Chapter 8

Originality and Innovation in Syrian Woodwork of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

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Introduction

When viewing the corpus of Islamic woodwork produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, one is immediately struck by four main trends. First is quantity: more has survived from this period than from previous periods, a trend that continues unabated into the fourteenth century. Second is the prevalence of geometry: whereas woodwork made in previous centuries is generally vegetal or calligraphic in style, the woodwork objects produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are decidedly geometric. Third is the dominance of Syria: many of the great wood masterpieces of this period were made in Syria, including objects made by Syrian craftsmen outside Syria. Fourth, there are indications—both in view of the increased frequency of craftsmen's signatures and the inclusion of some of their names in biographical dictionaries—that at least some woodworkers in this period began to enjoy an increased status.1

In this paper I would like to examine the aesthetic and historical foundations of these trends by looking at a coherent group of wood objects made in Syria or by Syrian craftsmen in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Following a brief introduction in which I assess the status of the woodworker in this period and a methodological statement on the study of Islamic ornament, I will discuss these objects, highlighting and analyzing in particular their innovative geometric patterns. I will conclude by exploring the factors and motives that may have contributed to the efflorescence of the geometric mode in Syria in the twelfth century and to its ultimate spread to other regions, in part due to the influence of Syrian craftsmen.

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1 As Miriam Kühn argues in her article in this volume, this was a far more common occurrence in the Mamlûk period, although the shift toward the acceptance of such may have started somewhat earlier.
As with all artisans in the Islamic world, the status of Islamic woodworkers (sing. najjār) was perhaps on par with that of shopkeepers, and well below that of jurists or merchants, although it seems to have improved in the period under discussion. One indication of the improved status of woodworkers in this period is the increased tendency they showed to sign their works: nearly all large objects made in this period bear a signature, and one has as many as four signatures. These artisanal signatures should not be understood as an indication of an elevation of status from artisan to artist—which rarely happened in Islamic art—but rather as a sign of pride in workmanship and, from the patron’s point of view, something like a certificate of quality.

Other crafts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including metalwork and stone masonry, are also marked by an increased occurrence of artisan’s signatures, but woodworkers stand apart from these others by dint of their occasional mention in historical sources. Miriam Kühn argues in this volume that this trend in fact became quite common under the Mamlûks, but it may have started in the twelfth century, when at least one famous woodworker was mentioned in a biographical dictionary. Nasser Rabbat has argued that the inclusion of short biographies of some woodworkers in biographical dictionaries may have been due to their association with important Mamlûk princes for whom they had done works. While this is entirely likely, there are two additional reasons that may have led to woodworkers being seen as more worthy of being commemorated in this manner. Some woodworkers, and especially those involved in design, were trained in practical geometry, which suggests that they were literate and therefore able to follow abstract designs on paper.

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2 The social status of Islamic artisans has been the subject of much debate, with most scholars accepting their comparatively low status and few arguing that they would have enjoyed a somewhat more elevated status. Overall, I agree with L. A. Mayer, in Islamic Metalworkers and their Works (Geneva, 1959), 14–15, in which he suggests that most Islamic artisans had a low status but that there were exceptional cases, mainly among woodworkers and architects, of artisans rising above their prescribed status, “by sheer force of intelligence and manual skill.”


5 See note 8, below. To these references should be added Ibn Khaldûn, The Muqaddima: An Introduction to History, trans. F. Rosenthal (Princeton, 2005), 321, who wrote: “In view of its origin, carpentry needs a good deal of geometry of all kinds. It requires either a general or specialized knowledge of measurement and proportion in order to bring forms from potentiality into actuality in the proper manner.”