The History of the Alphabet
[Abridged from a lecture by Marc Barety, Diplomat and Linguistic researcher, Former Counsellor, French Embassy in Kuwait.] Delivered on May 19th, 1997

Current Challenges Facing Museums in the USA
[Abridged from a lecture by Dr. Andrew L. Camdem, Senior Vice President & Director Private Banking & Investment, Chairman, Museum Trustee Association.] Delivered on November 10th, 1997

Wood carving from a Palace of Fatimid Cairo: the Coptic Connection
[Abridged from a lecture by Dr. Sabihah Khemir, Researcher specialized in Islamic Art and Archeology.] Delivered on May 12th, 1997

From Imagination To Discovery: New Details about Info. Sources of Kuwait in Old Maps
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[Abridged from a lecture by Dr. S. Carboni, Assistant Curator of the Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York.] Delivered on May 8th, 1997

Pros And Cons of the Crusades
[Abridged from a lecture by Dr. Saeed Aashour, Professor in Literature Faculty, University of Cairo, Chairman of the Arab Historians Association in Cairo.] Delivered on November 18th, 1997

"Islamic Art" From the Perspectives of the Heritage and Orientalism
[Abridged from a lecture by Prof. Sharbel Daghur, researcher, Art Critic and lecturer at Balamand University, Lebanon.]
The History of the alphabet

by Marc Barety

Kuwait is a very suitable place to talk about the history of the alphabet because it is located in the heart of a region which, from the Nile Valley to Mesopotamia and from Syria to Yemen, has seen the invention of writing and of a very special kind of it which is the alphabet. A large number of scripts are or were in use in Kuwait: Cuneiform, Aramaic, Greek, South Arabian, Arabic, Latin and some Indian scripts. Except for the cuneiform script, all these alphabets, and many others, have the same origin.

The idea of storing information on a material support goes back to the 4th millennium BC in Southern Mesopotamia and to the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC in Egypt (not to speak of China). Both Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform writing and Egyptian hieroglyphs were based on a mixed system of logograms (formerly known as ideograms) and syllabic signs. Because of the number of signs involved (between 600 and 2700, depending on time and place), and sometimes of their ambiguity, these scripts were difficult to learn and use. For this reason, writing at that time was the privilege of a professionally trained group: the scribes. In this context the alphabet came as a revolution because it allowed one to write any message using a mere set of 30 signs or so.

The first traces of alphabetic writing were found in 1905 when British archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie discovered inscriptions in Sinai dating back to the 18th century BC. They consisted of hieroglyphic signs which, however, did not make any sense in the Egyptian language. In 1915, Sir Allan Gardiner had an intuition that (1) these signs were not standing for their Egyptian value, but (2) were alphabetic signs and (3) expressed a Semitic language. On this basis, Prof. Albright attempted in 1965 to decipher these ProtoSemitic inscriptions and designed a comparative chart of ProtoSemitic script and the Phoenician alphabet showing striking analogies between both sets of signs. The ProtoSemitic script is very similar to the one used in ProtoCanaanite inscriptions discovered in Palestine, dating from 17th-11th century BC. However both ProtoSemitic and ProtoCanaanite inscriptions remain partly undeciphered.

Another type of alphabetic writing was used in Ugarit (Ras Shamra, Syria) between the 14th and the 12th century BC. It is considered the first true alphabet because clay tablets bearing a list of letters in alphabetic order have been discovered, together with great quantities of archives, religious and legal texts, the

*A stone with Greek inscription, was found on March 1980 at Fatikho village around 205 BC.*
language of which, here again, is a Semitic one. The
Ugaritic alphabet might well be a cuneiform type of the
Proto-caninite script. It disappeared around 12000 B.C., with-
out giving birth to any offspring.

The Phoenician alphabet is the first obvious ancestor of all
North Semitic scripts, including our Arabic and Latin
alphabets. The earliest inscriptions date back to the 11th
century B.C. and were discovered in Byblos (Lebanon).
Characteristically this alphabet, fit for a Semitic language, is
composed of 22 consonants and no vowels. What is its
origin?

As far as the shape of the letters is concerned, it is very
likely that the Protosinaitic script, through the
Proto-caninite, is the ancestor of the Phoenician alphabet
(and of all the related alphabets known as North Semitic
and South Semitic) and it seems possible to track the
stages of evolution between the former and the latter.
Regarding the names of the letters, they are obviously
those of the objects that were depicted by the original
Protosinaitic pictograms (aef means ox, and the shape of
the letter is that of an ox). Both means house and assumes
the shape of a house, etc.). As for the order of the letters,
its origin remains unknown. However, the order adopted
in Accadian word lists shows some similarity with the
Phoenician letters order. The only thing we know for sure
is that North Semitic and South Semitic alphabets have dif-
f erent orders for their letters and that both orders were
already known in Ugarit.

Another group of scripts developed from the Protosinaitic:
the South Semitic alphabets, with two branches: North
Arabian and South Arabian. The former is represented for
instance by the Thamudic, Dedanite and Liyianite inscrip-
tions in the Arabic language of the Arabian Peninsula, from
the 6th century BC to the 4th century AD. The latter is
known by the Sabaic, Qatabanic and Minaic inscriptions
in the local South Arabian language, mainly found in
Yemen (9th century BC - 6th century AD). However,
South Arabian was also used to write an archaic form of
Arabic, like in Qaryat al Faw (Saudi Arabia). It is rep-
resented today by the Ethiopic syllabary.

Within the North Semitic group, the Phoenician alphabet
had four offshoots. Punic (and Neo Punic) were in use in
Carthage, the famous city founded by Phoenicians in
North Africa and destroyed by the Romans in 164 B.C. Old
Hebrew was used by the Jews before their exile to Babylon
(587 B.C.) and has progressively disappeared except for its
Samaritan type. But the two main offshoots of the
Phoenician script are Aramaic and Greek. The Arameans
who came to Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent
around the 10th century B.C. borrowed their script from
the Phoenicians and spread it throughout the Middle East
together with their tongue which, as of the 8th century BC,
became the international language of the time, under the
Assyrian and Persian Achaemenid empires.

The Aramaic alphabet was adopted and transformed by
various peoples of Eastern Mediterranean. During their
exile in Babylon, the Jews had learned the Aramaic script and, after their return to Palestine (538 B.C.), devised on this basis an alphabet known as Square Hebrew, which progressively replaced the Old Hebrew and is still in use today. On a similar Aramaic basis the Nabateans of Petra (150 B.C. - 150 A.D.) developed their own script that survived the disappearance of the Nabatean kingdom (the last dated inscription extant in Nabatean Aramaic is from 356 A.D.). The language they used for inscriptions was Aramaic but it became more and more influenced by their Arabic vernacular. Eventually, Arabic was written in Nabatean script as can be seen for instance in the famous burial inscription of Imru'l-Qays (Al Namara, 328 A.D.).

Between the 1st century B.C. and the 3rd century A.D., the Palmyrans developed Aramaic into a local script, which in turn evolved into the Syriac alphabet, still used for liturgical purpose by the Syriac church. According to Arabic sources (Baladhi) and to some modern scholars (Starcky) the Syriac script gave birth to the Arabic script. Others scholars (Healey) consider that Syriac had only a secondary influence on the Arabic script whose origin, according to them, is Nabatean. This scholarly dispute is likely to remain unsettled until the discovery of further archaeological evidence.

The Arabic alphabet, of which the earliest example extant is dated 512 AD (inscription of Zabad), developed under the influence of grammarians (Abu al Aswad al Du‘ali, Nasr ibn ‘Asm al Laythi, Yahya ibn Ya‘mur al Adwani, Al Khalil ibn Ahmad al Farahidi) who invented the system of dots to differentiate consonants of similar shape and the additive signs for the transcription of vowels. Calligraphers (Ibn Muqala, Ibn al Bawwab, Mubarak ibn Mubarak, Yaqut al Musta’simi) also played an important role in elaborating various types of beautiful scripts. The Arabic alphabet spread, together with Islam, replacing other scripts like Pehlevi in Persia, again another offshoot of Aramaic.

By diffusing eastwards, the Aramaic script reached India and, at the time of King Asoka (3rd century BC), influenced the elaboration of the Brahmi script, the common origin of nearly all the alphabets or syllabaries found in the Indian subcontinent today. In turn, India gave to the West its numeral system, based on a set of ten signs including zero, a major mathematical breakthrough and the equivalent of the alphabet in terms of digits.

So far, nearly all the alphabets we have been through are made of consonants, the transcription of vowel having come at a later stage and being considered in Semitic
scripts only as a help to reading. This is due to the fact that, as far as Semitic languages are concerned, the consonantal structure of the word is primordial. When, around the 8th century BC, or even before according to some scholars, the Greeks adopted the Phoenician script they had to resolve the question of how to write vowels, a major feature of Indo-European languages. The solution, based perhaps on an Aramaic principle of orthography for final long vowels, consisted of using for this purpose the letters corresponding to Phoenician consonants with no equivalent in Greek and which, therefore, had become useless: alef for A, he for E, ayin for O, etc. This major innovation, together with the growing influence of Greek culture, allowed the alphabet to spread westwards. It is worthwhile mentioning that, at an early stage, several local types of Greek alphabet existed together. The Ionian type, adopted officially by Athens in 405 B.C. then became the classical script.

Two categories of scripts branched off the Greek. The first is represented by alphabets created on the basis of the Greek script, mainly for religious purpose (Coptic, Armenian, Cyrillic). The second encompasses alphabets which came as the result of an evolution from the Greek (Italic, Etruscan). Best known among them is the Latin alphabet, borrowed in the 7th century B.C. from the Etruscans who most probably got it from the Greeks. However, the Romans did not keep the Semitic names of the letters that had been preserved so far and this is the reason why the users of the Roman script do not say "alef, bet, gimel" or "alif, ba, gem" or "alpha, beta, gamma" but "a, b, c". Because of the power of the Roman empire and its policy of conquests, this alphabet diffused all over Europe and maintained itself in the areas where Latin became the liturgical language of the Church. It spread even further due to the colonial conquests of the West, especially in the New World.

The history of the alphabet is a very good example of the dialogue between cultures that has been going on for millennia around the Mediterranean Sea. The alphabet was invented nearly four thousand years ago, somewhere between Sinai and Palestine. It has spread progressively, being adopted by all the great civilisations from India to Western Europe, each one of them adapting the alphabet to its special needs and goals (trade, administration, religious proselytism, conquest) and transforming it according to its own genius. In this respect, special mention should be made of Arabic calligraphy, which has taken the art of writing to its best, as can be seen in the collections of manuscripts of Dar al Atjar al Islamiya.

* These photographs were taken from (J.F. SALLES-MISSION ARCHEOLOGIQUE FRANCAISE AU KOWEIT).
Current Challenges Facing Museums in the United States of America

by Dr. Andrew Camden

There are over 8,000 museums in the United States, 55% of which are history museums or relate to historic sites. Only 15% are art museums, while another 15% are science museums, and the remaining 15% are miscellaneous, such as botanical gardens, zoos, aquariums, planetariums and children's museums. Those are unique to the US and are designed to do things just for children. They are not necessarily part of other museums. Only 8% of the museums in the US have budgets over a million dollars, indicating that most are not very big. On average, every American visits a museum or participates in a museum program three times a year. On average, each child in school will visit a museum once a year with a school group, not including what they do with their families. What is significant, though, is that our museum machine in the US is built on volunteerism. I am a volunteer. For every paid staff member in the US, there are two and a half volunteers. The museums in the US could not be run without this high level of volunteerism.

Turning to funding, we can say that, unlike other parts of the world, where almost all the funds come from the government, in the US only 40% of museum funds come from the government. Another 40% comes from several sources including endowment income from investments, earned income from museum shops, admissions, food service and from renting out their facilities, and the remaining 20% comes from private contributions. This includes membership dues as well as financial support from foundations and corporations. Our tax system encourages this. Another distinction of museums in the US is opposed to elsewhere in the world, is that in the United States our museum collections are object-based, the object being regarded as a tool to teach us about other cultures and issues. In most other parts of the world, the collecting is done to preserve the local culture.

Museum funding in the US is a politically sensitive issue, centring around the role of the National Endowment for the Arts which is an organisation that was created in the mid-sixties to support art activities around the country. One view is that the N.E.A., in partnership with individuals, corporations and foundations, brings art and culture to communities throughout the US, thereby helping to attract tourists, stimulate business, and expand the tax base. The other view opposes the National Endowment for the Arts and questions the active involvement of the government in the culture business. To give some perspective on the issue, arts funding in the United States per capita is a little over $3 a person, while in Britain it is $16, in Canada $28, in France $35, in Germany $40, and in Sweden, $45. Of the tens of thousands of grants that the N.E.A. has made since its inception, perhaps a dozen or so have been controversial but they have raised criticisms over the use of tax revenue to support what some regard as objectionable art. People in the museum world feel this has been very destructive to the arts in my country since it means that the small amount of government support is going to be reduced, which pushes greater pressure on the private sector to pick up that slack. The Museum Trustee Association was started in Washington in the early 1970's when it was perceived that the people elected or appointed to the museum boards needed political clout to stand up and speak to people who were in legislative positions. However, the Museum Trustee Association does not just represent art museums. In addition, we represent history museums, science museums, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, children's museums and so on. We deal with issues of governance and try to learn from each other by sharing ideas and trying to teach each other about fund-raising.

I would like to illustrate my remarks on some of the critical financial issues by referring specifically to the Detroit Institute of Arts, because we are an excellent
case study. One of the things that we do as a large encyclopedic museum is organize local and travelling exhibitions. In addition, we loan 100-150 works of art a year to museums around the world because we believe art is a universal language helping people learn about one another and thereby helping to promote international understanding.

A major challenge, however, is how to make a large museum like ours relevant to the people that live in the community. The Detroit Metropolitan area has the largest concentration of Arabic-speaking people outside of the Middle East, so we have a very large Arab-American constituency to appeal to. The Department of Ancient and Islamic Art has been a major department in our museum for a long time. Elsie Holmes Peck, the curator, points out that the Department of Ancient and Islamic Art has installed a variety of exhibitions of ancient near-eastern and Islamic art to complement its existing collections and to educate the Arab-American community as well as the wider public about the rich and varied cultural heritage of the Middle East. These have included lectures, symposia, workshops for the public and for school children.

Although 40% of museum funds in the U.S. comes from government sources, in our case it is only a third, with two-thirds coming from the private sector. Our museum is owned by the City of Detroit and yet we do not get our support from them. We have to raise the money in other ways. I have already mentioned that we have 45,000 members. We are also beginning to focus on the income we earn from our museum shop and our food service operation. These two sources of revenue are particularly helped by the staging of popular exhibitions. In addition we generate income from the rental fees we charge from people wishing to hold parties in the museum. We also get corporate contributions through the Family Art Game, whereby corporations sponsor works of art and get their name in the Sunday newspaper. This raises close to $100,000 a year, and it is a regular part of our fund raising program. Because funding for endowment is very important to secure our future, we are trying to build up a large capital base that can generate income for future operations. We have now reached $75 million through a great deal of very hard work involving learning how to talk to people, how to ask for money, how to persuade them to mention us in their estate planning documents, in their wills when they die. The fact that such gifts are tax advantaged in the U.S. creates a win-win situation. We now employ someone full-time in our museum, devoted entirely to working with people on planned giving, on how to
raise money that will provide for our future in the years to come. This is happening at all types of museums all over my country. The funding issues are never going to go away, but we are taking important steps year by year to do things better. We talk to other museums to learn what they are doing and pick up on their good ideas. For example, we picked up the Family Art Game idea from another museum. Sharing is very important.

Museums are places of learning and have an educational role. However, the learning experience is different since, unlike the classroom setting, it is informal. In the informal environment, you come and go for short periods of time, but each time you come you learn something that you didn’t know before, or you pick up a little nuance that you didn’t notice the last time. Speaking personally, as a volunteer, every time I am at the museum for a meeting, I always take a different route to get out of the building, so that as I walk through the building I will see something that I didn’t notice the last time I walked through. We feel that the school programs and the children’s programs are very important. We play a very active role in introducing children to the arts when they are very young. For instance, we have a tour program for children every day that the museum is open during the school week. Before the museum is open to the public, school groups go through. They come by bus from all over the State of Michigan. We also have another program called Art to the Schools where volunteers go into the schools. They take objects out into the classroom and explain them to the children, which often entices those children to bring their parents and their families to see the museum. We also have a program for teacher training. The teachers can come in and learn about our activities and any current exhibitions, so they can go back and tell their students. We also have Saturday classes for children. I believe that the educational mission is very significant and there is a need to. We’ve got to start reinforcing this point in the US, much better than we’ve done before, to get this message across, because believe that the public doesn’t perceive it properly. We’ve got to change that! We have to make people understand that what we do is relevant and important. If we don’t travel, in addition, we loan 100-150 works of art a year to museums around the world. Why do we do that? It’s very interesting. We do it because we believe art is a universal many of these points that I have made tonight are not particularly restricted to museums in the United States, they’re not area very universal issues. They are a concern to people all over the world who are interested in museums all over the world. I think that we here is a need to continue to share through such organisations and botanic gardens, zoos, aquaria, planetariums and children’s museums. Those are a unique thing to the U.S. and elsewhere they are designed to do things just for children, many ways but we have to talk in order to do this. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to come here and speak with you tonight.
Wood Carving
From a Palace of Fatimid Cairo:
The Coptic Connection

by Dr. Sabiha Khemir

The Fatimid conquest of Egypt took place in 969 A.D., led by the General Jawhar, who was sent from Ifriqiyya (present day Tunisia), by the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah. This event marked the start of a new era, when the Abbasid caliphate in Egypt was overthrown. In 972 AD, al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah, himself, entered Cairo in a magnificent ceremonial procession, bringing with him the riches of the Fatimid courts loaded on camels. He was accompanied by his extended family, many followers and, more significantly, the sepulchres of his ancestors with whom he wanted to share his triumph. The new dynasty provided solid patronage, and a recognisable Fatimid art emerged.

Aware of the symbolic meaning of construction, the Fatimids were great builders. Significantly, Jawhar traced the foundations of the Eastern Palace (al-Qasr al-Sharqi) on the night he arrived at al-Fustat, old Cairo. The foundation of a new capital, al-Qahirah, (Victorious) and the building of the architecturally magnificent Eastern Palace embodied a significant political act. Al-Aziz (975-996 AD), the second Fatimid caliph in Cairo and son of Al-Mu’izz, continued living in the Eastern Palace after his father’s death. It remained the caliph’s residence, and the official base for the state until Fatimid rule ended in 1171 A.D. Al-Aziz had al-Qasr al-Gharbi, the Western Palace, built opposite the Eastern Palace. This special building was to become the dwelling of his only daughter, Sitt al-Mulk, a remarkable princess who played an important role in directing Fatimid politics. Miraculously, many woodwork panels from the Palace of Sitt al-Mulk, have survived. They were discovered, in 1910, in the Mamluk complex of Qalawun, most being found with their face to the wall, with Mamluk designs carved on their backs. The theme and style of the original carvings, however, was Fatimid. The 14th century historian, Al-Maqrizi, tells us quite clearly that Sultan Qalawun bought the palace, and built his maristan (hospital), madrasa (college) and mausoleum on the site, in 1283 A.D. The panels were thus reused in this complex, built on the site of the Fatimid palace some 112 years after the collapse of the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt.

The surviving wood-work, most of which is housed in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, consists of what was probably a main door of the palace, parts of other doors, several friezes, and ceiling panels. They display an exuberant use of figurative images. Nine panels form friezes that are approximately four metres long, 30 centimetres wide, and about three and a half centimetres deep. On either side of the principle band on each panel, there is a band decorated with scroll.
The principle band is divided into starlike shapes alternating with oval sections in which figures and animals are represented in relief on a scrolled background. These friezes probably decorated qa'as, reception halls for social gatherings and entertainment. This type of frieze would have been used as a wainscot, like the one in Qa'at al-Dardir in Cairo, the only surviving Fatimid qa'a.

The palace woodcarvings reveal sophisticated workmanship. There are three levels of carvings, the deepest being almost two and a half centimetres. The carving of some of the friezes are angular, but the surface was smoothed over and the wood brightened, or whitened, with a thin layer of gypsum, a technique which was widely practised in ancient Egypt from the fifth dynasty onward. Traces of colour on most of the panels indicate that they were once painted. Rather than the wood we see today, the original effect would have been colourful and vibrant.

The figures portrayed on the friezes include musicians, dancers, drinkers, and hunters, among others. In these woodcarvings we see the seeds of later manuscript illustrations. There is no doubt that the artist or craftsman who produced these carved images was capable of manuscript illustration. These carefully-planned images must have been drawn on paper prior to their carving. However, no illustrated manuscript has survived from the Fatimid period apart from fragments found at Fustat, nothing is known about painting during the Fatimid period. Next to lustre painted Fatimid pottery, and the few frescoes from Hammam Abu Su'ud in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, these wood-carvings constitute unique material illustrating Fatimid figurative imagery.

Although most of these images display court life, they are undoubtedly symbolic. The hare, or rabbit, for example, which is represented frequently in these woodcarvings, is a popular motif in Fatimid art found in rock crystal, ceramics, ivory carvings and textiles. Its representation in the heraldic position, two hares opposite each other, is more symbolic than realistic. To ancient Egyptians, the hare was a symbol of divine qualities because of its swiftness and acute senses. Other characteristics associated with the hare, or rabbit, are fertility, cleverness, trickery and survival. Because the rabbit always sleeps with its eyes open, it is often seen as a symbol of wisdom and knowl-
edge, and the representation of the hare in Fatimid art could have derived directly from its frequent representation in Coptic textiles.

The peacock was a symbol of immortality in ancient times and it was also an early Christian symbol of resurrection due to the analogy of the periodic renewal of its beautiful plumage. It has always been the custom, in Iran, to exchange peacock feathers at Nawruz, the festival of new year and rebirth. The same custom was followed by the Copts at the beginning of the Coptic year. The first Caliph to practise this was al-Mu'tizz li-Din just a year after his arrival in Cairo. In medieval literature, the peacock is a symbol of beauty. Al-Qalqashandi describes the peacock as having the highest rank and value among birds, in terms of beauty and glory.

The panels also include the harpy, a bird with a woman's face, a popular motif in Fatimid art probably originating from ancient Egyptian art. In these panels, the harpy has a tail like a peacock, and wears a kind of headdress. In Fatimid pottery, the peacock wears a crown, suggesting medieval royal connections. The harpy appears frequently in medieval Islamic art, for example in ivories from Spain and Sicily. In general, the harpy symbolises femininity, with a connection to birth.

The griffin combines the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. The griffins in the panels also have human heads. The representation of the griffin has roots in ancient Assyria and Greece. It was a guardian of treasure, and a symbol of watchfulness.

During the Fatimid period, dance was not just court entertainment, but also a royal attribute used to display grandeur. Al-Maqrizi recalled that the Fatimid Caliph al-Zahir used to cross Cairo in a procession preceded by performing dancers. There are frequent representations of dancers in these wooden friezes. They show variations which suggest that the artist is representing a particular dance that is familiar to him. In one, a woman is holding a scarab and a man is clapping his hands. This appears to be the dance of the palms, (tanziat al-kaff) which is still danced today in Egypt. In another variation, the dancer is using castanets. Dancers are often portrayed in the panels with musicians and drinkers. Images of musicians occur quite frequently, about 29 times, since music was taken seriously. The Caliph al-Zahir was a musician himself, while it is said that the physician of Caliph al-Hafiz had a drum made especially for him to cure him from an illness. The musical instruments we see in the panels document those used at that time: the lute, oboe (surra), flute, drum, tambourine, qanun (psaltery) and harp.

The drinker is always shown in the frontal, monumental posture with legs crossed. The symbolic nature of these drinking scenes is more important than the realistic aspect. The goblet motif existed in the area around Iran from ancient times. The seated figure with the goblet in hand is one of the most frequent motifs in medieval Islamic art. The goblet is generally interpreted as a ceremonial symbol, connected with power, eternal life and rebirth. We can only speculate as to the contents of the goblet, but such scenes should be interpreted as representing a view of paradise rather than real life.

One representation in the woodcarvings has its roots in Sassanian Persia, and Central Asian art: a ruler with a cup in one hand and a flower in the other. This image is found in many media in the medieval period, and there is a comparable example in the 12th century Capella Palatina in Palermo. Since hunting, the pastime of princes, enjoyed high esteem, it is also depicted on the panels.

Three panels from the palace of Sitt al-Mulk show gazelles among scrolls. Two of these are in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo and the third is in the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah in Kuwait. The latter depicts a gazelle holding a leaf in its mouth. Animals holding leaves in their mouths recur in Fatimid art and may relate back to the story of Noah and the returning dove with an olive branch in its beak, a symbol of life, peace and forgiveness.

Art history usually reveals a separation between abstract art and figurative art, but in Fatimid art, the two are strongly connected and combined, a convention which had already started during the preceding Tulunid period. Some of the wood-carvings from the palace of Sitt al-Mulk display a harmonious combination of human, animal, calligraphic and vegetal motifs. This smooth amalgamation of figurative and abstract representation implies that the same mentality produced both.

My field work in 1989 was very rewarding since I discovered a wooden Fatimid ceiling. The beams are decorated with scrollwork and between the beams are stars inscribed with rabbits (or hares), fish and gazelles. Inscribed in one corner is the word 'al-Mulk', standing for al-Mulk Li Allah (The kingdom is for God), probably consciously chosen in relation to Sitt al-Mulk. This is the only surviving ceiling of its kind.
Apart from similar abstract representations found in mosques, materials comparable to this and the other woodcarvings from the palace of Sitt al-Mulk come from Coptic buildings. One example is a wooden screen in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, originally from the Church of St. Barbara. Carved designs are set within small panels as found in the great door from the palace of Sitt al-Mulk. Fatimid motifs are interspersed with Coptic crosses but the screen is earlier than the wood-carvings from the palace. The carving is relatively shallow, with only one level as opposed to the three in the palace panels which, in general, are much more sophisticated.

Also in the Coptic Museum are three panels from the Convent of Dayr al-Banat, which bear a striking resemblance to the group of nine wainscot friezes from the palace of Sitt al-Mulk. In each panel the space is divided into oblong shapes and polylobes, like some of the palace panels. Depicted are an elephant, a man leading a horse, another horse drinking from a bucket and a camel waiting its turn. One polylobed compartment contains two hares in the heraldic position. The two narrow outer bands are identical to some of the palace panels. The second panel is more sophisticated and complex in its detailed carving, showing hunters, musicians and a jester performing on a rope. The third panel, in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, bears a remarkable resemblance to the friezes from the palace.

Other Coptic woodwork includes a pair of tall doors in Mar Girgis Convent, which show the same themes as Sitt al-Mulk’s palace woodwork, particularly its main door. Not only is the general layout of the panels within the doors the same, but their quality, style, technique and overall character are also identical. Other comparable material can be found in the remote desert monasteries of Wadi Natrun.

Islamic art is often analyzed in terms of external influence, rather than its makers’ contribution. It is widely thought that early Islamic art of was strongly influenced by the conquered peoples. One thing is sure, however; from the very beginning Islamic art seems to reflect deliberate choices, so omissions as well as saved elements are very revealing. Obviously, artisans of the conquered countries continued to produce art for Muslims, but most of them entered the fold of Islam relatively quickly, and were, themselves, influenced by the new style. The new sense of aesthetics was the product of the new faith. The connection with Abbasid art is usually stressed in relation to Fatimid art in Cairo, but it is important to consider the indigenous contribution to Fatimid art. It is only to be expected that people who lived together and formed one society, would influence each other’s culture and art.

The influence of Coptic art can be seen in early Islamic monuments like the carved stone facades of the Umayyad Mshatta in Jordan, the first major mosque (the Dome of the Rock), and in the woodcarvings of al-Aqsa, both in Jerusalem. Documentary evidence of the Copts’ activities outside Egypt confirms that Coptic artists, architects, and craftsmen were held in high esteem well after the Arab conquest.

The Copts already had established wood workshops when the Muslims arrived, and probably continued to produce artefacts for Muslim patrons. Most of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs were strict with the Copts, but the Tulunid and Ikhshidid rulers were more tolerant and Copts were allowed to practise their art. The Fatimids, threatened by the Abbasids, were interested in the internal peace, prosperity and unity of the country and maintained good relations with the Copts. Some were even chosen as counsellors by Fatimid caliphs.

The Fatimid period is particularly appropriate for the study of the Coptic connections with Islamic art. Muslim-Coptic relations were at their best, and it was a period during which a particular Islamic style emerged, recognisable as Fatimid. There was an outburst of diversity and intricacy in style, easily incorporated into mainstream Coptic art. Except during the rule of Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021 AD), peace and prosperity under the Fatimids allowed the Copts to be creative and artistically active. Coptic culture revived and Copts and Muslims enjoyed a harmonious relationship. As in the court of al-Andalus, in Spain, where tolerance allowed people of different religions to live and work together, thus leading to an artistic expression that is unique to al-Andalus, Fatimid tolerance led to the formation of an art that is uniquely Fatimid.
Historical maps are things of beauty, but also sources of historical information. Maps are among the earliest sources of knowledge about Kuwait, the first proof that Europeans, and European merchant ships, visited Kuwait. Finally, maps are the first source to show that, for three centuries, the border between Kuwait and Iraq has been where it is now.

We refer to early modern European maps, based on exploration, of which there are two kinds. The first and best, but also the rarest, is nautical charts, made by sailors for the use of sailors, with the limited instruments of that time, mainly the nautical astrolabe or quadrant and the azimuth compass. Charts can be reasonably accurate in areas near shipping routes, but are vague about lesser-known coasts.

The second kind is maps published commercially for scholars, politicians and others. Except for the sumptuous versions prepared for princes these were usually printed. They were compiled from available information: old geography manuals, maps and travel books. An interesting 1694 French map contains data from the 3rd century BC, the 11th, 13th, 16th and 17th centuries AD, from Greek, Arab, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch and French geographers.

Geographical maps had to look attractive, or nobody would buy them. Nautical charts are less consciously artistic, but can have the beauty of a well-designed
tool. Charts tended to become increasingly simple: uncluttered images permitting sailors to plot their course, while scholars liked their geographical maps filled with data, even if not fully verifiable.

The oldest Portuguese chart of the Gulf, by Francisco Rodrigues in 1513, covers the lower Gulf only, with few names. The Portuguese had not yet penetrated far inside the Gulf. Like all charts made by explorers, Rodrigues' map looks much more realistic than copies and compilations, in which careless copying caused inaccuracy. Gasparo Viegas first attempted to chart the entire Gulf in 1527, but without the coast of the Arabian Peninsula. With Lazaro Luis' maps of 1563, Portuguese knowledge had much improved. On Luis' map there is an island approximately where Faylaka is, named 'Island of Aguada'. Luis' second map has the same image, without the name Aguada.

These charts made by navigators have a sound cartographic image. The problem with scholars' maps is that it is hard to see anything recognizable on them for the Gulf area. Place names look completely fantastic.

The scholarly cartographic tradition between the 1570s and the 1650s, the classical Flemish and Dutch schools, seems to show the Gulf of Kuwait. The origin of this cartographic tradition, however, is Italian. Giacomo Gastaldi of Venice printed two maps of the Arabian Peninsula. The second, in 1561, was more important because it was imitated by great names: Mercator, Ortelius, Blaeu, Hondius and Janssonius, which led later scholars to use it as a basis of cartography. Imitations of this map were printed without essential changes between 1570 and 1792.

Gastaldi's 1548 first edition is the first printed map depicting the contemporary situation, and not antiquity (before, Gulf maps had place names from classical Greek authors). The Gulf appears as a shapeless bag, as in Medieval European cartography. The second version has several differences, including names in the Kuwait area, originating from Duarte Barbosa's interesting but confused travel book. Thanks to Barbosa's inaccuracies, Gastaldi wrongly puts places from the Persian coast (Basidu, Kuhistak, Qishm island) in the Kuwait area. However, there is a noticeable Gulf of Kuwait where most older maps, even nautical charts, have nothing.

I found the origin of this "Gulf of Kuwait" in Paris, in a 1505 or 1507 manuscript planisphere by the Genovese Nicolo Caverio, one of the first maps recording Portuguese explorations accurately. Caverio's Gulf has the bulky shape of the Greek geographer Ptolemy's maps, since Ptolemy was his source. While Indian names are modern, Gulf names are Ptolemy names. The Gulf of Kuwait is called Sacer Sinus, as in Ptolemy's Geography.

Also in the National Library in Paris is the Miller atlas, a product of great Portuguese cartographers. At first, this seems very beautiful, but nonsense. Study of the Vatican Library's 1520s maps, however, taught me that, before the Portuguese visited the upper Gulf, they often saw the Shatt al Arab as much too wide and made it part of the Gulf, so that Basra should not be sought on the river, but somewhere down the Gulf coast. Looking thus at the Miller atlas map, one finds Basra halfway down the Gulf, and other identifiable names, two related to Kuwait. Just below Basra is Feleq (Faylaka) Island, not found on any other contemporary map. Below Basra on the coast is Xar, Zar, probably Ras Zur near the Saudi-Kuwait border.

These geographical maps were mainly scholarly speculation. Sailors with their instruments were sounder. While scholars speculated, sailors in the Dutch ships Schelvis and Deliflaven made the first recorded European visit to Kuwaiti territory.

In 1645 the Dutch East India Company, established in the Gulf since 1623, sent these ships to experiment with trade in Basra. Apparently they had no Portuguese charts of the Gulf, only an English chart which they termed completely useless. Making a fine chart of their route, the Dutch reached Kharg Island, where they hired a local pilot to Basra. The pilot brought them to Shatt-al-Arab, which was
Dutch maps became standard Gulf nautical charts, imitated by French and English cartographers, and the wrong shape of the Gulf became universally accepted.

The general image of these charts hardly changed between the 1660s and 1820. Not conspicuous, but important, is a change indicating indirect contacts between European mapmakers and Arab sailors’ knowledge; Faylak replaced the name Aguaa. The oldest dated version is a 1716 printed English chart. Another, better, version is the 1760 Dutch manuscript, but the original version, which has not survived, is possibly of French origin.

Strange things happened when nautical chartmakers also made maps for scholars. The famous Dutch cartographic firm Blaeu was the official provider of the Dutch East India Company, and produced realistic charts. But they were also market leaders in scholarly maps, and thus produced two incompatible images of the Gulf. Weak attempts were made to reconcile them: the worst errors on geographic maps were corrected and Blaeu’s great atlas attempted to mix Portuguese nautical data with traditional scholarly cartography.

Old charts are very rare. Because of daily use on ships, they got damaged and thrown away. Collections and museums contain mainly geographical maps. For a long time imitations of Gastaldi were standard. After 1721 some maps showed in the location of Kuwait a city called Cathema, which looks like the modern name Kadhimah (Kazima). Research soon showed this on earlier maps, the earliest in 1652. Kadhimah on older maps is slightly inland, just outside the border of Ottoman Iraq. In other areas these maps show considerable precision in the borders.

Kadhimah is found in Arab sources: Idrisi’s geography, printed in Rome in 1592, mentioned Kadhimah as between Basra and Al-Ihsa. Sanson, otherwise not a very good cartographer, believed that Arab geographers should know the Gulf better than Gastaldi’s obscure sources. There are several versions of Sanson’s map, some with Kadhimah. The strangest version is an Ottoman one printed in Istanbul in 1730, the oldest surviving Islamic map with anything on Kuwait.

French scholarly Gulf cartography made a step forward when Delisle in 1700 published maps based on nautical charts. Finally scholars accepted that humble sailors using instruments could draw the Gulf better than rough sketches of distinguished scholars. Delisle used names from Idrisi, although his earliest maps have no Kadhimah. In 1718, Abulfida’s medieval description of the Arabian peninsula became available in French translation. It mentions Kadhimah between Basra and Al-Ihsa on a large bay. D’Anville used the text in 1720 for a map showing Arabia according to Abulfida, with a very prominent Kadhimah. The next year Delisle followed suit, but unlike D’Anville did not show the Gulf of Kadhimah, although he put the name there. An important point about Delisle’s maps is the precise way he puts Ottoman Iraq’s border exactly over Jabal Sinan, where the UN put it.

The best French cartographers were real scholars. D’Anville wrote a critical account of geographic and cartographic descriptions of the Gulf for the French Academy of Sciences in 1758. He tried to reconcile facts from nau-
tical charts, information from sailors, texts from reliable travellers, classical Greek and medieval authors. This is embellished with a map combining data from different sources, showing Kazima from Afulfida near Faylaka from nautical charts. Bellin also showed Kazima, and a Gulf of Kazima south of it, looking rather like the Gulf of Kuwait.

Between 1750 and 1756 contacts and trade were established between the Dutch East India Company and Kuwait: the first recorded contacts between the state of Kuwait and a European power. I published these European documents, which describe Kuwait as a separate small state on the Gulf, and give interesting hints about its political structure, in the first edition of Origins of Kuwait. These contacts were also reflected in maps. The first chart was produced, showing Kuwait with the name of Grain. This rare chart, printed in Amsterdam in 1753, shows the track of a Dutch ship sailing between Basra, Kharg, and Grain: proof that Dutch ships had entered Kuwait harbour. This is geometrically one of the best charts of its time, but we find names on it originating not from nautical observation, but from French scholarly maps.

In 1765 the German geographer Carsten Niebuhr was at the Dutch East India Company establishment at Kharg island. There they knew about Kuwait. What appears in Niebuhr's book printed in 1772 is very closely related to Dutch documents of the 1750s.

The map in Niebuhr's first book is rightly famous, as the first map with the word Kuwait on it. Otherwise Niebuhr followed traditional procedure: he took a map and put some places he had heard of, but never visited, approximately where he thought they should be, like scholarly cartographers before him. His model was an English nautical chart, probably an English version of the 1740s French map, in turn a version of a Dutch map based on Portuguese maps of the 1580s. There is a lesser known Niebuhr map in his second book, Travels in Arabia, which shows more details of Kuwaiti territory, but with the name Grain. Kuwait City stands with some nautical precision on the 1753 Dutch map and the Niebuhr maps of 1772 and 1773.

After the Dutch and the Germans, the English appeared. In 1775-1776 the EIC ship Eagle explored between Basra and Kuwait, producing a short description of Kuwait City in the India Office Records in London. The Eagle's officers made a chart of the port, which does not give many more details than van Keulen or Niebuhr, but everything has a better shape, because instead of the azimuth compass which needed two persons to handle it, angles were quickly and efficiently measured with the sextant. We may consider this the first modern map of the Kuwait area.

However, it still lacks exact coordinates. Geographical longitudes could not be measured on board ships, and navigators could not plot their accurate position before the late 1770s. For this an accurate chronometer was needed, which became slowly available after 1775. New cartography did not appear very soon. British ships had to be very careful in the Gulf because there was always a risk of attack by French privateers. The first British Admiralty chart of the Gulf printed in 1820 was the first to put Kuwait (again called Grain) on reasonably accurate coordinates.

Knowledge regarding the Kuwait area reached Europe through unexpected channels: in 1823 sources connected to the Egyptian military expedition to the Arabian peninsula produced a map containing inland data not seen on nautical charts.

In the 1820s Britain's East Indian navy explored the Gulf, using the full range of geometrical instruments. The result was Brucks' 1828 chart, on which coasts are explored in detail and all places on the Kuwait coast figure in Arabic and Latin script, with Arabic names more accurate than Latin ones. Speculation has been replaced by full exploration.
For a thousand years, before the Portuguese ever set foot on Arab lands, Arab and Moslem astronomers, scientists, geographers and travellers contributed a great deal to the study of the geography of the territories opening out to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. These included Spain, North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula and the countries of South-East Asia. Contacts between Arab merchant fleets and India, Malakha, Indonesia and the southern part of China, as early as the beginning of 8th century, are well documented.

The period between the Crusades and the mid-15th century witnessed an active trade between East and West, particularly through Arab merchants. They carried precious goods such as jewels and frankincense from the East, to Syrian and Egyptian ports, from where these goods were transported to Genoa and Venice before finding their way to other parts of Europe. However, after the Turks conquered the Asitana (Istanbul) in 1453 and became the masters of the Middle East and the Balkans, the commercial links between Asia and Europe were disconnected. Under such circumstances, efforts to establish new links between the distant parts of the world started vigorously in Spain and Portugal, in particular in search of a sea route to India. The Spanish turned to the Atlantic Ocean to achieve their goal, having the conviction, after the journey made by Columbus, that the Atlantic Ocean stretched to the borders of eastern India.

The Portuguese, on the other hand, decided to reach India through the sea route around Africa. Until the second half of 20th century, there was a common belief that Vasco da Gama had crossed the north-western part of the Indian Ocean, from Malinda in West Africa to Calcutta, with the help of an Indian sailor. However, scholars such as Fagan, the great French expert in the history of navigation in the East, and Kratckovsky, the great Russian orientalist and academician, both proved, beyond any doubts, that the navigator who assisted and guided Vasco da Gama in reaching India from Western Africa was an Arab by the name of Ahmad bin Majid, who was born in Dhofar, a district of Oman presently.

Ahmad bin Majid is the author of over 40 books on navigation in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. His book Kitab al-fawa'id fi usul ilm al-bihar wa al-qawa'id was first published in Russian, with extensive commentary by the Arabist Tchomovsky. Another book of his: Thalathat Isbudat Bahriyyin Ahmad bin Majid has been translated into many eastern and western languages.

The second trip taken by Vasco da Gama to India coincided with the appointment of Afonso Albugurk as the King of Portugal's representative in India. The occupation of Malakha, Java, Hormuz, Bahrain and Oman soon followed that appointment and a new Portuguese colonial empire was established in Asia and Africa, extending over two million sq. km. Their complete domination of the Indian Ocean enabled them to build new empires in the East.

Thus, for the Arab World, Vasco da Gama’s expedition had a particular significance.
The Mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i in Cairo and its Painted Glass Tiles

by Dr. Stefano Carboni

Hidden in the Haret Halawat, is an interesting building listed in Creswell’s map of the monuments in Cairo as number 243. From the exterior, it is unpretentious, and probably for this reason has been mentioned so little in recent literature. Nonetheless, the interior of its mausoleum is one of the most interesting examples of early Mamluk architectural decoration.

Al-Maqrizi mentions the building in his Kitab and describes it as “the ribat known as the riwaq of Ibn Sulayman, located at Haret al-Hilaliyya outside Bab al-Zuwayla.” The full nisba of the pious man who founded it is given as Ahmad ibn Sulayman ibn Ahmad ibn Sulayman ibn Ibrahimi ibn Abi al-Malik ibn al-Abbas al-Rahabi al-Bataihi al-Rifa'i, shaykh al-fuqara. Al-Maqrizi uses the words ‘ribat’ and ‘riwaq’ for Ahmad ibn Sulayman’s building, outside Cairo. In al-Maqrizi’s time, the building was probably a fairly important destination for the adepts of the Rifai religious order. It became known as a ‘ribat’, a dwelling or hospice for devotees of the shaykh who customarily resided there.

Monuments de l’Art Arabe undertook restoration work after its 1910 report on the building. The main structure is in stone and measures around 15x6.20 m. The qibla wall with two mihrabs and part of the eastern wall have survived intact, while the presence of an isolated brick plumb and the remains of an arch prompted the Comite to complete the enclosure, constructing two more walls (north and west) and a new arcade running parallel to the qibla wall in the middle of the enclosure. The actual mausoleum of Ahmad ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i was built at the south-eastern corner. Unlike the rest of the building, it is constructed of bricks instead of stone and for this reason, we can safely assume that it was added just after Ahmad ibn Sulayman’s death in 690/1291. The original stone building (the ‘riwaqi’) which, unlike the mausoleum, is not dated by any inscriptions and was probably built in the 1270’s-1280s, when Ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i was teaching in Cairo shortly before he died.

The central and main mihrab is of the shell-type set in a bevelled-arched frame and the inner edge is decorated with a naskhi inscription of which most of the right half still retained its coating of brick-red paint at the time Creswell studied it (now it is almost undetectable). The ribs of the shell-hood were once painted in black and brick-red alternately. The outer, rectangular stucco frame is ornamented with vegetal motifs on the spandrels, and inscriptions are set in round ended panels alternated with circular medallions.

Unfortunately, very little is known about Ahmad ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i. Probably there never was a pilgrimage to his
tomb, let alone a proper mausoleum. It is likely that a number of pupils and followers continued to live on the premises at least until al-Maqrizi's time, then Shaykh Ahmad fell slowly into oblivion and the building was progressively neglected and abandoned, eventually partially collapsing. Al-Maqrizi himself did not know much about him, except that he was one of the followers of Ahmad al-Rifai in Egypt. He was a pious man, held in great respect by the amirs and by everybody, and much venerated by the followers of the Rifai order. He had learnt the tradition from al-Salah's grandson [I have no idea who this al-Salah was]. He died in this 'riwaq' in the evening of Monday, 6th Dhul-Hijja 691 [November 18th, 1292]." In Ibn Sulayman's nisba we find also al-Batalihi, meaning from the marshlands of southern Iraq. We can assume, therefore, that he was of Iraqi origin like the more famous founder of the Rifai order, Ahmad al-Rifai, born one hundred and fifty years earlier, whose nisba also included al-Batalihi. We do not know if Ibn Sulayman was a direct descendant of his, nor if he was brought up in Egypt or moved there to escape the persecution of his sect, as did his contemporary Zayn al-Din Yusuf. The founder of the Rifai order, Ahmad ibn Ali Abu al-Abbas al-Rifai was born at the beginning of the 12th century AD, in southern Iraq and died at Umm Abida in the district of Wasit in 1183. Even if some hyperbolic traditions state that once he had a crowd of 100,000 persons to listen to his teachings, it seems to have kept the humble profile of a Sufi shaykh. It is likely that Ibn Sulayman was a good follower of his teachings a century later in Egypt.

On entering the mausoleum after viewing the inconspicuous exterior of the building, the visitor is surprised. The interior stucco decoration of the dome and the pendentives is extremely rich, paral-lelled only in the mausoleum of Zayn al-Din Yusuf mentioned above. The stalactite pendentives start just above a narrow wooden frieze that still retains part of its painted Quranic inscription. The three windows on each side have been restored with stained glass, as they were originally. The dome was once pierced with four windows, only one of which is presently open. The stucco decoration of the dome is one of the best and most lavish examples known from the early Mamluk period. The inscriptions are all Quranic: around the base is one in plated Kufic while those above the windows and in the central medallion at the top of the dome are in thuluth.

The monumental wooden tabut, or cenotaph, dominates the small room and fills the floor almost entirely. It is one of the best examples of its kind from the early Mamluk period and the use of ivory inlay to outline the single panels, still a rarity in Egypt at the end of the 13th century, makes it even more refined. The most obvious parallel is Sultan Baybars' coffin, dated 676/1277 and partially preserved in Lyon, the earliest example of ivory inlaid wooden panels in the Mamluk period.

The most impressive piece of architectural decoration of the building is the qibla wall. Around the mihrab, the stucco decoration measures 3.85 m by 3.30 m, although the bottom half has long disappeared. The niche, like the central mihrab of the 'riwaq', is keel-arched and its profile is surrounded by a similar double band in stucco, the inner of which has a plated Kufic Quranic inscription. The upper part of the mihrab is flanked by two blind niches, whose interiors are filled with a background of rosettes. Above the blind niches are two small inscriptional panels while the main inscribed cartouche fills the upper part of the decoration. As in the decoration of the main mihrab, this panel is round-ended and flanked by circular medallions. The large inscription is also Quranic (sura IX:18): "Only he can maintain the mosques of Allah who believes in Allah and the Day of Judgement...".

The activities around the 'riwaq' of Ibn Sulayman were those of a small, quiet community devoted to their shaykh and the Rifai order. The building itself was not prominent and did not have a minaret. Ahmad was certainly much beloved by his followers and they honoured him after he died with a mausoleum which, reflecting the personality of their master, had to appear humble outside but was very rich inside. Given their vote of poverty, we do not know whether the 'riwaq' had an endowment that allowed the community to build Ahmad's mausoleum or if they were helped by some well-off sympathisers like the amirs mentioned by al-Maqrizi.
The dark areas of the stucco decoration are paint under glass, a surprising and rather unique variation of the verre églomisé (paint sandwiched between two layers of glass). Glass tiles of different shapes and sizes, most of them elongated hexagons and roundels, were produced from sheets of glass and cut to size, deliberately maintaining rough edges and in some cases slightly bending the glass when still hot, in order to provide grooves that would fit into the soft stucco and keep the tile in place. After the tiles were cut to shape and size, and before being set on the stucco, they were cold painted on the back, the side that would be in contact with the stucco. It was a brilliant solution because very little oxidation has affected the paint itself, which is tightly sandwiched between the stucco and the glass. Notwithstanding the deterioration of the stucco, the tiles still retain their original paint underneath. Three colours were employed: black, pale green, and pale brown. Black was used for the outlines while green and brown filled the background of the designs, so that all the patterns appear in reverse, another clever solution to make the main pattern more visible. The patterns on the elongated hexagonal tiles around the outer frame and on the band above the keel arch of the mihrab are invariably 8-shaped vegetal scrolls, each individually painted, therefore all slightly different from each other. The round tiles that are alternated to the hexagonal ones include simpler versions of the vegetal scrolls. The small roundels around the arches of the blind niches and inside the two medallions of the upper panel show a simple trefoil or fleur-de-lis pattern. A similar pattern, on a large and more complex scale, is present on drop-shaped tiles around the main inscription, in the spandrels of the mihrab and at the top of the outer frame of the keel arch. There are also traces of glass insets in the semi-dome of the mihrab which were painted with irregular fan-shaped palmettes. Finally, the letters forming the main inscription on the upper panel were also covered with glass cut to shape, although it is not clear whether the glass was left unpainted or coated in brown. With traces of red paint still showing on the surface of the plaster, the original overall effect must have been rather sumptuous. The light filtering through the wooden screens from two sides, and through the stained glass windows between the pendentives and on the dome must have made quite an impression as reflected by the glass tiles set in the plastered wall.

I think the 'broad-glass' technique was used to obtain these tiles. Broad-glass, a type of flat pane glass, was made by blowing a large glass bubble, swinging it on the blow-pipe to form a long bottle, then cutting off both hemispherical ends. The resulting cylinder was then cut lengthwise with shears, reheated, and flattened with a wooden plane or allowed to sink to a flat state. The other type of flat pane glass is called 'crown-glass'. Its technique was slightly more complicated and needed more polishing; the bubble of glass was transferred from the blow-pipe to a rod (the pontil), cut open and then rotated until, by centrifugal force, it spread into a large flat disk. The glass was then annealed and cut into fairly thin pieces with slight convexity and concentric wavy lines caused by the rotation, and a boss (called 'bull's-eye') in the center, where the pontil had been attached. The individual elements obtained with the crown-glass process are familiar to us from medieval cathedral windows. Crown-glass was known to the Romans, while broad-glass, a simpler method probably developed at a later stage, was used in Lorraine, around 1100 and became popular in Venice around 1500. The tiles from this mausoleum do not show.
The concentric wavy lines or the convexity of crown-glass, and I could not spot any traces of bull’s-eyes. This is the only example of broad glass known in the Islamic world probably because no proper analysis of window glass or flat glass has been undertaken from archaeological material. Investigation might reveal that broad-glass was used in the Middle East before France, around 1100.

The only possible, loose comparison in architectural ornamentation can be found in the Eastern Islamic world, in the pavilion of a ruined palace at Old Timimn in southern Uzbekistan, near the border with Afghanistan. During excavations there in 1937-39, moulded green or reddish glass medallions have been discovered with animal and human figures, rosettes, and Kufic inscriptions in low relief. From an inscription, they can be dated to the beginning of the 13th century. A number of similar medallions have appeared on the market recently and four of them are now in the collection of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. They are reportedly from Maymana in northern Afghanistan, about 200 kilometres south-west of Timimn, thus confirming that they were produced in that region.

It is extremely difficult to understand what inspired the decorator of the interior of the mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman and what prompted him to use a large number of painted glass tiles for it, but only on the qibla wall. The best parallel, and perhaps the indirect source of inspiration for the “interior designer” of our mausoleum, is represented by the Fatimid hammam of Abu Saud in Cairo, fragments from whose decoration are preserved in the Mathaf al-Fann al-Islami in Cairo. They show very similar elongated hexagons with vegetal motifs, the trefoil and the fleur-de-lis-like patterns. The hammam was destroyed in 1168, so its decoration is at least a century and a quarter earlier than that of the mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman.

A surprising parallel can also be found in an almost contemporary religious building in Christian Italy. Originally part of the staircase of the pulpit made by Guglielmo di Pisa in 1270 for the church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas in Pistoia, the fragment is now preserved in the Museo Diocesano of the same city in central Tuscany. The decoration of the marble slab consists of small glass plaques of various geometric shapes, including six-pointed stars, arranged in a definitely Islamic-inspired pattern common in contemporary Mamluk Egypt. The plaques are in true veneer eglogism, that is, the gold and black colours left unfired are sandwiched between two layers of glass and subsequently set into the bed prepared on the marble surface. The designs, also inspired by Islamic models via southern Italy, include mainly animals in a highly decorative vegetal landscape with flowers and semipalmettes and, sometimes, geometrical designs. The original pulpit and its staircase must have been very impressive in the dim light of the church, and vaguely reminiscent of a contemporary minbar with ivory inlay, with the additional glittering of the glass surface. The pulpit was made by Guglielmo in 1270, few years before the decoration of the mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman.

Since there is no doubt that the painted glass tiles belong to the original plaster decoration of the mausoleum which is firmly dated by the inscription on the tabut, I think we have to accept the fact that the decoration of this qibla wall is unique. This type of decoration was not imitated in later buildings. Obviously, there must be an explanation that escapes us, be that a now lost model (the safest and most logical interpretation), or the influence of Venetian glass makers and of contemporary verre eglogise (the explanation I fancy most). It is also possible that glass could assume a special meaning in a burial site for the religious order by providing the ideal material for Ahmad ibn Sulayman and his followers to see through, and mystically walk through, the wall of the mihrab, like suff Alices in Wonderland walking through the mirror. The vegetal decoration of the painted tiles suggests nothing but the garden of paradise and the Tree of Life that lie just past the glass screen. Behind the wall are knowledge and the reward for a life well spent in prayer and poverty, and every visitor to the shaykh’s tomb can have a glimpse and look forward to it.

The restoration work, about 75 years ago, concentrated on completing the lower part of the plaster decoration, but a number of glass tiles, in particular from the outer band, have fallen since. I found many glass fragments on the floor in front of the mihrab during my first visit in 1988, and in the space of a few months I noticed further fresh fragments. This means that the plaster is fast deteriorating and that, before long, this unique decoration could be lost. I appeal to the international public on the matter of preservation and restoration of Islamic monuments in the hope that this effort will lead to a program of preservation of the qibla wall of the mausoleum. Perhaps our reward, if you want to join me in expressing my worries and the need to act quickly, will be the feeling of a sort of intimacy with Ahmad ibn Sulayman and his followers of the Rifai order and we shall be able to observe for a second what lies behind the glass tiles, in other words, di guadagnare un pezzo di paradiso, “to gain a bit of paradise”.
The Pros and Cons of the Crusades

by Prof. Dr. Saeed Aashour

As is clear from the title, this lecture was not intended to be a review of the battles, military positions, victories and defeats of the Crusades. Its aim was to be an intellectual analysis based on events, in order to cast light on the prevailing atmosphere surrounding the Crusades which caused them to be launched. It also examined the changes that they brought about in the contemporary world, and their consequences to regional political situations in terms of civilization.

The natural introduction to this study is to take a comprehensive look at the character of the ages in which the Crusades originated. This is the first basic pillar of the research. The second pillar - which is to some extent connected to the first - centres around the attitude of the Western Church towards Islam, particularly when the Islamic state expanded at the expense of the Christian world. This raises a question: why did the Crusades, in the traditional form which they assumed as from the end of the eleventh century AD, not appear in this form at an early stage to coincide with the process of Islamic conquest during its active phase? Why did the volcano of the Crusades explode in the latter half of the Middle Ages, and where were these feelings in the first part of that era?

It is necessary to pause here to refer to an important historical fact, namely that the Crusades took place on several battlefields: in Spain, some Mediterranean islands, North Africa and Egypt, in addition to the main battlefield, Greater Syria which contains numerous holy places. With the variety of battlefields on which the Crusades were fought, the nature of these wars varied in their different campaigns, even if they had the same spirit in common. So we find that the Crusader current in Spain was different in some respects from the Crusader current in Syria, and this leads us to attempt to explain the time span of the Crusades, and whether they had a specific historical beginning and a specific historical end. In other words, if the Crusades appeared in the main arena, namely Syria, at the end of the eleventh century AD, can one take this date as indicating the beginning of the appearance of the Crusader current in Spain? On the other hand, if the Crusades in their wider sense ended in Syria with the expulsion of the last remnants of the Crusaders from that country at the end of the thirteenth century AD, can one take this date to determine the end of the Crusades in Andalusia and North Africa?

These are all facts on which an historical researcher has the duty to cast light, and to reach conclusions about them based on breadth of vision, impartiality and lack of bias towards religious feelings, so that the researcher is not subject to his dogma or his inclinations, but seeks historical truth alone.

We also have a duty to testify that the Crusades took place in a period which witnessed active relations between the Islamic and the Western Christian worlds. But we blame the Crusades that, although there was a receptiveness towards Muslim sciences at some stages of this period, at other stages there were destructive tendencies aimed at rejecting everything in any way connected with the Islamic heritage, and to destroy some aspects of this heritage by fire and extermination.

Finally, in this research I endeavour not to have a one-sided view of history. Since the subject of the lecture is the Pros and Cons of the Crusades, the methodology of historical research requires us to mention the pros and cons, with regard to the Islamic world on one hand, and Western Europe from which that movement emerged on the other. Thus we can make an honest and clear evaluation of the Crusades.
"Islamic Art"

from the Perspectives

of the Heritage and Orientalism

by Prof. Sharbel Dagher

The term "Islamic art" is a very recent one, which did not appear in Arabic writings before the first decade of this century, in fact in a translation by Sheikh Yusuf Hubaish and Elias Saidawi of an article by French art critic Paul Casanova entitled The Islamic Arts. Such terms were not used in older Arabic writings, because they are an outsider's definition of the subject, from a civilization other than that which produced it. But the question remains: did older Arab writers use other terms to describe what western writers term Islamic art?

There is in fact no older Arabic book still existing on the history of Islamic art, although this subject deals with materials produced by Arab-Islamic civilization during periods of its greatness, and studies of it often rely on information and analyses from books written during those periods.

Although Western scholars have adopted "Islamic art" as a subject for study, their conclusions need to be viewed with some caution. For example, Western writings for a long time expressed the view that there has never been any Islamic pictorial drawing. This was based on their knowledge of people's dislike of pictures in Ottoman society, and on some sayings of the Prophet Muhammad translated into European languages. So they were astonished when a French diplomat discovered pictures by Al-Waslî from Syria, and when mural paintings were discovered in a number of Umayyad palaces in the Syrian Desert. This led to "tiresome" reappraisals of views on Islamic art, whose effects we still see to this day. Scholars of Islamic art express reservations, make up excuses and are sometimes confused in their interpretations on the subject of pictures, particularly of the human form. There are many pre-twentieth century examples showing how orientalists became acquainted with Islamic art gradually, and often mistakenly on the basis of preconceptions about "the Arabs" in particular. In many nineteenth century books we find traces of arguments over questions like the "ability" (or inability) of Arabs to practise the arts. These views were not only expressed in analyses, but also affected the way the history of art was written. Because of this "racist" viewpoint, there was a long debate in which doubt was cast on whether the castles in the Syrian desert belonged to the Arab-Islamic era.

Researchers have often pointed out that the sciences, like the arts, were classified in past ages in a different way from their modern classification. This is true in European culture, where the old classification of "manual arts" and "intellectual arts" is not appropriate to present-day arts, not only with regard to the difference between "plastic arts" and others, but also because of the introduction of new art forms like the cinema and photography. This indicates that definitions of the arts are not determined by mere theory or complex aesthetic evaluations, but also by historical considerations. Thus the classification of our ancient arts may not necessarily be appropriate to modern classifications, which we have come to adopt following Western criteria.

If we go back to the ancient classification in Arabic writings, we would not find a definition appropriate, or even
remotely similar, with present classifications of art, including what we term “Islamic art” in our writings. We have to distinguish between the existence of objects of art and their classification according to one system or another. What surprises us is that we do not usually find mention in older writings of the objects of Islamic art which we admire today and are material for museums and institutions of higher learning. They existed then, of course, but did not receive their share of attention in writings (or these writings were lost), whereas we find poems which are the subject of much comment and analysis.

Ahmad Taimur, in the first decades of the twentieth century, found some useful material on Islamic art in ancient writings, as did Bishr Faris and Habib Zayyat. But regrettably one book on decorative arts, Daw al-Nibras li Akhbar al-Muzawwqin min al-Nas, which was referred to by Al-Maqrizi in his Kitab, appears to have been lost. Other works of which no known copies exist in modern times are some books by the scholar on geometry Al-Buzjani, and essays by Ibn al-Bawwab and Muqalla and Yaqut al-Mustasim on calligraphy.

We also need to read books from the Arabic heritage more carefully, to find details on art that have hitherto been overlooked. A closer reading of Al-Radd ‘ala al-Mushtihafa ???? by al-Jahiz, for instance, is valuable in shedding light on controversies of his time. Many other books on philosophical subjects, by well-known authors like Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, are useful in their comments on creativity, beauty, aesthetics, ornamentation and other matters closely connected with art, as are the Rasail Ikhwan al-Sala on the “industries of decoration and beauty”.

We can find aesthetic concepts in Islamic philosophy based on the link between beauty and sensation, and on the phenomenon of nature as a yardstick of beauty, attributing to beautiful man-made works qualities like-completeness and symmetry (as expounded by Ibn al-Haytham), derived from the perfection of geometrical shapes which are seen as a reflection of divine perfection. These aesthetic ideas refute much of what orientalists have claimed about the lack of a philosophy of beauty in Islamic culture.

To sum up, there is no conformity between the Islamic and Western perspectives of art, even if there are some interrelationships. What we are establishing today, in a separate body - as other peoples’ arts have done, including ancient European arts before ours - is based on glorifying man-made works. We may find the reasons for this not only in the artistic work itself, but also in the status of art in our society and our beliefs.

We must draw a distinction between owning works of art and contemplating and criticizing them and analyzing the creative reasons behind them. The existence of materials and of a fierce competition to own them do not mean that thought is being directed to studying this conduct in terms of taste and social values. We find many references in our ancient books to a Caliph’s sister or wife who boasted of owning the largest jewel or arranging the most splendid procession on the pilgrimage, as a form of status seeking. Sy, a company may now boast that it owns a Van Gogh painting.

Nevertheless, any light we may cast on how our cultural heritage was formed does not make us unaware that we have found in this body of European studies this art which has not been compiled in our ancient literature, nor anywhere else. Without the work of these Western orientalists, we would not have had this precise historical knowledge of many works of Islamic art which can be found in museums throughout the world, including Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah.

We can, of course, criticize the scholastic and aesthetic premises on which the body of European studies of Islamic art has risen, as well as finding in it some artistic and aesthetic criticism appropriate to this art. However, we are not able to ignore what European (and American) archaeological studies have achieved in a number of Islamic countries, or the documentation of a number of manuscripts and other works of art, enabling us to have a correct and precise knowledge of these legacies of Islamic art.

So it is advisable to differentiate between the results of European archaeological work (and American and Arab archaeological work, since some Arab scholars are also carrying out such excavations, as in the Arabian Peninsula today), and the results of European theorizing in the same field. Archaeological and investigative effort remains “open”, in that it can be increased and corrected, as a number of archaeological missions have shown today at several Islamic and Arab sites. Whereas the effort of criticism needs a complete reappraisal, which can only be done by going back to the cultural sources by which this art is defined, and to the social exchanges is which these materials fell between competition, possession and status seeking.
The seasonal rains have been plentiful the last few years in Kuwait. Dar al-‘Athar al-Islamiyyah has also enjoyed a similar deluge— in the form of gifts for the library. Our many friends have made these thoughtful gestures, and they are truly appreciated. Their kind consideration for the restoration and improvement of the library will be of benefit to many scholars, now and in future.


Slot, B.J. The Origins of Kuwait (Kuwait: Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, 1998). Gift of Dr. Abdullah al-Ghinaim, Director, Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, Kuwait, November 1998. ISBN 99906-32-00-6


