



'AJAMI AS WOOD PANELING CRAFT IN SYRIAN ART AND INTERIOR ORNAMENT

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The Arabic term 'Ajami means Persian or Non-Arabic is used to describe the technique and the ornaments as well as the interior as a whole. The 'Ajami decorations became very prominent throughout the Ottoman Empire after the decline of tile production and rose to sophisticated levels of art in Syria. 'Ajami decoration is almost universal in the interior adornment of Syrian houses and palaces, especially during the seventeenth to late eighteenth century. However, nowadays, it can be seen that this beautiful decorative painting technique is now-forgotten by modern generation and would gradually become one of an extinct art in Syria. This deep-rooted art has a rich history in the country, however, the production and technique of 'Ajami has not been fully embraced and recorded in past studies. Secondary data was obtained from review of related literatures and researches that were published in the past few decades. This paper presents Damascus and Aleppo 'Ajami rooms as case studies. The methods of historical and visual analysis were adopted to investigate the art and craft of 'Ajami in the two rooms. The results of the analysis are presented simultaneously with the information that characterizes the valuable and historical art of 'Ajami as wood panelling for art and interior adornment. Findings of the research suggest for further investigation on the lost techniques and the original surface appearance of the 'Ajami, which are essential in order to sustain its historical aesthetic value and its antecedents among traditional artisans.

Keywords: 'Ajami art; Wood Panelling; Syrian Art; Interior Ornament; Damascene Art.

Introduction

'Ajami means Persian or Non-Arabic which is used to describe the technique, the type of ornaments and the interior as a whole. 'Ajami is esteemed as a luxurious art because of the both values which involve historical and antique art. The kings and famous people used this kind of art in their palaces, houses and also in their museums, so all the remains of the art still exist until today. 'Ajami decoration is almost ubiquitous in the interior adornment of Syrian houses and palaces, especially during the seventeenth to late eighteenth century. The implementation of 'Ajami as an art and

craft in Syria has been accepted by people who possess high income and high social status. In fact, this art had been owned by the kings and the most famous people in the seventeenth to eighteenth century (Scharrahs, 2010).

This paper discusses the techniques and principal motifs in 'Ajami focusing on the status of this art as decorative components in the Syrian prominent houses, namely Aleppo Room and Damascus Room. Therefore, the objectives of this study are: 1) to analyse the decorative components of 'Ajami in Aleppo Room and Damascus Room, 2) to determine the types of motif used in the components.

The Art of 'Ajami as Wood Panelling and Decorative Component

'Ajami is known as Gesso ornaments which were gilded, fluffy leaved, gleaming and coloured in order to produce a complex interaction of reflexive or lustreless and heavy painted on the surfaces of wood panelling (Khalil, 2011). In addition, 'Ajami is regarded as a very costly and expensive art because of both antique and historical values. Likewise, the expensive art like 'Ajami might just be tolerated by the people who have high individual income (A.-C. D. Mathews, 2006).

The 'Ajami as decorative components for walls, ceilings and doors were applied in surfaces of different kinds of wood, namely Cedar tree (*Cedrus*), Poplar tree (*Populus*), Terabit tree, and Walnut tree (*Juglans*). Thus, the 'Ajami art as decorative wood panelling is widely applied to the internal wooden walls and ceilings in which the small headed panels are integrated with niche, doors, walls and windows (Scharrahs, 2010). For example, Figure 1 illustrates the integrated 'Ajami wood panelling on the internal walls, windows and doors of Alazem Palace Hama in Syria.

Techniques and Principal Motifs

'Ajami Art starts by covering the surface of the wood slab by using oil, painted with the raised geese, and then gold gilded and glass surface through using different colours and designs (Schultz, 2006). In addition to that, 'Ajami Art is made of a special kind of wood, which is called a poplar whereas the unpainted outline consists of wainscot and cypress. The decoration contains basically of floral patterns, fruit orders, geometric designs, and handwriting "calligraphy" (ICOM, 2008). Other types of motif include a group of many flowers, such as: carnations, roses, tulips, hyacinths, in vases inside pictograms or within strewn on luminously painted background. Also, the tureens overflow from vegetables and fruit and stellar motifs and geometric decorations are equally depicted as border and edges.

'Ajami' technique which is for decoration, walls, ceilings, windows, and doors depends on its designs which involve poetry, geometric and floral decorations on ceilings such as clove flower, and Quran verses cornice that placed on the top part of

the wall (Ekhtiar, 2011). For example, Figure1 illustrates the integrated 'Ajami wood panelling on the internal walls, windows and doors of Alazem Palace Hama in Syria.

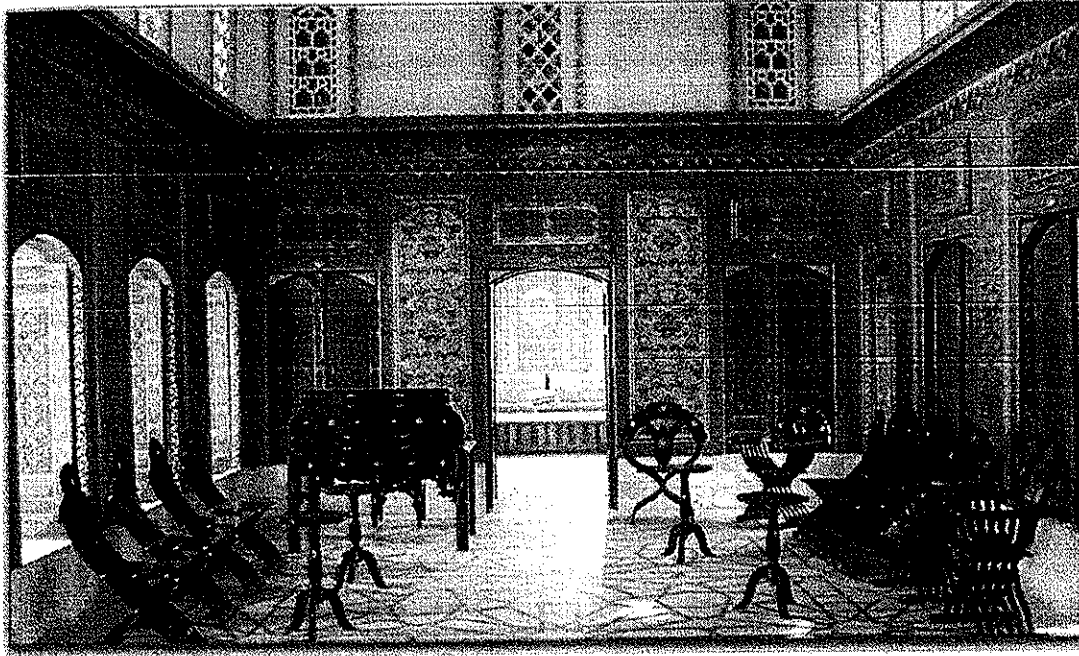


Figure 1: 'Ajami art on the walls, windows and doors of Alazem Palace

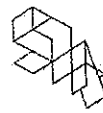
'Ajami Art in Syria:

At the beginning of the 18th century Syria included more than five hundred majestic houses which qualified as one of the most incredible Craftworks architecture art (A.-C. D. Mathews, 2006). 'Ajami art demands an artisan with accurate experience because the making of 'Ajami involves dexterous process. The quality of work depends not only on a specific request made by class of rich people, but it also depends on their private wealth. In fact, the presence of 'Ajami as decorative components in Damascene homes gives majestic and wonderful view from inside. The art work prospers with Mosaic craftsmanship which regards as one of the most precious technique (Hitti, 2004).

Occasionally, 'Ajami is one of the most famous terms of Damascus art work, which was used to show the painted woodwork. However, recently 'Ajami is still used to show generally the ancient kinds of woodwork. During the past, this art might have signified as a style of decoration, which was not exactly Persian but quite more predictably Islam (A.-C. D. Mathews, 2006)

Methods on Two Case Studies

There are several reference books, journals, seminar papers, reference study, articles and web sites that relate to this study have been referred. It aims to gather



secondary data from the review on existing studies that have been done on the art of 'Ajami. For this paper, in-depth literature studies had been done which covers the aspects of the art of 'Ajami as wood panelling decoration, techniques and motifs of 'Ajami and the development of 'Ajami in Syria.

The historical and visual analysis was conducted on two selected Syrian rooms, namely Aleppo Room and Damascus Room, which have been discovered during seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, respectively. These rooms are historically significant which display distinctive 'Ajami of an excellent floral ornamental decoration. Table 1.0 below highlights the full background information about the Syrians rooms and the situation of ornamental components.

Table 1.0: The Syrian rooms of Aleppo and Damascus

No	Type of House	Year Built	Owner	Location of House	Area of Placement	Ornamental Components
1	Aleppo Room	1721-1722 And restored in 1917-1920	Isa ibn Butrous and now Metropolitan museum	Aleppo Syria	Living Room for women (Haramlic)	Ajami art panelling, Wall, ceiling, doors, and windows
2	Damascus Room	dated A.H. 1119/A.D. 1707	Syrian family and now Metropolitan museum	Damascus Syria	Visitor Room	Ajami art panelling, Wall, ceiling, doors, and windows

Aleppo Room:

Aleppo Room is considered as an exceptionally accurate symbolic with decorative painting. It is the oldest remaining interior during the Ottoman Empire (Schwed, 2006). Persian artist had signed and dated the panelling by engravings 1600–1603. This room was used for the reception and was called in Arabic as "Qa'a", this room comes from the Wakil house which was located in Aleppo. Its genuine architectural circumstance is well studied and documented and now new research on modern sources has been done. This has been achieved when the Aleppo Room entered the Berlin city in 1912, and it exposed in different forms in Museum of Islamic Art "für Islamische Kunst" (Schwed, 2006).

This Room consists of wood panelling and has many 'Ajami paintings which have different layers with various colours supported by some metal leaves. The artisan who implemented this room was Isa Bin Shah from Aleppo. The 'Ajami paintings of this

room is considered as one of the oldest Syrian Ajami painting during the Ottoman period(Hagedorn, 2015). During that time, Isa Bin Shah brought the best workshop to implement this room to be used for hosting and welcoming his guests this room represented of different subjects in the Islamic Art Style. He painted 'Ajami of floral formation and different architectural patterns using a high technique that was instilled in tradition of Ottoman style (Gangler, 1993). The panel of Aleppo Room as shown in Figure 2 includes floral design such as cloves, Jasmine and ivy with small flowers. Geometric designs such as triangle and rectangle also are depicted as complementary motifs.

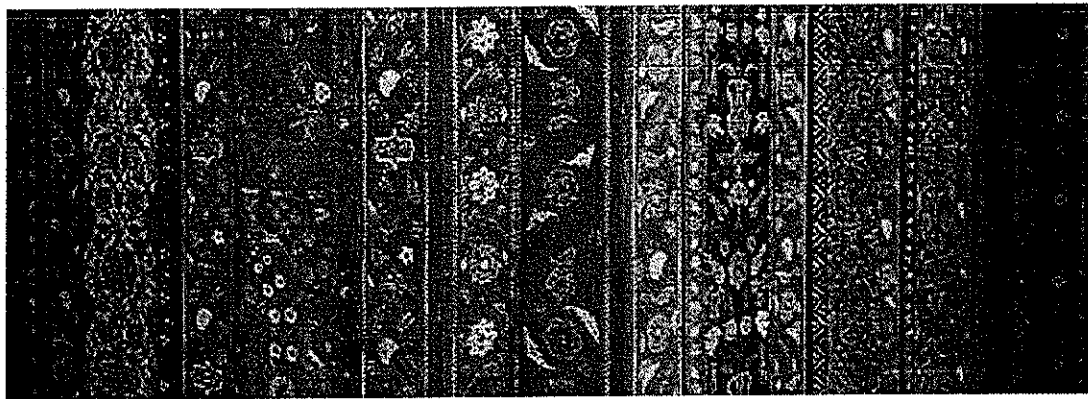


Figure 2: Detail design of 'Ajami in Aleppo Room

The paintings of Aleppo room (Figure 3) is considered as the oldest and most ancient antique collections of the Syrian lodging house which is related to Ottoman time in the beginning of the 17th century(Hagedorn, 2015). According to what had been written on Aleppo room, the real owner was Isa Bin Butrous, who was a rich merchant and Christian civilian.

The themes of Aleppo room were established on modern Islamic illustrations, containing of floral and geometrical installation, presented in the greatest conventional Ottoman style. The Islamic religion added to this room an Islamic stamp because this room owned before to the Christian patron. It includes some of Christian themes such as portrayed and many figurations of religious characters. All these are identities of a peaceful society to various religious tenets which were existed together (Schwed, 2006).

This unity of different patterns shows that there were no discriminations between the whole religions. Panels have been shown in numerous forms, and the document stated that this room was back to (Alwakeil) house in Aleppo city (Gangler, 1993).

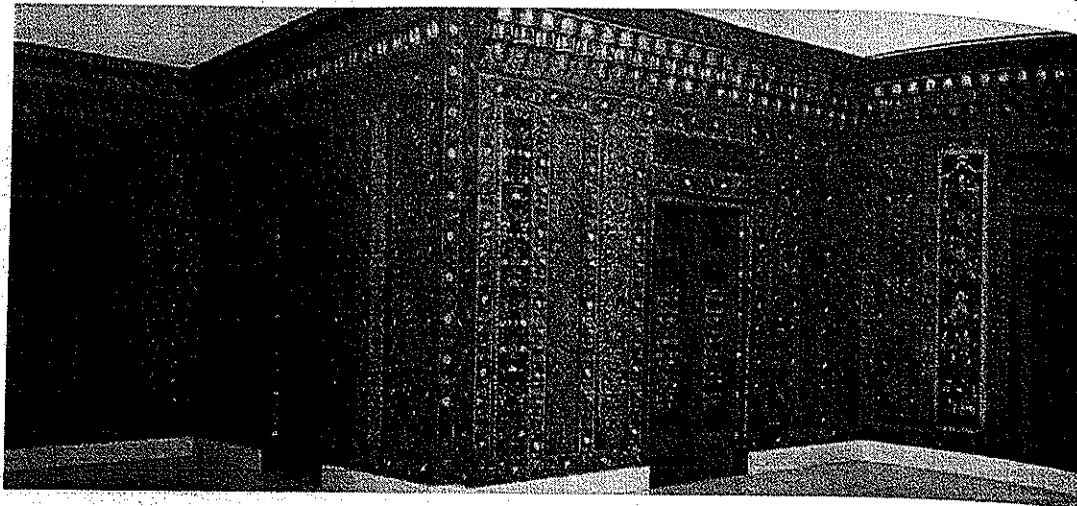


Figure 3: Aleppo Room as Ajami wood panallings (Islamic Museum in Berlin 2015)

Selected characteristic of the "Pergamon Museum" is its attractive use of huge architecture residue to contextualize slighter archaeological innovations and ornamental movable substances. The paintings of the replacement and figural images were consequently understated, involving an exception of areas from Mughal folders and irregular future acquisitions previously showed in Aleppo Room, which regards now an inaccessible background of a transparent display (Necipoğlu & Bailey, 2008). 'Ajami art paintings make Aleppo room as the oldest preserved remains of ancient antique kind. (Gangler, 1993)

Damascus room

Damascus room dated 1766–1767 AD and measuring 15' x 20', a 26-foot-long reception room built in 1707 is an 18th century courtyard house with at least one elaborate reception room crafted from hand-painted wood panels. It contains woodwork walls and windows, ceilings provided with corners, cupboard doors and storage niches, and it contains masab, the inlaid stones and floor with elaborated spectacular arch with plaster voussoirs decorated and coloured inlays that served to divide the room into upper and lower sections separated by a single tall that called Tazar (Kenney, 2011).

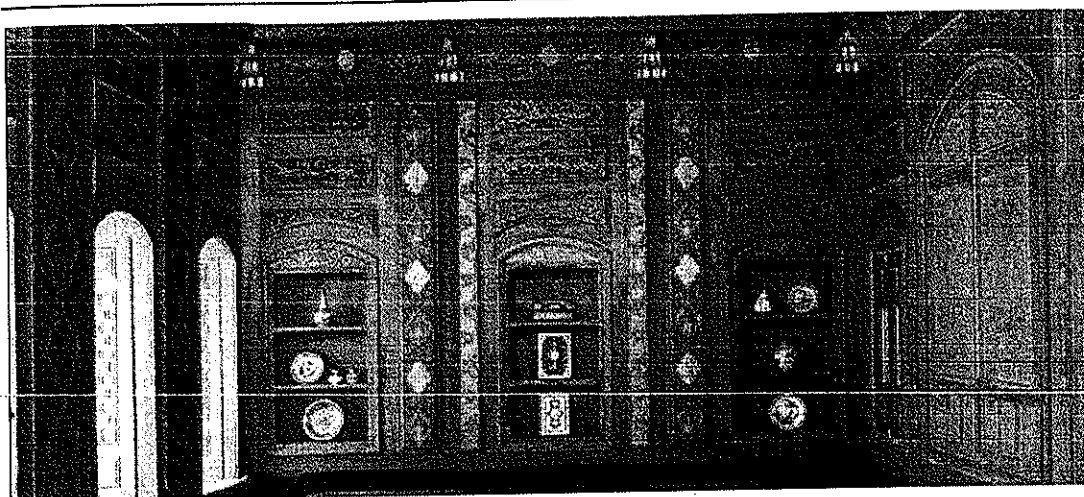
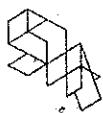


Figure 5: Damascus Room showing 'Ajami art on the walls (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2015)

The wood panelling of the Damascus Room consists of both flat and raised painted surfaces., including the cartouches with beautiful calligraphy praising the Prophet Muhammad's companions (Duke, 2015). Their cornice and the Tazar ceiling cornice are calligraphic panels. These panels bear poetry verses based on an extended garden metaphor-especially apt in conjunction with the surrounding floral imagery-that leads into praises of the Prophet Muhammad. The room was dismantled from its previous location near the entrance of the Islamic Art galleries, so that it could be re-installed in a zone within the suite of new galleries devoted to Ottoman art (America, 2015). Many verses, eulogies and speeches for prophets found inside the complicated designs of ornaments, while the house plan and rooms section shows the strong relationship between Islam and 'Ajami art in damascenes house in general (Kayyal, 2013).

The name of Damascus room was known in Damascus as Nur al-Din Zengi and the researches shows the relationship with this name and the neighbourhood between the Damascus room and the tomb of Nur al-Din Zengi (Scharrahs, 2010). This room had been exported to Beirut, where they somehow managed to survive the Lebanese Civil War. After that, the room had been lifted for 30 years to recursive with the restoration and conservation done by LACMA and the King Abdul-Aziz Centre for World Culture in Saudi Arabia (Miranda, 2015). The painted wood surfaces in the Damascus room are embellished with a particular type of relief decoration ("al-'Ajami") or as pastiglia in the West (A.-C. Mathews, 1997).

The 'Ajami panelling of Damascus room had been purchased from Asfar & Sarkis in 1952 and it required considerable retrofitting to meet the dimensions of the pre-existing guestroom located off Shangri La's foyer. The workshop specialized in the creation and restoration of 'Ajami interiors and was led by the master artisan



Muhammad 'Ali al-Khayyat (better known as Abu Suleyman) from the 1930s until his death in 1960, he is the master artisan who participated in the restoration and retrofitting of many of 'Ajami interiors, including the 'Ajami room and panelling that are preserved in the Robert Mouawad Private Museum in Beirut and the National Museum of Damascus (Scharrahs, 2010). The Damascus Room at Shangri La therefore shows and illustrates broader global trends in the preservation and appreciation of late-Ottoman Syrian interiors during the twentieth century (Lauren Fair, 2010).

Findings and Discussion

It is apparent from the case studies that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'Ajami art was reflecting the cultural and religious background of the owner of the Ajami in forms of paintings of motifs, wood panels and decorations. Ajami is regarded as a luxurious wooden painting using an exclusive kind of wood panels apart from being an antique and historical art. It can be discovered through the analyses of the ornaments, poetry and inscriptions that the patrons were totally Muslims, and they were rich and wealthy Syrian family (Miranda, 2015). In addition, the cost is high to make this art. Time and money are challenges faced by the makers of this art.

'Ajami is an art used for interior spaces, namely living room for women and visitor room as found in the Aleppo Room and Damascus Room, respectively. The art is applied as wood panelling for windows, doors, ceilings and walls. 'Ajami art is indeed categorized as Islamic art that contains different design elements and patterns, for instance, floral, geometric patterns, vegetal and fruits and calligraphy. The floral and geometry patterns have been drawn as surrounding elements for a beautiful calligraphy of Quran and Poetry.

In both rooms, the technique of 'Ajami produces raised designs of gypsum (mixed with glue), which are then covered with metal leaf, coloured glazes as well as the surrounding flat ones. 'Ajami are further embellished with metal leaf (gold, copper, tin) covered in multicolour translucent glazes (red, green, yellow, orange), and matte paint (Scharrahs, 2010).

In Syria, 'Ajami art gave a special imprint and style, particularly, in many houses of wealthy people and palaces of Damascus. 'Ajami is considered as a valuable art which is maintained and reduplicated for centuries. In the seventeenth century, 'Ajami art was the most famous art during the Ottoman period, it requires a professional artisan who can implement this technique accurately. Likewise, Aleppo Room and Damascus Room contain the works of 'Ajami which are among the most prominent and luxurious Syrian art, also known as the Dāmascentes' art. They had been kept through many centuries. 'Ajami art shows the flourished side of the history of Syria



and its deep rooted crafts in the civilizations (Goffam, 2002). It was developed significantly because the Ottomans were very interested in the 'Ajami decorations of the museum and they preferred the glory to the places which they were living in. In fact, this art was very famous and very popular in Syria. This is because many artisans in this country had played their roles to improve the art using their own style and stamp (Goffam, 2002).

Conclusion and Recommendations

'Ajami is a deep rooted art that has a rich historical and aesthetic value in many Muslim countries including Syria. Many past studies documented the 'Ajami works of seventeenth to eighteenth centuries found in famous places. This is apparent in Aleppo Room and Damascus Room. In order to keep the history and the high value of this unique art and to give it a new chance to survive, the future study is required to cover 'Ajami art in details as an adequate documentation. The study could save the art from distinction by the pessimistic outlook of the youngster and the current generation.

The production and technique of 'Ajami was not fully embraced and recorded by the researchers in the past. Many historical sites that contain 'Ajami art on wooden panelling and ceilings had been destroyed due to war in Syria. These places exhibit the works of 'Ajami with fine craftsmanship of past generation and should be embraced and treasured through proper research.

Moreover, a further study and documentation of 'Ajami art as a technique and design around the world can create a huge knowledge related to the applied art and cultures of the old artisans and the societies surrounding them. In this way, 'Ajami art will not be forgotten by the modern generations of artisan who should discover the hidden secrets behind this great art.

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