

# Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World

Edited by  
Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz



Collecting has a long tradition in the Middle East but the museum as a public institution is relatively new. Today there are national museums for antiquities in most Arab countries. While in some cases the political and social climate has hindered the foundation of museums, with existing collections even destroyed at times, the recent museum boom in the Gulf States is again changing the outlook.

This unique book is the first to explore collecting practices in archives and museums in the modern Arab world, featuring case studies of collecting practices in countries ranging from Egypt and Lebanon to Palestine, Jordan, Iraq and the Gulf, and providing a theoretical and methodological basis for future research. The authors are also concerned with investigating the relationship between past and present, since collecting practices tell us a great deal not only about the past but also about the ways we approach the past and present conceptions of our identities. Collections can be textual as well, as in the stories, memories or events selected, recalled, and retold in the pages of a text. As interest in memory studies as well as popular and visual culture grows in the Arab Middle East, so collecting practices are at the heart of any critical approach to the past and the present in that region.

The book will be of great interest not only to scholars and students of the modern Arab world but also to professionals in museums and collections in the region, as well as around the world.

*This is a pioneering book that sheds light on a wide-ranging view of collecting practices in the Arab world. Readers interested in the cultural history of the region, the origins of modernity and the making of a national identity would find it a vital source. With the recent boom in the art market and the fever of collecting raging in the oil-rich Gulf countries, this work offers a critical reflection and an essential reading for art historians, collectors, art dealers, academics and students of art. It shall remain a key reference for years to come.*

Kamal Boullata, Author of *Palestinian Art from 1850 to the Present*

Cover image: Khalil Rabah, 50320 Names, 2007, Photograph size varies. A project of The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, 2003 ongoing.

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- 9.1 Jewad Selim, *Nasb al-hurriyya* (Monument of Freedom), Baghdad, 1961–63, photo c. 1970s. Photo taken by the author’s father, Muhsen Shabout. 200
- 9.2 Faiq Hassan’s class, Art Academy, Baghdad, 1950s. Reproduced with kind permission of N. Ramzi from his book *Min al-dhakira*. 201

## Introduction

### Challenges and Directions in an Emerging Field of Research

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz

I’m afraid that this museum craze in the West has inspired the uncultured and insecure rich of this country to establish ersatz museums of modern art with adjoining restaurants. This despite the fact that we have no culture, no taste, and no talent in the art of painting. What Turks should be viewing in their own museums are not bad imitations of Western art but their own lives. Instead of displaying the Occidental fantasies of our rich, our museums should show us our own lives.

Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*<sup>1</sup>

While this passage focuses on Turkish museology, it also points up the broader problem for collecting practices in the Arab world.<sup>2</sup> For this discursive activity – and the emerging discipline that studies it – faces a twofold challenge: to think critically about the transmission of Western assumptions, methods and goals while adapting the insights of a tradition most commonly associated with the West, and to combat the Orientalist tendency to essentialize the region’s culture and society as timeless and identical. How can collectors in and of the Arab world show ‘their own lives’? How can they do this without offering an elitist or paternalistic representation of these lives? How might they bridge the gap between art and life? What are the social and material conditions in which art production and exhibition function? Who are the audiences for these collections? For what purposes are they exhibited? And how can those who study such collections read, analyse, critique and intervene in them?

Rather than provide ready answers to these pertinent questions, this book proposes a reflexive turn in critical attention, examining collections as processes or practices and not just as things. It focuses on the local context of a given collection: the mesh of exigencies, desires and discourses that distinguish a collection in form and function and drive it into being. It pays attention to the particular interplay of audience, goal and circumstances that situates a collection rhetorically and historically. It foregrounds local histories of collecting, allowing room for the contestation of meaning and the messy contradictions and discontinuities that this

1 Trans. Maureen Freely (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), pp. 524–5.

2 The term Arab world here is used as a geographical marker, designating the countries on which the case studies included in this book focus.

entails. It complicates the monolithic conception of Arab society and culture by situating cultural practices and products within their specific historical, social and material contexts – in relation to their lives and afterlives, their narratives and counter-narratives, their patterns of production and consumption.

As Preziosi and Farago point out in their introduction to *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, more has been written about the museum in the last decade than ever before.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not apply to the Arab world for a variety of reasons. *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* fills a gap in collection studies, a growing area of concentration within the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. It does not give a comprehensive overview; rather, it offers case studies of collecting practices in different Arab countries, at the same time highlighting their shared histories with colonial – and neo-colonial – practices in Western countries. The authors come from numerous disciplinary backgrounds, including Middle Eastern studies, history, art history, archaeology, anthropology, and comparative literature. Their case studies deal with both material artefacts, such as antiquities, art, and architecture, and textual artefacts, ranging from dictionaries and encyclopaedias to print ephemera and history textbooks, while complicating the distinction between textual and material. The book aims to make sense of the growing phenomenon of collections in the Arab world, by joining nascent theory to inchoate practice, and to pave the way for further research.

We set out by introducing the case studies, grouping them in three interrelated sections. Local Representations of Modernity deals with questions of identity and the relationship between past and present. Collecting Practices, Historiographic Practices focuses on history and memory. From Institutional to Artistic Practices of Collecting examines public and private as well as artistic undertakings in building and staging collections. We then venture to map the emerging field of collecting practices in the modern Arab world and conclude by outlining challenges and directions.

### Local Representations of Modernity

Collections construct identity, not just that of the social group whose reality is interpreted through the objects on display, but also that of the collection's authors. Collections also fashion the identity of their audiences, who reinterpret according to their own discourses and desires the stories that the objects tell. One of the themes of this book is thus the identity – or rather, the local identities, both contemporary and historical – constructed by collecting practices in the Arab world. Closely linked to this theme is the relationship between past and present, reconfigured as heritage (*turath*) and modernity (*hadatha*) since the

<sup>3</sup> Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (eds), *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Hants: Ashgate, 2004), p. 1.

*nahda*, the so-called Arab awakening or renaissance of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Joseph Massad explains in *Desiring Arabs*, the Arabic term *turath* says little about the past; rather, it is a 'product of twentieth century modernity'.<sup>4</sup> As such, it participates in Orientalist discourses that inscribe Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 as a turning point in history and set the *nahda* apart from previous cultural development in the region now classified and judged in terms of 'cultural decadence', as Reinhard Schulze points out.<sup>5</sup> The anxiety arising from the dichotomy thus established between heritage, associated with an authentic 'self' and 'local culture', and modernity, linked to a Western, and indeed colonial, 'other' and 'global culture', has greatly impacted intellectual thought and cultural production in the modern Arab world, as a number of contributions in this book show.

The attempt to 'show us our own lives', as Pamuk puts it in his novel *The Museum of Innocence*, has historically been hampered by an understanding of modernity as a goal to be achieved by emulating Western models, not only in military reform and political life but also in cultural production and lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> This Eurocentric understanding assumes a series of 'stages' of development that the Arab world and, more generally, the Third World must pass on their way to modernity. In 'The Stage of Modernity', Timothy Mitchell relocates concern 'not with the passing of modernity but with its placing, not with a new stage of history but with how history itself is staged'.<sup>7</sup> Resituating modernity within a more global context foregrounds the interactions and encounters between colonizer and colonized that were instrumental in the making of the modern. This move complicates the powerful story of modernity by introducing notions of difference and displacement.<sup>8</sup> This reconceptualization resonates with Pamuk's interest in how modernity is represented locally, as well as with what Reinhard Schulze calls a 'multilinguism' of modernism in which 'the European dialect of modernism is merely one of many cultural dialects of modernism'.<sup>9</sup>

Nadia Bou Ali's 'Collecting the Nation: Lexicography and National Pedagogy in *al-nahda al-'arabiyya*' focuses on local histories of collecting linked to an interest in language. She examines the archive of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, lexicons, translations and treatises produced in Egypt and Lebanon in the late nineteenth

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> See Reinhard Schulze, 'Mass Culture and Islamic Cultural Production in 19th Century Middle East', in Georg Stauth and Sami Zubaida (eds.), *Mass Culture, Popular Culture, and Social Life in the Middle East* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus Verlag and Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), p. 189.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192. See also Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Mitchell, 'The Stage of Modernity', in Timothy Mitchell (ed.), *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, trans. Azizeh Azodi (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 6.

century, in particular the works of Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883) and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1804–1887), in order to reveal their role in the construction of the ‘Arab nation’ and of ‘Arab history’. She argues that these printed materials both regulate and illustrate the possibilities of imagining an Arab national past. In her words, she is ‘interested in approaching the archive not as a source of evidence of a Nahda that has happened, but as a process through which society re-thinks itself at the cross-section of colonialism, modernity and nationalism.’

According to Hélène Sader, it is precisely the failure of the Lebanese to rethink themselves in terms of a coherent national identity that has led to the destruction and dispersal of the country’s antiquities. In ‘Between Looters and Private Collectors: The Tragic Fate of Lebanese Antiquities’, she addresses the collection of archaeological artefacts and its impact on the preservation of the Lebanese past. She traces the looting of archaeological sites from the colonial era to the present and attributes it largely to the failure of the Lebanese to understand the archaeological past as a crucible for national identity. Recently, she argues, archaeology has served political interests and divided the Lebanese instead of uniting them as heirs to the same heritage.

Taking Birzeit University’s acquisition of the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets in 1995 as a starting point, Vera Tamari’s ‘Tawfik Canaan – *Collectionneur par excellence*: The Story Behind the Palestinian Amulet Collection at Birzeit University’ explores the practices that brought this collection into existence as well as the meanings it has acquired since. As Tamari reveals, the loss of Palestinian material culture dates back to the foreign archaeological expeditions of the nineteenth century, as in the case of other countries in the region. However, this loss took on a new character with the *nakba* of 1948, which translates into ‘catastrophe’, the creation of the state of Israel which led to the first Arab-Israeli war and a first wave of Palestinian refugees. As Tamari says, it ‘forcefully separated [a whole population] from its material culture and roots [and] meant that the greater part of that material culture has survived within the fading memory of persons and families only.’ Having begun his collection in Jerusalem in 1912, Canaan differs from post-*nakba* collectors since he was not faced with ‘the threat of losing it all’, as Tamari explains – a threat that has turned collecting practices into a ‘national duty’ since the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, referred to in Arabic as *hazima* or *naksa*. As Tamari concludes, Canaan, a practising scientist who had studied medicine at the American University of Beirut and in Germany, was caught between an Orientalist perspective on Palestinian culture and a genuine quest to understand his own national culture.

### Collecting Practices, Historiographic Practices

The relationship between past and present and between heritage and modernity also involves questions of history and memory. In Pierre Nora’s view, ‘We speak

so much of memory because there is so little of it left.’<sup>10</sup> Nora’s distinction between memory as ‘a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present’, and history as ‘a representation of the past’ – between an authentic, pre-modern memory embodied in a communitarian culture and landscape, on the one hand, and an alienated, modern historical consciousness objectified in such self-conscious *lieux de mémoire* as monuments and museums, on the other hand – shows that our very understanding of the categories of history and memory is itself at issue.<sup>11</sup> Thus, before we decide how, what, when and why to remember, who should do the remembering, and to whom such remembrance should be borne, we must understand what it means to remember – what is memory? what is history? and what are the relations between them? Nora’s argument that history compensates for the loss of memory reminds us that we remember only what is forgotten and that we collect only what is discarded. We must also bear in mind that remembering can itself be a form of forgetting, and collecting a form of discarding, just as in Plato’s view writing, as an instrument of memory, encouraged oblivion.<sup>12</sup> To guard against this danger and to promote memory-work in the present is the special task of the anti-monument and its corollary, the anti-museum.<sup>13</sup> Anti-monuments and anti-museums do not make present what is absent but rather manifest the absence of what is absent. Put another way, the object of remembering is not limited to the past but also includes the present forgetting of the past.<sup>14</sup> A related development in memory studies is the call for museums and other memory-sites to conceive of

10 Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire’, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–25.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

12 For example, the problem with monuments, Nicholas Andrew Miller argues, is that while in practice they can be a space for the ongoing activity of memory-work, as sites for the reading of history they risk posing an ‘objectified version of history for which the physicality of the memorial itself stands’. The result is often a ‘distancing [of] present rememberers from the past in which such objects accrue their historical meaning’. By engraving the past in stone, memorial sites threaten to ‘en-grave’ it, in Miller’s words, rendering viewers passive before the ‘historical Real’ (especially museums that rely on an aesthetics of ‘you are there’ illusion) and thus burying opportunities for the continuation of memory-work in the present. Nicholas Andrew Miller, *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 8, 24–5.

13 An example of the latter is Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum Berlin, in which an empty space called ‘The Void of Memory’ seeks to foreclose the possibility of achieving closure on the past, aiming instead to create ‘a tension between the substance of that story, what can be told, and what can never be told, what can only be intuited and what will always remain something that subverts any attempt to control, make the story finite, and finish with it.’ See Richard Copans and Stan Neumann, *Architectures 3* (Arte France), 2002, DVD.

14 The Beirut buildings of Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury, with their Christo-like mesh wraps that both conceal and reveal the physical scars of time, their self-conscious, ironic amnesia, and their sly winks at local history, exemplify the architectural commemoration of oblivion in the Arab world.

themselves as living entities touched by the historical processes they purport to speak of.<sup>15</sup> Identity, modernity, history, memory and their interrelations are, then, all at stake in this book.

Lucie Ryzova examines a repository of historical material in Cairo, albeit a recent and unofficial one – the ‘used paper’ market, located in *Sur al-Ezbekiyya*. In ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Collector, Dealer and Academic in the Informal Old-Paper Markets of Cairo’, she treats the market as both a subject of ethnographic study and a source of historical study. In the first approach, she analyses the social relations and narrative constructions woven among the dealer, the buyer and the academic, showing how collectively they constitute the ‘historical value’ of the private materials exchanged under market conditions. In the second approach, her examination of old books, magazines, posters, photographs, private papers and other print ephemera – including their wear and tear, their lives and afterlives – yields insight into the history of reading and writing practices in modern Egypt. Ryzova’s analysis of the used paper market and of the private materials that circulate therein serves as an excellent means of ‘show[ing] [the] lives’ of the people of the region, in contrast to monolithic narratives promoted by Egypt’s National Archive.

Betty Gilbert-Sleiman’s contribution, entitled ‘The Reform of History School Textbooks: Collecting Conflict Memories in a Peace-Building Process (1996–2001)’, is concerned with a more official account of ‘our lives’. Gilbert-Sleiman examines the Lebanese attempt to reform school history textbooks, launched in the 1990s in accordance with the Taif peace agreement concluded in 1989. In an effort to collect conflict memories in a peace-building process, the reform aimed to provide Lebanese society with a new image of itself. However, as Gilbert-Sleiman argues, its alignment with powerful political discourses underscored the limits of the peace process. The reform did not succeed. Nevertheless, historians have re-appropriated the project by authoring informal textbooks. While Gilbert-Sleiman examines attempts at coming to terms with Lebanon’s recent history of civil war (1975–1990) based on textual collections, Sophie Brones focuses her study, ‘The *Beit Beirut* Project: Heritage Practices and the Barakat Building’, on a building. As the site of a proposed museum, the Barakat Building, which plans to open its doors to the public in 2013, not only will house the memory of Beirut, but is conceived in such a way as itself to speak of the past – ‘the building appears as both a container and content for the museum’, in Brones’s words. It resists the powerful trend toward erasing all traces of the Lebanese civil war, as in the case of downtown Beirut. Integrating the city’s past destruction into the city’s present landscape, it participates rather in the current development in memory-sites.

<sup>15</sup> A counter-example of this idea is the post-war reconstruction of downtown Beirut, which arguably promotes a narrative of healing that occludes remembrance of the civil war.

### From Institutional to Artistic Practices of Collecting

While collecting art has a long history in the Middle East,<sup>16</sup> the museum and the collecting practices it entails constitute a relatively new phenomenon in the region, closely linked to the modern history of Europe. The oldest museums in the region date from the late Ottoman Empire. The reforms of the *Tanzimat* (its literal translation into ‘Orderings’ is significant in regard to collecting practices), begun in 1839, are viewed by historians as ‘a period of economic and political liberalization’ on one hand and ‘a sign of increasing ideological imperialist encroachment into the Ottoman Empire on the part of the European nations’ on the other, as Wendy M. K. Shaw explains in *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire*.<sup>17</sup> As she shows, museums, such as the Imperial Museum opened in Istanbul in 1869, played an important role in nation building by providing ‘spaces for the concrete manifestation of new values for a state and society in rapid flux’.<sup>18</sup> As such, they took part in establishing a national identity – first Ottoman, then Turkish – that could withstand colonial power. As Shaw demonstrates, taking the Imperial Museum as a case study, ‘the legislative practices associated with it spoke not only verbally in the language of heritage and history but also physically in the language of conquest and territory.’<sup>19</sup> Similarly, museums in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, governed by French and English mandates since the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 before gaining independence, came into existence through colonial practices during the *nahda* referred to above. Here academic interest has focused on Egypt. As Mitchell and Preziosi have argued for the case of Egypt, Western exhibitionary and museological traditions have framed the very understanding of Middle Eastern history according to European national interests and Orientalist imagination.<sup>20</sup> As Elliott Colla points out in *Conflicted Antiquities. Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, the history of collecting practices

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Oleg Grabar, ‘Patronage in Islamic Art’, in Esin Atıl (ed.), *Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1991), pp. 27–39; Esin Atıl (ed.), ‘Patronage by Women in Islamic Art’, special issue, *Asian Art*, 6/2 (1993); D. Fairchild Rugglers (ed.), *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* (New York: SUNY, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Wendy M. K. Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 19–20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Mitchell, ‘Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order’, in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (eds), *Grasping the World*, pp. 442–61; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 1–33; Donald Preziosi, ‘The Museum of What You Shall have Been’, in *Brain of the Earth’s Body: Art, Museums, and the Phantasms of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 116–36.

in modern Egypt is closely linked to colonial rule and the new field of Egyptology.<sup>21</sup> Colla compares 'the colonial enlightenment narrative' that claimed the Pharaonic past—similar to the Mesopotamian past—as 'the rightful patrimony of the West' to 'the national enlightenment narrative' that considered the past as part of its heritage and sought the formation of museums in Egypt.<sup>22</sup> Both narratives, Colla says, struck an elitist stance, regarding Egyptian peasants as ignorant of and threatening to this ancient heritage. Both narratives also approved of the acquisition and preservation of ancient artefacts as 'unambiguous, desirable indices of modernity and civilization'.<sup>23</sup> Egypt's first *Antiqakhana* for the storing and exhibiting of antiquities was established in 1835. It was directed by Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, today considered one of the great thinkers of the *nahda*, who had been a member of Egypt's first educational mission to France in 1826–1831.<sup>24</sup> More museums followed not only in Egypt but in other parts of the Arab world as well: the second *Antiqakhana* opened in a new and larger building in 1863 and moved in 1902 to what became the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The Archaeological Museum at the American University of Beirut (then the Syrian Protestant College) opened in 1868, the Damascus Museum in 1920, the Baghdad Museum in 1925, and the Palestine Archaeological Museum in 1938.<sup>25</sup> As Christel Braae points out, 'the

21 Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 10.

22 Colla distinguishes between four different narratives. To the two mentioned above he adds 'the revisionist accounts' that in line with Afrocentrism critically question Europe's scientific disinterest, while, like 'the colonial enlightenment narrative', sidelining all reference to modern Egypt and Egyptians. He mentions another body of writing that he terms the 'agnostic narrative', which shows awareness of the contingencies of archaeological knowledge and the impact this knowledge has had on defining and legitimizing 'contemporary identities, be they Egyptian, European, or African'. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–15. On Europe's early interest in the Mesopotamian past, closely linked to biblical studies, and the consequent circulation of Mesopotamian artefacts worldwide, see David Damrosch, 'Gilgamesh's Quest', in *What is World Literature?* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 39–77.

23 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 14.

24 See *ibid.*, 116–112. On Egypt's early museums, see also Donald Malcolm Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?: Archaeology, Museums and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). On al-Tahtawi and his accounts, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), pp. 67–102; Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: Al-Tahtawi's Visit to France 1826–1831* (London: Saqi, 2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

25 See Christel Braae, 'The Early Museums and the Formations of Their Publics', in Hans Chr. Korsholm Nielsen and Jacob Skovgaard-Petersen (eds), *Middle Eastern Cities 1900–1950: Public Places and Public Spheres in Transformation* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001), p. 113. Similar to the Egyptian Museum, most of these museums had a number of forerunners. The Palestine Archaeological Museum, for instance, was built on the collection of the Islamic Museum in the esplanade of the Noble Sanctuary and the archaeological museum of the Franciscan Order in Jerusalem. It was not 'the

specific outgrowth' of the museum—similar to other public institutions—in the region 'is a conjuncture of various political, scientific and emancipating practices taking place locally and beyond and cannot be reduced to the mere transition of a Western institution'.<sup>26</sup> She shows how museums played an important role in the creation of public space, feelings of belonging and citizenship in the first half of the twentieth century as they came to envision history not as world heritage but as national heritage.<sup>27</sup>

The number of museums in the region, both public and private, has increased significantly since national independence. They range from archaeological museums to museums of history, natural history, ethnography, national costumes and folklore, agriculture, geology, military, Islamic art and modern and contemporary art. Palestine has been an exception, since the *nakba* of 1948 paved the way for a 'politics of dispossession', to cite the title of one of Edward Said's books, which through Israeli military occupation continues to this day.<sup>28</sup> As Kamal Boullata states in *Palestinian Art. From 1850 to the Present*:

the cultural centre that Jerusalem was for a brewing art movement was crushed for good in 1948. Since then and with the continuous fragmentation of the Palestinian homeland and the dispersal of its people, no Palestinian art movement could possibly coalesce anywhere when works like those discussed in this book have yet to be viewed under one roof.<sup>29</sup>

This does not mean that collections and museums do not exist at all. As Tamari mentions in her contribution, collecting practices have turned into a 'national duty' and there are a number of important, if small, registered museums across Palestine.

first Palestinian museum', as Felicity J. Cobbing and Johnattan N. Tubb hold in 'Before Rockefeller: The First Palestine Museum in Jerusalem', in Fabio Maniscalco (ed.), *Tutela, Conservazione e Valorizzazione del Patrimonio Culturale della Palestina, Mediterraneo series 5* (2005), pp. 79–89. The name of the Palestine Archaeological Museum was changed by Israel after 1967, when Israel annexed East Jerusalem, to the Rockefeller Museum. See Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi), p. 82–3.

26 Braae, 'The Early Museums', p. 113.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 128. See also Wendy Doyon, 'The Poetics of Egyptian Museum Practice', *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* 10 (2008): 2–37; Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, 'Museums and the Construction of National History in Syria and Lebanon', in Nadine Méouchy and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives/Les mandats français et anglais dans une perspective comparative* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 185–202.

28 Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–2004* (New York: Vintage, 1995). This dispossession can take various forms, both symbolic and material, as in the case of the planned Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem, which was projected to be built partly on the site of a Muslim cemetery. See Saree Makdisi, 'The Architecture of Erasure', *Critical Inquiry* 36/3 (2010): 1–51.

29 Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, p. 36.

In the absence of a state and 'official' state-run archives, efforts to open NGO-run and privately owned archives and collections to the public have increased.<sup>30</sup>

The *hazima* of 1967 exposed as illusionary the political discourse of Arab nationalism closely linked to a firm belief in modernity and progress, as it had come to the fore with Gamal Abd al-Nasser's presidency in Egypt. The profound self-criticism it triggered led to an interrogation of the region's modern history that also had an impact on cultural production.<sup>31</sup> The 1973 war changed the picture again, witnessing the emergence of the Gulf countries as important regional players and the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, in particular in Syria and Iraq. Finally, increased globalization, the international museum boom since the 1980s, and the re-inauguration of biennials since the 1990s have had an impact on cultural production and collecting practices throughout the Arab world.<sup>32</sup>

Sarah Rogers's 'The Formation of The Khalid Shoman Private Collection and the Founding of Darat al-Funun' offers a close study of the Khalid Shoman Private Collection begun by Khalid and Suha Shoman in the early 1980s and housed since 1993 in Darat al-Funun in Amman, Jordan. Dedicated to contemporary Arab art, the collection bears testimony to the transformations artistic practices have undergone in the region over the last 30 years, Rogers says. After providing an overview of Darat al-Funun's history as 'a hub through which artists, ideas, and formal languages move throughout the region and beyond', she traces two genealogies, one institutional and tied to the Abdul Hamid Shoman Foundation, the other aesthetic and linked to Suha Shoman's art training with the Turkish artist Fahrennissa Zeid, which contributed much to her openness toward new media and emerging artists. Rogers concludes by situating the dialectic between regional history and individual initiative that has shaped the collection in the recent context of heightened interest in modern and contemporary art from non-Western, in particular Middle Eastern, art.

This is the starting point for Emily Doherty's contribution on collecting practices in the United Arab Emirates, a powerful newcomer to the field of collecting practices. In 'The Ecstasy of Property: Collecting in the United Arab Emirates', she explores the meaning of collecting practices, both public and

30 See, for instance, the Birzeit University Working Paper 2011/2 by Roger Heacock on 'Locating and Opening Palestinian Archives: A National Priority', <http://ialiis.birzeit.edu/fmru/userfiles/Roger2011-02.pdf>.

31 See, for instance, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 48–115.

32 The recent biennials in Athens, Venice, Sao Paulo, Istanbul, Sharjah and other cities have been traced back to the *fin-de-siècle* world fairs, such as the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1889 and the Venice Biennale in 1895, and have met with criticism. See Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, Solveig Øvstebo (eds), *The Biennial Reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010); Quinn Latimer, 'To Biennial or not to Biennial?', *Frieze*, 4 Oct 2009; Caroline A. Jones, 'Troubled Waters: On Globalism and the Venice Biennale', *Art Forum* Feb 2006.

private, in Dubai and Abu Dhabi in regard to national and local identity. She draws particular attention to the notion of property for property's sake, or in Benjamin's words, 'the relationship of a book collector to his possessions', except that here 'book' is replaced by 'art'. Accordingly, it is not the spectating of works of art that grants aesthetic pleasure but the sensation of ownership that shapes contemporary consumer culture. That said, the author makes clear that 'despite its reputation for being an ultra-consumer society, for Dubai collectors the 'ecstasy of property' is not the only motivation behind the consumption.' What is at stake for the young nation, she concludes, is 'establishing identity through culture on an entrepreneurial level'.

The Gulf's impact on collecting practices in the Arab world is referred to in a number of other contributions in this book, although they do not deal with the Gulf explicitly. Ryzova, for instance, portrays the Gulf clientele, as seen through the eyes of Egyptian dealers in the old paper markets of Cairo, as 'the villains' – the 'bad guys' who themselves 'have no history'. At the same time, she explains, the Egyptian dealers do business with them and raise the value of old papers turned commodities and sold at 'astronomic prices' to the Gulf clientele. Rogers mentions high-profile galleries in the Gulf that produce glossy artist monographs, 'seeking to substantiate a rapidly inflating market for contemporary Middle Eastern art'. In Nada Shabout's contribution, Gulf collectors are held responsible for 'a new monetary value for Iraqi art', and the Gulf is named along with Europe as the new place of destination of much Iraqi art.

The recent museum boom in the Gulf is closely linked to global developments and raises a number of questions with respect to the production and consumption of art. It can be regarded as an effort to provide the 'cities of salt', as the late Arab novelist 'Abd al-Rahman Munif called them in his five-volume novel of the same title, with 'cultural capital', 'distinction', and 'taste', to use Pierre Bourdieu's critical vocabulary.<sup>33</sup> The new museums in the Gulf are, in fact, closely related to cultural tourism and near in character to theme parks. Saadiyat Island ('the island of happiness'), off the coast of Abu Dhabi, with its cultural district housing four major museums, is especially noteworthy not only for its scope and the architects involved in its design, such as Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Zahah Hadid and Norman Foster, but also for its institutional affiliation with the world's most powerful museums, such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim.<sup>34</sup> While such mega-institutions claim to speak on behalf of one world, they fail to give room to 'conflicted histories' and to 'reveal the imperial as well as the Enlightenment

33 See especially Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Harvard University Press, 1984) and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993). See also Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Darbel and Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

34 See <http://www.saadiyat.ae/en>.

history of collections', critics say.<sup>35</sup> Instead, they react 'to the challenge of a globalized world by expanding their spheres of influence and by establishing neo-colonial branches of modernist art in other parts of the world.'<sup>36</sup> The Guggenheim in particular has also been criticized by human rights organizations and artists for its abuse of foreign migrant workers in Abu Dhabi.<sup>37</sup> Its plan to devote a large part of its branch in Abu Dhabi to contemporary Middle Eastern art may end up being praiseworthy, but may also prove a belated attempt to gain control of what has emerged as a powerful market over the last decade. Interest in contemporary art in the Middle East has dramatically increased since September 11, 2001 and the Iraq war of 2003.<sup>38</sup> The expansion of foreign funding in the region's cultural production and the new interest of auction houses in the region, starting with Sotheby's and Christie's and followed by Bonhams and Phillips De Pury, have played a significant role in this market. Even with a large part of its collection devoted to contemporary Middle Eastern art, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is part and parcel of a Western culture whose rhetoric of a world culture only reinforces its leading position. As Belting critically points out:

Western culture, which once felt up to the task of representing all ethnic cultures via exploitation as collection, is now proclaiming the future of a world culture in which it again claims the leading position. Non-Western cultures, on the other hand, are retreating in a kind of countermovement into their own histories in order to rescue a part of their identity. To Western eyes, such moves make them look nationalistic – a telling misconception.<sup>39</sup>

Qatar's *Mathaf. Arab Museum of Modern Art*, opened in 2010, differs from such neo-colonial undertakings. It developed out of a private collection, accumulated over the last three decades by Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammad bin Ali Al Thani with the help of a number of prominent artists, art dealers and academics from the region and beyond. In this respect, it shares some characteristics with Jordan's Darat al Funun.<sup>40</sup> As Rogers argues in her contribution, 'the moment of Mathaf's

35 Mark O'Neill, director of the Glasgow Museum, objecting to Neil MacGregor's vision of the British Museum as quoted in Hans Belting, 'Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age', in Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg (eds), *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), p. 33.

36 Belting, 'Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age', p. 33.

37 See, for example, Human Rights Watch on 16.3.2011, 'UAE: Artists Boycott Guggenheim-Abu Dhabi. Protesting Exploitation of Foreign Migrant Workers', <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/16/uae-artists-boycott-guggenheim-abu-dhabi>.

38 See Jessica Winegar, 'The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 81/3 (2008): 651–81.

39 Hans Belting, 'Global Art and Minorities: A New Geography of Art History', in *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 70.

40 See Sophia al-Maria, 'A History of Mathaf', in Nada Shabout et al. (eds), *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* (Doha: Qatar Museums Authority, 2010), pp. 43–9, quoted in

transition from private to public hands [...] concludes its historical parallels with Darat al Funun'. Compared to the 'neo-colonial branches of modernist art' in the region, Mathaf may come closer to what Pamuk meant by showing 'our lives', here referring not to Turkey but to the Arab world – 'our lives' as represented and imagined in modern and contemporary art in the Arab world. The title of its inaugural exhibition 'Sajjil' is reminiscent of Mahmoud Darwish's popular poem 'Sajjil ana 'arabi' (Register! I am an Arab) and likewise carries notions of resistance and pride.<sup>41</sup> However, Mathaf can be criticized for the monopolizing grip it holds over this heritage expressed in the museum's very name, simply *Mathaf* – a catchy name but one that overshadows the existence of previous museological traditions in other Arab countries, such as Egypt or Iraq. Mathaf does provide space for modern and contemporary art and artists in the Arab world, especially Iraq. Yet, as Shabout's contribution suggests, it also participates in the uprooting of artistic practices, taken out of the culturally rich contexts in which they were produced, ranging from Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem, Ramallah and Damascus, to be housed this time not in Europe or America but in the Gulf. It competes with Western institutions to play a leading role in an increasingly lucrative market that promises to combine financial and cultural capital.

At the same time that the Gulf is taking a leading role in institutionalizing the collection of modern and contemporary art in the region, war, occupation and political crisis have hindered the foundation of collections and at times destroyed existing collections, both public and private, as in the case of Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. This is elaborated in more detail in Sader's, Tamari's and Shabout's contributions. The world has taken notice primarily of the fate of the Baghdad Museum in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war,<sup>42</sup> as the museum's looting and destruction threatened what Western countries have claimed as world heritage. The destruction of other museums, libraries and archives was rarely mentioned. As Shabout says, 'the world seems to forget that the "cradle of civilization" is the

Rogers's contribution.

41 The curators of the inaugural exhibition, Nada Shabout, Wassan al-Khudairi, and Deena Chalabi, acknowledge 'the inherent subjectivity of collecting as necessarily an aspect of a private collection turned public' and say that 'the objectivity of the collection is further complicated by the lack of a regional or international tradition of collecting Arab art, which makes comparative analysis impossible' (p. 17). They add a footnote, 'to clarify, it is not that the Arab world did not collect art, but collecting meant a very different thing than we are now accustomed to, and did not follow in the same European practice.' Nada Shabout, Wassan al-Khudairi, Deena Chalabi, 'Sajjil ... A Space to Question', in *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* (Doha: Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2010), pp. 17–18.

42 On the looting of the museums and other collections in Iraq, see, for instance, Lawrence Rothfield, *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009); Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael, and Tareq Y. Ismael (eds), *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010).

land of a contemporary country with a thriving culture.<sup>43</sup> In her contribution to this book, 'Collecting Modern Iraqi Art', Shabout shows that collecting practices in Iraq emerged out of a very different historical context from that in Europe. Focusing on the period prior to the 2003 Iraq war, she highlights the role collecting modern art played in a larger state-building process. She draws particular attention to the role of art institutions and artists as well as art groups, such as The Baghdad Group for Modern Art (*Jama'at Baghdad lil fann al-hadith*), in the development of art consciousness and collecting practices of modern art in Iraq. Post-2003 practices have been marked by the destruction of cultural institutions, Shabout concludes, pointing out two trends: globalism and representations of modern art from the region including Iraq, on one hand, and 'national' acquisition that seeks to keep Iraqi art in the hands of Iraqis, on the other hand.

A number of non-governmental and non-profit organizations have set out 'to rescue a part of their identities', to use Belting's words, in response to the destruction of collections, to global claims over world heritage, and to authoritarian regimes' control over collections – which might be summarized as the absence of collections devoted to 'show(ing) our lives'. A few examples are The Photography Archive of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), founded in 1987 in Jerusalem; the Arab Image Foundation, established in Beirut in 1997 to 'collect, preserve and study photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora'; UMAM Documentation and Research, founded in Beirut in 2004, which 'is guided by the belief that acknowledging Lebanon's relatively recent past requires that important evidence and artifacts of its history be carefully collected, protected, and promoted to the public'; and the Modern Art Iraq Archive, instituted in 2011 as 'a resource to trace, share, and enable community enrichment of the modern art heritage of Iraq'.<sup>44</sup>

These initiatives have gone hand in hand with an increased interest in collecting practices, especially the archive, in contemporary artistic practices. The latter have introduced a new perspective on collecting, as they bring together factual and fictitious material. Referring to the works of Lebanese artists Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, both founding members of the Arab Image Foundation, Suzanne Cotter in her contribution to *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* even speaks

43 Nada Shabout, 'The Forgotten Era: Modern and Contemporary Iraqi Art', in Jocelyne Dakhlia (ed.), *Créations artistiques contemporaines en pays d'Islam: Des arts en tensions* (Paris: KIME, 2006), p. 281.

44 The information and quotes are taken from the organizations' websites which provide more information on their respective collections: The Photography Archive of the Palestinian Academic Society for the study of International Affairs (PASSIA): [http://www.passia.org/passia\\_files/passia\\_files.htm](http://www.passia.org/passia_files/passia_files.htm); the Arab Image Foundation: <http://www.fai.org.lb/home.aspx>; UMAM documentation & Research: <http://www.umam-dr.org/>; the Modern Art Iraq Archive: <http://artiraq.org/maia/>.

of a 'documentary turn'.<sup>45</sup> Artists from the Middle East have also been included in Okwui Enwezor's 2008 New York exhibition, accompanied by a catalogue essay entitled after Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, and in Charles Merewether's 2006 publication *The Archive*.<sup>46</sup> Of particular interest for the subject of our book is Khalil Rabah's ongoing project of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*; a photograph, which is part of the multi-media installation, figures on our book cover. Rabah has collected, classified and put on display often invented artefacts. *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* has travelled to a number of different art venues, each time taking on different manifestations. Existing as a virtual museum only, it offers institutional criticism and mocks the museum, but at the same time 'function[s] as a substitute for a situation so deprived, so disrupted, so totally unlike any other'.<sup>47</sup>

Part of a broader critique of art from the post-civil war generation in Lebanon, Walid Sadek's 'Collecting the Uncanny and the Labour of Missing' identifies the most pressing need to collect in Lebanon not with retrieving and preserving threatened artefacts but with objectifying and sustaining a presence for those who physically disappeared during the civil war. 'Collecting the uncanny' does not mean to recover the disappeared but to render them uncannily present by, paradoxically, objectifying their absence. Only thus can those awaiting the return of the disappeared begin a conversation with them. What Sadek calls 'the labour of missing' consists in this solitary, informal practice. Sadek's re-conceptualization of collecting proceeds from a recognition that the full return of the disappeared is impossible, that disappearance remains even when the absent return, that absence is substantive and not merely a notional negative of presence. Collecting the uncanny thus relates to the anti-monument and anti-museum in acknowledging the ultimate irretrievability of the past and irrecoverability of the missing.

The recent Arab uprisings that have spread from Tunisia and Egypt to other countries in the region, notably Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria, may add to the trend of taking collecting practices out of the hands and control of authoritarian

45 See Suzanne Cotter, 'The Documentary Turn: Surpassing Tradition in the Work of Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari', in Paul Sloman (ed.), *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* (London: black dog publishing, 2009), pp. 50–51.

46 On the documentary character of contemporary artistic practices in the Arab world, see also Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, 'Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: the Book as Document in Iraq', *Art History* 5/35 (2012), forthcoming.

47 Sacha Craddock in *Nafas art magazine* April 2007. See [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2007/khalil\\_rabah](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2007/khalil_rabah). Khalil's recent Art Exhibition: Readymade Representations 1954–2009 shown in the Sharjah Biennale 2011 sees a continuation of his institutional critic and interest in collecting and museum/exhibition practices. The installation consists of paintings based on 'real' photographs of 'real' exhibitions devoted to modern and contemporary Palestinian art. It reproduces the exhibitions' settings in addition to the art works and art lovers in the exhibitions in the most classical medium – painting – represented in art museums.

regimes or foreign domination and (re)turning them – if we can even speak of a ‘return’, keeping in mind the entanglement of collecting with colonial practices in the region – where they belong: to the people who now may more freely and openly engage in showing and viewing and thus re-imagining their own lives. That said, it is important to note that private collections and informal collecting practices have existed and flourished in the absence of, as well as next to, public collections, as in the case of Palestine. In Egypt, where the liberalization of the economy has gone hand in hand with a liberalization of the arts and changes in consumer culture, private collections have multiplied since the early 1990s, as Mona Abaza points out in *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art: The Private Collection of Sherwet Shafei*.<sup>48</sup> These, Abaza concludes, having focused on Shafei’s collection, say much ‘about Egypt’s recent transformations in lifestyle, tastes, and of course ultimately, the emergence of new class formations.’<sup>49</sup> The recent outcry over Sotheby’s announcement that ‘a highly significant archive’ of private papers from the late Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz were up for auction sheds light on the state’s negligence and the people’s (re-)claiming of Egypt’s rich and multifaceted modern history. The papers were eventually withdrawn from auction.<sup>50</sup> A noteworthy example of collecting and writing ‘our lives’ – not from the higher strata of society but literally from the street – is Samia Mehrez’s *Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, which developed out of a course Mehrez taught at the American University in Cairo in Spring 2011.<sup>51</sup> Exploring the uprisings through the lens of translation theory, Mehrez sets out to read ‘the revolutionary moment [...] as a layered and open text.’<sup>52</sup>

It is against this background of increased but also diversified collecting practices in the region that our book seeks to position itself as an occasion to halt and critically reflect. Examining collections as processes or practices and not just as things, it differs from such glossy publications as Hossein Amirsadeghi and Maryam Homayoun Eisler’s recent *Art & Patronage: Middle East*, which features ‘50 great collectors’ in their palatial mansions ‘in-between’ Monaco, Paris, New York, Tehran, Beirut, or Cairo, surrounded by their artistic treasures, Hussein Amirsadeghi and Maryam Homayoun Eisler, *Art & Patronage: The Middle East* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010). Lacking any criticism of how these private

48 Mona Abaza, *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art: The Private Collection of Sherwet Shafei* (Cairo/New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011), pp. 1–29. See also her *Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo’s Urban Reshaping* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), pp. 217–228, and Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

49 Abaza, *Twentieth-Century Egyptian Art*, p. 26.

50 See <http://arablit.wordpress.com/2011/12/13/questions-about-mahfouz-archives-up-for-auction/>.

51 Samia Mehrez (ed.), *Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (A Tahrir Studies Edition) (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), forthcoming.

52 See Nazri Bahwari, ‘An Interview with Samia Mehrez’, *Asymptote*, Oct. 2011, [http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Interview&id=8&curr\\_index=1](http://www.asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Interview&id=8&curr_index=1).

collections came into existence, have evolved and have played into the global art market, *Art & Patronage* assures its reader that we ‘in the Middle East’ are modern – just like you in the West. With Pamuk’s words in mind, it can be described as yet another attempt by the rich of our countries to establish and show off ‘ersatz museums [and collections] of modern art’, here not with adjoining restaurants but amid luxurious, private dwellings.

### Mapping an Emerging Field

Collection studies boasts an extensive literature, but one that deals largely with Western collections to the neglect of those of the Arab world. As Susan Pearce has shown, the 1970 publication of Benjamin’s *Illuminations* was and remains seminal for collection studies, especially the essay ‘Unpacking My Library – An Essay about Collecting’, with its focus on the relationship between collector and objects.<sup>53</sup> In his cultural critique of the commodity in consumer society, Baudrillard<sup>54</sup> contributed an important early study of collecting, as did Stewart in her study of the collection as the ‘paradise of consumption’.<sup>55</sup> Other publications have followed, extending our knowledge of the history, theory and philosophy of collecting, some of them studies of material culture,<sup>56</sup> others concerned with the museum as the collecting institution *par excellence*,<sup>57</sup> still others offering specialized studies in collecting.<sup>58</sup>

Overlapping collection studies is the field of museum studies, an institutionalized area of art education that in America goes back to the decade after WWII. Today, it is enjoying a surge of interest from cultural critics, an interest that, again, is

53 Susan M. Pearce, ‘Introduction’, in Susan M. Pearce (ed.), *The Collector’s Voice: Critical Readings in the Practice of Collecting* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000), vol. 1.

54 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. J. Benedict (London and New York: Verso Books, 1996 [1968]).

55 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 151.

56 See Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (New York: B. Blackwell, 1987); W. David Kingery, *Learning From Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

57 See Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Peter Vergo (ed.), *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989).

58 See Susan M. Pearce, *Art in Museums* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone, 1995); Susan M. Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press), 1998.

the traditional view of communication and education. Objects do not speak by themselves, critics argue. Rather, they are brought into speech through interpretive frameworks that 'act to produce texts of discourse that shape meaning'.<sup>59</sup> These frameworks are embodied in the exhibition apparatus, which consists of accompanying texts (wall texts, catalogues), display technology (walls, vitrines, lighting, photography, audio, video), installation (sequence, height, layout and design, and overall architecture). Objects do not speak for themselves either. Instead, they combine with the exhibition apparatus to produce a 'narrative' that unfolds within a broader social and material context, through their ordered display, make arguments.<sup>60</sup> Critics have also revealed the collaborative nature of meaning-making in the museum. Curators once defined museum education in terms of the transmission of neutral, information-based knowledge.<sup>61</sup> today they see it as an activity that involves a constant negotiation between the stories given by the museum and those brought by visitors.<sup>62</sup> Still other critics have drawn attention to the impact of emerging technology on the museum's interpretation of objects

in the Arab World. Empire, as the aforementioned studies by Shaw, Mitchell, Preziosi, Colla, Reid and Braae indicate. David Roxburgh has argued that since 9/11 and 7/7, 'just when the monolithic concept of an Islamic art was being broken down, a number of factors have coalesced – exhibition and museum programming, their popular reception in mass media, the instrumentalization of Islamic art for public relations projects or educational objectives – that seem intent on promoting a Neo-Orientalism'.<sup>66</sup> This revival of uncritical paradigms threatens the developments in the field, from the late 1980s up to the early years of the new millennium, toward 'detailed, specialized study of historical contexts and positioning of works of art in those contexts in more sophisticated ways'.<sup>67</sup> Instead of the anachronistic, idealistic, aestheticist and ahistorical approaches to Islamic art reappearing these days, Roxburgh argues for a return to modes of organization that would stress historical difference or context, such as framing exhibitions through discrete geographical milieus, regional 'traditions' more circumscribed in scope, or individual mediums (e.g., ceramics, painting, jewellery).<sup>68</sup> Other possibilities, not mentioned by Roxburgh, include treating art works as singularities or finding connections across various contexts in terms of actual exchanges, relationships, and sources of information. In *Modern*

literature has challenged the traditional view of communication and education inside the museum. Objects do not speak for themselves. Rather, they are brought into speech through interpretive frameworks that 'act to produce texts of discourse that shape meaning'.<sup>59</sup> These frameworks are embodied in the exhibition apparatus, which consists of accompanying texts (captions, brochures, wall texts, catalogues), display technology (walls, vitrines, lighting, photography, audio, video), installation (sequence, height, layout and design, and overall architecture). Objects do not speak for themselves either. Instead, they combine with the exhibition apparatus to produce a 'narrative' that unfolds within a broader social and material context. In short, objects do not speak for themselves. They have also revealed the collaborative nature of meaning-making in the museum. Curators once defined museum education in terms of the transmission of neutral, information-based knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Whereas museum education was once defined as a linear transmission of information, today they see it as an 'activity that involves a constant negotiation between the stories given by the museum and those brought by visitors'.<sup>62</sup> Still other critics have drawn attention to the impact of emerging technology on the museum's interpretation of objects



### Challenges and Directions

This book critically questions not only what collections exhibit – whether museums, archives, or lexicons – but also how and why we collect, how collections come into existence, grow, transform, wither, or are destroyed, what purposes and audiences they serve, and what narratives they engender. As the book's title indicates, the focus is on collecting *practices* rather than on collections themselves. The book thus argues for a valuation of collections as the subject, and not just the source, of study. Such reflexive attention parallels the introspection in museum studies, in which the re-examination of the field's assumptions, methods and goals has led to a new regard for the institution, and not just its contents, as an object of study. More broadly, treating collections as ends and not just as means participates in the archival turn in cultural and historical studies in the last three decades. As Ann Laura Stoler explains in 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form', the archival turn leads to questions not just about the content of archives but also about their peculiar form, to a focus on archives as sites of knowledge production as well as of knowledge retrieval.<sup>80</sup> 'This is not a rejection of colonial archives as sources of the past', she argues. 'Rather it signals a more sustained engagement with those archives as cultural artefacts of fact production.'<sup>81</sup> Bou Ali's and Ryzova's contributions demonstrate this engagement from within the ambit of the archival turn.

Scholarship on collections in general, and on collections in and of the Arab world in particular, could gain from heeding this turn toward the study not just of collections but also of the making of them, that is, of the discourses that make collections and the discourses they make. For collecting is a fundamentally discursive practice – hence the 'collecting practices' of the book's title – and, as such, it is governed by a set of epistemological and semiotic habits that both enable and delimit what can and cannot be collected, what stories can and cannot be told through the collection. In other words, certain assumptions determining what counts as knowledge inform the collection of objects that are seen as the sources – or, today, as sites for the negotiation – of such knowledge. In turn, the knowledge gleaned from the objects – more dynamically, from the contestation over their meaning – confirms or alters the original assumptions as to what constitutes knowledge. Approaching collecting as a practice thus means engaging in epistemological inquiry. The discourse of collecting, and collecting as a discourse, are inseparable from the social and material conditions within which collections are embedded and, thus embedded, both reflect and intervene in. Therefore, the study of collecting practices ultimately involves a change from considering collections solely in terms of the world to which the objects refer, to

80 Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form', in Carolyn Hamilton et al. (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (New York: Springer, 2002), p. 85.

81 Ibid.

considering them also in relation to the world to which the collections themselves refer; that is, to the circumstances – social, political, cultural and economic, as well as epistemological – that made the objects in the collection *collectable* in the first place. Part of such inquiry involves questioning class dynamics: Who are the collectors? What sorts of distinctions enable them to collect? Why do they collect? Who has access to these collections?

Benjamin can aid this dual task of thinking about the conditions of possibility of both objects and collections. In his writings from the 1930s the German theorist argued that the private collection is useless for capitalism since the collector prizes objects not for their use or exchange values but for their historical value. This historical value gives the collection the potential for a revolutionary usefulness.<sup>82</sup>

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this 'completeness'? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection.<sup>83</sup>

Removing the object from its original, functional context and arranging it in a collection according to the 'secret affinit[y]' of its background with that of other objects enables the collector to recover the object's 'fate', a kind of total history that includes knowledge of the period, the region and the craftsmanship in which it originates, the maker of the object, its various owners, its various uses, meanings and values, the reproductions that have been made of it, and most importantly for the collector, how he or she came to possess it.<sup>84</sup> Collectors are best positioned to recover the object's fate because their interest leads them to research the background of an item before deciding on its suitability for their collection. Knowledge of the background of other items in the collection also aids the recovery of the object's fate, so that the collection as a whole forms the broader context for the individual object. The more knowledge the collector possesses of an object's fate, the more knowledge he or she possesses of the collection as a whole, and vice versa. Knowledge of the item's production, distribution and consumption history thus joins with the memory of the circumstances of the item's acquisition to transform it from a commodity fetish that mysteriously appears on its own into a 'magic

82 Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 200–35.

83 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 204–05.

84 Ibid., p. 207.

encyclopaedia<sup>85</sup> of the whole world of social labour responsible for the object's life and 'afterlife'.<sup>86</sup> The collection's revolutionary potential lies in this process of demystifying objects, in turning them from mute automatons into eloquent testaments to the material encounters with history they have experienced.

Benjamin's writings on collecting are thus useful for the study and practice of collecting in the Arab world because they give a methodology and a goal for thinking locally and historically about both objects and collections. A historical-materialist approach to collecting means organizing and analysing objects according to their circuits of creation, transmission and reception in order to divest objects of the human characteristics that are conferred upon them and to return them to the human agents who made them and continue to remake their meaning. Since a collected object's career through history and geography encompasses its entry into the collection, such an approach leads to further understanding of the collection itself, of the circumstances of its own acquisition and, if it is public in nature, its own reception. In short, Benjamin helps us make a seamless transition from thinking about collections to thinking about collecting, and from contextualizing objects only to contextualizing collections as well.

Benjamin can thus be considered a theorist of the archival turn *avant la lettre*, since his push for the study of the collection itself as an object (and not just the study of the objects of the collection) parallels the turn toward analysing the organizing principles of the archive. In so far as Bou Ali and Ryzova work, in different ways, within the archival turn, their contributions continue, even while complicating, a direction earlier indicated by Benjamin. Conversely, Doherty's use of Benjamin to explore not *what* but *why* collectors in the UAE collect resonates methodologically with the archival turn, although she does not explicitly discuss archives. Roger's contribution engages Benjamin differently. Rogers draws on Benjamin to show how a private collection displayed within a larger public institution can yet retain the history not only of the objects themselves but of their private collector as well. Benjamin argued that 'the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner.'<sup>87</sup> Focusing on the Khalid Shoman Collection housed within the Darat al Funun in Amman, Rogers illustrates an exception to his argument.

The collecting practices discussed in this book encompass both objects and texts. Their common status as historical documents and discursive monuments justifies the inclusion of both the material and the textual. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault identifies a change in the object's status with the disciplinary transformation of history in terms of archaeology, which he links to a broader transition from the modern to the postmodern episteme. In the modern episteme, archaeology turned mute, opaque monuments into fluent, transparent

85 Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library – An Essay about Collecting', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 60.

86 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 460.

87 Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', p. 67.

documents. In the postmodern episteme, history converts written documents into monuments. These monuments represent "discourse in its own volume"—opaque, non-allegorical, non-referential—and derive their meaning not from the decipherment of hidden messages but from their underlying habits of thought.<sup>88</sup> Foucault's valuation of texts and objects as discourse and his own archaeological approach to historiography drive the archival turn toward collecting rather than collections that we consider methodologically useful.

In arguing for archives, museums and collecting practices in the modern Arab world to 'show us our own lives', the lives of the people of the region, we suggest a strategy of examining 'the local, in a historical way, and the historical, in a local way'.<sup>89</sup> This strategy, pursued broadly by our contributors, involves steering between the Scylla of an uncritical, Western-centric approach to collecting practices, satirized by Pamuk as the 'establish[ment of] ersatz museums of modern art', and the Charybdis of a nationalistic emphasis on an authentically and exclusively Arab culture. A strategy that looks at collecting practices in their cultural and historical specificity paradoxically reveals the entanglement between the local and the global. It is a commonplace in collection studies that national collections, which arose in conjunction with the nation-state, symbolize the continuity and coherence of that nation-state. This book complicates that model, showing that every collection is always already enmeshed in identity conflicts. A methodological focus on collecting practices, as well as on collections, reveals these contradictions in the history of every collection. Tracing the local circuits of production, transmission, reception and collection, of encounters and exchanges, often of clashes in contact zones of asymmetrical power relations, in colonial, neo-colonial and postcolonial settings – tracing, that is, the *practices* responsible for a collection's existence exposes the contest of meaning that occurs at every stage in the process of collecting. Every collection constitutes a narrative, the narrative of its own contestation. From this perspective, every collection amounts, fundamentally, to a collection of the practices that went into its creation. These practices, uncovered by our contributors, attest the efforts by collectors in and of the modern Arab world to 'rescue', in Belting's words, 'a part of their identities' (our italics) from competing efforts to identify the collected objects with contending cultures. Collecting practices are, at bottom, rescue practices. Thus the aim of a local-historical approach to collecting practices – to 'show us our own lives' – does not mean showing a monolithic national identity, as it may appear to Western eyes. Rather, it means showing that 'our lives' are plural in the sense that every collection bears the imprint of many lives – lives given, gained, claimed and counter-claimed in that contention over the meaning of objects, material and/or textual, that forms the object of this study.

88 *The Archaeology of Knowledge* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 139.

89 Susan Babbaie, 'Modern Arab Art', lecture, American University of Beirut, 27 January 2010.

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## PART I

# Local Representations of Modernity