

A Room of “Splendor and Generosity” from Ottoman Damascus

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INCREDIBLE AS IT MAY SEEM, the biggest single attraction of the Metropolitan Museum’s permanent collection of Islamic art is a largely unstudied and underestimated treasure. Although the so-called Nūr al-Dīn Room has raised many questions in the minds of its visitors, its study has been conspicuously neglected in scholarly literature.

The Museum’s room is a complete environment comprising a marble inlaid floor, decorated wood paneling, and matching carved and painted ceilings (Figure 1).¹ Over time, the meaning of this eloquent interior has been obscured and must be rediscovered through the systematic study of its decorative vocabulary and its inscriptions.

The Metropolitan’s room and another, similar interior were brought from Damascus to the United States in the 1930s by the late Hagop Kevorkian, a well-known collector, art dealer, and benefactor. After being stored for several decades, the two period rooms were donated in 1970 by the Hagop Kevorkian Foundation to the Metropolitan Museum and to New York University’s Kevorkian Center of Near Eastern Studies. The Museum’s room bears the date 1119 A.H./A.D. 1707 (see Figure 36), while the one belonging to the university is dated 1797. Both interiors came from affluent homes: the one at the university was taken from a house owned by the well-known Quwwatli family; but the Museum’s room had no settled provenance, so it was named the “Nūr al-Dīn Room,” perhaps referring to a neighborhood of Damascus rather than to the famed twelfth-century conqueror himself.² We may call it more simply the Damascus Room. The recent discovery that it is the earliest surviving nearly complete Damascene interior makes it a document of unique importance.³

SETTING AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

In Syrian houses, perhaps more than in any other Islamic country, the central courtyard is the pivot of

interior organization.⁴ The house is closed off to the outside world and its rooms are open to the inner courtyard.⁵ More affluent households may have had two courtyards, one for the men’s quarters (*salāmlīk*) and one for the women’s (*ḥarāmlīk*). Some aristocratic families maintained three courtyards, one for formal male receptions, one for everyday family life, and one for servants. Only rarely do we find houses with four courtyards, where the *salāmlīk* and *ḥarāmlīk* each had its own service courtyard.⁶

Traditional Damascus houses had no external windows on the ground floor; only the entrance doorway interrupted the anonymous uniformity of their walls. The upper floors sometimes had many large windows, which, despite their elevation, were screened off by lattices of turned wood that preserved the family’s privacy. In contrast to traditional Cairo houses, the street entrance would have no decoration to indicate the degree of luxury inside.⁷ The wooden doorway, usually of two leaves, would give access to a corridor (*dihlīz*) leading to the inner courtyard.⁸ The *dihlīz* might have a second door at its other end to control access to the inner sanctum and to ensure that no indiscreet glances could penetrate from the street. For additional privacy, in some houses the *dihlīz* would be angled in the customary Islamic manner of corridors connecting the outside world with the private domain indoors.

The courtyard is intended to strike the visitor’s eye immediately. Having stepped in from the bustling street and gone through the dim passage, one would be pleasantly greeted once again by daylight. In the courtyard the light would be at its most beautiful, filtered through the leaves of trees, refracted through the prisms of the fountain’s water jets,⁹ or gently kept at bay within the shaded areas of the portico and its open halls. The floor of this courtyard was paved with flagstones of black basalt and rose limestone in geometric patterns resembling a labyrinth or a checkerboard.¹⁰ The courtyard played an important role in Damascus houses in terms of circulation because one had to pass through it in order to reach most of the rooms that were disposed around it. Furthermore,

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The notes for this article begin on page 134.

111

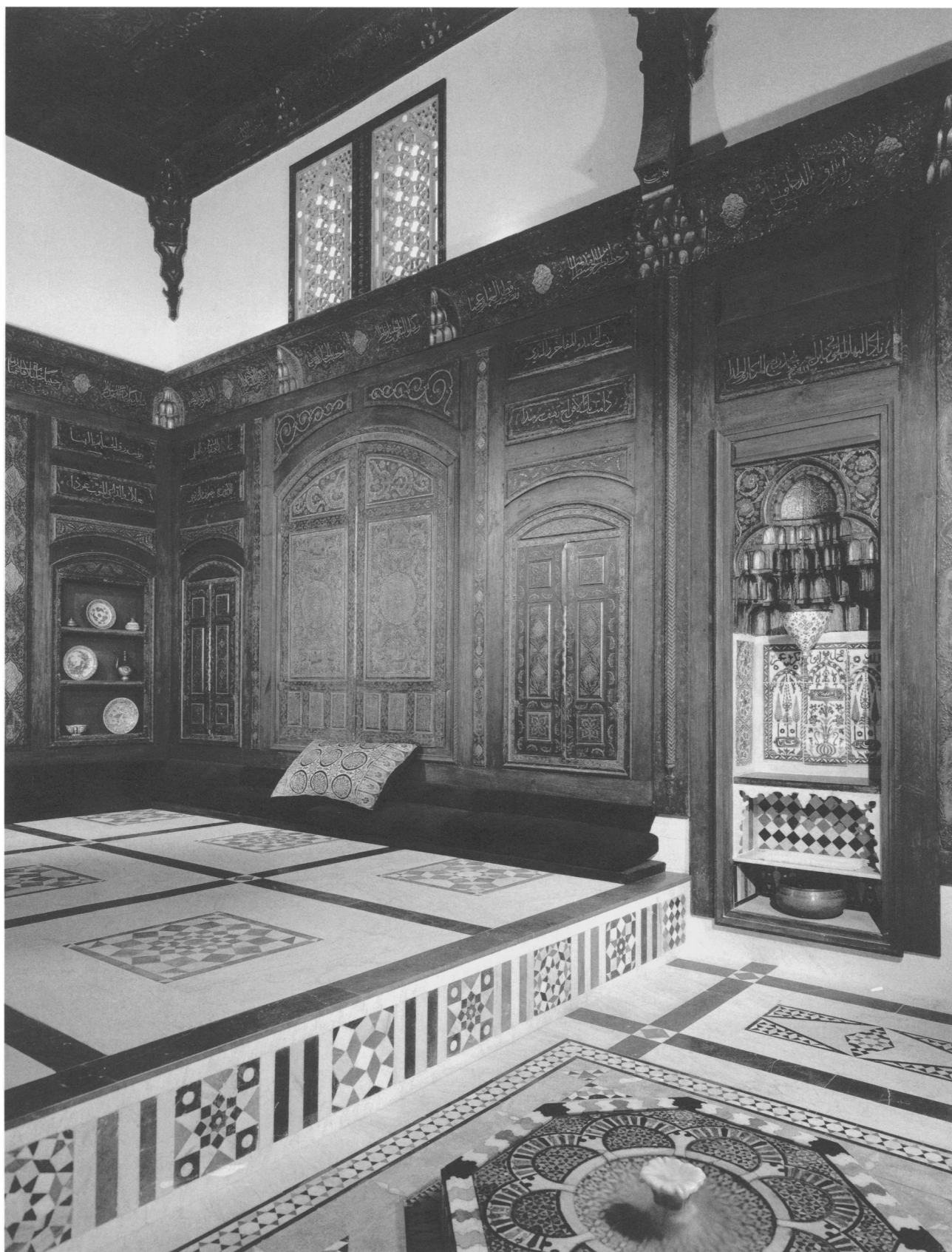


Figure 1. The "Nūr al-Dīn Room," Damascus, 1119 A.H./A.D. 1707. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of The Hagop Kevorkian Fund, 1970, 1970.170

light and air could reach the various rooms only from the courtyard. The climate of Damascus is pleasant from the last winter rains until the fall, so the lush vegetation of the courtyard and the attractive decoration of its facades would offer a welcoming milieu for all kinds of activities.

Damascene houses had two basic types of principal reception rooms. One type was the *qā'a* (pl. *qā'āt*); the other was the *iwān* (pl. *iwānāt*) or *līwān*. A large house might have a number of such rooms, resembling one another in plan and general function. Broadly, the *qā'a* was a kind of living room, or salon; in traditional Islamic houses most spaces were not confined to a single use but could harbor various daily activities, such as eating, sleeping, receiving guests, or entertaining. Depending on the size of the house, however, one or more *qā'āt* would be distinguished from the others by having grander dimensions and decoration and might be reserved more for formal male entertaining than anything else. On the northern side of the courtyard, for example, would be located the great winter parlor, which benefited from its southern exposure.¹¹ On the opposite side of the yard, open to the cool northerly breezes, would be the impressive summer hall, the *līwān*.¹²

Except for its wooden ceiling, the *līwān*'s decoration was of stone, marble, and brick, materials that maintained the hall's coolness in summer.¹³ In some of the older houses the floor of the *līwān* was elevated from that of the courtyard by one step, and all around its three walls would run a low, built-in bench (*maṣṭaba*). In later examples, a marble-paved floor would be flush with the courtyard. The *līwān* was frequently connected with one or two lateral *qā'āt*, which could be used when the weather was not ideally suited for the *līwān*.¹⁴ Thus, the great winter *qā'a*, featuring elaborately decorated wood paneling and ceilings as well as glass-paned windows, constituted the seasonal counterpart of the summer *līwān*.¹⁵

Both winter and summer formal reception areas were given special attention in their lavish decor, for it was through these rooms that the family could demonstrate wealth and good taste. If a residence had more than one of these luxurious salons, it was the most formal *qā'a*, a kind of *salle d'apparat*, which would be the showpiece of the house, displaying the finest workmanship and most prized possessions.¹⁶ And, as movable furnishings were few in the traditional Islamic household, it was principally the walls, ceiling, and floors of such rooms that served to convey social prestige.¹⁷

In addition to being adaptable to season and time of day, the flexible utilization of space in the Syrian house also served to emphasize the importance of the

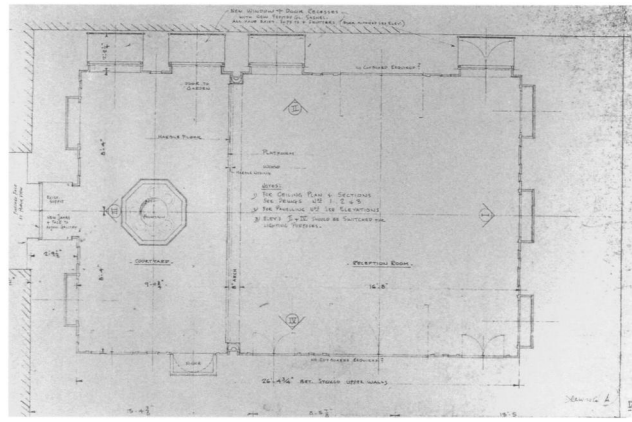


Figure 2. Floor plan (drawing: Department of Islamic Art, MMA)

guests being received. Thus, the grandest *qā'a* would be used for the more prominent visitors, whereas people of a more intimate acquaintance might be received in a smaller one. In summer, the high-ceilinged open *līwān* would be sought out. In spring or fall, the adjoining *qā'āt* could better respond to changing weather conditions. In winter, rooms with glass-paned windows and wood paneling would offer warmth through the aid of portable braziers, as there were no fireplaces in Damascus homes.¹⁸ Upon entering the Museum's room, we are ushered into such an elegant *qā'a* of a wealthy, albeit unknown household.

The *qā'a* is distinguished by two well-differentiated zones, and all rooms of this type, even the simpler ones, retain this dual partition of space. The first zone, known as the *'ataba* (pl. *'atabāt*), is a sort of antechamber, or circulation area, where visitors were received, where one would deposit one's shoes, where domestics stood to prepare coffee, water pipes, ewers for ablutions, and braziers.¹⁹ Generally, the floor of the *'ataba* is on the same level as the courtyard, and it occupies between a quarter and a half of the total surface of the room.²⁰ The *'ataba* of the Museum's room assumes approximately one-third of the entire space of the interior (Figure 2). The second zone, called *ṭazar* (pl. *ṭazarāt*), is the reception area proper.²¹ Higher than the *'ataba*, it is attained by a high riser.²² In a sense the *'ataba-ṭazar* arrangement is a repetition of the courtyard-*līwān* pairing, with the *'ataba* taking on the function of a covered courtyard.²³

Domestic space was described with a graphic vocabulary in which the house was compared to the human body. The facade, for instance, was the "face" (*wajh*); the noblest space of the *ṭazar* was the "bosom or chest" (*ṣadr*); the most honored place of the *ṣadr* was the "head" of the room (*rā's al-makān*); finally, the decorative long spandrels that connect the ceiling to the



Figure 3. View toward Wall No. 2 and the ṣadr (photo: author)

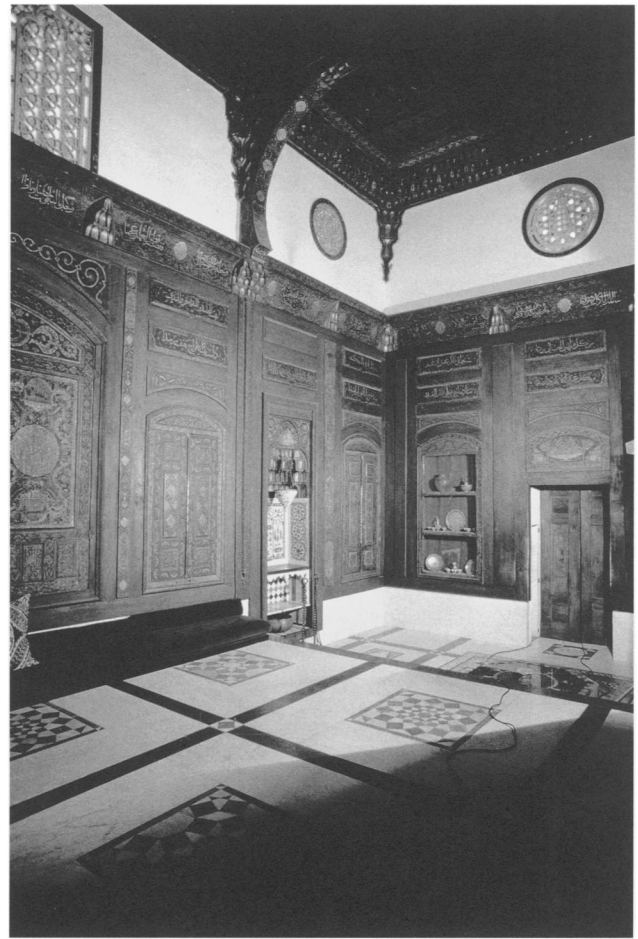


Figure 4. View from the ṭazar to the ʿataba (photo: author)

room below were referred to by the picturesque term “neck” (*raqba*). The gradation within a given room began with its entrance, continued to its ʿataba, and ended in the innermost part of the elevated ṭazar—that is, the ṣadr (Figure 3). The degree of a guest’s prestige was established by his social rank, age, and relationship to the owner, and this determined the place he would occupy in the ṣadr.²⁴ Furthermore, seats could be classed by their height, height being achieved through the relative thickness of the cushions on which people sat. Thus, the most important seat of the ṣadr would also be the highest.²⁵ This “geometry of the body” likewise defined spatial relations in terms of a person’s movement upon entering the room and of his line of vision. In a large *qāʿa* such as the Museum’s, the presence of a fountain in the ʿataba indicates that this lower space was displayed to those who took their place in the ṣadr and who then faced out toward the ʿataba, with its focal point being the marble fountain (*fisqīyya*, *salsabīl*, *baḥra*) (Figure

4), just as the *liwān* opening to the actual courtyard of the house looked out on a fountain placed on its axis.²⁶

The richness and profusion of decorative details could not have failed to impress the visitor. Wherever the eye came to rest, it would find images of infinite detail and great beauty to contemplate. This sheath of architectural decoration—calligraphy, geometric and abstract floral patterns—spreading over floor, walls, and ceiling like a tapestry, would evoke thoughts of the infinite nature of God, the eternal pattern of creation, and the rhythmical processes of growth and decline of this transient world. Endlessly repeated ornamental compositions enveloped the room and endowed it with a timeless dimension, reflecting the divine origin of creation.²⁷ Appealing equally to the senses and to the intellect, an interior such as this would achieve an unbroken symmetrical articulation of wall decoration when its shutters and doors were closed; the outer world was then completely excluded from this colorful interior universe.²⁸

The Metropolitan room's general decorative scheme stresses the horizontal axis, a consequence perhaps of the fact that most activities in the traditional Islamic house took place while sitting, reclining, or kneeling on the floor. This horizontality is organized in four distinct planes: floor, lower walls, upper walls, and ceiling. The lower wall zone of both *'ataba* and *ṭazar* comprises the elaborately decorated wainscoting, with doors, windows, cupboards, and niches all starting at approximately the same level and maintaining a consistent height. This uniformity, together with the various clearly separated zones of the room (walls, cornices, ceilings), accentuates the overall sense of horizontality. The upper wall zone is left undecorated, having the effect of a clear demarcation between the two most heavily embellished parts of the room, the paneling and the ceiling.²⁹ For the sake of clarity, we will follow this four-part spatial division as we examine the most significant features of the Museum's room in some detail.

THE FLOOR

The ground cover of Syrian houses always had stone decoration. Like the floor of the great *līwān*,³⁰ the floor of the *'ataba* would be entirely paved in polychrome marble inlay, marble mosaic, and large marble plaques disposed according to an orthogonal grid pattern comprising square, rectangular, and round compartments.³¹ The floor of the *ṭazar*, on the other hand, was most often paved not with marble but with limestone, as it would be covered with carpets. All around the *ṭazar*'s three walls were low cushions upon which rich textiles could be laid.³²

The floor design of the Museum's *'ataba* consists of a grid pattern enclosing large rectangles decorated in opus-sectile geometric designs in white, brown, and black marble. Similarly, the floor of the *ṭazar* is laid out as a grid enclosing large square panels of white and brown opus sectile. The square and rectangular panels of both *'ataba* and *ṭazar* (see Figure 1) are surrounded by plain white marble plaques, which are modern, as is the white marble dado all along the lower walls.³³ According to Museum records, the opus-sectile sections and large geometric panels of the *ṭazar* and its riser came from the courtyard of New York University's 1797 Quwwatli house. It is possible that the original plain flagstones of the room's *ṭazar* were not considered interesting enough to be included in the ensemble that was saved. Or perhaps the flooring of the *'ataba* had suffered extensive damage, which would

have led to its abandonment. The reconstruction of the *'ataba*'s floor respects some principles of authenticity, but the absence of carpets covering the floor of the *ṭazar* greatly diminishes what must have been the room's splendid overall effect.

The floor of the *'ataba* is dominated by the fountain, an indispensable feature contributing to the freshness and sensuousness of the hall's atmosphere (Figure 5). The shape of eighteenth-century Damascene fountains was most often octagonal, and the exterior paneled sides of their basins rose considerably above the floor.³⁴ The form of the Museum's fountain, however, is significantly different. In keeping with other examples from Damascus, its outer shape is octagonal, but it does not have a high freestanding basin as was customary in the eighteenth century. According to a photograph, of uncertain date and provenance, of the fountain taken before its installation in the Museum (Figure 6), its basin was designed to be sunk into the floor, a feature that is mostly associated with the

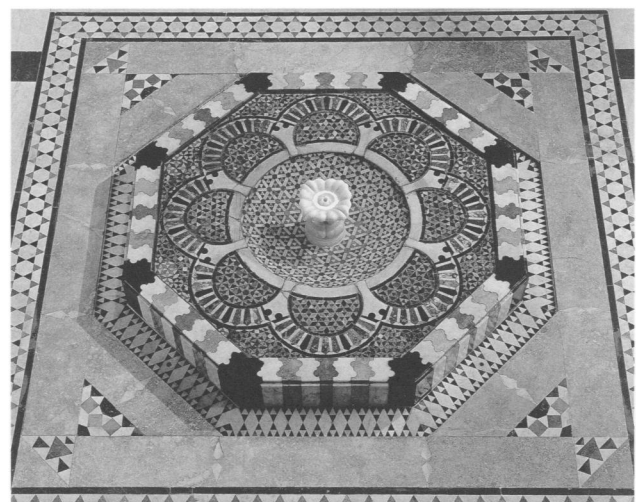


Figure 5. The fountain

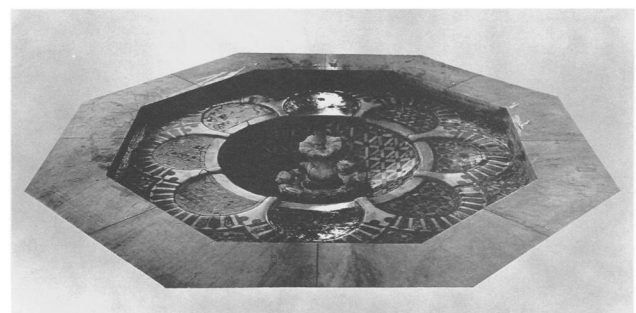


Figure 6. The fountain, date of photograph unknown (photo: Department of Islamic Art, MMA)

Mamluk period.³⁵ In Damascus the Mamluk style of fountain seems to have persisted all through the seventeenth century, as a fountain at the Victoria and Albert Museum³⁶ and one in the “Red Salon” of the H. Pharaon collection indicate.³⁷ As currently reconstructed, the fountain of the Museum’s room has an outer octagonal border composed of joggled patterns in marble and stone of white, black, green, yellow, and red. This border is not present in the photograph;³⁸ it rises above floor level approximately 12.5 centimeters and conforms in terms of design with the outer borders of the two older fountains mentioned above. Although it is in keeping with contemporary practices, it is not clear why, or when, the addition of such a border was deemed necessary.

Within the border is a series of eight large lobes evoking an arcade that has been laid flat. Such lobes are present in the above two seventeenth-century fountains as well as in the Mamluk precedents. All these lobed designs create a similar impression, but the ones from the Syrian fountains clearly belong to the same subgroup, influenced by, but distinct from, the Mamluk prototypes. Actually, the “arches” of the Museum’s fountain and those of the other Damascene examples have very similar polychrome “voussoirs,” which resemble arrows pointing outward.³⁹ A further common feature of the Syrian fountains are dots at the intersections of their “arches.”

The central well of these Syrian fountains is circular.⁴⁰ The nucleus of the Metropolitan’s fountain is a white marble finial in the shape of an open flower. It is a copy after the now-lost finial seen in the photograph. In the Museum’s fountain the background surface between and beyond the “arcades” is covered with minute repeating star and polygon patterns. The area in the central well has an overall strapwork design of larger triangles enclosing smaller triangles. At the points of the larger triangles are small hexagons. Both of these patterns are present in the two seventeenth-century fountains.

As regards materials, three types of stone were employed in the decoration of Damascus *qā‘āt*: marble, limestone, and basalt. Basalt, which came from the region of the Hauran, south of the city, was chiefly used for the paving of the *ṭazar*. Limestone was also used for the *ṭazar* flooring, often in alternation with basalt. It came from nearby quarries.⁴¹ One can distinguish a number of marble types, such as a softer black marble which originated in the region of Nabak, a red marble from the Zabdani-Tal area northwest of Damascus, and various harder polychrome marbles that were imported from different places.⁴² In local nomenclature Syrian marble is usually referred to as *rukḥām*;

imported marbles, mostly from Turkey (e.g., rose-colored), Lebanon (several light colors), and Italy (especially white), were differentiated by the word *marmar*.⁴³ The older parts of the Museum room’s mineral decoration also seem to incorporate these three materials.

Techniques of decoration combined local marble inlay work (similar to fine marquetry), marble and stone opus sectile, and marble and stone mosaic. Inlaying, the finest and oldest stone technique practiced in Syria, is not present in any of the original sections of stonework that came with the Museum’s room.⁴⁴ (This does not mean, however, that it was not used in sections that have perished.) In the reconstruction of the floor and fountain of the Museum’s room both opus-sectile and mosaic techniques have been employed. The former would indeed have been used in Damascus interior decoration, especially in order to bring out the beauty of the central ornamental compositions of inlay work or mosaic.⁴⁵ We also find opus-sectile work in parts of the original section of the room’s fountain, in the arrowlike “voussoirs” of the “arcade.” The rest of the original segments of the fountain are decorated in mosaic. This method, used to cover fountains and parts of floors and to line the casings of certain *‘atabāt*, involved cutting tiny polychrome pieces in a specific shape and assembling them into geometric configurations, bound by mortar.⁴⁶ Both opus sectile and mosaic were very old Syrian crafts.⁴⁷

Thus, in its overall form, in its decoration and materials this fountain—the principal part of the original floor decoration remaining—conforms closely to an earlier, seventeenth-century Damascene style inspired to a large degree by Mamluk fountains.

THE LOWER WALLS

While stone ornament in Syrian homes remained quite unchanged for centuries, the decoration done in wood was modified substantially in eighteenth-century houses when traditional geometric and arabesque motifs were combined with newer floral compositions, and when landscape views came into vogue in eighteenth-century Turkey.⁴⁸ The lower walls of a great *qā‘a* were clad in an ensemble of wood paneling (*ḥalqa*, pl. *ḥalaqāt*), which would have endowed it with a warm atmosphere. This painted and gilt woodwork was rich in floral and geometric designs, as well as in cartouches containing inscriptions placed in panels over the various arched openings and on the cornice that encircled the entire *qā‘a*.

Niches incorporated in the wainscoting of the *ṭazar* were frequently fitted with built-in shelves for exhibiting small objects of value (*rafrāf*) and books (*kutbiyya*).⁴⁹ Other sections of the paneling featured large cupboards with double doors (*khazāna* or *dūlāb*), while still other alcoves (*yūk*) concealed their contents with curtains. *Yūk* would have held bedding, additional cushions, and carpets, whereas *khazāna* and *dūlāb* might have been “treasure” cabinets containing precious objects—especially a type called *samandara*, with elaborately decorated doors.⁵⁰ Appropriately, then, the *kutbiyya* and *rafrāf* of the Museum’s room contain lavishly bound tomes and objets d’art of the period while the closed doors of its *khazāna* leave one to imagine the stacks of textiles and cushions that might be arranged within.

Another important feature of a great *qā’a* was the *maṣab* (pl. *maṣabāt*), a large and highly ornamented niche, located usually in the *ataba*, designed to hold an object of value: a flower vase, a water jar, an ornate water pipe, or coffee and sherbet cups.⁵¹ Some *maṣabāt*, such as the two in the *qā’a* of Jamīl Mardam Bek in the Damascus National Museum, were made

entirely of marble and stone and functioned as wall fountains connected with the *ataba*’s floor fountain. The arch of the *maṣab* might have had a small vault from which cascaded a succession of miniature niches, or *muqarnas*. Below, the entire *maṣab* would be lavishly decorated with marble and mother-of-pearl mosaic or, occasionally, with ceramic tiles.⁵²

The room arrived disassembled in hundreds of pieces and was installed in 1972 with the aid of little more than a few old photographs since lost.⁵³ Its various original wooden components are suspended from a modern wooden armature at a distance from the Museum’s actual floor, walls, and ceiling, and new frames have been introduced to hold the wall panels (Figure 7). A closer examination of the four walls of the Damascus Room should begin with the right-hand wall as one enters today, which will be called Wall No. 1 (see Figure 4). This wall, as will be explained, would originally have been the first one seen by the visitor, and it is here that the beginning of the poem inscribed on the wainscoting is to be found. On the *ataba* level, the *ḥalqa* features a double-door *dūlāb* or *khazāna* with an arched top, and each door is divided into three sections—the upper and lower square, the middle rectangular. This type of opening, with the same divisions but variations of decorative motifs, is found in two cupboards of equal size on the same wall, as well as on the four windows on the opposite wall.

Next to the *dūlāb* is the *maṣab*, which is a pastiche of original and other elements of the period (Figure 8). Its original upper part has a wooden trilobed vault filled with *muqarnas*. Below is a Syrian tile panel from the Museum’s collection that is typical of the kind of revetment such a niche may have had in the first half of the eighteenth century. (The Museum owns two other comparable tile panels, both of which schematically represent a mosque with three domes topped by finials.⁵⁴) The arches circumscribed beneath have alternately colored voussoirs, and below them are hanging mosque lamps, cypress and palm trees, and either a large ablutions ewer or, as in the panel of the Museum’s *maṣab*, two-handled vases out of which carnations and other flowers grow. All these panels have similar color schemes—mainly turquoise and cobalt blue, green, and aubergine—and they all feature inscriptions with the names of Allah, Muḥammad, and the four Orthodox caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. The Museum’s panel has a central cartouche inscribed “Trust in God!” (*tawakkal alā Allāh*). The two side walls of the niche have three floral tiles in complementary colors also from the period. Below is a marble-clad compartment with a diamond pattern, which likewise is not original to the room.



Figure 7. The room’s woodwork during installation, 1972

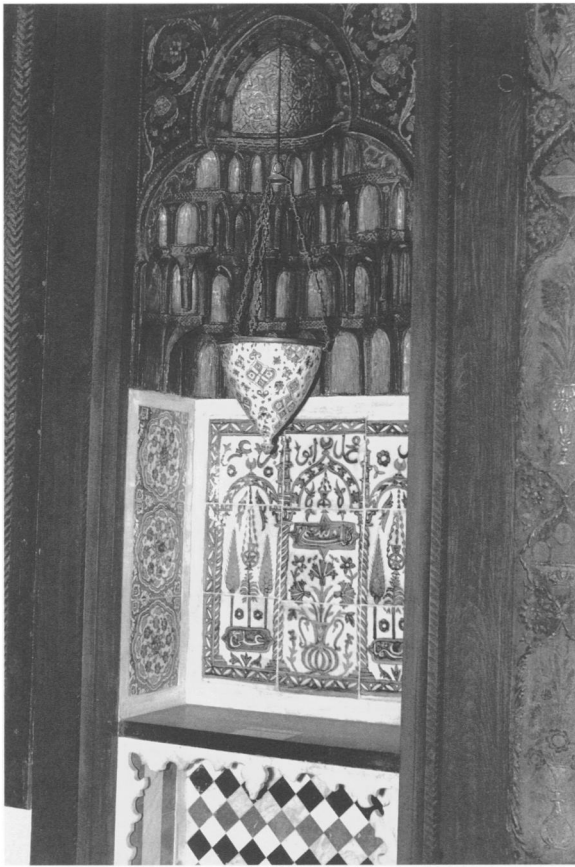


Figure 8. The decorative niche known as the *maşab*, Wall No. 1 (photo: author)

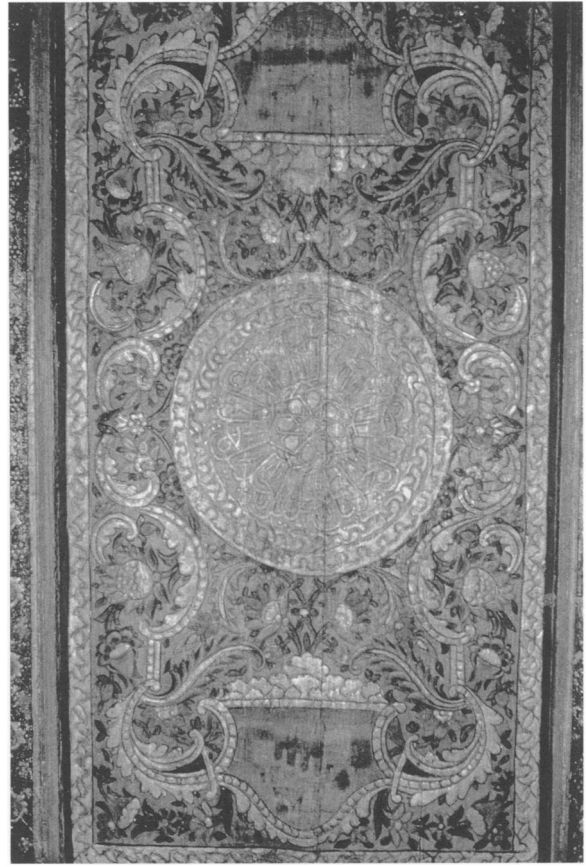


Figure 10. Right-hand panel of the largest closet (*saman-dara*) in Wall No. 1 (photo: author)

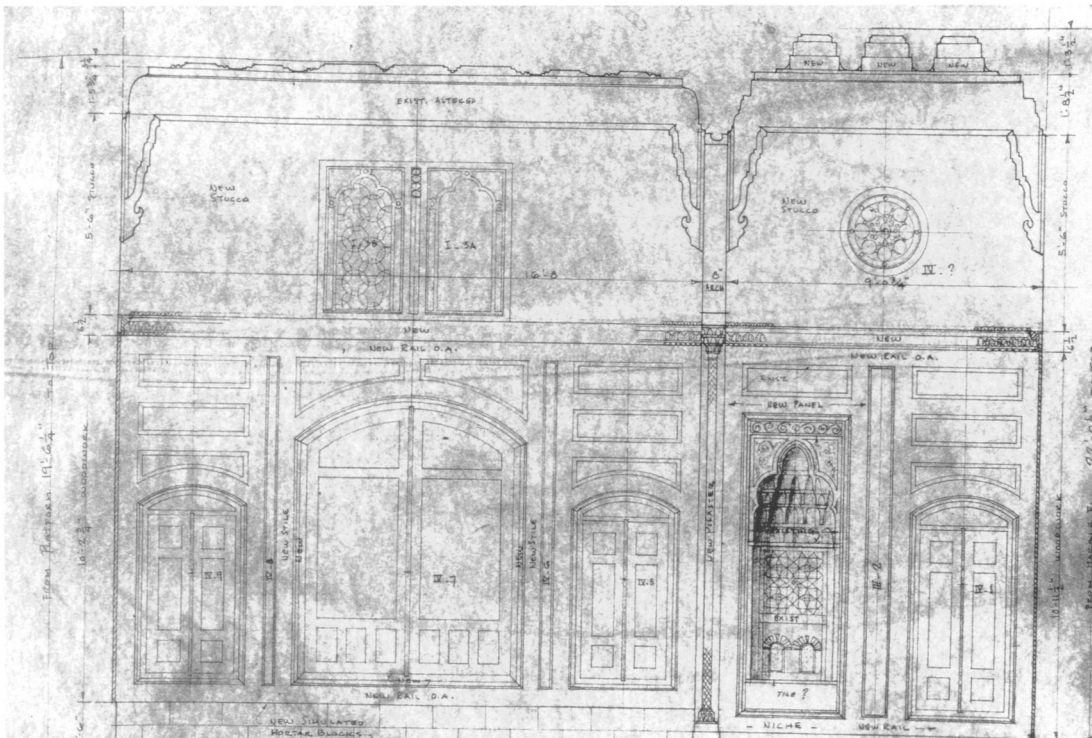


Figure 9. Elevation of Wall No. 1, 1972 (drawing: Department of Islamic Art, MMA)



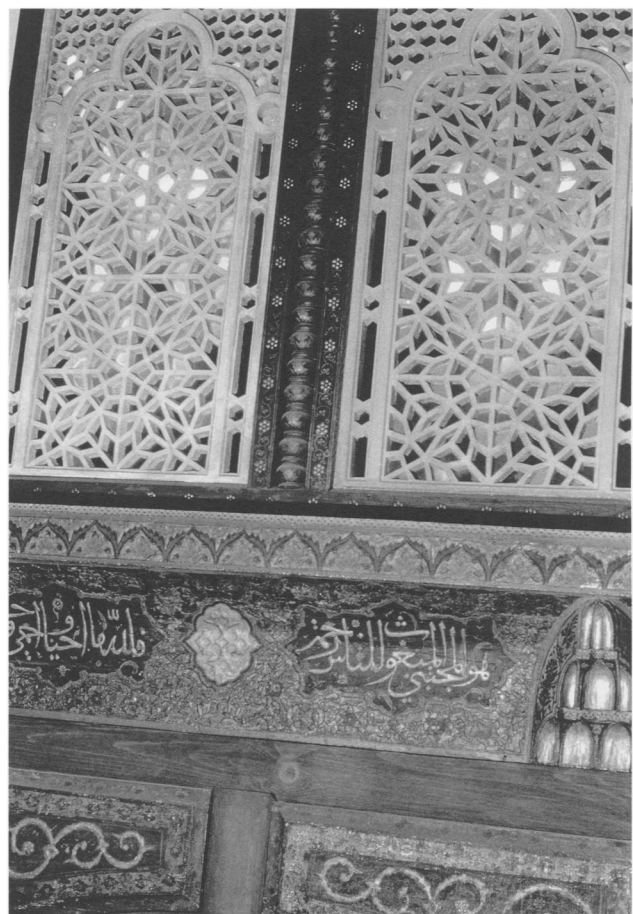
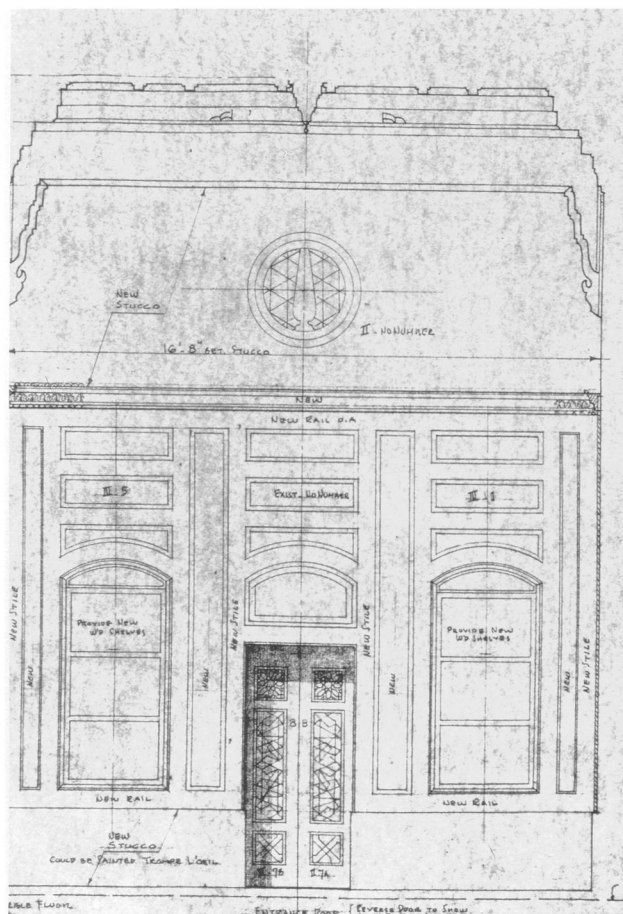
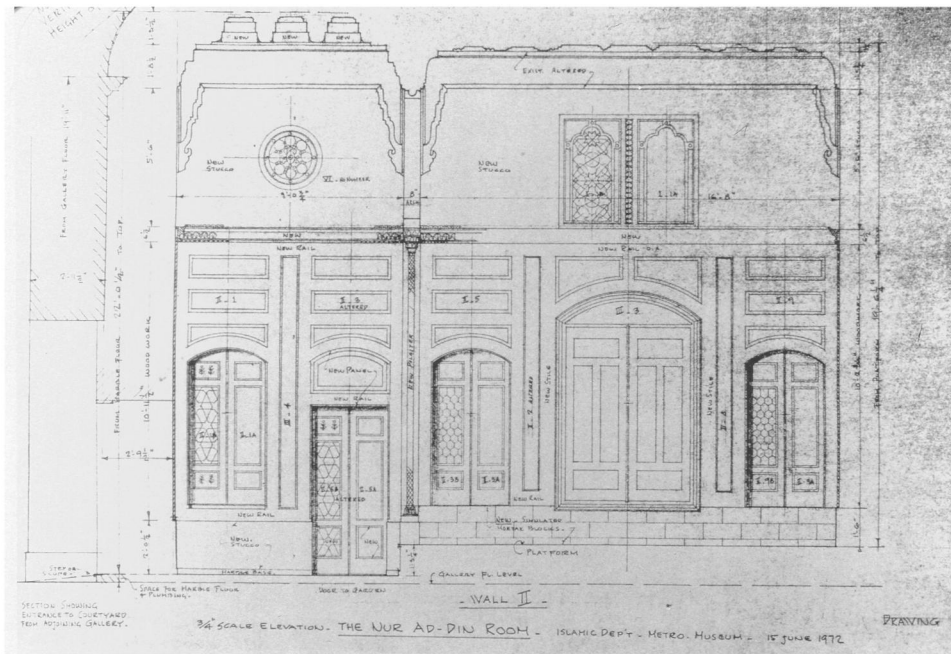
Figure 11. Windows of the *‘ataba* section of Wall No. 3 and Wall No. 4 showing the present entrance (photo: author)



Figure 12. View of Wall No. 3 at the *ṭazar* level (photo: author)

There seem to be two anomalies in the present form of the *maṣab*. First, as installed, it looks as if it is missing its topmost ornamental panel; second, it is the sole niche in the room that springs from floor level (Figure 9). In fact, it should start at the same height as all the other niches and its upper limit should be where the inscription panel is now. The inscription panel in turn should be where the blank modern panel was inserted. (There is no wall text missing, as will be discussed below.) Thus arranged, the line of the room’s *ḥalqa* would remain unbroken.

Finally, the *ṭazar* segment of Wall No. 1 features an imposing closet, or *samandara*, also with an arched profile (see Figure 1). Every such room would have at least one cabinet bigger than the rest. Each of its elaborately decorated doors (Figure 10) has a prominent, centrally placed circular *naskhī* inscription. It is entirely gilded and surrounds a central star motif. It reads “Oh, Glorious!” (*yā jalīl*) eight times.⁵⁵ Proceeding from right to left, the direction of the



Arabic script we find that the wall facing the present entrance, Wall No. 2 (see Figure 3), is articulated by three symmetrical *rafrāf* or *kutbiyya*, appropriately used for displaying precious pottery, metalwork, and leather-bound tomes from the collections of the Museum's Islamic Department.

The windowed wall to the left of the present entrance, Wall No. 3, would have originally faced the courtyard. On the *ṭazar* level (Figure 12) two of the windows, with grilles⁵⁶ and shutters, flank a large *samandara*; two more windows of equal size are now found on the *ʿataba* section (Figure 11). Originally, however, the window nearest to the dividing arch on the *ʿataba* level was the actual entrance to the room from the courtyard outside. This is clearly documented in the architectural plans and elevations that accompanied the installation of the Museum's room (see Figures 2, 13, and 14). The room's entrance was switched from Wall No. 3 to Wall No. 4 in order to conform to the shape of the gallery space. This involved relocating the entire door assembly and its overdoor panel.⁵⁷ Thus the door that originally communicated with the courtyard was where a window is at present. When the door was reinstalled in its current location, it was reversed in order to show its finished face toward the Museum's gallery. This side of the doors, carved and inlaid with an eight-pointed star design in mother-of-pearl, would originally have faced inward, complementing the other lavish materials of the wall paneling (see Figure 14). The present entrance wall, Wall No. 4, once included two open display niches with shelves and a central opening whose precise function remains uncertain. Three possibilities are suggested, however, by existing Damascene houses: a cabinet, a window, or a door to an adjacent *liwān*, or, less likely, a door to an interior smaller room.⁵⁸

The paneling culminates in a concave cornice (*ṭanaf*, pl. *aṭnāf*) that runs all around the room (Figure 15). At regular intervals it features inscription cartouches alternating with gold medallions and gilded *muqarnas*. The style of this cornice is common to a number of Damascene rooms, in which the paneling terminates with some kind of ornamental cornice.⁵⁹

THE UPPER WALLS

This section is like a white border framing the dark and rich wainscoting below and setting it apart from the equally sumptuous ceiling. Yet it is not totally blank: several jewel-like stucco windows inlaid with col-

ored glass punctuate its whiteness (see Figure 15).⁶⁰ Light entering at different times of the day through these high, multicolored skylights (*qamariyya*) must have created a kaleidoscopic effect in the room below. From the early centuries of Islam, glass had been used as decoration or set in carved and pierced window frames. Lead was never used, as it was in Western stained glass; instead, colored or clear glass pieces were inserted within a stucco trellis, a practice that continues to the present time. Most surviving antique examples date from the Ottoman period.⁶¹ These upper lights, which are more ornate than the lower, functional windows with clear panes, are one of the most attractive elements of wealthier Turkish houses. They are placed above reach, in a zone that emphasizes the height of the room, adds color and light to it, and accentuates the ceiling's impact.

The two long upper walls of the Museum's room each have a single oculus with geometric floral patterns over the *ʿataba* as well as a pair of joint rectangular lobed windows bearing geometric designs, including stars over the *ṭazar*. The two other walls also have one oculus each, both of which feature a highly stylized cypress tree within a geometric network, the cypress being a favorite motif of the Ottoman period. This upper wall area, painted white and containing only windows set with colored glass, is a distinctive feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ottoman houses in Anatolia.⁶²

THE CEILINGS

The intricately decorated wooden ceilings (*saqf*) of Syrian houses were beamed or coffered or a combination of the two, as is the case with the Museum's room (Figure 16). As was customary, the beamed ceiling of the *ʿataba* is separated from the coffered ceiling of the *ṭazar* by a lofty wooden arch (Figure 17), and the ceilings of the two spaces have different schemes of decoration. Around the *ʿataba* ceiling runs a magnificent *muqarnas* cornice (Figure 18), whereas the *ṭazar* ceiling is framed by a concave cornice exactly like the one over the wainscoting below (see Figure 16). Curved *muqarnas* spandrels, the so-called *raqabāt* (sing. *raqba*), reach down from the four corners of each ceiling (Figure 19).⁶³

The beamed *ʿataba* ceiling has two projecting timbers spanning the entire width of the room. Each beam is divided into three sections, the outer ones flat and edged, the central one rounded. These sections employ *muqarnas* for their transitional elements. The



Figure 16. The two ceilings

Figure 17. Elevation of the arch looking into the *ṭazar*, 1972 (drawing: Department of Islamic Art, MMA)

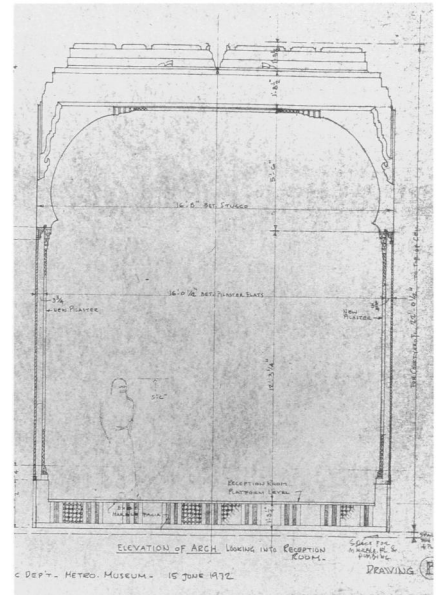


Figure 18. *Muqarnas* cornice circumscribing the ‘*ataba*’ ceiling (photo: author)

Figure 19. The ceilings' curved *muqarnas* spandrels (photo: author)

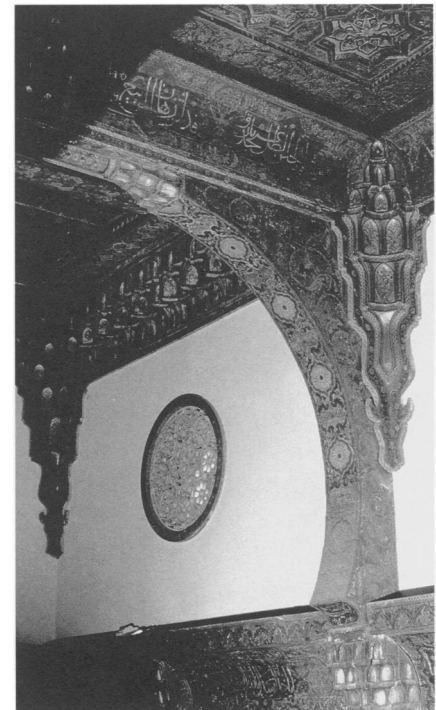




Figure 20. Compartment rug. Damascus(?), early 17th century. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Joseph Lees Williams Memorial Collection, 55–65–6 (photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art)

sides of the beams have narrow, cordlike fillets. Between these beams are painted and carved boards that are subdivided into smaller rectangular or polygonal segments and supported by small wooden crossbars. The middle board has a central *duḥa* (pl. *adwāḥ*), a *muqarnas* conelike projection from which a light fixture would hang (see Figures 16 and 18).⁶⁴ A border then frames the whole and connects it to the *muqarnas* cornice.

The ceiling over the *ṭazar* is composed of suspended boarding where the construction elements, such as the beams, are hidden. Its alternately projecting or depressed surfaces consist of thin short or long boards laid next to one another, giving the impression of a rich, coffered composition. The effect of varying levels of relief is achieved through painting, polygonal molding, small crossbars, narrow ledges, framing boards, and other carved details.⁶⁵

Ceilings of both these types were customary in Damascene *qā'āt*, and the many variations on the two basic themes testify to their success and durability.⁶⁶ In particular, the design of the *ṭazar*'s ceiling was thought

to evoke a carpet or textile canopy, with the wide outer border enclosing several framing boards resembling guard bands and the central square taking the place of the rug's "field." The corner *muqarnas* pendentives, tapering downward so as to resemble gathered curtains, further accentuated the textile analogy. It appears that the decorative patterns of such ceilings were perceived as echoing those on Persian carpets.⁶⁷ Closer examination of the general layout of ceilings such as the Museum's, however, reveals stronger affinities with the astral and geometric designs of Mamluk carpets and "compartment" rugs attributed to seventeenth-century Damascus (Figure 20),⁶⁸ rather than with the medallion floral examples of Persian Safavid production, which, if anything, may have influenced only late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ceilings. The square format, the eight-pointed stars, the hexagons, the grid of squares on the diagonal, the multipetaled rosettes enclosed in, or enclosing, stars, and the borders of ribbonlike bands and alternating oblong hexagonal cartouches with hexagonal medallions containing floral motifs—all these features are characteristic of the geometry favored by Egyptian and Syrian rugs between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. This archaism may also be indicative of the room's early date, like its fountain, which looks back to the Mamluk tradition. On the other hand, the small octagonal mirror set in the central square of the *ṭazar* ceiling seems to be a feature that anticipates the mirror-encrusted interiors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁶⁹

TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS OF THE WAINSCOTING AND CEILINGS

Discussions of the types of wood and the techniques employed for the construction and decoration of the woodwork of Damascene rooms have been infrequent and brief.⁷⁰ Available references mention local poplar as the wood most commonly used both for construction and for the decorative and structural parts of ceilings. Local walnut, a resistant and uniform type of wood, seems to have been put to all kinds of uses, such as paneling, doors, and even beams.⁷¹ Elsewhere, poplar beams and panels of cedar and terebinth are mentioned as having been employed for beamed ceilings,⁷² cedar for coffered ceilings,⁷³ terebinth, cedar, and poplar for *muqarnas* cornices,⁷⁴ zedrach for the framing boards, and cedar or terebinth for the painted panels of the wainscoting.⁷⁵ Although the woodwork of the Museum's room has not been ana-

lyzed, it is reasonable to assume it was made according to standard practice and available materials.

In terms of construction, an infrastructure of large beams is hidden by decorations of worked wood that can be divided into four basic types: visible beams, hidden or dressed beams, decorated ceiling, and canvas-lined ceiling.⁷⁶ The *‘ataba* usually involved the first method, which was the most popular. In this, the infrastructure, or support, beams were left visible and received painted decoration. The *ṭazar* ceilings were made by the second method, whereby large tree trunks were covered by a framework of wood forming smaller beams and crossbars, between which the panels of the coffers were installed.⁷⁷ The Museum’s ceilings seem to follow these two techniques, the first for the *‘ataba* and the second for the *ṭazar*.

The wood paneling, on the other hand, involved a tongue-and-groove construction.⁷⁸ The Museum’s room shows this technique on shutters and doors, whereas the various panels of decoration are fastened by nails through a lip onto the modern wooden mounting, and this seems to have been the manner by which they would have been attached to their original backing.

The decoration was executed in various special techniques.⁷⁹ As the Museum’s room has not been scientifically analyzed, we can only assume that its relief or flat painted areas were executed according to methods generally employed in Damascus houses. For example, a sense of textures in relief would be achieved by adding small wood fillets to form the frames and the panels. On the ceiling, this relief effect would be attained by juxtaposing and superimposing cut wooden elements glued or nailed on the main background. The woodwork, whether on the walls or the ceiling, then received a coat of gesso, which in some places was executed in relief. It was this gesso that served as the actual base for the polychrome decoration.⁸⁰ Decoration involved painting with animal glue, painting with “lacquer” (actually a mixture of pigments with oil and a hard vegetal resin), and painting with wax.⁸¹

Two distinct methods were employed in the application of these three types of painting. The first technique involved raised motif painting, which resembled stone relief carving. In this mode, wood would be covered by a primer of carbonate of calcium paste, which would form small protruding fillets that determined the desired motif. Glue or wax-based paint would then be used. The second method would be flat painting. In that case, the layer of paint would be directly applied to the wood or on a primer covering the entire supporting surface.⁸² Moreover, painting in either fine leaves of gold or tinfoil was employed. Gold would be

applied on an ocher-colored ground; tinfoil would be made to adhere to an intermediary preparation of glued lead white.⁸³ The decorative patterns were transferred using perforated paper bearing the desired designs that acted as stencils.

DECORATIVE MOTIFS OF THE WOODWORK

The Museum’s room sought to reveal to cultivated and erudite guests the status, taste, and sensibilities of its owner. We are fortunate that by analyzing the room’s rich decoration and interpreting its eloquent inscriptions we can discern that original intent. Moreover, we can consider the delicate tensions brought about between the two, as well as between traditional and innovative, local and foreign elements. From traditional and/or local sources stem the spatial divisions and function of the room, the materials and techniques of its construction and decoration, and the practice of inscribing eulogistic poetry to the Prophet on the woodwork of a grand *qā‘a*. On the other hand, the room contains certain rather striking imported motifs that serve as novelty “punctuation marks.” This dual heritage, in which Syrian/Arab features outweigh Turkish/European ones, makes the Metropolitan’s room a very important stepping-stone for our understanding of Syrian domestic architecture of the Ottoman period.

The wooden ceilings, walls, window shutters, and soffits of our room are embellished with painted and gilded decoration, which was frequently executed in bas-relief. The various motifs, disposed on panels, vertical bands, or cartouches resembling golden book-cover medallions, are set against a background of dark, murky green. A small area that has recently been cleaned revealed that the present dull background was in fact light green, a color that seems to have been common in Damascene interiors of the period,⁸⁴ possibly because it helped to transform an enclosed salon into a kind of garden pavilion.

Traditionally, the most common Damascene terms used to refer to painted woodwork of this kind were *‘ajamī* (i.e., Persian) and *istānbūlī* (i.e., from Istanbul).⁸⁵ Although nowadays the term *‘ajamī* is still used to refer to this style of early woodwork in general, in the past the term may have denoted a type of ornament that was not specifically Persian, but rather more conventionally Islamic, such as the arabesque and various small geometric and stylized floral designs that evolved over the centuries. All these could be found in any older Syrian decorative ensemble. Clearly, this

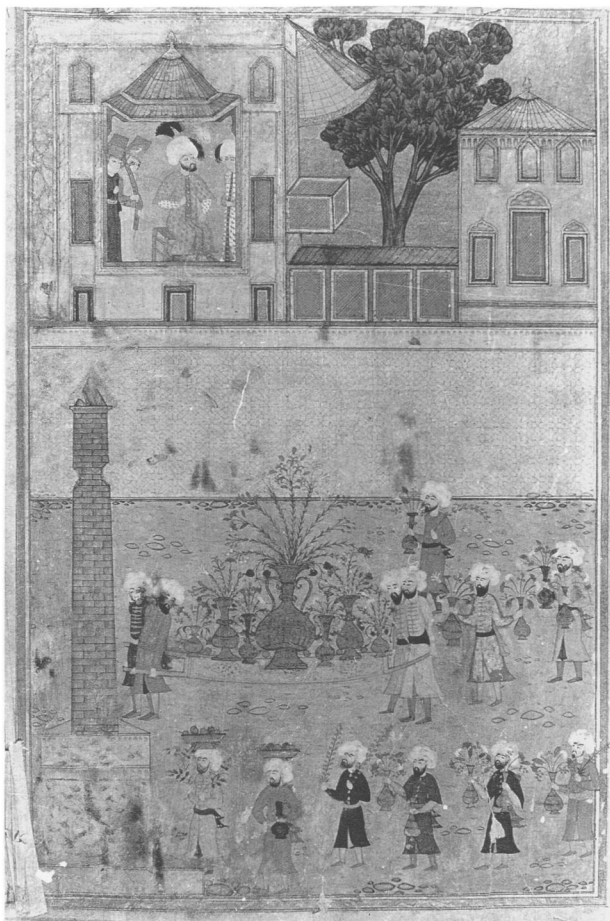


Figure 21. *Surname* of Ahmed III, the guilds of florists and fruit sellers, 1720. Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayı Museum Library, H. 1344 (photo: Topkapi Sarayı Museum Library)



Figure 22. Detail of open tulips from a window-shutter panel (photo: author)



Figure 23. Detail of closed tulips in a vase from a long vertical panel in Wall No. 1 (photo: author)

issue requires further study and clarification. *Istānbūli*, on the other hand, signified the new repertoire of ornamental compositions from the so-called Turkish rococo, which filtered into the Arab provinces from the Ottoman capital. Thus, in the Museum's room, in counterpoint to the backdrop of conventional forms and patterns, are prominent images of naturalistic flowers, bowls with lush fruit, cornucopias, and architectural vignettes—all elements that undeniably connect this room with foreign tastes.

Specifically, the room's flowers are depicted emerging from typical Turkish water bottles (*sūrahi*) (Figure 21),⁸⁶ and they clearly belong to the popular Ottoman typology codified as "quatre fleurs":⁸⁷ open and closed tulips (Figures 22, 23), carnations (Figure 24), wild roses (Figure 25), and hyacinths (Figure 26). All these are very similar to the flowers that can be seen on objects throughout the Ottoman world. Furthermore, the bowls are golden Ottoman tazze (*ayaklı, tabak, tas*),⁸⁸ where are filled with piles of assorted fruit (Figure 28), in the tradition of miniature paintings depicting royal banquets.⁸⁹ (In European interior decoration too, flowers and fruit were often combined in different ways to celebrate the domestic arts of the table.) The series of cornucopias in the Museum's room (Figure 27) is another foreign element that emphasizes the suggestion of abundance and well-being.⁹⁰

Architectural scenes also may be considered within the category of foreign ornament. The *samandara* of Wall No. 1 has four atmospheric scenes set in undulating festoons that emerge from two lateral cornucopias (Figure 29). As these paintings are very faint and considerably damaged, all one can determine is that the buildings depicted—religious, secular, or both—are set in a landscape with trees. Finally, the rectangular arched overdoor panel also features architecture, trees, and a tazza with fruit (Figure 30). The scene represented here is unusual in that it combines two near mirror images of the two halves of a mosque fronted by trees with a disproportionately oversize central fruit bowl.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE MOTIFS OF THE WOODWORK

With the exception of generic Islamic motifs such as arabesques and small floral and geometric designs, the woodwork of the Museum's room displays a certain originality of design that places it in the vanguard of its surviving contemporaries. Its influences from



Figure 24. Detail of carnations from a window soffit (photo: author)

abroad make themselves felt discreetly, yet pervasively, like a haunting musical leitmotiv. There is nothing uncommon about these designs in Syrian domestic interiors beginning with the second decade of the eighteenth century, and especially after midcentury. Surviving examples abound, either from intact rooms (Figure 31) or important fragments.⁹¹ The 1707 date

of the Museum's *qā'a*, however, documents not only the fact that "Turkish rococo" had reached the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire by the first decade of the eighteenth century, but also that a mature and sophisticated synthesis of indigenous and imported elements had already been achieved by that time.

Indeed, these motifs may have been employed in Syria much earlier, in Aleppo, as the room from about 1602 in the Berlin Staatlichen Museum demonstrates; but pre-eighteenth-century evidence is much too scarce to allow a definitive conclusion.⁹² From Damascus surviving evidence is totally lacking earlier than the Metropolitan's room, although there is indication that rooms with similar decoration did exist such as the now-lost interiors, dated 1589–1639 and 1689 respectively, that were in the London galleries of Vincent Robinson about 1913,⁹³ and the presumed late-seventeenth-century Damascene salon of Eustache de Lorey in Paris, at present unaccounted for.⁹⁴ Hence the added importance of the Museum's *qā'a*, which may well be not only an early instance of this fashion in Damascus but also the only one to survive.

Both Aleppo and Damascus were international com-

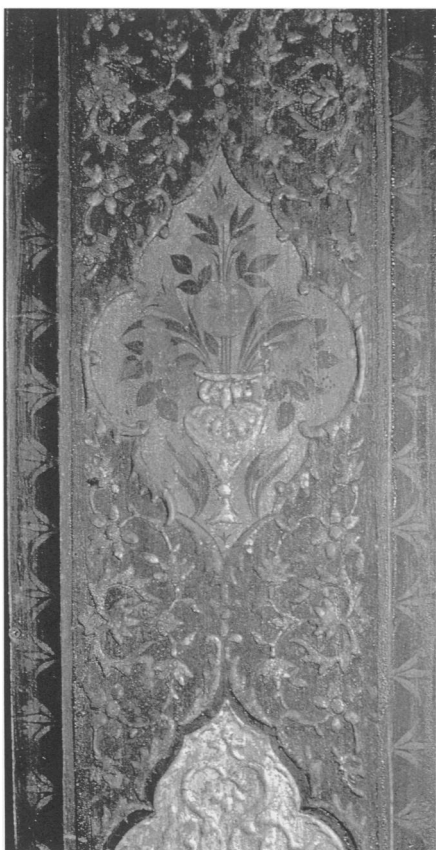


Figure 25. Detail of wild roses in a vase from a long vertical panel in Wall No. 2 (photo: author)



Figure 26. Detail of hyacinths in a vase from a long vertical panel in Wall No. 1 (photo: author)



Figure 27. Long vertical panel with cornucopias in Wall No. 2 (photo: author)



Figure 28. Long vertical panel with fruit bowls in Wall No. 3 (photo: author)

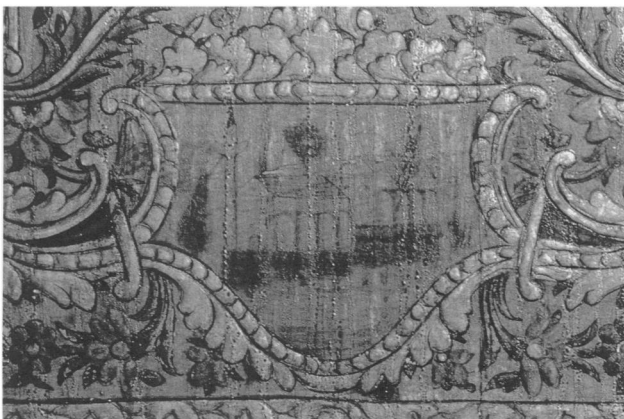


Figure 29. One of the architectural vignettes on the left door of the large closet (*samandara*) in Wall No. 1 (photo: author)



Figure 30. The overdoor panel (photo: author)



Figure 31. Detail with fruit bowls and flower vases from the paneling dated 1749 in the “Salle de la mariée” of the ‘Azm Palace in Damascus (photo: author)

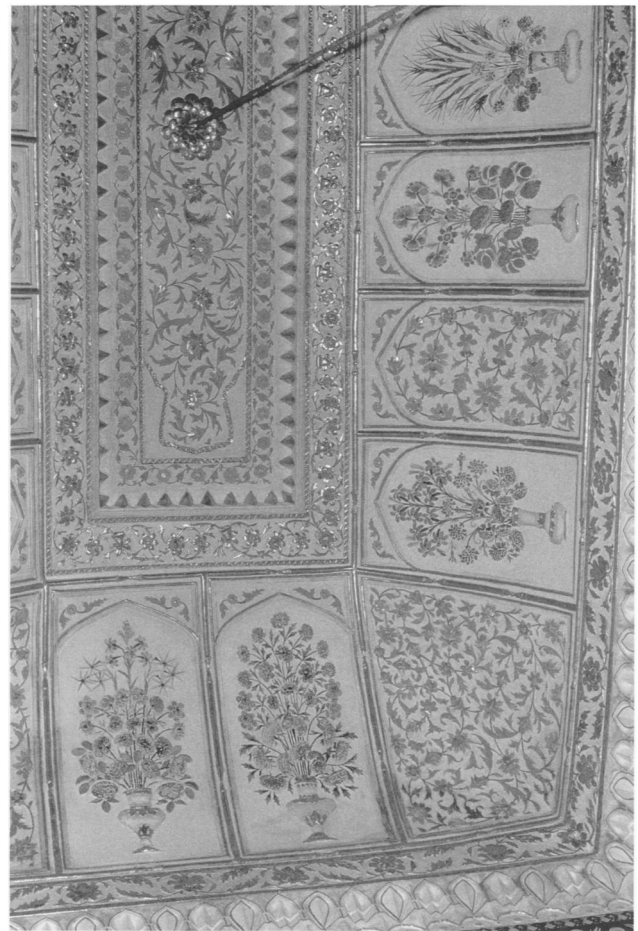


Figure 32. The ceiling of Sultan Ahmed III's library in the Topkapi Palace, dated 1720 (photo: author)

mercial centers, and their leading citizens were cognizant of and receptive to artistic influences from the East and the West. As the Berlin room suggests,⁹⁵ the trade of textiles and silks between Europe and the Near East played a prominent role in the changes of styles and tastes. Where architecture in Syria is concerned, Sultan Selim's conquest of 1516 eventually launched two architectural trends, one purely Ottoman and one combining Syrian Mamluk with Turkish elements.⁹⁶ Specifically, the decoration featuring bouquets in vases and fruit bowls was at this time a kind of revival and reinterpretation of motifs traditionally employed in Islamic art that developed in Turkey and Persia in the period between the late sixteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth.⁹⁷ In Syria, this new naturalism was more directly linked with the art of Ottoman Turkey than with Safavid Iran.

Ottoman taste was further marked by a fascination with things French⁹⁸ (a penchant, incidentally, that was reciprocated by the numerous manifestations of *tur-*

queries in France). Scrolls, pieces of mirror, painted landscapes, flowers, fretted and curved glittering decoration of all kinds were manifestations of the rococo adapted to Turkish interiors. According to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife of the English ambassador to the Porte about 1717, rooms everywhere in Turkey seemed partly Rococo, partly oriental.⁹⁹ While exhibiting the new French vogue, Istanbul homes also held on to traditional Eastern elements: amassing Persian, Turkish, Indian, and even European rugs and textiles with naturalistic sprays of flowers on raised divans; covering walls with painted and gilt wood paneling that incorporated many cupboards; and placing fountains on the floor. It becomes evident, then, that Syrian rooms of the period, such as the Museum's, reflected several trends prevalent in the Ottoman capital, especially the practice of linking European and Near Eastern elements of decoration.

Perhaps more than anything else, the so-called *lâle devri*, or “Tulip Era,” of the Ottoman sultan Ahmed III

(r. 1703–30) was responsible for codifying the new love of flower vases and fruit bowls. The sultan ushered in an epoch of extravagance and rarefied pleasures whose emblem became the tulip. Among his numerous construction projects, his “Fruit Room” (*Yemiş Odası*)¹⁰⁰ and his library¹⁰¹ (Figure 32) from the Topkapı Palace best exemplify early Turkish rococo interior decoration. The former, featuring a variety of flowers and fruit in enfilades of vases and bowls painted on different registers, was a *cabinet*-type small room, entered through the library of Ahmed I, made as a sort of retreat for the sultan’s relaxation; the latter, a light-filled, freestanding building resembling a garden kiosk, is crowned by a ceiling repeating the remarkable flower vases of the “Fruit Room.” Both of these fascinating spaces were made between 1705 and 1720 and must have played a key role in setting the trend for fruit bowls and flower vases.¹⁰² In fact, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s firsthand accounts mention such exuberant images everywhere, as, for instance, on the walls of the *yali* of the grand vizier on the Bosphorus. Its galleries were decorated, in her words, with “Jars of Flowers and Porcellane dishes of Fruit of all sorts so well done in Plaister and colour’d in so lively a manner that it has an enchanting Effect.”¹⁰³

A slightly earlier example (1697–1702), the famous Kuprulu Yali of Hussein Pasha, the grand vizier of Mustafa II, also fits this description: a frieze of large-scale porcelain vases holding a symmetrically arranged profusion of flowers dominates the paneled zone above the windows, while smaller flower vases and even simple wildflower bouquets tied by ribbons echo the larger motifs in other sections of the paneling.¹⁰⁴ The close association of flower vases and fruit bowls is perhaps best encapsulated in a painting by Levni in Vehbi’s *Surnameh* of Ahmed III (Topkapı Sarayı Museum Library, H. 1344) that depicts the guilds of florists and fruit sellers parading together in front of the sultan in 1720 (see Figure 21). Examination of the painting reveals a striking resemblance of execution between the wares on parade and the ones on display in the Ottoman interiors of the period.

From the second half of the sixteenth century onward we also find that shared motifs between portable arts, manuscript painting, and architectural ornamentation became more prominent than before,¹⁰⁵ both in Syria and in Turkey. As many similarly decorated objects were used in a home, it seems natural that they would have been coordinated with interior decoration as much as possible. To this effect, the Museum’s room may be considered a typical example: on its woodwork we find all the motifs from the Ottoman ornamental vocabulary mentioned above

(vases with naturalistic flowers, fruit bowls, and architectural scenes) as well as countless pointed and serrated *saz* leaves¹⁰⁶ (either alone or embracing rosettes or isolated blooms).

The room’s cornucopias may denote a distinctly European import because they became popular only much later in Ottoman interiors. Also of European inspiration are the architectural scenes. These paintings belong to the same genre that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was featured in Ottoman interior domestic decoration¹⁰⁷ and that was influenced by the *vedute* of European interiors, by Turkish miniature painting,¹⁰⁸ and by engravings of Istanbul and its environs done by Western artists working there.¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, the curious iconography of the overdoor panel calls for separate consideration. In a general way, the two mirror-image halves of a mosque recall both topographical miniatures,¹¹⁰ and the paintings of certain ceramics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries done in a schematic linear style and often employing the convention of showing buildings from the side with lamps hanging within (Figure 33).¹¹¹ The mosque in question on the Museum’s panel resembles the type built in Damascus during the Ottoman period, combining Turkish domes with Syrian arches of alternating polychrome voussoirs.¹¹² The two leaning trees on the panel act as dividers between the mosque halves and the giant fruit bowl, following in the tradition of those on the mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus, or the mosaic frieze of Sultan Baybars’s mausoleum (1277–81). In the latter, flat mirror images of buildings are divided by trees (Figure 34); acanthus scrolls emerge from cornucopias (Figure 35); and fruit bowls figure between buildings or with scrolls (Figure 35). Thus, the overall style of the overdoor’s paintings may suggest an earlier date than the rest of the woodwork, or a provenance from another decorative scheme.¹¹³ Its iconography is, at any rate, unusual for domestic paneling.

THE INSCRIPTIONS

Distributed in lobed cartouches on three registers—wainscoting, *țazar* ceiling cornice, and upper wall cornice—the Arabic inscriptions of the Museum’s room are a significant body of evidence. All are written in gold against a black background strewn with delicate wildflowers. The wall paneling contains thirteen pairs of superimposed rectangular panels, plus one single panel. The *țazar* ceiling cornice has a series of twenty-

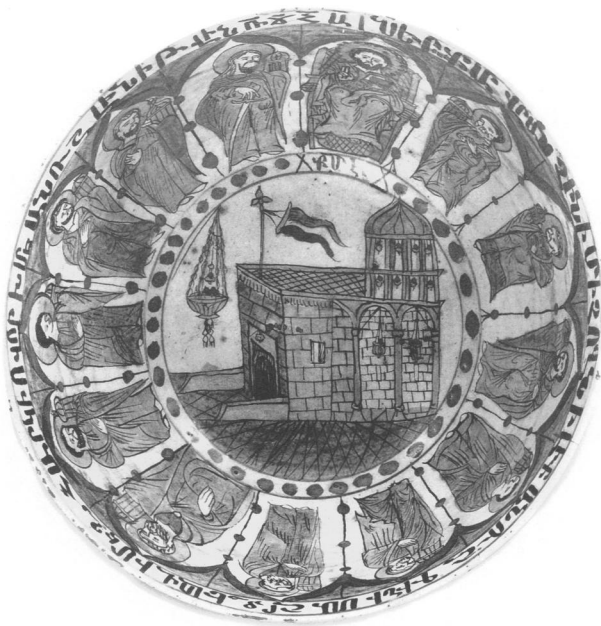


Figure 33. Ceramic bowl, ca. 1718. Underglaze painted "By the Painter T'oros." Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 7649 (photo: Benaki Museum)

four panels, whereas the wall cornice inscriptions unfold in a continuous frieze of twenty-eight cartouches.

Only two previous attempts have been made to translate parts of the room's inscriptions.¹¹⁴ Therefore, all the legible inscriptions are translated here for the first time,¹¹⁵ although the identity of the poet is still unknown.¹¹⁶ This situation is, however, not unique to this room; late *madḥ al-nabī* poems composed by local Damascus poets are known to be problematic. Perhaps this accounts for the conspicuously incomplete treatment of the inscriptions in other published Damascene interiors and significant fragments.¹¹⁷ From the scant information available and the author's recent research in situ, it can be established that a large number of Damascene grand *qā'āt* bore inscriptions eulogizing the Prophet and were frequently

taken from the *Hamziyya*, an expanded version of the famous "Ode on the Prophet's Mantle," or *Qaṣīda al-Burda*, by Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd al-Būṣīrī (d. 1694).¹¹⁸ Preoccupation with the *Burda* was by no means exclusive to Damascus; it could be found all the way from Cairene rooms to the "Fruit Room" of Ahmed III. In the latter, golden inscriptions appear on black cartouches resembling those of the Damascus Room.

The poetry of the Museum's wall paneling is written in *thuluth/jalī* script and is cast in the *kāmil* meter rhyming in the letter *dāl* (*dālīyya*). It has thirteen lines, each consisting of two hemistichs. The two hemistichs of each line are placed within individual cartouches on separate panels. The first hemistich of every line is superimposed over the second, and the poem follows a counter-clockwise direction. Between the third and fourth lines is an independent couplet. Unlike the main poem, its two lines are arranged on only two panels, one line (not hemistich) per panel. The couplet is in the same meter (shortened by omitting its last syllable) as the main poem. It rhymes in *qāf* (*qāfīyya*). It is prominently situated in the center of Wall No. 2, in other words, on the *ṣadr* wall of the *ṭazar*. As the couplet is not part of the poem, its placement seems significant and must have been intentional: making reference to the Prophet, it crowns the most important seat of the room reserved either for the noblest guest or for the master himself.

The poem begins to the left of the lofty arch dividing *'ataba* from *ṭazar*; that is, its starting point coincides with the beginning of the *ṭazar*'s elevated area. As had been customary even since the Mamluk period, the date appears after the end of the poem.¹¹⁹ In this case, the last line of the poem, which bears the room's date, is inscribed on a single panel by itself (see Figure 36), located over the *maṣab*, to the right of the dividing arch, so that it directly precedes the first line of the poem on the other side of the arch. The identical formulaic phrase "Entrust in God" appears twice at the spring line of the arch, at the points where it connects to the cornice. The same exhortation also occurs at similar points in other known rooms.¹²⁰



Figure 34. Detail of fruit trees dividing buildings from the mosaics in the mausoleum of Sultan Baybars, 1277–81, Damascus (photo: author)



Figure 35. Detail of a fruit bowl and an acanthus scroll emerging from cornucopias from the mosaics of the mausoleum of Sultan Baybars (photo: author)

Following is a translation of the wall text, which, except for the couplet, extols the virtues of house and owner and invokes good wishes upon them. Words marked with an asterisk are Noble Names of the Prophet.

Couplet:

- 1a. O Muṣṭafā* [Chosen One], (who was) before Adam was created,
- 1b. And before the mysteries of the universe were revealed,
- 2a. How is it possible for any creature to praise you,
- 2b. After the Creator has lavished praise on your virtues?

Poem

- 1a. House of praises, glorious deeds and magnanimity,
- 1b. (May) feasts of rejoicing remain with you eternally.
- 2a. Noble hands erected you in highest dignity;
- 2b. Those seeking refuge from destruction have an abode which protects them.
- 3a. The turtledoves sing delightedly,
- 3b. The rewarded Dā'ī* [Caller] sings [lit., twitters] wishes upon you.
- 4a. I rejoice in your loftiness,
- 4b. For the one who built you is the one who surpasses the stars in sovereignty.
- 5a. He assigns comfort to every difficulty;
- 5b. The ferocious lions come and prostrate themselves before him.
- 6a. A family branch which traces its root to the most distinguished group (of men),
- 6b. They [i.e., the group] derive significance from

high-born glory.

- 7a. A hand that assists with means of subsistence those who implore,
- 7b. As the sea yields when it froths.
- 8a. They have made ministry and the *ṣadara/ṣidara* [office of the *ṣadr*]¹²¹ a servant,
- 8b. And (made) time content, and feats subservient.
- 9a. Remain in happiness, O unique one of your time,
- 9b. And enjoy what was erected with such care for you.
- 10a. (And may you remain) one of those who wear nobility as a cloak,
- 10b. And be clothed with all splendor among mankind.
- 11a. Living all your life luxuriously,
- 11b. Achieve what you wish in spite of your enemies.
- 12a. What has come down to us is the date of its building [lit., official decree of its building];
- 12b. (It is) a house that all minds cry out that verses be recited to.
- 13a. In its towers are assembled splendor and generosity;
- 13b. It is strengthened by Muḥammad,* the abode [lit., quarters] of noble qualities.

(In the) year [A.H.] 1119 [A.D. 1707]

Certain textual observations may be instructive at this point.¹²² First, the two hemistichs of line 5 are reversed on the wall, probably an oversight at the time of installation. The rhyme should appear on the second hemistich. As inscribed on the walls, the poem has several such errors, which may be ascribed to the poet or the calligrapher. Second, letters are often missing as, for example, the letter *yā* of the word *aidī* in line 2, the letter *yā* of the word *al-darārī* in line 4, the *hamza* of the verb *jā'anā* in line 12, and the letter *waw* of the verb *awṭadā* in line 13. Third, the end of the first hemistich of line 11, *arḡhadā*, should end with a long vowel *ā*; otherwise the meter is broken. Fourth, in the couplet, the end of its first hemistich should, once again, end in a long vowel (*adamā*) to avoid breaking the meter. In the first hemistich of its second line the word *thanā'uka*, here in the nominative, should be in the accusative (*thanā'aka*) because it is the direct object of the verb *yarūm*. Also, its *hamza* should sit on the line, not on the letter *waw*. Finally, throughout the poem sets of two dots are used where not required. Puzzling as these errors may be, they are by no means unique to the Museum's room; Dorothea Duda, for example, also noticed considerable grammatical or linguistic license in the inscriptions of the Pharaon collection woodwork which originated in a number of houses.¹²³

The second poem is in the same script as the paneling poem; its meter is *ṭawīl* and it rhymes in *mīm*

(*mīmīyya*). This poem begins with the cartouche on the right-hand corner of the *ṭazar* ceiling cornice.¹²⁴ After circumscribing the ceiling cornice, the poem continues below on the cornice, of the wall paneling, picking up with the line that is just to the left of the dividing arch (thereby aligning with the beginning of the wainscoting poem). The two sections of the second poem, written on the two cornices, are unified further by the repetition of the first hemistich of the first line on the final cartouche located on the wall cornice, just to the right of the dividing arch, exactly above the last panel of the wainscoting poem, the one with the date that is in turn above the *maṣab*.¹²⁵ A few parts of the ceiling cornice still present some problems of legibility and one hemistich is damaged. This section describes daybreak and morning rain in a flower garden, an appropriate introductory topic for a poem. It may be translated as follows:

The *Ṭazar* Ceiling Cornice

- 1a. The lightning saw the frowning of the darkness and smiled;
- 1b. It grazed over the flowers of an elevated place and (then) it puffed [i.e., a gentle breeze resulted].
- 2a. The forehead of the dawn began to shine in the forelock of the darkness
- 2b. And it pierced the whiteness of the teeth within the fruit of the (lips?).
- 3a. The lightning's flag flared when the winds played
- 3b. Horse races in the racing ring of the sky.
- 4a. The Bowman of the sky strung the bow of a cloud,
- 4b. And sent down to earth arrows consisting of the (rain's) downpour.
- 5a. Tears of a rain cloud had moistened the soil's sleeves.
- 5b. (Pearl-like tears) were scattered on their [i.e., the sleeves'] threads and were restrung.
- 6a. They [i.e., the tears of rain] dragged over the head of the elevated place the train of their garment,
- 6b. And then they adorned the clothes of the area and the lot.
- 7a. And the silver of the shadow mixed with the gold of the lightning,
- 7b. And they covered the flowers of the spring and made them round like a silver *dirham* coin.
- 8a. And the hand of the garden gathered up the sleeves of its blooms,
- 8b. And it adorned the sides of the branches and wrapped them in a turban.
- 9a. The mouth of the flowers kissed the cheek of its rose.
- 9b. What a most beautiful cheek and what a most lovely mouth!
- 10a. [ILLEGIBLE] . . .

- 10b. Just as the (water's) waviness [or curliness] put bracelets on [or enclosed] the river's wrist.
- 11a. [ILLEGIBLE] . . . the energy [?] of the willow tree [or *ben* tree] dancing,
- 11b. Because of lightning that had become visible, or doves that were warbling.
- 12a. It embraced a cloak made of the green branches of the *arak* tree,
- 12b. And it kissed a mouth [lit., smiling place] made of the white flowers of the chamomile [or daisy].

The Wall Cornice

This section concludes the garden metaphor begun above, then proceeds to praise the Prophet and finally to supplicate God. Once again, an asterisk denotes Noble Names of the Prophet.

- 13a. And wrote gilded lines on the air's sheet of paper,
- 13b. And the clouds ornamented [the gilded lines] with silver drops and put on the diacritical marks [i.e., of Arabic letters],
- 14a. And kohl-rimmed with sapphire an eyelid and an eye
- 14b. And daubed with henna a hand and a wrist.
- 15a. There is no need for the soul but to praise him,
- 15b. Abu'l-Qāsim* [Father of al-Qāsim], the Hādī [One Who Guides Right],* the exalted Prophet.
- 16a. Bashīr* [Bringer of Good Tidings], Nadhīr* [The One Who Warns of the Horrors of the Hereafter], Šādiq* [Sincere] in his words, Peace be upon him,
- 16b. Ḥabīb* [Beloved, i.e., of God], Khalīl* [Good Friend], Hāshimī* [from the family of Hāshim], preferred by all, including God.
- 17a. A pure, a pious one, Abṭahī* [Belonging to al-Baṭḥa, an area around Mecca], a revered one,
- 17b. Shining Sirāj* [Lamp], (one of the well) of Zamzam, Mukarram* [Honored].
- 18a. A prophet who dons glory and power as finery,
- 18b. [Finery that is] white-striped where beauty is embodied.
- 19a. A prophet of right guidance—if it were not for him, the dark would not be illuminated,
- 19b. And the dark would not abstain [?], and the hot place would not bring forth greenery.
- 20a. He is the Mujtabā* [Elect] sent to the people (in) mercy;
- 20b. For by God! How many are the lives (he has given), how (great) is his revelation [?], and how merciful (is he)!
- 21a. He is the highest summit that cannot become higher,
- 21b. He is the firm bond that never breaks.
- 22a. O, Khātīm* [Seal, i.e., the last prophet] of those sent, O, Fātiḥ* [Opener, Conqueror] of sublime things [i.e., heaven],

- 22b. Have mercy for I have come to thy door as a sinner.
 23a. And, O our Lord God, be for me and not against me,
 23b. The world [lit., open space] has become narrow and dark
 24a. I ask thee, by the Hādī * [One Who Guides Right], answer my prayer and be generous,
 24b. With that (which) is hoped for, O Master of the earth and the sky.
 25a. Be tolerant and favorable and He who conceals (sins);
 25b. O God, do not burn Muslims in the (hell) fire.
 26a. Bless the one who prostrates himself and his companions
 26b. Whenever lightning sees the frowning of the darkness and smiles.

Some textual errors exist in this poem as well: in the first hemistich of line 23 the nonclassical Arabic *yā Allahu* is used; in the first hemistich of line 15 the pronoun of *imtidāḥahā* should be the masculine *imtidāḥahu*, and in the first hemistich of line 18 the word *taraddā* is misspelled without the *yā*.¹²⁶

These poems that adorn the Museum's room are fairly conventional, particularly in their many references to the Prophet. Still, that does not mean that the poet did not attempt something a bit clever. A possible play on words may underlie the appearance of the Prophet's name Muḥammad, reinforced by the inclu-

sion of several of his Noble Names and his *kunya* Abu'l-Qāsim (Father of al-Qāsim). As the last line of the wall poem praises the house's towers wherein "splendor and generosity" dwell and refers to the Prophet Muḥammad as "the abode, or quarters of noble qualities," it might also have been alluding to the owner and his qualities, if his name were also Muḥammad. Or his name may have been Muṣṭafa, the name appearing in the exhortatory couplet prominently placed over the *ṣadr*, or Muṣṭafa b. Muḥammad. In any case, the Prophet's proper name at the end may call upon him to bless his namesake and his house. Moreover, the multiple mentions of the Prophet may indicate that the owner claimed actual kinship with his family. As is intimated by line 6 of the cornice poem, the owner of the room belonged to "a family branch which traces its root to the most distinguished group of men, who derive significance from high-born glory." Many such families of *ashrāf*, that is, who claimed descent from the Prophet, had established themselves over the centuries in Damascus.¹²⁷

It was likewise conventional to build, or decorate anew, a reception hall on the occasion of some auspicious event such as a wedding or circumcision. Such rooms would then feature inscriptions making allusions to these festivities, or eulogizing the room and/or the whole house, and its owners.¹²⁸ Following this tradition, too, the wall poem begins with the wish that "celebration remain" with the house forever and



Figure 36. The wall panel bearing lines 13a and 13b of the poem, as well as the room's date

proceeds to shower praise and invoke blessings upon the “noble hands” that built it.

As to the identity of the poet, one can only hypothesize at this point. Perhaps a local poet was called upon to write verses for this new room, someone known in the vicinity. The patron desiring an original work rather than a popular classic may have requested poetry in the manner of Busīrī, in keeping either with the tradition of *tashlīl*, the expanded later versions of the *Burda*, or with the practice of composing imitations of that powerful work. Assuming the grammatical errors are not the poet’s but those of the calligrapher who copied his manuscript, it may be said that the poet worked within the well-established conventions of his period and had no special talent. A second hypothesis suggests that the owner may have been an amateur versifier who enjoyed seeing his rhymes on the walls of his new grand *qā’a*. This would also explain the linguistic problems, including the grammatical ones, especially if this gentleman-poet was not a native Arabic speaker.

It is unfortunate that the owner’s name still eludes us.¹²⁹ Informed speculation can be our only recourse at present. Perhaps he was an important religious or secular dignitary, as the words *wizāra* and *ṣadāra* imply, possibly a prominent Turk, as the foreign ornament and the textual flaws intimate. Or he may have been a wealthy merchant, either a Syrian or a Turk, whose contacts with the East and the West inspired the novel decorative motifs of his *qā’a*. What may be inferred with some certainty is that he belonged to an eminent family.

The early date of the room’s decorative ensemble suggests a house of considerable age that may therefore be presumed to have stood in the environs of the Great Mosque, where the nucleus of the old *intra-muros* city is. This area (which contains such monuments as the twelfth-century hospital and *madrasa* of Nūr al-Dīn), along with the extra-*muros* zone just to its west, including the quarter of Qanawāt (where in the sixteenth century many Ottoman officials erected their residences), suffered vast destruction in October of 1925 during a three-day-long French bombardment. In these districts, often still referred to as *ḥarīqa*, or “fire,” at least 250 houses were lost and many others endured major damage.¹³⁰ During the late 1920s and early 1930s, much of the remaining woodwork from partly destroyed houses was easily dismantled and taken to Europe, where it appeared either on the market or in private houses like Eustache de Lorey’s. By the time Hagop Kevorkian acquired the room in the 1930s, the interior must have lost its identity—but may have retained an echo of having come from the vicinity of Nūr al-Dīn’s monuments.

Despite its uncertain provenance, the room that has come down to us through the centuries endures as a space of “splendor and generosity” that can still make any visitor “rejoice.” Perhaps its special magic lies in its balanced dialogue between innovation and tradition. Whoever the family may have been, we can imagine that they were cultivated and cosmopolitan people who took pleasure in decorating their reception rooms in an eclectic and personal style.

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NOTES

1. MMA, acc. no. 1970.170. H. 671.6 cm, W. 509.2 cm, D. from inside front entrance to back wall 804.2 cm.

2. There are no records of the location of the house in which this room originated. Though the 12th-century monuments associated with Nūr al-Dīn survived the bombardment of 1925, a very large number of ancient houses in the immediate vicinity were destroyed or greatly damaged, and this room may have been in one of those residences.

3. Annie-Christine Daskalakis, “Damascene Interior Decoration of the *‘ajamī* and *ablaq* Style,” dissertation in progress, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

4. Bernard Maury, “La Maison damascène au XVIII^e et au début du XIX^e siècle,” in *L’Habitat traditionnel dans les pays musulmans autour de la Méditerranée I: L’Héritage architectural: formes et fonctions* (Aix-en-Provence, 1988) p. 24.

5. The arrangement of an empty central space surrounded by living quarters was by no means unique to the Islamic world. It was early on adopted around the Mediterranean; the same disposition can be found in the Roman house with its atrium and the Hellenistic house with peristyle (see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Georges Marçais, “*Dār*,” and Kassem Twair, “Die Malereien des Aleppo-Zimmers im islamischen Museum zu Berlin,” *Kunst des*

Orients 6 [1969] p. 11, figs. 7, 8). Also, central or enclosed courtyards existed in Fayum of Ptolemaic Egypt, in northern Syria of the 2nd to 6th century, in 5th-century Byzantine habitations, and in North Africa during the late Antique and early Byzantine period; see Philippe Leveau, "Aspects de l'espace domestique dans l'habitat urbain antique des pays devenus musulmans autour de la Méditerranée," in *L'Habitat traditionnel II: L'histoire et le milieu* (Aix-en-Provence, 1990) pp. 336, 342, 343, 346, 348, 349, 354–357.

6. Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 4. In Pharaonic Egypt, papyrological documentation indicates that a multiplication of courtyards existed for the purpose of separating private living space from reception areas (see Leveau, "Aspects de l'espace domestique," p. 358).

7. Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "al-Dūr al-Athariyya al-Khāsa fī Dimashq (Old Private Houses in Damascus)," *Annales Archéologiques de Syrie* III, 8/9 (1953) p. 49.

8. Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 6, and Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "Old Private Houses," p. 49.

9. The presence of plentiful water in Damascus was largely due to a Roman adduction system that gave abundant and fresh water to all parts of the city; see M. Ecohard and C. Le Coeur, *Les Bains de Damas* (Beirut, 1942) pp. 11ff., and Oscar Reuther, "Die Qāʿa," *Jahrbuch der Asiatischen Kunst* (1925) II, p. 210. The river Barada seems to have supplied the city's tanks; see M. S. Briggs, "The Saracenic House," *Burlington Magazine* 38 [1921] p. 301.

10. Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "Old Private Houses," p. 50.

11. See Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 8; Briggs, "The Saracenic House," p. 301; Jean-Paul Pascual, "Du notaire au propriétaire en passant par l'expert: descriptions de la "maison" damascène au XVIII^e siècle," in *L'Habitat traditionnel II*, p. 400; Karl Wultzinger and Carl Watzinger, *Damaskus: die islamische Stadt* (Berlin, 1924) p. 19; Reuther, "Die Qāʿa," p. 211; and Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "Old Private Houses," p. 48.

12. See Maury, "La Maison damascène," pp. 29, 399; Reuther, "Die Qāʿa," p. 208; Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "Old Private Houses," p. 51; Anne Rouanet and Denis Piponnier, "Étude iconographique et technique d'un ensemble décoratif: la maison Nizām à Damas," *Bulletin des Études Orientales* 37–38 (1985–86) p. 2. An *iwān*, or *liwān*, is a monumental arched niche. In much of Islamic domestic architecture the *iwān* unit is employed as the preferred living space; there it is a covered lofty room closed on three sides but open completely on the fourth. It can be directly related to the courtyard in the case of open-air rooms used during the warm months (in Damascus enjoying shaded coolness in the daytime and northern breezes in the evenings), or it may be part of a formal interior space, like the *qāʿa*, formed of one to four slightly elevated *iwānāt* adjoining or surrounding a covered central space.

13. Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 29.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

15. This notion may be founded on the writings of Vitruvius concerning the adaptation of the house's placement to local climatic conditions; see the 1673 French translation by Cl. Perrault, "Disposition de la maison et condition sociale d'après Vitruve," *De l'Architecture* VII, repr. by A. Dalmas as Vitruve, *Les dix livres d'architecture* (Paris, 1979) pp. 198–200.

16. Reuther, "Die Qāʿa," pp. 208, 212.

17. As Geneviève Husson has written, there is evidence that in the

Egyptian Pharaonic house the term *andron* was used not for a part of the house strictly reserved for men, but for a spacious and stylishly decorated hall where one received guests. (Thus, the *andron* was a reception room, a traditional element in Egyptian domestic architecture, where the tripartite division between entry, reception, and living quarters can be found in all periods; see *Oikia, le vocabulaire de la maison privée en Égypte d'après les papyrus grecs* [Paris, 1984] pp. 39–40). In the Greek house, the *andron* was the room where men got together to feast, a formal hall where the master's guests were received (see *ibid.*, p. 37). It is in the sense of these time-honored uses of the *andron* that the great *qāʿa* can best be understood and can find its nearest antecedents and equivalents.

18. Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 30.

19. In Syria, family members even washed and dressed in the *ʿataba*, a practice that seems to persist even today (see Jean-Charles Depaule, "À propos de l'habitat ancien aujourd'hui au Caire, à Damas et à Alep," in *L'Habitat traditionnel III: Variations et mutations* [Aix-en-Provence, 1991] p. 861 and n.1; Wultzinger and Watzinger, *Damaskus*, p. 20; Reuther, "Die Qāʿa," p. 207).

20. Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 8; Rouanet and Piponnier, "Étude iconographique," p. 2.

21. *Ṭazar* is a non-Arabic word denoting the higher part of the *qāʿa* (see Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "Old Private Houses," p. 53 n. 1).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

23. Reuther, "Die Qāʿa," p. 210.

24. See Depaule, "À propos de l'habitat ancien," p. 861, referring to the pioneering work of Russel in the 18th century and Lane in the 19th; they based their work on the study of original Arabic sources (E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* [rev. ed. London/Cairo, 1878], and A. Russel, *The Natural History of Aleppo* [London, 1794]).

25. J. Sadan, *Le Mobilier au Proche-Orient médiéval* (Leiden, 1976) p. 15.

26. Depaule, "À propos de l'habitat ancien," p. 862 and n. 2.

27. S. Bianca and Sami Anqawi, "Common Principles in the Domestic Architecture of Islam: An Introduction to a Current Research Project," in *Islamic Art, Common Principles, Forms and Themes: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held in Istanbul in April 1983*, Mohammed Issa and Omer Tahaoglu, eds. (Istanbul, 1989) p. 96.

28. F. Sarre, "Bemalte Wandbekleidung aus Aleppo," *Berliner Museen Berichte aus den Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* XLI, 4 (April/May 1920) p. 145.

29. Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 38.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

31. Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "Old Private Houses," p. 51.

32. Maury, "La Maison damascène," p. 31; Depaule, "À propos de l'habitat ancien," pp. 860–861; Reuther, "Die Qāʿa," p. 207; Rouanet and Piponnier, "Étude iconographique," p. 2.

33. The *ṭazar*'s dado is modern stucco.

34. See, for example, the *qāʿa* of the Dār al-Bulād (illustrated in Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, "Old Private Houses," p. 51); the 1737 *qāʿa* from the house of Jamīl Mardam Bek, now in the western wing of the Damascus National Museum (illus. in "al-Qāʿa al-Shamīyya [The Syrian Qāʿa]," pamphlet no. 4 of a series published by the Damascus

National Museum [n.d.] p. 3 and in Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Tāda Inshā’ al-Qā’a al-Atharīyya al-Shamīyya fī al-Mathāfi al-Waṭanī bi Dimashq [Reconstruction of the Old Syrian Qā’a in the Damascus National Museum]” *Annales Archéologiques de Syrie* [1963] pl. 12, fig. 20; the qā’a in the Bayt al-Sibā’i (illus. in Marwan Musselmani *al-Buyūt al-Dimashqīyya* [Damascene Homes] [Damascus, 1979] p. 307); the late-18th-century ‘ataba of the “Golden Salon” in the H. Pharaon collection (illustrated in Dorothea Duda, *Innenarchitektur syrischer Stadthäuser des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts* [Beirut, 1971] pp. 76–77, pl. 88).

35. Two well-known 14th-century examples are in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (illus. in *The Museum of Islamic Art, A Short Guide* [Cairo, 1955] p. 26, fig. 15) and in the Louvre (illus. in Gaston Migeon, *Musée du Louvre: L’Orient musulman* [Paris, 1922] pl. 4, fig. 11). A 15th-century Mamluk fountain said to have come from a palace in Cairo was published in the Sotheby New York’s catalogue *Islamic Works of Art* (April 29, 1993) p. 61, lot 111.

36. Illus. in M.S. Briggs, *Muhammadan Architecture in Egypt and Palestine* (Oxford, 1924) p. 200, fig. 194.

37. Illus. in Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 63–65, pl. 75.

38. This photograph is in fact somewhat of a mystery. On the one hand, it is a modern print depicting the fountain against a totally blank background, as any work of art might appear in a dealer’s presentation photograph. On the other hand, the fountain seems to have been installed into a floor and operating with water when the photograph was taken. Since there are no written indications, it is still unknown where the photograph was taken and why all evidence of the fountain’s surroundings was carefully masked out. Unlike the room that belongs to New York University, which has photographs in its original domestic setting, the Museum’s room was accompanied by no such valuable documentation.

39. These arrowlike “voussoirs” can also be found in the Mamluk fountain offered by Sotheby New York in 1993.

40. Similar to the Mamluk fountain in the Louvre.

41. From Jdeyde, Seidnaya, or Qasiyūn (see Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” p. 147).

42. See *Ibid.*, p. 147, and Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 130–131.

43. See “The Syrian Qā’a,” p. 6, and Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, 130–131.

44. Inlaying of this local type involved first incision and then incrustation, where the shapes of small stylized floral or geometric motifs were carved away from the background material (usually marble, but also stone) and the resulting cavity was filled by polychrome marbles or colored stones, using a black paste of powdered basalt and glue as mortar. Besides fountains, inlay would be used in combination with large marble plaques to cover the floor of the ‘ataba and the back walls of the *maṣab* (see Maury, “La Maison damascène,” pp. 39–40, and Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” p. 148).

45. Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” p. 148.

46. Maury, “La Maison damascène,” p. 40.

47. Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 26–27.

48. Maury, “La Maison damascène,” p. 31.

49. See, for example, Pascual, “Du notaire au propriétaire,” p. 396 n. 4, and Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Old Private Houses,” p. 54, n. 1.

50. See, for example, Reuther, “Die Qā’a,” p. 205, pl. 110; Wultzinger and Watzinger, *Damaskus*, p. 20, pl. 45 a, c; Pascual, “Du notaire au propriétaire,” p. 396 n. 3. Multifunctional rooms could thus be turned into sleeping quarters at night, and in the morning, the bedclothes and mattresses hidden from view in the *khazāna* and *yūk*, they could once again be ready for day activities.

51. See Pascual, “Du notaire au propriétaire,” pp. 396 and 400, and Reuther, “Die Qā’a,” p. 207. A similar decorative element, the *suffa*, was employed in Cairene reception rooms. Consisting of a marble or stone shelf supported by one or more arches faced with marble or tiles, it was located opposite the entrance and served the same function as the Syrian *maṣab* (see Lane, p. 23).

52. See Pascual, “Du notaire au propriétaire,” p. 396 n. 1, and Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Reconstruction,” p. 137 n. 1.

53. Marilyn Jenkins, quoted in Frank J. Priol, “Two Old Syrian Rooms Go on Display,” *The New York Times* (March 16, 1974) p. 46.

54. MMA, o6.1237, dated 1150 A.H. (A.D. 1737/8), and MMA, 15.76.3. A very similar panel was placed in the wall fountain of the salon called the “Vieux Sérail” in the Parisian house of Henry-René d’Allemagne (see D’Allemagne, *La Maison d’un vieux collectionneur* [Paris, 1948] pls. 181, 185); another was for sale as lot 168 on Oct. 21, 1993, at Sotheby’s London.

55. Similarly executed inscriptions were placed on the largest cupboard of “Room U” in the “Yellow Salon” of the Pharaon collection, dated between 1775 and 1789 by Dorothea Duda (see *Innenarchitektur*, pls. 7a and 57, pp. 118–121 and 161).

56. Only one is the original metal grille, located in the third window counting from left to right. The rest are painted wooden copies. All the window soffits and shutters are original.

57. According to the Museum installation architect’s notations, new doorjambs were employed with the original soffit. The switch was possible because the measurements of these openings match exactly: both are 92 cm wide, and the distance from the crown of the window’s arch, as well as from the center of the overdoor panel’s arch, to the floor is 264.5 cm. In addition, both the width of the overdoor panel and that of the narrow arched decorative panel over the window are also the same, 95.5 cm, which indicates that the overdoor panel could have fitted perfectly under the narrow arched panel.

58. The height of the window now in place of the original entrance is 185 cm, a measurement that would be appropriate for any of the three types of opening. For example, see Maury, “La Maison damascène,” pp. 10–11, 20–21, and Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” p. 133.

59. For the closest parallels, see the “Qā’a of Lectures,” dated 1150 A.H./A.D. 1737, formerly from the house of Jamil Mardam Bek, in the National Museum of Damascus, illus. in “The Syrian Qā’a,” pp. 6–7, and in Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Reconstruction,” pl. 5, figs. 11, 12, and pl. 10, fig. 25; and the qā’a of the house of Sayyid Ahmad al-Sibā’i, illus. in Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Old Private Houses,” p. 53.

60. The white, plastered upper walls are new, but the windows are original.

61. See Marilyn Jenkins, “Islamic Glass,” *MMAB* (Fall 1986) pp. 54–55, illus. title page and back cover. For the technique in Damascus, see Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Reconstruction,” pp. 125–160, pl. 2, fig. 3.

62. Onder Kuçukerman, *Turkish House: In Search of Spatial Identity*

(Istanbul, 1991) pp. 69–78, 129–131.

63. Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Old Private Houses,” p. 52. According to Dorothea Duda and information she received from Creswell, the earliest example of similar curved counterfillings reaching downward into the room are from the Mamluk period, from the 1368–69 Madrasa of Umm as-Sultan Shaʿban in Cairo (see Duda, “Painted and Lacquered Woodwork in Arab Houses of Damascus and Aleppo,” in *Lacquerwork in Asia and Beyond*, W. Watson, ed. [London, 1982] p. 259 and pl. 4a).

64. For similar *adwāh*, see the ceiling of the *qāʿa* of Sayyid Ahmad ab-Sibāʿi, illus. in Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Old Private Houses,” p. 53; the ceiling of “Room H” of the “Golden Salon,” dated 1775, in the Pharaon collection in Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pl. 37; the ceilings of the Bayt Khalid ʿAzīm (now the Museum of Damascus) and the Qasr ʿAzīm (now the Museum of Popular Arts and Tradition), illustrated in Musselmani, *Damascene Homes*, pp. 53, 141; and the 1782 ceiling of the “Syria-Lebanon Room” in the “Cathedral of Learning” at the University of Pittsburgh.

65. Duda, “Lacquered Woodwork,” p. 250.

66. For comparative examples, see a 1733–34 Damascene ceiling in the Great Serail at Dair al-Qamar, Lebanon, in Duda, “Lacquered Woodwork,” pl. 5c; a 1749–50 ceiling in “Room P” of the Pharaon collection, Beirut, in Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 100–102, pl. 52; a mid-18th-century ceiling in “Room F” of the “Red Salon” in the same collection, *ibid.*, pp. 65–66, pl. 33; and yet another ceiling from the end of the 18th century in the same collection, in the “South-East Bedroom,” which additionally features a ribbonlike undulating motif very similar to the one on the ceiling of the Museum’s room, *ibid.*, pp. 121–122, pl. 67; the ceilings dating from the mid-18th century to ca. 1800 from two different houses (Abū ʿArif al-Mohaini and Shaykh Ahmad al-Bistāmi), in Wultzinger and Watzinger, *Damaskus*, pl. 48; two ceilings of the ʿAzīm family, one in the 1749 Qasr al-ʿAzīm and the other in the Bayt Khalid ʿAzīm, both illus. in Musselmani, *Damascene Homes*, pp. 53, 141; and the ceiling of Sayyid Ahmad al-Sibāʿi, illus. in Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Old Private Houses,” pp. 53, 55.

67. See Duda, “Lacquered Woodwork,” p. 250, and Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Old Private Houses,” p. 53.

68. See Charles Grant Ellis, *Oriental Carpets in the Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia, 1988) pp. 118–131.

69. Abū al-Faraj al-ʿUsh, “Old Private Houses,” p. 54. In these later period houses, mirrors were mostly inserted in the center of the largest closets (*samandara* or *khazāna*). For some illustrated examples, see two closets in the Ḥāfiẓ Bey al-Qadīm house, dated 1776–77, in Wultzinger and Watzinger, *Damaskus*, pls. 45a, c; and a closet in “Room 4,” the so-called rococo of the Bayt Nizām in Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” p. 141, pl. x, 4. New York University’s room from the 1797 Quwwatli house also has similar mirror inserts. As for mirrors on ceilings, they seem to have been much rarer. One example is the ceiling from an 1800–1801 room that came up for sale as lot 115 at Sotheby’s London on Oct. 20, 1994. This ceiling is in fact set with six oval mirrors, and more mirror inlay has been placed on its surrounding borders.

70. For example, a brief paragraph is devoted to the subject in Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, p. 130. However, Denis Piponnier has recently published a technical manual on the conservation and restoration of this type of woodwork (see *La Conservation-Restauration des bois polychromes* [Damascus, 1989]).

71. Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” pp. 149–50.

72. Maury, “La Maison damascène,” 37 and Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 100–102.

73. Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 77–78.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 45–49, 55.

75. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–53, 118–121, 122–123.

76. Maury, “La Maison damascène,” p. 37.

77. *Ibid.* The other two methods were primarily employed in the 19th century. In the first a boarding of wood strips was nailed on the support beams to hide them completely, and then the strips were painted. Later in the century this type of woodwork would also have stucco, openwork, mirrors, and gilded decoration. The second method, also popular in the 19th century, involved stretching a thin fabric and nailing it on the wooden cornice all around the room in order to hide the poplar beams. This fabric then received lacquer painting (see Thomas Tunsch, “Eine syrische Innenraumdekoration,” in *Völkultur und Volkskunst im Orient: Stadtpunkte, Vorarbeiten, Diskussionsbeiträge*, B. Brenjes and M. Mode, eds. [Halle, 1986] p. 137).

78. *Ibid.*

79. On the technology of woodwork decoration and its terminology, see Pascual, “Du notaire au propriétaire,” p. 397 and n. 2, where the terms *mqqli* and *skandarāni* are given as appearing in a 1700 document, although the precise meanings of the terms remain uncertain; they may designate either a technique of fabrication or a type of decoration, or both.

80. Maury, “La Maison damascène,” pp. 39–40.

81. See Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” pp. 149–150. Painting with animal glue could be applied either directly on the wood, or on a coating of carbonate of calcium; “lacquer” painting might also be used for repainting and for such pigments as chrome green and copper blue; wax painting included various pigments. Only scientific analysis can pinpoint the substances used in the Museum’s room.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

84. For examples, see the Damascus ʿAzīm Palace, 1749; three panels from Damascus dated 1764–65 offered by Sotheby’s London (lot 176, April 29, 1993); many of the principal panels of the 1790–91 Damascus room offered by Sotheby’s London (lot 127, April 26, 1982); several panels from the now-lost late-16th- or early-17th-century larger Damascus room last published in 1913 as being in the London galleries of Messrs. Vincent Robinson (“A Room from the Street Called Straight,” *Connoisseur* 36 [1913] pp. 132–135); several panels from the Damascus room installed in the Paris house of Eustache de Lorey, said to be from the end of the 17th century (“Une salle d’un palais de Damas dans un hôtel parisien—chez Mr. E. de Lorey,” *Art et Industrie* [May 1933] pp. 21–25); the “Syria-Lebanon Room” in the “Cathedral of Learning” at the University of Pittsburgh, dated 1782; and the “Damascus Room” of the Cincinnati Art Museum, dated 1711–12.

85. Pascual, “Du notaire au propriétaire,” p. 400, and Tunsch, “Eine syrische Innenraumdekoration,” p. 140.

86. See, for example, the shapes of ceramic tall-necked bottles in Nurhan Atasoy, *IzNIK: the Pottery of Ottoman Turkey* (London, 1989) p. 47, fig. 33.

87. Jean Soustiel, *La Céramique islamique* (Fribourg, 1985) p. 336, fig. 26.

88. Ibid., p. 45, fig. 28.

89. As, for instance, in Ottoman painting, the table set with metal and ceramic vessels placed in front of Sultan Murad IV, from an album page of ca. 1639 (Topkapi Sarayı Museum Library, inv. no. H.2148, fol. 11b), detail illustrated in *ibid.*, fig. 14.

90. Unlike the European convention for decorative cornucopias, which usually overflow with flowers, fruit, and corn, the Museum room's golden "horns" put forth flowers or architectural vignettes.

91. From Damascus, see the "Damascus Room" at the Cincinnati Art Museum, dated 1711–12, with many fruit bowls and flower vases; the "Syria-Lebanon Room" in the "Cathedral of Learning" at the University of Pittsburgh, dated 1782, with flower vases and some fruit bowls; the now-lost room of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, dated 1789–90, with flower vases and fruit bowls; the "Syrian Qā'a" from the house of Jamil Mardam Bek in the Damascus National Museum, dated 1737, with bouquets, fruit bowls, etc.; a room offered by Sotheby's London (lot 127, April 26, 1982), dated 1790–91; rooms 4, 7, and 8 of the Museum of Popular Arts and Tradition, all from the former 'Azım Palace, dated 1749, with striking amphora-like flower vases; and from the H. Pharaon collection, Beirut: wall paneling and curved cornice in the "Green Salon," dated 1778, with architectural scenes and fruit bowls; wall paneling in the "Blue Salon," dated 1785–86, with fruit bowls, flower vases, and architectural views; wall paneling in the "Golden Salon," dated 1775, with flat architectural views, like architectural sketches, and with amphora-like vases; and the wall panels in "Room R" from Damascus and Aleppo, dated ca. 1740–50, with golden flower vases in cartouches. Other notable examples are from Aleppo: the wall paneling in "Room V," the "South-East Bedroom" of the Pharaon house, dated 1740, with flower vases and fruit bowls set in cartouches, and from Hama: the 1740 'Azım Palace, with more fruit bowls and flower vases.

92. According to Dorothea Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 69, 113–115, the high point of these decorative art forms was reached in Aleppo in the 16th and 17th centuries (see, for example, the 1601–3 room in the Berlin Museum and ca. 1600 panels of "Room S." and the "Baldachin Bedroom," of the H. Pharaon collection).

93. "A Room from the Street Called Straight," pp. 132–134 and figs.

94. Anon., "Chez Mr. E. de Lorey," pp. 21–25.

95. Twair, "Aleppo-Zimmers," pp. 39–41.

96. Michael Meineke, "Die Osmanische Architektur des 16. Jahrhunderts in Damaskus," in *Fifth International Congress of Turkish Art*, G. Féher, ed. (Budapest, 1978) pp. 575–595; and Duda, "Lacquered Woodwork," pp. 250–254.

97. In Iran, at the time of Shah Abbas (1587–1629), European floral motifs enriched the decorative repertoire and, in the 17th century, connections between rugs, textiles, bookbindings, illumination, and wall paintings became even closer than before (see Twair, "Aleppo-Zimmers," pp. 23–26). In Turkey, surviving interiors with naturalistic floral decoration even date from the late 16th or early 17th century (see, for instance, a house in the Shaykh Hamit district of Bursa, in Sedat Eldem, *Türk Evi* [Turkish Houses] [Istanbul, 1984] I, pp. 113–117). The number of important examples from the late 17th to early 18th century is larger still (see, for example, the mansion of Tahir Pasha in Mudanya, in *Ibid.*, II,

pp. 47–49). Specifically, the decorative theme of a bouquet emerging from a vase is repeatedly encountered in ceramic revetments and windows of the late 17th century, such as in the Blue Mosque, the *çifte* Kasırlar, and the imperial *mahfil* of the Yeni Valide at the Topkapi Palace.

98. See, for example, the former Semaki family house, now a museum, in Yenisehir, near Bursa, or the 18th-century house of Cakir Aga, a notable of the small town of Birigi in the Aegean hinterland, in Stéphane Yerasimos, *Turkish Style* (New York, 1992) pp. 148–155.

99. R. Halsband, ed., *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford, 1966) pp. 341–355, and Henry Maundrell, *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter, A.D. 1697* (Oxford, 1749, 7th ed.) pp. 29–30.

100. See, for example, J. M. Rogers, trans. and ed., *The Topkapi Saray Museum Architecture: The Harem and Other Buildings* (Boston, 1988) pls. 74, 75, and İlhan Aksit, *Topkapi* (Istanbul, 1986) p. 8, pl. 6.

101. See, for example, Michael Levey, *The World of Ottoman Art* (London, 1975) pp. 117–119.

102. Ibid., pp. 112–117.

103. Halsband, ed., *The Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, p. 414, and John Carswell, "From the Tulip to the Rose," in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Islamic History*, Thomas Naff and Roger Owen, eds. (Carbondale, 1977) pp. 348–352.

104. M. H. Saladin and René Mesguich, *Le Yali de Keşprülü à Anatoli-Hissar*, preface by Pierre Loti (Paris, 1915). This *yali* was first published with Fossati drawings, but in this lavish volume the illustrations are by M. H. Saladin.

105. Models (*numune*) were made available from the court studios to artists (see Soustiel, *La Céramique islamique*, p. 336).

106. Similar to, for instance, an Iznik bowl and tile (mid-16th century) in *ibid.*, pp. 133–135, figs. 221, 226.

107. See, for example, Günsel Renda, "Wall Paintings in Turkish Houses," in *Fifth International Congress of Turkish Art*, G. Féher, ed. (Budapest, 1978) fig. 13.

108. Ibid., figs. 25, 29.

109. See, for example, Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: the Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (New York, 1991) figs. 114a, 135, and pl. 27. See also Renda, "Wall Paintings in Turkish Houses," pp. 711, 718–719. According to Renda, landscapes were actually first depicted on writing boxes, embroideries, ceramics, mirrors, belts, etc., and then in architectural decoration.

110. Such as the famous ones by Maṭrākçı Naşüh, as, for example, the Topkapi Palace buildings represented in the miniature of Istanbul (IU, T5964, fol. 8v.) in Hüseyin G. Yurdaydin, *Naşühü's-Silâhi (Maṭrākçı), Beyân-i Menâzîl-i Sefer-i 'Irâkayn-i Sultân Süleymân Khân (The Description of the Stages of Sultân Süleymân Khân's Campaign in the two Iraks)* (facs. ed., Ankara, 1976).

111. See, for instance, Soustiel, *La Céramique islamique*, p. 343, pl. 362, and p. 344, pl. 363, or Gönül Oney, *Ceramic Tiles in Islamic Architecture* (Istanbul, 1987) p. 73, pl. 98.

112. See, for example, the single-dome square chamber of the mosque in the Tekke of Süleyman, dated 1550–60.

113. It could, for example, be from the same room at an earlier stage, or an older room, or another, earlier house of the owner. As

surviving buildings indicate, a house might well contain rooms that were decorated in different periods, as, for example, the Nizām House whose decoration spans the 19th century (see Irène Labeyrie, “Quelques Réflexions à propos de la maison Nizām à Damas,” in *L'Habitat traditionnel*, III, p. 845).

114. First, by Dr. Annemarie Schimmel, who read most of the inscriptions on the wall cornice, though with some difficulty because of their high location and insufficient lighting; her translations remain on file at the Museum. And, second, by Dr. Wen-chin Ouyang, who, as a graduate student at Columbia University, translated those of the wall paneling. I thank Dr. Ouyang for placing this material at my disposal.

115. I am very grateful to Dr. Ouyang, currently assistant professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Virginia, and Professor Wolfhart Heinrichs of Harvard University's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations for their invaluable assistance with some of the difficult passages.

116. The room's poems are not, for example, included in Yūsuf Nabhanī's four-volume compendium of eulogistic poetry to the Prophet (*madh al-nabi*) *Al-majmū'a al-nabhanīyya fi'madh'ih al-nabawīyy*, nor were they recognized by experts in the field as being by any known poet.

117. The only works that in any way address inscriptions are the following: Duda transcribed and, where possible, identified the texts from which some inscriptions in the H. Pharaon collection came, but she did not translate any of them (see *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 134–163); Tunsch transcribed and translated those parts he felt certain about from the Syrian room in the former villa of Herbert M. Guttman in Potsdam (see “Eine syrische Innenraumdekoration,” pp. 141, 147); Abū al-Faraj al-'Ush transcribed the poem on the 1737 *qā'a* of Jamīl Mardam Bek, now in the Damascus National Museum, and identified it as being from Būṣīrī's *Hamzīyya* (see “Reconstruction,” pp. 138–139); Rouanet and Piponnier transcribed the passage inscribed on the east wall of the “summer *qā'a*” in the Nizām House, but did not translate it, mentioning only that it has a votive character, (see “Étude iconographique,” p. 136).

118. See, for instance, Abū al-Faraj al-'Ush, “The Syrian *Qā'a*,” p. 7; Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 134–135, and, more specifically, in the “Green Salon” paneling dated 1778 with verses 1–3 and 5 (p. 137, pl. 45), in the anteroom of the “Golden Salon” a ceiling with verses 1, 2, 4–9, 10, 11 (pp. 141–142, pl. 26), and in the “Golden Salon” paneling dated 1775 with verses 1, 2, 3a, 4, 5, 8a (pp. 142–143, pls. 38–41); and lot 127, a room dated 1790–91 that came up for sale at Sotheby's, London, on April 14, 1982, with verses 1–7.

119. For other Damascene rooms where the date appears at the end of the inscribed poem, see, for example, the “summer *qā'a*” of the Nizām House (Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” p. 136) and the “Golden Salon” of the Pharaon collection (Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, pp. 142–143).

120. See, for instance, in the “summer *qā'a*” of the Nizām House (Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” p. 143) and in the entrance room “A” of the Pharaon collection (Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, p. 136, pl. 17).

121. As expounded in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition, pp. 746–752), “from the expression *ṣadr al-majlis*, the upper or front part of the assembly, i.e., ‘the place/seal of honour,’ the term *ṣadr*

for an outstanding person is synecdochically derived.” In post-Mongol Iran the terms *ṣadr* and *ṣadr al-ṣudūr* were employed for the head of the religious administration, whereas the term *ṣadr-i 'aẓam* referred to the grand vizier in the Ottoman Empire. By extension, *ṣadr* “denotes an eminent or superior person or primus inter pares, whence its use for a chief, president, or minister. The title was especially used in the Persian world for a high religious dignitary whose function, the *ṣadārat* or *ṣidārat*, was concerned with the administration of religious affairs.” In the early Ottoman Empire (14th century) *ṣadr* referred to the highest religious officials of the ‘*ulemā*’, who could be promoted to viziers. Later (15th century), as viziers came to be appointed from the ranks of military commanders, the term *ṣadr* continued to be employed in its original general sense of “prominent, high ‘*ulemā*’ dignitary.”

122. The majority of these remarks should be credited to Dr. Ouyang's earlier work on this poem.

123. Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, p. 134.

124. Because the two hemistichs of line 1 rhyme with two rhyme consonants (*ṣīn* and *mīm*) in the *luzūm mā lā yalzam* fashion, i.e., the poem's words *wa tabassamā* and *fa-tanassamā*.

125. Once again I have greatly benefited from Dr. Ouyang's suggestions.

126. These textual errors were pointed out by Professor Heinrichs.

127. As, for example, the ‘Abid family of Syrian bedouins whose recorded ancestor Muḥammad settled in the Damascus Maydan in 1701–2, or the Bakri family, a branch of which settled in the city in the 14th century, or the Muradi family of Kurdish origin whose ancestor Muḥammad Murad came to Damascus in 1685–86 (see Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Wiesbaden, 1985) pp. 153–165.

128. Sarre, “Bemalte Wandb*ekleidung,” p. 157.

129. Regarding the room's identity, the only record in the files of the Museum's Department of Islamic Art is a single unsubstantiated phrase to the effect that, in 1977, Afif Bahnassi, then director of the Damascus National Museum, believed it came from the Nizām House. My research has thus far yielded two Nizām houses. One of the two was purchased by a certain Muḥammad Hasan Nizām only in 1928–29 (see Duda, *Innenarchitektur*, p. 133). Two publications deal with a second Nizām house of the 1760s to 1770s, but neither specifies the given name of the proprietor (see Rouanet and Piponnier, “Étude iconographique,” and Labeyrie, “Quelques Réflexions”). Both publications agree that the oldest surviving decorative elements of this house are from the early 19th century. It seems unlikely that the Museum's interior came from either of those houses.

130. Among the houses destroyed by the fire were the governor's ‘Azm palace, the beautiful Quwwatli residence and all its neighboring houses, and that of the former prime minister Jamīl Mardam Bek, whose mansion was abandoned after the fire—the surviving parts of its great *qā'a* were given to the National Museum. On the fire and the historical events surrounding it, see Gérard Degeorge, *Damas: des Ottomans à nos jours* (Paris, 1994) pp. 164–165 and Alice Poulleau, *À Damas sous les bombes, Journal d'une Française pendant la révolte syrienne (1924–1926)* (Yvetot, 1925).