Interactive histories

How might interactive exhibition elements improve the understanding of Islamicate history?

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Interactive histories

What if the objects in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin could talk?

All the artefacts are there for a reason. But especially in a historic exhibition on another culture those reason can be extremely difficult to see. Why look at a shagged old carpet?

More than 4 million Muslims live in Germany today. Most people have very little background knowledge in Islamic art or history - but Islam is a regular topic of heated debate. People come to the Museum of Islamic Art with today’s questions, ideas and expectations.

In today’s exhibition, visitors are flooded with impressions and information, but without background knowledge, it is difficult to relate things. The questions of many of the visitors I spoke to were very particular - then it is difficult to get deeper information or know where to find it.

The exhibition will be restructured for 2019, for triple its size. Within that masterplan, numerous projects are on their way. For my thesis, I collaborated with researchers from the project ‘Objects in Transfer. Museographical Concepts for the Display of Transfer Processes between the Near East and Europe’. My collaborators were interested in new concepts for communicating the findings of their still ongoing research.

What are engaging, and information-rich, but not overwhelming formats to access deeper information on particular objects? How to explore their specific contexts as well as their relation to other objects?

My final design - ‘Storytellers’ are guides. They are small tokens that represent objects from the museum. Each object has its own character, topic and relationships to other objects. It will show you through the exhibition on its’ individual tour. There are tours with stories for children, families, different levels of background knowledge and interests.

Each storyteller uses a different voice. They all have some interactive functions on screen: they serve as looking-glass and preview window for a bifocal display on maps and timeline. Characteristic interactive behaviors refer to the objects they represent.

After your visit, you can keep the storyteller as a souvenier.

Through my design process, I tried to bring different people together. What are different visitors really interested in? What would people with roots in Islamic cultures like to show? And what can art historians tell through objects?

I used a participatory and iterative approach to the project. In my research I spoke with more than 40 people from different backgrounds. It showed the importance of points of reference - being able to relate what you see to a bigger framework, with time and space as keys to social and artistic relevance. Exploring few objects in more depth often created a more interesting and meaningful experience, but requires good, rich sources of information.

I developed three series of physical or screen-based concept prototypes. In each concept I explored either options to create a framework, give more depth of information in a specific topic, or both. The prototypes were then used as props for two workshops in the museum, bringing together experts, visitors and people with a personal relationship to Islam.

Through an iterative assimilation - and simplification process, basic ideas from those concepts finally merged into the concept of Storytellers.

The result will open new perspectives to the museum, helping visitors to relate the objects on display to each other and their context, and tell engaging stories.
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Introduction

How might interactive exhibition elements improve the understanding of Islamicate history?

How to make historic objects speak?
Initial interests

I was initially interested in the topic for different reasons:

**What is Islamic culture for Germany?**
With 4 million followers, Islam is one of the biggest religions in Germany. In recent years, the public perception of Islam has been overshadowed by political coherences. The focus on extreme orientations often somewhat associates even non-religious people. The image does not correspond with my personal experiences. I wanted to learn more about Islam and the role it plays in different cultures and people’s lives.

**What is the role of museums?**
I was interested in the value and potentials of a physical space and original artefacts to aid learning and exploration in conjunction with new interactive technologies.

**How to “translate” what old artefacts can tell?**
What meaning do things have in another culture, or in a historic time, unfamiliar to the observer? How to communicate to a broader audience what things tell about their context to specialists? How can design help communicate meaning and value beyond what language can? Is it possible to “translate” semantics?

**How to explore history?**
An emphasis on global interplay, connections and different perspectives has been increasingly important in the conception of history in the past decades. Considering evermore relations increases the complexity. How can interactive design aid the exploration of such connections?

**How to open up the museum?**
Traditionally the venue of a cultural elite, many museums today try to attract less Academic audiences. So does the museum of Islamic art, my collaboration partner. How can design help create meaningful and fun experiences and cater to the interest of people with different backgrounds?
Starting this project, I assumed, different Muslim cultures must have at least some things in common beyond the name. After all, there are exhibitions of ‘Islamic art’, the ‘Muslim world’ is a term frequently used in mainstream media, for example (Nytimes.com 2013), there is influential political theory such as that of the Clash of Civilizations (Huntington, 1993) setting that ‘Muslim world’ into opposition to the ‘Western world’. Whatever the Islamic world is though, it encompasses vast geographies, nations, cultures, religious sects - with very conflicting ideas. Today, most countries in the world have at least a large Muslim minority. Especially talking to people with roots in predominantly Muslim cultures gave me a sense that I was looking for something that was not there. As Stefan Weber, the director of the museum of Islamic art, phrased it: “Das Wesentliche gibt es nicht” (The quintessential does not exist). But how to communicate that?

**Muslim life in Germany**

According to a study by the Federal Office for migration and refugees (Haug and Müssig et al. 2010) between 3.8 and 4.3 million muslims were living in Germany. Around 45% of these had German nationality, while 55% had foreign nationalities. Many of the people from predominantly Muslim countries are actually not Muslim: only about half of them consider themselves Muslim at all. The role religion plays in everyday-life differs extremely between individuals and different countries of origin: for example 55% of Iranians never pray, while more than 52% of African Muslims stated to pray daily.

**Islamicate - a better term?**

So, I felt uncomfortable with the adjective “Islamic” before terms such as “world”, “history”, “culture” or “art”. But what other term fit what I was looking at? “rooted in predominantly Muslim countries” “middle World” (Tamim Ansary)? The orient? Ayse, one of my interviewees, preferred this term. Orient, literally means ‘east’, but its meaning has changed. Since Edward Said’s book “orientalism” (Edward Said, 1976) the term is commonly used to describe outsider’s prejudiced positions about, primarily Arab and Muslim worlds.

Finally, I started using the term ‘Islamicate’: “Associated with regions in which Muslims are culturally dominant, but not specifically with the religion of Islam.” (Wikipedia) It is commonly used in Academia today. It seems open: something might be rooted in religion, but can take any direction from there in the future. However, while being most correct, the term sounds very scientific, and needed explanation. Some of the “Islamicates” did not like being called such. As one woman explained: she didn’t know the term, so it had nothing to do with her. The lack of a good word might be a sign of how difficult generalizations are.
The museum of Islamic Art, Berlin

My collaboration partner, the Museum of Islamic art is located in the Pergamonmuseum. It displays art from Spain to India, from the 8th to the 19th century, with Islamic, but also Christian and Jewish motives in 16 large rooms. The museum was established in 1904 as part of the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum. Since its beginning, the permanent exhibition had been rearranged several times according to the respective Zeitgeist.

The visitors

The museum currently has about 600 000 visitors per year. According to a quantitative study (Gerbich, 2010), the most common visitors are tourists: about 90% do not live in Berlin.

Most are first-time visitors, for whom the museum of Islamic art is part of an extended visit to the Pergamonmuseum. Thus, it is a very brief visit: About 40% spend 30 minutes or less in the exhibition of Islamic art.

Although the vast majority of visitors have higher education, most of them know very little about Islamic art history. According to the survey, visitors wished for more information on geographical, historical, political and social context.

The museum attracts relatively few visitors with a Muslim background. Statistically, this can be explained by a lower percentage of Muslims with higher education in Germany - and the appeal of the museum to those with higher education. But different attempts are made to connect especially to the resources of Islamicate audiences in Berlin.

An intense experience: Before entering the Museum of Islamic Art, visitors have already passed 1000 years of history: the pergamon altar, the roman market of Milet, the Ischtar gate and procession street, and numerous smaller pieces

Tired: According to a survey, one of the main concerns of visitors was for more seating possibilities
Plans for a new permanent exhibition

For 2019, it is planned to triple the space by 3000 square meters, and rearrange rooms and artefacts. The director of the museum, Stefan Weber describes the plans (Weber, 2013): The goals are to show the “complexity and diversity of the current research”, while appealing to a wider public. There will be a strong emphasis on contextualizing the individual artworks “in their time and conception”. The aim is to break with the “notion of closed cultural identities”, but to show influences and connections. The floorplan will facilitate different perspectives through axises of “time and space”, “object biographies” and “patterns and themes in muslim cultures”, while the historical dynasties will be summarized in 4 major phases.

Weber puts great emphasis on attracting a wider, and non-Academic public, through “aesthetic design and linguistic patterns”. The current aesthetic presentation is “designed primarily to introduce the objects to the better-educated user-groups of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries”.

The museum’s highlights include a section of the Mschatta palace facade in Jordan and the largest collection of Oriental tapestry in northern Europe.

In 2019, the exhibition will be connected to neighbouring museums through a subterrenean “promenade of archeology”, connecting it to the European medieval and renaissance period.
Changing ideas on exhibiting Islamic art

The opinions on how to exhibit Islamic art have radically changed over time. Here I present few of the ideas which I found most relevant to my topic - to be avoided or especially considered.

Islamic Art - a notion by the West
The idea of the “Orient” as a unified entity in juxtaposition to the “modern” Western world was created by Europeans in the 19th century, fascinated with the oriental, mystic other (Edward Said, 1976). Miscellaneous, rich traditions were made out to be one unified body - by outsiders. A similar, simplifying perspective has been applied in art history. In the ‘Islamic world’ the term ‘Islamic art’ had never been used. Collectors brought pieces to Europe and created museums around them. Until the 1970ies, research focused very much on the question of “What is Islamic about Islamic art?” But there had always been exchange and connections to other parts of the world, and especially to Europe. (Gülru Necipoğlu, 2013) Islamic art was often judged on the aesthetics of European art and not from within its respective own categories - making it out to be exotic, or even “Non historic - permanently fixed in a medieval past” (Necipoğlu, 2013)

The white cube
Since the 20ies of the 20th century, the so-called “white-cube” has been a common approach in exhibition design (O’Doherty, 1976): showing art-pieces in a neutral white space without much contextual information. In this way, objects could shine for themselves - without interference - and interpretation is open to the beholder. But in most Muslim countries, the whole concept of ‘art’ did not exist in the same way as it did in Europe: artefacts, albeit richly decorated, always had a primary function. They were never intended as standalone-masterpieces, but parts of a larger ensemble - and to be used. As Susan Kamel (Kamel, 2006) criticizes, a white empty space can distort our perception of them. A lack of information makes it difficult to understand historic artefacts: Many of them are exciting less for their aesthetic value, but only in their relative context.
‘Entangled history’: Looking at the connections

Cultures are not closed units: even national states and borders were a European invention of the 18th century. ‘Entangled history’ is a concept looking at how cultures interweaved and influenced each other. (Sidney Wilfred Mintz, 1986) The aim is to look at them not independently in closed frames (as for example nation-histories). ‘Histoire croisée’ (Michael Werner, Bénédicte Zimmermann, 2006) is a method that focuses specifically on points of intercrossing between cultures and histories. The moments when they impacted each other can tell a lot about the respective cultures - and how difficult it is to segregate them. The concept of entangled history has great implications for museums: “Closed “museum spaces” reflect and reconfirm closed “spaces of thought” which are based on self-referential and non-intertwined cultural entities. “ (Weber, 2013) How do you design for a museum without such boundaries? How might relations between cultures be made visible, even across museums and collections?

Make it more accessible!

Museologists, exhibition makers, and representatives from the museum of Islamic art are calling to make museums more accessible for wider audiences. Museums should not be elitist institutions. But “religious experience and aesthetic experience are not mystic talents” (Kamel, 2006) - their context needs to be explained in a way that people understand. A variety of projects attempt to include laymen in the creation of exhibitions (Gesser et al, 2012), or to contribute to the content, for example in projects of collaborative storytelling.
2. Methodology

I set this up as a (partially) participatory project. My first step was to start setting up a network of people to work with.

In my research, I set out to understand the interests of visitors, islamicates, and exhibition makers - and how objects could potentially link them.

Based on my findings, I developed four concepts, which I tested and iterated upon in two workshops in the museum. The final design includes aspects of three of those concepts, and was finalized in an iterative process.
2.1 Research methodology

**Interviews with Islamicates**
I interviewed five individuals, and one family with roots in predominantly Muslim countries. They have different backgrounds of education, age and religious affiliation. The goal was to get initial directions on what and how to exhibit, and establish connections to accompany me through the project.

**Academia and exhibition makers**
I looked at different exhibitions and read about different approaches to exhibiting Islamic art (some of which are described above). I talked to curators involved in different museums, and set up a collaboration with the museum of Islamic art, where I worked primarily with art historians from the project ‘Objects in Transfer. Museographical Concepts for the Display of Transfer processes between the Near East and Europe’. (See appendix page 44) Different specialists from the museum later participated in my workshops.
Visitor research
I observed and interviewed people in the exhibition anonymously on five occasions. I spoke with more than 21 visitors: individuals, pairs and groups, for 10 - 30 minutes each. Interviewees included different nationalities, educational backgrounds and age. I especially looked out for avid museum-goers with a lot of contextual knowledge - not as primary target group, but to find out how they used that knowledge. I used a rough guideline of questions, and focused on different particular aspects in each session. I also conducted two longer interviews with students who had very recently visited the museum and one thinking-out-loud tour of the exhibition. A quantitative visitor study report (Gerbich et al., 2009) and an interview with the researcher helped me contextualize my findings. Together with the ethnologist Barbara Lenz, I organized two small workshops in the ethnological museum for her project. They gave me valuable insights into object-centered thematic deep-dives.
For more detailed information on methodology and sampling, see Appendix p.46

Evaluation and synthesis
I documented most of my interviews on video or in sound-recordings. To synthesize I wrote short profiles with interesting observations (see appendix p.47 for more examples). I used these as a basis for a meta-analysis of some topics, to identify problems and design opportunities.
Research insights

Everybody is interested in something different

Most visitors know very little about Islamic art and history
The visitor research showed that most visitors were unfamiliar with different dynasties in Islamic art history. Many people come to the museum to learn something. They come with today’s questions, experiences and assumptions.

An aesthetic experience
As I asked what they liked in the exhibition, most people first named the beauty, patterns - the visual aesthetics of objects. Few people came to the exhibition just to appreciate the beauty, like F. who said “When I go around with my camera, I look out for different things. Good light, colors”.

All things are there for a reason - visitors want to know it
As a Colombian volunteer puts it, “everything has a reason - I would like to know it”. Visitors without background knowledge depend on the information provided by the museum. It is often unobtrusive objects that have the most interesting stories. But without the story, they are just more boring display boxes tired visitors need to pass. If information is there, it was often difficult to find, or understand in language.

People really are interested in very different things
Since many of the stories are not easily accessible, it is difficult to say what people would really find interesting, if they knew everything. According to the visitor study, the museum’s highlights are also the visitors’ favorites. But when I interviewed people with more background knowledge, they often guided me to other objects: tiles with mongolian images ”because I am interested in Chinese history”, a carpet “because we have a friend who makes carpets - it is so much work!” A personal connection seemed to make objects more interesting and memorable.

“I hope to learn something about Islam.”
Magdalena, student

Design opportunities
How might interactive experiences use sensual experiences to aid contextual understanding?

Cater to different linguistic patterns and learning styles to make stories more accessible to a wider public.

Matchmaking: help visitors discover personal connections with objects, the right format and level of information
Too much and too little information

Today, the exhibition seems to provide too much, and too little information at the same time. According to the survey, most visitors have little background knowledge in Islamic art and history, and wished for more information. But the amount of information on display is already overwhelming: Magdalena, eager to learn, gave up frustrated after the 3rd room. The great number, unclear hierarchy and arrangement of different text plates made it difficult for her to filter what is important.

But if an object was specifically interesting, there are limited resources for further exploration - most often only a text plate with time, date and catalogue number, sometimes additional text or a section in the Audio guide. But people’s questions were often very particular and could not be answered. It was unclear, whether at all information exists, and where to find it.

The pressure to see it all
40% of the visitors spend 30 minutes or less in the exhibition. Many tourists would “like to see everything” in their limited time in the city. Not seeing the whole exhibition feels incomplete.

Go to the museum to just see one object?
For Christine Gerbich, the museum ideally is a place where you go and look at few objects in depth every time. Such focused explorations are currently experimented with across different practices. Such as (BBC.co.uk 2010): The history of the world in 100 objects by the BBC.

When I suggested the approach to Magdalena, she seemed relieved: it allowed her to focus. It tested very well in the workshops in the ethnological museum.

Such deep dives require a lot of information. Different potential sources exist, for example in the databank of the museum with no frontiers - but visitors do not know about it, or how to find it.

“For me, the museum is like a library - you also don’t go there just to look at all the covers of the books”

Christine Gerbich, visitor researcher
Connections help make sense

Visitors are flooded with new information, dates and dynasty names. They need a framework to relate things.

Relative in time and space
According to the visitor study, people wished for more information on geographical, historical, political and social context (Gerbich, 2010). Time and space are key for reference. But it is the relative position of the objects to each other that matters. A relational framework should always be accessible, since most visitors did not know any points of reference.

Relate to what you know
It helps to be able to relate new information to something you already know: One man who knew little about Islamic history always referred to dates he knew in European history. This bridge of reference, helped him relate new artefacts.

Connections tell stories
It is often in relation to each other that the objects become interesting: They are proof to the cultural “entanglements” described above: blue-white ceramics are interesting as they show how Chinese influences spread around the world, and were adapted to local customs.

Discovering connections is fun
People with a lot of background knowledge see connections more easily - and seem to take immense pleasure from it. “It is like a puzzle, every time I come to the museum, new piece fit in. It’s a great feeling” as an elder history teacher put it. Magdalena, albeit new to Islamic art history, was proud, when she kept recognizing blue-white ceramics.

“I can tell you what I definitely don’t find interesting: When they start just listing names and their birthplaces - so boring. Especially when all these names sound the same.“

Miha, student
People don´t talk in the museum

According to the visitor survey (Gerbich, 2009) the great majority of visitors come as part of a group or couple. But most people I observed wandered through the exhibition on their own: 77% use the Audio guide. “If you carry that, you usually don’t take it off” (anonymous). Interestingly, it was often the (few) people who come to the museum regularly who talked most. M. believes that “if at least one of the people is already knowledgeable, you tend to go together. If not, you go alone”. The fear of “saying something stupid” in the high-cultural museum seemed to prevail. However, exploring together really improves the experience in many ways: a friend knows what will be interesting specifically for you, can point you at it and can open other perspectives. Talking, phrasing questions and discussing assumptions helps reflecting and understanding - and very often, the other knows something that you don’t. It feels great to feel smart, and show someone something they find interesting.

“I just listen in to the guide - so I did not think about any additional questions”

A woman in the exhibition

An active tour of discovery

Stories the visitors had “discovered” themselves were the ones most memorable. Most information is given very top-down and linear. For contextual information, the visitors can only listen to the audio-guide, or read the texts. There are very limited ways to question or interact with the museum.
A historical museum has relevance today

Most of the people I spoke to did not see the exhibition relate to today. But many visitors come with an expectation to answer questions of today: “I hope it will teach me something about what Islam is!” (Magdalena). Germany has large Islamicate communities - their heritages are on display here. How they are presented sends out a political message. Many people potentially have their own stories to tell about the exhibits.

O. has his own perspective on the carpet collection. When he was a child in Turkey, his family had lived on knotting carpets. “We wove our stories into them”.

New technologies

I looked at other exhibitions and the way technology is used. Applications for mobile museum guides are increasingly common, and interactive installations cater to specific topics. This has changed visitors’ expectations. N., for example wished that the museum of Islamic art should “become more like the Jewish museum”. For permanent exhibitions, the robustness and longivity of a technology is extremely important. Technology applied for its own sake and novelty might not age well.

Data might also become relevant: existing databanks (MWNF) could be a basis for more personal exploration.
Make it mine!

People were taking a lot of images in the exhibition. While this had various reasons, one strong driver I found was an urge to own, and conserve what could not be digested now. Especially people with little time in the exhibition took many images “to look at the objects later when I have time”. Some people never took the camera down. One girl explained that she would print the images to decorate her room - but most admitted that they hardly ever even looked at the images again “they are just too many”. But attempting to conserve the experience might interfere with the real one.

Look at the particular

Islamicate cultures are extremely faceted. The interviews showed that there are no quintessential overarching truths to be exemplified- but manyfold contradictory interpretations of what Islam is and how it is adapted in different cultures. Only a sum of specific particular stories and perspectives can give a picture. Many Islamicates were tired of stereotypical topics, and talked about other aspects of their cultures: art, sciences. Even if I showed a variety of veils - what would remains in the end is a veil.

Design opportunities
How to enable people to conserve their visit in a meaningful and interesting way?

Provide visitors with a souvenir

Tell particular stories to avoid generalizations.

Don’t focus on stereotypical topics, but look out for interesting themes that are less in the public spotlight right now, especially in the fields of arts and science.

Focus on culture beyond religion
Primary goals
#1 To create tools to provide a framework that allows to actively explore individual objects and their relative position and connections to other objects for people with little or no education in the subject.

#2 I wish to create ideas for concepts that aid the deeper understanding of specific objects: their meaning, context and biography.

Secondary goal
#3 Through the primary goals, I hope to contribute to the understanding of relations between cultures, highlighting especially the role of Islamicate cultures for a German audience.

Main insights
Most visitors who come to the museum of Islamic art have very little background knowledge in Islamic art history. The current information system provides them with a lot of information, but they have no own points of reference - it is difficult to keep an overview and create a mental framework.

With all the information, and visual impressions, people feel overwhelmed - it is impossible to see everything. To focus on very few objects in more depth is still an uncommon approach, but successfully applied in a number of other projects. When I probed similar “deep-dives” on three occasions, respondents seemed engaged.

Opportunities
I also identified a number of design opportunities (see previous pages). The most important ones merged into my goals. Other opportunities included providing visitors with a souvenir, or tools for collective exploration. They were potentially useful means to achieve the goals that I used them as a basis for ideation.

My mental model of the information structure I would like to achieve: if the exhibition was a collection of icebergs, goal #1 targets the level above the surface, while goal #2 targets below the surface.
2.2 Ideation and evaluation: methodology

Probe
Through personifying objects from the museum, I asked people to imagine “object-specific modes of communication”. The goal was to get ideas and identify object-specific affordances. I was also looking for general ideas on how to create connections between objects in the museum. I made an online- and a paper version of the probe for participants in different locations.

Concept sketches
I developed four rough scenarios, which I introduced in the end of the online probe, asking for preferences and to build on those ideas. The concept sketches can be found in the Appendix on p.51 - 52.

Mockups
I built 3-d prop sketches and a tablet-based processing sketch for 3 concepts. I kept these props open to interpretation, but developed a number of suggestions of how they might be used.
**Workshops**

I conducted two workshops in the exhibition in Berlin. Each workshop had 10 participants: people from the museum, potential visitors and people with personal connections to predominantly Muslim cultures. For the first workshop, I had prepared tasks to build upon each of the three concepts. In the second workshop, I briefly introduced all, but focused on one (“Friendly objects”). I used a number of props (a blanket to sit on, my mock-ups) to bring the ideas to life and spur ideation.

**Individul talks**

In addition to the workshops, I got feedback from interaction designers, experts from the museum, potential visitors and other students in Umeå.

**Prototype iterations**

I kept up an iterative work-method, using prototypes to be inspired and evaluate my ideas.
Decisions
What I learnt through prototypes

# 1 Make objects speak!
A personification of “talking objects” proved an engaging format, in the probes as well as prototypes. Objects can have different characters and “opinions”, they can be adapted to different types of visitors and speak with different voices than a more “official” guide of the museum would.

#2 Don’t show everything
An interactive visualization of the connections between objects and to visitors tested well as a prototype. Especially the ability to relate new artefacts to things one has already seen was appreciated. Including existing datasets (the museum with no frontiers) also tested well. Data-Mining for more personal connections was critically discussed: it is fun to discover connections yourself - the service should aid discovery, but not do all the work. A tour should stay open for spontaneous adaptation.
#3 Make it tangible!
Participants liked physical objects: “we spend so much time in front of screens already”. They were considered richer than pure screen interactions - and simply “more interesting”. The physical act of leaving something in the exhibition, or taking it away made a big difference “Suddenly, you can touch things - it makes the museum feel a lot more approachable!”

#4 No big physical interactive objects
I was thrilled by the idea of building physical interactive objects. But in the exhibition, the prototypes were an obstruction from the artefacts. Some interactions felt ridiculous in repetitious use, and physically obstructive. They also were potentially damaging to the artefacts: a “story-hoover”, for example was seen as an invitation to touch the artefacts.
It is difficult to provide and maintain objects for more than 2000 visitors a day. Many of the prototypes could work well for fixed stations and single use, but did not fit into my overall concept anymore. So I abandoned them.

Christian placed the vase on the display cabinets. In his idea, collected stories are displayed as flowers in the vase.

Nuriye dislikes touchscreens: she is not used to them. To her, a hoover as an interface was intuitive and less intimidating.

Acting out the use of the story-hoover showed that it was fun only once. It did not appeal as an object one might want to carry around and use repeatedly, and was potentially damaging to the artefacts.
While prototyping the objects, I had begun using capacitive touch displays and conductive materials as a technological basis. In a next step, I reduced physical shells to a bare functional minimum: small tokens. These showed to be very versatile: in conjunction with the screen abstract tokens could turn into different things: the artefact, a looking glass, a zooming lense. Tokens promised for lower production and maintenance costs.

I started building shells around a touch-tablet to use its technology, but retain a tactile experience. Further iterations became increasingly abstract.

I had initially planned for the tokens to be carried around on a mobile touchscreen - so that they could “guide” to artefacts. But using fixed screens and carrying only tokens ‘as keys’ provided more freedom. Different screen sizes and types of interactions can be incorporated.

Accessing different information through tokens could make the museum more social: if they are placed on big “common” screens, it would be socially acceptable to watch the information that even a stranger gets. This would not be true for “private” tablets.
3. Result: Storytellers

Storytellers are representations of historic artefacts that offer thematic tours through the exhibition and are brought to life by placing a token on a screen.
The final design: for visitors

Objects with a character
Storytellers are small tokens that represent objects from the museum. Placing them on capacitive screen in the exhibition, will bring them to life through screen graphics. Each object has its own visual character, and its own stories to tell.

Different guided tours
Each storyteller will guide you to different thematically related artefacts in the exhibition and has different stories to tell. Tours can be designed for different levels of background knowledge and age groups and last about 30 minutes each.

Relative in time and space
Storytellers help in creating a mental framework: see new things in time and space in relation to what you already know.

Keys to the exhibition
The tokens are small objects you carry around with you. They serve as tangible keys to the exhibition. Through them, you can interact with the objects on display. The tokens are something you can touch, and leave in the exhibition.

Social creatures
Since different visitors have different tokens, it will be interesting to see what other tours include. Sharing public screens makes it socially acceptable to “tune in” to someone else’s tour.

A souvenir
After your visit, you can take the storyteller home and keep it as a souvenir. Through the website, you can access the objects on your tour again later - they become your personal collection. Storytellers can also be sent out as physical invitations, connecting the museum to the outside.
Implications for the museum

An infrastructure of screens
Storytellers require an infrastructure of fixed screens. Ideally, there should be one with every display box - replacing existing text badges. These screens should be unobtrusive - integrated in exhibition boxes or seating areas whenever possible. They are an infrastructure for information, not the focus of the exhibition. They can be utilized in different ways, and could largely replace mobile guide applications.

A toolbox
Storytellers are a toolbox for curators: Once the infrastructure is set up, new tours can be set up later. Some storytellers could serve as a participatory medium to tell stories by visitors.
Use scenario

For a video of the scenario see https://vimeo.com/67016141

Introduction
After looking at the whole pergamon-museum, Maja is tired and happy to find a comfortable sitting area, close to the entrance of the exhibition. There are large screens between the seats, and different storytellers invite for exploration.

Guiding
A map shows up, guiding her the way to the first exhibit on the tour. It is aligned with the floorplan - so she just needs to follow the direction.

She can see an overview of different tours, and filter what she is interested in: for example tours for children, basic tours or new perspectives for people who already have background knowledge.

As she places one token on a screen, it a short introduction on the theme of the tour starts. She chooses the circular token, it stands for a part of a niche from a house in Damascus, and tells stories about the changing relations between different religions.
The first object
Maja sees a small screen by the first object, a fatimid fresco. The screen shows the fresco’s position in time and space. As she places the token on the screen, the storyteller comes to life again, and gives her information on the palace the painting had been part of, and its inhabitants.

Collecting objects
As Maja places her token on screens by different objects, she can access different information. For each object she looks at on her tour, an icon is filled in on her timeline and map. She can browse the timeline to see the objects again, and see things in better relation to each other.

The Damascus Niche
As Maja comes to the original niche, and places her token on the nearby screen, a line-drawing of the niche appears. As she browses over it, it enlarges the area below, and different questions pop up: to get the answers she has to rotate her token.

Accessing from home
After she completed the rest of her tour, Maja takes the token home. Back in Sweden, she finds it at the bottom of her bag. She visits the museum website on her tablet, and wow, it works! She can access all the things from her tour. The token is magnetic, and she keeps it as a fridge magnet.
Sketching 3d and 2d

One of my main challenges was to make the 3 dimensional tokens and the 2-d dynamic graphics become a coherent visual and functional unit, as a family and individuals. Thus I developed 2d and 3d prototypes together in interactive sketches.
The objects` characters

The objects and their relations had to clearly stand out from the background. One challenge was to make them relate to the physical tokens to form a visual unit. Each object’s character should also be clearly distinguishable within a coherent design language.

Physical tokens
All tokens have the same thickness and frame thickness. The size is adjusted to their respective screen representations - thus the tokens are unequal in size. I compensated for that by introducing different materials, hinting at the material character of the original object.

Screen representation
In the final design, each object is characterized by a palette of similar colors taken from its source artefact. Thus, their character easily stands out on the monochrome background, both in its light and dark version. While most interactions are similar for all tokens, each has one characteristic trigger to access further information, based on its source object.

For more information on the original objects, see appendix p.44, for an overview of the object-specific behaviors, see the Appendix p.51.
The framework: map and timeline

Inspiration

The screen background of map, timeline, schematic views and some interactivity would also serve as a general information system for visitors without tokens. I wanted to achieve a clear, functional design in black, white and greyscale. Fields are distinguished through different shades of grey and patterns of thin lines.
Blend in to different locations

The screens should be unobtrusive and blend into the exhibition. Therefore, the screens should not stand out in light or dark situations: some parts of the exhibition need to be kept dark to protect the artwork, while others are well-lit. Therefore, I designed a light and a dark version of the screen background and applications for different screen sizes.
Using it without a token
Without a token, general information from databanks (like the museum with no frontiers, and the museums databank) can be accessed.

Selecting Damascus on the map:
Info on the Artwork

Selecting Mamluk Empire on the map:
Info on the socio-political context

Browsing the timeline:
Access info on relevant historic events
The story content

Inspiration
I wanted to use a collage style to illustrate the content objects have to talk about. The art historians provided me a lot of images related to each object. In a collage, I am able to bring together those images in meaningful ways, while telling entertaining stories.
Design: collage style
I also chose this less serious, sketchy format, as I wanted to give some images to give richer stories: what did people look like back then, what did the space look like? A lot of that is not known for the specific objects, but often images of similar situations exist. More elaborate visualisations could suggest a historical accuracy that is not there.
For as much historical accuracy as possible, I tried to work with images as close to the time and location as possible. If such images were not to be found, I used photographs or sketches. Finding the right images, and right tone turned out to be time-intensive. A close collaboration with art historians helped. While being engaging, such movies can also orientalize.
Reflections

The design process

My role
At the beginning of this project, I hoped to understand and explain something in the end. I have often been asked to position myself in relation to Islam. I am not a Muslim, nor do I have roots in an Islamic culture. This makes me an outsider. Due to the currently often negative image of Islam, this was a critical position: I did not want to join in scarifying. I almost felt an urge to draw an overly-positive image - to compensate all the negative stereotypes. But this would not have done justice to people whose lives are negatively affected. For this project, I tried to avoid judgement and generalizations, but become an explorer and enabler instead.
So I focused on different particular objects and stories: I did not want to “talk about” people and things so much, but help tell their particular stories in an engaging way. Hopefully, this would help create a more faceted image.

Working in the museum
Being able to do research and test prototypes in the museum directly was very inspiring and challenging. It helped bringing the concepts to life, and getting new perspectives of the museum - but also showed what did not work, and made me reconsider many ideas.

Substance of content depends on collaboration
Especially for culturally sensitive content, the substance really depended on a good collaboration with experts. I could not find what I did not know existed. Knowing very little about Islamic art and history helped me in some ways: I was able to relate to other visitors with little background knowledge. As a non-expert, I was also in a good position to ask ‘stupid questions’. However, for much of the project, I felt blind and illiterate, lacking cultural sensitivity and understanding. Here it helped to collaborate with art historians and people with roots in Islamic cultures, to get feedback on accuracy and on how to tell stories. However, for better quality, an even closer collaboration would be necessary - which was not possible, as I spent so much project time in Sweden away from my collaborators, and they did not have such resources.

Finding the right language
Being ‘blind and illiterate’, I struggled to find the right framing, verbal and visual language. It started with terminology - like “Islamicates”, but issues kept appearing on a smaller level too: How can I avoid making a particular collageclip orientalizing, or ridiculing? Is it orientalizing to use pattern-inspired graphics for an interface? I depended on open and direct feedback from people sensitive to the topic from different angles.

Adapting the design
I see potential to improve the design, for example, to put less focus on the design of the individual tokens. I would make them and their behavior more similar, and focus on a more functional graphic format for conveying content.
Project goals

Narrowing away from some initial goals?
In the final sample of storytellers, there is less direct focus on the role of Islam in Germany today than I had initially intended. But the focus on the historic perspective in the museum opened up more direct opportunities for collaboration, and I found it personally very interesting - this way I could explore my other initial questions. I believe that a better understanding of historic coherencies will ultimately aid a better understanding of Islam in Germany. Also, through my final design it is possible to relate the historic questions back to the situation today - for example by asking today’s people to cocreate storytellers.

A focus on ideas
I saw this whole project as an opportunity for myself, as a student, to develop ideas to challenge expectations rather than just fulfill a client’s expectations - a study rather than a business project. The plans for rearranging the museum for 2019 are in their concepting phase now - and this is where I was aiming with my project too. I did not have the responsibility to realize ideas, and very much enjoyed that freedom. So while many aspects of the final concept ended up as quite realistic (due to the close collaboration with the museum), making something immediately adaptable was not my main purpose. While I tried to create a coherent story of how a final design could work, I still think of it as collection of insights and ideas to inspire rather than a rigid framework that needs to be adapted as it is.

Concept relevancy

The result is a format and toolbox
I spent much of the project time on general research and quite open concepts - formats rather than content. Due to the aforementioned lack of time and resources, I had to focus also later in the project. I decided to focus on designing a format, an open toolbox, and put less emphasis on the content. In this way, basic ideas could be adapted to different museums. Thus the result is potentially relevant for a broader audience than just one particular museum.

A more engaging experience
I believe that the concepts holds great potential to create more meaningful and engaging museum-experiences. It uses technology for the deeper exploration and contextualization of artefacts rather than putting technology in the foreground.

The result is a prototype
The final design can be seen as a prototype to challenge and inspire the plans for rearranging the museum of Islamic Art for 2019, or for other museums. To adapt it, it would need to be tested and evaluated in the exhibition context further, and filled with content by a team of experts and visitors.
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The objects

I based my work on the project ‘Objects in Transfer. Museographical Concepts for the Display of Transfer Processes between the Near East and Europe’, a collaboration between the Freie Universität and the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. In this way, I was able to target my ideas on more real-life exhibition design problems, and to establish a closer collaboration with experts from the museum.

The goal of this project is to investigate the role of artefacts in processes of transcultural knowledge transfer. It focuses on the deeper exploration of few selected objects.

At the time of my thesis, the project was still in its early stages. Thus, we agreed that I would focus on more ‘visionary’ solutions to explore what could be possible and inspire their process, as well as other projects in the museum rather than develop a solution that could be directly implemented.

Early on in their own process, the art historians had just decided on two artefacts to first focus their research on. Each object shows a number of different cultural influences. A number of objects from the Abasid capital of Ctesiphon was also considered to be included in the project. I used these objects as a basis for my ideation and a sample to test systemic ideas on.

While I observed the carpet for 10 minutes on a busy day from a distance, no-one looked at it for more than a glance. It is very inconspicuous and in bad shape: located in a dark corner by the Mshatta facade,

Carpet from Letur

The carpet was made in Spain in the 15th century, more than 100 years after the area had been conquered by Christians. Continuing the “Muslim” style, it indicates how traditions were carried on - and how difficult it is to draw an easy line between Christian and Muslim art: the distribution of similar carpets to Aristocrat families, churches and even a pope’s palace indicate that at the time, the style was probably not seen as ‘Islamic,’ but simply elitist. Similar carpets in other collections carry European heraldic symbols amongst “Islamic” patterns.

The carpet is adorned with Arabic pseudo-letters, and other symbols - today we might read it as “Islamic”.

Design opportunities
- design tools to explore the symbols and pseudo-descripture of the carpet
- show how styles, technology and actual pieces travelled through regions and time
- explore that “time of transition” - possibly in relation to today’s hybrid cultures
- explore the process of making, possibly through an interactive installation
Objects from Ctesiphon
Stylistically, early Islamic artifacts build upon antiquity. This can well be seen in some of the artifacts from Ctesiphon: they carry the same kind of ornament as was common in antiquity.

The Sasanians also adopted a number of motives from the Persian Schah-name (book of kings).

Finally, it might also be very interesting to look at why German archaeologists in the 19th century were so interested particularly in Sasanian heritage: there is some evidence this might be related to growing beliefs in race theory in Europe at the time - and the relation of the Aryan race to the area.

Damascus Niche
This niche might appear like a Muslim prayer niche, but belonged to the home of a Samaritan. Other parts of the same building have been put into a different collection: the museum of the middle east (in the same building). This shows how arbitrary the line between different collections/museums often is. Its’ ‘Islamic’ motives, like the muqarnas - half-dome structure can be found in other exhibits in the museum. The use of materials, especially the differently colored stones, can be traced back to antiquity, and similarly shows up for example in Italy.

Design opportunities
- Tools to explore the relationship between religions
- Relate to the other pieces of the same house in the same building, but other museum (an invisible line of connection)
- Show how architectural elements/influences merge in this piece
Visitor research: methodology and sampling

Quantitative study report
The basis for my research was a quantitative study conducted by Gerbich et al. in 2010. Before reading the report, I spoke to Christine Gerbich about her experiences and impressions during the study.

Interviews and observations
I observed people in the exhibition on 5 different occasions. There, I also did short anonymous interviews with more than 21 visitors. I spoke with individuals, pairs and groups, for 10 - 30 minutes each. Interviewees included different nationalities, educational backgrounds and age groups. Since they were rare, I especially looked out for avid museum-goers with a lot of contextual knowledge - not as my target group, but to find out more about how they used that knowledge. I used a rough guideline of questions, which I iterated upon after each session. In addition to few general questions, I focused on different aspects in particular every time I went to the museum.
In addition, I conducted two 40mins interviews with people who had very recently visited the museum.

Thinking out-loud visit
I conducted one thinking-out loud tour through the exhibition with a student who had “no idea about the topic”. The 2-hour session included a short preliminary interview about expectations, and a short interview afterwards about impressions and some ideas for my project. After we had passed most of the exhibition, I pointed her particularly at the objects relevant for this project, and gave some contextual information to test her reactions.

Workshops with students at the ethnological museum
Together with the ethnologist Barbara Lenz, I organized two small workshops in the ethnological museum. They were aimed at a project to develop didactic materials for the exhibition “Muslim worlds” - with a focus on approaching larger topics through a deeper study of very few objects. After some initial associations, then the curator joined, explained why she had chosen those particular object for the exhibition, and a discussion sprung from that. Reflecting on the discussion, we asked the students what might interest their peers - and what could be good tools to foster discussion. To conclude, we introduced a few ideas Barbara and I had thought about, and let the students build on them.

Interview questions
What was your favorite object in the exhibition so far?
What did you like about it?
(alternatively: I saw you spent a lot of time looking at that object)/ taking images. Why - what interested you about it?

What were you thinking/ talking/ wondering about while looking at it?

What would you like to know about it?

What guides your attention in the exhibition - where do you look at?

How much did you know about Islamic art and history before? Did you know, for example any of the dynasties?

What do you think about the information system in general? Did you miss anything? Was it enough, and the right type of information?

Did you learn anything? What will you remember about the exhibition?
Some visitor profiles

Magdalena is an informatics student/political scientist. She says that she has “no idea” about the topic of Islamic art. She hopes that “there will be not just art, but that it will be put into context”. In the exhibition, Magdalena rarely spends more than a glance at objects, but takes great interest in the texts. After the 3rd room, her attention decreases: she wanders through, and rarely reads anything. After we have seen most of the exhibition, I change roles, and play the guide/ friend, pointing at specific objects, giving context and sharing my own associations. “that helped very much in relating to the things - I will remember the carpets now”.

Magdalena: “The more information I get, the more interesting it becomes”

Nil-Heves was born and raised in Berlin. She works in the sales department of a pharmaceutical company. Her father was working as a cleaner, both parents migrated from Turkey - “they weren’t very educated - but it doesn’t mean they are stupid”. When she was small “we never went to museums or anything like that. I only did that with school” She thinks she knows too little about Islamic art history - nobody taught her. She wouldn’t just go to a museum on a day off. She thinks that Muslims might not go to the museum because they think “they already know their culture. And they often simply don’t have the education, and background for that.”

Nil-Heves “You need to have the education and background to go to the museum”

Miha is an interaction design student who, while doing his Master thesis, spends one month in Berlin. He is there with his girlfriend. Since they have limited time and “want to see everything”, they go to up to 7 museums in one weekend. Miha used the Audio-Guide to the museum and loved the “key to hear excavation stories - he is fascinated by the passion with which archeologists followed their calling. While both we the Audio-guide, he barely talks to his girlfriend. “Only after the museum, we would talk about what we have seen: ‘did you see that helmet?’ or ‘did you see the big gate?’”

Miha “I can tell you what I definately don’t find interesting: When they start just listing names and their birthplaces - so boring. Especially when all these names sound the same.”

R. studies history, but doesn’t “know anything about Islamic art” as she keeps proclaiming. Since all the badges on individual items are in German, she cannot read all the connections, but only access general information - and interpret objects through what she already knows. She shows me the photos she took during her visit “I found those tiles particularly interesting, because they are from the period when the Mongols conquered the Islamic empire. I have an interest in Chinese history.” She thinks that it is “very interesting that there are all these museums dedicated to other cultures in Germany. Why is that?”

R., history student from Taiwan “I had no idea German archeologists were so active in discovering histories in those places. Why that interest?”
D. and S. are extremely chatty: they spend almost 2 hours in the Samarra room along, always together, and almost constantly talking, pointing out details to each other, laughing, questioning. Is this statue real, or a replica? How were these ceramics made? D. says “It is important to go with someone with the same interest - one sees this, the other sees that. You need a partner.” They have some background knowledge from “years of travelling, reading books, general education - but mostly interest”. S. enjoys going to museums: “Every time you go, new puzzle-pieces fit in!”

She was especially fascinated by two ivory pieces and lets me share her imagination. “All the little figures tell a bigger story. Someone made them for a reason. I would like to know that reason.” She points at the detail. “for example these two birds: why are they holding grapes? Why are they not horses or something? Probably the maker thought about love, and live or something - I would like to know what he thought about.”

Then she points at a horn. “That was used to make sounds in war - just look at all the strong animals on it - but I don’t know, I cannot tell you anything”.

E. comes from a religious Sunni family, her best friend F. is Alawit, “faithful, but not religious”. In their class, an argument between friends on whether or not one should eat pork as a Muslim had caused major arguments. To end it, their teacher took them both to a mosque and Alawit prayer house. In the exhibition, E. is especially surprised by the parallels in symbolism between Islam and Christianity as the curator talks about her own fascination with rosaries and prayer beads, or protective talismans. Both of them think the exhibition at the ethnological museum is “cold - it should have music, and more personal stories”. F. is also interested in the Burka and asks for explanation on that.

In his free time, T. regularly takes his camera, and goes on tour around the city. In an exhibition, he is especially interested in the light situation, which drew him to a table with glass fragments. “At first I found them just beautiful.”

While we talked, he started wandering about what had happened to them, how they were found, how they were used. He much admires the handcraft, and stong colors. And wonders about the aesthetics of the past: “Back then, it must have been seen as beautiful - otherwise they wouldn’t have put so much effort into making all the colors”.
Technology research: Token recognition

I looked into different technologies for token-recognition.

**Image recognition**
Using, for example fiduciary markers would allow for low-cost production of tokens. For the markers to be placed on the underside of the tokens, a camera tracking the movement from the underside (and a screen projection) are necessary.

**Capacitive touch tokens**
Capacitive touch tokens simulate finger touches on capacitive displays using passive conductive materials. These materials can be used to transmit energy from a human body touching it. For a permanent recognition on the display, active modulation circuits are needed. The materials can be embedded inside tangible objects: by leading to different touchpoints, touches in different positions can be detected. (Neng-Hao Yu et al., 2011)

**Magnetic field recognition**
Andrea Bianchi, and Ian Oakley use the inbuild compasses in mobile devices to detect magnetic tokens (Flaherty 2012): different magnets have different strength and direction. This enables the software to detect different tokens, their position and relative rotation. The technology would be very promising for this application, but the accuracy of positioning individual tokens would need to be tested.
Interesting projects

Oliver Lerone Schultz, “Tischgeflüster”ars electronica 2010
I liked this table showing Jewish table customs: Each object tells stories. Where and how you place them together on the table influences what you hear. It gives a sense of participating, experiencing a ritual.

art+com Jurascope gallery
Binoculars open new perspectives on existing objects.

The museum with no frontiers
One of the largest online museums, it comprises more than 850 objects and 385 monuments. Its data-base on objects from the Museum of Islamic art in Berlin is impressive, often including more information than is accessible in the exhibition. There is one old computer station in the museum of Islamic art to access to the MWNF. However, during my visits there, I never saw anyone use it. I explain this with bad usability of the website and the not very inviting appearance and positioning of the station. Its potential does not become clear fast. The exhibition trails are also interesting: connecting objects across different museums according to topics.

Local Projects: Gallery One
Local projects designed a series of interactive installations for the Cleveland Museum of Art. It utilizes numerous interesting ways of exploring connections.
Initial Scenarios

My Context

When Scanning a new object in the exhibition, ‘My Context’ relates it to other objects that you have seen in the past:

It visualizes different kinds of connections between objects in the exhibition that you have already looked at, so that you can relate them more easily.

If you sign up for a personal profile, ‘MyContext’ also relates it to other things you have seen in the past.

You can choose between different kinds of connections: maybe you are not so much into artistic styles? But transfers of scientific knowledge really fascinate you? Or you want to connect to the world today? What would you like to see?

The Time-Space-Compass

The Time Space compass gives you a better sense of where and when a specific object was relevant - and what happened in the world at the time.

Explore the interactive overview on your phone or tablet by ‘scanning’ the object:

Scroll through the timeline to see what happened in history at the time that was relevant to the object. Geographical developments will show on the interactive map - for example how the territories of relevant dynasties changed.

Events and places the object’s biography are highlighted and displayed interactively.
Leisure Carpet

Leisure carpet is an installation that invites you to relax: linger, sit or lie and rest for a moment after your long museum tour. As you do so, you can use different tools to explore aspects of the carpet/ carpet histories:

1. Use the "looking glass" to explore the ornament and pseudo-Arabic symbols on it, their stories, and significances.
2. Use the "knotting frame" on an interactive screen showing you how such a carpet was made. Every time you make a knot, you learn more about how the knowledge of craftsmanship travelled and developed.
3. Use the "story-hooks" to pick up story cards. Read and listen to stories about who owned the carpet, how it was used and how it came to the museum.

The carpet could be an image or reproduction of an original carpet. Or, it could be a carpet made for the situation, with integrated electronic, and depicting a graphic as a basis to explore connections between different carpets – for example, a map of different sections or a timeline. Using these, different sections of the carpet could trigger different content.

The Object-Designator

The Object-Designator is a machine placed at the entrance of an exhibition. It seems a bit like a time-machine, but could also feel somehow magic: it assigns you an object that (seemingly) matches you: The machine advises you that, to this particular object you should pay special attention. It has something to tell, ‘specifically to you’.

First, you name your preference: This could be what type of genre you would like to experience, how much background knowledge you have (what questions would you like?)

Then you place your hand on a surface (alternatively, you could spin a destiny-wheel, draw a number - or how would you like to trigger it?)

The machine then will give you directions to the object you should ‘explore’, and give you ‘hints’ for questions to ask.

The aim of this concept is to help visitors focus their attention, lessen the pressure to see the whole exhibition by providing an alternative way of going through it, and explore specific objects in more depth - with a sense of adventure, fate and personalisation.