

Contribution ID: 86

Type: not specified

Ways of Knowing: Exploring Science and Practice in the Early Modern Arabic Notion of al-*Ṣināʿa*

Friday 19 September 2025 09:15 (20 minutes)

This paper explores the Arabic notion of *al-ṣināʿa*, which can be translated as knowledge in practice or applied science, that developed between the 14th and the 18th centuries. It documents the polyvalence of the concept in different contexts and registers of *ʿilm* (science or knowledge at large) and traces the long and collective process of meaning making around *al-sināʿa* that spanned traditions of knowledge and imperial geographies alike. Following a particular chain of texts, including glosses on works of rhetorical sciences, lexicons, and technical or specialized dictionaries produced within Arab-Islamic cultures in different regions, my analysis shows that *al-ṣināʿa* was defined as the practical application of science, as embodied knowledge, and as a disposition that enabled a modality of action. In encompassing both the Greek *technê* and *praxis*, the Arabic notion retained a more comprehensive and less divisive system of knowledge in comparison to the original Aristotelian concepts, from which the modern Western organization of knowledge derived and devised its new classifications. This study on *al-ṣināʿa*, which came to mean modern industry in the late 19th century, offers a reconsideration of ways of knowing and revisits the notion of science and its relation to practice.

Short Biography

Sarah Sabban specializes in Arab and Middle Eastern history with a focus on intellectual history and material culture. She recently completed her PhD at the History and Archaeology Department at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon. Her dissertation titled “*al-Ṣināʿa* in late Ottoman Beirut: A historical study of an Arabic concept” traces the emergence of *al-ṣināʿa* from the classical Arabic-Islamic corpus of knowledge into a modern field of inquiry. Previously trained in anthropology (AUB) and Islamic art history (University of Oxford), her academic inquiry has focused on arts and crafts from the Islamic world and different categories used to describe, assess, and relate to them in a variety of contexts. These included the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar, which Sabban compared in an ethnographic study with the Pergamon Museum in Germany, in how they constructed and de/contextualized the modern concept of “Islamic art” through their display strategies. She has also examined the roles arts and crafts fulfilled in the making of the Lebanese identity from the French Mandate to the first exhibition of Islamic art in Lebanon on the eve of the Civil War in 1974. In 2022, she published an article on this subject, “Imagining Lebanon with Islamic Art: The 1974 Exhibition at the Nicolas Sursock Museum.”

Keywords

Practice, science, knowledge, Arabic

E-mail

sbs03@mail.aub.edu

Affiliation

Position

n/a

Primary author: Sarah Sabban (Lebanese American University)

Presenter: Sarah Sabban (Lebanese American University)

Session Classification: S.4.3. Embodied Knowledge: Applied Sciences and Material Practices in Ottoman and Arabic Traditions

Track Classification: Individual papers