

## Chapter III

### Trade with the East and the Influence of Islamic Art on the “Luxury Arts” in the West\*

For this working section on the thirteenth century, I was given a task of far greater complexity than I, or, I hope, Professor Belting had anticipated. How can one possibly come up with any sort of conclusion or even hypothesis about art and trade, art and cross-cultural relations, or objects and *Prachtkunst*, when the individuals or groups of people involved are Frederic II, the Franciscans, Joachim of Flora, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Marco Polo, Baybars, Genghis Khan, the Seljuq Turks, and Cilician Armenians? It is not only that no scholar can claim to have even elementary awareness of all the problems and monuments, it is also that my subject raises very peculiar questions of method, and I should like to deal first with two of them directly suggested by my title.

Few art-historical questions are as fraught with dangers as questions of influence. Three particularly complicated and elusive attributes of any monument need to be isolated for a meaningful discussion: (1) how significant within the monument is the motif or theme for which an “influence” is claimed? (2) how does one decide what is an influence; is it through the existence of outside models or through inconsistencies within the synchronic or other set to which the monument belongs? (3) how important is the monument; is it part of an established typology or an a-typical one?

These questions require the understanding of two aspects of a work of art: its own “semantic field” and the semantic field of any one of its parts and, second, the social or personal motivations and associations which surround it. Both semantic field and motivation–association possess two axes or vectors: a *re-gressive* one involving models, impacts, patronage, expected function and whatever else *preceded* the creation of a monument, and a *pro-gressive* one consisting of its actual uses, its impact on other monuments, the ways in which it was judged, altogether whatever happened to it after its creation. To deal with influences without possessing even partial monographic or

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typological studies of groups of pertinent monuments automatically leads back to lists of ill-digested motifs, at best the occasional discovery of an important document, most often a curiosity of little significance.<sup>1</sup> It is, for instance, true that some of the thirteenth-century lunettes at San Marco can easily be related, by their geometry of total covering of surfaces, to Islamic ornament,<sup>2</sup> but in the totality of San Marco, these little details are of secondary importance and thus their semantic field is quite small. Lists of *bacini* are interesting but so far have been more important for dating certain types of [28] Near Eastern ceramics than in helping to explain anything about an Islamic impact on Europe.<sup>3</sup> And, to use a slightly earlier example, studies on the imitations of Arabic writing on the doors of the cathedral at Le Puy have only shown, I feel, the existence of a strange and out-of-the-ordinary detail, not that a pattern can be established either for Romanesque architecture or for imitations of Arabic inscription.<sup>4</sup> Except for a group of Romanesque aquamaniles of the twelfth century,<sup>5</sup> an “Oriental” connection for a cohesive group of monuments or motifs has never to my knowledge been worked out or explained.

The second half of the title assigned to me poses an equally complicated methodological problem. Its implication is that there is a relationship between commercial movements and artistic contacts. Here we are faced with a choice between two methods. One is to identify trade routes and then seek and study appropriate monuments on these routes. The other is to discover whether formal or thematic parallels which are visually justified can be explained by commercial patterns. The second possibility requires the prior establishment of influences and I indicated how difficult it is to do so without ending up saying something obvious or useless. For instance, it can be shown that the celebrated Pisa griffin was brought to Pisa in a merchant ship from North Africa; for the Pisa griffin the information is very important, as it dates it and explains something of its background,<sup>6</sup> but for “influences” the information is of no importance, as the impact of the griffin was minimal.

The first possibility – the identification of routes (or of other means of contact) and then the search for monuments – may be more fruitful, especially

<sup>1</sup> Such is my criticism of otherwise useful lists such as K. Erdmann, *Arabische Schriftzeichen als Ornamente in der abendländischen Kunst des Mittelalters* (Mainz 1953–4), or S. D. T. Spittle, “Cufic Lettering in Christian Art,” in *The Archaeological Journal*, 3 (1954). For a full bibliography see R. Ettinghausen, “Impact of Arts on the Arts of Europe,” in J. Schacht and C. E. Bosworth, *The Legacy of Islam* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 316–20.

<sup>2</sup> O. Demus, *The Church of San Marco* (Washington, 1960), fig. 88 and pp. 104–105.

<sup>3</sup> G. Ballardini, “Note sui bacini romanici e in particolare su alcuni bacini orientali in San Sisto di Pisa,” in *Faenza*, 17 (1929), pp. 113–21.

<sup>4</sup> A. Firky, *L'Art Roman du Puy* (Paris, 1934).

<sup>5</sup> E. Dodd, “On the Origins of Medieval Dinanderie,” in *The Art Bulletin*, 51 (1969).

<sup>6</sup> Information supplied by Dr L. Jenkins, of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who is completing a study of the griffin.

if the routes or contacts can be shown to be new. Let me give two examples. One of the most important novelties of trade in the thirteenth century is the opening up of major trade routes in Anatolia, as the Seljuq Turks sought to attract business by building fancy caravanserais.<sup>7</sup> Among the rich architectural façades which identify nearly all buildings along the trade routes and in the cities they served, there is the striking façade of the Divrigi hospital, whose decorative themes are unmistakably Islamic but whose articulation in recessed splayings obviously derived from the visual and technical memory of some Western façade.<sup>8</sup> We cannot go much beyond that, as nothing known so far connects the local patrons (in this case a woman, perhaps born a Christian) and the builder with a Muslim name (but he could be a convert) with the West. In theory at least, impressions fostered by trade could be seen as influencing this unusual monument, but how significant can this rare example be?

My second example is the far better documented sack of Constantinople in 1204. Hardly a peaceful commercial enterprise, it *was* a “contact” between cultures, and we all know how enriched Venice became with treasures of all sorts and how much the conquest opened up Venice’s trade with northeastern Europe and Asia. But does it matter for the development of Venetian art? Hardly at all. Contact is clear, visible, but, if there is an impact of Near Eastern forms, it is made only diffusely visible in certain arcades or in details from the façade of the [29] Palazzo Ducale, precisely elements and expressions which do not appear in those objects for which a contact can be demonstrated.

I shall return later to another aspect of medieval Venetian art. Let me simply say at this time that what seems known of the art of Pisa, Genoa, or Venice in the thirteenth century (at least to an outsider to the arts of Italy and of the West) does not seem to reflect the respective changes in the commercial or other Islamic connections of the three cities. And why should art reflect this trade? The lists of traded items (spices, precious stones, unfinished silk or cotton) hardly lend themselves to aesthetic impressions, with the partial exception of some textiles,<sup>9</sup> and the restricted life of merchants in alien lands hardly lent itself to more than occasional collections of local “souvenirs” and vague visual memories. Although not entirely fair, the comparison can be made with contemporary technicians and businessmen who stay at Hilton hotels and buy rugs in their shops.

So far my points have been primarily negative: imprecision of the very notion of influence without better understanding of artistic and thematic “sets” or better knowledge of patronage and motivation; difficulty in connecting obvious major events like the sack of 1204, the Venice–Genoa

<sup>7</sup> Basic publication by K. Erdmann, *Das Anatolische Karavanseray* (Berlin, 1961–76).

<sup>8</sup> The most available source is O. Aslanapa, *Turkish Art and Architecture* (London, 1979), pl. 14.

<sup>9</sup> W. Heyd, *Histoire du Commerce du Levant* (Leipzig, 1883–5), vol. II, pp. 556 ff.

commercial rivalry, or the opening up of Anatolian trade with well-defined artistic phenomena; danger of excerpting a single example, however fitting and appropriate it may seem.

But then, it can be argued, the thirteenth century in the Mediterranean is a most peculiar century and, in our perspective of Islamic-Christian contacts, a particularly unsettling one. Four examples of political events and monuments will, I hope, prove my contention of a confused century and suggest a way of interpreting it.

The first example is the monastery of Santa Maria de las Huelgas de Burgos, begun in 1187 (with many additions) and used throughout the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries as the main place of burial for the ruling family of Castille. Its stuccoes and especially textiles form a remarkable series of reasonably well-dated thirteenth- and fourteenth-century works, and Gómez Moreno has successfully separated purely Islamic works from *mudejar* and already Gothic ones.<sup>10</sup> The interesting points are two. One is that the chronological sequence based on whatever is known about the life of the deceased does not correspond neatly to a stylistic sequence; the cultural assumption of a growing “northernization” does not quite work, especially if stuccoes and woodwork are also taken into consideration. The other point is that this century of particularly successful *reconquista* (by the end of the century the kingdom of Granada alone remains in Muslim hands) is also the century of full formation of *mudejar* art. There is, therefore, an apparent contradiction between cultural appreciation and political antagonism, a contradiction which is just as clear in the Sicily of Frederic II and which, I will suggest later, is more apparent than real.

I am more hesitant about my second example, Italy, because we are, at least to my knowledge, lacking in clearly datable sequences or [30] in an obvious stylistic or ideological focus around which even an intellectual construct can be built. To be sure, there are church façades in Siena, Assisi, Perugia, Pisa, and pavements in San Miniato whose tight geometry, unarchitectonic sheathing and animal motifs can easily be related to Near Eastern or Spanish Islamic ornament. Then a sequence of textiles from Palermo or Lucca can easily be put together suggesting that, while Islamic patterns of medallions with animals or personages may have initially inspired Italian weavers, during the thirteenth century novelties and changes occur which do not owe much to Islamic sources: growing vivacity of poses for hitherto frozen forms, incorporation of themes (towers, for instance) from the visible world. Two such changes are particularly far-reaching and have already been pointed out by Weibel or Podreider, among others: the abandonment of the dictatorial medallion for a more fluid and more sophisticated composition of equally weighted units; and the reworking of traditional ornamental animal motifs into Christian ones, as

<sup>10</sup> M. Gómez Moreno, *El Panteón Real de las Huelgas de Burgos* (Madrid, 1946), pp. 45 ff.

gazelles may well have become the Lambs of God in a silk now in Düsseldorf.<sup>11</sup> Reworking may even become translation, as a Lucca silk has “Felice” written on its wings in the very form and manner characteristic of Islamic textiles. We know from a text published by Bertaux many decades ago that there were many Muslim artisans in southern Italy and that toward the end of the thirteenth century they were relocated;<sup>12</sup> such is the traditional explanation for the early styles of Lucca during that century. What is troubling in these Italian examples is not merely, as I have indicated earlier, that Pisa, Genoa, Venice – the key trading intermediaries with the Orient – do not exhibit obvious or extensive impacts from the Orient, but, much more significantly, that Sicily and southern Italy, those provinces where Frederic II constructed his unique synthesis with a large number of Muslim artisans, soldiers or advisers, do not exhibit Islamic features even remotely comparable to those of the preceding century.<sup>13</sup> Bertaux has well shown the dangers of seeing a Saracen behind every fortress wall.

My third and fourth examples may help in formulating an explanation and series of hypotheses for the thirteenth century. I have already alluded in another context to the façades on Anatolian buildings. Since these are probably less familiar to medievalists, let me expand on them. Although conquered from Byzantium at the end of the eleventh century, it is during the thirteenth that the Seljuq rulers covered Anatolian cities and roads with mosques, *madrasas*, caravanserais, hospitals, mausoleums – in short, all the functions of the urban culture of Islam. Among many unique characteristics of these monuments is their predilection for impressive façades, a form, in my judgment, of conspicuous consumption. A great deal is known about the patrons and builders of these façades; they ranged from Christian converts to Islam to Turks recently arrived from Central Asia. But the important point for our purposes is the immense variety of their formal vocabulary within a technique of stone construction which is clearly Anatolian: flat surface of designs of many kinds, stalactite half-domes, and a series [31] of unique attempts at three-dimensional articulation. These façades, which are contemporary with each other and the products of the same social milieu, do not form a *style* in the standard meaning of the term. They do, however, illustrate a taste, a taste for the externalization of whatever set of forms struck an individual’s fancy or whatever habits and practices an artisan had at his command. Experimentation was rife because the spread of possibilities was, for historical and cultural reasons, unusually wide.

<sup>11</sup> O. von Falke, *Decorative Silks* (New York, 1922), figs 22, 223, 226; A. C. Weibel, *Two Thousand Years of Textiles* (New York, 1952), pp. 59 ff.; F. Podreider, *Storia dei Tessuti d’Arte in Italia* (Bergamo, 1928), pp. 29 ff.

<sup>12</sup> E. Bertaux, “Les Arts de l’Orient Musulman dans l’Italie Méridionale,” in *Mélanges d’Archéologie et d’Histoire*, 15 (1895).

<sup>13</sup> The issue is a very complicated one, as can be seen from *Federico II e la cultura musulmana*, *Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Fredericani* (Palermo, 1952).

My fourth example consists in a fairly well-known although little studied group: practical objects (ewers, candlesticks, plates, bottles, cups) of bronze inlaid with silver containing Christian subjects.<sup>14</sup> The technique has been common in the Muslim world since the middle of the twelfth century, but the objects with Christian subjects are limited to, roughly, the first half of the thirteenth century and to the Fertile Crescent, that is Palestine, Syria, northern Mesopotamia, possibly (but not very likely) Egypt and Anatolia. Hitherto these objects were considered as examples of the art of Christians all over the Levant. But a recent investigation by two students at Harvard University has brought out a more novel and probably more accurate explanation.<sup>15</sup> Three of their arguments are pertinent to our purposes. One is that the Christian imagery on these objects is always defective from a strictly Christian point of view and never deals with critical themes of Christian dogma. The second is that nearly all objects contain the full range of the so-called Muslim princely cycle, and the third is that this kind of object disappears from existence shortly after the middle of the century. The explanation is that these objects were made for the primarily Muslim but also Christian feudal lords of the Levant, as the early decades of the thirteenth century are times of a sort of feudal balance of territorial and personal treaties in which individual deals took precedence over religious and ethnic allegiance. Charles of Anjou, in his efforts against Michael VIII Paleologus, signs treaties with Hungary, Bulgaria and the Tatars. Gregory IX denounced Frederic II for his arrangements with infidels. Muslim religious leaders, on the other hand, criticized Ayyubid leadership for exactly the same reasons, that they established a political and cultural, aristocratic, *modus vivendi* with Christians in the Levant. The inlaid metal with Christian subjects would appear as the visual illustration of this *modus vivendi*.

Thus my introductory remarks introduced a methodological concern with superficiality in the arbitrary choice of an accidental motif or with the easy assumption that expanded trade *has* to have results. Examples of monuments of different kinds and in different regions possessing both Christian *and* Muslim components permit another conclusion. *It is the absence of a coherent pattern in that art of the Mediterranean where contacts between cultures were most obvious, and at times even the appearance of visual tendencies which seem contrary to expectations.*

The contrast is striking with the twelfth century, when in Sicily a reasonably clearly defined semantic field is provided for Byzantine or Islamic forms, and, in Spain or in the Levant, Christian and Muslim [32] forms coexist but

<sup>14</sup> These objects have often been mentioned but rarely discussed. For an exception, see L. T. Schneider, "The Freer Canteen," in *Ars Orientalis*, 9 (1973).

<sup>15</sup> Ronnie Katzenstein and Glenn Lowry are completing a study of all these objects; see their article in *Muqarnas*, vol. 1. Ms Katzenstein also helped me a great deal with the documentation which led to this paper. I am most grateful.

hardly interfere with each other; it is as though the role of each set of forms and themes was clear and accepted. The contrast is also striking with the fourteenth century, when Lucca textiles lost almost completely their Islamic prototypes, but occasionally add a pseudo-Kufic inscription or even a Chinese dragon; when Hugh IV de Lusignan orders an inlaid brass to be made for him in Egypt;<sup>16</sup> when the first steps of Venetian inlaid metalwork occur; and when the robes or haloes of Virgins acquire imitations of Arabic inscriptions, culminating in Gentile de Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*, where one can even recognize the beginning of the Muslim profession of faith: there is no God but God. The Orient, Islamic or Far Eastern, has become exoticism, luxurious carpets or objects leading to the *turqueries* and *chinoiseries* of later centuries.

What happened then in the thirteenth century? I would like to propose the following explanation, being fully conscious of its hypothetical character. The thirteenth century is a turning point in the history of Mediterranean forms, because it was the century during which the cultural equilibrium of the Mediterranean was modified. The failure of the Crusades, the weakening of Byzantium, the growth of Italian cities and of Spanish Christian kingdoms (not to speak of what was happening in northern centers) – all of these changes led, first of all, to a less fluid and less continuous relationship between Muslim and Christian cultures, in a way also between Eastern and Western Christian cultures; a political and fiscal control ruled over contacts and Oriental objects became luxury items, for which substitute and at times improved techniques eventually developed in the Christian world. But a more interesting conclusion would be that in the thirteenth century, and especially in the fourteenth, forms and subjects began to acquire a nationality or, perhaps more appropriately, they were no longer simply useful or beautiful attributes of power and prestige. They were associated with a place and eventually with a person, an artist; they became works of art and, to a degree, escaped from life.

This point, however, leads to the far more important and more fascinating issue of the relationship between object and works of art within medieval social systems, but it is an issue which is not directly pertinent to this paper.

Let me conclude on an entirely different note. Many of the Anatolian monuments I mentioned were restricted to Muslims, but the feature in them which is pertinent to our purposes is their most public one, precisely the one which was not restricted. On inlaid metalwork, on the other hand, the reverse occurs. The object is not culturally restricted; its Christian imagery was initially culturally restricted but its occurrence on the objects and its association with entirely different themes weakened its original cultural restrictions. Gentile de Fabriano or the very Christian kings of Castille never

<sup>16</sup> D. S. Rice, "Arabic Inscriptions on a brass made for Hugh IV de Lusignan," in *Studi Orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi della Vida* (Rome, 1956).

worried about the restricted meaning of the inscriptions they copied or used. All these monuments are in a secular *mode* which is characterized by a lower and less compulsory intensity of meaning associated with any one form. Islamic art, [33] it has been argued by some, lent itself to such secular use, because of its abstraction and possibly its own lesser intensity of meaning.<sup>17</sup> But a more accurate explanation would rather be that Islamic and Christian art could fulfill this secular function for each other, because of ignorance of each other's restricted meanings. It is this ignorance, even tainted with antagonism, which grew in the thirteenth century. Roger II could still endow his Islamic ceiling and his Islamic coronation robe with specific meanings, because the nationality of forms and themes was not very important to him, only the ideological or aesthetic effect they had. After 1204 Venice used its looted treasures as "things," sometimes transformed into chalices or patens, most often kept in treasure rooms, eventually even making and selling back to the Orient cheap imitations of their techniques.<sup>18</sup> It is in the thirteenth century that the psychological and motivational changes occurred in the relationship of Western Christian and Islamic cultures which eventually led to the use of Persian and Indian miniatures as wall-paper in Schönbrunn.

Thus it is that the main changes of the thirteenth century are not really formal ones but changes in point of view.<sup>19</sup> It is the eyes of the cultures which become different. Why did the change take place? In part, no doubt, for the political reasons mentioned earlier. But a more interesting and in the long run a more fruitful explanation can be proposed, although its full elaboration requires totally new investigations. To the intercultural art taste of kings and princes there was substituted (or simply added), with the same and at times improved technical sophistication, the art and taste of an urban bourgeoisie, more localized in its use, but also beginning to be affected by what can be called an art market. The sources for this development are certainly in the twelfth century<sup>20</sup> and the fruition will be in the fourteenth.

<sup>17</sup> This is implied by R. Ettinghausen, "The Decorative Arts and Painting," in J. Schacht and C. E. Bosworth, *The Legacy of Islam* (Oxford, 1974).

<sup>18</sup> Heyd, *Histoire*, p. 711. Note also the very perceptive remarks made by O. Demus about the exoticism of thirteenth-century Venetian art, "Oriente e Occidente nell'arte Veneziana," in *La Civiltà Veneziana del Secolo di Marco Polo* (Venezia, 1955), p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> For an entirely different side of these "points of view" of the thirteenth century, see A. Grabar, "Art du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Problèmes et Méthodes d'Investigation," in *L'Art Byzantin du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Belgrade, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> O. Grabar, "Imperial and Urban Art in Islam," in *Colloque International sur l'Histoire du Caire* (Cairo, 1972), reprinted in *Studies in Medieval Islamic Art* (London, 1976).