

## AGA KHAN MUSEUM

### Lingering Orientalism in Global Practice<sup>1</sup>

AMIN ALSADEN is a scholar, curator, and educator whose work focuses on transnational solidarities and exchanges across cultural boundaries. His curatorial practice is committed to advancing social justice through the arts, and to disseminating inclusive narratives that expand existing canons and challenge hegemonic epistemological and power structures. His research explores modern and contemporary art and architecture globally, and often involves documenting endangered heritage and examining how precarious archives and scarce resources shape lopsided global narratives. Alsadén holds graduate degrees from Harvard and Princeton, and has published and lectured widely.

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From a distance, it revealed itself as a broad, white plateau, emerging from the snow-covered ground. It came into sharper focus as I approached the site for the first time, on one of those hazy winter days. The building's refined silhouette, monolithic mass, and pristinely chiseled planes contrasted with the lackluster background of that suburban business district. The Aga Khan Museum (AKM) in Toronto is certainly the exception in that landscape, standing in aloof isolation from the noisy highways that frame the sprawling site, and the quieter street through which one enters its grounds. Against that uniform light grey sky, the building presented itself as an improbable rock formation, a foreboding iceberg caught in a frozen sea. On subsequent visits, particularly on bright spring days, the building's hulking white mass glistened in the sunlight, sitting there within a green landscape, like a glacier that proudly refuses to melt.<sup>2</sup>

The significance of this building cannot be overstated. It houses North America's first purposely built museum dedicated to displaying the arts of the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the building has been erected where Muslims are not in the majority means the institution bears great responsibility: representing the diverse cultures associated with Islam, and informing those who are unfamiliar with complexity of this faith. The building houses a permanent collection, the core of which covers ten centuries of history and vast geographies (from China to Spain), and includes manuscripts; decorative objects in ceramic, metal, glass, and other materials; arms and armor; jewelry;



FIG. 1. VIEW OF THE SOUTH CORNER OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM (AKM), DESIGNED BY FUMIHIKO MAKI, WITH ITS PUBLIC ENTRANCE MARKED WITH A THIN METALLIC CANOPY, FACING THE PLAZA LINKING IT TO THE ISMAILI CENTRE DESIGNED BY CHARLES CORREA (NOT VISIBLE IN THIS IMAGE). | COURTESY OF THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM, PHOTOGRAPHER TOM ARBAN.