Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas
eISSN: 2775-4596, Vol 6, No 4, 2026, pp. 1793-1814
https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v6i4.59129

Preserving Objects, Losing Meaning: An Islamic Epistemological Critique of New Museology

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Suggested Citation:

Jalal, Ahmad Farid Abdul; Rahim, Rahimin Affandi Abdul; Yusof, Azman; Alias, Ahnaf Wafi; Rahman, Mohammad Taufiq. (2026). Preserving Objects, Losing Meaning: An Islamic Epistemological Critique of New Museology. *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas*, Volume 6, Number 4: 1793–1814. https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v6i4.59129

Article's History:

Received September 2026; *Revised* September 2026; *Accepted* November 2026.
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Abstract:

Modern museums possess sophisticated professional capacities for acquiring, documenting, classifying, conserving, researching and exhibiting objects. Yet the physical survival of an artefact does not necessarily ensure the survival of its meaning. This problem becomes especially significant when Islamic heritage is classified primarily according to material, aesthetic or administrative criteria, while its relationships with religion, intellectual traditions, social practices and structures of authority recede from view. This article examines the epistemological limitations of *New Museology* through an Islamic intellectual framework. It adopts a qualitative approach combining conceptual analysis with a critical comparison of museological scholarship, works on Islamic epistemology and four official collection records concerning two Qur'an manuscripts and two astrolabes. The analysis is organised around four categories: the status of the object, the validity of knowledge, interpretive authority and the purpose of preservation. The study argues that *New Museology* has effectively challenged institutional neutrality, curatorial dominance and the exclusion of source communities, but has not developed a sufficiently robust normative basis for adjudicating between forms of evidence, defining the limits of expertise or addressing the status of sacred objects. To address this limitation, the article proposes a tawhid, knowledge, adab and amanah framework that connects material preservation with the preservation of meaning. It distinguishes three forms of meaning loss interpretive restriction, erosion and destruction and

introduces adab-based authority as a means of allocating interpretive responsibility according to the question under consideration, the available evidence, the relevant method and the limits of expertise. Islamic museology, therefore, need not be constructed through a rejection of modern museum professionalism, but by providing its practices with epistemological and moral direction.

Keywords: adab-based authority; Islamic epistemology; Islamic museology; *New Museology*; preservation of meaning; sacred objects.

INTRODUCTION

Museums are not merely repositories of old objects. Through acquisition, documentation, classification, conservation, research and exhibition, they determine which materials are valued, which categories are used to identify them and which narratives are communicated to the public. A museum collection is therefore not a complete representation of the past, but the outcome of selections shaped by institutional policy, curatorial expertise, material condition and research priorities. Museums operate simultaneously as professional, epistemic and social institutions (Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, 2000; Macdonald, 2006). The documentary and conservation systems developed by modern museums have made it possible to preserve, compare and study objects systematically. Yet those same systems also determine which attributes receive attention and which fields of meaning are treated as authoritative. When an object is classified as art, ethnography, archaeology or natural history, the category does more than facilitate its management. It influences how the object, and the society that produced it, will be understood (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Pearce, 1992).

The relationship between museums and colonialism further demonstrates that the production of knowledge cannot be separated from structures of power. Manuscripts, artworks and cultural materials from colonised societies were collected, renamed and reorganised through classificatory systems developed largely in metropolitan institutions. Objects with religious, political or social functions could be removed from their original settings and presented as ethnographic specimens or decorative art. In such cases, classification did not simply arrange things. It privileged the conceptual framework of the institution that possessed the authority to name and interpret them (A. S. Said, 1985; Thomas, 1994). Criticism of museum neutrality and curatorial monopoly contributed to the emergence of *New Museology*. This approach shifted attention away from the technical administration of collections towards questions concerning institutional purpose, representation, authority and the social consequences of exhibition. Vergo criticised a form of museology overly preoccupied with method, while Hooper-Greenhill described the museum as a site of communication and meaning production. These developments created greater space for community participation, interpretive plurality and the correction of incomplete institutional records (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Vergo, 1989).

The multiplication of voices, however, does not by itself resolve questions of truth, evidential hierarchy or the limits of authority. Community experience, oral tradition, documentary evidence, material analysis and disciplinary expertise perform different epistemic functions. Source communities are not internally homogeneous, nor do all claims possess equal evidential strength. Museums must still distinguish between established fact, inference, memory, belief and unverified assertion. These limitations become more apparent when museums care for Islamic heritage. Qur'an manuscripts, religious texts, gravestones, astronomical instruments and objects associated with governance possess material, historical and aesthetic dimensions, but their significance cannot be confined to those dimensions. A Qur'an manuscript displayed primarily as an example of calligraphic achievement may be appreciated for its visual qualities while its relationship with revelation, recitation, memorisation and education becomes obscured. Physical preservation that neglects function, authority and context may leave an object materially intact while diminishing the field of meaning through which it was originally recognised.

Islamic intellectual traditions offer a framework for addressing this problem through the concepts of *tawhid*, knowledge, *adab* and *amanah*. *Tawhid* preserves the relationships between the different dimensions of an object. Knowledge concerns the validity of sources and the degree of certainty attached to a claim. *Adab* governs the proper placement of objects, forms of knowledge and holders of authority, while *amanah* connects material care with truthful documentation and institutional responsibility. This framework does not

reject professional museology. Documentation, conservation and research remain indispensable, but they require normative direction if objects are not to be preserved through processes that obscure their epistemic identity. This article has three objectives. First, it distinguishes material preservation from the preservation of meaning. Second, it examines the limitations of *New Museology* in adjudicating between forms of evidence and determining the boundaries of interpretive authority. Third, it develops the concept of adab-based authority within a tawhid, knowledge, adab and amanah framework. Adab-based authority refers to the allocation of interpretive and decision-making responsibility according to the nature of the question, the form of evidence, the relevant method and the limits of expertise, rather than institutional position or identity claims alone.

"Meaning loss" is used here as an overarching term encompassing interpretive restriction, erosion and destruction. Interpretive restriction occurs when one dimension of an object is privileged to the point that other relationships become less visible. Erosion occurs when terminology, *provenance*, function and community knowledge gradually disappear from documentation. Destruction of meaning occurs when institutional categories displace the epistemic identity of an object so thoroughly that the surviving material can no longer be understood through the intellectual world, function and structures of authority that once defined it. These terms do not imply that all museums deliberately erase meaning. They indicate that the preservation of material alone is insufficient when the relationships that make an object intelligible as heritage are not preserved with it.

Museological scholarship has long shown that objects do not enter museums as interpretation-free entities. Acquisition, documentation, classification and exhibition relocate them within new systems of knowledge shaped by institutional priorities. Pearce argues that objects undergo a change of status once they are removed from their original settings and incorporated into collections. This transition enables preservation and comparison, but it also determines which features will be emphasized and which relationships will be considered relevant (Pearce, 1992). Hooper-Greenhill links the development of museums to changing systems of knowledge. Categories such as art, archaeology, ethnography, history and science improve the institutional management of collections, yet they also select certain characteristics as the basis of identification (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). An object that simultaneously functions as an heirloom, a technological artifact, a symbol of authority and a ceremonial possession may be reduced when only one of these dimensions is given interpretive priority.

Classification is therefore more than a technical operation. It shapes how objects are identified, compared and presented to the public. A Qur'an manuscript classified under Islamic art may be interpreted through its calligraphy, illumination and material composition, while its relationships with revelation, recitation, education and devotional practice become less visible. An astrolabe may be presented as a scientific instrument while its connections with the qibla, prayer times and Islamic intellectual culture recede from view. Museums also shape memory by selecting which materials are deemed worthy of transmission. Halbwachs explains that memory is formed within social frameworks, while Assmann shows how cultural memory is sustained through texts, monuments, symbols, rituals and institutions. In museums, objects provide material form to memory, but catalogues, spatial arrangements and exhibition narratives determine how they are connected to people, events and collective experience (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992). Interpretation is thus integral to the production of knowledge. Hooper-Greenhill describes exhibitions as communicative processes involving objects, institutions, visual language and audiences. Visitors do not receive meaning passively, yet openness to multiple responses does not remove the museum's responsibility to identify sources, distinguish fact from inference and communicate the degree of certainty attached to a claim (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

The emergence of *New Museology* expanded museological inquiry beyond technical procedure towards questions of power, representation and institutional purpose. Vergo criticised a traditional museology overly concerned with collection management while paying insufficient attention to the assumptions and interests underlying museum practice. This critique did not reject conservation or documentation; rather, it insisted that professional decisions have consequences for the production of knowledge. Bennett presents the public museum as a cultural institution that shapes how societies understand history, progress and social order. Museum power operates through the selection of objects, the organisation of space, historical sequencing and the legitimation of particular forms of language. Exhibitions therefore do more than transmit established knowledge. They participate in determining which people, values and experiences are treated as representative (Bennett, 1995; Vergo, 1989). Criticism of institutional

monopoly brought greater attention to source communities. Museum records, especially those produced under colonial conditions, often preserve more information about collectors, acquisition dates and institutional categories than about makers, owners or original users. Community participation can help restore local terminology, clarify function, recover histories of use and identify sensitivities absent from institutional records.

Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice provides a useful framework for understanding such marginalisation. Injustice occurs when individuals or groups are denied appropriate standing as knowers, or when their experiences cannot be expressed through the conceptual categories recognised by an institution (Fricker, 2007). In museums, this may occur when community testimony is dismissed because it is not presented in academic form, or when institutional terminology displaces more precise local concepts. Community participation, however, does not mean that all claims occupy the same epistemic position. Source communities are not internally uniform. Differences of family, generation, region, education and religious orientation may produce competing interpretations. Shared authority must therefore distinguish between local experience, material evidence, documentary history, linguistic expertise, conservation knowledge and religious authority. Correcting curatorial monopoly requires a more just distribution of responsibility, not the abandonment of expertise. The ICOM museum definition adopted in 2022 reflects this shift by combining research, collecting, conservation, interpretation and exhibition with commitments to ethics, inclusion, accessibility, sustainability and community participation. It does not, however, specify how conflicts between sources, forms of expertise and normative claims should be resolved.

New Museology has shown convincingly that museum interpretation is shaped by institutions, power and social experience. Yet recognition of plurality does not itself provide a method for assessing the strength of competing claims. Documents, inscriptions, scientific analysis, oral traditions, family memory and curatorial inference perform different epistemic functions. An inclusive museum must still distinguish established fact from probability, belief and interpretation. This problem is especially pronounced in the care of Islamic heritage. A Qur'an manuscript may be examined through paper, ink, script, illumination, binding and ownership history. Such research is essential for conservation and dating, but the manuscript cannot be reduced to its material or aesthetic features, since its significance is also tied to revelation, recitation, memorisation, education and proper conduct towards a sacred text. An astrolabe similarly exceeds the category of scientific instrument when its history involves qibla determination, prayer times, Qur'anic inscriptions and systems of patronage.

Community participation alone cannot determine the full status of such objects. Communities may provide knowledge about use, memory and sensitivity, but questions of dating, material composition, language and religious law require different forms of expertise. Interpretive authority must therefore be allocated according to the question under consideration, the evidence available and the qualifications required, rather than institutional status or identity alone. Museological scholarship has examined power, representation and participation in considerable depth, but it remains less developed in establishing a normative order among evidence, expertise and responsibility. Criticism of curatorial authority does not automatically yield a theory of who should interpret, which evidence should prevail or how sacred objects should be treated when claims conflict. This unresolved problem provides the principal point of entry for an Islamic epistemological critique.

Museological literature has extensively examined conservation, classification, communication, representation and community participation. It has paid less systematic attention, however, to the distinction between the physical survival of an object and the survival of its meaning. An artefact may remain materially stable while losing *provenance*, terminology, histories of use and community knowledge. Pearce shows that an object acquires a new status once it enters a collection. This transformation is essential to preservation, but may also detach the object from earlier environments of use. Hooper-Greenhill demonstrates that museum categories shape what can be known about an object. Together, these perspectives suggest that preservation concerns not only material condition, but also the structure of knowledge surrounding the object (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Pearce, 1992).

Existing scholarship has not, however, clearly distinguished between interpretive restriction, erosion and destruction of meaning. Interpretive restriction occurs when one dimension of an object is privileged so strongly that other relationships become difficult to see. Erosion occurs when terminology, function and *provenance* gradually disappear from documentation. Destruction of meaning occurs when institutional categories displace the object's epistemic identity to such an extent that the surviving material can no longer

be recognised through the function and intellectual world that once defined it. This distinction is necessary because not every interpretive omission should be described as destruction. Every exhibition involves selection, and no label can communicate the entire history of an object. The problem arises when emphasis becomes denial, or when institutional documentation closes off the possibility that neglected relationships might later be recovered through further research.

Three principal gaps emerge from the literature. First, museological criticism of power, classification and representation has not been sufficiently integrated with a normative framework for assessing evidence and defining the limits of interpretive authority. *New Museology* has widened participation, but it has not fully explained how conflicts among documentary sources, material evidence, community knowledge and religious claims should be ordered. Second, scholarship on Islamic art and heritage has produced substantial research on material, form, chronology, calligraphy, manuscripts and collection histories, but has paid less attention to the distinction between material preservation and the preservation of meaning. The category *Islamic Art* facilitates comparison and research, yet it may group together objects with radically different statuses, including Qur'an manuscripts, scientific instruments, devotional items, commercial goods and symbols of governance.

Third, *tawhid*, knowledge, *adab* and *amanah* have been widely discussed in Islamic philosophy of education and intellectual thought, but have not been systematically applied to museum acquisition, documentation, classification, conservation and interpretation. As a result, the relationship between museum professionalism and Islamic epistemology is often trapped between two extremes: the uncritical adoption of modern categories and the rejection of professional methods because of their Western genealogy. This article addresses these gaps in three ways. First, it distinguishes material preservation from the preservation of meaning and develops a threefold account of meaning loss. Second, it proposes adab-based authority as a means of organising the relationship among curators, conservators, historians, linguists, source communities and religious scholars according to the question, the evidence and the limits of expertise. Third, it develops a tawhid–knowledge–adab–amanah framework that connects contextual unity, evidential validity, interpretive authority and institutional responsibility. *New Museology* is therefore not rejected, but treated as a necessary yet insufficient reform. Museum professionalism provides methods for preserving and studying objects; Islamic epistemology provides normative direction so that preservation does not detach objects from their function, authority and epistemic identity.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on conceptual analysis and critical comparison. The method is appropriate because the central concern is not visitor response or the technical condition of collections, but the epistemological assumptions that shape how museums identify, classify, preserve and interpret objects. The analysis therefore focuses on the concepts, evidential practices and structures of authority through which objects acquire institutional meaning. The study draws on three groups of sources. The first consists of museological and social-theoretical works addressing classification, curatorial power, interpretation, memory and community participation. The writings of Vergo, Hooper-Greenhill, Bennett, Pearce, Clifford, Macdonald and Fricker provide the basis for examining museums as professional, epistemic and social institutions. The ICOM museum definition adopted in 2022 is also considered in relation to research, conservation, interpretation, ethics and community participation (Bennett, 1995; Clifford, 1988; Fricker, 2007; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, 2000; Macdonald, 2006; Pearce, 1992; Vergo, 1989)

The second group comprises works on Islamic epistemology, intellectual tradition and moral responsibility. The writings of al-Attas (1995), al-Faruqi (1992), Nasr (1989), Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud (1998), al-Ghazālī (1962) and Ibn Khaldūn (1967) are used to develop criteria concerning the status of objects, the validity of knowledge, the limits of expertise and the ethics of transmission. Qur'anic verses and an authenticated hadith are employed as normative sources relating to *tabayyun*, justice, *amanah* and recourse to qualified knowledge. They are not treated as direct technical prescriptions for museum practice, but as principles through which institutional conduct may be evaluated. The third group consists of four official collection records used as limited empirical illustrations. Two records from The Metropolitan Museum of Art concern *Folio from a Qur'an Manuscript* (object number 62.152.2) and *Portable Qur'an Manuscript* (object number 89.2.2156). Two records from The British Museum concern

astrolabes with museum numbers 1855,0709.1 and 1880,0308.1. These records were selected because they connect material description with social, scientific or religious function.

Sources were selected purposively according to three criteria: direct relevance to the production of object meaning, applicability to at least one of the study's analytical categories, and usefulness for examining the relationship between professional method and epistemic responsibility. The corpus is not intended to represent the full range of museological scholarship or the entirety of the Islamic intellectual tradition. The analysis proceeds in three stages. The first involves a conceptual reading of the key terms, assumptions and problems within both traditions. The second organises the material around four analytical categories: the status of the object, the validity of knowledge, interpretive authority and the purpose of preservation. The first category asks whether an object is understood only through material and aesthetic attributes or also through function, use, source communities and religious status. The second distinguishes documentary, epigraphic, material, oral and inferential forms of evidence. The third examines the respective roles of curators, conservators, historians, linguists, source communities and religious scholars. The fourth considers whether conservation protects only physical continuity or also contextual and epistemic continuity.

In the third stage, the two bodies of thought are compared through relations of convergence, difference and complementarity. Convergence appears in their recognition of context, institutional responsibility and the plurality of knowledge sources. Difference lies in their normative foundations, conceptions of truth and arrangements of authority. Complementarity emerges when museum professionalism provides the methods of documentation, conservation and interpretation, while Islamic epistemology offers criteria for judging purpose, evidential limits and responsibility towards objects. The collection records are analysed in relation to classification, material, stated function, inscription and the object's connection with social, religious and intellectual contexts. Claims framed by the museums as possibilities are not converted into certainties. The distinction between established information, institutional inference and unresolved questions is retained because precision in language forms part of epistemic responsibility. This is a conceptual study. It does not include interviews, visitor observation or technical examination of the objects. The four collection records are illustrative rather than representative of the wider practices of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The British Museum or modern museums in general. The argument therefore concerns analytical possibility, not institutional generalisation.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

The theoretical framework brings *New Museology* into critical conversation with Islamic epistemology. *New Museology* is used to examine how museums produce knowledge through acquisition, classification, interpretation, exhibition and the distribution of authority. Islamic epistemology provides a normative basis for evaluating the status of objects, the validity of sources, the limits of expertise and the purposes of preservation. The relationship is not framed as a simple opposition between Western museology and Islam. The professional achievements of modern museums in documentation, conservation, research and communication remain indispensable. The Islamic framework addresses the direction, limits and moral consequences of those practices.

New Museology and the Critique of Museum Neutrality

New Museology emerged from the recognition that museums do not merely transfer facts from collections to visitors. Every exhibition rests on decisions about which objects are selected, which categories organise them, which sources are considered authoritative and which narratives receive priority. Vergo criticised a form of museology overly preoccupied with procedure while neglecting questions of institutional purpose and interest (Vergo, 1989). Hooper-Greenhill demonstrated that categories such as art, archaeology, ethnography and science are not simply neutral systems of administration (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). They determine which properties of an object are made visible and which are marginalised. In her later work, she described exhibition as a communicative process involving objects, institutions, visual language and audiences (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Bennett likewise showed that museum power is exercised through selection, sequencing and the legitimisation of particular languages of display (Bennett, 1995)vcv. This critique encouraged community participation and the reassessment of institutional records. Yet the recognition of multiple voices does not itself determine how evidence should be weighed or how

conflicts among documentary records, material analysis, lived experience and religious claims should be resolved. Islamic epistemology enters the discussion at this point, not to reverse the gains of *New Museology*, but to provide a more explicit normative order.

1.4.1 *Tawhid* and the Relational Unity of Objects

Tawhid provides the basis for understanding objects, knowledge, human life and moral responsibility as interconnected rather than radically separated. Al-Faruqi associates *tawhid* with the unity of truth, knowledge and action, while Nasr argues that knowledge in the Islamic tradition remains connected to its metaphysical source and moral purpose. Applied to museum practice, *tawhid* resists the reduction of an object to a single institutional category. A manuscript may simultaneously possess material, linguistic, aesthetic, historical, educational and religious dimensions. An astrolabe may bring together metalwork, mathematics, astronomy, geography, worship and patronage. These dimensions are not interchangeable, but neither are they historically isolated (Al-Faruqi, 1992; Nasr, 1996). Relational unity does not require every exhibition to give equal space to every dimension, nor does it dissolve disciplinary boundaries. It requires that emphasis on one aspect should not sever the object from the network of relations through which it acquired meaning. In this study, *tawhid* therefore functions as a principle of contextual integrity.

1.4.2 Knowledge, *Tabayyun* and Evidential Hierarchy

Knowledge governs the acceptance, organisation and communication of claims about objects. Al-Attas associates knowledge with recognising the reality and proper place of things. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud further emphasises that fields of knowledge possess distinct objects, methods and levels of expertise. Museum records draw on material analysis, documents, inscriptions, oral traditions, family memory and curatorial inference. Each may contribute to knowledge, but none carries the same weight for every question. Scientific examination may establish material composition without explaining ritual use. Oral tradition may preserve memories absent from written records, but its source, context and transmission still require clarification (Al-Attas, 1991; Daud, 1998).

The Qur'anic principle of *tabayyun* requires reports to be examined before they become the basis of judgement (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥujurāt 49:6). The prohibition against following what is unsupported by knowledge similarly establishes that claims should not exceed the available evidence (Al-Qur'an, al-Isrāʾ 17:36). A hadith in the introduction to *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* warns against transmitting everything one hears without scrutiny. Ibn Khaldūn adds that historical reports may be distorted by bias, excessive confidence in transmitters and failure to understand social conditions. Evidential hierarchy, therefore, is not fixed in the abstract. The value of a source depends on the question being asked (Khaldūn, 1967). Documentary evidence may be strong for ownership or chronology, while oral knowledge may be more relevant to customary use. Islamic epistemology does not collapse these forms of knowledge into one category; it places them in an ordered relationship.

1.4.3 *Adab* and Adab-Based Authority

Adab connects knowledge with the proper status of objects and the proper limits of interpreters. In al-Attas's thought, *adab* involves recognising and acknowledging the appropriate place of things within the order of knowledge and existence (Al-Attas, 2001). In museums, this means that objects should not be classified in ways that diminish their function or status, and that interpreters should not exceed the boundaries of their expertise. Curators possess authority in collection management and exhibition communication, but not necessarily in religious law. Conservators understand material condition and risk, but may lack expertise in the social history of an object. Source communities hold valuable experiential and inherited knowledge, but no single voice necessarily represents an entire tradition. Religious scholars may address questions of law, sanctity and proper conduct, but their judgements still need to engage with historical, linguistic and material evidence.

The Qur'an instructs those who do not know to consult people of knowledge (Al-Qur'an, al-Naḥl 16:43). This principle recognises both expertise and its limits. From this basis, adab-based authority may be defined as the allocation of interpretive and decision-making responsibility according to the nature of the question, the form of evidence, the relevant method and the boundaries of competence. Adab-based authority rejects curatorial monopoly because no institution possesses the entirety of an object's meaning. It also rejects relativism because not every participant possesses equal authority in every matter. Its central demand is not the elimination of authority, but its disciplined distribution.

1.4.4 *Amanah* and the Responsibility of Preservation

Amanah makes preservation a material, epistemic and moral responsibility. The Qur'an commands that trusts be delivered to those entitled to them and that judgement be exercised justly (Al-Qur'an, al-Nisāʾ 4:58). In museum practice, this obligation is not fulfilled merely by preventing physical deterioration. Misleading classification, concealed *provenance* and interpretation that detaches an object from its context may also constitute failures of preservation. *Amanah* requires accurate documentation, transparency about missing evidence and willingness to revise interpretation when new information emerges. Museums are not expected to know everything about every object. They are, however, responsible for distinguishing what has been established, what remains probable and what is still unknown. Carefully expressed uncertainty is therefore a form of scholarly integrity.

Justice strengthens this responsibility. The Qur'an prohibits hostility or partiality from producing injustice (Al-Qur'an, al-Māʾidah 5:8). Colonial records should not be treated as automatically true because of their institutional origin, nor dismissed solely because of the identity of their authors. Community testimony likewise deserves fair evaluation rather than automatic acceptance or exclusion. *Amanah* also informs the care of sacred objects. The Qur'an associates reverence for the symbols of God with piety of the heart (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥajj 22:32). This does not generate a complete technical policy for museums, but it establishes a normative requirement to consider the religious status of an object alongside its material condition and exhibition context.

1.4.5 Synthesis of the Analytical Framework

Tawhid, knowledge, *adab* and *amanah* operate as interdependent principles. *Tawhid* preserves the relational unity of the object. Knowledge determines the validity and degree of certainty of claims. *Adab* orders the status of objects and the authority of interpreters. *Amanah* binds the institution to material care, documentary accuracy and interpretive honesty. This framework does not replace the professional methods of museums. Documentation, conservation, research and exhibition remain essential. Its contribution lies in directing those methods towards a fuller account of why an object is preserved, which relationships should remain visible, who possesses authority in a given matter and what limits should govern institutional claims.

Nor does the framework assume that an object possesses only one fixed and original meaning. Meanings may change as objects move between owners, functions, regions and institutions. Such changes should, however, be recorded as historical layers rather than allowed to erase earlier functions. The analysis that follows is guided by four questions: What relationships make the object meaningful? What evidence supports its interpretation? Who possesses authority in relation to the question being asked? What responsibilities does the institution bear towards the material, the knowledge attached to it and the communities connected with it?

DISCUSSION / ANALYSIS

Material Preservation and the Responsibility to Preserve Meaning

The preservation of collections is one of the principal achievements of the modern museum. Systems of acquisition, documentation, storage, environmental control and conservation have protected countless objects from physical deterioration and loss. Pearce notes that objects acquire a new status once they are selected, collected and incorporated into museum systems. This transition enables preservation, comparison and transmission, but also alters their relationship with earlier environments and users. The names, categories, *provenance* records and historical narratives attached to an object shape how it will subsequently be understood. Hooper-Greenhill demonstrates that documentation and classification are not neutral operations, while Macdonald emphasises that heritage always involves selection, valuation and the production of memory. Material stabilisation therefore does not by itself ensure the survival of the object's historical, social or intellectual relationships (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Macdonald, 2006; Pearce, 1992).

This distinction gives rise to two related dimensions of preservation. Material preservation concerns the physical continuity of an object through storage, documentation, conservation treatment and professional handling. The preservation of meaning concerns the continuity of its relationships with terminology, function, *provenance*, histories of use, source communities, intellectual traditions and religious status. Without the material object, historical evidence may disappear. Without its surrounding meanings, the surviving material

may no longer be recognised through the relationships that once defined it. *New Museology* sharpened awareness of this problem by rejecting the idea that collections are neutral deposits of the past. Vergo argued that museology cannot stop at the methods of collection management, but must also examine institutional purpose and the assumptions behind selection and display. Hooper-Greenhill similarly showed that meaning emerges through the interaction of objects, exhibition language, visual culture and audiences. A museum may therefore preserve an object while narrowing the interpretive framework through which it is understood (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Vergo, 1989).

Islamic epistemology provides a normative basis for treating the preservation of meaning as an institutional responsibility. *Amanah* is not confined to physical custody, but extends to the accuracy of information and the integrity of transmission. The Qur'anic command to return trusts to those entitled to them suggests that objects entrusted to institutions should be cared for together with the histories and forms of knowledge attached to them (Al-Qur'an, al-Nisāʾ 4:58). Museums cannot be expected to recover the complete history of every object, especially where collections were formed through poorly documented or colonial processes. *Amanah*, however, requires a clear distinction between what has been established, what remains probable and what is unknown. Incomplete evidence is not necessarily an institutional failure. Presenting inference as fact is.

Al-Attas associates knowledge and *adab* with recognising the proper place of things. A Qur'an manuscript possesses paper, ink, script, illumination and binding, but its identity also derives from revelation, recitation, memorisation, education and proper conduct towards the sacred text. To value its calligraphy while neglecting its devotional and epistemic status is to recognise it only partially (Al-Attas, 1999). Preserving meaning does not require an object to be fixed permanently within a single original function. Meanings change as objects move between owners, regions, institutions and uses. A manuscript initially used for teaching may later become a family heirloom before entering a museum collection. Each stage forms part of its biography and should be documented as a historical layer rather than allowing the latest institutional use to erase earlier ones. Museum professionalism and Islamic epistemology are therefore complementary. Conservation secures the survival of the material object, while knowledge, *adab* and *amanah* ensure that it remains intelligible as heritage.

1.4.6 Classification, Knowledge Production and the Limits of Institutional Claims

Classification is indispensable to collection management. Without systematic categories, objects are difficult to locate, compare, research or conserve according to their material needs. Categories such as manuscript, textile, metalwork, archaeology, ethnography and scientific instrument provide museums with necessary professional vocabularies. Yet, as Pearce observes, the incorporation of an object into a collection also transforms its status and network of relationships. Hooper-Greenhill shows that classification does not simply arrange objects whose identities are already fixed. It selects certain features as primary and relegates others to secondary status. An object catalogued as a *weapon*, for example, will usually be interpreted through its material, form, technology and use in combat. If the same object also functioned as an heirloom, a ceremonial possession and a symbol of sovereignty, the category explains only part of its identity (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Pearce, 1992).

The consequences are particularly visible in collections formed under colonial conditions. Said demonstrates how knowledge about colonised societies was often produced through categories shaped by the needs and assumptions of external observers. Thomas (1994) likewise shows that objects moving through exchange, collection and colonialism acquire new meanings within receiving institutions. Local names may be replaced by broad labels such as *amulet*, *ritual object*, *native weapon* or *ornament*. Such terms may facilitate administration, but they can efface distinctions that were central to the societies from which the objects came (E. W. Said, 1978). *New Museology* enables these classifications to be examined as historical products of power rather than neutral systems. Yet criticism of institutional categories must still explain how names and functions are to be judged. Local terminology is not automatically accurate, just as institutional terminology is not automatically false. Classification must be assessed through evidence, source history and correspondence with the object itself.

The Qur'anic prohibition against following what is unsupported by knowledge places limits on institutional naming (Al-Qur'an, al-Isrāʾ 17:36). Catalogue terms should not rest solely on visual resemblance, inherited assumptions or undocumented collector notes. Claims about function require support from inscriptions, structure, *provenance*, traces of use, documentary evidence or assessable

community knowledge. The principle of *tabayyun* likewise requires reports to be examined before they become the basis of judgement (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥujurāt 49:6). A description does not become true merely because it has been repeated in a catalogue for decades. Its origin, context of acquisition and historical vocabulary must still be assessed. The warning in the introduction to *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* against transmitting everything one hears without scrutiny is directly relevant to inherited museum documentation.

Ibn Khaldūn further cautions that historical reports may be distorted by bias, excessive confidence in transmitters and failure to understand social conditions. Colonial records, travellers' accounts and collectors' notes may contain indispensable evidence, but they should not be treated as neutral descriptions superior to all other forms of knowledge (Khaldūn, 1967). A more disciplined classification system does not abandon categories. It makes them relational. An object may retain a primary administrative category while also being linked to local terminology, social function, religious significance, technology and political history. A keris, for example, may remain within a weapons collection while also being documented as an heirloom, ceremonial object and sign of authority. Such an approach preserves administrative utility without turning one category into a total interpretation.

1.4.7 Qur'an Manuscripts: Between Collection Object and Sacred Text

Modern museology provides essential methods for the study of manuscripts. Codicology, material analysis, palaeography, art history and conservation allow scholars to examine paper or parchment, ink, script, binding, dating and physical change. Through these methods, manuscripts can be studied as products of technology, craftsmanship and written culture. Yet classifying a *mushaf* as a manuscript or as Islamic art does not exhaust its significance. If attention is confined to script, illumination, pigment and workmanship, the Qur'an manuscript risks becoming a visual surface detached from recitation, memorisation, teaching and proper conduct towards revelation. The problem lies not in material or aesthetic study, but in treating such study as a complete interpretive framework. The Metropolitan Museum of Art provides an example of more layered documentation. *Folio from a Qur'an Manuscript*, object number 62.152.2, is identified as a folio from a small Qur'an. The record describes its Kufic script, parchment support and red dots used as vocalisation marks. Its scale is also cautiously connected with possible personal use and portability during travel.

This record demonstrates that size is not merely technical data. It may offer evidence about how a manuscript was carried and used. The museum does not, however, turn this indication into certainty. The language of possibility is retained because scale alone cannot establish a complete history of use. Such phrasing preserves the distinction between evidence and inference. *Portable Qur'an Manuscript*, object number 89.2.2156, is associated with the use of small Qur'an manuscripts as devotional and protective objects in the Ottoman world. The museum record connects them with metal cases or pouches, military standards, bodily wear and attachment to weapons or ceremonial objects (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.-b). The manuscript is thereby situated within networks of devotion, protection, warfare, governance and political symbolism. Similarity of scale or appearance, however, cannot establish that all small Qur'ans served the same function. Each manuscript must be examined through its inscriptions, container, physical traces, *provenance* and documentary history. *Portable Qur'an* may be a useful comparative category, but it cannot replace the particular history of each copy.

An Islamic epistemological reading places the manuscript within the relationship between materiality and revelation. *Tawhid* resists a rigid separation between beauty, knowledge, worship and social life. Calligraphy and illumination remain important, but they are interpreted alongside the manuscript's history of recitation, instruction, devotion and reverence. Al-Attas helps clarify why the *mushaf* must be recognised according to its proper status. It cannot be treated as identical to a literary manuscript or administrative document merely because they share materials and techniques. The distinction lies in the authority, function and content of the text. *Adab* requires that this difference inform handling, storage and display (Al-Attas, 1991). Museums need not return every Qur'an manuscript to its former devotional use. They should, however, ensure that earlier functions do not disappear from documentation and interpretation. The Metropolitan Museum records themselves demonstrate that material properties can be connected with use and context. The central issue is therefore not whether the object belongs to an art or manuscript department, but whether the documentation system allows its other evidenced relationships to remain visible.

1.4.8 The Astrolabe: Science, Worship and the Unity of Intellectual Tradition

Astrolabes are commonly classified as astronomical instruments or examples of metalwork. Both categories are valid. Their production required mathematics, geometry, astronomical observation and sophisticated craftsmanship. Material analysis and the history of technology are essential to understanding their structure and development. Scientific classification alone, however, does not explain the full history of the astrolabe in Islamic societies. Its uses could include determining the qibla, calculating prayer times, measurement, navigation, education, astrology and courtly patronage. If displayed solely as evidence of scientific achievement, its relationship with worship and intellectual culture may disappear. If treated merely as decorative metalwork, its mathematical and functional complexity is obscured. The British Museum record for astrolabe 1855,0709.1 describes it as a two-dimensional representation of the heavens used for astronomical purposes, including determining the direction of Mecca and the times of prayer. The record also preserves the maker's name, decorative features and evidence of possible elite patronage. The object therefore brings astronomy, craftsmanship, religion and political culture into a single interpretive field.

Astrolabe 1880,0308.1 includes latitude markings for Cairo and Alexandria, as well as a Qur'anic inscription concerning reliance on divine protection. The museum record also refers to its use in determining time and the direction of Mecca. The coexistence of astronomical function and religious inscription shows that science and religion were not necessarily separate domains in the historical life of the object. *Tawhid* offers a conceptual basis for understanding this unity. Al-Faruqi connects *tawhid* with the unity of truth and knowledge, while Nasr rejects the separation of knowledge of nature from its metaphysical and moral setting. This does not mean that every astronomical activity in Islamic history was undertaken exclusively for worship. It means that astronomy, social life, governance and religion could occupy an integrated intellectual world (Al-Faruqi, 1992; Nasr, 2002).

Integration does not eliminate disciplinary difference. Historians of science are needed to explain calculation and design; conservators assess metal composition and material risk; linguists read inscriptions; historians of Islam examine links with worship, education and patronage. The Qur'anic instruction to consult people of knowledge supports such an ordered distribution of expertise (Al-Qur'an, al-Naḥl 16:43). The British Museum records show that scientific classification can coexist with religious and social information without weakening technical precision. The astrolabe need not be defined as either a scientific or religious object. Its identity lies in the relationship among technology, knowledge, worship, inscription and patronage. Preserving meaning requires those relationships to remain visible.

1.4.9 Interpretive Restriction, Erosion and Destruction of Meaning

Every exhibition involves selection. Space, time and audience attention make it impossible to present the entire history of an object in a single label. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) emphasises that museum interpretation is a communicative process shaped by decisions about objects, texts, visual form and audiences. Brevity or emphasis is therefore not inherently distortion. Selection becomes problematic when it is no longer open to contextual recovery or correction. The first form of meaning loss is interpretive restriction. This occurs when one dimension of an object is privileged so strongly that others become difficult to perceive. A Qur'an manuscript interpreted mainly through calligraphy, or an astrolabe presented only as an astronomical instrument, may be restricted in this sense. The information may be accurate, but it does not represent the wider identity of the object.

The second form is erosion of meaning, which occurs when terminology, *provenance*, histories of use and community knowledge gradually disappear from documentation. Brief early records are copied into later catalogues, local names are replaced by general categories and inherited assumptions are repeated without verification. The object retains a collection number and material description, but its relationship with makers, users and earlier functions becomes increasingly difficult to recover. The third form is destruction of meaning. This occurs when institutional categories displace the object's epistemic identity so thoroughly that the surviving material can no longer be recognised through the terminology, function, authority and intellectual world that formed it. A sacred object may become merely a visual specimen, an instrument of knowledge may become decoration, or a symbol of rule may be reduced to an ethnographic curiosity. Destruction in this sense does not necessarily mean that all information has vanished. It means that the dominant institutional interpretation has made historically grounded relationships inaccessible or unintelligible.

New Museology helps expose the role of curatorial power and institutional categories in producing these conditions. Islamic epistemology clarifies the responsibility attached to inherited information. *Tabayyun*

requires chains of transmission to be examined before reports become authoritative (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥujurāt 49:6). The hadith warning against uncritical transmission is particularly relevant to the repeated copying of older catalogue records. Errors may acquire false authority simply through repetition. Museum records should therefore preserve the origin of claims. Collector notes, family traditions and earlier interpretations may remain valuable historical evidence, but they should be distinguished from information that has been independently established.

Ibn Khaldūn insists that historical reports be tested against social conditions, probability and the purposes of their transmitters. In colonial collections, names or functions recorded by officials, traders or travellers may reveal as much about the observers' knowledge as about the communities they described (Khaldūn, 1967). Such records remain important for reconstructing collection history, but they should be compared with inscriptions, material evidence, local sources and community knowledge. *Amanah* requires institutions to preserve the history of changing knowledge. When an attribution or object name is revised, the earlier record may be retained as part of the documentation history, accompanied by an explanation for the change. Terms such as *possibly*, *according to an earlier record* or *function uncertain* show that the museum distinguishes between evidence, inference and unresolved questions. The distinction among interpretive restriction, erosion and destruction makes criticism more precise. Categories, summaries and selection remain necessary. They become problematic when they deny relationships supported by evidence or when institutional systems prevent future reconsideration. The preservation of meaning does not require complete knowledge. It requires responsible care for what is known, disputed and still unknown.

1.4.10 Table 1 : Forms of Meaning Loss in Museum Practice

Form of Meaning Loss	Defining Condition	Typical Museum Manifestation	Epistemic Consequence	Required Institutional Response
Interpretive restriction	One valid dimension is given disproportionate priority	A Qur'an manuscript is treated mainly as calligraphy, or an astrolabe solely as a scientific instrument	Other historically supported relationships become difficult to perceive	Introduce relational classification and layered interpretation
Erosion of meaning	Contextual knowledge gradually disappears from documentation	Local names, provenance, histories of use and community testimony are omitted or repeatedly shortened	Later researchers cannot reconstruct earlier meanings with confidence	Recover terminology, identify source histories and mark documentary gaps
Destruction of meaning	Institutional categories displace the object's epistemic identity	A sacred object becomes merely decorative, or an object of knowledge becomes an ethnographic curiosity	The object can no longer be understood through the function and intellectual order that formed it	Reassess classification, authority, evidence and the normative status of the object
Legitimate interpretive selection	Information is abbreviated without denying other evidenced dimensions	A concise label focuses on one theme while catalogues preserve wider context	No necessary loss if the omitted dimensions remain accessible	Maintain transparent links between summary interpretation and fuller documentation

Table 1 provides a more precise vocabulary for criticising museum interpretation. Not every omission constitutes an erasure of meaning. Exhibition labels necessarily select and condense information, and thematic displays may legitimately emphasise one aspect of an object. The decisive issue is whether other evidenced relationships remain institutionally visible and open to recovery. Interpretive restriction is the least severe form because the neglected dimensions may still be reconstructed from existing records. Erosion is more serious because information disappears gradually through repeated copying, generalisation and the loss of source attribution. Destruction occurs when the institutional category becomes so dominant that the object's earlier function, terminology and intellectual status are no longer intelligible. This distinction prevents the argument from treating every act of classification as inherently oppressive. Classification remains necessary for collection management and research. Its epistemic risk emerges when an administrative category is allowed to replace the historical identity of the object rather than functioning as one interpretive layer among several.

1.4.11 Interpretive Plurality and Responsibility towards Truth

One of the most important contributions of *New Museology* is its rejection of the assumption that objects possess a single, fixed meaning that can be transferred directly from curator to visitor. Meaning may change across makers, owners, users, regions, historical periods and exhibition settings. Hooper-Greenhill argues that museum interpretation emerges through the interaction of objects, exhibition language, visual culture, institutions and audiences. Visitors do not receive meaning passively; their education, experience and cultural background shape how exhibitions are understood (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). The recognition of plurality corrects the tendency of museums to treat institutional interpretation as the only legitimate account. Older records may preserve detailed information about collectors, materials and dates of acquisition while saying little about makers, users or local terminology. Source communities can help restore missing knowledge, correct object names and clarify changes in function. Their participation therefore contributes not only to inclusion, but also to the quality of museum knowledge.

Interpretive plurality, however, does not mean that all claims possess equal epistemic strength. Inscriptions may be examined through linguistics and palaeography, material composition through scientific analysis, and function through structure, traces of use, documentary evidence and historical comparison. Community knowledge may be indispensable, but it should still be documented together with the identity of the informant, the context of transmission and its relationship to other evidence. Fricker shows that epistemic injustice occurs when individuals or groups are denied appropriate recognition as knowers (Fricker, 2007). Correcting such injustice does not require museums to accept every claim without scrutiny. It requires previously marginalised forms of knowledge to be recognised and evaluated fairly.

The Qur'anic principle of *tabayyun* requires reports to be examined before they become the basis of judgement, while the prohibition against following what is unsupported by knowledge prevents interpretive openness from collapsing into relativism (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥujurāt 49:6; al-Isrāʾ 17:36). A museum cannot simply place several views side by side without explaining their evidential basis. Visitors should be able to identify whether a claim derives from an inscription, a document, material analysis, community tradition or curatorial inference. The warning in the introduction to *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* against transmitting everything one hears without scrutiny is equally relevant to oral history and catalogue records. Ibn Khaldūn similarly argues that historical reports must be assessed in relation to social conditions, probability, the purposes of transmitters and other available evidence. Together, these principles allow oral traditions to be treated seriously without automatically presenting them as established fact (Khaldūn, 1967). Responsible plurality is therefore not a rejection of truth. It recognises that knowledge about objects may come from different sources, while insisting that each source be identified, assessed and placed according to its evidential weight.

1.4.12 Epistemic Injustice and the Recovery of Community Knowledge

Power imbalances within museums are expressed not only through the movement of objects, but also through control over language and classification. The communities that produced or used an object have often been denied the opportunity to name it, explain its function or define its context. Institutional records may foreground collectors, colonial officers and professional categories while giving little attention to makers, owners or source communities (Clifford, 1988; A. S. Said, 1985). Fricker distinguishes testimonial injustice from hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly reduced because of prejudice concerning identity or status. Hermeneutical injustice arises when a group's experience

cannot be adequately expressed through the concepts recognised by dominant institutions (Fricker, 2007). Both forms may occur in museums when community testimony is dismissed because it is not academic, or when local terms are replaced by broad categories that fail to capture the community's own distinctions.

Recovering community knowledge requires more than adding quotations to exhibition labels. Catalogue structures, classification systems, *provenance* records and research procedures must also be reconsidered. Local names can be preserved alongside translations; regional or generational variations can be documented; and gaps in acquisition history can be marked rather than concealed. This allows communities to participate as knowledge holders rather than as symbolic contributors. Source communities, however, are not internally uniform. Differences of family, region, generation, education, occupation and religious orientation may produce competing accounts of the same object. Treating one individual or group as the sole representative of an entire community may create a new form of exclusion. Museums should identify who provided a particular account, the nature of that person's relationship to the object and the limits of the testimony.

The Qur'anic demand for justice requires that claims should not be accepted or rejected merely because of the social position of those who make them (Al-Qur'an, al-Māʾidah 5:8). Colonial records do not become true simply because they were produced by recognised institutions, just as community testimony does not become true simply because it is local. *Amanah* further requires museums to preserve the origin, authorship and degree of certainty of the information they record (Al-Qur'an, al-Nisāʾ 4:58). Al-Attas associates *adab* with recognising the proper place of things and people within an order of knowledge. A craft practitioner may possess authority concerning technique and terminology; an owning family may preserve the history of an heirloom; a linguist may interpret inscriptions; and a historian may assess chronology. Epistemic justice does not require all voices to occupy the same level. It requires each to be placed according to the kind of knowledge it contributes (Al-Attas, 2001).

1.4.13 Adab-Based Authority as an Alternative to Monopoly and Relativism

The question of who has the right to interpret objects is central to contemporary museology. Traditional models often concentrated authority in curators and institutions, while *New Museology* called for greater participation by communities and audiences. This shift is necessary, but interpretive authority cannot be resolved merely by increasing the number of participants. Curators possess expertise in collection management, narrative construction and exhibition communication. Conservators understand material condition and risk. Historians assess documentary evidence and chronology. Linguists interpret terminology and inscriptions. Source communities contribute knowledge of use, memory and custom. Religious scholars are required when questions concern law, sanctity and proper conduct. No single participant possesses complete authority over every dimension of an object.

Criticism of curatorial dominance should not lead to the equalisation of all claims. Experience, technical expertise, belief and historical evidence occupy different epistemic positions. Shared authority must identify the question being asked, the form of evidence required and the qualifications necessary to assess it. The Qur'an instructs those who do not know to consult people of knowledge (Al-Qur'an, al-Naḥl 16:43). Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud likewise emphasises that the Islamic intellectual tradition recognises distinctions among fields and levels of expertise. Together with al-Attas's account of *adab*, these principles support the concept of adab-based authority (Al-Attas, 2001; Daud, 1998).

Adab-based authority allocates interpretive and decision-making responsibility according to the object of inquiry, the strength of the evidence, the relevant method and the limits of competence. It rejects curatorial monopoly because institutions do not possess the totality of an object's meaning. It also rejects relativism because participants do not hold equal authority in every matter. The concept requires experts to acknowledge the boundaries of their own knowledge. Religious scholars may clarify legal and devotional questions, but they do not necessarily determine conservation treatment. Conservators understand material risk, but may not be qualified to interpret theological content. Source communities contribute essential experiential knowledge, but one account does not automatically represent an entire society. In practice, adab-based authority can be supported by layered documentation. Material data and *provenance* can be recorded separately from disciplinary interpretation, oral history and unresolved claims. Disagreement need not be hidden, but its character and evidential basis should be made clear. In this way, the museum ceases to function as the sole voice while remaining responsible for placing each claim according to its source and strength.

1.4.14 Table 2 : Adab-Based Authority in Museum Interpretation and Decision-Making

Question or Decision	Principal Knowledge Holder	Supporting Contributors	Primary Evidential Basis	Limit of Authority
Material composition and physical condition	Conservator or conservation scientist	Curator, technical specialist and object historian	Scientific examination, condition reports and material analysis	Cannot independently determine religious, social or historical meaning
Dating, ownership and historical provenance	Historian, archivist or provenance researcher	Curator, source community and linguist	Documentary records, inscriptions, archival sources and comparative history	Documentary evidence may remain incomplete or shaped by institutional bias
Terminology and inscription	Linguist, epigrapher or manuscript specialist	Source community, historian and religious scholar	Language, palaeography, inscription and textual comparison	Linguistic expertise does not alone establish use or legal status
Customary use and community memory	Source community or relevant practitioner	Historian, curator and anthropologist	Oral history, inherited practice, family records and material traces	One informant cannot automatically represent the entire community
Sacred status, religious law and appropriate conduct	Qualified religious scholar	Conservator, curator, manuscript specialist and community representative	Religious texts, legal reasoning, object content and historical function	Religious judgement must engage with material condition and museum realities
Exhibition narrative and public communication	Curator or interpretive team	All relevant knowledge holders	Synthesised evidence, audience needs and exhibition objectives	Curatorial responsibility does not confer unlimited authority over every knowledge domain
Conservation treatment of a sacred object	Conservator in consultation with a religious scholar	Curator, object historian and source community	Material risk, professional ethics, religious status and intended use	Neither technical nor religious expertise should operate in isolation
Revision of catalogue information	Interdisciplinary institutional panel	Previous record authors, specialists and communities	New evidence, source comparison and documented reasoning	Revision should preserve the history of earlier interpretations

Table 2 translates adab-based authority into an institutional arrangement. It neither abolishes curatorial authority nor transfers complete control to source communities or religious scholars. Instead, authority follows the question being addressed, the evidence required and the competence of the participant. This structure recognises that expertise is real but limited. The model is particularly useful when objects occupy several domains simultaneously. Decisions concerning a Qur'an manuscript may require a conservator to assess binding and pigment, a manuscript specialist to identify script and dating, a historian to examine provenance and a religious scholar to advise on appropriate handling or display. None can provide a complete interpretation independently. Adab-based authority also prevents community participation from becoming symbolic. Source communities are treated as holders of specific knowledge concerning terminology, use, memory and sensitivity. Their testimony is documented and assessed rather than inserted merely to

demonstrate inclusivity. At the same time, the model acknowledges that communities contain internal differences and that no single participant automatically represents an entire tradition.

1.4.15 Sacred Objects and the Limits of Museum Use

Sacred objects present challenges that are not identical to those associated with ordinary historical collections. Sanctity may arise from textual content, devotional function, religious law, original location or the way an object is treated by a community. Qur'an manuscripts, objects containing sacred verses, ritual implements and funerary materials therefore require attention to both material condition and normative status. Modern museology offers indispensable methods for the conservation, study and display of such materials. Codicological analysis, imaging, epigraphic research and environmental control contribute to their preservation and interpretation. Professional method alone, however, cannot determine whether an object may be touched, displayed at a particular height, included in an interactive programme or reproduced digitally without restriction.

New Museology values audience experience and community sensitivity, but the sacred status of an object cannot be determined solely by emotional response. Within Islam, sanctity may derive from content, function or legal status. Community perspectives remain important, but questions of law and proper conduct also require consultation with qualified religious scholars. The Qur'an associates reverence for the symbols of God with piety of the heart (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥajj 22:32). This provides a general normative basis for respectful treatment, but not a complete technical policy for museums. Application requires attention to the nature of the object, its physical condition, the purpose of display and the expertise relevant to the decision.

Sound practice therefore depends on cooperation between religious and museum expertise. Legal judgement should not be formulated without understanding material condition, while conservation requirements should not be used to disregard sacred status. *Adab* allows a *mushaf* to be studied as a manuscript without treating it as identical to every other text. *Amanah* requires institutions to record transparently the reasoning behind decisions concerning handling, display and digitisation. Recognising sanctity does not obstruct research. It ensures that research, access and exhibition do not diminish the object or damage the relationship that communities maintain with it.

1.4.16 Decolonisation as the Recovery of Context and Intellectual Order

Museum decolonisation often focuses on *provenance*, restitution, representation and community participation. These concerns are essential because many collections were formed through unequal relations of power. Yet ownership transfer or the addition of community voices does not by itself restore meaning if colonial terminology, classification and intellectual ordering remain unexamined. Said demonstrates how colonial knowledge represented Eastern societies through categories that facilitated control. Clifford and Thomas (1994) likewise show that objects moved into collecting institutions acquired new identities within the classificatory systems of their receivers. Epistemic decolonisation must therefore ask not only who owns an object, but also who names it, classifies it and defines its relationships (Clifford, 1988; E. W. Said, 1978).

The recovery of local terminology is one practical step. Terms carry concepts, functions, regional histories and social relationships. Original names may be retained alongside translations, while variations can reveal differences of period, region or use. Such plurality is not an obstacle to classification; it forms part of the biography of the object. Colonial sources need not be discarded wholesale. Records produced by officials, travellers and collectors may preserve information unavailable elsewhere. They should nevertheless be evaluated in relation to purpose, language, authorial position and administrative interest. Ibn Khaldūn's (1967) critique of unexamined historical transmission allows such records to remain evidentially useful without granting them unlimited authority.

Islamic epistemology extends decolonisation from the recovery of voice to the recovery of intellectual order. *Tawhid* resists the separation of art, religion, knowledge and social life when such divisions distort the history of an object. Knowledge requires claims to be supported by evidence. *Adab* places terminology and interpreters according to their proper status. *Amanah* requires acquisition histories and gaps in *provenance* to be disclosed honestly. The Qur'anic requirement of justice also prevents decolonisation from becoming a wholesale rejection of scholarship produced by Western researchers or colonial officials (Al-Qur'an, al-Māʾidah 5:8). The aim is not to replace one monopoly with another, but to reopen the object to a wider range of evidence and a more just ordering of knowledge.

1.4.17 Operationalising the Tawhid–Knowledge–Adab–Amanah Framework

The tawhid–knowledge–adab–amanah framework does not replace professional museum methods or produce identical decisions for every collection. It offers direction for acquisition, documentation, classification, conservation and interpretation. At the point of acquisition, tawhid requires the object to be understood through its relationships with makers, users, functions, environments, religious traditions and communities. Value should not be determined solely by age, rarity or market price. Acquisition records should preserve original terminology, histories of use, circumstances of transfer and the identities of communities that remain connected to the object.

In documentation, knowledge requires a distinction among fact, inference and tradition. Material, dimensions and inscriptions should be recorded as verifiable data. Claims about function should be accompanied by sources and degrees of certainty, while oral testimony should retain information about the speaker and context of transmission. In classification, adab prevents administrative categories from displacing the identity of the object. A primary collection category may remain necessary, but original names, functions, communities and cross-disciplinary relationships should also be preserved. *Adab* likewise allocates responsibility among curators, conservators, historians, linguists, source communities and religious scholars according to competence. In conservation, amanah connects material stability with evidential integrity. Traces of use, earlier repairs, colour changes or ownership marks may possess historical value. Treatment decisions should be documented so that future researchers can distinguish original material from later intervention.

In interpretation, all four principles operate together. *Tawhid* maintains the relationships among material, social, scientific and religious dimensions. Knowledge ensures that claims remain evidence-based. *Adab* orders interpretive authority. *Amanah* requires institutions to acknowledge uncertainty, correct errors and resist filling documentary gaps with narratives that appear more complete than the evidence allows. This framework does not require every exhibition label to contain the entire history of an object. Selection remains unavoidable, but emphasis should not become denial. Concise labels can be connected to catalogues, databases, community recordings and digital resources that provide additional layers of information. Four questions can guide institutional practice: What relationships make this object meaningful? What evidence supports its interpretation? Who possesses authority in relation to the question being asked? What responsibilities does the museum bear towards the material, the knowledge attached to it and the communities connected with it? These questions translate the preservation of meaning from an abstract claim into a workable professional responsibility.

1.4.18 Table 3 : Operational Application of the Tawhid–Knowledge–Adab–Amanah Framework

Museum Function	*Tawhid*	Knowledge	*Adab*	*Amanah*
Acquisition	Identifies relationships among object, maker, user, function, environment and tradition	Verifies ownership, acquisition history and available evidence	Recognises the object's status and the parties qualified to advise on it	Ensures lawful, transparent and ethically defensible acquisition
Documentation	Preserves multiple dimensions rather than a single administrative identity	Distinguishes verified fact, inference, testimony and uncertainty	Retains original terminology and assigns claims to appropriate sources	Records provenance gaps, changes and corrections honestly
Classification	Connects material, religious, social, scientific and political dimensions	Uses categories supported by evidence	Prevents administrative labels from displacing epistemic identity	Maintains cross-references that allow neglected meanings to be recovered
Conservation	Relates physical treatment to historical use and evidential value	Assesses materials, deterioration and traces of intervention	Respects sacred status and the historical significance of alterations	Documents treatment and avoids unnecessary removal of evidence

Interpretation	Presents the object through its relevant relationships	Aligns claims with sources and degrees of certainty	Orders voices and expertise according to the question	Communicates limitations, disagreement and missing information transparently
Community participation	Restores relationships between collections and knowledge-bearing communities	Documents testimony and compares it with other sources	Recognises internal diversity and limits of representation	Avoids token participation and preserves attribution
Display of sacred objects	Connects material, devotional and intellectual significance	Establishes the object's content, function and legal status	Applies appropriate handling, placement and explanatory language	Balances public access, research and respect
Digitisation	Links digital images to full contextual metadata	Identifies what the digital representation can and cannot establish	Respects status, sequence, scale and conditions of access	Prevents decontextualised circulation from replacing responsible interpretation

Table 3 demonstrates that the proposed framework is not confined to theoretical criticism. Each principle performs a distinct function across the principal activities of the museum. *Tawhid* protects relational integrity; knowledge governs evidential validity; *adab* orders the status of objects and interpreters; and *amanah* binds the institution to transparency and responsible care. The four principles should not be treated as separate procedural boxes. They operate together. During acquisition, for example, verification of ownership is an epistemic requirement, recognition of sacred or communal status is a matter of *adab*, and transparency concerning transfer is an expression of *amanah*. During conservation, material stability must be considered alongside traces of use, religious status and the documentary record of intervention. The framework also allows museums to retain professional methods without assuming that technical efficiency alone determines good practice. It directs documentation, classification and conservation towards the preservation of both evidence and meaning. Its purpose is therefore not to Islamicise museum terminology superficially, but to establish a coherent relationship between professional competence, epistemic discipline and moral responsibility.

1.5 Implications for Contemporary Museology

The tawhid, knowledge, adab and amanah framework has direct implications for documentation, classification, conservation, shared curation, the care of sacred objects and museum education. These implications are not confined to institutions formally identified as Islamic museums. Any museum holding Qur'an manuscripts, gravestones, ritual objects, astronomical instruments, textiles, ceremonial weapons or objects associated with Muslim governance must address the relationship between material form, function, knowledge and authority. Professional museology remains indispensable, but its methods require epistemic and moral direction.

1.5.1 Documentation, Provenance and Epistemic Transparency

Museum documentation commonly records accession numbers, object names, material, dimensions, technique, date, place of origin and physical condition. Such information is essential, but records limited to material description can gradually lose local terminology, histories of use, provenance and community knowledge. The way an object is documented determines what may subsequently be known about it, while its incorporation into a collection alters the relationships through which it was previously understood. Layered documentation should distinguish material data, disciplinary interpretation, oral testimony, institutional inference and unresolved claims. Names, dates, attributions, functions and provenance should not be accepted as fact merely because they have appeared in catalogues for many years. The principles of

tabayyun and evidential restraint require the language of the record to correspond to the strength of the available evidence (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥujurāt 49:6; al-Isrāʾ 17:36).

Collectors' notes, dealers' accounts, family traditions and community testimony may contain information unavailable elsewhere and should not be discarded. They should, however, retain details about authorship, date, context and degree of verification. The hadith warning against transmitting everything one hears without scrutiny supports a clear distinction between preserving a report as evidence and endorsing it as established fact (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, n.d., Introduction, Hadith 5). Provenance should likewise extend beyond a succession of owners. It includes the circumstances of acquisition, mechanisms of transfer, relations of power and gaps in documentation through which an object entered the museum. Colonial collections may have been formed through purchase, gift, expedition, coercive removal or circumstances that can no longer be reconstructed. *Amanah* requires institutions to distinguish openly between complete, disputed and unknown parts of this history (Al-Qur'an, al-Nisāʾ 4:58). Expressions such as *possibly*, *according to an earlier record*, *based on family tradition* or *function uncertain* are not signs of weak scholarship. They demonstrate that the institution distinguishes evidence from inference and acknowledges the limits of its knowledge. Such precision prevents inherited assumptions from acquiring false authority through repetition.

1.5.2 Relational Classification and the Evidential Integrity of Conservation

Classification remains necessary for the systematic management of collections. A single administrative category, however, should not be treated as a complete account of an object's identity. A Qur'an manuscript may be documented simultaneously as a codex, sacred text, educational object and devotional possession. An astrolabe may be connected with astronomy, metalwork, geography, qibla determination, prayer timekeeping and systems of patronage. *Tawhid* provides a basis for preserving these relationships. The unity of knowledge does not dissolve disciplinary distinctions, but it resists the rigid separation of art, religion, science and political life when the history of the object itself joins them. A primary category may remain useful for storage and administration, but it should be accompanied by original terminology, function, source community, intellectual context and changes in use.

The same principle applies to conservation. Scratches, discoloration, earlier repairs, residues and traces of handling may appear to be damage, yet they may also contain evidence of use, ownership or changing function. Treatments designed primarily to produce a visually clean object risk removing part of its biography. Responsible conservation distinguishes deterioration that threatens material survival from alterations that possess historical significance. Interventions should be fully documented so that future researchers can distinguish original material from later treatment. The purpose of conservation is not to return an object to an imagined state of perfection, but to secure its physical continuity while protecting the evidential traces through which its history can be reconstructed.

1.5.3 Shared Curation and Adab-Based Authority

Community participation can recover terminology, histories of use, memories and sensitivities absent from institutional records. Shared curation should not, however, be reduced to inserting community quotations into exhibition labels. Catalogue structures, classification systems, provenance research and interpretive procedures must also remain open to correction. Source communities are internally diverse. Family affiliation, region, generation, education, occupation and religious orientation may produce different accounts of the same object. Museums should therefore identify who provided a claim, the person's relationship to the object and the limits of that testimony. Treating one voice as representative of an entire community may reproduce the exclusion that participation was intended to correct. Shared curation is strengthened when organised through adab-based authority. Curators, conservators, historians, linguists, source communities and religious scholars possess different forms of knowledge and different limits. The Qur'anic instruction to consult people of knowledge recognises that authority should correspond to the nature of the question and the expertise required to answer it (Al-Qur'an, al-Naḥl 16:43).

Museums may establish advisory groups suited to particular collections. Such groups need not replace curatorial responsibility, but they can ensure that decisions involving language, historical interpretation, religious law, conservation or community sensitivity are not made by one discipline alone. Disagreement need not be concealed, provided that its nature and evidential basis are made clear. Adab-based authority also has implications for professional training. Curators of Islamic heritage should

understand the basic intellectual and religious status of the objects they manage, while religious scholars involved in museum decisions should be familiar with documentation, provenance and conservation. The aim is not to turn every participant into a universal expert, but to cultivate the judgement required to recognise when another form of expertise is necessary.

1.5.4 Sacred Objects, Exhibition and Digitisation

Sacred objects require policies that connect conservation, research, display and religious status. Professional methods can determine physical condition and material risk, but they do not by themselves resolve questions of handling, display height, photography, interactive use or unrestricted digital reproduction. Within Islam, sacred status may derive from textual content, ritual function or legal classification. Community perspectives remain important, but these questions may also require consultation with qualified religious scholars. The Qur'an associates reverence for the symbols of God with piety of the heart, establishing a general basis for respectful treatment (Al-Qur'an, al-Ḥajj 22:32).

This principle does not produce a ready-made technical policy. Decisions must consider the nature of the object, its material condition, the purpose of exhibition and the expertise relevant to the case. A *mushaf* may be examined through codicology, material analysis and art history without being treated as identical to every other manuscript. Research remains legitimate, but its procedures should reflect the authority and status of the text. Digitisation expands access and reduces handling of original objects, yet digital images can detach an artefact from scale, texture, sequence, function and context. Images should therefore be accompanied by metadata concerning terminology, provenance, inscription, use, source communities and the status of interpretation. Where sacred material is involved, museums should also consider the purpose of access and the possibility that images may circulate in contexts radically different from those for which they were produced. Respect for sanctity does not require the withdrawal of objects from research or public knowledge. It requires that access, reproduction and display be governed by informed judgement rather than by the assumption that technical possibility is sufficient justification.

1.5.5 Museum Education and the Assessment of Meaning Preservation

Museum education should do more than communicate dates, names and materials. Visitors can also be introduced to the processes through which knowledge is produced from documents, inscriptions, material analysis, oral testimony and curatorial interpretation. Such an approach develops epistemic literacy: the capacity to assess sources, recognise degrees of certainty and understand why interpretations change. Islamic heritage objects are particularly suited to this form of education. An astrolabe can illuminate the relationship among astronomy, mathematics, geography, qibla determination and prayer times. A Qur'an manuscript can open discussion of materials, writing, recitation, education, devotion and *adab*. Such connections prevent objects from being presented only as aesthetically impressive artefacts or evidence of technical achievement.

Museum performance is often measured through visitor numbers, programmes, digitised objects and physical collection condition. These measures are useful, but they do not reveal whether meaning has also been preserved. A museum may achieve high standards of conservation while retaining incomplete provenance, inaccurate terminology or inherited catalogue assumptions. Additional assessment may consider the completeness of provenance records, preservation of local terminology, distinction between fact and inference, participation of relevant knowledge holders, documentation of community testimony, policies for sacred objects and the institutional history of catalogue correction. Such criteria need not become a rigid numerical index. Their purpose is to identify forms of loss that are not visible through physical inspection alone. A museum that preserves meaning does more than prevent material deterioration. It sustains the conditions under which knowledge about an object remains transparent, layered and open to correction.

CONCLUSION

Modern museums possess the professional capacity to stabilise, study and transmit objects across generations. Physical survival, however, does not guarantee the survival of meaning. An object may remain materially intact while becoming increasingly detached from its original terminology, function, provenance, source communities, intellectual traditions and structures of authority. *New Museology* has transformed

understandings of the museum by challenging institutional neutrality, curatorial monopoly and the exclusion of communities. These achievements remain essential. Yet interpretive plurality alone does not determine the relative strength of evidence, the limits of expertise or the appropriate treatment of sacred objects. Without a clearer epistemological order, the correction of curatorial dominance may give way to a relativism in which materially different forms of knowledge are treated as equivalent. Islamic epistemology addresses this limitation through *tawhid*, knowledge, *adab* and *amanah*. *Tawhid* preserves the relationships among the material, historical, social, scientific and religious dimensions of an object. Knowledge requires claims to correspond to evidence and degrees of certainty. *Adab* orders the status of objects and interpreters, while *amanah* connects physical care with documentary accuracy, provenance transparency and institutional willingness to revise error. The Qur'an manuscripts and astrolabes examined in this article demonstrate that professional classification does not necessarily eliminate meaning. Museum records can connect material description with devotion, education, protection, astronomy, qibla determination, prayer times and systems of patronage. Loss occurs when categories such as Islamic art, manuscript or scientific instrument become total explanations that obscure other relationships supported by evidence. The article makes three principal contributions. It distinguishes material preservation from the preservation of meaning; it differentiates interpretive restriction, erosion and destruction as forms of meaning loss; and it proposes adab-based authority as a method of allocating interpretive responsibility according to the question, evidence, method and limits of expertise. Interpretive restriction occurs when one dimension is privileged so strongly that other relationships become difficult to see. Erosion occurs when terminology, provenance, histories of use and community knowledge gradually disappear from documentation. Destruction of meaning occurs when institutional categories displace the epistemic identity of an object to the point that its surviving material can no longer be understood through the function, authority and intellectual world that formed it. This distinction permits a precise critique of museums without treating every act of selection or compression as distortion. The study remains conceptual and uses four official collection records as limited empirical illustrations. The framework therefore requires further examination through museum catalogues, exhibition labels, provenance research, conservation practice, shared curatorial processes and policies concerning sacred objects in specific institutions. Islamic museology need not be built through the rejection of modern museum professionalism. Documentation, conservation, research and exhibition remain indispensable. Islamic epistemology provides the normative direction through which those practices may preserve not only the continued existence of objects, but also the histories, meanings and moral claims that make them heritage.

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