European fascination with Islamic aesthetics from the Middle Ages to nineteenth-century orientalism is a commonplace in the history of Western and Islamic arts. In this context the relationship between Renaissance Italy and the Muslim Mediterranean world occupies a prominent place. Mamluk art, which is the subject of this article, is known to have had an impact on Venetian craftsmanship in glass, metalwork, and other media. In the study of European-Mamluk relationships, however, no attention has so far been dedicated to the possibility of a reverse process, that is, of a European echo in Mamluk art. The following pages will demonstrate that the Mamluks (1250–1517) were not blind to European arts and crafts, either in the Bahri or in the later Circassian period, which coincided respectively with the European late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. As in the reverse case, however, this interaction did not imply the adoption of aesthetic concepts; rather it remained confined to haphazard individual details.

The earliest opportunity for Mamluk craftsmen to come in contact with European artistic ideas was during the later Crusade period. The hostilities between Crusaders and Muslims did not prevent the urge on both sides, during either the Ayyubid or the Mamluk period, to maintain commercial relations. Although it is generally believed that the confrontation between Muslims and Crusaders did not have a significant cultural or artistic impact on the Muslim world, interest in exotica was not only a European phenomenon. Moreover, as demonstrated by M. Meinecke, heraldry—a characteristic feature of Mamluk art—seems to have emerged under European influence as a result of the encounter with the Crusaders.

The arts and crafts of medieval Europe could not have the same kind of appeal in the Muslim world as did those of China, India, or Byzantium. As demonstrated by the chinoiserie that begin to spread on Mamluk decoration in the first half of the fourteenth century, Mamluk society was receptive to Eastern artifacts, but it did not ignore artifacts from the medieval Latin world. The Mamluks valued some Gothic decorative patterns, as is shown by the numerous spoils carried away from Crusader churches in Syria and Palestine to adorn religious monuments in Cairo. Unlike the pre-Islamic spoils used as building material or for apotropaic purposes, and unlike the taste for chinoiserie, Gothic spoils had the significance of being trophies of war taken from the Christian enemy. It is difficult to assess, however, the exact associations triggered in the mind of the medieval Cairene population at the sight of these spoils. They might have been viewed merely as exotica, with no more political or religious associations than chinoiserie.

CRUSADER SPOILS IN MAMLUK MONUMENTS

Among the Crusader trophies used in Mamluk architecture was the maqsūra built by Sultan al-Zahir Baybars at his mosque at Husayniyya (1266–69), which was roofed over its mihrab with the most monumental dome in Cairo at that time. Covering the space of nine bays, the maqsūra was made of wood and marble taken from the Crusader fortress of Jaffa, which the sultan had just captured in a decisive battle. Today it is impossible to assess how these spoils characterized the appearance of the maqsūra, or what the marble mihrab looked like, since the decoration and the dome disappeared long ago.

Above the entrance to the complex of Sultan Qalawun in Cairo, built in 1284–85, is a window grille of wrought iron, which Creswell identified as of Frankish craftsmanship. This grille could have been removed from a Crusader building and fitted into the window, or it could have been made by a Frankish craftsman in Cairo (fig.1). Besides featuring a European iron grille, the façade of the complex is itself indebted in design to Norman Sicilian architecture, as are various other features in the interior of this singular building. More than one and a half centuries separate the Mamluk complex from comparable buildings in Sicily, however. This gap makes it difficult to interpret the modalities of this
transfer of patterns, just as is the case with the façade of the mosque of Sultan Hasan and its Rum-Seljuq prototype, which has been discussed by J. M. Rogers.9

The most prominent Gothic spoil in Cairo is the portal brought to Cairo after the decisive Battle of Acre in 1291 and installed at Sultan al-Adil Katbugha’s madrasa (1295), which was later (1304) appropriated and completed by al-Nasir Muhammad (fig. 2). Maqrizi describes the portal as “one of the most beautiful in the world!”10—a surprising statement considering the existence in his time of some glorious Mamluk portals, such as those of Sultan Hasan’s mosque and Qawsun’s palace. Other dispersed spoils can be seen in prominent places on various Mamluk buildings, such as the engaged colonettes with Gothic capitals flanking the niches of the portal recess at the khānqāh of Baybars al-Jashankir.11 Likewise, the madrasa of Sunqur al-Sa’di, built between 1315 and 1321, has a window above the entrance door adorned with two pairs of colonettes with Gothic capitals (figs. 3–4).12 In all these cases the Gothic ornaments are placed at the entrance—that is, in a most visible and prominent location.

Similarly, the mosque of Sultan Hasan (1356–62) displays Gothic spoils in several prominent locations. Two rectangular slabs, of equal size but carved with different patterns, adorn the portal on each side of the entrance recess (figs. 5–7). The pattern on the right panel consists of superimposed buildings, which look like churches and which Herz has interpreted as a “signature” of Christian craftsmen involved in the building of the mosque. The similar slab at the left side, however, shows a different pattern—a meander of

---

Fig. 1: Window with wrought iron grille at the portal of the complex of Sultan Qalawun.

Fig. 2. Gothic portal of the madrasa of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad.

Fig. 3. Portal of the madrasa of Sunqur al-Sa’di.
Gothic floral motifs—indicating that these two slabs are of the same origin and must have been removed from another building. The imprecise way with which they have been fitted into the wall of the portal confirms that they were not originally made for their present location. These slabs are not the only exotica to adorn the portal; it also displays a profusion of floral chinoiserie carved within the framing band. Flanking the mihrab niche are another two pairs of Gothic columns (fig. 8), and two others adorn the corners of the muezzin’s platform (dikka) in the main iwan. The prominent location of these structures of Christian European provenance leaves no doubt that they were highly valued. It should be recalled, however, that Mamluk architecture was not very creative in the design of capitals, and that the traditional capitals, taken from pre-Islamic buildings, were mostly of Roman-Byzantine and Coptic styles. (It cannot be excluded, however, that Muslim craftsmen copied pre-Islamic capitals to fill the gaps.) Other than these, so-called bell-shaped capitals, which were already used as capitals and column bases at the mosque of Ibn Tulun, continued to characterize Mamluk columns.
EUROPEANS IN THE BUILDING CRAFT OF AL-NASIR MUHAMMAD

To meet the needs of his building boom, al-Nasir Muhammad is reported to have used Frankish and Armenian prisoners of war.13 The sultan allowed these prisoners to settle in two neighborhoods in Cairo: in the Citadel and in a quarter of the city called Khazanat al-Bunud. In his Khitat, Maqrizi writes that Khazanat al-Bunud included Franks, and in the Sulük he reports that they were mainly Armenians. These Armenians and other Latin communities must have been captured during the multiple Mamluk raids on the kingdom of Little Armenia or Cilicia from the thirteenth century until 1322, when al-Nasir Muhammad finally integrated this territory into the Mamluk empire. In the course of this last offensive, al-Nasir is reported to have taken a great number of prisoners of war. Armenian cities at that time included large communities of Europeans,14 which explains Maqrizi’s reference to the faranj in this context. These colonies seemed to have enjoyed a privileged status in Cairo, as they were allowed to dwell there with their families and to keep their own taverns and even a church; Maqrizi speaks with great disgust of the taverns and the lifestyle of this community. It is also interesting to note that Ayas, one of al-Nasir Muhammad’s amirs, who started his career as the intendant of the construction works, was a converted Armenian.15

When the amir Almalik, who was a hajj renowned for his religious zeal, complained to the sultan about the presence of taverns and of repulsive things taking place in the vicinity of his residence, the sultan replied that he should move elsewhere. Following al-Nasir’s death, however, Almalik, as soon as he was promoted to the office of viceroy (nā‘ib al-saltana) in 1343, dismantled the quarters of both the Citadel and Khazanat al-Bunud and transferred their inhabitants to the neighborhood of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in the southern outskirts, where their communities continued to dwell in Maqrizi’s time a century later. Since these colonies were settled by princely initiative and tolerated over a long period, it is likely that they were continuously supplied with new recruits. As late as the second half of the fourteenth century, Europeans captured during naval raids on Alexandria were sent to Cairo to work in the building craft.16 Such prisoners, however, were not necessarily specialized builders. In any case, the use of European labor did not have a visible impact on the architectural aesthetics of Bahri Mamluk architecture.

The case of the dynasty of master builders called al-Tūlūnî led me to speculate in an earlier publication about a possible connection with the French southern port city of Toulon.17 These master builders, who worked for the Mamluk court, are mentioned for the first time during the reign of Sultan Barquq, and they continued to play an important role throughout the entire fifteenth century. Although they were said to originate in the Maghreb, I was unable to find a North-
African toponym “Tulun,” which led me, therefore, to the southern French port-city of Toulon as a possible origin. Another more likely possibility is that they came from the quarter of Ibn Tulun, where Maghrebis and the descendents of the above-mentioned European community dwelt. In any case, the origin of these builders, whether it be North Africa or European, is not apparent in the architecture of their age.

THE DHAHABIYYA

Venice might have been the source of inspiration for a major item of Mamluk regalia, the dhahabiyya, or golden ship, with which the Mamluk sultans navigated on the Nile to celebrate the opening of the Khalij (Grand Canal) of Cairo on the occasion of the yearly flood.18 The dhahabiyya is not mentioned in the early Mamluk period; Maqrizi uses the term al-ḥarrāqa al-dhahabiyya, or “the golden boat,”19 for the first time to refer to Sultan al-Ashraf Sha’ban’s royal barge on the occasion of a naval maneuver performed on the Nile in 1367.20 Throughout the fifteenth century the chronicles regularly mention the dhahabiyya in the ceremonial context of the sultans’ excursions on the Nile and, more particularly, the festival of the Khalij. According to Ibn Iyas, the boat had as many as sixty oars and belonged to the regalia of the sultanate until Sultan Qaytbay (1468–96) abolished it. In 1513, however, Sultan al-Ghawri (1501–16), who was very dedicated to ceremonial and festivities, revived the tradition by ordering the construction of a barge in the “style of the old boat called dhahabiyya.”21 In the years between Qaytbay’s rule and al-Ghawri’s revival of the dhahabiyya, Ibn Iyas does not mention this term in the context of the Khalij festival, referring instead to the traditional harrāqa. This clearly indicates that the dhahabiyya was something distinct from and more lavish than the harrāqa or the ‘ashārī referred to in earlier periods.22 The use of a lavish ceremonial boat for the Khalij festival was an old tradition that predates the Mamluks. The Fatimid caliphs sailed on a boat known as ‘ashârī, which had an octagonal wooden superstructure inlaid with ivory and ebony and surmounted by a gold-and-silver cupola; it was adorned with hangings and gilded wooden lanterns.23 In the twelfth century, ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi described the ‘ashârī as a large and beautiful royal barge. Built with two stories, its upper level was occupied by a comfortable domed chamber painted in many colors, gilded, and equipped with its own latrine. It was rowed by oarsmen below deck.24 The dhahabiyya, a golden ship with sixty oars, however, recalls the Venetian ceremonial Bucintoro, or Golden Ship, which had forty-two oars and was used by the Doges to celebrate various ceremonies, the most prominent of which was the traditional marriage of Venice with the sea.25 Although this ceremony began in Venice in 1311, the origin of the vessel itself goes back to the tenth century. One of the many etymological interpretations of the name of this ship, which may not be the right one, is that it is consists of burchio (a type of boat) and oro (gold), which refers to its appearance. Of course, water festivals are a universal phenomenon, and Venice and Cairo each had its own traditions. However, the emergence in the late fourteenth century, at a time of intensive contacts between the Mamluks and Venice, of the term dhahabiyya referring to a large golden barge suggests a Venetian inspiration.

EUROPEANS AT THE LATE MAMLUK COURT

During the Mamluk period European merchants and consuls were not allowed to dwell in the capital but were allocated funduqs, or large compounds, in Alexandria, which continued to be the center of Mamluk-European trade. (They moved freely in Syria, however.) These regulations seem to have been loosened during the reign of Sultan Qaytbay, who intensified his trade with the Venetians and through them with the Germans and Flemings. Moreover, Qaytbay’s court seems to have included quite a number of Europeans and mamluks of European origin, who could have introduced and even promoted a taste for Renaissance craftsmanship and technology. Art historians have emphasized the Mamluk export of luxury goods to Europe; trade history, however, indicates that the Mamluks imported more luxury goods than they exported, their revenue from foreign trade being rather the transit fee on Indian spices. Qaytbay imported gold-embroidered velvet from Venice; luxurious textiles and gold-encrusted crystals from Europe were among the gifts that delighted al-Ghawri.26

The Flemish traveler Van Ghistele, who visited Egypt in 1482–83, writes that the sultan’s Great Treasurer was a mamluk from Danzig called Nasr al-Din.27 Mamluk sources indicate that the person who held this position at that time was Khushqadam al-Ahmadi, who was also a vizier and to whom Sakhawi gives the nisba “al-Rumi,”28 which at that time referred to Anatolians or persons from the Ottoman empire, thus including the Balkans. Khushqadam therefore might have
been recruited or purchased in Ottoman lands. Van Ghistele also mentions mamluks of Greek, Albanian, Italian, and Vlach origin alongside the more common Circassians and Turks.

Most interestingly, among the Europeans Van Ghistele met in Cairo was a prominent merchant from the Flemish city of Mechelen, whom he calls Francisco Tudesco, his surname indicating a German origin. He was a goldsmith who also dealt with crystals and entertained privileged business relations with the sultan and his wife. He was apparently a liaison for European merchants in Cairo. The Swiss pilgrim Felix Fabri, who came to Egypt with a German group in 1483, also met this German goldsmith from Mechelen.

During his stay in Cairo, Van Ghistele had the opportunity to see the arrival of two European embassies, that of Ferdinand II of Aragon, King of Sicily and Naples, and that of the queen of Cyprus, Catharina Cornaro. Cyprus had been tributary to the Mamluk sultanate ever since the reign of Barsbay, and at the same time was under the tutelage of Venice, Catharina herself being Venetian. According to Van Ghistele, Ferdinand, who was trying to persuade the sultan to help him install his illegitimate son on the throne of Cyprus, sent the sultan a remarkable gift—a shipload of artillery equipment, which included a large array of richly decorated white weapons and armor. Ferdinand’s gift delighted Qaytbay and his courtiers but annoyed the Europeans, who viewed it as an act that undermined the Pope’s ban on the sale of strategic goods to Muslims.

Although unlike the Catalans, Venetians, and Genoese, merchants from Flanders and Germany did not have a funduq in Alexandria, they seem to have been privileged enough to dwell in Cairo and do business at Qaytbay’s court. Fabri also saw at the Mamluk court a German from Basel and many mamluks of Hungarian origin who had been captured as prisoners of war by the Ottomans and sent as gifts to Egypt. He emphasizes the importance of the mamluks of Christian origin at Qaytbay’s court and their eagerness to work for the sultan, to the extent that they would baptize their children so that they could later be recruited as mamluks of Christian origin. This is also confirmed by Arnold von Harff, who in 1497 visited Cairo, where he met mamluks of German origin, and by Anselm Adorno (in 1470–71), who mentions Italian, Greek, Slav, and Albanian mamluks; he moreover writes that Qaytbay himself came from Christian Scythian territory near Russia.

Fabri reports that the Venetian consul in Alexandria had a residence in Cairo where he stayed to oversee the commercial transactions of German merchants. Like Van Ghistele, Fabri mentions the son of Ferdinand II of Aragon, the king of Sicily and Naples, who apparently resided at that time at Qaytbay’s court. Beside the Great Treasurer from Danzig mentioned earlier, other Europeans are reported to have acquired the status of amir during the fifteenth century. A well-documented case is Taghrībirdī, the sultan’s dragoman, who was an “amir of ten” during the reigns of Qaytbay and his son Muhammad. Fabri reports that he was a Sicilian Jew who had converted to Christianity before entering Qaytbay’s service and eventually converted to Islam. He had a Greek and an Italian wife. It seems that already in the early fifteenth century the dragoman of the sultan was a converted European Jew: the one who worked for Sultan Barsbay came from Seville. According to the historian Ibn Taghrībirdī, the dawūdār of Sultan Inal, Amir Sayf al-Dīn Bardabak (d. 868/1464), was a converted Cypriot, an ifrānjī, who had been captured at a young age during Barsbay’s invasion of the island in 1426. Because of his origins and his connections, he was particularly involved with the Mamluk policy of Cyprus.

These cases show that the contacts between the late Mamluk court and Europe were close enough to arouse Mamluk curiosity and interest in the artistic and technological evolution that was taking place in Renaissance Europe. It can be moreover assumed that the European mamluks were likely to maintain contacts with their countries of origin. Italian paintings and engravings depicting Sultan al-Ghawri attest to the presence of Italian artists in the Mamluk empire, perhaps even at the Mamluk court itself. Leonardo da Vinci, who writes in his notebook that he was hired by an amir of Qaytbay in Syria for a mission in East Anatolia, seems to have been involved in an undefined task that was not of an artistic nature.

**EVIDENCE OF EUROPEAN CRAFTSMANSHIP IN QAYTBAY’S EMPIRE**

There is also physical evidence for Qaytbay’s employing European professionals in military architecture. When Fabri arrived in Alexandria, he saw Qaytbay’s fort, which had just been completed; he attributes it to a German architect from Oppenheim. Qaytbay might have assigned the task of building this fort to a German in view of the recent developments in the technology of warfare, in particular artillery. The threat of the Ottomans, who
had used German artillery in their recent wars, must have prompted Qaytbay to update his fortifications to cope with the new weapons (fig. 9).43

A remarkable import of European technology under Qaytbay was a mechanical device mentioned in the chronicle of Ibn al-Himsi.44 The historian, who describes in detail the restoration works of the Umayyad mosque of Damascus following the fire of 1479, mentions a hoist used to raise the beams of the ceiling, which he praises as a technological innovation:

The works progressed rapidly thanks to the ingenious mechanical device of an old carpenter from Salihyya called Muhammad al-Kufti, which consisted of a mast (ṣārī) and a wheel (dālāb) that could easily raise the beams, so that all the beams of an aisle could be raised in one morning, which was a great blessing that saved a great deal of money.

Later on, when a fire broke out at the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, Muhammad al-Kufti was summoned there to contribute to the reconstruction with his hoist.45

It is obvious from this text that such a device, which had no Arabic terminus technicus of its own, was something singular at that time in the Mamluk empire, for only Muhammad al-Kufti was known to possess and use it and was therefore summoned to Medina. The fact that this device was not known elsewhere in the Muslim world seems to be confirmed by its absence in late-fifteenth-century Persian miniatures of the Bihzad school representing construction scenes. However, this type of hoist or treadwheel, which is mentioned by Vitruvius in his chapter on hoisting devices, was commonly used in Europe for the construction of Gothic cathedrals and by the thirteenth century had already been depicted in many miniatures referring to this subject.46 It seems to have been re-devised in 1350 by the Florentine master builder Giovanni di Lapo Ghini. The machine was a giant spool operated by several men who, like hammers, walked within it to wind a rope that, through a system of pulleys, raised the weight attached to its end. Some of these hoists are still in situ at Mont-Saint-Michel, the cathedrals of Beauvais and Salisbury, and some churches in Germany (fig. 10).47 Where Muhammad al-Kufti learned about the device remains a matter of speculation.

During the very short reign of Qaytbay’s son al-Nasir Muhammad (1491), a European craftsman called “Domenico the Caster” (Dūmīnīkū al-Sabbix), most probably a Venetian, produced cannons in Cairo for the amir Aqbarī, who was trying to suppress the
rebellion of a Mamluk faction that had created a chaotic situation in Cairo at that time. However, the unsuccessful Aqbardi had to run for his life, leaving Domenico to be beheaded by the rebels.\textsuperscript{48}

**THE “VENETO-SARACENIC” CASE.**

Artistic contacts with Venice are well known to art historians in the context of the so-called Veneto-Saracen metal vessels. These vessels, which exist in large numbers in European collections, often, though not always, have European shapes of Venetian, German, or Flemish origin, and surfaces decorated with unconventional arabesques and silver and gold inlays that distinguish them from the mainstream of Islamic metalwork. These features, combined with the frequent occurrence of Muslim craftsmen’s signatures, the most famous being that of Mahmud al-Kurdi, led scholars in the nineteenth century to attribute this production to a Muslim workshop established in Venice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: hence their appellation. This possibility, however, has more lately been dismissed on the grounds that the labor situation in Venice would not have allowed such an intrusion. S. Melikian-Chirvani and James Allan have presented convincing arguments in favor of a Mamluk production during the reign of Qaytbay.\textsuperscript{49} This can be confirmed by a most decisive argument, so far overlooked, that most signatures engraved on these objects, regardless of their different styles, carry the title \textit{mu'allim}, unmistakably an Egyptian or Syrian craftsman’s title, not common on metalwork from Iraq, Iran, or Syria (fig. 11).\textsuperscript{50} Moreover, the rare epigraphic adornments that occur on this group of vessels definitely belong to the late Mamluk repertoire.\textsuperscript{51}

The frequent occurrence of Muslim signatures on “Veneto-Saracenic” metalware could have been meant to emphasize the Islamic provenance of this production, perhaps in order to prevent a mistaken attribution to Europe. The European shapes and the new taste displayed in the decoration, however, indicate that there was a Mamluk initiative to modernize and “westernize” the art of metalwork, probably with the motivation of export to Europe. Such an initiative might have taken place in the cosmopolitan environment of Qaytbay’s reign described here.

The hypothesis of a European involvement in late Mamluk craftsmanship might also help explain the origin of an enameled glass lamp bearing the name of Qaytbay, in the Islamic Museum in Cairo.\textsuperscript{52} This lamp is the only one of its kind attributable to the late fifteenth century, the production of enameled glass having come to an end in the Mamluk empire in the late fourteenth century, at a time when it began to flourish in Venice and Spain. The Qaytbay lamp is evidence of an attempt, albeit not successful, to revive the tradition of Bahri Mamluk enameled glass lamps. The style of the inscriptions and decoration betrays occidental features and appears rather “orientalist.” Stefano Carboni has argued that it could not be Venetian, as commonly believed; he has instead suggested a Catalonian production.\textsuperscript{53} In light of the previous documentation, it can be proposed that the lamp was the product of a Cairene workshop using European expertise. Qaytbay might have hired European craftsmen, such as the German goldsmith and crystal maker from Flanders,\textsuperscript{54} to promote the art of metalwork, which had declined in quality and quantity, and to revive the production of enameled glass, which had entirely disappeared during...
the previous century. Such initiative would have been consistent with this sultan’s patronage of the arts.

There is a tension between the picture presented here of the late Mamluk court as an environment propitious for the assimilation of European skills and the image conveyed by Mamluk chroniclers, who rarely mention persons of European origin unless they were monarchs or envoys. Although Ibn Iyas briefly mentions Taghrbirdi in his function as dragoman, he does not refer to his origins, nor does Sakhawi list this amir in his biographical encyclopedia. Mamluk authors rarely refer to craftsmen in any case; when they mention indigenous Christian craftsmen, they keep them anonymous. For instance, the Christian master builder who is reported to have built Qaytbay’s mosque in Jerusalem is not named. Neither do Mamluk authors include non-Muslim citizens in their biographical encyclopedias. There is more research to be done on this subject, for which it will be necessary to consult European sources and archives.

NOTES


18. Qalqashand, Ibn Iyês, vol. 4, pp. 24, 120
17. Ibn Iyês, vol. 4, pp. 24, 120
13. Muhammad al-Kufî is also mentioned by Ibn Tûlûn, who similarly credits him for having raised the beams of the mosque: Ibn Tûlûn, Mujiyakabat al-Ýâllîn fû hawûdith al-Ýamûn (Cairo, 1901), vol. 1, p. 51.
12. This device, however, is not mentioned by Villard de Honncourt, who compiled his notebook in the first quarter of the thirteenth century.
7. Melikian-Chirvani, “Venise entre l’Orient et l’Occident.” A bowl in the Khalili Collection signed “Mu’allim Mahmûd” (fig. 11) has a late Mamluk poetical inscription.