

# The Medieval History Journal

<http://mhj.sagepub.com/>

---

## Objects, Frames, Practices: A Postscript on Agency and Braided Histories of Art

Monica Juneja

*The Medieval History Journal* 2012 15: 415

DOI: 10.1177/097194581201500208

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mhj.sagepub.com/content/15/2/415>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *The Medieval History Journal* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://mhj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://mhj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://mhj.sagepub.com/content/15/2/415.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Mar 20, 2013

[What is This?](#)

# Objects, Frames, Practices: A Postscript on Agency and Braided Histories of Art

Monica Juneja\*

'I'd see a man with a long beard standing next to an elegant lady, sharing a moment.... Maybe through art we can bring people together.' This observation by Sheika Hussah Sabah al-Salim al-Sabah of the Kuwaiti royal family during the exhibition 'Islamic Art and Patronage', which featured the family's private collection and drew large crowds at the 22 sites across the world it travelled to, has been cited by Alan Riding in an article published in the *New York Times* as he advocates the potential of 'Islamic art' to act as a 'mediator for cultures in confrontation'.<sup>1</sup> Both the Sheika's sanguine hope and the tenor of Riding's essay articulate a stance taken up by sections of a globally spread liberal intelligentsia as a counter-poise to the sombre mood following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the political demonisation of Islam by large sections of the media. Art, according to Riding and several others—journalists, curators, politicians and cultural bureaucrats<sup>2</sup>—possesses the power to heal the wounds inflicted by terrorism and the war against it. In addition, the article continues, through the medium of art unruly 'Muslim youths in Europe could identify with the glories of their Islamic roots'.<sup>3</sup> In short, the rich heritage of an 'Islamic past' would work as a panacea for evils of the present, a position which comes disturbingly close to the neo-conservative voice of George W. Bush when, six days after September 11, he declared: 'The face of terror is not

---

<sup>1</sup> Riding, 'An Essay'.

<sup>2</sup> Discussed in Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism?'

<sup>3</sup> Riding, 'An Essay'.

---

\*University of Heidelberg, Cluster Asia and Europe in a Global Context. E-mail: [juneja@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:juneja@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de)

---

*The Medieval History Journal*, 15, 2 (2012): 415–423

SAGE Publications ♦ Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/097194581201500208

the true face of Islam ... Islam is peace... [Terrorists] represent evil and war.<sup>4</sup> Underlying both positions are shared assumptions which postulate a clear set of oppositions: between a valorized past and a discredited present, between Europe and its other, between art objects classified as 'Western' and those labelled 'Islamic'. Such oppositions have long formed the basis of much art historical scholarship whose taxonomies echo the clear divide between Europe and Islam. These classificatory protocols are in turn rooted in institutional structures—the university and the museum, to mention two important ones—each reinforcing the other. The articles brought together in this special issue of *The Medieval History Journal* present research mainly by a younger generation of scholars who have been participating in and in turn contributing to a growing historiographical endeavour to dismantle and work beyond dichotomous categories, such as, Islam and the West, sacred and profane, art and ethnographic object, which have been deployed by scholarship while constituting its objects of investigation.

The attempt to frame art history from a multi-local as opposed to a single Euro-American perspective, to rethink taxonomies and epistemologies by drawing upon insights from the fringes—these have been a concern of postcolonial writings over the past few decades. In addition, studies of modern globalisation have provided impulses to researchers of pre-modern societies to highlight mobility, encounters, and the transformatory potential of migrant peoples, objects and practices long before the advent of modern communication and global capital. The recent years have seen burgeoning research on Asian networks, on the effects of the Pax Mongolica, on diplomatic, mercantile and material exchanges in medieval South and East Asia.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the far-reaching implications of these exercises notwithstanding, the category 'Europe' continues to be treated in art history as closed, self-sufficient and constituted entirely from within. Till now, it would seem that the onus to open up scholarly fields to investigations that explore connections and circulatory practices across porous frontiers, corresponding neither to those of modern nation-states nor to those delineating the civilizational units of the nineteenth century (e.g., Islamic or Buddhist), rests with the practitioners of Asian studies, while European art history goes about its business as usual. This major lacuna has been

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism?': 43.

<sup>5</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*; Markovits, Pouchepadass and Subrahmanyam (eds), *Society and Circulation*; Flood, *Objects of Translation*; Ertl and Limberger (eds), *Die Welt 1250–1500*.

addressed by the articles in this issue which delve into and uncover the processes by which the practices and taxonomies of 'European' art have been deeply and continuously transcultured through the encounter and engagement with Islamicate objects. The way to posing these questions has been shown by a handful of recent studies:<sup>6</sup> the contributors to this issue draw upon these precedents, which they supplement through further empirical investigations and whose insights they carry forward.

The editors and authors of this issue deploy the notion of transculturation or the transcultural as a lens and a heuristic device to analyse processes of circulation and reception across territorial and cultural boundaries. The concept of transculturation goes back to the work of the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz who used it in his study of sugar and tobacco cultures of postcolonial Cuba to insist on the nexus between objects and practices.<sup>7</sup> In Ortiz's understanding the explanatory potential of transculturation went beyond that of acculturation, in that it helped reconceptualise processes of adaptation as transformation. More recently the term has been used in different disciplines, at times to critique a notion of culture as a closed, internally cohesive and linguistically homogenous sphere, at others as a synonymous with 'inter-cultural' or 'cross-cultural'.<sup>8</sup> From our perspective the explanatory power of the notion of transculturation lies in its insistence on process rather than object: to denote the workings of transformations which unfold through extended contacts and relationships between cultures.<sup>9</sup> The term refers to spatial mobility, circulation or flows, but is neither synonymous with nor reducible to these. It focuses on processes through which forms emerge in local contexts within circuits of exchange. Contact, interaction and entanglement make the transcultural a field constituted relationally, directing our attention to uncover the dynamics of those formations both in the past and the present constituted through regimes of circulation and exchange, that is, to look at the multiple ways in which difference is negotiated within contacts and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation,

<sup>6</sup> Wolf, 'Alexandria aus Athen zurückerobert?'; Baader, 'Universen der Kunst, künstliche Paradieste der Universalität: Florenz, seine Sammlungen und Global Art History I'; Shalem, 'The Second Life of Objects'.

<sup>7</sup> Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint*. First edition New York, 1947.

<sup>8</sup> Welsch, 'Transkulturalität: Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen'; see articles in Sandkühler and Lim (eds), *Transculturality—Epistemology, Ethics and Politics*.

<sup>9</sup> Flood, *Objects of Translation*; Juneja, 'Global Art History'.

translation, re-historicising and re-reading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance—or a succession/co-existence of any of these. Exploring the possible range of transactions built into these dynamics offers a helpful corrective to the well-worn yet tenacious art historical category of ‘influence’ which assumes a unidirectional flow followed by passive absorption rather than active engagement. The articles in this issue, through their close focus on local contexts, bring to light the broad range of relationships and transactions engendered by transcultural engagements and challenge scholarship to find an appropriate repertoire of conceptual categories to describe their morphology.

A transcultural lens works as a safeguard against polar conceptions of identity and alterity, equally against dichotomies between complete absorption and resistance, which have characterised recent scholarship: an example here is Hans Belting’s study of Renaissance art and Arab science which, even as it seeks to write a connected history of Europe and Asia, ends up bringing a form of cultural essentialism through the back door stemming from its unfortunately deficient engagement with a large number of local contexts across the breadth of Asia, all brought under the label ‘Islamic’, which in turn morphs into the notion of ‘cultures without images’.<sup>10</sup> The close examination of diverse historical settings and of the range of negotiations built into mechanisms of reception also avoids the pitfalls of certain approaches which erase or flatten difference through their overweening concern to highlight commensurability and permeability, in the process assuming mechanistic overtones as they elide the question of choice. The latter—handled as a decisive category in the art historical contributions brought together in this issue—brings back agency into artistic and cultural processes, as their examination moves between idea and practice, action and representation, confrontation and absorption, between expressions of syncretism and radical alterity. In the same vein, a transcultural approach can enable greater linguistic and analytical precision than that offered by terms such as hybridity, *métissage* or creolisation, whose explanatory power has suffered dilution as a result of inflationary use in the recent years; these notions have become all too convenient straightjackets into which experiences of global interactions can be accommodated without an in-depth investigation of the transactions and agents involved. Furthermore the potential of the notion of hybridity

<sup>10</sup> Belting, *Florenz und Bagdad*.

remains limited by the presupposition, implicit in the term's indelible biologicistic overtones, of 'pure' cultures which somehow blend or merge into a 'hybrid' that is treated as a state beyond enunciation or articulation. The category transcultural, on the other hand, explicitly undermines a notion of culture defined as ethnically bounded and contained within a territorial frame: the prefix 'trans-' enables emancipation from such a notion in order to promote an understanding of culture that is in a condition of being made and remade.

The understanding of culture as 'something always in process and not a thing with an essence'<sup>11</sup> has further implications for disciplinary practices and classifications: historical units and boundaries cannot be taken as given; rather they would have to be regularly constituted as a subject of investigation, as products of spatial and cultural displacements, in the ways the articles in this collection have sought to do. From the perspective of art history this would involve questioning the taxonomies and values that have been built into the discipline since its inception and have been taken as universal. To begin with, this would necessitate a closer and more critical empirical examination of artworks labeled 'Buddhist' or 'Islamic' or 'Renaissance' or 'Modernist', and require constituting new units of investigation that are more responsive to the logic of objects and artists on the move. The case studies brought together in this collection have pointed to the ways in which widely accepted art historical labels and taxonomies end up being static and inadequate to the task of representing the unstable, complex and often seemingly paradoxical phenomena they purport to stand for. In this and other senses a transcultural history of art rejects a principle of mere inclusion to argue instead for a change of paradigm. Rather than postulate stable units of investigation which exist next to each other and are connected through flows or transfers, the problem of how these units themselves are constituted needs to be systematically addressed. Units of investigation are constituted neither mechanically following the territorial-cum-political logic of modern nation-states nor according to civilizational categories drawn up by the universal histories of the nineteenth century, but are continually defined as participants in and as contingent upon the historical relationships in which they are implicated. This would further mean approaching time and space as non-linear and non-homogeneous, defined through the logic of circulatory practices.

<sup>11</sup> Sheldon Pollock, cited in Flood, *Objects of Translation*: 5.

Looking at the world of art practice through a transcultural lens would mean bringing back excluded materials and questions to centre stage: in what ways did the presence of objects, not always categorised as ‘art’ from the regions of Asia, Africa or South America, within collections of European elites, artists or museums and their modes of reception, reuse, sale and display, proves to be constitutive of cultural achievements associated with major art movements, such as, the Renaissance, Rococo or Cubism? Such a view has the potential to destabilise many of the values that underpin the discipline of art history and as such have remained unquestioned for too long. The modernist elevation of ‘originality’ to measure creativity and the ensuing dichotomy between the ‘original’ and ‘copies’ or ‘derivations’, for instance, continues to be a cardinal value that informs scholarship in the field. However, a view of historical processes over centuries brings out the centrality of imitation/emulation as a site of cultural practice across regions. Imitation can be a creative form of relating to migrant objects, forms and practices, of dealing with difference, of acknowledging authority or of dialogical practice. Seen in this perspective, hierarchies of genre and distinctions between objects classified as ‘art’ as opposed to artefacts of ‘everyday use’ or ‘crafts’ call for critical questioning.

Finally, the contributions to this issue of *The Medieval History Journal* draw our attention to two further conceptual categories that could fruitfully enrich art history: frames and materiality. Frames are both physical—a material device that seeks to define the boundary of an artwork—as well as metaphorical or institutional; in each of these articulations they impinge on and inflect a work by highlighting or delineating the spaces in which objects are displayed and seen.<sup>12</sup> Frames could be defined as transitional devices with a delimiting but also mediating function. They have a special role in processes of appropriation and reception and in this sense become a particularly resonant site where a transcultural relationship unfolds. Framing devices—be they artistic conventions, paratexts, borders, book covers, illustrations, scripts—all address or create users, viewers and readers and in the process constitute processes of reconfiguration or domestication of alien artistic and cultural elements. They reinforce an agency-based perception of transcultural relationships which often get lost in a disembodied study of circulation or flows. Frames as conceptual

<sup>12</sup> Duro (ed.), *The Rhetoric of the Frame*.

schemes or pre-existing artistic conventions themselves get reorganised, expanded or displaced while opening up to or domesticating the alien. What frames of all kinds—literal or metaphorical—have in common is that they function as interfaces or thresholds between cultures, traditions or practices. They display traces of attempts, successful or futile, to present ideas, objects or practices as culturally compatible or deny them a place in new contexts. As such they are an invaluable archive for scholars working not only in the arts and visual media but in fields such as literary criticism, religious studies, linguistics, to name a few.

The thematic focus on material objects which holds together the contributions to this theme issue is related to the remarkable growth of scholarly interest in the materiality of specific things and the power it exercises in cultural processes. Not only does studying things no longer easily invite accusations of fetishism, most of us would agree today that social worlds are as much constituted by materiality as the other way around. The post-Cartesian description of materiality and nature in modernity as inert has been critiqued from different disciplinary positions: the philosopher Jane Bennett describes a ‘vibrant matter’ which operates beyond and within human beings, whereas the cultural anthropologist Christopher Pinney envisages materiality as a zone of ‘affective intensity’ where new identities are forged.<sup>13</sup> In short, a view of ‘subjects’ as ontologically distinct from the ‘objects’ they create, use and circulate has come to be increasingly contested within studies of materiality. By focusing on the pathways of material things and their reconfigured identities and attributes as they are appropriated by new agents, within a new set of frames, symbolic attributions and agendas, this issue highlights the enormous constitutive potential of migrating things—the potential to connect, to innovate, to transform lives, to bring to light hidden tracks and to make us rethink our understandings of culture as an attribute of human societies formed by relationships of encounter and braiding. All these relationships are mediated by the materiality of things: a manuscript that travelled from the possession of a North Indian prince to an auction house in Europe was more than a text, rather an object whose materiality was laden with cultural meaning, as it was exhibited, coveted, auctioned, cut apart, copied and reassembled. Narratives of material things are both embedded in social transactions and can exist in disjunction from or be

<sup>13</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Pinney, ‘Creole Europe’: 125–61, 132.

disruptive of stories told by other sources. Each of the stories told by things on the move might be seen as a miniscule mirror which gives us a glimpse from an unknown angle into a larger story and in the process suggests new ways of thinking about space, cultural geographies and the complex and often contradictory association of power and culture.

While art history in the West has been practiced as a grand Hegelian narrative of progress, a narrative that emerged with the Enlightenment and the industrial nation-states of the nineteenth century, and evolved in tandem with museums to construct a model history of Western heritage, the newly independent postcolonial nations of the non-West assiduously cultivated a narrative framed by the nation, with their museums buttressing through their displays the idea of unique and incomparable achievements of ancient civilizations, now cast as the nation's heritage. Both positions are mutually constitutive and rest on similar canonical premises. Both these variants of art historical writing are framed within discrete cultural units—be they national or civilizational—and subsume experiences of cultural braidedness under the taxonomic categories of 'influence', 'borrowing' or 'transfer'. This issue of *The Medieval History Journal* is a contribution towards rethinking these disciplinary frameworks: by highlighting the mutually constitutive relationship between Islamicate and European artistic practices its authors eschew both the civilizational division of the world espoused during the nineteenth century as well as its modern *avatara* conjured up by Samuel Huntington.

## References

- Abu-Lughod, Janet L. 1989. *Before European Hegemony: The World System, AD 1250–1350*, New York.
- Baader, Hannah. 2012. 'Universen der Kunst, künstliche Paradiise der Universalität: Florenz, seine Sammlungen und Global Art History I', in *Universalität der Kunstgeschichte? Theme Issue, Kritische Berichte*, (eds) Matthias Bruhn, Monica Juneja and Elke A. Werner, 2: 48–59.
- Belting, Hans. 2008. *Florenz und Bagdad: Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*. Munich. English trans. by Deborah L. Schneider, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham.
- Duro, Paul (ed.). 1996. *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, Cambridge.
- Ertl, Thomas and Michael Limberger (eds). 2009. *Die Welt 1250–1500*, Vienna.

♦ *The Medieval History Journal*, 15, 2 (2012): 415–423

- Flood, Finbarr Barry. 2007. 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art', in Elizabeth C. Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, New York and London: 31–53.
- . 2009. *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, Princeton.
- Juneja, Monica. 2011. 'Global Art History and the "Burden of Representation"', in Hans Belting, Jakob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel (eds), *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, Ostfildern: 274–97.
- Markovits, Claude, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds). 2003. *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950*, Delhi.
- Ortiz, Fernando. 1995 [1947]. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Durham, NC (trans. Harriet de Onis with an Introduction by Fernando Coronil).
- Pinney, Christopher. 2002. 'Creole Europe: A Reflection of a Reflection', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 20: 125–61.
- Riding, Alan. 2004. 'An Essay: Islamic Art as Mediator for Cultures in Confrontation', *The New York Times*, April 6.
- Sandkühler, Hans-Jörg and Hong-Bin Lim. 2004. *Transculturality—Epistemology, Ethics and Politics*, Frankfurt am Main.
- Shalem, Avinoam. 2008. 'The Second Life of Objects: Ivory Horns in Medieval Church Treasuries', in Gudrun Bühl, Anthony Cutler and Arne Effenberger (eds), *Spätantike und byzantinische Elfenbeinbildwerke im Diskurs*, Wiesbaden: 225–36.
- Welsch, Wolfgang. 1997. 'Transkulturalität: Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen', in Irmela Schneider and Christian W. Thomsen (eds), *Hybridkultur: Medien, Netze, Künste*, Cologne: 67–90.
- Wolf, Gerhard. 2009. 'Alexandria aus Athen zurückerobert? Perspektiven einer mediterranen Kunstgeschichte mit einem Seitenblick auf das mittelalterliche Sizilien', in Margit Mersch and Ulrike Ritzerfeld (eds), *Lateinisch-griechisch-arabische Begegnungen: Kulturelle Diversität im Mittelmeerraum des Spätmittelalters*, Berlin: 39–62.

