

Islamicate Art, Copy, Forgery?

The Case of the Safavid Revival *miḥrāb* in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin¹

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Abstract. When does counterfeit art become inauthentic? Where is the line between forgery and copy? Can copies find a place in ethnological collections? Taking the case study of a Safavid Revival prayer niche (*miḥrāb*) and accompanying horizontal tiles (*ṭirāz*) in the “Aspects of Islam” exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum at Humboldt Forum, this article examines the abrupt shift in attitudes towards these objects once they were found to be much younger than previously thought. Placing the prayer niche within the greater context of Safavid Revivalism and Islamicate cultural production, this article challenges European perceptions of forgery, arguing that, for visitors to the exhibition, the young age of the prayer niche is largely irrelevant as it evokes an experiential connection to Islamicate history through its cultural meaning and religious function.

[Islamicate Architecture, Safavid Revival, forgery, Qibla, material religion]

In a collection of around 40,000 objects, the North African, West and Central Asian Collection of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin houses a wide range of textiles, ceramics, photographs, and other materials from Morocco to Western China. Known as the Islamic Orient Collection until 2011, the collection consists largely of donations and inheritances from private art dealers, researchers, and diplomats who travelled throughout the region, collecting objects they found to be beautiful, unique, or curious. A large portion of the collection also consists of objects purchased from foreign markets or collected during research expeditions, such as the several German Turfan Expeditions of the early 20th Century, the Soviet German Alai-Pamir Expedition of 1928, and the German Hindukush Expedition of 1935. A much smaller portion of the collection reflects objects which the museum purchased in recent years; a category usually reserved for extremely unique objects, for example created within the framework of the initiative *CoMuse: The Collaborative Museum*, or financed through third-party funds. Throughout every part of the collection, regardless of how the objects entered the museum, the question of authenticity is always present and curators and restaurateurs over the years have worked together to maintain a certain standard and work ethic. Nonetheless, a small number of objects present a challenge to understandings of authenticity, posing the questions: when does counterfeit art become inauthentic? Where is the line between copy and forgery? Can forgery be art?

All these questions are exemplified in one specific object: a large prayer niche, part of which is currently on display within the “Aspects of Islam” exhibition in Humboldt Forum. The *miḥrāb* with two accompanying *ṭirāz* (horizontal text mouldings), several tonnes of vibrant turquoise ceramic tiles with Arabic calligraphy across all four sides, was originally purchased by the Museum für Islamische Kunst in 1969 from the Kevorkian Foundation, a fund managing the estate of the archaeologist and art collector Hagop Kevorkian (1872–1962). At the time of purchase, the prayer niche was believed to be several centuries old, dating back to the first half of the 16th Century CE due to its use of turquoise ceramic tiles typical of the Safavid era (16th–18th Century CE). As the prayer niche was purchased in New York, it was difficult to trace its exact origins and the involved parties received little information:

Dieser Miḥrāb und die beiden Schriftfriese sind 1969 in New York von der Kevorkian Foundation erworben worden. Sie befinden sich länger als fünfzig Jahre außerhalb des Irans. Eine genaue Provenienz ist noch unbekannt. (Staatliche Museen – Preussischer Kulturbesitz 1979)

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[This mihrāb and both text mouldings were acquired in New York in 1969 from the Kevorkian Foundation. They have been outside of Iran for more than fifty years. An exact provenance is not yet known.] (author's own translation)

One story circulating around the museum is that the prayer niche was part of a mosque in Tehran which was being demolished to make way for a road. Art collectors salvaged the niche from the demolition site and it eventually came into the collection of Hagop Kevorkian, but this story has never been proven. Kevorkian, as an archaeologist, had a great interest in Persianate and Islamicate² art, having conducted excavations in Sultanabad and Rey in present-day Iran in the early 20th Century, and was one of a group of Paris-based Armenian art collectors credited with bringing Persianate and Islamicate art to the European capitals of Paris and London (Volait 2021). Working together with fellow Armenian collectors such as Calouste Gulbenkian (1869–1955), Kevorkian amassed a huge collection throughout his life, which later became a philanthropic fund, financing a research centre for Near Eastern Studies at New York University and a visiting lectureship at the Penn Museum, Pennsylvania. The prayer niche was a typical object found in Kevorkian's collection of ceramic tiles and Islamicate art, the fund having organised several exhibitions in London and New York and donating many objects to the Brooklyn Museum and University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Calouste Gulbenkian Museum 2020). The prayer niche, therefore, appeared to fit in with the rest of the collection.

Although the prayer niche was purchased as a 16th century example of Safavid architecture, curators began to question how the glazing could be so perfectly intact after all this time. It was not until 1991 when, as part of a campaign of thermoluminescence dating throughout the collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the prayer niche was revealed to be much younger than first thought. Just as several other objects, for example in the Pergamon Museum's collection of Tanagra statues, were confirmed to not be antiques, so too was the prayer niche dated between 1930–1940 and deemed to be a “Fälschung”, or forgery (Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz 1992). It remains unclear how exactly the Museum für Islamische Kunst came to purchase a forgery, but it should be assumed that the sale and purchase were conducted in good faith and rather exemplifies the role of scientific innovations such as thermoluminescence in provenance studies, and the importance of keeping information up-to-date in the face of growing digitisation (Tunsch 2018: 6).

While the prayer niche was categorised as a forgery, to visitors, its young age is largely irrelevant. Walking with guests through the “Aspects of Islam” exhibition, the prayer niche is a definite highlight and draws attention, not only for its striking turquoise tiles, but its sheer size and grandeur. For Muslim guests especially, the prayer niche is much more than just a reminder of the great Safavid mosques of Central Asia and Iran, it is a symbol of the rich diversity of the Islamicate World and a reminder of the importance of *ṣalāh* (prayer). Taking the prayer niche as a case study, this article aims to question definitions of forgery, arguing that copies challenge conceptions of authenticity, and that ultimately art is defined by the beholder.

Forgery or Copy?

² Islamicate is used throughout the article to consciously reference the influence of non-Muslim communities on cultural production in Muslim-majority contexts, be they pre-Islamic or contemporary.

As discussed by Bowden (1999), the fine line between copy and forgery is relative to the cultural context. Drawing from the example of the Kwoma society of Papua New Guinea, the author demonstrates how copies are commonplace as sculptures, artwork etc. are made from perishable materials and therefore a copy is made when the object is reaching the end of its life. While originals hold little meaning in this context, they are greatly

valued by Western art collectors in contrast to the copies which are seen as inferior. Bowden explains these two varying approaches to copies through the cultural sensitivity of aesthetics, with Kwoma aesthetics seeing no difference between the original and a well-made copy as even the original is built on existing materials. In contrast, Western aesthetics views the original as a feat of creativity which a copy does not possess. Furthermore, Western art markets, in their commitment to the original, see copies as the work of foul play and fraud, and have institutionalised both the sale of genuine objects, and the identification of forgeries.

For Bowden, Kwoma and Western societies represent two varying systems of aesthetics and subsequently value objects differently, with the latter maintaining an overwhelmingly negative perception. While Bowden focuses on the aesthetic transmission of copies, Benhamou & Ginsburgh (2002: 39) differentiate fakes from copies and reproductions based on the intention of deception, with copies paying “tribute to the original” while forgeries “deny [its] aesthetic superiority”, suggesting there is room in art markets for copies but only based on good intentions, which the authors contend is at times difficult to identify. Seeing this vilification of art forgery as a “modern obsession”, Lenain (2011) argues that 19th century authors like Paul Eudel led to forgery being seen as a great evil in (Western) art markets, whose eradication is the source of much time, energy, and resources. In post-modern times, Lenain continues, this obsession has developed into an unwillingness to admit that a forgery has taken place, rooted in the disturbance caused when such an event occurs. Moses (2020) further builds on this idea, discussing authenticity in terms of perceptions of reality, arguing that fakes, forgery, and fraud distort reality to varying degrees, causing an unease not only in art communities, but wider society as authenticity is understood through feeling and essence, rather than physical characteristics. While Moses (2020) notes that authenticity can mean many things to many people, it should be highlighted here that, in European art markets, the existence of copies is something sensational and shocking, at times even legitimising their destruction (Lenain 2011). By contrast, Kwoma aesthetics does not limit essence or authenticity to the original, maintaining that knowledge is not bound to materials, which are finite (Bowden 1999). In this sense, Kwoma aesthetics presents a challenge to Western aesthetics and can be used as a decolonial approach to understanding the connection between art and knowledge which goes beyond material limitations.

Building on this context-sensitive approach to aesthetics, it can be argued that the prayer niche is also an authentic piece of Islamicate art, despite its categorisation by the 1992 report as a “forgery”. As Shaw discusses in her book, “What is “Islamic” Art: Between Religion and Perception” (2019), the key to understanding art in Islamic contexts is shifting from seeing with the eye, to the heart. Drawing insights from Qur’ānic and philosophical Islamic discourses, Shaw argues that the perception of the object is what makes art Islamic, i.e. that the experience of the beholder is what shapes an object. By viewing Islamic aesthetics as experiential, Shaw makes a decolonial argument for unframing Islamic art as a Western academic field of study, placing this instead within the wider field of Islamic intellectual and cultural history. Following Shaw’s approach, reminiscent of Meyer’s (2010) understanding of religious aesthetics as grammars of experiencing material religion, the prayer niche can be understood as a piece of Islamic art due to the experience it evokes by the (Muslim) beholder. Just as the beauty and intricacy of the ceramics can be admired, so too can the style, form, and calligraphy of the prayer niche awaken in the beholder religious sensations.

Nonetheless, this aesthetic experience is not limited to Muslim audiences. In a detailed discussion of Islamicate film, Siddique (2023) traces the usage of this visual aesthetic concept in current literature, juxtapositioned against the “Islamic”, informed by the religion, and “Islamdom” which sees Muslims as socially dominant (Hodgson 1975). By contrast, Islamicate suggests a conviviality as “the cultural confluence and association

of the non-Muslim with the Muslim across time and space” (Siddique 2023). In this sense, Islamicate is inclusive and highlights the contribution of non-Muslim cultures to the aesthetic appearance of the art and architecture in question. It is therefore of particular importance to use the term Islamicate with reference to such art and architecture as it includes non-Muslim communities living in Muslim-majority regions and references the pre-Islamic influence of what has come to be known as Islamicate art and architecture, highlighting the developmental nature of architectural styles over the history of mankind as movements and ideas converge and form something new.

To understand the prayer niche as purely a copy is somewhat limited as it would, in most understandings of a copy, imply that there is a prayer niche which is exactly similar to this one somewhere in the world. This is perhaps a common understanding of copy due to the widespread use of plaster cast in archaeology and other museal collections, or growing 3D-modelling trends in digital exhibitions. While the possibility of this can never be ruled out, there is no real way of knowing the intention of the artisans who made the prayer niche, given the lack of provenance details. As will be argued below, the prayer niche is constructed using the same technique and materials commonly found in Safavid architecture, highlighting not only the prevalence of architectural knowledge, but also the sustained relevance of this aesthetic. The topic of authenticity, therefore, does not lie on the age of the ceramics but rather of the aesthetic experience the prayer niche provokes.

Islamic Architecture, Revivalism, and Knowledge

The Western perspective is exemplified in the treatment of the prayer niche after it was revealed to be a copy. While it had previously been displayed in the Museum für Islamische Kunst in its West Berlin location in Dahlem, the Reunification of Germany in 1990 brought with it the eventual move to the museum's current location in the centre of the city in 2000 and the question of what to do with the prayer niche. Originally planned to be part of the new location's permanent exhibition, in 2004 the prayer niche and its accompanying text mouldings were loaned indefinitely to the Ethnologisches Museum, where it was displayed within the “Welten der Muslime” exhibition in Berlin-Dahlem. Since the closure of the Berlin-Dahlem location in 2016 and the opening of Humboldt Forum in 2022, the prayer niche and a partial section of the near 20 metres of tiles have found a place in the “Aspects of Islam” exhibition and sit alongside other objects from all over the Islamicate world. The remaining tiles sat for several years on multiple load-bearing trolleys in the Berlin-Dahlem depot, eventually finding their permanent home in December 2024 in the satellite depot in Berlin-Friedrichshagen.

The move from the Museum für Islamische Kunst to the Ethnologisches Museum highlights a changed classification of the prayer niche, demonstrative of its new status as a “forgery”. While the Museum für Islamische Kunst acts as a reference point and research centre for “the artistic, architectural and archaeological heritage of Islamicate regions” (Museum für Islamische Kunst n.d.), the Ethnologisches Museum “critically investigates the legacy and ramifications of colonialism, as well as the role and standpoint of Europe. [...] to awaken interest in interaction with other cultures and intercultural dialogue to foster a global understanding that goes far beyond the Eurocentric viewpoint.” (Ethnologisches Museum n.d.). Therefore, the Ethnologisches Museum, while dealing with the same disciplines as the Museum für Islamische Kunst, has a stronger focus on the social and cultural aspects of heritage, striving to critically question orientalist perspectives on art collection, curation, and cultural production. Through this shift to the Ethnologisches Museum, the prayer niche therefore changes from a piece of “Islamicate art” to a “cultural belonging”. As a term which is gaining popularity in museal contexts, “cultural belong-

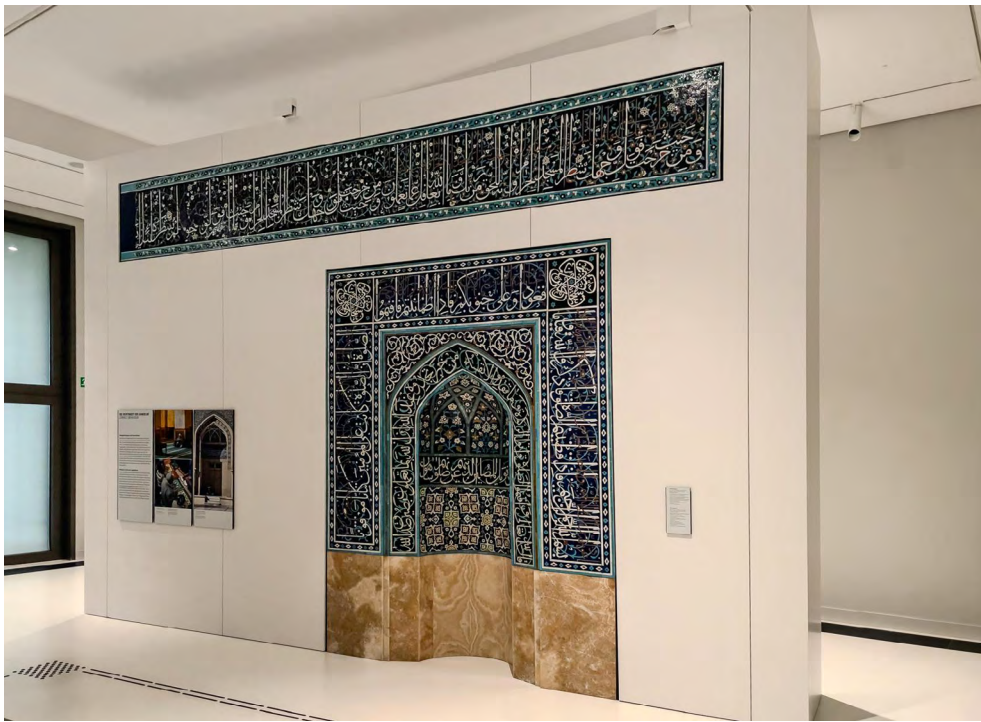


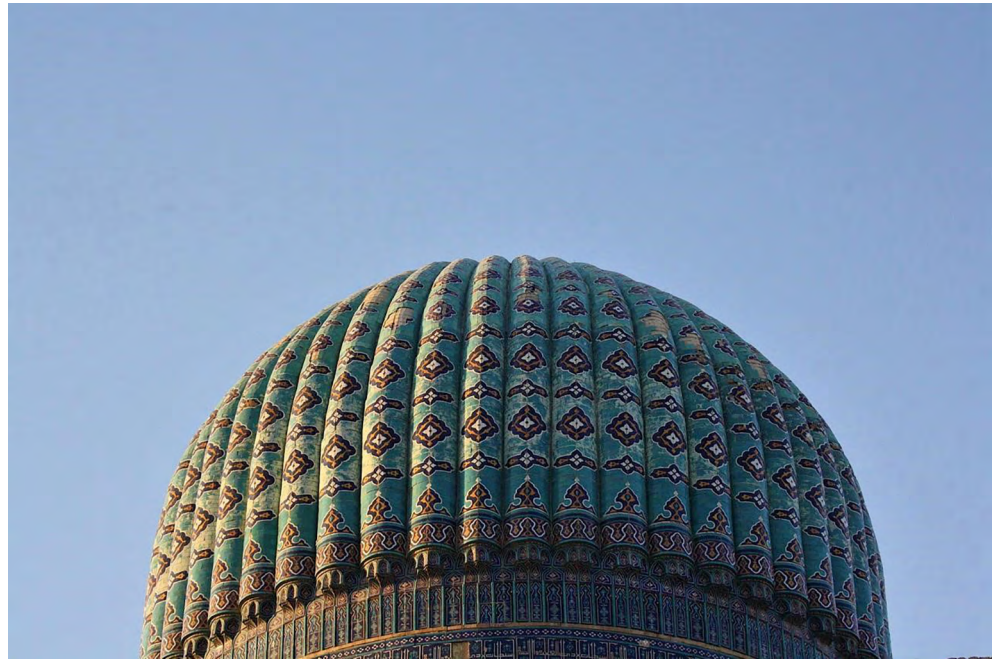
Fig. 1 The prayer niche currently displayed within the “Aspects of Islam” exhibition space of the Ethnologisches Museum in Humboldt Forum, photograph: Fiona Katherine Smith.

ing” places focus on the meaning objects have to communities, highlighting issues of ownership and how people understand their place in the world (Pritchard 2009). That is not to say that there is a clear boundary between art and culture, rather “culture is alive, developing and often self-consciously engaged with understandings of what belongs and what does not” (Pritchard 2009: 122), suggesting that art, as cultural production, is also informed by such relational understandings of place, ownership, and belonging.

Moving past the negative interpretation of copies which finds its home in European art markets, the prayer niche demonstrates impressive craftsmanship and exemplifies Persianate styles of cultural production. At its time of purchase, the prayer niche was no doubt selected for its use of striking cobalt and turquoise faience mosaïque. This technique, which involves piecing together precisely cut ceramic tiles and applying a thin layer of cement in between, gives the appearance of a glazed surface completely covered by one colourful pattern (Wilber 1939). Popular in Samanid, Seljuk, and Safavid architecture, the technique is attributed to the region of Kashan in present-day Isfahan province of Iran, from which the name “*Kāshī*” or “*Kāshānī*” comes from (Wilber 1939). Kashan was the main site of cobalt ore processing until the 12th Century CE, with references in Persian, Chinese, and European literature and confirmed by modern chemical analyses of contemporary Islamicate and Chinese ceramics (Matin & Pollard 2015). While it remains unclear how exactly the pigments spread so far, notable remaining examples of architectural cobalt faience mosaïque can be found in the Masjid-i Jami’ in Yazd and the Gur-i Mir in Samarqand. The technique of cobalt faience mosaïque, or *Kāshī*, is therefore a widespread phenomenon which is instantly recognisable for its striking colour.

Despite its young age, the prayer niche demonstrates a good example of cobalt faience mosaïque and is instantly recognisable as Safavid-inspired architecture. It highlights that this technique was still in use in the first half of the 20th Century when the prayer niche is thought to have been constructed. Not only the skill of producing *Kāshī* ceramics, but also the knowledge of style of Safavid design and re-producing the right palette can be found in this prayer niche. Its form also follows proscribed architectural rules character-

Fig. 2 The dome of Bibi Khanum Mausoleum, Samarkand, photograph: Tobias Stefan.



istic of Safavid mosques: the prayer niche itself is constructed around an indented semi-circular pointed dome, forming an arabesque archway with a thick border, itself framed by two further quadratic borders. It is interesting to note that very few significant examples of Safavid architecture remain from the period first thought to have produced the prayer niche, most having been destroyed by earthquakes, conflict, or decaying due to poor construction (Utaberta *et al.* 2012). Heavily influenced by European decorative craft, Safavid architecture flourished under Shah Abbas I (1587–1629 CE), with the capital shifting to Isfahan and a great process of urban development ensuing. In Iran’s first Shia dynasty, Safavid architects further developed existing Islamicate styles, inspired heavily by Timurid architecture and establishing the arabesque as a symbol of Iranian architecture (Utaberta *et al.* 2012). The prayer niche is therefore demonstrative of Safavid architecture, showing that the centuries-old knowledge of Safavid architecture was still very much alive in the first half of the 20th century when the prayer niche was constructed.

Given the strong examples of Safavid architectural style, form, and use of colour found in the prayer niche, I propose to move past the term “forgery” and view it in terms of revivalism and preservation, as has been done with miniature paintings of the Qajar and Pahlavi periods (Baer 1995, Langer 2020). As a copy, the prayer niche is a valuable resource in the study of Safavid architecture and the transmission of architectural knowledge. Bloom (1993) attributes the spread of designs in the early Islamic period to the growing availability of paper, making it possible for architects to make their own sketches and send drafts with more ease. Drawing from remaining examples of Islamicate architecture, large-scale modern-day constructions are still common-place. For example, the Ismaili Centre Dushanbe, Tajikistan, is inspired by Samanid and Karakhanid architecture in its brickwork and use of banna’i calligraphy (the Ismaili n.d.), while the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, UAE, combines elements of Moroccan and Moghul traditional artwork (Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque n.d.). Such examples revitalise ancient handwork techniques and architectural styles, not only preserving knowledges of cultural production, but also making the past tangible and relevant to contemporary times.

As the prayer niche was dated between 1930 to 1940, it is highly probable that it is demonstrative of Safavid Revival which saw its height during Iran’s Pahlavi dynasty. The

beginning of Persian revival as an architectural movement is traced by Grigor (2021) to Parsi elites in British India from as early as the 1830s, following figures such as art historian Manekji Limji Hataria (1813–1890) who was active in Persia over several decades. While Grigor views this revival of pre-Islamic architecture as a movement to re-connect Parsi communities in British India and Persia under a shared identity as “true” Persians, producing for example fire temples with architecture inspired by the columns of Persepolis, it was the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–1941) which cemented revivalist architecture with a growing Persian national identity. Overton (2012) attributes the Pahlavi dynasty’s passion for the restoration of Safavid architecture to a combination of contemporary archaeological findings and a “self-conscious cultural reawakening” which favoured preservation, while Langer (2020: 16) places the artistic movement in the field of nostalgia for the “glorious days of Persian past” while the nation re-discovered its own sovereignty. With the art schools of the late Qajar period increasingly combining fine arts and handicrafts, Iranian artists continued to traverse the dichotomy of modernity and tradition upon the advent of the Pahlavi era (Diba 2013). Just as the functionalism of the International Style and the columns and reliefs found in Iran’s pre-Islamic architecture were fused in Neo-Achaemenid or Neo-Sassanid architecture, bringing Iran’s heritage into modern times, so too was *Kāshī* revered as an ancient technique which was still being practised and instrumentalised in the large-scale restorations of several monuments in Iran, including the Masjid-i Shaykh Lutfallah and Madrasa Chahar Bagh (Overton 2012). *Kāshī* and other handicrafts were among those selected for preservation during the early Pahlavi era efforts to raise public interest in Iranian fine arts and handicrafts. Under the stewardship of the Society for National Heritage (official transliteration: *Anjoman-e Asar-e Melli*), directed by Reza Shah Pahlavi, architecture especially was used in the early Pahlavi era to edify an air of superiority with the reconstruction and museumisation of monuments being part of the new commitment to modernise the country through preservation of heritage (Grigor 2004).

The Pahlavi campaign for modernisation caught the attention of several Western Orientalists, such as the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948) who excavated Persepolis, and the American art historian Arthur Upham Pope (1881–1969) who is believed to be the inspiration behind the campaign of restoration of Safavid mosques and other monuments due to a rallying speech in support of Persian heritage delivered before Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925 in Tehran (Grigor 2004, Overton 2012). Safavid architecture soon grew in popularity internationally, attributed by Overton (2012) to Pope who organised exhibitions in the US and London featuring recreations of the Masjid-i Shah in Isfahan which presented the monument as an “ahistorical mélange” of elements of Achaemenid and Sassanid architecture. Through this “reductive” representation of Persianate architecture, a growing “Persomania” (Overton 2012) swept over elite American and European circles in the 1930s, creating a generic “Persian” aesthetic exemplified in several contemporary contracts including the former home of Doris Duke at Shangri La in Hawaii. Fuelling this growing desire for Safavid art in contrast to European modernism, Pope was supported by a network of Persian art dealers in selling contemporary pieces as genuine Safavid art (Diba 2013). This could well explain how the prayer niche came to be in New York in the first place; the US was a key point in the Safavid Revival art market.

The prayer niche in question is thus a product of a national artistic movement during the Pahlavi dynasty which drew upon symbols and elements of Safavid heritage to envision a modern nation. In this sense, the prayer niche was not necessarily seen as a piece of Islamicate architecture but rather symbolic of a greater (pre-)Islamic Persian heritage due to its Safavid aesthetic, and as such was involved in the commercialisation of Persian art, supported by international exhibitions and an at times dark art market. Such commercialisation of Safavid Revivalism in US and European markets highlights a heightened exoticisation rooted in the Western fascination with Islamicate architecture. As

Rabbat (2012: 1) argues, Islamicate architecture was introduced to Europeans in the 19th century in the form of detailed illustrated catalogues, produced by architects who had travelled to the 'Orient' "in search of adventure, employment, and the thrill of fantasy associated with that mysterious land." This led to Islamicate architecture being understood in the most general of terms: representing cultural production from the pre-colonial, pre-modern times of a huge geographic area, yet shunning all religious inclinations (Rabbat 2012). This reductive representation of Islamicate architecture, much like that of "Persomania", draws attention away from the deeper symbolic meaning of pieces such as the prayer niche, rendering these instead as a caricature of an imagined 'Orient' completely irrelevant of its Islamic function.

As Rabbat (2012: 7) continues, Islamicate architecture as understood today was re-conceptualised by Western-trained architects from Islamicate communities who sought to reclaim their heritage, propagating the discourse of a "living and breathing Islamic architecture" which was the product of pre-colonial times but still surviving under colonialism, locating social and cultural influences in Islamicate architecture and reimagining these as articulations of cultural identity. Such a decolonial approach to Islamicate architecture has continued into the postmodern era, with its establishment as an articulation of religious identity, facilitating both Muslim acts of worship and the physical embodiment of Islamic principles (Omer 2011). By re-locating Islam in studies of Islamicate architecture, and by extension art, the colonial exoticisation responsible for its distribution in US and European art markets can be deconstructed and the prayer niche therefore transforms from a collectible to a cultural belonging of great religious significance. The beauty of the cobalt tiles and sprawling Qur'ānic calligraphy becomes the embodiment of Islamic values, and its arabesque form the setting for *ṣalāh*. What was seen as exotic and endearing by colonial draftsmen and trivialised for collectors holds a far greater meaning within its glazed tiles for its very functionality.

The *miḥrāb* and Islamic practice

The prayer niche is an integral part of the *masjid* (mosque) where Muslims pray together. Placed in the direction known as *Qibla*, the prayer niche's position helps worshipers to find the *Ka'ba*, the sacred site in Mecca (present-day Saudi Arabia) towards which Muslims face when they pray. The prayer niche therefore holds an important function in the *masjid* and is present already in architecture of the early Islamic period, perhaps inspired by the niches of other holy sites (Kaptan 2013). While prayer niches can vary in form according to architectural design, its function as the marker of the *Qibla* is fairly constant. An interesting example is presented in the Ayasofya Grand Mosque, the famous site in Istanbul which was originally built as an Eastern Orthodox church and is now a functioning mosque. In the Ayasofya, the direction of prayer is also marked by a prayer niche which is nonetheless slightly off-centre from the building's architecture as Orthodox Christians pray towards the East. The prayer niche is thus a functional piece of the *masjid*'s architecture, much like water basins for performing *wuḍū'* (absolution) and the *minbar* (pulpit) from which the Imam gives the *khuṭba* (Friday sermon).

Moreover, the prayer niche also serves an aesthetic purpose. While such integral pieces of architecture are found in purpose-built mosques, the situation of most mosques in Berlin is quite different. It is not uncommon for congregations to rent an apartment, office space, or studio and turn it into a mosque. This repurposing of space often involves designating separate areas for men and women, fitting a lined carpet to create rows for worshipers, and constructing a makeshift prayer niche and pulpit. These prayer niches can vary greatly in design: for example, the prayer niche in the Emir-Sultan-Moschee in Berlin-Schöneberg is decorated with blue tiles sprawling around the whole *masjid* and a

thin string of LED lights to accent the arabesque, while the prayer niche of the Arreselah Moschee in Berlin-Moabit is a quadratic, golden construction bearing the names ‘*Allāh*’, and ‘*Muḥammad*’ and geometric tiles in muted, neutral tones. These two examples show how central the prayer niche is to turning a room into a *masjid*, but what makes a prayer niche Islamic? How can the prayer niche in the collection of the Ethnologische Museum be understood as a piece of Islamicate architecture, especially when the above argumentation has placed it strongly in the field of Safavid Revival art?

To approach this question, we come again to our working definition of Islamicate as a convivial aesthetic which is the accumulation of Muslim and non-Muslim influences on cultural production. As argued above, Safavid Revival architecture found its origins in a point in history when a new Persian national identity was being constructed on the archaeological remains of a past civilisation. While the Safavid period was Persia’s first Shia-Muslim dynasty, the Persian national identity of the early Pahlavi era paid reference to the columns of Persepolis and further symbols of other pre-Islamic and Zoroastrian sites. Therefore, to understand Safavid Revival as purely Islamic is limited and would ignore the socio-cultural context from which it was produced. However, this accounts only for the visual aesthetic of the prayer niche and not the approach proposed by Shaw to view with the heart. Approaching this double purpose of the mosque’s architecture, Gonzalez (2024) proposes there are two ways to view a mosque: semiotic and phenomenological, with the former being the method of assigning space in the urban landscape, and the latter as the material experience of *qibla*. Following Gonzalez’s (2024: 83) argument, the outward appearance of the mosque delivers to worshippers “a sacred encoded visual language in a world built on religious significance”, acting as a “prelude to their edifying religious experience inside the building.” The *miḥrāb* is therefore both functional and aesthetic as it directs the worshipper to *Qibla* while adding to the experience of prayer itself, i.e. placing oneself in the correct cosmology to enter into communication with *Allāh*. There are therefore two criteria which make the prayer niche Islamicate: its cosmological function and the aesthetic experience it evokes. This aesthetic experience is not limited to worshippers but speaks more to the informed practice of the artisan who constructed the prayer niche.

The aesthetical experience of the prayer niche works on the understanding of certain symbols, for example the arabesque shape of the *miḥrāb*. Perhaps most overtly, the Qur’ānic calligraphy sprawled across almost every area of the prayer niche communicates its purpose very clearly to worshippers. With the words of *Sūrat al-Baqara*, *An-Nisā*, and *Al-Jumu’ah* referencing prayer, the prayer niche clearly commands the worshipper to observe their proscribed prayer, for example in white text:

Fa-idhā qaḍaytumūṣ-ṣalāta fa-dhkurū llāha qiyāman wa-quūdan wa-‘alā junūbikum fa-idhā ṭuma’nantum fa-aqīmūṣ-ṣalāta innaṣ-ṣalāta kānat ‘alā l-mu’minīna kitāban mawqūtan (Surah 4, Verse 103)

[And when you have completed the prayer, remember Allah standing, sitting, or [lying] on your sides. But when you become secure, re-establish [regular] prayer. Indeed, prayer has been decreed upon the believers a decree of specified times.] (translation from le-coran.com)

Interestingly, while many worshippers may not understand the passages used in full, be it due to an unfamiliarity with calligraphy or weaker reading skills in Qur’ānic Arabic, by viewing the prayer niche as a whole, it becomes an object which reminds the perceiver of prayer. On one level, therefore, Gonzalez’s approach is helpful when defining this object as a prayer niche, but this only goes so far in the prayer niche’s current situation in the “Aspects of Islam” exhibition, i.e. outside of the *masjid*.

The “Aspects of Islam exhibition”, located in Humboldt Forum on Berlin’s Museum Island, works together with several Berlin-based Muslim communities to curate a space of education, communication, and understanding which intends to question stereotypes and present the diversity and flexibility of Islam. Through this dialogical approach, the exhibition floor becomes the site of knowledge-sharing and representation, highlighting the plurality of Islam which goes far beyond the cosmopolitan setting of Berlin. Such a “sensual-aesthetic experience” (Weber 2012) is designed to pull the visitor in, using an object to attract attention and awaken curiosity. In this sense, the prayer niche acts as a symbol of Islamicate art and practice within the exhibition, reminding the visitor not only of the great mosques of Iran and Central Asia but also of the beauty and diversity of Islamicate societies through the use of cobalt faïence mosaïque, the arabesque, and the sprawling calligraphy. In its union of text, form, and colour, the prayer niche and accompanying text mouldings therefore overtly evoke an aesthetic experience, creating a connection between Muslim and non-Muslim visitors alike to Islamicate cultural production and religious practice.

While the prayer niche displayed in Humboldt Forum is not part of a functioning *masjid*, it does fulfil the function of representing *Qibla*. During its days in the former location of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin-Dahlem, the prayer niche and partial text mouldings were built into an available wall to support their great weight and were not displayed in the *Qibla* direction, instead exemplifying the use of calligraphy in Islamic cultural production. With the construction of Humboldt Forum and the move to the new location, however, it was possible to construct an additional support wall at some distance from the actual wall and, since 2022, the prayer niche denotes the direction of *Qibla* within the exhibition space. By making this change, the prayer niche’s function is integrated into the exhibition, contextualising Islamicate art within Islamic religious practice. While largely symbolic, the placement of the prayer niche in the direction of *Qibla* not only displays the beauty of Safavid Revival and Islamicate architecture, but demonstrates the religious function of the prayer niche, fusing both Islamicate aesthetics and religious practice.

While prayer does not take place directly in front of the prayer niche, a small group of Muslim museum workers do use a quiet corner of the same exhibition space to pray during shifts, secluded slightly by other installations. This holds testament to the multifunctional, flexible nature of the prayer niche as it sits on the intersection of museal object, cultural belonging, and art. It also exemplifies how the role of objects, including copies, within ethnological collections is largely dependant on the perception and response they evoke. By using assigned aesthetics such as shape, texture, and colour, copies challenge Western aesthetics of authenticity when placed within a dialogical, educational context such as the “Aspects of Islam” exhibition. In this way, copies can be used as tools of communication and knowledge transmission, moving beyond the limitations of material age and creating a connection between the visitor and the object itself, contextualised within the exhibition as a whole. While the prayer niche was deemed as a forgery for the circumstances surrounding its sale and purchase, it has found a place within the permanent exhibition space of Ethnologisches Museum in Humboldt Forum where it continues to connect visitors with Islamicate art and religious practice, challenging understandings of authenticity through the aesthetic experience which it provokes.

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