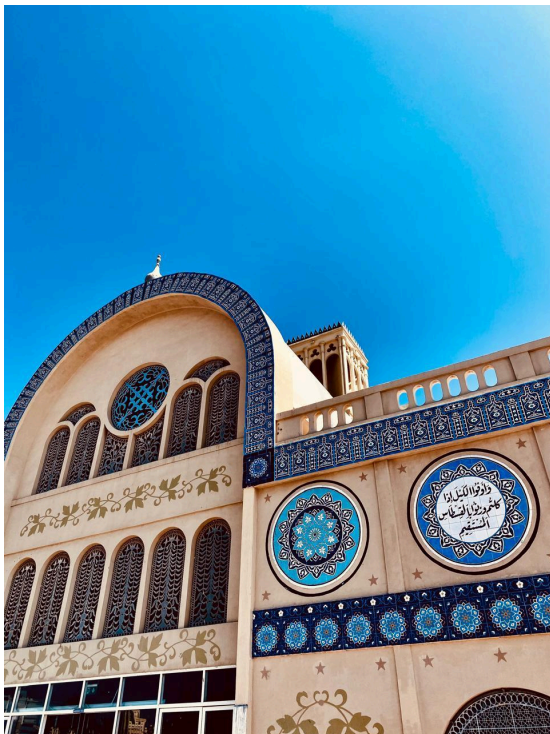


Islamic Art الفن الاسلامي Islamische Kunst

By Jasmin Holtkötter

When I first arrived in Sharjah, I was struck by how prominently Islamic art and architecture shape the city, revealing themselves through its many landmarks. The Al Noor Mosque stands tall with its domes and minarets, inspired by the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed Mosque. Further along, the Sharjah Mosque commands attention with its blend of Ottoman and Andalusian influences, evident in its patterns and grand arches. Passing by the Blue Souk (Central Market), I was captivated by its display of Islamic design through tiles and arches, enhanced by traditional *badgir* بادگیر (wind towers) known in Arabic as *barjeel* بارجيل that evoke Persian architectural ingenuity.



Blue Souk, Sharjah



Souk Al Arsah, Sharjah

Walking through the Souk Al Arsah feels like stepping into a living museum, with stalls overflowing with Seljuk pottery, Safavid tiles from Isfahan, Iznik ceramics, and Qajar glassware and pottery.

Everywhere I looked, echoes of what is known as Islamic art were highly prominent, coming together to create an eclectic impression—a juxtaposition of styles that have coalesced in Sharjah from various regions.

I became particularly interested in how Sharjah museums present Islamic art and how this approach might differ from exhibitions in Western countries. The Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, housed in a former souk repurposed as a museum, holds a collection of those objects. Walking through its four gallery rooms dedicated to Islamic art, I noticed that the exhibitions echoed what I had seen outside in the city – the canon of Islamic art.





Islamic Art Galleries at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization

The term "Islamic Art" was not used until the 19th century, when Western scholars began categorizing the art of regions from North Africa to Southwest Asia, spanning from the 7th century until the end of the 19th century. Driven by a fascination with the "exotic East," often viewed the art through a colonial lens, these scholars grouped diverse artworks and architectural forms under a single artistic tradition. So called "Islamic Art" encompasses not only religious or devotional works but also secular creations, reflecting the complex social and political dynamics of societies across centuries and a vast geographical region.

The discourse surrounding "Islamic Art" remains a subject of extensive debate. Some scholars defend its use, highlighting features such as calligraphy and geometric patterns as distinct markers of the tradition. They argue that these elements represent a unifying cultural influence across regions shaped by Islam. However, this view is challenged by the fact that, in academic discussions,

countries with the largest Muslim populations, such as Indonesia, are often overlooked.

However, I have always felt uncomfortable with the term because it oversimplifies a diverse and complex body of artistic traditions. To label it all under a single umbrella term like "Islamic Art" risks homogenizing this diversity. Additionally, categorizing Islamic art by ruling dynasties, such as the Umayyads, Abbasids, Safavids, and Ottomans, introduces a political framework that aligns artistic production with the agendas of ruling elites, overlooking the continuity and regional exchanges that transcended these temporal and political boundaries. These classifications, while practical, reflect a Eurocentric lens that often prioritizes a linear, dynasty-based narrative over the fluid, intercultural exchanges that shaped these artistic traditions. As a result, the term "Islamic Art" carries with it the biases of its time, stemming from a desire to classify and study these non-Western artistic traditions.

This tension surrounding the term "Islamic Art" became more pronounced when I started my junior curator position (Justus Brinkmann Volontariat) at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (MK&G) in Hamburg, where I focused on the Islamic art collection. For the first time, I encountered public reactions, questions, and assumptions from an audience unfamiliar with academic debates. These questions – often posed by white, middle-class individuals – frequently centered on the religion of Islam itself. At times, they even veered into discussions about terrorism and radicalization. The objects in the exhibition thus became a site of negotiation, challenging (or reinforcing) Western stereotypes and misconceptions.

From my friends and family, I often heard comments suggesting that "Islamic Art" was not of interest as it was part of the past, traditionalist, and primarily religious. These responses were not mere misunderstandings but reflections of deeper issues. They revealed how the term "Islamic Art" has become entangled with broader stereotypes about Islam and the Muslim world. This association

partly stems from the Western scholarly tradition that coined the term. By adhering to this label without critically questioning its implications, art historians have sometimes reinforced narrow and problematic assumptions about the art and the people it represents.

After thorough discussions and reflections on the term "Islamic Art" within the context of the MK&G in Hamburg, we have decided to rename the collection to the SWANA Collection. SWANA, an acronym for the geographic region Southwest Asia and North Africa, is a term that has gained increased usage in recent years. This term moves beyond the religious framework to emphasize the broader cultural, social, and artistic heritage of these regions.

All these changes within the institution I work at took place during the SAWA Museums Studies Program. I am incredibly fortunate to be able to share and exchange ideas with the other fellows. When we first started in Berlin earlier this year in May, one of the most important lessons I learned was how to conduct curatorial work collaboratively with communities and transform the museum into a space for dialogue.

Inspired by these insights, I was able to immediately share and implement these ideas into a new, community-centered format we were developing. During this process, I exchanged ideas with Abdelaziz Almula, the Library Programme Coordinator at the Sharjah Art Foundation. We discussed the concept of *majlis*, as we had also experienced *majlis* sessions in Berlin as a form of gathering. His feedback and professional experience gave me the confidence to move forward with the idea of establishing a *majlis* at the MK&G in Hamburg.

Today, "Majlis – Get Together at MK&G," co-organized by Sarah Savalanpour and myself, is a new program directed to individuals who feel connected to the SWANA region. Each gathering centers around a specific topic related to the arts and

culture of the region, complemented by tea and snacks. This format fosters a space for people to connect and share experiences.

Although these changes are promising, we still face the legacy of an academic field in Islamic art history that often stops at the 19th century, excluding artistic traditions from the 20th century onward. This gap creates the impression that the cultural heritage of the SWANA region is a relic of the past, disconnected from contemporary times. I witnessed these effects first-hand in Sharjah during my visit to the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, founded by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, that focuses on modern and contemporary art, mostly fine arts, from the Arab World.



Untitled, Wasmaa Khalid Chorbachi, Iraq, 1984

While exploring the gallery, I came across a ceramic plate decorated with blue, turquoise, and white geometric patterns and inscribed with the name "Mohammad" in square Kufic script. The reference to Islamic art was clear and immediate. My

initial thought was, "This is exactly how I imagine modern Islamic art." It came as no surprise to learn that the artist holds a PhD in Islamic art history. This encounter led me to question how SWANA art might look today if it had not been influenced by Western academic frameworks. Would there be more works categorized as applied arts, crafts, or design?

In a conversation with Suheyra Takesh, curator of the Barjeel Art Foundation, she mentioned that in recent years, they have made efforts to include more female artists in their collection. I asked whether the genres and mediums chosen by female artists were gendered, with women gravitating toward mediums considered as craft. She confirmed this pattern, which aligns with my research on modern craft and design in Turkey from the 1950s onward, where many important works by female artists were often overlooked or marginalized due to their gender.

We also discussed the term "Arab World," used in the current exhibition at the Barjeel Art Foundation. I pointed out that this term can overlook the various influences from other regions that have historically shaped what is perceived as the Arab world, creating a sense of separation. Sharjah itself is a testament to the diverse styles and influences that have converged over time.

My experience in Sharjah highlighted how the academic framing of Islamic art has impacted the perception of SWANA's cultural heritage and how this perception continues to shape contemporary discourse. Efforts by institutions in Sharjah offer hope for a more nuanced view of art history in the region—one that will hopefully include applied arts, craft, and design to provide a more comprehensive picture.

Starting in Berlin with a mind full of questions and then traveling to Sharjah to discuss them with the fellows of the SAWA Museum Study Program provided me with valuable insights that I will take back to Hamburg. Ultimately, my experiences in Berlin and Sharjah highlight that we are still confronting the enduring impact of colonial legacies, which can only be addressed together.