

Islam, Art, and Popular Culture

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In this issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Islamic Studies* we explore the interplay between Islam, art, and popular culture. We could have begun by defining the three terms involved, all of them multivalent and complex. 'Islam', as all readers of this journal know, covers 1,400 years of human religious history, involving continuities and breaches, coherences and contradictions, and referring to different branches, interpretations of scripture, authority structures, legal requirements, rituals, and ethical and moral considerations. 'Art' and 'popular culture' are also complex terms riddled by value debates. Is there a hierarchy between them? Do we talk of 'fine arts' or 'high art' versus 'popular culture', or do we have a concept of art that is less elitist? And what does 'culture' refer to in 'popular culture'? Is it the same 'culture' as in 'multiculture' or 'a plurality of cultures'?

Given the complexity of all the terms involved, we have opted for pragmatism: what the terms mean depends on context and on the various authors' use in their respective contributions. Hence, in this special issue, 'Islam' in one contribution provides a repertoire of potent references that may be translated into culturally significant images, capable in turn of being used to raise political awareness and engagement; in another, 'Islam' is understood as something representable – one religious tradition among others that are to be exhibited in a museum; and in a third, 'Islam' is perceived as a set of values that can provide arguments for engagement, whether in interreligious dialogue or in pedagogical programmes of ballet instruction. In similar vein, the authors of these contributions engage with various aspects of 'art' and 'popular culture', ranging from orchestral music, religious images on political posters and religious artefacts in museums to classical ballet and motorbike rides.

The study of Islam, art, and popular culture is part of a trend

in the academic study of religion/s, whereby over the past few decades approaching religion through the medium of artistic/aesthetic expressions has gained momentum (Gilmour 2005; Partridge and Christianson 2009; Nieuwkerk 2011; Klassen 2014; Cutrara 2014; Nieuwkerk, LeVine, and Stokes 2016; Lund 2016; Forbes and Mahan 2017; Piela 2018; Coody, Clanton, and Clark 2023; Rashid and Petersen 2023, Endsjø and Lied 2011; Peter, Dornhof, and Arigita 2014; Zorgati 2023). The focus of this special issue is not on religious foundational texts, rituals, or experiences alone, but on how discourses, lived experiences, and representations of religion are produced, adopted, and negotiated in art and popular culture. Scholars have remarked noticed that religious imagery, themes, symbols, and ideas have become more frequent in popular culture, and hence that popular culture as a medium offers a ‘pool of resources’ from which individuals can draw ideas, symbols, practices, and beliefs, and thus shape their own conceptualization of and relation to religion (Partridge 2004, 2005). In the call to this special issue, we chose to use the word ‘configuration’, asking how art and popular culture may be explored as “sites for possible configurations of Islam, Muslim cultures, and identities.” In order to question the assumption that the connection between art and Islam is the religious identity of the artist (Muslim artist creates Islamic art), we underlined that “configurations may stem from Muslims producing art and popular culture, or from Islam and Muslims being represented or portrayed in art and popular culture (*independently of the producers’ self-identification as Muslim or non-Muslim*), or from Muslim theological/juridical/ethical discussions about art and popular culture.” The contributions we have received address different trajectories of/in the intersection between Islam, art, and popular culture.

In her article, “Muslimer, jøder og kristne i samspil, dialog og på motorcykel: En feltstudie om interreligiøse foreninger i København”, Alma Munk Kronik explores the issue of interreligious dialogue and ‘living together’ among Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Copenhagen. In an atmosphere of increased tension both between majority and minority/ies and between different minority groups due to ongoing conflict and war in the Middle East, Kronik underlines the urgency of doing research on interreligious and interethnic communication and dialogue. Taking the UN ambition of creating a ‘Culture of Peace’ as a point of departure, she asks how interreligious groups in Copen-

hagen practice ‘living together’ (*sameksistens*). Her study focuses on three associations: Goldschmidts Musikakademi, Islamisk–Kristent Studiecenter (IKS), and MuJu og Co. Danmark. Combining field work and interviews with theories on lived religion and affect theory, Kronik demonstrates that although the goal of the three groups is similar, their practices differ considerably. While IKS represents an organization that favours verbal dialogue about (potentially contentious) religious issues, the other two groups engage in nonverbal practices of coexistence – playing music or riding motorbikes together. For the founder of the Musikakademi, words often create tensions, while music produces shared feelings among the participants that transcend religious and ethnic differences. The academy seeks to create a space and communal feeling for children, hoping to provide tangible alternatives to paths that might lead towards interreligious or interethnic conflicts. Its founder therefore seeks to reach out to children to foster this communal feeling before they are claimed by interreligious or interethnic conflicts. Kronik labels the practice of the academy as ‘bricolage’, arguing that “sammenblanding af kulturer og religioner gennemsyrrer gruppernes praksis, f.eks. idet der spilles musik fra forskellige kulturelle og religiøse traditioner på musikskolen.”

While Kronik sheds light on how music is used to build bridges between children from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, Otterbeck draws attention to ballet instruction for Muslim children in “Grace & Poise: A Muslim ballet school in the UK”. At the Grace & Poise Academy in London and Birmingham, children (boys are accepted up to the age of 6–7 years) learn classic ballet steps and movements accompanied by rhythmic poetry. The school does not employ music, as its founder, Miss Maisie, deems music as a possible hindrance when marketing the school. Combining her background as a professional ballet dancer with insights from Montessori pedagogy and Islamic *adab* (etiquette) and *akhlaq* (ethics), the school’s founder aims to install bodily integrity and a culture of excellence and endurance in the children through ballet. The school is open to all children but follows what the founder defines as Islamic ethical standards, and most of the participants are Muslims. Unlike the Copenhagen Musikakademi, which aims to recruit children from different minority groups, Miss Maisie’s school is structured in such a way as to be accommodating to Muslim families. Still, in combining a classical (European) art form with a

pedagogical programme building on Islamic ethics and values, the ballet school, like the music academy, stands out as an example of what Otterbeck refers to as blending that is not so unlike Kronik's 'bricolage' or 'hybridity'. Moreover, and despite their different approaches to music, the examples of the ballet school and the music academy illustrate how Muslims actively engage in various cultural and popular cultural forms, and in so doing, create new ways to relate to Islam.

Kronik and Otterbeck study the intersection of Islam, art, and popular culture in Denmark and the UK, both contexts in which Islam represents a minority religion. What happens with the intersection in countries where Islam represents the religious tradition of the majority? While Ingvild Flaskerud explores the topic of religiously inspired political art in Iran through the theoretical lens of semiotics, Thomas Brandt Fibiger analyses how museums in the Arab Gulf represent different religious traditions, including Islam.

In "Visual Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Modern Iranian Public Sphere: Recontextualizing Twelver Shiite Culture in the Mobilization of Protest", Flaskerud sheds light on the visual strategies used by the protest movement, known as the Green Movement, mobilized in the aftermath of the Iranian presidential election on 12 June 2009. More precisely, she studies the visual and verbal language of four posters produced by the movement, all of which draw on a repertoire of cultural codes connected to Twelver Shia. Understanding the movement as a 'counter public', she investigates how the protest movement "use[s] religiously anchored visual language and cultural codes to unite people against the authorities." Religiously and emotionally charged references, such as the colour green or scenes from the battle of Karbala, have a long political history in Iran; Flaskerud's contribution consists in demonstrating how these codes are recirculated and reinterpreted in the post-2009 political context to contest the current theocratic regime in Iran.

In "Religion på museer i de arabiske Golf-stater – Islam og universalisme", Fibiger compares the representation of religion, and particular Islam, in the various museums of the Gulf region. Giving a short overview of the history of museums in the region, he demonstrates a process of change, from the establishment of relatively modest historical and ethnographic museums in the early 1970s to that of recent, important institutions in buildings designed by internationally renowned architects and with the

ambition of becoming centres of the global museum industry/sector. Examples in point are the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Qatar, the National Museum in Qatar, the National Museum in Bahrain, and Louvre Abu Dhabi. Fibiger finds that while Islam is presented as a natural part of local history in the national museums of Qatar and Bahrain, Louvre Abu Dhabi has another ambition. In exhibiting religious artefacts or holy scriptures from different religious traditions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – side by side, Islam is represented as one among other important religious traditions of the world. According to Fibiger, “I et Golf-område, som ofte fremhæves som konservativt, er denne sammenstilling af forskellige religioner bemærkelsesværdig.” He discusses whether the universalist ambition reflected in the format of the exhibition may be explained in terms of the museum’s close connection to the Louvre in Paris, and to a specific French form of universalism “hvordan den universelle sammenstilling af ‘store traditioner’ og ‘civilisationer’ er det væsentlige fokus.” In a later passage, Fibiger conducts an interesting discussion where he contrasts Louvre Abu Dhabi’s outspoken postcolonial ambition with the colonial legacy of its ‘mother’ institution, the great Louvre in Paris.

In both Flaskerud’s and Fibiger’s contributions, the interrelationship between aesthetic expression/representation and politics is explicit. While Flaskerud demonstrates how protesters in Iran use religious imagery to contest the politics of the regime, indicating how such images can be installed with new oppositional meaning, Fibiger shows how museums form part of diplomatic ‘soft power’ and national branding for both local and global audiences.

A common thread in the articles in the current issue is the observation that art and popular culture need to be studied contextually, and that different actors may use them for different, even competing purposes. The articles cover very diverse geographical locations – Iran, the Arab Gulf states, England, and Denmark – and artistic expressions – political posters, ballet, museum exhibits, and orchestra music. Still, there are overlapping themes, such as integration, tolerance, and nation building; the articles show that religious art or religion in art and popular culture are often used to pursue further ends – interreligious understanding and dialogue on a local level (Kronik, Fibiger, Otterbeck), political purposes, such as freedom of speech (Flaskerud), or attempts at global positioning (Fibiger). Another inter-

esting feature common to all is the encounter between Islam and a cultural repertoire which is traditionally associated with European culture: classical ballet, museums, and Montessori pedagogy.

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