

# THE GENIUS LOCI IN ISLAMIC ART

## HISTORICAL EXPLORATIONS IN TOPOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

Art History, like any discourse about the past, is an exercise in representation. To discern the logic underlying the act of selection – by the historian – means to understand the structure of the kind of narrative produced. Islamic art histories have traditionally taken as their point of departure the desire to explore past times' artistic phenomena through 'major works'. Such are recommended for inclusion by their perceived aesthetic qualities, owing to factors such as an artist's superior skills, a patron's determination to see momentous projects to completion, or both. The stock image of Islamic art as either princely or religious is, accordingly, the product of a certain selection logic. For the 'major works' traditionally foregrounded are typically connected to court life and royal patrons, or to the practice of religion. Similarly, the fact that these objects were typically created, collected, or displayed in a given polity's principal power metropolis, which inevitably tended to function as a showcase for what art had to offer at a certain point in time, has also led to a focus on a few chosen locales. The resultant academic geography of Islamic Art History only very unevenly corresponds to the spatial geography of Islamic art.

Patronage studies, gaining in popularity since the 1970s, have presented an interesting alternative to the 'major works approach'. Its principal criterion for artworks selected for study is not aesthetic but rather the works' connection to a specific patron. Regarded as a 'producer' alongside artists and other agents, the patron's persona and agenda are examined as causal factors in the biography of artworks – and as an instructive link between different works of art. For researchers, however, it has not always been easy to distinguish between the patron's genuine disposition and the public image he sought to project through his participation in the artistic sphere. Resulting misapprehensions may have led to an excess of pious and selflessly art-loving rulers in the scholarly literature. The sweeping verdict that art was used for 'representations of power' can be similarly problematic if it fails to inquire about the specific historical circumstances in which expenditure on art seemed beneficial. Even so, research taking the patron as its point of departure has made a substantial contribution to the field by bringing critical historical investigation to artworks traditionally neglected on the basis of (modern) aesthetic judgments. In Islamic art history, which cannot be configured around artists' biographies in the same manner as Western art history is, patronage studies have played an important role in reconnecting art with human actors instead of portraying it as the automated product of an abstract belief system's culture.

A third point of departure for the selection and interpretation of artworks – that which the planned workshop intends to foreground and critically examine – is the factor of place. It investigates the extent to which artworks owe their characteristics to their connection to a certain city or region, or to the specific historical milieu in which they were conceived, produced, or critically received. In an effort to question the traditional geography of Islamic art history, which was shaped by historians focused on princely and religious art, the workshop focuses special interest on places, other than royal residences, that succeeded in becoming 'art centres' in terms of production and/or reception. Contributors to the workshop will discuss the factors that helped bring about these places' importance within a certain historical space or their status change with regard to their place in histories of art. The workshop is equally interested in the reasons for patrons' decisions to expend funds on works of art or for the development of specializations and skills in specific places, and in the question of how an artwork's conception and production in a given place impacted its form. In

essence, the workshop is interested in geographically contextualized appraisals rather than in assessments based on form, style, and medium comparisons with other artworks.

By integrating an understanding of place-specificity (topology) and of the logic underlying decision-making in the artistic sphere (aesthetics) in a historical context, the workshop aspires to reach beyond knowledge-production within an 'area studies' framework. Rather, it aims to demonstrate that research in Islamic art can contribute to a globalizing academic discipline's development beyond a mere filling of gaps, and how this might be achieved; namely, in addition to the continuous production of knowledge along established lines of inquiry, by developing (new) research questions emerging from the specificities of a given historical space. These must not be used to segregate (e.g. 'Western' from 'non-Western') by emphasizing difference, but to develop the institution of art history so as to encompass and direct to study a greater variety of cultural expressions.

Convened by [Maximilian Hartmuth](#) in the context of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project P 26406: *Centre and Periphery? Islamic Architecture in Ottoman Macedonia, 1383-1520*

