The State of Islamic Art Studies in Japan

Studies in Islamic Art have been ignored until recently by most art historians in Japan. Japanese scholars in art history have been dealt principally with European Art or Far Eastern Art, or with Buddhist Art to some extent, and as yet, no extensive studies have been conducted in the field of Islamic Art. This situation probably occurred partly due to lack of interest in the Islamic world, both by archaeologists and art collectors in Japan. Before the end of the Second World War, no Japanese archeological survey or expedition comparable to that of the Europeans reached beyond the Central Asia, and also no notable Islamic art collectors have appeared. Another main reason could be explained from a scholarly point of view, especially in the humanities. The term, “Oriental Art,” refers always to the art of Far Eastern region, and in most cases, to that of China. Collecting Chinese works of art has a long tradition in Japan, and they have been highly esteemed. In general, books on Oriental Art have chapters starting with Buddhist Art in India, but the period in India following Buddhism is very often omitted or rarely mentioned, with only a few lines dedicated to the Islamic period. Also, the term “Near-East” should be explained here. Near Eastern Art in Japan has been a field dealt with by archaeologists, most of whom specialise in the period which ends with the rise of Islam in the 7th Century. Only a few archaeologists have been interested in Islamic sites in the Middle East, and most research has concentrated on the pre-Islamic period.

Although Islamic works of art, such as carpets, textiles or ceramics reached Japan before the modern era and have been collected and transmitted through the present, these were of a relatively small number and considered exotic objects. As a result, their impact on Japanese intellectual life was very limited, and art collecting in Japan has been generally oriented first to Chinese and Japanese art,
then to European art. Thus, there are only a few museums in Japan with collections of Islamic works of art. The Middle Eastern Culture Centre in Tokyo has archeological materials from the Middle East, acquired especially from their own excavations in Egypt and also by acquisition or donation from private collectors. The Ancient Orient Museum, also situated in Tokyo, centers its collection on the pre-Islamic period. In Okayama City, The Okayama Orient Museum holds an important Islamic ceramic collection; as does the Tenri Museum in Nara. The Miho Museum in Shiga Prefecture, opened in 1996, has gathered some masterpieces of Islamic Art, such as the “Sanguszco Hunting Carpet,” a highly important Persian carpet of the sixteenth century. Although some other museums own Islamic works of art, principally ceramics, there are no notable collections of manuscripts or paintings.

**Art Historians of Islamic Art**

Although some illustrated books on Islamic art appeared in the 1950’s, practically no major publication in Japanese appears until the *Art of Islam, History of World Art, No.8* (Fukai 1972) a general survey of all aspects of Islamic Art such as architecture, manuscripts arts and decorative arts. Next was *New History of World Art: Oriental Art, vol. 17, Islam* (Sugimura 1999) published in 1999, which included the latest scholarly information.

Japanese scholars interested in Islamic Art have to face two major problems in Japan: limited access to Islamic works of art and lack of graduate programs in Islamic Art History. Since none of the Japanese graduate schools offers a course in Islamic Art, students who wish to pursue their studies have to choose between studying European, Chinese or Japanese Art, or alternatively, studying abroad.

The latter was the case for Toh Sugimura (Professor, Ryukoku University, Faculty of International Cultural Studies), considered a pioneer of Studies in Islamic Art in Japan. He received his Ph.D from the University of Michigan, under the supervision of Oleg Grabar. His major research subject was the interrelations between Chinese and Persian paintings, focusing on the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. He has published many articles both in English and in Japanese, especially on Chinese-influenced manuscript paintings included in albums (the Saray Albums) preserved in the Topkapu Saray Museum (Sugimura 1971, 1976, 1986, 1992). Among his numerous contributions while on the staff of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, was a project, “Integral Study
of Silk Road, Roads of Dialogue,” sponsored by UNESCO and initiated in 1988 as a five-year project (Sugimura 1992). Also, in September 1994, he organized the first major exhibition held on Oriental carpets in Japan, titled; *Woven Flowers of the Silk Roads: An Introduction to the Carpet Heritage of West Asia and Central Asia* (Sugimura 1994).

The next prominent scholar in Islamic Art studies is Minako Yamanlar-Mizuno (Professor, University of East Asia, Graduate School of Integrated Science and Arts), a Ph.D. graduate of Istanbul University. Her numerous works focus on the development of decorative motifs found in manuscript paintings, as well as in other materials in decorative arts (Yamanlar 1989, 2000). Since April 1997, she has been conducting a project involving most of the scholars mentioned here, concerning the survey of the Saray Albums (H.2153 and H.2160) in Topkapu Saray Museum, in preparation for its publication (Yamanlar 1998). Relating to this project, an International Conference on the Saray Albums was held on 19 March 2001, in Topkapu Saray Museum, Istanbul.

Masuya Tomoko (Associate Professor, University of Tokyo, Institute of Oriental Culture) completed her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of New York on the Il-Khanid tiles from the Takht-i Sulaiman in Iran. Based on materials found at the site, as well as pieces preserved in museums, she analyzed the historical background and evolution of Chinese motifs found on Il-Khanid tiles (Masuya & S. Carboni 1993; Masuya 1997). Related to her dissertation subject, she recently published an article: “Persian Tiles on European Walls: Collecting Ilkhanid Tiles in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” in *Ars Orientalis* (Masuya 2000).

Kazue Kobayashi (Lecturer, Waseda University) is another art historian who has been publishing and actively taking part in many current research projects, such as the project started in 1997 concerning the history and formation of the *A Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*) and also the Topkapu Saray Album project mentioned above. Her main interest is in the pictures of illustrated manuscripts and their relation to the texts, especially those of the Post Il-Khanid dynasties (Kobayashi 1996, 1997).

The author of this article (Lecturer, Ueno Gakuen University), is studying in the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne and is currently working on his Ph.D. dissertation about Persian ceramics of the Safavid period, focusing on the blue-and-white decorated type and its relation to tiles, especially those found in the city of Kerman, in Iran (Abe 2001).
Scholars from other fields

A number of Japanese scholars who have been interested in Islamic Art belong to various fields such as history, archeology, literature and architecture. Since the study of the history of architecture in Japan has been placed within the sphere of architectural engineering, scholars have focused more on structural or material analysis of architecture rather than its historical or stylistic aspects. Although there are several notable works dealing with architecture of Islamic world, principal sources in the Japanese language are still translated versions of major Western publications such as Pope’s *Persian Architecture*, translated by Akira Ishii (Ishii 1981). Since the early 1960’s, Akira Ishii has produced numerous articles dealing with architecture in the Middle East, and from 1977, he presented a detailed survey on the subject in a series of six articles, “Styles and Techniques in Islamic Architecture” (Ishii 1977-1979).

Recently, many scholars who trained as architects have become interested in Islamic architecture. Naoko Fukami, lecturer at Tokyo University, graduated from Yokohama National University with a Ph.D. dissertation on Muqarnas vaulting in Persian architecture. She is one of the few architects focusing on the decorative aspect and its techniques in Islamic architecture. However, the latest introductory work on Islamic architecture, focusing on its historical role, was produced by Masashi Haneda, a historian specializing in Safavid Iran (Haneda 1994).

However, there have been extensive studies on Islamic ceramics undertaken by scholars specializing in Chinese and Japanese ceramics. The most prominent figure in this field is Tsugio Mikami, who completed a general survey of Persian pottery (Mikami 1965). By publishing more than thirty articles and works since the end of the 1950’s, he helped Islamic ceramics studies to be recognized among Oriental Art scholars in Japan. He also contributed to assembling some of the major collections of Islamic pottery in Japan, such as that of Middle Eastern Culture Center in Tokyo. Ceramic tiles from the Islamic world have been the subject of various research and exhibitions. In 2001, a exhibition based on pieces from Japanese collections, titled *Burning Colours on the Desert: 5000 Years of Tile Design in the Middle East*, was held in the Okayama Orient Museum (Iijima 2001).

Several archeologists have been excavating, mainly in Egypt and in the Persian Gulf Region. Tatsuo Sasaki, professor at the Department of Archeology in Kanazawa University, has undertaken consecutive excavation projects in the
United Arab Emirates (at Julfar from 1988, at Jazīrat al-Hulaylah from 1994). Based on materials excavated from Julfar, he discussed the Islamic blue-and-white ware of the 14th to 15th centuries (Sasaki 1999). The Middle Eastern Cultural Center in Tokyo also supports many important archeological projects in the Middle East, and is working on several Islamic sites, such as the one in the Sinai Peninsula being investigated by a team led by Mutsuo Kawatoko (Kawatoko 1995). Kawatoko also published articles on Islamic works of art found in al-Fustat (Kawatoko 1985). Other research fellows belonging to this institution, such as Tomohiko Okano, Tadahisa Takahashi, and Yoko Shindo, are conducting various projects in Egypt, Iran and Turkey, as well as exhibitions (Takahashi & Yuba 1999).

Scholars of history and literature have also explored the possibility of new approaches such as interaction between texts and works of art. Hideaki Sugita, assosiate professor in University of Tokyo, interprets Islamic works of art as seen in literary materials (Sugita 1993).

Conclusion

As discussed above, Islamic Art is just beginning to be recognized as an area of study in art history in Japan. Also, in consideration of growing interest in the cultural aspects of the Islamic world, many scholars have begun to cross the borders of their fields of research to deal with Islamic works of art. Even Japanese art historians, who had ignored the development of artistic traditions in the Islamic world, have just begun to realise the role of these traditions in an area which extends from the Iberian Peninsula to China. However, despite this general expanding interest in the cultural and artistic aspects of Islamic civilization, the lack of any continuous graduate program in Islamic Art in Japanese universities is an issue which must be adressed in the near future.

Bibliography

Note: Due to the limitation of space, the bibliography could not be extensive. All responsibility for any omissions or errors in this article rests with me alone.


