Chapter XXV

Islamic Art and Architecture and the Antique*

In a possibly apocryphal statement, al-Jahiz (776–869), the great *homme de lettres* of the early ʿAbbasid period, wrote: "The Byzantines have no science, no literature, no deep thoughts, but they are only good with their hands in metalwork, carpentry, sculpture, and silk weaving … The [ancient] Greeks were learned, the Byzantines are artisans."[1] Leaving aside the judgment on Byzantium, which belongs to a category of stupid generalizations often uttered by the best minds in our own times, the interest of the quotation lies in the fact that it was more or less contemporary with the period of intense translation from Greek into Arabic and of the first steps of what became the philosophical, mathematical and scientific culture of the Islamic world, so deeply indebted to past Greek accomplishments. A further curiosity of al-Jahiz's statement is the contrast it establishes between thought and the work of artisans, between what excites the intellect and what pleases the senses. As I will later suggest, when one deals with the arts, whatever relationship can be established between Islamic art and the Antique often passed through the filter of Byzantium or, more precisely, of a Christian art which, in most of the areas of Mediterranean Islam, had been under Byzantine rule. The very word "Rumi," so often used in medieval literature to identify artisans, could mean Christian, Byzantine, Anatolian and even, although more rarely, "Greco-Roman antique."

The encounter between antique art and the Islamic world was unavoidable for geographical as well as for historical or psychological reasons. But it took different forms at different times. I will define four categories of connections, and then draw some conclusions about their significance.[2] [798]

The first category, the most obvious one, can be called phonetic or graphemic. It consists in elements from ancient art which were reused,

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1 Ch. Pellat, "Al-Jahiz," *Journal Asiatique*, 255 (1967), p. 71.

2 The latest survey of the subject with a lengthy bibliography is Robert Hillenbrand, "The Classical Heritage in Islamic art: the case of medieval architecture," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 7 (1986); see also Oleg Grabar, "Survivances classiques dans l'art de l'Islam," *Annales Archéologiques de Syrie*, 21 (1971) and "Classical Forms in Islamic Art and Some Implications," in Thomas W. Gaethgens, *Akten des XXVIII Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin, 1992).

1 Location of sites in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iraq mentioned in the text

occasionally with modifications, by Muslim patrons and artisans without any particular recognition or meaning given to the origin of these elements. The most common examples are in architecture. The shape of the Great Mosque of Damascus, built between 705 and 715, was determined by the dimensions and foundations of a Hellenistic *temenos*. Many of its columns, several of its entrances, most of the stones used for its construction were originally cut for the ancient complex of a temple and, thus, the very striking proportions of the elevation of the mosque, which was to influence many Syrian mosques for several centuries, are the accidental result of the dimensions and proportions of the antique sanctuary in the city. The Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, the third-holiest sanctuary in Islam, also acquired its astonishing dimensions and its trapezoidal shape from the size of the Hellenistic platform for the Jewish Temple built by Herod the Great in the last cen-[799]tury before the common era. In Jerusalem as well as in many early Islamic and Umayyad sites in the Syrian, Palestinian and Jordanian countryside, there are stones with Greek or Latin inscriptions. Most of them are spoils from older buildings, but a few graffiti in Greek testify to the presence of those "Byzantine" artisans mentioned by al-Jahiz.[3]

Such examples could easily be multiplied from Spain to northern Mesopotamia. They are most common in the early Islamic period, when a

3 For early Islamic Damascus and Jerusalem, see the standard manuals, such as R. Ettinghausen and O. Grabar, *Islamic Art and Architecture, 640–1260* (London, 1987) or more elaborate discussions in O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, 2nd edn (New Haven, 1983) and O. Grabar, *The Shape of the Holy* (Princeton, 1996).

2 The Great Mosque of Damascus

new setting and a new art were being created for new and wealthy patrons in spaces with a long history of use. But such direct, phonetic or graphemic, examples are not restricted to the seventh and eighth centuries. In the celebrated instance of the Great Mosque of Diyarbakr (ancient Amida on the upper Euphrates, now in Turkey), it is in the eleventh century that a large and heavily decorated classical entablature was used to transform the court of the mosque into a spectacular [800] festival of sculpted antique ornament.[4] There is some debate as to how much in this decoration consists of reused older material as contrasted with eleventh-century imitations. But this and a number of other examples in this century and especially in the following one have led some scholars to argue for a true revival of antique forms in Syria and in northern Mesopotamia. It is indeed true that, in Aleppo as well as in Damascus and in many smaller cities, large numbers of ancient stones, often carefully decorated ones, were placed in newly erected Zengid or Ayyubid buildings. A most spectacular example is found in Bosra, in southern Syria, where a beautiful Roman theater serves as the spectacular central courtyard of a medieval

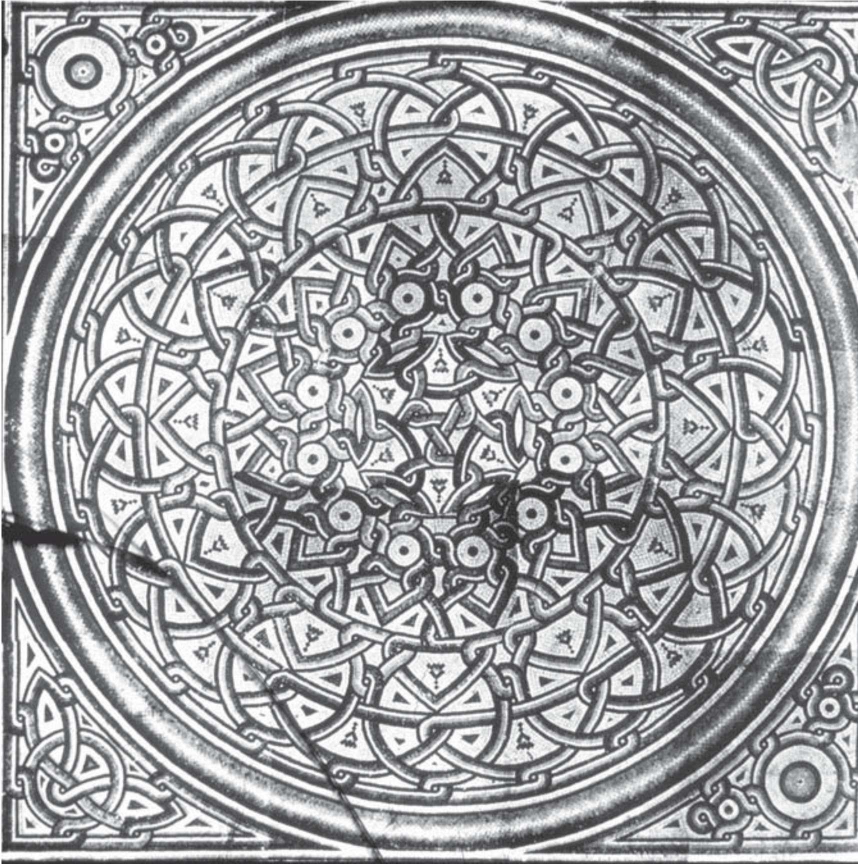
[4] Terry Allen, *A Revival of Classical Architecture in Syria* (Wiesbaden, 1986); Yasser Tabbaa, "Survivals and Archaisms in the Architecture of Syria," *Muqarnas*, 10 (1993).

3 A representation of the Tazza Farnese in the *Diez Album*

fortress.[5] This phenomenon is probably easiest to explain by the sudden boom in construction which needed building materials rather than through some genuine interest in Antiquity. This is why I include these examples in the category of graphemic connections, even though some may prefer to see in them a more thoughtful intent.

In other arts, just as unconsciously, some techniques, such as the ways of manufacturing glass objects, were simply continued, maintaining practices that went back to Roman times. There are, however, here and there, curious examples of another "graphemic" function of medieval Islamic art, which was to transmit things or subjects without understanding anything about them. In the so-called Diez albums of the Berlin Staatsbibliothek (Diez A, fol. 70–73), there is a drawing signed by one Muhammad al-Hayyam, known to have been active in Herat and Samarkand early in the fifteenth century. The drawing is an almost exact representation of the "Tazza Farnese," a magnificent carved gem from Roman imperial times, now in the National

5 A. Abel, "La Citadelle Ayyoubide de Bosra," *Annales Archéologiques de Syrie*, 6 (1956).

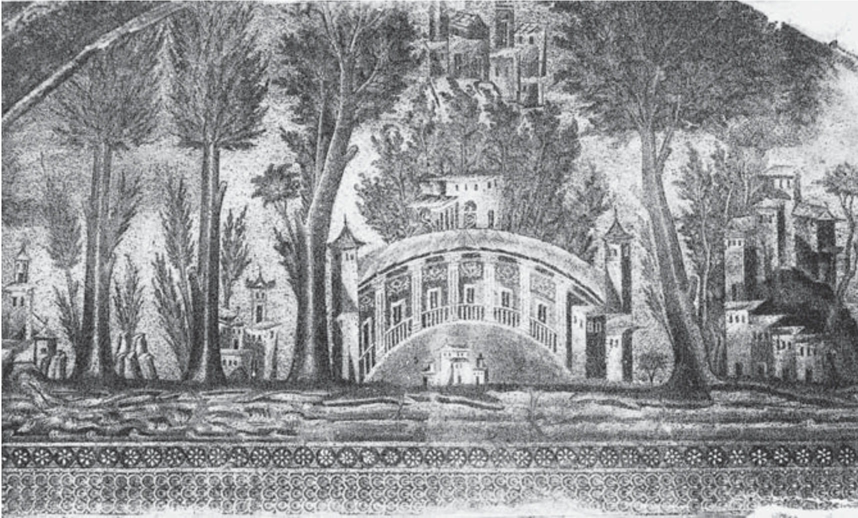


4 Detail from the mosaic pavement in the bath hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar

Museum in Naples, given to Lorenzo de' Medici in 1471.[6] We can only speculate as to how this Ptolemaic object, apparently in the possession of Frederick II in 1234, got to Central Asia and then back to Rome. But enough indications remain to suggest that it was considered as one of the *aja'ib* ("wonders") which princes exchanged among themselves. It was not its origin nor its sub-[801]ject that were important until it reached the collection of the Medici; it was its high cost as a gem. Possibly some magic and healing virtue was attached to it, as it often was for old stones with representations or inscriptions that could not be understood. And it would be the visual curiosity of a court artist which preserved traces of an antique gem in the fifteenth-century world of the Timurids, even though there is absolutely no evidence that it had any impact on the arts of the time, not even in its collective memory.

[6] H. Blanck, "Eine Persische Pinselzeichnung," *Archäologische Anzeiger* (1964), pp. 307–12; see also U. Pannati, "La Tazza Farnese," in *Technologie et Analyse des Gemmes Antiques, Atti del Convegno di Ravello* (Louvain, 1994) and Carlo Gaspari, ed., *La Gemme Farnese* (Naples, 1994).

5 Detail from the mosaic pavement in the bath hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar



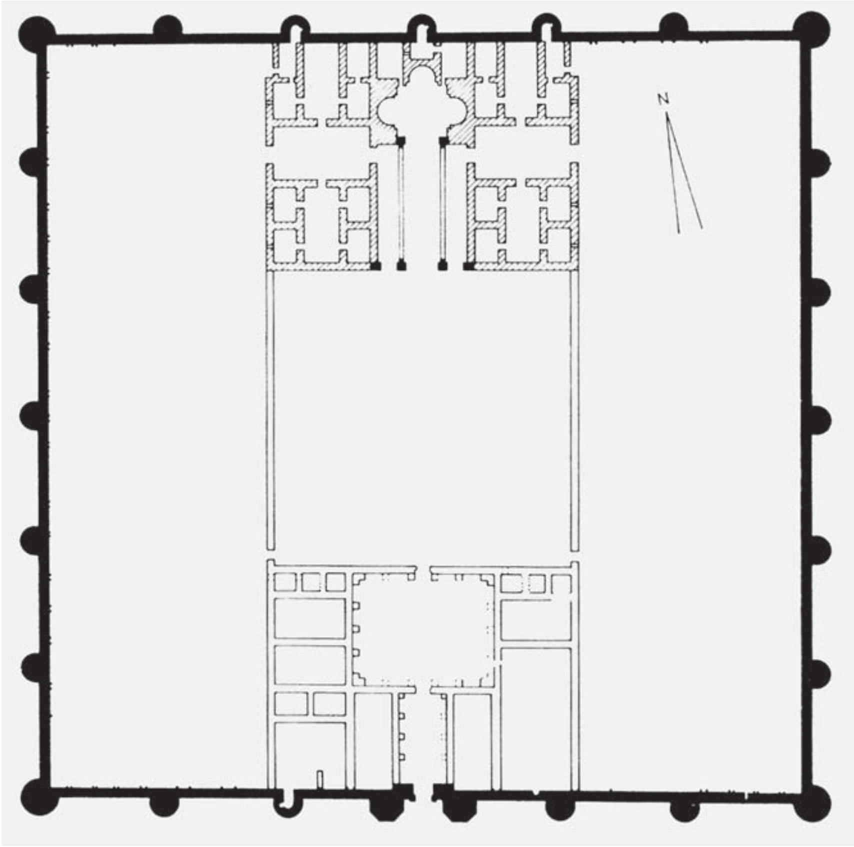
6 Detail from the wall mosaic in the Great Mosque of Damascus

In all these instances of graphemic contacts, we can usually assume that the host culture – in this case the Islamic world – either served as the transmitter of an object or of a form or else used it without giving particular attention to its original meaning or purpose. The interest of these examples lies less in each individual case (curious though some of them may be) than in whatever lesson they provide on how forms circulate or become reused without significant semantic charge. It will probably some day be possible to list these examples by region and by category, to separate direct reuses from modified transfers or occasional mutants like the Bosra citadel with a theater, in general to understand the process of transmission of forms which is almost biological in its automatic and mechanical character.

Morphemic survivals and connections are identifiable by two characteristics. The main one is that it is usually possible to define a concrete decision, a specific choice, on the part of the Islamic host. The other one, a corollary of the first, is that such connections are fewer in number and their geographical spread is much more uneven.

Once again, early Islamic examples predominate. There is the interesting instance of the technique of floor and wall mosaics. Both could be considered as graphemic in the sense that early Islamic patrons simply picked up and continued a manner of decorating private and public buildings which had for centuries been common in the Mediterranean area. It is often said, although there is a scholarly debate about the truth of the claim, that mosaicists were brought from Byzantium itself to Jerusalem, Damascus, or Cordoba in the seventh, eighth and tenth centuries respectively. But what is in-[803]teresting about early Islamic mosaics is, first of all, that they are, for the most part, of a very high technical quality, as are the many mosaics of the eighth century found, in recent decades, in churches all over Jordan. And, secondly, in most instances, they are iconographically and formally

7 Stucco sculpture from Khirbat al-Mafjar



8 Ground plan of the Umayyad palace in Mshatta

original, as they do not simply copy Byzantine motifs. It can, in fact, be argued that, probably as a result of their desire to avoid the representation of living beings, Islamic patrons sponsored the revival of early Roman geometric ornament in mosaics, [804] as it appears on the floors of Khirbat al-Minyah and Khirbat al-Mafjar.[7] It is not reasonable to attribute the ideological motivation of a classical revival to the formal choices made by the Umayyads, as can be done for the nearly contemporary Carolingians, but some kind of decision was taken, because there were choices to be made. In the Great Mosque of Damascus, the style of some of the representations of buildings clearly harks back to early Roman imperial illusionism instead of the more contemporary two-dimensional sobriety of Byzantium. Here again choices were made, however they are to be explained.

An even more interesting example of morphemic connection occurs with the short-lived revival of monumental sculpture for the representation of people, animals, possibly even narratives in Umayyad times. An art of

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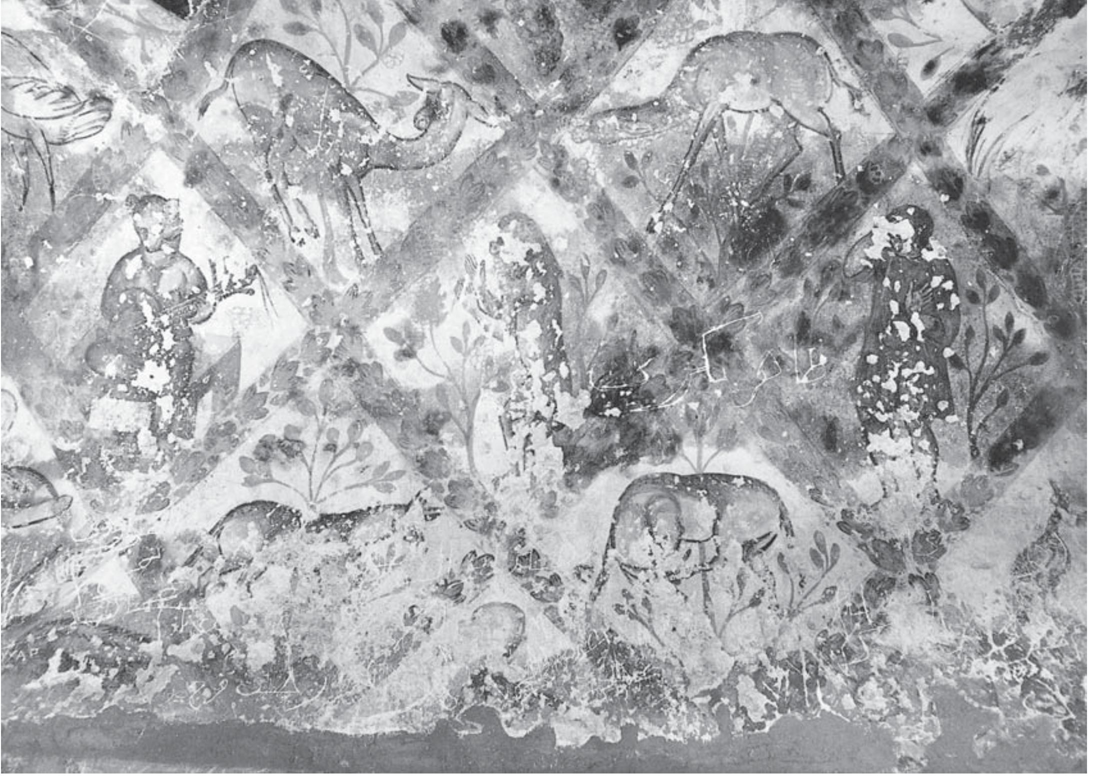
7 For all these buildings, consult Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Islamic Art and Architecture* and R. Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and Early Islam* (Leiden, 1972).

9 Detail of the external wall decoration of the palace in Mshatta



10 Wall painting in a Hellenistic mode in the bath at Qusayr ʻAmrah

figural sculpture had more or less disappeared in the eastern Mediterranean after the fourth century, but remains of statues and reliefs could be found everywhere and were usually associated, at least in popular lore, with imperial monuments. They were signs of the awesome power of the "Caesars," the title under which the medieval world encapsulated all Hellenistic and Roman rulers. And it is probably under the visual influence of these remains that Umayyad princes adorned at least two of their palaces – Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr West – with hundreds of sculptures representing royal figures, personifications, animals, nature, and masses of other topics. Many of these remains are far too fragmentary to be fully understood. But one example from Qasr al-Hayr West, now in the Damascus National Museum, may illustrate the problem many of them pose. On the richly decorated façade of the palace, there was a partially preserved stucco sculpture which clearly copied a typical Palmyrene funerary composition of a frontally depicted seated figure next to a reclining one. It is most unlikely that a funerary connotation was meant for the façade of a palace and the whole ensemble is too obvious to have become a meaningless ornament. What new meaning could have been given to these sculptures? What associations were made with them? Answers are lacking, because, while we can explain the presence of some sculpted forms rather than

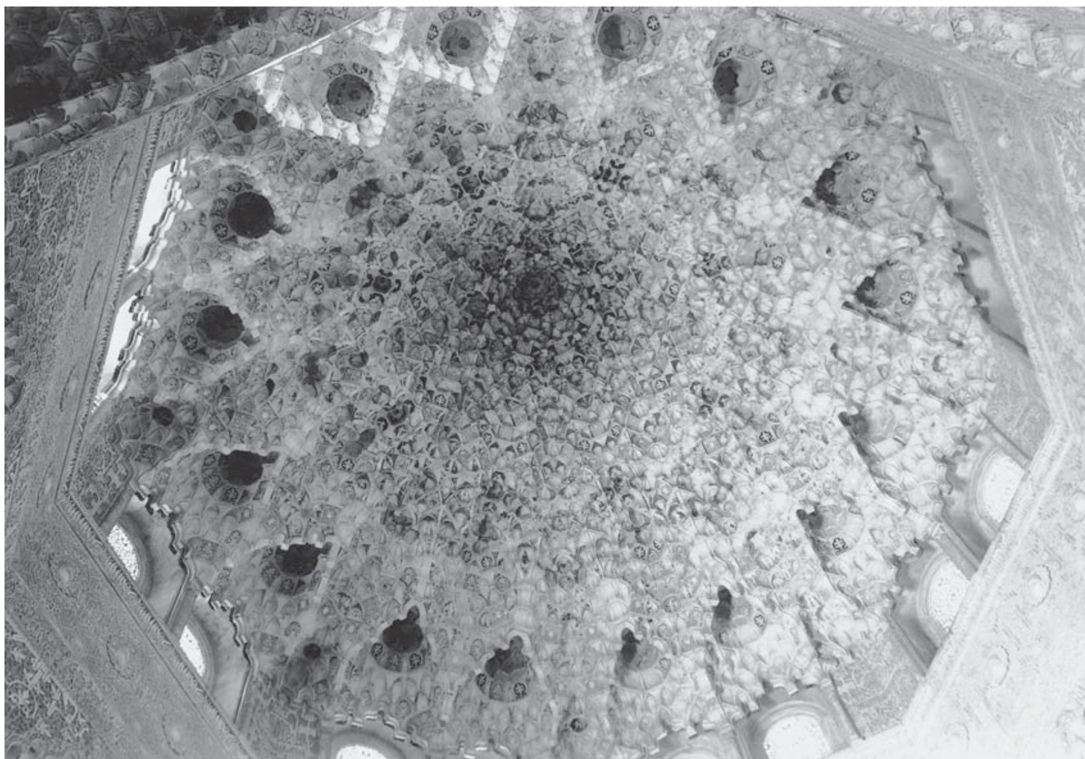
11 Portal of Nur al-Din's hospital in Damascus

12 Student in front of a scholar. Miniature from a manuscript in Arabic of the *Materia Medica*, 1229

others, [806] we cannot, at this stage of research, penetrate the minds that made the choices or reacted to them.[8]

At Mshatta, while the general shape of the large square enclosure with massive towers bears a clear resemblance to Roman frontier architecture, the

[8] The finds from Qasr al-Hayr West have not been published systematically; the latest publication, a partial one, is the posthumous one by Daniel Schlumberger et al., *Qasr el-Heir el-Gharbi* (Paris, 1986).



13 Dome of the Hall of the Two Sisters in the Alhambra

celebrated decoration of the façade with monumental triangles (now in the Berlin Museum) carries no structural or other connection to the antique world, except in the graphemic detail of some of its motifs. But the arrangement of the throne-room into a triconch was clearly chosen from several possible types and implies some knowledge and understanding of antique (or, at the very least, late antique) forms and of their ideological implications. Because Mshatta is a unique example without appropriate cultural context, we cannot explain how the form would have come to the attention of an architect or of a patron in the middle of the eighth century.[9] The problem is even more acute in the case of Qusayr ʿAmrah, the famous small bath-house of the early eighth century in the Jordanian steppe, whose walls are entirely covered with paintings. Although more or less successfully cleaned and now beautifully surveyed for a forthcoming joint publication by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and the French Archaeological Mission in Jordan, these paintings are still mostly known through the elaborate volumes of drawings published by A. Musil early in this century.[10] They

9 Irving Lavin, "The House of the Lord," *The Art Bulletin*, 44 (1962).

10 Incomplete publication after restorations by Martin Almagro and others, *Qusayr Amra* (Madrid, 1975); O. Grabar, "La Place de Qusayr Amra dans l'art profane du Moyen Age," *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 36 (1988); forthcoming complete publication by Claude

14 The Süleymaniye mosque in Istanbul, by Sinan (1550–57)

contain examples of nearly every style known in the Mediterranean and Iran since the second century, including striking representations of nude personages, an astronomical ceiling which copied a Roman globe, and topics which range from the evocation of contemporary life to personifications of rulers or of ideas, often with their Greek names next to Arabic ones. We can only assume that the patrons and users of Qusayr ʿAmrah were conscious of the "antique" flavors of the motifs they used, but there is little doubt that they chose what to represent from a larger set of possibilities.

These are just a few examples of a phenomenon which was certainly [808] quite common in the seventh to ninth centuries, the willful and conscious adoption of selected antique motifs or techniques for the same or new ideological, personal, or practical purposes. The phenomenon is most typical of greater Syria and Palestine, probably of Egypt and of the Muslim West, although we are less well informed about the latter. The difficulty lies in defining the quality of the consciousness involved. Was it a purely aesthetic set of choices? Or were there ideological components attached to it? How aware were the new patrons and makers of the sources they used?

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a similar outburst of morphemic connections with the Antique took place not only in Syria, but also in newly

Vibert-Guigues. An interesting interpretation of the palace has been proposed by Garth Fowden in *Empire to Commonwealth* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 142 ff. and in *Qusayr ʿAmrah* (Berkeley, 2004).

conquered Anatolia and in the northern Mesopotamian area known as the Jazira. Its architectural examples are difficult to interpret properly. Thus, in Damascus, the entrance to the hospital of Nur al-Din (completed shortly before 1174) contains a superb antique lintel over the doorway.[11] This could simply be an instance of graphemic reuse. Yet, it is interesting that the dimensions of the lintel [809] served as the module for the composition of the purely Islamic *muqarnas* (stalactite) half-dome above it. The lintel may well have been chosen in order to provide a scale for the composition of the building. Similar difficulties in interpretation arise when one considers Seljuq architecture in Anatolia in the thirteenth century, where secular architecture took over many classical forms and a revival of sculpture mixed together new creations with ancient remains.[12]

Matters are more secure when we turn to objects and to the illustrations of books. The coinage of Turcoman dynasties in northern Mesopotamia and Anatolia used for a while classical and Byzantine motifs as signs or symbols identifying [810] various rulers.[13] The actual connections between the original antique motifs and the Islamic ones were, most of the time, arbitrary. This was not so with book illustrations. For reasons that have never been fully elucidated but which, almost certainly, had something to do with a new set of connections between the Islamic world and Byzantium, the Christian East, even Latin Christianity, both literary and medical or technological books in Arabic acquired illustrations in the late twelfth century and especially in the thirteenth. There are instances, especially in Dioscorides manuscripts which were often copied throughout the Middle Ages, where the very styles of Antiquity were preserved in medieval Arabic manuscripts. But these instances are relatively rare. More frequent and more original connections are found in authors' portraits representing old Greek scientists, mostly physicians. Many, as in pseudo-Galen manuscripts in Paris and Vienna, are shown in medieval Islamic garb with handsome turbans.[14] Some, as in a Dioscorides manuscript in Istanbul, have seated Byzantine authors in pseudo-antique robes (almost like Evangelists), also with turbans. And, in a wonderful frontispiece from a Dioscorides manuscript in Bologna, a Nilotic landscape is set in front of a building at whose entrance is seated, in a long robe, a classically inspired figure labeled in Arabic "Dioscorides the Philosopher."[15] The composition of some of these frontispieces recalls the composition of late antique consular diptychs, and several fragments of carved ivories in various museums

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11 See Ettinghausen and Grabar, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, p. 309 and Yasser Tabbaa, *Constructions of Power and Piety in Medieval Aleppo* (University Park, 1987).

12 Scott Redford, "The Seljuqs of Rum and the Antique," *Muqarnas*, 10 (1993).

13 N. Lowick, "The Religious, the Royal and the Popular in the Figural Coinage of the Jazira," in J. Raby, ed., *The Art of Syria and the Jazira 1100–1250* (Oxford, 1985).

14 Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (Geneva, 1962).

15 O. Grabar, "Islamic Art and Byzantium," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964), fig. 15.

(especially Florence and Berlin) were originally part of a book cover, probably for some fancy scientific or literary book.[16]

The formal, morphemic, connections between the Antique and the art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Muslim lands were not, most of the time, simple accidents. They were part of a conscious set of choices made possible by two phenomena. One was the vitality of a Muslim world in cultural and intellectual effervescence and in political expansion everywhere except in Spain. The artistic component of this effervescence was an explosion of creativity, and, as in all places and at all times, moments of intense artistic activity included [811] retrospection and a search for ancient visual models. The second phenomenon is the equally brilliant growth of Christian arts, with similar searches in and observations of the past. One can even argue that in the thirteenth century, whether it was in technical manuals, like those of al-Jazari, recasting late antique Greek books, or in the more official dedicatory pages made for the benefit and glorification of feudal lords, the sense was strong of being connected to an old history of forms and images.[17] That particular Antique [812] was mostly the Late Antique, which had been kept up by Byzantium and whose styles may well have been more easily understood by medieval Muslim artisans and patrons than the illusionism of earlier times.

A third general type of connection with the Antique may be called semantic. In it, forms may or may not have maintained their connection to an ancient past, but ancient meanings are still present in new clothes. The most interesting example of this type is that of the Court of the Lions in the Alhambra and of the two halls on either side of the court with their spectacular *muqarnas* domes. The forms here are unmistakably medieval and Islamic. The context is that of spaces used for audiences, receptions, feasts and other activities typical of a weakened Muslim dynasty surrounded by a militant and combative Christian world while basking in the memory of its own glorious past in Andalusia. These covered halls are provided with poetic inscriptions written especially for the building by the court poet Ibn Zamrak. These poems were meant as guides to an interpretation of the halls and, among the many themes of these poems, two are important for our purposes. One is that of the Dome of Heaven, whereby the cupola is seen as the celestial globe and its decoration, in this case the composition of *muqarnas* which fills it, represents or symbolizes stars, constellations and other heavenly motifs. This particular theme is quite ancient and was a [813] common one in Hellenistic and Roman palace architecture, as the ruler was both supposed

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16 Eva Hoffman, "A Fatimid Book Cover: framing and reframing," M. Barrucand, ed., *L'Egypte Fatimide, son Art et son Histoire* (Paris, 1999).

17 Ibn al-Razzaz al-Jazari, *Book of knowledge of ingenious mechanical devices*, tr. D. Hill (Boston, 1974); K. Weitzmann, "The Greek Sources of Islamic Scientific Illustrations," in G. C. Miles, ed., *Archaeologica Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld* (Locust Valley, NY, 1952).

to be seen under a propitious heavenly order and somewhat assimilated to a celestial body.[18] The path of this theme within Islamic palace culture is not well known, but its existence is assured in the eighth century, even if its forms are not clear. Were antique or Byzantine and Iranian forms taken over directly or had a new visual language been created for old themes? Eventually, in the Alhambra, it is newly developed forms, not necessarily created for these purposes, that were given a specific iconographic meaning through the addition of writing, just as, two centuries earlier, images rather than words gave the same celestial meaning to similar forms in the unique Christian as well as Islamic context of the Norman Cappella Palatina in Palermo.[19]

Where matters become even more suggestive is when we consider a second theme of the poems of Ibn Zamrak, which is that of a constructed rotating heavenly dome. Indeed, as the light of the sun or of the moon rotates around the base of the domes, it gives to the same, highly rigid and highly symmetrical composition, a constantly changing look which is asymmetrical and which always leaves different parts of the ceiling in the shade. Whatever its shape may have been, a rotating dome was part of the Domus Aurea of Nero in Rome and may have been suggested by some of the legends around the throne of the Sasanian ruler Khosro Parviz. No evidence exists to explain how a motif which became part of the legend of the Caesars in Rome would have traveled to fourteenth-century southern Spain. It is, however, most unlikely that it would have been reinvented there. This particular problem of the transmission of an idea still remains to be solved. In the meantime, we seem to be facing the rather interesting example of abstract forms being given concrete meanings through the intermediary of writing. The theoretical implications of this fact, if it is indeed an accepted conclusion, go much beyond the scope of this essay.

Other such semantic connections may well have existed, although they have not been studied as much [814] as the Alhambra. For instance, there is the Ottoman dome, especially after it acquired its canonical form in the sixteenth century under the impact of the genius of Sinan's designs. It is by now agreed that this dome did not originate with an attempt to copy Hagia Sophia but evolved over centuries of experimentation outside of the Byzantine capital. Yet at some point in its development, the great masterpiece of the sixth century became some sort of inspiration or model for the Ottomans. Much more than through their forms, it is through the meanings attached to domes that the Ottomans perpetuated or revived, and eventually modified, a very classical formula developed in imperial Rome and continued in

[18] O. Grabar, *The Alhambra* (London, 1978), esp. chs 3 and 4; José Miguel Puerta Vílchez, *Los Códigos de utopia de la Alhambra de Granada* (Granada, 1990). For a different approach see Antoni Fernández-Puertas, *The Alhambra I* (London, 1997).

[19] Ugo Monneret de Villard, *La Pitture Musulmane al Soffito della Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Rome, 1950); for a new interpretation, see William Tronzo, *The Cultures of his Kingdom* (Princeton, 1997).

Byzantium. In all these instances there were simultaneously present technical achievements, culturally specific associations, religious or imperial, ceremonial uses, and universal or local symbolic meanings.[20] [815]

The example of Ottoman domes may well serve to illustrate a fourth type of connection between Islamic art and the Antique, that of creative continuity with variable consciousness. As opposed to my graphemic examples which are merely automatic instances of *Nachklang* or to the morphemic and semantic ones with their conscious choices leading to conscious revivals, certain forms or attitudes to forms, often first identifiable in Roman art, entered into common usage without maintaining their original identity and then underwent a variety of developments. Occasionally, they could be charged with a meaning connecting them to some well-known old monument, such as Hagia Sophia in the Ottoman case, but these instances are much rarer than in Christian art.

Altogether then, this small selection of monuments, objects, or moments in history when the art of the Islamic world appeared to connect with Classical Antiquity serves to illustrate two points. One is that, like its Christian counterparts, Islamic art west of Iran maintained a relationship to classical forms, largely because of the striking wealth of possibilities the latter offered. Many things were difficult to express without, consciously or not, turning to classical models, or at least appearing to do so. The other point is that this relationship was more visual and technical than intellectual and ideological. This may well have been so because so much of Islamic art was secular rather than religious. This provided it with a great freedom in searching the past of the lands it occupied and in reusing it precisely because they no longer had any meaning for it.

[20] Much has been written about Ottoman domes; the latest is D. Kuban, *Sinan's Art and Selimiye* (Istanbul, 1997); on this particular theme, see O. Grabar, "The Meanings of Sinan's Architecture," *Uluslararasi Mimar Sinan Sempozyomu Bildirileri* (Ankara, 1996) and "The Many Gates of Ottoman Art," in *Art Turc/Turkish Art, 10ème Congrès international d'art turc* (Geneva, 1997).