Art and the precariousness of the aesthetic: images of the Prophet and narratives behind “beautiful objects”

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Abstract Controversy surrounding the exhibiting of artefacts depicting the Prophet Muhammad has become a global “hot topic” in both private and public spheres in contemporary times. The resulting religious, cultural, political, and societal tensions affect individuals, communities, and institutions, especially the museum where many of these images reside. Such polemical disputes are problematic for these cultural entities seeking to attract and maintain diverse audiences, significantly influencing their decision-making and politics of display.

Based on qualitative empirical evidence and primary and secondary textual sources, this article maintains that the story of an object’s journey through space and time can impact audience attitudes and mindsets especially if rich contextual histories and narratives are promoted in museum spaces. Discussion and analysis will serve to highlight the potential of museum encounters to enlighten and promote understanding through an overview of the religious/historical trajectory of depictions of the Prophet, current museological approaches, in-depth analysis of a particular artwork, and reactions to its display at a specific exhibition site. Final recommendations suggest that exhibiting and encouraging appreciation of “controversial” displays through exposure to an object’s multiple layers of meaning can challenge the viewer to reflect and reconsider their mindsets.

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To many followers of Islam, any depictions of the prophet Muhammad (referred to hereafter as the Prophet, Allah, or Muhammad) are sacrilegious and deeply offensive. The violence, societal tensions and debates concerning freedom of speech following events such as the publication of satirical caricatures depicting the Prophet in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in 2005 and French newspaper Charlie Hebdo in 2015, and films such as Innocence of Muslims movie trailer in 2012, are contemporary examples of the local/global reactions to what has become a contentious issue for many contemporary audiences. Consequently, conversations in private and public spheres have argued the religious and historical validity of the prohibition of visual representations of the Prophet regardless of the medium. Although any “ban” is not universally accepted or applicable in all situations, and there is a lack of consensus among jurists regarding the legality of images, the display of artistic, cultural and religious objects in any public space has
required many museums to increasingly reconsider their individual and collective positions on the issue when engaged in institutional and curatorial decision-making.

Underlying many arguments in the museological world favoring the display of such representations is the notion that art alone has a universal language that can transcend all boundaries (religious, cultural, political, and social), and find a common ground for humanity to unite by restoring harmony and building cross-cultural understanding. However, historical situatedness is a characteristic of any aesthetic encounter, and emerges out of specific cultural and political contexts - even its most romantic and abstract forms are cultural productions. Further, the boundaries between art, culture, religion, and politics have been negotiated and disputed from the pre-modern world to current times.

Against the backdrop of an overview of the historical trajectory of depictions of the Prophet, the current curatorial attitudes in several museums, an in-depth analysis of a work of art and an exhibition site, this article will investigate what happens when museums claim to enlighten and promote understanding when displaying what is often considered exotic and foreign. The artwork in question is Muhammad leading Hamzah and the Muslims against the Banu Qaynuqa, created in Tabriz, Iran (1314-15), from Rashid al-Din’s Jami’ al-Tawarikh or Compendium of Chronicles that is currently owned by the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art. A specific museum display will be discussed and analyzed for its politics of display and audience reception during a travelling exhibition entitled The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection (hereafter referred to as the AoIE) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in Sydney, Australia in 2007.

This article argues that when the historical, cultural, social, and religious contexts of an artwork are ignored in favor of formal properties (the interpretative versus the aesthetic approach), the possibility of altering mindsets and promoting cross-cultural understanding across diverse audiences (local Muslims, “traditional” museum goers, art critics, and the press, for example) is diminished. Therefore, the depth of any aesthetic encounter will depend on the degree to which each of these contextual dimensions is allowed to influence the exhibition experience. The following discussion suggests that exhibiting and encouraging the appreciation of artworks like the case study under investigation, can assist in shifting negative public perceptions of Islam and its followers that has been pervasive since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and exacerbated by local/global conflicts and sensationalized media reporting. Specific works of art can provide a rich source of knowledge and cultural/artistic heritage for contemporary Muslim communities.

**History of prohibition: a question of interpretation**

The religious and historical basis for figural bans (aniconism) is complex and mired in differing readings, understandings, and applications of textual documents and sources. According to Mikhail Piotrovsky, the Prophet objected to images for two reasons: for their potential as “objects of worship and as manifestations of impious luxury.” (2004, 20) The Qur’an, however, has no explicit prohibition of images of the Prophet or Allah, but there are two passages that are suggestive:

Chapter 42, Verse 11: [Allah] is the originator of the heavens and the earth...[there is] nothing like a likeness of him.

Chapter 21, Verses 52-54: [Abraham] said to his father and his people: 'What are these images to whose worship you cleave?' They said: 'We found our fathers
worshipping them.’ He said: ‘Certainly you have been, you and your fathers, in manifest error.’

The Hadith (collection of gestures, acts, and sayings of the Prophet, and the second source of law after the Qur’an) is not considered divine revelations and can be confusing and inconclusive, but it lends more weight to this “ban” because when multiple valid sources agree, the command is considered binding. There are many references to the depiction of the human form, but the strongest appears in the canonical collections of al-Bukhārī (810 - 870) and Muslim (812 - 875): “Those who paint pictures would be punished on the Day of Resurrection.” (Sahih Muslim, vol. 3, no. 5268)

Prohibiting human images as dictated in the Hadith, however, was not always the case. Veiling the Prophet’s face became commonplace in the 1500s, and any visual representation of the Prophet grew rare by the 1800s. Yet investigations reveal that depictions of Muhammad’s face had begun appearing in manuscripts from the 13th century onwards. (Young 2015) Additionally, many instances of figural representations exist in secular or courtly art, although the majority existed for private viewing only.

Figurative art in Islam was not confined to the Mongol period in Iran. The art works of the Shi’ite dynasty the Fatamids (909-1171 A.D.) portrayed humans and animals on their ceramics. Sculptural reliefs and friezes of animals and people was found on the monumental architecture of the Seljuk Turks. Figurative miniature paintings of the Ottoman Empire reign from the 15th through 19th centuries also exist. Further, many scholars including Mika Natif conclude that in the time of the Prophet himself and his direct successors (Rāshidūm caliphs), figural depictions were not regarded as a threat or as idolatry. (Natif 2011, 42) Natif maintains that attitudes did not change until the 9th century, and at that time being “pure” meant “free” of images or idols. Importantly, she argues that this new visual direction resulted from a “socio-political power struggle, and not a religious or spiritual one.” (Natif 2011, 43) She maintains tensions between the dynastic power of Umayyad and Abbasid rulers and theologians who strove to increase their status, opposed their caliphs concerning the caliphs’ claims to “religious authority.” This situation resulted in accusations of idolatry over the growing popularity of images of the Prophet and the caliphs on minted coins during the eighth and ninth centuries.

Islam is not alone in prohibiting images of gods and prophets as the Bible states in the Second Commandment:

Book of Exodus, Chapter 20, Verses 4-5: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in Heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.

Similarly, Jewish rituals exclude images and depictions of God, yet examples including the synagogue at Dura Europos in Syria reveal exceptions to the rule. Further, abundant portraits of Jesus have existed since the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. in spite of the Byzantine bishops and emperors of the 8th and 9th centuries arguing that these images violated the Second Commandment. Therefore, although all three Abrahamic faiths decreed images of prophets and gods are idolatrous, artists of these denominations painted a variety of figural depictions of divine beings in human form to illustrate religious stories at various periods throughout history.
Currently, numerous prominent voices are unconvinced that such images belong in the public domain. This is evident in a response to this issue from a spokesperson for the Muslim Council of Great Britain, Nasima Begum, who maintains that attitudes towards depictions of the Prophet are consistent, and that sacred art is simply an unnecessary “historical anomaly:”

...[Historically] there may have been books producing images of the Prophet, however, the very fact that images of his face were covered up in the 16th century or so does show that Muslims were not happy about the depictions and therefore resulted in a veil being used to cover the face. (Graham-Harrison 2015a)

Museological dilemmas
As discussions suggest, debate over the existence and significance of representations of the Prophet is a relatively modern phenomenon that has often divided opinions along religious, cultural, political, and societal lines. This issue is increasingly problematic on both the micro level of exhibition display and for the broader museum community. Disagreements complicate the debate over what the real issues of concern are and the possible solutions to this global dilemma.

Museum curators are split on this issue, often due to their specific circumstances, particular practices, or museum display policies. For example, the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), London, believes it is misinformation and ignorance that causes problems because “after 9/11, people had a very strong idea that Islam was something that was resistant of the outside world...this idea that there's no images in Islam, is not true.” (Author and Meyer 2012) The Islamic Museum of Australia (IMA) agrees that there is “a lack of understanding,” but emphasizes that “people have the right to their opinion. If they are not comfortable with something, they don’t have to support it or engage in it.” (Author and Shkembi 2014) The David Collection in Copenhagen has concerns over the display of individual pages from Qur’ans that “can be a problem for a very orthodox person, as these Qur’ans are torn into pieces and handled by infidels,” but maintains that European audiences generally “don’t see these problems. We are so used to exhibiting Christ being crucified, and all the saints...we don't have issues about that...So we have a different sensitivity.” (Author and Meyer 2012)

New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) owns six images of Mohammad, and states that their website and exhibition displays aim to “contextualize” these works “appropriately” and “have very good exchanges with people about the interpretation of the art, and their meaning for audiences.” Curators maintain that they do not shy away from “stimulating conversations,” but accuse “irresponsible tabloids fueling the flames of social and cultural discontent.” (Author and Haider 2013) Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) supports this view, pointing to the “...really big difference between a caricature that is derogatory and a painting that was done by a Muslim out of respect.” (Author and Komaroff 2013)

Societal tensions are oftenacerbated when the media and others regularly portray Muslims and Islam as inherently intolerant, barbaric, or dangerous. A leading figure in the French Central Council of Muslims, Abdallah Zekri, draws attention to the fact that Islam is only one of many faiths that object strongly, even violently, to derogatory depictions of religious symbols, yet is the only group regularly identified as such in the media: “...The Catholics did not accept the movie The Temptation of Christ, and the movie theatre was burned [Latin
Quarter Paris 1988], and the movie was withdrawn...so it is not only Islam and the Muslims ...as it was Catholic fundamentalists who carried out acts.” (Shevarnadze 2015)

Further, negative depictions of Jesus in art and in film have incited controversy, including outrage over the portrayal of Christian symbols. On Palm Sunday in 2011, French Catholic fundamentalists attacked Andres Serrano’s 1987 work Piss Christ, a photograph of a crucifix in a glass of urine that had generated enormous controversy in America in the 1980s. Chris Ofili’s The Holy Virgin Mary (created with elephant dung and collages of female genitalia) was displayed in 1999 at the Brooklyn Museum, and New York Mayor Rudolph Guiliani threatened to cancel the museum’s funding from the city. (Socolovsky 2015)

The reaction to raising terrorist alerts in recent times has continued to affect museums and the media. For example, a 2015 newspaper article in The Guardian began with the statement: “Warning: this article contains the image of the prophet Muhammad, which some may find offensive.” The article describes what the journalist believes is “a wider pattern of apparent self-censorship by British institutions that scholars fear could undermine public understanding of Islamic art and the diversity of Muslim traditions.” (Graham-Harrison 2015b)

The media have criticized the removal of diverse devotional images of the Prophet. The V&A’s display of Islamic art and its online database now lack images of Muhammad because “the museum is a high-profile public building already on a severe security alert.” The British Library’s decided to show only veiled depictions of Muhammad, and the Hague Museum withdrew masks of Muhammad from a planned photographic display. It is speculated that many museums and galleries that have images of the Prophet are suddenly reluctant to display them. (Meotti 2015) Yet similar images were previously shown throughout Europe with little protest. For example, the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam received no complaints when it displayed a contemporary Iranian image of Muhammad next to a Christian icon, as part of an exhibition on cross-cultural encounters in 2013. As curator Mirjam Shatanawi explained: “We knew it might be controversial, but decided to take the risk because the story is important to tell. These images are a real eye-opener, a powerful example of Islam being different and more diverse than many imagine.” (Meotti 2015)

The Jami’ al-Tawarikh: a case study
In 2014, Edinburgh University Library opened a temporary exhibition entitled The World History of Rashid al-Din, 1314. A Masterpiece of Islamic Painting. It featured sections of the Jami’ al-Tawarikh that the University acquired, yet excluded depictions of the Prophet. Scholars, including Ingvild Flaskerud, condemned this curatorial decision: “By not displaying the images, we give privilege to certain understandings of Islam and marginalize others. This is not simply a scholastic issue; it is also a democratic matter.” (quoted in Graham-Harrison 2015b) Christiane Gruber agreed:

There is no artistic reason whatsoever why those folios should have been left out...I worry that our institutions of culture and learning are muting these significant Islamic works of figural art due to a variety of fears. This is a real shame and a terrible loss for our shared global artistic heritage...[to not publish them] is actually quite belittling of Muslims. There is a pernicious unspoken message that Muslims won’t be able to handle seeing these materials or talking about them. (quoted in Graham-Harrison 2015b and 2015a)
Further, Omid Safi argues that exposure to works like the *Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh* can help to dispel ignorance:

It is really important for audiences that have never seen the pietistic images of Muhammad to make a radical distinction between the mystical and beautiful images that have been produced over the last 1,000 years by Muslims and for Muslims, and the offensive and sometimes pornographic images [currently portrayed in the news]. (quoted in Graham-Harrison 2015a)

The following section of this article describes and analyzes an artwork from this “controversial” set of chronicles. The manuscript painting *Muhammad leading Hamzah and the Muslims against the Banu Qaynuqa* from the *Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh* has been selected because of the work’s potential to promote Islamic heritage and cross-cultural understanding of the multi-faceted history of Islamic art and culture. A detailed account of the stories and provenance that accompanies this artwork and its journey through time and place, including its creators, various patrons and owners, reveals contextual beyond aesthetics in the display of artistic and cultural objects in contemporary curatorial practices. This is particularly important when artworks like the *Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh* manuscript are exhibited as “stand-alone” objects in museum exhibitions, and are removed in time and space from their historical, geographic, cultural, and religious contexts. Moya Carey and Margaret Graves posit that re-presenting the Islamic artefact as a “star object...Placed upon a pedestal” means “the unbroken object is almost openly characterised as a desirable commodity that is tempting the acquisitive beholder, but not as an object with a history to relate.” (2012, 9)

The cross-cultural narratives behind “beautiful objects”

The *Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh* was produced during the Ilkanid period (1247 - 1318 A.D.). During that time, Iran was territorially and politically re-united, the arts flourished, and diverse religious and sectarian trends predominated. As Sheila Blair comments: “In religion as in many cultural and artistic affairs, the Mongols were eclectic...[it was a] time of extraordinary cross-continental exchange...[producing artworks whose] transcendent beauty still speak to us today.” (Blair 2002, 118) The increased use of paper and wood block printing to print text (both Chinese influences) meant the “arts of the book” (or Islamic codex) became a fashionable, highly collectible, portable, and readily-available way to educate and disseminate knowledge and understanding of Mongol history (cultural, political, and religious) and illustrious Mongol rulers. (Blair 2002, 141, 137) Yuka Kadoi agrees with the Westward dissemination of these manuscripts, and the impact of Chinese landscape painting on Ilkanid painting, resulting in “new pictorial concepts suitable for [Iran’s] own cultural sphere.” (Kadoi 2009, 238) The numerous extravagant illustrations of the *Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh* enhanced the accompanying text, and increased the manuscript’s appeal, especially among illiterate populations. (Blair 2017, 16) Importantly, despite being luxury items made for, and usually viewed by, a very small elite audience, the *Jamiʿ al-Tawarikh* was “copied en masse and intended for free public display” to urban populations under Ilkanid rule in major cities. (Hillenbrand 2011) Further, Hillenbrand maintains this “gigantic picture book” with its recurrent themes of violence, authority, and piety was a “flexible vehicle for quite sophisticated propaganda.” (2011) Thus, the primary aim of these books was to emphasize and promote heritage and religion within Iran and to an audience beyond its borders.
Rashid al-Din’s *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* was one of the most significant and innovative works of its time as it recorded the first history of the world seen through the eyes of the Mongol conquerors, and was unique in its scope and research methods. (Blair 1995) Rashid al-Din established the *Rab’-I Rashidi* in Tabriz, Iran: a multi-purpose funerary facility containing a scriptorium where works of art, including manuscripts like the *Jami’ al-Tawarikh*, were produced as a collective effort by research assistants. The manuscripts were copied in Arabic and Persian, and disseminated throughout Iran and the Arab lands. (Melville 2008)

The *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* originally comprised four sections, but only two parts (or fascicles) survive: one owned by the Khalili Trust, and the other residing in the Edinburgh University Library. (Ali 2001) These manuscripts were the most lavishly illustrated sections of the series, and they reflect Tabriz’s cosmopolitan 14th century culture where the use of Arabic, Latin, Persian, Chinese, Mongolian, and Sanskrit texts, along with illustrative material from the Old Testament and New Testament Gospel scrolls, and manuscripts from China and Northern Europe were commonly available. (Ali 2001) Tabriz was the Ilkhanid capital, and was considered the main metropolis of the modern world: “a multicultural, multi-confessional, political, and commercial centre that served as a bridge between you and East Asia...Tabriz was thronged with European missionaries, Chinese officials, and merchants and diplomats from all over the old world.” (Hillenbrand 2002, 145, 162)

The primary aim was to reproduce and distribute these texts (a turnaround of six months), so artists had to work closely with each other and conform to a “house style” that favored several compositional prototypes over meticulous detail and originality. According to Talbot Rice, at least twenty families of artisans, a Turkish painter named Qutqubuga, and more than one Chinese artist lived and worked at the *Rab’-I Rashidi*. Rice has identified four principal painters and a possible separate artist for the scenes of Muhammad’s life (“Iram Master,” “Luhrasp Master,” “Tahmuras Master,” “Master of the Scenes from the Life of the Prophet,” and “Alp Arslan Master”), and at least two assistants through their particular styles. The author concludes that the *Master of the Scenes from the Life of the Prophet* was a “Persian who, although a native idiom was evident in his style, had seen both Central Asian and Christian works.” (Rice 1976, 6)

The arts of the book became central to artistic production during the Ilkhanid period, but sections of the *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* (especially depictions of Muhammad and his life to which an entire section is dedicated) are often considered outside the definition of “classical” Persian painting due to their historical rather than romantic or epic focus. (Rice 1976, 11) However, despite the religious nature of these depictions with Muhammad as their central subject, these manuscripts were the product of royal courtly artistic production in a “bio-historical” Ilkhanid style (Gruber 2012, 17), and were never intended to decorate religious text such as the Qur’an or become icons or sacred art incorporated into mosque architecture. (Ali 2001, 4) These princely residences became not only the main centers of artistic creativity due to royal patronage of the arts, but places like Tabriz and the *Rab’-I Rashidi* became hubs for learning and knowledge dissemination.

**Continuity, disruptions, and innovation**

The work under discussion, *Muhammad leading Hamzah and the Muslims against the Banu Qaynuqa*, depicts the Prophet guiding his forces into battle in the name of Islam. Battle scenes such as this are unusual depictions in manuscripts/narratives relating to the life of Muhammad. Blair and Priscilla Soucek both argue that Rashid al-Din, as a Jewish convert to Islam, viewed these victorious battles of Muslim forces over Jewish settlements as significant. (1995, 56; 1988, 201) In the case of the conflict at Banu Qaynuqa (a Jewish
community near Medina), this was one of several treaties with the Muslims that Muhammad had revoked, and the ensuing battle forced the Jewish inhabitants to desert their homes.

The illustrated manuscript deserves a detailed description in order to reveal its significance, uniqueness, and its potential as an agent for promoting cross-cultural understanding and Islamic heritage (Fig. 1). An oblong frame and double red border encloses twenty-three lines of written Arabic “naskh” text, divided into three sections below the illustrated images, and a small section (three lines) of text above the figural depictions. Set against an azure blue background and surrounded by clouds under the guidance and divine protection of nine bare-headed, curly haired, angelic bodies wearing Greek styled chiton garments (six leading and three watching from the rear), the Prophet is depicted on horseback separated from his army who follow behind him at a distance. Muhammad is identified by his dark plaited hair and beard (that was the established convention in earlier portrayals), wearing an opaque white robe and turban (symbolizing purity) that contrasts his red saddle, bridle, and staff. His army is led by his uncle Hamzah (singled out from the soldiers by his red beard and blue hued garments) holding the Prophet’s checkered white banner (liwā) tied to his lance. The remaining troops wear garments finely outlined in red to emphasize their drapery.

Figure 1. Muhammad leading Hamzah and the Muslims against the Banu Qaynuqa, Jami’ al-Tawarikh, Tabriz, Iran, 714 AH (1314-5 AD). Ink, translucent and opaque watercolor, gold and silver on paper. 43.5 x 30cm (page); 12 x 25.5 (painting above). MSS 727; folio 6a.
Source: courtesy of Khalili Family Trust (khalili.org).

The illustrative device of using strong color, form, and line to frame and therefore isolate Muhammad from his army, and Hamzah from his fellow soldiers has the effect of heightening their importance, especially set against the neutral, washed-out background. This highlighting of Muhammad is clearly both an artistic and educational device to advance his mission to actively promote Islam as the new state religion to wider audiences.
This is what Hans Belting refers to when he states that Islamic rhetoric images functioned “as an instrument of a supernatural power,” transmitting knowledge and promoting conversions to Islam. (1994, 47)

The preference for strong, primary colors such as the red, blue, and green of the main figures, balanced with the subtle and nuanced tonal qualities of off-white, pink, grey, and brown of the horses, clouds, and landscape in this manuscript is distinctively Chinese. (Gray 1978, 23) These compositional and color scheme choices were typical of manuscript painting at the end of the 14th century. Pigments extracted from minerals such as gold, silver, and lapis lazuli (blue pigment), as seen in this example, were used extensively in manuscript illustrations, as were areas of vibrant, saturated color contrasted with larger sections of pale tones to emphasize particular details and create dynamism. (Tilitye 1984)

The use of ultramarine blue from ground lapis lazuli or “azure stone,” a mineral from Afghanistan that was rare and expensive, was widely used in Western manuscripts for important features such as the robes of the Virgin Mary and other holy individuals. The artists of the Jami’ al-Tawarikh may have been emulating the techniques of these popular and pervasive Western models. (Blair, 1995, 63) The application of gold leaf and gold sprinkling for outlines and borders, along with the preference for larger colored paper such as the use of cream toned hue in this example, was a common practice in Chinese manuscript painting, and continued to greatly influence artistic canons in later Islamic art production. (Blair 2000, 24-36)

This approach to pictorial space is undoubtedly borrowed from Chinese techniques of manuscript painting: compositions contained within scroll-like, horizontal sections of paper where open spaces serve as backdrops for images in motion rendered in ink, opaque and translucent watercolors, with linear outlines to emphasize drapery. Further, bands of clouds are common Chinese motifs, and Muhammad’s facial features (calm expression, neatly trimmed beard, almond eyes) are more Chinese than his characteristically Arabic army and angels.

Other cultural and artistic influences beyond Asian influences are evident in these manuscripts. According to Michael Rogers, the use of gold and silver for facial features in these paintings is very “un-Chinese” with “elongated figures, expressive features and mannered gestures” closer to the late-Byzantine tradition. (Rogers 2000, 131) The extension of red lances held by Muhammad and his followers beyond the pictorial border and into the textual space is also unique for the period, and may be the result of innovative techniques by imaginative artists to create interest and diversity within the enforced compositional prototype. Additionally, the type of “bunching” of compositional elements that is evident in the angels and the soldiers may be due to the speed of reproducing these manuscripts for distribution, and part of the compulsory “house style.” There are alternative views, however, suggesting that painting beyond picture frame is borrowed from Mesopotamian traditions of illustrated manuscript from the previous century, such as the gospel book Manafi al-Hayawan. (Gray 1978, 23) Figural crowding as a technique could also reflect borrowing from Western European styles and artists (Christian and Jewish), and their depictions of Biblical scenes. (Hillenbrand 2000, 147,149)

Two rulers of the period, Öljeytü and Ghāzān, converted to Islam from Christianity during this period. This may explain the elements of Christian iconography that were employed throughout this section of the Jami’ al-Tawarikh that concentrates on the history of Islam and the life of Muhammad. Examples in Khalili’s collection include Abrahamic narratives and images shared by Muslims, Christians, and Jews: Noah’s Ark, Jonah and the Whale,
the birth of Christ (including Mary, Jesus, and Joseph), scenes from the life of other prophets and Biblical characters including Moses, Saul, and Jacob, along with illustrations of Buddha. It has also been suggested that the choice to adapt elements of Christianity may be due to the scarcity of illustrated histories of the life of Muhammad. (Hillenbrand 2002, 149)

Conversely, many commentators argue these works are not mere imitations or transfers of intact styles of artistic production from either Asia or Europe, but are a highly innovative, artistically refined and complex synthesis of pre-Mongol, early Ilkhanid, Chinese and Byzantine pictorial traditions, and multi-faith iconography and artistic practices. Rice contends that the cross-cultural influences evident in Jami’ al-Tawarikh did not “constitute merely an artistic jumble, build up wholly on the basis of borrowing and mixing; rather they represent the first stages in the formation of a new and independent style ... distinguished by real artistic genius.” (1976, 4) There are alternative readings. Soucek, while agreeing that the technique of applying silver to drapery and shading figures were new pictorial components, stresses that artists emulated and repeated the work of their predecessors: “the emphasis was on continuation of tradition, rather than innovation.” (1998, 66)

Yves Porter advances the notion that Muslim artists created archetypical images of animals and humans rather than realistic depictions in Persian manuscript painting in an attempt to defend themselves “against a taboo placed on the image.” (Porter 2000, 113) This is a compelling argument, considering Muslim societies’ intense interest in the natural sciences and medicine would have meant they were well aware of anatomical correctness. Thus the meaning derived from their representational schema may have carried more significance than realism. However, Porter also suggests that artists may have had choices in terms of depicting knowledge based on the Sufi belief in the duality or “double nature” of form and meaning. Following this theory, images could be either depictions of interior/esoteric (bātin) or exterior/exoteric (zāhir) information. This would explain the preference for archetypes rather than realistic figural compositions as well as the aversion to shadowing in order to render “a pure, bright luminous world beyond the reach of terrestrial sight...[with ‘divine’ bodies painted] flat, almost transparent, without the forms of muscles, while dīvs [demons] are shown with heavy bodies, with muscles, hair and genitalia.”

There were obvious variations to these archetypes as Muhammad leading Hamzah and the Muslims against the Banu Qaynuqa illustrates. While facial expressions and body contours of all figures are flat and static, Muhammad is rendered in a white, semi-transparent wash, and his family and angels more colorful in red and blue outlines. This lends weight to earlier observations that artists working on the Jami’al-Tawarikh were employing imaginative and innovative techniques to break monotonous and repetitive “house styles” imposed upon them.

As Natif and Grabar succinctly observe:

On a cultural level...the Islamic world had a much more complicated and sophisticated concern with religious or pious imagery than is usually suggested... images were constantly present and active according to social, intellectual, or other areas of interest...They could have been inspired by existing, real models of works of art from many different cultures, or perhaps they were mnemonic devices created in learned or popular rhetoric. (2003, 36)
Regardless of perspective, this new style of Mongol painting adopted in Tabriz by the end of the 13th century was clearly influenced by a diversity of artistic and religious traditions from China and Central Asia. The Rab’-i Rashidi employed artists and models from these regions of various religious denominations including those of the Buddhist and Jewish faiths, which gradually altered the traditional Ilkhanid style. (Ali 2001, 2) In turn, this flourishing of Islamic art in Tabriz was widely distributed and significantly affected artistic production of other cultures and regions: “East Asian elements absorbed into the existing Perso-Islamic repertoire created a new kind of artistic vocabulary, one that was emulated from Anatolia to India.” (Yalman 2000-14, 1)

Discussions have revealed a profusion of cross-cultural influences and their impact on the development of artistic traditions and innovations. This supports the view that if these diverse influences are ignored, a deeper understanding of the plurality and multitude of meanings that cultural and artistic objects can convey is reduced. A visitor’s network of knowledge can be promoted when objects are displayed as interconnected so that interpretation and translation of layers of meaning in displays is possible. (Weber 2012, 30) An artwork isolated behind showcases with minimal contextual information provided is insufficient to communicate concepts necessary to create linkages and to encourage knowledge acquisition. Agreeing with Carey and Graves (2012), German museum director Stefan Weber suggests the “aura of singularity” (2012, 36) of the unique aesthetic object limits contextual frameworks that privileges current appreciation rather than an object’s social and temporal background. He maintains that Islamic art is often denied social and cultural pasts along with continuities and disruptions, which are typical of explanations of artistic changes in Western art. If promoting a shared human experience and heritage is the aim, then an understanding of cultural and artistic production and societal formation is essential. (Weber 2012, 38)

Curatorial and Audience responses to *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW)

As the previous analysis highlighted, knowledge and appreciation of artefacts has the potential to provide a richly textured artistic heritage for followers of Islam and for the wider community, especially if exhibited in a multi-dimensional display format. This does not always occur, as revealed by a brief survey of museological approaches, reinforced by the following empirical evidence from the AGNSW.

The general attitude of the AGNSW regarding social and political issues in their art displays was evident during the exhibition entitled *The Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Nasser D. Khalili Collection* (AoIE) in 2007 concerning depictions of Mohammad. The touring AoIE promoted the aesthetic rather than the interpretative approach by concentrating on the “beauty” of the objects rather than on their contextual backgrounds, particularly discussions involving religion.

The effect of belief systems on audience reactions was evident in a number of ways concerning controversy over depictions of the prophet Mohammad in the *Jami’ al-Tawarikh*. It was a key point of disagreement amongst parties involved in the Sydney exhibition. Attitudes often varied depending on audience demographics and familiarity with museums and art/cultural displays. Generally, views were polarized over these depictions, particularly between Muslim and non-Muslim visitors and curatorial staff.11
One non-Muslim visitor who fit this profile believed that images of Mohammad may possibly bridge differences between cultures, rather than offend any Muslim religious sensibilities or reinforce negative stereotypes:

...I feel it is important for Westerners to view these images to help them reflect on the depth of the Islamic culture - hopefully it will provide a better understanding and insight and a more compassionate view of all Muslims. As for Muslims, I don't believe it would offend them. If anything, they should feel a sense of pride when viewing such exquisite artworks and seeing Mohammad in such a poetic and aesthetic image. It is also a way of all Muslims understanding in greater depth their rich history. (Author and Courtenay 2013)

Another visitor felt museums have the right to display controversial images, but acknowledged that the museum may not represent ethnic groups with “sensitivity,” and this can affect how Muslims perceive themselves:

...If the local people had problems, it probably says something about their level of sophistication or perhaps their sensitivity about feeling displaced and feeling alienated...unfortunately we tend to treat those groups as if they were monolithic, and some of the groups treat themselves that way...If the works have been made, then there is a legitimate reason for displaying. (Author and McKeon 2012)

Other visitors were more intolerant of adverse views, demonstrated by this comment from another regular museum-goer who, while agreeing that artistic practices should not be censored as the gallery had a right to “challenge belief and value systems generally” finding this attitude “quite legitimate and well within their remit,” the non-Muslim visitor felt that Muslim visitors should “self-censor” if necessary, ending with the comment:

...If the Gallery was made to adjust their curatorial practice based on anticipated responses from every prickly sector of the community, then their whole reason for being would disappear, and I for one would probably stop going to such a museum out of sheer boredom. (Author and Phipps 2012)

Exceptions to this point of view exist, however, as evidenced in this observation from a non-Muslim visitor who appeared more empathic with the conservative Muslim religious perspective: “Well, certainly it [image of Mohammad] would offend me if I was a religious Muslim...I would be horrified if there were human beings in the art, because it wouldn't be Islamic art.” (Author and West 2011)

Data suggests that the majority view obtained from interviews and focus groups conducted with non-Muslim visitors echoed the AGNSW curators’ attitude towards this issue who did not perceive the depiction of Mohammad’s face a problem before, during, or after the exhibition:

...I remember too when the show went up people were saying 'you can’t show images of the prophet in the show'...When people saw the enormity of what the exhibition was it was beyond their wildest dreams. This is people from the community...All of those worries or concerns that we weren't going to handle culture properly seemed to be put into the back of the mind. (Author and Menzies 2011)
This criterion of success based on satisfying the “typical” AGNSW visitor is evident, as the curators had “no worries” about showing images of Mohammad, which runs contrary to the warning given by the Khalili Trust curator:

We are very aware that Islamic art, although it is not necessarily entirely religious in its content, a large amount of it is of a religious nature, and it means a lot to Muslim people. So we are very careful that especially the religious part of any display does not offend anyone. (Author and Nasser 2011)

This observation is supported by responses from visitors outside of the AGNSW target demographic audience. For example, the common reaction from Muslim visitors who were interviewed was that even if they were personally not insulted, the majority of Muslims would take offense and view the display of such images as problematic:

...when you start drawing images of Prophet Mohammad and his looks, that can really go hurting a lot of people...the use of the image of Mohammad could be offensive to a lot of Muslims...[Mohammad] has a face which is against early Sufi interpretations of Mohammad as too perfect a being to be depicted by man, that many Muslims would think should be followed, despite this being an artwork made for secular use...not my opinion though. (Author and Gunaydin 2011)

One Muslim visitor and her friends, in particular, were extremely insulted by the images:

...I was shocked...when I saw the pictures I couldn't believe it...I think art is art but people are people and no matter what you do, there has to be a line drawn where you realize that some things offend and hurt people, and just for the sake of art you can't break millions of hearts...If I knew it was there I would have never gone...I would have told my friends don't go...I mean if I had a piece of art work that offends Jews or Christians...I would think twice and be sensitive. (Author and Ansari, R 2011)

Mehmet Saral, an important community leader and current president of the Australian Infinity Foundation, the primary Muslim agency involved in the exhibition, felt that the Muslim community had not been consulted concerning this issue: “...it's not acceptable showing his face...Yes, I think in future it would be good to consult Muslims about some things that could be offensive to them. But when I say Muslims, we should go with the majority, not with some minorities ... the majority would say no to it.” (Author and Saral 2011)

Reactions to exhibition spaces and objects on display varied between visitors to the AoIE, even within the same community groups. For instance, responses to labelling and rhetoric of speeches and exhibition publications (catalogue, brochures, advertisements) resonated with some Muslim and non-Muslim participants who viewed all the text and publications related to artworks on display as appropriate and tasteful (Author and Debboussey 2011; Author and Courtenay 2011). Other Muslims (particularly Sunni Muslims) were offended by the statement that the exhibition was 90% secular, as they believed all art was made for God, therefore is religious: “...most of those people [artists] would have been inspired by some part of their faith...if I was an artist I would be totally offended...calling it secular takes away the part of Islam...you are kind of negating a whole history.” (Author and Saral 2011; Author and Gunaydin, B 2011; Author and Ansari, R 2011)
Evidence presented thus far suggests that perspectives and attitudes regarding images of the Prophet Mohammad are generally divided along certain lines, with the AGNSW curators and the majority of non-Muslim interviewees maintaining there is no issue displaying such images that many of the Muslim community thought were insensitive and inappropriate. The different cultural and religious codes are evident in the polarity of views that separate the Muslim and non-Muslim audiences, institutional staff, and audiences, yet some visitors operate in liminal spaces between worlds. Besides the disparity in definition between what constitutes “secular” and “religious” art, a group of Muslim volunteers aware of the changing contextual circumstances surrounding representations of the Prophet through exposure to alternate display formats in previous museum encounters, and who did not personally feel insulted by the images, agree that these images may be offensive to the majority of Muslims and to their contemporary Muslim communities. (Author and Ansari, M 2011; Author and Gunaydin, L 2011) Thus, while the majority of audiences surveyed appear to be re-confirming their cultural codes and mindsets, a small number of visitors experienced conflicting and competing experiences beyond the aesthetic display.

Conclusion
A multitude of differing viewpoints and attitudes surrounding the validity and historical significance of images of the Prophet Muhammad is central to on-going and intense debates in contemporary theological, political, scholarly, and artistic public/private forums. This article has focused on the politics of display and curatorial attitudes towards controversial displays at several museums generally, and the AGNSW in particular. These reflect wider cultural, ideological, and philosophical issues that have often resulted in conflict and disagreement between societal groups. While acknowledging one case study is a limited example (historically and geographically) and may not have universal application, discussions of the AoIE in Sydney are illustrative of the dilemmas posed when audiences are divided on the interpretation of the intrinsic properties of objects, which can trigger problems when the commonly held norms, values, and attitudes of particular communities are challenged.

This study acknowledges that museums are essential spaces where alternate views from diverse audiences can be heard, even when these views create conflict and tension. However, with many of the issues related to depictions of Muhammad shown to be under dispute, the museum has an opportunity to encourage knowledge acquisition and open-mindedness when visitors encounter displays that may be confronting or offensive. If visitors are presented with evidence confirming that at certain places and in specific eras portrayals of Muhammad were acceptable to promote religion and heritage, then these visitors are shown an historical precedence suggesting valid alternate views regarding Islamic doctrines, pointing to a larger over-arching narrative that has been subjected to changing social, religious, and cultural forces. Through exposure to multiple layers of meaning that the social life of an object carries with it from creation to exhibition, all audiences, no matter what demographic they belong to, may begin to question their own mindsets (as Muslim volunteers at the AoIE illustrate) by imagining a different past, and adopting different ways of thinking in the future. (Doumani 2013, 133)

Research data suggests that visitors believe the museum is a safe environment where controversial topics can be debated and disputed, despite museum management concerns about certain topics and displays of art and culture. (Cameron 2010, 55, 57) If an object’s extrinsic properties are presented alongside its intrinsic qualities, the opportunity for situations to occur where institutions, collectors, and curators are apprehensive, or audiences offended, can potentially be mitigated and reduced. Only an integrated
approach, which respects the multi-dimensional context of museum practices, will be able to provide a dynamic and inclusive space where cross-cultural understanding can be promoted, and forgotten heritages rediscovered.

Notes

1 For a comprehensive investigation that views the Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy debates around freedom of expression, blasphemy, and the nature of modern Islam as political in nature rather than a result of cross-cultural misunderstanding see: Jytte Klausen (2009), The Cartoons that Shook the World, Yale University Press: New Haven.

2 On this topic see: Christiane Gruber’s 2015 Newsweek article “How the ‘Ban’ on images of Muhammad came to be” (www.newsweek.com/how-ban-images-muhammad-came-be-300491). To confirm that no record exists of debates over images of Muhammad in legal sources before the twentieth century see: Houari Touati’s 2015 book on the figural arts in Islam (particularly the Introduction in “Le régime des images figuratives dans la culture medieval islamique.” (Leiden: Brill, pp. 1-29)

3 Several studies exist on this topic including those by Issa (1990) and Paret (1960).


6 Rather than advocating a ban, some scholars including Jan Assman argue that “the acquisition of iconic literacy” is not the abandonment of the image in favor of the narrative, but rather the development of better skills in understanding, interpreting, and responding to the image as “the visible images must disappear to make room for the word and the mental images it evokes.” (2011, 22,31)

7 The earlier form of the book was the codex, attributed to and spread by the Coptic Church. Each region developed its own distinctive decorative and structural style of codex in terms of binding and manuscript creation, including Islamic craftsman and the production of highly formalized and adorned Qur’ans, and other illustrated manuscripts. (Hobbs http://www.ultimatehistoryproject.com/the-islamic-codex.html)

8 This section of the Jami‘ al-Tawarikh is remarkable for both its actual dimensions and length (fifty-nine pages of thick paper, 435 x 300 millimeters in size), making it one of the largest manuscripts of its kind to survive from the medieval period. (Blair, 1995, 16)

9 While Rashid al-Din maintained that Muslim historiography was the “most authentic of all,” he realized the need to consult other sources (Chinese, Uighur, Arabic, Hebrew, Tibetan, Kashmiri, Frankish, and Mongolian) for accuracy and comprehensiveness, as evident in his own words: “I queried and interrogated the scholars and the notables of the above mentioned peoples and made extracts from the context of [their] ancient books.” (Allsen 2001, 84)

10 Alternatively, other scholars argue that “images are too powerful...instead of establishing contact, images
block communication with God” and “stopping on the object itself” with the image and its creator being revered instead of the divine being and the image being “idolized” instead. (Assmann 2011, 25, 28; Fumaroli 2011, 33)

Research data reveals that at the Sydney AoIE, the average visitor was: non-Muslim, female, from New South Wales, living in the socio-economically affluent Eastern Suburbs or the North Shore area of Sydney, who rated the exhibition “highly” after spending over an hour in the exhibition, and was “aware” of Islam prior to their visit. (AGNSW 2007)

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