"Heritage as a Transcultural Concept – Angkor Wat/Cambodia from an Object of Colonial Archaeology to a Contemporary Icon"

(Michael S. Falser, Heidelberg University/Germany)

“Cultural heritage” as an aesthetic concept is a product of European modernity and was inscribed into the late 18th-century birth process of nation-states within their fixed territorial borders and collective identity constructions. In a juxtaposition of different emerging theories and disciplines from art history and archaeology to conservation methods in architecture, the protection of cultural heritage was institutionalized. In the context of European colonialism, the concept of cultural heritage was transferred into non-European cultures. However, within the postcolonial background, trends of universal migration and the effects of “globalisation”, the founding characteristics of “cultural heritage” desperately need a new theoretical foundation that tries to overcome supposedly fixed notions of territoriality and “pure” ethnic and cultural entities.

One way to discuss a new approach is the concept of “transculturality” which does not focus on fixed cultural end products within fixed territorial “containers” such as nation states, but on the processes of transformation and translation during the contact and exchange between cultures.

This paper tries to re-frame “cultural heritage” as a transcultural concept with a case-study that takes place at the Chair of Global Art History at the University of Heidelberg/Germany.

The project investigates the formation of the modern concept of cultural heritage by charting its colonial, postcolonial/nationalist and global trajectories. It does so through researching the case study of the Cambodian 12th century temple of Angkor Wat as different phases of its history unfolded within the transcultural interstices of European and Asian projects and conceptual definitions: from its “discovery in the jungle” by French colonial archaeology in the 19th century, its re-presentation during French Universal and Colonial Exhibitions to its canonisation as a symbol of national identity during struggle for decolonisation and under the postcolonial Khmer Rouge regime, and finally as a global icon of contemporary heritage schemes.
About the presenter

Michael Falser (MA, MSc, PhD) studied architecture and art history in Vienna and Paris. He wrote his PhD-thesis on “The Political History of Historic Preservation in Germany” at the Berlin University of Technology. After practical experience as preservation architect in San Francisco and consultant at the Austrian UNESCO-Commission, he worked at the Institute of Building Research and Conservation at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and at the Art History Department at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. Since 2009, he is research fellow at the Chair of Global Art History within the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context” at the University of Heidelberg. His research focuses on “heritage as a transcultural concept” with the case study of Angkor Wat in Cambodia.


Contact

Dr. Michael Falser (Research Fellow)
Chair of Global Art History
Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context”
Karl Jaspers Centre of Advanced Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University
Voßstraße 2/Building 4400
D-69115 Heidelberg - Germany
Phone: +49 (0) 6221-54 4307
E-Mail: falser@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de