

# THE WORKS OF MARIO ROSSI AT ALESSANDRIA

Properly to understand Mario Rossi one has to site his work at the confluence of two streams: the Egyptian renaissance around the turn of the century and Europe's cultural invasion of Egypt, which began with the Napoleonic occupation but accelerated following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Rossi is therefore a Levantine phenomenon; as such, he represents a tradition of commercial and cultural intercourse that goes back at least to when the Mediterranean — the Middle Sea (*al-baḥr al-mutawassit*) in Arabic as in Latin — was a Roman lake and all the countries on its littoral shared a common cultural language. This situation was never quite to repeat itself, although there were times between the 8th and 16th centuries when it looked as if the Mediterranean might become an Islamic lake. This hope was shattered first by the loss of Spain, and secondly by the defeat at Lepanto; instead, the Mediterranean became an intermittent battleground between the two religions.

The historical rivalry between Christendom and Dar al-Islam never, at least until the 19th century introduced a different set of cultural presuppositions, precluded a fruitful interchange of ideas. In architecture, unquestionably the most significant result of such borrowing was Europe's adoption of the pointed arch, transmitted through North Africa and Italy *via* Mahdiyya in Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> By the 18th century, such borrowings had become reciprocal, with Islam taking rather more from the West than the West took from Islam. Although an eclecticist, Rossi exemplifies the opposite tendency, in which Europeans set out consciously to imitate Islamic models. He employs a visual vocabulary lifted almost entirely from late (i.e. Burji) Mamluk architecture. Rossi, therefore, represents the principle of relativism, which holds that architecture must relate to the cultural climate.

Rossi was not an isolated phenomenon: his work cannot be disassociated from what was taking place in comparable fields at the same time, like 'Umar Mukhtar in sculpture, Sayyid Darwish and Zakariyya Ahmad in music, Ahmad Shauqi and Hafiz Ibrahim in poetry or Taufiq al-Hakim and 'Abbas Muhammad al-'Aqqad in prose. Even as an architect, Rossi's talent is far from unique; apart from internationally known figures like Hasan Fathi, Egypt was at this time producing architects of undoubted calibre. The international acclaim accorded the work of Fathi

has tended to obscure the contribution of others no less talented, like Rossi or 'Ali Thabit. 'Ali Thabit has to his credit three important mosques in Alexandria: Ramaḍan Shaḥaṭa, near the square; Sulaiman Shaikh in Muḥarram Bey and the Basili mosque in Wardiyan.

Since we are dealing with a renaissance, this raises the question of patronage. In Islam, the most important source of patronage has always been the state. Such was the case with Rossi, for he was chief architect to the Ministry of Waqfs and had in his hands responsibility for the design of all major mosque projects in Egypt. Rossi's plight was no different from that of hundreds of architects in Islamic history, totally dependent on royal patronage. But here he was lucky, for King Fu'ad conformed at least in some respects to the type of the ideal Muslim ruler. Two characteristics of the ideal Muslim ruler are that he respects scholars and patronizes the arts. King Fu'ad did both: he would kiss the Shaikh al-Azhar's hand whenever he met him, and he patronized music, setting up an Institute of Oriental Music in an elegant building in the Shari' al-Malika in Cairo. No less significant, it was Fu'ad who gave Rossi his first commission.

The difference between Rossi and the other figures in this renaissance is that they were Egyptians and he was an Italian. Rossi belonged to the Italian emigration. The cultural impact of Italy on Egypt was second only to that of France. At one time, it was fashionable in Egypt to have an Italian doctor, an Italian lawyer and even an Italian architect. Examples of Italian, or Italianate, architecture abound; in Alexandria, the Banco di Roma near the square is a literal copy of Michaelangelo's Palazzo Farnese, with the original three storeys reduced to two. Works of less pure model also exist, like the colonnade fronting the Corniche, the memorial of the Italian community in Alexandria to the Khedive Isma'il. King Faruq was an ardent Italophile, and this was to render him unacceptable to the British. Italian influence even penetrated mosque architecture, as can be seen from the eclectic interior of the Rifa'i mosque in Cairo, burial place of the royal family, where the opulent decor contrasts with the chaste exterior, deliberately designed by Husain Fahmi Pasha, head of the Waqfs Diwan, in the 14th century style to match the Sultan Hasan *madrasa* opposite. The interior was the work of Prof. Roberto Burati, who was born in Ancona.

Not the least striking paradox in a country unusually rich in paradoxes is that five of its best modern mosques were designed not by a Muslim but by a Christian. Mario Rossi was born in Rome in 1897 and embraced Islam only shortly before his death in Cairo in 1961. A study of the designs which issued from Rossi's drawing-board produces amazement that any non-Arab could so thoroughly have assimilated the principles upon which Arab art is based. Such an observation, of course, by no means implies that his work is merely pastiche.

The present mosque of Abu 'l-'Abbas, completed in 1945 after work had been in progress for sixteen years, replaces a much smaller structure dating from 1767 which burned down during an electrical storm.<sup>3</sup> On so colossal a scale was the reconstruction that followed that the present mosque may be accounted the Muslim cathedral of Alexandria.

The mosque is raised on a crypt, or undercroft, which did not form part of the original building but was added to give monumentality by raising the level of the floor. Some idea of the originality of the design can be

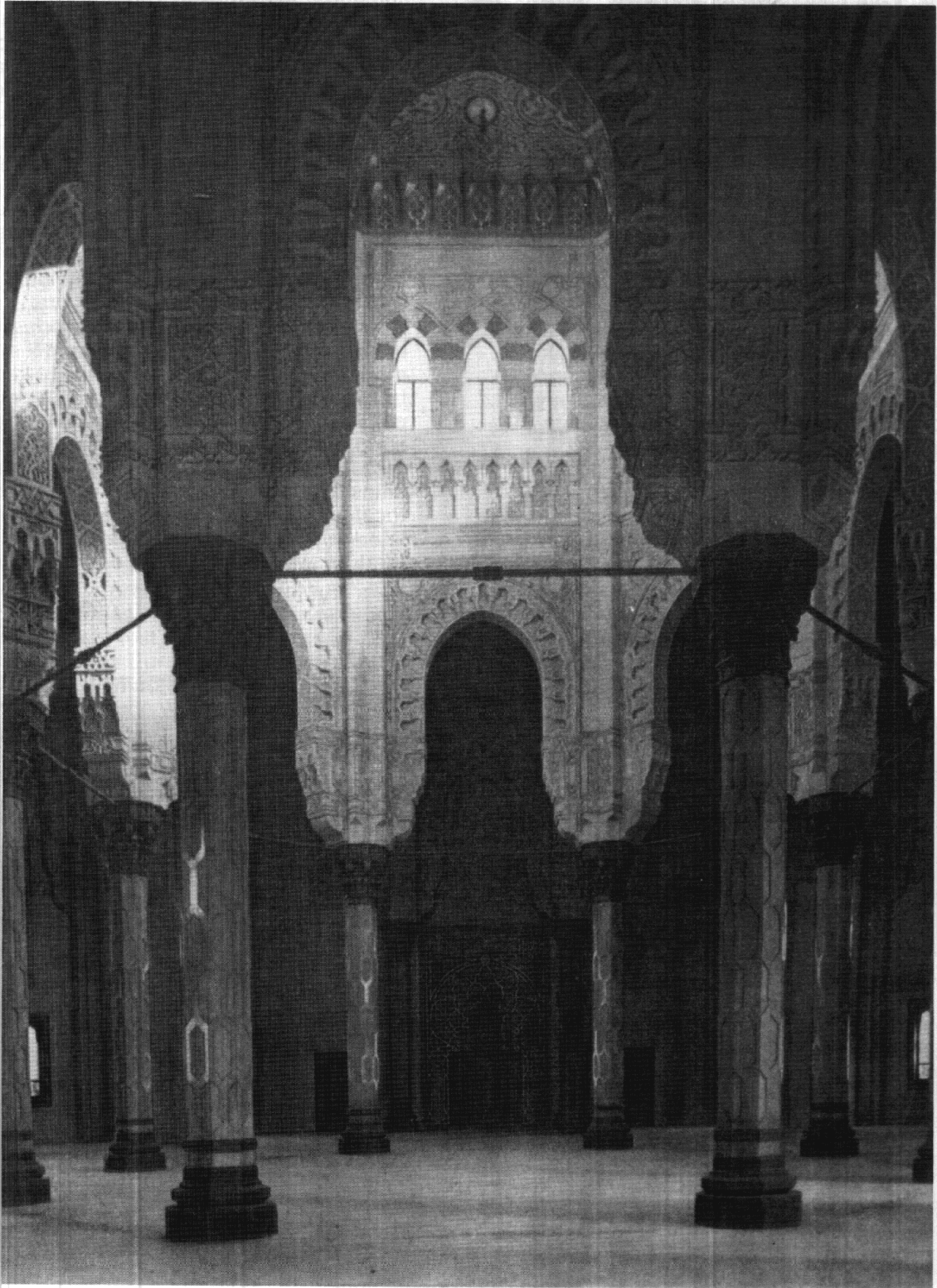
gathered from the octagonal plan, at this time an innovation in Egyptian architecture and unfortunately one of dubious orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> Surrounding the octagon is an ambulatory the height of whose roof allows the soaring immensity of the central lantern, 24 m. above the floor, to be appreciated even from the doorways. This lantern is supported on eight monoliths of pink granite which were quarried, cut, and polished in Italy. Each column boasts a base and capital of bronze. But the richest effect is reserved for the *mihrab*, which is framed in a profusion of joggled, variously coloured marbles producing an overpowering effect on the beholder. Rossi was ably supported by a team of craftsmen in metalwork, marble and wood who fashioned the bronze grilles, the brass chandeliers, the marble revetments and the items of liturgical furniture. The niche is flanked by wooden pulpit (*minbar*) and cantor's chair (*kursi 's-şura*), both as richly carved as the niche is tessellated. The encircling embrace of columns and arches carried the eye toward this focal point, where the niche, perfectly articulated within the whole, forms the architectural as well as the liturgical climax of the

ABU'I-'ABBAS MOSQUE: GENERAL VIEW

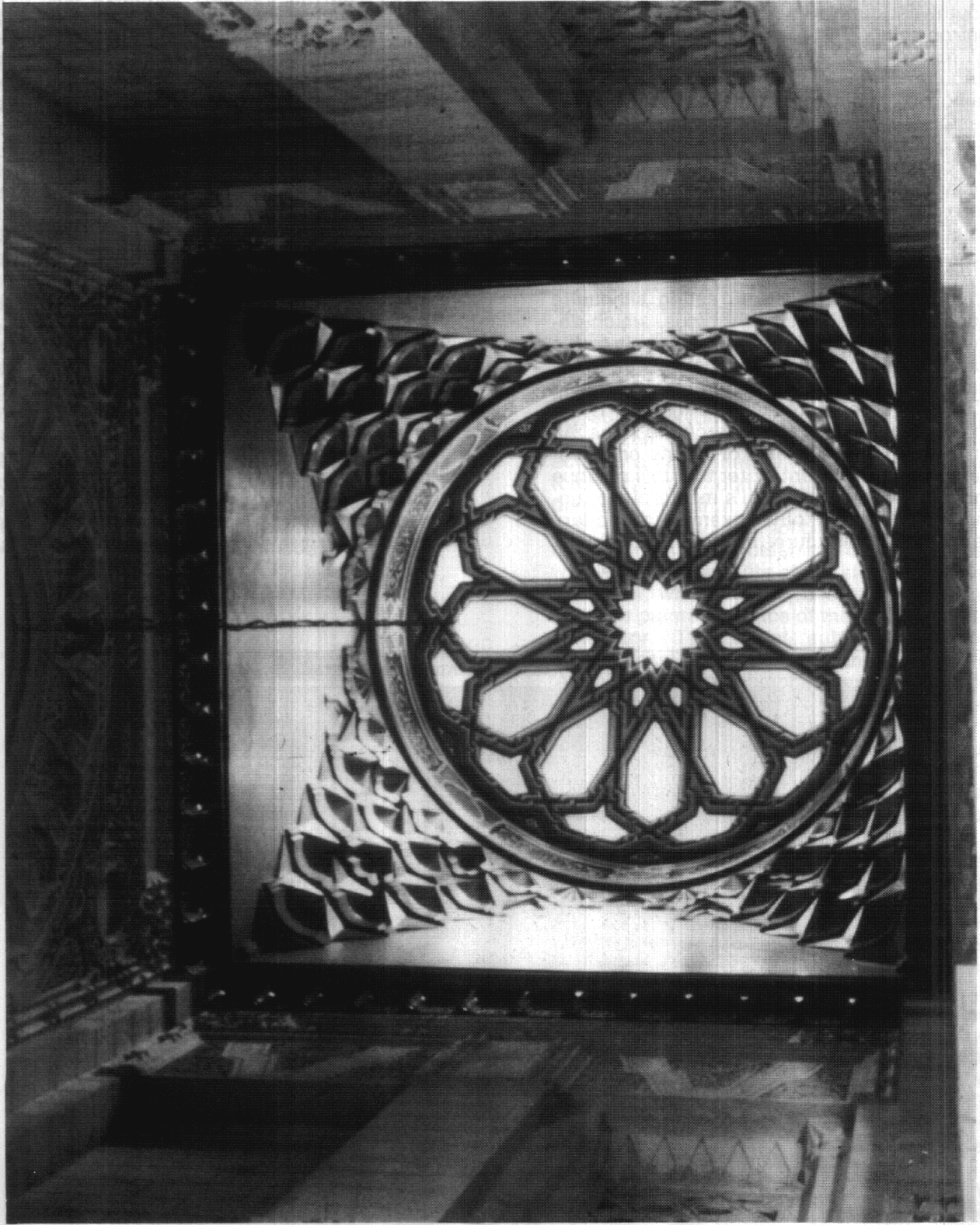




ABU'I-'ABBAS MOSQUE: INTERIOR



ABU'I-ABBAS MOSQUE: AMBULATORY ROOF

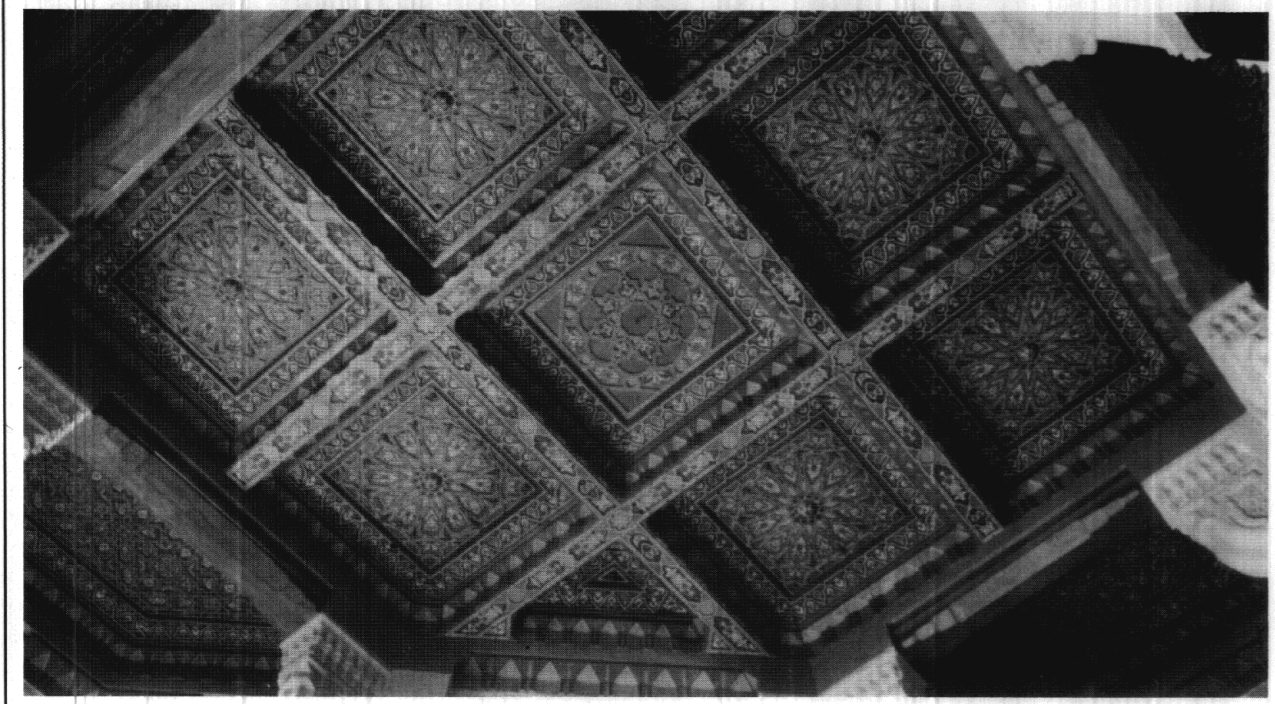




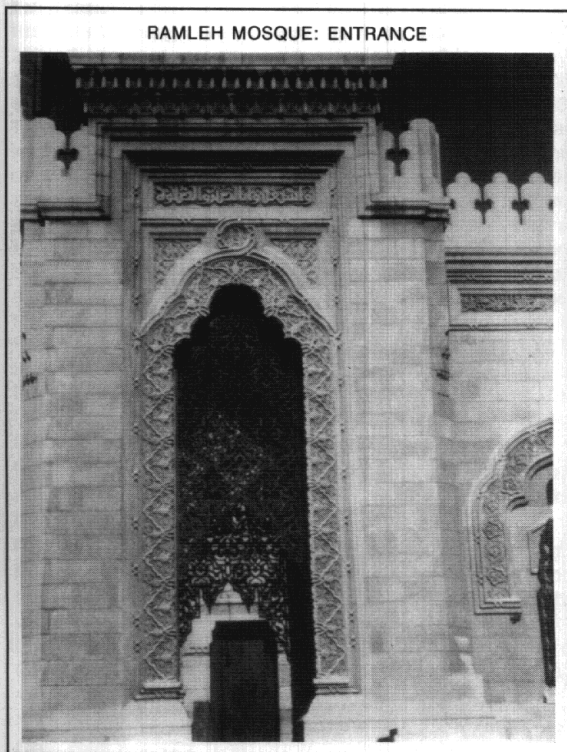
building. Small cupolas lend emphasis to four sides of the octagon, and under the southwest cupola lies the tomb of the city's patron saint.<sup>5</sup> The grave in the crypt beneath is marked by a Turkish-style catafalque (*tabut*) of lamentable design which, if removed, might disclose the primitive gravestone underneath.<sup>6</sup> Particularly noteworthy is the plastic treatment of the exterior: here the design, based on the notion of the interlocking cube, is handled with a virtuosity verging on the sensational; indeed the nervous intricacy of the surface might almost justify the description "arabesque Baroque". Every visitor to Alexandria is familiar with the small mosque with the arresting silhouette opposite Ramleh metro terminus, which dominates with its profile one of the main traffic axes of the city. A splendid vista between tall palms terminates in a deliberately low-keyed structure spectacularly overlooked by a minaret which aspires to pierce the skies. An architect in the Ministry of Waqfs once observed to the present writer that this mosque must be accounted Rossi's masterpiece, unsurpassed by any other example of modern religious architecture in Egypt. Certainly,

seen from outside, the handling of Islamic forms is masterly, and the minaret, based on the traditional Delta type, seems to stretch endlessly upward, developing out of itself, using strange, almost surrealist forms which blend sweetly with the abstractionism of Muslim art. The rustic appearance of the wooden balcony imparts a touch of whimsy, reminiscent of certain eccentricities of architects of the English Regency, like the sophisticated use of the primitive in the *ferme ornée*. After this soaring profile the interior comes as an (?intentional) shock; it is small and rather gloomy. But the roof compensates for any sensation of disappointment: a shallow saucer-dome, painted with a red, black and gold diaper in rhomboid pattern radiating from the centre, rests on four squinches in the traditional manner. Properly, this saucer covers the *ṣaḥn*, and, standing beneath it, we are startled to discover ourselves in a covered courtyard, for the plan harks back to 1262 and the emergence of the cruciform *madrassa* in Egypt in that year.<sup>7</sup> The Ramleh mosque — originally it bore the name of Ibrahim Pasha — is an adaption of the cruciform *madrassa*, with two entrances,

ABU'L-ABBAS MOSQUE: AMBULATORY ROOF, DETAIL



one on the *qibla* axis and a second to one side; the ablutions zone opens off a third *iwan*, in the form of an exedra. So subtle is the disguise of a medieval form that this is only apparent when we face the *qibla* and there confront two great responds bearing a pointed arch with return at the foot, forming a fourth *iwan*.<sup>8</sup> Beneath the Arab skin there lurks a Renaissance skeleton: the combination of square and hemicycle is typically Classical, as is the notion of a centrally designed building, for the shallow *iwans* relate to a central area, the covered *ṣaḥn*. Rossi was an eclectic genius. The lavish use of exedras, typical of late Roman architecture, was revived in the Renaissance. Rossi was not the first Islamic architect to combine square and hemicycle, for this occurs in the Nur Osmaniye mosque (completed 1755) in Istanbul<sup>9</sup>. Rossi must have been aware of this, for he introduced an exedral courtyard in one of his least successful designs, the 'Umar Makram mosque in Cairo. His miniature masterpiece, the Ramleh mosque, was built between 1948 and '51. The view of the rear is not improved by a detached *muṣalla*, erected in 1964 to accommodate overflow



congregations.

The last mosque of this trio is dedicated to Muḥammad Kurayyim, the governor of Alexandria at the time of the Napoleonic occupation. It flanks Ra's at-Ṭin Palace, of which it forms the palatine chapel, on the promontory separating the two bays known as the Eastern and Western Harbours. Work on the mosque started in 1949 and was completed in 1953. A rich grouping crowns the rocky site, setting off the sober classicism of the palace alongside. This design develops an idea present in embryonic form in the earlier mosque of Abu 'l-'Abbas. There each of the four corner cupolas is really a double dome, with the inner shell cut in a stellate pattern silhouetted against the outer dome. In the Kurayyim mosque, Rossi has applied the same idea on a magnified scale by throwing huge girders of masonry across the sanctuary space to form a star at the level of the drum. This star foliating beneath the dome acts as a brace neutralizing the centrifugal forces of the dome structure. Windows pierced in the drum of the dome form a clerestory. This way, the hollow of the dome is transformed into a golden ball of light against which the components of the star are thrown into relief, whilst light is reflected downward from the painted surface of the dome into the sanctuary. The visual subtleties toward which Rossi had been groping at Abu 'l-'Abbas find here triumphant expression. To describe it as an optical illusion were misleading, because no attempt is made to conceal the structural means by which this *tour de force* is contrived, but the recession in planes characteristic of Islamic art, emphasized by the lighting, approximates to Baroque illusionism.

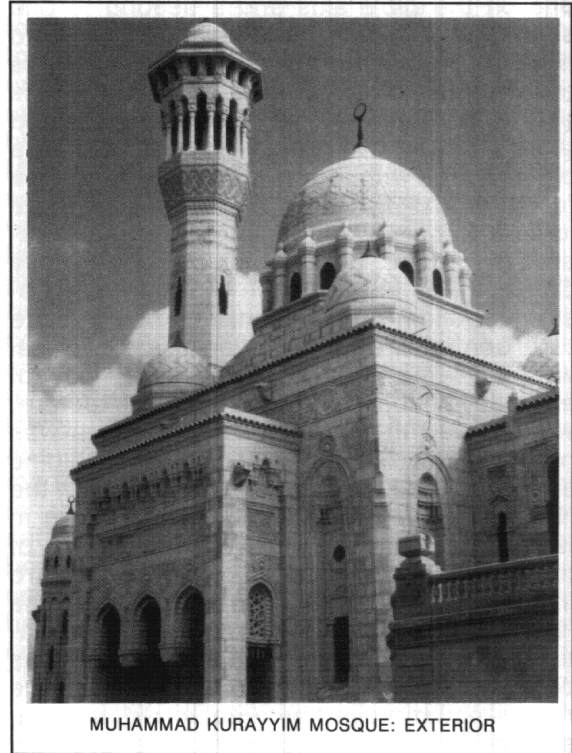
Unfortunately, at Muḥammad Kurayyim the builders used a white artificial stone, lending the whole a dead, chilly appearance which the elaborated marble dado only partially relieves, an effect at variance with the warm tones of the other two mosques. Probably the former royal associations account for the mosque's lavish interior decoration, as in the Rifa'i mosque in Cairo. The balcony on the right, closed off with a *mashrabiyya* screen, was for the use of the womenfolk in the palace. Outside, the recessed fenestration is direct quotation, but the plan remains Renaissance, not Mamluk, with a central dome and four corner ones.

A curious incident contributed to the originality of the design. As first planned, the minaret was much taller, but the Ports and

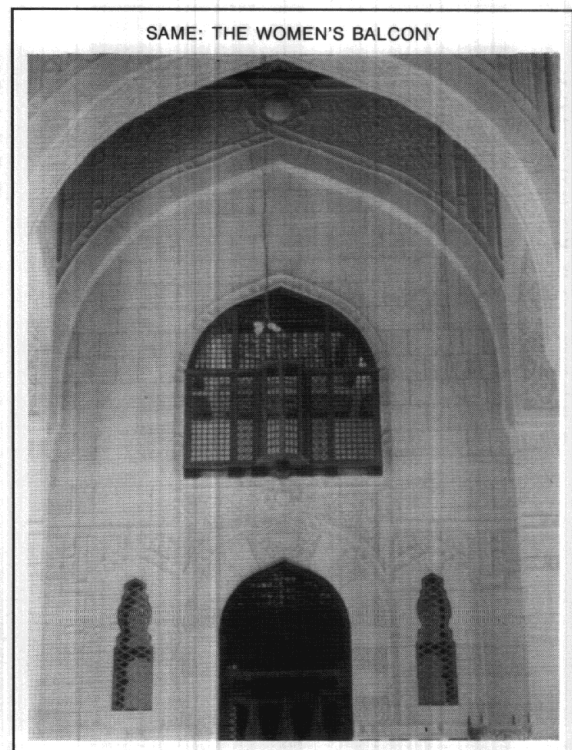
Lighthouses Authority objected that from a certain point at sea the minaret could blanket the harbour lighthouse. Much to his chagrin, the architect was obliged to lop off half the minaret and had to devise some kind of solution for the truncated shaft. He settled on a heavy pavilion of the Mughal type, known in India as *chhatri*, and so gave the mosque — already hybrid by virtue of its Renaissance ground-plan and Mamluk elevations — a curiously Indian appearance; indeed, this quaint feature is more striking than the slender tower originally envisaged. Were proof still wanting to attest the versatility of Mario Rossi's genius it would be enough to adduce this instance of ability to make capital out of adverse circumstances. It is sad to record that two later mosques in Cairo (Zamalek and 'Umar Makram), evince a falling-off in his powers; however, two other mosques, that of al-Fuli at Minya (completed 1946) and that of 'Abd ar-Rahim al-Qinawi at Qena, both in Middle Egypt, are powerful designs which do not suffer from comparison with his work at Alexandria. Rossi's Alexandrian mosques, sited as they are on the shoreline, have done much to Islamicize the city's appearance.

These three mosques share a common style not only because they issued from the same drawing-board but because they express a specific intention, the reinterpretation of traditional Islamic forms. In one respect, Rossi was the reverse of traditional, aiming at a monumentality that never interested the Mamluk architect, for whom the integrity of the urban fabric took precedence over individual buildings. Rossi sited his mosques to take advantage of a vista, and where there was no vista, as with Abu 'l-'Abbas, he would create one, by landscaping.

A master of volume, Rossi produced spectacular interiors: in Abu 'l-'Abbas he created a vast interior of cathedral-like proportions which meets the congregational needs of a modern *jami'*. This handling of volume, as seen in his centralized designs, derives from classical precedent. Rossi's pursuit of monumentality obliged him to consign ancillary functions like ablutions to an exedra, which he was at pains to conceal by siting it away from the main angle of approach. The ablutions zone always poses a problem for any mosque architect, and the exedral solution is seldom a happy one. Maladroitly managed in Abu 'l-'Abbas, Rossi handled it with more skill at Ramleh. Rossi sought inspiration in the Mamluk style, which was congenial to him on



MUHAMMAD KURAYYIM MOSQUE: EXTERIOR



SAME: THE WOMEN'S BALCONY



account of its exuberance. His work is certainly Italian in feeling; rich and exuberant, it is a far cry from the spare forms and austere beauty of the work of 'Abd al-Wahid al-Wakil, the pupil of Hasan Fathi, the foremost living exponent of historicism in practice.

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(Yaquz Zaki)**

<sup>1</sup> This brief resumé of Rossi's work has been adapted from an earlier study, "Modern Islamic Architecture in Alexandria", *Islamic Quarterly*, XII (1970), pp. 183-191.

<sup>2</sup> See K.J. Conant (with H.M. Willard), "Early Examples of the Pointed Arch and Vault in Romanesque Architecture," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, II (1971), pp. 203-209 (with illustrations).

<sup>3</sup> The date of completion, 1943, given in the official publication, *Masajid Misr*, Cairo, 1948, is incorrect.

<sup>4</sup> This is because of a principle, less well known as it could be, known as *faql as-şaff al-auwal wa as-şalat qurb al-imam* ("the priority of the first row and prayer in proximity to the Imam"). A mosque ought always to be quadrangular in plan, not only because that was the Sunna (precept) of the Prophet but because the plan is governed by the nature of the liturgical action; *i.e.*, the operation of the *şaffs* across the floor. This means that any plan that restricts the length of the first *şaff* in relation of the *şaffs* behind ranks in law as *makruh* (objectionable). Usually, anomalous ground plans were confined to oratories in caravanserais or khans, like that of ar-Rastan in Syria (13-14th centuries) or the Kuloglu Mosque at the Khoja Khan in Bursa. The mosque of Abu Nasr Darsa at Balkh is only octagonal on the outside, being a variant form of *châr-şuffa* inside, in which respect it resembles the contemporary Timurid mausoleum; in Samarqand, the 'Ishrat Khaneh. The *dars-Khaneh* of the Koprülü Kulliye in Istanbul has now been converted into a mosque, but such liturgical aberrations are frequent in modern Islamic architecture. Mosques with polygonal plans reappeared in Baku in the early part of this century, but the octagonal layout is indigenous to the area; it is found in Gula, a district of North Azerbaijan adjacent to Daghestan, where the famed orthodoxy of the inhabitants has not prevented octagonal mosques from proliferating.

<sup>5</sup> On this saint see ad-Disyawi (Ahmad Husain), *Al-Imam Abu 'l-'Abbas al-Mursi*, Cairo, 1965. 1287 is also given by some sources as the date of death.

<sup>6</sup> When Dr. al-Bahi was in charge at the Ministry of Waqfs he had the intention of opening up a well, Napoleon's tomb at les Invalides-style, so that the tomb would be visible from inside the mosque. This is an innovation in Islamic architecture found at Nizami's mausoleum at Ganjal (North Azerbaijan) and at Avicenna's mausoleum at Hamadan.

<sup>7</sup> The Zahiriyah madrasa in Şuq an-Nahhasin, Cairo. See Creswell, K.A.C., "The Origin of the Cruciform Plan of

Cairene Madrasas," *Bulletin de l'Institut Francais d'Archaeologie Orientale*, XXI (1922), pp. 38-39, also *The Muslim architecture of Egypt*, Oxford, 1959, II, p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> Equilibrium is the key to the success of the Muslim aesthetic, and it was precisely this feature of the pointed horseshoe arch which inspired E.M. Forster in *A Passage to India* to refer to it "the architecture of Question and Answer".

<sup>9</sup> This was the first Baroque mosque in Islam and set in motion a fashion for the Baroque. The architect, Simean, was Armenian. Godfrey Goodwin (*Ottoman Architecture*, London, 1971, p. 387) hazards that foreign, perhaps French, advice was sought. Goodwin states (p. 384) that the "horseshoe court is a bold but isolated attempt to introduce baroque form, and not just decoration, into Ottoman architecture." The plan shows a deep acquaintance with the principles of the Baroque, with an apical *mihrab* answering the exedral courtyard. Rossi was a learned man and may have known of this mosque.