

Choose a book on a subject related to your proposed research topic and write a book review of approximately 1000 words

Introduction

One of the first books that brought information about Islamic architecture to the Western world is *Landmarks of the World's Art: the World of Islam* by Ernst Grube (1966). This was published at a time when there was considerable interest in the exoticism of the East amongst the general public. The East was usually only seen by rich travellers, but detailed and inexpensive colour photography meant that books could bring the world to readers. This short review looks at several details of the book, including its author, readership, and value.

Review

Intended for the general public as well as for academics, *The World of Islam* focuses as much upon illustrations as it does upon the written word. The pictures are designed to appeal to wide ranges of audiences, and serve the purpose of conveying large amounts of visual information. Iconic landmarks such as the Taj Mahal are included in order to showcase the finest examples of Islamic architectural design.



Figure One: The Shah Mosque in Isfahan, which is one of the earliest examples of Iwan Mosques



Figure Two: The Taj Mahal, one of the iconic masterpieces of Islamic Architecture

Grube was a German art historian, and his interest in Islamic art was considered revolutionary at the time (Hillenbrand, 2004). A professor with an affiliation with many of the top institutions in the US, Germany, and Italy, Grube was the leading scholar of the style. As he had curated and worked in iconic and diverse institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the University of Venice, Grube had been exposed to a wide range of audiences. Therefore, as a writer he was well placed to know how to reach his many potential readerships. It is clear from reading the book that Grube aimed for a balance between information for academics and information aimed at capturing a readership.

Writing for a readership that may well know nothing about a subject is a challenge, and Grube overcame this with his approach to structure. Rather than simply describing buildings, Grube gives a detailed introduction to the complex blend of cultures and ideas that have come together to inform the Islamic styles. One of the

most important elements of this is the anti-imagism within Islam (Bloom and Blair, 2009). Grube carefully constructs a narrative that explains why Islamic art and architecture looks as it does.

The main argument of the book is that different dynastic legacies have left different imprints on the architectural landscape. In other words, it assumes that the readership may have a pre-formed idea of what Islamic structures are like, and sets out to show that there is both incredible diversity and incredible complexity in the end result of each building (Grube and Michell, 1978). Grube argues that each piece of Islamic architecture can be visualised not just by how it appears in the present day, but as a structure that contains many layers of sociocultural and political history.

The book itself reads as something as a journey, discussing the history of Islam and the history of its architecture. The two are of course inseparable (Grabar, 1987); but Grube makes the link between historical precedent and eventual outcome very clear. This is arguably unsurprising as during this era there was a surge in interest in origins (Hatt and Klonk, 2006). This is because for the first time in many years the art of non-Christian civilisations was being considered, discussed, and evaluated as if it had as much integrity as recent Western art. For instance, Medieval art and architecture was considered seriously for the first time (Sekules, 2001), and with this came a renewed interest in the East (Bloom and Blair, 2009). A flurry of academic discourse accompanied the interest in the skills of other cultures (Hatt and Klonk, 2006).

What the book does not have the scope to cover is the history of Islamic design influences in any depth. They are mentioned, but Grube's aim was to capture the interest of a wide range of readers, and this meant not alienating them by going into too much detail. The book is very much focused upon presenting what is there rather than giving a detailed discussion of how the end product began. This may not, however, necessarily be Grube 'leaving out' elements of Islamic art and architecture: as one of the first authoritative texts on the subject many of the key questions had not been formed in 1966. It is books such as this that have given the next generation

of scholars the information that they need to start exploring the deeper phenomenology of these issues.

One of the most striking aspects of the book, aside from the pictures, is the clarity of the language. This makes it highly readable. The tone is formal, but engaging and informative, neither patronising the reader nor alienating him or her. This is a style that was just beginning to emerge in the 1960s, when informational texts began to be more widely available to the general public (Bloom and Blair, 2009). It is arguably this that is the most successful element of the book: it is able to provide a comprehensive introduction to the subject that provides the basics for both beginners and academics.

Conclusion

The value of the book is therefore in its appeal to multiple audiences. It has an authenticity that comes from it have been written by one of the leading scholars of the topic, meaning that it is filled with detailed knowledge and information that is meticulously structured and organised. However, this multi-audience approach is also its greatest limitation for those looking for a more in-depth analysis of designs, stylistic content, and materials of Islamic art and architecture. This is partly simply because audiences have evolved, and the average reader in 2014 is likely to have a good basic knowledge of what Islamic art and architecture looks like due to exposure on the television and Internet, meaning that this book really was aimed as an introduction. However, it remains a popular introductory text that provides the baseline for much contemporary discussion.

References

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