



Call for Papers

Arts and Crafts in the Late Ottoman Empire: Rethinking Practices and Concepts of Material Culture in Syria and Beyond (18th - early 20th c.)

Date: May 15-16, 2026 (new dates)

Venue: Lebanese American University (Beirut, Lebanon)

Convenors: May Farhat and Sarah Sabban

In Collaboration with: Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB)

New Orientations in Islamic Art and Architecture History

Long excluded from the foundational narratives of Islamic art and architecture history, the period from the 18th till the early 20th centuries has attracted growing scholarly attention since the turn of the 21st century (Flood and Necipoğlu 2017; Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit 2006; Deguilhem and Faroqi 2005; Vernoit 1997). New interdisciplinary research shaped by the material turn in the humanities and by critical reflections on the Eurocentric framing of modernity has challenged earlier assumptions that Islamic artistic and architectural practices declined after the 17th century (Graves forthcoming; Trevathan 2025; Rosser-Owen 2020; Hamadeh and Kafescioğlu 2021; Flood 2019; Roxburgh and McWilliams 2017; Phillips 2016). Equally, scholars have demonstrated the vitality, adaptability, and creativity of late Ottoman visual and material worlds, revealing their entanglements with global flows of goods, ideas, and technologies, as well as their embeddedness in local practices, knowledge systems, and social lives (Lanzillo 2024; Graves and Seggerman 2022; Volait 2021; Avcioglu and Flood 2009). Despite this momentum, Syria (*Bilād al-Shām*) received far less sustained attention than other Ottoman and Islamic lands such as Anatolia/Turkey, Egypt, or Iran, and has only recently started to gain traction (Milwright 2018; Abou-Hodeib 2017; Auji 2016; Sheehi 2016; Scharrahs 2013; Weber 2009; Establet and Pascual 2005; and Kalter, Pavaloj, Zernnickel 1992).

Building on this new scholarship, the Arts and Crafts conference aims to advance art-historical and interdisciplinary research on the practices and concepts of material culture in Ottoman lands between the 18th and the early 20th centuries. While inviting contributions on all geographies of the Empire, our call for papers foregrounds late Ottoman Syria as a case through which to expand the analytical and historical horizons of Islamic art and architecture studies and to contribute to broader debates in Ottoman and Arab historiographies of modernity.

Entangled Modernities: Materialities, Epistemes, and Temporalities

Following the methodological program of entangled histories, our endeavor is not limited to chronologically expanding the scope of study but strives for a deeper reflexive commitment to rethink the relationship between material culture, knowledge, and modernity as an integral part of

the history of the Islamic world. We propose employing “entangled modernities” as a critical site of inquiry into the materialities, epistemes, and temporalities at play in the configuration of arts and crafts in the late Ottoman Empire. Integral to this approach is the premise of polyvalent and malleable thinking that can transcend rigid boundaries, undo dichotomies, and illuminate processes of cross-fertilization.

Temporalities

The timespan covered by the conference aligns with a strategic decision to step back and, we hope, productively reframe the usual terms of periodization and pregiven contours of modernity and pre-modernity that preset the objects of study and their coordinates in time. We thereby encourage serious attention to indigenous temporalities embodied or performed in objects, concepts, and material processes that reveal new matrices of continuities, ruptures, and revivals. Indeed, the period under consideration witnessed the gradual integration of the Empire into the global economy and the implementation of a series of reforms, culminating in the Tanzimat period (1839-1876), which signaled profound changes that the state and society had to contend with. These developments raise the question of plural and contested temporalities, which gains further importance in light of the increasingly unequal terms of exchange and interaction that characterized Ottoman relations with a fast-industrializing, expansionist Europe.

Epistemes

Our approach emphasizes the mutually constitutive nature of cross-cultural encounters (often between parties of unequal power) and, to the extent possible, contextualizes their components and outcomes in a processual, holistic, and heuristic manner. It equally entails the necessity to historicize categories of knowledge, partly by focusing on webs of meaning formed between emic and etic notions that organized the material world, transformed it, and were transformed by it. The many languages spoken across the Empire fostered unique environments in which the modern Western order of knowledge was refracted in many directions and reflected local and regional histories. Translation between languages and epistemes undoubtedly depended on emergent, experimental, and contingent forms of knowledge that can instruct the modern historian on the changing conditions and materialities within which they existed.

Materialities

The staggering effects of the Industrial Revolution on the material world and people’s engagement with it cannot be overstated, but they were not all-encompassing, simultaneous, or uniform. Hence, the central aim of this conference on arts and crafts is to reconsider all aspects that constituted, (re)shaped, and represented material culture across this period of more than 200 years including conditions, modes, and tools of production; regional and global circulations of goods and technology transfer; interplay between science, economy, and state; relations between makers, patrons, merchants, and consumers; apprenticeship and other forms of knowledge transmission; skill and artistic traditions between artisanal and mechanical production; modes of valuation, such as taste or aesthetics; how Ottoman economic and legal reforms as well as international agreements negotiated between global pressure and internal stakes.

Overall, we encourage authors to consider the analytical frameworks—temporalities, epistemes, and materialities—that underpin the conference’s critical inquiry into the entangled modernities of Ottoman arts and crafts, in Syria and beyond. We welcome contributions engaging with any of the themes discussed in this call, or those that innovatively expound on them, including but not limited to interdisciplinary research, object-centered studies, case-based micro-histories of concepts, people, and institutions, as well as historiographical questions on sources, archives, conservation discourses, and digital humanities initiatives dealing with material culture.

Submission Guidelines

We invite abstracts of up to **300 words**, along with a short biography (max. 100 words), to be sent to MAIA.events@lau.edu.lb by **January 15, 2026**. Papers may be delivered in English or Arabic. Decisions will be communicated by **February 1, 2026**.

Selected papers from the conference will be considered for publication in an edited volume or a special issue of a journal.

Selected Bibliography

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- Behrens-Abouseif, Doris and Stephen Vernoit, eds. *Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation, Eclecticism*. Leiden: Brill, 2006.
- Deguilhém, Randi and Suraiya Faruqi, eds. *Crafts and Craftsmen of the Middle East: Fashioning the Individual in the Muslim Mediterranean*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005.
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- Hamadeh, Shirine and Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, eds. *A Companion to Early Modern Istanbul*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021.
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- Roxburgh, David J. and Mary McWilliams, eds. *Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-Century Iran*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Art Museums, 2017.

- Scharrahs, Anke. *Damascene 'Ajami Rooms: Forgotten Jewels of Interior Design*. London: Archetype, 2013.
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- Vernoit, Stephen. *Occidentalism: Islamic Art in the 19th Century*. London: Nour Foundation, 1997.
- Volait, Mercedes. *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse in Cairo and Damascus 1850–1890: Intercultural Engagements with Architecture and Craft in the Age of Travel and Reform*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021.
- Weber, Stefan. *Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation 1808-1918*. 2 vols. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009.