Jnanapravaha

JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI
QUARTERLY

JULY - SEPTEMBER 2025

CONTENTS

Director's Note

The unusual early monsoons in Mumbai fortunately did not disrupt our programming, as we had successfully completed our academic year and were already finalising the details of our next, beginning mid-July. As always, we are exploring new terrain as this note will testify, and are very excited with all the new offerings which our course directors have insightfully created.

We begin with 'Conjuring Empire: Art, Faith and Power in the Byzantine World', a natural extension into the world of material culture of this era after their philosophical traditions studied in the recently concluded course, 'The Age of Illumination', which delved into the times of Late Antiquity through to the Islamic Golden Age.

Our flagship yearlong course on Indian Aesthetics also kicks off at this time with some new realms of enquiry brought in. Recent research remains the chief focus.

In the coming quarter, our Aesthetics, Criticism and Theory programme also ventures into new intellectual terrains. Over a four-session series in October and November, we will examine how William Shakespeare's works engage with – and often transcend – the philosophical traditions of his time. From the Stoic tensions of his Roman plays to his startlingly modern interrogations of love, agency, and the emergent self, we will trace how Shakespeare's drama does not merely *stage* ideas but actively *thinks* with them.

We are also delighted to be bringing back the annual Mona Ahmed Lectures in Photography this October. Delivered over two evenings by Tina M. Campt, Roger S. Berlind '52 Professor of Humanities at Princeton University, the series honours the late Mona Ahmed, a singular individual and muse to the artist Dayanita Singh. The series seeks to bring conceptual rigour to thinking about images and our evolving relationships to them while drawing on Mona's legacies of love, refusal, and radical agency.

In December, we welcome Avinoam Shalem back to Jnanapravaha to deliver a series of three online lectures tentatively titled, 'The Black Mediterranean – Artistic Encounters and Counter-Narratives'. The series draws critical attention to the often-forgotten role played by the African continent in shaping Mediterranean aesthetics during the early

modern period (14th–17th centuries). Moving beyond Eurocentric narratives, Professor Shalem's lectures will illuminate the dynamic exchanges – both material and conceptual – between Africa and the Mediterranean, revealing how African artistic practices, networks of trade, and political forces fundamentally shaped the region's aesthetic as well as social landscapes.

We hope to have you amidst us, and wish you a restful monsoon.

With my warmest wishes,

Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.
Director

AESTHETICS

A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya 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

Jnanapravaha's Indian Aesthetics (IA) course, which is simultaneously physical and online, continued to reach out in the last year to students in Mumbai on the one hand, and to those as far afield as the UK, Canada and Port of Spain in the Caribbean on the other. The effort required to run the hybrid mode has proved worthwhile: some students are able to come to our aesthetically appointed heritage space and engage in vibrant personal interactions with scholars and with each other, while others can participate only because the course is also completely online, and enables direct interaction between scholars and students in this mode.

As usual, the course evolved further this year: resource scholars for IA have been spread over a wide geography since the Covid-19 pandemic,

which ironically allowed the course to tap into expertise from all over the world for the first time. Dr. Crispin Branfoot and Dr. Elizabeth Lambourn conducted their sessions from London, Dr. Shailendra Bhandare from Oxford, Dr. Julia Hegewald and Dr. Parul Singh from Germany, and other resource scholars from the Indian cities of Delhi, Gurugram, Kolkata, Pune, and Hyderabad.

Thirty-four students enrolled in the course this year. After having attended the thoughtfully curated IA sessions that illuminate Indian aesthetics by deploying multiple prisms such as archaeology, history, architecture, anthropology, art history, literature, philosophy, and religion during four-hour Saturday-afternoon classes as well as some Friday evening sessions, these students are empowered to ask pertinent questions. The IA course, as always, shone a light on 5,000 years of visual material from South Asia through more than forty sessions on selected subjects conducted by experts who paid careful attention to the political, economic, social, and cultural contexts in which this art was created. As usual, each session comprised illustrated lectures to familiarise students with seminal examples of Indic art and included Q&A and discussion.

After a brief orientation, Dr. Rashmi Poddar introduced students to classical Indian aesthetics, elaborating this concept through Sanskrit texts and Indic philosophical tenets. She used these to formulate an understanding of the visual and material culture of the subcontinent. She showed that *Rasa* theory, first codified by Bharata Muni in the *Natyashastra* in the context of dramaturgy, provides a valuable indigenous aesthetic framework which can be deployed to analyse Indic visual art. Exploring form through tenets such as rhythm, harmony, iconometry, materiality, line, colour, and proportion, Dr. Poddar shed light on the content, subject matter, and meaning of Indic art, distinguished between iconography and iconology, and dwelt on the symbolism inherent in the subcontinent's ancient and mediaeval art. Dr. Veena Londhe delved into the *Rasa sutra* and the concept of *dhvani*, expounded by the mediaeval Kashmiri philosopher and polymath Abhinavagupta, in relation to Sanskrit poetics.

Dr. Kurush Dalal presented a comprehensive survey of the Harappan civilisation, the material remains of which are the earliest found in the subcontinent. Dr. Naman Ahuja discussed the terracottas of the Sunga period and showed that these are linked with similar examples found as far as West Asia. Dr. Shailendra Bhandare explored the importance of Satavahana numismatics as artefacts that help scholars reconstruct the history of this early period. Dr. Supriya Rai and Swati Chemburkar offered an understanding of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism through the numerous examples of extant Buddhist art from the various periods of Indian history. They drew in the rich narrative lore of the *Jatakas* and the *Avadanas*, explaining various Buddhist philosophical tenets found in texts from across the world, and their linkages to art such as *bhavachakra* paintings and *thangkas*, apart from discussing meditative and other practices followed by various sects of Buddhism.

Dr. Viraj Shah explored Jain philosophy, art, and Jain narratives, showing that this philosophy rests on asceticism and privileges *vira rasa* or the heroic sentiment. The Jina is seen as a warrior who successfully conquers the senses. Her study of the Jain caves of the Western Deccan bore out this view. This year, the Indian Aesthetics course included a seminar series by Dr. Julia Hegewald, a renowned scholar of Jain temples. The two-evening seminar series offered insights on planning principles in Jain temple architecture in India, showing that Jain temples do not differ in style from examples of other religious denominations found in the same regions. The scholar also discussed how Jain temple architecture in Karnataka is shaped by the climate of the region and the resources available locally.

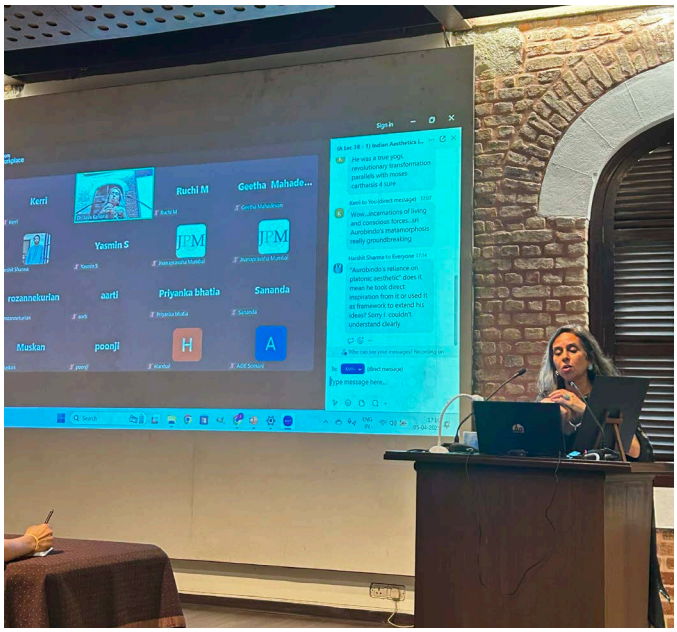
The iconography of Vedic and Hindu deities holds the key to understanding important aspects of the religion. Arvind Sethi's exploration showed the evolution of the iconography of several major and minor male deities in the pantheon, while Dr. Rashmi Poddar introduced the feminine divine. Devi and Shakti are powerful independent female deities who also became important in tantric worship. Dr. Poddar explained tantra, which percolated across religious and philosophical boundaries during its heyday in the subcontinent. Its practices have been misunderstood due to their esoteric and deviant nature which digressed from mainstream Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism. A freshly curated session on Shaiva Pashupata ascetics was conducted by Swati Chemburkar.

Sculptural and textual evidence shows that these ascetics played a vital role in the spread of Shaivism to Southeast Asia in the long mediaeval period of the continent of Asia. After Dr. Pushkar Sohoni's survey of Hindu temple architecture and its morphology, Dr. Crispin Branfoot and Kamalika Bose illuminated temple architecture from specific regions of the Indian subcontinent, showing that the typology can vary significantly due to local materials as well as due to traditions of worship and political exigency. Dr. Riyaz Latif introduced the Islamic funerary architecture of West Asia, and connected it to Indic regional examples through comparison and contrast.

The earliest painting extant in the subcontinent can be seen in the exquisite murals of Ajanta which were explored by Dr. Leela Wood. Manuscript paintings of the *Chaurapanchashika*, Jain examples, and those seen in Sufi *premakhyan*s, such as the *Chandayana*, were introduced to students by Dr. Shailka Mishra. Roda Ahluwalia's exposition of Mughal, Pahari, Rajput, and Deccani painting was followed by a deeper and narrower enquiry into paintings from Awadh and Murshidabad by Dr. Parul Singh and Dr. Mrinalini Sil. Dr. Harsha Dehejia's exploration of the philosophical, poetic, and artistic underpinnings of Krishna *shringara* brought forth its directly personal and sensuous nature.

The final section of the Indian Aesthetics course focusses on trade and the littoral, as well as the colonial, nationalist, modern, and contemporary periods in the subcontinent. A freshly curated session by Dr. Elizabeth Lambourn explored trade networks in the Indian Ocean world before the year 1500. She presented instances of carved marble tombs from Khambhat found both in West Asia and Southeast Asia, and Hindu icons and carvings commissioned by Tamil communities that have been found in Quanzhou, China. The speaker also discussed evidence found in the 'India book' of the Cairo Geniza which shows that an inquiry into the subcontinent's art is incomplete without making reference to early trade networks and the exchange facilitated by them.

The visual art of India's colonial period is rich and varied, including paintings by European and Indian artists who worked for both Indian and Western patrons. Dr. Jaya Kanoria analysed this art through the lens of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Dr. Suryanandini Narain's analysis of colonial and postcolonial photography in the subcontinent showed that the originally Western medium was simultaneously employed by the colonised in ways that subverted the coloniser's desire to use it for surveillance and control. Dr. Jaya Kanoria's examination of early-20th-century



Dr. Jaya Kanoria — Course Director — Indian Aesthetics, Jnanapravaha

Indian aesthetics focussed on Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh, both influential figures during the nationalist period. Their political and philosophical positions shaped their art, and each one's life's work. A careful consideration of these figures offers important insights into how the nationalist period's tumult was negotiated and shaped by them, and how their aesthetic oeuvre was influenced by their time. Dr. Pushkar Sohoni's overview of Indian examples of colonial architecture and a vignette of his primary research on the colonial market hall were instructive in showing how built forms are products of their time but are also affected by unpredictable factors. Despite being built with specific purposes in mind, colonial architecture in general and the colonial market hall in particular both exceeded and failed in fulfilling their stated functions. The market halls were constructed to ascertain a sanitary environment where European, particularly British, buyers could safely purchase food and other goods in the colonial period. These halls were designed accordingly, but several of them burgeoned into extended, chaotic markets as local sellers set up stalls around them, defeating their original purpose. Dr. Sohoni also presented an overview of Modernist

Ms. Sumakshi Singh speaks during 'Unseeing the Object'

architecture before examining the practice of the most significant Indian architects of the modernist period. This survey lecture was a fresh and significant addition to the IA course this year.

The Indian Aesthetics course 2024–25 included an online lecture by the well-known art practitioner Sumakshi Singh, who shared her creative journey and her practice with our students as well as Jnanapravaha's wider audience through an extensively illustrated session. Beginning with her student days, the artist spoke of the factors which shaped her work, such as her lived environment, teachers, and mentors, her own artistic predilections, as well as her family, and importantly, her grandparents' home which rooted her. She showed images of works which were produced through micro-interventions in gallery walls, floors, and ceilings. The practitioner has worked in multiple media and explained the laborious, painstaking processes that produced her variegated output. In the case of her threadwork pieces, she explained that the setting up of an exhibition involves the materiality of tools such as hammer and nails, and ladders and props, in contrast with the light, airy, almost ethereal final product. Sumakshi Singh's work and especially her installations play with the concepts of illusion and reality, as well as of ephemerality and materiality. Her painting, drawing, and sculpture create interfaces between technology and art: she uses techniques such as animation and projection-mapping using anamorphic drawings to create a changing visual that questions the idea of a fixed reality. The artist has taught at many premier institutions and is a curator and a writer. She communicated with lucidity and effectiveness; her openness and the details she included in her session were engaging, and indeed moving, for Jnanapravaha's audience. The session was free for the public and was a part of Jnanapravaha's Creative Processes rubric.

As usual, IA students were provided with carefully curated readings and bibliographies for each IA session on our learning management portal JPM Think. Twenty-six students enrolled in the IA diploma, which involves three writing assignments. All students are required to discuss topics, related images, and authentic source material with Dr. Jaya Kanoria, Course Director of Indian Aesthetics, before beginning work on their essays and thesis. Two evening sessions on the basics of academic writing by Dr. Jaya Kanoria, held in September 2024, equipped students for this writing and made clear the institution's expectations from those attempting the IA Diploma. The sessions offered insights on reading academic material. Each assignment received extensive feedback, and students, as always, revised their work until it was *satisfactory*. The goal of the IA Diploma is to train students so that they are able to publish their academic writing. Several essays first written for the IA Diploma have found publishers over the years, the most recent being one by Aditi Kashyap, an alumnus of IA 2024–25, whose first essay on the topic 'Usgalimal Labyrinth: An Archetypal Form in the Indian Context' has already been published in 2024. IA 2024–25 students wrote their theses on topics such as 'Designing a Language: Tracing the Transformation of Devanagari', 'Khon and Kathakali: A Comparative Study through the Lens of Indian Aesthetics', 'The Cosmic Charm of Devi Bagalamukhi: A Study of Mahavidya Temple at Kangra, Himachal Pradesh', 'From Sedition to State Symbolism: The Visual Afterlives of Nationalist Posters in India', 'Passion and Play as Pathways of Reaching the Divine in Krishna Shringara Bhakti' and 'Reimagining Rasa in Modern Art: A Study of some works by Raja Ravi Varma and M.F. Husain'.

Jnanapravaha continues to strive to expand the reach and depth of the Indian Aesthetics course, curating lectures by well-established scholars that will equip our students with deep knowledge of the subject. This has produced vibrant class discussions and accomplished writing by our diploma students. Our scholars and students are our pride; we look forward to an even stronger iteration of the IA course in 2025–26. ***– J.K.***

PAST PROGRAMMES

Mobile Objects, Mobile People — South Asia in Indian Ocean World Circulation Before 1500 CE

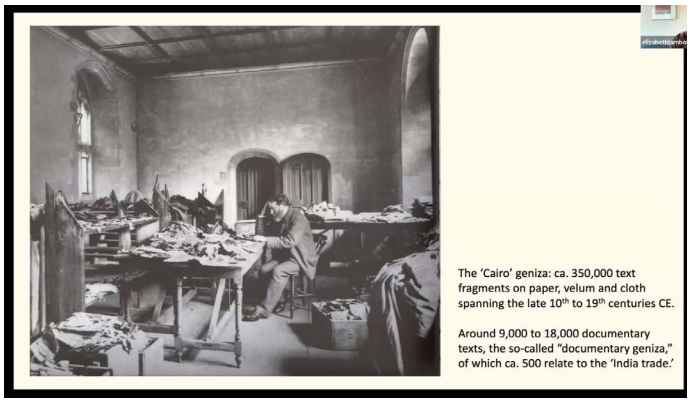
March 13th & 14th, 2025, 1:30 - 5:30 PM IST | Prof. Elizabeth Lambourn (Historian of South Asia and the Indian Ocean world & newly elected Fellow of the British Academy)

Neither heroes nor conquerors: craft mobility in the Indian Ocean world before 1500

Professor Elizabeth Lambourn presented an understanding of the mediaeval world which centred on the Indian Ocean. Material from East Africa and the coast of China shows that objects circulated through Indian Ocean trade from very early on. This included cotton and printed textiles from India, pottery and large quantities of ceramics from China which went to the Middle East in the 9th century CE, and objects such as finished beads and ivory work which were exported from Africa. Since craft is closely linked to local materials and is still learned through practice, craft communities are usually considered to be intrinsically immobile. However, the speaker argued that the volumes of trade in the Indian Ocean indicate the possible movement of craftspeople along with the objects. Ideally, such movement would be tracked through texts, documents, and inscriptions, but may, in some cases, be traced from material remains. The other, less plausible, explanation for such remains may be learning in informal settings, where craft was self-taught; perhaps an object might reveal the method of its making to a far-away craftsperson, making the movement of the originators of the craft unnecessary.

Diverse and sometimes fragmented material pertaining to trade networks that involved the Indian subcontinent have been found in the Cairo Geniza (*geniza*: a ritual depository in Jewish places of worship), a large, unruly group of about 350,000 fragments such as text, drawings, and scribbles on paper, vellum, and cloth broadly spanning from the late 10th to the 19th centuries CE, recovered from the Ben Ezra synagogue in the city. These Indic materials were given the moniker 'The India Book' by the primary researcher S.D. Goitein, and include a rich stash of documents pertaining to trade in the Mediterranean and the Western Indian Ocean in the 12th century.

A letter written roughly around 1130 CE by Madmun bin Hassan, the leader, or at this period the son of the head of the Jewish community in Aden, to the chief representative of merchants, Abu Zikri Cohen in Egypt, was found in the Cairo Geniza and is now in the Bodleian Museum, Oxford. The letter documents a boat constructed in Aden carrying goods to Sri Lanka in partnership with Sheikh Bilal, governor of Aden. Salim, the son of the Cantor (a religiously trained individual, presumably Ibn Hidada), Al Batiti, the son of the smith, the maker of slippers, the goldsmith who had arrived with him, and two other goldsmiths recently arrived in Aden, Abu Ali and Al-Maghribi, also travelled in the boat. This letter provides evidence that autonomous, probably self-motivated craftspeople travelled for work. Unfortunately, this is the only mediaeval record known to the scholar of craftsmen travelling freely in the Indian Ocean area, raising the possibility that this was an isolated case.

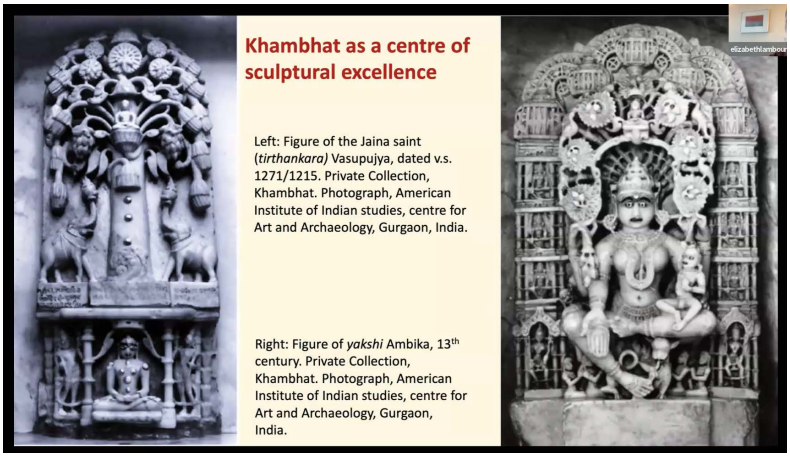


Khambhat, or Cambay, in present-day Gujarat, has been at the heart of Indian Ocean exchanges from prehistory until the mediaeval period. It was an important centre of trade during the Harappan civilisation with active trade and contacts with Oman and the Persian Gulf region,

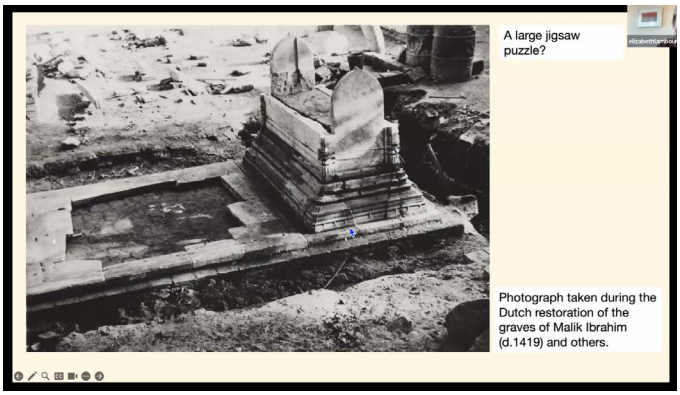
connecting them to Northern India. Khambhat was internationally known as far as China, and its centrality to trade was documented by Marco Polo in the early 15th century and in European maps of the time. Although there are no large, ancient temples preserved at Khambhat, extant material evidence confirms that it was a centre of excellence in marble carving patronised by the Jains in the early 13th century CE. The depth and detail in the carved objects made in Khambhat display sophisticated skills: they became a coveted luxury in the Indian Ocean region.

Khambhat continued to be a thriving city until the 15th or early 16th century CE due to successive waves of patronage, long after it became a part of the Delhi Sultanate. This is apparent from a still-extant tall minaret, the survivor of a pair that have an architectural design drawn from Iran, which was constructed in the 14th century CE adjacent to the Jami mosque, over the tomb of a prominent merchant, Umar bin Ahmad al-Kazaruni. Eventually, the accumulation of river silt reduced Khambhat's usefulness as a port. As a result, Surat gained in importance. Muslim patronage at this time seeded innovation and collaboration between artisans with different skills, seen in the grave of al-Kazaruni, built in his lifetime at the south end of the Jami masjid. The cenotaph of the grave has alternating carvings of plantains and mango trees, which are common motifs in Indic temples. The *bismillah* is carved on the headstone, in addition to other high-relief, extremely accomplished carving reminiscent of still-extant Jain figures of Vasupujya and Yakshi Ambika. This carving style is often referred to as 'flat cut'; it is raised but has a flat surface. The floral motifs have been adapted accordingly, and interlaced designs have been used. The scale, form, and design of the decoration, intricate Tughra calligraphy, and Quranic verses found here are rarely seen in other Muslim tombs in India, showing the innovative skills of the carvers of Khambhat, the development of which can be traced through other examples. The detail and the exquisite flat finish of the background is remarkable and was unique to Khambhat. Marble carving from Rajasthan and other regions does not display this degree of finesse, even though marble was found in Rajasthan and not available at Khambhat. Carved marble from here has been found at many sites, from Kilwa on the East African coast, Java, Indonesia, and China, proving that Khambhat's reputation of excellence spread over a wide region from the late 13th century.

Oman was ruled by the Rasulid dynasty of Yemen in the early 14th century. A set of three stones produced before 1311 CE includes the headstone and footstone of the grave of the Rasulid governor of Dhofar. Carved on both sides, the stones display the evolution of carving styles at Khambhat in the 13th century under Jain patrons, which were continued in the Islamic period. The banana plant, split plantains, and a richly carved lamp in high, rounded relief are evidence of the inheritance from the earlier period, offering clues to a synthesis of two traditions: the lamp hanging in a niche is a standard motif in Islamic art and architecture by the 13th century, inspired by Quranic verses. In Khambhat, the niche is interpreted as a pavilion, and split plantains evoke the Jain wedding *chawri* (pavilion) familiar to the craftsmen, despite the Islamic context. The split plantain fills the space at the top in an aesthetic manner and has a design function. Similar motifs and skilful carving are seen in a headstone from 1315 on which traces of paint and colour still remain. No inscription is seen, and the date is eroded and illegible. In other examples from Khambhat, the name of the patron, and the date, is usually placed at the bottom of the niche. Khambhat carving is evident on a *mihrab* rescued from the city of Lar in Southern Iran. The style of the carving dates the piece to the first half of the 14th century CE. Some elements of the *mihrab* were probably buried by a mid-20th-century earthquake and were restored later. The paint on these elements is intact, perhaps from being buried, while the *mihrab* remained standing and suffered weathering after the earthquake. It



is evident that marble objects from the period were painted.

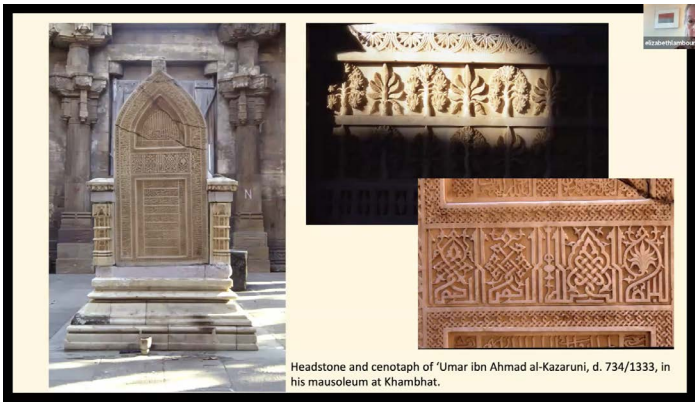


Fragments of marble carving as well as inscribed pieces that were documented in Somalia in the 1930s suggest that the Fakhr al-Din mosque in Mogadishu had a major decoration of imported Khambhat marble. Java in the Eastern Indian Ocean has large numbers of graves that were exported there from Khambhat in the 15th century, including the grave of Maulana Malik Ibrahim who died in 1419, in addition to the graves of two of his relatives. The design of Malik Ibrahim's grave is well-documented as it was often reproduced in drawings that were popular souvenirs bought by 19th-century visitors. The drawings show that while traditional elements remained, evolution took place. The design is distinctive and clearly developed for exports as it does not resemble the type of headstone being produced for the Ahmed Shahis of Gujarat. Considerable carved marble from Khambhat has also been found in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Pasay in North Sumatra.

The scholar speculated that even though fully-finished pieces were certainly being shipped out from Khambhat, it is possible that some material was exported semi-finished and perhaps occasionally carved in other places by Khambhat carvers who travelled to complete commissions. Despite the lack of evidence, the traffic at the port of Khambhat was heavy enough to imagine that prominent merchants may have commissioned work as they passed through. It is unlikely that designs circulated on paper or palm leaf, because at this period in this geographical region, paper was an uncommon material, and palm leaf was unlikely to weather long sea voyages. In the speaker's opinion, the communication of ideas for commissions of Khambhat marble must have been largely oral, through letters, or in person. Some evidence of recycling of graves points to the large number of commissions which required quick execution.

Sometimes headstones and footstones were shipped with a blank space for the epitaph and the date of death, which was surrounded by decoration and Quranic verses carved in Khambhat. In one case, the blank space on the footstone has been filled by the Fatiha, and on a headstone this space has been carved, probably by a local Dhofar artisan, with the epitaph in a very different, shallower carving with tightly packed letters which do not seem the work of a specialist marble carver. In another case, the name is likely carved in Khambhat, but the date of death inserted in Oman, probably because the stones were commissioned and arrived before the death of the individual concerned. Scholars have documented the export of semi-finished goods during this period, such as imported glass rods which were cut and processed to make glass beads to local specifications. It is also possible to imagine the export of raw cotton to be spun at other locations, or spun cotton to be exported for weaving on location, though no evidence has been found for such trade in the Indian Ocean region.

In one of the 19th-century drawings of the grave of Malik Ibrahim in Java, the headstone and the top of the cenotaph are complete and inscribed. However, on the side, there is a blank panel, and all three graves on the site have sections of dressed marble where the decoration is unfinished, perhaps because of lack of time due to restricted sailing seasons for boats going to Java. Many examples of half-finished tombs raise questions about what patrons were willing to accept. The scholar speculated that there may have been an understanding that the work would be completed by a Khambhat carver in situ. Such conjectures are difficult to prove in the absence of recorded commissions, but the multi-component *mihrabs* and large cenotaphs which would have been shipped from Khambhat in many parts, packed separately due to the delicate nature of marble and the fine carvings, would have been challenging to assemble without a foreman or knowledgeable person, especially in the absence of paper drawings. Java and Sumatra receive heavy monsoon rain, necessitating proper foundations for these marble structures, a job requiring expertise. It is possible that craftsmen travelled, too, to make fine adjustments.


Headstone and cenotaph of 'Umar ibn Ahmad al-Kazaruni, d. 734/1333, in his mausoleum at Khambhat.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for close collaborations and exchanges between Khambhat and present-day Indonesia comes from mid-15th-century-CE tombstones made for the rulers of the kingdom of Pasay in North Sumatra, displaying a marked shift in design from earlier Khambhat marble work. Two smaller stones that are placed on top of the cenotaph have shapes that differ from those of Gujarat, and are decorated with Sinicised motifs and designs that are seen in local gravestones. A lobed knob at the top, and curved wings seem to draw from Chinese designs. However, the calligraphy and material clearly originate in Khambhat. This synthesis was probably a result of the production of larger quantities of paper in the Ahmed Shahi kingdom, enabling the commissioning of designs preferred by patrons in Sumatra. It is possible to speculate that marble carvers from Khambhat saw these designs in Sumatra and emulated them on their return to Khambhat, or in North Sumatra while they were in that location. For Pasay, Khambhat carvers designed footstones that evoked textile designs, which were another luxury.

Documentary evidence for the movement of craftsmen is rare in the Indian Ocean region where power was held by very small polities and even by community groups. However, such movement is recorded by empires where craft was considered a resource; craftspeople were sometimes enslaved or forcefully moved in Egypt, Iran, and the Achaemenid kingdom. It seems possible that by the 15th century, Khambhat marble goods were seen as highly luxurious, gaining royal commissions rather than those of merchants, which explains the change in the calligraphy and designs.

A group of carvings found in the ancient port of Zaitun (identified as present-day Quanzhou in Fujian) in Eastern China show that the ocean connected this city to Tamil Nadu. Published in the 1930s before the cultural revolution by Coomaraswamy, the material has garnered scholarly interest after research proved the importance of Tamil artisan guilds from Chola and later times. Tamil communities were present on the Malay Peninsula, Thailand, and in China. Found in and around Quanzhou, these several 100 granite sculptures and architectural elements have clear Hindu, often Shaiva iconography and design links to sub-imperial, late-Chola architecture from Tamil Nadu. A figure of Kali with attendants on a granite panel, a Bhairava, a Shiva image, a Krishna figure, carvings such as a doorway, a basement frieze, pillars and columns, and fragments of figures now detached from original temples and dispersed in various locations in Quanzhou have been found. The mixed nature of this material points to the existence of not just one temple, but several.

A bilingual Tamil Chinese inscription records the foundation of a temple in the late 13th century, but Risha Lee's stylistic analysis suggests that there were earlier temples of 12th-century Tamil styles. Chinese decorative motifs such as a phoenix are seen among the mixed iconographies. According to Coomaraswamy, the Chinese work so closely reproduces Indian formulae and style as to give the impression of Indian workmanship recalling late Chola Temple architecture. In Risha Lee's opinion, the cultural identities of the temples' builders are difficult to determine. Evidence suggests that artisans knowledgeable about both South Indian and Chinese designs and building techniques were involved. The speaker suggested the possibility that sub-imperial carvers from Tamil Nadu, rather than those who worked on royal commissions, were taken by the merchant elite settled in China to work on temples there. Since the main stone available in Fujian was granite, also local to Tamil country, the transition would have been smooth. However, Chinese elements present in some roundels suggest collaborations.

Metals and models: the exchange of technologies between Aden and the Malabar coast as recorded in Geniza documents

The Cairo Geniza yielded perhaps 500 texts that relate to Jewish trade with India. This group constitutes the largest and oldest documentary corpus of the Western Indian Ocean region,

predating other important material, and contains a rich variety of documents including contracts, legal disputes, family letters, notes, chits to pay workmen, texts, calligraphy exercises, and poems. Most of the documents are in Middle Arabic, used by mediaeval Jews in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, and written in Hebrew characters. Paper was scarce in the region, so Jewish merchants in Aden expended a considerable amount of effort to bring paper from Cairo, Syria, or Iran. Writing was crammed into this precious resource. The speaker mentioned that while Goitein published a letter that discusses metalwork on the Kerala coast or Southern Karnataka, such material has not been closely studied. The letters addressed to a Tunisian Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju and written by his Indian slave Bomma were researched by Amitav Ghosh for his novel *In an Antique Land*. Many Jewish merchants from this period made their fortunes by trading with India, occasionally settling there for some time.

Ben Yiju, originally from Mahdia in Tunisia, came to Mangalore, probably via Cairo, in 1132, and continued to visit and stay there for the next twelve years, marrying a local Tulu woman called Ashu, and having three children. Building relationships that allowed him to amass a considerable fortune before he returned to Cairo, he engaged, along with his co-religionists, in exporting pepper, cardamom, and different spices, and importing a variety of metals and other more unusual commodities, such as a large consignment of Middle Eastern sugar for his business colleagues in Mangalore. Textiles, too, were traded. The speaker, with a fellow researcher, has delved into rare and challenging documents relating to commissions from Ben Yiju's metal workshop on the coast of Malabar in the 12th century CE.

Vidya Dehejia's research into Chola bronzes revealed that copper was not easily available in India despite Rajaraja Chola's 1065 grant of 85 sheets of copper for copperplate inscriptions. Carol Bolon's work has shown that the metal oil lamps from Kerala can rarely be dated before the 16th century CE, challenging the traditional chronology of this production. The Cholas sourced copper from Sri Lanka after they conquered the region, and possibly from the Kerala copper belt; it was a coveted resource. Chola metal idols were made by specialist metal workers and regularly lustrated to retain a golden hue, reflecting a more prestigious material, quite unlike the patinated museum exhibits of these bronzes today.

Another discovery that reveals something about the metal trade in the region is the Nanhai shipwreck of 1184, which was discovered in 1992 and scientifically excavated until September 1998. Apart from the huge ceramic consignment aboard the Chinese junk, its cargo also included metals such as iron coins, copper coins, tin, gold, and silver. Research publications have traced the contraband bronze rings on the Nanhai shipwreck and studied the metals being transported, providing insight into the huge transoceanic, transregional flows of metals at this time. The publication asserts that copper coin was used as a unit of measurement. The biggest value of the cargo was gold, silver, and iron. The details of the gold chains on board can be connected to the trade in this period between the Eastern Chinese coast and Tamil Nadu. The 30,000 copper coins were available for reuse through melting.

The unusual India-book material confirms the movement of metals. A letter written by Madmun, the son of the head of merchants in Aden, to Ben Yiju, clearly records a large metal consignment being sent to Mangalore and other ports in North Kerala with its value. A memorandum written between 1134 and 1137 from one of Abraham Ben Yiju's colleagues in Aden, Joseph Bin Abraham, describes in beautiful, precise, and knowledgeable detail the consignment and the objects to be made after melting it, and mentions the twenty old Maliki dinars he sent to pay the coppersmith, providing insight into what was being produced in Ben Yiju's workshop, and the

Chola temple bronzes, in situ, note the gold hue from daily lustration 1065 (from Dehejia 2021)

high price commanded by this labour. No doubt exists that the remaining copper was to be used to produce a copper lamp, but even though Goitein and Friedman asserted that Ben Yiju's was a bronze workshop, doubts remain. Brass, another alloy of copper, sometimes referred to as 'yellow copper', may have been the final product. Copper and brass utensils were a common but important product at the time. The details of weight and combination of metals mentioned in the letter provides some insight into the alloys involved, but identification is challenging since the mixtures described could be altered by the process used, especially if lead was added.

The cargo of the Nanhai shipwreck is revealing because it includes used metals such as bronze rings, cullet and scrap gold. Matthew Ponting asserts that it is very difficult at this period to identify original metals and to locate sites of extraction as these materials have been melted, remelted, remade, and mixed. Isotope signatures providing pure origins for pieces of metalwork were not discernible through scientific analysis; more useful is a contextualisation through Arabic and Persian metallurgical texts which describe copper alloys such as leaded copper, and a particular mixture used for some vessels, mortars, cauldrons, and casseroles, but not ewers and lamps. Another type of copper alloy, broadly referred to as gunmetal in the Western world, was made up of leaded copper and brass with the mixture used for vessels, to create the jugs in the commission by Joseph Bin Abraham.

No metal objects from that period survive in Yemen or in India, necessitating that archaeologists use a textual and experimental approach to reveal the objects and composition of metals involved. The India-book documents also suggest that merchants may have been key intermediaries in manufacture, and that the movement of craftspeople may not have been necessary for the transfer of craft knowledge. The objects themselves may have been 'samples' to be emulated, both here and at other places in the mediaeval world.

Another intriguing inference that can be drawn from Vidya Dehejia's and Carol Bolon's research involves the multilingual Kollam copperplate inscriptions. The speaker presented three of the five Kollam copperplates, the biggest such inscriptional record in the Chera period, which documents grants and privileges given to a Persian Christian church at Kollam in 849, and trade privileges given to guilds. Dehejia's assertion that copper was not abundant in the region adds an element of prestige to the Kollam copperplates, despite their small number and size when compared to larger Chola examples. This is borne out by the fact that only nine sets of copperplates survive from the 9th to the early 12th centuries in Kerala, while hundreds of Chola and Northern Indian examples are extant. The Cholas sourced their copper through cullet, trade with Sri Lanka and the Eastern Indian Ocean, and North India from mines in Rajasthan. Bolon points out that lamps in Kerala only increased in size and thickness in the 16th century, when production was spurred by European contact. She asserts that stylistic dating sets the earliest oil lamps from Kerala in the 11th or 12th century, when Jewish merchants were possibly participating in a vibrant new circulation of materials. Yet, Kerala lamps of this period are small, with very thin walls, which suggests a dearth of copper which was essential to make bronze. This explains why the letter commissioning a lamp of a larger size and design from Ben Yiju's workshop specifies the copper and other metals sent from the Middle East to fulfil it. Further research is required to reveal more about the people and objects of this period which the serendipitously preserved Cairo Geniza documents have brought to light. **– *J.K.***

Dr. Elizabeth Lambourn speaks during 'Mobile Objects, Mobile People — South Asia in Indian Ocean World Circulation Before 1500 CE'

Buddhist Aesthetics

PAST PROGRAMMES

TABO — Re-encountering the Oldest Original Tibetan Monastery

March 18th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:45 PM IST | Prof. Peter van Ham (Frankfurt/Germany-based Researcher, Author, Photographer, and Curator)

This lecture, part of the Buddhist Aesthetics programme at Jnanapravaha, provided an in-depth exploration of the artistic and spiritual treasures of the Tabo monastery, located in the Spiti valley of Himachal Pradesh. Presented by Prof. Peter van Ham, the session delved into the monastery's historical significance, unique cultural synthesis, and challenges in documentation and preservation.

Prof. Peter van Ham speaks during 'TABO — Re-encountering the Oldest Original Tibetan Monastery'

Historic Documentation and Exploration

The Tabo monastery, founded in 996 CE, represents a harmonious blend of artistic, spiritual, and philosophical traditions of Indo-Tibetan culture. Prof. Peter van Ham began documenting this remarkable cultural complex in 1993, with significant support from scholars like Dr. O.C. Handa, whose expertise in navigating administrative hurdles was crucial for uncovering the monastery's rich history. Situated along the historic Hindustan-Tibet Road, the barren landscapes of Spiti valley, at elevations ranging from 3,500 to 4,200 metres, unveil a stark yet captivating setting for this ancient site.

The monastery's establishment is accredited to the West Tibetan king Yeshe-O and scholar Rinchen Zangpo. It serves as a testament to the revival of Buddhism through Mahayana scriptures. It houses multiple structures, including the Tsuglag Khang, which contains treasures designed for meditative engagement and spiritual enlightenment.

Intersection of Art and Philosophy

Central to the lecture was the Vajradhatu Mandala, or 'Mandala of the Adamantine Sphere', situated within the sanctum of Tsuglag Khang. This three-dimensional *mandala* embodies an idealised, enlightened realm, free of impurities, and is meticulously crafted to encourage meditative practices.

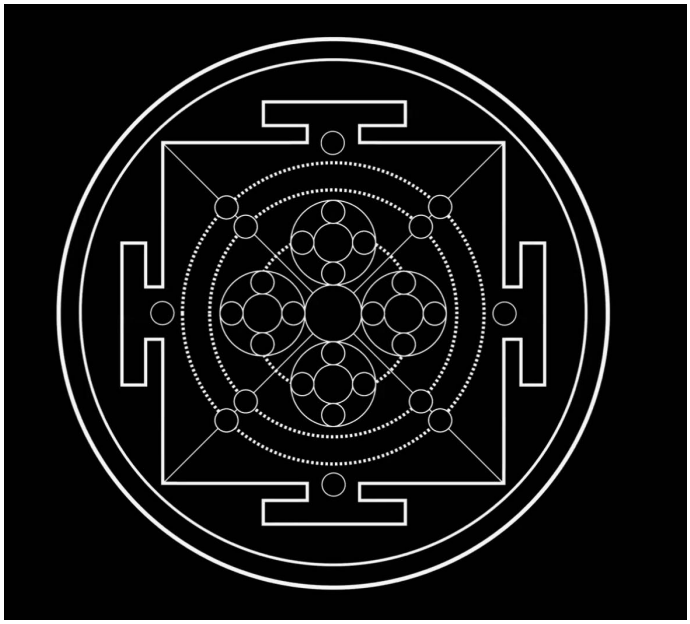
The monastery's walls feature a tripart division of art. The lower sections narrate Buddhist stories through continuous paintings with inscriptions. The middle registers showcase life-sized clay sculptures of *bodhisattvas*, goddesses, and protective deities that appear to levitate mid-air as they project out of the background. They appear to be floating in a state of ascension into the spiritual realm, in a state of enlightenment. Lastly, the upper sections depict framed Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*, creating a layered spiritual tableau.

Vairocana, the four-metre-high fourfold deity symbolising 'all-encompassing light', occupies the centre of this arrangement, seated on the lion throne. It is surrounded by 33 deities depicted in sculpture and painting. These figures reflect a spectral division of white light and serve as an earthly bridge to spiritual realms. The outer

layer of the *mandala* incorporates fearsome protective deities whose wrathful expressions ward off negativity and reinforce sanctity. The *mandala* that the sculptures and paintings emanate from embody the primary colours of light — red, yellow, green, and blue — symbolising white light's spectral divisions. This celestial framework connects the temple to the spiritual realms. The wall arrangement represents cosmic balance through deities like Amitabha on the west, coded red; Ratnasambhava on the south, encoded yellow; Akshobhya as blue on the east; and Amoghasiddhi on the north as green. The *mandala* arrangement reflects profound philosophical depth and cosmic order, blended with worldly aesthetics.

The Tsuglag Khang showcases sacred art arranged in upper sections, illustrating cosmic and protective themes. Pre-Buddhist figures, such as Vinu and natural goddesses in the forehall, exemplify the fusion of indigenous beliefs with Tibetan Buddhism, emphasising cultural integration. The depiction of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions accentuates cosmological concepts and virtues, influenced by Sasanian and Silk Road aesthetics. The northeast *mandala*, interpreted by Christia Luczanits, features over 220 tantric deities representing enlightenment. Lower sections of the temple inspire monks through motivational paintings and historical narratives, merging Tibetan artistic traditions with external influences. Inscriptions reveal Tabo's establishment and highlight the complexities of cultural integration during Buddhism's expansion, preserving its legacy as a sanctuary of spiritual and artistic wisdom.

The Vajradhatu Mandala embodies sacred geometry and layered symbolism, reflecting virtues such as meditation and morality. Feminine deities symbolise compassion and patience, adorned with almond-shaped eyes, crowns, necklaces, armlets, and dhotis — Kashmiri-inspired embellishments that provide insight into 11th-century artistry. Elements like the Sasanian Sogdian lotus, *henna*-painted hands, heraldic seated elephants, foxes, and *hamsas* (symbols of luck and guidance in the afterlife) further showcase Indian, Gandharan, Tibetan, and Indo-Dardic styles. The monastery's artistry is enriched by Sasanian and Persian influences through the Silk Route and complemented by Greek-inspired aesthetics. Wall inscriptions in the Sharada script, alongside the Yadharma inscription, underscore the seamless integration of diverse artistic traditions, affirming Tabo's universal spiritual and artistic significance.



The rare painted cloths on the ceilings of Tsuglag Khang, unique to the Tabo monastery, face serious conservation challenges due to humidity and temporary repairs, necessitating urgent efforts to safeguard their historical significance. Life-sized paintings depict stories of Shakyamuni Buddha, the seven Buddhas of the past, the supreme transcendental Buddhas, the Tathagatas to whom they belong, and the future Buddha Maitreya, showcasing Tabo's artistic brilliance. The Dharmadhatu Vagisvara Manjushri Mandala, rendered in tantric form, features over 220 deities, alongside 16 *bodhisattvas* and 16 *maha-bodhisattvas* painted on the walls. A key narrative frieze on the southern walls vividly portrays the well-known tale of Sudhana, while beautiful tapestry panels on the ceiling are adorned with floral and geometric patterns on painted cloth.

Challenges in Documentation and Preservation of the Monastery

Documenting the intricate interiors of the Tabo monastery presented significant challenges due to the structural limitations of its clay compound, including roof-supporting pillars and short viewing distances. Gerald Kozicz, an architectural scientist and computer artist, employed innovative techniques such as panoramic assembly of the wall panels to address these constraints. This idealised drawing became the goal for Prof.

Peter van Ham to photograph the impossible in the Tabo monastery. The use of ultra-wide-angle photography equipment — provided by PhaseOne, a company known for high-resolution cameras — was essential to the endeavour. Over nine months were spent to meticulously recreate seamless visual representations of Tabo's north and south walls, revealing its artistic arrangement, offering groundbreaking insights into the temple's artistic composition.

Continued Legacy of the Tabo Monastery

The exploration of the Tabo monastery, as presented in this lecture, sheds light on its unparalleled cultural, artistic, and spiritual significance. Despite the challenges in documentation and preservation, the monastery remains an extraordinary cultural treasure, demanding urgent conservation efforts. The legacy of Tabo, captured through innovative techniques and scholarly dedication, highlights its enduring relevance in the broader narrative of Buddhist art and heritage. These actions underscore the efforts required to document and preserve such a remarkable site of cultural heritage. It also stresses on the vital need for global initiatives to document and preserve these artistic and spiritual treasures for future generations. – ***P.Pai.***

Islamic Aesthetics

PAST PROGRAMMES

The Fatimids: A 10th–12th century Mediterranean Empire

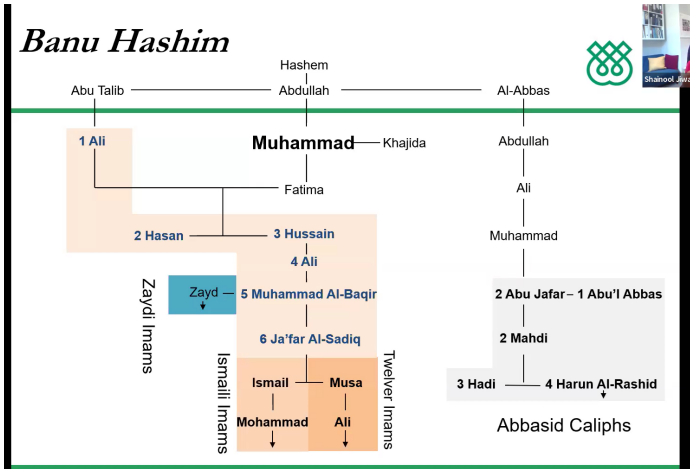
March 25th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Shainool Jiwa (Associate Professor at The Institute of Ismaili Studies)

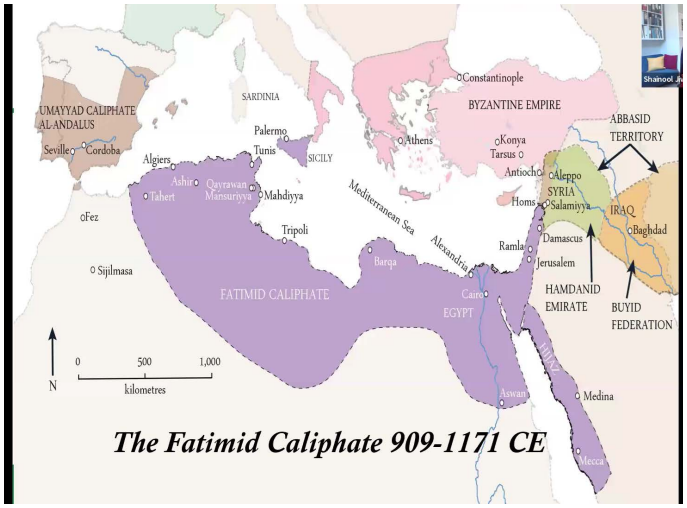
In a rich and stimulating lecture, Dr. Shainool Jiwa, who delivered the opening lecture of this JPM course, introduced the audience to the world of the Fatimid Caliphate — an Ismaili Shia empire which ruled parts of the Mediterranean between the 10th and 12th centuries.

Historical Backdrop

Dr. Jiwa began by tracing their spiritual legitimacy to Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and her husband Ali, and their sons Hasan and Husayn. This lineage formed the core of Shia Islam in contrast to the Sunni majority.

Following the death of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (c.765 CE), Shia Islam experienced a significant schism: the emergence of the **Ismailis** (who recognised Ismail, Jafar's son, as the rightful successor), the **Twelvers** (Ithna Asharis), and the **Zaydis** (followers of Zayd ibn Ali, step-uncle of Jafar). The Fatimids, as Ismailis, claimed both religious and political leadership in direct opposition to the Sunni Abbasids who controlled much of the Islamic world then.





***Dawr al-Satr*: The Period of Concealment**

According to Dr. Jiwa, a key phase preceding the Fatimid rise was the *Dawr al-Satr* (c. 765–909 CE), during which Ismaili imams lived in secrecy due to Abbasid persecution. For these 144 years, there exist no public records of Shia leadership until the foundation of the Fatimid Caliphate in 909 CE, a watershed moment of Shia polity.

The Fatimids in North Africa

The rise of the Fatimids began when **Abdullah al-Mahdi**, the first Fatimid imam-caliph, travelled from Salamiyya (in Syria) to the *maghrib* (west), disguised as a Hashemite merchant. His eventual conquest of **Sijilmasa** (in modern-day Morocco) marked the public reappearance of the Ismaili Imamate.

Their first capital was at **al-Mahdiyya** (920 CE) in modern-day Tunisia. North Africa at the time was a diverse region inhabited by Berbers (indigenous Africans), Arab settlers, mountain dwellers and multiple Islamic sects — Sunnis (primarily Maliki),

Kharijites (puritans), Zaydis, and Ismailis — leading to tensions like the Kharijite rebellion (943–947 CE). This necessitated the relocation of the capital to **al-Mansuriyya** in 947 CE, where the Fatimids eventually thrived.

The Conquest of Egypt and Founding of Cairo (968–969 CE)

Egypt had long been a Fatimid goal. A non-aggression pact with the ruling Ikhshidid dynasty (Abbasid vassals) delayed their advance. After the death of the Ikhshidid ruler, the Fatimids invaded in 968 CE and founded their capital, ***al-Qahira al-Muizziyya*** ('The Victorious City of al-Muizz', now Cairo), in 969 CE.

Dr. Jiwa highlighted the issuance of the ***Aman* document**, an 11-paged declaration of protection and religious freedom for the conquered population. In it, the Fatimid caliph assured Egyptians:

> "You can remain steadfast in the beliefs of your worthy ancestors, the companions of the Prophet."

The Fatimids institutionalised legal pluralism: while Ismaili law was official, Jewish courts and Maliki courts functioned under state protection to resolve personal matters like inheritance and divorce.

Architectural and Cultural Patronage

Dr. Jiwa also gave an overview of the grandeur of Fatimid Cairo. At the heart of the city stood two majestic palaces — **the Eastern palace** (for the caliph) and **the Western palace** (for the heir apparent) — flanking a central processional square called ***Bayn al-Qasrayn*** (literally, 'Space between Two Palaces'). This was the site of elaborate court rituals, emblematic of the Fatimids's performative style of kingship.

The Fatimids also built religious architecture which included **Al-Azhar mosque (969 CE),** the first mosque built by the Fatimids in Egypt, and named after *al-zahra* (the luminous one), an epithet for Fatima, and the much grander **Al-Anwar mosque (992 CE),** later renamed **Al-Hakim mosque**.

The Controversial Rule of Al-Hakim

Particularly compelling was the discussion on the enigmatic **Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah** (r.996–1021 CE). On one hand, he founded the **Dar al-Ilm** (House of Knowledge), home to one of the most extensive libraries of the time. However, his legacy remains controversial — some followers attributed divinity to him, rejecting *Sharia*, which eventually led to the emergence of the Druze movement. His rule also saw tensions rise with the Abbasids and the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Conclusion: Decline and Legacy

Dr. Jiwa concluded by examining reasons of the Fatimids's decline, which included internal military divisions, the declining inundation of the Nile impacting agricultural prosperity, and challenges to political authority from emerging powers like the Seljuks.

Yet, the Fatimid legacy of religious tolerance and urban development must not be forgotten. Dr. Jiwa's lecture offered not only a chronological overview of the Fatimid empire but an exploration of their polity and culture. – ***C.J.***

Dr. Shainool Jiwa speaks during 'The Fatimids: A 10th–12th century Mediterranean Empire'

Building the Caliphate: Fatimid Architecture in Cairo and Jerusalem, 1005–1030

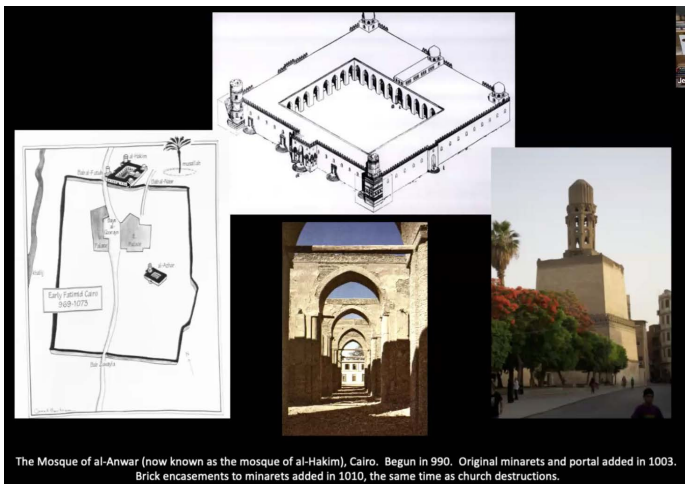
March 31st, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Jennifer Pruitt (Howard and Ellen Louise Schwartz Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at the University of Wisconsin – Madison)

Prof. Jennifer Pruitt's compelling lecture explored how architecture served as a material expression of ideological and sectarian claims during the Fatimid Caliphate. Drawing on her 2020-published monograph of the same name (as the lecture), she highlighted a series of paradoxical architectural actions undertaken by the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah in the early 11th century CE. Pruitt used these examples to illuminate how built forms negotiated both religious authority and political legitimacy in a divided Islamic world.

The lecture commenced with two enigmatic moments from al-Hakim's rule: the unusual decision to enclose the ornate minarets of his mosque in Cairo, and the catastrophic destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in 1009 CE. These acts — one of concealment, and the other of annihilation — appear contradictory but become comprehensible when situated within the theological and political context of the Fatimid dynasty.

The Fatimids, an Ismaili Shia dynasty, established their rule in North Africa and later moved their capital to Al-Qahira (Cairo) in 969 CE. As rivals to the Sunni Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, the Fatimids positioned themselves as the sole legitimate imams and caliphs of the Islamic world. This dual spiritual-political claim rested on the belief that their imam-caliph had access to *batin* (esoteric) truths, contrasting with the *zahir* (exoteric) interpretations dominant in Sunni orthodoxy (Pruitt 5). Fatimid religious architecture thus was not merely functional or aesthetic in nature, but also served as a physical manifestation of the dynasty's distinct Shia theology.

Drawing on the works of Prof. Paula Sanders, Dr. Irene Bierman, and other prominent scholars of Fatimid studies, Pruitt pointed out how Al-Qahira itself was conceived as a sacred city, with urban planning centred around the palace of the imam-caliph and the newly built al-Azhar mosque. Processional routes, architectural alignments, and ceremonial spaces all functioned to elevate the visibility of the Fatimid imam as a divine figure. Prof. Pruitt underscored the significance of Jami Al-Anwar (the luminous mosque), known more commonly as al-Hakim's mosque, which featured minarets completed in 1003 CE. These were curiously embellished with calligraphic inscriptions and architectural motifs signifying *nur* (light), family lineage, and esoteric knowledge — an overt Ismaili theological expression.



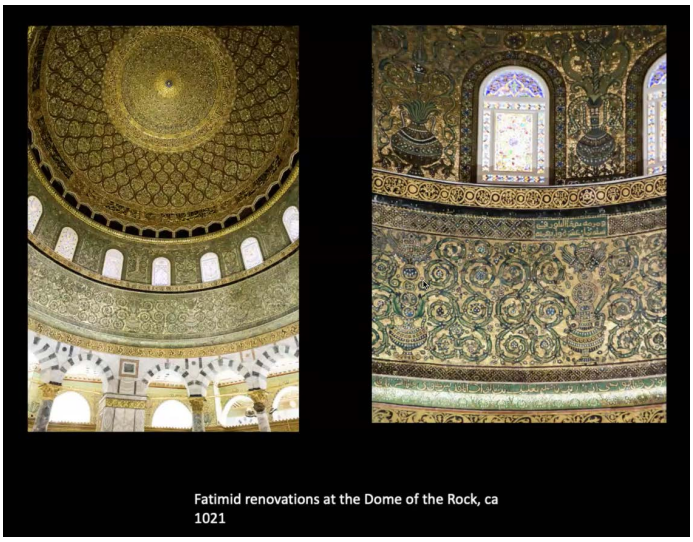
The Mosque of al-Anwar (now known as the mosque of al-Hakim), Cairo. Begun in 990. Original minarets and portal added in 1003. Brick encasements to minarets added in 1010, the same time as church destructions.

In a dramatic turn of events around 1010 CE, al-Hakim ordered these very minarets to be concealed within plain brick bastions, erasing their ornate 'esoteric' surfaces from public view. This act of architectural suppression coincided with an empire-wide iconoclastic wave, culminating in the razing of the Holy Sepulchre. Pruitt interpreted this not as irrational behavior — as many mediaeval and modern sources have claimed — but as a calculated reconfiguration of public theology. The minarets were reinscribed with Quranic verses emphasising universal Islamic principles such as prayer and charity, toning down their overtly sectarian messages. For example, among the new inscriptions was Quranic verse 62:9 urging the populace to observe the Friday prayers:

> O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday [the Day of Assembly], hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and

> leave off business [and traffic]. That is best for you if ye but knew.

Strategic placement in the public realm of such verses "without allegorical discussion, and a lack of overt Ismaili symbolism emphasises the importance of following Islamic law, rather than its *batin* dimension" (Pruitt 102).



This transformation, according to Pruitt, was part of a broader effort by al-Hakim and his *duat* (religio-political missionaries) — such as the *dai* Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani — to position the Fatimid imam as a legitimate universal ruler, not merely a Shia sectarian figure. The bastioned minarets thus became a type of palimpsest of sectarian negotiation: their concealed ornate interiors symbolising *batin* truth, and their plainer exteriors projecting *zahir* orthodoxy to a wider Muslim audience. The theological allegory embedded in this architectural concealment exemplifies a core principle of Ismaili doctrine: the division between surface and depth, appearance and reality. As Pruitt noted, the physical architecture of al-Hakim's mosque rendered doctrinal subtleties into stone, producing a building that spoke to multiple audiences simultaneously. In doing so, the imam-caliph made a conscious effort through architectural patronage and changes in the urban landscape to appeal to the Sunni populace by downplaying the esoteric aspect of the Ismaili faith and emphasising the *zahir*.

Moving from Cairo to Jerusalem, Pruitt examined the Fatimid restoration of Islamic monuments in the wake of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre's destruction. Al-Hakim's son and successor, al-Zahir, spearheaded renovations at the Haram al-Sharif, particularly al-Aqsa mosque. These efforts were characterised by their embrace of broadly accepted Islamic motifs: Quranic inscriptions, symbolic references to the Prophet's Night Journey, and the reuse of earlier Umayyad decorative forms. In contrast to his father's seemingly contentious actions of destruction, al-Zahir's restorations sought to re-enforce Fatimid rule by emphasising continuity and orthodoxy.

The talk concluded with an assertion that the Fatimids used architecture as a dynamic medium through which to assert, negotiate, and sometimes obscure their sectarian identity. Far from being inert structures, mosques, minarets, and religious sites functioned as ideological battlegrounds — sites where the visible and invisible, the political and theological, the *zahir* and *batin* coexisted in deliberate tension.

This lecture was a powerful reminder that in the mediaeval Islamic world, as in modern times, architecture is never neutral. Rather, it is a bearer of meaning, an enforcer of identity, and occasionally, a site of resistance. Through insightful analysis, Prof. Pruitt made a compelling case for why understanding these layers is essential to interpreting the legacy of the Fatimids and, more broadly, the role of material culture in shaping religious and political discourse. **– *T.P.***

Prof. Jennifer Pruitt speaks during ' Building the Caliphate – Construction, Destruction, and Sectarian Identity in Early Fatimid Architecture'

Works Cited

Pruitt, Jennifer. *Building the Caliphate: Construction, Destruction, and Sectarian Identity in Early Fatimid Architecture*. Yale University Press, 2020.

Aesthetics' Epistemology in the Islamic Context: The Example of Ibn al-Haytham's Writings on Beauty and the Senses

April 1st, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Valérie Gonzalez (Specialist of Islamic Art History, Aesthetics and Visual Culture)

Prof. Valerie Gonzalez speaks during 'Aesthetics' Epistemology in the Islamic Context: The Example of Ibn al-Haytham's Writings on Beauty and the Senses'

The *Kitab al-Manazir*, or the *Book of Optics* is perhaps one of the most important yet enigmatic texts to have emerged from the mediaeval Islamic world. It was composed as a seven-volume treatise on optics, images, beauty, aesthetics, and more by the intrepid Fatimid scholar Ibn al-Haytham (known in the Latin West as Alhazen). And so revolutionary were its contents that it brought to a decisive end not only the long-held Euclidian notion of optics (based on the theory that vision is perceived via beams of light emitted from our eyes onto objects) thereby ushering in our modern notion of the science of vision, but it was also an early and critical moment in the development of a *scientific method* – the pairing of observation with rigorous experimentation and analysis to determine the outcome of a hypothesis.

To understand why the Fatimid world made such a distinct mark on the history of the world, despite being an empire that was in power for a scant 200 years, the story of Ibn al-Haytham becomes a fascinating lens from which to view the mediaeval world and its move towards a radical and yet fraught modernity. And while Ibn al-Haytham's groundbreaking work as a scientist is increasingly known today, his contributions as a philosopher of aesthetics is not as well studied. In her vibrant talk, Dr. Valerie Gonzalez engaged precisely with Ibn al-Haytham's dual embodiment of the roles of scientist and philosopher to highlight how the very notion of 'aesthetics' operates within an 'epistemological problematic' of being both science and philosophy, while not fully belonging in either characterisation.

At the heart of the lecture lay the concept of beauty. Through his analysis of sight and optics, Ibn al-Haytham established a critical link between nature and geometry. This led to the development of new conceptions of the universe as well as a new aesthetic framework. The Renaissance, which came to see symmetry, perspective, and proportion as the fundamental concepts of perfection, took much from Ibn al-Haytham's concepts of observable beauty. The Fatimid thinker revived earlier notions of order and symmetry from Plato and Aristotle, as well as ideas of regularity and proportion in formulating a more 'universal' notion of beauty.

Dr. Gonzalez's main argument was to assess Ibn al-Haytham's contributions not only as a scientist, but also as an aesthetic philosopher. In going further, Dr. Gonzalez demonstrated that Ibn al-Haytham's approach is recognisable today as that of a phenomenologist, a thinker who used both the subjective experience of sight as well as the objective science of physics to arrive at an aesthetic sensibility. The modernity of his approach is striking to us today but were especially revolutionary in his own circles, given how intertwined physics, ontology, and theology were in the Islamic world at the time. Ibn al-Haytham was perhaps one of the earliest thinkers to isolate the phenomenon of vision from broader metaphysics, and place it rather at the intersection of objective physics and the subjective field of experience.

To really understand how revolutionary Ibn al-Haytham's approach is, we need to consider the act of 'seeing' more deeply. Seeing itself is an act that is outside of rationality, but when our rational self begins to register what we see, that is when we begin to *look* – an act of establishing our relationship to the world, from our place as its

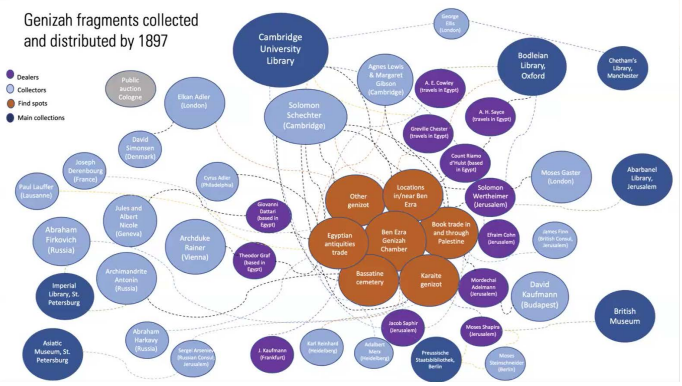
subject, in its centre. This idea of human primacy in the conception of the universe was a surprising position within the Islamic world, where, as in other monotheistic cultures of his time, humanity was subordinate to the divine. However, with time, it found its place in Christian Europe, where realistic representation of the human form became a cornerstone of its art, and through it developed modern philosophical thought in the Enlightenment. In fact, it could be argued that the long tradition of Western aesthetic philosophy owes its origin to the categorical distinctions made by Ibn al-Haytham, a radically innovative Muslim thinker from 11th-century Fatimid Cairo. ***– A.T.***

Reconstructing Fatimid Cairo from the Cairo Genizah Fragments

April 3rd, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Rebecca J. W. Jefferson (Curator of the Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica and a faculty member at the Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies, University of Florida)

Prof. Rebecca Jefferson's lecture offered an in-depth account of the Cairo Genizah — a vast repository of manuscript fragments — and its role in revealing the cultural, legal, intellectual, and social life of Fatimid Cairo. Divided into two parts, the lecture first addressed the historical context and discovery of the Genizah, followed by diverse insights gained from its contents, including life in mediaeval Cairo.

Part One: Understanding the 'Genizah' and its Discovery



What is a Genizah?

Prof. Jefferson began by explaining that a *genizah* (pl. *genizot*) is a **designated space within which Jewish communities store damaged or worn out sacred writings**. The term comes from the Hebrew root *gnz* or *genzi*, meaning 'to hide' or 'to store'. *Genizot* were typically located in synagogues, cellars, attics, or cemeteries, and were understood to be temporary storage sites until their contents could be given a proper burial according to Jewish law.

Scholarly Interest in the Genizah

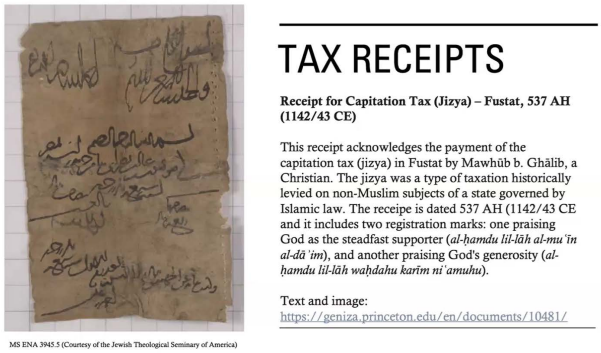
Scholars became interested in *genizot* in the 19th century due to the absence of early *Torah* scrolls. At the time, the oldest known copies included the 13th-century Bologna *Torah* Scroll and a 10th-century (severely damaged and mostly lost) codex from Aleppo. However, with the discovery of the Cairo Genizah fragments in the 1890s followed by the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 1940s, the field of biblical manuscript studies was revolutionised.

Discovery of the Cairo Genizah

Prof. Jefferson traced the earliest discovery of Genizot to Abraham Firkovich, a Karaite Jew who sought to prove that Karaites predated Rabbinic Judaism. Backed by authorities, he scoured synagogues across Crimea, collecting manuscripts from their Genizot. Perhaps one of the most significant finds among Firkovitch's collection today is called the 'Leningrad Codex' (dated 1008–1010 CE), now containing the oldest known complete Hebrew *Bible*. He found 124 original copies of the *Old Testament* and expanded his exploration to synagogues of Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo, and Cairo. His work is now known as the **First (Crimea) and the Second (Middle East, especially Cairo) Firkovich**

Collections. Another key figure was Jacob Saphir, a holy land emissary and manuscript hunter who travelled to India, lost his way and landed in Yemen – becoming the first European to have a full-fledged encounter with Yemenite Jews. He discovered the ***Midrash ha-Gadol***, a 14th-century Yemenite narrative based on the *Bible*, and documented his findings.

The Ben Ezra Synagogue and the Making of the 'Cairo Genizah Collection'



MS ENA 3945.5 (Courtesy of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America)

Prof. Jefferson gave a list of synagogues in Fustat and Cairo, paying special attention to the **Ben Ezra synagogue** (also known as the *Al-Shamayin* synagogue**)** in Fustat. Dated roughly to the 9th century CE, it was destroyed by Caliph al-Hakim in 1012, rebuilt by 1040, and restored again in the late 19th and 20th centuries. In 1889, its intentional dismantling due to structural decay led to the accidental discovery of the Genizah chamber. The Oxford-based collector, Greville Chester, acquired these fragments, and after his death, Archibald Sayce continued the work, uncovering a **Hebrew-Syriac palimpsest**. This fragment drew the attention of twin sisters Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, self-taught scholars who had earlier discovered the **Sinaitic Palimpsest, the oldest copy of the *New Testament* in Syriac**. They brought bundles of fragments from Cairo to Cambridge, where Solomon Schechter, a scholar in Rabbinics, identified a Hebrew copy of *Ben Sira* (Ecclesiasticus). Schechter later travelled to Cairo and returned with 13 crates containing around **100,000 manuscript fragments** — now part of the **Cambridge Cairo Genizah Collection**, estimated at over 193,000 pieces. Jefferson aptly called the entire event the "Oxford-Sinai-Cambridge Connection".

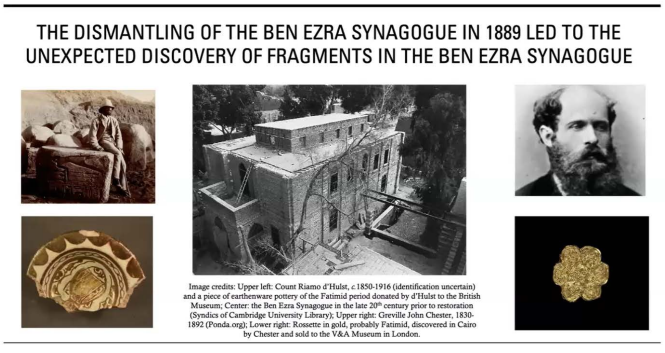
Part Two: Life in Fatimid Cairo Through the Genizah Fragments

A Shift in Focus: Goitein and the Mediterranean Society

The second half of the lecture picked up from Schechter's discoveries which included some of the oldest *Torah* fragments, dating to the 6th century. The Genizah also preserved writings by Moses Maimonides, including *A Guide to the Perplexed* in the great Rabbi's handwriting. In the 1950s, S. D. Goitein shifted his study of the Genizah from religion to people, places, and their practices. Goitein catalogued 29,000 index cards to create a six-volume study, *A Mediterranean Society*, reconstructing everyday life in the Fatimid world.

Treasures of the Genizah

What followed for the rest of the lecture were a series of fascinating case studies and anecdotes which included **property disputes**, **public orders** prohibiting merrymaking during Sabbath time, and hundreds of ***ketubot* (marriage contracts)** detailing dowries and marital gifts. Particularly interesting were the nine fragments on **Karima al-Wuhsha al-Dallala**, a female broker disowned by her community after bearing a child out of wedlock, yet leaving substantial bequests — except to the child's father. Of great importance is the ***Materia Medica* Collection**. It contains **1,360 medical fragments** — from classic medical treatises by Hippocrates and Galen to letters, prescriptions, and medical notebooks by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim physicians, all ending with the phrase, *"beneficial, if God wills"*.



Some other highlights included fragments on **commerce and international trade** between **Fustat, India, Yemen, Tunisia, and Sicily** — covering goods like silk, corals, perfumes, and spices. Payment orders which functioned like **early cheques**, minimised risk in money transport. **tax**

receipts such as the *jizya* (non-Muslim tax), **book inventories** from private libraries revealing the intellectual culture, **astrological texts**, including horoscopes, almanacs, amulets, and **literary texts** — including an ode to Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir.

Conclusion

Prof. Jefferson concluded by emphasising the vast number of unidentified Arabic fragments still awaiting scholarly attention which requires "training the eye" in Fatimid-period Arabic. She also highlighted modern challenges in Genizah research: unprovenanced fragment sales, dispersal across institutions, and the need for digital tools and global collaboration. Yet, she underlined the transformative potential of this archive in reshaping our understanding of Jewish, Islamic, and Mediterranean histories.

Prof. Jefferson's lecture underscored that the Cairo Genizah is not just a Jewish archive — it is a multilingual, multicultural reflection of Fatimid Cairo, and a precious repository for global history. ***– C.J.***

Prof. Rebecca Jefferson speaks during 'Reconstructing Fatimid Cairo from the Cairo Genizah Fragments'

The Cosmopolitan Ecosystem of Late Fatimid Ceremonial

April 8th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Paula Sanders (Joseph and Joanna Nazro Mullen Professor in Humanities and Professor of History at Rice University)

The Fatimids, an influential Ismaili Shia Islamic dynasty, carved out a significant realm across North Africa, Egypt, and parts of the Levant from the 10th to the 12th centuries. As founders of the vibrant city of Al-Qahira (Cairo) and rulers of a vast Mediterranean power, their era was marked by remarkable cultural, intellectual, and economic flourishing. Understanding the intricacies of their sophisticated statecraft and societal fabric requires looking beyond traditional political histories. It is precisely this deeper exploration that Professor Paula Sanders, a distinguished historian of the Fatimid world, offered in her illuminating lecture, 'The Cosmopolitan Ecosystem of Late Fatimid Ceremonial', part of Jnanapravaha Mumbai's dedicated series on the dynasty. Prof. Sanders presented a compelling case for using material culture, analysed through what she terms a "ceremonial ecosystem", to reveal fresh, nuanced perspectives on Fatimid state power and societal dynamics.

Prof. Sanders, who has dedicated much of her scholarly life to the Fatimids, briefly traced her own research trajectory. While her earlier work drew from anthropological approaches to understand aspects like political legitimacy and ceremonial as an "urban language", her recent research, inspired by pioneering studies like Marina Rostow's *The Lost Archive*, employs a more holistic "ceremonial ecosystem" model. She defines this as "the entire interconnected world of not only ideas, both theological and political, but more specifically the expression of ideas in different and interconnected registers which have their equally connected practices, and the material world in which they found expression…" This innovative lens considers the full life cycle of materials — from sourcing and labour to their use in objects like textiles and their circulation within elaborate state ceremonies — to understand the underlying structures of Fatimid society.

The lecture pivoted around a crucial historical juncture: the early 12th-century vizierate of Al-Mamun Al-Bataihi. (The vizier was the chief

minister and a powerful figure in the Fatimid administration.) Al-Mamun famously reinstated grand public ceremonies, particularly the lavish distribution of what contemporary sources called the 'festival of gala costumes', a practice that had been significantly scaled back under his predecessor, Al-Afdal. Prof. Sanders argued that this revival was far more than a display of imperial grandeur; it was a carefully calibrated signal of the regime's recovered economic strength, administrative efficiency, and its pervasive control over a complex production and distribution network.

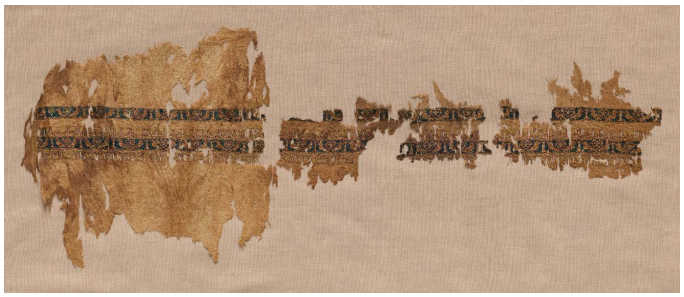
Textiles, ubiquitous and economically vital, served as Prof. Sanders's prime case study for this ecosystem. She meticulously deconstructed the journey of flax — a cornerstone of the Fatimid agricultural economy — from field to finished fabric:

Cultivation: Egypt's Delta and Fayyum regions were centres of flax cultivation, a process guided by the scientific understanding of crop rotation and intricate irrigation systems. Decisions on planting were often made by state tax officials, reflecting a high degree of centralised planning.

Taxation as an Economic Driver: A particularly insightful point was the Fatimid system of collecting taxes in gold dinars before the harvest. This necessitated cash advances from merchants to cultivators, directly integrating rural agriculture with urban commerce and state finances, demonstrating a sophisticated, managed economy rather than a simple laissez-faire system.

Labour-Intensive Processing: The transformation of raw flax involved numerous specialised and labour-intensive stages: harvesting, retting (with water-retting likely for finer court textiles), drying, scutching (beating stalks), and hackling (combing fibres). The quality control at these stages was paramount, often directly overseen by merchants, and historical sources like the Cairo Geniza and Hisba (market inspection) manuals reveal significant concerns about preventing fraud.

From Thread to Tiraz: Further specialists were involved in spinning, weaving (with Christian men prominent in the Delta's weaving industry),



Tiraz with gold, probably from a wide sleeve 1013–1020. Egypt, Fatimid period, reign of Caliph al-Hakim, 1013–20. Cleveland Museum of Art : https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1950.549

and finishing processes like cleaning, fulling, and pressing. The resulting high-quality linen would then be supplied to the prestigious Tiraz factories – state-run workshops producing luxury textiles, often emblazoned with inscriptions, for the court and as robes of honour. Professor Sanders referenced the industrial scale of production in towns like Tinnis, where the royal treasury claimed a right to a substantial portion of the output, illustrating direct state interest. To illustrate the tangible outputs of this system, Prof. Sanders presented visual examples of surviving Fatimid textiles, such as finely embroidered Tiraz fragments with intricate gold work on linen, possibly from ceremonial garments, showcasing the high quality of materials and craftsmanship that the Fatimid ecosystem could produce.

This kind of deep, material-focussed research, Prof. Sanders noted, is increasingly enriched by sources like the Cairo Geniza, Arabic papyri, and the application of new digital humanities technologies, which open these complex historical records to wider scholarly scrutiny.

Ultimately, Prof. Sanders connected Al-Mamun's broader administrative and economic reforms — such as improvements in land management (*iqtas*) and investment in agricultural infrastructure like canals — to the demonstrably increased agricultural output that could sustain such elaborate ceremonial revivals. The renewed spectacle of costume distributions, therefore, was a powerful communication of the Fatimid regime's vitality. It showcased the caliph (the Fatimid spiritual and temporal head of state) not merely as a distant sovereign but as the lynchpin of a thriving, interconnected, and truly "cosmopolitan ecosystem".

The lecture's resonance extended into the Q&A session, where the discussion touched upon the

Prof. Paula Sanders speaks during 'The Cosmopolitan Ecosystem of Late Fatimid Ceremonial'

living legacy of Fatimid heritage, particularly for the Dawoodi Bohra community. Referencing her book, *Creating Medieval Cairo*, Prof. Sanders spoke to the restoration of Fatimid-era monuments, most notably the Jamea al-Anwar (the Al-Hakim mosque). She offered a compelling critique of conservation philosophies that prioritise only material authenticity, arguing instead for the significance of "original use". For communities like the Dawoodi Bohras, Prof. Sanders noted (citing her earlier work mentioned by an attendee), such sites are "centres of a living tradition", not static relics. The restoration of Jamea al-Anwar as a functional, "beautiful spiritual place" for worship and community gathering — an outcome appreciated by both the Bohra community and the wider local population in Cairo — exemplifies a heritage practice that honours both historical integrity and continuous spiritual life.

Prof. Paula Sanders's presentation masterfully demonstrated how an interdisciplinary, material-focussed approach can unlock profound layers of understanding about complex historical societies. By meticulously tracing the threads of the Fatimid ceremonial ecosystem, she revealed a dynamic interplay of economy, environment, administration, and symbolic expression, offering insights that resonate far beyond the specialist's study, and enrich our appreciation of this pivotal Islamic civilisation. **– *A.N.***

Fatimid Metal Arts 267–567 / 909– 1171 : Economy, Production, and Style

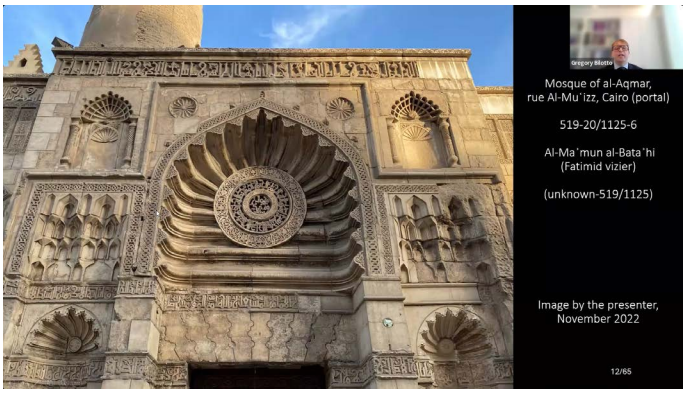
April 22nd, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Gregory Bilotto (Art Historian, Archaeologist, Associate Curator of early Islamic art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Associate Lecturer and Researcher at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London)

The lecture 'Fatimid Metal Arts 267–567 / 909–1171: Economy, Production, and Style' presented a compelling overview of a lesser-studied chapter of Islamic material history. Drawing from an MA thesis submitted to the American University in Cairo, the presentation mapped a detailed narrative of craftsmanship, cultural identity, and political symbolism embedded in Fatimid metal objects. The speaker combined archaeological evidence, stylistic analysis, and iconographic interpretation to position Fatimid metalwork as a distinct visual tradition that resists easy categorisation.

A defining feature of the discussion was the interplay between economic, devotional, and artistic functions in Fatimid metal production. While ivory and ceramics often receive greater scholarly focus, the surviving bronze, brass, and copper objects — ranging from incense burners to polycandela — reflect how utility and symbolism coalesced. The lecture noted the absence of many noble metal artefacts (silver or gold), likely lost to repurposing during economic hardship or conflict. This loss is itself a reminder of the volatility of artistic survival.

Stylistically, Fatimid artisans drew on Abbasid and Umayyad precedents but shifted toward a more restrained and abstract idiom, emphasising geometric, vegetal, and animal forms over human figuration. The move from figural exuberance seen

in earlier periods to the calibrated visual language of the Fatimids mirrored broader ideological and religious values. Aesthetic restraint was not a limitation, but a deliberate choice shaped by theological and political contexts.



Another key dimension explored was iconographic hybridity. Cairo's status as a cosmopolitan capital found expression in metalwork that borrowed freely from Byzantine, Coptic, and Sasanian motifs. Architectural fragments and domestic items carried palmette patterns, Kufic inscriptions, and floral compositions that were both regionally resonant and transculturally legible. This hybridity reflected not only visual taste but a calculated assertion of Fatimid universalism.

Issues of provenance and attribution were addressed in detail. Many surviving objects were relocated through trade, conquest, or donation, which complicates their historical context. Attribution relies on triangulated approaches that include visual evaluation, textual records — such as Nasir-i Khusraw's travelogues — and limited scientific analysis. The frequent reuse of scrap metals presents additional challenges, making flexible methodologies essential for accurate interpretation.

Material circulation emerged as another major theme. The talk explored key finds such as the Caesarea and Tiberias hoards — hidden caches likely buried during political unrest. These collections reveal insights into both artistic convention and everyday utility. Underwater discoveries, like the Serce Limani shipwreck, revealed economic partnerships and trade exchanges between the Fatimid and Byzantine worlds, deepening our understanding of regional connectivity.

Recent discoveries have also featured prominently. One highlight was a finely wrought pendant from the Fatimid period, prompting reflection on the interplay of personal adornment, piety, and craftsmanship. Additionally, objects introduced during the April 2025 symposia — including vessel fragments and architectural elements — show how ongoing excavation and fieldwork are reshaping the typological boundaries of Fatimid metalwork. These pieces expand the interpretive frameworks available to scholars today.

The lecture gave close attention to religious and functional meanings, especially regarding mosque furnishings like polycandela. Some cruciform-shaped examples may indicate the involvement of Christian artisans or collaborative workshops, pointing toward a shared regional aesthetic. These designs, resonating with Ismaili metaphysics, reinforced how geometry and light symbolised sacred cosmologies.

The session concluded with an engaging discussion that modelled intellectual transparency and methodological care. Questions on figural transmission, material reuse, and cross-cultural borrowing were addressed with precision and thoughtful qualification. Rather than over-claiming certainty, the speaker emphasised the interpretive limits of available evidence — a position that aligns well with contemporary postgraduate scholarship.

Ultimately, this lecture illuminated how art objects serve as entry points into wider cultural systems. Fatimid metalwork, when considered in its full aesthetic, economic, and ideological context, emerges not simply as a decorative tradition but as a vital contributor to our understanding of mediaeval Islamic society and the enduring legacy of transcultural production. **– *T.***

Prof. Gregory Bilotto speaks during 'Fatimid Metal Arts 267–567 / 909–1171: Economy, Production, and Style'

Fatimid Rock Crystals: From The Indian Ocean to Venice, via Cairo

April 23rd, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Anna Contadini (Professor of the History of Islamic Art at SOAS University of London)

In the lecture, 'Fatimid Rock Crystals: From The Indian Ocean to Venice, via Cairo', Prof. Anna Contadini offered a compelling narrative that interlaced material culture, artistic production, and transcultural transmission in the mediaeval Islamic world. Drawing from her 2015 publication *Facets of Light: The Case of Rock Crystals*, the presentation investigated how Islamic rock crystal objects operated as bearers of belief, aesthetic form, and geopolitical movement.

At the heart of the analysis lies the use of rock crystal in Fatimid Egypt, a material prized not only for its visual clarity but also for its theological resonance. The Quranic reference to divine light (*Quran* 24:35) serves as a conceptual cornerstone, where light is not merely an optical phenomenon but a symbol of spiritual truth. Through this lens, rock crystal vessels emerge as objects that refract not only light but meaning — physically, symbolically, and ritually.

The lecture examined how such vessels, intricately carved yet minimally adorned, reflect an aesthetic rooted in both technological mastery and esoteric ideology. Their transparency and form mirrored the Fatimid emphasis on spiritual visibility and legitimacy. One exemplar shown — a rock crystal ewer now in San Marco, Venice — offered a vivid case of how Islamic objects were later recontextualised within Christian ritual spaces. Despite their new mounts and inscriptions, these objects retained a strong sense of their Islamic origin, illustrating how cultural adaptation does not always erase original identity.

Rather than treating these objects as static artefacts, the lecture emphasised their historical mobility. By mapping the circulation of rock crystal from Indian Ocean trade routes to Fatimid Cairo and into European treasuries, it revealed how meanings transformed across contexts. This approach underscores a valuable methodological insight: material culture should be read as dynamically situated within social, theological, and political flows.

Equally notable was the interdisciplinary method applied. The lecture bridged art historical analysis, theology, trade history, and visual studies to offer a multidimensional view of the subject. In particular, the interplay between form, function, and inscription was explored to illustrate how meaning is layered into the very surface of these objects. Such triangulated analysis provides a robust model for postgraduate researchers.

In comparing Islamic and Christian uses of light — both materially and symbolically — the lecture opened further intellectual ground. Whereas Islamic crystalware employed transparency to reflect divine cosmology, Christian relic display often used enclosed containers to mark sacred invisibility. This contrast deepened the cross-cultural conversation on how faith traditions use materiality to articulate belief.

The session concluded with an engaging discussion, where questions about museological classification, iconographic continuity, and interpretive limitations were addressed with both precision and intellectual openness. This interaction modelled the responsibilities of scholars in presenting complex cultural histories

Prof. Anna Contadini speaks during 'Fatimid Rock Crystals: From The Indian Ocean to Venice, via Cairo'

with nuance. By focussing on the vessel as a carrier of light and meaning, and the lecture as a vessel of critical inquiry, the session succeeded in offering layered insight into Islamic art's transcultural dimensions.

The core takeaways — material as theology, object as agent, mobility as meaning — are directly relevant to academic discourse in Islamic studies, visual anthropology, and museology.

The strength of the lecture lay in its refusal to flatten complexity. Rather than presenting rock crystal artefacts as isolated masterpieces, it revealed them as embedded in historical, theological, and intercultural networks. It reminded its audience that to study objects is also to study their afterlives, meanings in motion, and the shifting light that refracts across time and belief. **– *T.***

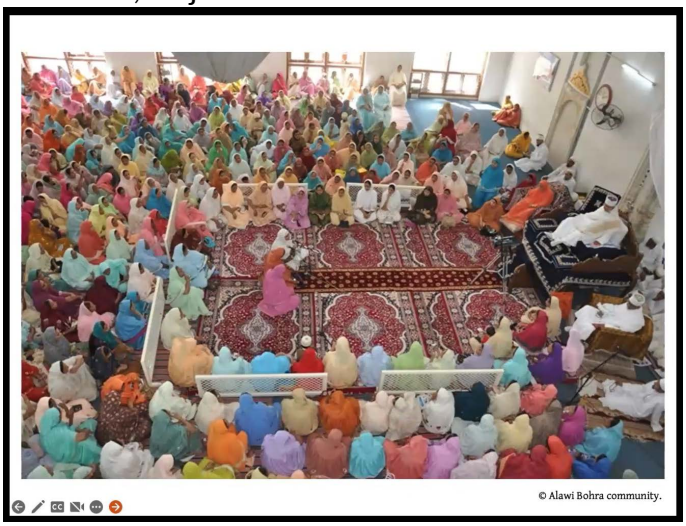
References

Contadini, A. (2015). *Facets of Light: The Case of Rock Crystals*. In Bloom, J., & Blair, S. (Eds.), *God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth: Light in Islamic Art and Culture* (pp. 62–79).

The Bohras: Tracing Fatimid Cairo in Gujarat

May 13th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Olly Akkerman (Institute of Islamic Studies, Freie Universitat Berlin)

Olly Akkerman, in her research paper, did not focus on the Dawoodi Bohras, which she rightfully acknowledged as an esteemed sect within the Ismaili communities. Instead, she delved into a different Bohra community known as the Alawi Bohras, who have their religious headquarters in Vadodara, Gujarat.



The lecture commenced with a compelling question about the nuanced positioning of this community — as a minority within a minority within a minority — yet maintaining firm connections with wider Ismaili networks across the globe. As the session progressed, she drew a clear distinction between the core theological beliefs of the mainstream Ismailis and those of the Alawis. The Alawis reject the idea that the imam is concealed in a cave or mountain; instead, they uphold the survival of a living manuscript tradition that alludes to the imam's continued existence in seclusion.

Statistical data referenced during the lecture recorded no more than 25,000 Alawi Bohras residing across parts of South Asia. This demographic detail reinforced the image of a relatively small, discrete community within the broader Ismaili landscape.

The speaker explored the Alawi tradition, culture, aesthetics, architecture, and sartorial practices comprehensively. Having spent several months residing with members of the community, her firsthand experiences provided a grounded basis for analysis. She also shed light on the internal structural hierarchy — detailing the roles of the Dai, Hudud, Mazun, Mukasir, and other important positions. Her discussion of the infallibility (*ma sumiyyah*) attributed to the Dai underscored how central this notion is in Alawi doctrinal belief.

A "Lost" Fatimid *Khizāna* in Gujarat?

© Photo: O. Akkerman

She walked the audience through various manuscripts that vividly reflect the community's social life. These documents were often handed over by the Dai to followers who would regularly visit to offer *salam*, pay their respects, and seek blessings. During times of crisis and unrest, such manuscripts were preserved with extreme care. One example included a *bismillah* inscription personally written by the Dai — often mounted and displayed in homes or businesses, a material expression of faith embedded in daily life. The lecture also examined the historiography of the Alawis, especially in relation to Yemen and Fatimid Cairo. A key argument was that the Alawi Bohras see themselves as spiritual successors of the Fatimid Imams, particularly following the seclusion of imam al-Tayyib — thus positioning themselves as the 'Fatimids of India'.

Akkerman also pointed to how the Alawi Bohras maintain visible references to Fatimid heritage in parts of East Africa, including Mombasa. These references appear in architecture and communal spaces such as mosques and markets. She noted that the term 'Fatimid' is used by community members and that manuscript collections, referred to as *khizanat al-kutub* (book treasuries), continue to play a role in how the community tends to engage with its historical and religious identity.

Prof. Olly Akkerman speaks during 'The Bohras: Tracing Fatimid Cairo in Gujarat'

She concluded the session by reflecting on the study of the Alawis, who maintain their Ismaili identity through a commitment to distinct sartorial codes across generations and historical shifts. **– *T.***

CRITICISM & THEORY

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.

Creative Processes

PAST PROGRAMMES

Unseeing the Object

April 19th, 2025, 5:30 - 8:00 PM IST | Ms. Sumakshi Singh (An Artist and Educator who has taught for five years at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and lectured at Oxford University, Columbia University, and The Chicago Humanities Festival)

Around Mother's Day, I visited the historic Elizabeth Park in Hartford for the new tulip blooms in spring. Walking around the plantings this year, I watched people and pets pose for 'grammable' photos and felt compelled to reflect on the slow cycles of growth versus the instant need for gratification. This thought was inspired by Delhi-based artist Sumakshi Singh, who delivered a two-hour seminar on her creative process for Jnanapravaha Mumbai this April. In her talk, Ms. Singh shared her multimedia practice spanning a 24-year global journey, and her nuanced ideological evolution shaped by her life experiences and contemporary social narratives.


"Pondicherry", 2001
Acrylic, collage, found objects, thread on canvas, 4ft * 4ft

Ms. Sumakshi, surrounded by exquisite drawings in her studio, began sharing stories and visuals from her early days in Baroda when her canvas was a diary layered with paintings and drawings **(Pondicherry, 2001).** Her struggles with framing ultimately led her to transcend boundaries during her Master's studies at the Art Institute in Chicago. Guided by peers and critics, she began integrating space and architectural elements, and sculpted micro-interventions using baked polymer clay **(Urban Fungus, 2004, Illinois).**


"Average Utopia", 2006. I painted a 'sunset' out of fiberglass, pigmented resin and acrylic paints (25ft X 7ft). I then rowed around the pond with my sunset attached, on a rather rainy day. Other people were invited to do the same. The sunset was then installed in the pond , so as to exist all day, all night.

What struck me was Ms. Singh's ambitious spirit, highlighted by her beautiful acrylic, fibreglass, and resin 'sunset' attached to a boat **(Average Utopia, 2006, New York)** and her dream of someday creating that sunset in coloured ice destined to melt away. I resonated with the cutting, aligning, and stitching iterations to find meaning in her art; this approach to work reminded me of my 2011 architectural dissertation, where I drew inspiration from Frank Gehry's deconstructivist style by tracing, cutting, and rearranging movie scenes to create spaces for a cinema museum. However, I also felt conflicted as a preservationist due to Ms. Singh's emphasis on the beauty of undesirable and invasive things. Watching her enhance the

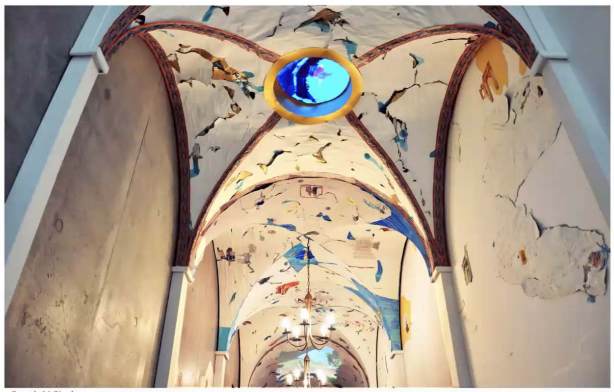
very features in buildings that I endeavoured to remove — water stains, peeling walls, urban fungus, and cracks **(Peel Till They Bloom, 2008, Zurich)** — left me stunned and pleased to 'unsee the object' in a new light.

Ms. Singh progressed in her work to explore heightened curiosity and playfulness, particularly through her illusory designs involving time and space, and her use of technology in stop-motion animations. She scrutinised unstable perceptions — how we view and remember things. Using her memories and dry pastels on objects and surfaces **(Mapping the Memory Mandala, 2008, France)**, Ms. Singh reconstructed her grandfather's living room. She aligned it digitally, but it ultimately disintegrated into dust. Her yogic practice led her to weave a symphony from people's breath cycles and associated words **(Breath Song, 2014, Vancouver)**, forming an ephemeral poem.

Process shots, "Mapping the Memory Mandala", 2008, Cassis, France

Versatility across artistic mediums and scales defines Ms. Singh's work, yet her journey with thread has become particularly noteworthy. It began as a means to connect with memories of her late mother, an embroiderer and gardener, and Ms. Singh expertly used thread to craft a tapestry of foliage **(Spectre of Images in Memory of the Gardener, 2017, New York)** and magical gardens symbolising the transience of life **(A Blueprint of Before and After, 2018, Israel)**. The artist has an exceptional way of commemorating the past, honouring time, and elevating the ordinary. I was delighted when Ms. Singh revealed how she set out to use thread to record the memory of her grandparents' home built post-Partition **(33 Link Road, 2019, Mumbai)**; each wave of her spectral threadwork shines brilliantly **(Afterlife, 2022, Australia)**.

Fragments of objects, their essence, and parts



Sumakshi Singh
Circumferences Forming, Always Transforming, Now Reforming and Leaving Centers Everywhere, "Indian Highway", 2011
MAXXI (Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo), Rome, Italy
17 meters long X 6 meters high

seeking a whole constitute an underlying theme that plays peek-a-boo in Sumakshi Singh's work — whether characters on cross vaults **(Circumferences Forming, Always Transforming, Now Reforming and Leaving Centres Everywhere, 2011, Italy)**, or embroidery completing plant forms **(Synonyms, Soulmates, 2020)**, or thread columns and doorways delineating the lost contexts of monuments **(Spectres of Belonging, 2023, Mumbai)**. Vulnerability during the pandemic made the artist question what happens to forms when they cease to serve their function. Her unresolved ideas surface toward the end of the talk, expressed through her mesmerising experiments with objects in flux, dissolving layers, and ever-shifting shadows — in pursuit of 'looking for absolutes in a relative world'. Through this presentation, Ms. Sumakshi Singh leaves a lasting impression due to her unique ability to communicate complex idiosyncrasies with technical proficiency, artistically alchemise undefined polarities of the real and the virtual, and render the intangible tangible. **– *P.P.***

Ms. Sumakshi Singh speaks during 'Unseeing the Object'

Announcements

CONJURING EMPIRE: ART, FAITH AND POWER IN THE BYZANTINE WORLD

July 14th – September 23rd, 2025 | Mainly Tuesdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 PM IST

FEE: Rs. 15,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org

Byzantine Martyr
10th century, ceramic with glaze, Walters Art Museum

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Alicia Walker
Elena Boeck
Elizabeth Dospel Williams
Jelena Bogdanovic
Karin Krause
Leslie Brubaker
Liz James
Maria Parani
Paroma Chatterjee
Paul Magdalino

The Byzantine empire stands as one of history's most enduring and influential civilisations, and has long been imagined as bridging a critical gap between the Classical world and the Mediaeval era. In this ten-part lecture series, we journey through the art and culture of a society marked by continual political turbulence and transformation as it fashioned itself into one of the most powerful and yet enigmatic empires in history. The series examines the lasting legacy of Classical Greece and Rome on Byzantine culture, as well as early Christianity and Islam's role in shaping its art, architecture, politics and society. The significance of events such as the Iconoclasm debates of the 8th–9th centuries and their impact on Byzantine material culture is also examined. Although it is one of history's longest continuous empires, the Byzantine empire is also remarkably little understood, and this series pays special attention to the Byzantine world conjured — from when it first established itself as a centre of power away from Rome, through the fifteen hundred years of its existence, and the long afterlife of Byzantium in the global imagination.

POSTGRADUATE COURSE IN INDIAN AESTHETICS

July 2025 – April 2026 | Typically Saturdays, 1:30 – 5:30 PM IST | Hybrid Mode: Physical & Online* | Platform: Zoom

Indra with vajra, outer wall, Bajramath temple, Gyaraspur, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh. Photo credit: Jaya Kanoria

Introduced in 1999, Jnanapravaha Mumbai's academic, yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/ Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics (IA) examines the historical development of visual forms in context, employing the disciplines of art history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature, and philosophy. The course traverses 5,000 years of Indian visual art, including pre-modern, modern, and contemporary forms as well as popular traditions, to illuminate aesthetic trajectories in the subcontinent. Internationally renowned scholars introduce students to this art, ensuring a material, geographical, historical, social, and cultural base that is broad and extensively representative. In keeping with JPM's mission, the course has evolved over the years to include topics of current research.

For admission, you are required to submit:
A digital copy each of your last degree certificate, CV, short bio (100 words), and passport-size photograph.

Fee structure:
Diploma (subject to writing and attendance) – Rs. 100,000 | Certificate (subject to attendance) – Rs. 75,000

For registration, click here: www.jp-india.org.

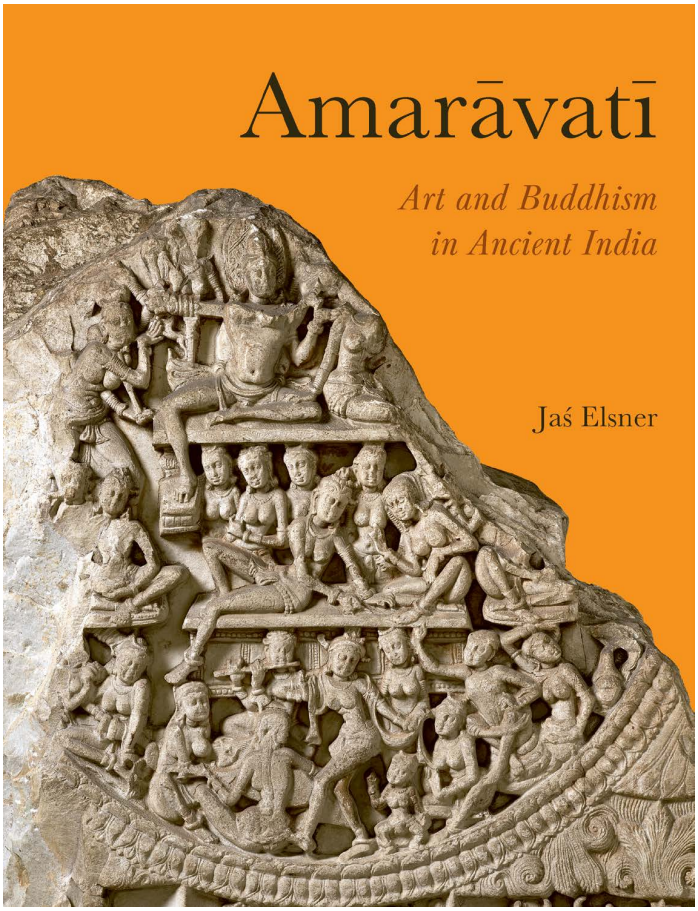
*** Please check details of hybrid mode on our website before registering.**

THE BUDDHIST ART OF THE AMARAVATI STUPA

JAŚ ELSNER

October 30th & 31st, 2025 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 2,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/-

Online Public Lecture on Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org



The great *chaitya* of Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh, built between the third century BCE and the third century CE was the first Buddhist stupa discovered in modern times. This seminar series will use its surviving remains (perhaps 10% of its sculptures, but comprising more than 300 blocks) to examine different aspects of the stupa and its remarkable visual culture to explore art and Buddhism in ancient India.

Session I: The Monument: A Phenomenology of its Reconstruction
Session II: The Inscriptions: Class, Patronage and Dana
Session III: Narrative and Buddhist Meanings
Session IV: Art and the Iconographies of Devotion

Amaravati: Art and Buddhism in Ancient India. Book cover. Image by Jaś Elsner

Jaś Elsner is Humfry Payne Senior Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College Oxford and Professor of Late Antique Art at Oxford. He is also Visiting Professor of Art and Religion at the University of Chicago and an external member of the Kusthistorisches Institut in Florence. He has been Senior Research Keeper at the British Museum in the past as well as lecturer at the Courtauld Institute of Art. His work is on art and religion across Eurasia, with a special interest in pilgrimage and the textual description of art. His most recent book is *Amaravati: Art and Buddhism in Ancient India* (2024).

AFTERLIVES // AFTERIMAGES

TINA M. CAMPT

October 16th & 17st, 2025 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 2,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/-

Online Public Lecture on Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org

This seminar series is part of the Annual Mona Ahmed Lecture Series

This two-part lecture engages two terms at the core of Campt's current writing: afterlife and afterimage. They are concepts that unsettle how we understand the temporality of the photograph. They are also concepts that photographers activate in creative and compelling ways in relation to the unique power of photographic images to help us grapple with grief and loss. Building on her commitment to attend to the 'fugitive registers' of images, and finding within them moments of resistance, resilience, and refusal often overlooked in traditional historical or visual analysis, each lecture engages the work of artists who use photographs as a bridge between the living and the departed in ways the mourn the ongoing presence rather than absence of lost loved ones and community members.

Tina M. Campt is Roger S. Berlind '52 Professor of Humanities in the Department of Art and Archeology and Director of Atelier at the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University. She is a black feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art and lead convener of the Princeton Collaboratorium for Radical Aesthetics and the Practicing Refusal Collective. Campt has published five books including *A Black Gaze* (2021); *Listening to Images* (2017); *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (2012); and *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich* (2004). She received the 2020 Photography Catalogue of the Year Award from Paris Photo and Aperture Foundation for the co-edited collection, *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography* and the 2024 Photographic Studies Award from the Royal Anthropological Institute for distinguished contributions to the study of anthropology and photography.

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Dayanita Singh

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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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