

Meditations at The British Museum

Part I - Background & History

By Dr. Rima Chahrouh



The Great Court of the British Museum. Courtesy of the British Museum.

Scene One: The Visit

A woman with long dark hair is walking around a quiet sunlit room. With her is a man in his mid-eighties, dressed in navy blue suit, perhaps her father. Her son, who has very light colored hair that contrasts with his mother's, is sitting in a pushchair. They are walking around objects in glass cases. While she is jotting down notes in a brown notebook her father is pointing his finger to different objects as if he is trying to remember something or assemble a particular memory associated with a particular object. It is an early morning, mid-week day and the museum is not busy. The two are walking slowly sometimes standing still next to the glass cases seemingly caught, as it were, in a web of narratives playing in the back of their heads and prompted by the objects in front of them. Every object is addressing the visitors with various thoughts and feelings, memories and effective knowledge, provoking them to recall personal experiences as well as public events. The woman is remembering her grandfather's copybooks in which he so elegantly filled pages and pages with different drawings of Arabic letters using black ink. She

thinks about something she watched on TV the other day, a documentary exploring and demonstrating the different imaginative ways in which artists treat letters in their artwork. She then rushes to write something down in her brown notebook while her child grows more and more impatient in the pushchair. The woman with dark hair tells her son about the cookies her mother used to make for some public celebration when she was her son's age; he is then given a biscuit. Facing them, across the other end of the glass case, the father is also drifting into different trajectories of thinking and smiling to himself, lost in memories. After a few moments, the old man then walks to the label at the entrance of the room and starts reading it to his grandson.

Every visit to a museum triggers an episode of remembrance and opens up a set of connections and narratives on both personal and public dimensions. Museums can be described as instruments of memory, teasing out threads of feelings, imagination and identity. Here is the British Museum, established in the age of the Enlightenment and its grand optimism; this place

of memory firstly reflects its time. The possibilities of gathering together a diverse range of material for creating worldwide encyclopaedic knowledge spaces led to the existence and expansion of this institution. The British Museum was founded on universalism and has made accessible in different forms the world's memory for visitors; 5,000 per year when it opened in January 1759 and 6 million visitors today. The British Museum as it stands in our current time on Great Russell Street consists of contemporary digital and on line presentations, alongside the physical presentations, of its collections enabling attendees to draw a chain of the human existence across time.

The display rooms of the British Museum as they are arranged today are also a product of chronological change across the institute's different periods of curatorial direction. The series of ordering of the collections within the museum's rooms has witnessed various decisions imposing different narrations of the same story of the human condition and the evolution of civilizations across time. For example, in the Nineteenth Century, the ordering of the collection was focused on directly presenting a cultural connectedness throughout time by demonstrating a historical developmental sequencing of the museum's rooms. The cultural connectedness of the British Museum's collection today, however, is no longer superimposed through the floor plan of the museum but is rather retold in a conceptual manner further reflecting its current time. The representation of the collection today seeks cross-cultural perspectives rather than developmental ones as Mack explains in his book "The Museum of the Mind: Art and Memory in World Cultures", published by the British Museum in 2003. In this sense the British Museum itself is also, like the materials it is holding and displaying, a product of its time. Over the last decades the British Museum has been changing and becoming a space for visiting exhibitions, eating at the cafe, shopping, studying, conserving artefacts as well as participating in discussions and conferences among other activities and events. The influence of the museum has also been spreading beyond its own rooms by the connections made through new narratives between society, the museum's understanding and relationship to its own history and that of other cultures. This change from

an authoritative unified discourse on history to various notions of memory and community is reflected in the curatorial strategies which focus on catering to an active and engaging role for the visitor. Therefore, museums in general today function as sites for the presentation and representation of the making, as well as the remaking, of history. For while museums reflect their current time in displaying and presenting past historical periods, these places are at one and the same time functioning as triggers and social vehicles for shaping and exploring various present ideologies and future remembrances. Like other museums today, the British Museum is an educational, social and imaginative space based on memory and memory as a product. A museum's significance is situated in its position as an incubator for negotiating and dealing with memory; its discussions and associations, its objects and its consumers. In this sense, a museum is an intersection of various discourses on the making and representing of not just of the past but also of the present and the future simultaneously. Similarly, the British Museum's existence today can be said to create a place for practising different narrations of history and for renegotiating these narratives and the various processes of narration. It is in these memory practices, offered by the museum space, that the emergence of new and alternative perspectives on different cultures and histories occurs. These practices, however, are based on curatorial strategies and their applied modes of display and varieties of presentations; on the packaging of memory as a product offered to the consumer. This process is deployed through different communication codes emerging from the museum as a space for memory and further from the display of the museum's collection as a range of curatorial decisions. However, the curatorial exhibiting of memory as a product does not negate or reduce the significance and main role of the visitor as an active participant in the recreation of history and his or her identification with past or present events and other contemporary cultures in different places.

Nonetheless, the classical definition of a museum as a public place for education and for prompting social reform through renegotiating memory is preserved in today's museum, however these roles are now expanded beyond merely displaying memory artefacts.



Idris Khan, 2012, *Seven time at the Hajj* exhibition. Courtesy of Richard Watkins

The curatorial role is redefined today to include new and creative dimensions for the narration experience. In this perspective, the space of the British Museum becomes one for interactions and critical reflections between the visitors' private narratives and the museum's own narratives, springing from the objects and the collection, the institution itself and the visitors. The space of the museum then can be described as a threshold for contact between the personal and private within public and formal dimensions. The museum is now described as an instrument of, and as a place for, learning and exercising the practical as well as mental skills for community reform. Thus, it has become the curatorial role to ensure and make accessible flexible structures of memory spaces in order to constitute and provide effective cultural discourses. The curatorial role pushes the museum space beyond the authentic object as the window to the past. The multi-media, theatrical and technological strategies museum curators are deploying today for their

presentation decisions facilitate immediate forms of engagement with these pasts or contemporary cultures of different places; further developing an imaginative experience for visitors. The emotional responses of visitors to these narratives enhance experiential learning, where the private individual stories transform into social investments eventually feeding into the creation of new memories and knowledge. In this logic, curators are responsible for thinking critically about the various social and humanitarian issues linked to the objects on display. Thus, the curatorial role goes beyond finding and preserving objects provoking memory and knowledge production, and moves towards engaging these objects in a constructive dialogue with visitors in the context of explanations. Such processes can be in different form such as exhibitions, educational programs and publications.

In the field of art, the status of the museum has also changed from a sacred space of awe into one of

discussion and reflection. The concepts of categorizing, representing and defining works, has transformed into interdisciplinary planes of continuous discussion and change. As if in a constant state of re-birth, the space of the British Museum is continuously tottering between the past's dusty history, as it were, and the outset of fresh futures. This is largely due to the curatorial practices and their re-accommodation of new modes of selecting, as well as displaying, pieces and contexts. Moving from the ruins of objects belonging to a lost past and into the spaces of potentialities, of re-narrating and re-contextualizing the shared meaning of museum objects, curators are now investing in active cultural debates. Museums are often described by researchers and various professionals as places for contemplating the meaning of humanity. Accordingly, the museum space can be said to be one that repositions not just past histories, but also present ideologies upon a future, which are open for re-negotiating and made further accessible to public engagement through the creation of these cultural debates.

Scene Two: The Display

At eleven o'clock, a tall blond man in his early 30s leads me into a room full of shelves. Each shelf is stacked with books made of marble. We speak about multiculturalism, the Middle East and different systems of beliefs. I decidedly dismiss his terming of the area where I originate from as the Middle East; this is unworthy of my consideration at the current moment. We walk side-by-side towards a huge iron gate. There are doors on the left side of the hallway but only paintings on the right side. My pressing questions regarding the room titled "The Dream Space" in the museum seemed threatening to the tall, blond man. His face turned with unease, avoiding the slightly tilted direction of my face; as if he were preserving precious information and thus must maintain character in protection of its secrecy. He rejected the generation of further dialogue and pulled out a golden mask that he used to cover his face. I am certain that the mask on his face now belongs to a distant Arabian ancient civilization. My knowledge of this mask formed a sub-rational connection with the blond man. His previous overall image was completely transformed by the mask. He had become as if situated

in a distant inner life of me; perhaps belonging to the same long ancestral chain or involved in an even more direct relationship with me and my origins. At that moment, the museum space became very quiet and the blond man and I continued to walk side-by-side towards the iron gate.

According to Sheldon Annis (1986), museum travellers move in three overlapping symbolic spheres: the cognitive, the social and the imaginative, which he called the 'dream space'. It is in the weaving together of these three symbolic museum spaces that the visitor creates and associates meaning. The significance of the last space, the 'dream space', is its focus on creating subversive paths in the trajectory of making new knowledge. Playing on refreshing our memories and energising our imaginations; this sphere, interacting with the first two symbolic spheres: the cognitive and the social, constructs vital relations in the experiences of visiting museums. This is based on imaginations, emotions and senses. Here, art's role is forwarded to the core of a museum's significance. Hence, in terms of representation as a form of making meaning and creating knowledge, the 'dream space' is the space where knowledge is formed in a different way than the intended aim. It is here that pre-received knowledge is manipulated and re-shaped; subverted. Today, and within the conceptual boundaries of the area referred to as the Middle East region, knowledge is generally received in ready-made moulds. These moulds are largely inflicted through the media focusing on the September 11 events and the violent episodes that followed. In this vein, the role of the museum as a 'dream space' is one aiming to re-narrate the story of the present Middle East. It is crucial here to consider the role of the 'dream space' as a process that expands and spreads out of and after the moments spent during a museum visit. The stories of the present operate in the museum through further associations, private and public recall, which tumble across a future series of memories. In this sense, the curator's role comes back to the light in its power to inflate emotions through the finding and displaying of inspiring art from the Middle East region.

When political relations fail, as Venetia Porter, the curator responsible for the collection of Islamic art, in particular of the Arab World and Turkey at the British



Nicene Kossentini, *Yasmina*, 2011, digital print on archival paper, 100x100cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Museum, explains, it is then the role of cultural relations to act. Venetia Porter is also responsible for developing the collection of the modern and contemporary art of the Middle East. At the British Museum, this particular curator works with a range of museum professionals, educators and researchers across a wide range of areas to re-narrate the complex narratives of the present Middle East. Using art as the tool for enhancing and emphasizing the ‘dream space’ of the museum, Porter has curated several exhibitions devoted to the present and past Middle East, such as: “Word into Art : Artists of the Modern Middle East” in London (2006) and Dubai (2008) and “Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam” (2012). Furthermore, her publications include *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (British Museum Research papers 2011), (Ed.) *Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam* and *The Art of Hajj* (2012), and she is working on a book based on the British Museum’s collection of Middle Eastern art.

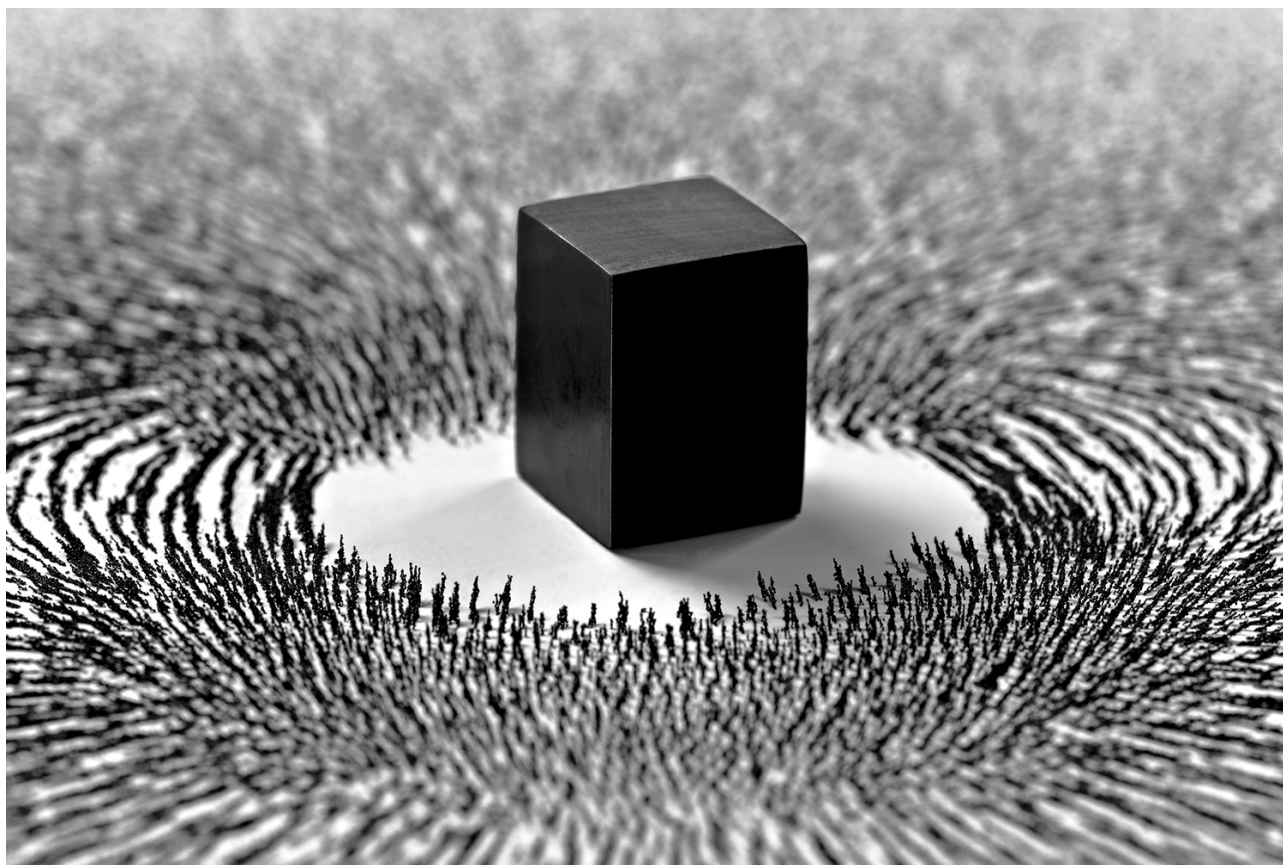
Venetia Porter’s effort is targeted at spreading awareness and inspiration on the Middle East and its contemporary art. Expanding from the actual space of the museum, her work, including publications, interviews and various collaborations and engagements in different projects, is ultimately contributing to the set of societal

concerns not just related to the Middle East region but also to the life of the British general public. For, by provoking the present widespread representations of the Middle East region, the work of this curator feeds into social reform, generating further dialogue and critical discussions beyond the museum’s walls. While the relatively recent notion of what is often called “Islamophobia” looped violence and more violence, largely within the American and European worlds and expanding worldwide, the exhibition “Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam” displayed a ‘dream space’ in Sheldon Annis’ terminology. Thus, the exhibition inspired and influenced new recreated knowledge and debating against the pre-received knowledge of Islamophobia. There is ever so much pleasure in ideas that are ‘handmade’, that is to say, ideas that are illuminated by an art work and gathered from the various affective components of a museum’s visit: imagination, emotions and senses, as this exhibition did.

In her recent talk at a conference on Middle Eastern Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (2013), Venetia Porter highlighted several artists whose works evoked mystical and religious rituals, including the artists Sadegh Tirafkan and Nicene Kossentini. The paper, under the title, “Histories of the Present: The Changing Worlds of Middle Eastern Artists” presented an overview on the interrelationships at work in the present Middle Eastern art scene; art presentation and art market. The curator expressed art as a tool for untangling the complex layers of challenges facing Middle Eastern artists today. But, perhaps art, it can also be argued, is an instrument for tangling knowledge and weaving associations on the path to re-narrating histories or further reinventing them. While the artists in Porter’s curated exhibitions are usually ones chosen consciously according to a decision aimed at triggering rich cultural debates, these artists nonetheless prove to be worthy of competing and excelling within the larger international art scene.

Scene Three: The Becoming

An artist is standing in the spotlight. Around him or her are approximately twenty million challenges looking straight into the artist’s eyes. On their left and right-hand sides are a few dozen viewers with their eyes focused



Ahmed Mater, *Magnetism 1*, 2012, Different sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

on the artworks; as if all these spectators have become immersed inside the artworks, almost transforming to become parts of it. The huge space of the museum where his or her work is exhibited seems to be closing in with all the daunting complexities of being an artist in general, and a Middle Eastern one specifically, while the levels of oxygen are silently dropping. The landscape is complex and saturated with multiple social commentaries. The artist, still in the spotlight, is melting slowly and quietly as though with the aid of the heat from the bright source of light; the boundaries dividing his or her human body and that body of the directed object of light blur to become one. The dazzling spotlights are spreading all over the space; viewers are still engaged in the artistic experience while the artist on the other hand is now racing through the twenty million challenges only to spread wide the eyelids of each and every viewer and replace their eyeballs with spot lights. The artistic scene experienced in the museum space now is one where

everyone has become 'learned' in this way. Today, artists of the Middle East face the various political challenges that firstly and simply restrict their basic right as artists to exhibit their created works. With all the political flux that the region has recently witnessed; the bloodshed and the so-called revolutions, works of art originating from this area transform into artefacts for negotiating and learning about the cultural aspects of the region. Even at the height of the loud political affairs, there has been a devastating failure to prove effective challenges to the widespread negative representations of this area of the world; the process of knowledge formation regarding this region is largely influenced by these political events which produce further negativity, to say the least. Here, cultural affairs hold a significant role in developing and promoting an otherwise hidden cultural side belonging to an identity of the Middle East region. Therefore, it is productive to look more closely at the cultural role of the British Museum in promoting a



British Museum at night. Courtesy of the British Museum.

positive and constructive presentation of the Middle Eastern region. While this museum is ultimately British it has nevertheless been throughout its time as an institution which simply collected and displayed global material culture and moved towards contributing narratives on open cultural relationships between politically struggling entities. For the British Museum is also part of the World Collections programme formed in 2008. This programme, among other cultural programmes, aims to develop new relationships between worldwide institutions and also to maintain professional development of the organisations involved. Such programmes enable a wide range of skill sharing, providing funding for training and research as well as the loan of exhibitions and different collections. All this feeds into a wider sphere of partnerships combining financial and diplomatic as well as different perspectives on the whole process of display in the museum. This happens through offering a new outsider's view on the collections and exhibitions among other aspects of the museum in focus. The importance of having a new pair

of fresh eyes contributing to the processes involved in the presentation of different cultures provides a space for criticism and for questioning the 'professionalities' of these display procedures. Furthermore, this enhances the quality of the museum experience and also relates to ongoing national and international, cultural and political debates. The latter is reflected in comparisons between different backgrounds and specialities, overlapping them and creating productive associations. These cultural partnerships between different institutions across the Middle East and the British Museum are often prompted by active curators such as Venetia Porter working with organisations and influential people, such as Edge of Arabia and Saeb Eigner, as well as different Museums in the Arab region among others. Through such activities, a relatively large number of Middle Eastern artists are now presented in a range of exhibitions at the British Museum. These include contemporary as well as modern artists. The works of these artists in turn produce a reference for revisiting intellectual discourses related to the art, cultures,

identities and representations of the Middle East. The scenarios of partnerships and curatorial developments produce artefacts which are displayed to retain powerful and sophisticated Middle Eastern viewpoints evoking a rich heritage able to stand solid amid the different political uncertainties of this region. All these cultural arrangements, discourses and critical reflections relate to understanding and spreading further public awareness on the present Middle East. By positioning Middle Eastern artists at the forefront within the already ongoing discourses of representation, the British Museum is making accessible to a wide multicultural public in the heart of London the voices of this region of the world. Furthermore, these curatorial processes related to the contemporary and modern art of the Middle East are at one and the same time making accessible the works of a large number of otherwise unheard of artists. For example, the British Museum is the first non-Middle Eastern institute to acquire and present the works of the Saudi Arabian artist Ahmed Mater, among other artists from the region. Mater's work is significant in its contemporary representations of the collective histories and ideologies of his country, tracing the transformations of its space as well as its traditions. The acquisition of high profile museums of artworks from the Middle East, induced the profiles and prices of these artists and their works. The significant role of museums in accelerating the prices of artworks belonging to this region of the world have generated a wave of demand on the art pieces and the names signing them; whether in art fairs, biennales, galleries and famous collections. This in turn has increased the prices of these Middle Eastern artists and their works, developing further demand for Middle Eastern art in general. Consequently, new galleries, spaces, schools and other institutes have become more and more interested in art from this region. This is a result of the high prices of art works now competing in the international market, as well as a cause of the 'aura' created through the high prices of these artworks, which is producing in-turn various assumptions that these pieces are of significant value beyond their economic one.

Museums today are crucially significant as cultural instruments involved in discourses on representations and knowledge productions. Museums re-narrate the

representations of distant pasts as well as the presents of different places. The cultural processes museums are involved in constitute continuous fashioning and reformulation of public cultural meanings through an extension of curatorial modes and practices as well as various research. Within this context of the museum as an active space, immersed in critical reflections and cultural debates on presentations, art in general plays important core roles in inspiring subversive meanings prompted by imagination, emotions and the senses. Therefore, the Middle East art scene, along with the British Museum, are productive examples of cultural relationships acting effectively where political relationships fail. Art from the Middle East region today becomes an apparatus for representing different perspectives beyond the widespread notions which define the region referred to as the Middle East in reference to Islamophobia and other political biases. By means of 'narrativization' and performativity, the curatorial role of the British Museum, in partnership with a range of institutions and cultural agents, managed to present a counter viewpoint of the cultures and identities of the Middle East. Throughout the process, the British Museum made accessible a large number of Middle Eastern artists to the world-wide public and further revived the art scene of that region.

About the writer

Rima Chahrouh is a Lebanese artist and researcher based in London. She is currently a visiting lecturer and a postdoctoral research fellow at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, UK. Her practice-based Ph.D. thesis is on the 'Arab Muslim' doll as a site for cultural contestation in contemporary Lebanon. Rima's work focuses the relationship between art and superstition, aiming to confuse assumed cultural boundaries and provoke pre-received knowledge through art interventions. Her interdisciplinary practice ranges from creating cultural objects, sound sculptures and interactive installations to performance art as well as collaborating with different artists and academics from various disciplines. She has exhibited and performed in different places including Berlin, London, New York, Dubai, Beirut and Paris. www.rimachahrouh.com

Part II in our next volume to discuss the permanent collection of the Middle Eastern Department as well as the curatorial program.