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Materializing Islam and the Imaginary of Sacred Space.

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Prologue

Sharon Macdonald posits that museums are a kind of sacralised places and may be compared to religious sites. They are said to be temples of culture, cathedrals of knowledge, mausoleums of past civilizations and keepers of the world's heritage and memories. Museums and religious sites also “share an aesthetic: hushed tones, dimmed lighting, a sense of reverence – of being in communion with the sacred; they may emanate an aura of age, the past, anachronism.” (Macdonald 2005: 209). This scenography affects both the displays and the public.

Since the 1970s museums have shifted their priorities from the presentation of authentic artefacts and established taxonomies to the production of experiences where design, the originality of the display and performance are central to exhibitions (Hein 2000, p. 65f.; Poulot 2005). This turn has also influenced the relationship between museums and their public and brought about new forms of participation. These include collaborative projects and the active involvement of individuals and communities in planning and setting up exhibitions as well as the implementation of new technologies.

Nowadays, exhibitions are more idea-oriented and focussed on the public and on reception. In a number of western countries museums of cultural history pursue a politics of positioning and endeavour to establish themselves as ‘authorities of recognition’ (Feuchtwang 2003:78). As such they acknowledge the sense of a

certain loss among various minority groups and as a token of redemption aim at strengthening a feeling of belonging and citizenship and at promoting respect and social cohesion in plural societies. With the establishment of various diasporas in different parts of the world citizenship has become multiple, global, regional and local concurrently. Several scholars have recently noted that the semantic dimension of the term diaspora has expanded during the last three decades or so to include various types of migrant communities and displaced populations so as to address different intellectual, cultural and political programs (Brubaker 2005: 1). To James Clifford (1994, 1997: 255f.) diaspora cultures and discourses rest on transnational belonging and networks while trying to reconcile 'separation and entanglement'. Drawing upon her own life experience Ien Ang (2001) is more critical to diasporas and the constraints of enduring territorial and ethnic roots and identities. She considers diaspora as a concept of 'sameness-in-dispersal, not of togetherness-in-difference' (2001: 13) that stands in opposition to cosmopolitanism. In my view, diasporas exemplify the polysemy and hybridity of 'imagined communities' while retaining in the majority of cases three core aspects which are more or less emphasized according to the circumstances. These are their dispersion in space; their orientation to a conceptual 'homeland'; and the maintenance of boundaries between them and 'others'. Diasporas are not homogeneous. They are often mixed, that is transethnic, transcultural and transnational, which, in my opinion, adds the notion of what I would label 'sameness-in-diversity' to Ang's 'sameness-in-dispersal'. They may, for example, be set up as racial groups like Blacks, Europeans or Asian diasporas, or as linguistic groups such as the Francophone, Anglophone, Arabophone or Lusophone diasporas. They may also constitute global religious communities like the Buddhists, the Catholics, the Sikhs or the Muslims. Thus, instead of restricting the study of diasporas to their boundedness and in-betweenness it would be more fruitful as Brubaker and Lauren Wagner propose to explore diasporic identities, practices, attitudes, projects and contentions (Brubaker 2005: 13; Wagner 2012). I would also include diasporic spaces and environments where these practices and projects unfold. These spaces and environments may be open landscapes, countries or cities. They may also be more restricted to buildings and institutions. Museums have during the last two decades been urged to create 'third spaces' where individuals are given

the opportunity of crossing the barriers of belonging (Bodo 2012: 184). By following that path, museums are developing into places where diasporic identities and practices are mediated.

Discussing some of the challenges that face museums in representing religions Chris Arthur pointedly asks:

“[H]ow do you picture the unpicturable; how do you mount a display about what, at root, is resistant to all forms of expression; how do you convey to visitors that what religions themselves see as of primary importance is something which lies beyond all the carefully assembled material which museums present for their scrutiny?” (Arthur 2000: 2)

These queries pertain to the imaginaries of religion. By imaginary I mean a dialogic process encompassing the interaction between the manner in which a religious group perceives and expresses the spiritual dimension of its own worldview and the ways museums articulate and visualize it in exhibitions. I shall try to answer some of these questions in the present essay. I am concerned with the ways a religion, here Islam, is materialized in a diasporic context and investigate the relationship between matter and religion. How faith is articulated through material culture and how it is displayed in a museum of cultural history.¹ One of the salient aspects of the museological turn of the last decades is, in my opinion, the blurring of boundaries between art and non-art. Taking an installation combining art and artefact at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life in Glasgow (hereafter St. Mungo) as a point of departure I examine how fundamental concepts in Islam are given concrete shapes to communicate the imaginary of an Islamic sacred space.

Conceptions of sacred space

Sacred spaces are implicitly tied to notions of purity and to a sense of property rights and belonging. Accordingly, they are contested spaces which are regulated by policies and strategies of inclusion and exclusion. We may envision sacred spaces as combining physical and conceptual qualities. They are the bearers of religious meaning and cover a great variety of sites, from nature and landscapes to specific areas in buildings. Sacred spaces are not only considered holy

because they fulfil certain functions as places of communication with a divinity and where religious rituals are performed, but also because they are religiously and emotionally laden sites that trigger the believer's affective response. Moreover, sacred spaces are defined spaces that are oriented towards a symbolically significant focal point. Whether this locality is imaginary, like heaven and paradise, or real, like Jerusalem and Mecca, is not important. In the belief of the community it exists. Thus, by mapping out a sacred geography, sacralised places provide direction to a religious group. I shall come back to this point later on. Further, sacred spaces are also tied to memory. They are *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), to use the expression coined by the French historian, Pierre Nora (1984-1992), and as such evoke a religion's most significant narratives. Thus, the Wall of Lamentation in Jerusalem reminds us of the destruction of the Temple and of the plight of the Jews through centuries; a cross in a church tells the life of Jesus; the Ka'ba brings forth the stories of Abraham, Ismail and Hagar and of Mohammed; Karbala recounts the martyrdom of Hussein; and Lourdes discloses the miraculous visions of Bernadette Soubirous. However, to be able to recognize the narratives, to listen to the stories which the different sites unfold, and to comprehend their symbolic meaning, one has to have some knowledge of the cultural and religious environments in which they were elaborated. Finally, sacred spaces are also related to time or, more exactly, to sacred time, that is a time out of time: the time of a beginning. The actual moment of this beginning may be lost in the memories of the believers, as for example the time of creation or be tied to a given historical event and have a precise date which marks the religious calendar of the community.

There are two main lines of approach to the study of the sacred, sacred spaces included. The first is the substantial, phenomenological viewpoint which was endorsed by scholars such as Rudolph Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade for whom the sacred spaces have supernatural inherent qualities emanating a sense of mystery and power (Otto, 1950 [1923]; Eliade, 1958, 1961: 20f.; van der Leeuw, 1986 [1938]: 52f.). Eliade went on to set up archetypes without, however, taking into account changes in religious symbolism and practices or the religious significance different cultural and religious groups have attributed to their sacred spaces. Basing himself on a celestial prototype

and the concept of hierophany he distinguished three aspects of sacred spaces. One is tied to cosmogonic repetition, the second points to the symbolism of a centre, or *axis mundi*, and the third to the assimilation of the temple with the *axis mundi* as the point of junction between heaven, earth and the netherworld (Eliade, 1958: 368). The other main perspective to the study of sacred space is the situational, processual one which grew out of the works of Emile Durkheim and maintains that the sacred is contingent to rituals and social relations. Nothing is inherently holy, but rather, sacredness is bestowed upon a site in compliance to its historical and contemporary setting. Accordingly, space is sacralised through ritual (Smith, 1987: 103f.). In order to communicate perceptions of sacred space museums tend to blend elements from these two approaches and visualize them according to the regime(s) of representation and the frame(s) they choose to deploy.

Representation and its frames

Museum exhibitions are organized according to certain contemporary regimes of representation that prevail among museum practitioners internationally at a given time (Varutti 2011: 14-16; Feuchtwang 2011). The term *regime* refers to political governance and choices that comprise sets of rules, appropriate conditions and suitable patterns for their implementation and visibility.

Representation is here understood as a process to create meaning through taxonomy and display (McLean 1998: 247f.). It is related to metonymy where the part stands for the whole and to metaphors or rather to visual metaphors. Visual metaphors are conventional schemes rooted in a given tradition where artists and craftsmen use specific artefacts, materials, motifs and colours to evoke given themes (Hermeren, 1969). In the long run and after repeated usage some of these objects and motifs may turn into clichés and be used as framing tools that reproduce stereotyped mental images of a culture and a religion.

Accordingly, an object refers to something else beyond itself. It is the concrete thing and at the same time the materialization of some intangible element that is bestowed upon it. In the context of museums representation requires classification and presentation. The latter entails a focus on the object and how it engages with the beholder (Moxey, 2008: 133). Today, aesthetics is a favoured regime of representation in museums of cultural history. It is often combined

with other regimes of representation as a way of producing meaning and imparting knowledge. It is based on the idea that art leads the visitors to resort to their accumulated knowledge, both learned and tacit, to understand a culture's social structures and practices, ways of life, beliefs and rituals. Drawing upon Aristotle's *aisthesis* and its emphasis on sensorial experiences Birgit Meyer (2009: 6f.) introduces the notion of 'aesthetic formations' that refers to both a community and processes of shaping it through shared imaginations that are given aesthetic forms. I posit that in plural societies and diasporic settings the various aesthetic formations that share a common space would influence each other, contest each other and negotiate with one another. Aesthetic formations may, in my understanding, also be established in institutions like museums and heritage sites. As Mieke Bal (2008) rightly points out, in museums aesthetics and politics operate together. Aesthetics reflects the opinions, policies and priorities of institutions and funding organizations. With the new forms of participation and collaborative projects nowadays the resulting exhibitions reflect what I would describe as a state of consensus between the aesthetic formations of the communities represented and their imaginaries and those of the museum displaying them (Bodo 2012; Reeve 2012: 127f.).

In exhibitions, regimes of representations are articulated and visualized through framing. Framing denotes a perspective, a specific angle of interpretation of objects and texts. It implies the act, process and manner of producing and shaping meaning. In the context of museums framing gives coherence to exhibitions by applying certain ways of arranging the different elements of an exhibition so that together they convey a specific worldview, an atmosphere or an idea (Naguib 2011: 112-114; Varutti 2011: 14f.). This involves methods of representation where every choice has consequences both for *what* kind of meanings are produced, for *how* they are produced and also for how they are understood by individuals and communities (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Hall 1997: 8; Watson 2007: 3f.). From the institutional side, curators and designers decide on the content, form and objectives of an exhibition. But, the message sent is received in the manner of the receiver and visitors do also bring along their own experiences, perceptions and individual background, baggage of memories and preconceived ideas to any exhibition. Their interpretations and reactions may

therefore be quite different from the intentions of the organizers.

Framing may consist of many - often overlapping – themes and perspectives. At St. Mungo the main frame is religion as it is lived and practised. It is visualized by relying on what Olivier Remaud describes as translation and familiarization approaches (Remaud, 2013). Translation denotes a shift from one form to another whether it is a language, a style or a medium: oral to written text, written text to still picture, artefact or film, or idea and belief into material culture. In museums, it means to use artefacts, texts and pictures to represent cultures and worldviews. Familiarization indicates to make something known and acknowledging it. It considers cultures or religions in terms of their own understandings and concepts. Nowadays, the translation and the familiarization approaches are normally used together in a dialogic relationship in exhibitions. Translation involves what Peter Bjerregaard describes in his article in this volume as ‘dis-connecting’ objects from their original context in order to confer upon them a presence and agency suited to the chosen theme and allotted space of the exhibition. It entails the selection and arrangement of objects to put on display, the compilation of the explanatory texts and deciding on the kind of mixed media devices to set up. The familiarization approach tends to rely on experience, the senses, emotions and narratives. In the process some objects may be transformed into something else and acquire layers of meaning and symbolic values they did not have before being put on display in a museum. This is particularly true in the case of artefacts that normally are used during religious rituals or objects of devotion when they end in a museum collection and lose their primary function and purpose. It is my contention, however, that in the majority of cases the objects displayed in exhibitions on religion, especially living religions, continue to connect. I’ll go over now to the example from St Mungo and to the materialization of fundamental concepts in Islam.

Materializing of Islam

St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life in Glasgow was inaugurated in April 1993. It is situated alongside the medieval Glasgow Cathedral and across the road from Provand’s Lordship which is the oldest house in the city. The building was designed by the architect Ian Begg in 1989 in a style complying

with that of neighbouring buildings. The museum was conceived as an engaged and engaging institution (O'Neill 1995).² The purpose of the museum as stated on its webpages is “to promote mutual understanding and respect between people of different faiths and people of none.”³ Mark O'Neill explicates that: “St Mungo is not an ‘objective’ museum. It exists explicitly to promote a set of values: respect for the diversity of human beliefs. It aims to do this by showing how important religion has been in humanity’s struggle to find a meaning for life. It ranges over five continents and over 3,000 years, from Neolithic times to the present The museum is not the result of systematic collection of religious objects, but draws upon Glasgow Museums’ reserve collections of anthropology, fine and decorative art, and local history. It goes beyond these disciplines, by trying to display objects in such a way that they retain some of their spiritual power, blurring the boundaries between the disciplines and between secular and sacred” (O'Neill 1993: 50).

Moreover, the museum follows different forms of participation by involving representatives of local communities and individuals in the elaboration of their exhibition programs and in providing a shared space to present alternative knowledge and personal narratives. In addition, the museum organizes activities directed towards schools and a younger population as well as other groups in society.

The exhibition space at St. Mungo is divided into three parts. The first is an open gallery with a high ceiling where singular artefacts and art objects represent one of the main world religions from antiquity to modern times. From there one has access to an adjacent room devoted to *Religious Life: from birth to death and beyond*. The approach is comparative and treats the different religious rituals and practices marking the various stages of life, and other themes as war and peace, persecution and spreading the Word. At the entrance of this room a declaration signed by representatives of the different religious groups in the city and by the Lord Provost of Glasgow underlines the importance of interfaith dialogue in such a complex society as the Glaswegian. The third room is the Scottish gallery which is also arranged thematically.

The installation representing Islam in the main gallery combines art and artefact. It consists of a seventeenth-century prayer rug from Turkey placed in front of a painting entitled *The attributes of Divine Perfection* by the artist Ahmed Moustafa (photo 1).⁴

The prayer rug is in blue, red and ochre hues and is adorned with the usual central niche symbolizing the *mihrab* with a lamp hanging from the top. A mihrab is the central architectural feature in mosques and serves to mark the *qibla*, that is, the direction of the Ka'ba in Mecca. It is usually formed as an arched doorway with a column on each side and an empty space in between. The latter denotes that, according to Islamic thought, God is omnipresent and not fixed in a given spot. In popular Islam the mihrab is invested with transcendental significance, and many consider it to be a symbolic gate to paradise (Naguib 2001: 55f.). Among the most important features of Islamic ornament is the transposition of the same design from one medium to another. Thus, three-dimensional patterns can be flattened and conversely, two-dimensional motives can be taken over in architectural projects and rendered three-dimensionally. Another characteristic of Islamic ornament is to radically change the purpose, function and use of its carrier (Grabar 1992: 41; Naguib 2001: 70). It is the design on a carpet that transfigures it from being a mere commodity into becoming a religious artefact and acquiring the status of prayer rug. Prayer five times a day is one of the five pillars of Islam.⁵ In addition to expressing piety, prayer involves the obligation (at least for men) to participate to the Friday prayer at the congregational mosque. By this Muslims testify their allegiance to the *'ummah*, namely, the community of believers. In a non-Muslim context as the one in Glasgow the commitment to an *'ummah* which is multi-ethnic, consisting of various national origins and composed of people adhering to different branches and schools of Islam, bestows on its members sameness-in-diversity and a diasporic stance based on an all-encompassing religious identity. The layout of a prayer-hall mirrors the notion of the *'ummah*. It is not partitioned; instead there is a lateral disposition so that the worshipers stand shoulder to shoulder facing the Ka'ba in Mecca. Muslims stand in rows on an egalitarian basis in order to perform their prayers behind an imam. Men and women are separated. In practice, such a gendered egalitarian layout is more an

ideal conception of society and the ‘umamah than a reflection of the experienced reality (Naguib 2001: 59). The floor of the praying-hall is normally covered with either small individual prayer rugs or woven mats, or long multi-niched carpets or mats adorned with lines of symbolic mihrabs. The various prescribed movements of prayer, standing, kneeling and prostration mean that each worshipper needs a minimum private space of approximately 1m x 2 m. Prayer rugs are handled with care. The smaller prayer rugs are usually rolled up or folded and kept in a clean, safe place after usage. The same is true for private prayer rugs.

The painting, *The attributes of Divine Perfection* is placed standing in front of the prayer rug. It is 130cm x 116cm, oil and watercolour on velin arches. The painting is in shades of blue, white, grey and black. It shows a cubic shape transversally cut open and resting on a white ground that is inscribed in blue green Arabic calligraphy. The background of the painting is dark blue and covered with Arabic script of a lighter tone of blue. The sides of the central form are brown with specks of gold. The texts consist of two quotations from the Qur’an. The one used for the background reiterates verse 255 in surah 2 (*al-Baqarah* “God! There is no God but Him, the Ever-Living, the Self Subsistent, Formest of all beings....”). The text at the base consists of the repetition of verse 110 in surah 17 (*al-‘Isra’* “Invoke God or invoke the Most Merciful by whichever name you invoke Him, He is always the One for His are all the attributes of perfection...”). The interior of the cube is subdivided into what I have somewhere else described as the principle of ‘ornamental fractals’, namely, smaller identical units recalling the *muqarnas* (Naguib 2001: 72). These are the honeycomb like architectural elements in Islamic architecture that are used to fill vaults and niches. The *muqarnas* at the Alhambra in Granada are among the most famous examples. In his creation the artist, Ahmed Moustafa has inscribed each smaller unit within the central cube with one of the ninety nine names or rather attributes of God (photo 2).

Style is, according to Birgit Meyer, at the heart of religious aesthetics (Meyer, 2009: 10). The hallmark of Islamic visual arts is its use of

ornamentation to transfigure space and the place of Arabic script and calligraphy. As the language of the Revelation, Arabic has acquired a special status of sacredness in the Muslim world. Even in countries where other alphabets and scripts have replaced Arabic, it has remained a fundamental part of the Muslim religious heritage and retained a privileged position. Today, Arabic calligraphy is a recurrent form of expression resorted to by contemporary artists from the Middle East and North Africa in their quest for identity and their endeavour to emphasize the unbroken spiritual and cultural line between the past and the present. Monia Abdallah (2010) observes that several museums in western countries do actually acquire the creations of Moslem contemporary artists to their exhibitions about the Islamic world, its civilization and religion. These works are then often displayed in what I would call a neo-orientalistic mode so as to enhance this sense of continuity and intransience. The objects of art are thereby transfigured into objects of civilisation with religion as one of its main components. The atmosphere in such exhibitions is imbued with a feeling of nostalgia for what is perceived by both the artists and the museums as a glorious, almost mythical, past.

Seeing is an active process which implies interpretation and the recognition of conventional designs and themes. In my understanding, the installation at St. Mungo materializes the fundamental precepts of Islam and hence serves to bind and bond the community of believers, that is, the 'ummah. The main cube recalls the Ka'ba in Mecca which physically consists of a hollow cube covered with a black tent embroidered with quotations from the Qur'an in gold thread.⁶ It is diagonally oriented and its corners face the four cardinal points. According to the Islamic worldview, the Ka'ba symbolizes the axis mundi of Islamic cosmology (in Arabic *qutb*). Hence, the installation at St Mungo refers to the three fundamental concepts of Islam. The first one which is the most important is *tawhid* (unity) that is expressed in the attestation of faith or *shahada*. Tawhid means literally "making one" or "asserting oneness" and refers to the belief in the indivisible oneness of God. The shahada represents the dogma of Islam as well as it testifies the finality of Muhammad's prophethood. The second major

concept is the qibla or orientation towards Mecca and its focal point the Ka'ba which represents the axis mundi in the Islamic worldview. This is the direction Muslims face when they pray. The third concept is the 'ummah or the community of believers and designates the social and political dimension of Islam (Naguib 2001: 94f.).

The enchantment of materiality

Paradoxically, in organizing and setting up exhibitions about religion, in our case Islam, museums of cultural history seem, in my opinion, to de-sacralise the objects. When displayed in museums – even in exhibitions treating religious faiths and practices as at St. Mungo – the artefacts that are decontextualized that is dis-connected and no more used in rituals and devotional practices appear to lose their religious aura. In the process they do acquire another quality. They become objects of knowledge and what James Wertsch calls *cultural tools* (Wertsch 2002: 52f.). As such they are tools of translation and familiarization that mediate information and impart learning, understanding and respect about a 'foreign' religion, its fundamentals and its articulation in time and space. The artefacts exhibited whether they are unique pieces, commodities or what I have elsewhere called 'religious kitsch' (Naguib 2001: 84f.) serve, in my view, to materialize religious thought and belief. Thus, the installation at St. Mungo plays on the convergence of the spatial qualities of the qibla pointing to Mecca and the Ka'ba, the quantitative, social and political significance of the 'ummah, and the qualitative and imaginary attributes that refer back to the concept of tawhid and the oneness of God. Even as de-sacralised objects of knowledge, artefacts on display and installations like the one at St. Mungo Museum combining a prayer rug and a painting by a renowned artist of Middle Eastern origin do retain their resonance. That is their affective presence and power of evocation, of reaching the beholder's feelings (Armstrong 1972; Greenblatt 1990). At the same time, they unravel their own individual message and biographies. As I perceive it the installation at St Mungo links the aesthetic formations of the Muslim diasporic environment of Glasgow with those of the museum. It may, hence, act as a site of religious memory for Muslim visitors and as such may trigger emotions and bring forth various forms of remembrance both individual and collective.



Photo 1: Representing Islam at St Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life, Glasgow. Installation: Turkish prayer rug (17th cent.) and painting *The attributes of Divine Perfection* by Ahmed Moustafa. Photograph by Saphinaz-Amal Naguib.

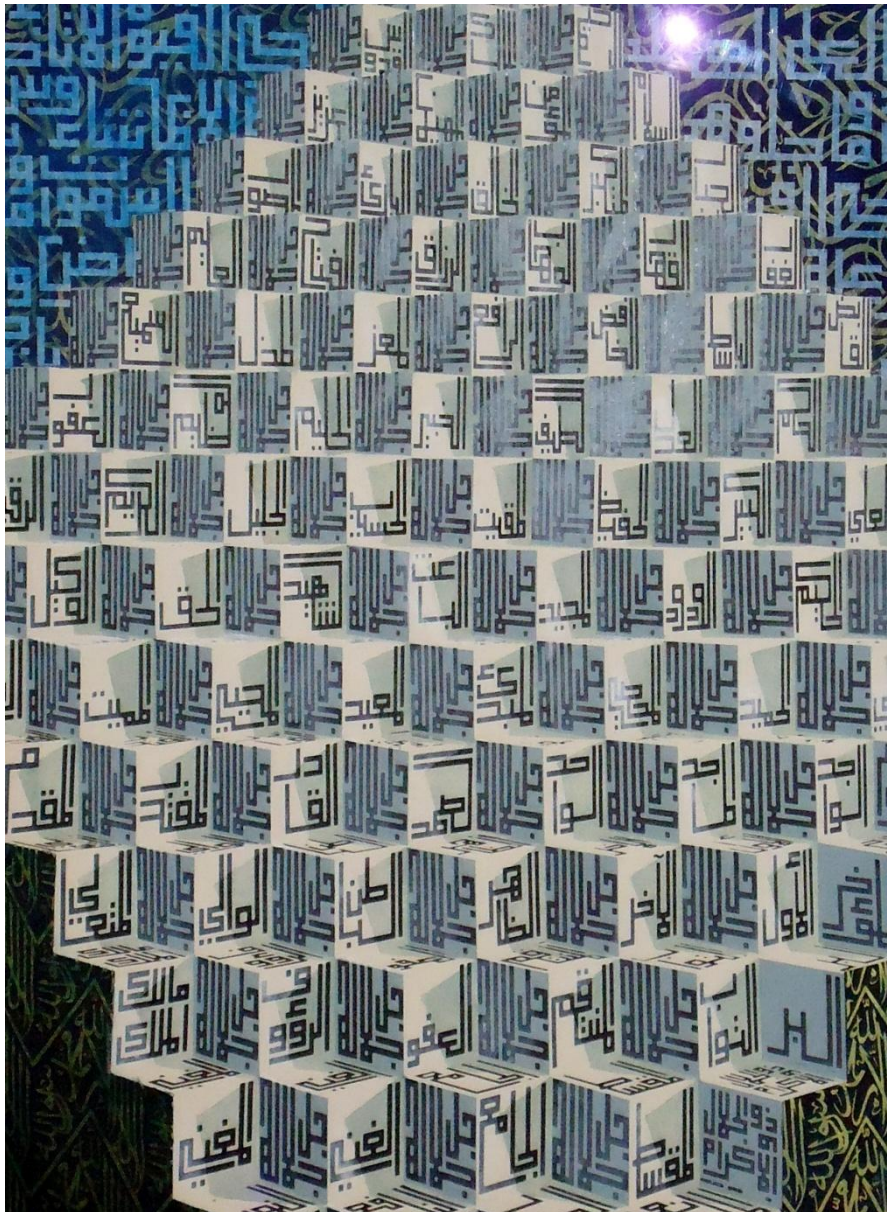


Photo 2: Detail of *The attributes of Divine Perfection* by Ahmed Moustafa.

Photograph by Saphinaz-Amal Naguib.

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¹ The generic denomination includes universal survey museums, museums of history and archaeology, museums of ethnography and ethnology and art museums (cf. Barroso, Eliane and Emilia Vaillant (eds.) 1993, *Musées et société: actes du colloque*, Mulhouse Ungersheim, juin 1991. Répertoire analytique des musées: bilans et projets: 1980-1993, Paris: Direction générale des Musées de France).

For recent studies on materiality and materialization processes see the studies in Naguib & Rogan (eds.) 2011.

² I thank dr. Anthony Lewis, curator of Scottish History at the St. Mungo for taking time the to discuss the goals and visions of St Mungo with me.

³ <http://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/our-museums/st-mungo-museum/Pages/home.aspx> (accessed January 3rd, 2012).

⁴ About the artist and his works <http://www.fenoon.com/artist/artist.html> (accessed on the 3rd January, 2012). The spiritual dimension of the painting and the concept of «cosmic homogeneity» introduced by the artist Ahmed Mostafa are discussed in a forthcoming article by Stefan Sperl entitled "Islamic Spirituality and the Visual Arts", *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Islamic Spirituality*.

⁵ The other ones are: the attestation of faith (*shahada*), fasting (*sawm*) during the month of Ramadan (9th month of the Islamic calendar), almsgiving (*zakat*) and pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca once in a lifetime during the month of *dhul-hajj* (12th month of the Islamic calendar). This last pillar is contingent on one's health and economical means.

⁶ One of the meanings of the root of the word *ka'b* is cube.