The present essay offers a viewpoint on the topic proposed that will not achieve unanimity among the scholarship, nor does it aim to do so. The intention instead is to open a debate and propose new ideas about the presentation of objects of artistic heritage, such as ceramics, in twenty-first century museums and galleries. Indeed, owing to the global phenomenon called ‘curationism’ by David Balzer, today world-class sites of art display showcasing rich historical holdings significantly contribute to reshaping perceptions and relationships between peoples, communities, and nations. In that context, the Islamic artistic traditions gained tremendous visibility, as venues like the Museum of the Islamic Art in Doha or the Louvre’s new scenography in Paris, put these traditions on the forefront of the international stage. This article examines this museology in transcultural perspective, through a comparison between Islamic and Korean ceramics installations in the renovated Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and in the Leeum, in Seoul. The former privileges an archaeological narrative, the latter an aesthetic phenomenological approach. In revealing a qualitative asymmetry between the expository practices in the areas of Islamic and East Asian art, this comparison allows for further discussion about museological issues such as the tension between didacticism and aesthetics, or the competitive relationship between architecture, design, and art in the displays’ space. Ultimately, the comparison posits East Asian experimentalism as a model from which to draw inspiration for reinventing the curation of Islamic art.

Keywords: Display of Islamic art; Ceramic art; Display of East Asian art; museology-curatorship; museum design; museum architecture

The present essay offers a viewpoint on the topic proposed that will not achieve unanimity among the scholarship, nor does it aim to do so. The intention instead is to open a debate and propose new ideas about the presentation of objects of artistic heritage, such as ceramics, in twenty-first century museums and galleries. Indeed, owing to the global phenomenon called ‘curationism’ by David Balzer, today world-class sites of art display showcasing rich historical holdings significantly contribute to reshaping perceptions and relationships between peoples, communities, and nations. One of the latest instances of this phenomenon is the Louvre Abu Dhabi, built by Jean Nouvel. The East-West axis of cultural interface, the magnitude of which is manifested by this Emirati museum, has had a major impact in the past decade: the unprecedented global exposure and visibility of the Islamic arts. Suffice it to mention, there is also the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the big-budget re-installations of the famous collections of this material in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) in New York, and in the Louvre in Paris. The present essay discusses this area of museology in the light of global contemporary museum practices. It does so, however, by basing the discussion on a museum event experienced by its author. Below is an account of this event.

Two Contrasting Experiences of Ancient Art Displays

Museum Studies deal with experiences in what Gernot Böhme calls ‘perceptual contexts’. My own experience took place in two such contexts that I visited within a short period of time: the renovated Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxford, and the Leeum Samsung Museum in Seoul. In the former, I went to visit the gallery of Islamic Art with the expectation of a modernised presentation after a big-budget campaign of refurbishment, while in the latter, I came across displays of ancient Korean art during a leisurely visit of cultural landmarks in Seoul. Less known in the West than the Ashmolean, the Leeum necessitates a brief introduction. In 2004, it consists of three edifices built by Mario Botta, Rem Koolhaas and Jean Nouvel: Museum 1 presents a collection of traditional Korean art; Museum 2 features national and international contemporary art; and the third is a Child Education and Culture Center (Figures 1–3).
Visiting these two institutions consecutively has revealed an unsettling contrast between the exhibitory modalities they employed to display their historical holdings, beyond the obvious fact that the Ashmolean and the Leeum have a different history necessarily reflecting different constraints and philosophies of display. One is an old British establishment premised upon the hegemonic Victorian vision of the world, the other a Korean vanguard creation of this century on Korean soil (Figures 4–6). However, the act of renovating ought to have had occasioned not an erasure of course, but a reduction of these differences. What would otherwise be the point of renovating? Instead, the contrast was so sharp that it compelled me to examine its causes and, in the process, produce a more general comparative critique of the curation of Islamic and East Asian artistic heritage. The present essay is the product of this double endeavour, although three epistemic points need to be clarified.

First, this comparison’s perspective is not museological history, but new museology that concerns both the Ashmolean’s gallery of Islamic Art as an example of

Figure 1: Interior view of Museum 1 built by Mario Botta, Leeum, Seoul. Photograph: courtesy of Pascale Vialleton-Touzan.

Figure 2: Gallery of Korean celadons, Museum 1, Leeum. Photographs in the public domain.

Figure 3: Gallery of Korean celadons, Museum 1, Leeum. Photographs in the public domain.

Figure 4: Islamic art gallery, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. Photographs in the public domain.

Figure 5: Islamic art gallery, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. Photographs in the public domain.
contemporary reinstallment of a historical display, and the Leeum’s presentation of Korean artistic tradition as an output of this new museology. Second, this study does not address the important corollary question of the curation of East Asian art in Western museums. The matter, however, deserves a study. Third, apart from general comments, my critique of the Ashmolean’s reinstallations is limited to the Islamic Art displays.

Thus, this pinpointed pattern of difference between the Ashmolean and the Leeum has appeared to me symptomatic of a broader condition that I would characterise as a qualitative asymmetry, by contemporary standards, between two curatorial practices. Important in both institutions, the ceramic wares’ installations struck me as particularly revelatory in this regard (Figures 2–6). While the Ashmolean repeats a traditional exhibitory scheme, the Leeum’s Korean ceramic galleries in Museum 1, most notably the gallery of Goryeo celadons on the top floor, creatively addresses a challenge that concerns the curatorship of both Islamic and East Asian artistic heritage: how to showcase finely-crafted items of practical use, albeit of great cognitive reach, that challenge the established narrative about high art versus archaeological evidence/material culture? How can these items not be reduced to decorative objects d’art or to mere historical artefacts with relative artistic value in the museum’s space? The Leeum’s approach to this challenge and the fact that the Korean and Islamic clay arts share significant commonalities, drove me to focus the comparison on these specific installations.

Islamic and Korean Clay Art: Shared Aesthetic Values and Historical Connections

Ceramics constitute a cultural signifier highly emblematic of both Korea and Islam’s civilizational history. Although obviously distinct in terms of aesthetics, meaning and form, the ceramic production in these regions share, as we know, the historical linkage with Chinese clay art. Crucially, Islamic and Korean ceramics are of the same aesthetic species. As in East Asia, in Islam the making of ceramic wares traditionally transcends the pragmatics of trade and commodity consumption to reach the highest aesthetic level of artistic expression. And in both cultural areas, ceramics convey as much value today as in the past. A brief description of these objects’ complex aesthetic ontology will make the point.

Islamic and Korean ceramics are finely-modelled usable things intended for actual or virtual haptic handling, thus involving kinaesthetic structures of beholding centred on the sense of touch. For example, while the Islamic pieces bearing calligraphic decoration require a manipulation of the object’s body to allow for the reading of the inscriptions, the Korean items entice the beholder to caress their smooth shining monochromatic surfaces (Figures 7 and 8). However, these artefacts also provoke intellectual, reveries and psychic events involving mental structures of beholding. Conceptual, abstract or figural, their ravishing morphologies and imagery, ranging from the real to the mythic, transfigure the artefacts’ materiality into a limitless field of metaphysical metaphors. They form a microcosm in poetic dialogue with the macrocosm, while some of them operate in the region of the pure sublime.

This ontology and the aesthetics it materialises ought to be made phenomenologically apparent and apprehensible in any installation, independently of the museum’s intended narrative, archaeological, artistic, ethnographic or else. In this respect, the Leeum succeeds and the Ashmolean fails.

**Excessive Didacticism in the Ashmolean**

The Ashmolean’s failure lies in an excessive didacticism, combined with a flawed visual semiotic and a deficient aesthetic presentation. Placed inside high glass cases, the ceramics fill up the shelves from bottom to top, and on all sides (Figures 4–6). The densely-furnished surrounding walls only increase the saturated aspect of the display. Clearly, the agenda was to show as much material as possible within the space allocated, so as to deliver a historical-archaeological narrative as comprehensive as possible. To better ensure the visitors’ grasp of this narrative, numerous explanatory cartouches are placed close to the items. This scheme, all too frequently used in institutions.

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**Figure 6:** Islamic art gallery, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology. Photographs in the public domain.

**Figure 7:** Bowl, Nishapur, Eastern Iran, 10th century. Earthware, black slip on a white slip ground. H. 7 in. (17.8 cm) Diam. 18 in. (45.7 cm). Museum number: 65.106.2. Roger Fund 1965. © 2000–2016 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
housing historic heritage, generates an overlap between textual and optical cognition that tends to impair the reception of the object’s aesthetic phenomenology and this object’s appreciation by the spectator. A similar example is the David Collection in Copenhagen, which possesses a fine Islamic art collection. Here, the invasive written documentation transforms the displays into an open art history book in which the objects seem to play the role of illustrations. To cite a counter-example, aware of this problem, the curators of the picture gallery in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna have removed all documentation from the walls; instead, metallic structures engraved with the painting’s descriptions have been installed at a sensible distance of the works.

To return to the Ashmolean, the ceramics selection itself betrays minimal consideration for the art they represent. The spectrum of objects indifferently ranges from shards, to products of average artistry, to fine works. In the absence of aesthetic logic and stimuli, the installation leaves up to the viewer the discernment of artworks in the miscellany of items. This disregard for the art raises this question: are archaeology and art-aesthetics mutually exclusive concepts in display? A positive answer to these questions would betray an antiquarian conception of archaeological installations, and of archaeology tout court.

In contemporary museology, archaeological scenographies, like any other type of display, require visual clarity and compelling space and object organisation for an optimal efficiency of knowledge communication. This was achieved, for example, in the traveling exhibition held in the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, in 2014, ‘The Lost Dhow: A Discovery from the Maritime Silk Route’. In this exhibition, the presentation of archaeological hoards of Chinese and Islamic ceramic wares was powerful in highlighting both the pragmatics of their function as utilitarian objects, and their aesthetics as artworks meant to induce a sensory experience (Figure 9).

All in all, in the uncompromising light of new museology, the Ashmolean’s reinstallation reveals itself to be inefficient and outdated. As a museological treatise stipulates: ‘One hundred years ago, art was shown in a way intended to educate. Galleries reflected the curator’s perspective at the expense of differing viewpoints. Today, not only do museums and galleries celebrate these differences of expression, they also welcome the collaboration of living artists, promoting an active dialogue between the present and the past. Galleries and museums are no longer repositories; they are sites of experience where the mind is often engaged as much as the eye’. Indeed, today museums are conceived as sites of total experience, namely an experience that is altogether aesthetic, psychic and noetic. Therefore, contemporary museum design emphasises object and space phenomenology by means of which a multilevel relationship between the viewed and the viewer can construct itself, thus making of the gallery a relational space. In contrast with the Ashmolean, the Leeum Museum 1 forges its galleries into highly-relational spaces for a total experience of Korean art.

**Phenomenology of the Sublime and Contemplation in Museum 1**

Museum 1 masterfully stages the sublime in the Korean art of ceramic, by optimising the conditions of operation of both the objects’ aesthetic phenomenology and the type of spectatorship it engages, centred on contemplation. To do so, it develops three main design strategies.

**I- The Theme Gallery**

The first strategy is the theme gallery, much more frequently used in East Asian art displays than in their Islamic counterparts. The Capital Museum in Beijing, for example,
thematic presents its collections of ancient Chinese art inside a tower, like the Leeum (Figure 10). Perhaps more than other exhibiting options, the thematic gallery warrants art appreciation and empathy. Empathy, says the curator Woo Hyesoo, is a priority in the Leeum’s curating philosophy.26 Islamic art installations, by contrast, privilege scenographies that emphasise patterns of historical didactics and aesthetic synthetics that manifest themselves through the wide range of things viewers are given to see within one and the same expository space. I call this formula ‘the sampling model’.

II- Documentation and Labelling
The second strategy concerns the installations’ discursive framing. The galleries signal their aesthetic-phenomenological conceptualisation through straightforwardly ahistorical declarations of content evoking the objects’ plasticity: ‘Pattern: Magnificence and Precision’; ‘Form: Elegance and Craftsmanship’; or ‘Brushwork: Creativity and Command’.21 In addition, written documentation is reduced to the essential in order to neutralise the tension between showing and talking about the artworks in the display. 

Explanations are confined to the galleries’ entrance, while audio guides provide history and context information if desired. But within the installations’ perimeter itself, except from very discrete small captions carefully separated from the items, art and visuality reign supremely. And the cognitive mode is aesthetic perception in the absolute.

III- Only Masterpieces
The third strategy concerns the choice of objects of superlative aesthetic quality. If the museology involving Islamic art still questions the concept of the masterpiece on the basis of its subjectivity, for contemporary curators of East Asian material, this issue does not seem to have relevance.22 The recently-created art installations throughout the region demonstrate the extreme care placed on the selection of the material exhibited. It is not that history is taken for granted—in Museum 1, historical information remains available by means of audio devices. It is just that the East Asian curating philosophy seems to put aside the sempiternal problematics of learning versus appreciation, to embrace instead the logic of appreciation as learning.

Joycean Epiphany
In Museum 1, the joining forces of these strategies serve what I would describe as revelatory visions of perfection akin to Joycean aesthetic epiphanies.23 In this regard, the celadon gallery surpasses them all. Its scenography exudes ‘wholeness, harmony and radiance’ in the true Thomistic-Joycean sense of these words, enabling the viewer to feel ‘a peculiar revelation of the inner reality of an experience, accompanied with great elation, as in a mystical religious experience’.24 The celadons placed in an isotropic curvilinear unfolding and the roundness of the gallery’s space intensify this enrapturing impression.

The building’s four galleries form a system of circular corridors in ascending movement, like in the pioneer Guggenheim Museum in New York. (Figure 1) Phenomenologically in architecture, roundness induces a gentle bodily progression throughout space, akin to the mind-elevating movement of circumambulation. However, unlike in the Guggenheim, where light and space fluidly circulate in and out, in Museum 1 and in the Capital Museum’s tower, a dramatic shift of atmosphere disconnects the outside from the inside of the expository perimeter, forming a peaceful area of art contemplation (Figure 10). In this space, a highly-controlled lighting lets the precious items shine in the dark, irradiating with intense significance. The sublime in Korean art reveals itself through itself, putting the beholders on an aesthetic journey increasingly noetic as the sightings of the awesome artefacts follow one after the other.

Such a description conjures up images of illuminated objects of cult in the sacred ambience of dimly-lit places of worship. By the same token, it raises the semiotic question of the museum as a kind of temple.

The ‘Temple Effect’ in and of the Museum
In religious institutions, sacredness resides not only in the venerated holy objects, but also in the special textures of the architectural space and light. In non-religious perceptual contexts, the super-potent alliance of space as light-shaping device with light as space-shaping device may create an infinite array of sacralities with or without spiritual meaning. I call ‘the temple effect’, this phenomenology of the sacred artificially created by space and light-shaping in these contexts in general, and in the context of art museums in particular.

In a pivotal study of the meaning of art museums as public institutions ‘offering up values and beliefs’, Carol Duncan designates them in terms of ‘ritual structures...structured around specific ritual scenarios’.25 The temple effect plays a determinant role in the setting of these scenarios. The Miho Museum, for example, purposely constructs this association museum-sanctuary in both its installations and architecture, I.M. Pei’s oeuvre.26 However, the use of this effect can be tricky. Although a great visual enhancer and stimulus in the museum’s space, it may construct gratuitous or incongruous sacralities.
Examples of ‘Temple Effect’ in the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, and in the New Gallery of this Art in the Louvre

In the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the over-exploitation of the temple effect creates a theatrical atmosphere that appears inadequate in respect of the phenomenology of most of the artworks displayed (Figure 11). In accordance with the precincts’ architectural logic of spectacle, inside the galleries the light flowing from high above the installations seems to descend from the heavens. While filling the luxuriously-fitted, spacious rooms with cold loftiness, this sacral luminosity sanctifies the artefacts within its field. This sanctifying process is reinforced by the haughty voids that surround and fill the encasing devices, disproportionately big in relation to the size of the items. Problematically, however, objects such as books, ivories and metalwork are typically used in private, intimate environments. While awe-inspiring because of their high artistry and meaning, these objects’ aesthetic properties and operations require, in order to be appreciated and effective, a relationship of proximity between the beheld and the beholder.

Contrary to these requirements of intimacy and accessibility, the museum’s lofty theatricality conspires to place the visitors at a ritualistic distance from the artworks, prompting them to enact a performance that has common phenomenological features with the veneration of untouchable sacred relics or unaffordable high-end commodities ‘religiously’ protected by glass or space walls.27 As a result, the displays project an image of the artefacts as sacred fossilised treasures that perhaps appears glamorous, but that falls short of truthfulness to the art’s ontology. In a similar case of inadequacy between display design and objects displayed, the new gallery of Islamic art in the Louvre makes use of, to not say abuses, elaborate theatrics and light effects.

The extravaganza in lieu of Islamic art display in the Louvre immerses the visitor in a swirling dramatic show whose central stage is not the exhibited collection, but the gallery’s ceiling, a huge undulating device with golden hues that evokes superstructures such as sport facilities, malls, and airport terminals (Figure 12). Topping the two-level gallery in the Cour Visconti, this construction forms a counterpoint to I.M. Pei’s famous pyramid in the Cour Napoleon.28 Although the latter limits its architectural-aesthetic function to covering the museum’s lobby, the former exceeds this function, as it partakes of the displays. In this respect, the dramatic roofing steals and spoils the show.

Inside the upper gallery, the hyperkinetic structure hangs closely over the visitors’ head making wide waves, and unavoidably diverting the attention from the installations. As the visitor moves or the weather changes, the natural light filtered through the diaphanous membrane shifts, flickers, and creates kaleidoscopic reflections. In some areas, it is one of the ceiling’s thick oblique supporting posts that slashes through the field of view. As to the installations themselves, they appear no less confusing than their framing. Organised according to an extreme form of the sampling model like in the Ashmolean, they are saturated with objects of uneven quality and convolutedly arranged in space. Yet, astonishingly, the curators and designers of the cumbersome gallery display claimed to have opted for ‘an obvious simplicity with a zest of mystery’.29 Even more baffling is the colonialist quote by the General de Gaulle that these curators and designers chose as the project’s leitmotiv: ‘Il faut venir en Orient avec des idées simples’ (‘One ought to come to the Orient with simple ideas in mind’).30 In fact, temple-like grand settings such as these two examples of the Qatari museum and the Louvre reflect a broader phenomenon in contemporary museum architecture related to the multiplication of creations supported by colossal budgets.

The New Museums: The Cathedrals of our Era

Targeting Frank Gehry’s oeuvre, Hal Foster calls this phenomenon ‘the lavish gestural aesthetic of the present’, and unflatteringly describes some of these new hyper-costly art buildings as ‘sites of spectacular spectatorship, of touristic awe. Showy, self-advertising, shallow’.31 If, in the past, art museum’s architecture similarly projected power and grandeur, it nevertheless did so within the
limits of a primary function of framing the collections. Most often the emphasis was placed on the spectacular façade, while the interior design maintained the balance between architectural design and art show. Even in the most lavishly-decorated institutions like the Kunsthistorisches Museum or the British Museum, that balance was never compromised. However, the enormous power bestowed on the architects today has changed the rules of the game. Although museum architecture has become more than ever a platform of creativity, this power not only has produced this side effect described by Hal Foster, but also it has challenged the traditional status of the art collection itself vis-à-vis that of its host institution. The balance has turned into a competition.

A palpable consequence of this phenomenon is that the architectural enterprise too often appears to outbid the showcasing of the art. For example, in Doha’s Museum of Islamic Art, the interior’s grandiosity projects too visibly both I.M. Pei’s stratospheric artistic reputation and Qatar’s ambition of world representation. The stupefying construction, akin to a modern Orientalising fairy tale palace, de facto posits the artworks as only the small part of a bigger scenario in which they are no longer the topic but the pretext. In the overbearing environment, the delicate ancient artefacts appear more like the building’s decorative furniture than autonomous aesthetic entities.

Obviously, this is only a trend, counterbalanced by counter-trends. The Aga Khan Museum’s ultra-contemporary architecture, for example, does not lose sight of its mission of housing exceptional holdings of Islamic art. How does Museum 1, the place that prompted this reflection in the first place, position itself in this configuration of trend and counter-trends?

Minimizing Grandeur and Temple Effects in Museum 1

Our description of the aesthetic epiphany-inducing displays in Museum 1 legitimately raises the question of the Leeum’s approach to the temple effect. The question is especially relevant because this museum applies the highly ritualistic scheme of the dark room. Does it thereby situate the precious Korean artworks in the region of the sacred, or fuse sublimity and sacrality in the presentations? In fact, while the dark room renders unavoidable the temple effect’s operations and the sort of ritualization of the viewing experience it causes, the genius of the Leeum’s scenographers lies in the conscious avoidance of any drama and pomposity.

Indeed, in Museum 1 there is no ostentatious light or space feature that would not be true to the aesthetic nature of the items displayed, and most importantly, to the relational type of spectatorship they implicate. Like for many Islamic portable objects, an empathetic encounter with the Korean artefacts requires the minimisation of this ritualistic distance necessarily imposed by the hyper-protected museum space. Accordingly, the galleries subtly stage the artworks in a cosy atmosphere of intimacy, thanks to an understated albeit ultra-sophisticated design. The lighting, spacing, and architectural design transmute the displays’ environment into a neutral space gently enveloping the illuminated masterpieces that places the absolute focus on the objects and lets them do the aesthetic act alone (Figures 2 and 3). For in museum design, only some form of architectural abstraction or discretion allows for such a phenomenology to take place. Unlike the Qatari museum or the Louvre, Botta’s edifice delivers its visual effects, meanings and symbols outside the exhibitory perimeter, thus compartmentalising the show of the architecture and that of the artworks; so does the Capital Museum’s architectural superstructure (Figures 1 and 10).

Again, the celadon gallery demonstrates the greatest efficiency in this matter. Here, the space’s abstractive qualities spring from three elements of design: the proportioning of the interior architecture adapted to the human scale, the ultra-minimalism of the material holding and framing the objects, and the drama-free lighting. In its strict uniformity and supersymmetry, the row of glass cases, each one in perfect proportion with the size of the unit it contains, recalls Sol LeWitt’s purist geometric ‘structures’ or Donald Judd’s hyper-lucid series of abstract volumes. Arranged in a gentle curve, the scenography harmoniously espouses the room’s round shape, thereby furthering the dissolution of the objects’ surroundings into a geometric abstraction. Moreover, the distance between each box has been carefully calculated, not too narrow so as to invite to pause at each celadon, but not too wide so as to avoid the pattern of lofty emptiness seen in Doha; voids would interrupt the display’s fluid deployment metaphorising the serial quality of celadon art.

The lighting itself induces something that can be described as the self-effacement of the gallery’s interior design. Contrary to the full-fledged temple effect, the tamed luminosity presents a character of normality, like the useful light of the lamp under which one comfortably reads a book. It just allows seeing, but with the utmost specular acuteness. Under this non-semiotic light, each celadon offers itself to the beholder’s gaze in the pure transparency of its materiality. The variegated shapes, textures, and minute motifs appear in every detail, in high definition like in a Robert Mapplethorpe photograph. (Figure 13) The spectator thus effortlessly acquires the photographer or the ceramist’s sharp eye. And the intended empathy-filled intimate encounter between viewer and art occurs in radical directness.

A rare remarkable Islamic ceramic display recently installed in the Bardo Palace in Tunis presents a similar minimalist scenography (Figure 14). Part of a project on the neglected Hussein period in Tunisia (1705–1957), the installation organises the items in a strict isotropic geometric order that, like in Museum 1, thematises the production’s feature of seriality, while highlighting the individual quality of each piece. In addition, the historical precincts of the Bardo contextualise the objects in their original Islamic milieu. Thus, the preserved wall tiling of the historic site meaningfully dialogues with the ceramic wares, as in Islamic artistic culture the clay medium was used to create both portable objects and surface decoration.
This installation leads us to address the important issue of contextualisation in the fabricated museum environment. Like in Tunis, the Leeum presents its collection in context, but not the original historical one: by including global art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the historical displays, Museum 1 contextualises, or rather re-contextualises, the ancient artefacts in modernity.

**Expansion of the Museum Universe: The Past/Present, East/West and Regional/Global Interface in Museum 1**

Museum 1 innovates again by bringing in, amidst and among the historic items, the presence of the modern art world, thus setting up past-present, East-West and regional-global interfaces. Visitors may come across works by living Korean artists, a Mark Rothko painting, or a sculpture by Alberto Giacometti in direct dialogic relationship with the ancient items (Figure 15). Based on significant affinities between the different creations, this transspatiotemporal intersectionality provides the age-old Korean art with a renewed relevance, making tangible the reality of ‘a mystic companionship, a moral fraternity with all those who in the past had been in the service of art’, to borrow Henry James’s words. 35

In the paradigmatic celadon gallery, powerfully semantising abstract paintings intimate the linkage between the monochromatic masterpieces and Abstract Expressionism, as both arts construct visualisations of metaphysical concepts, be they the colour field as locus of sublimity or the edge variously apprehended as border, fission or delineation between aesthetic materialities and immaterial worlds (Figure 16). This same idea was behind the exhibition ‘Red: Ming Dynasty/Mark Rothko’, held in 2016–17 at the Freer Gallery in Washington DC, that showed a red Ming porcelain dish in an aesthetic-metaphysical conversation with a red Rothko painting (Figure 17).

The inclusion of contemporaneity within installations of ancient art has been introduced in the late eighties and recently turned into a steady curatorial practice. The

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**Figure 14:** View of the exhibition of Tunisian ceramics, Bardo Palace, Tunis. Photograph: Issam Barhoumi. Courtesy of Ridha Moumni and Issam Barhoumi.

**Figure 15:** Gallery of Korean painting, with an Alberto Giacometti sculpture and a Mark Rothko painting, Museum 1, Leeum. Photograph in the public domain.

**Figure 16:** Gallery of Korean celadons, Museum 1, Leeum, Seoul. Photograph in the public domain.
aforementioned Kunsthistorisches Museum was a pioneer in this practice, with an installation of modern sculptures in the picture gallery in 1989, among the classical masterpieces and not in a separate space. The current exhibition in this same gallery, ‘The Shape of Time’ recreates a similar situation. Yet, only a few museums in the world have, like the Leeum, pushed the practice further by giving these intimate interfaces the high status of permanent installations. Another example is the Museo del Banco de la República, in Bogotá, in which one may admire colonial paintings depicting dead Christian female devotees in their open coffins, arranged in two rows symmetrically unfolding toward a contemporary centrepiece: a monumental photograph of Marina Abramovic representing herself in levitation in a kitchen filled with pots and pans.

Rare, Ephemeral and Strictly Intracultural: Past/Present Interfaces in Museums and Galleries of Islamic Art

Since the momentous 2001 exhibition ‘Ornament and Abstraction’ at the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, too rarely and always temporally do we get to see the artistic heritage of Islam in the expansive light of its connections with global contemporary creation. Some reputed institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum and the Freer Gallery do exhibit contemporary art by Muslim creators or inspired by Islamic heritage. The latest events to date are the 2018 show ‘Tape Art’ in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin and contemporary installations in two new rooms showcasing Islamic art in the British Museum that just opened to the public. A few among these institutions have even begun to build a permanent collection of this new art, notably the Canadian Aga Khan Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). However, for both these new collections and the ephemeral shows, the permanent historical displays only provide a loose semiotic framework as the use of separate spaces of display maintains the division of genres (Figure 18). The Aga Khan Museum does occasionally present mixed settings of old and new creation amidst the historical installations in the lower floor; but once the show is over, the traditional partition between the two genres is restored. As a result, these initiatives do not quite challenge the traditional sequencing of tradition and modernity, and do not quite allow for the thoughtful pinpointing of affinities between the ancient and new art worlds as the Leeum or the aforementioned museum in Bogotá do it by means of direct interface.

In fact, things have evolved in a slow pace since Susanne Lanwerd remarked, in 2012, that contemporary art ‘should be integrated into the permanent exhibitions of museums of Islamic art’. The momentous re-installations of this art in the Met in 2011 attests to the weight of tradition that conceives of Islamic artistic creation after the eighteenth century as ‘something else’. As Emine Fetvaci observed in her review of these re-installations: ‘The collection of ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ art from the Islamic world is clearly considered outside the purview of this department, since even the most recent objects they have acquired belong to traditional artistic and craft traditions. This is also signalled by the wall text in the introductory gallery, which refers to ‘the Islamic period’ in the past tense, indicating that the collection’s scope does not continue to the present’.

The Re-installations in the Met: ‘Islamic, ‘Vous avez dit’ Islamic?’

The use of this concept of ‘the Islamic period’ in the Met’s description of its collection bespeaks the confusion surrounding the definition of what is ‘Islamic’ and what is not in this area of curation, and in Islamic art studies in general. Putting aside this highly-questionable concept, the confusion culminates with the abysmally imprecise and ambiguous labelling of the gallery: ‘The Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia’. The absurdly long list of regions squarely omits the

Figure 18: Interior view of the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto. Photograph in the public domain.
term ‘Islamic’ and thereby silences what actually justifies their regrouping, namely Islam. But what is Islam? Suffice it here to refer to Shahab Ahmed, who answers this question masterfully in What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic (2015). Ironically, if there was any sense in this gallery labelling, it would reside in its opening onto the modern art world. Instead, in the misnamed re-installations, the unnamed Islam remains enclosed in a reductionist periodicity excluding modernity. We may henceforth wonder why such issues mar this area of curatorship. The answer to this question lies in the social-historical background of Islamic art curation and studies.

Social-Historical Background of Islamic Art Curation

Two socio-historical parameters frame the curation of Islamic art: the colonial legacy and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. First, the colonial history of Islamic civilisation still influences the curatorial practice. As is well known, the conceptual tools employed to categorise the arts of Islam, write their history, and present them in museums were created by the colonial West. Symptomatic of the trauma of colonialism on the dealings with this material is the lingering debate about the concept of the masterpiece contested on the basis of its historical context. As a result, installations privileging aesthetic phenomenology are frowned upon and invariably criticised for their lack of historical context.

Second, wars, extremism and political violence sadly affect the global relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. The necessity to ward off fear and prejudice against Islam has driven curators and other art agencies to concentrate predominantly on introductory educational objectives. His Highness the Aga Khan’s speech about the museum in Toronto summarises this general climate: ‘One of the lessons we have learned in recent years is that the world of Islam and the Western world need to work together much more effectively at building mutual understanding—especially as these cultures interact and intermingle more actively. We hope that this museum will contribute to a better understanding of the peoples of Islam in all of their religious, ethnic, linguistic and social diversity’.44 The dominance of the sampling model and, by extension, the lack of diversification of display concepts are the direct result of this state of affairs. Panoramic displays of the Islamic cultures’ variegated artistic achievements are thought to be the most likely to raise the novice public’s interest and heighten their understanding.

David Roxburgh missed this crucial point in his review of the Met’s 2012 rearrangements reiterating the old displays’ sampling scheme, as he praised ‘the absence of any effort to impart lessons about Islam, to use the objects as a blunt teaching tool in an exercise about Muslim religion and Islamic culture’.45 The replacement of the chronological order by a regional organisation does not change the didactic nature of the new scenographies. The columnnist Jerry Saltz pinpointed the very feature that entrenches these scenographies in the established educational trend, as he wrote: ‘The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s glorious new Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia have an encyclopedic name, and they make the greatest encyclopedic museum on Earth even greater’.46 A brief description of one these displays will illustrate this point.

**The Helmet in the Textile Room with the Wooden Ceiling**

One of the rooms exhibits Ottoman period textiles on the walls and floor, a monumental Mudejar ceiling, and a free-standing helmet that strangely recalls a lonely tombstone in the Ashmolean (Figures 5 and 19). The combination of textiles, woodwork and metalwork exposes the material’s dazzling richness, the high skills of its makers and Islamic ornament’s aesthetics. By no means innovating, and no less didactic than the Met’s old displays, this kind of exposition of Islamic art’s generic visuality and materiality has been the primary agenda of this art’s curation since the Orientalist period. The systematic filling of the space with different objects, each one related to a very visible and visually disturbing explanatory cartouche, conjures up the dense eclectic Orientalist reconstitutions of Islamic domestic interiors. These reconstructions in the past intended to reveal the unknown beauties of Islamic art to the ignorant Western world. The helmet’s presence, placed on one side of the central carpet like a decorative object d’art, contributes to revive these faded Orientalist images, even though a built-in installation of pieces of armour in a concealed corner of the room ultimately discloses this presence’s meaning. By way of conclusion, I propose a re-imagining of this display.

**Epilogue**

A simpler arrangement of this room would set in a vertical cosmic dialectic the two most powerful aesthetic expansions in the room, namely the floor carpet and the wooden canopy above it. The walls and space around this setting would be left bare except for the one hanging textile facing the carpet, as it would insure a continuous material channeling the ascending and descending movement between earth and heavens through the fabric-wood threaded path...
of the floor-wall-ceiling. The built-in armour installation, phenomenologically disconnected from this ensemble due to its invisibility from the room’s main viewpoint, would be left to produce its own show. Importantly, the documentation would disappear from the surroundings to be placed discretely at the room’s entrance. Such a configuration would give anyone, a novice or a cultivated spectator in Islamic culture, a sense of the metaphysics translated by the objects displayed, and of their original function in the spirituality-informed Muslim world of aesthetic materialities.

This suggestion of virtual rearrangement, however, does not imply that the curatorship should radically change strategy and sever its ties with established traditions that still make sense through the rich and specific history of the collecting and display of Islamic art. The idea is rather to encourage this curatorship to open itself up to creative avenues that would allow the museum experience of this art to reach another level beyond the acquisition of elements of knowledge on Islamic visual culture and a mere enjoyment of its riveting beauty, namely the deep level of an aesthetic-philosophical appreciation. With its compelling scenographies, the Leeum demonstrates that reaching such a level is possible in the artificial and decontextualizing space of the museum.

Notes
9 To summarise, while China inspired Korean clay art, it has also been a model for ceramic making in the Muslim world from the beginning of Islam onward. Not only Chinese ceramics were highly valued and purchased by the Muslim elite, but also ceramists themselves would find technical and aesthetic inspiration in Chinese models.
10 In the plethora of publications on Islamic ceramics, see Oya Pancaroglu, Perpetual Glory, Medieval Islamic Ceramics from the Harvey B. Plotnick Collection. With transcriptions and translations by Manijeh Bayani (Chicago, New Haven: The Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press, 2007).
12 Here the sublime is used as a generic concept. See the analysis of Samanid wares with epigraphic decoration in Valerie Gonzalez, Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics of Islamic Art and Architecture (London-New York: IBTauris, 2001), 100–105.
14 For a reflection on this museum’s display conceptualisation, see Kjeld von Folsach, ‘Concepts Behind the New Installation of Islamic Art in the David Collection, in Islamic Art and the Museum, 225–231.
16 About this exhibition see: https://www.blogto.com/arts/2014/12/new_agakhanmuseum_hosts_first_major_show/ It is also worth mentioning the example of the National Tea Museum in Hangzhou, China. While not being an art institution, this museum does not lack aesthetic stimuli. The objects bearing a certain aesthetic value such as carefully shaped compressed
teas and tea pots, are accordingly presented in aesthetics-based arrangements.

17 This reinstallment reflects the reductive functionalist trend in Islamic art studies in general of which a critique can be found in Valerie Gonzalez, Aesthetic Hybridity in Mughal Painting, 1526–1658, series ‘Transculturalisms’ (Farnham, UK, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 29–34.


19 About these essential concepts of relational space and form in museums and galleries, and more broadly in perceptual contexts, see Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998). ‘New aesthetics’ is the branch of aesthetic philosophy that emerged in the eighties.


26 See the museum’s website: http://www.miho.or.jp.


30 Ibid.15. The translation of this citation is also my own.


34 My comment on this installation only relies on a presentation by one of the exhibition curators, Ridha Moumni, in a lecture organised by the Islamic Art Circle, SOAS, University of London, in May 10, 2017. I am grateful to Mr Moumni for allowing me to use the photographs of this installation that he kindly sent to me. See: Wikipedia: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27%C3%A9veil_d%27une_nation


37 The concept of the edge in art and related matters of objecthood is of utmost importance. See Andrew Causey, Drawn to See, Drawing as Ethnographic Method (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 73–114. Regarding the exhibition see this website: http://www.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/current/red/.


41 See the video in https://ismailimail.blog/2017/02/13/persian-flying-carpet-agakhan-museum/.


About the expression ‘Islamic, vos avez dit Islamic?’.
This French interrogative expression ‘vous avez dit’ (you said’) that repeats twice ‘la chose dite’ (the thing said), once before and once after the statement, became canonical across linguistic fields. It expresses perplexity with a witty tone and a touch of irony. It is based on the French actor Louis Jouvet’s famous utterance: ‘Bizarre, j’ai dit bizarre, comme c’est bizarre’, in the French classical film by Marcel Carné, Drôle de Drame, 1937.


Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.