

Medieval Islamic objects and the architecture of the mind

Review of:

Arts of Allusion: Object, Ornament, and Architecture in Medieval Islam by Margaret S. Graves, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 339 pp., over 100 col. plates and b. & w. illus., £68 hdbk, Print ISBN 9780190695910, Online ISBN 9780190695941

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In *Arts of Allusion* Margaret Graves makes a significant contribution to the study of the art of the object. That is, artworks that often have a utilitarian purpose in addition to an aesthetic one, and are often portable and three-dimensional: vessels, small furnishings, jewelry, and scientific instruments are examples that would fall under this classification¹. Within this vast category, the book focuses specifically on a subset of objects that Graves calls “archimorphic”, which can be defined as objects that reference architecture in some way, either through their form (such as a house model) or through their ornament (such as a vessel decorated with an arcade motif)². The scope is further refined by geography and time, treating works dating to the ninth through thirteenth centuries produced in today’s Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. In this region during this era, craftsmanship flourished at various centres, leaving behind a rich corpus of imaginative objects made of metal, ceramic, glass, crystal, ivory, wood, and stone.

Islamic art is a field well positioned to offer a consequential monograph on this subject to the discipline of art history, as so much of what constitutes its canon of masterworks falls into the category of complex, beautiful, and useful things. Islamicists have long offered compelling and sophisticated analyses of earthenware beakers, inlaid brass canteens, and ivory caskets that might be reserved in other fields for cathedrals or illustrated manuscripts³. *Arts of Allusion* continues the celebrated historiography of the Islamic art object in its general choice of subject matter, but also departs from previous studies in its grouping of artifacts and in their consideration as material evidence for a history of thought. The scope of the

¹ For the introduction of this term and some of the questions it raises for art-historical research, see Oleg Grabar, ‘An Art of the Object’, *Artforum* 14, 1976, 36-43. See also Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 12-13.

² Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 3.

³ For many examples of such studies, but also a critique of how architecture still dominates research in the field, see Avinoam Shalem, ‘The Discovery and Rediscovery of the Medieval Islamic Object’, in Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu, eds, *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture, Volume 1: From the Prophet to the Mongols*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017, 558-78.

book is in itself a noteworthy historiographic intervention, as the family of archimorphic objects as defined here offers an alternative to the most common ways that scholars of Islamic art have divided the material record, which is usually according to either dynasty or medium. While there are obvious merits to those two configurations, they have reached the point where a well-trodden intellectual path is becoming a rut, and some re-shuffling is beneficial for generating new questions. Indeed, the group of objects at the center of Graves' study raises intriguing questions about the mechanics of visual representation relevant to broader discussions in the field of art history. These objects often allude to their architectural referents indirectly rather than reproducing them directly, inviting the reader to contemplate the why and the how of non-mimetic forms of reference. Indirect, allusive practices of visual representation and the modes of thought that underly them are the main subject of this work.

Thus, detailed stylistic and technical analyses of individual pieces or groups are not the aim of *Arts of Allusion*, although style and technique are discussed when necessary. The book's thorough bibliography will point the reader to many excellent studies that address these necessary subjects. Rather, this book attempts to use the material, stylistic, and technical qualities of these objects to grant insight into the minds of the people that produced and used them. As Graves' thoughtful interpretations reveal, these minds were adept with verbal and visual metaphor and delighted in semiotic complexity.

It is not only the objects themselves that invite the art historian to use the work of the hand to illuminate the workings of the mind. Medieval Islamic sources also point in this direction, as Graves demonstrates in the first chapter of the book. Here, a variety of sources in the history of Islamic philosophy, including the Ikhwan al-Safa', Miskawayh, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Khaldun, are marshaled to suggest that craftsmanship was understood as an intellectual activity. Aside from explicit statements that connect the hand to the intellect, Graves points to the profusion of references to making and makers in the sources that speak to what she calls a "material imagination".⁴ Examples include the metaphor of God as divine artisan conveyed in many theological texts, and the way that the process of knowledge acquisition is likened by philosophers to the impression of a stone seal in clay. The survey of sources lays out a theory of the "intellect of the hand" or a "thinking hand" in medieval Islam, paving the way for the following chapters, which provide detailed discussions of archimorphic objects and the intelligent hands that produced them.

Chapter Two explores the ways that the use of architectonic elements as motifs to adorn objects can transform the significance of those objects. Graves begins from the premise that the arches, doorways, windows, columns, and other

⁴ Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 38-42.

architectural motifs that frequently appear on objects in the central Islamic lands between the eighth and thirteenth century allude to the idea of architecture rather than attempt to represent actual buildings. The abstract and playful manner in which these motifs often appear supports this premise. A second important argument is that the architectural motifs were not treated by the craftsmen as two-dimensional “skins” applied to the surface, but cleverly engage with the form of the object in ways that alter the viewer’s perception of space, either by dividing up the surface, offering the illusion of three-dimensionality, or, in many cases, merging with the form of the object as actual three-dimensional sculptural elements.

The proliferation of objects adorned with arcade motifs in the early and medieval Islamic period serves to illustrate these propositions. In the eighth century, for example, arcades appeared on Qur’an folios, boxes to hold Qur’ans, and on architectural features such as mihrabs. Arguments that these arcades are meant to represent a specific monument do not get one very far. Beginning with the notion that these decorations allude to the idea of an arcade and its various associations is more productive. Graves demonstrates that arcades were associated in late Antiquity with thresholds, which connote both passageways and boundaries, evoking borders and liminality, hence their use in funerary contexts. With these associations in mind, the motifs on the early Islamic examples may be seen to transform the objects they adorn into points of contact between sacred and profane. The box, the folio, and the mihrab decorated with arches become mediators or, as Graves suggests, “cordons sanitaires” for what lies within or beyond. The argument is strengthened through the discussion of a plethora of objects and architectural elements produced in the thirteenth-century Jazira (northern Iraq and Syria, and southeastern Turkey), where the arcade appears in conjunction with well-established apotropaic motifs such as knotted serpents, frontal figures, and menacing beasts. In the context of some shrines and fortresses, the arcade motif also appears on the frames of gateways, thus in the context of actual thresholds. Graves points to the way which the motifs no longer lay flat on the surface of these objects but take on more three-dimensional forms. In ceramic water storage jars produced in and around Mosul, the arcades merge with the handles and mouths of the jars to provide three-dimensional lairs for human figures and lurking animals ready to protect the vessels’ aqueous contents. Thus, whereas the arcades on the earlier examples of Qur’an boxes and mihrabs remind the viewer that the object serves the function of demarcating space, the motifs on the later vessels actually create miniature spaces, changing the form of the jar’s mouth in the viewer’s mind to a miniature shrine or fortress.

In Chapter Three, Graves continues to explore ways that the idea of space is manufactured in archimorphic objects, focusing specifically on how the incorporation of human forms into or alongside motifs like arches changes one’s perception of the object and enhances its allusions to architecture. A group of metal inkwells attributed to twelfth and thirteenth century Khurasan (modern-day

northeastern Iran, Afghanistan, and southern Turkmenistan) provides a case study. The inkwells are cylindrical in form, usually featuring extensive inlaid decorations and inscription bands, and are surmounted by lids that vaguely resemble domes. Based on these dome-like lids, one group of scholars has seen these as archimorphic, referencing monumental building types such as tomb towers (or, as Graves suggests, tents or perhaps even Buddhist stupas). Others do not see an architectural reference. Thus, these objects have proven to be ambiguous, hovering between interpretations and resisting categorization. One subgroup of these inkwells features arch-shaped medallions inhabited by seated figures, which Graves argues allow the architectural references to be seen more easily. Aside from suggesting depth (the illusion of the figure being seated “inside” the arch), these inhabited arches also provide a sense of scale, much like the technique of placing people in photos of archaeological excavations or architectural interiors. The opening of spatial interpretations brought about by the conjunction of human figure and arch motif is pushed further in a group of inkwells that contain depictions of figures between rather than within arched medallions. Graves demonstrates how the arches not only make the space architectonic, allowing the viewer to read the framing inscription bands as a “floor” and “ceiling,” but also add a theatrical dimension to the experience of the vessels. When one considers the fact that the viewer would have rotated the cylindrical objects and seen the images in a sequence, it becomes clear that the arches enhance the narrative function of the images, dividing scenes, sometimes suggesting that the figures are in a room and other times suggesting movement between indoors and outdoors.

The analysis of the inkwells suggests that there is no one correct way of reading these objects. They can be seen as archimorphic or not, and even in the examples with arched medallions where the architectural reference is more obvious, the motif assumes different functions across the group. The non-fixity of the architectural references resonates with ideas expounded in the writings of medieval literary critics, particularly al-Farabi and his followers, who valued imaginative, indirect imitation rather than mimetic representation in poetry⁵. The inkwells also offer the opportunity for art historians to reflect on modern theories of perception. Throughout the chapter, Graves utilizes Merleau-Ponty’s model of “seeing-with” as an interpretative framework, encouraging the reader to consider the conditions of viewing and the inherent qualities of the medium in addition to the intent of the artist and the gaze of the viewer⁶. The inkwells, whose images convey different narratives depending on where one begins rotating the object, and whose forms might appear more or less architectural depending on the angle at which they are viewed, lend themselves to productive conversations with this and other frameworks that destabilize the idea of monolithic meanings attributed to visual art.

⁵ Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 139, and the studies cited in footnotes 127-30.

⁶ This concept is introduced in *Arts of Allusion*, 98-101 with relevant citations to other studies.

The final two chapters explore the resonances between verbal and plastic arts, demonstrating that certain concepts in medieval Islamic literary criticism can provide useful lenses for the interpretation of coeval visual culture. In the Islamic tradition, the most explicit writing about aesthetics comes in the form of literary criticism, and it could be argued that fine writing was considered to be the highest form of artistic creativity, with poetry occupying the very top of the hierarchy. For this reason, historians of Islamic art have often turned to the copious and highly sophisticated literature on poetry and rhetoric in Arabic and Persian to understand the inventive forms taken by architectural ornament and painting⁷. Bolstering this multidisciplinary approach is the fact that medieval Islamic literary critics frequently used finely crafted objects as an analogy to describe finely executed verse. A survey in Chapter Four reminds the reader that weaving, jewel- and metalsmithing, and building are all used as metaphors for the poet's craft in literary criticism of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Thus, the arrangement of the parts of poem are like the orderly stringing of jewels on a necklace, and a unified poem is like an object cast in one piece from metal.

Arts of Allusion contributes substantially to this methodological strand in the historiography of Islamic art. Both its focus on three-dimensional objects (as opposed to architecture or painting) and its sustained exploration of the idea of indirect expression as a literary concept that might aid the analysis of visual art represent under-explored directions. While the term "allusion" has been used throughout the book to describe indirect visual referencing, the literary corollary explored in these chapters as a way to think through allusive objects is a cluster of rhetorical devices that could be grouped under the concept of metaphor, which Graves further defines as "the principle of making something become something else in the mind of the beholder or listener or, more simply, seeing one thing as another".⁸ The bulk of Chapter Four is devoted to looking closely at different types of archimorphic objects that may have served as visual metaphors. Seen through the lens of the writings of thinkers such as Ibn al-'Arabi, who described the imagination as using material metaphors to understand abstract concepts, incense burners and lamps shaped as domed buildings become convincing representations of the

⁷ For some examples, see Oleg Grabar and Cynthia Robinson, eds, *Islamic Art and Literature*, Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2001. The discourse on poetics and architecture is perhaps most developed in the context of Islamic Spain, where architectural ornament evolved to resemble poetic descriptions of fantastical monuments and poetry describing architecture appeared on buildings. See Cynthia Robinson, *In Praise of Song: The Making of Courtly Culture in Al-Andalus and Provence, 1005–1134 A.D.*, Leiden: Brill, 2002; and Olga Bush, *Reframing the Alhambra: Architecture, Poetry, Textiles and Court Ceremonial*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. The role of poetry in Umayyad palace architecture, both as a source of iconography and as a mental model for the organization of images, is discussed in Garth Fowden, *Qusa'ir 'Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004, 79-84, 85-88, and 308-10.

⁸ Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 143.

concept of holiness and visualize the Qur'anic metaphor of God as light. Adding weight to this later interpretation is the author's comparison of the Islamic domed-building-lanterns to an archimorphic polycandelson from the Byzantine era, in which a series of candle holders radiate from a central model of a cathedral. In the medieval Islamic period, candle and domed building merged into one inseparable form.

Chapter five continues the exploration of literary frameworks for understanding plastic arts, looking at an extraordinary class of objects that not only allude to the form and function of architectural monuments, but recreate aspects of the experience of moving through them. This later operation is carried out through a kind of visual ekphrasis of monumental architecture in the ornamentation of the objects, whose structure Graves compares to architectural descriptions in Arabic poetry. The objects at hand are intriguing and idiosyncratic enough to merit a brief explanation here: they are a group of stands for water jugs carved from stone produced in medieval Cairo called *kilgas*. These stands usually comprise a hollow, octagonal base set on four feet into which the bottom of a large water storage jar would have been set (fig. 1). From this octagonal base, a shallow trough extends from one side where water that seeped from the bottom of the jar collected. The *kilgas* are of interest for their exuberant decorations consisting of various architectonic forms that evoke the function and experience of architecture, including inscriptions, representations of muqarnas niches, windows, and arches.



Figure 1: Stand for Water Jar (*kilga*) made of carved marble. Attributed to Egypt or Syria, 11th–first half of 12th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1920. Open Access image source:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/447320>

Graves makes a layered argument for how the stands relate to their architectural referents. Most directly, the muqarnas niches and the form of the base as an octagon evoke the domed exteriors of many a medieval Cairene mosque or tomb, triggering the allusion to architecture. Two of the motifs that appear on these stands - miniature lion's heads and *shadirwans* (a type of weir flanked by steps) - evoke the specific function of monumental fountains as they were both parts of elaborate waterworks in the Mediterranean region. Yet, the ornament program invites a deeper engagement with the idea of monumental architecture. The inscription bands that encircle the stands encourage the viewer to circle their perimeters, initiating a mode of viewing reminiscent of walking through a building. Moreover, the manner in which the artisans who carved these stands introduced fragmentary images of architectonic components presents a striking parallel to the way that monumental architecture is described in Arabic poetry. The paradigmatic examples of architectural ekphrasis in the Arabic tradition are the descriptions of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil's palaces by court poets al-Buhturi and 'Ali ibn al-Jahm⁹. In these poems, the palaces of the caliph appear as series of architectural vignettes: a towering dome, a mosaic panel, a garden with palms, a fountain with a water jet¹⁰. These are not room-by-room descriptions, nor attempts at conveying a complete image of a palace, but a series of fleeting images of splendor that replicate the experience of visiting an Abbasid palace¹¹. Seen through the lens of Arabic architectural description, the *kilgas* and their seemingly disconnected yet detailed architectonic motifs convincingly become "microcosmic odes to water architecture".¹² Both visual and verbal modes of architectural ekphrasis, Graves argues, manifest one way of understanding the structure of the creative mind itself expressed in contemporary texts, based on a set of internal faculties that received, processed, stored, re-combined, and re-fashioned bits of sensory information. This observation also has potential implications for understanding monumental architecture in the medieval Islamic tradition.

Having summarized the arguments put forth in this impressive book, a few comments will serve to highlight some particularly striking contributions and

⁹ For a survey of themes in these poems, see Julie Scott Meisami, 'The Palace-Complex as Emblem: Some Samarran *Qaṣīdas*', in Chase F. Robinson, ed, *A Medieval Islamic City Reconsidered: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Samarra*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 69-78.

¹⁰ See the translation of a poem describing an unidentified palace of Mutawakkil in Matthew Saba, *Impermanent Monuments, Lasting Legacies: The Dār al-Khilāfa of Samarra and Palace Building in Early Abbasid Iraq*, Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2022, 83.

¹¹ Ḥilāl ibn al-Muḥassin al-Ṣābi', *Rusūm Dār al-Khilāfa = The Rules and Regulations of the Abbasid Court*, translated by Elie A. Salem, Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1977, 16-18.

¹² Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 210.

provocations. First, it is worth noting that the inventory of object types synthesized in this book is quite remarkable. The kinds of artifacts that Graves brings together are more likely to be left out of the sort of speculative iconographic and contextual analyses of medieval objects that the field of Islamic art needs more of, either because of the generic nature of their decorations or the humility of their material. Few other scholarly works treat such artifacts with this level of nuance, although similar examples to the objects discussed here are found in numerous museum collections and cannot be ignored.

In fact, *Arts of Allusion* invites us to see these art-historical difficulties as an opportunity rather than a problem. When the makers and patrons of a vessel are unknown, when its form and decoration resist precise interpretation, and when its point of origin in geography and time are even in dispute, we are forced to let go of some of our most cherished methods of analyzing art. We cannot convincingly look at the object through the lens of individual intent or as part of a temporal or geographic style. The focus shifts instead to a broader arena of comparison in time and space, and opens the possibility of seeing objects as parts of larger historical patterns that not only implicate the artworks themselves but other products of the societies that produced them¹³. In setting aside the idea of precise mimetic referents, Graves' analysis may also be put into communication with other recent research in the field of Islamic art and architecture, which suggests with increasing nuance the ways that polysemy played an important role in both the visual and verbal arts of the early Islamic period and, more broadly, in the world of late Antiquity¹⁴.

One of the delights of reading the book is the discussion of objects in light of texts: filigreed armllets are seen in light of metaphors of the working of the intellect; incense burners and lanterns of a vague domed form take on significance in light of Farabi's conception of the beauty of indirect depiction; and bases for holding water jugs decorated with a series of architectural allusions make better sense in light of Ibn Sina's understanding of the manner in which the imagination processes sensory input. Graves' efforts open the possibility that inspiration might also flow in the opposite direction, both then and now. Might the ideas of the medieval Islamic philosophers and literary critics have been informed, refined, or adjusted in part by the world of intricate, useful objects in which they lived, in addition to their readings and discussions? Or might we as historians use this incredibly rich material record to illuminate the literary masterpieces? One imagines the ninth-

¹³ George Kubler, who also grappled with the interpretation of series of objects with unknown makers and users, may have been speaking in part to this opportunity when he said that "the historian's special contribution is the discovery of the manifold shapes of time." On this aim and the related critique of the limits of the "biological" models of both artist-biography and style-history as art-historical approaches, see George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962, reprinted 1976, 5-16.

¹⁴ For example, Alain George, *The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus: Art, Faith, and Empire in Early Islam*, London: Gingko, 2021, 204-9.

century polymath and essayist al-Jahiz in his library, pausing from a morning of thinking through questions of effective speech in a draft of his *Kitab al-Bayan wa'l-tabyin* (*The Book of Clarity and Clarification*). The reflected light off a small ceramic bowl sitting on a stack of books catches his eye. The bowl is made of yellowish Mesopotamian clay, but its surface has been disguised with a tin-opacified glaze that mimics the look and glint of imported porcelain. This glaze has been further adorned with decorations in cobalt blue, which form what might be a pithy Arabic aphorism, and what might be a series of vegetal forms, or both. The blue glaze has been encouraged to run a bit in the firing, heightening the ambiguity of the pseudo-inscriptions. Jahiz picks it up and holds it in the palm of his hand. He smiles knowingly and returns to the draft, his zest for laying out the underpinnings of verbal eloquence renewed and perhaps even sharpened during an everyday encounter with an object that seemingly makes a theme of the complex relationship between form, word, and meaning, revealing something of the intellect of the hand that made it.

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