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## THE PAINTED GLASS DECORATION OF THE MAUSOLEUM OF AHMAD IBN SULAYMAN AL-RIFA'Ī IN CAIRO

Hidden in the Harat Halawat—a short, blind alley off the Suq al-Silah, not far from the madrasa of Sultan Hasan on the side opposite the Qal'a (Citadel)—is an interesting building that has so far escaped proper attention (fig. 1). Listed as number 245 on Creswell's map of the monuments in Cairo,<sup>1</sup> it was briefly discussed and illustrated in the chapter devoted to four mausoleums of the end of the thirteenth century, in the second volume of his *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*.<sup>2</sup> The exterior of the building, especially in its present

incomplete and restored state, is unpretentious and modest, and it is probably for this reason that it has been mentioned so infrequently in the recent literature.<sup>3</sup> The interior of its mausoleum, however, reveals itself as one of the most interesting examples of architectural decoration of the early Mamluk period, in particular because of its qibla wall, which displays the prominent use of painted glass tiles.

Al-Maqrizi mentions the building in his *Khitat* and describes it as “the *ribāt* known as the *riwāq* of Ibn



Fig. 1. Complex of Ahmad ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'ī, exterior. (Photo: Stefano Carboni, 1989)

Sulayman, located at Harat al-Hilaliyya outside Bab Zuwayla."<sup>4</sup> He gives the full genealogy of the pious man who founded it as Ahmad ibn Sulayman ibn Ahmad ibn Sulayman ibn Ibrahim ibn Abi al-Ma'ali ibn al-'Abbas al-Rahabi al-Bata'ih al-Rifa'i, Shaykh al-Fuqara'.<sup>5</sup> Al-Maqrizi's use of *riwāq* for the building suggests its initial function as an arcaded shelter (from the original meaning of the word as "forepart of a tent" or "curtain extended below the roof"), probably intended for devotees who visited the building from outside Cairo.<sup>6</sup> When al-Maqrizi described the building in the fifteenth century, it had likely become a fairly important destination for the adepts of the religious order of the Rifa'i and was therefore known as a *ribāt*, that is, a dwelling or hospice for the shaykh's resident devotees, with a function very similar to that of a *zāwiya*.<sup>7</sup>

Restoration work on the small complex was undertaken by the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe after its report on the building

of 1910;<sup>8</sup> Creswell's map (fig. 2) shows how it looked in the 1950s and still looks today. The main structure is stone and measures approximately 15 by 6.20 meters. The north wall and the qibla wall, with two mihrabs, have survived intact. The presence of an isolated brick column (*B* on the map) and of the remains of an arch (*A*) prompted the Comité to complete the enclosure by constructing two more walls (south and west) and, in the middle of the enclosure, a new arcade, supported by columns and parallel to the qibla wall. Whether or not the Comité's reconstruction precisely reflects the dimensions of the original building is unfortunately a matter of speculation; it is certain, however, that the original arcades of the *riwāq* paralleled the qibla wall. The mausoleum proper of Ahmad ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i was built at the northeast corner (fig. 3).

A very small, irregular square, the longest side of which is 3.31 meters, with a small recess on the northern side, the mausoleum is peculiar in having been

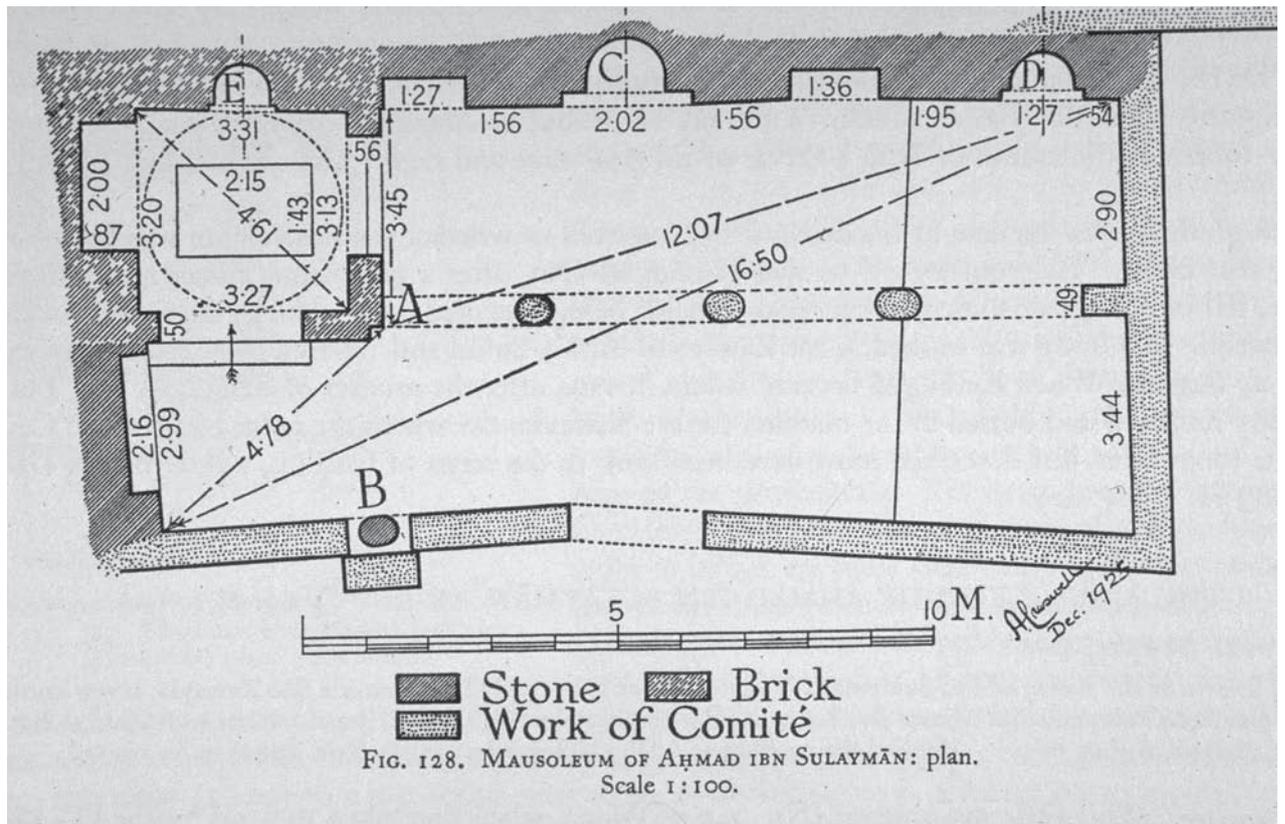


Fig. 2. Plan of the complex. (After K. A. C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 1959, vol. 2, fig. 128)



Fig. 3. Mausoleum, exterior. (Photo: K. A. C. Creswell, ca. 1920–30)

constructed of brick instead of the stone used for the rest of the building. For this reason, we can safely assume that it was added to the original structure, probably shortly after Ahmad ibn Sulayman's death in 690 (1291).<sup>9</sup> The *riwāq* itself, that is, the original stone building, which, unlike the mausoleum, is not dated by any inscriptions, must have been erected at the time al-Rifa'i was teaching in Cairo in the last decades of his life; a construction date in the 1270s or 1280s is likely.

The central and main mihrab of the *riwāq* (fig. 4) is of the shell type, set in a beveled-arch frame of which the inner edge is decorated with a *naskhī* inscription. At the time Creswell studied it, the right half of the mihrab still retained its coating of brick-red paint; this is now almost undetectable.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the ribs of the hood of the shell were once painted in alternating black and brick-red (as on the dome of Sayyida Ruqayya, for example).<sup>11</sup> The outer, rectangular stucco frame of the mihrab is ornamented

with vegetal motifs on the spandrels, and inscriptions are set in rounded panels that alternate with circular medallions in typical early Mamluk style.

Unfortunately, little is known about the life of Ahmad ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i, because he never achieved the fame gained by other prominent Sufis and founders of *zāwīyas*, *taqīyyas*, and *khānqāhs*, and because there probably never was a pilgrimage to his tomb, let alone a proper *mawlid* (birth celebration).<sup>12</sup> It is likely that a number of pupils and followers continued to live on the premises at least until al-Maqrizi's time, after which Shaykh Ahmad ibn Sulayman fell slowly into oblivion and the building, neglected and abandoned, eventually partially collapsed. Al-Maqrizi himself did not know much about the shaykh, apart from the fact that "he was one of the followers of Ahmad al-Rifa'i in Egypt. He was a pious man, held in great respect by the emirs and everybody else, and much venerated by the followers of the Rifa'i order. He had learned the tradition from al-Salafi's grand-



Fig. 4. Central mihrab of the complex. (Photo: Stefano Carboni, 1989)

son. He died in this *riwāq* on the evening of Monday, 6 Dhul-Hijja 691 [November 18, 1292].<sup>13</sup> His *nisba* also includes “al-Bata’ihi,” that is, from the marshlands of southern Iraq between Wasit, Kufa, and Basra. One can assume, therefore, that Ibn Sulayman was of Iraqi origin, as was the more famous founder of the Rifa’i order born one hundred and fifty years earlier, Ahmad al-Rifa’i, whose own *nisba* also included “al-Bata’ihi.”<sup>14</sup> We do not know if Ibn Sulayman was a direct descendant of Ahmad al-Rifa’i; likewise, we do not know whether he was brought up in Egypt or moved to that country to escape the persecution of his sect, as did his contemporary Zayn al-Din Yusuf.<sup>15</sup>

The founder of the Rifa’i order, Ahmad ibn ‘Ali Abu al-‘Abbas al-Rifa’i, was born at the beginning of the twelfth century in southern Iraq and died at Umm ‘Abida, in the district of Wasit, in 1183. His activities appear to have been confined to Umm ‘Abida and the neighboring villages, and even though some hyperbolic traditions state that on one night of Sha‘ban a crowd of 100,000 persons listened to his teachings, he seems to have kept the humble profile of a Sufi shaykh. Only two discourses, a divan of odes, and a number of prayers, devotional exercises, and recitations are attributed to him. Poverty, abstinence, and refusal to respond to injury or kill any living creature were among the rules that he imposed.<sup>16</sup>

About a century later, judging by al-Maqrizi’s comments (see above), Ibn Sulayman was most likely a good follower of Ahmad al-Rifa’i’s teachings. The nineteenth-century reports by Trimmingham and Lane of spectacular practices of the Rifa’is—“sitting in heated ovens, riding lions, etc.”<sup>17</sup>—were probably overstated and embellished, if true at all. The activities around the *riwāq* of Ibn Sulayman must in actuality have been those of a small, quiet community of people devoted to their shaykh and to the Rifa’i order. The building itself, even though close to the Citadel, was not prominent and, like all *zāwiyas*, lacked a minaret. Judging from the scant attention paid to him in the best-known Mamluk sources, Ahmad ibn Sulayman was never interested in the political involvement and fame-seeking that were the daily bread of other religious leaders both before and after the time of al-Nasir ibn Qala’un.

But Ahmad was certainly a much-loved religious leader, and his followers honored him after he died with a mausoleum meant to reflect the personality of their master: humble on the outside but very rich within. Given the Rifa’is’ embrace of poverty, we do

not know whether the *riwāq* had an endowment that allowed the community to build Ahmad’s mausoleum, or if they sought the help of well-off sympathizers of the order, such as the emirs mentioned by al-Maqrizi.<sup>18</sup>

The mausoleum was erected inside the enclosure of the *riwāq*, in a corner corresponding to the space facing the qibla wall around the left mihrab. Ahmad’s wooden cenotaph was placed over a platform under the dome. The structure is open on both south and west sides, which have wooden screens to let light glimmer through and to allow the devotees living in the enclosure to see the cenotaph without having to enter the mausoleum. The entrance is on the open west side (fig. 5).

For those who enter the mausoleum today, having viewed its inconspicuous exterior after strolling



Fig. 5. Entrance side of the mausoleum. (Photo: Stefano Carboni, 1989)

through the run-down alleys behind the complex of Sultan Hasan, the contrast is great and unexpected. The interior stucco decoration of the dome and the pendentives is extremely rich and finds a parallel only in the above-mentioned mausoleum of Zayn al-Din Yusuf, which, built in 1297, is more or less contemporary with this building (figs. 6–7). The stalactite pendentives start just above a narrow wooden frieze that still retains part of its original painted Qur’anic inscription. The pendentives look from the interior as if they were formed by three tiers of niches, but an examination of the exterior shows that they consist of two tiers only, each of three niches. The three windows on each side have been restored with stained glass, which they had originally. The eight keel-arched niches that form the apparent third tier are in reality the inner treatment of the drum, interposed between the zone of transition and the dome itself. This drum treatment is rather unusual but constitutes an effective solution, giving considerably greater verticality to the building and allowing a more lavish decoration of its interior. Only one of the four windows that originally pierced the dome is now open. The stucco decoration of the dome represents one of the best and most lavish examples known from the early Mamluk period. The inscriptions are all Qur’anic:<sup>19</sup> the one around the base is in plaited Kufic script and those above the windows and in the central medallion at the very top of the dome are in *thuluth* (fig. 8).

A monumental wooden *tābūt*, or cenotaph, dominates the small room and fills the floor almost entirely, leaving just enough space for circumambulation (fig. 9). The *tābūt* is one of the best of its kind from the early Mamluk period and is made even more refined by the use of ivory inlay, still a rarity in Egypt at the end of the thirteenth century, to outline its single panels. The most obvious parallel for this cenotaph is the well-known coffin, partially preserved in Lyon, that was made for Sultan Baybars I; dated 676 (1277), it is the earliest example from the Mamluk period utilizing ivory-inlaid wooden panels.<sup>20</sup> According to the report of the Comité, Ibn Sulayman’s *tābūt* is made of fir.<sup>21</sup> The elements that form the geometric decoration—six-pointed stars, regular and elongated hexagons, and pentagons—are arranged in three tiers, the widest of which is also the most intricate (fig. 10). These geometric elements are combined with carved vegetal decoration related to the stucco ornamentation around and above the cenotaph. The

fourth and uppermost tier, by which the tabut achieves the considerable height of about 1.5 meters (nearly 5 feet), includes the date of Ibn Sulayman’s death in a *naskhī* inscription contained in a panel flanked by sets of small wooden columns. The inscription reads “This is the coffin of the pious shaykh, the learned imam, the master of the shaykhs of the Muslims, Muhyi al-Din Abu al-‘Abbas Ahmad ibn Sulayman al-Rifa’i, who died on Monday, 6 Dhul-Hijja of the year 690 [November 30, 1291].”<sup>22</sup> Despite its one-year discrepancy with al-Maqrizi’s text, we can safely assume that the date written on the cenotaph is correct.<sup>23</sup>

The most impressive piece of architectural decoration in the building is the qibla wall. Around the mihrab, the stucco decoration measures 3.30 meters in width and 3.85 meters in height, although the bottom half of this decoration has long since disappeared (fig. 11). The niche, like the central mihrab of the *riwāq*, has a keel arch surrounded by a double band of stucco, the inner band with a Qur’anic inscription in plaited Kufic. The upper part of the mihrab is flanked by two blind niches with round arches resting on slender columns. The interior of these niches is filled with a background of minute rosettes, and above them are two small calligraphic panels; the main inscription fills the upper part of the decoration. The cartouche containing this inscription, like that over the central mihrab of the *riwāq*, is rounded and flanked by circular medallions. The large inscription is also Qur’anic (10: 18): “Only he can maintain the mosques of Allah who believes in Allah and the Day of Judgment...” A narrow band surrounds the whole decorated area (fig. 12).

From the black-and-white photographs of the qibla wall published by Creswell, it appears that paint was used to darken areas of the stucco decoration. Closer inspection, however, reveals that these embellishments are paint under glass, an unexpected and unusual variation of *verre eglomisé* (paint sandwiched between two layers of glass).<sup>24</sup> The technique employed is basic but effective; one can imagine how dazzling the wall must have looked in its pristine condition. Glass tiles of different shapes and sizes, the majority of them elongated hexagons and roundels, were produced from sheets of glass cut to size. The edges were deliberately left rough and in some cases were bent slightly while the glass was still malleable in order to provide a groove that would fit into the soft stucco and keep the tile in place (figs. 13–14). After the tiles were cut and before they were set on the stucco,

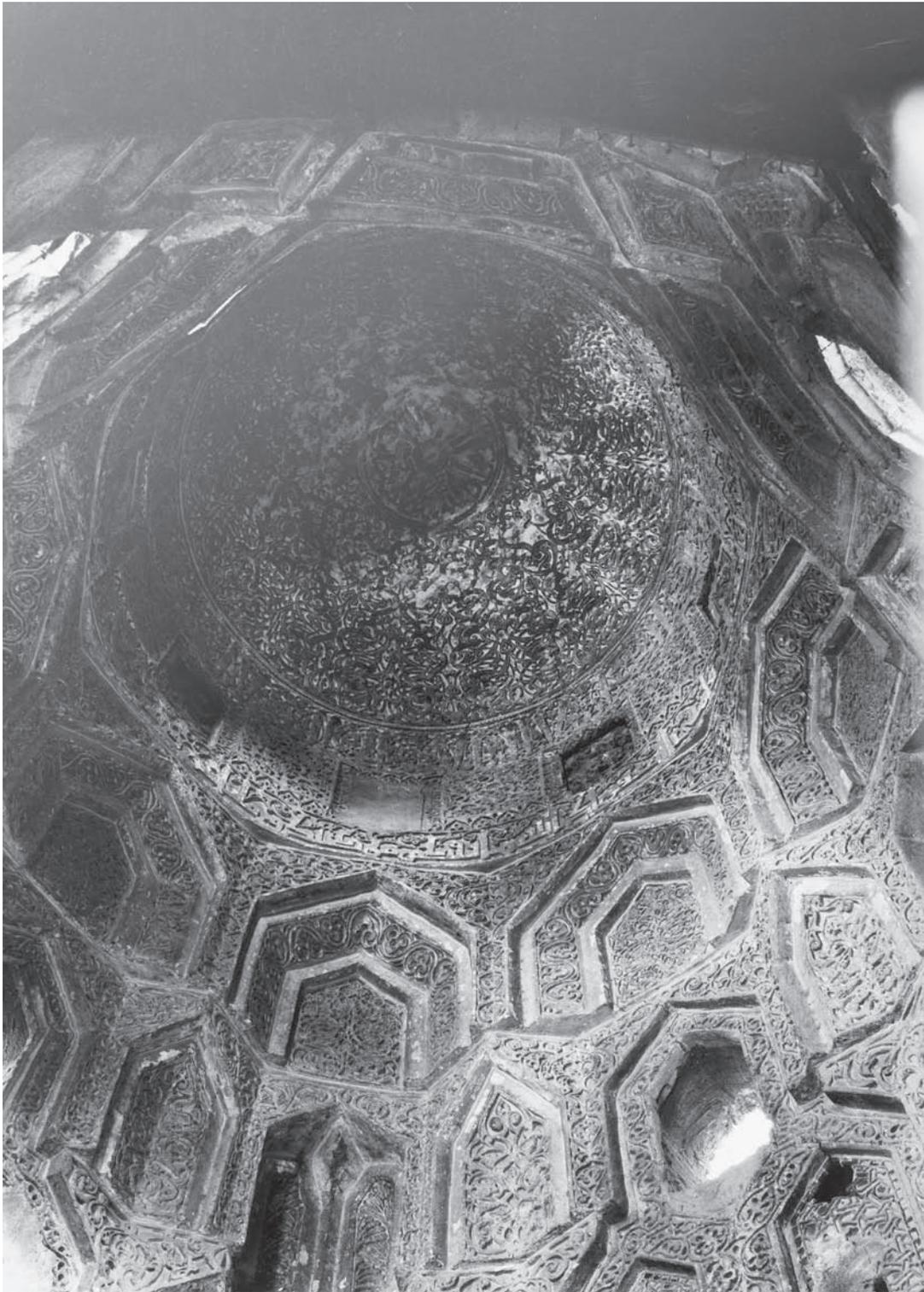


Fig. 6. Mausoleum, interior. (Photo: K. A. C. Creswell, ca. 1920–30)



Fig. 7. Interior of the mausoleum of Zayn al-Din Yusuf, 1297. (Photo: K. A. C. Creswell, ca. 1920–30)



Fig. 8. Mausoleum interior, central medallion of the dome. (Photo: Stefano Carboni, 1988)



Fig. 9. West side of the *tābūt* in the center of the mausoleum. (Photo [detail]: K. A. C. Creswell, ca. 1920–30)

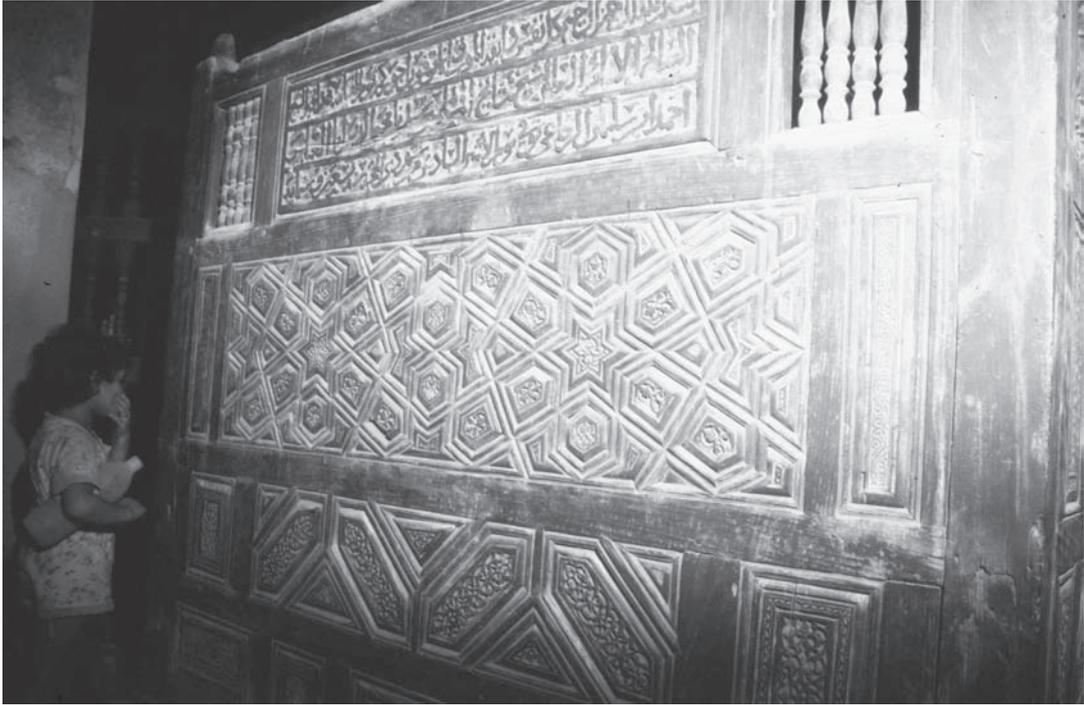


Fig. 10. South side of the *tabūt*. (Photo: Stefano Carboni, 1988)



Fig. 11. Qibla wall of the mausoleum. (Photo: Stefano Carboni, 1988)



Fig. 12. Qibla wall of the mausoleum. (Photo: K.A.C. Creswell, ca. 1920–30)

they were cold-painted on the reverse, that is, the side that adhered to the plaster. This clever solution prevented oxidization from affecting the paint, which was tightly sandwiched between the stucco and the glass. Notwithstanding the present sorry condition of the qibla wall and the great deterioration of its stucco, the few tiles left in situ retain their bright original paint underneath. Three colors were employed (fig. 15): black for the outlines and green and brown to fill the background of the designs, so that the patterns appear in reserve—this last perhaps another clever solution, meant to emphasize the main pattern against the white plaster underneath. The designs of the elongated hexagonal tiles around the outer frame and on the band above the arch of the mihrab are invariably vegetal scrolls that form a double loop like an 8 (fig. 16). The details of the designs show slight variations, since each one was individually painted. The round tiles that alternate with the hexagonal ones include simpler versions of the vegetal scrolls; the much smaller round ones surrounding

the arches of the blind niches and set within the two medallions of the upper panel feature simple trefoils or fleurs-de-lis (fig. 17). A similar pattern, but on a larger and more complex scale, is present on the teardrop-shaped tiles around the main inscription, in the spandrels of the mihrab, and at the top of the outer frame of the keel arch. In the semi-dome of the mihrab there are also traces of glass insets that were painted with irregular fan-shaped palmettes. Finally, the letters forming the main inscription on the upper panel were also covered with glass cut to shape; no vegetal patterns were added to those tiles, however, and it is not clear whether their reverse was left unpainted or coated in brown. Here and there on the qibla wall remain faint traces of red paint on the surface of the plaster.

When the mausoleum was completed shortly after Ibn Sulayman's death in 1291, the overall effect of the interior decoration must thus have been sumptuous. The light filtering through the wooden screens from two sides and through the colored glass win-

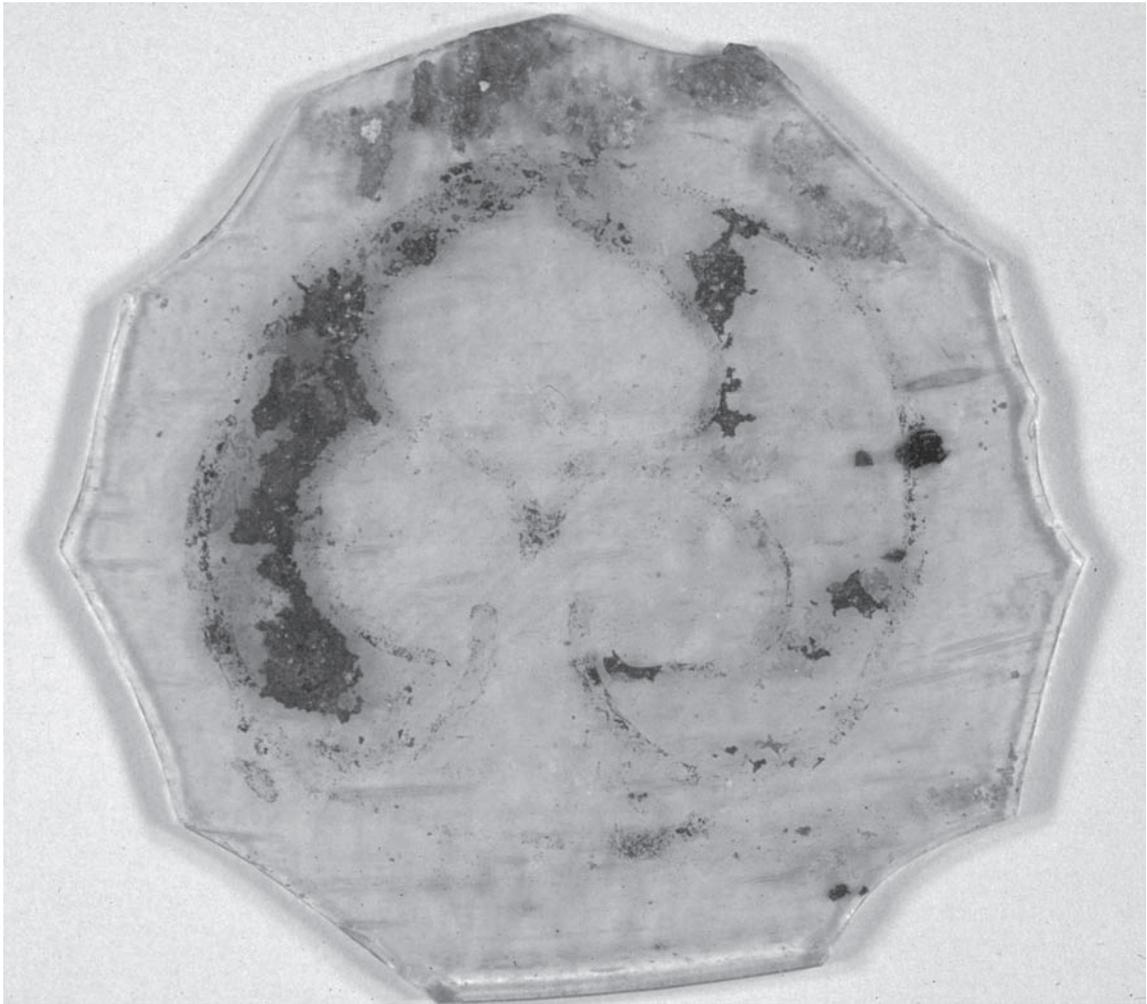


Fig. 13. Circular tile with trefoil pattern from the qibla wall. (Photo: Stefano Carboni)

dows between the pendentives and in the dome—not to mention the light from the enameled and gilded lamp suspended above the cenotaph<sup>25</sup>—surely were impressive when reflected by the glass tiles set in the plastered wall.

The glass of the tiles is colorless with a faint greenish tinge and contains ovoid bubbles (fig. 18). Qualitative analysis has showed it to be a soda-lime-silica glass with relatively high levels of magnesium and potassium and a small amount of aluminum; the composition is therefore typical of glass from the Mediterranean area.<sup>26</sup> The presence of bubbles indicates that it was blown (rather than simply poured into a shallow mold), allowed to cool, and cut into shape. The tiles

show neither the concentric wavy lines nor the convexity typical of crown glass,<sup>27</sup> and I was not able to spot any traces of bull's-eyes on those still in situ. Consequently, from the samples I have been able to investigate, it is almost certain that the technique used was that of broad glass.

Broad glass was developed in the early Christian era and was in common use by the second century; in the twelfth century it was revived in Lorraine, France, and around 1500 it became definitively popular in Venice for the production of mirrors.<sup>28</sup> A type of flat pane glass, it was made by blowing a large glass bubble, then swinging it on the blowpipe to form an elongated narrow shape, and finally cutting off both



Fig. 14. Circular and hexagonal tiles set in the qibla wall. (Photo: K. A. C. Creswell, ca. 1920–30)

hemispherical ends. The resulting cylinder was then cut lengthwise with shears and reheated, after which it was flattened with a wooden plane or allowed to sink to a flat state. At present the tiles of Ibn Sulayman's mausoleum are the only recognized examples of broad glass in the Islamic world, but this is probably because no proper distinction between broad and crown glass has thus far been attempted for archaeological window glass, or for flat glass in general.<sup>29</sup>

The three pigments applied to the tiles without subsequent firing have been analyzed in the Department of Objects Conservation of the Metropolitan Museum. The black used for the outlines is some form of carbon; the pale green contains significant amounts of copper, chlorine, and calcium; the pale brown is not an iron pigment as expected but contains large amounts of such non-chromogenic elements as so-

dium, calcium, and potassium as well as a brownish coloring agent that is almost certainly organic. The original binding medium of the pigments was probably gum arabic.<sup>30</sup> In short, there is nothing unusual about these pigments to challenge the notion that they were produced locally at the end of the thirteenth century.

Flat glass, the great majority of which was employed in windows, is not at all infrequent in the Islamic world and is commonly found during archaeological excavations. Glass of various colors, including darker and more precious hues like blue and red, was left unpainted, cut to size from sheets, and set into a plaster grid; the resulting window, or *qamariyya*, would filter light in a pleasant manner and throw colors into interiors. Windows of this sort have been produced in large quantities throughout the centuries and are still



Fig. 15. Detail of a tile. (Photo: Stefano Carboni)



Fig. 16. Hexagonal tile with vegetal pattern. (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Fig. 17. Detail of qibla wall with tiles. (Photo: Stefano Carboni, 1988)

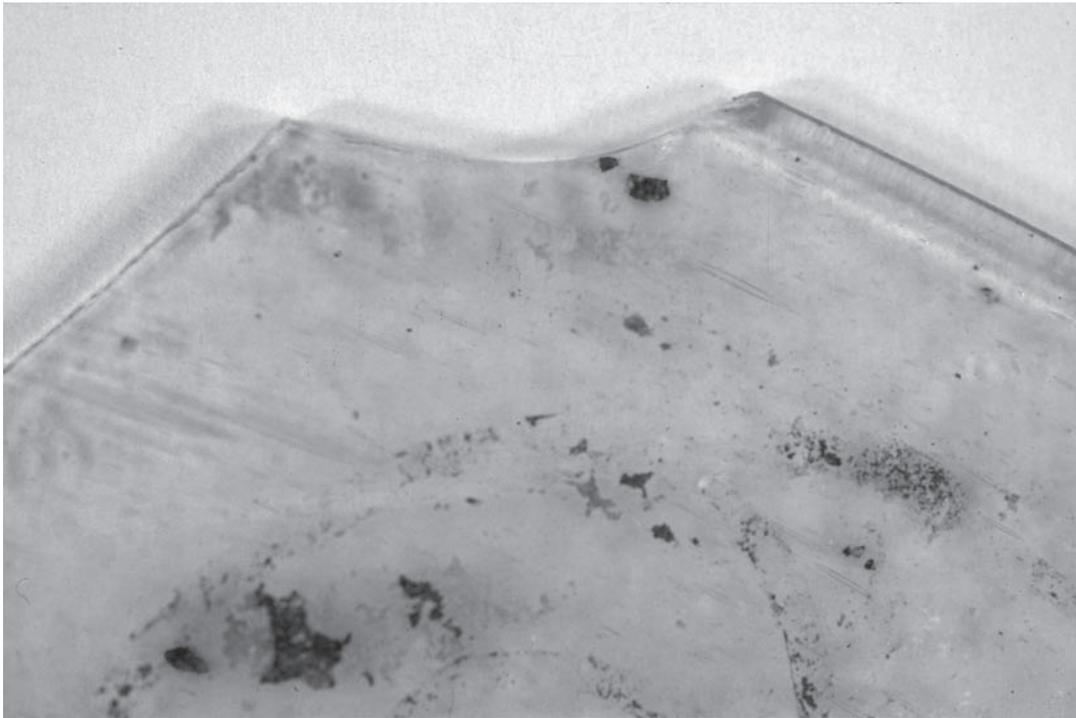


Fig. 18. Detail of a tile. (Photo: Stefano Carboni)

made today (fig. 19).<sup>31</sup> The qibla wall of the mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i is, however, the only known example of decorative glass being given such bold prominence in architectural decoration.

A comparable decorative concept in secular architectural ornamentation can be found only in the twelfth-century eastern Islamic world, in the pavilion of a ruined palace at Old Tirmidh (present-day Termez, in southern Uzbekistan near the border with Afghanistan). During excavations there between 1937 and 1939, a number of impressed glass medallions, embellished with animal and human figures, rosettes, and Kufic inscriptions, were discovered.<sup>32</sup> Many more have emerged recently from Afghanistan. The medallions are of different colors—some vivid, some pale—and the figures are in low relief. Most likely they decorated the windows or walls of Ghaznavid and Ghurid palaces, since some of them carry inscriptions dedicated to the Ghaznavid rulers Bahram Shah (r. 1117–57) and Khusraw Malik (r. 1160–86), or to the Ghurid emir Shams al-Din Muhammad Pahlavan (active 1181–82) (fig. 20).<sup>33</sup>

Otherwise, only a few archeological objects and fragments suggest the use of decorated glass as architectural wall ornament in the Islamic world. Among them are three small octagonal glass plaques found at Tel Mevorakh in modern Israel, in a grave dated between 1162 and 1174 on the basis of a silver Crusader coin. Each of the three plaques is greenish, colorless, slightly concave glass (probably crown glass) with remains of cold-painted decoration consisting of a layer of reddish-brown paint and parallel stripes in dark paint above it, on the inner, concave side (fig. 21).<sup>34</sup> Dan Barag related these plaques to the glass inlays of Syro-Palestinian mirrors dating from the Byzantine period, but he was puzzled that the grave in which the plaques were found did not contain the remains of any object for which they could have served as inlays.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, there were no visible traces of plaster or glue around the edges of the plaques to suggest that they were once affixed. He guessed that they might have been part of a leather or textile object, and he concluded that an explanation for their function should be sought in the realms of popular superstition or magical practice. Two other plaques—rectangular with rounded corners and similar in size to those found in Israel (about 11 centimeters)—have been published, although their function is also uncertain. The first, apparently found in Russia, was formerly in the Macaya Collection in

Barcelona; painted on it is the figure of a multicolored bird (fig. 22).<sup>36</sup> The second, in the Benaki Museum, Athens, apparently does not show any traces of paint, although this may be due to the condition of its surface.<sup>37</sup> Clairmont thought that it could have been a mirror and indicated Egypt as its origin, but he could not suggest a date for it. In addition to these scant published examples, an inconspicuous fragment of flat greenish glass that I recently noticed in the Corning Museum of Glass shows traces of brownish paint on the reverse, thus providing the best match for the technique and materials used on the tiles of the mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman al-Rifa'i.<sup>38</sup>

The most interesting point raised in the discussion of the plaques found at Tel Mevorakh is that they are associated with a Muslim burial site, as in the case of the mausoleum in Egypt. Burials and the use of glass have in fact often been associated, at least in popular belief. According to legend, for example, Iskandar (Alexander) was buried in Alexandria in a glass sarcophagus,<sup>39</sup> and a glass coffin with the body of Sultan Qabus (d. 1006–7) was suspended midway from the ceiling of his mausoleum, the Gunbad-i Qabus near Gurgan.<sup>40</sup> The latter legend was probably inspired by a story reported by Benjamin of Tudela about the crystal coffin of the prophet Daniel, which was suspended by chains from the midsection of the bridge at Susa.<sup>41</sup> The transparency and purity of glass is ideal, in popular superstition, for simultaneously preserving the body and keeping it visible, as if it were crystallized in time, or hibernating rather than dead.

Legends, however, do not provide a satisfactory explanation for what led the decorator of Ibn Sulayman's mausoleum to plaster its qibla wall, and only this wall, with many painted glass tiles. An indirect source of inspiration, partially surviving today, seems to be the wall paintings of the Fatimid (or earlier) hammam of Abu Su'ud in Cairo, fragments of which are preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (fig. 23).<sup>42</sup> Although these paintings were meant for a secular building and their significance is therefore different from that of the mausoleum decoration, similarities of design, composition, and colors are noticeable. In the wall paintings, elongated hexagons with vegetal motifs parallel the shape and decoration of the glass tiles, and the trefoil and fleur-de-lis patterns are very similar. The hammam was destroyed in 1168;<sup>43</sup> thus its decoration is at least a century and a half earlier than that of the mausoleum of Ibn

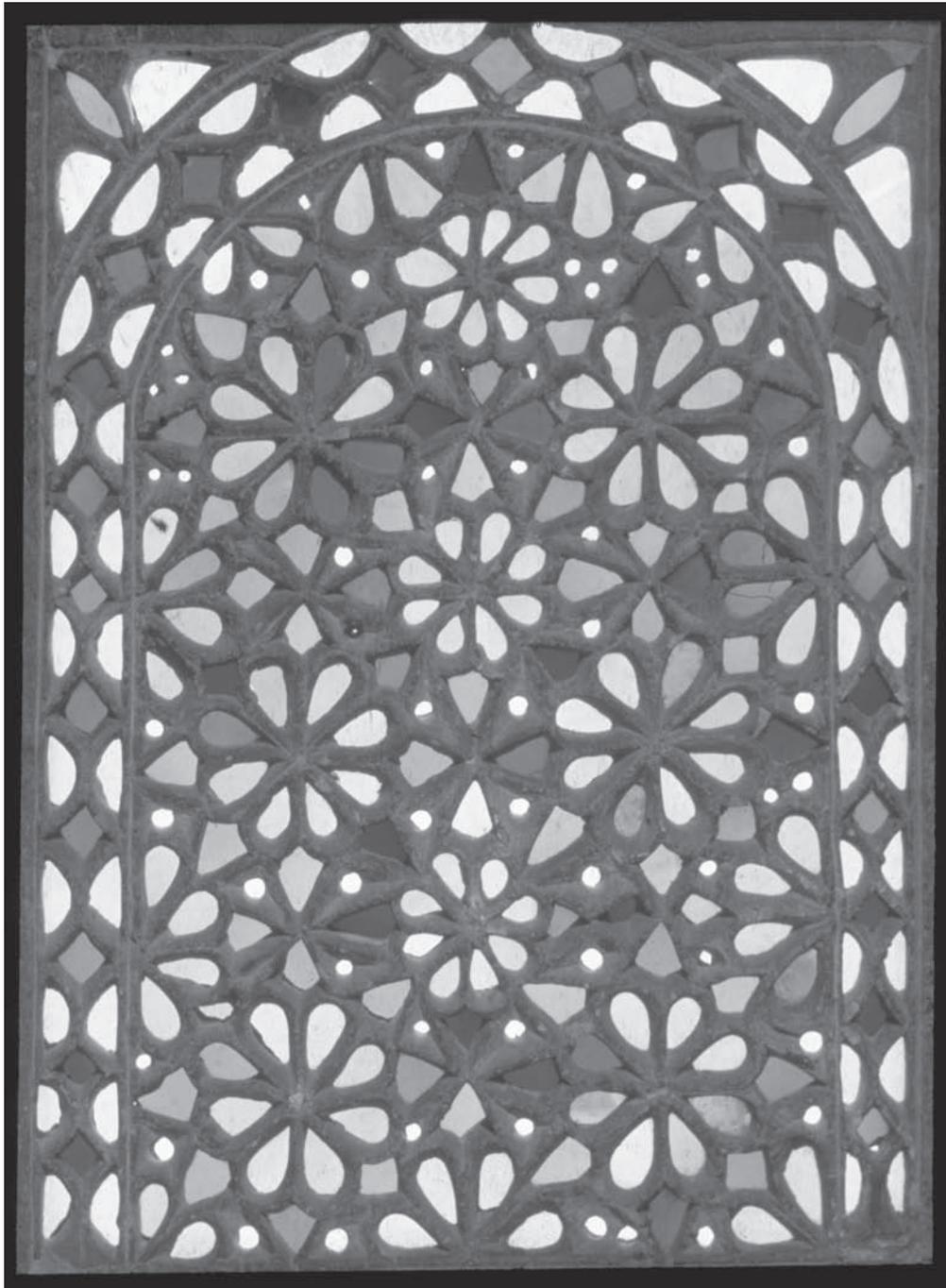


Fig. 19. *Qamariyya* window. Egypt or Syria, eighteenth century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of William R. Ware, 1893 (93.26.15) (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Fig. 20. Three impressed medallions for window decoration. Uzbekistan or Afghanistan, second half of the twelfth century. Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya, Kuwait National Museum, inv. nos. LNS 365 G, LNS 323 G, LNS 378 G. (Photo: Bruce White)

Sulayman, but it seems logical to assume that between the Fatimid and the Mamluk periods many buildings, now entirely lost, were decorated in similar fashion.

The decorative program of Abu Su'ud is ultimately an example of the visual language that developed in Islamic art from the Samarran period in the ninth century. In the Throne Room of the Jawsaq al-Khaqani at Samarra, for example, elongated hexagons (depicting birds, as on the plaque in Barcelona, fig. 22) alternate with smaller, regular hexagons as on the outer border of the qibla wall at Ibn Sulayman's mausoleum.<sup>44</sup> In the bath of the Qanat Tepe at Nishapur (10th–11th c.) appear simple sequences of elongated hexagons decorated with pseudo-vegetal designs that vaguely resemble those of the glass tiles.<sup>45</sup>

All the comparative examples cited thus far, however, belong to secular buildings. Surprisingly, an interesting non-secular parallel can be found in an almost contemporary religious building in Christian Italy. Originally part of the staircase of a pulpit made by Guglielmo di Pisa in 1270 for the church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas in Pistoia, a marble fragment is now preserved in the Museo Diocesano of the same city in central Tuscany (fig. 24).<sup>46</sup> The decoration of the marble slab consists of small glass plaques of various geometric shapes, including elongated hexagons and six-pointed stars, arranged in a clearly Islamic-inspired pattern that was common in contemporaneous Mamluk Egypt. The individual plaques are in true *verre egglomisé*, their unfired gold and black col-

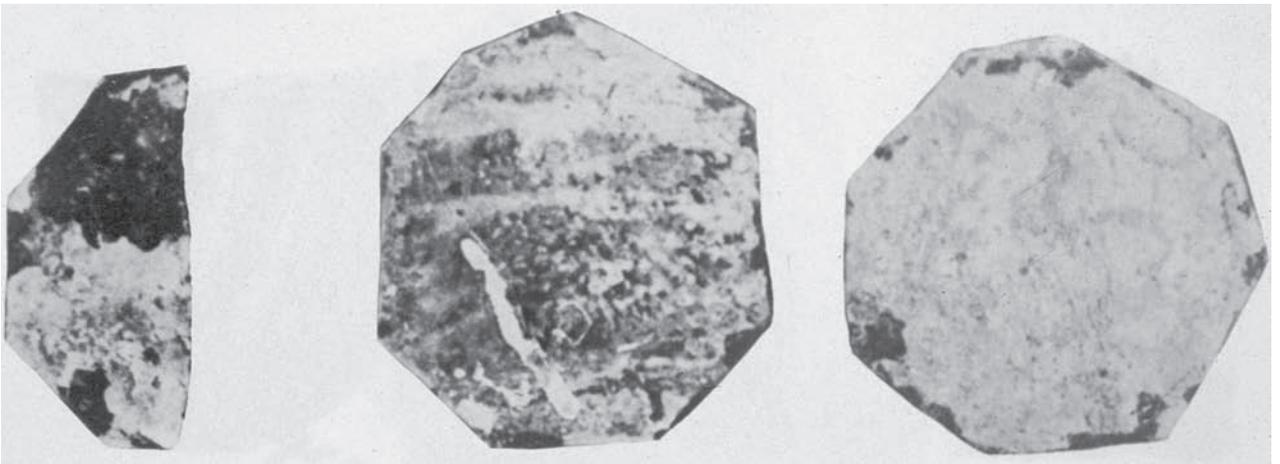


Fig. 21. Glass plaques from Tel Mevorakh, Israel. Eastern Mediterranean coast, ca. 1162–74. (Photo: after Barag, "Three Glass Plaques," pl. 41, nos. 23–25)



Fig. 22. Glass plaque with painted bird. Formerly in the Macaya Collection, Barcelona. (Photo: after Gudiol Ricart and De Artiñano, *Vidrio*, fig. 101)

ors sandwiched between two layers of glass and subsequently set into prepared beds on the marble surface. The painted designs, which are also inspired by Islamic models, in their case via southern Italy, include animals set against a highly decorative vegetal

landscape with flowers, half-palmettes, and, sometimes, geometrical motifs. Carlo Bertelli has convincingly suggested that the craftsmen responsible for this decoration were Venetian glassmakers, who must have been familiar with both the Islamic decorative language



Fig. 23. Painted plaster decoration from the Hammam of Abu Su'ud, Cairo. Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo. (Photo [detail]: after Hasan, *Kunūz al-Fāṭimiyyīn*, fig. 3)

and the thirteenth-century Gothic repertoire of gold-sgraffiato glass. Decorated in this way, the original pulpit and its staircase must have made quite an impression in the dim light of the church, and its patterns must have recalled those of a contemporary, ivory-inlaid minbar, with the added glitter of the glass surface.<sup>47</sup>

Unfortunately, apart from window grills, no other existing building with similar function and stucco decoration (such as the 1297 mausoleum in the *zāwiya* of Zayn al-Din Yusuf in Cairo, which is only six years later than that of Ibn Sulayman) shows traces of glass inlay. In 1927, Carl Lamm wrote, “Dr. Fredrik Martin tells me that the same technique has been used for the decoration of a little mosque or church in Upper Egypt, which I regret not to have been able to identify.”<sup>48</sup> And, “In Tiflis, Dr. Martin has seen a seventeenth-century house decorated in the same manner.”<sup>49</sup> If they ever existed, both the mosque in Upper Egypt and the house in Tiflis have disappeared, and it is possible that Martin may have been referring simply to plain glass inlay rather than to proper architectural decoration as in our mausoleum.

Unless other examples become known in the fu-

ture, therefore, it can be surmised that the painted glass decoration of the qibla wall of the mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman is unique, since a prototype cannot be found for it and its ornamental idea was not imitated in later extant buildings. There is no doubt that the painted glass tiles belong to the original stucco decoration, which is firmly dated by the inscription on the *tābūt*; thus they can be seen as an original concept developed by the artists involved in the creation of the mausoleum.

Regardless of whether the glass tiles had a now-lost model in Cairo, or whether Venetian glassmakers' *verre egglomisé* influenced their designs, it is the special meaning of glass in a burial site for the Rifā'i order that needs interpretation. Following the lead of Souren Melikian-Chirvani, for example, one is tempted to find an esoteric meaning for the use of painted glass tiles. Referring to a mihrab in Kashan, he writes, “This mihrab actually provides an illustration of the Bab al-Ma'rifa, the Door of Knowledge, leading into the celestial garden; through this door we can see a second arch crowned by the band of supreme knowledge, and beyond the second arch looms the Tree of Life . . .”<sup>50</sup> Hyalescent glass tiles

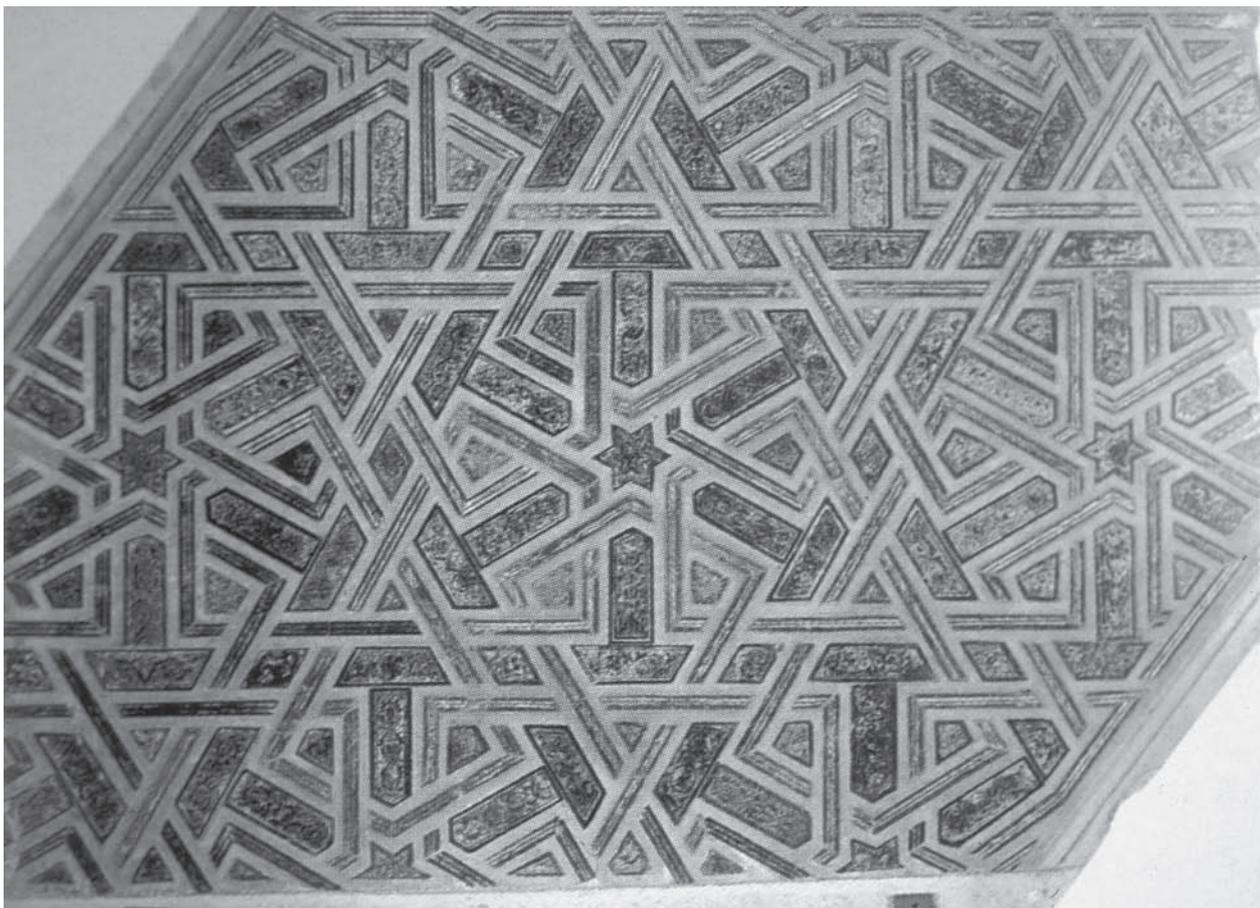


Fig. 24. *Verre eglomisé* decoration from the pulpit of the Church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas, Pistoia. (Photo: after Bertelli, "Vetri italiani," fig. 1)

could have provided the ideal material to enable Ahmad ibn Sulayman and his followers to see through—and mystically *walk* through—the wall of the mihrab, like Sufi Alices in Wonderland walking through the mirror. The vegetal decoration of the painted tiles suggests nothing less than that the Garden of Paradise and the Tree of Life lie just past the glass screen. Behind the wall are knowledge and the reward for a life well spent in prayer and poverty, and every visitor to the shaykh's tomb can have a glimpse of this reward and look forward to it.

The preservation of this interesting monument is a matter of grave concern. By comparing photographs taken before the Comité restored the complex (see fig. 12)<sup>51</sup> with slides that I took in 1988 (see figs. 11 and 17) and 1989, when I had the chance to study

the mausoleum, one can notice that, despite the work devoted about seventy-five years ago to repairing the lower part of the plaster decoration, a sizable number of glass tiles, in particular from the outer band, have since fallen. During my first visit in 1988, I found many glass fragments on the floor in front of the mihrab, and in the space of a few months I noticed more fragments, newly fallen.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, the plaster is deteriorating at a fast pace, and before long this unique decoration may no longer exist. This article is intended to call attention to a jewel of early Mamluk architectural decoration and to urge a program of preservation of its glass-tiled wall. Perhaps the reward will be a feeling of intimacy with Ahmad ibn Sulayman and his followers of the Rifa'ī order, and we shall be able to observe for a moment the Garden of Para-

dise that lies behind the glass tiles. In the words of a familiar Italian expression used when one performs a good deed, we might come “*di guadagnare un pezzetto di paradiso*,” “to deserve a small piece of paradise.”

*The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
New York*

### NOTES

*Author's note:* This article was developed from a lecture that I gave in Kuwait on May 5, 1997, the abridged text of which, titled “The Mausoleum of Ibn Sulayman al-Rifa’i in Cairo and Its Painted Glass Tiles,” appears in *Dār al-Āthār al-Islāmīyah Newsletter* 9 (1997): 18–21 (published in 2000). I also gave a revised version of the lecture at Harvard University on Nov. 15, 2001.

1. The map of the city of Cairo, with the monuments numbered, is attached to vol. 1 of K. A. C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1959).
2. Creswell, *Muslim Architecture*, pp. 219–22 and pls. 78, 79, and 80a.
3. Carl Johan Lamm, “A Muslim Decoration in Stucco and Glass,” *The Burlington Magazine* 50 (1927): 36–43; Layla Aly Ibrahim, “Four Cairene Mihrabs and their Dating,” *Kunst des Orients* 7, 1 (1970–71): 31, 35, and note 26; Layla Aly Ibrahim, “The Zāwiya of Shaikh Zain al-Din Yūsuf in Cairo,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 34 (1978): 101, 108–9, and notes 99, 149, and 153–54.
4. Al-Maqrizi, *Kitāb al-mawā’iz wa-al-i’tibār bi-dhikr al-khitat wa-al-āthār*, ed. Bulaq (Cairo, 1916), vol. 2, p. 428.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. The zāwiya, the place where a shaykh teaches Sufi doctrines to his adepts, often is his own house. After the shaykh’s death, the zāwiya remains the gathering place of the Sufi sect, and the shaykh’s tomb or mausoleum, when added to the building, becomes a place for pilgrimage.
8. Max Bey Pasha Herz, *Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l’Art Arabe, Exercice 1910*, fasc. 27 (Cairo, 1911), pp. 69–70, 147–49, pls. 15–18; p. 70, pl. 28.
9. The year of Ahmad’s death is inscribed on his *tābūt* (coffin).
10. See above note 2.
11. For the *mashhad* of Sayyida Ruqayya, see Creswell, *Muslim Architecture*, vol. 2, pp. 247–50, pls. 119 a–d and 120 a. Other nearly contemporaneous examples of painted stucco are the dome of the mausoleum of the Abbasid caliphs of 1242 (Creswell, *Muslim Architecture*: vol. 2, pp. 89–91, figs. 41–42, pls. 30b–d and 115a); the muqarnas of the dome of the mausoleum of Shajara al-Durr of 1250 (Creswell, *Muslim Architecture*, vol. 2, pp. 136–39, pls. 41–43); and the mihrabs of Sultan Lajin in the mosque of Ibn Tulun of 1296; of Baktimur al-Jukandar in the mosque of Salih al-Tala’i of 1299; of the mausoleum of Qarasunqur of 1300; and of Salar in the mosque of al-Azhar of 1303 (Ibrahim, “Four Mihrabs”).
12. The *mawlid* more generally is the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad or of an especially venerated saint.
13. Al-Maqrizi, *Khīṭat*, vol. 2, p. 428.
14. As reported by al-Maqrizi, *Khīṭat*, vol. 2, p. 428).
15. For the zāwiya of Zayn al-Din Yusuf, see Ibrahim, “Zain al-Din” and Sheila S. Blair, “Sufi Saints and Shrine Architecture in the Early Fourteenth Century,” *Muqarnas* 7 (1990): 40–41.
16. See Spencer J. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 20–21 and 37–40.
17. See Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians, Written in Egypt during the Years 1833, -34 and-35, partly from Notes Made during a Former Visit to the Country in the Years -25, -26, -27, and -28*, 5th ed. (London, 1871), p. 460; Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, pp. 37–38, citing Ibn Khalliqan (d. 1282).
18. Al-Maqrizi, *Khīṭat*, vol. 2, p. 428.
19. Qur’an 33: 56 to *alladhīna*; 2: 255 to *bi-ithmihi*; and 48: 1 to *naṣrān*. I am extremely grateful to Bernard O’Kane and his students at the American University in Cairo, who, as part of a project to record the inscriptions of Cairene monuments, recently visited the mausoleum and recorded its inscriptions for the first time.
20. *Bulletin des musées et monuments lyonnais* 2 (1989): 32–35.
21. Herz, *Comité*, p. 148.
22. The inscription on the *tābūt* was copied in Arabic and translated into French by Herz, *Comité*, p. 148. It was checked against the original and is offered in English here for the first time.
23. A survey of chronological tables reveals that in neither year was the sixth of Dhul-Hijja a Monday. (November 30, 1291 was a Wednesday, and November 18, 1292 was a Tuesday).
24. *Verre églomisé* typically consists of a layer of unfired gold or, occasionally, silver engraved with a needle and sandwiched between two layers of glass. For a survey of the technique, see Harold Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 103.
25. For example, the enamelled and gilded lamp inscribed with the name of the Amir Aydaqin al-‘Ala’i al-Bunduqdar (d. 1285–86) was made for his small mausoleum in Cairo, where it was probably suspended in front of the mihrab and above his cenotaph. The lamp is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: see Stefano Carboni and David Whitehouse, *Glass of the Sultans* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Corning Museum of Glass, 2001), pp. 228–230, cat. no. 114. It is likely that Ayyubid and Mamluk custom of hanging lamps in buildings started in mausoleums and blossomed in madrasas and mosques, where lamps were hung from ceilings in seemingly endless rows.
26. Compositional analysis of the glass tiles was undertaken in the Department of Objects Conservation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The author is grateful to Richard Stone and Mark Wypyski for their help in this matter.
27. Flat window glass could also be produced from so-called crown glass. The technique was slightly more complicated than that of broad glass, and the glass produced needed more polishing. To make crown glass, a bubble of glass was transferred from the blowpipe to a rod (pontil) and was cut open and rotated until, by centrifugal force, it had spread into a flat disk. It was then annealed and cut into pieces of the

- desired shape; each piece was fairly thin but showed slight convexity and concentric wavy lines, caused by the rotation, and a boss, or "bull's-eye," in the center where the pontil had been attached; these individual pieces are known by the French term "plates de verre" and the Venetian "rui." Most famous for its use in medieval cathedral windows, crown glass was already known in many parts of the Roman Empire, including the Middle East.
28. On broad glass, see the brief discussion, and especially note 33, in Stefano Carboni, "The Use of Glass as Architectural Decoration in the Islamic World," *Annales of the Fifteenth Congress of the Association Internationale pour l'Histoire du Verre* (Congress held in New York and Corning, 2001) (Corning, 2003), pp. 131-32.
  29. Even the more detailed reports of glass from archaeological excavations do not identify the production technique of flat glass. See, for example, Hayat Salam-Liebich, "Glass," in Oleg Grabar et al., *City in the Desert: Qasr al-Hayr East* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1978).
  30. Written report by Richard Stone and Mark Wypyski (see note 26 above).
  31. An exhaustive study of the *qamariyya* has not yet been written, although it is the subject of Jocelyn Kimmels' doctoral dissertation, now in preparation at the Institute of Archeology, University College, London. For an example published in color, see Marilyn Jenkins[-Madina], "Islamic Glass: A Brief History," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 44, 2 (1986): back cover. The term is defined by Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Wiesbaden, 1961), as a "skylight or a small window." For further information on Islamic windows, see Finbarr Barry Flood, "Palaces of Crystal, Sanctuaries of Light: Windows, Glass, and Jewels in Medieval Islamic Architecture," (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1993) and idem, "The Earliest Islamic Windows as Architectural Decoration," *Persica* 14 (1990-92): 67-89.
  32. Henry Field and Eugene Prostov, "Excavations in Uzbekistan, 1937-1039," *Ars Islamica* 9 (1962): 143-50.
  33. Stefano Carboni, *Glass from Islamic Lands* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), pp. 272-79, cat. no. 73; and Carboni and Whitehouse, *Glass of the Sultans*, pp. 133-36, cat. nos. 50-52.
  34. Dan Barag, "Three Glass Plaques," Ephraim Stern, ed., *Excavations at Tel Mevorakh (1973-1976), Part One: From the Iron Age to the Roman Period* (Qedem: Monographs of the Institute of Archaeology, 1978), pp. 5-7.
  35. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
  36. José Guidol Ricart and P. M. De Artiñano, *Vidrio: Resumen de la historia del vidrio; Catálogo de la colección Alfonso Macaya* (Barcelona, 1935), p. 134, fig. 101.
  37. Christoph W. Clairmont, *Catalogue of Ancient and Islamic Glass in the Benaki Museum* (Athens, 1977), p. 111, pl. 24.
  38. The fragment in the Corning Museum of Glass (inv. no. 51.1.169) is made of translucent greenish colorless glass with bubbles; its surface is slightly weathered. It is free-blown and painted, the brownish pigments applied on the reverse creating a geometric pattern.
  39. As reported in the first century by Strabo in his *Geography*, bk. 17, chap. 8, paragraph 8: "...the body of Alexander was carried off by Ptolemy and given sepulture in Alexandria, where it still now lies—not, however, in the same sarcophagus as before, for the present one is made of glass, whereas the one in which Ptolemy laid it was made of gold." See T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rouse (eds.) and H. L. Jones (trans.), *The Geography of Strabo*, 8 vols. (London and New York, 1917-32), vol. 8, p. 37. Some translators concede that the original Greek *hyalos* may be interpreted as "alabaster" rather than "glass."
  40. Guitty Azarpay, "The Islamic Tomb Tower: A Note on Its Genesis and Significance," Abbas Daneshvari, ed., *Essays in Islamic Art and Architecture in Honor of Katherina Otto-Dorn* (Malibu, 1981), p. 11.
  41. See introduction by Michael A. Signer to *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages* (Malibu, 1987), p. 109.
  42. Zaki Muhammad Hasan, *Kunūz al-Fātimīyyīn* (Cairo, 1937), pls. 3-4.
  43. Layla Aly Ibrahim and Yasin Adil, "A Tulunid Hammam in Old Cairo," *Islamic Archaeological Studies* 3 (1988): 45.
  44. Ernst Emile Herzfeld, *Die Malereien von Samarra* (Berlin, 1927), pl. 46.
  45. Charles Kyrle Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Some Early Islamic Buildings and Their Decoration* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), pp. 276-77.
  46. Carlo Bertelli, "Vetri italiani a fondo d'oro del secolo XIII," *Journal of Glass Studies* 12 (1970): 70-78.
  47. See, for example, Esin Atil, *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), pp. 185-87.
  48. Lamm, *Stucco Decoration*, pp. 36-43.
  49. *Ibid.*
  50. A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Light of Heaven and Earth: from the Chahār-Yāq to the Mihrab," in *Aspects of Iranian Culture in Honor of Richard Nelson Frye, Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 4 (1990): 95-131.
  51. The photograph, preserved in the archives of the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum, was taken by Helmut von Erffa, presumably in the 1910s.
  52. According to Bernard O'Kane (see note 19), most of the decoration of the right-hand half of the qibla wall had fallen to the ground last year.