

The Visual Culture of Sufism in France and in Germany

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SufiVisual aims to explore the religious visual culture of 'mystical' Islam, or Sufism, in France and in Germany by identifying the ways in which visual culture actively constructs and shapes religious concepts and informs our understanding of Islam. This endeavor is premised on the assumption that Sufi visualizations of belief and piety involve a common conceptual vocabulary, a shared 'text' around which 'interpretative communities' of differing social, religious and political outlooks have evolved, thereby forming a kind of visual lingua franca in the widest sense. What role then do vision and the image play in the devotional behavior and imagination of contemporary Sufi orders?

The study follows a gender-sensitive reading of Sufi visual culture, paying particular attention to the role of gender imagery and symbolism, especially the feminine element, and its interrelation with gender differentiation and construction from a comparative perspective. SufiVisual will produce pioneering work on gender-specific Sufi visual culture and contribute important data for further academic research, allowing a more open-ended and gender-balanced understanding of the visualizations of belief and piety in Sufi orders. By shedding light on Sufism and its dynamics in a constantly changing social landscape, this analysis of Sufi visual expression in the context of mystical Islam in Western Europe will also serve more generally as a bridge between 'East and West', exploring the

roles of visual culture and religious practice as counter movements to religious fundamentalism and driving forces for religious pluralism.

The topic is timely and important because (1) questions relating to vision and visualization inform, and often complicate, intercultural encounters as well as inner-Muslim debates over the alleged prohibition of figural imagery in Islam; (2) the project will address the wider problématique of Islam's alleged denigration of vision contributing to its inability to modernize; and (3) the ways in which visual culture negotiates meaning with regard to aspects of religious and mystic imagery marked by new patterns of engagement with both tradition ('routinization') and modernity.

The interdisciplinary project approaches the study of Sufi visual culture through anthropology, ethnography, religious studies, gender studies, and art history, and by considering both emic ('insider') insights and etic ('outsider') analysis, in order to assess the data from both subjective and objective perspectives.

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