Book Review

Wendy M. K. Shaw. *What Is "Islamic" Art? Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), xix + 366 pp. ISBN 978-11-0847-465-8. Price: $28.85 (cloth).

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As Wendy Shaw states in her introduction, *What Is "Islamic" Art? Between Religion and Perception* aims to provide readers with a new episteme to approach the field of Islamic art. Shaw hopes, she writes, to move the conversation from the production of Islamic art to its reception, emphasizing commonalities across time and space. Above all, *What Is "Islamic" Art?*, recipient of the 2020 Albert Hourani Book Award Honorable Mention from MESA and the 28th Iran's World Book Award, advocates for a philosophy that understands Islamic art as experiential and interactional, something she finds lacking in current scholarship. Shaw's book has enjoyed a mixed reception thus far, perhaps unsurprisingly, given its ambitious title.

Readers should approach this book with the understanding that it does not offer an answer to the question "What is Islamic art?" Rather, Shaw interrogates the question itself, and the title should be understood as challenging the boundaries of the discipline, encouraging her audience to think about whether the Western-defined field of art history is an appropriate model for conceiving of non-Western cultural production. Her working title, *Fortress of Form, Robber of Consciousness* (p. 221), far better encompasses the book, and one is curious as to what considerations in the publishing process led to the title under which the book ended up being distributed. Although Shaw's book does *challenge* what constitutes the field of Islamic art and, interestingly, pushes scholars away from visual understandings toward aural and performative ones, the book does not review historiographical debates about Islamic art, nor does it provide the type of

analysis that its clear comparand, Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam?*, does. Reading it with this understanding, one can appreciate the novel arguments Shaw has to offer.

What Is "Islamic" Art? eschews the geographical and temporal organization that typically dominates introductory books in the field, and for that it deserves commendation.[1] Instead of centering a particular place and time, Shaw chooses a structure that focuses on how the individual receives "art," then moves outward in considering reflections of the self before looking at how poets, philosophers, and makers conceived of "the image." Shaw begins with a discussion of "the Islamic image" (chapter 1) and then transitions from visual perception to audial reception in chapter 2, "Seeing with the Ear." Chapters 3 ("The Insufficient Image") and 4 ("Seeing with the Heart") emphasize the importance of understanding the role of the divine in artistic production, arguing that Islamic art cannot be understood outside of an inspired tradition. At this point, Shaw moves the discussion away from the individual to a more relational approach, looking at the whats, hows, and whys of artists and their production. Chapters 5 through 8 explore the various webs and networks of makers, looking at what those who create are interacting with, how artists and patrons express their works in a variety of forms, and why art in Islamic traditions manifests in different genres. The book ends with discussions on geometry and perspective, which seem not to fit the flow of the narrative; instead, they read as addenda of issues not covered elsewhere. At times it is unclear why a particular topic follows another, an aspect that is particularly evident in the lack of transition between "Seeing through the Mirror" (chapter 5) and "Deceiving Deception" (chapter 6). On a macro level, this feature could be challenging for beginning scholars attempting to understand the field that Shaw intends to introduce. One is left with the feeling that this work could just as well have been published as a series of articles or, alternatively, as a much longer book that fully engages with all the issues upon which it touches.

Shaw's strongest chapter is her first, in which she joins a chorus of scholars, most recently Shahab Ahmed and Christiane Gruber, in attempting to debunk myths about the prohibition of figural imagery in Islamic art.[2] Although many of her arguments are not novel, this concise look at the subject benefits from her unique voice. One's view of Shaw's writing style, with its abundant opinions and generalizations mixed with academic jargon, is a matter of preference. Her writing is often polarizing—frustrating for those who find it too casual or opinionated, energizing for those who appreciate her passion—and readers may grapple with both reactions while reading her work.

1. For a summary of historiographical approaches to survey texts of Islamic Art, see Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003): 152–184.

2. See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Christiane J. Gruber, ed., *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and across the World* (London: Gingko, 2019); eadem, *The Praiseworthy One: The Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

Yet for Islamic art historians, her willingness to be candid and clear about the supposed prohibition of figural image in Islamic art is welcome. Chapter 1 is masterful and should be required reading for every Introduction to Art History course, and perhaps for any course that touches on Islamic culture. Shaw's exasperation at the unending repetition of such an easily refutable myth echoes that felt by anyone who has had to teach and continuously explain its erroneousness—to both students and the general public—and her willingness to express these sentiments openly and forcefully in an academic text is long overdue. Though the chapter runs through the early history of Islam and the development of the Quran, hadith, and Sunni schools of jurisprudence at a breakneck pace that might leave those new to Islamic studies feeling overwhelmed, the overall arc of the chapter is well conceived and delivered. For those for whom the history moves too fast, the appropriate references are available for further investigation and study. For specialists, the coherent weaving together of seminal works on imagery in Islam is unmatched in current scholarship. Finally, Shaw's discussion of the ways in which twentieth-century popular culture contributed to a modern understanding of an aniconic Islam is new and well argued.

Another novel contribution to the field is Shaw's focus on the role that poetry has played and continues to play in "express[ing] cultural roles for perception" of Islamic art (p. 25). As a result, poetry and the arts of the book form the core source base for her argument. *What Is "Islamic" Art?* elucidates philosophies in Islamic poetry to explicate a theory of perceptual culture in Islamic art. This is a major shift in considering Islamic art as both a field and a corpus, a choice perhaps driven by Shaw's aim to integrate poetry as the progenitor of the illustrated manuscript tradition more fully into the study of Islamic art as well as by her stated goal of demonstrating the ubiquity of figural imagery in the arts of Islam. However, the choice to exclude other forms of Islamic art, including architecture, metalwork, ivories, and ceramics, from a book titled *What Is "Islamic" Art?* implies that readers have a working knowledge of the field prior to engaging with this work. In short, Shaw assumes her readers know that up until this point, Islamic art has not been defined the way she chooses to do in this book.

As Lawrence Nees has pointed out, the book's source base is surprisingly limited to the "Persianate" world.[3] With the exception of one picture of the Sasanian Taq-e-Bustan and illustrations on her discussion of geometry in chapter 8, all illustrations date to after the thirteenth century, and the majority were produced within the "Balkans-to-Bengal complex" as defined by Ahmed. Coverage of many areas, including North Africa and Southeast Asia, is almost nonexistent. As a result, many scholars of Islamic art can read the book without ever recognizing themselves or their area of research in its pages. There is a pronounced lack of images for an art-historical text, and despite the discussions of Islamic art as object, only the forms of painting and carved stucco

3. Lawrence Nees, review of *What Is "Islamic" Art? Between Religion and Perception,* by Wendy Shaw, *CHOICE: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* 57, no. 10 (2020): 1081.

appear in the work. Of course, to some extent this is Shaw's point: that Islamic art need not be defined by what we see with our eyes, and that there is far more to consider in terms of experiencing art than just what we process visually.

Shaw's least successful chapters are those in which she attempts to generalize about Islamic art history and its development in relation to the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods (chapters 4, "Seeing with the Heart," and 10, "Perspectives on Perspective"). It is clear that this is not her area of expertise, and her depiction of post–Nicene Creed (325 CE) Christianity as a monolith does to Christianity what she argues we must not do to Islam: paints it as an unnuanced, singular faith (p. 106). This is the greatest fault of the book: Shaw's unfamiliarity with Late Antique culture leads her to see differences as "Christian"/"Christianate"/"Western" versus "Islamic," and while she convincingly argues that this dynamic began in the late Middle Ages with "Renaissance" and "Enlightenment" thought and was later entrenched in European hegemony and colonization, this binary simply does not work as a framework for the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods.[4] Shaw's unfamiliarity with this time period and the scholarship on it reveals a lack of understanding of methods in and approaches to premodern "art."[5] In chapter 10, she repeatedly states that Christian art lacks a "multi-centered mode of viewing the world," seemingly unaware that for the first one thousand years of "Christian" art, makers depicted expressions of space from "an infinite network of focal points" in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional pieces (pp. 314, 325).[6] This seems a missed opportunity; readers wait for a discussion that never comes on how theoretical approaches tied to pre-perspectival theories of medieval art might be useful in the study of Islamic cultural perception.

Similarly, the discussion in her longest chapter, "The Transgressive Image" (chapter 7), inhabits this Christian vs. Islamic dynamic that she criticizes in her assessments of early scholars in the fields of art history and Islamic art, particularly Alois Riegl, Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Kühnel, Oleg Grabar, and Owen Jones. In this chapter, Shaw regularly juxtaposes Islam and Christianity, forcing comparisons that may not be appropriate.

4. It is also of some concern that Shaw never explains why she accepts Ahmed's definition of "Christianate" but rejects the use of "Islamicate," referring the reader only to Ahmed's work in a footnote. This sets up a strange tension between Christianate vs. Islamic art, which is never fully explained. Though many scholars have discussed the problems with projecting nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural dynamics onto the medieval period, perhaps the most succinct discussion of works in the field of Ottoman studies, and thus the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, can be found in Alan Mikhail and Christine M Philliou, "The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (2012): 721–45.

5. For further reading on challenging approaches to medieval art, see Miriam Schild Bunim, *Space in Medieval Painting and the Forerunners of Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940) and Meg Boulton, "'The End of the World as We Know It': The Eschatology of Symbolic Space/s in Insular Art," in *Making Histories: Proceedings of the Sixth International Insular Arts Conference*, ed. Jane Hawkes, 279–90 (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2013).

6. For similar essentializing assertions about the perspectival nature of Christian art, see pp. 300, 301, 305, 306, 319, and 321.

The crux of this chapter revolves around Islamic artistic renderings of the story of Joseph, Zuleikha, and Potiphar, dominant in the poetic and artistic corpus of Islam, and their comparison with Christian depictions of the same story. Although one sees why she chose this story as representative for Islam, the Potiphar story has relatively little importance in the Christian tradition and as such provides a poor example from which to make sweeping generalizations about Christian art. One wonders why the comparison to Christian art is necessary, given the strength of her argument concerning the indivisibility of painting and poetry evinced in her chosen exemplar.

Ultimately, a tension between defining and interrogating the field of Islamic art persists throughout the book. The attempt to explain the field to a novice audience, coupled with the deep theoretical discussions that could only make sense to those well versed in both art history and Islamic art history, results in a lack of cohesion. However, one should not dismiss the questions that Shaw begs us to consider. Despite its shortcomings, the book is a valuable contribution. *What Is "Islamic" Art?* seeks to answer a question, but perhaps more importantly, it challenges readers to think about what questions we ask and why.