

**Exhibition:** *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East*

**Dates:** February 1, 2015–ongoing

**Location:** Ahmanson Building, Level 4



(Image Captions Page 4)

(Los Angeles – January 8, 2015) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East*, the first major exhibition of LACMA's holdings of Middle Eastern contemporary art—the largest such institutional collection in the United States. In recent years, the parameters of Islamic art at LACMA have expanded to include contemporary works by artists from or with roots in the Middle East. Drawing inspiration from their own cultural traditions, these artists use techniques and incorporate imagery and ideas from earlier periods. As the first of a two-part exhibition program, *Islamic Art Now* features 25 works—including photography, sculpture, video, and installation—by 20 artists from Iran and the Arab world, including Wafaa Bilal, Lalla Essaydi, Hassan Hajjaj, Mona Hatoum, Susan Hefuna, Youssef Nabil, Shirin Neshat, and Mitra Tabrizian, among others. Most of the works in *Islamic Art Now* have never been displayed previously at LACMA.

"The works of art in this exhibition are a contemporary counterpart to LACMA's world-renowned historical Islamic art collection and demonstrate the deep connection between past and present," said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. "Within the last decade, LACMA has collected major artworks by some of the most influential Middle Eastern and diaspora artists working today. We are thrilled to share some highlights of the museum's collection in the context of this exhibition."

"*Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East* demonstrates the virtuosity and creativity of artists from the Middle East (and diaspora communities) whose work is at once local and global. The artists in this exhibition are not reinventing Islamic art but rather repurposing it as a form of personal expression," said Linda Komaroff, Curator of Islamic Art. "The contemporary works share a similarity with historical Islamic art in

terms of their use of writing in the Arabic alphabet as a means of both communication and decoration, as well as their brilliant use of color and superb balance between design and form.”

### **Exhibition Highlights**

Highlights from *Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East* include:

Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, 1996

Shirin Neshat is perhaps the best-known artist of the Iranian diaspora following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Born in Qazvin, she left Iran in 1974 at the age of 16 to study in the United States. Neshat returned to Iran in 1990, and much of what she saw and experienced informed her first major body of work, the photographic series *Women of Allah*. The series is comprised of black-and-white images of chador-clad women, often the artist herself, covered with text in black ink, and frequently focusing on different body parts—face, feet, hands, eyes. Neshat has noted the recurrence of four symbolic elements in this series: veil, gun, text, and gaze. She intends these images to contradict a western notion of Muslim women as diminished and desexualized by the veil and disempowered by their faith.

Abdullah Al Saab, *Technology Killed Reality*, 2013

Al Saab studied interior design, began designing clothes in 2008, and most recently has turned his creative interest to conceptual design and photography in the series *Boundaries* in which he incorporates his own line of clothes and explores his interest in merging art and fashion. The series, as exemplified by the photographs *Ayb* (*Shame*) and *Technology Killed Reality*, depicts life in Kuwait for the 20-something generation caught between sophisticated technology and unbridled consumerism and religious tradition and social conservatism.

Wafaa Bilal, *Chair*, 2013

Wafaa Bilal is an assistant professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, who fled Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1991. Known internationally for his provocative performative and interactive works, Bilal came to the attention of a wider audience in 2010 when he had a camera surgically implanted in the back of his head. Entitled *3rdi*, Bilal transmitted images to the web 24/7 in part as a statement on surveillance, the mundane, and the things left behind. His latest series—*Ashes*—depicts in photographs his handmade miniature reconstructions of media images that document buildings destroyed in the Iraq war (2003–13); the models are covered with ashes, including human ashes. These powerful photographs capture and reflect Bilal's own reactions to the war as an exiled Iraqi who witnessed the devastation from the relative safety of America.

### **Islamic Art at LACMA**

LACMA houses one of the most significant collections of Islamic art in the world. These widely diverse arts, from an area extending from southern Spain to Central Asia, trace the distinctive visual imagination of Islamic artists over a period of 1,400 years. The collection comprises more than 1,700 works including glazed ceramics, inlaid metalwork, enameled glass, carved wood and stone, and manuscript illustration, illumination, and calligraphy. The museum began to concentrate seriously on Islamic art in 1973, with the acquisition of the Nasli M. Heeramanek Collection, the generous gift of Joan Palevsky. Since then the collection has received numerous significant acquisitions. Most notably, in 2002 LACMA acquired the Madina Collection of Islamic Art, gifted by Camilla Chandler Frost, which nearly doubled the size of the museum's existing holdings. In 2006 LACMA began to acquire contemporary art of the Middle East within the context of the historical collection; today the museum has the largest such collection of any American museum. Currently, 200 highlights from LACMA's historical Islamic collection are touring internationally. *Earthly and Divine: Islamic Arts of the 7th–19th Centuries from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art* opens a Latin America tour on January 15, 2015 at the Centro Cultural Palacio de la Moneda, Santiago. A presentation of more than 130 highlights of Islamic art from LACMA's collection will travel to Saudi Arabia for the opening of Saudi Aramco's King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture in 2016. Featured in this exhibition will be a never-before shown 18<sup>th</sup>-century period room from Damascus, recently acquired by LACMA.

### **Related Programming**

April 26, 2015

Lecture by Dr. Venetia Porter, British Museum Curator, Islamic Art and Contemporary Middle East

May 13, 2015

World Premiere of Moroccan artist Hassan Hajjaj's first feature length film *Karima: A Day in the Life of a Henna Girl*

\*Check [lacma.org](http://lacma.org) for event times and further details

### **Credit**

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

### **About LACMA**

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes over 120,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art, Latin American art, ranging from pre-Columbian masterpieces to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the

world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over a million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives, such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement at [lacma.org](http://lacma.org). Situated in Hancock Park on over 20 acres in the heart of Los Angeles, LACMA is located between the ocean and downtown.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

**Image captions:**

- (left): Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, 1996, gelatin silver print and ink, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Jamie McCourt through the 2012 Collectors Committee, © Shirin Neshat, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels, photo © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA
- (center): Wafaa Bilal, *Chair*, from the series *Ashes*, 2003-2013, 1/5, archival inkjet, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Art of the Middle East: Contemporary © Wafaa Bilal, photo © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA
- (right): Abdullah Al Saab, *Technology Killed Reality*, from the series *Boundaries*, 2013, 3/5, inkjet print, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Tamara Keleshian, © Abdallah Al Saab, photo © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA

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