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

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Axel Langer and Ariane Varela Braga**

Impressum

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Dittmar's Turkish Ornamental Cabinet

A "Furniture Style Comparison" around 1900

Abstract

One of the most formative narratives of the reform movements around 1900 was a departure from earlier creative principles of imitation, now defamed as an inadequate approach. Thus, artists, architects, and designers were called upon to formulate freer approaches to artistic design. Precisely because this narrative of the new and the free, which had become a myth, excluded art of the later nineteenth century—which supposedly only imitated older styles—little attention was paid to how exactly the ornamentation of Islamic art was taken up and artistically exploited in the decorative arts around 1900. Yet, what else can be classified as stylistic imitation and what as freer abstraction? After all, the geometric derivation of Islamic ornamentation offered rich material for abstractions in the sense intended by the reform movements, before it was radically, and very lastingly, banned from the discourse a short time later along with all other ornament. It will be shown that the abstraction of Islamic ornamentation around 1900 was not only triggered by the objects that were increasingly accessible in exhibitions and as holdings of ethnological or applied arts museums at the turn of the century but was already influenced by scientific research and by the textbooks with historical models as they appeared in the course of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: design principles; nineteenth-century art; non-European objects; textbooks; political iconography

A furniture factory in Berlin around 1900

At the turn of the twentieth century, Berlin had a population of almost 1,900,000. In the course of industrialization, its population had doubled in twenty-five years and a further influx of rural population seemed unbroken.² In order to satisfy the demand for living space, more and more housing complexes were built in new suburbs for the newcomers; apartments in which furniture was needed (Haeder).³ Thus, Dittmar's furniture factory, founded in 1836 in Berlin and located on Molkenmarkt in the center of the city, could probably not complain about orders. The "Meubleur" Dittmar regularly appeared in contemporary advertisements in the daily press (Stiegel 232, 272, 467, 570), a circumstance that undoubtedly promoted the success of the company.⁴ The marketing concept of the furniture factory foresaw various media with references to brochures on the subject of furniture and interior design.

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² On December 1, 1900, 1,888,848 residents were registered (*Statistisches Jahrbuch* 1).

³ On furniture production for the general public in Germany around 1900 (Scheiffele 56-63).

⁴ On the relationship between design and marketing around 1900 (Schuldenfrei).



Dittmar's Möbel-Fabrik

Berlin C. **Molkenmarkt 6** bitte beachten.



Vornehme Möbel, einfache u reiche,
preiswürdig.

Abbildungen von:

Damenzimmern, Herrenzimmern, Speisezimmern,
Schlafzimmern, Stühlen und Sesseln, Küchen- etc. stehen
gern kostenfrei zu Diensten.

Wie richte ich meine Wohnung ein?
Broschüre mit erläuternden Abbildungen auf Wunsch gern
kostenfrei.

Figure 1: Advertisement for Dittmar's furniture factory, 1907. Taken from *Adreßbuch der Fabrik- und Handelsstadt Forst*. Image courtesy of DOK, Digital Repositorium of Potsdam City and State Library.

In 1907, for example, an announcement of Dittmar's furniture factory appeared in the directory for the town of Forst in the region of Lausitz, south-east of Berlin (*Adreßbuch*; fig. 1), with a reference to the company's location in Berlin, Molkenmarkt 6 and the product range of gentlemen's and ladies' rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms, and so on. Next, the price segment—"einfache und reiche, preiswürdig" (simple and rich, worthy of a prize)—is appointed and finally a brochure entitled, *Wie richte ich meine Wohnung ein?* (How do I furnish my flat?), is announced (*Adreßbuch*). The size and typography of the letters particularly emphasize the company name and its products, namely "vornehme Möbel" (distinguished furniture). The advertisement is adorned with a cartouche in the form of a transverse oval that provides a look into a contemporary interior.



Figure 2: *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung*. Ca. 1900. Taken from the eponymous furniture factory brochure by Dittmar. Image courtesy of private collection.

Dittmar's furniture factory also published an advertising brochure with the title *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung* (Furniture Style Comparison; figs. 2-4), a publication of particular interest for this essay due to its praise of "Turkish" and "Moorish" furniture. From a methodological perspective, the advertising brochure of Dittmar's furniture factory, widely distributed for marketing purposes, can take on the role of a stamp, as Aby Warburg explained in his lecture *The Function of the Stamp Image in the Intellectual Intercourse of the World* of 13 August 1927: the stamp image, not primarily created for artistic purposes, spreads in visual form ideas that can sometimes condense almost into symbols (Zöllner). At the same time, stamps or such outline drawings in an advertising brochure, unwittingly reveal time-bound notions such as the variability of styles. Precisely because the furniture from Dittmar's furniture factory was, despite good workmanship, a mass-market commodity, and precisely because the *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung* brochure is not an art-scientific

study but follows the laws of advertising, one can expect meaningful, if perhaps surprising, findings. The analysis of a piece of furniture with Ottoman or Moorish elements from Dittmar's furniture factory can help to show principles, but also contradictions of the reception of the arts of Islam in the West around 1900.

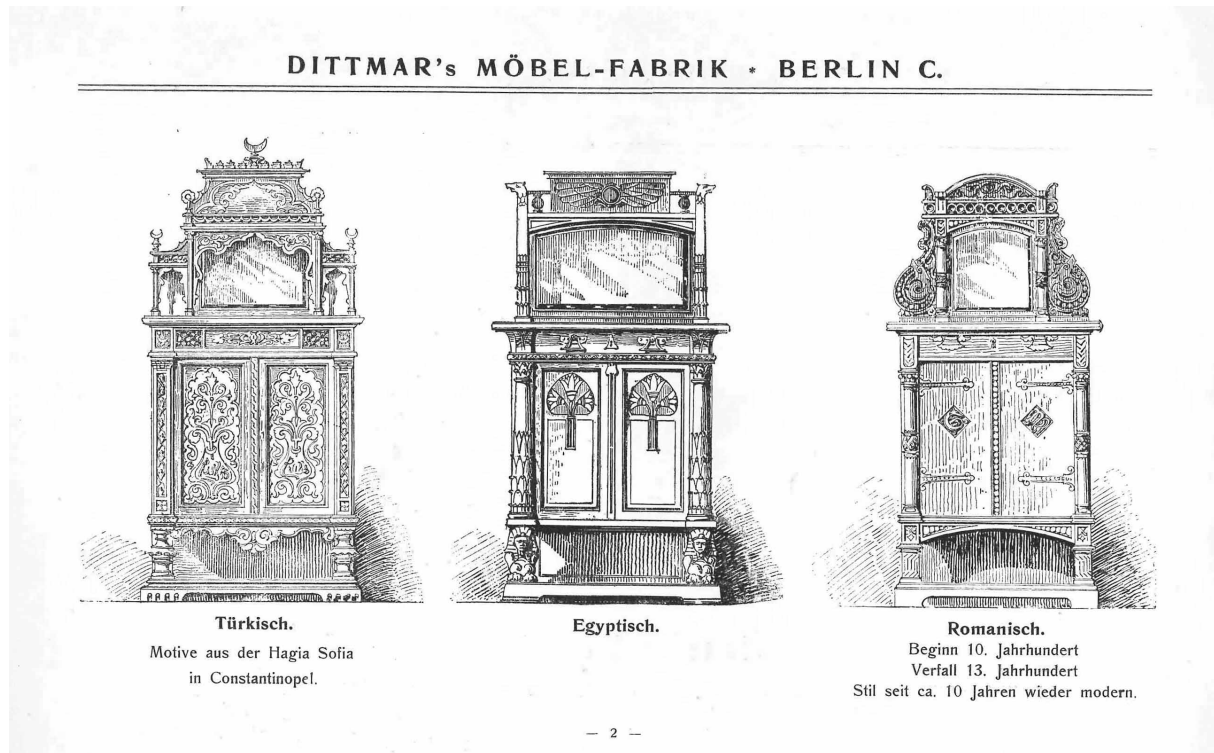


Figure 3: Dittmar's "Turkish Cabinet". Ca. 1900. Taken from the brochure *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung*. Image courtesy of private collection.

Dittmar's brochure (figs. 2-4) is only one of a whole series of instructional works on the subject of interior design and furnishings, as they had been on the market since the 1880s (Manske), including the 1886 best seller *Das Deutsche Zimmer* (The German Room) by Georg Hirth. Around 1900, they were supplemented by numerous magazines such as *Innendekoration* and *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*. On the back of this advertising brochure the Dittmar's furniture factory proudly refers to its deliveries by presenting the customer distribution in Germany in form of a map (fig. 4). There seems to be an additional marketing message associated with this brochure, namely that of spreading sales far beyond Berlin. For this reason, the map with the entries of the sales shows no borders. In Berlin and the surrounding area alone, 43,298 pieces of furniture had been delivered from Dittmar's furniture factory since 1888, forty other pieces of furniture were shipped to Leipzig and forty-four to Greifswald and so on (*Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung*).

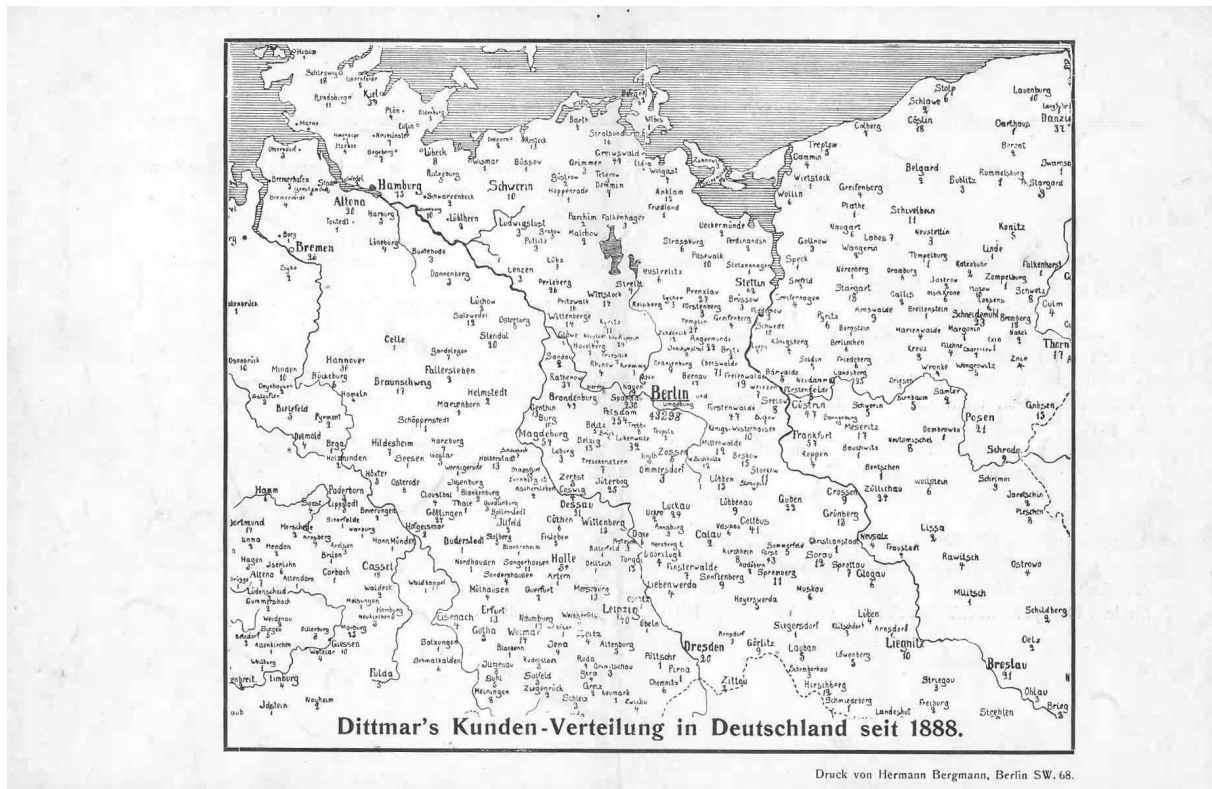


Figure 4: Back cover of the brochure *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung* presenting the customer distribution of Dittmar's furniture factory. Ca. 1900. Image courtesy of private collection.

"Motifs from the Hagia Sophia": Exploitation of cultural-historical knowledge

The front page of Dittmar's *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung* announces the presentation of an "ornamental cabinet shape... in 30 styles" (fig. 2), as they are "common in the furniture industry today"; these styles are "designed in the drawing room of Dittmar's furniture factory." Among them, in addition to an example in "rural style" on the front page, there is also a cabinet marked "Turkish. Motifs from the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople" (fig. 3, left). Surprisingly, this cabinet leads the visually mediated list of the thirty historical styles. On page ten of the brochure, the "Turkish cabinet" is followed by an example with the designation "Spanish-Moorish after Alhambra Motifs" (*Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung*).

In view of the thirty announced styles, the interested reader must soon also notice a contradiction: surprised, one takes note that in Dittmar's advertising brochure thirty different versions of the one, in the core form always the same furniture, are available. This core form is that of box furniture in proportional systems: golden sections and ratios of 1:2 or 2:3 are placed over the underlying ratio of 1:2. This system is inherent in all thirty versions of cabinet furniture shown.⁵ According to the text on the second page, this core form enables industrial pre-production; the parts characterizing the styles were only supplemented as production on demand when a piece of furniture was ordered (*Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung* 2). There is a clear derivation from the architectural theory of form, as it was taught throughout the entire nineteenth century at polytechnic and arts and crafts schools.⁶ With the help of the brochure, citizens of Berlin and Leipzig could decide whether their living room

⁵ Theories of proportion are derived from architectural theory and, like a canonically defined repertoire of forms, were an integral part of the curricula in arts and crafts schools throughout the 19th century (Wittich, "Muster" 29-42).

⁶ Proportion studies were usually taught as part of drawing lessons (Preussisches Ministerium).

should contain a cabinet in the style of early German Gothic, French Late Renaissance, Modernism, or a Turkish cabinet.

The advertising brochure, which at first appears to be of little importance, is greatly expressive in answering the question of how Islamic art was handled in the design of the period around 1900. Contrary to all reform attempts in Germany to use industrial principles in the sense of a contemporary modification and increase in expression of the applied arts (Campbell), the brochure of Dittmar's furniture factory reveals a radical exploitation of forms as set pieces of industrial production. In the design-theoretical writings of the time around 1900, often one-sided and polemical, such an industrial exploitation of forms is railed against, and examples worthy of rejection are presented (Preussisches Ministerium; see Lux, *Kunstgewerbe*). The ornamentation on the cabinets from Dittmar's furniture factory corresponds to the criticism of such "masking" of products in the period around 1900, which was regarded as decay (Lux, *Der Geschmack* preface). In the design theory of the time, freer approaches to form development were favored, especially through the drawing of natural forms (Manske 11-20). New impulses were also expected from non-European decorative art objects; they were used as examples of forms based on the traditional methods of production in arts and crafts schools at that time (Pralle).⁷ However, exhibitions such as the *Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst* shown in Munich in 1910 were not the first to make the art of the Islamic world known (Troelenberg). On the contrary, this assumption must of course be rejected as a gross simplification of far more differentiated facts.

The role of collections and publications for an artistic use of Islamic art and architecture

Throughout the nineteenth century, Islamic decorative arts were collected and exhibited on a grand scale in European ethnographic and decorative arts museums (Iselin). In addition, from the mid-nineteenth century and increasingly around 1900, period-themed rooms were popular, which included Islamic style rooms (Giese and Varela Braga, *Myth; Fashionable Style*). Originally courtly rooms, such as the so-called "Turkish", actually "Moorish" bath in Albrechtsburg Castle by Carl von Diebitsch (1819-1869; Heller), they were all the more readily accepted by the upper middle classes, as shown, for example in the Moorish house in Berlin, a large apartment building, by the same architect (Kaufmann). It is striking that such interiors were mostly executed in the Moorish style but described as Turkish; recourse was made to topoi in travel literature that paid particular attention to this type of room (Büttner). An interior by the architect August de Meuron (1813-1898) in an early volume of photographs on Hamburg architecture in the 1880s (fig. 5) represents the transition to an upper-middle-class use with simultaneous use of the latest technical possibilities of pictorial reproduction (*Hamburger Privatbauten* pl. XXXVIII). The furniture of such rooms, like the fabric of the sofas here, quotes Islamic models, but the furniture types as such are derived from European forms.⁸

Nevertheless, the *Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst* was demonstrably of great importance for the further development of the arts in Europe, especially with regard to the use of color and the principle of abstraction. However, this applies less to interior design and furniture than to painting (Hagedorn). Thus, the achievement of the polytechnical and arts and crafts school's teaching, as well as publications of scientific research on Islam architecture, should be stressed to show how Islamic forms were constructed by using abstractions to geometrically generate shapes of well-known Turkish or Moorish motifs.

⁷ Heinrich Pralle was a teacher at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Hamburg.

⁸ The surviving furniture based on designs by Carl von Diebitsch also show these characteristics (Fischer 113-123).

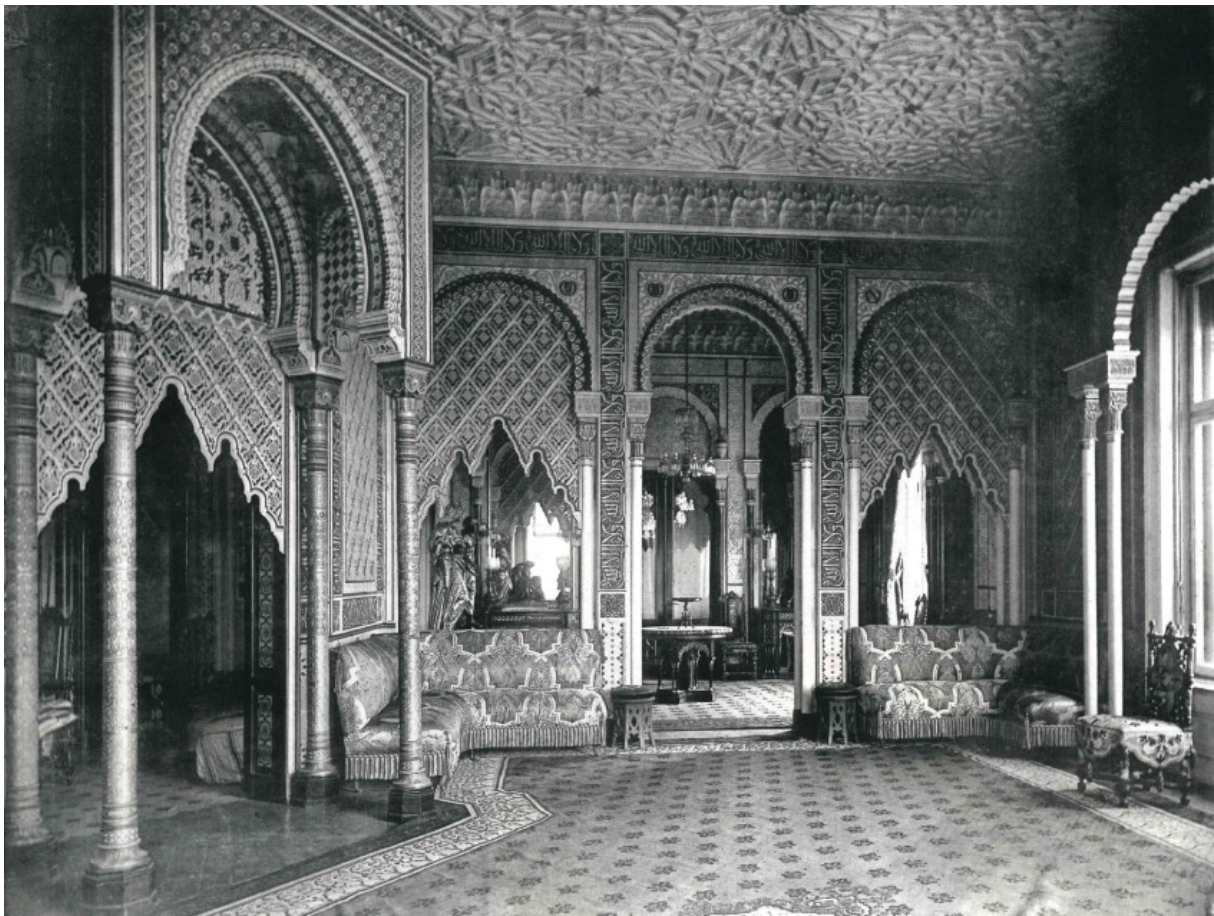


Figure 5: Auguste de Meuron. *Moorish Salon in a Villa at the Alster*. 1883. Taken from *Hamburger Privatbauten*, pl. XXXVIII. Image courtesy of the Library of the Hamburg Authority for Urban Development.

A good approach is offered by the textbook *Das Geometrische Ornament* for the elementary drawing classes of the Austrian arts and crafts schools in the 1870s (Andel pl. XLII). While one could easily assume that geometric ornament of Islamic arts could have given new impulses to the European arts and crafts around 1900 in terms of abstraction, for example to create wall and surface design, the textbook shows that these forms of concrete Islamic ornament had already been sorted into the canon of teaching material twenty-five years earlier, for example in plate XLII for the “division and decoration of the square” (fig. 6); the basis for this were engraving publications like *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra* of 1842-1845 as well as the analysis and exploitation of the forms of the Alhambra in Owen Jones’ famous *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856 (Varela Braga).

This decidedly inductive approach to ornamentation in dealing with Islamic art was by no means new but owed to the reception of antiquity since the eighteenth century. Ancient ornamentation, too, had first been made accessible in the archaeological travel literature and subsequently incorporated into ornamentation teachings. This process enabled further use independent of the carrier medium as well as the original material and size (Wittich 65-76). Thus, for the draftsmen of Dittmar’s furniture factory, the templates of a textbook with the details of the ornamentation played a much greater role than the personal knowledge of the concrete building or a complex like the Alhambra. For this reason, special attention must be paid to the principles of the textbooks—isolation and limitation of ornaments, exemption from the carrier medium or the concrete place in a room, visualization as an outline drawing, and so on.

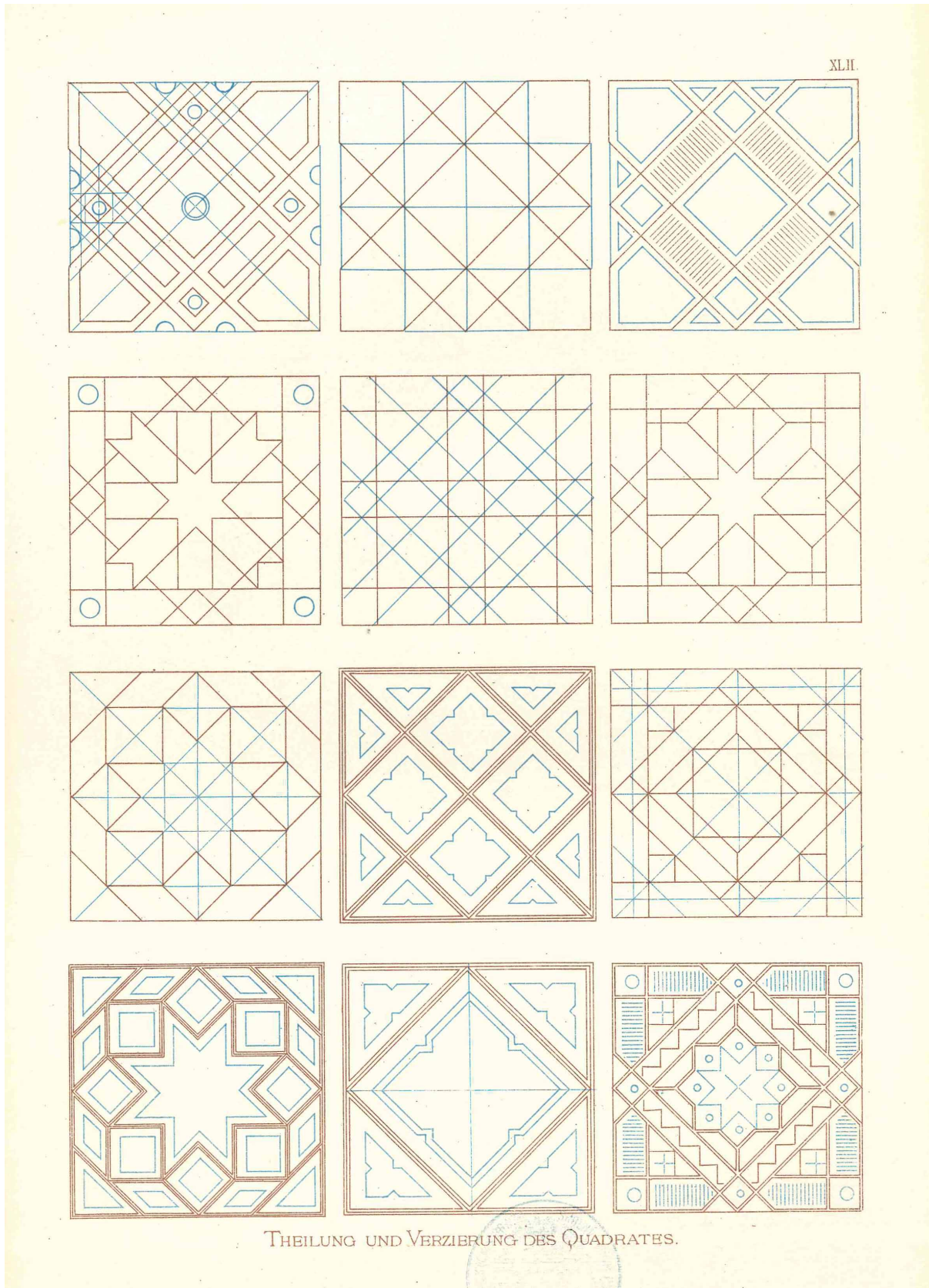


Figure 6: Anton Andel. *Theilung und Verzierung des Quadrates*. 1877. Taken from *Das Geometrische Ornament. Ein Lehrmittel für den Elementaren Zeichen-Unterricht*, pl. XLII. Image courtesy of the Library of the Hamburg University of Fine Arts.

Defining characteristic and recognizable Ottoman forms

In order to analyze what was considered characteristic of a cabinet in Turkish style by the draftsmen at Dittmar's furniture factory, we are looking for characteristic features for this cabinet shape and can first of all find the crowning with the stepped trim and the crescent on the Turkish cabinet (fig. 3). Secondly, irregularly curved openings in the center and on the sides of the top can be counted among the characteristics. And thirdly, the doors show a floral planar ornamentation as it is depicted in the contemporary model works. The French as well as the German edition of Auguste Racinet's *L'ornement polychrome* with "2000 motifs of all styles," which were published in 1871-1873 and 1874 respectively, were still very useful for the draughtsman at Dittmar's furniture factory, especially since the technically new "gold, silver and colour printing" reproduced the ornaments far more vividly than the previously used outline drawing. Furthermore, Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* from 1856 was well used, too, a publication that had also been available in German since 1865. After 1900, the large-format publication *Das farbige Ornament aller historischen Stile* by Alexander Speltz came on the market in three volumes; it was published in German, French and English and was considered a new standard work. These publications draw their material from buildings and vessels, from weapons and carpets or other textiles.

The top of the Turkish ornamental cabinet (fig. 3) shows geometrically shaped openings on the sides, which can easily be recognized as characteristic motifs from the fund of what were known as Turkish (actually Ottoman) forms. They can also be founded on one of the panels in Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* (Jones pl. XXXVI; fig. 7). Now it is less important that a motif is adopted exactly, but rather that a characteristic and recognizable motif is presented. Based on their drawing studies, students at arts and crafts schools could easily analyze the construction of such ornaments and transfer them into their own works, for example to construct a characteristic Turkish opening. However, such ornaments are comparable because of their characteristic design. And then there are the art-historical reappraisals from the second half of the nineteenth century, for example Julius Franz Pasha's *Baukunst des Islam* from 1887, in which the author presents outline drawings of minarets with the crowning by a crescent moon (Pflugradt-Abdel Aziz). Skilled draftsmen such as those at Dittmar's furniture factory could easily deduce the crowning for the Turkish cabinet from such outline drawings—all regardless of the fact that the minarets shown by Franz Pasha were not to be found in Constantinople but in Cairo. Much more important was the iconic effect of the crescent as a form classified as characteristic, which was also known as part of the imperial flag of the Ottoman Empire.



Figure 7: Owen Jones. *Turkish No. 1*. 1856. Taken from *The Grammar of Ornament*, pl. XXXVI. Image courtesy of the digital holdings of the Heidelberg University Library.

Political iconography of Ottoman heritage around 1900

One last question we should clarify: why does the Turkish ornamental cabinet head up the other cabinets in thirty styles in the *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung*? The cabinet probably owes this position not to artistic or art historical considerations, but rather to the journey of the German imperial couple to Constantinople and Jerusalem in 1898, and to the impressive propaganda around this state tour (Alkan). The emperor brought gifts such as the German Fountain to Constantinople—that is he brought a German interpretation of Ottoman architecture to the Ottoman capital. In addition, a flood of pictorial material such as postcards and scientific as well as popular publications appeared in this context, including a text volume and two large-format panel volumes on *Die Baukunst Konstantinopels* (The architecture of Constantinople) by Cornelius Gurlitt, published some years later in 1907-1912. Among the numerous drawings and photographs is the "Loge des Sultan" (fig. 8), which was added to the early Christian building from the sixth century after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The lodge features rich ornamentation on the grilles; they could have been the models for characteristic ornamentation on the door panels on Dittmar's Turkish Cabinet and justify the reference to the Hagia Sophia in the caption of Dittmar's *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung*.

However, the sequence of styles for furniture in the *Möbel-Stil-Vergleichung* does not seriously address questions of style, as contemporary critics already pointed out (Schmidkunz 20), and among the Islamic styles, references to Mamluk architecture and ornamentation are missing although there was significant literature on the subject (Coste; Franz Pasha; see Giese and Varela Braga, *Myth section* 11). Accordingly, the furniture itself lacks an examination of the stylistic elements, they are merely borrowed from available teaching and research works. Nor is there any engagement with the materials of Islamic interiors. The Turkish cabinet from Dittmar's furniture factory would not even have fitted into one of the Islamic period rooms customary at the time (fig. 5). All in all, Islamic art was probably less interesting for the manager of Dittmar's furniture factory than a sales-promoting idea of what was feasible at that time.

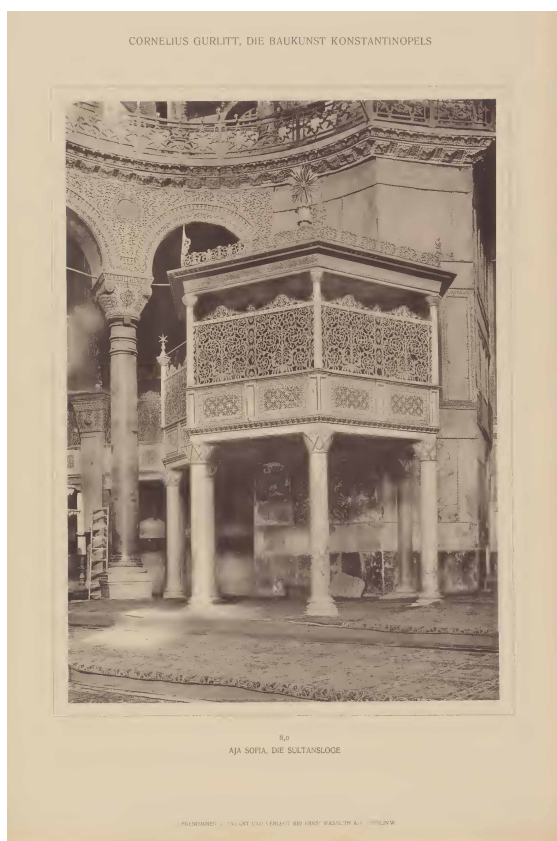


Figure 8: Cornelius Gurlitt. *Aja Sofia, the Sultan's Lodge*. 1910. Taken from *Die Baukunst Konstantinopels*, pl. 8.0; vol. 1. Image courtesy of the Getty Research Center, Internet Archive.

Conclusion: Negative evidence of engagement with Islamic art

Taken as negative evidence, this marketing strategy of Dittmar's furniture factory proves how wide the range of engagement with Islamic art was around 1900: from profound, research-based insights into the formal repertoire of Islamic architecture to mere quotations without any meaning, as in the case of the Turkish ornamental cabinet, everything can be found. It remains to be said, however, that every form of adaptation is based on a construction against the background of European forms of thought. From a methodological point of view, this example must also lead to a warning against taking stock of the phenomenon exclusively on the basis of monographic analyses, because the contexts are obviously complex, and the principles of reception that transcend genre and time are affected. To work through these contexts, especially the role of art and crafts schools, appears to be just as important as uncovering the political iconography of the imperial activities of the Germans, the English, and the French in the Near East in that time.

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Biography

Elke Katharina Wittich is professor and head of the Center of further scientific education at the Leibniz University in Hannover, Germany. She studied history of art, archaeology, German literature and history of music at the University of Hamburg, and was a member of the "Political Iconography" postgraduate research group of the German Research Foundation (DFG). Her PhD thesis examined the knowledge about architecture and the methodology of architectural writings in the early nineteenth century by taking Schinkel and his educational training at the Berlin Building Academy as an example. She has published books and articles on the history of architecture and design as well as on the history of science in the seventeenth to twentieth century.
