Museum *Islamania* in France

Islamic art as a political and social scene

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Paris, Cairo, Berlin, London, New York, Tehran, Kuala Lumpur, Melbourne, Washington, Doha, Honolulu, Copenhagen, Toronto: these are only a few of the cities with museums – partly or fully – devoted to Islam. This international boom, which started in Europe at the very end of the nineteenth century, has considerably increased since the 2000s (Junod, Khalil, Weber & Wolf, 2013). In recent years, there has been a sort of museum ‘*islamania*’ (Rieffel, 2011). More and more cultural institutions are investing in Islamic art worldwide (Ådahl & Ahlund, 2000). In France alone, 37 museums hold objects so categorised (Boyer, 2006).

Despite this marked trend, in France no research on Islamic art has been done to date in the fields of political science or religious studies. Looking abroad, the topic remains barely addressed (Flood, 2012; Frank, Dornhof & Arigita, 2013). However, according to the historian Pierre Rosanvallon, culture is used by the French state ‘to give face to [i.e. to picture] the nation’ (Poirrier, 2017; Rosanvallon, 1990, p. 403). Museums, in particular, are exploited as a political tool to build national identities (Anderson, 1983; Levitt, 2015). Furthermore, as Benoît de L’Estoile (2010) explains, the exhibition of otherness is involved in the creation of the national identity because exhibiting otherness is essential to creating a self-image. Therefore, museums are a key tool to study the political and social spheres. By extension, by looking at museums in France that display Islamic collections, we can have a better understanding of the French nation-state and its relationship to Muslim otherness.

Collect and collections

Intrigued by this premise, I conducted fieldwork that covered major French museums hosting Islamic art collections.¹ From 2013 to 2019, I documented, analysed and interpreted the presence (or the absence) of Islam, as well as the meaning given to it (i.e. religious, cultural, political, etc.), in French cultural institutions, exploring them in three ways. First, I looked at the archives (paper and online) to reconstruct the histories of representation. Then, I interviewed the principal actors involved who worked for them. From security to cultural and administrative staff, I did not neglect any institutional role. Finally, I visited the museums several times, alone, in pairs, or in group visits.

Among the many French institutions holding Islamic collections, I selected two main case studies: the Louvre museum and the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) (The Arab World Institute). Those institutions, both located in Paris, are in fact simultaneously exceptional and typical. Given their attendance, legal status, artistic content, success, etc., each of these institutions is unique, although their way of showing Islam can be found in other French museums. As my analysis in this chapter shows, the Louvre and the IMA are in fact representative of two major trends of framing Islam in museums and their underlying issues.

The Louvre is currently the most visited museum in the world and the national museum *par excellence*.² It has held Islamic art collections since 1893 and has recently opened a brand-new department of 5,000 m² dedicated to it. Inaugurated in 2012, that new department was initiated by the former President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The aim of the French government was to show ‘the bright face of Islam’ (<https://www.louvre.fr/le-nouveau-departement-des-arts-de-l-islam>) to promote dialogue and peace in the post-2001 socio-political context. In the same way, Saudi prince Alwaleed bin Talal, whose foundation spent over 17 million euros on the project (the greatest donation ever made by a private sponsor to the Louvre) wanted to present ‘true Islam to the world’ through the Louvre’s new department (<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-19672951>).³ The Islamic Art department seems, then, to have become a diplomatic and economic asset for these politicians, not just an artistic one. More broadly, French museums’ *islamania* can also be interpreted as a political trend in addition to being an artistic phenomenon. However, this is mostly not how it is seen by cultural professionals, especially at the Louvre. In fact, the project of the new department was put under the supervision of Islamic art expert Sophie Makariou, whose intention from the beginning was to avoid any connections between Islamic art and contemporary Muslims, which she did through public statements and scenography choices but without great success. Right after the inauguration, she declared: ‘We cannot judge a work of the tenth century through the prism of current events. It would be really unfair’ (Iqbal, 2012). Furthermore, she chose the name *Département des Arts de l’Islam*, which in English translates as ‘Arts of Islam Department’ (AID). It is also no accident that the I in Islam is in upper case. In fact, in French, this typography refers to Islam as a political and cultural entity, whereas islam with a lower case means religion. This effort to marginalise religion is not limited to this detail – one can notice it in the AID exhibition, as I will discuss. Indeed, it is also relevant to note that the term ‘arts’ is used in plural to signify that Islamic art is a very complex artistic genre. Despite all these efforts, public expectations and the media coverage at that time maintained the connection between Islamic art and contemporary Muslims (Junod et al., 2013), as in the BBC coverage of the AID inauguration which made link between Louvre collection, 9/11 and French debate on the Muslim veil (Iqbal, 2012).

Like the Louvre, the IMA holds an exceptional place in the cultural landscape of Paris. Created in the 1970s, right after the Middle Eastern crisis (the Six-Day war and the oil crisis provoked by the OAPEC embargo) by the will of the President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (1974–1981), the IMA is considered an

institution *sui generis*. It is the only cultural organisation co-directed by a partnership between France and the 22 countries of the Arab League. It was built to promote the 'knowledge of the Arab world, to conduct in-depth research on its language, its cultural and spiritual values, as well as to promote exchanges and cooperation, particularly in the fields of science and technology between France and the Arab world, thereby contributing to the development of relations between it and Europe' (IMA, 1981, p. 3). Given its mission, the IMA is governed by a staff of ambassadors and politicians, together with curators and managers.

While on the one hand unique, the Louvre and the IMA can also be seen in some ways as typical organisations. More precisely, we can speak about them as two ideal-types of museological framing of Islam in France. In fact, after looking at a large sample of institutions,⁴ from the mid-nineteenth century World's Fair to contemporary museums exhibits, I maintain that Islam is caught between two logics, two parallel and competing 'exhibitionary regimes' (Flood, 2007),⁵ one or other or both of which can be detected in all French cultural institutions that address Islam. On the one hand, Islam is staged through the masterpieces of Muslim civilisation, understood as a past and distant political and cultural entity but only marginally as a religious reality. The Louvre embodies this first model. On the other hand, in museums like the IMA, a wide range of facets of Islam are shown, especially the religious one. The IMA exhibits both historical and contemporary Islam, objects from the Arabian Peninsula as well as testimonies from the French Muslims. From exhibitions about hip hop in Muslim culture to veiled comedians, Islam is made a 'cool' religion and Muslims a 'cool' community.⁶ This presents an alternative way to showcase otherness that merits a more in-depth analysis.

Islamic Mona Lisa versus pop islam: two ways to showcase otherness

In this section, I describe the main characteristics of the two cases studied, giving details about what a visitor might see while walking through the museums. With more than 3,000 works of art shown in the Islamic department of the Louvre and no less than 1,000 at the IMA, this analysis is limited to three types of objects: 1) large objects, 2) pedagogical tools (i.e. maps, panels, etc.), 3) objects directly related to Islam.⁷ Here, I discuss those objects that, in my opinion, are especially prominently displayed and, thus, most likely to be noticed by museum visitors.

The arts of Islam at the Louvre: a peaceful, bright and beautiful Other that became French

'I'm looking for the *Département des Arts de l'Islam*, can you tell me where I have to go?', I asked the young woman at the information point situated in the Napoleon hall just at the entrance to the Louvre museum. She turned back to a huge lion statue on a billboard behind her and answered: 'Follow the lion'.

Like the other nine departments, the Islamic art collection is represented by one of its flagship art works. In this case, the masterpiece chosen by the Louvre is a

massive bronze statue in the shape of a lion with mouth wide open called the *Lion of Monzòn* founded in Monzòn de Campos, in Palencia, a province in north central Spain, in a palace which was recaptured by Christians in the eleventh century from Islamic forces. It probably served as a waterspout or as a water vessel for both Muslims and Christians.

Enlightened Islam

'It's an object that was chosen for the poster of the department because it has a lot of presence', Sophie Makariou explained to me about this artwork, but it is also well-known among the experts due to its rarity and history. Indeed, this piece is 'one of the few preserved metal works of the entire Islamic West', as stated on the museum's website.⁸ The 'Western Islamic' formula indicates the moments of strong Muslim presence in the West. In this case, it refers to the Muslim occupation in medieval Spain, because the lion dates from the seventh and eighth centuries and was found in the province of Palencia, which the Umayyad dynasty occupied at the time. It was likely used as a fountain mouth in a Muslim palace and later passed into Christian hands to be used in a monastery in the region. A transformation of use that would testify to the peaceful '*convivencia*' (i.e. coexistence) between Islam and the West during the period of Al-Andalus (711–1492). It is in any case, the multiplicity of uses that the museum's team emphasises about the *Lion of Monzòn*. So, despite the efforts made by Sophie Makariou to keep the exhibition apolitical, by emphasising the Europe-Islam relation, she renders it nonetheless political.

Elena Arigita (2013) talks about the 'paradigm of Cordoba' (from the name of the capital of Al-Andalus) to describe the contemporary use of this period of Islamic history. She explains that after the attacks of 11 September, 2001, Al-Andalus is used as a 'counter-narrative' to react to the growing association of Islam with violence in public discourse. Arigita argues that in a context where Islamophobia has grown to international proportions, the approach becomes one of finding a historical precedent that shows the possibility of integrating Muslim populations into Western democracies. This is what the AID with the Lion of Monzòn attempts to do. The problem of this approach, she warns, is that it is also a historical construction. As she points out, the irenic character of Al-Andalus, its ideal of tolerance and dialogue, is an idea that has been stretched by historians. For this reason, she suggests caution in the exploitation of the 'paradigm of Cordoba'. She argues that its use is likely to become 'counterproductive' (Flood, 2007, p. 44) precisely because it refers to the past – to the Middle Ages, which is seen nostalgically as an idealised bygone 'golden age' (Lowney, 2006; Menocal, 2002). By selecting only some of the biographical elements of the Lion of Monzòn, the AID contributes to the idealised construction of a refined and tolerant Islam.

The visitor might confuse this idealised Islam with a more complex and multifaceted reality of contemporary Islam. This could create a disappointing anachronism. Contemporary Islam ends up looking inadequate by comparison with the fictive tolerant one from the past. It acts as a distorted ideal, impossible for today's Muslims to live up to.

The lion poster leads the visitor to the entrance of the AID. The public enters in the AID through a long dark tunnel. The light coming from the floor is barely sufficient to illuminate the quote inscribed on the left black grey wall: 'François Hollande President of the Republic inaugurated the new spaces of the Arts of Islam on September 18th 2012'. Located just at the entrance to the AID, at eye level, in golden bold letters, this reference shows the links between the Louvre and the state, the museum and the government. This strong relationship began, as mentioned above, immediately after 2001, when Chirac, President at the time, asked the Louvre to build the new department. This is unique to the Louvre, which, being a national museum and one of the most visited in the world, has the power to be a voice that the government tries to exploit to drive national discourse. The museum becomes a vehicle to define an idealised Islam and to promote a dialogue between France and Muslims.

As they walk through the tunnel, visitors gradually see more clearly the department whose first-floor bathes in natural light that penetrates the golden fishnet roof designed by the French architect Rudy Ricciotti. Indeed, this brightly lit first level of the AID contrasts with the penumbra of the path that precedes it. When leaving the tunnel, visitors are dazzled, awed by the amount of light.

The museum historian Carol Duncan argues that the construction of the first public museums in the eighteenth century helped to replace religion with the state, and religious ideals with Enlightenment values, and thus to transform the faithful into citizens (Duncan, 1995). To do this, the museums of the time were inspired by places of worship (churches, temples, etc.). According to Duncan, museums took over the architectural codes (e.g. facades, porticoes, entrance halls, tunnels, galleries), aesthetics (lights, artistic elements, etc.) and conduct (the silence, the meditation, the decency) that were characteristic of religious buildings. Consequently, visitors' circulation through the museum is comparable to the circumambulation of a worshipper in a place of worship. The aesthetic experience resembles a religious experience. In both cases, the presence – as well as the absence – of light plays an important role.

Analysing the path leading to the AID from Duncan's perspective, we can argue that the museum's choices of illumination and internal architecture give to the Louvre's Islamic collection an almost sacred character. The same is true, as we will see, for the lighting of certain objects. Art, the aesthetic value of the collection, is sacralised here. In 2012, Henri Loyrette, former president of the museum, emphasised the enlarged size of the new galleries: 'Marginalized for too long, the Arts of Islam, which were presented in a simple section of the Department of Oriental Antiquities, did not have proper rooms to do justice to one of the largest collections of this type in the world' (Monier-Vinard, 2012). The quality and the uniqueness of the Louvre's Islamic collection, publicised by the museum, recognised by the experts and appreciated by the press, relies especially on its vastness. With origins spanning from Spain to China, the artworks date from the seventh to the nineteenth century. There are few museums that can boast such variety in terms of periods, styles and genres.

Chronological boundaries: the acceptable limits to access French heritage

As the first museum panel at the entrance of the AID shows, the date chosen to begin the exhibition is 632, the death of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. Yet the date is not treated as a religious reference but as a historical landmark. The expedition of Napoleon in Egypt, in 1798, ends the exhibition. The choice to reference a specific event in French history is unique. Other museums of Islamic art stop more vaguely somewhere in the nineteenth century, at the beginning of colonialism. It is for instance the case at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. Here, the direct reference to Napoleon seems more related to the history of the Louvre than to Islamic art in general. In this respect, we already noticed that the entrance is named after a French general. The chronological limit ‘frenchifies’ the Islamic collection, making it more familiar to the visiting public, especially those educated in France. Also, by choosing 1798 as *terminus post quem*, the AID does not show any recent Islamic works of art. This ‘contemporary denial’ (Shatanawi, 2012) can be explained by the fact that the Louvre is mainly a history museum, which seldom exhibits contemporary artefacts.

This chosen end date should have allowed the thorny question of colonial looting to be raised. Napoleon’s expedition brought back a vast number of objects now displayed in the museum, including those exhibited in the AID. However, this topic has not yet been faced. With high profile museums in other countries (e.g. the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, and in the United States, the Contemporary Art Museum in Los Angeles and Queens museum in New York; see also Shatanawi, this volume), as well as the international organisations UNESCO and ICOM⁹ starting to address the complex issues of legitimate ownership and restitution, the Louvre and French museums in general still seem out of touch and hesitant to get involved in the topic of art decolonisation process. This is despite efforts by organisations such as Decolonize Art (*Décoloniser les Arts*) and the restitution policies recently initiated by President Emmanuel Macron. In 2018, Macron’s government appointed French historian Bénédicte Savoy and Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr to examine the conditions under which African heritage exhibited in France can be repatriated in their countries of origin. The report Sarr/Savoy (<https://bj.ambafrance.org/Telecharger-l-integralite-du-Rapport-Sarr-Savoy-sur-la-restitution-du>) recommends a 5-year restitution plan that the government has not yet initiated, but has already been rejected by some museums, including the Louvre (Price, 2020).

Alexandre Kazerouni, political scientist specialised in the study of the museums of the Gulf, coined the term ‘eclipse effect’ (*effet d’éclipse*) (Kazerouni, 2017, p. 14) to refer to something which is voluntarily ignored or marginalised in museums. In contrast, he adopts the word ‘overthought’ (*surpensé*) to describe something excessively highlighted (2017, p. 65) in them. If religion is the major eclipsed topic, along with colonial history and the present, what are then the ‘overthought’ themes?

Holy beauty

By taking the stairs leading from the first floor, full of artefacts dating from the Islamic Golden Age (8th–13th century), to the underground second level, the visitor discovers a vast set of copies of the Qur'an as well as several objects used as tools for the illumination of these religious manuscripts. In this transitional section, aesthetics is central. Indeed, the religious content of the Qur'anic texts is never mentioned. It is only a question of artistic quality. In fact, the section title 'Art of the book' refers to the work of the illuminators and the calligraphers. The captions placed beneath the exhibited Qur'anic manuscripts emphasise only their decor and style, while the religious meaning of these holy books is not mentioned. The same happens in the carpets section, placed just behind the manuscripts. Ultimately, Islam as religion is never directly addressed, not even in the video devoted to 'Religions in the Islamic civilisation' placed at the end of the circuit, itself a problematic positioning given the very large size of the AID which usually takes more than 2 hours to visit. The visitor is by this stage likely to be too tired to pay attention to the video explanations and identify the rare religious references, which thus end up eclipsed.

In contrast, as the Qur'an and carpets sections show, art is one of the main 'over-thought' topics of the AID. Several sections of the collection are devoted to 'masterpieces of Islamic art'. These include, for instance, the Lion of Monzòn, whose artistic value has been described more closely above. The Lion also embodies the commonalities between East and West, which is the other important theme of the collection. More precisely, it is the idea of the 'bridge between civilisations', Islamic and French ones which is underlined in this case.¹⁰ In fact, the Louvre's storyline particularly insists on the influence of the Graeco-Roman art and European late antiquity on Islamic art, which is posterior to them but never showcased as such in the exhibition. Yet, instead of reciprocal links, these connections are represented as unidirectional. More precisely, they end up highlighting Western Art as superior to Islamic art, and by extension Eastern Art, which ends up being considered derivative. Presented as a 'familial relationship', so to speak, the relation between East and West becomes unbalanced in favour of the latter. There is no mention, anywhere in the gallery, of Islamic Art influencing Western artists, even though many examples could be made (Rieffel, 2011).

However, by placing Islamic art in a continuum with Graeco-Roman art and European late antiquity, it finally wins a place in the universal art history, which the Louvre claims to represent and preserve. In this perspective, the AID collection is also presented as part of French heritage. Neutralised of their religious nature and associated with a westernised ethnocentric definition of universal art, the Louvre's Islamic objects are thus integrated into national heritage. Indeed, the curators talk about the 'Mona Lisa of Islam' or 'Turkish Versailles' to describe some of the flagship objects of the Department of Islamic Arts, thus reconfiguring their biographies to award them French nationality. One of the most interesting examples in this respect is a basin called '*Baptistère de Saint-Louis*' (Figure 6.1) that I discuss in the following section.

Figure 6.1 'The Baptistry of St. Louis', around 1320–1340, Syria © R. Ricciotti - M. Bellini - R. Pierard / Musée du Louvre. Photograph by Diletta Guidi.

Manipulating creativity to assimilate otherness

Considered one of Mamluk masterpieces of the AID, this Syrian basin dates around 1320–1340. As Sophie Makariou (2011) explains: 'the sponsor of the object remains enigmatic'. What is known is that from the seventeenth century onwards, it was used for baptising children of the French royal family, including Louis XIII, hence the choice to call it 'Baptismal font of St. Louis'. However, this attribution seems to be erroneous because Louis IX, known as Saint-Louis, was born in 1214 and died in 1270, which is long before the creation of the basin. The AID does not mention this mistake. The coat of arms on its interior contains an inscription: 'France, 1821', and it is this 'French identity' that is instead publicised.

Far from being trivial, the naming (Hauser, 2012, p. 210)¹¹ signals then the museum's desire to insist on the basin's use by French Christian monarchy rather than on its Mamluk origins. The Islamic biography disappears in favour of its later redefinition; the work is frenchified in a process of one civilisation gaining supremacy over another.

The framing process (Goffman, 1974) is also worthy of interest. The baptistry is displayed alone, in its own showcase, treated as a masterpiece. Raised by a pedestal, it benefits from a low-angle illumination that gives it more value. The distance between the visitor and the work, as well as the lighting, generates what Avinoam Shalem calls an 'auratic zone' (Shalem, 2013, p. 109), according to the piece an aura, an exceptionality (see also Benjamin, 1991 [1936]). The President of the Republic François Hollande, in his inaugural speech of the AID in 2012, called it an 'exceptional work'. Indeed, the baptistry undergoes one last manipulation, political this time. François Hollande mentioned it as a proof to illustrate the points in common between Islam and France. In fact, he said: 'Revelation! So,

monarchs of divine right bathed in Islamic art works. We did not know that. It reminds us of sometimes-common origins'.¹² The basin is therefore invested with a diplomatic meaning, transcending mere artistic value to become a symbol of the possibility (the term 'sometimes' is remarkable in this respect) of a dialogue between two civilisations.

The treatment of 'The Baptistry of St. Louis' is an example of how the museum storyline can alter the nature of an object and modify how visitors understand it. In this case, the Mamluk basin is no longer seen as an Islamic work of art but instead becomes for the audience a French Catholic royal masterpiece, part of the national heritage preserved in the most important museum of France. To justify the exclusion of Muslim religion, the AID's team speaks about the department's policy as a testimony of the '*laïcité à la française*' (i.e. French secularism) (Guidi, 2019), especially because the Louvre is a public institution. The mention of the Catholic religion nevertheless seems to be acceptable unlike the Muslim one. This challenges the claim about adherence to the idea of *laïcité* and at the same time positions the Muslim faith in France as all the more problematic.

To deal with this problem, the Louvre shows a peaceful, refined, barely religious, and westernised image of Islam. The representation with which the visitor comes out of the museum fits *volens nolens* with the one desired by the state right after 2001. Despite Sophie Makariou's wish to separate art from current events, the storyline that she herself created ended up offering an image of Islam resembling the one desired by the government at the time and since then. But even if the political goal was to counter the social tensions generated by the terrorist attacks and their representation, the final result produces a sense of nostalgia for what Islam used to be (or, better, for what the AID's displays suggests Muslim civilisation used to be in the past) and what Islam no longer seems to be capable of being today. Thus, by assimilating the other through art, the Louvre places them at distance.

The Institut du Monde Arabe: an alive, modern and similar neighbour

The second type of staging of Islam in France is that of the IMA. In direct contrast with the Louvre, the IMA displays a multiplicity of facets of Islam – especially the contemporary and religious ones avoided by the Louvre's AID.

Walking with the others

To access the museum's permanent collection the visitor must cross an audiovisual installation – a contemporary work of the Swiss artist Anna Katharina Scheidegger, created for the reopening of the IMA Museum in 2012. Entitled *The Arab World in Motion*, this installation consists of several screens featuring extracts from daily life filmed in the Maghreb and the Middle East.¹³ Women, men and children talk to each other, buy bread at the market, pray at the mosque, and so on. The screens are in turn placed in a room with walls lined with mirrors. The visitor walks through

the room, juxtaposed with the projected scenes. They see their own reflection mirroring the daily experience of those who are only geographically distant. By this method of *mise en abyme*, the visitor is positioned not just as a spectator but as an active participant who may actually learn from the exhibition and not just admire it. Pedagogy thus seems to take precedence over aesthetics.

This space, like others in the museum, is a multisensory area, where the visitor is 'immersed' in the collection, which they discover 'by eye and ear' (Nerou, 2012). Here, they experience the Arab world and are integrated – symbolically and physically – in its movement. Contrary to the stereotypes that make the Arab world resemble a monolithic block frozen in time and tradition, through this work, that world becomes a living entity, contemporary and dynamic. The distance between the visitor, in the room, and the Arab world, on the screen, is reduced.

Unlike the Louvre, which is organised chronologically, the IMA's museum has six types of 'atmospheres', as museum designer Roberto Ostinelli named them (Foissy, Delpont & Chakour, 2014), each relating to a theme: poetic, spiritual, scientific, urban, intimate and festive. For each of these sequences, the IMA exhibits objects from the past and the present, artefacts from East and West; civilisations, cultures, traditions, religions and spiritualities are all merged within the same showcase. The section dedicated to 'sacred books' is particularly representative of this.

Hosting the sacred

The 'sacred books' section consists of four showcases, placed sequentially. The visitor begins with the first case, containing a copy of the Jewish Torah, then on to the second, where a Catholic Gospel is exhibited. The third displays a copy of the Qur'an, a gift from the famous Khalili family (renowned for its large and precious art collection) to the Presidency of the French Republic, who then offered it to the IMA. This donation shows the importance of the IMA as a place of culture in the eyes of the French State. In recent years, this importance has increased still further. French heads of state and politicians, previously frequent attendees of the Louvre, begin to favour the IMA. The fact that right after the shooting at the Charlie Hebdo magazine, that took place in January 2015, President Hollande chose to make his very first public speech in the name of the government at the IMA's entrance is symptomatic in this respect.¹⁴ In the same way, it is remarkable that the prime minister at the time, Manuel Valls, met with the main French representatives of different religions at the IMA, just in front of the 'sacred books' section.¹⁵ Like the Louvre, the IMA is ultimately used as a policy tool, to address international and domestic issues, reconnecting with the diplomatic role imagined by its designers in the 1970s.

These books, which the three monotheist religions consider sacred, are accompanied by long captions explaining the content to the visitor. Nothing is said about the aesthetic quality of these works, only their historical and theological significance matters. The fourth and last showcase displays a book of watercolour paintings on paper. It is a work entitled *Zikr* ('invocation of God') made by the Lebanese-American poet Etel Adnan in 1978. The caption below it reads: 'This

artist's book is a contemporary invocation of the ancestral sacrality which founds the three religions of the Book'. The work synthesises the common origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It desecrates and then re-sacralises the three monotheist religions together. Again, meaning (i.e. an explicit message about religious and historical connections) takes precedence over aesthetic features.

According to Mirjam Shatanawi, when curators place Muslim objects next to Christian artefacts they create a *continuum*, which builds a link that makes Islam more accessible to the public, thus encouraging visitors towards positive analogies (Shatanawi, 2012, p. 184). This is likely the case here too. The exhibition framework does not just equalise the three religions through identical showcases, it places them in visual continuity suggesting a progression from Judaism to Islam, with Christianity as an intermediate step. Islam is the climax, with an extended set of windows entirely dedicated to it just after these showcases. Indeed, the section that follows exhibits several prayer carpets, with captions detailing their ritualistic use. As with the Qur'an mentioned above or with other objects (e.g. a set of rosaries) and installations (e.g. a set of architectural buildings reproductions composed of a temple, a church and a mosque), their significance as religious objects is central, becoming even 'overthought'.

Unveil the connections

The visitor finds again the museological framing evoked above in one of the very last showcases, the one dedicated to the veil (Figure 6.2). Veiling is presented as not concerning Arab or Muslim women only, but as a phenomenon involving tradition, religion and sex gender, as suggested by the title 'The tradition of the veil for men and women'.

The variety of veiling is also illustrated by the objects inside the window, where a *mahatma marchoucha*, a facial veil formerly used by Tunisian brides, and a *tagelmust*, a Tuareg veil, are placed side by side. It is also interesting to see that the *tagelmust*, unlike the Tunisian veil, is a recent example. In fact, the caption signals that it was draped in 2012 by the Tuareg Iswhad and that it was destined for the Touareg market, which shows that this traditional dress is still relevant, while the use of *mahatma marchoucha* is rare among women in Tunisia. The veil is therefore neither primarily female, nor exclusively Arab. The origins of the veil are also plural, as shown by the presence of a veiled female statuette of the Hellenistic period inside the same box. 'The veil envelops women from ancient times, both in civilisations around the Mediterranean and in the East, as evidenced by this representation [Figure 6.2, bottom centre] of a woman from the Greek high society; only poor women were not veiled. The veil is not only a religious sign or a symbol of tribal affiliation, but also a social marker, well beyond the borders of the Arab world', as mentioned on the display sheet. The fact that the objects are arranged equidistantly in the showcase, in a circular fashion, with no culture or religion visually overriding the other is especially meaningful. What Stefan Weber (2013) calls 'crosscultural connections' are central at the IMA; similarities between diverse civilisations come before differences between them. The interreligious and intercultural displays, which reflect the

Figure 6.2 Showcase of 'veiling and unveiling'. Photograph by Diletta Guidi. Courtesy of the Institut du Monde Arabe.

IMA's co-direction between France and the Arab League, appear then as the main theme of the museum. It is also noticeable that all that can make the Other (i.e. the Muslim or the Arab, these terms tend to be used interchangeably at the IMA, the first category usually used to subsume the latter) radical or dangerous is not addressed. It is, in other words, 'eclipsed' (Kazerouni 2017, p. 14). Topics such as violence, conflicts and war, as well as sensitive themes like human rights (i.e. freedom of speech, belief, etc.) are absent from the exhibition. This is less the case at the Louvre. Here, the first showcase of the collection is entirely devoted to aniconism in Islamic art, thus deploying a deconstructive perspective in order to show that Islamic art cannot be reduced to being only ornamental and instead to present it as also figurative, and thus as like many other forms of Art.¹⁶ Moreover, although it does not foreground such concerns, the AID also mentions conflicts that took place in ancient history of Muslim dynasties (e.g. Mughal era, Ottoman time). Unlike the Louvre, the IMA chooses not to address these topics, emphasising

instead what brings Arabs and non-Arabs/Muslim and non-Muslims together. So, the visitor comes out of the IMA with an image of 'the Other' as relatively familiar and remarkably pleasant. The museological framing of Islam here, then, appeals to both non-Arab/non-Muslim and Arab/Muslim visitors, by providing each audience with a positive image of the Other and of oneself.

Islam as a fashionable event

The visitor's cultural 'journey' does not end with the museum. Indeed, at least once a year, the IMA hosts a big temporary exhibition. By listing those exhibitions, I noticed that Islam as a religion is being increasingly frequently addressed. Thus, the public has been offered topics including pilgrimage to Mecca, the prayer at the mosque, and veiling in exhibitions like *Hajj. Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Institut du Monde Arabe, 2014).¹⁷ Inspired by a show created a few years before by the British Museum (2012),¹⁸ the IMA presented one of the most important Muslim rituals. Mixing old Islamic art masterpieces with contemporary creations, archaeological artefacts with recent testimonies of *hajjis* (Muslims who made the pilgrimage to Mecca), the museum sought to familiarise French audiences with Islam. Especially since the pilgrims whose testimonies were shown mostly were from France, this made them appear closer to the visitors who attend the museum.

In the last few years, the IMA has seen increased attendance on account of these exhibitions.¹⁹ Despite Islam's current widespread negative reputation, the IMA manages to make the religion fashionable. Indeed, associating Muslims with hip hop music and street art (e.g. tags, graffiti), as in the exhibition *Hip Hop: from the Bronx to the Arab streets* (Institut du Monde Arabe, 2015)²⁰ it even makes Islam cool! Moreover, hosting these kinds of events as well as inviting Islamic feminists, Muslim artists and business leaders to speak up during the Institut's numerous symposia help to produce the image of a free Islam, which is emancipated and modern, successful and open-minded. This image of Islam also seems to be attractive to politicians. As noted above, if yesterday the government favoured the Louvre, today the IMA is becoming the privileged museum of the French state, in particular when it comes to discussing contemporary questions related to Islam, dealing with the local Muslim community or considering diplomatic and economic partnerships with the Middle East countries. It is becoming the default choice for public announcements, political gatherings and other diplomatic events. The IMA, it seems, has come to be the institution more in line with the current policies of the French government. It is on these policies that the last part of this chapter focuses.

Conclusion

This chapter shows that in France today, there are two major models of representing Islam in public museums. The first one, embodied by the Louvre, can be called the 'secular type' because of its particular treatment of otherness, especially religious. Indeed, in the Louvre's AID, Islamic art is portrayed as the result of a political and cultural – and only marginally religious – system influenced by Western Art.

The Louvre ‘frenchifies’ Islam, erasing its potentially problematic particularities, and moulding it to fit neatly within an idealised concept of the nation. The storyline promotes a unified and equalitarian – but nonetheless ethnocentric – definition of the ideal nation as one that ensures social peace. In this perspective, religion is understood as the ultimate difference and is thus regarded as a threat to the common good. This has especial traction given that in France memory of the Religious Wars (sixteenth century) is still vivid, and the *laïcité* (i.e. ‘secularity’, the French principle of separation between of church and state) is itself considered a national value (Baubérot, 2014). Art, unlike religion, is seen as a harmless ‘proof of humanity’ common to all civilisations (Winegar, 2008), and, as such, as unifying. Thus, throughout the Louvre exhibition circuit, the aesthetic takes precedence, and topics such as religion or colonisation, or contemporary issues, are barely addressed. The Louvre presents the masterpieces of Islamic art; it shows a refined and peaceful Other, a sort of Islam *à la française*. Muslim otherness is assimilated – it is presented as capable of being integrated into French society.

The second model of framing Islam in French museums can be found at the IMA. Unlike the Louvre’s assimilationist type, the IMA offers a more ‘intercultural’ treatment of otherness (both Arab and Muslim), based on the expression of differences to promote common living. Cultural and political, as well as religious, particularities are valorised. However, this is never a valuation *per sé*. The differences are positioned in a *continuum* – in a common logic – to identify what is similar between them. Islam as a religion is the continuation of Christianity, which is itself the extension of Judaism, and so on. This interreligious approach is also intercultural. Indeed, Islam as a culture is placed under the ‘Arab world’ label, inserted in a network, connected with old and distant traditions and civilisations (Mesopotamian, Graeco-roman, etc.) as well as with contemporary and close groups and communities (Berber, French Muslims, etc.). Even if this is not ethnocentric, the IMA tends to present an idealistic and quite stereotyped definition of otherness, especially of Muslimness. Islam is made friendly and nothing that might jeopardise social peace is allowed. The ideal Muslim should have a moderate religious practice, fight only for just causes (in favour of feminism, against racism, etc.) and ideally be successful in French society (start-upper, intellectual, renowned artist, etc.).

At first glance, these two exhibitionary regimes appear as parallel and in competition, suggesting that the French state oscillates between being conservative (i.e. attached to its own national unity and tradition) or liberal (i.e. open to recognise the pluralism of individuals beliefs and lifestyles). However, a deeper look reveals more nuance. My research on historical representations of Islam, starting from the first World Art Fair in the mid-nineteenth century (Bancel, Blanchard, Boëtsch, Deroo & Lemaire, 2004) and up to current exhibitions, concluded that the Louvre type framing remained unchallenged until the 1970s when the IMA’s type appeared and slowly started to compete, recently becoming the prevalent one. In response, the Louvre began to adopt a new cultural policy. Yannick Lintz, the AID’s current director, has been more willing to discuss issues like colonialism, integrating topics like religion and hosting contemporary art events (Göle & Lintz, 2018).

Thus, from a political point of view, the evolution of both models confirms, as Sharon Macdonald (2003) argues that rather than being static, many – and especially national – museums adapt to wider nation-state developments. It is notable that the Louvre's assimilationist model was prevalent in the 1900s, just when the idea of the nation-state was in the making, when dominating the Other was crucial to build a national identity (de L'Estoile, 2010). In the same way, the fact that the IMA's intercultural model has spread since the very end of the twentieth century, prevailing in today's post-national and global context (Badie & Smouts, 1992; Gauthier, 2019), shows that the state develops cultural policies to address contemporary needs (Levitt, 2015; Proesler, 1995).

For now, IMA's liberal model seems to be the preferred one, showing a willingness of the French state to be more open to the expression of its nation's plurality with respect to Islam, one of its largest religious minorities. This preference suggests awareness by the State on the issue of islamophobia in France (Hajjat & Mohammed, 2013) and the need to deal with it by proposing alternative narratives. Furthermore, this model could favour diplomatic relations between France and other countries, especially Arab ones. Notable here are the cultural and economic partnerships with the Gulf countries, such as the recently opened Louvre Abu Dhabi museum, generating great economic returns for French national museums (des Cars, 2013; Kazerouni, 2017). After the lease of the Louvre's label, the IMA has been attracting the interest of Middle East investors, who recently met there to discuss economic cooperation and cultural diplomacy.²¹

How these various changes will be reflected in France's museums in the future remains to be seen. There are also influential counter-movements, especially the rise of populism (Norris & Inglehart, 2018) with its rejection of policies of diversity (Kaya, 2019). What is clear is that by continuing to observe the staging of Islamic art, it will be possible to contribute to a better understanding of Islam in French cultural policies (Frank, Dornhof & Arigita, 2013) and, more broadly, will enhance understanding of the representation of Muslims in Europe.

Notes

- 1 This chapter summarizes the main results of my research on Islamic museums in France. Guidi (2019), *L'islam des musées: sociohistoire de l'islam dans les politiques culturelles françaises. Les cas du Louvre et de l'Institut du monde arabe* [Islam at the Museum: sociohistory of the (re)presentation of Islam in French cultural policies. The cases of the Louvre and the Institut du Monde Arabe] (Unpublished PhD thesis). University of Fribourg and École Pratique des Hautes Études, Switzerland and France. I want to thank Gora Conley for his help with the English translation.
- 2 See the latest annual report published by the Louvre about the museum attendance: <https://presse.louvre.fr/8-1-million-visitors-to-the-louvre-in-2017/>
- 3 The total cost of building the Department of Islamic Arts is 98.5 million euros. Of this sum, 31 million was paid by the French State, 9 million by foreign countries (Morocco, Oman, Kuwait and Azerbaijan) and 30 million by private patrons in France or abroad. Finally, the Louvre participated with an amount of 11.5 million euros.

- 4 In addition to the Louvre and the IMA, the sample included the Institut des Cultures d'Islam, the Cité de l'Immigration, the Musée du Quai Branly, the MuCEM in Marseille and the Louvre Abu Dhabi.
- 5 The term 'exhibitionary regime' to define Islamic art is coined by Finbarr Barry Flood, inspired by Tony Bennett's concept of 'exhibitionary complex', himself influenced by Michel Foucault's work on prisons. Bennett considers museums as 'exhibitionary complex' ruled by the government to exercise control over the citizens. See Bennett (1988).
- 6 Institut du monde arabe. (2015, April 28–July 26). *Hip Hop: du Bronx aux rues arabes*. Paris; Institut du monde arabe. (2020, January 24–26). *IMA Comedy Club*. Paris.
- 7 This selection is based on the results of an inquiry conducted by the Louvre on the AID's visitors (Louvre, 2014).
- 8 Louvre museum. Lion de Monzòn [display sheet]. Retrieved from http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=33644
- 9 'UNESCO and Issues of Colonization and Decolonization', University of Dakar, 5–6 October 2009; 'Decolonization and Restitution: Moving Towards a More Holistic Perspective and Relational Approach', ICOM Kyoto conference 2019.
- 10 On the bridges of understanding narrative in Islamic art exhibitions in the West, see Winegar (2008).
- 11 For Hauser, to name an object is to confer on it a magical power, a religiosity, by extension the process of appointment is a magical, religious act too.
- 12 Quote from the statement mentioned *supra*: <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/127001659.html>
- 13 IMA. (2013). Préambule de l'Institut du monde arabe à Paris [Preamble of the Institut du Monde arabe in Paris]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGQGKqXNWNE>
- 14 IMA. (2015). Déclaration de M. François Hollande, Président de la République, sur les liens unissant la France avec les pays arabes, à Paris le 15 janvier 2015 [Statement by Mr. François Hollande, President of the Republic, on the links between France and the Arab countries, Paris, 15 January 2015]. Retrieved from <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/193553-declaration-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique-sur-les>
- 15 See the IMA's website: <http://www.imarabe.org/manuel-valls-assiste-une-reception-oecumenique>
- 16 On this matter see for instance Grabar (2003).
- 17 Institut du monde arabe, *Hajj. Le pèlerinage à la Mecque*. Paris (2014 April 23–August 10). On a similar topic, see also *A secret art. Talismanic scripture in West Africa* (2013 February 14–July 28); *The Dome of the Rock* (2013 March 25–June 2); *Treasures of Islam in Africa. From Timbuktu to Zanzibar* (2017 April 14–July 30).
- 18 British Museum (2012, January 26–April 15). *Hajj. Journey to the heart of Islam*. London.
- 19 To access the activity reports of the IMA (2012–) see <https://www.imarabe.org/en/missions-functioning/business-report>
- 20 Institut du Monde Arabe. (2015, April 28–July 26). *Hip Hop: du Bronx aux rues arabes*. Paris.
- 21 Institut du monde arabe (Quarterly meetings). Paris. *Rencontres économiques du monde arabe* [Economic meetings of the Arab world]. <https://www.imarabe.org/fr/activites/rencontres-debats/rencontres-economiques-du-monde-arabe>

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