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The Mediterranean Seminar Review

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al-Tawil, Hashim. *History of Arab Art*. Ronkonkoma, NY: Linus Learning, 2018. ISBN: 160797819. 329 pages. 210 color + b/w illustrations. Hardcover \$72.00

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Hashim al-Tawil opens his recent survey text, entitled *History of Arab Art*, by correctly identifying one of the most prevalent misconceptions about the field of Islamic art history, namely the conflation of the term “Islamic” with “Arab.” The distinction between the two has been discussed in a number of recent publications intended for academic audiences (for example, see Shahab Ahmed’s *What is Islam?* and Wendy Shaw’s *What is “Islamic” Art?*), but this is one of the first texts to do so at the introductory level. In fact, this introduction serves as something of a prolegomenon for any novice that lays a critical foundation for understanding the survey’s frequent disparities in chronology, geography, politics and cultural influence. Rather than attempt a comprehensive if necessarily limited survey of the Islamic world, al-Tawil instead chooses to focus on the “Arab” side of this equation, and sets out to define and describe the characteristics of what he terms “a reasonable foundation for Arab visual art” (pp. XI).

The survey is organized into a broad chronology, beginning with the ancient (2000 BCE-650 CE) and continuing into the modern (1700-1900), an ambitious scale for a 274-page text. Part One, consisting of four chapters, addresses the development of Arabic writing, the kingdoms of ancient Yemen, Petra, Palmyra, and Dura Europos. These chapters form a rough sketch of the Arabian Peninsula’s intersecting histories prior to the arrival of Islam, and counter the common misconception of an empty desert landscape populated solely by Bedouins and djinn. Part Two focuses a single, stand-alone chapter on the pre-Islamic religious monuments and sites that populated the peninsula, with a particular focus on those sites that would later be coopted into an Islamic canon. Al-Tawil also briefly outlines the various political players of the Late Antique Middle East, putting the visual culture of pre-Islamic Arabia into dialogue with more widely studied and visually defined fields of Byzantine and Coptic art.

Part Three address the art and architecture of early and medieval Islamic periods, covering what is often referred to as “the Islamic heartlands” of the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and Egypt. Here, Al-Tawil is on firm ground in terms of chronological and geographic scope, as the relative unity of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates grant him narrative focus. His inclusion of sites known primarily from literary description or archaeological excavation, such as the congregational mosques of Kufa and Wasit, is a particularly welcome expansion of a period often characterized by the more unusual or outstanding architectural exemplars. The arts of the book are presented in the context of the Baghdad school, and al-Tawil not only covers changes in

style and script, but actually contextualizes several of the most recognizable texts of the era, such as the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri and the Pseudo-galenic *Kitab al-Diryaq*.

Part Four is a bit of a thematic outlier in the book, covering “Arab” art in Europe, i.e. the art and architecture of al-Andalus and Sicily, as well as including a chapter on artistic exchange and communication throughout European courts. Of particular importance is the chapter on Sicily, which does not shy away from an architectural record made opaque through extensive conversion and adaptation. Instead, the chapter engages directly with the visual remnants of Arabic presence on the island, from Arabic inscriptions to reused columns. This is a significant methodological step forward for a text meant for a more general audience, revealing the ways in which architectural survivals have informed the scholarly understanding of the period. Pseudo-Arabic and Orientalist abstraction, both explored in the final chapter, form the counterpoint to this structure, lending weight to al-Tawil’s claims at the beginning of the text that twentieth-century colonial practices distorted the historical perspective.

One of the primary strengths of *History of Arab Art* is Al-Tawil’s inclusion of pre-Islamic pagan material, as well as Jewish and Christian objects. Far too often, such evidence is siloed into a single textual aside, essentializing the inherent diversity of artistic influences and adaptations that is so characteristic of the visual culture of the Islamic world. For example, al-Tawil points out that many ka’abas existed throughout the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula (although they are more commonly referred to as betyls), and were applied to both minor and major sites of worship.

The chief drawback of the book is the quality of the images and their relation to the text. Many of the maps and manuscript images are blurry, which hinders the reader’s engagement with them. There is also an occasional disconnect between the images and the objects or sites they depict, in which the images come from different periods or regions than their subject matter. This broad approach frequently fails to contextualize the manner in which the image is being used. For example, a Safavid-era miniature painting is used in the description of the Ka’aba (pg. 134), while an Umayyad-era mihrab is used in descriptions of the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina (pg. 141). This divorces the object from its art historical context, and would likely confuse an introductory or casual reader. Moreover, there is little formal analysis of the images used, an anomaly in a textbook that focuses on the visual, and which undercuts the utility of the book in a classroom setting.

History of Arab Art is an ambitious text, and covers a wide range of material, but often neglects to fully articulate their underlying connections. “Arab” art, as a category distinct from “Islamic,” remains an undefined one in al-Tawil’s book, and as the text moves beyond the Arabian Peninsula, the justification for categorizing objects as “Arab” become increasingly thin. Rather than engaging with the Mediterranean matrix as a framework for critiquing the category of “Arab” art, al-Tawil seeks a more traditional definition, albeit one that employs themes of mobility and interchange as essential. Nevertheless, it is a thought-provoking contribution to one of the field’s most enduring debates.



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The author was provided with an opportunity to respond to the review, but declined.