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The Lost Treasure of The Polychrome Wooden (‘ajami) Interior of Ghazalyeh House, Aleppo, Syria

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Abstract

This paper documents and describes original motifs from the ‘ajami panels in the *red qa’a* of the *Ghazalyeh* house in Aleppo, Syria and identifies the styles of their motifs. All floral motifs are listed in a typology table with their corresponding codes. The *Ghazalyeh* House built in 1691 was refurbished in 2007 and transformed into a historical museum. From 2009-2011, they restored its ‘ajami panels. However, during the war in old Aleppo city in 2013 these ‘ajami panels were stolen. Information from this paper can be used to better understand and ultimately restore the *Ghazalyeh* house’s original ‘ajami panels.

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Keywords: Ghazalyeh House; Aleppine houses; polychrome wood; ‘ajami

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1. Introduction

For hundreds of years, craftsmen have been producing polychrome wood, 'ajami art, to decorate buildings in Syria, particularly the houses. Ottoman style houses, containing the largest treasure of 'ajami, have become the icon of Ottoman Syrian art. 'Ajami includes several geometric designs, floral motifs, and inscriptions. These motifs have rich symbolic backgrounds, originating from house owners, artists, their native culture, the environment, and religion. Impressive 'ajami interiors dating from the 17th to the 19th century have been preserved in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama (in Syria). This paper will document and identify the styles of motifs used in 'ajami panels in the red qa'a of Ghazalyeh house in Aleppo.

2. Background research

2.1. Aleppo heritage

Aleppo is the largest city in Syria and serves as the capital of Aleppo Governorate (Figure 1), the most populous Syrian governorate. It is located in northwestern Syria, 310 kilometres (193 miles) from Damascus. With an official population of 2,132,100 (2004 census), it is also one of the largest cities in the Levant. Consequently, Aleppo flourished and became a very important station on the Silk Road; the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo².

Aleppo is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world; it has been inhabited since perhaps as early as the 6th millennium BC. Excavations at Tell as-Sawda and Tell al-Ansari, just south of the old city of Aleppo, show that the area was occupied by at least the latter part of the 3rd millennium BC. Cuneiform tablets unearthed in Ebla and Mesopotamia noted Aleppo for its commercial and military proficiency, due to its strategic trading point midway between the Mediterranean Sea and Mesopotamia³.

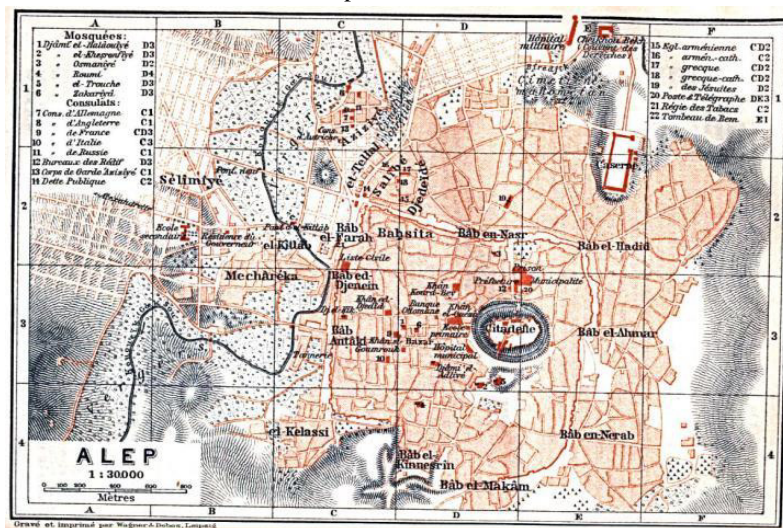


Fig. 1. Aleppo Map 1912 (wikipedia.org)

The city's significance in history has been its location at the end of the Silk Road, which passed through central Asia and Mesopotamia. When the Suez Canal was inaugurated in 1869, trade was diverted to the sea, and Aleppo began its slow decline. At the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Aleppo ceded its northern hinterland to

² Alafandi, Rami. Abdul Rahim, Asiah. (2014). Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo. Yesterday, Today, and tomorrow. International Journal of Art & sciences (IJAS) Conference, Harvard Campus, Boston.

³ Russell, Alexander. The Natural History of Aleppo (1st ed.). London. p. 266.

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