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REVIEW

# Marcus Milwright: *A Story of Islamic Art*

## xii, 311 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 2024. ISBN 978 1 032 44815 2.

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This book is provided with a glossary, a timeline, an appendix of notes, a section on further reading, and also some fine drawings by the author, but is rather different from other accounts of Islamic art. As Milwright himself declares, the word "Story" in the title is pertinent. Milwright selects 50 items from the field and elucidates each within a bubble of narrative. As explained in the introduction, he has adopted two characters from the *Maqāmāt* (Assemblies) of al-Hariri (d. 1122): al-Harith, a merchant, and Abu Zayd, a picaresque figure, who here proves to be remarkably well informed about technical aspects of the manufacture of Islamic objects. To these he adds Salim, a servant well-versed in Islamic teaching, and Aisha, daughter to al-Harith, who is an eager questioner. Aisha's is the principal, but not exclusive, narrative voice. These figures are encountered in differing locations in pursuit of merchandise, but more importantly they are time travellers. First encountered in the seventh century, they are still active in the twenty-first, having developed skills of the relevant periods.

Using this format, Milwright is able to focus attention on 50 disparate items. They are presented in an approximately chronological order – of which more later. They are not grouped by region or technique, and are not related to each other except insofar as Islamic belief and practice is their background. First comes a Quran leaf in Hijazi script, datable to the second half of the seventh century, marking the fundamental importance of the sacred text and of writing as a vehicle for it; and last, in 2020, come two cloth facemasks of the sort made familiar during the pandemic, with apotropaic inscriptions. Between these two items, many are already well-known and celebrated, but others indicate Milwright's intention, signalled in his introduction, to include a wider geographical scope than has often been the case, hence a fountain at Nafplio, Greece, the Great mosque of Djenné, Mali, and chromogenic prints produced in New York. It can perhaps be said that Milwright's selection of media favours the applied arts: ceramics, metalwork, stone carving, textiles, carpets, and woodwork – if we include the Palermo ceiling. Architecture is sometimes treated in terms of an element of its decoration: we learn of the sort of European botanical work that must have influenced the carvings on the dadoes of the Taj Mahal, but nothing of the building's structure and lineage. Painting also gets rather short shrift. Aside from the cover there is no product of the Timurid period, and there is nothing from Sultanate India.

Each item is headed with a place and a date; these, however, do not refer to their creation but the narrative moment in which they are set. Thus the chronological arrangement of the 50 depends on their individual history, known or surmised. Sometimes the

heading statement may be a fairly close match to internal information: a copy of the *Maqāmāt* itself is headed *Wasit, 1236*. This offers us a narrative time that can precede the colophon date of 634/1236–37, so that we see the volume as yet unfinished; while the precise but unproven location of Wasit is based on the origin of the copyist-painter al-Wasiti, and thus goes beyond the evident but less specific stylistic location of Iraq. Sometimes the disjunction between heading and production can be considerable: *London, 1892* refers to the Ardabil carpet, made in Safavid Iran and dated 946/1539–40, but acquired in London by the South Kensington Museum (later Victoria and Albert) in 1893, the narrative placed a year earlier than that to allow us to see from whom the carpet was acquired. Fortunately for readers who are unnerved when dates and places skim close to the known or diverge far from it, a note for each heading in the Appendix supplies some nuggets of certainty. Or of near certainty: the *Shāhnāmah* made for the Safavid Shah Tahmasp during the 1530s was received in the Ottoman court in December 1568, and thus its passage through Erzincan in that year is extremely likely. In one case there seems to be little justification for narrative or note: the "Siyah Qalam" style of painting demons has the heading *Panjakant 1490*. The place is arbitrary, though within Central Asia, while the captions in the narrative section offer dating of late fourteenth to early fifteenth century, but the Appendix notes late fifteenth to early sixteenth. The present reviewer would place the style nearer to Tabriz in the early thirteenth.

For whom is this book intended? Can it be an introduction to the subject? Can readers be lured in by way of the narratives, and would they then remain tourists? If a reader has a dawning interest, are they led in so many directions as to retain only general notions of diversity and intricacy? Similarly, for students in the early stages there is the burden of a possible multiplicity of chronologies and locations, both narrative and historical. It may be suggested that the best use of the book might be as a gift from teacher to pupil at the end of a degree, when the recipient is so expert in the subject as to take pleasure in analysing the skill of the writer in composing the narratives. For there is surely a playful element intended – sometimes an aim to include as many topics as may be touched on in one episode. For example, *Nizwa 1531* alludes to Chinese ceramics, minaret history, the profession of faith, Gujarati textile trade, fabulous birds, and restrictions on the representation of animate creatures in mosques. Can we perhaps play back with questions about the narrative settings? With what could al-Wasiti pin pages to the wall? Were herbs grown in glazed pots in Samarqand in 1085? Can one sit at a table chin in hand without a Western chair in Tabriz in 1306? May we doubt that a kettle, of whatever form, whistles over a fire in Erzincan in 1568?

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