



# JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI QUARTERLY

JANUARY - MARCH 2025

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# Director's Note

The last quarter saw the successful completion of our seminal semester-long course titled 'The Age of Illumination: Philosophical Thought from Late Antiquity to the Islamic Golden Age'. Platonic thought, Jewish intellectual traditions, and Neo-Platonic thinkers rubbed shoulders with Manichaeism and early Christian philosophers in the first half. The second saw the ascent of the Islamic Golden Age which not only centralised syncretism but also valorised the famed Greek-Arab-Latin translation movement. Details can be read in the inner pages of this *Quarterly*.

Our constant endeavour to add dimensions to the Indian Aesthetics course by addressing aspects left out due to time constraints led to us taking a deep dive into the realms of Jaina temple architecture with an emphasis on Karnataka *basadis*, Mughal coinage and its political and religious symbolism, and Creolisation and the Indian ocean world, with Goa as a special case study of the same phenomenon – all being explored for the first time as always.

Furthering our rubric of Curatorial Processes, Shailendra Bhandare from the Ashmolean Museum presented the 'ideation to delivery' of his recently acclaimed exhibition *Money Talks*, giving a virtual opportunity to walk-through and critically experience all facets of the show.

Kucha, Mathura, and Kota will be our special focus in the coming quarter:

On the northern fringe of the Taklamakan lay Kucha, whose elite cultivated a special fondness for Indian culture. Through two lectures, the well-preserved caves, paintings and manuscripts, as well as traces of Brahmin culture will be discussed.

Located at the intersection of three major cultural zones – Bactria and Gandhara, the Gangetic valley, and the Deccan, Mathura's legendary and formative stone sculptural workshops testify to the outward, inward and crossflows of people and ideas which will be explored through four seminars.

From its origins in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Bundi, painting at the court of Kota will traverse through the geographical distribution of the style within Rajasthan, through its murals, famous *Ragamala* sets, hunting scenes and images of their tutelary deity Brijnathji.

Before the quarter ends, we will look into the various facets of Indian ocean history and its relationship to India, and start an eight-part lecture series on the rich artistic, cultural and architectural legacy of the Fatimid Caliphate as it developed in its illustrious capital, Cairo. Do join us whenever you can!

As we ring out the old and bring in the new, here's wishing you and yours health, prosperity, joy and peace for the coming year.

With my warmest wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rashmi Poddar', written in a cursive style.

Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.  
Director

# AESTHETICS



A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacharya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

JPM's Aesthetics offerings include:

(1) an academic yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Yoga & Tantra, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (3) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Southeast Asian Art and Architecture, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (4) a fortnight of public seminars and lectures in Islamic Aesthetics; (5) an ongoing series of public seminars in Buddhist Aesthetics; (6) an ongoing series of public seminars in Southasian Painting; and (7) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

## Indian Aesthetics



The October quarter of the IA course opened with Dr. Supriya Rai's exposition of Buddhism which combined philosophy and art in a seamless manner. As both a scholar and practitioner of Buddhism, she is uniquely equipped to offer unusually deep knowledge regarding the Buddhist world, its art and its true meaning. Illustrating the life of the Buddha and his teachings with the help of masterpieces in stone from the most significant Buddhist sites in the continent, Dr. Rai introduced students to the art of Sanchi, Amaravati, Bharhut, Nagapattinam, Kanaganahalli as well as Sarnath and many others. The scholar pointed out that students should consider various Buddhisms and not a singular philosophy and practice, as the faith developed many forms not only where it was born but also as it spread far and wide on the Asian subcontinent very soon after its advent. *Jataka* narratives in painted murals and stone became the tools using which she helped students explore Buddhist philosophical concepts. She also discussed what the terms Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*, the four Noble





Truths and the doctrine of dependent origination meant to adherents. Her nuanced explanation of scholarly debates regarding aniconic and iconic representations of the Buddha, and the insights regarding the notions of sovereignty and compassion in *Mahayana* Buddhism left students spellbound.

Swati Chemburkar's session on *Vajrayana* Buddhism delved into the artistic, philosophical, ritual and political ramifications of these esoteric practices. She presented a riveting fresh lecture on *Prajnaparamita*, the text that became a Buddhist Goddess whose representations are rare in the Indian subcontinent.

Dr. Jaya Kanoria's evening sessions on the basics of academic writing are held to orient IA diploma students to the requirements of the course but are usually open to all IA students. The vibrant second session on this subject asked students to contribute their analysis of an academic text so that the writing strategies employed in it came into focus. This analysis is useful for readers of academic literature related to aesthetics, and therefore for all our students. Additionally, students of the course continue to be provided with substantial curated readings related to each session, synopses of lectures, bibliographies and glossaries. The lectures on academic writing help them to tap into this rich source of authentic material uploaded on our learning management portal JPM Think in a more confident manner.

The goal of the IA Diploma to train independent writers capable of producing publishable material is being fulfilled as our students' essays find external publishers. The writing produced for the IA Diploma is of an increasingly high standard. The

first IA assignment, which was submitted on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2024, included unusual topics such as 'Usgalimal Labyrinth: An Archetypal Form in the Indian Context', 'Between Peace & Peril: The Arya Ashtamahabhaya Tara', 'Lost Stories in Bronze: Revisiting the Chauri Bearer' on a tiny bronze figurine, an analysis of a teakwood *wada* ceiling panel featuring *Sheshashayi* Vishnu surrounded by an endless knot pattern interspersed with *naga kanyas*, and other equally intriguing subjects. Twenty students submitted this assignment and were, as usual, provided with extensive feedback and an opportunity to revise their work before it was finally assessed.

Dr. Viraj Shah's first session on Jain philosophy and art described and explained the beginnings of Jainism and lives of the *tirthankaras*. Dr. Shah introduced students to the ascetic basis of the *Jinas*' beliefs. Born as *kshatriyas*, the *Jinas* are considered heroic or *vira* (as was the historical *Jina*, Vardhamana the Mahavira) as they gave up untold wealth and the fulfilment of worldly desires when they undertook ascetic practices to gain victory over their senses and to attain *nirvana* or freedom. Dr. Shah's next session examined the reasons for the inclusion of popular deities (such as *nagas*, *yakshas*, Krishna and Balarama) that were already in worship into the Jain pantheon. She also shared her path-breaking primary research on the Jain caves of the Western Deccan.

Dr. Pushkar Sohoni's mesmerising exposition of Indian temple architecture presented the evolution and morphology, and the resultant forms of this architectural type in the subcontinent. The speaker convincingly showed that the form originated in the hut, which still echoes in the fractals that are seen in temple forms and

*shikharas* as demonstrated by the internationally renowned scholar Adam Hardy. Temples were built on sacred spots and represent sacred time through their architecture, placement and proportions. However, the earliest temples may have been caves rather than built structures, even though extant examples show that their makers were emulating wooden architecture in stone. Entire mountains were fashioned into temples, as is evident in the Kailasanatha temple at Ellora. Extant temples show what wooden precursors may have been.



Kamalika Bose delved into two unusual temple types: the terracotta temples of Bengal and the Jain temples with varied forms that are also found in the same region. This was a fitting addition to the more generalised overview of the Indian temple offered by Dr. Sohoni. Dr. Crispin Branfoot presented the instance of the South Indian temple with its soaring gateways or *gopura* and *shikharas*. He not only explained the form and development of these structures, but also shared his primary research on ritual processions in Tamil Nadu, showing how temples and temple towns of the region have been shaped by the journeys that *chala* or portable images make through them. The processional image is accessible to many devotees who cannot enter the temples beyond a certain point.

Dr. Rashmi Poddar explained the little understood term 'tantra' and the practices associated with it in her session that navigated through the concepts of *Shakti*, *nada*, *bindu*, *kundalini yoga*, and *chakras* as they are understood in the tantric context. The anti-ascetic, anti-speculative, and heretical philosophies and practices of tantra use experiential body-centric methods that are radical in nature. Certain branches of tantric practice attempt the expansion of the practitioner's consciousness through anti-brahmanical and secretive means such as the use of the *panchamakaras*, of which ritual sex is one. These methods required initiation by a *guru* and claim to lead to ultimate bliss or *jeevan mukti* while still residing in the body. The esoteric texts and practices of tantra are responsible for the misunderstandings regarding these systems, their methods and their goals.

Dr. Riyaz Latif's introduction to Islamic aesthetics rightfully began with an exploration of Middle Eastern and Egyptian examples that set the

context of Islamic funerary architecture in the subcontinent. Subcontinental examples both conform with the basic concepts of this architecture and differ from it due to political, geographical and cultural differences. He discussed Sultanate and Mughal tombs, regional variants in Bengal and Gujarat, and minutely examined Dawoodi Bohra *rauza*s, pointing out that tombs provide the tangible means to access and understand the intangible reality of a time long gone.

This year, our students have taken full advantage of the fact that the IA course has become completely flexible since the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and allows them to attend in either physical or online mode, even to the extent of switching between them. This flexibility has made participation easy and comfortable for both students and scholars. The sheer variety of India's cultural past and multifaceted present has become apparent to all our students as a result of the dizzying number of aesthetic modes and tropes discussed in this quarter. We will now dive into an exploration of the delectable and equally varied types of painting in the subcontinent, which will open new windows for our students.

– J.K.



# PAST PROGRAMMES

## The Art of Jaina Temple Building in India

October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:45 PM IST | Prof. Julia A. B. Hegewald (Professor of Oriental Art History at the University of Bonn)



Jaina temples follow the larger idiom of Indian temple architecture, but they have incorporated some unique vocabulary to cater to the compulsions of geography and the ritual needs of the faithful. This essence was conveyed by Professor Julia A. B. Hegewald of the Department of Asian and Islamic Art History, University of Bonn, in her online lecture titled 'The Art of Jaina Temple Building in India'. Considering the diversity of the audience, she initially touched upon the basic tenets of Jainism wherein the veneration of the *tirthankara* images forming the backbone of the temple experience was underlined. Unlike in Hindu temples, a single *tirthankara* does not form the core of the entire structure and offer *darshan*. Instead, each *Jina* takes primacy in his own right and manifests as an epitome for the laity to follow in their path to salvation. A myriad of deities and sacred symbols, though worshipped, occupy a hierarchically subordinate position. These multitudes of venerable forms, augmented by the Jaina virtue of donation of images, make the temples in which they are housed elaborate. A tripartite arrangement housing triple *Jina* images is common. This plan also gets reflected externally as three shrines radiating from a common central hall. Also, *chaumukha* shrines opening in the cardinal directions are constructed as a figurative representation of the auspicious sermon of *samavasarana*. A *panchayatana* arrangement with a central shrine with four prominent corner shrines is also not uncommon. At times, a chain

of shrines, *devakulikas* are erected, which double as the inner lining of the compound wall. Such sundry arrangements are often multiplied not just horizontally but also vertically, both above and below the ground. The expansion along both the axes serve two purposes: 1) symbolic, by which the temple became the *Meruprasada* emulating the mythical mount Meru stretching above and beneath the earth, 2) practical, as more safe space could be made available for all images in densely populated urban areas where land is a scarce and costly resource. This proliferation created 'Complex Complexes' exclusively for *Jinas* in contrast with the Hindu temple cities in which divinities cohabit with laity.

Having taken the attendees through the Jaina sacred space, Prof. Hegewald channelled their attention towards the Jaina temples of Karnataka in the second session. It was an appreciation of the delicate balance of artistic freedom with that of climatic dependency. This equilibrium is much more pronounced in Karnataka as the dry, hot interiors of the Deccan Plateau sit by the side of wet, humid Coastal Plains separated just by the narrow strip of the Western Ghats. Towards the east, the arid climate coupled with the abundance of hard stone had favoured the flat-roofed Dravida style of architecture, with or without







beliefs and traditional needs of the devotees dictated the ever-changing forms of the resilient Jain temples. Thus, the evening lecture by Prof. Hegewald turned out to be a resounding emphasis of the pilgrim-centric nature of the Jain temple architecture straddling the perpetuity of the spiritual realm and the malleability undergone by the material world. – S.K.



*vimanas*. However, on the windward side of the Ghats, the copious rainfall necessitated sloping roofs with overhanging eaves, an idiom dubbed as 'Kerala Dravida' or 'pagoda style'. Locally sourced timber was preferred to the rare granite made available through costly transportation. Cut laterite blocks available in the vicinity lacked the necessary strength and were used only in the compound and other non-structural walls. Superior clay was cast into roof tiles which in turn were sheathed in copper. With burgeoning prosperity, hard stone became affordable and found usage in the vital structural elements like the base-pedestal and pillars. On their support, upper storeys of lighter materials were erected. Also, pillars called *Brahma/Manastambhas* were added in front, bearing miniature shrines of the *kshetrapala* on their top. The walls encompassed subsidiary shrines. Grand sloping gateways, *mahadwaras*, with porches for pilgrim amenities were also incorporated. The introduction of modern materials like cement concrete in recent times has facilitated taking the superstructure to lofty heights. But, the vocabulary of the *Canarese* architecture has remained faithful to its rain-battered landscape.

Irrespective of the material and mapping, the

# Islamic Aesthetics

## PAST PROGRAMMES

### The Political and Religious Symbolism of Mughal Coinage in Global and Comparative History

November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:45 PM IST | Dr. A. Azfar Moin (Department Chair and Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Texas at Austin)



Can coins of an empire be more than just a means of transaction? Can coinage be viewed as an instrument of propaganda? Or is it more nuanced, layered with cultural, political, and religious significances? Can it help differentiate a ruler from his predecessors? Can coinage elevate the ruler from his mere human form to grant him a status much closer to the divine?

Exploring these questions, Prof. A. Azfar Moin delved into the *pratyaksh* (visible) and *paroksh* (hidden) facets of Mughal coinage, with this lecture, uncovering how it mirrored the rulers' aspirations and ideologies.

In this two-part lecture, Prof. Moin invited the audience into the enigmatic and layered world of Mughal coinage, pointing out its distinct

departure from earlier sultanates, contemporary empires, and even the variations seen under different Mughal rulers. He then laid down the analytical framework to unravel the relationship between coinage and sovereignty, two main components of which are *sikka* and *khutba*.

He drew on two key concepts to shape his argument: Victor Lieberman's *Charter State Collapse in Southeast Asia, ca. 1250–1400, as a Problem in Regional and World History*, which posits that a state functions as a historical template for subsequent states, and Ronald Inden's *The Temple and the Hindu Chain of Being*, which illustrates the ritual enactment of a ruler's connection to the divine or cosmic order through sacred sites, or relics, or body. Using these concepts, he made a pivotal analytical move, framing his argument



around the idea that coinage in precious metals can itself become a sacred space – to enact the royal *Chain of Being* and serve as a template for an oath of loyalty. Viewed through this lens, the inscriptions and religious imagery on coinage take on new significance.

The speaker then traced the history of coinage and the divinisation of rulers, beginning with Alexander, whom he identified as the first leader to be deified posthumously. Shifting focus to Islam, he explored the inherent challenge of true kingship in a system where only God is the ultimate sovereign, and human rulers can merely act as Caliphs (deputies). He highlighted how the Umayyads were the pioneers in striking the first Islamic coins and explained how the Abbasids emerged as a *Charter State* for Islamic coinage, establishing the Caliphal *Chain of Being*, a hierarchical framework that positioned Allah at the apex, followed by the Prophet, the Caliph, and then the Sultan, effectively intertwining religious authority with political power.

Prof. Moin then explored the concept of sovereignty within the Mongol Empire, highlighting its distinct *Chain of Being*, where the ruler was believed to have a direct connection with the divine, eliminating the need for any higher sacred authority above him. This unique approach also reflected in the Mongol Empire's egalitarian treatment of different religions, where all were regarded equal, provided the subjects remained loyal to the ruler.

In the second part of this lecture, Prof. Moin guided the audience through the evolution of the Mongol-Islamic coin template, followed by the

Ottoman *Chain of Being* and the Safavid *Chain of Being*. His focus then shifted to the Mughal Empire, where he discussed the emergence of 'Millennial' sovereignty, a paradigm introduced by Akbar that redefined the relationship between ruler, divinity, and authority, which offered a distinctive reinterpretation of Mongol sovereignty.

He then analysed how Mughal coinage evolved under successive emperors. Akbar's millennial coinage set a precedent, which Jahangir adapted during his reign. With Shah Jahan's ascension, coinage was used strategically to align him with the dynasty's founding ancestor, Timur. Aurangzeb's era introduced further changes, drawing from Ottoman aesthetics, albeit expressed in Persian. Prof. Moin concluded by observing that the hallmark of Mughal coinage was its variability, reflecting each emperor's desire to establish his own *Chain of Being* and distinguish himself from his predecessor, creating a rich tapestry of variation.

Both parts of the lecture were followed by an engaging question-and-answer session, covering topics from Neoplatonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism to the impact of the Mongols's nomadic influence on their worldview, and the significance of the language used on coinage. Prof. Moin's perspective revealed how coinage serves not just as a medium of economic exchange but as a sacred space that reinforces sovereignty, legitimises authority, and articulates the ruler's role within a divinely ordained hierarchy. The inscriptions and religious imagery on coinage transform from mere decorative or symbolic elements into deliberate enactments of the ruler's connection to the divine or cosmic order. – N.S.



# CRITICISM & THEORY

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*Apnavi Makanji | Untitled - Significant Other | 2018 | Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery*

JPM's Criticism & Theory offerings include: (1) a Certificate course in Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) an ongoing series of public seminars and lectures in Indian Intellectual Traditions; and (3) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.



# Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory

## The Age of Illumination: Philosophical Thought from Late Antiquity to the Islamic Golden Age

### PAST PROGRAMMES

#### Mani and Manichaeism in Late Antique Iran

August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Thomas Benfey (Assistant Professor at the University of Tübingen)

Dr. Thomas Bensley, specialising in the late antique and early medieval period of the Middle East, focussing primarily on Iraq and Iran during the Sasanian (Eransahr) and early Islamic periods, addressed the subject of the prophet Mani and Manichaeism in late antique Iran, tracing the life of Mani in particular, contemplating on whether he visited India, or possibly an area now in Pakistan.

Manichaeism became a kind of global religion, spreading west to Tunisia and east to Eastern China. It existed for many years. This study offers many new insights both on Manichaeism as well as on Sasanian history.

Understanding Manichaeism depends on the sources being reviewed, as well as Mani's own life. Evidently, Manichaeism was different in medieval China, in late antique North Africa and during Mani's lifetime itself. It became and remained the official religion for a couple hundred years under the Uyghur Empire.

Mani (ca.216–277) was born in Ctesiphon, capital of the Parthian Empire, and later also of the Sasanian Empire. His parents moved to the southwest of the capital, where Mani was raised in a Jewish-Christian community who were followers of Elchasai and were called Elchasaites. At the age of 24, in around 240 CE, at the behest of a 'twin' who had supposedly been appearing to him since he was 12, Mani left the community. The 'twin' had urged him to leave and start a new

tradition, and to preach it beyond his community.



Mani's crystal seal (now at BNF in Paris);  
Aramaic inscription reads "Mānī,  
messenger of Jesus the Messiah"

Manichaeism was founded with the intention of spreading it throughout the world, with the belief that it was better than other religions already in existence. Mani expressed these aspects time and again, fundamental of which was Manichaeism's universality – 'beyond one country – beyond one language'. A native speaker of Aramaic, Mani invented a special script to transmit his teachings, which was easier to read when compared to that of other languages.

A key belief of Manichaeism is its two fundamental principles of light and dark. Light is identifiable with the good and non-material or spiritual, while darkness is identifiable with evil, i.e., with matter

and the material world. These two principles are tested through time and their positions in three different phases. In the first phase, darkness and light are separate. The second phase sees an invasion of the light realm by forces of darkness, which results in a kind of mixture, i.e., light particles are mixed with matter. The third and the last phase is that of separation. Manichaeans believe the world is created to release the light particles from matter. The two entities that play a pivotal role in this are the Sun and the Moon. The goal is to get to the final state of separation.

A code of conduct is set for Manichaeans. Manichaeism arranges the community into smaller groups called Elects or the chosen ones, while the other fairly larger group of lay-Manichaeans is called Auditor or Hearer.

Social activities are divided into permitted and non-permitted ones for different classes of the community. Activities that perpetuate the mixture are considered harmful, and Elects are forbidden from such activities such as sexual intercourse, cultivating plants, agriculture, picking fruit and hunting. Manichaeism regards eating meat as sinful. All Manichaeans periodically fast. Auditors/Hearers bring food to the Elect, which the Elect consumes in described ritualist manner. The ceremonial eating is one way of liberating light particles in the food from matter.

A primeval source of this information is excerpts from a damaged Middle Persian text found in Turfan (Western China), whose language seems older than other Middle Persian texts, giving reason to believe that it was actually composed by Mani himself or originated in his lifetime. Texts from Egypt on day-to-day life in a Manichaean community rather than theological treatises also emerge. Anti-Manichaeism texts are another important source as it was easy to target and criticise people like Elects who seemingly did not do any work. Augustine is one of the critics of unequal or unfair dynamics in the Manichaean community.

A scroll from the later period of Manichaean history depicts the structure of the universe and the complex layers of the cosmology in a hierarchical manner from bottom to top, i.e., from different layers of earth and sky to the top, referred to as heaven. The realm of light is often translated as just heaven. The layers reveal the relationships between time and space. Another



scroll from Turfan depicts a female Elect on the left and a male on the right, throwing light on the status of women in the Manichaean community.

The source of how Mani arrived at this complex Manichaean cosmology is not known. Dr. Bensley suggests analysing ethnicity and the language of the people to understand this.

Another material source, questioned by some scholars, is a crystal seal potentially belonging to Mani. Of the three figures, one is considered to be Mani, one his father Patik, whilst the third is yet unclear. The Aramaic inscription reads: 'Mani the messenger, the Messiah', showcasing the manner in which Mani presented himself and his religion to different audiences. For Christians, he was the messenger of Jesus, the Messiah. Mani, Manichaeism, and Manichaeans adapted themselves to different audiences.

Manichaeism became global, spreading far west to far east. Sogdians, active in trade with China, became instrumental in spreading Manichaeism into China. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Manichaeism had a pretty substantial presence which grew sparse by the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

During Mani's lifetime, several major political events took place. Ardashir I overthrowing the Parthian ruler created the Sasanian Empire, making Zoroastrianism its core. He built a circular city and initiated cultivation. His successor Shapur I, in whose court Mani spent most of his time, sponsored translations from Sanskrit and Greek into Middle Persian.

During this time, the Kushans were the major power in the East. In the year Shapur I takes power, Mani embarked on his eastern journey, and there are accounts of his travels to areas along the Indian Ocean and Turan. Texts of the period have references to Buddhist and Indian concepts, references to Mani as Buddha and discussions of

him ascending Nirvana.

Upon his return to Shapur I's court, Mani stayed there until 270 and composed several authoritative texts. Succession of the Sasanian Empire took place during Mani's life. He is imprisoned by the later king where he ultimately died after about 26 days. The Zoroastrian priest Kerdir emerged as Mani's notable enemy and the main person behind his imprisonment. Kerdir's inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam states persecuting Manichaeans. Firdausi's manuscript, *Shahnamah*, illustrates Mani being skinned.

Manichaeism got more or less eradicated in the Sasanian and Roman Empires, raising the question of why it was a threat to Kerdir, Zoroastrians and Christians, unlike other religious communities of the time.

Another downfall of Manichaeism is attributed to

its insistence on non-violence. Mani disapproved of hunting and participation in such activities.

Manichaeism did survive a long time after Mani's death, especially in China and Central Asia. Scholars have located a Manichaean temple in China, eventually incorporated into a Buddhist temple complex. Mani's depiction and reference in this temple is as 'Moni', which could be reinterpreted or reanalysed as Shakyamuni, a name for the Buddha. Until quite recently, Mani was worshipped in China.

Dr. Bensley stated that a lot of work still needs to be done, and he warned that it is a difficult process, as one individual is unlikely to know all the varied languages involved in accessing Manichaeism. He concluded by suggesting collaborative projects to throw more light on Mani and Manichaeism.  
- R.P.

## Burzōy the Physician and Kalīla wa-Dimna: Cosmopolitanism and Religious Uncertainty at the Late Sasanian Court

September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Thomas Benfey (Assistant Professor at the University of Tübingen)

EBERHARD KARLS  
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TÜBINGEN



Philosophische Fakultät /  
Humanities Faculty

Seminar für Alte Geschichte / Ancient History Institute



Burzōy the Physician and *Kalīla wa-Dimna*: Cosmopolitanism and Religious Uncertainty at the Late Sasanian Court

The late Sasanian court of Khusro I (r 531–579 CE) was a period of ferment, with peasant revolts and their violent suppression, cosmopolitan knowledge-sharing with the presence of philosophers, physicians and astronomers from Rome, Greece, Syria and India at the court, whilst also the assertion of the perfection of Zoroastrianism, the state religion, as the source

of all knowledge.

Dr. Benfey took us the furthest east in our survey of philosophical thought from late antiquity to the Islamic golden age, focussing on the 6<sup>th</sup>-century-CE interaction between Sasanian Iran and the medical, astronomical and statecraft traditions of the Indian subcontinent centring on the personality of Burzōy the court physician of Khusro I, and his visit to India to bring back stories from the *Panchatantra*, a statecraft manual. He is reputed to have translated this into Middle Persian, as '*Karirah ud Dimnag*', which later became famous throughout the Islamic world as the Arabic translation *Kalīla wa-Dimna*.

We first started with a survey of textual sources for the late Sasanian period, and the difficulty of finding contemporary texts from the region.

Most of the sources for our period are either contemporary foreign, such as Roman, Syriac or Armenian, or are from the later 8 -11<sup>th</sup> centuries, including Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts from India, and Islamic writers writing in Arabic or New Persian. The most famous of the latter is Firdausi, the 11<sup>th</sup>-century author of the pre-Islamic history of Iran, the *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings), who was based in Ghazni in present-day Afghanistan. A key text of the late Sasanian period is a book of history, the *Xwaday Namag* (Book of Lords), which survives only in fragments, and from references in later texts (for instance, Firdausi is reputed to have used it for the *Shahnamah*).

We heard about the fascinating but little-known figure of Mazdak, a religious leader who gained prominence under Khusro I's predecessor, Kawad (r 488 - 96, 498 - 531 CE) and preached for a radical re-distribution of wealth and women, both of whom were seen as being hoarded by the aristocracy. He radically re-interpreted the fundamental Zoroastrian text, the *Avesta*, and gained favour under Kawad before the movement, which took the form of a peasant revolt, was violently suppressed by Khusro I who had Mazdak executed. Kawad was possibly attracted by the idea of cutting down the power of the aristocracy before the movement got out of hand. The story might be apocryphal and is not known from contemporary Roman or Syriac sources.

#### Burzōy appearing at Khusrō's court after his return from India

Manuscript with  
New Persian  
translation of *Kalīla  
wa-Dimna*, ca.  
1392; now in the  
BNF, Paris



Another Middle Persian text, the *Denkard*, which also comes to us in a later translation, is a source for an early history of science and philosophy at Khusro I's court. Khusro's speech, recorded in the *Denkard*, welcomes knowledge from all sources, including Sanskrit and Greek texts, but also proclaims that in fact they are restoring Zoroastrian knowledge as everything comes

from Iran. Perhaps a clever balancing of the cosmopolitan impulse to gain knowledge but at the same time not threatening the Zoroastrian priesthood. There are records of debates between Khusro I and Graeco-Roman philosophers who had been expelled by the Christian Roman emperor Justinian, at the court, and of comparison between Graeco-Roman and Indian astrological texts (according to later Arabic sources, the Indian text *Arkand* won!). And finally, we come to medicine. There is an account of Indian and Graeco-Roman medicine at Sus (Khuzestan, SW Iran) at a medical centre established by the earlier emperor Sapur II which later became Gundeshapur, the preeminent centre of medicine under the Abbasid caliphate. Burzōy, the court physician of Khusro I, is reputed to have travelled to India to bring back medical texts. His Middle Persian translation of stories he gathered from the *Panchatantra* and *Mahabharata*, named '*Kalilah ud-Dimnah*' (in later Arabic translation) after two jackals in the *Panchatantra*, doesn't survive but the text became a literary classic in the Islamic world after an 8<sup>th</sup>-century Arabic translation by Ibn al-Muqaffa (which itself doesn't survive), and was later translated into Syriac, Greek, New Persian, Hebrew, and other languages. Whilst the text is a manual of statecraft used for educating royal princes, there is an intriguing addition of two chapters found in Ibn al-Muqaffa's text that tells of Burzoy's journey to India and also his evaluation of all known religions using rational

principles with his conclusion that they are all lacking. Ibn al-Muqaffa, a Zoroastrian or Manichaean convert to Islam, was suspected by some of adapting Burzōy's introduction or indeed adding the chapters himself to promote Manichaeism.

The intellectual and societal ferment of the late Sasanian period was brought to life, giving us a picture of a cosmopolitan court eagerly sourcing knowledge from neighbouring empires and kingdoms whilst asserting its own pre-eminence. But given the paucity of information available, questions remain, including the validity of the sources, all of whom are either from outside Iran or a later period, the context of Mazdak's revolt, the authenticity of Burzoy, and whether what he experienced was a spiritual crisis or an echo from the later Ibn al-Muqaffa. – A.M.



## Augustine of Hippo: from Africa to Immortality

September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Catherine Conybeare (Leslie Clark Professor in the Humanities at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania)



What happens when a teenage boy – seeking a religious connection, (raised unbaptised but by a devout Christian mother), a boy with a love for philosophy, training and excelling in Rhetoric in a Latin-speaking world of antiquity – turns to reading the *Bible*? He squirms at the biblical language. It is ugly. He hates it. Rejects it.

Sans a PowerPoint presentation, Professor Catherine Conybeare traced the journey of how the lost God found the seeker – through the lands and life of a man from 350 CE, whose reflective writings played a deep role in the development of Christian theology and philosophy in the Western world – a highly regarded priest, St. Augustine of Hippo, not from all-glorious Rome or Jerusalem but the small town of Thagaste in the North of Africa.

Set in the backdrop of his autobiographic, theological, philosophical, metaphysical, deeply self-reflective, one-of-its-kind, risky exposé, *The Confessions*, in 13 books, Prof. Conybeare told his story in three phases – Manichaean, Neo-Platonic and Christian, marking his prodigal return to the Holy Trinity. She reiterated that this partitioning served more as a clarificatory teaching tool rather than an illustration of how his reasoning unfolded – which was dialectically between the phases, always almost running in parallel, tugging at his past and current tows till his very end. So much so that he resolved this volume with the image of himself scattered and changed across time, while God existed in and as it, immutable eternally.

A 19-year-old Augustine connects with Cicero's writing, assured that philosophy is his bridge to faith. As a university student in Carthage, his search for religious definition finds ground, belonging, and philosophical engagement in the (by-then-underground, rival, and illegal-in-Rome) order of Manichaeism. He remains rooted there for 10 years until the Manichaean argument of God and Evil as a substantial autonomous matter no longer satisfies him, for he is certain that God or Evil cannot be a thing, an entity – no matter how pure or dense. Here, the Neo-Platonic works of Plotinus and Porphyry offer him temporary liberation with their presentation of a non-corporeal God. However, their lack of answers for why God's son is incarnated only to be sacrificed, or why original sin exists, leaves him wanting. As if once a Manichaean, always a Manichaean, although he pointedly snips the chord with the sect and always refers to it with disdain in retrospect, he would spend the rest of his life defending his conversion to Christianity as the inevitable calling – justifying his dipping toes in Manichaean waters as an outlet for the naivete of his youth. This is a touchy nerve, exploited by many rival Christian priests, scholars, and Neo-Platonists who repeatedly attack Augustine even after he is ordained as a Bishop to preach regularly to dedicated parishioners.

Augustine, the deeply philosophical man who was the Rhetorician in the Imperial Court of Milan by his mid-20s (an opportunity that came to him, he would say, through his tainted Manichaean connections) was also once the boy who stole fruit for the fun of it, the adolescent who went to church mainly to pick up women, and the adult who kept a mistress and had a son, Adeodatus, out of wedlock. He simply could not come to terms with how *he*, with the complete roster of grammar and reason under his belt, still needed the satiating joys of flesh. How could a man desperately in pursuit of understanding divinity, seeking to learn why evil was a seed that wouldn't stop sprouting, how could *he* not will his own will to surrender?

Christianity is the end that the avoidant dodged till he is brought to his knees in helplessness one day in a garden, where he weeps about how he sets himself to be blind and unreceptive to the very truth he seeks. By now primed by his mother Monica's persuasion that her son should find Christ, (making sure he is distraction-free by coolly dismissing his mistress but keeping their boy Adeodatus), and his committed attendance to sermons by his friend and cleric Ambrose – Augustine is ready to see and hear what he needs – a sign from above that will take him to the point of no return.

Almost cinematically written, comes the moment in the garden when a tear-soaked Augustine, beside himself, hears the hymn 'Take it and read it' in the voice of a boy. He reaches for the *Bible* and opens it, landing on St. Paul's letter to Romans 13:13–14, which urges him to leave debauchery behind and instead wear Christ. A man, now aware he must give up sex (although Christianity doesn't ask him to) to live an ascetic life, he "steels" himself (to face the withdrawal from his favourite vice) and takes his leap of faith. He moves with his students, son Adeodatus, and mother Monica to the countryside to articulate what this 'commitment' to Christ means, and to discover how to display this articulation as philosophical dialogues which lead him to address Christianity not as a derivative or decoration of and on Neo-Platonism but as a sound theological framework of its own standing. In the company of his overjoyed mother, Augustine is baptised in Milan by Ambrose.

In another instance of pure grace, the mother and son one day, while introspecting on a dream she has, together hear the voice of God emanate from the silence. Affirmed that her work is done, Monica dies a year after Augustine's baptism. With her passing, Augustine and Adeodatus return to Thagaste in hopes of setting up a monastery, a Christian retreat for reading, writing, and reflecting, in their family land. He never leaves North Africa again.

What should have been a fresh start takes a dark turn when the 16-year-old son he is extremely fond and proud of also dies. Augustine, who was in many ways able to reason and get past his mother's death, finds a different well of grief in the loss of Adeodatus, a son who was

an intrinsic part of his theological reasoning through conversations and daily routine, which are recollected in *The Confessions*, where the son and father dialogue, argue and teach each other, guided by Christ, their interior teacher.

As if from frying pan to fire, en route to finally set up his monastery, Augustine arrives in Hippo to be 'seized' by the church and ordained a Bishop on the spot for his Latin and oratory prowess. This allows him to return, to read and decipher the *Bible* with the intent to disseminate and therefore reflect on, rigorously. From here, part of his life is taken up with fights involving different orders of the church in the region that refuses to recognise his Bishop-dom, as he was baptised in Milan. Despite having a full house when he preached in Latin, his parishioners walk out en masse when he has his sermon translated to Punic (the local language). In addition to this, he is still being publicly attacked and humiliated for his Manichaean past. Augustine juggles and contends with this onslaught of the outside world.

*The Confessions*, among his critical writings like *The City of God* and more, becomes the work through which he unravels his journey to Christ and the Holy Trinity for himself. To arrive at the image of humans as intrinsically bound into a trinitarian relationship, as those born into sin, bearing the wrath from the first 'thought' and 'impulse' of disobedience in the Garden of Eden, with Christ as the only exception who can save us through immaculate conception – Augustine remembers and interprets how his life poses one internal conflict after another, only to unfold as nudges towards his God.

Across 13 books, he strings beads back and forth – with scenes of an adolescent Augustine, play-acting in Virgil's Proto-Roman poem *Aeneid* at school, who is vulnerable enough to weep for Dido, the Queen of Carthage who kills herself when her Trojan hero Aeneas abandons her and their well-dreamt plans of love and life-to-be over the Gods' mission for him to birth a Roman legacy – hinting at the African identifying with Dido, a foreshadowing of Augustine's journey to Carthage to learn Rhetoric and then to Rome to teach it. The scenes include one of him as a young man whose pride is chaffed (a wound he carries with weight, for long) when his Roman enterprise was disastrously cut short by the mockery of his

students insulting his African-accented Latin, often taking his classes but leaving him unpaid. In so writing, he makes sense of his life, moving in time as only humans can, as they are fated and destined to a temporal existence, living with anticipation for what is to come while forever dealing with the loss of the present turning into the past in an instant.

In all its self-effacement, *The Confessions* is a story of rising to cause and redemption, a form potentially detrimental to the image of Augustine, who was still alive when it was read. Conybeare reminds us *The Confessions* is a prayer to God, where the 'you' in the dialogue is God, and in fact, in its very form, if one didn't know it, one would think it is a compilation of Psalms. – **M.P.**

## John of Damascus, A Philosophic Light in Dark Ages Past: Theological Appropriation of Aristotelianism in Eighth-Century Jerusalem Sectarian Debate

September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Scott Ables (Lecturer in the School of History, Philosophy, and Religion at Oregon State University)



John of Damascus was a fascinating figure not much discussed in the history of philosophy, as he was treated more as a compiler of traditions rather than a philosopher in his own right. John advanced theology in his lifetime.

Professor Scott Ables claims that though John was first discovered by the Byzantine theological world, he should be decoupled from a timeline that ties him to Damascus, Byzantine and iconoclasm. John lived roughly contemporaneously with the Umayyad dynasty, dying in about 750, at about age 75, and was educated in elite levels. Although he considered himself to be a Roman, he never visited the Roman Empire. He wrote mostly in Greek, and was the last person to do so after the languages switched to Arabic in the area.

His party, Chalcedonian, represented the Byzantine Church, supporting the Council of

Chalcedon in 451 AD, and became known as the Melkites, the Syriac word for 'king'. Arabs were wary of the Melkites who remained a minority party in the Syrian-Palestine area, where other Christian sectarians, and West and East Syrians dominated. Melkites were used by Arabs as a wedge between these two larger parties. John was instrumental in a quid-pro-quo patriarchate exchange between the Umayyads and the Chalcedonian hierarchy in Damascus.

On the site of the cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, Arabs build the Damascus mosque now known as the Umayyad mosque, one of the primary pilgrimage sites for Muslims. Although there's no direct evidence of the reason for this occurrence, it seems that the Chalcedonians were requested to give up the church under a treaty Damascus had with the Arabs.

John then moved to Jerusalem. Prof. Scott argues that the shift to Jerusalem cannot be merely coincidental and needs to be investigated, especially as John was commissioned to produce proto school texts.

In an environment of sectarian debate, John authored several books on polemics prior to his treatise *Concerning Heresy*. He composed at least one polemic against Manichaeism, two each against the Miaphysites (West Syrian side),

historians (East Syrian side), and Maronites, (a small group in the North which were part of John's party with some theological differences), few usually dated later in his career against liturgical misuse of the Trisagion, iconoclasm and possibly against Islam.

At a time when philosophy and theology were not treated as distinct disciplines, John, aware of local needs, adapted and addressed these issues. These adaptations are where John's use of philosophy and theology becomes apparent. However, it is his theological method that is noteworthy.

Around the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, theologians realised that they were arguing one another for lack of uniformity in definitions used in their terminology. Unpacking of John's theological background brings forth his philosophic background. In his philosophical handbook, the *Dialectic*, John gathered definitions from the Church and harmonised them for theological use, putting the definitional problem to rest, at least for the Chalcedonians. John cited an example that Essence, Nature and Form, according to the holy Fathers, are the same.

Many other texts earlier attributed to John, on how divinity and humanity came together in the Incarnation, are now considered dubious or spurious by modern scholars, and are not credited to him anymore. Some scholars in the 1960/70s initially believed and argued that John wrote nothing of his own. However, by the early 1980s, this view underwent a drastic change, and these scholars, post work on John's contours, concluded that the *Fountain of Knowledge* was a masterpiece of seldom-achieved depth and the last word on the problem of evil. Four chapters of this masterpiece deal with 'unorthodox faith'.

Anti-Manichaeism thought seemed to remain central throughout John's career, and Professor Ables suggests that the genesis of John's innovative shift, moving from Christology to Trinitarian thought, was in his Manichaean thought. Several treatises suggest that there were active Manichaean communities at the time.

John's use of theological technical terms underwent development, as he adopted terms used by Maximus and exported them into his

Trinitarian theology, something that none of the previous theologians had done. John moved beyond theology to consider existence and the nature of the relationship of the body and the soul. John addressed the interpenetration of the divine and human natures in Christ, and stated that nature retains their attributes as they are. They don't change, so the divine nature does not change.

Theologians in this period thought Aristotle to be a pagan, and hence wrong. In a manner, John brought Christian theologians to think with Aristotle rather than to reject Aristotle altogether. During the Empire, theologians held councils and told the emperor what ought to be done; and the emperor, with the force of his army, either got everyone to concur or leave the Empire. As the Empire became more and more Christian, philosophical schools closed down. Though John continued to use treatises written by them, he did not really engage in those topics, as these monastic schools almost replaced Plato and Aristotle with the Church fathers, and were less willing to admit that they were dealing with Neo-Platonism. With the Arabs taking control, the sectarians only had persuasive powers. Arab conquest led to unrest in the area, education taking a hit. The biography of John is a bit unclear, but it seems John did get trained under the Arabs along with the Caliph's children.

In late medieval theology, Church fathers ignored internal differences, spoke with one voice, and didn't contradict each other. This theory of accommodation basically meant politely ignoring things.

John wanted to harmonise terms and engage people in debates using the same words in the same way. He wanted to dispense the problems faced earlier wherein words had dissimilar meanings and people connoted different definitions for them.

Islam looks at Jesus as a prophet, whereas in the Christian conception, Jesus is divine in the same way the Father is divine. Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, and the West Syrian position starts from that assumption. Thus, East and West Syrians understand terminology in a similar manner though they work on different assumptions, e.g., for West Syrians, one



hypostasis necessarily implies one nature. In one of John's works, each species is one nature, such as all men are one nature. Yet, in spite of common ground, John disagreed with both West and East Syrian interlocutors.

John talked about different ways in which mixtures are formed and cited the example of perfume, wherein different things are smashed and blended in a manner that they cannot be unmixed. A new thing distinct from its source is made. Another common example is that of a horse and a donkey making a mule which is sterile and cannot reproduce. Thus, the third thing which is produced is defective.

There is a lot less evidence that John is thinking about the divine first principle. John expressed his views on how Providence allowed him to view God, revealing truths through pagan philosophy. John wrote three treatises and dealt with the two periods of iconoclasm, where he decisively argued for a critical distinction between the two Greek words, *latreia* – worship which may be offered to God alone, and *proskuneo* – veneration paid to anyone, or anything that deserves honour, which could be a king, a saint, or a religious object.

Professor Scott Ables concluded by asserting that just as John's icons are revered, his burial place, if known, would be equally revered. – **R.P.**

## Islamic Theology and Arabic Philosophy: the Mu'tazila, al-Kindī, and Ibn Sina

September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Peter Adamson (Professor of Late Ancient and Arabic Philosophy at the LMU in Munich)

What were the earliest interactions between rational Islamic theology (*kalam*) and Greek-inspired philosophy (*falsafa*), and how did the philosophical world evolve with these schools of thought under the Abbasid Caliphate? Who were the Mutazilites and Asharites and how did philosophers like al-Kindi distil and expand their understanding of Islamic *falsafa* alongside or in debates with these schools of *kalam*? These are some of the questions that the lecture with Professor Peter Adamson brought to the fore as part of Jnanapravaha's 'The Age of Illumination: Philosophical Thought from Late Antiquity to the Islamic Golden Age'.

Professor Adamson began with introducing the class to al-Kindi – the first Greek-inspired philosopher in the Islamic world, and his pioneering work in overseeing translations of Greek works of science into Arabic, which he eventually used in his body of work. This could be understood as the beginning of philosophical world expansion under the Abbasids, where Greek works of medicine, metaphysics, mathematics, and philosophy, among others, were highly prized. The elites invested heavily in this enlightenment

project. These translations helped al-Kindi as he attempted "to present how the truths of Islam can be related to the truths of philosophy", as Professor Adamson notes. The 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries, therefore, offer a unique window into the period when the Islamic knowledge-building project was taking roots and people like al-Kindi were motivated to draw their conclusions beyond the existing Islamic schools of thought (mainly the Mutazilites) and react to what they had been working on for nearly a century.

Within the framework of *kalam*, the Mutazilites were known as the 'upholders of unity and justice'. To them, unity was the foundational idea on which God's uniqueness rests, i.e., the God and his divine attributes (*sifat*) were separate. This could be further extended to the idea of 'God is one', who does not have a body, or any elements that make Him human-like. Denoting or even attempting to make such attributes as an extension of His being was, to the Mutazilites, polytheistic in practice. On the other hand, justice was an element of free will that the Mutazilites believed was what humans had, because not having free will would mean God taking all actions on behalf of humans.

As Professor Adamson stated, the relevance of these interactions helps develop a deeper understanding of how such ideas were being contested in the Islamic world, and which are inevitably part of the larger medieval philosophy.

Inspired by Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists, al-Kindi arrived at the understanding that a 'True One' was indeed God as understood in the Islamic tradition, which drew parallels with the Mutazilites's idea of unity in God. As Adamson noted, al-Kindi's appreciation of pure, rational argument based in Aristotelian ideas was the way he created a distinction of his work and philosophical inclination while arriving at similar conclusions as the Mutazilites. When it comes to the idea of eternity of the universe, al-Kindi differed from Aristotle, who believed the universe was eternal. Al-Kindi's body of work thus elaborates the many facets and debates around *kalam*, deepening one's understanding of how the interactions between Greek and Islamic texts were playing out in a rather non-conservative manner. Another interesting feature of this period is the influence of the Mutazilite caliphs on the religious doctrine in the Abbasid court. This eventually proved to be a political failure and is often considered one of the reasons later Islamic rulers did not have any specific "doctrinal commitments", as Professor Adamson put it, which was a departure from medieval Christianity.

The lecture also covered a critical facet of the Mutazilites's view on the idea of the non-existent, i.e., not just what God has created but is yet to create as well. "The question is whether the non-existent is a 'thing.'" For the Mutazilites, this realm of metaphysics was a significant one to contemplate, emphasise on God's choice of deciding which 'thing' will exist, and even debate on how this related to certain passages within the Quran and God's power to make things by saying "Be" (*kun*) and it becomes. These ideas have been connected also to Ibn-Sina, the most famous Islamic philosopher, who was the other figure covered in the lecture.

Influenced by the *kalam* tradition, Ibn Sina's work examines the concepts of 'essence' and 'existence'. For Ibn Sina, 'essence'

was a feature that made a human, human, i.e., "that what makes a thing to be what it is," stated Professor Adamson. Ibn Sina further goes on to cementing that into the idea of "thingness" which Adamson underlines as one of the key debates happening in his time, between the Mutazilites and the Asharites. For Ibn Sina, a non-existent thing has an essence, simply because thinking about it leads to its creation in one's mind. His conceptualisations continued to be examined and discussed within later *kalam* traditions, even as the Asharites began dominating the theological discourse in the Islamic world.

A key feature of most of these lectures is recognising the diverse, at times non-linear, interactions between different philosophies and philosophers from different religious backgrounds. At the same time, while *kalam* argumentation did not necessarily influence everyday Islam, one could imagine and possibly investigate how jurists (most of whom were philosophers) could've worked towards identifying the most "genuine Hadith" (words spoken by Prophet Muhammad to his companions) in managing societal affairs. The *kalam* tradition and its emphasis of God's transcendence could also be captured in Islamic architecture seen in later centuries, from Central to South Asia. In his signature humorous style, Professor Adamson noted, "...philosophers obviously want to think that philosophy makes a big difference," and while that might not always be true, the influence and interactions of different philosophical traditions in the medieval period within the Islamic world underscore the very importance of mutual discourses spanning across centuries, and how we approach fundamental philosophical concepts rather than the isolationist understanding of it. – **M.H.**

### A final note: *kalām*'s influence on philosophers of other faiths

Christians, e.g. Ibn 'Adī (d.974)



Jews, e.g. Saadia Gaon (d.942)



## The Development and Translation of Scientific Thought in Central and West Asia from Alexander the Great to Al-Biruni

October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Dimitri Gutas (Professor Emeritus of Arabic at Yale University)



The Graeco-Arabic translation movement, as explored in Professor Gutas's lecture, reflects centuries of political, intellectual, and cultural exchange. This movement, centred on the transmission of Greek scientific and philosophical knowledge to the Islamic world, spanned a wide geographic area, connecting various regions, including Persia and India. The process was far more than a mere translation of texts; it was a deliberate act of knowledge acquisition, driven by imperial and ideological ambitions.

The translation movement has its roots in the intellectual developments of ancient Greece, especially through the work of Aristotle. His systematic approach to philosophy and science formed the foundation of the curriculum that would later be transmitted across centuries. Aristotle's curriculum, which encompassed logic, natural sciences, and practical philosophy, became the backbone of the translation efforts that followed.

The first major phase of transmission occurred after the conquests of Alexander the Great. By establishing his empire from Greece to Central Asia, Alexander facilitated the spread of Greek knowledge across a vast region. As Gutas explained, even though Alexander's campaigns were primarily military, they inadvertently created a world connected by Greek intellectual influence. Greek became the dominant language of science and philosophy in regions such as the Near East and Egypt, where Hellenistic successor states, like the Ptolemaic dynasty, established institutions such as the Library of Alexandria to cement Greek intellectual hegemony.

A key theme in Professor Gutas's work is the political role of the translation movement. Knowledge was not pursued solely for intellectual enrichment but was seen as a means of asserting power and prestige. In the Roman era, for instance, Greek knowledge was commodified as a form of spoils, exemplified by the Roman general Sulla's seizure of Aristotle's library. This act demonstrated the appropriation of Greek knowledge as part of Rome's conquest of Greek culture.

The Sasanian empire in Persia similarly viewed translation as a way to assert its own cultural and intellectual superiority. The Sasanians believed that Greek knowledge, particularly in science and philosophy, was originally Persian/Zoroastrian, and had been stolen by Alexander. By translating these works back into Middle Persian, the Sasanians sought to reclaim and repatriate their intellectual heritage. This ideological narrative linked knowledge directly to the political ambitions of the empire.

The translation movement reached its height during the Islamic Golden Age, especially under the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. The Abbasid rulers, particularly Caliph al-Mamun, established the House of Wisdom as a centre for translating Greek, Persian, and other texts into Arabic. As Gutas emphasised, this movement was not just about learning but was deeply intertwined with the Abbasids's political and imperial goals. The translations allowed the rulers to demonstrate their cultural superiority over rivals and to legitimise their rule.

The translations during the Abbasid era were often motivated by practical needs — astronomy, medicine, and astrology were especially valued. However, these efforts were also ideological. By controlling the knowledge of earlier civilisations, the Abbasids positioned themselves as the inheritors of global intellectual heritage. The translation of texts from Greek, Syriac, and

Sanskrit into Arabic created a new intellectual culture, and a form of intellectual conquest parallel to the empire's military expansions.

While the primary focus of the translation movement was on Greek texts, Indian works also became essential components of the intellectual exchange, notably through the translation of *Kalila wa Dimna*. Originally part of the Indian epic tradition, this text was translated from Sanskrit to Middle Persian under the Sasanian rule and later into Arabic during the early Islamic period. *Kalila wa Dimna*, with its moral and political guidance, became a widely influential text across cultures, symbolising the integration of Indian wisdom into the broader Graeco-Arabic intellectual framework. This inclusion illustrates how the movement drew from diverse sources, expanding the scientific and cultural curriculum of the Islamic world beyond its Greek foundations.

Despite being transmitted through different languages — Greek, Syriac, Persian, and Arabic — the Aristotelian curriculum remained largely intact throughout the translation movement.

While scholars regularly commented on and debated these texts, their core integrity was maintained because any significant alterations would have disrupted the coherence of scientific and philosophical ideas. This ensured that the foundational knowledge was preserved across centuries and cultures.

By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Arabic had become the primary language of scientific discourse. At this point, scholars in the Islamic world began producing original works that built upon the Greek, Persian, and Indian knowledge they had inherited. This movement continued to have a profound impact on Europe. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, European scholars, particularly in Spain, were translating Arabic texts into Latin, transmitting the enriched body of Greek knowledge back to Europe and setting the stage for the Renaissance. Ultimately, the translation movement played a crucial role in shaping both Islamic and European intellectual traditions, leaving a lasting legacy on the development of science and philosophy.

– M.T.

## Al-Kindī - The House of Wisdom

October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Ms. Adira Thekkuveettil (Course Director of Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory, JPM)



This lecture by Adira Thekkuveettil delved into the life and contributions of al-Kindi, an eminent philosopher of the Arab world, often regarded as the 'First Philosopher of the Arabs'. The lecture began by providing a background to the setting in which al-Kindi lived — 9<sup>th</sup>-century Baghdad, the

capital of the Abbasid Caliphate.

In the prelude, Thekkuveettil emphasised the foundational role of Baghdad as a hub for intellectual and cultural synthesis. Situated near the former Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, Baghdad inherited and adopted many Sasanian systems, including prioritising the acquisition of knowledge and ensuring its preservation. Central to this endeavour was the creation of the 'House of Knowledge' (Bayt al-Hikmah), a monumental library and translation centre.

Thekkuveettil explained how the Abbasid caliphs, especially al-Mamun, funded large-scale translations of Greek, Syriac, Persian, and Sanskrit texts into Arabic. This initiative brought



together scholars from diverse backgrounds, including Nestorian Christians like Hunayn ibn Ishaq, who translated major works of Aristotle and other Greek thinkers. The lecture highlighted the massive scale of these efforts, with translators often receiving lavish rewards. Hunayn, for instance, was roughly paid the modern equivalent of a million dollars.

The lecture proceeded to provide a comprehensive account of al-Kindi's life, tracing his journey from his birthplace in Basra to his influential career in Baghdad. Born around 800 CE into a prominent Arab family, al-Kindi was "a true Arab Prince" who served under the caliphs al-Mamun and al-Mutasim, enjoying patronage for much of his career.

His contributions primarily included:

1. His work on 'Unity of Being', integrated ideas from Plotinus and Aristotle to argue for the unity and simplicity of God as the source of all creation.
2. His key involvement in the Translation Movement at the 'House of Knowledge'. This aspect was interesting because al-Kindi lacked proficiency in Greek and Syriac, as he only knew Arabic. Thekkuveettil explained how al-Kindi took recourse to "an interpretative translation" rather than the standard "word for word" one.

Next, one of al-Kindi's treatises, *On the Intellect*, was discussed. In this work, al-Kindi categorised

intellect into:

- Potential intellect: The innate human capacity to comprehend intellectual forms.
- Acquired intellect: The state of actualised understanding when engaging with external intelligible forms, such as the meaning of truth.

Beyond philosophy, al-Kindi was a polymath, contributing to fields like mathematics, music, psychology, and medicine. Interestingly, Thekkuveettil mentioned that in his lifetime, al-Kindi was more known for introducing Indian numerals to Arabic mathematics, and wrote extensively on topics like optics and the treatment of depression. Despite his later political challenges — such as imprisonment under Caliph al-Mutawakkil — al-Kindi's intellectual legacy influenced later Islamic philosophers like al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, and extended to medieval Europe.

The lecture then transitioned to al-Kindi's exploration of imagination, dreams, and their relationship to the soul's rational activity. Drawing from Aristotelian ideas, al-Kindi proposed that dreams occur when sensory faculties are inactive, allowing the imagination to engage more freely. Of particular interest was al-Kindi's association of dreams with prophecy. While Aristotle had a more sceptical view of prophecy, al-Kindi embraced it as a way for the soul to communicate divine truths. This aspect of his philosophy reflects a synthesis of rational thought and religious belief,



Al-Ma'mun sends an envoy to the Byzantine emperor Theophilos  
13th Century, Biblioteca Nacional de España

showcasing his ability to integrate different intellectual traditions into his worldview.

A core theme of the lecture was al-Kindi's understanding of the soul as eternal, existing before and after its physical embodiment. The soul's innate intellect, Thekkuveettil explained, is its true essence for al-Kindi. While he acknowledged the importance of navigating physical existence, he believed that focussing on the soul's rational and intellectual capabilities brings individuals closer to divine truths.

Interestingly, al-Kindi does not elaborate on the fate of the soul after death, nor does he discuss reincarnation. These open-ended aspects of his thought invite further exploration and interpretation.

The lecture went on to discuss another of al-Kindi's works, this being a work on psychology – *On Dispelling Sadness*. Herein, he offers practical advice for living a meaningful life, likening earthly life to a temporary stop in a longer spiritual journey that encourages individuals to prioritise intellectual and spiritual pursuits over attachment to material wealth.

Thekkuveettil convincingly connected these ideas to al-Kindi's personal experiences, noting that while he began life in privilege and power as the son of a governor in Basra, his fortunes fluctuated due to political instability. By the end of his life, al-Kindi experienced loss and decline, making his emphasis on intellectual and spiritual resilience particularly poignant.

The lecture concluded with a discussion on al-Kindi's influence on later Islamic philosophers, such as al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Averroes. While some, like Ibn Sina, critiqued aspects of his philosophy, others found his ideas as a source of inspiration, particularly his blending of rationality and spirituality.

Thekkuveettil emphasised al-Kindi's role in shaping the intellectual landscape of the Islamic Golden Age, presenting him as a figure who bridged ancient Greek philosophy and Islamic thought. His contributions remain a valuable lens through which to examine the interplay of intellect, soul, and human nature in philosophical inquiry. – **C.J.**

## Saadia Gaon - A Jewish Intellectual in an Islamic World

October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Marc Herman (Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities at York University)

What did being a Jewish intellectual in the medieval Islamic world entail? In his lecture on Saadia Gaon, the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish philosopher, Marc Herman, assistant professor at York University, explored what the philosopher's world was like, expanding the understanding of terms like 'Islamic world', 'Jewish intellectualism', the role of minorities and the flow of philosophical ideas from one school of thought to another during that period.

A "conservative revolutionary", Saadia Gaon was born in Egypt and eventually moved to Baghdad, dedicating his life to cementing and preserving Jewish philosophy which had not been done until his time, while creating more room for new ideas that emerged as he interacted extensively

with the world around him. As Professor Herman noted, the pre-modern Islamic world "was not Islamic in a monolithic sense", but rather, was diverse, incorporating minority voices and Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian thoughts and ideas. Herman added that this Islamic world was "exclusively in dialogue with Judaism", owing to the shared Biblical traditions, setting the course for Saadia Gaon's philosophical and theological breakthroughs in this world. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, for the first time in history, nearly 80-90% of Jewish communities previously split between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, were brought under one umbrella through the Islamic conquests, making Arabic a single language for the Jews. It is in this period that Saadia's work contributes immensely towards establishing the

foundation of Jewish philosophy for centuries to come.

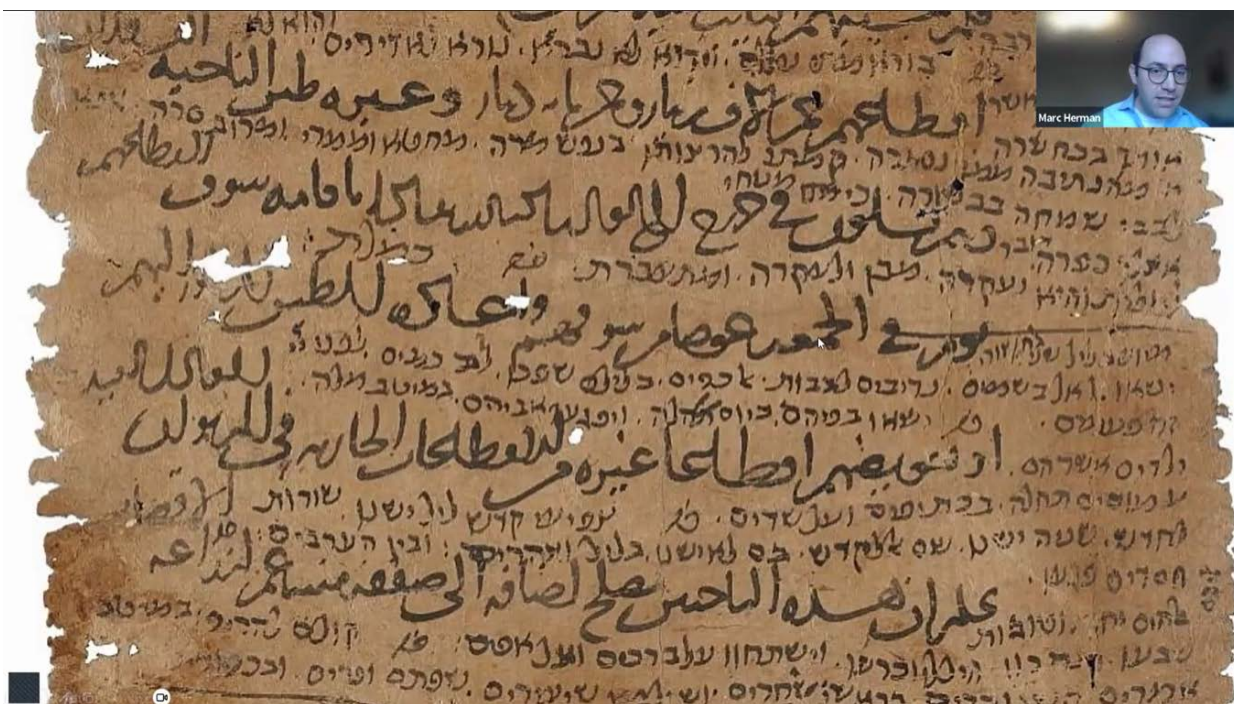
At 23, Saadia began writing Hebrew linguistics, and polemics against Jewish scripturalists who considered the Hebrew Bible as the main authority on Jewish law. He travelled from Egypt to Syrio-Palestine and spent about a decade in Tiberias studying the Hebrew Bible, while also reportedly engaging in *kalam* (Islamic theology), before finally moving to Baghdad. Once there, Saadia Gaon's major journey began at the *yeshivot* (Jewish academy), where Babylonian Talmud was extensively studied, but focussed on Jewish law and what living like a Jew meant. As Herman pointed out, "Jewish literature in the first Islamic centuries was primarily produced in the Middle East," reinstating the diversity of thought and philosophy emerging from the centre of the Islamic world, and it is Baghdad where Saadia was appointed as the head (*gaon*) of the *yeshivot*.

Saadia was a rare Jewish polymath, as he made contributions to several disciplines, including Biblical commentary, poetry, philosophy, linguistics, and polemics among others. One of Saadia's biggest contributions remains his Hebrew Bible translation in Judeo-Arabic (Arabic in Hebrew characters). For a community that was "highly Arabised", Saadia's work standardised how transliterations worked from Hebrew to Arabic and vice-versa, which was a highly sophisticated achievement. These transliteration rules were in use for a long time after him, and his

translation of the Hebrew Bible would continue to be used for another 1,000 years, by people of different religions including Muslims and Samaritans among others.

Saadia remains the most distinguished Jewish philosopher not just for his diverse contributions, but also because he absorbed and "adopted" ideas "in the crucible of the much larger world he lived in". Just like the Muslim and Christian philosophers who were engaged in scriptural exegesis at the time, Saadia's commentary on the Hebrew Bible was the beginning of Jewish philosophical tradition for centuries to come. Saadia was the first *gaon* to produce a theological text titled '*Kitab al-Amanat wal-Itiqadat*' (The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs), comprising ten different sections dealing with the creation of the world, free will, the soul, death, redemption, the next world, moral conduct, and belief, all of which were ideas being examined and debated within the larger world around him. Interestingly, Saadia's rules for scriptural exegesis were quite similar to those of Ibn Hazm, the Andalusian Islamic polymath, who was born more than a century after Saadia. How was that possible? Herman's simple answer is, "We're talking about a world that asked similar questions of a text and produced, therefore, similar answers."

Saadia's theological contributions are testimony that he was leaning into certain Mutazilite arguments around revelation and reasoning, using them as ways to expand on how certain





divine laws made sense in practical manners. If the divine law said 'do not steal', what did stealing mean? What did ownership of property mean? What did transfer of inheritance imply? For him, reason was not enough to justify a law; instead, the source of law came from the prophets. Herman concluded his lecture with a key reminder: "If you want to understand the Jews of this period, you need to understand the (Islamic) world that they lived in ... and if you want to understand this world, you also have to understand the Jews ... (and) all sorts of other minorities ... They were as much thoroughly a part of this world as anybody else." He emphasised that monolithic society "is a tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and is not all reflective of the 10<sup>th</sup> (century)", and diversity of thought and contributions of minorities

are immeasurably important when trying to understand that part of the medieval period.

This lecture, as part of Jnanapravaha's 'The Age of Illumination: Philosophical Thought from Late Antiquity to the Islamic Golden Age', offered a remarkable opportunity for many to introspect on the often limited ideas around terms such as 'Islamic world', 'Jewish philosophy', 'Muslim world', and at the same time, dispel narrow understandings of a time that was perhaps more open to differences of philosophical ideas, enriched by diverse thinking and surrendered to not approximating one idea as better than the other, something that the modern world seems to have sadly forgotten. – **M.H.**

## Ibn Sina - His Life and Times

November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Jon McGinnis (Professor of Classical and Medieval Philosophy at the University of Missouri, St. Louis)

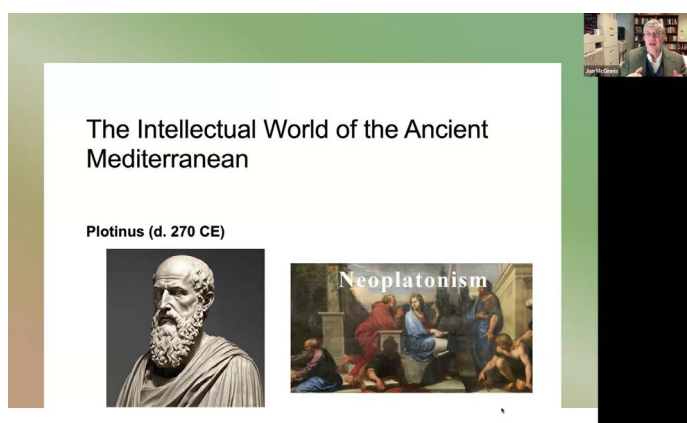
The first lecture in Prof. Jon McGinnis's trilogy on Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna, provided a comprehensive account of the intellectual traditions that formed the backdrop to this celebrated prodigy's work, alongside the key events of his formative years.

## The Ancient Mediterranean Intellectual Tradition

Prof. McGinnis began by discussing the genesis of intellectual tradition: Plato and Aristotle. Plato introduced a two-tier ontology, distinguishing between 'being in the truest sense' and 'becoming' as two ways of existence. Aristotle, in contrast, emphasised empirical science and logic, codifying the four Platonian causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) as 'potentiality' and 'actuality'. These philosophical approaches often clashed but together laid the groundwork for later thinkers.

Plotinus, a key proponent of Neo-Platonism, reconciled Plato and Aristotle's ideas into a coherent Greek philosophical system. Galen, who believed "a good doctor is always a good

philosopher", contributed to medicine by examining Hippocrates and critiquing Aristotle's biology treatise. Ptolemy, though never directly critical of Aristotle, advanced knowledge through empirical methods in astronomy and mathematics.



This intellectual tradition became the basis of the 'Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement' in Baghdad (8<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), which transmitted Greek texts to Syrian, and thereby into Arabic, just before Avicenna's birth. Prof. McGinnis applauded the translation movement and the incredible feat it achieved in 150 years.

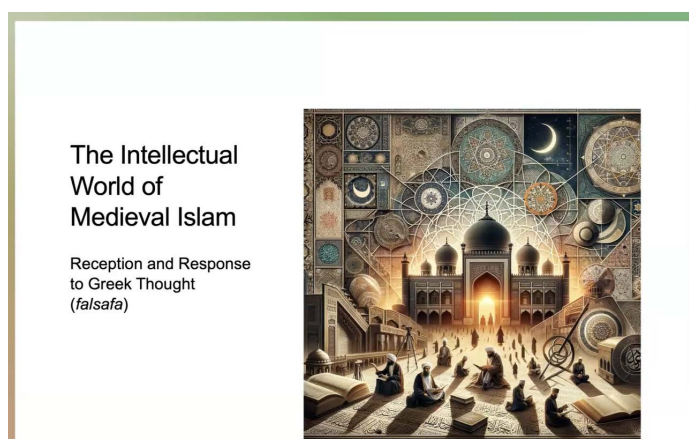


## “Translating almost the entire intellectual culture of one world into another world” –McGinnis

The translation was not without its faults – for example, Plato’s work was paraphrased, however, Aristotle’s works and commentaries were translated almost entirely, though misattributions of Neo-Platonic texts led to the evolution of “Neo-Platonic Aristotle in the Arab world” being distinct from the historical Aristotle that existed in ancient Greece.

### The Intellectual World of Islam

Prof. McGinnis then briefly explained how Islam expanded in the Middle East, followed by the ‘Islamic Golden Age’ that fostered intellectual dialogue between Greek philosophy and Islamic theology, particularly under the Abbasid Caliphate. Muslim scholars developed the *Ilm al-Kalam*, an Islamic philosophical system that engaged and responded to the Greek worldview.



The Mutazilites, for example, argued that the superiority of Islam could be established by reason alone. They sought to demonstrate the existence of God independent of what was written in the Quran, which they saw as a ‘logical outcome’. Though their seemingly radical views led to their persecution, giving way to a more traditionalist (and defensive) approach, their rationale influenced the broader Islamic intellectual tradition.

Even though by the time of Ibn Sina’s birth in 980 CE, the Abbasid Caliphate was in decline, its intellectual legacy continued, creating a fertile ground for thinkers like Ibn Sina to synthesise Greek philosophy with Islamic thought.

### Ibn Sina’s Eventful Life

Post an exploration of the intellectual legacy that Ibn Sina inherited, Prof. McGinnis introduced the philosopher. Born in c.980 CE (debated by some to be 873 CE), near Bukhara, Ibn Sina displayed prodigious talent early on. By 16, he had mastered the Quran, mathematics, and natural sciences, and by 18, he had become a skilled physician. His successful treatment of the Sultan granted him access to an extensive library.

Ibn Sina’s life was marked by frequent relocations. From Bukhara to Gorgan, then Jurjan to Rayy to Hamadan, and finally to Isfahan, he pursued knowledge while navigating political instability. Ibn Sina served as a vizier in Hamadan but faced resistance due to his assertive personality, leading to temporary exile. Despite these challenges, he continued writing prolifically, producing treatises on medicine, philosophy, and politics, whilst fulfilling his administrative role and tutoring his disciples.

Prof. McGinnis also addressed myths about Ibn Sina, such as the unfounded claim that he burned the library gifted to him to deny others access to its knowledge. The circumstances of his death in 1037 CE, likely due to acute pancreatitis exacerbated by a harmful remedy, remain a topic of speculation, with some suggesting deliberate poisoning.

### Ibn Sina’s Contributions

Prof. McGinnis discussed two of Ibn Sina’s works: *al-Qānūn fī aṭ-Ṭibb* (‘The Canon of Medicine’) and *Kitāb al-shifā’* (‘The Cure’).

*The Canon of Medicine* distilled Galen’s magnum opus into a concise, practical text of five treatises that became a standard reference in Europe and the Islamic world until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ibn Sina’s medical theories influenced practice as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Kitāb al-shifā’* was a vast philosophical encyclopedia categorising knowledge into theoretical and practical sciences. Though Ibn Sina sought to rework both branches, he could only finish one – theoretical sciences – which covered logic, natural philosophy, mathematics, and metaphysics in 19 books, discussing disciplines like chemistry, poetry, and rhetoric among others.

## Why does Ibn Sina Matter?

Prof. McGinnis concluded the lecture by highlighting Ibn Sina's enduring influence on Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, and Christian philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas. Ibn Sina's genius lay in his vast worldview and stupendous knowledge while

remaining aligned with Abrahamic traditions.

Prof. McGinnis positioned Ibn Sina alongside intellectual giants like Plato, Aristotle, and Einstein for his unparalleled contributions. His work bridged ancient Greek thought with Islamic philosophy, creating a legacy that transcended cultural and historical boundaries. – **C.J.**

## Ibn Sina - A Radical Break from Theology to Philosophy

November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Jon McGinnis (Professor of Classical and Medieval Philosophy at the University of Missouri, St. Louis)

It could perhaps be said that the philosophical giant, Ibn Sina, had been haunting us ever since the beginning of our series, 'The Age of Illumination'. Even as we read the first-century thinker Philo of Alexandria and ventured into the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus's theorisation of The One (another giant who has consistently haunted this series), the whisper of what was to come – the proof of the necessary existence of God – was already in the air, waiting almost a millennium for Ibn Sina to finally, elegantly and some might say conclusively, set down as the canon.

possibility, impossibility and necessity. And of course, here too, we find another ghost, that of Aristotle, who had been *the* foundational ancient thinker for the philosophical schools of the Islamic world. And here, for Ibn Sina's theorisation of the Necessary Existent to be made clear, we needed to confront Aristotle's notion of the Unmoved Mover.

Why is there motion in the world, and what causes motion to begin and continue? While philosophers of the time knew that most motion is caused by physical action, the push and pull of actual material objects that is the heart of physics, the question remained as to where motion first begins, or rather, what the *metaphysics* of motion is. Aristotle theorised that in order for motion to exist, there must also be pure actualities that are perfect in every respect, that bring about motion by being objects of desire, attracting the imperfect who desire to imitate or be like this pure actuality, or the Unmoved Mover. Ibn Sina found the idea of an Unmoved Mover to be useful; however, Aristotle's Unmoved Movers (there can be many more than one) are not creator-gods; they do not create motion, but instead, they simply exist, not unlike gravity in Newtonian physics. They explain why motion takes place, but they do not explain why anything exists. Rather, Aristotelian metaphysics is based on the concepts of potentiality and actuality, where potentiality is associated with matter, and actuality with pure form. Living beings like humans are composites of form and



In our second session with Professor Jon McGinnis on the philosophy of Ibn Sina, or Avicenna as he came to be known in the Latin West, we finally arrived at the philosophical breakthrough that would come to be known as *wagib al-wugud*, or the *Necessary Existent*. In order to properly grasp this concept, Professor McGinnis began with a breakdown of Ibn Sina's modal ontology – a study of the nature of

matter, in the sense that we are material things but we also possess the potentiality of what we can do; therefore we are *hylomorphic* – a literal composite. While most things are either pure matter or hylomorphic, some are pure form, like the unmoved movers.



Ibn Sina however, found Aristotle's metaphysics unsatisfactory in that it did not have a place for a creator-god, a definitive first principle, and so proceeded to conceptualise a new way to understand existence. He replaced Aristotle's actuality and potentiality with the possible existent and the Necessary Existent. In an elegant stroke, he argued that if everything in the universe is contingent, that is dependent upon an external thing to exist, then the sum total of all contingent things must also be contingent on something external to it; however, this external thing cannot also be a contingent thing as then it would find itself within the aggregate. This leaves only one option, that of the external thing determining the contingency of everything else being a Necessary Existent.

While the proof itself is deceptively simple, our discussion with Professor McGinnis in analysing the proof took repeated twists and turns, revealing that the Necessary Existent while in itself is absolutely simple and unique, and therefore for Ibn Sina is the God of Islam, its understanding contains multitudes. What was perhaps most striking for the class was the fact that although this proof had immense importance within the medieval world, with thinkers across the political and religious spectrum embracing the idea of the Necessary Existent, it is a proof that still remains valid today. Even while our understanding of physics itself has transformed completely since Ibn Sina's time, the proof of the Necessary Existent continues to withstand even quantum physics. It's the pure simplicity of the idea that makes it such a brilliant concept, one which does not require a revealed text, a religious ideology, any doctrine. It is pure logic that leads one to God according to Ibn Sina. While in sessions following this, we come to look at challenges to Ibn Sina's philosophy in other areas by other deeply influential thinkers like Ibn Rushd (known as Averroes in the Latin West), the idea of the Necessary Existent itself has remained seemingly untouched, and for our classroom, who have been wrestling with concepts like Plotinus's One and even Plato's demiurge and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover as we have attempted to reconcile theology with philosophy, it has been Ibn Sina who has truly stood a class apart, more than eight centuries later. – **A.T.**

## The Paramodern Condition: Art and Culture After Postmodernism

September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Mr. Girish Shahane (Writer and Curator )

As the grand fiesta of the Ganesh festival in Mumbai drew to a close in September 2024, Mr. Girish Shahane delivered a public seminar, as part of the Aesthetics, Criticism, & Theory programme at Jnanapravaha. His lecture aimed to theorise contemporary culture under the aegis of 'The Paramodern Condition'. It presented a cohesive synthesis of arguments from various

fields, including visual arts, popular cinema, and literature, clearly establishing key characteristics of cultural styles from modern, postmodern, and even recent digimodern and metamodern eras. This was a thought-provoking introduction to paramodernism and invites further debate and exploration, potentially through a multidisciplinary symposium.





Mr. Girish Shahane speaks during 'The Paramodern Condition: Art and Culture after Postmodernism'

Mr. Shahane began his lecture with an illustrated timeline detailing the evolution of depth and technique in art, starting with the premodern artist Raphael from the Italian Renaissance. He highlighted the tensions between wholeness and fragmentation, artists' subjectivity as seen in the works of 19<sup>th</sup>-century figures like Vincent van Gogh, and the impact of Sigmund Freud's ideas (among other thinkers') following World War I. I found this portion of the lecture particularly enjoyable, as it allowed me to reassess the **modern** aesthetics I have appreciated over the years – from Mumbai's Art Deco theatres during my architecture studies to Kandinsky's works displayed on the curves of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2022.

As times changed post-World War II, entering the age of consumerism and mass culture, Mr. Shahane shared his visual memories from travel experiences in Trivandrum and Ha Long Bay, Vietnam, to describe mediated experiences created by the overwhelming influx of images that define the **postmodern** era. He addressed critical concepts of deconstruction, moral relativism, and intertextuality, referencing works by postmodern luminaries such as Roy Lichtenstein, Jane Jacobs, Jean Francois Lyotard, and Quentin Tarantino. At this point, my curiosity was piqued, and I was delighted to discover that in 1988, my birth year, architect Philip Johnson

revolutionised postmodernism by curating a landmark '*Deconstructivist Architecture*' exhibition at MoMA (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), which introduced the works of renowned architects like Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind to the world.

Transitioning into what he termed as '**The Paramodern Condition**', Mr. Shahane cleverly utilised scenes from films such as *Joker* (2019) and *Barbie* (2023) to analyse the current state of art, culture, and politics. He elaborated on the theme of 'paranoia', drawing on numerous relatable examples from popular media, including Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *Bridgerton* (2020), the Paris Olympics (2024), and the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020). It was interesting to examine political scenery through the lenses of conspiracy theories, the lack of new economic ideas, propaganda, and identity politics. Mr. Shahane captivated the audience by highlighting patterns that define this post-postmodern era. He stated, "If modernism is the flattening of the picture space, paramodernism is the flattening of time.... It is a culture where everything is everywhere all at once." In essence, modernism rejects the past, postmodernism playfully engages with the past, and paramodernism combines elements of both, enriched by conspiracy, performativity, personal narratives, apophenia, and a touch of irony.

After absorbing the insights from this intellectual seminar, my mind playfully exclaimed "*Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!*" and tried to fathom the wide spectrum of concepts presented. This reflection took me back nearly two decades to my first-year basic design class in 2006, themed 'Chaos', where naive millennial students delved into the nature of chaos in design. Perhaps that was the inception of paramodernism. Shortly after, design using parameters and computer algorithms emerged as parametric architecture; the term 'parametricism' was coined in 2008 and coincidentally shares the same prefix as paramodernism. The subject is extensive, and there is still much to uncover, as Mr. Shahane acknowledged. His patience with audience questions and comments, combined with his light sense of humour, made the talk feel like a thoughtful dialogue guiding us through the blurry lines of our times. – **P.P.**



# Curatorial Processes

## PAST PROGRAMMES

### Curating 'Money Talks': From Ideation to Delivery

November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Shailendra Bhandare (Senior Assistant Keeper of the Heberden Coin Room, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford and a Fellow of St. Cross College and member of faculty of Oriental Studies)

The Curatorial Processes module at Jnanapravaha delves into the creation of exhibitions. During this session, Shailendra Bhandare discussed the ongoing exhibition titled 'Money Talks: Art, Society & Power.' It features more than 100 objects from across the globe, including artworks by Rembrandt, Banksy, and the new phenomenon of cryptocurrency and NFTs. This exhibition draws from significant collections, including the Ashmolean Museum, the Royal Mint Museum, various British institutions, and significant private collections, making it an expansive and eclectic showcase.

The presentation focussed on the evolution of

ideas, exhibition design, audience engagement, and curatorial practices. It highlighted the relationship between money and art, showcasing the social history of money through artistic interpretations. The presentation comprised two parts: From Ideation to Delivery, and Objects and Themes in the Exhibition.

Special exhibitions like these, Shailendra Bhandare mentioned, are essential for museums, as they generate income and attract visitors, encouraging them to spend time and money in museum shops and cafes. These exhibitions also please patrons, promote collaboration and new research opportunities.

### Money as metaphor: Economy and Politics



## Gallery 1: Technique, inspirations and Style

- From Portraits to Patterns – Edward VIII ‘coinage that never was’
- Calligraphy
- Art Deco (Metcalf and Gill)
- Art Nouveau (the Viennese avant-garde)
- Money inspiring artists (Rubens)



Initially set for 2022 to mark the Centenary of the Heberden Coin Room, but postponed due to the pandemic, the *Money Talks* exhibition was launched in 2024. It blends historical, visual, and cultural elements, inviting audiences to consider the implications of money in society. The exhibition presents the connection between art and money while focussing on the social history of money without emphasising its financial valuation. Along with being a familiar, functional, and fungible object, money serves as a potent visual medium, and the exhibition underlines its cultural significance by examining numismatics alongside money's historical context, presenting it as a reflection of human activity through art.

A visual tour of the exhibition was provided. The exhibition's structure is divided into three galleries. The first gallery, themed around techniques, inspiration, and style, illustrates how money immortalises individuals through coin and currency portraits, and inspires artistic styles. The second gallery speaks of the social, cultural, and political impact of money, showcasing art that reflects global perspectives, addressing themes of politics and protest. The third gallery emphasises how artists use money as both a subject and medium, exploring technology's influence on art.

Two strategies from sociologist Max Haven were incorporated, involving the use of monetary objects in political discourse and revealing the inherent elements of money in art. These strategies frame the exhibition's main themes. The three-year curatorial process included theme identification, proposal development, research for object selection, business planning, marketing approaches, and final exhibition design.

Understanding audiences and tackling potential challenges related to viewing money through an art lens were emphasised. The extensive

museum collection allowed for showcasing items in innovative contexts, augmented by loans of rare objects. The exhibition was set to intrigue various demographics, from retirees to art lovers and specialists.

Interpretative strategies blended art and money themes, fostering visitor engagement through interactive elements, narrative hooks, and thematic transitions. These aspects encouraged deeper interactions with the displayed works. Curatorial efforts aimed to present engaging interpretations that were made accessible to all visitors by avoiding jargon while incorporating humour and playfulness.

The exhibition culminated in distinct areas for visitor engagement and featured interactive elements that extended beyond mere object display. The project's evolution addressed challenges in writing engaging exhibition narratives that resonate with shorter public attention spans. Transparency and clarity in presenting artworks were prioritised.

In the second part of the presentation, narrative connections between art and money were highlighted, inviting deep exploration of how these themes converge across cultures and epochs. The exhibition shares important stories and contextualises money's multifaceted significance through a variety of artistic perspectives.

The artworks range from those including Roman, Chinese, Japanese, and Islamic monetary examples, Art Nouveau banknotes, incorporation of Art Deco styles in currency, and those featuring Kings Edward VIII and Charles III. Iconic monetary portraits of Queen Elizabeth II are also included.

A diverse selection of artists are showcased, including pieces that provoke discussions on contemporary issues such as gender representation and economic crises. These include Grayson Perry's *Comfort Blanket*, Paula Stevens-Hoare's over-stamped banknotes with images of 'Notable Women,' Guerrilla Girls's artwork highlighting gender and income disparities using a banknote, Justine Smith's *A Bigger Bang*, commenting on the 2008 financial crash, and Stephen Sack's dolphin-shaped ancient coin titled '*Creatures of the Black Sea*', addressing the disappearance of dolphins due to war.

The presentation emphasised money's enduring role in societal critique and glorification while showcasing its representation in contrasting depictions in Western and Eastern art. Western artworks include *No Watermark* by Charles Spencelayh, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's engraving *The Battle of Money Boxes*, and Bruegel the Younger's satirical artwork *Man with the Moneybag and Flatterers*. Eastern artworks include a Persian coin with Farsi calligraphy in the Nastaliq style, a Tibetan depiction of Kubera, the Hindu, Buddhist god of wealth, clutching a mongoose vomiting coins, Indian depictions of Goddess Lakshmi, and Japanese New Year's *surimono* greeting cards featuring Daikokuten, the god of wealth.

Threshold exhibits, positioned at the transition spaces between galleries, hold a prominent place in this exhibition, themed around iconic and intriguing art, politics and protest, and futuristic aspects of the convergence of money and art. These exhibits feature works by Andy Warhol and L.N. Tullur.

A key focus of the exhibition is the integration of digital art and new mediums such as generative AI, tokenisation, and NFTs. *Bitchcoin NFT* by Sarah Meyohas is included in this section. This approach blurs the boundaries between art and money, offering a futuristic perspective in exploring the artistic and contemporary significance of money. The main narrative approach employs art to understand the social history of money, leveraging art's subversive and irreverent qualities to reveal deeper insights.

During the Q&A session, Shailendra Bhandare discussed the various levels of complexities that exist while curating such an exhibition. He acknowledged the critical support received during the process and shared insights about navigating through potentially sensitive topics. The exhibition's broad temporal range and commitment to inclusivity were emphasised, making it relevant across various demographics.  
- **P.Pai.**



# Announcements

## THE TOCHARIANS OF KUCHA

**MONIKA ZIN**

February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2025 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 1,000/-, Students\*: Rs. 500/-  
Online Public Lecture on ZOOM | Register: [www.jp-india.org](http://www.jp-india.org)



Deity, from Kizil, Cave 38, lunette of the front wall, Berlin, Museum für Asian Art, no. III 8700 © Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, CC BY-NC-SA

On the northern fringes of the Taklamakan lay Kucha, whose elite cultivated a special fondness for Indian culture; this is mirrored by the wall paintings and countless fragments of Sanskrit manuscripts that have been preserved there. Kucha developed its own independent cultural system, which influenced the areas further to the east, but thanks to the favourable climatic conditions, documents have been preserved there that are of first-class importance for the study of Indian Buddhism and non-Buddhist India.

Session I: Introduction to caves and paintings and what we can learn from them

Session II: Traces of Brahmin culture



Monika Zin studied drama, literature, art history and Indology in Krakow and Munich, where she taught the art of South and Central Asia for 25 years. She currently heads the research group 'Buddhist Murals of Kucha on the Northern Silk Road' at the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Leipzig. Zin has contributed to numerous studies on Buddhist narrative art, ranging from Kucha to Borobudur in Java. She is particularly interested in the art of ancient Āndhradeśa; her book on Kanaganahalli was published in 2018 (Arian). She has published two books on Kucha, *Parinirvāṇa Story Cycle* (2020) and on *Gods, Deities, and Demons* (2023) (DEV).



## KINGS AND COMMONERS: MOBILITY AND IDENTITY IN THE ART OF EARLY MATHURA (2ND C. BCE – 5TH C. CE)

**CHANDREYI BASU**

February 13<sup>th</sup> & 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 2,000/-, Students\*: Rs. 1000/-  
Online Public Lecture on ZOOM | Register: [www.jp-india.org](http://www.jp-india.org)



Located at the intersection of three major cultural zones – Bactria and Gandhara, the Gangetic valley, and the Deccan – Mathura's stone sculptural workshops in the early historic period received generous support from kings and commoners, who were based locally or belonged to distant regions. The four talks in this seminar will explore themes of physical and social mobility as well as outward, inward, and cross flows of people and ideas using select examples of Mathura's art.

**Session I:** Outward flows: The monk Bala and the artist Dinna as Mathura's brand ambassadors

**Session II:** Inward flows: Huvishka as a master influencer

**Session III:** Passing through: Cattle herders and animal-headed deities

**Session IV:** Itinerancy: Ascetics and their disciples

*Inscribed image of Śākyamuni created by Dinna and dated to year 115, Gupta period, Govindnagar, red sandstone; Government Museum Mathura 76.25.  
Courtesy: Biswarup Ganguly*

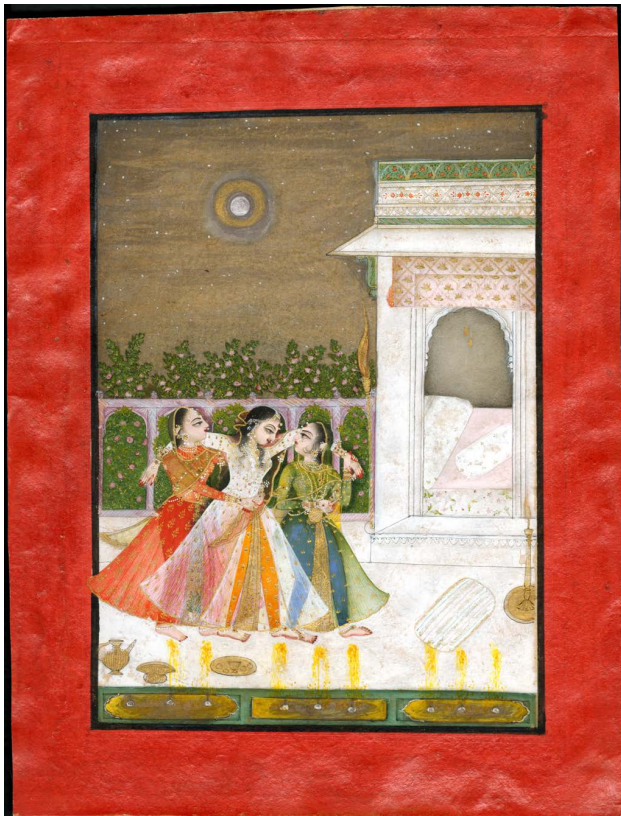
Chandreyi Basu is Associate Professor at St. Lawrence University, USA, where she has taught Asian art since earning her Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania in 2001. Her scholarship focusses on the art of early historic northwest India and Pakistan, specifically patronage and iconography of Mathura sculpture. Her recent publications highlight the urban underpinnings of Gandharan narrative art and the interactions between non-human and human animals in ancient Bharhut. She recently curated an exhibit for the Richard F. Brush Art Gallery at St. Lawrence featuring nearly fifty paintings by thirty-five individual Indian artists working outside mainstream contemporary art.



## KOTA - FACETS OF A ROYAL PAINTER'S STUDIO

**JOACHIM K. BAUTZE**

March 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:45 PM IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 3,000/-, Students\*: Rs. 1500/-  
Online Public Lecture on ZOOM | Register: [www.jp-india.org](http://www.jp-india.org)



A lady being led to the bedroom by two friends at night. Kotah, ca.1740-80. 19,8 x 14,9; 14,9 x 10,8. Published: Sotheby's. Bautze, Joachim: *Die Welt der höfischen Malerei* [a] / 'Katalog der Malereien' [b], in: *Rajasthan, Land der Könige*, ed. Gerd Kreisel, Stuttgart: Linden-Museum in Zusammenarbeit mit Kunstverlag Gotha, 1995, pp. 123-80 [a], 273-9, 287-92, 295-306, 310-316 [b]; p.158, Abb. 141. Private collection.

The Kota style of painting or Kotakalam developed from the earlier Bundikalam from which it at times cannot be distinguished. Only during the last quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it became more distinct from the parental Bundikalam. During the late 1760s artists from Bundi created in Kota the most extensive *Ragamala* of about 251 folios in which the artists adhered to the templates of the so-called Boston-Bundi *Ragamala*, which is from Kota. After about 1725 the famous hunting scenes from Kota can easily be distinguished from those made for Bundi rulers. In contrast to Bundi, the rulers of Kota employed photographers from outside the state until the earlier decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Session I: From Rao Surjan of Bundi (r.1555-1585) to his grandson, Rao Ratan (r.1607-1631)

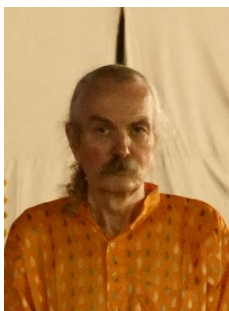
Session II: The geographical distribution of the style within Rajasthan

Session III: Early Kota painting under Raos Jagat Singh (r.1658-1683), Kishor Singh (r.1684-1696) and Ram Singh (r.1696-1707)

Session IV: Maharao Bhim Singh (r.1707-1720), and the tutelary deity of Kota/Nandgaon, Shri Brijnathji, under his successors

Session V: Two Kotah *Ragamalas*

Session VI: The hunting-scenes



Joachim. K. Bautze began studying Indian philology (i.e. Sanskrit) and art history at the Freie Universität of Berlin in 1973, where he completed his doctorate in 1982 with a thesis on wall paintings in Bundi. His *habilitation* followed in 1990. His first extensive trip to India started in early 1974, work in Bundi and Kota began in 1979 and has continued ever since. He taught Indian art history at universities in Heidelberg, Tokyo and Berlin, and curated exhibitions on Indian painting in Stuttgart, Dresden, San Francisco and Brussels.

## IN SPIRIT AND STONE: THE ART AND LIFE OF FATIMID CAIRO

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March 25<sup>th</sup> – April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025 | Mainly Tuesdays & Thursdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST

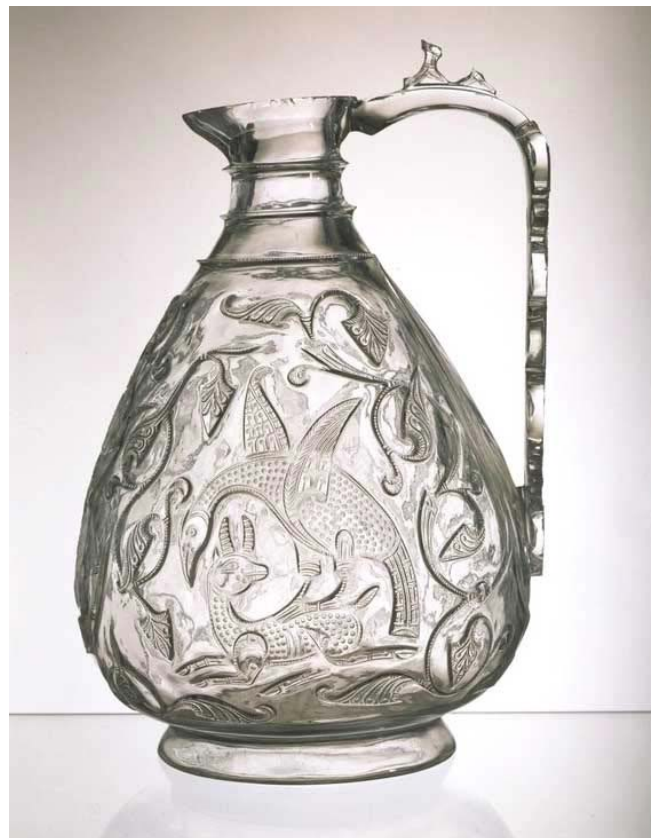
FEE: Rs. 10,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: [www.jp-india.org](http://www.jp-india.org)

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The Fatimid Caliphate holds a significant and yet intriguing place in history. From their shadowy origins as a religious and political movement following the birth of Islam, the Fatimids emerged in the 9<sup>th</sup> century as a military powerhouse, cementing their place as an empire stretching from Sicily in the west to modern-day Pakistan in the east. And while their enormous power was relatively short lived, lasting a little over two centuries, the legacy of the Fatimids has lived on through their art. From illustrious textiles to their famed ceramics and metalware, through icons of philosophical and scientific thought to architectural marvels that stand to this day. But perhaps their most enduring contribution to the history of the world is their foundation of the city of Cairo. Through this eight-part lecture series with the world's leading scholars on the Fatimids, we explore the rich artistic, cultural and architectural legacy of the Fatimid Caliphate.

### FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Anna Contadini  
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Rebecca Jefferson  
Shainool Jiwa  
Valerie Gonzales



Rock Crystal Ewer, 1000-1050, Fatimid Egypt. V&A Museum no. 7904-1862



## UNSEEING THE OBJECT

SUMAKSHI SINGH

April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2025 | Lecture: 5:30 - 8:00 PM IST | Free Online Public Lecture on ZOOM | Register: [www.jp-india.org](http://www.jp-india.org)



*Afterlife, 2022*

Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Australia

Singh's immersive installations are invitations into worlds of shifting perceptions, fracturing illusions, slower rhythms of time and fluid figure-ground relationships, to explore the bases of how we assign attention, construct meaning and perceive our realities within and without. Our everyday 'givens' are questioned as her work dissolves familiar forms and intimate memories into insubstantial mirages using perspective, eroding surfaces or using gossamer, web-like skins of thread and lace. Join us, as Singh walks us through 23 years of her interdisciplinary, creative practice

- discussing the roles of accidents, inspiration, site, history, personal memory and metaphysics in making visual art.



Sumakshi Singh is an artist and an educator who taught at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and lectured at Oxford University, Columbia University among other museums and colleges. Her work has been presented in gallery and museum exhibitions in Australia, India, U.K., China, USA, Canada, France, Italy, Serbia and Switzerland. Exhibition venues include *The Gallery of Modern art*: Queensland, *Saatchi Gallery*: London, *Kochi Biennale*: Kochi, *Museum of Contemporary Art*: Lyon, *MAXXI Museum*: Rome, *The Mattress Factory Museum of Contemporary Art*: Pittsburgh, *Museum of Contemporary Art*: Chicago, *Kiran Nadar Museum of Art* and (*KNMA*): India. She has mentored residencies for the Victoria and Albert Museum, *TheWhyNotPlace* 2010 and 2011, and was

a visiting artist advisor at KHOJ Delhi. Singh received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting, Drawing and Art History from MSU (Maharaja Sayajirao University), Baroda, India, in 2001 and her BFA in Painting and Drawing from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL in 2003. She is the recipient of several awards, including the Asia Arts Future Game Changer award by the Asia Society in 2022 and the YFLO award in 2019.



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We know we have made a difference. Our endeavour to encourage and facilitate pedagogy meaningfully continues with the firm belief that the humanities are indispensable to the well-being of the community and the individual.

\*\*\*\*\*

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