Joan Kjaer: This is WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer and we're coming to you from Merge, our new home in downtown Iowa City. On tonight's program, we're joining forces with Hancher, the University of Iowa's renowned performing arts center, to discuss the Embracing Complexity Project and the diversity that exists within Islamic cultures and traditions, ancient and modern, near and far. We'll examine aesthetic, artistic, architectural, and other elements of Islamic expression that have made their way into the global consciousness and we'll learn about the contemporary Muslim experience in Iowa. This will all lead up to a live performance by the musical group Niyaz, whose instruments are around us just now. Their members will talk with us about their music and some of the poetry that inspires so much of it. So, here with me for the first segment of the program are Micah Ariel James, the education manager for Hancher. Nice to have you here.

Micah J.: Thank you.


Chuy Renteria: Hello, hello. Hi, everybody.

Joan Kjaer: And at the far end, we have Dr. Björn Anderson, a faculty member of the University of Iowa's School of Art and Art History. Thank you, Björn.

Björn Anderson: Thank you.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, Micah, I'm going to start with you. And first of all, thanks to you and thanks to Hancher for allowing us to be part of this very big project, Embracing Complexity. This is a project with broad shoulders and lots of moving parts. So, explain to us what Embracing Complexity is all about.

Micah J.: Sure. So, embracing complexity is a Hancher project that is specifically interested in celebrating Islamic art and culture and, basically, throughout a year and half and hopefully longer, we'll be exploring that through various artists who will be coming to Hancher and doing residencies and engaging with the community. This is a project that is a part of the Association of Performing Arts Professionals' Building Bridges project, which is funded through the Doris Duke Charitable Fund for Islamic art.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, Hancher's idea, and obviously the funder's idea, is that there could be more understanding in the world about the diversity within Muslim cultures, the geographical spread of this religion. It's not just in one place in the world, people who are Muslims are not just living in one area. Obviously, here in Iowa, we have many Muslim residents, so you are taking the performers here, in this group, and also throughout the whole project, into schools, to meet with community groups, and so on.

Micah J.: Yeah, so, I love that the project is called Building Bridges. Our particular project is called Embracing Complexity, but the idea behind that is that we are Building Bridges across cultures, across differences, so that we can dispel stereotypes and really just create understanding between different groups. So, we're doing that through the arts because we're Hancher and that's what we do, so I think that works out well.
Joan Kjaer: Many of you will have read the really wonderful commentary that was written and published earlier in the week by Micah regarding this whole project and the sense that people who are some ‘other people’ are not really other people, they’re us and our neighbors.

Micah J. : Right. Exactly, and that’s so important for us to understand, and what better way to understand that than through seeing someone else’s art? Opening up conversations that way, we see, and we understand. We create. We develop empathy around that, which is something that is always extremely important to us and our work.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So let me go down to you Chuy. Your work takes you out into the community very intentionally. You’re an outreach coordinator for Hancher. What have you been doing this week with Niyaz?

Chuy Renteria: What haven’t we been doing? We’ve been doing so much stuff. I’ll start backwards because the week kind of becomes a blur as we are getting everything done, and the members of Niyaz can tell you the same thing, but today, we took a member, Tanya, she’s actually a Whirling Dervish, and we took her and a couple of the musicians and we went to Mann Elementary. It was born out of... because I’m dancer, we tried to have Tanya visit the dance department, but with scheduling, and the dance department has a career week. Instead, we, in the last hour, we’re like, let’s take them to Mann (local elementary school). It was one of those things we weren’t sure if it was going to work, because it was a lot. I don’t know how many grades. It was all the way through sixth grade maybe?


Chuy Renteria: Yeah, and we were talking to Tanya, and they thought it would be 20 students, so when they got there, the whole student body came, and they were ... That was something that Micah and I were interested in, is like, can people whirl for an hour? The thing with Tanya too, which we found out at the very end, is that she used to be a teacher, so she had the ‘you have two eyes and one mouth use your’, like listen more.

Micah J. : Listen twice [crosstalk 00:05:29]

Chuy Renteria: No, it was really, and it’s one of those things where they talked about the idea of mysticism and Sufi mysticism and the practice of whirling, and how it’s a meditation. They asked the students, "Do you guys know what a meditation is?"

More than a couple raised their hands. Tanya asked, "Can you show me?" and they had a couple of students do that.

She was like, "Well, whirling is just meditation for somebody who can’t sit still."

I think that really resonated with the students and they all just started moving. It was amazing, because, even by the end of it, the sixth graders, not all the sixth graders, but a couple of them, were actually working on it too, and like 80, 85% of the kids were whirling by the end of it, like to the very end, so it was really cool.

That’s in my mind because I’m a dancer. Afterwards, Tanya was showing me some of the more advanced steps with the, you know, because as somebody who grew up with the Western style of dancing, modern, hip-hop, ballet, we spot, and so the idea ... I’m like, "Do you guys spot?"
She's like, "No."

When she teaches novices, she has them have their hands up as she's going so you don't ... You just don't even have that idea of spotting.

Besides that, we've done a brown bag lecture series every day this week, which has been very fruitful. We actually have a ... We did a podcast as well, Micah and I, and we have the first one, which is kinda like a, touches base on every single one of the lectures, and it's been everything from Feminism in the East to The Difference between Sufism and Islam. Today was Technology in the Arts, which is really, really, cool. Yeah, so they're all just very, very fruitful conversations.

Micah J.:

It was important to us to make this residency as broad as possible. This residency is kind of kicking off our series of residencies. We'll have several throughout the year, so we said, how young can we get, how old can we get, who can we get in the room so that we can get everybody to be a part of this conversation?

Joan Kjaer:

Wow, no, that sounds absolutely fantastic, and you know, for those of you who are already planning to go to tomorrow night's performance at Hancher Auditorium, you'll see the full effect: the lights, and the ... Just the whole show with the Fourth Light Project. I'm sure that it would have been really fun and informative to hear that conversation today on the arts and technology.

Chuy Renteria:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Joan Kjaer:

Yeah.

Well, we had a little taste of the technological efforts this afternoon as the band was setting up here in the room. As you can see, lots of instruments, lots of work to do, and, it's real treat we're going to have later on when they perform.

Let me go down to you now Björn, and talk a little bit about artistic, cultural traditions that we're trying to place in the time since Islam came along, you know, the seventh century. But go back a little bit further than that, so that you can give us a bit of grounding in where some of these traditions actually came from.

Björn Anderson:

Sure, and thank you so much Joan. I should confess that, as I teach art history classes, especially the survey class, which goes from Paleolithic cave paintings all the way up through Gothic cathedrals, I really have a special link with the Islamic section. I work in Jordan on pre-Islamic art, but I feel like there's a duty I have to demystify and kind of de-foreignize the Islamic world. I think that by putting Islamic art in context, and in conversation with the traditions that kind of contributed to its formation, that really helps me to, I hope, get the students to say, "Hey, this isn't weird and scary. It makes sense."

So that's kind of my preamble going in. I have a couple of slides, oh right, we have them up on the screen in the corner. I realized for the podcast, you can't see the slide, so I'll describe what I can, but as an art historian, it's hard for me to talk without pictures. So, on the screen right now, you can see, of course, the most probably recognizable Islamic structure, the Dome of the Rock. I've placed next to it our own golden dome in Iowa City, which I call the Dome of the Hawk. You'll have to forgive that.
When we think about Islamic art, I think the things that probably come to mind are strange scripts with lots of cursive, and a lot of filling up of space with all sorts of patterns that kind of crisscross, and go and fill every inch ... You know, it's too busy. It's a little frightening.

Also, there are traditions and rituals, which, for a Western audience, may seem unfamiliar. On screen here is a slide of the Kaaba in Mecca, where during the Hajj, pilgrims will circumambulate. They'll walk in circles around the Kaaba. I want to just, kind of, take those, and give a little bit of background on them, and then, maybe we can return to them and say, "Oh, okay, I get it. It makes sense in context."

I start, actually, with, pre-Islamic Arabia, which is, I work in Jordan on a place called Nabataea. You may not know that name, but you may know Petra, the rose red city half as old as time, as the poem goes, with these great rock-cut tombs most famously featured in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade of course.

The inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia, there's a couple features I just want to hit for you. One is that many of their temples have a square podium in the middle, and the idea is that people could walk in circles around that square podium, just like we see at the Kaaba in Mecca. So, there's a tradition that something deeply rooted in Arabian heritage that we can already see six, seven, eight hundred years before Islam. Also, there's a tradition common to a lot of Semitic cultures of not representing the god in human form, so these are actually Nabataean gods. Those of you who can see the screen, you can see that they are blocks of stone, some with an eye or mouth added to them, but these aniconic blocks are common, again, for centuries before the rise of the Islam.

Then, finally, the ceramics, and the pattern of decoration of ceramics, especially in pre-Islamic Arabia, ancient Jordan. They, probably informed by this aniconic tradition, they said, "We don't really like figural ceramics. We don't like gods and heroes like the Greeks would draw on their pots. We like vegetal patterns, plants, things like that, arranged in neat, geometric organization."

That's what we see in later Islamic architecture, so the first point I would just make is that Islamic art is in conversation with its own heritage in the Arabian Peninsula, and there's a lot of background. Now the, second thing I'll just point out, and I have few, a little structure to this, so bear with me, is that, as Islamic art developed proper, it was in response to what was happening in, especially, the Byzantine Christian world. On the screen I have a quote from an Arab historian al-Masudi, who was writing in the tenth century about what was happening in the seventh century, when the caliph, a guy named Abd al-Malik, this is after the death of the prophet Mohammed. He came to Jerusalem, and what did he see? He saw the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and all of the other churches, and their bells were ringing and things like that.

So, I'll read from the screen, Caliph Abd al-Malik sought to build for the Muslims a mosque, a mesjid, that should be unique and a wonder to the world, and in a like manner, is an evident that Caliph Abd al-Malik, seeing the greatness of the Martyrium of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and it's magnificence, was moved, lest it should dazzle the minds of Muslims, so he erected above the Rock, [inaudible 00:13:27]
So, the original reason for building the Dome of the Rock was 'hey, there's all these churches around, let's get in a conversation with them and maybe see if we can upstage them', so the architecture of the Dome of the Rock, if you look at what the structure is, it's an octagon with a drum pierced by windows with a dome on top. That's a really common structure for churches for the previous 300 years or so. On screen here, you can see the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, or, again, the Santa Costanza in Rome. They've got the same kind of plan, and, I think, especially exciting, is right next to Jerusalem, we're talking a couple miles south, is the Church of the Sitting, a Kathisma church where the Virgin Mary took a rest. So, it's an octagonal around a rock that she sat on, right next to Jerusalem, right?

So there's a conversation that early Muslim architects are having with Christian builders, and they say, this octagon, drum, dome thing seems to work for us too, but, not the decorations, because we have this Arabian heritage of aniconic representation, and vegetal pattern, so, if you look at the Dome of the Rock, you see it's covered with the sorts of thing we might expect from that pottery we saw before, something like that. The interior, there's no, obviously, Jesus figure, but there wouldn't be a figure of the Prophet Mohammad either, that's not appropriate, so it's filled with vegetal patterns filling all the space.

Third point, the Byzantine Christian church was a five senses church. There's things you touch. There's things you smell. There's things you taste, things you hear, and of course, things you see. On screen now is a Byzantine Greek church, and it's got a lot of confusing architecture; curvilinear surfaces, linear surfaces, light, shadow, light, shadow. Everything's kind of spinning and revolving around as you look at it, and then you add to that the full experience: smelling the incense, hearing the monks chant, things like that. The end result is that Byzantine Christian architecture was there to sort of overwhelm the senses, and I think, in response to this, early Islamic architects said, "Hey, we want to overwhelm the senses as well, but we're going to do it with a different approach."

Instead what they do is dizzying, confusing architecture. So, if we look at many mosques for example, on screen is a mosque in Spain at Cordoba, it's hard to make out what's structural and what isn't. There's lots and lots of arches, there's lots of ways that the arches are kind of broken up with different colors of paint, or different lobes and things like that, and so, we get confused looking at it, and sort of transported, and our senses are a little bit overwhelmed.

This is seen, of course, famously, at the Alhambra in Spain, where the arches are broken up with little lobes all around them to further mask and hide the structural elements of them, and then they're covered in all sorts of decorations. Then, in the interior, we have, on screen here, it's a dome on a drum, but it doesn't look like it, because there's little stalactites that are hanging down from the ceiling and catching the light and reflecting the light and creating shadows, and making it very hard, again, to see what's structural and what isn't. So, I think, much of what's kind of apparently confusing when we look at Islamic art, it's so busy, is there as a response to this Byzantine tradition to overwhelm our senses with complexity, and by extension, of course, the complexity of god.
And then, with text, the other thing, and this I want to just highlight because we can ... I think it serves as a reminder that Islamic art is in conversation the other way. The Islamic scribes were the first ones in the West to really deal with calligraphy. The Greeks and the Romans and the church, the asled, “Was it legible?” That's all that mattered, and early Islamic script is fairly along that same line, but quickly, the Islamic scribes said, "This the word of god, and it should be beautiful. That adds value to the text."

And, so, they're the ones who developed calligraphy and then it goes back to the West, and then we get into these 12th, 13th century manuscript illuminations, and Book of Kells and things like that, but that is an independent Islamic development, which goes both ways, so the point is, it's a two way street. People are not necessarily influencing one another, but they're having conversations and learning from one another, which I think is really important.

So, in sum, then, we can look, and I've got on screen here, this is the dome of a mosque in Turkey, and you can see, kind of, the combination of all these elements. The architecture, where you have a dome on a drum that's very confusing. It's broken up. And then, we have script, which is decorating the interior of the dome, and it's got medallions of script on screen, and all kids of interlocking vegetal patterns arranged in interesting geometric ways, and it makes sense. That is what I hope to have convinced you of. It's not that weird and foreign when we see how it came about, and the kinds of priorities that were important to these architects and artists as they develop things.

So, here's a mihrab in a mosque in Iran, and you can see script and vegetal patterns and all sorts of things like that as well, and even as far away as India, these same traditions persist hundreds of years later, throughout the history of Islamic art.

Joan Kjaer: Wow. Well, thank you very much for walking us through that. That is really great. Then, my follow up question is, with so many renowned buildings, pieces of architecture... so many parts of the world, these days, have things we can see that clearly drew from some of these patterns, some of these styles, you know, arched windows, maybe the arch with the point, beautiful use of mosaics in many different places. I mean, I think, just buildings from the last two, three hundred years, architects have clearly admired greatly this work and have tried to have this conversation, incorporate some of those elements into more modern pieces.

Björn Anderson: Absolutely, and you mention the pointed arches. Gothic architecture, the great soaring churches of France, exist because of the pointed arch, which is an Islamic development, so absolutely, there was a conversation happening in the Islamic traditions of tile work as well, really were very influential throughout the middle Ages and onward.

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and, you know, these days, all of us have so much access to magazines, to textbooks, to obviously anything that lives on the internet. We have, all of us in this room, seen these kinds of shapes and styles and tiles and so on pass before us in one way or another throughout our lifetimes, but if you could imagine, 800 years ago, 500 years ago, when that sort of printed material or other mediated material wasn't available to you, and you
walk into one of these spaces as someone who had never seen it before, it must have been incredibly awe inspiring.

Björn Anderson: Absolutely. I think it’s a feeling that you can really only get by seeing some of these places in person. The first time I stood inside Amiens Cathedral, which is not an Islamic building, but it’s 18 stories tall inside, right, and you think, "Wow, I could fit the tallest buildings in Iowa City inside this church."

The Dome of the Rock, or, here on screen is Qutb Minar in Delhi, these are really big, impressive structures, and would absolutely overwhelm, again, your senses as you take them in.

Joan Kjaer: Well, if we have a couple more minutes, I think we’d all be interested to hear a little bit about some of the work you’re doing in and around Petra. I know you work with digital imaginings, are they? Or digital renderings of things that no longer exist in complete form?

Björn Anderson: Yeah. Okay, this is a little different topic, but I’m happy to get into it. So, I work in Petra, which is not where the Holy Grail was buried although Indiana Jones ... People are always disappointed to find out that this tomb is actually only about 10 feet deep inside, there’s no booby traps and things. You have to see the movie, or that is going to be meaningless. But, the site has something like 650 rock-cut tombs. We know one of them, but they’re all over, and I’ve been interested in the last couple of years. One of them has a really weathered sculpture on the side of it. Using a technique called photogrammetry, where basically, you take a thousand photos of it and feed it into a computer that does a lot of math, you can spit out these 3D images. I’m working on trying to play with the 3D images to see if I can recover what this statue may have been by playing around with light, and kind of volume and things like that, since it’s so badly worn. That’s been an interesting process.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Very cool. Again, thinking back to what you told us about, Chuy, with art and technology, different kind of use of technology here?

Micah J.: In about a week, just over a week, we have G. Willow Wilson on October 9th, I believe, giving a lecture. She is the author of the Ms. Marvel comic book series, and also of our One Community, One Book book, Butterfly Mosque, here in Iowa City. Then we have, in the spring, Amir ElSaffar and Rivers of Sound, which is like a 17 piece orchestra, and we have Feathers of Fire, which is another extremely visual work of theater that is puppet, like a paper puppet sort of thing.

Chuy Renteria: That Niyaz ...

Micah J.: That shadow puppet that Niyaz did the music for, so you'll get to hear them again. And then, we have Zeshan Bagewadi and the Transistors. They'll be doing two free performances, one as a part of the Friday night concert series, and then one at Hancher, so it'll be going on all year, and we'll be doing residencies around all of them.

Joan Kjaer: Right, and then, there'll be news about next season later in the year I guess?

Micah J.: Absolutely yes, yeah.

So, we'll have on our podcast, Hancher Presents, on our website, anywhere, you can find that information throughout the year.
Chuy Renteria: That's something that we have had a lot of conversations about because, right now, we're programming for the next season, and something that we're trying to think about is we've had lots of discussions with community partners and different people, and like, the idea of how vast Islamic art is, or the Muslim world, and how do we, within the frame of year and a half, even begin to touch on what that means? So, for us, it's like, the idea of, and we've had this conversation, we haven't had any artists from Indonesia, which has the biggest Muslim population in the world, so, like, what can we pick, and it's ... It creates stimulating conversations, because we're like, how do we choose, because we have like three or four artists that we're going to try to get for next semester. It makes it so it becomes a very exciting idea of what we can choose and how can we best represent with what we have.

Joan Kjaer: Yeah.

Micah J.: Yeah, and how can we stay true to that Embracing Complexity?

Joan Kjaer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you so much for talking to us about it, Micah Ariel James, and Chuy Renteria, and Björn Anderson. Thank you very, very much.

In the next part of WorldCanvass, we're going to discuss contemporary Muslim experiences, both here in Iowa, and a little bit further out in the world. I want to thank all of you who are here with us in the room for coming today. Stick with us. In just a minute, we're going to change guests, and we'll start with the second part of WorldCanvass.

WorldCanvass is available as a podcast, on iTunes, on the Public Radio Exchange, and the International Programs Website. We'll get today's program up just as soon as we can, so thank you for joining us, and that's it for this segment!