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3

Geometry and Color

Decoding the Arts of Islam in the West

Edited by Sandra Gianfreda,
Francine Giese, Axel Langer
and Ariane Varela Braga

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Journal of the Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

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Geometry and Color. Decoding the Arts of Islam in the West from the Mid-19th to the Early 20th Century

**edited by Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga**

Impressum

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese, Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

Revisiting the Reception of Islamic Ornament and Color in the West ——— 6

Following Prototypes

Olga Bush

Color and Geometry in the Alhambra and What Got Lost in the Alhambresque — 13

Sarah Keller

Islamic Geometry Reinterpreted: The Neo-Mamluk Windows of the Moroccan House ————— 30

Nadhra Shahbaz Khan

Persian-Punjabi/Urdu Identities of Traditional Geometrical Patterns Lost During the Colonial Rule of the Punjab (1849–1947) ————— 45

Elke Katharina Wittich

Dittmar's Turkish Ornamental Cabinet: A "Furniture Style Comparison" Around 1900 - 64

Creating Imaginaries

Ariane Varela Braga

Through the Looking Glass of the Orient: Color, Geometry and the Kaleidoscope
————— 78

Francine Giese

Eastern Light: Western Fascination for Islamic Colored Glass Windows ——— 93

Agnieszka Kluczevska-Wójcik

La modernité « orientale » : les arts décoratifs polonais face aux arts de l'Islam au début du xx^e siècle ————— 110

Mireia Freixa & Marta Saliné

The Starting Point of the Arabic-Andalusi Influence in Gaudi's Ornamental Ceramic:
The Pavilions Güell (1884–1887) ————— 131

Re-Orientations

Rémi Labrusse

Deconstructing Orientalism: Islamic Lessons in European Arts at the Turn of the
Twentieth Century ————— 145

Emily Christensen

Wassily Kandinsky at the Exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* in
Munich, 1910: A Modernist Artist's Interpretation of Persian Art ————— 165

Ieva Kalnača

An Encounter with the Architecture of the Islamic World as Turning Point in the
Transformation of Artistic Expression: The Case of the Latvian Modernist Jāzeps
Grosvalds ————— 176

Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese, Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga¹

Revisiting the Reception of Islamic Ornament and Color in the West

This volume is dedicated to geometry and color, two basic elements that lie on the threshold between art and science, while the contributions presented here are about transfer across cultural, historical and medial boundaries. Our previous research projects and exhibitions on Islamic art and architecture and their reception in the West, have brought to the fore the complexity and multi-layered nature of the studied phenomena. This demanded an equally multifaceted approach, in which experiences from the academic world and the museum had to be considered jointly. These exchanges between scholars and curators opened up a new level of discussion in which object-related and contextualizing research allowed for different ways of interpretation. Guided by the notion of Islamophilia coined by Rémi Labrusse, a concept that implies a serious engagement with the arts of Islam considered as a model for the union of art and science, we decided to tackle the crucial role played by geometry and color as a key to apprehend and interpret Islamic arts in the West.

Ornament and color are indeed two aspects of Islamic art and architecture that have been at the center of many nineteenth-century publications that deal with its material culture and ornamentation (Girault de Prangey; Racinet; Bourgoin; Parvillée). Among them, the chromolithography *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Details of the Alhambra* by Welsh architect Owen Jones (1809-1874) and his French travel companion Jules Goury (1803-1834), explicitly addressed the geometry and color of the Nasrid architecture and ornamentation of the Alhambra. Issued in two volumes in 1842 and 1845 but available in parts as of 1836, the publication became the uncontested reference work for artists, architects, and scholars dealing with the topic (Darby 42-55; Galera Andreu 180-207; Ferry).

Jones deepened his examination of non-Western ornamentation and polychromy in his 1856 *The Grammar of Ornament*. In this crucial publication for nineteenth-century theory of ornament and decorative arts, he discussed the symbolic use of colors as a transcultural element, suggesting a deep relationship between the state of a culture and its use of polychromy. He noted that the "primitive colours" had been employed "during the early periods of art; whilst, during the decadence, the secondary colours became of more importance" (25). No surprise, according to Jones, that the polychromy of the Alhambra represented one of the best examples of such a genuine use of color. Drawing from his observations of Nasrid ornament, combined with the optical theories of British chemist George Field (1777-1854) and the laws of simultaneous contrast established by French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889), he took a scientific approach to the argument. Emphasizing the abstract qualities governing color, he strove to consider it as a quantifiable element that could be treated in a regular and objective manner. Through a set of rules or propositions, Jones not only demonstrated a tentative to control and order color but also a

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Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

desire to define and map its several hues—according to primaries, secondaries, and tertiaries—at a precise time when this order was breaking down, as the result of the invention of artificial pigments.

Due to the relevance of Jones' seminal work, a plate from his *Grammar* was the obvious choice for the cover of the present issue, which includes a selection of the contributions presented on 11-12 September 2020 at the international conference "Geometry and Colour: Decoding the Arts of Islam in the West 1880-1945", co-organized by the Kunsthaus Zürich, the Museum Rietberg in Zürich, and the Vitrocentre Romont (Switzerland). The aim of the conference was to renew the intense debates on geometry and color in Western art and architecture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to emphasize the outstanding role played by the visual and material culture of the Islamic world as a source of inspiration for the West.

Besides a few recent initiatives, such as the "Third Biennial Hamad bin Khalifa Symposium on Islamic Art", held in Córdoba in 2009 and dedicated to color in Islamic art and culture (Blair and Bloom) or the workshop "Colour in Islam: Understanding Textual and Visual Historiographies of Colour in Inter-Disciplinary Perspective" (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 22-23 October 2021), co-organized by Teresa Bernheimer and Eva-Maria Troelenberg, the use of color in Islamic art and architecture and its reception in the West have not yet received the scholarly attention it had in the nineteenth century, starting with the debate on polychromy, instigated by the German architect Jakob Ignaz Hittorff (1792-1867) (Hittorff and Zanth; Middleton; Van Zanten, *Architectural Polychromy*; Van Zanten, "Life in Architecture"; Kiene, Lazzarini and Marconi; Giese and Varela Braga esp. 38-43). Theories of ornament, on the other hand, have come under the scrutiny of art historians in the last thirty years, with an number of publications on the subject (Snodin and Howard; Payne, *The Architectural Treatise*; Carboni; Trilling; Schafter; Buci-Glucksmann; Payne, *From Ornament to Object*; Dekoninck, Heering and Lefftz; Varela Braga; Frommel and Leuschner; Payne and Necipoğlu; Fléjou and Decrossas; Labrusse; Vandl).

With the present issue, we would like to join this burgeoning interest and contribute to diversifying the debate on ornament and color by introducing genres that have received little attention until now, such as furniture or glass art, as well as lesser-studied regions, among them Poland, Latvia, and the historical Punjab region. Divided into three thematical parts, this issue starts by considering the role played by prototypes. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an ever-growing output of publications on Islamic architecture and design, which provided a large variety of information, analysis as well as plans, elevations, and detailed line drawings or colored plates. They were accompanied by numerous articles, travelogues, and descriptions, which contained more specific material. At the same time, the World's Fairs, especially those in London (1851) and Paris (1867 and 1878), offered the opportunity to directly study architectural specimens, interiors, furniture, and other artifacts from the Islamic world. Both the printed sources as well as the exhibitions made models available for patrons, architects, and designers. Which of these sources were used and how they were exploited is demonstrated by three case studies, included in the first part of this issue. They show the different strategies of appropriation and transformation that designers and/or patrons used; ranging from thoroughly informed imitation to imaginative transformation and superficial application, while a look into traditional crafts in India complements this section.

Following prototypes

In her article, Olga Bush concentrates on Owen Jones' analysis of the aesthetics of the Alhambra. She retraces the path from "derivation to deviation" that can be observed in Jones' own *Alhambra Court* for the Crystal Palace (1854) on the one hand, and the *Salón árabe* (1847-1851) in the Royal Palace of Aranjuez (Spain), the *Salotto Turco* in the Villa Mimbelli (1865-1870) in Livorno (Italy), and the *Moorish Bath* in Schloss Albrechtsberg in Dresden (Germany) (1850-1854) on the other. Bush shows that Jones' own observations of the subtle interplay of geometry and color in the Alhambra

Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

echo the definition of beauty as expressed by Ibn al-Haytham (ca. 965-1040) in his groundbreaking *Book of Optics*. While remaining faithful to his findings, Jones could successfully recreate the beauty of the Alhambra in another surrounding with differing spatial dimensions. In comparison, the three other interiors reveal a visual disharmony due to the emphasis on broad colors while ignoring the other relevant factors, a characteristic that can be generally attributed to the “Alhambresque”.

While focusing on the stucco glass window or *qamarīya*, Sarah Keller recounts the story of the so-called “Moroccan House” and the transformation of its windows. Originally constructed in Tangier for the World’s Fair in Vienna (1873), it was also shown in Philadelphia (1876) and finally in Paris in 1878. There, the wooden structure was bought on behalf of King Ludwig II of Bavaria (r. 1864-1886). The interior was repainted, gilded, and newly furnished and the colorless windows replaced with multicolored ones in *qamarīya*-style, produced in Munich. Designed after a Cairene prototype, the window grid was then executed in metal instead of plaster. This transformation is all the more interesting as Munich was one of the centers where the tradition of Gothic stained-glass windows was revived.

Contrary to this technical adaptation of an Egyptian window to other climatic conditions, the “Turkish cabinet” of Dittmar’s furniture factory is a telling example of the use of stylistic set pieces in the context of industrial design. Elke Katharina Wittich sheds light on the furniture industry in Berlin around 1900. The German capital was rapidly growing and the demand for furniture was increasing. It was met by mass-produced furniture whose exteriors were then decorated in up to thirty different styles, as was the case with Dittmar’s cabinet. Wittich’s contribution highlights the reception and exploitation of Islamic art beyond the artistic trailblazers.

Nadhra Shabaz Khan’s article offers a completely different perspective: In contrast to the European fascination for Islamic arts and their endeavors to recreate them, the traditional knowledge of local artisans in India under the British Raj were rapidly lost. In his attempt to keep knowledge alive, the attention given by John Lockwood Kipling (1837-1911) to the traditional names given to geometric patterns used in contemporary woodwork is a case in point. By analyzing these terms in different vernacular languages, Khan makes clear that they are more than mere denominators; they convey a cultural heritage and a meaning that reaches beyond pure geometric composition.

Creating imaginaries

The romantic interest for the Middle Ages that favored the appreciation for medieval Spain and its Islamic heritage was in great part responsible for the wide and international fortune of the Moorish Revival. The study of the Nasrid decorative system, pioneered by Goury and Jones, was deeply connected with the more general revival of architectural polychromy. This interest in color cannot be dissociated from the rich polymateriality of nineteenth-century interiors, which—through the integration of colored glass, ceramics, marble, and textiles—constituted a perfect field of experimentation for architects. The second part of this issue explores the multilayered imaginary dimensions derived from the encounters with the arts of Islam, from aesthetic exploration to identity constructions.

Considering the parallels between David Brewster’s kaleidoscope and Nasrid ornament, Ariane Varela Braga examines the fruitful dialogue between art and science that involved the appreciation of Ibero-Islamic ornament, color theories, and optical experiments. She discusses two different cases of creative interpretation, exemplified by the decorative use of colored glasses by Owen Jones and Ferdinando Panciatichi Ximenes d’Aragona, whose villa of Sammezzano in Tuscany owes much to the British architect’s publications. Although Jones and Panciatichi clearly departed from the original prototypes, their use of colored glass can be paralleled with the general admiration for Islamic colored glass windows (*qamarīyāt*) that was shared by many European travelers, who appreciated the delicacy and particular intimate atmosphere that their presence gave to interiors.

Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

Because of its fragility, much of this colored glass has not been preserved, but is known through the drawings and testimonies of architects and designers of the time.

One of those was British architect James William Wild (1814-1892), brother-in-law of Owen Jones, who spent many years in Cairo and carefully recorded several such examples. In her essay, Francine Giese discusses his contribution together with those of the American artist and decorator Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) and the less known art collector Karl von Urach (1865-1925), analyzing the artistic and cultural significance of *qamarīyāt* as expressions of an imagined East.

While in many of these examples Islamic art belongs to the sphere of the 'Other', the lines are more blurred for Eastern Europe, as in the case of Poland, where Oriental elements were present in Polish culture since the Middle Ages, in the form of "*sarmatism*". This entangled heritage was recuperated and transformed by the wave of interest in Islamic art that reached the country at the end of the nineteenth century. It provided the background for the successful mixture between European, Oriental, and popular models that became representative of the Polish applied art revival movement. Discussing this inherent tension in Polish culture, Agnieszka Kluczevska-Wójcik explores the contribution of the artists from the Cracow workshops (*Warsztaty Krakowskie*) founded in 1913 and whose products attracted international attention at the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris.

Cultural hybridization is also at the center of the essay by Mireia Freixa and Marta Saliné, who analyze the tile work of Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926) and his original use of ceramic *trencadís* at the Park Güell in Barcelona. Inspired by the Islamic and Mudéjar tradition of ceramic wall decoration, Gaudí transformed it into a specific element of his art. He did so by breaking colored ceramics into pieces and incrusting them in the walls, an ingenious procedure that contributed to bringing his architecture to life.

Re-orientations

The third and final part of this issue focuses on the visual arts of the modern era. At the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous artists were inspired by objects from non-European cultures, namely from Japan, Africa, and the Islamic world. By their preoccupation with objects that were unfamiliar to them, European artists aimed at overcoming entrenched conventions and at developing new forms of expression—thereby initiating a transcultural process. The curiosity and admiration for these objects were usually of a purely formal and aesthetic nature, without the artists having developed a deeper interest in the respective culture or the people of these countries. Moreover, very few of them knew the countries of origin of the artifacts that had come to Europe from their own experience but discovered them—detached from their context—in exhibitions, collections, and publications in their immediate surroundings. Seen from this perspective, there is something superficial but also appropriative about their preoccupation, and it subliminally reflects the imperialist and colonialist attitudes of the time.

As diverse as the Islamic arts are, so are the approaches of the artists in Europe towards them. In this section, three painters are treated in the three essays presented here as case studies: Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), and Jāzeps Grosvalds (1891-1920). Rémi Labrusse's analysis of the impact of Matisse's 1906 trip to Algeria and the artist's interpretation of Islamic arts gives a new perspective on Orientalism and modern production of visual images, which the author examines from the point of view of a "state of crisis". In both—Orientalism and the modern production of visual images—, he demonstrates a self-deconstructing system that keeps reaffirming itself without ever finding resolution: Self-criticism and a destructive action are thereby the two sides of this "state of crisis". By analyzing some representative works by Matisse, which the

Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
 Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

artist created after his stay in Algeria, Labrusse shows how these two poles are interrelated within Orientalism and modern image-making.

In 1910, Wassily Kandinsky visited the groundbreaking exhibition *Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst* (Masterpieces of Muhammedan Art) in Munich and wrote a review of it for the Russian literary journal *Apollon*. On the basis of this text, which deals almost exclusively with Persian miniatures, his understanding of this art becomes clear. Kandinsky described the three elements that he valued most highly in these works: their approach to composition, their use of color, and the manner in which they provoked a sense of revelation in him. In her contribution, Emily Christensen focuses on the importance of this sense of revelation, which Kandinsky skillfully manages to transfer to his own compositions created from the end of 1910 onwards.

And finally, Ieva Kalnača's article examines the journeys that the Latvian painter and draftsman Jāzeps Grosvalds made to Andalusia in 1913 and to Iran in 1918, and their relevance to his work. She argues that the architecture experienced on site was an important impulse for a formal and aesthetic turning point in his work.

The contributions compiled in this third issue of *Manazir Journal* represent only a few facets of the large and challenging topic that deserves further exploration. Although interest and scholarship in the arts of the Islamic world has increased noticeably since the early 2000s, in many respects we are still only at the beginning of a process of reassessment that is continuously reshaped by changing social and political attitudes. Hopefully, this publication will contribute to the reevaluation of the arts of Islam as a significant source for Western visual and applied arts.

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Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
 Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

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Biographies

Sandra Gianfreda studied art history, history of architecture and psychology in Bern and Rome. She completed her PhD in 2001 with a thesis on half-length figures in history painting of the Seicento and worked as an assistant to the chair of Renaissance to Modern Art History in Bern from 1998 to 2002. Subsequently, she undertook a traineeship at the Kunstmuseum Basel in the department for the Nineteenth Century and Modern Art. She was a curator at Kunstmuseum

Sandra Gianfreda, Francine Giese,
Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga

Winterthur from 2005 to 2009, a project manager and curator of special exhibitions at Museum Folkwang in Essen from 2009 until spring 2015 and has been a curator at Kunsthaus Zürich since summer 2015. She has published and organized exhibitions on Impressionism, modern art, and American, German and Italian art from the post-war period.

Francine Giese is director of the Vitrocentre and the Vitromusée Romont, Switzerland. From 2014 to 2019 she held a SNSF professorship at the Institute of Art History of the University of Zurich, where she led the research project "Mudejarismo and Moorish Revival in Europe." Her PhD thesis, dealing with the Islamic ribbed vault, was published in 2007 (Gebr. Mann), and her habilitation (second book) on building and restoration practices in the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba was issued in 2016 (Peter Lang). In her current research project "Luminosity of the East" (SNSF, 2020-2024), she investigates the typology, materiality, and provenance of Islamic colored glass windows (*qamarīyāt*) within Western museum collections. Her research focuses on transfer and exchange processes between the Islamic world and the West, architectural Orientalism, provenance research, and the arts of glass.

Axel Langer is curator of the arts of the Islamic Near and Middle East at the Rietberg Museum in Zürich, Switzerland. He has organized a number of exhibitions whose recurrent theme has been the cultural transfer between the East and West, including, for instance, Chinese blue and white porcelain as a source of inspiration for Persian, Ottoman, and European ceramics, but also the cross-cultural exchange between Persia and Europe in the seventeenth century. In spring 2022, his exhibition *In the Name of the Image. Imagery between Cult and Prohibition in Islam and Christianity* is on show at the Rietberg Museum.

Ariane Varela Braga is a historian of art and architecture. She is currently a Visiting Professor at the University of Milan. In 2021, she was a Chastel Fellow at the French Academy and a Fellow at the Bibliotheca Herziana in Rome, where she worked on a book manuscript titled "Crafting the Moresco: Orientalism, Architecture and Material Culture in 19th and Early 20th-Century Italy" (Habitation project, University of Zurich). Her research is located at the intersections between visual and material culture, and architecture and cultural history in the late modern period. Her first book was about Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* (Campisano, 2017). She has published volumes and articles on the history and theory of decorative arts and architecture, polychrome marble, and the European appropriation of non-Western art, and curated exhibitions on nineteenth-century art and architecture, as well as on contemporary art.
