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**It's time we bury 'Orientalism’ in Jerusalem’s Museum of Islamic Art**

**Nevet Yitzhak exhibit peels off the prevailing view of 'Islamic art’ as 'monolithic and mysterious'.**

By Galia Yahav | Dec. 12, 2013 | 8:21 AM

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One of the most wonderful aspects of “Orient Express,” the brilliant exhibition of works by Nevet Yitzhak at Jerusalem’s L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, is the resounding answer she gives to the superficial, cliché-filled discourse on Islamic art. It is a discussion that defines Islamic art as a “rich, ancient, much respected culture” in a generalized manner that, as it declares the wealth of ancient Islam, presents Islamic art as homogeneous, monolithic and bereft of any nuances.

“Orient Express” rejects such declarations and, more importantly, Yitzhak transcends the critical treatment on which she bases herself, notably the article by art historian Avinoam Shalem, “What do we mean when we say ‘Islamic art’”? In this article, Shalem, who coined the term “post-Edwardian,” refers to the response to “Orientalism,” the book written by Edward Said. In transcending this attitude, Yitzhak creates intricate artistic works that are an escape from conventions.

“In an age that expresses serious reservations about the canons of evaluation and cataloguing regarding ‘Islamic art,’” writes the exhibition’s curator, Sally Haftel Naveh, “and which, moreover, challenges this generalized category, Yitzhak offers a reflective interpretation of the essence of the museum’s collection – a collection of ancient utilitarian and ceremonial objects. She raises questions regarding the museum’s role as a space that preserves time, while presenting and conveying knowledge.”

The exhibition is the result of extensive research into the museum’s collections and was especially created for the museum, which also served as its inspiration. There are eight exhibits of animated films, three-dimensional model designs and digital collages, which radiate reproductions of items from the museum’s collection - a piece of fabric, a ceramic plate, a decorated wooden chest, a sword, a decorated plate, an incense burner, a page from the Koran and a page from an illustrated manuscript.

Powerful X-rays

The adapted objects are animated and presented in YouTube segments and scenes from films that have been added to these objects or which are incorporated in them. The color has been removed from the photographs so that the result is powerful X-rays, which are reflections that have the look of catalogue items, but which have lost the classification technique of a museum. What the visitor sees therefore is magical images that lack any periodic, functional or cultural context, and which have been restored to their magical or mystical status as mysterious objects of the Orient.

Yitzhak’s approach appears deceptively simple. In her “What in the World,” a 17th-century Mughal ivory-ornamented chest of drawers opens up to display the video clip of a television quiz produced in 1950 by CBS and Penn State University’s museum. The aim of the quiz is to identify archaeological objects.

The panel’s participants – Froehlich Rainey, director of the museum; archaeologist Alfred Kedar; sculptor Jacques Lipchitz; and a scholar of Islamic art, Richard Ettinghausen – feel a given object with their hands, studying it from various angles and trying to decipher its nature: Is this a musical instrument, a writing tool or a ritual object? They are unable to discover its true identity.

The visitor sees this moment of failure and the nature of the object remains a mystery. In effect, the visitor is observing a pure academic scene: the etiquette of experts as expressed by their language, habitual behavior, interpersonal relations, diction and hedonistic, arrogant wonder. Unwittingly, the interpreters themselves become an archaic archaeological finding, which is contained in the chest as a reflection of typical academic behavior (which, in this case, is refracted through the medium of television); it is a finding that is no longer relevant. The experts are seen as genies that have been returned to their bottle.

In the film, “The Dark-Skinned Nightingale,” a Persian illustration from 1506, “Yusuf and Zulaykha,” is screened. The illustration is that of a couple engaged in lovemaking. Now the page turns into a screen that is also an apartment building through whose windows one can see segments from the film “Dalila” (1956), the first Egyptian movie to be shot in Cinemascope, directed by Mohammed Karim and starred Abdel Halim Hafez and Shadia.

The artist has added to the film segments various musical selections and a camel caravan that keeps on moving forward in an endless loop. The exhibit is a blend of segments from different works produced in different periods and under very different circumstances; yet together they give the impression of being a single, complex narrative in which the powerfully emotional dramas rise up to stunning climaxes as flames that unite, excite but also destroy.

In “Short Pictures,” on a page from the Koran dating from the 16th century a film is screened, replacing the sura (chapter) that appears on that page. The film is very short, lasting only 52 seconds and consisting of three takes of Egyptian-born director-writer-producer Youssef Chahine being filmed by means of an original Cinématographe camera created by the Lumière brothers.

One sees two photographers, who look very much like the two brothers, operating the Cinématographe in front of the pyramids at Giza. As they adjust the tripod, a wild-looking, Zombie-like creature – a kind of ancient Pharaoh – suddenly leaps out of the sand dunes and attacks them, hurling the camera aside and then fleeing the scene. Like the exhibition’s other works, which culminate in destruction, disintegration or a meltdown, or which just end up disappearing, this scene ends in inexplicable violence.

In all of these works, the removal of the object from its museum-archaeological-historical-ethnographical context and its insertion into a new context is an act of rewriting history for the purpose of creating an invented hybrid narrative, a fictional iconography, a work of pure fantasy. On the museum’s walls are screened giant enlarged images of objects from its collection; these are rare specimens of Islamic art that are no longer representatives of a Eurocentric perception but rather shining signs of a violent clash of values.

Challenging Islamic art’s scholars

Thus, the focus is on the gap between the object and the academic research on that object - “research that,” in the curator’s words, “charges it with an external interpretation that, in most cases, stems from the perspective of Western scholarship.”

Yitzhak peels off the prevailing view of “Islamic art” as monolithic and mysterious, as she openly challenges Islamic art’s scholars, collectors, film directors and screenwriters, and as she takes on the discourse of the experts and interpreters who seek to rescue the concept of a museum from oblivion.

In setting up this challenge, Yitzhak returns to the public the items that have been changed, displaying them together with their Western appendices; however, now the items are different and have a renewed visual wholeness. This is an exhibition in which intense beauty is projected from every wall and onto the viewer like a planetarium that is also a time tunnel and a crystal ball. Yitzhak shows the tense relationship between the “finding” and the “scholar,” between culture and folklore, between the mysterious object and the way it is perceived. She is concerned not only with offering a political exposure of the invention of the Levant; she also wants to reestablish the Orient as an entity with a dramatic, hypnotic aesthetic. At the same time, she presents the Eurocentric approach of the experts as nostalgic material, as yet another story.

The L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art is to be commended for its vision and imagination in commissioning this exhibition. “Orient Express” is an exhibition displaying the spirit of contemporaneous, critical involvement in a museum’s collections, an involvement that is generally an action of condemning and humiliating the museum as an institution. It can certainly be said that “Orient Express” is a superb example of this genre.

Nevet Yitzhak, “Orient Express.” Curator: Sally Haftel Naveh. L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, 2 Hapalmach St., Jerusalem. Hours: Sunday, Monday and Wednesday, 10 A.M. to 3 P.M.; Tuesday and Thursday, 10 A.M. to 7 P.M.; Friday, 10 A.M. to 2 P.M.; Saturday, 10 A.M. to 4 P.M.