remo per tutti i musulmani, perché qualche cosa di analogo si trova presso alcuni mistici arabi, ma per lo meno per i teologi ortodossi e per i comuni credenti. Nei confronti della Divinità l'uomo non è che uno schiavo tenuto a eseguire tutti gli ordini del suo signore, fra cui vi è anche quello di combattere i miscredenti, i «kāfīr». Ma il musulmano trova difficoltà a credere che gli errori e i peccati degli uomini possano addolorare la Divinità che il trascende di tanto; possono tutt'al più sollevare il Suo sdegno. Il culto del Sacro Cuore è certo estraneo alla mentalità islamica. E questo credente, che si sente tanto insignificante di fronte al suo Dio onnipotente, è perciò poco esposto al pericolo di cadere nella rete dello «Stratègea Satanae», di volersi ergere a vendicatore della Divinità. E si convince facilmente che gli «ahlul-hawā'» restano malgrado tutto degli «ahlul-kiblāh», i cristiani e gli ebrei degli «ahlul-kīlāb», e che il giudizio finale spetta solo al suo Signore. Ma la nostra è di nuovo una ipotesi che dovrebbe essere verifica ta attraverso lo studio metodico della vastissima letteratura teologica islamica. Per uno studio di questo genere che esigerebbe anni di lavoro non abbiamo più l'età e possiamo solo sperare che questi nostri suggerimenti siano ripresi ed esaminati da qualcuno dei numerosi discepoli del Maestro a cui queste pagine sono dedicate.

ERNST J. GRUBE

REALISM OR FORMALISM: NOTES ON SOME FATimid LUSTRE-PAINTED CERAMIC VESSELS

Of the many puzzling aspects of Fatimid figurative art the question of realism is perhaps the most elusive. A number of scholars have claimed that during the Fatimid period the depiction of the human figure displayed "early realism"; it has also been claimed that in the Fatimid period iconographic themes were introduced which were no longer devoted to the depiction of princely exploits but to "the life of the people". This concept, most recently restated by Richard Ettinghausen in the reissue of his Arab Painting, was first put forward by the same scholar in his essay Early realism in Islamic art, published more than twenty five years ago. When it appeared, it stimulated similar statements by other scholars who, in one way or another, confirmed Ettinghausen's view. It is evident that this interpretation has found general acceptance; to the best of my knowledge it has never been seriously questioned.

3 Richard Ettinghausen, Early realism in Islamic art, in Studi orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida, I, Rome, 1956, pp. 250–273; see also the same scholar's "The dance with zoomorphic masks and other forms of entertainment seen in Islamic art, in Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A.R. Gibb, Leiden, 1965, pp. 211–224, pls. II–XXV, where he says (p. 223): "...they (dancers with zoomorphic masks) can be traced in Egypt under the Fatimids in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when artists were for the first time able and willing to render extensive scenes of daily life and to do so with a fair amount of realism".
5 See, however, Grabar's study quoted in the preceding note, p. 181, for some critical remarks.
Such a conception of realism applies to two different but in the view of the scholars concerned closely interrelated aspects: style, and subject matter. Realism is expressed in realistic renderings of detail of the human figure, its garments and its movement and actions; realism is also expressed in the choice of subject matter, in the attention paid to events of everyday-life of ordinary people rather than to the life of the court, with its long established ceremonial activities. Both aspects of realism may be present in one and the same work; it may even be deduced that realism of style is a result of a realistic subject, and it would seem that this is, ultimately, what is perhaps meant by those who have used the term in relation to Fatimid art. But they do not always make a clear distinction between these two aspects of realism.

Ettinghausen takes a lustre painted bowl with a dancing girl as an example of "realism" in the sense in which he defines it, realism in the rendering of the figure's movements, its physical presence, its garment. In comparing the rendering of the dancer (Pl. Ia) with those of the celebrated Samarra wall-painting (Pl. IIIb) Ettinghausen states:

"By contrast the graceful figure, shows the body in vivid action, with the left leg thrust forward and held vertical, while the right leg is pulled along close to the ground. The counterpoised position of the arms—the left curved downwards, the right held straight up—stresses the movement, as do the long sleeves with which the girl is performing her dance. The bend of the head to the side, its slight turn to the back also emphasizes movement. The tightly fitting garment reveals the human body, this being in sharp contrast to the loose, sacklike clothes of the Samarra dancers which hide their bodies. Even the folds, though not too realistically rendered, have an air of naturalness about them and are therefore unlike the often unrealistic and purely symbolic folds of the Samarra dancers." 6

These are purely stylistic considerations, and Ettinghausen is obviously aware that the subject belongs entirely into the realm of the symbolic princely cycle. He even points to the fact that very similar dancers are common in Fatimid art, but he claims that it does not "matter that the position of the dancer ... presents a standard rendition of movement." 7 It would seem however, that as regards the question of realism in Fatimid art, this matters very much indeed, because a comparison with other representations of dancers in Fatimid painting shows, it is not only the movement that represents a standard form but almost all other aspects of the figure in question as well. The physical type of the girl, the specific garment, the manner of rendering the garment folds, the 'clinging' of the garment to the body to the point of indicating the girl's round thighs and breasts, the dance step, the position of the arms, the use of small scarves, the totally unproportional rendering of secondary objects "floating" on the background against which the figure is shown—all these are elements which can be found in exactly the same manner on other lustre painted bowls of the Fatimid period, of which the one in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo is an excellent example (Pl. Ib). 8 The bowl is decorated with a dancing girl that clearly derives from the Samarra dancers as a principal source; in certain aspects it is, in fact, closer to that source than the figure on the bowl in the Freer Gallery, but the girl is still executed in the same "realistic" manner as that of the Freer bowl. How little the painter knew, however, or even aspired to true realism can be seen in one practically identical detail, the odd and totally unanatomical placement of the girls left breast which appears almost on her shoulder. Both pieces clearly have a common source of inspiration which seems quite certainly not the dancing girl at the Fatimid court, observed and rendered true to life by the painter, but an artistic convention for the representation of such figures.

The analysis of the dance actually represented may help to clarify this question. Georges Marquis has described the rendering of this dance in Fatimid art in the following manner:

"... une attitude quasi stéréotypée; c'est une marche à grands pas ou quelques chose d'analogue à la "fête" de l'escrimeur au fleuret, une jambe en avant posant verticalement, une jambe en arrière presque parallèle au sol. Parfois la jambe de devant ne touche pas terre, et le danseur semble bondir. La tête se retourne en arrière; les bras s'arrondissent l'un en l'air, l'autre en bas, et les mains agissent des objets allorqués que l'on peut aisément reconnaître pour des foudres. La danse des foudres, que l'on fait flotter d'avant en arrière, est pratiquée depuis la Perse jusqu'au Maghreb."

This describes very well the form of dance executed by the two girls in the Samarra wall painting, and a good many Fatimid dancers as well as the one on the Cairo lustre bowl (Pl. Ib), those on the Cappella Palatina ceiling (Pl. II), the Florence ivory plaques (Pl. IIIa), and numerous others. That performed by the girl represented on the Freer bowl (Pl. Ia), on the other hand, could not be described in exactly the same words. In fact, there is a fundamental difference, inasmuch as the girl's left leg

---

6 Ettinghausen, Early realism (quoted in Note 3), pp. 233-254.
7 Ibid., p. 235.
8 Inv. No. 15950. Illustrated in Mohamed Mustafa, Unity in Islamic Art, Cairo, 1958, p. 12, Fig. 9.
9 Georges Marquis, Les figures d'hommes et de bêtes dans les bois sculptés d'époque fatimite conservés au Musée Arabe du Caire, Étude d'iconographie mauresque, in Mélanges Maqdisi, III, Cairo, 1940, p. 251.
is not stretched out vertically in relation to the ground (as is the case in the figures just mentioned) but is bent, pulled up so that thigh and lower leg touch in a doubled-up position. One could argue that the step represented is not basically different from that performed by the other dancers but that we have here the rendering of another movement of the same dance; or, that the right leg appears to be bent but is really meant to be understood as being vertically in relation to the ground while the left is pulled up in the manner similar to the right leg of the other dancers.

A quick comparison with a large number of dancers represented in Fatimid art shows, however, that Marquais' description refers to one (and for that matter the rarer form of) dance movement, while the other is that represented in the Freer bowl. The essential questions then are: whence comes this dance, that is, where else has it been represented, and what form of dance does it actually depict?

The first dance, that rendered in the Samarra wall painting and the Cairo lustre bowl (Pl. 16), finds an almost immediate parallel in classical art. In Egypt, Coptic textiles offer the most convincing parallels: the dancing figures (always women) are rendered very much in the fashion of the Samarra dancers (Pl. IIIb), and other classical parallels of exactly the same dance step can easily be found in a variety of contexts (Pl. IV) 10. The second form of dance, which may be described as a kind of stamping movement, also finds parallels in classical tradition, as a late classical ivory from Egypt (Pl. V) 11 shows. But the extreme bent position of both the dancer's legs in the Fatimid representation is missing and one wonders whether the true background for this dance is not to be found in non-classical, Central Asian tradition. Several representations of dancers in paintings of the Tang period resemble the dancers discussed. Especially striking is the painting on the pectoral guard of a bhum (lute) in the Shoso-in at Nara, dating from the eighth century 12. The painting shows a large


12 For a good colour illustration see A Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Oriental Arts, Ed. Kadokawa Shoten, New York, 1969, Vol. 1: Japan, col. pl. 72; the painting has been discussed by Oswald Sirin, Central Asian Influence in Chinese Painting of the Tang Period, in «Arts Asiatiques», III, 1956, pp. 3–21, especially pp. 20 ff., illustration on
are sharply bent at the knee, a form that is reproduced in almost identical form by the author of a small sketch in the Keir Collection, almost certainly of the Fatimid period (Pl. VII). Another early rendering of the dance with bent knees, which we believe to be the prototype of the dancing figure on the Freer bowl (Pl. Ia), is shown in the famous 10th-century relief from Ghazni with its row of male dancers (Pl. VIII), a type that lives on almost without alteration into the Seljuk period.

It may not be possible, without further investigation, to decide whether we are here dealing with two essentially different dance forms or instead with two different moment of the same dance sequence, the fact remains that in both cases the representations of dancers in Fatimid art, especially Fatimid painting, follow old, well-established traditions, both in terms of the dance itself and in terms of its representation in the visual arts.

If the rendering of this particular dance follows a tradition several centuries old, we may wonder how much actual observation – or to put it in the term here under discussion – how much “realism” is actually conveyed by the Fatimid image. This is a particularly important question: for there can be little doubt that something very much like the dance depicted in Fatimid art was actually performed in Fatimid Egypt, and a painter might have seen, and consequently depicted it on the basis of his observation. That he appears to have chosen instead the standard image would seem to be quite indicative for the question of realism resulting from the observation of real life on the part of the Fatimid artist. One

---

18 One is struck by the close parallel of this figure to those of the running athlete in ancient Greece rendered in the so-called Knieschamächen (see Erich Beihe, Buch und Bild im Altertum, Leipzig und Vienna, 1945, p. 45, fig. 26) which is transmitted into medieval times through the various representations of the constellation of Eonginos in the disguise of Hercules (see ibid., p. 45, fig. 25, and p. 46, fig. 27 for medieval examples). The same figure still appears in the illustrations of Al-Sufi’s Book of the Fixed Stars, where, in fact, Hercules is represented in exactly the same way: see Emmy Wellenz, An Early al-Sufi Manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, in Ars Orientalis, III, 1959, pp. 1-26, pl. 2, fig. 5, which could have been a model for the similar representations in Fatimid art. If this should turn out to be correct, an ancient classical tradition may well have to be recognized as the basic source also for this scheme.


21 See Giovanna Ventrone, Una brocca selguchi da con ser di danza, in Arte Orientale in Italia, Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale, Rome, 1, 1971, pp. 31-46, with ample documentation of the theme in Seljuk art. See also Mehdi Bahrami, Gurum Fainenc, Cairo, 1949, pl. 5, for a similar representation in the Kitab al-Aghiti.

---

23 Ibid., p. 56.
the personal observation of such an event (wherever it took place, in the
town square or at court) but he might have freely drawn on a long-existing
artistic tradition. Finally, a representation of wrestler on a Hispano-
Islamic ivory patera of the 10th century made for Prince al-Mughira, son
of the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III, in A.D. 968 (Pl. XI) - that is, on
an object of highly ceremonial function and significance - would indicate
that the subject formed part also of official courtly iconography.

An even stronger case for a symbolic, or at least not "popular",
interpretation of such a scene can be made for the remarkable Fatimid
lustre bowl in the Keir Collection, (Pl. XIlA) generally considered to re-
represent the preparation for a cock-fight, a typical "village square sub-
ject." 26 But Herbert Hoffmann in a brilliant study has recently drawn
attention to a remarkably long-lived iconographical tradition that suggests
that the "cock-fight" has to be seen in a totally different light. 27 The
representation of men with fighting-cocks does not refer to popular enter-
tainment but instead to a specific line of thought which uses the seemingly
popular motif as a complex and rather esoteric symbol. The motif can
be traced back to a relief on the throne of the High Priest of Dionysos
in the amphitheatre in Athens (4th century B.C.). 28 which, curiously and
interestingly enough, had been dated into the Roman period in the same
misleading assumption that the motif reflected an interest in popular the-
mes inconceivable during the classical period in which the theatre
was built. Hoffmann has shown, however, that the subject has nothing whatever
to do with popular sport but is clearly a symbol of the fighting spirit, to
which is added at times the complementary symbol of virility; it ultimately
becomes a specific symbol of the agon (which explains its appearance on the
Dionysiac priest's throne). 29 But the motif at times acquires a more specific
ly erotic and homosocial meaning. In this context it appears on
objects that are used as gifts from older men to youths with whom they are
in love and whom they are actively courting (Pl. XlIlB).

While Hoffmann has shown that some of these meanings (and, conse-
quently, also the representations of fighting-cocks) are lost in the later

26 See Ernst Kühnel, Die Islamischen Ellenbeinschul protesters, VIII-XIII. Jahrhundert,
Berlin, 1973, No. 30, and Pl. XVIII; see also John Beckwith, Caioets from Cordoba,
London, 1960, pls. 16-17, and pp. 18-20; he identifies the two men as wrestlers.
27 For the object see Ernst J. Grube, Islamic Pottery of the Eighth to the Fifteenth
28 Herbert Hoffmann, "Hellenismus in Athen. Zur Biologie einer attisch Bild-
29 ibid., p. 196, fig. 1, and p. 197, fig. 2.
30 See the personification of Agon on a Corinthian mirror - a winged youth with a

25 See Irene H. Forsyth, The Theme of Cock/fighting in Burgundian Romanesque Sculp-
31 See Ernest J. Grube, Studies in the Survival and Continuity of Pre-Muslim Tra-
ditions in Egyptian Islamic Art, in «Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt»,
I, 1962, pp. 75-97, fig. 29, a-f, where certain manerisms in the depiction of the human
physiognomy in an early 14th-century manuscript of the Automata are traced back to
Roman times. See also ibid., pl. XX, figs. 21-24, and pl. XLI, Figs. 25-26. A similar

periods in Greece, largely it would seem as a result of a fundamental change in Greek society, the existence of this iconographic theme in clas-
sic and late classical art, surviving actually into the medieval period
in the West, is, of great interest for our question. Because, while it
may be difficult at this moment to prove the exact meaning of the fighting-
cocks in the Fatimid representation, the ancient tradition of the theme as
such and the complex symbolism that is attached to it through the centu-
ries, would make it highly probable that also in the Fatimid period such
a representation has nothing to do with popular entertainment but refers
to an esoteric, possibly erotic, at any event courtly and "official" context.
It is undoubtedly no coincidence that the same distinction in age is made
between the two men holding the fighting-cocks that appears already as
an important if not to say vital element in the representations of the same
subject in ancient classical art.

To return to the starting point of this brief consideration - realism in
Fatimid art - one must conclude that, at least for the question of the
choice of subject, a true orientation to the events of the "real world"
arounding the artist that could have offered subjects for his artistic rep-
resentations is to be excluded. The choice of subject appears to have
been dictated by the requirements of the ruling class for whom the artist
was working, and determined, even in details of representation - the exact
definition of a dance step, the specific grip of the wrestler's clinch, the
identification of the age of the men engaged in the "preparation for a
cock-fight" - by well-established traditions of symbolic significance and
formal articulation that left little, if any freedom to the artist's rendering
of the subject.

On the other hand, when it comes to the actual Fatimid manner or
style of representing at least some of these subjects (the wrestlers, the
men with the fighting-cocks), there is no question that a certain amount
of realism is employed. But is it a true realism, that is, a style and manner
developed on the basis of the actual observation of real life? Or is this
manner not instead fully indebted to an ancient classical tradition still
fully alive in Mamluk Egypt, where painters of the 14th century still em-
ployed technical manerisms that had been in use since Roman times? 31
Fatimid painting is clearly heir to two great traditions: the Abbasid, as exemplified in the dancing-girl pictures, so clearly derived from the manner of painting current in Baghdad and Samarra; and the classical, realistic manner that "introduces" (but only seemingly so) an awareness of "real life" into Islamic art. This realism is as formal, as standardized and codified, as the Asian tradition of Abbasid painting and it only appears to be realistic since it renders objects and events of the real world in an artistic language that - originally - was developed on the basis of true observation of this world. In 10th-century Egypt it has become a highly successful but nevertheless totally traditional mannerism.

Plate IV

Tapestry Weave from Egypt, 4th-5th century. Leningrad, Hermitage Museum.

Plate V

b) Slip-painted Ceramic Bowl with a Dancer. Iran, Nickapur, 10th century. Tehran, Foroughi Collection. Dimensions: 190 mm.

Sketch Drawing of a Dancer. Egypt, 10th-12th century. London, Keir Collection, No. 114. 83 × 76 mm.

a) Lustre-painted Ceramic Bowl with Wrestlers. Egypt, 10th–12th century. Cairo, Museum of Islamic Art, Inv. No. 9689. Dm. 383 mm.


a) Lustre-painted Ceramic Bowl with Two Men with Fighting Cocks. Egypt, 10th-12th century. London, Keir Collection, No. 88. Dm. 237 mm.

b) Detail of Black-Figure Painted Greek Amphora with Fighting Cocks and an Older and a Younger Man holding Fighting Cocks. 6th century BC. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. No. 89.273.