

century, wonder was "a form of learning — an intermediate, highly particular state akin to a sort of suspension of the mind between ignorance and enlightenment that marks the end of unknowing and the beginning of knowing;" and the American writer, Stephen Greenblatt, "the expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of experience."

We can be justly proud today of the way in which we have developed and conserved our museum collections, and of our organization of knowledge into highly useful and worthwhile exhibits that use those objects of material culture and the natural world that make up what we appreciate today as art, history and science. What David Wilson's particular museum provides us, however, is the chance, in his own words, "to reintegrate people to wonder." Through remarkable displays on horned humans; the curative powers of urine, duck's breath and mice on toast, fur and all; fruitstone carving; bees who are

understood "to be quiet and sober beings that disapprove of lying and cheating ... dislike bad language and should never be bought and sold;" and the Thums, father and son, whose collections form the basis of the MJT and whose story bears a bizarre similarity to that of the Tradescants, Wilson's creation reminds us of that marvellous human capacity for astonishment and absorption out of which all true creativity arises.

Today's museums are part of a world buried in knowledge. As the critic Reid Sherline has put it in his review of the MJT on the World Wide Web (<http://www.voyagerco.com/links/archive/links960318.html>; see also [www.mjt.org](http://www.mjt.org)): "Mystery under our care has atrophied, has grown delicate and consumptive. Wilson, in his small way, offers an antidote; with him we take our first, tentative steps back from knowing to unknowing." Lawrence Weschler, in this gem of a book — an easy and stimulating evening read — suggests that, in all our certainty and authority, we not forget our roots in the *wunderkammern* — the "wonder cabinets" of a couple or more centuries ago.

## **Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East***

**EDWARD J. KEALL**

Hattox, Ralph S. *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985. xii + 178 pp., 16 illus, paper, US\$14.95, ISBN 0-295-96231-3.

The extraordinary truth is that, compared to thousands of years for the drinking of beer or wine, coffee drinking is a relatively new habit, with less than five centuries of history. We are given the facts to substantiate this case, along with an explanation of why some of the universally told stories like the one about the goat nibbling berries and getting frisky are apocryphal, in Ralph Hattox's 1985 book *Coffee and Coffeeshouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East*. It is a serious treatise, which presents a thorough critique of sixteenth-century Arab writers who published discourses on the history of the subject.

The interest of these writers, as Hattox's, revolves around the religious acceptability of coffee drinking. The introduction of the habit

prompted conservatives to question its legality in religious law, seemingly based on the fact that it was something new and therefore wrong. We hear of fatwahas issued condemning the consumption of coffee. How can one explain that the power of these edicts did not last? One should remember that a fatwah is not a formal edict of the state. It is an opinion. The state may choose to act upon it, of course.

In order to help us understand the different reasons for opposition to the practice, Hattox goes into great detail about the definitions of intoxication and stimulation through substance use that one can extract from the richly poetic, but sometimes confusing language of the Koran. If Hattox had limited himself to these kinds of legalistic theorizing, he might have lost most of our attentions. But by exploring possible political motivations for opposition to the habit, such as by city administrators concerned about unseemly behaviour in coffeeshouses that looked too much like taverns, we have a lively sense of the social setting in which all of this

moralizing took place. The most intriguing of these was the notorious Mecca incident of 1511 when the city superintendent observed shadowy figures lurking in the precincts of the mosque and drinking coffee. Following a staged trial, coffee was declared illegal and burned in the city's streets.

The current commercial nurturing of congenial atmospheres in coffeehouses as places to provide customers with more than just a quick beverage brings us back five hundred years to the beginning of the coffee habit. We benefit, then, indirectly from the fact that in order for us to understand the reasons for the legal wrangling, we are taken back to the origins of coffee drinking and the growing popularization of the coffeehouse culture. For some, this may be the most interesting aspect of the book.

The habit began with groups of mystics in Yemen who, around the mid-fifteenth century, used its stimulating properties to enhance their devotional exercises. As Hattox explains from a digest of Arabic literary traditions, the coffee bush itself was brought to Yemen from Ethiopia. Strangely, coffee found little favour with the Ethiopians at this time. Indeed, southwest Ethiopia is the world's original source of what we call "coffea arabica." But Hattox's association of that name with the region of Kaffa, via the Arabic kahwa-coffee connection, is erroneous

because this regional term was only coined in the eighteenth century. This is a rare lapse, however, and Hattox's presentation of the various theories and interpretations concerning the origin and spread of coffee has stood the test of time (since 1985) very well.

He speculates about the possibility that the spread of coffee may have been prompted in part by merchants who, following the loss of their monopolies in the spice trade after 1492, needed new products to peddle. He takes us on a wonderful tour from the houses of mystics in fifteenth-century Yemen, to the enclaves of expatriate Yemeni merchants in early sixteenth-century Cairo, and thence to Ottoman Istanbul by the middle of the century, all of which happened before the emergence of coffeehouses in eighteenth-century Europe and the Americas besides.

This is not a light read. It is the kind of book one dips into, to explore one facet of the story or another. There is a chapter that deals with the medical effects, or at least reputed effects, of coffee on an assortment of ailments like dropsy, gout and scurvy. For those of us addicted to the caffeine habit, it is useful to be reminded that it was known to be a diuretic. But it was also thought to cure insomnia and melancholy as well. To find out more, read the book and enjoy.

## Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts, *A History of European Picture Frames*

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Mitchell, Paul and Lynn Roberts. *A History of European Picture Frames*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997. 136 pp., 94 illus., cloth US\$29.95, ISBN 1-85894-036-2.

Picture frames are of increasing interest to conservators, art historians, curators and collectors. No longer considered merely an accompaniment to a work of art, picture frames have taken a prestigious and distinct place within the realm of decorative art. Professionals in the art world now strive to study each frame in great detail and view it in both an historical and cultural context. Within the past few decades the picture frame has been highlighted in several exhibits on frames such as *The Art of the Frame: An Exhibition Focusing on American Frames of the Arts and Crafts*

*Movement, 1870-1920*, held at Eli Wilner & Company, Inc., in New York in 1988, and the exhibit, *Italian Renaissance Frames*, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1990. Frames are today considered worthy of study and admiration, and it is not surprising that scholarly publications such as the book under review are being produced as resource material for this emerging area of study.

*A History of European Picture Frames* is a comprehensive survey. It consists of written and visual information on frames gathered by the authors for over twenty years. This information was originally intended for inclusion into a thirty-four-volume *Dictionary of Art* by Macmillan, but, once the magnitude of information collected by the authors was reviewed, it resulted in this independent