

WRAPPED IN FABRIC: FLORENTINE FAÇADES, MEDITERRANEAN TEXTILES, AND A-TECTONIC ORNAMENT IN THE RENAISSANCE

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Façade and Surface

In scholarship on Renaissance architecture ornament has become synonymous with columns and entablatures, friezes and capitals. In effect, this is the default setting for any discussion of the topic: in the wake of Leon Battista Alberti's claim that the column was "the principal ornament without any doubt" in his treatise on architecture (ca. 1450), other ornamental devices remained on the periphery of theoretical attention at that time, and have continued to do so in scholarly discussions thereafter.¹ Alberti had followed Vitruvius, and what was not treated in his text—the oracle of ancient architecture—fell into oblivion, no matter how much present in practice. Even figural sculpture, attached to so many early modern façades, fell outside of the discussions, as if extraneous to their architectural support.² Texts responded to texts, and the power of the ancient model was such that certain formal problems that had since emerged remained on the periphery of verbal discourse.

In this chapter, I would like to turn to a different and even more neglected architectural device—the *sgraffito* façade—a flamboyant, extreme instance of pure ornament, that has experienced an almost total eclipse in scholarly work and is virtually absent from the Western scholar's concerns (fig. 22.1).³ Indeed scholars' attention has been almost exclusively turned to the sculpted stone façade type, or more precisely, to the ubiquitous columnar orders with their associated sculptural elements (entablatures, brackets, cornices, etc.) that modulated the walls of most Renaissance structures. To be sure, this sculpted surface divided into vertical and horizontal members was itself *ornament*, that

is, an embellishment as a *representation* of a fictitious structural system at work rather than the actual makeup of the building (the carrying elements were invariably walls, not columns and beams).⁴ This was the tradition of the palace façade as developed by Bramante and subsequently modified by Michelangelo into a more modulated sequence of supporting members unfolding in depth, and it is the tradition that provided the predominant semiotic expression of architecture as a tectonic/sculptural build-up thereafter. The sculpted façade remained the strong Renaissance position, underpinned by antiquity, and was indeed the sign of its successful appropriation (fig. 22.2).⁵ The modern move toward structural rationalism and the call for the expression of the real structure of a building on its façade (and elsewhere) as a sign of "honesty" created a discourse that did not leave scholars of the Renaissance untouched. It is no surprise therefore that under the influence of contemporary discourse they should privilege questions that responded to these biases, leaving others—such as surfaces, ornament, and stucco coverings—to one side.⁶

In contrast to the sculpted façade, the *sgraffito* façade is profoundly a-tectonic, completely surface-dependent, and in many cases flamboyantly unrelated to the structure of the building, its syntax or sections, its description of weight and support, and the effort involved in maintaining this equilibrium. Instead it is lacy, a seemingly transparent veil, and light, a complete opposite to the heavy either rusticated or carved façade of the Renaissance palace. At best it could be read as a drawing, that is, as a linear representation of ornament applied to the skin of the building. Apparently some-



Fig. 22.1. Cristofano Gherardi, Palazzo Vittelli alla Cannoniera, 1534. Castello, Italy.

thing of an anomaly, it does not fit comfortably in the evolutionary model developed for Renaissance architecture, and evidently for this reason it has been ignored, even eliminated from our histories. Yet the *sgraffito* façade was neither as rare nor as insignificant as accounts make it seem today. In fact, Florence steered a somewhat eccentric course in this respect, and the tectonic sculpted façade was not actually a success there. The Albertian model of the Rucellai palace was not followed in the direction of an increased three-dimensional presence of the orders organizing the plane of the façade, although there are a few examples of this approach, such as the Palazzo Uguccioni and the Palazzo Bartolini Salimbeni by Baccio d'Agnolo (yet, contemporary witnesses tell us, it was much derided at the time of its building).⁷ But on the whole, the Florentines remained faithful to their own tradition. The predominant models were the rusticated and dressed stone block and the *sgraffito* type, which enjoyed significant popularity,

sadly belied by their low survival rate today. Florence was not alone in developing this alternative façade model. There was a vogue for such decorated palaces in Rome—mostly executed by Polidoro da Carvaggio and Maturino da Firenze—which ended with the Sack of Rome and the consequent dispersal of artists, as well as many notable examples in the north of Italy and north of the Alps. But in Florence, and Tuscany more generally, it had a longer and more consistent history, a tradition really, that was not the case elsewhere.

The Renaissance architectural texts do not dwell on this architectural type either. Although Sebastiano Serlio addresses painted façades in his 1537 trailblazing treatise on the orders, he presents them as cheap alternatives to stone façades and thus condemns them to be read as ersatz-architecture thereafter, losing any kind of value as an architectural feature.⁸ Critical of this practice, he warns that painting disintegrates the solidity of the wall, which as a result becomes transparent

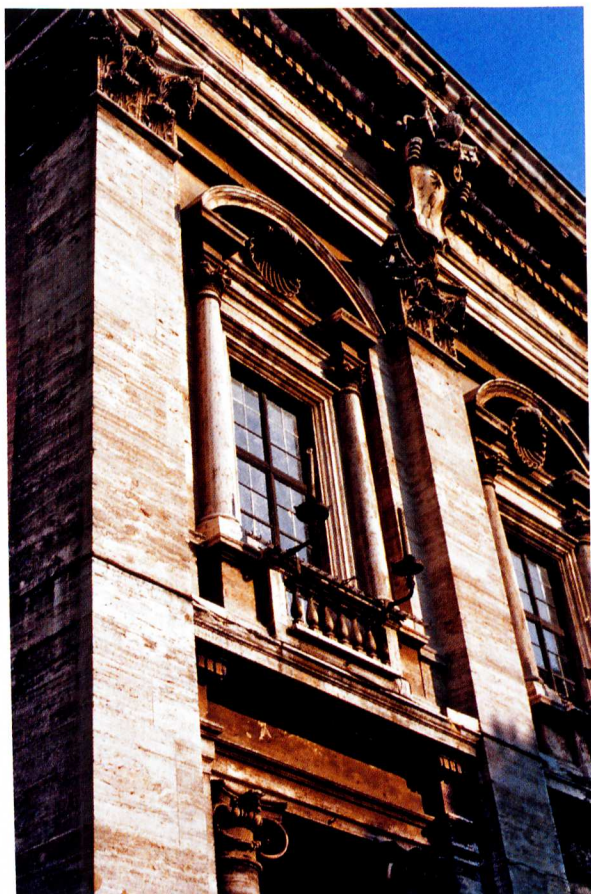


Fig. 22.2. Michelangelo, detail of façade, Palazzo Nuovo. Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome.

and disappears altogether. And to this end he prohibits painting landscapes, colored figures, or animals; he prefers chiaroscuro and he refers the reader to painting in grisaille, which imitates marble or stone, and even bronze, and which will enhance the mass effect of the front wall.⁹ Another exception he admits are representations of festoons, leaves and flowers, fruit, trophies, arms, and other such items as are used for triumphs and feasts and that are allowed to be hung from the walls. Color is only permitted if the objects represented are *cose mobile* (mobile things), such as cloth attached to the wall, on which anything can be painted without disturbing the architectural order and integrity of the building. Such devices were in fact the stock in trade of the *sgraffito* decoration, yet, though he invokes its forms, as a practice, he ignores it entirely.

Hailing from Bologna and subsequently from the Roman entourage of Bramante/Raphael and Baldassare Peruzzi, Serlio's aesthetic allegiances may not be hard to

guess. Perhaps not surprisingly then, alone among his contemporaries, it is the Tuscan Giorgio Vasari who discusses *sgraffito* (he designed such façades himself), and he does so at some length—both in the techniques segment of *The Lives of the Artists* (1550 and 1568) and when he comes to describe the careers of various artists known to have excelled at it.¹⁰ Most important, he includes *sgraffito* in the introduction to painting, and *severs it from architecture*. Indeed, in the painting section, Vasari includes a number of crafts that by rights belong to other domains more closely connected with stone and carving, with the chisel rather than the soft brush: mosaic work, intarsia, niello, damaschina, engraving, and woodcuts.¹¹ This was by no means a universally accepted division, and Vasari may well have wished to tilt the balance in favor of his own art in the contest (not to say quarrel) between painting and sculpture then much in vogue (the so-called *paragone*). Indeed, Alberti, though defining mosaic work as painting (“pingere e figurare”), had attributed its invention to an architect (following Vitruvius).¹²

Clearly the *sgraffito* façade posed problems—then as now. And it is this conflicted form of architectural treatment and dramatic statement of ornament for its own sake that I want to recuperate and examine in order to see what it tells us about an alternative deployment of ornament in the Renaissance; about the definition of artistic, more specifically architectural, practice and its relationship to technique as a rhetorical gesture; and about the presence of a pan-Mediterranean aesthetic with ornament as its principal site.

Sgraffito Technique and Style

What modern research there is on this technique has been done by the Thiems in the 1960s, and their catalogue of buildings, with an introductory survey of its development, is among our only sources.¹³ There is clearly a continuity in the popularity of *sgraffito* façades in Florence and more generally (though perhaps less so) in the rest of Tuscany—in Pienza, Pisa, Prato, Siena. The manner of *sgraffito* itself seems less widespread elsewhere in Italy, though there are examples in Rome and certainly in the later Cinquecento, in the Trentino and also north of the Alps, from Switzerland to Prague.¹⁴ More common outside of Tuscany was the chiaroscuro façade widely associated with Polidoro da Caravaggio and Maturino da Firenze (another Florentine), who



Fig. 22.3. Detail of *sgraffito*, Palazzo Lapi, after 1452. Florence.

brought it to a height of fashion in Rome before the Sack, but it seems to have fallen off after Polidoro's death.¹⁵ This variant of painted grisaille façades, mostly figural, did not meet with much success in Florence itself, as indeed was the case for painted façades, of which there are some very fine but few examples (such as the Palazzi Mellini Fossi and Dell'Antella). The patterned *sgraffito* façade remained the preferred Florentine choice across several centuries.

Evidently the practice of *sgraffito* is one intended for stucco façades. Although a number of Florentine palaces—Medici, Gondi, Pitti, Strozzi—were clearly part of a discourse about rough, rusticated stone and in a dialogue with the Signoria, stucco was probably as popular, if not more so, both in the Trecento and later. Indeed Alberti spends a fair amount of space in *De re aedificatoria* describing the process of obtaining exquisitely finished surfaces (6.10), and Vasari (another Tuscan) echoes this view a century later, thus indicating an enduring aesthetic preference.¹⁶

It is in this stucco surface, then, that the *sgraffito* designs were incised with a sharp, metal tool. As the Thiems rightly point out, it is wrong to refer to *sgraffito* as painting because it is a form of scratching, incising, and minute carving; one could even construe it as a form of painting crossed with goldsmithry. In fact *sgraffito* decoration was seen early on as similar to pottery technique (*pâte-sur-pâte*)—an art of incision, based on the interplay of two layers of finished surfaces, one glazed, the other only fired, in the case of the potter, and white and black stucco in the case of *sgraffito*.¹⁷ The relief obtained was less than one-quarter inch deep, but, even if minute, it was based on chiseling, scratching, and peeling off. In other words, it was a removing technique (rather like engraving) and recalled the work associated with bronze as well as stucco reliefs. Color washes could be added, but this was certainly not essential—the basis of the process was a coating of the wall with black and then white stucco and its incision to allow for selective subtraction of the



Fig. 22.4. (a) Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini, façade of Palazzo Sertini, ca. 1515–20. Florence. (b) Giorgio Vasari and Bernardino Poccetti (*sgraffito* decoration) and Bartolomeo Ammannati (architect), Palazzo Ramirez Montalvo, ca. 1573. Florence.

light surface material to reveal the design against the dark background (fig. 22.3).¹⁸

Historically, the period of popularity of *sgraffito* can be divided broadly into three phases: a Trecento to mid-Quattrocento phase of borders and infill with imitation ashlar stone and some references to architectural orders that evolves gradually into less tectonic forms of increasingly complex figural and floral bands for the borders, while maintaining the floor-by-floor divisions. This is the phase of the Medici palace courtyard of Maso di Bartolomeo and of the Palazzi Coverelli, Gerini, and Spinelli (see fig. 22.5b).¹⁹ The second, later Quattrocento to early Cinquecento phase, is that of Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini (student of Morto da Feltre, himself a student of Cosimo Rosselli).²⁰ This phase is represented by the Palazzi Sertini, Lanfredini, and Bartolini (where Feltrini worked with Baccio d'Agnolo) and is a phase of *groteschi* but also of a balance between pattern and geometrical arrangements (the *grotesche* fashion had reached Florence by many avenues, but significantly also through Morto da Feltre, Feltrini's master) (fig. 22.4a). The final

phase is that of the large-scale *groteschi* that cover the entire field with a continuous design of figural forms, the phase of the mid- to late Cinquecento, of Bernardino Poccetti, Cristofano Gherardi, and Giorgio Vasari himself working with Bernardo Buontalenti and with Bartolomeo Ammannati, respectively. Representative are the palaces of Bianca Cappello (by Bernardo Buontalenti and Bernardino Poccetti) and Montalvo in Florence and the Palazzo dei Cavalieri di Malta in Pisa (the latter two with the involvement of Vasari) (fig. 22.4b).²¹

It is clear that in all three periods the ambition was to cover the entire field of the façade with ornamental forms: the difference is how. The effects are of lightness and transparency, but also of a certain brightness, thanks to the use of white, which, when seen against the dark stucco, enhances the effect of fragility and delicacy but at the same time gives great luminosity to the façade. It has been argued that the decorative patterns of fine borders and ornamental bands of early *sgraffito* work were indebted to sculpture, in particular to *festoni* (festoons), and to stone incrustation as well.²² This treat-

ment produced the effect of an overall flat ornamental field halfway between *sgraffito* and sculpture, such as on the Duomo, on the façades of the Florence Baptistery and the thirteenth-century San Miniato al Monte, and reinterpreted in the Renaissance for the façade of Santa Maria Novella by Leon Battista Alberti (fig. 22.5a).²³ These two-tone, flat façades that create effects of light and shade as well as projection and recession achieved by means of contrasting colored stones resemble the *sgraffito*, but not its lacy transparency, nor its calligraphic and floral quality (fig. 22.5b). Indeed, despite the evident resemblances to sculptural stone revetments with complex geometrical forms—which also recall the rich though more colorful Cosmatesque pavements in the self-same churches—the stone carving tradition may not be the only and perhaps not even the main referents here. The very nature of the *cursive and linear* ornament (flowing ribbons is a staple device), its deployment, and its low relief also suggest a range of sources among the minor arts: particularly textiles (silks, damasks and brocades, or raised velvets), ceramics, carpets, and metalwork. And its *factura* also comes close to embroideries and raised applications on silks, typical of rich contemporary vestments, whether religious or lay.

Silk Façades

As is well known, the production and trading of silk was a major economic feature of Florence. Much of it, indeed the highest-quality fabrics, depended on silks imported from the Caspian region (Asterabad, today Iran); trade extended far and wide both for importing and exporting luxury textile wares and also tied Florence to Ragusa (in what is now Croatia), Portugal, Valencia, and Palermo.²⁴ Through this intermediary, new ornamental patterns that had come West from China (arabesques and asymmetrical arrangements, also dragons and other such animals) had entered the Florentine repertoire and had been disseminated throughout the Mediterranean region. Some textiles were pattern on pattern, others were lace, while certain forms of brocades were actual relief work—rather like the *sgraffito*, the so-called alto-basso and bouclé. Work with silver and gold thread also meant collaboration with goldsmiths and other metalworking trades, as well as the production of complex and layered micro-masterpieces in which some of the major artists participated.

The connection of architecture to such textiles for the ornamentation of exterior walls is not that far-

fetched. Indeed, it has been claimed as a source for sculpture as well, as in the case of the carved ornamental motifs on the façade of Orvieto Cathedral, which had both a formal and iconographic link to the processions and dedication of the cathedral and the vestments associated with both.²⁵ In Florence there was another important context that united fabric and stone: one of covering external walls with ornamental hangings on the occasion of major feasts—as faithfully recorded by Apollonio di Giovanni and others on wedding chests (*cassoni*) (fig. 22.6).²⁶ The ornamental Pseudo-Kufic inscriptions that sometimes framed such images speak of an aesthetic interest in Islamic designs and calligraphy, while the cloth with which the Baptistery is covered and the white/black effect is similar in *factura* to the *sgraffiti* then in vogue.²⁷ Moreover, not only were external walls covered with embroidered silks (and carpets), creating the effects of interiors for events in large outdoor spaces, but the piazzas themselves were covered with fabric on special occasions. Such a practice of creating a soft textile boundary enhanced the intimacy of outdoor events and religious processions as well as increased their splendor (also documented on painted wedding chests such as the Bargello *cassone* where the Baptistery piazza is shown covered with billowing cloth).²⁸

Permanent references to such textiles would not have been out of place on the façade of a patrician's, especially on a silk manufacturer's, palace. Indeed, it is not entirely coincidental that the Spinelli palace façade recalls the ornamental strategies of lace and silk, for the family owned one of the largest silk manufactures in Florence at the time, the heyday of this industry in the province. As scholars have noted, the Spinelli produced the most expensive silks, and Tommaso, the palace's patron, was the family's most remarkable member, also known as "il grande Tommaso" whose business acumen had allowed the family to rise to great prominence. His patronage was lavish, especially for the nearby church of Sta. Croce, where he built a chapel and presented gifts that included the most expensive vestments, of an approximate value of more than two thousand florins in 1454. Clearly, he wanted to be known through his own luxury products (fig. 22.7).²⁹

The same link may also hold true for the façades of Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini, who also borrowed the aesthetic of all-over design from fabrics for his *sgraffito* façade designs—brocades, lace, carpets—and where the use of black and white produces effects of transpar-

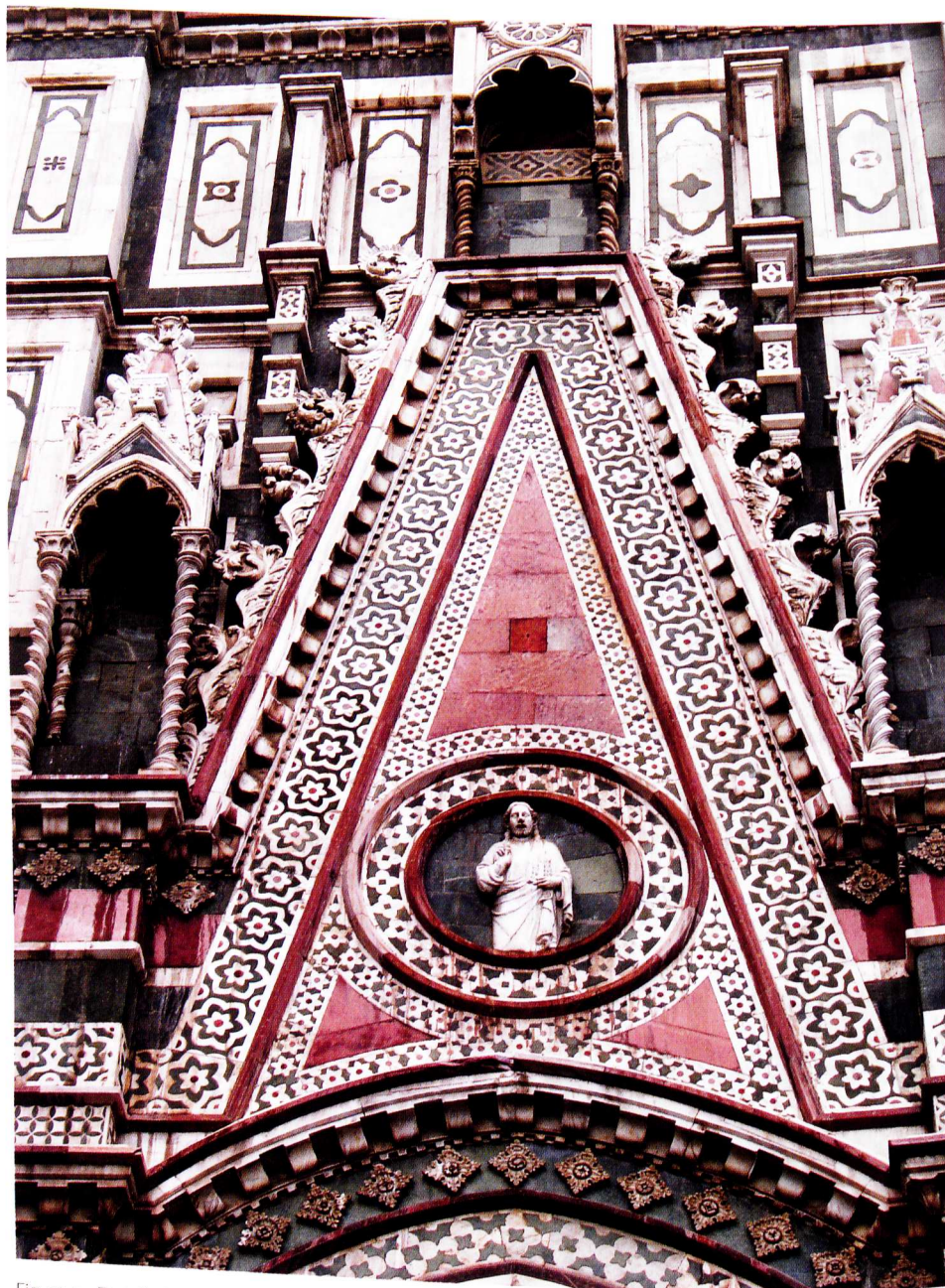


Fig. 22.5a. Detail of portal, Porta della Mandorla, Duomo, Florence.

ency. If not the main patterns, which are more *alla grottesca*, the *factura* is the same, and so are the borders and “fillers” reminiscent of patterned silks and embroideries (fig. 22.8a). Indeed, as Vasari records, Feltrini was an artist of many talents who worked on ephemeral *apparati*, on ornamentation of wooden ceilings, of *cassoni*, and most interesting, he designed *bandiere* (flags) and fabrics, suggesting the presence of one continuous field

of ornament that circulated autonomously from one scale to another, from one medium to another.³⁰ Significantly, Feltrini belonged officially to the category of *pictores operarum draporum* (painters of cloth) as defined by the statutes of the guild of Arte di Por Santa Maria (also known as Arte della Seta, the silk-makers’ guild). Feltrini was not alone: Antonio Pollaiuolo, Botticelli, Raffaellino del Garbo, Cosimo Rosselli, and the Ghirlandaio



Fig. 22.5b. Detail of courtyard façade, Palazzo Spinelli, ca. 1460–70. Florence.

are said to have designed for silk weavers and in turn were influenced by them, an example of artistic circularity.³¹ Not directly active with cloth yet still working across many crafts were also architects like Francesco di Giorgio, whose workshop (*bottega*) produced polychrome and bronze sculpture, painted *cassoni*, and cartoons for marble pavements, in addition to paintings and, increasingly, designs for architectural ornament

and decorations for interiors.³² Indeed, many ornamental forms can be detected in sculpture and painting that originate in cloth patterns and testify to this reciprocal influence between the arts and the crafts, particularly in the Trecento and Quattrocento. Vasari gives us a glimpse inside one such artist's *bottega* when he describes Perino del Vaga's establishment: "Perino had acquired such authority that all the work in Rome was



Fig. 22.6. Apollonio di Giovanni, panel from a marriage chest, depicting the "Continence of Scipio." Victoria and Albert Museum (5804-1859), London.

allotted to him, . . . having to draw night and day and to meet the demands of the Palace, and among other things, to make the designs of embroideries, of engravings for banner-makers, and of innumerable ornaments required by the caprice of Farnese and other Cardinals and noblemen. In short, having his mind incessantly occupied, and being always surrounded by sculptors, masters in stucco, wood-carvers, seamsters, embroiderers, painters, gilders, and other suchlike craftsmen, he had never an hour of repose."³³

That architecture and textiles, even clothes, should enter into a dialogue is less odd than it may seem. As the sixteenth-century *Libro del sarto* (Book of the tailor) testifies—a manuscript owned and updated by several generations of Milanese tailors—fabric and dress designs were often brought together, along with architectural ornament, within the same covers. The fabric for the *tenue d'apparat* (full-dress regalia), be it for war or for display, extended beyond the wearer's body and included the soft architecture of the tent, the horse, and the parasol—all of which partook of the same patterns and moved beyond the immediate body of the wearer to those things it touched. In short, the owner was part of the building brief. *Decorum*, as per Vitruvius, and later according to the sumptuary laws, provided a finely graded scale that calibrated personality and building, as well as its richness. Cloth, and its ornament, would have probably been seen as a similar bridge between the person of the owner and his representation onto the street and the city at an iconographic level, but more important, as a gauge of magnificence.

Not all *sgraffito* façades were equally rich, and Spinelli's was a particularly extravagant one. Indeed, it

might be worthwhile to ask if even more was at stake in these façades than self-representation and if the richness of the cloth was not also a reference to the wealth of the local industry. The same may well be true of the Palazzo dell'Arte della Seta, likewise *sgraffitato*. Moreover, the neighborhood of Santa Croce, where Spinelli's palace was located, was the home of the silk industry, so displaying his riches in textile on his palace façade, a stone's throw away from the church, was a likely strategy. The heyday of the Florentine silk industry was the fifteenth century, when the center of gravity moved from traditional wool manufacturing to the more specialized and artisan-intensive luxury industry of silks and highly worked textiles (with gold and silver metal threads as well as inlays, including painting and enamel applications).³⁴ A century later, Eleonora of Toledo and Cosimo I encouraged and supported the local cloth industry and tried to revive it to its former glory.³⁵ The commission of the Pontormo/Bronzino tapestries was part of the same effort to create and re-create an industry.³⁶ In such a context, the architectural references to the all-over pattern aesthetic of fabrics in contemporary palaces (especially among those from the Medici/Toledo entourage, like Ramirez Montalvo for whom Vasari designed a *sgraffito* façade) would have been immediately legible to the "period eye" (see fig. 22.4b)

But textiles were not the only crafts with which *sgraffito* stood in a condition of exchange. Pottery, embroidery, calligraphy, and wood intarsia were others, and the "porcelana" patterns in Cipriano Piccolpasso's *Three Books of the Potter's Art* (1556–59) amply illustrate this fact. There is great similarity in the ornament used by Baccio d'Agnolo for the intarsia choir stalls in Santa



Fig. 22.7. Detail of street façade, Palazzo Spinelli, ca. 1460–70, Florence. From Carl von Stegmann and Heinrich von Geymüller, *Die Architektur der Renaissance in Toscana* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1886–1909).

Maria Novella (Florence) and Feltrini's *sgraffito* decorations of a decade or two later.³⁷ And indeed, they worked together on the Palazzo Bartolini-Salimbeni, one creating the architectural shell and façade, the other the *sgraffito* ornaments in the courtyard. Islamic pottery such as the medieval *baccini* (glazed ceramic plates and bowls arriving from North Africa, mostly in the fourteenth-century) that were mortared into church walls in Pisa, for example, like the trade in cloth and its ornament between Florence, Venice, and the East, signal the ways in which form translated across materials as well as across geographic confines (fig. 22.8b). Moreover, treatises intended for multiple categories of artisans brought together between the covers of one book embroiderers, goldsmiths, and calligraphers; and elsewhere the cordovan leather panels produced in Spain—the *corami d'oro* or *corami di parato*—that often lined (or dressed) the walls of palaces were likewise imprinted with ornaments by goldsmiths and engravers, thus bringing together a number of craftsmen. These are recorded in the inventories of the Medici, the Barberini, the Piccolomini, and so on.³⁸ The manufacture of the cordovans (not only made in Cordoba but also in Barcelona since the Middle Ages) was not that different fundamentally from the *sgraffito* “removing” technique: gold or silver leaf was laid over leather, a pattern was incised, and the extraneous material removed to reveal the design.³⁹ As surface layers on interior walls, they could easily invite transfer of the treatment to the external ones.

All these were portable objects and as such may not seem to enter into a likely relationship with immobile and monumental architecture.⁴⁰ But they were also the transporters of pattern and design ideas, of a sense of luxury and craftsmanship, of exquisite worked surfaces, no matter how small. What came through them was a taste for “all-over” ornament, for filigree and rich textured surfaces, for visible intense craftsmanship—whether from the eastern (objects from Byzantium and the Ottomans) or western Mediterranean (*majolica* or cordovans from Spain). The actual so-called *mudéjar*, Mameluke, or Ottoman architectural monuments need not have been experienced firsthand—they traveled by proxy. In their stead, silk cloth traveled back and forth across the Mediterranean, wrapping relics coming from the Middle East or lining reliquaries, gifted to viziers and sultans and gifted back to ambassadors and princes, popes and prelates (fig. 22.9).⁴¹ Indeed, luxury cloth was



Fig. 22.8a. Silk lampas, probably from Venice, ca. 1370–1430. Victoria and Albert Museum (756-1875), London.



Fig. 22.8b. Degli Agli basin, Manises, Spain, ca. 1400–1440, lusterware. Victoria and Albert Museum (C.2055-1910), London.

the most ubiquitous portable object in caravans and ship cargoes, as ambassadorial gifts and bridal trousseaus—relatively light, resistant to breakage, and easily adapted to multiple uses, from religious vestments to wall hangings and clothes. Carpets traveled as well, as did metal objects and majolica pottery (in great demand in Florence and bearing the marks of the families commissioning it, like the Spinelli), which caused similar wares to be produced in imitation.⁴² The pleasure of craftsmanship for architectural surfaces that Alberti records included the aesthetic of intarsia, of gem and majolica work, of mosaic, of brocade and silks, and they all converged. Found within the scope of the same *bottega*—like Feltrini’s—they were also an expected visual stimulus for those moving in environments where all these materials and ornaments created harmonious extensions among themselves, reaching even to the fabrics on the walls and those on the bodies wearing them.

Sgraffito and Disegno

Finally, one might go even further and wonder if this *sgraffito* approach, so dramatically foregrounding the thread of textile and embroidery and their graphic qualities on the presentation face of architecture, on the façade, was not also a way to bring line into the materiality of the building: to make a statement about drawing and *disegno* that is not hovering in the background of a building as an ephemeral halo or adjunct but *is* the building. It is perhaps no coincidence that Leon Battista Alberti’s Rucellai palace façade of the 1440s, which is contemporary with many early *sgraffito* façades discussed here, appears also as a celebration of drawing. The two traditions have never been considered together. In the scholarly literature, the Rucellai palace is viewed as a first and decisive stepping-stone toward the sculpted/tectonic façade, yet it is also contemporary with the palazzo Gerini *sgraffito* ornamentation of 1450,



Fig. 22.9. Reliquaries of St. Anselmo and Santa Marcella, Lucchese lampas lining Dalmatian silver caskets, second quarter of the fourteenth century. Treasury of St. Anselmo, Nin, Croatia. Courtesy of Silvija Banić.

and though less ornamentally flamboyant, it also uses a pattern of incisions into the surface of the wall akin to a monumental drawing that illustrates a system of verticals and horizontals. Indeed, the similarity is not only to the Palazzo Gerini but also to earlier examples that relied mostly on geometric *sgraffito* ornamentation (ashlar stone outlines and bands dividing floors and windows) and that has been interpreted as deriving from stone incrustation.

That Alberti had closely observed and liked the encrusted wall tradition has already been mentioned, so his approach for a domestic façade halfway between *sgraffito* and encrusted marble yet which creates the same effects of outlined members may not be a coincidence. The palace and church façades (Rucellai palace and Santa Maria Novella) were commissioned by the same patron—Giovanni Rucellai—and roughly in the same time frame. To be sure, the Palazzo Gerini façade is

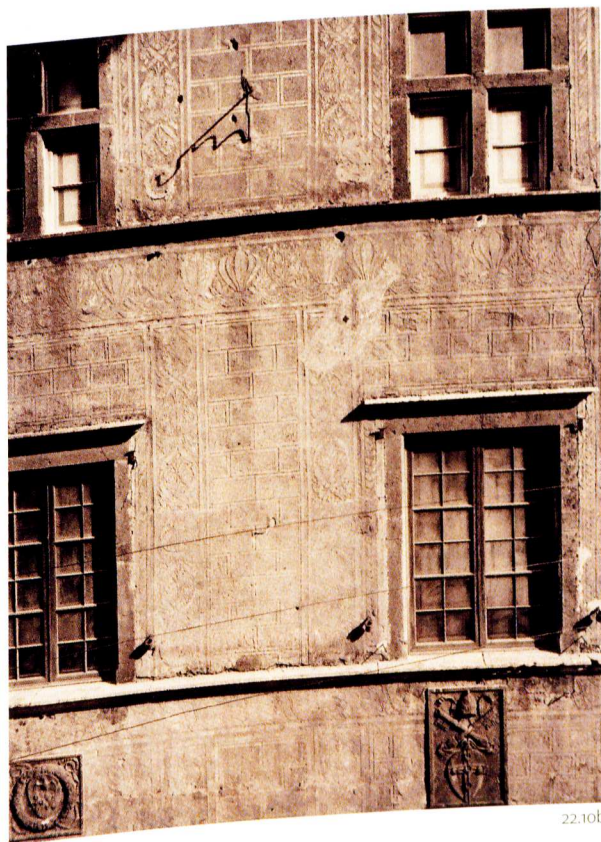
much richer, with more varied ornaments than the Rucellai, and it clearly appeals to and reflects a luxury taste: its grid of facsimiles of pilasters and pediments are unequivocally ornament, a fictive architecture with many eccentric, nonarchitectonic features rather than indicative of support. But neither do Alberti's surface incisions in any way signal three-dimensional members or weight-bearing devices; rather, the Rucellai façade as it stands seems poised at a crossroads between two approaches to façade treatments. On the one hand, the graphic line-work that covers the façade like a web has sharp, razorlike edges and recalls more a cut crystal than a soft fabric/tapestry; on the other hand, despite the often-mentioned references to Roman multistory buildings, it is also an ornamental grid, not unlike a drawing. There is no hierarchy, all stones and all orders have the same joint depth and hence shadow line, all entirely flat, a grid of intersecting lines that is ultimately highly

decorative—neither is treated as more important than the other and the result achieved is one of an all-over geometric pattern, of an incised drawing on the plane wall of the palace. The “family connection” between *sgraffito* and the Rucellai palace may be further confirmed by Bernardo Rossellino’s own work in Pienza in the 1460s (after having collaborated with Alberti on his Florentine projects in the previous decades).⁴³ The palace of cardinal of Pavia (Ammannati) and several others are treated in *sgraffito*, while the pope’s palace, around which the others cluster into one holistic design, is a virtual copy of the Rucellai, thus signaling a perceived affinity and continuity between the two treatments (fig. 22.10). Beyond Alberti’s own connection to this project by way of his relationship to Pope Pius II, Rossellino’s reading of the context for Alberti’s Florentine façade indicates the high likelihood of a dialogue between the two solutions.

Indeed, the *sgraffito* technique may have been seen as a dramatic graphic statement, executed with a sharp instrument that carves the stucco along the outlines of

a set pattern, and in so doing reenacts the movement of the pencil on paper. Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* and Filippo Baldinucci (who drew substantially from Vasari on issues of technique) in his *Vocabolario toscano dell’arte del disegno* of 1681 certainly thought of *sgraffito* as a manifestation of *disegno*.⁴⁴ And in late-nineteenth-century Britain, the Arts and Crafts group and William Morris still thought of *sgraffito* façades as a celebration of line.⁴⁵ In the accounts of Vasari, Polidoro da Caravaggio, famous for his decorated façades in Rome, was seen primarily as a draftsman, a master of *disegno*, who succeeded so well as *sgraffito* artist precisely for that reason and, conversely, was far less accomplished in his painted work as a result.⁴⁶ The fact that there was a strong association between silk weavers and *disegno* is underlined in yet another related environment by its consecration in the mid-1700s, when the Venetian Senate created an *academia del disegno* for textile weavers, thereby dignifying their work and raising it on par with that of the other visual artists.⁴⁷

Fig. 22.10. (a) Leon Battista Alberti, detail of façade, Palazzo Rucellai, Florence. (b) Bernardo Rossellino, façade of the palace of the cardinal of Pavia, 1460–62, Pienza, Italy. From Stegmann and Geymüller, *Die Architektur der Renaissance in Toscana*.



Long ago, Erwin Panofsky argued for the rise of the phenomenon of the architect-painter coming out of the Raphael *bottega*, and discussed it with reference to a pair of painted façades in Siena by Domenico Beccafumi and to the issue of Mannerism in architecture (a medievalizing tendency in Cinquecento work, as he defined it).⁴⁸ Although he did not discuss *sgraffito* façades, and the ones by Beccafumi were painted rather than scratched into the surface, he makes the point that this painterly ornamentation of the front wall of a building may have been “the rebellion of the non-architects,” a reaction “against the architectonic” definition of the façade. Might the façade then have been the battleground between artists and arts? A site of the *paragone*, used by sculptors as a giant relief, by painters as a giant canvas, by decorators as sumptuous giant fabric or tapestry, and by architects conceived as a system of supporting members? And might the *sgraffito* technique then be yet another inflection in that endless competition between the arts? Might this archaizing manner of the *sgraffito* façade that survives in Florentine architecture and subverts the main Renaissance trends toward sculpture not also record a fascination with, as well as an anxiety, vis-à-vis *disegno*? And in its very homeland, Florence?

The Florentine aesthetic preference for intricately worked surfaces, I would argue, competed with the growing Renaissance aesthetic for deep-relief façades and became a site of significant overlapping with other media. A crafted surface, the *sgraffito* borrowed from other crafted surfaces, no matter how small or diverse in materials—the silk cloths, the damasks, the *niello*, the damascene, the cameo, the engraving, majolica, and the *corami*—and signals the participation of architecture in the luxury taste that Jakob Burckhardt identified long ago as the aesthetic motor of Renaissance invention.⁴⁹ This is a complex world of connected things across materials, techniques, instruments, and ornamental patterns that may be also at the root of the dis-

comfort with the *sgraffito* in twentieth-century art history. With the *sgraffito* façade as cloth, it is almost as if the viewer takes the façade inside with him- or herself—it is the same cloth that covers his or her body; conversely, it is also a piece of the interior that has slipped out, a part of “life,” not a monument, just as the sumptuous silks lining reliquaries and covering precious relics signal the importance of what lies within. As such, it challenges the distance between viewer and artwork—not quite in the way that Yuriko Saito argues in *Everyday Aesthetics*—but it similarly hints at a bridge or continuity between the personal realm and art.⁵⁰ It also emphasizes the interest in exhibiting artisanship and exquisite craft of a different order than that of painting—of small intricate gestures, not the bold strokes of the fresco painter.

But beyond everything, the *sgraffito* façades are a feast of pure design, a level of frivolity and jocundity, of play and movement, of animation, that stand in stark contrast to the austerity of Albertian civic aesthetics and its sculpted, monochromatic, static, stone heritage—an escape into pure ornament, pure drawing, unbridled invention. *Sgraffito* also signals an aesthetic that traversed geographic confines as well as artistic media. An acknowledged phenomenon in Islamic art, it has been virtually ignored by scholars of Western architecture, where monumental art is expected to remain aloof from its “minor” siblings. It is here, in these links with the crafts, that may lie the deepest prejudice and discomfort caused by the *sgraffito* aesthetic. Yet looking at ornament in terms of fluidity of media acknowledges also that in the fifteenth century especially, the Mediterranean culture was more buoyant, more extroverted, more hybrid—as Fernand Braudel recognized more than half a century ago.⁵¹ The promiscuous circulation of ornament across media and borders is a testimony to this fact—a way to exhibit the bravura of craft, architecture as performance through its ornament, as the Children of Mercury exhibit their skills high up on the scaffold (fig. 22.11).



Fig. 22.11. Baccio Baldini (?), *Children of Mercury*, engraving. British Museum, London.

THREADS OF ORNAMENT IN THE STYLE WORLD OF THE FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES

Anna Contadini

Driven by congruent needs and tastes that fostered the production of goods for export, the relationship between Renaissance Italy and the Ottoman Empire was marked by a mutually beneficial adoption and adaptation of an array of designs and their constituent motifs. But only rarely, it seems, did this process provoke reflection, so that although the Renaissance is better documented than earlier periods, we find that the ascription of meaning remains elusive. Reception, beyond the evident valuation of objects shown by the barometer of price, was certainly not verbalized in ways that might suggest recognition of an emerging cultural nexus with an articulated aesthetic in some degree connected to the reengagement with the world of Islam occurring in intellectual circles. As a result, the artifacts themselves provide the primary and sometimes the only investigative resource. Yet however thorny the problems they may present, we can at least disentangle some of the complex strands of borrowing and mutation that mark the changes in Middle Eastern and Italian ornament during the Renaissance, tracking the ways in which the responses of each to the arts of the other would change.

Previously, Middle Eastern artifacts acquired by the West did not serve as models to be imitated. Rather, they were assigned novel functions: rock crystal vessels, for example, might be used as reliquaries, often embellished with luxurious mounts, to “stage” them and acknowledge them as, usually, royal gifts. But if the process of adaptation in such cases is transparent, it is far less so with the ambon of Henry II in Aachen Cathedral, an early example of the integration of a variety of artifacts, including two Middle Eastern rock crystal vessels,

within a quintessentially medieval, western European ambon in trefoil shape against a background decoration of *verni gris*. Here various interpretative problems arise, including that of perception: were the Middle Eastern objects of particular symbolic significance, in the context of *translatio imperii*, as representative of the cultural glitter of the Islamic world, or were they thought to be of Byzantine origin? Or, did they, rather, as I have argued elsewhere, primarily form part of an aesthetic program determined by the concept of *varietas*?¹

During the Renaissance, new functions might still be found for exotic items (a perfume container might be used as a hand-warmer), but this aspect becomes less significant, and there is a major shift in emphasis toward what I have termed the “freeing of the motif.”² Italian textiles, for example, begin to incorporate Ottoman designs, and Ottoman production in turn adopts Italianate elements, thereby presenting scholars, in addition to problems of provenance, with questions concerning the transmission of design as the industry evolved—and it also needs to be borne in mind that “Ottoman” design may be shorthand for a common vocabulary of ornament shared with the Persianate world. As with the rock crystals on the ambon, a motif may not always have a clear geographical provenance or “national” identity. We are, rather, confronted with the incorporation of imported features of ornament that are then creatively reinterpreted or reassembled to provide new variations to attract appreciative customers: Italian fabrics based on Ottoman models are thus not simple imitations either in terms of ornament or of technique, even if they might be aimed at the Ottoman market. Such fabrics illustrate well the seamless integration of motifs from various sources

within a common design world, and if associated problems of attribution can now often be resolved, we are still left with the more intriguing and important task of reading them as cultural texts, of following the local inflections of a common vocabulary, and, where possible, teasing out their implications.

There is, in addition, the phenomenon of transmateriality to consider. It is found both in the morphology of objects (such as metal vessels in the shape of leather ones) and, in particular, in the vocabulary of ornament. Within the Islamic world, for example, thirteenth-century Abbasid manuscript illustration inspires Mosul metalwork; decorative motifs in fourteenth-century Mamluk Qur'anic illumination recur on the relief design of the domes of Mamluk mosques; and sixteenth-century Ottoman and Safavid ornament is adapted to all media, from textiles to carpets to book illumination to ceramics.³ In Europe, we find similar phenomena of both morphological adaptation and transmateriality (as between metal and glass, for example), and as far as perceptions are concerned, we may detect a parallel move toward nonspecificity in the trajectory of the Renaissance vocabulary of design.

The material discussed below suggests, indeed, that by the sixteenth century, if not before, Middle Eastern ornament had become an integral part of an artistic vocabulary that was increasingly international, thereby calling into question, for this period, the validity of traditional art-historical tropes such as "exoticism" and "imitation." The term "influence," too, needs questioning: while unavoidable, it must be understood here to operate in the context of a complex set of circulating elements, and not to denote a simple relationship between donor and recipient, that is, from a Eurocentric perspective, as

unidirectional and insensitive to reciprocity. In tracing this change we may point to trade itself as a vehicle of exchange and familiarization, but also to creativity in technology and design for purposes of emulation and competition. Transmateriality provides further evidence of adaptation, and the way in which it plays not just with vessel shapes but also with decorative motifs serves as an index of reduced cultural localism and of an eclectic widening of aesthetic horizons.

Antecedents

The European acquisition of Middle Eastern artifacts, whether by pillage, diplomatic gift, or trade, began long before the Renaissance. The rock crystal vessels converted into reliquaries and those on the ambon of Henry II, mentioned above, provide early examples, and there are others in different media, for instance, Middle Eastern textiles with ornamental bands (*ṭirāz*), sometimes decorative but usually consisting of text.⁴ They provide evidence for the existence at this period of trade in luxury goods, and that they were appreciated as precious objects is demonstrated by the fact that they might be used as wrapping or shrouds for Christian relics. An extraordinary example is the "tunic of Saint Ambrogio" (d. 397), used as a wrapping for the remains of the saint, made of indigo-dyed silk with an inscription in Arabic woven in yellow silk. The blue silk has a lozenge pattern, and the inscription is in a double horizontal band, repeated in mirror image. Unfortunately, thanks to the activities of Franz Bock, known as "Scissor Bock" for having systematically cut textiles to sell to museums and private collectors,⁵ it is now dispersed in different reposi-



Fig. 23.1. *Reliquary of the Nails of Saint Claire*, Egypt, tenth century, Fatimid rock crystal; copper gilt chalice with precious stones, Italy, fourteenth century (?). Protomonastero di Santa Chiara, Assisi, Italy.

Reliquary of the Nails of Saint Claire, a rather beautiful tenth-century Fatimid vessel that was mounted in Italy, upside down, on a high, copper-gilt stem with a base embellished with semiprecious stones, probably in the fourteenth century.⁹ The carving in relief is sharp, and it exhibits mastery in the curved floral decoration, with one element seamlessly linked to the next, that is typical of the highest quality of rock crystal production from Fatimid Egypt. Drilled into the very clear crystal is a cylindrical hole, which suggests that the vessel originally must have served as a receptacle for perfume or cosmetics,¹⁰ but it now contains nail clippings of Saint Claire, the devoted disciple of Francis of Assisi, who died in 1253—a striking example of the radical transformations to which such early acquisitions were often subjected (fig. 23.1).

Renaissance Acquisitions

tories, with the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London having the most important fragment—the one containing the part of the inscription that tells us it was done for the noble prince Nasr al-Dawla Abu Nasr, the Kurdish ruler of Diyarbakır, in southeastern Anatolia, between 1010 and 1061.⁶ The tunic was probably woven in Abbasid Baghdad, a major center of textile production at the time. Another early acquisition, now in Bodmin, Cornwall, is an ivory casket with a painted decoration, mainly in gold, now largely lost. Used to house relics of Saint Petroc, it shows connections with various Middle Eastern styles and is the work of Muslim craftsmen.⁷ It makes the point that the “Middle Eastern” geographical boundaries may at that time have been rather different from the current ones, for it was produced in Sicily or southern Italy under Norman rule and, as one of the so-called Siculo-Arabic caskets, bears witness to the extraordinary syncretic culture of Sicily in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁸

Particularly prominent among these early European acquisitions are rock crystal vessels, ranging from the spectacular and finely carved ewers now displayed in, for example, the treasury of San Marco in Venice and the V&A, to a variety of smaller pieces. One such is the

The above are just three examples from a wide range of artifacts that survive in European collections and church treasuries and demonstrate that Europeans started acquiring artifacts from the Islamic Middle East already during the Middle Ages.¹¹ During the Renaissance, such acquisitions multiplied and became more varied, as trade assumed greater importance, facilitated by the growth of extensive and increasingly dependable mercantile networks. Artifacts were imported from various parts of the Middle East: from Fatimid (909–1171) and, later, Mamluk (1250–1517) territories, that is, principally, from Egypt and Syria; from the Ilkhanid Empire (1256–1353), which controlled Iraq and Iran and also gave access to Central Asia (Turkestan) and China, especially with regard to silk; and, with the rise of the Ottomans as a new major power in the fifteenth century, increasingly from Turkish centers of production. Indeed, Ottoman rugs and textiles were to become a significant import. In Italy, Islamic artifacts were transmitted not only through Sicily and southern Italy, as before, but also primarily through the commercial activities of the maritime republics and other pivotal mercantile centers, with Venice particularly active in importing carpets and textiles. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Genoese trade gradually became less significant; Venetian commercial activity increased, regardless of the political tensions—sometimes escalating into actual military conflict—between the Sublime Porte and the Serenissima; and Florence, in turn, was granted trading



23.2a



23.2b



23.2c

Fig. 23.2. (a) Velvet cope, Turkey, ca. 1500. Chiesa di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice. (b) Velvet, Italy (probably Venice), sixteenth century. Museo Nazionale del Bargello (inv. Franchetti 639), Florence. (c) Velvet, Italy, second half of fifteenth century. Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. no. CIRC.346-1911), London.

capitulations in 1460: a ready supply of imported material of various prices and qualities was assured alongside an equivalent range of locally produced material. Likewise, Ottoman customers had access to European goods, and became increasingly keen to acquire them, fabrics especially, for the quality of Italian production made them particularly attractive. There are two resulting trends: a variety of economic factors encouraged the manufacture of similar materials in several locations, while on the other hand, homogeneity was countered by local specialization.

Trade

The dissemination of ornament through trade may be illustrated first by textiles. Ottoman exports were principally in the form of *çatma* (voided and brocaded) velvets, with Bursa as the main production center from the later fourteenth century onward. But Bursa also became an international center for trade in raw silk, and it was this that increasingly attracted Italian merchants supplanting Italian centers of production. The consequent growth in the output of the Italian weaving industry resulted in a reduction in local demand for Ottoman worked silk, especially as Italian weavers had begun to explore Ottoman patterns. Indeed, Italian fabrics with design features of Ottoman or other Middle Eastern

derivation would be imported in increasing volume by the Ottomans, as demonstrated by Ottoman court documents: of the velvet caftans in the Topkapı Palace, only a few are of local production.¹²

Not surprisingly, the ornamental repertoire of these fabrics shows a degree of interchange that can create problems of identification. For example, on grounds of design, the Santa Maria dei Frari cope of ca. 1500 (fig. 23.2a) was long thought to be Venetian, but technical analyses confirm that it is in fact Ottoman, testimony to the adaptability of Ottoman weavers in responding to imported fabrics.¹³ On the other hand, a sixteenth-century velvet in the Bargello Museum was once thought to be Ottoman, but it is now accepted that it is of Italian (and probably Venetian) manufacture (fig. 23.2b).¹⁴ Although it incorporates well-known Ottoman motifs, their overall organization is rather atypical, as is the combination of colors, which can, however, be matched in textiles known to be Italian: the light red/pinkish color of the spreading tendrils, for instance, is found in Italian textiles from the end of the fifteenth century onward, as in an example in the V&A (fig. 23.2c),¹⁵ and further evidence for an Italian origin is provided by the fact that the fabric is pure silk (not normal for Ottoman velvets) and by differences in the way the pile is treated.¹⁶ Italian fabrics based on Ottoman models would have been mainly aimed at the Ottoman market, but that



23.3a



23.3b

Fig. 23.3. (a) *Çatma*, Bursa, Turkey, sixteenth century, brocaded velvet. Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. no. 100-1878), London. (b) Velvet, Bursa, Turkey, late sixteenth–seventeenth century. Museo Nazionale del Bargello (inv. Franchetti 99), Florence.

Ottoman-derived motifs were also included in designs for the Italian home market is suggested by the presence of clothes with Ottoman patterns in paintings, such as the *Portrait of a Lady* by Parrasio Micheli (ca. 1565)¹⁷ and Titian's *The Burial of Christ* (ca. 1572) with the *cintâmanî* motif.¹⁸ It is instructive, however, to note that fabrics with Ottoman motifs in paintings cannot readily be identified as Ottoman, in contrast to the frequent presence in paintings of Ottoman rugs, thus reflecting the disparity between the high level of demand for Ottoman rugs as against the low level of demand for Ottoman fabrics, given the abundance of local manufactories.¹⁹

The trajectory of a particular design motif is often complex, as shown, for example, by the diffusion of the ogival lattice, the origins of which are ultimately to be found in eastern Asia. It traveled westward with the Mongol Ilkhanids (1256–1353), reaching Mamluk Syria and Egypt and thence Renaissance Italy, and it is likely that the Ottomans' adaptation of it was indebted to Italian rather than Eastern models.²⁰ In a sixteenth-century *çatma* velvet in the V&A²¹ (fig. 23.3a), the ogival lattice encloses yet another motif with a complex history, for it serves as a framework for rows of carnations,

or possibly sweet sultan (*Centaurea moschata*), a floral element that may have been derived from European herbals and books of floriculture, but took on a rather abstract and instantly identifiable fanlike shape in its Ottoman manifestation.²²

And then we have capers. A document dated June 14, 1555, in the National Archive in Florence, sent from Frankfurt by the merchant Francesco Carletti to the Saliti Company in Florence, contains a drawing for a textile design with an ogival lattice through which are threaded branches with capers, accompanied by a request for pieces like it to be manufactured for a "Frankfurt fair."²³ Although the organization of the ogival lattice in this drawing is typically Italian, and the representation of the capers likewise, as may be seen in textiles such as a *stola da procuratore* (a procurator's stole) in Palazzo Mocenigo in Venice,²⁴ both were also to be found on Ottoman velvets, such as one in the Bargello (fig. 23.3b),²⁵ and Carletti was presumably familiar with such fabrics. But no Middle Eastern source is implied by his specifying that the order should be made of *domascho tanè*, for by the sixteenth century, *domascho* had long lost any connection with Damascus: it refers to a

locally produced fine, thin silk (while *tanè* specifies a maroon/orange color). This document thus illustrates well a design world marked by the seamless integration of elements from various sources, and quite possibly ignorance of, their ultimate origins.

At the same time, his letter provides an interesting insight into entrepreneurial activity and commissioning insight into entrepreneurial activity and commissioning insight well beyond Italy. This international market also included the Middle East, for commissions involving the dispatch of drawings with textile designs were not just internal European affairs: documents recently published by Gülru Necipoğlu contain orders of this kind from Ottoman pashas, one for Venetian fabrics to be sent to Cairo, the other, to go to Istanbul, involving various cushion designs.²⁶

Similar complexities arise with metalwork that can be identified as European imitations of Middle Eastern models, mainly Italian objects demonstrating the desirability of such designs in Renaissance Italy. Examples are the two candlesticks in the V&A with the Foscari coat of arms that strive toward a Middle Eastern typology in their decoration (fig. 23.4a).²⁷ Indeed, the stylistic similarity of such pieces with ones of Middle Eastern origin is sufficiently close for this group to have been identified as European only relatively recently, on the

basis of the more clearly compartmentalized organization of the decoration, a conclusion confirmed by the absence of the black organic compound used on Middle Eastern pieces to provide the background for the silver inlay.²⁸ Another candlestick in the V&A demonstrates the reciprocal nature of such transfers, although in this case with regard to morphology rather than decoration (fig. 23.4b).²⁹ Of its two component pieces (the third is missing), the upper part is a later replacement and does not concern us.³⁰ The morphology of the lower part, made in western Iran in the late sixteenth or seventeenth century, is derived from an Italian and most probably Venetian prototype, one demonstrated by the Foscari candlesticks. The incised design, however, most of the inlay of which is now unfortunately lost, conforms faithfully to Safavid ornament of the period of Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) as demonstrated, for example, by a flask of ca. 998 (1590) in the British Museum (fig. 23.4c).³¹ In both the V&A and BM pieces, we find an almost identical treatment of the cusped arches and split palmettes. For the interpretation of these phenomena, however, especially in order to make sound deductions about style preferences, much still remains to be done, in particular by taking into consideration a much larger corpus of artifacts than has hitherto been

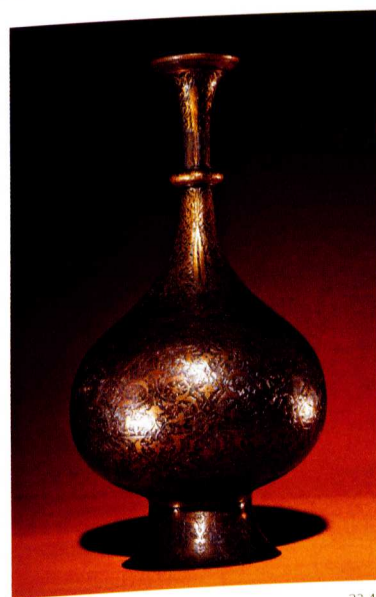
Fig. 23.4. (a) One of a pair of candlesticks, Italy (probably Venice), mid-sixteenth century, brass engraved and inlaid with silver. Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. no. 553-1865), London. (b) Candlestick (lower part), western Iran, late-sixteenth or seventeenth century, engraved bronze. Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. no. 4301-1857), London. (c) Flask, Iran, ca. 998 (1590), brass. British Museum, Henderson Bequest (inv. no. 78.12-30.735), London.



23.4a



23.4b



23.4c

attempted and by identifying textual references more fully. In the interim, it may be suggested as plausible that, beyond curiosity, an aesthetic openness allowed a conceptual "naturalization" of Middle Eastern ornament that allowed for the frictionless integration of certain novel elements.

Transmateriality

A further feature of the circulation of ornament is transmateriality, as a common pool of design elements appears in different media. This is a phenomenon that appears within both European and Middle Eastern production as well as between them. European metalwork, for example, may imitate ornament on glass, which in its turn derives from textiles, as in the case of a late-seventeenth-century silver gilt beaker in Hamburg³² that displays the same peacock-feather pattern as an early-seventeenth-century glass beaker in Vienna³³ on which the red dots, rendered in the metal beaker by punches, seem to have their origin in a textile pattern.³⁴ For Renaissance Italy, to take just one instance, we may cite the decorative designs on the foil disks of a group of medallion-shaped, silver-gilt and enamel costume ornaments that exhibit similarities with manuscript illumination from Milan around 1380 to 1400.³⁵

The incorporation of designs found in manuscript illumination also occurs in Mamluk metalwork, while similarities between the figural images on Mosul metalwork and Arab and Syriac manuscript illustrations have been noted on a number of occasions.³⁶ In terms of ornament, one may observe parallels with manuscript and luster tile painting in the background decorations of Mosuli metalwork, which range from plain backgrounds to thick winding scrolls, hatching, spirals, and independent ornamental scrolls.³⁷ Likewise, it has been noted that the designs on metalwork produced by Mahmud al-Kurdi (see below) have elements in common with those found in Mamluk and Iranian architecture and manuscript illumination,³⁸ while earlier metalwork may also exhibit the phenomenon of imitating the decorative effects used on a different material: the Courtauld metal bag (ca. 1300), for example, has an overall decoration that recalls Chinese-like textiles.³⁹ A particularly striking example of transmateriality is shown, during the reign of the Mamluk sultan Qaytbay (1468–96), by certain motifs such as the three-petaled leaf, which appear on artifacts in various media,⁴⁰ including on the

dome of his mausoleum and on a brass bowl inlaid with gold and silver in the V&A.⁴¹

The process by which a decorative motif migrates across different media may readily be illustrated by the grotesque, which consists of fantastical human and animal forms interwoven with foliage designs. It derives from ancient Roman wall paintings that were discovered in Rome during the fifteenth century, and thereafter began to be popularly used in the decorative arts not only in Italy but also across Europe. From its beginnings as wall decoration, it thus spread to a variety of media such as engravings, woodcarving, textiles, ceramics, and metalwork, where it appears on objects as diverse as German silver tankards and Italian armor.⁴² Such transferability of motifs can be partly explained by the fact that artists both produced designs for, and worked on, a variety of luxury objects, including tapestries, frescoes, stucco, and metalwork and were often commissioned to decorate entire residences, as in the case of Giulio Romano (ca. 1499–1546) and Perino Del Vaga (1501–47), both of whom had trained with Raphael.⁴³ The wide dissemination of artists' designs was a significant factor in the circulation of ornament in Renaissance Europe, for while these drawings were initially private affairs between artist and patron, they later became a collection of stock samples, and sketchbooks were lent to friends and colleagues. The development of printing further increased their availability, and ornamental prints and pattern books were published to cater to craftsmen in various fields who were trying to keep up with the demand for luxury goods from the emerging bourgeoisie but did not have the necessary expertise to create their own designs. In Germany, for example, pattern books by artists such as Hans Brosamer (1495–1554) provided goldsmiths with ideas.⁴⁴

Evidence for the existence of such pattern books in the Islamic world is scanty,⁴⁵ but there are certainly parallels between Europe and the Middle East with regard not just to one person working in more than one medium but also, and more significantly, to the ways in which transferability was encouraged by the close relationships that sometimes existed between craftsmen working in different media. How extensive the former practice was is still a matter of investigation, but it is very likely, for instance, that the building superintendent of the Sultan Hasan mosque-madrassa complex in Mamluk Cairo, Muhammad b. Biylik, was also the scribe of a Qur'an in the Keir Collection (and connec-

tions have been made between the decoration of that building and manuscript illumination).⁴⁶ There is clearer Mamluk evidence for the latter process, as we find familial ties between goldsmiths and manuscript scribes and illuminators: the scribe of a Mamluk Qur'an dated 801 (1397),⁴⁷ for instance, was a goldsmith's son, while an earlier Mamluk Qur'an, dated 701 (1302), was produced in the mosque of the goldsmiths' market (Suq al-Sagha).⁴⁸ In the Ottoman world, likewise, a direct connection between manuscripts and metalwork is provided by the binding of the *Dīvān* of Sultan Murad III in the Topkapı Sarayı, which was done by the court goldsmith Mehmed.⁴⁹ For a European parallel, I cite the particularly strong connection, reinforced on occasion by social and familial ties, that existed between German armorers and the engravers and etchers who ornamented their suits of armor.⁵⁰

Given the resulting transferability of design elements, we find that, just as with fabrics, metalwork sometimes presents us with seemingly intractable problems with regard to provenance. Those pieces for which a Middle Eastern origin can be identified include both objects made for a local market, some of which were acquired by Europeans, and objects made for a European market, sometimes in response to commissions. Dubbed "Veneto-Saracenic,"⁵¹ they are typically brass objects distinguished by the use of silver inlay and may be assigned broadly to two types: One consists of pieces in which the decorative design can be identified as late Mamluk, typical examples being globular perfume burners.⁵² The other type, associated with Mahmud al-Kurdi, is of uncertain provenance. It is stylistically akin to late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Iranian metalwork, but yet distinct,⁵³ while being differentiated technically from the first type by the finely engraved arabesques of the background.⁵⁴ In both types, the background is covered with a black organic compound, a feature that points to Middle Eastern origins, as do the metallurgical analyses showing that the Mahmud al-Kurdi pieces contain much lower levels of nickel than do European ones.⁵⁵ One example of this second, Mahmud al-Kurdi-type, actually includes on one rim an Arabic formula identifying the maker and on the opposite side a corresponding transliteration in Roman characters,⁵⁶ clearly indicating that it was intended for Europe. Among the late Mamluk pieces, some have a European morphology, which suggests either that Middle Eastern craftsmen were consciously creating shapes to appeal to

a European market while adhering to their own decorative idiom, or that they were commissioned to decorate pieces of European manufacture, which implies either a back-and-forth trading process or the presence of craftsmen from the Middle East in Venice. The latter possibility has generally been discounted, the assumption being that these metalwork pieces were probably produced in Egypt or Iran with European buyers in mind. However, recently discovered documents confirm the presence in Venice in 1563 of a certain Armenian named Antonio Surian, thirty-five years of age, from Damascus, employed to recover ordnance from sunken vessels (*artiglierie dalle navi affondate*) but who is also noted as doing inlay work (*all'agemina*) better than any Italian, implying that he was producing inlaid metalwork of high quality, and the possibility cannot be excluded that he taught craft skills to Venetian assistants, as Marco Spallanzani speculates.⁵⁷ But whatever his role, recent documentary evidence confirms the existence of a back-and-forth trade in metalwork: pieces produced in Venice or arriving from elsewhere in Europe were dispatched to Damascus to be decorated, even on occasion incorporating a specific design feature commissioned by an aristocratic European buyer, such as a family coat of arms, and then brought back to Venice.⁵⁸ The well-known Molino ewer,⁵⁹ for example, has a European shape and coat of arms,⁶⁰ but its decoration is characteristically Middle Eastern in style, and the presumption is of a vessel of European manufacture with the surface worked in the Middle East or by a Middle Eastern craftsman.⁶¹ The decoration is in fact very similar to that of a tray made in Cairo in the second half of the fourteenth century now in the V&A.⁶²

Further evidence for transmateriality is provided by leatherwork, as exhibited by bookbindings and shields. Venetian gilded leather shields,⁶³ for example, which are primarily decorative symbols of power, paraded on special occasions, exhibit Ottoman design features found on bookbindings and other material such as textiles and metalwork. On one of the shields, we find a twelve-point medallion in the center with an interlace of flowers and half-palmettes (fig. 23.5a), while the field is decorated with the cloud-collar motif, reminiscent of the cloud-collar border of Ushak carpets, such as the one in the V&A, so that the whole is a quite typical assemblage of Ottoman motifs (fig. 23.5b). Indeed, without knowledge of the differences in shape and materials it would require detailed analysis in some cases to deter-



23.5a



23.5b

Fig. 23.5. (a) Gilded leather shield, Venice, 1550–1600. Armeria del Palazzo Ducale (inv. J20), Venice. (b) Small Ushak double-niche medallion rug, Turkey, 1500–1550. Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. no. T.51-1920), London.

mine their Venetian provenance. On a buckler from the same group, in contrast, the organization of the various elements, together with the coloristic effect, is a creative Venetian reinterpretation of an Ottoman design (see below), its transformational strategies reminiscent of what we have seen happening on the Venetian velvet in the Bargello and the Frari cope. Similar processes are apparent on another shield, where the medallions on the field, with their polylobed contour and the quadri-lobed split palmette with a central flower (fig. 23.6a), are very similar in shape and ornament to those on sixteenth-century Ottoman silks, and also have a similar coloristic effect (figs. 23.6b, 23.6c). However, another motif, the cloud-band, is used in a “stylized” form quite foreign to its Ottoman realizations, with the curves squeezed tighter. The lack of any pretense at precisely reproducing an Ottoman object is confirmed by the insertion of the Lion of St. Mark in the central medallion and, below it, the initials “A C” (probably for a member of the Contarini family). The shields thus exhibit a variety of responses, including the reassembly of selected motifs in novel combinations.

In the only painted buckler (fig. 23.7a) that does not have a relief ornament, we find links with yet other media. In the interlace of half-palmette, including the coloristic effect of blue and red, the decoration is close to Ottoman Iznik ceramics, as illustrated by a tile datable to around 1578 (fig. 23.7c), while the shape of the split-palmette medallions recalls elements found in metalwork, as seen in a late-fifteenth- to early-sixteenth-century perfume burner, in Bologna, probably made in Egypt or Syria (fig. 23.7b). A glimpse of the importance attached to painted shields (and other arms such as lances and quivers) is given by documents that Luca Molà has recently found relating to a Hungarian, Nicolò Ongaro, who was invited to work in the Venetian arsenal, as he had a reputation of being a good shield and lance maker.⁶⁴ He eventually complained of being underpaid, and was granted a yearly stipend of sixty ducats on condition that he would supply thirty shields and thirty lances annually. Although the shields mentioned in these documents may not be the same as the ones discussed so far, as they were not destined to the Venetian aristocracy, the documents clearly describe



Fig. 23.6. (a) Gilded leather shield, Venice, 1550–1600. Armeria del Palazzo Ducale (inv. J14 [formerly inv. 122/Sala E]), Venice. (b) Ottoman silk (*kembā*), Bursa or Istanbul, second half of sixteenth century. Museo del Tessuto (inv. no. 75.01.316), Prato, Italy. (c) Ottoman silk (*kembā*), Bursa or Istanbul, Turkey, ca. 1540–50. Museo Nazionale del Bargello (inv. Carrand 2514), Florence.

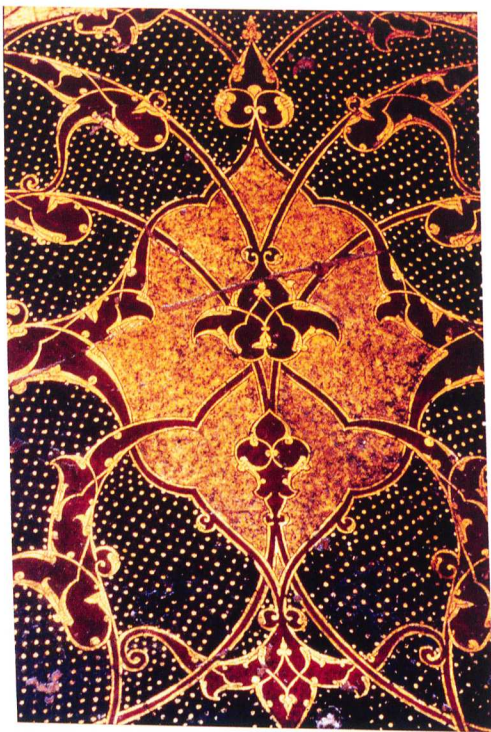
them as painted, and the money and time that Nicolò Ongaro was granted suggest that items like these were of importance nevertheless.

Technique

Analogous combinations of ornamental features found on a wide range of media occur in another leather product, bookbinding, the study of which highlights again the importance of investigating the techniques used in order to understand modalities of transfer. The splendid Venetian stamped, painted, and gilt binding in the Newberry Library containing the document of appointment, by Doge Alvise Mocenigo, of Girolamo Mula as procurator (*procuratore*) of St. Mark in 1572 is made up of varnished upper covers and doublures, and within the clearly Islamic-derived design format of a central lobed medallion, corner pieces, and arabesques we find not only the Lion of St. Mark and the coat of arms on the reverse but also elements of Renaissance ornament in the “populated” border that contains not just birds and insects but also grotesque figures.⁶⁵

Another instance of the incorporation of features characteristic of fifteenth-century Mamluk bindings is provided by a copy of Cicero’s *Epistolae ad familiares*, printed on parchment in Venice in 1475, and bound for Peter Ugelheimer (d. 1489), the owner of the Deutsches Haus Inn in Venice.⁶⁶ Edged with knotwork motifs, it has at the center a typically Middle Eastern almond-shaped medallion. But this contains Ugelheimer’s coat of arms surrounded by the Y-shaped stamps that are usually found on Islamic metalwork, not on bindings, thus indicating that transferability of ornament might also be mediated technically. Similarly, the tools used on the Italian binding of a manuscript from Padua, copied in 1400, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, may have been modeled on metalwork tools, “a natural borrowing since tool cutting was generally the work of goldsmiths.”⁶⁷

Venetian bindings in Mamluk or Ottoman styles are never precise imitations, contrary to common assumptions. The outer cover of Leonardo Bruni’s *Commentarius rerum in Italia suo tempore gestarum* (1464–65) shows segmented borders with gilded tool work,



23.7a



23.7b



23.7c

Fig. 23.7. (a) Buckler, Venice, late sixteenth century. Armeria del Palazzo Ducale (inv. 66/Sala E), Venice. (b) Perfume burner, Egypt or Syria, late fifteenth–early sixteenth century. Museo Civico Medievale (inv. no. 2110), Bologna. (c) Tile, Iznik, Turkey, ca. 1578. Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. no. 1645-1892), London.



Fig. 23.8. (a) Doublure, L. Bruni, *Commentarius rerum in Italia suo tempore gestarum* (Bologna [?], 1464–65), Biblioteca Marciana (Lat.X, 117 [=3844]), Venice. (b) Upper cover, Petrarch, *Canzoniere and Trionfi* (Florence, 1460–70), Bodleian Library (Ms.Canon.Ital.78), Oxford.

while the doublures have elaborate filigree (fig. 23.8a).⁶⁸ Although the overall organization is derived from Mamluk bindings, the leather cutout constituting the design of the filigree is covered with little pearls, once thought to be made of glass, but actually, as recent analysis shows, of resin—a form of ornamentation not used by Middle Eastern binders.⁶⁹ The tooling inside the segmented borders of the outer cover is rather messy by comparison with the binding in the Bodleian Library of 1460–70 (fig. 23.8b), a type that could have provided a possible inspiration.⁷⁰ This binding, which covers Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, was for a long time thought to be Italian, but recent analyses of the sewing show that it must be Mamluk,⁷¹ a conclusion reinforced both by stylistic considerations, as the design is elegant and rigorous in its organization, and by technical features, for the tooling is identical to that on other bindings known to be Mamluk.⁷² Similarly, a volume in the Biblioteca Marciana containing two manuscripts (one of which, *De vita et moribus philosophorum*, is dated 1453) that was later owned by the Venetian historian Marin Sanudo the Younger (1466–1536) has a Mamluk

or North African-style binding (with a flap) that Anthony Hobson believes was bound in Egypt.⁷³ In addition, Hobson has noted two other European books—a copy of the Aldine Press edition of Catullus, Tibullus, and Propertius (1502) and the *Horae Beatae Mariae Virginis*, printed in Paris in 1505—that have Ottoman bindings and sewing, which suggests to him that they were sent to Istanbul to be bound.⁷⁴ At the same time, the collections of kings and scholars such as King René of Anjou (1409–80), the Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), and the Spanish ambassador to Venice Diego Hurtado de Mendoza (ca. 1503–75) attest to the presence of Arabic and Turkish manuscripts from the Islamic world (and their bindings) in Europe, and these could have provided models for local bookbinders, thereby facilitating the transfer of Mamluk and Ottoman ornaments into the European repertoire.⁷⁵ Yet if we compare the tooling of the borders in the Bruni binding, we can see how the design of the Mamluk model has, seemingly, been misunderstood. Or has it? Another possibility, in the absence of tools capable of such fine detail, would be

approximation born of necessity, which might also explain why the problem of steering the design around the corners is solved or, rather, evaded by the substitution of little squares.

Differences in both equipment and technique, whether enabling or inhibiting, may well be a factor contributing to stylistic shifts as a design feature travels. For example, on the varnished binding in the Newberry Library that was mentioned earlier, the binder resorts to painting, thereby allowing certain designs to be copied more easily; and where painting was combined with relief, this was made not with small metal tools, but by pressure molding. With advances in technology, by the end of the fifteenth century, large stamps could be produced by European binders (fig. 23.9c), facilitating the transfer of ornament by drawing an imitation design, whether inspired by an object or a pattern book, from which the stamp would be cut. The pattern of the central medallion of the Venetian binding in Chatsworth Library, the 1520–30 Fra Giocondo, *Sylloge* (fig. 23.9a), for example, is very similar to the field of an earlier Ottoman binding made by the influential Turkmen binder Ghiyath al-Din in 1477 (fig. 23.9b),⁷⁶ but even without access to an Ottoman model incorporating this design in a medallion, the Venetian binder could have drawn it out himself, based on an original or copied pattern, in order to create a stamp for pressure molding. The printed drawing of an almond medallion by Francesco di Pellegrino in his *La fleur de la science de pourtraicture: Patrons de broderie, façon arabique et ytalique* (1530) demonstrates well this possibility (fig. 23.9d).⁷⁷ Such pattern books, together with single-page ornament prints, were particularly in vogue in the sixteenth century; intended for craftsmen of various fields, including bookbinding,⁷⁸ they would have facilitated the transmission of ornament across media and encouraged eclecticism.

Renaissance Eclectic Taste

The extraordinary *Libro dei ricami* (Book of embroidery) (fig. 23.10) by the Venetian Gaspare Novello, dedicated to Loredana Mocenigo (wife of the Doge Alvise Mocenigo, whose varnished binding was discussed earlier), is a precious document testifying to the circulation of embroidery models intended for women, whether printed, as in the case of Pellegrino's work, or drawn by hand in ink and various watercolors, as here.⁷⁹ Some of the drawings show clear affinities with Ottoman ornament, especially

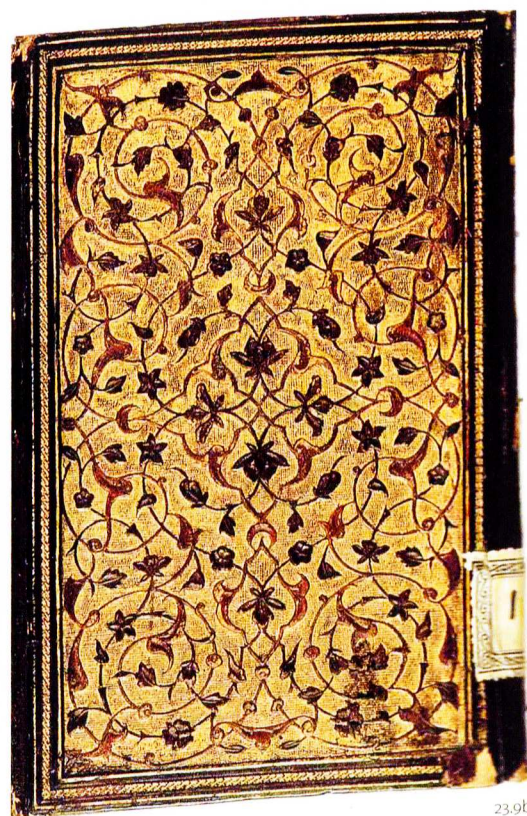
in the intertwined vegetal motifs that often contain a reinterpretation of the lotus flower, palmettes, tulips, and carnations. The outlines have been pricked for transfer of the design by pouncing. Like the two embroidery books in the V&A by the Venetians Lunardo Ferro and Amadio Novello, both dated 1559, the *Libro dei ricami*, dated 1570, contains material similar to Pellegrino's aforementioned drawings, published in 1530, pointing to the longevity of such designs.

But Pellegrino was already producing designs rather closer to the abstract "arabesques" found on early-sixteenth-century Venetian bookbindings, metalwork, and textiles than to those on Middle Eastern objects featuring seminaturalistic identifiable flowers. There is no attempt to identify the origin of specific designs, and as with other sixteenth-century European pattern books, Pellegrino's designs are in fact strongly eclectic in character, including also Renaissance grotesque ornament. Frequently a single term—usually "arabesque" or "moresque"—is applied generically to a variety of styles: for Pellegrino, his patterns are in the *façon arabique et ytalique* (Arabic and Italianate manner). With regard to both metalwork and textiles, the early *da* or *di Damasco* (from Damascus) is gradually replaced, in the sixteenth century, by *alla damaschina* (in the Damascene manner), a term now also applicable to pieces made in Italy.⁸⁰ Although, as seen above, it could be a technical designation of a particular quality of silk, in other contexts it referred to a spectrum of design features, so that while no longer necessarily signaling geographical provenance, it could be argued that it demonstrated at the level of style an enduring awareness of a Middle Eastern association allied to the prolongation of a taste for "orientalizing" motifs up to the second half of the sixteenth century. It is true that the Carletti drawing mentioned above contains no such motifs, but the term was certainly applied to the Middle Eastern objects and designs and their Italian emulations for which there was a taste and even a fashion in cities like Venice and Florence from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Such artifacts, carpets especially, spread to various levels of society, not just the aristocratic and upper classes. Indeed, as Marco Spallanzani has shown, the type of carpet that we now label as Holbein (*a ruote*) became so fashionable that one customer, in 1472, wanting variety, had to insist on having something different.⁸¹

By the second quarter of the sixteenth century, Middle Eastern-derived ornament had become an



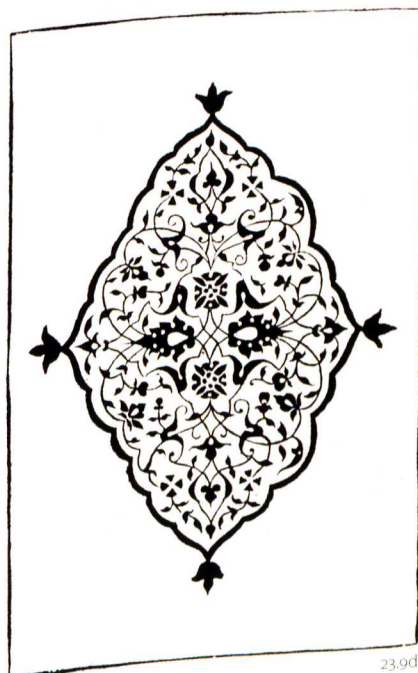
23.9a



23.9b



23.9c



23.9d

Fig. 23.9. (a) Upper cover, Fra Giocondo, *Sylloge* (Venice, ca. 1520–30). Chatsworth Library, Chatsworth House, Derbyshire, England. (b) Binding, Fakhr al-Din al-'Iraqi, *Al-Lamā'āt* (Istanbul, 881 (1477). Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts (MS. 2031, formerly MS. 1501), Istanbul. (c) Stamp for pressure molding from a modern bookbinder, twentieth century. Private collection, Istanbul. (d) Pattern in Islamic style, from Francesco Pellegrino, *La fleur de la science de pourtraicture: Patrons de broderie, façon arabique et ytalique* (Paris, 1530).



Fig. 23.10. Gaspare Novello, *Libro dei ricami* (Book of embroidery) (Venice, 1570). Museo del Tessuto (inv. no. 97.01.M, fol. 14r and detail), Prato, Italy.

integral part of the Italianate stylistic repertoire, a productively hybrid domain within the larger European and Mediterranean style world where concepts such as “influence” no longer have traction. This is underlined by the emic perceptions that we can detect, however faintly: the generalizing vocabulary of Renaissance ornament seems to indicate a gradual diminution in the signaling, not of Middle Eastern connections, but of non-European otherness. There is, indeed, a surprising lack of commentary on the “foreign” nature of both Middle Eastern objects and the so-called arabesque. For example, Sabba da Castiglione, in his *Ricordi* (written in 1549), simply lists a wide range of objects to adorn the home that includes tapestries from Flanders, Turkish and Syrian carpets, leathers from Spain, and new and wonderful things from the Levant and Germany.⁸²

Such eclectic acceptance and integration seems to be characteristic of the primarily nonrepresentational arts. Although there could, by definition, be no comparable dilution of otherness in figural painting, parallels might be anticipated in the acceptance and circulation of novel styles and techniques, yet these can be detected only sporadically. The early paintings in the Cappella Palatina, Sicily (1143), demonstrate that Islamic-style figural representations might be integrated within a

Christian setting, and a later self-conscious adaptation of techniques typical of painting in an Islamic tradition can be seen in the *Seated Scribe* (1479–81), attributed to either Gentile Bellini or Costanzo di Moysis (or da Ferrara). This in turn was to be copied by Persian artists,⁸³ and a Persian painting of *The Virgin and Child*, datable to the late fifteenth century, was also based on an Italian model, closely resembling one of Bellini’s works.⁸⁴ Yet such examples are rare, and later European depictions of people from the Islamic world remain firmly within Western artistic traditions of representation.⁸⁵ Having seen Western paintings, Mughal artists were prepared to copy aspects of the techniques that they employed.⁸⁶ But apart from the painter of the *Seated Scribe*, it may be assumed that Western artists did not generally have access to representative examples of Islamic painting, and even if this had been the case, one can only speculate as to what their reactions might have been. Accordingly, comparison between figural representation and the circulation of ornament can only be taken so far: the former gives the occasional glimpse of a potential cultural openness and reciprocity with implications for an awareness of novel aesthetic norms, while the latter demonstrates an achieved integration. The apparent ease with which this came about may be partially explained by a significant cultural

shift during the Renaissance, the "rediscovery" of antiquity. Allied to the growing humanist concern with the languages, literatures, histories, and sciences of the past, this also embraced an enhanced visual awareness of Greco-Roman art, and with it of the elements of arabesque and their organizational possibilities that both classical and Byzantine ornament contained. Once familiar with such forms, the Western eye would hardly find their Middle Eastern manifestations unusual and would, indeed, be predisposed to react positively toward them. They could thus be both readily incorporated as design elements and naturalized to the extent that awareness of their origin might be erased. Even as late as the nineteenth century Middle Eastern objects such as the famous Fatimid rock crystal ewers were considered Byzantine: the vegetal interlace surrounding animals is a form that had long existed around the Medi-

terranean, while the Kufic inscriptions that merge beautifully with the rest of the decoration were often not understood to be Arabic at all.

Conceptually naturalized, Middle Eastern ornament was thus fused within an increasingly undifferentiated Renaissance design compendium, a unified world that allowed Sabba da Castiglione to arrive at a cultural vision with an ethical dimension, for he concludes that all these ornaments (and he actually uses the word *ornamenti*) are to be commended and praised because they sharpen the intellect and induce politeness, civility, and courtliness (*e tutti questi ornamenti ancora commendo e laudo, perché arguiscono ingegno, politezza, civiltà e cortegiania*).⁸⁷

It would be nice to think that our enhanced awareness of the international movement of ornament and the creative local energies it helped to inspire might, in turn, itself foster such qualities.

VESTING WALLS, DISPLAYING STRUCTURE, CROSSING CULTURES: TRANSMEDIAL AND TRANSMATERIAL DYNAMICS OF ORNAMENT

Gerhard Wolf

The famous dictum, attributed to Augustus, that he found Rome a city built of brick and transformed it into a city of marble, is not lacking a certain irony if we consider that many Roman buildings were made of brick and then vested with marble: think of the Pantheon, the basilica of Maxentius, and the other monumental imperial buildings of Rome, and later Constantinople. Brick was an agent of this new world of architecture that Augustus had hardly been able to imagine, and brick walls themselves (also in combination with stone blocks) served as frame, container, and/or stabilizing factor for the amorphous Roman concrete. By this system, a graphic language of the walls could be elaborated, if they were not dressed by marble or opus sectile, plastered and painted, or adorned with stucco decorations. The aesthetics of walls was flanked or counterbalanced by a combination of columns, entablatures, friezes, and cornices, and in both, the nature and skillful treatment of materials played an important role. In the classical architecture of the Mediterranean world and beyond, this created a basic tension, as far as the notion of ornament is concerned. Even in buildings with walls apparently made of travertine or marble blocks, the joints and the bossage could form a vocabulary and literally the syntax of an architectural language often no less fictitious than those of the applied columns with their canonical ornaments. Whereas the former are often revealed to be not real blocks because they are made of thin slabs put in front of the “real” wall, the columns show their muscles but carry nothing, being superimposed on the walls and ready to visually unburden if not negate them. Here, I will not return to the much-discussed question of the

architectonical orders; my argument goes in a different direction: What I explore here are some aspects of the interplay of position and “nature” of ornaments in architecture in relation to their material dimension, in particular the contrasting elements of marble and brick, as well as plaster. My area of interest is the cultural interactions from the sixth to the eleventh centuries in the larger Mediterranean area, from Byzantium to Central Asia. Starting with a rather conventional notion of ornament, I will try to refine the concept in the process of a detailed examination of a small number of monuments. The first is the Church of St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople, built between 524 and 527, destroyed in the eleventh century, and excavated in the 1960s—a site especially famous for the preserved fragments of architectural decoration (figs. 8.1, 8.2).¹

Commissioned by Anicia Juliana, granddaughter of Emperor Valentinian III, the Church of St. Polyeuktos was built in the center of the city on the way to the Constantinian Church of the Holy Apostles.² In Juliana’s time, her church was the most monumental sacred building of the city, overshadowed only by Justinian’s Hagia Sophia, begun some fifteen years later. The building of Juliana’s private commission in such a public space is a gesture of the old senatorial nobility in a moment of short-lived, non-elite emperors. The church is a typical brick construction, its interior walls were vested with precious marbles and decorated with mosaics and paintings, a space articulated by a superimposed order of columns and pilasters, with walls retracting in niches, and an enlarged central bay in front of the altar space, presumably surmounted by a dome: in short, a longitudinal structure with a centralizing tendency. An inscription ran around



Fig. 8.1. Pilastri Acritani, pilasters from the Church of St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople (Istanbul), sixth century. Piazzetta San Marco, Venice.

the walls, encircling the arches, which celebrated Juliana in classical panegyric topoi and a no-less classical script, a meaningful ornament, which could also be appreciated as a visual claim, a band marking the ground plan in the space between the two stories of the Christian temple.³ Of particular interest is a second inscription placed in the vestibule of the church. A self-explanation of the monument, it is at the same time part of its visual decor. It addresses those who enter the church: "What singer of skillful works shall now hasten to the west, armed with a hundred eyes, and will catch sight of the manifold inven-

tions of art, gazing on the circle of the shining house." The inscription celebrates the unbreakable columns or pillars set one over another, the arched recesses under the golden cupola, and the marble slabs with their veins vesting the walls: "The walls opposing each other in innumerable paths are covered with cut stones like marvelous flourishing meadows which Nature made to flower in the depth of the rock and hid their glory, keeping them for the House of God, to be the gift of Juliana, so that she might produce a divine work, following in her toil the stainless dictates of her heart."⁴



Fig. 8.2. (a) Detail of Pilastro Acritano, sixth century, Piazzetta San Marco, Venice. (b) "The tree of life" on the Great Pilaster from the Great Iwan, Taq-i Bustan, sixth–seventh centuries, Kermanshah, Iran.

The inscription subtly balances the appreciation of the system of columns with that of the surface wall. Regarding the latter, it juxtaposes the extraction of the hidden beauty of Nature from the depth of the earth, transformed into art by human hands, with another transition, namely, from the stainless heart of Juliana to her divine work (*theskela erga*) dedicated to God (which is in turn, an interior space). It does not say anything, however, about the architectonic ornament in the modern sense of the word: the capitals, the shafts of the pillars, and the tympana and spherical triangles of the arches, decorated in manifold ways, which since their discovery have profoundly changed the art-historical narrative of an intrinsic evolution of late antique architectonical ornament from the classical system of capitals and entablatures into a new mediation between pillar and wall, further developed in the Hagia Sophia. That the inscription is silent about these ornaments may be explained by the fact that inscription and decoration are arguing in the same way that the plants carved on the surface of pillars or walls and the celebration of the flourishing meadows in the distichs complement rather than comment on each other. The second point is more intriguing: If an art historian trained in classical architecture had advised Juliana concerning

her political claims, he or she likely would have proposed the adoption of a retrospective classical style to insist on the continuity with Roman imperial culture. Juliana's taste was different; she speaks a cosmopolitan contemporary language, embracing Eastern and Western traditions and innovations. The preserved decorations show an extreme variety of forms and concepts, even techniques, from highly mimetic vine scrolls to more abstract ones, from hybrid plants gently trailing over the marble surfaces leaving them well visible, or capitals with rather abstract leaves or palmettes undercut so as to cast the ground in penumbra; other capitals are overlaid with a net of basket-like ornaments, whereas pillar shafts could be transformed into a grid encrusted with semiprecious stones. The decoration elegantly explores the dynamics of surfaces and the mediation between the critical zones or thresholds where the art of architecture transculturally finds its challenges and potentially gives space to ornament.⁵ We are dealing with a mediation by means of ornament, different from but not unrelated to Grabar's concept.⁶ In the case of Polyeuktos, but not only there, all this happens by means of mimetical or stylized plants, geometrical forms, as well as letters—and also by means of animals: note the peacocks that display their tails in the niches, a space where shells were traditionally more frequent (fig. 8.3). The peacock feathers were understood as endowed with a hundred eyes; this mirrors the hundred-eyed viewer of the inscription, who admires the building, an architecture looking back to the viewer, from the depth of the niches.

Since the time of Martin Harrison's discoveries, the ornaments of the Church of St. Polyeuktos have been seen as a response to Sasanian royal art in early sixth-century Byzantium, and this has been variously explained. The hypothesis encounters some difficulties because most of the Sasanian material available dates from the later sixth and early seventh century. Sasanian art itself was not created in a vacuum; it was part of the wider marketplaces of representations, ornaments, and material knowledge shared by the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asian world.⁷ Nonetheless, in the case of Polyeuktos, the reference works well; there are new elements in the decoration of the church that point to the East, even if it is certainly not the only source of inspiration. Juliana and her artists seemed to have been interested in an aesthetics of *poikilia*,⁸ of experimenting with a multitude of forms and motifs, negotiated in the



Fig. 8.3. Niche with peacock, fragment from the Church of St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople, ca. 524–27. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul.

building. Juliana was the master builder of early-sixth-century Byzantium, and this is confirmed also by the famous Viennese Dioscurides codex. The latter was a gift of a district of Constantinople, given to Juliana in thanks for the erection of a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The codex, with its botanical and ornithological illustrations and texts, has been widely studied over the centuries by Greek, Persian, Arab, Jewish, Turkish, and Latin scholars, to judge from the scripts and comments alone, written into it.⁹ The dedicatory miniature presents an ideal geometric shape by intertwined cords, creating spatial depth by a subtle interlacing of two squares inscribed in a circle (fig. 8.4). In such a way, they form an inner octagon, in which Juliana is shown sitting on a throne flanked by the personifications of Megalopsychia and Sophrosyne (Magnanimity and Temperance). At her feet we see the allegory of the city quarter and a child holding the codex covered by coins Juliana has thrown over it. Noteworthy are the play of color in the surrounding fields, the letters forming the name “Juliana” in the red triangles, and in the spherical blue ones with putti engaging in construction work. The pictorial order with its stretched-out geometry (like a building ground measured by cords) creates and defines the space for the figurative dimension of the miniature.

Fig. 8.4. Donor portrait of Anicia Juliana, Vienna Dioscurides (Cod. med. gr. 1), fol. 6v, sixth century. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

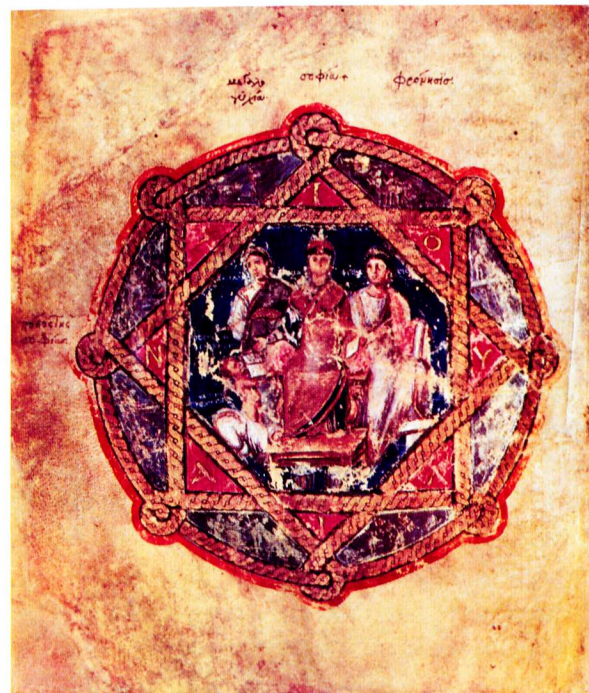




Fig. 8.5. Peacock, Vienna Dioscurides (Cod. med. gr. 1), fol. 1v, sixth century. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

Going a step further, we could compare the concept of Nature in the codex with that of the inscription and ornaments of the Church of St. Polyeuktos: that of the peacock in the codex and that of the peacock in the niches (fig. 8.5). There is a cross-reference between the botanical manuscript and the building: the miniatures of the book include a reference to Juliana's building activities, whereas the building shows the growth of vine and other plants over the surfaces of columns and arches, on marbles extracted from the hidden places of Nature by human labor. Plants are predestined for ornament with their interplay of iteration and variation in leaves, flowers, and fruit; their ability to fill a given surface and to negotiate order; and to do all this with a life of their own.¹⁰ Juliana's plants are gentle and unpopulated (not inhabited by any figures), a highly cultivated and ordered Nature. The aesthetics of *varietas* may be seen as a political claim, a cosmopolitan gesture, showing that Juliana is aware of the latest artistic achievements of the Sasanian court, against whom her Gothic husband, Aerobindus, had fought at the eastern border of the Byzantine Empire. For sure, vessels, textiles, and also people traveled between the two worlds. However, only a small elite would have been able to grasp this reference. Other levels of interpretation may be added to this: the building could have been seen as a Christian celebration of royal claims in the Solomonic tradition

(Solomon in fact is a transcultural hero like Alexander), not by chance mentioned in the inscription. That the Pilastri Acritani in Venice were for many centuries thought to originate from the Holy Land is symptomatic in this context.¹¹

The argument of universal kingship has been more strongly worked out in the case of Justinian's Hagia Sophia, as well as for the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Dome of the Rock.¹² The architectural decoration of the great church homogenizes the *varietas* of Juliana's inventions into a cosmic order (fig. 8.6). The Hagia Sophia was also promoted by words, for example, by the famous ekphrasis of Paulus Silentiarius, who mentions the vine scroll in the intermediary zone between the marble slabs vesting the pillars and the nonfigurative mosaics of the vaults and the cupola.¹³ In between, deeply undercut acanthus leaves pass from the capitals to the wall, which tend to dissolve under the brushwood. The Justinianic Hagia Sophia is a non-site, built so to speak over water, petrified in the marble floor, as Paulus put it.¹⁴ It is not the tomb of an apostle or

Fig. 8.6. Architectural decoration of the Hagia Sophia, ca. 532–37. Istanbul.

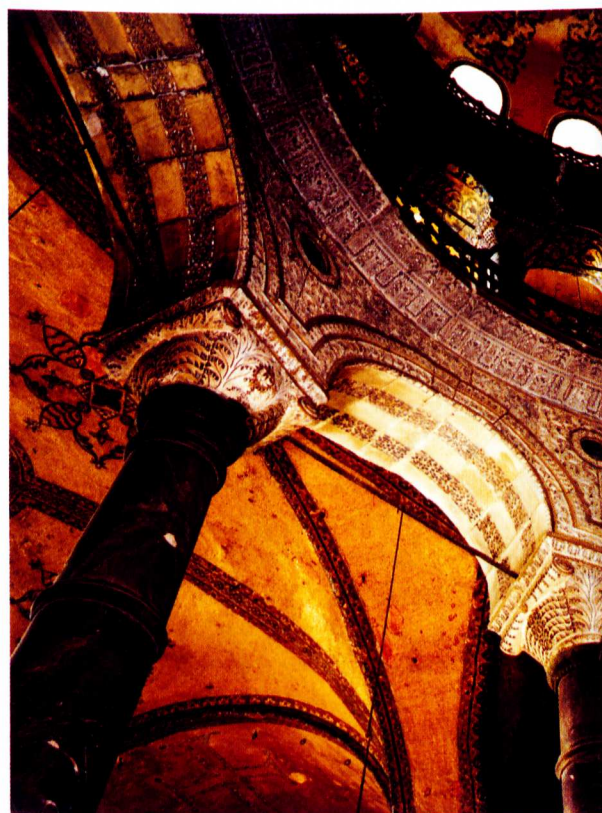




Fig. 8.7. Western façade of the Church of the Holy Cross, ca. 915–21. Aght'amar, Turkey.

of any other sacred memory. Rather, the Hagia Sophia reenacts the genesis of the *kosmos*, when the Spirit was floating over the primordial waters, as an imperially built and adorned “universe” immersed in and emerging from divine light: Paulus in fact calls it a lighthouse. The sharpness of the ornaments is softened and modulated by the light; this we also learn from the inscription on the Church of St. Polyeuktos.¹⁵ In all this we should not underestimate the contemporary observer’s appreciation of art and craftsmanship. A brief examination of the Dome of the Rock is instructive: If the Hagia Sophia is built over waters, the latter enshrines a sacred mountain. It does so by means of marble meadows and shimmering mosaics in the form of an abundant scroll growing out of monumental vases. Here we encounter an organization of the walls that is more “classical” than on the Hagia Sophia, with its columns, capitals, and distribution of ornaments. This makes the visual impact of the monumental scroll of the drum circling around the holy rock even more forceful. It is a dominant element of the decoration.¹⁶

Let us now briefly turn to the multimedial and polymorphic nature of scrolls, which seem to loop from the Medi-

terranean to India, or the other way round, over centuries. They can be inscribed in one register as in the Hagia Sophia or on exterior walls as in the tenth-century Armenian church in Aght'amar, but scrolls, be they vine or acanthus, can also fill conches or tympana, growing in all directions without being cut by the frame (fig. 8.7).¹⁷ Compare this system of scrolls with that of autonomous circles frequent in textiles, often cut to show their potentially endless nature. The scrolls, in turn, can be inhabited and populated, or even overpopulated, with figures wrestling with the power of the continuously rolling scroll, in danger of being entangled or suffocated, or even able to escape the outlines. Ornaments can become the battleground between order and anarchy or, put in more positive terms, the creative playground for the generation of polymorphic beings (either metabolic or diabolic) and, at the same time, for the installation of a more geometrical order (*more geometrico*). I could speak of ornaments in Warburgian terms, as a subtle balance between stability and mobility or motility, an order of life or genetic code (implicating an agency or portability of the ornament).¹⁸ Romanesque art has been considered excessive in this respect; we need only think of the famous critique of Bernard of Clairvaux.¹⁹ This could be illustrated by an eleventh-century Spanish



Fig. 8.8. Eastern lintel from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, ca. 1150–80. Rockefeller Archeological Museum, Jerusalem.

cross or by the tympanum of the façade of the Holy Sepulchre (fig. 8.8), where the scroll has returned to Jerusalem along with the Crusaders' presence in Palestine, in a late response to those of the Dome of the Rock.²⁰

Scrolls are directional or pluri-directional in their spiral growth, but they apparently do not succumb to gravitational forces as garlands or festoons do, or oppose them, in the manner of vertically growing trees.²¹ This gives scrolls a relentless power. Even if attached to walls, they are more deeply embedded in the architectural order than the festoon, which are fictitiously hanging on them. In the case of the Church of St. Polyeuktos, the marble surface and the gentle foliage (here not circling in scrolls) are overlaying systems, articulating the surface, which makes the brick walls under them invisible.

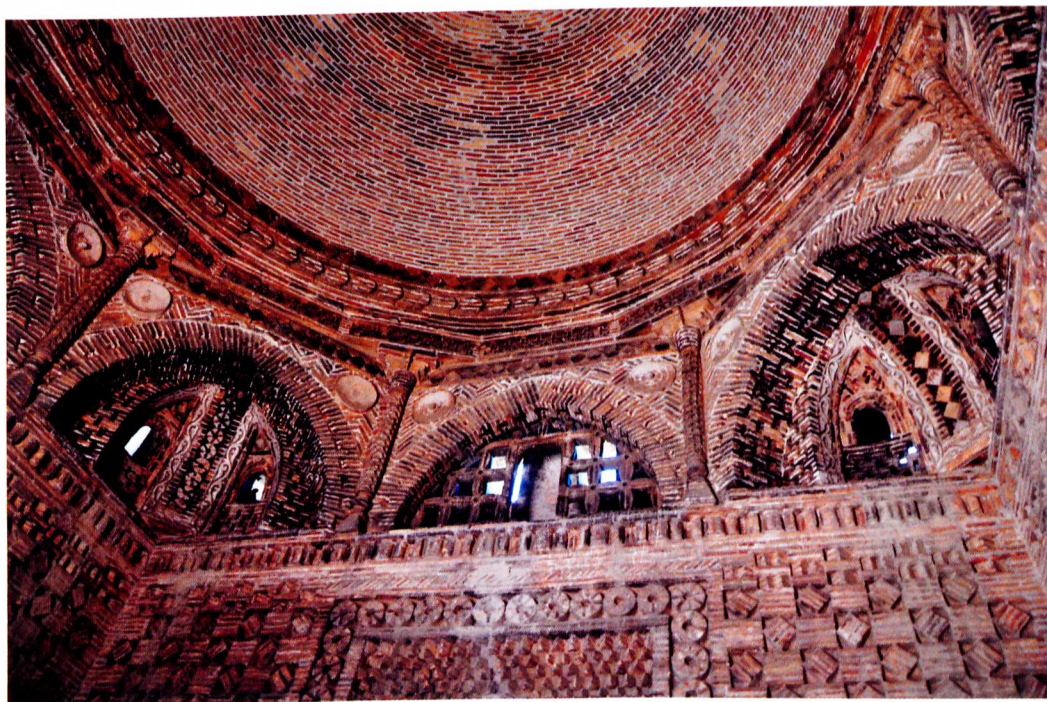
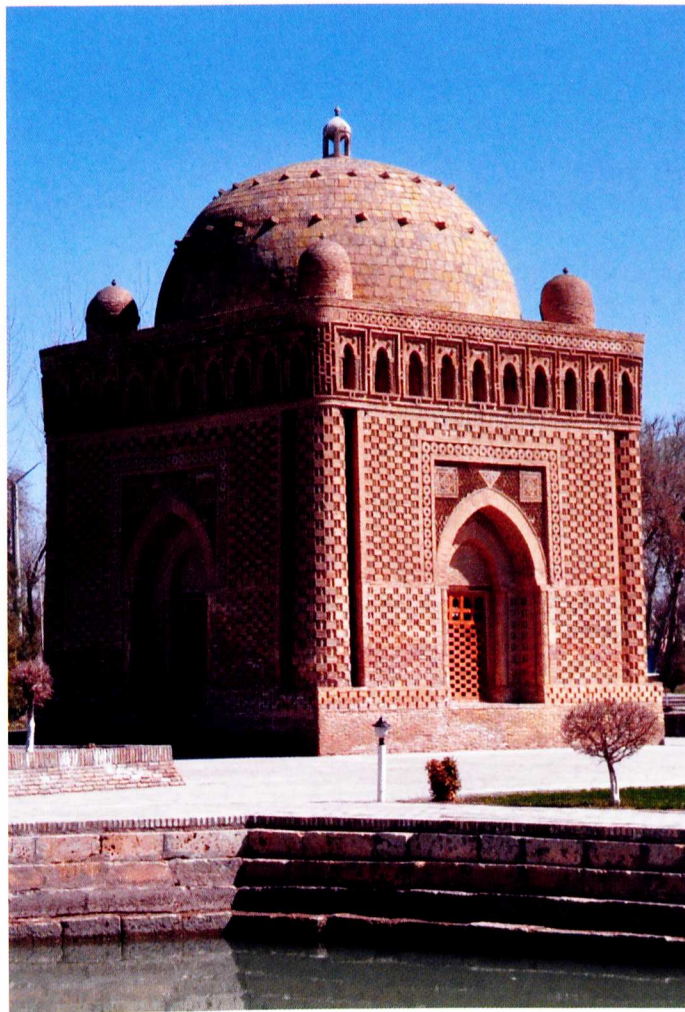
In this brief section, I would like to bring the brick—baked or unbaked, a truly transcultural building material—to the surface: If we again turn to the sixth century, we could study the brick exterior of San Vitale in Ravenna. Here, there is hardly any ornament, apart from a dog-tooth cornice, but nonetheless it is an impressive articulation of the architectural masses and shaping of the architectonic body, with the brick exterior and the flourishing of marbles and mosaics within the sacred space of the interior. From the tenth to eleventh century, we witness the elaboration of more complex brick ornaments in the exterior of Byzantine churches. A good example is the monastery of Hosios Lucas with its combination of stone, plaster, and brick,

where one also finds a Pseudo-Kufic script. In Byzantium, the difference between the outer and inner space remains basic: it is conceived as part of the visual experience to turn from the brick outside to the marble and mosaic within the paradise of the church.

For an example of a structure with a brick exterior as well as interior and a negotiation between outside and inside, let us turn our attention to an intriguing, small, centralized construction in Bukhara, dated to the mid-tenth century and identified as the mausoleum of the Samanid ruler Isma'il (figs. 8.9, 8.10). For centuries, the region of what is today Uzbekistan has played a central role in trade routes connecting China to western Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe. In the ninth century, Bukhara became the capital city of the Samanid dynasty, which claimed its origin from Sasanid Iran, introducing a Persianate court culture in the Khorasan region.²² In fact, the Samanids became the promoters of the New Persian language and literature; poets like Rudaki and Daqiqi were attracted by the rulers of this dynasty. Even Firdawsi's great project, the *Shāhnāma* (The Book of Kings), finds its origins there—though mostly written under the subsequent dynasty. It follows the legacy of the Samanid court, tracing its cultural identity back to pre-Islamic Iran, and this again, at least in part, means Sasanid Persia. The richness of Samanid Bukhara was based on the production and trade of textiles and many other goods, but mostly on the slave trade. The real founder of the short-lived dynasty was Isma'il ibn Ahmad (r. 892–907). Nearly nothing is left of this period; the Mongol destruction of Bukhara and later rebuildings

Fig. 8.9. (right) Samanid mausoleum, ca. 892–943. Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

Fig. 8.10. (below) Detail of Samanid mausoleum, ca. 892–943. Bukhara, Uzbekistan.



have erased the traces of the flourishing Samanid city. Bukhara was an oasis formed by an early established citadel, an inner city, bazaars, palaces, and gardens; the Samanid city was crossed by a multitude of canals with a great number of open and covered cisterns.²³ The only surviving Samanid monument that appears in every history of Islamic architecture is the mausoleum of Ismaʿil ibn Ahmad (also dedicated to his father and burial place of his son).²⁴ Positioned at the western outskirts of the city in a cemetery close to a city gate, it soon became a center of pilgrimage, as we learn from tenth- and eleventh-century travelers. Over the centuries, the mausoleum was surrounded by tombstones and burials up to the point of being partly hidden between them, leaving only a small corridor as access to one of the entrances, placed on each side of the mausoleum, as can be seen in old photographs. In 1922–23, under Soviet dominion, the mausoleum was restored and its dome reconstructed. With further excavations in 1926–28 and 1937–39, the mausoleum was transformed into a monument, making it the isolated, profane center of the park created around it, remodeled again by the Uzbek authorities in the first decade of the twenty-first century.²⁵

Studying this monument proves fascinating, first on a descriptive or analytical level, and a true challenge for art history. Robert Hillenbrand has termed it “a fire temple in Islamic dress,”²⁶ and both Russian and Western scholars have connected it to Zoroastrian and even Buddhist architectural traditions. These interpretations will not be discussed. In her dissertation and a recent, posthumously published article, Melanie Michailidis has brought scholarship to a new level, situating the monument in the context of Iranian and Central Asian funerary tomb monuments of the tenth and eleventh centuries, often only poorly preserved. It would be an even more difficult endeavor to go a step further by attempting to open a comparative horizon regarding ninth- to eleventh-century brick architecture and ornament between Byzantium, the Caucasian region, Iran, and Central Asia.²⁷ This must obviously start with a careful analysis of the monument itself in its extreme complexity and tension between monumentality in small scale (ca. 10 by 10 meters) and virtual or intrinsic mobility. Here, I offer only a short look at this domed cube mausoleum, particularly at the interplay of structure and ornament. The monument displays a refined *transmateriality* of architectural and nonarchitectural ornaments on various levels, in

an elaboration of a great variety of layers and playful mimetical references. In this, it stands at the opposite end of what we have observed in the case of the Church of St. Polyeuktos: In the Bukhara mausoleum we encounter brickwork with the intermediate mortar and the integration of some stucco elements. Perhaps it was partly plastered and colored, but substantially it consists of the multiple orchestration of that single material element, baked brick, which allows one to experience an inextricable passage or turnover from structure to ornament and vice versa. The bricks are placed in rhythmic horizontal layers, shifting blocks of three and four alternating with vertical elements in manifold ways: bricks form circular ornaments, fragments of bricks are placed diagonally or as protruding triangles, and so forth. In these ways, the bricks form and articulate architectural elements such as engaged columns and the arcaded gallery—counterbalanced by the fiction of textiles, basketwork, weaving, wooden entablatures, and dog-tooth carving. The interior and exterior build different realities in relation to the wall but are mediated by the arches and vaults from the inside. The passage from the square to the circle of the inner dome is realized by eight arches flanked by semicolumns—those over the corners forming niches, the others filled with brick grids, again in different geometric orders that subtly orchestrate light and shadow. The Samanid mausoleum is a brick “universe,” which seems to transubstantiate the walls into other materials and artistic techniques, while emphasizing the materiality of the brick itself.

All this calls into question the nature of architecture, inviting discussion of Semper’s and Riegl’s concepts of ornament. At the same time, it poses the question of transcultural migrations of techniques, or better, the combination of material and technique as constitutive elements in the construction and translation of meaning. In the case of the Samanid mausoleum, this process results in a monarchic statement, negotiating and claiming traditions in time and space, from ancient Persia to Islamic Khorasan.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly comment on the terms “transmediality” and “transmateriality.” They have been introduced here as closely related or complementary aesthetic concepts to allow the distinction and definition of the basic dynamics of ornaments and visual patterns in general. Transmedial phenomena

here refer to those artistic forms or contents that are shared by or spread across various media:²⁸ for example, an iconographic formula that can be found in marble reliefs, ivories, textiles, paintings, and metalwork. Or, to remain within the repertoire that is traditionally considered ornamental, we can think of the inhabited scrolls discussed above, again found, for instance, in stone, wood, and mosaic. Transmediality does not presuppose a source medium from which certain patterns are transferred to another. In the case of figurative representations *sensu stricto* this is rather obvious. If we take an early Christian example, we might think of the entry of Christ into Jerusalem on sarcophagi and mosaics containing a man climbing on a tree or another displaying his dress: this codified vocabulary one encounters in all media that represent the scene. In ornamental features (often a combination of figurative and vegetal/geometric forms, organized by the overall structure of the latter), things are more complex, for certain patterns can be media-specific inventions to be imitated in other media. The inhabited scroll that we have followed across the Mediterranean world is rather not an example of this, even if it articulates itself differently in various media, materials, and techniques, sometimes exploring their aesthetic potential.

Ornaments can, however, point back to another medium, evoking it by imitating its characteristics: think of the imitation of etching in sixteenth-century drawings or vice versa; there are certainly trans- and intermedia phenomena. If we stay with the scrolls, another dimension still has to be considered: the scroll is a partly representational mode of ornament, referring to Nature and the vegetal world of growth. Its appearance does not only vivify architecture; in various media it makes, so to speak, a reference to Nature and in such a way explores also media-specific or nonspecific relationships of surface and ground/structure. The various levels of transmediality rather schematically displayed here show many points of contact with the semantic field of the other term, that of “transmateriality.” For a media-specific pattern can simulate one material in another—for example, by means of translating traditional textile patterns in wood or marble, not simply in a representation of cloth in a figurative scene, but as an

ornamental feature of its own. The classical architectural language of the orders mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is based on such a model, a transmaterial explanation of form and formal elements, which in turn are understood as specific to the techniques of working in another material, in this case, wood: I refer to the famous Vitruvian definition of the triglyphs and guttai of the Doric order if not of the columns themselves. As is obvious by this example, transmateriality can also have different levels, including a fictitious model of imitation or translation in an origin myth. Another, even if somewhat different, example from Vitruvius would be the etiology of the Corinthian capital, supposedly imitating the famous basket on the tomb of a young lady, overgrown and lifted by acanthus plants.

It is not my aim to work out these arguments further. In the case of transmateriality, this would mean a discussion of Semper's concept of *Stoffwechsel*.²⁹ Given that *Stoff* in German can have three meanings, namely, “material matter,” “subject matter,” and primarily “cloth,” it fits perfectly in Semper's world of the textile origin of architecture and ornament, or surface and structure. In comparison to Semper's metabolic concept, with its biological and evolutionistic dimension, “transmateriality” is a neutral term that allows us to explore the artistic translation of materials into one another, sometimes defined by an affinity of materials according to natural history, such as the marble ocean of the Hagia Sophia floor, and sometimes representational (as in Bernini's marble becoming pasta or flesh) or metaphorical (in the literal sense of the word), as marble being like silk. In the various forms of transmateriality one can encounter an exploration of Nature and/or of the nature and aesthetic potential of materials and the techniques of their working, that of the translation of patterns specific for one medium into another as an aesthetic celebration of both: the presumed source medium/material and the artistry with which it has been evoked by the other. In this chapter, I have primarily worked with the transmediality of ornaments, as in the case of the scrolls, and transmateriality, as in the case of the Bukhara mausoleum. What is intrinsic in both of these translational aesthetics is the potential for transcultural interaction and negotiation, which finds in these processes a privileged field of operation.

TIMURID ARCHITECTURAL REVETMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA, 1370–1430: THE MIMETICISM OF MOSAIC FAIENCE

David J. Roxburgh

By the time of Timur's ascent to political power in 1370, a broad repertoire of architectural revetments had developed in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.¹ From the outset, Timur (1336–1405), as well as contemporary and later members of the Turko-Mongol Timurid elite, sponsored art and architecture as a means of enhancing personal and dynastic prestige and charisma, using them as vehicles to secure legitimacy before diverse social constituencies, chiefly the bureaucratic, religious, and mercantile communities of the sedentary population. The Timurid dynasty (1370–1506) emerged from the loose confederation of nomadic tribes making up the Ulus Chaghatay in Central Asia. In its political and social structure and many cultural traditions, the Ulus Chaghatay shared much with the preceding regional political entity, the Chaghatay Khanate, first created by Genghis Khan in 1227, which endured until 1363 as one political unit of the Mongol Empire.

The founder of the Timurid dynasty, Timur (English, Tamerlane), grew up within the Ulus Chaghatay and embarked on a series of campaigns across Central Asia, the Middle East, and extending as far south as India. A final campaign against China during the reign of Ming dynasty emperor Yongle (r. 1403–24) was aborted when Timur died in 1405 near Utrar. While Timur supported many of the political institutions and traditions of the Turko-Mongols—like any other would-be leader Timur was forced to work within a preexisting framework endemically resistant to prolonged centralized rule and primogeniture—he was hampered by a line of descent that did not directly stem from Genghis Khan. To remedy this genealogical shortcoming, he cultivated an enhanced

bloodline by marriage to women of prestigious Genghisid descent and supported the customs and institutions of Turko-Mongol society. Although his personal charisma and military acumen, and specific military tactics, closely emulated attributes and actions of Genghis Khan, Timur's ambitions were different. As Beatrice Manz observed, unlike Genghis Khan, Timur showed no interest in establishing a permanent presence in the steppe lands of nomadic life but set out to control the settled lands he conquered. Further, the society of the Ulus Chaghatay had already adopted Islam and was familiar with the ways and values of settled life: to the first generations of Mongols in the time of Genghis Khan, these were foreign and often regarded as anathema to nomadism.² To maintain power, Timur balanced the institutions and political symbols of the Turko-Mongol aristocracy of amirs (military commanders), against those of the settled populations with their traditions and institutions. Unlike any of his successors, Timur found a brilliant equilibrium between the traditions of nomadism and sedentarism and sponsored a carefully measured assimilation between them.

Architecture was a key medium of this political program. Architects, builders, and craftsmen were gathered and sent to Samarqand as a direct consequence of Timur's military campaigns and conquests. A double-page painting illustrating the version of Timur's history-biography (*Zafarnāma* [Book of victory]) composed by Sharaf al-Din 'Alī Yazdī imagines the construction site at the Great Mosque (*Masjid-i Jami'*) of Samarqand, commenced in 1398 after the warlord's victorious Indian campaign and finished in 1405 (fig. 10.1).³ The courtyard of the mosque bustles with activity as builders and craftsmen of various ages, races, and eth-

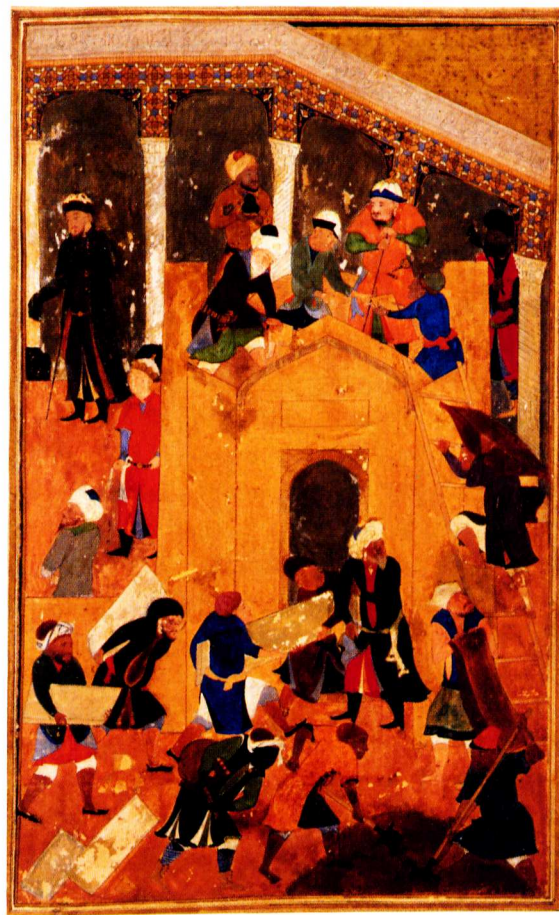


Fig. 10.1. Construction of the Masjid-i Jami' in Samarqand, from *Zafarnāma* (Book of victory), of Sharaf al-Din 'Ali Yazdi, 1467–68; copied by Shir 'Ali for Sultan Husayn Mirza (paintings ca. ten years after copying), Herat (?), Afghanistan; opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 23.5 × 15.2 cm (folio).

nicities work at transporting materials to the site—with the help of an elephant and a horse—cutting and trimming stone, sawing and planing wood, mixing mortar, and laying brick. At one side before a doorway, a foreman lifts his stick as encouragement to the seated man who chips away at the edges of a baked brick. Though other patrons of architecture—members of the Timurid house, male and female, military commanders, the religious and clerical elites—built during Timur's reign, their activities were severely constrained. This can be explained by Timur's monopolization of resources—financial, material, and human—and perhaps also by unvoiced notions of social rank and hierarchy, a decorum expressed through building type and size. The boldest move was made by Timur's wife Saray Mulk Khanum (to whom the Masjid-i Jami' was dedicated), when she erected a funerary-madrasa on the opposite

side of the street from her husband's mosque. The monumentality of Saray Mulk Khanum's complex prompted Timur to order that the entrance portal of his mosque be demolished and built larger, a change recorded by Ruy González de Clavijo—ambassador of King Henry III of Castile—late in the year 1404.⁴ The contemporary Muslim writers Ahmad b. 'Arabshah and Fasih Ahmad b. Jalal al-Din Muhammad Khvafi directly attribute the rebuilding of the Masjid-i Jami' portal to Timur's anger when he saw his wife's building.⁵ Saray Mulk Khanum seems to have been unique in possessing sufficient resources—and ambition—to compete on terms equivalent to the monumentality of her husband Timur's architectural commissions.

The program of architecture sponsored during Timur's reign was developed through the formation of a diverse collective of formerly regional architectural prac-

tices. Architects, builders, and craftsmen, gathered from the lands Timur conquered—stretching from Khvarazm to the north, Delhi in the south, and Damascus to the west—were brought into collision and cross-fertilization in cosmopolitan Samarqand, the first capital (the second was Shahr-i Sabz in the Qashqa Darya valley, where Timur and his family, the Barlas tribe, were based). While numerous aspects of this initial period of Timurid architecture have been discussed and intelligently characterized in scholarship, the contention of this chapter is that insufficient attention has been given to the surfaces of the monuments and their revetments.⁶

Brick—sun-dried and baked—was the traditional construction medium of Islamic architecture throughout Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia because of the ready availability of raw materials and their low cost. Some of the earliest extant buildings—especially from the mid- to late eleventh century onward—evidence the practice of using brick for structure and decoration and the integration of brick-bonded interior and exterior revetments to the building core.⁷ This practice included the use of custom-made bricks and epigraphic components that together produced visually engaging geometric patterns that mitigated the effects of an otherwise drab material under various, sometimes strong, lighting conditions. Plastic surfaces transformed what might have been otherwise static buildings into machines of light and shadow, animated in the course of each day and across the seasons. Custom-made brick pieces, different from the regular rectangular form that could be used to make bonded patterns, augmented the intricacy of designs and were combined with sculpted brick plugs (of clay and/or plaster) and polychrome glazed pieces (including simple square or rectangular brick ends) to enliven façades and delineate surfaces and zones of structural transition.⁸ Most of these developments had taken place in monuments erected under the Samanid, Qarakhanid, and Seljuq dynasties that ruled over Central Asia and Iran from the ninth through the twelfth centuries. Their practices were disseminated to other regions, such as Anatolia under the Seljuqs of Rum (1081–1307), where the effects of color and pattern based on brick were adapted to the local tradition of stone construction. Full color emerged in the period of Mongol Ilkhanid rule over Iran (1256–1335) to sheath domes in turquoise blue and to articulate walls as well as tectonic components, such as doorways and the spandrels and soffits of arches.⁹ Well before this time, revetments were

no longer physically integrated with superstructure but were applied as a veneer. (Despite this separation between structural mass and surface, revetments were generally configured in a manner that “represented” structure, articulating openings such as doors and windows, recesses, or such morphological elements as portals, drums, and domes.) The strategic use of ceramic revetments solved the challenges of rendering a building visible and legible from distances near and far. Revetments also served a practical function because they shielded the exterior of the building from the deleterious effects of weather, including rain and wind erosion, and also damp.

Several revetment techniques were employed on Timurid buildings, including carved, glazed terracotta; polychrome underglaze (*haft rangī*, comparable in effect to *cuerda seca*); polychrome overglaze; and monochrome glazed ceramic forms of different shapes.¹⁰ Together, these techniques yielded ceramic forms of various shapes as well as panels of different sizes that could be applied to architectural surfaces. Another ubiquitous technique used in Timurid architecture, called “builder’s bond” (*bannā’ī*) or “thousand-weave” (*hazār bāf*), was used to create patterns by alternating unglazed and glazed bricks and tiles of different colors in a grid. The technique was particularly effective for creating monumental inscriptions and decorating large surface areas. The principal concern of this chapter is to chart the technical and aesthetic developments in the application and design of revetments to the structural core of buildings in the early Timurid period, specifically the shift from the three-dimensional reliefs of carved and glazed ceramic components that had prevailed between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries to flat panels of tile mosaic with jigsawlike polychrome compositions, assembled from many individual pieces cut from monochrome-glazed tiles.¹¹ Selected monuments offer examples of these changes, including tombs built at the Shah-i Zinda in Samarqand and the Aq Saray palace in Shahr-i Sabz.

Although modern architectural history has tended to present the history of brick construction and the development of ornamental programs—integrated with the structural material or applied over the surface of the structural core—in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia in terms shaped by western European discourses about the relation between form and function, especially since the nineteenth century, such distinctions were of no consequence to Timurid architects and

builders. It is difficult to develop a definition for ornament or theories of ornament from the available materials. Timurid written sources often used metaphors suggesting analogies between architecture, the body, and textiles and praised the components of architecture, the skill they embodied, as well as height. It is possible to say that ornament was understood as additive and an enhancement, that revetments were comparable to an act of clothing the body. But this chapter moves away from these stereotypical metaphors to focus on what we can understand about the design processes of architecture, what mosaic faience revetments could achieve that other revetments could not, and suggests why they were desirable. Mosaic faience, as one of several available systems of revetment, seems to have become a marker of elite status—not only because of the skill required to make it but also because of its labor intensiveness—and it was used with varying degrees of coverage on monuments in proportion to the patron's relative status and financial resources. But that is only one aspect of mosaic faience. Another is the capacity of the medium to emulate other media, such as watercolor painting and ink calligraphy. Designs in mosaic faience could achieve what relief-carved and glazed terracotta could not, especially in the development of epigraphic programs for monuments. The consequences of the design and application of tile mosaic to Timurid architecture are the prime subject of this chapter. Other issues of concern include the growing practice of using paper as a medium of design and transmission as well as the relation between architectural ornament and calligraphic culture and the Timurid “library/workshop” (*kitābkhāna*). It was the *kitābkhāna* designs on paper that mediated the curvilinear designs and cursive epigraphy found in mosaic faience rather than a direct relationship between architecture and such media as textiles.

Shah-i Zinda (The Living King), Samarqand

Shah-i Zinda lies just outside Samarqand's city walls near the Iron Gate and Timur's Masjid-i Jami'. It is an extramural cemetery complex built up around the shrine housing Qutham b. 'Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, who in foundation lore is believed to have come to Central Asia in the seventh century to propagate Islam. Disturbed during ablutions before his prayers, Qutham b. 'Abbas was decapitated by a band of infidels, but by some miracle survived and jumped into

a well where he continued to live, hence the toponym “the living king” (*shāh-i zinda*). The site had become a locus of devotion for local inhabitants and regional pilgrimage at least since the eleventh century. At that time, the cult center of the Shah-i Zinda was urban, located on a thoroughfare with a madrasa built on the opposite side. By the early fourteenth century, the shrine assumed an exclusively sepulchral function: the city enclosing the Shah-i Zinda had been put to the torch by Genghis Khan in 1220 and destroyed to such an extent that it prompted the few survivors to rebuild at a nearby site to the south. Over the course of the fourteenth century several unicameral tombs were built along an ascending pathway leading from the lower elevation adjacent to Samarqand's walls up to the cult center on the crest of the hill.¹²

In choosing to build at the site from the 1370s onward, high-ranking women of Timur's immediate family and military commanders continued the historical, local practice, but their architects built there in a spirit of competitive discourse with what already stood at the site. The street of tombs can almost be read as a chain of response—with each new addition positioned at the best available site (ideally in closest proximity to the cult center at the top of the hill)—each successive tomb in dialogue with the earlier monuments. Each tomb, pre-Timurid and Timurid, generally consists of a square chamber surmounted by a dome, a crypt, with the primary façade oriented toward the street. But this similarity of tectonic form is obscured by an impressive variety of ceramic revetments applied to the exteriors and interiors of the tombs, which together transform Shah-i Zinda into a laboratory of sorts.

The earliest tombs at the Shah-i Zinda, such as that of Khvaja Ahmad, ca. 1350, provided the initial models as domed chambers opening onto the thoroughfare, their main façades entirely reveted in polychrome glazed ceramic dominated by a palette of white and dark and light blues (fig. 10.2a). The composition is symmetrical, with a barrel vault above the entrance, and is composed of multiple bands of various widths made up of ceramic panels, tiles, and monochrome glazed bricks. Geometry, cursive and angular epigraphy, and vegetal forms—scrolling leaves, stalks, and flowers—make up the basic subject matter. The liveliest band comprises a cursive white inscription set over an arabesque glazed in light blue in incised terracotta. The outer engaged columns are covered with a gridded pattern of glazed bricks in blue

and white. Carved and glazed ceramic is used for calligraphic, geometric, and vegetal components and juxtaposed against flat glazed bricks and tiles.¹³ Projection and recession across the façade modulates the mass in a manner suggestive of structure, a fiction most obviously revealed in the non-load-bearing articulated plastic columns with capitals that “hold up” the central arch.

The adjacent tomb, identified as Qutluq Aqa/Shah Arab, dated 1361, employs the same basic palette, techniques of revetment, and compositional principles that together suggest structure and divide what would otherwise have been broad, continuous, unrelieved surfaces into smaller but related components (fig. 10.2b). Though entirely nonstructural, the façade also infers a tectonic logic and complexity. At Qutluq Aqa/Shah Arab, however, there is an elaborate *muqarnas* vault, composed of carved and incised terracotta blocks, added to encompass the space below the arch. A richer variety of inscriptions is deployed, including square compositions composed of the angular Kufic script and bands of Kufic and others with a wild curvilinear *thuluth*-variant script. The epigraphic programs of both of these pre-Timurid tombs include historical inscriptions recording foundation, texts developing the highly apt *vanitas*/memento mori theme, and the names of the workers who created the revetment.¹⁴

Ten years later, the tomb of Qutluq Aqa/Shah Arab became the direct model for the first imperial Timurid tomb to be built at the site (fig. 10.2c). Known as Shad-i Mulk Aqa, the tomb was sponsored by Timur’s older sister Turkan Aqa (d. 1383) for her daughter Ulja Shad-i Mulk, who died on December 29, 1371. Like Qutluq Aqa/Shah Arab, all exterior surfaces of the tomb are treated with revetment, which at Shad-i Mulk Aqa continues on the interior as well. Subtle layers of emulation and adaptation between the Timurid tomb and its earlier model are immediately apparent, most evidently in the general composition of the façade and the use of the *muqarnas* vault. The most remarkable difference lies in the full development of a textual program in the inscriptions that combine the historical-foundation text with others on the theme of *vanitas* and that reference the accomplishment of the architecture. Inscriptions from the primary façade, in different kinds of cursive scripts, include: “This edifice is the smile of the houris in their veils of silk / Who are like white flour in charm and beauty” (on the right wall); and “Do not covet the perfume of fidelity in this transitory world / As long as you

have an arch and a roof, do not think of the heavens” (on the flanking arch). A longer text, also versified, appears on the door frame:

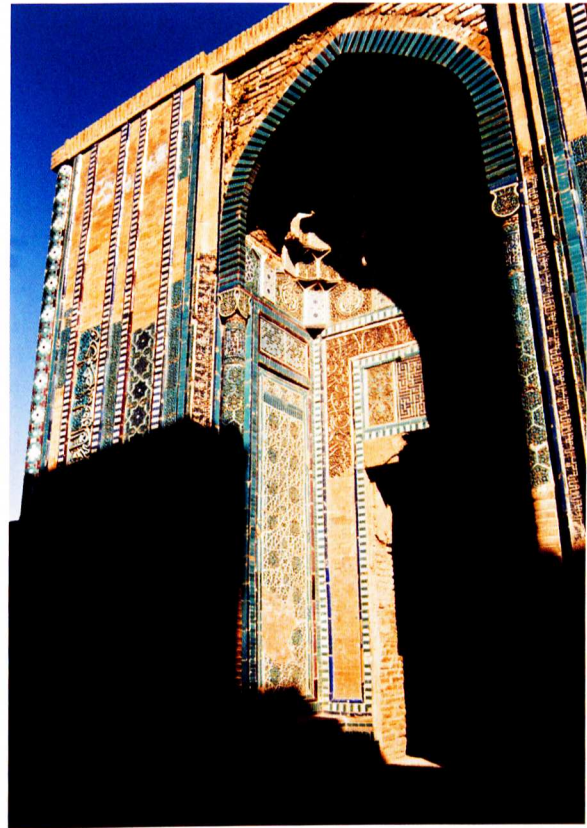
This is the garden where rests a treasure of felicity:
This is the tomb where a rare pearl was lost.
In it, she with a waist of cypress found grace
There is no other remedy but that she lie in the earth.
She was dust: she was carried by the wind like
Solomon,
Although he wore the seal of Protection as a ring.¹⁵

Equivalent to the *vanitas* or memento mori themes of western European art, such texts cautioning the viewer about the futility of life and the superiority of the afterlife became de rigueur in epigraphic programs at Timurid Shah-i Zinda. They were combined with excerpts from the Qur’an, sayings (*hadith*) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, and aphorisms extracted from works of prose and poetry in both Arabic and Persian.

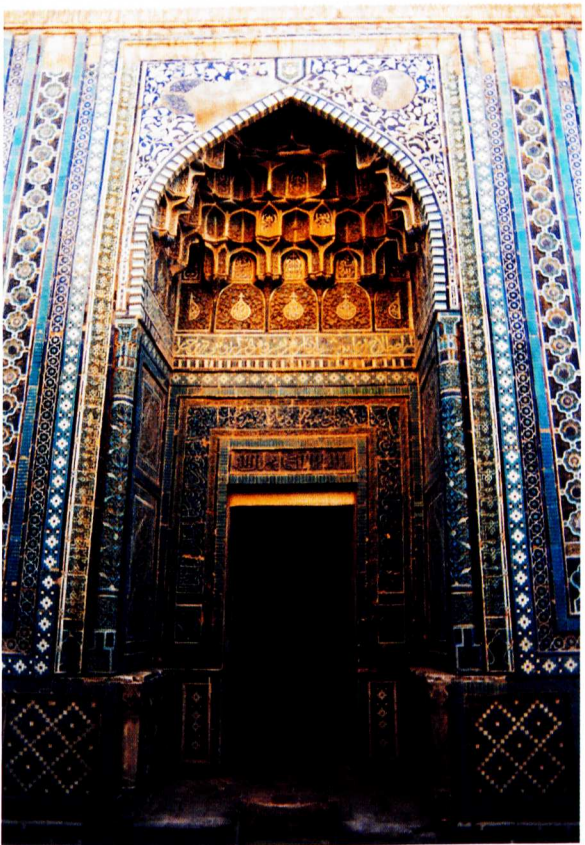
The paradigm fashioned between the tombs of Khvaja Ahmad and Shad-i Mulk continued in other examples of the 1370s and early 1380s but took a radical departure some time during, or after, 1385–86, the year of death of Shirin Biqa Aqa, another sister of Timur.¹⁶ The entire façade is now covered in richly polychrome mosaic faience (fig. 10.3). The façade is flat, apart from the slight variations in planar projection caused by the raised and recessed vertical borders modulating the pylons, the articulated columns set below the springing of the arch, and the surface of the *muqarnas*. The proportions of the façade are, in addition, taller than earlier tombs at the site and were intended to balance the stretched height of the drum over which rises an ellipsoidal double-shell dome, the first of its type at Shah-i Zinda.¹⁷ The façade is divided into vertical bands of majuscule cursive *thuluth* and starkly contrasting minuscule geometric Kufic calligraphy separated by bands of the same width, but here populated with alternating six-cusped medallions and oval medallions. Flowers, graceful scrolling plants, and tendrils fill the interstices. There are also panels composed of ogee arches that frame plants growing out of pots and discs set inside the spandrels above the door. The calligraphy, done predominantly in contrasting white and yellow/ochre and arranged in multiple tiers, is highly accomplished in both design and execution. The innermost band combines white *thuluth* and yellow Kufic set in two



10.2a



10.2b

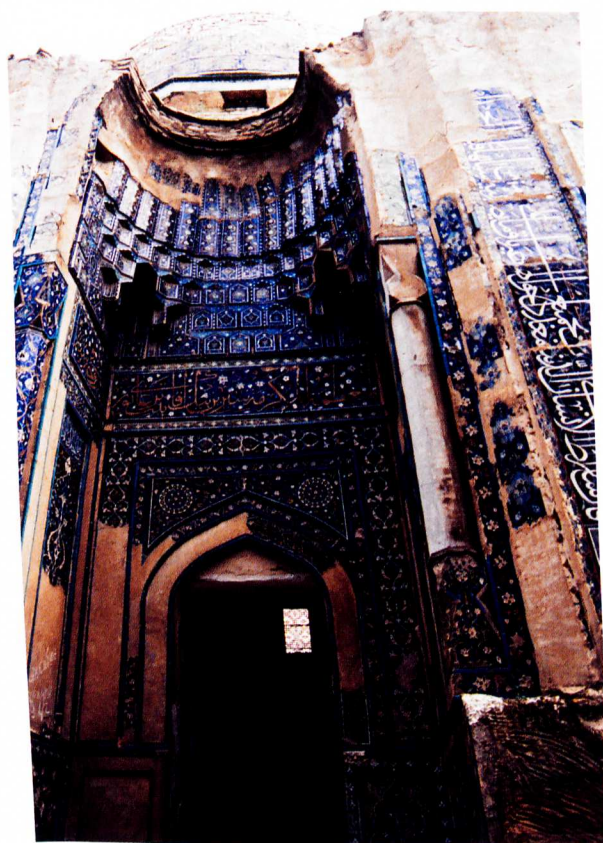


10.2c

Fig. 10.2. Façades of three pre-Timurid and Timurid tombs at Shah-i Zinda, Samarqand, Uzbekistan: (a) Khvaja Ahmad, ca. 1350; (b) Qutluq Aqa/Shah Arab, 1361; (c) Shad-i Mulk Aqa (Turkan Aqa), 1371–83.

tiers, the two scripts overlapping so as to appear interwoven. The outer band consists exclusively of cursive *thuluth* arranged in two lines with the script in each of equal size. In their design they follow the patterns and conventions established for calligraphy written on paper. The texts selected for the façade are Arabic translations of aphorisms attributed to the Greek philosopher Socrates.

A wider palette of colors appears here than in any of the earlier buildings at Shah-i Zinda, rich in dark and light blues, slate-blue, black, white, grey, green, yellow, and ochre. This most likely reflects a greater technical ability. The effect of this broad polychrome was amplified by slight variations in the firing of the monochrome glazed tiles cut by the tile makers to execute their epigraphic, geometric, and vegetal designs. These subtle shifts in color hue deepen the visual perception of varia-



10.3a

Fig. 10.3. (a) Façade and (b) detail of the tomb of Shirin Biqa Aqa, Shah-i Zinda, 1385–88. Samarqand, Uzbekistan.



10.3b

tion across the tile mosaic surface and heighten the impression of naturalism and movement.

Tile mosaic was a labor-intensive technique and had already been developed and applied to expansive surfaces on buildings by the middle years of the 1300s in central and southern Iran (Yazd and Isfahan), with the possibility of a regional tradition also stemming from Khvarazm (Urgench).¹⁸ The emergence of the mosaic faience technique in early Timurid architecture is generally explained by the movement of builders and craftsmen from Tabriz in 1386 and from Shiraz in 1388, and again in 1393, after Timur's conquests.¹⁹ Though Shirin Biqa Aqa's tomb may have been the earliest monument to employ the technique in toto, it appears on other imperial monuments of the same period as a marker of elite patronage, because of its expense, and as a conspicuous display of skill and technical knowledge.²⁰

More than any other form of ceramic revetment, mosaic faience was dependent on a paper design. Full-scale paper models first needed to be drawn. These were then used at the site, presumably in a nearby temporary

building workshop, by the “tile cutter” (*kāshī tarāsh*), who took whole monochrome glazed tiles and cut them into different shapes and sizes using a saw and shaped them with a double-pointed thin hammer of the kind depicted in the illustration from the *Zafarnāma* of the construction of the Masjid-i Jami‘ in Samarqand (see fig. 10.1). The example of mosaic faience propped up behind the cartwheel, while reflecting a decorative mode from later in the fifteenth century, shows the finished product before installation. When the tile cutter completed cutting and trimming his monochrome glazed ceramic pieces and arranging them over the paper drawing into a polychrome pattern, the pieces were fixed by being set in plaster on the reverse side. The panel could then be lifted and permanently installed on the building.²¹

The second complex built at Shah-i Zinda with complete mosaic tile revetment was sponsored by Tuman Aqa, one of Timur’s wives, in 1404–5 (figs. 10.4, 10.5).²² She sponsored construction of a mausoleum and a mosque at the top end of the street in the corner facing the tombs of Khvaja Ahmad and Qutluq Aqa/Shah Arab, in immediate proximity to the cult center of Qutham b. ‘Abbas. Tuman Aqa’s complex was, in fact, directly connected to the cult center (comprising an assembly place for prayer, visitation, and the tomb proper) by an arched doorway and corridor. Separate entrances are produced for the tomb and mosque, with a vestibule attached to the mosque providing yet another point of access. Once again, mosaic faience was selected to envelop the façade of the complex. The faience is in a unified palette of rich, vibrant colors organized into the same cursive and angular calligraphic bands separated by others, composed of geometric figures and vegetal forms found in the earlier tomb of Shirin Biqa Aqa.

A broader variety of cursive scripts is found here. Two Arabic historical inscriptions appear, one on the tomb façade above the recessed entrance where the building is identified as the “illuminated shrine” (*buq‘a nūriya*) (see fig. 10.4), and in a panel set above the entrance to the mosque vestibule (see fig. 10.5), where Tuman Aqa’s descent from Amir Musa is given and she is extolled for her merits (the mosque is here referenced as *masjid al-nūriya*). The border around the pointed arch of the door to the tomb conveys a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, “The tomb is a door and everyone enters it.” The two bands framing the pylons of the tomb use the cursive *muḥaqqaq* script in white over cobalt blue to

present an expanded text, which begins, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Lord! Give us light in our hearts, light in our graves, light in our candle, light in our sight . . .” (see fig. 10.4).²³

This inscription concludes with the name of Shaykh Muhammad b. Hajji Bandgir al-Tughra ‘i Tabrizi, the calligrapher responsible for the epigraphy design. This is the only known instance at Shah-i Zinda where the calligrapher is identified. Shaykh Muhammad b. Hajji Bandgir, whose epithets point up his role in official correspondence (*tughra* ‘i), employment in the chancery, and his origin in Tabriz, was well known in the early Timurid period. The historian Sharaf al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi (d. 1454) records a letter written by him that measured three by seventy cubits given to the Egyptian Mamluk ambassadors when they visited Samarqand in 1403–4.²⁴ The specific formula at Tuman Aqa cannot be taken as a signature, however, for it attributes the writing to his hand through the Persian phrasing “calligraphy by” (*khaṭṭ-i*), or if read in Arabic *khaṭṭa*, “designed/outlined [by].” While the phrasing infers the transmission of a design from one medium to another—its translation from paper to mosaic faience—it is equally important for its identification of the specific individual whose index is recorded and registered in the script, a fact that again underscores the mimetic potential, and hence value, of mosaic faience.

The two rectangular panels set over the doorway to the adjacent mosque—recessed under a pointed arch—comprise white *thuluth* inscriptions surmounted by interlacing and overlapping ochre Kufic inscriptions (see fig. 10.5). Designed with as much vigor as the *muḥaqqaq* on the tomb façade, these didactic sayings proclaim: “And the messenger [Prophet Muhammad], peace be upon him, said: ‘Hurry with prayer before burial,’” and continues in the second framed panel, “God the Great, and his Prophet the generous, deem, ‘And hurry with repentance before death.’” The field above these presentation panels of calligraphy is formed by the profile of the pointed arch and occupied by a large-scale geometric design—the first example of its kind to be made in mosaic tile—executed in a dark blue strip trimmed with white that also deploys overlapping to establish the pictorial illusion of depth. The spaces in between are populated with flowers and a large, radiant rosette at the center. The same geometric and floral design extends over the soffit of the arch, while the wall panel below the inscriptions and next to the door simulates a grilled window, an allusion perhaps to the inte-



Fig. 10.4. Façade of the tomb of the Tuman Aqa complex, Shah-i Zinda: tomb 1404–5; mosque ca. 1404. Samarqand, Uzbekistan.

rior space where an actual lattice window (*panjara*) offers direct visual access from the mosque to the tomb. The simulation of a real architectural element in mosaic faience is hardly surprising in Timurid architecture of this period. The Spanish ambassador Clavijo endlessly remarked on the artifice and play between soft, portable, evanescent architecture—in the form of different kinds of tents, awnings, and curtains or enclosing walls of cloth (*sarāparda*)—and hard, permanent architecture

made from brick and stone and decorated with revetments, plaster, and paint.²⁵

The Aq Saray, Shahr-i Sabz, 1379–1396

The Aq Saray, “White Palace”—the adjective is believed to suggest aristocratic status rather than the color of the building—was constructed inside the walled city of Shahr-i Sabz, its massive entrance portal oriented to the



Fig. 10.5. Entrance portal to the mosque of the Tuman Aqa complex.

north and Samarqand, which lay beyond the Zarafshan Mountains (figs. 10.6, 10.7).²⁶ The palace was begun after Timur's 1379 campaign to Urgench in Khwarazm. The fragmentary portal is all that remains. It is composed of two nested arches (*ivāns*) flanked by enormous pylons with round towers set on top of twelve-sided socles engaged at each end. An arched door led from the lower *ivān* to the palace interior. Despite several written accounts of the palace and archaeology at the site, little

is known about the configuration of the palace. Although construction commenced in 1379, the revetments probably date to 1395–96, as recorded on the east tower by an inscription. Another documentary inscription, located on a molded cable decorated with fine mosaic faience, names Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Tabrizi, recording the presence of at least one craftsman from western Iran. The Aq Saray was one of two monumental ensembles commissioned by Timur in Shahr-i Sabz,



Fig. 10.6. View of entrance façade, Aq Saray, commissioned by Timur, 1379–96. Shahr-i Sabz, Uzbekistan.

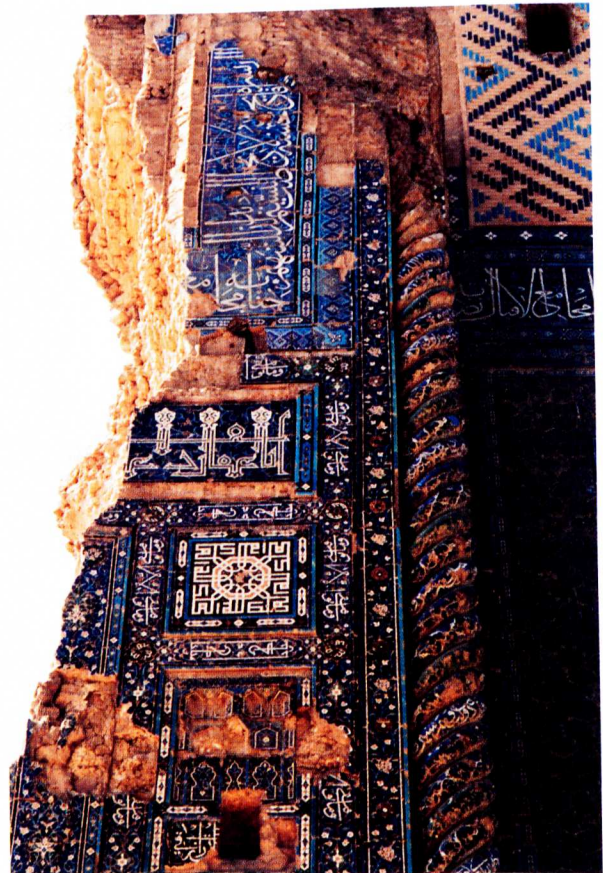
projects no doubt intended to mark the prestige of the city through its association with Timur's father Taraghay. The city remained a bastion of the Barlas tribe during Timur's reign and was one of the few cities used to house a permanent garrison.²⁷

The entire surface of the façade was covered in revetment in different techniques, including *bannā'ī* (brick mosaic used to form large-scale pious phrases in Kufic script visible from a great distance); underglaze relief tiles; hexagonal *haft rangī* tiles with vegetal and epigraphic content; and large surface areas of mosaic faience structured in vertical bands and panels that comprise vegetal and epigraphic content. The mosaic faience epigraphy is in *thuluth* script and a frequent, if curious, large-scale Kufic. Scholars have noted that the appearance of mosaic faience at Aq Saray is among the earliest in Timurid architecture and have observed that the remarkable naturalism of vegetal and floral ornaments disappeared after Timur's death.²⁸ The Aq Saray revetments

indicate a mixture of practices stemming from Iran and Khvarazm, but the final result resembles neither.

The scope of mosaic faience, no less than its staggering quality and effect, was conspicuous as a marker of the elite status of the building. These meanings were further mobilized and directed through the content of the inscriptions. They offered blessings to the "tenant" (Timur), requesting longevity of life comparable to Noah and a quality of rule equal to Solomon, noted that the heavens marveled at the beauty of the palace, proclaimed "If you have doubts about our grandeur, look at our edifice," and likened the sultan to "God's shadow (on earth)." The portal was an obvious symbol of the ruler Timur, and, like him, it cast an enormous shadow. There could be no grander claim made of the ruler's prerogative to sponsor private and public architecture. Height, mass, and visibility from great distances were attributes praised by contemporary writers. In a sepa-

Fig. 10.7. Revetment on the inner surface of the nested archway, Aq Saray, 1379–96. Shahr-i Sabz, Uzbekistan.



rate entry on the Aq Saray, Yazdi writes: “The height of its crenellations reached the limit / Which to the eye disputes equality with the stars of heavens.”²⁹

A comparable repertoire of revetment techniques was used in later monuments commissioned by Timur, including the Masjid-i Jami‘ (1398–1405) and Gur-i Amir (ca. 1400–1404) in Samarqand. Mosaic faience is focused on the entrance and sanctuary portals of the Masjid-i Jami‘—where it is interspersed with stone-carved components—with extensive use of *haft rangī* tiles and *bannā’ī*. The mosaic cube technique of *bannā’ī*, useful to cover large surfaces, was not limited to Kufic inscriptions but also used the cursive *naskh*.³⁰

Aesthetic Values and Cultural Resonances of Mosaic Faience

From the extant monuments sponsored by Timur and his contemporaries it is possible to trace the adoption of mosaic faience as a revetment technique from the mid-1380s onward. It was applied to monuments sponsored by Timur on a large scale and in more limited scope on the mausoleums sponsored by his sister (Shirin Biqa Aqa) and one of his wives (Tuman Aqa), and in a still more restricted manner in the funerary-madrasa complex of another wife, Saray Mulk Khanum. Access to the technique continued to be circumscribed—presumably owing to the expense resulting from its labor-intensiveness—in the architecture of Timur’s successors, particularly Shahrukh (r. 1409–47), his wife Gawhar Shad, and their son Ulugh Beg (who governed from Samarqand). Mosaic faience continued to be a hallmark of elite status. There were other techniques that could achieve polychromy and handle epigraphy. Techniques like *haft rangī*, comparable in visual appearance to *cuerda seca*, had the potential to simulate the complex chromatic range and effects of tile mosaic with the advantage of greater economy of means—multiple glazes were applied to tiles in a single firing—but rarely achieved it. Despite the potential of *haft rangī*, it lacked the hard-edge quality made possible in mosaic faience. Another technique, underglaze blue and white used extensively in Ottoman architecture, could approach the effects of calligraphy in mosaic faience but for whatever reason was not used in early Timurid architecture. Polychrome overglaze presented comparable potential but was also no match for mosaic faience. For sharpness, precision, sense of depth, and the ability to inject

subtle color variation through the choice of monochrome glazed elements, nothing in the potter’s repertoire could equal mosaic faience. It took the chance out of glazing and firing and was more comparable to the painter’s practice than that of the potter.

The revetment technique was most advantageous to epigraphic programs of the cursive scripts. While the grid-based system of pixilated colored units (*bannā’ī* / *hazār bāf*) was sufficient to render Kufic script, they made an awkward fit to cursive scripts—despite attempts at *thuluth* and *naskh*—unless produced on a monumental scale. Even then, they were not without their shortcomings, particularly in the transit from remote to close viewing positions. The carved and glazed terracotta tiles and panels could render the form and effect of cursive scripts, but did not match the chromatic range possible in mosaic faience. The technique of mosaic faience under the Timurids outstripped applications of the material in earlier buildings of Iran and Khvarazm.

In the *thuluth* inscriptions at the tomb of Shirin Biqa Aqa, the cursive script is actually rendered in a manner resembling writing in ink on paper with a commensurate degree of fluency and liquidity. It appears in multiple tiers of white tile mosaic surmounted by a geometric Kufic executed in subtly shifting ochre hues. The two systems of script, *thuluth* and Kufic, overlap and intersect in a planar operation, an effect deepened by the writing being set over a ground of scrolling plant tendrils studded with blooming flowers and closed buds on a deep blue ground (see fig. 10.3). In this way, the mosaic faience simulates depth through planarity, a fictive depth in contrast to the real relief achieved in sculpted terracotta (see figs. 10.2a, 10.2b). The mosaic faience technique embodies the high visual values associated with the pictorial arts, especially the arts of the book in the medium of illumination. The mimetic properties of mosaic faience are also enhanced at Shirin Biqa Aqa’s tomb and elsewhere through the variations in the rendering of the flowers and the chromatic breadth.

The role of the *kitābkhāna* in generating designs, and in some instances producing building components like panels in mosaic faience, has already been mentioned. The operation of the *kitābkhāna* explains the high incidence of interrelated artistic subject matter and formal effects across so many media (in an era before medium specificity), how it was that architecture could suggest not only textiles but also paper, illumination, and the bindings of books. A sizable corpus of technical materials



Fig. 10.8. Epigraphic design that combines cursive *thuluth* and angular Kufic scripts in two tiers set over arabesque, from the Timurid workshop album, before 1447, Herat (?), Afghanistan. Topkapı Palace Museum (H. 2152, fol. 22a), Istanbul.

used in the workshop is extant, preserved among the pages of codex-bound albums. Some include large designs for inscriptions in the canonical “six [cursive] scripts” (*al-aqlām al-sitta*, viz. *naskh*; *thuluth*; *muḥaqqaq*; *rayḥānī*; *riqāʿ*; and *tawqīʿ*), and Kufic, often with one of the cursive scripts combined with the angular Kufic, as in architecture (fig. 10.8). The chancellery was another institution where fine calligraphy was essential. But under the Timurids, as in earlier times, calligraphy was more than a profession: it was also an avocation, a mark of social standing, cultural refinement, and personal elegance. Later princes of the Timurid house developed skill in this art form and also designed inscriptions for architecture (the chief examples are Baysunghur’s design for the calligraphy framing the sanctuary portal of his mother’s *Masjid-i Jamiʿ* at Mashhad, in 1418, and his brother Ibrahim Sultan’s calligraphies applied to several monuments in Shiraz). Apart from his work at Tuman Aqa’s complex at Shah-i Zinda, Shaykh Muhammad b. Hajji Bandgir’s calligraphy is known through a corpus of practice sheets preserved in workshop albums from the

early Timurid period alongside those of his father, Hajji Muhammad Bandgir.³¹ These are often bold statements of writing, virtuoso performances in the six scripts. His practice sheets juxtapose writing in different scripts and scales, repeat words written in alternative orthographies, move from one script into another from one line to the next, and arrange writing in multiple orientations that require viewers to read by physically moving around the sheet of paper or by remaining static and rotating the sheet in their hands.

Conforming to the calligraphic practice of his day, Shaykh Muhammad’s work looked to a specific historical precedent in the canonical scripts developed by Yaqt al-Mustaʿsimi (d. 1298), a legacy that generations of calligraphers fostered and perpetuated up to the Timurid period. It was in the first decades of the fifteenth century that Timurid patrons started to assemble collections of historical calligraphies, and this is also the time when we find calligraphers increasingly conscious of their genealogies of practice. Calligraphers worked within the bounds of a historical, fastidiously transmitted canon, in a process predi-

cated on imitation, but they also inflected their writing with the trace of their own hand. In this way, a history of calligraphy constituted the “built-in remains” (*une trace instituée*, *pace* Jacques Derrida), of writing, temporally both present and past.³² Mosaic faience was appealing because it offered the capacity to fashion full facsimiles of an individual’s writing as produced on paper. This technique could also accommodate the complex temporal dimension and specific indexicality of writing despite the transfer from one medium into another. Moreover, mosaic faience could retain the sense of depth achieved by the illusionistic means of drawing or painting on paper.

It is also possible to think—as another form of potential resonance—about the compositional analogues between the calligrapher’s practice exercises on paper and the configuration of various techniques of glazed tile revetment found on such monuments as Timur’s Aq Saray at Shahr-i Sabz. Practice sheet and architectural composition share the habit of presenting numerous script types—angular and cursive—in multiple perspectives, simulating movement, an assumed visual or actual bodily one, as well as the customary habit of combining—radically juxtaposing—micrographic and macrographic systems of script and ornament redolent of the gigantic/miniature binary. Such a binary appeared on Timur’s massive Aq Saray and Masjid-i Jami’ projects and continued in the monuments of his

successors. The normative practice of integrating vegetal, geometric, and epigraphic systems of revetment in the techniques of mosaic faience, *haft rangī*, and *bannā’i / hazār bāf* fashioned decorative programs for viewing near and far. The union of mimetic and abstract modes developed under Timur also continued.

Though the aesthetic disjuncture between big and small, closely adjacent on the surfaces of the building, has troubled some scholars of Timurid architecture (as well as the antimodernist deception perpetrated through various forms of simulated structure), the contemporary aesthetic value of the gigantic/miniature epigraphic binary may be discerned through references to Shaykh Muhammad b. Hajji Bandgir’s official correspondence to the Mamluks, or in the tale of the calligrapher ‘Umar al-Aqta’. The latter is reported to have copied a Qur’an in “dust” (*ghubār*) script so small that it produced a book that could “be fitted under the socket of a signet ring,” which aroused Timur’s displeasure.³³ The calligrapher responded by producing another Qur’an written so large—each line the length of a cubit or more—that it had to be tied “on a barrow” and wheeled to Timur. ‘Umar al-Aqta’'s switch from large to small summoned the opposite extremes of humans’ sensory abilities, one difficult to discern, the other encompassing the entire field of vision in a manner comparable to the practices of Timurid architectural revetment.