Like all major historical events, the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 had an impact on the development of the visual arts. It introduced the most significant rupture in the art history of this country since the Arab conquest. Unlike the political and economic crises that took place during the Mamluk sultanate, which had never managed to substantially diminish artistic patronage, and in particular the building zeal of the sultans, the fall of the Mamluks marked a turning point in the art history of Egypt and Syria but also in the Muslim world in general. Even the last decades of Mamluk history, or more precisely the reigns of the two last major sultans Qāytbāy (1468-96) and al-Ġawrī (1501-16), had been a period of artistic innovation in architecture and the decorative arts in spite of grave economic problems. Cairo had owed its glory to a long history of central and metropolitan status and most of all to its direct connections with the rest of the world. Its artistic production was intimately linked to the patronage of the Mamluk sultans and their focus on the capital. Syrian cities, which changed from a Mamluk to an Ottoman provincial status, did not experience this decisive kind of rupture.

With the conquest of Cairo the Ottomans appropriated the major metropolis and artistic center of the medieval Muslim world, at a time when Istanbul’s glorious age had not yet begun. Unlike the rise of the Mamluks, who emerged from the establishment of their Ayyubid predecessors, the Ottomans came as powerful invaders from a foreign territory, with a well-established tradition of government and an articulated artistic experience of their own. This furthermore contributed to the break in the art history of Egypt.

Sultan Selīm did not endow Cairo with any religious foundation, as he did in Damascus by building a mausoleum over the tomb of the Sufi saint Ibn ‘Arabī with a Friday mosque. Although Ottoman governors of the

---

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries founded some handsome mosques in Cairo, the short tenure they were given was in general not conducive for the foundation of great monuments or the planning of great urban projects. Instead, the emphasis of Ottoman rulers was on the appropriation and maintenance of existing buildings, rather than creating new ones. They turned Mamluk madrasas and ḥāṅqāhs into Ottoman institutions and they sponsored the major shrines and saints’ mausoleums. The anonymous al-Azhar, in particular, became the major academic institution of Egypt. The academic distinction that it maintains to the present day was essentially a development that took place during the Ottoman period. Under the Mamluk sultanate al-Azhar had been one among many other madrasas and mosques sponsored by sultans and emirs. Its prestige was due to its status as the first mosque of al-Qāhira, and eventually, as a venerated popular shrine, which attracted Egyptians from the provinces. The promotion of al-Azhar by the Ottomans strengthened the common religious bond with the Egyptians while at the same time overshadowing the image of their Mamluk predecessors. In the absence of a royal court in Cairo, the architectural symbols of status of that era became instead the residences and commercial buildings of the military elite.

The Ottoman regime contributed to Cairo’s welfare and architecture by improving its water supply through the proliferation of sabīl-maktabāt. This type of philanthropic foundation, which combined a fountain house with a primary school and sometimes an oratory, was widespread under the Mamluk sultanate, and it continued to be sponsored by Ottoman governors, officials of the military corps, as well as by black eunuchs of the imperial palace and other notables. It was not before the mid-eighteenth century that an Ottoman sultan founded a religious monument in Cairo; this was the madrasa known as takiyya of Sultan Maḥmūd I, built towards the end of his reign in 1750.

Although the Ottomans are reported by Ibn Iyās to have deported a large number of craftsmen, professionals and members of the administrative elite to Istanbul, no such deportation is reported from Syria. The deportation of the Cairene elite was short-lived, however: four years later, Sultan

---

4 D. Behrens-Abouseif, 1994, pp. 89-95.