

'Haptic games': the display of Qajar playing cards in the British Museum

Natasha Morris

To cite this article: Natasha Morris (30 Dec 2024): 'Haptic games': the display of Qajar playing cards in the British Museum, Museum History Journal, DOI: [10.1080/19369816.2024.2440341](https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2024.2440341)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2024.2440341>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 30 Dec 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 74



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

'Haptic games': the display of Qajar playing cards in the British Museum

Natasha Morris

SOAS, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article reviews the display furniture used to present Iranian playing cards in the British Museum's Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World. It examines the need for alternative approaches to Perso-Islamic material, as distinct from European exhibition methods, while addressing the challenges of engaging with Qajar-era objects that were originally meant to be held and played with but are now confined behind museum cases. The article highlights the materiality of the cards and the design of their display, emphasising the role these sensory dimensions play in audience engagement. A case study of these playing guards, that contrasts the original sensory context of their use with their ensuing display in a museum context, reveals the way museum cases involving a 'separation of the senses' that split vision and touch along a series of nested binaries.

KEYWORDS

Playing cards; touch; display; museum; Qajar; Persian; Iran; cases

1. Introduction

Lining the juncture between the first and second rooms of the British Museum's Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World is a built-in showcase (G42/dc12) dedicated to the theme of 'Games: People and pastimes' (Figure 1). The objects gathered under this title include chess sets and pieces from Ghana, Egypt, India, and Pakistan, alongside a wall-mounted Azerbaijani Backgammon board neighbouring a Syrian Mancala set. The latter are both hung above a spread of Qajar-era (1789–1925) playing cards for the game of *as nas* (literally 'ace characters') dating from mid-to-late nineteenth century Iran (2000,0613.1-4) (Figure 2). This was a period characterised by modernising reforms, changing social economies of gender and sexuality, and artistic proliferation which ranged from academic oil painting to the so-called 'folk' or 'naïve' arts.¹ Part of the latter category of painterly ephemera, the thirteen cards on display are extant from potentially three different decks but were all originally acquired together in 2000 from the dealer and auctioneer Arthur Milner.² Laid out in loose iconographic groupings of what remains from each suite, the cards are tilted towards the viewer on a diagonally positioned backing, whilst the visibility and legibility of these palm-sized cards is aided by a small spotlight that refracts light against the glass pane of the wall-sized showcase.

CONTACT Natasha Morris  nm89@soas.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.



Figure 1. Exterior view: Case G42/dc12, The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, The British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

Using these cards as a case study, this article posits that the presentation of the cards within a glass encasement sets the stage for a ‘haptic game’ between viewer and display but withholds the rules (ludic and sensorial) for playing. This builds upon discussions of the sensory epistemologies at work within the production, display and reception of Islamic arts. Simon O’Meara has argued that there is a need to understand that vision is ‘normatively configured as a sense more haptic than optical’ when attempting to access the ‘Islamic sensorium of times past’.³ O’Meara calls for art historians working on Islamic architecture to develop a ‘seeing hand’ to probe beyond the superficiality of ornament. This methodological habit is particularly useful for examining Qajar



Figure 2. Qajar era playing cards for the game of *as nas*: (2000,0613.1-4) Case G42/dc12, The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, The British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

playing cards as objects, where associated processes of touch, surface texture, and multi-dimensionality, are also important. These qualities of these tactile objects, as well as the sensory habit of the ‘seeing hand’ through which they would have originally been perceived, are hidden by their placement within a display case, where they rest with one figural side facing upwards – ready for viewing but never activated for gameplay. Exhibited without any indication of how the game in which the cards were used was played, the remaining pieces of the deck are rendered immobile. But more than this, there is no perceptual contextualisation of the objects. The museum audience therefore perceives the cards from the vantage point of their own sensory habitus, with no sense of how they might ‘feel’ their way towards the ‘seeing hand’ of nineteenth-century Iranian leisure, and more broadly, material culture. In the modern museum, as the inheritor of nineteenth-century western modes of display and sensory compartment, the desire for access to an exhibit is split into sight as an essential and touch as a privilege. This article illuminates the way in which the case has operated as the hinge or lever in prising apart the tactile and the visual.

In making this argument, the article draws on a broader methodological insight from the growing field of sensory studies. The birth of the modern museum in the nineteenth century rested on a particular hierarchy of the senses in which vision was prioritised above other forms of perception. The act of placing non-western objects into Western museums involved separating those objects not just from the daily lives in which they had been implicated but the sensory contexts – both the material flows and modes of perceiving – that made sense of them.⁴ If we are to recontextualise these objects and re-engage audiences with temporally or geographically different modes of perception, it is not enough to offer new sensory access to them (that is to say, allowing people to touch or play with the cards) but to offer museum visitors an understanding of the perceptual modes through which those objects would have been understood in the past.⁵

1.1. *The Albukhary Gallery*

Display practices concerning objects from what has been historically known as the Islamic World have long been subject to a standardisation inherited from European exhibitionary practice. Along with special exhibitions, permanent museum installations such as the Albukhary Gallery (two rooms within the British Museum that were opened in 2018) provide one of the most accessible arenas for public audiences to experience Islamic art, namely material produced from the seventh century to the present and across the globe from West Africa to Southeast Asia. The arrangement of a gallery, the decisions as to what is shown, and the suggested interrelations between exhibits, all make subtle statements about how Islamic art should be understood, whilst the turn towards the incorporation of applied arts and ethnographic objects alongside fine art and architecture has reflected developments in scholarship and the field as a whole.⁶ Taxonomic presentation systems adopted from Western art history, including captioning, cataloguing, and framing, are open to reappraisal given the material, visual, textural, and tactile specificities of Islamic material. This small collection of papier-mâché cards used for the game of *as nas* dated to nineteenth-century Iran (Figure 3), which have been part of the Middle East collection of the British Museum since their acquisition in the millennium year, had not been placed on permanent display until the opening of the Albukhary Gallery. In their current situation within the museum's sprawling reinstalled Islamic gallery rooms, thirteen of the cards are now shown within an embedded floor-to-ceiling case that situates them within a subject-based display section centred around the theme of 'Games and Pastimes'. This display case is one chapter in the gallery's thematic mapping of its material, with subject-led cases lining the periphery of the Albukhary Gallery. It forms one part of a series of complimentary pauses within a wider chronological exploration of the artistic history of the Islamic world. These cases are intended as moments of cross-cultural and intermediary connection within a collection that is staggeringly diverse in medium, geography and date of creation.

Whilst the organisation of the Albukhary gallery is centred around a circular regional and chronological narrative with topic-based insets, the display heritage of Islamic art – from temporary exhibitions to permanent galleries in national collections from the V&A to the British Museum – has often looked very different. Looking back to the survey

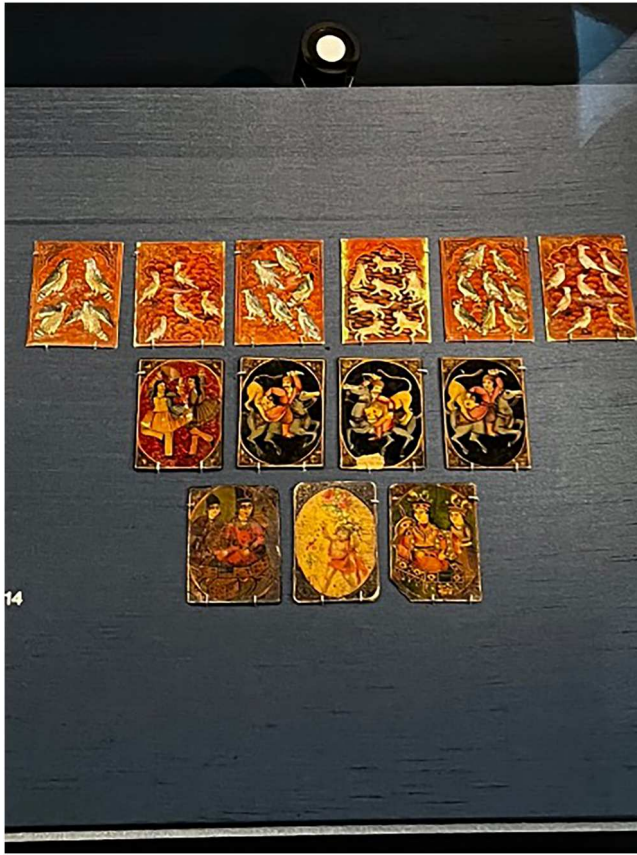


Figure 3. Interior view: cards with backing and torch. Case G42/dc12, The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, The British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

shows of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, two seminal exhibitions – the 1901 International Art Exhibition in Munich and the London exhibition of Persian Art at the Royal Academy in 1931 – marked the naissance of the exhibition of Perso-Islamic material in the West. Densely displayed material, from walls laden with carpets and crowded, object-laden display cases was visually overwhelming and difficult to navigate physically without knocking or touching an exhibit.⁷ The dynamics of this way of presenting and viewing material *en masse* can still be evidenced in the tightly packed fifth floor ceramics gallery of the V&A.

The Albukhary Gallery marks a difference in this visual approach to Islamic art within the environment of the British Museum. Natural light is an integral part of the architectural harmony of the space; window openings in the façade are covered by the five delicate walnut screens commissioned from the artist Ahmad Agnawi, each based on traditional Islamic architectural patterns from *mashrabiya* latticework. These overlays integrate light as a design element whilst protecting the collection from direct sunlight, creating an atmospheric effect as light filters through. Such design elements add to the

overall dramatisation of the exhibits, something which extends to the placement of the cases around the gallery – there is a constant variation in height, including appealing objects placed at floor level at the base of wall cases for children’s attention. These sensorial considerations behind the gallery design and its display features capitalise on the temporal, textural and directional potential of the space. The variety of surfaces and encasements throughout the gallery’s two rooms are intended to aid and diversify vision but still hinder and prevent touch.

The Albukhary Gallery was an ambitious re-installation of the British Museum’s Islamic collections, most of which had been previously housed in the John Addis Gallery of the Islamic World (formerly Room 34), a downstairs space that was the last display room before the museum’s Montagu Place exit. The curatorial programme of Room 34 followed a broadly chronological approach with areas of regional focus, a small middle section reserved as a thematic temporary exhibition space for contemporary works on paper. The redesign was an opportunity to change and widen the scope and interpretation of the exhibits, whilst presenting the museum’s collection of Islamic material culture in a way that was both accessible and innovative.⁸ As such, the translation of the collection into the Albukhary Gallery entailed resituating and expanding upon existing displays into a new 620 m squared exhibition space, utilising the nineteenth-century interiors of the recently renovated ‘White Wing’.⁹ The design of the Albukhary was a collaboration between the curatorial team of the Middle East department and Stanton Williams Architects. The result, spanning across rooms 42–45, aimed to create a sophisticated and modern setting; its charcoal grey framing with dark wood accents making a space that would provide a clean, rich, warm, setting for these Islamic objects. The project was more than a straightforward reinstallation of the John Addis gallery; a transposition of the contents of the existing display required a complete reappraisal of existing collections – both what had already been on display as well as what was contained within the museum stores.

Before the cards were integrated into the display programme of the Albukhary Gallery, they had been only accessible through individual viewings in appointments made within the Middle East study room (West Stairs, Room 4). Upon requesting the cards for a closer look, the objects could be observed and handled by a curious beholder; hands tracing and creating a palimpsest over the fingerprints of those who had inspected and even played with the cards at previous moments in time; makers, users, and now conservators, curators and researchers.¹⁰ The end of this chain of cutaneous transmission and connection happens once the case becomes involved and the potential for easy and frequent tactile access to museum exhibits is curtailed, a quite literal embodiment of Classen’s observation that: ‘and so it is generally with museum pieces. We receive their histories with the fingerprints wiped off.’¹¹

The cards are now housed in a floor-to-ceiling window case (Figure 1). These large installations line the sides of the gallery and are envisaged as self-contained stories, with different kinds of objects brought together within the case by an overarching theme. The display furniture of the Albukhary was manufactured by Goppion Technology, who suggest that ‘while not forming complete isolation from the others, they [the cases] showcase particular pieces and artefacts ...’. The cases are designed to be large enough to let the objects be clearly seen, the visitor’s sightline not obstructed by other

objects. These wall cases are complimented by large L-shaped free-standing cases that present slices of time across the general geographic thread of the gallery's layout (Figure 4), with objects of differing media grouped together by the location they were made in, underlining the strong regional differences of Islamic art. Goppion conceived of the dramatic middle section in a similar vein as those in the earlier Waddesdon Bequest Gallery (Purcell) in which '... the large display cases, the true and proper exhibiting spaces, shun the minimalist and impersonal model...'.¹² The designers also intended that 'the galleries [would be] welcoming and convivial, with spaces to gather, rest and pause'.¹³ With this emphasis on creating a genial space, there is a coincidental link between the intended informality and sociability behind the gallery concept, the playful theme of the case and the nature of the objects as game pieces.

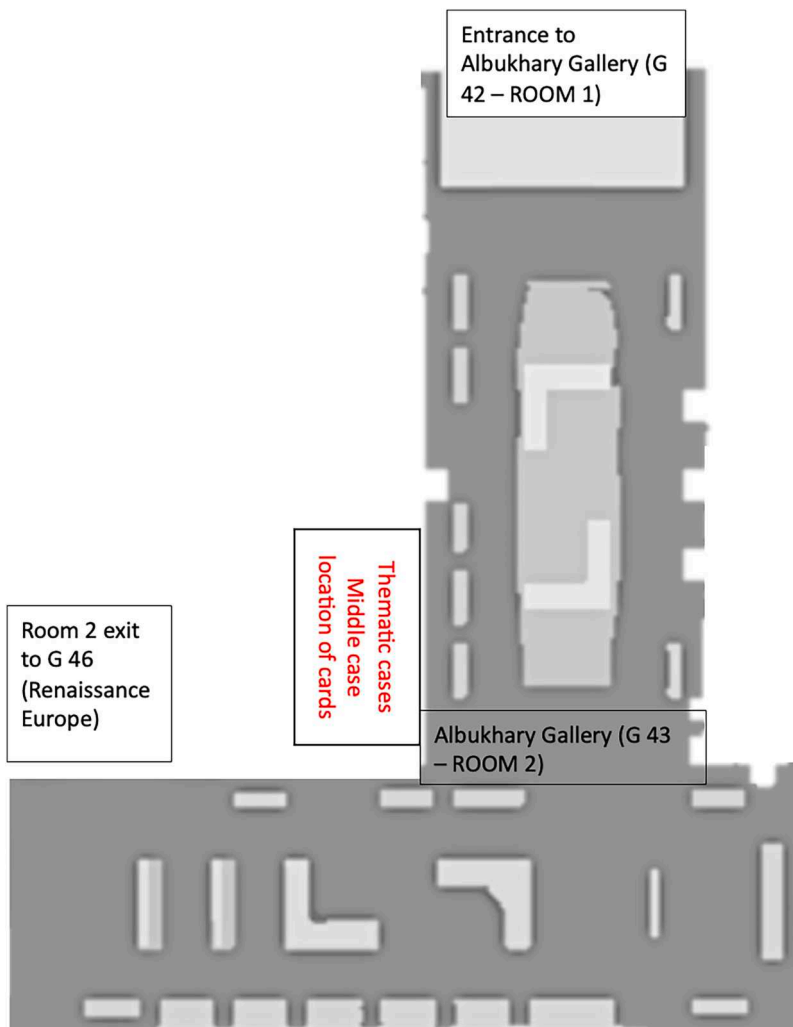


Figure 4. Plan of The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, The British Museum, London. Author's map.

1.2. *Ghavehkhaneh to gallery*

The concern in the development of the Albukhary gallery – to elevate visual tidiness, space between items, and finely delineated sets of objects – might be said to sit within a longer tradition in which the visual and the tactile appreciation of objects in museums have been split, with the museum visitor only given access to the former. As museums have moved towards better integration of touch in their exhibits, a new literature has traced the evolving relationship over time between touch and vision, hands and eyes, and their implications within a display context.¹⁴ The work of Constance Classen has been integral to the study of how the modern museum has become a purely visual site, with touch understood as a largely forbidden level of intimacy with objects. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries touch had been permissible and even encouraged in early museums, as an mode of ‘civil’ interaction with a collection; with audiences being given the ability to manually investigate exhibits during regulated and guided individual visits.¹⁵ Accounts of object handling by seventeenth-century diarist John Evelyn, where exhibits are shaken, smelt, and lifted outside of their cabinets, served to either confirm or correct the initial impressions of sight, as well as satisfy a desire to encounter an object on a privileged level of intimacy that surpassed the distance of looking alone. The cabinet or casing, therefore, was less a permanent home of an object and more a comfortable middle ground where the exhibit could rest between opportunities for simultaneous viewing and handling. The British Museum, inaugurated in 1759, opened with these handling practices that were tied up with ideas of civility, hospitality, and social discipline as described by Classen, coinciding with the advent of a heightened societal and consumerist visuality of culture in general.¹⁶

Yet by the middle of the nineteenth century, with concerns about a wider public’s access to the museum, the ability to touch objects was further minimised.¹⁷ Arguably one of the most popular and iconic collections in the world, the British Museum’s rarefied atmosphere of display was also the subject of a satirical publication by the cartoonist H. M. Bateman, entitled *The Boy Who Breathed on Glass in the British Museum* (1916): a humorous account of a child who is arrested for simply exhaling near a gallery case. Ironically, one of the most prized objects in Hans Sloane’s own collection, which formed the basis of the museum itself, was a ‘sacred pin, that touched the ruff that touched Queen Bess’s chin’, its mythological aura, like a relic, denoted by its once close proximity to flesh.¹⁸ Today interactions with displays within the modern museum are often seen as supplemental to a viewer’s primarily visual experience of an exhibited collection. As such, theoretical evocations of the tactile quality of an aesthetic encounter are often hinged around emotional affect and feeling, rather than through physical contact.¹⁹

As with all objects on display in museum cases, the sensory environment of the cards has changed profoundly. Yet for the playing cards this is accentuated by the stark, almost diametrically opposed, sensory atmospheres of the contemporary museum or study room on the one hand and the nineteenth-century Iranian coffee-house (*ghavehkhaneh*) on the other. The former is often seen as a space of sensory discipline or neutrality whilst the latter is described in historical texts as a place of sensory excess.

The British Museum’s Middle East reading room has all the characteristics one might expect of a museum library. The ‘Arched Room’ is quiet, as readers enter already aware of

the expectation that disciplined reading subjects will be silent and studious.²⁰ The shuffle of other readers' footsteps and the creak of chairs are sometimes joined by whispered conversations between researchers and archivists. The smell of the space is soft and neutral. It is characterised by the scent of old books – of paper and leather bindings – and dust, which are held to be the defining scents of the traditional library.²¹ Odour is limited because the smells of food and drink are banished from modern libraries, especially within special collection reading rooms.²² When ordered up, the cards are viewed together on an otherwise empty table, accompanied only by the researcher's laptop and a felt mat, each picked up one by one and attentively examined on each side before being carefully placed back on the surface. The museum gallery in which the cards are now displayed is characterised, depending on how busy it is, either by the smell of cleaning products and ventilated air or the odours of other museum visitors. The main café with its coffee and snacks is located far away on the ground floor and so the aromata of food and drink, or the sounds of their preparation and consumption, do not reach the hall in which the cards are kept. Here, conversations between circumnavigating gallery visitors are similarly hushed.

Contrast these potted descriptions of the study room and museum space with the sensory atmosphere of the nineteenth-century coffeehouses in which *as nas* was frequently played. A Frenchman's description of a Tehran coffee-house in the 1880s gives some sense of the multisensory experience:

From all sides little boys run around carrying fruit, some cheese wrapped in thin leaves of dough, grilled over red stones, which serve as bread; richer or more discriminating people surround the open kitchens, which display pots of soup or mutton, skewers of kebab and pyramids of pilaf with saffron. This is followed by the hour of kif, the hour of tea and water pipe, and from one end of the bazaar to the other, in the most elegant alleys and in the disreputable passageways where they sell rags, in all avenues and in each and every corner, one only hears the noise of samovars and the gurgling of water in the water pipes.²³

Alongside food a range of stimulants, from coffee and tea to wine and opium, would have accompanied the playing of *as nas* in the coffee house. The sounds of the samovar mingled with musical performances and dancing or the voices of storytellers (*naqqali*) who recounted scenes from Persian history, Shi'i legend, and poetry. From accounts, both by Iranians and by foreign visitors, we have a sense of Qajar coffeehouses as buzzing places of social interaction and consumption in which the handling of cards might have been interspersed with holding drinking vessels or pipes.

There is a subtle irony here. Originally the playing cards on which this article focusses were part of a game that was played at all levels of Iranian society, from palaces to coffee houses and drinking dens.²⁴ Had they been in the collection of the British Museum in its earliest eighteenth-century years, they might have formed part of the sociable sensory interaction that characterised early modern museums and their largely elite, select, users.²⁵ Yet with the widening of the British Museum's audience to include the broader 'public' (and not just a middle class public), the cards were encased and the senses of museum visitors (at the British Museum and other national museums) were disciplined to accept a more limited degree of tactile interaction with exhibits.²⁶ In fact, for reform-minded British politicians and cultural commentators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the museum was explicitly framed in opposition to the card playing

and gambling in which the playing cards would have originally been used. Museums, as with the permanent fairs that sprung up in the same period, explicitly banned not just spitting and swearing but also gambling in their environs.²⁷ Educational looking in the museum was thus implicitly opposed to the tactile interactivity concomitant with card games and wondering, morally suspect, hands.

With the synecdoche of hands as touch, much like the temptation to reach for the oversized sculpted hands of statues, playing cards are particularly inviting given their overt ergonomic connections. After all, unlike chess or other game pieces, cards are often constantly passed and held throughout a game in a 'hand', literally and figuratively. Housed behind a floor-to-ceiling glass pane in the Albukhary Gallery interior, the British Museum cards are held in stasis and frozen in the public gaze. This treatment opposes their previous stage of life, where they were periodically observed and held (if not shuffled and toyed with) in the hands of researchers and curators whilst being stored in the collection holdings of the Middle East department. The object history of these cards, as well as their original purpose as Qajar-era playthings, invites a consideration of the relationship between case and encased, an object and its surroundings, as well as the object's own history of handling, function, and use.

Where the role of touch in museum practice was once seen as essential to a visitor's experience of a collection, it is rare to find an exhibit that encompasses active touch-centred and haptic technologies beyond the gimmick or the segue. Cultural trends, accessibility requirements, and advancements in technology, have seen the integration of touch screens and 3D printed facsimiles as supplemental opportunities to 'feel' an object on display by proxy without needing to venture fingers beyond the threshold of a glass case. Most notably in terms of the display of Islamic art, the reinstallation of the Louvre's Islamic galleries in 2012 was one of the first to apply touch stations that presented opportunities to handle one-to-one scale models of exhibits.²⁸ Meanwhile, the Jameel Gallery of the V&A has long complemented the wall display of a calligraphic frieze from the tomb of Buyanquili Khan (c. 1359) with an open-access reconstruction wherein the curves and crevices of *thuluth* script in Timurid glaze and earthenware technology may be traced and poked whilst maintaining a degree of bodily distance between the object proper and passing visitor's hands.²⁹

Cases are an agent of exhibitory ocular centrism and represent an aversion to touch within the museum as a potentially hazardous physical interaction. Moreover, they stand as a conceptual blockade to understanding the 'tactile properties' of objects and materials, as Bernhard Berenson most famously characterises.³⁰ In acknowledging the case as a barrier to certain sensory engagements and analysis, Classen has written of the quest of the historian in 'prizing open the metaphorical glass case which encloses the subject of collection experience'.³¹ Most tactile interventions in museum spaces have involved opening up routes for visitors to touch things – whether originals or facsimiles of objects. This means prizing open the literal glass case. But what such changes in curation neglect is to then open up the metaphorical glass case, the one that allows us to sit inside our contemporary sensory habits as we touch museum objects. We may be able to touch more things in museums, but visitors are often not asked to reflect on *how* people touched those things in the past and what those tactile investigations might have *meant*. In fact, these tactile interactions in museums often simply offer a more proximate equivalent of looking through the glass case: a feeling that either by looking at or

touching an object we are ‘in touch’ with ‘the past’, by virtue of the fact that the object itself has touched past places or people.³² Yet being ‘in touch’ with ‘the past’ is not the same as touching an object *as it was touched* in the past.

1.3. Encasing the cards

The inclusion of the cards in the contents of the Albukhary Gallery speaks to a renewed valuation of Qajar material within exhibition contexts more generally, as well as the elevation of vernacular objects.³³ The cards had previously been overlooked in not being chosen for display in the John Addis gallery and at a pocket-sized 6 cm high by 4.10 cm wide they were emitted in favour of the grander oil paintings that have also dominated previous scholarship on Qajar art. In being incorporated into the gallery proper, by way of the thematic showcase, the cards are given an elevated sense of purpose. In being included as part of the Albukhary display, the cards would be treated more deferentially than any moment previously; viewers then internalise a notion of value, partly aesthetic and partly anthropological. However, by elevating them to items of museological interest, the required placement in a case arguably obscures the visual and tactile interactions in which they would have been implicated.

In his work exploring the museum as a ‘sensorium’ David Howes has described how, although some institutions have sought to rehabilitate touch, working to incorporate ‘hands-on’ engagement activities, the traditional view of museums as ‘sites of pure spectatorship, with objects in glass cases and visitors warned to keep their hands off’ endures.³⁴ The glass case is the middle man in this dynamic, positioned both physically and conceptually as a barrier to touch; it is described by Howes, Classen and others as a product of nineteenth-century conventions of perceptual behaviour, where, as we saw above, handling an object had been largely demoted in the hierarchy of how to properly appreciate an exhibit by the turn of the twentieth century.³⁵ The translucence of the glass gives it an illusion of access that disrupts our perceptual processes, which include the reflexive urge to grab and feel; it is designed to be an imperceptible background that mediates and ultimately polices an aesthetic encounter. The case instantiates a particular ‘distribution of the sensible’ that polices not only what can be sensed – one can look but not touch – but that directs the user to a particular way of describing the cards – visual and aesthetic – over and above other ways of talking to, with, or about them.³⁶

Each and every case within a museum or gallery is thus positioned at the juncture between object and beholder, playing with a viewer’s calculations of distance and proximity. Although the cards are a less spatially demanding art form than ceramics or tile friezes, they have ergonomic considerations in their design. The way in which the cards are laid out within the Albukhary showcase positions them at roughly hand height on a tilted backing (Figure 2). This is an approximation of the viewing level they might have been laid out on a table during gameplay, as well as creating a level correspondence between the sense of touch and hands as the body part that the cards are designed to interact with. The mode of display provides a tacit understanding between card and audience: that these are objects that are connected inherently to haptic processes – touching, shuffling, throwing down, rubbing – but that looking into the case is the only way to ‘grasp’ and understand the object in isolation. The case is ultimately a field of

presentation provided for the cards as an art object, as opposed to showing them as primarily a functional ‘thing’.³⁷

As such, cases are an organisational entity beyond the object alone: they foster both contemplative behaviour (eyes) and restrictive deportment (body) on behalf of the gallery visitors. According to Rajchman the case:

permits us to place things in a coordinate space, reidentify objects, and say what’s up and what’s down; and it makes all the textures of our *haptisch* space come to conform to this *optisch* organization.³⁸

Rajchman portrays this manner of organisation as impacting both viewer (outside) and object (inside). As two-sided objects that are placed flat, we cannot see the back and front of the cards simultaneously and therefore form a complete picture of what each card or deck would look like in totality.

To play *as nas* one shuffles the deck and then distributes five cards to each of the four players, dealt to the right of the dealer. Much like poker, the aim is to have the highest value hand. The dealer puts down a stake and the first player to the right then examines their cards. They decide whether to raise the stake, cover it, or not play at all. Betting continues until all stakes are equal and no player is inclined to raise their stake any further. Then the cards are revealed and the player with the heist value hand wins the stake. The highest value is a full house of three and a pair, whilst the lowest value is a single pair.³⁹

Since the cards need to be turned to be wholly observed, not least within the context of a deck proper, the felt relations of the current museum audience, on the one hand, and the embodied visual and kinesic experiences of their original handlers in nineteenth-century Iran are markedly different. British Museum visitors are given a constant view of the side of the cards with human figures and thereby taught that this is the side that ‘matters’ from an aesthetic, art-object viewpoint.⁴⁰ This completely obscures the visual play of the card game – in which only the hand-holder can see the ‘charactered’ side of the cards whilst this is hidden from the other game players. This is even more startling when we consider the terms used to describe the options available to each player. If the player decided to cover or raise the stake he said *didam* (‘I have seen’), if he did not wish to play he said *nadidam* (‘I have not seen’), and if he wished to play without actually looking at his cards first he said *nadid didam* (‘not seeing, I have seen’).⁴¹ The complex dynamic of seeing, not seeing, and seeing without seeing, which depends on holding and picking through the cards in one’s hand, is absent from the display or its accompanying text. The dynamic of hiding and revealing at work in the game, with the uncertainty, tension, and surprise consequent upon it, is therefore obscured.

Playing cards have users as much as they have witnesses; how they were handled in gameplay entails a degree of concealment in the hand before they are laid on the table. They would then be placed back within the deck and a box and/or pocket after being used. They would not have been constantly visible, as they are within the museum case. A mid-way point between play and display that is part of the object histories of the cards can be located in the presence of their contemporaries in marketplaces in Iran. Playing cards are often featured amongst the wares of antiques dealers, given the indeterminate number of cheaply produced nineteenth and twentieth century sets that may still be extant. In this way, the cards may be out on display in a retail setting and prospective customers may enquire of the vendor to touch and examine the cards

before purchase. However, the museum case puts the cards in an arrested state of permanently being seen.

On being housed within the locked case these three-dimensional objects become flattened into two-dimensional images. Although the cards are grouped by both their case and accompanying caption when shown together in the gallery, they are likely from three separate sets. The images on the cards (the 'characters' of the game's name) ranged from figures from Persian epics and contemporary life to images of foreigners and occasionally even erotic scenes. The card suits were distinguished by birds or animals. In the British Museum case we are presented with a subtle formal distinction between three different lines of cards; the top row being different quantities of birds and lions, the second from another deck showing three cards from the *sarbaz* (soldier/jack) suite with black backgrounds, and one *lakkat* card with a ruby red circular grounding (this is the lowest ranking of the court cards, often translated as a dancer or servant but sometimes as 'whore'). The last two of three shows two *shah* (king) court cards flanking an ace or *as* (a European style cherub). The cards are therefore not part of a complete deck, show from top to bottom in a manner that does not match their original 'value' in the game, and their original casing is absent; be this a box, a pocket, or a hand. A curious re-evaluation of the cards has occurred. For the Qajar card players some cards were less valuable than others (a *shah* card is worth more than a *lakkat* card) or were only valuable when present in multiples (for example three *lakkat* cards is worth more than a single *shah* card). Yet as they are displayed in the case these items take on an equal value as precious, historical, objects. In fact, a total inversion occurs: if seen in terms of 'rarity' or individuality the *lakkat* card, of which only a single example is shown, becomes more valuable to the untutored observer than some of the other cards.

The materiality of the card is made visible by its display. Cards for *as nas* were usually hand-painted on papier-mâché and had a heavily lacquered finish to protect against the contact damage that was likely to be caused by constant playing. Given their vernacular, near ephemeral status, Iranian playing cards have been largely overlooked and underappreciated so far in terms of at least their iconographic significance, primarily due to their apparent stylistic and technical naïveté, an assumption originating from value judgements originally made by visitors to Iran in the nineteenth century.⁴² Designs were usually completed in the same style and technique as contemporary miniature paintings but were drawn on top of a layer of gesso, a practice indicative of a localised Iranian style of lacquer work that used a papier-mâché substrate rather than the tree sap used in Chinese and Japanese traditions.⁴³ The cards for *as nas* tend to be of a small size, usually measuring some 6 by 4 centimetres. Given their diminutive dimensions, they were inherently portable and could easily be slipped into a pocket and taken out for an impromptu round. These were objects that, once produced, would be in a continual state of motion: shuffled, handled, and thrown down, before the deck was picked back up and the process was repeated again.

Elements such as the refraction of the glass, the texture and colour of backing materials, the interplay of light, and the shape of the case all form a concretion of visibility, which adds to the sensory content of the case. The spotlight attached to the grey grounding is angled to highlight the smoothness of the lacquer and the crackling of the surface and how light makes contact with it, highlighting the cards' solidity and

fragility. These are all surface aspects of each card that appeal to the senses, both visual and felt. There are even explicit marks of previous touch visible, most notably a rectangular area where the lacquer has chipped away in the corner of one of the *sarbaz* cards (Figure 5). This break in the surface layer shows the interior components of the cards: the base of the lacquer being an English language newspaper or book page, through which one can see the traces of printed words (*.. lots of the ... face. Th ...*). The opportunity for close looking provided by the set-up of the case reveals three ways that touch is significant in terms of the pictorial and material qualities of the cards, which are all inter-related: the chipping of the lacquer, the touch surface marks of brushstrokes, and the fading and roughing of edges from cutaneous grazing. These are physical points of contact where tactile sensation is translated into physical evidence.⁴⁴ This dynamic between material evidence and the sensation that created it is evocative of what Deleuze and Guattari described as the grey area ‘where the material ends, and sensation



Figure 5. Qajar era playing card for the game of *as nas*: (2000,0613.1-4) Case G42/dc12, The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, The British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

begins', where 'effects' are wrested from 'precepts' – in other words, the space that the audience then must negotiate when faced with a covert instruction to look but not touch.⁴⁵

Yet, somewhat ironically, the audience is invited to closely examine the condition of the side of the objects that mattered least to the original players, who had more interest in ensuring the rear side of the cards had no identifiable marks that might enable unsportsmanlike recognition of the cards in another player's hand. As one nineteenth-century observer noted: 'they would wrap each card in the pack separately, so as not to scratch the back, which might afford means of identification to the opponent'.⁴⁶ The case is implicated as a protective environment as much as it is a viewing platform. This is a necessary curatorial concern given the public nature of a museum and the British Museum's mission statement of acting as the custodian for material culture. The absence of the original case or packaging heightens that sense of the British Museum as the public protector of the cards, yet obscures the fact that during the nineteenth century, many such sets of cards were very carefully handled not in the interests of conservation but of fair play. Cases keep objects away from potential damage and loss, particularly those objects which, like the cards, would slip all too easily in a pocket or be chipped or crushed in a hand. Yet modern museum preservation obscures, or fails to recognise, the care with which such objects might have been treated in their original context. The case protects (the cards would not last long if they were continually handled by museum goers) but also hinders an appreciation of the particular tactile practices that have surrounded the cards.

The lighting within the case, revealing every detail and surface of the cards, is part of that strategy of display. The Iranian coffee-houses in which *as nas* cards were originally used stayed open late into the evening and were lit by lanterns and candles that reflected off myriad mirrors creating a sparkling, immersive, lighting.⁴⁷ This parallels the wider urban experience that has been said to characterise Islamic cities in which 'irregularity and an abundance of gated alleys and cul-de-sacs' served to resist 'visual legibility' in a smooth blurring of public and private spaces.⁴⁸ Yet in the gallery case the cards are made constantly, consistently, legible under the eye of the lamp. The visual illegibility and multifarious reflections of the Iranian coffeehouse are replaced by focussed, singular, lighting. Rather than the luminous play of the nineteenth-century Iranian coffee-houses this lighting is more in keeping with nineteenth-century British museums, in which light represented the intellectual and moral improvement – the enlightenment – of museum visitors and the self-regulation of their bodies and morals under the watchful glare of artificial light.⁴⁹

The case, as we have seen so far, is a hinge or lever for transforming the meaning of the playing cards from objects of play to objects of disciplined aesthetic attention. Where the cards had originally been valued based on their role in the game, they are now elevated to items of aesthetic interest whose condition and patina, highlighted by the lighting and glass, become central to their value. The original spaces in which cards were played with were characterised by a multifocal lighting the bounced off mirrors, but now in their new home they are subject to the fixed, disciplined, gaze of the lamp. The visual play involved in the use of the cards, of seeing or not seeing or seeing without seeing has been replaced simply with seeing.

1.4. *Everyday sensory environments and ways of perceiving*

The case is not a tabletop or a space for physical play, it is place in which objects for play are transformed into objects for aesthetic contemplation. There is already a small object handling desk in the second room of the Albukhary, where periodic sessions are convened by a gallery assistant. However, the cards would be too fragile a component to be interacted with in this way. The desire for access to an exhibit is split into sight as an essential and touch as a privilege, a split that operates in parallel to that between public visitor and museum professional.

In placing the cards outside of their original realm of everyday perceptual experience, the case creates an intensified experience of 'looking' at surface textures, dimensions and images without the need to physically reach out and touch the objects themselves. Such feelings have often been discussed in relation to more traditional art objects such as large-scale paintings. Along similar lines to Berenson's characterisation of 'tactile values' in Renaissance painting, Margaret Boden, writing about the lush Pre-Raphaelite textures of Lord Leighton's work, claims that 'one can – and often does – imagine reaching out to touch them, to feel their sensuous folds with one's fingertips or to lay them gently against one's face ... painting only rarely produces this sort of response'.⁵⁰ In the case of the *as nas* cards, it is the potential for tactility that is provided by the sensory appeal of the cards themselves as playthings, which reminds us of their sensory modality. The 'tactile associations' of the cards are still apparent despite only being apprehended visually.⁵¹ Work on the history of touch, especially in the world of shopping and consumption, has frequently noted the transferability of tactile skills between spaces. For example, nineteenth-century knowledge of knitting, sewing, and mending developed in the home could be applied to the perusing of products in department stores.⁵² Whilst visitors to the British Museum may not be familiar with *as nas* in particular, the sheer popularity of card games throughout the world and their connection with gambling means that the basic link between shuffling, dealing hands, and putting down cards and money in pursuit of pleasure and profit are likely to enter the gallery in the minds and hands of visitors.

Arguably, even the presence of a display case recognises the centrality of touch, or at least the promise and possibility of tactility, as well as the significance of the hand as something that must be managed, and solidifies that association of tangibility and epistemology where the cards are concerned.⁵³ Instead, we could consider a 'seeing touch' or even 'haptic gaze' that extends into the reach-space of the case but which prevents actual touch, an illusion of 'being with' the object through a translucent pane, a space provided to visually 'play' with the cards as a form of engagement, entertainment, and mental exercise. Yet this space of play is ambiguous. There is a, perhaps unintended but nonetheless interesting, trace of Victorian moralism in seeing cards used for gambling but not being able to touch them. The case restrains the hands of the visitor, attempting to transform the desire for tactile play into a distanced aesthetic appreciation.

Nineteenth-century western museums emerged at the same time as a psychophysical splitting of the senses into distinct sensory powers in medicine and psychology. This new arrangement of the senses was accompanied by new technologies such as the telegraph, photograph, and phonograph that that drew on the idea that the functions of the senses could be separated and isolated.⁵⁴ As this article has sought to suggest, the museum case

should be conceptualised as another of these technologies that crafted a series of nested separations: between seeing and touching, between the eye of the museum public and the touch of the curator or conservator, between the educational eye and the gambling hand.

Yet this separated of the senses sits in stark relief to the visual culture of Qajar Iran from which our playing cards originated. There are three ways the visual culture of Qajar Iran was distinctive from that which contemporary museum visitors might be familiar. Firstly, it inherited a longer tradition found in Islamic philosophical and religious texts in which to look at art was, as Simon O'Meara puts it, to 'caress' it with one's eyes rather than penetrate it with a fixed, concentrated gaze of the sort we might find in the European aesthetic traditions that influenced museum display.⁵⁵ Secondly, Laura Marks has suggested that the 'haptic space' at work in Islamic artistic traditions, which invites the viewer into a performative, active, engagement with a continuously unfolding space, is a unique quality of Islamic art that has influenced contemporary new-media artworks.⁵⁶ Thirdly and finally, in nineteenth-century Iran ideas of vision were different to those prevalent in Europe in the period (and today). Debates were still ongoing as to whether seeing was based on intromission (in which objects and light move towards the eye) or extromission (in which eyebeams reach out and touch the world).⁵⁷ This triumvirate of Islamic optics suggest a more haptic, immersive, notion of what it means to see an object. The seeing-hand or haptic-gaze was at work in nineteenth-century Iran, yet in the subsequent history of museum display that inter-sensorial connection was, if not entirely severed, changed into one that was characterised by bodily discipline instead of immersive play.

2. Conclusion

Play is ultimately a performative practice that is transformed into a visual experience through the material culture associated with it (such as cards, game pieces, boards). In being part of a display within the Albukhary Gallery, the playing cards are emblematic of their role in the quotidian embodied experience of players in Qajar Iran, whilst being removed from the tactile contexts of being a game piece. This forms, in many ways, a haptic puzzle. As a new context is made for them within the showcase, it is hard to distinguish what the cards 'mean' to a viewer who observes them in terms of the way they *look* rather than the way they *feel* or, by extension, may be used. To quote Klatzky, the sensory aspects of the aesthetic experience are complicated to say the least: 'There's more to touch than meets the eye'.⁵⁸

Exhibiting objects, like cards, that have such specific tactile connections raises issues around the practicalities and aesthetics of display. Cases are a particularly tricky component in terms of exhibitionary haptics, and objects like this invite us to consider the place of touch in the museum: as a manner of non-verbal social communication, how it is or can be interrelated with visual perception, and the involvement of the body with an exhibit.

Whilst touch and the promise of tactility in aesthetics will be developed through the haptic/optic distinction in art history, at least in Western industrialised cultures, such attitudes maintain the sensory stereotype whereby vision is predominant.⁵⁹ There remains the implication that optical distance is collapsed by the more proximal engagement of the tactile object, whilst the psychological urge to touch the cards is forever

disturbed by the case around them. From behind glass, the tactile appeal of the smooth lacquer surface of the coating, the shape and size of them made to fit in the palm, to be shuffled, revealed and concealed is rendered indeterminate. The case transforms an object of the hand into an object of the eye, an object of playful seeing and not seeing into an object of concentrated aesthetic attention. Even artefacts, with obviously important non-visual dimensions, such as textiles and musical instruments, customarily undergo this transformation within the museum, and this is no different to the curation within the Albukhary galleries, where anthropological collections (costumes, objects with ritual use) are interspersed with ceramics, book arts, metalwork, glassware and so on.

The atmosphere for the contents of the games showcase is set by the inclusion of a quote in Persian by Abbasid statesman Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Sulayman al-Rawandi (d. 789):

شطرنج باز چندانک بازی خویش ببند بازی خصم راهم نگرد

Like a chess player, one must observe the enemy's moves as well as one's own.⁶⁰

Much like two competitors, the haptic is not in straightforward opposition to the optic within the context of the display case; their appreciation necessitates if not a seeing hand, then a feeling eye.⁶¹

Today when museums think of 'immersion' they tend to reach to VR (virtual reality), XR (extended reality), or – in more commercial cases – the 'experiences' of reconstructed multisensory environments.⁶² Yet if we teach museum visitors to examine items such as the Qajar playing cards with nineteenth-century eyes, then we can encourage them to imagine the immersive qualities of the tactile gaze. By freeing them from the metaphorical perceptual glass case of their twenty-first century modes of seeing, we can encourage them to gain an immersive feeling without having to remove items from their physical case: their tactile sight can reach through the glass and grasp the material qualities of Qajar ephemera.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive – and generative – overview of the artistic life of the Qajar era, see L. S. Diba and M. Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings: the Qajar Epoch 1785–1925* (I.B. Tauris, 1999).
2. Arthur Milner's career started at Sotheby's where he ran their Indian, Himalayan and South-east Asian auctions in London. Arthur Milner has an MA in South Asian Studies from SOAS and has written and lectured on a range of topics in the subject.
3. S. O'Meara, 'Haptic Vision: Making Surface Sense of Islamic Material Culture,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 467.
4. David Howes and Constance Classen, 'The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts,' in *Sensible Objects Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. by Chris Gosden et al. (Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 199–223.
5. Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).
6. L. Komaroff, 'Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art,' *Ars Orientalis*, 30 (2000), 1–8.
7. B. D. Wood. 'A Great Symphony of Pure Form': The 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art and Its Influence,' *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000), 113–30; R. Lindsey, 'Displaying Islamic Art at the Metropolitan: A Retrospective Look' (February 2nd 2012) <<https://>

- www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2012/displaying-islamic-art-at-the-metropolitan > [accessed 5 April 2022].
8. L. Akbarnia, V. Porter and F. Suleman, *The Making of the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World* (British Museum, 2019).
 9. The White Wing was originally completed in 1885 and designed by Sir John Taylor. It was named after William White (d. 1823), whose bequest enabled a significant expansion of the Museum into a suite of galleries on the site of what had been the garden of the Director's house. The British Museum, 'The Making of the Gallery', <<https://islamicworld.britishmuseum.org/making-the-gallery/>> [accessed 5 April 2022].
 10. Current conservation best practice required that the cards be handled without gloves. The loss of dexterity when wearing gloves is regarded as more of a threat to the objects than oils on clean hands.
 11. C. Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 5.
 12. 'Albukhary Foundation Gallery: British Museum' <https://www.goppion.com/projects/albukhary-foundation-gallery-british-museum>.
 13. 'The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World' <<https://www.stantonwilliams.com/projects/the-albukhary-foundation-gallery-of-the-islamic-world/>> [accessed 5 April 2022].
 14. For a range of material on this debate see N. Levent and A. Pascual-Leone, eds., *The Multi-sensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); H. Chatterjee, ed., *Touch in Museums: Policy and Practice in Object Handling* (Routledge, 2020); Elizabeth Pye, ed., *The Power of Touch Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Context* (Routledge, 2016).
 15. C. Classen, 'Touch in the Museum,' in *The Book of Touch*, ed. by C. Classen (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 275–286.
 16. C. Classen and D. Howes, 'Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artefacts,' in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. by E. Edwards, C. Gosden and R. B. Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), pp. 199–223.
 17. F. Candlin, 'Museums, Modernity and the Class Politics of Touching Objects,' in *Touch in Museums: Policy and Practice in Object Handling*, ed. by Helen J. Chatterjee (Routledge, 2008), pp. 9–20.
 18. Cited in G. R. de Beer, *Sir Hans Sloane and the British Museum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 125.
 19. Walter Benjamin's observations on the 'tactile properties' of art is a metaphorical tactility more to do with empathy and being 'touched' as feeling than a physical tactile relationship with a work of art. When appreciating art, the viewer should be 'touched' by it if not literally touching it. See W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zorn, ed. by H. Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999); G. Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge, 1992).
 20. S. Mattern, 'Resonant Texts: Sounds of the American Public Library,' *The Senses and Society*, 2.3 (2007), 277–302.
 21. C. Bembibre, 'Smell of Heritage: A Framework for the Identification, Analysis and Archival of Historic Odours,' *Heritage Science*, 5.2 (2017).
 22. N. Lazakis, "'It Is A Non-Negotiable Order": Public Libraries' Body Odor Bans and the Ableist Politics of Purity,' *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, 6 (2020), 24–52.
 23. R. Mathee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500–1900* (Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 270.
 24. W. M. Floor, *Games Persians Play* (Mage, 2011).
 25. C. Meyer, 'Ancient Vases in Modern Vitrines: The Sensory Dynamics and Social Implications of Museum Display,' *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 63.1 (2020), 91–109.
 26. A. Goldgar, 'The British Museum and the Virtual Representation of Culture in the Eighteenth Century,' *Albion*, 32.2 (2000), 195–231; Constance Classen, 'The Senses at the

- National Gallery: Art as Sensory Recreation and Regulation in Victorian England,' *The Senses and Society*, 15.1 (2020), 85–97.
27. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 27, 232; Cécile Doustaly, 'Museums, the Exhibitionary Complex and State Stability in the Victorian Era,' *Angles*, 4 (2017), 1–20.
 28. D. J. Roxburgh, "'Open Sesame!'" David J. Roxburgh on the Musée du Louvre's Galleries of Islamic Art,' *Art Forum*, 51.5 (2013), 61–64.
 29. F. Jordan, 'The Remounting of a Victorian Tile Panel,' *V&A Conservation Journal*, 33 (October 1999), 10–12.
 30. B. Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, 3rd edn (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 4ff.
 31. C. Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 5.
 32. C. Korsmeyer, *Things: In Touch with the Past* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
 33. Since the Albuqharh Gallery's opening in 2018, there has been an unprecedented number of Qajar-focused exhibitions worldwide. This includes *L'Empire des Roses* (Louvre Lens, 2018); *Transforming Traditions: The Arts of 19th Century Iran* (Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, 2018–9); *Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-Century Iran* (2017–2018, Harvard Art Museum).
 34. D. Howes, 'Introduction to Sensory Museology,' *The Senses and Society*, 9.3 (2014), 259–267.
 35. T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).
 36. For this concept see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. G. Rockhill (Bloomsbury, 2013).
 37. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 163.
 38. T. Rajchman, *Constructions* (London: MIT Press, 1998), p. 46.
 39. A. Hotum Schindler in correspondence with Stewart Culin, as quoted in D. Parlett, *The History of Card Games* (Oxford, 1991), p. 23.
 40. F. Monti and S. Keene, *Museums and Silent Objects: Designing Effective Exhibitions* (Routledge, 2017).
 41. W. Floor, *Games Persians Play* (Mage, 2011), p. 46.
 42. S. Mahdavi, 'Amusements in Qajar Iran,' *Iranian Studies*, 40.4 (2007), 496.
 43. B. W. Robinson, 'Qajar Lacquer'; N. D. Khalili, B. W. Robinson, and T. Stanley, *Lacquer of the Islamic Lands* (Oxford, 1997). L. S. Diba, 'Lacquerwork of Safavid Persia and its Relationship to Persian Painting' (PhD thesis, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1994).
 44. R. Shiff, 'Cézanne's Physicality: the Politics of Touch,' in *The Language of Art History*, ed. by S. Kamal and I. Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 129–180.
 45. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), p. 166.
 46. W. Floor, *Games Persians Play* (Mage, 2011), p. 75.
 47. A. al-e Dawud, 'Coffeehouse,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol 6, fasc. 1, pp. 1–4.
 48. O'Meara, 'Haptic Vision: Making Surface Sense of Islamic Material Culture', p. 475.
 49. A. Barnaby, *Light Touches: Cultural Practices of Illumination, 1800–1900* (Routledge, 2017), p. 122; C. Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910* (Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 74.
 50. M. A. Boden, 'Crafts, Perception and the Possibilities of the Body,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40 (2000), 289–301.
 51. H. Khatchadourian, 'On the Nature of Painting and Sculpture,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 14 (1974), 326–343.
 52. A. Loxham, 'Women, Tactility and Consumption: Middle-class Female Sensory Participation in Victorian Shopping Environments' (PhD thesis, Department of History, Lancaster University, 2016).
 53. Khatchadourian, 'On the Nature of Painting and Sculpture', p. 336.

54. J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990); E. Fretwell, *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (Durham, 2020); J. Sterne, *The Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003); for critiques of Crary see L. Calè and P. Di Bello, 'Introduction: Nineteenth-Century Objects and Beholders,' in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 1–21; M. J. Schmidt, 'Visual Music: Jazz, Synaesthesia and the History of the Senses in the Weimar Republic,' *German History*, 32.2 (2014), 201–223.
55. O'Meara, 'Haptic Vision: Making Surface Sense of Islamic Material Culture', p. 475.
56. L. U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New media Art* (MIT Press, 2010), p. 63.
57. A. Ghajarjazi, 'Techniques of the Senses: 19th-century Media and Shiism in Iran' (PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2021), pp. 61–69.
58. R. L. Klatzky et al., *Semantic Factors in Cognition* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978).
59. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Athlone, 1988), p. 492–499.
60. Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Sulayman al-Rawandi, *Rahat al-Sudur wa Ayat al-Surur*, 599–603 AH (AD 1202–07).
61. S. O'Meara, 'Haptic Vision: Making Surface Sense of Islamic Material Culture,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 467–480.
62. For more on the uses to which such curatorial tactics are being put, see M. Shehade and T. Lambert-Sytlianou, eds., *Museums and Technologies of Presence* (Routledge, 2024).

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to Venetia Porter, former curator of Contemporary Middle East Art at the British Museum for her insights into the making of the Albukhary Gallery. My thanks also to Shigeru Myojin and Donya Nadar for endowing my position at the British Museum as project curator from 2019–2020. I would also like to thank Arthur Milner for his correspondence concerning the cards acquisition.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Dr Natasha Morris FHEA BA, MA, PhD (Courtauld, University of London) is Lecturer in Islamic Arts and a convenor of the Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art at SOAS. She was previously Myojin-Nadar Project Curator Middle East Art at the British Museum, and co-authored *Reflections: Art of the Middle East and North Africa* (British Museum, 2020) and *Honar: The Afkhami Collection of Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art* (Phaidon, 2017). She has written extensively on the art of the Middle East for publications including *The Oxford Art Journal*, *The Art Bulletin*, *Time Out*, and *The Guardian* as well as authoring several exhibition catalogues.