

# Contemporary Muslim Fashions Racism and Diversity in European Museums

This presentation is about the ongoing difficulties and obstacles BIPOC<sup>1</sup> artists and cultural practitioners face when working in *white*-dominated environments – between hyper visibility and invisibility. These affect the daily work within institutions as well as modes of (non-) presentation within the exhibition space. The exhibition *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*, which was on display at the Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany, between 4 April 2019 and 1 September 2019 will serve as an example to illustrate not only the attempt to include a contemporary cultural aspect that is for different reasons (still) seen as not being fully integral to European culture, but also in order to discuss the challenges the museum as an institution faced and continues to face in terms of community outreach and visitor engagement.

Since 2012, and with its current director Matthias Wagner K, the Museum Angewandte Kunst aims to be a vibrant site of discovery. It tries to keep track with the *Zeitgeist* through an emphasis on design and fashion. Against the backdrop of its prominent collections of outstanding works of applied art, it strives to shed light on the obscure and create relationships between the events and stories revolving around objects from the concluded past, the emerging present and the immanent future. The changing exhibitions focus on cultural values and evolving living situations, and new presentation formats have made way for the negotiation of current reflections.

*Contemporary Muslim Fashions* was the first major museum exhibition to explore the complex and diverse nature of contemporary Muslim clothing styles. The Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt was the exhibition's first venue in Europe. The concept of the exhibition was developed at the deYoung Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and was initiated by former director Max Hollein, now director at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and who had previously served as director of Schirn, Städel and Liebighaus in Frankfurt, Germany.

In selecting designers, Jill D'Alessandro, curator in charge of costume and textile arts, and Laura L. Camerlengo, associate curator of costume and textiles at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco,<sup>2</sup> focused particularly on the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as Europe and the USA. *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* took a close look at the diverse interpretations of Muslim clothing traditions in these different countries, and not only showed regional differences, but also highlighted the similarities. It presented itself as a snapshot of this fashion phenomenon, which carries religious, social and political implications.



**Figure 1** Exhibition view of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt, 2019.  
© Museum Angewandte Kunst Frankfurt/Wolfgang Günzel

The exhibition showed on the one hand how Muslim women implement their own fashion interpretations of “modest fashion”, and on the other hand, how international fashion companies are coming up with their own creations in response to the increasing demand for “discreet”, less body-oriented and nevertheless fashionable styles from Muslim and non-Muslim women worldwide.

## Inclusion

The team in San Francisco, all non-Muslim, worked closely with Muslim communities in San Francisco from a very early stage. It was important to them that the phenomenon is not only seen as something that happens somewhere else, but rather in their immediate environment, that it is also a part of contemporary American culture and that there is a huge community transcending national borders that is supported by social media.

What interested me as a curator for fashion, body and the performative at the Museum Angewandte Kunst in taking this show on was the fact that the topic is no less relevant to the European – or more precisely, German – context. It offered the possibility to challenge stereotypes and redefine a certain idea of what being European actually means. It put a spotlight on objects, narratives and actors that are usually missing in museum reflections on contemporary daily lives and societies in Europe.



**Figure II** Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ\_2 (2013). © Habib Yazdi

We followed the example set in San Francisco and put together a group of experts not only advising the museum's non-Muslim staff but also supporting in creating side programmes and overseeing the whole process to illuminate blind spots that usually go unseen in the everyday practices of traditional museums. The group was also tasked with adapting the results of the community outreach groups in San Francisco to the German context. Since the exhibition was mostly complete, we in Frankfurt were quite limited in making changes and additions to the exhibition itself,<sup>3</sup> so we focused on an additional publication which accompanied the book published in San Francisco and a three-day conference that took place at the museum the weekend after the exhibition opening. This conference was co-organised by the Muslim activist, feminist and social worker Nabila Bushra, and invited speakers from relevant communities to critically reflect on the exhibition itself and the context in which it was situated. The conference made space for what was missing in the presentation, and encouraged discussion from the perspective of young European Muslim women.

We used the power of social media and collaborated with three prominent figures from the German context – Meriem Lebdiri of Mannheim-based fashion label Mizaan, blogger, influencer and presenter Amira Haruna, and writer and student Yasmine M'Barek – to produce a trailer for the German version of the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> All three of them were involved in the process of implementing the exhibition in the German context from a very early stage. They gained trust in the institution and acted as spokespeople within their communities.

## Trust

In 2018, the *Künstlerhaus Mousonturm* in Frankfurt published a book that reflected upon the institution's process of addressing its own colonial legacy. The point of departure for this publication was their experiences in realising their three-year project *Afropean Mimicry & Mockery in Theatre, Performance & Visual Arts*, which was initiated as an artistic exchange between Africa and Europe at the

---

Mousonturm. As the editors of the publication state, this project became “a laboratory investigating our own *whiteness* within the structures of German theatres, institutional racism and structural discrimination” (Liepsch and Warner 2018). *Allianzen: Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen* is both a documentation of the process and an anthology, and is fundamental to any critical cultural practice today.<sup>5</sup> It gathers texts by artists, academics and curators revolving around the contradictions of critical practice within and surrounding *white* institutions in Germany, which are used to create *white* self-affirmation through representations of the self and the other.

Both the publication and the project are involved in a paradigm shift which challenges cultural institutions to “critically reflect upon the diversity of their audiences, their staff, their programming, and their institutional access, in order to acknowledge a multi-ethnic German society” (Liepsch and Warner 2018, 21). At the Museum Angewandte Kunst, we didn’t start from scratch. Being Black<sup>6</sup> and an active member of the *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland* (Initiative of Black People in Germany, or ISD) with an extensive personal and professional network, it was easy for me to access members of different communities and convince them to participate and distribute invitations and information through their networks. Distrust in *white*<sup>7</sup> institutions that too often reproduce colonial dynamics based on the idea of self and other and tend to tokenise people and issues instead of thoroughly challenging their exclusionary structures was complemented by a deep understanding of imbalances and power dynamics. *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* didn’t redefine Western Culture. There’s still a lot to learn. However, it left a visible mark, changed the museum’s visitor structure and attracted people who never had set foot in a museum before.

Historically, museums are not safe spaces. They were created to exhibit the “other” in order to reassure the majority culture of their status as the norm. One major challenge of the exhibition was to avoid the possibility of visitors feeling like exhibits themselves. “Who speaks for whom, why and where” is still a question that is rarely asked. We tried to challenge these questions in the conference, in the side programme and in our guided tours. Two of the interns that have been working on the exhibition and helped with the conference also gave tours of the show. One of them – a Black Muslim woman – was repeatedly confronted with ignorance, micro-aggressions and racism from *white* exhibition visitors. These included questions like “where are you from?” (she was born and raised in Germany), and the fact that people are surprised to find out that she is the guide at the beginning of the tour (as they don’t expect a Black woman to have this kind of position), or the fact that she was constantly asked for her personal opinion on the exhibition topic. None of the other *white* guides shared her experiences. This shows that the Museum Angewandte Kunst can still not be considered an inclusive space, there is still little recognition that the “other” is not actually so different. The Black body moves through a space that reproduces the body’s racialised position in the world. BIPoC within *white* institutional spaces always do extra work. They accomplish their assigned tasks and carry out emotional labour to create their own safe spaces within the institution. Demands are at most met individually, but never structurally. Diversity is not limited to hiring non-*white* employees, it also means challenging racist structures within the institution to provide a safe and trustworthy working environment for everyone. This may be the first steps in changing a *white* institution into a diverse institution.



**Figure III** Exhibition view of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt, 2019.  
© Museum Angewandte Kunst Frankfurt/Wolfgang Günzel

I was the person Black Muslim women would come to talk to. Sometimes just someone listening helps, a person that understands and acknowledges. There is this constant struggle with the compulsion to behave “appropriately”, which means not hurting *white* feelings and catering to a certain expectation of the good ‘immigrant’ – mostly without being an immigrant at all – to behave in a non-threatening way; that is, to behave *white*.<sup>8</sup> The performance of *whiteness* places BIPOC under constant stress. Besides my work as a curator at the museum, I also do a lot of care work in my community. That is not the museum’s fault, but it is necessary work I do in addition to my actual work, and is basically unpaid, because it is structurally not seen as a crucial form of labour. This is a structural problem. How is racism addressed within the institutions? What has been done to ensure that *all* employees feel safe? These questions also need to be asked when it comes to inclusion.

### Critique and possibilities

The ease with which we defined Muslim cultures as part of everyday German practices has been highly criticised. This exhibition didn’t show the exotic “other”, it catered to the fact that there are at least 5 million Muslims living in Germany, many of them German citizens going back several generations. We stressed that the “other” is a part of “us”. Many people didn’t approve. What could have been an exhibition that highlighted *one* aspect of contemporary German culture turned into a political arena surrounding the fundamental question of whether Islam is a part of Germany or not, and if yes, to which extent. Existing complex discourses



**Figure IV** Exhibition view of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt, 2019.  
© Museum Angewandte Kunst Frankfurt/Wolfgang Günzel

were transferred to an exhibition which was in many respects critical, and that focused on an international fashion trend, a billion-dollar market and an existing phenomenon, not something that we had invented. Nevertheless – besides many (open) letters from various initiatives, parties, groups and private individuals, ranging from general concern to alarming threats against Museum staff – the protest culminated in a hearing called by a politician from the party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen in Frankfurt in which the question was asked if the museum's future curatorial decisions may need to be approved by the head of the regional department of culture. The main argument was that the exhibition supported the oppression of women and fundamentalist Islam. It was labelled the "headscarf show" even before the it had opened, contrary to the fact that only a quarter of the mannequins wore something that was widely recognisable as a religious symbol. Other mannequins wore hats, turbans, baseball caps which, without a religious framing, would have never been seen as uniquely Muslim. Some mannequins wore no head covering at all. Dialogue was hardly possible, because the critique and the exhibition set different parameters. While most of the critics framed the headscarf as a definitive symbol of a very specific and oppressive element of Islam, the exhibition focused on Muslim dress, in which the headscarf in more or less contemporary interpretations functions as highly versatile, multifaceted sign, dependent on context. A wider frame created the space to discuss much more pressing questions like why many young Muslim women, especially in Western societies, are these days deciding to live a visibly religious life – this phenomenon

is not limited to Muslim women or indeed women at all. How can oppressive and problematic aspects of Muslim cultures be discussed without denouncing the religion as a whole? How can Queer perspectives be discussed, as well as topics like feminism and Islam, topics usually neglected in Western discourse?

## Looking forward

The main goal in our museums should be that ethnic, racial and sexual categories should not determine the way we form, define, preserve and exhibit culture. In fact, all categories should be an integral part of curatorial practice. We are not there yet. And it is not the marginalised groups' task to keep up the illusion of an inclusive and democratic society by keeping silent about shortcomings. What we need to do is to deconstruct society as it is now in order to rebuild it by delving into detail, and by listening to all the stories that have not been officially told and are missing because their storytellers have been silenced. We need to re-define history, to make what has been obscured visible, to try to understand what is there – to rebuild society, to overcome the fear that in the end, when we put all the pieces back together, that there will be something different to what was there before, something we have no idea about yet. We need to fully embrace the diverse, multifaceted “us” we may not always and completely understand, and to finally get rid of that abstract concept of the “other”.

## Endnotes

- 1 Black, Indigenous, People of Colour.
- 2 Prof Reina Lewis of the London College of Fashion was advising co-curator of the exhibition in San Francisco.
- 3 We added four designers from Germany and Austria to the show, to highlight the fact that contemporary modest dress rooted in Islamic clothing traditions is also a German, Austrian and European phenomenon. One style was by Mannheim-based fashion label Mizaan, run by Meriem Lebdiri. Feyza Baycelebi from Berlin contributed another style, with two designs from Vienna-based label Naomi Afia, and one ensemble from Imen Bousnina, also from Vienna.
- 4 The deYoung museum in San Francisco produced their own trailer with internationally renowned Black Muslim model Halima Aden.
- 5 Another crucial publication is *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Sara Ahmed, Durham, 2012.
- 6 The term “Black” does not refer to a skin colour but a politically emancipatory self-designation, and as such, is capitalized.
- 7 *white* is written in lower cases italics in this text in order to mark its construction as a concept or privilege, rather than a skin colour.
- 8 Frantz Fanon has written about this extensively in his ground-breaking work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986), London.

## Bibliography

Liepsch, Elisa and Warner, Julian (Eds.) (2018): *Allianzen: Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen*. Bielefeld.