

Article

# Muhammad at the Museum: Or, Why the Prophet Is Not Present

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**Abstract:** This article analyses museum responses to the contemporary tensions and violence in response to images of Muhammad, from *The Satanic Verses* to *Charlie Hebdo*. How does this socio-political frame effect the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NY, the V&A and British Museum in London, and the Louvre in Paris? Different genres of museums and histories of collections in part explain differences in approaches to representations of Muhammad. The theological groundings for a possible ban on prophetic depictions is charted, as well as the widespread Islamic practices of making visual representations of the Prophet. It is argued that museological framings of the religiosity of Muslims become skewed when the veneration of the Prophet is not represented.

**Keywords:** museums; Islam; Muhammad; Islamicate cultural heritage; images; exhibitions; Islamic art; collection management

## 1. Introduction

One seldom comes across the Prophet Muhammad in museum exhibitions of Islamicate heritage. The aim of this article is to analyze the framings of this absence, and to discuss how it affects the representations of Islam given in museums. Critical frame analysis will be used to analyze empirical material consisting of the displays in museums with major exhibits of Islamicate material culture in the US, Germany, France, the UK, Turkey and Iran in 2015–2018. The contemporary socio-political frame will be uncovered from media coverage of conflicts around non-Muslim representations of Muhammad from the Rushdie affair to the present.<sup>1</sup> To understand different possible Islamic framings of representations of the Prophet, Islamic theological and devotional traditions will be consulted. This will show that the prevalent framing of images of the Prophet as controversial and dangerous fails to distinguish between Islamic and non-Muslim representations of the Prophet. It is argued that the absence of Muhammad in exhibitions of Islamicate collections leads to skewed representations of Islam.

### 1.1. Public Framings of Islam as Potentially Violent

In the post-9/11-era exhibitions of Islamicate museum collections are increasingly framed as introductions to Islam, and as means to create tolerance and understanding of Muslims (Grinell et al. 2019). This can be understood as a reactive response to the large-scale dissemination of images of Islam as misogynist, homophobic and violent (Larsson and Spielhaus 2013).

On the more particular topic of this article, we can see how repeated tensions around representations of Muhammad, from the literary one in Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic verses* to caricatures in

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a larger investigation of museological framings of Islam (Grinell 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Berg and Grinell 2018, forthcoming).

*Jyllands-Posten* and *Charlie Hebdo*, has mainstreamed an idea that portraying the Prophet of Islam is punishable within Islam. A result of these public framings of Islam as potentially violent is that the Islamic depictions of Muhammad present in most Islamicate museum collections are rarely chosen for display in the galleries.

### 1.2. Frame Analysis

Critical frame analysis consists of a “mapping of the different ways in which an issue is framed” in order to understand how institutional, cognitive, discursive and emotional frames determine interpretation, discourse and possible actions (Verloo and Lombardo 2007, pp. 31–42). In linguistics, ‘frame’ can be defined as “structured packages of knowledge or expectations that shape the way in which humans enact or interpret their experiences” (Fillmore 2008, p. 1). This article focuses mainly on the sociopolitical and representational framings of “Islam” in the post-9/11 era, and how they can explain the absence of Muhammad in museums exhibiting Islamicate heritage (Grinell 2016, 2020).

### 1.3. Conceptualizations of Islamdom

To be able to discuss the representation of Islam in general, and Muhammad in particular, I find it helpful to make distinctions between Islamic religious traditions, Islamdom, and Muslim and Islamicate culture and cultural heritage. Historian Marshall Hodgson in his classic *The Venture of Islam* introduced the terms Islamicate and Islamdom to exchange the biases and ambiguities of the term Islamic for a terminology that can differentiate religion from society and culture. Post-structuralism and other later theoretical developments have shown how any attempt to order, categorize and explain the world will always be incomplete and create systems of value not stemming from the world-in-itself. Even so, a more nuanced terminology is still helpful for unpacking the many framings of ‘Islam’ (Derrida 1978; Sayyid 2003; Ahmed 2015). Hodgson started by making a distinction between Islamic as a term for religious phenomena and Muslim for cultural traits common among Muslims. In order to talk about the areas under influence from Islamic religion, he coined the phrase “Islamdom”. In analogy with the concept Christendom, Islamdom denotes the society that carries a culture/civilization. Hodgson urges us to talk about “the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions” (Hodgson 1974, p. 58). This leaves Islamic as a term for Muslim religious aspects of these Islamicate cultural traditions that also include Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other cultural actors within the lands of Islamdom. Like the term Christian art, Islamic art would thus only cover artistic expressions of religious ideas and functions (Hodgson 1974, pp. 31–58; Grinell 2018a). This terminology will be adopted in this article.

## 2. Museum Settings

There are four main types of exhibitions on Islam, where Islamic representations of Muhammad might thus appear (Ådahl and Åhlund 2000; Kamel 2013; Berg and Grinell 2018, forthcoming). The oldest and most well established is in permanent galleries of Islamic art in major so-called ‘universal museums’. This framing of Islamic art can be traced back to the seminal 1910 exhibition of Islamic art in Munich (Lerner and Shalem 2010). The second is in the similarly institutionalized genre of ethnographic museums (Pfluger-Schindlbeck 2012; Paine 2013). Thirdly, exhibitions on migration and multi-culturalism in Europe sometimes relate, if in often vague ways, to the heritage of immigrant Muslims (Shatanawi 2012a). The fourth and more recent category of exhibitions is temporary exhibitions addressing Islamophobia and/or contemporary everyday lives of Muslims (Shatanawi 2012b). The aim here is not to give an extensive catalogue of exhibitions in each category (see Berg and Grinell). Instead, this article focuses on why Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam and the first leader of Muslim society, is almost absent in these exhibitions.

In Europe, there have been major recent investments in new galleries for Islamic artefacts, often with financial support from the Gulf and Saudi Arabia (Grinell et al. 2019). The V&A opened a new gallery of Islamic Art in 2006, the Ashmolean Museum in 2009, as did the Louvre in 2012 and the

British Museum in 2018; the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin is working for a re-launch in 2026 as one of the final parts of the great Museum Island project.

The political-rhetorical framing of most of the mentioned re-development projects express that they shall produce tolerance for the Muslims living in the cities and countries where the museums are located (Grinell 2016; Berg and Grinell). The selection of objects still reflects traditional museological principles focused on the most significant and beautiful artifacts; and a similarly old canon of material categories—ceramics, glass, metal, calligraphy, miniature painting and carpets (Karp and Lavine 1991; Heath 2007; Cuno 2011; Kamel and Gerbich 2014; Grinell 2016, 2020).

Gülru Necipoglu has argued that the post-9/11 era represented a backlash where stereotypes and outdated approaches have returned and been strengthened in documentaries, exhibitions and new museums of Islamic art. There is a widening gap between simplistic popularization frames of Islamic cultural heritage as a past civilization without direct contact to contemporary lived Islam, and the more and more complex academic interpretations of Islamic visual cultures (Necipoglu 2013; Fakatseli and Sachs 2008).

The framing of Islam as potentially violent is so strong that it is highly likely that an appearance of an image of Muhammad in a museum will create tensions and debate, as has recently been the case with for example the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Victoria and Albert in London. Institutions like the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin and the British Museum in London seems to have accepted the limitations set by the frame. At least they have not publicized any representations of the Prophet. Framings are however always situated and non-determinant (Butler 2009). The David Collection in Copenhagen, the Louvre in Paris and the National Museum of Iran in Teheran all display visual representations of the Prophet without any reported incidents or public protests.

Almost all Islamic art exhibitions we studied in the project *Museological framings of Islam in Europe* opened with a brief encyclopedia-like introduction to Islam that normally mentions Mecca, Muhammad, the five pillars of Islam and the rapid spread of the Islamic Empire in the 7th century (Grinell et al. 2019). Muhammad is named as the Prophet of Islam in this narrative, but how and to what extent his example has formed the various developments of Islamic and Muslim lifes, and Islamicate cultures is never addressed. No room is given to the central role the veneration of the Prophet has played, and continues to play, in Muslim piety throughout Islamdom (Schimmel 1985; Katz 2007; Elias 2012, p. 273). Not only is this a historically inaccurate image of the practice of Islam. When these important aspects of Islamic piety and material culture are left outside the frames, Muslim life is depersonalized, and a good opportunity to counter prevailing stereotypes is lost.

### *Collecting and Collections*

The absence of Muhammad in Museum galleries is also framed by the history of collecting and museum formation. The collections on which most exhibitions of Islamicate art are built were not collected to represent the religion of Islam. Most collections of “Islamic art” have their origin with collectors interested in arts & crafts and bourgeois orientalism (Vernoit 2000; Berg and Grinell). The ethnographic frame of collecting considered Islam as a foreign intrusion and contamination of the pure indigenous cultures. Ethnography aimed to capture cultures before they were tainted and destroyed by outside influence (Coombes 1994; Muñoz 2011; Grinell and Renius 2013). Objects collected for ethnographic museums were chosen for the cultural functions and meanings they represented, meaning that most often they were not made, used or collected with a focus on their beauty (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

There are also archeological collections more directly centered on the material traces of Islamicate Empires. In the British Museum and the Museum of Islamic art in Berlin, these play a significant role in the representation of Islam as a world civilization (Berg and Grinell).

The material aspects of religious practices and experiences of Muslims have seldom been the focus of collecting, with noteworthy exemptions like Rudolph Otto’s collection of material for religious phenomenology in Marburg.

Most large museums in the West have visual representations of Muhammad in their collections, since depictions of Muhammad have been present in Islamicate (courtly) traditions, especially in Iran, South Asia, Central Asia, and Turkey, i.e., the Persianate, non-Arab lands, where a majority of Muslims have lived and live. Today, this tradition is strongest in Iran (Hussain 2010; Gruber 2018). A more widespread and un-contested form of visual representation of the Prophet is in the form of calligraphic descriptions of him and his physical beauty (Elias 2012, pp. 236–83). Such calligraphy is found in most museum collections and many exhibitions. The meaning and use of these kinds of calligraphic representations were not explicitly addressed in the exhibitions studied for this article.

### 3. The Prophet of Islam

The veneration and love of the Prophet Muhammad has played and continues to play a very important role in the religious life of many Muslims in large parts and segments of the Islamic world, even if it is contested by for example modern Wahhabism (Schimmel 1985; Noyes 2013). Throughout Islamic history, Muhammad has been vividly portrayed, even if often in words rather than in images (Gruber 2009; Elias 2012; Ekhtiar 2014). When this is not represented, the image of Islam is affected.

The canonical understanding of Islam holds that Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim was a man, who, at the age of 40, received a revelation from God and a mission to spread God’s word to the Arabs and the world. During the last decade of his life, he created a new society in Medina in the Arab peninsula. After his death in 632 CE, his followers and successors developed the Islamic religion, the empire of Islamdom and Islamicate cultures (Safi 2009, Ali 2014).

The core of Islamic doctrine is the submission under God and the acceptance of the message and commandments of the Qur’an, the book that is believed to have come down to the prophet Muhammad through revelation. Together with the example of the Prophet and his companions (the *sunna*), this is taken as the main source of Islamic theologies, ethics, law and piety (Waines 2003).<sup>2</sup>

### 4. From the Satanic verses to Charlie Hebdo

The current tension around depictions of the Prophet is the result of a series of contemporary incidents. A “watershed event” in this development is the so-called Rushdie affair in 1989 (Vidino 2010, p. 121; Malik 2017). In the novel *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie recycled old Christian stereotypes about the libidinous Mahound (Muhammad) and had a Bollywood actor transform into the archangel Gabriel (Gibreel) giving revelations to Muhammad in Mecca. The book won the Whitbread Award for novel of the year in 1988 but, in 1989, stirred uproar in some Muslim communities. Already in 1988, the book was banned in Pakistan and, in February 1989, Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a call that Rushdie should be killed for his mocking of the beloved prophet of Islam. (It can be noted that also the Ayatollah himself was caricaturized in the novel.) There were repeated and violent protests throughout the world, causing many bookshops to refrain from having the book in stock. Several persons were killed—most of them by anti-protest police violence. Rushdie himself was forced to a life in hiding (Rushdie 1988; Sardar and Davies 1990; Hussain 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Different interpretations of the relationship between Qur’an and *sunna*, and on what are reliable sources to the *sunna* explain many of the foundational differences of the schools, branches and traditions of Islam. The sayings of the Prophet are called hadith and can be found in a number of classical collections. For Sunni Muslims, the most authoritative ones are by al-Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim (d. 875). The hadith collections of Ibn Maja (d. 886), Abu Da’ud (d. 888), al-Tirmidhi (d. 892) and al-Nasa’i (d. 915) are also seen as authentic in Sunni Islam and known as authentic (*Sahih*), even if the Maliki school excludes Ibn Maja for the benefit of the *Muwatta* of Malik ibn Anas (d. 795). Even if they share this canonical material, different Sunni schools of law interpret it differently. The various branches of Shi’ism have their own authoritative collections—for Twelver Shi’ism, the *Kitab al-Kafi* by al-Kulyani (d. 941), *Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih* by Ibn Babawayh (d. 991), *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* and *Al-Istibsar*, by Shaykh Tusi (d. 1067). Ibadhi Shi’ism use *Tartib al-Musnad* by al-Warjilani (d. 1175), whereas Ismaili’s prefer the *Da’a’im al-Islam* by al-Qadi al-Numan (d. 974) (Burton 1994; Brown 2017). The hadith collections are all thematically arranged, and it is therefore hard to get an image of Muhammad’s life journey from them. This interest was instead covered in the biographical *Sira* literature, historical works narrating the life of the Prophet. The Sunni classics are by ibn Ishaq (d. 767), Ibn Sa’d (d. 845), al-Baladhuri (d. 892) and al-Tabari (d. 923) (Khalidi 2009, p. 16).

The Rushdie affair, the coinciding fall of the Iron Curtain and the civil war in Afghanistan, with the eventual victory of the Taliban, resulted in a surge of Muslim enemy images in media and popular culture. The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York heightened the Western fear of Islamist terrorism, culminating with the destructive al-Qaida attack on the WTC in 2001. On the more particular topic of visual representations of the Prophet Muhammad, the next phases of controversies came with the Danish Cartoon crisis in 2005–2006; the allusions to depicting Muhammad in the comedy cartoon *South Park* 2005–2010; the Muhammad drawings by Swedish artist Lars Vilks in 2007; and the *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures and the attack on the magazine in 2015 that killed 12 people (Yaqin and Morey 2011; Elias 2012, p. 2; Green 2019).

#### *Responding to Critique, Protests, Threats and Violence*

In the aftermath of the Danish cartoon crisis, the German Opera in Berlin in September 2006 cancelled four performances of the Mozart opera *Idomeneo* because the director in a scene where Idomeneo in the original libretto enters the stage with the severed head of Neptune had added heads of the Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad. The decision to cancel shows met with massive critique of alleged self-censorship, arguing that no actual threats had been directed towards the opera house (Dempsey and Landler 2006). In January 2010, the Metropolitan Museum of Art confirmed that it had removed the historical Islamic works depicting Muhammad from public display during its interim exhibition. The Islamicate galleries were reopened in 2011 under the name “Art from the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia”. Further, here the critique argued for self-censorship: “Museums shouldn’t shy away from showing this in a historical context,” said Kishwar Rizvi, historian of Islamic Art at Yale University (Vincent 2010). In the new galleries, the Metropolitan eventually included a display on “The Prophet Muhammad and the origins of Islam,” where several Islamic depictions of Muhammad are featured. The museum web resource for educators introduces the theme with the following nuanced paragraph:

Commissioned by Muslims for Muslims, these images appear in biographies of the Prophet and his family, world and local histories, and accounts of Muhammad’s celestial journey (*mi’raj*), as well as in literary texts. In each context, they serve a distinct purpose. They illustrate a narrative in biographies and histories, while in literary texts they serve as visual analogues to written praises of the Prophet. An image of the Prophet Muhammad at the beginning of a book endows the volume with the highest form of blessing and sanctity. Thus, illustration of him was a common practice, particularly in the eastern regions of the Islamic world.<sup>3</sup>

It could be added that such representations of Muhammad have mostly been restricted for elite consumption (Elias 2012, p. 38).

If museums and libraries bend to the pressure of protesters claiming to talk in the name of Islam, they inadvertently become part in mainstreaming contemporary Muslim mobilization for a radical framing of Islam (Vidino 2010; Grinell 2017b). The acceptance of an Islamic condemnation of images of the Prophet is also an effect of the Arabocentrism of classical and journalistic framings of Islam, where the historical Arab so-called ‘heartlands of Islam’ and the texts produced there are taken as representing ‘true Islam’ (Hodgson 1974; Sayyid 2003; al-Azmeh 2009).

#### **5. Are (Some) Images Forbidden in Islam?**

A first distinction must be made between images of living beings and the depiction of the beloved prophet of Islam. All museums surveyed in our project on museological framings of Islam exhibited visual representations of human beings. These are most often found in miniature paintings, on ceramics

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/curriculum-resources/art-of-the-islamic-world/unit-one/the-prophet-muhammad-and-the-origins-of-islam>.

and in engravings in metalwork. We found no exhibit label discussing any possible theological impermissibility of such images. Depictions of humans are legion also in radical Salafi circles as well as in orthodox Muslim media and communication, even if there has been continuous theological debate on the issue (Larsson 2011, pp. 47–70).

It is a widespread contemporary belief in the West that images are not allowed in Islam. One of the main difficulties in untangling this conception is to break free of the abstract and dichotomous frame of West vs. Islam (al-Azmeh 2009). As Silvia Naef has argued, the current conflicts around images of Muhammad has more to do with migration and social conflict than with the possible impermissibility of images in Islam. Naef ends her discussion of images in Islam with a provocative rhetorical question if the perceived ban on images in Islam is not a bigger concern in the West than it is within Islam (Naef 2007, p. 137).

As we have already seen, there are a range of differing opinions regarding images present in the broad traditions that make up Islam (Elias 2012). The Qur'anic verse most often quoted as a support for a ban on images is Sura al-Maida (no. 5), verse 9, In Marmaduke Pickthall's translation, it reads: "O ye who believe! Strong drink and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are only an infamy of Satan's handiwork. Leave it aside in order that ye may succeed" (Pickthall 1930). The most common alternative translation is to interpret 'idols' (*nusub*) as "idolatrous practices" (Asad 1980) or "dedication to stones" (Malik 1997) or "idolatrous sacrifices at altars" (Al-Halili and Khan 2000).

The literal meaning of the word *nusub* is idol or statue, and the form it is used in implies treating them as idols worthy of worship. In the hadith literature, there are more explicit mentions of images. In *Sahih Bukhari* it is said that "Angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or a picture" (al-Bukhari 1997, Book 5, hadith no. 338). What kind of image this refers to is a question of interpretation. There are also historical narratives of how the Prophet Muhammad on the conquest of Mecca cleared the Kaaba of idols before he prayed there. In another hadith, the Prophet is asked by a man if it is permissible to pray in a direction where there is an image (*tamathil*). The Prophet answered that the man should put a piece of cloth over the image when he prayed. In *Sahih Bukhari*, the prophet's wife Aisha narrates how the prophet allowed her and her friends to play with dolls when she was little (al-Bukhari 1997, Book 8, no.151).

In *Sahih Muslim*, Ali ibn Abu Talib recalls a mission he received from the Prophet: "Do not leave an image without obliterating it, or a high grave without levelling it" (Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj 2007, Book 11, no. 31). In all these cases, it seems reasonable to interpret the ban and condemnations to be directed against idols and images meant for worship.

A stronger condemnation of images is also found in *Sahih Bukhari*, "'Whoever makes a picture will be punished by Allah till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it.' Hearing this, that man heaved a sigh and his face turned pale. Ibn 'Abbas said to him, 'What a pity! If you insist on making pictures I advise you to make pictures of trees and any other unanimated objects'" (al-Bukhari 1997, Book 3, no. 428) The making of images of living beings is understood as a challenge to the exclusive creatorship of God.

In his rich "iconological quest for Islamic culture," Jamal Elias argues that even if there exists "a negative-leaning ambivalence" in Islamic traditions, "it is impossible to speak in terms of comprehensive and pervasive perspectives on religious images, be they of Muslim or non-Muslim origin or content" (Elias 2012, pp. 13, 26).

From the examples and sources cited above, it seems as if the common opinion is that the tension around images relates to either 1. The ungodly desire to create, or 2. The risk of falling into polytheism and idolatry. Even if there have been scholars who have opposed all images, we can see that visual representations have continuously been made by people considering themselves to be pious Muslims (Naef 2007; Elias 2012; Gruber 2018).

To go beyond the legalistic frames of the discussions about images in Islam, Elias investigates Islamic theories of representation in scientific works on alchemy, optics and dreaming, as well as in philosophy and Sufism (Elias 2012). As Oliver Leaman has also shown, there are also ambivalences

towards images that are unrelated to the Prophet's criticism of idolatry. One of the philosophical concerns Leaman explicates is a worry that "creative visual representation will result in reason being overwhelmed." (Leaman 2004, p. 57) The power of images could overthrow the balanced perception of the world that according to this argument was a key to a correct understanding of creation, which in turn was seen as a prerequisite for correct behavior. Another concern found in the philosophical material Leaman discusses is that "concentrating on the visual obstructs understanding how things really are" (Leaman 2004, p. 59). Even if the natural world was often described as a book to be read and understood, the philosopher should seek the deeper patterns and meanings of phenomena, and not be caught up with the visual surface.

### *Representing the Beauty of the Prophet of Islam*

There are in fact more common and widespread artistic expressions of the veneration of the Prophet in Islamic traditions than pictorial images (Elias 2012). Already in the canonized hadith-collections, there are numerous testimonies and descriptions from his companions on the beauty of the Prophet. The hadith scholar al-Tirmidhi even made a separate compilation of these traditions called *Kitab al-Shama'il al-Muhammadiyah*. This inspired poets and singers to compose odes on the beauty and character of the Prophet. The widespread masterpiece being the *Burda* by al-Busiri (1211–1294) (Homerin; Pinckney Stetkevych 2010; Vimercati Sanseverino 2014). In the 16th-century Ottoman Empire, it became popular to make calligraphic artworks of descriptions of the beauty of the Prophet, called *Hilya al-Nabi* (Behiery 2014; Brunner 2014). These were inspired by a contemporary poetic adaptation of al-Tirmidhi's material by Hakani Mehmet Bey (Elias 2012, p. 273). Throughout Muslim history, other traces of Muhammad has also functioned as visual representations of him, for example, his cloak, hairs of his beard, his sandals and footprints, and other relics (*athar*) from the Prophet. There are also abundant visual representations of these relics. Even the name of the Prophet is considered a source for blessings (*baraka*) (Schimmel 1985; Elias 2012).

Idealizing portrayals of the Prophet are thus a constant in Islamic veneration (Khalidi 2009; Elias 2012, p. 273). As South Asian-Pakistani poet Muhammad Iqbal said, the prophet Muhammad "runs like blood through the veins of his community" (Bennett 1998, p. 190).

Visual representations are not very prominent expressions of the veneration of the Prophet, even if they might also play a role for example in the celebrations of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid*). The celebration of the Prophet's birthday and the recitation of *mawlid* texts "was overwhelmingly accepted and practiced by Muslims at all levels of education and authority", writes Marion Holmes Katz (Katz 2007, p. 169). In recent years, Saudi-sponsored global Wahhabism has actively challenged the legitimacy of *mawlid* and other popular expressions of love for the Prophet (Farquhar 2016).

A ubiquitous form of respecting the Prophet is the uttering of the *tasliya*, the calling for peace and blessings on Muhammad, which is by most considered as a part of the obligatory daily *salat* prayers. The *tasliya* blessing of the Prophet is also prescribed in response to the call for prayers, and at every mention of Muhammad (Schimmel 1985, pp. 92–104). In most pious texts, every mention of the Prophet is followed by *pbup* (for peace and blessings be upon him) or *saw* (for *salla allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) in parenthesis.

When the extensive love and respect for the Prophet is missing from the representation of Islam, important aspects of piety, passion, folklore, festivity, music, beauty and the beloved role model of the Muslims will be missing. As Annemarie Schimmel has stated:

All will agree that the personality of Muhammad is indeed, besides the Koran, the center of the Muslims' life; the Prophet is the one who forever remains the 'beautiful model' (sura 33:21) for the life of all those who acknowledge in the profession of faith that he is truly 'the messenger of God'. (Schimmel 1985, p. 5)

Rather than breaking with Islamic laws on depiction, it was the perceived demeaning of Muhammad as comforter, friend, intercessor and family member—the beautiful model—that

triggered the protests and violent attacks (Khalidi 2009, p. ix). The central issue might not be whether portraying the Prophet is punishable or not, but rather that out-group depictions made within a frame of self-proclaimed Western superiority are interpreted as attacks on Muslim identity (Sardar and Davies 1990).

## 6. Exhibiting Muhammad, or Not?

As said, many museums and libraries have depictions of Muhammad in their collections. Increasingly since the Rushdie affair, they are framed as difficult, and any decision on how to handle them is likely to stir controversy and critique, even security risks. Many have kept on displaying them, such as the Bibliothèque National in Paris in 2011, without any reported incidents. In 2013, the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam exhibited an image of Muhammad made by an Iranian artist next to a Christian icon, stressing the difference between devotional and respectful in-group images and mocking out-group caricatures (Shatanawi 2014; Muñoz-Alonso 2015).

As argued above, this distinction between in- and out-group representations pointed to also by the Metropolitan Museum is essential, if often obscured in the public discourse on representations of Muhammad. The distinction between a social group to which a person identifies as a member (in-group) and one with which the person does not identify (out-group) is crucial for understanding conflicts within the frame of identity politics. How we interpret for example an image depends as much on content as on if we perceive it coming from within our outside of our group (Brewer 1999). This distinction produces fundamental phenomenological and hermeneutical differences in how we interpret intentions in the subjects or objects we encounter (Kearney and Semonovitch 2011).

The material for this article can now be qualified as museological framings of devotional in-group images of Muhammad, and their place in representing Islamic faith and spirituality. Since the Rushdie affair, such images have become increasingly framed by heightened sociopolitical tensions around Muslim migrants in the West, and terrorist attacks perpetrated in the name of Islam (Fekete 2009, Yaqin and Morey 2011). In 2014, Edinburgh University Library hosted an exhibition of a 14th-century Persian manuscript without showing the images of Muhammad found in the manuscript. *The Guardian* interviewed the art historian Christiane Gruber, who has written extensively on images of the prophet (Gruber 2009, 2013, 2014, 2018). Gruber stated that:

There is no artistic reason whatsoever why those folios should have been left out. The paintings of Muhammad are superb and form a significant part of the manuscript's pictorial programme. I worry that our institutions of culture and learning are muting these significant Islamic works of figural art due to a variety of fears. This is a real shame and a terrible loss for our shared global artistic heritage. (Graham-Harrison 2015)

According to *The Guardian* in 2015 “no sacred images of Muhammad are on public display in the UK” (Graham-Harrison 2015). This is a reflection of the strong ‘tolerance and community engagement’ framing of the British museum sector (Crooke 2007; Sandell 2007; Morse 2018).

The most recent large-scale installations of Islamicate heritage in Europe are found in “the Albukhary foundation gallery of the Islamic world” at the British Museum. The galleries mix handicrafts, art, archeology and folklore, as well as history and contemporary art, with an aim “to tell for the first time a story of interconnected worlds across time and geography” (Fischer 2018, p. 18). One stated aim, highlighted by the funding Malaysian foundation, is to give the visitors “a deeper understanding of Islam” (Albukhary 2018, p. 15).

In vitrine 10 on ‘Healing and protection,’ there is an amulet (OA+.7431) where it is mentioned that the name of Muhammad is invoked, giving a hint at the power attached to the Prophet in living religious practice. There is also a tinned copper bowl with a blessing to Muhammad, Ali and twelve other persons revered by Twelver Shi’ism (object no. 2006,0405.1). Several other amulets, as well as tombstones and coins have calligraphic renderings with invocations of Muhammad’s name. Otherwise, Muhammad is all but absent in this effort to give “a deeper understanding of Islam”. Given the strong

sociopolitical framing of images of Muhammad in particular and Islam in general sketched above, it is highly unlikely that the making of the new British Museum gallery has been unaffected by it. Nevertheless, *The Making of the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World* does not address the question. Muhammad is not mentioned a single time in the book, and there is no reference to any possible discussion on how to deal with the topic of sensitive images.

In the online collection of the British Museum, containing over 4 million objects, a search for “Prophet Muhammad” return no results, whereas “Muhammad” returns over 8000 hits and effectively hides anything having to do with the Prophet in hordes of coins from rulers named Muhammad. This avoidance of the topic might function to avert both critique and possible threats. Even so, it normalizes the dominant frame and thereby excludes the veneration of the Prophet from the “deeper understanding of Islam” strived for.

When the Louvre in Paris opened its Islamic galleries in 2012, they released a press-kit containing a presentation of a co-produced documentary called *Islam as a beacon*. Describing the richness of Islamicate culture, the text mentions “illuminated manuscripts depicting the prophet Muhammad in the sixteenth century” (Louvre 2012, p. 19). Apart from the mention of these manuscripts, the Louvre keeps the Prophet out of sight.

### 6.1. Digitalization and Colliding Responsibilities

In light of the deadly violence directed towards people involved in different kinds of publications of the image of Muhammad, there are certainly legitimate concerns both for the museums’ safety and for how an exhibition might strengthen existing polarization. I have personal experience from an institution where a work of art was taken down in response to concerns and critique expressed by Muslims in the local and national community. Such decisions are always contested and ambivalent. Laws and regulations concerning safety and work environment have to be met by the institution, and it is difficult to assess if the potential security threats are explicit enough to refrain from showing an image that strengthens the idea of the exhibition in question (Lagerkvist 2006; Grinell 2011).

A museum has competing responsibilities: for artistic freedom and quality; for historical accuracy and representation; as well as for the welfare of its employees and for constructive relationships with local communities and political bodies (Grinell 2011). It could be argued that museums are framed to avoid images of Muhammad.

The ongoing efforts to make collections digitally available online have made the question around the depictions of Muhammad more pressing. It is no longer possible to keep them unnoticed in storage among the 95%+ rest of the collections not accessible to visitors. In 2015, the V&A in London removed an image of a contemporary Persian artwork depicting the Prophet Muhammad from its website. The removal came after the V&A had earlier claimed that its collection did not contain any images of Muhammad, when the image in question was in fact both in the collection and displayed in the web galleries. Even if removed from the web, the image is still in the collections and accessible upon query (Graham-Harrison 2015).

### 6.2. I Am Muhammad ... but Not That Muhammad

The exhibit *I am Muhammad* includes 14 photographs of people sharing the Prophet’s name, printed on canvas with accompanying audio clips of each person. The exhibition was shot and curated by US photographer Narmeen Haider in response to President Trump’s travel ban and presented in 2017 at the World Money Gallery in Brooklyn (Zauzmer 2017). This is one of many efforts to normalize Muslim presence in Western countries via portrayals of everyday local Muslims. This particular one was built on the popularity of the name Muhammad. As such, it alludes to the Prophet of Islam, without being explicitly about him. In this, it is quite similar to one or two of the caricatures of Muhammad in *Jyllands-Posten*’s series (Klausen 2009).

## 7. Conclusions

After events like the terrorist attack on the Charlie Hebdo editorial offices, it is reasonable for a museum to refrain from exhibiting images of Muhammad, due to its legally mandated responsibility for the security of its staff. However, curating other types of exhibitions with images of Muhammad will unfortunately not compensate for decentering Muhammad in the presentations of Islamic religiosity or Islamicate culture.

My contention is that any general description of the faith and religious life of “the Muslims” where Muhammad is missing will lack a central dimension.

As has been shown in this article, the veneration of the Prophet is central to many interpretations and ways of living Islam. Poetry, calligraphy, music, and festival materials offer rich potentials for more immersive ways of making the Prophet present in the museum, ways that to some degree also might escape the prevailing framing of images of Muhammad. These artistic media have high potential to give non-Muslim visitors meaningful opportunities to understand Muslim piety. They might even foster less conflictual engagements with local Muslim communities that can escape the frames set by the modern *Bilderstreit*.

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