

Collecting and Presenting ‘Islamic Art’ in European Museums

Filiz Çakır Phillip, Helena Lahoz, Mattia Guidetti, and Alicia Miguélez

1 Introduction

Can museums keep pace with the changes in society? This simple, direct question is crucial when we consider the current definition of a museum as “a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage”.¹ In a world where everything from technology to politics, economics and moral values is in a constant state of mutation, what are the main challenges that museums face today to fulfil that main objective of being at the service of society?

In Europe, one of the deepest social transformations to have occurred in the past two decades is the broadening of its citizenship to include many citizens with a non-European and Islamic background. This has in turn led to more public awareness of migration, refugees, and asylum seekers, and to debates on relevant issues such as inclusion policies, and cultural and religious diversity. It therefore seems appropriate to examine the way in which European museums might serve society by exhibiting the vast Islamic heritage they have amassed over the past centuries.

The public or private ownership of an institution has had a direct impact on collecting interests and expansion policies, financing capabilities, and long-term institutional sustainability. Furthermore, when displaying Islamic visual art and culture, the shaping of narratives, and the creation and fostering of dialogues with diverse audiences have been directly related to the institution’s mission and the nature of its collection. In recent decades, however, further challenges and opportunities have emerged. Thus, the presentation of Islamic cultural legacy, and indeed of art in general, in European museums, is progressively moving away from the didactic approach that appeals to visitors with

1 The definition was approved in Prague, on 24 August 2022, by the Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Available at <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> (Accessed April 25, 2023).

higher education. Instead, the current global and decentralized approach allows visitors to interact with collections, sometimes even on a very personal level, evoking memories, and creating individual and emotional connections.

Starting with the more general questions on the role which museums play in a constantly changing Europe and on the existence of a vast, rich, and diverse Islamic heritage that should be at the service of society, this chapter seeks to address the part now played by the display of Islamic visual and material cultures in European museums, and to consider how and to what extent this legacy might help museums to become social agents that promote inclusion and social integration, accessibility, diversity and sustainability.

2 Case Studies

Among the large and varied panorama of 'Islamic Art' collections in Europe,² the analysis offered in this chapter covers four case studies. Two are public institutions: the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* [National Archaeological Museum] in Madrid (1867) and the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* [Museum of Islamic Art] in Berlin (1904); the other two are private collections, the *Davids Samling* [David Collection] in Copenhagen (1948) and the *Museu Calouste Gulbenkian* [Calouste Gulbenkian Museum] in Lisbon (1969). Diverse in terms of the origins and scope of their collections, the selected museums offer the chance to investigate the vast array of approaches taken towards the arts from the Islamic lands in the Europe of today.

Opened to the public in 1871, the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* in Madrid reunited the collections of three institutions: the *Museo de Medallas y Antigüedades* [Museum of Medals and Antiquities] of the *Biblioteca Nacional de España* [Spanish National Library], the archaeological and ethnographic objects of the *Museo de Ciencias Naturales* [Museum of Natural Sciences] and the collection of the *Escuela Superior de Diplomática* [School of Diplomacy]. Private donations and acquisitions of objects from archaeological excavations, private collections and ecclesiastical treasures widened the scope of the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional's* holdings. It also houses an 'Eastern Islam' collection – defined in contrast to objects from the Iberian Peninsula – consisting of several donations by private collectors.³

2 Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art. Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850–1950* (London, 2000).

3 Alejandro Marcos Pous, ed., *De Gabinete a Museo. Tres siglos de historia* (Madrid, 1993); Ángela Franco Mata, "Grandes museos y acopio de arte medieval", in *Luz de sus ciudades:*

The *Museum für Islamische Kunst* in Berlin was created in 1904 as the Department of Islamic Art in the Bode Museum (then known as Kaiser Friedrich Museum) in Berlin.⁴ It was established under the auspices of Wilhelm von Bode (1845–1929) following the gift of the Mshatta façade by the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842–1918). The main bulk of the collection consisted of the findings of the numerous archaeological excavations carried out by Germany-based scholars, of private donations and new acquisitions on the art market and long-term loans from other German museum such as the *Kunstgewerbe Museum* [Arts and Handicrafts Museum], the *Vorderasiatisches Museum* [Museum of the Ancient Near East] and the *Ethnologisches Museum* [Ethnological Museum].⁵

These Madrid and Berlin institutions – despite both being public – are different kinds of museums. The first aims to reappraise Islamic legacy within the nation-state, while the latter offers a comprehensive overview of the arts produced by one among many great civilizations. Although today, as we will discuss below, this difference is blurred, it is important to consider how the two collections were initially conceptualized.

The second pair of case studies, the *Dauids Samling* in Copenhagen, and the *Museu Calouste Gulbenkian* in Lisbon, are the result of the activities of private collectors. Both of these fine arts museums still carry the names of their respective founders and possess collections that seek to encompass the whole historical production of 'Islamic Art'. Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian (1869–1955)

homenaje a Julio Porres Martín-Cleto, ed. Ramon González Ruiz (Toledo, 2008), pp. 280–329; Gaspar Aranda Pastor, "Isidro de las Cagigas López y las antigüedades iránias de la Colección Martínez Santa-Olalla del Museo Arqueológico Nacional", *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional* 34 (2016), 287–304; Andrés Carretero Pérez, "El Museo Arqueológico Nacional: 150 años de presencia institucional", in *Arqueología de los museos. 150 años de la creación del Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Actas del V Congreso Internacional de Historia de la Arqueología / IV Jornadas de Historia SEHA – MAN*, ed. Andrés Carretero Pérez, Concha Papí Rodes, and Gonzalo Ruiz Zapatero (Madrid, 2018), pp. 21–42; Beatriz Campderá Gutiérrez, "Del objeto «árabe» a al-Ándalus: La exposición de las colecciones andalusíes en el Museo Arqueológico Nacional (I)", *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional* 41 (2022), 143–60; Beatriz Campderá Gutiérrez, "Del objeto «árabe» a al-Ándalus: La exposición de las colecciones andalusíes en el Museo Arqueológico Nacional (II)", *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional* 42 (2023), 417–432.

4 Almost at the same time, in 1905, the Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre was founded under the label 'Arts of the Muslims'. See: Sophie Makariou, ed., *Les arts de l'Islam au Musée du Louvre* (Paris, 2012), p.13. For colonial history and French strategies of collecting Islamic art see: Eva Maria Troelenberg, *Mshatta in Berlin. keystones of Islamic Art* (Berlin, 2016), pp. 96–97.

5 State Museums of Berlin Cultural Property, *Museum of Islamic Art* (Mainz, 2003).

was born in the Islamic world (in late Ottoman Istanbul), while Christian Ludwig David (1878–1960) was born in Copenhagen.

Christian Ludwig David was a lawyer specialized in financial matters and an art lover. He took a special interest in Danish fine art and later expanded into the decorative arts, including ceramics, and also began to collect Islamic items. However, his interest in ‘Islamic Art’ was secondary, and it only became the focus of the museum after his death. When he died in 1960, the Islamic collection consisted of 210 pieces of ceramics, one bronze, five manuscripts, three glass items and forty-one textiles, twenty-six of them carpets. The Board took the decision to focus on and enlarge the Islamic collection, in view of its uniqueness in the Danish museological landscape.⁶

For his part, the businessman and diplomat of Armenian origin, Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, considered himself an ‘Oriental collector’.⁷ Although he was interested in a vast range of different materials, from Lalique glass to ancient Greek coins, old master paintings and French furniture, his collection had a very special focus on artefacts from the Islamic world. Nevertheless, the major part of his collection associated with Islamic lands was not formed on his own travels to places like Egypt or Syria, but rather “in Britain and France, taking advantage of local sales as well as commercial networks that extended across the Middle East”.⁸

The nature and character of these four museums, as well as their institutional embeddedness, now influence their declared missions and implementation policies. They follow common goals, as expressed in ICOM’s deontological guidelines,⁹ and face similar challenges and opportunities regarding their mission. However, their disparate locations, working methods

6 Kjeld von Folsach, *Art from the World of Islam in the David Collection* (Copenhagen 2001), pp. 29–35; Kjeld von Folsach, “The David Collection: The Museum’s History, Character, and Various Reflections on the Reinstallation of the Islamic Collection”, in *Cosmophilia. Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen*, ed. Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom (Boston, 2006), pp. 31–38.

7 According to Jessica Hallett, “his roots extended beyond the Ottoman borders of the Empire in which he was born to a larger Orient that included Iran”. See: Jessica Hallett, “Calouste Gulbenkian and the Rise of Islamic Art”, in *The Rise of Islamic Art, 1869–1939*, ed. Jessica Hallett (Lisbon, 2019), p. 13.

8 On Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, see also: Jonathan Conlin, *Mr Five Per Cent: The Many Lives of Calouste Gulbenkian* (London, 2019); Piran McClary, “Calouste Gulbenkian, His Minā’ī Ware, and the Changing Islamic Art Market in the Early Twentieth Century”, *Muqarnas* 37, no. 1 (2020), 325–343.

9 ICOM, *Code of Ethics*. Available at <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/code-of-ethics/> (Accessed March 24, 2023).

and decision-making independence have different impacts on their daily operations and the communities to which they are directly connected.¹⁰

3 Challenges and Opportunities

Museums have taken different approaches to the pressure exerted by recent societal and cultural demands. A question of increasing resonance regards how fast sociopolitical and cultural realities are changing in Europe: to what extent is the public familiar with the Islamic legacy? A comment by the Moroccan writer Abdelfattah Kilito on lecturing on medieval Arabic literature in contemporary Europe is useful to illustrate the set of challenges faced today in museum curatorship. Kilito observes that the European audience needs not only to be transported back to medieval times – which is difficult in itself – but also introduced into a specific cultural context (i.e. the Arabic / Islamic world) that is unfamiliar to the average European person.¹¹ The familiarity or unfamiliarity of the objects on show is crucial to evaluate the problems and potential for current museum display policies. As stated by Seif El-Rashidi, the feeling of estrangement for the values conveyed by Islamic medieval objects is an issue within the Muslim world as well.¹²

Recent changes in the main collections of 'Islamic Art' around the world (New York, 2011; Paris, 2012; London, 2018; Doha, 2022; Berlin, expected in 2028) are a response to several driving forces.¹³ These include the events in New York on September 11, 2001, which resulted in Islam being perceived predominantly as a religious notion, overshadowing other cultural dimensions of the Islamic world. Additionally, the growing population of individuals with Islamic or Asian-African backgrounds in Europe has played a role. These profound social changes have thus generated a very different vision of collections and

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- 10 Andrés Carretero Pérez, "El Museo Arqueológico Nacional: 150 años de presencia institucional", in *Arqueología de los museos. 150 años de la creación del Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Actas del V Congreso Internacional de Historia de la Arqueología / IV Jornadas de Historia SEHA – MAN*, ed. Andrés Carretero Pérez, Concha Papí Rodes, and Gonzalo Ruiz Zapatero (Madrid, 2018), pp. 29–40; Stefan Weber, "A Concert of Things: Thoughts on Objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context", in *Islamic Art and the Museum. Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber, and Gerhard Wolf (London, 2012), pp. 28–53.
- 11 Abdelfattah Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, first published in Arabic in 2002 (Syracuse, 2017), pp. 6–8.
- 12 Seif El-Rachidi, "Museum of Islamic Art and Public Engagement", in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, p. 210.

the role of museums in presenting them. As clearly pointed out by Christian Sassmannshausen, “While in the museum’s early days, objects were pivotal in constructing notions of Otherness and confirming national self-images in a colonizing Europe, in recent decades, the museum’s association with the colonial past has come under severe criticism.”¹³

In other words, the structure of knowledge created in the eighteenth century which was built upon a ‘territory-based’ concept of identity and artistic production which was reflected in museum organization has entered a crisis and new models are emerging.¹⁴ Given that the Islamic collections in Europe reflect the continent’s relationship with Islamic lands, “redefining the concept of Islamic art in the museum context is ultimately about reconfiguring Europe’s vision of itself and its relation to the Other”.¹⁵ Thus, for European museums, the last few decades have meant an in-depth reflection on the categories, labels and terminology used to define, classify, and produce new knowledge about pieces and objects from Islamic lands. More broadly, it is apparent that what has been occurring in museums in the past twenty years runs parallel to reflections in the related academic field.

The debate on the categorization of ‘Islamic Art’ production started as early as the late nineteenth century, when the arts from the Islamic lands – previously labelled ‘Saracen’, ‘Arab’ and ‘Mohammedan’ art – were defined under the collective term ‘Islamic Art’, and offered to the public in galleries or museums created for that purpose. Europe epitomized the process, but it also involved the Ottoman Empire and the colonial and local elites of Egypt.¹⁶ Following the first comprehensive exhibitions of arts from Islamic lands, including the Exhibition of Arab and Persian Art in London (1885), *L’exposition d’Art Musulman* [Muslim Art Exhibition] in Paris (1893), and the exhibition *Meisterwerke*

13 Christian Sassmannshausen, “The Stuff of History: Everyday Objects, the Construction of Ambiguous Meanings and the “Afterlife” of Social Things”, in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, p. 116.

14 Robert Skwirblies, “‘Greatest Adornments, Enormous Profits’: How European Cultural Heritage Values were Formed in the 18th Century”, in *Translocations. History of Dislocated Cultural Assets*, ed. Felicity Bodenstein, Merten Lagatz, and Bénédicte Savoy (forthcoming).

15 Beshara Doumani, “The Power of Layers or the Layers of Power? The Social Life of Things as the Backbone of New Narratives”, in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, p. 129.

16 Linda Komaroff, “Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art”, *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000): 1–8; Wendy M. K. Shaw, “Islamic Arts in the Ottoman Imperial Museum, 1889–1923”, *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000): 55–68; Jean-Gabriel Leturcq, “The Museum of Arab Art in Cairo (1869–2014): A Disoriented Heritage?”, in *After Orientalism Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-appropriations*, ed. François Pouillion and Jean-Claude Vatin (Leiden, 2015), pp. 145–61.

muhammedanischer Kunst [Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art] in Munich (1910), private collections and public museums in Europe ruminated on the potential and the limits of collecting and displaying Islamic visual and material culture.¹⁷ Of special interest is the change in the display policies adopted by collectors and museums in exhibiting Islamic legacy. The early twentieth century marked the beginning of a new attitude towards the display of Islamic objects. They were raised to the rank of fine art objects and as such arranged in low-key, white-walled rooms.¹⁸ Both the effort to find a category that facilitated an art historical discourse on 'Islamic Art' and its introduction as an artistic product to display alongside other artistic traditions marked a new era for art from the Islamic lands.

In recent decades, however, the chronological and geographical scope of the field and its definition have undergone scrutiny: the definition 'Islamic Art' is not considered an appropriate reflection of the diversity of artistic output from Islamic lands.¹⁹ Moreover, the field's potential fragmentation along national lines has been criticized.²⁰ The difficulties involve not only the dichotomy of the national versus pan-Islamic character of what is dubbed 'Islamic Art', but also the tension between a cultural definition of Islam and a religious interpretation of the term.²¹ 'Material and visual culture from the Islamic lands' is

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- 17 Remi Labrusse, "De la collection à l'exposition: les arts de l'Islam à Paris (1864–1917), in *Purs décors? Art de l'Islam, regards du XIX^e siècle*, ed. Remi Labrusse (Paris, 2007) pp. 64–74; Jens Kröger and Ernst Kühnel, "The 1910 Exhibition «Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst»: Its Protagonists and its Consequences for the Display of Islamic Art in Berlin", in *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered*, ed. Anna Lermer and Avinoam Shalem (Leiden, 2010), pp. 65–116. See also: Wendy Miriam Kural Shaw, "From postcoloniality to decoloniality, from heritage to perpetuation: The Islamic at the museum", in *Islam and Heritage in Europe. Pasts, Presents and Future Possibilities*, ed. Katarzyna Puzon, Sharon Macdonald, and Mirjam Shatanawi (New York, 2021), pp. 31–50.
- 18 David Roxburgh, "Au Bonheur des Amateurs: Collecting and Exhibiting Islamic Art, ca. 1880–1910", *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000): 9–38; David Roxburgh, "After Munich: Reflections on Recent Exhibitions", in *After One Hundred Years*, pp. 357–386.
- 19 Oleg Grabar, "Islamic Art: Art of a Culture of Art of Faith?", *Art and Archeology Research Papers* 13 (1978): 1–6. Interestingly, the discussion mainly developed in the USA, though some of the problems were exposed as early as 1910 in Germany by Carl H. Becker ("Der Islam als Problem", *Der Islam* 1, 1910, pp. 1–21).
- 20 Jonathan M. Blair and Sheila S. Blair, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field", *The Art Bulletin* 85 (2003), 152–84.
- 21 Nasser Rabbat, "What is Islamic Architecture Anyway?", *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012, online); Avinoam Shalem, "What do We Mean when We Say 'Islamic Art'? A Plea for a Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam", *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012, online). A different stance on the topic has been formulated by the historian of Islam, Shahab Ahmed (*What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton, 2016).

often considered an appropriate alternative formulation, while a quadripartite chronological division of the field (as in the case of other art historical traditions) has also been invoked.²² Furthermore, more specific labels, such as 'Arts of al-Andalus' are also finding their own space in historiography.²³

The leading museums devoted to 'Islamic Art' are currently facing the above epistemological shift regarding the term and notion of 'Islamic Art'. Indeed, they illustrate the failure to resolve this terminological discussion. Moreover, the aforesaid new approaches to the term and concept, as well as the new approaches taken to its display, are determined by their inherited collections, museographies and architectures, and implemented accordingly. As we have seen, their original character was shaped during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, right before the rise of Postcolonial Studies and the New and Critical Museologies. They were responding to their coetaneous scientific and sociocultural contexts, curatorial methods and museographical fashions. Thus, the bulk of their foundational and displayed collections reflect splendid epochs, major production centres, masterpieces, and luxurious objects. The Islamic world was scientifically systematized through dynastic, chronological, and cultural references, and was displayed correlatively.

The four case studies considered here reflect this major paradigm shift. At the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* in Madrid and the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* in Berlin, objects were integrated into larger narratives and chronological itineraries. The German scholars of the nineteenth century saw the art of the Islamic World as a continuation of Greco-Roman and Mesopotamian cultures, which explains why the collection was moved from the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum (now the Bode Museum) into the Pergamon Museum, which houses collections of Greco-Roman, and Mesopotamian civilizations. The move was carried out to legitimize the display of archeological collections from Samarra (Iraq), Raqqa (Syria), Ctesiphon (Iran), and Mshatta (Jordan), to mention a few.

In Madrid, the display of 'Islamic Art' responded to the lively debate about Spain's national identity by integrating Andalusian and so-called 'Mudéjar'

recently quoted by the Islamic art historian Simon O'Meara (*The Ka'ba Orientations: Readings in Islam's Ancient House*, Edinburgh, 2020).

22 Gülrü Necipoğlu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches", in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, pp. 57–75; Virginie Rey, "From 'Islamic Art' to 'Muslim Heritage': The Display of Islam in Museums of Europe and Beyond", in *Archaeology, Politics and Islamate Cultural Heritage in Europe*, ed. David J. Govantes-Edwards (Newcastle, 2022), pp. 183–196.

23 Susana Calvo Capilla (ed.), *Las artes en al-Andalus y Egipto. Contextos e intercambios* (Madrid, 2017).

art.²⁴ Andalusian, Mudéjar, and Eastern Islamic art were all shown together in its first museographies, distributed within its corresponding Medieval or Modern Art galleries. But this form of organization has also undergone several changes. Given the Museum's progressive specialization towards archaeology and a national focus, and with the incorporation of modern museologies that advocated a reduction in the number of exhibited objects, the display was limited to the most representative legacy of al-Andalus, Sepharad, and artistic and trade relations with the Orient.²⁵

The *Davids Samling* in Copenhagen, on the other hand, was originally linked to the idea of a historical townhouse museum safeguarding a private collection and aimed to show its holdings in an interior, creating for its visitors the atmosphere of a home rather than a museum. This conception is still apparent in its Danish and European art sections, but the Islamic galleries were converted into a new display in 2008, merging two historical townhouses to ensure sufficient space to show the artworks adequately, and creating an encyclopedic circuit that traverses the main geographies and chronologies of the Islamic World.

The distribution chosen by the *Museu Calouste Gulbenkian* in Lisbon is similar to the latter arrangement: the 'Eastern Islamic Art' section includes pieces from Iran, Turkey, Syria, the Caucasus and India dating from the twelfth to eighteenth centuries, and showcases a great variety of techniques and materials, which include ceramics, fabrics and illuminated manuscripts. This section,

24 Antonio Urquizar-Herrera, "La caracterización política del concepto mudéjar en España durante el siglo XIX", *Espacio, tiempo y forma. Serie VII, Historia del arte* 22–23 (2009–2010): 201–216; Juan Carlos Ruiz Souza, "Los estilos nacionales y sus discursos identitarios: el denominado estilo mudéjar", in *La Historia del Arte en España: devenir, discursos y propuestas*, ed. Alvaro Molina Martín (Madrid, 2016), pp. 197–216; Elena Paulino-Montero, "Repensando el mudéjar desde el siglo XXI: el canon hispánico que no fue", in *Repensando el canon: Modelos, categorías y prestigio en el arte medieval hispano*, ed. Javier Martínez de Aguirre, Ángel Fuentes Ortiz, and Víctor Rabasco García (Madrid, 2022), pp. 177–192. This issue has been addressed by Museo Arqueológico Nacional through activities such as the guided visit organized by J. C. Ruiz Souza in 2019 *De la invención del mudéjar al arte andalusí: teoremas y persuasiones* (Available at <http://www.man.es/man/en/actividades/actividades-extraordinarias/historico-extraordinarias/2019/20191107-semana-ciencia/20191112-arte-andalusi.html> (Accessed March 31, 2023)).

25 María Ángela Franco Mata, Luis Javier Balmaseda Muncharaz, Isabel Arias Sánchez, and Sergio Vidal Álvarez, "Nuevo montaje de la colección y Arqueología y Arte Medieval del Museo Arqueológico Nacional", *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional* 32 (2014), 424–430; Guillermo García-Contreras Ruiz, "Al-Andalus en el Museo Arqueológico Nacional: Donde arquitectura y artes decorativas prevalecen por encima de la historia", *ArqueoWeb* 16 (2015): 292–303; Josephine Shaya, "Communicating Context: Spain's Newly Renovated Museo Arqueológico Nacional", *American Journal of Archaeology* 121.2 (2017): 333–341.

nevertheless, is displayed alongside galleries devoted to Egyptian Art, Graeco-Roman Art and European Art.

Given these circumstances, after successive analyses of their institutional characteristics, the nature of their holdings and desired narratives, museums are designing and implementing specific projects that comply with their visions and missions, all of which affects the enrichment of their collections, as well as their display and narratives. It is an ongoing balancing act between the pace of sociocultural demands, scientific developments, and the long-term realities of their permanent exhibitions. The required changes can be difficult to implement in a timely manner. For instance, the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* witnessed the split of Germany, which meant the division of its collection, and the subsequent reunification of both sections later (1958–1991). The museum has already spent more than twenty years planning a new way of displaying its collection, which will occupy the entire north wing of the Pergamon Museum and is set to open to the public at the end of this decade. We can expect a fresh approach and new interpretation of this collection, with plenty of community engagement. And yet by then, the museum may well need to start planning all over again to adapt to a changed world, in which museums are living and ever-evolving spaces.

Bearing this challenge in mind, the permanent exhibition can function as a primary structure, showing general historical dynamics, while different strategies and actions can be used to provide a deeper insight on selected topics and disrupt its static character: these might involve small parallel temporary exhibitions,²⁶ theme-based itineraries, a ‘monthly artwork’ series (involving brief publications, guided or streamed visits), ‘guest pieces’ that are on loan from other institutions, and the use of new technologies.

Where narratives are concerned, the possibilities range from treating Islamic objects as ‘cultural artefacts’ to considering them ‘aesthetic works of art.’²⁷ Between these two poles, the different strategies that have emerged – which are not mutually exclusive and may overlap – can be schematized as follows. One option is to utilize objects to explain Islamic cultures. This implies not only gearing objects to the audience’s desire to know more about Islam – as well as exploring neglected facets of Islamic life – but also creating micro-narratives around everyday objects. A second choice is to address the museum’s Muslim audience, both local and non-local. This means involving

26 Rachel Ward, ed., *Court and Craft: A Masterpiece from Northern Iraq* (London, 2014); Sergio Vidal, et al., “Vitrina CERO: De Nishapur a Samarcanda: arqueología y arte de la Persia medieval”, *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional* 41 (2022), pp. 513–22.

27 Miriam Kühn, “Museums and Their Formation”, in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, p. 215.

local communities as stakeholders in planning exhibitions or highlighting core beliefs and practices of Islam through objects. A third approach is to praise the peaceful and tolerant facet of Islamic civilization by narrating the greatness of Islamic artistic feats, especially in science and literature. This involves selecting historical episodes and objects that aim to reassure the non-Muslim museum audience about the positive values of Islamic culture. A fourth direction taken by museums is to present Islamic objects as connectors across cultures or as hybrid materials that defy rigid taxonomies. The migration of objects, their reception and transformation are presented as key aspects – in some cases to the detriment of the context of the object's production – that enable curators to destabilize their audience's preconceptions. A fifth preference is to highlight the aesthetic values, technical innovations, and stylistic developments of 'Islamic Art'. The display might be arranged along regional or dynastic lines and, in some cases, tends to downplay the religious and cultural content of the artistic production of Muslim societies.

In short, two major challenges for the twenty-first-century museum are to navigate between displaying artworks as aesthetic objects and to present the artwork as an identity-maker or storyteller. Both approaches are equally important and are closely connected to the nature of a museum's collection and its capacity. Similarly, it is important to openly participate and foster debate on the process of collecting, addressing the criticisms raised on the colonial past of museums and their holdings. Some museums, like *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* in Madrid, include a section related to its history as institution, to the ways in which its collections have increased and to their diverse provenances.

Furthermore, the recent movements of decolonization and decentralization of museums encouraged and gave the institutions a much-needed push to invest in provenance and archival research, which aids transparency and can provide a source of new narratives for storytelling. Acquisition policies have been updated and renewed frequently to respond to ongoing turmoil in the art market and illicit trade of artworks. Considering that museums display only 1–3 % of their collections, the artworks remaining in storage are either preserved for rotation, loans or considered as study collections. One part of the collection might evoke the question of authenticity and forgery. The *David's Samling* recently devoted a section of its gallery to this specific topic on inspiration, restoration and forgery,²⁸ rather than simply putting questionable objects into storage. This opens a fascinating window enabling visitors to understand and encounter the commercial world of art dealing and authenticity. Talking

28 Kjeld von Folsach, "The new installation of Islamic Art in the David Collection and the Concept behind it", *Journal of the David Collection* 3 (2010): 19.

about forgery on an institutional platform may be controversial but is also intellectually stimulating. This unconventional approach adopted by the *Dauids Samling* includes restored and copied artworks as well. The restoration of artworks seems to have become a well-accepted trend, allowing museums to offer a glimpse behind the scenes. These restoration projects are carried out publicly in the galleries.

Expanding their Islamic collections offers European museums major opportunities to fulfil their aim of serving a changing society, but it can also entail certain threats. It involves profound reflection as to how new acquisitions fit into their vision, how to complement existing holdings, how to fill possible gaps, foster new research or provide for certain display interests. *Museu Calouste Gulbenkian* in Lisbon is testimony to Calouste Gulbenkian's contributions to the museological landscape and reflects his personal tastes and knowledge. Although he collected 'Oriental' objects for nearly fifty years, his final acquisitions were made in 1949, some years before his death, preventing the collection's expansion with new pieces. The permanent exhibition is therefore not only a reflection of 'Eastern Islamic art', but also of Calouste Gulbenkian's personal understanding of that cultural legacy. Meanwhile, the other three case studies might be considered 'open' collections since they are still enlarging their holdings. For instance, *Dauids Samling* continued to acquire objects after its founder's death and, since the mid-1980s, nearly all available funds have been used for the Islamic collection.

In the case of state museums such as the *Museo Arqueológico Nacional* in Madrid, the possibilities to increase their collections of 'Islamic Art' and archaeology are reduced by legal provisions which give preference to the nearest regional museums when allocating findings and acquisitions.²⁹ Furthermore, the existence – or non-existence – of demand for artefacts on the market, their high prices in view of the increasing participation of emerging states and the budget limitations of European museums are also factors. Additionally, museums need to take strict precautions regarding provenance and the trade in this kind of artefact in view of the looting of cultural heritage from war-torn and postwar regions. Museums have an obligation to combat illicit trade in cultural goods, avoiding acquiring objects about which there is even the slightest suspicion.³⁰

29 BOE, *Ley 16/1985 de Patrimonio Histórico Español*, Título V Del patrimonio arqueológico, art. 45, accessed March 24, 2023. Available at <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-1985-12534#tvii>. Andrés Carretero Pérez, "El Museo Arqueológico Nacional", pp. 27–29.

30 UNESCO/ Zeynep Boz, *Fighting the illicit trafficking of cultural property: a toolkit for European judiciary and law enforcement* (Paris, 2023).

Given that museums display only a small proportion of their collections, and considering the potential to develop the narratives and contents of the permanent exhibition, technology can also be an ally. The maelstrom of innovations and public demands also presents the museum with further challenges. These include the conceptual, financial and maintenance efforts required to integrate audiovisual and interactive installations in the permanent exhibition. It is worth noting too that the constant need to feed social media contrasts with its rapid outdating. Nevertheless, technology still offers major opportunities, such as pioneering 'online collections' which gives chance to forge new relations between museums, the public and academia: fragile or objects in storage can be rendered visible with no risk of damage; collections can be customized and virtual exhibitions can bring together pieces from distant institutions, for instance.

New apps and social media also imply horizontal communication, fostering the museum's educational role by answering enquiries and questions in initiatives such as 'Ask a curator', or by elaborating on information about selected objects through apps like 'Smartify' or QR codes. These are a few of the many ways in which museums can dynamize and connect with society and academia for mutual benefit.³¹ They not only add to the pool of knowledge, but help to increase feelings of belonging and community, reaching new audiences and reducing obstacles that might prevent potential public from visiting the museum.

4 Final Remarks

As outlined above, contemporary discourses focus on the agency of objects and beyond.³² The role of an artwork becomes increasingly important when considering its accessibility today and in the future. Contrary to the more elitist approach of twentieth-century museums, objects should be made accessible tangibly, intellectually, and emotionally to all visitors of diverse social, cultural and geographical backgrounds.³³ The Internet has changed the way we shape and share ideas. Many museums have seized the opportunity to portray

31 Soledad Gómez Vilchez, "Museos españoles y redes sociales. Evaluación de preferencia y participación", *Telos: Cuadernos de comunicación e innovación* 90 (2012), pp. 79–86;

32 Avinoam Shalem, "The Transformative Museum. Why We Need an Other Museum for the Arts of Islam", *Dynamics of the Image*, ed. Emmanuel Alloa and Chiara Cappelletto (Berlin, 2020), p. 330.

33 Eva Maria Troelenberg, *Mshatta in Berlin*, p. 104.

'Islamic Art' and culture across a variety of media, including social media as mentioned earlier. Investigations are taking place to define museums' collections and their engagement with diverse faiths and communities without creating parallel societies. Can the hyper-acceleration of our time be utilized for the globalization of knowledge, helping museums to unlock the potential of their collections and challenging misguided stereotypes in a rapidly changing and increasingly interconnected world? Online collections, digital and in-person public programmes offer wide and customized accessibility to foster greater understanding, integration, and stronger secularization.

Active audience participation in creating, narrating, and engaging with artwork increases and creates new collective knowledge, as illustrated by the Multaka project at the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* in Berlin,³⁴ in which visitors are expected to question their own cognitive and emotional states and make room for other perspectives. Examples like this help reduce unfamiliarity and promote empathy, tackling global and social challenges like prejudice, conflict, injustice, and inequality, and thus contributing, in a very specific way, to the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Museums are also expected to reduce the euro-centric narration of the past and to reconstruct it in a more diverse and inclusive way, helping to improve understanding through transparency.

"Museums are not neutral".³⁵ Neutrality is not an option in the ongoing conversations regarding museums as colonial products, and urgent creative and sensitive actions are required in these ever-changing living spaces. The history of art is the history of seeing. What we see in the galleries is a selection from the collection, chosen by curators in collaboration with educators, interpretive planners, and designers.³⁶ The curator's knowledge, tastes, visionary thinking, and choice of arrangement is crucial for the intellectual stimulation and nourishment of audiences while maximizing the aesthetic experience. Interdisciplinary work, production of new knowledge and inclusive narratives can be accomplished jointly and collectively, and made accessible to everyone. Creating connections between the collections and their visitors, and offering transparent artistic spaces to appreciate, admire, enjoy, and learn are the key to active engagement with art in the museum environment.

34 Available at <https://multaka.de/en/startsite-en/> (Accessed April 25, 2023).

35 Available at <https://www.museumsarenotneutral.com/learn-more/we-are-stronger-together> (Accessed April 25, 2023).

36 Available at <https://www.artcurators.org/page/ProfPractices> (Accessed April 25, 2023).

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