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# ORNAMENTATION AND POLYCHROME DECORATION BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND RENEWAL : DAMASCUS, 1864-1963

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## ***Historical context: Damascus under al-nahdah movement***

As a pursuit of the “Sublime-Porte” edicts of reforms, *ḥaṭṭi šerīf* in 1839 and *ḥaṭṭi hūmāyūn* in 1856, the Syrian cities were the object of a wide-ranging and multifaceted modernization. Extensive urban and architectural transformations took place and radically restructured the cities’ aspect<sup>1</sup>. The Europeanization of urban and architectural trends was pertinent since the Ottoman reforms had been largely built on the European experiences, particularly French. After the departure of the Ottomans in 1918, the Syrian and French rulers initiated another period of reforms, enlarging the Europeanization of the urban and architectural fabrics on one side<sup>2</sup>; promoting a renaissance of the vernacular

architecture on the other. This attitude was affected by Syrian and Arab nationalist ideologies growing since the mid-19th century, focusing on different forms of independence, proposing dissimilar understandings of the wished modern society. After the complete departure of the French in 1946, Damascus was to experience a period of large-scale urban projects. The demolition and reconstruction of most buildings of al-Margeh square reveals the extremist attitude towards the legacy of the Ottoman Reforms. The Post-colonial period, a prosperous phase of the political exercise in Syria, ended by the arrival of al-Ba’th Party to power in 1963.

Such long-term changes encouraged rival and socially differentiated networks to emerge and to modify the traditional sociopolitical debate. As a result, two main notions: conservatism and renewal have found their place in all fields of life, in different degrees, and in continuous confrontation. They have channeled theoreticians, reformers, national and transnational projects, each one with a set of interior and exterior references. However, the acceler-

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1 For more information about the Syrian urban and architectural transformations from 1839-1963, see (for example): Weber, Stephan., *Damascus, Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation 1808-1918*, Aarhus University Press, 2009, 2 vol; Soufan, Anas., *Influences occidentales et traditions régionales sur l’évolution urbaine et architecturale des villes arabes, de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle au milieu du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, l’exemple de Damas*, Thèse de doctorat, Paris, 2011.

2 On the subject of westernization of urban and architectural space during the Ottoman Reforms and the French Mandate, : Soufan, Anas., *Influences*

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*occidentales et traditions régionales sur l’évolution urbaine et architecturale des villes arabes, de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle au milieu du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, l’exemple de Damas*, Thèse de doctorat, Paris, 2011, 2<sup>th</sup> par (Ottoman Reforms), 3<sup>th</sup> part (French Mandate).

ated changes during the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the “revolutionary upheavals”, according to Sāṭii al-Ḥuṣari<sup>1</sup>, proved the domination of the renewal current. The contradictions between the two doctrines culminated at the turn of the 19th century, having preserved a continuous “reformist” debate around three main questions: the identification of the right kind of modern society and State; the place of Islam and Islamic law, or *al-šarī‘ah*; and the vision as to the position and role of the West in the Arab modernization or *al-‘iṣlāḥ*<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, the Islamic conservative tendency has tended to preserve the existing and to reject the concept of historical rupture in the existence of Islam, understood as a religion of the eternal, unchangeable, and bearer of values revealed by God through his Prophet. According to Ḥāled Al-‘Azm (1903-1964), a principal figure of the political sight in Syria, although the religious practices decreased during the first half of 20th century, religion remained the fundamental notion in the life of a great many Syrians<sup>3</sup>. The second tendency, liberal, has tended to transform the bases of society and to update the historical process of Muslim societies through sciences and new ways of thinking, thereby canceling or reinventing the traditional representations and methods. Subsequently, it is not surprising the previously mentioned mindsets have led to the mounting of two groups of reformers<sup>4</sup>. On the first side, the conservative

reformers or the renewal salafists according to Abdul Raḥmān al-Šahbandar<sup>5</sup> have deemed reformed Islam and Islamic Caliphate to be the adequate bearers of Modernity<sup>6</sup>. Until the First World War, this current was mainly forged by the Ottomanism, in clear relationship with the principle of Islamic Caliphate<sup>7</sup>, embodied by the Sublime-Porte. Many authors supported directly or indirectly the Ottomanism and might be considered as part of its pillars in Syria. Taḥer al-Jazā’iri (1851-1920), Saṭīm al-Buḥārī (1851-1928), Adul-Azīz al-‘Azman (1856-1943) and Rašīd Riḍa (1865-1925)<sup>8</sup> were relevant exam-

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mers, adopts the following classification of Muslims who lived at the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century: the conservatives. (*al-muḥāfiẓūn*) who refuse all kinds of modernity; the Europeanized (*al-mutaḥārijūn*) who know only the name of their religion; the reformers (*al-muṣliḥūn*) who try to modernize society while preserving their religion. Rašīd Riḍa., *al-Ḥilāḥah*, p. 99-104. Sāṭii al-Ḥuṣari has also classified the reformers in three categories: the conservators, the renewals and the moderates who were rassembling principles of the two previous categories: see: Ḥuṣari, Sāṭii., *‘Abḥāt* 1964, p. 540.

5 See for instance his speech for the commemoration of Rašīd Riḍā : *Al-Manār*, n° 3, vol. 35, March, 1935.

6 Certainly, other tendencies had place in the society, for instance, the traditionalists who try to preserve the original Islamic spirit, resisting all renewal and change; it is a kind of Salafism but without the clear political issues of the current expression. This category had been comprising a large part of the Syrian society, but since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it began a continuous decline.

7 al-Ḥeṣnī, Muhammad taqi al-dīn., *Montaḥabāt al-tawāriḥ li-dimašq*, Beyrouth, Dār al-‘Āfāq al-jadīdah, 1927, Vol. 1, p.298.

8 Before the departure of the Ottomans in 1918, Rašīd Riḍa considers himself as “Ottoman” and appeals to respect the different origins, religions and

1 Ḥuṣari, Sāṭii., *‘Abḥāt* 1964, p. 540.

2 See in this rate: Hourani, A., *Arabic thought in the liberal Age, 1798-1939*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1983, p.69, p.1-24, p. 34-67; and: Arkoun, Muhammad., *Essaie sur la pensée islamique*, Maisonneuve & Larose, Paris, 1983, p. 251-281.

3 Al-‘Azm, Ḥāled., *Muṣakarāt Ḥāled al-‘Azm*, 3<sup>e</sup> éd., al-Dār al-mutaḥīdah, Beyrouth, 2003, vol.1, p. 49.

4 Rašīd Riḍa, one of the most important Arab refor-

ples. Nonetheless, antagonistic ideologies, such as the Arabism and Syrian nationalism<sup>1</sup>, found place in Damascus as a reply to the anti-Arabs policies and turkification plans, carried out by the central Ottoman administration after the deposition of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II and the arrival of the Committee of Union and Progress – CUP to power, in 1908-1909.

On the other side, the liberal reformers have dealt differently with the inherited traditional values and heritage. Part of them have invited to initiate the essential renewal in order to instigate a radical rupture with the past. Others have encouraged the adaptation of the irreversible movement of modern civilizations to the local context. Both have admitted the efficiency and the supremacy of secularized societies exemplified by certain European models. Arabism and Syrian nationalism constituted the chief ideologies of liberal reformers during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Their leaders' style, which was often a mix of traditional city patrons and modern party men<sup>2</sup>, illustrated adequately liberal reformers' trend: Hāled al-'Aẓm (1903-1964), Fāris al-Ḥūrī (1877-1962), Faḥrī al-Barūdi (1887-1966), Abdul Raḥmān al-Šahbandar (1879-1940)<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Kurd

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ethnics of all Ottomans. “Tādat al-qanūn al-'asāsi wa majlis al-maḥāṭūn fil dawlat al-'aliyyah”, *al-Manār*, vol. 11, part 6, July, 1908. Since 1917, Rašīd Riḍa declares that “the political interest of Arabs is to have an independent State, (...), Arabs are one of the most ancient nations on the earth”. Al-mas'alah al-'arabiyyah, *al-Manār*, vol. 20, part 1, July, 20, 1917, p. 33-47.

1 S. Khoury, Philip., *Urban notables and Arab nationalism*, 1983, p. 67.

2 S. Khoury, Philip., “The Paradoxical in Arab Nationalism, 1997, p. 282.

3 The most of al-Šahbandar's writings were published in the journals *al-Muqataf* and *al-Hilaāl* in

'Ali (1876-1952)<sup>4</sup> and others. After the independence, Arabism and Syrian nationalism continued to fascinate many Syrians<sup>5</sup> and the conservative Islamic movements continued to be unsuccessful in retaining their popular bases. The People Party, the Nationalist Social Party and Arab Socialist Ba'th Party were examples of this fact, competing the religious ideologies, appealing to a secular and 'civil' discourse for the development of the homeland and nation / *al-waṭan – al-ummah*. In this framework, how the architecture, as a product of the incessantly combined interacting activity of reason and imagination, affected by / influenced the aforementioned context. How can we demonstrate this link, its bearer and material expression?.

#### ***Representative and memorial functions of polychrome decoration***

For the “People of the Book” or People of the Sacred Scriptures, both interior and exterior design have been deemed to be profoundly influenced by the Revelation or by the notion of

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Egypt during his stay there from 1927 to 1937. See in this rate: *Al-doctor Abdul Raḥmān al-Šahbandar, al-maqālāt*, edited by, Muhammad Kāmel al-Ḥaṭīb, Ministry of Culture, Damascus, 1993, 535p.

4 Muhammad Kurd 'Ali invites Syrians to benefit of European knowledge and culture for the well-being of the nation, *al-'ahz bi-ma'arif al-awropiyyin*. Muhammad Kurd Ali, *al-Muqtabas*, vol. 4, Introduction, 1909, p. 3.

5 About the struggle between the partisans of Arabism and Syrian nationalism see: Al-'Aẓm, Hāled., *Muẓakarāt Hāled al-'Aẓm*, 3<sup>ème</sup> édition, al-Dār al-mutaḥidah, Beyrouth, 2003, 3vol; Al-Ḥūrī, Fāris. *Awrāk Fāris al-Ḥūrī, 1877-1962*, éd. Colette Ḥūrī, Dār al-ba't, Damas, 2<sup>ème</sup> édition, 2007, 2vol ; Al-Ḥakīm, Ḥasan., *Muẓakkarāti, šafaḥāt min tarīḥ sutiyyah al-ḥadīṭ 1920-1958*, Dār al-kitāb al-jadīd, 1<sup>er</sup> éd, Beyrouth, 1965, 406p.

'God' as it was exposed by Moses in the Torah, Jesus in the Bible and Muhammad in the Qur'an. In Islam, all existing things are signs referring to God as the Creator. The word 'God' is expressed by the speech of God Himself and that of the Prophet. It takes a material form through theologians, lawyers, writers, craftsmen, artists, builders and designers. For example, the calligraphy using the verses of the Qur'an represents a major component of the decoration of most prestigious civil, military and religious monuments until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the process of secularization constituted an inevitable notion of the historical evolution of the Syrian society since the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. One must therefore consider how radical the extent of the intellectual rupture between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was. The disappearance of notions like metaphors, mysticism, contemplation, signs, saints that characterized the traditional "People of the Book" proved their transformation to become more rationalist and more secularized. According to Afif Bahnasi, when the decorative art in Syria left the religious and spiritual aims, it began to be in touch with the international artistic currents, from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the urban and architectural fabrics have offered a fascinating example of

1 The French Revolution in 1789 had brought a chief symbolic rupture with the church of the Ancien Régime. It proved that State may be governed separately from the religious power. This idea was transmitted to the Syrian society by the expedition of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1832-1840) as well as but in a long-term context, by the European religious-cultural missions. In addition, the transformations issued from the period of French Mandate represented a motor of the secularization movement.

2 Bahnasi, Afif., *Aš-Šām, lamaḥāt 'āṭariyyah wa fanīyyah*, 1980, p.203.

this fact. Many theoreticians and historians of art have illustrated this fact. Muhammad Arkoun has distinguished between religious and secularized space, each one, having its distinctive link to the language, the past, the community, the physical world and the values of society<sup>3</sup>. Oleg Grabar for his part has indicated the existence of an "Islamic secular art"<sup>4</sup>. Rather, he has underlined the existence of Christian Islamic art and Jewish Islamic art<sup>5</sup>. G.W.F. Hegel has described the universal mission of the art as a means that enables Man to represent himself generally or individually and to materialize this reality<sup>6</sup>. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Gottfried Semper stressed that «*Everywhere when a new thinking finds its place in the soil of a culture and appears to be assimilated by the public conscience, it finds a support in architecture in order to define its adequate monumental expression*»<sup>7</sup>. Finally, Robert Venturi had referred to 'symbols' in his definition «*Architecture is a shelter with symbols on it*», then, he announced "the urbanity we were seeking would come

3 Arkoun, Muhammad, «Islamic Culture, Modernity, Architecture», in: *Architecture education in the Islamic World*, The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, proceedings of seminar, Granada, 1986, p. 17.

4 Grabar, Oleg, *The formation of Islamic Art*, 1973, p.139.

5 Grabar, Oleg, *The formation of Islamic Art*, 1973, p.1.

6 Hegel, G.W.F., *Esthétique des arts plastiques*, Hermann, Paris, 1993, p. 42.

7 Semper, Gottfried, *Du style et de l'architecture, Ecrits 1830-1869*, translated from the German by Soullou, Parenthèses, Marseille, 2007, p. 344: «*Partout où une nouvelle pensée prenait pied dans le sol de la culture et se voyait assimilé en tant que telle à la conscience générale, elle trouvait un soutien dans l'architecture pour en définir l'expression monumentale adéquate*».

from space and signs”<sup>1</sup>. Using the same method of interpretation, Karsten Harries has revealed the ethical role of architecture and wondered “if the language of architecture, too, is a language of representation?”<sup>2</sup>.

In light of the previous approach, architecture has both practical and abstract functions<sup>3</sup>: it is at once a shelter of human activities, a memorial instrument and representational art. In this respect, the architectural aspect is the bearer of the expressive and abstract functions of architecture. But how might the architectural aspect be defined? It is a configuration of visually perceptible colours and forms, executed by the use of certain materials, invented and realized according to certain creativity, patterns, convictions, techniques and references. It characterizes the interior and exterior façades exercising the representative and memorial functions of the building, providing indications about the technical process, the cultural identity and the narratives intended by the builders, in other words, what did they see or mean to represent during its construction and existence.

However, the interpretation of the architectural aspect depends on the beholder’s truths: his physical situation, psychological state, as well as his artistic, cultural and sociopolitical references and convictions. In this way, we emphasize two points. One is that, when a Muslim looked at or used a form, this last bore a differentiated sense, and this difference of visual understanding or of practical use has largely af-

fect the making of other forms<sup>4</sup>. The second point is that several beholder’s truths might be present simultaneously in any architectural façade and *they may even conflict with each other as is already the case with liking or disliking works of art*, said Oleg Grabar<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, it is legitimate to evoke the representative (symbolic and memorial) functions of ornament and polychrome decoration themselves and in the context of society in which situated the building. Meanwhile, it is possible to associate ornament and polychrome decoration to abstract notions such as authenticity and renewal on one side, to raise the question whether the visual creativity in Damascus was built on the artistic freedom hypothesis or did belong to the artist’s engagement to undertake the sociocultural control by materializing of symbolic and ideological intents, on other side.

The following approaches display that, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the amplitude, technical and artistic characteristics of buildings would not have been distant from the sociopolitical ideologies preferred by Damascus governors as much as the civil society. This perception might be demonstrated by the focus on chief architectural trends such as the *konak* style, the 1910-50s Syrian Style, the *Art-déco*, and International Style, as concerned their linkage to Ottomanism and Arabism.

### ***Ornament and polychrome decoration between Ottomanism and Arabism***

Problems of artistic change are neither new nor the unique privilege of art historians. Social

<sup>1</sup> Venturi, Robert., “A definition of architecture”, 1984, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Harries, Karsten., *The ethical function of Architecture*, MIT Press, 1997, 403.

<sup>3</sup> About the definition of abstract and ornament see Grabar, Oleg, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 1992, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Grabar, Oleg, *The formation of Islamic Art*, 1987, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Grabar, Oleg, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 1992, p. 19.

scientists have hence presented models to explain the myriad ways in which mutations have been brought about<sup>1</sup>. Decorative arts in Damascus were never isolated from exterior influences. Talking about a local artistic spirit originating from several resources has been admitted by many historians since the beginning of the 20th century. Ernest Kühnel, Oleg Grabar, Jean Sauvaget, A.-K. Riḥāwī and ‘Afif Bahnasi have adequately exposed this idea approaching the hybridity in techniques and forms of ornamentation and polychrome decoration, profoundly rooted in the city’s culture and practices.

Dealing with the historiography of the Islamic Art and its medieval references, N. Rabbat underlines that *the dynastic periodization has also resulted in needlessly privileging the role of the patrons in the conception of architecture and its signification in the detriment of the designers and builders*<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the architect and engineer dominated that of the traditional artisan. The training either in the field or in the modern schools shaped the main differentiation between them. Therefore, the artistic creativity has belonged to the designer’s techniques, spiritual and sociopolitical convictions more than the artisan’s ones. What’s more, before the establishment of engineering schools in Syria<sup>3</sup>,

most architects and engineers were descendants of the healthy sociocultural elite owing the sociocultural vision and the financial capacity to educate its youth in the West, Beirut or Istanbul. After coming back to Damascus, these architects formed part of the political life of Syria. Consequently, it is not unexpected that their artistic achievements have reflected not only their new technical training but also ideological references including the nationalism which has *defined the period, moreover, nationalist elites defined everything in term of nationalism*, said Ph. Khoury<sup>4</sup>.

The focus on the Technical Office of the Public Works Department in Damascus clarifies the linkage of nationalist political thought, adopted by architects and engineers from healthy Damascenes families, to the design of public buildings. Abd al-Wahhāb al-Mālki<sup>5</sup>, graduated from the *École des Ponts et Chaussées* in Paris, Šakīb al-‘Umari<sup>6</sup>, from the American University of Beirut, Rafiq Abou Ša’r<sup>7</sup>, from the *École française d’Ingénieurs de Beyrouth* and they had all been working as designers in this office for decades. They constructed many buildings such as the Parliament, the Medical Center, the *Waqf* Department, the State Fields Department and Damascus University Council. However, the case of Suleimān Abou Šaar, son of Naaman Bey Abou Šaar, gives evidence on the aforesaid linkage. Abou Šaar had received

1 Grabar, Oleg., *The formation of Islamic Art*, 1987, p. 4.

2 Rabbat, Nasser., ‘Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Enquiry’, *AD Architectural Design*, 74(6), 2004.

3 The Engineering School of Aleppo, inaugurated in 1946 graduated the first promotion of engineers in a Syrian school, in 1951: see on this subject: Records of the Engineers Syndicate in Damascus; Ĥier, Š., *Madinat dimašq, dirāsah fi juġrāfiya al-mudun*, Publications du ministère de l’Éducation, Damas, 1969, p. 619; Chawaf, K., *Organisation et fonctionnement*

*du métier d’ingénieur en Syrie*, thesis, EPHE, 1973, diagrams.

4 Khoury, Philippe., ‘The Paradoxical in Arab Nationalism, Interwar Syria revisited’, p. 286.

5 Engineers Order of Damascus, Records of members, n° of registration: 90, Damascus, 2012.

6 Engineers Order of Damascus, Records of members, n° of registration: 43, Damascus, 2012.

7 Engineers Order of Damascus, Records of members, n° of registration: 01, Damascus, 2012.

his secondary education as civil engineer in the United States. During the 1930s, he became the chief Engineer of the Public Works Department as well as a main figure in the Syrian political scene as demonstrated by the correspondence of the British consulate in Damascus, ranking him in importance just after Muhammad Ali Bey al-‘Ābid, a previous president of the Republic<sup>1</sup>. The case of the Technical Office has not been insolated. The illustrations about the connection between the public buildings’ designers and the sociopolitical context came back to the late Ottoman period.

### *Pro-Western or pro-Islamic artistic references*

With a stimulated press and mounting Ottomanism and Arabism, the architectural debate has been associated to central questions derived from the previously mentioned conservative and liberal ideologies. It has approached the sense of modernity [*al-tamaddon*]; the artistic taste [*al-zawq al-fanni*], the local heritage [*al-‘irāq*]; and the perception as concerned the European styles [*al-turoz al-‘awropiyyah - al-tajannuju*] introduced by the Ottoman and French reforms. In contrary to the colonial and post-colonial periods, there were only a few writings due to designers who worked during the late Ottoman period. We indicate to a report of the French architect in Damascus Municipality Paul Apéry approaching al-Hejaz railway project, emphasizing on non-architectural themes<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, the reflection about the architectural debate depends on an understanding of Syria’s socio-cultural climate, mainly determined through

two resources. The first is the literature of the civil society’s journalists and thinkers. The second is public administrative correspondence related, for example, to competitions of architectural design<sup>3</sup>.

Examining the literature of the Syrian civil society during the period under review, the historical novels of Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914) for example, made a deep impression on younger writers by glorifying the lionhearted national heroes of past times and consequently, glorifying the Arab past in general. Another genre of writings has been represented by Muhammad Kurd ‘Ali (1876-1952), reformist, thinker, author and politician. It concerned the documentary literature. Henceforth, Kurd Ali’s influence on architectural thinking was evident but it was not direct. His book *Ġrā’ib al-ġarb*, illustrated clearly his admiration for western civilization, particularly the French. In another famous book, *al-Ḥoṭaṭ*, Kurd Ali approached the notion of artistic taste by highlighting its relativity to the civilization: [*husnu al-zawq taba’ on lil-ḥadārah*]<sup>4</sup>. In this regard, he showed his contentment towards the initiatives of some damascene craftsmen to revival and preserve the traditional craftsmanship<sup>5</sup>. Another author from Damascus, Taqī el-dīn al-Ḥeṣnī, (date of birth unknown-1940), historian who dwelled the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century, talked about the neces-

1 FO 371/21914, Report E 441/441/89 on 06 May 1937, p. 2

2 *Ottoman Archives Center, Istanbul, Šām Šerīf* vol., File. 118, report for the Nazim Pasha, governor of Syria.

3 Such as the competition for the conception of al-‘Abbāsiyyah building, directed by la *Commission de gérance des biens, droits et intérêts du chemin de fer de Ḥidjāz*, in Damascus, in 1935. Cf. the French diplomatic archives funds: CADN, Fond de Syrie-Liban, 2e V, Services Techniques, carton n° 46. Cahier de concours annexé.

4 Kurd ‘Ali, M., *Ḥoṭaṭ aš-Šām*, al-Taraqqi, Damascus, 1927, Vol. 5, p. 307.

5 Kurd ‘Ali, M., *Ḥoṭaṭ aš-Šām*, al-Taraqqi, Damascus, 1927., Vol. 4, p. 229.

sity to adopt the “new civility [*al-tamaddon al-jadīd*] which characterized the western nations when they have replaced the religious ties with national patriotism<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, al-Ḥeṣnī criticized the blind imitation of Europeans, arguing by the dissimilarities between European and Oriental tastes, customs and ethics<sup>2</sup>, admitting the importance of a hybridity between the predecessors’ local civilization and Western progress<sup>3</sup>.

In a similar sense, other thinkers of the Arab *nahdah*, such as Sātī al-Ḥuṣārī (1880-1967), ‘Amīn ar-Riḥānī (1876-1940), Šekīb ‘Arslān (1869-1946), and Ṭāhah Husseīn (1889-1973), all had visited Europe, have displayed their admiration for French and British creations in most disciplines. For instance, according to Sātī al-Ḥuṣārī, the renewal should affect all fields of life, including the language and literature, education and morale, art, politics, economy, trade and agriculture<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, it should be dynamic and vigorous in order to attain the progress of many other nations<sup>5</sup>. Although these thinkers have revealed the necessity of a general secular renewal, they were not anti Islamic references. They have attempted to prove that Islam itself was not responsible for the current artistic sterility of its adherents. They have argued that, it would not have allowed the building of the great masterpieces of Islamic architecture, and would not have left obvious influences on the Western architecture<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, the linkage between the progress or decay of the arts to the vi-

tality or decadence of the societies formed also one of the most relevant ideas of these thinkers’ writings. In this framework, Muhammad Kurd Ali underlined that the perception of Syrian civil society as concerned the architectural trends was influenced by the Syrian diaspora through the novelties and changes that it had introduced in Syria since the late 19th century<sup>7</sup>. In spite of its prevailing place, the renewal in art and architecture has not expressed the admitted logic of reforms of all Damascines. Adul-Azīz al-‘Azmaḥ (1856-1943) another historian who lived in the course of the most studied period, showed his regret and disappointment for the use and imitation of Western style or [*taqlīd al-ṭirāz al-ġarbi*]<sup>8</sup> and criticized the prevailing of westernized tastes [*wa ġalab al-tafarnuju ‘alā al-‘azwāq*]<sup>9</sup>.

From the Mandate’s correspondence, we have several examples illustrating the public administration’s vision to the question of the architectural style. The first concerns the competition for the conception of al-‘Abbāsiyyah building in Damascus, in 1935<sup>10</sup>. The French architect, Lucien Cavro, who proposed a building of International Style, won the competition. The second example was a competition for the construction of new Main Court on al-Naṣr Street in the beginning of 1940s<sup>11</sup>. The Syrian architect

1 Heṣnī, M.-T., *Montaḥabāt at-tawāriḥ li-dimaṣq*, 1927, vol. 1, p.302.

2 *Ibid*, p. 302.

3 *Ibid*, p. 302.

4 Ḥuṣārī, Sātī., *Abḥāt* 1964, p. 549.

5 Ḥuṣārī, Sātī., *Abḥāt* 1964, p. 546.

6 Yared, Naziq-Saba., *Arab travellers and Western civilization*, Saqi Books, London, 1996, p. 180.

7 According to M. Kurd Ali, about two hundred-fifty thousand Syrians, mostly in the Lebanese regions issued from the diaspora in Northern and Southern America in 1906. Kurd ‘Ali, Muhammad., *Ġrā’ib al-ġarb, kitāb ‘ijtimā’i tāriḥi ‘iqtisādi ‘adabi*, 2<sup>ème</sup> éd, al-maktabah al-‘ahliyyah, Le Caire, 1923, p. 28

8 ‘Azmaḥ, Abdul al-azīz., *Mirāt al-Šām, tāriḥ dimaṣq wa ahlahā*, 1987, p.68.

9 *Ibid*, p. 67

10 CDA-N, Fond de Syrie-Liban, 2<sup>nd</sup> V, Services Techniques, carton n° 46. Cahier de concours annexé.

11 SHD, GR 4 H 306, D.F.L.L, Cabinet militaire, Re-

Abdul Razzaq Malaş, who presented a design in the 1910-50s Syrian Style, was retained from the twenty proposals. The third example was the construction of the National Museum and the organization of surrounded gardens in the end of 1930s in al-Ḥalbūnī quarter, on the west of the Tekkiyah Suliemāniyyah. The French architect and urbanist Michel Écochard designed the project in International Style<sup>1</sup> and the building was the subject of administrative and newspaper reports illustrating its “very modern” - très modern - style<sup>2</sup>. In addition, the new Preparatory School of Damascus, designed by the Lebanese architect Joseph Aftimus at the late 1920s, was illustrated as a beautiful building in Arab style<sup>3</sup>.

The previously mentioned literature and correspondence were contemporary to important building activity with permanent alteration, caused by the considerable increase of population<sup>4</sup> and the economic prosperity of many families, which characterized the late 19th century and some phases of the Mandate. Furthermore, the desire to apply the contemporary prevailing tastes to the interior and exterior design has taken more and more significance in the Damascene society. These factors have been translated into a stylistic diversity of two main trends. The first is recognized by the imported styles in

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port on the labors of the Syrian government and the France combattante, 1<sup>st</sup> semestre, 10 August 1942, p.8.

1 SHD, GR 4 H 306, D.F.L.L, Cabinet militaire, Report on the labours of the Syrian government and the France combattante, 1<sup>st</sup> semestre, 10 August 1942, p.6 and Annex n° 2.

2 SHD, GR 4 H 306, D.F.L.L, Cabinet militaire, Report on the labours of the Syrian government and the France combattante, 1<sup>st</sup> semestre, 10 August 1942, Annex n° 2.

3 CDA-P, 50CPCOM/573, MF. 2403 / sheet n° 176.

4 Weber, Stephan., *Damascus, Ottoman Modernity*, 2009, vol.1, p. 227.

use since the 1870s for public and residential buildings, including for example the Neoclassic for the Ottoman Bank (1895) or the New Serail (1900); the Art-déco for the Ummeyeh Hotel (1928) or the Orient Palace Hotel (1934); the International style for the Central Syrian Bank (1954) or the Building of the Central Post (1949). The second trend was instituted by the meeting of Western techniques with local heritage and craftsmanship. It was materialized by the 1910-50s Syrian Style of which characterized many private and public constructions such as al-Hedjaz Railway Station (1914), the Syrian Parliament (1928), the Main Court (al-Naşr), (1946), residential buildings in al-Najmah Square and many others. At any rate, the two tendencies coincided with two visions relating to the importance of ornament and polychrome decoration in the architecture of the 19th-20th centuries. Oleg Grabar<sup>5</sup>, has illustrated one of these two tendencies indicating that ornament *alone among the forms of art, is endowed with the property of carrying beauty and of providing pleasure*. Nevertheless, another stream caused a violent reaction against the ornament as sign of modernism. The examination of large number of buildings related to the preceding indicated trends enables the researcher to link the use of ornament and polychrome decoration to the adopted style.

### *Neo-Ottoman - Konak style*

In the late 19th century, the *Konak* style, of Anatolian origin, was very popular in domestic architecture realized in extensions in Damascus. The main feature of these buildings was the presence of a central hall [*al-şofa*] replacing the traditional courtyard. Another type of build-

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5 Grabar, Oleg., *The Mediation of Ornament*, 1992, p. 226.

ings in *konak* style developed both a central hall and a courtyard, such as the example of Bayt al-‘Ajlāni, in ‘Arnūs quarter (fig. 1). The effect of this style was to open up the building towards the street and consequently, the façades were largely upgraded. The ornamentation was often absent, but colour became an important element of decoration. Additionally, there was symmetrical shaping; ordered bays opening; red-tiled roofs; *frankah*<sup>1</sup> and new techniques of coloured decoration. From the appearance of the *konak* style and onwards, the exterior façades reflected the building’s interior configuration. In other words, it seemed that “form follows function” became one of main specificities of the architecture of Modernity in Damascus.



fig. 1 - Konak Style, Bayt ‘Ajlāni, in ‘Arnūs quarter, Sālihiyyeh, built in the turn of 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century

This evolution enabled exterior façades to

1 Room, largely opened, in light structure, situated on the roof of building, utilized especially during the summer.

exercise the above mentioned representative function explaining not only the new current trend in urban planning and municipal management, but also a step in the social and cultural transformation, new contemporary tastes and the search for a modern Ottoman lifestyle<sup>2</sup>. The exterior design of the *konak* style buildings illustrated a specific decoration method resulting from the combination of two main processes. The first concerned the construction which usually consisted of walls of stone (Basaltic or calcite) on the ground floor, endued and coloured walls of wood structure and non-burn mud brick in the upper floors “*Baghdadi*”. The second concerned the employment of specifically carved wooden frames, “*moucharabieh*” and apparent parts of wooden structure (corbels, lintels, beams, encircling frames, rain protection roofs, etc). Obviously, the outcome of the two processes was related to the texture of wall materials: smoothed in the case of non-burned mud brick walls, rusticated or smoothed in the case of stonewalls (in the ground floors). When smoothed, they could be one-coloured (such as Bayt Šāmiyyeh; the Main Court in al-Marjeh square) or in alternating coloured courses (al-ablaq), (such as parts of Yūsef ‘Afandi ‘Anbar house). As ornaments are concerned, they have been practically absent.

### *Ottoman wall painting*<sup>3</sup>

The investigation on the polychrome decoration in Damascus should consider the widespread landscape wall painting technique,

2 Weber, Stephan., *Damascus, Ottoman Modernity*, 2009, vol.1, p. 332.

3 For more information on this subject, see our article: Soufan, A., “Istanbul – Damascus: transcultural memory and architecture of Modernity prototyping”, Istanbul, 2014.

directly applied on stucco supports, largely employed from the 1840s onwards<sup>1</sup>. According to Stephan Weber, its first application took place around 1819-20, in a main hall in Bayt Šārjī in the Old city<sup>2</sup>. After the Ottoman baroque style, which has been transferred through Istanbul, the Ottoman wall painting dominated the prestigious spaces of houses of the middle and wealthy Damascenes classes. Accounts of European travelers underlined the decoration by landscape wall painting since the 1830s. For instance, the English traveler John Kinnear, who visited Damascus in 1839, transmitted a description of the principal hall of Jurjius Maksoud's house, indicating to a kind of wood panel painting in old Saracenic style<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, Josias Leslie Porter's book, relating to his stay in Damascus (1851-1856) included a detailed description of Ali Agha's house ('Ali Āğa Ḥazina-Kātibi / Nizām), decorated also in *Saracenic* and *Italian* styles. "*The style of decoration in this mansion may be called the modern Damascene, the painting of the walls and ceiling being a recent innovation. In the more ancient houses the ceiling and wainscotted walls are covered with the richest arabesques, encompassing little panels of deep blue and delicate Arabic characters, whole verses of their law*"<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, in the account of his travel to Damascus in 1875, Eugène Melchior De Vogüé portrayed the houses of Rabweh, at the western entrance of Damascus: "*The summer residences of wealthy Damascenes bring to life the gorge of Rabweh, joyful, cheerful, all embellished by terraces, balconies,*

*painted in contrast with the exterior, creating a very pleasing atmosphere: steamboats, railways, apocalyptic monsters, unknown birds for the naturalists, fraternally intermingle on the wall's whitewash*"<sup>5</sup>.

The landscape wall painting had had a regional extent. Indigenous and foreigner artists, of military or civilian background, realized it in Damascus. Several outputs of the late 19th century are signed, for instance, the dome of *khan al-Ḥayyāṭīn* was decorated by 'Aḥmad as-Syrawān in 1327/1909; the vista of the Concorde Square in Paris was painted in Bayt Faḥri al-Bārūdi in Qanawāt by B. Samra, in 1911<sup>6</sup>. The artists have applied their paintings on ceilings, domes, mouldings and on the upper parts of walls<sup>7</sup>. The predominant themes have comprised landscapes, cityscapes and architecture related to symbols of the current period such as Mecca, the Bosphorus, the Golden Horn, the Ottoman star and crescent, the Sultan emblem (ṭuġra), famous byzantine and Ottoman buildings, the Madonna, as well as special Baroque floral motifs. The accuracy of details has not been constantly ordered. Human and animal representations have found place in some works.

In fact, the narratives of Ottoman wall painting style have referred to social, political and religious adhesions as well as practical and aesthetic experiences. The technique's national extent was obvious depending on its widespread employment in the elites' houses of the Empire on one side; and the adoption of pan-ottoman

1 Weber, Stephan., *Damascus, Ottoman Modernity*, 2009, vol.1, p. 301.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 293.

3 Kinnear, John., Cairo, *Petra and Damascus in 1839*, Johan Murray, London, 1841, p. 275.

4 Porter, Josias-Leslie., *Five Years in Damascus*, 1855, 1st vol., p. 36-37.

5 De Vogüé, Eugène Melchior., *Syrie, Palestine, Mont Athos*, 1876, p.69.

6 The family al-Sayrawān is from the suburbs of Damascus. The Family of Samra is clearly Syrian or Lebanese.

7 But it was also largely used for other architectural purposes especially for the furniture and the wooden decorative objects.

symbols proving the linkage of these elites to the “national” prevailing fashion on the other<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, the circulation of the Ottoman wall painting would be considered as a step in the creation of national decorative style in the framework of the sociopolitical Ottomanism. In this framework, the famous *Usul-i Mi'mariyyi Osmani* book<sup>2</sup>, defining an Ottoman architectural style might be perceived. However, this “trend” in painting would not survive the changes of tastes and of aesthetic values which occurred during the French Mandate. It fell into decay towards the end of the 1920s. This alteration could not have taken place without the simultaneous decline of Ottomanism, the main ideological pillar of Ottoman wall painting.



fig. 2 - Bayt Fahri al-Bārūdi – Northern house, Qanawāt, Damascus, left: main hall, ground floor.

1 Lycklama a Nijeholt, T.-M., *Voyage*, IV, p. 544.

2 See *Usul-i Mi'mariyyi Osmani*, Ahmet Ersoy, p. 291-295, In: Turkish Art, Actes-Proceedings of 10th International Congress of Turkish Art, Fondation Max Van Berchem, Geneva, 1999.

### *Neoclassic, Art-Deco and International Style*

Since the late 19th century, the segregation of the urban space of Damascus into traditional quarters including the intramural city and its suburbs on one side; modern quarters composed of the city's extensions such as al-Marjeh, al-Muhājirin, 'Arnūs and al-'Abūd on the other, became more and more obvious. Muhammad Arabi Kātibi al-ṣayyādi, who had been living the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, indicated lucidly to a “very modern Damascus”<sup>3</sup> - *Dimašq al-ḥadīthah jiddan* – and to the “new style”<sup>4</sup> of buildings - *al-tirāz al-jadīd* - at the end of the 19th century. As of the 1890s, the neoclassic appeared, without a doubt, as the dominant ‘official’ building style of the Ottoman Reforms era. However, it is legitimate to raise the question whether that style was considered as “neoclassic” or as “neo-Ottoman”. This debate might be built on two complementary factors. The first was the Sublime-Porte's aspiration to prove the modernization impact of Reforms by erecting buildings that demonstrated a total break with the past, exhibiting at the same time a ‘national ottoman style’; the second was related to the strong presence of European experts, working in the municipal institutions of the Empire, with their own training and references. Both, the Greek engineer Wasiliadis Afandi, chief of the Department of Public Works; and the French architect Paul Apéry, head of the Technical Department of the municipality in the turn of the 19th century were relevant examples.

The arrival of the French in 1920 put an end to the construction of public buildings in the neoclassic style, but not definitely as concerned the residential ones. The same aspiration, tar-

3 Arabi Kātibi al-ṣayyādi, M., *Dimašq aš-šām*, p.60.

4 Arabi Kātibi al-ṣayyādi, M., *Dimašq aš-šām*, p.59, 62.

getting the displayed rupture with the past – with the Ottoman era in other words - might establish the justification for the mandatory authorities' trend. To respond to the intensified demands of the building market, Syrian and European architects have designed buildings in Art-déco and International styles that characterized the new airy garden city's quarters, described by M. Kurd Ali as “Modern Damascus” - *Dimašq al-ḥadīthah*<sup>1</sup> – or as “Western quarters deprived of the eastern spirit” - ‘*aḥyā’ ḡarbiyyah mujaradah min aṭ-ṭābi’ aš-šarqī*<sup>2</sup>.

build with Art-déco and International styles<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, as the annexed diagram reveals, until 1950, most architects and engineers in Damascus had graduated mainly from schools in Europe, USA and Beirut where, the school of Engineer of Saint Joseph University and that of the Syrian Protestant College were the principal institutions for the architecture and engineering studies. For these reasons, it was not surprising the adoption of the prevailing Western architectural tendencies of the interwar period including in the first place the Art-déco and International styles.

#### Origin and place of training of architects and engineers plasticizing in Damascus from 1909 until 1950

Place of training	Syrians					Forgiens	Total	%
	Damascus	Aleppo	Homs	Hama	Latakiah			
<b>Syria</b>	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
<b>Egypt</b>	1	–	–	–	–	–	1	0.5%
<b>Lebanon</b>	21	15	4	2	5	1	55	35%
<b>The West</b>	40	22	3	2	7	6	82	52%
<b>Turkey</b>	5	4	–	–	–	4	13	8%
<b>Ing. Proficient</b>	6	–	1	–	–	–	7	4.4%
<b>Total</b>	79	39	8	4	12	11	158	100%

Obviously, the increasing employment of cement and concrete after the interdiction of the traditional materials shaped a main factor to

In the majority of constructions in Neo-classic, Art-déco and International styles, the polychrome decoration was absent. The em-

1 Kurd ‘Ali, M., *Dimašq, madīnat as-siḥr waš-si’r*, 1944, p.7.

2 Kurd ‘Ali, M., *Dimašq, madīnat as-siḥr waš-si’r*, *Dār al-Fikr*, Le Caire, 1944, p.77.

3 See on this subject: Soufan, A., « Remarques sur la décadence de l’architecture de terre à Damas, dès la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle », proceedings of UNESCO’s colloquium *Earthen Architecture*, December 2012, electronic version.

bellishment of exterior façades was no longer realized by the traditional polychrome stone, ornamentation or painting, but rather through a new aesthetic language based on the use of the same material, on discrete lines, more interrelation between the building and the exterior space, and more preoccupation with the urban constraints and regulations. The option of modernist architecture was clearly to avoid the insertion of all forms of polychrome decoration as a major mark of difference relatively to the traditional old Damascus' architecture. This attitude explains how Syrian architects and their clients have become part of the Movement of Modernity, promoting by a favorable economic, cultural and sociopolitical context. However, this did not characterize the whole body of

attributing of a sociopolitical function to the its buildings. The aim of the following approach is to elaborate on the emergence of this style and to identify the eventual narratives of its polychrome decorations.

### *1910-50s Syrian Style*

As a response to the westernization process of the urban and architectural environment taking place first by the Ottoman, then by the French Mandate's authorities, the old city's references had been reinterpreted and reemployed in new constructions, particularly, in public buildings<sup>2</sup>, erected during the first half of 20th century until the 1960s. In other words, besides



fig. 3 - (left): International Style: National Museum, 1936;  
(right): Art-Deco, Ummeyyah Hotel, early 1930s

buildings carried out until the 1960s, because, by the construction of al-Hedjaz Railway Station in al-Qanāwat district<sup>1</sup>, the 1910-50s Syrian Style became a major feature not only in the stylistic diversity of Damascus but also in

the contemporary pioneers of the Western architectures, the old Damascus shaped a source of inspiration of the architecture of Modernity of that time. This influence was materialized by the emergence of the 1910-50s Syrian Style under the impact of three main factors.

At first, the French colonizers have generally

<sup>1</sup> See on the characteristics of this building : Bārūdi, M.-Kh., “masā’il mi’ māriyyah taḥlīlyyah”, *Alam al-Binā’*, n° 171, 1996 and A. Soufan., *Traditions régionales et influences occidentales*, 2011, p. 184-187 and 353-366.

<sup>2</sup> Bahnasi, Afif., *Aš-Šām, lamaḥāt ‘ātāriyyah wa fanīyyah*, 1980, p. 169.

showed an interest in the preservation of the indigenous culture and heritage<sup>1</sup>. The institution of Antiquities Department in the Haut-Commissariat offices since 1920; the establishment of School of Decorative Arts; the School of Modern Arab Arts in al-Azem Palace since 1922<sup>2</sup>, were relevant examples. Thus, in addition to the Art-déco and International styles, the French administration encouraged the development of trends linked to the local architectural heritage and handcrafts. The Technical Office of the Public Works Department in Damascus, which designed many public buildings in the 1910-50s Syrian Style<sup>3</sup> was often presided by a French architect such as Lucien-Paul Vasselet or Lucien Cavro. At the same time, considerable part of the French architects who worked in the private sector in Syria and Lebanon adopted the 1910s-50s Syrian Style such as Leon Nafilyan, Paul Micaëlli, Samuel Victor Erlanger and others.

Then, during the Colonial and Post-colonial periods, each one of the working sociopolitical forces found in the local heritage an exploitable material to consolidate their different claims about the Syrian, Arab or Islamic identity of Syria. In this regard, the writings of Abdul Raḥmān al-Šahbandar<sup>4</sup> or Sātii al-Ḥuṣari<sup>5</sup> were

1 Bahnasi, Afif., *Aš-Šām, lamaḥāt 'ātāriyyah wa faniyyah*, 1980, p. 204; Soufan, A., *Traditions regionales et influences occidentales*, 2011, p. 266, 281-285, 360-377.

2 In order to enlarge the focus on this subject, see: Avez, Renaud., *L'Institut français de Damas au palais Azem (1922-1946) à travers les archives*, French Institut of Damascus, Damascus, 1993, p. 320

3 Like the Parliament, the Health Ministry, the Public Labor Department, the Waqf Department, the Cadaster Department and others.

4 For example: “al-Māḍi wal mustaqbal”, “The past and future”, *Al-Muqataḥaf*, vol. 5, part. 78, May, 1931.

5 For example: “al-qadīm wal jadīd”, “The old and the new”, in: al-Ḥuṣari, Sātii., ‘Abḥāt, 1964, p. 538-



fig. 4 - al-Saqiifah mosque, 868/1465, Bāb Touma.

significant instances. According to J. S-Petersen, one of the dominant ideas of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Middle Eastern cities was that “*the public buildings and spaces ought to express the identity of the nation, be it Arab, Turkish, Islamic, Hellenic or Pharaonic architectural style. This aspiration for a national style could spring from a nationalist ideology*”<sup>6</sup>. This ‘nationalist’ trend may also appropriately serve to exhibit a European ideology of difference<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, as previously mentioned, part of the Syrian society has believed in the complementarity of the local and western references in the modernization of many fields including the urban and architectural environment. Accordingly, it was not surprising that Muhammad Kurd Ali, reformist, nationalist and passionate about Europe, preconized the development of architecture by means of a new pattern built on

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6 *Middle Eastern Cities, 1900-1950*, ed by. K-Nielsen, H.-C., and S-Petersen, J., Proceedings of the Danish Institut in Damascus I, 2001, p. 14.

7 Ibid, p. 14.

both Western and local bases<sup>1</sup>: “It is clear the evolution of these arts in Syria is related to the mounting of geniuses who leave to the West to benefit from its sciences, and then, they come back in order to do relive the disappeared local arts and those which are going to disappear, diffusing them adequately according to the modern Western system”. This thinking found echo in the views of the first Syrian art historians in the 20th century. For instance, A.-K. al-Rihāwī revealed that a building owing a local or national identity should explain the spirit of present period, the civil evolution and modern

ry sociopolitical current, which has believed in one of the previous identity, has found in the buildings of the 1910-50s Syrian Style expressions to support its claims. The appeal to recuperate a flourishing past should be understood according to the context of the studied period and the need to replace the previous Ottoman tie or *al-jāmi’ah al-‘uṭmāniyyah* by a new believed identity. The architecture presented a material expression of this will. As Denise-Scott Brown underlined, the architects and urban designers who used the architectural symbolism of the classical tradition, knew that its meaning would

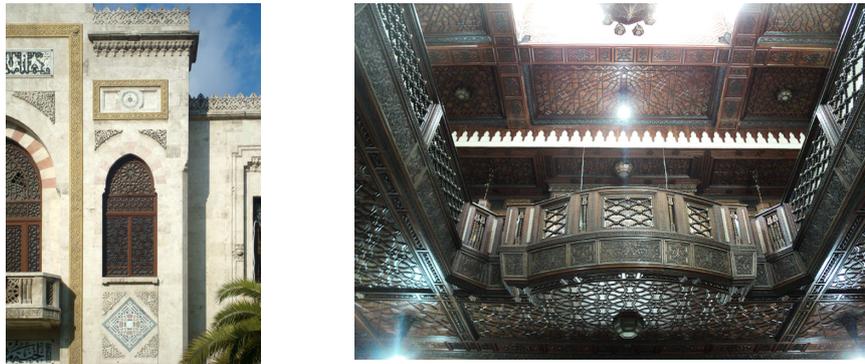


fig. 5. Department of Waters of ‘Ayn al-Fījeh :  
(right), main façade, Arabic thread, polychrome marble panels, stone openwork, coloured bands-frames, stained glass windows, wood openwork,  
(left), main hall with cupola, reminding the design of the traditional qa’ā

techniques<sup>2</sup>. Undoubtedly, the reemployment of local heritage elements has had not only esthetic aims, but also messages to remind Damascenes of their Syrian, Arabic or Islamic identity. Eve-

be shared by their clients and by the public at large<sup>3</sup>. For these reasons, the 1910-50s Syrian Style, based on the meeting of western architectural experiences with the Syrian pre-Ottoman Reforms heritage, found a large place in

1 Kurd ‘Ali, Muhammad., *Hoṭaṭ aš-šām*, 4<sup>ème</sup> vol, al-Taraqqi, Damas, 1925, 1er éd. P. 145.

2 Rihāwī, A.-K., *al-‘imārah al-‘arabiyyah al-‘islāmiyyah, ḥašā’ishuhā wa taṭawurrihā*, Culture and National Education Ministry, Damascus, 1979, p. 252.

3 Brown, Denise-Scott., “A definition of architecture as shelter with decoration in it, and another Plea for a symbolism of the ordinary in Architecture” in: *A View from the Campidoglio, selected essays 1953-1984*, Icon Editions, 1984, Jaban, p. 62.

the public and private buildings during the first half of the 20th century until the 1960s. It was illustrated by the local literature, often as “Islamic” or “Arab” style. For instance, M. Kurd ‘Ali designated al-Hedjaz Railway Station built in 1908-1914 as in Arab modern style - *ṭirāz ‘arabi ḥadīthī*<sup>1</sup>. The 1910-50s’ Syrian Style’s buildings have been adorned by interior and exterior polychrome decorations, inspiring from the old city, distinguishing these buildings from others, for instance, in Art-déco or International Style. The Department of Waters of ‘Ayn al-Fījeh building gives a significant example on these techniques as well as the linkage of the 1910-50s Syrian Style to symbolic and socio-political values. This building has reflected the course of the Damascene civil society to prove its linkage to Islamic identity during a sensitive period of struggle against the French Mandate and other regional powers or projects such as Bagdad Pact (1955-1979).

The determination of the Damascene civil

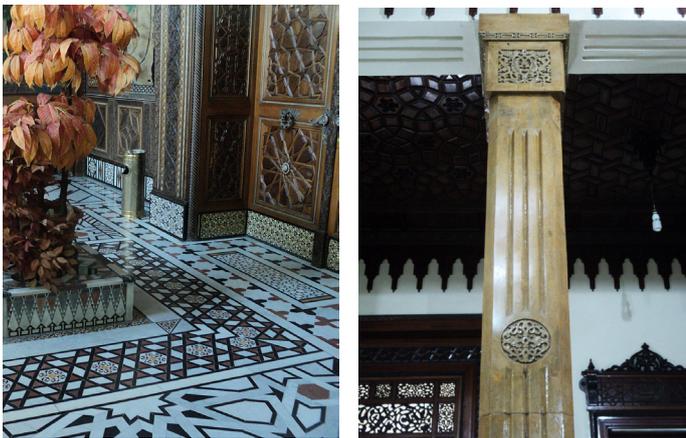


fig. 6 - Department of Waters of ‘Ayn al-Fījeh: Arabic thread, polychrome paving panels, wood openwork, curved stucco panels.

1 M., *Ḥoṭaṭ aš-Šām*, 1927, vol. 5, p. 180.

society to finance the extremely high cost of the building, regarding its rich interior and exterior decoration, reinforces the precedent perception<sup>2</sup>. Abdul Razzāq Malaṣ, a graduated in architecture from the School of Public Works in Paris designed the building, located on the north side of al-Naṣr Street, inaugurated in 1942<sup>3</sup>. The Department of Waters of ‘Ayn al-Fījeh exemplifies the frequent decorative techniques utilized in others buildings of the 1910-50s Syrian Style:

\* Polychrome marble / stone panels (*ḥašwah*), usually framed by geometric design (linear or interlaced), used for the soils and the exterior façades. It exists in many buildings, such as the Ministry of Public Labors, achieved in 1944<sup>4</sup>, and others.

\* Alternating coloured stones (*al-ablaq*)<sup>5</sup>, in horizontal bands or as frames of doors and windows; used also in the Ministry of Public Labors and the Direction of *Waqf*, 1932.

\* Engraved or curved stucco panels: used also

2 In order to enlarge the focus on the project, see: Al-Ḥūrī, Fāris., *Awrāk Fāris al-Ḥūrī*, 1877-1962, ed. Colette Ḥūrī, *Dār al-ba’ṭ*, Damascus, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2007, 1. vol, p. 315. A. Soufan., *Traditions régionales et influences occidentales*, 2011, p. 173-175.

3 About the date of inauguration: Šihābi, Q., *Dimašq, Tārīḥ wa ṣouar*, p. 142.

4 Ministry of Public Labor is the actual Ministry of Communications. Situated on al-‘Ābid - Parliament Street, it is designed by Spanish architect Fernando in framework of the Technique Office of Service of Public Works.

5 The same nomination is used for another technique, in which, a decoration is realized by digging and fulfilling of special polychrome mixture on the limestone. See Kurd ‘Ali, M., *Dimašq, madīnat as-siḥr waš-si’r*, *Dār al-Fikr*, Cairo, 1944, p. 114-115.

in the façade of the main entrance of the New Justice Palace, achieved in 1952 and the main façade of the Department of the State Fields, both located on al-Nasr Street.

\* Tiles with underglaze painting (*al-qīšāni*)<sup>1</sup>, were used in the al-Hidjāz Railway Station and in Damascus University Council, achieved in 1929, amongst others.

\* Decorative bands of calligraphic, geometric or vegetal motifs on stone, used in special colours: the Syrian Parliament, residential buildings, the New Preparatory School<sup>2</sup>, and others.

\* Stained glass windows (*ta'sīq*), used in the Syrian Parliament – 1928-1929 and 1946<sup>3</sup>, in al-Hedjaz Railway Station and many residential constructions. Sālem aš-Šawwā was a famous artisan in this domain<sup>4</sup>.

\* Openwork or grillwork in wood, marble or stucco panels (*tahrīm*), used also in other buildings such as al-Hedjaz Railway Station and the Ministry of Public Labors.

\* Carved wooden panels: usually presenting vegetal ornament<sup>5</sup>: rarely used in other build-

ings of the 1910-50s Syrian Style<sup>6</sup>.

\* Hand-turned wooden panels with polychrome inlay: whose traditional use has been dedicated to forge the *musharabiyyah*. In the 1910-50s Syrian Style buildings, the turned-hand wooden panels were used in the interior barriers and partitions.

\* Polychrome wooden panels for ceilings / walls, with slight reliefs referred to the Persian or 'ajami technique<sup>7</sup>, used rarely, for instance, in the main Hall of al-Hedjaz Railway Station. Abou Suleiman al-Ḥayyāt and sons, Aḥmad Maḥfoud, Nāder Oṭah-bāši were the most famous artisans of this technique.

\* Arabesque or Arabic thread decoration (*al-raqš - ḥayṭ 'arabi*): This technique has been restrained on the prestigious buildings as concerned the doors, interior façades and cupolas in such as the Department of Waters of 'Ayn al-Fījeh and the Parliament buildings.

\* Mosaic and granito cement tiles (*blaṭ mosaic and balaṭ šemento*): This technique existed in Damascus and Beirut since the late 19th century<sup>8</sup>. It appeared in residential and public buildings according to the importance of space: the most prestigious spaces were paved in marble or stone, the secondary ones were paved in cement tiles. The manufacture of this material was

1 M. Kurd Ali indicates to the loss of this artisanship since the mid-18th century because of the disappearance of the main family specialized in it: Kurd 'Ali, M., *Dimašq, madīnat as-siḥr waš-si'r*, 1944, p. 120.

2 The Preparatory School (old Damascus Faire) is built in 1929-1933, situated in Zoqāq Šaḥr, designed by the Lebanese architect Joseph Aftimus.

3 The Syrian Parliament is situated on both Šāliḥiyyah and 'Ābid Street. It was designed by the Technical Office of the Service of Public Works and built in two phases; the first was achieved in 1928-1929 the second in 1946.

4 Bahnasi, Affif., *Aš-Šām, lamaḥāt 'ātāriyyah wa faniyyah*, 1980, p.201.

5 The panels in the Department of Waters of 'Ayn al-Fījeh building referred to the style of vegetal ornament of Khirbat al-Mafjar palace, due to the

Umayyad period: see on this type of ornament in Khirbat al-Mafjar: Grabar, O., *The Mediation of Ornament*, 1992, 139-141.

6 See on this subject: Bahnasi, Affif., *Aš-Šām, lamaḥāt 'ātāriyyah wa faniyyah*, 1980, p. 201.

7 See on this subject: Bahnasi, Affif., *Aš-Šām, lamaḥāt 'ātāriyyah wa faniyyah*, 1980, p. 196-198; Kurd 'Ali, M., *Dimašq, madīnat as-siḥr waš-si'r*, *Dār al-Fikr*, Cairo, 1944, p. 115.

8 Soufan, A., Cement tiles in Syria: Historiography, technics, and evolution, *Architecture beyond Europe*, 2015.

semi-artisanal and it could not resist the invasion of industrial ceramic tiles since the 1970s. If the mosaic cement tiles enriched the buildings in Art-déco and International styles, their employment was extremely limited in the 1910-50s Syrian Style's buildings. This perception did not belong to the *granito* – or unicolor tiles which paved the most non-prestigious spaces of these buildings.

In addition to the previously mentioned techniques, the mural painting, widespread during the 19th century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century decorated rarely buildings of the 1910-50s Syrian Style. Al-Hedjaz Railway Station is an example in which, basic geometric and floral motifs, more linked to local references than others were employed in the central hall of the ground floor. In light of the previous approaches, the aforementioned techniques of ornamentation and polychrome decoration shaped common figures between the 1910-50s Syrian Style buildings. The number and nature of employed techniques pursued the significance of the building as well as the context of its construction especially as concerned the financial aspects.

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The present article, built on field investigation and bibliographical sources, indicated to the main sociopolitical currents that characterized the Syrian society during the under reviewed period; then, approached the knock-on effect of architecture as an indicator of the prevailing sociopolitical thought, finally, illustrated the links of the most utilized architectural styles to the ornament and polychrome decoration. The

previous paragraphs attempted to demonstrate that the architectural design has reflect not only the prevailing ideologies of Damascus governors, Ottoman, French and Syrian, as the situation was since centuries, but also, those of its civil society sociopolitical forces, conservative as much as liberal, according to their different understanding of the term “reform” or *‘islāh* on one side, their attitude towards the notions renewal and conservatism, on the other. The three notions affected the Damascene society since the 1830s. This context influenced the urban and architectural sphere through a continuing, dynamic and multifaceted process, implying on most elements of the building such as the ornament and polychrome decoration, carrying several manners of change: disappearance, insertion, reinterpretation, hybridization, involvement and in sometimes, disassociation from their cultural roots. Hence, the survey demonstrated indirect relationship between the *stylistic diversity* and the sociopolitical ideologies such as Arabism and Ottomanism, For example, the techniques and tastes, which characterized works of the 1910-50s Syrian Style and the 19th century Ottoman mural paintings displayed clearly the changes in the Damascene lifestyle. In both cases, new clients as well as new manners of design, appropriation and realization were carried out. As a result, the traditional techniques were either adapted or replaced.

During the Ottoman Reforms, in reply to the disassociation of traditional urban tissue and the opening of building towards public space, the exterior façades assumed new municipal regulations, new technical and artistic experimentations. Damascenes clients and artisans increasingly abandoned techniques, forms and motifs of traditional decoration in order to involve new fashionable repertoires. As a sign of Modernity, the wall painting prevailed the interior design

of the new houses, constructed in the old city and its suburbs. At the same time, the exterior design of the public buildings, erected in *konac* style, permitted the utilization of colour for the embellishment of the building, especially for the frames and wooden decoration. As for the last generation of Ottoman public buildings, mostly in neoclassic style, ornaments was almost disappeared. In both cases, these monuments constituted a material supporter of the Ottomanism, the main sociopolitical ideology of the Empire.

During the French Mandate and the post-colonial period, the use of ornament and polychrome decoration reflected another form of Modernity based on the association of the notions of authenticity and renewal, as well as the reinterpretation of the local architectural heritage in a new method, by new indigenous and foreign architects and engineers. Nevertheless, often, this interpretation did not exceed a clear imitation of buildings or artifacts of the old city. This perception is primarily explained by the radical changes affecting the place of artisans in the design and construction hierarchy and organization. In this phase, Arabism became a guide to a wide part of the society, its art and architecture. The literature as well as the writings of several nationalist politicians and theoreticians would not have insulated from the designers' references.

Be this as it may, the present article has attempted to deal with the use of ornament and polychrome decoration by categorizing the above-mentioned buildings according to a set of pre-defined criteria. Nevertheless, the said categories might not be always able to include all of the buildings. Finally, except by analyzed indications and examples of civil society's writings, no clear-cut answer can be given to the question whether the narratives of ornament

and polychrome decoration did convert according to ideological differentiations of the active sociopolitical forces.

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