



CURATOR'S CORNER

“Goodbye Mshatta”: Connections and Disconnections on Berlin’s Museum Island¹

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Abstract

This essay is concerned with a contemporary art intervention in Berlin’s Museum of Islamic Art, in the context of the Mshatta Façade’s move. Sketching out Mshatta’s relocation history, the essay highlights how the dynamic of connection and disconnection plays out in a museum setting and is embedded in epistemic concepts mobilized in knowledge-making about objects. Specifically, it focuses on an installation entitled “Goodbye Mschatta. Ich bin ein Fremder. Zweifach Fremder” (“Goodbye Mshatta. I Am a Stranger: Twofold a Stranger”), by a Syrian-born German visual artist who was commissioned to bid farewell to the Façade in its most recent location before it moves to the Pergamon Museum’s north wing. Entering into a dialogue with Mshatta, his sculptural intervention pivoted around the themes of incompleteness, *mélange*, and in-betweenness. It revealed multiple connections and disconnections with regard to the Façade’s biography, while ostensibly disengaging from the debate on historical justice and imperial legacies.

Keywords: Mshatta Façade; Museum Island; contemporary art; relocation and dislocation; Berlin

Mshatta is moving, again. The stunningly ornamented façade of Qaşr al-Mshattā’s outer wall is leaving the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum. Remaining within the Pergamon’s walls, it will relocate to the north wing, which has been undergoing renovations since 2013 and is scheduled to reopen to visitors in 2026. There, the refurbished Mshatta will join other exhibits of the Pergamon Museum’s archaeological circuit.

To mark this transition, the Museum commissioned Ali Kaaf, a Syrian-born German visual artist, to create a work in tribute to Mshatta. Entering into a

¹ I dedicate this essay to my father, who instilled in me aesthetic appreciation and a passion for knowledge, including for the Middle East.



dialogue with the object, his sculptural intervention explored the themes of incompleteness, *mélange*, and in-betweenness, while revealing multiple connections and disconnections in relation to Mshatta's biography and to that of the artist, too.

Mshatta in Berlin

Upon reaching the Mshatta Hall, the final room of the Museum of Islamic Art, visitors would see the façade of Qaşr al-Mshattā (winter palace). “Unknown to history, and unnamed in the maps” in the late nineteenth century, as the British traveler Henry Baker Tristram remarked,² the Mshatta Façade now represents one of the most prominent objects of Berlin's Museum Island (*Museumsinsel*), an ensemble of several museums situated in the city's Mitte district as part of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Qaşr al-Mshattā is estimated to have been built around the mid-eighth century in the steppe of Moab east, roughly 30 kilometers south-east of Amman, in present-day Jordan. Classified as belonging to a group of the Umayyad *quşūr* (palaces), most of which were constructed across the Eastern Mediterranean region of Western Asia, it is attributed to the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd ibn Yazīd, whose assassination is believed to have interrupted the palace's completion.

In 1903, the Mshatta Façade left its place of origin and was brought to Germany's capital city as a gift from the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II to the German Emperor Wilhelm II. It traveled via the sea route from Beirut to Hamburg and then through the rivers of Elbe and Spree and the Kupfergraben canal in the Mitte district. Having reached the Museum Island, it was reassembled and put on display at the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (named after German Emperor Frederic III), today's Bode Museum, which exhibits primarily Late Antique and Byzantine artworks. The Façade remained there until 1932 when it moved to the newly opened Museum of Islamic Art,³ on the Pergamon Museum's second floor. German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld, a seminal figure in the history of Islamic art, classified Mshatta as representative of early Islamic art. The Façade's relocation to the Museum of Islamic Art reinforced the uniqueness not just of its categorization, with which Herzfeld was starkly preoccupied, but also of the concept of Islamic art, which, in his view, Mshatta embodied⁴ – and whose luster grew over time. This contributed

² Henry Baker Tristram, *The Land of Moab. Travels and Discoveries on the East Side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1873), 212.

³ For more on the history and future of the Museum's collection, see Stefan Weber, “New Spaces for Old Treasures. Plans for the New Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum,” in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 293–320; Julia Gonnella and Jens Kröger, eds., *Wie die islamische Kunst nach Berlin kam: Der Sammler und Museumsdirektor Friedrich Sarre (1865–1945)* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag and Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2015).

⁴ Avinoam Shalem, “Intersecting Historiographies: Henri Pirenne, Ernst Herzfeld, and the Myth of Origin,” in *Comparativism in Art History*, ed. Jaś Elsner (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 117.

to making the Façade more about Berlin and Germany than about Bilād ash-Shām. In this respect, Mshatta was not an isolated case⁵ – and certainly not the only object fated to *dislocation*⁶ in a museum.

Displays of Islamic art collections have been undergoing transformation in museums across the globe for the last fifteen years.⁷ Still, the concept of Islamic art, entangled in Europe's imperial era and reflecting a rather limited secular perspectival frame,⁸ appears to have been little challenged in the process, and the taxonomies of Islamic collections have not been sufficiently contested.⁹ This comes as a surprise considering the ongoing debate on historical justice and colonial legacies, especially given that in these discussions, museums often emerge as culprits responsible for reproducing silences and imperial histories. Despite presenting a chance to contribute to the debate, the Façade's current transit does not seem to offer much room for Islamic art to come out of the shadows in this regard. Mshatta's relocation nevertheless signals a rupture, to a certain degree, with its narrow classification, while allowing other connections to form. By joining the exhibits not denoted solely as "Islamic," Mshatta could be seen as breaking with its fixed arrangement within the Islamic collections, as well as seemingly diverting from its "othering."¹⁰ What comes out of this move remains to be seen in the years to come – and once the Façade becomes available to the public again in a new constellation.

“Goodbye Mshatta. I Am a Stranger: Twofold a Stranger”

In the context of Mshatta's resettlement, the installation “Goodbye Mshatta. *Ich bin ein Fremder. Zweifach Fremder*” (“Goodbye Mshatta. I Am a Stranger: Twofold a Stranger”) was mounted in the Museum of Islamic Art for nearly three months, from December 2021 to February 2022. Designed by Ali Kaaf as a sculptural intervention, a triangle-shaped object protruded from the ground in front of Mshatta. There were no captions or signs adjacent to it, except for “Don't touch” inscribed in English and Arabic on the floor betwixt the sculpture and the Façade. *Goodbye Mshatta's* shape referenced a zigzag band, which features on the Façade, whose limestone reliefs are embellished with griffins,

⁵ See for example Mirjam Brusius, “The Field in the Museum. Puzzling Out Babylon in Berlin,” *Osiris* 32 (2017): 264-85.

⁶ See also Ian Straughn, “A Tale of Two Façades: Archaeology and the Secularization of an Islamic Past,” *Material Religion* 15.2 (May 2019): 184-203.

⁷ Patricia Blessing, “Presenting Islamic Art: Reflections on Old and New Displays,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 52.1 (April 2018): 147-52.

⁸ Wendy Shaw, *What is 'Islamic' Art?: Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁹ Katarzyna Puzon, Sharon Macdonald, and Mirjam Shatanawi, eds., *Islam and Heritage in Europe: Pasts, Presents and Future Possibilities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁰ It needs to be noted that the “authenticity” of Islamic art as a category has been proclaimed not just in Western contexts but also by the Ottomans, as descendants of the Caliphate. See, for example, Ayşe H. Köksal, “The National Art Museums and the ‘Modernization’ of Turkey,” in *National Museums: New Studies from around the World*, eds. Simon J. Knell, Peter Aronsson, Arne Bugge Amundsen, Amy Jane Barnes, Stuart Burch, Jennifer Carter, Viviane Gosselin, Sarah A. Hughes, and Alan Kirwan (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 163-79.

lions, peacocks, pheasants, and several vegetal motifs. It also alluded to Kaaf's other works, such as "The Byzantine Corner," due to its geometrical form and monochromatic tones.

The artist drew inspiration for the installation's title from a poem by the tenth-century Baghdad-based philosopher and poet Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī and the figure of the stranger as someone who would separate themselves from society for contemplative reasons. To the Gnostics and the Sufis – another source of inspiration for Kaaf – one's estrangement from the self entails connecting spiritually with the world and achieving unity with it.¹¹ The "twofoldness" in the title points to this practice. It implies the dilemma with which a "stranger" grapples upon entering another culture, and a new setting or space, when the double bind of separation from society and from oneself comes into play. This dynamic undeniably applies to objects, too, as it does in Mshatta's case reflected through Kaaf's work. It resonates with the idea of space with a space that is used to display exhibits in the Pergamon Museum.

Besides the titular "twofoldness," there were a number of other themes guiding the installation. Incompleteness was one of them. Like the Façade, brought to Berlin as a part of a larger – and unfinished – structure, Kaaf's artwork was presented as an enlarged piece of the exhibited Mshatta. It reflected the Façade's incomplete nature, both in its place of origin and at the Museum, as well as Mshatta's reconstruction history as it was dismantled, transported, and reassembled multiple times.¹² Kaaf connected the Façade's trajectory to his own biography, which falls within the category of a "serial migrant"¹³ who calls more than two places home; he was born in Algeria, raised in Syria, lived in Lebanon, and settled in Germany. His every move, like that of Mshatta, entailed "recreating" himself in a new place of residence, losing parts of his identity and gaining others in the process.

In its incompleteness, not only literal but also figurative, *Goodbye Mshatta* enabled visitors to look at the Façade through the "holes" featuring in it. Serving as a close-up of Mshatta's reliefs, its form resembled a *mashrabiyya*, an oriel window with a distinctive lattice-like pattern, that represents a traditional element of Arabic buildings and is an essential feature of Islamic architecture. It allowed visitors to see out through an artwork whose exhibition oscillated between visibility and invisibility – and what is seen and not seen. This facet transpired in the installation's presentation, which magnified selected aspects that are exemplary of Kaaf's work, that is, materiality, temporality, and collage. The collage component, in particular, resonated with Herzfeld's conception of Mshatta as the embodiment of *Leiturgie* (mélange). Such depiction of the object, displayed as influenced by Byzantine, Sassanian, and Islamic eras, sought to reinforce the Façade's exceptionalism.

¹¹ Magdalena Heinrich, "'Ich bin Fremder. Zweifach Fremder.' Zeitgenössische Kunst trifft auf frühislamische Hochkultur," *Qantara*, January 28, 2022, <https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/ich-bin-fremder-zweifach-fremder-zeitgenoessische-kunst-trifft-auf-fruehislamische-hochkultur>.

¹² Eva-Maria Troelenberg, *Mshatta in Berlin – Grundsteine Islamischer Kunst. Connecting Art Histories in the Museum* (Dortmund: Verlag Kettler, 2014).

¹³ Susan Ossman, *Moving Matters: Paths of Serial Migration* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013).

It underpinned the German archaeologist's search for the *Stunde Null* (zero hour) of Islamic art, with Mshatta playing a crucial role in Herzfeld's efforts to mark the beginnings of Islamic art.¹⁴ Although the notion of Islamic art was not, as such, addressed in the installation, the work's *mélange* component hinted at the early attempts to define this concept in a German setting at the turn of the twentieth century.

The idea of in-betweenness constituted *Goodbye Mshatta's* other notable feature. As the artist describes himself: "I use perspectives on and glimpses of the monumental Mshatta Façade to build an area of tension which creates a space of ambivalence in the place in between, between facade and intervention, history and present, familiar and strange, visible and invisible."¹⁵ This approach materialized in the installation's arrangement, which simultaneously connected visitors with the Façade and disconnected them from it. Displayed in the museum's separate room, the Mshatta Hall, the Façade seemed estranged from other exhibits – as it did from its place of origin. In a similar vein, at first Kaaf's artwork gave the impression of disturbing the view of the Façade. Sticking out from the ground, the sculpture resembled more of an out-of-place object, or even "matter out of place," to quote anthropologist Mary Douglas's term.¹⁶ Could it be that the Mshatta Façade itself also embodied that very "matter out of place"?

Here, space too came into play. Kaaf's site-specific installation exposed the dyad of space and time, none of which is neutral as both remain imbued with meaning and power, especially if they are laden with difficult legacies,¹⁷ including in the museum context. In this respect, the pertinent questions of imperial heritage and historical justice were missing in the artist's reading of Mshatta's presence in the Museum of Islamic Art, thereby disconnecting from the current debate on redress and restitution. This way, notwithstanding Kaaf's expanded form of engagement with Mshatta, his installation sidelined other stories and the political nature of "mise en scène" in museums. While focusing on connections of various kinds and addressing disintegrations, *Goodbye Mshatta* missed out on the ways in which the Façade, along with other objects, remains disengaged from other, more critical narratives that challenge the triumphalist stories about artifacts displayed in the museum. Kaaf's work is just one voice, which nevertheless could have been raised to connect with a broader range of audiences and to cast light on colonial entanglements and imperial legacies.

¹⁴ Shalem, "Intersecting Historiographies," 109-29.

¹⁵ Heinrich, "Ich bin Fremder," *Qantara*.

¹⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

¹⁷ Katarzyna Puzon, "Memory and Artistic Production in a Post-war Arab City," in *Post-conflict Performance, Film and Visual Arts: Cities of Memory*, eds. D. O'Rawe and M. Phelan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 265-83.

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