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COMMENTARY

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

Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online, which I launched with a group of fellow academics in the autumn of 2020, was originally developed as a coping response to the pedagogical constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ 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 the open-access online *Khamseen* repository with Topic and Term talks on themes and technical vocabulary falling within their fields of expertise.² In the coming year, we also will expand the website to include born-digital exhibitions and web-based projects, explorations of 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-19 winds, embracing and channelling its powerful currents. Our logo includes the Arabic-script word *khamseen*, the triple-toothed letter S of which turns into an abstracted wind-catcher [Figure 1]. Known as *badgir* in Persian, wind-catchers function as passive cooling systems.³ In light-hearted moments, I think of our collective endeavour as a ‘ventilator’ of knowledge, pumping fresh air across fields.

Keywords

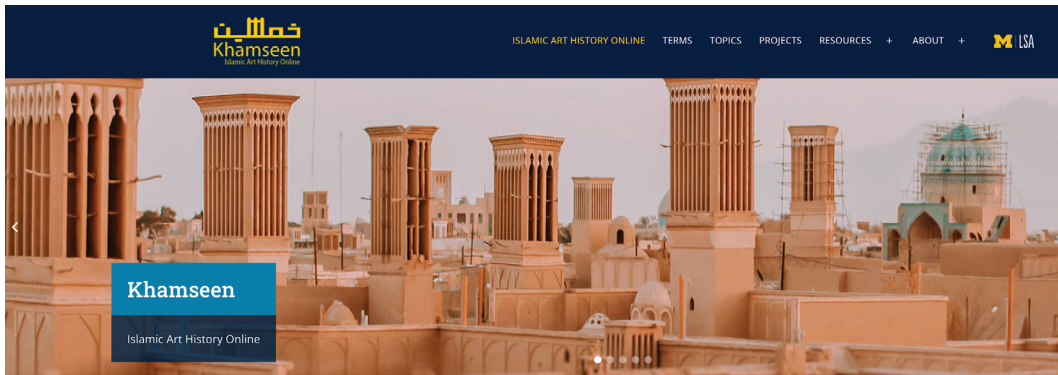
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Islamic Art History Online

Khamseen homepage, accessed May 1, 2024, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/khamseen/>.

Figure 1: *Khamseen's* homepage masthead with its logo and badgirs (wind-catchers).

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, including how to manage multiple projects at different stages of production with our team members and contributors based in different time zones. This 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.⁴ We also had to learn how to embed multimedia files into webpages, which turned *Khamseen* into the most complex and data-heavy website hosted by the University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA). Finally, we needed to understand how to store and update our data for optimal security and sustainability over the long term.

Besides our webpage, we have social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram, each of which has 1000–2000 followers, and we are also on LinkedIn. We are now exploring YouTube as another potential forum for presenting our content. From the time of our launch during the autumn of 2020 through the winter of 2024, our website has been viewed more than a quarter of a million times. This large and ever-expanding footprint has taken 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, but also that this demand stretches well beyond classrooms and academic spheres.

Structure and Process

Our online content is structured in an open-ended fashion: it 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 a suggested resource. Many of our talks are accompanied by worksheets, which help students understand key concepts, think analytically, and write comparatively, while all videos are tagged with related names, terms, and themes so viewers can craft their own learning trajectories.⁵

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Additionally, our glossary of terms 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 an exhibition vitrine, 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 all post pages. Now that many books and articles are available in the public domain, we can include hyperlinks, making information access, retrieval, and research more effective and speedier. As they navigate *Khamseen*, students and scholars therefore can shuttle between digital and print scholarship in a mutually beneficial way. This toggling between spheres can help us achieve some of the more elusive promises of the Digital Humanities: namely, a multi-modal, pluri-directional reinvigoration of human connectivity and knowledge via virtual collaboration.⁶

Along with fixing errors *a posteriori*, our ability to adjust, 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 scripts in chapters or objects in cases; 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 catalyse an engaged form of teaching and learning for anyone who uses *Khamseen*.

Our contributors go through several rounds of editing, revision, and recording, in coordination with Team *Khamseen*. In essence, the goal is to produce a peer-reviewed video article, whose scholarly contents are accurate and whose audio-visual delivery is smooth, with captions and image rights carefully checked along the way. Besides hosting these multimedia talks, *Khamseen* aims to provide scholars with tentacles into the public sphere while also supporting their career development, especially since public scholarship is increasingly a criterion of tenure and promotion cases at American universities.⁷

While English remains the dominant language at *Khamseen*, talks include abstracts that are being translated into five other languages: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, French, and German. Moreover, a cluster of our pedagogical worksheets will soon be translated into Arabic and other languages as well. We are now embarking on a larger endeavour 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 giving viewers the option to pivot to languages other than English will prove instructive in multiple ways, including to better learn foreign languages and technical vocabulary. This linguistic manoeuvre likewise can alter our positions and expectations as well as diversify the voices and approaches that comprise Islamic art broadly defined, thereby demonstrating that this type of open-access art history can decelerate what some scholars have bemoaned as an increasing uniformity of thought, methodology, and writing.⁸

Content: Present and Future

All our talks include closed captioning in English to maximize access and inclusion. We have learned how to create and fix AI-generated closed

captions, and the bloopers have proved quite entertaining; indeed, who knew that *Khamseen* can be heard as ‘crime scene?’ 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 per cent of course content.⁹ This has forced me to personally re-evaluate 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 from non-anglophone viewers thanking us for the captions as well as from professors asking for captions for their hearing-impaired students. The latter requests came early on, so we decided to include closed captions in 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 whom fall in the chronological bracket of 1050 to 1450 CE. This gaping lacuna suggests that scholars of Islamic art no longer focus pre-eminently on the medieval period and/or that our youngest, most eager, and tech-savvy contributors focus on early modern and modern Islamic art, the latter a topic that has long been neglected in the discipline. Regardless of the forces at work, we are keen to find colleagues willing to contribute to *Khamseen* and would be thrilled to receive Topic and Term proposals from experts of medieval Islamic art and architecture in particular.

We have also started to embark on cross-institutional collaborations. The first of these is a Hands-On initiative that takes scholars, students, and general audiences into museums, libraries, and other repositories around the world. As they work in reading rooms, storage facilities, and conservation labs, local and international experts handle and present various original Islamic artworks and visual materials, thus offering virtual access, and various curatorial approaches, to objects that often are not on display or accessible. This type of teaching is thus experiential since students learn by doing, albeit virtually.¹⁰

We launched our first Hands-On collaboration in Spring 2024 with the University of Edinburgh Library. We shot handling videos of its famous fourteenth-century manuscript of Rashid al-Din’s *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), which explore its provenance and paintings of the Prophet Muhammad.¹¹ The latter topic was deemed pressing as a form of public pedagogy in the wake of the Hamline University debacle, which saw the termination of an adjunct professor for including an image of this manuscript in her survey of global art.¹² Other presentations exploring various aspects of the *Jami’ al-Tawarikh* – including its author Rashid al-Din, the text’s contents, the manuscript’s state of preservation, and its images of India, the Jewish prophets, and Alexander the Great – will be added over time by leading scholars.

While at the University of Edinburgh Library, Mira Schwerda, *Khamseen’s* Managing Director, produced a Hands-On presentation on a miniature Qur’an printed in Glasgow c.1900 CE [Figure 2].¹³ It takes viewers into the world of Lilliputian books, exploring these items’ reliance on earlier Ottoman manuscripts along with their apotropaic use by Muslim soldiers who fought on the battlefields of World War I. This module on Islamic manuscripts and rare books in the University of Edinburgh Library will grow over the years



University of Edinburgh Library, RB.S.4656. Photograph by Mira Schwerda.

Figure 2: A miniature Qur'an, after a manuscript calligraphed by Hafiz Osman, photolithographed in golden ink, published by David Bryce, Glasgow, c.1900.

with other handling videos of the library's manuscripts. Such scaffolded and synergistic endeavours can be replicated in tailored ways for other institutions seeking to disseminate reliable and engaging information about their Islamic holdings.

Within the realm of architecture, in autumn 2024 *Khamseen* will launch its first special project focusing on the living history of the Emamzadeh Yahya in Varamin, Iran [Figure 3]. It will be the first of a new series of born-digital architectural projects that are more expansive in their content and more dynamic in their virtual engagement. The Emamzadeh Yahya is simultaneously an architectural monument of Iran's Ilkhanid period, a living sacred space and community cemetery, a cultural heritage site that has experienced destruction, renovation, and renewal, and an object on display in over forty museums worldwide.¹⁴ Spearheaded by Keelan Overton, the online exhibition will

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Hamid Abhari.

Figure 3: Interior of the Imamzadeh Yahya at Varamin. Photographed in 2024.

offer an alternative museological space for exploring the shrine's many looks, functions, resonances, users, and stories over the last seven hundred years. The project involves an international team of a dozen collaborators and is part of a larger multi-year research effort devoted to the shrine. *Khamseen's* born-digital projects are thus much more than simply online exhibitions. They make use of integrated technologies – such as 3D models, photo timelines, ArcGIS StoryMaps, short films, multimedia presentations, and audio files – to explore sites, landscapes, 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. As Lorenz Korn has recently noted for digital Islamic architectural endeavours, the Varamin project will help build a deeper conceptual and more reliable reservoir of information over time.¹⁵

Finally, soon we 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 will explore theoretical ideas and models and how they relate to Islamic art history. Specifically targeting undergraduate and graduate students, the first cluster of Concept talks will focus on themes such as Iconography, Vision and Gaze, Modernism, Hybridity, Decolonization, and the Digital Turn, among others. They are in part inspired by the positive student response we received to Alex Dika Seggerman's talk on Orientalism, which is conceptual and historiographical rather than thematic or linguistic.¹⁶

Concluding Thoughts

When it comes to ambitious or 'pie-in-the-sky' imaginings, within the next five years we hope to mobilize *Khamseen's* expanding toolkit to offer the very first MOOC (massive open online course) on Islamic art, architecture, and

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visual culture. I personally would relish the opportunity to teach an entirely free and open-access class in coordination with international colleagues that is directed to a truly global student body, levelling access to resources and embracing multilingualism. Ideas and possibilities abound but the main challenge, as always, remains a financial one. We must continue to secure grants or, most ideally, an endowment to ensure *Khamseen's* sustainability and success in perpetuity.

Leaving questions about the long-term future aside, *Khamseen* helped us ride the proverbial 'winds of change' as we coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. Along the way, we discovered the unexpected silver linings of working in a remote fashion, such as the possibility of bringing our colleagues' voices and expertise into our classrooms, connecting experts with audiences worldwide, translating scholarship into accessible public knowledge, enabling virtual access to objects and materials held in international repositories, bypassing pay walls and language barriers, and creating more dynamic, engaging, and time-sensitive pedagogical interventions in the public domain. These are all opportunities offered by the Digital Turn, and they will benefit and energize the field of Islamic art and architecture for decades to come.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. Founding and current members of the team are introduced at 'Team Khamseen', *Khamseen*, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/khamseen/team-khamseen>.
2. A complete list of contributors can be found at 'Khamseen Contributors', *Khamseen*, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/khamseen/about/contributors/>. Topic and Term talks can be found, respectively, at 'Topics', *Khamseen*, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/khamseen/topics/>, and 'Terms', *Khamseen*, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/khamseen/terms/>.
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