

The Phenomenon of "Foreign" in Oriental Art

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Zu [Inhaltsverzeichnis](#)

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Foreword

How is the Word “das Fremde” / “the Foreign” to be understood in Oriental Art?

Annette Hagedorn

For many years I had been interested in the study of the interaction between the different regional cultures of the Oriental world. In the spring of 2003 I therefore decided to initiate a panel on this subject during the 29th German Orientalist Conference held by the “Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft” (“German Oriental Society”) in Halle.

I was aware that many of my colleagues had similar interests and took the opportunity of inviting several scholars to the Orientalist Conference 2004 to take part in a discussion on “The Phenomenon of ‘Foreign’ in Oriental Art”. Taking into consideration the diverse angles of approach of individual members of the “Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft”, I asked participants on the panel to occupy themselves with varied aspects of Oriental art, in order that the theme could be discussed from as many different viewpoints as possible. In German speaking countries Oriental art (Orientalische Kunst) includes Islamic, Indian, South-East Asian as well as Far Eastern art.

The short text which I attached to the invitation is published here in English to recall the subject to be discussed at the congress:

“fremd/ foreign means the opposite of near, of indigenous and familiar, but it also contains an aura of strange, peculiar, bizarre and even hostile. Although the idea of foreign often has positive associations such as colourfulness and the spirit of adventure, at the same time the foreign and unfamiliar person just as often experiences rejection in many societies. On the other hand artists of all eras and nationalities have always been fascinated by unfamiliar phenomena, because the unfamiliar is often at the same time picturesque and therefore able to draw the attention of the beholder.

The phenomenon of how strangeness was perceived, judged and figuratively retained is therefore one of the basic themes of the visual arts which today's scholars can approach from many different perspectives.

The purpose of the meeting is to examine this phenomenon from as many angles as possible and not only from the European point of view, but also from the one of the oriental and East Asian cultures. Comments on foreign art are equally as interesting as the portrayal of foreign peoples and their appearance, the attitude towards foreign culture, positive or negative, and the treatment within one's own society of the alien person, whether he be an immigrant, asylum seeker, missionary, scientist or tourist. A variety of approaches to the theme can reveal similarities as well as differences in the treatment of the alien in different eras and regions and thus throw some light on the modern tendency to regard the unfamiliar as something peculiar or disconcerting, even in this age of globalization.”

At the congress the word “fremd” was addressed within the context of art history. For the publication of the articles in this book the theme should be explained here in more detail with regard to its different levels of meaning and its objectives. The contributors to this book look at how art transposes sociological phenomena in different cultures and which links can be shown to have existed between different regions. Examples of this are for instance the reciprocal fertilisation of art of the Middle East and China, of China and Europe, of Persia and North Africa, of Turkey and ancient Europe as well as of India and Europe. There is also an article describing the influence which Islamic art has had on European art.

In this context the question arises regarding temporal development within the assimilation of the unfamiliar. When for instance did objects from earlier periods become alien within the same country, simply because the basis of their origin was no longer understood? Or when did conquered peoples begin to provide inspiration for the changing and developing culture of their conquerors, as happened with the pre-Islamic Sasanian dynasty in the Middle East or the Islamic Umayyad dynasty in Spain? The wide variety of approaches to the theme can help to pinpoint similarities as well as differences between different eras and regions in their intercourse with the unfamiliar.

At this point it should be mentioned that despite all previous scientific discussion it has not yet been possible to satisfactorily define the word “das Fremde” in its relation to Islamic art. In the Koran the only approach to the subject is in Sura 30 (The Greeks), Verse 22: “Among His other signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for all mankind.” (The Koran. Translated with notes by N. J. Dawood. London 1990.)

Already in 1996/97 Gregor Schoeler (using the word “der Fremde”) and Franz Rosenthal (for “stranger”) attempted to find a general definition which could serve as a basis for discussion, although at that time they were not talking about art. (Schoeler, Gregor: *Der Fremde im Islam*. In: Schuster, Meinhard: *Die Begegnung mit dem Fremden. Wertungen in Hochkulturen von Altertum bis zur Gegenwart*. Stuttgart/ Leipzig 1996. 117–130. Rosenthal, Franz: *The Stranger in Medieval Islam*. In: Arabica. Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies. Vol. XLIV. 1997. 35–75.)

In the English-language literature the word “das Fremde” was translated in the end with the expression “the other”, although that term in no way contains the same complexity of meaning as the German word “das Fremde”. “Der Fremde” (the stranger) refers obviously to a person. In art history the emphasis is on “das Fremde”. The various approaches to the subject which are submitted in this publication will hopefully lead to further discussion and possibly to a definition of the expression, whereby the use of the term “das Fremde” in English should certainly be taken into consideration. I am delighted that Ernst J. Grube uses the words “Fremde” or “fremd” several times in his essay, although it is written in English. I would like to thank him very much for using this term.

The chapters of this book are texts which have been arranged around several aspects of the term “das Fremde” or aspects of “foreign” in oriental art, as they were discussed in Halle. They all aim to show how productive it can be to discuss different areas of oriental art history under the single aspect of “das Fremde” or foreign.

In a more or less chronological order of their topics of art history the authors are forced to use different words to provide an exact modern meaning for term “das Fremde”/ “foreign”. The words “the other” and the “exotic”, which are used in various ways in different parts of the oriental world, have special meanings. It is interesting that all types of art from architecture to painting and the applied arts could have been taken as the basis for articles showing the fundamental importance of the influence of foreign art in different districts and among different nations of the Oriental world.

In their articles Adalbert Gail and Jens Kröger discuss questions of early Indian and Mediterranean art.

Ernst J. Grube portrays the “Chinese Elements in Islamic Art” and the strong influence of Chinese art on Islamic art and culture, as Grube says, from the beginning of the Islamic era. This article is an example of the examination of the influences of one country and not of a region. Grube explores the notion of the term “das Fremde” as a distinct and “separate” word but he also has to use several other words. This shows the complexity of the meaning of the term “das Fremde”.

Karin Rührdanz also gives examples of Chinese influences on Islamic art, focusing on early Timurid art (15th century AD). For these influences Rührdanz uses the word “exotism”. Lorenz Korn also uses this word for the influences of Persian art in Mamluk architectural decoration in Egypt. Martina Müller-Wiener concentrates on cosmographical knowledge in Greek, Indian and Iranian culture and its use in medieval Islamic art. In his text Avinoam Shalem studies the example of an idol of a 14th century manuscript from Meopotamia or North Syria to explain the meaning of this image as an illustration of danger and its spirituality. Eleanor Sims, Ebba Koch, Ursula Toyka-Fuong and Turgut Saner deal with aspects of European influence on the art of Persia, India, China and Turkey. The reciprocal influence of Islamic art on European learning is explained by Annette Hagedorn.

At the first meeting in Halle the variety of themes had already shown how productive and fruitful it would be to start a wider project on the concept of discussing Oriental art by using the term “das Fremde”/ “the foreign” as a central focal point. I should like to thank all members of the panel in Halle 2004 who decided to contribute.

The papers read in Halle by Bernadette Bröskamp, Desirée Heiden, Christiane Kothe, and Vera Wolff could not be included, because for various reasons the authors were not able to participate in the publication. Although they were not able to attend the congress

in Halle, Adalbert Gail, Ebba Koch and Ursula Toyka-Fuong kindly made their contributions available because of their relevance to the theme. To them I extend my grateful thanks.

My thanks also go to Ursula Reichert (Dr. Ludwig Reichert Publishing House, Wiesbaden), who quickly took the decision to publish the essays in book form and who contributed a considerable amount of her own energy. Her cooperativeness made it possible to endow the publication with the illustrations necessary for any work on art history.

And finally I should like to thank Elizabeth Ettinghausen, whose knowledge of Islamic art and whose familiarity with the principles of research in art history led me to invite her to write the introduction for this book. This is an introduction in which she gives a fundamental outline of the foreign and its influences on Islamic art.

