SPECIAL FEATURES

REPORT:

Riding the Winds of Change: Khamseen and Islamic Art History Online

By Christiane Gruber

Figure 1

Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online, which I launched with my team members in Fall 2020, was originally developed as a coping response to the pedagogical constraints caused by the COVID–19 pandemic. As professors and students struggled to pivot to remote teaching and learning, it became clear that the time had come for us scholars to embrace fully the digital turn and to unite as an international community to produce reliable multimedia scholarly content for inclusion in our university courses. Since then, many colleagues have provided us with "Topic" and "Term" talks on subjects falling within their fields of expertise. In the coming year, we also will expand the website to include digital-born exhibitions and web-based projects, theoretical concepts, and cross-institutional collaborations.

But first: why the name "Khamseen"? In Arab lands, *khamseen* is a strong and sometimes violent wind that brings seasonal turnover. We decided to ride the COVID "winds," embracing and channeling its powerful currents. Our logo includes the Arabic-script word *khamseen*, whose triple-toothed letter "s" turns into an abstracted wind-catcher. Known as badgir in Persian, wind-catchers function as passive cooling systems (Fig. 1). In lighthearted moments, I like to think of our collective endeavor as a "ventilation" of knowledge, pumping fresh air across intersecting fields.

Over the past few years, we have learned much, most of all from our struggles. Some of the challenges have been purely logistical and technical: how to manage multiple projects at different stages of production and within a team

setting, which eventually led us to adopt Trello, a Kanban-style, online project management tool that has cut down on thousands of emails and substantially improved our workflow; how to embed multimedia files into web pages, turning us into the most complex and data-heavy website in the University of Michigan's LSA College; and how to edit, store, and update our data for optimal security and sustainability over the long term. Bihter Esener, our Digital Technologies Coordinator, often manages multiple operations on at least two computer screens, looking like a pilot handling flight instruments (Fig. 2).

Besides our webpage, we have four social media accounts, managed by Deniz Vural: Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram, each with 1,000–2,000 followers, and we are also on LinkedIn. From the time of our launch in Fall 2020 until today, our website has been viewed over 235,000 times. This large and ever-expanding footprint has caught us by surprise, making it clear not only that there is a widespread desire for historically accurate and accessible information about Islamic art, architecture, and visual culture (broadly defined), but also that this demand stretches well beyond classrooms and academic spheres.

Our online content can be used however viewers wish. A video can be played at home, within the classroom (be it in-person or remote), or assigned as a group exercise, homework assignment, or simply additional resource. Many of our talks are provided with worksheets created by Sascha Crasnow, which help students understand key take-aways, think analytically, and write comparatively, while all videos are tagged with related names, terms, and themes so viewers can craft their own learning trajectories. Our glossary of terms, which is managed by Michelle Al-Ferzly with the help of Nehal Al-Shamy, lends itself especially well to self-directed study. This non-monolithic, non-directive, multi-directional learning model avoids teleological narratives as well as the fixed content of a published book or article. This said, traditional print scholarship remains of paramount importance, and it is our goal to direct web users to further reliable resources by listing them on video post pages. Now that many articles are available in the public domain, we can include hyperlinks, making information access, retrieval,

Figure 2

and research more effective and speedier. As they navigate *Khamseen*, students and scholars therefore can shuttle between digital and print scholarship in a mutually invigorating fashion.

Along with fixing errors a *posteriori*, our ability to tweak, expand, and integrate information over time is one of the greatest benefits of digital scholarship. Indeed, whatever is produced online is never fully final or immutable, in contrast with print publications or museum exhibitions. We are not forced to place our presentations in chapters or vitrines; instead, our capacity to move the pieces around allows us and our users to bypass master narratives to explore virtually endless interconnections, circulations, and constellations. This loosened structure, we hope, will help catalyze an engaged and experiential form of teaching and learning for anyone who uses *Khamseen*.

Our contributors go through several rounds of edits, revisions, and re-recordings in coordination with Team *Khamseen*. The goal is to produce a final result whose scholarly contents are accurate and whose audio-visual delivery is smooth, with captions and image rights carefully checked along the way by Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg. In other words, our modus operandi mimics the peer review process, and indeed many presentations can be considered "video articles"—a production
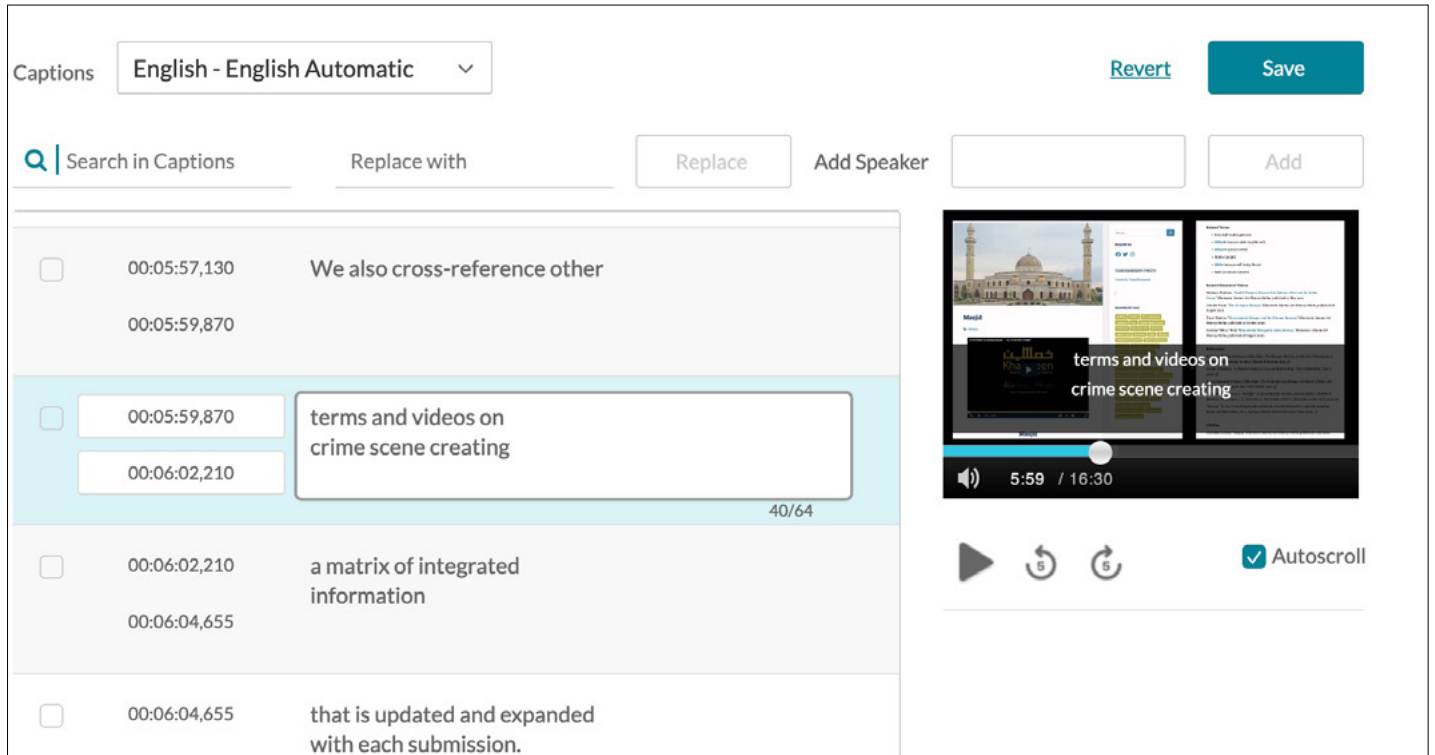
Figure 3

format that might prove central to art historical scholarship in the not-too-distant future. Additionally, *Khamseen* aims to provide scholars with tentacles into the public sphere while also supporting their career development, especially in light of the fact that publicly engaged scholarship is increasingly a criterion of tenure and promotion cases at American universities.

Khamseen talks include abstracts that are being translated into five other languages, i.e., Arabic, Persian, Turkish, French, and German. For example, a cluster of our pedagogical worksheets will soon be translated into Arabic and other languages as well. Our Translations Project Coordinator, Sarah Abou-Zied, is also overseeing the production of closed captions in Arabic as part of a pilot project that will be launched by Spring 2024. By Fall 2024, we hope to embark on a larger endeavor that will see our talks include Persian and Turkish closed captions. We also will experiment with stripping audio from anglophone talks and "dubbing" them into various Islamic languages, and we plan to ask scholars to deliver their talks in other languages, to which we will add English captions. At *Khamseen*, we think that having viewers "pivot" to languages other than English will prove beneficial in multiple ways, including through the learning of foreign languages and technical vocabulary, the altering of our positions and expectations, and the diversification of voices and approaches that comprise the present and future of our field.

For now, all our videos include closed captioning in English, overseen by Leena Ghannam, to maximize access and inclusion. We've learned how to create and fix AI-generated closed captions, and the bloopers have proved entertaining; indeed, who knew that *Khamseen* can be heard by some as "Crime Scene"? (Fig. 3). Although these errors cause giggles, they are serious business because it has now become clear to us that students in our virtual and in-person classrooms are likely not understanding up to 10% of course content. This has forced me to reevaluate my teaching techniques and to better align my oral delivery with strategically selected text in my PowerPoint slides. In addition, the percentage of lost information increases even more for those individuals who are neurodiverse, those whose native tongue is not English, and those who are hearing impaired. We have received emails by non-anglophone viewers thanking us for the captions as well as from professors asking for captions for their hearing-impaired students. The latter request came early on, so we decided to add captions to all videos as a matter of course.

At the disciplinary level, we also discovered something illuminating about the field of Islamic art history as it stands today. Our line-up includes major gaps: for instance, we still have no coverage for the Abbasids, who ruled across the Islamic world from 750 to 1250 CE. Abbasid art is a key part of the canon, as are the Fatimids, Seljuks, and Nasrids, all of which fall in the chronological bracket of 1050–1450 CE. This gaping lacuna suggests that scholars of Islamic art no longer focus preeminently on the medieval period and/or that our youngest, most eager, and tech-savvy contributors focus on early modern and modern Islamic art. Regardless of the forces at work, we are keen to find medievalist colleagues willing to contribute to *Khamseeen* and would be thrilled to receive "Topic" and "Term" proposals from ICMA members.
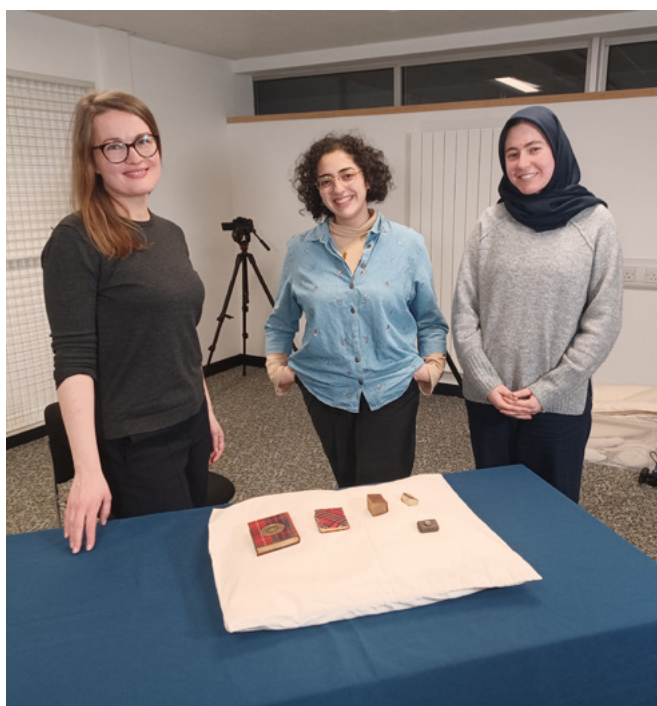

Figure 4

We also are beginning to work on some cross-institutional collaborations, a particularly promising development in the digital humanities as it enables us to break down our proverbial walls and to make visible materials that are otherwise inaccessible. Over the next few months, we will launch our first collaboration with Edinburgh University Library, where we shot hands-on videos of its famous fourteenth-century manuscript of Rashid al-Din's *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles) as well as a video talk by Mira Xenia Schwerda, *Khamseen's* Managing Director, exploring a

printed miniature Qur'an (Fig. 4). We also will continue crafting thematic modules and months, including those presently dedicated to Black History and Women's History.

In Fall 2024, *Khamseen* will launch its first special project focusing on the living history of a shrine in Varamin, Iran. It will be the first of a new series of digitally-born projects that are more expansive in their content and more dynamic in their virtual engagement. Spearheaded by international scholars and their teams of experts, these projects are more than online exhibitions. They make use of integrated technologies to explore sites, objects, and images in Islamic cultural spheres in ways that are novel and cannot be realized by conventional means, such as physical exhibitions and print publications.

In Fall 2024, we also will be introducing a new initiative that interrogates the frameworks of inquiry within the field of Islamic Art History. Joining "Terms" and "Topics," these new "Concepts," managed by Ani Kalousdian and Mira Xenia Schwerda, will focus on theoretical ideas and models and how they relate to Islamic Art History. All under ten minutes and forgoing jargon, the first cluster of "Concept" talks will focus on themes such as Modernism, Hybridity, Decolonization, and the Digital Turn.

Finally, within the coming years we hope to mobilize this growing toolkit to offer the very first MOOC (massive open online course) on Islamic art, architecture, and visual culture. I personally would relish the opportunity to teach a free and open class in coordination with international colleagues that is directed to a truly global student body, leveling access to resources and embracing multilingualism. Ideas abound but the main challenge, as always, remains a financial one. This means that we remain active in our efforts to secure grants or, most ideally, an endowment to ensure *Khamseen's* sustainability and success in perpetuity.

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