

Matisse and Islamic Art

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Abstract

Matisse discovered Islamic miniature paintings (mainly Persian and Indian) at three great exhibitions held in Paris in 1902, in Munich in 1910 and again in Paris in 1912. Their cumulative impact on the painter - along with his well-known appreciation for Russian icons - would immediately prove as aesthetically overwhelming (notably for the artist's resort henceforth to primary colours juxtaposed in vivid patterns with further rejection of all illusionistic depth), as the similar utterly powerful impact of Japanese prints on Van Gogh, and of West African sculpture on Picasso: with transformative effect in all three cases on all 20th-century world art. Only the Islamic impact on Matisse, however, has remained almost completely under-appreciated: even though the artist even travelled to Morocco in 1912 to discover at first hand the architectural and textile patterns and sharp colours of Islamic creativity seen under bright North African light. And yet Matisse's appreciation of Islamic art - along with most subsequent 20th-century connoisseurship of Islamic art - would remain based almost solely on delight with surface aesthetics alone, ignoring the art's precise cultural context, coded visual allegories and profound mystical symbolism (indeed just like Picasso's borrowings from West African art.) This illustrated talk explores such paradoxical confrontations and contradictions, discussing the actual 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic paintings which Matisse saw, appreciated, adapted and transformed.

Short Bio

Michael Alexander Barry has lectured in Princeton's Near Eastern Studies Department since 2004 on the medieval and modern Islamic cultures of Iran, India, Pakistan, and most especially Afghanistan.

His ongoing courses in Princeton with the Department of Near Eastern Studies since 2004 have included "Afghanistan and the Great Powers, AD 1747–2001" (cross listed with the Program in South Asian Studies); "South Asian Islam, AD 998–1803" (also cross listed with the Program in South Asian Studies); "Spanish Islam, AD 711–1492" (sponsored by the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and cross listed with the Department of Comparative Literature); "Readings in Early Classical Persian Literature, AD 800–1200" and "Readings in Later Classical Persian Literature, AD 1200–1800" (two semester-course, cross listed with the Department of Comparative Literature); and "Introduction to Early Sufism, AD 700–1200" and "Introduction to Later Sufism, AD 1200–1800" (also a two-semester course, focusing on the

teachings of Avicenna in the first portion and of Ibn ‘Arabî in the second). Other courses have included “The Thousand and One Nights” (cross listed with the Department of Comparative Literature) and “Symbols and Allegory in Medieval Islamic Art.”

A recognized expert on Islamic art, Barry further conceived the reorganization of the New York Metropolitan Museum’s galleries of Islamic art scheduled for reopening in autumn 2011 (as consultative chairman of the Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Islamic Art in 2005–2008), and has served since 2009 as special consultant to the Aga Khan Trust for Culture on museum issues, in view of the forthcoming openings of the Aga Khan’s Museum of Islamic Art in Toronto, and the Aga Khan’s Museum of the Civilizations of the Indian Ocean in Zanzibar. He contributed major chapters to the catalogues of the international exhibitions held in Paris and Lisbon in 1992 and 1998 commemorating the great Iberian discoveries of 1492 and 1498, and also to the catalogues of the Aga Khan exhibitions of Islamic Art in Madrid, Barcelona, and Berlin in 2009–2010. He has lectured on Islamic art at the Accademia Museum in Venice, at the shrine of Rûmî in Konya, Turkey, and for the Aga Khan organizations in the United States, Spain, and Afghanistan; presided with Tunisian scholar AbdelwahhabMeddeb over the Round Table on Islamic Art held by the Fundación de lasTresCulturas in Seville, Spain, in 2008; and has lectured on Islamic art and participated every spring since 2007 in the cultural debates sponsored by the International Festival of Sacred Music in Fez, Morocco.