

At the Exhibition, revisiting the Encyclopedic Museum  
 Modern and Contemporary Art Wing from the Arab/Islamic world for the MET

*'The age of the exhibition was necessarily the colonial age'* Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt, 1988*



Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC

**Introduction: 'The World as a Picture'**

The rise of the Encyclopedic Museum in the 19<sup>th</sup> C (Louvre, British Museum, etc...) paralleled the expanding footprint of the Colonial powers at the time. The gained territories by the Western empire, in the Orient and elsewhere, generated a vast collection and acquisition of material culture that required building and expanding these large institutions. The Encyclopedic Museum became a vast depot of collected objects of all kinds (drawings, building fragments, books, arts and crafts, ceramics, etc...)

The Museum (and in similar fashion the World Exhibition fairs and the Orientalist Congresses in the late 19<sup>th</sup> C) ordered and classified, under glass, 'strange' civilizations to the satisfaction of the colonizer's gaze to study, investigate and grasp. The Arab /Islamic city and culture (like other parts of the newly colonized world) presented itself as an obscure maze, an 'irrational' entity that is hard to assimilate.

To colonize, it would be necessary to step outside the maze and to 'determine the plan', to draw a clear and legible picture of that world. The Encyclopedic Museum typology offered the perfect plan (and floorplan) for this mental framework.

But this has never been the intent. The Museum was not supposed to be an Instrument of the Empire. Born in the age of the Enlightenment, the universal aspiration of the Museum sought the query for truth for all, regardless of cultural and civilizational boundaries.

### **'Islamic Art is in Fashion again'**

Since the tragic events on September 11, the Western nations have witnessed a surge of interest in Islamic Art and culture, some going to the extent of expanding their museums further to house an even larger collection of art from the Islamic and the Arab world (ie Louvre, British Museum, Met). In a reverse boomerang effect, we are also witnessing a surge in Islamic Museums being built in Arab and Muslims countries (Qatar, IM-PEI), but also Western Modern Art Museums emulating their counterparts in the motherland (Louvre in Abu Dhabi by Jean Nouvel, Guggenheim by Frank Gehry, etc...)

The position of the museum now (as then) is still to 'understand' or 'to create a bridge' with the East, to correct previous understandings that misled or misconstrued reality; a position that is characterized by a diplomatic reconciliatory tone. The problem with such approach is that 'to bridge' assumes that there is a gap, and that Islamic art and culture existed on the other side, in a world that fits neatly in the 'clash of civilizations' rhetoric. As in the history of philosophy and the sciences, Art and Architecture in the Islamic world has organically grown from the civilizations before it, and it heavily influenced what came after. To 'understand' one has to think from outside the Eastern Western binary.

As such the loosening of the lines of the different periods and departments within the museum becomes a necessity in order to foster an intellectual conversation.

### **The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC**

Established in 1880 the Met Museum, originally understood as a 'building in the park', has undergone many expansions which were carried, since 1967, by Kevin Roche and Associates. In 2011, the museum opened the newly renovated Islamic Art wing, with a more historically and geographically accurate description of its collection, titled: Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia.

Unlike the just opened wing in the Louvre (titled 'Muslim Art') or the new plans for the British Museum which plans to open in 2018 (titled 'Gallery of the Islamic world'), The Met collection will not stop at the 19<sup>th</sup> C , 16<sup>th</sup> C

respectively. Instead the newly leased Breuer Building will be a place to temporarily house modern and contemporary art including the one from the Islamic world which set to open in 2016.

Here the Met conceptual framework does not divorce itself from current world events. As such it will (uncomfortably perhaps) confront an Art that responds to modern politics, sitting side by side, and questioning the long established historical narrative of its collection within its walls.

### **The Studio: Modern and Contemporary Art wing from the Arab/Islamic World for the Met**

With this opening, the Met presents itself as the perfect institution that is ready to question its history and its home. The studio will mobilize the interest in housing the modern and contemporary art collection (from the Arab/Islamic world) to question the architecture of this old institution: both the Met's original, heavy 2 Million square feet building, (museum as fixed collection of rooms) and the no less heavy (104 X 125 square foot) Breuer's Modernist box.

The scope of the studio will be to look at the work of the new (rotating and permanent) pieces of modern and contemporary artists and design specific spaces to house them. Exact site(s) of these spaces (MET's original building, Met Breuer, or the Park) will be left to the students to decide on based on their specific thesis and Interests. The conceptual framework ought to be radically different in the way it actively questions the generic quality of the white box and create spaces that are less generic and more diverse (scale, light, proximities, etc...).

In an age of resurgent nationalism and sectarian violence, the objective of the studio would be to revisit the Encyclopedic Museum, and rejuvenate its mission under the Enlightenment period as a place where one's perception of the world is challenged, and where cultures ought to thrive and evolve, under one roof.

### **Architecture Program: ~70,000 sqft**

- 1-Entrance / Lobby
- 2-Lecture Hall
- 3-Exhibition Rooms (different sizes)
- 4-Event Space
- 5-Storage / Back of House
- 6-Admin

### **Collaboration, Trip:**

The Studio will work in close collaboration with the Met museum, including the new curator of Art from the Middle East, Clare Davies and the museum Head of Design (and a founding partner at 2X4) Susan Sellers.

We will also plan a non-obligatory day trip to **Washington DC** to visit national cultural institutions at the Mall, including the currently under-construction Museum of African American History and Culture by the team Freelon Adjaye Bond, where we will have a private, guided tour of the structure.

### **References: TBD**

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