

Islamic Revival on Mamluk Terms: the Impact of Historical Cairo on 19th-century Design

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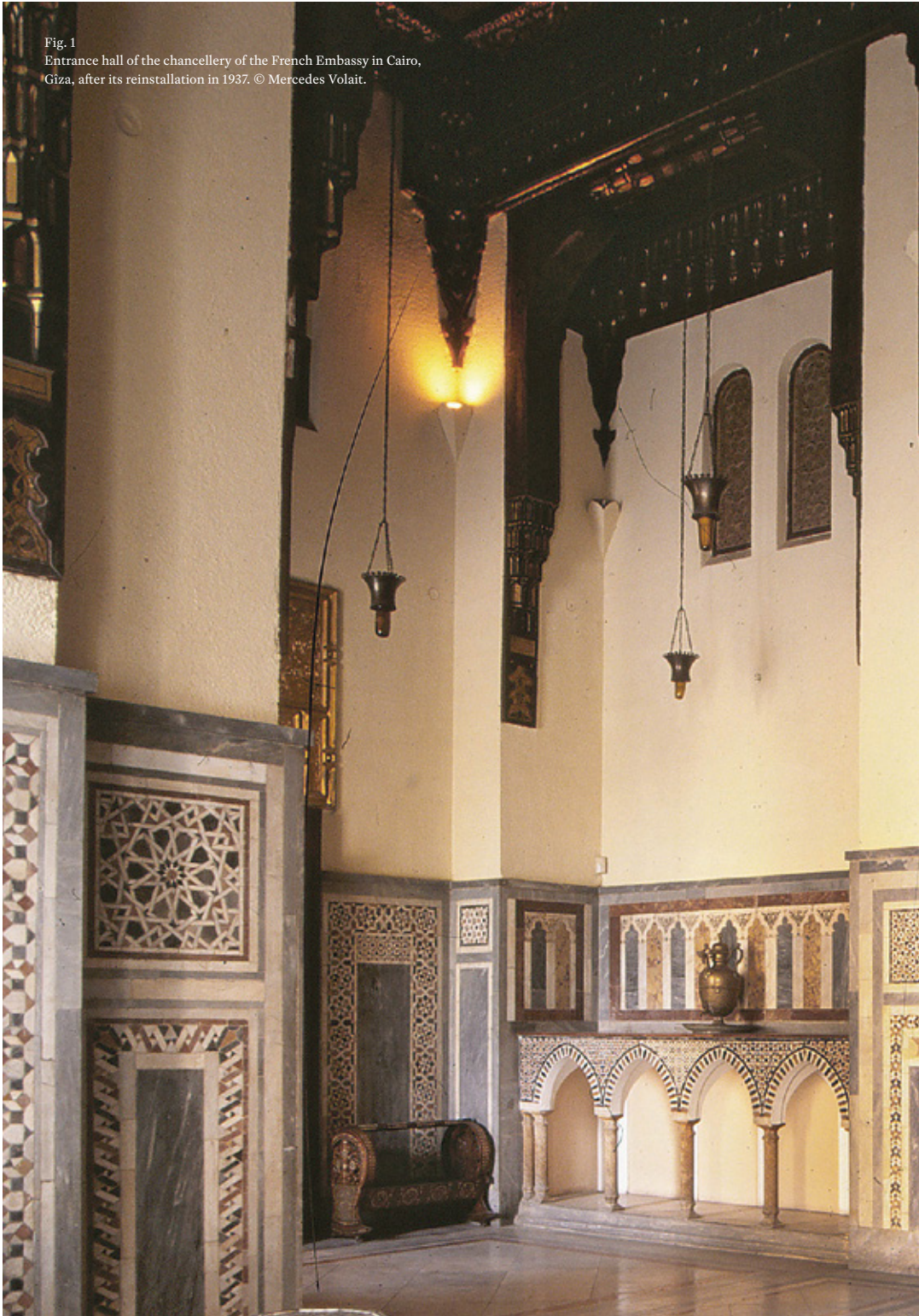
More than a century ago, naming a building “Egyptian” did not mean “Ancient Egyptian”, but referred to the arts of Islamic Egypt. Three interrelated phenomena sustained this distinctive trend: the European fascination with the architecture of Cairo; European transpositions of Cairene architecture and ornament into 19th-century design, and the ways in which local actors incorporated and naturalized the gusto for “Mamluk” art. At the time, this branch of art was indistinctly termed

Arab/Arabic, Moorish, Saracenic, Oriental, Eastern – and indeed Persian in some instances. Labels reflected contemporary concerns, whether political (the conquest of Algeria), academic and cultural (the scholarship on the history of the Crusades and more broadly Biblical studies) or artistic (the Romantic discovery of the Alhambra). “Mamluk” later became the generic name for the full range of Cairene historic architecture that inspired 19th-century design.

Surveying the Architecture of Cairo

The appeal of monumental Cairo can be traced back to the 18th c., but accounts did become more systematic after the French expedition in Egypt (1798-1801) and the famous multi-volume encyclopedia *Description de l'Égypte* that ensued. The flow of works has not stopped ever since. However, only few surveys, the most famous ones, have been studied so far, and ad nauseam. A good example is the grand portfolio published by French architect Pascal Coste from 1834 to 1839 after a 10-year

Fig. 1
Entrance hall of the chancellery of the French Embassy in Cairo,
Giza, after its reinstallation in 1937. © Mercedes Volait.





L'appropriazione dell'Oriente

Fig. 2
City Hall of Sarajevo, built 1891-1896, Alexander Wittek
and Ćiril Iveković, architects, after its restoration, 2016.
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L'appropriation de l'Orient

stay in Egypt. In contrast, many drawings and surveys lay undetected in some European archives, be it in Czechia, Poland, Germany, or indeed Switzerland.

The 1840s were particularly fruitful for the French artistic connection to Cairene architecture: no less than 800 precious daguerreotypes of Cairo's mosques and minarets were produced by Girault de Prangey in 1842-44, while Vicomte Adalbert de Beaumont accumulated drawings to sustain a theory on the natural origins (in marine organisms) of ornamental motifs in Cairo. The draughtsman, amateur-archaeologist, and historian Emile Prisse d'Avennes started collecting material on Egyptian monuments in parallel. Prisse's privately-funded campaign was finalized in 1858-60, with the assistance of Dutch artist Willem de Famars Testas and French photographer Edouard Jarrot. Hundreds of drawings, tracings, squeezes and photographs were brought back to Paris (all available online on the Gallica platform of Bibliothèque nationale de France). Prisse knew well the country for having served in the Egyptian administration for a decade, and spoke Arabic; he considered fluency in the language a prerequisite to properly study "Arab art". His lifelong engagement with Egyptian Islamic architecture materialized in a 2-volume album which took 20 years to be produced and conducted him into bankruptcy.

The task of surveying monuments in Cairo required stamina; the city was torrid half of the year round, it was plagued with diseases, and it was already overpopulated. Structures crumbled down; getting into religious buildings required know-how and connections. Nevertheless, Cairene architecture continued stirring passions. British artists, in particular the architect James Wild, produced their share of sketches and watercolors depicting Cairene domestic architecture, either for future publications, or like painter John Frederick Lewis, for pictorial compositions.

Images could be repetitive: *the mandara* of the so-called *Bayt al-Mufti*, the House of the Mufti, was surveyed by German, British, French and indeed Czech artists. When looked at closely, each offers in fact rich information *per se*: the section drafted by Schmoranz in 1871 reveals the date of 1280 H. (1860) on a wall, while watercolors by Swiss architect Theodor Zeerleder, dated 1848, suggest that it has been early on an empty room accessible to artists and travelers.

Early Mamluk Revivalism

The *raisons d'être* of such efforts were diverse. To Prisse d'Avennes or the group of German artists who gathered in Cairo in 1875 to produce Orientalist imagery, these were scholarly or artistic pursuits. For others, they were design-oriented. Coste clearly stated in his Memoirs that he had embarked upon surveying architecture in Cairo when he was commissioned by the Egyptian ruler to design a mosque at the Citadel. He did draft in 1823 the earliest recorded project in Mamluk style, albeit one not implemented. Zeerleder similarly drew in Cairo for design purposes: a Smoking room at Oberhofen castle for a Swiss diplomat (1855).

Architect Ambroise Baudry (1838-1906), active in Cairo from 1871 to 1886, was to specialize in Mamluk revivalism. He designed in Egypt, as well as in France, some of the most spectacular early instances of "modern Arabic style" inspired by Cairene architecture. An early achievement was the house of count Saint-Maurice, the French grand equerry of Khedive Ismail. A devoted collector of Islamic art and architecture, Saint-Maurice indulged into a house built out of salvaged material from historic structures in Cairo and Damascus, combined with plaster casts of Cairene ornament. The mansion had a central cruciform hall, the typical feature of Cairene domestic architecture known as the *qa'a*, incorporated authentic marble, metalwork, ceramics and wood-



Fig. 3
Entrance door of the building of the Assicurazioni generali in Cairo
refurbished in Mamluk Style 1910–11 by architect Antonio Lasciac, detail of the
plating with the name of the architect in Arabic script. © Mercedes Volait.

work, and featured Arabic inscriptions along its walls. Part of the fittings survive today in a new setting, the French embassy in Cairo (Fig. 1).

Their second and third lives offer food for thought about “hybridity”, “adaptive reuse” or “creative preservation”, as they were practiced in the 19th c., at a time when reuse in architecture had become almost an industry, in France notably. Baudry’s designs in Cairo include the house, currently in very poor condition, of another devoted collector of Islamic art, Baron Alphonse Delort de Gléon, to which the Louvre museum owes its first Islamic section. Delort de Gléon in turn became a would-be architect, investing in a “Salon arabe” for his Parisian home, commissioning the famous Cairo street at the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris, pieces of which he partially reused afterwards to build a second villa in Cairo, as well as a summer house in Normandy, named a “chalet égyptien” in his will. Another Mamluk style design was a dining-room in a khedivial harem (upper floor in Mamluk style, ground floor in Second Empire style), meaning that it catered also to Egyptian taste.

A common feature of Baudry’s designs was modern furniture reusing antique fragment, producing hybrid objects that museums do not accommodate easily nowadays. A cupboard commissioned c. 1876 by Ambroise Baudry for his own house in Cairo, reusing woodwork bearing 14th c. epigraphy, is currently displayed in the Mamluk hall of the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo, and has stirred questions about Mamluk furniture, while it is a plain 19th-century object, most probably made by a Maltese cabinet-maker.

As most of his clients, Baudry was a collector of Islamic art, among other things. His most precious pieces, including a Fatimid woodwork, are now in the Louvre and reveal an early interest for artifacts featuring human representations. His was not a purely aesthetic Islamophi-

lia; scholarly concerns also mattered. Baudry collected blazoned pieces, samples of calligraphy, and figurative iconography. A proto-historiography of Islamic art was on the move.

Another major mediator and interpreter of Mamluk architecture is the Czech architect Frantisek Schmoranz (1845-1892). He was attracted to Cairo by the same frenzy that channeled many architects to the land of the Pharaohs: the city’s building boom, orchestrated by Khedive Ismail, who had grand ideas for the modernization of his capital. Schmoranz started working in 1868 for a khedivial palace, received further architectural commissions from Ismail and his entourage, until he was granted in 1872 the task to build the Egyptian section at Vienna World’s Fair. In the meantime, he had gathered extraordinary drawings of religious and domestic architecture in Cairo, a material assembled for a publication on Islamic architecture that never saw the light. The richness and accuracy of details is remarkable – and their archaeological value is also noteworthy since many buildings surveyed no longer exist. His knowledgeable understanding of Islamic architecture in Cairo gave a special flavor to the buildings he designed for the Egyptian section in Vienna, an impressive group of constructions with striking resemblance to their sources. Back home, Schmoranz used his portfolios for glass design in the Lobmeyr company in Vienna and Egyptian-inspired tile design for the Hungarian factory Zsolnay company. More importantly, Schmoranz was the founder, builder and first director in 1885 of the School of Decorative Arts in Prague. Many of its graduates were sent throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire afterwards, in Bosnia-Herzegovina for instance, where they conceived a national style for official buildings, choosing for that matter an adaptation of the Mamluk style, as in the famous Vijećnica (Fig. 2).

Built 1892-96, the ex-city hall and ex-library of Sarajevo displays multiple references to architecture in Cairo, including

a citation of the plaster cast used for the Saint-Maurice mansion. This architectural style has been fully naturalized as the “Bosniac style” in Sarajevo.

Indigenous Revivalisms

The interest in, and revival of, Mamluk art and architecture had local examples as well. An early significant milestone is the display of a collection of Islamic woodwork by an Egyptian amateur at the Paris World's Fair of 1867. The exhibit represented the very first exposure of most visitors to Mamluk craftsmanship, the only precedent being the show organized in Paris by *the Union des arts appliqués à l'industrie* in 1865. Husayn Fahmy *al-mi'mar*, the author of the 1867 display, blends well with the cast of characters mentioned so far: he was trained as an architect, worked at restoring some mosques, was an art amateur, collected Islamic salvages and did engage in Mamluk style design for a mosque to be erected in Cairo – the Rifai mosque, finally completed after his death on a different design. By 1894, Mamluk style had become the official style promoted by the Administration of Awqaf for religious buildings.

A full industry, well beyond architecture, was to develop in Egypt in the context of Mamluk revivalism, for foreign and local consumption alike (Fig. 3).

Cabinet-making (Gasparo Gualiana and Giuseppe Parvis were early practitioners), glass work – producing mosque lamps – or metalwork were some of the crafts revived. Lamps, doorknockers, bronze ornament *à la mamelouke* were available to the interested customer. They are heavily collected today, as recent auction sales demonstrate.

Influential individuals also engaged in Mamluk revival: Boghos Nubar pasha, the son of a famous minister of khedive Ismail, had several fountains, built in 1908 in Mamluk style, to honor the “soul and spirit” of his late father by offering free water to the people at a time when it was a luxury affordable only by a few.

Others used the Mamluk style for their homes, i.e. the Zoghebs (from Syria) for their palace in central Cairo or Hoda Chaa-rawi, the famous Egyptian advocate of women rights in Egypt for her villa (the latter with reuse pieces). Her brother Umar Sultan built an extraordinary neo-Mamluk ensemble in Cairo, known locally as “Dar al-Mathaf”, where he installed his art collections. Here again, the love of art objects provided an essential drive, leading to imagine creative settings for art display. It confirms that inanimate things have power, the power to shape one's own domestic space and built environment.

The Reuse Phenomenon

The reuse of salvages in modern architecture goes against current preservation principles voiced at world scale by international organizations such as Unesco. One should not forget that the tradition of reuse and of recycling historic fragments is a very ancient practice that cut across most cultures. It is still alive in Egypt, as elsewhere. The house lately completed in Fayyum by architect Omar al-Farouk, a follower of Hasan Fathy, is a good example. It incorporates carved stone from an Ottoman mosque recently demolished by the ministry of religious endowments, as well as replicas, in a distinctive way. The practice may chock mainstream ideas about authenticity and heritage conservation, but it does represent a form of creative preservation that deserves attention.

A full version of the text (in French), with footnotes and illustrations, is available online at www.inha.revues.org/7207

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