

'Whose Object is it Anyway?' – Four Workshops at the Aga Khan Museum investigating the 'Properties of Things'

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In October 2018, the Aga Khan Museum was invited to contribute to the conference 'Properties of Things: Collective Knowledge and Objects of the Museum', sponsored by Ryerson and Mount Allison Universities. The event was conceived to throw an innovative, and intellectually bold, multidisciplinary spotlight onto curatorship within a museum context, and to engender discussions around the multifarious ways in which objects might be re-considered, re-contextualised, and re-interpreted for the benefit of and in line with the interests of a broad, contemporary public. What follows is a summary of the conceptual considerations and questions that underpinned the workshop explorations the Museum devised for four distinct display contexts: the Bellerive Room, the Permanent Collection Gallery, and two temporary exhibitions on show at the time: *Emperors and Jewels – Treasures of the Indian Courts from the Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait* and *Transforming Traditions*, an exploration of the arts of nineteenth-century Iran.

Coming from the overarching question of how to democratize interpretative object narratives beyond rigid discipline-imposed taxonomies and parameters, and somewhat provocatively entitled, 'Whose Object is it Anyway?', the workshops proposed four different ways of contemplating the multi-layered and often shifting meanings and identities of Islamic art objects in a museum context, at the same time raising awareness of the challenges associated with the recovering, restoring and communicating of object narratives lost or neglected across time and space.

Key words: Museum; Canada; Collective Knowledge; Museum Context; Artifacts; Artefacts

From Private Collection to Museum Display – Shifting Object Identities

The first workshop was conceived for the Bellerive Room (Fig. 1) and entitled 'From Private Collection to Museum Display - Shifting Object Identities.'

The Aga Khan Museum's Bellerive Room represents a sympathetic recreation of one of the private rooms in the home of the late Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan and his wife Princess Catherine Aga Khan at the Chateau de Bellerive in Geneva, Switzerland (Fig. 2). Known as the 'Persian Salon,' this room once housed part of an important art collection that – in addition to Islamic artworks – comprised African sculptures, eighteenth-century French furniture, as well as European and contemporary art. Today, some 60 Islamic ceramics are on display in the Bellerive Room, charting the diverse technological and aesthetic achievements of Islamic potters from the early Islamic period through the seventeenth century. Contemplating the history of the room as well as the display and its tight thematic focus, the central question posed to workshop participants in the Bellerive Room centred around how narratives associated with artefacts can change or get lost when they move from the context of a private collection to a public museum space. In a private collection like the one Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan (1933-2003) and his wife assembled over fifty years, every object – beyond its specific historical, art-historical or ethnographic significance – carries unique, subjective, and often highly personal meanings and stories associated with the collectors themselves: specific memories attached to first coming across an artwork that fascinated or intrigued them; the emotional, taste-related or intellectual reasons for acquiring; official communications or intimate conversations with fellow connoisseurs and peers over an object's aesthetic beauty, intrinsic value or historical importance; the rationale for displaying aspects of the collection and conceiving public exhibitions; and, indeed,



Fig. 1, Bellerive Room, The Aga Khan Museum. © Janet Kimber



Fig. 2, Persian Salon. Chateau de Bellerive in Geneva, Switzerland. © Photograph courtesy of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.



Fig. 4, Qur'an Manuscript, copied by Ismail b. 'Abdullah of Makassar, Indonesia, Sulawesi Island, dated 25 Ramadan 1219 AH/28 December 1804, Ink and opaque watercolour on paper, 34.9 × 22.7 × 9 cm © The Aga Khan Museum, AKM488

their potential to engage visitors to the Bellerive Room with a host of relevant stories beyond the context of Islamic art. The question is: could some of them still be recovered and restored, and should they be?

Beyond Materiality – Recovering the Intangible Dimensions of an Object

The second workshop was held in the Permanent Collection Gallery (Fig. 3), and entitled 'Beyond Materiality: Recovering the Intangible Dimensions of an Object.' In line with Islamic art galleries in museums the world over, the interpretation of the objects displayed in this space focuses exclusively on their tangible materiality, in particular their formal technical, stylistic and aesthetic properties. Thus, the label for an Indonesian Qur'an manuscript dated to 1804 (Fig. 4) for example typically reveals its provenance, the materials used in its creation, references to its calligraphic and ornamental qualities as well as comments relating its production and style to a specific historical and cultural context. Meanwhile, the object's highly significant and once integral, intangible dimensions, most importantly the art of recitation, are neither referred to nor, indeed, represented as part of the interpretation. Many other artefacts in the gallery – illustrated manuscripts, calligraphic leaves of poetry or miniature folios among them – suffer the same fate,

considerations leading to disposal or exchange. Both individually, and in sum, such narratives have the potential to facilitate fascinating insights into the personal passion of an individual collector and, at the same time, the dynamics of collecting and connoisseurship at large. However, very few – if any – can be shown to have been retained or indeed actively collected. Instead, as is the norm, the various aspects of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan's private collection were considered and dealt with exclusively within the confines of their taxonomic art-historical parameters, with the internationally significant Islamic art contingent – largely works on paper and ceramics – transferred to the Aga Khan Museum before its opening in September 2014. Here, these artefacts now appear within an exclusive narrative determined by Islamic art discourse and curatorship. Most narratives relating the objects back to their collector and their reality within his collection have been lost, and with that,



Fig. 5, *Emperors & Jewels – Treasures of the Indian Courts from the Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait. Aug 18, 2018 - Jan 27, 2019, The Aga Khan Museum. ©Aly Manji*

conventionally interpreted in isolation from the rhythmic recitation, rhetorical improvisation, literary discourse or musical accompaniment that might have once 'made them whole' in their original contexts. In routinely ignoring the integral intangible dimensions of Islamic artefacts, meaning is not only lost, but Islamic art history becomes distorted. The question posed to participants consequently focused on how we can meaningfully reconstruct the original, contextual 'wholeness' and significance of an Islamic artefact in a museum context by using its material presence as a departure point to explore its inherent intangible dimensions and meanings. This question is particularly important given the fact that among the cultures of the Islamic world, many of the intangible arts have traditionally been considered just as worthy – if not sometimes more so – than their material manifestations.

Emperors & Jewels – Artefacts as Markers of Identity and Ideology

The first of the temporary exhibitions explored in the remaining two workshops was *Emperors & Jewels – Treasures of the Indian Courts from the Al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait* (Fig. 5). The show featured bejeweled weapons, adornments and miniature paintings associated with the ruling male elite of Mughal India and affiliated courts between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Presented in the context of courtly life and ceremony, hunting and battles, the artefacts and depictions offered many narratives relating to the universal and timeless desire to project unassailable power, wealth, masculinity, prowess and superiority, with subtle but carefully observed rules of hierarchy governing the acquisition and wearing of jewels and accoutrements among the emperors, princes and officials at court (Fig. 6). The visual projection of male power and virility has formed an important part of art making and iconographic endeavor for millennia and continues to this day. The underlying, universal aspects of human psychology at play offer many interesting departure points for innovative, cross-cultural object interpretation as well as the opportunity to draw meaningful parallels between history and the present day. Coming from these considerations, participants were invited to contemplate the interpretative potential of historical object narratives relating to the projection of male power, ideology and identity for the museological exploration of comparable contemporary contexts. Discussion also focused on the types of objects and methods of visualization used in the twenty-first century to project those notions effectively to an intended audience.

Transforming Traditions – What makes an object ‘traditional’ or ‘contemporary,’ and who decides?

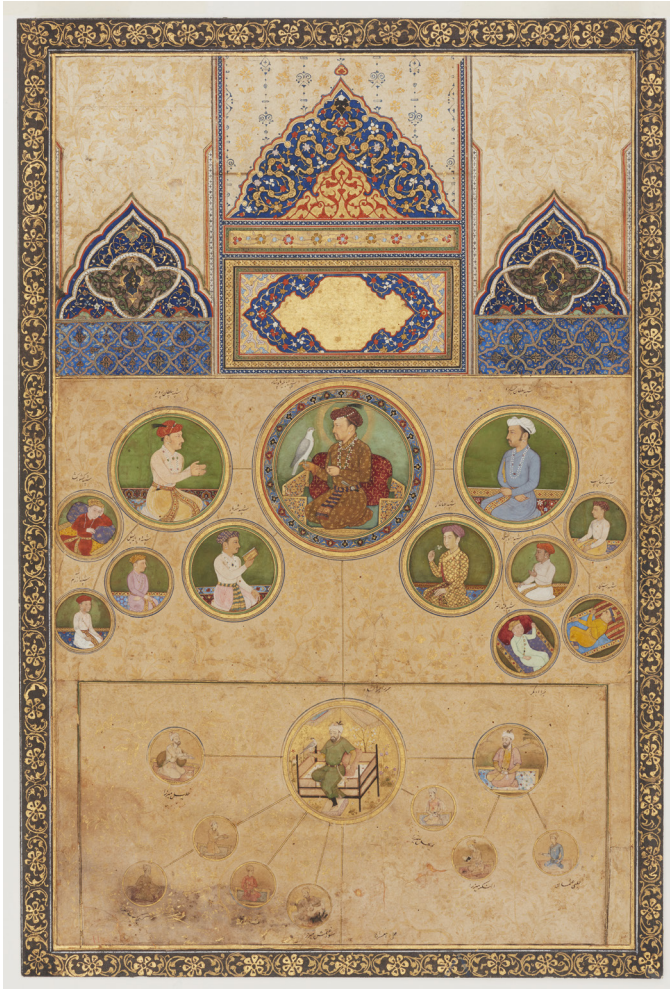


Fig. 6, *Genealogical Chart of Jahangir*, signed by Dhanraj, India, Agra, 1610–23, opaque watercolour, ink, and gold on paper, 36.2 cm × W. 24.2 cm © The Aga Khan Museum, AKM151

The second temporary exhibition, *Transforming Traditions: The Arts of 19th-Century Iran* (Fig.7), concerned itself with the complex dynamics that impacted the arts of a complex, and creative country at a crossroads between tradition and transformation during a century of unprecedented, turbulent change. Engagement with the West brought military, economic, technological, and cultural innovations to Iran. As well as adopting many of these new impulses coming from the West, the ruling elite at the time consciously revived local religious and artistic traditions, and their active patronage of Iranian religious customs, poetry, and the arts – initiatives aimed at legitimizing their rule – fostered a new national identity and laid the foundation for a modern nation state.

Participants were invited to explore the various ways in which the artefacts of the time may act as veritable mirrors of broader societal currents and upheavals, while revealing three overarching yet contending trends that can also be observed in many other communities and cultures exposed to

change across time and space, including those living in Canada today: 1. a concerted attempt to revive, revitalize and reinvigorate traditions, thus placing them at the heart of ‘contemporary’ cultural and artistic discourse; 2. a cultural current dedicated to embracing change, adapting ‘state-of-the-art’ ideas and technologies wholeheartedly and turning away from tradition as outdated; and 3. varying attempts at fusing tradition and the latest trends of the time. In this context, the contentious question of what should be considered as ‘traditional’ art and what would classify as ‘contemporary’ art was also posed. The very title of the exhibition - *Transforming Traditions* – encapsulates a play on words relating to that quandary. It suggests on the one hand that tradition and its arts can play an active, transforming role in contemporary artistic practice, thereby raising the question in how far it, too, has to be considered as ‘contemporary’ in itself.



Fig. 7, Transforming Traditions: The Arts of 19th-Century Iran. Sep 22, 2018 - Feb 10, 2019, The Aga Khan Museum. © Aly Manji

On the other hand, traditions and traditional arts are themselves undoubtedly transformed through their encounter with the 'contemporary,' i.e. cutting-edge, innovative practice. Taking these considerations from the historically and culturally specific context of the exhibition to contemporary discourses around global art production today, a crucial question arises: 'what is 'contemporary' and what is 'traditional' art, and who decides?'.

In conclusion, the workshops at the Aga Khan Museum were devised to open up new avenues of thought related to the interpretation and display of Islamic artefacts. They were intended to unlock fresh thinking around the potential of objects to reveal unexpected, thought-provoking, universal and timeless human stories that can impactfully bridge cultures and show the relevance of the historical to the contemporary world of today. Indeed, in that - rapidly changing - world, bold and innovative interdisciplinary academic and museological thinking around Islamic artworks is crucial to the continuing relevance and vibrancy of both the discipline and the objects in our care.

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