

'Temporary Until Further Notice': The Museum of Islamic Art and the Discursive Endeavour of Displaying Islamic Art in Qatar

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Abstract

Taking the case of curatorial practices at the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, this study analyses practices of exhibiting Islamic art in Qatar. Drawing on interviews, observations and visual material collected during a stay in Doha in November and December 2015, it sheds light on MIA's conditions, history, and present. Against the backdrop of Michel Foucault's writings on power/knowledge, I argue that MIA cannot be understood on the basis of a dominant liberal *cultural policy* paradigm. Rather, it needs to be understood as 'a dynamic and contingent multiplicity' (Barad 2007: 147). Notwithstanding, this multiplicity meaningfully relates to Qatar's shifting political priorities as well as discourses on Islamic art and the exhibition.

Key Words: Qatar, Islamic art, cultural policy, museum, Foucault

Introduction

Museum establishments in Qatar have caused a great stir in the past decade, with Qatar particularly venturing to establish itself as one of the key actors for funding, collecting, and promoting Islamic art, notably through the establishment of the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in 2008. Due to its enormous hydrocarbon wealth,¹ Qatar has undergone significant economic growth since the beginning of the 1970s, making it the world's highest income country per capita as of 2015.² Enabled by these enormous revenues Qatar, among other things, has invested heavily in the cultural-educational sector. Within this context and following the coup d'état of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani in 1995, the grander scheme of museum establishments started to get enacted. During the 1997-2005 tenure of Sheikh Saud bin Muhammad Al-Thani as president of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Heritage, Qatar assembled notable collections of Islamic as well as modern art. In 2005, responsibilities shifted to the state-run entity Qatar Museums Authority (QMA), renamed as Qatar Museums (QM) and turned into an independent body in 2013. The organization's undisclosed acquisitions budget has been estimated at an annual \$1 billion, with a majority of QM's acquisitions devoted to Islamic artefacts. Recently, however, major transformations have shifted Qatar's cultural landscape, leading to budget cuts and resource re-allocation. Attributed partly to a change of paradigms in the wake of the 'more conservative' (Exell 2016) Sheikh Tamim's accession to power in 2013, as well as to a downfall of the global crude oil price, these transformations arguably contradict the story line of Qatar as patron of culture and the arts.

MIA, advertised as 'the flagship project of Qatar Museums'³ seems crucial to Qatar's museum sector, and it is for the Museum's⁴ apparent symbolic significance that media narratives and scholarly research largely address MIA as merely representative of Qatar's *cultural policy* rationales. In contrast, this research will address MIA as 'a dynamic and contingent multiplicity' (Barad 2007: 147) through an in-depth analysis of its exhibition making. Drawing on Michel Foucault's writings on power/knowledge, it will not simply 'read off' meaning of exhibitions, but analyse 'that which has rendered them possible - they and not others in their place: the conditions of their emergence' (Foucault 1972a: 233). In analysing these conditions in the Qatari case and considering MIA's actual curatorial practices, this research challenges dominant frameworks of *cultural policy* premised on liberal regime types. Hence, it will indicate how MIA

is constitutively linked to broader socio-cultural and politico-economic processes at work in Qatar, and 'pin down the specific type of rationality' (Foucault 2011: 241) they are bound up with. Therefore, it will address the following research questions: *How is Islamic art constituted at Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art? How do MIA's curatorial practices and structures inter-relate with discourses on Islamic art and the museum as well as Qatar's cultural policies and their aims?*

The second section of this article reviews the relevant literature on MIA, focusing on its shortcomings in premising a distinctly liberal model of *cultural policy*. The third section outlines an alternative theoretical and methodological framework for addressing *cultural policies* in general and curatorial practices in particular. In accordance with the necessity of paying close attention to detail while acknowledging historic processes, section four delineates some of the historical lineages that shape MIA's curatorial practices, while the fifth and sixth sections provide a close analysis of MIA's permanent exhibition as well as the temporary exhibitions on display at the end of 2015, respectively. Finally, a synthesizing analysis (section 6) discusses MIA's curatorial practices in the light of challenging *cultural policy* paradigms and relates the findings to cultural-political processes unfolding in Qatar.

'A master stroke of cultural diplomacy'?

While most academic publications on MIA represent rather descriptive accounts on behalf of cultural workers associated with the regime's apparatuses (Ghose 2013; Gierlich 2014; Jodidio and Lammerhuber 2008), only a few contributions address MIA comprehensively, largely by addressing it from within a framework of nation branding and identity politics in the Arabian Peninsula.⁵

Museologist and consultant to Qatar's National Museum Karen Exell argues throughout her writings that museums in Qatar transform 'regionally developed agendas and forms of modernity and globalisation [...] into and within an aspect of Western, or Eurocentric, modernity' (2014: 54). Hence, MIA disseminated a fraught construction of 'Islam as global' (54). Specifically, the influx of thousands of art professionals and the interests of the globalized art market (Exell and Rico 2014: 7) as well as the (local) 'elite actors inviting' (Exell 2016) them in hindered local vernacularization. Exell ascribes MIA a primarily symbolic function, assessing that MIA's official discourse 'ends with the opening of MIA in December 2008, a no-expense spared international event which arguably marked the culmination of the project' (Exell 2016). Hence, MIA's establishment in and of itself proved 'a master stroke of cultural diplomacy' (Excell 2016).

In contrast, historian Allen Fromherz (2012) reads MIA as an attempt to 'achieve an aim of authenticity' (2) in the context of a 'newly nationalized notion of Qatari history, citizenship and obligations of lineage' (6). Similarly, sociologist Peggy Levitt (2015) concludes 'that museums in Doha are trying to express a strong national message' (92). Middle Eastern scholar Miriam Cooke (2014) also argues that MIA 'serves a national *qua* religious function' (84, emphasis in original) by 'mak[ing] an Islamic statement about Qatar's leadership within the contemporary Muslim *umma*' (84, emphasis in original). In accordance with Cooke, archaeologist Aisha Mellah (2014) argues that MIA puts forward an 'inclusive discourse' (303) that claimed Islamic art as part of a Qatari national *and* a universal human heritage. This followed the distinct aims of nation branding, specifically, the objectives of attracting tourism and foreign direct investment (303-4).

While the literature reviewed above provides valuable insights, several biases become apparent. Firstly, studies tend to regard the display of Islamic art at MIA 'as representative of organizational goals and thinking' (Sutherland 2005: 156) and, by implication, the Qatari state. Succinctly, scholars, for one, tend to presume as object of analysis a coherent Qatari policy rationale, instigated by the Qatari regime (read: local elite) and acted out in tandem with expatriate professionals. This rationale, then, tends to be interrogated in terms of its one main stimulus: performing a Euro-American form of modernity (Exell 2016), displaying local or national authenticity (Fromherz 2012; Levitt 2015), 'legitimis[ing] [Qatar] in a global society' (Mellah 2014: 301), or as part of the Muslim *umma* (Cooke 2014). Despite their elaborate analysis of MIA-as-institution, the intricate workings of MIA's institutional framework and its exhibition making capacities remain mostly unaccounted for, and its actual exhibitions of Islamic art are not addressed in their complex detail.⁶ In contrast, this research will not only provide a detailed, in-depth analysis of the multi-level curatorial and institutional processes at work at MIA, but

also theorize the inter-relations between exhibiting Islamic art at MIA and broader politico-economic and socio-cultural processes at work in Qatar from a cultural policy perspective. Hence, this paper will contribute to the existing literature in that it regards exhibition making at MIA as the entangled and dynamic inter-play of political rationales, institutional structures, and cultural workers' individual agency.

Curatorial practices as 'discursive endeavour': Conceptualising the constitution of Islamic Art in Qatar

I maintain that the bias in the literature to interpret museum practices 'as representative of organizational goals and thinking' (Sutherland 2005: 156) corresponds with dominant framings of *cultural policy* and how these premise liberal regime types. In contrast, I will draw on alternative frameworks of *cultural policies* in order to theorize MIA's institutional framework, and the multiplicity of agents that perform its curatorial practices.

In the literature, *cultural policy* is commonly defined as 'embodied in systematic, regulatory guides to action that are adopted by organizations to achieve their goals' (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 1). Based on this paradigm dominant both within cultural studies and political science (Miller and Yúdice 2002: *passim*; Barnett 1999: 388), practices within cultural institutions are divided into rationales issued by a political actor and mediated within the realm of (mostly national) cultural institutions (371). Accordingly, these rationales are conceptualized as instituted in order to reach distinctive aims commonly associated with cultural policy directives. Specifically, they are paired up with national identity politics (the formation of *cultural citizens*) or the enactment of nation branding in the context of globalized politico-economic competition (Aronczyk 2008).

The underlying theoretical presumptions are seldom made explicit. However, at stake here is the crucial premise of intentionality - more precisely, a state's political intentionality that is being re-negotiated by means of the cultural intentionality of an institution, i.e., the museum. This premise hinges on two presumptions. Firstly, it institutes the state (regime/government) as a coherent actor, the '*loci* of power, authorization, and responsibility' (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 3, emphasis in original). Secondly, it institutes the cultural institution (i.e., the museum) as its coherent counterpart, representing and/or challenging this 'ideological nation building work' (Sutherland 2005: 156). With reference to the exhibition, 'artefacts [are hence analysed] as representative of organizational goals and thinking' (156). As point of reference these concepts presume a cultural institution that is the locus of open and critical debate and potential self-corrections. Ultimately, this ideal institution is bound up with the formation of 'virtuous political participants through self-scrutiny and self-improvement' (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 27) - cultural citizens that, more often than not are simultaneously addressed as consumers and as citizens (Stevenson 2003: 41). This imagery has a clear historical lineage with *liberalism*. As Foucault argues in his later writings on governmentality, liberalism needs to be understood as a type of 'political rationality' (Foucault 2011: 241) that can be defined as 'a form of critical reflection on governmental practice [...] the fact that it is the object of public debate as to its "good or bad" its "too much or too little"' (Foucault 1997a: 77). He maintains that instead of presuming liberal rationality, i.e. 'the distinction between state and civil society into a historical universal that allows us to examine all the concrete systems' (75), one should 'pin down the specific type of rationality a state produced' (Foucault 2011: 241). Cultural policy scholars have pointed out how the alleged 'historical universal' (Foucault 1997a: 75) of liberalism introduced as its other the cultural institution of the non-liberal regime, fostering patron-client partnerships and bringing censorship and oppression in its wake (Jones 2005: 2). Hence, as social geographer Clive Barnett formulates, 'cultural policy studies [...] assume the existence of the characteristic institutional arrangements of liberal, representative democracy and the existence of an elaborate public sphere of cultural institutions mediating the relationship between state and citizenry' (Barnett 1999: 374). In the following, I will demarcate this paper from this 'common assumption' largely by drawing on the writings of Foucault.

The concept of *juridico-discursive power*, as developed by Foucault, defines power as a complex nexus, productive rather than coercive, producing the notion of the modern individual through disciplining *and* regulating' it (Foucault 1978). Rather than a (more or less

fixed) structure, it is 'the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society' (Foucault 1978: 93). This positioning is mediated through *discourse*. *Discourse*, often misunderstood as 'speech acts or linguistic statements' (Barad 2007: 63) is rather synonymous to *discursive practices*, 'that which constrains and enables what can be said' and 'what counts as meaningful statements' (146). In Foucault's own words, '[t]he transformation of a discursive practice is tied to a whole, often quite complex set of modifications which may occur either outside of it (in the forms of production, in the social relations, in the political institutions), or within it (in the techniques for determining objects, in the refinement and adjustment of concepts, in the accumulation of data), or alongside it (in other discursive practices)' (Foucault 1997b: 12). Power/knowledge thus has to be situated in a process of *discursive formation*. In discursive formation, meaning and order are neither fixed nor inherent to any set of objects, but are produced within 'a system of dispersion [...] [that] define[s] a regularity' (Foucault 1972b: 38). A variety of agents enact discourse, and Foucault's work has proven particularly productive for discussions as to how their subjectivity is constituted precisely in the process of discursive formation.

The formation of discourse is studied by means of *genealogy*, a 'history of the present', that traces back elements, their recurrence, absence, and transformations (Foucault 1984: 76-7). While this understanding of discursive formation is particularly sensitive to discontinuities, it also accounts for discursive continuity over time, enacted through the dispersed but non-the less powerful 'regularity' of discourse in its factual discontinuities.

As to the implications of the above for this study, exhibition making at MIA is conceptualized as a contingent and multivocal set of meaning making practices (Sheikh 2012: 16).⁸ Various discursive entities such as museum professionals, institutions and objects will be considered as enacting this meaning making. Hence, *institutions* (in this case, MIA and QM) are understood as constituted of a 'systematic set of relationships between collective intentionality, the assignment of function, the assignment of status functions, constitutive rules, institutional facts, and deontic powers' (Searle 2005: 22).

Consequently, exhibition making, or curating, is understood as 'a discursive endeavor' (Sheikh 2012: 16). In his PhD research, curator and art scholar Simon Sheikh (16) argues that curating is related to discursive formations such as the genealogy of exhibitions, the canon, the modern history of the museum, and its institutional critique. Always invested with these contexts, they inevitably forge the articulations of the exhibition (135). In the case of MIA, curatorial practices are framed by the discourse on Islamic art as well as those related to the museum, museum professionals and the exhibition as such.

Furthermore, multiplicity does not premise chaos. Exhibition making at MIA is legible, and I will make statements on how it relates to politico-economic and socio-cultural processes at work in Qatar. These statements will broaden an understanding of the workings of cultural policy outside the context of liberal regimes: rather than assessing how exhibition making at MIA deviates from that distinct ideal type (for instance, through censorship, or oppression of civil society actors), they are analysed in terms of what 'specific type of rationality' (Foucault 2011: 241) they put forward.

In an attempt to translate my theoretical framework into an appropriate methodology for the study of exhibition making at MIA, I am drawing on textual as well as ethnographic approaches. Hence, I have combined three data collection methods at the heart of ethnographic and textual research, namely (1) participant observation at official MIA and other QM events as well as the exhibitions, (2) semi-structured and unstructured interviews with a total of 15 interviewees (employed at MIA and QM as well as a range of other cultural and academic institutions based in Doha),⁹ and (3) documentary research. This allows me to give a detailed account of curatorial practices at MIA and 'that which constrains and enables' (Barad 2007: 146) them, as well as consider their historic conditionality. Drawing on textual approaches to the museum, I am applying the concept of *museum-as-text*. Linguist Louise Ravelli (2006), in a broad understanding of the textual, argues that the museum-as-text draws 'on a variety of semiotic resources' (121), namely, physical, discursive, and written and verbal resources. As for 'physical' resources, she refers to 'practices of design and display' (122), while 'discursive relations' include elements such as 'entry charges, community involvement, government directives' (139). I am also profiting majorly from ethnographic approaches to the museum

as put forward by anthropologists such as Sharon Macdonald (2002). The time and space specificity of ethnographic methods resonates with my research aims since it allows me to capture the dynamics enfolding 'at a very precise moment in time' (Foucault 1972a: 228) and account in detail for a variety of discursive elements. Accordingly, I focused on a particular time period (October–December 2015) in terms of data collection and the temporary exhibitions on display at that time, all the while paying close attention to MIA's exhibition making history by studying textual material.

'Largely dysfunctional'?: The genealogy of a museum

MIA's permanent collection is comprised of some 114,274 objects and has not yet been registered in its entirety¹⁰. As to the impetus behind the Museum's collection history, 'it probably emerged in the early 1990s in close association with members of the Al Thani ruling house' (Gierlichs 2014: 200), namely, Sheikh Saud b. Muhammad Al-Thani, first cousin to Qatar's then Emir. Hence, it is inextricably linked to MIA's collection history, or, to be more precise: A royal family member's interest in Islamic art. Under the auspice of Sheikh Saud, 'the collection grew rapidly' (200). During his 1997–2005 tenure, in addition to individual acquisitions, he acquired complete collections (Gierlichs 2014: 200).

According to a senior professional at QM, Sheikh Saud's practices of collecting Islamic art were in accordance with the economy of the Islamic art market: with a capacity to outbid all other potential buyers he acquired the 'canon' of Islamic art as offered by auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's,¹¹ thus considerably rising the sales prices of Islamic art objects. Arguably, these collecting practices epitomise the inextricable link between auction houses (part and parcel of the global art market) and QM.¹²

The first display of MIA's permanent collection was opened in 2008 and displayed some 750 objects (Gierlichs 2014: 202). As of March 7, 2016, the display of the collection was made up of 824 objects¹³. Regarding temporary exhibitions, in spite of the rhetoric around MIA's significance, no follow-up exhibition was scheduled after the inaugural temporary exhibition *Beyond Boundaries: Islamic Art Across Cultures*¹⁴. The absence of an in-house curatorial team resulted in the fact that until the parallel exhibitions *The Intelligence of Tradition: Antiquity and Early Islamic Glass* and *Illuminations: The Mosque Lamp as Iconographic Image* in mid-2012, all exhibitions were conceptualized and curated externally, often consisting majorly of objects on loan, and, at times, had no explicit relation to Islamic art (such as *The Dream of a King: Dresden's Green Vault*, 2011/12, comprised of loans from the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, or *The Golden Age of Dutch Painting: Masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum* (2011) in cooperation with the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

Upon being appointed as MIA director in 2011, Aisha Al-Khater, according to one QM employee, found herself with a 'largely dysfunctional institution'¹⁵. As a counter-measure, under her tenure, an in-house curatorial team was established. Also, an 'Exhibition Policy' document gained final approval in 2014. The document states that MIA exhibitions are to foster certain aims: With regards to its audience, exhibitions are to promote MIA's 'local, regional, and international profile'. The document also emphasizes that MIA's exhibitions ought to '[b]e relevant to the MIA Permanent Collection and have a focus on Islamic art'. Lastly, it promotes MIA's sensitivity 'to local cultural norms' (Museum of Islamic Art 2014). The 'Exhibition Policy' reflects a prior change of priorities, with temporary exhibitions ever since 2012 displaying an increasing number of objects from MIA's permanent collection and being increasingly conceptualized and curated by MIA's in-house curatorial team.¹⁶

In mid-2015 the reality on the ground changed considerably due to recent changes implemented by QM. These changes can be summed up into the following aspects: a cut for QM's funding, a focus on employing Qatari nationals ('Qatarisation'), and the centralization of responsibilities within QM (such as public relations and exhibition design). This, for one, is due to the fact that the Qatari cultural budget is coupled only with the crude oil price, that is, not the comparably more stable gas price. With the crude oil price in significant decline ever since June 2014, QM's budget has been cut by 30 per cent.¹⁷ According to The Financial Times, the number of employees shrunk from 1,200 to less than 800 in 2016.¹⁸

Consequences for MIA's exhibition making capacity have been tremendous for the period in question: Most notably, due to major staff realignments MIA only operated with one curator and one

assistant curator at the end of 2015. According to one senior informant at QM, MIA director Al-Khater decided to leave her position since she felt that the Museum's functionality had been jeopardised.¹⁹ The position of MIA director remained vacant until the appointment of Dr Julia Gonnella in early 2017. In late-2015, because of the shortage of staff, according to a senior exhibition staff member the Exhibition Committee had cut down its quota to two to three temporary exhibitions yearly.²⁰

All of this has had implications for MIA's curatorial practices. Firstly, recent developments had led some of the museum professionals to believe that they found themselves on a sinking ship.²¹ While employing more Qatari nationals might be understood as a reasonable move in the light of the high turn-over of expatriate staff, the (forced) leave of expatriate museum professionals in fact proved highly problematic in the light of an apparent lack of qualified nationals to fill the ensuing vacancy (ibid.). In addition, it also impacted second-generation Qatari immigrants. Born in Qatar to labour immigrants of the 1960s and 1970s (particularly from South East Asia) some were forced to leave their country of birth upon being dismissed from their government-sponsored position in the museum field²² due to the nature of residence and citizenship legislation in Qatar.²³

Secondly, MIA's institutional framework implied weak levels of institutional critique and self-correction, capacities arguably crucial for the functioning of cultural institutions in liberal environments (cf. Sheikh 2012). Due to the high turn-over of staff, workers feared for their jobs, a fact which, paired with confidentiality agreements, made them less likely to voice their concerns and critique. Additionally, QM in general and MIA in particular lacked any form of documented institutional memory, both due to a deficit of resources and the hasty leave some employees have had to take (usually, non-Qataris have to leave the country within a fortnight after their contracts are determined). This often forced new employees to start from scratch, which would increase the likelihood of re-iterating mistakes and perpetuating inefficient institutional structures.

Hence, the transformations enfolded in late-2015 exacerbated a condition that had made the sustainability and endurance of some of the structural changes introduced (such as the establishment of an in-house curatorial team and the 'Exhibition Policy') highly volatile to begin with. This condition, far from being merely imposed upon MIA's staff, was partly facilitated by the productive regulatory potential of power (cf. Foucault 1978). While it seems overly simplistic to assess MIA (and the cultural sector in Qatar) as censored in the sense of being restricted, all of the employees had to sign strict confidentiality agreements. The sense of carefulness and compliance these induced was even more prominent in the case of non-Qatari employees (who made up the large majority of MIA staff in the years 2008-2015²⁴) whose residence permit was bound to their employment by a Qatari entity (*kafāla* system). Since a Qatari non-state cultural sector barely exists, most artists and cultural workers in Qatar, unless employed by the few private or communal cultural institutions, had to be employed by QM - and were even more inclined to refrain from overt criticism of QM and its many institutions.

'Uninteresting'?: MIA's permanent exhibition

The gallery rooms of MIA's permanent exhibition are organised either thematically (second floor) or according to periods of artistic production (third floor). The majority of space on the second floor is devoted to the *Calligraphy* and *Pattern Galleries*, often seen as the quintessential stylistic motives of Islamic art. Third floor galleries are not only ordered by time period, but also designated by the names of modern nation-states. Iranian art is featured prominently, with three out of eight galleries at least partly displaying 'Iranian' artefacts.

The *Permanent Exhibition Galleries* offer a minimum of contextual information, mostly consisting of object labels (in both Arabic and English) listing name of the object, date, provenance, material and accession number. While some of the glass displays are recessed into the walls, the majority of glass shelves are on free display or placed against the walls, with artificial lighting pointed directly at the individual showcases. Each section is furnished with a wall chart (in Arabic and English).

'Pattern in Art'

Vegetal patterns were adopted and transformed at an early stage in Islamic art. This experimentation led to the arabesque, a design derived from palmettes and half-palmettes connected by interweaving stems. With stylisation and multiplication,

the arabesque became increasingly abstract, becoming one of the defining and unique elements of the Islamic style. [...] All Islamic pattern is based on the idea that what we see is always and only part of a whole that extends to infinity.

The wall chart's choice of language is matter-of-fact, created through the predominant use of indicative verbs and short sentences. Its decisive manner is accompanied by the assertions made within the text. Here, the wall chart suggests a consistent entity of 'Islamic art', an entity that features certain unabated characteristics throughout the course of time. Hence, in the preceding example, the transformation of the pattern of the 'arabesque' is described as one linear development from the 'early stage in Islamic art' to later 'Islamic style', culminating in the statement that '[a]ll Islamic pattern' is based on one spiritual leitmotif.

Regarding the display of the permanent collection, two aspects transpire: firstly, the aestheticization of objects, secondly, the unspecific and transnational quality of Islam that is conveyed. MIA's mode of display resonates with what Singh (2015) observes in the context of ethnographic museums and collections: techniques of display elevate objects to the rank of modern or contemporary art (as opposed to culturally, religiously or ethnically bound artefacts). This corresponds with their universal claim, a signature that 'the art does not need to be explained' (15). Its 'specific taste or quality' (Mellah 2014: 209) also 'represents a specific social class - the elite' (209). Conversely, the objects displayed at MIA are stripped of their religious function as well as their local origin. While MIA does display a number of sacred objects in an Islamic context, this is not discussed within the Museum. Hence, questions regarding the religio-secular nature of objects are not addressed. This has prompted a lot of criticism on behalf of Qatari religious communities and authorities.²⁵ The similarity of MIA's permanent exhibition display when compared with Euro-American institutions is striking, both in terms of periodization and exhibition design as well as with regards to the over-representation of Iranian objects (Komaroff 2000; Mellah 2014). All of this has prompted one senior executive at QM to assess MIA's permanent exhibition display as 'uninteresting', since it reproduces curatorial models developed elsewhere in an all-too straightforward manner.²⁶

From Dresden to Ferozkoh: Temporary Exhibitions at MIA

Some of MIA's temporary exhibitions, especially after around 2013, have made an effort to instigate Qatari residents' contribution, and include source communities to interact with its collection.²⁷ In this regard, I contend that the variety of geographic regions, and imaginary audiences addressed marks a central feature of MIA's permanent exhibitions. I further argue that this disparity is paired up with certain inconsistencies regarding the framing practices of MIA's exhibitions. These inconsistencies are raised, but not explicitly discussed.

At the time of this research, MIA hosted the temporary exhibitions *The Hunt: Princely Pursuits in Islamic Land* and *Qajar Women: Images of Women in 19th century Iran*. While *The Hunt* (September 16, 2015 to January 9, 2016) engages with depictions of the act of hunting in Islamic art, *Qajar Women* (April 8, 2015 to June 11, 2016) juxtaposes artworks from the Qajar period (1785 to 1925) with a selection of contemporary artworks.

Arguably, *The Hunt*, more so than any other previous exhibition, is attempting to link MIA's collection with the notion of a Qatari cultural heritage. Noteworthy are the Falcons and Salukhi event, a recital of classic Arabic poetry (in Arabic language only), and the choice of the exhibition to begin with: According to a senior exhibition staff member, a curator suggested to stage *The Hunt* precisely for the relevance of falconry among Qataris²⁸. This resonates with various statements by interviewed museum professionals at MIA that point towards a lack of local resonance.²⁹

However, the local audience that is targeted by *The Hunt* is arguably restricted to the strata of Qatari nationals, which only make up a small part of Qatar's population. In addition, according to my own field notes collected during frequent visits to the exhibition, it is mainly male Qataris that were attracted by *The Hunt*. Ironically, even within this limited societal strata, the exhibition did not resonate particularly well. As one senior exhibition staff member explains³⁰: *The Hunt* addresses hunting not primarily from a 'contemporary or cultural' perspective, but a 'historical' one, adding that this has irritated a lot of, mainly Qatari, visitors, who 'mistake' MIA as a Qatari national institution (ibid.). Generally, *The Hunt's* framing of 'the historical' is that of

a timeless Islamic past: similar to the permanent exhibition, artefacts blend representations of various Islamic dynasties and traditions, promoting hunting as an activity represented in a common Muslim 'royal iconography' (*The Hunt*, Wall chart). Thus, *The Hunt* merely touches upon the contested question of a Qatari national identity.

While the constitution of a specific brand of cultural heritage lies at the core of *The Hunt*, the notion of femininity seems a central concern of *Qajar Women*. Arguably, *Qajar Women*, by deviating from contemporary notions of feminine beauty (Qajar women often wear moustaches and a mono-brow), even introduces a potentially emancipatory approach to gender.³¹ However, the framing of the exhibition rather seems to capitalise on introducing a provocation that is not that provocative after all. On the one hand, visitors are encouraged to take pictures as a Qajar woman (with a moustache) behind a cardbox and tweet those with the caption '#QajarWomen', the MIA gift shop offers moustaches in numerous variations and, according to a senior social media executive, engagement with *Qajar Women* (on Social Media) exceeded that of all previous exhibitions³². For all the entertainment factor of *Qajar Women*, as one MIA curator put it: *Qajar Women* is 'not about gender ambiguity in Iran'³³.

The potentially futile topic of gender relations is hence contained within a safe realm, resonating with the goal stated earlier in MIA's 'Exhibition Policy' and repeated by one MIA curator: '[W]e're still trying to respect the environment the museum is in, to respect the country and respect the values and not shock people'³⁴. This non-political framing of gender corresponds with the accompanying International Women's Day event on March 8, 2016. Described as a 'prestigious' and 'targeted' event, the audience was invited to visit the exhibition and join a small art workshop followed by an Iranian music performance. Invitees were all female embassy employees as well as spouses to high-ranking embassy officials, secondly (as a 'back-up'), members of the Doha Business Women Club and the MIA Ladies Club.³⁵ This de-politicization of gender is revealing in the light of what I have discussed as the self-regulatory, productive potential of power.

Moreover, the brisance of an exhibition of Iranian objects in a museum whose collection is heavy on Iranian objects, but located in a country with culturally complex but notoriously strained geopolitical relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran (cf. Kazerouni 2014) is noteworthy. However, it was not taken up within the exhibition. In regard to this ambiguity, one senior QM professional even referred to Iran as 'the name that shall not be mentioned'.³⁶ This ambiguity becomes even more meaningful adding the fact that Iranian artist Hojat Amini was not allowed to enter the country and present his work.

From deviation to 'a specific type of rationality'

With regards to the permanent collection display and MIA's temporary exhibitions, some overall aspects have transpired: (1) the selection of 'so-called masterpieces' (Shaw 2012: 4) and their de-contextualized type of display, and (2) the variety of themes addressed by MIA's curatorial practices. I will now discuss these in the light of my theoretical considerations on cultural policies.

In the literature, MIA is considered as (1) a coherent entity and (2) as such representative of one or the other Qatari intentional cultural policy purpose. The analysis is then based on measuring MIA's functionality up against in how far the Museum fulfilled its purpose. I have argued that this approach is - albeit subtly - embedded in liberal framings of cultural policy, that is the presumption that political rationales are 'embodied in systematic, regulatory guides to action that are adopted by organizations to achieve their goals' (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 1). I further maintain that these very categories of liberal cultural policy (making) correspond to the ways in which some of my informants assess MIA. The fact that even high-ranking QM professionals, lament the Museum's 'dysfunctionality' and how things in Qatar - when dealing with Qataris - never go as planned³⁷ seems to demonstrate how their thinking is based on a Western, liberal model of efficiency, 'self-scrutiny and self-improvement' (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 27) and the participatory involvement of the 'cultural citizen' deeply embedded in the logics of consumerism (Stevenson 2003: 41).

In contrast, drawing on my earlier theoretical elaborations, I argue that a shift in focus to an alternative understanding of MIA as (1) 'a dynamic and contingent multiplicity' (Barad 2007: 147) and (2) consider the possibility of an alternate inter-relation between MIA and the state that deviates from the liberal model of cultural policy, will throw into relief MIA's workings in all their complexity as well as facilitate an understanding of what 'type of rationality' (Foucault 2011: 241) MIA, and, by implication, Qatar puts forward.

Firstly, regarding MIA's permanent collection and its display, I argue that the parallels found, rather than merely proving how MIA copies curatorial practices elsewhere (Mellah 2014) and is therefore 'uninteresting'³⁸ are at least partly due to the particularity of MIA's collecting practices. As has been noted, MIA's collection has mainly been assembled by Sheikh Saud, who was succeeded by former Christie's expert and art dealer Guy Bennett as QM's director of collections and acquisitions. In the light of QM's relation to the international art market, I agree with the remark of a senior QM executive, who argues that MIA's collection is mirroring the range of high-priced objects offered by international auction houses.³⁹ In that regard, it has been demonstrated how the value attached to these objects is intimately bound up with conceptualizations of 'value' as established within the nineteenth century discourse on Islamic art (cf. Kazerouni 2014: 94). In fact, the very 'definition' of Islamic art at that time was forged precisely by the coupling of power/knowledge at the heart of the Islamic art complex, brought about by the intersection of European industrialism and concomitant patterns of circulation and consumption (cf. Flood 2012; Roxburgh 2000; Shaw 2007) as well as colonialism and its practices of plunder and occupation (Blair and Bloom 2013). Interestingly enough, the inter-relation of auction houses, Islamic art history and museums at play in Qatar is partly reproducing the conditions of 'Islamic art' in the nineteenth century, when the functions of art dealers, colonisers, and art historians were interchangeable, and, at times, gathered in personal union (as in the case with adventurer-collectors) (Blair and Bloom 2013: 157). Arguably, transferring the discourses on Islamic art to Qatar and changing the 'conditions of their emergence' (Foucault 1972a: 233) resulted in the re-emergence of certain of their initial conditions. While, in Europe and the US, institutions by now are at least pretending to stay aloof from auction houses (and the international art market, if only for lack of financial resources), this is not the case in Qatar. Moreover, MIA's permanent collection display is constituted by the fact that interviewees often claimed a responsibility towards properly representing MIA's collection as acquired through certain collection practices⁴⁰. These references to MIA as institution, its collection, and collection history do not indicate that MIA (as a national Qatari institution) has decided to mirror Euro-American practices of displaying Islamic art. Rather, they underline how discourses on the museum, collecting, patronage, and the institution 'round' curatorial practices (Sheikh 2012: 16). For instance, Sheikh Saud appears as a figure that is invested with both fascination and contempt. Hence, what is conceived of as the history of patronage crucially informs MIA professionals' sense of responsibility vis-à-vis the permanent collection. Sheikh argues that this is characteristic of curators' relation to the figure of the 'connoisseur' (Sheikh 2012: 37), understood 'as a man of taste, and thus always individual and idiosyncratic' (Sheikh 2012: 37). As a consequence, '[i]t is through the taste of this collector-curator that we must read and understand their curatorial choices' (Sheikh 2012: 37). These two interpretations have verified my claim that by looking at how MIA's curatorial practices relate to a complex set of discursive practices (Foucault 1997b: 12), here vis-à-vis the discourse on museum, collecting and patronage as well as the institutional discourses of the Islamic Art field and the global art market, one may gain a rich interpretation of the Museum.

The same comes true when applied to the second finding discussed here; that is, the broad array of themes that MIA introduces in the area of temporary exhibitions, and the apparent ambiguities these produce.

These ambiguities, here listed as opposites for reasons of accessibility, include the following:

- *Exhibition making at MIA focuses on Iranian art. Exhibition making at MIA does not focus on Iranian art.*
- *Qajar Women is about gender. Qajar Women is not about gender.*

- *MIA attempts to be accessible to various local and source communities. MIA targets 'high-quality expats' and the local elite.*
- *Exhibition making at MIA is catering the notion of a national Qatari identity. Exhibition making at MIA is catering the notion of a transnational Islamic culture.*
- *MIA (partly) displays sacred objects. MIA displays aesthetic objects that are stripped of politics, history, and religion.*

Firstly, with reference to Foucault's writings on power/knowledge, I have maintained that discontinuities are part and parcel of any given discourse. In the case of MIA, curatorial practices are enacted by institutional frameworks, objects, museum professionals, and visitors, with contradictions being not a mere a side-effect, but laying at the heart of discursive formation. In this instant, I contend that MIA does not differ from cultural institutions elsewhere. Secondly, once again, MIA's institutional structures need to be considered, that is the 'systematic set of relationships between collective intentionality, the assignment of function, the assignment of status functions, constitutive rules, institutional facts, and deontic powers' (Searle 2005: 22).

For instance, MIA's as well as QM's budget has been reportedly unlimited following its opening in 2008. Instead of mounting expensive loan exhibitions, it might have started off with exhibitions putting its noteworthy permanent collection on display and, by actively discussing the collection's relation to its local surroundings, initiating conversation with local communities and their cultural diversity.

This would have required MIA to employ museum professionals that were familiar with its collection or museologically trained locals. For its recent establishment as well as the absence of a museum studies programme prior to the establishment of UCL Qatar's Museum and Gallery Practice M.A. In 2011, these were virtually non-existent. Moreover, a different engagement with local communities arguably pre-requisites assessing the demands of local audiences, for instance through visitor surveys. However, this assessment, in Qatar is hindered by a particular understanding of cultural institutions that does not hinge on 'the existence of an elaborate public sphere of cultural institutions mediating the relationship between the state and the citizenry' (Barnett 1999: 374). Hence, MIA's first systematic in-house visitor survey was executed only in 2015 amidst hostilities on behalf of QM.⁴¹

Therefore MIA's allocation of resources is constituted by the specifics of how Qatar's cultural institutions operate, part of which is their opposition to 'a form of critical reflection on governmental practice' (Foucault 1997a: 77). For many reasons, MIA operates in very specific ways, ways that, though not unequivocally representative of the State of Qatar, nevertheless are entangled with its specific political culture and the nature of its public sphere.

Hence, rather than measure Qatar's cultural policies against a historically contingent ideal type, it seems much more interesting to ask what 'type of rationality' (Foucault 2011: 241) Qatar puts forward, and how this shapes the peculiarity of (cultural) institution building in Qatar. In that regard, I would go as far as suggesting that the broad array of addressed themes is in fact very much in line with Qatari policies, particularly regarding its strategies of economic diversification (nation branding) and 'activist foreign policy' (Kaussler 2015: 1). Qatar's investment portfolio is characterised by its enormous financial power and a rather impulsive practice of acquisitions, which have been undertaken from within the framework of Qatar 2030 (Chesnot and Malbrunot 2013: 235). Therefore, I argue that the broad range of Qatar's activities in the economic as well as cultural and educational sector is not simply due to a lack of focus, but rather a result of Qatar's specific rationality. This rationality engenders frantic activities within different sectors. In the context of the cultural-educational sector, the establishment of MIA and its curatorial practices are in accordance with this rationality. Fuelled by years in which Qatar's financial power appeared utterly endless, Qatar has not only invested heavily in museums, but just as well in major sports events (the FIFA World Cup 2022, tennis tournaments), branches of Anglo-American universities, and Al Jazeera's various media outlets, to give but a few examples. From this perspective, the decision to establish MIA as the first in a number of museums might rather be due to the incidental existence of a large collection of pricey Islamic art objects than a grander policy scheme.

The relatively non-outstanding relevance of MIA is also backed by the transformations starting in 2015. Here, for one, the decline of the crude oil price must be considered. However,

there is no such thing as an economic hard fact that foregoes politics. Decisions on how to prioritize expenditures are always already invested with political projections. Arguably, in the case of Qatar, the decline of the oil price brought in its wake the belief in the necessity to cut and re-examine its expenditures. Budget cuts have been most apparent in the cultural and media sector. For instance, consequences for the museum sector were tremendous, while Al Jazeera America, only established in 2013, was shut down altogether by May 2016.

In contrast to that, while cultural and educational budgets have remained frozen, military spending even increased. For instance, in March 2016, Qatar spent \$6.7 billion on a fighter deal with France. This apparent concern for military strength can be coupled with exacerbated geopolitical concerns, such as a feeling of threat by the amplification of violent conflicts in the Middle East region in general, and Yemen in particular.⁴²

While certain developments suggest that Qatar's endeavours in terms of asset allocation might become more streamlined, and this might continuously affect the museum sector and curatorial practices at MIA, as transpires from my interviews, recent developments amplify prior developments, correlating with Sheikh Tamim's accession to power in 2013. For instance, they have pointed to the sidelining of hitherto powerful members of the royal family that have placed an emphasis on the arts and culture, such as Qatar Foundation (QF) head Sheikha Moza bint Nasser.⁴³ All of this remains suggestive, and it is to be clarified how Qatar's potentially shifting political priorities will affect its museum sector in general and MIA in particular.

Seen through the lens of the liberal universal, that is, its apparatuses of critique, their instruments, technologies and regulations, MIA's curatorial practices may appear as a deviation, and translate into impressions of inconsistency, elitism and a system of patronage fringing on nepotism. In contrast, I have demonstrated how MIA's curatorial practices and their entanglement with the socio-political field in Qatar as well as the transformations at the time of this research in fact correspond with a 'specific type of rationality' (Foucault 2011: 241). While MIA's symbolic significance and crucial importance have been challenged, the Museum is there to stay. Forged by the regularity of discourse in its factual discontinuities, like much of Qatar's discursive endeavours, MIA is 'temporary until further notice'.⁴⁴

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Notes

- 1 Qatar is reported to hold about 14 per cent of the world's gas reserves, and is surpassed only by Russia and Iran (Hanieh 2011, 91).
- 2 Worldbank, 'Gross National Income Per Capita 2015', Worldbank Databank. <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GNIPC.pdf>, accessed 11 December 2016.
- 3 Museum of Islamic Art, 'Fact Sheet', Museum of Islamic Art. <http://www.mia.org.qa/docs/press/mia-fact-sheet-en.pdf>, accessed 11 May 2016.
- 4 Here and in the following the 'Museum' will refer to MIA.
- 5 Museum developments in the Arabian Peninsula are often analysed as part of the rise of *soft power* in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Kazerouni 2014). While some edited volumes offer a wide range of case studies on collecting and museum practices *vis-à-vis* identity politics and economic diversification (Erskine-Loftus 2013; 2014), the volume *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices* (2014), edited by Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico, displays a focus on heritage projects in the Arabian Peninsula and how they capitalize on 'Western' heritage expertise in achieving international recognition.
- 6 The significant lack of on-the-ground research on the subject matter might partly be due to the difficulties of gaining access to informants in Qatar's museum field.

- ⁷ For a distinction between disciplinary and regulatory power in Foucault's earlier and later writings, respectively, see Barnett 1999: 381-84.
- ⁸ Foucault himself only commented on the museum in passing, as one example of a heterotopic space (Foucault 1998). It is in this context that he addresses a particular kind of museum, the nineteenth century universal survey museum as being characteristic of 'Western' modernity (182). Scholars have taken up this point and characterized the museum as the quintessential Enlightenment institution, and intimately bound up with the (ideological) nexus of colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism (see, e.g. Duncan and Wallach 1980).
- ⁹ In order to protect my informants, especially in the light of strict confidentiality agreements, I have decided that using pseudonyms as code names in the course of this study is not sufficiently secure. Hence, I have attributed anonymized statements to descriptive figures such as 'one senior QM professional'.
- ¹⁰ Jonathan Wilson, Head of Registration, MIA, personal communication. 7 March 2016.
- ¹¹ Anon, personal interview, 12 Dec. 2015
- ¹² Former QM director of the public arts, Jean-Paul Engelen, Edward Dolman, acting CEO and executive director of QMA 2011-2014, and Guy Bennett, QM's director of collections and acquisitions, all held senior positions at the auction house Christie's.
- ¹³ Jonathan Wilson, pers. comm., 7 March 2016.
- ¹⁴ Sheika Nasser Al-Nassr, Sheika Nasser. 2015, Head of Exhibitions, MIA, interview by author, digital recording, 14 December 2015.
- ¹⁵ Anon, personal interview, 19. Dec. 2015
- ¹⁶ Following the exhibitions *Illuminations* and *The Intelligence of Tradition*, in 2013, MIA mounted *Ferozkoh: Tradition and Continuity in Afghan Art*, displaying MIA objects and contemporary objects created by students of the Turquoise Mountain Institute of Afghan Art; and *Swords: Steel and Gold*, representing MIA's first exhibition entirely curated in-house. 2013/14 the museum displayed *Hajj: The Journey Through Art*, an exhibition that, though inspired by the 2012 British Museum exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*, was curated by MIA curator Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya (MIA Curator of Manuscripts) and Cécile Bresc (former MIA Curator of Coins), with objects stemming mostly from MIA's collection. Those were followed by *Building Our Collection 1: Ceramics of Al-Andalus*; *Building our Collection 2: Safavid and Mughal Albums*; *Kings and Pawns: Board Games from India to Spain* (in 2014), all curated by MIA and primarily displaying MIA's own objects, *The Tiger's Dream: Tipu Sultan* (in 2014/2015), exclusively featuring objects from MIA's own collection, and finally, in 2015 *Marvellous Creatures: Animal Fables in Islamic Art*. The number of in-house exhibitions totals thirteen.
- ¹⁷ Anon, personal interview, 24. Nov. 2015
- ¹⁸ Simeon Kerr, and Shannon Bond, 'Qatar Targets Cultural Assets for Cuts as Oil Price Hits Budget.' The Financial Times 2016. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/1b69a9e2-bad4-11e5-b151-8e15c9a029fb.html#axzz48LjO7at>, accessed 11 May 2016.
- ¹⁹ Anon, personal interview, 19. Dec. 2015
- ²⁰ Sheika Nasser Al-Nassr, Sheika Nasser. 2015, Head of Exhibitions, MIA, interview by author, digital recording, 14 December 2015.
- ²¹ Anon, personal interview, 19 Dec. 2015

- ²² Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya, Curator, MIA, interview by author, digital recording, 18 November 2015.
- ²³ In Qatar, residence permits are entirely dependent on the employment by a Qatari entity (*kafāla* system).
- ²⁴ Anon, personal interview, 19 Dec. 2015
- ²⁵ Anon, personal interview, 19. Dec. 2016
- ²⁶ Anon, personal interview, 19 Dec. 2015
- ²⁷ In the run-up to *Hajj: A Journey Through Art*, Qatari residents (both nationals and non-nationals) were encouraged to contribute their private Hajj artefacts. While half of the objects displayed at *Ferozkoh: Tradition and Continuity in Afghan Art* originated from MIA's collection, the other half was created by students of the Afghan Turquoise Mountain Institute in engaging with the historical objects. *Marvellous Creatures: Animal Fables in Islamic Art* included sound recordings of excerpts from fables in stories recorded and told in Arabic, English, Turkish, Russian, Urdu, Malayalam, Tagalog, and Chinese. Urdu, Malayalam, Tagalog and Chinese were targeting migrant communities residing in Doha, and recordings were produced in cooperation with local migrant communities.
- ²⁸ Sheika Nasser Al-Nassr, interview, 14 December 2015.
- ²⁹ Anon, personal interview, 9 Dec. 2015; Sheika Nasser Al-Nassr, interview, 14 December 2015; anon, personal interview, 19 December 2015.
- ³⁰ Sheika Nasser Al-Nassr, interview, 14 December 2015.
- ³¹ The historical implications of the Qajar period for women's emancipation are much more complex than suggested here (cf. McElrone 2005).
- ³² Osman Ahmed, Head of Social Media, MIA, interview by author, digital recording, 15 November 2015.
- ³³ Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya, interview, 18 November 2015.
- ³⁴ Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya, interview, 18 November 2015.
- ³⁵ Sarah Anne Tose, Head of Education, MIA, interview by author, digital recording, 16 December 2015.
- ³⁶ Anon, personal interview, 9 Dec. 2015
- ³⁷ Anon, personal interview, 19. Dec. 2015
- ³⁸ Anon, personal interview, 9 Dec. 2015
- ³⁹ Anon, personal interview, 12 Dec. 2015
- ⁴⁰ Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya, interview, 18 November 2015; Sheika Nasser Al-Nassr, interview, 14 December 2015.
- ⁴¹ Sarah Anne Tose, interview, 16 December 2015.
- ⁴² I owe this insight to a conversation with Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab.
- ⁴³ Anon, personal interview, 9 Dec. 2015
- ⁴⁴ Anon, personal interview, 19. Dec. 2015

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