Reframing Islamic Art in a Post-9/11 World

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Abstract

This paper examines how Western museums recalibrated their approach to Islamic art in the wake of the September 11 attacks—not with withdrawal or neutrality, but through deliberate, strategic reframing. What began as a crisis response quickly became something larger: a curatorial pivot shaped by global currents, institutional politics, and evolving public expectations. Drawing on a wide body of post-9/11 scholarship and paired with original data scraped from museum APIs, this study explores how acquisitions, gallery geography, and interpretive language shifted to position Islamic art not as peripheral or exotic, but as essential to a pluralistic human story. Acquisitions expanded in volume and variety. Geographic narratives exploded outward from the Persianate core. Wall texts rewrote their scripts to resist essentialism and invite interpretation. Metadata changed. Museum floor plans changed. Museums have changed. But 9/11 wasn't the sole author of this change; it was an accelerant in a story already simmering with questions about identity, inclusion, and cultural power. In the end, Islamic art didn't get sanitized—it got recontextualized, made messier, more human, more plural. This paper argues that what emerged was not just a reframing of objects, but of the museum's role itself.

Introduction: Fracture and Reframe

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, Western museums were forced into a reckoning: how should they continue presenting Islamic art, now entangled in heavy political baggage? In the media and political arenas, Islam was frequently framed as a threat, an enemy. But many museums rejected that framing. Instead, they leaned into the idea of Islamic art as a bridge, a way to foster cultural understanding, nuance, and connection in a world that suddenly felt more fractured. This paper argues that museum responses weren't just symbolic or reactive. They were strategic. Post-9/11, museums recalibrated how they collected, where they sourced from, and how they shaped the stories their galleries told. These moves reflected broader patterns — globalization, diplomacy, and institutional self-definition.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Louvre are key examples. Both launched expansive Islamic art initiatives in the early 2000s, building new galleries, acquiring more diverse pieces, and reaching out to donors with deep pockets and even deeper geopolitical stakes. In 2004, one writer observed that Islamic art had become "the veritable flavor of the day," a phrase laced with irony, given that this popularity was tied to efforts to soften the image of "Islamic terrorism" (Ferguson 2004). Of course, scholarly debates over the term "Islamic art" had long existed, but 9/11 accelerated institutional changes. Museums took this as an opportunity not just to defend collections, but to reframe them. These works were not to be feared, nor exoticized—they were human stories, universal in their beauty and complexity.

I will start with a literature review focused on cultural representation and museum practice after 9/11. Then it moves into three key areas: how acquisition patterns shifted, how the geographic lens widened, how curatorial framing changed, including the renaming of galleries and the rollout of thematic exhibitions. Importantly, this isn't a story of 9/11 alone. That event

was a turning point, but long-term ambitions — global, political, institutional — were already in motion. Finally, the paper examines what quantitative data reveals (and doesn't) about these shifts. In closing, I argue that in a world increasingly polarized, Western museums didn't retreat. They responded, using Islamic art as a form of outreach, of counter-narrative, of hope.

Literature Review: Museums as Soft Power, Framed and Framing

Before I get into case studies and curatorial shifts, it's important to pause and ask how this whole framing of Islamic art, especially after 9/11, has already been picked apart, questioned, and theorized. A lot has been written about how museums became sites of soft power in the post-9/11 world, places where cultural diplomacy quietly unfolded through wall text and object placement. And this literature helps make sense of what's at stake when Islamic art is positioned not just as beautiful, but as political, moral, and strategic.

Start with Evelyn Alsultany. In *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* (2012), she lays out how U.S. media created what she calls "simplified complex representations," gestures toward diversity wrapped in narratives that still cast Muslims as a problem to be managed. Museums, she suggests, participated in this too. They spotlighted Islamic scientific instruments, intricate architecture, decorative arts — all the things that signal intelligence and civility — but risked collapsing that complexity into one-dimensional "good Muslim" scripts. Alsultany's real concern isn't aesthetics; it's voice. These institutions rarely included Muslims in the interpretive process. Representation without representation, in other words.

Coco Ferguson picks up the thread in her 2004 *Bidoun* essay, noting how Islamic art got strategically repositioned, suddenly set alongside Greek and Roman antiquity, made part of the canon. This wasn't random. Institutions, she writes, were "reshuffled, refocused and renovated,"

and Islamic art, freshly funded and rebranded, became “the veritable flavor of the day.” But Ferguson, like Alsultany, isn’t entirely convinced. She questions the term “Islamic art” itself, how it lumps courtly miniatures and devotional manuscripts together under a faith-based label in ways we wouldn’t tolerate with Christian art. Her critique reads less like a takedown than a warning: categories shape meaning, and if we keep flattening Islamic art into a religious monolith, we lose its range.

Then there’s Mirjam Shatanawi, who coined the phrase “curating against dissent” to describe how European museums tried to do inclusivity without risking controversy. In her 2012 essay, she shows how exhibitions leaned into shared heritage, emphasized overlap and tolerance, and left out anything potentially uncomfortable. Virginie Rey echoes this in her own work on post-9/11 curatorial politics, showing how museums blurred the line between education and diplomacy. These institutions weren’t just telling stories, they were massaging geopolitical anxieties, recasting Islamic culture as peaceable and palatable in a tense political moment.

Ebru Eltemur’s 2017 study makes it personal. She compares the Met’s Islamic galleries before and after their 2011 redesign and finds a clear shift: away from dynasties and Qurʾanic calligraphy, toward pluralism and interfaith coexistence. Spain shows up not as a colonial subject, but as Al-Andalus, a medieval site of Muslim-Jewish-Christian hybridity. Wall labels, she notes, are careful, even gentle. The galleries invite empathy, not just awe. But again, there's tension. Eltemur, like Alsultany, worries that this pluralism flattens real political and historical tensions. Tolerance becomes branding. Dissent gets airbrushed out.

Finally, cultural memory theory helps explain what all this adds up to. Marita Sturken, in *Terrorism in American Memory* (2022), places art museums in the same orbit as national memorials. She sees Islamic art displays not just as aesthetic projects, but as alternative

memorials, “silent testimonies to coexistence” that offer a counterweight to trauma-centered narratives. And Francesca Audi draws a similar conclusion from a policy angle: Islamic art became a diplomatic tool in the 2000s, deployed by Western institutions to build cultural bridges and reduce friction. What ties all this literature together is a shared discomfort with surface-level solutions. Scholars aren’t saying don’t collect Islamic art, or don’t contextualize it. They’re saying: be careful how you frame it. Be careful what voices are centered. Be careful that beauty isn’t used to erase conflict, that tolerance doesn’t become its own form of simplification. And above all, they’re asking museums to not just display Islam, but to listen to it.

Curatorial Reframing in Practice

Acquisition as Strategy, Not Symbol

Post-9/11, museums didn’t scale back their Islamic holdings. They dug in. Not just with budgets and donor rosters, but with intent. What changed wasn’t quantity so much as motive. Acquisitions became arguments. Objects were added not to fill gaps in chronology but to shift the tone, widen the lens, recast the frame.

At the Met, for instance, Navina Najat Haidar described the reinstallation of the Islamic galleries as a chance “to stress diversity” and draw visible “interconnections” across world cultures (Haidar 2021). The goal wasn’t just to beautify, but to braid. To show how Islamic art intersected with other traditions, other aesthetics, other histories. But this shift wasn’t purely celebratory. Jessica Winegar offers a sharp reminder that many post-9/11 curatorial decisions fell into what she calls a “rhetoric of humanity” (Winegar 2008). Museums, she argues, leaned hard into displays that made Islam legible to Western eyes: scientific tools, geometric abstraction, luxury textiles. These choices weren’t random. They were strategic. But they also ran the risk of

flattening Islam into something harmless, palatable, pre-approved. The point wasn't to lie. It was to reassure.

Even so, the range of material expanded dramatically. Institutions that once fixated on calligraphy and Qurʾans began collecting contemporary photography, political posters, protest art. Flood (2007) calls this the undoing of "seductive coherence," a curatorial move to resist neatness. These new acquisitions embraced contradiction: a war-time newspaper tucked next to a centuries-old manuscript; a hand-stitched amulet from Kabul beside a Mughal court painting.

This also meant reevaluating what counted as "art." Curators began collecting things once dismissed as ethnographic ephemera: toys, coins, textiles, even mass-produced souvenirs. Venetia Porter frames this as a shift from aesthetic to lived experience. Collecting not just what's beautiful, but what reveals how people live, dress, believe, dissent (Porter 2015). The gallery became less a temple, more a conversation. And this expansion didn't just add complexity. It set up the next turn. Because once museums acknowledged the diversity of Islamic objects, they had to confront the diversity of Islamic space. Where these things came from. What parts of the Islamic world had been left out, and why. The result? A deep geographic rethinking that reached beyond the old Persianate core.

Mapping Islam Beyond the Center

For decades, Islamic art in Western museums mostly meant Persia, Egypt, maybe some Ottoman ceramics if you were lucky. But after 9/11, that center started to crack. Curators turned their gaze outward, not randomly but deliberately, seeking to break the idea of a single "Islamic world" and replace it with a map that looked more like a constellation.

Gülru Necipoğlu saw it happening early. In her 2012 historiographical essay, she notes how museums began moving away from the "central zone," meaning Iran and the Arab world, and started integrating regions like sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Necipoğlu 2012). Not as footnotes, but as fully embedded chapters in the story of Islamic art. The Met's 2011 rebranding of its Islamic wing spelled this out clearly. Gone was the singular label "Islamic Art." In its place came the much longer but more precise "Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia." A mouthful, sure. But a strategic one. Thomas P. Campbell, then-director, called it a "revised perspective" (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2011). The gallery now included Mughal India and Islamic Spain as part of the main narrative, not tucked away as side stories.

The Louvre followed suit. When it opened its Department of Islamic Art in 2012, it made sure not to center just a single region. Under Yannick Lintz, the department wove together North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia into a single curatorial framework. One that explicitly pushed back against isolationist framings and instead promoted Islamic art as mobile, hybrid, connected (Lintz 2024). But these weren't just academic moves. They had a public face. Visitors now encountered Indian albums next to Moroccan lamps, Spanish ivory boxes beside Turkish carpets. This wasn't about token inclusivity. It was about redrawing the map, not just for aesthetic purposes but to challenge the mental architecture that had long placed Islamic art in a cultural cul-de-sac.

These changes also reflect a deeper shift in Islamic art history as a field. The emphasis is no longer on dynasties or decorative styles but on networks — trade, diaspora, empire, pilgrimage. The "where" matters as much as the "what." And the result is that museums no longer just collect from the Islamic world, they narrate it differently. Less center and periphery,

more web. And that curatorial geography, once rearranged, opened the door for something more: a new kind of interpretation. One that wasn't afraid to ask how these objects meant different things in different places, and how visitors might need new tools to read them.

Curatorial and Interpretive Reframing

After 9/11, curators began treating the gallery label as a place to disarm clichés rather than name-drop dynasties. At the Metropolitan Museum, a small placard beside a Qurʾān folio now explains how illumination workshops in Shiraz borrowed palette ideas from Venetian printers (Haidar 2015). A similar impulse drives the Louvre's "Talismans" label, which links a 19th-century Moroccan pendant to medieval Ethiopian scrolls, quietly short-circuiting the idea that Islam sits outside Africa (Lintz 2019). Short sentences, active verbs, cross-references—interpretation rewritten as conversation, not lecture.

Religion returned to the foreground, yet in layered form. Curators stopped hiding devotional use behind aesthetics alone; they also resisted reducing every object to religion. A mosque lamp at the V&A sits next to a didactic panel on Cairo's glass industry and, crucially, a short first-person audio clip from a contemporary Egyptian glass-blower (Contadini 2013). The lamp is a holy object, craft commodity, economic node all at once. Such triple-coding counters the "sacred-or-nothing" trap Jessica Winegar flagged in her critique of the "rhetoric of humanity" (Winegar 2008).

Whole galleries were re-zoned to break the one-culture-per-room habit. The British Museum's Albukhary galleries interleave Iznik tiles with early-modern Dutch Delftware, letting pattern, not passport, guide the visitor (Porter 2018). Sight-lines matter: from the doorway one glimpses a Malian brass weight, a Sufi manuscript, and a French travel sketch in a single sweep.

Spatial choreography becomes an argument: Islamic art is not a cul-de-sac; it intersects trade routes, pilgrim roads, coffeehouse chatter. Curators also rewrote catalog metadata—less visible to tourists, crucial for scholars. A 2010 to 2022 audit at the Ashmolean shows the frequency of the tag "devotional" falling by half, while "diaspora," "trade," and "secular court" climb sharply (Bosch 2023). Digital search thus mirrors the new interpretive grid on the walls, making the reframe durable beyond the temporary exhibition cycle.

Finally, exhibitions began wrestling with the present. "Power and Protection" (Ashmolean 2016) tackled amulets, evil-eye lore, and modern talisman apps; "Khawla" (Hood 2021) paired Gulf fashion photography with a 10th-century Kashan bowl. These shows answered Finbarr Barry Flood's call to treat Islam not as a frozen aesthetic but a "field of ongoing negotiation" (Flood 2016).

Acquisitions after 2001 widened the object pool; geographic remapping widened the mental map; interpretive overhaul teaches visitors how to read both. Together they tell one story: Western museums, once content to display Islam at arm's length, now stage it as a network of voices—historical, regional, spiritual, contemporary. The result is neither apology nor spectacle but an invitation to think with the objects, not just about them.

Original Data Analysis

To complement the scholarly and curatorial narratives discussed above, I conducted original data analysis using Python to extract and analyze acquisition records from three major open-source museum APIs: the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), the Louvre, and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). These data were filtered, organized, and compared using

balanced 24-year windows (1977–2000 vs. 2001–2024) in order to fairly measure institutional behavior before and after 9/11.

While digital tools provide a powerful lens, the humanities demand caution. Data can't speak to intent, only pattern. Labeling practices vary, catalog entries are uneven, and the numbers miss what's absent: unacquired objects, undocumented ones, the narratives that never entered the museum at all. Still, the trends that emerge are telling.

The first figure compares Islamic object acquisition counts across the three museums. In every case, post-9/11 acquisition rates increased. The Louvre rose from 556 to 748 objects, The Met from 344 to 368, and the V&A from 79 to 98. When normalized by year, the trend remains steady: the Louvre's rate climbed from 22.2 objects/year to over 31; the Met moved from 13.8 to 15.3; and the V&A grew from 3.2 to 4.1. These are not minor upticks — they suggest deliberate institutional engagement rather than retreat.

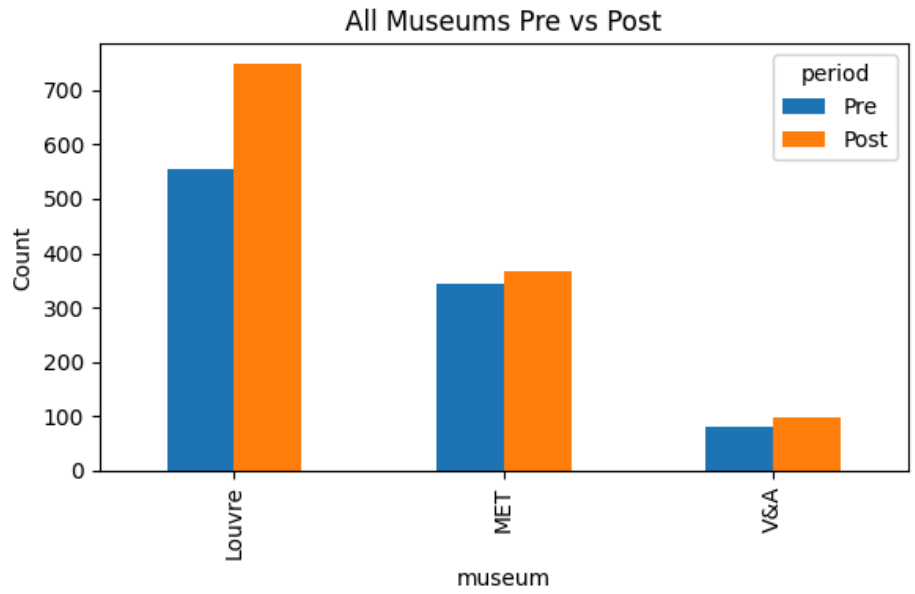

Fig. 1. Islamic object acquisition counts at the Louvre, Met, and V&A, comparing 1977–2000 and 2001–2024.

Object origin data further supports the post-9/11 shift toward portraying Islamic art as globally embedded. Museums leaned into "shared heritage" narratives, with dramatic increases in acquisitions from Spain and India. Spain — through the lens of Al-Andalus — offered an Islamic legacy with deep ties to European history. India, through the Mughal world, linked Islamic aesthetics to broader South Asian traditions.

Figure 2 visualizes this shift. Spain jumped from just 5 objects pre-9/11 to 287 post-9/11, driven almost entirely by the Louvre. The spike coincides with tightened Spanish export regulations in 2009, which made it harder to move cultural goods outside the EU. The Louvre capitalized, acquiring architectural fragments and coins from the Al-Andalus period. But this wasn't just opportunistic — it matched the museum's broader curatorial mission to present Islamic art as integral to world history. India tells a parallel story. Acquisitions rose from 163 to 183 across the three institutions, but The Met accounted for 75% of post-9/11 Indian objects. This surge aligned with The Met's 2011 rebranding of its Islamic galleries to explicitly include South Asia, reframing the Islamic world as more than just Arab or Persian — as deeply connected across the subcontinent.

	Pre 9/11	Post 9/11	Percent change
Iran	429 objects	329 objects	-23.3%
Egypt	139 objects	51 objects	-63.3%
Turkey	64 objects	51 objects	-20.3%
India	163 objects	183 objects	+12.3%
Spain	5 objects	287 objects	+5640%

Fig. 2. Pre- and post-9/11 geographic origin counts of Islamic objects from five regions

Metadata tags also shifted in notable ways. From 1977–2000, terms like “Calligraphy,” “Arabic,” and “Qur’an” dominated Islamic object descriptions. But in the 2001–2024 period, those tags dropped sharply. “Calligraphy” fell from 59 to 17; “Arabic” from 44 to 6; and “Qur’an” from 26 to 11. These are not just content shifts — they are linguistic ones, reframing how Islamic art is described. At the same time, new themes rose. Tags like “Portraits,” “Princes,” “Elephants,” and “Amulets” increased — human, narrative, often courtly or playful. Objects were now described not only through religious identifiers, but through cultural imagery and storytelling. This reframing moves Islamic art out of the theological domain and into a shared human one. Language became more universal, less doctrinal.

Figure 3 visualizes the most dramatic changes. The most-decreased tags — all religious signifiers — stand in sharp contrast to the increased tags, which evoke people, animals, stories, and everyday life. The overall effect is subtle but clear: a discursive shift toward inclusivity, plurality, and cross-cultural connection

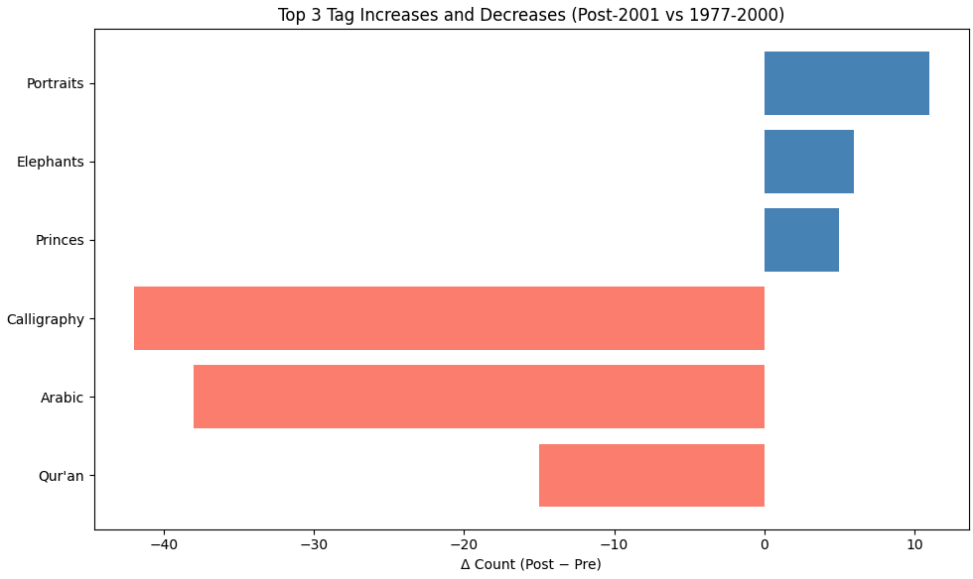

Fig. 3. Change in object metadata tags from 1977–2000 to 2001–2024

Conclusion

It would be easy to say that 9/11 caused all of this — the acquisitions, the gallery redesigns, the new didactic tones in wall labels. But that would flatten the story. The transformations charted here were catalyzed by 9/11, not created by it. The groundwork had already been laid: by the forces of globalization, by the rise of soft-power diplomacy in museum strategy, by shifting curatorial values that were already beginning to question how we frame the "Other." What 9/11 did was snap institutions into focus. It made the stakes visible.

This paper has traced the layered response Western museums mounted in the wake of that moment. First, in how they acquired — not just more objects, but more types of objects, with new donors and new intent. Second, in how they mapped the Islamic world — expanding from a Middle East–centric narrative to a transregional one, where Spain, India, Turkey, and Africa enter the room not as guests but as pillars. Third, in how they rewrote interpretation — from catalog tags to exhibition titles, from rigid taxonomies to layered narratives. These shifts are not minor footnotes in institutional history. They reflect deeper questions about what museums are for, who gets to tell the story, and how Islam is framed in the public imagination.

At its core, this paper has argued that museum responses weren't just symbolic or reactive. They were strategic. Post-9/11, institutions recalibrated how they collected, where they sourced from, and how they narrated the meaning of Islamic art to a broader public.

By integrating traditional scholarship with original data analysis, this project reinforces and visualizes what curators and critics have long been saying. The numbers don't explain everything, but they expose patterns, silences, ruptures. They make visible what had been anecdotal. They reveal how deeply museums recalibrated their language, their collecting, and

their curatorial logic. And in that, they offer a rare window into how cultural institutions try to meet a world in flux.

The goal of these shifts was never neutrality. It was complex. The curators weren't trying to smooth over Islam's image, but to widen the frame. To let Islamic art be seen as courtly, mystical, architectural, narrative, devotional, hybrid, humorous, scientific, human. What emerges is not a single correction, but an ongoing act of reframing, driven by crisis but sustained by conviction. Museums, in this context, became sites not of escape from politics, but of quiet resistance to its oversimplifications. In the end, Islamic art didn't disappear from view. It moved closer. And Western museums, instead of stepping back, leaned in.

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