Part Three

Fatimid Egypt and the Muslim West

Chapter XIII

Imperial and Urban Art in Islam: The Subject-Matter of Fatimid Art*

The Fatimid period in Egypt has long been a puzzling one not only to the cultural historian but also to the art historian, and it may be worthwhile at the outset to define some of the apparent features of the puzzle. Three of these seem to me of primary significance. The first concerns the *time* of the dynasty. If we disregard its early decades in Ifriqiya, it was in 969 that the occupation of Egypt and the ceremonial foundation of Cairo symbolized the transformation of a comparatively remote heterodox dynasty with far-flung "underground" connections into a major empire. The time of this transformation followed the political and social decadence of ʿAbbasid Iraq and preceded by a few decades the fall of the Umayyad dynasty of Spain as well as the slow and still very poorly known rise of the new Turkish-centered Muslim world in northeastern Iran. For a century or so, at least until the Seljuq successes of the middle of the eleventh century, only Fatimid Egypt existed as a strong and purposeful force in the whole of Islam and one can appropriately wonder whether Egypt did not become for a century the place to which artists and artisans came from all over and therefore a creative center with an impact throughout the *dar al-Islam.* With the great crisis which shook Egypt between 1052 and 1072 (and about which more will be said later), with the Crusades, and with the establishment of Seljuq power in Iran and Iraq, the second century of Fatimid rule was certainly not as successful politically, but artistic growth does not always coincide with political strength and quite frequently the arts, especially the industrial arts so characteristic of medieval Islam, followed and were influenced by ideas and patterns developed during periods of strength. It is furthermore remarkable that the decadence and eventual fall of the Fatimid dynasty in the second half of the twelfth century coincided with the striking and apparently sudden growth of a series of styles in ceramics, metalwork and manuscript illustration which have been called

* First published in *Colloque International sur l'Histoire du Caire* (27 mars–5 avril 1969), Ministry of Culture of the Arab Republic of Egypt, General Egyptian Organization, pp. 173–90.

"Seljuq,"[1] but which in reality affected all Muslim regions from Central Asia to the Mediterranean. Thus the question raised by the *time* of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt is whether it may not have inspired or possibly even created the artistic changes which have characterized the rest of the Muslim world in the twelfth century, for during a crucial century of Islamic history it seems to have been the only major political and cultural force of the Muslim world.

The second feature I would like to identify is a geographical one and concerns the *space* of [174] Fatimid power. There are several facets to what the term "space" means in our present context. One is purely technical. The Fatimids began their rule in North Africa, established their power in Egypt, and ruled over various other provinces such as Sicily, Syria, Palestine and Arabia, with variable degrees of success. But the center of their power was primarily Egypt and, since for the first time since the Ptolemies a major power was actually centered in Egypt, the question arises whether Fatimid art and culture did not develop characteristics which were primarily regional. Or to put it in another way, within the characteristically Islamic tension between regional traditions and universal ideals, how important was the Egyptian contribution to Fatimid art? The question is of some significance for even when under foreign rule Egypt has had for centuries an identifiable artistic personality. Since most Fatimid ventures outside of Egypt failed in spite of a considerable investment in propaganda and missionaries, should not Fatimid art be considered as the expression of a local tradition with deep roots in the past which would have been magnified to a particularly high, almost pan-Islamic importance because the dynasty itself filled a major power vacuum within the contemporary Muslim world and achieved in its time a unique level of sophistication and wealth? An answer, even a tentative one, would be of considerable interest both for the history of Egypt and as a document in the wider problem of the importance of local traditions within Islamic art.

Yet there is also another facet to the question of Fatimid space. It is that most of the history of the Fatimids took place within the Mediterranean world. Only the strong Byzantium of the Macedonian and Comnenian dynasties could and did compete with the dynasty from Egypt, especially in Syria and on the seas. Otherwise it has been possible to show that, for most of the Fatimid period and for any number of reasons which need not concern us at this stage, the Fatimid centers of North Africa and of Egypt were the major magnets and the dominant forces of Mediterranean trade.[2]

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[1] O. Grabar, "La Révolution dans les arts mineurs de l'Islam au XIIème siècle," *Cahiers de Civilisation médiévale* (1968); also O. Grabar, "The Visual Arts, 1050–1350," *Cambridge History of Iran* (1968), vol. V, pp. 626–58.

[2] All these problems are being revolutionized by the research of S. D. Goitein, whose latest pertinent publication is *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. I (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), especially pp. 29 and ff.

There was indeed a Fatimid "miracle," as Professor Goitein has called it, and, while one of the reasons for the miracle was certainly the weakness of the contemporary Christian Mediterranean, the more positive reasons were the remarkable ethnic and religious liberalism of the dynasty's politics, the administrative if not always political stability of the state, and the freedom of trade. The question, then, is whether the part played by the non-Muslim Mediterranean in the economic and social life of Fatimid Egypt did not contribute another piece to the Fatimid puzzle. If it was indeed so, the importance of this period transcends the Muslim world and involves in an understanding of its art and of its culture an awareness of other artistic and cultural traditions than those of Egypt and the Muslim world.

The last feature of the Fatimid period I should like to emphasize at this stage is that there is considerable information about the art of the dynasty. This information is of two kinds. First there are the monuments themselves. Architectural remains are best known, since they have been magnificently published by K. A. C. Creswell,[3] and no discussion of Fatimid art as a whole can avoid being a tribute to his painstaking activity over six decades. Outside of architecture, three techniques are sufficiently well represented with monuments which, if not always dated, are clearly definable as Fatimid and have been accepted as such for many decades. One such series consists of textiles, many of which are inscribed and precisely dated.[4] Another such series consists of woodwork, for which the catalogs of the Arab Museum in Cairo are the main source.[5] The third series with large numbers of examples is ceramics, about which there is no comprehensive study but whose body of known pieces is constantly being increased by the publications of the staff of the Islamic Museum in Cairo,[6] for it is in Cairo that we find the overwhelmingly largest collections of actual objects and of sherds. Numerous fragments of glass and of mural paintings exist as well,[7]

3 K. A. C. Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt, vol. I: Ikhshids and Fatimids* (Oxford, 1952).

4 E. Kühnel and L. Bellinger, *Catalogue of Dated Tiraz Fabrics: Umayyad, 'Abbasid, Fatimid* (Washington, DC, 1952); also E. Kühnel, "Four Remarkable Tiraz Textiles," *Archaeologia Orientalis in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld* (New York, 1952), pp. 144–50; H. Schmidt, "Islamische Seidenstoffe der Fatimidenzeit," *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, 64 (1930–31), pp. 185 ff.

5 Edmond Pauty, *Les Bois sculptés jusqu'à l'époque Ayyoubide*, Catalogue général du Musée Arabe du Caire (Cairo, 1931).

6 See A. Bahgat and F. Massoul, *La Céramique musulmane de l'Egypte* (Cairo, 1930); G. M. Mehrei, "Al-Khazaf al-Fatimi," University of Cairo, *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* (hereafter *BFA*), 7 (1944); M. Z. Hasan, "Tuhaf djadida," ibid., 13 (1951); Hasan al-Basha and 'Abd al-Ra'uf 'Ali Yusuf, "Tabaq Ghaban," ibid., 18 (1956); 'Abd al-Ra'uf 'Ali Yusuf, "Khazzafun min al-'asr al-Fatimi," ibid., 20 (1962); there are numerous other articles on specific topics which will be mentioned in due course, but the above are of primary significance.

7 C. J. Lamm, *Mittelälterliche Gläser*, 2 vols (Berlin, 1929); for latest published paintings see E. J. Grube, "Three Miniatures from Fustat in the Metropolitan Museum in New York," *Ars Orientalis*, 5 (1963), pp. 89–97; but the fundamental study is that of R. Ettinghausen, "Painting in the Fatimid Period: A reconstruction," *Ars Islamica*, 9 (1942).

in addition to a more limited number of crystals,[8] ivories, and metalwork.[9] One should add that works of Fatimid art have also been discovered archaeologically or else are found *in situ* and, aside from the still continuing Fustat excavations[10] or the many monuments of Cairene architecture described by Creswell, one should mention the very important Fatimid remains from Syria and Palestine such as the mosaics of the Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem,[11] or the various investigations carried on in the early Fatimid cities of North Africa.[12] Altogether this information is quite remarkable by its quantity, by its quality, and by comparatively secure general dates and provenance. It should, therefore, be possible to use it to answer some of the questions we have raised, inasmuch as a whole category of monuments exists outside of the Muslim world itself for which a Fatimid background has been posited or assumed, such as the paintings of the [175] Cappella Palatina in Palermo, as well as certain Romanesque bronzes and Italian ivories.[13]

But in addition to this archaeological documentation, the Fatimid period is provided with literary sources of a kind which is unfortunately very rare for most other periods of Islamic art. There is a particularly precise description of Cairo by Nasir-i Khusraw,[14] who lived there for seven years during the city's greatest wealth. And then there is the wealth of information found in Maqrizi's *Khitat Misr* to be supplemented now by the recent discovery of one of Maqrizi's original sources, the *Kitab al-Dhaka'ir wa' l-Tuhaf.*[15] As a result of the existence of this literary information, much of which goes back to Fatimid times, it is possible in dealing with Fatimid art to relate actual

8 D. S. Rice, "A Datable Islamic Rock Crystal," *Oriental Art*, 2 (1956), with summaries and bibliographies; K. Erdmann, "Neue Islamische Bergkristalle," *Ars Orientalis*, 3 (1959).

9 No systematic publication of objects in these categories exists and one must refer either to very old surveys or to general works on individual techniques or on Islamic art; the simplest introduction is probably that of M. Z. Hasan, *Atlas Funün al-Islamiyya* (Cairo, 1956), who also wrote a suggestive introductory essay in his *Kunuz al-Fatimiyyin* (Cairo, 1937).

10 In addition to the older publications summarized by Creswell, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, pp. 119–30, see the articles by G. Scanlon in the *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 4 and 5 (1965 and 1966).

11 H. Stern, "Recherches sur la Mosquée al-Aqsa et ses Mosaïques," *Ars Orientalis*, 5 (1963), pp. 28–48.

12 A. Lézine, *Mahdiya* (Paris, 1965); S. M. Zbiss, "Mahdia et Sabra-Mansouriya," Journal Asiatique, 144 (1956).

13 U. Monneret de Villard, *Le Pitture musulmane al soffito della Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Rome, 1950); for bronzes, see E. Meyer, "Romanische Bronzen und ihre islamischen Vorbilder," *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst* (Berlin, 1959); for ivories see P. B. Cott, *Siculo-Arabic Ivories* (Princeton, 1939).

14 Nasir-i Khusraw, *Voyages*, edited and translated by C. Schefer (Paris, 1888), pp. 124 ff.

15 Al-Rashid b. al-Zubayr, *Kitab al-Dhakha'ir wa' l-Tuhaf*, edited by M. Hamidullah (Kuwayt, 1959); M. Hamidullah, "Nouveaux documents sur les rapports de l'Europe avec l'Orient musulman," *Arabica*, 7 (1960). For Maqrizi, we have used the old (1853) Bulaq edition in two volumes.

objects with contemporary literary sources and, what is perhaps far more important, to suggest some sort of historical, cultural, or aesthetic setting for those monuments of art or of material culture which have remained.[16] At this methodological level, of course, the study of Fatimid art transcends both the time and the space of the dynasty, for it may become possible to put together a sort of model of the relationship between man and his creation within Muslim culture. To be sure, the ultimate validity of this model for all regions and times is likely to vary, but the construction of the model itself may be of eventual use.

There is thus a historical question of setting the art developed by Egypt in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries within several possible cultural periods (early Islamic, later Islamic, Mediterranean). There is an interpretative question of deciding whether pan-Islamic, local Egyptian, North African, or Mediterranean features predominated in that art or else what sort of balance was achieved between possible sources for Fatimid art. There is finally a methodological question of how to relate to each other a considerable mass of visual and literary information in order to develop some general hypothesis of the styles, functions and artistic ideas which prevailed in Fatimid times.

It is obvious that even a paper of some length cannot presume to answer all these questions and I should like to attempt to focus on one problem only and to suggest a historical and interpretative solution to it for our collective discussions.

The simplest way to begin may be to discuss briefly the implications of one of the latest appreciations of Fatimid art by a leading scholar. In a recent general introduction to Islamic art, Professor Otto-Dorn has emphasized the following main characteristic of Fatimid art other than architecture: its surprising (*überraschend*) delight in the representation of living things (*Figurenfreude*) which appears in woodwork from the palaces, in painting, and in the minor arts.[17] This Fatimid feature is stylistically related by the author to the art of the early ʿAbbasids as it is known primarily through paintings found in Samarra, but then the author concludes: "At the same time the parallels with Seljuq art are astonishing, a relationship which still needs investigation." It would be difficult to quarrel with this appreciation. The most rapid survey of works of Fatimid art when compared to earlier art in Egypt or anywhere else in the Muslim world makes it very clear that a subject-matter with living beings makes its appearance in all media. But in a more general way one might say that there occurred a rather extraordinary extension of themes of decoration in all techniques and that these included a much higher proportion of personages and animals than in any of the previously known series, such as Samarra or northeastern Iranian ceramics,

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16 Only M. Z. Hasan in his *Kunuz al-Fatimiyyin* has attempted to do something of this kind in dealing with a precise text to which we shall return.

17 K. Otto-Dorn, *Kunst des Islam* (Baden-Baden, 1964), p. 109.

Tulunid woodwork, and ʿAbbasid or Spanish Umayyad stucco.[18] The relationship between this new Fatimid art and ʿAbbasid art of the ninth century in Iraq is perhaps not quite as extensive as has been believed, but its existence can be demonstrated both through the undeniable impact of Iraq on late ninth- and tenth-century woodwork and ceramics in Egypt[19] and through a number of details such as the celebrated sidelocks in the representation of personages, especially women. But, even if these details were not available, the impact on the rest of the Muslim world of Baghdad and Iraq in the latter part of the eighth century, during the whole ninth century and at least during the first half of the tenth, could be assumed from political and cultural history alone.

The third point made by Professor Otto-Dorn, that of the apparent relationship of Fatimid themes with those associated with the so-called "Seljuq" art, is far more significant. This relationship is, however, not of the same kind as the apparent relationship between ʿAbbasid and Fatimid artistic traditions, for there are very few instances, if any, of direct stylistic or iconographic parallels between the two arts. It is rather a *structural* relationship in which two cultural moments chose to transform their industrial and decorative arts by introducing a large number of new subjects, including figurative and animal themes hardly used until then. In such a relationship subjects vary according to the [176] visual vocabulary particular to individual regions and it is by the *fact* of the new subjects that regional traditions are related to each other.

In the following discussion we shall not be primarily concerned with the further exploration of these three points and to a certain extent we shall take them as axiomatic, although our comments may eventually lead to some refinement in the ways in which they might be put. Our objective will rather be to concentrate on the question of why, how, and if possible when, within the Fatimid period, the introduction of a new subject-matter took place. For on these topics unfortunately both the archaeological and literary sources are silent. Changes in taste are not usually recorded in chronicles and the vast majority of the objects which illustrate them are undated. It is a curious fact for instance that, whereas a great deal is known about the names of Fatimid potters, only two signed pieces exhibit any of the new subjects for decoration.[20] Or, in the instance of woodwork, the celebrated frieze

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[18] A partial exception may have to be made for a group of Iraqi and Iranian ceramics dated usually to the tenth century, A. Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery* (New York, 1948), p. 16. But this particular group, like most Iraqi-Iranian ceramics outside of the northeast of Iran and of Samarra, still requires a more thorough investigation, with if at all possible, some archaeological confirmation of the dates given.

[19] See the very important study by R. Schnyder, "Tulunidische Lüsterfayence," *Ars Orientalis*, 5 (1963).

[20] *BFA*, 18 (1958); M. Jenkins, "Muslim: an early Fatimid Ceramist," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, May 1968. See also *BFA*, 20 (1962), for a rather thorough investigation of signed sherds. It is noteworthy that, while animal, vegetal, epigraphic

found in Qala'un's hospital is usually considered to be from the Fatimid palaces and from the middle of the eleventh century[21] but there is no definite evidence for this and we are not dealing with more than a probability. On the other hand, the very remarkable changes in the composition of large wooden objects with their geometrically conceived star patterns and multiplicity of levels of decoration can be dated fairly precisely to the early twelfth century thanks to a group of inscribed *mihrabs*. Examples could be multiplied to show that, as a general rule, the objects in ivory, woodwork, ceramics or glass as well as the paintings which best illustrate what is supposed to be the most original novelty of Fatimid art are anonymous and undated, whereas monuments with more traditional purely ornamental designs are more often provided with specific historical information. This state of affairs could be purely accidental but it does complicate the task of the historian in understanding the reasons for the timing of a precise change.

The method I should like to utilize will therefore be somewhat different from the usual art-historical one in the sense that instead of working from a small number of objects with a maximum number of known coordinates and then expanding whatever conclusions may be reached to include the mass of known objects, I shall consider primarily the mass itself and then fit individual objects within resulting schemes or models. Beginning with ceramics, with the largest number of fragments or complete pieces, an attempt at a classification of subjects and styles will be made which will then be briefly correlated with whatever evidence may be known from other techniques. Out of this survey a sort of profile will, it is hoped, emerge of the representational themes of Fatimid art. Then in the following part an explanation will be suggested for the appearances of these themes, while in our conclusion we shall return to some of the questions posed at the beginning of our paper. It is, of course, superfluous to add that what is being proposed here is not more than a hypothesis, or rather a series of hypotheses, for the study of Islamic art is still too young and too insecure to provide more than hypotheses for further research. Yet one may perhaps suggest that at times the wrong hypothesis can be more fruitful for scientific knowledge than the correct fact.

One preliminary remark about Fatimid ceramics in general is of some pertinence. Although no thorough study of the techniques is available and although the exact dimensions of each individual object are not always published, it seems that a rather remarkable consistency was maintained

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and geometric designs predominate on these fragments, human ones are rare. See below for an evaluation of this point.

[21] Often published and discussed; Pauty, *Les bois sculptés*, pls. XLVI and ff.; best comments by G. Marçais, reprinted in vol. I of his *Mélanges d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de l'Occident musulman* (Alger, 1957), pp. 81 ff.

throughout the Fatimid period in the quality of the technique used and in the shape and size of the individual objects. On both of these subjects, it is expected that the excavations now being carried out at Fustat will bring more definitive results. In the meantime the technique with which we are primarily concerned is a ware of rather coarse and sandy red or buff bodies, covered with a slip and a tin glaze, and then luster painted. Most lusters have a brown to yellow tinge but the color range can reach a reddish tone often found in Iraq. No significant change seems to have occurred in this technique, which had been fully developed by the time of the dynasty's appearance in Egypt.

Shapes of objects appear to have been equally consistent and changeless. A small number of fairly large jars is found, but the vast majority of Fatimid luster-painted objects are plates with rims of varying size or more or less deep bowls.[22] It seems uncertain at the moment whether any evolution occurred in the proportions of these shapes, but it may be pointed out that the predominance of "open" shapes over "closed" ones can be explained by the fact that the former lent themselves much more easily than the latter to being decorated with a single design or image, for which it is therefore proper enough to propose an iconographic significance rather than a purely ornamental one. That this single design was in fact the main purpose of the ceramic is further suggested [177] by the rather rough and usually meaningless decoration of circles and hatched lines found on the back of most plates. The only important information occurring there is that of the names of potters, but in the two instances of inscriptions with precise information[23] the inscription is set on the main, obverse side of the plate.[24] We are

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22 For a first attempt at systematizing the terminology to be used for shapes see J. Sauvaget's posthumous article "Introduction à l'étude de la céramique musulmane," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* (1965). It is probable that eventually an Arabic terminology should be adopted for most of these shapes, and ours would be a *sahn* and a *zubdiyya* or a *sultaniyya*.

23 *BFA*, XVI, pl. 5 in Hasan al-Basha's article and G. Wiet, "Un céramiste de l'époque fatimide," *Journal Asiatique*, 241 (1953).

24 It seems to me in general that the whole question of the presumed names of potters on Fatimid objects needs considerable review; cf. *BFA*, 20 for 'Abd al-Ra'uf Yusuf's summary of the information available and Sauvaget's article quoted above, pp. 44 ff. The matter can perhaps be best summarized in the following manner. There is little doubt that most of the inscriptions involved are in fact signatures of individual potters or of ateliers, although more than one potter by the same name may have existed. To derive from this information stylistic distinctions seems most unlikely to me, since there is little evidence in medieval Islamic art that stylistic differences were prized and there is considerable evidence to show that the appreciated artisan was one who was able to imitate many different ways imposed by the taste of the patrons. It is therefore elsewhere that we must search for the meaning of the information provided by these names. It could reflect a particularly organized system of guilds, but then why is Egypt so unique? Or it could reflect a snobbish taste which gave special importance to the maker without necessarily involving a style; such an interpretation would strengthen our point (to be discussed later) of the importance of the patron or the buyer of the object. Other interpretations can be found as well and the matter deserves further investigation.

therefore, it seems to me, justified in considering that the main purpose of the ceramic object was the artful and successful presentation of a single design on one primary surface. In this, of course, Fatimid ceramics are not unique; they agree with most series of Islamic ceramics and are differentiated for instance from Chinese pottery with its emphasis on the purity of the body and of the shape and from direct imitations of Chinese types.

Greater originality occurs in the general composition of the main design. If we except the jars whose two types of composition – decoration of the upper two-thirds of the object in concentric bands of varying width or vertical division of the object's surface into panels[25] – are quite common with this particular shape, three main types of arrangement are found on the plates and bowls. The first and by far the most common one exhibits a comparatively narrow border made up of a variety of themes and then a single subject occupying in more or less successful fashion the center of the plate. In general comparatively little effort was made to fit the design to the circular shape of the object, or rather the painter's art was so consummate that he rarely needed the distortions of form found in some Iraqi-Iranian pottery of the time or the convention of dividing the circle into bands or by means of an exergue which are so common on earlier metalwork of the same shape or on Iranian pottery of the following centuries. Great though the merits of the decorator may have been, the essential point for our present purposes is that in this particular type of composition a single image was the subject of the decoration and compositional concerns were subordinated to it.

The second type of composition is identified primarily by the great width of its border and the corresponding narrowness of the central area. It is a particularly common composition for the circular shape of plates and bowls all over the Near East and its peculiarity is that a developed design occurs both on the wide border (often inscriptions) and in the central area, thereby diluting somewhat any certainty one may have about the ornamental or iconographic meaning of a given motif. Finally the third composition is a radial one, with a narrow border and a division of the circular space from one or more centers. Although comparatively rare, it can reach at times considerable complexity[26] and it is a type of composition which will become comparatively common in later Iranian ceramics, while in earlier times it is only in northeastern Iran that it was often used with stunning success. Like the preceding type of composition, the radial one is a device which takes into primary consideration the circular shape of the object and therefore here also some uncertainty may exist about the meaning to be attributed to

[25] Compare Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, pl. 24 to Hasan, *Atlas*, fig. 40 or *BFA*, 13, pl. 9.

[26] Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, pl. 29 A; Hasan, *Atlas*, fig. 53; *BFA*, 13, figs 31 and 32; also R. Pinder-Wilson, "An Early Fatimid Lustre Bowl," *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst* (Berlin, 1959).

whatever themes of decoration can be identified. It should be noted that three types of composition common to pre-Fatimid pottery in Egypt, Iran and Iraq and not unknown in later times seem to be totally absent from Fatimid ceramics: the all-over composition found for instance in Samarra ceramics, a composition based on the creation of an exergue so common in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and a composition with limited subjects on a primarily empty background so typical of northeastern Iranian ninth- and tenth-century series as well as of rarer Seljuq ones. The point of this comparison is that the two compositional types in which ornamental values take precedence over iconographic ones seem mostly absent from Fatimid series and we would have here a further confirmation for the hypothesis that the majority of known ceramic objects from Fatimid Egypt were not merely vehicles for their decoration but that the general composition of the decoration tended to emphasize a single subject rather than a complex design. It is therefore possible to attribute an iconographic rather than a simply ornamental meaning to the designs and, while the ambiguity between ornamental and iconographic so typical of medieval Islamic industrial arts was never completely removed, it seems less pronounced in many Fatimid ceramics. From this particular point of view, it is difficult to compare Fatimid pottery with other Islamic series without discussing the latter in detail, but it seems that, while hardly exhibiting the wealth of compositional and thematic inventiveness of twelfth- and thirteenth-century works or the simplicity and effectiveness of the earlier Iranian groups, Fatimid ceramic decoration stands out as being most consistently clear and definable.

If we turn now to the themes of decoration, we may eliminate for the purposes of our discussion such features as borders (usually half-circles, but exhibiting also chevrons, braids, bands, waves, vegetal rinceaux, many of which recall traditional [178] Mediterranean ornamental borders of Hellenistic and Roman origin) or "fills" between main subjects which, when they occur, consist either of modifications of the "peacock's eye" motif from Iran or of a miniaturized vegetal rinceau which almost merges visually with the "peacock's eye." Important though they may be in our eventual "phonetic" definition of Fatimid ceramics or in determining some of the influences which may have been at work in the creation of their designs, these elements are by definition secondary features of the decoration. Similarly one may conveniently eliminate a discussion of purely vegetal themes. Most of them are used in conjunction with some other subjects; they are supports for animals or backgrounds for larger scenes or else they appear to play a specific iconographic part in a number of fragments representing palm-trees.[27] Only a small number of objects use vegetal motifs as a main subject.[28] In most of these instances we meet

27 *BFA*, 18, fig. 50.
28 *BFA*, 13, figs 27–30; Pinder-Wilson, "Early Fatimid Lustre Bowl."

either with a translation into painted design and dark–light contrast of the generally sculpted total ornamental surfaces developed in Samarra's third style or else with a rather clumsy composition based on a single large leaf with sprouting tendrils. One would need lengthy analytical studies like Professor Shafi'i's on the calyx[29] in order to classify and interpret such vegetal ornaments properly.

Outside of borders, fills and vegetal themes, three main categories of potentially meaningful subjects can be defined. The first one consists of writing. As a theme it is not as common in Fatimid ceramics as in earlier northeastern Iranian series or in later Seljuq ones, but it is almost always meaningful and one encounters less commonly the pseudo-writing so typical of other Islamic series.[30] Outside of the two historically significant fragments mentioned above, all inscriptions known to me consist of anonymous good wishes and no evidence exists either for the proverbs and aphorisms of northeastern Iranian ceramics or for the poems of Seljuq ceramics.[31] There is probably a development in the style of writing which could be worked out in some detail by comparison with inscriptions on other media, a subject on which there exists a considerable bibliography.[32] The important point for our purposes is, however, the limited use which has been made of epigraphical themes by Fatimid potters. A secondary point may be that anonymous inscriptions of good wishes are particularly characteristic of metalwork but the possible significance of this relationship will only be developed after we have discussed other motifs.

The second category of subject-matter is much more common and far more important. It consists of animals. Zoologically the following animals are found: hares or rabbits in very large numbers; small birds which could be interpreted as anything from sparrows to partridges, magpies or even ducks; roosters; peacocks, eagles or other birds of prey; gazelles or other long-horned animals; fish; gryphons; elephants,[33] and finally harpies. All these animals (except fish) occur at least once singly as the sole subject-matter of a given object, but they could also be shown in groups, symmetrical compositions of two similar animals or sets of three to five arranged according to some geometric or other pattern. It is interesting to note that no example is known to me of two different animals together on the same plate, except

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29 F. Shafi'i, *Simple Calyx Ornament in Islamic Art* (Cairo, 1957).

30 Exception in *BFA*, 13, fig. 28. During the discussion of the paper at the Colloquium this point was challenged by a discussant on the basis of the many fragments found in the Cairo Museum. Many of these fragments are unpublished and the point, whose validity I cannot question, may serve to emphasize once again the need for complete publications of documents.

31 On this point also a discussant, M. 'Abd al-Ra'uf Yusuf, pointed out the existence of one fragment with a proverb.

32 The works of G. Flury, A. Grohman and G. Wiet are particularly numerous and one would wish for someone to put them all in a usable introductory form.

33 *BFA*, 18, fig. 30.

on a jar in the Cairo Museum showing a wild animal attacking a hare.[34] In this unique example an extraneous source – probably the very ancient theme of a peaceful animal attacked by a wild one known already in Achaemenid art – transformed a typical Fatimid animal and the image should be considered as exceptional. A last point to note about these animals is that the quality of their representation varies considerably and the larger the number of preserved examples (as in the case of the rabbit), the larger the variations. In some instances of unique objects there is even a grotesque quality to the animal,[35] which suggests the misunderstanding of some model, but it is only with rabbits and birds that some sort of range of qualities of execution could eventually be developed. The point, as we shall see later, is of some importance in showing that a wide variety of technical abilities and tastes was involved in the making of these objects.

Can one suggest any interpretation of these animals? A secure answer can only be provided by individual monographs on each animal and by appropriate textual studies on bestiaries and on the whole literary genre of the *Manafi' al-Hayawan.* Yet recent studies by R. Ettinghausen and E. Baer[36] may make a hypothesis possible. There are two sides to ours. First, while it is true that northeastern Iranian ceramics also exhibit from the tenth century on a rather remarkable bestiary, it is in the Fatimid ceramics that this bestiary acquires its most precise character and, except for the birds which are common elsewhere, its fullest extent. It is in Fatimid Egypt, furthermore, that Mrs Baer has seen the first development of the harpy which was to have such an elaborate later history in Islamic art. Thus we may suggest that whatever artistic or literary models may have [179] existed for these animals, it is in Fatimid Egypt that they were first transferred in such systematic manner on ceramics. And even if it may be proved some time that the northeastern Iranian group preceded the Egyptian one in time, it is likely that these were two quite independent phenomena since there are so few instances in which precise stylistic parallels can be made.

The second side of our hypothesis about the animals is that, since in the instances of the harpy, of sphinxes, of rabbits, of fish and of birds, it has been possible for R. Ettinghausen and E. Baer to suggest, if not to prove, that the animal was connected with cosmic (especially solar) symbolism and, like the *senmurv* of Sasanian Iran, was meant to bring happiness, health, joy and prosperity, the same interpretation should perhaps be given to all these animals. They would be the visual equivalents of the inscriptions found on the objects. The problem to solve then becomes not only that of discovering

34 *BFA*, 13, fig. 9.
35 *BFA*, 13, fig. 17.
36 R. Ettinghausen, *The Unicorn* (Washington, DC, 1950) is the first model for this kind of monograph; see also his "The Wade Cup," *Ars Orientalis*, 2 (1957); E. Baer, *Sphinxes and Harpies* (Jerusalem, 1965).

the artistic origin of each type, a subject which is beyond the aims of this paper, but also to find out why it was at that time that this translation of a very common feeling of good wishes into images of animals was made. To this last question we shall return later.

The third group of subjects found on ceramics involves *representations of people.* Since many of the objects with such representations are either fragmentary or unique, and since, in rather puzzling fashion, contemporary scholarship has been particularly ill at ease with the identification of human figures in early Islamic art, it is only tentatively that I would like to propose the following iconographic typology. One large group appears to be derived from what is generally agreed to be the princely cycle. The use of the cycle is peculiar in Fatimid ceramics because there is not a single object or fragment known to me which would clearly and obviously show a prince or a royal figure in some kind of formal pose. The personages illustrating the princely cycles are hunters (most often with falcons), musicians (a particularly common theme usually showing male or female *rubab*-players,[37] or, more rarely, drummers), drinkers and pourers of wine (comparatively common and with a variety of poses and actions), and finally what has usually been interpreted as dancers, almost throughout female. These images can be interpreted in either one of two ways. One can argue that they were in some ways symbols or representations of individual personages identified here by their courtly functions and the image together with the object on which it is found should be considered as some sort of private memorialization. Alternately, and in our judgment preferably, these images are actually representations of functions, of hunting, music-making, drinking and dancing. These functions which identified princely life had acquired the more general meaning of symbolizing a "good life," a life of pleasure, and the images served thereby a purpose similar to the purpose of animals and of inscriptions, that of wishing well to the owner of the object.

While a fairly large number of complete objects and of fragments can be interpreted as part of a royal cycle, a number of others pose special problems. Thus a well-known fragment in the Cairo Museum[38] showing a woman half-lying on a bed, surrounded by attendants, and about to pick up a musical instrument (or giving it back after use), could be understood simply as a more developed and more precise illustration of a courtly life of pleasure. Yet it could also be the depiction of some event or the representation of a privately meaningful image. Or else is the fragment with an apparent representation of a nude dancer[39] merely an erotic version of the princely dance theme or else part of some more complex subject? There is, in other

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[37] H. Bessier and M. Schneider, *Musikgeschichte in Bildern, Vol. III* Islam (Leipzig, 1966), figs 19, 28–30, etc.

[38] Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, pl. 27 B; Hasan, *Kunuz*, pl. 27.

[39] Hasan, *Atlas*, fig. 61.

words, a fairly large number of fragments which are only uncertainly relatable to the princely cycle but which cannot automatically be put into our second group.

The latter may be called narrative, for its most immediately perceivable characteristic is that it appears to deal with a precise scene or event. Such are fragments with two personages wrestling,[40] with an old man carrying a bucket on his back,[41] with a bearded personage kneeling in front of a cheetah,[42] with a boat being rowed alongside a strange building,[43] and so forth.[44] It is in this narrative group that I would like to put the well-known series of Christian images, either actual Christian scenes[45] or representations of priests. Finally a celebrated and much discussed fragment with personages is provided with the names of the individuals involved, Abu Talib and Mansur, although the context of the story is unknown.[46] The exact reference in the visually meaningful vocabulary of the time of all these images is, for the time being, almost impossible to find and it is possible that some of them – the wrestlers, for instance, or certain representations of personages with animals – were in fact part of a courtly cycle. On this score the art historian is in constant need of help from social and literary historians, since they alone can discover the contemporary practices [180] or literary references which could be illustrated with such images.

It is equally difficult to suggest a general interpretation for these subjects similar to the interpretations we have proposed for the princely ones. It is true, of course, that the general theme of good wishes and happiness is always possible for some of them. Yet this explanation is only partially valid, for it seems difficult to associate whatever Abu Talib and Mansur may have been doing with pleasure alone. It is perhaps more appropriate to hypothesize that, for reasons as yet unknown, the object in ceramics became a vehicle for a far wider number of images than before and that these images corresponded to a much more developed system of visual symbols and of social needs than the simple one of good wishes. This, it may be noted, is exactly the conclusion which can be reached by surveying the ceramics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Iran,[47] even though the breadth and complexity of the subjects found in the latter is far greater. More important is the point that this development is completely unknown anywhere else in the Muslim world

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40 Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting*, p. 55.
41 Hasan, *Atlas*, fig. 63.
42 J. and D. Sourdel, *La Civilisation de l'Islam classique* (Paris, 1968), fig. 143.
43 Fragment in the Berlin Museum, to my knowledge unpublished, whose photograph I owe to Dr K. Brisch.
44 Hasan, *Atlas*, fig. 44.
45 Often reproduced, for instance, M. Mostafa, "Darstellungen des täglichen Lebens," *Bustan*, 2 (1960), fig. 26.
46 R. Ettinghausen, "The Mesopotamian Style in Lustre Painting," *Artibus Asiae*, 18 (1958); Bahgat–Massoul, *La Céramique*, pl. XXXII.
47 Cf. O. Grabar in the articles quoted in note 1.

before Fatimid times or even at the same time as the flowering of the Egyptian dynasty.

Two further remarks of slightly lesser significance may be added to our discussion of subject-matter. One is that there may also have been an astrological cycle, since some fragments show images which could be interpreted as suns.[48] The other point is that most of these images with human scenes and especially the courtly ones exhibit a great variety in quality of execution, ranging from very finely drawn and composed images to strangely crude ones. There does not seem to be any correlation between type of subject-matter and quality, thus suggesting that the subjects themselves were quite widespread in their usage.

We must turn now to the last aspect of our analysis of Fatimid ceramics, their style, i.e. the set of visually perceptible formulae through which individual subjects and themes were made understandable. If we consider the whole body of objects and especially the variations in quality found in them, it is clear that there is no single unified stylistic definition valid for them all regardless of subject-matter. At the same time, the lack of clearly dated objects does not allow us, it seems to me, to define a stylistic evolution, since no theoretical system has been formulated by which an evolution of ceramic designs took place and since, in a more general sense, the dynamics of stylistic change in the Muslim world have never been investigated.

I would prefer therefore to propose that we consider the existence of two formal tendencies, which may have followed each other or may have been contemporary and corresponding to different modes. The first of these tendencies may be called two-dimensional, although there are many ways in which this expression is not satisfactory. It would have the following major characteristics: almost all forms and shapes are suggested by contrasts between two tones, one light, and the other dark; outlines predominate over shapes; repetitive patterns, at times unrelated to the subject-matter, are often used to cover identifiable units of design; great care is given to composition; space tends to be filled with motifs of all kinds or else an uncertain balance is created between main subject and background. This tendency appears to have had two main sources. One is the ninth-century style usually associated with Samarra; in Fatimid ceramics it tends to flatten out the curved shapes of stucco ornament[49] and reaches at times considerable sophistication of formal arrangement.[50] It is to this source that belong the objects datable to Hakim's reign, but it is impossible to say how late these designs might have continued. The other source for this two-dimensional tendency was probably folk art, and it is to traditional patterns of folk art that I would like to attribute many of the simply drawn faces and elementary bodies found on a

48 Bahgat–Massoul, *La Céramique*, pl. 30; Sauvaget, *Introduction*, p. 48.
49 Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, pl. 24.
50 Pinder-Wilson, "Early Fatimid Lustre Bowl."

large number of fragments. How much this latter feature may have also derived from textile patterns or from a popular Coptic art is still a very moot question which deserves further investigation. In any event this first tendency appears to have existed on two planes, one probably purely local and the other one relatable to the high ʿAbbasid tradition which continued in Iraqi and Iranian art during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The second tendency is far more original and it was first identified in stylistic terms by Dr Richard Ettinghausen.[51] Its main characteristics are three. One is that in its depiction of the human or animal body it does not limit itself to a contour filled with a single color or with more or less arbitrary patterns, but emphasizes the volume of the body by a fairly artful use of dark and light tones. In most instances this has meant representing certain parts of the body – breasts and belly of female dancers, belly of animals, knees, thighs and arms of almost all personages – with both light and dark areas arranged no longer in clearly separated parts [181] but closely intermeshed with each other. This device is almost never used for faces and it never becomes transformed into the tonal variations of *chiaroscuro*. A second characteristic of this stylistic tendency lies in its interest in space and movement. On a number of objects such as the plate with stick fighters[52] or one of a man leading a giraffe or on any number of dancing-girl plates, space and movement are identified by emphasizing and at times suggesting the pose of that part of the body which is primarily involved in the subject, thereby actually making the image an arrested movement from a sequence of movements rather than a pose. In a smaller number of examples this emphasis is strengthened by the disappearance of extraneous fills and the image becomes a lively or static (depending on the needs of the subject-matter) design creating its own space on a dark background by contrasting the background with a thin and precise line rather than with a heavy contour. This new interest is also remarkable for being used in details of texture, such as on fragments showing a liquid being poured into a glass.[53] The last characteristic of this tendency is that it does not identify only complete objects but also occurs on details in images which would normally be put in our first tendency. The significance of this point is that this tendency cannot therefore be considered simply as a feature identifying a given school or a moment in the evolution of ceramic styles. Instead it has to be understood as having become part and parcel of the ways of representation available to Fatimid ceramicists, at least from a certain moment on.

The more difficult question is that of giving a name to this tendency. Professor Ettinghausen has called it "realism" and, like Dr Mostafa, he has

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51 R. Ettinghausen, "Early Realism in Islamic Art," *Studi Orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi della Vida*, Vol. I (Rome, 1956).

52 Hasan, *Atlas*, pl. 44.

53 Ettinghausen, "Early Realism," fig. 11.

connected it with representations of daily life or of visually observed details which do indeed occur on many objects. Dr Ettinghausen has also related it to the celebrated painting competition between Ibn 'Aziz and al-Qasir organized by the vizier Yazuri (before 1058). The story of the representation of dancing-girls coming in and out of walls through color contrasts actually follows in Maqrizi's account the equally interesting but almost unnoticed description of a painting in a mosque. The latter consisted of a fountain with steps which were so colored that they appeared as a *trompe l'œil* when seen from one specific place while from other places the image was flat and the *trompe l'œil* is identified in the text as an illusion (*wahm*). This kind of achievement, writes Maqrizi, is "the ideal creation for painters" (*fakhr al-sina'i 'ind al-muzawwaqin*).[54] In spite of this text with its clear statement of an illusionist ideal, I find it difficult to accept either the term "realism" or even the preferable one for stylistic purposes of "illusionism" for the images on ceramics or for the closest parallel known to me for the mosque paintings described by Maqrizi, namely the mosaics in the drum of the main dome of the Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem datable around AD 1035.[55] It is always possible, of course, that the truly illusionist monuments have disappeared but it seems to me that the Aqsa mosaics which were certainly works of an imperial Fatimid art[56] would have illustrated the tradition at its best. Yet, as has been amply demonstrated by H. Stern, they show instead a conscious return to Umayyad mosaic types and thus reflect only secondarily illusionist Antiquity. For these reasons I would prefer to consider this second stylistic tendency neither as a realist one nor as an illusionist one, but in contrast with the first one, as a *spatial* one, that is as a tendency to use a selected number of conventions in order to compel the viewer to notice details of texture, movement, action, or space. The tendency is always a selective one and never implies the conception of a total physical reality translated into image which is implicit in terms like realism or illusionism.

While these considerations on terminology may be mostly theoretical, the important point about this second tendency is that it is quite unique in Islamic art, both at this time and later. Its uniqueness lies also in the artistic sources which can be given to it. For most of these have to be put outside of the Muslim world, in the Byzantine tradition. Thus it is in the manuscripts of the Macedonian Renaissance – almost contemporary with the Fatimids – that occurs the convention of creating volume by contrasting dark and light areas.[57] And it has long been recognized that the lightly contoured personages set against a dark background as well as certain poses and profiles relate this

[54] Maqrizi, II, p. 318; translation by Wiet in *Syria*, 13 (1932).

[55] H. Stern, "Recherches sur la Mosquée al-Aqsa'," *Ars Orientalis*, 5 (1963).

[56] The importance of the Fatimids in the development of the Haram area in Jerusalem is a hitherto little-studied problem, to which I hope to return to the near future.

[57] A. Grabar, *Byzantine Painting* (Geneva, 1953), pp. 166–9.

tendency to the pre-Islamic classical art of the Mediterranean.[58] How this relationship was possible has never been made clear and we will attempt to do so presently.

Before proceeding to this topic, however, it may be useful to sum up our description of Fatimid ceramics and to compare them to other contemporary techniques. We are dealing with a large body of objects or fragments related to each other by shape and by a comparatively standard and consistent technique closely tied to earlier Egyptian and Iraqi techniques. Both technique [182] and shape tended to emphasize a single surface for decoration, again a feature common to much Near Eastern ceramics before and after the Fatimid period. In subject-matter and style, two modes coexisted. One, two-dimensional, with primarily epigraphic, vegetal and animal themes, can easily be related to other Islamic traditions. The other one, spatial with an extraordinary variety of subjects many of which included human figures, is quite new and relatable structurally, but neither iconographically nor stylistically, to post-twelfth-century ceramic series in Iran. The two modes interacted a great deal with each other and with a possible third, folk source. Thus there are representations of figures in two-dimensional style and of animals and even of vegetal themes[59] in spatial style. As far as meanings are concerned, the predominant one is that of happiness and well-being, but it is clear that other possible meanings were developed for ceramic images. In this respect, the Fatimid phenomenon seems to anticipate the later Seljuq one much more than follow the earlier Iraqi or Iranian ones. Finally, a Mediterranean non-Muslim source must be given to some of the stylistic conventions of Fatimid ceramics. At the same time, none of these characteristics can be dated; there is no internal indication of how a development took place within this large body of objects. Yet somehow, the historian has the responsibility of providing an explanation for changes in taste and form.

Before suggesting such an explanation, we should turn briefly to techniques other than ceramics, for, even though ceramics are most numerous and therefore lend themselves most easily to systems of classification, it is possible that some pertinent information may be derived from the smaller numbers of works of art in other media. The closest parallel to ceramics occurs in woodwork with many fragments and complete pieces. Their importance is only tempered by the fact that a vast percentage of remaining woodwork was made for mosques and thereby limited in decorative subjects. Even with this limitation the evidence of carved wood agrees with that of ceramics. If we

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58 Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, pp. 20–21.

59 This point appears in objects like the one in Hasan, *Kunuz*, pl. 24, whose vegetal arabesque acquires a freedom of movement in space which is quite different from the total coverage of objects like the ones discussed by Pinder-Wilson ("Early Fatimid Lustre Bowl").

except the geometrically planned compositions of the early part of the twelfth century, two main groups of woodwork can be determined. The first one is an almost indistinguishable continuation of what had been done in Egypt since the middle of the ninth century and has usually been interpreted as a translation into wood of Samarra stucco themes. Its remaining masterpiece is the celebrated door from the Azhar mosque dated in 1010,[60] where already a hitherto less common precision in the representation of individual leaves and stems is found. The second group exhibits characteristics which, just as in ceramics, can be called spatial. A greater contrast between subject-matter and background and a liveliness of individual motifs coincides with a much-expanded vocabulary of themes. While the most important monuments of this group are the frieze from Qala'un's hospital with its many subjects from princely and daily life and a comparable fragment from the Coptic Museum,[61] the animation of wood carving with the help of a large variety of subjects and a more dynamic and natural treatment even of traditional vegetal designs are novelties of the Fatimid period. These novelties are, however, difficult to date with any precision, but it seems very likely that they do not antedate the middle of the eleventh century when al-Mustansir renovated a part of the Western palace.[62] The important point is that it is in the imperial art of the caliphs that these themes are first seen, a conclusion which would be confirmed by Nasir-i Khusraw's amazement at the sight of the hunting and feasting subjects painted on the imperial throne.[63]

Most of what is known of Fatimid metalwork is by inference only and the only more or less certain group consists of a series of animal-shaped vessels and sculptures in bronze. The most celebrated of these is the Pisa gryphon with its rather extraordinary surface decoration.[64] None of these objects is clearly dated and therefore the evidence to be derived from them is limited. Far more important is the evidence provided by crystal, glass and ivories. Two points here seem to me of primary significance. One is that, whereas the early Fatimid period seems to have produced a number of superb imperial objects in crystal with precise epigraphical identification of the personages for whom they were made, the later Fatimid production tended to be anonymous and consisted primarily of smaller objects. Even though definite examples from Egypt itself are lacking, Spanish objects make it possible for us to reach the same conclusion about ivories.[65] A group of precisely dated and personalized objects from the late tenth century and the first decade of the eleventh with the earliest and most explicit statement of the princely

60 Pauty, *Bois sculptés*, pl. 23.
61 Ibid., pls XLVI and ff.; Ettinghausen, "Early Realism," pp. 259 and ff.
62 Creswell, *Muslim Architecture in Egypt*, Vol. 1, p. 129.
63 Nasir-i Khusraw, *Voyages*, pp. 157–8.
64 E. Kühnel, *Islamische Kleinkunst* (Braunschweig, 1963), pp. 164 ff.
65 The subject is well summarized by J. Beckwith, *Caskets from Cordoba* (London, 1960), with bibliography.

cycle of images is followed by the same subjects or purely decorative ones represented on a large number of single objects or of plaques for inlays, almost all of which are anonymous. A [183] large number of the latter come from Egypt[66] and almost all of these exhibit the very same spatial concerns as are found in woodwork and ceramics. Finally, even though many of their problems have not yet been solved, the paintings from the Cappella Palatina in Palermo demonstrate the very same type of interest and, whatever other influences may have been at work in them, they appear as a convenient summary both of the variety of subjects available to the Fatimid world and of the variety of ways of representation.[67] As to the numerous painted remains from Egypt itself, most of them are much too fragmentary to lead to any other conclusion than the fairly obvious ones that there was an art of painting in Fatimid Egypt, that it occurred both as miniature and as wall painting, and that it involved a variety of subjects and an even greater variety of quality ranging from rather elegant personages all the way to grotesque or folk drawings.[68]

Brief though it had to be, this survey of arts other than ceramics leads to two conclusions. One is that the iconographic and stylistic concerns found in ceramics are not unique but typical of all the arts of the time and therefore that an explanation of the more numerous ceramics may be considered as valid for Fatimid art as a whole. The other conclusion is more hypothetical and deserves some elaboration. If we consider the two most expensive techniques which have been discussed, ivories and crystals, a curious point emerges. Both are known primarily through dated and individualized objects up to the early eleventh century and by anonymous objects thereafter, suggesting thereby some change in the social setting of the objects and of their use. Moreover, whereas all techniques exhibit novel interest in figural representation but generally alongside of other, more traditional, vegetal or animal themes, it is on royal ivories that this interest appeared first between 950 and 1050.[69] Our hypothesis then would be that there occurred in the middle of the eleventh century a change in taste or in some other aspect of life likely to affect the arts which led to major modifications in the ways in which expensive materials were used and also to the spread to all media of figurative themes hitherto primarily limited to the more expensive ones. Furthermore, whatever it is that occurred must

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66 Other illustrated panels in the Berlin Museum or in the Bargello; Kühnel, *Islamische Kleinkunst*, fig. 794; Sourdel, *Civilisation*, figs 148–9; Ettinghausen, “Early Realism,” figs 5–6.

67 In addition to Monneret de Villard’s book mentioned in note 13, see R. Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting*, pp. 44 ff. and A. Grabar, “Image d’une église chrétienne,” *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst* (Berlin, 1959).

68 Most of the bibliography will be found in E. Grube’s article in *Ars Orientalis*, 5 (1963).

69 While it is true that the objects involved are all from Spain, it can easily be shown that they belong to a generalized princely repertoire and their evidence can certainly be used for Fatimid Egypt.

have taken place in Egypt, for no other part of the Muslim world exhibits the same changes at that time, even though a century later Iran was to undergo a similar revolution in the arts.

It so happens that there is an event which took place in the middle of the eleventh century and which could be proposed as the event which triggered the artistic changes of Fatimid art. I am referring to the liquidation of the Fatimid imperial treasures either through looting, through cheap sale in order to raise cash, or through distribution in lieu of money. Although probably spread over several years, the main event took place in 1067 and has been remarkably well recorded.[70] The operation was primarily a financial and economic one, but it is our contention that this dumping of a huge mass of expensive objects and works of art on to the public market was a revolutionary one in affecting the taste of large numbers of people in Fatimid Egypt. In order to justify this position we have to be able to show two things: that what is known of these treasures can indeed explain a certain number of the new features of Fatimid art and that there was a "market" for such novelties, i.e., that there was a probable "receiving" entity which could utilize, interpret and modify for its purposes whatever was suddenly made available.

The first point to make is that the Fatimid treasure must be distinguished from the large number of private treasures gathered together by all sorts of individuals throughout the Muslim world. Most of the latter were primarily treasures for hoarding purposes, investments against bad days, and included only expensive materials, mostly gold and silver which could be melted down if there was a need for it.[71] The Fatimid treasure belonged instead to a rarer category of imperial treasures in which were kept not only expensive objects but also rare and symbolic items of all sorts. It was divided into sections, one of which was even called the section of strange curiosities (*tara'if*). In each room there was a throne for the prince when he formally visited his treasure and large groups of servants were employed at keeping everything clean and in order. This official and ceremonial character of the Fatimid treasure relates it to the very similar Byzantine imperial treasures on which much information exists[72] and probably to a similar 'Abbasid treasure,

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70 Maqrizi, I, pp. 408–25; *Kitab al-Dhakha'ir*, pp. 249 and ff.; P. Kahle, "Die Schätze der Fatimiden," *ZDMG*, 89 (1935); much of the textual comparison between Maqrizi's work and the *Kitab al-Dhakha'ir* was done by my student, Mrs Renata Holod-Tretiak, working at that time with Miss Lisa Volow, now Dr Golombek. The political events which led to the sale and distribution of the treasures are best recounted in G. Wiet, *L'Egypte arabe*, vol. IV of G. Hanotaux, *Histoire de la Nation Egyptienne* (Paris, 1937), pp. 239 ff., and in the article "Fatimids" by M. Canarad in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition.

71 There is no study of such hoards, although the chronicles of Ibn al-Djawzi or of Ibn al-Athir contain much interesting and important information for the arts and probably also for economic history.

72 M. Canarad, "Le cérémonial Fatimite et le cérémonial Byzantin," *Byzantion*, 21 (1951), p. 365.

although on this score our information is very scanty.[73] It seems also unclear whether the Umayyads of Spain had developed a similar official treasure.

The function of an imperial treasure was not merely that of a sort of dynastic museum. Its objects were made visible on certain occasions, such as the great Fatimid processions which [184] differentiate so remarkably Fatimid ceremonies from ʿAbbasid ones and relate them so closely to Byzantine ones or in official receptions of foreign ambassadors whose descriptions have been preserved for both Byzantium and the ʿAbbasids.[74] The huge storerooms of clothes were certainly primarily for such official occasions, as were the numerous tents which are quite interesting for the history of secular architecture. In most cases, however, this visibility of the treasures was limited to foreign visitors only, and until the time of the looting, the treasures themselves were better known on a sort of mythic level than in reality. Another function of these treasures seems to be more peculiar to the Fatimids; at least I do not know of any evidence for this function in other imperial treasures. There were in one of the treasure's sections toy-like sculptures representing gardens with the earth done in nielloed silver, trees of silver with fruits of amber, Nile boats with baldachins as they were used for princely outings, and pavilions with expensive decorations. I am unclear as to the use of such small objects illustrating imperial life, but it may be noted that Nasir-i Khusraw saw many of the same themes done in sugar for the caliph's feast. In all probability, like some of the culinary achievements of our own time, the Fatimid ones and the sculptures of royal boats, gardens and pavilions served as symbol – souvenirs of the complex life of the palace. It is possibly in the same fashion that one should understand the 22,000 figurines (*tamathil*) in amber found in the treasure. A symbolic meaning should also be given to a huge silk hanging with maps of all the lands of the earth and representations of their kings with the names of each properly embroidered.

A further point of importance about the treasures is that they were made up of things from three different sources. One was local manufacture, especially in the case of the clothes which were manufactured in a particularly elaborate and well-known way,[75] but probably also in the case of many other items about which we are less informed. A second source was the rest of the Muslim world and an extraordinary traffic in historical souvenirs must have taken place if the Fatimids gathered in their treasures the rug on which Buran first appeared to Ma'mun or 100 jasper cups with Harun al-Rashid's name on each one. Certain crystals had also been ordered

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73 D. Sourdel, "Questions de Cérémonial ʿAbbaside," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* (1960).

74 The texts describing the spectacular 917 embassy reception in Baghdad have often been discussed; G. Le Strange, "A Greek Embassy," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1897); M. Canard in A. A. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes* (Bruxelles, 1950), vol. II, pp. 72 ff.

75 The best introduction to all these problems is found in R. D. Serjeant's series of articles, "Materials for a History of Islamic Textiles," *Ars Islamica*, 9 and ff. (1942–5).

in Syria for the caliph al-ʿAziz and kept by his successors. But a third source is perhaps even more important and consisted of gifts from foreign rulers and foreign countries. This is where the *Kitab al-Dhakhaʾir* is so important, for it provides us with long lists of what Byzantine emperors sent to ʿAbbasid and Fatimid caliphs. For instance in 937–8 the list included the following items: three golden arrows with jewels, two crystal bottles with silver incrustation and a crystal lion on top, a palm-stalk of gilded silver with engraved sparrows, an octagonal silver box with floral designs, a gilded palm-stalk with handles made in the shape of peacocks, brocades with lions and eagles, silk garments with the likeness of a Persian king holding a banner in his hand.[76] In 1045–6 and 1052–3 similar groups of objects were sent and included even a saddle for the son of Mustansir which was supposed to have belonged to Alexander the Great. When one reads in the accounts of the looting that the looters found all sorts of crystals and cut glass, many enamelled gold plates, peacocks incrusted with precious stones, gold roosters and gazelles, or gold palm trees with gold leaves and imitations of dates, the possibility must be kept in mind that many of these items were of Byzantine manufacture, just as the 1204 looting of Constantinople was to bring to the West a large number of Muslim objects together with Byzantine ones. The evidence for Muslim gifts to the Byzantines is less numerous in the *Kitab al-Dhakhaʾir,* probably because they were less noteworthy from a Muslim point of view, but in 1056 silver candlesticks and "apricot" colored porcelain were sent over by a minor prince. From this evidence we may conclude that ceramics from the Muslim world were particularly prized and I would suggest a local Muslim manufacture for the ceramic objects described by Maqrizi which included large urns set on tripods shaped in the form of lions and other wild animals.

But what is probably more important to note is that, regardless of where a given object may have been made, the art which is illustrated through these treasures was an international or intra-cultural art common to the great empires, to the Family of Princes whose themes and ideals were all inherited from Roman and Sasanian Antiquity.[77] It was an art in which a Fatimid prince would own a saddle supposed to have belonged to Alexander the Great and Byzantine craftsmen made textiles representing Persian kings. This is not to say that there was no enmity or competition between the princes. On the contrary, political competition was fierce and [185] acute, even if it took at times the form of artistic embellishments, as in the case of the Fatimid reshaping of the Haram area in Jerusalem shortly after the Byzantine rebuilding of the Holy Sepulcher. But, in spite of wars and strife, there was an imperial taste and an imperial tradition which were shared by the great empires, Byzantine and Fatimid, only after the decadence of the

[76] *Kitab al-Dhakhaʾir*, pp. 60 ff.

[77] For this theme see O. Grabar, "The Six Kings," *Ars Orientalis*, 1 (1954).

'Abbasid caliphate, in the middle of the tenth century.[78] Thus what fell into the hands of looters or what was sold by the caliph did not consist only of works of contemporary Islamic art, but also of works from many different lands and from many different times. Most of them illustrated the practical or symbolic needs of an ancient imperial tradition which had been inherited by Fatimid princes and which, as the *Sirat Qaysar wa Kisra* shows, was already apparent in Umayyad times. To the mass of the Muslim population this tradition had only until then been known as a myth and its sudden availability and visibility were obviously major novelties.

One last aspect of the looting of the Fatimid palace may be mentioned. It is that, as crowds went through the palaces, their interior decoration was made visible and known to all. Thus the whole Muslim tradition going back to Umayyad art of a *private* palace decoration of human figures and scenes involving people suddenly appeared to all. Little beyond the woodwork mentioned above remains from this decoration, but textual information, some of which was already given, makes it quite clear that the old Muslim princely traditions were fully preserved and the themes known from Umayyad, 'Abbasid and Tulunid palaces can be assumed in Fatimid times as well.

Even though much work is still needed to put together all the information which is thus available from these literary sources, I would like to suggest that a large number of features we have determined in ceramic and in other arts as being new in the Fatimid period can be explained though the impact of the art made for and gathered by the Fatimid caliphs. The rather curious spatial concerns with their Byzantinizing relations are easy to explain if so many of the treasures were actually Byzantine made or if much more ancient objects were available. The development of large cycles of images, with single personages and even whole scenes, can similarly be explained by the sudden impact of actual paintings and sculptures and of objects with all sorts of representations of personages and animals. Even certain details of the decoration like the circles and grooves on the Pisa gryphon or the Kassel lion could perhaps be explained as translations into cheaper bronze of the inlaid or enameled gold and silver objects found in the treasures, most of which were probably of Byzantine origin, perhaps made for the Muslim princes, as can be suggested for the celebrated Innsbruck plate.[79] And a possible impact of metalwork with its inscriptions of good wishes on ceramics can also be suggested.

This sudden influx of a mass of new objects and of new artistic themes did not simply lead to their translation into more common techniques and media

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[78] A. Grabar, "Le succès des arts orientaux," *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, 2 (1951); O. and A. Grabar, "L'essor des Arts inspirés par les cours princières," *L'Occidente e l'Islam nell' alto Medioevo* (Spoleto, 1965).

[79] M. Van Berchem and J. Strygowski, *Amida* (Heidelberg, 1910).

where they acquired a social meaning which was no longer internationally imperial but more locally popular. It also created an impetus for the creation of new images and of new ideas and it is in this fashion – as transformations into images of views and ideas of new groups of patrons – that I would like to interpret most of the new subjects of ceramic decoration. The impetus was successful because Egypt at this time was receptive to such an impetus. As the Geniza fragments show quite conclusively, Egypt had a remarkably developed middle class of Muslim, Christian and Jewish tradesmen and artisans who profited from what has been called the "free-trade community" of the Mediterranean at that time[80] and who had the economic means to acquire or to order for themselves objects with new and sophisticated themes. It is this urban bourgeoisie which transformed the international art of princes into a locally Egyptian version of Islamic art. And this transformation was made possible in the middle of the eleventh century by the sudden availability of masses of works of art from an older tradition to a growing new social class. It is thus not an accident that Christian themes appear among these works, for Christians played a significant part in this social development. It is also true that Christian themes are easy to recognize and that our knowledge of the non-religious imagery other than that of princes of the medieval Near East is still far too elementary to allow for precise identifications of meanings to be given to visual forms. There lies one of the most important and most immediate tasks of scholarship in Islamic art.

It would not be proper to conclude our paper without returning to some of the questions raised at the beginning. Before doing so, it is also necessary to point out that there are two areas immediately pertinent to our subject which have not been discussed but which certainly deserve [186] further work. One, perhaps the most important one, is the area of textiles. The point there is that texts give rather elaborate descriptions of textiles, most of which do not correspond to the fragments which have actually remained, however numerous the latter are. How is one to explain this anomaly? An answer to this question must eventually be provided, for the Fatimid period is uniquely rich in literary information. Furthermore, documents exist which suggest that it was through textiles that much of the contemporary world acquired its aesthetic judgment, as when Nasir-i Khusraw compares luster ceramics to *buqallamun*.[81] The other subject, which has already occupied the attention of knowledgeable Arabists like P. Kahle, M. Mostafa and M. Hamidullah, is that of the exact meanings to be given to the terms found in literary texts.[82] Yet there is still much to be done, especially in the study of verbs and nouns, for there is some intellectual presumption in claiming any

80 Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, p. 61.
81 Nasir-i Khusraw, *Voyages*, p. 151.
82 In addition to works quoted above, P. Kahle, "Bergkristall, Glas and Glasflüsse," *ZDMG*, 90 (1936).

sort of historical competence in the arts when one does not fully understand contemporary references.

These questions should be left for other occasions. Our aim at this stage is to try to draw some conclusions – or at least hypotheses – from our observations on Fatimid ceramics and the representational themes found on them. There are three such hypotheses I would like to propose. The first one is that the transformation of a "restricted" artistic tradition into a source of inspiration and an impetus for a more popular art is a characteristically Romanesque phenomenon. Since the correlation in dates is quite striking, I would suggest that it is not accidental that, at the time when the Fatimids utilized and modified the international art of empires, local entities all over Italy and the West translated into a sculpture visible and accessible to all the private, monastic or royal, art of manuscripts, ivories and metalwork of older generations. It is probably not an accident as well that antique themes reappeared in the West as they did in Egypt and the rather remarkable transformation in the second half of the eleventh century of Italian episcopal thrones into princely ones with many themes closely related to those of Fatimid art[83] cannot be a coincidence. Yet, even though the Fatimid phenomenon can justifiably be called a Romanesque one, its very Romanesque nature of a sort of democratization of the visual arts world led to its separation from other Romanesque traditions, for control over taste and patronage was no longer in the hands of a small group of princes partly withdrawn from the area in which they lived but in those of a locally centered urban order. Thus, to recall a question raised at the beginning, Fatimid art belonged indeed to a Mediterranean, partly non-Muslim tradition and was influenced by it, but it is in Fatimid times that the first original art of Muslim Egypt acquired, so to speak, its aesthetic and thematic independence from the rest of the Mediterranean, as well one might add, as from the ʿAbbasid traditions of Iraq.

It is far more difficult to assess the impact of Fatimid art on later Islamic art, outside of Egypt itself where it obviously maintained a continuing influence.[84] On this score our hypothesis, the second one, would be that on the technical level of artistic forms the Fatimid impact was minimal. Even though it can be argued that the transformation of imperial objects into automatic toys for minor princelings, as appear in al-Djazari's *Automata*,[85] may have been influenced by the looting of the Fatimid palace (actually

83 A. Grabar, "Trônes épiscopaux du XIème et XIIème siècles en Italie Méridionale," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, 16 (1954).

84 The point has been made for architecture by K. A. C. Creswell on a number of occasions (as in the cases of the mosque of Baybars or of the *muqarnas*). It could also be made for many other arts.

85 O. Grabar in *L'Occidente e l'Islam*, pp. 870–71. For the manuscripts themselves, which have never been properly studied, see Ettinghausen, *Painting in the Fatimid Period*, pp. 194–5 with a good bibliography.

other sources existed as well), on the whole Fatimid art remained a peculiarly Egyptian phenomenon which drew on and synthesized sources available to the specific land of Egypt. The Seljuq arts of the twelfth century with which Fatimid art shares so many structural features do not seem to have been influenced by what happened a century earlier in Egypt.

The reason for this may be provided by our third hypothesis. It is that the arts – and perhaps the whole culture – of the classical Islamic world[86] grew and developed through a complex interaction between princely and urban tastes and needs. While the princely ones tended to be interchangeable from one region to another, the urban ones tended to be more localized and to reflect regional characteristics. If our interpretations are acceptable, what created the originality of Fatimid art was the predominance taken by an urban Egyptian, Cairene taste in the second half of the eleventh century. Different developments and different regional traditions would have led to the impact of an urban taste in Iran and, for reasons as yet unknown, the phenomenon took place at a different time.

Such seem to me to be some of the conclusions and hypotheses which may be derived from a consideration of some of the monuments of Fatimid art. Whether they are justified or not is for others to judge. It seems to me, however, that by compelling us at the same time to raise questions about the dynamics of all Islamic arts [187] and to define the uniqueness of medieval Egypt, the art of the Fatimids more than fulfills the expressions of those who founded the city of Cairo a thousand years ago.

[86] I am using the term in the sense suggested by D. and J. Sourdel as meaning the centuries before the Mongol onslaught and the growth of the Ottoman empire.