



ASK Working Paper 20

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**Islamic „Art“ History –
some postcolonial perspec-
tives**

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Abstract

This Working Paper questions the concept of “Islamic Art History”. The term is amorphous: ever since the fundamental studies of Oleg Grabar we have known that the direct allocation of religion to art and vice versa raises questions. Art constitutes a cultural subsystem within societies. Sociologically, art has to be tied, or referred, to the realms of politics, economics, law, social orders, institutions and further cultural patterns. Only in the interplay with other cultural studies and the humanities is it possible to deconstruct art, considering its function and cultural context. Often enough it considers its task in the recording, description and classification of objects. This is, of course, an important and essential step, yet, it should not be the reason for stopping to ask further questions about the objects and, especially, to relate them to their socio-cultural context in which they emerged and to which they have to be related. In general, we ask how concepts current in postcolonial studies in disciplines such as history and comparative literature can help Islamic art historians to re-envision their objects of study.

Islamic „Art“ History – Some Postcolonial Perspectives

Stephan Conermann/Bethany Walker

(together with Amr El-Hawary, Miriam Kühn, Nur Özdilmaç & Daniel Redlinger)

A. Outline

On one level, this Working Paper concerns questioning the terms and content of those – usually historically grown – disciplines, that deal with material objects in non-European pre-modern societies on the university level. “Islamic Art History” represents one of them. It is similar to the German term “Islamwissenschaft”, a highly problematic expression which becomes clear immediately when translating it into English: Islamic Studies means neither “the science of Islam” (a literal translation from the German) nor can it be reduced to Islamic theology, which is what “Islamic studies” means in North America. As in the case of the term “Islamwissenschaft”, the term “Islamische Kunstgeschichte” (Islamic Art History) is amorphous: ever since the fundamental studies of Oleg Grabar we have known that the direct allocation of religion to art and vice versa raises questions. Art constitutes a cultural subsystem (like religion as well) within societies. Sociologically, art has to be tied, or referred, to the realms of politics, economics, law, social orders, institutions and further cultural patterns (like knowledge, aesthetics, environment etc.). Only in the interplay with other cultural studies and the humanities is it possible to deconstruct art, considering its function and cultural context. From our point of view, “Pre-Modern Art History” is inextricably linked with Archaeology. Therefore the interconnection between these disciplines plays an important role in our considerations. Collaborative, interdisciplinary research is the only way today of preventing the very real threat of the marginalization of the discipline (or any discipline, for that matter). Archaeological projects are, by necessity and tradition, multi-disciplinary – at least since the “New Archaeology” (or “processual” movement) of the 1970s - and the last decade has witnessed a new spirit of research collaboration that is truly interdisciplinary. New research agendas, which lie beyond the nuts-and-bolts of typology and chronology, and project designs that allow for real dialogue and exchange among specialists, have been key to success in this regard.

There are six components of traditional Islamic Art History which immediately offer themselves for critique. Like other non-European art histories (NEAH) it generally considers its task in the recording, description and classification of objects – the typologies and chronologies that are the building blocks of textbook instruction. This is, of course, an important and essential step, yet, it should not be the reason for stopping to ask further questions about the objects and, especially, to relate them to their socio-cultural context in which they emerged and to which they have to be related. Interpretations remain mostly within a “History of Islamic (South-, East-, Central-Asian, Latin American, African) Art” which is as meaningful or questionable as every history of ideas. It resembles an artificially isolated common thread.

It seems reasonable to increasingly analyze individual works of art, in order to better understand the complexity of embedding the objects in their social conditions. By doing more such qualitative studies of individual works, we are in a better position to establish links between the subsystems of society and the objects. It is also problematic that the patterns for derivation and categorization, which are currently being used in NEAH, are mostly based on research on non-European people and cultures from the 19th century. These schemes of classification have

not sufficiently been critically questioned in the current research of NEAH. The interpretation of the NEAH through the self-reflecting western perspective works only partly, as has been demonstrated by Dipesh Chakrabarti's "Provincializing Europe" (Princeton 2000). Here, the basic problem is that the terms of one culture do not fit into the other one and each culture must be defined with its own terms. But "European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought ... may be renewed from and for the margins" (16). Precisely the "indispensable and inadequate" reveal the present situation of the disciplines dealing with historical issues after the "post-colonial turn". Although, given this paradox, one would like to refrain from the established meta-narrative; it simply does not work.

B. Problem Area

(1) Object Culture vs. Art Object

A majority of material evidence of the pre-modern non-European cultures is widely accepted as objects of art in art historical research and has often been presented as such to the public. Related to this perspective, there is a historically grown concept of art in western art historical research that is applied directly to the non-European object culture. As several studies focusing on "western" art history have already shown, the crucial question arises also in non-European art history as to what extent these artifacts of the pre-modern time can be classified as "art" or whether they are, rather, handicrafts. This pertains, as well, to the issue of surface decoration" does ornament play more than a decorative function, and is it a core characteristic of what makes art "art"? It is problematic, particularly in regard to the non-European, pre-modern contexts, that a large number of art historical research concentrates heavily on objects emerging exclusively from the context of elite culture and are thus rather being interpreted with the notion of "objects of art" instead of "objects of culture". Furthermore, the focus on elite culture leads to a neglect of objects of everyday culture ("object culture"?) in research as a source of social processes and phenomena. A particular problem is the assumption of a western perspective and the methodical approach to the objects derived from it. In order to critically scrutinize one's own perspective on historical objects (like art objects vs. object culture), indigenous attributions and terminologies from sources that developed during the same time as the objects are rarely taken fully into account. This raises a number of questions: What is "art" in the pre-modern time? Which concept or concepts of art can be substantiated within the scientific classification system of the "non-European world"? With regard to this cultural area in the pre-modern time, can we assume that "art" existed as a cultural subsystem or was identified as such? Is there an indigenous concept of art? It must be considered that the indigenous art term itself is generally vivid, not static, heterogeneous and complex. It is necessary to explore the ways such objects functioned in their own societies. What is the significance of indigenous attributions and how to deal with "cultural" interfaces? To what extent do the hitherto existing set of objects and its handling permit modes of inquiry derived from the cultural sciences? Do objects serve as sources for understanding social processes and phenomena? Does it therefore make sense at all to talk about art history in the non-European realm, i.e. the history of "art", instead of object culture, solely? In order to allow a trans- and interdisciplinary network of research, to what extent would a common scientific language be necessary in the field of non-European and European art history research? Culture-specific aesthetics is one promising, and hitherto seldom explored, line of inquiry in this regard. Is it possible to identify the aesthetic norms and habits of a medieval society? In no case can we apply today's aesthetic judgments to pre-modern objects. Yet, what can we consider as "beautiful" or "ugly", as "evil" or "good"? How did the canon of "masterpieces" develop? Isn't it a reflection of

the western researchers taste? Here, studies “beyond the gaze” are necessary. How were the objects seen, cultivated, described, and represented in the textual medium? Furthermore, the term aesthetics, too, should be extended in order to include function and relevance, as well as situativity, and not to restrict to indigenous-aesthetic approaches.

A discussion on the issue of terminology is relevant here. It seems that the concept of “object culture” (*Objektkultur*) comes close to the archaeological term “material culture”. Material culture refers to the totality of material things produced by human hands. It refers to both the “major” and “minor” arts, and recognizes no inherent divide between the “sacred” and “secular”, or “public” and “private”. (The context, and not the object itself, determines these things.) An “artifact” can be understood as a single component of material culture – an object, building, and, yes, even a text/manuscript (the written word, in any form, is an artifact, too). The reality of the material object is a given; interpreting its function, perception, consumption, and contemporary and indigenous meaning is not. You will rarely find a discussion about aesthetics in an archaeological report or study. Archaeologists generally leave such topics to art historians, as it is a level of object analysis that goes a step beyond the archaeologist’s preoccupation with context and function. That is not to say, though, that archaeology has nothing to contribute to debates on what constitutes “art” and “the beautiful”. On the contrary, archaeological analysis offers uniquely spatial and, for want of a better term, “practical” perspectives on what local societies valued aesthetically. The repair and prominent display of ceramic vessels we would consider commonplace, mass-produced, or even unattractive in village households warrants thoughtful discussion of what was “beautiful” in rural society in the medieval Islamic period. One laments the paucity of textual sources (letters, travelers’ accounts, or even drawings of house interiors in illuminated manuscripts) for the medieval Islamic period on non-elite domestic decoration that could be so informative in this regard.

As for source material, an archaeologist would turn to spatial context and particular genres of texts to define art and beauty in pre-modern, non-European cultures. The object itself may be mute, but spatial context, textual allusions (if read critically and creatively), and ethnographic parallels (used with caution) can, collectively, help us unpack the meaning of objects in the aesthetic universe of the cultures we study. There are kinds of textual sources that have been proven to be useful in describing for us the aesthetic sense: artists’ signatures and dedicatory inscriptions, *hisba* manuals, pattern books, and inventories (of personal effects and private collections), which indicate patterns of patronage and production; Sufi-inspired treatises of the Safavid period on aesthetics and art; and customs lists and price indices, which record, but do not explain, the financial value of the time of a commodity. As for the objects themselves, we should revisit, for example, the issue of mass-production. Mass-production and mass-consumption today cynically evokes images of petty bourgeois aspirations and the production of lower quality, imitative goods to satisfy them. But was it necessarily so in pre-modern society? To briefly cite one example, the widespread use of Mamluk heraldry in “civilian” cottage industries, such as mass-produced ceramic bowls and household production of embroideries for trousseaux, suggests a popularization of an official symbol once its original function may have changed. In this case, the individual object tells us little, but the objects in aggregate (let us call them “assemblages”) are very informative. Mass-production of certain kinds of inexpensive glazed bowls – indicated by tripod scars (the evidence of kiln stacking left behind in the bowl interior) and wasters (misshapen, misfired vessels) recovered from excavated contexts – suggests a predilection for color and certain kinds of surface design that we cannot fully understand from the objects themselves. In other words, the act of mass-production alone suggests what is beautiful and valuable to the masses; the fact that the masses appreciate an object’s aesthetic value does not make it any less “beautiful”.

With the recent shift towards rural, as opposed to urban, archaeology and a new emphasis on “vernacular” architecture and cottage industries, the “everyday” of Islamic culture is coming under more focused scholarly scrutiny and gaining greater public visibility. There is a greater appreciation today of what constituted, in a material sense, the non-elite or rural household, how domestic space was organized and how that space was decorated, how members of the household were clothed and what they ate, and what they purchased from a distance. The recent interest in vernacular architecture has promoted study of localized industries and traditions of architectural decoration that have been obscured by an earlier emphasis on official monuments, urban sites, and text focusing on what we have come to call “masterpieces”. Documentary, as opposed to narrative, sources, however, offer an alternative perspective on architecture and domestic space. One should speak namely of *waqfiyyat*, the endowment documents that have been previously mined for information on urban institutions, such as *mad-rasas* and mosques. It takes patience and fortitude to identify *waqfiyyat* on equivalent rural institutions. They do exist, however, with some surprisingly detailed information on village houses, local institutions (mosques and churches, shrines), and other built environments (roads, mills, grain and water storage facilities). “Art” is not merely an urban phenomenon. The greater visibility in the archaeological record of tribal designs (in ad hoc inscriptions, ceramics, textiles, and glass) and regional architectural and ceramic traditions suggests rich rural traditions that are not readily recovered from the textual record and are less familiar to the public.

To summarize, the spatial context is potentially informative about such material aspects as function and aesthetic quality. The archaeological record is uniquely positioned to contribute to debates on what was beautiful and valued as such in medieval Islamic society, so long as the emphasis is on the aggregate (a genre, the assemblage) and the spatial context (the provenance and stratigraphic context), rather than on the individual object or monument.

(2) History of Research

In order to deconstruct the disciplines, fundamental research (*Grundlagenforschung*) with regard to the different histories of science has to be carried out: who were the founders, in which disciplinary environment are they embedded, what was their cultural and intellectual milieu? Art historiographies – just as the representation of the non-European History in general – are largely defined dynastically. Whether this is reasonable is highly questionable in both cases, since on the one hand, this kind of scholarship follows a European conception of history, which cannot be translated neatly to cultures outside of Europe. On the other hand, it defines problematic essentializations (“Seldjuq art”, “Abbasid art” etc.). Thus, continuities and inconsistencies can only be partially followed and analyzed. Beyond this point, such a political orientation blocks the view for other perspectives (economic, cultural, religious, social), which would result in a completely different definition of epochs. Generally, in traditional NEAH the material culture of the ruling elite is being analyzed. This is true both for architecture as well as “craftwork” and painting. The selection of the two latter groups as fields of research is strongly affected by the history of collection and the presentation of these items in the most important museum collections. The analysis of the materiality of religious experiences could lead to new research perspectives. Religiousness— just like all other social phenomena – leaves marks in the material world and is generally not connected to the boundaries of dynasties. Furthermore, the research of articles of daily use can tell about the daily life and give answers about religion, faith, customs, festivities and traditions of the particular society. One should, additionally, ask whether “mass production” is contradictory to our conception of objects of “art” and whether our predilections turn them into objects of culture (articles of daily use)? Is this even a *reductio ad absurdum* of the question of objects as art or

culture? Doesn't the potentially mass-produced salad bowl become an object of art because of its unique feature of preservation and the presentation in a museum or publications? Or maybe this question arises: How are the culture-immanent perceptions of luxury, art, everyday life, and articles of daily use and how can they be made comprehensible? In addition, it would be desirable to gain more knowledge about the artisans. Hitherto, they have been rather neglected in the studies. Little research has been conducted so far about the working place, the organization of artisans, the process of work and production, working tools, distribution channels, and prices, yet they could provide valuable insight into the social status of the artisans and the culture-immanent value of their works. Does it make any sense at all to talk about art history, i.e. the history of "art" in a non-European context? Doesn't it rather refer to a meta-discipline that developed within the western tradition of science, where different scientists analyze historical, social, and cultural phenomena with different methodical approaches and questions based on sources from the field of "object culture"?

Islamic archaeology, in North America as in Germany, grew out of the discipline of Islamic art history. The two disciplines were traditionally taught together. This remains the case in Germany, though the archaeology of the Islamic world has emerged as an area of specialization in its own right, with stand-alone academic programs and institutes in the United States and Denmark. (In the French tradition, Islamic archaeology is closely affiliated with textual history.) In North American academia, it is generally housed in Area Studies (namely Middle East Studies, the American equivalent of the "Islamic Studies" of the German tradition). Regardless of the national tradition, Islamic archaeology remains a disciplinary hybrid, pulling on the methodologies of art history, anthropology, and textual analysis. The special relationship between Islamic art history and archaeology continues in North American scholarship, even if the disciplinary umbilical chord has been severed. Both disciplines continue to be concerned with issues related to production and patronage, distribution, provenience and date. Archaeologists continue to be trained in a specific specialization of art history – in my case that is ceramics – and no excavation team can function without consulting numismatists, glass specialists, ceramicists, and architectural historians. Archaeological research, in short, relies on the expertise of art historians to identify and date objects and buildings, when that information is not readily apparent from the physical, archaeological context. The unfortunate result is the old emphasis on chronology and typology, putting art historians, once again, into a methodological straight-jacket. One way out of this dilemma is to cultivate the inherent potential of both disciplines to illuminate social history. Islamic art history and Islamic archaeology are integral components of Islamic Studies; their methodological focus on objects makes them natural reference points for *Kulturgeschichte*. On a final note, chronological schemes are particularly problematic. It is difficult to break out of the tradition of teaching art history in dynastic segments. To tell the truth, it is too convenient to teach undergraduates Islamic art through reference to the Umayyad, Seljuk, Mamluk periods. In this way, artistic developments can be situated in larger political history, which provides a ready reference. Political chronologies have long been rejected, however, by archaeologists, at least in North America and the larger Anglo world, where the norm has become cultural periodization. Archaeologists there no longer refer to "Umayyad art", but to the "material culture of the Early Islamic period", recognizing that "art" does not necessarily change with a political transition, and that people continue to eat out of the same kinds of bowls, regardless of whether a caliph or sultan is now on the throne. (The handmade pottery of the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods in Southern Bilād al-Shām, for example, belong to the same ceramic tradition – it is all "Middle Islamic" to archaeologists and material scientists.) In writing a cultural history based on objects, this kind of periodization does greater justice to the material record than political chronology.

(3) Terminology – Historical Semantics

A basic difficulty when observing pre-modern phenomena is constituted by (a) using modern categories and concepts to refer to pre-modern phenomena and (b) adopting indigenous terminology without reflection. So far, a historical *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts) that traces the semantics of terms has not even begun at all. The primary text sources which are made accessible by philologists could be groundbreaking here. Concepts of art and definitions of colour, pattern, textile, surface texture etc. provide important information and implicate more than we can see. Since the development of the historical-critical method, addressing language testimonies is part of the basic requirements of an analysis of sources (*Quellenarbeit*). Research approaches which can be summarized under the generic term of historical semantics and which attribute a significant role to the history of terms take this matter of course as a starting point in order to examine the source language itself for its historicity and to determine its role during and for the historical change. Historical semantics analyze the semantic content and change of cultural – especially linguistic – utterances for their historicity. As a historical-scientific approach, this research perspective analyses and interprets the cultural, social, and political conditions and requirements of assigning and articulating meaning at a particular time. For this purpose, the specific access of the history of terms selects isolated, aggregated keywords which are given a key function in order to collect and contextualize linguistic conceptualization. What is not examined is the historical language change which is the subject matter of linguistics. Unlike etymology, that decodes the origin of words, the primary aim of the history of terms and historical semantics is not the linguistic analysis of the history of development of words and terms, but to access historicity in the medium of language and terms. In the sense of a history of meaning, the history of historical semantics is not only suitable for the analysis of words, terms, languages, and discourses. In a broader sense, the methodical arsenal can lead to a survey of further cultural expressions like pictures, rituals, habits, and performativa (such as mimics and gestures) within their changing meaning. A historical analysis that focuses on semantics measures the communicative ranges of a time and traces what was possible to articulate, possible “to say”. In this point, it overlaps with the history of discourse, the analytical process of which particularly identifies and historicizes the rules of what could be said (*Sagbarkeitsregeln*), yet, as a non-hermeneutic history of knowledge, assumes a different linguistic understanding. With the particular attention to the linguistic constitution of historical periods that becomes the subject of analysis itself, and the historicization of cultural knowledge and interpretation, these approaches are closely related to each other. Together, they contributed to the language-philosophical and language-historical raise also in the science of history in the last third of the 20th century which is linked to the key word ‘linguistic turn’. The interdisciplinary approach focuses, thus, on the production of meaning of former societies by means of language, texts, and pictures. By analyzing semantic phenomena which are already interpretations we try to reconstruct meanings through doubly broken lenses. A past is construed on the basis of concepts and conceptualizations which had certain validity for the contemporaries. With our own intellectual premises, we are looking at their worldviews and ideologies. In this scope of subject lies the close relationship to the history of ideas and mentalities. Whereas approaches of the historical semantics focus more on the reconstruction of former communication but fulfill this contextualization in different degrees. While classical history of terms considers the novelty of an imprint as the defining moment that makes a term historically noticeable and usable as an index of historical change, broader perspectives of historical semantics focus more on its controversies and contradictions. Beyond the linguistic level, they functionally determine the negotiation of concepts, terms, or argumentations in political and social situations of communication and specify them with regard to the particular speaking, the political regimes, and further social and historical conditions at a certain moment or period.

If the ultimate goal of studying an object is to better understand the culture behind it (and the people that produced and consumed it), then every attempt should be made to utilize terminology, and cultural references, of that time and place. Certainly this is already done to some degree in architectural history (*muqarnas*, *iwān*, *qubba*). Part of the challenge of assembling a corpus of culture- and period-appropriate terms is in locating them in the texts of the period. It is theoretically possible to do this to some degree through such texts as *waqfiyyat*, *hisba* manuals, and contemporary art treatises (as mentioned earlier), documenting changes in terminology (and their social context) over time. Such sources, however, are more plentiful for certain periods than other. There has been a movement in Ottoman archaeology to adopt architectural and ceramic terminology that is regionally, and even tribally, specific. These efforts have relied heavily on descriptions of places and things culled from 19th-century travel literature and on ethnographic parallels (*qiwara* for a clay grain bin, for example, and an *ibriq* as a spouted drinking jar). This has had some limited success, documenting developments in food systems, family structure, and group representation in the process. Consultation with a much wider range of cultural products would be required, though, for earlier periods, for which we do not have detailed travel literature or the opportunity for immediate ethnographic enquiry (through interviews). Once again, we return to the importance of context – material culture in the aggregate and in a spatial setting. In this sense, it might be easier to write a narrative of rural society, in which ethnographic parallels with more modern cultures of comparable socio-economic structure are possible. This is not to embrace an orientalist perspective, in that all rural societies of the Middle East are the same in all periods, but to recognize that certain patterns of food and water storage traditions are to be found in certain cultural and environmental contexts, for example. Anthropological and ethnographic methods could prove useful in this way.

(4) Context

It is a central task to locate an object in its context and to consider it as a coherent whole. Here, the question of which context is reasonable comes up. In linguistics, for example, the smallest significant unit (*Sinneinheit*) marks the outlines of a semantic context of auto- and synsemantic words. Applied to an object, this may mean that in the context of “close reading” a reference generates itself from the object as such. Thereby, an autonomous aesthetic, transsituational, and functionless meaning of the object can be determined; as we already know it from the traditional definition of art. Questions like how to limit these relations and whether the object really carries its meaning inside are crucial. In addition, in order to locate the object, the approach of the history of style and the typological one are options, too. By doing this, we approach closer to “close reading” concerning the object, the hierarchization of family-like types and genres, the epochs, and the groups of material. Hereby, the context is outlined through referentiality, intertextuality, citation, and evocation and the relationship of the object to its family members is being disclosed. Now, it is crucial to find out whether there are interferences between the object and the outside world. The object, or monument, is situated in its larger cultural context and a multiplicity of socio-cultural relations and functions are to be considered. In this way, we move conceptually to social history in its fullest sense. Postmodern tendencies regard the object as a meeting point of different factors and contextualize it according to different socio-cultural premises. These factors are power relationships, staging of power, colonization, gender- and race-images as well as social and economic aspects that are discussed in relation to centre vs. periphery. However, it is left open under which premises the objects were “used” and which factors played a role in the production and usage. How can a context be defined? From which perspective is a context constructed? Where do we have to search for the context and above all, how was it established? Even in the

archaeological context, in the end, findings become – despite meticulous documentation and scientific efforts – an issue of interpretation. Interpretation itself derives from new as well as historical background information, sources, texts, etc. that could be constructed themselves. How should we deal, then, with the fragmentization, hybridity, and fluidity of the sources?

Spatial context is the crux of archaeological interpretation. Archaeologists work and conceptualize in a three-dimensional environment, constantly referring to the physical context of artifacts. Excavations (both legal and illicit) are the ultimate sources of the objects (if those objects are authentic) studied by art historians. Archaeology, and archaeological methods and interpretations in particular, have everything to contribute to discussions on context and meaning. Objects, for the archaeologist, acquire meaning through their physical association with other objects and their recovery from certain kinds of buildings, rooms, and installations. Pivotal to these spatial contexts are the concepts of stratigraphy, provenience, and assemblage. The stratigraphic relationship of objects to one another – the result of the superimposition of layers of soils and the cultural remains within them through single events or activities – bear physical witness to relationships among artifacts (objects), their function within a space, and the relative sequence of the events that produced that sequence of layers. Provenience refers to the place of origin (or manufacture) or archaeological find spot, through which narratives of production, distribution, exchange, consumption, reuse, and disposal can be posited. An assemblage of artifacts is the collective of objects – those which are found together in the same stratigraphic context and were presumably used together. The nature of the assemblage, moreover, helps us to identify the function of the room in which they were found. Together the three concepts allow for a reconstruction of social and physical context, function, and contemporaneity that is not possible with the study of a single object alone, particularly if divorced from its physical environment. It is the purpose of locus and feature sheets (which correspond to the smallest units of excavation and survey, respectively) to reconstruct the three-dimensional context of each object in a way that relates it spatially to other objects, places, and spaces. The record-keeping can be overwhelming in its detail, and painful to maintain, but without it, spatial contexts (and all other related contexts – environmental, topographical, etc.) would be lost in a process that is ultimately destructive. It also relates objects to one another, and can objectively be used to reconstruct chronological and functional relationships between and among objects. While such data is subject to interpretation, the benefit of this kind of record-keeping is that it preserves such relationships for study in the future, when methods develop, research programs change, and new questions about cultures and societies arise. It also allows us to relate what may at the time seem to be unrelated phenomena. A vessel that functioned as a beehive in one context, may have been used to bury infants in another, to cite recent examples from Mamluk Palestine. The physical context informs about socio-cultural context and, ultimately, meaning. Outside of the extant architectural setting, spatial context can only be constructed from archaeological fieldwork. An unprovenienced object – and this, unfortunately, accounts for many of the “masterpieces” on display in world-class museums (and which, in turn, become the focus of art historical analysis) – are stripped of this invaluable information. The benefit of archaeological context should be obvious – the stratigraphic context is physically (and chronologically) closer to the object (when it was in use) and preserves a range of associated artifact types that never make it into museum collections. Without stratigraphic associations of different kinds of objects, how would we know that women’s glass bangles were likely used as currency during *hajj*? While stratigraphic contexts provide some of the best physical contexts for the assessment of social context, function, and meaning, we should remember that objects end up in a particular place through different means. Depositional processes, which operate independently of socio-cultural ones, are also important in moving an object from one place to another.

(5) Categorization and Canonization of the Total of Objects

Pre-scientific consciousness and mythical evaluation of epochs – especially the ancient and biblical period – highly influenced the conception of time in the history of art and thus the branches which have emerged from it like the Islamic history of art. The particular problem at this point is that the patterns of derivation and categorization referring to this issue are mainly based on a research on non-European peoples and cultures of the 19th century. As yet, there is no critical and broad study on this problematic, historically developed schemata of categorization with a specific relevance to the objects of the field of non-European history of art. Art historiography in the pre-modern time is in most cases largely oriented on political processes, dynastic constructs and inconsistencies. It is questionable if this is reasonable since on the one hand, these presentation lines follow a European concept of history that can rarely be transferred to non-European fields one-to-one, and on the other hand, they undertake problematical essentialisations. Therefore, continuities and inconsistencies can only be followed and analyzed in a limited way. Furthermore, this politics-oriented historiography blocks the view for other (economic, cultural, religious, social) perspectives which would result in a completely different set of epochs. For example, it would be difficult to put the history of rural settlement into dynastic categories. Historical and modern museum projects just like well known art historical overview works in which these non-European artifacts are presented in direct relation with dynastic and political, monolithic time levels, strengthen this canonized view on object culture that is limited on political events. In this regard, objects are seen as memoirs of the past. Yet, in doing so, the focus is not on the visual but rather on the link between the narrative, the territorial, the ethnic, and the national union. It should therefore be asked in how far the individual disciplines uncritically pass on this canon formation until today? Do these models of assignment themselves lead the observer and the observed to an image that creates the identity of “another” culture? How could these narratives be decoded and broken in trans- and interdisciplinary research groups?

C. Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

There is generally a lack of a clear methodological approach in the “non-European art histories”. The traditional stylistic-descriptive method is rather outdated, and little in it is innovative and attractive. How much contextual knowledge do we have? How do we proceed? Stylistic and typological analysis provide an important basis for any work with art but the analysis of single works should be taken into consideration, as well, before starting to contextualize. At the same time objects should be seen as solidified social dynamics, first of all providing criteria for the definition of key discourses (poetics of culture). After all, we are dealing with the following questions: What is the function of an object in the society? Is art a part of a culture? Does art have a function in the cultural field? What about travelling concepts? The discipline of Islamic archaeology, rooted in description and classification like that of Islamic art history, has been threatened by scholarly marginalization for want of theoretical depth. It is becoming increasingly clear that the salvation of archaeology, at least in North America, is a return to its roots in anthropology, where well developed concepts of culture and social process have lent themselves to theoretical sophistication. Theory is, of course, only an interpretive and narrative tool, but an important one in translating scholarship from one discipline to another and in addressing the larger questions about society that transcend individual fields of study.

(1) Comparison

Discussions about the social-scientific comparison of culture always revolve around the question of identity and difference. A common critique of any comparison between cultures is that such a comparison hold close to it “own” pattern and assimilates or exoticizes “the other”. This corresponds to the criticism of the modern approaches of anthropology and culture theory which evaluate the attempts of comparing cultures as ethnocentric intentions and veiled efforts to subjugate the other. According to Joachim Renn, this criticism reflects the “decentralization of ‘own’ horizons” that many people experience in connection with social and cultural diversification in the context of globalization. Here, first of all, the assumption that entities of nation-states constitute a cultural homogenous unity erodes. After that, “not only the homogeneity of a nation’s culture (...) is called into question but the ‘container’-model of cultures in general, that among other things exclusively assigns persons to one and only one culture and understands borders between cultures as distinct and stable as well as self-identifying.” Following this logic, it seems that the “other” culture is out of reach through the heightened experience of distance between the description of a culture and the culture itself. However, taking into account that the description of a culture is selective and the approach to this other culture is multidimensional, the difference between the verbal description (“conceptual representation”) of a culture and the practical perception (“practical approach”) of this culture can be explained. It can therefore be concluded for the practice of comparing cultures that not only the translation between two horizons and life forms but also or especially “the translation between the certainties of acting and explicit knowledge or rather rationalized, argumentative discourse” is necessary. In order to do so, at first the translator has to gain knowledge in order to deduce the distance between familiar conceptual categories and those phenomena which they should describe. Then the translator has to try to express these new insights in the language of the culture (of origin). These new relations across the borders between unions of integration signify at the same time factual interventions and represent selective, uncontrollable exportations that are connected to unpredictable side-effects. Therefore, in Renn’s view, the translation relations must “keep a balance between ongoing opportunities of exchange relations and the maintenance of borders between unities of integration.”

(2) Objects in Translation

With his publication *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval „Hindu-Muslim“ Encounter* from 2009, Finbar B. Flood offers a new view on object culture of the pre-modern elite in the region of today’s Afghanistan, Pakistan and Northern India during the 8th and 13th century. What makes the publication particularly interesting is the critical look at the historically grown narrative of the used terminology in order to separate two cultures that oppose and are hostile towards each other – a “Hindu” and an “Islamic” one. In previous research, both narratives were mainly regarded as monolithic cultural realities and culturally inconsistent. Finbar B. Flood demonstrated that this use of categories and their link to material culture is mainly politically motivated and constructed on the basis of historical texts. As a counter model, he shows with the help of objects of the material culture like coins, clothing, architecture, paintings, and sculptures how these artifacts can be used as proof of social and political encounters and processes of exchange beyond the imaginary border. Finbar B. Flood focusses especially on the aspect of mobility of the objects, for example how they “work” as a political gift or article of trade. In this context, he also discusses the mobility of the artisans who are involved in the production of these objects and their products. Finbar B. Flood also offers an important approach for the methodical integration of *cultural studies*. As a result of his reflections, he no longer interprets object culture as static art objects that are limited by location and directly related to the ruling elite. For him, they rather reflect material translation

processes of culture which have taken place on different levels in the above mentioned period as a result of the development of transcultural identities in South Asia.

(3) Actor-Network Theory (Bruno Latour).

Motion of ants, swarm intelligence, agency of objects: the question emerges, what would our research object say about our interpretation? How does the history look from the objects' perspective? In this method, basically, the division of subject/object is called into question. Objects are not just nature or culture, they are rather involved in the shaping of their meaning as an intermediary. From this point of view, objects are capable of action, because they resist, and, due to their materiality and constitution, they dictate in a constant reciprocal process of acting and reacting how people who work and shape them have to deal with them. The actor-network theory (also called ANT) concentrates on the dynamics of dealing with objects. Objects have to be regarded as dynamic processes and not as static mass that is once shaped by human efforts. Objects are the final result of long term interactions in several steps and complex processes in which they were involved as intermediary. Thus, there are not only subject and object but heterogeneous intermediaries and hybrid beings Latour calls "quasi-objects". These heterogeneous "quasi-subjects" transform constantly and therefore can only define as intermediaries and actors where the network starts and where it ends. What role do the different elements play in this process of sense-giving (*Sinngebung*) and how can they define their role in the context of a circulating reference of meaning? This can only be accomplished by describing transfer and shifting processes as they are carried out in an ANT-analysis that immitate the tenacious motion of a hard-working ant and, in doing so, the associative relation of all involved elements is outlined. For this purpose, laboratories, workshops and studios have a special significance, since only there the observing and describing of "art in making" or "art in action" following Latour's "science in the making" is possible. A stable network leaves no marks and therefore, it is not noticable for those who are not involved and outside of the network. For this reason, crises, revolutions, times of upheaval, and innovations are of particular importance. In such cases, the need for definitions of defence and explanations and actualizations are obvious. In those examinations, closed "blackboxes" are divided into their smallest components and each part is followed as a thread through the historical developments (*Entstehungsgeschichten*). The innovative character of this method is, above all, that with this way of description, an important switch of perspective takes place - from the subject to the object and back. Important questions arise from this perspective. How will an object tell its story? Is it possible to separate technical, cultural, material, and social factors from one another? Why do we write a one-sided, "flat", art history? How can we methodically separate single elements in a proper way? Where does this confusing historical development (*Entstehungsgeschichte*) consisting of complex webs begin? The potential of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is to trace the many, overlapping social networks that give objects meaning, and through which they are transformed. ANT is not so much a map (a "how-to" guide) for interpreting networks, as a way of visualizing their complexity and vitality. Relevant to the scholar of material culture is the notion that an object/artifact, as an "actor", can function in different networks at the same time (or put differently, could serve multiple social functions), and that each experience along the way can change the object's function, meaning, and ability to impact other objects. The material becomes alive in this way and takes a life of its own. Most importantly, ANT challenges us to investigate a multiplicity of relations and networks, with the understanding that even the most unlikely factors may impact one another (even if not directly). This, I believe, is also the key to successful interdisciplinary research. Related to this is the anthropological concept, espoused by Clifford Geertz, of "thick description". (Here we prefer the anthropological understanding of the term, rather than that of literary criticism, since we are dealing with objects. The archaeologist, besides, gravitates naturally towards the

anthropological.) Culture is complex and many-sided. One cannot understand a culture other than one's own, without attempting to describe every one of its components, in as rich as detail as possible. Human behavior, and its material products, becomes meaningful only in its larger cultural context. No aspect of culture is irrelevant; everything is interconnected. Both rituals (Geertz's preoccupation) and objects are cultural products and represent that culture on some level. In short, a single object can be related to all aspects of culture, in one way or another, and the full meaning of the object can be appreciated only when those interconnections are investigated.

(4) New Historicism

In the New Historicism, the question concerning the way of how literary texts refer to their historical environment is posed in a new way. The relationship under scrutiny is not the one of works and background anymore but – regarding the theory of intertextuality – the relation of one text to all the other texts of its culture. A text is not regarded as an aesthetically closed unit any longer but as a junction in a cultural web where numerous strings of discourses cross each other. Texts are loaded with social energy which makes them resonate with their cultural environment. A literary text can, in quite different ways, take and give back topics of its own culture. So the text belongs to a network of social circulation. Referring to the theories of the ethnologist Clifford Geertz, most of the theorists of the New Historicists therefore regard the whole history or every culture as a text or a set of texts. Their interest lies in the “historicity of texts und textuality of history” (Loius Montrose). The historicity of texts means that texts are always embedded in a cultural historical environment to which they owe their existence and in which they interfere. They can only be understood with regard to this context. Literary works are not autonomous (as it is according to Adorno's influential view) but they only have a certain degree of a relative autonomy. They can become socially productive, for example, by providing models for social roles or reflecting about social roles themselves. Textuality of history means that history is not accessible “immediately” – there is no “history in itself” – but always only through narrations. When history is written – whether as anecdotes, tales, newspaper articles, or chronicles – there are narrative and textual patterns of selections at work that cannot be separated from the story told. The New Historicism shares the view of the historian Hayden White who represents in *Metahistory* (1973) the influential position that every historiography is structured by basically linguistic and literary patterns. On the theme of text and power: New Historicists take the position of Michel Foucault in claiming that every text is inscribed in social power structures of discourses. This power of structures does not act repressively but productively: it makes the production of certain texts possible but also acts as a system of rules that regulates what actually can be said. For this reason, literature does not represent an autonomous space that is isolated from social constraints a priori. This border has to be negotiated regularly. Furthermore, literary texts intervene in the power structure of society. They can circulate like viruses and support or attack contemporary opinions. Social behavior is often shaped by guidelines of art (just think of literary heroes like Goethe's Werther or movie characters that are imitated in everyday life). Alternatively, social regulations control what is allowed in literature by censorship and laws. The New Historicism also expands the subject area. Not only literary works but all kinds of texts, historical documents, anecdotes, and objects can be integrated in the reading of literary studies. The selection is not limited by a direct “influence”. All parts of a synchronic cross-section of a period can be applied to the analyzed text. Hence, the selection of the “right” material is the researcher's duty. There are no fixed structures in a culture that could determine which context is appropriate for a certain text. Particularly Stephen Greenblatt's essays clearly show that work of literary studies has to remain aware of its contingency. After all, the researcher himself writes from a historical point of view that already preselects possible interests and perspectives.

D. Outlook: Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity means using approaches, mindsets or at least methods of different disciplines. Scientific research is marked by processes based on the division of labor. The consequence is specialization. Nevertheless, the reality which is reflected by research is multi-layered and complex. A subdivision into single individual sciences (*Einzelwissenschaften*), which most often is arbitrary, occurs rarely. Problems do not exist alongside disciplinary borders, but comprise several disciplines. This means that research questions cannot be answered by only one discipline and therefore a cooperation between disciplines is needed. Interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary work comprises several individual disciplines (*Einzeldisziplinen*), independent from each other, that follow a scientific research questions with their respectively own methods. Hereby it is of minor interest if these disciplines follow interdisciplinary approaches by themselves or if these approaches arise only in combination of disciplines. In order to distinguish it from interdisciplinarity, it is important that methods can be transferred between the disciplines with an eye to a research goal and not merely the exchange of results of research obtained independently from one another. Interdisciplinarity requires the merging of lines of inquiry, perspectives, goals. NEAH – even though not everywhere – isolated and separated itself from other disciplines. And yet collaborative research (*Verbundforschung*) builds the focus of the German research funding for the last 15 years. A real cooperation with the related historical and philological disciplines is still to be established. Even collaborations with mediaeval art history or (Islamic) archaeology are far too rare. The cooperations in Germany that do exist are largely driven by individual institutions or scholars in disciplines that are related to NEAH. NEAH on its own, but also mediaevalists, archaeologists and art historians should be important partners. A significant topic could also be iconicity (key word: iconic turn). The methodological approaches to the objects of the NEAH are essentially determined by the disciplinary orientation of the individual study. Most of the researchers working in NEAH were not trained in art history but are coming from related disciplines and research fields such as philologies, European art history, construction and urban studies or archeology. This is why NEAH functions as a meta discipline with a broadly common scope of objects that is created by the inventory of objects. But the applied methodological approaches in NEAH differ inevitably from each other and are combined in a trans- and interdisciplinary manner only in rare cases so far. This becomes problematic, if the disciplinary methodology and the related perspective on these objects is marked significantly by the respective disciplines (especially strongly relevant to the European history of ideas - *Geistesgeschichte*). The transfer of the analysis of images could serve as an example as well as the stylistic analysis and categorization of western art history on the objects of non-European cultural spheres. Indeed through the diversity of methods the opportunity of an interdisciplinary cross linking could emerge. But regarding the individual studies on NEAH in the German-speaking world it becomes particularly obvious how strong the isolation of the respective scientific individual studies in the realm of humanities aimed at larger research questions. This becomes particularly apparent when remembering that discussions on methodological approaches in IK remain to be held. Additionally, essential discussions, discourses, and paradigm shifts that changed and influenced the NEAH significantly during the last decades and in which work with the scope of objects of the NEAH, are widely ignored. As examples, the different *turns* – such as the *visual*, *spatial*, *post colonial* or the controversy on the anthropology of images of the art historian Hans Belting - might be mentioned. How is it possible – regarding this research question – to seek for a trans- and interdisciplinary approach? Collaborative, interdisciplinary research is the only way today of preventing the very real threat of the marginalization of the discipline (or any discipline, for that matter). Archaeological projects today are, by necessity, multi-disciplinary, and the last decade has witnessed a

new spirit of research collaboration that is moving to true interdisciplinarity. New research agendas, which lie beyond the nuts-and-bolts of typology and chronology, and project designs that allow for real dialogue and exchange among specialists, have been key to success in this regard. Truly collaborative, interdisciplinary work is more than the collective result of individual contributions to a common project. It is only successful when all project members do their work in dialogue with one another, adjusting their frames of reference and interpretations as their colleagues progress on their projects. The old-fashioned archaeological report, in which “specialists” (art historians, textual historians, environmental historians, petrographers, etc.) contribute unconnected appendices, is, thankfully, disappearing. The archaeologist, art historian, and textual historian should work initially with their own methods, but ultimately write a narrative that transcends the limits of their respective disciplines. The ultimate goal is a social history that allows the people behind the object to speak for themselves, where meaning is culled from context and not imposed by the scholar. The call for a new „archaeological art history“ in the study of medieval western material culture is equally appropriate for the study of Islamic art, as well.

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