

By a Wing and a Tale: Authenticating the Archive in Mohamad-Said Baalbaki's *Al Buraq I The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount*

Erin McLeod

Volume 38, Number 1, 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066667ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066667ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

McLeod, E. (2013). By a Wing and a Tale: Authenticating the Archive in Mohamad-Said Baalbaki's *Al Buraq I The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount*. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 38(1), 97–105. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066667ar>

Article abstract

Al Buraq I : The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount de Mohamad-Said Baalbaki est le premier volet d'une trilogie qui interroge les pratiques archivistiques et muséales qui prennent forme à partir d'« histoires fortuites ». L'installation complexe de Baalbaki révèle une découverte exceptionnelle : en 1914, l'archéologue allemand Werner von Königswald déterrait d'un cimetière islamique à Jérusalem des objets surprenants, parmi lesquels les os d'une créature ressemblant à un cheval ailé. Von Königswald engagea ses collègues, le paléontologue Hans Wellenhover et l'ornithologue Heinrich Ralph Glücksvogel, dans de nombreux débats scientifiques et théoriques. Ces os avaient-ils appartenu à un cheval difforme ? à un oiseau géant ? ou peut-être même à la créature mythique Al Buraq, le cheval ailé qui guida le Prophète Mahomet ? *Al Buraq I* met en scène la correspondance et divers objets de curiosité liés à l'excavation, ainsi qu'une réplique du squelette (les vrais os disparurent pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale). Si sa réception illustre l'héritage d'un mélange culturel qui n'est que trop réel, *Al Buraq I* est en fait une fabrication totale. L'exposition de l'animal fantastique dans une vitrine classique d'histoire naturelle et les débats subséquents soulèvent des questions centrales quant à la façon dont art et artefact sont construits dans le musée. Les objets d'art « posant » comme des artefacts archéologiques et archivistiques jouent entre le réel et le mythique, entre l'authentique et la contre-façon. Par cette orchestration d'objets, Baalbaki invoque des histoires imaginées qui, par le biais de la représentation muséale, prétendent à l'authenticité. Nous considérons ici les rôles croisés que jouent l'institution, l'artiste et le spectateur dans l'authentification de l'archive.

By a Wing and a Tale: Authenticating the Archive in Mohamad-Said Baalbaki's *Al Buraq I The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount*

ERIN MCLEOD, WESTERN UNIVERSITY

2012 UAAC conference graduate student essay award/Prix pour le meilleur essai par un(e) doctorant(e) au congrès de l'AAUC de 2012

Résumé

Al Buraq I: The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount de Mohamad-Said Baalbaki est le premier volet d'une trilogie qui interroge les pratiques archivistiques et muséales qui prennent forme à partir d'« histoires fortuites ». L'installation complexe de Baalbaki révèle une découverte exceptionnelle : en 1914, l'archéologue allemand Werner von Königswald déterrait d'un cimetière islamique à Jérusalem des objets surprenants, parmi lesquels les os d'une créature ressemblant à un cheval ailé. Von Königswald engagea ses collègues, le paléontologue Hans Wellenhover et l'ornithologue Heinrich Ralph Glücksvogel, dans de nombreux débats scientifiques et théoriques. Ces os avaient-ils appartenu à un cheval difforme ? à un oiseau géant ? ou peut-être même à la créature mythique Al Buraq, le cheval ailé qui guida le Prophète Mahomet ? *Al Buraq I* met en scène la correspondance et divers objets de curiosité liés à l'excavation, ainsi qu'une réplique du squelette (les vrais os disparurent pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale). Si sa réception illustre l'héritage d'un mélange culturel qui n'est que trop réel, *Al Buraq I* est en fait une fabrication totale. L'exposition de l'animal fantastique dans une vitrine classique d'histoire naturelle et les débats subséquents soulèvent des questions centrales quant à la façon dont art et artefact sont construits dans le musée. Les objets d'art « posant » comme des artefacts archéologiques et archivistiques jouent entre le réel et le mythique, entre l'authentique et la contre-façon. Par cette orchestration d'objets, Baalbaki invoque des histoires imaginées qui, par le biais de la représentation muséale, prétendent à l'authenticité. Nous considérons ici les rôles croisés que jouent l'institution, l'artiste et le spectateur dans l'authentification de l'archive.

A sacred site. An archaeological dig. A curious find. Myth meets history, and war, unearthing more questions than answers. Artist Mohamad-Said Baalbaki's ambitious *Al Buraq* trilogy interrogates archive, museum, and media representations shaped by what he describes as “haphazard histories.”¹ Baalbaki's trilogy isolates an Islamic myth, that of the famous creature Al Buraq, within Western museological display and subjects all elements to a fictive historic framework set in the early twentieth century at the height of “European colonial ambitions in the Arab world.”² What Baalbaki reveals in his work is how “reality is dependent on power,” on cultural convention, and on the “context of reception.”³ Despite its period setting and authentic-looking details, the *Al Buraq* trilogy effectively highlights a continuing and contemporary story of geopolitical instability in the Middle East, of which the now Berlin-based Lebanese artist has first-hand experience. At the heart of the *Al Buraq* trilogy lies this sense of instability, as well as the intermingling of the categories of “original, reproduction, and forgery” and the roles played by the artist, the institution, the visitor—and one very strange animal—in “distinguishing those categories.”⁴

Baalbaki's first installment of the trilogy, *Al Buraq I The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount* (fig. 1), debuted at the Maqam Gallery in Beirut in late 2010.⁵ It introduces a most fantastic story: in 1914, on the eve of World War I, German archaeologist Werner von Königswald was excavating an Islamic burial ground near the Temple Mount at the base of Jerusalem's Western Wall. Upon digging up an old battered suitcase Dr. von Königswald discovered within what appeared to be the skeletal remains of a large creature with two bony protrusions sprouting from its spine. As the curious find lay beyond his field of knowledge, von Königswald sent it to Germany and enlisted the

expertise of colleagues. Professor Hans Wellenhofer, a paleontologist in Berlin, took a staunch and epistemological approach; he identified the bones as belonging to a malformed horse and busily collected records of other such disfigurements to substantiate his theory. At the behest of von Königswald he cast plaster copies of the bones and sent those along to ornithologist Heinrich Ralph Glücksvogel in Munich. An altogether flightier character, Dr Glücksvogel envisioned some giant flying creature—a horse *perhaps*—but most certainly winged, like the Pegasus of classical Greek myth. Scientific and theoretical debates buzzed between the men as their research inventories accumulated. Was this a malformed horse? A gigantic bird? Or both?⁶ The specificity of the discovery site also weighed upon their deliberations: the Western Wall or Wailing Wall is also known as the Buraq Wall in the Muslim faith. Could the bones then possibly belong to the mythic Al Buraq, the human-headed winged horse of Islamic lore who is said to have guided the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century from Mecca to Jerusalem and back again?⁷ How is it that these bones were buried in an old suitcase, and who could have placed them at this sacred, albeit contested, site? What are the implications—historical, cultural, spiritual, scientific, geographic—of this exceptional find? These questions remain unanswerable, left for the viewers to process from their own personal orientations.

Al Buraq I The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount seemingly reactivates a nearly century-old archive of correspondence, research, and photographs surrounding von Königswald's archaeological dig, as well as related curios and even an impressive replica skeleton of the winged beast. The narrative however reveals that the “original” bones—and the scientists—were lost during the two world wars and bombing of Berlin: this is where



Figure 1. Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, *Skeleton of a winged horse "Pegasus,"* 2008. Ceramic and brass mounted on a wood base, 43 x 72 x 50 cm. Werkbundarchiv – Museum der Dinge, Berlin (Photo: Armin Herrmann).

Baalbaki's fictive title: "Reconstruction of a skeleton of a winged horse "Pegasus" after the notes of Professor Glücksvogel by Gustav Horn. This reconstruction was executed at the occasion of the National Taxidermy Exhibition in Munich, 1924. Collection: Museum of Natural History, Bavaria."

the archive abruptly ends although the story undoubtedly continues. Most interesting to me is how the exhibit's historical facts and falsities inhabit (and inhibit) the unanswerable questions emerging through the archive. On the one hand, history as a concept becomes unreliable through an unfinished archive with questionable origins; on the other, an ancient myth is made plausible through the materialization of *Al Buraq* seemingly "rebuilt" in skeletal form and substantiated by expert hypotheses... which also happen to be fictionalized!

As if frozen in another time, *Al Buraq I* is displayed in the material finery of an elaborate antique wood and glass specimen cabinet, lined in rich red velvet, just as it could have been during the 1920s and 1930s at the Berlin Museum of Natural History where Dr. Wellenhofer worked (fig. 2). Why would this display

be exhibited in such a way in a contemporary Beirut gallery? For visitors to this exhibit, the fact of its historical fabrication may come as less of a surprise than the effects of its display. Part of the value of an exhibit like *Al Buraq* lies in the way in which its cultural contingency destabilizes its purported historical ground in Western museological practice. East meets West in the narrative, while West meets East in the physical exhibit on show in a Beirut gallery. The period display *in play* with the skeleton provides a rich material backdrop that grounds the story in reality, but it also acts as an improvisational prop for more ethereal, fantastical play by a visitor who brings his or her own cultural perspective(s) to the world of *Al Buraq I*. Charles Garoian would identify such a visitor as a "critical participant" who, engaged in dialogue with the museum, allows "new cultural myths" to be performed.⁸



Figure 2. Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, *Skeleton of a winged horse "Pegasus,"* 2008. Ceramic and brass mounted on a wood base, 43 x 72 x 50 cm. Werkbundarchiv – Museum der Dinge, Berlin (Photo: Armin Herrmann).

Baalbaki's fictive title: "Reconstruction of a skeleton of a winged horse "Pegasus" after the notes of Professor Glücksvogel by Gustav Horn. This reconstruction was executed at the occasion of the National Taxidermy Exhibition in Munich, 1924. Collection: Museum of Natural History, Bavaria."

Having grown up amidst the civil war in Beirut, Baalbaki invests his work with legacies of instability and injustices. Further influenced by his art education in Berlin, he also plays between themes of re(dis)covery and relocation. The *Al Buraq* trilogy is in no small sense a merging of Baalbaki's parallel worlds. It invokes a precedence of institutional interventions harkening back to earlier (Western) art practices of the 1960s and 1990s; European postwar artists Joseph Beuys and Christian Boltanski, for example, fictionalized their own biographies as artistic rewritings of past traumas.⁹ In other words, there is a history of artists messing with history, artists who have produced works of art that memorialize as much their *struggle to reconcile* their immediate history(ies), as that history in and of itself. This contextual convolution was further exacerbated by artists' engage-

ments with materiality in an attempt to grasp immaterial loss, which, in the conceptual movement of the 1960s, moved beyond Freud's modernist lexicon of the transposition of the ego from a (lost) body/object to a new one.¹⁰

In the *Al Buraq* installation the visitor's grasp of the transposition between art object and artifact object may waver, may find no finality at all. Some visitors may not partake of every didactic panel and narrative clue in *Al Buraq* (such as Dr. Glücksvogel's name translating to "Lucky Bird") and will come away from Baalbaki's exhibit believing the *Al Buraq* archive to be historically genuine, while at the same time asking, *how can this be?*¹¹ In the *Al Buraq* trilogy, the appropriation of (Western) natural history modes of exhibition, the display of a fantastical skeletal beast, and the accompanying authorial and scientific

debates raise critical questions about institutional constructions of art and artifact. Art objects posing as archaeological artifacts or even specimens play between reality and myth, authenticity and forgery. Once revealed to be art (i.e., props in a fictive archive) these specimens or artifacts implicate the viewer who invests in the plausibility of these constructions, whether naively or through a willing suspension of disbelief within the immersive staged space of the exhibit. Through an orchestration of objects and the main attraction of the skeleton, Baalbaki invokes imagined histories. The museological display conjures up a space of pause or transition where the “presence” of the absent scientists is felt, and felt authentically.

This reflective pause is crucial to the world of *Al Buraq*, as the visitor is faced not only with the force, or push, of a history legitimized by Western science, but also with the imaginative pull of the Buraq (cultural) myth, enlivened by its proposed skeletal body. These are competing authorities: historicity is actualized through the tangible bone objects presented within the institutional space, and myth is validated by its cultural endurance despite the distorting lens of another culture. Myth then has an invitational power, providing access into more detached historical settings, something educator Geraldine Dimondstein calls a “cultural kinship” but one that must be continuously redefined. Myth “lives on the thin edge between fantasy and reality”¹² and is therefore ever open to renewal. History and myth also work in exchange in *Al Buraq I*, where cultural myth gains authority through the tangible evidence of the mysterious beast’s (reproduced) bones, while the scientific theorizing of the German experts, one leaning towards malformation and the other towards myth as the official explanation, are exposed as culturally conditioned and perpetually debatable.¹³

For the visitor to the *Al Buraq* exhibit this engagement in debate does not require an investment in the objects as historically accurate (as history is called into question), but rather requires the visitor to invest in the potential of the impressive skeleton to give credence to the (fictive) experts’ debated theories, or to add “value to wishful fantasy.”¹⁴ The staged historical museum display of the *Al Buraq* trilogy, interpretable through contemporary galleries located in both the East and West, provides the conceptual space for visitors’ narrative explorations. The experience of the exhibit, not the supposed evidence, is the key. As David Lowenthal states, fabrication “destroys nothing, not even faith when the fake is found out.”¹⁵ Lowenthal suggests the fabrication of heritage, in the “bad sense” of “telling lies and tall tales,” is an entirely modern conception based on the desire “to promote the power of the empire” by investing divinity in kingship, and adding sanctity to one’s legacy.¹⁶ The *Al Buraq* trilogy, set amidst an era of tremendous political fluctuation in the East and West—the fall of the Ottoman Empire,

world wars, British infiltration in the Middle East—, unravels this desire. Evoking Carol Duncan’s notion of the museum as ritualized space, *Al Buraq* again concentrates the problematic of this “sanctified legacy” in its fabricated museum staging. This fabrication of heritage has thus informed the interpretation of cultural objects, which, as Lowenthal continues, became “exemplar of other sacred translations—fragments of bone and dust that were easy to fake, easy to steal, easy to move, easy to reassign to new saints as needed.”¹⁷ In this way heritage is differentiated from history, which seeks to “convince by truth” and aligns more closely with an idea of myth as an “imaginative record,”¹⁸ which the skeleton literally embodies. Lowenthal suggests there is a complementarity between fact and fiction; this allows museum visitors to “locate (our) own private stories within a larger collective narrative” that lends “cosmic meaning to our own quests.”¹⁹

With respect to the era of the early twentieth century in which the *Al Buraq* narrative is primarily set, the natural history museum is a site which conflates the seeming polarities of fact and fiction, or history and myth, particularly through the study and display of anomalous specimens. Teratology, the study of animal malformation, is a branch of comparative anatomy made popular at the turn of the century in Europe, notably Germany, France, and Britain. In 1900 anthropologist D.S. Lamb recognized how easily culture could fill in for the indeterminacies of science: “To see the monster, and deify or demonize him, and set him up in the classic pantheon and give him some realm to rule over, suggests a process of involution instead of evolution.”²⁰ In line with the character of Wellenhofer, Lamb was inferring that this involution was a regressive movement, as myths “in their origin [are] not so much myth as hyperbolic history.”²¹ In a strikingly appropriate turn for the narrative of *Al Buraq I*, Lamb also recognized a certain conscious logic in the imaginative reach to interpret what cannot be empirically explained:

Wisdom comes from the brain, so Minerva springs full-armed from the head of Jupiter. In that dawning self-consciousness which led to crude introspection the power of thought was a marvel. It bore one strongly from earth to heaven, and that with infinite swiftness. What else could it be but a winged horse, Pegasus? No wonder he was associated with exploits of danger as well as with poets.²²

Science historian Evelleen Richards explores the development of “transcendental anatomy” within Victorian scientific naturalism and identifies its distortion through the “positivist historiography of dominant Darwinians” of the late nineteenth century.²³ She considers how these morphologies have been further distorted through social and institutional factors that have bestowed immense authoritative power, not to the anomalous body (at all), but to its classificatory representations, or



Figure 3. Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, *The Königswald Collection*, 2010. Maqam Galerie, Beirut. (Photo: Mohamad-Said Baalbaki).

Baalbaki's fictive title: "*The Königswald Collection*."

illustrative othering. This illustrative othering is particularly powerful in the *Al Buraq* exhibit, as the masterful quality of the scientific drawings of the debated skeletal beast offers a disquieting aesthetic aside. A British medical journal from 1891 substantiates Richards's assertion: "Without illustrations the value of any systematic work on teratology would be slight."²⁴ The *Al Buraq* archive incorporates several found images of the mythic Al Buraq, but the detailed illustrations presumably created by the scientists are notably only of the skeleton, not of Al Buraq as a fully envisioned figure. These illustrations thus serve to bolster the empirical existence of the bones, while leaving the rest of their living embodiment ambiguous.

In the early twentieth century many questions were arising surrounding potential linkages between biological malformation and the persistence (transcendence?) of cultural myths. A 1902 article entitled "Mythology and Teratology," for instance, noted,

It would be a most interesting line of investigation to apply this principle of selection to the mythologies of other nations...especially to those of the East... The results might be of unexpected service in clearing up moot points in comparative mythology and racial folklore. At any rate, if some even of these speculations turn out to be true, it may be said *Saepe visae formae Deorum*.²⁵

If the creature discovered by von Königswald *was* more than an unfortunately formed equine, how does the fantastical figure of Al Buraq, with the body of a horse, the wings of a bird, and the head of a human fit into a teratological framework? Would this human-headed mount be classifiable as human or as animal? Garoian employs Roland Barthes's "metaphoric association between the human brain and the institution of the museum" to express a "double-meaning," where the human

brain is both an object and a memory repository for objects.²⁶ Barthes “parodies Cartesian disembodiment by exposing the absurdity of disconnecting the brain’s and museum’s intellectual operations from the larger contexts of the human body and the body politic.”²⁷ The figure of Al Buraq, as a composite creature serving multiple purposes in Baalbaki’s narrative, evocatively extends the mind/body paradox into myth and fantasy. Ali A. Mazrui explains that historically few Muslims would “blaspheme” by creating an image “of the Prophet Muhammad himself. But what about al-Buraq...?” Muslim artists “have not always resisted the temptation of trying to represent Islam’s

ultimate ‘flying horse.’ Was al-Buraq a bridge between Mecca and Jerusalem or between heaven and earth?”²⁸ For Baalbaki, the figure of Al Buraq is an amalgamation of human, bird, and animal parts, but also the embodied bridge between Western and Islamic ideologies, or cultural “authenticities,”²⁹ where art and artifact, history and myth, reality and fiction, conceptually merge into the activities of collecting and archiving. Al Buraq, conceived as it is through the archive, also responds to the “re-conceiving” after the 1920s of the “modern states in the Middle East from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire.”³⁰

Notably, the recurring motif of the suitcase in Baalbaki’s work symbolizes “immigration and departing” but also “the decision to stay and settle.”³¹ This instability reflects Al Buraq’s oft disputed journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and back again. If Al Buraq returned to Mecca, why were the bones found where they were... in a suitcase no less?³² Has Al Buraq returned to (re)claim a Muslim site that has been most hotly disputed in modern history between Jewish and Palestinian groups?³³ Such questions speak as much of contemporary contestations of the sacred wall site as of ancient ones, while interjecting a colonial (and confounding) attempt to classify a Middle Eastern myth within Western epistemological parameters, namely, the specimen object displayed, as if frozen in time in the afterlife of the museum. Baalbaki seeks to question past-to-present representations as they are simulated and generalized within the museum environment. And of his audience, I impart Garoian’s suggestion, wherein “by performing the museum, viewers challenge the museum’s monologic practices through the discourse of their memories and cultural histories, thereby (re)introducing narrative content that would otherwise remain ignored.”³⁴ The visitor must recognize his or her participation in the making of meaning within Baalbaki’s museum-within-a-museum space, and once this complicity is fully acknowledged, art overcomes the artifact; the two no longer operate as distinct entities. Self-consciousness becomes the visitor’s primary memory of this kind of engagement, which overtakes the fiction of the narrative, pushing the art experience into the realm, potentially, of political, critical agency. This revelation extends all the *what if* possibilities of the fictive narrative into the broader institutional spaces of the museum; authenticity becomes contingent on “cultural codes,” and less conclusive when “works of art represent the potential to dialogue with history.”³⁵

So it is that *Al Buraq I* presented an ancient Islamic myth through the lens of early twentieth-century Western science in the context of a contemporary Beirut gallery. *Al Buraq II Chimerical Kingdoms* however rearranges these perspectives. Shown at the Georg-Kolbe-Museum in Berlin in the spring of 2011, *Al Buraq II* begins to unravel not the epistemological improbability of a human-headed horse, but rather the authenticity of the archive and the reliability of the museum. In 1920 the



Figure 4. Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, *Copy of shoulder blade (Scapula) restored, circa 1916-1918*, 2010. Maqam Galerie, Beirut (Photo: Mohamad-Said Baalbaki).

Baalbaki’s fictive title: “*Copy of shoulder blade (Scapula) restored, circa 1916-1918*. In the framework of cooperation between Prussia and the Ottoman Empire, the Turks made copies of important archaeological findings excavated by German archaeologists on the Ottoman territories. Mehmed V gilded them and preserved them in his palace until his death. Collection: Museum of Turkish national History, Istanbul.”



Figure 5. Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, *Skeleton of Al Burak*, 2011. Ceramic, papier-mâché and brass mounted on a wood base, 62 x 65 x 15 cm. Werkbundarchiv – Museum der Dinge, Berlin (Photo: Armin Herrmann).

Baalbaki's fictive title: "The reconstruction of the skeleton of Al Buraq was produced by the taxidermist, James Tyler, who worked at the Natural History Museum, London. (ca. 1920)."

British government commissioned the Museum of Natural History (London) to prepare a Buraq display for presentation to Hussein bin Ali, emir of Mecca and leader of the Arab Revolt, in thanks for the Arab-British cooperation during the First World War. It was to symbolize the emir's dream of uniting Mecca and Jerusalem, but by 1921 the emir and the British government were at odds and the Buraq project was discontinued.³⁶ Again displayed in a Western historical mode, *Chimerical Kingdoms* carries the story on through World War II, after the archive was abruptly silenced through the deaths of the scientists and the destruction of the "original" bones (fig. 3, 4 and 5). Allied bombing damaged much of the Berlin Museum of Natural History, but much of the correspondence and research documents of von Königswald, Wellenhofer, and Glücksvogel were amazingly salvaged along with the suitcase that had once contained

the bones at the base of the Buraq Wall.³⁷ The materials were donated to the Natural History Museum in Beirut in the 1940s and later moved to the National Museum of Beirut,³⁸ where (ironically) they were thought to be safest during the city's increased social unrest of the 1950s.³⁹ By 1976, however, as the museum site literally became the demarcation point between warring factions during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), the *Al Buraq* archive—whether forgotten, looted, vandalized, or cemented over—could not be traced.⁴⁰ And yet... *Al Buraq I* and *II* have come to light, while the final installment of the trilogy, *Al Buraq III The Exhibition that Never Took Place*, is still to take place, promising to bring "the story of the professors and the creature they studied to an end."⁴¹ I return briefly to Lamb's hundred-year-old notion of involution, as a kind of detrimental bodily enfolding, or malforming, which sits in seeming contrast

with the modern mode of evolutionary progress hailed in traditional natural history displays. Within the *Al Buraq* narrative, the natural history museum operates only as a conceptual site: through its destruction, it is denied its material history, and thus its reliability and authenticity, and it becomes another casualty in Baalbaki's epic story. Despite, or perhaps in spite of, this historical entropy, the Al Buraq myth prevails, ever adaptable and applicable where history is otherwise contested.

The *afterlife effect* of the museum, though once intended to define a culture historically by its reduction to an object, and/or nature by its reduction to a specimen, also suggests a transformative potential dependent upon the visitor's varied approximations. This potential is efficacious in the environment (albeit staged) of the natural history museum. By 1922 prominent scientists such as Walter Libby understood the evocative, synecdochic power of the object specimen to unleash one's "scientific imagination."⁴² The visitor might expect a sensory engagement with a tactile object but may be less conscious of the conceptual encounters where an object or specimen "has value," as Libby wrote, "not as representing an individual but as symbolizing a group (and for a group). Each concrete object/specimen, like a word in a catalogue, serves to recall a concept."⁴³ This concept, even when empirically framed, is perpetually vulnerable to the cultural inflections of the museum's institutional ideologies, from traditional modes of display to contemporary ones, and now to virtual modes of museum access, which become significant methods of partaking in Baalbaki's trilogy, especially for those lacking the capacity to follow his exhibits across cities and countries.

Culture, even as it is translated through the historical terms of the museum, is fluid and transformative and is always open to new social enactments. In 1930 Georges Bataille enjoined us to "realize that the halls and art objects are but the container, whose content is formed by the visitors."⁴⁴ Similar to Carol Duncan, Charles Garoian believes that it is "within the liminal, contingent, and ephemeral spaces" of an "embodied pedagogy" that new museum myths are performed.⁴⁵ In this way Baalbaki's unfinished archive acts as a never-ending story.⁴⁶ The visitor must also be activated in this process of authenticating the archive, because "to reshape is as vital as to preserve."⁴⁷ Of the era encapsulated within the *Al Buraq* trilogy Baalbaki has said, "The colonial powers offered us chimerical kingdoms, countries that were fake, that didn't exist. The history is haphazard, unstable."⁴⁸ When this instability is refocused as a strategy for critiquing museum contexts, the narrative conflict of "malformation or myth"⁴⁹ holds ever promising possibilities.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper appeared in *Museums, Marginality and the Mainstream*, ed. Jeffrey Barbeau, Lynda Jessup, and Kirsty Robertson, 2012 (<http://issuu.com/myuglyswearer/docs/mmm>).

- 1 Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, quoted in Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy," *The National*, 7 January 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/mohamad-said-baalbaki-flights-of-fantasy#full>.
- 2 Charlotte Bank, "The Museum Revisited: Knowledge, Authenticity and Forgery in Two Exhibitions by Leila Pazooki and Mohamad Said Baalbaki," *zakharif*, 7 May 2011, <http://zakharifblog.wordpress.com/2011/05/07/the-museum-revisited/>.
- 3 Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, "Mohamad-Said Baalbaki," Universität der Künste Berlin, Graduiertenschule, 2008–09, <http://gs.udk-berlin.de/en/stipendiaten/mohamad-said-baalbaki/>
- 4 NadineK., "AlBuraq, The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount," *Beirut Night Life*, 18 November 2010, <http://www.beirutnightlife.com/lifestyle/around-town/al-burak-the-prophets-human-headed-mount/>.
- 5 The Maqam Gallery closed after an extended run of the *Al Buraq I The Prophet's Human-Headed Mount* due to a rise in rent at its Saifi Village storefront location just as Beirut's art scene was experiencing a boom. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "A Bouquet of New Spaces and Work," *The Daily Star*, 27 December 2011, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2011/Dec-27/157973-a-bouquet-of-new-spaces-and-work.aspx#axzz2RhBt2Vyg>; and 5 January 2012.
- 6 Wilson-Goldie, "Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy." See also "Museumsbauhütte. Zwölf künstlerische Museen und Museumsentwürfe" (Museum Building Workshop, Twelve Art Museums and Museum Designs), exh. cat., Werkbundarchiv – Museum der Dinge / The Museum of Things (Berlin, 2008–09), http://www.museumderdinge.de/z_files/Museumsbauhuetten-Booklet.pdf, 28–30.
- 7 A description of Al Buraq is found in Volume 5, Book 58, Number 227, Hadith.
- 8 Charles R. Garoian, "Performing the Museum," *Studies in Art Education* 42, 3 (Spring 2001), 235.
- 9 Joseph Beuys's use of ritual practices and his performances of *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) are notable with respect to Baalbaki's ethos. Christian Boltanski's *Monument* series of photograph shrines in the 1990s is also informative to the contemporary practice of falsifying memory.
- 10 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), 584–89.
- 11 Wilson-Goldie, "Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy."
- 12 Geraldine Dimondstein, "Mythology Is Not a Child's Fairy Tale; It's a True Inner Meaning of an Event: Discovering Cultural Kinship through Metaphoric Connections," *Art Education* 45, 3 (May 1992), 50.

- 13 “Museumsbauhütte.”
- 14 David Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” *History and Memory* 10, 1 (Spring 1998), 6.
- 15 Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 6.
- 16 Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 6.
- 17 Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 6.
- 18 Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 14, 17.
- 19 Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 18.
- 20 D.S. Lamb, “Mythical Monsters,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 2, 2 (April–June 1900), 286.
- 21 Lamb, “Mythical Monsters,” 288.
- 22 Lamb, “Mythical Monsters,” 288–89.
- 23 Evelleen Richards, “The ‘Moral Anatomy’ of Robert Knox: The Interplay between Biological and Social Thought in Victorian Scientific Naturalism,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 22, 3 (Autumn 1989), 376.
- 24 “Monsters And Teratology,” *The British Medical Journal* 2, 1599 (22 August 1891), 441.
- 25 *Saepe visae formae Deorum* loosely translates as “the shapes of the gods often seen.” “Mythology And Teratology,” *The British Medical Journal* 1, 2150 (15 March 1902), 672.
- 26 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 234.
- 27 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 234.
- 28 Ali A. Mazrui, “Islam and African Art: Stimulus or Stumbling Block?” *African Arts* 27, 1, Memorial to John Povey (January 1994), 56.
- 29 Baalbaki, “Mohamad-Said Baalbaki.”
- 30 Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Maqam Art Gallery,” *Artforum* 49, 7 (March 2011), 286–87.
- 31 Lulwa Shalhoub, “The Suitcase: Baal’s Sense of an Ending,” *Arab News*, 12 October 2011, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/394431>.
- 32 Wilson-Goldie writes, “In the Quarnic text itself, the story is as spare as it is vague.... The details about the winged steed and the wall come from the supplemental narratives of the hadith and accounts of the Prophet’s father-in-law, Abu Bakr.” Wilson-Goldie, “Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy.”
- 33 Abraham Cooper and Yitzchok Adlerstein, “Who’s [sic] Wall Is It, Anyway? Well, Here Are Some Facts,” *Jewish Exponent*; 30 December 2010, 229, 13; *Ethnic News Watch*, 15.
- 34 Garoian, quoted in Vera Frenkel, “A Place for Uncertainty: Towards a New Kind of Museum,” in *Museums After Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*, ed. Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans (Malden, MA, 2007), 125.
- 35 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 236.
- 36 Mohamad-Said Baalbaki, “Burak II” press release, provided by the artist, 1 April 2012.
- 37 “Museumsbauhütte.”
- 38 “Museumsbauhütte.”
- 39 Wilson-Goldie, “Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy.”
- 40 “Museumsbauhütte.”
- 41 The title of the third installation of the trilogy is mentioned in Wilson-Goldie’s article, however I have found no further documentation for this proposed exhibit. Perhaps the article’s title says it all: Wilson-Goldie, “Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy.”
- 42 Walter Libby devotes a chapter to the scientific imagination in *An Introduction to the History of Science* (1917; reprinted by Kessinger Publishing, 2003).
- 43 Walter Libby, “Conceptual Thinking,” *The Scientific Monthly* 15, 5 (November 1922), 436.
- 44 Georges Bataille, “Museum,” trans. Annette Michelson, *October* 36 (1986), 25; first published in *Documents* 2, 5 (1930), 300.
- 45 Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” 234.
- 46 Baalbaki could be referencing *The Neverending Story*, or *Die unendliche Geschichte*, the German fantasy novel published in 1979 by Michael Ende. The story’s main action takes place in a parallel fantasy world being destroyed by the Nothing. In the real world this Nothing equals society’s growing apathy and lack of imagination. The protagonist is a boy named Bastian who is aided in his quest to stop the Nothing by a talking “luckdragon,” a giant, white-winged beast named Falkor described as having a horse’s head and a dragon’s tongue. Michael Ende, *The Neverending Story*, trans. Ralph Manheim, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc, 1983.
- 47 Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 19.
- 48 Wilson-Goldie, “Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy.”
- 49 Wilson-Goldie, “Mohamad-Said Baalbaki: Flights of Fantasy.”