



Objects in Transfer

A Transcultural Exhibition Trail through
the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin



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[fig. 1]
Hands-on intervention on the zodiac plate
of the Museum für Islamische Kunst

Preface

STEFAN WEBER

No object in our museums exists without migration — every object is an expression of transregional connections and the exchange of techniques, thoughts, patterns, fashions and ideas. Many cultural realities are interwoven, and both sides of the Mediterranean were formative for each other over very many centuries. We live in an entangled past and an entangled present. The birth of our cultures, east and west, north and south of the Mediterranean, has its roots in late antiquity. Also, the drastic change in patterns of life during the 19th and 20th centuries are closely interconnected phases of our development. No culture would be as it is without others. Nevertheless, many museums are committed to mono-cultural narratives. The categories of museums confirm a perception of Europe and of “other”, of non-European cultures as closed entities. Exhibiting Islamic art in a separate gallery carries the risk of suggesting that there is such a closed, self-referencing system; it offers an encapsulated approach to understanding Muslim cultures, but does not reflect these cultures’ historical connections to pre-Islamic cultures or to contemporaneous non-Islamic societies.

Precious silk textiles, for example, which were produced in the medieval Mediterranean were elements of a supra-regional courtly lifestyle that moved across the different shores of the Mediterranean over the course of centuries. Such textiles resist the clear-cut categorisations of museums. Interconnectedness is also characteristic of Middle Eastern societies. There are numerous examples of art and crafts made by Jewish and Christian masters for patrons and consumers of different religious (and ethnic) groups. This is not a new idea — and should be common knowledge among researchers.



[fig. 2]
Hands-on intervention on an ivory horn

So why do museums of Islamic art not reflect this in their curatorial practices? The reason for the often systematic exclusion of cultural production in non-Muslim religious contexts in museums of Islamic art lies in the traditions of our academic training and institutional order. If culture and not just religion is the theme of the exhibition, and if pluralistic religious identities are part of the local environment, as in Umayyad Jerusalem and Damascus or in thirteenth-century Mosul, one should try to incorporate this principle more thoroughly into exhibition-making.

While an interdisciplinary approach to art history has been discussed and applied extensively in recent academic practice, it is now the task for museums to bring these new transcultural methods into the galleries of Islamic art. This was the specific aim of the project “Objects in Transfer”, a project carried out in cooperation with the

Collaborative Research Centre “Episteme in Motion”, which also allowed us to experiment with different formats for intervention and evaluate their success with the public. In this way, the project fulfilled the double function that scholars in museums should fulfil: as researchers we should engage with the transcultural history of museum objects; and at the same time we should explore new ways of conveying art and (trans)cultural histories to a broader public. I am therefore extremely grateful to Vera Beyer and Isabelle Dolezalek (and their great team, of course), who helped us in a very practical way to reflect on our traditions and test new methods of curating. I extend my gratitude to the research centre “Episteme in Motion” in having us as their partner.

But this is not just an academic exercise. The task of communicating the transcultural biographies of objects is essential in our contemporary society and a task of the utmost importance for our museum. A focus on transcultural relations offers us the chance to provide models for cultural identities, ones which are not reduced to religion and in which the entanglements between Europe and the Near East are constitutive rather than marginal. In times of social uncertainty and increasing culturalistic exclusion, objects from the past function as reflective items and allow for the negotiation of collective identities. How were ideas in art, music, science and history exchanged over the centuries? Where are our origins? We are in urgent need of answers to these questions given recent social and political developments.



[fig. 3]
Albarelo intervention in
the Museum für Islamische Kunst

Introduction: Transcultural Relations, Global Biographies — Islamic Art?

ISABELLE DOLEZALEK, VERA BEYER AND SOPHIA VASSILOPOULOU

How did the facade of a desert castle from Jordan end up on the first floor of the Pergamon Museum? Why does a fresco show the pope standing on an Arab carpet? How was the secret of lustre production transferred from Iraq to Italy? Our transcultural exhibition trail through the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin reveals a network of relationships between widely differing cultural contexts, ones which are not necessarily associated with Islamic art today. It thus questions modern assumptions about cultural boundaries, while subjecting the whole notion of Islamic art as a separate category to scrutiny.

The exhibition trail was developed within the project “Objects in Transfer: Concepts for Communicating Transfer Processes between the Near East and Europe in the Museum Context” (2012–2016). Funded by a programme run by the German Research Foundation, which supports the transfer of academic research into other social contexts, the project was carried out as a cooperative venture between the Collaborative Research Centre “Episteme in Motion” (Freie Universität Berlin) and the Museum für Islamische Kunst Berlin. The study of transfer processes within an increasingly globally understood art history is a growing field in current academic research. The aim of the project was to transpose this new art historical approach to objects to museum practice, and specifically to the constraints of a permanent exhibition. To do so, we studied the transcultural relationships of

selected objects in the museum's collection and developed formats by which the results could be communicated to visitors.

While the final result of our work is now visible in the museum in the form of an exhibition trail consisting of fifteen interventions spread throughout the permanent display, this short publication and a documentary film [\[link on p. 52\]](#) offer a look behind the scenes of the project. They give those of us involved in the research and conception of the interventions as art historians a voice, and allow us to reflect on the interventions' formats, concepts and contents — and the difficulties we encountered.

The variety of transfer processes that we address in the exhibition trail is illustrated by our “albarello” intervention, for example, which focusses on a jar from early fourteenth-century Syria [\[fig. 3\]](#). A historical source quoted in the intervention, an inventory of King Charles V of France (r. 1368–1380) mentions a jar filled with ginger from Damascus and thus testifies to the circulation of such objects between the Middle East and Europe. A second layer of transfer — the transfer of the characteristic form of Near-Eastern albarelli — is illustrated through visual cross-references to two examples in other Berlin collections: one made in Tyrol and dating to the fourteenth century (Deutsches Historisches Museum), and one from sixteenth-century Italy (Kunstgewerbemuseum). Alongside the movement of albarelli and their form between East and West, medical and pharmaceutical knowledge related to these objects was also transferred. The intervention addresses this by means of a visual juxtaposition of the albarello with a detail from an early fifteenth-century Italian manuscript featuring a miniature depicting an apothecary shop with a shelf stocked with albarelli. The manuscript, itself a gorgeous example of the permeability and fluidity of cultural boundaries, contains a Hebrew translation of Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, an Arabic medical text based on the Greek tradition which set standards for medical practice in medieval Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and beyond. The albarello intervention uses both texts and visual references, allowing visitors to trace connections across Berlin with floor arrows pointing toward related objects housed in other Berlin collections. In turn, similar arrows in the Gemäldegalerie, Bode-Museum, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Antikensammlung and

Deutsches Historisches Museum refer back to various objects in the Museum für Islamische Kunst.

This format “Tracing Connections — Across Berlin” is one of four different types of interventions which we have used to present transcultural relations in the exhibition trail. In addition, there are touchscreens presenting different aspects and stages in the transcultural biographies of five objects. A further format, QR codes and NFC tags, offers mobile access to our contents via a digital platform specially developed for this project. This platform thus makes information available in front of the objects, while the objects, in turn, can be viewed online. Finally, three hands-on displays were built in front of a medieval ivory horn, an Arab chess piece and a Persian zodiac plate, presenting open questions that reach beyond the facts of the museum labels, encouraging visitors to draw their own conclusions — not only about the objects themselves, but also about the museum narratives within which they have been placed.

“Chinese Wandering Dragons”, “Knowledge on the Move”, “Unlimited Luxury”, “Alhambra in Berlin”... Our intervention titles stand for stories of interaction, trade routes, court culture and diplomacy. They evoke the movements of forms, objects and techniques, and the movements of people and their knowledge across alleged cultural boundaries. To communicate our research in the museum, we chose formats that add to the displays without altering them and which express alternative object histories without concealing the museum's own narrative. The exhibition trail “Objects in Transfer” shows our own, deliberately broad selection of transcultural object histories in the Museum für Islamische Kunst; many of the museum's objects can tell similar stories. We would hope, therefore, that our project's attempt to offer alternative perspectives provides an incentive not only to think beyond the definition of these objects as “Islamic art”, but also, more generally, to question modern assumptions about cultural boundaries.

Beyond the Museum Walls. Questioning the Cultural Delimitation of “Islamic Art” by Pointing to the Entangle- ment of Collections

The category of “Islamic art”, which is part of the name of Berlin’s Museum für Islamische Kunst, has already been criticised on many occasions, in particular because it unites objects from very different regions, periods and contexts under the religious category of “Islam” in combination with the Western European concept of art. Criticism of this concept is not new, but rather dates from the early twentieth century and hence from the same period in which the term, as well as the museum in Berlin, was established.¹ The fact that “Islamic art” largely replaced ethnically defined categories such as Turkish, Arabic and Moorish art around 1900 can be understood as part of the establishment of the history of religion in Western Europe,² which focused on religion as a social factor and in the Middle East often sought out traces of its own Christian culture.³ “Other” cultural elements that the European researchers found there were then included in the religious category of Islam.⁴ A process of delimitation of Christian from Islamic culture was thus constitutive of “Islamic art” as part of the establishment of the modern academic categories.

“Islam”.⁵ This museological category thus becomes fraught with current political concepts. A division of cultural space into “the West” and “Islam” is in keeping with the museum’s traditional function of establishing distinct cultures⁶ and with the “colonial technique of keeping cultural narratives separate”.⁷

As noted above, however, when one examines the objects that have been collected under the label “Islamic art”, one stumbles at every turn over the common features, connections and intertwining between objects of “Islamic” and (especially but by no means exclusively) “Western” art, whether it is the mutual reception of antiquity or the circulation of luxury goods, the depiction of Old Testament scenes or reciprocal imitation. The histories of the objects thus show that the category of Islamic art has to do primarily with European observers and institutions and not so much with the objects being observed—and at the same time reveal connections that has to be declared inessential and marginal in favour of an idea of distinct cultures [fig. 5]. This is in keeping with the phenomenon that descriptions of Islamic art often valued such interconnections negatively—or even judged “Islamic culture” as a whole negatively because it combines different traditions.⁸

If one takes the function of museums to establish cultural identification seriously, these transcultural objects raise the question whether museums cannot also establish other identities as well, that is, post-national, migratory or transcultural concepts of identity, so that “the identity potentialities of the museum can be put to new use”,⁹ as Sharon Macdonald has put it. For if one assumes that objects play an important role in making cultural identities objective,¹⁰ these objects would have much to counter their identification as Islamic art. They offer other concepts of identity when one considers their connections to other regional, historical or religious contexts, or the traces of their transfer—not least from the Middle East to the Berlin museums.¹¹

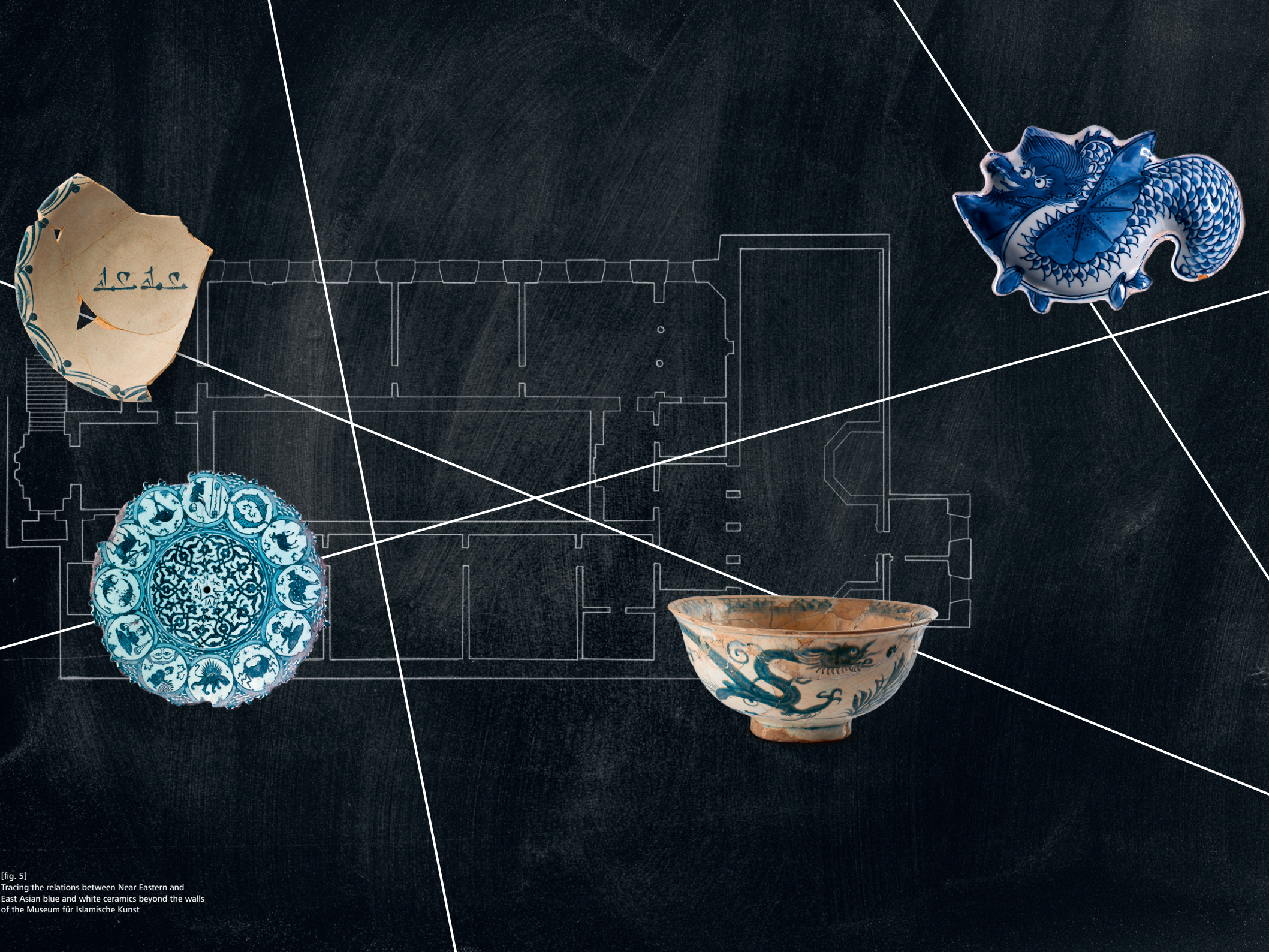
For those reasons, we have made it the task of our project to make visible current research on transcultural, Mediterranean and global histories of objects in the collection of the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin. We have explored connections and transfers of objects that are transcultural in the sense that they undermine

current cultural categories—in this case that of Islamic art. We then worked out prototypical concepts enabling us to communicate these transcultural relations to visitors.

We, as researchers, quickly learned that relating objects from different collections and places is much more easily done by juxtaposing illustrations in scholarly publications than it is with the objects themselves within a museum. Exhibition projects that assemble objects from different collections are usually temporary. But how can the permanent exhibitions in which collections are often presented show connections beyond the limits of the collection?

One central problem was that museums do not just objectify distinct cultural identities by means of artefacts, but also carve these cultural categories in stone: the borders between Islamic art and Byzantine art, for example, are manifested in Berlin in the form of museum walls—and a railway line.¹² The walls of the museum as a white cube do not just stand for a presentation free of context—in combination with a timeless religion, as Susan Kamel underscored in the succinct subtitle of her publication on the mediation of religion in museums in Berlin: *Black Kaaba Meets White Cube*.¹³ The walls also embody the cultural isolation of “Islamic art”, that is to say, on a spatial and physical level they prevent visitors from perceiving Constantinople and Istanbul as the same city for example.¹⁴ How can these demarcations be broached? More precisely, how can objects undermine these boundaries?

One important point of departure for us was the close connections that very different objects in the Museum für Islamische Kunst have to objects in other Berlin collections—such as the relationship between an acanthus ornament from the early Islamic dynasty of the Umayyads and an acanthus ornament from late antiquity located on the floor below in the antiquities collection, or the relationship between an Anatolian carpet and depictions of carpets in the paintings of the Gemäldegalerie (Old Masters Gallery), or the interactions between Persian and East Asian ceramics held in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. Just as in scholarly papers, placing images in the collection can make it possible to follow the connections visually. If an image of a painting is placed on the floor, while the corresponding carpet is hung on the wall, this at the same time directs



[fig. 5]
Tracing the relations between Near Eastern and
East Asian blue and white ceramics beyond the walls
of the Museum für Islamische Kunst



[fig. 6]
Digital intervention describing the
transfer of lustre ceramics to Europe

attention to the display of the exhibition [fig. 23]. Accompanying texts place these visual relations between different regional and historical cultures in their social, political and economic contexts, such as the Umayyad display of continuity or early modern economic relationships. This practice prevents these visual connections from being de-contextualised, or even perceived as universal; it counters the risk of aesthetically “anesthetizing” transcultural relations, as Jessica Winegar has put it.¹⁵

Beyond such connections by which objects point beyond the limits of the collection, our team in its research repeatedly stumbled across evidence of how abruptly the limits of the museum come up in the biographies of the objects themselves. A niche from a Samaritan household in early modern Damascus, for example, was disassembled when it arrived in the Berlin museums in the early twentieth century: its ornaments seemingly conformed to the idea of Islamic art, but apparently its inscriptions from the Samaritan Pentateuch did not — they were removed and given to the Vorderasiatische Museum (Museum of the Ancient Near East).

These problems of categorisation could, of course, be addressed in the texts we integrated into the collection in the form of labels and digital interventions [fig. 6]. Such texts certainly represent the most complex possibility for using the biographies of the objects to implement — not only through the expansion of the collections to include modern art but also through the modern biographies of earlier objects — what Barry Flood so pithily asked for:

“Challenging ‘the fictitious creed of immaculate classification’ [C.B. Steiner, ‘Can the Canon Burst?’, *Art Bulletin* 78/2, 1996, 215] that facilitates the co-option of the materialized past in service of a ‘New World Order’, we need to adumbrate synchronic histories of intention and origin with diachronic accounts of circulation, consumption and reception. Instead of occluding the entangled histories of colonialism, capitalism, and the canon, it is essential to explore the ways in which these imbrications are manifest in the practices of collecting and representation through which the field was constituted, and the contentions that currently shape it.”¹⁶

Against the backdrop of his experiment at the HumboldtLab Berlin, Helmut Groschwitz, however, has emphasised that the colonial apparatus remained dominant over such attempts to use texts to introduce alternative narratives into the exhibition space.¹⁷ In order to at least touch on this dominance not only on a cognitive level but also within its visual and spatial apparatus, we experimented with ways to make it possible to experience in the room the connections beyond the limits of the collections. First we developed “peepholes”, through which visitors could look through the walls of the museum, literally, and pursue the connections by looking at related objects in other Berlin collections [fig. 7]. At the same time, looking at the reference object was supposed to direct attention on a physical level to the museum walls — which we usually perceive as neutral, if we notice them at all — blocking our view.

As emblematic as this form of intervention may have been for our project, the evaluations were, unfortunately, sobering:¹⁸ the “peepholes” simply did not appeal to visitors. First, for many it was not possible to understand the connection between the object — in our test-case an Umayyad acanthus ornament — in the room and the peephole, because the peepholes could not be placed right next to the object owing to the lighting and the fact that the object was hung very high up in the room. Moreover, a peephole seemed to promise viewers more than just stone fragments with a leaf pattern — in this case, the acanthus ornament from late antiquity and one on a capital in the Nationalgalerie next door. Was it the wrong object? Would a Chinese vase have been more attractive? Was it too difficult to recognise the object because we wanted the peephole to have the effect of distance, and would a magnifying glass have worked better? Or was the apparatus of the gaze through a peephole perhaps from the outset associated with other expectations that did not suit our project?

Increased use of these peepholes, moreover, was complicated by the fact that they were relatively difficult to install, especially as they required backlighting, and could thus not be implemented everywhere. So we decided to test another, simpler possibility to demonstrate connections to objects in other collections: arrows on the floor indicate the distance to the collection in which a related object can be found [fig. 8]. Because crossing boundaries and entanglement are,



[fig. 7]
“Peephole” offering a glimpse of the
acanthus capitals of the Alte Nationalgalerie

of course, processes that concern not just one side, it was of great concern to us that the limits of the collections be questioned not just from the perspective of Islamic art, but conversely that other collections also pointed to objects in the collection of the Museum für Islamische Kunst.

Happily, our colleagues at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, the Antikensammlung, the Deutsches Historisches Museum, the Bode-Museum, the Kunstgewerbemuseum and the Gemäldegalerie responded very positively to this idea, so that now the arrows point to one another from both sides of the walls [figs. 9 and 10]. This at least begins to suggest a network of references between the Berlin collections and draws the attention of visitors to the walls dividing the museums. Furthermore, it might make them curious to trace the connections undermining the pigeonholes of the museums and the demarcations



[fig. 8]
First samples of arrows for the "Tracing Connections—
Across Berlin" intervention format



[fig. 9]
Label and arrow pointing from the albarello in
the Kunstgewerbemuseum to the albarello in the
Museum für Islamische Kunst



[fig. 10]
Intervention "... also in European Pharmacies" with label
and arrows pointing to the albarelli in the Deutsches
Historisches Museum and the Kunstgewerbemuseum

between “the West and Islam” that are increasingly associated with those museological categories.

By conveying connections and entanglements between so-called “Islamic” and “Western” art in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, we thus wish to make visitors question the demarcation between Western and Islamic culture that the museum might suggest with its denomination. We hope that the global biographies and transcultural connections of these objects may point to other models of cultural identities. — Translated by Steven Lindberg

- 1 Cf. S. Kamel, “Vorsicht: Frisch gestrichen! Museen islamischer Kunst zwischen postkolonialer Kritik und Orientalismus”, in *total: Universalismus und Partikularismus in postkolonialer Medienwissenschaft*, eds U. Bergemann and N. Heidenreich, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 291–306, esp. pp. 297–98. On this discussion, see also the various contributions to the “Representations of Islamic Art” section of B. Junod, G. Khalil, S. Weber and G. Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum — Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, London 2012.
- 2 See, for example, M. Müller-Wiener, *Die Kunst der islamischen Welt*, Stuttgart 2012, pp. 17–18.
- 3 On this, see also S. L. Marchand: *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*, Washington D.C. 2009.
- 4 S. Kamel (n. 1), p. 298.
- 5 M. Shatanawi, “Kuratieren gegen Widerstände: Museen und die öffentliche Diskussion über den Islam”, in *Experimentierfeld Museum: Internationale Perspektiven auf Museum, Islam und Inklusion*, eds S. Kamel and C. Gerbich, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 233–52.
- 6 S. Macdonald, “Museums, national, postnational and transcultural identities”, *Museum and Society*, 1/1, 2003, pp. 1–16, pp. 2–4.
- 7 H. Groschwitz, “Und was ist mit Europa? Zur Überwindung der Grenzen zwischen ‘Europa’ und ‘Außer-Europa’ in den ethnologischen Sammlungen Berlins”, in *Quo vadis, Völkerkunde-museum? Aktuelle Debatten zu ethnologischen Sammlungen in Museen und Universitäten*, eds M. Kraus and K. Noack, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 205–25.
- 8 S. Mangold, review of S. L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*, Washington D.C. 2009, *H-Soz-Kult*, 22 July 2011: <http://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-15331> (last accessed 21/06/2016).
- 9 S. Macdonald (n. 6), p. 6.
- 10 S. Macdonald (n. 6), p. 3.
- 11 This sort of understanding of the objects in the Museum für Islamische Kunst as objectifications of post-national, migratory and transcultural identities could, in turn, appeal to a (post-) migrant audience and hence function as a complement to inclusive approaches to museum education. We are grateful to Barbara Lenz, Christine Gerbich and Susan Kamel for discussions of this question and hope that we can take it a step further in the future. See also Stefan Weber’s thoughts in this direction, for example, S. Weber, “Kulturelle Bildung in der Islamdebatte”, in *Handlungsempfehlungen zur Auseinandersetzung mit islamistischem Extremismus und Islamfeindlichkeit: Arbeitsergebnisse eines Expertengremiums der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, ed. D. Moltzhausen, Bonn 2015, pp. 261–73.
- 12 On the approaches other museums have developed to this question, see the text by I. Dolezalek in this brochure and, for example, S. Macdonald, “Migrating Heritage, Networks and Networking: Europe and Islamic Heritage”, in *Migrating Heritage: Experiences of Cultural Networks and Dialogues in Europe*, ed. P. Innocenti, Farnham 2014, pp. 53–64.
- 13 S. Kamel, *Wege zur Vermittlung von Religionen in Berliner Museen: Black Kaaba Meets White Cube*, Würzburg 2004.
- 14 The white of these walls may correspond to the claim that such distinctions are neutral.
- 15 J. Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 81/3, 2008, pp. 651–81, p. 663.
- 16 F. B. Flood, “From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art”, in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, ed. E. Mansfield, London 2007, pp. 31–53, p. 44.
- 17 H. Groschwitz (n. 7), p. 219.
- 18 Concerning the evaluation of this project, see also the text by S. Vassilopoulou in this brochure.

Alternative Narratives. Transcultural Interventions in the Permanent Display of the Museum für Islamische Kunst

ISABELLE DOLEZALEK

Walking through the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin means experiencing objects in a particular frame. This frame depends on each visitor’s personal background, and aesthetic and emotional responses, as well as on the museum itself in terms of the curators’ arrangement of the permanent display, which provides an overall narrative structure in which the objects are embedded.¹ In Room 3, “Fatimids (909–1171) and Sicily”, for example, we find a medieval ivory horn [fig. 14].² This object, attributed to southern Italian craftsmen, is presented in a line with a marble basin featuring figurative reliefs and painted ivories from twelfth- and thirteenth-century Sicily. On the other side of the aisle, spotlights draw attention to the intricate carvings of ivories with courtly scenes from Fatimid Egypt.

What does this immediate exhibition context convey? Here and throughout the museum figures are highlighted, thus countering the preconception that Islamic art is aniconic. More specifically, the horn is placed in a chronology and displayed in the section corresponding to the Fatimid realm. This highlights the ties between the Fatimid eastern Mediterranean and Italy, while omitting equally important relationships between Italy and Byzantium, or the Islamic western Mediterranean — Spain, for example. Furthermore, the sober, aes-

thetic presentation of the horn encourages visual comparisons between the motifs, styles and techniques of the different ivories in this section. What it omits, however, is context and the biography of the objects, which, in the case of the ivory horn, is decidedly transcultural.

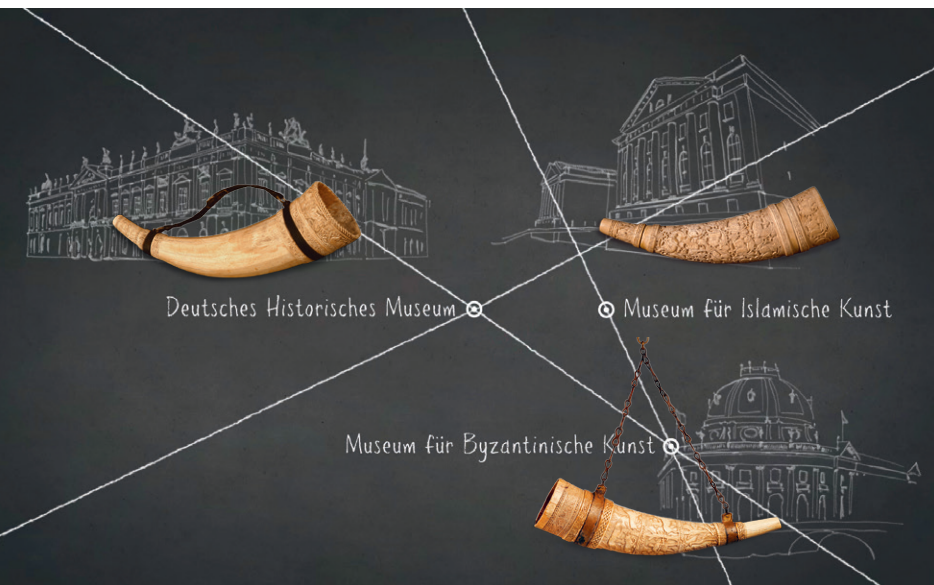
This contribution focuses on the format of interventions as a means of introducing transcultural perspectives into a culturally-bounded “Islamic” permanent exhibition.³ Hands-on interventions in particular offer the visitors an interactive encounter with the museum’s objects and involve them in the construction of narratives within the museum space. A chess problem we set up, for instance, can be solved according to Arabic, medieval Castilian or contemporary rules, and in our zodiac plate intervention [fig. 11], the visitors can choose their own label for the object. In the following discussion, however, I will mainly focus on Mediterranean art history and our ivory horn intervention,⁴ exploring how transcultural art historical approaches can be brought into a museum display.

Luxury objects such as the museum’s ivory horn circulated throughout the medieval Mediterranean, where a shared taste for such goods transcended political and religious boundaries.⁵ Precisely this shared Mediterranean taste makes it difficult to ascertain where such horns were produced.⁶ The uncertainty around where such objects were made is reflected in their dispersal across different museums [fig. 12]. There are several more ivory horns in the immediate surroundings of the Museum für Islamische Kunst: one in the Deutsches Historisches Museum and one in the Byzantine collection of the Bode-Museum, where the exhibition context is emphatically Christian. Here, ivory panels with Christian iconography flank the object and the most immediate visual axes lead toward the apse mosaic of a church in Ravenna and a large wooden altarpiece. From their respective exhibition contexts, a Mediterranean connection between the three horns is not at all evident. The manifold transcultural entanglements of the “Islamic” horn remain invisible in the narrative structure of its permanent display.⁷

Not only in the field of Mediterranean studies, but also more generally, the pronounced art historical interest in movements of interchange, transcultural and global perspectives brings about new approaches to historical artefacts, approaches which lead to an ever-in-



[fig. 11]
Zodiac plate intervention



[fig. 12]
Tracing connections across Berlin

creasing dissolution of boundaries between the various disciplines of art history. The question this poses, one which occupied us in the conception of our exhibition trail, was how to combine these transcultural art historical approaches and the ensuing pluralistic conceptions of objects with the institutional parameters of the Museum für Islamische Kunst.⁸ How can transcultural perspectives be deployed in culturally-defined collections? How can alternatives to the prevailing master narrative be brought into a permanent display? Contrary to temporary exhibitions, in which curatorial voices are often experimented with more freely, permanent exhibitions are a particular challenge in this respect, as they are conceived to last.⁹

As one possible response to these concerns, our project chose to work with interventions, which we integrated into the permanent display. The different formats of hands-on interventions, touchscreens, QR codes/NFC tags and labels with arrows pointing toward objects located beyond the museum walls provide an easily identifiable thread

of alternative narratives within the permanent exhibition. Our hands-on interventions in particular draw the visitors' attention to scholarly debates and unanswered questions,¹⁰ thus involving the visitors in the process of thinking about the objects, the contexts in which they were produced and used, and their potential to comply with, complement or even contradict the museum's narrative.

Our use of interventions is part of a broader trend in current museum practice of questioning traditional exhibition formats and introducing new ways of dealing with the different layers of meaning that can be attributed to museum objects in varying contexts.¹¹ However, the transcultural outlook of these interventions presents a novel way of reflecting upon and undermining the cultural categories which were set out in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and which are still at work in museums. To provide a glimpse of the context of our interventions within the transcultural and Mediterranean narratives currently deployed in other institutions, I shall briefly discuss two examples: the *Mediterranean World Gallery* in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the *Galerie de la Méditerranée* in the Musée des Civilisations d'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM) in Marseille.

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford was re-opened in 2009 after a complete makeover following a strategy called "Crossing Cultures, Crossing Time".¹² The new architecture is light and transparent with meaningful visual axes between the different galleries and floors—these still follow the traditional division into culturally-defined sections, but are linked through transcultural "orientation galleries". The *Mediterranean World Gallery* is slightly different in that respect because of its inherently transcultural display. It consists of one room, in which objects from medieval Greece, Egypt, the Near East and Italy are arranged around a large map of the Mediterranean. In principle, the gallery thus reflects the methodological approaches of Mediterranean art history, in which the Mediterranean is conceived as a culturally diverse entity. Of course the map—like its geographical prototype the Sea itself—is large and in the way when one tries to cross from Byzantium to Cairo. Moreover, the choice of separate showcases reproduces the classification of objects into "Byzantine", "Islamic" and "European", which a gallery such as this one could also

seek to avoid. Nonetheless, here the Mediterranean ivory horns from the Museumsinsel in Berlin would have been facing each other. They could have been perceived as belonging to a Mediterranean courtly language of representation, while the history of their classification as objects of separate art historical disciplines would still have been apparent through their placement in different display cases.

One of the peculiarities of the MuCEM, which opened in 2013, is the exhibition concept. The main building of the museum has one large area for a “semi-permanent exhibition”, the *Galerie de la Méditerranée*. This has space for two temporary exhibitions, in which themes of trans-Mediterranean interest are presented, for example *Lieux saints partagés* (Shared Holy Places — April–August 2015). The structure of the *Galerie de la Méditerranée* is defined by four overarching themes, presented as “*singularités*”, or special characteristics that present (or project) a Mediterranean identity: agriculture and the emergence of the gods, monotheism, civil societies and discoveries.¹³ Within this space, objects from different times and regions — such as a horn from Spain, an object from France and one from Tunisia, all depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac — are juxtaposed so that they enter into a dialogue across geographic, cultural, linguistic and religious divides. Visitors are invited to search for and experience similarities between cultures. In such a gallery, the three ivory horns from the Museumsinsel could quite naturally be shown side by side, as belonging to a single Mediterranean culture. They could be part of a narrative that reflects our current preoccupation with the historical and present ties between East and West, North and South, Christian and Islamic cultures.

Pointing at similarities, connections and interchange counteracts an essentialist conception of cultures, and highlights the complexity of societies. It is obvious that, in the authoritative voice of the institution museum, such a discourse has broad social and political implications, particularly at a time when reductionist ideas about “Islam” and “the West” circulate all too freely. However, in the MuCEM, the absence of a curatorial voice to frame the narrative presented is irritating. Although a semi-permanent exhibition does not pretend to offer a “permanent” truth, this is not addressed explicitly. The visitors are led through a linear parcours which allows no deviations. The



[fig. 13]
Hands-on intervention: The Olyphants Question

conceptual frame of the gallery is presented as a fact, not as the decision of a curator, not as a trend anchored in current scholarly interests in the Mediterranean and the present socio-political context.

Alongside our task to introduce alternative, transcultural narratives into the culturally-defined permanent display of the Museum für Islamische Kunst, we were particularly committed to fostering such an awareness of the narratives that surround the objects. Whichever form they take, interventions in permanent exhibitions can provide multiple alternative perspectives and present open questions.¹⁴ They help to reflect how the presentation of objects in their specific exhibition contexts shapes our perception, and to draw attention to the structure and the content of the narratives proposed by the institutions. With the introduction of interventions into the very structure of the permanent exhibition, in the form of classic wall-texts, but also touchscreen-stations, arrows to related objects in other collections



[fig. 14]
Ivory horn intervention in Room 3
"Fatimids (909–1171) and Sicily" and chess intervention



[fig. 15]
"Objects in Transfer" design

and hands-on displays, we wanted to create moments of irritation through art historical commentaries on the objects and thus invite visitors to think off the beaten track. At the same time, the clear visual demarcation of our interventions from the remainder of the permanent exhibition also highlights the fact that this narrative is in the voice of our project and so is just one of many possible ways of reviewing the permanent display.

As an extension of the ivory horn's showcase, our intervention invites visitors to reassemble fragments of the different Berlin horns in a puzzle and thereby note their similarities [figs. 13 and 14]. By introducing comparative objects into the gallery space, the intervention casts a transcultural, Mediterranean perspective on the object on display. It draws attention to the framing of objects within the museum space and addresses the constructedness of cultural classifications.

Transcultural interventions complementing the permanent display do not disrupt the museum narrative—which remains as a frame to the objects. To us, our interventions offered a way of presenting a culturally entangled world in its complexity without concealing the classificatory system on which the history of European scholarship and museums is based. To the visitors—we would hope—these interventions, easily recognisable as a thematic trail through their design and colour codes [fig. 15], function not only as an invitation to focus on cultural interaction rather than isolation, but also to think about the definition of cultural boundaries inside and beyond the walls of the museum.

- 1 On the museum as a purveyor of narratives, see M. Bal, "The Discourse of the Museum", in *Thinking About Museums*, eds R. Greenberg, B. Ferguson and S. Nairne, New York 1996, pp. 201–18; F. Bodenstein, D. Poulot, "Introduction", in *Great Narratives of the Past: Traditions and Revisions in National Museums*, Conference Proceedings, Paris 2011, eds D. Poulot, F. Bodenstein and J.-M. Lanzarote Guiral, *EuNaMus Report* 4, 2012, pp. 9–20: http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp_home/index.en.aspx?issue=078 (last accessed 01/08/2016).
- 2 The current display dates from 2001. For an analysis of Islamic art displays in Berlin, see S. Kamel, "Vorsicht, Frisch gestrichen! Museen Islamischer Kunst zwischen postkolonialer Kritik und Orientalismus", in *total. Universalismus und Partikularismus in postkolonialer Medienwissenschaft*, eds U. Bergemann and N. Heidenreich, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 291–306. See also: B. Junod, G. Khalil, S. Weber and G. Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum—Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, London 2012.
- 3 For a critical discussion of interventions as a format, see R. Muttenthaler, "Interventionen als 'intelligenter Grenzverkehr' mit Dauerausstellungen?", *Neues Museum*, 3, 2009, pp. 16–23.
- 4 M. Rosser-Owen, "Mediterraneanism: how to incorporate Islamic art into an emerging field", *Journal of Art Historiography*, 6, 2012: <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/rosserowen.pdf> (last accessed 01/08/2016).
- 5 O. Grabar, "The Shared Culture of Objects", in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. H. Maguire, *Dumbarton Oaks* 1997, pp. 115–29.
- 6 On problems regarding the classification of elephants, see A. Shalem (with M. Glaser), *Die mittelalterlichen Elfenbeine*, Berlin 2014 pp. 45–47.
- 7 See also Vera Beyer's text on the limitations of the notion of "Islamic art" as a museum category in this brochure.
- 8 This was addressed in our workshop "Transcultural Art Histories in the Museum" (September 2015). See review by M. von Oswald: <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6303> (last accessed 01/08/2016).
- 9 B. Habsburg-Lothringen, "Dauerausstellungen. Erbe und Alltag", in ead., *Dauerausstellungen. Schlaglichter auf ein Format*, Bielefeld 2012, pp. 9–20, p. 9.
- 10 We are grateful to Rebecca Jacobs for an inspiring tour of the William Morris Gallery in London, where stimulating questions (left unanswered) are written on the exhibition walls.
- 11 Formats include open storage, semi-permanent exhibitions, interventions, site-specific works, participatory initiatives etc. See B. Habsburg-Lothringen (n. 9), p. 15.
- 12 C. Brown, *Ashmolean: Britain's First Museum*, Oxford 2010.
- 13 See <http://www.museum.org/fr/exposition/galerie-de-la-mediterranee> (last accessed 01/08/2016).
- 14 R. Muttenthaler, R. Wonisch, *Museum und Intervention*, Vienna 2003: <http://www.iff.ac.at/museologie/service/lesezone/intervention.pdf> (last accessed 01/08/2016).



[fig. 16]
Hands-on intervention
on the museum's zodiac plate

Bringing Academic Research into the Museum. Reflections on the Process of Developing the Exhibition Trail

SOPHIA VASSILOPOULOU

“The curator and visitor were placed on opposite sides of a line separating those who had been trained to see the invisible order [...] and those untrained beholders who needed to be tutored [...]”.¹ Though this quotation refers to the first public museums in Europe, today many visitors have the same experience when visiting a museum or exhibition. Taking this as a starting point, it was quite a challenge to try to present academic research in a way that attracts visitors, in a way that does not simply inform but rather mediates between scholars and museum audiences. Our project’s aim was not only to discuss processes of knowledge transfer between the Near East and Europe and to break with the tradition of presenting Islamic art as a monolithic cultural entity, but to do so by communicating our research to the broad audience of the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin through appropriate interpretation formats. This contribution will discuss the project’s aims, the constraints on it and its results regarding the development of these interpretation displays.

The form of the museum exhibition, which is part of the Pergamon Museum’s presentation of mainly ancient cultures, dates to the early 2000s in its formalist display system and comparative lack of contextualisation of the objects presented.² These objects are



[fig. 17]
Previous presentation of the Room 12,
“Early Ottomans” in the Museum für
Islamische Kunst, presenting mainly carpets



[fig. 18]
Detail of the hands-on intervention
on European and Arab chess rules

arranged according to Islamic dynasties and are supposed to speak for themselves [fig. 17]; they are accompanied by very little interpretation, mainly in the form of labels and maps. This “relatively context-free isolation”³ derives from Western principles that still today predominate in art museums and academia.⁴ The decontextualized presentation, focusing almost exclusively on the aesthetic and artistic elements of the objects, provides no “space” to discuss socio-cultural entanglements between regions, periods and the objects themselves. Under these circumstances, we wished to develop interpretation displays that discussed transcultural relationships in pre-modern societies and at the same time communicated contemporary academic research to modern museum audiences.

PROJECT AIMS AND INTERVENTION PROTOTYPES

Developing an interpretation display can range from a curator writing a text and hanging it on the wall to a long-term project engaging curators, educators and visitors (always according to the capacities and aims of curators or institutions).⁵ In our project, which, as part of the Collaborative Research Centre “Episteme in Motion” at the Freie Universität Berlin, had the objective of bringing together academic research and museum communication, but was not set up as a museum education project, we needed to connect experts from other relevant fields and benefit from their experience to help us develop our displays. There were three core issues we focused on.

1. Who do we want to address with our content? What language do we use for it? The State Museums (the umbrella group for the Museum für Islamische Kunst) of course offer special services for tourist groups. And since we could not hire educators, who would adjust our content to the needs of special visitor groups,⁶ such as families or school classes, we chose language that was as clear as possible for a broader audience, while at the same time focusing on individual adult visitors.⁷ And since the Museum für Islamische Kunst has (among its 700,000 visitors each year)⁸ various types of visitor, ranging from those “strolling” through the museum to those searching for specific information on Islamic art and cultures,⁹ we decided to work with different types of text, written and spoken, offering short overviews as well as insights into specific themes.

2. What kind of display would be the most appropriate for the content we were about to produce? Searching for an answer to this question, we visited other museums and talked with museum professionals who had set up similar projects and had faced similar problems.¹⁰ Our visits¹¹ clearly showed that there is no one perfect display type. Therefore, from the very beginning, we worked together with a communication designer and a team of programmers, consulting with them at every step in our research, in order to develop digital as well as “analogue” display formats that would specifically suit the objects and our aims.

3. How would we know that our intended message was being communicated effectively? During the first phase of the project, supported by an external expert,¹² we analysed our needs and reflected on the use of the different evaluation types. We decided to evaluate and then adjust our prototypes before installing them permanently in the museum rooms.

We therefore started experimenting quite early with seven prototypes and objects in order to establish initial first results, approximately 18 months after the project start. At that point it was important for us to know whether we should keep on developing these formats and in what direction. Bearing methodology in mind, as described by Economou,¹³ for example, and important general remarks on the perception of Islamic art in museums, as shown by Fritsch,¹⁴ as well as past visitor surveys within the Museum für Islamische Kunst,¹⁵ we chose a “quick and dirty” version of an evaluation as appropriate for our needs and capacities. We established a list of questions and problems that were important for us to clarify and used a mix of tools ranging from visitors’ observation to “think-alouds”, on a sample of 40 visitors, in order to get specific answers or more general opinions on our list of questions. Further, we asked five people to comment on all the objects thoroughly and filmed them. Even with such a small-scale “evaluation”, we were able to receive useful feedback, as visitor preferences could be clearly recognised. For example, while on the one hand almost all visitors we asked were satisfied with the length of the texts and the font size, on the other hand the verdict on one of our formats—the “peepholes”¹⁶—was a clear no, which saved us time and effort developing something that would not have worked.

FINAL INTERVENTION FORMATS

As mentioned in the introduction to this brochure, the four different intervention formats we developed needed to communicate our research results suitably. They also needed to follow some overall criteria, which we had set up during our project. One important aim was to propose an alternative contextualisation of the objects, one undermining the isolation of Islamic art, but which at the same time did not distract visitors from perceiving the objects per se. This is not easy in a field divided between aesthetic and cultural/anthropological approaches,¹⁷ but for us it was a fundamental component of our research: the objects chosen were not supposed to merely exemplify our theories but were to be seen in their role as agents and mediators of the transfer processes. Thus it was indispensably important that all intervention formats communicated with the visitors while prompting an experience of the materiality, technical qualities, form and design of the objects [figs 3, 14, 20]. The displays therefore needed to be aesthetically attractive but not in a way that meant that they competed with the objects in the display cases. Rather, they had to be developed in such a way that they could be placed as close to the objects as possible, so that direct visual connection was ensured. Thus each display was adjusted to the corresponding object.

Additionally, the interventions needed to correspond to the different research contents and messages, and at the same time provide varying means of access for the visitors to these contents. Since there is no perfect display for every content, and no one perfect interpretation format for all visitors, our four intervention formats introduced possibilities of different types of access and interaction for different types of visitor [fig. 16].¹⁸ It was important that the interventions could be regarded in two ways—either individually when focusing a specific object or as an exhibition trail to be pursued through the whole collection.

Floor arrows and accompanying wall labels: This intervention introduces the possibility of showing objects that are closely related to the museum’s exhibits, but are located in other museums or galleries in Berlin. Arrows in striking turquoise fixed to the floor make visitors “stumble” on them. Written on each arrow is the name of a Berlin museum or gallery, and the distance and direction. This very

short information aims to intrigue visitors and make them search for more information on the wall labels [fig. 22].¹⁹ The labels themselves, which through their form and colour are connected to the floor arrows and carry the motto “Across Berlin”, present unexpected questions or assertions about the museum objects and are accompanied by pictures of the reference objects, inviting visitors to compare different exhibits [fig. 3].

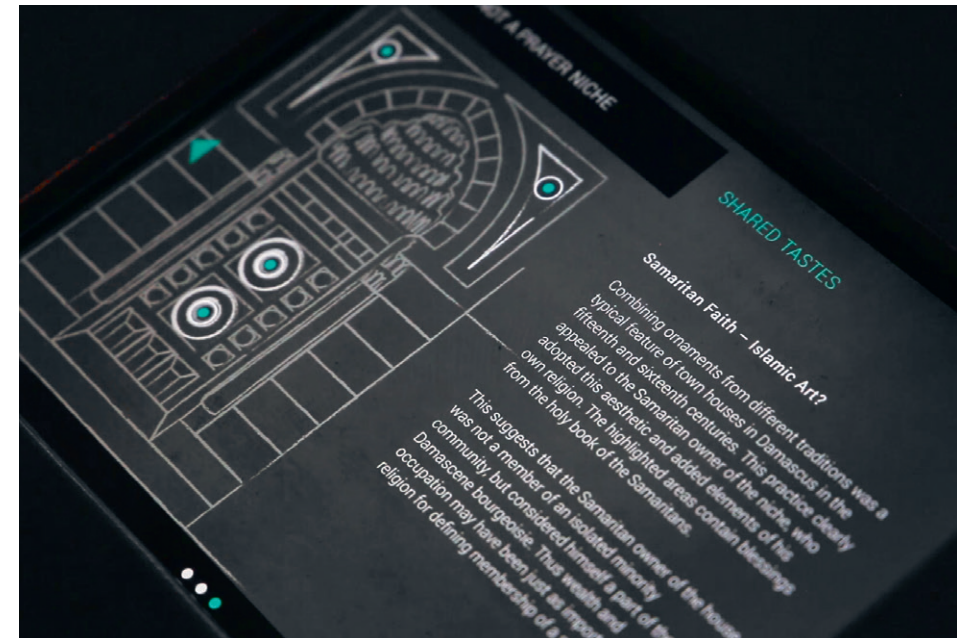
Hands-on stations: With hands-on-stations we wanted to further challenge visitors to propose answers and solutions instead of passively absorbing them. They invite the users to think, discuss and comment on possible scenarios. This turned out to be a very useful medium for presenting cases within the museum context where academic research cannot yet offer reliable answers. Our three displays follow the same concept but differ in form and use, adjusted to the needs of each object and theme.²⁰ The common element is that the main focus lies on the interaction, with the accompanying text offering more in-depth information about each case [figs 14, 16, 18].

Digital media: With a digital format developed specifically for our exhibition trail we had the possibility of discussing subjects in detail. In this case, it was again important not to lose sight of the object, which is a common risk when using digital media in a museum. For this reason, touchscreens are built into benches placed within sight of the objects discussed, offering a relaxed atmosphere for visitors to take their time to investigate the objects [fig. 19]. Further, the texts are formulated in such a way that they pose questions that can only be answered and understood through observing the objects.

Next to the texts we have included videos, audios, pictures, drawings and interactive maps, in order to make the themes more easily accessible for users. For every subject starting from a key question or thesis we offer three tracks to pursue. The three tracks present different aspects of the subject discussed and the visitors can at every step decide if they want to continue reading or return to the start and choose another theme. Further, pictures and maps are not simply illustrative of the written text, but contain detailed information (hidden behind turquoise buttons) [fig. 20]. Thus, technology has allowed us to structure the content and visitors to decide how much they wish to learn about the objects.



[fig. 19]
Observing the original while using the
“Not a Prayer Niche” digital intervention



[fig. 20]
Detail of the “Not a Prayer Niche” digital intervention
with text, image and buttons offering further information



[fig. 21]
An example of the smartphone version of
the "Not a Prayer Niche" digital intervention



[fig. 22]
Interventions "... also in European Pharmacies"
and "Not a Prayer Niche"

QR and NFC access and online platform: Finally, apart from the touch-screens, visitors can use their own devices to access the digital information via a QR code or NFC tag positioned next to the object. The information appears in a smartphone or tablet version [fig. 21]. But not only the digital interventions and their content are offered "to go": all the content of our interventions can be found on an online platform (www.objects-in-transfer.sfb-episteme.de) that allows remote access and its use beyond the "physical" exhibition trail. Thus, the content is accessible to an even wider audience as well as to experts interested in our work.

- 1 T. Bennett, "Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision", in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. S. Macdonald, Oxford 2006, pp. 263–78, p. 268.
- 2 On this, see for example Jens Kröger, "Early Islamic Art History in Germany and Concepts of Objects and Exhibition", in *Islamic Art and the Museum—Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, B. Junod, G. Khalil, S. Weber and G. Wolf, eds, London 2012, pp. 173–82, p. 182.
- 3 S. Weber, "A Concert of Things: Thoughts on Objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context", in *Islamic Art and the Museum* (n. 2), pp. 28–56, p. 29.
- 4 B. Junod, G. Khalil, S. Weber and G. Wolf, "Islamic Art and the Museum", in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, (n. 2), pp. 11–16, p. 13.
- 5 From the proceedings of the conference "Looking Backward, Looking Forward" (Manchester Museum, 9–10 May 2005) see for example A. K. Brown, "The Kelvingrove 'New Century' Project: Changing Approaches to Displaying World Cultures in Glasgow", *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 18, 2006, pp. 37–47.
- 6 For another model/project of developing interpretation strategies, see J. Fritsch, "The Jameel Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London", in *Islamic Art and the Museum* (n. 2), pp. 189–200.
- 7 See the classification of visitor types in J. Fritsch, "The Jameel Gallery", in *Islamic Art and the Museum* (n. 6) p. 193.
- 8 According to the museum's records, 758,838 persons visited the Museum für Islamische Kunst in 2014 and 704,903 in 2015.
- 9 For more information on the visitors of the museum, see C. Gerbich, "A Wooden Room with many Doors..." Social, Physical and Intellectual Accessibility at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin", in *Islamic Art and the Museum* (n. 2), pp. 321–26.
- 10 This idea was developed after working with Susan Kamel, Professor for Museum Studies at the University of Applied Sciences Berlin, who joined our team as a guest researcher and discussed with us the possibilities and difficulties of exhibiting Islamic art and cultures today.
- 11 Überseemuseum (Bremen), William Morris Gallery (London), Museum of London, Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), Museum of Science (Oxford), Victoria and Albert Museum (London), Musée du Cinquantenaire (Brussels), Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Marseille), Musée du Louvre (Paris), Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris), Musée du quai Branly (Paris).
- 12 Christine Gerbich, Doctoral Fellow (TOPOI) at the CARMaH, helped us during her time as a guest researcher, to find suitable evaluation methods.
- 13 M. Economou, "Evaluation strategies in the cultural sector: the case of the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow", *Museum and Society*, 2(1), 2004, pp. 30–46.
- 14 T. Mousouri and J. Fritsch, "Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art Front-end Evaluation Report", 2004: http://www.vam.ac.uk/files/file_upload/17174_file.doc (last accessed 05/09/2016).
- 15 The most recent and in-depth visitor survey was conducted by Christine Gerbich: *Experimentierfeld Museologie, Ergebnisse der Besucherbefragung am Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin im September–Oktober 2009* (available upon request). Also useful for us were the results of a small-scale visitor survey conducted by Cornelia Weber, student assistant on the project, for her BA thesis "Kontexte und Präsentationsformen in Ausstellungsräumen—Dargestellt an einem Beispiel aus dem Museum für Islamische Kunst", HTW Berlin 2012.
- 16 See V. Beyer's contribution to this brochure.
- 17 M. Müller-Wiener "Aesthetics Versus Context? Towards New Strategies for the Study of the Object", in *Islamic Art and the Museum* (n. 2), pp. 139–43, p. 142.
- 18 More on different visitor types and suitable interpretation formats in J.-P. Sumner, "Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum: Eine inklusive Erfahrung in Glasgow", in *Experimentierfeld Museum: Internationale Perspektiven auf Museum, Islam und Inklusion*, eds S. Kamel and C. Gerbich, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 133–58, esp. pp. 141, 144–46.
- 19 For a thorough description of the development of this intervention, see V. Beyer's contribution to this brochure.
- 20 On the three objects see the introduction to this brochure.



[fig. 23]
Tracing connections across Berlin: relating a “Holbein carpet”
to a Holbein painting in the Gemäldegalerie

The Collaborative Research Centre “Episteme in Motion”

GYBURG UHLMANN AND ANDREW JAMES JOHNSTON

The Collaborative Research Centre “Episteme in Motion. Transfer of Knowledge from the Ancient World to the Early Modern Period” is a research group funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and based at the Freie Universität Berlin. It is dedicated to the examination of processes of knowledge change in European and in non-European pre-modern cultures. In addition to the Freie Universität Berlin, other participating institutions are the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science with a total of 22 academic disciplines in the fields of the humanities, history, art and cultural studies.

The Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) is dedicated to the examination of processes of knowledge change in European and in non-European pre-modern cultures. This phenomenon deserves particular attention because there has been and still is a tendency to portray the knowledge of these cultures as particularly resistant to change, a tendency detectable both in the ways such cultures have often seen themselves as well as in the ways they have been described from outside. It is our basic thesis that these cultures are subject to constant processes of knowledge change. But this kind of change occurs over extended periods of time, in a subcutaneous fashion and through the differentiation of already existing knowledge as well as through the tacit integration of novel items, so that the traditional toolkit of the History of Knowledge with its focus on indicators of ‘progress’ within narratives of rupture or revolution is no longer

sufficient to describe the phenomena we are interested in. In order to analyse the processes of knowledge change sketched above, the Collaborative Research Centre opts for a narrowly defined concept of knowledge subsumed under the term 'episteme' which encompasses the notions of 'knowledge' and of 'science/scholarly activity', while simultaneously defining knowledge as the 'knowledge of something', i.e. as knowledge that is invested with a claim to validity. These claims to validity are not necessarily made by explicit reflection, but may also be constituted and reflected in specific forms of representation, particular institutions or aesthetic and performative strategies. The Collaborative Research Centre examines the thesis that knowledge is always constituted in a processual manner as every attempt to fix knowledge, pass it on, codify it or edit it didactically involves an element of movement and transformation, as does the discarding of previously established knowledge. For this reason, 'episteme' is always in motion — even (and especially) where it appears to remain stable.

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Website: www.objects-in-transfer.sfb-episteme.de

A short documentary film about the project “Objects in Transfer” sheds light on the concepts behind the exhibition trail and provides further views behind the scenes.



www.objects-in-transfer.sfb-episteme.de/#/about/dokumentation

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