Spirits in Transcultural Skies

Auspicious and Protective Spirits in Artefacts and Architecture Between East and West

Niels Gutschow · Katharina Weiler Editors

Springer
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## Contents

### Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Goddess of Victory in Greek and Roman Art</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai Michael Töpfer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Iconography of Zoroastrian Angelology in Sasanian Art</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shervin Farridnejad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angels as Agents of Transfer Between Hebrew Origins, Byzantium, and</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe: Marienberg in South Tyrol as a Case Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelika Konrad-Schineller</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dragon in Transcultural Skies: Its Celestial Aspect in the Medieval</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic World</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara Kuehn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winged Immortals and Heavenly Beings Across the East Asian Skies</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chari Pradel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Celestial Spirits Became Winged in the Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal (Sixth to Nineteenth Century)</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niels Gutschow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomonic Angels in a Mughal Sky: The Wall Paintings of the Kala Burj</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at the Lahore Fort Revisited and Their Reception in Later South Asian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Qajar Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebba Koch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethereal Imagery: Symbolic Attributes in the Art and Architecture of India .................................................. 173
Rabindra J. Vasavada

Entangled Visualities: Celestial Beings in Early Twentieth Century Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal ............ 193
Katharina Weiler

Epilogue ................................................. 213
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Introduction

Transcultural Journeys

Art history has long been one of the disciplines most firmly rooted in hermetic and regionally limited analytical frameworks. Since the nineteenth century, art and its historiography have been intimately bound to a whole range of projects dedicated to identity formation. Only recently have scholars in the field of art history begun to look for new frameworks (Bruhn et al. 2012) that focus attention on the creation of a new historical mind map, and the growing tendency to transcend and query a hitherto Western-dominated historical perspective. In this regard, “transculturality” is a major keyword for defining such a new approach, as it addresses issues of processuality and the consistent networks of cultural relations that are understood to constitute a culture. “Cultures” are in turn not understood as hermetic and regionally limited by fixed boundaries. Instead, a transcultural approach aims at gaining insights into cultural dynamics and the entanglements that lie beyond those transmitted through discourses of cultural purity and originality and the forms of cultural essentialism they stand for and sustain. This approach inquires into reciprocal effects and aspects of interwovenness in art and architecture with a view to reconceptualizing given realms (Juneja 2012). A project of this nature may begin by reconstituting art-historical units of analysis, replacing fixed regions with mobile contact zones featuring shifting frontiers (spaces of transition), and considering nonlinear and palimpsestic aspects of time.

From time immemorial, objects of art, migrant artists, and traveling visual regimes have invariably created an open public sphere of shared meanings and forms of articulation. Because of this tendency, the present volume investigates the visualization of both ritual and decorative aspects of auspiciousness and protection in the form of celestial characters in art and architecture. Their iconography proves a useful tool for investigating and conceptualizing transculturality as a form of relationality. Presented here are the proceedings of the workshop “Spirits in Transcultural Skies,” held at the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global
Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows” at Heidelberg University from 30 June to 2 July, 2011. The workshop set out to approach the issue of “protection” from a primarily art-historical perspective and was devoted to spirits or goddesses and gods, that is to say essentially auspicious and protective figures “populating” architecture on their travels between the East and West.

A vivid account of buildings inhabited by spirits is to be found in Italo Calvino’s *Le città invisibili* (1972) (translated into English as *Invisible Cities*, in 1974), a compilation of fragmentary, fictitious urban images. The author conjures up cities through imaginary conversations between the thirteenth-century Venetian traveler to Asia Marco Polo (ca. 1254–1324) and his host, the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire (r. 1260–1294) and Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty in China, Kublai Khan (1215–1294). “Gods of two species protect the city of Leandra,” says Marco Polo of one of these legendary cities. “Both are too tiny to be seen and too numerous to be counted” (Calvino 1974). Invariably, however, these gods inhabit the houses. When families move house, the Penates (guardians of the provisions) follow them. The Lares (guardians of certain places or families) “belong to the house, and when the family that has lived there goes away, they remain with the new tenants; perhaps they were already there before the house existed, among the weeds of the vacant lot, concealed in a rusty can.” These house gods like to intermingle in a house: “they visit one another, they stroll together on the stucco cornices, on the radiator pipes; they comment on family events; not infrequently they quarrel; but they can also get along peacefully for years.” Marco Polo continues his description of the encounters and relationships between the two kinds of gods: “The Lares have seen Penates of the most varied origins and customs pass through their walls; the Penates have to make a place for themselves, rubbing elbows with Lares of illustrious, but decaying palaces, full of hauteur, or with Lares from tin shacks, susceptible and distrustful.”—“If you listen carefully, especially at night, you can hear them in the houses of Leandra murmuring steadily, interrupting one another, huffing, bantering, amid ironic, stifled laughter.”

What Calvino conjures up in his tale is the notion of Roman *genii*, the idea of gods connected to places, landscapes (rivers, mountains, and valleys), buildings, or even entire cities. Aside from those related to particular persons, such places were guarded by a *genius loci*. In his descriptions, Calvino hints at the contacts and encounters and at the dynamic and culturally productive practices that are associated with auspicious and protective deities as soon as they are personalized.

The nine articles in the present volume deliberate further on the relationships between ethereal creatures and the symbolism found in pictorial programs. The authors come from different fields of research, including art history, architecture, and classical archaeology. They detect the different ways and situations in which aspects of protection, power, and salvation find their expression, for example, when painted or carved in stone or wood in art and architecture, or on ritual implements, covering a wide geographical area between Tyrol and Japan. The examples presented do not claim to provide a comprehensive overview. The collection rather opens a window on a phenomenon in the history of art and architecture that has never been looked at from this vantage before. The time frame ranges from Greek
and Roman antiquity to the twentieth century. Though they are individual examples, the objects of investigation discussed here can be analyzed in terms of specific fields of tension that have evidently evolved from situational shifts in meaning. With the help of a range of different instances, the authors detect multiple identities in some of these figures, identities that have taken shape as a result of their multipolar genesis. The philosophies present in the art and architecture featured here are primarily religious (though some are also political) and communicate distinctive notions of protection. In descriptive terms, they find expression in the pictorial programs of temples, churches, palaces, triumphal arches, and houses where goddesses, gods, or heavenly spirits, e.g., genii, victoriae, angels, paris, apsaras, vidyādharīs, shenren, yuren, hiten, or tennin, as well as winged dragons may “dwell” in reliefs, murals, or carvings on façades, arches, spandrels, vaults, niches, cantilevers, composite capitals, tympana, door and window lintels, or roof struts. The scholars delineate the spirits’ diverse trajectories and histories, inquire into the periods and situations in which they came about or were created, and ask what these beings—both winged and wingless—can tell us about the power of exchange.

In its attempts to conceptualize transculturality and transcultural flows, this volume contributes to charting the motif of the aerial spirit in architecture and art objects and examines the eagerness displayed in adopting certain concepts and artistic ideas. Moreover, varied as their approaches and analyses may be, the authors all apply methods that examine the diverse and often contradictory processes of relationality, keeping in mind the fact that transculturality may be described not only in terms of the empathy required to accept foreign forms and practices but also of the desire to domesticate them. Perusal of the “migration” of the motif of airborne or winged auspicious beings reveals clearly defined instances of experiences of cultural entanglement and multiple ways in which both homogeneity and difference are negotiated within contacts and encounters through the selective appropriation, translation, and rereading of signs. In this case, “translation,” rooted in the Latin cognate translatio, stands for a form of border crossing, a space where different cultures engage with each other. The term can be used to define a series of relationships across boundaries of genre, language, and cultural formation. In this sense, translation provides a comprehensive and productive basis for reconsidering what, in cultural and artistic practice, is referred to as “influence.” With respect to transculturality, “translation” can be read as a dynamic and culturally productive practice through which the circulation, mediation, reception, and transformation—in short, the representation—of specific cultural forms, codes, and practices are affected. In highly transformative processes, certain artistic prototypes are revived and consciously imitated, copied, and amalgamated.

As is characteristic of transcultural entanglements, the way beliefs “travel” and translate into symbolic motifs, fashioned in a two- or three-dimensional form, is never linear. The routes are complex and unexpected. The belief in auspicious goddesses and gods or in spirits related to people, places, or victories can be found in many regions and throughout different time periods, thus making such notions of protection universal. These deities materialized in local contexts and were altered in