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Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

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DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :
Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

IMAGINING LEBANON WITH ISLAMIC ART:
The 1974 Exhibition at the Nicolas Sursock Museum

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Abstract | Focusing on the first exhibition of Islamic art in Lebanon, organized by the Nicolas Sursock Museum in 1974, this article shows how the construction and the operationalization of the concept Islamic art overlapped with postcolonial endeavors to foster national identity. By closely examining the making of the art exhibition and tracing material histories intersecting in Beirut, it elicits constructions of the national, the secular, and the spiritual via the notion of art. It contributes to the growing scholarship on the historiography of Islamic art, regional museums, and nation-building in the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords | Islamic art – Nicolas Sursock Museum – Lebanon – Postcolonial nation-building – National heritage – Antiquities trade

Résumé | S'intéressant à la première exposition d'art islamique au Liban, organisée par le Musée Nicolas Sursock en 1974, cet article montre comment la construction et l'opérationalisation du concept d'art islamique se sont chevauchées avec les efforts postcoloniaux promouvant l'identité nationale. En examinant de près la réalisation de l'exposition d'art et en retraçant les histoires matérielles qui se croisent à Beyrouth, il suscite des constructions du national, du séculier et du spirituel à travers la notion d'art. Il contribue aux études croissantes sur l'historiographie de l'art islamique, les musées régionaux et l'édification de la nation dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle.

Mots clés | Art islamique – Musée Nicolas Sursock – Liban – Identité postcoloniale – Patrimoine national – Commerce des antiquités

Introduction[1]

In 1974, the Nicolas Sursock Museum organized the first exhibition of "Islamic art"[2] in Lebanon on loan from private local collections and presented it to the public as part of the national heritage. Situating the exhibition at a critical juncture in the national history between the belle époque of the 1950s and 1960s, and the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), this article shows how the construction and the operationalization of the concept of Islamic art overlapped with postcolonial endeavors to foster national identity. My analysis is guided by this central question: What can this exhibition say about the role of art and religion in Lebanon's nation-building process, heritage, and identity politics? By closely examining the making of the art exhibition, which solicited the contributions of local collectors and foreign experts, and tracing material histories intersecting in Beirut, I elicit constructions of the national, the secular, and the spiritual via the notion of art.

Hitherto unexamined in scholarly writings, the exhibition "Islamic Art in Lebanese Private Collections" offers valuable insight into the growing phenomenon of Islamic art in the 1970s and contributes to the Islamic art historical scholarship focusing on the non-Western world to assess the field's development. By documenting this event, the present article sheds light on the multifaceted legacy of the Sursock Museum before its recent specialization in modern and contemporary art and thus captures missed historical links and East-West entanglements that tied the museum institution to a modern Lebanese identity. Using the museum's archives,[3] I reconstruct the exhibition and examine the idea and the making of Islamic art in Lebanon through the museum committee's own questioning of and grappling with their mission.[4]

The first part of this article lays the groundwork for the study of Islamic art in Lebanon by historicizing the concept, problematizing its Orientalist and colonial legacy, and sketching a brief historical overview of Lebanon's political and cultural map. It thus contextualizes the establishment of the Nicolas Sursock Museum by connecting it to the nation-building process and cultural fervor of the period. The second part describes the 1974 exhibition focusing on the display,

1- I thank the anonymous reviewers for their thorough and generous engagement with an earlier draft of this article, and for their insightful and critical feedback.

2- For visual facility, "Islamic art" appears in this text without quotation marks though it is used and referred to in this article as a particular historical construct.

3- I am grateful to Rowina Bou-Harb, Library and Archive Officer at the Sursock Museum, for her help in locating the archival material at the museum and for freely sharing her knowledge and enthusiasm for arts, museums, and history.

4- From the museum's archival collection, I consulted professional and personal correspondences, the museum committee reports, meeting notes, informal drafts, official documents, photographs and newspaper clippings (mainly collected through The Monitor Agency for press clippings). The archiving and digitizing process at the museum is still ongoing, and it is possible that more material in connection with the exhibition will emerge. The next steps involve digitizing the video and audio records consisting of a short documentary of the exhibition realized by Baalbeck Studio and the lectures given at the museum.

the objects, and the configuration of the Islamic and the artistic. The third part contextualizes the idea of Islamic art as a counterpart to an earlier exhibition on Christian Melkite icons and aligns it with the museum's rebranding as a modern national institution. The fourth part ties the museum's strategy of borrowing from private collectors to the construction of Lebanese heritage at large. The fifth part offers a behind-the-scenes look at how Islamic art was operationalized as a secular category by foreign experts in museological practice and collections. The sixth part reveals the historical interest and trade in antiquities dating back to the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Beirut to account for the presence of the Mesopotamian jar and the letter attributed to Prophet Muhammad as highlights in the exhibition. The final part revisits the construction of the secular, the spiritual, and the artistic in light of the controversial letter.

I – Problematizing Islamic Art and Lebanese National Identity

"Islamic art," a modern concept coined in the late nineteenth century, has constituted a Eurocentric way of knowing and coming to terms with "Islam" and "Art."[5] Deriving from a concern with universalism and taxonomies specific to the Enlightenment for which modern European civilization represented the culmination of historical evolution, Islamic art served the universal art historical narrative as the medieval node connecting the Greco-Roman Antiquity to the Renaissance.[6] In this matrix of European categories, Islamic art operated as the ultimate *other* (in Saidian terms): it represented what was understood as the opposite of fine art in the modern order of knowledge – that is, crafts – and situated these within a religious purview against the secular grip of art history.

The situation of this art is further complicated by restricting its history to pre-industrial and pre-colonial times, when it was allegedly still pure and authentic, and alienating it from post-colonial Muslim populations.[7] In recent years, critical historiography of the field has scrutinized and challenged the Orientalist and art historical legacies of this awkward category across time and unwrapped the politics of exhibiting it in Western and Muslim lands.[8] Studies have problematized

5- This statement is in reference to Edward Said's definition of *Orientalism*: "the French and the British … have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience." Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978, reprint 2003), 1.

6- Finbarr Barry Flood, "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* (London / New York, Routledge, 2007), 31-34; and Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches", *Journal of Art Historiography,* 6 (June 2012), 2-3.

7- Flood, op. cit., 39-40; and Wendy M. K. Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic Art History: Secularism and Public Discourse", *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6 (June 2012), 2.

8- See Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror", *Anthropological Quarterly*, 81:3, (2008), 657-659; Kirsten Scheid, "The Study of Islamic Art at a Crossroads, and Humanity as a Whole", in Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber, Gerhard Wolf (eds.), *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 90-94; and Valerie Gonzalez, "The Religious Plot in Museums or the Lack Thereof: The Case of Islamic Art Display", *Religions*, 13:4 (2022), 281-314.

how this concept disconnected living Muslim communities from a glorified past and "opened the way for a secularized vision of religious identity" at critical junctures between the East and the West whether in the late Ottoman Empire or in the post-9/11 context.[9] Moreover, scholarly debates on the label "Islamic" as a secular or religious signifier point to wider tensions between modern genealogies configuring Islam as a religion, civilization, or culture. The meaning and the configuration of Islam are at stake in the modern taxonomies pitting the religious against the secular and complicating the engagement with artistic traditions.

This modern category remained absent from Ottoman Syria, while Islamic and Arab art were institutionalized in the late nineteenth century in Ottoman Cairo and Istanbul at the hands of European and local actors.[10] The Lebanese experiment with Islamic art took place at a particular juncture in the national history, a year before cosmopolitan Beirut was ravaged by the protracted Civil War (1975-1990) that divided the capital along sectarian lines. Since the creation of the modern Lebanese state in the post-World War I partition of the Ottoman Middle East, divergent strands of nationalism marked the French-mandated country (1920-1943) contributing to a conflicted historiography and contested perceptions of heritage between Lebanese nationalism and Arabism in general terms. Moreover, French authorities and the local elite founded national museums in Beirut and in Damascus, harnessing selective and divergent identities for the newly created states of Lebanon and Syria: westward-looking and Phoenician for the former, and Arab and Islamic for the latter.[11]

Post-independence official discourse perpetuated the vision of a Lebanese entity removed from its Arab-Islamic heritage and geographical context in favor of a Western-oriented identity embedded in a Phoenician-Mediterranean heritage and nurturing cosmopolitanism as a national trait.[12] The 1950s and 1960s in Lebanon marked the postcolonial nation building process amidst an economic laissez-faire policy, an opening up of the country to mass tourism, and cultural

9- Wendy M. K. Shaw, "Islamic Arts in the Ottoman Imperial Museum, 1889-1923", *Ars Orientalis*, 30, (2000), 55; and Winegar, op. cit., 663-665.

10- The Museum of Arab Art opened its doors in Cairo in 1884 while the Department of Islamic Arts in the Ottoman Imperial Museum was established in 1889 in Istanbul.

11- Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, "Museums and the Construction of National History in Syria and Lebanon", in Nadine Meouchy, Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 185-202. For an account of institutional approaches to Islamic artifacts in Lebanon, see Hala Auji, "Tales of Tiles: Shifting Narratives of a Museum's Islamic Artifacts", *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique moderne et contemporain* (2020), 1-27.

12- Zeina Maasri, "Troubled Geography: Imagining Lebanon in 1960s Tourist Promotion", in Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (eds.), *Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in the Age of Globalization* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2016), 135; and Sarah Rogers, "Daoud Corm, Cosmopolitan Nationalism, and the Origins of Lebanese Modern Art", *Arab Studies Journal*, 18:1 (Spring 2010), 48-49 and 62-65.

and artistic effervescence.[13] Increasing economic disparities and political tensions also marked this period as radical transformations in the region polarized by the Cold War and the confrontation with Western powers supporting the creation of the Israeli state played out in the Lebanese capital. In retrospect, this phase is associated with belle époque Beirut, often eliding contradictory experimentations with art, heritage, and identity politics. Fostering the Lebanese identity prompted "the need to define a national art" and a serious consideration to establish a ministry of culture.[14] It was in this context of postcolonial nation building that the Nicolas Sursock Museum was founded.

Late in December 1952, the bachelor scion of the Sursock family died in his mansion in Beirut, leaving behind a secret will that was to transform his love for the arts into a national project. Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock (1875?-1952) had bequeathed his mansion to the city of Beirut in mortmain (*waqf*) to serve as a museum for ancient and modern works of art (*al-athār al-faniyya al-qadīma wa-l-ḥadītha*) extracted from Lebanese, Arab, and foreign lands as well as for the fine arts produced by the Lebanese people.[15] The motivation behind this venture, clearly expressed in the aesthete's will, was to make public and propagate the fine arts for the benefit, prosperity, and advancement of Lebanon (*allatī taʿūd bi-l-khayr wa-l-izdihār wa-l-ruqiyy ʿala Lubnān*).[16] Nicolas Sursock's art patronage continued a family legacy of "demonstrat[ing] their cultural capital through an investment in the arts," as with commissioning portraitures in the late nineteenth century.[17] Originally from Mersin (in present-day Turkey), the Greek Orthodox Sursock family had established itself in Ottoman Beirut in the late eighteenth century. They became one of the most prominent families of the merchant aristocracy in the city making their fortunes in "trade, banking, real estate, and silk manufacture."[18]

Less than a decade after the Lebanese independence in 1943, Nicolas Sursock's project pertained to the national aspirations of the aristocracy to partake in –

13- Sarah Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut: Drawing Alliances* (New York / London: Routledge, 2021), 3-4; Maasri, op. cit., 126-130; and Nadia Von Maltzahn, "Heritage, Tourism, and the Politics of National Pride: The Baalbeck International Festival in Lebanon", *Quaderni Storici*, 54:2 (August 2019), 72-73.

14- S. Rogers, *Modern Art*, 4-6; and Nadia Von Maltzahn, "Ministry of Culture or No Ministry of Culture? Lebanese Cultural Players and Authority", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 38:2 (August 2018), 330-343.

15- Nicolas Sursock, "Hadhihi waṣiyyatī", Sursock Museum Archives (SMA), 1. This document is a typed and unsigned copy of Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock's will; my translation. Unless otherwise noted, all the translations from Arabic and French into English are mine. The will stipulated a close association of the museum with the city of Beirut by the de facto appointment of the president of the Beirut municipality as the custodian of the museum and by its funding via a percentage of the taxes levied on construction permits in the capital. Ibid., and Loutfalla Melki, "Nicolas Sursock: L'homme et son musée", in *Musée Nicolas Sursock: Le Livre*, (Beirut: Musée Nicolas Sursock, 2000), 19, 21, 35 and 37.

16- Sursock, op. cit., 1.

17- S. Rogers S., "Daoud Corm", 66-67.

18- Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 65 and 92-93.

or spearhead – the cultivation of Lebanese civil society. The state, however, had other plans for the Sursock property and turned it into a guest palace until the late 1950s when the testament was finally executed.[19] The early twentieth-century triple-arched villa in the eastern quarters of the capital was inaugurated as a museum at the end of 1961 with the *Salon d'Automne* by its committee composed of the Beiruti elite. Among them were Lady Yvonne Sursock Cochrane as the president, Camille Aboussouan as the curator, and Amine Beyhum as the *mutawallī* (custodian of the museum).[20] The committee brought the testator's museum vision to life in a threefold mission which promoted Lebanese fine arts, raised awareness about the Lebanese and Arab heritage, and inducted the Lebanese people into the arts of foreign cultures[21]; a comprehensive program, it could be said, for the education and the edification of the nation.

II – The First Exhibition of Islamic Art in Lebanon: A Vignette

On Friday, May 31, 1974, a revamped Sursock Museum inaugurated its state-of-the-art facilities with the exhibition "Islamic Art in Lebanese Private Collections." The occasion was widely publicized in the local media and drew a crowd of high society figures whose excitement was heightened when the new security alarm went off just before the opening — apparently triggered by a fly that inadvertently landed between the panes of a showcase.[22] A corps of twenty-four armed military men was deployed to watch over the precious artworks for the duration of the event.[23] The military presence contributed to the thrill around the exhibition and reaffirmed the national value of the private possessions from the perspective of the Lebanese state. While it was not the first time security forces mingled with art and visitors at the museum, it was probably the first inauguration where no drinks were served — a gesture possibly honoring the "Islam" in Islamic art.[24] The six-week event attracted more visitors than any previous happening in the locale.[25] Journalists reported on everything from the art display curated by the highly acclaimed former keeper of Oriental Antiquities

19- It was under Lebanese President Camille Chamoun (r. 1952-1958) that Nicolas Sursock's property was confiscated in 1953 then reinstated in 1957. Melki, op. cit., 29. The mansion was handed to the museum committee at the end of 1960. Sursock Museum Committee Reports (CR)/SMA, October 17, 1960. Except in a few cases, all the committee meetings reports were drafted in Arabic.

20- Camille Aboussouan, "Naissance et gloire d'un musée", in *Musée Nicolas Sursock*, 47.

21- Ibid., 47, 51 and 57; and Saad Kiwan, Sylvia Agémian, *The Nicolas Sursock Museum*, Beirut, Chemaly & Chemaly, 1999, 11, 15 and 17.

22- "Avec l'art islamique, le Musée Sursock est bien parti", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, June 1, 1974.

23- CR/SMA, May 28, 1974; and "Pour protéger sa fabuleuse collection…", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, May 30, 1974. In the last meeting before the inauguration, the committee president, Victor Cassir, telephoned General Ghanem for the guarding of the exhibition. Shortly after, Lieutenant-Colonel Sahmarani of the public relations division arrived at the museum and assigned the guardianship to the army after touring the premises. CR/SMA, May 28, 1974.

24- CR/SMA, May 28, 1974.

25- Recorded interview with Saleh Saad, Sursock Museum, 2015, unpublished, SMA. One enthusiastic review set the number of visitors at 10,000. E. A. [Adnan Etel], "Ce soir, clôture de l'exposition d'art islamique du musée Nicolas Sursock: Un bilan inespéré", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, July 15, 1974.

at the British Museum, Basil Gray, to the public lecture series which featured a motley group of Arab and foreign scholars and professionals. A fancy catalogue featuring a picture and a description of every exhibit in French, English, and Arabic supplemented the display but was only accessible to the "happy few" who could afford it.[26]

With the exception of a few pieces on the first floor, the exhibition was staged on the second floor of the museum in the large, pristine showroom. The layout generally followed a technical organization, grouping together artifacts of the same medium which were then arranged by place of origin and chronology. While ceramics prevailed with over 100 specimens, metalwork, glasswork, woodwork, textile, rugs, ivory, limestone, marble, coins, and manuscripts formed the remainder of the 219 exhibits. Display strategies varied according to the material and size of objects and employed different types of showcases and lighting to facilitate and guide the viewing experience. Carpets, ceramic tiles, one of two column capitals, and two Qajar paintings hung directly on the walls, while bowls, dishes, flasks, and Qurʾan manuscripts were placed in tailormade cases.[27] Though the once private mansion flaunted Venetian and Ottoman elements typical of the turn-of-the-century architectural style,[28] the spacious, white-walled gallery otherwise granted a neutral setup with natural light and spotlights hanging from the ceiling. A decontextualized approach dominated the installation emphasizing the formal and aesthetic qualities of the artifacts over historical or cultural interpretations. The artworks were merely identified by numbers that visitors could look up in a freely available booklet in French and Arabic,[29] while "Oriental" tunes of Persian, Syrian, and Turkish music played in the background, adding to the sensual experience (Figs. 1-5).[30]

It was certainly difficult to gather any working definition of Islamic art — in both its Islamic and its artistic components — from the display alone. While the display strategy invited the viewers' scrutiny and appreciation of the objects' formal aspects, it abstracted Islam and art from their historical and cultural contexts. The aesthetic setup of overwhelmingly functional objects must have signaled to the visitors their outdated production, utility, and meaning in favor of visual contemplation and sensuous appeal. Spiritual life was minimally represented with a few Qurʾan copies which were evaluated for their size or

26- "Avec l'art islamique, le Musée Sursock est bien parti", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, June 1, 1974.

27- Other types of artifacts included pencases, mirrors and mirror cases, daggers, tiles, incense burners, stands, statuettes, a mortar, and a table.

28- See the Sursock Museum, *Architecture*: Link: https://sursock.museum/content/architecture.

29- This free booklet, an abrigbed version of the catalogue, defined the objects by type and historical provenance only and omitted pictures. It also contained some inaccurate data.

30- Nabīl Aṣfahānī, "'Maʿraḍ al-fann al-islāmī fī al-majmūʿāt al-khāṣṣa': Thagharāt zamaniyya… wa-matḥaf maʿzūl ʿan al-nās", *al-Usbūʿ al-ʿArabī*, June 10 1974, 71; and Adnan, "Ce soir, clôture de l'exposition". The playlist was recorded on three mixtapes by Agémian's good friend and music aficionado, Georges Tarazi, of the prominent Maison Tarazi for Oriental crafts, from his extensive personal collection of world music. Personal communication with Georges Tarazi and his son Alfred, September 2022.

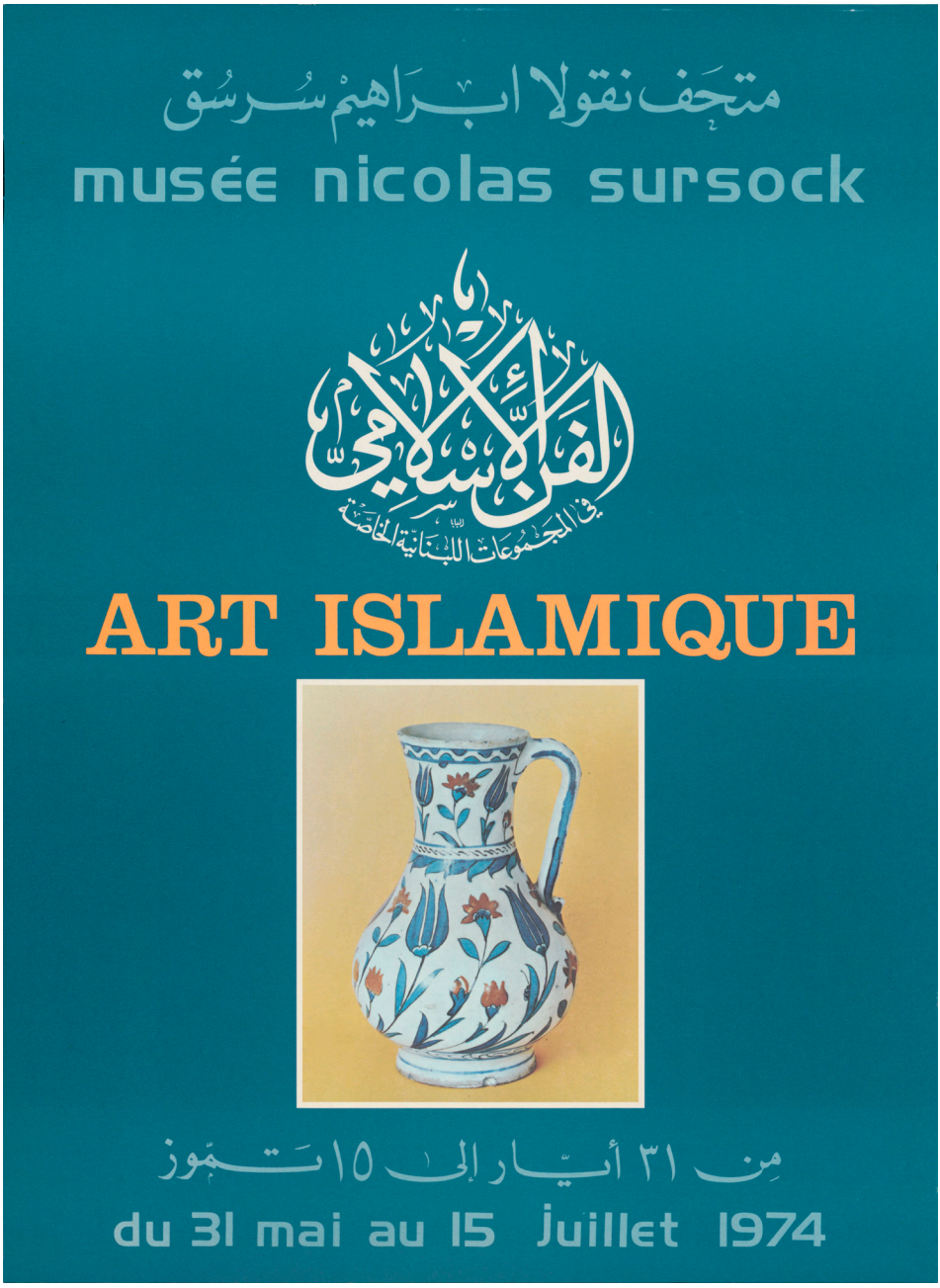

Fig. 1 Poster of the exhibition "Islamic Art in Lebanese Private Collections," 1974. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

Fig. 2 The exhibition of Islamic art in the revamped gallery of the museum, on the second floor. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

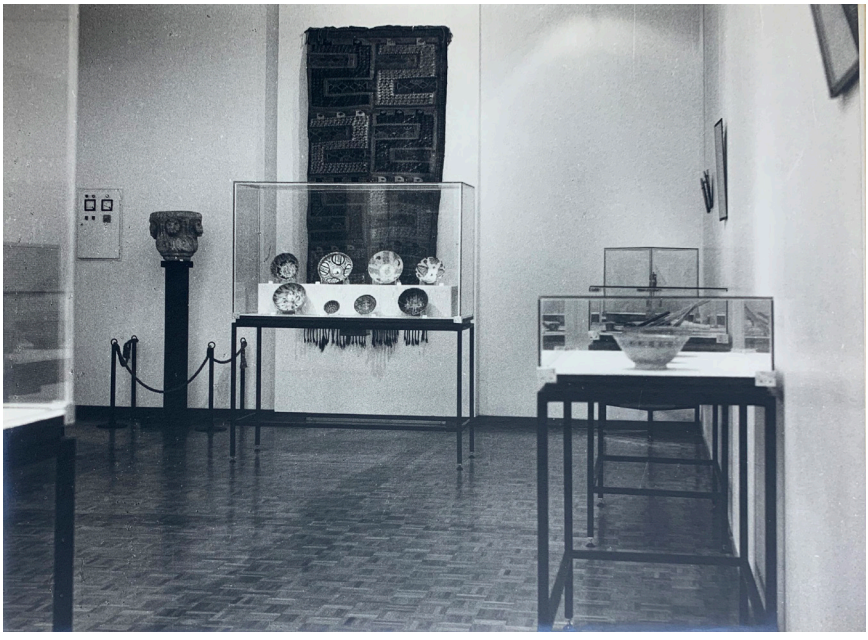

Fig. 3 Display showing ceramic bowls in showcases, a hanging carpet, and a column capital on a prop. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

Fig. 4 Display showing Qurʾan copies and a mihrab tomb tile from Qashan. They are grouped under "Calligraphy" in the catalogue. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

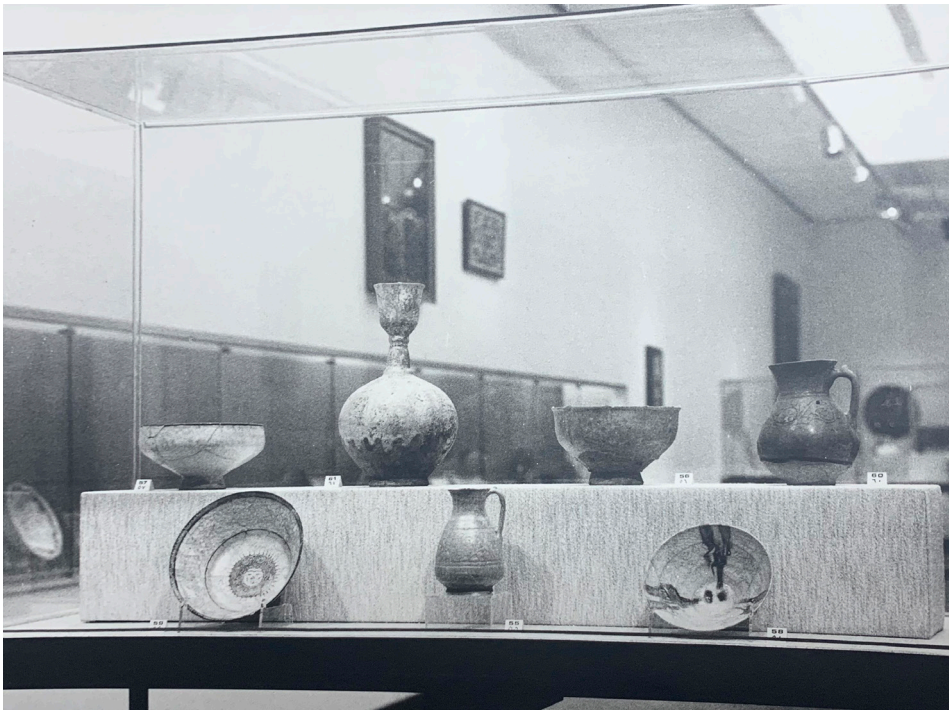

Fig. 5 Close-up of ceramicwares – the most prevalent medium in the exhibition – showing jugs, bowls, and a bottle. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

decorative composition, while religious or ritual inscriptions on objects were presented as mere ornamentation. The catalogue entries only note the presence of inscriptions and describe their formal and visual qualities such as their place on the object and the type of calligraphy used.[31]

The artifacts were typically defined by their formal attributes: shape, size, color, and origin. Their provenance was an essential feature through which the geographical and historical parameters of Islamic art were indexed. A quick glance at the catalogue shows that the exhibits originated from Syria, Persia, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, and spanned some eleven centuries from the time of the Prophet to the time of the Qajar and Ottoman dynasties (seventh to nineteenth centuries). The objects were localized through a mix of references to dynasties, cities, and names of historical and modern geographic or political entities. The Ottoman Empire, which had encompassed the modern Lebanese territory until fifty years earlier (1517-1918), was minimally present, while most artifacts belonged roughly to the period before the seventeenth century.

Two exhibits stood out in the show owing to contrasting display techniques: unattached and uncased, a sizeable jar stood on a free-floating prop close to the entrance on the second floor, dwarfing anyone standing next to it, while a half-torn manuscript roughly measuring 40 by 20 centimeters was sealed off in its lone showcase in the middle of the *salon arabe* kept on from the original proprietor's décor on the first floor. (Figs. 6-7) The jar, originally covered with a turquoise glaze, acquired with time an iridescent darker blue color that alternated with the uncovered earthenware material on its shoulders. Just about a meter tall and some 60 centimeters wide in diameter, the "large storage jar" from Mesopotamia dating to the Umayyad or the early Abbasid periods was virtually intact for its age.[32] The manuscript, on the other hand, was a letter attributed to the Prophet of Islam inviting Sasanian King Khosrow II to embrace the Muslim faith in the seventh century. The visual appeal and imposing presence of the Mesopotamian jar passes almost unnoticed in the exhibition catalogue where the pictures of most objects also occupy a full page, and where its art historical importance did not seem to outdo that of others. Conversely, a little dossier devoted to the letter of the Prophet and authored by the museum curator Camille Aboussouan sticks out in the catalogue thanks to a cardboard-like dark green page on which an effigy of the letter is glued.[33]

31- The only exception is the inscription on a Mamluk brass basin dated to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, belonging to Fouad Matouk, transcribed and translated by Fouad Ephrem Boustani, veteran professor of Arabic Literature and History at Saint Joseph University and the Lebanese University. Camille Aboussouan (ed.), *Art Islamique dans les collections privées libanaises: Exposition organisée par le Musée Nicolas Sursock du 31 mai au 15 juillet 1974* (Beirut, Imprimerie Catholique,1974), 138.

32- Basil Gray, "Descriptions", in Aboussouan (ed.), *Art Islamique*, 110.

33- The green cardboard was intended to reproduce the framing of the letter at the time it was first discovered. The green cloth was apparently removed for the purpose of the exhibition.

Fig. 6 View of the second floor showing the Mesopotamian jar attributed to the 7th-9th centuries Umayyad or early Abbasid Mesopotamia. 95.5 x 63.5 cm. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

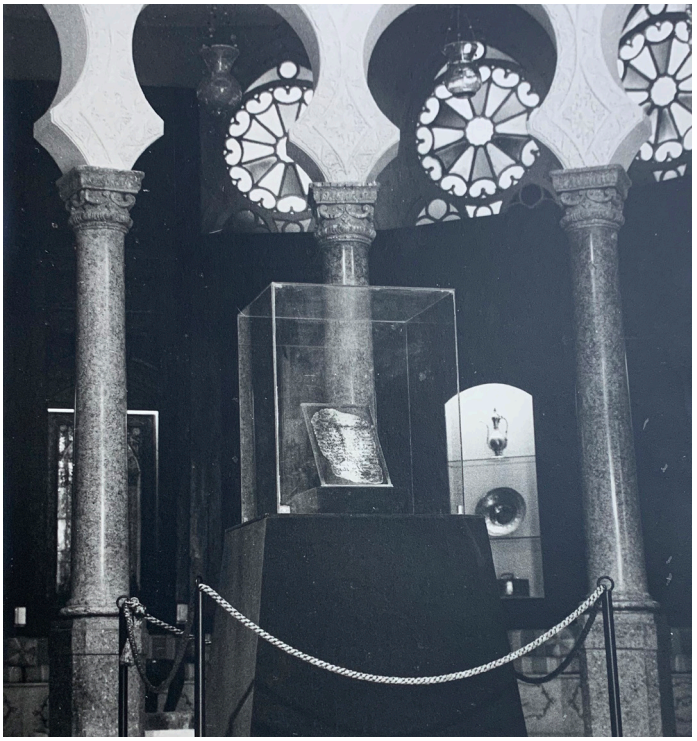

Fig. 7 The letter attributed to Prophet Muhammad in its lone case in the *salon arabe* on the first floor of the museum. 38 x 21 cm. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

The media generally picked up on the secular and dehistoricized approach of the museum and likewise singled out the letter as the most valuable piece. Newspapers and magazines interspersed pictures of standalone exhibits in their texts and highlighted their aesthetic value for current times. For example, poet, journalist, and visual artist Etel Adnan, in her preview article on the exhibition, commented on a partial reproduction of a sixteenth-century Ottoman copy of the Qurʾan written on a ten-meter scroll: "The central calligraphy starkly proves

the determining influence of Arab art on Paul Klee."[34] Otherwise, journalists and art critics praised the past achievements of Islam (as a historical actor) or Islamic civilization without any bearing on the living Muslim community. Only Nazih Khatir, columnist and art critic in *al-Nahār* newspaper, sought to extrapolate the artistic traditions to the present: "Our modern Man in whom persists the Man of Islamic history is in need of modern arts that perpetuate the artistic heritage."[35]

While Islamic art was not problematized in its conceptual construction or material manifestation, the museum and the media pointed out gaps and biases concerning the historical, geographical, and artistic span of Islam without tackling issues of misrepresentation or implications on the notion of Lebanese heritage. In the following sections, I highlight some of the unquestioned aspects which I attempt to complicate and address in tracing the story from the genesis of the idea of Islamic art in Lebanon to its materialization into a full-fledged exhibition.

III – Charting the Way to Islamic Art: Christian Melkite Icons, a Modern Museum, and the National Imagination

By the mid-1960s, after a series of exhibitions from Lebanon and the world at large, the committee considered refurbishment plans to transform the private residence into a functional public museum.[36] The Sursock Museum closed for renovation at the end of 1969 and the committee used this closure period to rethink the mission and the profile of the museum, especially in light of the success of the "Melkite Icons" — the last exhibition of this first period of activity — hailed for introducing a new typology into post-Byzantine art studies.[37] The Melkite icons, representing the work of Arab icon painters, were associated with a regional cultural and artistic flourishing in the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Eastern Christian churches in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine resulting

34- Etel Adnan, "Réouverture du Musée Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock: Grande exposition d'objets d'art islamique", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, May 24, 1974. Interestingly, the same picture featured as the cover picture of the exhibition catalogue.

35- In Arabic: "Insānunā al-jadīd alladhī yastamirr fīhi insān al-tārīkh al-islāmī huwa bi-ḥāja ilā funūn jadīda tastamirr fīhā funūn al-turāth." Nazīh Khāṭir, "Hadhā alladhī fī maṭḥaf sursuq yashhadu li-aṣālatina al-tārīkiyya fa hal yataʿaddāhu ilā turāth mustaqbalī", *al-Nahār al-Mulḥaq* June 9, 1974.

36- CR/SMA, June 20, 1966, and September 13, 1966. These exhibitions included "Precious Manuscripts, First Published Oriental books, Rare Books prior to 1799 (lent by Lebanese Libraries)" (1962); "German Art from 1910 until the Present Day" (1963); "65 Sculptures, 61 Drawings and Watercolours of Auguste Rodin" (1964); "Islamic and Modern Stained-Glass Windows" (1965); "Ancient and Modern Japanese Wood Engravings" (1966); and "Engravings of Canada's Eskimos" (1969).

37- Sylvia Agémian, "Introduction à l'étude des icônes Melkites", in CANDEA Virgil (ed.), I*cônes Melkites: Exposition organisée par le Musée Nicolas Sursock du 16 mai au 15 juin 1969* (Beirut : Imprimerie Catholique, 1969), 95-96.

in a differentiated iconography.[38] The museum took pride in the international collaboration and scientific research that gave rise to this exhibition dedicated to Nicolas Sursock in celebration of the museum's tenth anniversary.[39] The resulting bilingual (French-Arabic) catalogue documented the ninety-three icons borrowed from religious establishments and private collections and included six paintings from the museum collection.[40] The Melkite icons enterprise of discovery, documentation, and branding of a local artistic tradition represented a landmark in the museum's evolution, especially that two of the museum's own, Camille Aboussouan and Sylvia Agémian, were closely associated with it.[41]

In early 1971, the relaunch of the museum and the opening exhibition featured on the committee's agenda and both projects were entrusted to Aboussouan, the museum curator and longest-serving committee member.[42] Aboussouan's proposal focused on how to interpret the will of Nicolas Sursock, twenty years on, in light of contemporary museum practice, and thus on formulating a modern identity for the museum.[43] The curator's translation of the aesthete's will into a systematic policy for the museum took on a sacred turn, suggesting a niche specialization in the understudied exemplars of the region's treasures: painted and illuminated Arabic manuscripts, namely Qur'an copies and Melkite

38- André Grabar, "Les icônes melkites", in Candea (ed.), *Icônes Melkites*, 21-23; and Agémian, "Introduction à l'étude," 96-97. The new artistic classification was coined by Romanian historian of the Middle Ages and church art, Virgil Candea, who "defined as 'Melkite' the icons that were created by Arabic-speaking, Byzantine-rite Christians of the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem." Ioana Feodorov, "Through the Looking-Glass: Remembering the First Exhibition of Melkite Icons at the Sursock Museum in Beirut, May–June 1969", in Feodorov Ioana, Heyberger Bernard, Samuel Noble (eds.), *Arabic Christianity between the Ottoman Levant and Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 344.

39- Amine Beyhum, "Conservation, recherche, éducation", in Candea (ed.), Icônes Melkites, 13-14; and Aboussouan Camille, "Nos icônes", in Candea (ed.), *Icônes Melkites*, 15-18. It is not clear why the committee chose the Melkite icons to commemorate the museum founder.

40- As the reference document of the pioneering exhibition, the catalogue comprised a glossary, an iconographic repertoire, and an index of painters and provenances along with sevens essays and the icons' descriptions.

41- Aboussouan claimed he voiced the idea for an exhibition on icons in the first meeting of the museum committee. Aboussouan, "Nos icônes". Agémian worked independently on Arab icon painters before collaborating with Candea for the exhibition and catalogue. Feodorov, op. cit., 341.

42- CR/SMA, March 4, 1971. Lawyer, diplomat, writer, and collector, Camille Aboussouan (1919-2013) was the son of Najib Bey Aboussouan, the first president of the Lebanese court of cassation (1919-1932). Camille served as the Secretary General of the Lebanese National Commission for UNESCO between 1953 and 1972. He was appointed in 1957 along with Lady Yvonne Sursock Cochrane and Adil al-Solh, then president of the municipality of Beirut, as the first nucleus committee by President Chamoun. Aboussouan, "Naissance et gloire", 44. A great bibliophile, Aboussouan had amassed an immense collection of ancient books, of which 1,097 were auctioned at Sotheby's in 1993. See the catalogue of the auction *The Library of Camille Aboussouan, London, Sotheby's*, 1993. Six years later, he donated his private collection of oriental antiquities to the Musée des Beaux-Arts (Museum of Fine Arts) of Agen, making this institution's collection the third largest in France after the Louvre Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon. The Collection Camille Aboussouan consists of 1,600 items. Link: https://www.agen.fr/en-ce-moment/agenda/visite-guidee-collection-camille-aboussouan-661.html (accessed June 8, 2022).

43- Camille Aboussouan, "Note soumise à l'appréciation du Comité pour sa réunion du Jeudi 15 avril 1971", SMA.

icons.[44] This projected visual parity between the written Qur'anic text and the painted icons, echoing Orientalist biases vis-à-vis Islamic arts, evinced a Christian bias or precedence in Aboussouan's approach in seeking the Muslim counterpart to the Christian tradition of sacred art, given the lack of a similar religious iconography in the Muslim tradition. His keenness for a balanced representation of the Lebanese spiritual components bespoke the consociational pact that undergirded the post-mandate nation. He further recommended gearing the museum's acquisition policy towards icons and copies of the Qur'an as objects of unwaning value.[45]

The committee discussed these ideas at length without finalizing them. Instead, they agreed on a less spiritual and more secular orientation for the museum, dedicating it to "the arts of the Middle East with a priority for Lebanese arts and particularly those from the 16th century A.D. onwards."[46] This formulation projected the modern Lebanese identity onto the past and sought to reify a national foundation myth centered around the figure of Emir Fakhr al-Din II (r. 1590-1633) in the Ottoman period. It departed from a certain emphasis on Arab heritage and culture articulated in the proposed exhibitions program for the years 1972 and 1973.[47] By the end of the following year, Hugues de Varine-Bohan, director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), was invited to advise the committee on how to reshape the museum, its mission, and its course of action.[48] The renowned museologist encouraged the institution to specialize in post-Antiquity Near Eastern arts, thus opening the way for the Sursock Museum to become the first of its kind in the country.[49] The expansive purview of the museum's rebranded profile resituated it within the wider Islamic heritage of the region.[50] The various artistic identities suggested for the museum correlated with the competing national ideologies mapping the Lebanese homeland since

44- "Il semble qu'à la lumière de ces deux considérants, le testament et la définition du rôle des musées on puisse suggérer que le Musée Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock fixe par exemple sa personnalité permanente dans la révélation des deux richesses non encore suffisamment étudiées et attachées à cette région du monde: les manuscrits arabes à peintures et enluminures, notamment les Corans, et les Icônes melkites." Ibid.

45- Ibid.; and CR/SMA, April 1 and 15, 1971.

46- This statement was proposed by Jean Naffaʿ, lawyer of the museum, in a committee meeting hosted by the *mutawallī* at the Bristol hotel for lunch. CR/SMA, June 23, 1971.

47- The events program featured "Arabic calligraphy," "Arab woodwork," and "Arab pottery." Sylvia Agémian, "Notes soumises à l'appréciation de Messieurs les membres du Comité faisant suite au programme établi par le Conservateur le 15 avril 1971", SMA.

48- Hugues De Varine-Bohan, "Musée Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock, Rapport de Mission", February 1973, SMA.

49- With the focus on post-Antiquity arts from the seventh century onwards, de Varine-Bohan explained that the Sursock Museum would be the second museum in Lebanon (after the national museum, mainly dedicated to the Antiquity period) but the first with this specialization. De Varine-Bohan made no mention of the older, yet private, Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut established in 1868.

50- Most of the guiding examples in the report of the ICOM director referred to categories and periodization common to the field of Islamic art; and in his listing of the museums of Near Eastern art in the region, with whom the Sursock Museum was encouraged to collaborate, these were mostly specialized in Islamic arts and antiquities.

the French Mandate period.[51]

Returning to the committee's agenda and the reopening exhibition, the original theme proposed by the curator, in line with his overall vision for the museum, was titled "Muslim Miniatures and Illuminations" and elaborated on the model of the "Melkite Icons."[52] The proposal Aboussouan presented at the committee meeting ultimately focused on non-religious themes.[53] Sketched in grandiose terms, the proposition sought loans from fourteen countries (half of them in Europe) covering the main "schools" from the seventh century on and planned to enlarge the most beautiful "miniatures" on panels, for a total of approximately 190,000 Lebanese pounds, which included the cost of studies conducted by specialists of international renown.[54] This project had no doubt been worked out with the help of Salah al-Din al-Munajjid, Syrian expert in Arab-Islamic manuscripts and former collaborator with the museum, who was a guest at that meeting.[55] It is noteworthy that the suggested themes seem to adopt Eurocentric biases such as associating Islamic arts with ornamented works and "miniatures", but also work against Orientalist claims about the inferiority of Islamic societies due to the alleged inherent opposition between Islam and the image.[56] The committee was nonetheless unimpressed with the proposition and discarded it in favor of another seemingly more exciting subject: Islamic art. The curator was to develop a new proposal with the aid of al-Munajjid.

The leap from "Muslim Miniatures and Illuminations" to "Islamic Art" was not obvious and went beyond a mere shift in content as revealed by the committee's grappling with this still unfamiliar concept. Aboussouan's report stipulated a labor of "reconnaissance and identification of the most characteristic pieces" of Islamic art and underscored the lack of references and guides in the country.[57] Museum personnel had to be dispatched abroad where the most important ensembles of Islamic and Arab art could be found, and ample diplomatic

51- Kais M. Firro, "Lebanese Nationalism versus Arabism: From Bulus Nujaym to Michel Chiha", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40:5 (September 2004), 1-27.

52- Camille Aboussouan, "Projet d'exposition de miniatures et d'enluminures musulmanes. A l'occasion de l'ouverture du Musée en janvier 1972", SMA; and CR/SMA, March 4, 1971.

53- The suggested themes, typed in Arabic on top of the otherwise French report, were elaborated in the following terms: "ornamented and illustrated manuscripts representing human figures, animals and plants, astronomy instruments, planets, geographical maps, ancient manuscripts, war battles, love scenes." Aboussouan, "Projets d'exposition". Aboussouan was not in the habit of writing in Arabic and usually wrote in French.

54- Ibid. "Miniatures" reflect the Eurocentric lens through which paintings in historical manuscripts of the Islamic world were viewed: this terminology defines them by their conspicuously smaller size vis-à-vis paintings in the European tradition.

55- Al-Munajjid (1919-2010) was renowned as an expert in Arab-Islamic manuscripts following his directorship of the Arab League's Institute of Arabic Manuscripts in Cairo in 1955. He collaborated with Aboussouan for the 1968 exhibition "Arabic Calligraphies" at the Sursock Museum showing calligraphic specimens from the eighteenth century onwards. Aboussouan, "Naissance et gloire", 71.

56- Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic Art", 14.

57- Aboussouan Camille, "Exposition d'Art Islamique et Arabe. Rapport présenté au Comité du Musée Sursock pour discussion au cours de sa séance du lundi 5 Avril 1971", SMA.

efforts had to be exerted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to secure loans of "exceptional pieces."[58] The structure and the form of the event were to be similar to the icons exhibition featuring studies by specialized scholars, plenty of photographs, and a catalogue where "each object and its situation in the Islamic and Arab civilization would be described."[59] The report did not offer any working definition of Islamic art or a guiding principle for the exhibition but broadly reproduced the content and the contour of the mainstream category: beginning in the seventh century and divided into materials and along geo-ethnic qualifiers referred to as "schools" by Aboussouan[60], perhaps associating them with schools of painting styles in the Western tradition such as impressionism or cubism.

Between a nebulous concept and the uncertain potential of Lebanese collections in the shadow of internationally prominent ones, the committee struggled to pin down the rationale or organizing principle of this exhibition and the nature of objects to be exhibited.[61] Committee members borrowed a capacious and unattainable definition of Islamic art grounded in the universalist model, but the materialization of this concept necessitated loans from specialized museums around the world, which according to Aboussouan, would prove difficult to secure given the Sursock Museum's lack of specialization and the insignificance of its reopening on the international scene.[62] He thus proposed to a doubtful committee that they glean the content of the exhibition from Lebanese amateurs and antiquities dealers as well as regional centers such as Cairo and Istanbul in the forms of purchases or loans. Stuck on the idea, the committee chose to test the Lebanese grounds and align this event with its mission of uncovering and promoting the national heritage.[63] This redirection of the exhibition set off a work of exploration and surveying of locally available Islamic art. Without further details recorded, the decision for Islamic art to be the focus of the opening exhibition was made on April 22, 1971.[64] The event was to take place three years later, under the title "Islamic Art in the Lebanese Private Collections".

IV – Islamic Art and the Importance of Lebanese Collectors for the Nation

Aboussouan's preliminary study for the exhibition pointed to an absence of Islamic art in Lebanon whether as an art historical concept, a museological practice, or a collectors' category.[65] To be sure, a material Islamic heritage was

58- Ibid.
59- Ibid.
60- The schools of Islamic art, according to Aboussouan, were Syro-Egyptian, Maghrebi, Persian, Ottoman, and Hindu. Ibid.
61- CR/SMA, April 1 and 5, 1971.
62- Ibid.; and Aboussouan, "Exposition d'Art Islamique et Arabe".
63- CR/SMA, April 1, 5 and 22, 1971.
64- CR/SMA, April 22, 1971.
65- Aboussouan, "Exposition d'Art Islamique et Arabe".

not lacking in Lebanon, but it had to be staged as "Islamic art" through loans from private Lebanese collections which endowed existing objects with an exhibitionary value. In the only academic review dedicated to the exhibition, John Michael Rogers, historian of Islamic art based at the American University in Cairo at the time and speaker at the public lecture series organized for the event at the museum, wrote: "The Lebanon is one of the few countries of the Middle East without any public collection of Islamic art, so that the exhibition was of particular importance as an index of the growing public interest in the subject."[66] The Islamic art historian also pinpointed the absence in the exhibition of Islamic finds from contemporary excavation sites in modern Lebanon such as Tyre and Tripoli.[67] This exclusion could have echoed the deliberate official strategy of omitting the Islamic historical sites from a map on the back of a tourism brochure by the National Council of Tourism in Lebanon circa 1970.[68] On the other hand, in the public lectures, the speakers integrated evidence from local archaeological sites in their arguments.[69] Nonetheless, the overall framing of the exhibition removed Islamic art from the immediate national context and anchored it instead in the cosmopolitan propensity of Lebanese statesmen and businessmen.

The collectors belonged to the traditional elite and consisted of a group of wealthy statesmen and businessmen whose political and economic clout partly manifested in the acquisition of private collections and the accretion of inherited fortunes. Of the sixteen amateurs who participated in the opening exhibition, many were known for other genres in their collections, and a few had contributed to earlier exhibitions organized by the Sursock Museum such as the "Oriental Carpets" (1963) and the "Melkite Icons" exhibitions, both drawing on Lebanese collections.[70] According to J. M. Rogers, "[t]he principal lenders to the exhibition, some of whom have been collecting for forty years or more, are mostly of Syrian or Egyptian origin and have concentrated accordingly upon the Near East - mediaeval Egypt, Greater Syria and Ottoman Turkey, and have only recently, I should judge, turned their attention to Iran."[71] The largest share of the Islamic exhibits, 188 of 219, belonged to six collectors while another five

66- J. M. Rogers, "Review of *Art islamique dans les collections privées libanaises", Kunst des Orients*, 9:1/2 (1973/74), 169.

67- Ibid.

68- Maasri, op. cit., 135-136.

69- These talks included for example: Emir Maurice Chéhab, "Naissance de l'architecture islamique illustrée par Anjar," and Amine Bizri, "Monuments mamlouks de Tripoli. Essai de restauration." See Aboussouan (ed.), *Art islamique*, 9.

70- In an interview with the magazine *al-Usbūʿ al-ʿArabī*, Agémian explained that the committee contacted these collectors specifically because they knew them. Aṣfahānī, op. cit., 71.

71- J. M. Rogers., op. cit., 170.

only contributed rugs.[72] Specifically, the substantial holdings of Islamic art were concentrated in three collections owned by Henri Pharaon (president of the Beirut port company and former minister of foreign affairs),[73] an anonymous tycoon,[74] and Ibrahim Beyhum (director of the Sursock Museum).[75]

The committee profiled the collectors as cosmopolitan individuals who have "historically promoted art manifestations in Lebanon and the values of civilization that our country prides itself in."[76] The museum framed the event as a highly scientific, professional, and modern endeavor of national interest and international import which necessitated their participation and support. An exhibition catalogue documenting the entirety of the exhibits would reveal to the world the hitherto unpublished possessions in famed Lebanese collections and enable the museum to fulfill its mission of promoting Lebanese and Near Eastern heritage at large.[77] The partnership between the museum and the private collectors warranted a national heritage contingent on the power and the taste of the few to acquire material possessions of international appeal, and on the institution's role to nominally consolidate it in public exhibitions. Associating the interests of select individuals with those of the nation, or the private with the public, the committee equated the aggregate of the privately owned collections to the Lebanese heritage and contributed to its mercantile and cosmopolitan configuration.

Islamic art, as it was introduced in Lebanon, ultimately represented the private fortunes of collectors — a select group from the predominantly Christian ruling elite. Defining the parameters of Islamic art and Lebanese heritage along the lines of twentieth-century collecting practices — some dating back to the French

72- The six principal contributors were Henri Pharaon, Ibrahim Beyhum, Fouad Matouk, Michel Chiha, and two anonymous collectors. In all, three collectors stipulated anonymity. The coins belonged to the late Chiha's numismatic collection. The remaining thirty-one exhibits belonged to Sami Shoukair, Abdallah Salam, Camille Aboussouan, Nicolas Bustros, Moussa de Freige, Amine Beyhum, Badie Boulos, Melhem Moubarak, and Edmond Massoud (the last five collectors contributed rugs).

73- For more on Pharaon's extensive collection and its connection with his nationalist ideology, see May Farhat, "A Mediterraneanist's Collection: Henri Pharaon's 'Treasure House of Arab Art'", *Ars Orientalis*, 42 (2012), 102-113.

74- In a letter concluding the loan agreement with the museum addressed to Agémian, this collector, whose contribution to the exhibition consisted of pieces from Samanid, Seljuk, Safavid, and Qajar Persia, specified that his name must not appear. Letter from [Anonymous] to Agémian, March 22, 1974, Beirut, SMA.

75- Due to limited space, only the following will be noted: Bustros served as the Sursock Museum president between 1966 and 1968; Chiha (brother-in-law of Pharaon and founder of the francophone daily *Le Jour* in 1934) and Shoukair were entrepreneurs in the banking sector; de Freige was a former deputy in the Lebanese parliament; Matouk was better known for his world-class collection of ancient Egyptian amulets and scarabs.

76- [Letters to the Collectors], May 13, 1974, SMA. The rationale, scope, and ambition of the exhibition were most articulately expressed in the letters addressed to the amateurs by Victor Cassir, president of the museum, on behalf of the *mutawallī*. Sixteen letters printed in French and dated May 13, 1974 were sent out to the lenders.

77- Ibid.

Mandate — marginalized the rich and varied material heritage, present and perhaps still used in ordinary households, that was not necessarily identified as "art" or distinguished as "Islamic."

V – Behind the Scenes of Islamic Art: Foreign Experts and the Aesthetics of the Secular

While the idea for the opening exhibition began with a Lebanese desire to complement the phenomenon of the Melkite icons with a counterpart in the Muslim tradition and develop the museum into a state-of-the-art institution, it ultimately placed Lebanon on the global map of Islamic art chiefly owing to the French, Egyptian, and British experts consulted for the exhibition.

The 1970s were an important decade in the historiography of Islamic art with scholarly overtures, such as Oleg Grabar's critical interrogations of the subject beginning with his *Formation of Islamic Art* in 1973, and studies expanding the methodological and conceptual postulations of the discipline beyond the early Islamic period and the Fertile Crescent.[78] Partly due to the emergence of new dynamics on the world scene rhythmed by oil and identity politics,[79] and partly due to changing patterns and novel questions arising from within the field, Islamic art gathered a new momentum.[80] It was the first time since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that largescale exhibitions were organized, noting here, for example: the 1969 exhibition in Cairo "Islamic Art in Egypt, 969-1517" celebrating the capital's millennium; the Paris exhibition "Arts de l'Islam des origines à 1700 dans les collections publiques françaises" (the first large-scale Parisian exhibition since the 1903 "Exposition des arts musulmans" at the Musée des arts décoratifs); and the "World of Islam Festival" in London and other British cities in 1976, which represented the "zenith" of European interest in Islamic art in the 1970s.[81]

During the committee's deliberations on Islamic art in early 1971, the director of the museum, Ibrahim Beyhum, and the museum researcher, Sylvia Agémian, were asked to compile a preliminary list of Lebanese amateurs and contact them to identify the locally available material. However, they still needed an expert to evaluate these findings.[82] Shortly after, the committee seemed set on Ralph Pinder-Wilson, deputy keeper in the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum, with whom Ibrahim Beyhum had met in London, to oversee

78- Necipoğlu, op. cit., p. 1. Oleg Grabar (1929-2011), son of famous Byzantinist André Grabar (1896-1990), involved in the Melkite icons phenomenon, was a leading historian of Islamic art and archaeology in the second half of the twentieth century.

79- Sheila S. Blair, Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field", *The Art Bulletin*, 85:1 (2003), 152-153 and 156-157.

80- Blair, Bloom, op. cit., 156-157.

81- Ibid., 157.

82- CR/SMA, April 5 and 22, 1971.

the selection of objects, the making of the catalogue, and the setting up of the exhibition.[83] Nevertheless, the path to the exhibition was going to take a couple of detours before materializing in the hands not of Pinder-Wilson, but his friend and senior, Basil Gray, the first keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum.[84]

Incidentally, the first appraisal and inventory of Islamic art in the Lebanese collections employed the criteria of French museums, and more precisely those applied in the contemporary exhibition at the Orangerie des Tuileries, "Arts de l'Islam des origines à 1700 dans les collections publiques françaises." A member of the exhibition committee and curator at the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the Louvre Museum, Marthe Bernus, in Beirut at the time, visited the collections designated by the Sursock committee in the fancy residences of the local amateurs and produced the first assessment relating to the "Islamic aspect" of Lebanese collections.[85] Divested of any spiritual meaning, the *Islamic* aspect indexed the medium, historical/dynastic period, place of origin, and style of the artifacts. Disappointed with the outcome, Bernus underscored the necessity of foreign loans lest the exhibition would misrepresent Islamic art. Severe but nonetheless didactic, the French curator's report laid out the components of a holistic and aesthetic exhibition of Islamic art as they had been canonized since the 1910 Munich model exhibition "Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art."[86] Bernus's report listed the various categories of objects by material and highlighted the gaps in the Lebanese collections while postulating a "desirable balance" of the various "Islamic personalities" across time and space and privileging an aesthetic experience for the viewer with select artworks instead of everyday objects.[87]

83- CR/SMA, June 23, 1971.

84- Official contact was made with Pinder-Wilson and Gray through Paul Gotch, director of the British Council. Letter from Pinder-Wilson to Gotch, January 24, 1972, SMA; letter from Gray to Gotch, March 1, 1972, SMA.

85- CR/SMA, August 30, 1971. Marthe Bernus, "Note relative à l'aspect islamique des collections libanaises considérées au cours de mon séjour au Liban sur l'invitation du Musée Nicolas Sursock en prévision d'une exposition devant se tenir en 1972", SMA.

86- Eva-Maria Troelenberg, "Framing the Artwork: Munich 1910 and the Image of Islamic Art", in Andrea Lermer, Avinoam Shalem (eds.), 37-64.

87- Bernus, "Note relative à l'aspect islamique".

The inauspicious account baffled the committee, who decided to request a detailed inventory of the collections from Bernus and to hold off the decision to seek loans until the arrival of the British Museum expert.[88] A few days later, a first public announcement of the project, featuring short interviews with Aboussouan and Bernus, associated the glamorous reopening of the museum with a sensational exhibition of Islamic art. (see fig. 8)[89] By mid-October 1971 a subcommittee for the event was formed.[90]

THE MONITOR
MAGAZINE

EXPOSITION

Un événement: l'exposition d'Art Islamique

A l'heure où les bâtiments du Musée Sursock ressuscitent, où il redevient possible de concevoir de nouvelles expositions, chacun devine que la première sera inoubliable. Il faut un événement artistique, pareil à l'intérêt mondial suscité par l'exposition des icônes melkites, pour inaugurer ces salles spacieuses, enfin conçues suivant les normes d'un véritable musée.

— Nous envisageons de faire une exposition d'Art Islamique, nous confie M. Camille Aboussouan, conservateur du Musée Sursock

M. Camille Aboussouan : « L'expression «icône melkite» est entrée grâce à nous dans le vocabulaire artistique international. »

Excellente initiative, qui donnerait, certes, beaucoup d'éclat à l'inauguration des nouveaux bâtiments, et qui rencontrerait un accueil chaleureux au Moyen-Orient, sinon dans le monde.

— La civilisation islamique est très riche. Nous voudrions nous limiter aux collections libanaises, mais représentent-elles toutes les formes de cet art, y trouverons-nous de quoi honorer la culture musulmane, ou devrons-nous avoir recours aux musées étrangers ?

La façade extérieure est maintenue, mais les nouvelles salles répondent aux diktats d'un m

C'est la principale interrogation que doit résoudre, pour l'instant, le conservateur du Musée Sursock. Voilà pourquoi, depuis plusieurs mois déjà, M. Aboussouan sillonne le pays, va d'une collection privée à l'autre, et cherche à établir le bilan des richesses libanaises. Il lui faudra trouver toutes sortes d'objets : tapis, céramiques, métaux, pierres sculptées, ivoires, bijoux, manuscrits, miniatures, verres émaillés, tissus... pour montrer au public les divers aspects de cet art.

La tâche est difficile, mais les responsables du Musée Sursock n'en sont plus à leur première expérience. La semaine dernière, cette quête connaissait un rythme encore plus grand, puisque Mlle Marthe Bernus, conservateur de la section d'Art Islamique au Musée du Louvre, se trouvait à Beyrouth.

— Nous avons invité Mlle Bernus à passer ses vacances au Liban, nous dit M. Aboussouan. Sur ma demande, elle a rendu visite aux divers collectionneurs.

La présence de Mlle Bernus au Liban est d'un grand intérêt, cela pour diverses raisons. En dehors d'attributions qui en font la spécialiste de l'art islamique en France, Mlle Bernus vient d'organiser — avec son collègue Henri Marchal — l'exposition d'Art Islamique, première du genre depuis 1903, qui s'est tenue à Paris du 23 juin au 30 août 1971.

Le Musée de l'Orangerie, où cette importante manifestation artistique avait lieu, recevait près de 800 visiteurs par jour. C'est assez dire l'intérêt suscité par un art peu connu du grand public européen.

— Le but de l'exposition était de montrer, dans le cadre islamique, l'art né dans des pays de cultures et de races différentes, et n'ayant qu'un seul trait d'union : l'Islam.

Analyser avec Mlle Bernus les caractéristiques propres à cet art exigerait plusieurs heures, et dépasserait le contexte d'une interview rapide. Nous nous contenterons de savoir que le conservateur de la sec-

Mlle Bernus : « J'ai toujours été attirée par l'Orient. »

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— Ainsi dans
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très vaste échant
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cela va des arme
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sculptées (tombea
néraires...), cristau
bijoux, tissus, ver
reliures, manuscrit
cour de Paris le
pects de l'art islan
fleuri.

Je reviendrai
la mi-novembre,
Mlle Bernus.

Ce retour n'est p
aux préparatifs qui
lent actuellement
Sursock. Et Beyrouth
prêter à vivre un mo
ment artistique, un d
les archives internat
l'art auront soin d'e

Figure. 8 – First announcement of the exhibition of Islamic art at the Sursock Museum, featuring interviews and photos of Camille Aboussouan, curator at the Sursock Museum, and Marthe Bernus, curator at the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the Louvre Museum. D. A., "Un évènement: L'exposition d'Art Islamique", *Magazine*, September 3, 1971. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

88- CR/SMA, August 30, 1971; letters from Ibrahim Beyhum to Bernus, August 31, 1971, and January 4, 1972; letter from Bernus to Ibrahim Beyhum, September 8, 1971, SMA. Bernus's inventory listed the objects in situ and provided only enough basic information to identify them. Marthe Bernus, "Objets appartenant à des collections libanaises et susceptibles de figurer à l'exposition d'art islamique du Musée N. Sursock", (no date), SMA; and letter from Bernus to Agémian, April 21, 1972, SMA. In all, Bernus visited eleven collections.

89- D. A., "Un évènement: L'exposition d'Art Islamique", *Magazine*, September 3, 1971, SMA. Only the author's initials are given for this article.

90- Formed on October 15, 1971, the subcommittee was presided over by Fawzi Daouk (vice-president of the museum), and included Nadia Kettaneh, Camille Aboussouan, Amin Bizri, ʿAsim Salam, and Loutfalla Melki. Letter from Victor Cassir (president of the museum) to Aboussouan, October 15, 1971, SMA. Unfortunately, no other document relating to this subcommittee has so far been located.

Mahmud al-Hadidi, archaeologist and head of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization's Islamic and Coptic section, was also invited to evaluate local collections and prepared the second appraisal in view of the exhibition. Al-Hadidi only visited four collections — the more substantial ones containing some 200 items as per his count — and provided a detailed inventory in Arabic including a thorough description, dating, and geographical or dynastic origin of thirty-five objects.[91] While the curator pointed out some of the shortcomings in the local collections, he assuaged the concerns of the Sursock Museum committee aroused by Bernus and reassured them that even with foreign loans, no exhibition could encompass the totality of Islamic art. He appeared even more in tune with the local parameters within which the committee envisioned its project, confirming the importance of the event in and of itself as a Lebanese achievement. He further noted the unique opportunity to create the first scientific reference for these hitherto unpublished masterworks and integrate the local collections into the larger corpus of Islamic art in the world. The Egyptian expert nevertheless recorded his frustration at the total lack of information regarding the accession of the items, which rendered his documentation work all the more difficult.

Between the reports of Bernus and al-Hadidi, the Sursock Museum committee discovered the secularist and aesthetic ideals through which art history attempted to study Islam in its material forms. Indeed, the encyclopedic approach of the 1970s helped translate the spiritual tropes of unity in diversity and diversity in unity concerning Islam into material forms.[92] Incapable of matching this comprehensive outlook, the local museum tailored the event to the Lebanese context and made it as much about joining the modern manifestation of Islamic art, as about the national heritage hidden in the private collections of the traditional urban merchant nobility.

Basil Gray flew to Beirut on four occasions for the purpose of the exhibition.[93] His first (and possibly unique) visit to the collections took place almost a year after Bernus's referential work, and that was probably when an agreement was finalized between the veteran British Islamic art historian and the Sursock Museum. The bulk of the work, which entailed the final selection of art objects for the exhibition, their description and the text for the catalogue, as well as other logistical issues including the display set-up, took place over a long trail of

91- Maḥmūd Al-Ḥadīdī, "Taqrīr bi-shaʾn iqāmat maʿraḍ al-fann al-islāmī min al-majmūʿāt al-lubnāniyya al-khāṣṣa", April 4, 1972, SMA.

92- This trope reflects the universalist approach to Islamic art which maintains that "all the arts produced by Muslims everywhere… [reflect] the universal verities of Islam, just as God's ineffable unity encompasses the infinite diversity of his creation." Blair, Bloom, op. cit., 158. Alternatively, arguments about artistic unity and variety were attributed to "timeless ethno-national categories with racial overtones." Necipoğlu, op. cit., 4.

93- Etel Adnan, "En marge de la grande exposition d'art islamique du Musée Sursock", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, May 27, 1974.

back-and-forth correspondence between Beirut and Berkshire.[94] The museum staff sent Gray photographs, transparencies, and descriptive notes of the objects he had selected on his ten-day visit,[95] thus enabling the third and final cataloguing of the exhibits.[96]

Gray completed his catalogue contributions and mailed them to the museum by March 1973, but the exhibition had to be postponed for yet another year due to the slow progress of renovation at the museum and the unfolding events in the Middle East between the oil embargo and the Arab-Israeli October War.[97] By the end of 1973, preparations were back on track, and in early May 1974, the committee finalized the insurance contract and sent off the official loan requests to the Lebanese collectors.[98]

The British expert articulated the proper way of showing, and thus of seeing, Islamic art by elaborating the exhibition specifications and outlining the spatial arrangement and the display techniques appropriate to the various types of objects. The means to understanding the material culture of Islam merely depended on the physical features of the artifacts like their medium, style, or size: calligraphic objects were best viewed in "the long architect-built vitrine," small translucent works (glass and rock crystal) on a shallow case against the wall with "rear lighting transmitted through frosted glass," and lacquer and other "very small exhibits" on a "flat-topped 'tablecase'."[99]

Gray's mise-en-scène at the Sursock Museum followed the Munich exhibition principles that strove to emancipate the artwork from its cultural or historical context and emphasize its formal qualities.[100] Such decontextualization opened the way for his public lecture on "The Idea of an Exhibition of Islamic Art," where he expressly articulated his belief in the "essence" of Islamic art based on two main principles: calligraphy and "what has come to be called not very satisfactorily the arabesque."[101] This was perhaps an early formulation of the fuller statement at the 1976 exhibition "The Arts of Islam" at the Hayward Gallery organized by a specialized committee chaired by Gray for the World of

94- The correspondence between Beyhum and Gray for the core preparations extended from July 26, 1972 until March 1, 1973 and comprised some fourteen letters. Beyhum also met with Gray in England in early 1973. Letter from Gray to Beyhum, February 12, 1973, SMA.

95- Gray visited the collections in the company of Beyhum and Agémian who took notes following Gray's selection of potential exhibits during their tour and later typed them up in his presence.

96- The entries for the rugs and the coins were taken on by Ibrahim Beyhum and Anouchavan Ebeyan respectively.

97- Letter Agémian to Gray, November 30, 1973, SMA.

98- CR/SMA, September 20, 1973, November 30, 1973, May 8 and 28, 1974, SMA. The archival records relating to the correspondence with Gray seem to end in January 1974 with a cable informing Gray that the exhibition was likely to start in April that year and inviting him for a visit early March and another just before the exhibition to help with the installation. Telegram from Beyhum to Gray, (no date), SMA.

99- Letter from Gray to Beyhum, November 23, 1972, SMA.

100- Troelenberg, op. cit., 37-39 and 43; Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic Art", 18.

101- Basil Gray, "L'idée d'une exposition d'art islamique", unpublished, SMA.

Islam Festival. In his article published on the occasion of the Festival and titled "The Essence of Islamic Art," Gray picked up his earlier argument and elaborated on "the two major categories of Islamic design" that produced visual continuities across media and time, which — unlike the display in Beirut — were highlighted in a thematic rather than a technical or a chronological arrangement.[102] The art historian detected a visual coherence and continuity in material designs which he attributed to a common faith and theorized as the "essence" that justified the unifying concept "Islamic art."[103]

The Lebanese exhibition of Islamic art gained a cosmopolitan edge with the involvement of French, Egyptian, and British professionals who selected the best objects and helped show them in an aesthetic light as per modern standards. The art historical tenets, conceptual tools, and methods that brought together and organized plates, bowls, Qur'an manuscripts, and paintings translated the "Islamic" attribute into formal, visual elements devoid of cultural meanings, historical contingencies, or spiritual experiences.

VI – Before Islamic Art: Material Histories and Euro-American and Ottoman Interest in "Oriental" Antiquities

Soon after the decision to dedicate the opening exhibition to Islamic art, the museum began building up its permanent collections in light of the themes of its past and upcoming landmark exhibitions, namely Melkite icons and Islamic art. By the time of its inauguration, the acquisitions included three icons, three to four pieces of Turkish silverware, and a few other antiquities from local dealers like Kosti Habis, Asfar Ikhwan, and Khalil J. Sarkis of the Big Oriental Market, as well as Aux Vestiges, Galerie Fakhreddine, and the antiquities shop at the Phoenicia Hotel.[104] Though none of these accessions featured in the opening event, the more important items of Islamic art in the museum collection — the seventeenth-century *Qishani* mihrab (ceramic prayer niche from Qashan) and the Mesopotamian jar — were bought during the exhibition.[105]

A closer look at some of the channels and means through which the Mesopotamian jar and the letter of the Prophet made it to the exhibition shows the historical and regional dynamics in antiquities trade that underlay the making of Islamic art in Lebanon in the second half of the twentieth century. In this regard, for example, we note the precursor to Asfar Ikhwan and Sarkis's Big Oriental Market, the early twentieth-century Damascus-based antiquities firm Asfar & Sarkis, which exported contemporary artisanal products and antiquities to Europe and the

102- Basil Gray, "The Essence of Islamic Art", *Apollo*, (April 1976), 262-263.

103- Gray, "L'idée d'une exposition".

104- CR/SMA, June 11, 16 and 23, 1971, February 29, 1972, and February 8, 1973.

105- CR/SMA, June 28, 1974. *Qishani* refers to the famous ceramic center in the ancient city of Qashan in Iran during the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries.The Mesopotamian jar was mistakenly referred to as *Qishani* in the minutes of the committee meeting.

United States via its post in Beirut.[106] These trajectories reinscribe the role of Ottoman Beirut as an entrepot for the regional and the East-West trade which contributed to its cosmopolitan identity.

The Lebanese collections eyed for the opening event mainly comprised historical artifacts from Syria and Iran. This was especially true of the ceramics — a medium so prevalent in these private holdings that, despite the numerous and beautiful specimens, Bernus noted a risk of monotony and historical particularism in her assessment.[107] The bias grew from an overrepresentation of pottery dated between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, of which a majority was attributed to Raqqa. A Syrian city on the left bank of the Euphrates River, Raqqa is particularly famous in modern times for its medieval production of ceramic ware, especially the underglaze- and luster-painted types resulting from sophisticated production techniques.[108] Artifacts from the region appeared in European and North American art markets in the late nineteenth century and soon turned into a craze for "Raqqa wares" which lasted at least until the Great Depression.[109] Syrian antiquities firm, Kouchakji Frères, which "concentrated its entire resources and experience in the discovery and the bringing to America of the most important examples of Near Eastern art," played a pioneering role in that trade as per the catalogue of their 1927 auction in New York.[110]

The Raqqa archaeological site was "the first and only Islamic site" to be excavated by the Ottoman Imperial Museum (1905-1906 and 1908) in an unsuccessful attempt to compete with Western covetousness and quasi-systematic looting of the site.[111] The early twentieth-century mania prevented any methodical study of the dating and provenance of the finds, typically though erroneously labelling them as ninth-century Raqqa ware.[112] Indeed, later excavations and research in the 1950s dated the earliest ceramic production at Raqqa to the twelfth century (rather than the ninth) and described them as the Tell Minis type.[113] The Sursock Museum display counted eight pieces of this recent discovery — "a group equalled at present only by those in the C.L. Davids Samling in Copenhagen," boasted the exhibition curator.[114]

106- Anke Scharrahs, "Two Layers of Authenticity: The Damascus Room at Shangri La", *Shangri La Working Papers in Islamic Art*, 8 (November 2014), 2-3 and 6.

107- Bernus, "Note relative à l'aspect islamique".

108- Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Raqqa Revisited: Ceramics of Ayyubid Syria* (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2006), 3-5.

109- Marcus Milwright, "Review of *Raqqa Revisited: Ceramics of Ayyubid Syria*", by Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *CAA. Reviews New York*, (2006), 1.

110- Quoted in Jenkins-Madina, op. cit., 17. Kouchakji Frères was established in Aleppo in the nineteenth century and expanded a generation later into galleries in Paris and New York. Ibid., 15n18.

111- Ayşin Yoltar-Yildirim, "Raqqa: The Forgotten Excavation of an Islamic Site in Syria by the Ottoman Imperial Museum in the Early Twentieth Century", *Muqarnas*, 30:1 (2013), 73-75 and 77.

112- Milwright, op. cit., 1; and Jenkins-Madina, op. cit., 15-17.

113- Gray, "Introduction" and "Descriptions", 92 and 111-112.

114- Ibid.

Incidentally, antique dealer Khalil J. Sarkis of the Big Oriental Market at Saint Georges' Bay promoted, authenticated, and sold to the museum an "Arab Raqqa earthenware jar of the 9th century."[115] Referred to as "Zone Franche" or "ZF jar" in the correspondence between Beyhum and Gray following the latter's first visit in June 1972, this unclaimed jar was spotted in the free zone of the Beirut port where it remained until right before the exhibition.[116] The preliminary agreement between the Big Oriental Market and the Sursock Museum was signed just ten days before the inauguration to release the jar for the exhibition. The jar did not feature with the Raqqa ensemble but was re-authenticated by Gray to an earlier period dating between the seventh and ninth centuries, with Mesopotamia as its place of origin. It was only towards the end of the exhibition, that the Sursock Museum agreed to buy what turned out to be "the finest piece in [its] collection," the jar figuring as number 10 in the catalogue.[117]

Another of Bernus's many reservations on the potential of the local collections designated for the exhibition concerned the arts of the book. Though generally dissatisfied with the limited spectrum of bindings, miniatures, illuminated manuscripts, and exemplars of calligraphy, the curator confidently noted that "the famous letter of the Prophet to Khosrow could in any case be the center of the exhibition."[118] The story of that infamous letter dated back to the previous decade when Salah al-Din al-Munajjid published in the Lebanese newspapers *al-Ḥayāt* and *Le Jour* his study authenticating the alleged letter sent by Prophet Muhammad to Khosrow II, king of Persia in the seventh century, now in the possession of Henri Pharaon.[119] Apparently, the latter found the unsuspected scroll among other decrepit ones passed down from his father who had allegedly bought it in Damascus at the end of World War I for 150 gold liras; Pharaon passed on the letter to Aboussouan who conveyed it to his friend and expert paleographer al-Munajjid to decipher.[120] The scroll, fixed on a green cloth and placed in a glass frame, was torn halfway and bore a circular seal at the bottom (Fig. 9); along with this iconic description, pictures of the purported "original" letter were reproduced in the Lebanese media.[121]

115- The sale proposal and authentication certificate from Sarkis confirmed the jar was found at Raqqa and dated back to the ninth century. Khalil J. Sarkis, "A la suite de notre proposition verbale" and "Certificat d'authenticité", May 20, 1974, SMA.

116- The story has it that, when passing by the port, Ibrahim Beyhum spotted the jar destined to a foreign country, probably the United States, and asked Gray to examine it. The latter enthusiastically recommended it to the museum, noting the exceptionally intact state and size of such an early piece. Recorded interview with Saleh Saad, Sursock Museum, 2015, unpublished, SMA.

117- CR/SMA, June 28, 1974; and Kiwan, Agémian, op. cit., 7.

118- Bernus, "Note relative à l'aspect islamique".

119- Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Al-Munajid, "Wathīqa tārīkhiyya qadīma yakshifuhā al-daktūr al-Munajjid fī ḥawzat Hanrī Farʿūn: Risālat al-nabī Muḥammad bin ʿAbdallah (ṣ) ilā Abrūwīz malik al-furs", *al-Ḥayāt*, no. 5242 May 22, 1963; and Salah Al-Mounajjid, "Dans la collection de manuscrits de M. Henri Pharaon, un important document historique: L'original de la lettre du Prophète Mahomet à Chosroès II Abhervêz, roi de Perse", *Le Jour*, May 23, 1963.

120- Al-Munajjid, op. cit. The narrative has been transmitted in somewhat varying versions and details.

121- See for example, *L'Orient-Le Jour and Ṣadā Lubnān*, May 31, 1974; *al-Nahār and al-Safīr*, June 1, 1974; *al-Jumhūr al-Jadīd*, June 5, 1974; *al-Liwāʾ*, June 14, 1974; and *Bayrūt*, June 16, 1974.

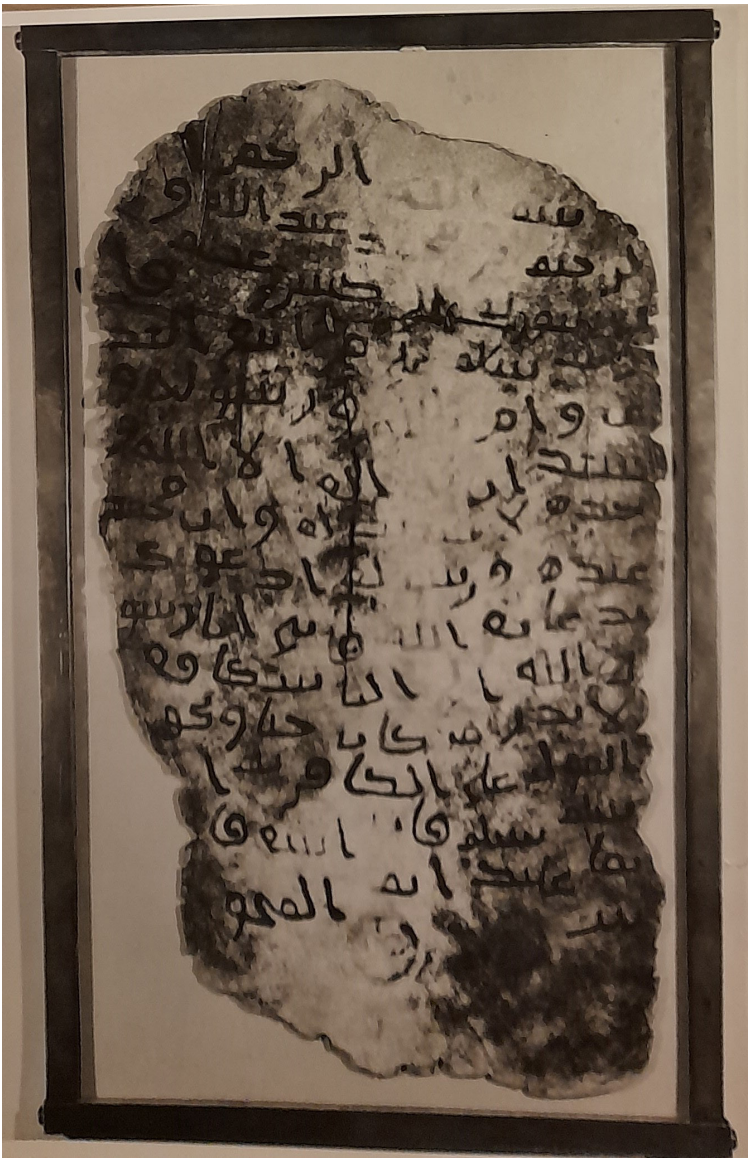

Fig. 9 – Close-up of the letter attributed to Prophet Muhammad showing the circular seal at the bottom center and the tear from the top to the middle. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

Two other purportedly prophetic letters were found in Damascus in 1863 and 1938. According to the British Orientalist and Arabist Douglas Morton Dunlop, who personally carried the putative prophetic letter addressed to the Negus of Abyssinia to London for examination in 1938, there was an active market for ancient manuscript forgeries at least since the astronomical sum was paid by the Ottoman government for the letter to the Muqawqis of Egypt, discovered by the young French Orientalist scholar Etienne Barthélemy in early 1850s Egypt.[122] Apparently, Barthélemy chanced upon the prophetic letter in a monastery while looking for ancient Coptic manuscripts to salvage.[123] The young scholar wet the Arabic parchment to detach it from Coptic vellums then placed it between two glass panes to prevent its further deterioration, all the while maintaining its visibility for further inspection.[124] This glass-framed letter may have inspired the later framing of Pharaon's parchment.

In general, "[t]he authenticity of the letters of the prophet Muhammad to the Emperor Heraclius, the Persian King Chosroes, the Negus of Abyssinia and to others" has caused great controversy.[125] Among the many letters the Prophet had sent to the rulers of neighboring kingdoms inviting them to embrace Islam, the one addressed to Khosrow II is the most problematic from a historiographical perspective given that the traditional Muslim sources agree that the Sasanian ruler tore up the letter in defiance. Thus, its serendipitous reappearance in the hands of Henri Pharaon some 1300 years later left room for doubt and contention.[126]

Connecting the letter of the Prophet to Khosrow with the stories around other prophetic letters since the mid-nineteenth century and the Mesopotamian jar to the early twentieth-century craze for Raqqa wares brings historical depth to the late twentieth-century exhibition. These artifacts elicit the role of late Ottoman Beirut in regional connections and international dynamics around the trade in antiquities variably labelled as post-Antiquity, Arab, Near or Middle Eastern, and finally as Islamic art.

122- D. M. Dunlop, "Another 'Prophetic' Letter", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, 1 (1940), 54, 56 and 58-60.

123- François-Alphonse Belin, "Lettre à M. Reinaud, membre de l'Institut, sur un document arabe relative à Mahomet par M. Belin, le Caire, 10 mars 1852", *Journal Asiatique*, 4:5, (1854), 484 and 490.

124- Belin, op. cit., 486-487.

125- Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "Muḥammad and Heraclius: A Study in Legitimacy", *Studia Islamica*, 89, (1999), 10.

126- Many aspects are left unexplained or unaccounted for with regards the accession and the authentication process of this document. To the best of my knowledge, neither al-Hadidi nor Gray alluded to the Prophet's letter or made any committed statement about it.

VII – The Letter of the Prophet and Configurations of the Spiritual, the Secular, and the Artistic

The letter of the Prophet puzzled the Sursock Museum committee. They questioned its nature and how to present it. They could not determine its authenticity and were apprehensive of the implications of misrepresenting it.[127] Some members problematized the issue in terms of the manuscript's classification as an "artistic" or "historical" piece: if it was considered to be an artistic object then it could be exhibited like the other art objects, but if it was reckoned to be an historical document, then it would be best to exclude it from the catalogue and reserve it for a separate booklet.[128] The debate between the artistic and the historical nature of the prophetic letter conspicuously shunned its religious value — at least in the written record of the meeting. It is equally interesting that it is a religious document that provoked a split between the secular components of art history — art and history — and questioned the artistic merit of this otherwise purportedly ancient artifact. Nevertheless, the committee's demur contrasted with Aboussouan's enthusiasm and adamance for featuring the religious manuscript in the art exhibition. He further "explained its importance and the value it would impart to the exhibition," especially if it was complemented by the historical study of al-Munajjid for which the museum would have to pay around 10,000 Lebanese pounds.[129] In the following meeting, the committee voted against incurring the study's expenses and instead sought to ask Pharaon's permission to display the letter using the formula "attributed to [the Prophet]." The matter was left at the discretion of the exhibition subcommittee.[130]

Ultimately, the letter of the Prophet to Khosrow featured as an integral part of the exhibition, sitting at the center of the *salon arabe*. It is likewise set apart in the exhibition catalogue, where an accompanying one-page text in the three languages briefly explains the letter's historical background, provides a transcription of its text, then states the role played by Pharaon, Aboussouan, and al-Munajjid in recuperating this missing piece in Islamic history.

While most newspapers readily reproduced and celebrated the find and the mystery shrouding it, the narrative did not go unchallenged, and the museum was accused of falsifying Islamic heritage by exhibiting a fake document too easily attributed to the prophet. Fawzi Shalaq, an outraged Lebanese journalist, recognized and therefore contested the secular authority of an exhibition of Islamic art and the legitimacy it could (in this case fallaciously) bestow on artifacts. To disprove al-Munajjid's paleographic study, he marshalled the opinions of four

127- CR/SMA, September 20, 1973, and November 30, 1973.
128- CR/SMA, September 20, 1973.
129- Ibid.
130- CR/SMA, November 30, 1973.

contemporary Islamic authorities and invoked canonical religious texts while pleading with Pharaon to have the vellum analyzed in laboratories.[131]

Al-Munajjid's analysis gained credibility on the basis of his expertise in paleography which, still a rare specialization in the Arab-Islamic world, became intimately associated with the authenticity of the letter and championed for its discovery. However, Shalaq undermined al-Munajjid's method by highlighting the lack of an authenticated chain of transmission and a consensus among authorities, which were common Islamic practices in assessing and interpreting arguments. The paleographer was particularly accused of employing and interpreting history selectively to credit his finding. Religious history and authority were at stake. Thus, the main objection that Shalaq and the Muslim religious and legal scholars voiced against al-Munajjid's claim was that it contradicted Muslim historical and scholarly traditions to the point where his findings distorted history in favor of paleography rather than subjecting the latter to the former. This critique crucially pointed at the lack of Islamic context and meaning in favor of form and style, which has generally marked the broader Orientalist and essentialist approach to Islamic history and culture, including but not limited to Islamic art.

While no official statement was made by the museum, Pharaon, or al-Munajjid in defense of the letter's authenticity, the controversy seems to have ended following the acclaimed visit of the supreme Muslim authority in Lebanon, Grand Mufti Hasan Khalid, to the Sursock Museum in the company of local and international religious figures like Shaykh Muhammad Salih al-Qazzaz, president of the Muslim World League in Mekka (Fig. 10)[132]. Shalaq's last diatribe, where he recapitulated his reasoned critique against the authenticity of the letter, appeared in the same issue of *al-Liwāʾ* newspaper reporting on the Mufti's visit to the exhibition. Other newspapers featured photos of the spiritual leadership entering the museum or examining the exhibits, listening to the men of arts, with catalogue in hand. To the public eye and the historical record, the national spiritual authority welcomed (and blessed) the art manifestation in all its secular magnitude.

131- Fawzī Shalaq, *al-Liwāʾ*, June 12, 14, 15, 18, 22, and 23, 1974.

132- See for example, "Ziyārat al-muftī Khālid wa-ṣaḥbihi li-maʿraḍ al-fann al-islāmī", *al-Nahār*, June 23, 1974; and "Le Mufti de la République au Musée Sursock", *L'Orient-Le Jour*, June 24, 1974.

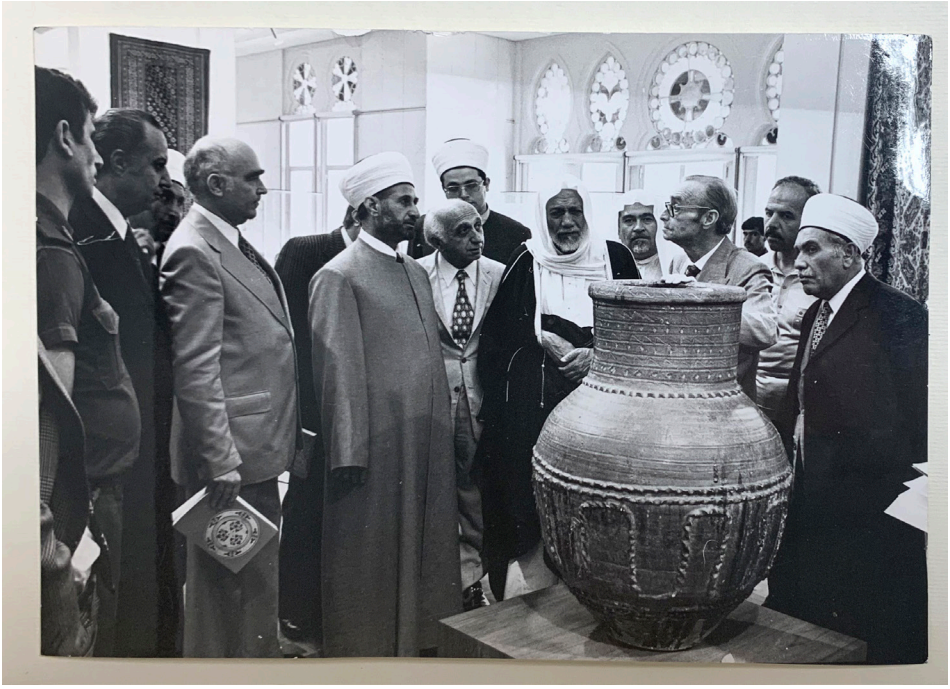

Fig. 10 – Grand Mufti Hasan Khalid in the company of local and international religious figures as well as members of the museum committee grouped around the Mesopotamian jar and listening to explanations from Virgil Candea, whose hand lays on the jar's rim. Camille Aboussouan (third person from the left) stands with catalogue in hand to the right of the Grand Mufti, and Shaykh Muhammad Salih al-Qazzaz, president of the Muslim World League in Mekka, stands to his left. Fawzi Daouk, vice-president of the museum, stands slightly behind the Grand Mufti and Shaykh al-Qazzaz. Courtesy of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut.

The concerns raised by Shalaq involved the authenticity and the integrity of the document in its spiritual *and* art historical dimensions. While the public controversy could have opened the way for faith-based knowledge or "the religious plot"[133] to be engaged in the secular space of the museum, the latter shunned it completely. By refusing to acknowledge the place of the letter in the Muslim tradition, the museum imposed a monolithic and exclusive reading of the artifact and experience of Islamic heritage at large, validating the secular at the expense of the spiritual.

At the end of 1973, around the time when the Sursock Museum committee deliberated on the nature of the prophetic letter while eschewing its spiritual value, an affair involving international relations of the highest caliber was unfolding around another of the Prophet's letters — this one to Heraclius,

133- I borrow this expression from Gonzalez, op. cit.

Emperor of Byzantium.[134] The fate of this letter could not have been more at odds with its counterpart in Lebanon which seemed to have evanesced from public sight with the end of the exhibition: "In 1977, King Husayn of Jordan announced in a TV broadcast that the letter is now in his possession, specialists having confirmed its authenticity. This news circulated in the Arab and Islamic world testifying to the legitimizing power that such a document still holds."[135] Handed to British experts for authentication and possible purchase, this prophetic letter gained political and symbolic powers that turned it into a "Moslem relic" in a time of political and economic turmoil that shook the world in the 1970s.[136] Sotheby's auction house and British diplomats joined in a conversation to assess the letter's potential for diplomatic maneuvering in the oil crisis vis-à-vis "King Feisal, the Keeper of the Holy Places,"[137] before it landed with King Hussein of Jordan (r. 1952-1999).[138] While the letter in Pharaon's possession could at best increase the Lebanese cosmopolitan prestige and offend some disillusioned local Muslim parties, the spiritual power of the other prophetic letter in the hands of the ruler of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan — himself a descendant of Sharif Hussein of Mecca — was fully invested in an Arab Muslim national identity and in boosting the legitimacy of the king's order.

Conclusion

Imagining Lebanon with Islamic art has helped flesh out and unsettle both constructs from their colonial origins to their reification in the postcolonial context of nation-building. The first exhibition of Islamic art in Lebanon offered an opportunity to examine how the concept developed in a multi-religious society struggling to form a coherent nation. Framed as a secular, aesthetic, and historical form of "Islam," Islamic art provided the Sursock Museum with the modern means to celebrate and engage the spiritual within the Lebanese mode of Christian-Muslim coexistence.

Both Islamic art and the Lebanese national imagination revealed each other's limitations, or at least parameters. They ultimately stifled and cut off meaningful (if contentious) connections with the past, the spiritual, and the national, when they could have opened the way for productive entanglements or created new intersections across seemingly dichotomous constructs in the modern Lebanese experience. The Civil War broke out less than a year later and redefined, in its own terms, sectarian, class, and ethnic relations undergirding the Lebanese national identity.

134- "Research into Authenticity of a Letter from Prophet Mohammed to Byzantine Emperor Heraclitus", Government Papers, The National Archives, Kew, 1973.
135- El-Cheikh, op. cit., 11n23.
136- "Research into authenticity".
137- Ibid.
138- King of Saudi Arabia, Faysal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (r. 1964-1975) protested Western support for Israel and led the oil embargo in 1973. He was assassinated in 1975.

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ملخص | بالتركيز على أول معرض للفن الإسلامي في لبنان من تنظيم متحف نقولا سرسق عام ١٩٧٤، تبين هذه المقالة كيف أن تداخل بناء وتفعيل مفهوم الفن الإسلامي مع مشاريع ما بعد الإستعمار يسهم في تعزيز الهوية الوطنية. عبر التدقيق في صناعة المعرض الفني وتتبع التواريخ المادية المتقاطعة في بيروت، تظهر الدراسة كيفية تكوين البعد القومي والعلماني والروحي من خلال مصطلح الفن. كما تسهم المقالة في البحث العلمي المتنامي في تأريخ الفن الإسلامي و دور المتاحف الإقليمية وفي عمليّة بناء الأمة في النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين.

كلمات مفتاحية | الفن الاسلامي – متحف نقولا سرسق – لبنان – الهوية الوطنية ما بعد الاستعمار – التراث الوطني – تجارة الآثار

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