



“Art History and Visual Studies” Liaison Group Project

The material culture in Western and Central Asia from the 12th millennium BCE to the end of the 1st millennium BCE includes a continuous production of ‘art objects’ or ‘artworks’. By the term ‘artwork’, the ARWA “Art History and Visual Studies” Liaison Group refers to all kinds of visual expressions ranging in form and substance from miniature to monumental, from perishable to persistent, from rock-hewn to clay-impressed and includes unique items as well as mass-produced replicates. Our ‘Art History and Visual Studies’ draw attention to the ingenuity of the human mind that gives visual form to cultural norms and social practices and enables processes of signification and communication beyond language.

A. Western and Central Asian Archaeology and Art History

Despite the unparalleled length of the art historical sequence, it remains an unfortunate fact that the art and visual culture of ancient Western and Central Asia is only rarely perceived outside closely circumscribed academic and museum contexts. The problem has existed since the first archaeological rediscoveries of monumental sculptures from the ruins of the Assyrian palaces in the mid of the 19th century, when the excavator of Nimrud and Nineveh, Austin Henry Layard, enthusiastically celebrating them as pieces of art comparable to the highest Greek standard was affronted by the scientific authorities in Europe: “Your winged genius is not the Apollo of Belvedere”. Such a negative assessment, expressed by the philologist Henri Rawlinson towards the archaeologist Layard, unmasks the hubris of a Eurocentric worldview with a lack of interest in interdisciplinary and intercultural discourse. Such attitudes have been challenged and modified during the last decades, but still persist in public as well as academic minds.

Nowadays, ‘art’ can be conceived as an autonomous category of human creativity with an intrinsic value beyond intended use or context. As archaeologists/art historians dealing with ancient societies, recognition of the conceptions of value embedding an artwork in antiquity is crucial. Therefore, a sculpture should be considered as a ‘manufactured’ object in close relationship with other categories of objects. As an object of art, however, the same sculpture must be viewed in terms of its aesthetic values.

B. Scope

The ARWA “Art History and Visual Studies” Liaison Group aims to highlight the importance of ancient Western and Central Asian visual and artistic phenomena by fostering a dialogue between regional specializations and subdisciplines, including the public.

There are several reasons for this approach:

- The vast region and its great temporal depth offer the possibility to investigate phenomena of art in a *longue durée* and regional comparative perspective.
- The social contexts from which art objects arose range from tribal and agricultural communities to complex states and empires. Therein, art relates to nearly all social structures, including politics, gender discourse, ritual and religion, economy and prestige.

- Such a variety of possible interactions between art and society allows to address the crucial question of defining ‘art’. Is it only a phenomenon which exists in societies who talk about and reflect on art? Or, is it a multi-faceted phenomenon that exists behind the curtain of art critical reflections? And, to what extent can art objects be distinguished from other categories of material culture?
- Art objects in ancient Western and Central Asia had their own ontologies. For some areas and periods, textual sources are highly illuminating in this respect. Understanding the life-cycles of art in society and the agency of art objects may teach us a lot about the meaning of art as an expression and animated extension of human culture.

Within ARWA, the Liaison Group complements studies in “Archaeology” and “History and Philology”. Concerning interdisciplinarity (see below), it uses insights from “Bioarchaeology” and “Geoarchaeology”, and shares an interest in artefacts, which are the focus of “Ethics” and “Heritage”.

C. Actions

Scholars associated with ARWA interested in artistic phenomena show a wide range of specializations in different cultural areas of Western and Central Asia. They may consider themselves primarily as archaeologists, historians or pure art historians following diverse approaches and specific interests. From such multiple perspectives arises the possibility to openly discuss the results of recent research and to review them in the context of current approaches in art history and visual (culture) studies. Such approaches include:

- The iconography and iconology of art objects as they consist in the form of sculptures, reliefs, wall-paintings, architectural decorations, painted ceramics, figurines, stamp and cylinder seals, decorated metal works, ivories, jewelry etc.
- The intermediality of art objects, i.e. the transfer of images through different visual media, through space and time.
- The multimodality of art objects, i.e. the multi-layered image which bears different layers of meaning, communication and reading, including its textual relations.
- The agency of art objects mediated through style, aesthetic qualities, rituals and other performances.
- The life-cycles of art objects, their changes of meaning from the moment of creation until their disappearance and destruction.
- A vocabulary of art-historical and aesthetics wording and definitions in ancient sources.
- The ‘aesthetic object’ and ‘work of art’ as autonomous theme to open up historical-artistic approaches also to the semiotic, cognitive and neurobiological study of the ancient visual perception of artworks.
- Crucial terms in the discussion about the functions and properties of art objects such as ideology, propaganda, ethnicity, hybridity and syncretism which all require a critical reflection.
- The perception of ancient art objects in modern and contemporary contexts: scientific and non-scientific literature, museums and exhibitions, popular culture, legal and illicit antiques markets, times of political and cultural crisis.
- New approaches in archaeometry, quantitative and computational analysis, 3D-reconstructions and machine learning techniques concerning the materiality of art objects and pictures.

It is obvious that the immense repertoire of ancient art objects and archaeological contexts from Western and Central Asia allows for a large variety of approaches helping us to learn more about cultural processes which would have been incomplete without art. The ARWA “Art History and Visual Studies” liaison group will promote this perspective and it is thankful for any suggestions and contributions to advance it.