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From Istanbul to Detroit: International networks of Islamic art in the early 20th century

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Abstract
While past decades have seen the rise of historiographical studies on Islamic art exploring collections, exhibitions and influential figures, the international nature of the formative years of the discipline, especially that of networks of people, is an aspect that needs further investigation. This article explores the beginnings of Islamic art in the United States by taking a well-known figure in Turkey at its center. Mehmet Aga-Oglu, curator of Islamic art at the Evkaf Museum, migrated from Istanbul to Detroit in 1929 to create a collection of Islamic art for one of the oldest museums in the country, Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). A group of international scholars facilitated this transition in their common goal to transform the United States into a leader in the academic studies of Islamic art history. By taking this little studied case, this article explores the key role this network of scholars played in establishing a new academic discipline in North America, which resulted in a little-known connection between Turkey and the United States as well as a keen interest in Turkish art and collections in Turkey in furthering the scholarship of Islamic art produced in the first half of the 20th century. To this end, this article outlines the beginnings and state of the field in 20th century; explores DIA's search for a curator and Aga-Oglu's appointment through the efforts of Bernard Berenson, Rudolf Meyer Riefstahl and Wilhelm R. Valentiner to highlight their unrecognized contributions; and Aga-Oglu's curatorial work at DIA from 1929 to 1933.

Keywords
Historiography and formation of Islamic art, Detroit Institute of Arts, Mehmet Aga-Oglu, Rudolf Meyer Riefstahl, Wilhelm (William) R. Valentiner.

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1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen the rise of historiographical studies on Islamic art history that explored the formation of major museum and private collections, organization of large-scale international exhibitions and impact of figures such as collectors, curators, dealers and scholars had on the perception and the scholarship of Islamic art. Among the many interesting findings of these exploratory studies, the international nature of the formative years (1850-1950) of the Islamic art history discipline, especially that of the networks of people, is one of the aspects that needs further investigation.

While the Islamic art history as a scholarly field of inquiry was established in Europe in the 19th century, the academic foundations of Islamic art was formed much later in the case of the United States dating back to as late as the early 20th century. This article explores the beginnings of the Islamic art history in the United States by taking a figure rather well-known in the art history field in Turkey at its center.

Dr. Mehmet Aga-Oglu (1896-1949), who was a curator of Islamic art at the Evkaf Museum (Museum of Pious Foundations) and a professor at the Istanbul University, migrated from Istanbul to Detroit, Michigan in 1929 to create a collection of Islamic art for one of the oldest museums in the country, the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). A group of international scholars, whose specialty varied from European art to Islamic art, facilitated this transition in their common goal to transform the United States into a leader in the academic studies of Islamic art history as well as enhancing Aga-Oglu's pioneering role in setting the academic standards of this burgeoning field in North America.

By taking this intriguing and under-examined case, this article aims to point out the key role the international network of scholars spread across the continents played in establishing a new academic discipline in North America, which resulted in a rather little-known connection between Turkey and the United States as well as a keen interest in Turkish art and collections in Turkey in furthering the scholarship of Islamic art produced in the first half of the 20th century in contrast to the well-established and uncontested taste for Persian art at the time.

To demonstrate these, this article first outlines the beginnings of the Islamic art history as an academic discipline and the state of the field in the United States in the early 20th century; then explores the DIA's search for a curator of Islamic art and Aga-Oglu's appointment to this role thanks to the efforts of a number of internationally known art historians such as Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), Rudolf Meyer Riefstahl (1880-1936) and Wilhelm [William] R. Valentiner (1880-1958) through the primary archival material housed at the DIA and the Biblioteca Berenson I Tatti to highlight their unrecognized contributions to the field of Islamic art; and lastly Aga-Oglu's curatorial work at the DIA from his arrival in September 1929 to his departure from his curatorial position in the Fall of 1933 due to the economic depression.

2. Beginnings of Islamic art history discipline

The beginnings of the Islamic art discipline date back to the 19th century Germany when the historical studies emerged as an academic field of inquiry and Islamic art history appeared as one of its subfields among many others, such as economic history, intellectual history, social history etc. The Colonial European Empires initiated and developed an interest in the study of the cultures of Muslim lands through the work of orientalist scholars, artists, architects, and engineers who travelled to the Near East. The early studies born out of exploratory travels in the region were mainly surveys of the architectural monuments (Vernoit, 2000, pp. 1-5).

By the late 19th century, the notion of Islam as a "cultural entity" and a "religious system" was well established leading the way to new forms of scholarship, hence the "discipline" of Islamic art emerged. Detailed inquiries were mostly focused on the early period of Islam with the aim to trace its formation, development and discover its

"essence," and specialists dedicating their entire careers to explore Islamic art and culture emerged in contrast to the Western travelers, historians and philosophers of the early 19th century, who expressed "general comments" on the Islamic world (Vernoit, 2000, p. 32).

Figure 1. *Mehmet Aga-Oglu (University of Michigan Faculty and Staff Portrait Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan).*

Figure 2. *Halil Edhem (Url-1).*

Another trend that became influential in the 19th century was the racial theories developed by Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, Ernest Renan, and others. As explained by Vernoit (2000), Gobineau in *Essai sur l'inegalite des races humaines* (1853-5), made the claim that "Indo-Europeans and Semites possessed different racial characteristics" (p. 6) giving superiority to the Indo-Europeans. As the Persians belonged to this superior race, Persia came to be seen as "the principle source of artistic inspiration in the Muslim world" (p. 6). This view dominated the field for multiple decades placing the Persians at the top of the artistic hierarchy in the Islamic world, whereas Arabs ranked second as they "created a flourishing civilization in medieval times," (p. 6) and the Turks occupied the lowest rank. Quoting from Ferguson, "the most stolid and least refined, and the least capable of elaborating such an art as we find in all other countries subject to this faith [Islam]" were the Turks (as cited in Vernoit, 2000, p. 7).

The impact of the racial theories is perhaps most visibly seen in the early scholarship on Islamic ceramics in the mid-19th century. For instance, the ceramics found at Lindos on the island of Rhodes were attributed to the Persians and called as "Lindos" or "Rhodian" ware, although they were originally from Ottoman İznik. In a similar vein, another type of İznik pottery, that of pale-purple, found in Damascus, hence called "Damascus" ware, were again attributed to Persia (Vernoit, 2000, p. 8; Lukens, 1965, pp. 38-39).

Another incident demonstrating the widespread acceptance of the racially biased opinions was the judgment made by Owen Jones during the first international exhibition known as the Great Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. Bringing together artefacts from across the world, in these international exhibitions, products were categorized along their national origins, thus introducing "the concept of nationhood" and national styles in art and architecture. It is important to note here that the first pub-

lic display of Islamic art took place in these international exhibitions of the 19th century. Providing a comparison of artefacts from different parts of the world, Owen Jones expressed that "the productions of Turkey 'were the least perfect of all the Mohammedan exhibiting nations'" (as cited in Vernoit, 2000, p. 14).

Despite and perhaps due to the lack of appreciation for Turkish artefacts, the Ottoman government provided support for studies on cultural heritage. Among the international exhibitions, Weltausstellung 1873 Wien (The Vienna International Exposition of 1873) is particularly significant for the development of scholarship on Ottoman art and architecture. *Les costumes populaires de la Turquie en 1873* (1873) by Osman Hamdi and Marie de Launay with photographs by Pascal Sebah; *L'architecture ottoman* (1873) again by De Launay and four artists, and Le Bosphore et Constantinople (1873) by Philipp Anton Dethier were prepared for this occasion under the patronage of the Ottoman government. In contrast to the commonly held opinion that only the Western scholars produced the early scholarship on the Near East, these works exemplified the early attempts by the Ottomans to write their own history of Ottoman art, architecture, and culture (Vernoit, 2000, p. 15; Necipoğlu, 2007, pp. 141-183).

In the United States, international exhibitions took place in the last quarter of the 19th century, first one held in Philadelphia (1876), followed by Boston (1883), New Orleans (1884-85), Chicago (1893), and St. Louis (1904). While the ones that were held after the First World War in Europe could not reach to their former glory, the ones in the United States were more effective in promoting the arts of the Islamic world. Particularly noteworthy among those were the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1926, especially for Persian art as Arthur Upham Pope (1881-1969) and Phyllis Ackerman (1893-1977) organized the "First Congress and Exhibition of Persian Art and Archaeology" on this occasion, and the New York World's Fair in 1939 (Vernoit, 2000, p. 16).

In addition to this geographical shift, another distinguishing factor between the 19th and 20th century international exhibitions was the change in the perception of Islamic artefacts. The 19th century international exhibitions treated these artefacts as industrial manufactures, finding interest in "their technical merits and the quality of their designs" (Vernoit, 2000, pp. 16-18), whereas in the 20th century these works were treated as having aesthetic value, hence demonstrating an increase in their appreciation as art works.

The specialized exhibitions on Islamic art by public institutions like museums emerged in such an environment of increased appreciation. In Europe, starting with *the Exhibition of Persian Art* at South Kensington Museum, London in 1876, a number of Islamic art exhibitions took place in various European centers from Paris to Stockholm, the most prominent one being *Meisterwerke Muhammedanischer Kunst* in Munich in 1910 (Vernoit, 2000, pp. 18-20).

In the United States, special exhibitions on Islamic art began to take place a few decades later than Europe, at the beginning of 20th century. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA), founded in 1870, acquired its first Islamic art objects in 1871. While in the 19th century, artworks from the Islamic lands were exhibited along with material from other parts of the world as decorative arts objects divided according to material, such as porcelain, metalwork etc., the collectors' demand for their gifted objects to be displayed as an assemblage pushed the museum to exhibit Islamic works on its own (Lindsey, 2012). An important turning point in the MMA's move toward "specialized temporary exhibitions" was a loan carpet exhibition taking place in 1910 with 50 objects from ten private collections and three museums (Valentiner, 1910b, pp. 221-222; "Loan Exhibition of Early Oriental Rugs", 1910, pp. 247-248). It was curated by William R. Valentiner, the decorative arts curator of the museum, who later became the director of the DIA and hired Mehmet Aga-Oglu as the first Near Eastern art curator of the Institute.

In the following two decades from 1910 to 1930, the MMA, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Boston MFA) and the Pennsylvania Museum organized exhibitions on different mediums and schools of Islamic art, such as *the Exhibition of Persian and Indian Manuscripts, Drawings and Paintings* in 1914 at the Boston MFA; *the Exhibition of Oriental Carpets* in 1921 at the MMA; *the International Exhibition of Persian Art* in 1926 at the Pennsylvania Museum in conjunction with the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition; *the Loan Exhibition of 'Polonaise' Carpets* in 1930 at the MMA (Vernoit, 2000, pp. 202-203).

It was only in 1930 that the first comprehensive survey exhibition on Islamic art in the United States was organized. Taking place at the DIA, the exhibition was curated by their newly appointed curator, Mehmet Aga-Oglu who arrived at Detroit from Istanbul in September 1929. It would be beneficial to investigate the circumstances of Aga-Oglu's appointment to an American institution as it portrays the state of the field in the United States and the expectations from a curatorial position at that time.

3. Detroit in search of a curator of Islamic art

The information on Aga-Oglu's early life is scant and no records, archival or otherwise, could be located at institutions in Turkey. Therefore, biographical details before his move to the United States are gleaned from the obituaries written at the time of his death by his colleagues in the United States, namely Adele Coulin Weibel (1880-1963) from the DIA and Maurice S. Dimand (1892-1986) from the MMA. According to these accounts, Aga-Oglu was born in Yerevan in 1896 to Turkish parents and received his training in history, philosophy, and languages at the Oriental Department of the University of Moscow, from where he graduated with a degree of doctor of letters in 1916. Upon graduation, pursuing his interest in Islamic art, he travelled extensively in Central Asia and Near East for five years. In 1921, Aga-Oglu arrived in Istanbul to resume his studies at Istanbul University, where he met Halil Edhem (1861-1938).

Halil Edhem guided Aga-Oglu's career by sketching a program for him to study Islamic art in Germany and Austria with the founding figures of the field for the next four years. In 1922, Aga-Oglu was in Berlin studying Near Eastern art and archaeology with Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948) and Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933). He studied classical and early Christian archaeology, and Western art and aesthetics at the University of Jena. Afterwards, he went to Vienna to study under Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941) from 1924 to 1926. He obtained his second doctoral degree in Turkish architecture from the University of Vienna (Weibel, 1951, pp. 267-271; Dimand, 1949-50, pp. 208-209; "Museum Notes", 1929, p. 14; "Dr. Aga-Oglu, Islamic Art Scholar, Dies", 1949, p. B2; Simavi, 2012, p. 2). Although his supervisor Strzygowski desired to keep him in Vienna, Aga-Oglu decided to return to Istanbul in 1927 (Riefstahl, 1928c), and became the curator in charge of the Islamic art collection housed at the Çinili Köşk, a part of the Archaeology Museums at the time where Halil Edhem was the director, and also taught Islamic art at the Istanbul University until he was hired to the DIA in Michigan in 1929.

Established in 1887 as one of the first museums in the United States, the DIA was considered to be a small municipal museum at the industrial center of American Midwest in the 1920s. Valentiner, a German born art historian specializing in Dutch art, was hired as the museum's director in 1924 and his tenure of two decades, from 1924 to 1945, is regarded as a golden era when he transformed the DIA into a universal survey museum with a world class collection (Peck, 1991; Richardson, 1992, pp. 37-40).

In his aim to build the museum's collection in an encyclopedic character, Valentiner began the search for a qualified curator of Islamic art among other fields. Benjamin March (1899-1934), a scholar of Chinese art, was already hired as the Asian art curator at the Institute and the position for the Near Eastern art curator was envisioned to be under his department. To aid Valen-

tiner in this search, March approached Rudolf Meyer Riefstahl for suggestions on potential candidates. Riefstahl was among the few specialists of Islamic art in the United States at the time holding a teaching position at the New York University. Riefstahl responded to this request expressing that there was no such trained person in the United States. He added that if the museum wished to invest in the training of an American, it would require multiple years for the person to be ready to take up such a role. Riefstahl's advise to the museum was to conduct an international search to fill the position. Teaching at Robert College at the time, hence being well-connected to the academic circles in Istanbul, Riefstahl suggested Mehmet Aga-Oglu could be an ideal candidate with his training in Russia, Turkey, Germany and Austria; his language skills (he knew Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Russian, German and French, his English was reading knowledge with very limited speaking ability but considering the number of languages he already acquired, Riefstahl assured that he could very quickly become fluent); and his knowledge of the material through his access to the collections in Istanbul and his extensive travels in the region. The only concern he had was the potential rage of Halil Edhem if he became aware of these plans to take Aga-Oglu away to America as he was trained specifically for his position in Istanbul. Riefstahl's solution was to present this as a temporary, one year only, opportunity for Aga-Oglu to spend time in the United States so that Halil Edhem's blessings could be granted (Riefstahl, 1928b).

Another instrumental figure in enabling Aga-Oglu's appointment to the DIA was Bernard Berenson, prominent scholar of Renaissance art, collector and connoisseur. In 1928, Berenson and his wife spent considerable time in Istanbul where they got to meet and acquaint themselves with Aga-Oglu. Riefstahl, therefore, suggested Valentiner to get in touch with the Berensons for an assessment of Aga-Oglu's both scholarly and personality qualities for the position in Detroit (Riefstahl, 1928d).

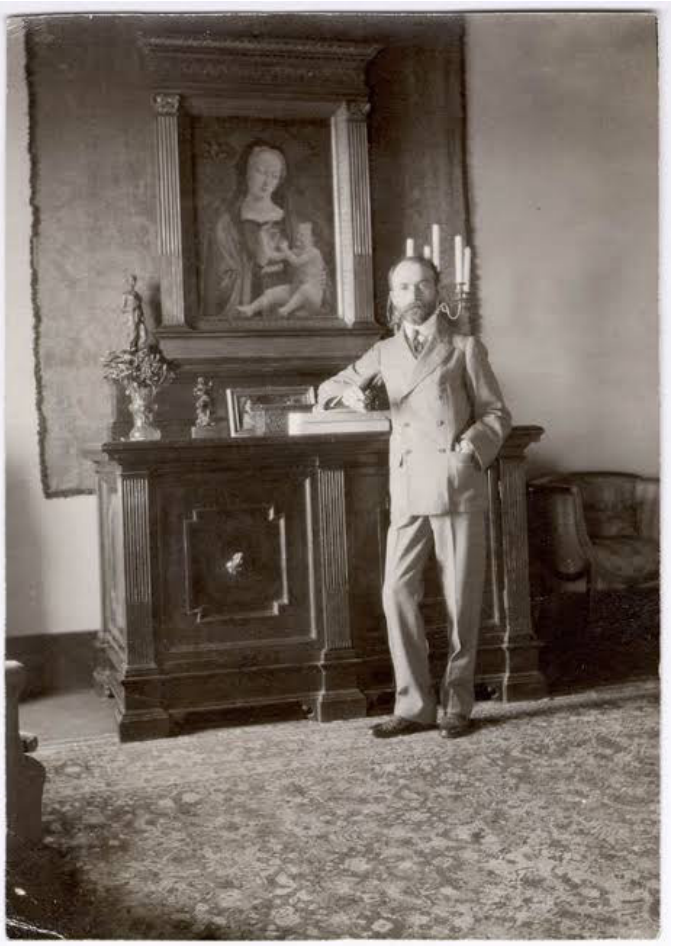

Figure 3. *Bernard Berenson at Villa I Tatti, 1903. (Url-2)*

Meanwhile, Berenson also contacted Paul Sachs (1878-1965) at Harvard University promoting Aga-Oglu for a curatorial position at Harvard before the DIA appointment went in effect, demonstrating Berenson's involvement in finding a suitable place for Aga-Oglu in the United States as well as his investment in the flourishment of Islamic art as an academic field of study in the New Continent (Cuddon, 2013, p. 21).

Quoting Berenson as cited in Cuddon (2013):

> I don't see him in Detroit… My ideal for him and for Harvard would be that he profess Islamitic [sic] art in my beloved Alma Mater. It is a far more important field than I could have imagined before going to Turkey. Aga Oglu has moreover material up to his sleeve, and ideas which will make him an ornament to any institution that can claim him. I should wish it to be Harvard. (p. 21)

These correspondences among the leading scholars in somewhat different

subject areas to find the perfect fit to establish a non-existent field in the United States demonstrates how international and well connected the art history network was already in those years.

In addition to the Berensons, further inquiries were made in the German-speaking Islamic art network for Aga-Oglu's appropriateness for the Detroit position. Riefstahl checked in with colleagues at the German Scientific Library while in Istanbul to gather information on Aga-Oglu. He also suggested March to contact Ernst Kühnel (1882-1964), Friedrich Sarre (1865-1945) and Strzygowsky to get "unbiased opinion" on Aga-Oglu (Riefstahl, 1928c).

After what seems to be a thorough background check, Valentiner prepared the letter offering Aga-Oglu the position of assistant curator for the Near East at the DIA with a yearly salary of $4,000 on October 20,1928. Aware of the lack of scholarly resources for research and absence of extensive collections to draw on, Valentiner quite frankly expressed that the conditions in Detroit could not match what Aga-Oglu already had in Istanbul, but he would be able to "build up a new department" and "educate the people in town." New York not being too far, Valentiner suggested Aga-Oglu could connect with scholars residing there, give lectures and contribute to the museum's journal by writing on Islamic art and the new acquisitions of the museum (Valentiner, 1928a).

Valentiner's offer letter did not reach Aga-Oglu until the first week of January 1929 due to Riefstahl's intervention. In a November 22, 1928 dated correspondence to Valentiner titled as "strictly confidential," Riefstahl expressed four concerns for Aga-Oglu's appropriateness for the job which were expressed to him by Berenson and Mrs. Riefstahl. The first one was that Aga-Oglu had not made much progress in English; the second concern was related to his personality, that while Aga-Oglu was "the highest type of scholar", he did "not have the aggressiveness which is necessary for a position in the Middle West"; third concern was that if the American chapter of his career would not be successful, this may "uproot him entirely & leave him in a worse position then now," in this instance Riefstahl is referring to his perception of the unlikelihood of Aga-Oglu reaching a high rank in Turkey due to his origin as an Azeri, and the fourth one was the impossibility of him to come to the DIA on January 1. Riefstahl's suggestion was to make a tentative offer and arrange an in-person meeting with Aga-Oglu in Europe for the following summer for Valentiner to make his own judgment (Riefstahl, 1928e).

However, Valentiner did not seem to mind these concerns and was eager to have Aga-Oglu onboard as soon as possible. In his response to Riefstahl on December 1, 1928, he wrote that it did "not make much difference about his English, and as for his aggressiveness, which you think is necessary for a position in the middle west, I think it can be done by others in the Museum." Valentiner further added that "If he [Aga-Oglu] can not come I shall be sorry indeed from all that I have heard about him" (Valentiner, 1928b). Upon receiving the offer letter in early January 1929, Aga-Oglu immediately accepted the position (Aga-Oglu, 1929b). It was agreed that he would start in Detroit on September 1, 1929 so he would have time to wrap up his duties at the museum and the university in Istanbul (Valentiner, 1929).

4. First survey exhibition of Islamic art in the United States

Upon his arrival at Detroit, the first undertaking of Aga-Oglu was to organize an exhibition that would bring together all schools and mediums of "Mohammedan" art, as it was called then, at the DIA. The few exhibitions that took place in the United States at the time, as mentioned above, focused only on a certain medium and represented the material in ethnoracial terms, such as Persian, Indian etc. Therefore, Aga-Oglu's aim to represent the Islamic art tradition as a whole was a first in the United States at its time ("Detroit Museum Shows Precious Art of Islam", 1930, p. 11; Simavi, 2012, p. 4).

Aga-Oglu travelled to New York to see the available material in his new home country in May, June, and September 1930 (Aga-Oglu, 1929a). Due

to economic constraints, the DIA could not pay for insurance and transportation fees, so rather than organizing an exhibition of loans from other public collections, they had to go after the material in the hands of New York dealers (Valentiner, 1930), which is unthinkable in contemporary museum practice but was an accepted convention at the time. These dealers were particularly interested in the opportunity to loan their artefacts as Detroit was known for its wealthy patrons due to the flourishing manufacturing industry. Many Detroit industrialists were art collectors themselves and were also serving on the DIA's board. Therefore, an exhibition showcasing the material on sale in Detroit would provide an opportunity for these objects to be purchased either for the private collections or on behalf of the museum.

This first survey exhibition of *Mohammedan Decorative Arts* took place from October 21 to November 23, 1930 and was the 14th loan exhibition held at the museum. There is no photographic record of the show, however a look into the exhibition catalogue gives an idea on the content if not of the visual organization. With a total of 171 objects listed in the catalogue, the exhibition featured 5 works of calligraphy, 8 manuscripts, 52 miniature paintings and 3 lacquer paintings, 39 pottery, 7 glassworks, 9 metalworks, 3 works in ivory, stucco, and wood, 30 carpets and 15 textiles. Only 9 of these objects were from the DIA's own collection and the rest were loaned from dealers and private collectors such as Costilayan and Company, Demotte, Duveen Brothers, Mr. and Mrs. Edsel B. Ford, Edward Wells, Fahim Kouchakji, French&-Company, H.K. Monif, Jackson Higgs, Josef Beilouny, Kevorkian, Leon Dalva, M.A. Koshif, Parish-Watson&Company, R. Hein, Stora, Valentiner, Zado Noorian, and a few anonymous lenders (Aga-Oglu, 1930a).

In the introductory essay to the catalogue, Aga-Oglu (1930a) described "Mohammedan art" as "extends over three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe, encompasses a period of more than a thousand years, and is carried on by various peoples such as Arabs, Persians and Turks" (p. 3). As he listed all the previous civilizations that occupied this vast geography before the advent of Islam, he emphasized that Islamic art "as heir to all these civilizations… combine the technical traditions and artistic epochs into its own art" (p. 3). Despite the multiplicity of influences, Aga-Oglu emphasized that Islamic art "nevertheless forms a unit, the basis of which is found in the Mohammedan religion…[which] bridged national differences as well as historical traditions, forcing not only the spiritual interests but also the everyday customs of the varying countries into one uniform mould" (p. 3).

After this brief description, Aga-Oglu (1930a) provided information on each medium presented in the exhibition, starting with calligraphy especially seen in the Qur'an manuscripts, and moving on to the arts of the book, which was the most prominent section of the exhibition with 52 examples representing all schools of Persian painting and some examples of Indian painting, whereas Turkish painting was totally absent. In the catalogue, Aga-Oglu (1930a) presented Persia as the most important contributor to the Islamic painting tradition whereas Turkey did not have the right soil for its flourishment and had been under the influence of the Persian tradition (p. 6). Among the 171 objects in the exhibition, Turkish art was represented with 9 objects only: 4 ceramics (3 from İznik and 1 from Kütahya), 4 brocades and a carpet.

In some ways, this exhibition echoed the conventions of the time where prominence was given to Persian art in terms of the objects featured. The commonly held belief based on ethno-racial characteristics determined that Arab art was appreciated for the early Islamic and the medieval periods, Persians were considered to bring the very qualities to Islamic art that were most deserved to be appreciated with their decorative repertoire, whereas the Turks were renowned for their weaving traditions, such as carpets and textiles (Vernoit, 2000, pp. 6-7, 14; see also Necipoğlu, 2012, pp. 57-75; Cuddon, 2013, pp. 13-33). It would be too far-fetched to claim that Aga-Oglu hierarchized the contributions of different

ethnic groups in his catalogue essay as he outlined the origins, influences and development of each medium at different time periods and different geographies that Islam ruled as a religion. As outlined in the introduction of the catalogue and through the display of all schools and periods of Islamic art together, the underlying message that Aga-Oglu conveyed was one of unity, which the Islam religion provided the basis of.

However, it is important to point out that in the instance of the Islamic painting tradition, Aga-Oglu (1930a) stated that the Persians surpassed all others whereas Turkey "furnished but a poor soil for its development" (p. 6). Reiterating the commonly held notions of his time, this is an interesting remark coming from Aga-Oglu. In contrast to his contemporaneous scholars in the field, Aga-Oglu with his access to the collections in Turkey must have been more knowledgeable about the Ottoman book arts along with others. An anecdote shared in a letter by Riefstahl addressed to Berenson, in fact, give a quite limited but an interesting glimpse into Aga-Oglu's time in Istanbul. On March 9, 1929, Riefstahl enthusiastically reported on Aga-Oglu's discoveries in the Topkapı Palace Library to Berenson, claiming "the entire history of Islamic miniature painting will have to be first written or re-written on the basis of the Stamboul material". Riefstahl encouraged Aga-Oglu to publish his findings in the United States with American funding and assistance of American scholars under Aga-Oglu's guidance. Riefstahl envisioned this to be a perfect opportunity to realize his "own Institute idea" where American scholars would have the access to the "immense Seraglio material" and Aga-Oglu would be the bridge in-between. The idea to establish an institute by Americans came to Riefstahl when he learned about the authorization given to Germans to open an Archaeological Institute which had the support of Halil Bey and Köprülüzade Fuad Bey (Riefstahl, 1929a and b). To realize this, Riefstahl suggested to mobilize "two or three serious scholarly institutions in the United States" to apply for a starting grant to the Rockefeller Board. The first project Riefstahl had in mind was an Islamic architecture survey with four or five resident American scholars in Istanbul assisting him. Research on Classical and Byzantine material could be included at a later stage with a good library and quarters in Istanbul. While Riefstahl admitted "all that is pipe dreams now," he still thought that "this possibility of alliance with Mehmed (whom Halil loves fatherly) is a tremendous step ahead concerning all possibilities" (Riefstahl, 1929b).

This was only one among other enthusiastic letters Riefstahl sent to Berenson between 1927 and 1929 reporting on his new discoveries in Turkey and his interest in promoting Turkish art as he was carried away with the possibilities and opportunities of academic research during his stay. Riefstahl's own research varied from Turkish rugs to Seljuk architecture in Anatolia at this time. For instance, while in a July 1, 1927 dated letter, Riefstahl (1927) stated that "it is very curious how an exact analysis in the field of Turkish art brings new conclusions," on March 8, 1928, he added:

> Deeper I enter the field of Turkish art, the more interesting and unpublished material do I strike. And in the long run I hope to be able to make a useful contribution to research by helping to open up this rather neglected field.

As for the libraries and the collection of the Evkaf Museum, where Aga-Oglu was the curator at the time, Riefstahl stated that there were "wonderful treasures," however "as far as buying possibilities are concerned, there is almost nothing left" (Riefstahl, 1928a).

Neither Riefstahl's idea for an American Institute in Istanbul (at least one focusing on the Islamic period) nor a collaboration with Halil Edhem or Aga-Oglu to promote Turkish art and collections materialized, and the art of the Seljuks and Ottomans did not receive the attention and appreciation in the United States that Berenson and Riefstahl enthusiastically advocated for in their letters, at least in their lifetimes.

Circling back to Aga-Oglu's 1930 exhibition, it preceded another significant exhibition for the field, that of *the International Exhibition of Persian Art*

at Burlington House, London in 1931 organized by Pope. The exhibition and the events surrounding it received considerable press and public attention, enhancing the already established popularity of Persian art. For many, this exhibition was a landmark and "set the standard for those that followed" (Vernoit, 2000, p. 21). Many objects that were exhibited in London were also featured in the DIA exhibition. Both Aga-Oglu and Valentiner served on the organizing committee of the Burlington House exhibition and the DIA loaned six objects from its collection to the London exhibition ("Americans Lend Treasures of Art…", 1930, p. 34; "Annual Report for the Year 1930", 1931, p. 46; Simavi, 2012, p. 4).

On the academic side, during the International Congress of Iranian Art held in conjunction with the London exhibition, Aga-Oglu announced that he discovered a history of Persian painting written by the court painter Dost Muhammed in 1544 as a preface to the Bahram Mirza album in the Topkapı Palace Museum (TSMK H. 2154, Thackston, 2001). This scholarly contribution became a media story, featured even in news outlets such as *The New York Times* ("Persian Art History Discovered at Show…", 1931) as a discovery that "will alter the study of Persian art" and "will mean virtually the re-writing of the history of Persian painting" (p. 37). Since it was announced as a discovery Aga-Oglu made on this occasion in London, it could not be the discovery that Riefstahl referred to in his letter to Berenson.

5. Building a collection of Islamic art in Detroit

In the early decades of its establishment, the DIA had limited number of objects in its collection from the region, which were some antiquities acquired through legally excavated sites in the Middle East through their subscription to the Egypt Exploration Fund and the collection of Frederick K. Stearns, a pharmaceutical manufacturer who in 1890 donated 10,000 objects he obtained during his travels to the Near and Far East (Peck, 1991, pp. 40-41).

It was only starting in 1917 onwards that objects from the Islamic lands entered the museum's collection though few in numbers at first. In 1924, the DIA made its first purchases for the Islamic department: a 13th century ceramic bowl from Rayy and a 15th century Persian tile. The following year, 1925, witnessed a big leap in the number of acquisitions. 43 new acquisitions of this year were either gifts or purchases from well-known dealers such as Dikran Kelekian (1867-1951), Kirkor Minassian (1874-1944) and Pope. Among these, the majority of objects were from Iran, with a few examples from Turkey and Mughal India. The following few years from 1926 to 1928, until the arrival of Aga-Oglu in 1929, the acquisitions were again few in number and the Turkish pieces among these were all İznik pieces, either plates or tiles[1].

This increased interest in the Islamic art from 1924 onwards must be due to Valentiner's directorship. As mentioned above, before becoming the director of the DIA, Valentiner worked at the MMA as their decorative arts curator and curated one of the earliest Islamic art exhibitions in the country with his 1910 loan exhibition of Oriental rugs. He also authored 7 articles between 1908 and 1913 in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* on Islamic art (Valentiner, 1908, 1909, 1910a and c, 1912, 1913a and b). Therefore, Valentiner had familiarity with Islamic arts from his curatorial experience in decorative arts. Moreover, he must have cultivated relationships with the New York based dealers during the years he was working for the MMA. For instance, Valentiner was corresponding with Riefstahl and Pope while in Detroit, and it was through them that he made some of his Islamic art purchases for the museum. To expand the Western art collection of the DIA, he was also working closely with dealers such as Sir Joseph Duveen (1869-1939), G. J. Demotte (1877-1923) and Kelekian, who are well-known for their access to the Near East. Hence, it would not be misleading to argue that Valentiner must have laid the groundwork upon which Aga-Oglu built the Islamic art collection at the DIA.

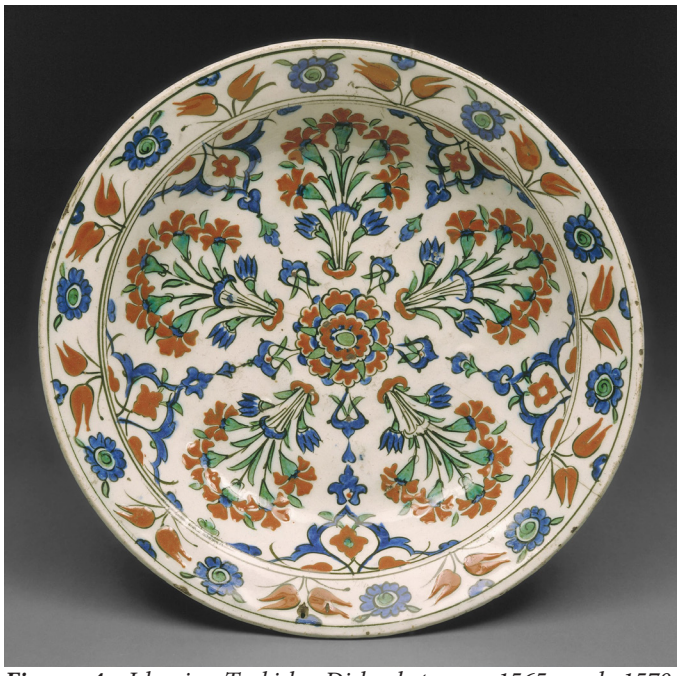

Figure 4. *Islamic, Turkish, Dish, between 1565 and 1570, underglaze-painted fritware. Detroit Institute of Arts, City of Detroit Purchase, 28.145. (Url-3).*

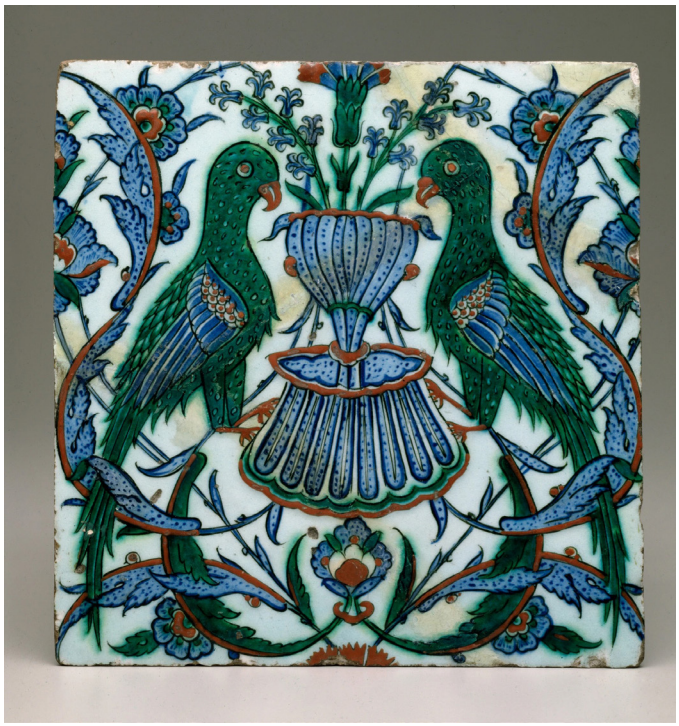

Figure 5. *Islamic, Turkish, Tile, ca. 1600, underglaze-painted fritware. Detroit Institute of Arts, City of Detroit Purchase, 25.36. (Url-4).*

In 1929, the year Aga-Oglu arrived to Detroit, 12 objects entered the DIA's collection of Islamic art. Then, right after the first Islamic art exhibition of the museum, Aga-Oglu was able to acquire as many as 45 objects in 1930 and 1931 as shown in the bulletins and annual reports of the DIA indicating that the exhibition played a key role for the DIA's collection acquisitions[2]. Some of the highlight objects of this period are the enameled glass bottle from Egypt purchased as a result of the 1930 exhibition from Otto Burchard, the Persian Qur'an written on colored Chinese paper from the 15th century, and 25 pieces of Persian ceramics purchased from Pope.

In the early 1930s, Aga-Oglu received many offers for the museum's collection, however, due to the depression era as well as his concerns regarding the artistic value and authenticity, he declined majority of them. Although Aga-Oglu was actively looking for Persian manuscript paintings to acquire, he could not get hold of many (Aga-Oglu, 1929a). His one major acquisition in this branch is a page from the Demotte Shahnama acquired in 1935. One of his aspirations was to bring together all the dispersed folios of the Demotte Shahnama for a publication project, but he was not able to materialize this during his lifetime.

6. Depression era and search for a new position

By 1932, the DIA being a city museum, reached to a point of not being able to support its staff members because the city almost became bankrupt due to the economic depression. Valentiner with the support from the president of the museum Mr. Edsel B. Ford (1893-1943), sent letters to colleagues across the United States to ask for positions for his staff.

In an April 13, 1932 dated letter, Valentiner wrote to Sir Joseph Duveen, a highly influential art dealer, asking for help in securing Aga-Oglu a position by speaking to his contacts should he have to leave the museum on July 1, 1932 due to economic constraints. A year later, on April 13, 1933, this time Valentiner approached the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC for Aga-Oglu but the museum conforming with regulations imposed on the government agencies could not hire new staff members (Lodge, 1933). Berenson also contacted Boston MFA and the Fogg Museum at Harvard throughout the 1930s for a position for Aga-Oglu (Cuddon, 2013, p. 21). Becoming suspicious about motives then director of

the Fogg, Edward Waldo Forbes (1873-1969) made inquiries with a number of people on Aga-Oglu checking whether he was a true scholar or a dealer under disguise. In the end, he was assured of Aga-Oglu's integrity as a scholar, however Joseph Upton (1900-1981), assistant curator of Near Eastern art at the MMA, expressed that though Aga-Oglu "has a broad knowledge of Muhammedan art and of the cultural background," he believed "his historical and stylistic opinions are colored and biased by an attempt to make every source of inspiration and development in the field Turkish" (as cited in Cuddon, 2013, pp. 21-22).

It is important to point out here that while Aga-Oglu's doctoral dissertation was on Turkish architecture and his publications were mostly on Turkish art when he was in Turkey, his research in the United States did not have this focus, with the exception of one article that he published in *The Art Bulletin* entitled "The Fatih Mosque at Constantinople" (1930c). One reason for this could be the unavailability of the Turkish material in the United States. As a curator, he was drawing mostly from what was available in the American collections and on the American market for his exhibitions, acquisitions, and research projects; and in the 1930s the trend for Persian art was high in the United States. Moreover, as his offer letter indicated, one of his main duties was to educate the public on Islamic art. Therefore, Aga-Oglu's projects focused on introducing this

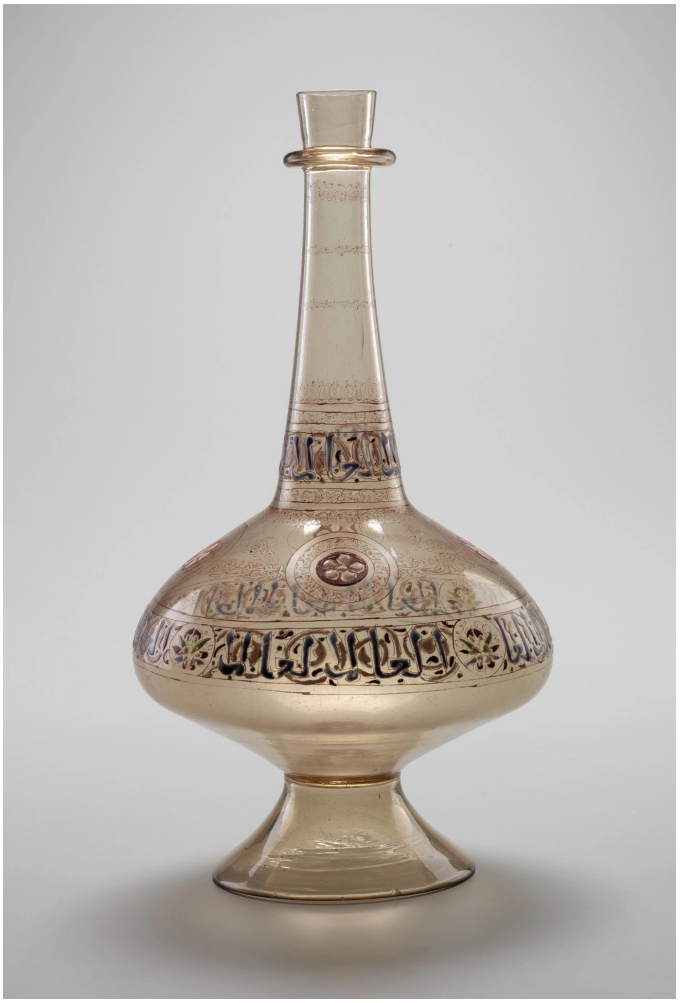

Figure 6. *Possibly Islamic, Syrian; possibly Islamic, Egyptian, Bottle made for the Rasulid Sultan Hizabr al-Din in Yemen, between 1296 and 1321, glass, gold, enamel. Detroit Institute of Arts, City of Detroit Purchase, 30.416. (Url- 5).*

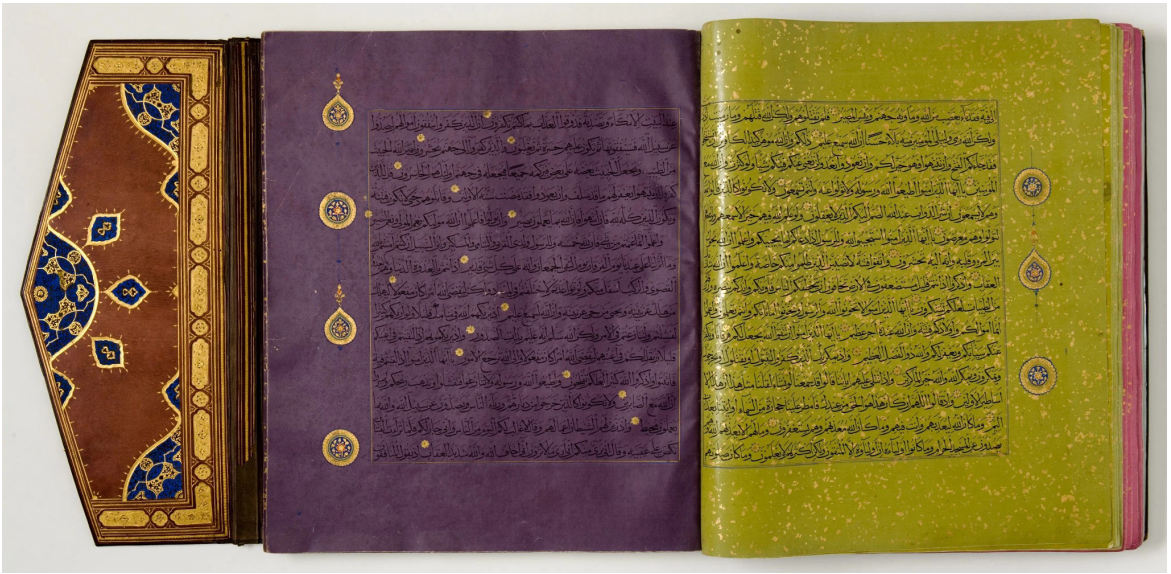

Figure 7. *Islamic, Iranian, Qur'an, 1450 - 1460, leather and paper with ink and gold. Detroit Institute of Arts, City of Detroit Purchase, 30.323. (Url-6).*

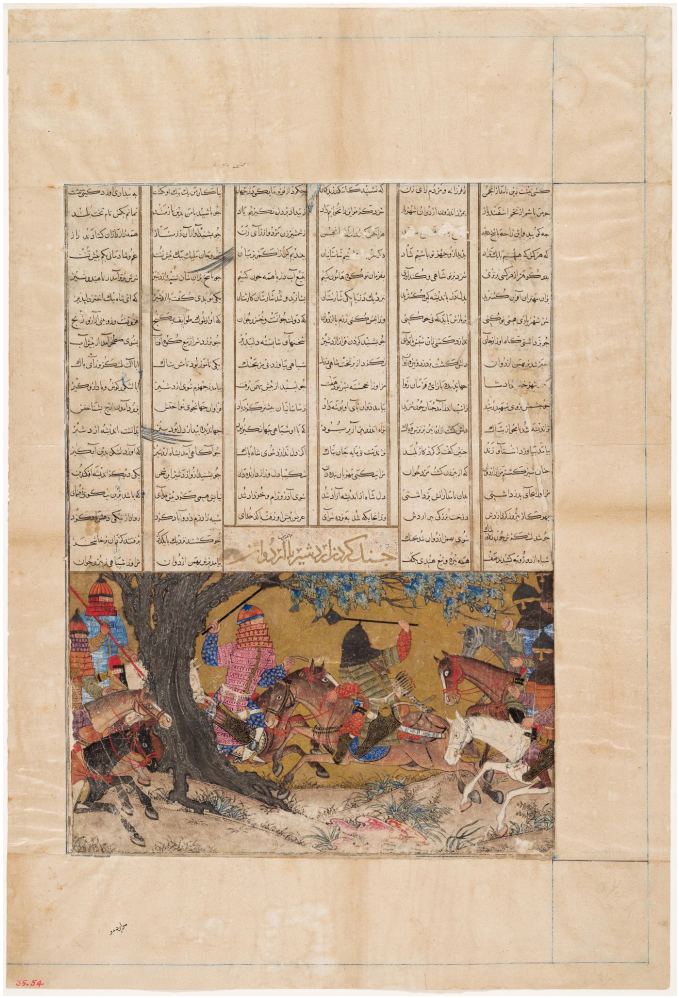

Figure 8. *Islamic, Iranian, Folio from the Great Mongol Shahnama: Ardashir Battles Bahman, Son of Ardavan, ca. 1335, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Edsel B. Ford Fund, 35.54. (Url-7).*

little-known art tradition to the audiences in the United States and establishing it as a scholarly field of inquiry with solid methodology. However, it should be stressed that with his publications Aga-Oglu brought attention to little or unknown works of Islamic art held in the museum collections of Istanbul such as his articles "Ein Prachtspiegel im Topkapu Sarayı Museum" in *Pantheon* (1930b); "Some Unknown Mohammedan Illustrated Manuscripts in the Library of the Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi at Istanbul" in *Orientalistische Literaturzitung* (1931); "Islamische Metallarbeiten aus Istanbuler Museen" in *Belvedere* (1932); "Preliminary Notes on Some Persian Illustrated mss. in the Topkapu Sarayı Müzesi, Part I" in *Ars Islamica* (1934) and his 1935 book entitled *Persian Bookbindings of the Fifteenth Century*.

In the end, Aga-Oglu secured a teaching position at the University of Michigan (UM), enabling him to stay in Detroit and keeping a joint appointment at the DIA and the UM simultaneously starting with the 1933 academic year ("Staff Changes", 1934, p. 14; Peck, 1991, p. 193), however, his curatorial position at the DIA was more of an honorary title which enabled him to organize joint programs with the museum and the university. This arrangement lasted until 1938 when Aga-Oglu resigned from his post at the University, which ultimately ended his honorary role at the DIA.

7. Concluding remarks

Before his arrival at Detroit, in a letter dated March 23, 1929 to Valentiner, Aga-Oglu (1929c) wrote, "I shall come to the United States with great hopes, for I believe I shall find there an opportunity for useful work, which is the best thing a scholar can desire". Indeed, in the following twenty years that Aga-Oglu spent in the United States from 1929 to his death in 1949, he found the "opportunity for useful work" accomplishing many firsts for the study of Islamic art in the New Continent, which was made possible with support from institutions such as the DIA and the UM among others and a strong network of international scholars despite the hardships due to the economic circumstances as well as the limited employment opportunities due to the nascent state of the field. Although a collaboration with Riefstahl to further the research on Turkish art or acting as a scholarly bridge between Turkey and the United States as Riefstahl wished for Aga-Oglu did not materialize, Aga-Oglu was able to form an international platform to advance the scholarship on Islamic art in the United States through the journal, *Ars Islamica*, providing a venue for international scholars to share their latest research, as well as establishing the first academic program in the country, the Research Seminary in Islamic Art, transforming the UM into a leading institution for this new academic field.

As for the DIA, upon Aga-Oglu's departure Adele Coulin Weibel served

as the Near Eastern art curator from 1938 to 1949, then until 1963 as curator emeritus in addition to her role as textiles curator. Her career trajectory is reminiscent of Aga-Oglu. Trained in Europe, Weibel moved to the United States in 1915. She met Riefstahl in New York, who encouraged her to specialize in textile arts and around the same time her path crossed with Valentiner while she was a lecturer at the MMA. She returned to Europe to study with Arthur Weese at Berne and with Strzygowski at Vienna, and became curator of textiles at the DIA when Valentiner established the department in 1927 (Textile Department Records, 1876-1973, pp. 1-2).

During Weibel's curatorship, Near Eastern art galleries were re-arranged in 1942 ("Growth of the Collections", 1943, p. 35), however, no Islamic art exhibition was organized with the exception of an exhibition of Persian architecture photographs by the American Institute for Iranian Art and Archaeology in 1939 ("Accessions", 1940, p. 58). The collection continued to grow, though at a slow pace, with 40 acquisitions over the course of twenty years[3], yet Weibel was quite a prolific textiles scholar along with many other responsibilities she assumed in her long career at the DIA (Textile Department Records, 1876-1973, p. 2).

When Valentiner retired in 1945, he had accomplished to create a world class collection for the DIA. His efforts are still lauded as his many important acquisitions "established the framework of today's collections" (Url-8). As for Valentiner's interest in Islamic art, it was not forgotten by the museum patrons, whose gifts in his memory to the DIA in 1958 were all works of Islamic painting.

Acknowledgment

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Endnotes

[1] All the acquisition information presented here is obtained through the Bulletins of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit between the years 1924 and 1929 and Object Card Records located at the Detroit Institute of Arts Research Library and Archives.

[2] All the acquisition information presented here is obtained through the Bulletins of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit between the years 1929 and 1931.

[3] All the acquisition information presented here is obtained through the Bulletins of the Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit between the years 1938 and 1959.

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