

22-23 May 2025
International Conference
Sensing the Materiality of the Early Modern Islamic World



Image: Book cover of the album of Murad III, 1572-3, Austrian National Library, Vienna, Photo by Suzanne Compagnon.

Convened by the SENSIS research project, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University (<https://sensis.wp.hum.uu.nl>).

Date

Thursday 22 May 2025 – Friday 23 May 2025

Location

Day 1: Centraal Museum Utrecht, Agnietenstraat, 13512 XA Utrecht

Day 2: University Museum Utrecht, Lange Nieuwstraat 106, 3512 PN Utrecht

Registration

Entrance is free, but registration compulsory since seats are limited (sensis@uu.nl).

Conference Abstract

This conference addresses the role of material culture and architecture in shaping sensory and affective experience in the early modern Islamic world. By shaping experience on a somatic level, objects and architecture hold the potential to inform us about embodied social and cultural practices of the past in a different way than textual sources. By directly impacting the body's sensory faculties, they facilitate or discourage certain emotional responses and forms of behavior. Sensations and emotions are often closely linked; thus, the careful calibration of the senses is an effective means of evoking affective reactions. Furthermore, the sensory and affective practices stimulated and mediated by material culture and architecture can collapse temporal and spatial distance by immersing subjects in the moment of experience. In other words, they can offer insights that complicate or contrast with scholars' reconstructions of lived experience based solely on discursive practices.

How did material culture and architecture shape early modern Islamic sensescapes and the affective practices associated with them? How did the material and sensory properties of objects and architecture modulate these sensescapes? How did specific objects or built environments stimulate affective engagement and what kind? How did material and visual culture mediate perception in the early modern Islamic world? How did the sensory practices in separate political and cultural entities engage or distinguish themselves from one another? How did objects arouse distinct sensory experiences as they circulated and were recontextualized in the early modern period? How did people's sensory experiences evolve as their urban environments changed in this era? These are some of the questions the conference seeks to address.

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Utrecht
University



Conference Program

Day 1 (Thursday, May 22), 9:00 – 17:30

9:00 Welcome and Introductory Remarks

Panel 1: The Arts of the Book and Sensory Knowledge, 9:30 – 11:10

Chair: **Yusuf Ünal** (Utrecht University)

9:30 **Giorgia M. Maffioli-Brigatti** (University of Cambridge), “Love’s Teachings and a Scented Garden: Sensory Approaches to Jami’s *Haft Awrang*”

10:00 **Theresa Zischkin** (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), “Colored Paper in the *Muraqqa ‘-i Gulshan*: Modular Structures Shaping Sensorial Experiences”

10:30 **Sukaina Husain** (University of Edinburgh), “Language in Texture and Color: Seeing, Feeling, and Speaking Persian in the Early Modern ‘Persian Republic of Letters’”

11:10 – 11:30 Coffee Break

Panel 2: Sensation, Ornament, and Transmediality, 11:30 – 13:10

Chair: **Ashley Dimmig** (University of Wisconsin-Whitewater)

11:30 **Valerie Gonzalez** (Independent scholar), “Sensation as Cognition: Phenomenography of Islamic Architectural Atmospheres”

12:00 **Saleema Waraich** (Skidmore College), “Sensescapes and Sensibilities in the Mughal Empire”

12:30 **Suzanne Compagnon** (Utrecht University), “Sensescapes of Ottoman Elite Gatherings”

13:10 – 14:30 Lunch Break

Panel 3: Mediating the Sensorium Through Architecture and Ornament, 14:30 – 16:10

Chair: **Gianni Sievers** (Utrecht University)

14:30 **Shunhua Jin** (Museum of Islamic Art), “Puzzling Eyes: The Intertwined Animals in Safavid Drawings”

15:00 **Sahar Hosseini** (University of Pittsburgh), “Sensing the River: Riverine Transformations and Sensescapes in Seventeenth-Century Isfahan”

15:30 **Shayan Rajani** (Michigan State University), “The Latticed Screen: Mediating Presence and Visuality in the Mughal World”

16:10 – 16:30 Coffee Break

Keynote Lecture, 16:30 – 17:30

16:30 **Birgit Meyer** (Utrecht University), “Matters of Sensation: The Making of Religious Experience”

17:00 – 17:30 Q&A and Wrap-up Day 1 18:00

Dinner for Speakers

Day 2 (Friday, May 23), 9:00 – 16:30

Panel 1: Tracing, Translating, and Transcending Experience, 9:00 – 10:40

Chair: **Stefan Weber** (Museum of Islamic Art)

9:00 **Sanja Savić** (Columbia University), “Talismanic Shirts as a Text, Textile, and Technology: Recovering Tactile Eloquence of the Early Modern Islamic World”

9:30 **Nur’Ain Taha** (Utrecht University), “Between Foreign and Sacred: The *Pusaka* in Javanese Rituals of Islamic Celebrations”

10:00 **Tuğrul Acar** (Harvard University), “Sensual and Embodied Experiences of *Sema‘* and *Ziyara* in the Shrine of Jalal al-Din Rumi: The Role of Outdoors and Mural Paintings”

10:40 – 11:00 Coffee Break

Panel 2: Sensing and Materializing the Prophet’s Presence, 11:00 – 12:00

Chair: **Christian Lange** (Utrecht University)

11:00 **Fatih Han** (Princeton University), “Anticipating the Prophet Muhammad Through the Luminous *Veil of God* in the *Mūsā wa ‘Uj* Illustration”

11:30 **Yahya Nurgat** (Sabancı University), “‘Light upon Light’: Material Culture and Sensory Experience in the Prophet’s Mosque, c. 1517-1700”

12:00 – 13:20 Lunch Break

Panel 2 (cont.), 13:20 – 14:30

13:20 **Simon O’Meara** (SOAS University of London), “A Window on the House of Aisha”

13:50 **Karen Ruffle** (University of Toronto), “Visual Experience, Shi’i Wonder, and Sacred Kingship in Seventeenth-Century Milād Rituals in Hyderabad, India”

14:30 – 14:45 Coffee Break

Panel discussion, 14:45 – 16:15

14:45 **Ashley Dimmig** (University of Wisconsin-Whitewater), **Stefan Weber** (Museum of Islamic Art) & **Suzanne Compagnon** (Utrecht University), “Sensing and Perceiving the Materiality of the Islamic World in a Museum Context”

16:15 – 16:30 Concluding Remarks

16:30-17:30 Borrel (Drinks & Snacks)