

## Islamic Expressions in Art, Culture, and Literature

*Weston F. Cook, Jr.*

The Fourteenth Annual Conference of The American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies, held on May 2 and 3, 1997, at The Connelly Center, Villanova University, Villanova, PA

The American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies (AC SIS), is one of the oldest continuing organizations in the United States that focuses specifically on Muslim states, societies, and the problems confronting Muslim communities throughout the world. Composed of American and foreign scholars, non-Muslims as well as Muslims, ACSIS encompasses the full range of humanities and social science disciplines. The represented disciplines include the familiar areas of political science, history, linguistics, philosophy, religion, economics, anthropology, international relations, and sociology; moreover, artists, musicians, media specialists, poets, folklorists, architects, agronomists, bankers, educators, and business consultants are involved in the Council's work. Along with this professional diversity, ACSIS has always taken special pride in providing a forum for younger and innovative students to present their ideas and research and encouraging them to publish

True to these founding goals, the Board of Directors chose "Cultural, Artistic, and Popular Expressions in Islam" as the theme for this conference. Papers on Muslim works from the Americas, Europe, South Asia, China, Africa, and the heartlands of the ummah were solicited. The call for papers also struck new directions for ACSIS—seeking music and performance presentations, calligraphy, textile art, film and animation, calligraphy, cuisine, and other original formats different from the standard conference panel modes. The Board also designated long-time member Weston F. Cook, Jr. as program chair and organizer. Dr. Dale F. Eickelman of Dartmouth College, currently a scholar-in-residence at the

Woodrow Wilson Center of Washington D.C., accepted the Council's invitation to be the conference keynote speaker. Thanks to the efforts of Professor Hafiz Malik and Kail C. Ellis, Connelly Center at Villanova University again offered its superlative facility for the meetings, displays, and the banquet.

Dr. John O. Voll, a noted American Islamist now at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, orchestrated the first panel: "Islam Expressed in Arts and Architecture." His presenters offered four delightful mixes of visual arts and narrative discourse. Rochelle Kessler, scholar and specialist from the Arthur M. Sackler museum of Cambridge, discussed "Mystics in Moghul Painting." She was followed by E. Sara Wolper of the University of New Hampshire who presented "Khidr in the Formation of Shared Muslim-Christian Sites in pre-Ottoman Anatolia." Covering painting, poetry, folklore (centered on the figure of Khidr), and architecture, she skillfully illustrated how Anatolians of different faiths found common meeting grounds in artistic themes and cultural syntheses. Elif Gokeigdem, a private scholar and doctoral candidate at Istanbul Technical University, focused on "Light Symbolism in Anatolian Candlesticks" and in Sufi handicrafts. Rosie Boyd, a professional calligrapher from Crescent Designs in Santa Barbara, California, discussed the styles and techniques of "Islamic Manuscript Illumination." At the conclusion of Dr. Voll's panel, Ms. Boyd set up a medieval-style workshop and provided an ongoing demonstration of manuscript calligraphy for the duration of the conference.

The second panel, moderated by Dr. Cook, covered Muslim architecture, ranging from the monumental and grandiose to the humble and ordinary. Marvin Mills, an adjunct professor from the University of South Florida and fellow of the American Institute of Architecture, conducted an extensive overview, "The Evolution of Islamic Architecture in the Middle Ages." Examining influences in such grand works as the Taj Mahal and the Grand Mosque of Cordova, Professor Mills led a spirited discussion on borrowing and innovation in Muslim building styles. In contrast, Dr. Vivienne Angeles of LaSalle University presented an elaborate overview of much simpler dwellings and popular ornamentation in "Homes and Housing in the Muslim Philippines."

After lunch, Dr. Sabah Ghandour of the University of Pennsylvania moderated a panel titled "Modern Islamic Literature." William Granara of Harvard University discussed "Islam, Colonialism, and Socialism in a Contemporary Algerian Novel." Kamran Talattof of Princeton University examined "Modern Islamic Literature in Iran: Subversion of Pre-Revolutionary Committed Literature." John Crofut of New York University covered "Rhythm, Time, and Politics of Turkish History." Margaret Mills from the Department of Folklore and Folk Life at the

University of Pennsylvania chaired the final panel of the first day: "The Technologies and Contexts of Muslim Cultural Expressions." Professor Mills herself set the tone for this panel with a paper, intriguingly titled "My Life on TV: An Afghan Refugee Storyteller watches Japanese Soap Operas on Iranian Television." Continuing in the popular culture vein, Dr. Maimuna Haq of Columbia University discussed "From Piety to Romance: Literary Shifts in the Bangladeshi Imagination of Islam." John Anderson, Catholic University of America, took us through Islam on the Internet and the adventures of Selim the Cyber-Muslim in his "Islam in the Global Information Infrastructure." Theodore P. Wright, Jr., professor emeritus from the State University of New York at Albany, reflected on "How Can Democracy Protect a Nation's Culture in the Age of the Global Information Highway: The Case of Muslims in South Asia." Professor Eickelman as discussant then provided an urbane and thoughtful synthesis of these different strands.

Council President Louis Cantori, University of Maryland professor of political science, opened the evening banquet and introduced Dr. Eickelman, the keynote speaker. Professor Eickelman gave the guests a fascinating overview "Mass Higher Education and Cultural Expression in the Muslim World Today." His talk ranged over a variety of themes, revealing that Muslim societies face challenges not unfamiliar to others confronting the global second industrial revolution. Our hosts, Executive Director Hafiz Malik and Chief Administrator Susan Hausman, had thoughtfully kept up the cultural theme of the conference by offering a number of Middle Eastern dishes to supplement the evening's fare.

Ellen Amster, graduate student from the University of Pennsylvania, organized a panel of students on the theme of "Drama and Performances in the Modern Islamic World." Her introductory paper, "Birth of the Nation—Women in Algerian Revolutionary Drama and Propaganda," set the tone with its meticulous review of Algerian journalism in the age of Franz Fanon. Dina Amin offered a sensitive media study of post-modernist performance in Alfred Farag's "El-Shakhs." Roberta Dougherty, the Middle East bibliographer at the University of Pennsylvania, gave a witty and incisive look at the "Image of the Female Performer as a Character in Egyptian Film." Farooq Hamid offered musical tapes and commentary on "Ibn al-Farid and his Legacy in Pakistan." The final panel, "Problems of Identity Facing Modern Muslims," looked at culture and identity. Kjeli Forsting of Viking Media Productions examined conflict and adjustment in "Muslims and the Media in Sweden." Grace Clark of Catholic University of America and the International Center on Aging gave a global overview titled "Aging and the Elderly in the Muslim World." In keeping with the spirit of both the Council and this fourteenth conference, exchanges between speakers and panel members were lively and constructive.