

Illuminated Verses

Program Evaluation Report

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Prepared for:

Poets House & City Lore

Prepared by:

John Fraser, PhD AIA

Karen Plemons, M.S.Ed

Elizabeth Danter, PhD

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Executive Summary

Illuminated Verses explores issues of traditional culture and modernity, as well as differences and diversity within the Islamic world, and offers an interpretive bridge to these content areas for both scholarly and general audiences. Through a symposium and a series of pre-events leading up to that program, Poets House and City Lore explored ways of using poetry, discussion and interpretation of poetry to create bridges for intercultural understanding. The symposium and pre-symposium events also served as a springboard to explore the potential for a broader, potentially national, program.

This summative report focuses on the evaluation of the *Illuminated Verses* series, including the Poetries of the Islamic World symposium and subsequent planning forum with panelists and selected responders, drawing from panelists and audience members to inform planning and decision making for the symposium and for future programs. The report begins with descriptions of events and observations of the symposium and the planning forum to further illustrate the context surrounding the program and reported outcomes. This section is followed by results from event attendee surveys (event attendees were surveyed immediately following each event) that addressed knowledge, attitudes, and learning outcomes accrued from the event. A small group of event attendees were also surveyed two weeks after the Poetries of the Islamic World symposium to explore the impact of the symposium. Planning forum participants were surveyed two weeks following the forum to gather their thoughts on the symposium and the planning process and any additional ideas they had for programs and funding.

To fully characterize the findings, this report also includes findings from a telephone survey of panelists' expectations and goals for the symposium, held before the symposium. These interviews identified each panelist's goals and thoughts regarding the mission of the project and related issues. They uncovered various participant perspectives and potential conflicts and opportunities that were used by program organizers to assist the planning and programming.

Key findings:

- Panelists viewed the mission as being laudable, interesting, useful, politically and culturally timely, worthwhile, and noble.
- Panelists' goals included their own personal goals, such as having the opportunity to learn from and interact with other panelists, their goals for their presentations, and the potential impact to the audience.
- Panelists valued their involvement in the project and saw it as an important opportunity for growth and education for both the event attendees and the panelists themselves.
- Event attendees had a high level of educational achievement and had specific interests in cultural issues and poetry.
- Event attendees claimed that the program contributed to their scholarly thinking. They claimed to have gained new knowledge of Muslim culture, religion and poetry through attending the program events.
- Symposium attendees were highly engaged, and active in participating in the question and answer periods in ways that contributed to developing a larger cultural vision.
- The panelists and respondents who participated in the Sunday Planning Forum were active and engaged in the larger town hall-style discussion.



- The panelists and respondents at the Sunday Planning Forum actively contributed to developing a long-range vision and demonstrated substantial investment in achieving a shared vision.
- The planning forum developed a series of clear and coherent ideas for scholarly programming and funding to support the ongoing effort to advance key humanities questions surrounding cultural understanding with specific target audiences.
- Many of the forum participants remained engaged in the project after their attendance, expressing interest in being involved in contributing their own scholarly work or skills to future programming or suggesting areas they might develop as off-shoots to the main program in their own communities.
- Sunday planning forum participants felt the forum was positive for them as academics and helped create a social network of scholars with whom they shared common interests.
- Sunday planning forum participants viewed the forum process as effective and engaging.

Based on the objectives outlined for the program in the original application for grant funding to the National Endowment for the Humanities, these results suggest that the program achieved its goals.



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Introduction

Illuminated Verses is a humanities forum and workshop that explores ways in which the performance, study, and interpretation of contemporary oral and literary Muslim poetry traditions can increase understanding of Muslim cultures. The project seeks to present the unique qualities of each of these diverse cultures and, in the process, modify the perception of Muslim culture as a monolith, creating opportunities for community learning through the development workshop. This initiative is designed to use poetry and the discussion and interpretation of poetry to create bridges for intercultural understanding between U.S. and Muslim cultures; U.S.-based Muslim communities and their home countries; devotional and more secular literature communities; and among Muslim cultures in different parts of the world. To accomplish this goal, Poets House and City Lore hosted a series of pre-event introductions to poetry in Muslim cultures organized in collaboration with various other groups, followed by a day-long series of panel discussions and events that included programs by U.S.-based literary and oral Muslim poets framed and contextualized by scholars' interpretations. The project concluded with a second one-day workshop exploring ways to disseminate similar programs in an effort to increase understanding of Muslim cultures through poetry on a broader scale.

Research Purposes

The non-profit Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI) served as the external independent evaluator for the program. ILI evaluated the impact of the *Illuminated Verses* series through a combination of phone interviews with panelists, surveys of audience members, observations of the symposium, co-facilitation of a forum being held the day after the symposium, and follow-up surveys with forum participants. The aim of this report is to provide the project leadership team with a summary of findings from five data collection efforts:

- 1) Panelist telephone interviews, detailing the perspectives and expectations of panelists presenting at the *Poetries of the Islamic World* day-long symposium;
- 2) A survey of the general public attending the *Illuminated Verses* series, including the *Poetries of the Islamic World* symposium, *Introduction to the Language of the Qur'an*, which describes impact of the events, and attendees experiences with Islamic culture and poetry, as well as demographic information;
- 3) A follow-up survey with symposium attendees assessing event impact;
- 4) A follow-up survey with forum participants describing their thoughts on the symposium and the planning process and any additional ideas for programming and funding; and
- 5) Observations of the symposium and the planning forum.

Methods

The pre-event telephone interviews were conducted with participating panelists to identify their thoughts about the project's success, their hopes and goals for participation, and what they thought could result from their collaboration. All participating panelists were informed of the program assessment by email and were asked to select a time they would be available for approximately 30 minutes to speak by phone. Between April 1st and April 16th, ILI conducted interviews with 15 of the 19 participating panelists. Participants were informed that the phone interviews were to be recorded for



the purposes of this report. All participants agreed to have the conversation audio recorded. ILI used an open-ended discussion guide (Appendix 2) to explore topics central to the program in order to focus the discussion and identify key attributes about their involvement in the program. After the qualitative data was collected from the telephone calls, researchers compiled and coded the data according to emerging patterns of meaning.

Between March 19, 2011 and May 14th Poets House organized 10 days of events focused on Islamic Poetry, including the full day Poetries of the Islamic World symposium. After the majority of the events, Poets House staff distributed and collected from audience members the first survey, created by ILI (Appendix 3). The survey addressed knowledge, attitudes, and learning outcomes associated with attending pre-workshop programs. Survey data was reviewed and analyzed based on the themes and trends that emerged from attendee responses.

There were a total of 200 survey respondents (of the 679 who attended events where surveys were distributed) to the end-of-the-event survey collected over 10 days of events, which used open-ended questions to explore attendee's prior experiences with poetry and Islam. Demographic data were also collected. Demographic questions were based on US 2010 Short-form census, with an additional LGBTQI gender identity question to expand opportunities for those whose physiological or emotional self does not conform to the binary opposites imposed by the census. In cases related to ethnicity/race, heritage, and experiences with poetry, the survey offered multiple responses because various views and thoughts may be held simultaneously, even though the polar ends of these views tend to be more discrete. Qualitative data was compiled and coded by researchers using a coding rubric developed based on trends that emerged from the survey data. A second set of researchers validated the tool by running an inter-rater reliability analysis.

The symposium held on May 7th contained 9 parts, with attendance information taken at each part of the day. The symposium evaluation employed a two-part strategy to assess attendees experience and the impact of the event. The first survey was distributed to event attendees and collected on site as these attendees left the building. The second survey employed a retrospective, pre/post online survey tool, completed by symposium event attendees who offered email addresses at the event, to assess preconceptions about the program, perceived change in knowledge and attitudes resulting from the program, reinforcement of existing knowledge, and program attendees reflections on how the major themes for the program impact their understanding of Muslim cultures and poetries throughout the world (Appendix 4). Because the response rate was very low for the attendee retrospective-pre/post survey, it was not possible to contact attendees again, as had been originally planned, so this survey was considered complete. Qualitative data collected from the surveys was compiled and coded according to emerging patterns of meaning.

For the evaluation of the planning forum, held on Sunday May 8th, ILI staff attended the forum, took notes on the event, and observed behavior and discussion among the participants throughout the day. These data were used to explore the manner in which dominant discussion themes emerged, how side conversations influenced or hampered discussion, the overall tone and tenor of the experience from the perspective of the participants, any provocations that appeared controversial, whether these provocations received tacit acceptance from the majority, and whether crowd dynamics may have suppressed dissenting views. ILI also created a post online survey, completed by the forum attendees, to assess reflections on the symposium and reflections on the format and ideas regarding programming and funding possibilities (Appendix 5). After the qualitative data were collected from the surveys, researchers



compiled and coded the data according to emerging patterns of meaning.

Findings from Front-End Evaluation

Panelist Telephone Interviews

Panelists offered a broad range of views based on their cultural background and area of focus. Some described themselves as a combination of poet, translator, and writer or scholar, while others were more likely to describe their perceived role in the program.

"I think my role is precisely to build bridges between cultures, between people, between the west and the Middle East."

During the interviews, panelists described a familiarity and experience with Muslim poetry from across the region where Islamic beliefs are dominant cultural views, including the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia. This diversity was recognized by several of the panelists as an initial sign of success of the program—the diversity of the scholars serving as panelists mirroring the diversity found within Muslim culture.

Participant Goals

The personal goals for many of the panelists focused on issues related to their scholarly growth, primarily helping to expand their own research or through the opportunity to interact with other scholars. In particular, one of the panelists described how the event gave her the opportunity to explore her memories of growing up in a Middle Eastern country and to situate them in the current academic discourses. Another panelist indicated that she saw this project as an example of the type of humanities project she would like to organize in the future. Multiple panelists were interested in contributing to and being a part of a larger conversation with other panelists.

I am also interested in hearing what the other panelists will be presenting, I am interested in hearing more about their perspective, to better build my own bridges of knowledge.

A few panelists expressed some uncertainty about what to expect from the event and what the audience was going to be like. At the time of the interview, some had not finalized their presentations and expressed trepidation about how their offerings might align with the work being presented by other scholars. This uncertainty made it difficult for them to identify their goals.

A few of the panelists felt the interviews helped them to frame their own thinking. They claimed it helped to remind them of their contribution to the larger project and allowed them to think about how their academic area of expertise might connect the content to the program mission.

When asked to describe their personal goals, many panelists spoke of goals related to what they hoped audience members would gain from attending the workshops and symposium. Several panelists felt the program would provide a valuable opportunity for audience members to learn about other cultures through learning about the poetry and literature of different regions.

Literature and poetry and the arts offer a rich opportunity to create bridges between cultures.

Panelists were interested in having the opportunity to share with the audience the content areas in which they specialize. They were interested in sharing with members of the general public aspects of the

Muslim world, the Qur'an, Muslim scripture, Arabic, specific poets and regions of poetry, and their connections to culture. There was also the hope that audience members would have an authentic experience of the performance-based nature of poetry.



Project Mission

Common terms or synonyms of those terms panelists used to describe the mission including: laudable, interesting, useful, both politically and culturally timely, worthwhile, noble. All panelists supported the project mission and several panelists focused on the timely nature of the mission, speaking to the current political environment and the growing Muslim population in the United States.

The mission is obviously is timely- politically and culturally. United States is increasing in Muslims in terms of the presence of Muslims in the United States. And also Muslims are themselves becoming more diverse.

One panelist was concerned about how the mission characterized poetry as a bridge to the Islamic world, when a similar event on American poetry would not be described as a bridge to the Christian world. This lone criticism was not necessarily evident to other participants, but the researchers were attentive to this point in reviewing the findings to determine if others felt that the framing indicated a non-American “other” that may be prejudicial in structure. There did not appear to be any evidence of this bias in other materials.

Many panelists felt the program was important and timely due to the negative public discourses surrounding Muslim and Islamic traditions in the post-9/11 political and cultural climate in the United States. A few panelists felt that achieving such a complex mission would be very difficult and possibly beyond the capacity of this small program. One panelist felt the mission could be better characterized as attempting to bridge three separate yet equal missions: bridging traditional culture with modernity; exploring the differences/diversity within the Islamic world; and creating an interpretive bridge for those unfamiliar with Muslim or Islamic culture.

Many panelists felt that poetry and literature are imbued with the ability to surface positive cultural awareness. Panelists described poetry as being an inherently accessible and approachable way of understanding other cultures.

Poetry in a lot of the societies we are going to be examining has a very prized place; it is a very important aspect of culture. Looking at things that way gives us a very different perspective. Then we can say that no matter what kind of government people maybe living under or what kind of culture they might be coming from, poetry has certain values and there is certain questions that we think might be common questions that people come to and through that we think we can present some parts of these worlds in a different way than might usually be presented.

Two of the panelists specifically addressed the popularity of the Sufi poet Rumi, and how many Americans might not even realize that Rumi is a Sufi poet. Both of these participants felt that the popularity of Rumi could be used as a positive entry point that would aid the new learner in discovering Muslim culture and other Islamic literature.

Diversity Within Muslim Culture

All of the panelists characterized Muslim culture as diverse and varied. They felt that some people in the United States hold an inherent bias toward Muslim culture as monolithic and anti-American. Several



panelists elaborated on the distribution of Muslim cultures across the globe as one way of describing the misperceptions about Muslim culture as something only found in the Middle East.

Islam always gets mistaken for being essentially an Arab connected religion when in fact Indonesia and Malaysia and millions and millions more Muslims not connected to the Middle East, it's a major misconception that most people have.

A couple of panelists spoke of their own personal experiences growing up Muslim in different parts of the world, such as Pakistan and North Africa, and the diversity present even in those regions.

A few panelists used Christianity as an example of describing diversity within a religion, with one panelist saying that people would never view Christians from all parts of the world as monolithic. Almost all panelists described the diversity of Muslim culture, though one panelist asserted that Muslims do have a core shared belief system, “just as Christians have a common belief system,” but then described how Muslims are diverse in other ways.

Challenges

Panelists identified and described three primary challenges to the *Illuminated Verses* program: stereotypes, language and audience, specifically, their concern about who would be in the audience—many felt unclear about their anticipated audience’s experience or knowledge of poetry and/or Muslim culture and stated that this challenge was impeding their ability to prepare an appropriate presentation. Several participants felt the greatest of these challenges would be related to overcoming stereotypes and preconceived notions. Many felt these concerns were being exacerbated by negative messages that stereotype Muslim culture in pervasive media coverage. They described some of these challenges with an open-minded approach to the program in relation to potential Muslim and non-Muslim audience members. To a lesser extent, panelists also identified language as a potential hindrance for non-Arabic speaking audience members accessing poetry written in Arabic.

Potential Impact

Panelists identified several areas where they felt the *Illuminated Verses* program might have important impacts on public discourse. Most felt that the educational aspects of the project might help reduce negative stereotypes about the Muslim culture. Several panelists felt audience members would have the opportunity to learn more about specific poets, literature, geographic regions, the Qur’an, and how diverse Muslim cultures are. One panelist felt this effort was very important and hoped that the program would draw a large number of people into an open learning discussion about these topics.

Basically I think it's a wonderful way to reach out to a wider public. Too often these conversations happen about academics and scholars and the general public is left out of the conversations. So I really applaud the organizers efforts to widen the circle.

All participants felt that poetry and literature were appropriate for helping reveal positive aspects of Muslim culture. Two panelists were particularly interested in how forming relationships with a culture through literature can build a greater sense of understanding.

Education and knowledge, information, data these things don't really change peoples minds. What changes peoples minds is relationships. And relationships are built precisely through story telling.



Looking Forward

Most panelists were interested in the possible extension of the *Illuminated Verses* project beyond the planned symposium. Many had ideas for how this might occur, all of which indicated support for a broad, national and even international platform for developing shared understanding among cultures. Some suggestions included:

- Teach courses on Islam and the Middle East to highlight diversity
- Utilize film as a medium for education
- Create educational programs highlighting the diversity of Muslim culture
- Create opportunities for personal relationships/connections with Muslim culture
- Address the overall lack of education in the country regarding these topics, and specifically, Arabic as a language
- Create programs that specifically address stereotypes
- Explore the religious drives for cultural behaviors and traditions
- Use familiar content or artistic media for exploring new subjects
- Create a publication documenting the *Illuminated Verses* programs
- Reach out to a diverse audience including students, educators, and other religious groups
- Expand to other places in the country
- Create infrastructures to support and encourage panelists to form lasting relationships with other panelists to create opportunities
- Explore ways of bringing poetry to the public, such as the New York program displaying poetry snippets on public transportation

Discussion

It was apparent from the interviews that panelists were eager to participate as scholars in the *Illuminated Verses* series and to explore ways the broader mission can be met. Panelists from diverse backgrounds expressed a connection to the mission and goals of the project and strongly support the potential for poetry and literature to serve as a bridge to cultural understanding. Panelists had a strong desire to share their research and knowledge with the general public and with other scholars. They felt that poetry and literature would open and sustain conversations around Muslim culture and Islam. Panelists were particularly interested in exploring ways that the series can continue beyond the planned events. While panelists are enthusiastic, there was some trepidation about the program specifics and audience composition.

Findings from Illuminated Verses and Poetries of the Islamic World Symposium

Illuminated Verses

The *Illuminated Verses* series explored poetic traditions of the Islamic world through 10 program events, including a full-day symposium with evening performances, entitled *Poetries of the Islamic World*. The program events held from March 19th until May 14th covered a range of topics relating to Islamic Poetry and presenting information on culture, history, and poetries of geographically diverse regions of the world including the Middle East Africa and Asia and America.

Attendance

In total, the programs garnered attendance of 1,257 people with some notable overlap between programs. Attendance varied greatly for the pre-symposium *Illuminated Verses* series (Table 1). The event that drew the fewest attendees was *Transmutations with Moroccan Poet Mohammed Bennis* (N=32), while, not surprisingly, the Saturday evening program featuring music and poetry reading drew

232 participants. Five other programs drew notably large audiences (averaging 155 people) for this type of project. These attendance numbers reveal that the co-programming between Poets House, City Lore, and the Asia Society seemed to touch on a topic of interest for New Yorkers.





Table 1: Event Attendance and Survey Totals

Event Date and Name	Attendance	Response Count	Response Percent
Saturday, March 19, 2:00–4:00pm Introduction to the Language of the Qur'an	56	33	59%
Thursday, April 21, 6:30pm A Prince's Manuscript Unbound: Selections from the Shahnameh	145	0	0%
Tuesday, April 26, 7:00pm Transmutations with Moroccan Poet Mohammed Bennis	32	21	66%
Thursday, April 28, 7:00pm The Traveling Word: A West African Epic	68	35	51%
Saturday, April 30, 4:30pm Modern Poetry of Pakistan**	125	0	0%
Saturday, April 30, 8:00pm Mushaira: Celebrating Urdu Poetry**	145	0	0%
Tuesday, May 3, 7:00–9:00pm Precarious Lives: Arab Poets since Pre-Islamic Times	36	15	42%
Thursday, May 5, 7:00–9:00pm From Tablet to Pen: The Literary History of Islam	57	29	51%
Saturday May 7th, Poetries of the Islamic World Symposium Day Programs***	198*	54	27%
Saturday May 7th, Poetries of the Islamic World Symposium Evening Programs****	232	13	6%
5/14: Illuminated Verses: Java Hiphop **	163	0	0%

Notes:

* During the day of the symposium the attendance fluctuated from 103 at the start of the day to 198 near the end of the days programs. This number represents the largest total number of attendees present, however it is likely the total number of unique event attendees is higher. If counted as five separate events, total attendance was 659 for the Saturday symposium.

** Due to unforeseen circumstances, surveys were not able to be collected at these events.

Total attendance was

Audience Survey Results

Demographics

Event attendees were more likely to be female, with 65% (126) selecting female. An additional 29% (55) selected male as their sex, while 6% (12) selected only LGBTQ preferring not to identify their sex. Again, not surprisingly, 95% of the audience lives in the greater New York region, including New Jersey and Connecticut, and participants already had an affiliation with one of the sponsoring organizations, with 74% reporting they were members of Poets House, 28% members of City Lore, and 28% members of the

Asia Society. These attendees were, in general, a highly educated group (Table 2), with 65% reporting completion of a graduate degree.





Table 2: Highest Level of Formal Schooling Completed

Categories	N	Percent*
HS	9	6%
Associates Degree	1	1%
Undergraduate Degree	41	28%
Masters	58	40%
PhD	37	25%
Other	1	1%
TOTAL	147	100

Notes: Other: "15"

Impact of Events

The pre-symposium event surveys revealed that most participants felt they had learned a great deal from the presenters, although the details of that learning varied based on the topic of the event. In general, however, they did describe in specific detail that each program had helped them gain new knowledge and appreciation for some aspects of poetry, including specific poets, history and culture, religion, and some specific aspects of the Qur'an.

I was interested in the differences between the standard & dialectical languages when they are used, how that has changed, the nuance.

Responding to the sentence stem prompt "this event helped me to reconsider how we...," participants described reconsidering poetry and specific poets, culture, religion, and the Qur'an, and gave descriptions of general learning and appreciation for the events. Many of the attendees felt they gained new knowledge about particular features or aspects of the Qur'an as a result of the event. Some examples of this new knowledge included learning about specific passages, and the history of the Qur'an.

[this event helped me to reconsider how we...] view the importance of text in Islam as well as Islam vs other monotheistic faiths.

[this event helped me to reconsider how we...] try to understand the language of religious texts, it helps to explain it more by scholars devoted to the study of the Qur'an.

Most respondents felt they gained more positive views about Muslim culture based on their experience at the event. They described learning about aspects of the poetry, literature, culture, and religion as contributing to that improved perspective. Even those attendees who claimed that their opinions had not been influenced by the program still described learning about Muslim culture and literature.

Not so much as influence but gave me another perspective in which to operate and learn. This event shows Muslims in a way the media and the USA government has not

Intercultural relationships were viewed by most attendees as important topics that they connected to cultural education and cultural growth through the arts. They felt that poetry is inspirational. They felt the program they attended or those similar in nature increased understanding about intercultural relationships that are positive and beneficial for individuals and their communities. Others described the benefits as having positive national and international impacts .

Increase understanding of oneself & show commonalities of our being common to all human beings



Most attendees found the events pleasurable, although, the descriptions of what they found pleasurable varied. Some described specific attributes of presenters, while others elaborated on the topics and details from the panels and presentations, how they experienced listening to poetry, or the value of music at some of the events. In general, these audiences responded well to the overall dramatic experience and linked that pleasurable experience to their learning.

How much the poetry was enhanced by the singing and the wonderful music

Overall the event was well received by the audience, with attendees reported personal growth and knowledge acquisition from the topics presented. Respondents frequently praised the panelists and performers, the materials presented, and the overall program. The few negative comments primarily focused on issues related to time management or reflected the feeling that the panels were too academic.

Prior Experience

The majority of participants had some experience with poetry programs and/or Islamic traditions in the past (Tables 3 & 4). These results revealed that the majority attended the event because they are interested in poetry and understanding other cultures. More than half of the attendees studied poetry in college. About half of attendees were familiar with Sufi poetry, and about half enjoy ancient Muslim poetry and contemporary Muslim writings. About one-third of the attendees were familiar with someone who follows Islam, and consider themselves to be familiar with Islamic traditions and teachings. Less than a quarter of attendees have lived in a predominantly Muslim country or have family members from a Muslim country; however, at least 80% of the attendees had prior experience with learning about Islam. Only 13% stated they had learned about Islam through the media.

Table 3: Experience With Poetry

Categories	N	%
I'm interested in understanding other cultures	166	85%
I enjoy hearing authors present/read poetry	146	75%
I am interested in international poetry	134	69%
I enjoy reading poetry	149	76%
I enjoy learning about poetry	140	72%
I studied poetry and literature in college	108	55%
I am interested in poetry in languages other than English	114	59%
I enjoy spending time with others who enjoy poetry	107	55%
I am a poet	88	45%
I have led poetry programs for others	60	30%
I have no prior experience learning about poetry	9	5%
I am not interested in poetry		0%



Table 4: Relationship With Islam

Categories	n	%
I am familiar with Sufi poetry	93	51%
I enjoy reading poetry from ancient Muslim cultures	71	39%
I enjoy contemporary writings by Muslim authors	80	44%
I have studied writers from Muslim cultures	73	40%
I have worked/attended school with those who follow Islam	64	35%
I feel familiar with Islamic traditions/teachings	52	29%
I have lived in a predominantly Muslim community	40	22%
My family is from a predominantly Muslim country	30	17%
I have studied Muslim faiths	28	14%
Family members live in a predominantly Muslim country	26	14%
I was raised in a Muslim faith/culture	26	14%
The media has helped me to learn about Islam	24	13%
This is my first experience learning about Islam	14	8%
Religious leaders from my faith instruct me about Islam	11	6%

Poetries of the Islamic World Symposium

Observations of Symposium

The symposium, Bridging Cultures: Poetries of the Islamic World, was held on May 7th at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. The day-long public forum of readings, presentations and performances included Illuminated Verses: Poetries of the Islamic World, an opening conversation setting up large questions and contexts; Origins and Orality, an examination of the poetries of the Arabian Peninsula from the Golden Age to the contemporary oral tribal poetry; Versifying Expressions, a discussion with readings from the lyric traditions of Persian and Iran such as Sufi poets Rumi and Hafez as well as modern Iranian poets Ahmad Shamlu and Forugh Farrokhzad; a Yemeni Wedding Procession with music and poetry, a musical procession of bendir drums, pipes, horns, and men chanting in a poetic form known as a zamil; Tradition and Modernity, a panel examining the role of the word in the Moroccan and Egyptian vernaculars, constructing modern nation states in the Middle East, and cross-cultural encounters with European forms; From Romance to Resistance, an examination of the Urdu tradition in South Asia from the earliest days in the Mughal courts to the role of poets like Muhammad Iqbal in modern Pakistan; and Feet in Two Worlds: the Poetry of Muslim America, a panel with Muslim poets speaking from the vantage point as American citizens of Islamic heritage negotiating their differing cultural and poetic traditions. The evening program featured performances by Lebanese poetry duelists, the Iraqi group Safaafir singing songs from the cafes of Baghdad, vocalist Kiran Ahluwalia performing classical and contemporary ghazals, Rumi singer Amir Vahab and readings by poets.

Presentations during the symposium varied from more humorous and light fare to highly academic analysis. Neither type of presentation appeared to be dismissed, with most participants remaining attentive through all presentations. Participation throughout the day demonstrated a high level of engagement. Between sessions, participants were reading over the schedule of the day and reading the



bios of the panelists. Participants were active in taking notes during the presentations. There was laughter when panelists made jokes and during humorous parts of poems that were read. There was also some laughter during humorous parts of the poems that were read in Arabic, indicating fluency of the language. When a presenter read poems aloud from a booklet that had been passed out to participants, those who had the booklet quickly found the poems to follow along. Of those who had not received a booklet, several got up to try to get one. Audience participants became more comfortable and active in participating through asking questions and commenting to one another’s questions; at one point someone interrupted a panelist to ask the name of a poet.

Observations of the audience behavior and interactions suggested that the attendees represented a peer-community, deeply engaged in the content and bringing knowledgeable insight to the questions and shared discussion. The questions were varied based on the topics, relating to culture, history, and poetry and literature. Those who asked questions had a great deal of background knowledge on the topics as indicated by the depth of the questions and by references made to other poets and related issues. Participant’s questions were often answered by more than one of the panelists, and on occasion others from the audience, creating a communal discussion. Some of the panelists were observed actively engaged in listening to one another’s panels and participating in those question and answer periods as well as their own.

The evening performances drew a large and enthusiastic crowd. The event started late, but those who were waiting did not seem to mind. Some attendees were observed chatting about the panels they had attended during the day, others chatting about general topics. There was a broad range of ages, with as many younger adults as older and all participated equally, evenly distributed through the room. It was very hot in the room and attendees fanned themselves with the event programs. While the pre-event period was marked by a great deal of active audience banter, once the performers began, the audience became quiet and focused on the performers. Engagement was evident by the widespread laughter during humorous parts of the performances and the quiet during more serious fare. There was also noted laughter during the humorous sections of performances that were solely in Arabic. This was a particular event during the Dueling Poets performances, much of which was not translated into English.

Although the half-time intermission did not begin until near the officially scheduled end of the program, almost everyone returned from the intermission and stayed until the end of the evening. During the intermission, people read their programs and chatted with others. Once the performances resumed, attention again focused on the performers. The majority of the audience stayed until the end of the performances, well past the scheduled end time.

Poetries of the Islamic World Symposium Attendance

Audience members were counted during each of the panels during the symposium, including the evening performances (Table 5). Although some attendees were observed coming for only one or two sessions, most stayed for the entire day and into the evening. Because many attendees stayed for multiple panels, it is unknown how many unique attendees the events drew, but likely more than the total reported here.

Table 5: 5/7: Poetries of the Islamic World Attendance Totals

Poetries of the Islamic World Opening Panel	103
Origins and Orality	135
Versifying Expressions	159
Yemeni Wedding Procession & NEH Chairman	121



Tradition and Modernity	141
From Romance to Resistance	102
Feet in Two Worlds: the Poetry of Muslim America	198
Closing Remarks	102
Illuminated Verses Performance	232

Follow-Up Survey With Poetries of the Islamic World Symposium Attendees

The response rate for the follow-up surveys with event attendees was low (11 of the 51 with valid email address). The survey results represent the self-motivated who took the time to fill out the online survey. Those who responded had prior knowledge and familiarity with Muslim culture and poetry traditions due to education or through their own cultural background. For those with prior experience and knowledge, the events validated their previous knowledge, opinions, and experience. Responders described being positively influenced in how they think about Muslim culture, particularly in broadening their knowledge of Muslim culture and poetry.

Although I had had some exposure to Islamic literature and culture previously, this gave me a better sense of the breadth of that culture, especially in its contemporary forms. It also was fun to be a part of the experience, knowing that a lot of the people sharing it were Muslims. It felt like Muslim culture is just another, rich part of world culture, and not a culture that necessarily represents opposition or negation of our own values.

After the symposium, the responders continued to think about specific performers and poems, and poetry and the arts in general. After attending the events, 6 of the 11 survey responders continued to engage in poetry and cultural activities, including attending other events and discussing the program with others.

Discussion

The majority of Symposium attendees attended programs throughout the day and into the evening. They appeared to represent a peer-community and were highly engaged and active in participating in the question and answer periods in ways that contributed to developing a larger cultural vision. A number of survey respondents continued to engage in related poetry and other cultural activities after the symposium.

Findings from Sunday Planning Forum

Observation of Sunday Planning Forum

The Sunday planning forum engaged participants in a morning town-hall style meeting about the symposium and poetry issues at large, followed by an informal lunch discussion that reconvened in a series of focused breakout sessions in groups of 6 to 8 that focused on future program planning. Researchers observed a high level of engagement by participants throughout the day. They were open about sharing ideas and actively listening to one another. There were few side conversations and only one or two participants were observed using cell phones or other distracting media over the course of the entire day. In general, most seemed to express the feeling that the planning forum was a safe place, a space where they could share their concerns about bias and negative stereotypes in order to develop strategies to redress this social challenge. Many expressed the opinion that the spirit of the day was essential to creating bridges between cultures.



The day began with an overview of the forum process and introductions of all of the participants. This strategy set the stage for the lively and engaging town hall meeting. Participants actively shared ideas, with opinions covering a broad range of topics. A few dominant topics included poetry and education, culture, media coverage of culture, negative stereotypes, the need for safe venues, such as the Forum, to discuss difficult issues, and the need for more cultural programming. Most people seemed familiar with the format and respectfully waited for the microphone to share their thoughts. The conversation was animated and did not have any gaps.

The afternoon breakout sessions gave participants a chance to brainstorm ideas in smaller, more focused groups. Participants were assigned to one breakout group to brainstorm ideas for planning and funding opportunities, then reassigned to a second group made up of mostly different people to exchange what they had developed. They were then asked to continue to explore ideas with their new group based on what they felt were the most important aspects they had learned from their prior sessions. Staff from Poets House and City Lore acted as facilitators, timekeepers, note takers, and moderators for these breakout sessions. During both breakout sessions, participants actively engaged in contributing and developing ideas. Some participants were reluctant to change groups because they were so engaged in the first breakout session, but later expressed that being able to work with two different groups of people was beneficial, leading to more complex and nuanced results. Most everyone stayed through to the end of the day's wrap-up session. Many continued their conversations beyond the concluding event.

Sunday allowed feedback, and that was very good. Also, breaking up into small groups facilitated interchange that wasn't available in the town hall meeting environment.

Follow-Up Surveys with Forum Participants

Two weeks following the Sunday planning forum, participants were emailed surveys to follow up on their thoughts on the Symposium events, the process of the planning forum, and any additional thoughts they had on future planning. Of the 51 participants who were sent the survey, 30 responded. The survey responses were fairly evenly split between those who had participated in the forum as responders, and those who had participated in the forum as panelists.

When asked what aspects of the Sunday planning forum process were beneficial, most appreciated that the format of the afternoon breakout groups gave everyone an opportunity to share ideas and brainstorm with each other. Several felt the format gave participants an opportunity to meet and learn from each other.

Truly appreciated that we had a gathering where we had a chance to discuss our thoughts on Saturday's events. This was a chance to get to know and build community with other responders and panelists and I appreciated the conversations I had and the connections I made.

When asked what aspects of the process were limiting, many of the participants identified time as an issue. They felt that there was not enough time, leading them to have rushed conversations. Others felt there was not enough focus or structure to the day.

I think that there were perhaps too many things to accomplish in the small groups in a short time, or perhaps the groups were large enough that no one got to talk too much (though they were no doubt truly interesting).

The survey also asked participants if they had any additional ideas for programming and funding opportunities. Almost all of the respondents described ideas for programming, including programs they

would be interested in participating in and general programming ideas. The lists of suggested programming and suggested funding sources are included in Appendix 6.



Discussion

The planning forum engaged panelists and select respondents in exploring issues related to extending and expanding the program. The participants were active and engaged in the larger town hall-style discussion and actively contributed to developing a long-range, shared vision. The highly interactive session felt a bit rushed by many, but the ideas that were surfaced were perceived as innovative and broad reaching. Overall, the forum participants viewed the symposium as important and worthwhile, and as representing a safe venue in which to explore difficult issues, such as negative stereotyping.

The forum resulted in the development of a series of clear and coherent ideas for future programming and funding in an effort to advance key humanities questions surrounding cultural understanding with specific target audiences. Many of the forum participants remained engaged in the project after their attendance, expressing interest in being involved in future programming or suggesting areas they might develop as off-shoots to the main program in their own communities.



Conclusions and Recommendations

The *Illuminated Verses* series explored issues of traditional culture and modernity, as well as differences and diversity within the Islamic world, and offered an interpretive bridge to these content areas for both scholarly and general audiences. Through a series of pre-events leading up to a symposium, the cultural partners hosting the program explored ways of using poetry, discussion, and interpretation of poetry to build stronger intercultural understanding. The pre-symposium, symposium, and planning forum served as a springboard that allowed for exploration of a broader national plan to increase humanities programming in ways that will build understanding across communities.

For many panelists, the aspirations for the program appeared illusive at times, but challenging. They hoped that through their work they would reach new audiences and build greater understanding. Based on the results of the survey, this goal was achieved. While nearly 65% of the audience consisted of people holding graduate degrees, the other 35% represented those with high school and undergraduate degrees suggesting that the audience targets for both groups were met. Participants were likely to have been familiar with poetry, but not necessarily familiar with Muslim cultures, though some participants had a strong grounding in Islamic cultures. These two groups engaged in healthy discussion with no sense of discord and represented a single inclusive community that sought to build greater knowledge together. Furthermore, the active engagement and animated discussion revealed that the programs were popular and engaging. Survey results confirmed that most participants felt they had a deeper understanding of the topics presented. As a result, the evaluators believe that the program achieved this goal of building stronger bridges between cultures.

The planning forum engaged panelists and select respondents in exploring issues related to extending and expanding the program. The highly interactive session felt a bit rushed by many, but the ideas that were surfaced were perceived as innovative and broad reaching. Overall, the forum participants viewed the symposium as important and worthwhile. Most were actively involved in developing fully fleshed out ideas, offered additional thoughts in the follow-up survey, and volunteered to remain involved if the program is able to continue. These results lead the evaluators to conclude that the project achieved the objectives it set out to meet.



End of Report: July 27th 2011

Appendix 1. Email to Participants/ Scholars



Subject: City Lore/Poets House, *Illuminated Verses*:

Dear <name>

Thank you for agreeing to be part of *Illuminated Verses* project being coordinated by City Lore and Poets House. We write today to request a brief moment of your time to participate in the evaluation that is required as part of the NEH funding process. We hope to find 30 minutes when I, Karen Plemons, a researcher working with the organization (the Institute for Learning Innovation, www.ilinet.org), might reach out to you by phone to speak about your thoughts and opinions about the project. Ideally I would like to schedule a time during the the following time slots to call:

Wednesday March 30th 1:00pm to 8:00pm

Friday April 1st 9:00am to 11:00am

Sunday April 12:00pm to 6:00pm

Please let me know when you are available during the times listed above that I can reach you. Also, please include a phone number where I can best reach you. Once I have you scheduled I will send a confirmation email. If you are unavailable during those times please respond with a couple of times that would work for you.

Rest assured that your responses will be treated as confidential, so we only ask that you be as honest as you can. Your responses will help Poets House and City Lore to consider how we will assess the success of the project, Poets House/City Lore's next steps with the program, and what we all might imagine for the future.

Thank you so much for being part of this important work.

Yours truly, Karen Plemons

ILI-New York



Appendix 2. Telephone Interview Discussion Guide

Telephone Interview Discussion Guide

Hi. This is Karen Plemons from ILI calling to follow-up on our scheduled discussion about your involvement in the *Illuminated Verses* project being coordinated by City Lore and Poets House. As I mentioned in my email, this conversation will only take about thirty minutes. Is this still a good time for us to chat?

With your permission I would like to audio record this phone call. The purpose of audio recording the call is to ensure that I will be able to take complete notes from our phone conversation. The audio files will be used only for the purposes of this project.

As you may recall from the correspondence you've had with the organizers, the program explores issues of traditional culture and modernity, as well as differences and diversity within the Islamic world and offers an interpretive bridge to these content areas for both scholarly and general audiences. Can you give me your thoughts on this mission?

As a participant in the program, can you briefly describe for me what you personally seek to accomplish through your participation in the program?

We've heard that some people here in the United States believe Muslim culture to be uniform and monolithic. What do you think about this situation?

Probe: What do you believe is needed to address this issue?

This initiative is designed to use poetry and the discussion and interpretation of poetry to create bridges for intercultural understanding between many groups. How do you think this project might impact the ways Americans relate to and understand Islamic cultures?

What do you believe pose the greatest challenges to accomplishing the goals set out for this project?

And can you tell me what you believe would constitute a program that you consider is successful?

Thank you so much for your time and insight. I look forward to meeting you at event.



Appendix 3. Forum Attendee Survey

The standard survey tool contains four open-ended word stem prompts to elicit feedback on the core questions associated with the project:

1.The most important new thing I learned today was This word stem will prompt exploration of the degree to which the program contributed to germinating new ways for Americans to engage with the Muslim world. Demographic questions will help to assess the degree to which census defined minorities and prior experience and knowledge mitigate these responses.

2.This event helped me reconsider how we ... This word stem will prompt exploration of the degree to which the program contributed to changed views on how relationships with the Muslim world are negotiated in American society . Demographic questions will help to assess the degree to which census defined minorities and prior experience and knowledge mitigate these response.

3.This event helped influence my thinking about Muslim..... This word stem will prompt exploration of the degree to which the program content was internalized by the participants, with a specific view toward how the humanities content is synthesized by participants. Again, with demographic questions helping to guide assessment of the degree to which census defined minorities and prior experience and knowledge with Muslim culture mitigate these response.

4.Based on this event, I now understand that intercultural relationships between..... This word stem will prompt exploration of the impact program content had on who intercultural exchanges exist in society and potentially how participants believe intercultural exchanges may be negotiated. Again, with demographic questions helping to guide assessment of the degree to which census defined minorities and prior experience and knowledge with Muslim culture mitigate these response.



Appendix 4. Forum Attendee Post Survey

Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this brief survey about your recent experience of attending Illuminated Verses: Poetries of the Islamic World on Saturday May 7th held at BMCC Tribeca Performing Arts Center, organized by Poets House and City Lore.

1. Please comment on what you thought about Muslim cultures and poetry traditions before you attended the Illuminated verses program.

2. I feel the Illuminated Verses program influenced the way I think about...

3. Since the program I have continued to think about...

4. Please comment on how the program has influenced your thinking about Muslim cultures and/or poetry:

5. The program caused me to... (select all that apply)

Seek out information on one or more of the topics presented

Read work by one of the poets/scholars who presented during the event

Read more poetry

Approach my own writing in a new way

Strike up a conversation with my friends/colleagues about the program

Find new people to talk with about the program

Attend another poetry event or lecture

Attend another event or lecture related to Islamic culture

The program had no influence on my thinking or behavior

Other



Appendix 5 Responder Follow-Up Survey

Dear [FirstName] [LastName],

We are following up with you as a responder for the Illuminated Verses: Poetries of the Islamic World programs organized by Poets House and City Lore. Now that you have had the opportunity to think about some of the many issues explored during the Sunday discussions of Illuminated Verses: Poetries of the Islamic World, we ask that you share with us your thoughts on the project and any additional ideas you may have had in the days since the symposium. We ask that you take 5-10 minutes to respond to the five questions in the survey link below. This will help Poets House and City Lore imagine possible next steps. Rest assured that your responses will be treated as confidential.

Click on this link to be directed to the survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx>

If you would prefer to opt-out, use this link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/optout.aspx>

Thank you,

Please take a few minutes to think about and respond to the following five questions about the format of the discussions and core issues that you have continued to think about since then.

If you were able to attend any of Saturday's events, please share how the program influenced your thinking and/ or influenced your work:

Thinking about Sunday, what aspects of the process were beneficial?

What aspects of Sunday's process were limiting?

Thinking about the ideas and issues discussed on Sunday, what were the core issues that you felt were particularly important, or have continued to think about?

Please share with us if you have had any additional ideas for programming and/ or funding opportunities:

Appendix 6 Panelist and Responder Suggestions for Programming and Funding



Suggested Programming:

- Create events around the literatures and cultures of the Maghreb
- Have local librarians initiate readings with local poets choosing a poet from the Islamic world to read and discuss — to be coordinated with recommendations from Poets House and City Lore for specific poets and books
- Cultural conversation/exchange with Muslim communities using poetry and the arts. In an interdenominational event, poets of different faiths can discuss works they admire as well as how their beliefs are reflected in their works.
- Produce collaboration between poets of different cultures and themed-based anthologizes not just by region or time but also by type of writing such as experimental poetry, by subjects such as faith, war, etc. Make them easily available online, in libraries
- Send a caravan, a bus that would drive through the U.S., bringing the Islamic world's poetry to different cities. The readers should include members of each community.
- More concerts and poetry readings since music and poetry pave the way to people's heart, and they are a soft and pleasant way to indirectly educate people.
- Satellite programming at places where Arab populations gather, such as the Arab American festival in July.
- Have writing workshops where participants could then practice forms of poetry Islamic poetry such as the ghazal, qasida.
- Host a translation workshop- one way this could work is that participants are given a poem and a list of the definition of each words and then allow them to translate in a method that is poetic. It would be an extra challenge to keep a rhyme scheme.
- Take a few poetic forms common in the region (the qasida, for example) and explore them, instead of trying to explain "Islamic" culture and history through poetry.
- Displays at libraries and bookstores
- Utilize Reza Aslan's new anthology TABLET & PEN to give future funders and poets and musicians an idea of the richness and power of the literary work over the past century.
- Host experts in Turkish music and literature. The court music and poetry of the Ottoman court was very sophisticated. There are still ensembles that perform this music and the associated songs.
- A transcultural examination of alternative (e.g., mystical) literatures, including Islamic, would be useful (through readings, books, etc.).
- participants in the Sunday discussions contribute to a successive chain of verses (from one email to another) that can be interfaced online.



- Reach out to the Boroughs so that the Illuminated Verses project not become Manhattan-centric.
- Events that are expressly cross-cultural, in which, for example, American poets are reading with poets from the parts of the world we were working with. Local initiatives are crucial, finding out if there are local communities, musicians etc.
- Exchange program taking poets from the states to read abroad, and inviting a touring body of poets to read here, with translators reading translations of the works.
- More discussions around the issue of language, generations, and the ways in which different Muslim populations express themselves; music, poetry and dance/theatre as well film and visual arts
- Use of the ghazal as a genre, and the story of Laila and Majnun as a particular focus, since it's so widely popular in Muslim countries and has a lot in common with Romeo and Juliet.

Suggested Funding Sources:

- Countries in the Islamic world
- Approach local councilpersons and arts organizations in the non-Manhattan boroughs, community centers, in addition to professional Muslim organizations
- Develop a partnership with the Agha Khan Society
- Organizations/ Foundations including: NEA, NEH, Doris Duke and Ford
- Getting local (NYC) communities involved is crucial
- Governmental and public policy funding organizations