

Lecture: Islamic ornament and the Italian Renaissance

1. Islamic ornament contributed to Renaissance ideals of beauty and inspired Renaissance creativity
 - a. No overt Muslim iconography or religious symbolism to offend other religions. 14
No exception can be taken from Arabic script which is found in many Western artworks.¹
2. Ideals of beauty
 - a. Islamic works were accepted for their aesthetic quality, their opulence, harmony, and rich colors. 14 ²
 - b. The inclusion of exotic objects represented opulence and were considered valuable in themselves. 9³
 - c. Islamic items that came into Western possession were evidently prized for their rarity and beauty and became a vehicle for the painter's expression of such qualities. 4⁴
 - d. There was also a high degree of technical skill that far surpassed anything in the West. 15⁵
3. Creative and cultural exchange between Islam and the Italian Renaissance
 - a. Renaissance predisposition to the Middle East
 - i. Renaissance eye, because of its appreciation for the arabesque and organizational possibilities contained in Greco-Roman art, would be predisposed to the Middle Eastern arts that also derived from the classical past.305 ⁶
 - ii. The vegetal interlace surrounding animals is a form that had long existed around the Mediterranean, while the Kufic inscriptions that merge beautifully with the rest of the decoration were often not understood to be Arabic at al⁷
 - b. Cultural and design integration
 - i. During the Renaissance, there was a major shift toward freeing the motif, whereby Italian textiles incorporate Ottoman designs and Ottoman productions adopt Italianate elements. ⁸

¹ Ettinghausen, "Muslim Decorative Arts and Painting: Their Nature and Impact on the Medieval West."

² Ettinghausen.

³ Contadini, "Artistic Contacts."

⁴ Contadini, "Artistic Contacts."

⁵ Ettinghausen, "Muslim Decorative Arts and Painting: Their Nature and Impact on the Medieval West."

⁶ Contadini, "'Threads of Ornament in the Style World of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries.' In."

⁷ Contadini.

⁸ Contadini, "'Threads of Ornament in the Style World of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries.' In."

- ii. Ottoman motifs were creatively reinterpreted or reassembled to provide new variations for customers.⁹
- iii. Such an example is Leonardo's knots and crosses and stars with eight points in his ceiling frescoes in the Sala delle Asse in Milan. Copies of the motifs appear then in Durer engravings.¹⁰
- iv. Not surprisingly, the ornamental repertoire of these fabrics shows a degree of interchange that can create problems of identification. It is difficult to parse the influences and borrowings of motifs between Italian and Eastern textiles. There is evidence of a design world marked by the seamless integration of elements from various sources, and quite possibly ignorance of their ultimate origins. 295¹¹
- v. By the second quarter of the sixteenth century, Middle Eastern-derived ornament had become an 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. 303-4¹²
- vi. Middle Eastern ornament fused with an undifferentiated Renaissance design compendium creating a unified world and integration of design. According to Sabba da Castiglione, there was an ethical dimension to this cultural exchange in which ornaments sharpened the intellect and induces politeness, civility, and courtliness.¹³

4. Textiles

- a. The West adopted these objects unchanged as is the most extensive case with Oriental carpets. 15¹⁴
- b. Textiles were the foremost craft of the Muslim world and were easily transported beginning soon after the rise of Islam¹⁵
- c. Preciousness of Middle Eastern luxury goods
 - i. Middle Eastern textiles with ornamental bands (tiraz) sometimes decorative but usually consisting of text are examples of this early period of trade in luxury goods. They were appreciated as precious objects is demonstrated by the fact that they might be used as wrapping or shrouds
- d. Sacredness
 - i. Oriental carpets began to appear in Italian paintings. They appear below the throne of the Madonna, on the floor of interiors where sacred rites took place, or hanging from windows and decorations. 16¹⁶

⁹ Contadini, "Artistic Contacts."

¹⁰ Contadini.

¹¹ Contadini, "'Threads of Ornament in the Style World of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries.' In."

¹² Contadini.

¹³ Contadini, "'Threads of Ornament in the Style World of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries.' In."

¹⁴ Ettinghausen.

¹⁵ Ettinghausen.

¹⁶ Contadini, "Artistic Contacts."

- ii. From biblical times onward, the concept of having an expensive textile underfoot has been associated with wealth, power, and sanctity.¹⁷
- iii. Oriental carpets especially of a type attributed to Anatolian Turkish workshops are introduced in religious paintings to demarcate the sacred space of the Madonna and Saints. 6¹⁸
- e. Opulence and prestige
 - i. Later with greater contact with Ottoman empire, Oriental carpets become elements of interior decoration functioning in portraits as symbols of power and wealth. ¹⁹
 - ii. By the sixteenth century, carpets were frequently depicted in portraits as a signifier of sophistication, education, and high social and economic status; an anonymous portrait by Moretto da Brescia shows at the very bottom a minor border of a contemporary Anatolian rug from Ottoman Turkey²⁰
 - iii. Inscriptions or pseudo inscriptions containing characters derived from arabic alphabet were widely used in pictorial arts of Renaissance Italy. 61 These epigraphic motifs were derived from medieval pseudo Kufic inscriptions, never cursive Arabic.
 - iv. While Oriental textiles will disappear in fifteenth century painting, decorative pseudo-epigraphic strips will persist as a well established pictorial convention. 5²¹

¹⁷ Denny, "Islamic Carpets in European Paintings."

¹⁸ Contadini, "Artistic Contacts."

¹⁹ Contadini.

²⁰ Denny, "Islamic Carpets in European Paintings."

²¹ Contadini, "Artistic Contacts."



Cimabue's Madonna and Child with Angels at S. Maria dei Servi in Bologna with psuedo-Arabic inscriptions in the textile covering the throne.



Duccio's Maesta. Textile covering the throne of the Madonna has a middle Eastern brocade and pseudo kufic inscription around the border.



4th century mosaic in Santa Costanza with arabesque and vegetal designs.



Moretto da Brescia, Portrait of a Man, 1520-25. Image of Oriental carpet to display sitter's prestige.



Works Cited

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