

## Chapter XVI

### Reflections on Mamluk Art\*

The exhibition of Mamluk art organized by Esin Atil and the symposium held in Washington DC, at its opening were both memorable occasions. Jointly they provided one of the very few opportunities in the slowly growing field of Islamic art for the collective attention of a large number of art historians and a smaller number of historians to focus on a single period. This volume of *Muqarnas* records much of the material that was presented at the symposium.

As is both common and appropriate in a new field, the overwhelming majority of the papers are taxonomic: they seek to organize a quantity of objects or monuments of architecture into formal, technical, or other categories, to provide accurate definitions of those categories, to propose and justify dates, and to suggest an evolution of style and function. One cannot quarrel with those objectives, but at the same time Mamluk objects, whether or not they were in the exhibition, and the great masterpieces of Mamluk architecture raise more complex questions of meaning and perhaps require more speculative treatment. In answering those questions and in suggesting different interpretations we can perhaps add to our understanding both of the nature of Islamic art and of the methods of the history of art in general.

*A priori*, few periods of Islamic history lend themselves as well to a thorough and detailed analysis as does the Mamluk period in Egypt and the Levant.<sup>1</sup> Its chronological framework is clearly defined by major political events: although one can quibble over whether 1250 or 1260 signaled its beginning, there is general agreement that 1517 marks its end. Its geographical spread is equally clearly defined. Egypt was its center; Syria, Palestine, and most of the Arabian

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<sup>1</sup> Esin Atil's catalog, *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks* (Washington, DC, 1981), contains an extensive bibliography of secondary works that can easily serve as an introduction to Mamluk studies in general (pp. 266–82). For primary sources only piecemeal introductions are available, such as Donald P. Little's *An Introduction to Mamluk Historiography for the Reign of al-Nadir* (Wiesbaden, 1970), and Barbara Schäfer, *Beiträge zur mamlukischen Historiographie* (Freiburg, 1971).

peninsula were its provinces. Compared with the territorial uncertainties of the beyliks of Anatolia or of the contemporary Turkic and Mongol dynasties of Iran, the Mamluks were tied to a reasonably well-demarcated area, to which they introduced a reasonably well-oiled administrative structure. Although subject to numerous changes and at times to devastating crises, the economic foundations of Mamluk wealth – primarily as middlemen in the transit trade from the East to the West – remained fairly secure. Cairo was the largest metropolitan center in the world throughout these two-and-a-half centuries. It was also a haven for refugees from the whole of Muslim western Asia, especially during the first half-century of Mamluk rule, and its stature as a major intellectual center was maintained throughout the Mamluk period as Muslims from independent North Africa and Spain came there to learn and to work. Many of the intellectual, religious and legal leaders of the budding Ottoman world were trained there.

The Mamluk period is superbly documented. Chronicles abound in great variety, permitting a reconstruction of events that is more balanced than is possible for earlier centuries, for which so often a single source predominates. Although less accessible, legal and archival documents are also numerous,<sup>2</sup> and there are masses of literary, pietistic, scientific, philosophical, and even popular compendia, studies and texts of all kinds. Mamluk coins and inscriptions have by and large been published. Mamluk history, society, trade and institutions have been the subjects of numerous studies and – a rare phenomenon in Islamic historiography – of actual scholarly debate. Most important for our purposes, the monuments of Mamluk times are visible. Cairo, Tripoli and Jerusalem are very much Mamluk cities, and Damascus, Aleppo and the holy cities of Mecca and [2] Medina were enormously modified during Mamluk times. According to the estimate of Michael Meinecke, nearly a third of some 3,300 identifiable Mamluk construction projects (new buildings and restorations) have been, at least in part, preserved.<sup>3</sup> Thousands of Mamluk objects fill the galleries and reserves of museums all over the world. In contrast to the situation for Iran, India, or the Muslim West, studies of the architectural monuments and, to a lesser degree, of smaller objects are available in books or articles. From the grand volumes of Napoleon's *Expédition de l'Égypte* to recent monographs on individual buildings or objects, the bibliography on Mamluk art is extensive and, however critical one may be of its intellectual shortcomings, for the most part reasonably accurate.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Muhammad M. Amin, *Catalogue des documents d'archives du Caire* (Cairo, 1981), and Donald P. Little, "The Significance of the Haram Documents," *Der Islam*, 57 (1980).

<sup>3</sup> "Regional Architectural Traditions," paper presented at "The Renaissance of Islam: The Art of the Mamluks," National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 13–16 May 1981.

<sup>4</sup> What constitutes acceptable accuracy in publication is a complicated question. New surveying methods and the development of new technical knowledge about painting

The Mamluk period coincides with the most extraordinary changes in the arts and culture of Eurasia, which begin as the Pisani cautiously discover antique sculpture, as Gothic cathedrals cover Northern Europe, as Anatolian architecture hones its Seljuq models, and as literate and sophisticated Sung painting still rules in China. It ends in the time of Raphael and Leonardo, when Northern Europe and Spain discover Italy, when the Ottoman dome is ready for Sinan's perfection, and after two brilliant centuries of Persian painting. In the thirteenth century the Crusaders were finally and definitively defeated, and Western awareness of Asia depended on Marco Polo and some lonely Dominican friars; by the beginning of the sixteenth, Portuguese and Spanish vessels sailed the entire Indian Ocean, and the Ottoman fleet was barely able to stand up to Italian and Spanish navies in the Mediterranean Sea.

Thus, for three different reasons – internal cohesion and continuity; quantity, variety, and availability of information; and concomitant historical and cultural changes elsewhere – the Mamluk period offers opportunities for research that are rare in other areas or for other times.

Methodologically, problems of this period are simple enough and, on the whole, hardly unusual. Some result from the sheer quantity of documents: determining the qualitative range of Mamluk art, for surely with so many examples it is unlikely that the same quality was maintained throughout; identifying paradigmatic works through which other works can be evaluated; and establishing the social range of Mamluk art, as it is highly improbable that different kinds of patrons sponsored or acquired the same kinds of objects.

Other problems are essentially historical: the sources of Mamluk art, its stylistic evolution, the relationship between the Cairene center and the provinces or among the provinces themselves. A more specific subject arises from contrasting the two-and-a-half centuries of Mamluk art with the changes wrought in Anatolia, Iran and Italy over the same period. Both Anatolian–Ottoman and Iranian art are characterized by clear-cut and at times irreversible changes, while Mamluk art impresses one by its secure conservatism, by its numerous variations on the same themes. How valid is that impression? If it

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and the decorative arts have introduced into art-historical research an expectation of precision that seems to require that nearly everything be restudied. While I am hardly willing to argue in favor of insufficient or incomplete information, I question whether a historian who studies taste and culture (as distinct from a historian who studies technology) necessarily profits from a surfeit of detailed information about some point that had no importance in its own time. For instance, to know where and even when certain ceramics were made is only pertinent to the historian of a culture if evidence exists to show that the time and place of manufacture were important within the culture itself. The same point could be made for masonry techniques and a number of other features. On the other hand, technical precision is essential if the objective of the investigation is to understand and explain modes of production, sources of materials, division of labor, technological know-how, and other similar issues.



1 Basin, *c.* 1330.  
British Museum,  
London, no. 51,  
1–41

is valid, should it be explained in social terms, as the visual and functional contract accepted by a stable society for an unusually long period of time, or in cultural terms, as evidence that inventions and new searches elsewhere simply did not reach the Mamluk world? Why did the Mamluk world appear so static and so stable in a Mediterranean world, both Christian and Muslim, in cultural ferment? The comparison with the Ottomans is particularly striking, as both cultures shared similar Sunni religious directions tinged with newly (at least in the Levant) fashionable Sufism, drew their elites from a comparable ethnic stock, and were in continuous, if not always friendly, contact with each other.

What posing these questions tells us, it seems to me, is that, however useful and indeed essential it may be to fulfill the taxonomic requirements of scholarship, these endeavors lose something of their import if they are bereft of their social, ideological or aesthetic contexts and divorced from their methodological implications. The variety of Mamluk forms that greets anyone visiting Cairo or Jerusalem, looking at the exhibition of Mamluk art in its many different locations, or perusing its catalog, provides a sumptuous feast for the eyes, but how does one recognize in these forms the will or the taste of the Mamluk world? I shall start with a number of almost random observations on some of the objects in the exhibition, then make a few remarks on Mamluk architecture, and finally sketch out a possible approach to Mamluk art as a whole.



2 Candlestick,  
1482–83. Museum  
of Islamic Art,  
Cairo, no. 4297

Let me begin by comparing two objects in brass, a basin (Fig. 1, c. 1330) from the time of Nasir al-Din Muhammad in the British Museum, and a candlestick (Fig. 2, dated 1482–83) in Cairo's Museum of Islamic Art donated by Qaytbay to the mosque of Medina.<sup>5</sup> Both are decorated with a single

<sup>5</sup> Atil, *Renaissance*, nos 26, 34; it is with purpose, if slightly perversely, that I write, "from the time of" the sultan. Since we have at least one formula, *mimma 'umila* (as on no. 28), that identifies an object as being by or for a specific individual, should not objects like these with a simple royal identification be put in a somewhat different category, at least when determining patronage?



band broken up by several strongly accentuated medallions and framed by narrow bands above and below. The primary decorative motif consists in writing set over or contrast-[3]ing with vegetal ornament. The visual coherence of the decorative schemes, the powerful stress on movement within circular objects seen respectively as a ring and a cylinder, the contrast between the forcefully proclaimed identification of a prince in the inscriptions and the more complex but also more static and repetitive elaboration of ornamental details are all features of a Mamluk style. They are also found in qur'anic pages, glass lamps, textiles and architectural ensembles of the Mamluk period,<sup>6</sup> and they are different from the stylistic characteristics of similar objects of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from Egypt, Syria, or Iran.<sup>7</sup>

The differences between the objects, such as the more elaborate and mannered style of writing on Qaytbay's candlestick, the technique of engraving in the later object versus that of inlaying in the earlier one, and the simplified ornamental motifs, represent differences of sub-periods within a single style. There is no difficulty in establishing some of the same stylistic distinctions by comparing al-Nasir's architecture to Qaytbay's or by surveying sequences of Mamluk domes.<sup>8</sup> Objects such as the Baptistère de St Louis (no. 21),<sup>9</sup> the candlestick in the Walters Art Gallery (no. 16),<sup>10</sup> the Rasulid basin (no. 22), the great basins, bowls and candlesticks from Cairo (nos 27, 28, 29, 30, 31) can all be identified and interpreted as personal, qualitative, or social variants of a single formal matrix. The penbox in the British Museum made by Muhammad ibn Sunqur in 1281 (no. 13) would be a transitional piece, and the one by Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Mawsuli made in 1269 (no. 10) a fascinating attempt to meet an emerging new taste with the fussy details of another style. The establishment of a set of formal characteristics for Mamluk metalwork (or, for that matter, any other technique), however broad, allows the traditional techniques of connoisseurship to operate, so that dating and

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., nos 1, 53, 122. In architecture the same kind of equilibrium between writing and other types of decoration occurs in most examples, such as the Barquq and Shaykhu ensembles; Louis Hauteceur and Gaston Wiet, *Les Mosquées du Caire* (Paris, 1932), pls 147, 166 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur U. Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, *A Survey of Persian Art* (London, 1939), vol. 6, pls 1321, 1324, 1332, for Iranian examples; Hayward Gallery, *The Arts of Islam* (London, 1976), nos 146, 198, 200, for Ayyubid examples.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, the structure of the dome of Nasir's mosque, Hauteceur and Wiet, *Mosquées* (pl. 86), is different from Qaytbay's, though a beautiful late fifteenth-century rug in the Metropolitan Museum (1970.105) contains a design strikingly similar to that of the wooden ceiling in Qaytbay's funerary complex. For the whole series of domes, see Christel Kessler, *The Carved Masonry Domes of Medieval Cairo* (London, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> This number and similar ones in the text refer to Esin Atil, *Renaissance*.

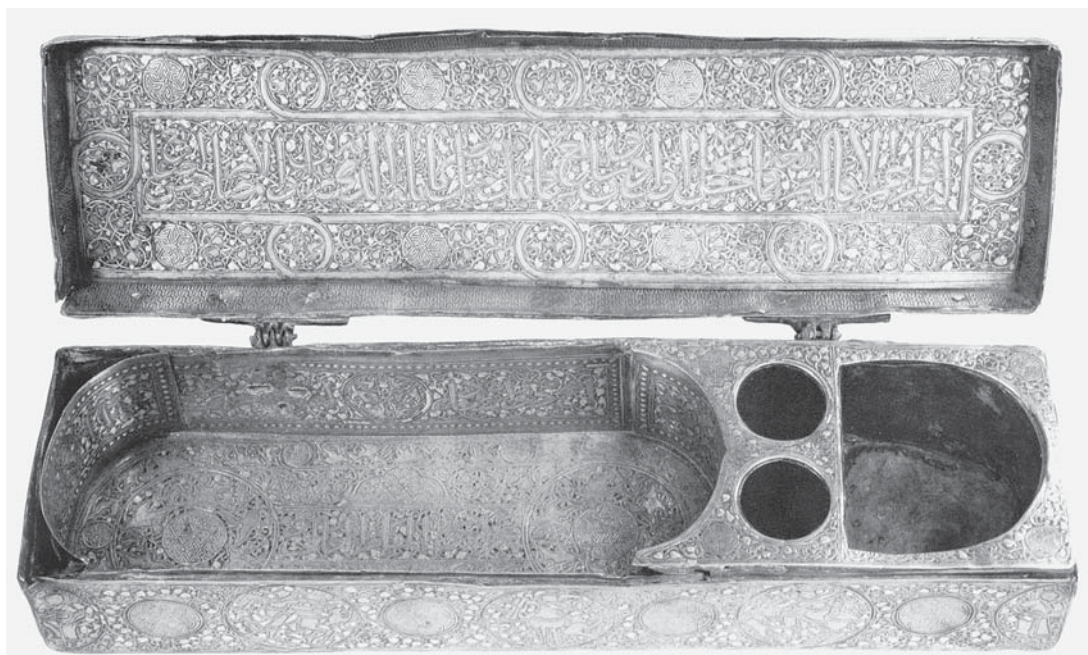
<sup>10</sup> Several problems surround the identification of this object, including that posed by the socket and neck from Cairo which are supposed to belong to it (no. 15): the neck of the Cairo piece has a pseudo-writing which is more Ayyubid than Mamluk, as are the medallions with astral symbols on the base of the candlestick. The possibility that both these objects were made by sticking together fragments of different origins cannot be excluded.



3 Ewer, c. 1300.  
Museum of  
Islamic Art,  
Cairo, no. 15089

evaluation of objects can result. For instance, the basin in the Victoria and Albert Museum (no. 18) has an interior decoration which appears to be a pastiche of all the motifs of classical Islamic metalwork, and one ewer in the Museum of Islamic Art (no. 19; Fig. 3) exhibits a striking and atypical contrast between the upper and lower parts of the body's decoration. In both instances the question is raised of the genuineness of the whole object or of parts of it. [4]

Three brasses, however, complicate matters somewhat. Two are penboxes, one in the Louvre (no. 23; Fig. 4), the other in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, made for Abu'l-Fida (no. 24); the third is a Qur'an box also in Cairo (no. 25; Fig. 5). All three are dated or datable to the first third of the fourteenth century, and all three bear some relationship to our hypothetical type, especially through the presence of large and powerful inscriptions. But all three also have areas of intricate and sophisticated designs whose effect is not immediately striking from a distance, as it is in the vessels from the times of al-Nasir Qaytbay; rather, they require close scrutiny and a personal, almost solitary, attention to the object. The inscriptions on two of these



4 Penbox, 1304–  
05. Louvre, Paris,  
no. 3621

objects clearly indicate that they were meant for private use. Even if the name of the owner of the Louvre penbox can no longer be read, its long statement about the glories of penmanship suggests a testimonial in honor of years or decades of writing services. The Qur'an box is covered with carefully chosen qur'anic inscriptions; the commonly known Throne Verse is in bold letters, but less frequently quoted passages are visible only at close quarters.

From these random observations on a few brass objects, the working hypothesis can be proposed that several modes coexisted in Mamluk times using a vocabulary of forms from different sources. Some were earlier than the Mamluks, others were new inventions. One mode was strong, outer-directed, impersonal; the other was intimate, inner-directed, personal. At times, as on a late Mamluk lamp from Cairo (no. 32; Fig. 6), the two modes can be found on the same object. It is perhaps too risky to suggest that one mode was official, the other private, but the possibility is not excluded. They may also reflect two levels of piety, one official and proclamatory, the other individual and perhaps mystical, in their use respectively of well-worn and uncommon qur'anic quotations.

I began talking about the style of two types of objects and then went on to identify them, as well as others, through modes. Without wishing to fall into the difficulties encountered by so many art historians in recent years in trying to define style, I wonder whether the identification of modes – that is, of combinations of subjects and forms, adapted to a particular function – does not better suit the historian's need to understand objects as active [5]





components of their contemporary life, especially when most of Mamluk art falls into the category of objects or buildings with primarily practical functions.

The problem of stylistic or modal definition is far more complex when one turns to the illumination and especially the frontis- and finispieces of spectacular Mamluk Qur'ans,<sup>11</sup> such as the magnificent ones of 1370 and 1334 (nos 4 and 5; Figs 7 and 8). Here the primary task, it seems to me, is not to describe them, nor to proclaim that they beautify the holy book, nor even to identify the sources or evolution of this or that motif in their decoration. The problem is first of all one of formal definition: what type or types of

5 Qur'an box,  
c. 1330. Museum  
of Islamic Art,  
Cairo, no. 183

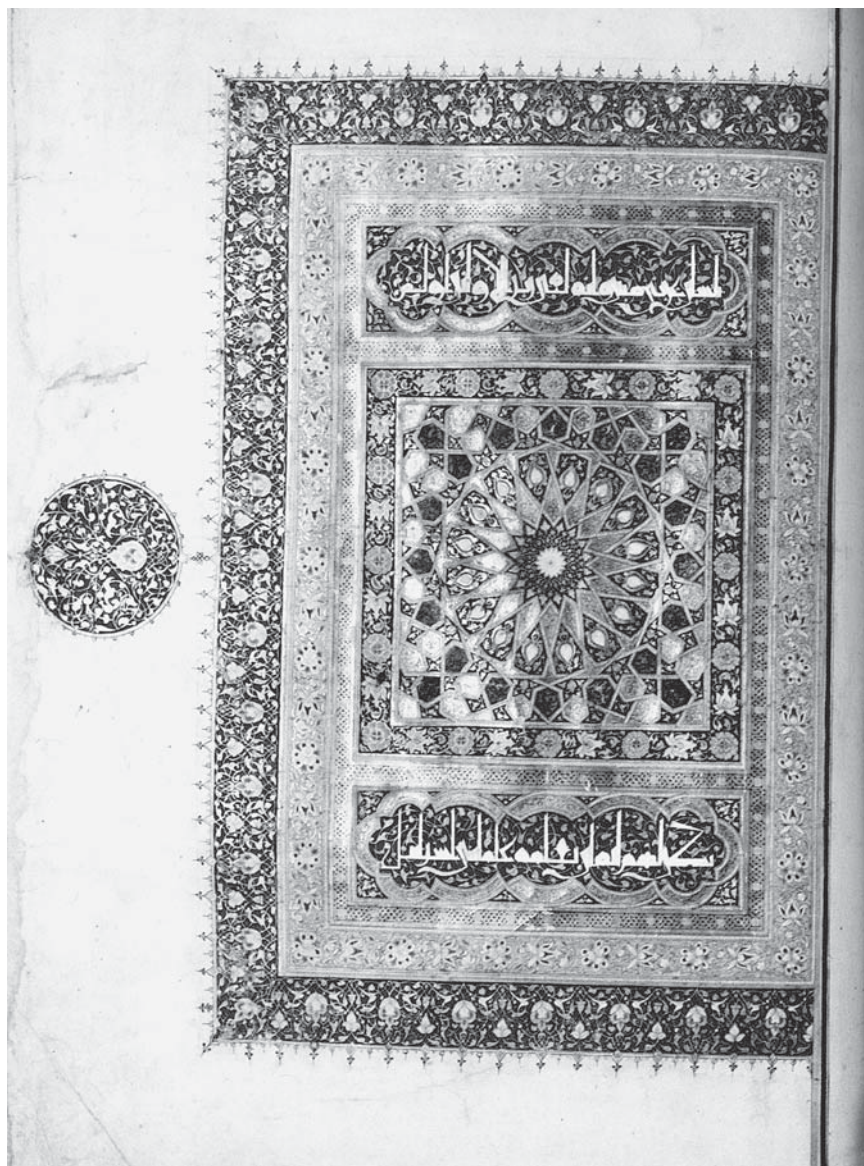
<sup>11</sup> I am purposely avoiding dealing with calligraphy, as the techniques for appropriate judgment of this prototypical form of expression in the Muslim world have not been worked out. This is not meant as a criticism of the various publications of recent years that deal with calligraphy, such as Martin Lings and Y. H. Safadi, *The Qur'an*, British Library Exhibition (London, 1976); or Hassan Massoudy, *Calligraphie arabe vivante* (Paris, 1981). All of them make useful and sometimes very important contributions to the history and techniques of scripts, but they do not provide all we need for developing critical terms to understand such texts as the one found in Qadi Ahmad, *Calligraphers and Painters*, trans. Vladimir Minorsky (Washington, DC, 1959), pp. 57–9.

6 Lamp, second half of the fourteenth century, Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, no. 15123



design are found in these manuscripts? Book pages are two-dimensional, finite surfaces, and these examples illustrate two characteristic ways of covering those surfaces: in the 1370 Qur'an a single motif growing from a center, and in the 1334 Qur'an an all-over repeat pattern of medallions. Both types of design occur on other flat surfaces, in ceramics (nos 69 and 72) or textiles (nos 116, 121, 125, 127), in Mamluk art and at other times or places as well. Once this level of formal generality is established, then detailed analyses of individual motifs and their origins serve to identify the historical and possibly cultural or social dimensions of a given page.

But neither formal typology nor historical morphology manages to answer a much more fundamental question: what led patrons of the same social and intellectual level (ruling princes), at roughly the same time (c. 1370) and for the same text (the Qur'an), to require or appreciate different kinds of illuminations? To postulate different religious meanings for these forms – for instance, esoteric and Sufi or establishment and Sunni – makes [6] sense because such meanings would reflect different interpretations of the holiness of the Qur'an, but no investigation, as far as I know, has identified the



7 Frontispiece,  
Qur'an, c. 1370.  
Egyptian  
National Library,  
Cairo, MS 54, fol.  
2a

processes by which these or any other visual forms relate to piety. The argument that these fancy frontispieces indicate royal patronage is weakened by the frontispiece of al-Busiri's *Kawakib* in the Chester Beatty Library (no. 9), where Qaytbay makes it perfectly clear that he is the patron of the manuscript by highlighting inscriptions proclaiming his titles and his sponsorship. Perhaps we have no choice but to see these designs simply as means of sensuous attraction or as homage to the holy text through rich and intricate designs. Illumination is in this case an attribute given to a book and not, like an illustration, issuing from it.



8 Finispiece,  
 Qur'an, 1334.  
 Egyptian  
 National Library,  
 Cairo, MS 81, fol.  
 378a



One last observation on Mamluk objects concerns their inscriptions. Metalwork in particular displays not merely a large number of inscriptions but an unusual variety of inscription types, ranging from straightforward statements of rank to personal statements or signatures. In the other media, only glass objects occasionally give a written indication of function, patronage, or location. Why is this so? With some hesitation, one might suggest that something about a hierarchy of media can be inferred from the presence or absence of inscriptions: not necessarily or simply a hierarchy of quality – that brass or glass were “higher” techniques than ceramics or textiles or ivory –



but one reflecting the relative ability to display individuality and peculiarities of taste. Metalwork demonstrated that quality as early as the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>12</sup>

Why these two media? Perhaps because, in contrast with ceramics, textiles and even architecture, the last stages of their ornamentation were artisanal and not industrial: the finishing touches, enameling or chasing, on glass or metal could be used to apply decoration at the whim of a single patron when the object was almost finished. This may explain, for instance, why the Baptistère de St Louis, the most elaborate work of early Mamluk *Prachtkunst*, depicting (or so it seems) the whole Mamluk court, has no royal inscription.<sup>13</sup> It did not need one, because it was made for an immediate and specific purpose, self-evident to those who used it.<sup>14</sup> The basin's maker, on the other hand, wanted to ensure that he was remembered so that he could receive new commissions: his signature can be found on the basin six times. As to the two other inscriptions on the Baptistère – the identification of a penbox as a penbox and of another vessel as one to carry food – they probably commemorate some concrete event that escapes us.

One conclusion we might draw from these remarks is that inscriptions serve to determine the [7] rarity or uniqueness of an object. Thus it is likely that the tray in the Metropolitan Museum made for al-Mu'ayyad (no. 22) was one of many similar objects, but unlikely that Abu'l-Fida's fancy pencase (no. 24) had any mates. A second conclusion is that inscriptions and other types of motifs were chosen to complement each other: with the exceptions of a problematic candlestick in the Walters Art Gallery (no. 16) and the basin in the Victoria and Albert Museum (no. 18), the fewer figures depicted, the more elaborate the inscriptions. Furthermore, the later the object, the less likely it is to have representations. Does this mean that the Mamluk period witnessed the replacement of one kind of visual vocabulary (representations) by another (writing) without necessarily implying changes in content? Or did the need for a different content for decoration lead to changes in vocabulary? The answer lies either in specific cultural and historical circumstances or in the mutually exclusive properties of certain visual terms.

Hypotheses such as those based on or derived from observations of individual objects can easily be multiplied to form a variety of combinations, which can then comprise what may be called the connoisseurship of Mamluk art. Connoisseurship is here defined as the web of impressions and associations triggered by a single object, which then, after appropriate comparisons with other objects, return to it as an attribution that is an explanation of place,

<sup>12</sup> L. T. Giuzalian, "The Bronze Qalamdan of 542/1148 from the Hermitage Collection," *Ars Orientalis*, 7 (1968).

<sup>13</sup> Atil, *Renaissance*, no. 21.

<sup>14</sup> In spite of its masterful publication by D. S. Rice (*The Baptistère de St. Louis* [Paris, 1953]), the Baptistère is far from having been explained.

function, patron and artist. Until now, however, our discussions of objects have not really explained any one individual object so much as they have identified themes, motifs and questions addressed either to a class of objects or to elements of design and decoration seen independently of an object.

Another possible approach both to objects and to monuments of architecture is to group them by period and then to identify discrete Mamluk substyles. An opportunity to do just that arose when the Mamluk exhibition was shown at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, where the objects were arranged in roughly chronological order.<sup>15</sup> One rapid exercise using this approach will suffice. The reign of Qaytbay (1468–96) was the last fairly prosperous and relatively quiet period of Mamluk history, and it is notable for a large number of surviving monuments and objects. The monuments are fairly accessible, and some preliminary studies have been devoted to them.<sup>16</sup> They include some thirty buildings in Cairo alone, numerous constructions in Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the holy places in Arabia.<sup>17</sup> About two dozen bronzes are attributed directly to Qaytbay's patronage or to his time,<sup>18</sup> as are many objects in glass and ivory, many manuscripts, and a quantity of textiles.

All these works display a number of common and consistent features. One is a sophisticated arabesque design that uses various motifs but always manages to transform surfaces in a way that makes the material of manufacture – whether stone, metal, paper, or fabric – lose its material quality and become a luxurious pattern, brilliantly reacting to the movement of sources of light, as Christel Kessler has so well shown for architecture.<sup>19</sup> Another is the predominance of certain vegetal designs, such as the three-lobed leaf, and of compositions based on coordinated medallions at different angles. Typical also are thick letters with playful finials, especially on the hastae, and an extremely complex geometry. Yet it is still very difficult to combine these details into a definition of a style, mainly because not one of these features seems sufficiently anchored in Qaytbay's reign to justify identifying it exclusively with that time.

In short, the strategies of traditional connoisseurship or of characterizing period styles do not seem appropriate to the study of Mamluk objects. Except in the case of the Baptistère, the analysis of a Mamluk object leads, not to a better understanding of any individual object, but to hypotheses,

<sup>15</sup> The exhibition was arranged by Marilyn Jenkins and contained additional examples from the Metropolitan Museum, the Medina Collection, and private and public collections from Kuwait.

<sup>16</sup> See Atil, *Renaissance*, *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Hautecoeur and Wiet, *Mosquées*, p. 307 and Michael M. Burgoyne, *The Architecture of Islamic Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1976), for a list.

<sup>18</sup> A. Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Cuivres inédits de l'époque de Qa'itbay," *Kunst des Orients*, 6 (1969).

<sup>19</sup> Especially for bronzes and domes (Kessler, *Carved Masonry Domes*).

ideas and concepts valid for classes of objects (lamps, basins, pencases) or for classes of specific decorative motifs (calligraphic bands, cartouches, peonies, geometric order), or, more rarely, to the identity of an owner or an artisan.<sup>20</sup> Nearly the same conclusion can be reached about Mamluk architecture. Such otherwise dissimilar scholars as Alexander Papadopoulos and the late K. A. C. Creswell seem to have been almost instinctively drawn to compiling sequences of domes and minarets (they could have used gates just as well), as though those elements could be studied apart from the buildings to which they belonged.<sup>21</sup> The reason for this attitude is not difficult to find. Aside from some of the early monuments of Mamluk architecture (the mosque of Baybars, for example, or some of Qala'un's or al-Nasir's buildings), whose forms have deliberately archaizing features,<sup>22</sup> the hundreds of Mamluk monuments of Cairo, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Damascus and Tripoli have a sameness of purpose, of form, of ornament, and of effectiveness – or, in Humphreys's words, “expressive intent”<sup>23</sup> – that is striking. [8]

So far as function is concerned, they are mosques, *madrasas*, *khanqahs*, or more rarely hospitals or *ribats*, and nearly always associated with the mausoleums of founders. They illustrate the high Muslim ideal of an architecture of social service, supported by charity in the form of the economic and legal conditions of the *waqf* system and inspired by the ideological and religious reform of the Muslim system that began in the eleventh century and assumed many regional variants.<sup>24</sup> The problem with all these Mamluk foundations is that there are so many of them, located so close to each other – as in the Shari' Bayn al-Qasrayn in Cairo, on the western and northern side of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem (Fig. 9), and in Cairo's eastern cemeteries – that one begins to doubt their actual social, religious, or intellectual uses and usefulness. At best, there is an apparent contradiction between the cost and quality of these buildings and their likely value to the surrounding population.

In form as well, the sequence of a large gate with a flanking minaret, a dark passageway, a court, a variety of public, covered areas (hypostyles or

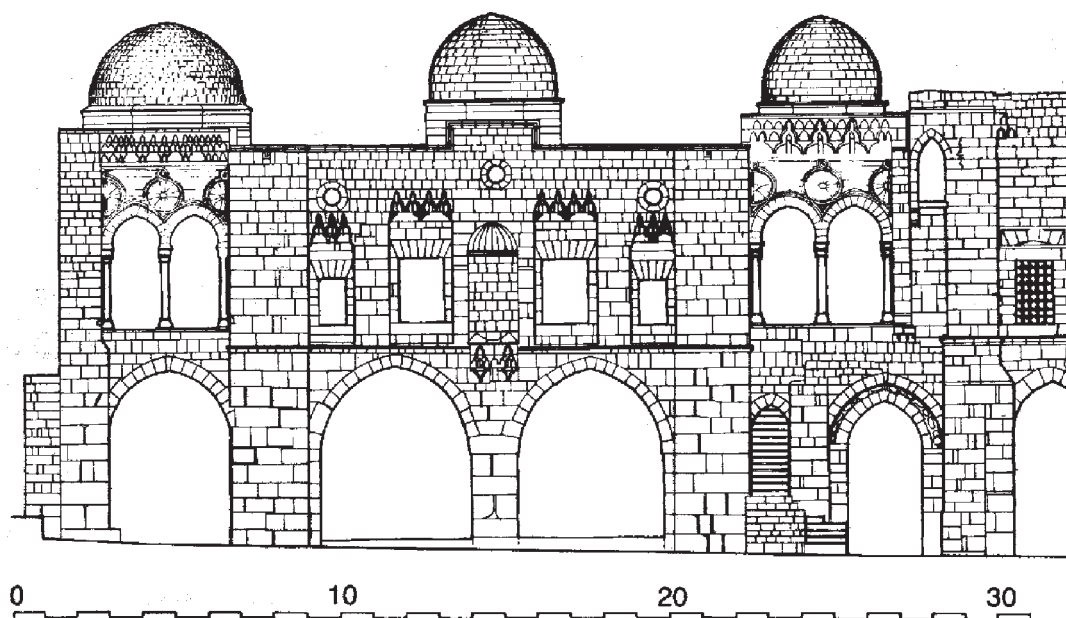
<sup>20</sup> This conclusion is not an original one for Islamic art, but one may wonder whether it is not so because much of the perception of Islamic art developed from Western knowledge of Egypt, which was familiar to us earlier than any other part of the Muslim world.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Papadopoulos, *L'Islam et l'art musulman* (Paris, 1976), figs 243–9, 267–70; K. A. C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1959), pls 121 ff.

<sup>22</sup> The mosque of Baybars is the subject of a reevaluation by Jonathan Bloom, “The Mosque of Baybars,” *Annales Islamologiques*, 18 (1982); in the meantime, see Creswell, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, pp. 155 ff.

<sup>23</sup> R. S. Humphreys, “The Expressive Intent of the Mamluk Architecture of Cairo,” *Studia Islamica*, 35 (1972).

<sup>24</sup> There is as yet no easily accessible study of the changes that began in the eleventh century. The best, but very difficult and often controversial, book on those times is Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1974). Some important studies have been done on building functions, such as Jacqueline Chabbi on the *ribat*, “La fonction du *ribat* à Bagdad du Ve siècle au début du VIIIe siècle,” *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 42 (1974).



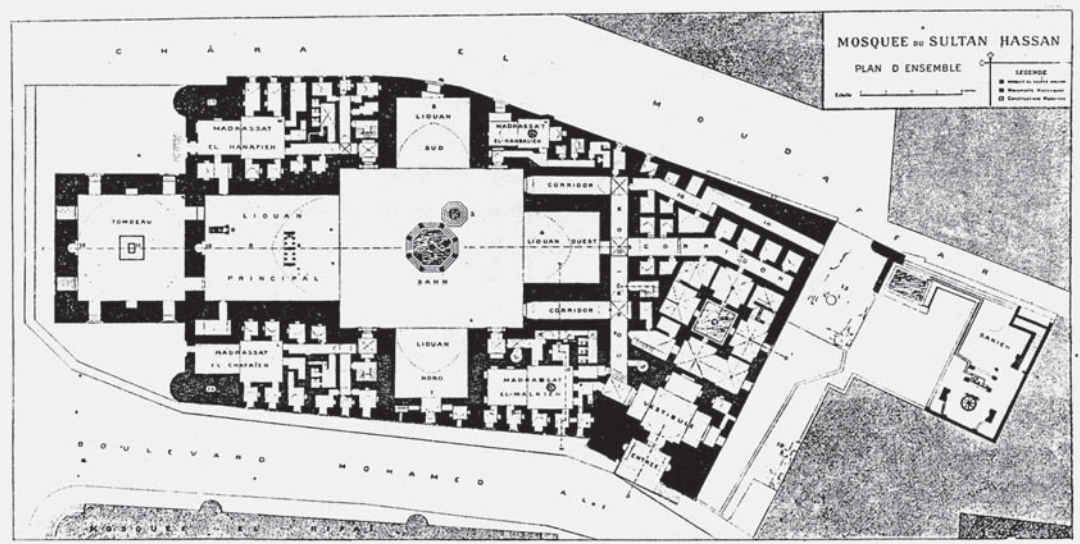
9 Haram al-Sharif, Jerusalem; elevations (Drawing by Michael Burgoyne)

*iwans*), a smaller number of more restricted living or functional spaces (cells, libraries, lavatories and the like), and an exteriorized mausoleum dome repeats itself hundreds of times. Changes in, for example, the construction of domes or the ornamentation of minarets do occur, and even sudden innovations, such as the appearance of loggias in the fifteenth century, are apparent, as are occasional returns to older models. On the whole, however, we are dealing with a circumscribed number of set pieces organized according to a very limited number of formulas. The existence of one or more types with variations is, of course, true of any "classical" period. It is as true of Ottoman architecture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as it is of Gothic architecture in the thirteenth. But if it is correct to conclude that Mamluk architecture is also such a classical moment of formal poise and equilibrium, then the question must be asked why this stage was reached in Mamluk Islam, but not in contemporary Turkish or Iranian Islam.

Mamluk ornament is not a subject I have studied in detail, but I suspect that, just as with three-dimensional forms, ornamental motifs can fairly easily be broken down into a relatively small [9] number of elements and treated in a relatively limited number of ways, and that, with occasional variations, exceptions, innovations and returns to older models, nearly the same motifs and visual interpretations of motifs prevailed for over two centuries.

Effectiveness or expressive intent is a combination of three separate things: the message conveyed by the monuments, the means used to convey that message, and the quality of those means. To identify the message itself, the only hypothesis we so far have for the Mamluks is the one developed by Humphreys: theirs is an architecture that embodies tension between religious





function and secular form because it is there to communicate to the population that the military aristocracy of the Mamluks, by accepting Islam and glorifying its precepts through buildings, asserts its political and economic domination of the local population. Except perhaps for a few early buildings, this interpretation still seems entirely applicable and has been confirmed by subsequent investigations.<sup>25</sup>

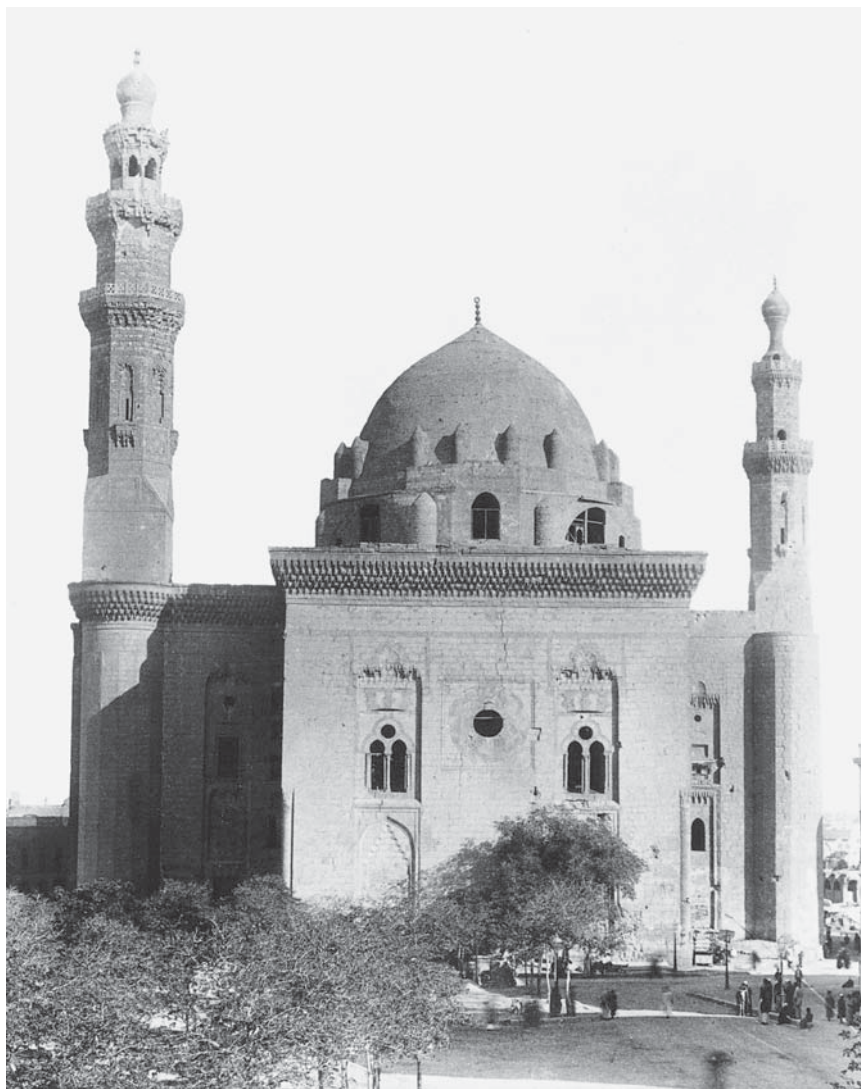
The means used to convey that message are more difficult to identify, but one possibly relevant observation is that, with the partial exception of the Sultan Hasan *madrasa*, which is anomalous in so many ways, a Mamluk building is very rarely perceived as a whole building, as almost any Ottoman mosque is, but rather as a small number of repetitive parts (dome, gate, minaret) which presuppose a building but are not necessarily visually integrated into it. Even an isolated building like the mausoleum and khanqah of Faraj ibn Barquq can be grasped as an architectonic entity only if it is seen from the air; on the ground, its separate sides have a fascinating asymmetry in the arrangement of the entrance, the minarets and the domes.<sup>26</sup> The powerful use of a continuous *muqarnas* molding around the whole building and perhaps a more spectacular siting in the city, which, among other things, makes it visually accessible from the height of the Citadel, differentiate the *madrasa* of Sultan Hasan from that norm, but even there the eccentricities of the plan (Fig. 10) – the location of the gate complex, for example – are

10 *Madrasa* of Sultan Hasan, Cairo; plan

<sup>25</sup> Oleg Grabar, "The Inscriptions of the Madrasah-Mausoleum of Qaytbay," *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy, and History*, ed. D. K. Kouymjian (Beirut, 1974).

<sup>26</sup> The works of Faraj ibn Barquq have been admirably published by S. Lamei Mostafa, in *Kloster und Mausoleum des Faraj ibn Barquq in Cairo* (Glückstadt, 1968), and in *Moschee des Faraj ibn Barquq* (Glückstadt, 1972).

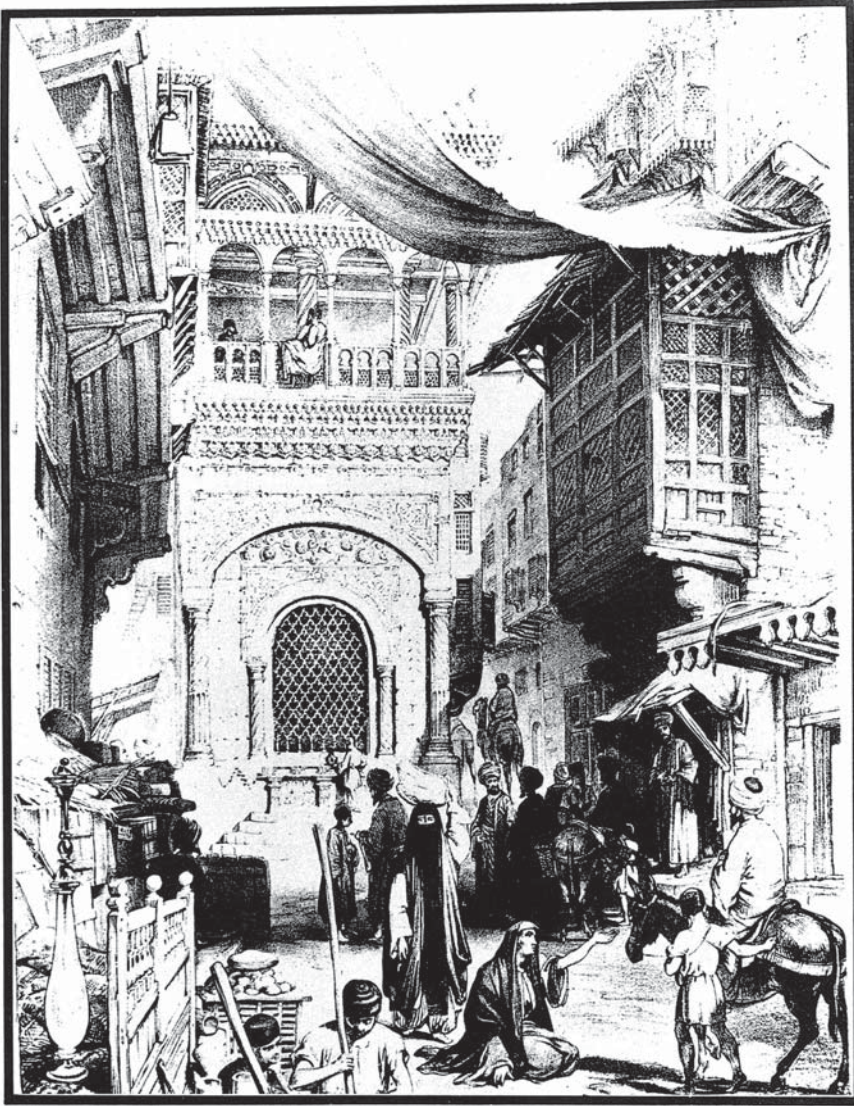
II *Madrasa of  
Sultan Hasan,  
Cairo*



fully in accord with it. This Mamluk [10] architectural norm consisted of a small number of signs (gates projecting into the street, minarets leading from one monument to the next, domes focusing on the presence of a benefactor or a holy man, *muqarnas* establishing some sort of qualitative hierarchy, long bands of qur'anic or royal proclamations) that are all essentially the same. At best, like faces in a crowd, they are recognizable and identifiable only after a social or affective relationship has been established.

For all these reasons a qualitative evaluation of Mamluk architecture is not, I think, an appropriate exercise, in spite of the large number of monuments. Aside from the Sultan Hasan *madrasa* (Fig. 11) and possibly a few others, it is not appropriate because the synchronic intent of the





12 Nineteenth-century drawing of a street in Cairo (Drawing after Prisse d'Avennes)

monuments was social and ideological and not aesthetic. Perhaps this is why nineteenth-century descriptions of Cairo, whether that of Prisse d'Avennes, of Roberts, or of one of the many other observers, almost always deal with streets or other urban settings that include monuments (Fig. 12),<sup>27</sup> but not with a monument alone. Perhaps that is why, also, when the great world expositions of the second half of the nineteenth century wanted to reproduce the Muslim world in Philadelphia, Chicago, or Paris, they picked the

<sup>27</sup> The general public visiting the exhibition appeared to look almost as much at the large reproductions of Cairo from nineteenth-century drawings as at the Mamluk objects.

monumental streets of Cairo rather than the imperial monuments of Istanbul.<sup>28</sup>

Always granting such exceptions as Sultan Hasan's madrasa and the Baptistère de St Louis, the artistic creativity of the Mamluk world did not express itself in individual monuments or objects made or built to glorify a specific individual or occasion. Its aim was to fulfill a range of functions, from financial investment and piety to such mundane occupations as heating and lighting a room or a mosque or writing a book. In this sense the best works of Mamluk art – its architecture, its bronzes, its illuminated books – were often technically brilliant continuations, maybe even culminations, of medieval Islamic (and in many ways also Western Christian) art, but they hardly paved the way for the kind of development that just a few decades after the end of the Mamluk regime made an ensemble like the Süleymaniye in Istanbul possible. Except in a minor way for rugs, Mamluk objects had nothing to do with the explosion of *Prachtkunst* found in the new imperial worlds of Islam. However interesting they may be archaeologically, the illustrated manuscripts of the Mamluk period show neither the vivacity of thirteenth-century Arab paintings nor the sophisticated brilliance of Iranian ones.

Why is this so? Only prolonged scholarly debate will provide the answer, but I can at least [11] contribute two tentative hypotheses to that discussion.

The first is that, whether or not meaning can be given to any particular object or monument, the real concern of Mamluk patrons, artisans and users lay not in the buildings built or the objects made, but in the cities ruled by the sultans and amirs and the lives of the several social classes who inhabited them. In Jerusalem, the whole Haram al-Sharif with its attendant street was the object of Mamluk attention and care.<sup>29</sup> As any drawing shows (Fig. 13), the several buildings are blurred into a single street façade to form a mass, rather than a group of individual monuments. In Cairo, Mamluk minarets and gates guide and accompany one from the Hakim mosque to the Citadel.<sup>30</sup> Rather than ends in themselves (as they have become in museums), the objects should be seen as intermediaries between people and activities, as expressions of an attitude toward artistic creativity much more characteristic of bourgeois than of princely art. Perhaps one of the paradoxes

<sup>28</sup> For instance, the Chicago exhibition, as in Halsey C. Ives, *The Dream City: A Portfolio of Photographic Views* (St Louis, 1894), unpaginated.

<sup>29</sup> For the monuments of Mamluk Jerusalem, consult the articles of Archibald Walls, Amal Abu'l Hajj, and especially Michael Burgoyne in *Levant*, 2–12 (1968–80).

<sup>30</sup> The visual structure of Cairo is only now beginning to be investigated. I owe my conclusions to papers presented in a seminar at Harvard University in 1980 by Katherine Fischer and Hazem Sayyed and to a visual study by Nezar al-Sayyad, *The Streets of Islamic Cairo*, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture Studies in Islamic Architecture 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).





of Mamluk art is that it was a princely art that maintained and developed the visual forms not of princely or imperial ideas but of an urban elite.

A second hypothesis is that the disappearance of alien threat that followed the final defeat of the Crusaders and the Mongols allowed the city dwellers of Egypt and the Levant to establish an equilibrium among social, intellectual, religious and economic structures that could remain unchallenged from both inside and outside. That equilibrium leaves the historian who looks only for changes and evolutions without a task, because all one can do is penetrate Mamluk life and not seek in it some element of vitality that was never there. The implication of this conclusion extends beyond Mamluk art, for it raises the fundamental question whether the methods or strategies to be used in studying any one period should be determined by universal principles or by the cultural idiosyncrasies of a particular moment of history.

13  
Reconstruction of  
a street in  
Jerusalem; plan  
(Drawing by  
Michael  
Burgoyne)

