Projects in manuscript studies

Orient-Digital database and Islamic book art

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Book art, including calligraphy, illuminations, and illustrations, embellishes the great manuscripts of the Islamicate world and comprises one of the finest artistic traditions of humankind. The database Orient-Digital at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz (<http://orient-digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/>; see Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Newsletter 6, 2013, 7–8) pays respect to this book culture: a unique art description module, conceived by the art historian Friederike Weis and the Arabists Thoralf Hanstein and Christoph Rauch, has been embedded in the database.

More than 8,200 art elements from 310 Persian, Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, and Javanese manuscripts have been so far described and made accessible online. The great span of time covered—the illustrated manuscripts date from between the fourteenth and twentieth century—and the vast geographic scope—the Persian world, the Ottoman Empire, Southeast Asia—account for the great variety of forms and styles of book decoration. The database catalogues calligraphies whether collected in albums or transmitted as single leaves, Persian and Mongol miniatures in the renowned Diez albums from the fourteenth and fifteenth century, luxuriously illuminated and illustrated Persian manuscripts such as Firdawsī’s Šāhnāma, Niẓāmī’s and Amīr Ḥusraw Dīhlavī’s Ḥamsa, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century miniatures from the Mughal India in the Ġahangir album, al-Qazwīnī’s cosmography ‘Aḡāʾīb al-maḥlūqāt wa ḡarāʾīb al-mawġūdāt, devotional literature such as Muḥyī al-Dīn Lārī’s Futūḥ al-ḥaramayn and al-Ḡazūlī’s Dalāʾīl al-ḥayrāt, astronomical manuscripts with drawings of constellations, and Arabic grammar books with later added illustrations.

In the database, each book art element gets its own description (fig. 1). First, general data are provided: the shelfmark of the manuscript and the page on which the element is found; a short title in English and German; and a thumbnail image linked with the digital collections of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Following the link, the user can view a high resolution photograph of the book art element (fig. 2)—and of the entire manuscript. A link to the
metadata describing the parent manuscript is equally provided for a broader context.

For each element, physical description is provided (material; dimensions); the date and place of origin; transcription of the text(s) embedded into the art element; information on the kind of ink, and the state of preservation.

The core of the entry is constituted by the content and history of the art piece: a picture description and a multiple classification of motifs contextual-
ize the book art element. Specific categories have been introduced by the database. Every book art element is first defined as illumination (here defined as a form of pictorial book art complementing texts, calligraphies and paintings, mostly with gilding), illustration (an image that has a clear connection to the text of the manuscript), non-illustrative image (that does not refer explicitly to a text, mostly a decorative motif), or calligraphy. Illustrations may be either miniatures (fully coloured) or line drawings (often monochromatic). The decorations are further classified according to the motifs represented; here, the categories include animal, fabulous creatures, plant, scenery, map, and

ornament. Information on reference literature and the exhibition history shed additional light on its reception.

Besides the usual search and PDF export possibilities, the users are given the opportunity to provide their input by sending remarks or error reports.

In cooperation with the Data Processing Centre of Leipzig University, the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin has developed an exemplary research tool presenting its Islamic book art in a comprehensive and clear manner.

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