

## **Exhibition Review: «Im Namen des Bildes – Das Bild zwischen Kult und Verbot in Islam und Christentum»**

Besides its permanent collection, the Museum Rietberg in Zurich regularly holds temporary exhibitions. The last one “Im Namen des Bildes – Das Bild zwischen Kult und Verbot in Islam und Christentum” was themed around the worship and destruction of images in both Islam and Christianity. It was displayed from the 4<sup>th</sup> of February until the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May underground the Emerald pavilion. In an interview I conducted with the exhibition’s curator Axel Langer he explained how the idea behind the exhibition developed. He said that it arose from the many questions he received from people asking about the strict ban on images in Islam in contrast to Christianity. The exhibition asked in what regards this notion was true. If images are categorically forbidden in Islam, what standpoint does Christianity take? Answering these questions or at least attempting to is no small feat. Axel Langer has clarified that he knew from the beginning that the exhibition would be heavily text-based. He also did not want to give a ready-made answer to these queries.

The exhibition follows the question of image worshipping over the course of four rooms and 136 objects. There were many different kinds of objects, from manuscripts and photographs to an ivory casket or glass bowl. The exhibition was built as a dialogic interaction between Islamic and Christian traditions. This juxtaposition is underlined by the exhibition architecture. The rooms were divided by freestanding walls which often had a squared hole to see the section behind [Fig. 1]. Frequently, two objects from both religions were grouped and then explained by a text. In addition, each room was introduced by an overarching hall text.

The first room of the exhibition foreshadowed a recurring downside of it. Upon entering, one is confronted with two images of which one is already a facsimile. There were many more facsimiles and reproductions, which is baffling given the numerous objects present. Most reproductions did not have noteworthy or impressive craftsmanship and did not add to the experience. Except for a digital reproduction of an ivory piece (Kat. 95) which allowed the visitor to zoom in on every detail and view the object from all sides. I argue that while it might have taken more work to reduce the number of objects shown, it would have been worthwhile. Another room that has a problematic structure was located mid-way through the exhibition. It was a large dark room with panels positioned in a big circle. Each panel consisted of an object either from Islamic or Christian culture. The catch of it: only one object at a time was illuminated

during which a voice-over played. However, because there was no control over which object would be next, it strongly decelerated the experience of the museum visit.

The many texts one could read obscured the fact that there were often no historical relations between the objects shown. Although the comparison between Islam and Christianity might sound straightforward the huge leap in time between the objects impeded this. They ranged from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Theological approaches from Byzantine were adapted to early medieval Western objects. This resulted in some questionable comparisons in favor of the overarching comparison between Islam and Christianity.

I was mentally exhausted after more than two hours of walking through the four-part exhibition and reading countless texts. Even though it sounded like an admirable undertaking to show the use of images from the perspective of two of the world's major religions it only worked partially. It turned out that the amount of text was one of the biggest weaknesses of the exhibition. But from an art historical point of view, it was definitely worth delving into the many objects. Prestigious objects such as the Theodore Psalter (Kat. 35) or ancient coins (Kat. 45) left an exceptionally enchanting impression.



Fig. 1: Exhibition View. Exhibition “Im Namen des Bildes – Das Bild zwischen Kult und Verbot in Islam und Christentum” in the Museum Rietberg Zurich, 04.02-25.06.2022 (Photography: Laura Hutter, 07.04.2022)

Bibliography:

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