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100 Years After the Exhibition "Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art" in Munich

September 17, 2010 - January 9, 2011

Press Viewing Hour Thursday, September 16, 2010, 4 pm

The exhibition "Masterpieces of Muhammadan art" from 1910

One hundred years ago an exhibition was staged in Munich that was regarded as the city's "absolute cultural feat of 1910." The organizers approached their task with the demand of doing justice to the Islamic world's entire range of visual culture. With about 3,600 pieces, the show on the exhibition grounds of Munich's Theresienh?he was extensive.

Although the title "Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art" reflected the Eurocentric view of the times, the exhibition organizers also developed an awareness of the contemporary artistic avant-garde: Their visual world was not the academic Orientalism, but rather the painting of the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Fauves and, just a few years later, that of the Cubists. It was, therefore, logical that the organizers distanced themselves from the salon-like arrangement of works typical of the times. Their innovative and purist presentation of the pieces led to new art historical relationships, above all with regards to the conception of form. The presentation also celebrated the exhibited objects for the first time as masterpieces, whose origins and time lines were systematically recorded for the catalogue.

As a whole, the 1910 exhibition succeeded in setting new standards for the reception and investigation of Islamic art in the West: The three-volume catalogue is still considered an important reference; two visitors of the several hundreds of thousands, Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, were deeply impressed by Islamic abstraction and went on to use it as a point of reference for their own art.

Thirty "tired objects"

On the 100th anniversary of this exhibition and the 200th anniversary of the Oktoberfest, Haus der Kunst builds on the inventory of the original exhibition. An introduction takes the visitor back to summer 1910: In the first room the original exhibition comes alive by presenting a model of the original exhibition grounds, letters from renowned visitors, a sketch by Kandinsky of an exhibition piece, catalogues, installation views and advertising material (from postcards to beer mugs).

In the adjoining central exhibition hall, thirty items that were included in the original exhibition are presented anew: carpets, vases, everyday objects - such as bowls, an ivory inkwell, an illuminated manuscript, a battle axe and a bronze horse - as well as other historic objects from renowned collections. Because they do retain their high art historical status to date, these objects have travelled the globe and have been exhibited and illustrated extensively over the last century. They have become "tired", as the curators once called it, and viewers almost take their presence for granted. Their presentation in the Haus der Kunst, therefore, is connected with the desire to revitalize these icons. The architect Samir el Kordy (b. 1974 in Cairo) has created an architectural structure of fabric, made of transparent fabrics that hang from the ceiling, for their presentation. In Islamic countries fabric has not only aesthetic connotations, but also social and religious ones; it is used to create tent-like spaces for dwellings, weddings, funerals, political gatherings and other occasions. The fabrics Samir el Kordy designed for

Haus der Kunst create several enclosures, each of them accommodating one or more objects. A network of paths runs between these triangular-shaped spaces. Just as in the 1910 exhibition, the individual objects unfold new effects thanks to their way of presentation.

Exemplarily among the thirty historical objects, we would like to highlight the 12th century Innsbruck Bowl whose origin still baffles experts. The ascension of Alexander the Great is depicted on the right side. What at first appears to be modest is actually of such exceptional technical and compositional quality that the bowl can only be the product of a sophisticated workshop: it possesses detailed, colorful cloisonné work, with enameled and originally gilded copper studs. Yet, other cloisonné enamel work on copper pieces of comparable size and complexity were not produced in the centers of Islamic enamel art at the time. A Persian inscription on the exterior has not yet been completely deciphered. Additionally, both inscriptions, including the one in Arabic on the bowl's interior, are carelessly executed with regard to calligraphy and spelling. All these features suggest that the bowl was not necessarily made by an Islamic artist. Its unclear geographical origin and the high quality of workmanship make it a one-of-a-kind and a unique example of medieval enamel art.

Modern and contemporary

The historical objects in the main exhibition hall are surrounded by 20th and 21st century works that contain elements of Islamic artistic tradition, such as ornament and calligraphy: paintings, drawings, sculptures and jewelry by Saloua Raouda Choucair (b. 1916 in Lebanon), Monir Sharoudy Farmanfarmanian (b. 1924 in Iran), Choreh Feyzdjou (1955-1996, Iran/France), Nassar Mansour (b. 1967 in Jordan), Mahmoud Said (1897-1964, Egypt) and Ibrahim el Salahi (b. 1930 in Sudan). The works of these artists are exemplary for various drafts of modernity that integrate individual elements of the Western avant-garde without adhering to it

absolutely.

The installation "The Invisible Masters" by Rachid Kora^{chi} (b. 1947 in Algeria) completes the composition of the central hall. Kora^{chi} himself is a member of an order of Islamic mystics (Sufism); he has integrated Arabic letters, symbols and ornamentation into 99 ivory-colored cloth banners that refer to sayings by famous Sufis, such as "I am God, the Truth" by al-Hallaj. This Sufi attained the total dissolution of self and became one with the one he loved: God. His contemporaries, however, regarded his ecstatic utterances as blasphemy and he was brutally executed. As an entity, the 99 banners are intended to have the protective effect of a talisman.

The outer ring composed of ten cabinets provides a forum for young contemporary artists, curators and institutions. One section is dedicated to town planning: Samir el Kordy explores the current plans for a "New Cairo" and a "New Damascus"; the Palestinian Wafa el Hourani presents a sad yet cheerful model for the future Kalandia refugee camp; stagnation, separation from the fortress Europe, exploitation of nature and growth at all cost are apparent in the works of Yto Barrada from Morocco; Reem al Ghaith makes the rapid changes in the Gulf region palpable; and in his animation film "Panoptikon" the Turkish artist Emre H^{ner} mixes elements from the Garden of Eden, medieval docks, workshops, laboratories and prisons.

Another section unites typography, design, fashion, painting and book making; the graphic designer Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFares presents five designers who have transformed Arabic letters into industrial design. In her paintings and animations Tala Madani (b. 1981 in Iran) presents the male - the 'crown of creation' - in situations in which he is exposed as ridiculous; Nadine Touma, who founded the publishing house Dar Onboz in Beirut that specializes in children's literature, designed a room for children in the Haus der Kunst.

Film as a routing medium

On the Theresienh[?]he exhibition grounds in 1910, the 'cinematograph' was still a sensation that was deemed potentially harmful to one's health. A century later, it is precisely the shift between static and flowing impressions that is the exhibition's signature, and, hence, artistic film is allotted ample space.

In "The Girl Splendid in Walking" Doa Aly unites dance, music and poetry; as a symbol of futility Kader Attia depicts a woman who stirs seemingly endlessly a number of glass shards as if they were couscous in his film "Couscous Aftermaths (3,000 year old movements)"; Mounira al Solh creates surrealist situations by transforming Arabic idioms and proverbs into moving images.

Three long films complete the selection: the love story "Shirin" by the well-known Iranian film maker Abbas Kiarostami; the parody on Egyptian local tourism "Domestic Tourism II" by Maha Maamoun; and the success story of a beer brewing family in Palestine that celebrates its own mini version of Munich's Oktoberfest: the documentary movie "Taste the Revolution" by Buthina Canaan Khoury.

"Shirin" (2008, 91 min) is based on the 12th century literary epic "Khosrow and Shirin". These lovers are as well known in the Persian world as Romeo and Juliet are in ours. Although the two fall in love with each other when they are young, Khosrow initially marries someone else. Years pass. When the two finally reunite, they are long since held captive by the conflicting emotions of desire, concretion and regret. Their happiness is brief: Khosrow is murdered by his own son, and Shirin subsequently takes her own life. Abbas Kiarostami films the audience watching this romantic drama. The majority of viewers are Iranian women, but Juliette Binoche is also in the audience. All are watching a filmed version of "Khosrow and Shirin" and identify with the heroine. The various emotions are reflected in the faces of the audience. Kiarostami's camera is almost

static, and the faces of the audience members are shown head-on and slowly fading out. This film-in-a-film achieves the tension of a feature film using minimalistic methods and rediscovers the cinema as the universal language of emotion.

The same could be said of "Domestic Tourism" (2008), a collage of scenes from Egyptian movies that were made between 1959 and 2006. Chronologically arranged, all the scenes take place in front of pyramids. Several of the original movies are romances in which the lover tries to seduce his companion. When the often-nocturnal rendezvous threatens to become permissive, the couples are disturbed by someone, such as a police patrol. Other scenes come from science fiction films or focus on themes like feminism, nationalism, Egypt's beauty or the battle of good and evil. Maha Maamoun calls her project an "informal typology of pyramid scenes." Together these scenes create an amusing panorama of urban tales for the viewer.

Contemporary artists

Doa Aly (b. 1976 in Cairo, Egypt; lives in Cairo, f)

Kader Attia (b. 1970 in Dugny, France; lives in Paris, m)

Yto Barrada (b. 1971 in Paris, France; lives in Paris and Tangier, Morocco, f)

Farah Behbehani (b. 1981 in Boston, USA; lives in Messila, Kuwait, w),
Khatt Foundation

Karen Chekerdjian (b. 1970 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Beirut, f), Khatt
Foundation

Saloua Raouda Choucair (b. 1916 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Beirut, f)

Nada Debs (b. 1962 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Beirut, f), Khatt
Foundation

Monir Sharoudy Farmanfarmaian (b. 1924 in Qazvin, Iran; lives in Tehran, f)

Chohreh Feyzjdjou (b. 1955 in Tehran; died 1996 in Paris, f)

Reem al-Ghaith (b. 1985 in Dubai, UAE; lives in Dubai, f)
Wafa Hourani (b. 1979 in Hebron; lives in Ramallah, Palestine, m)
Emre Hönner (b. 1977 in Istanbul, Turkey; lives in New York, USA, m)
Raya Khalaf (b. 1973 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Beirut, f), Khatt Foundation
Buthina Canaan Khoury (b. 1966 in Palestine; lives in Ramallah, Palestine, f)
Abbas Kiarostami (b. 1940 in Teheran, Iran; lives in Iran, m)
Rachid Koraichi (b. 1947 in Ain Beida, Algeria; lives in Paris, m)
Samir el Kordy (b. 1974 in Cairo, Egypt; lives in Cairo, m)
Maha Maamoun (b. 1972 in Cairo, Egypt; lives in Cairo, f)
Tala Madani (b. 1981 in Tehran, Iran; lives in New Haven, Connecticut, USA, f)
Nassar Mansour (b. 1967 in Amman, Jordan; lives in London, m)
Milia Maroun (b. 1971 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Beirut and Istanbul, f), Khatt Foundation
Walid Raad (b. 1967 in Chbanieh, Lebanon; lives in New York, USA, m)
Mahmoud Said (b. 1897, died in 1964, Egypt, m)
Ibrahim el Salahi (b. 1930 in Omdurman, Sudan; lives in Qatar and Oxford, England, m)
Bahia Shehab (b. 1977 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Cairo, f), Khatt Foundation
Huda Smitshuijzen-AbiFaris (b. 1965 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Amsterdam, f), Khatt Foundation
Mounira al Solh (b. 1978 in Beirut, Lebanon; lives in Amsterdam, f)
Nadine Rachid Laure Touma (b. 1973 in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon; lives in Beirut, f)
Akram Zaatari (b. 1966 in Saida, Lebanon; lives in Beirut, m)
(m = male, f = female)

Curatorial team

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The catalogue is published by Prestel, ISBN 978-3-7913-5085-1, 120
pages, 75 color illustrations, designed by Huda Smitshuijzen-AbiFaras,
store price 39,95 [UTF-8?]€; with texts by Birgitt Borkopp, Chris Dercon,
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Funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation

With kind support of the Schorghuber Unternehmensgruppe

In cooperation with
Goethe Institute Egypt
Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut

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