

Overview of Islamic Art and Architecture: The Mamluk Period (1250 – 1517)

Boyun Woo, Ph.D.^{#1}

School of Sport Science, Endicott College, U.S.A.

Abstract

Despite some of the common characteristics shared by Islam art and architecture, the style and characteristics of the specific time period and region vary greatly. Therefore, it is important to examine Islam art and architecture focusing on a specific area and time. The purpose of the current paper is to provide an overview of Islamic art and architecture particularly focusing on the Mamluk dynasty, which ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. This paper provides begins with the discussion on the overall Islam expansion in different times and regions, and discusses background information on environmental, cultural, and political situations of the time that impacted the art and architecture. Then, the details of the Mamluk style and design are discussed in terms of architecture, furniture, and decorative arts followed by materials, motifs, and construction techniques. Finally, some of the modern architecture and art inspired by the Mamluk style is introduced.

Keywords — Islam Art, Islam Architecture, Mamluk, Egypt.

I. INTRODUCTION

Islamic art and architecture have been evolved around a large geographic area over a long period time. As Islam spread quickly after the 7th century, and still expanding around the globe, its influence on art and architecture is found in vast forms in vast areas. Although there are common characteristics in Islamic art and architecture, differences exist based on the time periods and regions. As a result, much of the past literature investigated the art and architecture of a particular area focusing on a particular time period. However, to the author's knowledge, there is no previous work that provides a comprehensive overview of the Mamluk dynasty, who ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. In fact, very little literature has looked into the details of the Mamluk art and architecture. Therefore, the purpose of the current paper is to provide an overview of Islamic art and architecture particularly focusing on the Mamluk dynasty.

II. BACKGROUND

Before discussing the art and architecture of the Mamluk dynasty, it is important to understand how far Islam expanded its territory and how long Islam occupied the areas. Also, understanding the

environment, culture, and politics during the time period is crucial as those factors are engraved into art and architecture. Therefore, this section introduces the social, cultural, and environmental background of the Mamluk period and how they influenced the art and architecture of the Mamluks.

A. Location

Islamic art and architecture were popular in a broad geographic area including all of Arabia, large areas of Africa, Europe, and Asia (Stockstad & Cothren, 2016). Within little over a century after the death of Muhammad in 632, Islam spread quickly to entire Arabia including Palestine, Syria, Persia (present day Iran), and Iraq, most of coastal North Africa including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, some parts of Europe (Spain and France) and some parts of Asia, such as Samarquand (present day Uzbekistan) and Pakistan (Bloom & Blair, 1997). Then, Islam further spread conquering territories over a few centuries and expanded its territories from Spain in the west to Afghanistan and North India in the east (Khalili, 2006). In the present day, Islamic art and architecture are found even in a wider area including Southeast Asia and China (Fazio, Moffett, & Wodehouse, 2014).

B. The Islam Era and Artistic Style

Scholars agree that the Islam era began in AD 622. However, when it comes to how long the era lasted, controversy exists. For some, it ended in the early 19th century, but for others, it is still continuing in the 21st century (Khalili, 2006). With a long history of Islam covering a vast geographical area, various artistic and architectural styles have evolved in different regions in different periods. Some of the common characteristics of Islam design across the Islam world include the use of calligraphy, a rich vocabulary of ornament including complex geometric designs and arabesques, and different variation of arches (Fazio et al., 2014; Khalili, 2006) and domes (Walhby & Montasser, 2012). In addition, the architectural design follows the pattern of geometrically ordered spaces that includes concentric composition and linear composition (Akkach, 2005).

However, the focus of this paper is given to the Mamluk dynasty, who ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. In particular, the discussion will be evolved around the Mamluk Egypt. The Mamluk architecture and architectural decoration are

characterized by monumental form, highly abstract cubic design, and contrast between a plain austere expanse and some form of articulation largely influenced by Fatimid, Seljuk, and Ayyubid (Grube, 1967). The use of long narrow windows with gridded screens was also a common characteristic of the Mamluk architecture (Hillenbrand, 1999). Yet, the most remarkable characteristic of the Mamluk architecture that distinguishes itself from other Islamic architecture is the use of the ornamented stone domes (Walhby & Montasser, 2012).

C. Environment

The Mongol invaded Iraq and Iran during the Mamluk period in Egypt, and this created a refugee problem in Cairo as people from Iraq and Iran, including craftsmen, moved into the area (Bloom & Blair, 1997; Hillenbrand, 1999). In addition, Ibn Khaldun, the most important figure in Muslim history, came to Cairo in 1382 and declared Cairo as the center of Islam for both civilization and urbanization (Rabbat, 2002). As a result, space became limited as the density of urban development increased, and this influenced the formation of the buildings to change dramatically. It is during this time that the buildings started being built in a vertical way rather than a horizontal way and also the buildings to be developed collectively rather than individually (Hillenbrand, 1999).

D. Culture

During the Mamluk dynasty, status and hierarchy were extremely important to its people, which may be due to the militarization of the ruling elite (Hillenbrand, 1999). The Mamluks expressed their rank/status through various media, such as epigraphy and blazons (Hillenbrand, 1999). Bloom and Blair (1997) state, “Their daily life was punctuated by elaborate ceremonial, and an individual’s rank was immediately visible in his dress. Many of the wares produced for the Mamluks were also marked with prominent emblems of ownership: sultans had epigraphic emblems, but amirs bore pictorial emblems, often called blazons” (p.280). From an economic standpoint, frequent international trading with the Italian city-states, southern Russia, the Eurasian steppe, and India happened during the Mamluk period making Cairo the most cosmopolitan Muslim city of its time (Hillenbrand, 1999). Religiously, Qur’an continued to influence religious art and architecture by prohibiting the use of realistic and/or naturalistic human, animal, plant forms (Stokstad & Cothren, 2016). However, this rule only applied to religious institutions and did not apply to secular art and architecture (Khalili, 2006).

E. Politics

The Mamluk dynasty was established by Turkish slave soldiers in 1250 with the fall of the Ayyubids (Grube, 1967). The Mamluks successfully

defended their country from the invasion of the Mongol in 1260 and maintained the successful defense for over half a century from the Mongol’s repeated invasion (Hillenbrand, 1999). In addition, the Mamluks defeated the Crusaders in 1292 and the Armenians of Cilicia, but eventually were extinguished by the Ottomans in 1517 (Khalili, 2006).

The invaders influenced the art and architecture of the Mamluks. As a matter of fact, the Mamluk style was already influenced by the previous dynasties reigned in the region (Grube, 1967). However, in addition to the earlier influence, the conquest of Mongol in the land of Iran and Iraq, which made the craftsmen in this area to move to Cairo, influenced the art of the Mamluk (Hillenbrand, 1999). Furthermore, some details of the stonework produced by the Mamluks were influenced by Crusaders (Frishman & Kahn, 1994). The reign of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad from 1293 to 1340 also greatly contributed to the development of Mamluk art and architecture. According to Khalili (2006), the Sultan was “one of the greatest Mamluk patrons of the arts and architecture. Although interrupted twice, the reign of the longest ruling Mamluk sultan ensures a period of great prosperity and facilitates the development of a distinctive architectural style” (p.32).

III. ART AND ARCHITECTURE

With the understanding of the social, cultural, and environmental background of the Mamluk dynasty and how they influenced the art and architecture of the Mamluks, this section now delves into the details of art and architecture of the Mamluk dynasty.

A. Architecture and Design

Some of the common characteristics of the Mamluk architecture and design include a strong sense of color in decoration, pervasive sculptural quality in stone domes and honeycomb muqarnas, and ornaments with abstract designs (Hillenbrand, 1999). Although the Mamluk architecture has its own style, it exhibits features derived from various regions, such as Iraq, Syria, North Africa, and Egypt, and various periods, such as the Fatimid, the Seljuq, and Ayyubi (Grube, 1967). For example, a strong sense of color in decoration using colored stones and marbles are from Syria (Grube, 1967, p.107; Hillenbrand, 1999). In addition, according to Grube (1967), “Secular architecture as in the Cairo Citadel, largely follows Fatimid models, while the great madrasahs are inspired by Syrian and Iraqi buildings, and the structure of the mosques, like those of Sultan Baybars or Kalaun, follow the local tradition, established with the mosque of Ibn Tulun” (p.106-107). Smooth-surfaced and precisely cut muqarnas patterns in gateway or portal are the influence of the Ayyubi (Grube, 1967).

a) Architecture

The Mamluk architecture was built of a monumental scale with great simplicity of form and a somber quality (Grube, 1967). According to Grube (1967), “Large, flat, undecorated surfaces are contrasted with deep carving both in the form of epigraphic or linear abstract ornament and in the form of deep niches often decorated with floral pattern and arabesque work. The upper part of such niches – around dome drums, on mosque facades, above gateways – is often decorated with the traditional serrated conch-shell motif” (p.107). Different colored stones and marbles were used both in the exterior and the interior of the buildings to give brilliant effect, and rich surface treatment was common in the building interior during this period (Grube, 1967). Yet, the most distinguishing feature is the use of ornamented stone domes with the geometrical patterns including interlacing stars and ribbing techniques (Frishman & Khan, 1994; Walhby & Montasser, 2012).

b) Furniture

Inheriting the Ayyubids’ inlaid brasses, the Mamluks developed their unique style of metalwork in the early 13th century. Unlike the Seljuq and the Ayyubids who decorated their metalwork with rich figures, the Mamluks decorated theirs with a purely non-figurative style, such as inscriptions and rich floral and arabesque designs (Grube, 1967). In fact, the earlier work used some figural images, but by the end of the 13th century, it was superseded by non-figurative designs (Khalili, 2006). Some of the surviving examples of metal furniture are a cupboard/table and a brazier. Other metal objectives include basins, ewers and trays, candlesticks, and incense burners. The furniture used silver and gold inlay and inscribed with the sultan or officer’s name that the object was made for along with the precise date for the production of the piece (Grube, 1967). Although the metalwork was widespread during this period, the quality of the work was not considered as good as the earlier metalwork in the eastern Islamic world due to mass production (Bloom, 1999; Hellenbrand, 1999). It reached its peak in the 14th century and declined in the 15th century. Some scholars argue that the decline is due to shortages of the metals (Grube, 1967; Hellenbrand, 1999) while others claim that it could be attributed to inflation, civil wars, the scarcity of workers resulting from the plague, and Timur’s conquest of Damascus (Allan, 1984).

c) Decorative Arts

Many forms of decorative arts were refined in this period. The Mamluk painting has a trace of the Baghdad style in that it employed a strict use of a highly polished gold background (Grube, 1967). Yet, the figures used in the painting were different from

the Baghdad style in a way that the Mamluks incorporated a considerably abstract form. The real life illustration, which was common at the Baghdad school, was removed from the Mamluk painting. Instead, all figures were depicted in the strict use of a polished gold background as types, ornamental abstractions, and representation of ideas, objects, or landscapes (Grube, 1967). The Mamluk pottery, though very little is known due to the lack of surviving pieces, was a hybrid form influenced by pre-Mamluk and non-Egyptian tradition. Both monochrome and polychrome (mainly blue and black) glazing techniques were used, and various decorations, such as carving, incision, and the use of Syrian and Persian floral and animal designs, were incorporated in the wares. Glassware was also popular. Enamelled glass technique, which originates from Syria and Egypt and went through a significant refinement during the Ayyubid period, reached its peak in the Mamluk period. A surviving piece of a mosque lamp includes calligraphy, figural representation, and geometric patterns as decoration (Khalili, 2006).

B. Materials

Both the exterior and interior of the Mamluk architecture were built mainly using stones, especially different colored stones, but bricks were also used in vaults, arches, and domes (Grube, 1967). The ornamented domes were all constructed using stones (Walhby & Montasser, 2012). For the interior, plaster was commonly used for decoration (Grube, 1967). Polychrome marble was also used widely in the interior to give color effects (Hellenbrand, 1999). For furniture and decorative art, metal was used commonly for furniture and utilitarian objects such as lamps, basins, candlesticks, and dishes. Brass was used for metalwork at the beginning of the Mamluk period due to the influence of the Ayyubids, but the material changed to bronze from the 13th century (Hellenbrand, 1999). Glasses were also used to make various objects, such as drinking glasses, bowls, ewers, and mosque lamps (Khalili, 2006).

C. Motifs

Wide ranges of motifs were used in the Mamluk art and architecture. Yet, certain motifs appeared more frequently than the others. For example, “the shell motif was widely employed all over the exterior of a building and now developed into a multi-framed flattened muqarnas composition” (Hellenbrand, 1999, p.143) during the reign of Bahri (1250-1382). The domes used elaborative arabesque motifs and geometrical patterns (Walhby & Montasser, 2012). In terms of interior architecture, carved plasterwork followed both epigraphic and floral motifs (Grube, 1967). In decorative art, the incised designs were largely floral, but the main motifs also included a large figure, human or animal (Grube, 1967). Sometimes, Far Eastern motifs such

as the lotus or the peony were employed in ornaments showing the influence of refugees from the East (Hellenbrand, 1999). The ogival design was also used in inscriptions, and often inscriptions were contained in the multicolored sequences of narrow horizontal bands or vertical stripes (Hellenbrand, 1999).

D. Construction Techniques

In the construction of the ornamented stone dome, the dome was built first, then the decoration program on the exterior shell of the dome was executed using the uniform grid pattern of stone joints (Walhby & Montasser, 2012). The pattern was mathematically calculated to make a perfect form. In fact, “the system of decoration in Mamluk stone domes was based on the repetition of a slice of decoration for a number multiple of 4 (4, 8, 16, 32), and the number of stone ashlar per masonry course (ring) either equal to the number of the slices or multiplies” (Walhby & Montasser, 2012, p.3). Evidence suggests that the builders of the stone structure and the stone carvers coordinated their works in a preparation phase and collaborated the work together successfully (Walhby & Montasser, 2012).

For the interior decoration, rich application of carved plaster was employed (Grube, 1967). In addition, flat lintels with shallow relieving arches, and the individual stones or voussoirs of lintel or arch became popular (Hellenbrand, 1999). Interlocking voussoirs were also widely seen in architecture during this period (Hellenbrand, 1999).

Regarding pottery, it was made using a heavy and thick glaze. In addition, “a very distinct intense coloring, green, brown, yellow, one color usually being used for the main part of the glaze with details of the pattern in another. The decoration consists almost exclusively of inscriptions and typically Mamluk heraldic emblems, being picked out in a second and third color. The effect is somber and powerful in the simplicity of design and the intensity of the deep colors” (Grube, 1967, p.110-111). For glass objects, “Clear glass was first gilded and decorated with colored glass paste, and then heated, causing the enamels to fuse to the surface and leaving the decoration to stand out in relief against the flat gilding” (Khalili, 2006, p.106).

E. The Mamluk Influence on Modern Architecture

One of the modern architecture that was inspired by Islamic style is Islamic Mosque and Cultural Center in Rome completed in 1992 (Stockstad & Cothren, 2016). This building utilizes ornament seen in Islamic architecture with modern lines and incorporates abstract design seen in the Mamluk architecture. Stockstad and Cothren (2016) described, “The structural logic appears in the prayer hall’s columns, made of concrete with an aggregate of crushed Carrara marble. This rise to meet abstract capitals in the form of plain rings, then spring upward

to make a geometrically dazzling eight-pointed star supporting a dome of concentric circles” (p.202). Other modern architecture also influenced by Islamic ornamentation includes the Islamic Center in Washington, D. C., built in 1957, and the Regent’s Park Mosque in London, built in 1977 (Frishman & Khan, 1994). In addition, The Mosque of the Islamic Center for Technical and Vocational Training and Research was built in 1986 using pure geometric forms, which were popular during the Mamluk period, in brick (Frishman & Khan, 1994).

The Mamluk design also greatly influenced modern glassware produced in Europe. For example, the Mamluk style enameled glassware was produced in multiple European countries (i.e., Austria, Bohemia, and France) in the 19th century to be consumed in the European market and also to be exported to the Islamic countries (Khalili, 2006). One of the notable glassmakers who was greatly inspired by the Mamluk style enameled glass is Philippe-Joseph Brocard of Paris (Khalili, 2006).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Beginning in the 7th century, Islamic art and architecture have influenced various regions leading up to some of the modern art and architecture around the world. As discussed in this paper, any art and architecture is a reflection of the social, political, environmental, and cultural values and elements prevailed in the society. Therefore, it is important to understand its societal and cultural background in order to have a clear understanding of one’s art and architecture. In fact, the complete grasp of art and architecture of a particular style can be greatly limited if it is discussed without the overall picture of the society.

The current paper provided an overview of Islam art and architecture specifically focusing on the Mamluk dynasty in the Egyptian region. It started with the discussion on the overall Islam expansion in different times and regions and provided background information on environmental, cultural, and political situations of the time. Then, the details of the architecture and design were discussed in terms of architecture, furniture, and decorative arts followed by materials, motifs, and construction techniques used during the Mamluk dynasty. Finally, some of the modern architecture and art inspired by the Mamluk style was introduced.

Despite some of the common characteristics shared by Islam art and architecture, the style and characteristics of the specific time and region vary greatly. However, much previous literature tends to treat Islam art and architecture as a lump sum with common characteristics. Therefore, future researchers should study distinctive styles of characteristics of various Islam art and architecture styles and provide valuable resources that discuss specific styles in depth.

REFERENCES

- [1] Akkach, S. (2005). "Cosmology and architecture in premodern islam: An architectural reading of mystical ideas". Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- [2] Allan, J. W. (1984). "Shaban, Barquq, and the decline of the Mamluk metalworking industry". *Muqarnas*, 2, 85-94.
- [3] Bloom, J. M. (1999). "Mamluk art and architectural history: A review of article. *Mamluk Studies Review*", 3, 31-58.
- [4] Bloom, J., & Blair, S. (1997). *Islamic arts*. London: Phaidoen.
- [5] Fazio, M., Moffett, M., & Wodehouse, L. (2014). *Buildings across time: An introduction to world architecture*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- [6] Frishman, M., & Khan, H. (1994). *The mosque*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- [7] Grube, E. J. (1967). *The world of Islam*. McGraw-Hill Book Company
- [8] Hillenbrand, R. (1999). *Islamic art and architecture*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- [9] Khalili, D. N. (2006). *Islamic art and culture: A visual history*. New York, NY: The Overlook Press.
- [10] Rabbat, N. (2002). Perception of architecture in Mamluk sources. *Mamluk Studies Review*, 6, 155-176.
- [11] Stokstad, M., & Cothren, M. W., (2016). *Art: A brief history*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- [12] Walhby, A., & Montasser, D. (2012). "The ornamented domes of Cairo: The Mamluk Mason's challenge". Center for Ancient Studies. University of Pensilvania. Retrieved from www.sas.upenn.edu/.../Wahby-Montasser_Domes_o
- [13] M.UpendraKumar,"Literature Survey on Agile Security Architecture Model" International Journal of Mobile Computing &Application,Volume1Issue1MaytoAug2014.