Jnanapravaha

JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI

QUARTERLY

JANUARY - MARCH 2026

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Director's Note

It is that special time of the year when introspection, deliberation, and future investigation become paramount — whether it be the completion of a quiet, half-year, academic calendar, or the joyous Gregorian one. There is utmost satisfaction in successfully mining the depths of Kucha, Mathura, Bundi and Kotah, Tabo, the Fatimids, Byzantium, and in the last quarter, Shakespeare, Photographic Image, Amaravati, the Mongols, and the Mediterranean, all through a fascinating interdisciplinary lens based on the current research of our extraordinary and generous global scholars. All this in addition to freshly minted lectures in our flagship Indian Aesthetics course where Andal, Phanigiri, Pashupata Shaivas, the Archaeology of Textiles, Buddhism, Indian Ocean Trade, *Bhagavata Purana* paintings, and An Architect's Research and Practice are adding invaluable dimensions to an already rich yearlong offering.

In the last quarter of October–December, the curtains came down on the 12-part series of 'Art, Faith, and Power in the Byzantine World'. What followed was a riveting 4-part lecture series which examined how Shakespeare transformed the stage into a vibrant arena of philosophical enquiry. In an age which was defined by intellectual chaos, the seminars demonstrated how he arguably invented the modern selfhood of today by engaging in questions of scepticism, agency, individualism, and problems of knowledge.

How is the temporality of the photograph to be understood? How do photographs mourn the ongoing presence of lost loved ones? Based on the unsettling concepts of the afterlife and the afterimage, 2 lectures helped unravel how photographers activate them to grapple with grief and loss as well as find moments of resistance, resilience, and refusal in the 'fugitive registers' of images.

It is seldom that a Classicist unpacks a monument — a *stupa*, which though of a similar time period, is geographically far removed. The great *chaitya* of Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, through a phenomenology of its reconstruction, inscriptions, narratives, art, and iconographies of its devotion, was one such which was examined for its remarkable visual culture of Buddhism in ancient India.

The rubric of Islamic Aesthetics was enlivened through a remarkable series of 6 sessions on the Mongols, and the extraordinary disruptions their sudden arrival caused, especially to the Muslim world and its caliphate in Baghdad. Establishing the largest

contiguous land empire in history, the artistic and cultural world that emerged from the encounters between the nomadic steppe peoples and the settled populations, covered areas of polities, statecraft, kingship, role of royal women, arts, and architecture. These were discussed with a focus on the Il Khanate (today's Iraq and Iran).

The quarter was brought to a close with a series of critical lectures titled 'Black Mediterranean: Artistic Encounters and Counter Narratives', which suggested a corrective methodological tool to include forgotten narratives and to revisit historiographies of historical subordination by incorporating the overlooked African continent and Afro-Mediterranean chronicles. It made the Mediterranean Sea a medial space for artistic interactions through privileging the north-south longitudinal meridians.

Please read the inner pages for the meticulous write-ups of these sessions/lectures, some of which may get carried forward to the next quarter. Our Course Directors along with other contributors have excelled themselves, as always. We are grateful that their tireless work gets recognised through public awards, as in the recent case of a colleague, Dr. Jaya Kanoria.

In the new year, the ACT programme brings a remarkable new series titled 'Prayer Winds and Profit: Indian Ocean Trade (1st–15th Centuries CE)'. Placing the Indian coastline at its heart, and sailing on the monsoon winds from Rome to China, the series examines how India's strategically located ports, entrepreneurial merchant communities, and highly prized commodities — pepper, textiles, gems, and aromatics — made South Asia the central hub linking Asia, Africa, and Europe for close to two millennia before the arrival of the colonial powers on its shores. With 16 lectures led by the world's leading scholars in the field, the series promises to be one of the most comprehensive looks at the Indian Ocean world through the trade of commodities, culture, and ideas.

A deep dive into the concept and images of Sheshashayi Vishnu in India and Cambodia through histories, philosophies, texts, and visual art will examine the 'creation, dissolution and re-creation' dimensions of this reclining icon. It will be followed by 'The Idea of Europe' thereby bringing our academic year to a close in April 2026. We hope to have you amidst us now that the digital world has brought us to close proximity. Till then, Season's Greetings and A Happy New Year!

With my warmest wishes,

Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.
Director

AESTHETICS

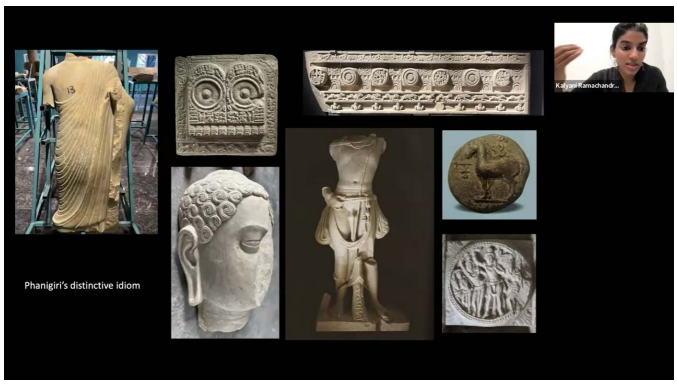
A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

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

The October quarter of the Indian Aesthetics course began with a thoughtful exploration of Buddhist philosophy, practice, and art. Dr. Supriya Rai, a scholar and practitioner of Buddhism, presented her deep insight on these subjects by illustrating the life and teachings of the Buddha using stone sculptural masterpieces from important Indic Buddhist sites. The scholar stressed that Buddhism today is not a singular philosophy or faith. Indeed, not only had it split into eighteen schools not long after the passing of the Buddha, but it had also spread to a wide geography over the Asian continent in its early phase. The scholar explored *Jataka* narratives in sculpted stone panels and painted murals at ancient sites to convey Buddhist philosophical concepts, just as they were once used to convey the nature of Buddhist practice to early adherents who lived in or visited such ancient and mediaeval sites. Her exposition of the terms 'Buddha', '*Dhamma*' and '*Sangha*', the four Noble Truths, and the doctrine of dependent origination were clear and nuanced. She also presented the scholarly

positions regarding aniconic or non-figural and iconic or figural representations of the Buddha, and discussed the meaning of sovereignty and compassion in *Mahayana* Buddhism at some length.



Dr. Kalyani Ramachandran's analysis of a single but important architectural element of the Buddhist site of Phanigiri, where ruined architectural remnants have been discovered, showed students how important such fragments are, and how patient scholarship and interpretation can illuminate the seemingly lost past of not only Buddhism but also of the lost art of cultures and communities around the world. This thoughtful lecture which illuminated research methodology was a fresh addition to the Indian Aesthetics course which not only disseminates knowledge but also encourages academic research and writing through the IA Diploma. It was especially useful for IA Diploma students who submitted their first assignment at the end of November 2025.

Aiming to train independent writers capable of producing publishable material, the IA Diploma has had numerous successes with essays first written for this stringent academic programme finding external publishers. This year the first IA assignment included topics such as 'Geometry, Faith, and Power: Examining the Rangiri Dambulla Cave Temple', 'Chamunda: The Horrific Destroyer of Evil', 'The Persistence of the Legend of Narasimha at the Chennakesava Temple, Somanathapura', and other equally important subjects. Seventeen students submitted this assignment and, as always, were given feedback to revise their work repeatedly before they were awarded grades.

Swati Chemburkar's session on *Vajrayana* Buddhism elaborated on the artistic, philosophical, ritual, and political ramifications of these esoteric practices. The very secrecy of these practices makes them difficult to decode, but former adherents, especially women who have spent years as part of these closed circles, have written on their experiences; the scholar analysed and critiqued these expositions for the benefit of students. She also presented a lecture on *Prajnaparamita*, an important *Vajrayana* Buddhist text which has come to be presented in an anthropomorphic form as a Goddess whose representations are found largely outside the Indian subcontinent. The scholar's primary research on the subject shed fresh light on it by identifying heretofore unnoticed representations of female deities in paintings and sculptural panels.

IA lectures on Brahmanical iconography included Arvind Sethi's detailed survey of the evolution of major deities such as Vishnu and Shiva, the myths, legends, stories, spaces, and places occupied by these gods, and the relationship between form and meaning that drives the evolution in their worship and in their iconography. Additionally, the scholar did not neglect less important deities which are not generally found in the womb chamber or *garbha griha* of temples. Accordingly, he presented an exposition of deities found on the inner and outer walls of Brahmanical temples, including guardian deities such as *ashtadikpalas* and *navagrahas*, as well as deities that have become less important over time, such as Brahma and Surya. The evolution of Ganapati and Kartikeya, considered to be the sons of Parvati and Shiva, was also discussed. The symbolic underpinnings of Brahmanical iconography were revealed through stories and by analysing sculptural panels that have immortalised these narratives in stone.

Swati Chemburkar's exploration of the Shaiva Pashupata sect which spread to Southeast Asia showed how sectarian affiliations bring in new narratives and therefore new aspects into iconography. The scholar considers the Pashupatas to be 'missionaries' who brought about the spread of this form of worship and its philosophy to distant shores.

The concept of Devi is that of a feminine philosophical principle that represents ultimate reality in the eyes of her devotees. She is unitary and independent of a male god for her

supreme power. It is, instead, her power or *shakti* that animates male gods; for example, Shakti is considered to animate Shiva in the tantric understanding. Dr. Rashmi Poddar in her session on Devi explained that she simultaneously possesses contradictory qualities; she is both a fierce warrior who receives blood sacrifice as well as a protective mother to her devotees. The scholar also elaborated on the largely misunderstood term 'tantra' and its practices in her next session. Tantric texts are deliberately secretive, resulting in speculative, even incorrect conceptions of this practice. Dwelling on the concepts of *Shakti*, *nada*, *bindu*, *kundalini* yoga, and *chakras*, Dr. Poddar explained the anti-ascetic, anti-speculative, and heretical philosophies and practices that fall under the umbrella of tantra. Largely centring on radical methods that use the body, several branches of tantric practice aimed at expanding the consciousness of the practitioner through esoteric means. For instance, the *guru* would initiate adherents into Brahmanically forbidden methods such as the *panchamakaras* – *mudra*, *mansa*, *matsya*, *madira* and *mithuna* or the use of parched grain, meat, fish, alcohol, and ritual sex – to help them reach the goal of *jeevan mukti* or the experience of ultimate bliss while still residing in the body.

Dr. Pushkar Sohoni's superb survey of Brahmanical temple architecture mapped the evolution, morphology, and the variations of this architecture that emerged from the basic form of a hut. The original hut form can be seen clearly in the fractals that repeat in temple forms, particularly in *shikharas*, as seen from the research and writing of the internationally renowned scholar, Adam Hardy. Dr. Sohoni showed how Indic temples reflect both sacred space and sacred time through their placement, proportions, and architecture. Early places of worship, including incredible temples in the Indian subcontinent, were hewn from living rock; for instance, early caves in the Barabar region of Central India excavated expressly for this purpose are still extant. The subcontinent boasts of whole mountains (as seen in the Kailasanatha temple at Ellora) and rock outcrops (as clearly seen at Mahabalipuram near Chennai) cut down until the material that remains is no different from temples that were built from the ground up. Stone elements such as pillars and ribbed ceilings which have no functional purpose in cave architecture clearly mimic earlier wooden architecture which is no longer extant. Dr. Sohoni also discussed his primary research on the Maratha temple, showing how this is a widely varied genre that draws elements (which did not quite settle logically and smoothly together) from many earlier temple forms.

Kamalika Bose explored two temple types: firstly, the increasingly complex terracotta temple typologies of Bengal, which show acculturation to colonial and contemporary Western mores; and secondly, the architecturally varied Jain temples in the region, quite different from examples of this typology in Western India. These hybrid temple types, varied not only in architecture but also in decoration, were illuminated by the architectural historian's primary research. She also showed how Jain temples in Ahmedabad came to be located in *haveli*-like structures that were outwardly residential and came to have interior spaces designed to protect the deities housed within them. Manifesting labyrinthine interiors with sight-lines that afforded multiple points of *darshan* for adherents, some of these spaces also had hidden passages and escape routes to be used in case of attack. This architectural innovation was a result of the threatening urban climate that was the reality of Sultanate Gujarat. The scholar's lively sessions showed how religious architecture is not static or canonical in its response to historical, social, economic, and

political exigencies.

Dr. Crispin Branfoot, who is a lecturer at SOAS, University of London, presented his primary research on the expansive architectural plans, soaring *gopuras*, and sensorily stimulating processions of the Tamil temple. Explaining the form of these structures and the development of their ritual practices, he related the temples and their processions to the very structure as well as the religious, economic, political, and social life rhythms of the towns in which they are located.

Dr. Riyaz Latif introduced Islamic aesthetics to IA students through a masterful survey of Middle Eastern and Egyptian architectural examples as stylistic exemplars for Islamic funerary architecture found in the subcontinent. Indic examples conform with the basic nature of Islamic architecture on one hand, while on the other, differ from it because of dissimilar political, geographical, and cultural contexts. The scholar presented his insights on Sultanate and Mughal tombs, showed the nature of regional variations seen in the funerary architecture of Bengal and Gujarat, and displayed that Dawoodi Bohra *rauzas* (tombs) provide the art historian and the lay viewer with material means that can aid an understanding of the intangible past.

The variety of topics in the October quarter of the IA course provided deep understandings of Jain, Buddhist, Brahmanical and Islamic philosophies, practices, architecture, and sculpture. The class is now well equipped to immerse itself in the equally varied repertoire of Indic painting which the course will explore in the first two months of the new year. ***– J.K.***

Buddhist Aesthetics

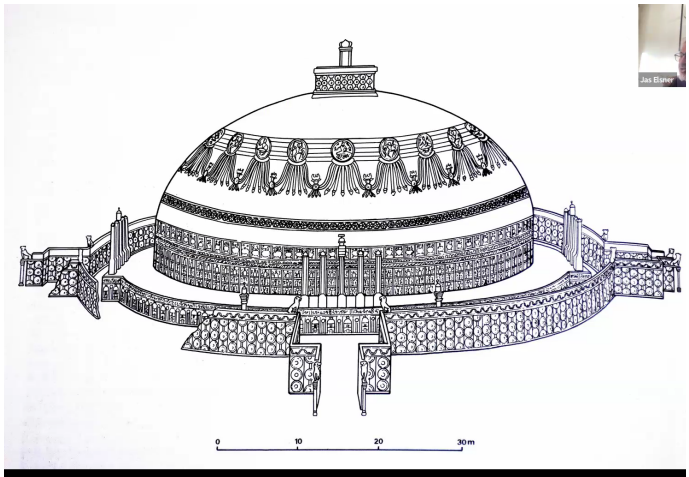
PAST PROGRAMMES

The Buddhist Art of the Amaravati *Stupa*

October 30th & 31st, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Jaś Elsner (Humfry Payne Senior Research Fellow at Corpus Christi College Oxford and Professor of Late Antique Art at Oxford)

Professor Jaś Elsner's seminar closely examined the great ancient *stupa* of Amaravati, one of the first *stupas* to be discovered on the Indian subcontinent. It was already extremely damaged before the 19th-century excavations by Colin McKenzie (who later commissioned an album of detailed drawings of its sculptures, now in the British Library), which largely destroyed the *stupa* and left insufficient records for well-planned reconstruction. Many of the stones found at that time have disappeared. Older photographs of the sculpture were largely of poor quality; Professor Elsner has been involved in the production of high-quality photographs which enabled his research and the publication of his recent book.

The speaker explained the phenomenology of the *stupa's* reconstruction, achieved on paper and in museums, using the 300 blocks of sculptures that survive. These include panels that depict *stupas*, useful in reimagining the original monument. Usually dated from the time of Ashoka (3rd century BCE), the work on the *stupa* accelerated roughly from the beginning of the 4th century CE; precise dating is difficult. In the 1850s, archaeological finds from the site were sent to the museum at Madras (now Government Museum Chennai). Later, some of these were taken to England, and are now in the British Museum; still others were placed in the Indian Museum in what was then Calcutta. Finds from a second series of 20th-century excavations are now in the Amaravati site museum. Ancient *stupas* had relic chambers, making them sacred sites regarded as the body of Shakyamuni or other *pratyeka* Buddhas, senior disciples of the Buddha, and universal monarchs or *chakravartins*. Relics of rich materials such as gold found at Amaravati in 1905 are no longer traceable. The monument at Amaravati does not survive except for the basic mound. Poor preservation of some objects increases reliance on old photographs, such as those by Tripe, and early drawings. Amaravati is noted for its low-relief carving, deeply undercut, leaving deep pools of shadow against which the figural groups emerge. The finely finished upper layer of almost all the surviving blocks has been lost.



Reconstruction of the Great Stūpa at Amarāvatī by Douglas Barrett, British Museum

Reconstructions of the massive *stupa* posit that there was a railing around it with four entryways. The drum had four extending platforms, called *ayaka* platforms, each with five *ayaka* pillars, and gave the ground plan a slightly cruciform effect. The *stupa* was topped by a drum with sculpted panels, supporting a decorated dome. Hardly any dome sculptures survive; between a fifth and a tenth of the *stupa's* sculptures are extant. There were no *toranas* or gateways at Amaravati, but two of its sculpted panels depict a *torana*. A 1950s and '60s representational reconstruction of the *stupa* by Douglas Barrett, keeper at the British Museum, is still accepted by most scholars. There were seemingly no steps or walkway

around the drum, but probably space to display freestanding sculptures. At their bases, *stupas* may have *swastika*-like or wheel-like foundations with oblique entryways. However, unlike the great *stupa* at Sanchi, at Amaravati, each of the four entryways was direct.

The railing was richly sculpted, inside and outside. The exterior of railing pillars was interspersed by huge lotus-shaped bosses: whole lotuses at the centre, three-quarter lotuses at the top and bottom, and lozenge-shaped gaps, often decorated in the manner of fluted columns, in between. The reconstructions of the railing at the Amaravati and British Museums are at best speculative, with the Amaravati reconstruction mixing the exterior and interior portions of the railing. The contiguity of the stones that have been put together cannot be established. In between the railings, lotus crossbars with varying numbers of petals, open or closed, are inserted to fit them together in extant examples. Most of them have seed pods in the centre, but occasionally, the Buddha *pada* (footprints of the Buddha) or two *stupas* are seen, along with other designs. The effect of an enormous lotus garland in stone placed around the monument would have been inescapable for the pilgrim entering the precinct. Across the coping on the railing, the exterior had figures of men carrying a huge, undulating flower garland. The garland, still commonly seen in Southasian devotional contexts, had gems or squares with detailed carving at the bottom bends. In the bend above, images such as a *stupa*, a *dharma chakra* or *dharma* column are visible in extant examples.

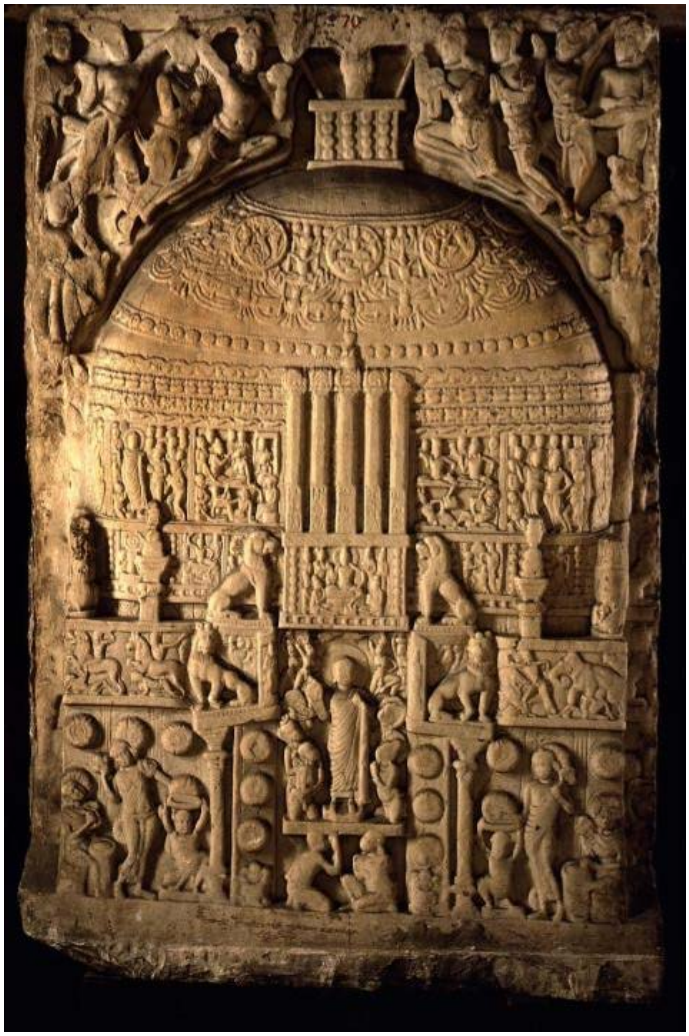
While some of the *stupa's* carved blocks would have been sculpted before they were fitted, a portion of the coping frieze, carved on both sides, and with continuous decoration across slabs on each of these sides, makes it likely that it was carved in situ. Most of the larger blocks whose relief sculpture remains on both sides are now preserved at the Government Museum Chennai, with only one major piece at the British Museum. The details that can be gleaned from the myriad representations of *stupas* on reliefs at Amaravati include a similar railing; gateways and columns with lion statues atop; *ayaka* pillars and platforms placed on all four sides with a centrally placed figure of the Buddha or a symbol that represents him, which can be imagined as the Buddha or the *dharma* emerging from the *stupa*. Each extant panel is unique in its details. The speaker displayed high-resolution photographs of these rich miniature *stupas* displaying architectural intricacies, remarkably detailed narratives of *Jataka* stories, the main incidents in the life of the Buddha, symbolic depictions such as the Buddha *pada* or the throne under the tree, as well as figural representations of the Buddha.

The speaker quoted lines from the description of what has been called 'Indra's net' but is the description of Maitreya's tower in the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, a *Mahayana sutra* probably written in 3rd century Andhra Pradesh, which is part of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. According to Prof. Elsner, Indra's net is a realm showing the reflections of all worlds, where worlds contain each other in a single atom. Those who come to see the net attain the knowledge that all realms of beings are like illusions, all Buddhas are like reflections, all existences, states of being, and births are like dreams, and all developments of actions are like images in a mirror. All becoming is like a mirage. Inside the Great Tower of Maitreya, Sudhana, the figure seeking enlightenment in this *Sutra*, saw hundreds of thousands of towers like his own, similarly, distinctly, and evenly arrayed in all directions as an infinitely vast space, while appearing reflected in each and every object of all the other towers. Sudhana saw himself in all the towers. The scholar suggested that this is the image of the reflective cosmology described in the *Sutra*, where each is distinct, yet reflects all the others. In visual and material terms, this image was created by the great *stupa* which contained more than a hundred carved panels depicting *stupas* in two-dimensional relief, beside its own three-dimensional presence.

In a recent book on ancient Greece, Renaud Gagne speaks of cosmography as the rhetoric of cosmology (the art of composing worlds); cosmography is not a universalist generalisation of a culture's cosmological assumptions, but a particular and transformative intervention in world-making and meaning-making. While Gagne relies on text, Professor Elsner used both epigraphy and a particular relief from the Amaravati *stupa* to analyse its cosmography through its visual constructions of time and space.

The narrative imagery at Amaravati shows

Siddhartha's life before and after his enlightenment, and depicts the *Jatakas* which recount his earlier incarnations as a *Bodhisattva*, the phase when he acquired the perfection to become a Buddha. Early texts understand this temporality as a tripartite pattern: the *Dure Nidana*, a distant epoch which ended with the *Bodhisattva's* incarnation as King Vessantara; the *Avidure Nidana*, an intermediate epoch from his descent from *Tushita* heaven, his final rebirth until the time of enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree; and the *Santa Nidana*, a proximate epoch, from the Buddha's enlightenment, teaching, and death, to the division of his relics. This precedes the current epoch, after the Buddha's death. The *Jataka* stories are juxtaposed with the final perfection of the Buddha. The pattern of incarnations across time is simultaneously a picture of space. Narratives of the *Bodhisattva* are set in diverse spaces both across the subcontinent of India and in divine spaces, mainly the heavens, but this space in turn is set within a cosmological vision of multiple lifetimes and immense spans of time so that space has a similar sense of vastness.



Drum slab representing a miniature stūpa (or meta stūpa)
BM 1880,0709.70, in R. Knox, Amaravati: Buddhist Sculpture from the Great Stupa, London, 1992, no. 69, pp. 131-33

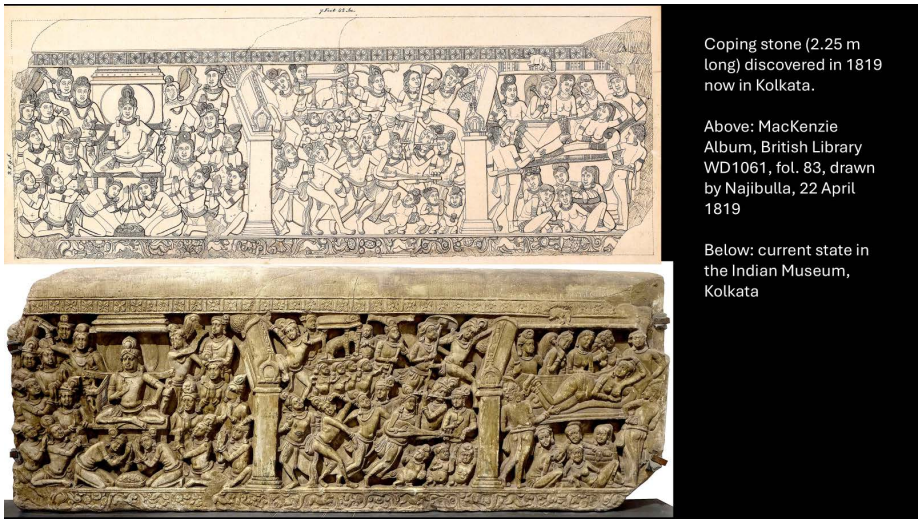
A panel from the circumference of the drum at the British Museum has gods paying homage to the *stupa* at the top, and two human figures with flower offerings moving towards the centre. In terms of cosmography, it represents the *stupa* between human worship at the bottom and divine worship at the top. The coping of the outer railing has a frieze of a mythologised *samsara* (world) full of conflict: an elephant trampling human beings; a man fighting a beast; and humans riding fantastic animals and trampling people. Behind this are scenes from the remote epoch, represented by the *Vessantara Jataka*, the *Bodhisattva's* last life before he becomes Buddha, in which Vessantara gives away his wife, children and all his possessions as an act of supreme generosity. In the *ayaka* platform panel at the same level is the *Avidure Nidana*: the *Bodhisattva* in *Tushita* heaven in the *abhaya mudra*, indicating freedom from fear, being exhorted by the *devas* to take his final rebirth. The *Santa Nidana* is represented twice: by the Bodhi tree, and the wheel on the column on top of an empty throne; and by the Enlightenment, which marks the shift from the intermediate to the proximate epoch, and the turning of the wheel from the proximate epoch. An image of a prince enthroned with his right hand raised is possibly a figure from a *Jataka* story, set in the *Dure Nidana*. These tiered images intersperse and imbricate all three epochs.

The scholar suggested that the narrative sculpted on and around the *stupa* depicted on this slab offers a cosmographic diagram of worlds. Depicted at the bottom, on the ground outside the *stupa's* perimeter railing, is the world of worshippers at the *stupa*. In the line of the railings and coping is the world of animals, mythical and real, and men. Above these, panels carved into the *stupa's* surface reflect the sacred mythological world of the Buddha's life and former lives, the sensual paradise of the human world; with references to paradisal worlds: *Tushita* heaven, the Naga world, and *Trayastrimsa* heaven, the heaven to which the Buddha's relics – his *ushnisha* and bowl – are taken. Above the dome, deities, who are meant to be present at a sacred site though invisible to human eyes, honour the *stupa*. The slab integrates mythological and hagiographic narratives showing *karmic* patterning in the representation of a *stupa*. These layered worlds and temporalities, including the present time of the approaching worshipper, are unified in the panel as a cosmic diagram by

the *Bodhisattva*, the liminal gateway figure which looks like a three-dimensional standing Buddha. The cosmography in this two-dimensional image, as in other panels like it, is a metonymy of the monumental cosmography of the Amaravati *stupa*.

Across the lower portion of the five *ayaka* pillars at the centre of the panel, there is a donative inscription which makes absolutely specific – with an individualised dedication – the universal implications of the imagery across time and space. Inscriptions are part of the cosmography of the site, revealing the variety of patrons, ranging from a princess, a general, government officials, professionals, merchants, traders, artisans, perfumers, whose families were often involved, to many monks and nuns. The scholar viewed the discourse of cosmography as a cosmological representation and communication created by visual rhetorical choices made at Amaravati to articulate the devotional culture in celebration of the Buddha.

According to Prof. Elsner, the *stupa's* imagery makes no comment regarding those cosmological issues about which the Buddha himself said he was refusing to speak, since they were not conducive to the holy life – whether the world is eternal or not eternal, whether it is finite or infinite, whether the world has an origin – and other questions which were seen as important, particularly in Brahmanical strands of Indic thought. This led the scholar to posit that ancient Buddhist monuments such as the *stupa* at Amaravati were not exclusivist: their evocation of multiple worlds and spaces, peopled by a variety of beings and accessible through the Buddha's relics inside worked through silence regarding traditionalist positions, enabling veneration by Buddhist and non-Buddhist pilgrims by avoiding explicit doctrine.



Coping stone (2.25 m long) discovered in 1819 now in Kolkata.

Above: MacKenzie Album, British Library WD1061, fol. 83, drawn by Najibulla, 22 April 1819

Below: current state in the Indian Museum, Kolkata

The personhood of the *stupa* as the Buddha is significant. In a famous passage, the Buddha claims that it is in the body, endowed with perception and mind, that the origin, cessation, and path to the cessation of the world can be discovered. On the body of the *stupa*, the macrocosm of the Amaravati monument offers multiple yet unique panels with microcosmic reflections, which according to the scholar are an opening onto the living, enlightened presence of the Buddha at its heart. This sculptural programme is unique to ancient Andhra Pradesh and did not come from a textual tradition. Its complexity seems, rather, the result of early *Mahayana* explorations that echo the *Gandavyuha Sutra's* vision of Maitreya's pavilion, itself an echo of *Mahayana* explorations of and against existing Indian cosmological traditions. According to the speaker, the creative narrative images of Amaravati depicted stories from oral retellings to elaborate textual renditions for explanatory and exegetic purposes. The narrative art of Amaravati functions through typical or essentialising episodes juxtaposed to reflect each other, evoking a larger story or a key event.

The drawing of the interior of a great coping block, discovered by Mackenzie in 1819 and now in Kolkata, depicts the story of the *Bodhisattva's* descent from *Tushita* heaven in three episodes, moving left to right as the viewer would move. The left-hand scene shows the *Bodhisattva* before rebirth into his last human life, frontally enthroned in a teaching gesture in *Tushita* heaven, with gods arranged symmetrically around him. The central image has a procession of deities, including dwarves, parasol bearers, celestial musicians, and dancers bearing the *Bodhisattva* in the form of an elephant on a litter with four pillars. The scene to the right shows his mother, Queen Maya, reclining on her couch and dreaming. These scenes seem to align with the description in the *Nidana Katha*, probably by Buddhaghosa,

for the *Jataka* collection in the Pali tradition.

Another block which has lost its exterior decoration and was plausibly contiguous with the Kolkata block, apparently aligns with the *Nidana Katha*. It has, on the left, the *Bodhisattva's* mother, Queen Maya, seated on a high chair surrounded by elephants, recounting her dream of the descent of the white elephant. Above, his father, King Shuddhodana, sits surrounded by his court, or perhaps Brahmin soothsayers. In the central section, the queen stands in *tribhanga*, grasping the branch of a tree above as she gives birth to the *Bodhisattva*, represented by footprints on the swaddling cloth held up by her attendants, marking his seven footsteps taken immediately after birth. The damaged final scene has the *Bodhisattva* in the centre, seated on a long throne or bed with a female figure, perhaps his wife, Yashodhara, surrounded by musicians to the right and female attendants seated below. In both slabs, the visual narratives do not depend on extant texts. For example, there is no textual presentation of the *Bodhisattva's* passage to the Nandana grove in *Tushita* heaven as an elephant, although this image appears repeatedly on the Amaravati *stupa*.

The size of stones along with the direction in which sculpted figures appear to move are important clues used by the speaker to ascertain where each stone block was placed. The processional movement of the devotee around the *stupa* in circumambulation keeps the monument to the right, along the processional path. Logically, then, the narratives on horizontal friezes on the drum would be from right to left. Coping friezes are complex to understand, since their historiated narratives are not labelled in Amaravati, but are intricately detailed. By and large, they move from left to right, in the direction pilgrims walk, with the main monument to their right and the railing to their left. However, there are instances where the sequence is clearly right to left, which might imply placement in the left-hand inner railings of gateways through which pilgrims exited the monument. Most commonly, the coping friezes use imagery of architectural or natural features to create boundaries between discrete scenes and sequential narratives.

A stone from the Government Museum Chennai is unusual: it shows male bearers with female consorts carrying the garland from right to left on the exterior. The narrative of the interior face moves from both left to right and right to left, culminating at the scene beneath the Bodhi tree in the centre. To the right, in the palace, beneath inscriptions, is the birth of Rahula, the son of the Buddha. To the left is seen an empty throne beneath the Bodhi tree, with a cushion and the Buddha *pada*, and the first five disciples. On the far left, looking at the other side of the slab, the Buddha's father, King Shuddhodana is seated among his attendants in the palace. To the right, the Buddha's wife, Yashodhara, sits among the ladies of her court. The queen is present at the left of the empty throne in the central scene. A female figure, followed by other women, presents a boy to the throne; there are various women, some prostrating. This is probably the scene of Rahula asking his father for his inheritance after the Buddha's return to Kapilavastu, at which point he is ordained into the order of monks. The directional dynamics are focussed towards the frontal throne, while the visual narrative reviews the story of the Buddha through the prism of Rahula's movement from birth to ordination. Such a narration is not present in any Buddhist text. The central scene combines the Enlightenment at the Bodhi Tree (representing the Buddha), the first sermon to the five ascetics (the *Dhamma*) with Rahula, and his entrance to the *Sangha*. Remarkably, the narration creates an icon of the three jewels, Buddha, *Dhamma*, and *Sangha* as a composite image.

The scholar displayed images of several double-sided coping blocks which show the movement of figures: a fat dwarf holding the end of the scrolling garland around his neck, while bearers carry it from right to left; also moving right to left, and probably completing a narrative of the Buddha's death and cremation, are scenes of the dance at his funeral pyre, the division of relics above it, and seven elephants carrying *stupa*-shaped caskets of the Buddha's relics out of the city of Kushinagara, and moving on towards the left.

A frieze placed just above eye level on the drum uses architectural features such as the city wall between its scenes, along with vertical lines of lotus bosses: it presents its subject matter with the sides sandwiching the middle. The central scene, from the framing *Kula Hamsa Jataka* (narrated by

the Buddha to honour his attendant Ananda who is ready to sacrifice his life for his Master) is to be read from right to left, as is logical for the drum friezes. The haloed and robed Buddha stands on the left, accompanied by a smaller figure, probably Ananda. The intoxicated elephant Nalagiri is presented twice, rushing out of the city gate of Rajgir after being released at the behest of the Buddha's evil cousin, Devadutta; and again, crushing someone under his feet, dramatically casting aside a woman and then scattering a crowd. When the elephant reaches the Buddha on the left, it is tamed and bows before him in the climax of the scene.

The malice of Devadatta is implicitly contrasted – through the two adjacent *Jataka* scenes of the *Sasa Jataka* in which the *Bodhisattva*, as a hare, offers his own flesh to a hungry Brahmin and is rewarded by having his visage painted on the moon, and the *Sibi Jataka*, in which King Sibi, as the *Bodhisattva*, cuts off his own flesh to save a pigeon from a hunter – to the offers of the Buddha's disciples such as Shariputta and Ananda (who offers to sacrifice his life so that the Buddha can escape), and the eighty chief elders, to confront the elephant. This juxtaposition requires viewers to know the story and to use this knowledge exegetically. Elephant training is a metaphor for training the mind, and particularly the crazed mind, and for Buddhist meditation.

Therefore, to either side of the depiction of Nalagiri's madness and the Buddha's taming of it (where the sub-theme consists of Ananda's keenness to perform the ultimate *dana* by giving up his life), are scenes from the *Jataka* tales of his former lives as a *Bodhisattva* which exemplify the exceptional perfection of *dana* or generosity, the first perfection in both the *Theravada* and the *Mahayana* traditions. Yet, in the Nalagiri episode, the Buddha shows mastery of all the perfections in his defeat of the rampaging elephant, which is greater than the compassion of Ananda's pointless self-sacrifice, which would have caused his death. The slab thus uses narrative juxtaposition to illuminate Buddhist teaching about the *Bodhisattva* path as a process of perfecting that is beyond even the highest forms of *dana*. The Nalagiri story is repeatedly depicted in the sculptures of Amaravati.

Another spectacular depiction of the same story, moving left to right on the inner face of the railing coping, also presents the elephant twice, rampaging towards the right. In this case and some others, the Buddha is shown in non-human form. Here he is depicted as a flaming pillar with a *trisula* at its top, rising from a lotus with the Buddha *pada* at the base. The emphasis on the miraculous aspects of the Buddha is shown symbolically, implying the *Dharmakaya*, or superhuman truth body. However, in the drum frieze, the Buddha is embodied in the *Rupakaya* of his human form. The scholar pointed out that Buddhist issues determine creative iconographic and narrative choices by the *stupa's* patrons and artists, which do not have a direct textual basis though they borrow from traditions of categorising in the *Nidana Katha* and the *Chariya Pitaka*.

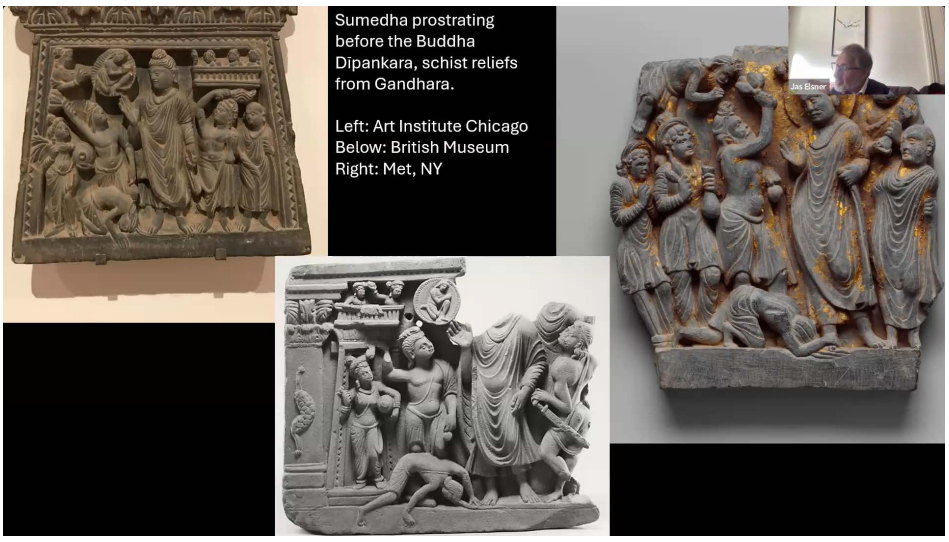
The scholar remarked that the stasis and constrained space of monuments demand movement of their viewers. Built edifices are embedded in culture and discourse in their forms, functions, layout, and design; the speaker pointed out that there is little comparative art history that focusses on such issues, but that understanding the movement of spectators and pilgrims, whether individuals or groups, is essential to comprehend the relation between monuments and their users. The builders and keepers of ancient and mediaeval buildings regulated sites and educated their visitors by exploring the possibility of mimetic play between the actual movement of viewers and the movement depicted in the decorations on the monument.

The scholar, an authority on Greek and Roman architecture, discussed several such examples from these cultures – as seen in processions on a 5th-century frieze on the Parthenon which emulated the direction in which devotees would walk, but elevated their status by depicting horses and chariots within it, emphasising collective engagement; processions of senators and of the imperial family on the external walls and steps of the Ara Pacis Augustae in Rome, with smaller sacrificial processions on the altar leading to the space where the sacrifice took place, allowing viewers to participate vicariously; processional movements of devotees or martyrs towards the altar in early Christian churches such as 6th-century edifices, both in Ravenna and the mosaics of the Basilica of Santa Apollinare Nuovo, also enabling vicarious participation; other processions of

sacrificial animals such as cows being herded; of a sacrificial bull for ritual slaughter played against sacrificial imagery and images of motion such as a procession of defeated barbarians; and the Roman imperial family performing libations at altars.

In the sculptures from the *stupa* at Amaravati, the scholar discerned similar strategies of evoking sacred movement; in addition, there is philosophical self-reflection on this movement and its ability to elicit devotion from its viewers. Buddhist texts such as the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* of the Pali Canon describe a *stupa* as a site of pilgrimage. The Buddha himself describes the happiness and peace, as well as the good *karma*, that comes from worshipping at a *stupa*. The network of *stupas* on the Indic subcontinent, and outside, create a sacred geography and monumentality interconnected by pilgrimage; the cultural trope of sacred geography is common to other Indic religions such as Brahmanism and Jainism.

Often, as seen at Sanchi, several *stupas* were constructed enabling a pilgrimage geography in a specific area. This was the case at Amaravati as well, but only the remains of one *stupa* survived. A cluster of such monuments became important features in the landscape of the region, creating patterns of devotional mobility. Many inscriptions at Amaravati name the pilgrims who donated to the site, and identify the places where they lived. Written accounts from Chinese pilgrims from the late 4th to the 8th centuries CE tell of the deep emotions that drove devotional mobility, and the difficulties and distances that monks from faraway lands conquered to pay homage to Indic *stupas* and pious men, and to collect sacred texts and objects to take back with them.



Devotional movement at sites, including at Amaravati, primarily consisted of circumambulation – moving clockwise, keeping the sacred monument to one's righthand side (Sanskrit *pradakshina*, Pali *padakina*) – advocated by the Buddha himself in the *Divyavadana* for the purpose of arousing *prasada* or the skilful state of mental composure, serenity, clarity, and trust (described as the devotee's mental state when approaching a *stupa* in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*). *Pradakshina* is a processional movement that can be performed individually or in groups. Additionally, in Indic devotion and at the *stupa* of Amaravati, the act of prostration (often full body prostration), the presentation of offerings and the gesture of *anjali mudra*, or the joining of palms in front of the devotee's breast while standing or kneeling, are often seen.

The scholar commented on the absence of secondary literature on early Buddhist ritual gestures and prostration, but apart from their ubiquitous representation in visual culture, unspecified acts of reverence are often described in the opening passages of the *Suttas*, where a deity or a person approaches the Buddha to pay homage and ask a question. The story of the Brahmin Sumedha, who was born in Amaravati, but whose narrative is repeated at Gandhara and not at Amaravati, describes his prostration before the Buddha Dipankara, when he laid out his long hair for the Buddha to walk on, in a specific instance of the inclusion of devotional gestures in Buddhist narrative.

The garland-bearer's devotional procession on the exterior of the coping of the Amaravati railing takes them to the gateways, effectively leading the visitor into the inner precinct. That is the likely processional and directional configuration of the monument's exterior. The absent railing sculpture can be confirmed through the configuration in the miniature coping of most of the *stupa* reliefs seen on the main monument's drum. The processional

theme is frequently represented and was a major motif in the narrative representations inside the processional path after the visitor entered the perimeter wall.

The railing was punctuated by four gates at the cardinal directions through which the worshipper could enter and leave the *stupa* site. The opening was relatively narrow but offered an unimpeded view of the entire monument as it widened, funnel-like, into the projecting entryway, which was probably marked by statues of lions on pillars. During circumambulation, the devotee was contained in a narrow passage with open air above and great walls of sculptural decoration, with an emphasis on the figural, to both right and left, encircling the entirety of the monument, an immersion with powerful and varied mimetic cues for pilgrims.

On the outer face of the best-preserved railing pillar, now in the British Museum, are scenes of worship. Dwarves dance in ecstatic devotion in the lower lozenge, couples bring offerings to a *stupa* flanked by a kneeling male and female in the process of prostration in the upper lozenge, and in the upper border, a pair of elephants bring lotus offerings to the Bodhi tree. All these motifs, as well as the worship of the *stupa*, are found frequently in other sculptures on both sides of the railing and on the drum of the monument. On the central roundel of the pillar, the Buddha, on a pedestal beneath the tree, is adored by women, some with bowls of offerings; the lower lozenge has the Buddha *pada* on a pedestal beneath the tree, surrounded by men bringing offerings of cloth. The upper scene of the Niranjana river-crossing is flanked by women with jars of offerings and lotus flowers to the left, and a *naga* king with three *naginis*, all in the *anjali mudra*, to the right. The central scene has four women prostrating before the pedestal, with those making offerings to the left, and ones on the upper right in the *anjali mudra*. The lower scene is flanked by male devotees approaching the Bodhi tree, while the three immediately around it make offerings. These sculpted figures are clearly didactic, emulating and prescribing specific motions that delineate devotional gestures.

The monument has a flood of imagery relating to devotion, captured from different angles, sometimes in the same sculpture, perhaps to indicate motion: the enormous garland and its bearers on the coping, other garlands and flowers throughout the monument, tiny figures of worshippers buying flowers from flower sellers, sculpted dwarves bearing trays where offerings can be placed on the *stupa* reliefs on the drum of the main monument, Buddha and *Bodhisattva* figures with the right hand raised in the *abhaya* posture, worshipping deities, and prostrating and kneeling *naga* and human figures in *anjala mudra*, along with the imagery of people moving towards the *stupa's* gateway and into its inner precinct. There is also a *Bodhisattva* kneeling in *anjali mudra* before the standing Buddha. Some stone slabs have more images of the embodied Buddha by comparison with others displaying symbolic representations.

A good example of the right-to-left flow of a narrative, flowing with the circumambulating pilgrim, is a drum slab in Chennai depicting the *Vessantara Jataka*. Vessantara holds a pitcher and pours water into the hands of a Brahmin who accepts the gift of an elephant. In the second scene from the right, people complain to the enthroned king, Vessantara's father, about the giving away of their elephant. In the third episode, Vessantara gifts his chariot, represented as an ox cart, to a Brahmin. In the fourth scene, Vessantara and his wife Madri carry their children on their shoulders to the hermitage built for them by the god Saka. The scholar pointed out that the most consistent theme of the surviving imagery of the *stupa* is the repeated representation of devotees in various postures: motion is devotion, in the pilgrimage context of a site such as Amaravati which displays models of ritual practice. **– *J.K.***

Chennai 115

Segment of the Vessantara Jātaka

Islamic Aesthetics

PAST PROGRAMMES

Mongol Connections: Art, Aesthetics, and Technologies

November 10th, 11th & 12th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Sussan Babaie (Professor of the Arts of Iran and Islam at The Courtauld, University of London)

Prof. Sussan Babaie speaks during 'Mongol Connections: Art, Aesthetics, and Technologies'

In presenting a rich view of the cultural history of the Ilkhanids – the Mongol Khanate encompassing present-day Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Eastern Anatolia, and Armenia, during the 13th and 14th centuries, this three-day lecture series took up two challenges. Methodologically, it aimed to break away from nation-based art history, by focussing on the near-global connectivity that defined the Mongol empire throughout its existence. From an art historical perspective, Prof. Babaie proposed to look in a new way at objects, evidencing their ability to tell multiple stories across different geographies and historical periods. The lecture series was an outcome of a large-scale research project housed at the Courtauld and supported by the Getty Connecting Art Histories initiative, in which Prof. Babaie, together with three senior scholars and 12 young researchers, worked on new ways in which to think about the Mongol empire, whose legacy, although immense, is often downplayed or even overlooked in modern and contemporary histories.

At the outset, it became important to challenge directly the perceived image of the Mongols as unique perpetrators of vast destruction, with prevailing accounts describing the sudden appearance of the Mongol troops, their swift action and capacity to wipe out cities, as well as holocaust-levels of human loss of life. In the re-assessed account, the focus moved to the aftermath of the invasion, when the regions integrated into the expanding Mongol empire experienced unprecedented levels of prosperity, driven by the creation of a new model of empire based on integration and connectivity.

The first two lectures expounded the specific understanding of connectivity in regard to the Mongol world. At its centre stood the notion of circulation, as opposed to the current – and historical – Eurocentric vision of the Silk Roads as linear, with European capitals as the inevitable endpoint of these commercial, intellectual, and spiritual routes. The Mongols devised a new model of empire based on their nomadic culture, which they never replaced with a sedentary one. This nomadic model of empire can be observed at many levels, including in terms of the Mongols' unique protocols of resource collection and distribution, their adaptability and culture of negotiation, and the impulse given to the continuous circulation of goods as either trade, taxation, or gift giving.

Furthermore, circulation becomes a relevant perspective to understand the artistic production of the empire. One immediate manifestation is in the supple adoption by the conquering hordes of cultural markers encountered in their new territories: in the case of the Ilkhanids, a self-described subordinate division of the empire, this marker was Islam. It is noteworthy that the conquest of Baghdad, the core of the

Muslim world, by a non-Muslim power had vast consequences in the *longue durée*; not only did the Mongols become Islamicised, they also promoted a high level of Persian culture throughout their domain.

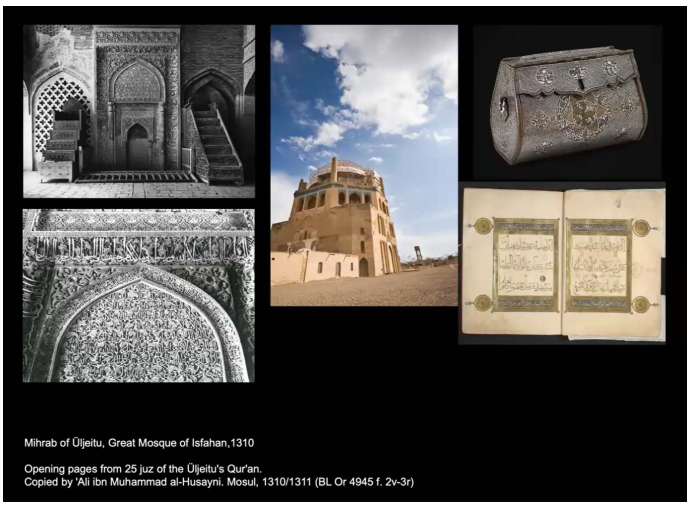
Rustam slaying Shaqqad, Great Mongol Shahnama, detached folio, Ilkhanid Tabriz, 1330-40, British Museum

H says he is wearing Chinese imperial robe! Mongol robe! Just like they all say Marco polo went to China; he went to the Mongol empire!

The merging of the Perso-Islamic-Mongol worldview is illustrated in manuscripts. An example that shined through in the lecture was the first ever manuscript of a *World History*, written by Rashid al-Din, a perfect illustration of the self-image of the Ilkhanids who, in contrast to the Mongols of the Far East whom the local Chinese perceived as foreigners throughout their rule, were seeking legitimation in the Persian territories. This manuscript, together with the more famous *Shahnama*, the 10th-century Iranian book of kings by the poet Fardausi, demonstrates the coming together of the Mongol lineage from the Golden Family, with an Iranian model of kingship, and the Islamic model of authority. Together, these elements lead to what Prof. Babaie views as Mongol universalism and ecumenism, a foundation which allows for a more complex understanding of the creation and circulation of motifs and styles in manuscripts, as well as other artefacts such as clothes or decorations.

The second day of lectures took forward the possibilities of connectivity with reference to what Prof. Babaie playfully termed 'bling' – that is, the extraordinary investment into luxury materials and, more importantly, into the support, commission, and development of new technologies to render these luxury objects. Before Chinggis Khan had conquered Asia, the Mongols produced objects, clothes, and dwellings using materials available in the steppe, such as felt or leather that was not too luxurious. Once they were installed in their conquered domains, however, the taste for luxury exploded. Exquisite objects were both a social signifier and, as gifts, an important political vehicle. It is particularly in paintings that the cosmopolitan and highly sophisticated arrangements of the Mongol court can be observed, especially the way in which ambience is produced through different media: clothes, lights, as well as the decoration of the tents with rich, colourful, and luxurious materials.

The architecture championed by the Mongols owed a lot to their nomadic style as well. *Soft architecture* – the building and decorations of tents – reached new heights, quite literally, with the Ilkhanids. In fact, monumental scale is a defining feature of their architectural legacy, including in the built cities and complexes. Because, of course, the Mongols built capitals, yet not in the nation-state sense: the Khan and his court rarely lived in cities like Tabriz or Sultaniyye, spending most of the year with their hordes; the palaces were complemented by tents located outside the city, with the permanent buildings hosting primarily craftsmen and administrators. A remarkable innovation of the Ilkhanids, which was to be replicated henceforth throughout the Islamic world, was to turn monument building to a person into *a complex* of buildings, each with a different function. Uljeitu's tomb complex in Sultaniyye is one of the first examples of this new model. On the same site, one can notice a second element of Mongol taste-making that was to have a lasting influence: craftsmen began to introduce accents with blue-glazed tile decorations as a major part of the sheathing of the building. At first introduced selectively, they became a key aspect of architecture in this part of the world, reaching the height of refinement in Timurid and Ottoman



Mihrab of Üljeitu, Great Mosque of Isfahan,1310

Opening pages from 25 juz of the Üljeitu's Qur'an. Copied by 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Husayni. Mosul, 1310/1311 (BL Or 4945 f. 2v-3r)

architecture. Finally, existing technologies were raised to a new level with the Ilkhanids, a glowing example from Uljeitu's mausoleum being the two-layered dome.

By the third session, it had become clear that the Ilkhanids had achieved a shared aesthetics across different media, each artefact exhibiting an intricate and wondrous quality, as well as the artisan's highly evolved skills. The commissioning of buildings, manuscripts, and objects of various kinds further led the conversation towards patronage, and the political role played by the Khatun – the Khan's principal wife – in the West Asian portion of the Mongol empire. It is one of the striking aspects of this culture that the Khatun was as important as the Khan himself: in courtly scenes, the royal couple is often shown sitting together on the throne, in an intimate posture, their hands and feet touching, often in conversation; this intimacy is also backed by textual evidence, as well as by the observation that details on clothes can be seen from only up-close, suggesting the physical proximity of the court. What is more, nearly all paintings depict the presence of women as participants, all of them dressed in the regalia of the royal status. In this context, Prof. Babaie shared the fascinating story of *the Courtauld bag*, a unique object that had entered the collection in the 1960s and until recently had been considered a carrier of official documents, hence a man's object. In an illustration of the methodological innovations of the project, Prof. Babaie retraced this object to a manuscript, where it was depicted in the hands of a woman attendant of the Khatun, thus understanding that it functioned more likely as a royal lady's purse. This finding was corroborated by the exceptional design of the lid, featuring a scene of revelry, with all participants attending the Khatun and a detail of a mirror in which one can see the Khatun herself, thus evidencing the very function of the bag as a carrier of personal possessions.

The closing lecture took the participants on a long voyage across empires, trade routes, voyager's accounts, and private homes across the world, in which the long-lasting taste for *blue on white ceramics* has been a feature since Mongol times. And yet, it is precisely the Mongol legacy that is almost entirely obscured in the various histories of this transnational aesthetics, with the credit for its invention most often going to the Chinese. Prof. Babaie termed the blue on white as the first global brand, a proof of the connectivity that the Mongols built their empire upon, and which they bequeathed to the mediaeval and early modern world. To enter in a dialogue with the Mongol empire in our times is to learn from the logic of this different way of being global. **– *C.B.***

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.

Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory

Conjuring Empire: Art, Faith, and Power in the Byzantine World

PAST PROGRAMMES

The Classical Tradition and Byzantine Women: Images, Objects, and Alternative Models of the Feminine

August 19th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Alicia Walker (Professor of Medieval Art and Architecture at Bryn Mawr College)

What can art tell us about how Byzantine women lived their lives? A striking feature of journeying through Byzantine history is to notice how little we can know or speculate about the details of women's lives, particularly from textual sources. Prof. Alicia Walker's talk was somewhat unique in the series, for focussing on women's histories through the clues that objects, both religious and secular, have left behind. Given that the Byzantine empire lasted over a thousand years, and inherited the legacy of Classical Greece and Rome, while also creating a distinctive Christian identity, the material culture of this empire is fascinating in what they reveal about a people navigating complex, changing, and powerful social influences across its long history.

Prof. Walker's lecture spanned a large swathe of Byzantine history, beginning from the 4th century, when it was very much the heart of the Classical Roman empire, to the early 13th century, when the fall of Constantinople in 1204 brought a definitive end to the middle Byzantine period, and heralded the dusk of the empire. The question of how a series of distinct objects from such a vast historical period could tell a cohesive story on gender in this culture was at the heart of Prof. Walker's lecture, and was one she examined through different approaches through her arguments.

Leading from Leonora Neville's 2019 book, *Byzantine Gender, Past Imperfect*, which used textual sources to study how gender was understood and navigated in the Byzantine world, Prof. Walker expanded its concerns into the realm of art history. In brief, prevailing scholarship agrees that Byzantine society was androgenic or centred around and upholding the primacy of men. Both men and women were thought to have gendered natures, where women were seen as passive, emotionally unstable, and generally unsuitable for positions of authority. Their primary role was to support the men in their lives and bear children. Men, on the other hand, were seen to be active, constant, and self-possessed, able to control their emotions and act in moderation, not falling prey to emotional shifts. Interestingly, both men and women in Byzantine society could be seen as more feminine or masculine based on their actions or positions in life, showing that even in such a clearly divided society, gender still had a certain fluidity. This understanding of the way gender was perceived is important as it also deeply informed the objects that men and

women used, and the art that they commissioned and viewed around them.

The early period of the Byzantine empire was also a period of deep flux as long-established Classical traditions gradually made way for a Christian way of life. To understand how this transition affected the perception of gender, Prof. Walker first presented us with a fascinating series of gold bracelets that have been found across the Byzantine world, primarily dating from the 5th–6th centuries CE. While found in different contexts and geographies, what united them was the depiction of a female figure, sometimes in prayer, and other times richly ornamented on their central medallions. These figures alternated between depictions of Mary, mother of Christ, and a depiction of *Charis*, a Classical personification of the concept of grace. What is interesting here is that grace itself was seen as a divine endowment both in the Christian tradition and in pre-Christian history, where figures like Athena would imbue their preferred humans with God-like qualities, making them visibly radiant. It would also make them physically more attractive and more persuasive in society. The continuation of the *Charis* motif in jewellery into the Christian world, woven into depictions of Mary, gives us clues as to how the idealised woman was conceptualised as both the pious and modest figure of the mother of Christ, while simultaneously embodying the radiant qualities of grace from the Classical world.

To further examine this complex negotiation of womanhood in early Byzantium, we looked at another fascinating object from the period, a *pyxis*, a small cylindrical container with no handles and a lid used in the Classical world to store cosmetics and trinkets. This *pyxis*, from the 5th or 6th century, depicted scenes from the Judgement of Paris, a pivotal Greek myth where the Trojan prince Paris is called upon to judge which among the three goddesses — Athena, Hera and Aphrodite — is the fairest, and he chooses Aphrodite, the Goddess of erotic love, as she had promised him Helen of Troy if he chose her, and this choice almost directly sets in motion the Trojan war. The *pyxis*, carved in ivory, depicts Aphrodite in the nude, and is daringly beautiful in its creation. However, the choice of the story also indicates that in this instance, Aphrodite is not merely beautiful, but she is clever and manipulative too. We also looked at a few other examples of the use of Aphrodite in early Byzantine art, with a particularly striking example being a portrait of the goddess on the medallion of a lapis lazuli necklace. Prof. Walker pointed out how the necklace would have been worn with the medallion reaching the chest of the wearer, and the parallels it might have drawn between the woman and the goddess.

Necklace with Pendant of Aphrodite Anadyomene, early Byzantine, sixth or seventh century, H. 1.75 in, gold and lapis lazuli, Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington, D.C.

A question that was at the heart of Prof. Walker's lecture was of how we might reconcile the ideas of female subjecthood in Byzantium with the strong values placed on Classical models. While Classical motifs like Aphrodite remained popular in early Christian and even middle Byzantium, their use was also tempered with an emphasis on the importance of Christian virtues. An example of this tension that Prof. Walker highlighted was the Veroli casket. Made from richly carved ivory and bone panels, the casket would have been used to hold scent bottles or jewellery. While the four side panels show scenes of frolic and gaiety between the Greek gods, Ares, Mars, and Aphrodite, the lid of the casket is what is of particular interest to scholars as it depicts the story of Europa and the bull. The story of Europa, the Phoenician princess whose beauty caught the attention of the Greek god Zeus, who then took the form of a bull and abducted her, is a somewhat ominous addition to an otherwise gay narrative. But scholars agree that it indicates a tension between the Classical norms of beauty and sexual freedom, and the Christian warnings of what might happen to a woman who transgressed the Christian teachings.

While it is beyond the scope of this report to speak on all the objects Prof. Walker showed us in her lecture, the final object we looked at together demands mention. The Projecta casket, a remarkably large object of beaten silver and

gold, was made in the very early Byzantine period, likely in the 4th century. It was used as a bath object, to carry toiletries for a noble woman. We know the object belonged to a woman, based on the inscription. The lid shows a married couple, and the inscription tells us that the couple are Secundus and Projecta who are identified as Christians. Apart from this statement, however, the iconography on the casket is pagan. We see Aphrodite grooming herself as she gazes into a mirror surrounded by her attendants. And right below this image, on the body of the casket, we see Projecta also in the act of grooming, surrounded by her own attendants, in a beautiful and symbolic mirroring. But how would it have been appropriate for a modest Christian woman to have such an extravagant object decorated with pagan imagery? A clue that Prof. Walker pointed us to lay in the portrait of the woman and her husband. In the portrait, we see Projecta holding a scroll as she stands next to her husband. Earlier scholarship presumed the scroll denoted a marriage contract, but the fact that the couple are not holding hands as would be the norm, indicates that the scroll may have other connotations. In examples of sculpture from the same time, we have seen depictions of women holding scrolls (like the marble bust of a woman holding a scroll from 5th-century Constantinople), which indicate her status as a learned woman, one who had been educated in the Greek ideals of *Paideia*. Prof. Walker argued that if we see Projecta as a highly educated woman in both the Classical and the Christian concepts, the choice of depictions on the casket become more interesting. Going back to the image of a naked Aphrodite mirroring Projecta herself, we see they are also distinct. Projecta being clothed and seated in a restrained manner also indicates that she is a Christian who follows the doctrines of modesty, is also temperate, and has control of her environment. The Greek ideals of *Paideia* emphasised all these qualities as being possessed of by one who is truly learned. Such an object is indicative of a high-ranking educated woman navigating both a Christian and a pagan identity in a calculating and intentional manner. The intentionality is further exemplified when considering that while this object was one involved in a woman's bath ritual, it was by no means meant as a private object, only seen by her and her attendants. The casket itself also depicts Projecta and her attendants, one of whom is carrying a similarly large casket, processing to the public or at least semi-public bath. This, and other evidence from the period depicting noble and high-ranking women going to the bathhouse with their attendants, displaying their wealth not only through the objects carried, but also in the adornment of the attendants, indicates that objects such as the Projecta casket served a social role as well, showing wealth and status, but also displaying the religious and cultural identities, and the intellectual strength of the women who owned them.

To conclude, what Prof. Walker's talk highlighted was the active role that women played in navigating a transitional world, through material and visual culture. In engaging with a public world while largely remaining silent in literature, politics or governance, high-ranking women who were still highly educated in *Paideia* were adept at displaying their intellect and awareness of the Classical world, while also embodying newly emergent Christian social values. In a world where women had little active presence in positions of power, they still managed to hold their own in the ways that they could, through the objects, the art, and the intellectual and social spaces they could access and speak in. ***– A.T.***

Prof. Alicia Walker speaks during 'The Classical Tradition and Byzantine Women: Images, Objects, and Alternative Models of the Feminine'

The Power of Relics

August 26th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Karin Krause (Associate Professor of Byzantine Art and Religious Culture in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago)

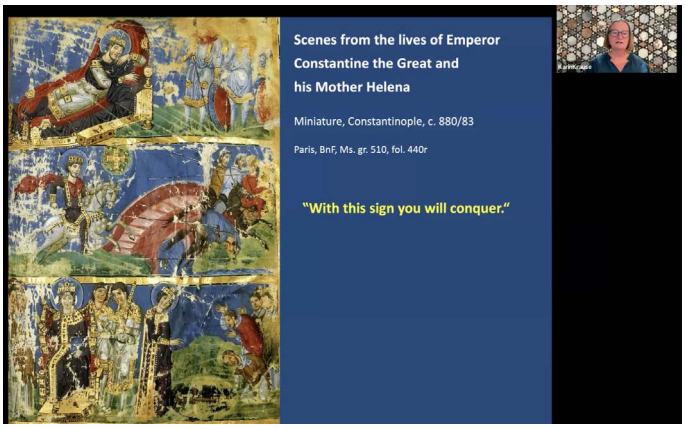
"Those who touch the bones of the martyrs participate in their sanctity," wrote St. Basil of Caesarea, reflecting the Byzantine passion for collecting and venerating holy relics. Speaking about the power of relics in the Byzantine empire, Prof. Karin Krause covered some key points in a topic that runs parallel to, and oftentimes overlaps with iconoclasm.

The lecture traced the evolution, function, and political significance of relics in the Byzantine empire, from the founding of Christianity to its integration into imperial ideology and everyday life.

The importance of relics — the objects connected with Christ, the saints, and biblical events, and believed to contain divine power — can be traced back to the *Acts* in the *New Testament* where people were supposedly healed by cloth that had been touched by Paul, or even by Peter's shadow falling upon them. Holiness and the power of saints could therefore be materially transmitted. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the 2nd century describes early Christians collecting the bones of martyrs 'as more precious than gold'. These were housed in chapels which subsequently became the focal point for veneration and became important during feasts of saints.

The early church fathers, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Basil, wrote that engaging with relics in a multisensorial way (kissing and touching) allowed a truly emotional experience, and direct participation in the sanctity of the saints. The doctrine of *pars pro toto* — a part of the saint carries all his power — led to and legitimised the fragmentation of relics and its spread across the empire. John of Damascus referred to the relics as 'receptacles of divine energy' and defended relics (and, thereby, icons as well) by claiming that through these objects, God worked His salvation.

The victory of Constantine the Great at the Milvian Bridge (312) is a significant event for relics. He attributed his victory over Maxentius to the image of the holy cross. Constantine's mother,



Helena, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where a series of miracles led to her discovery of the holy cross and the nails. The relic was divided between Jerusalem and Constantinople. Constantine had it embedded in his monumental column, and the nails were converted into bridle bits and a helmet. This integration of Passion relics into imperial military and for state protection established the pre-eminence of Constantinople.

In the early 7th century, fearing a Muslim invasion of Jerusalem, Emperor Heraclius brought the remaining piece of The Holy Cross to Constantinople, where it was publicly displayed at the Hagia Sophia three times a year. The veneration of relics was a part of everyday life, especially during famine, drought, or military threat. Imperial and ecclesiastical leaders carried the relics in a grand procession through Constantinople. This reinforced Byzantine faith, imperial authority, and a sense of community, even if sometimes, the prayed for miracles failed to materialise (or materialised in abundance — as in 1037 when a procession of relics to end six months of drought resulted in a massive hailstorm that destroyed trees and broke the roof tiles of homes).

During the following centuries, Byzantine rulers acquired relics; some were formally given, and some were stolen, although these acquisitions were interpreted to be divinely sanctioned. The translation of St. Chrysostom in 438 and the arrival of the hand of John the Baptist in 956 are interesting stories. The relics were stored

in Constantinople's palace complex; by the 12th century, the Pharos Chapel, which housed the relics of Christ's Passion, was even called the 'New Sinai', 'New Jerusalem', and 'New Golgotha', indicating the power of relics and a powerful narrative to create new holy geographies.

The arrival of the Holy Mandylion in 944 and the supposed correspondence between Christ and King Abgar ushered a wave of Supersessionism in Constantinople. In a sermon, Emperor Constantine VII described the Mandylion and the letter as the new Tablets of Law and their reliquary as the new Ark of the Covenant. This Supersessionist assertion that Byzantines were now the God's chosen people and Constantinople was the true Holy City was bolstered by the aura, story, and symbology given to the relics.

Prof. Krause closed the information-packed session with the movement of relics from

Constantinople to St. Chapelle in Paris in 1240, when King Louis IX purchased major relics from the beleaguered Byzantine empire. For nearly 1,000 years, relics had been used to consolidate imperial authority, and the integration of relic veneration into Byzantine life had far reaching social and political influence. **– *A.S.***

The Global Reach of Textiles and Jewelry in Early Byzantium

September 2nd, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Elizabeth Dospel Williams (Penny Vinik Chair of Fashion, Textiles, and Jewelry at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Elizabeth Dospel Williams is the curator of one of the world's leading collections: Byzantine Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She gave an intensive lecture on the global reach of textiles and jewellery in early Byzantium. She has researched Byzantine dress and aesthetics, as well as material fragments and objects in museum galleries, archives and those sourced from archaeological field sites.

Williams discussed how Byzantine textiles were not only material adornment but global currency. She highlighted how the Byzantines used patterns and prints across both textiles and furniture as a common medium. In modern contexts, however, textiles and furniture are treated as separate categories.

The following report is a review of the lecture Williams gave where she exemplified to an Indian audience the resonances of the Byzantine aesthetics and luxuries, and how we share a heritage of global trade and culture.

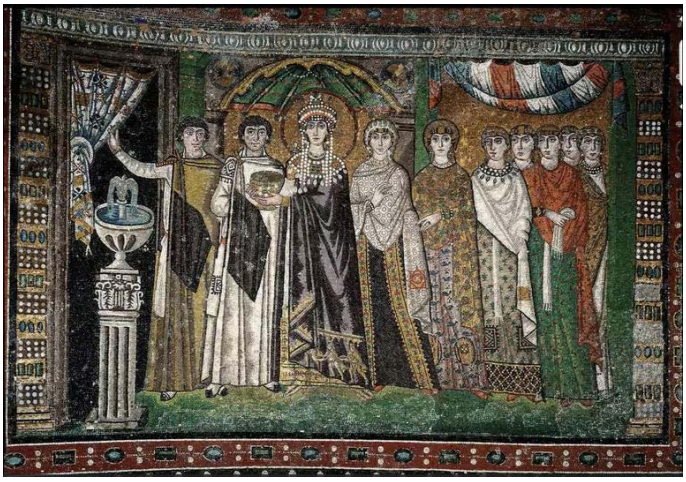
Introduction: Textiles and Jewellery in the Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine empire (330 – 1453 CE) traded in the luxury goods of textiles and jewellery across the late Antique and mediaeval world. The global trade networks of the Byzantine civilisation extended from Western Europe and the mediaeval Islamic world to the Far East.

Textiles and jewellery were produced, distributed, and transported across borders more easily than

architecture or sculpture, and thus they became more portable modes of expanding trade, power networks, aesthetic cultures, and values.

Byzantine silks embroidered with gold were renowned, and these often featured Christian and imperial symbols like medallions with figures and animals. Their jewellery was characterised by intricate gold work, and rich gemstones such as garnets, emeralds, and pearls. Christian iconography was used to convey status and meaning. Both their textiles and jewellery displayed a continuation of Roman traditions with added innovations that influenced the wider mediaeval world. Wealth and power in the Byzantine world were demonstrated through opulent materials and detailed craftsmanship.



Textiles as Global Currency: Byzantium and India

The Byzantine empire was at a crossroads of trade and political influence across the Mediterranean, and was a gateway to Asia. Its capital, Constantinople, was seen as the 'New Rome'. With Egypt as a gateway for trade into the Byzantine empire, Africa, and Asia, the empire's trade networks expanded into mediaeval India and beyond. Cotton grown in Egypt was processed as raw material, woven and finished in India before being shipped back to the Byzantine empire. Techniques such as resist-dyed patterns were done by hand for garments and other textiles. Furnishing textiles often illustrated Christ enthroned with apostles, and these fabrics with painted icons were common in churches. Textiles were also adorned with mythological imagery which were seen in elite domestic spheres and religious contexts.

The trade networks between the Byzantine empire and India included connections of pepper, indigo, cotton, and gems. Byzantine coins have been found in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and evidence of silks, textiles, and goldsmithing in Indian styles points to a connection between global trade and Byzantine luxury culture.

Imperial Control of Silk and Tyrian Purple

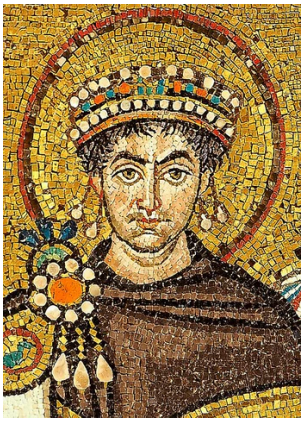
As with most luxury goods, textiles were also used as currency in dowry and diplomatic relations. As opposed to jewellery, surviving archaeological remains of textiles, mostly in fragments, are organic and can be carbon dated. The history of these garments and textiles can be more accurately mapped on a timeline within the context of political and geographical empires.

Under Emperor Justinian, silkworms were smuggled from China in the 6th century, and Byzantium became one of the first centres in the Mediterranean to produce silk. The production of silk became one of the empire's most important industries, and its production was tightly controlled by the State.

Later Byzantine emperors monopolised the production of silk in imperial workshops, and the gifting of silks was an important diplomatic and political gesture. In Constantinople, silk looms were largely situated next to the imperial palaces, and the technology of making silk was highly

controlled. Silks have been found buried under churches, as well as European church treasuries and graves. Written documentation has also been found with the textiles. Inventories, letters and orders for the production of silks and textiles have been found in church treasuries as important evidence of economic history.

The colour Tyrian purple was associated with the imperial court and was reserved for use by the emperor. Also called royal purple or imperial purple, Tyrian purple was one of the most famous and expensive dyes of Antiquity. It was produced from the secretions of certain sea snails found in the Eastern Mediterranean. Fermenting the mollusc glands in sunlight produced a rich purple that deepened with exposure to light, and extracting the dye was an extremely labour-intensive process. In Rome, laws restricted its use to elite classes, and Tyrian purple became the colour of emperors and senators, used as imperial authority in the Byzantine empire.



Jewellery as Identity and Power

Gold was the primary medium in Byzantine jewellery, and gold jewellery was usually set with precious gemstones such as garnets, sapphires, emeralds, and amethysts as well as pearls. Gems from South Asia such as sapphires and garnets were also mounted on Byzantine gold settings. Techniques of Roman metalwork were inherited and continually adapted, and these included filigree work, chasing, engraving and enamelling. Enamelling was a specialty of the Byzantines alongside other techniques of granulation and filigree.

Byzantine textiles and jewellery were not solely luxury objects. They also signified imperial power and religious symbolism. Religious symbols included crosses on pendants, and amulets with a mix of Christian and pagan motifs. Jewellery such as wedding rings, devotional pendants, and imperial crowns marked status, piety, and wealth. These were often given as diplomatic gifts and also used in religious devotion. Protective power was also vested in jewellery, and these were engraved as reliquary gems.

The Byzantine art of textiles and jewellery deeply influenced the fashions of mediaeval Europe, Islamic decorative arts, and even the Renaissance. The ornaments worn by Byzantine women and men acted as cultural identity markers.

Mixing Mediums: Textiles, Jewellery, and Furniture

Dr. Williams also showed examples of textiles and jewellery used in furnishings and furniture. One of her key insights was that the Byzantines did not distinctly separate categories of fashion, furnishings, and art as is done in contemporary contexts.

Byzantine fabrics adorned thrones, jewels decorated reliquaries, patterns crossed from clothing to chairs for example, silks were draped over altars, carved into furniture with ivory panels, and rendered in stone mosaics. Jewellery techniques of granulation and cloisonne were adapted into embroidered patterns.

Byzantine Resonances across Global Networks
Examples of Byzantine textiles and jewellery have been found in treasuries, churches, and trade routes across Europe, North Africa, and West Asia. These have survived as fragments of resist-dyed materials and hordes of jewellery that were excaveted from archaeological sites. The influence of Byzantine luxury culture and trade can also be seen in historical Ottoman court dress, as well as European Renaissance luxury goods. Today, Byzantine aesthetics and ideals still influence the textiles and jewellery of elite fashion houses. Evidence of Byzantine material culture can be seen influencing global fashion.

Byzantine motifs of mirrored symmetry, jewelled patterns, and sacred symbolism are still trending in contemporary couture markets. From Gustav Klimt's golden mosaic-like paintings to Chanel's Byzantine inspired jewellery, leading designers have envisioned Byzantine opulence as their global aesthetic of luxury. We see today Byzantine revival in high fashion couture, ready to wear garments, and accessories.

Conclusion
Our understanding of visual culture today is inseparable from the legacies of Byzantium. Mediaeval symbolism and aesthetics have been reimagined across centuries, resurfacing in Renaissance art, luxury fashion, and contemporary design. The classical ideals of Byzantine opulence — richly woven silks, intricate jewellery, and the seamless crossing of motifs between fabric, furniture, and ornament — still resonate in today's global markets of couture and high-end craftsmanship. These creations, whether digital or handmade, remain testaments to the same pursuit of beauty, meaning, and power that shaped Byzantium.

Byzantium's textile and jewellery traditions were never confined to a single empire; they were woven from Indian, Persian, Central Asian, and Roman influences into a global fabric of exchange. These objects functioned as political tools, religious symbols, and markers of social identity, while at the same time dissolving the boundaries between what we now categorise as fashion, furniture, and art.

As Elizabeth Dospel Williams illuminated, the Byzantines lived in a seamless material world where a cloak could embody diplomacy, a gem could symbolise eternity, and a woven pattern could cross oceans. To revisit their world is to be reminded that culture itself is a fabric — threaded across borders, dyed with shared meanings, and adorned with symbols of power and devotion. The brilliance of Byzantium endures not as a relic of the past, but as a living influence — glimmering in the mosaics of Ravenna, in the saris of India, and on the runways of Paris.

In the end, Byzantium does not simply belong to history. It belongs to us — woven into the very texture of our global imagination. – ***M.K. & S.K.***

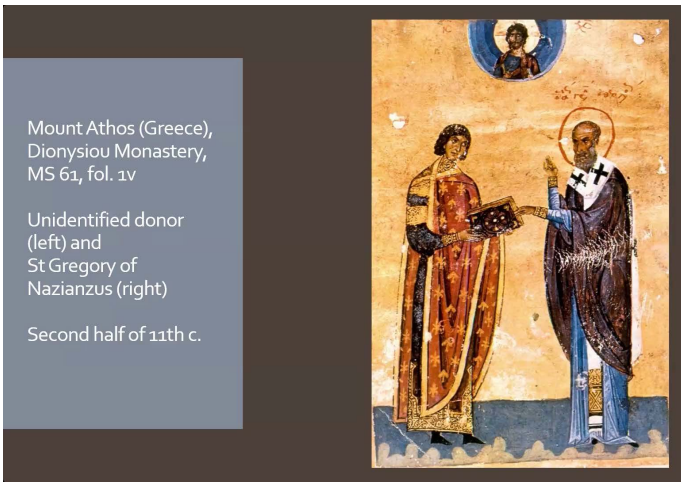
Being Byzantine: The Testimony of Dress

1. Byzantine Dress as an Identity Marker

2. Embodying the Identity of Empire: Byzantine Imperial Dress

September 9th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Maria Parani (Associate Professor in Byzantine and Post Byzantine Art and Archaeology at the University of Cyprus)

The Byzantine empire lasted about 1,100 years. And when you consider the size of the empire, the diversity of the people (with their language, faith, and ideologies) that gathered under its banner, and the empire's shifting boundaries, the concept of 'Byzantine identity' is complicated. In her lecture, Prof. Maria Parani focussed on clothes (including jewellery, accessories, manner of wearing, styling, and even posture) as one of the key markers of Byzantine identity. In the second part of her lecture, she discussed how royal attire embodied the Byzantine identity. The lecture was part of the ACT lecture series, 'Conjuring Empire: Art, Faith, and Power in the Byzantine World'.



Byzantine identity (as Prof. Parani discussed) rested on three pillars: a Hellenic education, Orthodox Christianity, and embracing Roman political institutions and imperial ideology. So, while we may refer to them as Byzantines today, they identified themselves as Romans (for the Byzantine empire was a continuation of the Roman empire), and used their attire to claim this identity and significantly differentiate themselves from 'the others'.

Apart from mere functionality, clothes indicated one's status and wealth. Layers indicated wealth and higher stature. Although the multi-layered, heavy, ornate clothes often inhibited free movement and necessitated a slow, deliberate gait, these inconveniences were ignored for it imparted stateliness and the appearance of the virtue of self-control.

Linen, wool, cotton, and silk were the primary fabrics used; expensive garments had gold and silver embroidery. Leather was primarily used for footwear and belts, while from the late 11th century onwards, fur began to be used for trimming tunics, lining coats, and in winter garments. A variety of bright, striking colours and complex designs were also indicators of wealth, status, and prestige. The clothes were tailored, and in keeping with the Christian values of that time, men and women ensured very little of the body was visible: the hands, face, and for the men — the neck.

An interesting aspect of clothes and identity is how garments and motifs with Persian origins (the kaftan, for instance), were comfortably absorbed into Byzantine identity by a process of naturalisation and appropriation. A convoluted story tracing all the way back to Alexander's conquest of Persia and his own empire falling to the Romans, enabled the Romans to claim the kaftan as Byzantine, even if it came from, say, Baghdad.

The Byzantine male's wardrobe, with its length, ornate embellishments, restrictiveness, and significantly without any military overtones — the very features that projected their Byzantine identity, cultural superiority, status, and wealth — in fact, made them appear particularly effeminate to their counterparts in the West. Women's clothes had to balance the contradiction of modesty and visibility (their role in Byzantine society was to eventually become a wife and a mother). Their wardrobe primarily consisted of gowns, mantles, and headdresses; these were colourful garments made of patterned fabrics

with embroidered or woven trimmings, at least for those who could afford them.

Prof. Parani closed the first session with the observation that while some Western-inspired, close-fitting dresses appeared, male writers of that time almost never criticised women's foreign fashions. A clear reflection that men, not women, embodied the empire's public identity.

The imperial dress was a critical identifier of Byzantine identity — for the ruler and the people. It was more in keeping with tradition than the fashion of the times. The imperial vestments were inherited across reigns to signify uninterrupted imperial lineage. This was a powerful exhibition of stability and continuity, something that became essential as the empire went through troubled times.

The emperor's wardrobe consisted of heavy layers of silk, gold threads, precious stones, fabrics dyed in true purple, and the uniquely Byzantine imperial marker — red shoes. These served not only to distinguish the emperor but also to elevate him. Distinctive imperial insignia like the crown, sceptre, and *akakia* communicated

divine authority. Ceremonial manuals prescribed the emperor's attire for each ritual as well as the multiple changes to his wardrobe. Two of the most important pieces of the imperial wardrobe were the chlamys (the administrative mantle, worn during coronations and official functions), and the *loros* (a jewelled scarf that symbolised triumph and Christ-like kingship).

Prof. Parani concluded the session with an observation that the imperial attire served to communicate the relationship between the emperor and the subjects, and between emperor and God.**– *A.S.***

Heart of Glass: Mosaics and Byzantium

September 16th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Liz James (Professor of Art History at the University of Sussex)

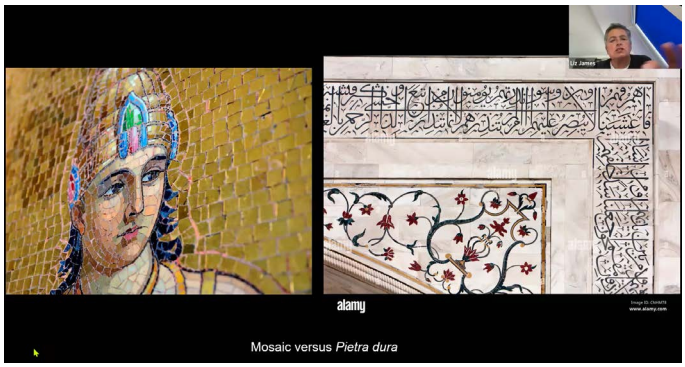
Professor Liz James introduces Byzantine mosaics by situating them within their artistic and aesthetic qualities, while also addressing the social, economic, and technological conditions that shaped their production. Beyond celebrating their visual brilliance, she seeks to expand how mosaics are read and understood as a complex art-form embedded in broader historical contexts.

She begins her lecture with images of the Salviati Workshop in London, named after the Italian mosaic-making firm, highlighting how parts of its original facade still survive. From there, she moves across political contexts, presenting Fascist mosaics in 1930s Rome and Communist mosaics from the USSR, before returning to London to discuss a modern mosaic located on Shepherdess Walk in East London. Through these examples, James demonstrates how mosaic as a medium has been repeatedly mobilised across different ideological frameworks.

James then extends her discussion to India to contextualise mosaic practices beyond the Byzantine and European traditions. She introduces stone mosaics such as the *pietra dura* of the Taj Mahal and the glass inlay work at Mor Chowk in the Raj Mahal. The use of blue glazed tiles in these examples evokes parallels with Iranian tile traditions, suggesting transregional aesthetic connections. She notes that these Indian examples employ larger pieces, functioning more

as inlay than as classical tessellated mosaics.

Finally, she presents the mosaics of the Laxmi Vilas Palace from the 1890s, which make use of very small tesserae, primarily glass, with occasional stone. Here, the tesserae are carefully cut and shaped to articulate bodily forms and facial features, allowing for a high degree of detail and figural precision.



James establishes a threshold for what may be defined as a *mosaic* within the Indian context. In the comparison she presents, the image on the left exemplifies what she identifies as a true mosaic, composed of small, cube-shaped glass tesserae arranged in a relatively regular composition. By contrast, the image on the right represents *pietra dura*, the hard-stone inlay technique seen at the Taj Mahal, which, although visually similar, belongs to a different material and technical tradition.

After setting this distinction, she structures the remainder of her lecture around four key questions: (1) How are mosaics made? (2) What materials are they made from? (3) Why were mosaics used? and (4) Where were mosaics used?

While mosaics are most strongly associated with Byzantium, James emphasises that they were produced across the wider Mediterranean world. She begins by explaining the process of mosaic-making, noting that mosaics are primarily composed of tesserae, small cubes of coloured glass, most commonly in shades of blue, green, red, and gold.

Gold glass tesserae, in particular, are made using a sandwich technique: gold leaf is beaten to an extremely thin layer and placed between a thick base layer of glass and a thinner top layer of brownish glass. This is achieved by blowing a cylinder of glass, cutting it open, and applying the gold leaf to the surface before fusing it to the base glass. A typical tessera measures approximately 0.7 cm square and weighs around 1.5 grams.

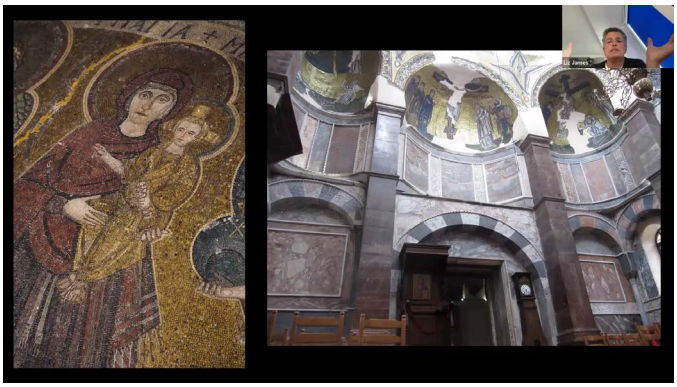
James extends her lecture by turning to examples from the mediaeval Mediterranean, beginning with the 6th-century dome mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. She emphasises the immense labour and material investment required to produce mosaics at this scale, noting that the tesserae are set directly into successive layers of wet plaster, demanding careful planning and coordination.

She then deepens the discussion of mosaic technique through an example from Cyprus, in the small village of Kiti on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. Here, she focusses on the church of Panagia Angeloktistis, which contains a relatively small but significant mosaic depicting the Virgin Mary flanked by two angels.

At the centre of the composition, the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, is rendered in red mosaic, holding the Christ Child. Archangels Michael and Gabriel stand on either side, distinguished by their richly coloured wings. These wings transition from soft greens and blues into deeper reds and greens reminiscent of peacock feathers, creating a sense of movement and luminosity.

James draws attention to the technical complexity of installing mosaics on curved architectural surfaces. Because the image is set within a domed space, the figures themselves are subtly curved rather than conceived as flat imagery. Each mosaic must therefore be specifically designed in relation to the architectural surface on which it appears, responding to the curvature, scale, and spatial context of its location rather than functioning as a transferable or autonomous image.

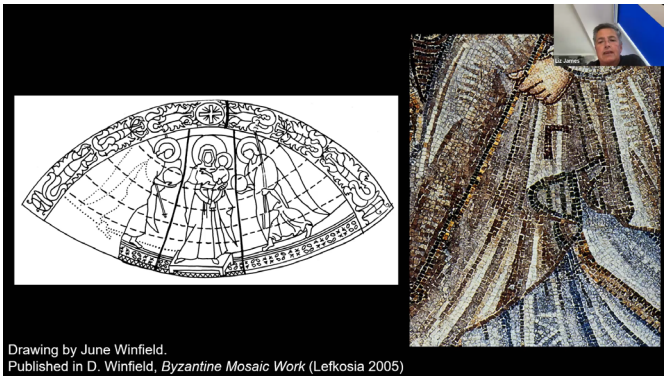
The process of making mosaics is relatively complex and unfolds in multiple stages, beginning from the earliest design conception



to its final realisation within architectural space. Initial drawings were often made directly onto brickwork, after which the surface was built up with three substantial layers of plaster containing chopped straw and fragments of brick to provide strength and adhesion.

At each stage of this layering process, the design was re-drawn or re-sketched onto the new plaster surface. The image therefore emerged through repeated acts of inscription, carefully adjusted to correspond with the number and condition of the layers applied. The final stage involved the setting of the tesserae into the uppermost layer of wet plaster, fixing the image permanently in place.

When working on curved architectural surfaces, such as domes or apses, mosaicists adopted a practical strategy of dividing the overall composition into multiple sections or facets. These divisions are still visible on close examination, where slight misalignments or breaks in the imagery can be detected. Such irregularities reveal the technical challenges of translating a designed image onto a curved surface and offer valuable insight into the construction process when studied retrospectively.



Mosaic artists also carefully calculated the viewing distance and angle of the audience, adjusting their techniques to account for how the image would be perceived from below or across a space. Visual effects were therefore not inherent to the materials alone but were strategically planned in relation to the viewer's perspective.

Mosaicists frequently employed varied techniques to achieve different visual effects using the same colour. By altering the direction in which tesserae were laid, they could produce subtle shifts in texture and light. This directional arrangement of tesserae, known as *andamento*, functions in a manner comparable to brushstrokes in painting, guiding the viewer's eye and animating the surface.

Another technique involved creating a checkerboard effect by placing light and dark tesserae next to one another, producing an illusion of shading. Rather than blending pigments, shading in mosaic is achieved through the juxtaposition of distinct blocks of colour. As seen in the image below, the Virgin Mary's face is modelled through the transition of blue tesserae into pink and white pieces, creating the visual effect of shadow on the cheeks, often described as resembling a 'five o'clock shadow.' This mosaic is generally dated to the 1360s.

A third technique involves angling or tilting the tesserae. This is achieved by setting the tesserae so that they project slightly outward, either from above or below. When light strikes these angled surfaces, it produces varied effects of reflection and shadow, depending on the orientation of the tesserae and the spacing between each row. From a viewer's position below, particularly on high architectural surfaces, the gaps between tesserae become visually negated, creating a more continuous and luminous surface. This method also allows for an economical use of materials, as careful angling can compensate for small gaps between pieces.

One particularly compelling example James

discusses is the use of translucency in mosaic, illustrated by the globes held by the angels in the church at Kiti. These globes appear to transcend the material limits of the two-dimensional mosaic surface. The globes reflect the form of the cross, while the angels' fingers, crafted from the same tesserae as the globes, are subtly differentiated through changes in direction and modelling. By slightly altering the orientation of the tesserae to suggest the reverse side of the hand, the mosaicist creates the illusion of transparency, as though the hand is visible through the globe. This sophisticated manipulation of material and technique produces a striking translucent effect within an otherwise solid medium.

The attention to detail in mosaic extends beyond the representation of figures and scenes to

include subtle translations of real-life effects. In one example, an angel is shown playing a trumpet, and fine white lines appear at the mouth of the instrument. These lines can be read either as visualisations of sound or as traces of breath or saliva, suggesting the physical act of blowing into the trumpet. Through such details, mosaicists sought to introduce elements of lived, sensory experience into the medium, extending its expressive range and imbuing the surface with a heightened sense of realism.

James then turns to the materials from which

mosaics are made, beginning with glass itself. She explains that glass is produced from sand heated with a flux, forming lumps of raw glass as early as the 5th century CE. Glass production operated as a two-stage process carried out on a large, almost industrial scale. Primary glassmaking took place in major production centres, effectively functioning as glass factories, where raw glass was produced in bulk. This raw glass was then exported to sites of secondary glassworking, where it was re-melted and transformed into vessels, bowls, and tesserae.

In the eastern Mediterranean, glass was produced in large tank furnaces, creating massive slabs of raw glass. These slabs were subsequently broken into smaller chunks and exported across the Mediterranean world, where they were further processed into mosaic tesserae and other objects. This system enabled the widespread circulation of glass while centralising its initial production.

James contrasts mediaeval glassmaking with post-19th-century practices, noting that modern technologies allow colour to be precisely controlled through furnace temperatures, measured colourants, and regulated melting processes. In the mediaeval period, however, colour production was far less predictable. Although colourants were added deliberately, the final colour depended heavily on furnace conditions and the chemical composition of the raw glass itself. As a result, there was no guarantee that a specific colour would emerge after firing. The same basic elements could yield multiple hues: copper and iron, for instance, could produce blues, greens, or turquoise, depending on the conditions of production.

Consequently, the colours used in mosaics were shaped by what was available and affordable to both the mosaicist and the patron. These material constraints are visibly reflected in the finished works. In Hagia Sophia, for example, areas of the mosaic, particularly in representations of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child, incorporate a mixture of glass tesserae and painted stone, as seen in the depiction of the Virgin's feet. Such combinations reveal how economic, technical, and material considerations directly influenced the visual character of monumental mosaics.

James notes that primary glass production centres were largely concentrated in regions such as Wadi Natrun, with other major sites including Jalame, Bet Eliezer, and Apollonia, areas corresponding to parts of the present-day coasts of Palestine, Lebanon, and Israel. These centres supplied raw glass to a wide network of secondary workshops across the Mediterranean world.

She then addresses a central question in her lecture: why mosaics became such a prominent art form in the mediaeval period. Mosaics were significantly more expensive than wall paintings and required a longer, more complex production process. Their cost reflected not only the price of materials but also the specialised labour and extended time involved in their execution.

As a result, mosaics functioned as powerful markers of wealth and social status, signalling a patron's ability to commission skilled artists and procure costly materials. While mosaics are commonly associated with churches, James points out that archaeological evidence also reveals their presence in domestic settings. Elite villas, in particular, often featured expansive mosaic panels, demonstrating that the medium was not restricted to religious architecture. One of the earliest surviving examples of such lavish use can be found in the Domus Aurea, the Golden House of Emperor Nero in Rome.

Beyond questions of patronage, James emphasises the close relationship between mosaic and architecture. The reflective properties of mosaic surfaces interact with light in ways that are carefully calibrated to specific architectural spaces, producing effects that can appear almost otherworldly. In Hagia Sophia, for instance, the image of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child is transformed by the building's curved surfaces and shifting light conditions, demonstrating how mosaics and architecture operate as an integrated visual and spatial system rather than as independent elements.

One of the key reasons mosaics were so highly valued was their capacity to produce a sublime visual effect. The inherent irregularities of mosaic surfaces generate a shimmering, glittering quality that shifts with the time of day and changing light conditions, an effect that cannot be replicated in painting. As light moves across the surface, certain figures emerge more prominently, heightening the sense of divine presence and making the image of God appear momentarily revealed. This flickering and apparent movement of mosaics underscores the central role of light in mediaeval spirituality, not only within Christian contexts but also in the mediaeval Islamic world, where light was similarly employed to disclose and emphasise sacred meaning.

James concludes that mosaics are fundamentally composed of light and shadow. They are designed to be changeable, mutable, subtle, and inconstant, with their visual power lying precisely in this instability. The very fabric of mosaic, she argues, depends on the dynamic interplay between brightness and darkness rather than on fixed, static representation.

In the final section of her lecture, James addresses the question of where mosaics were used. While the medium is strongly associated with Byzantine culture, it was by no means exclusive to it. Mosaic was widely employed across the mediaeval Mediterranean. The earliest surviving examples come from Italy and Rome, as well as from Pompeii and Herculaneum. From the 2nd to the 6th centuries within the Roman empire, mosaic patterns for walls and floors often shared similar formal languages. Wall mosaics, in particular, became widespread across the Mediterranean by the 4th century.

James illustrates the geographical and chronological spread of mosaics through a timeline charting their presence from the 5th to the 13th centuries across Europe, Greece, Turkey, North Africa, Italy, and Iraq. Italy, in particular, demonstrates a notable continuity in maintaining mosaic as a dominant art form over several centuries.

She concludes by emphasising that mosaics were a widespread and integral component of major Mediterranean cities. Despite being an expensive medium, mosaic was not confined solely to emperors or ecclesiastical patrons but was also commissioned by a broader range of individuals, reflecting its cultural significance across different social contexts. – ***T.V.***

A Forgotten Colossus: Recovering the Legacies of the Most Cross-Culturally Significant Sculptural Monument of the Mediaeval Mediterranean.

September 23rd, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Elena N. Boeck (Associate Member of the Institute for South-East European Studies, Romanian Academy of Sciences)

About 95–97% of Byzantine objects no longer exist. For example, when Mehmet II, at the age of 21, captured Constantinople in 1453, the victory was followed by three days of looting, as per the rules of Islamic warfare. Mehmet then went to pray at the Hagia Sophia, and new mythologies were concocted — like the Prophet sending his saliva to be used as a binding agent to help build the Hagia Sophia. New practices were also being performed — like prayers, now held on carpets, which on Fridays were accompanied by the showing of Mehmet's sword, turning the church into a mosque of conquest. Add to this the fact that memory is malleable. If Byzantine statues survived, it was only because they were looted and taken off to, say, Italy. An example of this is the statue of horses of Constantinople or the five-metre Colossus of Barletta, the latter being the only surviving statue from the late Byzantine empire.

Prof. Boeck drew focus to a Justinian statue that has now vanished — a bronze horseman on a very tall column, with "the daring of height and the aspiration of the unthinkable, defying the imagination". It once stood in front of the most important church of the Byzantine empire, which she considers one of the most cross-culturally significant monuments of the mediaeval Mediterranean. (For context, before 1699, it was the largest metal equestrian sculpture.)

Who is the man on the horse? Is it Constantine, or a Theodosian or Justinian emperor, or Heraclius? The answer varies, for each emperor ascribes their name to the predecessors' monuments, and each cultural moment re-reads the monument to express their cultural anxieties. Power is not about likeliness but capture. The Crusaders in the 13th century, for example, reidentify him as Heraclius, the only Christian emperor to set foot in Jerusalem in the 14-year war against the Persians in the 7th century. Incidentally, the statue points towards Jerusalem. Later, towards the end of the Byzantine empire, the man is re-read as Constantine.

Adding to the mystery is the fact that the statue no longer exists. Bronze statues often didn't survive because they were melted into coinage. Though the Crusaders did not melt this one, seeing in it Heraclius, it was later, with the Ottomans, between 1453–1456, that the statue finally came down.

It was under Justinian that the tall column

was built, on which the equestrian sculpture was placed, next to the Hagia Sophia. But its placement became a complication: the Christians were happy about the church, but angry that the shadow of this column — which might have been equal to if not taller than the church — fell on it. The hubris of placing a monument of personal glory next to a church did not go unnoticed. On the one hand, it was a technological marvel; on the other, it was an offering of narcissism, rivalling that of faith.

The question of bronze's materiality is important, for it is a metal that produces a patina, especially given the climate, and presence of a water body, which hollows the weight of the bronze over the centuries, leading to parts of it falling. Why not marble? For one, marble is less precious than bronze in value. From the Greco-Roman culture, if you wanted to be remembered, you needed to have a bronze equestrian statue. Besides, since it was hollow-casted bronze, it would be much lighter than marble.

If the statue does not exist, how do we access its life and times? To render the Byzantine as a legible empire, worthy of preservation, Professor Boeck

Notitia Dignitatum, mid-15th c.

noted, you have to make it important to them. So, in the 17th century, Charles du Fresne, sieur du Cange's work on Byzantine history wanted to reframe the Byzantine empire as a precursor to the glorious French empire. In the book, he included an illustration of Constantinople for the cover, where on the column next to Hagia Sophia, there is no statue. Is this an erasure? For in other 15th-century manuscripts, when someone drew Constantinople, the three immediate features included — the sea walls, the Hagia Sophia, and the bronze equestrian statue. **– *P.P.***

Rediscovering Late Antique and Byzantine Architecture: Space, Context, and Heritage

September 30th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Alessandra Ricci (Associate Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine Archaeology and cultural heritage at Koç University in Istanbul)


Prof. Alessandra Ricci speaks during 'Rediscovering Late Antique and Byzantine Architecture: Space, Context, and Heritage'

Professor Alessandra Ricci, Associate Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine Archaeology at Koc University in Istanbul — and thus, a practitioner of Byzantine Studies at the site where the events and architecture studied took place, events and architecture which are currently being written over and whose legacy is contested — delivered a survey lecture on Byzantine architecture in 'late Antiquity'.

The label of 'late Antiquity' itself is of importance — as opposed to 'late Roman', for example — because it allows us to look at the Eastern Mediterranean as a point of contact and exchange, as one of flux. When, in the late 18th century, Edward Gibbon wrote *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with his central thesis that the Roman empire's embrace of Christianity began its descent, the idea of the Byzantine as a 'Fall Period' took root. Prof. Ricci, instead, using 'late Antique' as a frame, looked at the Byzantine period, like most periods, as one of

transition, and charted these changes taking place.

One of these is the beginning of the arch instead of flat trabeation, and the changing shape of the tympanum. While before, domes were placed on circular buildings, with the Byzantine empire, domes were now being placed on square or octagonal buildings — with the help of the pendentive. The purple porphyry stone — that can only be quarried in Egypt — was now used for sculptures, like that of the Tetrachy, now in Venice, and over time was associated with the imperial house.

From aqueduct bridges to monasteries, catacombs underground to the hippodrome, even the landscape of the city changed under the Byzantines, as the axes of power shifted east.

Constantine, for example, hardly spent any time in Rome during his life, though he was born in Serbia in 272 and died in Turkey in 337. In fact, the only non-Byzantine element of the Hagia Sophia prior to the Ottoman conquest is the tomb of Enrico Dandolo, doge of Venice, whose bones were exhumed and thrown into the Bosphorus by the inhabitants of the city, offering a peek into their non-Western comportment.

What is interesting is what Prof. Ricci calls "dissonance", i.e., the same changes were not uniformly applied in the realm of ideas and materiality. If the Christian Pentarchy made each of the five regions — Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople — respond uniquely to the challenges of interpreting texts, the varying landscapes of the Byzantine empire gave rise to different spaces, across geographies, but also time. For example, the late Byzantine empire's buildings were far stockier. Certainly, the Macedonian Renaissance (867–1204), where reopened universities and promoted literature brought back Greek aesthetics and scholarship to the forefront, pushed art and aesthetics in a different direction.

The guiding idea of the lecture was to see every period as one of transition, for to label it statically as a period of 'fall' might not allow you to see the various changes, innovations, and interventions that were taking place. Some innovations were folded over from previous empires, and some innovations folded into succeeding empires. The Church's orientation, for example, where you enter from the west, with the apse on the east, was perfect when converted to mosques, for the Church facing east became the mosque facing the Kaaba, in Mecca. ***– P.P.***

“What a Piece of Work Is Man”:
Shakespeare and the Staging of Philosophy

PAST PROGRAMMES

What is Shakespearean Drama? & Shakespeare and Modern Aesthetic Culture

October 8th & 14th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Paul Kottman (Professor of Comparative Literature and Chair of Liberal Studies at the New School for Social Research)

Detailed reportage will be carried in the next *JPM Quarterly* (Apr - Jun '26)

Call him… Shake-scene

November 4th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Ewan Fernie (Chair, Professor and Fellow at the University of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon)

Who was William Shakespeare? While countless wonderful and illuminating answers have been supplied to this question over the last four centuries, none are perhaps as intriguing as the first one to have ever come in print. In 1592, the Elizabethan dramatist Robert Greene, a contemporary and rival of Shakespeare, spoke of a newcomer to the Elizabethan stage —

“…there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapped in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.”

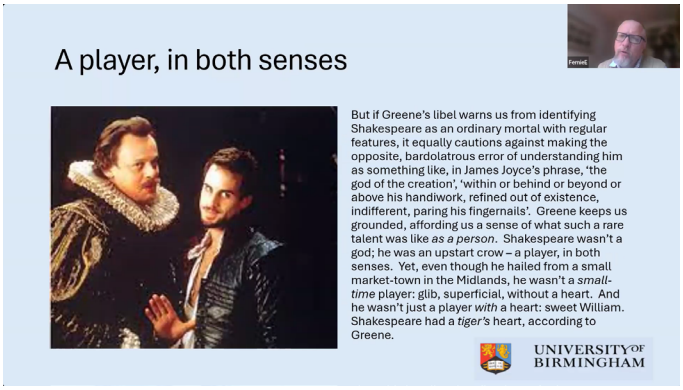
In a fascinating talk, Ewan Fernie led us through the impact that Shakespeare had on Elizabethan society in his own lifetime, and what that can tell us about the radicality of his talent. Greene’s critique comes very early in Shakespeare’s career — in 1592 he was around 28 years old and was still largely known as an actor who had been out of work due to the closures of the playhouses from a recent outbreak of the plague. By calling him an upstart crow beautified with the feathers of others, Greene effectively accuses Shakespeare of plagiarism, gathering the words of those around him like a crow or a magpie. While this was not particularly offensive in a society where most dramatists reappropriated the plays and stories of others, Greene’s use of the word ‘our’, as in *our feathers*, indicates that one of Shakespeare’s primary faults was to be an *upstart*, i.e., not of the same social class as his university-educated contemporaries like Greene or the charismatic Christopher Marlowe.

Prof. Ewan Fernie speaks during 'Call him… Shake-scene'

The bestial motifs of Greene’s continue in the second half of this line where Shakespeare is described as having a “Tiger’s heart wrapped in a Player’s hide”. Interestingly, Greene is the one who is parodying a famous line from Shakespeare

here, from his early play, *Henry VI*, in which the Duke of York cries out when tormented by the ruthless Queen Margaret, "O tiger's heart, wrapped in a woman's hide". Greene's comparison of Shakespeare to this famous villain is particularly interesting as it contrasts sharply both with the notion of a 'player' or actor being a mere blank canvas, possessed of a "vanilla vacancy" as professor Fernie describes, and with Shakespeare's reputation beginning immediately after his death as being the "sweet swan of Avon" as extolled by Ben Johnson.

Greene's picture of Shakespeare depicts him as having a dangerous quality that was already apparent to his contemporaries much before he wrote his most famous works. This is not a mere



player, an upstart who thoughtlessly plagiarises popular works to churn out hits on stage. Rather, this is someone able to mould the material he is dealt, draw and stretch it out at will and *play* with the dramatic form. Two centuries later, the poet John Keats likened Shakespeare to a 'chameleon poet', famously describing his unique talent as a Negative Capability, "that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".[1]

While recognising that it was Shakespeare's incredible ability to carry the multitudes of his characters regardless of morality, societal norms or philosophical truths that made his genius so timeless, professor Fernie brought Greene's libel back to also caution us from making the 'bardolatrous' error of seeing Shakespeare as 'the god of the creation', "within or beyond or above his handiwork, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" as James Joyce wrote of the role of the artist in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Greene's Shakespeare was not a detached artist who created in indifferent, neutral, and objective strokes. Indeed, Shakespeare was deeply grounded within the everyday world of Elizabethan England, and the 'slings and arrows' of this world affected him starkly.

A clue as to how Shakespeare himself felt about the experience of creating and then watching the multitudinous universes, characters, and situations in his own plays is suggested from a passage from his last solo-authored play, *The Tempest* (1610–11), where Ariel describes how he simulated the sublime storm that gives the play its title —

I boarded the King's ship; now on the beak,
Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin,
I flamed amazement. Sometimes I'd divide
And burn in many places. On the topmast,
The yards, and bowsprit would I flame distinctly,
Then meet and join. Jove's lightning, the precursors
O' th' dreadful thunderclaps, more momentary
And sight-outrunning were not. The fire and cracks
Of sulfurous roaring the most mighty Neptune
Seem to besiege and make his bold waves tremble,
Yea, his dread trident shake. (1.2.232-242)

Perhaps it was flaming amazement that Shakespeare experienced when bringing forth his characters and letting them graze the extremes of human consciousness on stage. To imagine a singular being creating such varied and yet nuanced characterisations of humanity does recall Ariel dividing and burning in many places, flaming distinctly and then meeting and joining back.

In trying to tease out definitive lessons from Shakespeare, we fail continuously, for he was not one who allowed himself to be determined by singular frameworks. No single performance of Shakespeare, no character, and certainly no plot could contain him, and yet he contained all of them. He was no lonely philosopher who locked himself away to tinker with questions of the human psyche in abstraction. Instead, he was at the very heart of the society he lived in, writing, producing, and even acting in the plays he presented to people from every walk of life. He was a commercial artist in every sense of the word, and his success or failure was heavily determined

1 Keats, John (1899). *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats, Cambridge Edition*. Houghton, Mifflin and Company. p. 277

by audience reception. His work, while challenging us at every turn on our suppositions of morality, justice, truth, love, and humanity, was never inaccessible. He was hardly an original dramatist, as Greene's critique sneeringly pointed out, but this did not dim his talent in any way. Rather, by remaking and retelling a story that his audience already knew, he made the familiar strange. In another of Greene's lashes, he calls Shakespeare an *"absolute Johannes factotum"*, or a Jack-of-all-trades. In hindsight, this only seems to further acknowledge that Shakespeare was not only good at everything, but that this was his particular talent — to be a convergence of singularity and breadth, a 'combination of fiery intensity with negative capability'. In the end, Greene's final insult, to call Shakespeare '*the only Shake-scene in a country*' seems more prophetic than hurtful, for he truly has been one of the only writers in modernity who has truly and irreparably shaken the scene — of the stage, literature, philosophy, and art. **– *A.T.***

'I am not what I am': Shakespeare and Early Modern Ontology

November 18th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Jessica Chiba (Assistant Professor at the Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham)

"To be, or not to be, that is the question:"

Ontology, or the study of the nature of being, is one of the most fundamental branches of philosophical inquiry. And in abstraction, it is also one of the most challenging disciplines to understand, much less to articulate. And yet, to experience almost any of the plays of William Shakespeare is to work through a searing inquiry into what it is to *be*. The most famous line in all of Shakespeare is, of course, the opening line of *Hamlet's* 'to be, or not to be' speech. When Viola declares in *Twelfth Night*, "I am not what I am", a somewhat confusing turn of phrase as opposed to something more sensible like *I am not what I seem*, we tumble into a spiral of questioning our own self. Famously, we see Iago saying this exact line again in *Othello*, written a few years later, demonstrating that Shakespeare was deeply occupied with the question — who am I, if I am not what I am? In another iconic play, Macbeth utters another infamous line — "nothing is but what is not", when contemplating the murder of Duncan, the benevolent, and perhaps too trusting King of Scotland. In each instance, as viewers or readers of Shakespeare, we find ourselves both in the play and in ourselves as we are confronted with these lines. What is it then, if it is not what it is? What do I know about who anyone is, if I do not know who I am myself? And what would this mean for life itself, for society, for justice, for truth?

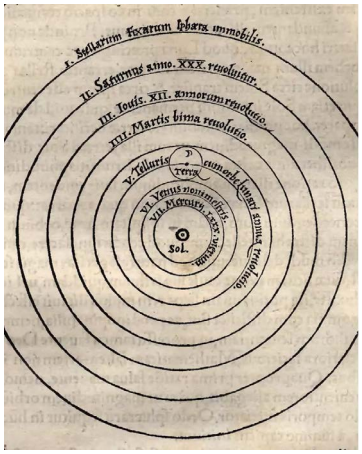
Prof. Jessica Chiba speaks during 'I am not what I am: Shakespeare and Early Modern Ontology'

Was Shakespeare himself interested in philosophy, and did he apply philosophical inquiries to his work as a playwright? Although we cannot know with any real accuracy as to what Shakespeare himself read or thought, we can get a sense of the prevailing philosophical doctrines of his time and ask if Shakespeare was writing within established understandings or radically re-imagining the questions. In a lecture that spanned both the historical and philosophical question of Shakespeare's relationship with ontology, Prof. Jessica Chiba pointed us to some possible, fascinating answers.

We began with one of the most well-known concepts of metaphysics in the mediaeval West — the great chain of being. Developed from Platonic and Aristotelian views as a hierarchy of

all things on earth, the great chain of being drew a ladder-like classification with God at the very top to inanimate objects like rocks and minerals at its base. Reaching its zenith in the Middle Ages, the great chain of being was a widely accepted theory in the early-modern England of Shakespeare's time. In such a distinct and unchanging hierarchy, the being is absolute. God is being itself, and everything receives its being from and can be comprehended as a part of that one supreme being — a familiar idea to the notion of the One as absolute in Neoplatonism. There is evidence of Shakespeare using prevailing early-modern thought in his work, as we see in a speech by Ulysses in a lesser-known play *Troilus and Cressida*:

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all line of order.
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye
Corrects the influence of evil planets,
And posts, like the commandments of a king,
Sans check, to good and bad.



Interestingly, Shakespeare uses a heliocentric rather than a geocentric model of the universe here. Yet we see clearly that "the heavens themselves…observe degree, priority, and place… in all line of order". Everything is in its place and the Sun or the Divine keeps the balance of the universe, correcting the influence of evil. Thus, the Sun is the supreme being, and all else falls into its ordained place. And we can see in other contemporary plays that the question of being was of interest, a famous instance being Doctor Faustus's flippant statement, "Bid *On kai me on* farewell", in Christopher Marlowe's famous play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. *On kai me on* translates from ancient Greek to *being and not being*.

While these and other examples demonstrate that Shakespeare was very aware of the prevailing philosophical and theological norms of his time, they also give us clues as to how Shakespeare departed from the established ideas on being. To return to Iago's line, "I am not what I am", we also realise that Shakespeare is twisting a well-known line from the *Bible*, where God declares, "I am what I am" (Exodus 3:14). Iago both is and isn't what he is, and this creates a split in the wholeness of being, contradicting the great chain theory where everything is an emanation of God, and therefore inherently whole. In a careful reading of *Hamlet's* 'to be or not to be' speech, Prof. Chiba pointed out another very nuanced look that Shakespeare takes on the question of being. Despite it being a very personal soliloquy, Hamlet never uses the first-person pronoun, I. There is also no mention of God. Instead, he is speaking very generally about being, and contemplating whether it might be better to commit suicide than engage with this imperfect world ("To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come…"). Despite drawing on the traditional question of being in the manner of Peripatetic philosophy, Shakespeare reframes the question into one of struggle with the fact of existence experienced by embodied individuals thrown into an imperfect world, not God's wholesome creation.

To further highlight how Shakespeare's departure from established worldviews was also an interesting development of the Renaissance itself, Prof. Chiba cited the philosopher Agnes Heller, who wrote that the worldviews of the autobiographies of the Renaissance was based on a practical atheism and on the image of man creating the world. By practical atheism, she meant that while people still very much believed in God, in practice they were more concerned with their own everyday actions, and as social hierarchies began to be more malleable, began to find that they could be what they made themselves, rather than being passive agents in a preordained universe. The advent of capitalism and colonialism throwing societal ranks into disarray, along with the religious upheavals of early-modern Europe added to the growth in this pragmatic belief system. And if a God-given order is so easily broken, it is no longer ontologically immutable.

One of the reasons that makes Shakespearean

drama so interesting is that each character in his plays is tackling these questions in their own way. We do not as much get a sense of what Shakespeare himself thought through any of his plays, but what we do get is a working through of the fundamental nature of being through the context in which each character finds themselves, through the choices they make, the actions they take or avoid, and the consequences they encounter. And perhaps this is ultimately what continues to make Shakespeare contemporary four hundred years after he put his pen to rest. There is no worldview or hierarchy that is ontologically unshakable in Shakespeare, and in this way his characters have a certain amount of freedom, to think, out loud. **– *A.T.***

Afterlives // Afterimages

October 16th & 17th, 2025, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Tina M. Campt (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)

On Oct 16th and 17th, 2025, Professor Tina M. Campt delivered this year's set of lectures as part of the Annual Mona Ahmed Lecture Series, supported by photographer and 'offset artist' Dayanita Singh. Through her two-part lecture, Prof. Campt examined the centrality of two overlapping, intersecting, interwoven terms at the core of her current explorations: afterlife and afterimage. Both are positioned in tender dialogue with the photograph, expanding upon its spatialities, its disbalances and the excess it accumulates in its relationship to memory.

Prof. Tina Campt speaks during 'Afterlives// Afterimages'

The mode through which she chose to present her thinking was through the lens of grief: what do images help us do with grief? How do they complicate, layer, or assuage it? While these enquiries emerged from her ongoing work, they also take off from her earlier works — *Listening to Images*, *Image Matters* and *A Black Gaze* — in how they proffer a reimagination of our ways of looking at photographs, everyday and archival, object and document. One cannot help but turn, inevitably, to the indispensability of these writings as stellar anchor points in this trajectory, grounding cultural writing and art-historical thinking in the urgencies of the contemporary moment.

On both days, Campt invited us, as viewer-listeners, to engage with the work of artists who approach the photograph as a rich, rife site, a thresholding of sorts between the living and the departed. Here, the photograph channels mourning, collective and individual; it oscillates in definition and meaning, yet always retains, in its fallibility, the texture of absence — something we have been compelled to reckon with most exceedingly in recent years. As part of her presentation, Campt did something particularly vulnerable: she spoke of work in progress, she spoke of incompletion, and of grappling with the same. Campt undid her notes for us, and in her annotations, she centred the audacity of grief and the manner in which it approached her, forming its own dialogue with her writing and her methodology. She addressed the fragmented nature of how grief presented itself, of how it surrounded her with loss, alienation, and solitude; relatably so, in her recollections, grief performed as a relay — fractal and sudden, diaphanous yet

eerily tangible.

One of her key starting points was Saidiya Hartman's formulation of the afterlife. Drawing from this, Campt described it as a conditional tense that articulates the political arithmetic of black futurity. She contrasted Hartman's contiguous afterlife with Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of the surviving image and the German concept of Nachleben. Here, the image's afterlife emerges as a continuum, something that weaves plural pasts simultaneously, in almost anachronistic languages. The forms these pasts conjure rupture linear temporalities, haunting the present, and confronting viewers with their own demise. Unlike survival, this afterlife endures because slavery continues to retain value and meaning, rendering Black lives exchangeable, replaceable, disposable; however, in the face of such convention, how do we rewrite how we grieve and mourn?

Campt's deep familiarity with 'quiet frequencies' led us into a reading of the potencies of whispers and hums. She examined murmurs as underappreciated sonic utterances, particularly in the context of the pandemic's slow thaw of sociality, when voice became one of its earliest casualties. For her, the hum emerged as protection against loneliness, loss, and despair: a tonal curtain of resonant breath; a beacon through daily routines; an amalgamation of sadness, satisfaction, solitude, and concentration. Here, Campt also opened up to incorporate notes from Edouard Glissant and his *Poetics of Relation*, especially his reflections on opacity and obscurity, the former an ethical and political claim. To be opaque, to remain opaque is to exist without being fully knowable, translated, or rendered transparent to dominant (especially Western, colonial) epistemologies. Opacity insists that relation does not require comprehension. Obscurity, by contrast, is often a condition imposed from outside. It describes being hidden, erased, marginalised, or rendered unintelligible through structures of power.

Looking at how opacity affirms presence without disclosure, Campt turned first to the work of American artist Carrie Mae Weems, foregrounding the opacity of Black grief and Black life, marked by precarity yet saturated with possibility. Weems's images (*People of a darker hue*) frustrate the gaze even as they magnetise presence. Works that visualise pallbearers, or the choreography of grief, register what Campt described as a broader state of emergency. They reckon with unsayable voids through sonorous visual tonalities. These are bodies that are always stopped, always charged, always culpable; this is where Campt's treatise on the 'Black gaze' emerges as a position of implication — one that sits alongside Black life's potentiality and eventual, inevitable precarity.

In Weems's practice, the artist becomes both witness and alter-ego, producing simultaneity rather than distance, and her subversive frames (*The Museum Series*) interrogate archives, institutions, and intimacies, elongating the residue of empire. In *All the Boys*, blur signals objectification. It functions here as a visualisation of grief's temporal disorder: unresolved, suspended, and uncontainable. It disrupts photographic indexicality and renders visible a condition of anticipatory grief. The photograph is no longer something that can be taken for granted — as evidence, as proof, as a stable tether to time. Weems loosens the image from its temporal certainty, and what we encounter is anticipatory grief folded into experienced grief, fear braided with memory.

What emerges is not an individuated psychology but a structural condition — so specific yet never only individual. In this way, Weems offers a way of apprehending what Glissant names as opacity: a presence that resists legibility without retreating into obscurity. The personal is not opposed to the individual; both are held together, allowed to be and not be at once. "What might we see differently if we didn't define the afterimage as bright white light? What might the afterimage of darkness or of Blackness look like?"

On Day 2, somewhere toward the middle of the session, Campt offered a deceptively concise yet

incisive annotation: "As a historian, the archive is always an interested archive. The archive is never objective." The statement lingered, opening itself outwards as she made her way through her references and her notes. To me, it became a very crucial consideration alongside the contingencies of memory — those we inherit, those we fabricate, and those we learn to carry. Especially, as she clarified, because "the archive is always assembled for the purposes of [a] particular collection." What follows from this is a further reflection: If we are, in some sense, archivists of our own lives, then what do we choose to assemble, and why? What do we elevate, preserve, return to, and what remains unattended? How does grief reorganise these choices, these hierarchies of attention? The archive truly is never objective; it is neither personal nor institutional, and its oft-unacknowledged partiality is precisely where its — and our — meaning-making takes hold.


Keisha Scarville, *Passports, 2023*

Campt unfolded a sustained engagement with the 'after' that animates 'the afterlives of afterimages', opening with a subsection titled 'Aftershock'. Here, the after is not a temporal endpoint but it extends as a reverberation, a condition that continues to register itself in the body, the image, the archive. Listening to Campt speak makes you realise that as an academician and a writer, she does not simply write on or with the photograph; she produces a larger affective and mediatic environment that builds around it, holds it, scaffolds it, and, crucially, tenderises it. This sensibility was especially evident in her reflections on what it means to theorise. Theory, she proposed, is not an abstraction removed from feeling; rather, it furnishes us with a vocabulary for the complexity of our emotional lives. That complexity extends outward to our participation in the world, to the work creative practices do within it, and to the entanglements that bind images, makers, viewers, and histories together.

Thus, when Campt spoke of grief, she spoke of it as a generative, ongoing process, one that produces its own modes of expressibility and articulation. Grief, in her formulation, moves, accrues, and circulates. Her writing became a meditation on grief in its many registers: personal and intimate, communal and social, structural and collective. Grief here is something to be thought with, listened to, and lived alongside, which situated grief as one of knowledge's most rigorous and fecund conditions.

Campt moved us next through the practices of Brooklyn-based American photographer Keisha Scarville and the late American painter and installation artist Noah Davis, offering readings that extended her thinking on grief, afterimages, and the archive into questions of touch, space, and Black world-making. Under a section titled 'Aftermath', Campt turned to Scarville's work as a series that opened her up to articulating grief outside the paralysis of shock (losses Campt reflected on deeply, many of which unfolded during the pandemic). In *Passports (2012–2025)*, Scarville reimagines her father's passport photograph through more than three hundred handmade iterations. These are improvisations that reinforce the photograph as a tactile, embellished, and insistently intimate object. Each collage of sorts excavates what passport photographs are designed to suppress in their clear objective(s) — stories of migration, settlement, and diasporic becoming. What resurfaces are fragments and clues, composing what Campt described as practices of Black-worlding: images that materialise relation, inheritance, and placemaking across generations.

For Campt, the affective pull of *Passports* was deeply personal. The work summoned her own familiarity with Black passport photography in Birmingham (*Listening to Images*, 2017), and more unexpectedly, her father. Not through likeness

alone, but through a recognition that exceeded resemblance. In Scarville's hands, the passport becomes a site of reclamation, and Campt found herself responding to the nature of their blank canvas-like surface through which suppressed histories were reanimated. *Passports* visualise the afterlife of a diasporic identity her father named as waning, yet which Scarville renders materially present through cloth, hair, glitter, and pigment. Absence is activated, textured, and held. Something you are invited to touch.

The tactility of this articulation deepened in *Alma*, *Mama's Clothes* (2015), a body of work made in the aftermath of Scarville's mother's sudden death. Here, Campt referenced Scarville's own conceptualisation of the phrase, 'materialising absence'. Scarville's grief was oriented toward what remains insistently tactile — her mother's clothing — in which she chose to bury herself, folding herself into textiles that caressed, engulfed, and sometimes overwhelmed her. These images, as Campt shared, hovered between two- and three-dimensionality, staging grief as a haptic exchange. Campt framed these photographs as afterimages of a different order. Not optical residues, but haptic afterimages — sensory impressions that refuse erasure. They enact the continuation of a loss of contact, of love. Theirs is a mourning that does not elegise but elevates. *Mama's Clothes* and *Passports* articulate a relational archive of parental presence, one that materialises love, inheritance, and filiation across absence and life alike.

From Scarville, Campt moved into 'Black-worlding' through the work of Noah Davis. A painter of extraordinary range, Davis reconfigured Black space through scenes of domesticity, leisure, labour, and repose. His paintings dwell and invite us to dwell in the Black quotidian — unspectacular, intimate, and insistently humane — with children, families, neighbours populating these canvases as figures of presence and relation.

Campt focussed particularly on Davis's 1975 series, based on undeveloped film rolls shot by his mother, Faith Childs Davis, and recovered after his father's death. These paintings are not typically read as works of mourning, yet Campt situated them firmly within grief's afterlives. In translating his mother's photographs into oil on canvas, Davis enacted a haptic digitisation, transposing photographic impressions into painterly touch. What emerges is a triangulated Black gaze: mother, son, and viewer converge in a shared field of looking and care.

At this point, Campt brought us to 'Black-grounding'. In Davis's paintings, Blackness is neither figure nor background. The optical hierarchy between foreground and ground collapses, and Black life becomes ground itself, rendered on its own terms, untethered from White referentiality. In the 1975 series, we walk alongside his mother, belated witnesses to worlds she captured and he reactivated. These are afterimages of care and ongoing relation — renderings of Black life that insist on its endurance, even as they remain attentive to its precarity. According to Campt, his canvases do not lean into depictions of Black life but instead choreograph it through gestures, postures and poses. Rhythms that invite viewers into close, intimate attunement. To engage Davis's work, Campt argued, is to learn to look with feeling, to listen to the visual frequencies of Black life.

Listening to Prof. Campt was a masterclass in how to read *with* images. In these readings, one is invited to attend to the vocabularies she employs — the words, the phrases, their modulations and their poetry — and to how they gather and cohere, centring the photograph and speaking with it as though it were a friend, a companion seated beside us, listening to what we have to say. As joyous as these lectures were in the rigour and criticality they offered, they also unfolded as a deeply meditative set of hours, as she guided us through intimate intonations of grief and loss, alongside the immense power that writing with grief has afforded her. As my notes come to a close, I am reminded of where I began writing: the vulnerability of reading one's own work aloud, of returning to incompletion and choosing to sit with it. Of opening up the processual as a site of invitation and co-thinking. The photograph in itself is a site of vulnerability; historically, it has tended towards excavating sight, toward extracting in varying definition that which it frames for posterity, toward memorialising — often quite ineffectively and inefficiently. Yet it is within this inefficiency that we thrive, that interpretation thrives, and to which we return at our most vulnerable, our most raw. **– *A.M.***

Community Engagement

PAST PROGRAMMES

Wound as Testimony and as Locus for Resistance

October 10th, 2025, Discussion: 6:00 PM IST | Introduction and moderation by Geeta Kapur
Panel Participants: Nikhil Chopra, Ranjit Hoskote, Anuradha Kapur, Sudhir Patwardhan, Ashish Rajadhyaksha

To accompany *Six Stations of a Life Pursued*, the late Vivan Sundaram's deeply introspective solo exhibition and final body of work — that was on view at Chemould Prescott Road from 5th September to 15th October 2025 — Jnanapravaha Mumbai convened an evening of reflection titled '*Wound as Testimony and as Locus for Resistance*' during the last week of the exhibition.

Right to Left - Geeta Kapur, Ranjit Hoskote, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Sudhir Patwardhan, Anuradha Kapur & Nikhil Chopra speaking during 'Wound as Testimony and as Locus for Resistance' panel discussion

The event was moderated by Geeta Kapur — art historian, critic, writer, curator, and also the wife of Sundaram — who put her heart into creating a panel that responded to the exhibition. She invited a film theorist (Ashish Rajadhyaksha), a cultural theorist-poet (Ranjit Hoskote), a theatre maker (Anuradha Kapur), a performance-based artist (Nikhil Chopra), and an artist-doctor (Sudhir Patwardhan). Each of these giants within their fields responded in such nuanced, delicate ways that they opened our perspectives to this important final body of work by Sundaram.

Six Stations of a Life Pursued (2022) provided an anchoring context for the evening's inquiry. First exhibited at Sharjah Biennial 15, the work unfolds as a journey marked by pauses or stages — moments where pain is confronted, memory renegotiated, and history revisited. Across shifting constellations of images, Sundaram stages encounters with wounded, performing, mourning, or incarcerated bodies, sometimes his own. The work echoes the late Okwui Enwezor's call to "think historically in the present", suggesting that personal and political histories remain inseparable and must be approached with ethical vigilance. This sensibility shaped the discussions that followed.

Geeta Kapur opened the conversation by framing the 'wound' not as evidence of victimhood but as an active site of testimony — a space where memory and resistance gather. This framing aligned closely with Sundaram's installation, where body and history converge to articulate an urgent search for meaning. Ashish Rajadhyaksha placed Sundaram's practice within longer histories

of political and aesthetic rupture. For him, the wound operated as both sign and method: the cut as a way of organising experience. He noted how the "stations" assemble fragments into constellations that hold fracture without surrendering coherence. Ranjit Hoskote read the wound as a philosophical paradox — simultaneously vulnerable and revelatory. Drawing on mystical and modernist lineages, he described the wound as a chosen openness to the world's suffering, a lens through which Sundaram's poetics of mourning take ethical form. Anuradha Kapur introduced a theatrical perspective, seeing performance as a mode that holds space for suppressed histories. Her insights resonated with Nikhil Chopra's reflections on endurance and vulnerability in his durational practice — gestures that enact defiance through exposure. Together, they emphasised the wound as a shared, continually re-inscribed condition. For Sudhir Patwardhan, the wound remained grounded in the corporeal. Speaking as both painter and physician, he underscored the body as an archive of trauma, reminding the audience that political violence ultimately impresses itself on flesh. Kapur's moderation braided these perspectives into a conversation that honoured Sundaram's interdisciplinary impulses. The dialogue moved fluidly between memory and history, aesthetic

strategy and ethical responsibility, returning to the question of what it means to witness.

In retrospect, *Wound as Testimony and as Locus for Resistance* became less a panel discussion and more a collective act of remembrance — a living conversation with Vivan Sundaram's legacy and with the unfinished histories his work continues to open. A spellbound audience, bursting at the seams at Jnanapravaha, remained glued to their seats for two intense hours of deep intellectual engagement with a single work. It was indeed a rare evening, one that allowed us to enter the minds of six diverse practitioners as they illuminated the many layers of Vivan's last artistic gesture. **– *A.P.***

Picturing Life...On The Art of Sudhir Patwardhan

November 6th, 2025, Screening & Discussion: 6:30 PM IST | Mr. Harshil Bhanushali (filmmaker) & Mr. Sudhir Patwardhan (Artist)

Picturing Life (2023), written and directed by Harshil Bhanushali, uses *Walking Through Soul City* (2019—2020), a much-lauded retrospective of Sudhir Patwardhan's work as its starting point, building a layered portrait of the legendary artist, and more importantly, of the world as seen by him.

The film is ostensibly simple — it's loosely chronological and takes us on a journey through Patwardhan's key concerns when it comes to content and form — from his role as a self-appointed 'spokesman' for Mumbai's subaltern classes to being more of an empathetic observer; from early experiments in spontaneous expressionism to a more studied and 'modulated' style; from the outward and overtly political to the private and personal realm of home and family; through explorations of structure, chaos, abstraction, and realism. We look closely at paintings and the settings and scenes that likely inspired them, punctuated by quotes from the

artist describing his process and preoccupations. The film's muted tones and deliberate pacing create breathing room for the art in all its detail.

But there's a reason *Picturing Life* is almost always described as 'animated.' Alongside the silent stretches is a quiet dynamism and a soundscape that's pitch perfect, quintessentially Mumbai. Multiple perspectives overlap — there are the subjects of the paintings and the documentary itself; viewers at the NGMA, including artists such as the late Lalitha Lajmi and the late Gieve Patel; there's even Patwardhan and his family, looking at each other and themselves. Patwardhan's paintings tend to be large, occasionally even monumental. The film zooms into brushwork and intricate stories within stories, and then steps back to allow us to look at the teeming whole. It's almost — not exactly — what it feels like to look at the works in person.

The first half of the film focusses on works created between the '70s — early '00s, and is dominated by portrayals of working-class life, including the famous *Accident on May Day* (1981). We see the people and places the artist familiarised himself with when he first moved to Bombay — daily wage labourers, crowds, train stations, chawls and tenements, bleak cityscapes — industrial wastelands (*Ulhasnagar*, 2001), construction sites and shanty towns (*Kanjur*, 2004), and nondescript nullahs (*Nullah*, 1985). Faces are world weary and the city is as we least like it — unequal, unforgiving, even violent, as memorably and disturbingly portrayed in the brutal *Riot* (1996).

Halfway through comes a pivotal moment. Patwardhan describes realism and abstraction as two sides of the same coin, and the tensions within this statement are brought alive by *The Abstractionist* (2012), which features an artist seemingly grappling with an abstract painting of the structures just outside his home, also reflected in its windowpanes. Which of these views is the most accurate, which portrayal most honest?

Finally, Patwardhan appears on screen just as his gaze is shifting inwards, towards his son, grandson, and family (*Family*, 2007). The artist is vocally negotiating an evolving identity and new role within the domestic sphere; exploring change, memories and the ties that bind fathers and sons (*Father's Story*, 2012), mothers and daughters (*Nostalgia*, 2010), even couples. It's fitting that some of the paintings shown here hang not only in his sturdily sensible home, but also in the bedroom he shares with his wife, Shanta.

But changing times and political tides draw Patwardhan back into the fray, compelling the creation of monumental works (*Mumbai Proverbs*, 2014) that express his dissatisfaction with the city's undercontested narratives of development, and the always-looming exclusion of the much-maligned migrant (*Nagrik*, 2019), among other minorities. When the film closes with a final glimpse of the artist's gaze and his quiet home, this viewer had the distinct impression of a mind and a space still bristling with art to be made and things to be said.

The screening was followed by a short dialogue and conversation that allowed both Sudhir and Harshil to expand on their approaches to their craft more generally, as well as in the context of this film. Harshil's stated goal was to create an 'experience' which would allow the viewer to observe Sudhir's works for themselves. *Picturing Life* successfully constructs its own coherent, considered world, no mean feat when the art (and artist) are in perennial engagement with the chaos of Mumbai. **– *T.J.***

Right to Left - Harshil Bhanushali & Sudhir Patwardhan in discussion during 'Picturing Life...On The Art of Sudhir Patwardhan'

Announcements

PRAYER WINDS & PROFIT: INDIAN OCEAN TRADE (1ST - 15TH C)

January 12th – April 22nd, 2026 | Mainly Tuesdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST

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

The image of a ship on Borobudur bas relief

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Anirudh Kanisetti
Bérénice Bellina
Chapurukha M. Kusimba
Eivind Heldaas Seland
Joe Thomas Karackattu
John Guy
Matthew Adam Cobb
Osmund Bopearachchi
Pia Brancaccio
Rebecca Darley
Roxani Margariti
Sean Cronan
Sebastian Prange
Shailendra Bhandare
Stephanie Wynne-Jones
Steven Sidebotham

Prayer Winds and Profit: Indian Ocean Trade (1st–15th c) is a 17-lecture series exploring the Indian subcontinent's pivotal role in shaping early global maritime exchange. It traces how South Asia's strategic ports, vibrant merchant communities, and coveted commodities forged enduring economic and cultural networks across Asia, Africa, and Europe. From the ancient map of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* to the Chinese general Zheng He's voyages in the 15th century, it follows ocean routes linking Roman Egypt, Southeast Asia, East Africa and Southern China to Indian ports in exchanges of pepper, gems, gold, textiles and more. The roles of Buddhist guilds in maritime trade and Hindu-Buddhist artistic exchange with Southeast Asia — receive special focus. The lectures also consider Jewish, Muslim, Swahili, and Arab merchant networks documented in the Cairo Geniza, concluding with Sino-Indian commercial ties, showcasing how artefacts anchored a vast premodern trading network sailing on monsoon winds.

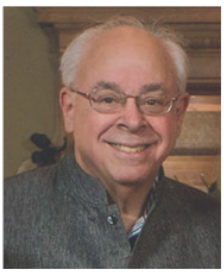
THE IMAGE OF THE AFRICAN IN INDIAN PAINTINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

KENNETH X. ROBBINS

January 19th, 2026 | Tea: 6:00 PM, Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 pm IST | Free Public Lecture | Register: www.jp-india.org

India is the only place outside of Africa where there were African rulers and African court elites. The sultanates of Bijapur and Ahmednagar came under the domination of African strongmen. Africans were also prominent in other sultanates as well as Hindu ruled states like Kutch and Nawanagar. Until 1948, two small states on the west coast of India, Janjira and Sachin, were ruled by African dynasties. Africans were not usually depicted as "the Other" or as members of a poorly regarded minority group in the Muslim and Hindu court miniature and gouache paintings of the 16th through 19th centuries. Most of the subjects are rulers, queens and concubines, strongmen, nobles, soldiers, eunuchs, maidservants, Sufis and Muslim scholars. Paintings of poor Afro-South Asians are less common. In some paintings, it is difficult to distinguish Africans from other Indians with similar dark skins or physiognomy unless the subject is identified.

Portrait of Malik Amber, Ahmednagar, early 17th century, Private Collection



Dr. Robbins is a collector-archivist specialising in South Asia and international crises in Asia, Africa, and the Ottoman empire. Most of his exhibitions and publications deal with South Asia's local and regional rulers as well as its minority groups [like Jews and Africans]. He has edited or written eighteen books as well as 160 articles. He is the co-curator of a New York Public Library Schomburg Center traveling exhibition Africans in India, which was shown at dozens of venues worldwide including the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, the United Nations, and UNESCO. He is the co-editor of the groundbreaking study African Elites in India and other publications that draw heavily on his Afro-South Asian collections for information and illustrations. He has specialised in documenting totally different aspects of Afro-South Asia in the African global diaspora with books like African Rulers and Generals in India, African Diasporan Communities across South Asia, and Black Ambassadors of Politics, Religion, and Jazz in India. His other publications have included articles on subjects ranging from Gujaratis in Africa to Indian Jews in African-ruled Janjira.

COSMOS AND ETERNITY, CREATION, DISSOLUTION, AND 'RE-CREATION': VISHNU ON ANANTA

VASUDHA NARAYANAN

March 26th & 27th, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 pm IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 2,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/-

Online on ZOOM | Register: www.jp-india.org | Recording Available*

Sheshashayi Vishnu - Ancient Stone Carving at the Preah Khan Temple, Siem Reap, Cambodia

This four-lecture series will focus on the concepts and images of Sheshashayi Vishnu in India and Cambodia. Working with literature and sculpture (up to the 13th century) in *situ*, and in many collections in both international as well as district museums, we will approach the topic in an interdisciplinary way. The history, texts, and art connected with Sheshashayi Vishnu will reveal that an image seemingly depicting stillness and *yoga nidra* is, paradoxically, also one of the most dynamic ones in Indian culture. The Sheshashayi Vishnu image explodes with action; that of creation, preservation, dissolution, and the 're-creation' of the cosmos. And all of these are seen as 'play', (*lila*) or 'recreational' activities of Vishnu-Narayana. The talks will unfold both the textual and sculptural intricacies, the times and places where there has been an efflorescence of such images, and the stories as well as philosophies connected with the Sheshashayi Vishnu.

Session I: Floating on the Waters of Ocean, reclining on the Ocean of Milk: Anantasayi Vishnu Narayana in Literature
Session II: Sheshashayi in sculpture in the Indian subcontinent: Early 5th to the 13th century CE
Session III: Reclining on Ananta, Reclining on a *Makara*: Vishnu-Narayana in Inscription and Art in the Pre-Angkorian and Angkorian Periods in Cambodia
Session IV: Can there be an end to what is endless? Connections with other reclining figures and 'finite' conclusions on Infinity

Vasudha Narayanan is Distinguished Professor, Department of Religion, and Director, Center for the study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra) at the University of Florida. She is a past President of the American Academy of Religion (2001-2002) and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2023. Prof. Narayanan was educated at the Universities of Madras and Bombay in India, and at Harvard University. She is currently working on Hindu temples and traditions in Cambodia. She is the author or editor of nine books and numerous articles, chapters in books, and encyclopedia entries. In addition, she is also the associate editor of the seven-volume Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism. Her research has been supported by grants and fellowships from several organisations including the Centre for Khmer Studies, the American Council of Learned Societies, National Endowment for the Humanities, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the American Institute of Indian Studies/ Smithsonian, and the Social Science Research Council.

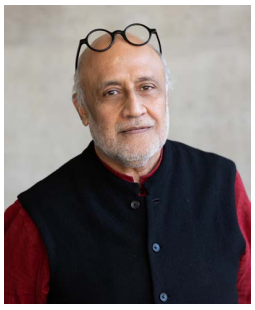
ARCHITECTURE IN A TIME OF FLUX: *RESEARCH AS PRACTICE & PRACTICE AS RESEARCH*

RAHUL MEHROTRA

March 2nd, 2026 | Lecture: 6:00 - 8:30 PM IST | Free Public Lecture | Register: www.jp-india.org

Gardeners tending to the green Facade of the KMC Corporate office in Hyderabad.
Photo Credit: Carlos Chen

The lectures will explore how we might imagine Architecture in a Time of Flux. To construct this understanding, it is important we look at the notion of flux at differing scales as well as modes of engagement. Furthermore, to examine how this idea might help us understand emergent forms of human settlements such as the notion of the kinetic city and the ephemeral as a productive category to analyse urbanism more broadly. Lastly, how this might be manifest as architecture that is context specific.



Rahul Mehrotra is an architect and divides his time between working in Mumbai and teaching at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University where he is the John T. Dunlop Professor in Housing and Urbanization. His writings include coauthoring *Bombay—The Cities Within and Conserving an Image Center—The Fort Precinct in Bombay* — based on this study and its recommendations the historic Fort area in Mumbai was declared a conservation precinct in 1995 — the first such designation in India. In 2012-2015, he led a Harvard University-wide research project with Professor Diana Eck, called *The Kumbh Mela: Mapping the Ephemeral Mega City*. This work was published as a book in 2014. Mehrotra's most recent books are titled *Working in Mumbai* (2020) and *The Kinetic City and Other Essays* (2021). The former a reflection on his practice and the latter his writings over the last thirty years.

WHAT IS EUROPEAN?

DAG NIKOLAUS HASSE

April 23rd, & 24th, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Online Public Lecture on ZOOM
Registration Fee: Rs. 2,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/- | Recording Available*

Im Café Josty by Paul Hoeniger (1890)

Many traditional ideas about European culture are one-sided and distorted, both historically and geographically. They remain burdened with intellectual baggage from the colonial and Romantic eras, leading to cultural arrogance and a midwestern European tunnel vision. The first lecture analyses persistent clichés about Europe and their historical origin, while the second lecture proposes an inclusive vision of Europe that is respectful towards other continents. It also addresses the question of whether criticism of European arrogance is possible without falling into anti-Europeanism: "Culture can provide an intellectual home for all people".

Session I: Colonial and Romantic Clichés about Europe
Session II: How to develop an inclusive and critical vision of Europe without falling into Anti-Europeanism

Dag Nikolaus Hasse, professor of the history of philosophy at the University of Würzburg, is a leading authority on the passage of ideas between the Muslim, Jewish and Christian worlds in West Asia, North Africa and Europe, and has worked on this topic for more than twenty years. Among his numerous publications, three monographs stand out: *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West* (London/Torino, 2000), on the impact of a Muslim philosopher on Latin European intellectual culture; *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), on the European Renaissance around 1500 and its formation by Arabic sources; and *What is European? On Overcoming Colonial and Romantic Modes of Thought* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025).

Celebrating Excellence: Dr. Jaya Kanoria Honoured at AJC Awards 2025!

We are delighted to announce that Dr. Jaya Kanoria, Course Director of Indian Aesthetics at Jnanapravaha Mumbai has been recognised with the Academic Achievement Award – Art & Aesthetics Education at the AJC+ Awards 2025!

This prestigious award was presented at the second edition of the AJC+ Awards held on 12th November 2025 at Palm Spritz, Willingdon Catholic Gymkhana in Mumbai. The event brought together leading voices from architecture, design, the arts, and academia to honour individuals whose work has significantly influenced contemporary cultural and educational practice.

Dr. Kanoria's award recognises her visionary contributions to aesthetic education, particularly her dedication to championing creative literacy and bridging traditional practices with contemporary pedagogies. Through her leadership and scholarship, she has helped shape thoughtful, empathetic learners and enriched the educational landscape.

Please join us in congratulating Dr. Jaya Kanoria on this well-deserved honour! Her commitment to excellence continues to inspire and elevate our community.

Left - Dr. Jaya Kanoria receiving the Academic Achievement Award – Art & Aesthetics Education at the AJC+ Awards 2025!

Jnanapravaha Mumbai is deeply indebted to the following for their support:

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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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