THOMAS KAFFENBERGER

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or "turns", attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

Formed as a building archaeologist, my original research focus was the uncovering of 'objective evidence', the reconstruction of original shapes and establishing of chronologies of medieval architectures. During my work on Eastern Mediterranean materials, though, I became aware of the limits of this methodology as well as of a traditional stylistic analysis. Both approaches remained of importance to me, in order to reach a solid base for interpretation – e.g., the creation of a comprehensive catalogue of medieval Greek Churches in Cyprus, each discussed with respect to their formal aspects and chronologies. However, this did not allow me to further elucidate the role of the investigated buildings within the societies they were built and used by, in this case the multi-denominational, culturally diverse environment of late medieval Cyprus. At this point my focus of interest started including questions of the potentially 'meaning-conveying', iconographic dimension embedded in numerous building projects of the medieval period (such as choice and reuse of materials, referential systems in chosen shapes and forms, interaction between spaces, images and beholders), which led to a better understanding of the multi-layered roles of buildings such as for example the Greek cathedral of Famagusta, Cyprus.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

In the beginning, I found books using the approach of traditional building archaeology particularly instructive – as an example I can mention *Der Dom zu Speyer* by Walter Haas et al., 1972, which formed my appreciation for the meticulous investigation of the material legacy. My interest in a further contextualisation of works of architecture was among others fostered by the seminal *Die gotische Architektur in Frankreich 1130-1270* of Dieter Kimpel and Robert Suckale, already published in 1985. The authors address the complex issue of the interdependence between form ('style') and function and prompt reflexion about the semantic readability of stylistic choices. This approach, de-

spite its age, is still influential for my approach to architectures, as it takes into account the complex historic realities surrounding each creation of a building in the Middle Ages, also paving way for the inclusion of more updated approaches e.g. of a hierarchisation of spaces.

Also Stephan Albrecht's *Die Inszenierung der Vergangenheit im Mittelalter. Die Klöster von Glastonbury und Saint-Denis* had an important impact on my approach to medieval architecture, pointing out the potential of architectures to be imbued with relic-like qualities in order to stage an institution's tradition and historic value.

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between "style" and "iconography"? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

An attempt to "fully overcome traditional art history", as occasionally preached, appears hardly fruitful. A solid analysis of the objects we are dealing with, as much as their historic realities by no means absent from older studies, still forms the base of our understanding, even if often more implicitly than explicitly. Notwithstanding, dualist distinctions often prove to be a limiting factor in the study of art. While style and iconography can evidently be clearly outlined through precise definitions, only a more fluid perception of phenomena, an acknowledgement of their interplay, allows for a productive use of both notions. If we speak about the iconography of architecture, where we encounter a different mechanism of semiotics than in most imagery due to the former's non-figurative nature, an integrated, combined methodology has proven to be most fruitful. Conclusively I would maintain that insisting on the use of a single approach – instead of a combination chosen for a specific set of questions and objects – will often be nothing more than an intellectual exercise for its own sake.

4. *Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different "turns", each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

The enhanced interest in certain approach angles has, despite the long-standing tradition of an iconographic reading of architectures, clearly helped to form new ideas about the potential iconicity of built environments. Foremost, the "spatial turn" with its focus on conceptual and actual spaces played an important role. It enabled the development of a framework within which an architecture is not solely perceived as the sum of its walls, but as one element in a relational network with the imagery it contains, the beholders it was conceived for, the cityscape or landscape it forms part of etc. Somewhat connected are also the effects of the "anthropological turn", more specifically the turn towards how humans affected the creation of architecture, and in turn its impact on society. My personal research has benefitted from the latter context in that it provides methodological tools for a valorisation of "minor" works of architecture, which serve as key to an understanding of the multi-layered nature of past societies.

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

Important aspects for the study of images in more recent research include the performativity, the interactive nature of the objects, which reflect onto the beholder and have the capacity to affect him/her. This is of special relevance to architectural iconography: here, the "image" is not confined to a flat surface or a restricted volume; it contains people, spectators and accounts for the latters' spatial mobility and potential reactiveness to what they behold. Aspects of this could be subsumed under the notion of "Raumbild" ("image-space"), which has however been used in rather diverse contexts and can be charged with different meanings.

A notion specifically useful for my own research has been one of the *dicta* of the sociology of spaces, which sees a space as a relational arrangement of beings and social goods in a place. Despite its general nature, it underlines the impossibility of discussing spaces without taking into account the factor of movable and immovable objects and the perspective of a (mobile) viewer.

6. *What is your specific understanding of "meaning" in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

A recurring problem in the discussion of "meaning in architecture" is the multifaceted nature of buildings, which at the same time serve a practical purpose (as a container for goods, for social actions), but also as marker of places and as objects structuring landscapes and cityscapes, ultimately as conveyer of political and religious realities. "Meaning" already occurs on a pre-iconographic level: the distinguishable shape of a building signals to the beholder, that he/she is for example approaching a church, a market hall, a bridge. This aspect is well illustrated by the debate around the "correct and suitable" architecture for train stations around 1900, where a distinguishable, intuitively recognisable shape for this new type of building was being sought. While a certain cultural embedding is necessary in the general sense for the perception of all "meaning" in architecture, further levels of meaning are conveyed to those with more profound visual and cultural experience. A specific choice of rare, expensive materials can be interpreted as a general message of venerability, or, with an enhanced cultural background, might refer to a very specific historic context explaining the use of a specific valuable material instead of another.

7. *To what extent is "meaning" determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as* mise-en-scène *strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

In my opinion, meaning in architecture is always created on the one hand through an interplay of appearance and form, spatial staging, the arrangement of movable objects etc., and on the other hand through the cultural experience of the beholder, paired with the "immaterial narrative". Meaning could already vary according to the expectations of the beholder and the mode of their interaction with the building: in the case of a church

this could be to find a space for prayer and worship, for burial and redemption, but also for refuge, physical security, and such. Cultural habits can imbue an architecture with meaning, often in an interplay between the conscious organisation of spaces, the form of the architecture and the placement of images within; as example might suffice the use of church portals as places of legal decisions and judgement. An iconicity, in a stricter sense, might often require knowledge about the political context in which an architecture was created, require the beholder to have personally experienced other buildings related to the one in question. Oftentimes, the key to iconic values such as the demonstration of a patron's alliances, the evocation of Holy Sites etc. would be some sort of narrative replacing a potentially lacking personal experience of the beholder.

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

While an awareness of new methods and new approach angles certainly enables us to draw a more balanced image of the relationship between artwork and beholder, this progress is limited by certain factors. Speaking specifically about the study of medieval architecture: despite the wider availability (yet not necessary knowledge) of primary textual sources and images, those materials still do not allow us to approach the actual experience of the beholder with certainty. Being aware of the potentially multifaceted nature of the latter is certainly an advancement, yet we must admit that we remain somewhat trapped in our period's subjective view projected onto the societies we study. Even more, the enormous flux of digital images surrounding us, the availability of reproductions, of digital tools might to some extent remove us further from the more authentic experience of architectures and artworks the early scholars of our field still enjoyed (as biased as their interpretations might often have been).

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers' understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

First, the experience of iconic qualities of architecture can be determined through the images placed within – e.g., the vault of a church can be turned into a simulation of heaven through the placement of angelic imagery, blue background etc. This in turn would evidently reflect back on the viewer's experience and perception of the architectural space, making its transcendental nature accessible.

Second, the contact with certain iconic architectures would further enhance the beholder's experience of other architectures, or even natural sites. If acquainted with the Mont St. Michel, or the Sacra di San Michele, a faithful person of the Middle Ages would presumably experience certain mountains, particularly those with churches on top as superior in terms of "closeness to the angelic spheres" (a parallel for the Byzantine world being chapels of St. Elijah on hilltops). In this way visual experience and once-heard narrative replaces the need for a further narrative later on and in some way even extends beyond the limits of said narratives.

10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

In architecture, materiality is on a first level a question of practical necessity; the availability of stones or wood, of easy-to-work or problematic materials. On a second level it becomes a question of aesthetics, a general enhancement of splendour evidently indicating a higher 'value', venerability of a building and its associated patrons. On a third level, materiality plays an important role in the iconicity of architecture. Often this happens through the use of particularly distinctive materials: if embedded in the floor or attached to walls, they can mark the places of particular liturgical or ceremonial importance. But also the material itself can be imbued with further significance through mise-en-scène or narratives: for Charlemagne it was of relevance that the marble columns used in his palatine chapel had been brought from Ravenna; for the Venetians the value of the spolia used on the façade of St Mark was not solely their (potentially imitable) artistic quality, but also the fact that they were physically brought from Constantinople, turning the material itself into the conveyor of a political message. Finally, the in itself nondescript material of an older building's fabric can be charged with veneration-worthy qualities: in the crypt of St. Denis, most prominently, the remains of the ancient basilica are not only kept but embellished to serve as visual connector with the institution's past.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the "social life" of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

Buildings and the space(s) they contain are highly intertwined with the societies that surround them. On the one hand, the viewer's experience, rituals, and performance are often the key to the iconographic understanding of buildings. For example, a centralised building might or might not evoke the presence of the Holy Sepulchre to a viewer acquainted with the latter's shape. If said church is additionally used for burial purposes, and perhaps hosts relics of the cross or related liturgies, specifically this use, this entanglement of the building with social actions 'unlocks' the whole extent of the building's iconicity.

On the other hand, architectures can form and shape social behaviour through their various levels of meaning. They can create points of attraction and specifically direct movement, on a small scale within spaces (e.g., orientation towards singled out, specifically staged places), on a larger scale across cities, landscapes (e.g., in the form of pilgrimages).

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

While hard to grasp, to re-imagine, the role of a multisensorial experience cannot be underestimated in a past viewer's experience of architectures. The importance of tactile properties goes hand in hand with the perception of materiality. Taste is harder to connect to architectures, yet phenomena like the ingestion of pulverised fragments of images supposed to be of healing qualities might also be traceable in particularly venerated architectures. The factor of scent certainly plays a role in the performative dimension of

spaces, e.g., to convey proximities to certain places within a church building during liturgies. An important example of my personal research field are the soundscapes of multicultural medieval societies. The use of bells, an inherently "Latin" custom, made its way to the Levant especially in the 13th and 14th centuries to concur with the *semantron* used by the Greeks. The investigation of patterns of appropriation of bells in the Greek sphere, in particular in monastic culture, has the potential to reveal a conscious direction of the faithful within a city, on the one hand, but also as an indicator of various liturgies throughout the day, adding the often-neglected factor of "time".

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that "iconicity" (or "visual efficacy") is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

Architecture itself is in some way the first level of a non-figurative object presenting iconicity on various levels. While not every notion expressed above can be transferred verbatim onto elements of landscape or natural materials, iconic properties of architecture can be enhanced by the latter – or in turn serve to enhance nature's own iconic qualities. I would claim that one of the essential human acts of cultural behaviour is the appropriation of distinctive natural sites through the placement of buildings. This can be of practical nature – a watermill needs to stand next to a river – but often contains important symbolical and very generally "iconic" meaning – a specific river can come to be regarded as miracle-working, healing as consequence of the placement of a sanctuary next to it. Or vice versa: the social practice of considering a water source as miraculous can initiate the construction of a building, interacting with the performative practice previously established on site. A further example for the interplay between "iconic" nature and architecture would be the above mentioned "holy mountains".

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

Works of architecture as a whole are, with rare exceptions, immobile. However, we can speak about the transfer of architectural ideas and models. The appropriation and transfer of those, their imitation in new spatial contexts, is of primary role in the perception of an iconography of architecture. Rather than suspecting an inherent semantic readability, it is a comparative analysis that leads to the uncovering of such transfer processes. Those imitations are by no means restricted to purely formal aspects but always include some of the previously discussed notions: contextual narrative, location, performative and liturgical aspects etc. One of the most useful hermeneutical keys are – to this day – the historical sources themselves, which can reflect the narrative attached to the visual and still visible aspects of a building. Evidently textual sources, such as pilgrim's reports, need to be treated carefully as well in order to distinguish idealised topoi and the reflexion of general narrative from the actual experience of the respective authors.

15. *English is more and more the* lingua franca *of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

The gradual introduction of English as common scholarly language came with the advantage of enabling intensified international exchange. Ideas previously blocked within a restricted scientific circle and bound to the language they were expressed in, can now be more easily shared, appreciated, and integrated in further studies. However, the extent of the methodological caveats becomes clear if we look at only the classical Western European scientific cultures: diverging terminologies even between German, Italian and French lead to a simplification and potential distortion if transferred into English. The entire thought process is impacted by the language it is led in: for example, subtle notions of uncertainty, for which the German language provides ample options, are much harder to convey in English. Transferred onto a global perspective, such caveats are amplified as even seemingly simple notions of chronological organisation, as basic as "medieval", cannot be applied universally. Here, a suitable way forward might be to not discard local scholarly traditions and the language that they are built upon, but instead allowing for more informed academic translations that can comment on those notions that are native to one academic context but absent from the other tradition.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

I see the main challenge for the nearer future in the exterior tendency to structure humanities the same as other sciences. The problematic need to ensure funding by complying with systems often created for fields in which there is a high frequency turnover of projects and publications, just like the quantitative rather than qualitative evaluation of publications, creates an unfavourable climate for more time-consuming groundwork or studies approaching large corpora of objects. An avalanche of new publications is bound to have a significantly shorter lifecycle than many of the older studies. Instead of adapting to those externally requested frameworks, humanities would profit from the development of more suitable, own structures of evaluation and evolution. For example, I would like to see more opportunities created to pursue research detached from the requirement of rapid publication and the pressure to use novel methodologies even on object groups previously not investigated. Rather, I'd favour a stronger return of studies originating from the object(s) and developing individual combinations of approaches suitable to uncover the layers of meaning of the objects in question. While I am aware of the "traditionalist" allure this might have, I am convinced that the relevance of research in our field lies also in the sustainability of results, in their relatability several research generations from now.

Thomas Kaffenberger
University of Fribourg
thomas.kaffenberger@unifr.ch