Security Check for Heaven

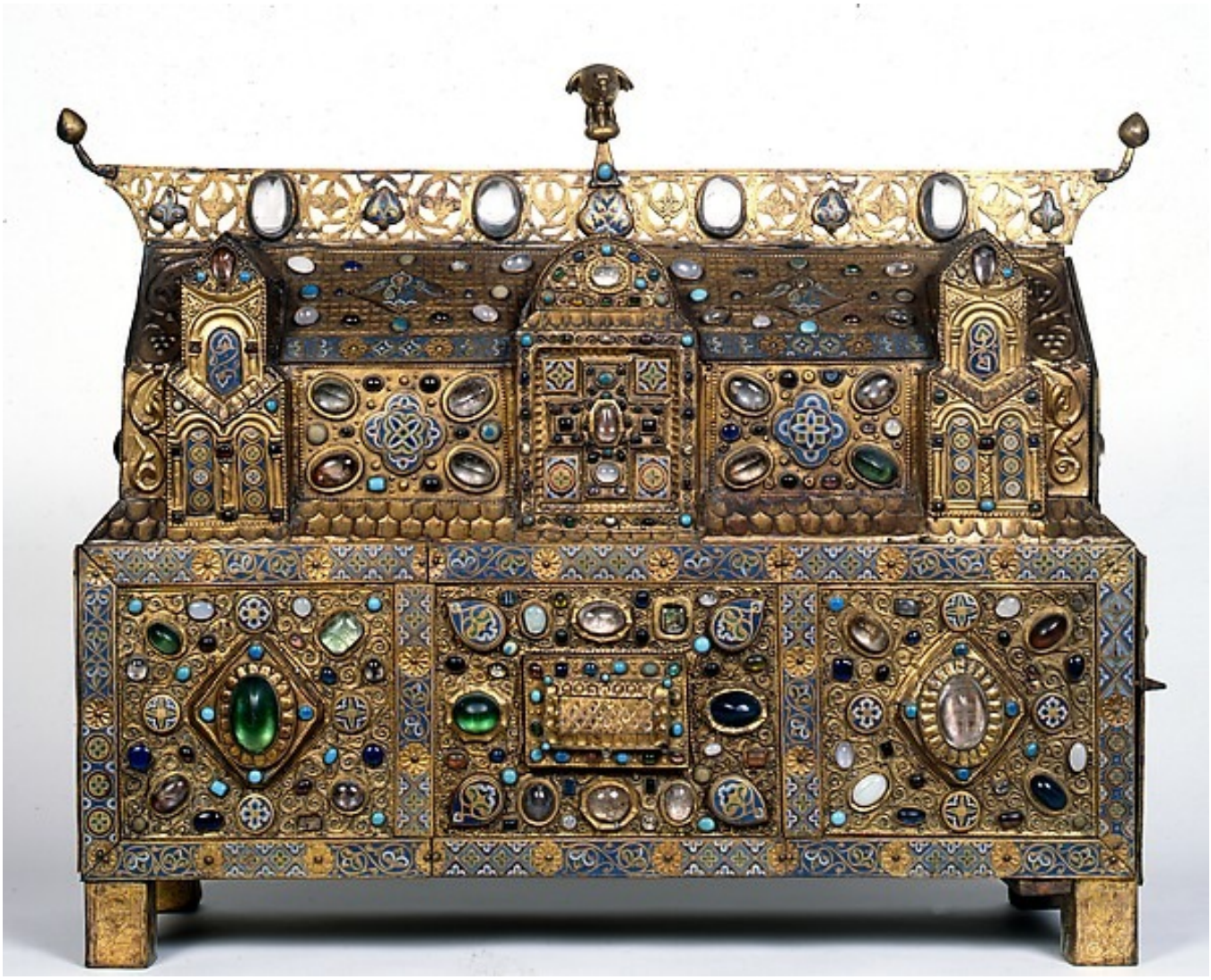
With a rich display of over 200 artifacts, the Metropolitan Museum exhibition “Jerusalem, 1000-1400,” subtitled “Every People Under Heaven,” intended to introduce the viewers to a peaceful, spiritual, culturally and religiously diverse place, which they imagine the city of Jerusalem to be. Rula Khoury visited the exhibition and came back with some thought-provoking questions.

Critique / Rula Khoury April 17, 2017

The city of Jerusalem, considered holy by many religions, is a place that encompasses numerous cultures and breath-taking beauty. But along with this variety and charm comes an extensive history of wars, of fighting over the spiritual walls. So much so that in speaking about Jerusalem, it is impossible to avoid the tension between beauty and destruction.

The title of the Metropolitan Museum exhibition, “Jerusalem, 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven,” provokes a certain curiosity about what curatorial stance it might take, and how its curators, Barbara Drake Boehm, senior curator of the Met Cloisters, and Melaine Holcomb, a curator in the department of medieval art, would navigate a subject that is as sensitive as a minefield.

Chasse of Ambazac.jpg



[1]Chasse of Ambazac, 1180–90
Gilded copper, champlevé enamel, rock crystal, semiprecious stones, faience, and glass. Made in Limoges, France

Mairie d'Ambazac
From The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition page [2]

Impressively, the exhibition displayed over 200 works—mostly artifacts. They included a stunning piece of jewelry of French origin, the Chasse of Ambazac *[3]*, dated 1180-90. It is made of gilded copper, champlevé enamel, rock crystal, and semiprecious stones. Another rare piece was the Mosque Lamp of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars *[4]*, made in Damascus, Syria, of pierced metal. It was created for the tomb of Sultan Baybars, who reigned in the years 1260–1277, during the Mamluk period. Another exhibit was a rare golden jewel, a Jewish wedding ring [5] from the first half of the 14th century, shaped like a miniature building, symbolizing the lost Temple of Jerusalem and the importance of its remembrance. Many more unique objects were shown throughout the exhibition, artifacts previously hidden or scattered in various private or public collections around the world.

Mosque Lamp of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars.jpg **[6]**

[7]Mosque Lamp of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars, probably A.H. 676 (1277)
Brass, inlaid with silver and black compound, Made in Damascus, Syria

Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (MW.117.1999)
From The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition page [2]

In their exhibition text, the curators eagerly emphasize the Holy City's role in shaping the art of the period, from 1000 to 1400, presenting medieval Jerusalem as a multicultural city that drew patrons, artists, pilgrims, poets, and scholars to celebrate this multiplicity of cultures, religious faiths, and languages. A map of the city between 1000 and 1400 suggests that Jerusalem's beauty has been a source of inspiration for a great many works of art. As Holcomb explains in a promotional video [8] for the exhibition, "it's not Jerusalem on the ground, but the Jerusalem of the spiritual imagination [that] will bear witness to the crucial role that the city has played in shaping world culture."

Screenshot 2017-03-19 11.51.32.png **[9]**

[10]A Still image from the video - Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven

From The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition page [2]

The exhibition is proudly presented as the first one to show the richness of the medieval city with its various cultural traditions and aesthetics. The period between 1000 to 1400 is presented as the most creative in Jerusalem's history, responsible for sustaining a universal preoccupation with the city. But the presentation of this era as a "Golden Age" hints at the premise that Jerusalem has become less creative since medieval times.

As I strolled through the exhibition, problematic moments started to appear, one by one. For

instance, the text accompanying the highly ornamental manuscript Four Gospels in Arabic *[11]*, made in the Holy Land around 1335 CE, read: “A hurried glance at the decoration and script of this manuscript might suggest that it is a Qur’an, but the book in fact contains the four Christian gospels.” The fact of the manuscript’s being a Christian text in Arabic was described here as if it were an astonishing discovery. By that, the curators, or the didactics writers, seem to be reaffirming an undiscriminating perception of Arab and Muslim cultures, following the stereotype that all Arabic-style decoration script (or all Arabs related to Muslim culture) must be Muslim.

Four Gospels in Arabic.jpg **[12]**

[13]Four Gospels in Arabic, 737 AH / 1335 CE
Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper; 205 folios, Made in The Holy Land

British Library, London (Add. MS 11856)
From The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition page [2]

More politically tricky moments were found in the video fragments of present-day Jerusalem projected in each of the exhibition sections: *The Pulse of Trade and Tourism, The Diversity of Peoples, The Air of Holiness, The Drumbeat of Holy War, The Generosity of Patrons,* and finally, *The Promise of Eternity*. In these video clips, one encountered the lively markets of the Old City, busy roads, people praying at holy sites, birds flying, and lastly, along the wall of the final gallery, footage of a grove of olive trees—the subject of *The Promise of Eternity*. Along with these projected images, monitors screened short interviews, collectively titled *Voices of Jerusalem: A Scholar in Search of the City's Hidden Archives*. The “voices” are those of librarians and archivists, authors, textile merchants, conservators, and ordinary religious residents of Jerusalem. Some of them talk about the historical period and about pilgrimage; others talk about how they preserve artifacts. A Christian religious man mentions how the three religions live harmoniously in Jerusalem.

It is in these edited videos of recent footage that one really finds the spirit of the exhibition: the three religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—co-existing peacefully in the same territory. This is where the curators’ historical revisions, their shaping of the history of Jerusalem as they have dreamt it, is the most evident. Unfortunately, the exhibition they have crafted narrated a story disconnected from reality, detached from its contemporary context, and based on misinformation.

While the works in the show - the crafted creativity and the shining goods - were remarkable, and the museal effort to gather all of these items together was inspiring, the combination of historical artifacts with recent “testimonials” implies a problematic premise for the whole show. By binding past and present together like this, the curators have created false, albeit comforting, vision that Jerusalem has always been a heavenly peaceful, creative and heterogenous place, even until today.

DP-1576-001.jpg **[14]**

[15]Installation view

From The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition page [2]

unnamed (1).jpg **[16]**

[17]Jerusalem, 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven, Installation view

The Generosity of Partons
From The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition page [2]

In the promotional video presenting the ideas behind the exhibition, curators Boehm and Holocomb explained they had been hoping “to bring the city to life and to create a truly immersive experience”, and that the contemporary footage not only showed the people who were maintaining the city's medieval legacy, but also “Jerusalem with its ever-present medieval monuments.” But in the *Voices of Jerusalem* videos, for example, when scholars talked about their devoted work to preserve the city with a sense of harmony, they were romanticizing the city through poetic speech, as if they were under the spell of Jerusalem’s past. To their detriment, they have neglected to honestly compare this past with the realities of the present.

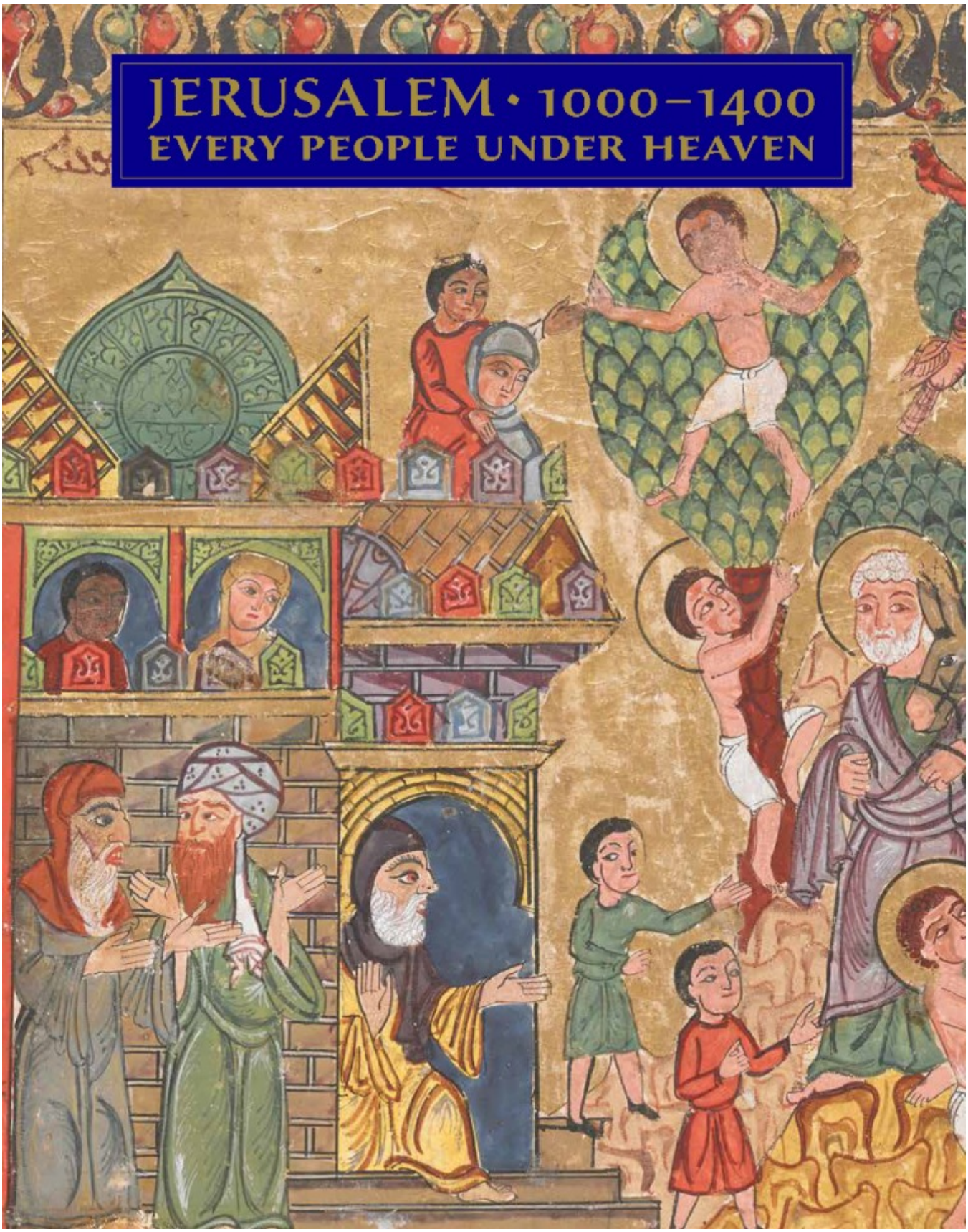
The real landscape of contemporary Jerusalem is an image of an armed Israeli soldier, waiting at the Heavenly Gates for people to go through a security check before they can enter to pray. Needless to say, the contemporary footage displayed in the show had no soldiers or security checks in it.

Lastly, in reference to the final section of the exhibition: it is beautiful to think of a grove of olive trees as a universal symbol of peace, but such sentiments unconsciously detach the olive tree from its connotation as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism, or as a reminder of settlers’ violence, burning Palestinian olive trees on this rich land.

unnamed.jpg **[18]**

[19]Jerusalem, 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven, Installation view
Photo: Rula Khoury

Catagloue front coverjpg.jpg **[20]**



[21]

"Jerusalem, 1000-1400: Every People Under Heaven [8]," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue, NYC, September 26, 2016 – January 8, 2017

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[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Chasse%20of%20Ambazac.jpg
[2] http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2016/jerusalem/exhibition-galleries
[3] http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b3e2bd038-7aea-4779-9951-2974efca566d%7d&oid=652551&pkgids=372&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=41&ft=*&offset=20
[4] http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b3e2bd038-7aea-4779-9951-2974efca566d%7d&oid=652550&pkgids=372&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=34&ft=*&offset=20
[5] http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b3e2bd038-7aea-4779-9951-2974efca566d%7d&oid=688007&pkgids=372&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=11&ft=*&offset=20
[6] http://tohumagazine.com/file/mosque-lamp-sultan-al-zahir-baybarsjpg
[7] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Mosque%20Lamp%20of%20Sultan%20al-Zahir%20Baybars.jpg
[8] http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2016/jerusalem
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[10] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Screenshot%202017-03-19%2011.51.32.png
[11] http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b3e2bd038-7aea-4779-9951-2974efca566d%7d&oid=652566&pkgids=372&pg=0&rpp=20&pos=9&ft=*&offset=20
[12] http://tohumagazine.com/file/four-gospels-arabicjpg
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