
DECORATIVE ARTS IN THE ARAB WORLD

During the 'Golden Age' of Arab civilization (7th to 13th centuries), when the Arab/Islamic Empire spread as far as Spain to the West, and as far as China to the East, a unique form of art was born. It was enriched by many different cultures, absorbing them and evolving its own distinct qualities. Examples of splendid architecture exist in many cities throughout the Arab world, in Spain, and in East Asia. Artists used non-realist, non-figurative forms to express themselves. Floral, geometric and epigraphic motifs characterized their works. Calligraphy evolved to become a major form of Arab art. The decorative repertoire of metalwork, ceramics, textiles and glass clearly indicates the impact of the art of writing on the visual arts.

METAL INLAY

Metal inlay is a highly specialized craft. The knowledge of the technique has survived from the 9th century. The craftsmen use undecorated pieces which have been cast or wrought in bronze or brass by other smiths; only the decoration is applied in the inlay workshops. The use of script is predominant in these decorations. Engraving and embossing of metals are also common crafts in the Arab World. Works in silver, brass and copper are usually very intricate in their decorations. The Niello technique of blackening the silver was developed by the Arabs, and is found frequently in Bedouin metalwork.

WOOD INTARSIA

Intarsia is a mosaic-like inlay of contrasting materials such as bone, mother-of-pearl, woods of various colors and (today) plastic as well, set into a wooden object. The earliest examples of intarsia in the Orient are found in ancient Egypt. The technique spread westwards from Egypt and Syria to Andalusia and Morocco, and eastwards to Iran and India. Syrian and Egyptian intarsia have retained their unmistakable style and even today they are technically among the best examples of this ancient craft. The traditional pieces of furniture decorated with intarsia were chests for storing textiles and jewelry. After the 18th century, furniture influenced by European styles were produced, including chests of drawers, massive armchairs, cradles, sideboards, screens, and mirror frames. Intarsia patterns are usually geometrical, and are occasionally supplemented by inlaid calligraphic inscriptions.

WOOD CARVING AND WOOD PAINTING

Wood -carving and wood painting are considered architectural crafts, in the sense that the objects made were elements of a building, such as wall panels, ceilings, and columns. Wood painting is popular in the countries of North Africa. All types of furniture can be transformed to beautiful pieces of art. In Syria and in Egypt, the technique of wood painting over plaster relief is practiced. The three-dimensional effect adds a luxury look to the painted objects. The designs are mainly geometrical, Arabesque, and calligraphy designs.

MOSAIC FLOORS AND FOUNTAINS

Mosaic floors and walls existed in many Arab countries since the Roman times. However, the use of Arab-Islamic geometrical patterns created a typical style of this art. Until early in this century, many private homes in Arab countries had exceptional works of mosaics on their floor. Fountains were a major focal point in the center of Arab houses. Today, public places in most Arab countries are decorated with these fountains and beautiful floors. The geometrical patterns used are inspired by the traditional patterns that embellished Mamluk Palaces.

The information in this flier was compiled by Rima Houssami for educational use only

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