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Pulling the Past into the Present: Curating Islamic Art in a Changing World, a Perspective from Berlin

Abstract

Demographic and social change presents museums with challenges at various levels. Islam has become a core referent in public discourse, which often also affects views of collective identity and personal political stances in fundamental ways. The dominant place of Islam in global debate does not stop at the doors of our museums. The main thesis of this article is that exhibitions of Islamic art are, whether we like it or not, sites of identity negotiation where relations to 'me and my world' are established. This article takes a closer look at the process of identity formation in regard to contemporary museum politics. It asks questions such as, 'In what ways do the social dynamics surrounding the subject of Islam function, and how do these impact museum spaces?'; 'What role do museums have in these emerging dynamics?'; and 'How do curators respond to the shifting needs of visitors?' The classical layout and communication strategies of Islamic art collections were often insufficiently framed to address these layered concerns, despite curators' knowledge of the rich diversity of Islamicate histories. During the last few years, however, different curatorial teams have struggled to discover better techniques and narratives for this diversity. The Berlin Museum contains one such team, and the second part of this article outlines some of their new approaches.

Keywords

Islamic art
museum
identity
Islamism and
   Islamophobia
'Multaka'
cultural education

Demographic and social change presents museums with challenges at various levels. Questions about the constitution and dynamics of our own society demand new answers that are not necessarily derived from common museum practice. Virtually unprepared in their institutional policy, collections of Islamic

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Figure 1: Visitors at the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, in front of the thirteenth-century prayer niche (Object: 623/1226) from Kashan, Iran, 2009.

art and archaeology situated outside the Islamic world have for decades witnessed a development in which radical Islamism and Islamophobia polarize the public sphere. Both in defining themselves and defining others, populist and extremist political movements increasingly use 'Islam' for the purpose of political mobilization, thereby channelling conflicts of socio-economic distribution, experiences of marginalization, anxieties about the future, and cultural uncertainty in times of globalization. This has taken on a dynamic that is likely to keep us in suspense for several decades to come. Everyone has now developed a view and emotions on the issue of Islam, which often also affect views of collective identity and political stances in fundamental ways. This does not stop at the doors of our museums. The main thesis of this article is that exhibitions of Islamic art are, whether we like it or not, sites of identity negotiation where relations to 'me and my world' are established. This means that whatever we present also serves in forging identity and therefore has socio-political implications. Due to our particular focus, many visitors – hundreds of thousands of them in the large museums – come with simple questions in their minds, such as 'Is Islam synonymous with Islamism and Islamism synonymous with terrorism?', or 'What can I learn here today about a culture I hear so many disturbing things about in the media?', and even questions about identity, such as 'Who am I? Who are the others?'[1] Whether intentionally or not, our museums have become part of a process of negotiating collective identities (they have probably always been part of such a process, but

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Figure 2: A group of school children engaging in an educational activity at the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, 2010.

with a different topicality and intensity). Cultural heritage and history serve as quarries for the construction of individual and collective identities. Museums resemble supermarkets in which visitors can help themselves to the elements with which to forge their identity. Reaching into the past for an understanding of the present is not a new phenomenon and seems to be necessary in our present times [Figures 1 and 2].

Defining the Challenge for Museums

Looking at the way our exhibition spaces are arranged, this at first seems a little far-fetched: the connection between the displays and our current issues does not readily reveal itself. How should museum curators handle topical questions? The particular details of art and archaeology from predominantly Islamic countries are scarcely known and the discourse is dominated by stereotypes – cultural history is not often the topic of a talk show. In spite of the media overload on the subject of Islam, people really know relatively little about the cultural development of the region. And why should museums take a leading role in these debates? Museums are not the obvious forums for discussion of the hijab and its relevance today, nor can they offer the type of guide that explains whether or not one may shake hands with Muslim women. The role of the museum is to give biographies of the objects themselves. The basis for the scholarly understanding of Islamic art of most curators and scholars

is cultural history; that is, the culturally based and dynamic transformational processes and transregional histories of objects. These are the historical foundations of our discipline. In Berlin, the Mshatta issue has been emblematic of this since 1903, when the monument was the cornerstone of the museum, while its Islamic origin had not yet been established: this was secondary, as the monument was seen as a representative of a late antique landscape out of which Islamic art developed. Culture and art were not characterized by rigid borders but by connections.[2] Much later trends in the historical sciences, such as the 'social turn' or *histoire croisée*, have altered the cultural approach of the twentieth century.

The point of outlining this set of problems here is not to suggest solutions such as overwriting objects with contemporary content, but to curate the approach of cultural history more consistently: objects are records of the migration of ideas, knowledge, and technologies, and they are transregional. In spite of curators' knowledge of the diversity of Islamic civilization, we often pursue exhibition practices that, in terms of visitor experience, tend not to be very consistent with this understanding of culture.

Visitors often have no way of discerning curator's understanding of history and culture because we do not present it clearly, and overestimate their potential of absorbing historical content. This begins, for example, with self-contained museum circuits that often start out with the Qur'an, and present visitors with multiple dynasties, each one presented as a coherent view of the culture, which is diametrically opposed to our scholarly view of the Islamic world as a cultural hub between Europe, Africa, India, and the Far East. This is changing slowly, and some collections, like the new Jameel Gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum (2006) and the Louvre (2012), have already abandoned their dynastical layout. Some recently opened galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2010) and the Islamic Galleries in the Brooklyn Museums (2009, and probably after the reinstallation in 2018), have curated exhibitions where transregional interconnectivity is stressed. The new Islamic Galleries at the British Museum (scheduled for 2018) will represent a major step in this direction.[3] However, in considering general curatorial practices, one can determine numerous problem areas by use of a critical survey. We started by critiquing our own galleries of Islamic art in Berlin: the difficult-to-explain order of the dynasties; wall labels providing purely historical and art historical information; reduced or oversimplified contextual frameworks; and decontextualized presentations of objects independent of object qualities. Scholars of Islam, such as Aziz Al-Azmeh and Peter Heine, rightly point out, for example, that presenting the conventional orthodox view of Islam as the authentic Islam – that is, reducing it to religious dogmas or providing only schematic introductions in museums – plays directly into the hands of extremists.[4] As public museums we are part of the 'battlefield' of collective identities, or at least participants in the process of collective identity formation, and do not always play the best role in this – a huge challenge, since there are no obvious good alternatives and we cannot allow texts to become even more complex and lengthy. The curatorial teams of several museums are struggling to find better tools and narratives. The Berlin Museum is one of them, and some of the new approaches with which we try to deliver the information more clearly are presented in the second part of this article.

First, however, I would like to take a closer look at the process of identity formation. 'In what ways do the social dynamics surrounding the subject

of Islam function and what role do the processes of self-perception and/or objectivity play in this?' and 'When it comes to defining cultural autonomy and heteronomy, what role do museums play and how does our concept of culture fit into this role?'

Culture, Identity, and Islam: The Pressure to Define What It Means to be Muslim

In debates on the Islamic world – especially when assessing and analysing the current crises – and in encounters with Muslim citizens in Europe, simplistic patterns of perception associated with its religion prevail. Awareness of the various Muslim societies and the complexity of their social, geographical, ethnic, and cultural formations is either limited or ignored in the analysis and evaluation of the Islamic world's social processes. This also applies to the variety of lifestyles of Muslims in Germany and other western countries. Limiting collective identity to religion or to a highly simplified and stereotypical idea of religion, in both self- and outside perception, obscures the view of social, economic, and cultural developments and complexity. At the same time, this limitation narrows the visibility of hybrid identities that draw on various social and cultural sources. In public debate, knowledge of the cultural historical backgrounds of various Muslim cultures is either completely lacking or gives way to stereotypical ideas. Even questions about the cultural situation of particular countries are frequently evaluated through difference, often leading to a negative projection of the 'Other' and an idealization of the culture and history of the 'Own'. In Germany, a heated public debate has developed around concepts such as '*Leitkultur*' or 'leading culture', and triggered such questions as 'Does Islam belong to Germany?'

The current cultural uncertainty, particularly among young, third-generation Muslims of Turkish or Arab descent who increasingly question themselves in terms of religion and culture in the social environment, has led Muslims to search for their identity and role within German society. The pressure to explain one's identity – often from a defensive position – frequently prompts people to resort to simplistic, exclusionary cultural views in the formation of a collective identity. Most recently, this development has taken on an unprecedented dynamic, causing extremist worldviews to gain considerable appeal; offering the promise of alleged strength, extremist cultural views have the potential to lift young people out of a defensive position and into an offensive one. Much the same can be said about right-wing extremism that, in turn, sets Islam as the antithesis. These are the extremes of a social dynamic that, in various degrees, has taken hold of many areas of society. What makes this social process so powerful is the compelling need of every human being to define his or her identity, with identity being conceived as a fixed construct, rather than something dynamic capable of combining levels of contradiction.

In both individual development and collective self-definition, 'Self' is closely linked to experience and to some degree even to the construction of 'Other'. In public discourse, this is accompanied by an often racist and essentializing media discourse portraying Muslims almost like aliens [Figure 3]. Cultural education can take this as a starting point, since both Islamophobia and Islamic extremism have similar driving forces: collective identity formation through the exclusion of 'Others' and the reduction of 'Self' and 'Other' to simplified, often ahistorical and distorted ideals that do not reflect the complexity of real life.

Stefan Weber / Creative Commons.

Figure 3: Islamophobia in the German press, 2004, 2014.

Since September 11, 2001 the debate about 'foreigners' in Germany has shifted to a debate about 'Islam'. Numerous programmes were initiated with the good intention of countering, both nationally and internationally, a social process that previously was only perceived peripherally.[5] Through dialogue with Islam, an attempt was made to solve conflicts and issues of biased social processes. However, in reality these conflicts were often not based on the 'Muslimness' of social groups but were a result of demographic changes in particular nation-states, and of the general political and socio-economic imbalances and disparities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the process of dialogue, complex political conflicts were, in the media and public discourse, frequently interpreted in simplistic, religious terms, a tendency with a long history, as evidenced particularly clearly by the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. As a result of the dialogue process, Muslims were internationally and nationally defined as social groups, which clearly reinforced the tendencies of religious association and the cultural structuring of society. Previously a latent tendency, the reduction of Muslim identity to simplified religious patterns now became the predominant practice when labelling Muslims as a social group.

What was striking in this process was the difficulty – both in the media and in social discourse – in accepting different concepts of 'Muslim identity', such as secular 'cultural Muslims', and in acknowledging hybrid identity patterns as the reality. Hybrid identities are quite common in urban societies, as inter-, trans-, and multicultural experiences.[6] And yet, people who are born into Muslim families are inevitably reduced to a simplified and often negatively assessed identity pattern. Muslims are stuck in an identity trap: in order to engage and be noticed in social discourse, the assumption that they should be labelled as 'Muslim' seems to be a prerequisite. This 'self-ethnicization' is not so much an isolation from, and rejection of, a social community but, rather, a strategy of integration into society necessitated by the persistent

assignment of collective identity patterns. The development of a specifically Muslim identity may be understood as a process of social construction with the intention of finding a place within society. At the same time, a constructed collective identity is not a specifically Muslim phenomenon but, rather, the norm in societal group formation. Yet this process may also lead to experiences of alienation and the subsequent formation of counter-identities. 'By resorting to traditional patterns of the imagined culture of origin and idealising and elevating them vis-à-vis the German majority culture the individuals concerned acquire perceived strength and self-confidence.'[7] Identity – and, during the last decades, increasingly religious identity – has become the core issue of our society, because we use it to understand and shape our social realities.

Central to this is the question 'What does being a Muslim mean?' Answers from a religious context are often strained: they allow for religious self-perception but cannot cover all aspects of a person's cultural identity. Awareness of cultural tradition is usually rudimentary, and simplified patterns are accepted as social realities in the process of 'inventing tradition'.[8] Self-orientalization and a deliberate cultural differentiation in terms of Edward Said's widely discussed 'imagined geography'[9] are patterns frequently observed in (self-) descriptions and are also widespread in the majority of societies. Headscarf debates, for instance, are used and perceived as markers on both sides. The reduction of collective identities to marked patterns leads to the negotiation of socio-economic issues based on such markers. Even dynamic and differentiated 'Neo-Muslim' identities, both in its moderate form and certainly more radical Salafism – developed through the creative construction of a new scope of thinking, which rigidly reduces itself in its identity patterns – are defined through real or imaginary traditions. At present, our societies find themselves in a situation that Riem Spielhaus encapsulates as follows:

> For immigrants from Muslim majority countries it seems hardly possible anymore to establish identities that disregard religious association. The Muslim and non-Muslim construction of the group of Muslims leads on both sides to a self- and outside perception in basic categories of 'you' and 'we', 'our community' and 'your community'. Other identities, such as social, professional, local, and national ones, appear less important and are pushed into the background by the (sometimes merely adopted) religious association.[10]

Yet in order to solve social problems one must be able to break away from such greatly simplified social categories. What is needed therefore is not a dialogue between the schematized 'them' and the similarly stereotypical 'us' but, rather, the experience and the exchange of multiple intersections in complex societies, which are beyond the scope of simplified collective patterns. The issue of identity has developed centrifugal forces that endanger our social peace.

In Germany, the 'refugee crisis' is currently fuelling the fear of change and the feeling of being overwhelmed by immigrants. The concern about Islamism among the majority population has triggered a political earthquake in Germany in the wake of the attacks in France in 2015, the refugee crisis throughout that same year, and the New Year's Eve sexual assaults that took place in Cologne in 2016. The attacks carried out with trucks in Nice, Barcelona, and Berlin, and the horrific videos issued by so-called Islamic State, have fuelled a crescendo of exclusionary voices. Right-wing populist agitators

use frustration at social inequality, fears of social decline, feelings of helplessness due to incomprehensible global processes, and, of course, direct worries about security to create fear of the 'Other'. In the abstract, 'Others' become a direct threat and every attack only confirms this. Exploiting the inadequacies of our public discourse, terrorists are becoming increasingly successful at polarizing and paralysing society. Even though as human beings we are all characterized by hybridity and pluralism, subject to constant change, free to choose between doner kebab, pasta, or sushi, to engage in continuous transregional exchange, the 'Other' nevertheless can appear fundamentally foreign and menacing.

This is where cultural education has an important role to play. Against the backdrop of this social anxiety, which can have a direct impact on cultural institutions in the hands of right-wing populist governments, there is a need to present more nuanced interpretations of identity formation and a clearer understanding of social and cultural connectedness. A person who is aware of the plural foundations of his or her plural identity is better protected from extremist worldviews. Channels of education such as schools, information material (published by political foundations, for example), TV-panel discussions, and, of course, museums, must increase their efforts towards an understanding that culture is not static but rather a constantly changing network of social experience and knowledge. This should be achieved by including problematic issues such as political, economic, and social inequality. A historical approach to this issue is better suited to Islamic majority societies with their traditional regions of origin between the Mediterranean and Central Asia, or rather the Indian Ocean: throughout history, the Islamic world was a hub for reciprocal influences and the global exchange of ideas and technologies between China and Europe, featuring a strong intermixture of cultural spheres. Culture is formed of hybrid sources; it is important not to equate religious association with cultural identity, as is currently common practice in the public debate. Cultural identity is more complex than personal faith.

Inside the Museum: Developing User-Oriented Cultural Education Programmes

Cultural education can counter the trend towards polarizing identity formation in our society. It is not about overwriting our objects or transforming galleries into ideological battle zones. Usually it is quite easy – and in many collections this issue has also been addressed – to present a plurality of expression in the Islamic faith as well as religious pluralism across the Middle East. The manifold Muslim ways of life in the regions between Morocco and Indonesia, with their social, cultural, and geographical diversity, as well as the historical experience of multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies, provide ample evidence of this. Across the centuries it was possible, for the most part, for a wide variety of Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, and followers of other beliefs and denominations to coexist in constructive ways (though, of course, not always). In Europe, the religious and ethnic pluralism of the Middle East was not recognized until the modern era. Museum objects tell this story. For example, we do not usually know the religious background of the individuals who commissioned, created, or bought an object. The delicate inlaid metalwork with Muslim and Christian imagery produced in thirteenth-century Mosul, Damascus, and Cairo was popular among princes, bishops, sultans, and wealthy private individuals of all denominations. All religious minorities were actively involved in

the manufacture of art and architecture and – looking at Islamic art galleries worldwide – only in very few cases can the objects be identified as religious. The same is true for the transregional connectedness of objects: the Middle East, the East Asian world, and Europe were connected in many different ways, as were their religions. The similarities and parallels between cultures with Muslim, Christian, or Jewish populations are remarkable.

The foundation of Muslim cultures is rooted in late antiquity. The legacy of the classical world in philosophy, the sciences, urban planning, architecture, and the arts was crucial for the development of Muslim societies. This is reflected in exemplary fashion by several objects in many museums; for example, Andalusian capitals from religious or secular buildings in tenth-century Cordoba are closely related to their ancient precursors. Even ornaments carved of wood or ivory in eleventh- to twelfth-century Cairo still carry the legacy of antiquity in the inscribed scrollwork decoration [Figure 4]. The art historian Alois Riegl (1858–1905), who coined the term 'late antiquity', understood the 'arabesque' as the culmination of the ancient scroll ornament.[11] In this and many other ways antiquity and the ancient orient lived on in the Middle East. However, this fact is not embedded in the cultural memory of present-day societies, nor even among many Muslims. Antiquity, meaning 'our European' cultural foundation, belongs to Islamic civilizations as well.

In terms of a global historiography one should also not forget the connectedness with other world religions. Objects of art and traditional craftsmanship bear witness to the intersections of historical experiences between the Mediterranean and Central Asia and contradict any suggestion of a self-contained Islamic cultural sphere. Art, traditional craftsmanship, masters, and patrons know no geographical and denominational borders. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, a 'sinicization' of Islamic art occurred, as dragons, phoenixes, and other Chinese mythical creatures animated textiles, book art, ceramics, and other media [Figure 5]. In other words, Islamic cultures have always changed and gained from this change. This also applies to the direct relationship between the Middle East and Europe. The increasing experience of modernity in the Middle East in the course of the nineteenth century should not be understood as effecting cultural alienation but, rather, as a local manifestation of a global phenomenon. As evidenced by art, material culture, and archaeology, culture never takes place within a closed system. This cultural understanding of open, cross-fertilizing systems is extremely important for us today. As a cultural product, each object in the museum has a transcultural background and migration history. Migration is a core element of our development – and has been for millennia. No culture originated in isolation. Cultural goods developed over the centuries in constant and intensive exchange: all objects in museums and even in everyday use tell of the migration of knowledge. Over the centuries cultural techniques travelled by land and sea, in later times also along the Silk Road and across the Mediterranean, even during periods of conflict such as the crusades. What we are did not come about without others. Put simply, without the Persian *sornay* no European *shawm* (ancient conical double-reed woodwind instrument) would have developed, which again became the mother of the modern oboe, and without the Arab *'ud* (a short-neck lute-type) there would not have been the European lute and therefore no guitar: without the musical developments of the Middle East our music would look and sound different. And this is just one example. From late antiquity to the modern era one can point to examples of mutual enrichment that are of tremendous importance to an understanding of how our culture developed. Whether in the field of language, science, music, artisanal

Hans Kräftner.

Figure 4: Panels featuring hunting and banqueting scenes in 'late antique' inscribed scrollwork ornamentation, Egypt (probably Cairo), eleventh–twelfth century (Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, inv. I. 6375), 2013.
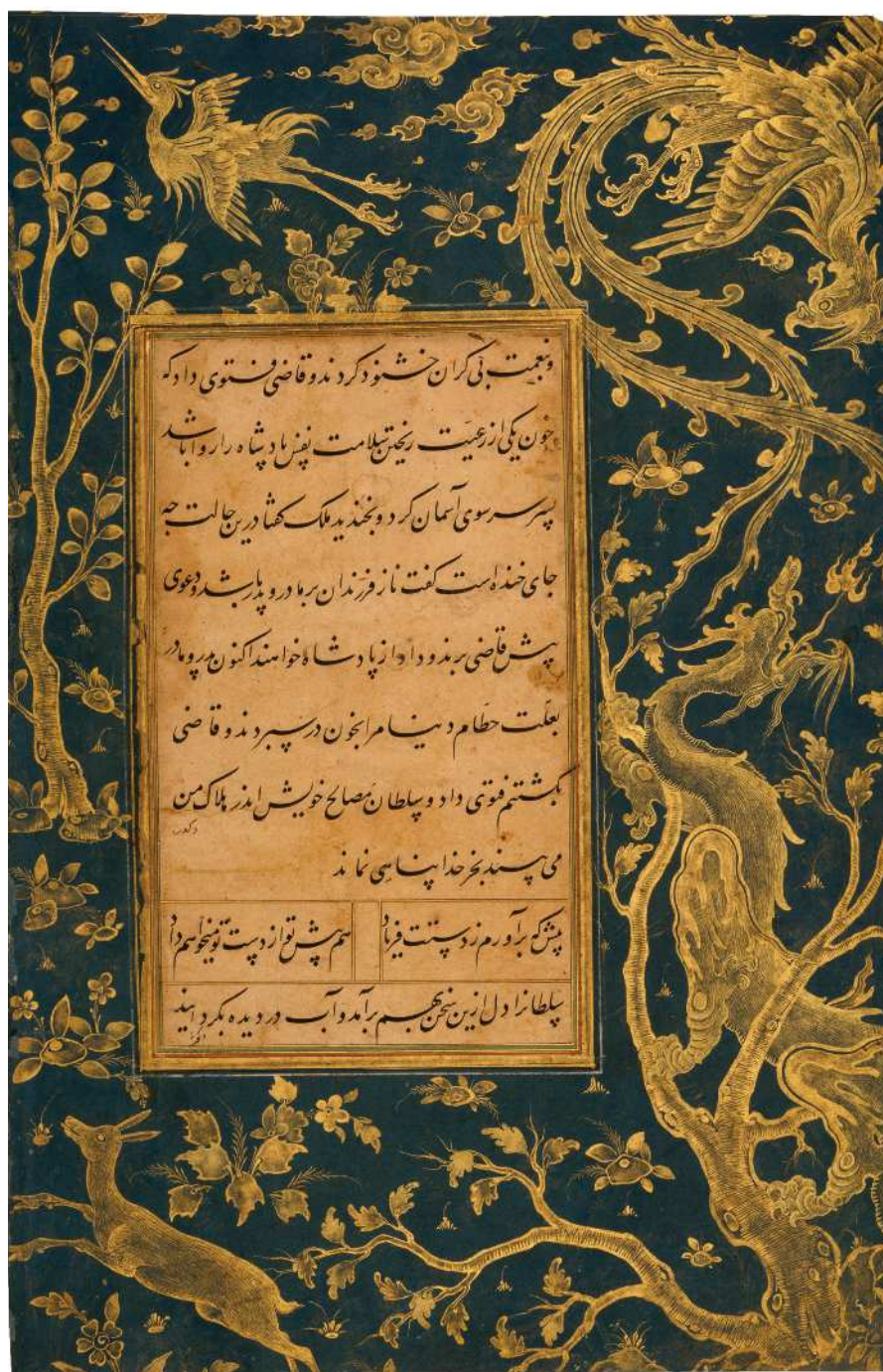
Jürgen Liepe.

Figure 5: Individual leaf featuring fine calligraphy as well as marginal imagery including a 'Chinese' dragon and phoenix, Herat, Afghanistan (?), c.1525–30 (Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, inv. 1986.104 v), 2010.

or artistic techniques, clothing, or architecture, in nearly every cultural output one can point to the close ties that existed between cultures ranging from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (and beyond). Identifying the right type of content to promote ideas about open cultural views and interlinked cultural landscapes is not difficult. The 'Other' is no longer foreign to a person who experiences the 'Other' as a constitutive element of his or her own cultural identity – a rewarding task for any educational programme. It is all the more surprising therefore that attempts at cultural interpenetration and historical experience hardly play a role in public awareness. In a knowledge-transfer process, museums can offer transregional traditions and multi-perspective considerations of culture – without betraying their principles, but by stressing scholarly understanding of the transregional contingency of knowledge and technology.

Yet practical experience in museum work shows that the curatorial staff are not adequately equipped in these efforts, or rather need more cooperation from partners such as schools. In recent years, certain German museums have been established that explicitly present transregional cultural spheres – other existing museums have renamed their ethnological collections, such as the Museum der Weltkulturen (Museum of World Cultures) in Frankfurt am Main or the Museum Fünf Kontinente (Five Continents Museum) in Munich. Yet most museums are still committed to culturally inherent narratives. The perception of a self-contained Europe and 'Other' non-European cultures is reinforced by the way museums are organized. Similarly, school curricula continue to promote established cultural views. The classical world continues to be perceived as the foundation of 'our' heritage in a linear view of history that is largely geared to Europe, with Islam appearing marginal and often unconnected to Europe in terms of its historical development. Teachers collaborating on the project at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, which is described below, remarked that they didn't have sufficient information and material about the art and culture of countries of Muslim majorities at their disposal, with the result that these subjects were, hardly discussed in classes.[12]

Dense curricula, lack of knowledge, and a degree of uncertainty regarding the subject of 'Islam' have prevented discussion in schools of one of the core issues in our society. It is imperative that education programmes on the subject of Muslim cultures should be developed and taught in schools. The following sections will focus on experiences with our newly developed education and outreach programmes to address the issues discussed in this article.

Teaching Materials

In order to provide teachers with suitable material, the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, with the aid of the Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media, has started a pilot project called 'Kulturgeschichten', or 'cultural histories', which is intended to bring the contents of the museum's collection to schools and to increase their accessibility for school lessons.[13] The challenge with this project was to establish what content would be suitable for the curricula of the different types of schools operating throughout Germany and to present it in ways tailored to the various target groups (in Germany education is almost exclusively the responsibility of the sixteen federal states). In order to precisely identify and define the target groups, numerous discussions were held by the museum with educators, teachers, and school administrators, and information was gathered about the curricula and media at schools, as well as about the interests and favourite media types of the various grades.

As a common thread, the materials that were developed contained (cultural) histories that emphasise the transregional connectedness of the Islamic cultures with European cultures. The aim was to create emotional connections in the majority population with objects and histories that are otherwise defined as 'different' and 'foreign'. The point was not to describe Islamic cultures and define them in their specificities but, rather, to identify common historical experiences and connections. The aim of the teaching materials produced by the Museum of Islamic Art, which are available free of charge, is to express diversification rather than 'Otherness'. However, the approach is still quite historical. A challenge for the future will be to connect the historical stories more closely to everyday reality and to establish a relevance to the present. Similar projects will be developed for additional age groups, to counter fears in dealing with Islam and simplistic self-perceptions. Thanks to a generous grant given by Alwaleed Philanthropies, the museum can continue to pursue this educational programme with a specialist team of curators. In the case of the 'cultural histories' project, close cooperation between specialists, pedagogues, teachers, and schools has led to a customization of the materials, especially with regard to integrating the subject matter into the curriculum as well as a target-group-tailored appearance. Today (2017), the 'Cultural histories from the Museum of Islamic Art' teaching materials are used at more than 600 schools throughout Germany. The results of the final evaluation show that these teaching materials function as an effective educational format and have aroused the children's interest: a majority of them would like to explore these subjects further. Participatory methods – including involving the target group in developing the materials – were key to this success.
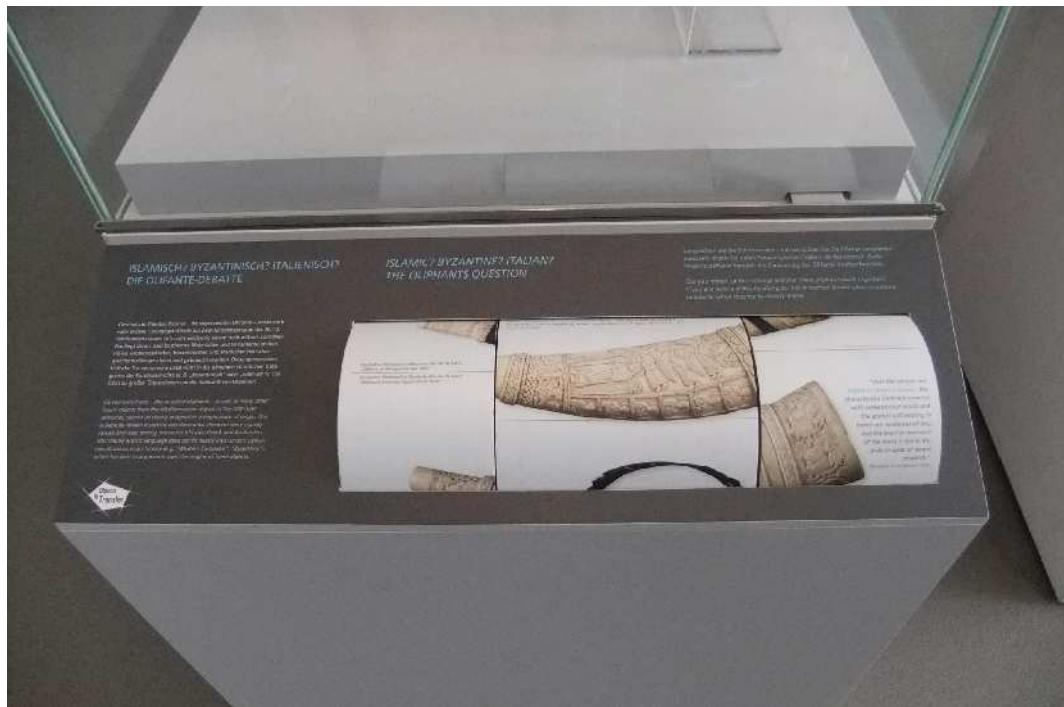
In the Galleries

As part of its core function the Museum of Islamic Art must appeal to the majority population. Each year, hundreds of thousands of visitors come to see the museum's permanent exhibition and, by doing so, inevitably expand their knowledge about Islamicate societies. Here, too, there is a need to develop educational formats that establish the relevance of the exhibits to the experience of the visitor. The museum plans to develop new exhibition formats and has tested various interventions, ranging from individual media applications to complete architectural installations, with the aim of enabling visitors to approach the displays in new ways, including through participatory methods.[14] The museum started by taking a quantitative and qualitative visitor survey that clearly showed that visitors considered the contents of the museum too difficult to understand. The ordering principles were said to be too complex, the accessibility for non-experts too limited, and communication on all levels was judged inadequate. The dynasty-based exhibition route, introduced in 1932 and quite innovative at the time, did not make much sense to visitors, who are generally unfamiliar with the history and names of these ruling families and are therefore unable to meaningfully integrate them into any previous knowledge. Furthermore, the linear narrative of a self-contained exhibition routes does not allow for any cross-referencing, say, to the traditions of the classical world or to exchanges between China and Europe; in other words, the basic elements for an understanding of Islamic art – transregional corrections – are not visible. In 2016, the 'Objects of Transfer' project involved the integration of fifteen interactive applications into the museum's permanent exhibition to present individual objects, or groups of objects, in their particular transregional and transcultural genesis

"The hunting, wrestling and fighting scenes [...] represent some of the central leisure and pleasure interests of the elite throughout the middle ages, and across the Mediterranean world. It is possible to find numerous parallels for the imagery in Western, Sicilian, Islamic and Byzantine art."
Anthony Eastmond 2012

"A significant problem that has hindered the proper consideration of this body of objects is the division of art history into discrete disciplines. Consequently, Islamic art historians are generally only interested in the oliphants decorated in an 'Islamic' style, while Byzantinists only look at those decorated in a 'Byzantine' style."
Mariam Rosser-Owen 2014

"What Islamic art historians call the 'courtly cycle' shares a common inheritance from classical antiquity with the art of Byzantium and the Latin West."
Mariam Rosser-Owen 2014

Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, SMB-SPK, Inv.-Nr. 586: „Oströmisches Reich, 11. Jh."
Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, SMB-SPK, Inv. no. 586: "Eastern Roman Empire, 11th cent."

"[Those objects have been] subjected to outlandish explanations [...] in order to explain a perceived non-conformity to the idea of what 'Islamic' or 'Islamic-style' objects should look like."
Mariam Rosser-Owen 2014

"The horn was originally carved in the 11th or 12th century by a carver steeped in the art of Fatimid Egypt. The horn was recarved [...] by another carver working under the influence of Byzantine art [...]."
David Ebitz 1986

"Recent literature has been ambivalent about the 'Byzantine' oliphants: some remain Byzantine, others have been re-catalogued as Southern Italian, but the attributions are never explicitly justified."
Anthony Eastmond 2012

Musée de Cluny, Inv.-Nr. Cl. 13065: „Salerno/Amalfi, spätes 11. Jh."
Musée de Cluny, Inv. no. Cl. 13065: "Salerno/Amalfi, late 11th cent."

"It should be stressed that the style of decoration [...] is Islamic par excellence. It is the method of carving combined with the repertoire of animals running after one another which usually appears in late Abbasid and Early Fatimid wood carving from Egypt."
Avinoam Shalem 2004

"The evidence for the availability of raw ivory in Egypt is slim and patchy [...]. Combined with the minimal evidence for the existence of Fatimid ivories, it is illogical to attribute this level of ivory production to Egypt."
Mariam Rosser-Owen 2004

Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv.-Nr. W 1007: „Olifant, wohl Ägypten um 1000"
Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv. no. W 1007: "Oliphant, probably Egypt about 1000"

"Many uncategorisable objects have been dumped in southern Italy, as a melting pot of Byzantine, Islamic and Latin styles, nevertheless the southern Italian context remains the one for which there is strong circumstantial evidence for the production of these objects, through stylistic comparison to architectural schemes, as well as the consumption of comparable ivory objects."
Mariam Rosser-Owen 2014

"That the designs are Islamic in origin is certain, the characteristic bird-tails covered with conventional scrolls and the animal-tails ending in heads are evidences of this, but the exact provenance of the horns is still in dispute in spite of recent research."
Margaret H. Longhurst 1926

Museum für Islamische Kunst, SMB-SPK, Inv.-Nr. K 3106: „Unteritalien oder Sizilien, 11.-12. Jh."
Museum für Islamische Kunst, SMB-SPK, Inv. no. K 3106: "Lower Italy or Sicily 11th-12th cent."

Hubert Graml / SMB, Museum für islamische Kunst.

Figure 6a: Intervention in the context of the 'Objects of Transfer' project: hands-on activity to playfully explore cultural exchange based on ivory signal horns (oliphants). Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, 2014.

Hubert Graml / SMB, Museum für islamische Kunst.

Figure 6b: Intervention in the context of the 'Objects of Transfer' project: hands-on activity to playfully explore cultural exchange based on ivory signal horns (oliphants). Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, 2014.

[Figures 6a and 6b]. These were accompanied by touchscreens with written and illustrated captions explaining the transfer of technologies and knowledge across cultural boundaries. Interactive stations invited visitors to think for themselves and to think further; floor arrows and labels pointed to a web of connections between Islamic art and objects in the German Historical Museum, the Asian Art Museum, or the Collection of Classical Antiquities. The exhibition route encouraged visitors to reflect on centuries-old relations between cultures and on the ways in which these relations shape us and our present.[15] Interestingly, not every intervention was successful. While touchscreen media were not used as much as expected, the combination of key objects with hands-on interactives led to frequent intensive involvement with the exhibit and quite complex contents.

In a few years, the new installation planned for the north wing of the Pergamon Museum will provide additional opportunities to demonstrate various ways of approaching Islamic art, offering visitors individual levels of experience and reflection. In the future, well over 1 million people a year will be able to experience the diversity and pluralism of Muslim life and culture, its connections to the classical world, its exchanges with Europe, and more.[16] At present, the Museum of Islamic Art is working together with a specialist in participatory curating to rigorously review the different ways in which the content could be communicated, asking, 'Who comes to the museum?'; 'What kind of experience are visitors supposed to take home with them?'; 'How can different age and social groups experience the past as enriching for the

present?' A new labelling method is intended to offer various visitor groups different 'menus': something for everyone, rather than everything for all.[17]

Mosque Communities

While the reorganization of the permanent galleries is aimed at the international public and the 'cultural histories' project is aimed at students in general, the museum is currently developing a cultural education module in cooperation with the Institute of Islamic Theology of the University of Osnabrück (IIT) and the Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media, which will be incorporated into the university-based continuing education programme for imams and support staff in Muslim organizations and mosque communities [Figure 7]. This is complemented by a similar project in cooperation with the Representative of the Berlin Senate for Integration and Migration and the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, which involves thirteen mosque communities and two youth clubs in Berlin [Figure 8]. The continuing education programme is attended by imams, mosque employees, and religious educators who function as multipliers and role models in Muslim organizations and mosque communities; these professional groups play a central role in the communities and work especially with young people, children, and families. The second project is aimed at young adults to develop, as a peer group, educational activities in the immediate local environment. Art education and cultural knowledge of both the history and present times of Islamic majority societies should be included in continuing education

Antje Canzler.

Figure 7: Working with mosque communities at the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, 2016.

Antje Canzler.

Figure 8: Working with mosque communities: participatory development of work material, 2016.

programmes and community activities. In this way we from the museum can encourage the development of culturally pluralist competencies among religious support staff, so that this content can be carried into the communities. The projects are strictly developed on a participatory principle: the participants decide in negotiation with the museum which stories make sense to them. For the museum it is an exciting, as well as challenging experience to discover how young people understand and use 'our museum objects' to address their cultural needs, worldviews, and religious identities. The goal is to offer an opportunity to confront and examine plural views of history and culture and thereby expand rigid notions of Islam and 'the Muslims', while at the same time enabling individuals to reflect on their personal identity. It should be made easier for young Muslims to develop identity concepts involving a close interconnection of Islamic culture with Europe and embeddedness in transregional, global cultural history.

These multifaceted identities should help strengthen a sense of self-esteem, a basic prerequisite for becoming an active citizen in the public sphere (if not already). In search for the cultural 'self' it is important to offer alternative concepts to stereotypical notions, to present exemplary Muslim personalities of both sexes from the past and the present, to point out humanistic traditions in Islam, and to seek and find answers to the issues of our day beyond religion. It is also important to be user-oriented and to involve imams, volunteer educators, and committed youth leaders directly in the development of the materials: only they know the conditions in the communities and can

guide the museum team in the development process. To this end, front-end evaluation and online surveys were used to discuss topics that would be of particular interest to those interviewed.[18] Particularly important to interviewees were historical stories from everyday life, as well as the discussion of reciprocal cultural influences ('contacts with the non-Islamic world in history'; 'depiction of the Islamic world in European art'), and the question of how Islamic art influenced the non-Islamic world, or in other words: 'what Muslims have contributed to the cultural and artistic development of our civilization'.[19]

One challenge for the project are the extremely diverse conditions in mosque communities, which differ in size; composition by age, sex and origin; as well as financial resources, availability of space, and educational content in training. Given the different age groups and teaching methods, developing suitable materials will be a challenge. Currently, the museum is trying out 3D prints to facilitate the presentation of objects outside the museum, before a museum visit occurs. At the same time, it is important to create an awareness of historical processes, since in the young Muslim discourse recourse to projections in history takes place in a largely arbitrary and indiscriminate manner. What is an authentic source and how should it be evaluated? What can sources deliver and what can they not deliver with regard to today's issues? A major advantage of art and archaeology in this regard is that it does not constitute an ideological and intellectual discourse, but rather one that develops in a multi-sensitive manner based on largely 'authentic' materials of the past. And indeed, the presentation of Islamic art at the Pergamon Museum on the Berlin Museum Island, probably the most prominent venue of museum-based 'high culture' in Germany, is received positively in a very direct way. The issue of origin and belonging quickly arises in discussions about cultural heritage, often in combination with a sense of injustice with regard to the political balance of power being associated – partly justified and partly projected – specifically with the archaeological collections. 'Why are the objects here?' This question is taken seriously by the museum, and initiates discussion on the issue of belonging with the participants of the diverse programmes discussed here.

An open-minded, constructive approach in schools and museums may not just guard against prejudices but may also have a positive influence, creating room and energy for new ideas. Cultural education is not just about content, it is also about discovering a variety of approaches to oneself and others and how to explore them. This counts for the institution of the museum as well, which is changing. One example: employing Syrian experts – who were refugees – to work with us on the archiving of Syrian heritage led to the project described below that reacted directly to new realities by implementing new curatorial practices.

Multaka: Refugees as Museum Guides

In December 2015, the museum launched a new programme with a focus on refugees entitled 'Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums', which has since received multiple awards. 'Multaka' (Arabic for 'meeting point') has so far admitted 24 passionate young museum guides from Syria and Iraq to welcome more than 8,500 refugees in the four participating museums [Figures 9 and 10].[20] The guides are not museum tour guides in the traditional sense; rather, they become mediators who speak to the refugees about their history and present reality. Almost all the guided tours involve individuals who are not familiar with visiting museums, engaging for long

Milena Schlösser.

Figure 9: 'Multaka' – twenty-five guides, four museums, one objective, 2016.

Milena Schlösser.

Figure 10: Attendees of a 'Multaka' guided tour at the German Historical Museum, 2016.

periods in intense discussions about how they relate to their cultural heritage and the history of their old and new home countries. There is no language barrier, no registration, just a peer-to-peer encounter of equals: 'Multaka' introduces refugees to dialogue-based museum guided tours that allow them to present their view of things. As a result, individuals who previously had no particular interest in museums begin to identify with them and their contents.

Central to the guided tours and the German-Arab workshops organized since 2016 is the exchange of different cultural and historical experiences. Syrians and Iraqis start talking about the Thirty Years' War (a religious conflict that occurred between 1618 and 1648 in Germany and its neighbouring regions), even if they had never heard of it before. What interests lay behind the religious conflicts? Were they really just about religion? The history of others becomes a foil for comparison with the issues of today. Such discussions in front of objects frequently bring together people of widely diverging political and religious persuasions, who then start to talk to one another. This works just as well on altering perceptions of the art of Muslim majority societies, which resist the simple categorization of 'Islamic art'. Individual positions are also constructively negotiated with ancient oriental monuments in the Museum of the Ancient Near East in the heart of Berlin. Consequently, the museum becomes not just a space for new social circles but also a constructive reference point and venue for discussion on the intercultural condition of our society.

Museum visits are a positive influence in this regard: citizens with a migrant background from the Middle East can reappropriate cultural artefacts from the Ishtar Gate to the Mshatta façade; they can take symbolic ownership of them, so that the museum and its artworks become part of their personal 'home'. This provides a new layer of meaning to the contested ground of museums. Objects that came to Berlin more than a century ago are for many a symbol and an outcome of power inequality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and connected with an experience of political and economic dependence.[21] Today in the museum we can – and we do quite a lot – negotiate the notion of heritage and belonging by looking to our common history and addressing challenging topics. This is frequently discussed during the 'Multaka' tours and everyone is invited to develop his or her own perspective on the presence of Middle Eastern objects in the museum. The large majority of people react positively to the loaded history. Many comment along the lines of, 'We are happy that it is here, and it feels like home.' The often-challenged location (of origin and present day) and complex biographies of the objects remain complicated issues, but the objects make a lot of sense to people from the Middle East who have found a new home in Germany. In this way the public space of the Berlin Museum Island becomes their 'living space', too. Participation is a prerequisite for identification with the host country – in this case also through the host country's appreciation of their cultures of origin – as their new home country. So far, public and symbolic spaces for this encounter have been lacking in Germany, and the use of such spaces could lead to greater identification and participation in the overall social community. In the case of the museum, its opening up to new social groups has resulted in direct identification with a public institution, as participation is structurally perpetuated by the institution.

Yet to us, the museum curators, the project's great success is very specifically related to our collection rather than to some abstract sociopolitical concept: museum objects from the past became relevant to our visitors in the present. The participatory principles of the project allowed each guide to 'narrate' his or her museum, his or her objects, his or her histories. In this way

they produced a direct 'translation' of the objects into the everyday reality of the target group. What was meaningful to them was obviously also meaningful to their compatriots. As curators we must sometimes move away from our usual privilege of interpretation and leave room for other histories – and in doing so we were richly rewarded. Our museum gained tremendous relevance for the type of visitor who is not usually easy to reach. 'Multaka' helped people find their own attitude to museums, define their own relationship to the objects, and relate these discoveries to their personal situations. The approaches were as individual and varied as our society [Figure 11]. Cultural education in this case is not a transfer of knowledge, but rather, it is the possibility for individual self-reflection and a creative and productive exploration of archived objects and contents.

The past three decades have brought with them political developments whose negative dynamic is, unfortunately, growing rather than slowing down. We have not yet reached the apex of social polarization. Global change, right-wing and Islamic terror, as well as refugee crises will continue to accompany us in the coming decades. For us and the next generation, this means reviewing the contents of our collections in terms of their relevance to the given social discourse, making them accessible and communicating them in

Zakaria Kursi / Rita Albahri.

Figure 11: 'Multaka' workshop for German- and Arabic-speaking attendees: reflecting creatively on the object and on oneself, 2016.

meaningful ways. However, it does not mean completely reorganizing the museum and rejecting the tried-and-tested methods.

Instead, we are concerned with complementing the contents and, above all, with developing innovative formats for communicating the contents. Furthermore, institutions that have up until now reached an educated, museum-going public must look beyond at how changes in society can be better reflected in their museums. The current visitor base will undoubtedly remain, although it may ask new questions, as is right and important. But today's museums will increasingly have to reach different groups in terms of their education, origin, and age. In this regard, museums of Islamic art have a great opportunity to build bridges between people of different origins and faiths. This is our chance to utilize the social relevance of our museums: in our exhibition spaces people can explore issues of personal and collective identity free of political baggage and deal with them on their own terms. The particular relevance of our museums can be realized when we succeed in making objects from the past meaningfully accessible in the present.

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Endnotes

1. Such issues are literally taken to the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. Between 2007 and 2013 alone, attendance figures increased by 80.85 per cent to 900,000 visitors a year. Visitor surveys clearly show an increased

need for information, which we similarly encounter in a very interested public outside of the Museum Island. This article is a modified version of my German-language essay 'Über uns und die Anderen – zur Rolle von Museen und kultureller Bildung in der Islamdebatte', *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz* 49 (2015): 88–109. Many thanks to Bram Opstelten for providing the English translation.

2. Volkmar Enderlein and Michael Meinecke, 'Graben – Forschen – Präsentieren. Probleme der Darstellung vergangener Kulturen am Beispiel der Mschatta-Fassade', *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 34 (1992): 137–72; Stefan Weber and Eva-Maria Troelenberg, 'Mschatta im Museum. Zur Geschichte eines bedeutenden Monuments frühislamischer Kunst', *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz* 46 (2010): 104–32.

3. While the term 'Islamic art' has been discussed critically for many years now, the fields of collections and museums shifted more recently into this debate. See Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber, and Gerhard Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum* (London: Saqi Books, 2013); or Linda Komaroff, 'Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art', *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000). For the field, one finds all relevant literature in the special issue on Islamic art historiography edited by Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves, *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012).

4. Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Die Islamisierung des Islam: Imaginäre Welten einer politischen Theologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1996); Peter Heine, 'Das Museum für Islamische Kunst nach dem 11. September', in *Das Pergamonmuseum, Menschen-Mythen-Meisterwerke*, ed. Carola Wedel (Berlin: Nicolai, 2003), 141.

5. Cf. Marcel Ernst, *Der deutsche 'Dialog mit der islamischen Welt' Diskurse deutscher auswärtiger Kultur- und Bildungspolitik im Maghreb* (Berlin: Transkript Verlag, 2014).

6. Naika Foroutan and Isabel Schäfer, 'Hybride Identitäten – muslimische Migrantinnen und Migranten in Deutschland und Europa,' *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 5 (2009): 11–18, accessed December 24, 2017, http://www.bpb.de/publikationen/KTORL9,0,0,Lebenswelten_von_Migrantinnen_und_Migranten.html.

7. Ibid.

8. See for this the classic works of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

9. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), esp. chap. 2, 'Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental', 49ff.

10. Riem Spielhaus, *Wer ist hier Muslim? Die Entwicklung eines islamischen Bewusstseins in Deutschland zwischen Selbstidentifikation und Fremdzuschreibung* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011), 55.

11. Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), first published in German in 1883.

12. Here I am referring to personal conversations with the teachers who were part of our team.

13. Güven Günaltay, 'Kulturgeschichten aus dem Museum für Islamische Kunst. Überregionales Pilotprojekt zur Entwicklung zielgruppenspezifischer Vermittlungsformate', *Museumsjournal* 1 (2015): 26–27, and Güven Günaltay (in collaboration with Stefan Weber and Christine Gerbich), 'Kulturgeschichten aus dem Museum für Islamische Kunst', *Eothen* 6 (2014): 153–67.

14. This included a more interactive remaking of the entrance hall and the museum's most important galleries with archaeological finds from the ninth century from the caliphal city of Samarra (Iraq) and, more recently, two other galleries of the thirteenth century in Iran and Turkey. This was done primarily in cooperation with Susan Kamel and Christine Gerbich in the context of their 'Museum as Testing Ground' project. See, Susan Kamel and Christine Gerbich, eds, *Experimentierfeld Museum. Internationale Perspektiven auf Museum, Islam und Inklusion* (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2014); as well as Lorraine Bluche, Christine Gerbich, Susan Kamel, Susanne Lanwerd, and Frauke Miera, eds, *NeuZugänge. Museen, Sammlungen und Migration. Eine Laborausstellung* (Berlin: Transktipt Verlag, 2013).

15. The exhibition route was developed by the 'Objects of Transfer' project team surrounding Vera Beyer and Isabelle Dolezalek as part of the collaborative research centre, 'Episteme in Motion' at Berlin's Free University, in cooperation with the Museum of Islamic Art; http://www.objects-in-transfer.sfb-episteme.de/#/, September 8, 2017, and Vera Beyer, Isabelle Dolezalek, and Sophia Vassilopoulou, *Objects in Transfer – A Transcultural Exhibition Trail through the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin* (Berlin: self-pub., 2016), accessed September 8, 2017, http://www.objects-in-transfer.sfb-episteme.de/document/Objects%20in%20Transfer.pdf.

16. For this concept see Stefan Weber, 'Zwischen Spätantike und Moderne: Zur Neukonzeption des Museums für Islamische Kunst im Pergamonmuseum', *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz* 48 (2012): 226–57, as well as Junod, Khalil, Weber, and Wolf, eds, *Islamic Art and the Museum*.

17. We thank John-Paul Sumner and the 'International Museum Fellowship' programme of the Federal Cultural Foundation and Marie Cathleen Haff for her support. Our thanks are extended as well to Monika Flores Martinez and the Prussian Cultural Heritage advisory board for their contribution. Thanks to the grant of Alwaleed Philanthropies, this approach will be developed further. Over the coming years exhibition situations will be systematically adapted by a new incoming curatorial and exhibition team.

18. Christine Gerbich and Annette Grigoleit, *Bericht zur Vorabevaluation für das Projekt kulturelle Bildung für Moscheegemeinden im Rahmen des Bildungsprogramms Kulturgeschichten aus dem Museum für Islamische Kunst*

im Pergamonmuseum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (Berlin: unpublished report, 2015). Roman Singendonk has been in charge of both projects. See also, https://tamam-projekt.de/, accessed December 24, 2017.

19. Please see note 18.

20. A project of the Berlin State Museums – Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation and the German Historical Museum, developed by the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin State Museums, sponsored by the Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the Schering Foundation, the Friends of the Museum of Islamic Art, the German Historical Museum, and numerous donors, especially the Oetker Family. Starting at the end of 2017, long-term continuation of the project has been made possible by Alwaleed Philanthropies. For the 2015 initial funding we are grateful to the 'Living Democracy!' federal programme of the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. The project is managed by Salma Jreige, Hussam Zahim Mohammed, Cornelia Weber, and the author. The Departments of Education and Communication of the German Historical Museum and the Berlin State Museums, as well as the teams of the four participating museums provide crucial support for the training. See for this, Stefan Weber, Razan Nassreddine, and Cornelia Weber, 'Multaka: Treffpunkt Museum. Geflüchtete als Guides in Berliner Museen', *Museumsjournal* 3 (2016): 6–7, as well as Stefan Weber, 'Migration and Museums', *Dimensions* 18.5 (2017): 34–36; and Stefan Weber, '"Multaka": il museo come punto di incontro – I rifugiati come guide nei musei berlinesi', *Archaeology & ME, Pensare l'archeologia nell'Europa contemporana* (2016): 142–45, as well as www.multaka.de, accessed September 8, 2017.

21. The best book on the intellectual framework of that time remains Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). It deals with German archaeology in the Ottoman Empire and the museums in Berlin on pages 188–245.

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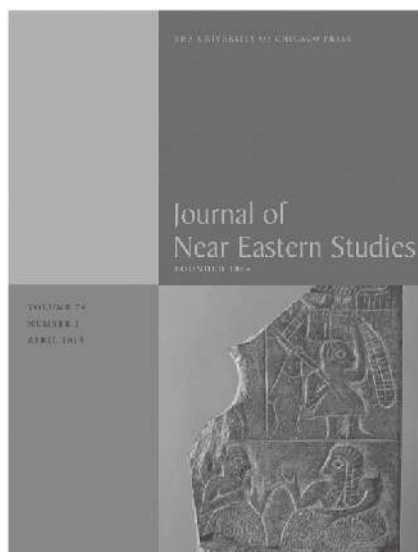
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