

Layers of Islamic Art and the Museum Context

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In the Pergamon Museum the visitors have the unique opportunity to experience all cultures from early to late antiquity including the Middle East in one single location. The collection devoted to Islamic culture comprises objects from the early 8th century to the 19th century and not only from the Middle East but from a territory which extends from Spain in the West to India in the East.

Starting from 2019 the major civilisations of the world will no longer be hosted in separate rooms on the museum tour but be shown together integrated in a Promenade of the civilisations.

The visitors will then see the facade of one of the most impressive testimonies of Islamic Art – the palace of Mshatta in Jordan from the middle of the 8th century which décor shows the transition from late antiquity to early Islamic art – in conjunction with the famous Ishtar Gate, the market gate of Miletus and the Pergamon altar on the ground floor of the north wing of the museum.

The museum will no longer be ordered by dynasties but by the great epochs, geography and spheres of life (like house, garden, sacred places and so on).

Thus we want to help visitors to get an overview and orientation of our collection and our heritage and to improve the communication of its content.

Objects don't have any borders: like no other, the Museum of Islamic Art demonstrates the close connection of ancient heritage, the exchange of

ideas, techniques and concepts in the Mediterranean and also all over the Silk Road to Central Asia and China. In our case transnational research is a matter of course.

You can't find Islamic Art and Archaeology as a discipline in the universities of Berlin.

But with the sources of the museums, such as their housed material culture, we can contribute to scientific discourse.

And thanks to our membership in EUME we are currently directly involved in this discourse, we hopefully can give some helpful input to the history of culture of Muslim societies.

I would like to thank my dear colleague, Stefan Weber, director of the Museum of Islamic Art, for being the catalyst of and for organizing this workshop. Thanks also to Benoit Junod from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Georges Khalil from EUME as the coordinators. EUME is a research program of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung und Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Institute for Advanced Study. The Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence / Max Planck Institute joins in bearing the expenses for the publication. Without financial and logistic aid, we wouldn't have been able to realise this meeting. Therefore I also want to express my gratitude to H'atelier and Almut von Bruckstein for their cooperation in the evening's event.

Aims of the workshop

The topic of the workshop is “Layers of Islamic Art and the museum context”.

Every week thousands of people come to visit the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, – and the current exhibition „Wohnwelten” demonstrates that the proportion of visitors being Muslim is steadily growing.

In Germany our museum is unique for the research and the communication of art and material culture of Muslim societies.

Research is the first step to the communication of contents.

Museums provide a unique intersection between research and public.

Research with or within the museums – in this case between the Middle East and Europe – must be a matter of course.

Without prematurely excluding any concept we are consequently asking the following questions: What does an object mean? How can we study this meaning and communicate it to the public? What are the different layers of meaning, which we have to explore and what are the avenues of research we have to consolidate? What is the content and what is the visitor interested in? And how can we finally communicate the complex cultural histories to largely unprepared audiences?

The rearrangement of the Museum of Islamic Art offers a unique chance to think about all these questions.

With our pursuit of knowledge we want to contribute to the actual research.

Therefore we hope that you, dear colleagues, give further impetus for the physical and conceptual rearrangement of the Islamic Museum here in Berlin and to the one in Toronto.

If you take some new ideas back home – we would be very pleased.