



American-Islamic Exchanges in the Long 19th Century

Symposium • Thurs.–Fri., **Feb. 26–27**, 2026

John Hay Library 20 PROSPECT ST., PROVIDENCE, RI



DAY 1 | THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26

ARRIVALS AND ACTIVITIES

LOCATION: JOHN HAY LIBRARY, 20 PROSPECT STREET, PROVIDENCE, RI

3:00–4:00 PM • Introductions and an object session
in Special Collections with rare books, manuscripts,
and a new gift of 19th c. Ottoman textiles from the Ness Family

4:00–5:00 PM • Exhibit tour of “Fashioning Insurrection:
From Imperial Resistance to American Orientalisms”
with curator Gwendolyn Collaço

6:00 PM • Dinner for participants at Brown Faculty Club
ONE BANNISTER STREET, PROVIDENCE, RI 02912

DAY 2 | FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27

FOUR PANELS

LOCATION: JOHN HAY LIBRARY, 20 PROSPECT STREET, PROVIDENCE, RI

8:30–9:00 AM • Continental breakfast

9:00–9:15 AM • Welcome / introductory remarks

9:15–10:45 AM • Panel 1

COFFEE BREAK

11:00–12:30 PM • Panel 2

12:30–1:30 PM • Catered Lunch

1:30–3:30 PM • Panel 3

COFFEE BREAK

3:45–5:15 PM • Panel 4

5:15–5:25 PM • Closing Remarks

6:00 PM • Optional closing dinner at Bayberry Garden
225 DYER STREET, PROVIDENCE, RI 02903

DAY 2 | FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27

SPEAKERS AND PANELS

9:15–10:45 AM • Panel 1

19th–20th Century Empires and Revolutions in the Eyes of Americans

- Tiraana Bains (Brown University) – *States of Rebellion: America and India, 1776–1857*
- Maureen Connor Santelli (Northern Virginia Community College) – *Restoring Greece’s “Ancient Liberty” but for whom? American Intellectual Imperialism in a Newly Independent Greece*
- Mira Xenia Schwerda (Duke University) – *From Princeton to Persia and Vice Versa: American Perspectives on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) and the Circulation of Information about Revolutionary Iran in Turn-of-the-Century North America*

DISCUSSANT: Alex Winder (Brown University, Center for Middle East Studies)

11:00–12:30 PM • Panel 2

**Islam in America and Americans in the Mediterranean,
18th–20th Century**

- Sylvia Chan-Malik (Rutgers University) – *Islam at the Fair: The Muslims of the Midway Plaisance*
- Kim Fortuny (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul) – *Herman Melville in Istanbul*
- Karine V Walther (Georgetown University at Qatar) – *A Holy War Made in America: The United States, Anticolonialism and the 1914 Germano-Ottoman Call for Global Jihad*

DISCUSSANT: Stacy Holden (Purdue University)

1:30–3:30 PM • Panel 3

Visual Exchanges Between the Islamicate and American Material Cultures

- Christine Kim Korkmaz (Johns Hopkins) – *From Constantinople to New York: Photography, Weaponry, and the Circulation of Ottoman Imperial Imagery*
- Nora Lessersohn (Columbia University) – *Irish Turks and Circassian Beauties: Image and Costume during the American Civil War Era*
- Emily Neimeier (Temple University) – *Winter in the Orient: Railroads, Resorts, and the Architecture of Fantasy in Gilded Age Florida*
- Ünver Rüstem (Johns Hopkins) – *Shining, Shimmering, Splendid: American Orientalism and the Architecture of Disney*

DISCUSSANT: Mary Roberts (Georgetown)

3:45–5:15 PM • Panel 4

Christian and Jewish Immigrants from the Ottoman Mediterranean to Industrial America

- Stacy D Fahrenthold (University of California – Davis) – *The Assyrians of Angel Island: Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Detention After World War I*
- Chloe Bordewich (University of Toronto), and Lydia Harrington (Boston Little Syria Project) – *Camels of Wonderland: Entertainment and Civic Life in Boston's Early Syrian Community*
- Oscar Aguirre-Mandujano (University of Pennsylvania), and Kerem Tinaz (Koç University) – *Ottoman Sephardic Migration to the US*

DISCUSSANT: Faiz Ahmed (Brown University, History)

5:15–5:25 PM • Closing Remarks

ABSTRACTS

9:15–10:45 AM • Panel 1

19th–20th Century Empires and Revolutions in the Eyes of Americans

Maureen Connor Santelli (Northern Virginia Community College) –

Restoring Greece's "Ancient Liberty" but for whom? American Intellectual Imperialism in a Newly Independent Greece

Beginning in 1821, men and women throughout the United States were engrossed with the unfolding revolution between the Greeks and the Ottoman Turks. Known as “philhellenes,” early Americans articulated sentiments through a perceived cultural, intellectual, religious, and even racial connection they felt to Greece. The redemption of the Greeks by various pro-Greek organizations assumed a “secularized missionary spirit,” which endeavored to spread an American understanding of freedom, liberty, and Christianity to all parts of the world. Reformers and missionaries planned a variety of different types of schools, ranging from elementary schools to high schools, and even colleges. Samuel Gridley Howe, a well-known American philhellene and veteran of the Greek Revolution, summed up American intentions in an independent Greece best: “If we would restore Greece to her ancient glory; if we would give her commercial importance; if we would erect on the outposts of Christendom light-houses and beacons, to guide the missionary and the teacher in the pagan East, we must elevate the moral and intellectual standard of the Greeks; we must make of them the pioneers of religion and civilization to Asia.” These efforts, however, clashed in some cases with local populations and their own vision for a newly independent Greece. In this paper I will examine how Americans and Greeks perceived national identity in light of their own respective revolutions. What did it mean to be Greek from the early American perspective and did that clash with what it meant to be Greek for the Greeks?

Tiraana Bains (Brown University) – States of Rebellion: America and India, 1776–1857

In 1776, while the leaders of the Continental Congress were attempting to legitimize what many Britons regarded as a rebellion, Mysore was one among several new polities to have appeared in South Asia as the Mughal Empire contracted and vanished from the Deccan region. The emergent states of Mysore and the United States of America shared much else beyond their relative newness. Both states waged war against the British Empire, allied with the French, and found themselves discussed in the same breath in British newspapers and pamphlets. The American Revolutionary War (1776–1783), like the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Seven Years’ War (1754–1763) before it, was a global conflict. The British war effort in the Thirteen Colonies was shaped as much by the need to deploy troops and naval squadrons to the Indian Ocean as it was by developments in the Atlantic. Through the 1770s, Hyder Ali, the ruler of Mysore, increasingly became a well-known figure in the transatlantic Anglophone press. In 1781, a text purporting to be The Manifesto, or Remonstrance of Hyder Ally Cawn even circulated in London’s print market. Tipu Sultan, Hyder Ali’s son and successor, similarly became a subject of intense scrutiny for Anglophone reporters and readers. While the United States of America would survive as a sovereign state; by 1799, Tipu Sultan’s efforts to maintain a state capable of rivaling British political and military influence had ended in defeat. This talk will focus on the entangled histories of the United States and Mysore in the late eighteenth century. It will conclude by considering

how these eighteenth-century histories inflected conceptions of rebellion, insurrection, and revolution in 1857–1858 when a massive revolt against British rule broke out across north India.

Mira Xenia Schwerda (Duke University) – From Princeton to Persia and Vice Versa: American Perspectives on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) and the Circulation of Information about Revolutionary Iran in Turn-of-the-Century North America

At the turn of the century, Iranian men and women took to the streets to demand changes, resulting in the introduction of a constitution and a parliament. After a few years, a counter-revolution led by Muhammad Ali Shah threatened the abolishment of the constitution and pointed towards a potential return to autocracy. During this time, the young Princetonian Howard Baskerville would become one of the first revolutionary fighters to die at the hand of reactionary troops in besieged Tabriz. Not long after this, once the constitutionalist government was in power again, the American Morgan Shuster was appointed as financial advisor. Shuster's work was cut short when a Russian-British alliance intervened in his reforms and in Iranian internal politics and forced him to leave the country. Baskerville and Shuster provide interesting perspectives on the first Iranian revolution and their stories and accomplishments were known in Iran at the time and continue to be recognized today. Yet what did the American public know about the Iranian Constitutional Revolution when it was taking place? What kind of information was circulated? And what role did visual media, including photography, play in this process? This paper will first consider the role Americans played in the Iranian revolution and then investigate how much their contemporary compatriots knew about them and the Iranian revolutionary events, taking us from Princeton to Persia and back.

11:00–12:30 PM • Panel 2

**Islam in America and Americans in the Mediterranean,
18th–20th Century**

Sylvia-Chan Malik (Rutgers University) – Islam at the Fair: The Muslims of the Midway Plaisance

This paper explores the presence of Muslims on the Midway Plaisance, the “entertainment zone” of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, alongside the larger role of Islam and Muslims in the making of the fair. While never marketed as such, the occasion marked the largest gathering of Muslims from around the world ever to take place in the United States until that time. As such, it marks a crucial site of Islam’s emergence and development of U.S., as well as a one in which to explore Islam’s role in constituting burgeoning notions of U.S. empire and American exceptionalism at the close of the 19th century. Hailing from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Ottoman Empire, the Muslims of the Midway Plaisance demonstrated Islam’s cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, while being displayed in a “human zoo” that bolstered and reinforced existing conceptions of race and gender in the post-Reconstruction era. In this setting, I expose the contradictory meanings of Islam that emerged when mapped on the racial calculus of the post-Reconstruction era US, in a moment when Chicago became a central destination for Black migrants from the South, as well as European immigrants, namely Italians, Poles, and Eastern European Jews. Through an analysis of Islam

at the fair, I argue that the close of the 19th century marked the most open and expansive period of how Americans imagined and understood Islam on the global stage, while at the same time, the utilized Islam to amplify existing racial logics of antiblackness, orientalism, and white nativism within the United States.

Kim Fortuny (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul) – Herman Melville in Istanbul

One goal of a book I wrote a few years back, *American Writers in Istanbul*, was to tease out the presence of a city whose majority religion was Islam at the heart of the American literary canon. What if Istanbul had since at least the mid-nineteenth century been active, though perhaps ignored, at the aesthetic and cultural center of American letters; active not only in the form of the intertextual adaptations we see in the poetry of Emerson and Whitman, but as a real place, directly experienced. What if the Oriental “outside” has been alive, for at least one hundred and fifty years, well inside North America’s literary and cultural consciousness. The book examined textual evidence of this proposition in the works of various canonical North American writers from Herman Melville to Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and James Baldwin.

In this talk I will revisit the case of Herman Melville who sailed to Byzantium in October of 1856, five years after the publication of his then infamous novel *Moby Dick*. Melville took copious, fragmented notes on his journey to the Levant which when read in dialogue with his novel expand our reading of his metaphysics. In both texts Melville dwells on the coexistence of the natural and the mystical; he turns often to ways in which humans, the natural world and the sacred exist with and within one another. In Melville’s reflections on mosques and cemeteries and details of Istanbul’s Ottoman topography we see depictions of a city that like his tale of an elusive but omnipresent whale, often return to the enfolding of death and life and honor complex and irreducible ontological uncertainties.

Karine V. Walther (Georgetown University at Qatar) – A Holy War Made in America: The United States, Anticolonialism and the 1914 Germano-Ottoman Call for Global Jihad

In 1914, after the Ottoman Empire joined the axis powers, German leaders convinced Ottoman rulers to declare a global jihad against the Allied powers. This German war strategy hoped to incite a rebellion among Muslim subjects in its French, British and Russian colonial territories, including India, Egypt, North Africa and Central Asia. Although the United States was still officially neutral in the war, some Americans worried that this call for a unified Muslim rebellion would incite Muslim subjects in their own imperial territories in the Philippines to rebel against American rule. Having just recently succeeded in ending its protracted war against Filipino Muslim insurgents the previous year, Americans both in the Philippines and in the United States were particularly sensitive to any threats to this precarious and newly-won peace. This paper examines how these concerns tied American imperial rule to larger global discussions about Islam, empire, self-determination, anti-colonialism and orientalist narratives of difference.

Visual Exchanges Between Islamicate and American Material Cultures

Ünver Rüstem (Johns Hopkins University) – Shining, Shimmering, Splendid: American Orientalism and the Architecture of Disney

The Islamic world has long enjoyed an outsize presence in the realm of popular entertainment, continually mined as a source of inspiration in ways that both confirm and complicate established understandings of Orientalism. Some of the most widely encountered and influential examples of this phenomenon are to be found among the vast and varied output of the Walt Disney Company, whose films, merchandise, and theme parks have together made use of Islamic imagery for almost a century. Focusing on examples at Walt Disney World in Florida, my talk explores the motivations, strategies, and tensions underlying Disney's portrayal of Middle Eastern lands in the architecture of its theme parks. Two contrasting case studies—a pavilion offering an ostensibly authentic representation of Morocco and a more fanciful marketplace conjuring the fictional sultanate of Agrabah—form the basis of my discussion, which demonstrates that the apparent disparity between these two areas belies their shared appeal as sites of timeless exoticism seemingly unencumbered by real-world associations. Already rooted in nineteenth-century practices through their obvious ties to the world's fair tradition, these architectural creations perpetuate, I propose, a distinctly American mode of Orientalism—less ideologically charged than its European counterparts—that developed at a time before significant US involvement in the Middle East. That this mode has, in contexts such as Walt Disney World, managed to survive the shifting geopolitical climate of the post–World War II era signals the complexity and multiplicity of contemporary American responses to the Islamic world, revealing the extent to which today's dominant discourses exist alongside, and sometimes even at odds with, older and shinier conceptions of the region.

Nora Lessersohn (Columbia University) – Irish Turks and Circassian Beauties: Image and Costume during the American Civil War Era

This paper examines how image and costume functioned as central tools of diplomacy and self-representation in the work of Khachadour “Christopher” Oscanyan, an Ottoman Armenian cultural broker who sought to reshape American understandings of the Ottoman world in the mid-nineteenth century. Starting with Oscanyan's 1855 Turkish Coffee House in New York and a published account of Bayard Taylor's failed linguistic encounter there, the paper analyzes how cross-cultural images—from theatrical tableaux and photographic portraits to embodied performances in Ottoman costume—constructed a fragile impression of authenticity. Through what I term “third place diplomacy,” Oscanyan used familiar visual languages to produce hybrid representations that were neither fully Ottoman nor fully American, but something in between. His strategic use of costumed bodies in lectures, cartes de visite, and an “Oriental Album” of modeled photography invited audiences to see Ottoman subjects as both recognizable and politically equal, blending theatricality with a sincere politics of mutual recognition. However, the paper shows that the success of these representations hinged on audience complicity: when the illusion of authenticity faltered, Oscanyan risked being seen not as a cultural diplomat but as a purveyor of humbug. By centering visual culture and costume as contested sites of political meaning, this paper offers a new framework for understanding Ottoman-American engagement and the high-stakes performance of “authentic” identity in an age of skepticism, spectacle, and photographic truth.

Emily Neimeier (Temple University) – “Winter in the Orient: Railroads, Resorts, and the Architecture of Fantasy in Gilded Age Florida”

In the late 19th century, a pair of railroad tycoons—Henry B. Plant and Henry Flagler—constructed competing railroad lines on either side of the state of Florida. At the end of these lines in Tampa and St. Augustine, each magnate built luxury resort hotels, with the express goal of attracting wealthy northerners sick of gray winters to come spend the season in what was being marketed as the “American Riviera”—an unblemished, exotic paradise. This strategy of framing Florida as a land of fantasy and recreation is underscored by the architecture of the hotel complexes, which make extensive reference to the Islamic Mediterranean, from Andalusí horseshoe arches to domes and minarets complete with golden crescents. Before the arrival of the railroad, Florida was largely rural, with the major urban settlements situated along the coast. For people coming from the northeast hubs like Boston or New York, Florida might as well have been on the other side of the world—and indeed, that’s the point. In this paper, I situate the Tampa and St. Augustine hotels within the wider phenomenon that I describe as “Florida Orientalism,” a process by which the southeastern United States became an ersatz Orient in the American imagination. For it was during the Gilded Age that a unique set of circumstances in the state of Florida—expansion of transit networks, mass migration and tourism, and a settler-colonial tradition available for exoticization—led to a proliferation of building projects inspired by historical Islamic architecture. I consider the shifting technological landscape of mass media and the emergent field of Islamic art history in this process, and how the winter playgrounds of the wealthy in Florida offer unique insights into the fluctuating fortunes of American Orientalism and capitalism.

Christine Kim Korkmaz (Johns Hopkins University) – From Constantinople to New York: Photography, Weaponry, and the Circulation of Ottoman Imperial Imagery

In 1896, a photographic album featuring views of Hagia Eirene was presented to American collector and Metropolitan Museum trustee Rutherford Stuyvesant by Ottoman statesman Şeker Ahmed Pasha. The album offers a rare visual record of the former Byzantine church-turned-arsenal, which briefly served as the first Ottoman museum, documenting both its architecture and the weapons collection it housed until the mid-twentieth century. By the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman arsenal’s holdings had become a source of considerable intrigue among collectors of arms and armor. Speculation about what remained circulated in collecting circles, prompting several Western travelers to journey to Constantinople with hopes of acquiring objects for themselves. Although some first-hand accounts exist, the precise nature and extent of the arsenal and military museum collections from this period remain largely unknown. The Stuyvesant album’s photographs have since become a crucial resource for understanding these collections and tracing their dispersal into Western collections. While long valued by arms and armor specialists, the album also offers critical insight into late Ottoman photography and visual expressions of modernity. This study examines how the album’s depiction of Hagia Eirene operates across both Ottoman political and Western cultural spheres to disentangle the layered histories revealed by the photographs. By analyzing the album’s gifting within the context of late Ottoman-American relations and its reception among Western collectors, this study situates the object within Sultan Abdülhamid II’s broader visual strategy of imperial self-representation, exploring how shifting contexts repositioned its significance and rendered it fuel for the collector’s imaginary.

**Christian and Jewish Immigrants from the Ottoman Mediterranean
to Industrial America**

Stacy D. Fahrenthold (UC Davis) – The Assyrians of Angel Island: Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Detention After World War I

This essay examines the transfer and resettlement experiences of Assyrian refugees who came to the United States after the Sayfo Genocide of the First World War. Beginning in the Baquba and Hamadan refugee camps where 45,000 displaced Assyrians subsisted after the war, I use passports, consular and court records, and oral histories to trace an Anglo-American project to transfer a section of the camps' Urmian (Persian) Assyrians to America. Working together with Assyrian American groups in diaspora, they secured emergency passports and visas for their passage to the U.S., and in 1920–21 sent 1,500 refugees on a transpacific migration corridor running from Basra to Bombay, through Yokohama to San Francisco.

However, upon arrival these refugees confronted the severe restrictions of the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. Designed to limit immigration and passed as refugee ships transited, the legislation imposed a chaotic system of national origins quotas and mandated the detention of any immigrants arriving "over quota." Despite U.S. consular approval for their travel and humanitarian appeals, hundreds of Assyrian refugees were detained indefinitely nationwide, including more than 100 on California's Angel Island, held there for over fifteen months because they were neither admissible nor deportable under the law. The Assyrian detentions on Angel Island were the longest the immigration station's thirty-year history. The refugees mounted successive legal challenges to stay deportations, and in so doing they forced American policymakers to contend with the human consequences of immigration restriction and develop a nascent recognition of refugee status.

Chloe Bordewich, (University of Toronto), Lydia Harrington (Boston Little Syria Project)
– *"Camels of Wonderland: Entertainment and Civic Life in Boston's Early Syrian Community."*

What were ten dromedaries doing in Boston Harbor in the spring of 1906? This presentation answers the question by weaving together the history of Boston's first Arabic-speaking community with that of the ill-fated Wonderland amusement park in nearby Revere, later a greyhound racetrack and now merely the terminus of the MBTA's Blue Line. Americans' zeal for so-called "Oriental" spectacles at the fairs, expositions, and circuses that drew massive crowds in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has been well documented. Camels were essential. In this presentation, we examine the communal politics, private dramas, and economic lives of those enlisted to procure them. This leads us to Boston's "Little Syria," or "Syriantown," which flourished from the 1890s through the 1950s in the areas today best known as Chinatown and the South End. The trans-Atlantic voyage of a Syrian immigrant with a global menagerie unites the economics of the Sahel region, the predilections of a growing American middle class, and an immigrant community navigating the fraught definition of whiteness.

Oscar Aguirre-Mandujano (University of Pennsylvania) – Ottoman Sephardic Migration to the US

This paper examines the everyday objects and cultural practices that Ladino-speaking migrants from the late Ottoman Empire brought with them to the United States, with a focus on Seattle in particular. It focuses on how these items reveal the complexities of identity formation in diaspora. Recipes, family recordings, popular songs, novels, and other seemingly quotidian materials did not merely preserve memory but functioned as vehicles through which religious, social, political, and cultural identities were negotiated. Far from being static relics of an Ottoman past, these artifacts were dynamic, adapting to shifting historical contexts of migration, settlement, and cultural encounter. These materials illuminate how communal belonging was articulated through the textures of everyday life, often entangled with cultural artifacts or practices of Muslim, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian neighbors and brought from the Ottoman Empire. The act of carrying and transforming these objects in a new environment underscored both the resilience of shared cultural memory and the fragility of its boundaries.

In the American context, the preservation of Ottoman Jewish heritage coexisted in tension with the pressures of integration into an emerging Jewish American identity. Recipes were reworked with new ingredients, songs translated or replaced by English popular tunes, and community storytelling reframed to resonate with the idioms of American Jewish life. This negotiation between shared post-Ottoman traditions and the demands of Americanization underscores the dual role of material and cultural practices: they marked continuities with the past while enabling the redefinition of collective identity in the present.



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