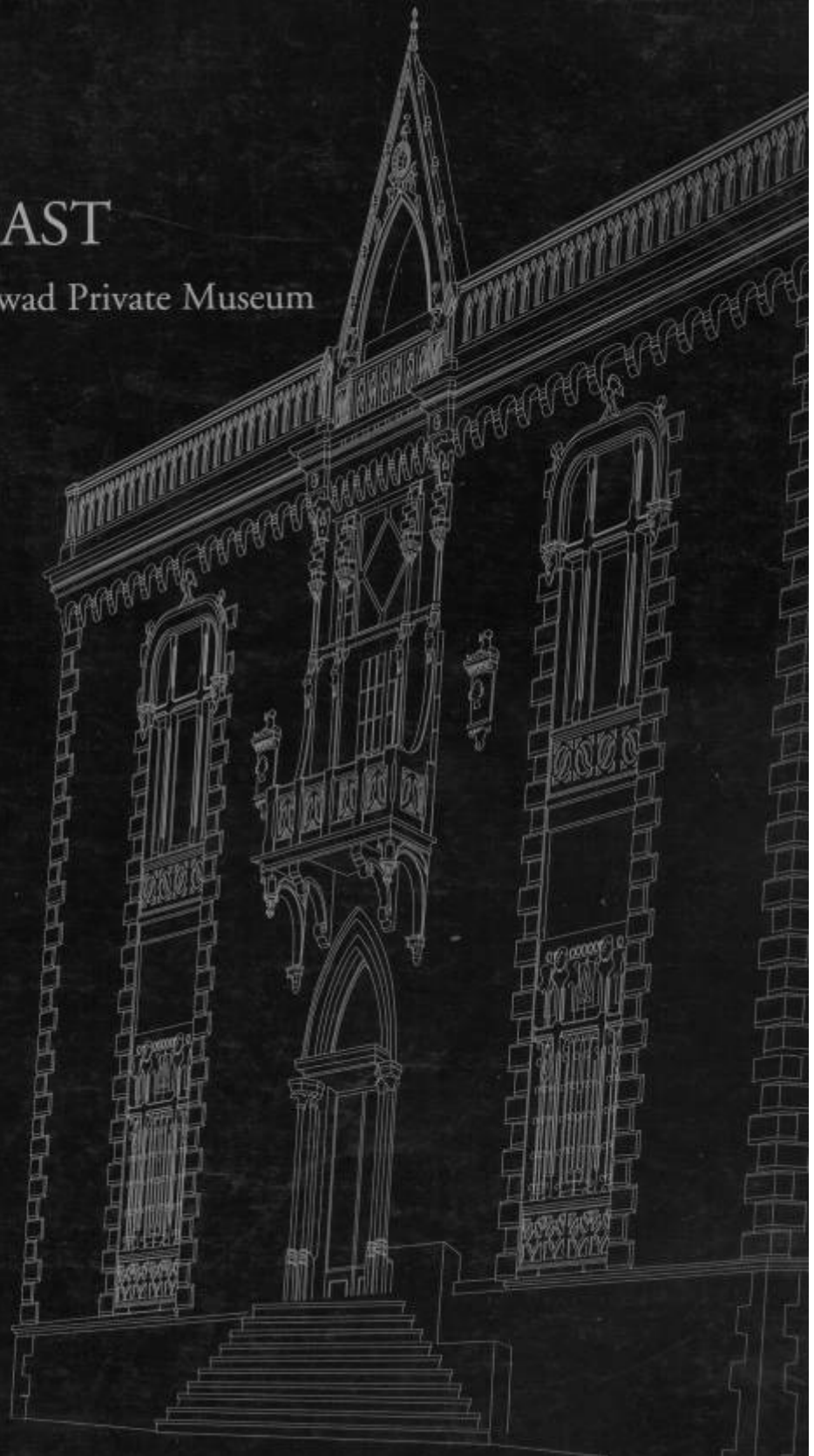
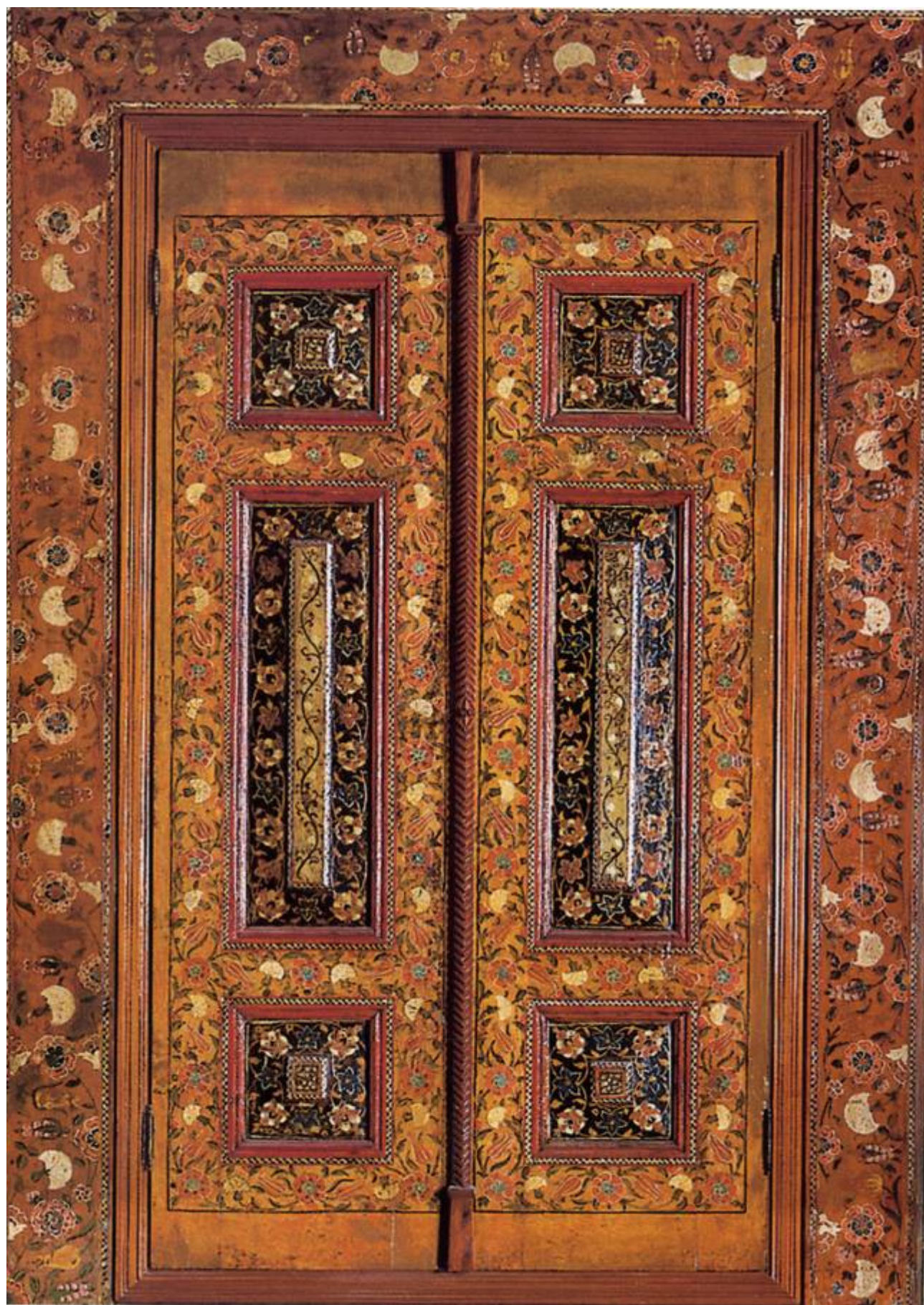


THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

The Robert Mouawad Private Museum





Walls and Ceilings

The collection in the Robert Mouawad Private Museum of interior decoration from Syria is unique; other museums usually only have a single room on display.¹ What was assembled by Henri Pharaon and installed by the architect Lucien Cavro and the Damascene artist-craftsman Abū Sulaimān from the early 1930s and later in the 1950-60s is a whole range of Arab interior decoration from the Ottoman period (1516-1918). The painted and lacquered wooden panels, beams and coffered ceilings, the carved stone and inlaid paste decoration, along with fine marble mosaics, floors and fountains all come from houses in Aleppo and Damascus and give an impressive picture of the richness of urban life in both cities under Ottoman rule.

Muslim, Christian and Jewish merchants, military officials, notables and dignitaries invested substantial sums of money in their private dwellings. In addition to their exquisite houses, there are also key monuments for the history of Islamic art and architecture in both Aleppo and Damascus. Yet neither city had – at least to the same extent – monumental public architecture of the kind found in Cairo, Istanbul or Isfahan. But as for private houses, and especially their interior decoration, the Syrian cities are of outstanding richness. Even quite modest houses are often filled with wonderful examples of Arab craftsmanship, like small jewelled boxes. The most comprehensive collection in the world of such material is in this Museum.

Its importance lies not only in the sheer quantity and exceptional quality of the pieces, but also in the presence of so many early examples of interior decoration, relative to what is still preserved in Syria itself. During recent surveys hundreds of houses in Aleppo and Damascus have been visited and more than sixty houses in Damascus alone with lacquered wooden wall panelling have been documented.² When Henri Pharaon bought this collection from the 1930s onwards he chose – obviously well informed – the oldest and finest pieces to be found on the market. In this sense the museum is a micro-world, a Syrian living room representing the many thousands of interiors in Damascus and Aleppo with their most important features.

For more than a century now dozens of rooms from Aleppo and Damascus have been acquired for museums and the villas of wealthy people in the Arab world and abroad. Some of them are known and accessible to the public, but others have unfortunately totally disappeared. Many of them came to Beirut or were incorporated in other houses of the region. But many more were demolished by ignorant city planners and investors. Even today rooms are being pulled down or left exposed, so that wind and rain destroy the houses and their masterpieces of Arab art, gradually making way for the short-term interests of real estate agents. Every day the Arab world is losing the testimony of the extraordinary craftsmanship of past centuries. Thanks to Henri Pharaon many examples of this cultural heritage survived, and it is to the merit of Robert Mouawad that this unique collection of Syrian interior decoration has been saved for posterity and made it accessible in his Museum.

Most of the interiors presented in this Museum belong to houses that were torn down, and it is often unclear where the houses were standing and what they looked like. Even the historical sources provide almost no information on their location and context. We can only draw conclusions from other residences still standing in the old cities of Aleppo and Damascus. A rare exception is the house of Ernst Lütticke (1843 - 1904) in

Damascus, which is documented by historical photographs; many pieces in the collection belonged to the Beit Lütticke.³

The house, which was built around 1775, served during Lütticke's residency between 1881 and 1904 both as a private bank, and the German consulate. It was destroyed in the 1950s in the course of the ongoing reorganisation of the quarter of Sîdî 'Amûd / al-Ḥarîqa after the French bombardment of 1925. Various pieces from the house are placed around the ground floor of the Museum⁴ and old photographs provide us an idea of what it originally looked like.

As mentioned above all the examples of Syrian interior architecture originate from the domestic quarters of houses in Damascus and Aleppo. These houses belong to the family of Arab court-yard houses and their main characteristic is the central court, to which the all rooms are oriented, forming a single architectural unit. Until the middle of the 19th century all the windows and decorated facades looked on to the courtyard, whilst the street facades were normally plain walls on the ground level and only had very limited windows on the upper floor, normally with no decoration at all. The splendour of the house was displayed on the courtyard facades and in the interiors, and it is from these living rooms that the walls and ceilings of the Museum come. During the period that covers the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, the plan of these rooms was highly formalised.

Unlike interiors with which we are familiar today, which enclose a more or less unstructured space and a plane levelled floor, the rooms from Mamluk and Ottoman times had a structure that was orientated towards the entrance door, very often the only access to the room. When entering a room one came first to a lower part, the so-called '*ataba* (threshold); this often takes one-fifth up to one third of the entire space. This part, habitually paved with rich marble mosaics, was the entrance area of the room. It might well incorporate a fountain, and most probably the three fountains on the ground floor of the Museum in G6, G9 and G12, and in F8 on the upper floor are quite early Damascus examples.

These fountains are only slightly raised above the floor, which means they are most probably from the 16th or 17th century or even before (13th to 15th century, like the fountain in G12). The majority of the indoor fountains from the 18th and 19th century were noticeably higher. The second part of the room, which rises like a platform between 40 and 60 cm from ground level was the *ṭazar*. In reception rooms (*qā'a*) of houses of more wealthy families the '*ataba* could lead to two or even three *ṭazars*. There is no raised *ṭazar* in the Museum but in some rooms the concept of the two different sections, the '*ataba*/*ṭazar*-arrangement was kept, especially in G12-13 and G6-7.

One normally enters the '*ataba* with one *ṭazar* on one side, facing a niche on the other side, sometimes flanked by two smaller niches, while in richer furnished rooms a fountain is placed in the middle of the '*ataba*. This is exactly the situation in G6. A fountain and fine marble paved floor do belong to a '*ataba*. Today while entering G6 from G4 one finds the niche with a splendid decorated wall on the left side facing where would have been the original entrance from G3. From the '*ataba* one enters the *ṭazar*, G7. The back



wall facing the entrance is - with a central niche - the most richly decorated one in *qā'as* with two or three *ṭazars*. One of the oldest niches so far known is the back wall of G5 (see no. 100).

The two elements of the rooms, the *ṭazar* and the *'ataba*, were separated by the step between them and by an arch over the step. There is no rising *ṭazar* in the Museum, but many of the arches that were used to separate the *'ataba* and *ṭazar* were integrated in the rooms, like all the three arches of G4, the arch between G6 and G7, between G12 and G13, between G9 and G10, G10 and G11 and the large window in F1.

This arrangement was highly formalised and nearly all rooms in old houses in Damascus and Aleppo were organised in this way, especially those built before 1850 or not rebuilt after that date. The *ṭazar* was the real living space, with carpets lying on the floor and low diwans running around the walls. Several niches, often with locked doors, gave storage space. While in Damascus the walls of the *'atabas* were designed with horizontal bands of different coloured stones (*ablaq*) with colour paste decoration, the *ṭazar* was often covered by lacquered wooden panels. But this is only a tendency; sometimes the whole room was entirely decorated in one of the two technique.

To understand the rich wooden panels, ceilings and wall sequences of stone in the Museum one has to keep in mind the *ṭazars* – ‘*atabas* that existed in Aleppo and Damascus. The ceiling of the ‘*ataba* was usually raised higher than the ceiling above the *ṭazar* and was a painted beam construction with panels and sections inside, while in Aleppo the ‘*ataba* of important *qā’as* were domed. In Damascus the ceilings of *ṭazars* tend to be coffered, hiding the load-bearing beams under lacquered panels. For both the coffered ceiling and the beam ceiling one can find wonderful examples installed in the rooms of the Museum.

Four main decorative techniques were used in Syrian rooms between the 16th and early 19th centuries: the most important are the colour paste and painted wooden panels that were enriched by marble dado and sometimes glazed tiles. The colour paste technique and lacquered wooden panels are of special importance for the collection and will be briefly introduced here.

The colour paste technique emerged in Cairo and Damascus during the late 14th century but became a more or less purely Damascene type of decoration during the 16th century, when it greatly improved, and was incorporated into Mamluk geometric patterns and Ottoman floral motifs such as the tulip and carnation. This paste is made out of a coloured mortar, which was inserted into designs carved into stone panels. After filling the paste into the stone it was most probably levelled with a spatula, so that it was flush with the surface, the effect being somewhat like a mosaic. From the 17th century the larger decorative fields were no longer deeply carved into the stone, but worked in paste while only the general lay-out was slightly carved. In the Museum some early examples are the back wall of G5 and the niche in G14 from the early 17th century (see no. 100). But also the side walls of G12 are from the 16th and 18th century, and the arches already referred to above (G4, G6-7, G9-10, G10-11, G12-13, and F12) were made in this technique during the 17th and 18th century. The sidewalls of G6 are from the first half of the 18th century, while the ceiling of G5 and the walls and ceilings of G17 and G18 were made in the late 18th century. All the examples of colour paste decoration mentioned here came from Damascus. But particularly during the 18th century Damascene craftsmen were employed in cities close by, such as Hama (‘Aẓm Palace), Dair al-Qamar (Saray Yūsuf al-Shihābī), and Sidon (Debbanē Palace, which has the finest examples of several buildings with such decoration).⁷ In Aleppo, the colour paste technique was not used, but instead very ornately carved stone decorated the façades of the inner courtyard. In particular, panels of carved stone decoration adorned the outside of the *qā’as*. Also underglaze painted tiles were more widely used in houses in Aleppo than in Damascus. The Museum has a wonderful collection of such tiles from Aleppo, not only of Syrian origin but also from Anatolia, and even imported from as far afield as Holland and the Iberian peninsular (see below, “Tiles”).

Lacquered wooden panels dominate the walls and ceilings of the Museum. They are typical of interior decoration in many towns of the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans to Palestine and Egypt, and among them Syria holds a special role, for it is in Syria that an outstanding number of such wooden panels were produced. In Syria, during the 17th century at the latest, they start to be painted on a slightly rising relief, which was prepared by a paste from gypsum and glue following the patterns which were outlined on the white

ground. Thus, the paste technique gives the painting volume and, especially during the 18th century, the plastic floral designs cover relatively large surfaces. After the panels and beams for the ceilings were painted and covered sometimes with a thin layer of lacquer, they were nailed together in the workshops with painted or plain wooden strips to frame the panels.⁶ The origin of the technique is still uncertain, but there are such ceilings from the Mamluk period (1250/60 – 1516) both in Cairo and Damascus. With the development of the Syrian T-shape *qā'a* in the 16th century (which looks different in style to the Mamluk *qā'as*, of which a few are still preserved in Cairo), it probably became fashionable to cover the walls with lacquered wood panels. This must remain speculation because of lack of evidence. The oldest known wood paneling on walls was manufactured in Aleppo 1009/1600-01 (1012/1603) and is located today in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin. The Mouawad Museum also has some very early and rare panels from Aleppo of the 16th / 17th centuries (F8, G10, compare catalogue no. 99). The majority of the lacquered ceilings and walls in the Museum are of very fine quality and belong to the 18th century (ceilings in G1-3, G6-13, G15, G18, G19, F1-4, F8-13; walls in G2, G3, G6, G7, G13, F1 to 4, F8-13 – some of them from the 17th century).

Especially during the 18th century these elements of interior decoration became highly standardised and were used in nearly all the houses of the period that have survived till today. In the houses of middle and upper class families – ordinary merchants, religious Sheikhs or military *āghās* – the style of interior decoration was the same and differed only in the scale of the houses and richness of decoration, according to the wealth of the family. It was a matter of good taste to design and decorate a room in this way. Houses were the element of urban architecture and interior decoration people spent most money on, and expressed their good taste in, as described as one of the main characteristics of the 18th century:

“Fundamentally, there was no longer the massive and direct patronage of arts as a natural corollary of court life. Instead, emphasis shifted to a more personal appreciation of the decorative arts among the professional and merchant classes.”⁷

It is this personal or even private character of the arts of the 18th century that we need to consider in our interpretation of the walls and ceilings of Museum. But to understand what the living world of wealthy Aleppine and Damascene people looked like, it is not enough merely to concentrate on the painted walls and ceilings. They are only one component of the complex arrangement of the houses in which everyone spent their daily lives. These interiors were furnished with chests, small benches (*divans*) and low tables, as well as books, fine textiles, Bohemian glass and especially Chinese porcelain. Some of these elements, such as the books and Chinese porcelain, are in the Museum and should be appreciated as an integral part of the whole scheme. Rare early photographs of houses in Damascus show that the niches in the walls were filled with porcelain bowls and plates. It should also be noted that much of the Chinese porcelain in the Museum actually came from houses in a village on the outskirts of Damascus. (see above, “Chinese Porcelain”)

During the period covered by the Syrian interiors in the Museum, “good taste” changed. Some early items show how the influence of Ottoman floral design enriched the local Mamluk tradition. Persian and Chinese models transmitted via Istanbul during the classical Ottoman period also came to Syria. From the middle of the 18th century the cultural horizon shifted as the European style became fashionable in Ottoman Turkey. Floral designs in the European manner became influential in the capital and spread to the provinces. In the last decades of the 18th century traditional decorative techniques and forms began to disappear, to be replaced by the style known as ‘Ottoman Baroque’, which was to dominate Syrian interior decoration in the 19th century.

From the perspective of social and cultural history it is important to recognise that the Museum collection is not limited to the period before European influences were felt. Rather than attempting a synthesis of strictly Syrian interior design, it reflects the changing aspects of Arab-Ottoman culture, which develops over time along with the tastes and perspectives of its patrons. The selection of walls and ceilings which follows illustrates these different stages of development in Aleppo and Damascus by drawing attention to some of the most important pieces on display.

Stefan Weber

- 1 Doubtless the most important single room is the famous room from Aleppo, dated 1009/1600-01 (and repaired in 1012/1603), which is in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin. There are also rooms with lacquered woodwork in the Cincinnati Art Museum (1711); Völkermuseum Dresden (1825); Villa Gutmann in Potsdam; University of Pittsburgh (1782); Manial Palace in Cairo, and parts of a room are in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In New York, two rooms of this kind are known, one in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1707), and the other in the Hagop Kevorkian Centre for Near Eastern Studies (1797). The latter does not contain wood work. For these rooms, see: Thunsch (1987); (1991) for Potsdam; Nippa, Fässler, Siegel & Werner (1999); for Dresden, Fässler (1999a), (1999b); for New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1987) 126-27. For the Aleppo room in Berlin, see Gonnella (1996); Toueir (1969). An extensive publication of the rooms and the wooden wall panels in Syria is under preparation for the Museum journal *Kunst des Orients*.
- 2 For the outcome of the survey see Weber, *Changing World*. For very good overviews of the main monuments and the urban developments, for Aleppo see Gangler (1993); Gaube & Wirth (1984), and for Damascus see Sack (1985), (1989). For some crucial points concerning Aleppo architecture see also David (1982); (1991).
- 3 Using historical maps, I was able to identify the house with plot no XXI/1-67 directly to the south of the Sūq al Ḥamīdiyya. Cavro and Duda refer to the Quwatli house, which was a bit further to the south and must have been still inhabited by the family in the late 19th century (the Quwatlis bought all their large residences in the 1860s and 1870s). Qasāṭili mentions in 1879 the house here as one of the residences of the Quwatlis, see Qasāṭili (1982) 97. Furthermore did the Quwatlis always rebuild their houses in the style of Ottoman baroque? Referring to the pictures of the house, this was obviously not the case here, compare Figs. 1, 2, 10. For Lütticke and the house see: Weber, *Changing World*, II, 2.3., and the catalogue entry of house no. XXI/1-67; Duda (1971) 96 f.
- 4 The colour paste decoration on the arches (first of all the one at the entrance), the stone panels between the Delft tiles, the chimney and the rosettes on the back wall of G9, 10, 11, the ceiling in G5, the inscriptions on the side wall of G5 and G8, as well as the colour paste panels in G16 and G17.
- 5 In Tripoli and Hasbaya are a few examples from the 16th, and turn of the 16th /17th century.
- 6 For this technique, which is known in Europe as pastiglia, see Duda (1971) 29; Fässler (1999a); (1999b); Gonnella (1996) 71; Nippa, Fässler, Siegel & Werner (1999) 150 ff.
- 7 Carswell (1977) 328.

Marble Mosaic

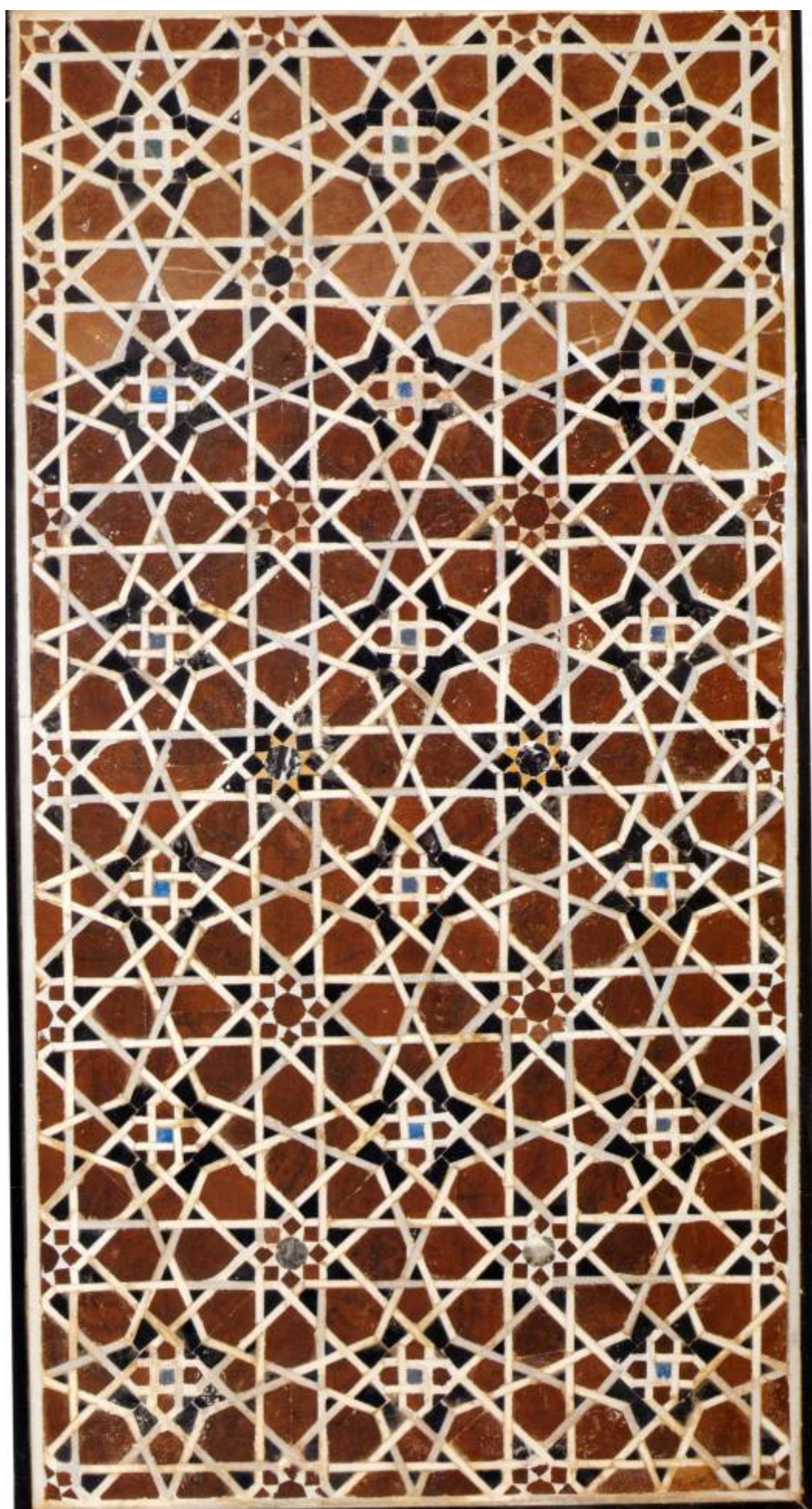
This geometric mosaic panel from Damascus of red, black and white marble is based on eighteen sections, each framing a four-pointed star with a blue ceramic element at the centre. The upper fifth of the panel is later and slightly lighter in colour. Cavro and Duda dated the mosaic to the 14th century, the oldest example of Syrian interior decoration in the museum.⁸ Basis for this early date are several similar marble mosaics in Mamluk buildings, like those in the mosque and mausoleum of Tangiz (AH 718/1318 AD). Fine geometric mosaics are typical of Mamluk decoration. Such mosaics are known since the 1270's and are first documented in Damascus and Cairo directly after the death of Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars (1277) and became fashionable in Mamluk architecture from the late 13th century and throughout the 14th and early 15th centuries, continuing in style up to the 18th century.

For instance, there are examples in the Madrasa al-Jāqmāqiyya (822/1419-20), Sibā'iyya-Mosque (915/1509-921/1515), Mosque of Sinān Pasha (999/1591), 'Imādī house (~1600) and the palace of As'ad Pasha al-'Azm (1163/1749-50).

The origin of the panel in the Museum is not clear and it could have belonged either to a house or a public building. Also the age of the mosaic panel is not easy to establish. The design is very similar to the early Mamluk ones but the example from the 18th century in the palace of As'ad Pasha al-'Azm shows that the same tradition persists until Ottoman period. Like the later example the long white stripes of the mosaic in the museum are not made of mother of pearl but marble, which makes a design from the Ottoman period more likely. On the other hand the early Mamluk mosaics do have the blue ceramic insets like the Museum mosaic. However, due to the limited amount of comparative material it is not possible to give a precise date to this panel, but the condition of the marble suggests an early date.

Red, white and dark blue-grey
marble and light blue faience
91cm x 48cm
Damascus, Mamluk period, or
later
RMFM room G9

8 Duda (1971) p. 91f.

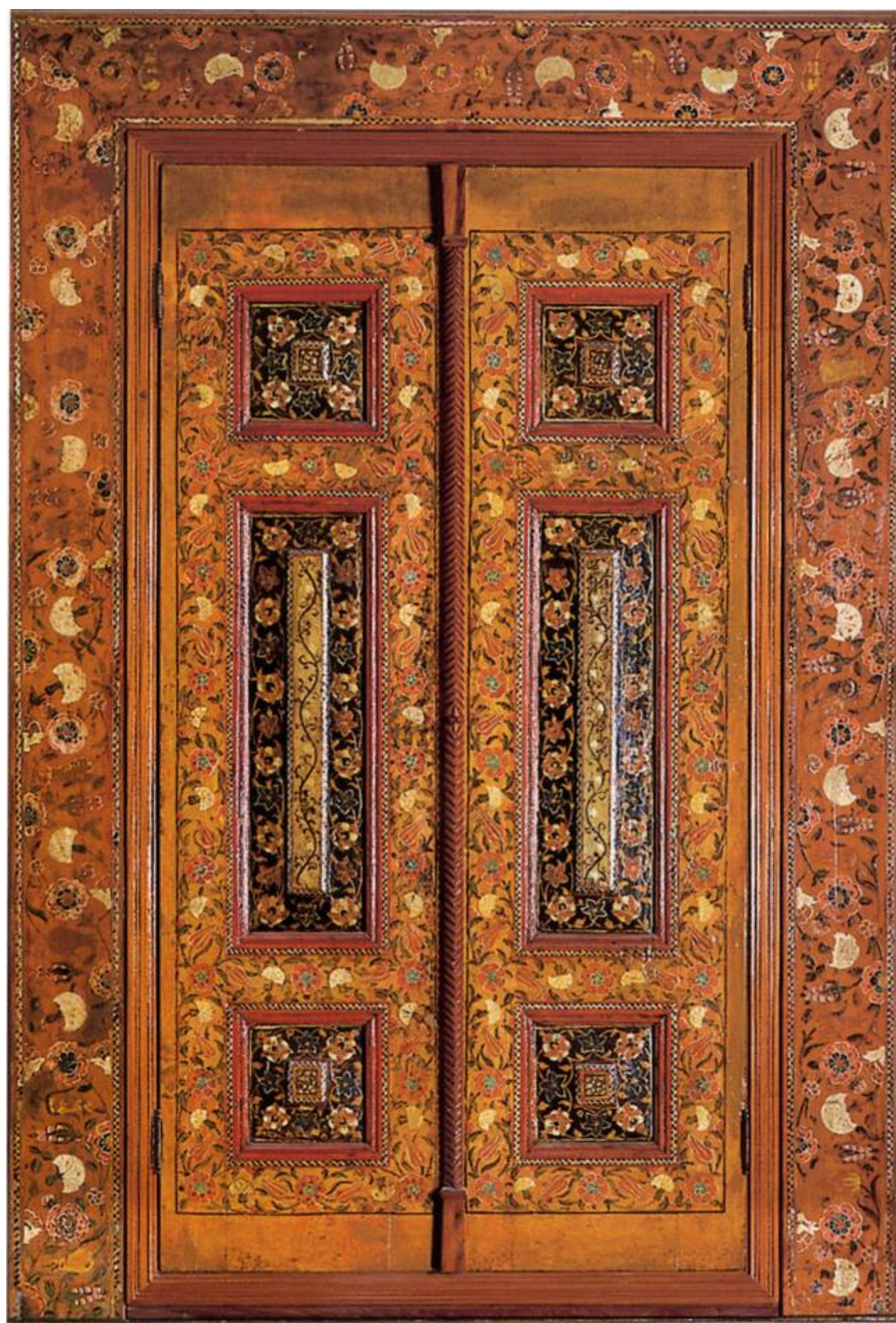


Wooden Door

With its shiny colours and harmonious composition, this wooden door is one of the most attractive pieces in the Museum. The red and golden-orange frames, aubergine ground and the rich floral design place it in the Aleppo school, around 1600. The four tall panels in G13, the inscription and its frame in the gallery at the door F12 (next to some smaller pieces in the collection) and the Aleppo room in Berlin, dated 1009/1600-01 (1012/1603), are similar in colour and design. Its similarity to examples from Aleppo and the lack of early painted wooden wall panels from other Syrian cities makes Aleppo the most likely provenance.⁹ If one compares the tulips, carnations and marigolds of the outer frame (which had lost some of its painting) with the frames of two of the panels in G13, one can see their similarity and it seems that the same craftsmen worked on them. Also the foliage of the tendrils of the inner frames from which the flowers stem is identical to those in G13. The floral arrangement belongs to the classical Ottoman canon of ornamentation and shows the affinity of the Aleppo designs to their origin in Ottoman court art, itself much enriched by Persian and Chinese models. This very strong, formative influence on Aleppo wood painting, and Syrian decorative art in general occurs in the late 16th-early 17th centuries. This style was combined with local decorative elements and techniques, and the indigenous architectural tradition (*qā'a*). After the period of the wooden door under discussion, Syrian interiors still show Ottoman influence of the classical period but then develop further. In the Museum the best example of the introduction of Ottoman floral motives and their local development during the following centuries are the tiles and wooden panels from Aleppo of the 18th century framing the wooden door in F8.

Cedar wood, painted
in polychrome
106cm x 156cm
probably Aleppo
late 16th-early 17th century
RMPM room F8

⁹ There are no known early examples of Damascus lacquer wall panels, which were perhaps quite similar to those from Aleppo.



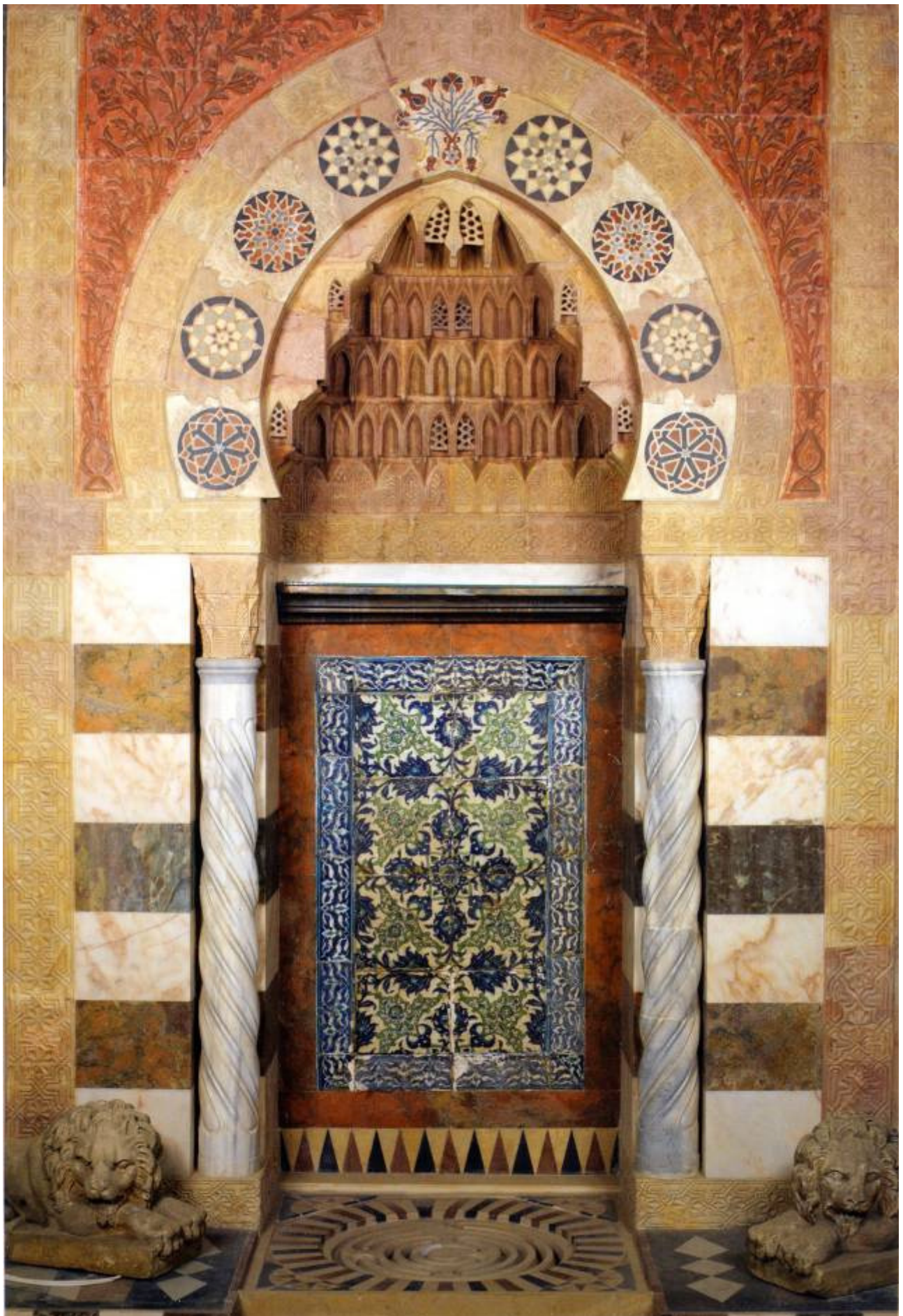
Wall of a Reception Hall with niche and fountain

This back wall of a *ṭazar* in a Damascene reception hall (*qā'a*) is composed of square panels decorated in colour paste framed by moulded ribbons, arranged around a central niche. This niche has a stone arch decorated with colour paste medallions and carved stone spandrels, with spiral columns (reconstructed with some older parts integrated). The glazed tiles of the *sabil* at the back of the niche are probably reused from an earlier structure. The small fountain in front is a replica of the badly preserved original. The panels on the western wall of G5 and most probably the entrance arch belong to the same reception hall. The inscription on the middle upper panel dates the niche to the year 1049/1639–40. The origin of the individual elements is uncertain and different houses have been suggested.¹⁰ The ceiling in G5 belongs to the house of Ernst Lütticke, which was mentioned in the introduction. The wall panelling on the two side walls date back to the 18th century.

Even though one can find among the thousands of still standing houses many masterpieces of craftsmanship, only a very few *qā'a* back walls of this type have survived in Damascus. But its importance lies not only in it being complete. It is among the oldest surviving examples of wall decoration and fills an important gap in the chronology of Damascene decorative techniques. Thanks to the many foundations of governors and dignitaries in the 16th century and the building boom of the 18th century (not only by the 'Az̧m family) one can get a clear idea of construction in these two centuries. But the evidence for the 17th century is very poor. During the period

Sandstone, limestone,
marble and glazed tiles
length of the wall 485cm
height of fountain 183cm
Damascus, 1049/1639–40
RMPM room G5

10 According to Duda the architect Cavro remembered that the niche and other parts of the Museum came from the Nabulusi palace, whilst Henri Pharaon asserted it was the palace of al-Sitt in the Damascus suburb of Midan; see Duda (1971) p. 99.



between 1610 and 1690 there are less than a dozen examples, often inadequately decorated public buildings and a few houses.

And there are very few remains of dated colour paste decoration, like the inner facades of the *turba* of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, which belong to its restoration of 1027/1617-18.¹¹ Other examples can be discovered under many layers of dust at the gate of the Khān al-Marādniyya in the Sūq al-Quṭn, founded by Bahrām Aghā as a *waqf* in 1055/1646.¹² A few years before, in 1049/1640, the rich decorated façades of the *turba* of Shaykh Raslān were erected by the qāḍī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ziry (1001/1592-93 to 1050/1640).¹³ However, none of these examples equal the elaboration and splendour of the niche in the Museum.

Both the niche, and the *turba* of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn show an Ottoman enrichment of the local Mamluk tradition of geometric design. Since the late 16th century floral motifs, first of all tulips and carnation, entered the decorative palette. They were often displayed as a bouquet placed in a vase, or growing from a central point. This motif, deriving from similar depictions in stone carving or ceramic tiles, was now executed in colour paste and soon became one of its main features. There are many 18th century examples of this kind in the collection.

As already mentioned, carved marble and stone, along with the tiles, textiles and manuscript illustrations, play an essential role in transmitting the new floral designs. The *minbar* of the Sinān Pasha Mosque (999/1591), and

11 The *turba* of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (d.1193) at the Ayyubid Madrasa al-'Azīziyah (592/1195-96) was restored with colour paste decorations and tiles. The inscription on the tiles is dated 1027/1617-18. The same date is on the tile inscription on the southern entrance to the *turba*, framed by colour paste decoration of the same period.

12 Al-Muḥibbī (1970), III, 408f.

13 For the Sheikh and his patronage, see al-Muḥibbī (1970), I, p.317.

the back of the Lālā Muṣṭafā Pasha Mosque (974/1566, today in the national museum) are examples from the late 16th century, when this type of floral marble carving was most probably introduced to Damascus. Here one can also find tall tulips and carnations in a vase.

There is a similar niche in G14 at the entrance to G16, which is hardly older. The closest parallels to its colour paste decoration all belong to buildings of the period 1565-1610, for instance, the Madrasa al-Sālīmiyya (974/1566-67), the Darwishīyya Mosque (982/1574-75), the Sinān Pasha Mosque (999/1591) and the very early 17th century gate of the Khān al-Jiqmīq.¹⁴ The G14 niche was most probably made shortly before 1600. The carved floral decoration of the spandrels shows a more static approach than the G5 niche and one can observe a clear evolutionary step between them. Together, the two niches in the Mouawad Museum give a good idea of how Ottoman floral design pervaded Damascene wall decoration. The niche in G6 and the arch between G16 and G17 are examples of the 18th century development of colour paste decoration, the motifs including interweaving stems terminating in a single tulip.

14 The simple drawing of the colour paste decoration and the interwoven ribbons are an argument for the quite early dating; for elements of decoration as an aid to dating Mamluk and Ottoman buildings, see Weber, Mortenson & Boqvist.

Painted Wooden Ceiling

The oldest known examples of similar paintings in the region are on Mamluk ceilings, where small coffers are placed between the supporting beams.¹⁵ The ceiling in F3 belonged to the now destroyed Bait Marshli in Aleppo, and is a good and rare example of a 17th century beam ceiling from the 17th century.¹⁶ Thus, it fills a gap between the Mamluk beam ceilings in Cairo and Damascus and the numerous later ceilings of the 18th and 19th centuries. The oldest known Syrian ceiling have been so far dated. But its importance lies not only in its age.

This ceiling combines three major elements: the Mamluk tradition, the Ottoman impact of the 16th century and the development of the local school of interior design that reached its peak in the 18th century. In many aspects the Mamluk and classical Ottoman tradition prevail, but in some details principals emerge which would influence the later Syrian decorative style from the end of the 17th century onwards.

One of the main characteristics of this ceiling is the strict and very regular subdivision of the space between the beams into regular compartments. Mamluk ceilings, especially in Cairo, show a very similar regular design. This is by contrast not the case with the two known Mamluk ceilings in Damascus.¹⁷ The ceiling in the Museum from Aleppo has several replicas with the early Mamluk ceilings in Cairo, and this tradition seems to be quite striking in Aleppo. The kufic-like geometrical pattern, for example, which could be read as 'Ali (but is understood here more as a purely geometric design) appears frequently in Mamluk geometrical schemes, such as in the ceiling of the Qā'a Kuhya in Cairo.¹⁸

Unlike this, the beams themselves show Ottoman painting typical of the classical period. The colourful tulips, lotus and carnations recall the ornamentation of the four long panels in G13, and the wooden door in F8. Also, the small white inscribed cartouches in red frames on a blue ground echo

Beams of poplar, coffer of cedar, painted and lacquered
600cm x 490cm
Aleppo, 1033/1623-24
RMPM room F2

15 Like the ceiling in the Khānqāh of Amīr Shaikhū (750/1349 and 756/1355) and the modern restored ceiling of Madrasa-Khānqāh of Sulṭān Barqūq (786/1384-788/1386) in Cairo or the Tawrīzī mosque (826/1423) in Damascus.

16 See Duda (1971), pp. 110ff.

17 The *ḥuṣṣ* of Bāyt al-'Aqqād according to our recent research was built between 868/1464 and 920/1514, most probably about 1500 or slightly before; see Weber, Mortensen Boqvist (forth coming).

18 Maury, Garcin, Revault & Zakariya (1982), Fig. 43



similar ones in the Aleppo Room (1009/1600-01) of the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin. But the quality of the paintings of the ceiling in room F2 goes far beyond the parallels mentioned here. There might be various reasons for this. Perhaps the ceiling was treated differently to the walls, or just the workshop employed in this house was not very good, or the school of drawing in Aleppo had already passed its peak. The latter reason is most probably true, because this ceiling stands for the period of transition when local schools of Ottoman art developed all over the Ottoman empire.

The treatment of the central parts of the beams is quite different to the rest and shows a method of lacquering that becomes very typical for the next two centuries. No longer are the flowers themselves in their fine net of tendrils stressed but rather the overall effect. The thin drawing of single flowers gives way to a denser more voluminous composition; the panels no longer appear “painted” but “moulded”. Now the lacquer work starts to be applied on a moulded gypsum paste in slight relief. Floral ornamentation becomes plastic and abstract. Designs are developed that sometimes look as if the background and the patterns flow into one another like a positive – negative mould. Compare as well the floral designs between the landscape cartouches of the wall panels from G2 (102). Many ceilings in the Museum are in this new style (G1, G2, G3, G6, G9, G12, G13, G15, G18, F3).



Painted Wall Panels

These wall panels come from an ordinary interior (*ūdā, murabbā'*) or reception room (*qā'a*) in an unknown house in Damascus.¹⁹ Like the ceiling in F2 (no. 101) this lacquer work also marks a period of transition, but one hundred and fifty years later. The local Damascene style, which developed quite independently from the 17th century having emerged from the Mamluk tradition and Ottoman impact went through a profound change in the last decades of the 18th century. This period is for Damascus the very beginning of a shift of cultural references. Now new tendencies of artistic design, recreated in Istanbul from European models, arrived to Damascus and also started to change the general plan and arrangement of lacquered wooden panels in the inside of houses.

These painted wooden panels stand as an early example of this development. The change is most obvious in two ways. First, the design of flowers, borders and cartouches are much more curved and choppy in a baroque manner and second, alongside familiar depictions of fruit bowls and vases with arrangements of flowers, landscape and architectural painting are introduced. In Istanbul, from the late 1720's onwards, art was influenced by European models of Baroque / Rococo decoration. From the middle of the 18th century the new technique of landscape paintings on walls was brought to the capital. The big Syrian cities remained at first unimpressed by the new trends. Some floral designs responded to the innovative manner, but the overall design remained the same. This started to change in the 1770s and "Ottoman baroque" became *à la mode* in Damascus with lacquered panels taking up the latest style.

These panels are a good example of how the borders of cartouches and the floral designs between changed. Also the wall paintings had their effect on the wooden panels. It is interesting to note, that small cartouches in the style of miniature paintings appeared in Damascus just in that period when the new way of wall paintings became *en vogue* in Istanbul. Having been known in Istanbul for two or three decades, the new technique spread out in the last decades of the 18th century into the provinces of the empire. Starting around 1770 nearly all of the many lacquered wall panels produced

Wooden panels, painted
and lacquered
of varying sizes
Damascus, 1200/1785-86
RMPM room G2

19 Duda (1971) 50ff



in Damascus were decorated with small landscape paintings. The landscape paintings had the same topics as the wall paintings in the capital or nearby urban centres: from the very beginning landscapes of the Bosphorus, gardens and palaces, Ottoman mosques, green hills and boats filled the screen. Bosphorus-like landscapes with palaces on its banks are the most favorite theme at a time when there was an awareness of the large palaces along the shores of the Bosphorus, that the Ottomans began building in the 18th century.

Only the style, size and placing of the paintings was different. In Damascus they are in the late 18th and early 19th centuries sometimes similar to the traditional style of book illustrations, quite small and placed between the floral designs of the lacquer works. In Istanbul, the paintings were placed more sparsely on the upper parts of walls and show a tendency towards a naturalistic depiction in the European style.

The beginning of Syrian landscape painting on interiors is very well documented in the Museum. The panels from Damascus in G7 of 1189/1775 are a few years older than those from G2, until now the oldest known dated panels with landscape and architectural designs. The treatment of the painting is much more static and the subject is not set in a baroque playfully curved cartouche but composed in a rectangular frame. The concept of a "page in a book" is visible. This is also the case with some architectural representations, like those in G13 and F3, which date from the very late 18th century.²⁰ In the following decades, it became quite rare for large surfaces to be designed with landscapes and the pictures were usually set in cartouches or in a floral garland. Exceptions to this rule, are two cupboard doors from Damascus of the late 18th /early 19th century that were incorporated into a room of the Amīr Amin palace in the Lebanese Shūf Mountains. The two representations of Jerusalem of the Amīr Amin palace and in the Museum (G7) depict the main landmarks of the Ḥaram al-Sharif, the Dome of the Rock and the Aqṣā Mosque. The depiction of real cities is rare on lacquered wooden panels and only a few abstract views of Aleppo and Jerusalem are known. In 19th century wall paintings identi-

20 Very similar but smaller architectural paintings are in the Damascene house of al-'Abda (cadastral no. XIII-316), dated 1212/1797-98.

21 On wall paintings and the new style of interior decoration in Damascus, see Weber (2002), where all the relevant literature is cited, particularly of Turkish scholars working on this period of 18th to early 20th century painting, such as Arik (1976) and Renda (1977); an English summary is given by Kuyulu (2000). The Museum does not contain any examples of the new school of interior design in Syria of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

able cities are often depicted. These were not Syrian cities but rather Istanbul and European capitals, mainly Paris, which were more fashionable.

Wall paintings appeared in Damascus during the second and third decade of the 19th century on the upper parts of walls and were mostly quite simple in style, with the exception of a workshop in the 1830s, and in the early 20th century. The new style emerged first as a matter of changing fashion but soon influenced Damascus very deeply. From the early 19th century not only new forms but a whole set of new decorative techniques emerged in Damascus. Not only were there wall paintings but stone and wood carving with gypsum and plaster modelling replacing the traditional techniques of colour paste decoration and the lacquer work (*'ajamī*) discussed here. The *qā'a* of the Lütticke German consulate could serve for the colour paste technique as a parallel to the panels of room G2. This room incorporates the new way of stone carving and marble mosaics on walls – a technique that will soon later replace the local colour paste decoration.

The 1820 /1830s are the turning point of Damascene decorative arts. The wooden lacquered panels became, vis-à-vis the “modern” baroque paintings and marble and wood carvings, old fashioned and were not produced anymore. The paintings shifted from the wooden panels to directly on the walls. The impact of modernization based on interpretations and developments of European models led to a dramatic transformation of many aspects of urban life. New techniques and patterns of decoration and construction and new house forms started to develop in all fields of architecture and the city of Damascus witnessed an in-depth social, economic, administrative and infrastructural change.²¹ The lacquered wall panels of G2 mark the beginning of the end of this tradition of Syrian interior decoration.

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