

## *Review Essay*

# In Pursuit of “Islamic Art and Architecture”

**Books Reviewed:** Richard Yeomans. *The Art and Architecture of Islamic Cairo*. United Kingdom: Garnet Publishing, 2006; Doris Behrens-Aboseif. *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and Its Culture*. United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris, 2007. George Michell. *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration: The Art and Architecture of Islamic India*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007.

Many people take it for granted that the blanket term *Islamic art and architecture* is sufficient to convey the vast production carried out in the name of Islam; however, they often have a limited vision of what this term actually entails. Islam’s time span (fourteen centuries and counting) and geography (historically ranging from Spain to China) simply means that the art and architecture produced in its name deserves a more detailed and accountable presentation of fact. In other words, it would be unthinkable for scholars to use a term like *Christian art and architecture* instead of such specific terms as *Byzantine*, *Romanesque*, and *Gothic*, each of which relates to a specific time and place. Thus, the vocabulary of understanding the production of art and architecture in Islam’s name requires the use and understanding of clear terms and deserves specific publication and study.

In the past few decades, texts have emerged that specifically analyze the art and architectural productions of the early caliphate, the Umayyid, Abbasid, Tulunid, Fatimid, Ayyubid, Andalusian, Mamluk, Timirud, Moghul, and Ottoman eras. It is necessary to understand that each era’s specific nuances were rooted in their own context and pre-Islamic cultures and traditions, which surface explicitly to distinctly root the production of each era in its own context. Therefore, although these eras were united in producing their works for a single religion, each one’s differences and unique brilliance is seriously undermined by lumping them all under one blanket term.

The books analyzed in this essay, each of which address a specific time and place, were reviewed with this in mind. Egypt is the explicit context for two of them, while the third one deals with Islamic India. Although ample research has resulted in a substantial number of publications on all eras of Islamic history, Egypt enjoys the strange position of being an extreme palimpsest. That is, like all of the other eras and areas of historical Islam, Egypt's production of Islamic art and architecture was greatly influenced by its geographical context and pre-Islamic cultures. Although these pre-Islamic cultures (e.g., Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, and Coptic) all influenced its production of Islamic works, the complexity does not stop there for Egypt, unlike many of the other eras and areas, became a melting pot due to its numerous foreign influences and rulers throughout Islamic history. Starting with Amr ibn al-`As, there was Abbasid influence under Ibn Tulun, North African influence under Fatimid rule, Syrian influence under Ayyubid rule, and finally Ottoman influence up to Egypt's independence.

Possibly the only truly "Egyptian" era was that of the Mamluks, who were originally enslaved Anatolian soldiers whose only visual resource was developing the existing types and styles in Cairo (Coptic, Fatimid, and Ayyubid) and some lesser influences coming from their expansive trade (including Spain and China) networks. These are just several of the reasons why this particular country's production of art and architecture garners so much diverse research, as even its Islamic works cannot be categorized under just one term.

Each book, in its attempt at specificity of geography and time, reveals the clear and delicate nuances of artistic expression in the name of Islam. Yet within specificity, there needs to be enough comprehensiveness to allow the reader to connect and place the material within the larger framework of the historical empires. As well, it is important to understand the culture in question with all of its politics, traditions, geography, locality (e.g., materials), and history to understand the artistic production and see how all of these factors permeate both art and architecture. Works of art should not be simply isolated and discussed within their own material qualities, but placed in the context of the society at the time and other contemporaneous productions. The same applies to architecture.

While many publications seek to "describe" buildings simply in terms of material, size, and location, the absence of any understanding of the context and the art production at that particular time prevents the buildings from "speaking" to us, for we are too far removed in time to take for granted all the qualities and passions embodied in each building built for Islam. Like the

need for specificity in reference to *Islamic art and architecture*, so too is there a need for a complete contextualization of the paradigm. As this is only an emerging approach in the research and publication about art and architecture production for Islam, there is a great variance as to the degree of contextualization provided.

Although Richard Yeomans, author of *The Art and Architecture of Islamic Cairo*, is a scholar, he was not specifically trained in Islamic art or architecture. His previous text, *The Story of Islamic Architecture* (New York University Press: 2000), and his travels and paintings of Egypt are the primary inspiration for this book. Accessible to the non-academic reader, it seeks to describe the city's entire Islamic history from Amr ibn al-'As' initial conquest in 641 up until the end of the Mamluk era. Chapter 1 reviews Umayyad and Tulunid architecture, chapter 2 reviews Fatimid architecture, and chapter 3 brings together the discussion of the decorative arts of the Tulunids and Fatimids. Chapter 4 discusses Ayyubid architecture, chapter 5 focuses on the architecture of the Bahri Mamluks, and chapter 6 brings together the decorative arts of the Ayyubids and the Mamluks. Chapter 7, the final chapter, studies the architecture of the Burji Mamluks.

After presenting a brief outline of Islam's beginning, chapter 1 focuses on the mosques of Amr ibn al-'As and Ahmed ibn Tulun with descriptive text (much of it referenced from other sources) and some contemporary photographs. The diagrammatic plan for each mosque is discussed; unfortunately, there is no context and only minimal analysis. Chapter 2, on the Fatimid era, begins with a diagram of the map and examines the three main surviving gates (al-Nasr, Futuh, and Zweila) and four mosques. This chapter contains several contemporary photographs and plans for three of the mosques, but again without any context.

Chapters 3 and 6, which summarize the "decorative arts," were interesting, for the author sought to analyze pieces from the specific Egyptian – Islamic era with contemporaneous examples from other parts of the Muslim and non-Muslim world. The information provided on trade and the exchange of goods and aesthetics was interesting, but very inconsistent and boarding on the fragmentary: each chapter was a "collection" of types of artworks with some description and images. No major issues, however, immediately strike the reader. First, the "types" of art analyzed in chapter 3 were very different from those of chapter 6 (e.g., woodwork, pottery, textiles, painting, ivory, metalwork, rock crystal, and glass [chapter 3] and ceramics, metal ware, "amiral blazons on metal and glass," chinoiserie, mosque furni-

ture and doors, woodwork, calligraphy and illumination, secular manuscripts, and carpets [chapter 6]). Second, there was no clear argument or vision of a continuous thread (or “spirit”) among the pieces. Nor did these pieces reflect their times (possibly like their architectural counterparts). It is thus up to the reader to discern any connections between the types of “decorative arts,” the architecture, and the era.

Chapter 4 opens with diagrammatic maps and describes six works of architecture; some with photographs, others with diagrams, and a few with detailed images of the surviving decoration. Chapter 5 elaborates upon its era with nine architectural examples and the pleasant inclusion of some non-Egyptian buildings that influenced the designs of some of the Mamluk works under study, including the Maristan of Nur al-Din in Damascus, the Gok Medresa in Sivas (Turkey), the mausoleum of Gur-i Amir in Samarqand, and the palaces at Ctesiphon (Iraq). Like much of the text, the descriptions rely heavily on quoted sources from texts on architecture (e.g., Hillenbrand) as well as historical and contemporary literary sources (e.g., al-Maqrizi). This is possibly the book’s most redeeming element, for Yeomans is truly attempting to paint a comprehensive image of the era’s architecture by drawing from “foreign” influences on architecture and from a variety of other descriptive sources.

Chapter 7, the most ambitious in number, features sixteen architectural examples from Egypt, a few from outside demonstrating influences, and many more plan drawings and even a few diagrammatic analytical drawings of patterning. Yeomans has included a larger variety in this chapter with mosques, *madrassas*, *wakalah*, *sabil*, and *kuttab*, but no residential examples. His choices include those on the well-known tourist track and are all familiar examples. Given that the Mamluk era has the largest number of surviving monuments, this decision is understandable. The cursory inclusion of a few Ottoman examples at the end, however, violates the logic of the author’s historical categorization.

The book also contains some odd structural anomalies: the distinct separation of chapters dealing with architecture and the decorative arts, lumping two eras in each of the decorative arts chapter, and having the second (of two) chapters on decorative arts precede the final chapter (on architecture). Another glaring anomaly is the lack of a separate chapter on Ottoman architecture and art. The few examples given at the end of the Burji Mamluk chapter are greatly undermined by their “tacked-on” location. Given the volume, influence, and importance of Ottoman art and architecture production in Cairo, however, this era surely deserved an independent chapter to do it

justice and properly culminate the centuries of foreign influence on Islamic production in the country.

*Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and Its Culture* by Doris Behrens-Abouseif is surely a labour of love. The author, who was born and raised in Egypt, is a professor of Islamic art and archaeology and has published numerous texts on Islamic architecture (especially in Egypt) during the past two decades. With an ambitious team of researchers, colleagues, and students (many from the American University in Cairo, where she previously studied, taught, and published), this dense 360-page text will no doubt become a reference on the subject. More for the student or scholar of Islamic studies and architecture, this text is an in-depth investigation of sixty of the buildings produced by the Mamluks during their over 250 years of rule. Some of them are documented for the first time in published format and many of them, which are off the tourist path, are suffering from neglect and deterioration. Beginning with eleven chapters on understanding the context of Mamluk architecture, the text continues with a further twelve chapters detailing the specific reign and production of the Mamluk sultans.

The book's first part is laid out as follows: the Mamluk sultanate as a system in both its historical and cultural contexts (chapter 1); the importance and role of pious patronage with respect to institutions, scholars, and *waqf* (chapter 2); the motivation and perception of the monumental patronage in terms of prestige, memory, and urban development (chapter 3); the patronage of the civilian elite, including the functionaries, shaykhs, and merchants (chapter 4); the ceremonial culture, the spectacle of the sultan, the sultan and his city, the sultan as the overseer, and other things (chapter 5); the era's treasures, status, and style (chapter 6); the construction, organization, and costs of Mamluk architecture (chapter 7); the growth of the metropolis and the Mamluks' urban vision and building zeal (chapter 8); the metropolitan architectural style and Cairo's singularity (chapter 9); the evolution of Mamluk architecture in Cairo with a specific analysis of the various architectural elements and decoration (chapter 10); and, chapter 11, which places the Mamluks in historical context as the Ayyubids' successors, analyzes three important Ayyubid buildings that signalled both the end of that era and the beginning of that of the Mamluks, with the architectural works of Shajarh al-Dur for herself and her completion of the works of her husband, al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub.

Chapter 12 to 23 each cover the works of specific sultans: al-Zahir Baybars, al-Mansur Qalawun to al-Nasir Mohammed, the early period of al-Nasir Mohamed, the third reign of al-Nasir Mohamad and after, al-Nasir Hasan and after, al-Nasir Faraj ibn Barquq, al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, al-Ashraf

Barsbay, al-Zahir Jaqmaq, al-Ashraf Inal, al-Ashraf Qaytbay, and al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri.

Each chapter contains not only a discussion of the architectural works built during this era, but also a clear analysis that builds on the contextualization of the first eleven chapters. Each element of each building is analyzed through text, axonometric drawings, plans, sections, and photographs. In addition, each building is located on maps so that connections and relationships can be easily expounded upon. Although the fine arts production is not discussed, the analysis of each building specifically references the calligraphic, decorative, and artistic elements with ample photographs and analysis in order to tie together their artistic relevance in the context of the building.

Mamluk architectural production was vast, mostly including religious complexes (the focus of the book). These complexes included everything from mosques, *madrassahs* (schools), *birmaristan* (hospitals), *sabil* (fountains), *kuttab* (Qur'an schools for the young), and mausoleums. During this era other types of buildings were constructed, including the *wakalah/khan* (a combination of bazaar and temporary accommodations for travelling caravansaries) and residential architecture, including palaces, *buyūt* (houses), and *rab`ah* (collective housing complexes). Neither *wakalahs/khans* nor residential architecture were included in this text, probably due to the immense amount of material already covered, although it would have enriched the plurality of the discussion. Thus this text focuses solely on the types of architecture built in the specific service of Islam (e.g., worship and charity).

*The Majesty of Mughal Decoration* written by George Michell, an architectural historian who specializes in ancient Indian architecture, has published numerous texts on both the architecture of the Islamic world and specifically on India's royal palaces. For those who are familiar with his previous texts, which were in-depth descriptions of examples of architecture built under Islamic rule, *The Majesty of Mughal Decoration* does not live up to scholarly expectations. This luscious 280+ page text with incredible detailed color images of various Mughal buildings provides an enriching visual experience of Mughal treasures. Best suited for the lay reader, this seemingly specific text nevertheless falls short on several fronts. The introduction includes some background on Mughals as patrons and their artistic sources, influences, materials, and techniques. The first chapter, a forty-two-page color portfolio of up-close detailed images from various Mughal constructions, is followed by the second chapter, "Themes," which depend amply on color images and covers geometry, arabesque, calligraphy, flow-

ers, animals, and birds. The final chapter, "Documentation," catalogues the objects detailed in the text, names the key monuments of Islamic India (in three pages), and gives a glossary and chronology.

Although "a picture is worth a 1,000 words," an entire text made up mostly of (wonderful) pictures does not satisfy those who are curious about the overall topic: art and architecture production in Islamic India. The argument of contextualization for a complete understanding of each era's importance necessitates sufficient explanatory or analytical text. A three-page summary of the contexts of the architecture from which all of the presented images are taken is simply insufficient, whether for the lay reader or the scholar/student. The term *coffee table book* unfortunately comes to mind, as the vast and brilliant empire becomes a collection of pretty pictures that, no matter how beautiful or well printed, cannot express all of the era and the empire's latent potency.

In conclusion, these three books, each of which aims at the specificity of art and architecture production in the name of Islam, are not equal in their comprehensive portrayal.

*The Art and Architecture of Islamic Cairo* wavers between a text for the lay reader and a resource for students and scholars; however, it satisfies neither. The descriptive and in-depth architectural discussions in five of the seven chapters relies on many technical references that would lose the lay readers. Yet the minimal number of examples, as well as the strange inclusion of Ottoman works at the end of the Mamluk chapter, would frustrate the scholar/student. While the decorative art chapters are thought-provoking in their variety and cross-cultural extent and impact, the examples presented are far too disconnected to devise any kind of continuous argument for either the lay reader or the student/scholar.

*Cairo of the Mamluks*, most definitely not a lay read, is directed toward the scholar and student of Mamluk architecture and is a dense resource of materials on this period – but only for religious architecture. The "total" image or understanding of the era is only understood through this specific framework. The roles of the decorative arts and of secular architecture are not included, but can be connected through the general era texts of the first eleven chapters and the detailed and consistent analysis of the decorative elements of each of the sixty buildings featured in the text. Again, the inclusion of many unknown/unpublished buildings makes this text an even more valuable resource on the era.

*The Majesty of Mughal Decoration*, specifically made for the lay reader, contains gorgeous images that are accessible and attractive to anyone who

comes across them. The book, however, is extremely frustrating for the student and scholar of Islamic arts and architecture. Without sufficient text, the descriptions or even complete images of the buildings presented simply seem incomplete and disappointing, especially considering the author’s previous in-depth publications.

The “architecture and art of Islam” needs to have a voice that communicates to the reader a vision of how the religion inspired so many varied expressions. It is important for those generally interested in history, for both Muslims and for Arabs, to have a clear understanding of the types of artistic and architectural production that emerged from Islam. Its simple plurality and diversity would not only be shocking, but would strike a resonant chord with the reality of Islam today. The potential that Islam’s art and architecture has is beyond the constraints of the one specific time-centered image that many people may have.

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