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Social Practices in Museums:
Near and Middle Eastern Historical Dimensions

1   Focus

A modern museum evokes a certain imaginary, with a history going back to private and less systematic collections, such as cabinets of curiosities. Stimulated by European Enlightenment ideas, the modern museum developed into a semi-public institution regulated by modern nation states in the 19th century. Unlike cabinets of curiosities, modern museums exhibit objects in order to convey certain ideas and systems of knowledge.[1] To contribute to the general debate on what makes a museum, this paper will focus on the history of Near and Middle Eastern institutions, considering socio-material practices that are normally thought to characterise modern museums. The paper is inspired by recent studies that have successfully traced certain markers of *modernity*, such as individuality, secularity, or atheism, to pre-modern times and non-European regions.[2]

This paper considers socio-material practices in Near and Middle Eastern institutions through the lens of two cultural studies approaches pertaining to *performance* and *social practices* respectively. These approaches also provide us with some methodological tools, allowing us to better understand patterns within the complex life of both contemporary museums and historical institutions in the Near and Middle East. As part of the material turn, contemporary discussions of both approaches regard objects as being interrelated with human actions.

2   Theory

German discourse about *performance* has been shaped for about 20 years by theatre studies scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte. Referring to Fischer-Lichte generally means one is working on social activities that can be perceived as being 'staged'.[3]

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1   Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 90–99.

2   E.g. Dorothea Weltecke, *"Der Narr spricht: Es ist kein Gott"; Atheismus, Unglauben und Glaubenszweifel vom 12. Jahrhundert bis zur Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2010).

3   Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Center, 1956).

In her recent work, *Performativität. Eine Einführung* (2012), Fischer-Lichte discusses museums and religions in two chapters, "Bildakte – Blickakte" and "Die Macht der Dinge".[4] Inspired by contemporary material culture studies, Fischer-Lichte's reflections connect the fields of museums, cultural history, and the history of religions, and thus provide instruments for our own analysis.

Her chapter "Die Macht der Dinge" deals with optional functions of objects in very different situations. Fischer-Lichte distinguishes several types of things, each connected with a way of using and understanding them: *holy things* such as relics, which are treated ritually; pragmatically used *things of everyday life*, which force their owners to learn how to use them; *prestigious things*, which are meant for staging the self, and *waste*, a thing that is no longer valued. Finally, she mentions *things* that are taken out of former social dynamics and, unlike waste, *placed in museums*.[5]

While her concept of religion does seem to be comparatively narrow and focussed on very special examples like orthodox Christianity and indigenous cultures, Fischer-Lichte plausibly points to ways of categorising objects, that could be applied to the historical materials we will explore below. She identifies a) material objects being used in various ways outside a collection, either in religious or in everyday contexts (in contemporary approaches of the study of religions, these are not necessarily distinguished), as well as b) the process of collecting: prestigious or meaningful things are kept, and prevented from naturally ending up as waste. They then become part of collections that might c) be institutionalised. In an institution, the objects are systematically made accessible to a public. In a modern museum this is planned and directed by the responsible curators.

Her chapter "Bildakte – Blickakte" focusses on visual processes. Like John Austin's *speech act*, Fischer-Lichte describes not *the* meaning of certain, in this case visible, signs and symbols, but dynamic interactions with the visible as one factor in social processes.[6] Her examples from religious fields are again quite traditional, such as kissing or gazing at icons, and reacting to their transformative power. But her general idea is striking, as her aim is to demonstrate that humans' reactions to objects that they see follow learned codes of behaviour. Fischer-Lichte provides the example of pieces 'staged' in art museums, such as that in Houston, Texas, where Mark Rothko's 14 monochrome paintings, being hung in a way that is reminiscent

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4   Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Performativität: Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2012), 147–78.
5   Cf. Fischer-Lichte, *Performativität*, 161–78.
6   Cf. Ibid., 147, 149.

of Christian spaces, regularly cause visitors to contemplate.[7] This aspect can be added to the classification above: d) visitors react to or interact with the special displays and arrangements of objects they perceive in a museum or another institution. Section 3 will explore this classification from a) to d).

German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz provides another perspective. He understands established activities of social groups as *social practices* combining communication, body movement, handling of objects and a worldview. A crucial term for Reckwitz is *routine*: "A practice is thus a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood."[8] In a museum, we might think of cultural practices that are necessary behind the scenes, from hygiene to heating, styles and methods of clearing up, constructing gender, etc. This perspective sheds new light on everyday life as well as on the less explicit habitual characteristics of social practices.

3   History

The starting point for our research is the Greek *museion* in Hellenistic Alexandria: scholars are not able to clearly reconstruct this institution, but it seems to have been a place of higher learning and academic knowledge, situated in a complex of buildings connected to the famous Library of Alexandria, and a temple named after the Muses, the Greek goddesses responsible for the arts.[9] During the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, the name of this institution was applied to European collections and, in colonial times, it spread around the world.

Given that it is commonly claimed that antiquity is the root of European culture, it might be interesting to see the extent to which this ancient *museion* survived and developed in the Islamic world. It is certainly the case that ancient philosophy, natural sciences, and other cultural practices from the Greeks and Romans did become part of 'Islamic'[10] cultures.

To search for traces of the *museion* complex in Islamic history, we need to examine mosques and their repositories. Like ancient temples, synagogues, churches,

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7   Cf. Ibid., 151–53.

8   Andreas Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 2 (2002): 250.

9   Klaus Meister, *Der Hellenismus: Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2016), 13–20 and Edward J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

10   This term is not meant in a narrow theological sense, but refers to complex cultures in regions ruled by Muslim dynasties.

or temples in Asia,[11] mosques stored and preserved a wide range of things from relics, ritual devices, and scripts, to donated precious objects, as a religious site was recognised as a safe place. Reasons for donating to mosques varied from the social prestige gained from one's donated items being used on public occasions, to the private desire to donate precious items to a reliable institution. Personal belief might have been involved when donations entailed the notion of a 'sacrifice', but belief was not necessarily a dominant motivation when objects were handed over to a mosque or its personnel preserved these things.

In his 19th-century account of visiting the chamber containing Muhammad's grave in the prophet's mosque in Medina, British traveller Sir Richard Burton sees evidence of something that was a common practice at the time:

> [The gate] admits, into the dark narrow passage above alluded to, the officers who have charge of the treasures there deposited, and the eunuchs who sweep the floor, light the lamps and carry away the presents sometimes thrown in here by devotees.[12]

Historically, devotees also threw presents into the Kaʿba in Mecca – once a treasury – and other important sites. I myself observed similar practices at a shrine in Baalbek, Lebanon: through the metal fence protecting the grave of as-Sayyida al-Khawla, a legendary woman from the prophet's family, visitors threw money and prayer beads. French author Yann Richard writes about the Astan-e qods in Mashhad, a major pilgrimage site with the grave of Imam Reza (d. 818). He notes that there is a yearly procedure to close and clean the Imam Reza shrine and collect the objects left by pilgrims, such as money and jewellery.[13] In Reckwitz's sense, the employees cleaning up and collecting the items donated by pilgrims can be seen as an example of social practice behind the scenes, which Reckwitz terms a "routine".

I would distinguish spontaneous donations, in popular religion often connected with a vow, from the shariatic form of a documented *waqf*, an endowment which must legally be of public interest. In Egypt, over centuries, believers dedicated

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11 Yui Suzuki, "Temple as Museum, Buddha as Art: Hōriyūji's Kudara Kannon and its Great Treasure Repository," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 52 (2007): 128–40.

12 Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1874), Vol. 2, 29–30.

13 Cf. Yann Richard, *Der verborgene Imam: Die Geschichte des Schiismus in Iran* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1983), 79; Suzuki, "Temple", 131 mentions that people visited Japanese temples for aesthetic reasons on *mushiboshi*, the annual day when the temple repository was opened for cleaning.

lamps, oil, and prayer rugs to the al-Azhar and other mosques to support religious life. Those endowments are officially documented in archives.

For centuries, the most common type of material objects donated in the form of a *waqf* were precious handwritten volumes, *suhuf*, of the Qur'an. While the Qur'an is recited in prayers or sermons, religious books have long been and continue to be given to mosques for believers there to read. Historically, such endowments also provided infrastructure for improving literacy. From Cairo, we have several historical accounts, such as:

> Al-Musabbahi wrote: In the year 403 [1012/3 AD] the number of 1298 volumes [*suhuf*] had been transported from the palace [with the ruling calif al-Hakim as donor] down towards the Old Mosque [= mosque of 'Amr]. The Qur'ans' and their chest's inscriptions had been fully made of gold, and the people had the opportunity to read the volumes.[14]

The examples given above indicate a whole range of different activities, some of which fall within Fischer-Lichte's classifications a) and b): 'religious' or other objects had a certain cultural worth for their users, and were handed over to institutions for a variety of reasons. The reasons might be religious, such as to gain merit, or to communicate with god, but in the case of the large donation by calif al-Hakim, public representation and politics also played a role.

For centuries, monasteries of different religions, from Christianity to Buddhism, were places of higher learning and of collections of manuscripts. Monasteries and temples were centres of infrastructure and places of collective memory. Parallels to these complex aspects of the *museion* in Alexandria can also be found in Islamic cultures. For example, mosque libraries resulted from the ongoing donations of Qur'ans and other religious books. Here we find more aspects of Fischer-Lichte's classification: a) things from outside an institution were b) handed over, and c) made accessible to the public.

We have several indications that book donations to larger mosques in major cities during medieval times included other religious and non-religious books.[15] They were all part of *awqaf*, endowments, given by wealthy persons and scholars. The books covered a wide range of topics, including medicine. The library attached to the Shiite shrine in Najaf, Iraq was said to have counted 400,000 volumes, others

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14 A Fatimid historian quoted in al-Maqrizi (14/15th century), translated from Bärbel Köhler, *Die Wissenschaft unter den ägyptischen Fatimiden*, Arabistische Texte und Studien 6 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1994), 22. See also Mohamed Makki Sibai, *Mosque Libraries: An Historical Study* (London/New York: Mansell, 1987), 52.

15 All data below regarding historical libraries connected to mosques, their organisation and librarians: Sibai, *Mosque Libraries*, 87–103, 108–15.

had several thousand texts. That made an inventory necessary, and profession-als were needed to catalogue the books. Scriptures were classified according to different disciplines, and interested parties could access the books in separate rooms for reading and copying. Providing a room for copying was ambitious, as it entailed the provision of a free supply of parchment or paper, ink, light and super-vision – all costly factors. For long-term preservation, large mosques employed both librarians and individuals who could copy and repair, translate and illustrate manuscripts. Larger libraries were often named after their founder, underlining their distinct status within urban social dynamics.

The classified and catalogued objects represented systems of knowledge and were arranged in special storage or display furniture. In smaller mosques, these were simply shelves somewhere in the prayer area, as is still the case today. Sometimes the books' relevance and their relation to religious knowledge was reflected by the cabinets being positioned close to a *mihrab*, a prayer niche. This was the case in the 15th-century Egyptian mosque of Sultan Hasan[16]. In other in-stances, the donated books were kept close to a *maqsura*, the prestigious place reserved for a local ruler near the *qibla* wall facing Mecca.

Larger institutions had separate storage areas with shelves, chests or cabinets, sometimes with glass doors, to store the books. A systematic order was used to aid people's search for a particular book, with information about the books' con-tent provided close to where they were stored. This was not unlike the common modern practice of placing information alongside a museum object.

Larger Friday mosques (*gawami^c*) were and remain very complex institutions with many purposes. Before the 11th century, and the establishment of the institution of the *madrasa* – an Islamic parallel to the European university – larger mosques were places of higher learning. As such, their libraries were likely frequented by students, scholars and interested parties for centuries. Before universities were established in Europe, European institutions of academic learning were mainly exclusive spaces within monasteries. Mosque libraries, by contrast, were open to the urban public. This setting and social embeddedness could be considered a historical trace of the *museion* and library in Alexandria. Well before public muse-ums opened in Europe, mosque libraries were already providing access to knowl-

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16 Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *The Book in Mamluk Egypt and Syria (1250–1517): Scribes, Libraries and Market* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 53 with illustration of this and other book cabinets, sometimes called *khalwa*, 'hidden chamber', 'place of protection'. These cabinets could be compared to the Torah shrines or the *geniza* (treasury) in synagogues. However, unlike the Torah shrine and *geniza*, the *khalwa* is not regarded as a 'sacred' sphere.

edge to a wide audience of interested and somewhat educated individuals, with the funding and administration that such a system would have entailed.

Islamic founders did more than supply collections to mosques. Two competing dynasties, the Abbasids in Bagdad (8[th] to 12[th] century) and the Fatimids in Cairo (10[th] to 12[th] century), also established academic institutions as meeting points for scholars from many disciplines. Like the libraries described above, these institutes were rulers' foundations (*awqaf*) regulated by shari[c]a law. The *dar al-[c]ilm*, 'house of knowledge', in Cairo, was supported by calif al-Hakim (d. 1021), who rented buildings for it in the southern part of the city. The institution had, besides its own administration and servants, a number of employees, such as librarians, professional copyists, etc. It housed thousands of volumes, which were made accessible via catalogues to interested parties who came to the reading rooms to read and copy texts on subjects including Islamic knowledge, history, philosophy, natural sciences, and literature.[17]

Based on former accounts, the historian al-Maqrizi (14th/15th century) described this institution as being frequented by various groups. Key individuals were part of certain 'programmes' that were quite common at courts of that time: scholars discussed interesting topics from their fields of knowledge, probably also with a competing element of entertaining the ruler and his entourage. Just as today's libraries often serve as multipurpose museums, these institutes were part of the intellectual life of the city.[18]

One major element associated with museums, namely the display of objects as the focus of reflections on cultural history, has yet to be identified. For this, we have to turn to different repositories: court collections and treasuries.[19] Alexander and Alexander regard European court collections and treasuries as the link between the *museion* in Alexandria and private collections in Renaissance times. One might think of the Roman emperor Hadrian's villa, or of emperor Nero, a lover of art and architecture.[20] The upper class even cultivated representations of deities as art, independent from temples and religious perspectives. They collect-

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17   Köhler, *Wissenschaft,* 56–64; Sibai, *Mosque Libraries*, 4 with an early example from 10th-century Iran.

18   Al-Maqrizi quoted in Köhler, *Wissenschaft*, 60–61.

19   Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections*, 90–98 considers the parallels between 'temples' and courts, regarding collections.

20   Cf. Edward Porter Alexander and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Lanham et al.: Altamira Press/Roman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 4–9.

ed vases or statues with various meanings and displayed them in special interiors of palaces and gardens.

This tradition was carried on in regions dominated by Islamic rulers. In Egypt, Ibn Tulun (d. 884) and his son Khumarawaih (9th century) are known for their impressive architecture following Roman models: a hippodrome said to have been decorated with golden lions, a zoo, a private botanical garden with fountains and a menagerie of birds, and even a golden pavilion with statues of beautiful women, depicting singers and slaves.[21] While this was probably not in line with theological discourse, the upper class did create such places.

Additionally, in the Near and Middle East, as in other parts of the world, collecting and exchanging precious objects with diplomatic contacts was a matter of culture and manners. Before modern economic systems, the wealth of a dynasty was reflected in their belongings. If we continue to follow the traces of the *museion* in Egypt, it was the Fatimids who were known for their excessive treasuries. Indeed, there are eyewitness accounts of their material culture. The archbishop William of Tyre (d. 1186) visited the Fatimid palace on a diplomatic mission, and was impressed by the architecture and decorations. He passed a menagerie of exotic birds and animals, and, in the inner palace, finally reached the ruler residing inside a rich interior.[22]

Other travelogues report impressive parades, processions and public feasts, and we know of the state-run manufacture of various luxury goods. After the end of the Fatimid dynasty, at the end of the 12th century, the Ayyubids opened and partially sold the contents of the Fatimids' chambers, and historians have written long lists of items. Many luxury objects made of gold, crystal, silver and ivory, glass and ceramics, or detailed woodcarvings and fine textiles survive from Fatimid times. Beyond the political implications of impressing others with these objects, we can imagine that Fatimid society or at least the court and upper class must have admired and loved precious objects to a certain degree.[23]

Returning to our guiding ideas and Fischer-Lichte, we find a) luxury and 'exotic' precious objects becoming b) part of collections, which were c) displayed and shared mainly with an elite, as well as their servants who again must have been professionals in the background, with knowledge of how to keep and handle crys-

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21   Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: An Introduction* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004), 5.

22   Wilfried Seipel, ed., *Schätze der Kalifen: Islamische Kunst zur Fatimidenzeit* (Wien: Skira, 1998), 225.

23   Seipel, *Schätze.*

tal jars or silver plates. This last aspect reminds us of Reckwitz's concept of social practices characterised as routines.

Fischer-Lichte's aspect c) deserves closer attention, as it is remarkable that we can find special furniture and elements of interior design with the function of 'staging' objects. Miniature paintings from about 1500 onwards depict the display of precious vases and similar items in niches in the wall as a common element of wealthy households. Such niches are regularly an element of illustrations of palace life. Lots of pictorial examples exist, from Safavid Iran, Mughal India, and the Ottoman empire.[24] The famous wall paintings in the Chehel Sotoun palace in Isfahan from the 17th century depict festivities at the court including such niches containing luxury dishes.[25]

From medieval times onwards, the elite collected porcelain from China. According to art historian Robert Irwin, the term 'china' was also attributed to other items, such as glass vases. Irwin explains that the Fatimids had close economic links with Asia, and that the list of contents of their treasuries included porcelain from China. The Iranian scholar ath-Thaᶜalibi (d. 1038) wrote the following about Arab collectors:

> The Arabs used to call every delicately or curiously made vessel and suchlike, whatever its real origin, 'Chinese', because finely made things are a speciality of [China]. The designation 'china' has remained in use to this day for the celebrated type of dishes.[26]

It is clear that at least the – not only Arab – owners and collectors of porcelain and exquisite tableware appreciated the objects for their style, and enthusiasts knew special codes of aesthetics.

It is not surprising that special furniture was developed to present these pieces. Art historian Ernst Kühnel describes carved wooden niches as a typical way of displaying precious objects, a type of interior that survives in Safavid palaces and historical buildings in Iran.[27] This form can also be found in architecture in other

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24 Elke Niewöhner, *Der Sultan im Bade: Bilder und Objekte höfischen Lebens im Islam* (Hannover: Kestner Museum Hannover, 1994), 70–71, 193, illustr. XVIII from an album depicting Shah Jahan, 17th century, or 78–79, 194, illustr. XIX a Mughal princess, 18th century. Niches and vases can be seen in the background.

25 Gholam Hossein Arab, *Isfahan* (Teheran: Farhangsara Yassavoli, 1996), 25.

26 Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art* (London: Laurence King Irwin, 1997), 233 referring to *ath-Thaᶜalibi, al-Lata'if al-maᶜarif*. See also Tim Stanley, "Patterns of Exchange in the Decorative Arts between China and South-West Asia," in *Aspects of the Maritime Silk Road: From the Persian Gulf to the East China Sea*, ed. Ralph Kauz (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 107–15.

27 Cf. Ernst Kühnel, *Die Kunst des Islam* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1962), 158 and Arab, *Isfahan*, 31 with Hasth Behesht Palace and 143 House of the Homa'i family.

regions, such as in a 17th-century Christian house in Aleppo under Ottoman influence, or in the Topkapı Serai, the residence of the Ottoman sultan himself.[28] For Egypt, this traditional form of interior design was documented by British scholar Edward William Lane, who lived and worked in Cairo in the middle of the 19th century. In his *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, an early ethnographic account of everyday life, including the way people designed and used their houses, he writes:

> There is, besides, in this and some other apartments, a narrow shelf of wood, extending along two or each of the three walls which bound the leewán, about seven feet or more from the floor, just above the cupboards; but interrupted in some parts, at least in those parts where the windows are placed: upon this are arranged several vessels of china, not so much for general use as for ornament.[29]

The photograph shows such niches on the upper parts of walls in the *chini khane* within a Safavid-era complex in Ardabil, Iran.[30] The octagonal space, with its high ceiling and walls surrounded by shelves, likely hosted the court's impressive collection. It evokes a very special 'aura', was used for political representation, and was located quite close to the building's more 'religious' functions, with the grave of the ancestor of this Iranian dynasty (1501/02–1722), Sheikh Safi ad-Din Ishaq Ardabili (1252–1334), who was a Sufi. This building again exemplifies the difficulty of distinguishing between sacred and profane spheres, as was the case with the *museion*. While the early Savavids were Sufists, and the origin of the complex of buildings in Ardabil is a *khanegah*, a place for gatherings of mystics, a mundane dynasty evolved and the building complex, and especially the *chini khane,* became a place of courtly and political representation. Today, the whole site is a public museum and is registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List, but it remains a location for religious practices such as pilgrimage to the Sufi's grave,

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28 Dominique Clévenot and Gérard Degeorge, *Das Ornament in der Baukunst des Islam* (München: Hirmer, 2000), 111, illustr. 159; Julia Gonella, *Ein christlich-orientalisches Wohnhaus des 17. Jahrhunderts aus Aleppo (Syrien): Das "Aleppo-Zimmer" im Museum für Islamische Kunst* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1996), 34, illustr. 31; Philippa Vaughan, "Architektur (Moghuln)," in *Islam – Kunst und Architektur,* ed. Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius (Potsdam: H.F.Ullmann 2015), 465 with a Mughal example and Almut von Gladiß, "Architektur (Osmanisch)," in Hattstein and Delius, *Islam – Kunst und Architektur*, 564 with the Sultan's palace in Istanbul.

29 Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians: Written in Egypt during the Years 1833, –34, and –35* (London: John Murray, 1860), 18 and illustrations 14, 17.

30 Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, *Sheikh Safi Al-Din Khanegah and Shrine Ensemble in Ardabil* (Teheran, 2009), 36 with floor plan, https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1345.pdf.
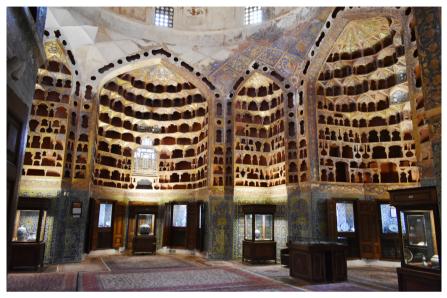
Figure 1: Exhibition in the Sheikh Safi ad-Din complex, Ardabil, 2019. Photo: Leila Tavangar.

and is a place of representation of national identity with the exhibition inside the *chini khane*.

The photograph gives us the chance to reflect on the development of 'staging' the objects. Obviously, the social frame and practices of display changed. The *chini khane* was once a closed space for selected guests at the Safavid court. This allowed for open shelves, but the items in the niches were still protected, above the social gatherings taking place on the ground. Given that there are miniature paintings – as mentioned – that depict similar designs, we can imagine a ruler hosting a reception for his entourage in this space. In such a situation, the treasury and chinaware served to confirm the ruler's power. The *chini khane* later became a semi-public space, making it necessary to lock the showcases and use glass vitrines. Interestingly, the same collection of chinaware is still displayed in Ardabil; it has been moved to the ground level and receives a lot of attention today.

This already refers to the final aspect mentioned above, d) a codified reaction to exposed and 'staged' items of collections. In addition to the representative spaces that were part of court life, there were similar spaces for ambling and observing carefully arranged material items. Medieval Arabic travelogues mention such spaces. For example, Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217) visited many mosques in different

countries on his *hajj*, and described in detail the marble wall decorations and precious lamps in gold and silver, impressive mosaic displays and artful textiles. His style reveals that his readers were interested in such information more from a perspective of connoisseurs of art and architecture than from a religious perspective. He even describes people admiring the architectural and material details of the courtyard around the Kaᶜba in Mecca.[31]

4   Conclusion

In conclusion, there is evidence of distinct types of performative activities in pre-modern Islamic collections. In line with Fischer-Lichte's system, a) meaningful things with religious and non-religious uses were b) collected by milieus that were not exclusively or primarily interested in the religious connotations of the artefacts, but also in the systems of knowledge they represented. In addition, c) institutionalised collections were open to the public to spread information. This was more commonly done through books, whereas objects like tableware were long part of exclusive displays. Finally, d) a reflective attitude towards material culture was quite common among art lovers, collectors and travellers.

Referring to Reckwitz and *routine*, one can identify parallels between the cultures, in terms of bodily practices, sensation, meaning, connected codes of behaviour and even emotions. Actors in modern museums and those in historical collections in the Near and Middle East seem to practise similar routines, such as professional inventory, preservation, and the re-arrangement of things in special furniture, as well as maintaining a 'secular' perspective on objects that represent knowledge or are perceived as pieces of art.

Many aspects of 'museums', which are frequently regarded as modern, secular, and European, also existed in historical Islamic regions. This may be because both cultures developed from common roots in antiquity, which lived on in part in Islamic regions and were rediscovered in modern Europe. As with the *museion*, the links and divisions between 'religion' and 'non-religion' in historical institutions in Islamic regions were not always immediately evident.

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31 Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, "*Maqām Ibrāhīm* and the Sacred Landscape of Mecca According to Ibn Jubayr," in *Abraham's Family: A Network of Meaning in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Lukas Bormann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2018), 458–59. About the interior of the Husain-Mosque in Cairo: Roland Broadhurst, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (Delhi: Goodword Books, 2016, first published 1952), 36–37 describing the interior of the Husain-Mosque in Cairo and 97 the Kaʾba.

This paper has focused exclusively on Islamic regions, but other cultures had similar forms. Japanese temples, for example, are repositories for artefacts.[32] Further investigation of the non-European histories of practices of collection could prove fruitful. Equally, exploring the specific furniture used to stage and exhibit items would likely contribute to our understanding of the historical development of socio-material practices in museums.

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