

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF ISLAM 1250-1800

Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom

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The explosion of interest in Islamic art and architecture in recent years has prompted a serious dilemma over definition. What makes art 'Islamic'? Is it a geographical, cultural or religious expression? How desirable or useful is it to separate these elements? In such a fluid and uncertain context, we can also question the validity of trying to explain the art and architecture of countries as diverse as Mauritania, Bosnia, Oman and Java within the context of a single volume which is both affordable and compact.

It therefore comes as no surprise that in this publication, the long-awaited sequel to Richard Ettinghausen's splendid volume covering the first six centuries after Mohammed, one should find in the preface a list of the countries and regions which are *not* included. Seeking solace in convention, this book takes us on a traditional tour of the Islamic world's 'core' regions - Central Asia, Persia, Egypt, Turkey, the Maghreb and India, tracing the development of their decorative arts and architecture over a six hundred year period ending c.AD 1800 .

However familiar this approach may be, it is rarely achieved as successfully as here. The main themes and elements are dealt with revealingly and with conviction. The development of key building types, their design and decoration, is traced coherently and through the use of apposite case studies. Islamic achievements in the fields of book-binding, illustrated manuscripts, metalwork, ceramics and textiles are highlighted and detailed through reference to key examples of each type. The result is both an

invaluable reference book and a most entertaining read.

Worthy of special note are the excellent summaries of historical and political context which open each chapter. A concise and fluent text, embellished with objective yet elegant descriptions of the key influences and motivating personalities, illustrates vividly the turbulent context of invasion, counter-invasion and internecine warfare that spawned the great Islamic cultures. Equally successful is the manner in which the arts and architecture are treated as an integrated whole, despite the rather artificial chapter divisions between the two elements.

The seminal importance of the Timurid contribution to architectural form and style is duly acknowledged and detailed, but attention is also drawn to the equally significant role played by the Timurids in establishing new standards of excellence in the decorative arts. The portable arts of the Timurid period remain relatively little-studied, not least because the physical evidence is so fragmentary and hard to come by. It is therefore particularly satisfying to read an account which properly highlights this achievement and the various cross-references that flow between the fine arts and building design and decoration. The interchangeable nature of motifs and artistic techniques was a natural consequence of the versatility, both geographical and otherwise, of specialist designers and craftsmen. The forced removal by Timur of large numbers of Damascene artisans to Samarqand in 1400 understandably prompted more than purely geographical cross-fertilization.

The effect of contemporary economic influences on the development of the Islamic arts has always deserved greater attention and here at last adequate consideration is given. Then, as now, the arts could constitute a potentially worthwhile investment proposition and the authors highlight how the Bahri Mamluks in particular turned to the arts to ensure the survival of their wealth and values. The ostentatious dressiness of the Mamluk era represented the final flourish of an architectur- and artistic

evolution which then faltered, only to re-emerge as the basis for the new orientalist style of the nineteenth century.

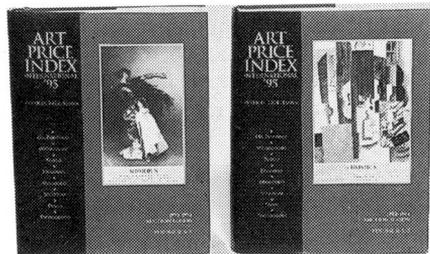
This volume is the first of the series to be issued in an enlarged format and glossy livery and it is handsomely illustrated by many colour and monochrome photographs, as well as maps, plans and some excellent axonometric views. The advent of good quality colour illustrations in this series was long overdue. With the exception of a handful of ill-chosen shots (such as the one which has rendered Samarqand's magnificent Registan square almost dowdy in appearance), the standard of photographs in this book is superb and the consistently high level of presentation provides an exacting new baseline for future volumes in the series.

Space doubtless precluded any detailed discussion of the evolution of Islam's vernacular styles, although a few more pointers would have been valuable. Yet this book's logistical success in terms of format, content and accessibility is arguably surpassed by the way in which it captures and conveys the cultural spirit of Islam. This elusive quality, forged from a fusion of the technical skill, spiritual passion and artistic flair which are the hallmarks of Islam's cultural contribution, provides a richness which flows elegantly through the book. Therein lies the greatest achievement of all.

JAMES PARRY



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