Arab Objects of Art in Western Hands

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It is interesting to observe the degree to which the study of the transfer of artefacts between the Islamic Near East and Europe has evolved away from early art-historical modes of enquiry. It has become increasingly attuned to the need to take account not only of political and economic factors but also of ideological issues. It has begun to address what may be couched in contemporary terms as hybridity and transformations of meaning and identity.

Of the Middle Eastern artefacts now in Western Europe, many arrived during the Medieval period, as is demonstrated by the rock crystals, ivory, glass, textiles and metalwork in many church treasuries and aristocratic collections, and although some were pillaged, others were gifts and others were traded. The Geniza documents, which record, amongst other things, the activities of Jewish merchants in Fatimid Egypt, give evidence of healthy trans-Mediterranean trade connections as far back as the eleventh century, indeed, noted Arabist S. D. Goitain named the collection of volumes of his major publication on the documents “A Mediterranean Society”.

Given such information, it is hardly surprising that the old emphasis on empires, which even when used as seemingly neutral taxonomic tools still carried the implication that they were the major actors in the generation and transfer of artefacts, has gradually receded. The role of Byzantium, for example, had traditionally dominated the landscape of Eastern Mediterranean scholarship, and more recently it has still been viewed as a bridge between East and West, especially in the transmission of ornament or technique (with reference, for example, to the use of pseudo-Kufic inscriptions, or to the origins of enamelling on glass in the western world).

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But such generalised appeal to the mediation of Byzantium merely prolongs the traditional scheme. It is problematic not merely because the evidence for it may be inconclusive, but because it shores up a too schematic set of temporal and geographical demarcations and transitions. We need to heed the complexities of trading patterns and look at the Mediterranean less in terms of large-scale power blocs and more in terms of a patchwork of cultural centres participating in a set of loosely structured transactions. Rather than just to plot patterns of acquisition, it might be more profitable and more interesting to trace the responses to the different categories of artefacts as they variously maintain their original function, inspire emulation, are transformed, or are represented in other media. Such retentions or adaptations point to conceptual flexibility, reflecting varied modalities of reception.

During the medieval period, we find objects being placed in new environments and put to radically new uses. The information on what was traded is scanty, so that the mechanics of acquisition are unclear and in some cases were probably haphazard, particularly when account is taken of booty and looted objects. But however obtained, with several pieces we are faced with drastic forms of functional dislocation as a result of which new meanings and symbolic values are assigned and original ones obscured. Study of such objects may thus involve complex trails of inquiry, crucially into how and why they were transformed and how they were perceived in their new setting, but also into what their previous function and valuation had been. So this paper will attempt to characterise aspects of the flow of material culture across the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages from this wider perspective, using a small number of representative case studies.

A hitherto neglected but representative example is the “Reliquary of the Nails of St Claire”. This is a wonderful rock crystal vessel (figure 1), mounted on a copper gilt high stem that contains the relic which gives it its name. It was first mentioned in Emma Zoega’s catalogue of Assisi’s antiquities in 1936, and subsequently by Kurt Erdmann in 1940 in an entry in which he assigns the crystal to Fatimid Egypt and indeed considers it as one of the highest quality. During the 1990’s I discussed this piece with the late Ralph Pinder-Wilson who encouraged me to try and study the piece, St Claire, who died in 1253, was the devoted disciple of Francis of Assisi, with whom she co-founded the closed order of the Clarissse, or “Poor Clariss”.

The relic is, then, Christian; the reliquary belongs to a convent and the mount is an example of western European goldsmithry, but the rock crystal is from Fatimid Egypt, so that the complex and extraordinary item of which it forms a part may suitably be considered emblematic of such processes of transformation, ones that combine embellishment, functional displacement, and effacement of any consciousness of origin. Just as renaissance painters happily allow the lute, the shawm and the long trumpets to be played by Christian angels, all knowledge of its Islamic cultural roots erased, this rock crystal piece and others like it have been converted into specifically Christian religious vessels, altered in their looks by being made into composites, and decisively detached from their original function. You have a wonderful example here in the collection of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyah, (figure 2) a beautiful rock crystal flask with an Arabic inscription carved in relief around the body which says “Baraka li-sahibih”. But it has been mounted in Europe with a silver gilt lid with a putto on top and a foot with inscriptions that relate the object to Spanish aristocratic families: it had been probably used as a reliquary. Going back to the reliquary of St Claire, the nails has been set upside down, and typologically belongs to a group of heart-shaped flasks, including
one in the Keir collection (now in Berlin) and one at the V&A.

The mount has a foot with six lobes onto each of which is set a strongly protruding semiprecious stone, and a smooth cylindrical stem interrupted at mid-height by a knob adorned with white pearls. The crystal itself is unfortunately chipped at the top and slightly at the sides, but the damage is minor, so that the full extent of its carved decoration can still be seen. Its height is nine centimetres (the total height of the reliquary being twenty centimetres) and the maximum width seven centimetres; drilled into it is a cylindrical hole, seven centimetres long and one centimetre wide—a size that makes it a quite convenient receptacle for nail clippings. The crystal is very clear, which, according to a-Binuni, point to it probably being of East African origin. The carving is sharp and used in masterly fashion for the curved floral decoration that allows us to relate this piece to Fatimid Egypt, for it consists of the typically Fatimid multi-petalled palmette that is found not only on other rock crystals but also on other media.

There are, in addition, half palmettes and leaves, all symmetrically carved with a main stem in the centre, fastened by three 'rings' with vertical incisions on them. Several types of cut are used: straight, at an angle and incisions, and this diversity not only permits a sophisticated decoration but also allows the light to play with the crystal in different ways, making it vibrant.

The metal chalice that supports the reliquary was added in Italy, perhaps in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Given the good fit one may think that it was created especially for this reliquary, although it could have been readapted from another object. The type recurs with other rock crystal pieces of Middle Eastern origin, and the practice of providing richly worked European mounts for such vessels is a long-standing one, continuing indeed up to the nineteenth century.

For the Assisi flask the more radical transformation was undoubtedly that of function and associated meaning: what is now a sacred object was previously a rock crystal of Egyptian manufacture of the second half of the tenth century that probably served as a perfume holder or a cosmetic receptacle, as the Geniza documents testify. What allows the transfer from a culture to another is thus the aesthetic, the fashioning of a valuable raw material into a precious, delicately carved artefact that, having served a practical purpose, was later found to be a fit container for a holy object, possibly even enhancing, through its very rarity and beauty, the sacred power of the relic within.

The craftsmanship involved, and the very transparency of the crystal, could not have been matched in contemporary European artefacts, but awareness of this does not necessarily imply any consciousness of a Middle Eastern connection. These rock crystal and other objects were not placed directly in Church contexts on arrival from the Middle East: they tended to be owned first by secular rulers and aristocratic families, only later to be donated to the church by queens, kings and doges, or even gifted to popes, who subsequently transferred them as donations to the churches. Many had previously been incorporated into the Byzantine imperial treasure, arriving in Venice after the sack of Constantinople in 1204, while others probably only reached Venice after 1261, when the Venetians were forced to abandon Constantinople, and it was there that they acquired their mounts.

There are also exceptional objects acquired at an early stage that were arguably subjected to processes of transformation driven by consciously ideological motives. One such object is the Andalusian marble capital (figure 3), set on the roof of Pisa cathedral. The capital, raised aloft on a short column, was situated at the end of the gabled roof of the north transept, possibly supporting, as its modern replacement does, a Pisan cross. Given that the capital seems to have been placed there early on, during the first or second phase of the construction of the cathedral, it is generally thought that it was consciously displayed as a trophy marking one of Pisa’s victories, and, assuming that to be the case, it is interesting to note that it was placed on the northern side of the cathedral, facing the sea, thus connecting it with Pisa’s maritime activities. More obviously, the fact that it was surmounted by a cross could be understood as a symbol of Muslim defeat.

The capital has an Arabic inscription that says “‘amal futa al-naqash ‘abdul ['abdil' (the work of Fatu the sculptor, his servant). It is carved with acanthus leaves at three levels, with the inscription on the central upper band of one side and belongs to a well-known group of the second half of the tenth century, from Madinat al-Zahra.

A splendid example is the one in your collection here (figure 4), the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, where a longer inscription is found around the top, bearing the name of al-Hakam II, Mustansir bi-llah, who reigned between 961 and 976, and of the same sculptor, Fatu. The capital may, then, have formed part of the architecture of the now ruined complex of Madinat al-Zahra. Given the vastness of the site, and the fact that it has only partially been excavated, it is impossible to determine the original position of the columns to which this group of capitals belonged, although given their size and quality it would be reasonable to associate them with either the palace itself or with one of the more imposing residences of official buildings. Although not identical, there are certainly strong resemblances between it and those in the still surviving part of the palace drawing room.

In any event, a century or so later it was in Pisan hands. Monneret de Villard has put forward the hypothesis that both it and the griffin arrived in Pisa as part of the booty obtained from either the sack of Almeria in 1089 or that of the Balearic Islands of 1144.

So, presumably once one of a group on a line of columns, the capital would have been a significant decorative element within an architectural complex enhancing grandeur and opulence, while when displayed in lofty isolation upon the cathedral roof, it could readily be understood as a projection of power, a trophy serving to mark Pisan domination.

However, there is also an aesthetic element here. If a capital was needed to support a cross matching the one at the other end of the transept, this one could have stood out among the various available pieces of mainly Roman stone because of the quality of the carving and the particular shade of the marble, which blends in well with the complex coloration of the material of the cathedral. The marble of the capital is not white, but of a creamy or indeed almost pinkish colour, depending on how the light strikes it, and because the deep carving of its wonderfully stylised and distinctive floral design absorbs as well as reflects the light, it could have been selected for its potential contribution to the subtle polychrome marble effects that play a substantial role in the visual aesthetics of the cathedral.

Figure 1: Reliquary of the Nails of Saint Clare in Assisi
Figure 2: The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 43 HS
Figure 3: Andalusian marble capital, set on the roof of Pisa cathedral
تحف عربية في أيد غربية

النوعية: كاتب إخباري

العنوان: تحت الرياح الثقافية

التاريخ: 21IOS11

النص:

لا يمكن فهم الشعر العربي الحديث إلا من خلال المكتبة العربية الحديثة. هذه المكتبة تضم مجموعة من الأسماء التي تجسد نشأة الشعر العربي الحديث، وهي تشمل أسماء مثل: بريدة العمري، هبة عبد الجليل، فؤاد عبد الحكيم، وعيسى عبد الحكيم.

الشعر العربي الحديث هو نتاج من التوجهات الأدبية الجديدة التي تشكلت في القرن العشرين، والتي تتميز بتنوع الأشكال واللغات والأدبيات. ومن بينها الشعر الإثيوبي، الذي يعتبر من بين الأشكال الأدبية الحديثة التي تجسّد نشأة الشعر العربي الحديث.

الأعمال الأدبية العربية الحديثة هي تجسيد لروح النزاع، وتعبر عن الصراعات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والسياسية. وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجسد في الأعمال الأدبية الحديثة، وهي تجد...
ولا تؤثر النتيجة على القدرة على الانتصاب، وحتى بعد أن يتأثر الوليد، فإن النتيجة لن تؤثر على القدرة على الانتصاب.

وعلى الرغم من ذلك، فإن النتائج الجماعية هيا أيضاً، فبدلاً من

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