OYA PANCAROĞLU

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?*

I came to study images in the context of my PhD thesis (completed in 2000) in which I sought to understand why figural imagery began to play a pervasive role in the visual culture of the Persianate world starting in the late 12th century – a phenomenon that lasted for less than a century. At the time, I was mainly interested in the images themselves and their immediate companions – inscriptions (in the case of objects and tiles) and texts (in the case of manuscripts) – and tried to establish connections that had either been ignored or denied in the extant scholarship. Since then, my interest has expanded to include questions about forms of objects on which images appear and the role of compositions that blur the supposed borders between image, ornament, and writing.

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

Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton, 1987); Jacques Le Goff, *L'imaginaire médiéval* (Paris, 1994); Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica, 1995).

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?*

"Traditional" (European/Western) art history has maintained all manner of rigidity, often riding on the easy premise of "one size fits all". The impulse to classify and categorize is understandable and perhaps necessary for preliminary stages of research but becomes unproductive and distorting when it becomes the end goal, resulting in art that is pigeonholed and straitjacketed. Perhaps it becomes more manageable and gives the impression of "furthered" research but, in effect, the application of too many rigid distinc-

tions becomes reductive. I am generally wary of any wholesale prescription of approaches to employ, whether "traditional" or not. Each field within the global landscape of art history has its own set of conditions against which any prescription of methodology should be tested.

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?*

I came into the field in 1990s as a graduate student and my earliest memory of such a "turn" involved the notion of the "gaze". At the time, especially in the mid-nineties in the United States, this was a rather loud drumbeat but, frankly, I found myself reacting to its loudness by avoiding it. Probably I was reacting to what seemed to me to be its blanket adoption, its trendiness at the time. Since then, my out-of-sync relationship to the sequence of "turns" has not changed much. That is to say, all or most of the debates generated by these turns are interesting or beneficial and no doubt I have benefitted from some of them by osmosis or otherwise, but I personally find it hard to participate in a collective scholarly debate at the "moment" that it becomes "hot". And, some 25 years later, the "gaze" as a "cooled off" notion is much more palatable to me.

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?*

In my field (medieval Islamic art), the notions that have been relevant in the last 20-30 years in the study of images include narrativity, portability (especially for objects but also images), spatiality and theories about ornament. Narrativity had interested me from the beginning, but I delved into ornament only in the last decade or so. I feel it has expanded my horizons considerably because the images I study tend to be "ornamental" as much as narrative and it has helped me to face this reality. Moreover, because I also do research on architecture, I find that thinking about ornament unites my two areas of interest, further expanding my horizons.

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

I don't think that I have a "specific" understanding of meaning. I try to keep an open mind about meaning in the sense that I think it is contingent upon context and conditions and therefore changeable. But, of course, that doesn't stop me from proposing meanings every now and then. For the period and region that I study, I find that images conveyed messages primarily by maintaining an affinity to a basic repertoire (a "set menu", if you will) that established their relevance while, at the same time, achieving some kind of inflection or modulation, especially, but not exclusively, by means of particular combinations with other images, texts or ornamentation.

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?*

All of those factors certainly have an impact on the generation and re-generation of meaning. Social protocol around the image, too, can be a determinant. Who owns the image, who has access to it and how... these things add weight to meanings.

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?*

Probably so, on the average. But it is not always possible to arrive at an understanding of viewers' expectations. We can guess but we don't always have the means to know. Still, the complexity of image-viewer relationship should always be born in mind.

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

Interrelationships among images as well as between images and, for example, human-made environments are some of the most fundamental questions that image studies require. Figuring these interrelationships out should ideally be more than a formal exercise. If we can approach the question of *why* those interrelationships exist, then we may come that much closer to the agency of images with regard to perception.

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

Does the "materiality of images" refer to the material(s) out of which the image is created or to something about the image that brings material (or the idea thereof) to the foreground? Perhaps these two make up two sides of the same medallion. Or perhaps the question is deliberately ambiguous. Why do certain images go with certain materials? There is a category of early Islamic (8th-10th c.) figurines (assumed to be toys) that are made exclusively from bone and encountered largely in archaeological contexts. Perhaps they were also made from wood, but wood does not survive in archaeological contexts to the same degree as bone. Hence, it's not clear how much importance should be attached to bone as exclusive material in this case but, at the same time, the materiality of bone seems to be a defining element for the formal aspects of the figurine. So, I would take the question of materiality on a case-by-case basis.

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?*

Discovering the "social life" of images requires some sense of the context(s) of their placement and/or movement. For images related to veneration (icons, votive statues, etc.) we can already be one step ahead in the game because of the basic functional interactivi-

ty of such images and our sense of their intended context even when they are removed from it. Similarly, a Roman villa with its preserved mosaic floors or wall paintings *in situ* opens up a whole vista for glimpsing into the "social life" of the images in the various spaces of the Roman household. When there is a total loss of context, however, sometimes it is only the image itself that can be interrogated about its social life and often images don't reveal everything.

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.*

Sight is a fundamental but not exclusive sense in the experience of images. Hearing, touching and possibly tasting can also be involved. From the late 12th to the early 13th century in Iran, we have a large body of ceramic vessels (especially bowls and plates) painted with images and inscribed with poetry. As poetry was a performative literary genre, these poems were quite possibly read out loud. In order to see the image and read the poem, the vessels required handling, hence touching. As vessels, they were potentially used for serving food in them, inviting the sense of tasting to the experience.

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?*

Iconicity does not have to be limited to artistic images and does not have to be a concept exclusive to art history. It would be more interesting and possibly more productive to see another discipline deal with this issue.

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?*

This is a broad and varied category of images. And each case is different, requiring a different set of tools.

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?*

I think the problem is not so much that some important notions about images have been developed vis-a-vis European/Western artistic production but rather the tenacious creed that those productions are somehow unrelated to anything else in the world and have a natural conceptual predominance. Thus, "medieval art" without any qualification is assumed to be European medieval art and all other medieval arts are expected to be qualified, geographically or ethnically. Even with those qualifications provided, however, the "others" continue to be lumped together as "non-western" this or that. This persistent

western vs. non-western dichotomy is, frankly, meaningless from a historical point of view. The status quo needs to be disturbed and, to my mind, one way to do this is to stop using non-European qualifiers as signposts and to reject "non-European" or "non-Western" as acceptable categories. Once the playing field is evened out, the applicability of notions across contexts can be assessed without the weight of biases.

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

I think art history in general would benefit from greater emphasis on breadth of coverage. If every scholar pushed herself or himself beyond his or her comfort zone in terms of chronology, geography and/or medium, art history would be a more connected world.

Oya Pancaroğlu
Boğaziçi University
oya.pancaroglu@boun.edu.tr