Decorative Arts in the Middle East

Overview

The Decorative Arts from the Middle East are wonderful material examples of culture. They are both beautiful and informative, as they tell us about the people who made them and the people who bought or commissioned them. These art forms represent a sophisticated lifestyle because they develop(ed) along with the people. Middle Eastern artists built upon styles from previous time periods and other regions, and developed distinctly unique Middle Eastern artistic practices and objects, which have commonly been imitated by other cultures. These treasures serve as both a link to the past and a celebration of the future as many artists keep the traditions alive today. Important forms of Decorative Arts in the Middle East include Marbling, Miniature, Pottery/Ceramic Tiles, Illumination, Calligraphy, Embroidery and Weaving. Decorative motifs spill over the surfaces of objects and the exquisite workmanship transforms these objects into works of art.

Marbling

Marbling is a unique method of creating beautiful patterns, and sometimes pictures, on paper. The patterns often look like marble and the images are generally floral, but it is up to the artist to create any design they choose! Many people think marbling is similar to painting with watercolors, but in fact, the technique is quite different. An artist begins with a tray of water or a viscous solution, and then uses a brush to flick or tap drops of pigment or dye into the tray. Historically, the brushes were made out of horse-hair and rose bush stems.

The drops of color expand into circular or oval pools of color, floating atop the water. Next, the artist pulls a needle-like instrument through the solution to pull the colors into a marble-like pattern. The artist may then flick more drops of pigment, enhancing the

design. Next the artist takes a piece of paper, which has been treated with ***size***, or sizing, to protect the paper from picking up the water, and only picking up the colors. The artist then lays the paper in the tray and gently pulls the paper off, such as in the picture on the left. Or, the artist may choose to manipulate the pools of color, such as the tulip, or ***lale*** (pronounced lah-lay in Turkish), in the picture on the right. These two pieces were created by a Turkish artist today, but working in the traditional method.

For centuries, marbling has been used for a variety of purposes. Sometimes people choose to decorate the paper further after it has dried, with calligraphy or painting. The oldest tradition of marbling can be traced to Japan. People in Persia and India also practiced marbling, but probably the most popular form is marbling from Turkey. In Turkish, it is called ***Ebru*** (pronounced Ay-broo) and this tradition spread to Europe and America. It was commonly used in bookbinding, and the first and last pages of a book were made of marbled paper. Today many people use it as stationary for a special letter. Artists also experiment using materials such as fabric, instead of paper. You never know exactly what you are going to get when you pull the paper or fabric off, so each **monoprint** is unique!

Illumination and Miniature

Illumination includes designed letters, borders and miniatures used to separate texts. It is similar to the function of graphic design or chapter divisions in books today, but often with much more embellishment and symbolic importance. The production of manuscripts and miniature painting was very costly and time consuming. Only persons of wealth could own such a treasure. On the right is a picture of an illuminated Qur'an from the Safavid Era in Iran, 16th & 17th c.

Hussain A. Al-Ramadan/Saudi Aramco World/PADIA

While Qur'ans do not contain **representational** or figurative art, these subjects can be found in secular illuminated manuscripts When considering the history of **miniatures**, we find evolving styles and subject matter, influenced by commissioners of the arts, individual artists, geographic regions and time periods. In the early 13th century, production flourished in the Middle East, especially in Mosul, Diyarbakir and Baghdad. In the late 13th and early 14th centuries, the painting became very refined while under commission of the Ilkanids in Iran. Refinement continued in the 15th century, and reached its peak in the 16th century in Iran. One historian commented "Should one want a thousand books, they could all be produced in Shiraz within a year." The top image shows a Persian manuscript from the 16th century. Persian manuscripts were often painted in a style that portrayed an idealized world. For example, in this image, a lovely garden with stylized trees and flowers, frames the subjects, who are relaxing, playing musical instruments and conversing, in an afternoon of leisure.

Persian manuscripts then inspired the Ottoman manuscripts. However, Ottoman manuscript artists, instead of striving for a style of idealization, tended towards accuracy, and commonly included histories of the sultans, military campaigns and geographic maps. The image on the left is an Ottoman miniature.

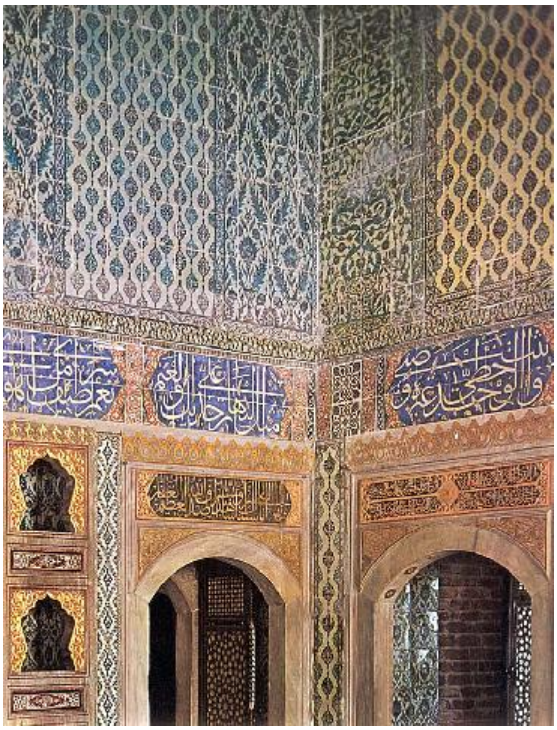
As a whole, miniature subject matter includes almost all aspects of daily lives. Subjects include enthroned leaders and their court, prophets, hunters, warriors, musicians, scribes and dervishes. Events such as war conquests, hunting outings, feasts, and even ***hammams*** (baths) are depicted. Styles vary among painters, but miniatures are commonly comprised of brilliant colors. Sometimes the pigment was enhanced by adding gold, silver and mother of pearl. Gold was also sprinkled atop. Miniatures are generally void of **perspective.** (In drawing, perspective is a technique that represents a three-dimensional environment onto a two-dimensional surface, similar to how the eye sees an environment. For example, objects further away are smaller in size.) In miniatures, the plane is typically flattened. However, in later pieces, as time progresses, elements of perspective can be found, along with subtle shading. They all have meticulous detail and tightly packed ornament. Each illustration is unique and individually conceived by the artist.

Ceramic Tiles / Pottery

Wendy Levine/Saudi Aramco World/PADIA

The Middle Eastern technique of forming artwork out of clay and then painting on it began in ancient Mesopotamia around 3000 BC. This recent picture depicts a man in Bahrain forming a vessel on a potters' wheel. Next he will bake the vessel before embellishing the surface by painting it with rhythmic and organic designs.

In the 13th century, the art flourished in Persia, and artists frequently depicted garden scenes. The craft experienced resurgence again in Turkey in the18th century. Turks built upon earlier styles and invented new styles. Tiles from Iznik, Turkey are still highly sought after today because of their lovely blue hues and intricate details, such as in the image on the right.



For centuries, glazed tile panels covered the interior and exterior walls of mosques, churches and palaces. This picture of the crown prince apartment in Topkapi Place, Turkey, shows repeated tile formations which form patterns on the interior walls. Highly detailed and expertly crafted, these tiles containing script and floral forms saturate the walls. The multiplication of diverse ornament and symbols flows perfectly and seamlessly into a balanced whole.

Traditional crafts, such as ceramics, are a source of national pride. On the right, an artist in Jerusalem keeps her heritage alive by painting ceramics with traditional motifs today.

Jane M. Friedman/Saudi Aramco World/PADIA

Jane M. Friedman/Saudi Aramco World/PADIA

Embroidery

Embroidery has been used for centuries to embellish fabrics all over the world. It is difficult to determine where and when it originated, but we know that it was very popular in ancient cultures throughout the Middle East. Elaborate embroidery transforms cloth into a special and valuable material. These decorated cloths and garments signified the value of the property, along with the wealth and status of the owner.

Makers use a needle and thread to stitch designs onto fabric. The subject matter ranges anywhere from ornamental designs, such as floral, vegetal and geometric designs, to stories that use animal and human figures, to rulers' symbols, to the written word. Threads are made from linen, silk, wool and even fine wire and gold! Traditionally embroidery was done by hand, but today we also have "machine embroidery."

Robert Azzi/Saudi Aramco World/PADIA

The image on the left is a caftan worn by Mehmet the Conquerer from the Ottoman Empire in 15th century. Ottoman caftans are men's cotton or silk cloaks, which are buttoned down the middle and covered with rich embroidery. The embroidery is made with gold and silver thread. The image on the right shows a woman at a fashion show in New York City today, wearing embroidered garments created by a designer who was born in Saudi Arabia.

Motifs

Beautiful motifs cover much Middle Eastern decorative art. **Motifs** are a repeated form, image or symbol used to form a pattern. Popular interpretations believe that the use of geometric, floral and vegetal motifs developed because traditional Islam does not endorse representational or figurative art. In other words, instead of painting a portrait on canvas, or carving an animal sculpture out of stone, Middle Eastern artists developed exquisite abstract surface decorations of beautiful motifs. Another reason for the abundance of floral and vegetal motifs could be because much of the Middle East is dry and people enjoy investing their time and efforts in the beauty of nature and gardens. However, over time, people have interpreted and debated the inclusion or exclusion of figural imagery in "Islamic Arts" differently. Also, the Middle East includes people of many religions, including Christians and Jews.

Geometric Designs

The first systematic writings on geometry were compiled by Euclid, in Alexandria, around the beginning of the 4th century. By the end of the 8th century these manuscripts were widely distributed among the Arab world, resulting in a soaring of Islamic interest in repetition, symmetry, and continuous generation of pattern. Geometry provided a method to repeat and divide patterns, and to enlarge exact replicas, regardless of scale. Geometric constructions were imbued with symbolic, cosmological, and philosophical significance. The geometric principle of relating parts to the whole is evident in individual pattern designs, and also on a larger scale, because each element is considered in relation to the entirety of the interior space, forming a balanced whole. The fluid interlacing of shapes, the balance of positive and negative areas, and the masterful use of color produce a detailed yet balanced whole. (Refer back to image of Topkapi Palace ceramic tiles.)

Arabesque

Geometric patterns, floral forms, and sometimes even calligraphy, blend together to form the art of the arabesque. In the arabesque, the underlying geometric grid is used as a formula upon which interlaced vines and scrolls propagate. Continuous stems regularly branch out to create new stems, which again split off or reintegrate back into the whole. This limitless, musical pattern produces a field of rhythmic movement and controlled pattern. The arabesque formula allows for an infinite recreation of the pattern. Sometimes calligraphy is woven into the design so brilliantly that all modes (calligraphy, scrolls, flowers, etc.) become the same form. This image shows the Arabesque with calligraphy from the Alhambra in Spain.