varying width. Typical motifs include inscriptions, pseudo-inscriptions, and large birds and animals on a vegetal background. Many of these same features appear on jars and albarelli decorated in the cheaper technique of underglaze blue and black on a white slip. The production of lesser vessels appears to have ceased in the fifteenth century, either as a result of Timur’s destruction of Damascus or, more likely, increased competition from Spain.

The Mamluks inherited a rich tradition of glass manufacturing in Egypt and Syria. Coloristic effects had long been a specialty of glass produced in the region, and the wide range of colored glass used in the Ayyubid period decreased under the Mamluks, when the techniques of enameling and gilding predominated. Decorative elements were outlined in red enamel and filled with white, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink. The enamel was applied cold and fixed by firing at a low temperature, the same technique used in the production of enameled metalware and ceramics. 

These techniques, which had been invented earlier, were fully exploited in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in glasswares destined for domestic consumption and export. Excavations at such sites as Pusst and Qasr ed-Din on the Red Sea have produced examples of simple wares intended for domestic use or as shipping containers. Luxury wares have been found in European church treasuries; others were commissioned by the Rasulid sultans of the Yemen, and some are even said to have been found in China, all testifying to the high esteem in which these products were held. Almost any shape could be produced, including goblets, tall bottles, pilgrim flasks, perfume-bottles, vases, footed bowls, and basins, but Mamluk glass-makers are best known for lamps.

The most characteristic type of lamp is about forty centimeters high and has a wide and flaring neck, sloping shoulders with six applied handles, bulbous body, and prominent foot or footing. A small glass container for water and oil with a floating wick would have been inserted inside the lamp, and the lamp itself would have been suspended by chains from the ceiling. Sometimes an egg-shaped object of glass would have held the chains together above the lamp. Thousands of such lamps must have been commissioned to illuminate the mosques and charitable foundations established by the Mamluks. The fifty lamps bearing the name of Hasan, for example, can be only a fraction of the number originally commissioned for the sultan’s enormous complex in Cairo. Although Damascus is traditionally considered to have been the preeminent center of glass production, Cairo may also have been important. In general, decorative developments on glasswares follow those of inlaid metal: figural compositions common in the early Mamluk period increasingly gave way to bands of cartouches and roundels filled with inscriptions and arabesques.

The decoration on lamps of Hasan’s reign show the full repertoire of motifs developed by Mamluk artists. Some pieces have lozenge-shaped panels with floral motifs or overall decoration with chinoiserie lotus and peony flowers amidst lush vegetal arabesques, but more typically they have bold inscriptions, such as the Light Verse (Koran 24:35) on the neck and a dedication to the sultan on the upper part of the body [138]. The inscription on the neck is written in a tall cursive script in blue enamel outlined in red. In contrast, the inscription on the body is written in a thick cursive script in reserve against a blue ground. The letters, which are piled one on top of the other, are outlined in red. When the lamp was lit, the sultan’s name and titles would have glowed with divine light, a stunning visual realization of the beautiful Koranic metaphor inscribed above:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a wick-holder [wherein is a light] (the light in a glass the glass as it were a glittering star).
In the fifteenth century there was a significant decline in the quality of glass manufactures, although its exact cause, whether plague, deportation of workers, or foreign competition, has yet to be determined. Enamelled tableware, such as goblets and bowls, seem to have gone out of production, and the few surviving lamps suggest that the quality of painting had declined substantially. A European visitor to the Holy Land in 1480 tells how vessels from Murano were sent to Jaffa and Damascus for one of Qaitbay's functionaries. The Renaissance decorative motifs and the inlay inscription on the one enamelled lamp from Qaitbay's foundation in Cairo show that it was of European manufacture.64

Despite the esteem in which textiles were held, comparatively few survive from the Mamluk period, probably because textiles are inherently fragile and were commonly shredded. Those that do survive illustrate the privatization of the textile industry in Egypt over the years of Mamluk rule. The Black Death and recurrent plagues are known to have decimated skilled workers in Alexandria's cloth factory and vitally affected production. The number of weavers in Alexandria is reported to have fallen from about twelve to fourteen thousand in 1394 to eight hundred in 1454. Furthermore, disruptions in trade wrought by the Mongol conquests made Iraqi and Iranian raw materials, particularly bsysi, very scarce. Egypt had always been famous for its textiles, particularly tapestry-woven woollens and linens, but loom technology had changed markedly, probably in the thirteenth century, when experienced weavers fleeing either the Mongols in Iraq and Iran or the Christian reconquest of Spain brought the drewloon to Egypt.55 Apart from the introduction of the drewloon, which was already in use in the fourteenth century,56 the period is characterized by technological stagnation. European woollens were cheaper and better. The dumping of European textiles, which had begun almost at the beginning of the Mamluk period, became a major factor in the economic life of the Near East.57

It has long been thought that government tiszat factories were the only ones with the potential resources to adapt to new competition, but those of Cairo and Alexandria were closed in the early fifteenth century, and private manufacturers lacked sufficient patronage and risked government confiscation. The closure of the state tiszat factory at Alexandria during the reign of Barsbay, however, did not indicate Egypt's penury and decay; rather production was shifted to Cairo and privatized. The reasons for this are unclear; perhaps it was due to the vulnerability of the Delta to pirates. Mamluk chronicles make it abundantly clear that the sultan continued to distribute precious cloths and imported furs to his subjects until the end of the regime.58

The richness of Mamluk silks can be seen in a splendid blue textile with a gilt pattern highlighted with white, which was eventually made into a mantle [134] for a statue of the Virgin in Spain. The ground is satin and the pattern worked in plain-weave with gilt membrane wrapped around silk thread. The complex ogival layout is composed of large poppy blossoms and small eight-pointed medallions on a vine

tried which frames tear-shaped lotus blossoms. The lotuses have Arabic inscriptions in mirror reverse; the medallions are inscribed in a horizontal band. A related textile in London has the same pattern in green and the medallions are inscribed with the title al-sharif.59 This pattern was depicted ca. 1420 in an Enthroned Madonna with Saint by the Master of the Bamboino Vispo, suggesting that the textile dates to the reign of al-Shahid Barsbay (r. 1422-72).60 The ogival patterns on Mamluk silks were undoubtedly inspired by those on Yuan silks, which were highly prized in Islamic lands, but it is still unclear whether these ogival patterns on Chinese textiles were themselves made specifically to cater to the taste of the Islamic world. In any event, the delicate and naturalistic patterns of Chinese originals were transformed into bold and abstract ones in the Mamluk derivations. In addition to ogival patterns, striped silks became increasingly popular in Mamluk times, and their prestige led them to be copied in textiles produced under the Naṣirids in Spain (see Chapter 7).

Reasonably fine examples of Koran manuscripts were produced at the turn of the fifteenth century, but then the quality of illumination suffered a marked change for the worse, although calligraphy remained fine. Illumination was heavily dependent on earlier styles; the palette was more limited, pigments declined in quality, and colors became muddied, and easily faded. All this was probably the result of the high cost of imported materials. The shortage of materials also seems to have affected the production of metalwork, for few pieces have survived and those that do are of beaten brass. Openwork rewevenets for wooden doors replaced cast bronze or brass plaques (see Chapter 7). The contemporary historian al-Maqrizi lamented the absence of metalworkers in the markets, and numismatic evidence attests to the shortage of silver and copper.62 The shortage of silver in Egypt may have been the result of increased demand for it in Italy, and henceforth copper fuses and dirhams were the principal currency. The currency was debased and inflation rampant.

LATE PERIOD

Many of the economic problems of the first half of the fifteenth century were overcome during the long and prosperous reign of Qaitbay, who promoted the economic interests of his realm and was well disposed to international trade. His financial resources, however, were followed up by the almost incessant wars he was forced to fight with his neighbors to the north, the Aqquyunli Turcoman and the Ottomans. Under Qaitbay there was a distinct revival in many of the arts, including metalwork, manuscript illumination, and carpet-weaving. In metalwork, such types and techniques as brasses and inlaid pieces, which had not been produced for some fifty years, were revived, perhaps spurred by the sultan's need for prestigious furnishings for the holy shrines of Arabia.63

Five candelsticks made for the Prophet's tomb in Medina have survived.64 They are of traditional form [140] with a truncated conical base, cylindrical neck, and tapering socket; the whole measures just under fifty centimeters high. The organization of the decoration is traditional, with horizontal bands interrupted by large medallions bearing the sultan's epigraphic emblem. The traditional inlay, however, has been replaced by engraving and the addition of a black bunimous paste in the sunken areas to contrast with the polished brass. Apart from some narrow bands of foliage, the decoration is entirely epigraphic and written in a distinctive script, in which the pairs of vertical shafts of the thick thuluth letters rise up and cross each other to form pincers enclosing lotus buds. Pierrerapped thuluth is a characteristic feature of metalwork made for Qaitbay.65 Although many of the pieces inscribed with his name are only incised, a few of the finest are inlaid with gold and silver, showing that Egyptian craftsmen could still equal the quality of work produced a century and a half earlier. A large lobed brass bowl inlaid with silver and gold is perhaps the finest piece surviving from the period [141].66 There are several other bowls of similar shape with faceted sides and engraved and inlaid decoration attributable to the period.67

A magnificent minbar in London [142] bears inscriptions.
with the name of Qf’itayb on the entrance and on the backs of the doors. It was presumably made for Qf’itayb’s madrasa at Qf’at al-Kahsh in Cairo (1460–9), but it may have come from another foundation, for the sultan was a prolific builder and restorer of religious monuments, and an unusually large number of minbars and religious furnishings survived from his reign. Most minbars, including the one made for his funerary complex (116–18) in Cairo, were made of wood, but several were also of marble, such as the one sent to Medina after the fire of 1881, or stone, such as the one prepared in 1485 for the complex of Farid b. Barquq in the Northern Cemetery of Cairo. Fine wooden minbars had been produced in Cairo throughout the fifteenth century, and woodcarvers were accorded high status. The career of Ahmad b. Isa, for example, is particularly long; around 1446 he signed the minbar made for the Mosque of al-Ghanti, which was later transferred to the complex of al-Nasir Barquq, and nearly thirty years later (1479/1480), at Qf’itayb’s request, Ahmad made a high wooden minbar for the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. In 1480–1 Ahmad also signed a minbar made for the madrasa of Abu Bakr b. Muzhir in Cairo. Minbars of the period have the triangular shape, elaborate portal, and speaker’s seat that had been typical for centuries, but they are distinguished by the projecting muqarnas cornice over the portal and the bulbous dome over the seat.

The wooden minbar is remarkable for its superb condition. The frame, which divides the surface into several architectural panels, is composed of large planks decorated with scrolls in shallow relief. The triangular flanks are decorated with a pattern of grooved strapwork radiating from sixteen-pointed stars; the interstitial star-shaped and polygonal fields are filled with ivory panels delicately carved with arabesques and inlaid into wood. Similar panels from either a door or minbar are preserved in New York. 

The balustrades and the vertical panels below the seat are filled with similar strapwork patterns on a smaller scale. The juxtaposition of the bold geometric patterns of the strapwork and the minute arabesque carving of the ivory inlays makes this piece visually striking from near as well as far. The sheer size of this and similar minbars forced designers to adopt architectural solutions for the overall conception, but the minute detail of the carving relates it to the other decorative arts of the period. Inlaid wooden minbars had already been made under the Ayyubids, but under the Mamluks, ivory was added to the varicolored woods, such as ebony and redwood, used for inlays. By the late Mamluk period, ivory seems to have become too expensive for all but the most elevated patrons; a minbar made in 1480–1 for Qf’at al-Ishaq, one of Qf’itayb’s admirers, is replaced by bone. 

Typical compositions were based on strapwork radiating from a central star and are comparable to the astral designs on the frontispieces to earlier manuscripts of the Koran. 

Historical and religious manuscripts and manuals are known to have been made for Qf’itayb, but the finest are manuscripts of the Koran and of Al-Kitab al-durayya ("The pearly stars"), also called Qasidat al-burda ("Ode to the mantle"), a laudatory poem composed by al-Hasari (d. 1260). The poem concerns the incident when the Prophet Muhammad placed his mantle on the shoulders of Ka‘b b. Zuhayr, a poet who had composed an ode in praise of Muhammad and recited it to him. No other Arabic poem attained such renown, and it became traditional in the Mamluk period to embellish the text with a tabulis (lit. "making of fire"), a poetic form in which each line of the
Qanibay. Although undated, an identical manuscript, also in Dublin, was made for Qanibay’s crony Yashbak min Mahdi (see Chapter 7) in 1472-3. The double-page frontispiece of the Qanibay manuscript shows how manuscript illumination had changed since the late fourteenth century: the typical astral panel in the center has been replaced by large foliated medallions bearing the name of the sultan (right) and a blessing on him (left). The traditional tripartite arrangement has been maintained, but the design has been simplified, with fewer border bands and less contrast between the size of panels, although there is greater contrast between epigraphic and arabesque motifs. The restricted palette comprises somewhat muddy tones of red, blue, green, and dull gold. The poor colors are typical of late-fifteenth-century work.

One of the most distinctive products associated with the patronage of the later Mamluk is the knotted carpet, and a group of several dozen carpets with a distinct technical structure and design are commonly called “Mamluk.” They are all wool, with the exception of one stunning example in silk. They have S-spun warps, usually three or four plied with a Z twist; alternate warps are depressed. The asymmetrical knots are open to the left, normally with three weft passes between rows of knots. The traditional palette includes a lace-dyed red, rich blue, and green, to which yellow and ivory are occasionally added. The design is always based on a field of one or more large octagonal motifs within a border of alternating cartouches and roundels. Typical smaller carpets (1.0 by 1.6 meters) have a field with a single octagon flanked by two narrow rectangular strips; larger carpets (up to 11 by 4 meters) have three or uniquely five octagons in a line filling the field. Filler motifs, such as octagons, hexagons, triangles, umbrella-shaped leaves, cypress trees, and cups, create a dense, almost kaleidoscopic effect.

The localization of these “Mamluk” carpets has been a matter of lively scholarly debate, and at one time or another they have been assigned to Damascus, Rhodes, Syracuse, Spain, Cairo, and the Maghreb, but Cairo seems the most likely. Historical sources show that already by the fourteenth century carpets were used in Cairo and made there. For example, when the palace of the wealthy amin and sugar industrious Sayf al-Din Qawwam was pillaged in 1347, the booty included carpets from Anatolia, Diyarbakir, Shiraz, sixteen pairs from the royal factories at Cairo, and four pairs of priceless silk carpets. In 1474 the Venetian traveler Giuseppe Barbaro mentioned that the carpets produced in Cairo were inferior to those of Tabriz. Two Mamluk carpets, furthermore, bear emblems directly associated with amins in the court of Qanibay. Production of Mamluk carpets in the fifteenth century may have been encouraged by virtually continuous warfare in eastern Anatolia, where the domains of the Ottomans, Mamluks, and Aqquyunlu were in constant conflict. This was a major center of carpet production, and workmen may have emigrated to the safer haven of Cairo. Another reason for attributing these carpets to Egypt is that Italian inventories of the sixteenth century refer to them as “Cairino.” Finally, Cairo continued to be an important center of carpet manufacture in the sixteenth century, for in 1583 the Ottoman sultan Murad III ordered eleven weavers from Cairo to move to the court in Istanbul, bringing with them almost two tons of dyed wool. Three other types of carpets technically related to the “Mamluk” group, “Paras-Mamluk,” “Chessboard,” and “Ottoman Court,” may have been produced virtually anywhere in the eastern Mediterranean during the sixteenth century (see Chapter 16).


Chapter 9

Architecture and the Arts in the Maghrib under the Hafsids, Marinids, and Nasrids

The collapse of the Almohad empire following its catastrophic defeat in 1212 at Las Navas de Tolosa led to the emergence of four regional powers in the Maghrib: three rival Berber dynasties in North Africa—the Hafsids of Tunis (1235-1341), the ‘Abd al-Wadids or Zayyanids of Tlemcen (1136-1354), and the Marinids and Wattasids of Fez (1220-1490) — and the Nasrids of Granada (1232-1492) in southern Spain. Power in North Africa was balanced between the Hafsids in the east and the Marinids in the west, for both claimed to be the rightful heirs of the Almohads. The ’Abd al-Wadids were often caught between their more powerful neighbors and had hardly the opportunity or the money to be major patrons of the arts. The Muslim cities of Spain, such as Córdoba and Seville, fell to the Christians following the Almohad retreat to North Africa, but the mountainous province of Granada came under the control of the Nasrids, who tried to maintain a balance between their powerful neighbors, Christians to the north and Muslims to the south.

The arts of this period in North Africa are best-known through religious buildings and their fittings, not only because court life was less splendid than in Granada, but also because, in the usual fashion, charitable endowments ensured the perpetual upkeep of religious foundations while buildings for secular purposes were often abandoned by succeeding patrons. In Spain, by contrast, succeeding generations destroyed virtually all evidence for the arts associated with the Muslim faith, and knowledge about the arts of this period there rests mainly on monuments identified with the splendid court life. The palaces and furnishings of the Nasrid court were easily adopted by the international culture of princes, appealing to Muslims and Christians alike.

The Hafsids

The Hafsids took their name from Shaykh Abu Hafs Omar (d. 1176), a disciple of the founder of the Almohads, whose descendants served as governors in the province of Ifriqiya (modern Tunisia). One of them, Abu Zakariya Yahya I (r. 1228-46), declared his independence and established his capital at Tunis. Under the Hafsids, Kairouan, the traditional capital, lost its political preeminence, and such coastal cities as Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax were reinvigorated by trade and diplomatic relations which flourished across the Mediterranean. The population was swelled by the influx of refugees from Spain, who brought many of their artistic traditions with them and made Tunis a great artistic and intellectual center. The close relations the Hafsids maintained with the Mamluks of Egypt brought artistic ideas from the eastern Islamic lands as well, and Hafsid art represents a meeting of east and west.

The Mosque of the Qasba in Tunis (1231-5) was begun several years before the Hafsid governor declared his independence from the Almohads. The building stands squarely in the long tradition of Islamic architecture in the region, with stone construction and a prayer hall roofed with groin vaults resting on columns. The new impact of decorative features from further west, whether Morocco or Spain, can be seen in the muqarnas and the elaborately carved stucco used in the dome over the bay in front of the mihrab. The square stone minaret [145], which is decorated with latticework panels and crowned by a lantern roofed with a pyramid of green tiles, is distinctly Almohad in inspiration and evidently another import from the west. The closest parallel is the minaret of the Mosque of the Qasba in Marrakesh, built some fifty years before.

Although Kairouan, once capital of the Muslim west, had been relegated to a provincial city, the Hafsids refurbished its congregational mosque in recognition of its revered status as one of the oldest mosques in Islam. They reconstructed the galleries surrounding the courtyard and remodeled some of the portals. The Ibâb Lalla Rihana [146] on the east was constructed on the order of Abu Hafs ’Umar in 1294. Known after a local female saint buried nearby, it is a projecting rectangular pavilion covered with a fluted dome. The general form and technique of construction are undoubtedly inspired by the projecting portal at the mosque in the nearby coastal town of Mahdia (977), but the blind arcading, crowning merlons, and carved plaster arabesques on the soffits of the arches are again derived from Hispano-Moresque models.

In addition to constructing mosques, the Hafsids were also responsible for introducing the madrasa into the Maghrib. Established under official or private sponsorship in the Islamic east in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to combat the spread of heterodoxy and strengthen orthodoxy, these theological colleges had become particularly popular in the central and eastern Islamic lands when housing the mausoleum of the founder, thereby combining piety works with the perpetuation of the patron’s name. In the Islamic west, however, the funerary madrasa was almost unknown, for according to Maliki law, which was prevalent there, an individual was prohibited from appointing himself administrator of a pious endowment. Most Maghribi madrasas were consequently sponsored by the government, for only the ruler could afford to spend such large sums for purely spiritual rewards.

145. Tunis, Qasba Mosque, Minaret, March 1233
146. Kairouan, Great Mosque, Ibâb Lalla Rihana, 1294