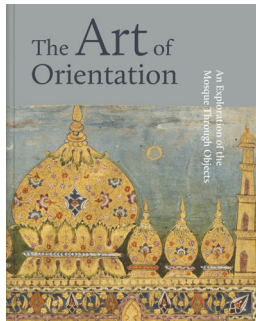


IDRIES TREVATHAN, MONA  
ALJALHAMI, MURDO MACLEOD, AND  
MONA MANSOUR (EDS.), *THE ART  
OF ORIENTATION. AN EXPLORATION  
OF THE MOSQUE THROUGH OBJECTS*

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Reviewed by  
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As they studied in the mosque, students of Islam utilized wooden tablets called *lawh* to aid their efforts in memorizing the Qur'an, copying out passages onto their washable surfaces. Idries Trevathan argues that in West Africa, this popular educational tool became such an important symbol of Islamic literacy that its image developed into a decorative device ornamenting the walls of mosques. For *Trevathan*, an understanding of the history and use of the *lawh* in West Africa offers a lens through which to understand the importance of literacy and the mosque's role in education and the dispersal of knowledge. In the volume in which Trevathan's essay is contained, a new exhibition catalog entitled *The Art of Orientation. An Exploration of the Mosque through Objects*, artifacts of material culture provide a structure through which to celebrate the mosque as an aesthetic and technical achievement, but also a means of explicating its connection to its context and its administrative, charitable, social, and cultural roles. In his foreword, Abdullah Al Rashid, Director of Programs at the Ithra Museum in Saudi Arabia, where the exhibition presented in the catalog was recently held, positions the transportable objects and decorative embellishments populat-

ing the mosque as critical to the understanding of these buildings themselves. The exhibition, which opened in February 2021, aggregated a vast selection of these objects – astrolabes, lamps, Qur’an stands, carpets, ceramic tiles, water basins, mihrabs, and minbars – from the collections of the Cairo Museum of Islamic Art and Ithra Museum archives, through them representing a number of historic mosques from across the Islamic world.

As the subtitle, *An Exploration of the Mosque through Objects*, suggests, the volume proposes to re-examine the mosque through a close reading of the artistic and social histories of the objects that inhabited its spaces, examining the history and development of the mosque through these artifacts rather than through its architecture. To this end, the editors have compiled a series of essays by scholars, architects, and artists that contextualize a selection of the exhibited artifacts. Each essay picks one object, or type of object to reflect on; the texts are accompanied by photographs of similar objects from the exhibition, spanning different regions and historical periods.

An exhibition catalog, *The Art of Orientation* is large in format and richly illustrated with photographs of archival objects. Its contents are aimed towards a general audience; readers are introduced to Islamic practices and rituals such as the Hajj, and to the mosque’s general architectural history and its primary elements, and they are given definitions for concepts such as the *waqf*. While some historical sources are provided, they are limited and compiled in a loose bibliography. Although the text is intended for a non-specialist reader, its structure fits squarely into a long tradition of Islamic art survey books: from early twentieth-century exhibition catalogs such as the publication accompanying the pivotal 1910 Munich exhibition, *The Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art*; to Titus Burckhardt’s 1976 survey *Art of Islam. Language and Meaning* – a source quoted in several of *The Art of Orientation*’s essays; to contemporary surveys such as Nasser D. Khalili’s *Visions of Splendour in Islamic Art and Culture* (2008). As architectural historian Nasser Rabbat argues in his essay “Surveying Islamic Art and Architecture”, the method of the “culturally specific survey”, framed around either a chronological or thematic approach, has effectively secluded the discipline of Islamic art and architecture from the general history of art.<sup>1</sup> The structure of *The Art of Orientation*, which divides objects into their own general categories, makes no exception to this trend.

Despite conforming to a familiar structural model, *The Art of Orientation*’s reading of the mosque through individual objects begins to offer a challenge to other tropes common to contemporary popular and scholarly discourse on mosque architecture – namely the clear opposition of religious versus secular space. The movement between the examination of a specific object and of a category of objects more generally allows the authors to both highlight mosques that are typically overlooked or only marginally covered in

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Nasser Rabbat, Surveying Islamic Art and Architecture, in: *Eothen. Münchner Beiträge zur Geschichte der islamischen Kunst und Kultur* 5, 2012, 267–274, here 271–272.

discourses of Islamic art and architecture, and to approach their discussions of well-known mosques from novel directions. In the introductory essay, the editors narrate the liturgical functions of the mosque's architecture but simultaneously emphasize the critical secular, social, and educational roles played by the tools, objects, and elements that performed these functions. Each of the following chapters takes on a singular object common to the mosque, utilizing it to connect the mosque and its contents to broader urban, social, educational, technological, and artistic histories.

Several thematic threads – some original and others familiar – weave across the essays, addressing objects, portable or fixed, from diverse perspectives. The catalog's most exciting theme – the recasting of the role of the mosque beyond its liturgical properties – connects several objects at opposing ends of the scale spectrum: from rock crystal containers to the architectural scale of the minbar. For the author of chapter 2, architect and Makkah native Sami Angawi, a nineteenth-century textile that hung on the prophet's tomb serves as an entry to a discussion connecting the role of the prophet's house as the first mosque to broader questions of the relationship of the mosque to its urban condition. Explaining how the prophet's house, through its proximity to the dwellings of the prophet's companions and its integration with the city that evolved around it, became the template for the urban mosque, the author argues that this urban embeddedness establishes “the importance of the mosque and its linking between faith and the daily life of citizens and the community”.<sup>2</sup>

This complication of the framing of the mosque as a purely sacred space comes to full fruition in chapter 3, written by Mona Aljalhami, one of the catalog's editors. Aljalhami introduces the non-expert reader to the Islamic concept of the *waqf* (charitable endowment), describing its impact on the development of the urban mosque's social welfare functions: from the incorporation of fountains serving fresh water, to the insertion of hospital facilities and soup kitchens to house and feed the poor. Accompanying Aljalhami's text are photographs of the diverse and fascinating objects that proliferated as a result of these overlapping programs: the gold dinars used for large charitable endowments, serving bowls, ewers and filters, jars and basins, and *sabil* plates and foundation stones. A series of medical objects – including measuring ladles and rock crystal containers, medical prescriptions, and a sixteenth-century copy of the twelfth-century *Kitab Al-Hasha'ish* (Book of Herbs) with exquisite botanical illustrations – offer further evidence of the mosque's succor of the poor and sick. Chapter 5 continues this theme, with co-editor Idries Trevathan exploring the historical role of the mosque in education and scholarship through an introduction of the objects that registered and disseminated knowledge. Trevathan

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Sami Angawi, Masjid Al Nabawi. The Prophetic Prototype, in: Idries Trevathan, Mona Aljalhami, Murdo Macleod, and Mona Mansour (eds.), *The Art of Orientation. An Exploration of the Mosque through Objects*, Munich 2021, 53.

moves from tablets and scrolls to the tall tables and cabinets that housed them, finally elaborating the eventual birth and construction of the great madrasas in the Seljuk Empire during the eleventh century. Questions of writing, copying, and reading from tablets and Qur'ans are intelligently tied into the technical and artistic evolution of calligraphic and script traditions. Trevathan shows how the development of the standardized cursive scripts in Qur'anic manuscripts in the late eleventh century made Arabic text clearer and more legible to increasingly non-Arabic-speaking Islamic communities.

An interrelated theme explores the objects that resulted from or facilitated the mosque's spread across increasingly vast geographies, driven by the expansion of the Islamic empire. In chapter 1, urban planner Abdullah H. Alkadi, introduces the scientific evolution of the astrolabe; a medieval measuring device, the astrolabe served a crucial function, permitting the accurate calculation of prayer times and the orientation of each new mosque toward Makkah. Alkadi then traces a continuous line from the astrolabe to modern-day astronomy and GPS technology. As the mosque spread across new territories, it also performed a vital societal role that was increasingly enacted from its pulpit. The final chapter, written by Minwer al-Meheid, sheds light on a unique eighteenth-century wooden Berber Minbar, originally from a small Friday mosque in the Atlas Mountains. Al-Meheid brings to the conversation a deep technical and artistic knowledge of the minbar; in the early 2000s, he was responsible for the restoration of the twelfth-century minbar of Saladin of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which was destroyed by a fire in 1969 during the political upheaval in Jerusalem. Following the tradition of pulpits in North African mosques, this Berber Minbar is built on wheels, allowing it to be rolled and stored away. But unlike the six- or eight-step pulpits of the urban mosques of the medieval cities of the Maghreb, al-Meheid describes this three step minbar as a reflection of a "modest rural community", its humility, "more evocative of the prophet's pulpit than any I have seen".<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the minbar's number of steps and overall scale to the supposedly ostentatious political role that it gained during sermons in the Friday mosque in the centuries that followed is an interesting observation that deserves further elaboration.

Chapters 4, 7, and 9 take on questions of how objects reframe the architecture of the mosque. Chapter 4 touches on the architectural visualization of the Two Holy Mosques of Makkah and Medina in historical manuscripts, Hajj pilgrims' handbooks, and the pictorial tiles placed initially in mosques. These manuscripts, guidebooks, and tiles offer some of the most satisfactory historical visual evidence of the two sacred sites, capturing their larger geographical and environmental settings and the practices and rituals that would have unfolded across this spiritual landscape. In their repre-

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Minwer al-Meheid, *Reflections on the Minbar*, in: Trevathan, Aljalhami, Macleod, and Mansour, *The Art of Orientation*, 249.

sentation of two sites, located at the heart of the “central lands” of the Islamic world, these pieces also reflected the influence of the architectural language common to their respective “peripheral” sites of production. For example, the eighteenth-century painting of the Prophet’s mosque reprinted on *The Art of Orientation’s* cover depicts the structure topped by an onion-shaped Mughal dome. The chapter’s author, Raeda Ashour, an artist herself, emphasizes the affective impact of experiencing these objects, postulating that a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century visit to the mosque that housed these tiles would have been similar to a museum visit today, making the spaces of the two sites “accessible for the common viewer”.<sup>4</sup> These plates, and the urban imaginaries they provoked, become even more poignant in light of the radical urbanization that both sacred sites have witnessed in the last few decades. In chapter 7, writer Mohammed Abdel Bari crafts a fresh poetic reading of the fourteenth-century Sultan al-Nasir Mohammad ibn Qalawun Mosque lamp that goes beyond the utilitarian function of providing light. His narrative, which describes in great detail the lamp’s inscriptions, volume, and surface, drifts in and out of various periods of Islamic history, uncovering historic spaces and places of worship in Mamluk Cairo. Writing that “my spatial journey would not be complete without imagining how this lamp swayed over the head of the worshipers who were washed with the light of kindness hope and love”, Abdel Bari visualizes the mosque at a time when the light hung above worshipers, teasing out the immersive spiritual experience it induced in them.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the author of chapter 9, Mohamed Ahmed Abd el-Salam, focuses on the carpet of the sixteenth-century Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, refocusing the viewer’s gaze from the mosque’s celebrated cascading dome to the ground below it. The carpet becomes a lens through which to unpack the history of the making of prayer rugs and row carpets. The author directly connects the Selimiye mosque carpet to the architectural space it inhabits, showing that the decoration around the niche arch in the carpet perfectly aligns with the decoration of the niche windows of the mosque’s central dome. But unlike the flexible, all-encompassing space of the dome, the knotted surface of the carpet must integrate and direct the dimensions of the worshiper’s body through positions of standing, sitting, and prostration. This choreography poses a sharp challenge for the carpet maker, requiring an intimate understanding of relationships of scale between the unit and the whole; a knowledge of material properties, life span, and interactions (wool, cotton, silk, and linen); and the development of intricate and complex knotting and weaving techniques (106 full knots per square inch for decora-

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Raeda Ashour, *The Mosque Tile. Visualizing the Two Holy Sanctuaries*, in: Trevathan, Aljalhami, Macleod, and Mansour, *The Art of Orientation*, 99.

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Mohammed Abdel Bari, *The Mosque Lamp. A Poetic Reading into Its Shades and Meanings*, in: Trevathan, Aljalhami, Macleod, and Mansour, *The Art of Orientation*, 179.

tive motifs). This task perhaps rivals in its challenge and complexity the construction of Mimar Sinan's majestic dome. In its final installed form, the Selimiye row carpet is as much a testimony to the mosque carpet-makers' talents and sophisticated expertise as it is a reference to the "unity between Muslims, who pray in aligned rows similar to the rows of angels".<sup>6</sup>

Other chapters retread paths familiar in discourses of the history of Islamic art and architecture, particularly those that address the archetypal objects of "Islamic art" – such as decorative ceramic tiles or the mihrab. Chapter 6 covers the all-too-prevalent topic of "arabesque" ornamentation in its discussion of fourteenth-century Seljuk-era ceramic tiles. Under the lens of geometric analysis, the essay unifies a diverse spectrum of tiles from Fez to Kashan, cropping them from their contexts and presenting them floating on the white pages of the catalog. The isolation of the tiles and the limiting of the discussion to a mathematical analysis of the geometric patterns of their ornamentation aligns the author's investigation with an attempt to extract universal meanings, applicable across time periods, regions, and cultures. Similarly, chapter 8 focuses on a narrowly aesthetic reading of the twelfth-century mihrab from the mosque of Sayyida Ruqayya bint 'Ali ibn Abi Talib in Cairo. A free-standing object, the back of the wooden mihrab is as richly articulated with complex geometric and calligraphic patterns as its front. The author's description of the mihrab qualifies it as "timeless", setting the stage for a conversation that emphasizes its aesthetic merits at the cost of describing its operative qualities. Recalling and at times directly referencing Burckhardt's stylistic definition of "feminine" and "masculine" geometric design, the chapter focuses on a painstaking interpretation of the spiraling arabesque and geometric star patterns that engulf the mihrab. One is left yearning to learn more about the functionality of this unique mihrab and how its mobile qualities might have reshaped understandings or experiences of the mosque's prayer space.

Through their orientation towards the object, the essays collected within *The Art of Orientation* begin to suggest a means of narrating an alternate history for the mosque, distinct from that familiar to scholarly discourses of Islamic art and architecture. The inclusion of artifacts of "material culture", rather than a narrow focus on what are historically considered to be examples of "high" art, allows the discussion of the mosque to broaden from aesthetics or oppositions of sacred and secular, at times effectively reinscribing it within the social, historical, and artistic context of its development and use. Through its collection of an array of unlikely objects, the book narrates stories that emphasize the mosque's relationship to the spiritual and physical well-being of the communities it served, and the labor invested in its making, as much as those of the patrons it is supposed to celebrate. Yet, despite this potential narrative depth,

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Mohamed Ahmed Abd el-Salam, *The Prayer Rug. A Microcosm of the Mosque*, in: Treva-  
than, Aljalhami, Macleod, and Mansour, *The Art of Orientation*, 231.

visually these diverse objects remain floating, unmoored within the white of the page. Little indication is given of their original contexts or even of the places within the museum which they finally came to occupy. This visual detachment, which follows the actual physical and sometimes violent removal of the object from its context, is reinforced by a recurring emphasis on its autonomy: its “timelessness”, “originality”, “essence”. This assertion of the autonomy of the artifact obscures the object’s geographical specificity and historical evolution, instead insisting that its formation was rooted and fixed with the birth of Islam, reproducing the historical meta-narrative of the canon and the encyclopedic museum. While we are successfully drawn to imagine the complex socio-religious history of the mosque through this rich collection of objects, one also realizes that that history must be more than just the sum of its isolated parts.