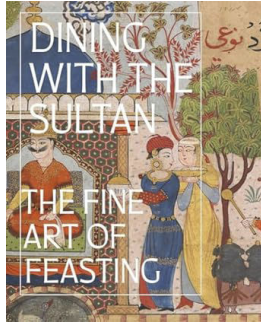



PERMANENT EFFECTS OF TEMPORARY DISPLAYS

Review of the exhibition *Dining with the Sultan. The Fine Art of Feasting*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
(December 17, 2023 – August 4, 2024).



Reviewed by
Yasmine Yakuppur 

The most recent exhibition of “Islamic art” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), *Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting* took place from December 17, 2023 to August 4, 2024. According to the museum, the exhibition was the first of its kind in terms of content and scale, bringing together 253 objects at the intersection of food culture and art. The exhibition’s theme, a cousin of the 2011 exhibition *Gifts of the Sultan*, was chosen by the curator Dr. Linda Komaroff due to its universality.¹ In post-9/11 America, where Islamophobia still runs rampant, food is an effective theme to promote and expand the audience’s interest in Southwest Asia and North Africa, as it appeals to all museum-goers regardless of

¹

I would like to extend my thanks and gratitude to Dr. Linda Komaroff for taking the time to meet with me on April 22, 2024 and answer my questions regarding the making of this exhibition. Statements regarding the intent of the curator in this review have been compiled from this interview.

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
6/2, 2025, 241–250

<https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2025.2.111790>



background, age, or gender.² Although Dr. Komaroff does not think that making non-Western art accessible in Western museums is part of the traditional job description of a curator, she believes that bridging the gap between differences is, in fact, part of her job as a human. That said, *Dining with the Sultan* was a humanist exhibition that aimed to re-evaluate and re-present the category of “Islamic art” beyond the confines of religion and rather as a complex network of peoples, objects, and stories that come together on dining tables across empires of Islam.

The exhibition was arranged thematically in eight open-format galleries, although lacking written headers that announced these preconceived themes. Clarified by Dr. Komaroff, the galleries were arranged as: introduction, water, outdoor dining, dining across cultures, eating for health, coffee culture, dressing for dinner, and music. Within each theme, objects in a variety of media were displayed, ranging from textiles, to paintings, to manuscripts, to glass, ceramic, and metalwork. Additionally, the exhibition included a Damascus Room [Fig. 1] and an installation by Sadik Kwaish Alfraji titled *A Threat of Light Between my Mother's Fingers and Heaven* (2023) [Fig. 2], the first work to be commissioned specifically for an exhibition by the curator. Along with the lack of thematic headers, the exhibition also did not have object descriptions on its wall labels, instead featuring only the catalogue number, name, place, approximate date, media, and provenance information of each work. When asked, Dr. Komaroff explained that the reason for omission was not only limited wall space, but also her personal aversion to excessive text, which she thinks hinders the viewer from navigating the exhibition space freely.³ Freedom of movement is an important tenet in Dr. Komaroff's curatorial practice, illustrated by the open galleries and three entrances into the space, which encourages the visitor to wander rather than forcing upon them a pre-ascribed route.⁴ Dr. Komaroff attributes this approach of hers to her visit to the 1990 exhibition *Matisse in Morocco* at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, which had a strict curatorial pathway guiding its audience along a linear trajectory. After noticing that instead of

2

The combatting of Islamophobia via displays of Islamic art, using such objects “as expressions of cultural tolerance”, has been an increasingly popular phenomenon since 9/11, one that was only practiced by a select few in the field prior to that date. See Magnus Berg and Klas Grinell, *Understanding Islam at European Museums*, Cambridge/New York 2021, 6.

3

Dr. Komaroff noted that she had hoped for viewers to go around the exhibition with the catalogue in hand, which was made available in two separate locations in the open-format galleries, to then look up descriptions of the objects that they were especially interested in; however, the final catalogue, weighing 2.4 kilograms, did not allow for such portability.

4

At the time of my visit to the LACMA, one of the three entrances was closed due to construction in the adjoining galleries, making only two of the entrances available to the exhibition space. I observed that most – if not all – visitors entered the exhibition from gallery 1 that featured the introductory wall text, which was visible from the main entrance to the Resnick Pavilion in which the exhibition took place; therefore, although the exhibition could be said to have had a “non-prescribed route” in the sense that it was composed of open interlocking galleries, there seemed to be a designated entrance and exit that most visitors preferred to use.



[Fig. 1]
Dining with the Sultan at LACMA, *Damascus Room*, image taken by author on April 19,
2024 © Yasmine Yakuppur.



[Fig. 2]
Dining with the Sultan at LACMA, Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, *A Threat of Light Between my Mother's Fingers and Heaven* (2023), images taken by author on April 19, 2024 © Yasmine Yakuppur.



[Fig. 3]
Dining with the Sultan at LACMA, gallery featuring objects related to outdoor dining,
image taken by author on April 19, 2024 © Yasmine Yakuppur.



[Fig. 4]
Dining with the Sultan at LACMA, gallery featuring objects related to dining across cultures, image taken by author on April 19, 2024 © Yasmine Yakuppur.

following the prescribed route, she did a quick walkthrough of the exhibition to then go back to objects that were of specific interest to her, Dr. Komaroff said that she came to embrace the free will of her audience in her own curatorial practice.

Due to its theme, *Dining with the Sultan* had the challenge of capturing the multisensory nature of the dining experience itself and incorporating as many senses in the exhibition design as possible. Sight, the primary sense associated with Western museum display,⁵ was captured via objects of different types, media, colors, and textures, in vitrines and pedestals of varying shapes and sizes [Fig. 3], creating a feast for the eyes. Smell was incorporated in scent boxes featuring traditional ingredients such as rosewater and orange blossom. These boxes also introduced an element of tactility, as the audience has to open and close them to access the scents, almost like how one would interact with the featured ingredients while cooking, opening and closing a spice drawer or a pantry cabinet. Sound was featured as the soundtrack of Alfraji's work echoing across the open galleries, although musical instruments on display were accompanied by QR codes, which allowed for those who wished to be able to hear how they sound from their smart-phones. The last and perhaps most important sense, taste, was notably absent from the exhibition due to obvious restrictions of having food in a gallery space; however, the museum did organize a limited capacity paid seated dinner on June 12, 2024, in which Iranian American chef Najmieh Batmanglij cooked six historic recipes she adapted to the contemporary kitchen. Images of these dishes were featured in four plate-shaped screens placed on a *sufra* in the gallery about dining across cultures, accompanied by custom made bread and vegetable sculptures [Fig. 4].

Although its title implied to represent the breadth of Muslim dining practices by referring to an ambiguous and general "sultan", the exhibition featured seventy-one objects attributed to Iran and forty-six to Turkey, accounting for almost half of the objects on display.⁶ This imbalance seems to be the result of the exhibition's basis on the collection of the LACMA itself, with a fifth of the objects on view being from the museum's own holdings.⁷ The LACMA

5

Regarding oculo-centrism in Western museums, see Svetlana Alpers, *The Museum as a Way of Seeing*, in: Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum*, Washington/London 1991, 25–32. For the difference between Western versus Islamic visual culture, see D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Making Vision Manifest. Frame, Screen, and Vision in Islamic Culture*, in: Dianne Harris and D. Fairchild Ruggles (eds.), *Sites Unseen. Landscape and Vision*, Pittsburgh, PA 2007, 131–288.

6

The remaining objects were attributed to the following regions: twenty-two each to Syria and India, twenty to China, fourteen each to Iraq and Italy, seven to Spain, six to Egypt, four to Afghanistan, two each to Russia and the Eastern Mediterranean, one each to North Africa, Dagestan, and Pakistan, and twenty-seven undecided with attributions to several distinct regions simultaneously.

7

In terms of provenance, the objects in the catalogue come from the following institutions, in order of prevalence: forty-six from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, twenty-four from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, eighteen from the Topkapı Palace (that were

collection is heavily saturated with works from Iran and Turkey due to the preferences of collectors such as Nasli M. Heeramanek and Edward Binney III, whose donations formed the nucleus of the Islamic Art department of the museum.⁸ Outside of its consequential focus on Iran and Turkey, the exhibition brought together works from Europe (Italy, Spain) and Asia (Russia, China), traditionally excluded from the geographical scope of the category of “Islamic art”.⁹ Dr. Komaroff has presented a renewed approach to this category since her appointment in 1995, aiming to expand mainstream canonical considerations beyond imposed restrictions of time (610 to around 1800) and space (Southwest Asia and North Africa), into one that encompasses the greater history of trade and migrations in and across majority Muslim empires, kingdoms, and countries. Her intersectional approach has been propagated by trading in a permanent display of Islamic art for temporary exhibitions in 2005, which allowed the museum to seek constant renewal in the meaning of this category labeled by religion. Efforts by Dr. Komaroff to expand considerations of Islamic art are parallel to the overarching efforts by the LACMA itself, which champions intersectional exhibitions that refuse traditional art historical categories bound by time and space, rather than relying on permanent displays of said rigid and outdated categories.¹⁰

not included in the final iteration of the exhibition), fifteen from the Victoria and Albert Museum, fourteen from the British Museum, thirteen each from the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar and the Detroit Museum of Art, twelve from the al-Sabah Collection, ten from the Walters Collection, nine each from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Louvre, and the Corning Glass Museum, eight each from the British Library, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the David Collection, seven each from the Ashmolean Museum, the Farjam Collection, and the Getty Institute, four from the Textile Museum, three each from the Fowler Collection, the Houston Museum of Art, and the Hispanic Society, two each from the Bodleian Library and the Asian Art Museum of Washington, and one each from the New York Public Library, the Pera Museum, and the Wellcome Collection.

8

For a history of acquisitions and the formation of the collection, see Linda Komaroff, *Collecting Islamic Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. A Curatorial Perspective*, Los Angeles 2017, and Pratapaditya Pal (ed.), *Islamic Art. The Nasli M. Heeramanek Collection, Gift of Joan Palevsky*, Los Angeles 1973.

9

The category of “Islamic art” has been heavily debated within the last two decades. See, for example, Wendy Shaw, *What Is “Islamic” Art? Between Religion and Perception*, Cambridge 2019; Avinoam Shalem, What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Islamic Art’? A Plea for a Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam, in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 6, 2012 (July 10, 2025); Gülrü Necipoğlu, The Concept of Islamic Art. Inherited Discourses and New Approaches, in: Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber, and Gerhard Wolf (eds.), *Islamic Art and the Museum. Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, London 2012, 57–75; and Finbarr Barry Flood, From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art, in: Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History. A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, London 2007, 31–52. A brief discussion is also included in Linda Komaroff, John W. Hirx, and Anke Scharrahs, Introduction, in: id., *Beauty and Identity. Islamic Art from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, Los Angeles 2016, 11–19.

10

A general view of categories prevalently used by Western museums to group their permanent collections can be found in the fields listed in the June 1995 issue of the *Art Bulletin*, as reproduced in Robert S. Nelson, The Map of Art History, in: *The Art Bulletin* 79/1, March 1997, 28–40, here 29. The list of *Art Bulletin* categories for Art History and Archaeology dissertations, which Nelson presents as a general list of the “fields” of art history in the West, is as follows: Egyptian, Ancient Near Eastern, and Classical Art; Early Christian, Byzantine, and Medieval Art; The Renaissance; Baroque and Eighteenth-Century Europe; Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe; Photography and Film; Art of the United

The exhibition also featured a companion installation at the Charles White Elementary School from January 20 to August 10, 2024, open to visitors on Saturday afternoons. This companion installation featured seventy works arranged in five galleries, sixty from the collection of the LACMA, five printed reproductions of folios on display at the Resnick Pavilion, two musical instruments from the collection of Amir Hosein Pourjavady, two video installations, and one floor spread made in 2023 in Ishafan, Iran, purchased for the exhibition. Out of the sixty featured objects, fifty were ceramic vessels used in either dining or storage, reflecting the stronghold of the medium in the LACMA collection of Islamic art. Unlike those installed in the main campus, the Charles White objects featured both English and Spanish labels, possibly motivated by the fact that the visitors to the site are primarily students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), 73 percent of whom identify as Latinx.¹¹ This collaboration with Charles White is part of the *Art Programs with the Community: LACMA On-Site* program that allocates a million dollars per year from a 23.9-million-dollar endowment by former trustee Anna Bing Arnold to support arts programming in the LAUSD. The program was established in 2006 to serve partner institutions in LAUSD's District 4, embodying the vision of Bing who saw "education as an essential function of [the LACMA]",¹² which has since been adopted by the museum. In line, *Dining with the Sultan* offered programming for the public to interact with the exhibition beyond simply looking, allowing for a hands-on approach, at the Resnick Pavilion with daily tours including practical exercises and at the Charles White Elementary School with family workshops.¹³ By placing a second installation of the exhibition at the school and offering educational programming, Dr. Komaroff has been able to expand her humanist mission of familiarizing the general American public with "Islamic art" and Muslim culture to not only adults but more importantly families with children.

Dining with the Sultan, in its celebration of tableware from the lands of Islam dating from medieval to contemporary, can be read not only as a decolonial project that challenged associations of "religious" and "medieval" with the category of "Islamic art", but also a humanist one that aimed to familiarize the American public

States and Canada; Native American, Pre-Columbian, and Latin American Art; Asian Art; Islamic Art; African Art; African Diaspora; Art Criticism and Theory.

¹¹

Los Angeles Unified School District, *LAUSD Unified: Fingertip Facts 2024–2025*, 2024 (July 10, 2025, page not available in all regions).

¹²

Art Programs with the Community: LACMA On-Site, Los Angeles 2011, 7; Susan Hoffmann, *SWAP: LACMA Exhibition Project at Charles White Elementary School*, Los Angeles 2009, 6.

¹³

The day of my visit, artist Eszter Delgado was leading a family workshop titled "Set the Table!", a monthly craft workshop in which children and their families made paper plates with different techniques such as linocut, in the designated workshop area within the exhibition space for weekly workshops.

with Muslim food culture. Although the exhibition fell short in its goal to provide a geographically holistic overview of dining ware and food culture in the lands of Islam due to logistical limitations and boundaries of the already existing collection of the LACMA, the curatorial approach taken by Dr. Komaroff made the exhibition a success in facilitating an intimate engagement between its audience and exhibited material. Free movement within the exhibition space, sensory engagement with the displayed objects, and educational programming that offered hands-on activities allowed this exhibition to refuse being a static informative display for passively viewing the Other, and rather to become an innovative project that engaged its visitors and promoted critical thinking.