THE MUSEUM
OF
ISLAMIC ART
A SHORT GUIDE
BY
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INTRODUCTION

In 1880 the Egyptian Government started to collect objects of art from old mosques and monuments and preserved them in the eastern cloister of the Mosque of el-Hakim. These objects of art were later exhibited in a small museum which was especially erected in the courtyard of the same mosque and was called “The Museum of Arab Art”. It was the architect Herz Bey who wrote the first guide to the Museum in 1895. The objects remained in the Mosque of el-Hakim until they were transferred to the present Museum at Bab-el-Khalq Square which was inaugurated at December 28, 1903.

In 1952 the name of the Museum was changed from “The Museum of Arab Art” to “The Museum of Islamic Art”, as it comprises objects of Islamic art produced in Arab countries as well as in other countries where Islamic art dominated, such as Turkey and Persia. The dates of these objects extend from the beginning of the Islamic period in the 7th century A.D. to the end of the 19th century.
Naturally, a special interest is given to those objects which offer us examples of the arts and cultures that prevailed in Egypt during the Islamic period. Thus, the Museum of Islamic Art can be considered as a scientific centre where the history of the dynasties that ruled over Egypt can be studied through the historical inscriptions written on the objects exhibited. There the visitor would be able to appreciate the different kinds of Islamic art and follow their evolution in other Islamic countries. In fact, the Museum of Islamic Art offers the most valuable and extensive collections of objects of Islamic Art in the world. Some of these objects are unique.

The excavations carried out by the Museum on sites near Cairo were of capital significance. A part of the old city of “al-Fustat” has been discovered and the tracing of its lanes and houses can easily be seen. A house surviving from the Tulunid period, with its walls beautifully decorated in stucco ornament (casts of which are exhibited in the Hall 3), has been excavated. Remains of a bath from the Fatimid period have also been uncovered in its neighbourhood. The walls of this bath were embellished with beautiful fresco designs, which till now are unique of their kind in Islamic art. (They are exhibited in the Hall 4. See fig. 8).

These excavations have supplied the Museum with innumerable objects from the various epochs. These objects and those acquired by purchase or donations illustrate the various decorative arts such as ceramics, glass, woodwork, textiles, stone, metalwork etc., shown in the Museum.

Since then, the collections of the Museum of Islamic Art have increased rapidly and enormously. Some of these collections are incomparable and the most complete in the world, such as enamelled glass lamps, Egyptian ceramics, filters of waterjugs, woodwork, textiles, and inscribed stones.

Some collections have grown to be among the richest in the world such as the collection of Persian and Turkish ceramics and the collection of metalwork objects after the Museum in 1945 had purchased the precious collection owned by Mr. Ralph Harari. The collection of carpets and rugs increased considerably after the purchase of the greater part of the collection of the late Dr. Ali Ibrahim in 1949. (A special list of the carpets and rugs is published at the end of this guide).

We can realize the enormous increase in the collections of the Museum when we consider that the number of registered objects was only 7028 at the time of the inauguration of the present Museum in December 1903. This number amounted to ca. 60,000 registered objects in 1954.

A number of scientific works has been published by the Museum. Now a new series of books has begun under the title “Collections of the Museum of Islamic Art”, each dealing with a certain class of objects preserved in the Museum. The first book of this series on the collection of “Turkish Prayer Rugs” was published in 1953.
ISLAMIC EGYPT

Two centuries had scarcely elapsed since the Arab conquest (641 A.D.), when the Egyptians became completely united in nationality and language. The Moslems became a majority and the Arab language was officially adopted in the administrations. The country had thus become arabicised while the Arab conquerers themselves became naturalized. Therefore at the accession of the Tulunid Dynasty in the second half of the 9th century A.D., the Egyptian nation existed already. This was of great help to Ahmad Ibn Tulun when he declared the independence of Egypt.

This independence brought about an improvement in the economy of the country. Ibn Tulun availed himself of this condition to expand the resources of
Egypt. A new era thus began in the political and artistic life of Egypt, which proved itself worthy of its supremacy over the Arab countries. Ibn Tulun even tried to transfer the residence of the Abbasid Khalif al-Mu'tamid (870—892 A.D.) to Egypt, in order to consolidate Egypt's position and make it the centre of the Moslem world.

This economic expansion and prosperity raised the level of social life in the country and provoked a great love for luxury and pomp. Ibn Tulun himself founded a new capital “al-Qatai”, built an aqueduct which was to convey water from the Nile to his capital, and erected a magnificent palace and a Cathedral-Mosque (Djami') to immortalize his memory.

In the domain of art in Egypt the Tulunid period represents a first attempt towards the creation of a new Egyptian Islamic style. The Tulunids introduced the new Abbasid style of Mesopotamia. This imported style came to be adopted everywhere in the country and was soon assimilated. Some fifty years later were to be admired the art objects of great splendour which Egypt was to produce during the Fatimid period.

After the fall of the Tulunids Egypt returned to the declining power of the Abbasids. Yet it did not completely lose its freedom. The authority of the Abbasid Khalifate was already weakening and incapable of preventing the sub-division of the Arab Empire into smaller states. It was then that the Ikhshidids took over the government of Egypt and established their dynasty. But their reign was only of short duration like that of their predecessors. It did not last as long as that of the Fatimids which continued for two centuries from 969—1171 A.D. The Fatimid Khalifs never failed to show their taste for glory and luxury. They founded the city of “al-Qahira” (the Victorious) (Cairo) north of the old Tulunid capital “al-Qatai”, erected the Mosque of el-Azhar and several others. They surrounded the new city with a wall, part of which included three monumental gates: Bab-en-Nasr (Gate of Victory), Bab-el-Futuh (Gate of Conquest) and Bab-Zuweilah (named after a tribe which came to Egypt under the Fatimids) which are still to be seen.

The Fatimids succeeded in establishing an extensive empire and favoured the growth of a new civilization that came to be felt as far as Sicily, Southern Italy and Spain (Andalusia).

Regarding art, the Fatimids introduced a new style of unprecedented richness. The new style was characterized by originality, exuberance and harmony. The artists excelled in expressing the emotions with astonishing sincerity and in giving to their works an impressive mask of reality which had never been attained before. It was an artistic upheaval of large amplitude.

Museums everywhere are proud to possess objects from the Fatimid period made of rock-crystal or metal, showing great beauty and unusual luxury. Some
textile fabrics of the same period in these museums are of such magnificence that they were formerly preserved among the treasures of churches.
The Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, owns splendid objects that faithfully illustrate the advanced art of Egypt during the Fatimid epoch. The perfection attained is strikingly evident in the carved woodwork surviving from the Fatimid palaces and in the silk, linen and wool fabrics, beautifully decorated and bearing important historical inscriptions. The same standard of perfection is also visible in the manufacture of the various objects of ceramics decorated with designs painted in lustre or engraved under the glaze.

After the extinction of the Fatimid Dynasty, Egypt suffered misery and want for many years. The Crusaders under the command of their king Amaury invaded the country and came as far as the gates of Cairo. In consequence, the Fatimids lost their authority and the power fell into the hands of their powerful vizirs (ministers). One of them, the great Salah-ed-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, dethroned the Fatimid Khalif and came to power.

Thus in 1171 A.D. he founded the dynasty of the Ayyubids which was to fight the Franks. He stopped their invasion and dislodged them from the lands they had conquered. The Ayyubid period was therefore a period of fighting and conquest, traces of which appear in their military works, in the Citadel and the great wall that surrounded the four Moslem capitals: al-Fustat, al-Asfar, al-Qatai, and al-Qahira. The Ayyubid style was consequently stamped with an austere gravity and a sense of perfect poise. These characteristics are particularly noticeable in the vigorous Ayyubid wood-carvings preserved in the Museum (see fig. 5 and 25).

The Ayyubids ruled over Egypt for 80 years. They were overthrown by their militia, “the Mamluks” who seized the government in 1250 A.D.. The reign of these Mamluks was a glorious period in the history of Egypt. They had the possibility of founding a great Egyptian Empire. Many European countries strived to gain the friendship of an Egypt which had grown powerful. Many of the Mamluk sovereigns like Sultan Baibars, Qalawun, his son en-Nasir Muhammad, Barquq and Qait-Bay were highly capable and possessed a great perspicacity in political matters. For instance Sultan Baibars welcomed to Egypt the Abbasid Khalif who was fleeing from Baghdad where the Tartars had overthrown his Khalifate. He proclaimed him Khalif in Egypt, appointed himself the representative of his authority and ruled in his name.
The Mamluk period was a period of capital importance in the history of Egypt and was marked with an overflow of wealth. The Mamluk Emirs lived in prodigious luxury and dwelt in palaces sumptuously furnished. They surrounded themselves with every comfort and enjoyed every refinement. It was a period of magnificent constructions like the Mausoleum of Sultan Qalawun and the Mosques of Sultan Hassan, Barquq and Qait-Bay. Innumerable historical monuments from this period of great splendour are still to be found throughout the city of Cairo. The 14th century A.D. had been in particular a period of pronounced artistic revival. It was the time of finely chased copperwork, inlaid with silver and gold, of enamelled glass and pottery, of woodwork inlaid with ivory and ebony, and of mashrabiyas (turned latticework), of which excellent specimens can be admired in the Museum.

Nevertheless, the discovery of the way to India by the Cape of Good Hope at the end of the 15th century A.D., was a great blow to the economy of Egypt, which the Mamluk Dynasty was unable to overcome. Commerce represented the principal source of the income of the Mamluks and with its downfall they were ruined and lost their fortunes. It was the end of their glory and their reign, when Egypt was conquered by the Ottomans in 1517 A.D.

These political changes had a strong effect on the development of arts in the country. The Ottomans
transferred artists and artisans from Cairo to their capital Istanbul and a rapid degeneration of art took place in Egypt. Towards the end of the 18th century Islamic art in general became influenced by the European Baroque style and thus lost very much of its beauty and originality.

However, nowadays in modern independent Egypt there is a strong attempt towards a revival of Islamic art. Many people are attracted by its beauty and harmony and fascinated by the delicacy and variety of the designs. We notice with great pleasure how amateurs show a remarkable interest in acquiring objects of Islamic art. The collections of the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, have increased rapidly and enormously, so that it now offers the most valuable, complete and incomparable collections of Islamic art objects in the world. Some of these objects are unique. Our aim is to encourage these tendencies so that together with the political revival in Egypt an artistic renaissance of Islamic art occurs. Egypt will again contribute its share to the artistic and cultural evolution of Islam.
THE MUSEUM

The Museum includes 23 Halls for exhibition. The objects exhibited are displayed according to:

1. Style: Halls No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 20, 22 being reserved for objects of the Umayyad, Abbasid and Tulunid, Fatimid, Mamluk, Turkish and Persian styles.

2. Material: the objects exhibited according to material are classified in chronological order: Halls No. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, being reserved for woodwork; 9, 11, for metalwork; 12 for arms; 13, 14, 15, 16, for ceramics; 17 for textiles, the inner part of 17 for ceramic studies; 18 for stone and marble; 19 for the art of the book; 21 for glass.

Owing to the limited place in the Museum the carpets and rugs are exhibited on the walls of the different Halls. A special list is published at the end of this guide, where they are arranged according to their current numbers. This had to be done considering the possibility of moving them from one Hall to another.

The numbers written on the objects in red or white or black are those of registration and are those used in this guide.

The dates given in this guide are of the Christian era (A.D.), unless otherwise stated.

VISITING HOURS

The Museum is open at the following hours:

Winter: November to February: 9 — 16.
March and April: 9 — 16, 30.
Fridays: closed from 11, 15 to 13.

Summer: May to October: 8, 30 — 13.
Fridays: 8 — 11, 15.

ENTRANCE FEE

Winter: P.T. 5.
Summer: P.T. 1.
Fridays: P.T. 2.

HALL 1

In this Hall are exhibited the new acquisitions, whether bought, presented or found during the excavations. Therefore they are of different dates and countries of origin, and are temporary exposed here before being distributed to their respective places elsewhere in the Museum according to style or material.

Some objects in this Hall remain here permanently, among them are three wooden cupboard fronts (No. 2402, 2403, 4238). They are decorated with panels forming geometrical designs. Some alcoves used as shelves were made to keep vessels and household objects. They date from the 16th to 17th century.
A brass chandelier (No. 92) is suspended in the centre of this Hall. It is inscribed with the name of Sultan en-Nasir Hassan ibn Mohamed ibn Qalawun who ascended the throne of Egypt in 1347. The chandelier is octagonal and decorated with perforated star-shaped designs.
One of the cases contains a collection of jewelry of different periods. The Museum owns some outstanding examples with polychrome decoration in cloisonné enamel, a technique popular in Egypt since the Fatimid epoch (fig. 2, 28, 35). One of these pieces is a pendant to a golden necklace (No. 13749) decorated in filigree technique, 13th century.

In the same case is an ivory star-shaped panel (No. 15622) designed in relief with a seated Emir holding a cup and flanked by two attendants. In front of him are two tiger-like animals (fig. 41). Seljuk-work, 12th century.

Another case in this Hall contains a small part of our collection of coins from different Islamic countries.

HALL 2

The pavement is of polychrome marble mosaic in white, red, blue and yellow. Against the wall on the left a narrow shelf, also in polychrome mosaic, rests on small columns, supporting pointed arches. The spandrels are covered with a series of polygons of mosaic. The upper part is composed of small marble panels framed with bands decorated with star-shaped compartments. 17th —18th century.

The other objects exhibited in this Hall represent the Umayyad style. It is the first Islamic style and is attributed to the Umayyads who made Damascus their capital and that of the Islamic world. It is thus quite obvious that the Umayyad style was based on the

Hellenistic art which then prevailed in Syria and which itself was influenced by the decorative motifs of Sassanian art which was in vogue at that time in the Near Eastern countries. Therefore we notice in the Umayyad style the naturalistic manner of Hellenistic art in dealing with floral and animal designs, alongside the traditional decorative compositions, such as the tree of life between two animals facing each other, a subject of Sassanian origin.

In the corner to the left of the entrance of this Hall is a tombstone (No. 1508/20) dated 31 of the Hijra (652) 12 years after the Arab conquest of Egypt.

Board I on the wall facing the entrance contains textiles and wooden objects of which piece No. 12149
is a woven material showing a circle surrounding two persons on horseback facing each other, each of them holding a bow and arrow ready to shoot an animal running away from him. A rectangular wooden panel (No. 15468) is decorated in bas-relief with a basket out of which rise branches with leaves and grapes, (fig. 88) a decorative motif recalling the mosaic patterns in the Dome of the Rock.

In Case I there are objects of glass which in shape and style are still under the influence of the Roman glass tradition. There are also ceramic objects among them, a dish (No. 15997) made in Egypt in the 8th century decorated with moulded geometrical designs in relief.

Case 2 contains a bronze ewer strongly influenced by Sassanian style and decorated with beautiful geometrical and floral designs. Its spout has the shape of a rooster with its beak open as if crowing. The details of this piece are highly impressive and almost naturalistic (fig. 24). This ewer was discovered at Abusir, in Lower Egypt, where the last Umayyad Khalif Marwan II was killed in 750.

HALL 3

The objects exhibited in this Hall represent the Abbasid style. It is the second Islamic style, created in Iraq where the Abbasid Dynasty established itself and founded the capital of the Moslem Khalifate, Baghdad. This style spread from Iraq to the other Moslem countries and came to Egypt with Ahmad ibn Tulun. It is marked by its abstract and stylized decorative motifs.

Several tombstones, mostly dating from the Tulunid period, are hung up on both sides of the entrance of this Hall. One of them (No. 3904) affixed on the right, is dated 243 H. (858). The richly decorated Kufic letters of its inscription are carved in slight relief. This remarkable slab bears the name of the artist “Mubarak al-Makki” (Mubarak of Mecca).
Fixed to the wall on the right there are hanging panels in stucco decoration donated to the Museum by the Department of Antiquities of Iraq. This stucco ornament originally decorated walls in the city of Samarra in Iraq. Samarra was founded by the Khalif al-Mu’tasim Billah in 836 and remained the residence of the Abbasid Khalifs for about fifty years. Later it was abandoned in favour of the old capital Baghdad.

The ornaments of those panels display three different styles exposed in chronological order from right to left. The first style is distinguished by its deep carving and geometrical setting out, the second by less deep carving than the first, and the third style by the slanting cut of its decorative motifs which are far from being naturalistic.

We can clearly observe the influence of the third Samarra style on the stucco ornaments hanging on the wall to the left. They are casts of stucco wall decoration of a house from the Tulumid period which the Museum excavated north of Fustat. The patterns are very similar to those of the wooden panels hanging nearby (fig. 31) and to those of the textile fabrics shown in the Case below the window.

In the centre of this Hall are three Cases. Case 1 contains ceramic objects decorated in cobalt blue and green on a creamy white background. This is a Persian (9-10th century) imitation of Chinese ceramics from the T’ang period (618-907).

In Case 2 there are metalwork objects of Egyptian or Iraqi origin dating from the 8th and 9th centuries.

Case 3 contains lustre-painted ceramic objects made in Egypt or Iraq in the 9th century. This kind of ceramics is painted over the glaze with metal oxides which produce a certain metallic reflection after being fixed by a special firing in the kiln. This technique of decorating ceramics is the invention of Moslem potters in the 9th century and was used in most Moslem countries.

HALL 4

The objects in this Hall represent the Fatimid style created in Egypt. It is evident that the artists in the Fatimid epoch succeeded in creating an Egyptian style of unprecedented richness. They were able to express with marvellous sincerity emotions and movements to a degree never attained before by Egyptian artists.

On the left side of the entrance of this Hall is a small Case hanging on the wall, containing a selection of rock-crystal objects, such as phials and small perfume bottles with beautiful ornaments and inscriptions. The art of manufacturing rock-crystal is very ancient in Egypt and starts early in Pharaonic times. Afterwards it experienced a certain decline but began to flourish again during the Islamic period, especially in the Fatimid epoch.

On the wall to the left of the entrance are frescoes dating from the 11th century which decorated the
wells of a bath from the Fatimid period excavated by the Museum in 1932. One of them shows a seated person wearing a turban and holding a cup in his right hand (fig. 8).

In the Case in front of these paintings are lustre-painted ceramic objects. The manufacture of this special kind of lustre-painted pottery reached a high degree of perfection in Fatimid Egypt. The Museum possesses a precious collection of this kind exhibited in Hall 13.

On the left wall are affixed wooden planks found in the Maristan (hospital) of Sultan Qalawun during its restoration. These planks seem to have decorated the walls of the western Fatimid palace which had been built on the same site in the 2nd half of the 11th century. They show in bas-relief carving various vivid and elegant scenes of social life: hunting, musical entertainment, dancing, drinking and several figures of animals and birds reproduced in a precise and vigorous manner. The figures were originally coloured to show the details. Traces of the colours are still to be seen on some parts (fig. 12, 29, 44).

Other wooden panels are exhibited on the board nearby. They are carefully decorated in deep bas-relief. One of them (No. 3591) shows a highly decorative combination of two horse-heads and arabesque scrolls (fig. 27). Early 11th century.

Case 5 (underneath this Board): Polychrome ceramic objects, so-called Fayyum. 10th-12th centuries. Also glass objects with cut or applied decoration, among these is a glass qumqum (No. 13504) decorated with coloured glass applied to the surface (fig. 69). 11th century.
Fatimid textile fabrics are represented on Board 1. The piece No. 14174 is woven in silk and linen on a black background. It is inscribed with two parallel lines of Kufic letters. One of the lines is turned upside down and has the opposite direction of the other. The inscription bears the name of the Fatimid Khalif el - Hakim (996 - 1021).

Below the central window is a marble capital (No. 2951) cut in two pieces, each bearing the figure of a lion-like animal in high relief with very carefully cut details of the muscles and mane.

Affixed to the wall on the right side of the entrance is a big wooden door (No. 554) of the 11th century, with rectangular panels showing in bas-relief human