

Mohammed Hamdouni Alami: *The Origins of Visual Culture in the Islamic World. Aesthetics, Art and Architecture in Early Islam*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris 2018. XIII, 184 p. 38 fig. £ 20.00. ISBN: 978-1-78831-096-3.

This book, originally published in hardback in 2015 and now available in paperback, consists of five chapters. It has a rather misleading title, as it is in fact an interesting analysis of selected elements of medieval Islamic philosophy, with the aim of establishing a link between the ideas espoused in the texts, especially one written by the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* in Iraq in the tenth century, and the symbolism of the art and architecture of Fatimid Cairo in the tenth to twelfth centuries. In the introduction the author states that the book is centred on the time after the end of the early Islamic period (5). These aspects could have been reflected more accurately under a different title.

The introduction (1–18) claims that all art is fraught with power and violence (5), before highlighting the centrality of both geometry and astrology to Fatimid society. The key theme running throughout the book is the use of textual evidence to make the case that there was a distinct epistemic break between the early Islamic period and the Fatimid era in the tenth to twelfth centuries.

Chapter two, entitled “An Aesthetic Revolution: From Trance to Meaning – a Metamorphosis of Islamic Aesthetics” (19–39) includes a wide range of useful primary source extracts in translation. The author examines a number of esoteric philosophical and poetic constructs and studies how they change over time. The chapter examines the role and effect of beauty on the beholder, and the significance of proportion to beauty, as well as beginning to make a number of comparisons with some of the architectural developments that took place several centuries later in Italy.

The third chapter, “The Ethics of Arts and Crafts” (40–66), builds on the discussions in the previous chapter and examines the theory of proportion and its place in aesthetics. Further detailed study of the writings of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* continues, alongside the inclusion of some very useful extended passages from the text. An admission that there is very limited specificity in the source concerning architecture (48), is followed by a widening of the textual horizon to include the study of Ibn Miskawayh’s views on aesthetics, Ibn al-Haytham’s *Optics*, and his theories of beauty and perception, including a

number of relevant passages in translation. The chapter continues with a return to the work of the *Ikhwan al-Ṣafā'*, including the theory of proportion and its Hellenic roots, as well as the role and significance of numbers and geometry in the Islamic tradition, before concluding with a study of proportion, and how it finds perfection in the human form.

It is not until chapter four, entitled “Painting in a World of Images” (67–99), that examples of Islamic art are addressed, with Fatimid lustre ware ceramics, the Berlin ivory frame, figural metalwork and a piece of Fatimid marquetry examined. Despite the extensive focus on texts, the author does admit that they may have only had a “possible impact” (67) on the painters and craftsmen who actually created the objects. In addition, while acknowledging that the philosophers were not craftsmen, and that links cannot be proven, it is assumed that their views were influential (74–75). The focus then turns to realism in Fatimid painting, and this rise in realism is attributed to the *Ikhwan al-Ṣafā'*.

The final chapter, entitled “Stone Metaphors and Architecture’s Whispers” (100–160) comprises over a third of the book and examines the arguments both for and against a symbolist reading of Fatimid art, followed by an attempt to show that Fatimid city planning was imbued with symbolic thinking (100). The possible means of intellectual exchange between scholars and craftsmen is addressed, and pertinent poetic excerpts are included. Reference is made to the process of building design in texts, but the author admits that there are doubts concerning Maqrizi’s credibility as a source (112–113). Alami then elucidates a broad view of symbolism, one that goes beyond the single symbol to a broader, and somewhat speculative, symbolic system.

The rise of facade architecture is then examined in the context of mosque design. Unfortunately, the limited scope of the book precludes the study of contemporaneous developments in the eastern Islamic world, which could perhaps have benefited the work more than the, at times forced, comparisons made with Italian renaissance church designs by Alberti. The author conducts a detailed and eminently readable study of the introduction of the monumental arch portal into Fatimid mosque facades, as well as examining the initial lack of minarets at the mosque of al-Mahdiyya in Tunisia, founded in 912. He shows how in its original incarnation the layout of the Fatimid city of al-Mahdiyya was heavily influenced by classical design, a tradition presumed to be drawn from Arabic translations of late antique texts (137). Column distribution in the al-Mahdiyya mosque is examined, and an argument

is made that the result is due to a poetic-semiotic choice (141). Attention then turns to the Fatimid mosques in Cairo, and the author argues for a close link between the earlier al-Mahdiyya mosque and the later, and now dreadfully over-restored, al-Hakim mosque. The limited number of surviving Fatimid buildings is a major problem when attempting to establish their symbolic meaning, and the chapter concludes with an examination of the surviving half of the facade of the al-Aqmar mosque.

The book draws on a number of written sources to present a richer and more nuanced view of how aesthetics, beauty and proportion were understood by scholars and philosophers in the Fatimid empire and beyond in the tenth century. This well-written and thought provoking book presents a number of interesting ideas, and challenges much of the existing scholarship on Fatimid architecture, using a range of textual sources to support the arguments. It is a volume which fits firmly into the strain of scholarship which take an essentialist and text-based approach to the material culture of the medieval Islamic world, and will be greatly appreciated by readers drawn to such an approach.

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