, both historical materials and contemporary art from the wide expanse of the Middle East and North Africa region, Central Asia and the Caucasus. The aim ostensibly is to build up visitor numbers and public understanding of Islamic cultures and civilisations. Can this increased interest in Islamic art and culture substitute for a greater commitment to effecting constructive change where it matters — on the political and military fronts?

Last year's array of events in London's world of art appears to have justified the city's reputation in some quarters as the capital of the Arab/Islamic world. Although events such as 9/11 and 7/7 have given that reputation a sadly ironic twist, London commands attention as a confluence of cultures, many of those from the Middle East, as evidenced by its growing communities that bear their own nicknames, such as *Mini-Beirut* (Edgware Road) and *Mini-Iran* (High Street Kensington). In 2006 the city attracted increasing numbers of Middle Easterners because of two major art events, the British Museum's *Word into Art* exhibition and associated lectures and conferences and the opening of the Victoria and Albert Museum's new Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art and its permanent exhibition.

The V&A is a latecomer in the current scramble to catch up on Islamic

art — both to cater for a domestic British Muslim audience on a quest for its inheritance and for numerous visitors from the MENA region, other European countries with growing Muslim communities, North America and beyond. The *Word into Art* show was a radical departure for the British Museum, even though it confined itself to the rather safe and generally less politicised contemporary art employing calligraphy as the chief medium of expression. It stayed well clear of what artists of today see as more cutting edge and provocative work that doesn't flinch from contributing to the myriad debates in their midst — from Palestine, Iraq, Islam and identity to the West's 'war on terror.' Curator **Venetia Porter** has received numerous well-deserved accolades for bringing into the BM some of the work that, till a few years earlier, would not have won sympathy past the museum gates,

such as London-based Palestinian artist **Laila Shawa's** consistently trenchant visual commentary on her native Gaza's plight under occupation, and numerous lesser known and admittedly poorly accomplished polemical works by other artists. Laila Shawa has followed up her work on the Palestinian situation, *Children of War, Children of Peace*,¹ which formed part of *Word into Art* but is now well over 10 years old, with more provocative work, which was shown earlier at the October Gallery in London and in Berlin. Also absent, though understandably so (for lacking any calligraphic content), were **Suad Al Attar's** deeply moving painterly commentaries, prefaced by *O My Burning City*, a response to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequently expanded into a whole new body of work, that was shown in London and Dubai. Suad Al Attar is no pamphleteer. Resident in London for well over three decades, Suad is a



O My burning City, 2003, by Suad Al Attar, diptych, 183 x 306cm, oil on canvas. In 2006 the artist showed and sold a larger version in Dubai



Clash, 2002, Laila Shawa
150 x 45 x 15cm
Mixed media on board, shown at the October Gallery, London, and subsequently at Kulturbrauerei, Berlin. The artist is currently producing a second edition of the piece for an American collector

consummate painter in oils and mixed media with a singular palette and deftness of technique. She delivers her message with passion and élan. But for her national origins, she is the kind of British artist who by now would have been snapped up for a retrospective at a Tate or some other venerable outfit. Can that still happen? We shall see. There has been change, but it is slow.

Word into Art introduced to the BM a whole raft of new audiences — from British and European Middle Easterners to MENA visitors. Many amongst these still tend to dismiss the venue as an outpost of the Establishment and a custodian of colonial loot. *Word into Art* also served a welcome educational purpose, opening up for the BM's regular clientèle almost entirely new worlds, otherwise rendered in unwholesome colours by the persistent prejudices of a wide body of Britain's print and electronic media.

Whether any of this good work will go towards fundamental shifts in attitudes leading to significant political change is yet to be seen, however. The British Museum has had a modest Islamic Gallery, funded by a bequest from sinologist John Addis, since the 1990s. It is a poor cousin to the museum's resplendent and much larger Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental (mostly Buddhist and Chinese) Antiquities, funded by philanthropy from overseas. In the

event the recent spurt of activity on the Islamic art front boils down to who funds what and the V&A has been lucky in securing generous amounts of cash for its brand new gallery, albeit from non-British sources.

The Jameel Gallery was made possible by generous support from Saudi Arabia's Jameel family and is dedicated to the memory of Mr Abdul Latif Jameel, the late founder of the Abdul Latif Jameel Group, and his wife Nafisa, by Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel, their son. Funding for *Word into Art* also came largely from non-British sources in the Gulf. So, while these institutions are earning plaudits for their magnificent displays of Arab/Islamic art, it is important to note that Britain's own public funding in these endeavours remains small. Funding for similar undertakings has been further undermined by recent British debates over multiculturalism, its imminent or induced demise, and the government's emphasis on mass-scale public art projects — nearly all with unproven delivery of audience participation on a larger scale than, say, initiatives aimed at specific British communities.

Money well spent

The Jameel Gallery demonstrates how money can be well spent on a worthy cause. The V&A's old display of the gallery's star items, such as the Ardabil

carpet, and the *minbar*, was heralded by a white-on-blue banner that simply announced 'Islam.' Today such a basic or stark labelling would simply turn off many amongst western audiences, who may be either conditioned by a relentless mass media onslaught on the faith and its practitioners or just curious enough to come and seek interconnections between their daily experience and history of Islam and its culture and art.

It is early days yet for an understanding of all things Islamic to materialise in the West in a constructive manner, a manner in which concrete results can be anticipated on the political level. An example of how excruciatingly slowly the debate is moving forward, if at all, was glimpsed in a piece that Philip Hensher wrote recently in *The Guardian* newspaper. "One art critic who visited the gallery during the two minutes' silence in memory of the victims of London's July 7 bombings hoped that 'all those lovely, beautifully displayed objects could help to heal society's fault lines.'" Hensher opines, in a reference to the Jameel Gallery. "The redemptive narrative implicit in this is obvious. The sort of Islamic culture that ends in twisted metal and blood splattered across London façades is cancelled out by its ancestral beauty..." and so on.

The point not taken still is that no amount of 'interest in Islamic culture' can substitute for an interest in constructive change where it matters — on the political and military fronts in Palestine, Iraq and beyond. The West's failure to recognise self-interest in fixing what it breaks time and time again is truly mind-boggling.

Another mistake often committed and evident in western interpretations of Islamic art, culture and society is the tendency to separate the old from the new, the contemporary from the historical. Surprisingly, in an



History in Ruins, 2005. Maysaloun Faraj, earthstone and raffia 30x60cm
Collection of the British Museum shown in the Word into Art exhibition
Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund

Faraj states: 'The text consists of a repetition of the words Bism Allah al Rahman al Rahim (In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate) and Dua'a (prayers). On the reverse are fragments from the famous poem Ya Dillat al-Khiazir (O blessed Dillat) by Mohammed Mahdi al-Jawahiri, and a repetition of the question Limatha (Why?).'

'From the land between the two rivers, I pick up in my mind's eye remnants of pages from an ancient past scripted on clay tablets...and recreate my own. I 'sew' them together in an act of healing and hope. I stand them tall and proud, like an open gate, defiant and dignified like our precious date palms, like our people, like our spirit. Our history, 'world' history, is in ruins; shattered and burnt to the ground.'

otherwise thoughtful piece, Hensher falls for that, too, when he chooses to identify "a museum culture and a culture of dissidence" — including art produced today and showcased in

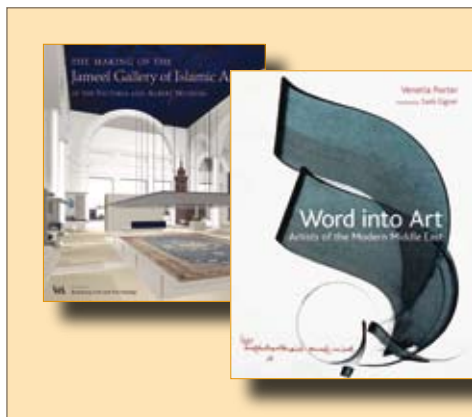
the British Museum's *Word into Art* or other public and private displays, some available only outside the Arab world. Why is it that such a separation would be hard to argue for in the context of western art when, for example, visiting Tate Britain or Tate Modern, the Louvre and the Centre Pompidou? Why indeed such a discourse is absent from the mainstream dissection of modern western art?

Tireless Champions

Thankfully, it is unlikely that many visitors to the V&A's gallery would care. In that respect it is important to see these developments as a celebration of the tiny minority that, from time to time, manages to effect change with long-term consequences. Those deeply committed curators at the BM (Porter, director **Neil MacGregor et al**) and the V&A (**Rosemary Crill** and **Tim Stanley**) form the vanguard of that minority. On a recent afternoon, while contemplating the view in the Jameel Gallery, I was ambushed by a noisy horde — dozens of British Asian, apparently Muslim, school children with notebooks in their hands and mostly white teachers in their tow.

No doubt there have been other school tours of the gallery by children and adults with no direct ancestral links with the objects on display, so that aspect of the gallery's arrival alone is a welcome step in the right direction. None of this, alas, takes us a huge distance away from the fact that no amount of art-gazing can dispel the problems that remain in our midst and require intelligent and urgent response. Further sociopolitical uncertainties await us in the West, especially Britain and the United States, as the retreat from Iraq begins and a rethink on Afghanistan looms large on the horizon, too.

¹ See Fran Lloyd 2001, *Displacement and Difference*, London: Saffron.



Two publications that coincided with *Word into Art* and the opening of the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art offer well considered critical and academic writing on the collections at the BM and the V&A and recent developments on the contemporary art scene in the Islamic world. In *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (British Museum Press, 2006), Venetia Porter enlightens the reader with a concise scholarly survey of what the museum

has collected and the interaction between the Arabic script and art. In *The Making of the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A Publications, 2006), informative essays by the editors, Rosemary Crill and Tim Stanley, are supplemented by contributions from Oliver Salway, Mike Wheeler, Nighat Yousuf and Claire Thompson. In addition, there is a wealth of resources available at the websites of both the museums, www.britishmuseum.co.uk and www.vam.ac.uk — SR