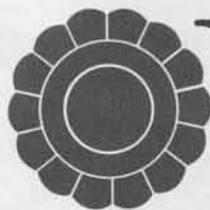


Nov 1979



# News & Notes

 DIRECTOR'S LIBRARY  
 ORIENTAL INSTITUTE  
 UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

 The Oriental Institute  
 50

Issued confidentially to members and friends

Not for publication

No. 55: November, 1979

## NEAR AND FAR EAST INFLUENCES ON SYRIAN TILE

*The zāwiyah of Sa'd ad-Din, Damascus, with panels of Syrian polychrome tiles of the second half of the 16th century.*



For more than 4,000 years craftsmen from Syria have excelled in ivory carvings, inlaid metalwork, engravings of cylinder seals, and enameled glass. Architectural ceramics are a form of Syrian art which particularly flourished from the 15th through the 18th centuries and show clearly Syria's links with Turkey and Egypt and cross-currents with China.

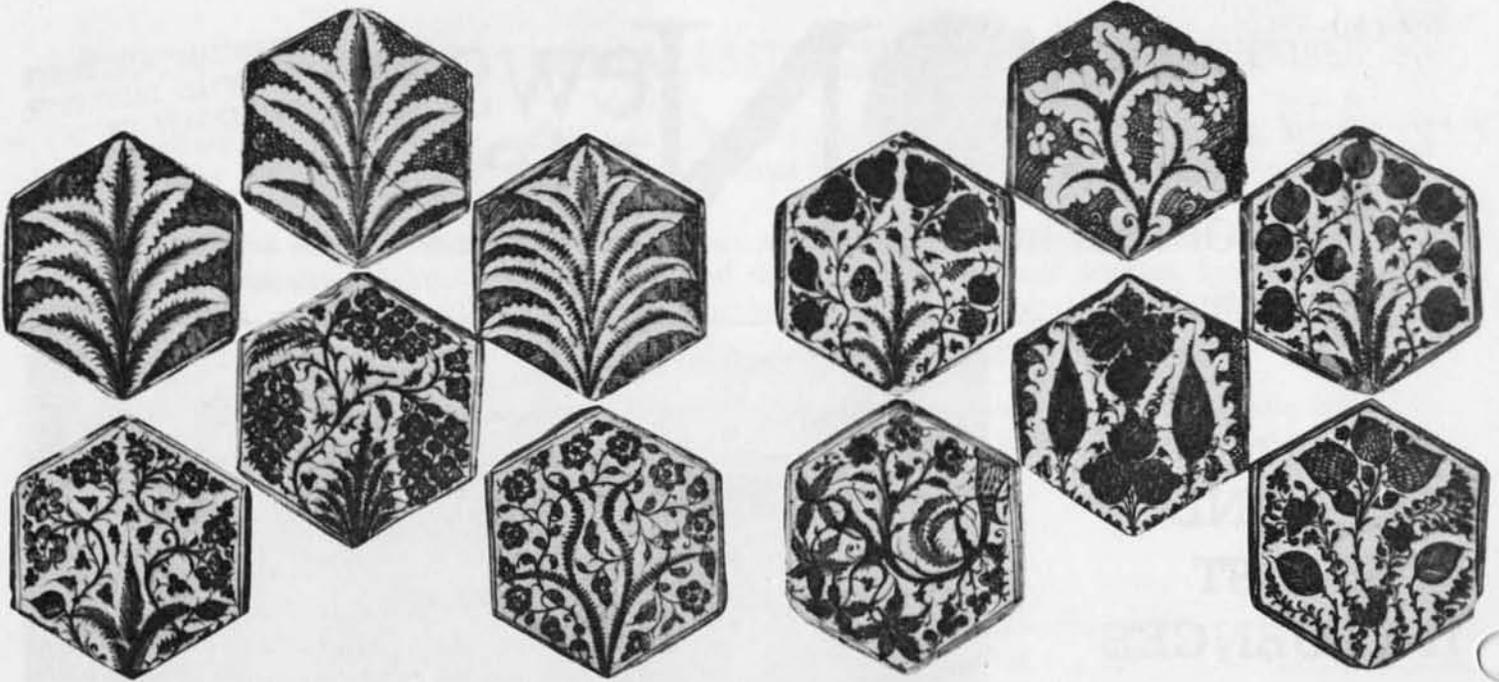
Here at The Oriental Institute Museum, curator John Carswell, a specialist in Islamic art and archeology, is at present making a study of all tiled monuments in Syria—so it is a privilege to be able to call on him for some insights into this area of cultural exchange. Mr. Carswell has worked in the Near East for over 25 years, has written four books in his field,<sup>(1)</sup> and has conducted his own research surveys in Egypt, Sinai, Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Jordan.

In an article on "Some Fifteenth-Century Hexagonal Tiles," Mr. Carswell considers the historical background of events in Syria and Egypt in the 15th century and its effect on Syrian craftsmen and their craft. This was the period of the Mamluk revival, following the collapse of the Mamluk Empire in the 14th century, which culminated in Tamerlane's conquest of Syria and the sack of Damascus in A.D. 1400. Although the empire never regained its previous prosperity, it recovered well enough in the 15th century for it to function with reasonable efficiency.

During this period the crafts were affected by several factors. Tamerlane himself deported large numbers of Syrian craftsmen; but it appears that the luxury crafts, like inlaid metalwork and enameled glass, felt the impact of Mongol acquisitiveness, rather than pottery. Mr. Carswell says that if one is to judge from those sherds of pre- and post-conquest blue-and-white pottery that have survived, the pottery industry did not seem to have suffered any great reverse. If potters were among those deported, the forced emigration was apparently not on such a scale as to enfeeble the craft. Increase in imports brought in quantities of Chinese porcelain which made a resounding impact on the pottery industry. The potters' dilemma is neatly reflected in the designs they made for the hexagonal tiles; while on the one hand they were unwilling to renounce traditional Islamic forms entirely, on the other they attempted to incorporate some of the novelty of the Chinese designs. Although it was impossible for them to reproduce the porcelain ware, at least when it came to decoration they managed to arrive at an acceptable compromise.

In the past few years, over 800 pieces of Chinese porcelain (Ming period, A.D. 1368-1644) have been found in Syria. As a result, Syria emerges as an important factor in any study of Chinese influence in the Near East. Apart from the patterns, the major preoccupation of both Near and Far Eastern potters

*(Continued on page 2)*



15th century Islamic blue-and-white tiles showing the influence of imported Chinese porcelain.

was the use of cobalt blue underglaze decoration on white body; the success of the Chinese potters in refining imported cobalt ore and using it to paint on porcelain gave them a significant advantage. One can imagine the frustration of the Islamic potters, faced with a flood of imported ware of superior and inimitable quality; the irony lies in the fact that it was Islamic potters who first developed the use of cobalt blue for decoration. It was the genius of the Chinese to appropriate the idea to apply it to the already established manufacture of fine white porcelain at Ching-te Chen and furthermore, to identify the Near East as the market most likely to appreciate the new product.(2)

The extent to which the Chinese potters designed their wares to appeal to foreign taste is still under debate. Suffice to say, that while it is obvious that the design of some of the shapes indicates a concession to Near Eastern utility, the increasing amount of early blue-and-white found in China itself suggests that it was not so wholly unacceptable to Chinese taste.

There was a steady interchange of trade between Syria and Egypt in the first part of the fifteenth century. Agricultural and manufactured goods were exported from Syria, and Syria received grain from Egypt in return. Hexagonal tiles could have been amongst the varieties of products made in Syria and exported to Egypt; but it is more likely that it was the potters themselves who travelled. This alone would account for stylistic similarities side by side with discrepancies in size, technique and colouring. This raises an interesting question—why should tile-makers in Syria, Egypt and Turkey have all worked in the same idiom? Although it has been shown that the common style has detectable regional variations, the fundamental questions of when, and where these hexagonal tiles were originally conceived, with their combination of Islamic and Chinese elements, still remain unanswered.

In the 15th century, tiles made in Syria were close in spirit to similar tiles being made in Egypt and Turkey. In the 16th century, the Ottoman conquest made its mark on the development of the decorative arts in Syria, and Syrian potters became aware of the work of the Turkish tile-makers at Iznik. In Aleppo, both the Adiliya mosque and the Bahramiya

mosque are decorated with fine panels of Iznik tiles, which must have been specially made for them. Such panels provided a stimulus for Syrian craftsmen to experiment with similar designs. But here occurs a difference which goes far beyond the inability of the Syrians to reproduce either the colors or the flawless technique of the Turkish tiles. The Syrian designers developed a certain individuality, and their designs broke with the magnificent but severe discipline of the Iznik product. This new quality can be seen to best advantage in five buildings in Damascus erected between 1550-1585 A.D. Instead of the unreal refinement of the Turkish designs, there is a primitive but lively naturalism at work, painted in the different key of the Syrian palette.

Architects and designers made use of tiles for many purposes, but nowhere so exquisitely as in a sacred spot. An outstanding example is a *zāwiya* of Sa'd ad-Din in Damascus. (The *zāwiya* is a mosque-like structure, with *mihṛāb*, where members of religious fraternities meet for the *dhikr*, i.e. the repetition of certain fixed phrases, repeated in a ritual order for the glorification of Allah.) Here, tiles have been used profusely throughout, and the whole facade is framed in stone carved with interlocking patterns, extended to the left and right at the level of the springing of the arches. The irregular spaces, between the arches and the Qur'anic inscription, are filled with tiles painted with floral motifs. Below the carved frame there are tiles painted with dated inscriptions in verses and elaborate floral medallions. That the tiles were mostly part of the original scheme for the decoration of the *zāwiya* is clear from their integration with the stone work.

Observes Mr. Carswell: "Considered as a whole, the tiles play an important part in the decoration of the *zāwiya*; apart from their obviously decorative function, they are also an important adjunct to the religious purpose of the building. The Qur'anic inscription marches sturdily across the facade, echoing the rhythmic pattern of the bands of coloured stone above and below it, and occupies a central position. The arched panels project their religious quotations against a rich background of decorative detail. The little plaque above the *mihṛāb* acts as a kind of ceramic talisman. Contrasting decorative effects are obtained by the other panels; the carpet-

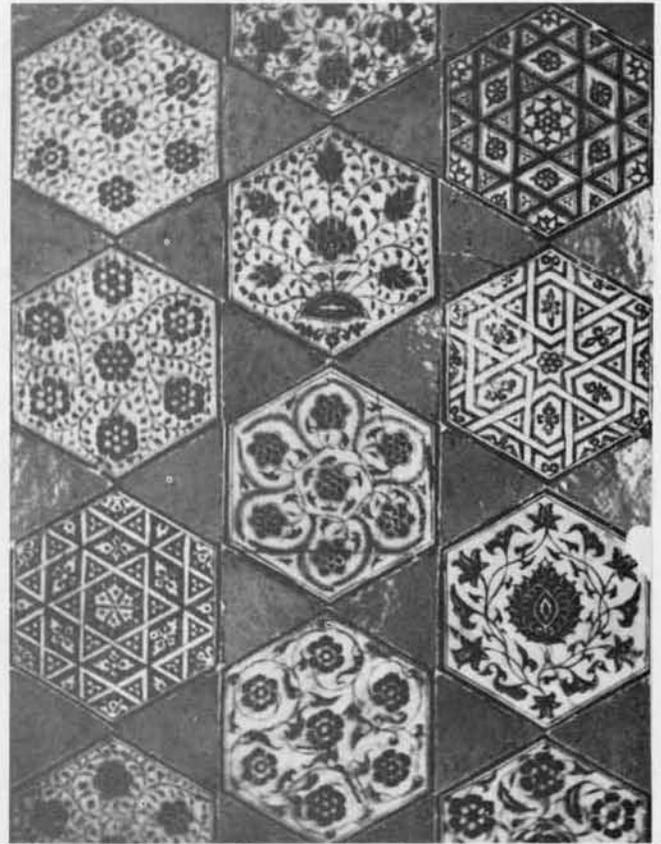
like panels help to stabilize the two sides of the wall, with the floral panels above providing lively accents at the springing of the arches. In sum, the designer drew on a variety of different styles to suit different purposes.”(3)

In the 17th century and later, Syrian tiles declined in quality as did their Turkish counterparts. The Syrians continued to produce tiles, but the designs were cruder and the technique less sure. The guiding hand of the architect/designer was lost, who alone could control the tiles as an extension of the building. The integration of glazed tiles and architectural form, one of the great achievements of the Islamic world, disappeared.

—Elda Maynard

- (1) Coptic Tattoo Designs (Beirut, 1958); The Drawings of David Roberts (Beirut, 1962); New Julfa: The Armenian Churches and Other Buildings (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968); and The Kutahya Tiles and Pottery in the Armenian Cathedral of St. James, Jerusalem (2 vols.; Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972).
- (2) See Sin In Syria, by John Carswell, reprinted from IRAN XVII 1979, published by The British Institute of Persian Studies.
- (3) Syrian Tiles from Sinai and Damacus by John Carswell in Archaeology in the Levant, Essays for Kathleen Kenyon.

For additional references, see Carswell's "Some Fifteenth-century Hexagonal Tiles from the Near East" in Victoria and Albert Museum Yearbook 3, published by Phaidon Press Ltd., 1972; and Carswell's "Six Tiles" in Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, edited by Richard Ettinghausen, 1972.



15th century blue-and-white tiles from the mosque of Murad II at Edirne in northwest Turkey; whilst some of the designs are strongly influenced by Chinese patterns, others are more strictly Islamic.

Photos: Made available by John Carswell; production by Jean Grant, photographer, The Oriental Institute Museum.



A 14th century Chinese blue-and-white porcelain dish, found in Damascus. It was this type of ware that strongly influenced the Islamic patterns.

## DYSON OPENS ART OF THE NEAR EAST LECTURE SERIES ON NOVEMBER 28

Lecture on The Art of Iran will be given by noted Iranian archeologist Robert H. Dyson, Jr., on Wednesday, November 28, at 8:00 P.M. in The Oriental Institute, as part of the Art of the Near East series.

Dr. Dyson, who is best known for his excavations at the site of Hasanlu in northwest Iran, is currently Professor of Anthropology and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, University of Pennsylvania, as well as Curator of the Near Eastern section in that University's Museum. He is author of numerous articles on Iranian archeology, including the section on Iran in the second millenium B.C., for the Cambridge Ancient History.

The general excellence of work by younger American and Canadian scholars in Iranian archeology is largely due to the superb training which Dr. Dyson has given a full generation of talented young archeologists, both through his work in the classroom and in the field.

Subsequent lectures in the Art of the Near East lecture series include:

**The Art of Mesopotamia**

by Helene J. Kantor,  
The Oriental Institute, on  
December 12, 8:00 P.M.

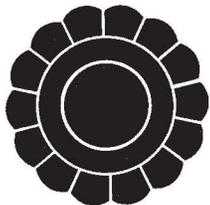
**The Art of Egypt**

by David P. Silverman,  
University of Pennsylvania, on  
January 16, 8:00 P.M.

**The Art of Islam**

by Esin Atil,  
Freer Gallery of Art, on  
February 13, 8:00 P.M.

DIRECTOR  
ORIENTAL INSTITUTE  
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



The Oriental Institute  
The University of Chicago  
1155 East 58th Street · Chicago, Illinois · 60637

NON-PROFIT ORGINAZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
BULK RATE  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  
PERMIT NO. 1504