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ROUNDTABLE

Studying Visual Culture

Introduction

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The study of the visual culture of the Middle East covers a wealth of topics from the birth of Islam to the present day and has long been marked by rigorous theoretical and methodological inquiries. Nevertheless, it has remained largely at the margins of Middle East studies, as measured by the limited space it occupies in interdisciplinary publications and conferences. This may perhaps be explained by a misconception that its reliance on "pictures" makes it a lighter, albeit pleasurable, complement to the more "serious" disciplines. Yet, due in part to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries and in part to the new wave of technological innovations, visual references now appear more frequently in the work of social and political historians, anthropologists, and even political scientists. In the process, some methodological tools for using visual material as primary documents risk being lost, as images are relegated to "decorative" backgrounds.

This roundtable introduces *IJMES* readers to some recent and exciting developments in the field. We approached a group of art and architectural historians and asked them to identify state-of-the-art theoretical and methodological perspectives, by constructing each of their arguments around one visual document. The contributors represent different areas of expertise—ranging from the art of the book to painting, photography, architecture, and cities—and cover a wide chronological spectrum from the middle ages to the 21st century. The goal is not to draw a comprehensive survey but rather to offer glimpses into the multitude of issues that shape present-day discussions. Unlike many other roundtables in *IJMES* that are organized around a focused question, this one takes a broad look at a field, with the hope of encouraging more article submissions to the journal from scholars of visual culture.

Some of the essays reinterpret and recontextualize artifacts that have been studied before; others introduce completely new materials. Whether they write on figural art and religious piety (Finbarr Barry Flood), late 19th-century battle painting (Mary Roberts), the translation of modernist ideas in architecture (Esra Akcan), astrology and visual representation (Persis Berlekamp), or the place of memory in contemporary art (Avinoam Shalem), the authors all engage in complicated, multidimensional, and multidirectional readings, avoiding formulaic explanations and dichotomies. "In-between" situations are revealed and frameworks of "intertwined histories" help examine products of cross-cultural exchanges. Different forms of absences lead to innovative responses: Shalem

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explains how a contemporary artist addresses political erasures by reconstructing his own subjective archives, D. Fairchild Ruggles discusses the appropriation of an "Islamic" monument as a symbol of national identity at a time and a place with a minimal Muslim population, and Heghnar Watenpaugh tackles the infamous lack of visual representation of premodern "Islamic" cities through the use of textual sources. As a group, the authors represent a broad pool of scholars whose work has helped reorient the discipline in recent years.

The visual documents that form the backbone of the roundtable coalesce into an unlikely ensemble. Joined with their provocative messages they also invite us into the "aesthetic considerations" and "pleasurable processes" (to quote Flood and Berlekamp) involved in working through them.

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