

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh  
joint event with the  
Alwaleed Centre, University of Edinburgh,  
and the  
Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany**

***Fragments of a Lost Past or Evidence of a Connected History:  
The Role and Concepts of Islamic Art in the Museum Context***

**Dr Stefan Weber  
Director of the Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum Berlin**

**27 September 2012**

Report by Matthew Shelley

*Dr Weber presented the first of four lectures being organised by Edinburgh University's Alwaleed Centre for the study of Islam in the contemporary world. He was introduced by Professor Robert Hillenbrand as someone with a profound knowledge of Islamic art, conservation and museum practice. His lecture revealed the behind-the-scenes thinking which governed the way Islamic art has been presented to the public in the past and how this is changing for the future. Dr Weber also explored the approach being taken by his own museum, which is being redesigned to meet the needs of a rapidly-growing number of visitors.*

The events of recent years have increased Western interest in the Islamic world. There is an awareness that we know little about Middle Eastern cultures beyond the headlines of violence and crisis. Visitors are heading for museums in search of a greater understanding of the histories and cultures of Islamic people. Dr Weber added that interest has also risen because of the increased presence of Muslims in our own countries.

Globalised culture and the closer connections between the Islamic and Western worlds present museums with new challenges and the need to address different issues. Dr Weber said: "A hundred years ago we were talking about societies that were far away, maybe colonial grocery shops out of which we could get some specialist items, but not part of the daily environment."

Dr Weber said that the concept of Islamic art was developed by Western academics to describe the objects they regarded as being of high quality and with importance to a particular place or period. It can incorporate items from many social spheres. He showed painted interiors of Ottoman houses in Syria, items created for the pleasure of courtiers and objects of religious significance. It is a highly complex field, as it endeavours to understand the cultural expression from many dynasties, geographies and eras.

Museums take different approaches to Islamic art. The Freer Gallery of Art in Washington concentrates on masterpieces. A small number of items are displayed, presented as monuments, and explained with text beside them. Others, such as the Turkish and Islamic Art Museum in Istanbul, are focused on the histories of particular spaces. These gather items from mosques, palaces and other places and present them by theme. Different again are those which tell the story of specific sites – such as Cordoba’s Mardinat al-Zahra Museum. This reveals the history of a key archaeological site from one of the cultural high points of Islamic Spain. In each case, decisions are being made about what the objects stand for and the story they tell.

According to Dr Weber, it is important to recognise that museums are cultural creations in themselves and reflect the ideas and values of their creators. Before the emergence of the idea of Islamic art, Western academia looked at the Middle East in terms of ethnology – attempting to systematise how people lived. Events such as the World Fair of 1851 changed ideas, and people began wanting to see objects because of their technical and design merits. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the emphasis was shifting again as interest grew in trying to integrate Islam into a world history. The museum designer Bode began to gather oriental carpets into “style rooms”, being part of the aesthetic experience at Renaissance palaces.

Bode was determined to open up the museum world to different artistic legacies – establishing the first museum of Islamic art in the West. He used objects to break down borders and show cultural connections and continuities. A prime example was an ornate section of stone façade from Jordan’s Mshatta desert castle which could not be dated with confidence (though it is now thought to be from a caliphal palace of the 740s CE). Despite uncertainty over its origin, the façade was used as the entry point for a gallery of Islamic art because, Islamic or not, it represented the same cultural landscape.

A further step forward was taken in 1927, with the decision to move the Mshatta façade into the Pergamon Museum (opened in 1932). Here it was positioned alongside objects from Late Antiquity from the Roman and Greek Middle East. At the same time, there was a growing recognition of the importance of chronology and that museum collections should show how art developed over time. Quite revolutionary was the idea that art history could only be understood by showing how, for example, early Islamic art flowed from pre-Islamic cultures.

By the 1950s and ‘60s, galleries and museums were heavily under the influence of modernist ideas and there was a movement to simply present objects as objects. This saw a reduction in explanation and contextualisation, leaving the visitor to be alone with their own response to the art. The development had started already with the famous 1910 exhibition of München in the light of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and was an important step in recognising pieces of Islamic art as art objects in their own right. Almost all Islamic art galleries in the last decades followed this trend and led to a strikingly uniform international gallery style. This, according to Dr Weber, presented difficulties for people who went to museums and galleries to find out more about a subject. While the curators understood why objects were placed together, visitors did not.

Since the turn of the Millennium, there has been a shift away from galleries as neutral spaces. Design is now used to enhance the impact of the objects on display. In some cases it is the exhibition space and design that the visitor is exposed to first, and the art objects second.

Scholars and curators are currently reappraising how museums should be organised. Dr Weber said he believes that one of the meanings of an object is linked to the meaning of the space it came from – and that it may be of beauty in its own right, be technically brilliant or of an extraordinary aesthetic quality, but has even more to offer when it is understood in context. The big question is how to connect the objects in a collection with the great traditions which gave rise to them.

The Pergamon Museum is planning for major changes in 2019. This will allow it to create a better cultural narrative in which the Mshatta façade will stand alongside the Ishtar Gate, from Babylon, and objects from the Hellenistic and Roman Middle East. Pre-Islamic and Byzantine elements will be incorporated in order to provide an overview of the region's history.

One of the big issues confronting the museum is how to represent the sheer complexity of Islamic history to a huge audience, which has grown by 50% during the last three years. Decisions have to be made about which objects to display and the stories to tell. Museums, argued Dr Weber, are places where scholarly knowledge is transmitted to a general population that may have little background in the subject. It is of critical importance that ideas can be expressed clearly and easily absorbed. Advances in technology, such as multi-media presentations and smartphone apps, now provide a range of options – and some objects are so powerful they need little explanation.

Currently the museum is organised by dynasty but, according to a survey, visitors only remember the names of 1.5 dynasties after they leave (multiple choice question). Dr Weber said: "That means that the 50 or so students and professionals of Islamic art in Germany can work with our system but the 730,000 visitors of last year cannot – and the museum is not for us scholars but for the public." The museum will retain a very strong, but simplified, chronology. It will not only be organised by time, but each area will have a sense of place, period and topic.

According to Dr Weber, a sense of structure and a strong narrative are essential. Unlike the scholar, the general public will be lost if they are abandoned in a free floating space, as they do not have the established knowledge to create links between the objects on display. One approach being taken in the redesigned Pergamon Museum will be to provide orientation rooms where people can learn about chronologies and cultures. The museum will also be arranged to reflect spheres of life, including homes, gardens and places of religion. Each will be infused with the atmosphere of these types of spaces.

Underlying the redesign are concepts of vertical and horizontal connections. The vertical involves showing where objects stand as part of a tradition. Dr Weber said: "Islamic art doesn't start with the Qur'an ... but develops out of the common heritage of the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and the Iranian world." The horizontal shows how people, places and objects are linked at any given time, such as the excavated pottery from the Abbasid capital of Samarra which uses ancient Middle Eastern blue pigments to synthesise Chinese decorative styles with cheaper local pottery.

The blue and white from ninth-Century Iraq is, in turn, linked to the later Delftware which achieved such popularity in the UK. In closing, Dr Weber said such narratives are of tremendous value as they allow visitors to relate other cultures to their own, making them easier to understand and appreciate.

## Questions

- Dr Weber was asked about the presence of depictions of people in some early Islamic art, despite a clear injunction against representations of the human form. He said that there is often a distinction between *topos* (what one is supposed to do) and reality. Whilst there were representations of people in all times and places, he added that they were rarely in a religious context.
- Asked what Western museums are learning from those of the Islamic world, Dr Weber said there is a mixed situation. Some museums in the Middle East are poorly kept, others are concerned with projecting a national rather than historical narrative. However, the Doha collection is fabulous, Iran has excellent museums and some of those in Turkey are of the very highest standards and have plenty to teach the West.
- On the issue of whether it would be better to return objects to the places of their origin, Dr Weber agreed that the removal of architectural objects did leave a gap. Nonetheless, he said the Mshatta façade had been legally given and that the section that remained *in situ* was subsequently destroyed. In another case, Berlin has a painted domestic interior from Aleppo which is now the only one of its kind, because the rest were destroyed and replaced when they went out of fashion. While acknowledging that there can be many questions about where objects should be, he said it would not necessarily make sense for all Van Goghs to be taken back to Holland or all Meissen to Dresden – culture is global.

The evening ended with a Vote of Thanks proposed by Professor Hugh Goddard, Director of the Alwaleed Centre.