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book review of

Making Modernity in the Islamic Mediterranean

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Artists and scholars have been articulating a need to pluralize modernity and locate non-European points of departure for modernization and its myriad cultural forms for decades. Noteworthy examples of institutional critique such as James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (1988) and Fred Wilson’s *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors* at the Seattle Art Museum (1993) contested binaries between the “primitive” and the modern, the “traditional” and the contemporary.[1] Clifford’s writings and Wilson’s projects displayed how hierarchical binaries and classifications lodged in the histories of colonialism have shaped museum display practices in the twentieth century. They are frequently referenced in art historical discourse. In their edited volume *Making Modernity in the Islamic Mediterranean*, Margaret S. Graves and Alex Dika Seggerman explain why they continue to face challenges when making the case for an Islamic modernization. According to the authors, Islam is still positioned as a “medieval” culture in Western popular discourse, perhaps in response to the anti-Western reactionism of Islamist fundamental groups, as they state.

With an introduction and eleven chapters organized into three thematic groupings: “Picturing Knowledge,” “Conceptualizing Craft,” and “Aesthetics of Infrastructure,” *Making Modernity* aims to break the universalist framework of modernization and modernist art to locate context-specific formulations of modernity within the Islamic Mediterranean. The book’s chronology situates modernity in the long nineteenth century to focus on the social, economic, and political upheavals triggered by the industrial revolution, the rise of global capitalism, and the rise and fall of different imperial regimes. The two chapters which focus on the time period of the French protectorate in Tunisia and Morocco (1881–1956 and 1912–56, respectively) are a welcome addition, as the book could have benefited from a deeper investigation of how earlier periods of modernization contributed to the emergence of high modernisms and decolonization struggles in the mid-twentieth century. Individual case studies cover sites and territories in the Ottoman Empire, including Anatolia, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula, and Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. They trace transnational
networks of knowledge and technology transfer between the Islamic Mediterranean and points of contact in Asia, the Americas, and, of course, Europe. The volume’s editors have positioned it as a complement to the breadth of recent publications on nineteenth-century Iranian art (hence their rationale for not extending their focus to Iran).

*Making Modernity* offers a compendium of compelling, well researched case studies that mainly engage methodologies specific to the discipline of art history, but also draw knowledge from other fields in the humanities and sciences, such as anthropology and seismology. Persuasive parallels emerge between the various chapters to augment the findings of each case study. As an example, the architectural patronage and reform program of Muhammed 'Ali Pasha (r. 1805–48) in Cairo is taken up by Alex Dika Seggerman in her discussion of the Muhammed 'Ali funerary Mosque in the Citadel of Cairo. It connects to the legacy of Muhammed ‘Ali’s family’s leadership, traced in David Roxbury’s essay on the opening of the Suez Canal, completed during the reign of his grandson, Khedive Isma’il (r. 1863–79). A line of continuity is drawn between Muhammed ‘Ali Pasha’s pursuit of modernizing reform and infrastructural development in the early nineteenth century, to the manner in which his grandson Ism’ail further secured Egypt’s geostrategic significance with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, thereby enabling faster trade routes between the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

Some of the chapters offer new perspectives on art historical subjects that have already received a good deal of scholarly attention, such as Ottoman-themed illustrated costume books, the paintings of Ottoman Orientalist Osman Hamdi Bey, and the photographs of Sultan Abdülhamid II’s encyclopedic library at Yıldız Palace. Yet these studies manage to move beyond familiar arguments in order to yield new discoveries and perspectives. As an example, Emily Neumeier’s essay "The Muybridge Albums in Istanbul: Photography and Diplomacy in the Ottoman Empire” aptly illustrates the theme of “Picturing Knowledge.” It focuses on *Animal Locomotion*, an eleven-volume set of Muybridge’s photographic studies gifted to Sultan Abdülhamid II by the University of Pennsylvania in 1888. Neumeier located these albums in the Rare Books Library of Istanbul University, the institution that has housed Sultan Abdülhamid II’s library of nearly thirty-seven thousand images, mostly photographs. She discusses how the possibility of the Sultan objecting to the inclusion of nudity in some of these motion studies was counteracted by the University’s careful presentation of these objects as documents of scientific study and tools of technological advancement. This would have appealed to a Sultan who embraced a positivist pursuit of scientific and technological progress and devoted much energy and effort to advancing his empire’s infrastructural development. He did not distribute these images to the public, however, shelving them in his library for personal reference.

The photographs functioned as gifts of diplomacy, and they appear to have yielded the desired outcome. That same year, the Sultan granted the University of Pennsylvania permission to excavate for artifacts at the Mesopotamian site of Nippur in Ottoman Iraq. The University’s purchase of a sizeable canvas by Ottoman painter Osman Hamdi Bey, who also happened to serve as the head of the Ministry of Antiquities, appears to have been another calculated attempt to temper resistance to the looting of artifacts from Ottoman territories. Osman Hamdi was, after all, in the process of drafting and passing new laws that would ensure that historical artifacts stayed within Ottoman lands. This diplomatic gesture
ostensibly also paid off, and the University of Pennsylvania sponsored the first American archaeo-
logical expedition to Mesopotamia. Neumeier makes a compelling case for how the cuneiform table-
ts that the University of Pennsylvania endeavored to obtain from Nippur, and the motion study photographs that entered the Sultan’s photography collection, both functioned as important conveyors of visual information for the participants of this exchange. They satisfied a quest for knowledge acquisition in the interests of power for both the Ottoman leadership and the university.

This exchange also sheds light on changing perceptions of time and an increasing historical self-consciousness, both symptoms and outcomes of modernization in the nineteenth century. The Muybridge albums made it possible to visualize fragmented and frozen units of time in sequenced snapshots, while the practice of archaeology enabled a re-examination of earlier periods of human civilization, with the cuneiform tablets serving as valuable written sources of ancient history. Perceptions of time were both sped up and elongated, inspiring artists and thinkers to respond to new imaging technologies. Take, for example, the work of the Cubo-Futurist modernists of Italy, France, and Russia, who found new ways to convey movement, dynamism, and speed in their paintings and sculptures by looking at Muybridge’s motion studies.

In their introductory essay, Graves and Seggerman also point to the processes of exchange between high and low cultures, between art, design, popular culture, and the everyday vernacular. They state that studying objects of material and visual culture, which are more widely distributed and easily accessible, can offer a better understanding of “the conditions of modernity meant for daily life” (4). The study of vernacular or “functional” photography and print culture has been incorporated into art historical discourse since at least the rise of postmodernism in the 1960s, yet the authors position this approach as a new contribution to the field of Islamic art. The contents of the section “Conceptualizing Craft” best meet the promise of recognizing these conditions of modernity by addressing how the artisans of local crafts industries were affected by the expansion of trade networks. Chapters by Graves and Jessica Gerschultz describe the ways in which French colonial forces in North Africa attempted to save the local crafts industries from disappearing after their markets were flooded with manufactured goods from the industrialized world. These two chapters form a nice dialogue with one another, echoing the points of connection developed between many of the contributions in this volume. Graves and Gerschultz write about the promotion of “indigenous” crafts in North Africa during the French protectorate from the end of the First World War through the mid-twentieth century, with Graves focusing on the production of ceramics in Morocco and Gerschultz writing about textile arts in Tunisia. They both critique the French colonial leadership’s focus on defining forms of “authenticity” in local craft production at the expense of stifling transnational dialogue, cross-cultural hybridization, and creative innovation.

In “The Double Bind of Craft Fidelity,” Graves describes how the protectorate’s goal of preserving indigenous institutions led them to regulate the crafts industries in order to promote their vision of what “national crafts” should look like in Morocco. The double bind she describes stems from the effort to promote crafts that were “purified” of what were conceived to be modern and foreign influences—in other words, aesthetic forms that appeared to be wedded to a fictional concept of an unchanging past, and hermetically sealed...
off from other cultural influences. The second part of this double bind was the effort to ensure that these so-called “authentic” forms stayed profitable in a contemporary market economy. Graves describes what she terms a “hybridity anxiety” in the French colonial mindset. She undertakes a visual analysis of an eccentric polychrome bowl from Fez dating from the late nineteenth century, to illustrate how crafts production in the region embodied a more pluralistic range of influences. She unpacks the various regional and historical influences embedded in this bowl, from plant pots of fifteenth century Spain, to Coptic ritual vessels of Egypt, to argue against the idea of a “pure” local craft tradition in a region crisscrossed by migration routes. Yet instead, French administrators such as Alfred Bel, who penned a defining book on the ceramics industries of Morocco, located their notion of craft fidelity in a very specific place and time—Fez in the early nineteenth century. By promoting a limited repertoire of colors, patterns, and shapes that they defined as being quintessentially “Moroccan,” Graves argues that people such as Bel may have prevented artisans from pursuing more experimental avenues of artistic production and stifled artistic innovation.

In “The Turn to Tapestry: Islamic Textiles and Women Artists in Tunis,” Gerschultz similarly describes how colonialist notions of authenticity prevented more promising collaborations between French and Tunisian artisans from coming to fruition. She offers yet another example of how the dogged insistence on classifying North African crafts production as a “traditional” art with a frozen and unchanging vision of the past undermined the French protectorate’s goal of supporting the textile crafts industries in Tunis. Her study focuses on the efforts of French administrator Jules-Jean Pillet, and his Tunisian workshop manager Hadi Djilani, who ran a vocational school and manufactory of textiles for women and girls in Tunis between the years 1898 and 1902. Gerschultz outlines how Pillet and Djilani’s vision of collaboration and design innovation between Tunisian artisans and artists and designers from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris was ultimately undermined by a colonial administration too set on maintaining a gendered and racist distinction between history and modernity, crafts and fine art. French administrators found Tunisian textile art to be incompatible with modern or contemporary artistic output, and they deemed Pillet and Djilani’s vision of collaborative practice and trans-cultural synthesis to be “doomed to failure” (167). Despite Pillet’s pleas for the French government to annex the school, and to use it as a pilot program after which to model a future manufactory of decorative arts for Muslim women and girls, the administration pulled its support. As Gerschultz states, the French Protectorate believed that only Tunisian creative output relegated to an “imagined past” would be of value to European consumers. As much as Pillet’s language belies the patronizing goal of serving a “civilizing mission” for the local female populace, one cannot help but wonder what new talents and creative output this foreclosed project could have yielded. Gerschultz ends her chapter with a brief discussion of Safia Farhat, a Tunisian artist who was working between and across these binaries at the height of modernism in the mid-twentieth century. Gerschultz states that Farhat’s fiber work from the 1960s consciously critiqued and disrupted the divisions between “traditional craft” and “modernist art.” This is a rare moment of agency mentioned in the book, and it comes from an artist, as opposed to a member of a political leadership or the economic elite. It leaves the reader yearning for similar examples in the other chapters of the book.

Questions of how society was shaped by the aesthetic and cultural shifts that were ushered in by modernization are also addressed in the section themed “Aestheticizing
Infrastructures,” yet the question of how individuals or communities responded to these shifts needs more attention. Ashley Dimmig’s article “Tents and Trains, Mobilizing Modernity in the Late Ottoman Empire” offers a fascinating study of how historical signifiers of Islamic rule merged with modern technologies to forge a context-specific image of modern identity, one that aimed to hybridize the legacies of the past with future-oriented goals. Dimmig writes about the ceremonial tents decorating the opening ceremonies of the Hijaz Railway, which extended to Medina and was completed in 1908. Unlike the other railways crisscrossing Ottoman lands, the Hijaz Railway was an infrastructural initiative conceived of and funded by the Ottoman leadership in order to provide Muslim pilgrims with a faster and more convenient mode of transportation to Mecca. It is a perfect topic to illustrate the crafting of an Islamic modernity in the long nineteenth century. This was a model that posed an alternative to European modernity and grew out of locally-specific needs. Looking at photographs of the opening festivities of the Ma’an station in Ottoman Jordan in 1905, Dimmig considers the symbolism of the ceremonial tents and their modern usage. She discusses how the use of tents not only symbolically linked the late modern empire with earlier periods of Ottoman leadership, but also to the mobile architecture of other itinerant Islamic empires such as the Timurids and the Seljuks. She illustrates how encampments had been used in ceremonial gatherings throughout the course of Ottoman history, but differentiates the regalia of the late modern tents from their predecessors. She then proceeds to discuss how the tent, as a structure that provides shelter, serves as a signifier of not only the Sultanate but also the Caliphate and its role as the protector of the global Muslim community. She further discusses how the ceremonial tents call to mind objects of ritual in Islamic pilgrimage, such as the kiswa (the fabric cover for the Ka’ba in Mecca) and the mahmal (the structure in which the kiswa was transported on camel back). What is missing from Dimmig’s discussion is a consideration of the encampments of the nomadic Bedouin who had made a living from being guides for Hajj pilgrims across the Jordanian and Arabian desert. The unveiling of the Hijaz Railway threatened to annihilate their profession. How did the Bedouin respond to the incursion of the railroad into their lands? Did they negotiate with the Ottoman powers to save their profession or to locate alternate channels of income? Lastly, to turn back to the symbolism of the tent as a ceremonial object, how might the tents pictured in the opening festivities of the Ma’an station have spoken to the Bedouin segment of the populace? Asking these types of questions might have led to an opportunity to address how regional groups were affected by the social and economic upheavals of the long nineteenth century, and how they struggled for self-determination under colonial occupation.

In summary, Making Modernity combines a compelling and well-researched range of studies that make a valuable contribution to the pluralization of global modernisms in art history, with a focus on nineteenth-century Islamic art and visual culture. This volume is a welcome addition to the literature of Islamic modernity and modern art. It brings to mind pioneering volumes such as Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture (2005), or Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation, and Eclecticism (2006), but updates descriptors such as “Orientalism” and “tradition” with “modernity.”[2] My one critique is that Making Modernity could have benefited from the study of histories from below in order to call attention to how art, architecture, visual culture, and material culture reflected the lived experiences of a broader range of people beyond the political and economic elites. The anti-colonial movements, the independence struggles, as well as the modernist art movements of the twentieth century were propelled by a greater segment of the population
than the cosmopolitan elites who benefited from capitalist growth, technological development, or even the expansion of print media (a majority of the region's populations were illiterate). The historical developments of the long nineteenth century planted the seeds of these later struggles. Therefore, a study of nineteenth-century art and visual and material culture must foreshadow and even anticipate their emergence.

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[1] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). In 1993, Fred Wilson worked with the collections of Native American and modern art at the Seattle Art Museum to critique the narrative structures of museum display practices and reveal the ideological prejudices through which institutions produce knowledge.