

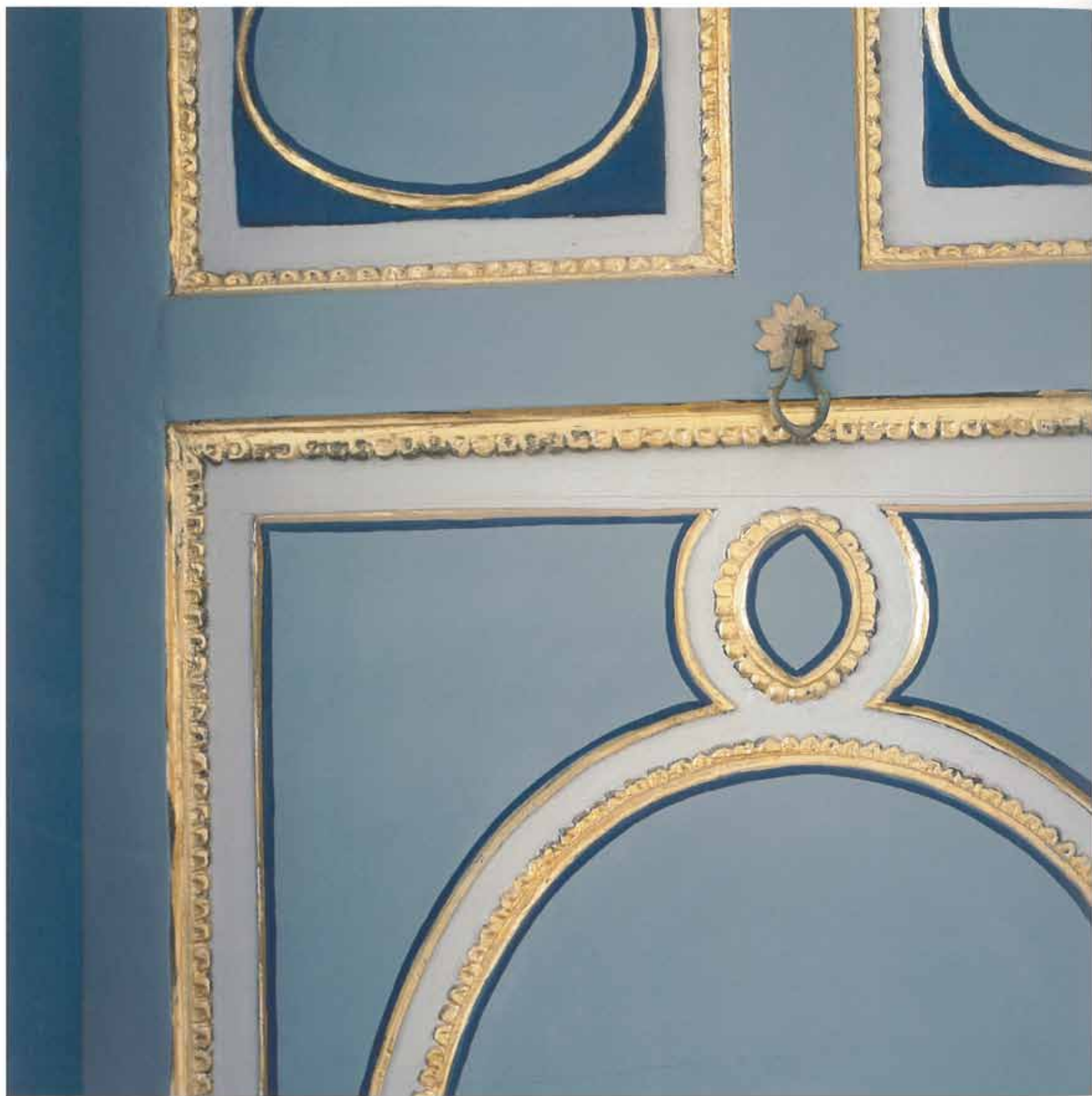


Bayt al-'Aqqad

*The History and Restoration
of a House in Old Damascus*

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The Change of Taste: New Elements of Decoration in the Blue Room

By Stefan Weber

Introduction

The so-called Blue Room (No 2.1) is one of the hidden treasures of Bayt al-'Aqqad and it was hidden indeed. During the restoration a whole set of murals from the first half of the 19th century was discovered under three layers of paint (Figs. 99, 118 and 119). The room is the only example in the house of the stylistic school of Ottoman rococo, which was very prominent in Damascus during the period from the 1830s to the 1870s.

Having first been decorated in its blue colours around 1840, the structure was originally built in the 18th century. It was part of an 18th-century arrangement which was most probably erected after the great earthquake in 1759. The 18th century building consisted of a small courtyard with a two-floor structure as its southern border (see Weber and Mortensen above: p. 272). It houses today the secretary's office on the ground floor, and the Blue Room which serves as the office of the director, on the first floor. A small corridor (*dihliz*) gives access from the small entrance courtyard to the main courtyard, while a staircase with an integrated fountain and a toilet leads to the room under discussion. In the 18th century the function of this setting was similar to nowadays. After one entered Bayt al-'Aqqad through the cut in the Roman Wall, the small courtyard served as a distributor of space, while the Blue Room provided a place to receive guests and/or function as an office (just as it does today – i.e. the director's office where guests are welcomed). It is most probably this function that gave the room special importance in the 18th, 19th and early 20th century. In contrast to many other rooms in the house, it was always rearranged and repainted to match the changing taste of its users. After being constructed in the traditional Damascene techniques, probably in the early 1760s, it was totally redesigned in Ottoman rococo around 1840, only to be changed again during the rearrangement of the house around 1900.

The building phase around 1840 is the most important one for the appearance of the room today. At that time the original structure from the 18th century was particularly modified: The old wooden ceiling was covered with a blue painted canvas fixed on all four sides with a strip of painted wood bordered by a cornice with a concave profile. In the middle the canvas was stacked by a wooden medallion on the ceiling (Figs. 255 and 262). Also the walls were totally redesigned. We do

not know about the wall-covering of the 18th-century room, but most probably we have to imagine a similar *boiserie* as found in the Red Room (see Haase above: p. 300 ff.). This Damascene painted wood panelling (*'ajami*) must have been taken down to be replaced by more fashionable blue-painted plaster. The redesign most probably followed the original changing rhythm of niches and windows, but the niches must have been enlarged and covered by the new murals. Paintings were also applied on other parts of the wall and on the concave cornice of the ceiling, structured by small cartouches, each of them showing a small landscape motif. Even though some of the paintings are lost today, one can easily imagine what the room looked like in the 1840s. One could add to this picture a small platform (*tazar*, for the structure of traditional rooms see Weber and Mortensen above: p. 255) on the eastern side of the room connecting the two entrances on the western side.¹ Today no remains of the *tazar* are visible, and rooms with no distinction between the higher proper living area (*tazar*) and the lower threshold zone (*'ataba*) only became common in the second half of the 19th century. Rooms with a plain floor should also have a c 70 cm high raised dado on the lower part of the wall or, in important rooms on upper floors, paintings imitating the dado. However, there was no arch, which normally separates the *'ataba* and *tazar* area, and the existence of a *tazar* must remain hypothetical. This “hypothetical” *tazar* was most probably a remaining structure from the 18th century and was integrated in the 19th-century making of the Blue Room.

Around 1900 the Blue Room was again changed. If there was a *tazar*, it must have been removed during the reorganization of the house, when the western and eastern wings in the main courtyard were added. At that time one preferred rooms with a continuous plain level suitable to put in high chairs and tables, newly introduced into the Damascene way of living during the 19th century. The *tazar*, causing a step in the room, was a hindrance and taken out. A new door was most probably broken through the southern wall, to connect the Blue Room to the new eastern wing of the main courtyard. Also the walls were at the latest repainted at this time and the murals were covered by a monochrome blue colour.

Regarding these three major steps in the making of the Blue Room, one can state that the main features, and artistically the most important and coherent ones, belong to the 1840s. This is why the restorers highlighted this phase and why this article will focus exclusively on it.

The Change of Taste and the Introduction of Ottoman Baroque and Rococo in Damascus

The turn from the 18th to the 19th century marks a major shift in Damascene interior design, much more essential than any other change that occurred during the

255. *Bayt al-'Aqqad: the ceiling of the Blue Room* (R.F. 2001).





256. Bayt al-'Aqqad: the southern façade of the Blue Room (R.F. 2001).

Mamluk and Ottoman periods. These changes not only affected interior decoration, but also began to change the way rooms were used. New functions and demands resulting from a new way of life affected the layout of rooms considerably. While modifications to layout occurred in the second half of the 19th century, and are dealt with elsewhere in this book (*Skovgaard-Petersen and Weber: p. 358 ff.*), I will concentrate here on the stylistic change that led to the Turkish Rococo design of the Blue Room.

The new style applied was strongly inspired by European Art and expressed itself through the way of painting and the new applied materials (canvas instead of painted or lacquered wood). Most of the local techniques of decoration were replaced by new ones – Turkish Rococo or rather Baroque. The integration of the new patterns into Damascene craftsmanship was not an *ad hoc* take-over but a continuous development during some six decades. First new forms and techniques were combined with the “traditional” Damascene way of interior design. Between the late 14th and the early 19th century colour-paste decorations and painted



257. *Pharaon Collection / Mouawad Museum: room G2, 1200/1785-86 (s.w. 2003).*



258. *Bayt al-Quwatli / al-Muradi: the room's westside, 1215/100-01 (s.w. 2002).*

wooden '*ajami* panels (often enriched by marble dado and sometimes faience tiles) had developed into being the most common way to decorate rooms (for these traditional techniques see Weber 2004b). But starting from around 1770 the wooden '*ajami* panels and the colour-paste became old fashioned vis-à-vis the "modern" rococo paintings or marble and wooden carvings, and from the 1820s-30s onwards were produced less and less. Voluminous work of stucco and wooden carvings in the '*ainab* style ('*ainab* – grape), rounded marble dado, ceilings with oil-painted canvas and wooden carving became the fashionable way to decorate a new house. In the 1830s/40s, the time when the Blue Room was created, the shift from the old to the new was nearly completed. The following will portray the main steps of this development.

During the Ottoman period (1516-1918), the first heyday of artistic exchange between the capital Istanbul and the city of Damascus took place. This was in the late 16th and early 17th century, when many aspects of architectural ornamentation were newly introduced to Damascus (for example the motif of the tulip) and



integrated next into the existing Mamluk designs. But from the early 17th century to the late 18th century any direct influence from Istanbul was limited. Damascene craftsmen developed, mainly out of the given corpus of techniques and patterns, a distinctive local Damascene style of what was recognized as good taste. Only paintings on wooden wall panelling show certain similarities between the two cities. The depictions of fruit bowls and vases with arrangements of flowers in the central Ottoman setting, most famously in the dining room (Yemish Odasi) of Ahmad III (1703–1730) from 1705–06, are closely related to what otherwise can be found painted on wood in Syria. At the same time traditions of local geometrical design (as a heritage of the Mamluk past) and a strong local consistency in techniques, showed a certain resistance to fashions from Istanbul. In the first half of the 18th century Istanbul was not the reference point for style for Damascenes. New patterns and techniques that had appeared in the capital arrived in Damascus quite late. In the Ottoman centre, art was strongly influenced by European models of Baroque/Rococo decoration during the first half of the 18th century and especially from the late 1720s onwards. From the middle of the 18th century the new technique of landscape paintings on walls was brought to the capital. But the big Syrian cities remained at first unimpressed by the new trends in good taste. The European-like landscape paintings and voluminous wood carving or stone cutting were not at all visible in the middle of the 18th century. Some shapes of floral

259. *Bayt Nizam / 'Ali Agha Khazina-Katibi: qa'at al-'Ainab, detail (s.w. 1998).*

260. *Bayt al-'Aqqad: Blue Room (s.w. 2002).*

261. *Bayt Nizam / 'Ali Agha Khazina-Katibi: qa'at al-'Ainab, ceiling above the 'ataba (s.w. 2002).*



design or themes of painting on wood adopted the innovative layout, but the overall composition and arrangement remained the same. This started to change in the 1770s and the "Ottoman Rococo" became *à la mode* in Damascus, with lacquered wall panels taking up the latest style (see Fig. 257), and arrangements of colour-paste decoration integrated a new way of stone carving. For the wooden interiors the design of flowers, borders and cartouches became much more curved and choppy in a rococo manner.

The wall paintings known in Istanbul also had their influence on the wooden wall covers and ceilings. It is interesting to note that small cartouches in the style of miniature paintings appeared in Damascus just after the new way of wall painting became *en vogue* in Istanbul. Having been known in Istanbul for two or three decades, the new technique spread out into the provinces of the empire in the last decades of the 18th century. In Damascus nearly all of the many 'ajami-wall panels produced were decorated with the new motifs from the 1770s onwards. A Damascene room today in the Pharaon Collection/Mouawad Museum in Beirut, dated 1189/1775, is the first known example of its kind. The style, size and placing of the paintings was quite different from the Istanbul models. In Damascus they were sometimes similar to the traditional style of book illuminations, rather small and arranged alongside familiar depictions of fruit bowls and vases with bouquets of flowers on the 'ajami panels (see Fig. 216 and Fig. 257), whilst in Istanbul the paint-



262. *Bayt al-'Aqqad, Blue Room: ceiling*
(S.W. 2002).

263. *Bayt al-'Aqqad: northern façade*
of the Blue Room (R.F. 2001).

ings were placed more sparsely on the upper parts of walls, showing a tendency towards a naturalistic depiction in the European style. However, the influence from Istanbul is not only visible by the integration of such paintings on the '*ajami*-panels, but also by the choice of themes. From the 1780s onwards most Damascene landscape paintings had the same themes as the wall paintings in the capital or nearby urban centres: landscapes of the Bosphorus, gardens and palaces, Ottoman mosques, green hills and boats filled the screen. Bosphorus-like landscapes with palaces on the banks were the most favourite theme. The Bosphorus played an essential role in 18th-century daily urban culture and leisure in Istanbul, expressing itself in large *sarays* of the ruling circles and in gardens open to the public along the shores of the Bosphorus.

During the first decades of the 19th century more and more voluminous wood carving was integrated in Damascene interiors. At first this was only in niches (Fig. 258), but soon cupboard doors and parts of the panels themselves were more structured by carved ornaments and curved strips and less by painted patterns in rectangular frames. The same is true for ceilings only in the middle at first, but later fine-worked three dimensional grilles with a rococo sweep were fixed all over and underlaid by small mirrors. The same can be observed with regard to other ma-



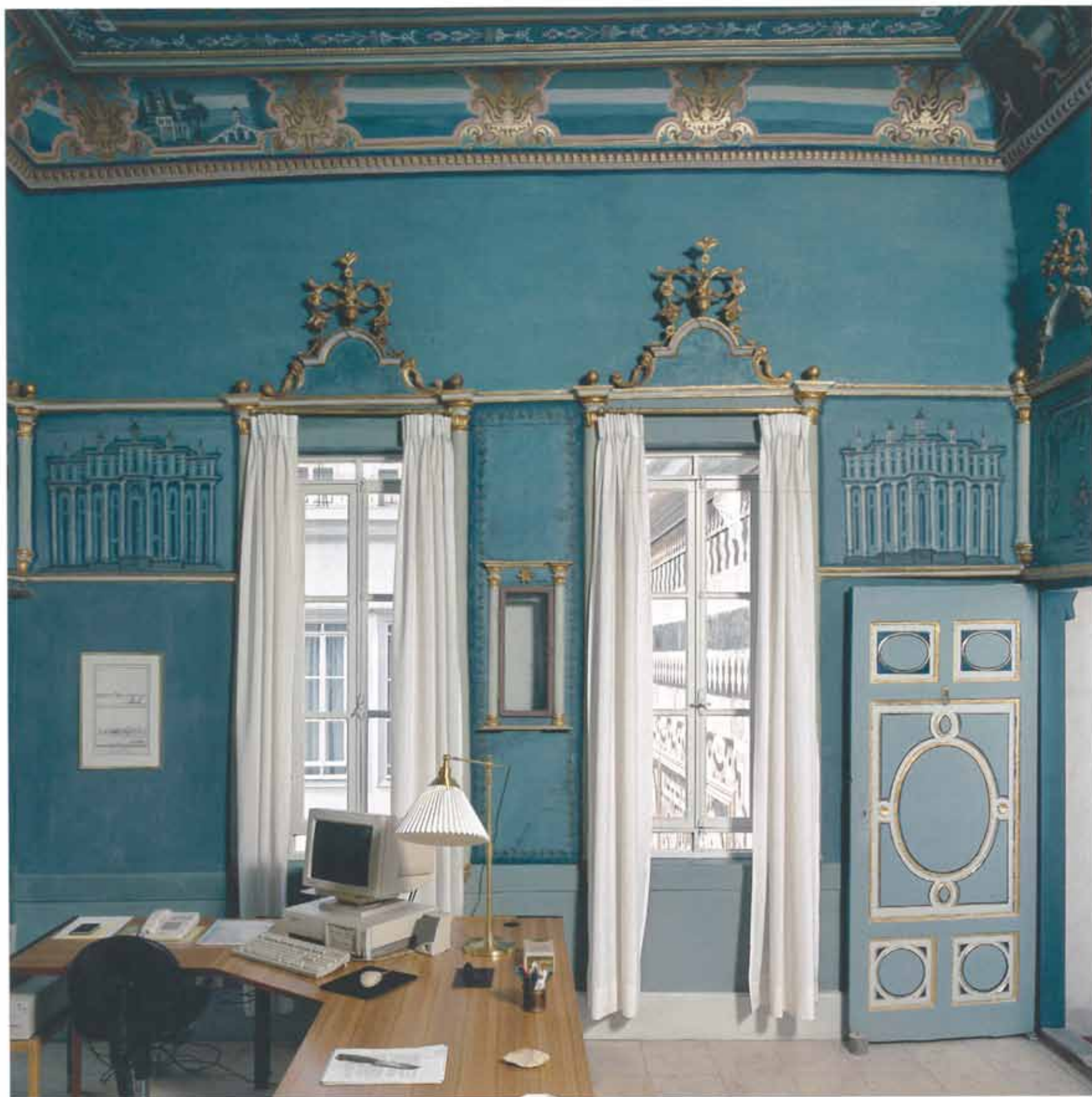
terials, most prominently the stone and marble carvings and marble mosaics on walls replacing more and more the colour-paste patterns. The south-eastern *qa'a* of the Bayt al-Quwatli/al-Muradi in Kallasa is – as far as I know – worked without any of the traditional techniques and applies the rococo/baroque style on all of its walls for the first time. The lower part of this room is dated 1260/1801–02. In the 1820s and 1830s this style becomes the very model of how to express good taste. The best known examples are the *qa'as* of Bayt Nizam/'Ali Agha Khazina-Katibi (Figs. 259, 261, 269, 271, cadastre XIII-334) and Bayt al-Mujallid (cadastre IX-252, recently restored by Nora Joumblat) from the late 1830s/early 1840s. They were most probably decorated by a travelling workshop (see Weber 2002: 155–163, Figs. 3–7).

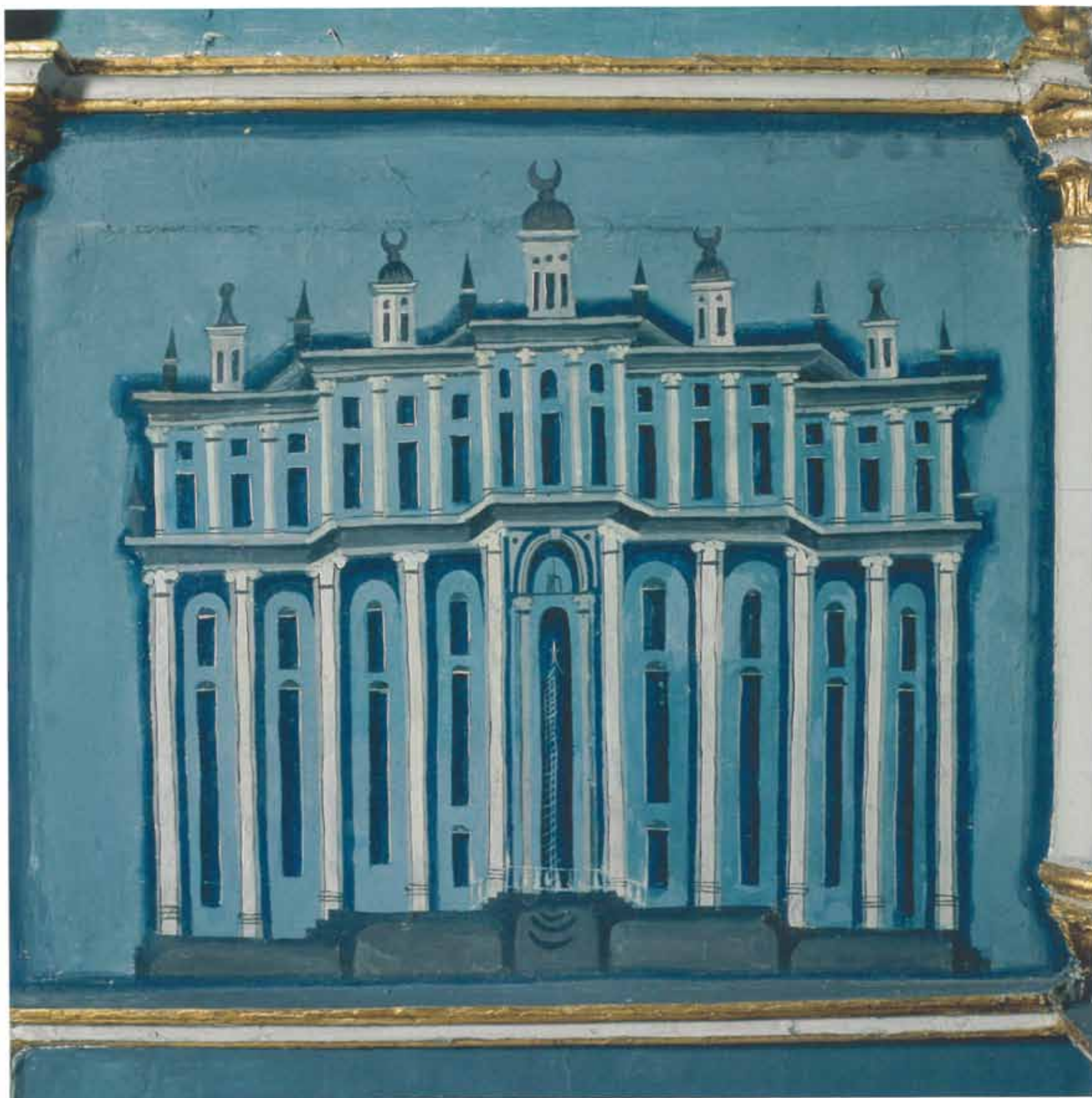
Both houses, Bayt Nizam/Khazina-Katibi and Bayt al-Mujallid, are closely related to the Blue Room of Bayt al-'Aqqad. Due to some stylistic alternations, the room in the 'Aqqad House can be dated a little later than the *qa'as* mentioned above. The Blue Room has in many respects been influenced by these models of new taste in Ottoman rococo, which had spread to many urban centres of the Empire in the early 19th century. Most distinguishable are fine wood carvings combined with stucco modelling on preformed wires, mainly of vine tendrils and grapes. Thus, I will call the style of these free-standing and gold-painted “sculptures” above niches, on cupboard doors and ceiling *'ainab* style after the *Qa'at al-'Ainab* (salon of the grapes) of Bayt Nizam/Khazina-Katibi (see Figs. 259–260).

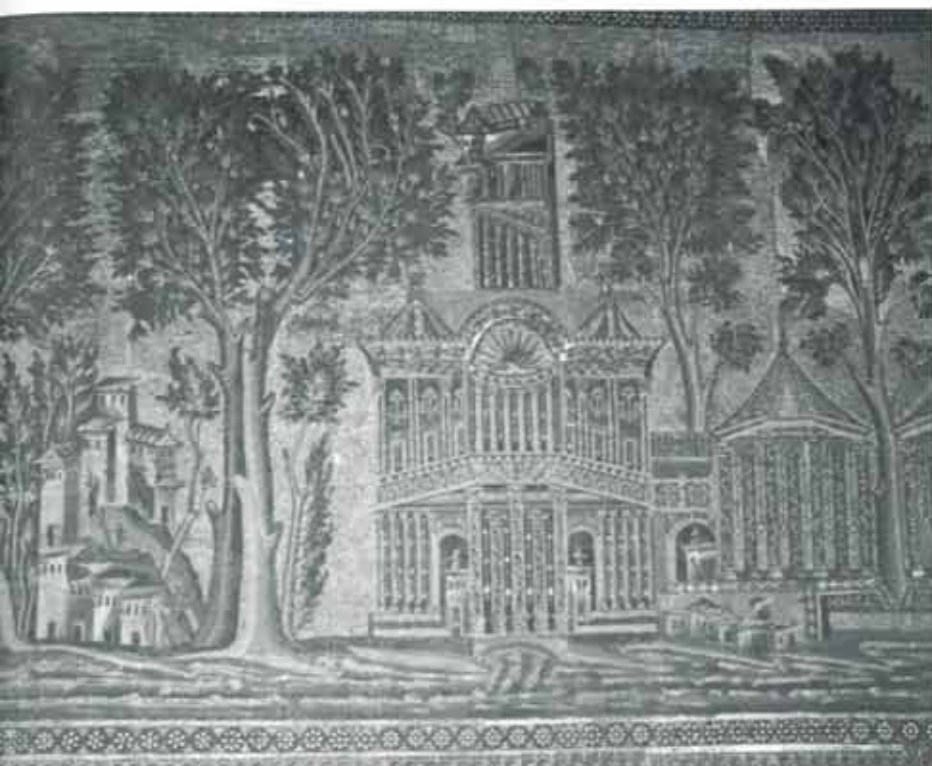
Along the new version of floral design one finds the coat of arms in the *Qa'at al-'Ainab*, which is quite common in the Ottoman realm and much used in Damascus from the 1820s to the 1850s. In the *Qa'at al-'Ainab* one finds dozens of them, expressing the vicinity to the Ottoman State, as the half-moon and star, the symbol of the Ottomans, also does (Fig. 261). Such expressive symbols of political sympathy were unknown in Damascus before. In the case of Bayt Nizam/Khazina-Katibi one can directly trace the existence of this decorative element to the position of its owner. 'Ali Agha Khazina-Katibi, who was chief tax collector of the province in the 1830s and through intermarriage best connected to the highest levels of power during the Egyptian interregnum (1832–1840, which did not help him when he was accused of conspiracy against the Egyptians and executed before they left). However, the Egyptian ruling class was at that time part of Ottoman culture and it is quite usual to see symbols of the Ottoman state in their palaces and houses in Cairo. To find the coat of arms and the half-moon and star in the house of Ali Agha, an important figure in the Egyptian administration of Syria is not strange.

In the Blue Room of Bayt al-'Aqqad a much simpler coat of arms is prominently fixed in the middle of the ceiling (Fig. 262). Most probably the owner of the house in those days wanted to demonstrate his relation to Ottoman culture or even his affiliation with the army in the room where he received his guests. Maybe it was only a sign of good taste in the 1840s to integrate this symbol in the interior decor-

264. Bayt al-'Aqqad: western façade of the Blue Room (R.F. 2001).



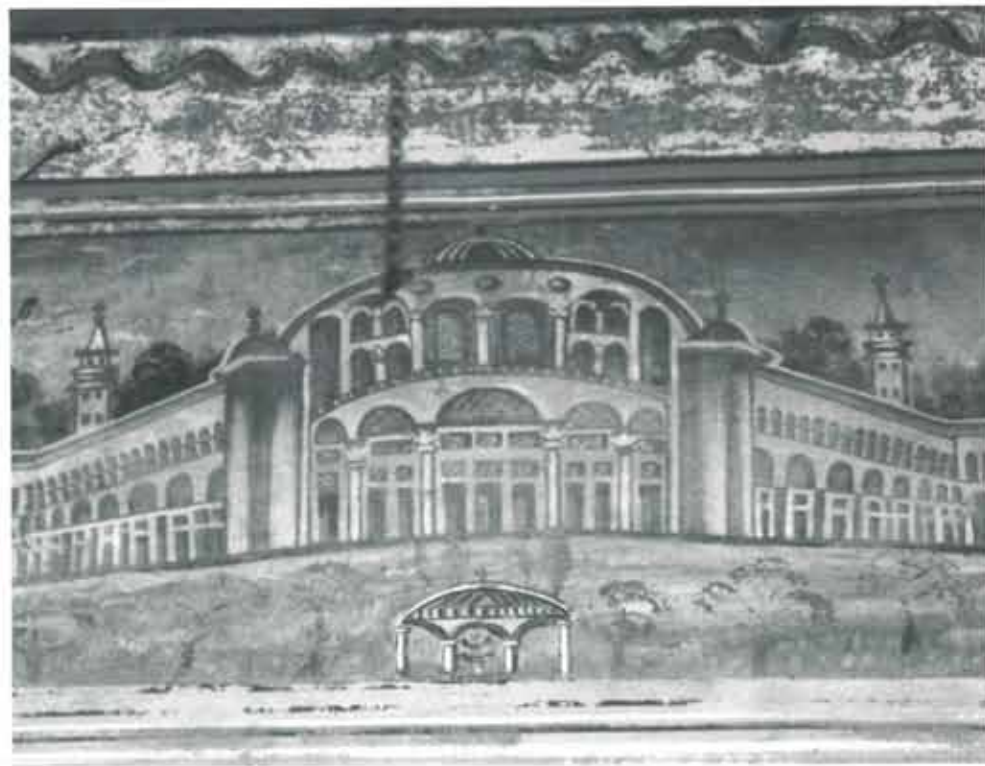




265. *Bayt al-'Aqqad: motif from the western façade of the "Blue Room" (R.F. 2001).*

266. *Umayyad Mosque: west riwaq (s.w. 1998).*

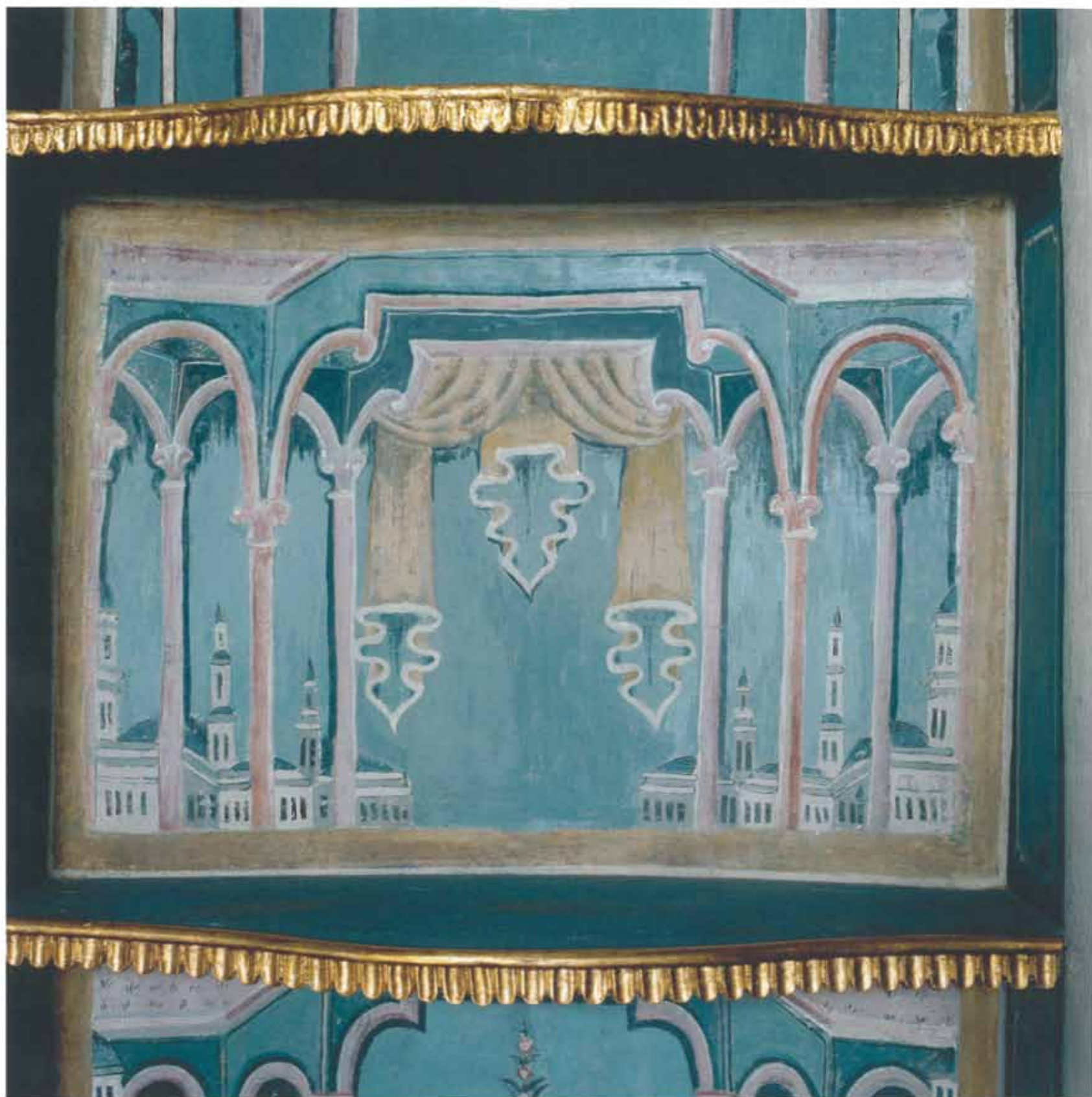
267. *Bayt Safi al-Lutf: iwan (s.w. 1997).*



ation of semi-public rooms. Wall paintings are another important element of the new way of interior design in the 'ainab style, which quite often depicted symbols from the Ottoman realm.

Images of Imagined Worlds on Damascene Walls

As mentioned above, wall paintings were newly introduced to Istanbul in the middle of the 18th century and it seems that the appearance of small landscape paintings in the 'ajami wall panelling from the 1770s onwards was a response to the new fashion in Istanbul. It is not known when in Damascus paintings were directly applied on upper parts of walls, in cornices of ceilings and on canvas on ceilings like in the capital. The first dated example known to me is the western *murabba'* of Bayt Sarji from 1235/1819–20, recently restored by Maya Marmarbach (Fig. 276). From the 1830s on these paintings became widely spread in Damascus and continued to be applied during the 19th century and up to the 1920s. Especially in the 1860s many large houses were built and their walls and ceilings decorated with images of cities (like Istanbul, Paris or Naples) or imagined cityscapes, Bosphorus-like landscapes and idealized architectural perspectives. Some rooms like the *salya* of the southern Barudi house (cadastre XXIV-653), the northern *qa'a* of the Qanbazu house (cadastre XVIII-457) or a recently restored room of the upper





268. *Bayt al-'Aqqad: motif from the eastern façade of the Blue Room (R.F. 2001).*

269. *Bayt Nizam / 'Ali Agha Khazina-Katibi: northern qa'a (s.w. 1998).*

270. *Bayt al-Jazairi: iwan (s.w. 1997).*



floor of Bayt al-Mujallid look like picture books, filled with many smaller and larger paintings expressing horizons of Damascene worldviews (see Weber 2002). Only those motifs depicted in the Blue Room will be discussed here.

The paintings of the Blue Room are in three groups, in general following their positioning: On the eastern façade there are six architectural perspectives enriched with flowers, small architectures and curtains in each compartment of the two built-in cupboards (Figs. 98, 268). A similar motif is applied above the entrance of the northern wall (Fig. 263). The second group consists of two unframed architectural perspectives on the western façade (Figs. 264, 265). The paintings in the cornice of the ceiling form the third group. From the, originally, 16 cartouches (four on each side and separated by a rococo floral motif) eleven were recovered during the restoration. They are filled with small fantasy architectures and trees, and in one case accompanied by a steam boat (Figs. 255, 271, 273, and 275).

Looking closer at the paintings one can make contradicting observations. Upon entering the Blue Room from the small courtyard, two architectural presentations can be found to the right, which represent an idealized façade of a building with a strong centralized geometry (Fig. 265). This unrealistic treatment of a façade perspective is marked by long columns on the lower part and small columns on the upper part of the façade. Small lanterns topped by half moons are the main feature of its roof. The emphasis lies on the columns and the façade seems to be unfolded,





271. Bayt al-'Aqqad: cornice in Blue Room
(R.F. 2001).

272. Bayt Nizam / 'Ali Agha Khazina-
Katibi: qa'at al-'Ainab (s.w. 1998).

273. Bayt al-'Aqqad: cornice in Blue Room
(R.F. 2001).

274. Bayt al-Mujallid: qa'a (s.w. 1998).





275. Bayt al-'Aqqad: cornice in Blue Room before restoration (P.M. 1997).



276. Bayt Sarji: south-western murabba' (S.W. 1998).

ready to be pinned on a wall. One is tempted to see an influence from the famous architectural presentation in the mosaics of the Umayyad mosque (706–715) which show similar idealistic buildings with colonnades of a strong centralized symmetry (Fig. 266). Indeed the Umayyad mosque itself became topic of the murals and the depiction in the Bayt Safi al-Lutf (cadastre XIV-223, Fig. 267) follows the above described principles of perspective.

However, these parallels are not a causal relationship but a happy match. Similar depictions and principles of architectural presentations can already be seen in the earlier paintings in Istanbul, like in the Sadullah Pasha Yalisi from the late 18th century or a bit later in the sultan's lounge (*hünkâr mahfeli*) of Atik Valide Camii in Üsküdar-Toptashi. These centralized unfolded façades, structured horizontally by stretched window or columns, are highly inspired by European wall paintings and spread throughout the Ottoman Empire. Thus in Damascus it fits well in the local heritage of depictions on walls but does not depend on it.

The second group of murals in the Blue Room follows similar patterns, only here a perspective arcade serves as the frame of each compartment between the shelves of the built-in cupboards. A centred vase with flowers or a curtain hangs in the middle of the arcade, while small houses frame the setting from both edges (Fig. 268). These settings give as a *trompe l'œil* the illusion of small windows with curtains, but with interesting surrealistic details: some of the architectural depictions are situated inside the frames and the proper treatment of perspective is negated. However, these nested miniature houses are a motif that one can find already in the mosaics of the Umayyad mosque (Fig. 266, middle left). But similar to the patterns discussed above this topic is frequently applied in earlier paintings in other cities of the Empire and cannot be explained by the Umayyad mosaics. In Damascus it appears quite often in cupboards (as in Bayt Nizam/Khazina-Katibi) or in slightly different variations on upper parts of walls. There are many examples, among others Bayt al-Mujallid, Bayt Nizam/Khazina-Katibi (Fig. 269) or Bayt Bayt Jaza'iri (Fig. 270, Cadastre XIX-992).

The third group in the Blue Room shows the most variations. The small cartouches of the cornice at the ceiling are filled with different small landscapes, most of them consisting of architectural representations framed and populated by trees (Figs. 271, 275). The small architectural representations follow more or less a similar treatment of architectural perspective as described above. Quite comparable settings can be found in many Damascene wall paintings and also here the link to Istanbul can be established. In the capital, murals like in the Sadullah Pasha Yalisi from the late 18th century depict small palaces and pavilions in the same stylistic approach. A painting in Bayt Nizam/Khazina-Katibi presents the setting of such a small palace with a mosque on the shores of the Bosphorus, recalling the splendid *sarays* of the Bosphorus and Golden Horn of the 18th and early 19th centuries. The

way of depicting such a *saray* matches exactly the style of the Istanbul paintings. Most of the Bosphorus drawings are imagined and refer to a symbolic Bosphorus/Istanbul (like Fig. 272). But often the link is established more clearly: The cityscape of Istanbul in Bayt al-Mujallid (Fig. 274) depicts the Nusretiye-Mosque (1825) and the neighbouring palace of Bashikitash – famous those days – quite identical to the painting in Bayt Nizam/Khazina-Katibi. Thus the architectural representations in the cornice of the Blue Room do belong to this group of depictions of sarays known from the 18th century wall paintings in the capital, which spread during the 1830s–40s in Damascus.

Similar architectural depictions dominate most of the other cartouches of the ceiling cornice. Generally the unrealistically drawn buildings can be identified with houses or pavilions. However, two cartouches show instead a steam boat (Fig. 273) and a bridge (Fig. 275). Both motifs are widely spread in Damascus and elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. Nearly all of the bridges – on three, four, five, or even more vaults – are shaped as an idealized model of a typical Ottoman bridge in triangle form with a centred top as the vertex in the middle of the bridge. Quite often a soldier is placed on one side of the bridge, like in Bayt Sarji (Fig. 276), but more frequently boats are often populating Bosphorus-like landscapes or cityscapes of Istanbul (Fig. 274). From the 1830s onwards, when the first steam boats arrived in Istanbul, these ships were depicted most of the time as Ottoman flagged steamboats. Later, other symbols of modern times, like trains, were also introduced. However, both briefly discussed topics are very interesting, since Damascus is neither a harbour town, nor can one find an Ottoman-shaped bridge in the direct vicinity of the city. The dozens of depictions of bridges and ships belong – like the Bosphorus landscapes and architectural depictions – to a fixed set of motifs arriving in Damascus with the new decoration technique of wall paintings. This technique is part of a whole programme of interior design spreading during the first decades of the 19th century in many living rooms of Damascene residences, replacing the local decoration techniques and patterns. Quite often symbols of the Ottoman Empire were fitted into the decorative programme, and Istanbul as a centre of artistic reference became stronger than it had ever been before. This radical change was not restricted to decoration alone, but many other aspects of urban life changed during the 19th century following the Ottoman reforms as well as general aspects of transport and communication in the Mediterranean. This is discussed elsewhere in this book (see *Meier and Weber* below: p. 390 ff.), but one can summarize that the Blue Room stands at the end of a continuing shift in Damascene interior design from the 1770s to the 1820s, distinguishing the 19th century domestic architecture as much more “Ottoman” than it had ever been before. This new style was taken up in one of the most representative rooms of Bayt al-‘Aqqad by the family that lived in the house during the first half of the 19th century.²

Notes

- 1) There must have been a door before on the southern side, like the one in the south-eastern corner today, and we assume one in the south-western corner also. Unfortunately no stairs or connection from that door to a building further south could be established.
- 2) I would like to thank Yasmine Barriane and Rebecca Sonntag for their critical reading.

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