

# Early Globalization of Art

Art history has traditionally been focused on the study of European artifacts. The links and interactions between artifacts in Central Asia, India and the Mediterranean were largely ignored. Researchers working with **Gerhard Wolf, Hannah Baader and Avinoam Shalem** at the **Art History Institute** in Florence (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, MPI) are seeking to break down these boundaries and open up new, global research perspectives.

TEXT GUIDO HINTERKEUSER

**T**he horizons of this project, which responds to the challenges of globalization, are broad. Its full title is "Art, Space and Mobility in Early Ages of Globalization: The Mediterranean, Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent 400 – 1650." Nevertheless, there are concrete starting points, for instance the Museo degli Argenti in Florence, which keeps parts of the former treasury of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany.

Gerhard Wolf, Director of the Art History Institute, and Hannah Baader, Head of a Minerva Research Group, are two of the three initiators of "Art, Space and Mobility." They happily give visitors a guided tour of the Medici collection, to provide a vivid explanation of one of the most challenging projects currently running at their institution.

Here, on the ground floor of the Palazzo Pitti, away from the crowds of tourists, are objects frequently dismissed with the label "handicrafts," even though they appear to have been specifically predestined to demonstrate the mobility of works of art in the pre-

modern era. In this context, Islamic and Mexican artifacts encounter and coexist with works of art from the northern Alpine region and Italy.

## A EWER TAKES ON A NEW IDENTITY

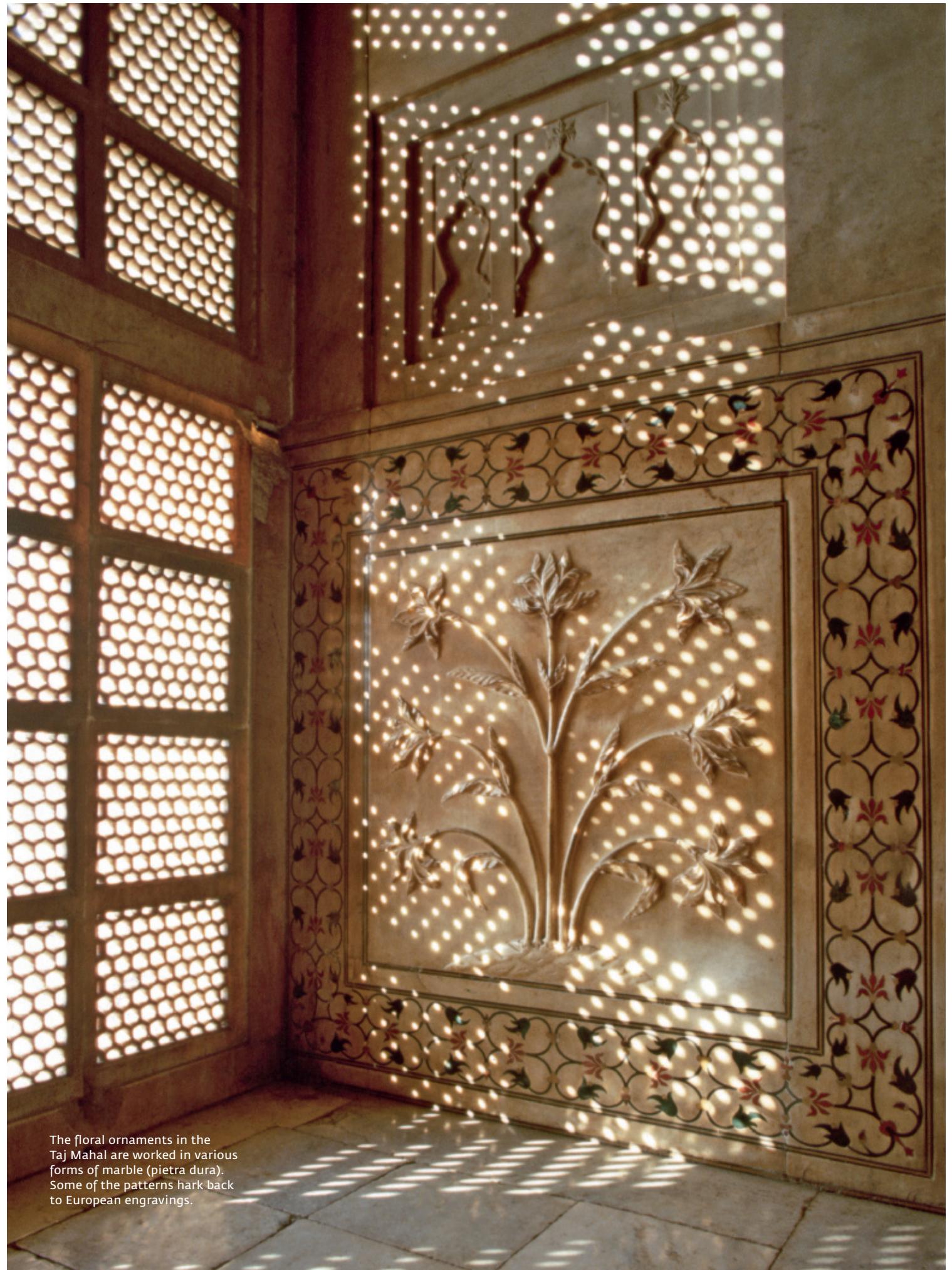
Baader and Wolf approach a display case containing a rock crystal ewer that may already have been in the art collection of Lorenzo 'il Magnifico' de' Medici. Decorated with ornamental plant forms and waterfowl, it bears the Arabic inscription '*li-qa'id al, quw-wad khassatan'* which, translated freely, means "for the Commander of Commanders in person." These words may identify Husayn, one of the founders of the Fatimid Dynasty, who held this title from 1000 to 1008, and then again from 1010 to 1011.

We have in front of us an object that has traveled far and taken on a new identity. Once it came into the possession of the Medici family, it evolved new effects and meanings, winding around its original core rather like the growth

rings of a tree. Conventional Islamic art history – the ewer would probably be classified under this heading – would attempt to reconstruct its original context. Who commissioned it? Were he or she and the recipient one and the same person? Is the artist or the workshop known? Where did the material come from? Of course, questions like these still remain important.

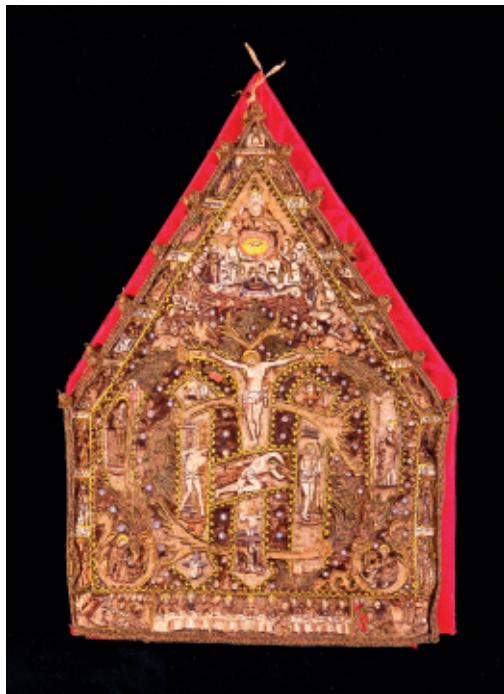
During our conversation, however, Avinoam Shalem, the third of the project's leaders, draws attention to the dialectics of scientific discovery and classification processes: a hundred years ago, the construction of Islamic art in its own right was a great step forward. However, it meant that other connecting lines were cut off, and must now be painstakingly knotted back together again.

Shalem cites two major art history initiatives: the founding of the Islamic Collection in Berlin in 1904 at the prompting of Wilhelm von Bodes, and the 1910 Munich exhibition "Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art." Both were of paramount importance in de-



The floral ornaments in the Taj Mahal are worked in various forms of marble (pietra dura). Some of the patterns hark back to European engravings.

- top This Fatimid rock crystal ewer was made in around 1000 AD and may come from Cairo. Today, it is at the Museo degli Argenti in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.
- bottom This miter from the first half of the 16th century shows New Testament scenes – not painted, but made with feathers.



veloping an awareness of Islamic art, which had, in the past, generally led a rather marginal existence in various departments.

But the danger of apparently unambiguous labeling is never far away. Shalem wrote an article for a collected volume published by the Kunsthistorische Institut on the transfer and circulation of Islamic objects in the medieval Mediterranean region. The title: *The Otherness in the Focus of Interest*. Here, the researcher explores how migrating artifacts, much like people, take on new identities when they end up in a different context. These migrations come more naturally to crafted objects in particular: the valuable materials and skilled work that go into their manufacture, together with their functionality, mean that they are usually immediately understood, even in foreign cultural circles.

#### IMAGES MADE FROM THE FEATHERS OF EXOTIC BIRDS

On the upper floor of the Museo degli Argenti, one comes upon artifacts from Mexico, which came into contact with the Mediterranean and Europe as a result of the Spanish conquest and hegemony. When examining a bishop's miter, it is only at second glance that we see that all the depictions of New Testament scenes on it are not painted, but made up of the colorful feathers of exotic birds. These feathers still possess their original brilliance and luminosity.

On the front of the miter, in the center, the crucifixion of Christ is depicted, and below it, the Flagellation, the bearing of the Cross and the crowning of Jesus with the Crown of Thorns, together with the Mass of St. Gregory. Running along the base, we see the Last

Supper, flanked by the washing of the disciples' feet on the left and Christ on the Mount of Olives on the right. The unusually woven interlacing that frames these scenes is formed by the initials of Jesus and Mary – IHS and MA – and as such can be found in engravings from the period around 1500. Prints of this sort were sent to Mexico, where they initiated indigenous artists into what were, for them, the new realms of Christian iconography.

So models migrated across the ocean to the West, where they were adopted and transformed, to finally make their way back to Europe in a new interpretation – possibly as gifts. So the artifact made in Mexico served less as a missionary tool to convert the local inhabitants than as a document of how successful the mission had already become.

The "Art, Space and Mobility" project is a highly ambitious one, as it aims to open up new, global research perspectives. It wants to break up the narrow view of traditional art history, with its focus on the Western world, and broaden it, not only chronologically but, above all, spatially. With this in mind, the researchers are seeking to create greater permeability in the dividing lines, still extant today, between general European art history and the art history of Byzantium, Egypt, Islam, India and East Asia, as well as between art history and various archaeological disciplines.

Furthermore, it is necessary to look beyond present national borders, as modern boundaries often have little to do with former constructs of rule and domination. Thus, national historical narratives are constructions that are often easy to unmask over a longer period of time – especially from the years 400 to 1650. Conflicts gave rise to new



empires, while old ones were driven back. The effects of the resultant sparks on the arts were sometimes destructive, but sometimes also creative.

### A CRITICAL VIEW OF NATIONAL ART HISTORIES

As with art history's most fundamental method, the analysis of style and form, "Art, Space and Mobility" aims to achieve a critical evaluation of national narratives in the discipline, which may not easily stand up successfully against a more global background. Using a geographical approach, the researchers want to conduct an impartial survey of the MeCAIS (the Mediterranean, Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent) area, which they have chosen for their study. "However, unlike the geopolitical studies of the pre-war era, this does not in any way involve an attempt to create new, present-day hegemonies," says Gerhard Wolf.

The project's leaders are particularly keen to illustrate the possibilities of "Art, Space and Mobility" using concise examples. One of these is the famous

Taj Mahal in Agra, built between 1631 and 1648 and lying at the eastern boundary of the region under study. It was commissioned by Shah Jahan, who ordered it to be built as a mausoleum for his principal wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631. Upon his death in 1666, he, too, was laid to rest here. Inside the mausoleum are various depictions of flowers, symbols of the anticipation of paradise.

Particularly striking are the flowers worked in *pietra dura*, or marble inlay, some of which hark back to European engravings. It is notable that the Mogul botanists referred to European engravings even for plants that were indigenous to their region: they saw a worthy example in the way these were depicted, usually with front and side views of the whole plant and its flowers, together

top: Shah Jahan commissioned the Taj Mahal in Agra as a mausoleum for his principal wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631. He was also laid to rest there following his death in 1666.

bottom: Inside the Taj Mahal, various depictions of flowers, symbols of the anticipation of paradise, are found. The copper engraving of a Turk's cap lily by the French artist Pierre Vallet (left) served a Mogul painter as a model for his drawing.





left

The *Tazza Farnese*, made of sardonyx, shows an allegorical representation from Egyptian Hellenistic mythology and may have been created in the 1st century B.C. in Alexandria.

right

In the early 15th century, Muhammad al-Khayyam produced this brush drawing from the *Tazza Farnese*.



er with images showing various stages of development. These European engravings found considerable resonance in the Mogul culture, as the latter was very familiar with the depicted subject matter. One example that is cited is Pierre Vallet's engraving of the Turk's cap lily (*Lilium martagon*), which must have eventually reached India, where a Mogul painter used it as a model for his drawing.

### CREATING A MULTINATIONAL NETWORK OF RESEARCHERS

The project, approved by the Getty Foundation in March 2009, will initially run for two years, but has been set up for a six-year period. The fact that the Getty Foundation opted for "Art, Space and Mobility" despite tight resources fills Institute Director Gerhard Wolf with pride. But this collaborative project was a logical move for the Getty Foundation, which counts "Art History as a Global Discipline" among its leading themes. "Art, Space and Mobility" was in the air, its subject matter a direct out-

come of the research efforts of the project's three principal investigators.

For a long time now, Wolf has been devoting himself to the art history of the Mediterranean basin and of early colonial Mexico. Hannah Baader, who has been working at the Art History Institute in Florence since 2004 and now heads the project "Art, the Sea and the Cultivation of Nature 1200 – 1650," is involved in the art and cultural history of the sea and its role as a link and a mediator. The most recent work to emerge from this project is the book *Das Meer, der Tausch und die Grenzen der Repräsentation* (The Sea, Trade and the Limits of Representation). Finally, Avinoam Shalem is a professor for the History of Islamic Art at Munich University's Kunsthistorische Institut (Art History Institute), as well as a Max Planck Fellow in Florence. For centuries, Islam has played a highly influential role in the region extending from Gibraltar to India, the project's chosen area of study.

One of the project's key concerns is to involve young scholars from many countries – with top priority being giv-

en to fellowships – in order to interconnect national art histories. Individual research projects, such as doctorates at an advanced stage, will initially be funded for one year. At the same time, the researchers will be encouraged to communicate with colleagues from other countries who share their field of expertise. This will ensure that they are brought out of the isolation of nation-centered art history research.

One of the most exciting and impressive objects, whose fate provides a particularly good illustration of the methodological guidelines of "Art, Space and Mobility," is the *Tazza Farnese* (the Farnese Cup) from the National Archeological Museum in Naples. Indeed, its varied ties and references could make it the leitmotif for the project.

It journeys across the region taken on by "Art, Space and Mobility" no fewer than three times: as its raw material sardonyx from India to Egypt, as the end product to Persia at some point in time, and then eventually westward again to Italy. Various dating attempts place it from the third to

» The *Tazza* could be an allegory for the Golden Age proclaimed by the Emperor Caesar Augustus, which was global and not restricted to Egypt.

the first century B.C., and there are a number of different interpretations for the subject it depicts.

While a Gorgonian (Medusa's head) can be seen on its reverse and bottom side, the base is occupied with a scene of eight figures, which requires elucidation. One convincing interpretation sees in it an allegory for the fertility of the Nile. Accordingly, the sitting bearded figure bearing the cornucopia is Neilos, god of the Nile, who nourishes Egypt, where the scene is clearly located, as suggested by the pharaonic sphinx at his feet. Seated on the sphinx is a fertility goddess, while the standing figure behind her could be the Greek hero Triptolemos, who represents farming and cultivation. The scene is rounded off by two winds, to whose influence the fruitful floods of the Nile are attributed, and two Horae, which symbolize the seasons.

The suggested time of its creation is the last seven centuries of the Ptolemaic court in Alexandria, which came

to an end in 30 B.C. with the suicide of Cleopatra and Egypt's degradation into a Roman protectorate. However, the fall of the Ptolemaic empire did not mean an end to its artistic workshops and traditions.

### THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELS OF AN ORNATE CUP

Therefore, the other possibility is that the *Tazza Farnese* was not made until between 30 and 10 B.C., also by an Alexandrian artist, but already under – or perhaps even for – the emperor Caesar Augustus. The *Tazza* could thus be an allegory for the Golden Age proclaimed by him, which was global and not restricted to Egypt. Accordingly, the scene-in-the-round would symbolize the world, and the rim of the vessel the ocean that surrounds it.

"Art, Space and Mobility" is not content with merely placing an object within the context of its creation, but also investigates its more far-reaching

effects, which are often associated with migrations. The *Tazza* is a paradigmatic example of this: Its whereabouts for many centuries after its creation are unknown. At the beginning of the 15th century, however, it must have been in Persia at the court of the Timurids, either in Herat or in Samarkand. Evidence of this is provided by a brush drawing executed by the painter Mohammed al Khayyam and kept at the Berlin State Library.

We know as little about the object's travels to Persia as we do about the circumstances of its relocation to Italy, which occurred soon afterward. Following stops in Naples and Rome in the collections of King Alfonso I and Pope Paul II, the aforementioned Lorenzo 'il Magnifico' de' Medici moved it to his Florentine collections in 1471 after a visit to Rome. In Florence, it was admired by Sandro Botticelli: the two winds were probably the inspiration for the wind deities, the *zefiri amorosi*, in his famous *Birth of Venus*. >

## THE TEMPLE AND THE MUSEUM

The foundation of the art museum was one of the hallmarks in the development of the secular state. Both temples and museums offer a narrative of the past, be it interpreted as secular or divine, showing history in an aesthetically organized framework. Studied from a comparative and interreligious perspective, the processes involved prove to be extremely complex. The Partner Group investigates this new field of research, focusing on the following questions: How are art and the museum considered in societies that have different experiences with modernity than is typical in European societies? What was the impact of the colonial experience in this regard? What is the function of art in Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic or pluri-religious societies like India? How do the visual practices and concepts of space in Hindu, Christian and Islamic temples differ from one another, and when and how do they relate to one another? How can art – today and in the past – interfere with religious conflicts or overcome them? The Partner Group investigates these problems by means of fellowships, workshops and conferences that involve a strong cooperation and

exchange with the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence within the scope of the research project entitled "The Temple and the Museum. Considering the Places of Art and Religion in a Comparative Perspective: The Mediterranean, Europe and India 1200 – 2012."

Kavita Singh is Professor for Art History at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. Her research interests include the history and politics of museum collections, the social history of Indian painting, and the application of narrative theory to art. Kavita Singh has been a Guest Curator at the San Diego Museum of Art. She was co-curator of Power and Desire: Indian Paintings from the Binney collection, an exhibition of Indian miniature paintings that traveled through the US, Europe and Asia, and of Where in the World, an exhibition examining contemporary Indian art in the era of globalization. She has received grants and fellowships from the Getty Foundation, the Clark Art Institute, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Asia Society, New York.



The coronation mantle of the Holy Roman Empire. Made of red silk interwoven with gold thread and embroidered with pearls and enamel, it was produced in 1133/1134 for King Roger II of Sicily in an Arabic-Norman workshop in Palermo.

But Florence was not to be its last stop. Through Lorenzo's great-nephew, Alessandro de' Medici, the *Tazza* ended up in the hands of his wife Margaret of Austria, who married Ottavio Farnese a year later and took the valuable object with her to Rome. Here, it was seen in the 17th century by Nicolas Poussin who, like Botticelli before him, was influenced by it, resulting in the Egyptian coloration of his painting *The Exposition of Moses*, now at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

### COMMUNICATION IN THE MONGOL EMPIRE

Borrowing directly from the *Tazza*, whose coloring is determined by the nature of the stone, Poussin also painted his sphinx with a dark body and a pale face. In 1731, the piece was inherited by Carlos, Infante of Spain, who became King of Naples and Sicily in 1735, who then moved the cup to the Palazzo di Capodimonte. At this point it must be clear that justice cannot be done to an artwork like the *Tazza Farnese* within a single discipline.

While the *Tazza Farnese* may be a special case, once the multilayered complexity associated with it has been

grasped, other works of art can also be approached with similar questions in mind. The individual fellows who will do the actual field research will also be encouraged in this direction. Their task will be to examine their material for such multiple layers and to take a critical approach to any apparent definitudes.

Satenik Chookaszian, for example, from Yerevan in Armenia, is using the 13th century medieval manuscripts created in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia to investigate the impulses of neighboring artistic languages. Irene Giviashali, post-doc from Tbilisi, Georgia, is looking into how medieval Georgia was positioned, in the artistic sense, between Byzantium and the Islamic dynasties. At the University of Ulan Bator in Mongolia, Dorjjugder Purevjav is working on a doctorate concerned with verbal and written communication forms and pathways within the Mongol Empire. Finally, Pushkar Sohoni at the University of Pennsylvania is investigating the spread of architectural knowledge in the early modern Deccan (the southernly part of the Indian subcontinent) and the mediating role played by the Indian Ocean.

While these four fellowship holders are staying at their home institutions, two post-doc projects have been established in Florence: Mattia Guidetti is researching the art of sacred construction in Syria between 600 and 1300, and is particularly interested in the sites where Christian and Muslim holy cities existed not only alongside, but also sometimes within each other. Simon O'Meara from the American University of Kuwait is using the examples of the Kaaba in Mecca and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem to investigate the dialectics between the "seen" and the "unseen" in Islamic theology and aesthetics.

### WORKSHOPS FOR FELLOWS AROUND THE WORLD

"Art, Space and Mobility" has developed a differentiated structure to facilitate networking between the widely scattered fellowship holders. All project participants meet several times a year to exchange views. Two thematic workshops in Florence and at the Berlin State Museums are complemented by a site-specific workshop that takes place at different locations each time. In addition, there are sym-

posia and an annual Summer School that is also open to outside applicants.

The first Summer School took place in Tunisia in May 2010. Participants devoted themselves to Ifriqiya as a cultural meeting place and visited late-Roman sites such as the Amphitheater of El Djem, the Aghlabid dynasty's city of Al-Qayrawan and Mahdiyya, the first capital of the Fatimids. Ifriqiya is identical to the former Roman province of Africa, which comprised the eastern regions of Algeria, Tunisia and parts of Libya, and was conquered by Muslim Arabs in 663. Under the Aghlabid dynasty, Ifriqiya experienced an age of cultural flourishing from 800 to 909.

The legacy of the region's ancient Roman and Byzantine masters was integrated into an artistic language that was deemed appropriate by the new Islamic rulers. From the year 827 onward, they began their bid to conquer Sicily, only a hundred kilometers away – a process that led to a further transfer of art and learning in both directions. In this context, it becomes clear that the sea was not an agent of separation, but of connection. Products could be transported by sea, something that could have been accomplished over land only with great difficulty, less speed and less scope.

The links to the West extended as far as Andalusia, and those to the East up to the centers of Islam, such as the Caliphs of Baghdad, on whom these rulers depended. In Qayrawan (Kairouan), which today is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the workshop participants visited the Great Mosque, which was extensively reconstructed by the Aghlabids starting in 836 A.D. The inner hall, with its 17 naves and the transept in front of the Qibla Wall, dates from this period. Spolia from Carthage were already used in a new building that was started around 703 A.D.; the Aghlabids also liked to use antique building components, "islamizing" the material, as it were, with verses from the Koran and professions of their faith.

Here, it also became clear that the boundaries of academic disciplines can

often obscure the view of connections. There is thus no doubt that the coronation mantle of the Kaiser of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which is kept in Vienna, also has some connection with Ifriqiya. Like the Fatimid rock crystal ewer at the Museo degli Argenti in Florence, the coronation mantle also bears an Arabic inscription in Kufic script, betraying its origins in the royal embroidery workshops (*tiraz*) in Palermo in 1133/34. This semi-circular, floor-length cloak, made of a shimmering silk fabric, is embroidered with pearls, gold and silver thread; on the back, the embroidery depicts a stylized palm tree flanked on each side by a lion prevailing over a fallen camel.

The mantle, made for the Norman King Roger II of Sicily, came through his daughter's marriage to the Hohenstaufen Kaiser Heinrich IV, and so made its way into the coronation insignia.

## THE PROJECT HAS AN OPEN FRAMEWORK

Christian re-conquest by the Normans didn't occur until 1061. This, however, did not mean the end of the then well-established royal court workshops of Islamic artists who, in turn, had encountered the traditions of the Byzantine craftsmen in the preceding centuries. On the contrary: the new rulers were not only keen to use their services, they also carefully observed the royal courts of the Mediterranean and brought both Greek and Arabic artists to Sicily. The new rulers, needing to achieve legitimization, regarded Arabic writing as a ceremonial, holy script, standing for monarchic identity or symbolizing the mythical glamour of the Fatimid court.

In view of the infinite number of themes that are possible for research within "Art, Space and Mobility," anything is suitable except a highly selective approach. Unlike other major projects in the past, this one does not define a set framework that must then be filled with years of painstaking

detail work. Instead, it is all about developing and implementing new methodological approaches for surveying visual arts over an intercontinental area.

Success will be measured particularly by whether the project generates not only collected works and conference proceedings issuing directly from "Art, Space and Mobility," but also, increasingly, studies that take a globalized view of artworks that appear to be narrowly and clearly demarcated. In doing so, the project lays the foundations for the research of visual arts in a globalized world. ▲

## GLOSSARY

### Fatimids

A Shiite-Ismaili dynasty that ruled in North Africa – in Maghreb and Egypt – as well as in Syria, from 909 to 1171.

### Iconography

An art historical method involving the identification and interpretation of motifs and meaning in visual artworks. The research and interpretation of the subject of images taking into account contemporary literary sources, such as works of philosophy, poetry and theology, that influenced the relevant motifs and their depiction is also known as iconology. Art historians Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky introduced the first systematic teachings of this method.

### Spolia

Structural components and other remains, such as parts of reliefs or sculptures, friezes and architrave stones, and remnants of columns or capitals, that originate from the structures of older cultures and are reused in new buildings. Antique intaglios, cameos and reliefs on medieval book covers and reliquaries are also referred to as spolia.

### Holy Roman Empire

Official name for the realm of the Roman-German Kaiser from the Middle Ages until 1806. The name of the Empire is taken from the medieval rulers' claim of upholding the tradition of the ancient Roman Empire and legitimizing their rule as God's holy will in the Christian sense. It is also known as the Old Reich, to distinguish it from the German Reich that was established in 1871.