



Iranian Medieval Wall Paintings

10 –14th centuries - Art Historical Research of Vanishing Cultural Heritage



1 The monumental wall painting repertoire of the Gunbad structure at Turbat-i Jam, north-western Iran. (Photographer: Ana Marija Grbanovic)

Research Subject and Objectives

The project focuses on the least researched medium of architectural decoration in Medieval Iranian monuments of the 10th to 14th centuries – the wall painting decorative programmes and their architectural contexts. This chronological span begins with the Arab conquest and Islamization of Iranian territory and continues through the period of proliferation of monument patronage under the Great Seljuq (1040-1157) and Ilkhanid (1256-1335/53) dynasties. The project approaches these three chronological units jointly to discern technological and aesthetic developments in wall painting. The project aims to better understand their production technology (artistic techniques and materials employed), visual and aesthetic features, function and meaning within the architectural context, and aspects of social history tied to their patronage and artisanship. The newly generated knowledge and publications on the subject should prompt conservation interventions on these repertoires, many of which are in a poor state of preservation. Moreover, the research findings will fill one of the major gaps in our understanding of Medieval Iranian architecture. They will benefit other fields of Islamic Art and Archaeology studies, as well as studies of Social History, Sociology and History of Islamate lands.



2 Vandalised and deteriorated wall paintings featuring a sacred landscape at the Gunbad mosque of Azadan near Isfahan. (Photographer: Ana Marija Grbanovic)

Subject

Wall paintings, as a decorative medium, are entirely distinct from carved stucco, applied moulded stucco, stencilled stucco, or tiles. Each of these decorative media was produced using specific artistic techniques and production technologies, including approaches to design and its implementation, pigment palettes, epigraphic repertoires, and overall aesthetic features. Wall painting repertoires under study are most frequently found in religious structures, such as mosques, pilgrimage complexes, mausolea, and other funerary buildings (e.g., imamzadas), as well as in secular archaeological sites. They served specific functions and meanings within these structures, which served as the focus of public life and religious rites, and they shaped the collective memory of these societies. Wall paintings could transmit the state's religious narratives and were closely tied to the function of monuments; they also expressed the political aspirations of their patrons. As a decorative medium, wall painting can be used to monumentalize architectural surfaces and structures and to highlight their focal points. In doing so, wall paintings could highlight or even transform the function of monuments. From the tenth to the fourteenth centuries, the modes of use of wall paintings and their aesthetic appearance, serving their function, developed in correspondence with advances in production technology and artistic techniques. In sum, these wall paintings reflect the socio-political traits of the societies that commissioned and produced them. They provide invaluable insight into the composition of craftsmen's workshops, their mobility, and the transfer of artistic knowledge across chronological and geographical scales.

Research Approach

The research focuses on wall paintings, which will be studied in close relation to their architectural contexts, and when relevant, as linked to the other types of architectural decoration of monuments, such as tiles, applied moulded and stencilled stuccos and carved stuccos. Studies of the chronology of construction and decoration interventions on monuments, which were frequently performed in a multitude of phases, across longer chronological spans, are essential in pinpointing the technological and aesthetic characteristics of wall paintings and their meaning and function within monuments. The research is divided into four consecutive stages: studies of wall painting production technology, studies of their art and aesthetics, and research on wall painting craftsmanship. The question of wall painting preservation is also addressed. The most significant part of the research comprises research of wall painting design, artistic techniques and colouring palettes, their epigraphic programmes, visual features and craftsmanship.

Research Output and Significance

This study comprises a systematic formation of a corpus of wall painting inscriptions (in Arabic and Persian) and an iconographic study of geometric and vegetal ornamentation on wall paintings. Accordingly, comprehension of wall painting aesthetic form, function and their meaning within monuments, is put forward. The relationship between the art of wall painting, carved stuccos, applied moulded and stencilled stuccos, and tiles is examined to better comprehend the logic behind the use of wall paintings, their role in decorating the monuments and their position within the decorative hierarchy of monument multimedia decorative programmes. This better comprehension of wall paintings is significant for further studies of sociology, anthropology and social history of Iran and the neighbouring lands, such as studies of religious expression of medieval societies, social status of wall painting artists and patrons, and in the understanding of the ever-changing socio-political context of monument and wall painting patronage. In doing so, the project elucidates the significance of wall paintings and proposes information regarding their state of preservation.



3 Badly damaged architectural revetments of the Shamsiyya madrasa in Yazd, central Iran. (Photographer: Ana Marija Grbanovic)

Project's Societal Relevance

Publications on this subject, the project's output (peer-reviewed articles and the monograph), are aimed at making these neglected and little-known monuments and art more visible among the scholarly audience and on the popular level, and to prompt their recognition as valuable cultural heritage worthy of being conserved and preserved. These publications provide knowledge about wall paintings, which must serve as the foundation of conservation interventions for their preservation for future generations and recognition as cultural heritage.

Competences of Bamberg

This interdisciplinary project combines research methodology and answers research questions pertaining to disciplines of art history, building archaeology, preservation sciences, and heritage studies. It therefore reflects the interdisciplinary character of the Centre for Heritage Conservation Studies and Technologies (KDWT). Its main goal is to research the wall painting corpus in order to prompt its preservation, and it thus counts among the following competences: cultural heritage preservation, digital cultural heritage long-term documentation, and comprehension of historic working techniques.



4 Detail of the early Islamic wall painting inscription band in the interior of the Sar-i Kucha Mir mosque in Muhammadiya village near Na'in. (Photographer: Ana Marija Grbanovic)

