

# Reevaluating Middle Eastern Contributions to the Built Environment in Europe

87

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## Abstract

*An exploration of the examination of Middle Eastern contributions to European architecture, interior design and decorative arts in historical survey texts reveals a prejudicial marginalization of the impact of the former on the latter culture. Western scholars' nationalistic efforts to build up the stature of their cultures' achievements have almost invariably resulted in discounting those of other cultures. Although designers of buildings might be more prone to share Bannister Fletcher's idea of architecture as the art form that is "more than any other a national product", students and teachers of all the arts should recognize and neutralize the impact of nationalism on art history and criticism.*

## Introduction

Current headlines highlight the ongoing political, ethnic and religious struggles that seem to characterize the West's relations with the Middle East. Geographical distance and perceived cultural differences color Western attitudes about this ancient and fascinating region, with the very use of the terms "East" and "West" emblematic of our acceptance of these lands as foreign, other, and different. Yet not that long ago the title "Cradle of Civilization" was used to describe lands that are now hostile territory. This paper will explore the reasoning behind, and promote a reevaluation of, the former view of the Middle East as a wellspring of world civilization, and suggest implications for arts education.

While the political and economic history of the West has continually intertwined with the East, historiography devoted to artistic production has focused more on the development of analytical methodologies for distinguishing between the two regions. Architecture, interior design, and the decorative arts are, to be sure, powerful engines of the socially constructed environment and reflectors of the cultures that generated them. Art histories are, similarly, socially constructed. The story they relate is tailored to the intended audience, with the focus of European histories narrowed to exalt European achievements. Distinctions drawn in art and architectural history over the last two centuries were based on battle lines that existed long before, rooted in a nationalistic goal of celebrating the unique excellence of Western art. Perhaps another goal, that of charting the complex exchanges and interchanges that have made every nation unique, should be adopted by scholars as we begin a new century.

## The Problem

Generations of historians have negatively affected our understanding of humankind's architectural achievements. Continuing the socio-political analytical tradition established by art historians like Winckelman, Hegel, and Fletcher (1933) defined each civilized society's architectural goal as "the building up of a great national style in the art which is more than any other a national product" (p. 512). Implicit in this definition is the idea that each homeland worthy of the name develops a singular approach to building that is uniquely its own, one that is expressive of its time, place, cultural outlook and of the particular goals and aspirations shared by its people. Fletcher's view, and that of many art and architecture historians, encouraged the partition of global achievement into artificial compartments, and discouraged the study and appreciation of contributions made by numerous cultures outside the lands that embraced the so called Western tradition.

History has been written as a sort of tally sheet, identifying the generation of original design or constructional innovations, their date and place of birth, with various cultures or ethnic groups scored relative to their achievements. Western historians, understandably though regrettably, tend to give higher scores to the output of civilizations they favor, and grant fewer points to those outside the tight circle of Western European culture. Contributions from non-European cultures are described as mere influences, secondary ideas flowing into Western culture from without, marginalizing their impact on the national product which Western scholars strive to distinguish as unique. The unique earns higher points. Lower scores are earned when design or constructional ideas are adopted, borrowed or derived from another nation's products. The notion of effluence, of an idea flowing out from one culture to another, places emphasis on the source of the idea; the use of the word "influence" emphasizes the importance of the culture that makes use of the idea. European borrowings are seldom described as derivative, since that pejorative term suggests that the high points earned by original authorship would be applied to another culture's scorecard.

## The Middle East in Architectural Historiography

Nowhere is this condition more apparent than in Western treatments of the contributions of Middle Eastern cultures to their European neighbors. Though stricken from recent editions, Fletcher's original distinction between "Historical" and "Non-Historical" styles separated the European homeland from all others. In treating Islamic architecture, the nineteenth edition of the text (1987) echoes Fletcher's earlier negative evaluation, since "much of the formal character of Islamic architecture is derivative, and is notable primarily for the originality of the manner of combining diverse elements" (p. 543).

This statement fails to recognize European architecture as similarly derivative; much that we value as Western is actually derived from Eastern sources. Even more closely aligned with Fletcher's negative judgement of non-European architecture is the assertion that "the most comprehensive range of features, however, does not make a coherent architecture" (p. 543). Fletcher's 1933 pronouncement defined architecture outside Europe as "Non-Historical", with the 1987 edition strongly suggesting that Islamic productions are non-architecture. More recently, Harwood, May, and Sherman (2002) displayed the same dismissive attitude. They explained that Islamic architectural forms "develop from a desire for visual complexity instead of structural innovation. Islam's pointed arches do not cover spaces of different heights, nor are they part of a structural system as in Gothic design" (p. 120). The denial of Middle Eastern innovation in this survey text continues a long tradition of either oversimplification or downright bias, and ignores findings in specialized texts that indicate that a structural system employing the pointed arch was developed in the Middle East significantly earlier than its implementation in medieval Europe.

Pyla (1999) noted that even Kostof's purportedly inclusive *A History of Architecture* (1985) fails to acknowledge the different developments in different Islamic cultures, and "essentializes 'Islam' as a single static culture" (p. 220). The acceptance of the term "Islamic" as sufficient to describe the design productions of numerous and diverse cultures spanning a significant geographical range is evidence in itself of Western historians' dismissive attitudes toward non-Western design production. When one considers the volumes that have been written charting the fine distinctions between *the artistic production of neighboring countries in Europe*, the inadequacy, oversimplification and even dishonesty of the designation "Islamic" becomes apparent. Though we would consider a survey of the architecture of Christendom impossibly broad, those that deal with Islam are seen, in the West, to suffice. Both Islamic and Christian architecture are syntheses of multiple homelands' contributions; neither is either singular or static. The prevalent oversimplification is prompted by the historiographical model's requirement to establish clear boundaries between cultures' architectural manifestations in the same way that maps create geographical borders. The canonical methodology requires that distinctions must be clearly drawn between us and them, between the native national product and the foreign. Some historians display a certain generosity in acknowledging influences that the Middle East has had on European architecture, but none treat these borrowings as effluences from cultures that deserve both more study and more credit for their achievements.

## Nationalism and History

Architecture, along with the other arts, has been studied and written about as a national product, often for nationalistic reasons. In order to boost the stature of European design achievements, it has been seen as necessary to diminish that of foreign lands. In the case of the Middle East, religious and political differences have, to this day, made it acceptable to diminish the importance of the region's design accomplishments. The noted orientalist W. Montgomery Watt (1977) observed that "for our cultural indebtedness to Islam, however, we Europeans have a blind spot. We sometimes belittle the extent and importance of Islamic influence in our heritage, and sometimes overlook it altogether" (p. 2). A review of various historians' treatments of significant inheritances from the East in the West's Middle Ages clarifies both the extent of the latter's indebtedness and of the "blind spot" to which Professor Watt refers.

While *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Riley-Smith, 1995) dismisses the possibility of Europe's borrowing of the pointed arch as "speculation" (p. 235), texts specific to architectural history are somewhat more generous. Hamlin (1953) states that it was "probably borrowed from Moslem prototypes, possibly as a further development of Sassanian ovoid arches" (p. 273). Gloag (1969) acknowledges the pointed arch as an Eastern invention, but qualifies that "it had been dormant-its latent possibilities unappreciated, until the new experimental spirit in architectural design" in Europe brought it to full fruition in the Gothic era (p. 144). Yarwood (1987) credits Islam with the development of the pointed arch, as well, but stated that "it was employed without comprehension of its constructional possibilities" (p. 57). Interestingly, in 1713 Sir Christopher Wren stated about "Gothick" architecture that "it should with more reason be called the Saracen style", but a more nationalistic tendency is apparent in Cichy's *The Great Ages of Architecture* (1969). There, Gothic is "an art of northern origin, and an expression of an essentially Germanic spirit" (p. 248). The author's homeland is not in doubt as he finds that the Gothic style "reflects, in the precision and logic of its constructional scheme, the rationalism of the Latin mind, and in the other-worldly, soaring beauty of its esthetic effect, the unfettered imagination of the Germanic races". An appreciation of the scorecard brand of history makes it understandable that Cichy could not acknowledge that the wellspring of this precision, logic, rationalism, beauty and imagination was sited far from Germany geographically and removed, chronologically, by centuries. To have done so would acknowledge that these qualities were derived from another culture. To be derivative is to lose points.

A similar Eurocentric bias is evident in Anderson's (1985) *The Rise of the Gothic*:

The introduction of the pointed arch must be seen...as an expression

of the nature and needs of North-Western Europe, no longer the home of wandering and barbarous tribes...but now, in the earlier 12<sup>th</sup> century, the most important region of the planet, for its vitality, its inventiveness, and its desire to expand, not merely territorially, but into regions of the mind and the spirit. (p. 39)

It could be argued that certain importance could be ascribed to regions other than northwest Europe during the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, most notably China and the Middle East, where vitality and inventiveness, desire to expand territorially, intellectually and spiritually have been noted by scholars less myopic than Mr. Anderson.

While the horseshoe arches of Moorish Spain are often illustrated in architectural history texts, the pointed arches used in Middle Eastern cities even before the advent of Islam are rarely depicted. Perhaps the horseshoe arch, never adopted by mainstream Europe, serves to reinforce the foreign nature of Islam to Western students. Neatly separating the products of one homeland from those of another may be pedagogically expedient, but this strategy fails to relate the complexity of cultural exchange that is the true driving force behind architecture and the other arts. The ruins of a Zoroastrian temple at Fahraj, in present day Iran, serve to illustrate that the pointed arch served as an expression of the nature and needs of a culture other than North-Western Europe centuries before the earlier 12<sup>th</sup> century. While Anderson acknowledges that the pointed arch had, indeed, been introduced from Islamic culture, its "migrating" to Christian Europe made it become "the symbol of Western domination in science and technology" (p. 39). It could be argued that it had been symbolic of Eastern domination in those areas even before Mohamed.

Frankl's landmark *Gothic Architecture* (1962) mentions the pointed arch only five times in 270 pages, and never cites the East as its source. His main thesis is clearly stated in the work's first sentence: "The Gothic style evolved from within Romanesque church architecture when diagonal ribs were added to the groin vault" (p. 1). Explaining at great length the Romanesque and Roman precursors of the rib-vault, he dismisses versions in Moorish Spain, Egypt, and Persia as different in character from Gothic examples, without explaining the difference. Pope (1933), however, states that "the aesthetic potentialities of salient ribbed vaults had been exploited by the Moors over a century before they appeared in the rest of Europe". Frankl mentions the 42 ribs, projecting and three-dimensional, at Hagia Sophia, but states that "quite understandably they are never given as the source of the Gothic style" (p. 2). Interestingly, Abbot Suger himself makes several references to that monument, obviously keenly aware of its magnificence and eager to exceed its sumptuousness in his own abbey church of St. Denis:

I used to convene with travelers from Jerusalem and, to my great delight, to learn from those to whom the treasures of Constantinople and the ornaments of the Hagia Sophia had been accessible, whether the things here could claim some value in comparison with those there. (Panofsky, p. 65)

The theological and symbolic functions of St. Denis were of paramount concern to Suger, and Frankl's text dwells on a philosophical reading of Gothic architecture. Where we have been told of Islam's lack of appreciation and lack of comprehension of the elements it had developed, a synthesis of the same features becomes, in European hands, a "form symbol for the institution of the Church" (p. 266). In reality, the features and elements which Islam adopted from the wide variety of cultures it represented were also implemented consciously as "form symbols"; Europe merely invested borrowed forms with a meaning expressive of its own theological and political structures.

### **"Orientalist" Contributions**

Not all surveys of Western Architecture are as miserly in crediting the East with significant contributions; a notable exception being *Simpson's History of Architectural Development* (Stewart, 1961). But the findings of specialists in Islamic and earlier Middle Eastern architecture are sadly absent from the standard survey texts assigned in our lecture halls. While Kostof (1985) acknowledges that the pointed arch, vault rib, buttress and stained glass, constituent elements of Gothic architecture, were not the invention of Europeans, he fails to state their sources. He does grant that Muslim architects appreciated the structural advantages of the pointed arch "almost from the start" (p. 333) but fails to mention where or when that start occurred. Specialists like Jairazbhoy, Kenneth Conant and A.V. Pope, in contrast, offer detailed evidence and convincing arguments for revising our estimation of Eastern contributions. Their research documents, from medieval sources, the spread of those architectural elements associated with the Gothic style, providing a compelling provenance that makes the use of the word "speculation" seem either petty or deliberately misleading. The long history of the pointed arch in the Middle East and its eventual introduction to Europe (through Norman Sicily) is thoroughly traced. Pope documents the use of the ribbed vault. Traceried windows with stained glass are described in literary sources, placing their significant use in the East as early as the late seventh century. Most books devoted to stained glass, however, ignore this evidence of earlier development, and credit medieval Europe with the initiation and mastery of this art form. Pope's quotation of a medieval acknowledgement of the East's contribution to European architecture makes its absence in the year 2000 all the more astonishing. At the consecration of the cathedral at

Chartres, Foucher, its Dean observed as follows: "Consider and reflect how in our days God has changed West into East".

Foucher was not astonished merely at the changes he witnessed in ecclesiastical architecture. Crusaders encountered castles, warships, tournaments, coats of arms and military regalia that were later imitated both in the Holy Land and back at home. Ebstosser (1979) relates that "the intellectual level of the European feudal lords did not approach that of their Islamic Arab counterparts" (p. 201), and it is to their credit that the Crusaders applied the knowledge they had learned. Howard (2000) discusses the transmission and propagation of ideas from East to West, both from verbal accounts of merchant travellers and in written or drawn form on the paper developed from the ninth century in Egypt and other Arabic lands.

Just thirty years after the First Crusade, the Norman Roger Guiscard crowned himself king of southern Italy and Sicily, lands wrested from Islam during the preceding century. The following year (1131), he began construction of the Cappella Palatina at Palermo, his capital. Pointed arches, mosaics in multi-lobal arch form, pavements in intricate Islamic geometric patterns and *muqarnas* decorating the vaulted ceilings all testify that Roger adopted significant architectural features from his defeated enemy. An "excellent gallon vase" given by Roger to Count Thibaut of Blois found its way to the abbey at St. Denis, to the delight of Abbot Suger, who records the gift in his *De Administratione* (Panofsky, 1979). It should be noted that Suger's St. Denis, often described as the first example of the Gothic style, was begun six years after the Cappella Palatina. The pointed arch had previously been used in the basilica of St. Benedict at Monte Cassino, whose abbot later became Pope. The basilica was visited in 1083 by Abbot Hugh of Cluny, five years before he began reconstruction of his influential abbey in France. The construction of that abbey, with 150 pointed arches used structurally in the aisle, prompted the Cistercian Abbott Bernard of Clairvaux to criticize Hugh's sanctioning of the use of the "infidel" pointed arch in a Christian church. It should be noted that Abbott Suger, chief counselor to King Louis VII of France and, in many texts, creator of the Gothic style at St. Denis, was a Cluniac.

## Conclusion

A more scholarly (and less politicized) view should acknowledge the region once termed the "Cradle of Civilization" as the source of many important design developments that have had significant impact on multiple facets of the built environment. Structural systems like the pointed arch and dome were fully exploited in the Middle East; the former was adopted to great effect in Europe's Gothic cathedrals, the latter is seen as a parallel development with Western (Roman) architecture. The stained glass windows that are

as emblematic of the Gothic as the pointed arch also can be traced to pre-Islamic times. A pointed arch with stained glass roundels in the public baths at Yazd provides an extant example of similar stained glass treatments described in literary sources relative to the palace of the Sassanian King Khosroe in the seventh century. A stained glass and rock crystal plate in the collection of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, possibly used by that king, bears comparison to the rose window at Chartres. The Middle East's development of the "Paradise Garden", a place to enjoy cultivated trees and flowers with the addition of water features such as pools and fountains, provided the foundation for Renaissance European gardens, and of the field of landscape architecture. Both the planning and finishing of interior spaces were so highly developed that they became a standard of comfort and craftsmanship in the West. Rather than influencing Europe, the design achievements of the Middle East overflowed the region's borders and contributed mightily to other homelands.

The recognition of architecture and all of the arts as borderless in the geographical sense is a seminal lesson to be learned from this discussion. In reality, artistic expressions have historically, and will always because of their very nature, flow freely between human cultures. While trade along the Silk Road linked nations and cross pollinated ideas pertinent to art and design during the first millennium, the ever developing communication of the third millenium will generate artistic interactions that we can barely imagine. Just as the Crusades can be understood as an unfortunate episode that nonetheless resulted in positive and constructive contact between cultures, the hostilities that have so long plagued the Middle East may similarly prove to have a silver lining.

Anticipating such a positive outcome from historic events might encourage a parallel attitude to approaching artistic criticism. The traditional approach that sought to compare and contrast resulted in an inordinate emphasis on uncovering differences, in formulating distinctions between artistic products and the cultures that generated them. A greater focus on revealing the similarities between artworks from different eras and areas might uncover the power of the expressive impulse that is common to all humanity. To achieve this shift in emphasis, it might be necessary to abandon traditional tools and adopt new ones. The laudable goal of informing students of the full breadth of human artistic production has utilized the historic survey text as its principal teaching instrument. This discussion of such texts' failure to adequately achieve the goal serves as merely one example of how the necessary oversimplification of this method leads more to misunderstanding than a merely incomplete understanding. While some survey texts utilize a thematic rather than chronological approach, most still employ a principally connoisseurship model, making distinctions between products

and peoples, separating the different arts and cultures into conveniently discreet elements.

Though revisionism is the pejorative label sometimes applied to the re-evaluation that this research intends to promote, it should be seen as no more threatening than an ongoing refinement of our understanding. While happily acknowledging Rome's enormous debt to Greece, Westerners are less enthusiastic about acknowledging our debts to cultures outside the perceived family. Discussions about globalization, diversity, and multiculturalism define our time, and underscore the narrow parochialism apparent in our traditional approach to art and architecture history. We should begin to question the validity of discussing Western art and architecture, and of the convenient compartments that now contain and transmit our knowledge about its development. Perhaps in the near future we will be as embarrassed about traditional distinctions between East and West, about the nationalistic bias still blatantly evident in architecture history texts, as we are today by Fletcher's definition of Historical (ours) and Non-Historical (theirs) styles.

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