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Trevor Paglen, Untitled (Reaper Drone) (detail), 2010, color photograph, 48 x 60". (See page 220.)

From top: Detail of documentation of Dennis Oppenheim's Reading Position for Second Degree Burn, 1970, color photographs and text, 85 x 60". Bernard Tschumi Architects with Zach Colbert, Parque Atmósfera, 2010, Santiago, Chile. Rendering detail. John Smith, Frozen War (Hotel Diaries 11, 2001), still from a color video, 11 minutes. Luis Camnitzer, Quemadura de primer, segundo y tercer grado (First-, Second-, and Third-Degree Burn) (detail), 1970, stenciled burn on paper, three sheets, each 30¼ x 27¾".
FROM THE VAULT

Foreign Exchange

DAVID J. ROXBURY ON "GIFTS OF THE SULTAN: THE ARTS OF GIVING AT THE ISLAMIC COURTS"

THE ANTHOLOGIZING HABITS of medieval Arab authors produced many texts that are as intriguing for their degree of cultural specialization as they are for their deeply suggestive arcana. These compendiums range from collections of graffiti left by lonely travelers in foreign lands to anecdotes about gate-crashers, a verse about misers and miserliness, and exhaustive listings of memorable gifts. Of the last, the best-known anthology is Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa al-Tuḥaf (Book of Gifts and Rarities), composed in the eleventh century and attributed to Qādī Ibn al-Zubayr. His text is a memory house of famous presents, encompassing raw materials, animals, slaves, and manufactured goods and mostly arranged according to a typology of events, viz. banquets, weddings, parties, circumcisions, marriages, and ambassadorial receptions. Ibn al-Zubayr’s text, made available to non-Arabic readers through Ghāḍa al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddāmi’s 1996 annotated translation, reanimated inquiry into medieval objects, their display and use, and their distribution between Islamic courts and Christian Byzantium. Al-Qaddāmi’s book gave rise to a series of innovative articles by Islamists and Byzantinists alike, including Anthony Cutler, Oleg Grabar, Eva Hoffman, and Alicia Walker.

The translation coincided with a moment when many art historians were turning their attention to collection and reception, i.e., the “social lives” or “cultural biographies” of things, theorized most prominently in the writings of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. The intersections between social identity and taste illuminated by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu were central to this enterprise as well, as was, of course, Marcel Mauss’s investigation of how the gift creates structures of obligation and reciprocity. So an exhibition framing Islamic art through exchange—one that examines the selection and making of objects designated as gifts and the processes by which they changed hands—is long overdue, especially because there is such rich material evidence and such a vast, albeit not comprehensive, written record to draw from (Ibn al-Zubayr being only one of numerous sources). Thus, “Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts,” curated by Linda Komaroff and on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art this summer, promises to offer a refreshing and bold alternative to the mostly moribund paradigms that have underpinned recent temporary exhibitions of Islamic art.

From the late 1980s until the turn of the century, exhibitions of Islamic art increasingly reflected—and in some instances directed—new patterns of research and teaching, as specialized scholarship broke apart the cultural monolith of Islam criticized most forcefully by Edward Said. This fragmentation fostered new modes of exhibition practice: Some curators focused on discrete areas of production classified by region, dynasty, and time period; others presented an individual medium such as glass, ceramics, or jewelry, often elucidating the techniques of artmaking as they did so. Such approaches propelled new research and, crucially, avoided the reductive encyclopedic models, favored since the late 1800s, that continued to have currency up to the 1970s—as embodied most infamously in “The Arts of Islam” at London’s Hayward Gallery in 1976. To organize its many hundreds of objects from disparate regions and eras, the curators of “The Arts of Islam” played on the trope of Islamic art’s “unity in diversity” and emphasized the role played by religion in shaping artistic outcomes, but without ever attending to the varying social and political circumstances that would condition such a causal relation. Primarily, “The Arts of Islam” offered an appealing framework for those who wanted to instrumentalize Islamic art as a medium for teaching Islam and Islamic studies.

After more than a decade in eclipse, temporary exhibitions in the mold of “The Arts of Islam” resurfaced as a form of neo-Orientalism after 9/11, in tandem with the growing simplistic belief that Islamic art might function as a “bridge to cultural understanding” for museum-going publics in Europe and North America. It is in light of these regressions, and other quandaries about how to stage temporary exhibitions these days, that “Gifts of the Sultan” emerges as something new by virtue of its thematic emphasis on the object as gift in historical Islamic societies and on the modalities of its exchange. The show comprises 259
artworks and artifacts from forty-one lenders in thirteen countries; pan-Islamic in scope and spanning nine centuries, it will represent the full range of medieval and modern media. Though its closest counterpart is the Smithsonian’s 2009 “The Tsars and the East: Gifts from Turkey and Iran in the Moscow Kremlin,” the scale of “Gifts of the Sultan” dwarfs this earlier exhibition. “Gifts of the Sultan” takes in pre-Islamic Iran; medieval Islam and Byzantium; Fatimid Egypt of the late 900s through circa 1171; Iran, Central Asia, and China in the period of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644); Hapsburg-Safavid relations of the late 1500s; the Ottoman and Mughal Empires, from the 1500s through 1700s, and their European contemporaries; and finally the Russian court and its Islamic counterparts up to the late 1800s. Komaroff has proposed three principal categories: personal gifts, gifts made to religious institutions, and state and diplomatic gifts. Actual gifted items will be intermixed with pictorial representations (e.g., a seventeenth-century watercolor showing a Mughal prince riding an albino elephant bestowed by a Deccani noble), a visual dramatization of the enacted performances of gift giving and their agents (chiefly ambassadors and envoys).

Indeed, locating objects within specific historical exchanges and correlating discrete things with unique social and political transactions between individuals or groups are not easy tasks. Few of the objects in the exhibition can be connected to recorded events, because external documentation is extremely scarce. Among the noteworthy exhibits in “Gifts of the Sultan” that can be securely linked to key events is the mammoth illustrated Shabnama (Book of Kings) by the poet Firdawsi, fashioned for the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp and given to the Ottoman sultan Selim II two years after his accession in 1566. Another is the Morgan Crusader Bible: Made in Paris in the 1240s for Louis IX, it found its way through the hands of several owners before it was sent to Safavid Shah ‘Abbas I in 1604. Other examples comparable to these two manuscripts—a cluster of books, as well as porcelains and other goods, endowed to the Safavid dynastic shrine in Ardabil, Iran, for instance—share a history of being repurposed, of becoming pious offerings when that was not the intent of their makers. The exhibition will include a selection of furnishings—lamps, prayer niches, cenotaphs, carpets, and books, especially the Koran—donated to religious institutions, including the Ka’ba in Mecca, as acts of piety, or as bids for personal prestige and social standing. These are generally well documented through inscriptions that record the act of giving.

As for the numerous objects whose histories are unknown, the curator has, by default, assigned them to a generic typological realm, positing them as possible gifts because their form and materials resonate with the categorizations used in written sources. These are items fashioned from precious and semiprecious stones and metals, carved ivories, intricately patterned textiles, silk robes, etc. There is no easy way around the paucity of direct documentation. But this problem does not preclude a fruitful exploration of the question posed by the epigraph to the exhibition catalogue: “What rule of legality and self-interest...compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object that causes its recipient to pay it back?” (Mauss; emphasis added). In other words, what registers of value accrue to the newly made object that is destined to be given or to the heirloom selected to be recommoditized through acts of exchange and the transposition of ownership? (This distinction highlights another problem, that of distinguishing between things made as gifts and things that became gifts in secondary usage.) How are craftsmanship, form, and imagery (figural, geometric, epigraphic) invested with meanings that charge the gift object with its desired potency? And under what categories and conditions could that potency be understood? Provocative examples have been offered by art historians Renata Holod and Francisco Prado-Vilar in essays about carved ivory caskets from tenth-century Iberia that were made for and circulated among members of the Umayyad dynasty. Their studies suggest that subversions of imperial iconographic systems—calibrated against a horizon of cultural expectation—subtly conveyed political asymmetries and personal slights and offered a means of engaging materiality and visual language that might answer Mauss’s charge.

Related to typology, and equally challenging for the exhibition, is the fact that so many gifts, particularly in the medieval period, comprised large quantities of raw materials, including elephant tusks, musk, camphor, ambergris, aloeswood, gold, and silver. Later, new trade networks expressed empire through the exchange of commodities culled from far-flung regions, including cinnamon, pepper, and cochineal. The bulk quantities of these materials were often amplified through their means of conveyance and presentation: endless sequences of caparisoned beasts of burden, horses and camels, also given in gift, as well as animals such as hawks and eagles, in addition to matching pairs of slaves. And then one could consider the containers—various forms of fancy wrappers—that stored prized, ephemeral commodities. While textual descriptions and inventories of gifts point to radically different magnitudes of scale, the full experiential effects of such largesse are difficult to convey in a museum setting. Could some of the sensations induced by such magnificent displays—engaging the full sensorium—even be conveyed and not simply described in wall texts?

It goes without saying that exhibitions present entirely different possibilities than catalogues, permitting, as they do, direct encounters with so many diverse objects, and it is exciting to speculate on how the challenges confronting “Gifts of the Sultan” will be dealt with in the installation. One thing that is not a matter of speculation, however, is the provocative salience of “Gifts of the Sultan,” given that this is a time in American political life when gifts and donations to elected representatives are supposedly so tightly monitored and controlled. Will our new austerity render the gifts from an Islamic past still more exotic, or resonate as transhistorical instances of how one may purchase influence, and of the constant slippage between the gift and economic systems of commoditization?


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