

Institution: University of Oxford		
Unit of Assessment: 25 Area Studies		
Title of case study: Shifting Perceptions of Islam and the Occult through Art and Material Culture: Social, Cultural and Economic Impact		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Francesca Leoni	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Assistant Keeper and Curator of Islamic Art, Ashmolean Museum	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2011-present
Farouk Yahya	Leverhulme Research Assistant, Ashmolean Museum	04/01/2016-31/03/2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 January 2016-31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact Leoni's research on the art and material culture produced in relation to Islamic occult practices (i.e. divination, amulets, etc.) resulted in a loan exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum which was the catalyst for a fresh public debate on Islamic spirituality and culture. The exhibition engaged diverse audiences (young adults; BAME; local communities; national and international visitors; regular and occasional museumgoers) and broadened interest in Islam and Islamic culture both within and outside the museum. The project also generated a number of significant personal, professional and economic benefits which affected the social, cultural and curatorial spheres both locally and nationally.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research In recent decades Islamic occultism has transformed from a marginalised subject to a burgeoning field of research. Text-based studies remain prevalent, however, ignoring the fact that being action and purpose-driven, occult practices cannot be fully understood without considering their material tools and end products. The research project Leoni led beginning in 2013 chose to concentrate on the visual and material evidence produced by well-documented divinatory arts – astrology, bibliomancy (divination with books), dream interpretation, geomancy (divination with sand), and lettrism (divination with Arabic letters). Between 2015 and 2018 this University of Oxford-based project received the support of the Leverhulme Trust and the Barakat Trust, the contribution of an early career research assistant (Dr Farouk Yahya) particularly through research around the Southeast Asian Islamic occultist tradition and curatorial support, and the advice of an international advisory panel of 8 scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds from the University of Oxford, British Museum, University of Texas at Austin, University of Bonn, Warburg Institute and the University of South Carolina.</p> <p>The key research questions explored were: What kind of objects have Islamic divinatory practices produced in the pre-modern period and what is their make-up? What do these objects tell us about their associated methods and their reception and how does this information compare to what we know from historical and technical literature? How does material evidence enrich our understanding of the nature and status of divination and its relationship with canonical religious practices in pre-modern Islamic societies?</p> <p>These questions were approached through direct object analysis, contextual study of both primary and secondary sources, and subject-specific conversations in the form of roundtables, workshops, and an international conference (<i>Islamic Occultism in Theory and Practice</i>, 6-8</p>		

January 2017, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). These resulted in a number of publications which offered the principal channel for academic dissemination (**R1-R4**).

The research concluded that:

- a) Material evidence is essential for a systematic assessment of occultist knowledge as it both completes and extends what we know from written sources;
- b) The materials and decorative make-up of the objects, not always documented in texts, were instrumental for their efficacy and potency and thus require careful analysis and systematic recording;
- c) The selection and combination of materials and formulas often point at the complex cosmological and philosophical ideas underpinning prevailing Islamic occultist theories, confirming the latter's pervasiveness and intellectual relevance;
- d) The merging of formulas generally labelled as "acceptable" (i.e. pious invocations and motifs) and "illicit" (i.e. magical texts and symbols) on many of the examined objects does not simply constitute a strategy to mitigate theological and juridical objections, but reflects, in fact, a different understanding of their respective spheres and associated powers; such an understanding is one that ultimately assigns a positive role and a status to occult sciences and their methods within a unified vision of the universe emanating from God;
- e) Practice-based evidence, including material culture, can help us to challenge polarising ideological stances and dominant assumptions, especially when concerning ideas and experiences of belief in the Islamic sphere; a more nuanced knowledge of the latter facilitates debate and interaction, contributing to improve mutual understanding and acceptance.

Generally criticised and disavowed, divinatory and amuletic practices, along with their material expressions, have coloured and continue to inhabit everyday existence within various Muslim societies, intertwined, as they are, with canonical forms of piety and devotion. Thus, a better understanding of their cultural significance and logic ultimately provides the ground for a more complete and less biased appreciation of Islam's multifaceted nature.

3. References to the research

- R1. [Edited Book, available on request] Francesca Leoni, Liana Saif, Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Farouk Yahya, eds., *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, November 2020), 718 pp. DOI: [10.1163/9789004426979](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004426979)
- R2. [Book Chapter] Francesca Leoni and Liana Saif, "Introduction," in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, edited by Francesca Leoni, Liana Saif, Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Farouk Yahya (Leiden: Brill, November 2020), pp. 1-40. DOI: [10.1163/9789004426979_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004426979_002)
- R3. [Book Chapter] Francesca Leoni, "A Stamped Talisman," in *Islamicate Islamic Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, edited by Francesca Leoni, Liana Saif, Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Farouk Yahya (Leiden: Brill, November 2020), pp. 527-71. DOI: [10.1163/9789004426979_013](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004426979_013)
- R4. [Journal Article, listed in REF2] Francesca Leoni, "Islamic Occultism and the Museum," *Installing Islamic Art: Interior Space and Temporal Imagination, special issue of International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7.2 (2018): 327–51. DOI: [10.1386/ijia.7.2.327_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ijia.7.2.327_1)
- R5. [Exhibition] "Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural," international loan exhibition curated by Francesca Leoni and held at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford, 20 October 2016 – 15 January 2017. Exhibition details and catalogue available on request.

Grants and Awards

Leverhulme Trust (Research Project Grant no. RPG-2015-185 entitled "Divination and Art in the Medieval and Early Modern Islamic World (1200-1800)" awarded to Leoni (PI), award of GBP107,979; 2015-2018.

Barakat Trust (publication grant awarded to Leoni for the exhibition catalogue *Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural*, award of GBP6,000).

4. Details of the impact

Wider public engagement with the research project outlined above was generated through a large-scale exhibition (*Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* [Ashmolean Museum, 20 October 2016 – 15 January 2017], **R5**), complemented by interactives (e.g., a micro website and sound-cloud recordings with curatorial comments, **E6**) and an exhibition catalogue. By offering an accessible and visually engaging entry to a complex and contested topic, the objects selected for the exhibition (e.g. mechanical instruments, specialist treatises, talismanic garments and weapons, amulets, etc.) stimulated discussions about the cultural diversity of Islam both within the museum, as documented by visitors' exit questionnaires (**E1-E2**), and beyond it, as reflected by people's engagement through social media and blogs (**E5-E6**) and by colleagues in the heritage sector (**E7-E8**), as further detailed below.

1) Improvement in UK public understanding of Islam and Islamic culture:

While headline news about Islamic terrorism and Islamic State were on the rise prior to and during the exhibition run, the choice of the Ashmolean Museum to propose a different conversation on Islam was valued by its public, thereby **creating an opportunity to broaden current knowledge of Islamic culture** (**E1-E2**). In particular, its diverse audiences appreciated the richness and range of the exhibition's contents (a "massive culture – made me aware of holes in knowledge about Islam" as noted by one 16-24 year-old male) (**E1**); the discussion of enduring misconceptions about Islam and Islamic art; and the tactful handling of a difficult topic ("controversial issues addressed in a non-controversial way", as observed by one 45-54 year-old female, **E1**). As such, the project created **an opportunity to widen interest in Islam amongst the museum's stakeholders including Oxford's various Muslim communities**, as further demonstrated by its endorsement by some of its most prominent members (**E3**). In the words of the Founder of educational interfaith charity The Oxford Foundation, "In sharing this aspect of the Islamic tradition – one that is common across many different religions – at a time of such misunderstandings about Islam ... this exhibition will help to deepen and enrich people's appreciation of our faith" (**E3**).

49% (**E1**) to 59% (**E2**) of the visitors also felt that by addressing the diversity and complexity of Islamic culture, **the exhibition affected their perception of Islam**. Many were surprised to learn about this tradition's engagement with the occult and saw their assumptions challenged about what Islam tolerates or not. One 65-74 year-old visitor stated that the exhibition was "an eye-opener, especially the similarities of Islam with other religions" (**E1**). This sentiment was echoed by another 35-44 year-old female respondent who considered it "a great counterbalance to current discourse on Islam as rigid" (**E1**), fulfilling the project's aim to counter negative presentations of Islam in UK public discourse and promote a deeper understanding of it. Indeed, for 65% of those interviewed it was the opportunity to learn more about Islam that prompted their visit to the exhibition. A total of 85% of attendees further indicated that they would continue to broaden their knowledge of Islamic culture by attending similar events (61%) along with travelling (37%) and reading (35%) (**E1**). Even Muslim visitors remarked on how their knowledge changed as a result of visiting the Ashmolean exhibition. Significant in this respect was the comment of a 16-24 year-old male visitor who noted "I saw a shape I didn't know about – sandals of the Prophet; am a Muslim, and am aware of the topic" (**E1**).

The exhibition was referenced at least 68 times in national and international press (**E4-E5**). Media drew attention to the topic's complexity and appeal and to the extent to which **the exhibition contributed to challenge conventional ideas about Islamic culture**. Rachel Campbell-Johnston (*The Times*, **E4.1**) observed that it "puts firmly to bed the assumption that Islam banned all figurative art," one of the most ingrained misconceptions associated with Islamic visual culture and one that has polarised public opinion since the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taleban in 2001. Similarly, Sameer Rahim, in the online blog of *Prospect Magazine* (a leading online platform featuring independent thinking on contemporary issues) highlighted **the value of object-based evidence in order to capture the complexity of Islam**: "Modern-day rationalists may dismiss such beliefs as mere superstition; many modern-

day Muslims, who prefer the streamlined purity of text-based religion, will see it as misguided or even heretical. Both miss the point. Such objects offer a window onto the common experience of a culture" (E4.5). This confirmed the benefits of using material culture and a space like the museum **to stimulate debate and inspire deeper cultural understanding**.

2) Increased museum attendance and participation of under-engaged groups and occasional audiences:

The exhibition was visited by 13,306 people and was **particularly attractive to various under-engaged groups (i.e. students and young adults)**. More specifically, attendance by local community members was 10% higher than Ashmolean general attendance in FY 2016/17 (35.56% compared to 25.87%); the young adult audience (16-24 years old) was also greater than the annual average (22.5% compared to 16.7%) and more than 3 times the national average (6.2%, Taking Part Survey 2015/16, or 6.7%, Taking Part Survey 2016/17) (E9). BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) visitors also made up a higher proportion of the audience than the Ashmolean annual average (14.38% compared to 10.23%) and considerably higher than the national museums average (6.58%, Taking Part Survey 2015/16) (E2, E9). Furthermore, the proportion of Muslim visitors (9.6%) was higher than Oxford's Muslim population as a whole (6.8%, UK Census 2011), and Muslims formed the second largest religious group to attend the exhibition (E2).

Members of the different **Oxford Muslim communities** (i.e., Muslim students and members of Oxford's central mosque) were active contributors to the project (i.e., contents, marketing, title and overall tone of voice). Some **proposed and helped to develop new gallery resources**. This included readings of the Qur'an in the gallery by the Imam of the central mosque, which added nuance and credibility to the practice of using this text for healing as much as devotional purposes. Additional help with visitor evaluations enabled others to nourish their interest in museum work. The involvement of an Iraqi refugee with *Power and Protection* and other Ashmolean initiatives resulted in **additional professional development and a career move to the University of Oxford's History of Science Museum** as Collection Officer for Multaka Oxford (E7). The project therefore **created concrete opportunities for interfaith and cross-cultural collaboration and for a more inclusive and dynamic curatorial experience**, one replicated in subsequent Ashmolean projects, from the 2018 exhibition *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Sudanese Artist in Oxford* to the ongoing redevelopment of the Ancient Near Eastern Gallery, both of which have broadened the participation of relevant local communities of users.

3) Cultural transformation in the heritage industry:

A further, important effect of Leoni's project can be traced in the heritage sector. In the recent redevelopment of the Islamic Galleries of the British Museum in 2018, objects associated with divinatory, healing and protective practices became the focus of a dedicated new space. As stated by the then Phyllis Bishop Curator for the Modern Middle East at the British Museum, "Dr Leoni's project strengthened my resolve to curate an entire case in the new gallery dedicated to the subject" (E8). The exhibition catalogue produced for *Power and Protection* was also used by the Curator to address the concerns of British Museum visitors, thereby proving useful as an educational tool in other museum settings. As noted in their letter, the Curator is now planning to incorporate the occult in their future reinstallation of the Islamic collections at the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, where they are now Curator of Islamic Art & Culture (E8). These initiatives reveal **a growth in confidence in the curatorial and professional sphere in addressing a contested topic in the public space, in addition to an increased recognition of these experiences as integral to Islamic culture**.

4) An investment in the city of Oxford's cultural programme and a contribution to the local economy:

That 3 high-profile Muslim donors – His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah al Thani (Qatar), His Royal Highness Sultan Nazrin Shah (Malaysia), and Dr Farhad Farjam (Iran and UAE) – underwrote *Power and Protection* with a total of GBP175,000 in sponsorship is a further testimony to the intellectual profile and cultural contribution of this exhibition. In return, the project contributed an estimated GBP650,590 to the Oxford economy in visitor spending, an

amount calculated by combining the Association of Independent Museums' economic impact model with data from the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA) and Ashmolean Museum's own exhibition visitor counts (**E9**). In particular, ticket sales generated GBP56,725 the in-house sale of the catalogue generated GBP19,805 (**E10**). The book was sold out within a year following the exhibition.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- E1.** *Power and Protection* exit survey report (detailed) containing data analysis and visitor feedback (confidential; data collected October 2016-January 2017 and collated in January 2017 by Farouk Yahya).
- E2.** *Power and Protection* kiosk and exit survey report (combined), including key findings/summary sheet and data analysis & detailed findings (confidential; report compiled in January 2017 by Marketing and Digital Communication Assistant, Ashmolean Museum).
- E3.** Ashmolean *Power and Protection* exhibition press release (30 September 2016) with endorsements from the Founder of The Oxford Foundation; and the Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies, St Antony's College, University of Oxford (public).
- E4.** Selected media coverage:
 - 4.1. The Times (Ireland), by Rachel Campbell-Johnston (2 December 2016);
 - 4.2. Art Newspaper, by Jane Jakeman (1 January 2017);
 - 4.3. The Spectator, by Justin Marozzi (15 October 2016);
 - 4.4. Funoon London, by Farida Mohamedali (18 November 2016);
 - 4.5. Prospect Magazine Blog, by Sameer Rahim (24 October 2016);
 - 4.6. On Religion, by Abdul-Azim Ahmed (13 January 2017);
 - 4.7. Royal Academy of Art Blog, by Kamila Shamsie (25 October 2016);
 - 4.8. Hyperallergic Magazine, by Allison Meier (24 November 2016).
- E5.** Summary of press and web coverage for *Power and Protection* exhibition, with 68 pieces of coverage and containing press clippings and figures for online readership, coverage views, social media shares and circulation (confidential; report compiled in February 2017 by Press Assistant, Ashmolean Museum).
- E6.** Summary of web statistics for *Power and Protection* exhibition's microsite and sound-clouds, showing that the total number of page views during the 12-week round of the exhibition was 33,661 (confidential; report compiled in February 2017 by Head of IT, Ashmolean Museum).
- E7.** Testimonial letter from Collection Officer for Multaka-Oxford, History of Science Museum, University of Oxford (17 September 2019) (confidential).
- E8.** Testimonial letter from Curator, Islamic Art & Culture, Royal Ontario Museum (dated 7 January 2020) (confidential).
- E9.** Summary of economic impact model and supporting data for *Power and Protection* based on Association of Independent Museums methodology using postcode data from the Ashmolean exit survey benchmarked against data sources used to benchmark age and ethnicity from DCMS Taking Part Survey 2015/16 and ALVA 2016/17 (Association of Large Visitor Attractions) (confidential; compiled in January 2020 by Evaluation Officer, GLAM, University of Oxford).
- E10.** Ticket and catalogue sales report for *Power and Protection*, showing P&P statistics in comparison with other Ashmolean exhibitions (confidential; report compiled in March 2017 by Head of Finance, Ashmolean Museum).