[CIS 14.1–2 (2018) 168–171] *Comparative Islamic Studies* (print) ISSN 1740-7125
https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.18987 *Comparative Islamic Studies* (online) ISSN 1743-1638

*What is "Islamic" Art? Between Religion and Perception*, by Wendy M. K. Shaw. Cambridge University Press, 2019. 382pp., 34 b/w figures and 18 colour plates. Hb. € 36,75. ISBN-13: 9781108474658.

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This is not a book about works of art, but a book on attitudes towards art, in "Islamic" and "Western" cultures. Quotation marks are in order, as cultural and religious determinants of these cultures are subject of debate in this book in a particular manner. The book is about the varied approaches that Muslim authors took to assess perception of art and nature. Once more, it is also about the construction of the "Orient" by Westerners—not, however, by travellers, colonial officers and "orientalists," but by art historians. Wendy Shaw rides an attack against the way in which the world of art is categorized in current academic traditions.

It is a timely publication, since Islamic culture seems to have reached a new position in public perception in North America and Europe, where the larger part of the audience of this book can be assumed. Ready to question their (post-)colonial prejudice, intellectuals of these cultures may be eager to discuss how involved this prejudice might be with concepts of art and perception. Within the rather limited circle of historians of Islamic Art, discussion is rife with the history of scholarship in Islamic art. It has arrived at a point where it may be interesting to take the very broad view and ask how the history of Islamic art tallies with the dominating narrative that developed on the history of "Western Art." For the debate whether there can be a universal history of art (or maybe even a universal history of culture), Wendy Shaw's book provides ample material.

The author introduces the topic with an extensive essay on Art History and its deficiencies in treating Islamic art adequately. It is interesting to read about her postulate that "Islamic" should be used in the same way as "Western," as it denotes a non-static and richly variegated culture that cannot be reduced to religion. In some way, this can be taken as a revival of Carl Heinrich Becker's notion of Islam as a cultural entity (that built on the Hellenistic culture of the Middle East). However, it is also meant as a broadside against simplifying concepts, according to which Islam came ready-made from the Arabian Peninsula—concepts, however, that are presently upheld only by Salafists or by the most narrow-minded cultural historians.

Keywords: Postcolonial studies, art history, figural painting, text-image relations, Sufism

In ten chapters, Wendy Shaw displays a rich array of paintings together with texts and derives interpretations on various aspects of art and perception. Of principal importance are questions how creation and representation are related, what senses are involved in the perception of truth —surprisingly, for an art historian, hearing is emphasized against visual forms—how the world of forms relates to the world of truth, and how love of the Divine translates into art. From Plato and Plotinus, via the Qurʾān and Ibn Sīnā to Ibn ʿArabī, Rūmī, Kant and Foucault: With all these texts representing a cultural history of Islam and of mankind, Wendy Shaw creates a firework of argument in favour of an Islamic history of Islamic art. Discussions on narratives of viewing, such as that of the competition between Greek and Chinese artists in chapter five, take the reader through many aspects of a story in all its variants by different authors. The problem is not that this battle of material may exhaust readers, but that some of the interpretations appear forced and foreshortened, such as that on the function of image in the story of Khusraw and Shīrīn, which allegedly "protects both protagonists from sin" (p. 208), whatever that should mean. There were many points during my reading at which I had the wish to go back to Puerta Vilchez's competent presentation of the Arabic sources on aesthetics, and to have an equivalent for the Persian and Turkish sources. This desire was fuelled not only by the fact that most sources are quoted from translations, but certainly also by the nonchalance that the author displays in many details. This ranges from the rash equation of the Sīmurgh with the pre-Islamic Senmurv to the invention of Būyid rule over Khurāsān, to the arbitrary ways in which terms and names are rendered. In a book that cares so much about *adab* (belles-lettres), this word should not be misspelled with an *ʿayn*. This carelessness about details of meaning, about historical facts, and generally about the circumstances under which works of art were created, is only a mirror of the priority that the author has given to one other aspect, that of intertextuality and of intermediality.

Scholars of Islamic culture can learn a lot from this book: Texts by some well-known authors are presented in a way to clarify in a striking manner to what degree art formed an integral part of social life and of philosophical thinking in the Islamic world over centuries. Images were perhaps not so special, their existence was apparently taken for granted. The book is less strong on original analyses of the artworks themselves, which are largely adopted from earlier literature. For art historians and other scholars of Western culture, a whole world may open up. It may be particularly

surprising to see how natural it was for Islamic culture to (justly) claim the heritage of Classical Antiquity, and how important this Classical heritage was for the understanding of viewing and representation, even after Ibn al-Haytham had revolutionized the theory of optics. In passing, the book deals with several other common prejudices of our time, for example that of an Islam that is essentially and invariably misogynous and anti-Judaic. However, the way in which the rich textual material is discussed holds another pitfall for the non-specialist reader: The intertwined presentation creates the impression as if, for example, the Qurʾān and Ibn Sīnā were in direct dialogue with each other. This way, the book runs in danger of confirming an image of Islam that it seeks to dismantle – that of an ahistorical entity for which it hardly matters whether one looks at the period of the Abbasid caliphate or the Ottoman Empire.

In accordance with the inter-medial approach that is concerned with narratives and their illustrations, the art discussed in this book is mostly restricted to figural painting. A wider notion of art emerges only in the chapter on geometric ornament. This, in turn, is largely reduced to interlaced star patterns (*girih*), which, thanks to their multi-nodal structure, are apt to serve mainly as a counter-metaphor to the concept of 'mathematical' perspective, which is discussed in the final chapter. The fact that perspective projection fixes observation to a single viewpoint is taken as a limitation instead of an achievement, as which it is commonly styled in Western Art History: Shaw maintains that by reifying visual impression, perspective excludes all other realities from the image.

Consequently, the last pages of the book form a pamphlet in favour of multi-polarity and diversity. Stepping "out of perspective" for Shaw means abandoning the single-minded approach of interpreting works of art through their location in time and space, and particularly through the narrative that was shaped by the hegemony of Western culture (embodied by the narrative of perspective as the superior mode of representation).

Wendy Shaw wants religion in a wide sense re-introduced to Islamic cultural history. She wants the 'Islamic' to become visible in works of art, through a reading that is not robbed of its important dimensions and of its conceptual character through a secularized history of art. Furthermore, she postulates an Art History that admits subjectivity instead of the "disinterested observer." As demonstrated in the chapters of the book, overcoming the dominance of the Western art historical approach means not only that the Muslim view is expressed in its own terms.It implies also that the rationalist attitude, into which the approach of Western aca-

demia is clad, is no more valid than subjective approaches—approaches that admit "erotic" aspects in the relationship between a work of art and the art historian who studies it. This epistle for a better history of art is thought-provoking and encouraging, yet written in a provocative tone, and it heaps accusations, many of them obsolete, on current art history.

When reading the book, I was torn between respect and anxiety. While I admire Wendy Shaw's audacity to come forward with an ideal of discourse ethics in art history to which many could subscribe, and to bolster it with a host of examples of inter-medial interpretation, I am also fearful for its weakness. Apart from the accidental deficiencies of the presentation (limitation to figural painting and disregard of socio-historical context being the gravest of them), there is the inherent vulnerability of this new approach, due to its stress on subjectivity. It will be interesting to see whether and how the postulated validity of subjective approaches will emerge in future art historical discussion.