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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Fatimid Woodwork in Egypt: Its Style, Influences and Development

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

by

Fatema AlSulaiti

B.A. Interior Design

under the supervision of Dr. George Scanlon

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Among all the dynasties that ruled the Islamic world during the medieval period, the Fatimid Dynasty, ruling over parts of North Africa and Egypt from 909 A.D. to 1171 A.D., was among the most active in its patronage of the arts. These items included textiles, ceramics, carved wood, ivory and rock crystal, which have survived the test of time. These luxurious materials were decorated with beautiful Arabic inscriptions and original creative motifs.

For two centuries, the Fatimids ruled from their capital, al-Qahira in Egypt. Their economy thrived on the great wealth of the Nile, with agriculture as the main pillar. Egypt's ideal location between the Mediterranean and Red Seas made it a prominent port for long distance trade among the markets of Europe, India and the Far East. The Geniza documents contain an account of commercial ties between Muslim and other communities in Fatimid Cairo, illuminating details of exchange between them.¹

Fatimid art is considered to be one of the most distinctive when compared to contemporaneous dynasties of the Muslim world. Art flourished under their reign, as they possessed great wealth that allowed them to spend lavishly. Due in part to their prosperity, they became a dominant voice in the Mediterranean area. However, this was not always the case; there was a time when Egypt was devastated by repeated famines and plague, the threat of Seljuk Turks, high taxation incurred to support the troops and the great expenditure of the luxurious court. These factors helped to precipitate social crises during the dynasty's tenure.

¹ Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 148.

Fatimid wealth allowed Egypt to produce great quantities of rich items, with crafts being a key form of artistic expression. The dry climate helped retard the decay process of artifacts, textiles, stone carving, metalwork, ceramics, carved wood, and other items, leaving several pieces for study today. Egypt has always had a wood deficiency but wooden furnishings were almost always found in mosques: minbars, lecterns, decorated panels, bands of inscriptions and wooden coffered ceilings. In some cases, old materials were re-used in new buildings, as occurred in the construction of the Fatimid palace panels that were found in the Māristān and Mosque of Qalāūn.²

Beautiful relics of the Fatimid Caliphate have been documented by important historians, such as al-Maqrīzī who lived during the Mamluk era but had an unusually keen interest in Fatimid history and their rule in Egypt. Many of their metal works, textiles, woodwork and ivory are considered rare treasures and exhibited today in several museums around the world.

The Fatimids were also known for their religious tolerance, a major basis for their diversity. This factor is thought in part to be one of the major reasons why art prospered during their period. Sunnis, Ismaʿilis, Copts and Jews represented an important sphere in Egypt. They benefited from the general Fatimid spirit of tolerance, except under the period of the caliphate of al-Hakim bi Amr Allah. Leadership also made use of the skillfulness of the Copts and Jews in industry and financial affairs, and entrusted them with many significant positions in office.³

Their administrative capital of al-Qahira stands proof of Fatimid original architectural aesthetic. Some of these innovative structures include towering protective city walls, mosques, mausoleums and shrines.

² Cyran, "Rediscovered Carved Panels of the Fatimid Palaces," 658.

³ Sayad, *al-Dawlah al-Fāṭimīyah fī Miṣr*, 502.

Artifacts are a testimony of the role played by any dynasty, and Fatimid art provides some of the finest examples of historic Islamic art. Unusual and innovative objects were created during their reign that distinguish their art from any other dynasty that ruled Egypt.

My purpose is to explore how far the decorative style of Fatimid art reflects other artistic styles of Islamic and non Islamic origins and the developments of the motifs in Fatimid carved woodwork. Many sources reported the influences on the style from other dynasties such as the Tūlūnids, or the impact of Coptic techniques. Another important consideration is to dwell further on Fatimid art so as to emphasize the Shi'a religious beliefs' influence, an attempt to show that Fatimid Shi'a art carried an iconographical message.

1.1 Fatimid religious beliefs and the origins of the Shi'a doctrine

The Fatimids derive their name from Fātima al-Zahra, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the wife of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, the cousin of the Prophet. The Fatimids themselves descended from Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Sādiq and his son Isma'il, Ja'far was al-Hasan ibn 'Ali's son-in-law. They believed that 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib was the rightful successor to Muhammad and thus rejected the legitimacy of the first three Rashidun caliphs.

The exact date marking the emergence of the Shi'a as a religious and political group is controversial. Some historians claim that they appeared during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad, while others such as Ibn al-Nadim, contend that the term "Shi'a" was used for the first time by 'Ali himself when describing his supporters in the war against Talha ibn 'Ubaidullah and al-Zubair ibn al-'Awwam, who had claimed the right to avenge the life of the assassinated caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān. It was also reported that 'Alī, directly after the death of Prophet

Muhammad (PBUH), showed strong political ambition and thought of himself as the rightful successor to the Prophet.⁴

Abū Bakr al-Siddīq, who was chosen by the Prophet to lead the Muslims in prayer during the last days of the Prophet's life, was therefore selected by the Muslims to be the first caliph. The Shi'a claim that such a choice outraged 'Ali and his followers. Due to the wisdom of Abū Bakr as-Siddīq and the second caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb, potential political divisions were subdued.⁵

Unfortunately, some of the decisions made by 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, the third caliph and a wealthy Umayyad merchant, aroused the entrenched historical conflict over power between the Umayyads and the Hashimites. The result was the assassination of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān.⁶

Under the leadership of Mu'āwīya ibn Abī Sufyān, the Ummayyads called for revenge against the assassins and whoever had supported them. In fact, Mu'āwīya was attempting to incite the Muslims against 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib and claimed that 'Ali was protecting the assassins. As a result of Mu'āwīya's cunning, the Islamic state was divided between the Umayyads under Mu'āwīya and the Hashemites, their lifelong enemies, under the leadership of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib and his followers, who were called the Shi'a of 'Ali.⁷

Shi'a beliefs, as established by the leaders of the Shi'a sect, were influenced by political theories of the Persians, who trusted in the sacredness of the king. This conviction is the origin of the Shi'a concept of the Imāmah, which follows after prophethood. In order to give their political claims a religious foundation, the leaders of the Shi'a cited the statement of Prophet Muhammad

⁴ Ahmad, *Tārīkh Miṣr wa-āthāruhā al-Islāmīyah*, 137.

⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁷ Ibid., 139.

(PBUH) that those who support the Prophet should support ‘Ali. The Shi‘a interpreted this saying of the Prophet as evidence that he had appointed ‘Alī to be his direct successor.⁸

The political struggle between the Hashimites and the Umayyads culminated in the Battle of Siffin in 657 A.D. (38 H.), which ended with the legendary arbitration incident and the dissolution of ‘Ali's coalition with the formation of the Kharijites. The Kharijites believed that any Muslim could be a leader of the Muslim community. They developed a variety of theological and legal doctrines that further set them apart from both Sunni and Shiite Muslims. It was in the mosque of al-Kūfah that ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muljam, a Kharijite, killed ‘Ali in January 661 A.D. (40 H.).⁹

Sympathizing with the sons of ‘Alī, the Shi‘a nominated Husayn ibn ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib to be the next caliph. Husayn, widely respected as a far sighted and wise man saw that since the Muslims in Bilad al-Shām, Egypt, al- Hijaz and Yemen supported Mu‘āwīya, while those of Iraq did not stand by his father ‘Ali, he agreed to make peace with Mu‘āwīya in order to stop shedding Muslim blood.¹⁰

The death of Mu‘āwīya 680 A.D. (61 H.) and the designation of his son Yazīd as caliph sparked riots in Islamic cities all over the region, particularly in Mecca and Kūfah. The Shi‘a in Kūfah then moved to called Husayn ibn ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib the rightful caliph, who then hurried to Kūfah in response to its people. At Karbala in 680 A.D. (61 H.) before al-Husayn and his followers reached Kūfah, they came to an unsightly and early end with their killing by the Umayyad supporters. The Shi‘a called for avenging the death of Husayn and moving against his Umayyad killers who began to curse ‘Ali in their prayers. Meanwhile, the Abbasids, descendant

⁸ Ibid., 140.

⁹ Ibid., 140.

¹⁰ Ibid., 141.

from the uncle of the Prophet al-‘Abbās, deceived the Shi‘a into believing that they had Abbasid support. After the later fall of Umayyad rule 750 A.D. (132 H.) brought succession of the Abbasids, the followers of ‘Ali realized the deception and a series of brutal battles between the Abbasids and the Shi‘a began.¹¹

Roughly three hundred branches evolved from the growing number of Shi‘a. In 765 A.D. the death of Imām Ja‘far al-Sādiq, who had held the Shi‘a together as a unified body, initiated their division into multiple branches. The Twelvers became the largest branch within Shi‘a Islam, with approximately 85 % of Shi‘a today belonging to the sect. The Twelvers believe that the twelfth and final Imām is Muhammad al-Māhdī, whom they believe to be currently alive and in occultation.¹²

Further, according to early Ismā‘īlī doctrine, the second largest branch of Shi‘ism, this messianic figure, Ismā‘īl himself reappearing as the Mahdi, would reveal the inner truths of the religion in its purest form (bātin).¹³ This Ismā‘īlī belief notably differs from that of the Twelver sect, who believe that the twelfth imam is the Mahdi. The Ismā‘īlīs, in addition to believing that Muhammad is the messenger of God and that ‘Ali is his successor and Master of the Believers, or the walī of God, hold that the Imāmah must come through appointment from the Imam to his successor. Moreover, according to Ismā‘īlism, the Imāmah is transferred from the father to his son and not from one Imam to his brother. The Ismā‘īlī derive their name from their acceptance of Ismā‘īl ibn Ja‘far as the divinely appointed spiritual successor (Imām) to Ja‘far al-Sādiq 762 A.D. (145 H).¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 142.

¹² Ibid., 143.

¹³ Taqoush, *Tārīkh al-fatimiyyin fī shamālī afriqiya wa misr wa bilād al-shām*, 52.

¹⁴ Al-Maqrizi, *Itt‘az al-hunafa bi-akhbar al-a‘immah al-fatimiyyin al-khulafa*, 15.

Ismā‘īlism emerged in the middle of the ninth century in Iranian Khuzistan. The movement of Ismā‘īlism to Syria took place when ‘Ubayd Allāh, a wealthy merchant and the religious teacher of the Ismā‘īlī doctrine, had to take refuge in Hama while escaping the threat of the Abbasids. Ismā‘īlism reached Iraq and the first Ismā‘īlī group was founded there between 875 and 878 A.D., then following in Yemen between 881 and 882 A.D. and later in 893 A.D. in al-Maghreb.¹⁵

Ismā‘īlism was forced into esotericism and underground politics due to suppression by the Abbasids. Therefore, *da‘i*-s (missionaries) were sent to Bahrain, Egypt, Yemen, India and Maghreb where the Ismā‘īlīs founded their first dynasty (910 A.D./ 297 H.). In 909 A.D., ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Māhdi Bil-lāh, a claimant to the Ismā‘īlī Imāmate, established the Fatimid Empire, a political power where Ismā‘īlī Imāms would rule for centuries.¹⁶ By the end of the tenth century, the Fatimid controlled the three holiest cities for Muslims—Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem—and as a result, believed their ambitions of controlling the Muslim world would be fulfilled.¹⁷

1.2 The arrival of Ismā‘īlism to North Africa

The Fatimids established their own rival Caliphate in 909 A.D. based first in North Africa. Bloom reports the movement of Ismā‘īlism to North Africa and Egypt as the beginning of the Fatimid era, whose leaders claimed to be descendant from Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima through Ismā‘īl, the seventh Shi‘a Imām. The Fatimids would gain increasing masses of followers and therefore, begin to overpower the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad. They claimed that

¹⁵ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 1.

¹⁶ Ahmad, *Tārīkh Miṣr wa-āthāruhā al-Islāmīyah*, 145.

¹⁷ Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*, 87.

they would soon lead the Islamic world to a more peaceful and harmonious path, envisioning the reunification of Dār al-Islam under their white banners.¹⁸

The spread towards North Africa and Egypt began with brothers Abu'l-‘Abbas and ‘Ubayd Allah relocating from Kūfah to Egypt in the ninth century. Whereas Abu'l-‘Abbas traveled between Egypt and Salamiya serving the Ismā‘īlī doctrine, his brother ‘Ubayd Allah went to al-Maghreb to found the Fatimid dynasty (969-1171 A.D.).

‘Ubayd Allah became the founder of the grandest Shi‘a Caliphate of the era, when power was centralized in the hand of the Sunni Abbasids in Baghdad. He became the first Shi‘a Imām and called himself ‘Ubayd Allah al-Māhdī, claiming that the origin of this dynasty was to be dated back to the time of the Prophet Mohamed’s daughter.¹⁹ He established the Fatimid state in North Africa in 909 A.D./ 296 H. and was later succeeded by his son, who took the regal title al-Qa’im, in 934 A.D./ 322 H. Al-Qa’im (943-45 A.D./ 322-34 H.) strengthened Fatimid power in North Africa by joining in alliance with another Berber group, the Sanhaja.²⁰

The Fatimids ruled the area of al-Maghreb from Tunisia and expanding to Sicily and in the south of Italy. In 947-948 A.D., the Fatimids moved to Mansuriyya, another city in the suburbs of Kairouan in Tunisia. By mid-century, the dynasty controlled most of Northern Africa, except for intermittent struggles that arose with the Sunni Umayyad caliphs of Spain.²¹

Simultaneously, the Fatimid leader of the Salamiya group Abu'l-‘Abbas was threatened by the Abbasid authorities and, with a small group of followers, fled through Ramallah in

¹⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁹ Abbas, “The Fatimids (969-1171),” 47.

²⁰ Sanders, *Rituals, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, 2.

²¹ Bloom, “The Fatimids (909-1171), Their Ideology and Their Art,” 1.

Palestine to al-Fustat, the then capital of Egypt. Upon arrival, he was welcomed by the Ismā‘īlī missionary Hamdān Qarmat.

The existence of the representative Hamdān Qarmat is regarded by Bloom as evidence for the intention of the Ismā‘īlīs to take over Egypt. Bloom observed that it was the missionaries and not the leader of the Ismā‘īlī movement who played the major role in establishing the Fatimid dynasty.²² Their expansion to the Middle East occurred at the expense of some territorial losses in North Africa, but they managed to take over Syria, the Arabian Peninsula and with the inclusion of Egypt within their sphere, they established the city of al-Mahdiya in what is now modern Cairo.

During this stage of territorial expansion the Fatimids gained immense power and wealth. However, later turmoil and diminishing strength of their influence would oblige them to reach out for help until the Fatimids found themselves in the hands of Salāh al-Dīn in 1171 A.D.²³

1.3 The arrival of the Shi‘a Fatimids in Egypt

When al-Mu‘izz came to power in 953 A.D./ 342 H., his rise marked a turning point in the history of the Fatimid dynasty. Al-Mu‘izz succeeded in conquering Egypt in 969 A.D./358 H. after three previous attempts were made—twice by ‘Ubayd Allah and once by al-Qa’im. The commander Jawhar led the campaign and founded a new capital city, Cairo.²⁴ In turn, Egypt became the center of an empire that, at its peak in North Africa, included Sicily, Palestine, Syria, the Red Sea coast of Africa, Yemen and the Hijaz.

²² Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 17.

²³ Abbas, “The Fatimids (969-117),” 147.

²⁴ Sanders, *Rituals, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, 2.

What was Egypt's internal situation at the time of invasion and who had been the real authority over Egypt? When the Fatimids first arrived, Egypt was in the hands of Kafūr, originally a slave from Ethiopia. Kafūr became the leader of the Ikhshidid armies and the ruler of the Ikhshidid kingdom after succeeding his master Muhāmmad bin Tughj. With the arrival of Fatimid influence into Egypt, they and the Hamdanids together stirred up disputes over Kafūr's authority. Nonetheless, proving to be a highly politically adept individual, Kafur managed to maintain his power over Egypt.²⁵

Several factors together paved the way for the Fatimids to achieve their objective of conquering Egypt for themselves. Most crucial among them was the deteriorating economic status during the last days of the Ikhshidid era (963-986 A.D./ 352-358 H.) Such was brought about by the continuous decline in the water level of the Nile, compounded by a sharp increase in the cost of living and commodity prices due to plunging tax value. Some Egyptians complained of Ikhshidid rule and realizing the current weakness of the Abbasid Caliphate, could no longer endure the situation and called upon al-Mu'izz in Africa to send his soldiers and promised to hand over the reins of Egypt to him. Moreover, the death of Kafūr in 968 A.D. /357 H. eliminated the last obstacle in the way of the Fatimids eventually achieving their goal of dominance over Egypt, as he had no strong successor.²⁶

The Fatimids in North Africa waited over half a century for the ripe opportunity to take over Egypt. Ya'qub bin Killis, a Jew from Iraq who converted to Islam during the time of Kafūr, escaped to Africa and met al-Mu'izz, informing him of the political and economic crises afflicting Egypt. Thus al-Mu'izz found it an appropriate opportunity to send his army to invade.

²⁵ Sayad, *al-Dawlah al-Fātimīyah fī Miṣr*, 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

Preparation began first with Fatimid preachers increasing their activity in Egypt and succeeding to attract masses of its people. Next, the Fatimids dug wells along the road to Egypt, readying the path for their army under the commandment of Jawhar al-Siqilli. They also distributed Fatimid flags among the Egyptians in order to mark their supporters.²⁷

As astrology guided the actions of the Fatimids, al-Mu'izz decided to invade Egypt only after consulting his astrologists.²⁸ Al-Mu'izz and General Jawhar al-Saqli's careful strategic planning and use of 100,000 soldiers and a naval fleet, met easy success in the expedition after reaching Alexandria in April/May 969 A.D. After defeating the Egyptian army on the east bank, al-Fustat was conquered. Jawhar and the invading army set up camp to the northeast of al-Qatta'i', in what is now modern Cairo.²⁹

On that very night, Jawhar chose the site of the camp—a location between al-Qatta'i' and al-Fustat—which would host the Caliph after his arrival to Egypt, and work on the foundation of the camp fortress began immediately.³⁰ The design of the settlement followed Jawhar's desire to separate the caliph and his armies from the general public. Toward this end, Jawhar also built a wall, which during daylight hours, proved to be uneven. Remnants of the 1,200 m² sun-dried brick wall survived until 803 H.³¹

This walled city, to the north of al-Qatta'i', became the political centre of the new dynasty, while al-Fustat remained the economic centre. Only some noteworthy gates and fragments of the old Fatimid city walls remain today. Yet, the greater area of old Cairo falls within those

²⁷ Ahmad, *Tārīkh Miṣr wa-āthāruhā al-Islāmīyah*, 146.

²⁸ Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt, 1: Ikhshidids and Fatimids*, 51.

²⁹ Yeomans, *The Art and architecture of Islamic Cairo*, 67.

³⁰ Bloom, *Art of the City Victorious*, 55.

³¹ Creswell, *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt, 1: Ikhshidids and Fatimids*, 181.

boundaries and alignment of the Fatimid streets remains the same, containing many of Cairo's most important medieval buildings, as well as the craft and commercial area known as the Khan-al-Khalili, built exactly on the site of the royal Fatimid cemetery.³²

The city was originally given the name al-Mansuriyya, which lasted until al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah came to Egypt four years later in 972 A.D./ 362 H. and changed its name to al-Qahira. The Fatimid Caliph also arrived with the three coffins of his father and grandfathers, symbolizing his intention to move permanently and establish the true center of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt.³³

1.4 The Fatimids in Egypt

Cairo traces its origins in the Islamic period back to al-Fustat, the first city in Egypt established by Muslims. But it was under the Fatimids that al-Qahira reached its apex and, became a major metropolis in the region attracting a wide range of inhabitants from Coptic artisans and merchants to administrators who all worked alongside their Muslim brethren.³⁴

The Fatimids were also leaders of a great religious, philosophical and social movement intended to spread their beliefs as the right principles of the Islamic faith. The establishment of their Caliphate in Egypt was strengthened by its exceptional geographical location, as well as its distinguished political and historical status. The Fatimids, aware the Muslim world aspired to be a leading state, found that Egypt with its abundant resources and strategic location in the center of the Muslim world was the ideal country from which to achieve their strategic objectives, namely controlling the entire Islamic world.³⁵ This expansive Muslim empire ranging from North Africa, Syria, Palestine and to the Hijaz grew immensely in power from its earlier days under the

³² Ibid., 69.

³³ Ibid., 21.

³⁴ Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*, 116.

³⁵ Sayad, *al-Dawlah al-Fāṭimīyah fi Miṣr*, 140.

Sunni Caliphate, and their influence on political, religious and cultural, as well as on architecture and urban design of Islamic Egypt was enormous.³⁶

The Fatimid state had a solid religious foundation and every political organization within reflected the core religious doctrine, motivated as well by the desire to lead as a good example of the devout and principled Islamic state, they believed that they had inherited spiritual authority over the Islamic world.³⁷

The power of the Fatimid state emerged from the capabilities of all individuals affiliated with the various racial and social blocs comprising the whole of the Egyptian people. While the original population had included Coptic Christians and Sunni Muslims, the population now expanded to include Maghrebis, Sudanese, Armenians and Sicilians, creating great diversity and wealth potential from the mixing of different peoples.³⁸ Fatimids sought the assistance of foreign elements, especially the Maghrebis, Turks, Dailamites, Sudanese and Armenians, and benefited greatly from the experience of Jews and Christians in financial affairs, entrusting them with the major jobs of the State from which Sunnis and other Muslims were excluded.

But in this way, the Fatimids ruled Egypt as a minority government separated from their subjects in part due to their religious opinions, which deprived them of support from the country's true inhabitants. Additionally, while Ismā'īlism had not taken root in North Africa after decades of propaganda, the Fatimids were beginning to see that Egypt, with its population of Christians and Sunni Muslims, was not fertile land to receive their preaching.³⁹

³⁶ Ahmad, *Tārīkh Miṣr wa-āthāruhā al-Islāmīyah*, 151.

³⁷ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 199.

³⁸ Sayad, *al-Dawlah al-Fāṭimīyah fī Miṣr*, 141.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

Al-Mu'izz did not intend to preach in Egypt, except within the narrowest limitations, the high officials who accepted their jurisprudence "*Madh'hab*" were to guide the Egyptian people into embracing the Ismā'īlī doctrine. Fatimid leadership was satisfied giving the state's high offices to free non-Muslims in addition to those who embraced their doctrine. At the finale of Fatimid rule in Egypt, all Ismā'īlīs were incorporated into the governing authority.

While Fatimid rule in Egypt began with Jawhar's declaration promising to protect Egyptians from the Byzantines, realize economic improvements, enhance national security and both restore old and construct new mosques, these initial remarks reflected the leadership's intent to win the acceptance of the Egyptian people. And so it followed during the first century of their Caliphate, in which caliphs superseded their viziers in authority, that unprecedented efforts were made to enhance governmental administration, the army, the navy, agriculture, commerce, science and the arts.

The Fatimids indeed followed through on their promise. "Politically the Fatimid period marked a new epoch in the history of the land, which for the first time since pharaonic days had completely sovereign power full of vitality and founded on a religious basis."⁴⁰ They protected Egypt against the invasion of the Qarmatians, entering into a treaty with the Byzantine Emperor that ensured the safety and security of their people. Moreover, leadership was religiously tolerant to followers of other religions, such that the people felt a sense of their own acceptance by the leadership without forced conversion. And so, the Egyptians enjoyed many Fatimid celebrations such as the Birth of Prophet Muhammad and the beginning of the new Hijra year, as well as celebrated non-Muslim holidays such as al-Nairuz and the holy Thursday. Such celebrations of non-Muslims proved the Fatimid's keenness to appeal to the public and win the favor of all

⁴⁰ Hitti, *History of the Arab*, 625.

Egyptians from across the religious spectrum. In fact, under Fatimid rule, Egyptians of different conviction had the freedom of their own religious practice, and non-Muslims were treated equally and assigned high positions within the government.⁴¹

1.5 Religious life

The Fatimids employed clever means of introducing their Shi'a beliefs to the Sunnis of Egypt, as the religious beliefs of the Fatimid dynasty were considered in opposition to those of the Abbasids. The core of the Fatimid belief system, in addition to holding that 'Alī is the Master of the Believers and the walī of God, is their belief in the Imāmah. According to the Shi'a, the reins of rulership were to be transferred from the father to the son, either through direct naming or nomination in a written will. Therefore, Jawhar decided not to perform Shi'a religious practices in Sunni mosques of Egypt, and thus began to build the Mosque of al-Azhar in 970 A.D./ 359 H., completed two years later. Al-Azhar Mosque was not only intended to serve as a congregational building, but was also intended to act as a centre for higher learning. With the dynasty's increase in wealth, the first university was established in this mosque during the reign of al-'Aziz. Al-Azhar continues to be the principle centre for Islamic theological scholarship in the Caliphate's intellectual center, where scholars and teachers prepared missionaries to preach in Egypt and beyond Fatimid frontiers in favor of their Caliph al claims.⁴²

Preaching Isma'ilism was the backbone of the Fatimid Caliphate and one of its most important features distinguishing it from other Islamic states. Although academic sources do not provide us with enough information about the role of the head preacher during the Fatimid period, it can be said that this figure had an important role to play in state affairs. According to

⁴¹ Holt and Lewis, *Cambridge History of Islam*, 184.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 185.

Ismā‘īlī doctrine, the head preacher is one of its pillars, and his status comes immediately next to the Imam. The head preacher, therefore, presides over the sessions of the Majlis al-Hikmah within the palace itself, al-Azhar mosque or in Dār al-Hikmah. Al-Qahira was, throughout the Fatimid age, the center of the “Ismā‘īlī Call” in the Muslim world. This “call” was centered in al-Azhar Mosque, al-Muhawwal, within the palace and in the House of Science (Wisdom), which served as the residence of the Fatimid grand preacher.⁴³

The Call represented the missionary activity of the Ismā‘īlī doctrine whose followers believed in the inevitability of its eventual dominance over the entire Muslim world. This doctrine was taught through public lectures called “Call Meetings” or “Wisdom Meetings.” Only believers or those about to convert were allowed to attend such gatherings, in which secrets of the Ismā‘īlī Call and the interior science were revealed, after submitting a signed commitment to the grand preacher.⁴⁴

The financial endowments of the caliphs to the scientists, philosophers, and literary men established al-Qahira as the center of culture and civilization. Libraries and manuscripts copying flourished as well, and it was said that the caliph al-‘Aziz owned a forty room library with more than eighteen thousand volumes on different disciplines of knowledge. In addition, there were two thousand nine hundred copies of Al-Quran beautifully bound and richly ornamented.⁴⁵

“There was vigorous encouragement of works on religion, on the exposition of Isma‘ili doctrines, on the allegorical commentary of Qur’an, on philosophy, and on the popularization of

⁴³ Sayad, *al-Dawlah al-Fātimīyah fi Miṣr*, 370.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 573.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 602.

scientific learning. The Fatimid period is characterized by a burst of intellectual curiosity analogues to that of the 18th century in Europe.”⁴⁶

1.6 Political life

Fatimid activities were directed toward striving to establish the Ismā‘īlī faith across the whole Islamic world. Whether through war or diplomacy, the Fatimids extended their territory eastward through Syria in the direction of Baghdad and the central and eastern Islamic lands.⁴⁷ The Fatimids were intent to win the support of free non-Muslims and in this way, adopted a policy of religious tolerance, as well giving positions of high office to non-Muslims albeit to those who embraced the doctrine of the state. Excluding uncharacteristic modes of treatment and punishment during the days of al-Hakim bi Amr Allah, to the non-Egyptians the Fatimid era represented a golden era, during which they could actively participate in the political and the public life of the Egyptian state.⁴⁸

The notion of religious tolerance had been adopted since the arrival of Caliph al-Mu‘izz to Egypt. Afraham al-Syriani, a patriarchal “father” asked al-Mu‘izz to grant him allowance to build the Church of Abu Marqura in Fustat and also the Hanging Church in Qasr al-Sham‘aa. The caliph gave the necessary funds from *Bait al-Mal* (state treasury), and when the people confronted the Copts to block the construction, al-Mu‘izz himself moved to supervise the process of laying for the foundations of the two churches and farther ordered that the building of churches must not be objected to.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Canard, “Fatimid,” 861.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 885.

⁴⁸ Sayad, *al-Dawlah al-Fātimīyah fī Miṣr*, 154.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 155.

Under these circumstances, it was not long before increasing numbers of Jews began to immigrate to Egypt. It was reported that until the middle of the 5th century H., a number of Jewish physicians, such as the Jewish Musa bin Al'azar, served the Fatimid Caliphs. It was likely that the Fatimids preferred free non-Muslim physicians to Sunnis, as the loyalty of the former was more strongly guaranteed.⁵⁰

Such religious tolerance continued and al-'Aziz Billah, following the death of Ibn Killis, entrusted the state's divans to the Christian 'Issa bin Nestorius in 994 A.D./384 H. and deputized a Jewish man Minsha bin Ibrāhim al-Qazzāz to govern Syria. This and other similar moves, in turn empowered free non-Muslims while simultaneously inciting the Sunni Muslims against them.

The inhabitants of al-Fustat, where the Sunnis of Egypt resided, recognized a good opportunity to express their fury against the preferential status of non-Muslims. Ibn al-Jawzi reported that the people of al-Fustat put a statue of a woman in the Caliph's procession with an attached note complaining of their sufferings under the rule of non-Muslims. Prior to this incident, the Caliph had been compelled to arrest both the head of the state Divan and his deputy in Syria who were non-Muslims.⁵¹

1.7 Economy

Before the time of the Fatimids, Egypt had endured its most economic crisis for over a century, beginning in 963 A.D./ 352 H. and continuing until three years after the Fatimid invasion. Initially, Jawhar was concerned foremost with finding a solution to the famine and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 155.

⁵¹ Ibid., 156.

stabilizing the regime. Then in 969 A.D./ 358 H., he called for eliminating the practice of bribery and restoring *Hishba* to Suleiman Ibn 'Azza, who was the second to rule *Hishba* during the Fatimid era. In this effort, Jawhar even convened grain dealers and brokers in one location and constructed only a single road to the market place, thus controlling the entrance and exit of all wheat tumbler. Nonetheless, prices remained high until 971 A.D./ 360 H. due to the shortage of Nile River water, which brought on severe epidemics and the spread of disease and death. Finally in 972 A.D./ 361 H., the land once again became fertile, with the signs of prosperity once again ending the famine⁵² A striking feature of the Fatimid economy was the freedom of enterprise. "All sectors of economic life were free—crafts, industry and trade. The government interfered in the trade in victuals only so far as it had to in order to guarantee the supply of wheat to the big towns."⁵³

The Fatimid adopted tolerance policy of other religions. They did not impose discriminatory customs tariffs by varying these according to people's beliefs; hence they were able to benefit from the Jews in trade and Copts in industry and financial administration.⁵⁴

As agriculture was the heart of Egyptian economic activities and fibers (flax) were the main source of income during this time, Jawhar focused on the renewal of earlier damaged bridges to improve the transport of raw materials and foodstuffs. He doubled the land tax from three and a half dinars to seven per acre and increased the liability of land to finance his direct expenses. The value of collected taxes in 970 A.D./ 59 H. reached 3,400,000 dinars and one year later to 3,200,000 dinars, which was unprecedented.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 146.

⁵³ Ashtor, 192-193.

⁵⁴ Canard, "Fatimid," 861.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 146.

1.8 Social life under the Fatimids

Magnificent and luxurious social living was not reserved for the Fatimid caliphs alone; ministers and senior men of state similarly enjoyed such extravagance. Fatimid celebrations were distinguished by lavishness and glamour, with feasting in excess. Such revelry was also an occasion during which silk robes of honor were granted to men of the state. Historians such as Ibn al-Ma'amun and Ibn al-Tuwair vividly portray details of the celebrations, additionally confirmed by eyewitnesses like Nasir-i Khusraw a Persian poet, Isma'ili scholar and traveler.⁵⁶ Most festivals and celebrations comprised holding huge banquets, the distribution of clothing, jewelry and other precious object to favored officials, as well as preparing special costumes for the caliph.

The Fatimid Caliphs and their ministers built resorts in al-Qahira and the suburbs of al-Fustat for the purposes of relaxation and recreation. The people would go out to watch the caliph's ride on a festive day. Moreover, a text dating back to 1123 A.D./ 517 H. cited by al-Maqrizi informs of the houses that were built for people to rent in order to hold public weddings celebrations.⁵⁷

A typical characteristic of the Fatimid Caliphate was their passion for living extravagantly luxurious social lives. This luxury was not only limited to the caliphs but also enjoyed by their viziers, high officials and in turn was reflected in public social life. In the book of *Kitab al-hadaya wa'l-tuhaf* (Gifts and Rarities) by al-Qadi al-Rashid b. al-Zubair, various anecdotes point to the interest of Fatimid rulers in collecting precious objects, textiles and beautiful furniture pieces, as well as commissioning masterpieces of artifacts. The handicrafts industry was by itself

⁵⁶ Sayad, *al-Dawlah al-Fāṭimīyah fī Miṣr*, 559.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 559.

a crucial one in the trading industry and the strategy of establishing diverse branches of industry became a hallmark of Fatimid Egypt. Several factors contributed to promoting industrial development in Egypt such as the luxury of the court, the need for a large and well-equipped army, the establishment of the great fleet and the opening of new markets due to the success of international trade.⁵⁸ Manufacture, which witnessed considerable development, included textiles and leather industries, various kinds of paper making, glass, pottery, jewelry, metal and wood crafts, as well as the better regulated manufacture of oil and sugar.⁵⁹

“The industrial arts were inherited from the pre-Islamic Coptic times. They were controlled by the government, which absorbed a large part of the product. The rest went to the luxury markets everywhere between Nile and Oxus and far beyond.”⁶⁰

1.9 The downfall of the Fatimid dynasty

While the Fatimids failed to attract the entire Muslim world to their side, they had at the same time to preserve their ideological challenges that led them to isolation and being outside the sphere of Muslim unity. As a result, they found themselves defeated and eventually disappeared from the political stage.

The first Fatimid caliphs were strong rulers who managed to keep the state strong and intact. It was after the second half of the rule of al-Mustansir that the Fatimid dynasty started to weaken. The crisis that occurred in the midst of al-Mustansir’s reign (1036-1094 A.D.) marks the beginning of Fatimid downfall. Sections of the Fatimid Empire began to lose its territories and the Seljuks won some foothold from the Fatimids in Syria such as Aleppo in 1060 A.D.,

⁵⁸ Ashtor, *Economic History of Near East*, 198.

⁵⁹ Canard, “Fatimid,” 860.

⁶⁰ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 25.

Jerusalem in 1071 A.D. and Damascus in 1076 A.D. The Zirids grew separate from the Fatimid Empire in 1040 A.D., North Africa, which encouraged other areas to spin away from the empire's reach, until their state spiraled rapidly to its downfall in 1171 A.D.(567 H.).⁶¹

Additional factors contributed to decline, such as riots within the army and the economic crisis that coincided with the emergence of the new Seljuk power in the region and the advent of the Crusaders.⁶² By the time the Seljuk Turks invaded the empire from the East, the civil war within had grown more serious. Finally, al-Mustansir called for the help of Badr al-Jāmāli, the Fatimid governor in Syria, in time Badr and his fellows viziers had become military dictators, making it close to impossible for al-Mustansir to regain control from them over the empire.⁶³

In the middle of the 11th century, North Africa declared itself independent from the Caliph at the time and al-Mustansir (1036-1094 A.D.) encouraged Bedouin tribes to devastate the region. Within the ten years following 1060 A.D., the Nile did not flood, resulting in famine and devastating social crises. While the Seljuks of Central Asia were conquering Iraq and Iran, attacking Palestine and Syria, and capturing Jerusalem and Damascus, the Fatimid caliph moved to appoint the governor of Damascus as his vizier in order to restore order to Egypt. The governor and his successors then assumed all political, judicial and civil duties from the caliphs. Moreover, by the end of the 11th century, European Crusaders had taken over Jerusalem (1099 A.D.) and controlled the entire Levantine coast (except for the city of Ascalon) by 1124 A.D., thus adding further devastation to the once solidly standing empire.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Weiss & Green, *A survey of Arab History*, 166.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶³ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 119.

⁶⁴ Bloom, "The Fatimids (909-1171), Their Ideology and Their Art," 16.

The later Fatimid caliphs proved weak and ineffective in comparison to their predecessors such as al-Mu'izz (953-975), al-'Aziz (975-996) and al-Mustansir (1036-1094). The country was devastated by repeated famines and plague. Adding to the misery was the high taxation in order to support the troops and the large expenditure of the luxurious court.⁶⁵

After the great crisis in the days of al-Mustansir, Badr al-Jamalī took over the authority in Egypt and encouraged fine architecture and the restoration of al-Fustat. He also assigned military and navy posts to the Armenians, who formed a great portion of the Egyptian population in al-Qahira. This move also caused many divisions to occur within the Egyptian army. The Fatimids received help from the Sunni Zangid rulers of Syria, but in 1171 A.D., the Zangid commander Salāh al-Dīn suppressed the failing dynasty and replaced it with his own Ayyubid line, thus ending two centuries of Shi'a rule in Egypt.⁶⁶ The ruling ministers interfered with the decisions of the caliph, which resulted in the division of Ismā'īlism into many branches. Soon Egyptian interests in and allegiance to it began to wane. These divisions made it easier for Salāh al-Dīn to replace Ismā'īlism with the Sunni *Madh'hab*.

Although the Fatimid ruled for two centuries, they were not successful in spreading their faith and controlling the Islamic world as they had planned. Yet, they have left us with superb examples of the rich interchange of ideas and aesthetics spurred by their ideology.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17.

Chapter 2

2.1 Coptic Examples

This chapter will highlight and examine a number of exemplary pieces of Coptic woodwork from the Fatimid period. Fatimid Coptic and Islamic artwork evolved in parallel, in part as a result of Fatimid religious policy toward people of other faiths, with works of the era representing the interaction between diverse ideas, cultures and beliefs. Through better understanding the Coptic *modus operandi* and design in woodwork, we will come closer to understanding just how great an influence it had on Islamic woodwork and vice versa.

Wood had always been a primary decorative element to adorn Coptic churches. Lintels, doors, panels and friezes were decorated with saints, biblical themes, vegetal and zoomorphic ornaments and geometric patterns, and scenes derived from the Old and New Testaments. Islamic wooden carvings from the Fatimid era bear the impact of Coptic artisans, with such impacting similarities between both styles.

One of the finest examples of Coptic woodwork is the Sitt Barbara screen (made at the end of the 10th century), best demonstrating Coptic tradition in woodcarving. Here, panels are decorated with common vegetal patterns and representational figures that markedly influenced Islamic woodwork with the introduction of new ornamental motifs.

2.2 Brief Description: Plate 1: *Sycamore Wood*⁶⁷ Door

- Date: End of 10th Century⁶⁸
- Location: St. Barbara Church, presently in the Coptic Museum, Old Cairo, Egypt
- Size: W: 2.68 m, H: 2.18 m
- Cutting: Shallow
- MIA: 778

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Geometric Sequence

Overview: The *haikal* consists of forty-five panels that screened the triforium.⁶⁹ The rectangles are arranged in a way similar to that of rectangles engraved on the Fatimid *minbar* placed in Saint Catherine Church (Plate 63). The geometric design cannot be identified as arabesque, as the rectangles do not intersect to form new detailed geometric shapes. Even though the shapes follow a determined pattern produced according to specific measurements, the main spiritual purpose of arabesque that might resemble the infinite nature of God is not expressed in this artwork, as the sequence of climbing rectangles stops by the two wide and plainly non-carved rectangles at the top (Plate 2).

⁶⁷ Pauty, *Bois sculptés d'églises coptes*, 5-14.

⁶⁸ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 64.

⁶⁹ Butler, *Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt*, 241.

Direction: The panels on the screen are placed horizontally in eight staggered rows, while the eight panels in the door are arranged vertically in two rows.⁷⁰ The direction of rectangles is specific in order to create a stable, simple and unified effect.

There is in fact a manifest contrast between the vertically placed carved panels and the horizontally placed panels on either side of the door. The door set in the middle is engraved with eight vertically oriented panels, and this vertical aspect seems most appropriate when used for a door as it mimics the vertical rectangular shape. The use of direction here is clever in order to draw attention to the door and avoid any incongruity or cause disturbance to the mind. If the panels were placed horizontally, the viewer would suspect the function of the constructed door. The horizontally placed panels on either side of the door reveal a strong balance generated by the use of a directional contrasting aspect. If one of the complementary screens was not built and the door was left with only a single wooden screen attached, then there would be disorder and imbalance, easily confusing the observer.

The extent to which Coptic artisans used their artistic intuition is very impressive. Direction is the first major concept used to illustrate the previous point. Vertical structures or shapes are very powerful as they specifically indicate height, whereas horizontal lines or shapes imply tranquility and rest. Therefore, the Coptic craftsmen intended to build two wooden screens on both sides of the door to reduce its strong effect, as well as to raise its decorative function.

Moving to the right and left edges of the door, we can notice that there are three vertical rectangles on each side differing from the other rectangles in size and orientation. This is the point at which the screens and the door merge together, creating unity and harmony as the panels

⁷⁰ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 162.

carved in the door and at the edges of the two screens are vertically-oriented (Plate 1). At the top of the door, there is a notable and significant square whose shape does not specify any direction. It is the central element of the artwork. It gathers and composes the artwork, and balances the powers, positioning it as the most powerful. If it stood as a vertical rectangle, the effect would be to increase the centrality of the door making it the dominant element. If the square were a horizontal rectangle, it would cause disturbance and negative conflict (Plate 4).

Size: Size is another essential element expressed in all Islamic artworks. Copts used geometry in a highly skillful way to achieve their decorative purposes. All of the rectangles are of the same size except those positioned at the top and edges of the screens. This composes harmony and peacefulness into the artwork, as there is no great difference in size. Such an effect additionally enhances unity and composition.

The small vertically oriented panels at the edges of the screens give the idea that the larger original horizontal rectangles were cut to form these small vertical rectangles. The two largest plain rectangles at the top have an important effect, as they specify the end of the geometric sequence as motionless and inactive figures, thus giving the feeling that they resemble barriers preventing the rectangles from developing (Plate 2). The size of the square is exactly half the size of the rectangles engraved on the door and in this way the screens lend further stability (Plate 4).

Composition: The geometric shapes follow a vertical symmetrical composition. The work has a single axis of symmetry, which is precisely the hinge of the door from which it can be opened, adding elegance, perfection and stability. The geometric shapes are also very decorative and raise

the importance of the door, as it is the source of symmetry. Symmetry is a common and significant aspect in Islamic artwork across different historical periods.

Nature of the carvings: Byzantine elements, such as the vine and vase motifs, as well as depictions of Abbasid themes, characteristic of the Fatimid's early period are found in this screen.⁷¹ The main role of the geometric carving is to draw a border around each panel as to make the panels appear more clearly and highlighted. The geometric shapes are engraved at the same level as the border to create a well-composed work. Each panel contains a beveled frame surrounding an inset plain, raised moulding (Plate 1).⁷²

Figures and Vegetal motifs

Overview: Each panels tells a different story or event. The carved figures and motifs clearly express the environment in which Copts lived. The origin of these illustrated human figures and animals, and expressions of how they interact with each other is in fact Byzantine. Coptic churches placed human figures on the ceilings, windows and walls. Almost all of the panels are decorated with flowing scrolls that resemble Samarra style C (Plate 3). The vase motif is repeatedly used in the same ornamental fashion found in most of the panels, illustrating the way in which the Fatimids detailed much of what that they saw around them in their works of art.

Square at the Top: (Plate 4, Panel 1) The top square demonstrates a symmetrical composition; all of the figures are reflected about a vertical axis of symmetry, which is the large branch. The vase is the main element from which all of the other elements grow. The flowing interlaced lines form a large trefoil, and the thick wide branch rising from the vase combines all of the ornamental elements. The arabesque flows under the peacocks and incorporates kidney-shaped leaves and

⁷¹ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 66.

⁷² Pauty, *Bois sculptés d'églises coptes*, 14-5.

two palmettes at the top two corners. These two palmettes are enclosed within two circles, whose circular shape is powerful as it draws in the eye. The design resembles the Tulunid style, which is elegant, peaceful and evokes joyful emotions. The two large peacocks are the symbol of pride and wealth in the Sassanian tradition.⁷³

First Panel on the Door: (Plate 5, Panel 2) This panel illustrates a person, perhaps a caliph or high ranking individual as evaluated by his posture, riding a horse. There is a top-pointed trefoil-shaped border surrounding the caliph, which is developed by the interlacing lines to indicate the caliph's importance. The pointed top of the tri-lobed leaf (spade suit symbol) takes the shape of the caliph's turban. The caliph is holding a scepter indicating his dominance and power, and he is also pointing forward as if to fight against another or in the way of leading an army. The two gazelles at the bottom are moving placidly along with intertwined lines. Their horns are elongated to amalgamate with the scrollwork. There are two flying birds at the top two corners to underline the highness and authority of the caliph.

Second Panel on the Door: (Plate 6, Panel 3) This panel illustrates a battle between a predator (lion or wild beast) and a man. The predator's face is displayed on the same level as the man's neck as this is the point of a predator attacking its prey. This particular aspect reflects acute attention paid to natural details. There are two deer at the top of the panel facing opposite directions, and at the same time, looking at each other. Circular interlacing lines integrate with flowers, palmettes and leaves.

Third Panel on the Door: (Plate 7, Panel 4) This is a beautiful and naturally designed panel expressing many symbolic meanings. All of the figures are carved in mirror image: large

⁷³ Auld, "Birds and Blessing: A Kohl-pot from Jerusalem," 7.

peacocks that face each other, symbolizing a peaceful and wealthy life; the wild beasts below them symbolize power. Their positioning implies that there is a kind of antagonism and hostility between them—with their bodies and their faces in opposite directions, their movement implies that they are jumping and emerging from out of the vase. The wild beasts are full of motion while the peacocks remain motionless. The legs and paws of the wild beasts are elongated and incorporated within the scrollwork, which also contains vegetal motifs such as trefoils and kidney-shaped leaves.

Fourth Panel on the Door: (Plate 8, Panel 5) This panel is full of life and motion. Two deer jump while two leopards climb. The deer face one another while the leopards face away, but at the same time their gaze is fixed toward the same point. The elephants oppose each other, one looking upwards and the other looking downwards. Their position indicates unity and cooperation. Circles surround the deer and elephants to enhance their curved bodies, and their limbs are amalgamated with circulating lines.

Panel 1 on the Screen: (Plate 9, Panel 6) This panel stands out separately, as it is full of human figures. The human figures are not completely separated; the front two figures cover a part of those behind them in order to create a unified work. In addition, their sizes are determined in a realistic way to show correct visual distances. The figures appear to be Sufi dancers as they rotate and twirl with their wide dresses (Plate 10). Another interpretation could be that the figures are guards running to serve their caliph. A distributed and unarranged pattern is engraved to fill the negative spaces between figures.

Panel 2 on the Screen: (Plate 11, Panel 7) This panel illustrates a man resembling a Roman hunter holding antlers of a deer (Plate 12). There is also a wavy line integrated at the end with

abstract shaped patterns. The person wears a headdress and elaborate clothes; he might be a nobleman or prince.

Panel 3 on the Screen: (Plate 13, Panel 8) Two peacocks face each other, integrated within rich scrollwork. The lines interweave and interlace to unify the work by incorporating all of the elements, forming two four-leaved flowers. The two peacocks symbolize beauty, femininity, pride and wealth.⁷⁴

Panel 4 on the Screen: (Plate 14, Panel 9) This simple panel shows what might be two large pigeons or harpies facing one another. The patterns are simpler, less ornate and larger than those on the other panels, thus enhancing the size of the pigeons. Two big scrolls and leaves rest on each side of two central trefoils, from which the patterns flow. The pigeons and patterns are mirror images of each other. Here, pigeons symbolize security, happiness, peacefulness and correct ways or the right path, as they always know how to find their destination.⁷⁵

Panel 5 on the Screen: (Plate 15, Panel 10) Two winged-horses face toward each other, their wings and legs integrated with the foliated patterns that end in scrolls. The patterns rise and flow from the vase at the center of the bottom area to form a trefoil constituting the center of symmetry, unity and composition. This panel is active, as the horses seem to be striding and the circular patterns gives a sense of motion.

Panel 6 on the Screen: (Plate 16, Panel 11) This panel is similar in ways to Panel 10, involving two horses with their wings and legs integrated within the scrollwork. However, the positions of the legs are different and it would appear to imply that the horses are on the verge of a fight. The lines interlace and circulate, placidly incorporating kidney-shaped leaves and ending in scrolls.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 10.

There is a trefoil at the center of the top area from which the scrolls and circles begin to gradually increase in size. The semi-circular border, itself formed of flowing lines generated from the central scrolls, draws the horses toward each other.

Panel 7 on the Screen: (Plate 17, Panel 12) The panel displays two large wild beasts attacking two gazelles with bites to the neck. Two men present are owners of the beasts, leading them to hunt. This image stirs multiple feelings as it activates the mind to think about the pain of the gazelles, the excitement of the hunters and the power of the wild beasts. This scene of predator attacking prey symbolizes power. There is also a vase from which the vegetal patterns develop which could be a symbol of birth and creation in life. Vases with vine leaves rising upwards can be traced back to monuments of the Umayyads, such as Dome of the Rock and the Palace of Mshatta (Plate 18).⁷⁶

Panel 8 on the Screen: (Plate 19, Panel 13) This panel mimics the fifth panel but is less active given the representation of camels, a typically more slow-moving creature. Their legs are short and straight, disproportionally carved. The interlacing lines form a tri-lobed leaf (spade suit symbol) between the camels, and combine leaves and two trefoils at the corners. No scrolls are complete, and the lines weave tranquilly to complement the motion of the camels, animals of endurance.

Panel 9 on the Screen: (Plate 20, Panel 14) This is a panel of willpower and determination; all of the animal figures face upwards. Two large birds fly into the infinite skies above and two gazelles underneath them seem to be running. The lines intertwine and interlace, forming scrolls and a circular border around each group of animals seems to draw the viewer's attention to their

⁷⁶ Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 87.

significance. These scrolls also unify and compose the woodwork by combining all of the figures as they integrate the limbs of the animals within the scrollwork.

Panel 10 on the Screen: (Plate 21, Panel 15) This panel is highly active, vigorous and dynamic, demonstrating a crucial battle between a gazelle and a wild beast. The beast attacks the gazelle from behind, and the gazelle jumps away to escape. The strength of the beast and the weakness of his prey stimulate the viewer's feelings and thoughts. There is also a contrast in direction—the direction of the gazelle's movement is opposite that of the beast's movement, resulting in a rotating motion which complements the circular screen formed around them by the interlacing lines. These lines loop into scrolls that spread across most of the negative space remaining.

Panel 11 on the Screen: (Plate 22, Panel 16) Here, a simple panel appears to be divided into two sections, distributing the natural scenery with each species occupying its own territory. The arrangement is important—if the wild beasts were engraved above the gazelles, then a viewer may neglect the gazelles, as they are the weaker of the two animals. There are two pairs of gazelles and wild beasts, each two facing the other two. The vase at the center is the source of the circulating and intertwining patterns that form a circle around the animal figures and also integrate with their limbs.

Panel 12 on the Screen: (Plate 23, Panel 17) This panel illustrates two gazelles moving up a decorative rock at the middle of the base, and looking upwards to a trefoil at the center of the panel from which all of the ornamental lines develop and incorporate leaves and scrolls. The lines form borders around the animal figures, including within the two birds and two gazelles. Unlike most of the panels, the two birds are not facing each other.

Panel 13 on the Screen: (Plate 24, Panel 18) This panel is vigorous and exciting, as it demonstrates a battle between human and animal figures. The man on the horse fights another man, attempting to take an oval object from him. The horse hits the chest of the wild beast with his strong and rigid forehead, while the wild beast looks to the man behind him who attempts to kill him with a dagger. The scrolls at the base resemble forceful sea waves. This panel arouses negative emotions of hostility, anger and antagonism.

Panel 14 on the Screen: (Plate 25, Panel 19) The foliated lines interlace, overlap and circulate to form scrolls and combine palmettes and leaves. The distance between the two gazelles is filled with attractive scrollwork, with the spirals indicating evolution and progress. A large bird rests atop each of the gazelles in a position showing sympathetic nature. This woodwork is very calm and quiet.

Panel 15 on the Screen: (Plate 26, Panel 20) This panel resembles a beautiful garden scene. Floral lines, incorporating palmettes and flowers, flow from a central trefoil and interlace smoothly to fill all negative space. The vegetal patterns seem to be dancing placidly to a dulcet rhythm. Two gazelles jump towards each other, enclosed in a large trefoil-shaped border that takes the form of their bodies to create harmony between the figural and vegetal decoration. A thick decorative column grows from a small spade suit symbol composed of two wing-shaped leaves to join the gazelles together.

Panel 16 on the Screen: (Plate 27, Panel 21) Here, two camels stare at one another and a cross-shaped structure is engraved in the space between them. The structure resembles a fountain from which the interlacing patterns flow like water incorporating trefoils and leaves. They circulate to form spirals around the camels.

Panel 17 on the Screen: (Plate 28, Panel 22) This small panel illustrates a wild beast attacking a gazelle from behind: a classic scene of demonstrating power and triumph over enemies. The scene of a lion or wild beast is identified as a sign of power in many dynasties, which for example, is reflected in the famous mosaic panel in the Khirbat al-Mafjar Palace of a lion attacking an antelope (Plate 29).⁷⁷

Panel 18 on the Screen: (Plate 30, Panel 23) This is a simple panel demonstrating a man riding a horse and an animal, perhaps a dog, lying beneath them. The man clasps a banner and goes without hesitation to his destination. The animal accompanying the horseman in his ride could be seen as a hunting dog.

Panel 19 on the Screen: (Plate 31, Panel 24) This panel exhibits two birds moving in opposite directions. The birds are enclosed within circular borders. A branch grows from the center of the base to combine four big spirals. With careful examination, it is clear that this panel was not carved with the same accuracy and skill in scrollwork as other panels.

Panel 20 on the Screen: (Plate 32, Panel 25) The panel here resembles Panel 12, but without the presence of human figures. Two wild beasts attack two gazelles as their prey. The lines grow from a vase and interlace to form spirals and club-shaped borders around each combination of animals (Plate 29).

Panel 21 on the Screen: (Plate 33, Panel 26) This panel illustrates a man who appears to hold a figure resembling a corpse, perhaps a dead gazelle caught while hunting. The negative spaces are filled with vegetal patterns and scrolls that give a sense of being in an outdoor wilderness environment.

⁷⁷ Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, 196.

Panel 22 on the Screen: (Plate 34, Panel 27) This panel and two other panels are similar, almost identical, the screen. Lines circulate to incorporate trefoils and enclose two birds and other abstract shapes difficult to distinguish but forming what look like a chain of circles.

Panel 23 on the Screen: (Plate 35, Panel 28) The panel illustrates two rabbits running towards each other and bordered by two circles combined and composed by three loops. The circles also bring together two trefoils in the middle.

The Spandrels of the Arch: (Plate 36, Panel 29) The circular, intertwining and floral patterns are dynamic and decorative. Here a combination of natural components is illustrated: humans, animals and plants. Two male figures at opposite corners ride horses and face one another. All of the lively figures (palmettes, horses) are integrated by the flowing scrolls patterns.

2.3 Brief Description: Plate 37: *Wooden Door Panel*

- Date: 1070-1100 A.D.
- Location: Deir Anba Bishoi, Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt
- H: 36 cm, W: 17cm
- Cutting: Deep

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Central Element: (Plate 37) The tri-lobed leaf motif (spade suit symbol) situated in the middle of the panel is the powerful source of all other ornamental lines and scrolls. It is elaborately decorated with thin lines interweaving in such an unusual way as to form a complicated network resembling entwined branches. The central motif has been significantly reduced and deeply cut

spiral elements spread out over the entire surface of the panel.⁷⁸ Thicker lines grow, placidly forming two larger spades suit symbol joined strongly by a loop; they overlap the middle trilobed leaf motif in the opposite way and incorporate a great Samarra C carving and join a net of interlacing lines on either side of the middle spade. The kidney shape designs surround the central motif, and are clearly supported by the spirals that originate from the reduced spade suit shape at the center.⁷⁹ Very thin lines form a border around the middle spade and scrolls. The composition is symmetrical and lends a strong presence as the lines overlap in a very delicate way. The abstract spade shape resembles the tree of life.

Samarra Influence: The kidney shapes are very clear here, and according to Lamm, this *haikal* belongs to the middle Fatimid period.⁸⁰ We can also notice the similarity to a panel from al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah door in the Islamic Museum (Plate 45), in which the kidney shapes are bordered with spirals.

2.4 Brief Description: Plate 38: *Wooden Door Panel*

- Date: 11th or 12th Century
- Origin: Dayr al-Baramus screen, Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt
- Size: H: 47 cm, W: 23 cm
- Cutting: Deep

⁷⁸ White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrun*, 153-154.

⁷⁹ Abdulfattah, *Islamic carved wood from Palermo, Sicily*, 35.

⁸⁰ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 69.

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Patterns

Central Element: (Plate 38) The panel is very close in its design to the panel of the Anba Bishoi screen (Plate 37). The large tri-lobed leaf constitutes the centre of the panel and has an important role in gathering and combining all of the elements to strengthen the composition, which is filled with meticulous interweaving lines that amalgamate small trefoils into circles. These trefoils surround a relatively large trefoil formed by flowing and intersecting lines, evidencing negative development in which size grows smaller and unifies the artwork. Two thin developing lines border the spade to enhance its shape and serve to draw more attention to the central area.

Samarra Influence: Another main element of the work includes the large scrolls that cover a wide area of the panel and border a Tulunid kidney shaped motifs. This scrollwork is similar to Samarra style C.⁸¹ At the top a large motif of two Sassanian winged shapes—a Tulunid version of the imported ‘Abbasid style (Plate 39).⁸²

2.5 Brief Description: Plate 40: *Wooden Door*

- Date: 1106 -1175⁸³
- Location: The Church of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt
- Size: H: 310 cm, W: 48 cm
- Cutting: Shallow

⁸¹ Abdulfattah, *Islamic Carved Wood from Palermo, Sicily*, 35.

⁸² Dimand, “Studies in Islamic Ornament: Some Aspects of Omayyad and Early Abbasid Ornaments,” 300.

⁸³ Manafis, *Sinai Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, 16.

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Geometric patterns

Geometry serves as the main decorative element throughout successive Islamic dynasties, thus the geometric shapes do not present strong evidence that the door was made during the Fatimid era. However, when we take a closer look at the geometric pattern, we notice the most favored Fatimid symbol of the radiating star.⁸⁴ In addition, the cruciform shape at the center of the panels, which can be seen to resemble the Christian cross, indicates the door's potential placement in a church yet it is of Fatimid origin. The first square panel engraved on the door has a small square as its centre about which the other geometric shapes rotate about this centre.

Vegetal motifs

The use of the Byzantine vegetal motifs was used in to Egypt by the predominantly Coptic artisans. These vegetal motifs were then increasingly used in various Fatimid woodworks. Nevertheless, the vegetal motifs are very close in design to the interlaced vegetal lines made in arabesque, as they are nonrepresentational; therefore, vegetal motifs cannot strongly reveal the indulgent nature of Fatimid artists, since most of the mediums such as glass, silk and wood were engraved with similar flowing vegetal patterns across nearly all Islamic periods. We should also take into consideration that Islamic art as a whole was influenced by Byzantine art.

Human figures

The carving of human figures is a vital motif in Fatimid artwork, as it indicates that the Fatimids maintained their own beliefs and inclinations, which in some cases went against

⁸⁴Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 77.

preferable Islamic artistic aspects. One of the elements distinguishing Islamic and Christian art from each other is the use of human figures.

The human figure in the square's centre is enclosed by mandala⁸⁵ to signify the important position of the figure that may be identified as a Saint (Plate 41). The two figures with wings at the top of the square resemble angels in Christianity and can be found on the ceilings of churches and on other Coptic artwork. It seems that the wooden panels narrate the account of Moses' encounter with God on the top of Mount Sinai and the story in which he receives the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone. This piece is a further example of a Christian structure of the Fatimid dynasty (Plate 42).

Handle

The metal hand handle takes the shape of a cross, which may have been added to the door after its placement in the church. We can reason that this may have likely been the case, as Fatimid inner doors did not typically contain handles, but were simply opened by pushing (Plate 43).

The central door divider, ornamented with leaves similar to those displayed on the Corinthian capital with smooth leaves and three large rosettes represents classical patterns of floral elements found in Byzantine monuments (Plate 44).

⁸⁵ In various spiritual traditions, mandalas may be employed for focusing attention of aspirants and adepts, as a spiritual teaching tool, for establishing a sacred space and as an aid to meditation and trance induction.

Chapter 3

3.1 Islamic Examples

This chapter will catalog and highlight the progress and development of Islamic Fatimid woodwork in relation to the objects under study. Vegetal, animal and geometric representations in these 10th to 12th century pieces will be highlighted. The study will describe and analyze sources of Isma‘ili Fatimid themes, and samples cited henceforth for analysis will reflect the distinctive features of Fatimid wood carving style. Furthermore, this chapter aims at identifying the influence of other styles and motifs of the time and creating a reference point for Islamic Fatimid woodwork. It will present a series of motifs that affected the artistic style of Fatimid wood, resulting from the Isma‘ili Fatimid policy of religious tolerance. The chapter will also highlight the development that woodworking experienced during two centuries of Fatimid rule.

The Early Period, 969-1021 A.D.: The Reign of al-Mu‘izz, al-‘Aziz and al-Hākim

According to Lamm, Fatimid woodwork underwent three phases.⁸⁶ The first period reflects a substantial influence of the Tulunid style the 9th century. Characterized by Samarra style C, which was a mixture of the beveled cut and abstract patterns based on vegetal motifs, was a predominant influence. All decorated surface areas were filled with interrelated motifs and arabesque took hold. Another characteristic was the presence of figural representations derived from Sassanian, as well as the Italian and Byzantine art, specifically with regard to animal representation.

⁸⁶ Lamm, “Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology,” 36-87.

The Middle Period, 1021-1094 A.D.: The Reign of al-Zahir and al-Mustansir

The middle period demonstrates the height of Fatimid wooden carvings of the open work technique—the princely cycle (portraying royal scenes) with vegetal element scrolls filling the background. Highly animated representations of zoomorphic figures in a scrolled background was a common quality of pieces from this era—peacocks, hares, gazelles and birds in the midst of capturing their prey standing victim beneath them—as was deep cutting techniques with stem designs typically containing two to three stripes or rows of beads between fillets.

The Late Period, 1094-1171 A.D.: The Reign of al-Musta‘li, al-Amir, al-Hafiz, al-Zafir, al-Fa‘iz and al-‘Adid

The Tulunid style is less visible during the late period. Floral ornaments, split palmettes, pulvin-leaves, vine leaves and other motifs took the form of trefoils or cinquefoils, which were always split. Geometric patterns appear more clearly with interlaced geometric patterns and star shapes as the most common. However, these geometric patterns were subordinate to vegetal elements, whose patterned strap work enclosed entire scenes and were displayed as a continuous vegetal frieze or combined with highly developed vegetal ornamentation. Floriated Kufic inscription is also a distinguishing characteristic of this period.

3.2 Brief Description: Plate 45: *al-Hākīm bi-Amr Allah Door*

- Medium: Turkish pine wood⁸⁷
- Date: 1010 A.D. /400 H.
- Location: Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt
- Size: H: 3.25 m, W: 1 m
- Cutting: Shallow
- MIA : 551

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Geometric shapes

Arrangement: (Plate 45) A composed work is created in the two vertical panels flanked by two horizontal panels, with a highly decorative function. Fatimid craftsmen used different patterns to generate variety and emphasize their beauty through duplication. The vertical panels of both doors are inverted, with one pointing downwards and one beside it pointing upwards (Plate 46).

Measurements: The lengths of the horizontal and vertical panels are the same, while the width of the horizontal panel is greater than that of the vertical panel, whose function is to enhance its horizontal shape.

Patterns

Inscription: (Plate 47) Although the use of Islamic calligraphy was not widespread among Fatimid woodwork, calligraphy is exhibited here both for decorative purposes and to acclaim the Caliph. It is written:

⁸⁷ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 63.

The first leaf: Our master, the prince of believers

Blessing of God on him and on

The second leaf: the imam al-Hākim bi-Amr Allah

His pure ancestors and descendants⁸⁸

The inscription is an incomplete phrase primarily because there was not enough room to write in full.⁸⁹ In the Sunni tradition as opposed to the Shi‘a tradition, the inscribed prayer phrase is known to be restricted to the Prophet Muhammad and his family; the Fatimids used this prayer to recognize al-Hākim bi-Amr Allah as a descendent of the Prophet’s family. The first horizontal panel is engraved with vegetal foliated Kufic, and the letters are elongated and terminate in scrolls and leaves. This technique lends the artwork a heightened unification as the other panels involve vegetal patterns.

Samarra Influence: In the first period, Fatimid artists were greatly influenced by Samarra styles, which are frequently observed in their artwork, with the door on exhibit serving as a good example of the first phase of Fatimid woodwork.⁹⁰ The vertical panels follow Samarra style C in which scrolls are the main decorative motif. Such is a dynamic and attractive design, as the lines wave and circulate placidly to form well-organized scrolls, also incorporating spade-shaped trefoils. One of the vertically positioned panels has a slightly different decoration, with thick lines elevating and developing from the spade to compose a simple ornate design and bisect the panel, creating two identical halves. The third panel at the bottom is carved with scrolls surrounding two central palmettes to form two five-leaved flowers. The negative spaces are filled with additional palmettes and scrolls. This design resembles Samarra style A in (Plate 48).

⁸⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁹⁰ al-Shaf‘i, “Mumāyẓāt al-Akshāb almuzākhrāfa fī alrāzīyan al-‘Abbāsi wa al-Fātīmi fī Miṣr,” 68.

Second Horizontal Panel: This panel involves two rhombs. The rhombs contain thick borders in order to enhance their geometric shape. The core of the rhombs, as well as the spaces between them, are filled by Samarra scrolls.

3.3 Brief Description: Plate 49: *Wooden Panel*

- Date: 1058 A.D.
- Location: 1885 from the Complex of Qala'ūn, presently in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo
- Size: 61 × 29 cm ⁹¹
- Cutting: Deep
- MIA: 441

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Overview

This panel (Plate 49) was found in the complex of Qala'ūn, which stands at what used to be the site of the western Fatimid palace. Unlike door panels in which figures are vertically engraved, the ornament of this panel is made up of figures in a mirror image. For this reason, it has been thought that it formed part of the decoration of a ceiling or the soffit of a lintel. Additionally, these reused Fatimid panels could have served as an architrave that existed at the entrance corridor leading to the hospital within the complex.⁹² The meticulous carvings are very similar to those found in contemporaneous ivories⁹³ (Plate 50).

⁹¹ Abbas, "The Fatimids," 74.

⁹² Ibid., 74.

⁹³ Ibid., 74.

Patterns and Figures

Overview: (Plate 49) Fancifully combined line patterns are the tools that compose most of the complicated ornaments and fuse together all elements in any Islamic artwork. The more complexity present, the more delicacy is added to the artwork. The arabesque here acts as both a border and a decorative tool, forming a club-shaped border around a set of three figures. It also forms a central and potent element that holds the two club-shaped borders together, emphasizing its appealing effect. The vegetal design of the flowing intertwined lines resembles a grape pergola, adding life and natural vigor to the woodwork.

The Central Element: (Plate 51) The central element is intensified by its detailed design, with pointed and curved edges of a frame within a frame to convey strong conflict and tension. The image in the center, although made indeterminate due to wear of the wood over time, resembles the Arabic word “Allah.”

Representational Figures: The club-shaped border attracts the eye and gives dynamic effect to the three figures at each side. The two birds enclosed between two wing-shaped leaves cause disturbance, as each of them face the opposite direction while the two human figures below them face one another. The figure with the turban is perhaps a person of high rank drinking from a wine cup. The other figures are depicted conversing with the caliph or a high rank person and making an offering to him (Plate 49).

Composition: (Plate 49) The decoration consists of figures reflected in a mirror image. The type of symmetry employed here is called *reflected symmetry*⁹⁴ (regardless of the slight difference between two of the figures), which uses symmetry by inverting one side. The result of this technique is to create interesting variation. There is a strong attraction and emphasis on the center, or axis of symmetry, since all patterns are reflected from here.

⁹⁴ Reflected symmetry uses symmetry about a single axis, in which a side is the mirror image of its corresponding side.

Space and Arrangement: Spaces between the birds and within the central element are fully filled by arabesque. As the configuration of these three elements is symmetric and the negative space between the outer interwoven lines is far larger, together they create a more balanced structure and decrease the effect of the central element.

Border: The border size is typical of works of the time and match as well with the composition. A thicker border would increase the turbulence of the work, while a thinner one would fail to compose and unify the artwork.

3.4 Brief Description: Plate 52: *Wooden Cross Beam from the complex of al-Nāsir Muhāmmad*

- Date: 1058 A.D.
- Location: Presently in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo
- Size: 1. H: 26 cm, W: 357 cm 2. H: 30 cm, W: 70 cm⁹⁵
- Cutting: Deep (interior), Shallow (borders)
- MIA: 3470 (top), 3473 (bottom)

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Overview

(Plate 52) The examples cited here originate from the princely cycle, that which portrays royal scenes. Max Hers, former director of the Arab Museum, now called the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt, accidentally discovered the beams while restoring the complex of al-Nāsir Muhāmmad.⁹⁶ The significance of the beams, which were relocated to the museum, is borne from their earlier figural carvings that

⁹⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁹⁶ Cyran, “Re-discovered Carved Panels of the Fatimid Palace,” 658.

demonstrate exceptional Fatimid wood working practices.⁹⁷ The piece depicts daily activities of the ruler and his court, a concept dating back to reliefs on the walls of the ancient Egyptian tombs.

Structure

The structure of the beams suggests they were specifically intended to decorate the Fatimid palace. Remnants of painted plaster found on some of the beams clearly show that they were not as thoroughly finished as other beams from the same period.⁹⁸

Patterns

Overview: (Plate 52) The gently and placidly interlaced lines incorporating vegetal figures fill the spaces between the figures, adding and enhancing the beams beauty and unifying the work by joining its elements together. A hexagonal frame surrounds the main figures in each of the beams, and two large wing-shaped leaves are carved at opposite sides to deepen the impact and strengthen the motif of the figures, both organic and full of life.

First Beam: The first beam depicts the caliph sitting between two servants and holding a scepter, a prominent item of royal regalia and an emblem of authority. This carving of the caliph is somewhat eccentric since the scepter is a Greco-Roman invention. Moreover, the caliph is drinking from a wine cup, a habit that goes against Islamic dogma. A man plays a musical instrument for the caliph while the other attendant bears an oval object, perhaps food or a wineskin.

Second Beam: This beam illustrates a battle between two warriors, each of whom fights with a shield and sword inside a cartouche. The cartouche ends with two knots with bird engraved inside a four-leaf clover.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 74.

Notably, the Fatimids borrowed the idea of carving human and animal figures from neighboring Byzantine art.⁹⁹

Foreign Impacts: Accordingly, Fatimid artists created new decorative motifs by making greater use of figural forms, including both humans and animals; this practice exemplifies how they were liberal to foreign ideas and welcomed new approaches and principles.

Border

The decorated border of both beams is the same, and indicates that the two form a single piece of art. Moreover, it is very thick, increasing the levels of its royal importance and revealing a notable extravagance. The interior of the border is filled with trefoil leaves, split palmettes and vine scrolls, which add to its sense of elegance.

3.5 Brief Description: Plate 53: *Wooden Door from the Complex of Qālā'un*

- Date: 11th Century A.D. (1001 – 1100)¹⁰⁰
- Location: Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt
- Size: H: 3.83 m, W: 2.65 m
- Cutting: Shallow
- MIA: 554

⁹⁹ Buschhausen, “The Coptic Art Under the Fatimid,” 559.

¹⁰⁰ Lamm, “Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology,” 70.

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Structure

The door stands as two attached valves whose screens are sturdily fastened together by a thick metal sheet.

Geometric Shapes

Overview: (Plate 53) The door is vertically divided into three parts; the first and third sections contain two panels, while the second contains six panels. The space between the panels is greater than that between the panels and the edge of the door, the panels are separated to an extent that they do not interrupt the rhythm of the work but results in a simple appearance that is comfortable to the eyes. Naturally, such vertical rectangular panels used for the door are most suitable and enhance its structure and function.

Size: All rectangles contained within are the same size except those at the top, which have been cut in order to help the door fit in its determined place. The incomplete engraved shapes resulted in a decrease in the value of the work the top-edge panels seem as though were cut so the door can fit into its space.

Patterns

Composition: (Plate 53) The door's design is symmetrical about a vertical axis. All figures, including the circles formed by the patterns, are repeated (Plate 54). The repetition of the same design causes a constructive and appealing rhythm.

Details: Similar to the panels of a door in the Anba Bishoi Church (Plate 55), all panels here contain the identical ornamental design, implying perfection and accuracy. Very thin interlacing and flowing lines form circles around the vegetal and figural carvings, creating a lacework effect. They integrate with two tri-lobed leaves shaped at the top corners, two wing-shaped leaves, two seated men (one playing drums)

and other animal figures. The patterns also incorporate two Sassanid wing-shaped leaves (plate 39) that serve as a border enclosing two birds. This border resembles the spade engraved at the bottom of the panel, which involves diminutive animal figures.

The previously described representational figures evidence the indulgent nature of Fatimid era artwork, as their pieces were flush with life, imagery and elaborate motifs. In many cases, because their pieces are so busy, it is difficult to detect the figural motifs, which are reflective of the presence of earlier or foreign influences on their work (Plate 53).

Cartouche: (Plate 54) Thick lines wave and bend to form a cartouche border. The clear symbolism of the cartouche as a source to indicate the importance of the figure placed inside the border. The human figure is also enclosed within a second border that forms an eight-pointed star above his head, perhaps an allusion to mastery and authority. In the centre of the star, two wavy figures meet and face one another. On the same mid-level, other animal figures are observed outside of the lantern looking at one another. The repetition of similar shapes and figures creates a strong and united composition.

Nature of Carvings

The cutting is shallow, indicating the door belongs to the early period, with a mixture of vegetal and figural representation. The scrolls are acting as a background to the figures.

3.6 Brief Description: Plate 56: *Wooden Panel*

- Date: 11th Century
- Location: Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt
- Size: H: 33 cm, W: 22 cm¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Abbas, "The Fatimids," 88.

- Cutting: Deep (shallow cutting for the patterning)
- MIA: 3391

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Overview: (Plate 56) This panel is nearly identical to another, currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States¹⁰² (Plate 57). Perhaps, it can be theorized that both panels originated from the same structure. Patterned lines give the work a pleasant rhythm; the curved lines reveal calmness, gentleness and beauty. The lines overlapping indicate a kind of unity and depth, bringing all elements together within the composed structure. Although the design seems unrelated to the earlier Tulunid woodwork, it is still identifiable from the kidney-shaped leaves at the base.¹⁰³

Arabesque: The type of line used in this woodwork is called arabesque. Arabesque is characterized by interlacing circular lines that form repeating patterns amalgamated harmoniously with kidney-shaped leaves. The arabesque in this panel employs two important artistic visual features: firstly, these interwoven lines vary in width and length to clearly highlight the dominating determined patterns, such as the spade-shaped motif in the middle of the bottom portion of the panel; secondly, the function of lines is to draw the viewer's eyes to the most important element within the scrollwork—the two horse heads.

Although arabesque typically includes the application of repeating geometric forms, there is no single geometric form in this example of woodwork. The figures here (spades, horses, leaves) are organic and typically found in nature, thus revealing that the panel reflects arabesque art based upon the flowing and peaceful feminine nature of plant forms.

¹⁰² Ibid., 88.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 88.

Representational and Non-representational Figures: The spade suit symbol represents a leaf of the "cosmic" tree, and thus, life.¹⁰⁴ The horses as well might symbolize life, royal power, nobility, strength, freedom and wealth. The ears and the bridles of the horses are elongated to interweave and integrate with the scrolls. Circular scrolls at the top, in fact resembling the eyes of an owl, are the first figures to attract the eyes; they are very powerful, deep and appealing.

Importantly, the carving of animal figures such as horses is not favored in Islam. Here the carving indicates that the Fatimids would express controversial ideas through their artwork. Unlike any other Islamic artworks where arabesque was the main ornamental element, Fatimid artisans were greatly influenced by foreign decorative motifs including Byzantine representational figures.¹⁰⁵

Composition: (Plate 56) The panel follows a symmetrical composition with the scrolls, horse and leaves designs around a vertical axis that bisects the panel into two equal halves, producing two mirror images of one another. The accurateness of the sizes of the carved shapes indicates that they were carved according to specific well-planned measurements. The piece's composition creates a sense of stability, luxury, peacefulness and relaxation, given its aforementioned characteristics.

Nature of Carvings

There is a noticeable contrast in depth between the foreground and the background, producing a pleasant and dominant chiaroscuro effect. Additionally, the contrast between deep-cut scrollwork and the shallow striations on the leaves, horses and spade intensify the beauty of the work, as well as imbuing it with natural elements.

Border

The border is thick and wide, lending a sense of intensity and increasing the power and unity of the work.

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O69-CosmicTree.html> (accessed April 5, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ Baer, "Fatimid Art at the Crossroads: A Turning Point in the Artistic Concept of Islam?" 385.

3.7 Brief Description: Plate 58: *Wooden Portable Mihrab*

- Date: 11th Century
- Location: Purchased from Abemeyer, 1946; presently in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo
- Size: H: 24 cm, W: 13.5 cm¹⁰⁶
- MIA: 15552

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Structure

(Plate 58) The pointed top of the *mihrab* specifies direction, which may indicate that it could have been used as a compass to identify the *qibla* or an object to prostrate on for Shi'a prayer.¹⁰⁷ The symmetrical composition conveys power, balance and unity.

Shapes

Circle: The top circle has a powerful effect, as it is an ancient and universal symbol of infinity, unity, power and wholeness, also representing a sacred space. The circular band with an inscription and ring in the middle is a characteristic of Fatimid coinage, and is also found in architectural building design, for

¹⁰⁶ Abbas, "The Fatimids," 63.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 63.

example the medallion on al-Aqmar mosque.¹⁰⁸ Such can be associated with the bewildering use of this portable *mihrab*, either lying buried underneath the head of the deceased or used as an object for Shi'a prayer upon which to prostrate.¹⁰⁹ Often *mihrabs* contain a hole at the top so that they can be hung (Plate 59).

Additional Shapes: The two columns at opposite sides of the *mihrab* are symbols of spiritual highness and religious dignity.¹¹⁰ The trefoil, or club, in the middle of the circle is energetic and alluring as it is enclosed inside another circle.

Flat Panel

The non-carved flat panel is remarkable, which may indicate how the hearts of Shi'a prayers and the deceased should be full of quiet peacefulness and religious relief as these portable *mihrabs* were found under the head of the deceased. This empty space in the center of the *mihrab* creates dynamic focal points and compositions with the use of empty, or negative, space.

Border

(Plate 58) The three frames condense the devout purpose of this *mihrab*. The first and third frames are inscribed with invocations to the Prophet, to 'Ali and to the Shi'a imams, with the text in angular Kufic script. The middle frame is carved with a continuous simple and mellow design creating more stability and balance.

¹⁰⁸ Bloom, "The Origin of Fatimid Art," 27.

¹⁰⁹ Abbas, "The Fatimid," 63.

¹¹⁰ Barrucand, Remarks on The Iconography of the Medieval of Cairo: Form and Emplacement," 23.

3.8 Brief Description: Plate 60: *Wooden Panel*

- Date: 11th Century
- Location: Purchased from Ilyas Khatun, 1909; presently in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo
- Size: H: 40 cm, W: 26 cm¹¹¹
- Cutting: Deep
- MIA: 3390

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Overview

(Plate 60) This panel's patterns mimic those found in Plate 56, yet size and engraved figures vary and the latter contains the heads of two horses. Nevertheless, it was suggested by Abbas that it demonstrates an earlier stage of design closer to the beveled carving of the Tulunid period.¹¹²

Vegetal Motifs

An unending and continuous pattern of tranquilly spiraling lines reveals a quiet peacefulness. The design is close to the Tulunid beveled style in which kidney-shaped leaves are increasingly used. In this panel, some of the beveled leaves have fairly rounded surfaces. The leaves are the life of the panel, smoothly curving along with the mellow lines and growing out from the tip of the scrolls.

The main motif of the design is expressed in flowing lines and leaves evoking feelings of relaxation and calm. The focal point lies in the center of the panel containing a small circle inside a square, from which the other patterns flow and are developed. The square is flanked by two palmettes.

¹¹¹ Abbas, "The Fatimids," 87.

¹¹² Ibid., 87.

Here, the sense of power is evenly distributed throughout the artwork because of the repetition of the patterns, the carving of lines with equal width and spaces between them.

Composition: The decoration is reflected about both horizontal and vertical axes of symmetry, called a biaxial symmetry.¹¹³ This layout guarantees balance as the top and bottom, and left and right sides are all symmetrical. Symmetry is a dominant organizational and influential visual concept resulting in a formal, organized and orderly work. One fourth of the panel is repeated four times in order to create unity and balance.

Nature of Carving

The scrollwork is deeply carved creating appealing contrast with the dark background that resulted from the depth of the carving. There is another contrast between the shallowly striated leaves and the deeply carved scrolls, creating a more interesting effect.

3.9 Brief Description: Plate 61: *Wooden Panel*

- Date: Early 12th Century
- Location: Purchased from Gamal al-Din Husayn, 1933; presently in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo
- Size: H: 108 cm, W: 50 cm¹¹⁴
- Cutting: Shallow
- MIA: 11781

¹¹³ A symmetrical composition can have more than one axis of symmetry. Biaxial symmetry uses two axes of symmetry—vertical and horizontal. These guarantee balance—top and bottom as well as left and right. The top and bottom can resemble the left and right sides, or they can be different. The most regular and repetitive image occurs when sides and top-bottom are the same.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 63.

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Patterns

Arabesque: (Plate 61) (Top horizontal panel) The intersected circular and spiraling scrolls combine to form palmettes whose elaborate and overlapping thin circular lines provoke sensory turbulence. (Bottom horizontal panel) Here, interlaced diagonal, curved and horizontal lines form geometric hexagons and vegetal patterns of wing-shaped leaves. (Middle vertical panels) The two vertical panels are organized on a series of arabesques with flat carving similar to Plate 49 but far flatter here.¹¹⁵ The scrolls twirl more gently and smoothly than those of the panels, arousing a feeling of calmness and relaxation. They also incorporate palmettes and wing-shaped leaves.

Space and Arrangement: The configuration of panels lends a noticeable balance and stability. The negative spaces between the lines on the horizontal panels are smaller than those between the lines on the vertical panels, thus creating a well-composed, compatible and original artwork.

Star Symbol (Bottom horizontal panel)

The star, a symbol favored by the Isma'ili Shi'a here enclosed in a hexagonal cartouche to deepen its symbolism. The star shape is a spiritually powerful motif and enlightens people's paths in areas in which they require spiritual and mental balance.

Border

The modern frame indicates that the four old panels were either taken from an original Fatimid door or from several Fatimid artworks due to the diverse arabesque styles engraved on each.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

3.10 Brief Description: Plate 62: *Wooden Chair (kursī)*

- Date: 1101-1130 A.D.¹¹⁶
- Location: Fatimid Mosque of Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt
- Size: H: 46 cm, W (from the top): 32 cm, base: 49 cm
- Cutting: Shallow

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

(Plate 62) The undated inscription on the stand reads that the piece was ordered by an emir of the Caliph al-Amir, Abu Mansur Anushtakin al-Amiri.¹¹⁷ The *kursī* mimics the structure of a pyramid without its top and four pointed edges pointing upwards, with construction designed this way to hold the Quran. Eleven spindles are installed in each of the four sides for the purpose of decoration and not to strengthen the structure, as continuous sequencing would. The inscriptions are Quranic verses carved in foliated Kufic script and divided by spool work.¹¹⁸ The design of this *kursī* containing a flat tri-pyramidal side is unlike that of other Quran stands in which the front part of the chair before the reader is shaped as a “V.” The use of small pieces of turned wood fitted together to form an open lattice and which was employed for decorative panels seems first to have appeared in the Tulunid period, but was developed chiefly in a number of Fatimid objects.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Rabino, *Le Monastere de Sainte-Catherine du Mont Sinai*, 88.

¹¹⁷ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 163.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 163.

¹¹⁹ Scarce, “Wood,” *The Arts of Islam*, 219.

3.11 Brief Description: Plate 63: *Wooden Minbar by al-Afdal*¹²⁰

- Date: 1106 A.D. /500 H.
- Location: Mosque of the Greek Monastery in Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt
- Size: front H: 260 cm, rare H: 240 cm
- Cutting: Shallow

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Structure

(Plate 63) A *minbar* is a pulpit in the mosque where the *imam* (leader of prayer) stands to deliver sermons. While *minbars* are typically more akin to pulpits in elevation and structure, they have a function and position more similar to that of a lectern, emphasizing contact with the audience. The *minbar* with a decorated front door is typically shaped like a small tower with a pointed roof and stairs leading up to it. The *minbar* is located to the right of the *mihrab*.¹²¹

Geometric Sequence

Overview: Separated decorative rectangles are equally, symmetrically and strictly arranged on a determined pattern. The application of mathematical geometric rules is apparent as all rectangles were engraved according to specific measurements. This piece reflects a combination of art and mathematics. In addition, the distance between every two rectangles is exactly the same as the distance between all others, creating an effective and strong sense of stability and perfection.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 163. The *minbar* has no inscription date but it is have been known to have been ordered by al-Afdal fifteen years after his father ordered the *minbar* of the shrine of al-Husayn at Ascalon, first published by Lamm.

¹²¹ Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 45.

Geometric accuracy is a common, powerful and remarkable feature of Islamic art, which is reserved throughout Islamic dynasties and employed in almost every original Islamic artwork. While the *minbar* generally resembles that of the *al-Khalil minbar* in elements of its construction (Plate 87), for instance regarding spool work in the railing, this *minbar* is less developed although made fifteen years later, and its interlaced design is only found on the inner parapets located inside the top panels of the stair way (Plate 64, 65).¹²²

Arrangement: The arrangement of geometric shapes is uncommon and cannot be considered arabesque since the geometric shapes are not formed by interlaced and interlinked lines. Moreover, the shapes do not overlap in any way and are completely separated by equal spaces, resulting in an esthetically decorative yet spatially static piece. The repeated use of geometric shapes enhances their ornamental effects.

The arrangement of rectangles carved on the stairs (Plate 64) resembles the arrangement of those on the first section. One large central rectangle is flanked by two smaller squares. When looking closely at the inner top part of the *minbar*, which creates the platform where the orator stands, we can notice the carvings on both sides. The inner panels at the top of stair way (Plate 64) are engraved with three rectangles in arrangement similar to the above-mentioned one. The large horizontal rectangle carved on the facing side is similar to that at the top of the first section, with the exception of a less defined pattern due to the shallow carving on the border of the latter one. This effect lends unity to the artwork and results in a strong composition.

Triangular panels: The staircase railing (Plate 63) forms a consistent diagonal pattern of right-angle triangles, indicating the end of the developing sequence of rectangles and intensifying the diagonal shape of the staircase. At the top seat area on both sides within the armrests, the carving significantly resembles the door of Saint Catharine's Church. Yet here, vegetal elements characterize the work, rather than angelic figures (Plate 41, 65).

¹²² Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 78.

Size: The distribution of multiple sized rectangles adds an appealing variety to the artwork. The rectangles of the first vertical rectangular section are in three different sizes. The large horizontal rectangles form the centre of each row flanked by two small vertical rectangles. All together, they form a symmetrical composition in which the large rectangle is the central point of symmetry. The medium-sized horizontal rectangles, whose side lengths nearly resemble a square, generate greater stability and balance since each side of a medium rectangle corresponds with an opposite side of the larger one above it.

One can imagine a rotation of the axis about which the rectangles rotate until reaching a balance point in which they correspond with each other. The small rectangles have a significant function as they create a positive balance and distribute power evenly throughout the artwork, to ensure there will be no focus on a specific shape over another. They fill the negative space between each two medium-sized rectangles as well as form the edges of the large rectangles to reduce any centralizing effect. The largest rectangle in the same section is at the top and indicates the end of the developing geometric sequence. It also contains two equal-sized rectangles within it to emphasize the unity caused by repetition (Plate 63).

The other section of the *minbar* nearly assumes the shape of a right angle triangle in which all of the carved rectangles are of the same size, measuring between the large and medium rectangles of the first section. If larger, the rectangles would create a dull and less united composition, as there would be few in the rectangular space, affecting the overall developing rhythm caused by the repetition. If they were smaller, they would not draw considerable attention, as the section would be unnecessarily crowded and thus distracting to the eyes. We can conclude from this, that Fatimid artists focused great attention on detail in their artwork.

The rectangles at the left edge of the second section, also half the size of the other rectangles, are cut by a thick separating border. This, in a way indicates the end of the developing horizontal sequence. The rectangles on either side of the border are vertically oriented, an effective useful way to combine the two sections.

Border: (Plate 63) The border around nearly all of the rectangles is of similar width. The largest two rectangles mentioned previously are surrounded by a thicker decorated border, with their inner smaller rectangles also enclosed by a plain and relatively thick border. In fact, these smaller rectangles have two borders—one is a thick and the other a thin line that surrounds the vegetal pattern.

Vegetal Motifs

Overview: (Plate 63) Each rectangle is engraved and adorned with spirals, which unify the work as all contain similar flowing interlaced lines. The effect also creates variety from the geometric and organic shapes used. This *minbar* reveals the extent to which the Fatimids were influenced by the impressive vegetal motifs of other civilization's artworks and also reflects the vegetal aspect of arabesque. The Tulunid beveled style is demonstrated in this *minbar* by carved kidney-shaped leaves. In addition, the Sassanid wing shapes, or "flugel palmettes" as termed by Hartsfield, and the Samara style C in which the placidly interlaced lines create lively spirals are also visible.¹²³ The Tulunid beveled style is known to have been a strong influence from the earlier period in which Samara motifs were dominant.¹²⁴

Details: (Plate 63) The rectangles of the first rectangular section are of a Samara design illustrated by the smoothly interwoven lines that form mellow and energetic spirals. The palmettes are integrated along with the scrolls and the large rectangle has two palmettes in two symmetric ornamental combinations. The medium rectangle has three palmettes developed and arranged in three circles, while the small rectangle has two palmettes, one overlapping the other.

The rectangles of the second section contain the same pattern on the medium sized rectangles of the first section, with the exception of those at the left edge and the right-angle triangles at the edge of the railing. These have a slightly different pattern as to their different sizes and shapes; unlike the geometric Islamic pattern, which mostly represents eternity as a way to demonstrate the nature of God, the vegetal patterns should be enclosed and limited according to the space it employs. The rectangle containing

¹²³ al-Shaf'i, "Mumāyẓāt al-Akhshāb almuzākhrifa fī al-trāẓyan al-'Abbāsi wa al-Fātīmi fī Miṣr," 4.

¹²⁴ Ettinghausen, *The Art and Architecture of Islam*, 59.

palmettes at the top of the inside and outside of the *minbar* has carved borders and a symmetrical vegetal pattern.

The Spandrels of the Arch: The spandrel of the *minbar* (Plate 66) is a beautiful and delegate element. It is the main part from which the other vegetal patterns are inspired and flow. The smooth circular lines intersect and intertwine, and amalgamate with the small kidney-shaped leaves like the leaves of the branches. The scrollwork also incorporates unique five-petal flowers and trefoils adding more life and energy to the border. At the corner, there is an interesting design that consists of two wing-shaped leaves, with the smaller leaf growing from the bigger one and combining with a trefoil. There is a sense here of peaceful harmony.

Nature of Carving

The carving of the scrollwork here is neither deep nor shallow but somewhere in the middle, whereas the flowers, leaves and scrolls have shallow striations. These details indicate that the *minbar* might belong to the middle period of the Fatimid dynasty, as the carving forms triangular fields with floral ornaments and split palmettes, yet contain no pulvin (Tulunid influence) or vine leaves, all representative of ornamental Fatimid features from the middle period.¹²⁵ The Fatimids developed a wide range of designs out of the ordinary Islamic pattern, which dates back to 1106 A.D./500 H. during the middle of their era of reign (Plate 63).

Two types of wood are used in the spandrels (Plate 66): The original one is shiny and the striations very clear, while the second wood was more likely used in renovation of the *minbar*. An antiquated method of renovation was employed, as the scrollwork does not match perfectly and there are noticeable cracks in the piece.

¹²⁵ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 77.

Spindles

The spindles are very closely installed in the staircase railing. The construction of such a railing with spindles was uncommon in the Islamic world; most of the railings were highly decorated barriers without any opening. The spindles of this *minbar* with cubic edges connecting them, take the form of beads arranged vertically with rings separating each bead from the other.

3.12 Brief Description: Plate 67: *Wooden Mihrab presented by al-Amir bi-Ahkam Allah*

- Date: 1125 A.D.
- Location: Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt
- Size: H: 165 cm, W: 119 cm
- Cutting: Shallow
- MIA: 420 and 422

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Structure: The *mihrab* was hewn from a huge single wooden log (Plate 68).¹²⁶ The unadorned niche has an ogee arch supported by two simple plain columns with bulbous capital of Cairene type.¹²⁷ The inscription panel appears to have once been placed into a rectangular wooden border, which notably would have been larger than the *mihrab* that fitted beneath it. The top beam is slightly curved, as if it had once been fitted into an arched niche. This *mihrab* was exhibited as a highly prized artifact in the mosque

¹²⁶ Bloom, *Art of the City Victorious*, 144.

¹²⁷ Barrucand, "Remarks on the Iconography of the Medieval of Cairo: Form and Emplacement," 33.

of al-Azhar, and within this mosque an inscription was made to dedicate it to the ruling caliph's ancestry. Some historians interpret the presence of the inscription as an attempt to honor the caliph.

Inscription: A long inscription, once painted, is carved in six lines on a wooden panel attached to the top of the *mihrab*:

“In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. Be you watchful over the prayers and the middle prayer; and do you stand obedient to God (Q 2:239). For such prayers are timed prescription for the Believers (end of Q 4:104). This blessed mihrab for the noble Azhar congregational mosque in the Cairo of al-Mu'izz is among the things that was ordered by our master and lord al-Mansur Abi 'Ali, the Imam al-Amir bi-Ahkam Allah, Commander of the Believers, may God's blessings be upon him, his pure ancestors and his noble descendants, son of the Imam al-Mustansir bi'llah, Commander of the Believers, may God's benedictions be on them all and on their ancestors, the pure imams, the sons of the rightly-directed guides and complete peace until the Day of Judgment. In the months of the year 519. Praise be to the one God!”¹²⁸

The letters in the first five lines are crowded together; however, the last row with the inscription date and idiom, “Praise be to the One God,” suggest that the craftsman may not have planned ahead regarding the inscription panel, as the overcrowded writing occurs in the initial rows but evens out with a more spacious line at the end.

Decoration:

Four rectangular panels border the concave niche of the *mihrab* on its left and right sides (the lower two panels have been restored). The panels were carved with arabesque with trefoil leaves combined within an intense net of interlacing vines. The carving is shallow and the panels are placed within a fitted frame, also adorned with a subtle carving in the beveled style and scrolls of vines and leaves.

¹²⁸ Bloom, *Art of the City Victorious*, 144.

The *mihrab* is different from other *mihrabs* of the 12th century, which were decorated more elaborately and geometric patterns accented the entire scope of ornamentation (Plates 68 and 70). This *mihrab* has a more simple shallow carving and the main design is of a beveled styled with vegetal motifs. Bloom theorizes that this *mihrab* may have originated at an earlier date and was later moved to the al-Azhar mosque, as the style differs and its top frame is rounded to suggest it had once been fitted elsewhere.¹²⁹

3.13 Brief Description: Plate 68: *Wooden Portable Mihrab from the Mausoleum of Sayyidah Nafisa*

- Date: 1137-38 A.D./532 H. or 1146-47 A.D./541 H.
- Size: H: 192 cm, W: 88 cm¹³⁰
- Cutting: Shallow
- MIA: 421

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Overview

This portable *mihrab* (Plate 68) made of sycamore and teak woods,¹³¹ was made for the Mausoleum of Sayyidah Nafisa which was renovated by the Fatimid Caliph al-Hafiz on two occasions, implied by the suggested dates above. It is distinctive due to the early use of a radiating star pattern for decoration of the outer frame.¹³²

¹²⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹³⁰ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 83.

¹³¹ Bloom, *Art of the City Victorious*, 165.

¹³² Ibid., 88.

Patterns

Lines Employed: Three levels of lines appear on the façade. Meticulously interlaced lines carved on the border, thicker interlinked ornamental lines—a smaller version of those engraved on the niche—that connect and compose the scrollwork, and the outer border or strap work design. Here this borderline has two distinct and important functions: it surrounds the arabesque to intensify its beauty by showing a clear contrast between the arabesque and the shallow design made on it. Secondly, the borderlines intersect and overlap to form geometric patterns and shapes, a technique called marquetry, which is formed by angular interlacing strap work radiating from central stars figures. Marquetry was widely used in contemporary Syrian woodwork.¹³³

The Niche: The interior niche (Plate 69) is rather outstanding for its charming combination of fancifully combined patterns of arabesque scrolls. The piece exhibits the typical lively Fatimid style, with lines incurving and interlacing like branches of a grape vine; it combines all the elements creating one unified spirit for the scrollwork such as Sassanid wing-shaped leaves, palmettes and cornucopia. Interlinked geometric patterns are exhibited, such as the octagon and large 16-pointed star, and ornate decorations spirited with naturalistic and vegetal figures characterize the work. The palmettes, wing-shaped leaves, tri-lobed leaves and cornucopia are all amalgamated within greatly feminine and extremely energetic composed artwork. There is an interesting contrast between the warmly and highly adorned niche and the simply decorated front side, this contrast points out the different decoration of the niche and the front side increasing the quality of their beauty, expressing the distinction and adding to their appealing effect.

Star Symbol: The star, a symbol of the Fatimid creed, is the centre of the woodwork. It could symbolize their beliefs and source of enlightenment. It might also express the relation between the Prophet and Imam ‘Ali as Shiites see it.¹³⁴

¹³³ Bloom and O’Kane, “Woodwork, Egypt, Syria and Iraq, c. 1000-c.1250,” 490.

¹³⁴ Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 77.

Border: The main frame is inscribed with several Qur'anic verses in the floriated Kufic style, beginning from the bottom right and arching over to finish at the bottom left. Notably, Zaki Hassan suggests that this inscription reflects the beginnings of the *Naskh* style, a style that eventually replaced the Kufic style.¹³⁵

3.14 Brief Description: Plate 70: *Wooden Portable Mihrab from the Mausoleum of Sayyidah Ruqayya*

- Date: 1154-60 A.D.
- Location: Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt
- Size: H: 210 cm, W: 111 cm, L: 54 cm¹³⁶
- Cutting: Shallow (front side), Deep (sides and back)
- MIA: 446

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Overview

The construction of this portable *mihrab* (Plate 70) was requested by the wife of the Caliph al-Amir. Its inscriptions indicate that it was made for the Mausoleum of Sayyidah Ruqayya.¹³⁷ Unlike the portable *mihrab* of Sayyidah Nafisa, the greater use of repeating geometric radiating star patterns makes this piece of woodwork extraordinary. The scrollwork on the sides and back incorporates cornucopias integrated with foliated scrolls rising from a vase.

¹³⁵ Hassan, *Kunūz al-Fātimīyīn*, 458.

¹³⁶ Abbas, "The Fatimids," 59.

¹³⁷ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 85.

Structure

The *mihrab* is a niche in the wall constructed to designate the *qibla* (direction to Mecca which Muslims should face during prayers). It is a common structure in mosques, thus making it easily distinguishable.

Geometric Shapes (Front)

The geometric shapes are interlinked, with each shape joined to the other by a shared side. The elaborate application of geometric forms, precisely the radiating star patterns, is manifest.

Star Symbol: The star is the source of light and a vital element in most Fatimid artwork, as it reveals the spiritual and inspiring light of the Prophet and ‘Ali.¹³⁸

Patterns and Decorations

Arabesque (front): The initial function of arabesque here is to focus the viewer’s eyes on a fixed geometric shape developed by intersecting lines. Vertical and horizontal lines are esthetically decorative, while diagonal lines are dynamic. The combination of these lines evokes strong emotions and thoughts by creating a visual intensity. The strict and accurate arrangement of lines that are cut at the border suggests there is a completion for the geometric patterns and that they will extend beyond the visible material, which indicates the infinite nature of “Allah.”

Scrolls (sides and back): (Plate 71) Engraved lines on the sides and back of the *mihrab*, which are rather shallow, visibly contrast with those deeply carved on the front, lending the visual impression of a raised surface. Two sets of sinuous spirals flow from a vase in a pattern designed to incorporate with the other elements in the scrollwork. The “S” and “O” shaped lines are emotionally active and warmly dynamic to arouse deep feelings.

¹³⁸ Williams, “The Cult of the ‘Alid Saints in Fatimid Monuments of Cairo, Part I,” 45.

Irregular shapes: (Plate 71) The organic and nature-inspired shapes (leaves, star-shaped flowers, vase and cornucopia) intensify the feminine, delightful and naturalistic mode of the artwork. The use of cornucopia here is extraordinary; symbolizing harvest and abundance, it was carved along with other elements to intensify the organic combination.

No element here is purely Fatimid; the wing-shaped leaves are either Sassanid or Sumarian, the cornucopias either Roman or Greek. The Fatimids borrowed artistic motifs and styles from other civilizations, attempting to combine them in one condensed and unified work so that they appear as being original and created by the same people, e.g. the Fatimids.

Nature of Carving

There is an astonishing contrast between the front and back (Plates 70 and 72). The sides are shallowly engraved, demonstrating the common arabesque style with its fancifully combined patterns. Conversely, the carving on the front facade is much deeper, thus creating a visual effect of the strapwork's protrusion. With time, Fatimid art styles began to display deeper carvings for the purpose of increasing the esthetic effect of figural and vegetal patterns.

In this piece, the brilliance of the best Fatimid technique is well revealed. It employs traditional motifs: the vine scroll, the trefoil, the cornucopia, but in a new and entirely individual way. While the purpose of these movable *mihrahs* is yet unclear, they excel in the richness of their decoration.¹³⁹

Border

The frames of the *mihrab* have great effect on the piece. The top frame is the largest, attracting attention to the decoration inside it. The width of the second frame is half the width of the first and encloses the arabesque made on the front side, creating more stability and a stronger composition. The frame of the

¹³⁹ Scarce, "Wood," *The Arts of Islam*, 218.

niche is the smallest in width. This regular and gradual diversity of the frames' width capture the viewer's eyes and draw them to the inside of the niche. All frames are inscribed with verses from the holy Qur'an.

3.15 Brief Description: Plate 73: *Wooden Minbar from Mosque of 'Amri at Qus*

- Date: 1155-1156 A.D.
- Location: 'Amri Mosque at Qus
- Size: H: 2.70 m, W: 1.15 m (height without the canopy)¹⁴⁰
- Cutting: Deep

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Overview

The construction of this portable *mihrab* (Plate 74) was requested by the vizir Tala' i b. Ruzzik and is one of the finest wooden *minbars* of the Fatimid era.¹⁴¹ The *minbar*'s canopy is shaped as a dome and beautifully carved, surrounded by crenellations. This *minbar* has the same general shape of that located in Hebron and in the mosque of Saint Catherine; yet, all surfaces here are treated as a unified structure, with polygonal patterns enclosing small panels filled with arabesque design.¹⁴²

Geometric Shapes

The *minbar* is covered with wonderful strapwork patterns, based on a 60° grid of parallel bands that produce a mixture of ordinary and elongated hexagons, hexagrams, bow-tie and also lozenge shapes.¹⁴³

The network bands were cautiously carved and to specific measurements. Similar to Sayyidah Nafisa, the

¹⁴⁰ Bloom, *Arts of City Victorious*, 166.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁴² Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 85.

¹⁴³ Bloom, *Arts of City Victorious*, 166.

bands were arranged in pairs. However, the balance between the geometric shapes and the interstitial panels was altered to draw attention to the individual panels, which are delicately and superbly carved with strap fashion. Additionally, the marquetry (strapwork) design is filled with pearl bands intersecting with vegetal arabesque, with some filled only by vegetal arabesque.

Backrest

The backrest is intensively carved with strapwork and arabesque (Plate 75). The finest and most innovative carvings include the marquetry and arabesque that are integrated into an almost architectural composition.¹⁴⁴ The back podium of the backrest takes the shape of a *mihrab*.

Star Symbol: One of the most commonly used geometrical shapes in this *minbar* is the star pattern. The top center of the blind arch (positioned at the back podium) of the *mihrab* shape backrest contains a seven-pointed star shape. This star image perhaps resembles the seven imams of the Isma‘ili, a reference to the potential linkage between the Fatimids and the holy family.¹⁴⁵

3.16 Brief Description: Plate 76: *Wooden Door of the Al-Sālih Tala'i' Mosque*

- Date: 1160 A.D.¹⁴⁶
- Origin: Location: Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt
- Size: W: 2:45 m, H: 4:33 m¹⁴⁷
- Cutting: Shallow
- MIA: 1055

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹⁴⁵ Williams, “The Cult of the ‘Alid Saints in Fatimid Monuments of Cairo, Part I,” 46.

¹⁴⁶ Lamm, “Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology,” 86.

¹⁴⁷ Pauty, *Les Bois sculptés jusqu'à l'époque ayyoubide*, 69.

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Geometric Shapes

Overview: The decoration consists of a series of repeating geometric forms developed by thick intersecting lines that also function as borders enclosing the intricate floral and foliate patterns carved in flat style with a tendency towards the lacework technique.¹⁴⁸ This typical Islamic design expresses the main purpose of arabesque, which can resemble the infinite nature of God, as the determined sequence of geometric shapes can exceed beyond the visual limits. It is the Islamic spiritual identity that lives in almost all Islamic artworks.

The Radiating Star: The most frequently displayed symbol of the Shi'a is the radiating star, which appears as the geometric center of the horizontal panel. The star as a symbol of light and guidance reveals the spiritual and sacred Shi'a beliefs of their most famous imams Ali and his son al-Husayn.¹⁴⁹ The importance of the Imam matches the significance of the star, as is well known in the Prophet's saying, "My companions are like stars; any you follow, and you will find guidance."¹⁵⁰ Shiites believed that the star symbolized the imam, as taken from the Prophet's saying, that the stars were his companions. These imams were highly regarded, as they guided and lit the way for the Shiite people along their paths in life. Furthermore, the stars represent Mohammed and Ali, who as the messenger of God and the interpreter of the message respectively, create a balance for Muslims in understanding their faith.¹⁵¹

Shapes: In each of the two vertically placed panels, there are three octagons. The formation of octagons results from the development of other irregular geometric shapes. Each two sides of an octagon are elongated to later bend and intersect with other lines. Most of the irregular shapes have sharp acute angles resembling fractions of stars. The third horizontal panel is engraved mostly with regular geometric shapes, such as the six hexagons surrounding the star that result in six-leaved flower flanked with two

¹⁴⁸ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 86.

¹⁴⁹ Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 77.

¹⁵⁰ Gabr, "The Shiite Aspect of Fatimid Art and Architecture," 12.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

large hexagons. The irregular radiating shapes attached to the small and large hexagons resemble a stretched or expanded hexagonal star. These geometric shapes are non-representational, emotionally passive and esthetically decorative, as it does not form any animal or human shape, nor evoke strong feelings. It is not the single geometric shape that attracts viewer's attention, but the steady repeating pattern that creates rhythm. Arrangement: The arrangement of panels is suitable for the vertical rectangular door, which creates a stable and balanced composition. Each of the two vertical panels is followed by one horizontal panel the employment of differently oriented panels allow for the more effective use of various ornamental combinations, as each one has its own patterns.

Size: The two vertical panels are the same width, while the horizontal panel is as wide as the two combined but only a third of their height. The diversity of sizing creates stability and variety.

Composition: Geometric forms in the vertical panel are reflected about one horizontal axis of symmetry passing through the middle octagon, here called inverted symmetry. Although the second octagon is the center of symmetry, it does not attract the focus of attention, as there are other similar octagons in the panel. The horizontal panel consists of geometric shapes reflected about two axes of symmetry—both horizontal and vertical—called biaxial symmetry. This indicates that if the panel is divided down the middle on a vertical plane, the left and right sides will be mirror images of each other, just as if the panel was divided in half along the horizontal plane, the top and bottom halves would be mirror images of each other. Such a technique decreases diversity and attracts more attention to the central element, in this case the hexagonal star, since it is the crux of all symmetry.

Vegetal motifs

Overview: The placidly flowing and shallowly carved floral and other patterns fill all negative space within the geometric shapes. They would be emotionally active and esthetically dynamic if not restricted by geometric borders. They also have a marked tendency toward the lacework effect.¹⁵²

The Vertical Panel (left): The first and third octagons are of the same design, with fancifully interlacing circular patterns forming four circles and incorporating four palmettes and small leaves. The octagon in the middle is the same as the others but with the minor difference of the inverted pattern but without inverted palmettes. Such is a clever way to create variety from within the same ornamental design. The corresponding irregular shapes in both of the vertical panels are filled with the same vegetal design and elements.

The Vertical Panel (right): Just as in the first panel, the first and third octagons are of the same design. The main difference between the two panels is that the patterns exhibited are more meticulous within the octagons of the second panel and incorporate more palmettes. The middle octagon is very similar in design to the others but with a small difference in the sizes of the scrolls or circles created by interweaving lines and in the position of the palmettes.

The Horizontal Panel: Similar shapes have similar designs. The star has one palmette enclosed in a circle that seems to combine five leaves and form a pointed oval. Each of the other elongated stars is decorated with two of the star's palmettes. The large hexagons are carved with tranquilly interlacing patterns combining one large and two small palmettes. The small hexagons are simply carved with one palmette enclosed in a circle.

¹⁵² Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 86.

Border

Every geometric shape contains two borders—one that is thick and formed by the intersecting lines, and a second border that is thin. The border that fills the spaces between the panels is a unique and rarely found border among Fatimid doors. The design displays a series of geometric shapes, with each rhomb followed by a circle in a repeating pattern—a classical motif. This border was made for decoration and beautification.

3.17 Brief Description: Plate 77: *Wooden Cenotaph from the Mosque of al-Husayn*

- Date: Late 12th Century
- Location: Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt
- Size: H: 136 cm, L: 186.5 cm, W: 132.5 cm¹⁵³
- Cutting: Deep
- MIA: 15025

Visual Analysis and Interpretation

Geometric Patterns

Overview: The *tābūt*, or cenotaph (Plate 77) stands with four sides, three of which are elaborately carved and one plain forth side that once may have displayed a dated inscription from the Fatimid era.¹⁵⁴

The cenotaph's overall rectangular shape allows for two shorter ends and two longer sides. Published pictures of this cenotaph are taken from the same point of reference, showing a shorter end on the left side and a longer side on the right; therefore, the second longer side and the second shorter end are both hidden from view. Consequently, we cannot be sure which side has a blank façade. Yet, if the second

¹⁵³ O'Kane, "The Ayyubids and Early Mamluks," 140.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 140.

shorter end is not blank, logic would see that it contains two upright rectangular panels spanning its width, just as the exposed shorter end shows, and similarly, if the longer side were not blank, it would reveal three upright panels spanning its width, just as the exposed longer side exhibits.

The cenotaph is well divided into geometric sections to increase the appealing effect of the shape sequencing and their ornamental core. The four hexagons, separated by hexagonal stars, in the second row of the front resemble those carved on the sides, yet with the latter elongated. The square engraved in the center of the top is unique and draws attention as it is not included in the rhythmic pattern, but rather disconnects it. The second section below takes a rectangular form that borders three vertically placed rectangles in the front (Plate 80), with the middle rectangle flanked by two rectangles of the same decorative design. The sides of the cenotaph (Plate 80) have the same two rectangles mentioned previously, yet without the middle rectangle of different design, enclosed into a rectangular frame. The top part of the shorter end (Plate 81) contains the same top pattern of the longer side, yet without the presence of the central square panel, there is a longer tract to fill and the hexagon shapes are horizontally elongated between the star shapes.

Star Symbol: The square (Plate 78) engraved in the upper part of the cenotaph's front side encloses a seven pointed star, perhaps significant for the number of points, formed by intersecting diagonal lines. The star is not easily visible, as the square is filled with rich scrollwork. Fatimid Shiites intended to leave their symbolic branding in the artwork they created, since it held great spiritual meanings for them. Importantly, if the pointed sections of the star were to be divided, it would express the names of the most important and ideal features among Shiites. Nevertheless, the star has been observed across almost all of the ancient civilizations, but Isma'ili Shi'a used the star that consists of two words: Mohammed and Ali. The interlacing of the two names refers to the strong relation between Prophet Mohammed and 'Ali.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Gabr, "The Shiite Aspect of Fatimid Art and Architecture," 13.

Vegetal Patterns

Overview: (Plate 78) Highly detailed and energetic vegetal elements have been employed in the cenotaph in addition to the Byzantine scrolls and Sassanid leaves. Each set of identical geometric sections contains exactly the same combination of vegetal motifs, mostly palmettes, which are enclosed in circles amalgamated with developing scrolls.

The Square: The square engraved in the middle of the top section is incredible for its rich scrollwork. A seven pointed star joins the corners of the square and strengthens the composition, reflecting yet another example of the favored number “7” among the Isma‘ili.¹⁵⁶ The palmettes in the interlacing lines develop and intersect resulting in complicated scrollwork. The circulating lines incorporate trefoils, leaves and palmettes.

Inscription: (Plate 79) The Qur’anic inscriptions, of both floriated Kufic and *Naskh*,¹⁵⁷ refer to the people of the House, which Shi‘ites interpret as in descent from Fatima. The first rectangular row in each of the cenotaph’s sides is engraved with beautiful floriated Kufic script. The rectangular frame, the border of the square and hexagons are also engraved with a similar kind of Arabic script but relatively smaller in size and with less vegetal patterns. The verticals and the end of some letters are elongated in a placid way, flowing and tranquilly curving along with the circulating floral lines that combine various vegetal elements such as kidney-shaped and wing-shaped leaves, trefoils and flowers. In the first rectangular row, the thin intertwining lines flow under and above the thick Kufic script as to unite the woodwork. The design in its entirety is very dynamic and lively.

The inscription design of the border (Plate 77) that surrounds the square is less active and ornamental, and there is no great difference between the width of the script and the vegetal patterns. The border of the hexagons is carved with Kufic script separated at the corners by palmettes. The vegetal motifs are striated in order to add more aesthetic detail to the scrollwork.

¹⁵⁶ Williams, “The Cult of the ‘Alid Saints in Fatimid Monuments of Cairo, Part I,” 47.

¹⁵⁷ Hassan, *Kunūz al-Fātimīyīn*, 464.

The parts separating each geometric section from the other are fully carved with rich scrollwork also incorporating scripts engraved in a different type of Arabic calligraphy (more slanted). It is formed in a way which makes it a part of the decorative interlacing lines and is therefore, rather difficult to read. However, the diversity of the width of the lines lends some ease in identifying what has been written.

This piece is one of the most creative of Fatimid artwork made during the late period, as cleverness and passion is revealed in this amazing combination of calligraphy and vegetal motifs, the accurate arrangement and distribution in the strap work and the strong symmetrical composition within.

Chapter 4

This chapter will outline the development and influences of various styles, specifically detailing Coptic, Samarra/Tulunid, Shi'a and Syrian influences, in Fatimid ornamentation as they relate to the objects under study. The focus will be on vegetal, figural and geometric representations produced throughout the two hundred years of Fatimid rule in Egypt, an analysis of which will identify sources of Fatimid decorative themes within the framework of carved wood. The purpose of this study is to identify popular motifs of the dynasty's artwork and establish a reference point from which the impact of other styles developed, flourished and grew. A spectrum of the popular Fatimid motifs of the time will be introduced, as well as their origin and appearance in Fatimid art.

Iconography in Islamic art is shared by a variety of media, and in many cases, one single object can integrate several ideas. Excellent examples demonstrating each type of iconography are commonly found in Fatimid wood carving, with some of the best examples incorporating figural and vegetal ornaments. A large number of pieces have survived as remnants of Fatimid monuments, demonstrating the breadth and popularity of this style, works of a variety of media as well as the fact that woodcarving from this dynasty was a mixed manifestation of other earlier styles such as Christian art and art of Samarra/Tulunid origin.

The Fatimids, as any other dynasty, had their individual taste and interest in art. Artworks created during the early years clearly reflect a strong influence of other artistic styles that existed in the region prior to dynastic solidification. The initial influence of the Tulunid style from Iraq is apparent, yet over time modifications and variations turned out a more complex Fatimid style.

As well, Coptic influence on Fatimid work was pronounced, with the Coptic community having lived in Egypt long before the arrival of the Fatimids. In time, however, Fatimid creations matured to reflect an identity of their own and almost incomparable to any other examples of Islamic artwork.

4.1 The Coptic Influence

4.1.1 Established Sourcework

Many art historians assert that Coptic artisans played a major role in affecting the characteristics of wood carving during the Fatimid period in Egypt. Wiet comments on Pauty's work about the wood sculpture of Coptic churches, and addresses the role of Coptic craftsmen. Russell echoes Wiet's thesis, arguing that both categories of woodwork found in Muslim and Christian contexts "are the work of the descendants of the Coptic craftsman."¹⁵⁸ While they fall short of stating that all Fatimid woodwork in Egypt was made by Coptic artisans, these scholars put forth comparisons of iconography and styles that highlight the impact of the Coptic tradition on Fatimid woodwork.

4.1.2 Foundation of Artwork and Style of Craftsmanship

"Coptic art" refers to artwork produced by Egyptian Christians who used ancient rudiments from their ancestry in the province of Rome's eastern Empire.¹⁵⁹ The Copts were part of the oriental Christian world that stretched throughout the Mediterranean region, and their artwork inherited almost unchangeable characteristic attributes. We must consider that Coptic art

¹⁵⁸ Jenkins, "An Eleventh Century Woodcarving from a Cairo Nunnery," 237.

¹⁵⁹ Bushhausen, "The Coptic Art Under the Fatimids," 549.

of the Fatimid era was an inherited custom in which novelty is rarely found, as Coptic ornamentation was derivative over centuries without significant change.¹⁶⁰

During Fatimid Egypt, Coptic craftsmen used many motifs from the Hellenistic tradition¹⁶¹ initially developed during the Byzantine era. These included foliate motifs, animals, features from the Classical acanthus scroll and geometric designs such as interlacing circles, blind arcading, patterns of small rectangles and other decorations. More commonly found were portrayals of animals, various scenes from the hunting field events or the court, as well as others from religions iconostases.

4.1.3 Characteristics of Style

Major Coptic decorative motifs were derivative from the Byzantine Christian art tradition, built themselves on late antique repertoires. Common themes include the use of vines, foliated scrolls and other vegetal designs in the form of complete trees and composite naturalistic elements.¹⁶² The vine scrolls, cornucopia, grapes and pinecones are Hellenistic in execution while the surface of the leaves have thick ribbing, a method common in Coptic art.¹⁶³

Human and animal figures are displayed in the decoration of early Ummayyad buildings, for example, the palace of Mshatta and Khirbat al-Mafjar (Plate 18 and 29) that followed classical Hellenistic traditions.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 550.

¹⁶¹ Hellenistic civilization represents a fusion of the Ancient Greek world with that of the Near East, Middle East and Southwest Asia, and a departure from earlier Greek attitudes towards "barbarian" cultures.

¹⁶² Ettinghausen, *The Art and Architecture of Islam*, 32-34.

¹⁶³ Abdulfattah, *Islamic Carved Wood from Palermo, Sicily*, 20.

4.1.4 The Coptic Influence on Fatimid Woodwork

Due to the heightening taste of Fatimid rulers toward extravagance in life style, craftsmanship and artistic qualities developed in parallel. Coptic and Islamic works in some cases became so closely alike that the nature of inscription was often the only way to clarify the piece's origination.¹⁶⁴

In numerous aspects Coptic and Fatimid works are similar, with the influence of the Coptic tradition strong and apparent in Fatimid art. Panel arrangement, the style of figural representation, as well as the presence of floral and vegetal motifs, are predominant characteristics in which the connection between and effect of Coptic works on Fatimid creations are apparent.

Panel Arrangement:

The arrangement of panels is characterized by the recurrence of elements within a piece: for example the panels' arrangement of a door repeated, often with some variation to maintain interest and rhythm may also be used to reduce the possibility of randomness. When comparing the arrangement of beautifully carved panels in Coptic and Fatimid pieces, the similarity regarding appearance and placement of the design is clearly apparent, as well as is the nature of the design and the surface carvings.

The distinct arrangement of panels in Coptic doors from the Fatimid era, such as those in the Church of Anba Bishoi in Wadi an-Natrun (Plate 55), can be seen to have influenced Fatimid Islamic woodwork to a great extent. Many of the doors are decorated in the same Coptic

¹⁶⁴ Buschhausen, "The Coptic Art Under the Fatimids," 550.

tradition, in which the panels are oriented vertically and the majority of engraved panels display the same ornamental design leading to rhythm by repetition.

Such similarity is well illustrated in the Fatimid door of the complex of Qala'ūn (Plate 53). When one compares, for example, the panels in the sanctuary door (Plate 37) of the Church of Anba Bishoi, with the door of the complex (Plate 54) we can detect clear resemblance in the character of design, in the design itself, in the surface decoration on the leaves and in regards to stylistic peculiarities such as the tri-lobed leaf motif of Anba Bishoi situated in the middle of the panel and the cartouche border at the center of the Qala'ūn panel. In these cases, the composition is symmetrical, as the scrolls create borders around the figures in the Qala'ūn panel and the kidney shaped leaf in Anba Bishoi. The likeness of these doors to one another is so much akin that it would seem reasonable to hypothesize that they were at least produced in different ateliers bearing a common tradition, or perhaps even produced in the same workshop.¹⁶⁵

Panels can also differ in orientation following a specific pattern of two vertically oriented panels followed by a single horizontal one. This arrangement creates both a stronger sense of stability, yet less dynamism than the first arrangement characterized by breaking up the sequence of the panels, which is different from that which can be observed in the Qala'ūn and Anba Bishoi doors.

The contrast of vertical then horizontal orientation is demonstrated in the doors of al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah (Plate 45) and al-Sālih Tala'i' (Plate 76). This mode of panel placement lends variation and boosts the importance of each panel so that the emotive stylism of the work is

¹⁶⁵ Jenkins, "An Eleventh-Century Woodcarving from a Cairo Nunnery," 237.

distributed, is spread evenly and equally, as opposed the Qala'ūn or Anab Bishoi doors of strict vertical positioning.

The Fatimids applied this panel ordering variation technique in further woodworks such as in *mihrab*s and *minbars*. The specific examples of the *mihrab* of al-Amir bi-Ahkām Allah (Plate 67) and the *minbar* of the Mosque in Saint Catherine (Plate 63) are important to highlight here. The al-Amir *mihrab* panels are vertical, similar to those of Anba Bishoi (Plates 55 and 67), whereas the *minbar* of the Mosque in Saint Catherine is more like that of Sitt Barbara, given the variation of panel arrangement due to the multiple sizes of panels used (Plates 1 and 67).

Representational Figures:

Figural representation in Fatimid art was used to depict reflections of everyday life rather than mimic Greco-Roman conceptions. The nature of representation of human and animal figures was transformed from pre-Islamic traditions and adopted into Islamic tradition, and can be considered a kind of artistic realism of that time.¹⁶⁶ Each panel tells a different story or event and the carved figures and motifs depict the environment in which Copts lived.

Yet, the origin of illustrated human figures and animals, and expressions of how they interact with each other are seen to be of Byzantine origin. Lamm suggests that the wooden screen from Sitt Barbara is evidence of a Byzantine impact on the Fatimid art of Egypt, transferred by Coptic craftsmen who occupied a major role among Egyptian artisans of the time. The most noticeable feature in the design of the Sitt Barbara screen is the presence of figural

¹⁶⁶ Baer, "Fatimid Art at the Crossroads: A Turning Point in the Artistic Concepts of Islam?" 394.

depictions human and zoomorphic of a category that was to become characteristic, not only in Fatimid art, but in the medieval art of Islam as a whole.¹⁶⁷

Human figures, for example, typically wear Arab garb, such turbans as in various panels of the Sitt Barbara screen, such as one that depicts a knight riding a horse (Plate 5), and in panels of the complex of al-Nasir Muhammad (Plate 54).

Panels from Sitt Barbara screen carry reflections of the Byzantine impact of human and animal figures. (Plate 11, Panel 7) This panel illustrates a man resembling a Roman hunter holding the antlers of a deer (Plate 12). There is also a wavy line integrated at the end with abstractly shaped patterns. The male figure wearing a hairdress and elaborate clothes, he might be a nobleman or prince. The panel (Plate 17, Panel 12) displays two large wild beasts attacking two gazelles with bites to the neck. Two men present are owners of the beasts, leading them to hunt. This image stirs multiple feelings as it activates the mind to think about the pain of the gazelles, the excitement of the hunters and the power of the beasts. This scene of predator attacking prey symbolizes power. There is also a vase from which the vegetal patterns develop, which could be a symbol of birth and creation in life. Vases with vine leaves rising upwards can be traced back to monuments of the Umayyads, such as the Dome of the Rock and the palace of Mshatta (Plate 18).¹⁶⁸ Again, Ummayad buildings as earlier mentioned are derived from Byzantine tradition.

Fatimid Muslim artisans rendered representational figures of both human and zoomorphic form, as the main theme of several significant woodworks, reflecting the extent to which Coptic art affected the overall artistic spirit of the Fatimid era. Moreover, it is also believed that Copts

¹⁶⁷ Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 67.

¹⁶⁸ Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, Vol.1, 87.

themselves were the creators of some Islamic Fatimid woodworks due to the fact that Coptic and Islamic figurative ornaments share many common features as mentioned above (Plates 24, 49 and 54) with human and bird figures in the panel and door found in Qala‘ūn and panels from Sitt Barbara).¹⁶⁹

An important decorative feature found in Fatimid art is that human and zoomorphic figures are typically enclosed within an ornamental border formed by interlacing patterns. This is additionally well demonstrated in the panel from the Qala‘ūn complex (Plate 49) and many of the Sitt Barbara panels (Plates 4-9 and 11, 13-17). Moreover, cross beams (Plate 52) from the complex of al-Nāsir Muhāmmad depict the caliph sitting between two servants and holding a scepter, an emblem of authority. A scene (Plate 24, Panel 18) demonstrates a battle between human and animal figures, a wild beast attacking a gazelle from behind: a classic scene of demonstrating power and triumph over enemies (Plates 28, Panel 22).

Beyond their decorative lively function, these figures are an effective way of narrating significant events or customs of the Fatimid era. The events include battles between knights holding daggers or swords and shields, a violent fight between a hunter and a carnivore, or a caliph drinking wine with the servants who attend him. These can be found in the unique Fatimid woodwork represented by the beams from the Qālā‘un complex (Plate 52).

Furthermore, another wooden panel (Plate 82) now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, displays figural motifs very similar to those found on the beams in the Qālā‘un complex. Jenkins asserts that although this panel reflects clear Coptic flavor and moreover, was made for a Christian building, it still cannot be classified as Coptic; it is a Fatimid piece and an

¹⁶⁹ Jenkins, “An Eleventh-Century Woodcarving from a Cairo Nunnery,” 236.

example of an “almost perfect fusion of Egyptian Christian tradition and Islamic influence and must be classified according to the period when [it was] produced.”¹⁷⁰

The doors of the Fakahani Mosque (1148-9 A.D.) (Plate 83 and 84) contain three horizontal panels at the top, mid-level and bottom sections, which alternate with vertically placed rectangles. These are framed within wide borders, ornately carved with fine lacework of leaves and scrolls growing out from vases.¹⁷¹ The panels of the door of al-Mu’allaqa church (Plate 85) are similarly decorated in ornamentation to the doors of the Fakahani Mosque, which was itself located nearby the church.¹⁷² These examples together support the notion that works of the time could not be categorized as distinctly Islamic or distinctly Coptic.

Vegetal and Floral Motifs:

Mshatta is an important monument in the development of floral and vegetal ornament. Scrolls and vine motifs can be traced back to monuments from Umayyad Syria such as the palaces of Mshatta and Khirbat al-Mafjar (Plates 18 and 29), which were known to be influenced by decorative motifs borrowed from the Byzantine.

Scrolls sometimes emphasize a design by developing multiple lines around them that act as a border. This can be seen clearly in Fatimid panels (Plate 54) and panels from the Anba Bishoi (Plate 37) and the Dayr al-Baramus (Plate 38) screens. Foliated scrolls were also used to fill in the backgrounds, as seen in the door of the Church of Saint Catharine, panels and cross beams from the complex of Qala’ūn (Plates 49, 52 and 54) and the two horses head panel (Plate 56).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 238.

¹⁷¹ Lamm, “The Fatimid Woodwork, its Style and Chronology,” 84.

¹⁷² Ibid., 84.

The use of a spade or a trefoil that resembles a leaf and thus life in Fatimid Islamic and Coptic woodwork is the central element from which all other ornamental motifs develop. This use of spades and trefoils is illustrated in panels from the al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah door (Plate 45) and panels from Anba Bishoi (Plate 37) and Dayr al-Baramus (Plate 38) screens.

The elaborately decorated background of many Fatimid and Coptic woodworks resembles a crowded vine. The lines circulate and interlace, accompanying trefoils and flowers to form a natural, intricate, lively, dynamic and continuous pattern, seen for instance in the spandrels and some of Sitt Barbara panels (Plates 7, 8, 19, 26 and 36) and in the panels of Saint Catherine's door (Plates 41 and 42).

The vine design of Byzantine origin in the previous examples occurs frequently in various Islamic Fatimid woodworks: for example, the large panel of Plate 49, panels of Fatimid doors (Plate 54, 62), portable *mihrahs* including those from Sayyidah Nafisa and Sayyidah Ruqayya (Plate 68, 69, and 70), spandrels of the arch of the *minbar* in Saint Catherine (Plate 66) and panels of al-Amir bi-Ahkām Allah *mihrab* (Plate 67).

The decorative motif of cornucopia, symbolizing profusion and wealth, dates back to ancient Greece.¹⁷³ In its uniqueness and rarity, cornucopia does not emerge in other Islamic woodworks before its appearance in the late Fatimid woodwork of the niche of Sayyidah Nafisa's portable *mihrab* (Plate 69), as well as in the panels of Sayyidah Ruqayya portable's *mihrab* (Plate 70).¹⁷⁴

When detailing is too minute and fine, it becomes challenging for the spectator to appreciate the piece's workmanship (Plate 53), as is the case with the great doors from the

¹⁷³ al-Shafi'i, "Mumāyẓāt al-Akhshāb almuzākhrāfa fi alrāzīyan al-'Abbasi wa al-Fātīmi fi Miṣr," 81.

¹⁷⁴ Abbas, "The Fatimid," 88.

Fatimid palace in the Islamic Museum. On the other hand, when the carving is at eye level, as with the movable *mihrab* from Sayyidah Ruqayya, the ingenuity of the best Fatimid technique is well exposed. Traditional motifs, such as the vine scroll, trefoil and cornucopia were used by Fatimid artisans, yet they were employed in an original and entirely individual way.¹⁷⁵ This new rendering is characterized by carvings of a mixture between geometric designs and small bands of lines adorned with circular and arabesque, which form palmettes and tri-lobed leaves and result in a superbly unique design (Plates 70, 71).

Trade ties between Alexandria and Constantinople lead us to the existence of these influences on Fatimid art. In fact, Fatimid and contemporary Byzantine art were parallel to one another, as an example of a stone billet from 11th century Byzantium shows. This stone billet employs the *champlevé* carving technique, also used in the screen of Sitt Barbara.¹⁷⁶ *Champlevé* in Sitt Barbara was used to replace the shadows, cast by the angular carvings of the Tulunid style, with modeled canals emphasized by the straight background.¹⁷⁷

Sitt Barbara establishes a perfect example to demonstrate the Byzantine influence on Fatimid art in Egypt, conveyed by the Copts who were among the premier artisans in Egypt (Plate 1).¹⁷⁸ Predominant decorations of the screen include figural motifs with vegetal elements subordinate to these.

4.2 Samarra Influence

Samarra influence affected Fatimid art from the earliest stages just as Hellenistic influences did. This can be rationalized for multiple reasons, such as the impact from the

¹⁷⁵ Jenkins, "An Eleventh Century Woodcarving from a Cairo Nunnery," 218.

¹⁷⁶ Lamm, "The Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 66.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 66.

¹⁷⁸ Lamm, "The Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 66.

previous Tulunid dynasty, the trade industries that flourished during Fatimid reign, and the emigration movement that came from south Iraq to Cairo.¹⁷⁹

4.2 .1 Established Sourcework

The introduction of the art of Samarra to Egypt during the time of Ahmad Ibn Tulūn, Lamm states, caused a complete change in style of Egyptian woodwork. Emerging carved wood soffits in the doors of mosques constructed by this Turkish ruler resemble panels found at Samarra, for example those containing the stucco ornamentation of “Style C.”¹⁸⁰

Furthermore, in his article entitled “Mumāyẓāt al-Akhshāb almuzākhrāfa fi alrāzyan al-ʿAbbasi wa al-Fātimi fi Miṣr,” Farid al-Shafīʿi explains that the decorative carvings of the Tulunid style are undoubtedly derivative from those of Samarra stucco, conventionally called Samarra Third Style. The name “Tulunid style,” in fact refers to the name of the Abbasid Samarra style of Egypt, of which we have many examples showing the firm relationship and common characteristics between them in ornamental elements and carving patterns.

4.2 .2 Foundation of Artwork and Style in Craftsmanship

From Samarra, Ahmad Ibn Tulūn came to the fertile land of Egypt, bringing traditions of construction and decorative arts that soon flourished. The new styles trumped local traditions and attracted Egyptian craftsmen who gave up their old practices and adopted new ones.¹⁸¹

Fortunately, a great number of these examples have survived in Egypt and are housed in the

¹⁷⁹ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 90.

¹⁸⁰ Lamm, “Fatimid Woodwork – Its Style and Chronology,” 62.

¹⁸¹ al-Shafīʿi, “Mumāyẓāt al-Akhshāb almuzākhrāfa fi alrāzyan al-ʿAbbasi wa al-Fātimi fi Miṣr,” 59.

Islamic Museum. Such developmental phases, which took place over less than a quarter century, resulted from the need to minimize the time required to make and mount ornaments.¹⁸²

The construction of edifices progressed at a rapid pace and craftsmen were forced to meet construction and decoration needs of property owners. Embossers worked on simplifying the first style, which required special artistic effort in element making, fine detail and carving the enclosing backgrounds. Accordingly, craftsmen developed the second style featuring flat complementary elements in an almost adjacent position with very narrow separators.

This third style saw the disappearance of the enclosing backgrounds of the first style. The elements are fully contiguous where their edges have become curved, giving them gradual shadows which are different from the sharp dark shadows that the elements cast over the hollow backgrounds in the first and second styles.¹⁸³

Artisans benefited from the characteristics of the third style and made use of its simplicity and ease of carving technique. They created templates from which to duplicate the original ornament into many stucco copies, able to cover the wide walls within a shorter time. Importantly, these templates contained their own decorative patterns, i.e. the positive original, by carving in stucco or wood.

It is likely that the developmental phases of wood decoration in Samarra did not coincide with those of stucco development. No examples of decorated wood have been found to display or even resemble the second style.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ibid., 58.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 59.

The industry of stucco ornamentation and the use of wood to prepare the original decorative pattern templates opened a new field for woodworkers. Carving decorations of this third style now became simpler and quicker, with the motifs incorporating new features from coating and special designs. Artisans then applied these new methods to woodwork carving in Samarra and Iraq.

4.2 .3 Characteristics of Style

Samarra, itself impacted by other regions of the Muslim world (Herzfeld asserts that Sassanian art was the most important influence on Samarra ornament,¹⁸⁵ due to the predominance of Sassanian derived motifs), was the source of new decorative forms that gradually resulted in unique styles of ornamentation and design of abstracted and complete surface patterns. Its motifs and beveled carving techniques are also found many centuries later across a wide geographical region, pointing to the spread of Samarra influence. Although the styles still use common iconography, there was an apparent shift from the traditions that pre-dated Islam and in some cases the floral origin is no longer apparent. Importantly, the styles of Samarra are categorized into three: A, B and C.

4.2 .4 Samarra and Tulunid Influence on Fatimid Woodwork

The manifestation of Mesopotamian roots of influence in Fatimid artwork is prominent. The Samarra styles born in this region, and brought to Egypt and expanded upon during the Tulunid era, bear a clear mark on important Fatimid works.

¹⁸⁵ Baer, *Islamic Ornament*, 7.

Samarra Style

Samarra Style A is identified by its purely graceful vine leaves, which together form a poly-petal flower. The leaves are interconnected by forming circular branches that create a natural, dynamic and strong piece. The entire design is enclosed within a thin border (Plate 48).

A precisely similar design can be found in the third horizontal panel of the al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah door (Plate 45). Replacing vine leaves are the common Tulunid scrolls, connected by circular lines that fill the petals of the non-framed hexagonal flower. This Fatimid composition as a whole resembles Samarra style A in its graceful soul and visual intensity.

In the first period, Fatimid artists were greatly influenced by Samarra styles, which are frequently observed in their artwork; the door of al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah serves as a good example of the first phase of Fatimid woodwork.¹⁸⁶ The vertical panels follow Samarra style C (beveled style), where here the wood works exhibit placidly circular lines that form spiral terminals or scrolls forming abstract shapes that are bulbous and undulating (Plate 3).¹⁸⁷ These elements develop a naturalistic combination and negative spaces are filled within. The vertical panels of al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah's door (Plate 46) exhibit such Tulunid scrolls, which develop from the central trefoil and spread to fill out all edges in a way similar to that of the Anba Bishoi (Plate 37) and Dayr al-Baramus (Plate 38) panels.

Tulunid Scrolls/Samarra Style C

During the time that the beveled style was brought to Egypt, the Tulunids also brought with them from Iraq a type of animated scroll that survives in one example from Samarra (Plate

¹⁸⁶ al-Shafi'i, "Mumāyẓāt al-Akshāb al-muzākhrāfa fi al-rāzīyan al-ʿAbbāsi wa al-Fātīmi fi Miṣr," 68.

¹⁸⁷ Ettinghausen, *The Art and Architecture of Islam*, 104.

84). It used the animal figure the *rinceau animé*, a new and abstract motif of a bird incorporated with the Tulinid scroll that was banned from palaces. The beveled style however appears in both religious and palatial contexts and sometimes blends with the animal figures (Plate 56).¹⁸⁸

During the Fatimid period, the beveled style was developed in a unique way, as in the famous horse's head panel (Plate 56). The style further became more flamboyant, with representation figures of both humans and animals, themes of court and hunting, or iconostases of the period from Coptic churches that depict saints and angels. To accommodate these extra design elements, a simpler version of carving was necessary (Plates 1, 41, 49 and 52).¹⁸⁹

As Fatimid art developed further with time, Tulinid scrolls in the works came to be shaped more decoratively, ending either in trefoils or other motifs that make difficult identification of a pure Tulinid spiral. While the panels of the *minbar* (Plates 64-67) are simply decorated with Tulinid scrolls, the decorative design is similar to that found in the al-Salih Talai door (Plate 74), with the exception that the scrolls are fully terminated into trefoils. This similar design characteristic is demonstrated in also portable *mihirabs* (Plates 67, 68 and 70) and the al-Husayn cenotaph (Plate 77).

The beams of al-Nasir Muhammad complex contain scrolls connected to wing-shaped leaves designed in a highly creative fashion, as they firmly keep the main carving intact inside the border of each beam and enhance the naturalistic beauty by unifying it with the main scene (Plate 52). The scrolls also appear in various forms in the panel of Plate 56, with lines circulating multiple times to emphasize the spiral shape at the top edges. The scrolls are either formed by

¹⁸⁸ Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival*, 80.

¹⁸⁹ Scarce, "Wood Carving," 218.

interlacing lines or developed from the tip of another scroll, as in the bottom two scrolls of Plate 56. They are also connected to kidney-shaped leaves.

The panel in Plate 60 is a typical rendering of the Tulunid style in which kidney-shaped leaves contribute to the importance of the Tulunid scrolls that, apart from other Fatimid woodworks, form the main ornamental element. Here, the kidney-shaped leaves are more delicate and not as bulbous as seen in Anba Bishoi or the door of al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah (Plates 37 and 45). The similarly sculpted Fatimid panels are considered prevailing because of their curved patterns in contrast to the background showing simple vegetal forms and kidney-shapes, for example, the shapes which appeared in the second half of the 11th century in the Dayr Anba Bishoi (Plate 37) and Dayr al-Baramus (Plate 38).

White analyses the central and pear-shaped forms in the Wadi Natrun churches in which he takes note that the gap width between the left undecorated surface areas grow wider in examples overtime.¹⁹⁰ Given this analysis, we are able to deduce that the panels of Dayr al-Baramus were made at an earlier date than those of Anba Bishoi.

Throughout the 9th century, the two most important sources of Islamic ornament stems came from Byzantine art and the Sassanians. These motifs included acanthus leaves, vines, foliated scrolls, tendrils, grapes, palmetto trees, pinecones, cornucopia, floral blossoms, lotuses and a variety of palmettes.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'm Natrun*, 153.

¹⁹¹ Baer, *Islamic Ornament*, 7.

Sassanian Themes

Lamm states that the Sitt Barbra screen reflects both Byzantine and Mesopotamian traditional art.¹⁹² Al-Shafi‘i and Hassan agree with Lamm that some themes in Sitt Barbra are of Sassanian influence, for example the themes of people at court during their leisure time drinking wine and being entertained by music from the Persian *oud* (Plate 9).¹⁹³

True to form in everyday life is a scene showing a group of figures set in leisure activity, wearing Arabian garb and with one figure playing an *oud* (a pear-shaped stringed instrument commonly used in Middle Eastern music). The human figures in Arab or Persian turbans displayed in some panels of the Sitt Barbara screen, for example, depict a knight wearing a turban, riding a horse and holding what seems to be a banner (Plate 5). Panels of the complex of al-Nasir Muhammad also show figures clearly dressed in Arab or Persian fashion (Plate 49).

Another examples of Persian influence and itself similar to a scene in Sitt Barbara (Plate 9) is found in the beams of the complex of al-Nasir Muhammad (Plate 52). A figure perhaps representing a member of royalty or high rank, is drinking from a wine cup, entertained by a man playing a musical instrument for the caliph while the other attendant bears an oval object, perhaps food or a wineskin. Another example of the Sassanian theme shows two seated men (one playing drums) and in another are other bird figures resembling peacocks (Plate 54). The patterns also incorporate two Sassanid wing-shaped leaves (Plate 39) that serve as a border enclosing two birds.

¹⁹² Lamm, "Fatimid Woodwork: Its Style and Chronology," 67.

¹⁹³ Hassan, *Kunūz al-Fātimīyīn*, 205-212.

4.3 Isma‘ili Shi‘a Influence

4.3.1 Established Sourcework

Bloom points out that the term ‘Fatimid art’ refers to arts specifically associated with the Fatimid dynasty and also to arts produced in North Africa and Egypt during the tenure of their rule. He further states that the degree to which the religious principles of Fatimid Shi‘ism influenced their art is a matter of debate, while art from this dynasty reveals Persian influence as Shi‘ites ruled over both regions. Bloom attributes this artistic richness particular to Egypt to multiple factors: firstly, wealthy Isma‘ili patrons who willingly encouraged the skilful artisan toward creativity; secondly, the increasing population; thirdly, skillful artisans who had long-practiced various artistic techniques; and finally, the income yielded from agriculture and trade.¹⁹⁴

According to Irene Bierman, the Fatimids utilized calligraphy as public text by rendering Arabic inscriptions as a central visual media displayed on buildings and objects. She relates the elaboration of script to Isma‘ili symbolism and beliefs, suggesting that the interlaced *lam-alif* found in many floriated inscriptions, such as those on the *mihrahs* in the tomb of Sayyidah Ruqayya erected in 527 H./1133 A.D., reflect the interior (bātin) hidden or obscured meaning behind the external (zahir) appearance.¹⁹⁵ Yasser Tabbaa and Ibrāhim Jum‘a also suggest that the development of floriated Kufic was not a regular progressive change; rather, it was an innovation the Fatimids created to confirm their legitimacy as a caliphate and differentiate them from all other dynasties.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 51.

¹⁹⁵ Blair, “Floriated Kufic and The Fatimids,” 109.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

4.3.2 Foundation of Artwork and Style in Craftsmanship

The art of the Isma‘ili Fatimids was similar to that of other existing dynasties during the medieval Islamic period. However, their wealth allowed them to produce great quantities of luxurious items such as textiles, ivory, woodcarving and ceramics. Art subjects were a key form of creative expression, as well as a kind of propaganda, through which the Fatimids attempted to publicize their ideology and representation. Woodwork was one such medium that carried Isma‘ili Shi‘a messages, either by iconography or decoration with ornamentation driven by other stylistic influences that express their tolerance of religious beliefs.

Figural imagery is a distinct feature of Fatimid art. Such imagery is believed to be influenced by the doctrines and philosophy of Shi‘ism, as the Shi‘a were more accepting of figural images than most other Muslim sects. Early Fatimid rulers showed their interest in art through coins and inscriptions. Once a succeeding caliph was appointed, he would order that new coins be made and had inscriptions of the previous caliph’s name erased. Such a practice proclaimed the name of the ruling caliph and also helped to extend his authority.¹⁹⁷

4.3.3 Characteristics of Style

Fatimid ornamentation style is uniquely characterized by inscription, the use of human and animal figures, as well as the star motif of Shi‘a Islam.

Inscription was a highly meaningful practice employed in the embellishment of textiles, decorative objects, mosques, shrines, city walls and gates. Most Fatimid inscriptions were executed in an elegant style of script, known as floriated Kufic, characterized by angular letters

¹⁹⁷ Bloom, “The Fatimids (909-1171): Their Ideology and Their Art,” 15-26.

with curvilinear stems, leaves and flowers.¹⁹⁸ Inscriptions contain not just Qur'anic verses but also prayers and invocations to imams.

The display of lively and expressive human and animal figures was also a common characterization of the Fatimid style. These lively figures were depicted in the middle of action, engaged in activities such as sports and hunting.

The star motif of the Shi'a held significant religious and spiritual meaning, and is found frequently in Fatimid woodwork of the 12th century. To the Shi'a, the star as light indicated the importance of the holy family in enlightening the right path for people to follow.¹⁹⁹

4.3.4 Shi'a Influence on Fatimid Woodwork

Various Shi'a religious protocol and manifestations of religious representation come through in Fatimid practices and artwork. Such elements as invocations for the imam and rulers, Shi'a symbols and Qur'anic inscriptions containing references to the sun, the moon and the stars, interpreted in the Shi'ite tradition as representing the holy family of the prophet Muhammad, show strong and solid representation in Fatimid works.²⁰⁰

Sanders identifies practices among the Muslim Shi'a Fatimids that are entrenched in specifically Shi'a social customs. In her book, *Rituals, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, Sanders provides an account of the relative ranks of the people involved who were established and acknowledged.²⁰¹ At court, gestures of tribute and respect were practiced such as prostration, kissing the ground, addressing the ruler in the manner deemed appropriate, mounting and

¹⁹⁸ Blair, "Floriated Kufic and the Fatimids," 109.

¹⁹⁹ Gabr, "The Shiite Aspect of Fatimid Art and Architecture," 13.

²⁰⁰ Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 77.

²⁰¹ Sanders, *Rituals, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, 17-21.

dismounting at designated places and times.²⁰² These disciplined acts were practiced by Fatimids of the time in addition to the necessary customs, such as *naming the ruler in the Friday sermon (khutba), and minting and inscribing the ruler's name on coinage (sikka).*²⁰³

Public homage was both a sign of reverence to the caliph and a mark of his rank. The Fatimid jurist and ideologue considers this protocol in the perspective of religious devotion; in his treatise, *Kitab al-Himma*, al-Qadi al-Nu'mān associates standing before the imam with prayer, thus raising one's stance before the imam to the level of a religious duty.²⁰⁴ Hence, the postures permissible in the presence of the imam were the postures of prayer.

The importance of Shi'a religious practices were upheld among the Fatimids, thus evidencing the great importance of Shi'a representation and customs in all aspects of life.

Star Motif

Isma'ili Shi'a Muslims believe that the holy family existed before the creation of the world and that they took the form of light. Evidence of such beliefs is reflected in the many tombs containing Qur'anic inscriptions with references to the sun or stars—an interpretation of the *ahl al-bayt*, or 'People of the House.' As Hillenbrands asserts, "Any name on the central roundel (significantly termed *shamsa* in Arabic, from the word *shams*, 'sun') would most naturally be interpreted as the source of light, and it is exclusively 'Allah,' 'Muhammad' or 'Ali.'"²⁰⁵

The star symbol to the Shi'a carries significant religious and spiritual meaning, and had occurred frequently in Fatimid woodwork of the 12th century. The Shi'a used the star to indicate

²⁰² Ibid., 20.

²⁰³ Ibid., 13-17.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁰⁵ Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 77.

the importance of the holy family in enlightening the way of the people in life as a symbol of light.²⁰⁶

The star is used repeatedly in Fatimid works and architecture. In the bottom horizontal panel of the four panels installed in a modern door in the Museum of Islamic Art (Plate 61) a hexagonal star is enclosed within a cartouche. It is barely clear because of the crowded design. The lines interlace in such a complicated way forming intense background, which distracts the eyes from noticing the hexagonal star. The inner panel on the sides of the *minbar* by the al-Afdal platform is engraved with a hexagonal star formed by overlapping lines, and the core of the star is filled with scrolls and trefoils (Plate 65).

At a later stage of development in Fatimid artwork, the star begins to exist as a main element in major woodworks of the time, such as Sayyidah Nafisa (Plate 68) and Sayyidah Ruqayya (Plate 70) *mihirabs*. In the al-Husayn cenotaph, the square panel on the front side is decorated with an intricate design that incorporates a seven pointed star (Plate 78). According to Caroline Williams, the number “7” is a mystical number favored by the Isma‘ili and could resemble the seven imams of the Isma‘ili sect.²⁰⁷

In addition, the star shape appears in the strap work on the sides as well as the front and the back (Plate 79).

Invocations to Imams

Prayers and invocations to imams, which are expressed in calligraphic decorative designs, are not acceptable in the Sunni religious sect, as they direct entire obedience and show

²⁰⁶ Gabr, “The Shiite Aspect of Fatimid Art and Architecture,” 13.

²⁰⁷ Williams, “The Cult of the ‘Alid Saints in Fatimid Monuments of Cairo, part 1: The Mosque of Al-Aqmar,” 47.

great allegiance to Shi‘a Imams. Nonetheless, such invocations were common in Shi‘a art, reflecting their beliefs and symbolizing their creed.

The Isma‘ilis were the rivals of the Abbasid Caliphate and therefore felt the need to publicize their position in the region through visual signs.²⁰⁸ The Fatimid insignia of dominion and protocol was similar to that of the Abbasids; however, Fatimid protocol likely sought to assert their ideology and power. The symbols had complex purposes, including both motivations of religious doctrine and political propaganda, found in inscriptions containing invocations of Imams or the Caliph.²⁰⁹

As the Fatimids were likely motivated to assert their dominance with greater impact than their rival Abbasids, they made use of religious reference to the Prophet Muhammad as a tool to increase their legitimacy.²¹⁰ Therefore, to the Shi‘a Fatimids, the display of such invocations in their artwork served both an artistic and spiritual purpose, as well a practical one.

Examples of calligraphic inscriptions honor imams and praise the Caliph as a relative of the holy family. Such inscriptions are represented through the calligraphy engraved on the upper panels on al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah door (Plate 45). The Kufic script is to offer praise and prayer to al-Hakim Bi Amr Allah in a glorious form. Nevertheless, the *salwat* is peculiar to the Prophet and his descendents and can never refer to any other person whatever the position that person occupies.

In Fatimid art, this kind of calligraphic script appears in the small portable *mihrab* filling large spaces as it forms thick bands which often border the *mihrab* several times to intensify the

²⁰⁸ Sanders, *Rituals, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*, 7.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

importance and centrality of the inscribed text phrase praising God, the Prophet, ‘Ali and the remaining Imams (Plate 58).

The same great devotion and splendid commendation to the caliphs and imams is presented in the top panel of al-Amir bi-Ahkām Allah *mihrab* (Plate 67). “Lord,” “commander of the believers,” and “master” were all used to express the high status and significant role of the caliph which reflects how Fatimids showed unlimited respect and obedience to their caliphs to such an extent that makes you believe that those caliphs were sent by Allah to rule them.

The different forms of Kufic calligraphy decorate nearly all spaces of the al-Husayn cenotaph, making it a rich record of Fatimid ideology. The inscription from the verse of Qur‘an, refers to the *ahl al-bayt*, referring to themselves, as Shi‘a believed they were descendants of Fatima (Plates 77-79).²¹¹

Portable *mihrabs* (Plate 58 and 59) link the manifest influence of the Shi‘a artistic tradition to Fatimid works and belief. These small portable *mihrabs* are unique in both their design and use and some were even found buried under the head of the deceased.²¹² Perhaps, due to their pointed top and small size, they were likely used as objects upon which to prostrate oneself during “private” prayer.²¹³

4.4 Syrian Influence

4.4 .1 Established Sourcework

In his book, *Arts of the City Victorious*, Jonathan Bloom asserts that Badr al-Jamali used Syrian or Palestinian craftsmen (known to produce refined woodwork utilizing superb geometric

²¹¹ O’Kane, “The Ayyubids and Early Mamluks (969-1171),” 140.

²¹² Abbas, “The Fatimids,” 63.

²¹³ Ibid., 63.

patterns in their design work) to build the *minbar* of al-Husayn's shrine in Ascalon. This *minbar* is considered to be one of the earliest pieces of Fatimid woodwork made in the strapwork fashion (Plate 87). Bloom also compares al-Afdal's *minbar* on St. Catherine's Mosque, built fifteen years after al-Husayn's *minbar* (Plate 63), highlighting the difference between the extreme refinement of Syrian workmanship displayed in the Ascalon *minbar* and that of the *minbar* and the chair (*kursi*) produced in Egypt and taken to the Mosque of St. Catherine (Plate 62). Syrian craftsmanship, Bloom concludes, was of a far higher quality in relation to that of Egypt, which nevertheless was the caliphate's capital and center.²¹⁴

Bloom considered the *mihirabs* of Sayyidah Ruqayya and Sayyidah Nafisa to be within the transitional stage between Syrian style strapwork of the al-Husayn *minbar* and the development of the geometrical style, which came to prominence after Fatimid rule. Additionally, both *mihirabs* of Sayyidah Ruqayya and Sayyidah Nafisa demonstrate that Egyptian craftsmen grew increasingly skilled in the kind of workmanship developed in Syria.²¹⁵

4.4 .2 Foundation of Artwork and Style in Craftsmanship

By the 11th century, the *Girih* mode of arabesque ornament had become widely popular throughout the eastern Islamic world. The *Girih* mode (Persian knot) refers to the ornamental mode of interlaced and interlocked vegetal forms, geometric shapes and patterns.²¹⁶ Although common across this region, the *Girih* mode was not widely used among the Fatimids before the second half of the twelfth century.²¹⁷ Later, however, this distinctive form developed in two ways: various vegetable forms and geometric designs. A few striking samples of woodwork,

²¹⁴ Bloom, *Arts of the City Victorious*, 164.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

²¹⁶ Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival*, 80.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

particularly two wooden *minbars* and *mihrabs* of the late Fatimid period, exhibit the *Girih* mode. Commissioned by Badr al-Jamali, the *minbar* for the shrine of the head of al-Husayn at Ascalon, which Salah al-Din later moved to Maqam Ibrahim in al-Khalil (Hebron) (Plate 87), contained strapwork of geometric shapes and stands as one of the earliest *minbars* to date (484 H.) displaying vegetal designs. The *minbar* of Qus, and the *mihrabs* of Sayyidah Nafisa and Sayyidah Ruqayya were executed in strapwork of geometric and vegetal arabesque, however these were constructed in Egypt (Plates 68, 70 and 73).

The al-Khalil *minbar* was concluded to be of Syrian craftsmanship or its creation under strong Syrian influence, and as it was deemed a product of Syrian technical and ornamental origin, it was not recorded as Egyptian in its foundation.²¹⁸ Nevertheless, some doubt has been raised at this conclusion: though the earliest Syrian marquetry postdates the al-Khalil *minbar* by a few decades, its newer style and woodwork are not evident in their entirety to be of the earlier style.

4.4 .3 Characteristics of Style

The geometric “strap” pattern is characterized by continuously crossing and overlapping bands. Producing a larger selection of geometric enclosures depends on the increase and decrease in the size of the interspaces, the density of the network and complexity of the strap work. In a majority of patterns, and especially among more sophisticated patterns, interspaces are noticeably smaller than those in the tile method. The visual effect differs as well, with one attracting attention to the panels and the other linear network generating the panels.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 81.

Magnificently strap-carved *mihhrabs*, *minbars* and doors took root in Egypt. The *mihhrabs* of Sayyidah Nafisa and Sayyidah Ruqayya, as well as the minbar of Qus, door of the Salih Tala'i Mosque and the cenotaph of al-Husayn (Plate 68, 70, 73, 76 and 77), which were made during the later Fatimid period, are such examples. Panels are dense with plant motifs, and interlocked plaited straps of the latter contain greater decoration in marquetry.²¹⁹ The al-Khalil *minbar* (Plate 87) did not consist of interlocking triangle and square based shapes, as these only appeared in later Syrian woodwork. This *minbar* consists of a triangle containing a grid of hexagons and regular or elongated six-point stars.

Simplicity of geometric patterns, in combination with rich vegetal ornamentation, is one of the most attractive aspects of these *minbars* and *mihhrabs*.²²⁰ They consist of hexagons and regular or elongated six-pointed stars. No *minbar* or any Fatimid woodwork examples are based on square or radial grids, and further, none exhibit the interlacing of triangle and square-based shapes that later become common in Syrian woodwork. The nice unity of simple geometric forms combined with an incredible wealth of vegetal decoration is the most distinctive feature of these wooden *minbars* and *mihhrabs*.

4.4 .4 Syrian Influence on Fatimid Woodwork

As Palestine and Syria were lands falling within the geographical boundaries of Fatimid rule, it is natural to assume movement and transfer of ideas, people and trade between regions within the dynastic region. Bloom theorizes that the *mihhrab* of Sayyidah Ruqayya is considered a transitional piece between the Syrian style strap work of Badr al-Jamali's *minbar* from Ascalon

²¹⁹ Baer, *Islamic Ornament*, 81.

²²⁰ Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival*, 81.

and that of the emerging geometric style.²²¹ It would appear to have been made by Egyptian woodworkers who grew skilled in the new style of decoration then being developed in Syria.²²² Additionally, the *minbar* that Nur al-Din ordered for the Aqsa Mosque, originally made in by Aleppan craftsmen and moved to al-Aqsa, confirms the movement of woodworkers between Syria and Egypt during the Fatimid period.²²³

Girih Mode

The *girih* mode, or Persian knot, refers to the ornamental mode of interlaced and interlocked vegetal forms, and geometric shapes and patterns. By the 11th century, the *girih* mode of arabesque ornament had become very popular all over the eastern Islamic world. Although it was common throughout the eastern Islamic world, the *girih* mode was not commonly used until the end of the Fatimid era in the second half of the 12th century.²²⁴

An elaborate natural beauty and the aesthetic intricate geometric forms combined in the *girih* mode to have a strong appeal and create an intense composition. The lines intersect to form geometric shapes integrated with interlacing lines that combine diverse vegetal motifs, such as cornucopia, wing-shaped leaves, trefoils and palmettes. The interlacing decorative lines are slender so as to match the delicacy of the foliated scroll within, as seen in the niche of Sayyidah Nafisa's portable *mihrab* (Plate 69), filling the space between the interlacing bands in the Qus *minbar* (Plate 74) and in the central square on the upper front section of the al-Husayn cenotaph (Plate 78).

Strap work

²²¹ Bloom, *Art of City Victorious*, 166.

²²² *Ibid.*, 166.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 166.

²²⁴ Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival*, 80.

Strap work describes geometric patterns in which bands crossing each other constantly overlap in a 'strap' fashion. The density of the work depends on spaces between the geometric shapes; the smaller the bands, the more delicate the design and the more intense the visual effect. The vegetal elements, for example, such as the foliated scroll, can also create greater density when placed among the plaited straps of the marquetry.²²⁵

Bands that intersect and overlap to form continuous geometric patterns, commonly bordering simple vegetal and floral designs, are observed in late Fatimid woodwork. Notably, the front side of the Sayyidah Nafisa portable *mihrab* (Plate 68), panels of al-Sālih Tala'i door and the Sayyidah Ruqayya portable *mihrab* (Plates 70 and 76) are decorated with intersecting bands to form polygons and stars, which enclose intricate vegetal designs.

The *minbar* of Qus (1155-6) for the 'Amri Mosque (Plates 73-75), decorated nearly in full with finely carved marquetry of Syrian character, as well shows the use of the strapwork style in artworks that later emerged as common during the Ayyubid era.²²⁶

This kind of strap work also appears in the al-Husayn cenotaph, dominating all its sides and ornamentally dividing the sections to contribute aesthetic appeal to the organized geometric composition (Plate 77). It was likely that Badr al-Jamali used local Syrian craftsmen who were known experts in producing wood pieces with high quality geometric shapes, to construct the *minbar* of al-Husayn's shrine, which is considered an early piece demonstrating strap work.²²⁷

The form and decoration of al-Afdal *minbar* for St. Catherine's Mosque was constructed fifteen years after the *minbar* for al-Husayn's shrine in Ascalon. Nevertheless, in contrast to the

²²⁵ Baer, *Islamic Ornament*, 81.

²²⁶ Siddiqui, *Islamic Art in Cairo from the Seventh to the Eighteenth Centuries*, 77.

²²⁷ Tabbaa, *The transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*, 136.

Ascalon *minbar* displaying the outstanding quality of Syrian workmanship, the Saint Catherine *minbar* and *kursi* were made in Egypt, the then political capital. With Syrian craftsmen established in their pioneering works, many wood carvings made in Fatimid Egypt developed out of Syrian influence.²²⁸ The combination of features in design and execution of the al-Afdal *mihrab* then suggest that it was likely the product of a shared effort combining both native Egyptian and foreign expertise.²²⁹

²²⁸ Bloom, *Art of City Victorious*, 164.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Works of art are often a mirror into civilization, reflecting culture and tradition within a society. Through Fatimid art, a visual language itself, we can envision the historic society and environment of the time, as the works of art are evidence of customs, practices, styles and preferences of patrons, artists, classes and traditions of Fatimid society. Through providing historical context, identifying notable artworks of the dynasty, presenting visual analysis of the works and following with an analytical comparison, this study has attempted to show the linkages between and influences from pre-Fatimid styles and artistic traditions on the development of Fatimid artwork.

Chapter one reviews the historical climate in which the Fatimid era took root, and outlines the context of the political, social, religious and economic nature of the dynasty. The historical overview grounds the assertion that Fatimid art was heavily influenced by earlier artistic styles and reflects the way in which the decorative style of Fatimid art developed from other artistic styles of both Islamic and non-Islamic origin.

The Fatimid state had a solid religious foundation and political organizations within reflected the core religious doctrine. The Fatimids were further motivated by the desire to lead as a good example of a devout and principled Islamic state, and they believed that they had inherited spiritual authority over the Islamic world.

Yet, the power of the Fatimid state emerged from the capabilities of all individuals affiliated with the various racial and social blocs comprising the whole of the Egyptian people. While the original population had included Coptic Christians and Sunni Muslims, the population expanded to include Maghrebis, Sudanese, Armenians and Sicilians and others, creating great diversity, new learning and wealth potential from the intermixing of different peoples.

The chapter describes the political character of the Fatimid dynasty and the ways in which leadership was open and accepting of people from all backgrounds for the purposes of peace and harmony, as well as popular support of the rulership, within the caliphate's borders. This context explains how the open mindset of the Fatimids had an effect on and showed through in their art and creative works

Furthermore, the religious policy of the Isma'ili Shi'a Fatimids was one of tolerance of non-Muslims. As a result, non-Muslim influences, such as from Coptic Christians, was greatly manifested in their artwork.

The social and economic context of the Fatimid era provides a picture of how people within the dynasty lived. The flourishing economy and lively social scene boosted the creative arts, within which reflections of wealth and developmental splendor were apparent in the artwork itself. As the economy grew strong, art of the time was similarly elevated.

Chapter two presents a categorical visual analysis and interpretation of Coptic woodwork in order to understand its fundamental influence on the initial and following development of Fatimid art. This exploration shows that the Coptic artisan produced outstanding examples of woodwork and remarks on its similarity to the Islamic examples of carved wood patronized by the Muslim rulers.

Furthermore, Chapter two explains that the background of Coptic art was founded in the Hellenistic tradition, which was also assumed into the creation of Fatimid pieces. Byzantine motifs were transferred to Egypt by the predominantly Coptic artisans and were then increasingly used in various Fatimid woodworks including Christian-inspired scenes and commissioned by Muslims, a reference to the tolerance common in Egypt at that time.

Chapter three offers a presentation of notable Fatimid woodworks and a corresponding visual analysis showing pieces from the early, middle and late periods of the dynasty in order to trace development and influences. Traits and characteristics of the Fatimid woodworking style and composition are highlighted, measuring development and changes throughout the beginning to later stages of the era.

The early Fatimid period was indebted to the motifs from Samarra art and Byzantine tradition. The middle period was replete with figural representation and the decorative vegetal motifs derivative from the Byzantine, and notably less of Samarra styles. In the late Fatimid period of Egypt sophisticated geometric patterns appeared, where they began to play a more important role by the end of the 12th century and the later phase of Fatimid rule.

Chapter three highlights the progress and development of the Fatimid's artistic motifs and styles borrowed from other civilizations, and which they attempted to combine into one condensed and unified work appearing as their own. The Fatimids sought to assert their ideology and power; their symbols had complex purposes, including both motivations of religious doctrine and political propaganda.

Chapter four attempts to show the direct influence and impact of various earlier styles on emerging Fatimid artwork. By examining and analyzing the styles of Coptic, Samarra, Shi'a and Syrian art, shown through the examples under observation, this study has attempted to illuminate direct linkages between these references and the origins of Fatimid work.

Through analyzing expressions of Coptic work, we discover the heavy influence of this style on Fatimid artwork from its initial development through the end of the dynasty's art production. The influence of Coptic tradition came mainly through Coptic craftsmen, who were living in Egypt at the time the Fatimids came to dominate. Therefore, figural representation characteristic of Coptic work, and originally of Byzantine and Hellenistic nature, is evident in Fatimid art.

Samarra/Tulunid influence affected Fatimid art from the earliest stages, due to the impact from the previous Tulunid dynasty, the trade industry that flourished during Fatimid reign, and the emigration movement that came from Mesopotamia. The Samara styles attracted Egyptian craftsmen and in Egypt, the Samara style was developed into unique styles of ornamentation. Sassanian themes of people at court, in addition to various other motifs such as the Sassanian wings, were additional influences brought from the Mesopotamian region.

The degree to which the religious principles of Fatimid Shi'ism influenced their art is a matter of debate. Yet undoubtedly, the Isma'ili Fatimids left us with an artistic richness particular to Egypt. Various Shi'a religious protocol and manifestations of religious representation come through in Fatimid practices and artwork. Such elements as invocations for the imam and rulers, Shi'a symbols and Qur'anic inscriptions containing references to the sun, the moon and the stars, interpreted in the Shi'ite tradition as representing the holy family of the prophet Mohammed, show strong and solid representation in Fatimid woodwork.

Chapter four also explores the Syrian influence on Fatimid art and asserts that certain thematic and stylistic influences from the Syrians are apparent in Fatimid artwork. *Bilad al-Shām* were lands falling within the geographical boundaries of Fatimid rule, and movement and transfer of ideas, people and trade between regions within the dynasty's control were more likely to happen. However Syrian influence appeared during the 12th century in the late period of Fatimid woodwork development, when refined geometric patterns were among major motifs to ornament the wood crafts.

Fatimid art can be defined as the fusion of different styles under the influence of Isma'ili Shi'a patrons. The aesthetics from different sources of Islamic and non-Islamic forms combined to create an expression to represent the mixed identity of the Fatimids.

In conclusion, Fatimid art flourished under the dynastic reign, as they possessed great wealth that allowed them to spend lavishly and created an atmosphere in which wealthy Isma'ili patrons encouraged craftsmen toward creativity. Hence, such wealth allowed Egypt to produce great quantities of rich items, with crafts being a key form of artistic expression. Prosperity elevated the Fatimids to a dominant voice in the Mediterranean area, resulting in the transfer and transmission of their aesthetics, culture and ideas by way of religious tolerance, trade routes and the immigration movements of many skillful artisans who had long practiced various artistic techniques which they brought to Cairo as a cosmopolitan city of medieval times.

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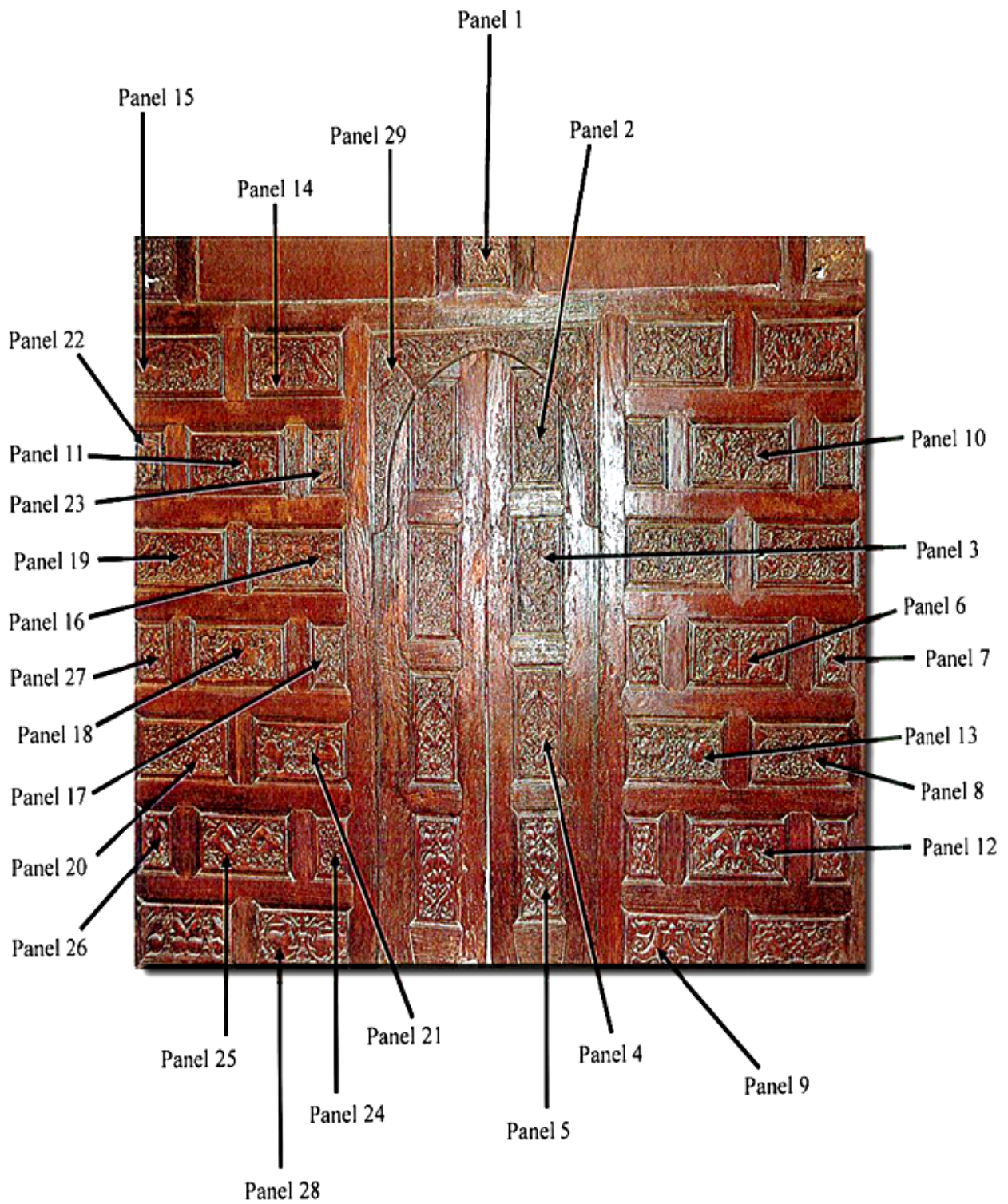


Plate 1, Screen from Church of Sitt Barbara, Coptic Museum, Old Cairo



Plate 2, Screen from Church of Sitt Barbara, Coptic Museum, Old Cairo

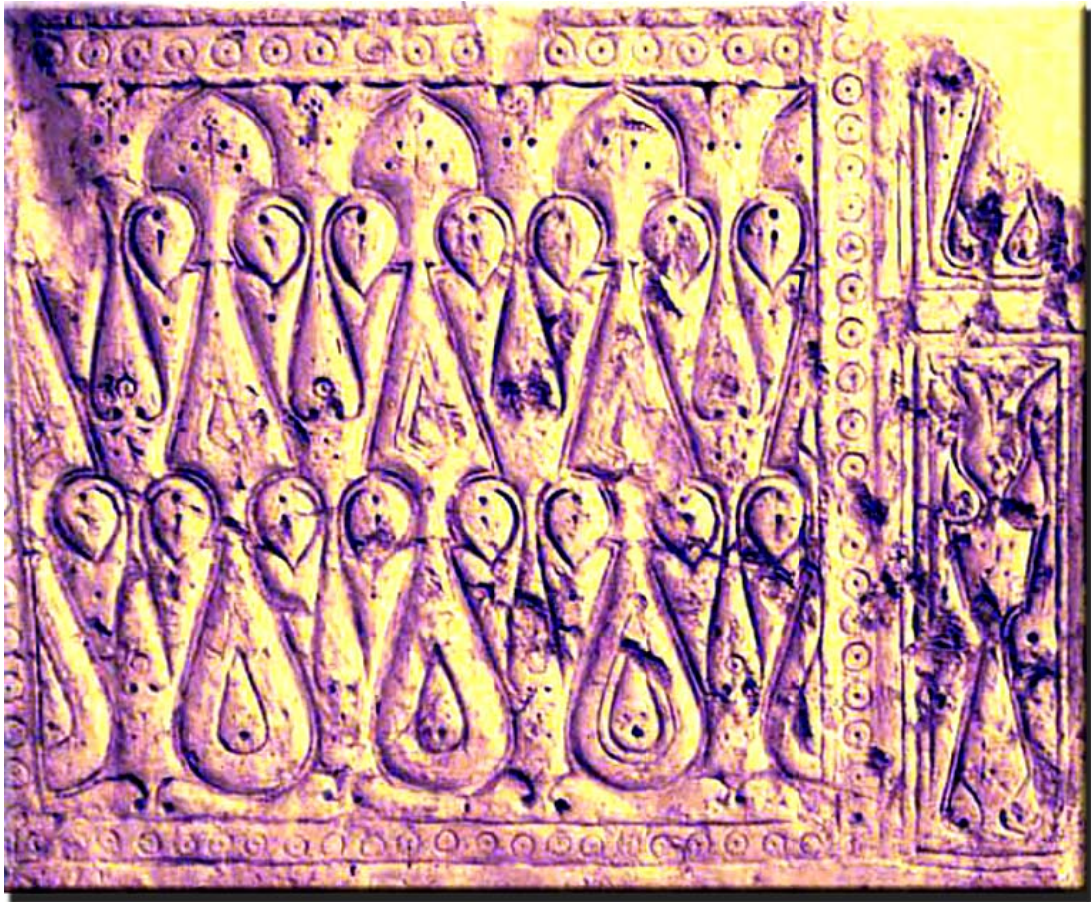


Plate 3, Samarra: Ornament, Style C (after Richard Ettinghausen)



Plate 4, Panel 1 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 5, Panel 2 from the door of Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 6, Panel 3 from the door of Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 7, Panel 4 from the door of Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 8, Panel 5 from the door of Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 9, Panel 6 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 10, Miniature painting showing Sufi trance dancing (sfusd.edu)



Plate 11, Panel 7 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 12, A Roman hunter holding antlers of a deer (theoi.com)



Plate 13, Panel 8 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 14, Panel 9 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 15, Panel 10 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 16, Panel 11 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 17, Panel 12 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 18, Mshattā, flanking tower on Westside of entrance, third triangle (MuslimHertige.com)



Plate 19, Panel 13 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 20, Panel 14 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 21, Panel 15 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 22, Panel 16 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 23, Panel 17 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 24, Panel 18 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 25, Panel 19 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 26, Panel 20 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 27, Panel 21 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 28, Panel 22 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 29, Khirbat al-Mafjar, mosaic of the Diwān (after Richard Ettinghausen)



Plate 30, Panel 23 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 31, Panel 24 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 32, Panel 25 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 33, Panel 26 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 34, Panel 27 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 35, Panel 28 from Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 36, Panel 29 The spandrels of the door arch of Sitt Barbara screen



Plate 37, Panel from Anba Bishoi screen, Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt



Plate 38, Panel from Dayr al-Baramus screen, Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt



Plate 39, Gilded Silver plate, Sassanian, about 7th century A.D. (British Museum)



Plate 40, Door in Saint Catherine Church, Sinai, Egypt



Plate 41, Panel from the door in Saint Catherine Church



Plate 42, Section from a panel of the door in Saint Catherine Church



Plate 43, Grips of the door in Saint Catherine church



Plate 44, Two valves of the door in Saint Catherine Church, Sinai, Egypt



Plate 45, Door of al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah, Cairo, Egypt (after Bloom)



Plate 46, Two panels from al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah door, Cairo, Egypt (after Bloom)



Plate 47, Two panels from al-Hākim Bi Amr Allah door, Cairo, Egypt (after Bloom)



Plate 48, Samarra: Ornament, Style A (after Richard Ettinghausen)

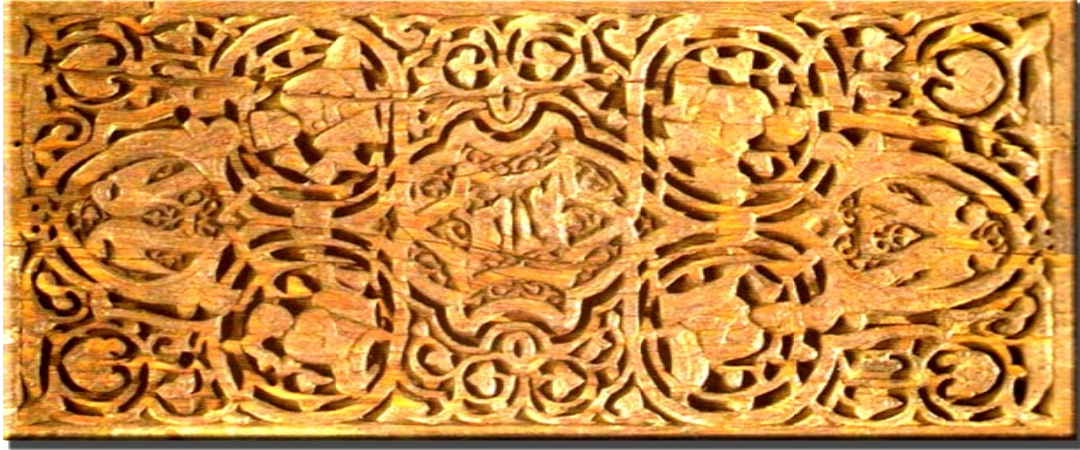


Plate 49, Panel from the complex of Qala'un, Cairo, Egypt (after O'Kane)

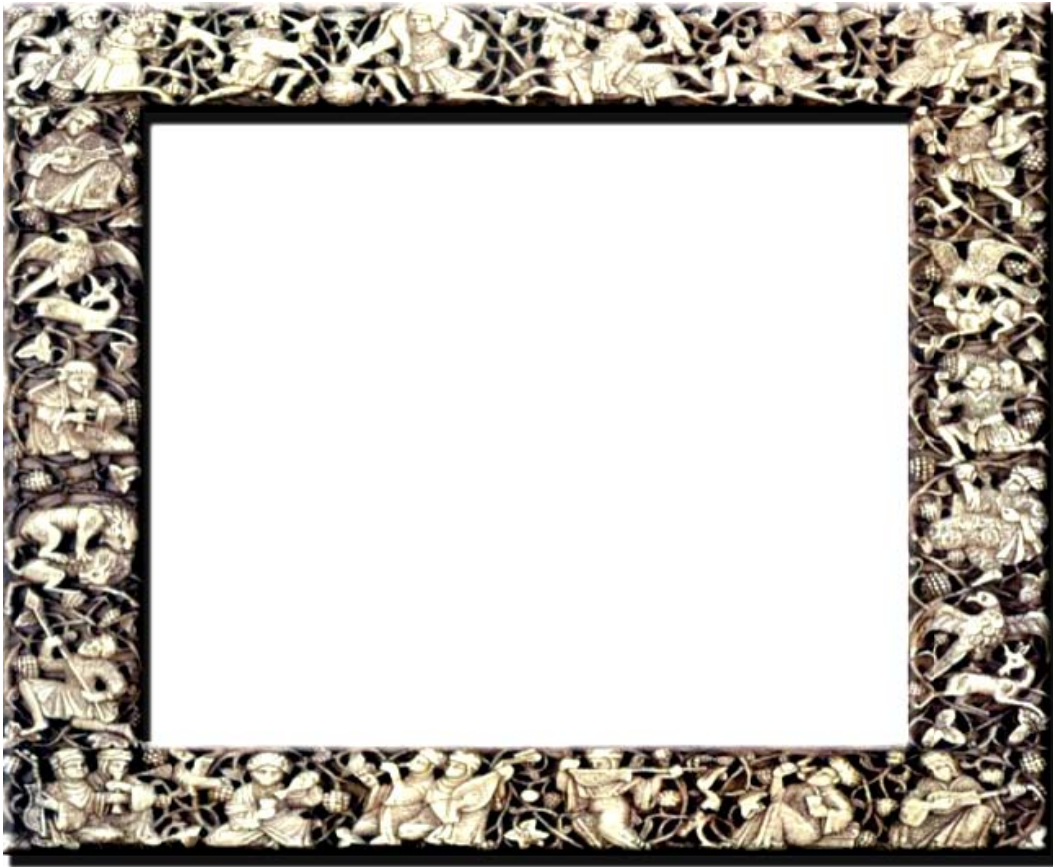


Plate 50, Four ivory plaques, 11th Century, Berlin Museum für Islamische Kunst (after Bloom)



Plate 51, Central element of a panel from the complex of Qala'ūn, Cairo, Egypt (after O'Kane)



Plate 52, Beams from the complex of al-Nasir Muhammad, Cairo, Egypt (after O'Kane)



Plate 53, Fatimid door from the complex of Qala'ūn, Cairo, Egypt (Islamic Museum)



Plate 54, Panel from the Fatimid door from the complex of Qala'ūn, Cairo, Egypt
(Islamic Museum)



Plate 55, Coptic door from Church of Anba Bishoi, Wadi Natrun, Egypt



Plate 56, Fatimid panel in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt (after O'Kane)



Plate 57, Fatimid panel in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States



Plate 58, Fatimid portable mihrab in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt (after O’Kane)



Plate 59, Fatimid portable mihrab with a hole at the top in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt (after O’Kane)



Plate 60, Fatimid panel in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt (after O'Kane)

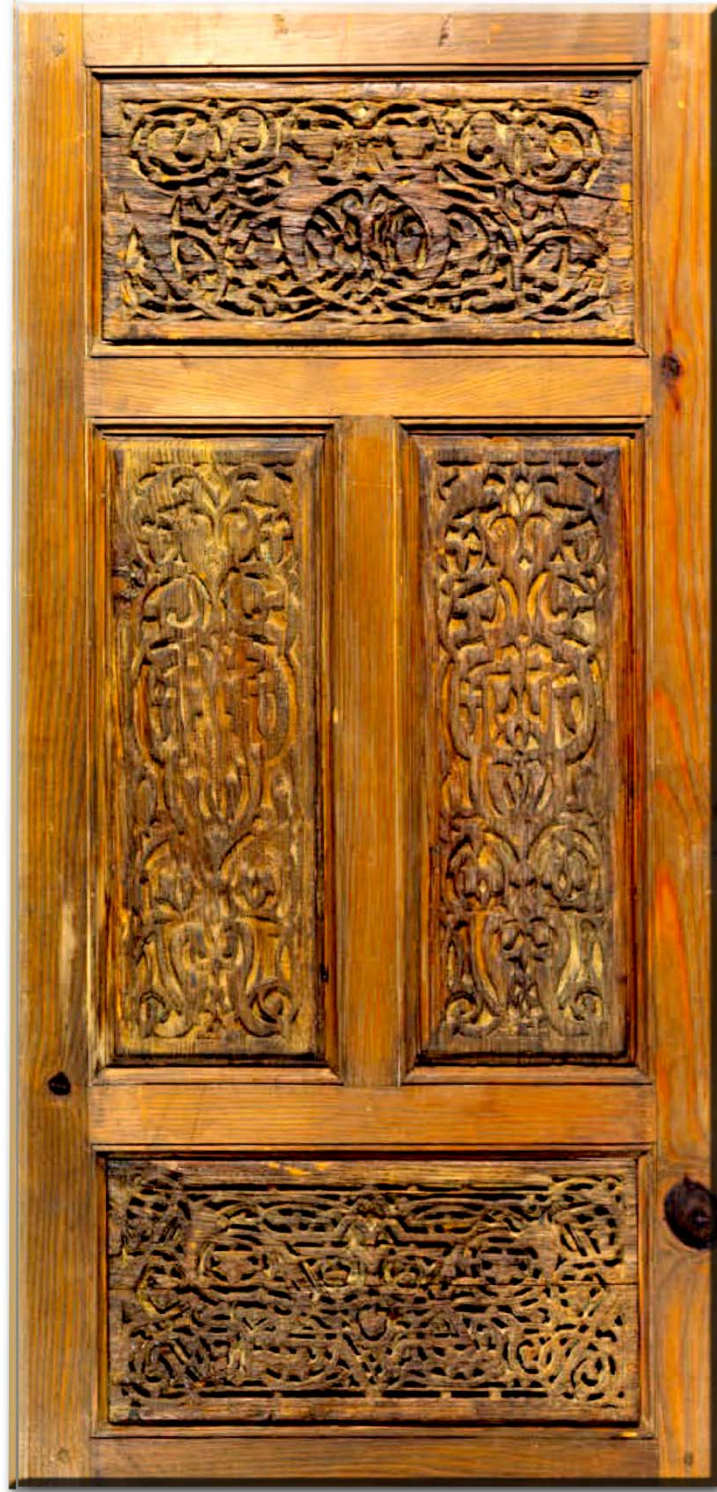


Plate 61, Four panels installed in a modern door, Cairo, Egypt (after O’Kane)



Plate 62, Quran stand in the Fatimid mosque in Saint Catherine's Church, Sinai, Egypt

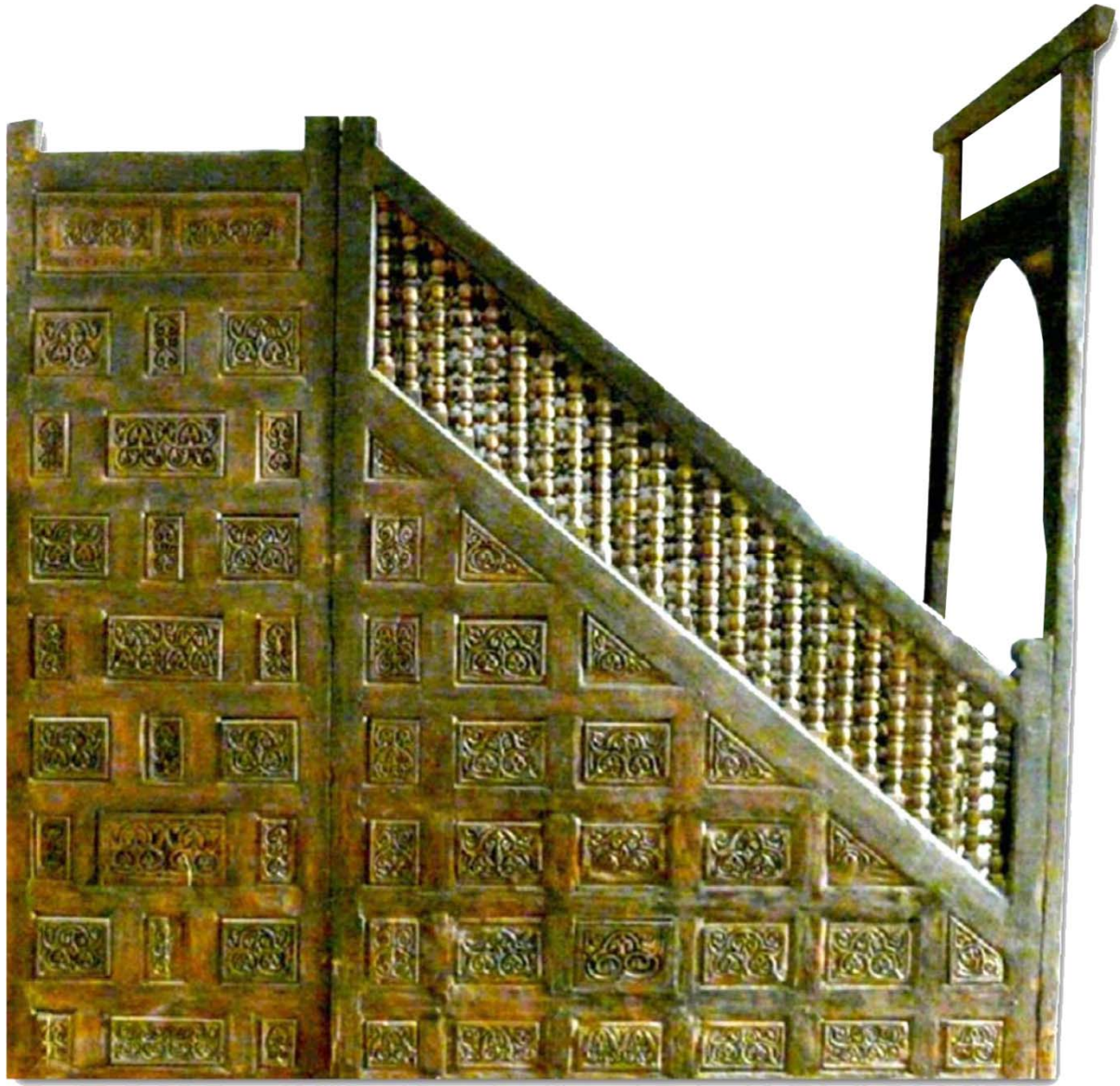


Plate 63, Minbar of the Mosque of the Greek Monastery in Saint Catherine, Sinai, Egypt



Plate 64, Stairs of the minbar in the Fatimid Mosque in Saint Catherine



Plate 65, Panel of the minbar in the Fatimid Mosque in Saint Catherine



Plate 66, Spandrels of the arch of the minbar in Saint Catherine



Plate 67, al-Amir bi-Ahkam Allah mihrab, Cairo (after Bloom)



Plate 68, Portable mihrab from Mausoleum of Sayyidah Nafisa, Islamic Museum, Cairo

(after O’Kane)



Plate 69, The niche of Sayyidah Nafisa portable mihrab (after O'Kane)

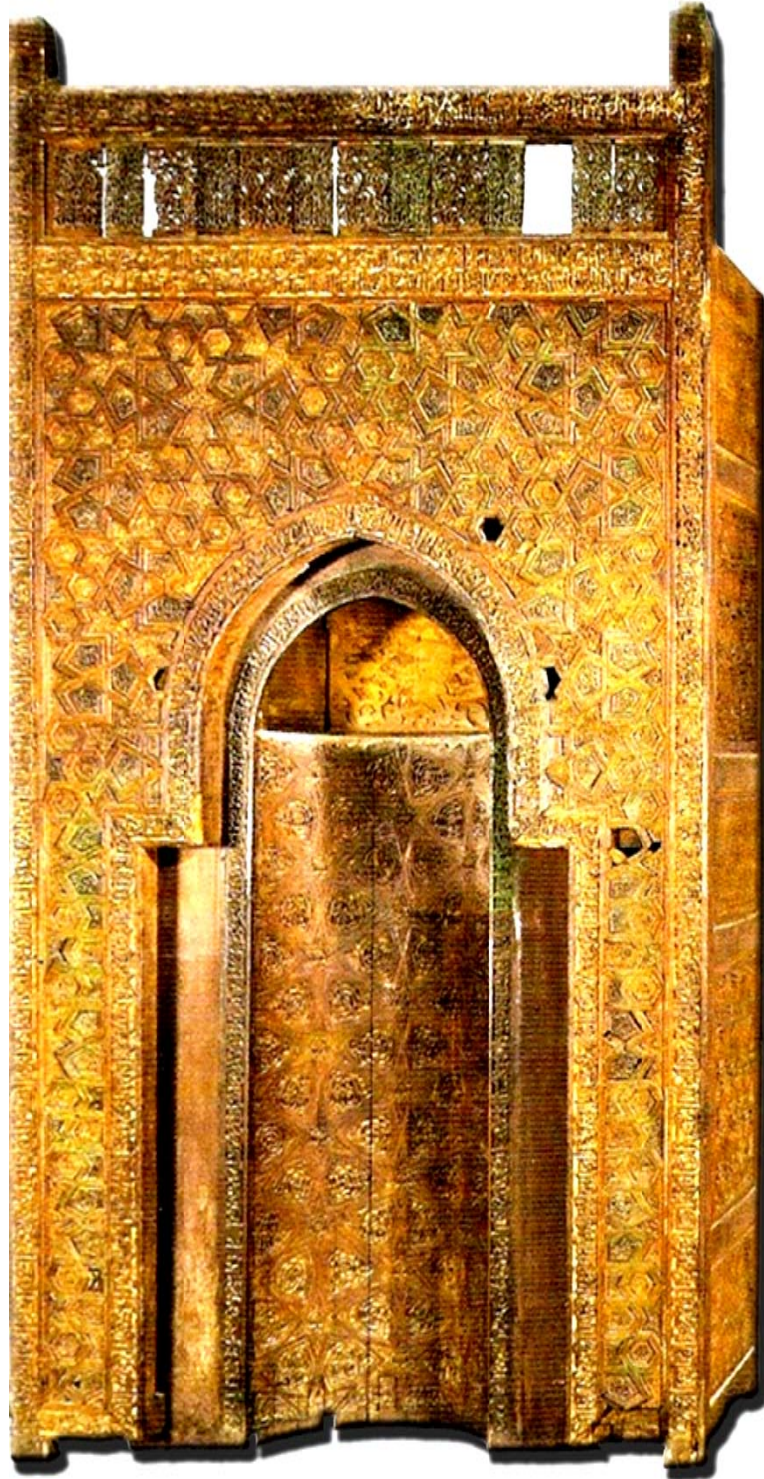


Plate 70, Portable mihrab from the Mausoleum of Sayyidah Ruqayya, Islamic Museum, Cairo
(after O'Kane)



Plate 71, Section from Sayyidah Ruqayya portable mihrab (after O'Kane)

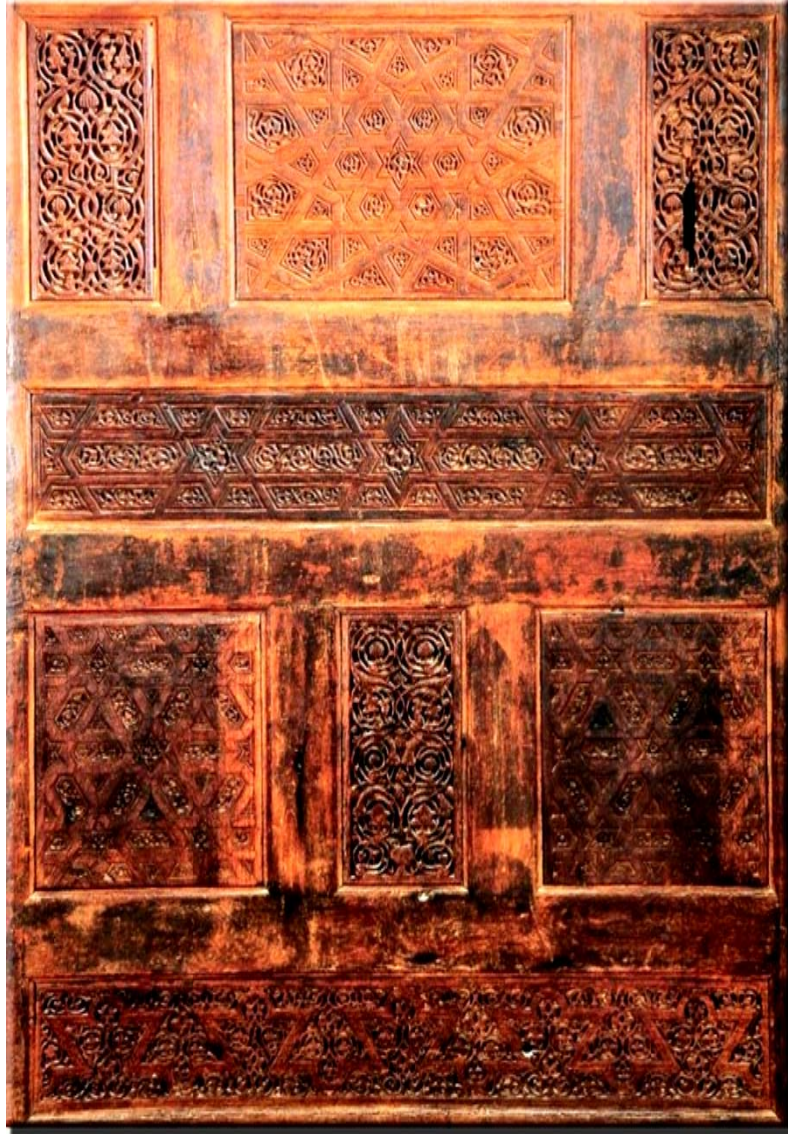


Plate 72, Back side from Sayyidah Ruqqaya portable mihrab (after O'Kane)

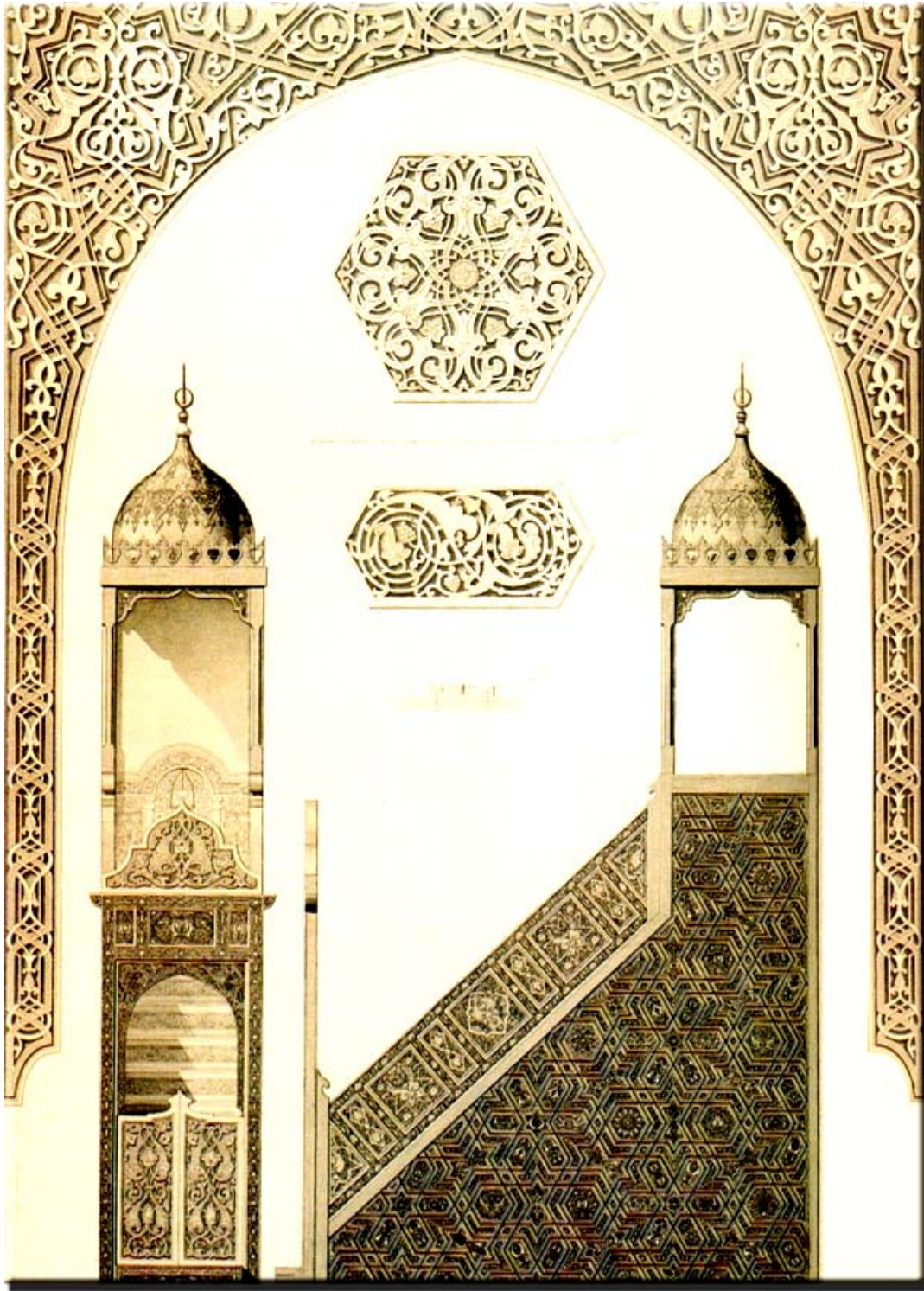


Plate 73, The minbar of Qus (1155-6) for the 'Amri Mosque
(after Siddiqui)



Plate 74, Detail of minbar of Qus, (after Siddiqui)



Plate 75, Detail of the backrest of minbar of Qus, (after Bloom)



Plate 76, Fatimid Door from Al-Sālih Tala'i' Mosque, Islamic Museum, Cairo (after Pauty)



Plate 77, Fatimid cenotaph from the Mosque of al-Husayn, Islamic Museum, Cairo

(after O’Kane)



Plate 78, Section from front side of the Fatimid cenotaph (after O’Kane)



Plate 79, Section from the front top of Fatimid cenotaph (after O’Kane)



Plate 80, Section from front and side bottom of the Fatimid cenotaph (after Hassan)

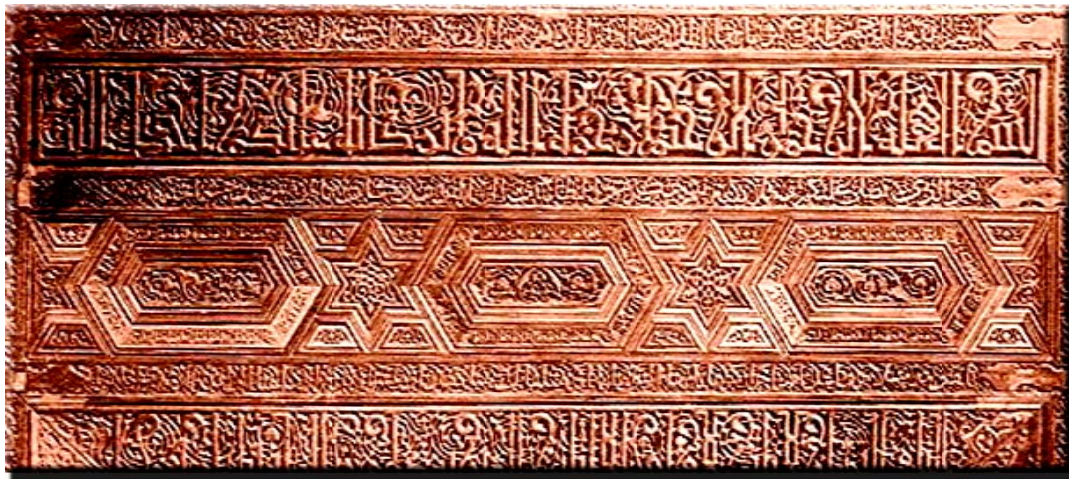


Plate 81, Section from the side top of Fatimid cenotaph (after Hassan)



Plate 82, Carved wooden panel, Fatimid mid 11th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
(after Jenkins)



Plate 83, Door of the Fakahani Mosque



Plate 84, Door of the Fakahani Mosque



Plate 85, Door of the Church of al-Mu'allaqa (after Lamm)



Plate 86, Carved wood, Tulunid Egypt (after Ettinghausen)



Plate 87, al-Husayn minbar, in the Sanctuary of Ibrahim (Al-Haram Al-Ibrahimi), Al-Khalil

(sacred-destinations.com)