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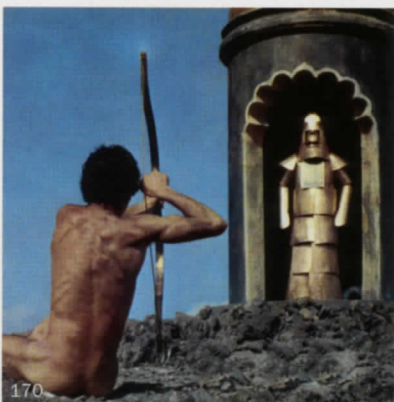
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Cover: Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Accattone* (detail), 1961, 35 mm, black-and-white, sound, 117 minutes.

This page, from top: Elad Lassry, *Woman 055* (detail), 2012, gelatin silver print in walnut frame, 14 1/2 x 11 1/2". Lynn Foulkes, *Happy Rock* (detail), 1969, oil and acrylic on canvas, 88 3/4 x 84 3/4". Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*, 1983, 16 mm transferred to 35 mm, color and black-and-white, sound, 103 minutes. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* (Arabian Nights), 1974, 35 mm, color, sound, 129 minutes.

Open Sesame!

DAVID J. ROXBURGH ON THE MUSÉE DU LOUVRE'S GALLERIES OF ISLAMIC ART

THE MOST CONSPICUOUS architectural intervention distinguishing the Louvre's new galleries of Islamic art is an iridescent, undulating, anodized gold screen. It lifts, falls, and stretches horizontally across the Visconti Courtyard, nearly filling the space, and seems to hover in the air, serving as the roof of two floors of galleries—one at ground level, the other below it—that together make a museum within a museum. This diaphanous metallic scrim appears to rest atop a glass curtain wall that wraps around the perimeter of the first-floor gallery. Excavators carved out a sufficient mass of earth to provide thirty thousand square feet of exhibition space, roughly four times what was previously assigned to display Islamic art at the Louvre.

Yet for all the labor such a massive undertaking entails, its end result seems less a building than a gesture whose form and effect suggest a response to I. M. Pei's pyramidal intervention of 1989. In contrast to the perfect geometry, stability, and classicism of Pei's pyramid, architects Mario Bellini and Rudy Ricciotti's wire-frame form, a computer-generated topographic map formed from a lattice of triangles, evokes the protean, the shape-shifting, the unstable. But *please* don't call it a flying carpet, veil, scarf, Bedouin tent, or sand dune, even though these references are clearly in play. Indeed, it's hard to accept that any of these analogies—steeped in nineteenth-century thinking about Islam as a monotheism fostered in the desert or in cultural tropes formed

through *The Arabian Nights*—are still possible, or could have credence, today (perhaps especially after the ban on wearing the full-face veil in public in France in 2011). Bellini and Ricciotti's avowed inspiration was Montesquieu's 1721 *Lettres persanes*—a proto-novel comprising letters written by the fictional Persians Usbek and Rica about their visit to Paris—but these days they prefer to liken their screen to a “dragonfly wing,” though the resemblance is, at least to my eyes, remote. Somewhat paradoxically, the architects also assert that while the screen responds to the genius loci of the architecture that surrounds it, it was not informed by the original contexts of the art it houses, but could have been designed for the art of anywhere.

Sometimes ambiguity can be annoying. Why not mention Hergé's *Tintin in the Land of Black Gold* as a formative influence of equal importance? In any case, for me the associations are less, as it were, high-flown: The animated and animating screen, tantalizing and seductive, appears to have landed at the Louvre transporting aesthetic associations, as well as economic possibilities, characteristic of contemporary architecture in the Gulf. The relation might become all the more evident when the Louvre opens its first global outpost in Abu Dhabi in 2015 in a building designed by Jean Nouvel.

But such considerations don't necessarily detract from the experience. The Louvre is the latest among a number of museums throughout the Middle East,

Europe, and America to reinstall its permanent collection of Islamic art. Among all of these reinstallations, the Louvre's stands out as the most ambitious and most consequential. Whatever one thinks of the spectacular gesture staged in the Visconti Courtyard, the museum has built an impressive space—opulent in its materials, steadfastly contemporary, thoughtful in its curation—in which to present one of the world's largest and most diverse collections of Islamic art. The demand for new galleries to display this collection (of approximately fourteen thousand objects, plus thirty-five hundred on permanent loan from the Musée des Arts Décoratifs) can be traced to 2001, the first year of director Henri

Please don't call the galleries' gold roof a flying carpet, veil, scarf, Bedouin tent, or sand dune, even though these references are clearly in play.

Loyrette's tenure. But the Department of Islamic Art only became an autonomous museum department in 2003, when it was unmoored from the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities. Bellini and Ricciotti won the international design competition in 2005, construction started at the site in 2008, and the galleries opened this past September after a mere four months of installation. Renaud Piérard, best known for his work at the Musée d'Orsay and Musée du Quai Branly, was selected as designer of the displays and interiors (or *muséographe*), and Sophie Makariou, director of the Department of Islamic Art, led the curatorial team. The project cost \$125 million and was funded by the French state and the Louvre with major gifts—of a scale unprecedented for the museum—from the Alwaleed bin



Mario Bellini and Rudy Ricciotti, Department of Islamic Art, Musée du Louvre, 2012, Paris. Photos: Philippe Ruault.





Above, top: Mamluk-period vestibule (detail), Cairo, ca. 1450, limestone, wrought iron, chestnut, 98% x 118% x 98%. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski/RMN.

Above, bottom: View of the Department of Islamic Art, Musée du Louvre, 2012, Paris. Photo: Kenzo Tribouillard/AFP/Getty Images.



Dagger with a horse-head handle (detail), India, ca. 1600, jade, rubies, emeralds, steel, gold, 19% x 3% x 1".

Talal Foundation; King Mohammed VI of Morocco; Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, emir of Kuwait, in the name of the State of Kuwait; the sultan of Oman, Qaboos bin Said al-Said, in the name of the Omani people; the Republic of Azerbaijan; corporations and foundations, including Total and Lafarge; and private donors.

If events of the past decade or so—the civil unrest in the banlieues in 2005 and 2006, for instance, or, more broadly, the tenor of Islamic-Western relations since 9/11—gave additional impetus to the project, there is no evidence of this to be seen. This is not a bad thing. As in the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the installation and explanatory materials do not address Islam today, nor do they engage the question of how a host of extraordinary objects could or should participate in the improvement of cultural relations (a common expectation now). Artistic, cultural, and sociopolitical complexities emerge from the objects, rather than being imposed on them by a misguided topicality.

A BLACK, TUNNEL-LIKE concrete corridor leads visitors from the Louvre's Denon Wing into the new space, where the low-slung gold screen overhead nurtures a

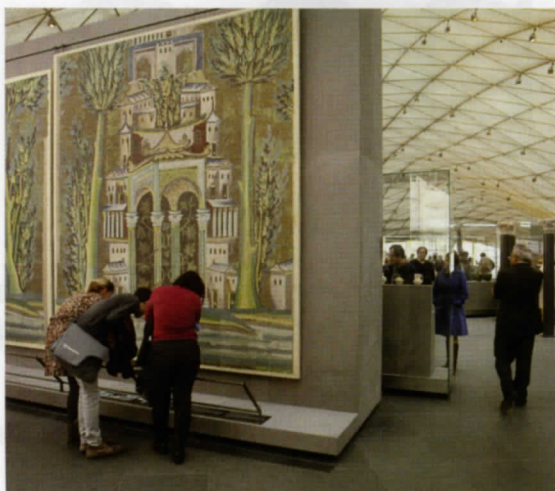
sense of intimacy and then seems to lift away as one moves farther in, billowing into the middle distance. Though this is the primary entrance, three other concrete corridors conduct visitors in and out of the galleries like umbilical cords connecting the nineteenth-century Neoclassical architecture to the new glass pavilion. The first-floor gallery, titled "From Foundation to Empire, 632–1000," is one of four chronological divisions. The other three (covering the periods 1000–1250, 1250–1500, and 1500–1800, respectively) are housed in the basement, which is reached via a sweeping staircase. Within each division, items are grouped geographically, so that the three thousand objects on display are divided into 103 discrete assemblages.

Despite criticisms to the effect that the installation is confusing, it in fact follows a clear—and wholly conventional—sequence. The chronological and geographic schema is essentially the same as that found at the Victoria and Albert Museum's Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art, which opened in 2006, and in the recently opened galleries for "The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia" at the Met, among other installations. Here, we begin in the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and Syria and progress through Islam's expansion into Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia in

the east, across North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula in the west, and, later, to Anatolia, the Balkans, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. It is a convenient model via which to organize so many artworks, and one generally employed in survey books of Islamic art and architecture, as well as in institutions. Distinct from other museums, however, is the Louvre's insistence on closing the narrative at 1800 (although there are a few objects on exhibit made after that date). This reflects a practical as well as a philosophical position: practical because the holdings are not sufficiently rich in materials from the 1800s and early 1900s; philosophical because the museum has no ambition to market its historical collection by piggybacking on contemporary art.

The 103 assemblages predominantly comprise mixed-media groupings arranged to show affinities of theme, form, or decoration (one grouping, for example, titled "Artistic Gateways 1," presents objects from Egypt and Iran in metalwork and ceramic, demonstrating the impact of imported Chinese wares on a repertoire of animal and floral motifs) and are presented in freestanding or podium cases, on platforms set close to the floor, or as wall displays. The full range of possible media is on view, showing the Louvre's uncommon depth of holdings in ceramics, glass, metalwork, ivory, wood, stone, and stucco, as well as textiles, painting, calligraphy, and other objects crafted from gold, silver, jade, and precious and semiprecious stones. Brief explanations of the themes addressed by each group of objects—for example, "Wall Decoration at Samarra" or "Cursive Scripts"—are accompanied by labels listing the basic information about each object. The labeling is minimal and unobtrusive but often disconnected by some feet from the objects it identifies. Avoiding the risk of excessive visual noise or clutter from didactic signage dictated that the names of subsections (for example, "The Iranian World and Its Margins") appear along the lower edges of the vitrines. It is clear that the aesthetic and sensual experience of the artworks, architecture, and museography was given primacy and that the machinery of information and instruction was secondary and, in some instances, physically marginalized.

While the scope of exhibited materials points to the diversity of the arts of Islam over time, it is also possible to identify the formation of stylistic coherence within regions and cities. This is especially evident in the basement gallery that showcases the art of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal dynasties of the sixteenth through early eighteenth centuries. Inflections to the teleological presentation of art within temporal and spatial frames—which might essentialize the artwork by proposing a static condition outside time and beyond contingency—are offered by clever didactic intersections. These interrupt the purely aesthetic encounter with the objects by contextualizing their formation through such factors as technology, transmission within and beyond the Islamic lands, market exchange, taste, individual and corporate patronage, interactions with other media and art forms



Above: View of the Department of Islamic Art, Musée du Louvre, 2012, Paris. Fehmi Kabbani, Kamal Kallas, and Nazmi Khayr, drawings of the Great Mosque of Damascus mosaics, 1929.

Right: Muhammad Sharif (center) and Murad Muhammad Samarqandi (margins), manuscript frontispiece, ca. 1615, gouache and gold on paper, 14½ x 9¾".



including literature, and legal, religious, and social customs. For example, displays of the Mamluk art of Egypt and Syria present material through such framing categories as "Mamluk Patronage: Furnishing Pious Foundations" and "Lighting in Religious Centers" to account for the particular ways in which Mamluk social and political frameworks generated practices of endowment to communal institutions. The installation is also marked by an unflinching commitment to the discipline of archaeology, essential to the field of Islamic art and architecture. Artifacts excavated at such sites as Susa and Ahvaz, Iran, are in abundant supply, as are more recent examples of items one would not normally expect to see in an art museum, ranging from coins to tombstones.

The key *affects* of the installation—transparency and movement—are evident as soon as one enters the first-floor gallery. Like the virtually seamless outer glass wall, the glass cases are designed to be as close to invisible as possible, so as to create a continuous spatial field of receding planes with luminous polychrome objects suspended between them. This effect is enhanced by the general practice of restricting cases that required solid backdrops to the outer areas bordering each gallery or by exploiting the solid walls of the basement gallery for their display. The sensation of spatial continuity is in fact stronger and even more dramatic in the basement, where the background walls are black concrete and where there is no natural light.

A sense of movement, the second trait fostered throughout the new design, is abetted by the fact that

the vitrines and plinths are not arranged according to the measured, predictable logic of a grid. Instead, the displays are of different sizes and are staggered at odd and shifting angles that engage the visitor in looping, zigzagging movements. This is perhaps why some visitors have found the galleries confusing, but preferred viewing perspectives are indicated in each vitrine by the orientation of objects and captioning, and sequence is directed by numbering (1 through 103), though admittedly there are lapses in the signage. Dynamism is also enhanced by cutaways in the floor that open onto views of the basement. From the basement, these same apertures offer views of the screen above. While this dynamism subtly updates the conventional chronological organization, it adds yet another layer of complexity to a challenging presentation and risks overwhelming the visitor.

The display technique is amplified by frequent technological applications. At the entrance to the first-floor gallery, the visitor is drawn to the left toward two large screen displays, one composed of a mosaic of luminous details (for example, animals, or figures such as cup-bearer, mace-bearer, etc., holding attributes of their offices), the other a monumental view of the full object from which the details are drawn (in this case, the Baptistry of St. Louis, Syria or Egypt, ca. 1330–40, made by Muhammad b. al-Zayn). The displays cycle through selected masterworks that one will encounter in the galleries—objects in inlaid metal, ceramic, and book paintings—but the theme of the display is "The Image and Its Miniaturization in the Islamic World."

We are thus subtly directed to look closely at a set of art traditions that are predominantly small in size and intricate and refined in their effects.

Some technological applications will surely be widely imitated in other galleries of Islamic art. They include sound stations where one may listen to literature composed in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish. Beyond sound, there is touch. Nine "touch stations" present focus objects from neighboring display cases through one-to-one scale models cast in relief. They are accompanied by captions in Braille, details of design components in relief, and samples of the material that one can feel at room temperature (ceramic, bronze, wood). Although the touch stations are directed toward the visually handicapped, sighted visitors can learn much from them.

It will be interesting to see future revisions to the galleries and how they contend with the inevitable shortcomings that result from such a complex, ambitious, and bold collaborative project. The manifest concern about design and ambience often seems to have trumped the best conditions for viewing objects: Top lighting works better on the first floor, for example, than it does in the basement, because on the first floor it is diffused by natural light. In the basement, the visitor has to be wary of casting shadows and must dodge shadows cast by others, and when the galleries fill with people, multiplying reflections on the glass cases create visual interference, obviating the design principles that sought to minimize intrusions across the spatial field. There is also a level of monotony in cases that are almost all the same height. Works on paper and the art of the book are represented by a disappointingly meager handful of objects.

Perhaps more significantly, the installation makes it difficult to tell the difference between unique objects and commonplace ones. It is instructive to learn that the majority of objects on view were multiples of a sort, made according to largely repetitive typologies, as is made clear when one sees them all together in great numbers. But variation in the mode of installation, singling out unique and precious objects amid the synchronic presentation, would encourage the visitor to linger on the special and the particular—in effect, to take a break from this demanding circuit, the fray of objects and visitors, by dwelling on the anomalous. The paucity of such opportunities is surprising, given the strong connoisseurial impulse evident throughout the galleries, where the focus is on aesthetic experience and on seeing many beautiful, engaging objects in relation to sequences of related *comparanda*.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the galleries and art on view merit several prolonged visits. I would recommend going when there are fewer visitors. Be advised that the Paris Fire Brigade prohibits direct access to the Visconti Courtyard for fear that people might bump their heads on the screen. □

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