Ceramics

Because the basic function of the pot is that of a food container, it is automatically associated with sustenance and human survival, and it is therefore natural that these vital aspects of its nature should be reflected in its decoration. Thus the decoration on the most ancient Near Eastern pottery can be explained in propitiatory and prophylactic terms: to ensure good harvests, rain, an ever-increasing herd or flock etc., and to prevent the opposite, by the use of symbols understood by the gods.

An intuitive belief in the efficacy of particular forms of decoration as protection or wish-fulfilment may well explain the appearance of certain animals, or combinations of animals, and symbols on Islamic pottery. The Abbasid pottery of 9th- and 10th-century Mesopotamia is particularly rich in non-figurative decoration, some of which is certainly of prehistoric Mesopotamian and Near Eastern origin. An interesting example is the large polychrome lustre plate in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Studies of ancient Persian pottery have suggested that the quartered square, the checkered design, and probably the trees or plants growing from the central intersection all have lunar associations, the quarters representing the four quarters of the moon which was a powerful Water symbol. Similarly, because in Islamic art the quantity of things depicted was rarely accidental (to the extent that one art historian refers to an 'aesthetic of numbers'), the division of the rim into eight segments is not without importance. Eight-sided figures presumably had some astral reference, that is the seven heavenly bodies and the region of the Fixed Stars. For the Muslim potter of course the significance of the lunar symbol may have been lost; he probably considered it a simple good luck sign.

At the same time our plate has numerous specifically Islamic references, the most important being the use of lustre. Lustre was one of the Islamic potter’s most important discoveries. Invented in Egypt shortly after the Muslim conquest, it was imported to Abbasid Iraq in the 8th century and used both there and in Iran in Seljuk times (12th and 13th centuries), and under the Safavids (17th century). It was also employed in the decoration of Egyptian Fatimid pottery (11th and 12th centuries) and in that of Muslim Spain, making it a truly ‘international’ element of Islamic pottery.

This and other international elements predomi-
nate in the decoration of a large ceramic vase from 13th-century Damascus: calligraphy, interlace, foliate arabesques and the blue-and-gold colour combi-
nation are basic ingredients of Islamic design, though their employment here is quite original. At other times peculiarly local forms could almost totally overwhelm the decoration of pottery, the naturalistic flora of Isnik ware for example, or the figure painting of Persian Seljuk work.

Because Chinese ceramics were universally admired throughout the Near East to which they had been exported since early Islamic times, Muslim potters strove repeatedly, presumably at the request of patrons, to imitate some of its qualities. However, it has been pointed out that this was not a continual aspiration towards a single goal, but sporadic imitation of certain aspects. In 9th-century Mesopotamia T’ang glazed wares were copied, then under the Seljuk attempts were made to reproduce fine hard porcelain resulting in the superb Seljuk white ware of 12th-century Iran. On later occasions only decoration was copied; sometimes the entire design and colour (to the extent that Persian 17th-century blue-and-white ware was exported to Europe by the Dutch as Chinese), at other times only a small portion of a design may be of Far Eastern inspiration.

From our references to Islamic pottery, in this and other chapters, it should be apparent that the subject is one of immense complexity. While we can judge a piece of Islamic pottery using the same simple criteria that we would apply to any work of art, assessing whether its shape, colour and design
appeal to us or not, obviously for its maker and owner those aspects would have aroused feelings and evoked memories quite different from our own. In conclusion we might take a piece of pottery such as the fine lustre-painted bowl from 15th-century Valencia, and point out some of the references within its decorative scheme that make it not only an object of great beauty but a complex cultural document with numerous levels of meaning—religious, magical, Iberian and Islamic.

Gold, blue and white are the basis of the international Islamic colour repertoire. At the same time the brownish-gold used here, along with blue and white, are the predominant colors of the Andalusian landscape, where this design originated. The proto-design was probably Mesopotamian, from where pottery had been imported since early Islamic times (a very similar design, a lobed octagon with four pronounced horizontals radiating from an eight-leaved rosette, appears on a 9th-century bowl from Iraq). The entire Valencian decorative scheme is based on the number eight, a figure with powerful cosmological and magical connotations, though the central motif has specifically Iberian Muslim connections: it occurs on the flag of the Almohades and is an almost exact copy of the vaulting system of the mihrab chapel of the Mosque of Cordoba. The two superimposed squares surrounded by trees and foliage can be taken as a general allusion to Paradise and a reference to the pool and garden patio at the centre of any Muslim building complex. The zigzag decoration could be a contemporary Gothic heraldic device or an ancient water symbol; whatever its intent the device has existed in the Iberian peninsula from megalithic times, appearing on eye-idols found in Estremadura.
Architecture

Islamic architecture revolves around two very different structures, the mosque and the palace. The mosque is unusual in religious building in that it has no liturgical centre, the mihrab simply indicating the direction of Mecca. Most mosques create a feeling of balanced equilibrium by avoiding concentration on any fixed point or direction. Even when the concept of verticality is employed this is generally counteracted by expansion in a lateral direction. The palace on the other hand is dominated by the personality of the monarch whose audience chamber forms an obvious focal point of the building complex.

Because of the social and political basis of Islam the mosque has rarely been simply a place of worship; it corresponds to church, townhall, school and hostel, all under one roof. Artistically the mosque is of great importance. Not only did the finest calligraphers and decorators embellish its surfaces and mihrab, but all objects of furniture in wood and glass (lamps, minbar or pulpit) etc. were of the highest quality. There were three types of mosque: the open-plan, four-ivan, and domed mosque.

The open-plan mosque
At its simplest the mosque was a rectangular area covered on the side facing Mecca and the direction of Mecca indicated, first by some mark and later by a niche, the mihrab. This was the earliest form of mosque established by Muhammad in Medina and was favoured, with slight modifications, in the areas of Arab settlement around the Mediterranean.

The Great Mosque of Damascus (Umayyad, 705–715) Although built within the area of a Roman temple, the Great Mosque employs the open plan in a form which became standard throughout the Mediterranean. The large courtyard is surrounded on three sides by roofed arcades (Ar riwaq); on the fourth is the prayer hall containing the mihrab. The prayer hall is three aisles deep, the aisles running parallel to the mihrab wall. The aisles are cut across by a raised transept surmounted by a dome. The dome is a modern structure, though apparently there was an earlier one for it is mentioned in the 10th century. The mosque had the first minarets in Islam, originally square towers at the corners of the Roman temple which were adopted by the muezzin (Ar. mu'adhthin) for giving the call to prayer.

The Great Mosque of Qairawan, Tunisia (Abbasid) Most of the present structure dates from the 9th century when the early 7th-century building was replaced. Here there are seventeen aisles at right angles to the mihrab wall but not actually reaching it. The central aisle which runs down to the mihrab is wider and higher than the others and is surmounted by two domes, the earliest one in front of the mihrab and the other at the far end of the aisle near the courtyard. The mosque was built without arcades around the courtyard; these were added later. The massive minaret is the oldest part and stands at the far end of the courtyard not quite in line with the mihrab. The most remarkable part of the building is the mihrab, a concave chapel dating from 862. The interior is faced with marble, grills carved with ornament of late Classical (i.e. Hellenistic) derivation and faced with lustre tiles imported from Iraq, the earliest examples of lustre which can be positively dated. Several of the designs resemble the central symbol on the 9th-century lustre dish from Mesopotamia (see page 70).

The Great Mosque of Samarra (Abbasid 848–852) Built at the one-time Abbasid capital it is the largest mosque known. It uses the open plan but with half-towers all the way round the outside...
The mihrab chapel, the Great Mosque of Cordoba. The mosque was begun in the 8th century and enlarged several times until the end of the 10th. The most important extension was that begun by the Andalusian caliph Al-Hakam II in 961. The present mihrab and the chapel in front of it date from that time. The work was carried out partly by craftsmen from the royal palace of Medina Azahara, and partly by Byzantine artists who are said to have been responsible for the mosaics.

In general the decoration follows the late Classical-Umayyad style of the eastern Mediterranean. The building has several unique and unusual features, particularly the method of supporting the roof by short columns placed one on top of the other.

The Bualand Dwarza (Gate of Victory), Jama Masjid, Fatehpur Sikri, India. The Jama Masjid or Great Mosque is the largest building of the Mughal Emperor Akbar's ceremonial capital Fatehpur Sikri. Begun in 1571 the mosque is a variation of the open-plan Arab type, and is supposed to be based on the Mosque of Mecca. In 1600 the original southern gate was replaced by the enormous Bualand Dwarza which dwarfs the entire city. The gate, which is practically a building in itself, is given an even greater appearance of monumentality by being set at the top of a steep flight of stairs and having its sides recede at an angle. As in contemporary painting Hindu and Islamic elements are combined, reflecting the Emperor's bipartisan approach towards the two communities of Mughal India.
The Mosque of Al-Hakim, Cairo. (Reconstruction after Creswell.)

The Great Mosque of Samarra, Iraq. 848-852. Built on the open-plan principle, this is the largest mosque of Islam (784 x 512 ft). The most striking feature of the mosque is the winding minaret (Al-Mahoya) which is ascended by an external stairway.

Portal ivan of the Maqādī-Shah (the Royal Mosque), Isfahan, Iran, 17th century. Although the painted tilework is slightly inferior to the facade decoration of earlier times, the 'floating' stalactite interior, towering minarets and shimmering colour all combine to create a mood of overwhelming transcendence which totally envelops the person passing through the portal into the mosque beyond. Built by Shah Abbas, the mosque proper is the culmination of the four-ivan court type developed by the Seljuk.

façade. The most famous part of the mosque is the winding minaret some ninety feet high.

The Mosque of Al-Hakim (Fatimid, 990-1013) The mosque follows the design established in Egypt by the Mosque of Ibn Tulun (876-879), which had introduced certain Abbasid features like the huge brick piers round the courtyard and a winding minaret. In the Mosque of Al-Hakim, brick piers are once again employed to support the roofing system of the prayer hall and courtyard arcades. There is a raised transept leading to the mihrab, over which is a dome. At either end of the mihrab wall are two other domes. In line with these, against the façade of the entrance wall, are two minarets. Between the minarets is a fine stone-built portico.

The façade of the mosque is also stone-built and decorated with carved inscriptions and geometric designs. However the finest stone carving of the period is found on the façade of the Mosque of Al-Aqmar, also in Cairo, finished in 1125.

The Mosque of Cordoba (Spanish) This is the most magnificent of all the open-plan mosques. It was begun by Abdal-Rahman I in 785 and continually expanded to accommodate the growing population of Cordoba until the end of the 10th century. The first mosque had eleven aisles at right angles to the mihrab wall, no minaret, and was without arcades around the courtyard. These were added as soon afterwards by Abdal-Rahman's successors.

In 833 the mosque was extended towards the south. There was a similar extension in the time of Al-Hakam II when the present mihrab was added (961-965). Finally in 987-988, eight extra aisles were added to the east making a total of nineteen.

The most remarkable aspect of the mosque is the system of two-storey arcades forming the aisles. By placing two columns on top of the other the roof was given the required height. The device may have been inspired by the Roman aqueducts in Spain, though there is nothing quite like it anywhere.

The four-ivan court mosque The mosque consisting of an open court with an open vaulted hall in each side developed in Iran under the influence of the huge Sasanian ivan at Ctesiphon, which continued to inspire Muslim architects.