Greetings and Good afternoon. My name is Cathleen Fleck. I am an associate professor of Art History in the Fine and Performing Arts Department and also the new director of our new Middle East Studies Minor program here at Saint Louis University. Let me welcome you to the Inaugural Lecture of the new Middle East Studies Minor Program here at Saint Louis University. As the new director of this special multidisciplinary program, let me start by explaining the program’s impetus, acknowledging some individuals important in its development, and then introducing you to our speaker today.

The idea for the Middle East Studies minor program is the brainchild of Ann Wainscott, an assistant professor in Political Science, and Luke Yarbrough, an assistant professor in the History Dept. here at SLU. A couple of years ago, they discovered that, though their diverse scholarly interests run the gamut from early medieval Islamic history to contemporary political and educational systems in northern Africa, they and their students had a common interest in the Middle East. They reached out to other faculty, such as myself, and also to those listed here, to come together and discuss the possibility of putting together a minor program of study. For such a complex part of the world that involves so closely to the cultures of the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, we deemed it essential for students to have a broad understanding of the history, the current state, and the influences of this region through study of a language from that region, a multicultural approach, and historical to modern coverage. We owe great thanks to Ann and to Luke for realizing the great interest among our students and the faculty to give a home to their intellectual intrigue in this part of the world. They shepherded us through the process of applying for the minor, which included helping us to find a home in the International Studies Dept. under the guidance of David Borgmeyer, whom we also thank for his warm welcome and the help he has given us especially by sharing Lori Corzine, his able and willing administrator. Approved then last year, we have been working to craft the details of our minor, to identify more faculty who can teach relevant courses, as you can see here in our expanded list of faculty, to connect with the Madrid campus that offers important classes in the minor as well, to work with student groups on campus, and to develop programming that can reflect the wide interests of students and faculty. We already have students signed up, and we hope that you direct any students who have an interest to us!

In so many ways, our lecture here today is a fitting inaugural event for our program. A first reason that Dr. Renard is so appropriate as a speaker is that he is truly the vanguard at SLU for this minor in Middle East Studies. Here at SLU for 37 years, he has regularly been the sole person teaching Islamic theology and culture on this campus after obtaining his Ph.D. at Harvard University's department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, where he focused on religious literature in Arabic and Persian, as well as Islamic religious art and architecture. At SLU he has been very busy developing a stunning record of publication and scholarly activity. He has written numerous books on topics such as, most recently,
Islamic Theological Themes: A Primary Source Reader ((designer/editor/translator), Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) and Fighting Words: Religion, Violence, and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Indeed today, his dedication to sharing his knowledge is exemplified in how he has kindly offered to sign and give away a number of copies of his short and accessible book Understanding the Islamic Experience after the lecture at the table to the side.

A second reason why Dr. Renard is a wonderful inaugural lecturer is for the interdisciplinarity that the minor aims for and which his work exemplifies. His book Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), shows his facility with images, and his few books on the mystical thirteenth-century poet Rumi (d. 1273) and on Sufi spirituality show how he crosses borders within Islamic studies from poetry to theology to find common threads. Within theological studies, he shows his capacity to think about comparative approaches across religions, as he has taught or written on Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Shinto, as well as Islam.

A third reason that a lecture by Dr Renard is so apt is for the multi-cultural understanding that he brings to the study of the Middle East. His book Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) has just been translated into Farsi and his book All the King’s Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) had an Indonesian translation in 2001. As his talk title suggests, Persian culture melded the richness of Islamic visual culture with that of the central Asian literary heritage to create sumptuous productions of word and image. He has an impressive list of languages in which he has reading knowledge: Classical and Medieval Arabic, Persian, Biblical Hebrew, Classical and Biblical Greek, Classical and Medieval Latin, French, Spanish, German, and Italian – and students wonder why we stress learning even just one language for our minor!

As a way to close my introduction, I would like to display for you a short video, which Dr. Renard himself calls a ‘riff on Rumi’, the mystical poet, jurist, Sufi mystic, and theologian who died in 1273 and whose lyrical words were translated into dozens of languages and have been appreciated for centuries, put to diverse types of music, and illustrated in beautiful books across many cultures. Through traditional Persian illustration backgrounds, forms, and figures, this video adds a modern flair to the words of Rumi. Like Rumi, whose work crossed ethnic boundaries of ethnic variations, national identity, and diverse languages, the work of Dr. Renard demonstrates not only the breadth of influence of the Middle East around the world, but the global effect that the scholarship of Dr. Renard will long have.

Link to youtube video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwVVgYNsAA0