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The Arabesque

INTRODUCTION

The basic vegetal tendril ornament of early Islamic art, that is to say, the art of the Near East during the Middle Ages and up into more modern times, is the *Arabesque*.^a The topic to be treated in this final section, therefore, directly follows the one in the preceding chapter chronologically as well as developmentally. If the definition that we gave initially is correct, then the all-pervasive law of causality impels us to assume a genetic relationship between the ornamental Islamic tendril and its direct predecessor, the tendril ornament of antiquity, a relationship that will be demonstrated carefully and in detail, step by step, in what is to follow. There is no concealing the fact, however, that our definition is by no means generally accepted in art-historical circles today. Therefore, it seems advisable to begin by taking an example of fully developed Arabesque and using it to illustrate those peculiarities which obscure and suppress its vegetal or tendril character. At the same time, this will provide a good opportunity to introduce the most essential individual motifs of Arabesque ornament, in order to gain some insight into the basic character of this important category of ornament before we proceed to tackle the question of its historical origin.

Since we have decided to begin at the end of the development, our choice will be a very late, nearly modern example of decorative wall painting¹ from the palace of the Sultan Abdul Aziz at Tscheragan (fig. 138). There we see an interplay of fine lines that coil up into spirals or form arches, interspersed with various thicker motifs whose contours are also curved. A few major types are repeated in a number of variations:²

a and *b* are motifs that split into two parts;

c and *d* are motifs that, in their simplest form, vaguely resemble droplets; more frequently, however they have one or more projections, at which point they begin to look like motif *a*;

¹ *L'architecture ottomane. Ouvrage autorisé par irade impérial et publié sous le patronage de son Edhem Pacha* (Constantinople, 1873), Peintures murales, pl. 3.

² Only the most important and characteristic variations were included in the drawing. The rest of them can be readily categorized accordingly.

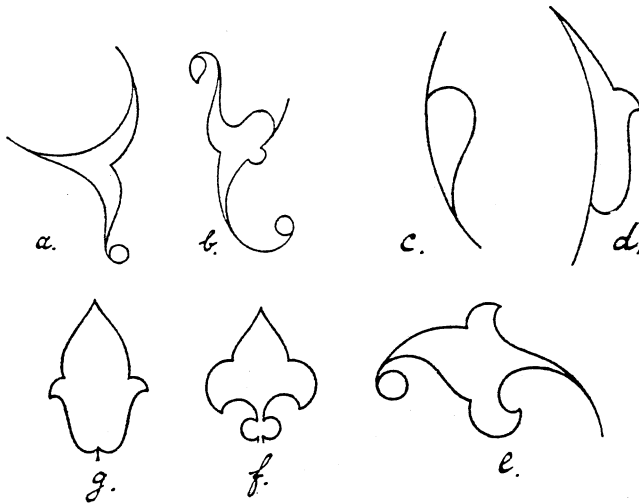
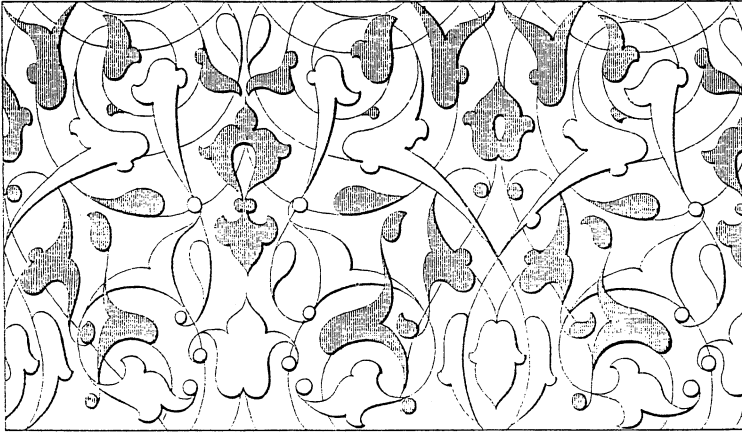


Fig. 138. Painted Arabesque wall decoration from the Palace of Sultan Abdul Aziz, Istanbul.

e, *f*, and *g* are more elaborately subdivided shapes, some of which (*f*, *g*) are strictly symmetrical. Motif *g* is generally a doubled version of *d*.³

³ The little round forms in which most of the tips of the motifs terminate are, as such, only characteristic of the present example. They can be understood either as little spiraling offshoots or schematic variations of tiny leaf shapes in both the frontal view (palmettes reduced to the trefoil) or the profile view (half palmettes); this is proven by the examples reproduced here from a manuscript from Cairo dating around 1411 which is also the source of figure 139, where the tendrils have the same rounded ends.

What is the basic meaning of motifs *a-g*? They are obviously not imitations of real things in nature, for the stylization, quite to the contrary, is distinctly and consciously abstract. However, the motifs are not stylized to the extent that they can be subsumed under the Geometric Style. If that were so, then they would have to adhere more strictly to the law of symmetry, which is, in fact, only the case with *f* and *g*. The conclusion is, therefore, unavoidable that these motifs still refer to actual models in reality.

Let us compare the nineteenth-century example in figure 138 with one dating approximately from the middle of the development. Figure 139 illustrates the border of an illuminated manuscript⁴ completed at the court of an Egyptian Mamluk sultan, which is dated by inscription to the year 1411.^b Curving lines form the network of the whole ornament, just as they do in figure 138, but they are thicker. The circling coils are not as important and do not form such pronounced spirals. The arcuated form, however, is still preserved in the treatment of the lines in figure 138. Here we can easily observe one of the characteristic features of the Arabesque, although because the lines are drawn so weakly, it could only be evident

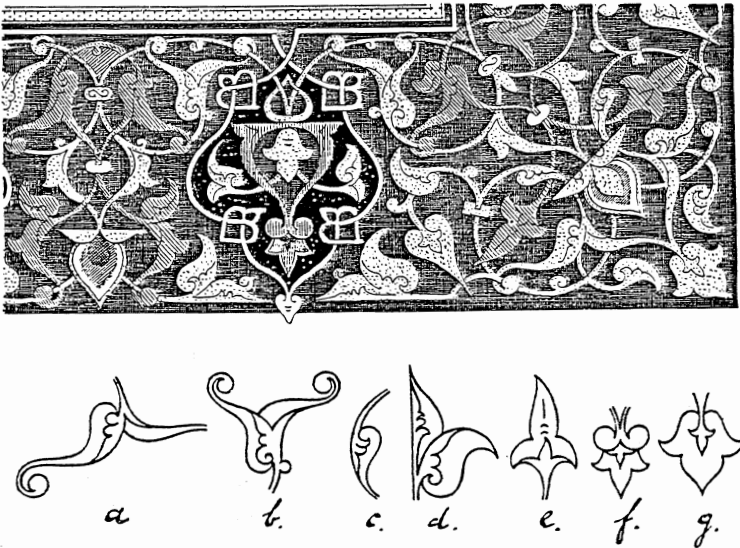


Fig. 139. Detail of frame ornament from the Koran of the Mamluk Sultan Mou'ayyed, dated 1411, written by Abdar'Rahman ibn as-Faigh.

⁴ J. Bourgoïn, *Précis de l'art arabe et matériaux pour servir à l'histoire, à la théorie et à la technique des arts de l'orient musulman* (Paris, 1892), part 4, pl. 27, center.

to someone already familiar with the nature of such ornament. That is to say, in figure 139 we can see how the lines converge in places to form their own independent patterns, the most striking of which is the one with the darker ground. Since, however, the treatment of the lines depends upon the arc, the contours of these configurations always have convex and concave indentations,⁵ and wherever two of these S-shaped lines meet under an acute angle, they consequently delineate a pointed, curvilinear or ogival form.

Let us now focus on the individual motifs that are set into the lines of the underlying network. The most important ones have also been singled out in a drawing and given the same letters as the parallel motifs in figure 138.⁶

While the motifs in figure 138 remained uncertain because they were only drawn as outlines, in figure 139 the motifs have greater definition. The leaflike, jagged lines that provide this greater definition demonstrate beyond any doubt the connection of these motifs to real plants. What we now see in figure 139, *a–d*, are stylized leaf or blossom forms, and as a result, it is absolutely justified to identify the lines connected to them as tendrils.

Motifs *a–d* are all seen in profile. A feature notable both on its own terms, and also for the profile orientation, is the volute-shaped, curved line or half calyx included on each of the motifs *a–d*, toward the bottom, where they begin. Despite this common feature, however, the motifs can be subdivided further into two categories. Motifs *a* and *b* appear as bifurcations seen in profile view, so we will designate them accordingly as *bifurcating tendrils*.⁷

Motifs *c* and *d*, on the other hand, are single forms; *d* is close to *b* because of its articulation. Since *d* is obviously half of *g*, we will first examine the last three motifs before we settle on a particular term for *c* and *d*.

The motifs *e*, *f*, and *g* are plantlike blossoms shown in frontal view. Of course, they were hardly meant to be accurate, although the two lateral, volutelike curved projections alone, which we recognize as the volute-calyx, already signal the presence of a whole blossom motif. We have

⁵ The way the lines are interlaced into hearts in this case makes it more difficult to see the basic pattern in its simplest form.

⁶ Only the figures *f* are not directly analogous. The shoots on the tendrils are sometimes little round forms like the ones on figure 138 (see note 3) and sometimes clearly treated spiraling involutions.

⁷ Earlier, in "Ältere orientalische Teppiche aus dem Besitz des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses," *Jahrbuch des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 13 (1892): 267ff., I referred to this motif as a "two-pronged tendril." In the text of my *Orientalische Teppiche* (Vienna, London, and Paris, 1892), the shorter term is used.

stressed the importance and significance of the volute-calyx for the entire history of ornament ever since we first encountered it in Egyptian art. As it appears in motifs *e-g*, it is not merely drawn in as a half-calyx the way it is in motifs *a-d*; instead it actually creates projections in the silhouette. Since the volute-calyx in antique vegetal ornament was an essential, characteristic component of the combined view of the flower we refer to as the *palmette*, we will call the analogous motif in Arabesque ornament the Islamic *palmette*—reserving for the moment the question of whatever representational significance the motif may have had in the art of Islamic peoples. Within the basic scheme, any number of variations is possible, depending on how elaborately it is subdivided. The simplest form is represented by *g*, which is so extremely common that we will designate it separately as the *Islamic trefoil*.^c

Now we have the appropriate term for motifs *c* and *d*. Since *d* represents half of the palmette *g*, we will call them Islamic *half palmettes*, all the more because there is also a correspondingly designated analogue in the history of antique vegetal ornament.

We have established these terms for the time being only to facilitate reference to each of the individual motifs when we begin to trace their histories. It is, however, inevitable, since we have been inclined from the outset, to assume that the apparently nominal similarities between antique and Islamic palmette ornament actually have some historical basis, even before we have attempted to justify them. To make our examination of the development of the motifs on both sides a little easier and avoid any misunderstanding, it should be pointed out straightaway that the motifs in Arabesque ornament are not descended directly from the more severely stylized Greek palmette but from the naturalistic versions found in Hellenistic and Roman art. Motifs *c* and *d*, for example, clearly resemble the acanthus rather than the rigid Greek half palmette with its stiff fan. We need only recall the conclusions made earlier regarding the acanthus: the frontal view of the acanthus leaf itself is nothing more than a naturalistic palmette, while the profile view of the acanthus leaf (for example, in the form of the acanthus tendril) is nothing more than a naturalistic half palmette.

That does not mean, however, that more rigidly stylized Greek tendril ornament was fundamentally excluded from Islamic Arabesque ornament. On the contrary, it exists in Islamic art at all times alongside its more naturalizing counterpart, just as Greek palmette and acanthus tendrils appeared side by side throughout the entire Roman Imperial period. Later, we will cite specific monuments to prove this; at the moment, I will

only point to the striking difference between motifs *d* and *g* in figure 139. The half palmette *d* is acanthusized or, as it were, projected in perspective: the full palmette *g*, on the other hand, is a pure “two-dimensional ornament” whose outlines do not suggest a striving to imitate nature more closely.

However, it is the genetic relationship between the Arabesque and the tendril of classical antiquity that we first wish to prove. Thus far, the discussion of the individual motifs in figure 139 has only established that the Arabesque is a vegetal tendril ornament. We will now try to determine what distinguishes the Islamic tendril from that of classical antiquity. In this way, we will quickly come to appreciate the special features of the Arabesque more accurately. In part, these distinctions concern the tendril lines, which form the basic network, and in part, the treatment of the blossom motifs.

There is a fundamental distinction between the way that tendril lines behave in classical decoration as opposed to Arabesque ornament. In classical decoration, the individual tendrils are juxtaposed clearly and independently against the background, whereas in Arabesque ornament, they are allowed to intersect and cut through one another repeatedly. Of course, this definition, like almost all the others involving the highest principles of a particular decorative system, does not apply absolutely and unconditionally in all cases. Intersecting tendrils occurred to a certain extent even in the ornament of antiquity, as the tendril interlace in figure 83 confirms, not to mention the naturalistic blossom tendrils of the Augustan period.⁸ On the other hand, we will also find examples of Arabesque fillers (figure 197) whose tendril lines are juxtaposed with clarity and independence, like the more stylized types of Hellenistic ornament, without any interpenetration. However, all of these instances are exceptions; they are far outweighed by the majority of monuments that do in fact justify the definition given above.^d

The reciprocal intersection of the tendril lines, as already indicated with regard to figure 139, also resulted in another special characteristic of Arabesque tendrils: at regular intervals within the overall pattern, they create enclosed polygonal compartments with curved sides containing the internal flower tendrils. Such an application of the tendril lines required that they attain a more independent and important status in comparison to

⁸ The Roman example of the continuous tendril in figure 130 has long tendril stems crowned by blossoms that branch off and intersect repeatedly with the main tendril; this is done, however, in conscious imitation of free, naturalistic, and therefore asymmetrical forms, whereas Islamic tendrils intersect at regular intervals according to a strictly symmetrical and ornamental layout.

the blossom motifs; if their task is to create such distinct compartments, then they must be able inherently to achieve a corresponding degree of importance. The desire to emancipate the palmette had been central to the evolutionary process behind the tendril ornament of classical antiquity. From a modest axil filler inserted into the bifurcation of two tendrils, it developed to a full-blown, independent blossom motif. In other words, the importance of the flower increased at the expense of the connecting tendril. This desire was obviously related to the naturalizing tendency that had been such a dominant factor in Greek vegetal ornament at least since the fifth century, and perhaps even much earlier. The opposing desire discernible within Arabesque ornament was a striving to restore the dominance of the tendril lines: the geometric component of this entire decorative system. In conclusion, we may attribute this retrogressive striving to a concept of vegetal ornament basically opposed to that of Hellenistic art. If the goal of Greek artists had been to reinvigorate palmette tendrils, then Islamic artists had striven, in contrast, to schematize them once more into geometric abstractions.

The point of departure for vegetal ornament in the Near East (Egypt) was the geometric spiral (figure 25), in which blossom motifs served only as accessory axil fillers. The Greeks transformed the spiral into a living tendril whose sheaths emitted beautifully formed blossom motifs. During the Middle Ages, the geometricized tendrils of Islamic art once again display that Oriental spirit of abstraction, which had, as we shall see, already begun to re-emerge in the late antique period. To be sure, the fundamental achievements of the Greeks—the rhythmic, undulating tendril sprawling freely over larger surfaces—were not abandoned; in fact the latter characteristic developed even further along the established course. However, the geometric element had again pressed itself, into the foreground wherever it could: this is manifested most clearly in the polygonal compartments created by the curving tendril lines, which are unquestionably geometric in character.

Here it would appear appropriate to interject a few remarks concerning the extremely rich development of interlaced bands in Islamic art. The ancient Near Eastern guilloche (figure 33) provided the point of departure. The Greeks had used it to a limited extent during the Classical period. In Pompeii it occurs more frequently, but only as a framing device. On the mosaics of the late Roman Imperial period, the number of bands comprising an interlace pattern had increased: in figure 140⁹ we can

⁹ J. Wilmsowsky, *Römische Mosaiken aus Trier und dessen Umgegend* (Trier, 1888), 9–10, and pl. 3.

CHAPTER 4

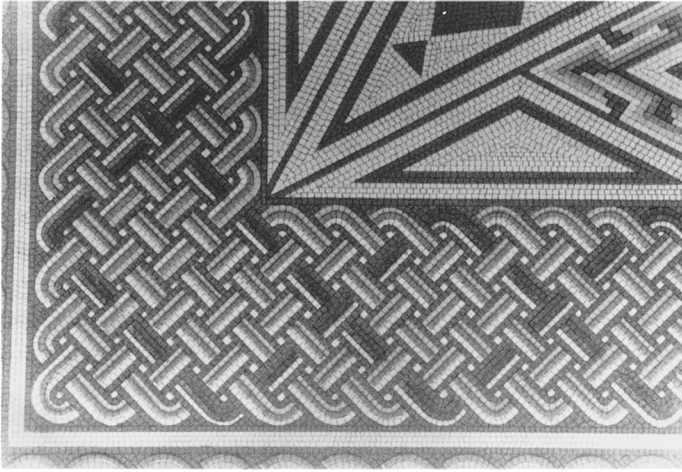


Fig. 140. Roman mosaic border from the entrance hall of the basilica at Trier.

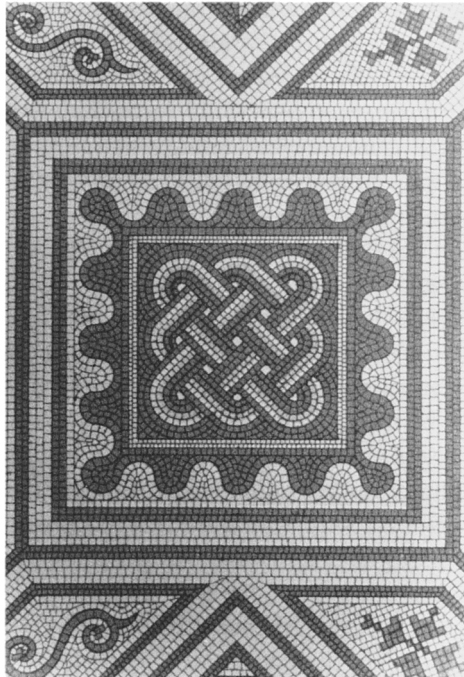


Fig. 141. Roman mosaic from Simeon-Strasse, Trier.

barely enumerate them, but they are still restricted to the border; in figure 141¹⁰ interlace ornament has finally been considered worthy of decorating an interior field.^e

This is the crucial point of departure for the entire subsequent development of interlacing band ornament in the Orient as well as in the West. This basically insignificant, geometric element, which had been used in classical art only for subordinate framing purposes, achieved the status of a major decorative motif in late antique art, when the need to give form to significant ideas was suppressed in favor of a pure decorative urge. From here evolved the interlaced bands of Early Christian sarcophagi and ambos, whose numerous fragments are now immured in the porches and cloisters of Early Christian basilicas in Rome, and also from here evolved the Byzantine interlaced designs, which even Bourgoïn¹¹ recognized as the direct predecessors of Islamic interlace and latticework.^f

This digression into the rich development of medieval interlace was necessary in order to render the antinaturalistic, abstract tendency of Arabesque tendril stylization immediately more vivid and comprehensible. There can no longer be any doubt that it is this same tendency that (on the one hand) encouraged the rich and elaborate development of geometric interlacing bands and on the other, the alternating interpenetrations and intersections of Arabesque tendril lines. At the same time, the general character of Islamic art itself explains how Islamic artists ultimately arrived at a treatment of the tendrils that deviated so clearly and fundamentally from that of classical antiquity.

If the first aspect that distinguishes Arabesque tendril ornament fundamentally from that of classical antiquity involves the rendering of the tendril lines, then the second, and equally essential, point of distinction concerns the treatment of the blossom motifs attached to the tendrils. However, it is not so much the motifs themselves that substantiate the essential distinction. There are examples of Islamic tendril patterns from the fourteenth century (figure 189 *b, c*) that are very similar to Greek ones of the finest period; on the other hand, there are blossom forms in the fifth century A.D., in the very midst of late antiquity, which already display an advanced retrograde tendency toward abstract stylization (figure 142), that cannot be surpassed even by the examples we have seen from the fifteenth (figure 139) and nineteenth centuries (figure 138). The fundamental distinction between Arabesque and antique ornament resides much more in the way that the flower is attached to the tendril.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18–19, and pl. 8.

¹¹ J. Bourgoïn, *Les arts arabes* (Paris, 1873), 24.

In the tendril ornament of antiquity, the blossom motifs were attached to the ends of the small offshoots that branch off from the main tendril. Therefore, the relationship is the same as it is in nature: the stem or the shaft is the lower part, while the flower is the crowning, free termination.

In contrast, let us examine motif *a* in figure 139, which comes from the border of the manuscript toward the lower right side.¹² The two parts into which this undoubtedly vegetal motif bifurcates do not serve as free terminations for the spiraling tendril from which they spring. Instead, they narrow down toward their ends to form new tendrils: the left one eventually ends in a rounded form based either on a small, spiraling coil or a freely terminating trefoil or half leaf; the right one forms an ogival arch together with a second offshoot from another bifurcating tendril, which then both converge to form a larger trefoil as the free corner solution. In conformity with earlier terminology, we will describe the bifurcating tendril as *embedded*.

The same is true of the half palmette, motif *c*, further up along the same spiraling tendril. The pointed end extends into a tendril, which then expands along the way into the bifurcating tendril we have just examined. However, even on the full palmette, this peculiar way of combining tendrils and blossoms is the same. This is not very striking in figure 139, since the two bifurcating tendrils that branch off from the central trefoil within the darkly shaded polygonal compartment do not emerge from its tip, but from the sides of the pointed arch-shaped leaf. This is easier to observe on the trefoil just to the right of the middle of figure 138.¹³

It makes no difference whether we conceive of these motifs as flowers, leaves, or buds: the characteristic manner in which they are allowed to sprout tendrils from what should be their crowns runs entirely counter to nature. This is another clear manifestation of that distinctly antinaturalistic tendency that we already found to be so decisive in the treatment of tendril lines. The ornament of classical antiquity apparently did not allow itself this freedom—provided that we consider only complete, genuine floral motifs such as palmettes, etc. However, let us recall the conclusions from our examination of the development of the two-dimensional Greek palmette tendril ornament in the Hellenistic period, which proved to be the point of departure for the development of embedded half palmettes. We may also recall the results of our investigation into the acanthus ten-

¹² The situation is, of course, even more pronounced and advanced in the nineteenth-century example in figure 138.

¹³ Because of a mistake in copying, the tendril line on the right, which was also supposed to emerge from the pointed tip of the trefoil in figure 138 as its counterpart does, is displaced somewhat to the side.

dril during the Roman period, where we saw the same tendency expand to include three-dimensional naturalistic tendril ornament. If we were not entirely convinced then that artists of antiquity were fully conscious of the antinaturalistic tendency manifested in the embedded treatment of the half palmette, we should certainly be convinced of it now in regard to the Arabesque. That is why we did not hesitate to refer to motifs *c* and *d* in figure 139 as *Islamic half palmettes*. In origin and substance, they are, like the bifurcating tendrils—none other than the axil fillers of the classical antique tendril. Our task in what follows will be to demonstrate in detail the transition from one to the other. There is only one more initial point needed to clarify the relationship sketched out just above between antique axil fillers and the floral motifs of Arabesque ornament: in Arabesque ornament, as a rule, the blossoms that are embedded and treated in an unnaturalistic manner are mainly the half palmettes and the bifurcating tendrils; in relatively few instances are full palmettes used in this way, and this occurs only at a more advanced stage of the development.

THE Arabesque is found in all of the regions that converted to Islam over the centuries. Those that come under primary consideration are North Africa with Lower Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Persia; hence, all of the provinces that had once comprised the great Roman Empire, regions that were thoroughly familiar with the formal vocabulary of Greco-Roman art, as the monuments all show. As we have seen, vegetal tendril ornament had played by far the most important and dominant role in the decoration of this art. If we now discover that vegetal tendril ornament once again became the most important decorative element in the same geographic area during the Middle Ages, then it seems unquestionable, as already indicated, that the later ornament must somehow have depended genetically on what preceded it, despite its different properties. At any rate, it will certainly be worthwhile to investigate the relationship between them. This is why I find it exasperating—and explicable only as one of the many unfortunate consequences of the materialist theory of art—that even highly experienced specialists still blithely dismiss any possibility of a relationship between the Oriental Arabesque and classical antiquity just as there can be no relation between fire and ice.

In what follows, we will examine the relationship between antique and Islamic tendril ornament, a connection that has until now been regarded with skepticism. Since we have just explained in an introductory fashion what is so typical and characteristic of the Islamic ornament that we understand as the Arabesque, we already know the ultimate goal of the

development. Now we will return to the point of departure and resume our historical investigation. It lies, of course, in the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, which is commonly associated with the decisive date of A.D. 476. The development of vegetal tendril ornament up to this time has been treated in the previous chapter. Consequently, we must now begin with the period that in the present system directly followed the collapse of the western Roman Empire. In the West, we have the more mature, Early Christian art and in the eastern Roman Empire, the art of Byzantium. Since we are interested only in the development of the Arabesque, we will restrict the investigation to the vegetal ornament of the eastern Roman Empire and disregard Early Christian tendril decoration in the West, even though there would be much to learn from such a comparison.

A. TENDRIL ORNAMENT IN BYZANTINE ART

Does Byzantine art not mark the beginning of something completely new? One would tend to think so from the kind of remarks that are commonly made about it. Everyone would agree that there was an historical connection between Byzantine and antique art in general, but we only hear in detail about those aspects of Byzantine art that were completely different in nature from the art of antiquity. This is, of course, true, if by antique we stipulate work like that of Pheidias and Iktinos. However, think of how distant the Parthenon was from Attic architecture, and yet no one would dispute it as a monument of Classical antiquity! Roman Imperial art was pursuing its own course of development, which, moreover, was on the rise and by no means declining, as many would have us believe. In this context, we always hear about the weakness of the newly-commissioned reliefs on the Arch of Constantine in comparison to those which had been reincorporated from the Arch of Trajan, while completely forgetting the astounding fact that it is precisely during the period of Constantine that we encounter the first example of a vaulted basilica! The problem that preoccupied all of Western medieval architecture had already been solved on the most monumental scale by the beginning of the fourth century A.D.^a

To begin with, Byzantine art is nothing more than the late antique art of the eastern Roman Empire. There is no compelling reason to assume that a new era in the history of art began when Emperor Constantine made Byzantium the capital of his empire. Let us first examine what transpires in architecture. Byzantium and, in its wake, virtually all of the east-

ern Roman Empire adopted the central plan for Christian churches. The domed Greek cross plan was not invented in imperial Byzantium but is found much earlier in the second century A.D. (Musmeh in Syria), where it was obviously the result of Hellenistic architectural ambitions. The adaptation of this pre-existing system to Christian purposes presented no fundamental difficulties at all: seen in this light, the Hagia Sophia is not at all as important architecturally as the Basilica of Constantine. Moreover, it is this very adaptation of a completely developed architectural system that is largely responsible for what we refer to as the stagnation, the "rigid conservatism" of Byzantine art, for a reversion to mannerism is inevitable whenever there is nothing new to discover or no new challenges to meet. We can praise the impeccable technical execution of Byzantine works of art and express our gratitude to the artists who so capably upheld the tradition of Roman technical skills, but Byzantine art will never be counted among the truly creative artistic styles. What we think of specifically as the mature products of the Byzantines were not really their own inventions at all but the heritage bequeathed by the greater artistic energy and creativity of the Hellenistic period.^b

There is another general characteristic of Byzantine art that should be stressed from the outset, since it will facilitate a closer examination and understanding of the details later on. In spite of its predominantly decorative tendencies, the formative period of so-called Byzantine art was not at all given to the easy and prolific invention of new forms. The artistic activity of the entire period was characterized instead by restraint: the tendency was to abandon the inexhaustible wealth of bright, decorative forms amassed during the Hellenistic and early Roman Imperial periods and to retain only those few elements which were indispensable to architecture.

A look at the kinds of problems confronted by sculpture and painting during the same period will give us a better understanding of the situation. A new cult with a wealth of new religious ideas had created new artistic demands and problems. As we see abundantly in the art of the catacombs, however, there was originally little need to depart from the classical antique decorative tradition. Only gradually were the Orpheus and Hermes figures abandoned and new types created, albeit in classical, traditional poses and dress. However, in the beginning these efforts were nothing but stopgap measures lacking any true artistic conception and execution. It is a characteristic feature of Early Christian images that the value placed specifically on actual artistic considerations was relatively minor. Any one of the new religious ideas could be embodied by any of the figural types that had been handed down, and little significance

was attached to matters of beauty, harmony, and proportion. Form was suffocated by concept, at least to the extent that this was possible at all for artists still working ostensibly under the influence of the classical tradition.^c

Of course, later a time came when the irrepressible drive for formal beauty stirred once again and exerted its influence upon Christian sculpture and painting, but in the Byzantine empire this drive was almost stifled during the iconoclastic controversy. And even after iconoclasm died out, its impact remained strong enough to constrain the production of religious art through rules and regulations. The desire for beauty and the urge for truly artistic creativity attained a certain degree of expression, but given the nature of the circumstances, it was very limited. Indeed, this revival of religious art may in a certain sense have been the undoing of Byzantine artists. On the one hand, their regulations kept them from striving for the kind of lofty goal that occupied their colleagues in the West; on the other hand, since they were expected to produce primarily figurative religious images, they could never in good conscience indulge in the kind of purely decorative art that satisfied the basic human desire for ornament, a goal that early Islamic artists, as we well know, had pursued to such advantage. Unable to decide whether to grapple with the most abstract concepts of religious art or to perfect a decorative system that provided transitory delight to the eye, Byzantine art vacillated between these two poles throughout its existence, and consequently its achievements in both directions only half succeeded.^d

Therefore, the East Romans first dealt with the generous inheritance from classical antiquity by reducing the repertory of artistic forms. One has to admit, however, that they made some very good choices: in church architecture, they selected the far superior centrally planned system rather than the Roman basilica, whose unyielding qualities would hamper Western architects throughout the Middle Ages.^e In the area of ornament, they retained the most flexible and potentially useful forms, especially the ancient conventional systems for the undulating tendril.

Now that we are about to embark upon the detailed investigation of Byzantine tendril ornament, we must once again begin with the unfortunate observation that there are no preliminary studies to rely upon. It is true that certain details, such as cross sections of acanthus leaves, have been addressed and emphasized by authors who were primarily interested in Justinianic architecture. However, the leitmotifs of Byzantine decoration and the larger perspective reflected in each and every detail have been virtually ignored up to this point. This is not the place to

attempt to fill in the existing gaps, since our present task is limited expressly to vegetal tendril ornament. Nevertheless, because of the extreme paucity of pertinent literature, we will be compelled more than once to digress into topics that should have been dealt with long ago in a more general survey of Byzantine art.

I will begin with a monument whose date is firmly established: the Church of St. John Studios in Constantinople, which was built in 463. Figure 142, taken from Salzenberg,¹⁴ shows a capital with an architrave that is also of interest to our theme.

The capital has a so-called composite form: two rows of full acanthus leaves are arranged on top of each other around the basketlike core. Until now, interest in the various facets of the building's decoration has focused on the treatment of the acanthus leaves. The way the edges of the leaves



Fig. 142. Capital and entablature from the Basilica of St. John Studios, Istanbul.

¹⁴ W. Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale von Constantinopel vom 5. bis 12. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1854), pl. 3, no. 1; this reproduction is still obviously more faithful than the one by D. Pulgher, *Les anciennes églises byzantines de Constantinople* (Vienna, 1878), pl. 1.

are carved into long and jagged points was considered a remarkable innovation compared to the soft, more opulent treatment of the Roman acanthus.¹⁵ As conspicuous as the jagged edges may be, they are nevertheless not an essential characteristic. It is easy enough to prove that they are direct descendants of the narrow pointed ones often found roughed out with the drill on numerous Roman monuments right next to the softer versions.¹⁶ If the long and jagged leaf profile were all that we could point to, there would hardly be a basis for speaking in terms of a “Byzantine” acanthus.

The feature that fundamentally distinguishes the Byzantine acanthus is the disintegration of the leaf itself into smaller individual leaves. These divisions are not yet sufficiently conspicuous on the capital in figure 142 because its prototype in the capitals of Roman times had utilized only full acanthus leaves arranged serially in rows.¹⁷ However, closer observation reveals changes even on this capital: the individual groups of pointed leaflets, which combine to create larger points in the contour of the entire leaf, are separated by unusually deep indentations. If the tips of the full leaves did not curl over and project into space, these individual groups of pointed leaflets would appear as a much more prominent feature of the entire leaf. The end result of the process is clearly illustrated by the continuous acanthus tendril decorating the architrave in figure 142. The leaves of the undulating tendril are unquestionably derived from the acanthus half leaf, as a glance back to our discussion of the acanthus tendril will remind us. However, the once unified half leaves are broken up into points, mostly three in number but sometimes four or five, which are detached from the periphery of the acanthus leaf. And what is more, these multiple groupings of leaves already curve around in a different spatial configuration, compressing themselves in varied angles and projects.^f

To clarify matters fully at this crucial point in the development, let us quickly go back and review what we have concluded thus far about the acanthus. The acanthus emerged from the smooth leaf fan of the palmette. The individual leaves of the fan soon acquired the kind of jagged edges that are found on the Monument of Lysikrates (figure 111). In spite of

¹⁵ J. Strzygowski, “Die Akropolis in altbyzantinischer Zeit,” *Athenische Mitteilungen* 14 (1889): 280ff., goes into the most detail on this point and includes an admirable compilation of the widely scattered investigative material largely ignored until now.

¹⁶ See, for example, the ones on Hadrian’s Gate at Adalia reproduced in K. Lanckoronski-Brzezic, G. Niemann, and E. Petersen, *Städte Pamphyliens und Pisidiens* (Vienna, 1890–92).

¹⁷ The full acanthus leaf also survived for a long time on the Corinthian capital, far into advanced Islamic art; nevertheless, the subdivisions of the leaves can already be observed on capitals of the early Byzantine period (Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, pl. 5).

these jagged edges, both full and half acanthus leaves were treated consistently as undivided wholes throughout the entire Hellenistic and earlier Roman Imperial period. Early signs of the coming solutions, however, are already detectable on the examples from the Forum of Nerva (figures 135, 136), which represent an intermediate stage: there the original independence of the component acanthus leaves is gradually being compromised by the interlocking of individual half leaves as larger connecting tendrils. In the fifth century, the process draws to its conclusion: the separate groups of pronged leaflets detach themselves from what had once been an acanthus full or half leaf to produce separate configurations with a significance of their own. One can hardly imagine a more appropriate conclusion to this linear course of development. The "Byzantine" acanthus consequently is the pure product of a process that can be readily traced from the High Classical period onward; it is by no means the creation of a local Byzantine genius or the reflection of some kind of original "Oriental" art that has yet to be discovered.⁸

Some examples of the detached independent pointed shapes of the Byzantine acanthus, taken from the church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, are illustrated in figure 143.¹⁸ The most important one is the so-called trefoil in the middle, which looks something like a heraldic lily. The motif figures so prominently later, in Byzantine as well as in Islamic art, and ultimately becomes such a common element of all decoration, that we must discuss it now a bit more in depth.



Fig. 143. Decorative sculptural details from the Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, Istanbul.

The trefoil consists of a volute-calyx crowned by a single leaf. Superficially, therefore, it is practically identical with some of the abbreviated versions of lotus blossoms found in ancient Near Eastern art (figs. 20, 35). The abbreviated volute-calyx of the two-dimensional palmette, which was still common in the fifth century and later, particularly the split type, surely exerted some influence on the stylization of the trefoil. In addition, there is still a second factor of essential importance: the formation of the

¹⁸ From Pulgher, *Les anciennes églises*, pl. 3, no. 2.

volute-calyx of the Byzantine trefoil was already naturally encouraged by the deep indentations separating the smaller groups of pronged leaflets, a feature that verges on disintegration even in the early stages of the acanthus leaf. The three-pronged leaflets of the acanthus tendril on the architrave in figure 142 illustrate this point convincingly.

Another noteworthy aspect of the trefoil is the ogival form of its crowning leaf. As is commonly known, this type of arch later became very characteristic of the Islamic style. Its appearance in East Roman art of the fifth century does not come as a total surprise, however, since the acanthus half leaf, as well as the split palmette, had displayed a pronounced tendency throughout the Roman period and earlier to bend back in a curve.

Anyone who has compared all of the relevant capitals from Salzenberg's and Pulgher's publications will soon be convinced that it is this dissolution and shredding of the original unified acanthus leaf, along with the arbitrary use and combination of its separate subdivisions (fig. 143) that essentially distinguishes the ornament of the Justinianic period from that of Greco-Roman times. That is why we must reject any hypothesis that suggests once again that the allegedly idiosyncratic "fleshy and pointed" leaf contour of the Byzantine acanthus has anything to do with the eastern Mediterranean *acanthus spinosa* as opposed to the Italian *acanthus mollis*.¹⁹ According to this hypothesis, the stone carvers under Justinian once again began to study leaves from nature, just as students do in the art schools of today. Perhaps we are actually supposed to assume that the practice had never died out since the days of Kallimachos. Yet the observable process of fragmentation affecting the former unity of the acanthus leaf in the late Roman period completely discredits the idea that there was ever any kind of close dependence upon a specific prototype in nature. It also shows, once again, that decorative art had always sought its own artistic solutions rather than reverting to the imitation of specific botanical species from nature.

We have been concentrating until now only on the changes taking place in the leaves; those on the architrave in figure 142, however, fall into a continuous undulating pattern that will now serve to illustrate our discussion of the early Byzantine tendril.

Does what we see there really qualify as a continuous tendril at all? Initially, the tendril stems or lines themselves seem to be missing, not to mention the offshoots, which are supposed to branch off and spiral back in their characteristic fashion. In order to convince ourselves that the

¹⁹ Strzygowski, *Athenische Mitteilungen*, 14 (1889): 280.

pattern at the top of figure 142 is basically a continuous tendril, we will have to go back and review its history.

The point of departure was the basic tendril (fig. 50). Later, the axils of the branching spirals were filled with half palmettes (fig. 76). During the naturalizing phase, the fans of the half palmettes began to curve back (as in the border from figure 122), or they turned into sculptural-perspectival acanthus half leaves (figs. 129–30). These last two examples, however, still display enormous care in the bending back of the tips of the leaves, leaving no doubt as to their independent status as individual motifs. The tendrils themselves continue on from beneath the curved tips of the half palmettes. On a number of examples (figs. 133–36), we were able to observe clearly how the tendril stems gradually disappear, transferring their function over to the leaves themselves. Once the acanthus half leaf had lost all individuality as it disintegrated into numerous subdivisions, there was no longer any reason to uphold the fiction of an autonomous leaf branching off from a stem. The pattern on the architrave in figure 142 is, so to speak, a single acanthus rib that continuously branches off into individual points.

The *continuous tendril*, which had been confined to a border in figure 142, now coils its way freely over a larger surface in figure 144.^{20, h} This

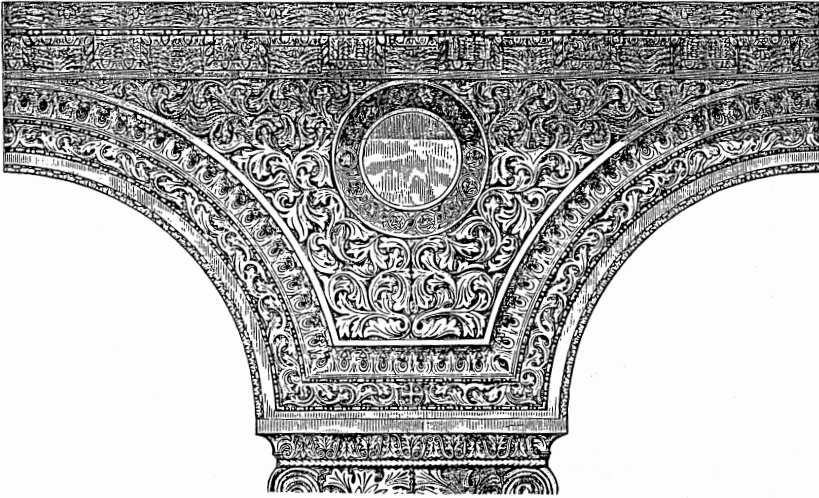


Fig. 144. Relief decoration from the spandrels of the lower nave arcade in the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

²⁰ Arcade decoration from Hagia Sophia, from Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, pl. 15.

simple basic tendril,²¹ devoid of any kind of subsidiary figures or other decorative accessories, would never have been allowed to fulfill this function in the Hellenistic or early Roman period. By the late Roman period, the demands upon the significant function of ornament had diminished sufficiently that the acanthus tendril could often be found patterning larger interior fields.²² On the continuous tendril, the component subdivisions of the once-unified acanthus half leaves are positioned one after the other; they are, moreover, embedded, without any stems of their own. Jones already recognized this as the whole secret of Arabesque ornament, even if his interpretation is not entirely correct. In the section of *The Grammar of Ornament* that deals with Arabic decoration, he makes the following comments concerning the same pattern reproduced in figure 144:

Be that as it may, this spandril [*sic*] is itself the foundation of the surface decoration of the Arabs and Moors. It will be observed that, although the leafage which surrounds the centre is still a reminiscence of the acanthus leaf, it is the first attempt at throwing off the principle of leafage growing out one from the other: the scroll is continuous without a break. The pattern is distributed all over the spandril, so as to produce one even tint, which was ever the aim of the Arabs and Moors.²³

Jones was also aware of the fact that the Greek principle of always having leaves branch off separately on their own stems had already slackened by earlier Roman Imperial times: "Roman ornament is constantly struggling against this apparently fixed law."^{23a} Nevertheless, he still considered the final step taken during the Justinianic period as a spontaneous invention that resulted in a completely new series of vegetal ornaments. Of course, Jones did not have the benefit of the kind of knowledge and perspective gained from the material that scholarship has since brought to light and that now enables us to trace this process from its genesis and earliest foundation up into Greek times. Furthermore, he was laboring

²¹ The same goes for the guilloche. This is one of the most crucial aspects in which late antique and medieval ornament departed from classical precedent.

²² Apse mosaic of the chapel of Sts. Rufina and Secunda in the Lateran Baptistery, dated according to G. B. de Rossi (*Mosaici antichi delle chiese di Roma* [Rome, 1872–99]), around 400; vault mosaic of the presbytery of San Vitale.¹

²³ Jones did not think of the undulating tendril as continuous and unified but as an arrangement of separate spiral tendrils placed in a series. It would be superfluous to repeat our arguments from chapter 3 exposing the one-sidedness of this interpretation. [Riegl fails to give a page citation from the original source. These English lines are from O. Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1856), 57.]

^{23a} [Ibid., 34.]

under the misconception that the essential change in ornament during and after the Byzantine period was the development of leaves growing directly from the continuous tendril, without any intermediary stems. This does not, however, get to the heart of the issue. It is much more essential to recognize that in decoration the leaf relinquished the kind of independent existence that it enjoys in nature. The leaf no longer branches off from the tendril but replaces it and fuses with it. This relationship is not yet so very apparent on the Byzantine ornaments from St. John Studios and Hagia Sophia, because the individual subdivisions of the original acanthus half leaf seem to branch off independently from a tendril one after the other. In these examples, the development is only half complete, and we cannot yet discern the final stage, such as we see it in the Arabesque, where the tendrils are allowed to continue on from the pointed tips of the embedded leaves. Nevertheless, we will soon be able to demonstrate beyond any doubt that this was also the case in early Byzantine art.

Let us return to figure 142 and discuss the two remaining decorative borders on the capital. The first one is the basic intermittent tendril scheme found between the two volutes crowning the capital. A simple, smooth undulating line winds its way from blossom to blossom with no trace of naturalism. The floral motifs have the abbreviated volute-calyx just like the flat palmette on the trefoil in figure 143. The three-leafed blossom crowning the calyx looks very much like the profile view of the three-leafed lotus. There can be little doubt about it: what we see is the ancient Greek intermittent tendril, whose palmettes manifest the fragmentation of the acanthus leaf that had meanwhile taken place.

Finally, the ornamental border on the abacus displays a continuous tendril, but in its ancient Greek form: only the attached leaves are stylized in a way that still betrays their origin from the palmette. The strip is interrupted in the middle by a projecting boss decorated with a row of lotus blossoms and palmettes. The lotus blossoms are stylized like the ones on the intermittent tendril on the preceding border, while the volutes of the palmettes clearly betray the process of fragmentation taking place in Byzantine acanthus ornament.

In figures 142 and 144, the kinds of curves produced by the tendril lines are not conspicuously different from those of Greek art. Initially, this is what makes it so difficult to identify the process that came to distinguish them from the tendril ornament of classical antiquity. The rhythms involved are simply those of the familiar continuous tendril. In fact, classical tendril ornament in general had never attempted to deny its origins from

spiral ornament, even at the very end when the developed acanthus half leaf had completely lost all traces of its original and almost purely geometric function as a mere axil filler, the spiraling coils of the tendrils were still based on the circle.

On the other hand, let us examine figure 145,²⁴ which is also a detail from one of the arcades in Hagia Sophia.^j First we will focus on the ornament of the soffit illustrated above. Here the tendrils no longer converge to form rounded shapes but create ovals that are pointed at either end. This detail is very critical to the development of an eastern Mediterranean decorative art that was following new impulses. The change in the relationship between tendril and leaf, which we saw taking place in figure 144 and whose significance Jones had already recognized, was also taken over in western regions, at least as the Byzantines had developed it by the Justinianic period. However, Western art always maintained a preference for tendrils arranged in circular curves, whereas, as we can already see,

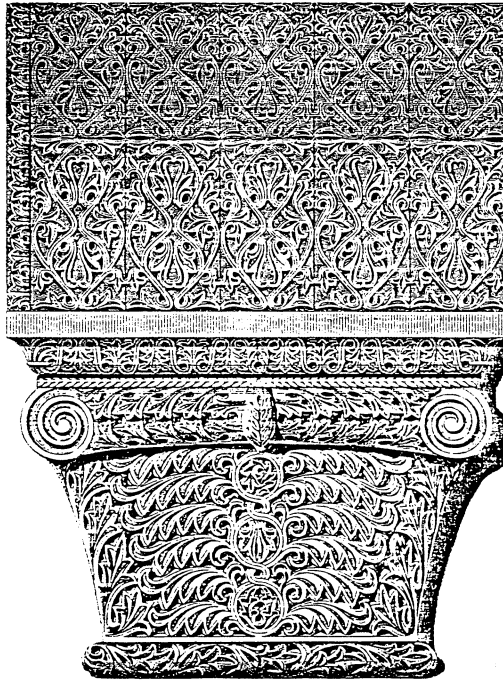


Fig. 145. Capital and portion of the intrados decoration from the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

²⁴ Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, pl. 15, no. 7.

figure 145, from Hagia Sophia, begins to lean toward the pointed oval as the basic shape for its tendril arrangements.^{25, k}

The individual leaf motifs in figure 145 consist predominantly of curved half palmettes that converge in symmetrical pairs to form a remarkable number of split full palmettes. The two half palmettes that comprise a full one, however, do not arise from one and the same tendril but from different stems. This is, of course, contrary to nature, where blossoms normally have their own individual stems. Consequently, we may note this as another antinaturalistic feature that would have become characteristic of the Arabesque. At this point, let us re-examine figure 139. To the left, we see bifurcated tendrils repeatedly converging to form shapes like ogival arches, in a manner that corresponds to the movement of both halves of a split palmette. This emerges even more distinctly in the solution used for the corner at the lower right of figure 139. Here the bifurcating tendrils converge from two different sides to form an ogival arch, to which a trefoil is attached as the free termination. Even if the individual vegetal motifs in figure 145 are not yet bifurcating tendrils, since the stylization had not advanced that far by the sixth century, there is still an unmistakable tendency to combine two independent half motifs into one full motif under a curving angle. The points of contact with Greco-Roman ornament for the curving angle are the split palmette and, furthermore, Pompeiian examples like the ones in figure 152. For the tendril stems, which converge from different sides to form calyces, there are modest forerunners like the upper palmette in the middle of figure 125 and the enclosed palmettes to either side.

The volute-calyx of the half palmettes in figure 145 is once again reduced to a fleshy leaf calyx. In stone, the leaves are indicated with the help of round drill holes, which are highly characteristic of the subsequent development. This is a technical process that Islamic artists would also later assimilate.

The tendrils along the central axis of the capital beneath the soffit form interlacing circles flanked by long, curved half palmettes of the split variety, containing the kind of subdivisions of the acanthus leaf seen in figure 143. Intertwining circles alternating in size and used as a surface pattern are familiar from Early Christian art in Rome where they are classified as interlacing bands.¹ As already indicated, the Byzantines took particular delight in this kind of decoration. Its continued development under Islamic artists presupposed a freer treatment of the bands. In their use of

²⁵ Once again, there are probably quite a number of forerunners for this in Pompeiian decoration.

interlacing bands, the Romans continued to rely basically on the circle, just as they had in regard to tendrils; Islamic artists, on the other hand, were entirely uninhibited about breaking and bending the interlace. If figure 145 made it clear that the Byzantines were the direct forerunners of Islamic artists in freeing tendrils from the constraints of the circle, then the capital decoration in figure 146²⁶ demonstrates that the transition from circular to angular interlaced bands had already taken place in pre-Islamic Byzantium.^m

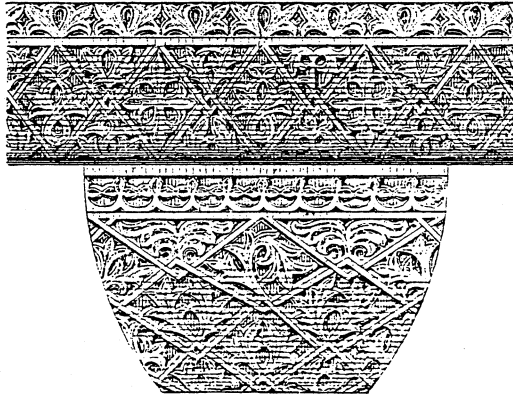


Fig. 146. Capital with entablature from the outer gallery in the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

The next few details will corroborate this opinion and serve to demonstrate further the latent Islamic tendencies in Byzantine art during the age of Justinian. Figure 147 from the Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus²⁷ shows how freely the detached subdivisions of the acanthus leaf could be applied. Here we see a reduced acanthus half leaf inserted into the familiar two-leafed calyx. The same motif in a lobed acanthusized variation became extremely common in later Islamic art.ⁿ

Figure 148²⁸ illustrates a type of palmette stylization that was equally common in Byzantine and early Islamic art. It should be compared to its Pompeiian forerunners (fig. 149).²⁹ In figure 150,³⁰ the two trefoils are twisted on their stems, while the tips of the additional leaflets are allowed to cross over each other: despite the deliberate retention of its plantlike

²⁶ Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, pl. 17, no. 4, from Hagia Sophia.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pl. 5, no. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Niccolini, *Case ed monumenti di Pompeii*, vol. 1, part 1, "Panteone [Macellum]," pl. 2, top center.

³⁰ Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, pl. 17, no. 4, from Hagia Sophia.



147



148



149



150



153

Fig. 147. Details of relief ornament from the Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, Istanbul.

Fig. 148. Details of relief ornament from the Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, Istanbul.

Fig. 149. Detail of wall painting from the Macellum at Pompeii.

Fig. 150. Detail of relief ornament from the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

Fig. 153. Detail of relief ornament from the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

qualities, this motif is treated in such a playful way that it could almost be called Islamic.

Finally, figure 151³¹ is from the carved decoration of a wooden tie beam at Hagia Sophia. In the circle at the far left, two embedded half palmettes diverge at the bottom and then serve as stems for the two identical half palmettes sprouting from their crowning tips: thus it exemplifies without any ambiguity the fully developed principle of the Arabesque. However, these carved decorations do not date back to the period of Justinian: the treatment of the details is no longer as sharp and angular but, on the contrary, flowing and almost geometrically correct. Even though we could refer to these ornaments without hesitation as Islamic works of the eleventh or twelfth century, we know that they still belong to the period of Christian-Greek rule in Constantinople because of the crosses that occur on other beams of exactly the same kind.³² Of course, one could still

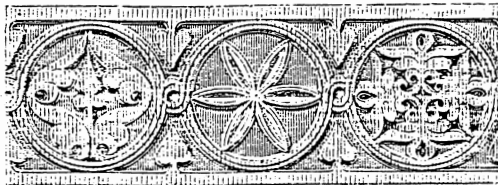


Fig. 151. Decoration on a wooden tie beam from the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pl. 20, no. 14.

³² *Ibid.*, pl. 20, no. 12.

assume that the reliefs were carved directly by Islamic artists under Byzantine patronage or that they show definite influence of Islamic art, which at that time was already gaining strength. However, as all our investigations have shown, there is nothing that compels us to ascribe the stylization in figure 151 to any kind of foreign influence. Its exotic impression results primarily from the round drill holes of the leaf calyces and, second, from the curvature of the leaves, both of which existed already in sculpture of the Justinianic period.³³ The inclination toward curving, pointed-arched forms was already latent in Greek art, waiting only to be sparked by the desire for greater abstraction that would promote it to a major formal element. To demonstrate this, I also cite the three details from Pompeii in figure 152, in addition to what we already know about split-palmettes, the outwardly curved tips of acanthus half leaves, etc.^{33, p}

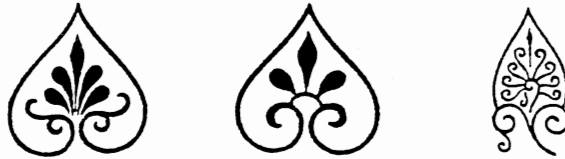


Fig. 152. Ornamental details of a third style wall painting from Herculaneum.

In the early Byzantine period at Hagia Sophia, moreover, there are also unmistakable examples of leaves sprouting into tendrils, like the ones just examined in the left-hand roundel of figure 151. Figure 153³⁴ shows three acanthus half leaves sprouting from each other one after another, like tendrils. Figures 154 and 155 are *opus sectile* decorations.⁹ The first one, resembling a capital, consists of two half palmettes of the split variety, as the spiraling volute-calyx and the subtly curved individual leaves clearly indicate. The outer rib of each of the leaves, however, curves up and around and then turns into the stem of a palmette. Similarly, in figure 155, the tendrils sprout and branch off from the bottoms of inverted cornucopiae within a border based on familiar Roman patterns; the two central offshoots meet to form a symmetrical pair in a manner similar to the split full palmettes in figure 145. The outer shoots of the bifurcating tendrils, however, provide the stems for buds or fanlike leaves. Beneath every second cornucopia, a palmette is supported by two tendrils treated like

³³ Niccolini, *Case ed monumenti di Pompeii*, vol. 2, part 2, "Descrizione generale," pl. 90, top center.

³⁴ Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, pl. 17, no. 13.



Fig. 154. Details from the marble *opus sectile* decoration in the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.



Fig. 155. Details from the marble *opus sectile* decoration in the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

leaves; these illustrate the same principle of leaves metamorphosing into tendrils.

The antinaturalistic tendency, which was unquestionably one of the fundamental guiding principles of Byzantine art, resulted positively from profound and significant cultural processes, some of which have already been suggested. However, the circumstances must have been extremely favorable to the process at work in the decorative arts of the Byzantine territories to have encouraged the extremely rapid development at this early stage, such as we see it in the many examples already cited. I would attribute this to the widespread preference in the art of the eastern Mediterranean basin, even during the Roman Imperial period, for the more severe types of Hellenistic tendril ornament. Without this preference, it would not have been possible for the leafless, inherently more abstract, intermittent tendril or for the split palmette to have occupied such a leading position in early Byzantine ornament. Typical examples, such as the one in figure 156 from the Church of the Pantokrator,^{34a} still occur in Constantinople during the twelfth century. Another is the abacus of the capital from St. Sophia in Saloniki, illustrated by Texier and Popplewell,^{34b} in which horizontal S-spirals and lotus blossoms are set into the axil calyces



Fig. 156. Detail of a cornice from the Church of the Pantokrator, Istanbul.

^{34a} [Pulgher, *Les anciennes églises*, pl. 10, no. 4.]

^{34b} [C. Texier and R. Popplewell Pullan, *L'architecture byzantine; recueil de monuments des premiers temps du christianisme en Orient, précédés de recherches historiques et archéologiques* (London, 1864), pl. 39, left.]

in complete conformity to the ancient Greek formula, but with leaves stylized in the Byzantine manner; the intermittent tendril on the neck of this capital is no less characteristic. And in fact, the few Roman monuments on Asiatic soil that have so far been considered worthy of more careful study³⁵ confirm that the intermittent tendril richly elaborated with two-dimensional palmette motifs always played a major role there. Even Salzenberg had already noticed the interrelationship between the Byzantine and the Hellenistic manner, although he missed the point when he abruptly announced that “the (byzantine) leaf ornament is not treated in the Roman manner, but more as it was in the Hellenistic period.”³⁶

This point is important not only for the formal changes taking place in ornament during the Justinianic period but also for the later development. The East must always have remained faithful to the older ways, whether they were local traditions or technical methods, and especially to the two-dimensional stylization in the ancient Greek manner. Otherwise, there would be no explanation for the fact that we still encounter almost purely Greek tendril decoration on works of art from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries.

Furthermore, the treatment of the acanthus in the stone sculpture during the Justinianic period was not the only approach to such ornament during early Byzantine times. The soft, lobular acanthus was also used continuously right alongside it, although this will not become apparent until we take up the subsequent development. Certainly, material and technique were fundamental factors in the choice of treatment: the rounded leaf was naturally more appropriate to painting, and the angular approach more suited to stone sculpture. However, local differences will also have had an effect, though these are the kind of differences that could never have left their mark on the established international art of the Roman Empire. Yet at a time when new impulses were appearing and new types of decoration were entering the mainstream, they had a better chance of attaining some importance. Therefore, before we begin our investigation of the actual Islamic monuments, we will spend a little time in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire to see what remained of the late antique, Greco-Roman tradition in the art of that region.

In relative terms, we are best informed about late antique or early medieval art in Syria. The photographs taken by Count de Vogüé of the ruins of central Syrian cities are already sufficient to form a complete picture of

³⁵ For example, the monuments published in Lanckoronski-Brzezine et al., *Städte Pamphyliens and Pisidiens*.

³⁶ Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, 19.

the Syrian ornament of the period, at least as it was applied in architecture. We will limit ourselves in the following discussion, as usual, only to vegetal tendril ornament.

Figure 157 reproduces a frieze from the great pyramidal tomb of El Barah,³⁷ which de Vogüé dated in the fifth century.¹ The continuous acanthus tendril decorating the frieze immediately recalls a similar monument, the architrave of St. John Studios in Constantinople (fig. 142). When we compare the two, we reach the surprising but inevitable conclusion that the Syrian relief represents an earlier stage of the Constantinopolitan example. The frieze from El Barah still clearly exhibits precisely those characteristics which we missed in figure 142. It has offshoots that branch off individually and spiral back in a direction opposite to the main movement of the tendril, which at first made us hesitate to call the pattern



Fig. 157. Decorated cornice from the Early Christian Church at El Barah, Syria.

a continuous acanthus tendril. The early classical acanthus leaf is likewise still clearly discernible. And even though the connecting tendril stems have already been suppressed into what looks like a leaf rib running along an undulating path, the edge of the leaf still consists of jagged points that are subordinate to the embedded acanthus half leaves themselves; they are not yet the independent three- or four-pronged subdivisions seen in the Constantinopolitan work of figure 142. There can be no doubt, however, that the Syrian frieze was the point of departure for the next step represented by the frieze from St. John Studios. The stems are already suppressed; the edges of the acanthus leaves are beginning to break down into bifurcating offshoots, and most important of all, the main ribs of the branching leaves continue on beyond the leaf tips as stems that then support freely terminating, angular stylizations of palmettes. What we encounter, therefore, are expressly bifurcating tendrils to which additional stemmed blossom motifs are attached.

The Syrian example demonstrates unequivocally that this tendency in ornament was by no means restricted to a local Byzantine decorative art

³⁷ C. J. M. de Vogüé, *Syrie centrale* (Paris, 1865, 1877), pl. 76.

that originated in Constantinople and then spread into the provinces of the Empire. On the contrary, the seeds had been scattered everywhere by Greco-Roman art; the cultural climate as well as the forces striving for change and further development were the same throughout the empire. Furthermore, the contrast between the elegant and flowing rendering of the frieze from El Barah (assuming the drawing is an accurate reproduction) and the stiff, sluggish movement of the relief from St. John Studios shows that decorative sculpture in fifth-century Syria had by no means fallen behind what was produced in Byzantium. The Syrian example, moreover, is not an isolated one. De Vogüé's plate 121, for one, shows a similar treatment of the continuous acanthus tendril. Furthermore, the arched doorway of the double portal illustrated by de Vogüé^{37a} and the one on the Golden Gate are both decorated with continuous acanthus tendrils, which establishes a tight developmental sequence between El Barah and St. John Studios.^s

Intersecting tendrils that form polygons filled with leaves and blossoms, hence an intermediary stage of the specifically Islamic decorative scheme, are found repeatedly on Syrian buildings.^{37b} There are also other examples, such as the one in figure 158,³⁸ however, that are strikingly similar to the formulas of the ancient Greek tendril (cf. the continuous tendril in figure 96 from the fifth century B.C.).^t



Fig. 158. Border from the main apse in the Early Christian Church at Qalb Lozeh, Syria.

Until about a decade ago, virtually nothing was known of late antique Egyptian art. Today there is more Egyptian material at our disposal, at least in regard to ornament, than from any other region in this period. We owe this first of all to the textiles discovered in the tombs of Saqqara, Akhmim, Fayum, etc. and, second, to the examples of Coptic sculpture preserved in the museum at Bulak.^{38a}

^{37a} [C.J.M. de Vogüé, *Le temple de Jérusalem. Monographie du Haram-ech-Chérif suivi d'un essai sur la topographie de la Ville-sainte* (Paris, 1864), pl. 5.]

^{37b} [De Vogüé, *Syrie centrale*, pl. 43.]

³⁸ Ibid., pl. 129, from Qalb Lozeh.

^{38a} [A. Gayet, *Les monuments coptes du Musée de Boulaq*, Mémoires publiées par les membres de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire (Paris, 1889).]

This material, which is rich beyond all expectations, has of course already been the subject of various studies. Karabacek has investigated the textiles acquired by the k. k. Österreichischen Museum in Vienna (the first of their kind to reach Europe), but he focused mainly on their evident connections with Sassanian-Persian and later Islamic art.³⁹ I myself have attempted to clarify, at least in general terms, the late antique connections of the purely decorative aspects of the textiles in the catalog published on the collection by the k. k. Österreichischen Museum.⁴⁰ As for the Coptic sculptures, besides Gayet, Ebers has dealt with them most thoroughly.⁴¹ This author also vastly underestimated their close connection with late Roman-Byzantine art because of his bias toward an alleged renaissance of indigenous Egyptian artistic traditions, as I have proven in detail.^{42, u} Notwithstanding all these initial attempts, no one has as yet compiled the kind of comprehensive overview of the material that would certainly yield highly significant results; we will have to confine ourselves in the following discussions to those monuments which can tell us something about the development of tendril ornament in early medieval Egypt.



Fig. 159. Decorated late antique pediment from Ahnas, Egypt.

The most significant example of all is reproduced in figure 159,⁴³ a fragment of a carved stone pediment.^v Visible to the right are the two leaves of the split palmette fan from the corner acroterion; above them is an animal. The middle of the gable is occupied by two not particularly

³⁹ J. Karabacek, *Katalog der Th. Graf'schen Funde in Aegypten* (Vienna, 1883).

⁴⁰ A. Riegl, *Die ägyptischen Textilfunde im k. k. Österreichischen Museum* (Vienna, 1889).

⁴¹ G. M. Ebers, *Sinnbildliches. Die koptische Kunst, ein neues Gebiet der altchristlichen Sculptur und ihre Symbole* (Leipzig, 1882).

⁴² A. Riegl, "Koptische Kunst," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 2 (1893): 112–21.

⁴³ Gayet, *Les monuments coptes*, pl. 6, identified by him and by Ebers as an imported Byzantine work.

well- executed figures, whom Gayet identifies as David and Bathsheba. Our interest will focus on the ornament consisting of two interlacing tendrils found within the reversing border strip of the broken pediment. The leaves, which are three-pronged subdivisions of the acanthus leaf (wherever they are not straightforward though weak imitations of the two-dimensional half palmette), do not branch off freely on their own stems from the tendrils but intersect them. One of the three leaflets that comprise each of the larger leaves curves back in a manner that qualifies it as a calycal leaf; the two other leaves are oriented in the direction of the tendril. When these two leaves are isolated and given a firm, smooth outline, they begin to look like one of the most common of all of the patterns used in Islamic borders, particularly for decorating pilasters. The basic idea relates once again to the new freedom of the tendrils to continue from the tips of embedded acanthus half leaves or half palmettes. Wherever the tendrils finally do run out, however, the free terminations are punctuated by full leaves, or possibly even by full palmettes, for that matter, since the stylization makes it hard to determine exactly which are involved.

This kind of stylized tendril decoration, as one might expect from its frequency in mature Islamic art, occurs repeatedly on Egyptian sculpture of the transitional type characteristic of Byzantine art. Examples of this kind appear in Gayet.^{43a} Gayet, of course, is trying to prove that the accompanying figurative depictions, illustrated on his plates 4 and 6, are of Byzantine origin and that the reliefs therefore are imports. Those of us who do not find any justification for Gayet's differentiation between Byzantine and indigenous Egyptian art in the sixth and seventh centuries will have no trouble assigning this sculpture an Egyptian origin. However, even if Gayet were right, it would not essentially alter our thesis: we have already established that the tendency leading up to the incorporation of the profile leaf within the tendril, characteristic of Islamic art, (which proved to be the underlying scheme of figure 159), was already present on any number of monuments from the eastern Roman Empire, including those originating in Constantinople. Figure 159 represents a very straightforward and decisive step in this direction, something we would sooner expect in the region that later gave rise to pure Arabesque ornament than within the precincts of Byzantium, where art continued to vacillate between an adherence to tradition and a susceptibility to the decorative inclinations of the period.^w

^{43a} [Ibid., pls. 4, 93.]



Fig. 160. Decorated border from a late antique or early medieval Egyptian grave stele.

The other examples of tendril ornament in Coptic sculpture all tend in the same direction, if not at the same quick pace. I call attention here simply to the frequency with which the tendril splits in figure 160.⁴⁴ This would not have been possible without the basic principle that began to govern the treatment of leaves and tendrils and was already a major factor in figure 159. The elaborate way in which the offshoots splitting off from the continuous tendril break down further into richly branching subsidiary tendrils⁴⁵ is at odds with the antique tradition, which in the same situation generally insisted on one free termination for each single spiral at this point. This innovation manifests a neo-Oriental preference for small, dense, and evenly distributed overall patterning. In addition, there are examples of basic spiraled undulating tendrils like the original Mycenaean scheme (fig. 50), which are enriched only by simple peaked forms serving as the equally primitive axil fillers.⁴⁶ This is not insignificant, considering that the same typically early tendril forms still frequently occur even after the Arabesque had become dominant.^x

AT THIS point, we must end our discussion of the extensive Egyptian material and turn to the early medieval monuments of the other Asiatic regions that maintained ties with Constantinople. There is, unfortunately, so little accessible material published about the art of Asia Minor that we can bypass it without any great loss. One can probably safely assume, moreover, that the western headland of Asia Minor followed Byzantium's lead more closely than any other region.^y On the other hand, a small but valuable group of monuments originated along the eastern periphery of Mediterranean culture, a region that was an artistic rather than a political province of the Roman Empire.

The Persians of the Sassanian period (A.D. 224–643) are usually accorded an important and in fact vital role in the development of the so-called Islamic style of the medieval Orient. This prevailing view sees the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pl. 98.

⁴⁵ For example, *ibid.*, pls. 98, 30.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pl. 27.

decoration on surviving Persian monuments of this period as closely related to that on the truly Islamic monuments themselves. At the very least, Persian ornament is claimed to be the immediate predecessor of Islamic work. Consequently, we need to advance a different view of the Sassanian-Persian monuments, one that would include them as part of the Byzantine transformations of antique tendril ornament.

It is indeed astonishing to think that we are still compelled even today, to justify our approach. At the same time, this situation results once again from a blind adherence to art-historical materialism and its corollary that virtually every category of art developed autochthonously with its own national character. The scholars of forty years ago or more, as we shall see, those who still worked with open minds and an unbiased view of historical developments, did not for an instant doubt the close connection between Sassanian and Western art. But the surging movement that would approach art primarily as the spontaneous result of material mechanisms rather than as a traditional process of study and imitation has, in the interim, managed to obscure and suppress the conceptual insight achieved initially by unprejudiced investigators. Therefore, in dealing with a few of the more characteristic monuments of Sassanian art published in Flandin and Coste,^{46a} our purpose will not only be to investigate the development of vegetal tendril ornament but also to determine more precisely the position of this entire group of works within the history of art.

Our first example is from the vaulted grotto built at Taq-i-Bustan by the penultimate Sassanian king, Chosroes II (Khusrau Parviz), which presumably dates from around A.D. 600.^z There are in addition a number of architectural fragments that Flandin and Coste discovered in Isfahan, and which are so similar in general character and detail to the decoration of Chosroes's grotto that we can without hesitation assign them an approximately similar date. In Byzantium at this time, the innovations we encountered in Justinianic architecture had already come to maturity, although not enough time had elapsed since the collapse of the Roman Empire for the art of the provinces to have made any substantial progress. In other words, the Sassanian architectural decoration we are about to investigate comes from the very period of transition that now pre-occupies us.

Let us first examine the capital in figure 161. The decoration consists of a single vegetal motif articulated as a number of component parts. It has a thick stem interrupted by rings and sheaths. Below to either side leaf

^{46a} [E. N. Flandin and P. Coste, *Voyage en Perse* (Paris, 1851–1854), atlas I, pls. 6, 17 bis.]

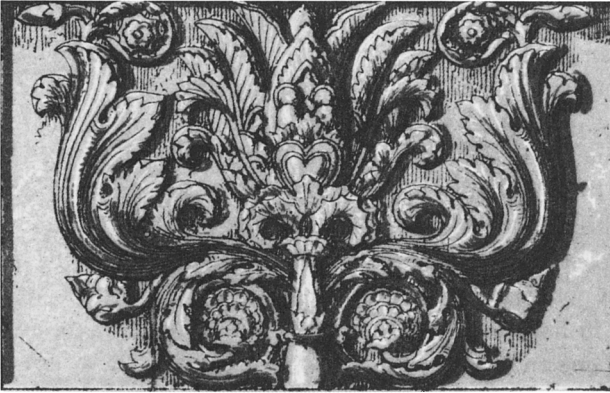


Fig. 161. Sassanian Persian impost capital
from Bisutun, Iran.

tendrils circle downward in a spiraling curve and terminate in flowers. Then come large, luscious leaves that branch off on both sides above the tendrils; the leaves immediately next to the stem curl toward the middle like volutes, while the outer ones curve around in the opposite direction to reveal tendril stems beneath their tips that terminate in half leaves and flowers. Finally, there is a flower crowning the main stalk that has volutes emerging from the sheath of the stem and a number of leaf calyces enclosing its oval core.^{aa}

The structure of the motif is familiar to us in every respect from any number of Roman monuments, and the same is true of the leaves, which consist exclusively and entirely of acanthus. Moreover, they are not the kind of geometricized acanthus motifs that predominate on buildings of the early Byzantine period but a type of bushy, luscious, plastic acanthus still very similar to the Roman acanthus itself. The indentations between the main groups of pointy leaflets are already quite deep, but they do not yet succeed in destroying the integrity of the leaf as a whole. The curving tips of the large, lateral acanthus half leaves recall the marked preference of later Islamic artists for lines that wind into ogival arches; nevertheless, they are still entirely Roman. This is also confirmed by the way the tendrils emerge from beneath the leaves and not from their tips. The emphatic volute-calyces that occur at the points in the stem where the large lateral leaves and the central flower emerge are also antique. Nevertheless, stylistically they do not so much reflect Roman sensibilities, which often preferred to omit the two-dimensionally conceived volute-calyx from the sculptural acanthus. They are closer to the more rigid Greek form of stylization, which of course had once held sway over this part of

Asia before the arrival of the strongly naturalizing tendencies that came with Roman classical art.

The prototypical qualities of figure 161, which appear to anticipate the specifically Islamic manner, reside not so much in the handling of the tendrils but in the articulation of the leaves and blossoms. This includes first of all the way that the lateral ribs of the acanthus leaf are drawn together tightly side by side; second, the way the edge of the leaf is echoed by a jagged, interior line running parallel to it on most of the leaves;⁴⁷ and finally, but not least important, the way the acanthus half leaves appear to be folded in half, so that a number of them, functioning as calyces, fit easily into one another to form larger blossoms like the one in figure 161. This is a very important feature, because later in Arabesque ornament we will encounter vegetal forms that look as though they are doubled-over versions of rounded calycal leaves.

In order to gain a more profound understanding of the fundamental decorative laws governing the formation of Sassanian blossoms, we would have to go back and systematically investigate the development of blossoms since the Hellenistic period, since they apparently started out from such naturalizing roots. As yet, no one has attempted this potentially rewarding task. Later, however, we will have an opportunity to point out some particularly significant details.

Let us now examine the pilaster capital in figure 162 from the grotto of Chosroes at Taq-i-Bustan. On the neck is a row of acanthus calyces that are doubled up in the way just described; the "pipes" are indicated by drill holes. The plant on the capital itself has the same thick, candelabralike stem as figure 161. The leaves that branch off to either side in profile are initially hard to identify. At first they seem to be acanthus half leaves, because of the relative dearth of volute-calyces. However, when compared to the two lower spiraling leaves, which are straightforward, if slightly unconventional acanthus half leaves, we see that they are actually two-dimensional half palmettes. The flowers perched on the tip of each half palmette clearly manifest, once more, the antinaturalistic law governing the combination of flowers and tendrils, a subject that has now been sufficiently discussed. In addition, there is a row of trefoil motifs like the one in figure 143, each of which is circumscribed by a heart, decorating the abacus.^{bb}

These two examples of Sassanian ornament are sufficient to justify Owen Jones's statement that "the ornaments are constructed according to

⁴⁷ See figure 163 from another capital of the same group. [From Isfahan (Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, pl. 14, no. 22).]



Fig. 163. Detail of an acanthus leaf on a Sassanian Persian impost capital from Isfahan.

Fig. 162. Pilaster capital in the grotto of the Sassanian Persian king Chosroes II at Taq-i-Bustan, Iran.

the same principles as Roman ornaments, though the modeled surfaces are treated more like the variations found on the Byzantine ornaments which they strikingly resemble."^{47a} Anyone who still sees these motifs as the typical expression of a supposedly indigenous Persian culture must answer the question as to just when and how this "national" art actually developed. As we discovered in chapter 3, the ornament on Sassanian monuments had nothing to do with the Persian art of the Achaemenid period. Did it come from central Asia with the Parthians perhaps? That is also not very likely, since, as we know from the Turks and the Mongols, only geometric forms managed to reach the West from that region. Therefore, the only assumption left is that the Persians themselves invented a kind of vegetal tendril ornament *ex nihilo*, parallel with the Greco-Roman development, i.e., that on their own, in a few centuries, they were able to accomplish what had taken the other cultures of antiquity no fewer than two millennia to develop. I fear, however, that this assumption would find few supporters.

The acanthus motifs in figures 161 and 162, as mentioned before, are rendered in the luxurious, naturalizing Roman manner. The pointy, conventionalized units or subdivisions, which we saw in early Byzantine art and which look as though they had been plucked from the full leaf, also occur on the border of another Sassanian capital, a detail of which is reproduced in figure 164.⁴⁸ At first glance, it looks completely Islamic, and

^{47a} [Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 30.]



Fig. 164. Lower border of a Sassanian impost capital from Bisutun.

yet no amount of close scrutiny can disclose a single detail that is not familiar to us from early Byzantine monuments. Below there are split palmettes like the one in figure 148; in the middle trefoils, comparable to figure 143 and circumscribed by ovals that are even more antique than the heart-shaped one in figure 162; and, finally, at the top, pairs of diverging trefoils that also recall figure 143. This indicates how closely the early Byzantine approach already approximated the Islamic ornament and how a similar process had been developing steadily in all of the regions once dominated by East Roman art. There was really little more that was necessary to transform them into the floral and leaf motifs of the pure Arabesque: only in the treatment of the tendrils, however, was there still one more crucial step to be taken; although, as we have seen, the basic course had already been set.^{dd}

B. EARLY ISLAMIC TENDRIL ORNAMENT

Now that we are finally about to discuss the Islamic monuments produced several centuries after the new religion had emerged, let us review the specific properties that characterize the mature Islamic tendril ornament, the so-called *Arabesque*.

1. The tendrils have once more become linear, more or less geometricized connecting elements. In their movements, however, they very often abandon the circular path that had remained a constant and characteristic feature of classical antique spiral ornament. Instead, they wind around in oval, eccentric curves, even forming polygonal shapes when, as is often the case, they converge from different

directions. This is especially true when the tendrils are treated as bands, i.e., when tendril ornament combines with banded interlace. In this case, the main bands follow the new scheme, be it polygonal or curvilinear, while the fine tendrils filling up the interstices maintain beautiful, swelling, circular curves.

2. The motifs resemble either the two-dimensional palmettes or the acanthus half leaves of antiquity, or, lastly, their Byzantine derivatives. The same antinaturalistic tendency, which had already restored the geometric quality of the tendrils, also manifested itself in individual motifs, firstly through the reduction or suppression of the separate leaves. Secondly, it appears in the pronounced, general preference for symmetrical schematization; and thirdly, in the way the pointed shapes, such as leaf tips for example, tend to curve back on themselves. In addition to the motifs that are stylized in a completely geometric manner, such as trefoils, there are also more naturalistic ones whose modeling unequivocally betrays their genetic relationship to the sculptural acanthus leaf. However, even in this case, there are smooth, unarticulated outlines around the perimeter of the delicately notched edge that leave a geometric impression. It is also characteristic for two half leaf motifs serving as the terminations of converging tendrils to curve together at an angle into a whole motif. Later we shall discuss how this relates to a very specific, fundamental law of Islamic surface ornament, the infinite rapport.

3. The relationship between the tendrils and blossom motifs is ultimately such that the blossoms are no longer *attached* as offshoots to the tendrils but *merge* to become more or less integral, embedded portions of the tendrils.

To begin our survey of the monuments, we will consider the stucco ornaments from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, completed in 878 after two years of construction. Prisse d'Avennes⁴⁸ has published all of them; the only one that does not belong to the ninth century is the wide filler number 17, found on the middle of the plate, which will have to be ascribed to a later period (twelfth or thirteenth century). Any one of the remaining thirty-six fragments of border patterns would serve to demonstrate the close relationship to classical vegetal ornament; however, the comprehensive task that we have set out to accomplish here compels us to limit the material as much as possible.

⁴⁸ A. Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe d'après les monuments de Caire, depuis le VIIe siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe* (Paris, 1877), pl. 44. Many of these are also illustrated in Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1856), pl. 31. [Riegl's original citation of Jones as pl. 30 is incorrect.]

Above all, we encounter the old familiar, undulating tendril schemes. Figure 165⁴⁹ is an intermittent tendril with alternating three-pronged lotus blossoms and palmettes connected by bifurcating tendrils (figs. 134–36). Figure 166⁵⁰ has the same scheme enriched by half palmettes (or acanthus half leaves), whose ends lead directly into the full palmette, merging unambiguously with the undulating tendril. The two bifurcating tendril motifs, which had functioned as connectors in figure 165, are used in figure 166 to flank and frame the other motifs while filling the space between them. It is also noteworthy that these bifurcating tendrils provide the five-pronged full palmette with a smooth outer contour line, just as the outer leaves of the three-pronged lotus blossom accomplish this for the four indentations of the half palmettes that interrupt the tendrils.

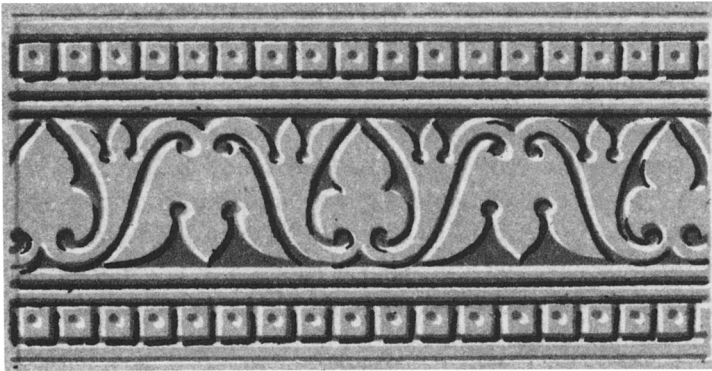


Fig. 165. Stucco ornament from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo.



Fig. 166. Stucco ornament from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo.

⁴⁹ Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe*, pl. 30, no. 31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pl. 30, no. 34.



Fig. 167. Stucco ornament from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo.

Figure 167⁵¹ is a continuous tendril with an offshoot bifurcating from each undulation of the main tendril. At first, these offshoots create circular curves in the antique manner. But, instead of terminating in palmettes, their outer leaves⁵² continue as tendril stems running in a direction opposite to the original circular spirals, and then they bifurcate once again. There are two things that distinguish the early Islamic undulating tendril from the version of classical antiquity: (1) the way the offshoots from the continuing tendrils double back in the opposite direction; (2) the fact that the palmettes, which are clearly characterized as such by the volute-calycal leaves at their lower points of inception, do not terminate the offshoots freely but merely interrupt them. However, figure 167a, which translates the pattern back into the antique mode, demonstrates how extensively the ancient Greek scheme already prefigured these apparently fundamental distinctions. The tendrils do not continue on as single strands but split so that the palmettes become mere axil fillers.⁵³ The intermediary Byzantine stage is found in figure 160.



Fig. 167a. Greek "translation" of fig. 167.

⁵¹ Ibid., pl. 30, no. 33.

⁵² Specifically in the case of half palmettes; however, whenever full palmettes are involved, then the tendrils continue on from one of the two available calycal leaves.

⁵³ This schematic version is, moreover, vastly in evidence in the Middle Ages as well; see the portable altar in F. Spitzer, *La collection Spitzer, antiquité, moyen-âge, renaissance* (Paris, 1890–1891), "Ivoires," pl. 13.

There are still two important details in figure 167 that require our attention. First, there are the distinctly drop-shaped axil fillers in the angles produced where the main offshoot departs from the principal tendril. The postulate of axil filling, which had been very strong in the Pharaonic period, as mentioned earlier, remained in widespread use in Islamic Egypt as well. Good examples of this occur among the Coptic miniatures reproduced by Stasoff,⁵⁴ although the overextended oval buttons in the axils of the tendrils are rather ungainly and jarring. The second noteworthy detail in figure 167 is the use of slots resembling commas that bisect each palmette or, better said, each half palmette. They represent a subdivision of the merged blossoms that is coordinated with the serrated articulation of the leaf contours. The next example will better demonstrate how important this detail was for the subsequent development.

In figure 168⁵⁵ the tendrils meet to form pointed elliptical shapes. Two tendrils rise from within the bottom of each pointed ellipse to expand into

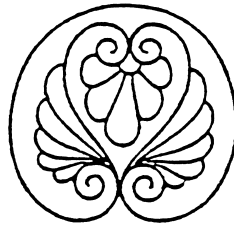
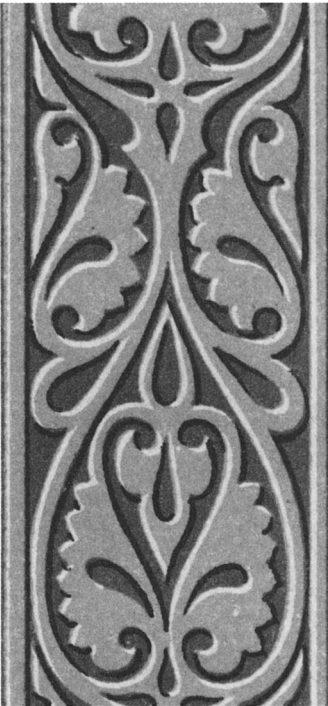


Fig. 168a. Islamic wood carving of the twelfth century.

Fig. 168. Stucco ornament from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo.

⁵⁴ W. Stasoff, *Ornement slave et oriental, d'après les manuscrits anciens et modernes* (St. Petersburg, 1887), pls. 132–35.

⁵⁵ Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe*, pl. 44, no. 6.

two half palmettes, each of which serves as half of the fan of a split palmette. These half palmettes, however, are not yet the free terminations of the tendrils but merely additional enrichments, since the tendrils continue on from the pointed tips of the two fan-halves to double back and converge once again in the trefoil motif that finally terminates the pattern. Even for this type of tendril treatment, it would not be difficult to trace out the underlying classical scheme. However, there is no need to do so, since, surprisingly enough, we already have such a Greek translation on a genuine Islamic wood carving of the twelfth century, which will be discussed later (fig. 168a). Consequently, it is no accident that in Byzantine art as well, we often find precisely this motif—a split palmette whose fan-halves continue above like tendrils, double back toward the interior, and finally terminate (freely) in a common trefoil. Nor can we explain such Byzantine examples as borrowings from Islamic art.⁵⁶ The generally exotic “Oriental” appearance of figure 168 resulted neither from the treatment of the tendrils nor from the stylization of the blossom motifs. It arose from the absorption of the blossoms within the tendrils, for it is very difficult for anyone to discern at first glance where the tendrils stop and the blossoms begin, and vice versa. Originally, in the ornament of classical antiquity, on the other hand, the tendrils and the palmette-fan-fillers were clearly and precisely differentiated, as they remained even in Byzantine ornament, where the embedded acanthus half leaves can still be distinguished fairly easily from the tendrils. The Islamic artists consciously resolved to expand upon the inherited germ of an idea that had already begun to sprout among the people of antiquity; in this respect as well, the difference between late antique and Islamic ornament seems to be merely a matter of degree rather than some deep-seated distinction.

Let us look again at the serrated half palmettes, which converge to form a split palmette within the pointed elliptical outline. The projecting points probably represent the individual leaves of the fan; however, the leaf veins themselves are not indicated; the tendrils forming the pointed elliptical shape provide smooth, outer contour lines. Furthermore, these half palmettes once again have the comma-shaped apertures that similarly divide each palmette approximately into two parts. These apertures clearly reveal a tendency to bisect and split the embedded half palmettes, resulting ultimately in the Arabesque bifurcated tendril (fig. 189a).

The two tendril bands that form the pointed elliptical frame for this filler motif divide once again at the top to form another pointed ellipse,

⁵⁶ See Stasoff, *Ornement slave et oriental*, pl. 124, no. 12. Moreover, it is by no means rare in Western art of the tenth through the twelfth centuries.

the bottom of which is just barely visible in figure 168. Wherever the two tendril bands meet between the pointed elliptical shapes of this narrow frieze, it partially produces semicircular spaces to the left and right. Let us examine the elements that fill these spaces identically to either side. Closer scrutiny reveals that they are simply half portions of the same motif that fills the pointed ellipse. The schematic, antinaturalistic quality that characterizes this developing Islamic tendril ornament is more striking here than any discussion of the individual motifs can demonstrate. These artists transformed into lifeless geometry what was originally a vegetal motif that had conformed to the laws of natural life. They subdivided it and transposed it as they saw fit, depending on the geometric or symmetrical demands of the space to be filled.

If we compare the motifs filling the lateral segments of figure 168 with the offshoots in figure 167, on the other hand, they suddenly appear to be nothing more than simple sections or offshoots from a continuous tendril. The only difference is that the palmettes in figure 168 are more elongated and have more jagged edges, in order to fill the larger segmental space. From this, we can also deduce that the filler motif within the pointed ellipse in figure 168 is no more than a duplication of the offshoot of the continuous tendril in figure 167.⁵⁷ This can, of course, only serve to strengthen our observations concerning the schematic quality of this kind of tendril ornament. At the same time, it reveals a very essential and fundamental principle regarding the structure of Arabesque decoration and Islamic surface ornament in general. As a rule, a simple element—even if it is a composite one—provides the basis of the entire decorative conception: either by duplication or division, so as to establish a continuous pattern of interrelation. This principle, of course, had long been known and practiced in geometric design: networks of squares and diamonds are the earliest attempts of this kind. The achievement of Islamic artists was the establishment of this law of infinite rapport as a dominant principle in their vegetal tendril ornament.

Another penetrating look at these ninth-century ornaments will soon demonstrate why we are justified in considering this a real achievement in the history of ornament. It is by no means obvious that the fillers on the sides of figure 168 are simply half portions of the central motif filling the pointed ellipse; this fact can only be detected after careful analysis. Even less striking is the connection between the motif in figure 168 and the

⁵⁷ This also explains the tendency we have seen repeatedly (chapter 4 A, fig. 145, and the beginning of chapter 4 B) allowing two half motifs joining to form one whole symmetrical motif.

undulating tendril in figure 167, and this is precisely what is so characteristic of Arabesque ornament: the individual motifs vary only slightly and then repeat continuously, and yet they never become monotonous. The pattern as a whole seems infinitely richer than it actually is; in fact, for the uninitiated Western observer, it often appears so confusing and complicated that there would seem to be little hope of ever untangling the "thread of Ariadne" at all, even though those familiar with the basic principles governing the formulation of the Arabesque would have little trouble doing so.^a

Now that we have raised the subject of infinite rapport, we shall discuss it a bit further from an historical perspective, even though it means digressing somewhat from our main topic. When does *infinite rapport* first appear in surface ornament? Is it also found in pre-Islamic periods? Obviously, these questions aim at determining the creative contribution of Islamic artists to this kind of surface decoration. The theme is, of course, so broad and the material so extensive, that only a book-length treatment could hope to succeed in exhausting it. Here we are compelled to restrict ourselves to delineating the main points of the development.

Infinite rapport appears very early on in geometric styles in the form of checkerboard and diamond patterns. However, they are hardly more advanced than rudimentary banded registers. Infinite rapport becomes interesting for our purposes only when the motifs have moved beyond the geometric stage. This first took place, as far as we know, in Theban ceiling decoration of the New Kingdom in Egypt. The basic structure of this decoration, to be sure, consists of winding spirals, but the intervening fillers are often animal or vegetal motifs. In Prisse d'Avennes's reproductions,⁵⁸ there are frequent instances where, for example, the whole palmettes that serve as fillers are rendered as halves when they abut the border at the edge of a pattern. The concept of the infinite rapport is clearly implicit here, for it is easy to imagine the half palmette doubling into a whole motif and running beyond the interrupting border. However, the variant that sets off the patterns at the edges and borders in this way is, to judge from Prisse d'Avennes's reproductions, by no means the rule;⁵⁹ the final decision would depend on the study of the originals themselves.

After what we have learned about the objectives and tendencies of Greek vegetal ornament in chapter 3, it will come as no surprise that

⁵⁸ For example, A. Prisse d'Avennes, *Histoire de l'art égyptien d'après les monuments, depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à la domination romaine* (Paris, 1878–1879), atlas 1, "Ornementation des plafonds; postes fleuronées," no. 9.

⁵⁹ Compare, for example, our figure 23.

infinite rapport did not play a leading role in Greek decorative art.⁶⁰ As long as Greek art gradually but consistently maintained its course toward naturalism, there was no place for vegetal *infinite* tendril patterns. It is only after the Hellenistic period, when naturalism had reached its high point and the initially subtle but then ever stronger inclination to stylize nongeometric decorative motifs first became apparent, that we can start looking for nongeometric infinite patterns in antique art.^b

The city of Pompeii, that invaluable resource, can again provide us with some very important evidence. Despite the fact that Pompeiian decoration represents the quintessence of free tendril ornament and figurative scatter patterns, it also has examples of geometricizing wall decoration based on infinite rapport. First of all, there is the basic diamond pattern;⁶¹ in this case, it is only the variation in color of the individual diamond fields that produces the decorative pattern. Then there is more complicated diamond patterning, which consists of larger diamonds alternating on a background of smaller, variously colored smaller diamonds.⁶² Here again, it is the coloring alone that creates the decorative effect. In both cases, however, there are triangles along the outer edges, or to be more specific, half diamonds that plainly announce the presence of an infinite rapport.

The Romans of Pompeii, however, were not satisfied with these rather simple patterns. There are also a number of highly remarkable attempts (fig. 169)⁶³ to subdivide a surface into a series of basically geometric but varied shapes. They include triangles, squares, diamonds, and hexagons, several of which combine to form larger, more complex configurations (dodecagons, stars, etc.). These larger configurations, bounded by angular, broken bands, are the most immediate and closely related prototypes of Islamic polygonal ornament.^c Geometric configurations alone, however, were not enough to satisfy the sensibility of classical antiquity. That is why we find small ornamental motifs inserted into the individual hexagons and other subdivisions in figure 169—although in this case, they are very simple basic geometric forms. Nevertheless, they are already enough to distort and disrupt the infinite rapport at the edges: the filler motifs were not sufficiently geometric or, to put it another way, not sym-

⁶⁰ It is, however, definitely found in Mycenaean art: in a wall painting illustrated by H. Schliemann (*Tiryns: der prähistorische Palast der Könige von Tiryns* [Leipzig, 1886], pl. 11) and in vase painting (*ibid.*, pl. 27). In the latter example, the polygons bordering the upper edge have surely been cut in half as opposed to the filler motifs, which are clearly derived from plants. The situation requires more careful observation.

⁶¹ Niccolini, *Case ed monumenti di Pompeii* (Naples, 1854–1896), vol. 2, part 2, “Descrizione generale,” pl. 47.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pl. 36, center.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, part 2, “Tempio d’Iside,” pl. 2, bottom.

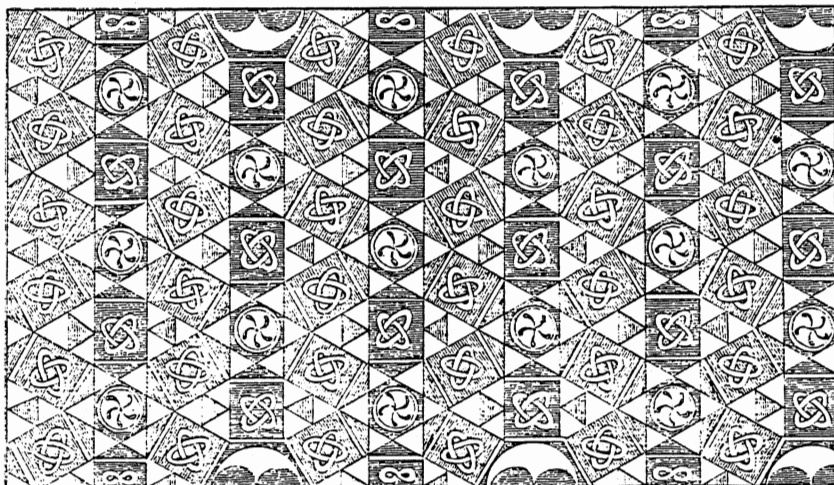


Fig. 169. Mosaic pavement from the temple of Isis, Pompeii.

metrical enough to be bisected arbitrarily. And this is primarily why the infinite rapport never attained the prominence in the Roman period that it achieved later in the Middle Ages: the Romans were never satisfied with insignificant geometric fillers alone; they simply would not give up figurative elements.

Several other examples can be cited as proof of this. In figure 169, the geometric compartments on the edges are still relatively independent. In another case,⁶⁴ however, the pointed ellipses forming the diamond network are cut off at the edges in approximately three-quarter lengths, merely in order to accommodate the floating Eros figures and Bacchantes, as well as the graceful floral boughs within the concave, square compartments framed by each set of four-pointed ellipses. It was obviously considered preferable to sacrifice the infinite rapport and the clarity of the basic ornamental scheme than to restrict the decorative figures in any way.

An extremely important step toward the refinement of more richly varied surface decoration based on geometric schemes is represented by the type of ceiling decoration (fig. 170)⁶⁵ that has circles alternating with curved polygons joined together by intertwined bands. Do we really require any further proof that the polygonal interlacing bands of Islamic art evolved directly from late antique beginnings? Is it not quite apparent that they are nothing more than the final and logical consequence of a geometricizing tendency in surface decoration, whose first faint and tenta-

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, part 2, "Descrizione generale," pl. 46.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, part 2, "Terme presso la porta Stabiana," pl. 3, 4.

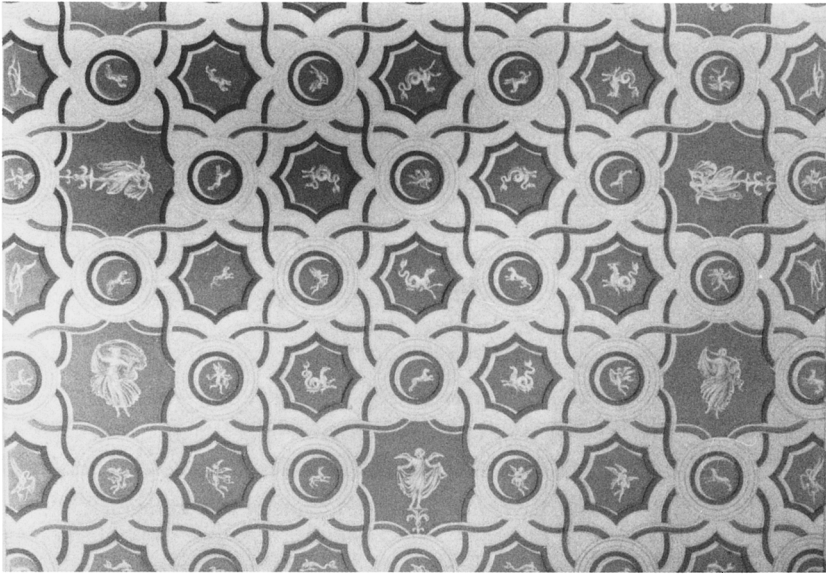


Fig. 170. Polychrome stucco vaulting decoration from the Apodyterium of the Stabian Baths at Pompeii.

tive impulses can be traced to the late Hellenistic period and whose continued application can be easily attested by any number of mosaic floors from Trier to [North] Africa^{2d}

In figure 170, all of the spherical subdivisions are also filled with figurative motifs; as a result, the same problems arise with regard to the edges as discussed above. Pompeiian art, however, was also able to find a compromise between the basic geometric scheme and the desire for nongeometric fillers by using appropriately stylized vegetal motifs to comprise the geometric compartments themselves. The mosaic column in the Museum in Naples (figure 171) displays such a solution.⁶⁶ The network of diamonds is formed by blossom calyces arranged along straight diagonal lines; the intersections are marked by rosettes that give rise to four three-pronged blossom profiles arranged in a cross. Rosettes are also used to fill the diamonds, obviously because the rosette is the most symmetrical and, consequently, the most geometric view in which a flower can possibly be depicted.^e

There can never be too much emphasis placed on the importance of this type of Pompeiian surface pattern for the history of ornament as a whole. It is a perfect example of an infinite rapport composed of appropriately

⁶⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, part 2, "Descrizione generale," pl. 63, center.

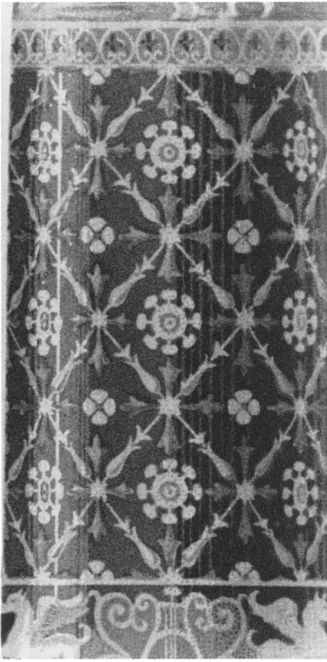


Fig. 171. Mosaic column from the Villa of the Mosaic Columns near Pompeii.

selected and stylized vegetal motifs. For the first time we encounter a scheme that would become enormously important later in Islamic decoration, especially in the ornament of carpets and tiles: halves of floral profiles occur along the edges, which become whole again in our imagination, thus allowing the pattern to expand infinitely. It is especially surprising to find an example like this in Pompeian ornament, considering how the Romans even in much later times still insisted on preserving the integrity of vegetal elements within the composition. Figure 172 serves to exemplify this latter approach to vegetal motifs in Roman surface ornament.⁶⁷

There is still one more issue that must be addressed to avoid any misunderstanding. As in all of the other

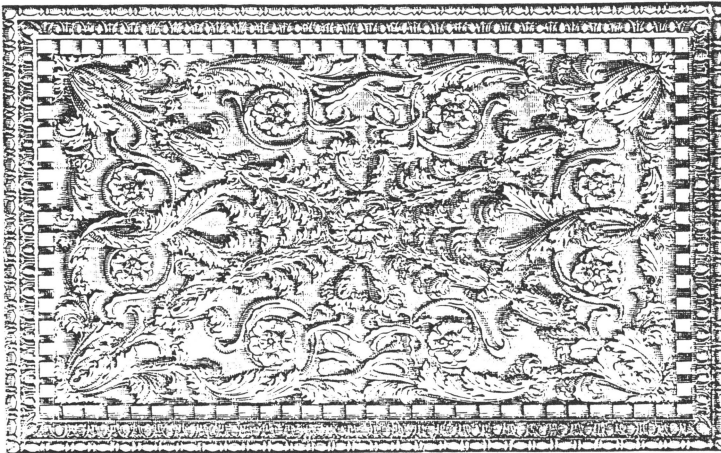


Fig. 172. Decorated marble soffit from the architrave of the Temple of Jupiter Tonnant, Rome.

⁶⁷ A. B. Desgodetz, *Les édifices antiques de Rome* (London, 1771–1795), “Temple du Jupiter Tonnant,” pl. 3.

ornamental systems, there have been attempts to trace the origin of the infinite rapport, in the advanced stage represented by figure 171, back to a particular technique—in this case, specifically, to laying tiles. This hypothesis relies on the observation that the infinite rapport as a rule is based on polygonal and often square units. The advantage for the technique of mosaic tiling, of course, was that tiles could be fired in great numbers with the same pattern, and when placed side by side, they would yield a complete and relatively elaborate pattern. But this once again reverses the causal relationship. It was only natural for those engaged in the fabrication of tiles or in actually laying tiles to adopt avidly a decorative system so perfectly suited to the technique. However, the notion that the infinite rapport first occurred on tiles is absolutely untenable. Not a single example can be cited from the Roman period: all of the relevant Pompeiian monuments introduced above were, without exception, executed either in painted stucco, fresco, or inlaid mosaic, and never in larger units of tile. On the other hand, glazed tiles were used very early in areas such as Babylon and then later in Assyria, where stone was unavailable and fired clay was required to take its place. However, the square enameled tiles from ancient Mesopotamia are not decorated with patterns based on the infinite rapport but with objective representations like the ones from Khorsabad^{67a} or with rows of vegetal ornaments connected by arches, as in our figure 33.^f

We come, therefore, to assume that there were artistic rather than technical factors involved in the creation and formation of patterns like the one in figure 171. And in the final analysis, these may have been the very same factors that were contributing to the gradually less naturalistic approach to the acanthus and the tendril. In fact, both phenomena run parallel to each other from now on. Wherever we meet the first clearly stylized acanthus motifs, like those of the eastern Roman Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries, we also find the infinite rapport occurring more frequently in wall decoration. Furthermore, both tendencies seem to have advanced to a stage approximately halfway in the development toward the ultimate conclusion represented by Islamic art. Figure 144 shows tendril ornament which, while already greatly transformed in detail, is still conceived in a completely antique spirit. In figure 145, the shift to a basically geometric scheme is complete, but the infinite rapport is not yet resolved in a satisfactory manner. In fact, the only place it comes to expression is on the lower edge, where one can imagine the half

^{67a} [V. Place, *Ninive et l'Assyrie* (Paris. 1867–1870).]

palmettes duplicating into the fans of split palmettes. Salzenberg's reproduction^{67b} is, however, a resolved example of an infinite rapport: in its arrangement and even its motifs, it has so many points of contact with the Pompeiian example in figure 171 that I have not bothered to reproduce it. Moreover, the quantity of relevant material preserved on East Roman monuments is so great that it deserves its own separate treatment. Therefore, I shall only illustrate a particularly characteristic example from Betursa (Syria) in figure 173.⁶⁸ Each of the bands, which twist partly into

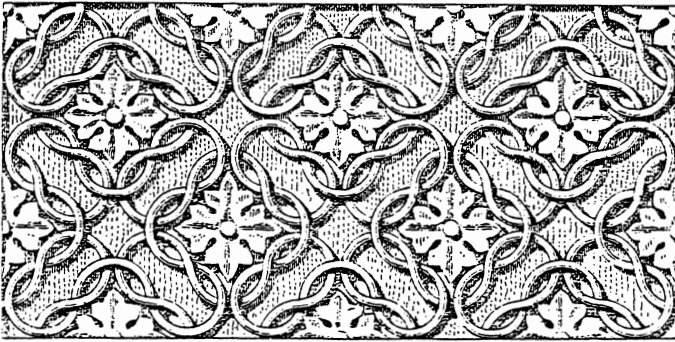


Fig. 173. Relief panel from Betursa, Syria.

quatrefoils and partly into pretzel-like interlacings, follows a path shaped like a cross tilted on its side—something that the casual observer surely would not notice. Here we already find a clear manifestation of the tendency, so characteristic of Islamic art, to render the interlacing patterns difficult to follow. The infinite rapport is indicated at the edges by half rosettes in half quatrefoils, while the motifs in the upper corners, consistently enough, have been quartered.⁶⁹

We can now resume our examination of the tendril ornament on early Islamic monuments. Figure 174⁶⁹ shows the carved front side of an ivory box that is now located in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. An inscription on the lid refers to the year A.D. 966, indicating that it dates approximately a century later than the stucco ornaments from the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo.^h Since each of the sections to the left and right of the lock is completely identical, we will focus on only one side. In a number of details, figure 174 does not seem to be as advanced in the development as earlier examples. The close connection to antique tendril ornament is

^{67b} [Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale*, pl. 25, no. 2.]

⁶⁸ From de Vogüé, *Syrie centrale*, pl. 43.

⁶⁹ G. L. Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantin du XIème siècle* (Paris, 1890), 125.



Fig. 174. Moorish ivory casket from Spain, dated A.D. 965.

still clearly visible in the spiraling of the offshoots, in the way the larger blossoms are attached to stems, and also in the minor role accorded the small, embedded half palmettes. This antique quality also emerges in the modeling of the leaf motifs in a distinctly plantlike manner with fine, featherlike leaflets: we have already explained how this treatment resulted from stylistic changes in the acanthus leaf. This is finally corroborated by figure 175, where some of the acanthus motifs still have pipes indicated by the round drill holes between the individual indentations.⁷⁰ Moreover, the leaves are not circumscribed by smooth outer lines, but have retained their finely serrated contours. In spite of all this, no one would ever question the Islamic origin of this box even at first glance. It is clear especially from the characteristic, polygonal shape, which the main tendril delineates over the entire height of the field, but also from the manner in which the tendrils intersect, and last—or so it seems at least initially—from the treatment of some of the blossom motifs.

Characteristically, the process that transformed the naturalistic antique tendril into the geometric, stylized Arabesque began simultaneously in various places. Moreover, its subsequent development was by no means even: in some instances, the schematization of the motifs advanced more quickly, while in others, it was the treatment of the tendril. This is hardly surprising, considering the process was taking place over a far-flung region that extended from the Pyrenees to the Hindu Kush. Surely further study of the history of Islamic art will eventually enable us to recognize

⁷⁰ Incidentally, examples of acanthus motifs treated in precisely the same way are not at all rare in Western art (ivory carvings, manuscript illumination) of this period.¹

and isolate the characteristics of individual local schools. Today we are still preoccupied with establishing the common denominator of the development as a whole, a development whose roots—and whose only possible roots, I might add—went back to the common experience of late antique-Byzantine art, i.e., the art that dominated all of these regions across three continents when Islam first emerged.¹

Now let us briefly discuss the specifically Islamic motifs in figure 174 already pointed out above. First of all, there is the main tendril, which curves inward to form a polygon with partially curved sides. This form then encloses a configuration of two tendril branches that intersect twice. Especially characteristic is the way the half leaves intersect at the bottom to form a kind of whole leaf. The blossom motifs are made up of acanthus-sized leaves and are of two types. There are those with double calyces packed into one another and crowned by a leaf resembling a palmette fan, and then (within the ogival arch) there are those with long fans curving off to the side above a calyx of circular, coiled volutes. The genealogy of these blossom forms will occupy us further, below.

But let us first examine another ivory box (fig. 175), which is so closely connected to the dated piece in figure 174 that it must have originated at

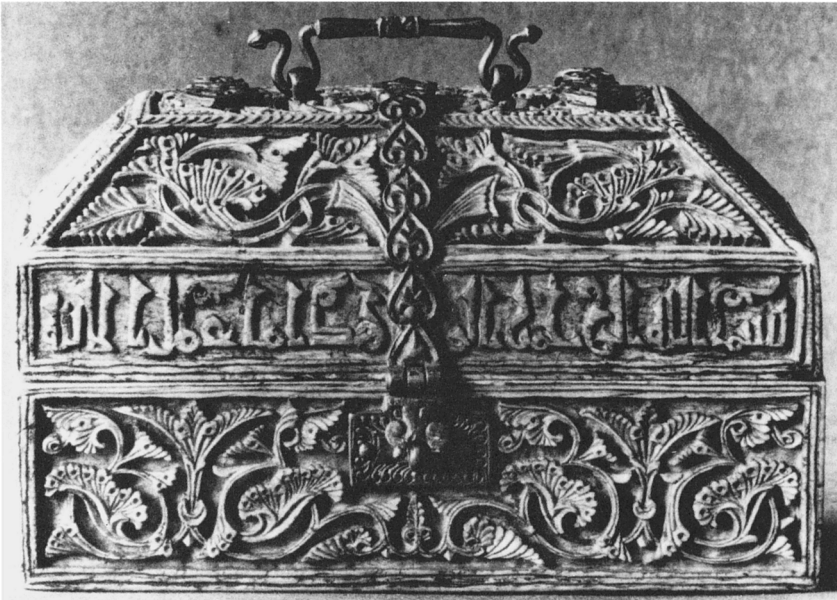


Fig. 175. Moorish ivory casket from Spain.

approximately the same time. Granted, the distinctly antique-inspired formation of the acanthus and the lack of a polygon as seen in figure 174 may well appear to suggest that figure 175 represents an earlier stage of development, as do the spiral tendrils that burst forth from the half palmettes along the upper edge of the front panel and serve more or less as axil fillers. But just the same, there is no paucity of evidence to demonstrate the distinctly Islamic character of figure 175, such as, for example, the abundance of interlace (particularly on the lid), the intersecting of leaves and tendrils, and the stylization of the individual leaf motifs. Full acanthus leaves, which are indented in the middle, have been inserted into the bifurcations that occur to the right and left of the lock on the front panel: they are true Islamic bifurcating tendrils (cf. figures 138, and 139, motifs *a*, *b*). The pronounced indentations in the middle of these motifs are also related developmentally to the apertures of the palmettes in figures 167 and 168, which can now be explained. The tendril in which we encounter the bifurcations just described is located directly below a large acanthus leaf. The leaf can be identified as a half palmette by the volute—albeit stylized as an acanthus—that appears at its point of inception. This is a rather characteristic feature for this stage of Islamic ornament as a whole, namely, that the general outlines are adopted from the two-dimensional palmette types, which tend to be geometric, while the treatment of details, on the other hand, is based for the most part on the acanthus. Even this acanthusized half palmette is now beginning to resemble the Islamic bifurcating tendril very closely; and it is, of course, derived from these two roots: i.e., the bifurcating tendril with acanthusized axil fillers and the half palmette. And after all, our study of the historical development of the vegetal tendril in antiquity has demonstrated that these two roots were ultimately one and the same.

There is still one last important detail to observe in figure 175: the tendril that we have just been discussing also gives rise to an embedded half leaf fan just before it terminates in the half palmette. The fan overlaps the main tendril and meets an equivalent motif coming from the opposite side to form a symmetrical pair, just as we have seen half palmettes combining into split palmettes time and time again. Because the acanthusized details make such a dominant impression, this genuinely “Arabesque” motif is lost within the overall effect, as in the works mentioned earlier.

The origin of the box in figure 175 within the Hispano-Moresque cultural domain seems to be fairly certain, since its inscription includes the name of a Spanish caliph.^k In that case, it is quite revealing to see that Christian-Spanish art made use of the same acanthus stylizations. Figure

176 serves as proof. Here we find a straight, upright stem from which two symmetrical pairs of acanthus half leaves branch off to left and right. The leaves closest to the stem are clearly rolled up into volutes, but they are as finely serrated as any of the other leaf units. The stem is crowned by a five-part palmette flanked by the two half fans of a split palmette. The quality of the acanthus is also evoked here by the deep indentations between the individual leaf sections, while the contours are all serrated in the same fine manner as figures 174 and 175; aside from that, one is outlined smoothly in a fashion that is at least not typically non-Islamic. Finally, the five-leafed fan that gives rise to the stem also has the same acanthusized details.

Figure 176 is taken from the *Codex Vigilanus* in the Escorial and, moreover, from an illuminated page accompanied by a text that still has a strongly cursive paleographic style. As a result, it cannot be dated earlier than the ninth century and is surely later than the caskets in figures 174 and 175. What makes figure 176 particularly important, however, is the caption "arbor" frequently accompanying this motif. Spanish miniaturists of the Carolingian period apparently interpreted an arrangement of this kind, trimmed with acanthus leaves, as an ideal tree, so to speak. Does it not follow necessarily that the meaning of the arrangement, at least in the beginning, was the same for the Islamic artists who were their pupils?

We saw in figure 174 that the acanthus leaf was used not only as the basis for the stylization of the half palmette-fan, which is to say, in its traditional, historical function, but also for the articulation of the volutes, that occur in the form of half calyces at the insertion point of every acanthus half palmette of this type, likewise following a traditional, historical scheme. Finally, it comprised the larger blossom motifs, which are the free terminations of the tendrils. We would be obliged to see this extensive use of the acanthus leaf as nothing short of amazing in an art oriented toward the abstract, the symmetrical, and the schematic, if we considered it to be something new. However, it is nothing but an heirloom handed

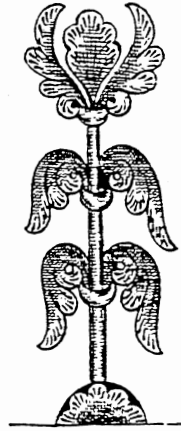


Fig. 176. Illuminated ornament from the *Codex Vigilanus* in the Escorial, ninth century.

down from late antiquity. Now is time for us to delve more deeply into the role that the acanthus played as an independent vegetal motif in late antique and early medieval art. We must do so first of all in order to account for certain forms typical of Islamic art, and, second, to determine what became of the most important ornamental motif of antiquity by far—the acanthus—once it reached the medieval Orient. This is a question that has never before been posed, because of the crippling restrictions arising from the pervasive attitude that laws of causality can never be unconditionally valid for ornament.

Mature Hellenistic art is once again the point of departure. Figure 177 shows the relief decoration of a cylindrical stone altar from Pompeii.⁷¹ The ornament has all the characteristic features of Hellenistic decorative art.

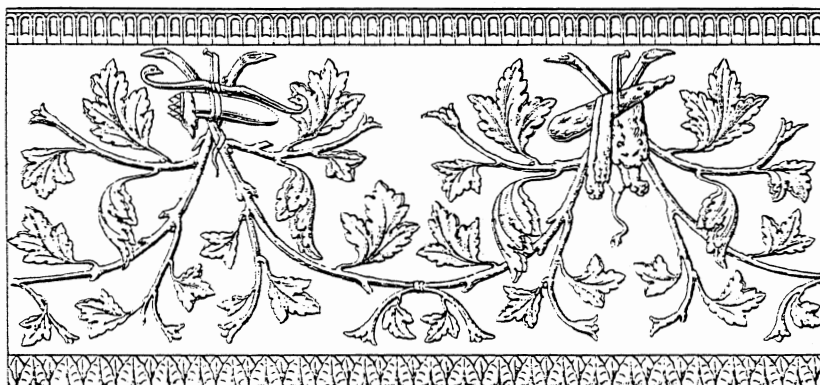


Fig. 177. Marble puteal or well head from Pompeii.

The attributes of Hercules, slung together in a loop, call to mind the requisite myths of gods and heroes, but they are treated in a playful, decorative manner and arranged like trophies. Behind them, two crossed branches diverge below and join up with branches that converge from the other side to form festoons. There is a faint echo, to be sure, of the circular motion of ornamental tendrils; all we actually see, however, are knotted, leafy branches. Thus far, everything breathes with naturalism. However, when we focus on the foliage of the branches, we find ourselves in a predicament. Of course, there is no question that with the exception of a small number of budlike terminations, what we see are leaves. What happens, however, when we try to ascertain their botanical species? We quickly discover that they do not represent a particular, identifiable type of southern flora, but are purely ornamental. Now, there could hardly be

⁷¹ Niccolini, *Case ed monumenti di Pompeii*, vol. 2, part 2, "Descrizione generale," pl. 96, top.

a more perfect example of Hellenistic naturalism than figure 177. Acanthus ornaments are used to create foliage that has a purely ornamental origin and a purely ornamental reason for being; at the same time, however, the viewer clearly understands them as leaves. Whereas in the case of the old, rigidly stylized palmette, for example, we ask not only what species of flower it depends upon but above all, whether it even represents a flower at all, no problem of that sort arises in regard to the leaves in figure 177. In this case, the intention of the artist to depict ornamental foliage is unambiguous, and for this purpose the artist used the acanthus ornament, which had been traditionally handed down and reserved for such purposes. The naturalism of Hellenistic artists never included the direct transcription of nature:⁷² decorative art always preserved its own domain, even if the forms that it produced were more closely connected to the real, natural world of living things than had ever been the case in the art of all preceding periods.

This point is of such great consequence and significance—not only for Greco-Roman vegetal ornament but for the decorative arts of all centuries, from the past up to most recent times—that it warrants one more illustration. Figure 178⁷³ shows the relief decoration of another stone altar

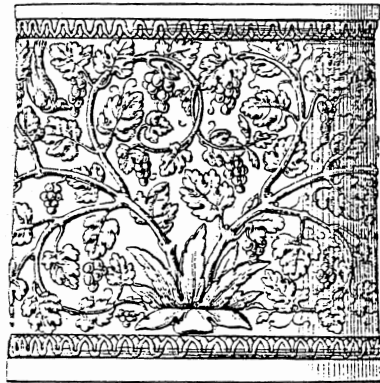


Fig. 178. Marble puteal or well head from Pompeii.

⁷² Except, however, when the intention was expressly representational; in this case, Hellenistic artists were very astute at recording nature's characteristics. Of course, it is often hard to keep objective and decorative intentions strictly separate, for example, in cases such as *Antike Denkmäler* Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1886), pl. 11, wall painting from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta. [For more recent and accessible photographs of this monument see R. Bianchi-Bandinelli, *Rome: The Center of Power. 500 B.C. to A.D. 200* (New York, 1970), figs. 130, 131, and 133; and D. Strong, *Roman Art*, 2d ed., (Harmondsworth, 1988), figs. 47–48.] What examples like these do seem to show, however, is that the art of the Augustan period tended toward realism, though it was almost immediately abandoned, only to be taken up once again in more recent times, this time, however, much more decisively.

⁷³ Niccolini, *Case ed monumenti di Pompeii*, vol. 2, part 2, "Descrizione generale," pl. 96, bottom.

from Pompeii.¹ Two tendrils sprout up from a double leaf calyx that grows both upward and downward, a type that gave rise to an endless succession of followers. They unwind to the right and left according to the familiar Hellenistic scheme (fig. 121), curling up into spirals and even intertwining. This example is one of the exceptions where the botanical species is explicit: the tiny grapes tell us, namely, that these are grapevines branching out over the surface of the cylinder in the ancient Greek scheme of the decorative undulating tendril. But let us examine the leaves: it cannot be said that they deviate in a very startling way from the appearance of the leaves on an actual grapevine, but botanists would surely consider them very inaccurate copies from nature. "These grape leaves are not exact facsimiles of nature," they might say, "something from the artist's imagination seems to have infiltrated their rendering." And what triggered the imagination of the artist in this case is immediately clear at a glance: the stylization of these grape leaves is based once again upon the acanthus ornament with its rounded projections and deep indentations resembling pipes. Nevertheless, the considerable extent to which the arrangement approaches natural appearances, as evidenced particularly in the scattered clusters of grapes, is still exceptional, although it has deep-seated causes that can be explained. First of all, there is the representational and symbolic meaning that has become associated with wine and things related to wine since earliest historical times; at the same time, however, the striking similarity between the ornamental tendril and the grapevine was surely also a factor. This is why we already find the grapevine arranged in a continuous tendril on relatively early examples such as the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus from Sidon.^{73a} Again it is the pipes that tell us that the acanthus ornament was the model for the stylization of the grape leaves, although their contours in this example are, quite typically, sharply indented like the Greek acanthus (cf. Figure 111), in contrast to the soft and lobed formation of the Roman version in figure 178.^m

Let us return to figure 177. The individual acanthusized leaves are varied in length and width according to need. There is only one type, however, that requires our attention: the ones that are folded over and drooping down. They need only to have their outwardly curving, pointed tips placed along a tendril and they would qualify as acanthus half leaves. It is, of course, this very same doubled-over acanthus motif, resembling a cabbage leaf, that survived down through the late Roman period into the Middle Ages and provided the basis for the formation of new blossom motifs of great significance.

^{73a} [T. Reinach and O. Hamdi Bey, *Une nécropole royale à Sidon* (Paris, 1892).]

However, the idea of using the acanthus to create new, complex blossom motifs was no longer new in the Byzantine period. There are already compelling examples at Pompeii. The right-hand spiral of the continuous tendril in figure 179⁷⁴ terminates in a common rosette; the one on the left, however, concludes in a bushy formation that, though it is unquestionably composed of acanthus leaves, is certainly not meant to be a leaf but a flower and, what is more, an ornamental flower.ⁿ

Fig. 179. Frieze with acanthus tendril and blossoms from the Temple of the Genius Augusti (Temple of Vespasian) at Pompeii.



The best examples of complicated, bushy, floral calyces made up of folded acanthus leaves from earlier Byzantine times occur on the remains of Sassanian architecture; figures 161–63 illustrate some good examples.

No one has so far succeeded in determining clearly the period in which the ornament from the East Roman provinces that fell to Islam began to diverge noticeably from the decoration produced in the areas that remained Byzantine. The impression that clearly emerges from our review of the monuments thus far, however, is that the subsequent development that took place throughout the long centuries of the early Middle Ages initially respected no political boundaries but followed the same direction in both regions. Naturally, the pace of the development was faster in areas where figurative representation was deliberately inhibited, if not outrightly suppressed by religious statutes and where art, as a result, was essentially limited to satisfying the decorative urge and to ornament alone. Here tendril ornament eventually developed much more quickly than in Byzantine art, where in spite of iconoclastic tendencies, no one was able or willing to abandon the figurative representation of religious subjects.

It was in the ninth century on the stucco ornaments of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo that we first saw Islamic ornament begin to diverge from the Byzantine. Initially, however, the development must have proceeded very slowly, since there is only minimum progress detectable on the ivory carvings that date almost one hundred years later. In fact, one may speculate that when our knowledge of Byzantine ornament eventually comes to be based on a larger and more comprehensive body

⁷⁴ Niccolini, *Case ed monumenti di Pompeii*, vol. 1, part 2, "Tempio detto volgarmente di Mercurio [Temple of the Genius Augusti (Temple of Vespasian)]", no. 8.

of material, the differences between the Byzantine and the Islamic Arabesque will diminish even more, while the extent of their shared development will increase even further.⁷⁵ It is not until the twelfth century, as we shall see, that the more or less full-fledged Islamic Arabesque appears. It is then that the various characteristic features comprising the Arabesque occur not only individually but as an integrated whole, resulting in an ornament whose connections with classical tendril ornament are no longer so evident or direct. Consequently, even if it is still not possible, as indicated initially, to establish a precise date for the divergence of medieval Byzantine and Islamic tendril ornament, we can nevertheless place it generally within the tenth and eleventh centuries, a long span of time, which is surely justified, in view of the uneven and very irregular pace the development must have taken within the far-flung regions that eventually came under Islamic control.^o

The decorative elements involved in the more accelerated Islamic development that departed from strictly Byzantine formulations were naturally those which had earlier led to the common development in the eastern Mediterranean in Christian Byzantine as well as Islamic art.

If we are now going to assume that Byzantine and Islamic ornament began to diverge sometime during the tenth and eleventh centuries, then we will have to look very carefully at the vegetal tendril decoration of certain Byzantine origin from this period, since it not only represents the last phase of the shared Byzantine-Islamic development but at the same time, the point of departure for the initial phase of purely Islamic ornament. The best sources of information about the Byzantine art of this period are illuminated manuscripts, whose production was widely patronized at the time. As a rule, the decoration of religious books was very rich and colorful. Conveniently enough for us, their main decorative elements were vegetal, and it was especially the blossom form that characterized this type of ornament.

These blossom forms consist of the combinations of acanthus leaves that have been familiar to us since the Pompeiian period. Figure 180 shows the simplest and the most common form, which is also widespread in the Romanesque art of the West: the *acanthus calyx*. Two acanthus half leaves folded in half (cf. figures 177, 161–63) converge to form a calyx. This describes, so to speak, only the basic scheme; the lively manner of its execution in miniature painting is illustrated in figure 180.⁷⁶ Here the

⁷⁵ The examples illustrated in Stasoff, *Ornement slave et oriental*, pls. 120–24, already provide convincing evidence of this.

⁷⁶ Figures 180–83, from a manuscript of the eleventh century, after Stasoff, *Ornement slave et oriental*, pl. 124, no. 24.



Fig. 180–83. Blossoms based on the acanthus, from a Byzantine illuminated manuscript of the eleventh century.



Fig. 184. Decorative heading from a Byzantine illuminated manuscript of the tenth century.

calyx is articulated with small paired hatchings and furnished with an axil filler that was no less of a requirement for the medieval artistic sensibility than it had been in antiquity.

More complicated versions appear in figures 181 and 182. The lower part of the first example consists of a calyx similar to the one in figure 180. Above it is a second calyx, whose upper edges are inverted downward like volutes. Moreover, there are also hatched lines and axil fillers. What appears characteristic is the tendency for the edges to fold or turn back and for the leaf tips to move in curves. (Compare this also with the spiraling acanthus tendril in figure 194). Occasionally, this movement is quite energetic, as in figure 182, where the acanthus half leaves are neither arranged according to strict symmetry nor oriented in the same direction but appear to be turning up and down into one another.⁷⁷

Figure 183 is a form that occurs very frequently. Basically, it is nothing more than an acanthus half leaf with its sides folded in, rising out of an acanthusized volute-calyx.^p

Now that we have described figures 180–83, it will no longer be difficult to recognize the essentials of the corresponding variations in figure 184.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Although this chapter cannot possibly touch upon every aspect of mature Islamic decorative flora, I would like to mention briefly that the capricious kind of leaf treatment seen in figure 182 was also adopted by Islamic art, as numerous carpets, miniatures, and tiles from the late Middle Ages and from the beginning of the modern period all prove. This is an emendation of my earlier opinion ("Ältere orientalische Teppiche," *Jahrbuch des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, 13, [1892]: 303) that this particular leaf treatment should be attributed to Chinese influence. Now that I see the situation more clearly, I also detect the same tendency in the articulation of the leaf edges in numerous Arabesque motifs from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

⁷⁸ From Stassoff, *Ornement slave et oriental*, pl. 124, no. 17.

The most frequent types are the trefoils whose volute-calyces and slightly curved, leafy crowns are stylized like acanthus. This trefoil, therefore, unites the characteristics that are typical of Islamic vegetal ornament: geometric outlines combined with details treated like plants. Thus, even figure 183 seems to be just a richer and more luxurious formulation of this type of acanthusized trefoil. In the central roundel of figure 184, a trefoil is encircled by two bifurcated tendrils: this is a genuine Islamic motif, even though it clearly has plantlike qualities and originated within the Byzantine artistic sphere. Finally, the form of the blossoms within the two outer roundels in figure 184 is related to the version found in figure 181.⁹

When we discussed the ornament of the ivory caskets in figures 174 and 175, we postponed the interpretation of their freely terminating blossom motifs. Now they can be easily clarified by simple reference to the forms found in figure 181 and 183.

In this period specifically, Byzantine miniature painting was zealously imitated in the Armenian monasteries. One such instance, thought to date from the eleventh century, whose significance I have already pointed out in another context,⁷⁹ was published by Collinot and Beaumont.^{79a} The section from their plate 28, which is reproduced in our figure 185, is a very



Fig. 185. Decorative heading from an Armenian illuminated manuscript.

⁷⁹ A. Riegl, *Altorientalische Teppiche* (Leipzig, 1891), 166ff.

^{79a} [E. Collinot and A. Beaumont, *Ornements turcs: recueil des dessins pour l'art et l'industrie* (Paris, 1883), pl. 27–29.]

revealing example of the last stages in which Byzantine and Islamic ornament were still closely related: embedded acanthus half leaves (in a much more rigid stylization resembling a palmette fan), bifurcating tendrils, and blossom types like the ones in figures 181 and 183, whose encircling tendrils are completely classical apart from the way that they intersect one another.^{80, r}

It is not necessary for us to examine any more examples of Islamic art from this period, since the characteristics of Islamic tendril ornament had clearly come to maturity by this stage. Here our observations and endeavors are intended to demonstrate the inherent genetic connection with the preceding classical or Byzantine tendril ornament and offer examples that illustrate the long-standing existence of the relevant motifs in their original form. The bulk of the evidence is taken almost exclusively from Prisse d'Avennes's, *L'art arabe* and consequently relies heavily on monuments from Cairo of the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries.

Figure 186 shows the openwork fill of a window from the Mosque of Al Zahir, which, according to Prisse d'Avennes, dates from the thirteenth century. The decoration with its acanthus offshoots curling into circular tendril volutes could readily be taken for Byzantine. One also begins to realize just how much the undulating movement itself encourages the convergence of the tendrils into pointed ellipses, in other words, how an essential characteristic of the Arabesque was already latent in the undulating tendril of classical antiquity.

Figure 186 is not an isolated example. Among the other similar works illustrated by Prisse d'Avennes, is a

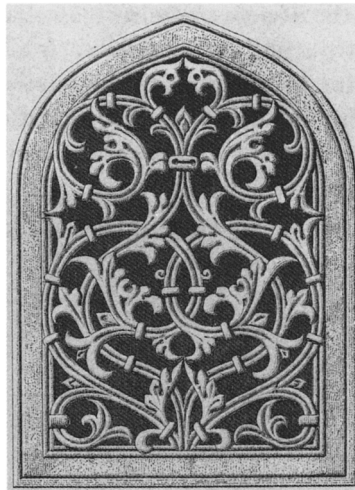


Fig. 186. Window grill from the Mosque of Al Zahir, Cairo.

⁸⁰ The "palmette moldings" of Armenian book illustration cited by J. Strzygowski (*Das Etschmiadzin Evangeliar. Beiträge zur Geschichte der armenischen, ravnatischen und syro-ägyptischen Kunst* [Vienna, 1891], 91), are nothing but bifurcating tendrils arranged on top of each other along interlacing, undulating lines in a pilasterlike format for which the original historical prototype is in figure 159. I would be the last to dispute their connection to Sassanian decorative variations like the ones in figures 161–63; however, the connection is by no means obvious and can only be truly and profoundly appreciated after one has examined and become familiar with the common, shared development that I have attempted to outline above.

second window decoration from the same mosque and, furthermore, two windows from the Mosque of Tala'i Abu-Riziq one of which is still almost purely Justinianic while the other, with its convoluted Arabic script, is similar to figure 186.⁵

Prisse d'Avennes places the last two examples in the twelfth century; if they, in fact, can be dated this late, then they bear astonishing witness to how conservatively the artisans of Cairo clung to particular technical aspects of tendril ornament that were purely Byzantine in style. The ornaments from the marble chancel [Mihrab] in the Mosque of Cordova are at approximately the same stage, as figure 187 demonstrates.⁸¹ It shows a section of a border strip with a row of acanthusized lotus blossoms and palmettes on an arcuated frieze. The round drilled pipes leave no doubt as to the acanthusizing process that has taken place. An inscription refers to the year A.D. 965. Consequently, the chancel dates from the second half of the tenth century and would therefore be several centuries older than figure 186, even though it is actually more advanced in development. Also worthy of note in figure 187 is the calyx of the lower blossom, consisting of two acanthus half leaves. (It takes the place of the palmette in the ancient lotus blossom–palmette scheme.) The close specific identity of this sculptural calyx with the painted version in figure 180 is eminently clear.[†]

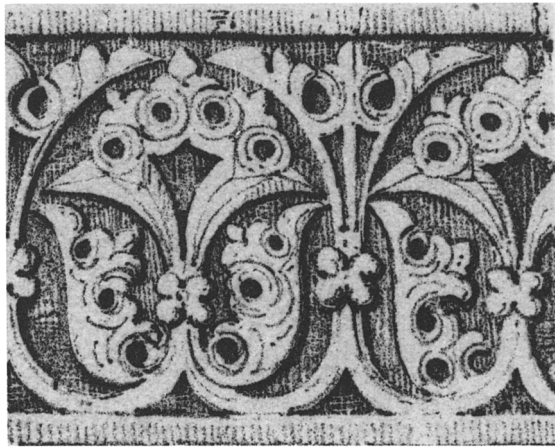


Fig. 187. Frieze from the mihrab of the Great Mosque at Cordoba.

⁸¹ From Girault de Prangey, *Essai sur l'architecture des arabes et des mores en Espagne, en Sicile, et en Barbarie* (Paris, 1841), pl. 4, no. 8. [Riegl's original citation here as pl. 4, no. 6 is incorrect.]

On the other hand, the system of ornament encountered in the Sicilian works produced by subject Islamic artists for the Norman kings, primarily in the twelfth century, is closely related to that on tenth-century ivories (figs. 174, 175). The example in figure 188⁸² is part of the stucco decoration of a dome in the Cuba near Palermo. The feathery acanthus leaves very much resemble those on the ivory carvings. The palmettes, with their laterally spread acanthus half leaves and crisply drilled volute-calyces, also occur in figures 174 and 175, whose Byzantine predecessors we already encountered in figure 183.

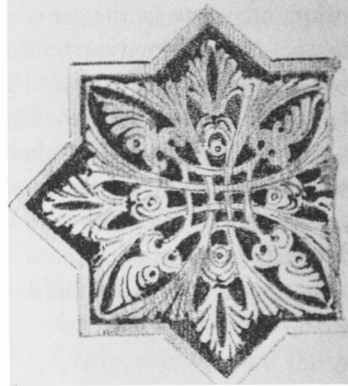


Fig. 188. Stucco ornament from the Cuba, Palermo.

Figure 189 illustrates a consummate example of Arabesque design.^{83, u} The decoration consists solely of tendrils, with the exception of the dotted band that winds its way through the middle of the decorative frieze in an alternately round and angular path like that of a window valance dividing the field into two interlocked zones. The movement of the lines is already quite diverse and complicated, no longer limited to circular patterns. The motifs, however, with the exception of the little sprouting spirals and



Fig. 189. Carved wooden chancel from the mimbar in the Mosque of Al Amri at Qus, Egypt

⁸² Ibid., pl. 12, no. 1.

⁸³ From the carved, wooden chancel of the Mosque of Qus, dated to the twelfth century, from Prisse d'Avannes, *L'art arabe*, pl. 79.

acanthus offshoots in the early Byzantine manner (see above), are half palmettes and bifurcating tendrils outlined by smooth contours, along with some full or frontal motifs.⁸⁴ Since the first two types are more important, we will discuss them in detail.

In figure 189a, we see two half palmettes (or acanthus half leaves with precisely rendered fans) combining to form a whole motif something like the split palmette; the calyx and fan are articulated in a vegetal manner, as in figure 174, for example, but they have a smooth contour. Moreover, there are apertures in the middle of each half leaf.⁸⁵ Both fans continue as tendrils, which then turn into similar bifurcating tendrils, and so forth.

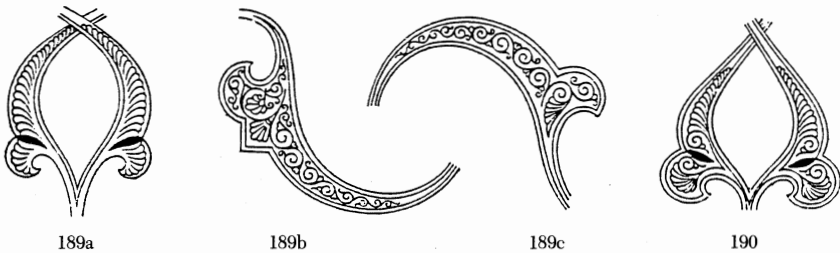


Fig. 189a–c, 190. Details from fig. 189.

The plantlike articulation of figure 189a is missing in the half palmette of figure 189b. Only its curved calycal leaf and fan, and the projecting axil filler between them, are readily distinguishable. However, what does occupy the interior of this Arabesque motif is more precious to us than any amount of acanthusized detail, for it is no less than a genuine Greek tendril complete with all of its distinctive traits. A palmette-fan oriented toward the axil filling projection of the outer contour is inserted where the tendril first bifurcates. To the left the tendril terminates immediately in a regular Greek full palmette, while to the right it curls into a typical continuous tendril with spiraling offshoots and axils meticulously filled.

Let us proceed to the half palmette in figure 189c. The same things apply as for figure 189b, except that the design in this case includes a conspicuous half palmette of the ancient Greek type (fig. 126). Figure 190, taken from another part of the same chancel, represents the transition from the pure and independent palmette-tendril to the acanthusizing treatment of the half palmette shape in Arabesque decoration. Prisse

⁸⁴ The frontal motifs in figure 189 resembling palmettes are probably based on the type represented by figure 181.

⁸⁵ Compare figures 167, 168.

d'Avennes reproduces a vast number of leaves of the second type with details that merit a separate and thorough study and discussion of their own. We only have time to mention figure 168a; it consists of two tendrils with half palmette fans resembling the split palmette that fill the axils and that terminate freely above in a full palmette. The astonishing relation between this seemingly pure Greek type of tendril ornament and the Islamic design in figure 168 has already been indicated. But the analysis of figures 189–90 demonstrates that this was by no means an isolated instance of copying or a reminiscence of an ancient pattern but a fixed, vital component of Islamic ornament. Consequently, there can be no doubt that even highly developed Islamic art still knew and applied the pure two-dimensional palmette-tendril ornament of the best Greek type. Nor is it difficult to bridge the gap in this process from the fifth century B.C. to the twelfth century A.D. Our discussion of late antique tendril ornament already demonstrated how the two-dimensional palmette-tendril remained continuously in use even when the acanthus reigned supreme, and how early medieval art in the East Roman Empire, understandably enough, revived the predilection for stylized Hellenic blossom and tendril forms. The intermediary stages in Byzantine art are documented by miniature illumination of the tenth and eleventh centuries, such as, for example, figure 191.⁸⁶



Fig. 191. Tendril decoration from a Byzantine manuscript.

Arabesques, in addition, are still found on works produced in Cairo during the late Middle Ages. We find them without any interpenetrations of forms and no polygonal formations; here the Islamic character is betrayed exclusively by the abstract treatment of the individual motifs (whole and half palmettes). Figure 192 is such an example;^{86a} Figure 192a provides a translation of the pattern according to Greek principles.

The graceful classical palmette-tendril ornament, therefore, was able to survive in Islam far into the later Middle Ages in particular techniques.

⁸⁶ From Stasoff, *Ornement slave et oriental*, pl. 123, 10.

^{86a} [From Bourgoïn, *Précis de l'art arabe*, part 1, pl. 32.]



Fig. 192. Arabesque filler ornament from a circular wall inset in the house of the fourteenth-century Emir Bardak in Cairo.



Fig. 192a. Greek "translation" of fig. 192.

For example, on wood carvings, it is still documented by the now famous filler designs from the Maristan [mosque hospital] of the Sultan Kalaun from the end of the thirteenth century.⁸⁷ However, the fact that Greek palmette-tendrill ornament was used on the carvings of the chancel at Qus specifically as the filler decoration of the large, abstractly outlined half palmettes is, in my opinion, a definite sign that Islamic artists were well aware of the close and essential connection between their Arabesque decoration and earlier classical tendrill ornament. I especially emphasize the "essential" and not the historical connection, for the latter was never a concern in the ornamental production of the earlier, truly creative centuries.

Figure 193 illustrates a decorated screen from the pulpit [*mimbar*] in the funerary Mosque of the Sultan Barquq in Cairo from the late fifteenth century.^v The Arabesque half palmettes are inscribed with fine, linear versions of the same motif. Here we truly approach the sort of treatment seen in figure 139, which we used earlier to define the basic characteristics of Arabesque decoration. Now the question arises as to whether the inscribed fillers of the motifs in figure 193 derive from the classical half palmette, as one may indeed gather from the discussion of figure 189b–c,

⁸⁷ On the robe of the centaur, as I have already pointed out in another context (*Altorientalische Teppiche*, 161), with a reproduction from Prisse d'Avennes also found in S. Lane-Poole, *Art of the Saracens in Egypt* (London, 1888; [reprint, Lahore, 1976], 143, fig. 46. [Riegl's original citation here of the illustration on Lane-Poole's p. 125 is incorrect.]



Fig. 193. Decorated panel from the mimbar in the Mosque of Barquq, Cairo.

and figure 190, or whether they should be interpreted as stylized variations of acanthus half leaves whose edges are folded over (figs. 180–83).

This question is not trivial, since the abstract character of Islamic blossom motifs renders it difficult in most cases to decide whether they are based on the acanthus or on the two-dimensional version, the palmette-fan. It is mainly the interior detail of the motifs in figure 193 and in figure 139 (especially of 139 *b* and *c*) that makes one think of them first as versions of the two-dimensional half palmette; the volute-calyx is indicated at the bottom of each incised leaf, a detail that has been an essential and inseparable component of the palmette since ancient Egyptian times. The volute-calyces on the Islamic half palmettes and bifurcating tendrils in figures 193 and 139 do not, however, come from the ancient Greek palmette volute but from a peculiar characteristic of the acanthus itself, namely from the rounded pipes always encountered between the pointed projections. Earlier we saw the extent to which this had already been a formative and characteristic element of the tendril offshoots already in early Byzantine acanthus. Figure 194 reproduces, furthermore, a portion of the apse



Fig. 194. Acanthus tendril-volute from the apse mosaic of the Church of San Clemente, Rome.

mosaic from San Clemente in Rome,⁸⁸ which was executed in the twelfth century, perhaps by Byzantine artisans, but at any rate under the dominating influence of the *maniera greca*, at least as far as the ornament is concerned. Here we find the historical or developmental progeny of the sculptural pipes indicated clearly and consistently at the point of inception or root of every leaf, by means of the volute-shaped spiral on the acanthus half leaves that comprise the acanthus tendril.^w

BECAUSE of the highly unsystematic conceptions that prevail concerning the nature and origin of Islamic ornament, and especially its most important expression, the Arabesque, it was essential to describe its formation and growth from a unified standpoint. The provenance of the examples used as evidence was of minimal interest; most of them originated in Cairo, whose unique climate has preserved the richest and least damaged selection of works. Particular local variations must also have developed, and it will now be the task of future research to investigate the distinctions within the geographically far-flung regions of Islamic culture and to establish the nature of the variation. However, our task, I repeat, was to accomplish the opposite: we sought primarily to demonstrate the historical and genetic continuity in the development of vegetal tendril ornament from antiquity up to more modern times, and toward this end, we have assumed a larger, all-encompassing perspective rather than to seek or establish similar distinctions.

⁸⁸ From Rossi, *Mosaici antichi delle chiese di Roma*, pl. 21. It is worth noting how the petals of the freely terminating blossom in the center of the scroll curl over like the ones in figures 181–83.

The task is now complete, for we have convincingly demonstrated that the allegedly geometric motifs of mature, fully-developed Arabesque decoration in the art of Cairo at the beginning of the fifteenth century are essentially and unmistakably plantlike at the core. The preceding third chapter, however, revealed how vegetal ornament had maintained a strictly historical course since the earliest known records of human artistic activity. Plants were adopted as decorative motifs for reasons that can no longer be determined, though possibly for representational, symbolic purposes. Once this began, the cultures that, in historical succession, appropriated and then furthered the artistic achievements of their forerunners consistently relied only on the types of vegetal decoration handed down by their predecessors. These they reformulated according to their own artistic sensibility and passed on to their successors. At no time did the creation of ornament involve an arbitrary dependence upon the natural plant world to the extent usually assumed.⁸⁹ When this did occasionally occur,⁹⁰ it never produced any lasting results. In contrast, the stylized palmette, acanthus, and other such ornaments have maintained a timeless, classic importance, even into the recent period of realism. The line of development exemplified by certain stylized blossom forms such as the palmette did not essentially deviate from its course even through the latest stage of antiquity, and we may as well extend this claim to include the late Middle Ages. Our next task was to establish the connection between late antique vegetal tendril ornament and Arabesque decoration by illustrating the intervening phases of the development with dated examples. Hopefully we have accomplished this even though there are almost no preliminary studies of the material.

Our last topic seems to involve only a particular region within the totality of Islamic art. Yet, if this chapter on Arabesque decoration concludes by discussing a type of decoration apparently of no more than local significance, we do so because it impinges directly upon questions of more general importance.

The art of the Islamic East also includes a kind of vegetal tendril ornament that can be characterized as naturalistic. It is preserved mainly on knotted carpets and ceramic tiles originating for the most part in Persia.⁹¹ Of course, many of these works date to within the last three centuries, when European influence had become pervasive not only in Turkey but

⁸⁹ Therefore, as has been frequently pointed out, not for their representational value.

⁹⁰ For example, in Mycenaean or Greco-Roman art.

⁹¹ Indian vegetal tendril ornament is totally dependent on Persian-Islamic decoration; once again, only those biased by a belief in the autochthonous origin of all decorative art have attempted to maintain the opposite.

also in Iran. However, some examples allow us to trace naturalistic vegetal tendril decoration back to the fifteenth century.

Figure 195 illustrates the corner portion of the border from a Persian carpet⁹² dated stylistically in the sixteenth century.^x The basic scheme and treatment resulted in an intermittent tendril of general Islamic type: the



Fig. 195. Border from a Persian carpet of the Safavid period.

blossom motifs form pointed ellipses in the geometric Arabesque manner, while the rhythmic tendrils between them are also broadly stylized in the same way. Within these Arabesque shapes, however, there are fine, vegetal tendrils that also follow the intermittent tendril scheme, in conformity with the main pattern. In the space remaining between the large intermittent motifs, the tendrils assume the continuous undulating scheme.⁹³ Only some of the blossoms actually branch off from the tendrils; the larger motifs, in particular, are almost all of the embedded type and merge with the tendril. Thus far, all the elements are familiar characteristics of Islamic tendril ornament in general. It is only when we look closely at the individual motifs that we find deviations from the typical Arabesque patterns as we came to know them in figure 139.

Let us focus first of all on the large pointed ellipse in the middle of the border. Here we find a number of petals arranged to either side of a rounded core that echoes the shape of the larger motif on a smaller scale. These petals grow up from their base in undulating movements that recall

⁹² It is lavishly illustrated in my *Orientalische Teppiche*, pl. 2.

⁹³ The so-called cloud ribbons found meandering among the tendrils, which are considered to be evidence of Chinese influence, will not be discussed here.

the fan of the split palmette. The edges of the leaves that fill the sharp axils between each of the petals are treated like acanthus motifs. For the sake of brevity, we will refer to the basic form of this motif as the *calyx-palmette*.

This motif is repeated a number of times; for example, in the middle of each of the undulating elements. There the edges of the curving petals encircling the core like a calyx are both folded together and acanthusized. Another example occurs inside the pointed ellipse of the corner motif. This time it is surrounded by an outer wreath of petals whose edges are no less finely serrated. Returning to the undulating element, however, we notice, in addition to the calyx-palmette, two more large blossom motifs that repeat frequently: it appears above, a flat, serrated, oblong plate that gives rise to the spadix, the so-called *fan-palmette*. Below, on the other hand, is a *palmette-wreath*, which can be easily distinguished from the calyx-palmette because the petals appear like a wreath oriented around straight axes instead of having the petals end in curved points around the core of the motif like a calyx.

The idiosyncratic stylization of the leaf edges is also characteristic of these motifs, and it must have been considered a rather essential feature since it occurs to a greater or lesser degree on almost all of the motifs discussed. In order to explain this in historical terms, initially we must investigate the Arabesque blossom motifs of the preceding medieval period to determine whether they qualify as prototypes for the palmettes in question, perhaps under the influence of the naturalistic trend that developed toward the end of the Middle Ages in Oriental art. However, we can hardly explain the naturalizing palmettes of the Persian carpet in figure 195 as a direct artistic formal development and transformation of the typical Arabesque designs seen in figure 139. As a result, only two other possibilities remain: either we are forced to see these motifs as specifically Persian, i.e., as products of an autochthonous, local development, or we must look for their roots outside the realm of Persian and Islamic art. Even now the first assumption has the greater number of adherents, in accordance with the general trend of the times. However, we are no more inclined to accept the notion that decoration develops *ex nihilo* or from obscure technical premises regarding this allegedly indigenous Persian ornament than we were in other instances. Our only alternative, therefore, is to turn to the art of other regions, starting, of course, with that closest at hand.

In the calyx-palmette, the acanthusizing treatment of the leaf edges and the upwardly curving movement of the folded petals already indicate that

this entire category of motifs can be interpreted as blossom-shaped arrangements of acanthus leaves similar to those discussed earlier, which appear from the Roman period onward. The course of development of the calyx-palmette can, in fact, be reconstructed fairly accurately. Persian ornaments of the Sassanian period (fig. 161) represent the point of departure; their Roman character was clarified sufficiently above. Any remaining suspicion that the calyx-palmette might still be a product of a national Persian art should be dispelled by the fact that it occurs in the early medi-

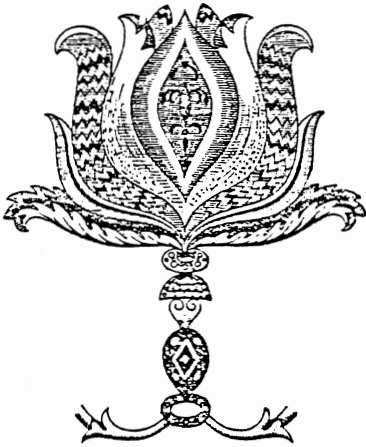


Fig. 196. Calyx-palmette from the mosaic decoration in the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem.

eval period even outside Persia. One such example appears in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (fig. 196),⁹⁴ usually considered to be the work of Byzantine artists and executed before the end of the seventh century.⁹⁵ During the later phase of development, Byzantine versions like the ones in figures 180–85 essentially run parallel to the motif of the calyx-palmette;⁹⁶ intermediary examples occur especially on silks, though it is debatable in most cases whether they are Byzantine or Islamic in origin. The calyx-palmette appears fully matured, and in a pure Islamic form, in Mesopotamian art of the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries on numerous examples of metalwork, some of which are dated.⁹⁶ The example in figure 197 is from the niello writing implement of a Mamluk sultan of Cairo from the fourteenth century.^{97, z} In this instance, it is important to observe how the vegetal tendril ornament of this group of works is generally stylized in the Arabesque manner and how it depends, almost exclusively, on schematically outlined palmettes with

⁹⁴ From de Vogüé, *Temple de Jerusalem*, pl. 21.

⁹⁵ Even the axil-filling leaves of the palmettes from figure 195 have corresponding counterparts in figures 180–83.

⁹⁶ See Lane-Poole, *Art of the Saracens in Egypt*, 180–239.

⁹⁷ From Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe*, pl. 171, left, "Ecritoire du sultan Bahrite-Schâban." The playfulness of Islamic vegetal tendril ornament is evident in the remarkable way that figures of birds are allowed to replace some of the half palmettes on the Mesopotamian metalwork mentioned above, and apparently only in these instances: see the continuous undulating tendrils with diverging birds illustrated by Prisse d'Avennes, *L'art arabe*.

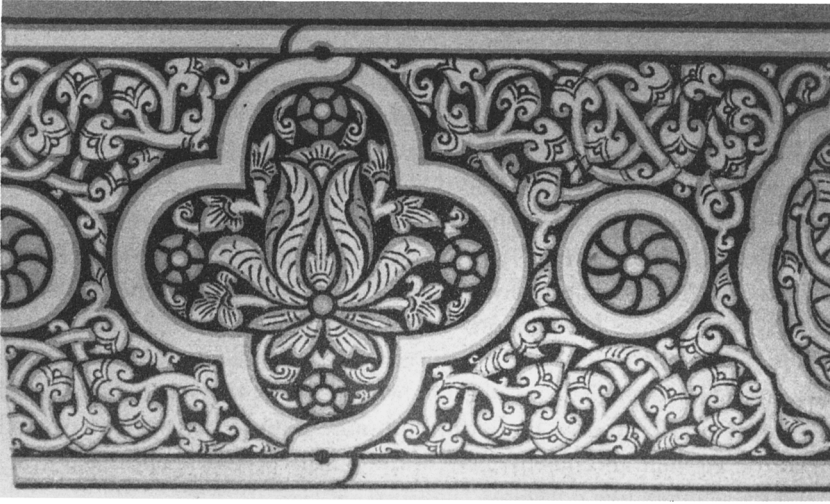


Fig. 197. Calyx-palmette and tendril decoration from a
 "Mosul Bronze," the inlaid copper inkstand of the
 Mamluk Sultan Bahrit Shaban.

volute-calyces (fig. 197), some of which have simple feathered fans. This proves that the use of the calyx-palmette as such is not peculiar to a definite naturalizing tendency and that it had long existed as a fully developed ornamental motif when in fact, as a number of factors suggest, a naturalistic tendency did begin to appear in certain techniques and in certain regions toward the end of the Middle Ages. However, there is a far better explanation for naturalistic forms like the ones in figure 195. Both kinds of vegetal tendril ornament—one basically two-dimensional, the other more sculptural, one allied with Arabesque decoration, the other naturalistic—coexisted side by side with each other in mature Islamic art, just as they always had in antiquity and the early medieval period, above all in those techniques that were tightly bound by tradition. The second—or sculptural-naturalistic type—was such that it led directly from late Roman overlapping acanthus leaf calyces to the calyx-palmettes on carpets made in the royal workshops of sixteenth-century Persia.

A recent attempt⁹⁸ to account for the naturalistic blossoms on Persian knotted carpets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has revived the thesis of Sir George Birdwood, who first wrote about their connections with ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian lotus blossoms. The author was

⁹⁸ W. Bode, "Ein altpersischer Teppich im Besitz der königlichen Museen zu Berlin (Studien zur Geschichte der westasiatischen Knüpftöpfe)," *Jahrbuch der königlichen Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 13 (1892): 134.

presumably unaware that his argument was basically the same as what I had already suggested in *Orientalische Teppiche* loudly and clearly enough to be audible for those with an active interest in the development of ancient floral ornament. We can now move beyond the position assumed by Birdwood and other scholars on these questions, since we have at our disposal the evidence that this ingenious researcher could only hypothesize intuitively. As the result of further specialized studies, we can now replace the vague clues of the past with definite links that combine to form a continuous chain of development. However, I would be the last to take issue with the fundamental ideas long ago expressed by Birdwood, Owen Jones, de Vogüé, and others, insofar as they agree with the views advanced above. In fact, I would not hesitate to say that our knowledge of medieval art would now be better and more mature had we not strayed from the straight and narrow path of the purely historical approach practiced by scholars like de Vogüé.

The ornamental flower types of Persian carpets cannot be traced back directly to Achaemenid-Persian or Assyrian sources; a fundamentally different stratum of art and culture separates the ancient Near East from the world of Islam in the late Middle Ages, a phase initiated by the triumphant advance of Hellenism and its subsequent development into the so-called Byzantine period. But even aside from these general historical considerations of style, the flowers on Persian carpets still do not qualify as the direct autochthonous progeny of ancient Near Eastern art for the simple reason that there is simply nothing ancient Near Eastern about the medium itself, the oriental knotted carpet.⁹⁹ The generally accepted notion that Oriental carpets have been in use in western Asia from time immemorial is contradicted when we observe that there is no evidence at all in the ancient Near East of the more modern Oriental practice of using carpets in place of chairs and tables, although it is certain that furniture was in use at that time.

It is typical as well of the shallow, mechanical approach to the subject that the Oriental "carpets" mentioned in ancient texts were so automatically assumed to be knotted rugs and that no one felt the need to test the suggestion against the evidence of artistic depictions. What these reveal, however, is that while chairs, beds, and tables were in use across the ancient Near East from the time of the early Pharaohs up to and including the Achaemenid-Persian period, there is not a single depicted instance of

⁹⁹ Elsewhere I have discussed this crucial point in more detail; see A. Riegl, "Die Heimat des orientalischen Knüpfteppichs," *Oesterreichischen Monatsschrift für den Orient* (Jan. 1892), 9ff.

carpets used in their stead. It was the central Asiatic tribes of Turkic origin—those who were accustomed to living without furniture in a nomadic existence and who migrated continually into western Asia throughout the Middle Ages—who first brought the knotted carpet and its characteristic use to the West. Wherever the migrating nomadic tribes continued to maintain their original way of life, they also continued to decorate their carpets with indigenous primitive geometric patterns consisting of linear motifs arranged according to abstract symmetry in the same way that so-called nomadic carpets are still decorated to a large extent today. But wherever they established large and splendid courts, such as in Persia and Asia Minor, they adopted the more highly developed ornament of the surrounding culture for their luxury carpets, i.e., the vegetal tendril ornament handed down by classical antiquity.^{aa}

Therefore, neither the knotted carpet nor its “flowering” patterns are indigenous to western Asia, as is usually assumed. The carpet originated in central Asia, though there may already have been a few scattered exceptions in antiquity: for example, in the mountains of the Caucasus. The floral pattern, however, is only typically Oriental in the sense that the classical antique decorative motifs that are the direct forerunners of Islamic vegetal ornament did in fact ultimately originate in the Orient. In the third and fourth chapters of this book, I hope to have forged the various links of this chain in an unbroken sequence, thereby connecting the mysterious flower of the Nile Valley and the spiral tendril of the even more enigmatic island culture of the Mycenaeans with the wondrous achievements of the Arabesque.

