

## PART FOUR

### ISLAMIC ART AND THE WEST



## Chapter XXI

### Islamic Architecture and the West: Influences and Parallels\*

It is not by accident that most discussions of Oriental and more specifically Islamic influences in Western art have dealt with objects or with motifs found on objects. Textiles, metalwork, even glass and ceramics traveled easily; they were essential ingredients of an East–West luxury trade and, after the beginning of the Crusades, became almost automatic items of the loot brought back from the East. The impact of such objects appears in architectural decoration, such as in imitations of Arabic writing like those on the doors of the cathedral at Le Puy in central France, in the use of Persian and Syrian ceramics in several churches of northern Italy, or earlier in the mosaic decoration of Germigny-des-Prés. During and after the Renaissance orientalizing elements derived from objects continue to appear, whether as precisely depicted curios (e.g., rugs), as ornamental devices (the pseudo-Kufic inscriptions on the robes of Virgins being the most obvious examples), or, somewhat later, as exotic *turqueries*. How significant these elements of Islamic origin really were within the rich creativity of Western art, whether they were accidents, minor themes, or major sources of inspiration, is still debatable, although their existence is easy to demonstrate and historical logic can in most cases explain their presence.

Matters are quite different when we turn to architecture. Since its monuments are immobile, influences and impacts can only take place if one of three types of events occurs: (1) masons, architects or other technicians move from one area to another; (2) patrons or other influential taste-makers carry with them the impact of an alien architectural monument or effect and seek to translate their memories into local techniques; and (3) drawings, photographs, and at times literary descriptions transmit technical or aesthetic impressions which are then used or transformed by some receptive milieu. In the first part of this paper I will discuss a few instances which seem to me to illustrate these three possibilities and bring up some of the problems and

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difficulties raised by them. But it also seems to me that the relationship between Islamic and Western architecture should not be limited to the identification and evaluation of direct or indirect imitations and influences. A far more interesting and important historical problem is that of parallelisms, for both architectural traditions were based in large part on the extraordinary heritage of Roman forms and techniques. Both utilized this inheritance for comparable purposes, secular and religious, public or restricted, while neither experienced a technical revolution comparable to the development of concrete or vaults in Rome or cantilevering in the nineteenth century. In other words, at least *a priori*, only cultural and ecological variables would have led to differences in the development of the same vocabulary of forms. The problem is whether the Western and Islamic evolutions remain indeed comparable during most of the Middle Ages or whether cultural differences were sufficient to make the results of the two artistic traditions incompatible. It is obvious that any conclusion or hypothesis which can be reached on this sort of question has implications which extend far [61] beyond the field of medieval trans-Mediterranean art. Since the methodology available for possible answers to the problem has not yet been properly developed, I shall limit myself to a few tentative considerations.

The remarks which follow must be considered as only very preliminary observations on this complicated subject of influences and parallels, for existing research has not yet made it possible to move easily from very concrete details to broadly significant generalizations. What I have tried to do is to discuss some of the directions which further work may take in order to improve our understanding of the problems involved.

### **Influences and Imitations**

Influences and imitations are easiest to detect and most obvious in areas where the two cultures coexisted for any length of time or where Christian rule replaced Muslim hegemony. Such is the case of Spain, where a whole architecture style, what is known as *mudejar* art, is clearly derived from Islamic art. Its major monuments are in the cities of Zaragoza, Toledo and Seville, though hardly a province of Spain outside of the extreme northwest has escaped the impact of Islamic forms. Even Renaissance palaces in Seville (Casa de Pilatos) and Guadalajara (Palacio del Infantado) still maintain strong traces of Muslim motifs. It is important to note, however, that this impact did not affect all aspects of architecture. It was minimal in the development of plans and in such details as supports like columns. It was very influential in the design of cupolas, where the Andalusian system of intersecting (fake or real) ribs is carried to some of its most baroque extremes, and in the development of polylobed arches, in exterior masonry as with the use of polychrome effects, and particularly in the consistent theme of blind

arcades. The Islamic impact may or may not be present in the character of single or attached towers, such as the square towers of Teruel or the octagonal ones in Zaragoza reminiscent of Muslim minarets, both Andalusian and oriental. It is consistent in certain types of composition, such as the doorway or window whose arch is set in a rectangular frame. It is overwhelming in architectural decoration, as exterior or interior wall surfaces and vaults or wooden ceilings are covered with motifs and techniques of Islamic origin. Although a monument like the fourteenth-century Alcázar in Seville followed the Islamic model in almost all respects, for the rest of Spain there seems to be a peculiar rhythm to Islamic influences, certain motifs predominating in one area or another and maintaining themselves for a more or less long period of time. Thus in the area of Zaragoza exterior masonry and decoration are often more Andalusian than the interiors, whereas in the provinces of Burgos and Valladolid, interior stucco decoration of Islamic background has remained much longer.

There is altogether a whole "ecology" of Islamic influences in Spain which still awaits a historian. Two points about it may serve as possible initial hypotheses. One is that secular architecture may have maintained such influences far longer than religious building. In Burgos, for instance, it appears stronger in the royal chapel than in the churches themselves and in Tordesillas almost a complete secular building has been largely preserved. The explanation [62] is probably that Christian Spain, until the height of the Renaissance, did not possess alternate models for an architecture of royal prestige, at least not until Charles V's palace in Granada or Philip II's Escorial. The second point is that, with regional variations, Islamic motifs did not begin to disappear until the middle of the fifteenth century when their integrity became either lost or difficult to disentangle from a strange mixture of Gothic and Renaissance designs. Such examples as the Seo of Zaragoza or the crossing of the cathedral of Burgos may serve to illustrate the point.

In the Spanish example we can assume, if not always demonstrate, both the presence and movement of artisans and the formation of a taste among patrons which explain the constancy of Muslim influence. The only similar area is Sicily. Muslim occupation there was short-lived but an orientalizing taste can be demonstrated through literary sources from the time of Frederick II in the early thirteenth century. It is, however, much more difficult to show in architecture, for, outside of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo with its spectacular Islamic ceiling, only fragments have remained, and it is not possible to illustrate precisely the actual depth of an Islamic impact in Sicilian and southern Italian architecture. Just as in Greece or the Balkans, the impact on architecture seems to have been less than that on the other arts, possibly because there were fewer available artisans and because the Christian patronage of these areas did not sponsor architectural monuments on the scale of the Spanish patrons from the thirteenth century onwards.

The problems of the significance and character of patronage and of the availability of works acquire their full meaning when the situation is compared with a non-Western area of Islamic impact which may serve as an interesting historical parallel. I refer to Armenia, where, from the early tenth century, a strong and original local architecture was constantly influenced by – just as it influenced – Islamic developments.

When one moves out of Spain and Sicily, matters become much more complex. All scholars have agreed that certain ornamental motifs, for instance Kufesque writing, are of Islamic origin. Beyond that the tendency has been either to indulge in orientaling orgies, whereby almost any motif or novelty is given an Islamic background since a high Islamic technical growth occurred earlier than in the West, or in denying “Saracenic” influences altogether, on the grounds (to which I shall return in the second part of this paper) that there is no need for Islamic influences to explain certain Western architectural developments. That both extremes are probably incorrect is certain, but where does a reasonable middle ground lie?

On methodological grounds I should like to suggest three kinds of direct or indirect influences or imitations. The first kind may be called *regional*. It seems fairly clear and makes historical sense that, as the great pilgrimage routes of the Romanesque period were established, contact with Spain became the norm for many actual or potential patrons and taste-makers in Romanesque Europe. As a result, by processes of osmosis which are still very obscure, themes and motifs were carried from south to north. The Roussillon definitely shows many Andalusian motifs; these are more selective in the Languedoc or Poitou, seem to increase in intensity in the Auvergne, and are but occasionally found in Burgundy or Provence. For the most part they consist of architectural [63] details, horseshoe arches, polylobes, masonry of stones of alternating colors, roll corbels, impost blocks, certain kinds of vegetal ornament, tendency in some monuments to cover entire surfaces with ornament. A complete survey of a characteristic Romanesque feature like the sculpted capital would no doubt bring out many points of Islamic influence. While the Romanesque period in France is the most obvious example of this sort of regional impact, it is not the only one. In Romanesque and even Gothic and Renaissance Italy proximity to Islamic centers certainly played a part in developing certain architectural motifs. The bichromy of masonry in churches in Siena and in Pisa, the towers of San Gimignano and the complex surfaces of official and secular monuments in Venice (even some details in San Marco) are just a few examples of tastes and techniques derived from the Muslim world. In the instance of Italy it is probably merchants and travelers rather than workers who returned with memories of Islamic lands and, as a result, one encounters less frequently than in Spain or southern France the small consistent detail, the tell-tale motif. Except in the south, it is rather an overall impression which was being imitated and its evaluation is correspondingly more difficult to make. In the same vein,

Islamic influences are also recurrent in, though not always easy to extract from, the Russian art of the Middle Ages and even in the pre-Petrine Kremlin, where Italianate and Oriental motifs are often inter-mixed with local traditions.

Regional impacts pose two distinct problems. One is to try to date their rhythm as securely as possible. The other is what may be called the “ripple effect.” For, in theory at least, the farther one is from the source of contact and the later in time, the less prominent the influence is. The question is whether this proposition is really true or whether it only applies to the impact created by actual artisans, for the impact of a patron is less specifically tied to geography and could occur anywhere. At which point, in dealing with an architectural motif, do we begin to deal with exoticism rather than the movement of a motif?

Next to regional influences of several kinds, there are *unique* and problematic instances. The most obvious example is that of Le Puy in central Auvergne, where the long study by A. Fikry has suggested that, beyond the usual ornamental motifs which could have traveled along regular routes, a great deal of the actual construction of the cathedral (along with several other monuments) is unusual within Romanesque architecture and exhibits major similarities with Islamic architecture. The emphasis on cupolas rather than on vaults and the use of a wide variety of squinches relates Le Puy to Kairouan and North Africa rather than to Spain, and thus a unique and still not very satisfactorily solved problem is posed. Another apparently unique example occurs in seventeenth-century Turin, where the Baroque architect Guarini created a type of intersecting ribs for several churches which are strikingly reminiscent of those of Cordoba and its descendants in Spain. Guarini’s manual with drawings of his own monuments was published in 1686 and made its way to Spanish America where it is supposed to have influenced the design of a number of Mexican churches as well. Whatever impact they may have had, the examples of Le Puy and of Guarini seem at the moment to be unique and, unless they can in the future be fitted into some pattern, they must be explained by unique circumstances, each of which deserves extensive research. One point about the two examples I have cited may deserve special emphasis. It is that, in contradistinction [64] to that which seems to occur in what I called regional impacts, unique ones tend to relate directly to major centers of Islamic architecture – Ifriqiyah and Cordoba – and cannot be explained as the result of popular osmosis.

The third kind of imitation or influence may be called *interpretative*. What I mean by this term is that the source of the impact was not necessarily a contemporary monument or group of monuments, an architect, or a team of artisans, but some knowledge acquired directly or indirectly about something Islamic. Such instances do not seem to me to have been frequent in the Middle Ages, although one may wonder whether the Islamic elements in the palace of Theophilus were carried directly or through stories and

literary accounts. Something like this may have occurred, at least in part, with the Norman kings of Sicily or with Frederic II, or else with whatever the returning Crusaders may have sought to create in their homeland. On the whole, secular art seems to have been more frequently affected by this type of influence, but unfortunately it has been less well preserved.

But this type of impact is not limited to the Middle Ages. It appears most significantly in the nineteenth century, as romantic curiosity led to a new awareness of the Orient. It was at times somewhat ludicrous, as in Brighton's pavilions reproducing all sorts of Islamic motifs. It becomes more interesting when practicing architects like Jones, Prisse d'Avernes, Bourgoïn, Coste, Flandin bring back and publish the first detailed drawings we possess of Granada, Cairo and Isfahan. The evaluation of their effect on nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture has not yet been attempted, but one may wonder, among several possible examples, whether Louis Sullivan and some of his contemporaries were not influenced by the striking solutions found in the Sultan Hassan *madrassa* in Cairo for the problem of long and tall continuous walls. Similarly Jones's publication of the Alhambra introduced into Western architecture a totally new conception of the relationship between outside and inside, covered and open spaces, construction and decoration. An Islamic influence cannot but be considered as a very secondary feature in the growth of modern architecture, but it is just possible that it was greater than has usually been imagined and that it went beyond a Hollywoodian exoticism.

### Parallels

Although, as I mentioned earlier, the methodology for the study of parallels is far from being properly worked out, there are three broad areas in which its investigation seems to me to be particularly profitable.

One such area is that of construction. The idea developed in the 1930s that Gothic vaulting may have had its origins in Iranian architecture of the eleventh century is not tenable. What is true, on the other hand, is that both Islamic and Western architects were faced with the problems of light and of height within an architectural system based on multiple supports for ceilings and roofs. Both were searching for ways to minimize reliance on continuous [65] walls and to build efficient vaults. As a result both sought to develop systems of ribs used for actual construction and for carrying thrusts down, and both sought to alleviate wall surfaces. The ultimate results were quite different, as Islamic ribs became integrated within the vault's mass, unlike the partly independent Western units; yet the Muslim world developed the *muqarnas* which did emphasize in its own fashion the architectonic value, if not structure, of the vault. Thus also the Muslim world alleviated its walls by extensive surface decoration rather than by the striking thinning out of



walled areas, but the intent was the same in both cases. The eventual development of stained glass in the West may be compared to that of faience tiles in the Muslim East. It has even been argued that the rose-window is of Islamic origin. While not excluded on purely chronological grounds since its earliest known instance is in the Umayyad palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar, this conclusion seems highly suspect to me, for the means of transmission of the motif have not been made clear. Nor is it necessary to imply in this case a direct influence, for the parallelism of concerns might easily have led to the same results. That both cultures were frequently operating on practically the same kind of "track" is further suggested by the visual and aesthetic similarities between the ornamental values of flamboyant vaults and Islamic architectural decoration. It is not very likely that a direct impact of one on the other can be demonstrated, and we are certainly dealing with parallel growth.

The second area of investigation of parallels lies in the utilization and development of certain common units of composition. One example is that of the porticoed court adjoining an enclosed building. Whether we are in the cloisters of Spanish monasteries or of Mont St Michel, or in the courts of mosques and palaces, we are dealing with a relatable type of transformation of an open area into a place where different activities can take place simultaneously but where an aesthetic cohesion of the whole is maintained. At a certain moment, for internal cultural reasons, such cloisters will lessen in importance in the West, while in a building like the Alhambra, a unique mix of covered and open, interior and exterior, space will be created, but the initial formal concerns are very much the same, even if the ultimate results are not. A similar method of reasoning could be used with respect to large congregational spaces, as Western churches or Islamic mosques tried to create interior spaces which could hold enormous crowds while maintaining symbolic, liturgical, or aesthetic foci.

Finally there are parallels between the two cultures in the relationship between patronage and architecture. The development in Gothic times of churches and cathedrals to accommodate secular patrons, often buried there in their private chapels, finds a remarkable analogy in the private mausoleums attached to privately funded religious institutions in Islam. And it is possible that certain characteristics of a mercantile architecture in Flanders or in Italy could be compared to similar features in Islamic urban architecture. But perhaps at this level, as for instance with military architecture, universal functional needs begin to predominate and the comparison between two very specific features loses its significance. [66]

### **Bibliographical Guide**

Islamic influences and Western-Islamic contacts have been discussed in a very large number of usually small articles. A full bibliography would take

dozens of pages and I have limited myself to three very recent works dealing with architecture which lead to most other pertinent studies:

- E. J. Grube, "Elementi Eslamici nell'architettura veneta del medioevo," *Bolletino del Centro Internazionale di Studi d'Architettura A. Palladio*, 8 (1966).
- R. A. Jairazbhoy, *Oriental Influences in Western Art* (New York, 1966).
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