

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
ARABIC ART

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Art and Architecture

Many Influences. The Islamic expansion produced a new, major world civilization, and with that civilization developed distinctive forms of art and architecture, influenced by pre-existing traditions and by those of neighboring regions but nevertheless distinct from them. The Umayyads, with their capital in Damascus, were influenced primarily by Roman and Byzantine architecture, producing frescos and mosaics, while the Abbasids, with their capital in Baghdad, were influenced by Persian exempla. Coptic influence is seen in the manufacture of textiles in medieval Egypt. Turkish military brought with them Central Asian artistic models, and the Pax Mongolica in the 13th and 14th centuries opened up communication with China and led to substantial Far Eastern influences on painting, porcelain, and tile. The Crusades brought European engineering techniques for the building of fortresses to the Levant. Contacts with Europe before, during, and after the colonial period in the 19th and 20th centuries introduced to the Middle East new techniques and styles of architecture, painting, and other arts.

The Islamic City. Cities in the Arab world differed in some respects from their counterparts in Europe. In many European cities, the central focus of the city was a large, open square. In many Islamic cities, the central open place was the large courtyard inside the main mosque. Nearby would be the ruler's palace or the governor's residence, as well as a central market, but the latter would be a conglomeration of alleys and arcades, often covered on account of the extreme heat in the region. The city was usually walled, with a limited number of large gates. In many parts of the Arab world, the medieval walled city remains intact; this is particularly true of areas colonized by the French, whose standard practice was to house their administration in a new center—the *ville nouvelle*—outside the old city—the *medina* (Arabic for "city")—and separated from it by an intervening space. The city of Fez in Morocco is an excellent example of a walled city, with its traditional gates still intact; to this day, cars may not enter the streets and alleys of the medina, and all goods, including refrigerators, stoves, and crates of Coca-cola, must be brought in on horses or donkeys. Cairo is a counter-example. In the late 19th century, the Egyptian Khedive Ismail had wide boulevards cut through sections of the old city, as Hausmann had done in Paris.

The Mosque. It is said that one can understand a great deal about a society by examining its greatest buildings. In the modern United States, the largest buildings are insurance company office buildings. In modern Egypt, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi, the largest buildings are hotels. Just as the greatest edifices in medieval Europe were churches, the largest buildings in the pre-modern Arab world were mosques, such as the Muhammad Ali mosque in Cairo, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, and the Great mosque in Cordoba. A more recent example, the Hasan II mosque in Casablanca, Morocco, completed in 1993, is an enormous edifice that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean with a minaret 60 stories high. These buildings had regular features: the *mihrab* or a niche in the wall indicating the direction of prayer; the *minbar* or pulpit, the minaret or turret from which the call to prayer could be made. Just as Islamic law and theology developed in conversation and debate with Jewish and Christian law and theology, the mosque evolved in close contact with Jewish and Christian models. In some cases, history dictated parallel evolution, so the *minbar* resembles the Christian pulpit. In others, a conscious decision was made to go against Jewish and Christian practice, so Friday was recognized as the special day for prayer in the week, and prayer was convened by calling rather than by using bells or clappers. Mosque architecture often

followed earlier models. The original model for many early mosques was the Prophet's mosque in Medina, many North African mosques were modeled on the Great Mosque of Cordoba, and the Muhammad Ali mosque built in early 19th-century Cairo was modeled on the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul; m. Innovations included domes, horseshoe and pointed arches, *muqarnas* (a type of decoration involving hanging geometric recesses in domes, doorways and niches), and other ornate decorations. Other major building types included palaces, fortresses, *madrasahs* (colleges of law), *khaniqahs* (colleges for students of Islamic mysticism), and mausolea or shrines.

A Ban Flouted. It is commonly believed that in Islam, as in Judaism, it is forbidden to paint or represent living things. While this rule certainly had an effect on Islamic art, the ban was violated as often as the embargoes on dancing and the consumption of alcohol. In some cases, decorations represent plants and flowers, but not animals; in some cases, animals but not humans; in other cases, humans but not revered figures from sacred history such as prophets, the Prophet, or his Companions. In some cases, even the Prophet is represented, but with a blank space or flames representing light in place of his face or head. In some cases, Ali, Husayn, or other figures are represented in total, without any blank spaces, flames, or haloes. Nevertheless, despite these instances in which the ban was not upheld, its strength led to an abundance of alternative strategies for ornament and decoration in architecture, metal work, glasswork, textiles and other art forms. Floral designs were common, as were geometric patterns and calligraphy, the latter often quotations of verses from the Qur'an in religious contexts such as the Dome of the Rock and verses of poetry in secular contexts such as the palace of Alhambra in Granada.

Architecture and propaganda. Art and architecture in the Islamic world served purposes of propaganda for the patrons, who were rulers, ministers, military commanders, governors, judges, women of the ruling family, and other members of the elite. The Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem was a strong statement about the Muslims' control over a holy site revered by Jews and Christians as well. Completed just after a civil war had prevented the Umayyads' access to Mecca and Medina in the Hijaz, it has also been interpreted as an attempt to raise Jerusalem's importance as a holy place in the Islamic religion, perhaps even surpassing the Arabian sites. During the Crusades, the Christians converted it into a church, but after Saladin took Jerusalem following the battle of Hittin in 1187, it was reconverted to a mosque. Decades before, the Syrian Zengid ruler Nur al-Din had had built for al-Aqsa Mosque a splendid wooden *mihrab* with intricate inlaid decorations. After 1187 it was brought from Aleppo and installed in Jerusalem with great fanfare. The opposite may be seen in the Great Mosque of Cordoba; the modern visitor to the mosque is struck by the incongruous Gothic church sitting in the midst of the monument's vast arcades of columns. Throughout the Islamic period, great mosques, *madrasahs*, *khaniqahs* and other architectural feats served to bolster legitimacy of rule, standing as public, visible evidence of the ruler's charity, piety and commitment to the faith of Islam.

The Arts of the Book. Beginning in the eighth century, the production of affordable, abundant paper revolutionized intellectual and artistic production in the Arab and Islamic worlds. A great deal of art became attached to the book. Calligraphy was especially prized in the Arab world, and a number of calligraphers such as Ibn Muqlah (d. 940) and Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022 or 1031) acquired legendary acclaim during their own lifetimes. Highly ornate Qur'ans in various calligraphic styles, decorated with gold leaf and many hues of ink, ranging from pocket-sized copies to huge tomes over a meter tall were produced for various rulers. Elaborately carved and embossed cases termed *rab`ah* were built to carry 30-volume sets of the Qur'an for the major mosques, one volume for each *juz'* or 1/30th of the text. Illuminations and elegant miniature paintings graced the pages of dynastic histories,

stories of the prophets, and triumphal accounts of battles, as well as literary works such as *The Book of Songs*, *Kalila and Dimna*, and the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri (d. 1122).

Questions

Discuss the salient features of Umayyad art and architecture.

Discuss the salient features of Abbasid art and architecture.

Discuss the salient features of Fatimid art and architecture.

Discuss the salient features of Andalusí art and architecture.

It is often stated that Islam, like Judaism, bans the portrayal of people and animals. To what extent was this ban upheld in Islamic history? What are some of the works that violated this rule? What are some of the consequences of the rule?

What are the standard features of a mosque? How did they change over time?

Define the following terms: Madrasah, Khaniqah, Iwan, Wikala, Sabil, Mashhad.

What role did women play as patrons of art and architecture?

How did architecture play a role in political propaganda?

Reading

Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*.

Further Reading

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