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**Color and Ornamentation as an Expression of Social Status and
its Impact on the Lebanese Architectural Development**

By

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Abstract:

Color and ornamentation are remarkable elements present through diverse forms in the Lebanese architecture. Throughout history, Lebanon has been the crossroad of a variety of cultures and civilizations. Diverse currents coming from the East and the West including the Canaanites, the Phoenicians, the Greek, the Roman, the Franks, the Mamluk, the Ottoman rule and the French mandate carried new forms. Many concepts, new technologies and socio-cultural aspects merged with the local tradition to unfold into what we currently know as Lebanese architecture. The rich historic background contributed to molding and evolution of social classes which was translated into architectural language to express social, religious and cultural status. Colors and forms are key elements in identifying the source of influence of a particular architectural feature. By closely analyzing a façade's ornamentation and color use, valuable information imbedded in the details can shed light on the evolution of the structure throughout its existence. The marks left by successive different cultures identify the background and particularities of the occupants. The value and significance of materials and colors are closely related to availability and cost. Some local and other imported, pigments and dyes were extensively used in the decoration of ceilings, internal walls, and entrances. Colored stones and marble were also widely used in exterior ornamentation which was closely related to the socio-economic and cultural background. This study will attempt to identify the origin of certain colors/ornamentations their meaning and use.

Key words: color ornamentation architecture history

Introduction

Color and ornamentation are remarkable elements present through diverse forms in the Lebanese architecture (Fig.1). Throughout history, Lebanon was the crossroad of a variety of cultures and civilizations. From the Canaanites, the Phoenicians, the Greek and the Roman, followed by the Franks, the Mamluk, the Ottoman rule and French mandate, to the independence in 1943; diverse currents coming from the East and the West carried new forms. Many concepts, new technologies and socio-cultural aspects merged with the local tradition to unfold into what we currently know as Lebanese architecture. The rich historic background contributed to the molding and evolution of social classes which was translated into architectural language to express social, religious and cultural status. Colors and forms are key elements in identifying the source of influence of a particular architectural feature. By closely analyzing a façade its ornamentation, and color use, valuable information imbedded in the details can shed light on the evolution of the structure throughout its existence. The marks left by successive different cultures identify the background and particularities of the occupants.

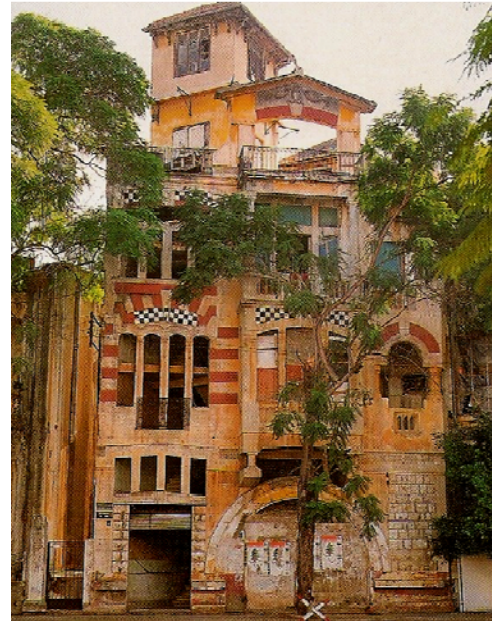


Fig. 1 Saliba [5]

Color-salience relates to different experiences of colors in a particular culture. Even though the color terminology follows similar patterns as discussed by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay in their work entitled *Basic Color Terms* in 1969, certain color use and meaning tend to vary from one culture to another [01]. The color use and value depend on the origin of the pigments, its abundance, and the difficulty of its acquisition, as well as religious and cultural significance. This distinction is well observed in Indian culture where the mourning color is white, the red is associated with weddings, and black is the symbol of evil [02]. Some early writings refer to colors and their glossary, especially in professional groups like horse breeders and traders who since Antiquity played an important role in keeping records of their activity and consequently in communicating the particularities of their culture to others.[01]

Red:

Very little is known on how the early settlers of the Lebanese coast used colors in their architecture. The few remains dating back to this period are foundations outlining the

- Bright Tyrian Purple (Bright Imperial Purple) (Tyrian Pink) (Hex: #B80049) (RGB: 184, 0, 73)
- Medium Tyrian Purple (Medium Imperial Purple) (Tyrian Red) (Hex: #990024) (RGB: 153, 0, 36)
- Tyrian Purple (Imperial Purple) (Hex: #66023C) (RGB: 102, 2, 60)

Fig 2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyrian_purple

perimeter of the dwellings [03]. The early Greek and Hellenistic writings mention the Phoenicians to be main producers and traders of the *Tyrian* purple (fig.2) referred to as the royal or “imperial purple”. The extremely high cost of this dye production dictated and controlled its use. Twelve thousand snails of *Murex* were needed to produce 1.4g of purple dye enough to color only the trim of a single garment [04]. The imperial dye was restricted for the coloring of silks of the elite of the imperial family: the *porphyrogenitos*, meaning “born in purple”. The sky-blue indigo shade was also produced from a similar sea shell when processed in sunlight. The use of these two colors was translated into architectural language and was used to stress the high social status and wealth. The red color retained its value throughout the ages. When first introduced, the red tiling of the roof was only affordable by the rich elite and being visible from a distance discerned this particular construction from the rest of the dwellings (Fig.3). The introduction of floor tiling in apartment buildings followed its presence in palaces and was confined to a large marble slab in the central hall and to red brick tiles in the remaining space. Later development of tiling of interior and exterior floors included a wide variety of geometric and floral designs (Fig.4). The colors used were mainly black, white, red yellow and brown [05]. The floral patterns were copied from Venitian art introduced to Lebanese architecture by the Maan and Shihab dynasties where added to the geometric and floral designs of the Islamic art [06]. It was common to find the coordination of several patterns in the tiling of one room and the use of different designs for adjacent rooms.

Black & White

The use of black and white colors is typical of the Mamluk period architecture (Fig.5). The alternating stripes of white and black marble decorate the entrances to mosques, madrasas and palaces [07]. In the Islamic color symbolism the black is associated with power, influence and represents the Prophet’s turban while the white is related to purity and peace [08]. The use of these alternating colors is found in tiles, interior walls and ceiling



Fig. 3 Baskinta, H. Melki 2009



Fig. 4 Saliba [5]



Fig. 5 Tripoli, H. Melki, 2009

decorations. The black colored stone was used in wall construction in the northern areas of Lebanon, Akkar, due to their abundance (Fig.6). These walls were then painted with white *houara*: very fine powdered lime base mixed with water and pieces of straw (Fig.7). The black was avoided for two reasons: first it is the color of death, misfortune and evil in the Christian culture and secondly if has the tendency to absorb heat and causes the temperature of the structure to rise. The *houara* is known for its antiseptic qualities, and was frequently used to clean the interior walls which were blackened from indoor heating, coking and lighting. The white surface was also preferred to gain luminance of the interior space. In many vernacular buildings the dominating color of the walls followed the availability of construction materials. During the Crusaders period the construction was done with stones of previously existing structures and what was found in nature close to the construction site. The mixture of small and large stones is visible over the consistent large scale of building stones. The need for fortification and shelter made speed the key factor guiding the construction. Minor decorative elements restricted to engraving of the cross and encryptions (Fig. 8).

Blue:

In the context of Islamic color symbolism the blue is the sign of protection, safeguarding and high status. The mosques cupolas and mausoleums were often covered with blue colored mosaics. This elaborate and expensive decoration was only affordable by the ruling elite who elevated religious construction to glorify and thank God for victory and success. The entrances of these buildings were covered by semi circular vaulted shape elements with intricate design and extensive use of colors. The *muquarnas* were considered by some scholars to be the architectural metaphor for the atomistic theology and that the changing repetitiveness and the defiance of gravity is a symbol of God's infinite wisdom and power (Fig.9 & 10). Muquarnas was also constructed over the



Fig. 6 Al-Menjez, H. Melki 2009



Fig. 7 Interior Al-Memjez, H. Melki 2009



Fig. 8 Al-Khonshara, H. Melki 2009

fine *minbars* of mosques and when light was directed towards to structure, it evoked the starry night sky arching over the standing person [09].

Earth-Tones: Brown & Yellow

The early Christian settlers used earth colors in their construction. They selected remote and difficultly accessed sites to escape persecution. Caves and natural cavities in mountains were the base of their homes (Fig.11). The building material was collected from the natural environment which included mud bricks, hand cut stone and wood (Fig.12). Their choice helped in camouflaging and protecting their dwellings from the eyes of intruders. This is captured in the St. Marmaroun in the Hermel area as well as the seclusion cells of the monks of Mar Izhaya monastery. Earth colors were frequently used in the dwelling of the commoners since the construction material was extracted from the surrounding environment and the homes blended in the nature's fabric. The yellow sandy stone was used whenever its abundance in the natural environment was found.

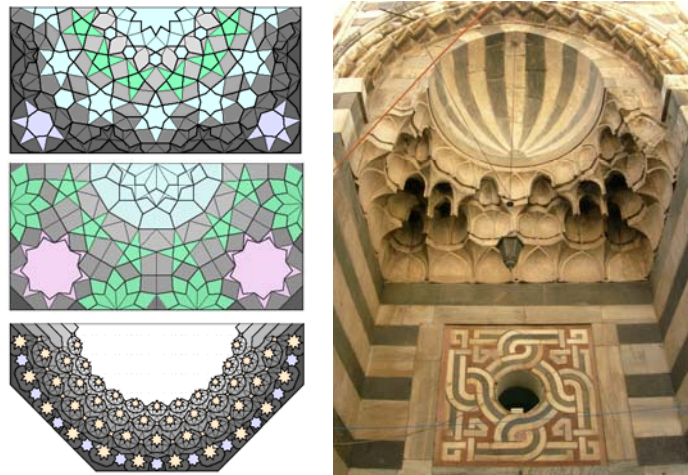


Fig. 9. Muquarnas [13] & Fig.10. Tripoli, H. Melki, 2008



Fig. 11 Mar Maroun – Al-Aassi, H. Melki 2009



Fig. 12 El-Hermel, H. Melki 2009

Ornament a particularity of the golden era of Lebanese architectural history was the expression of a precise and well conceived architectural function. It was related to the domestic life, the family's wealth and status, the dwelling's relationship to the town and landscape expressing signs of welcome and hospitality. These elements were never gratuitous and gained in refinement and intricacy under the influence of foreign cultures [10]. Many such examples of merging of different decoration origins are present in balcony supports, window and door frames, ceilings, arches and rooftops (Fig.13). This portrays the political and social role played by the Lebanese aristocracy in uniting cultures from the East and the West [03].



Fig. 13 Rashayya Al-Wadi (left), Chebaa (middle) and Hasbayya, H. Melki 2009

It is relevant to explore the origins of the ornaments in respect to their relation to nature, their meaning and use in each of the cultures that affected the Lebanese architecture. It is obvious that the rich decorative repertoire of architecture was plucked from the world of nature and inspiration was dictated by the ability of humans to listen and meekly surrender

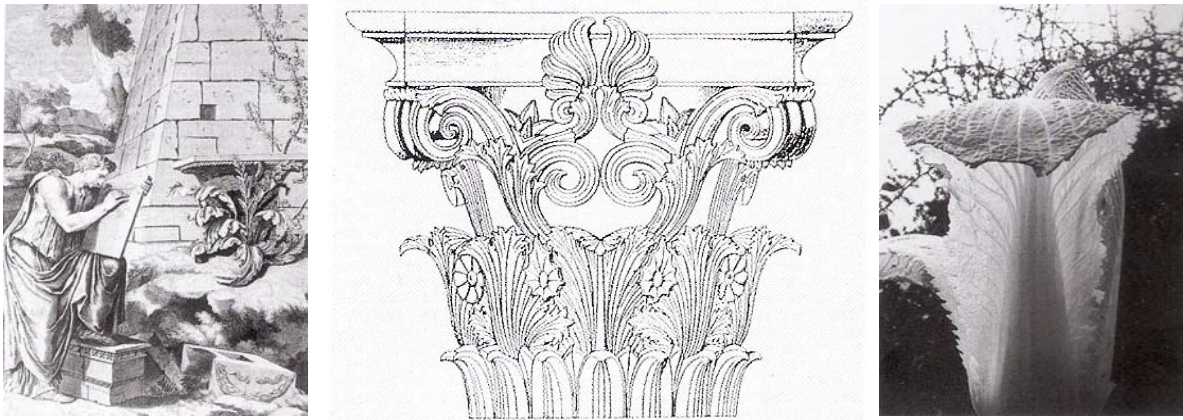


Fig. 14 The genesis of the Corinthian capital [11]

to its laws [11] (Fig.14). Frank Lloyd Wright wrote: “both melody and ornament reach us by way of the soul of all Creation and as we are made we respond.” Academic classification divides the ornate into two large groups: geometric and naturalistic decorations [11]. Both groups however follow direct and structural imitation of natural forms to express feelings, religious beliefs, and theoretical concepts. Geometrical forms evolved through abstraction, different types of symmetry, structural repetition and filtered by geometry and mathematics (Fig.15).

Many of the selected natural elements related to sanctified objects. The horns of ram, considered sacred in Greek civilization found their way to the top of

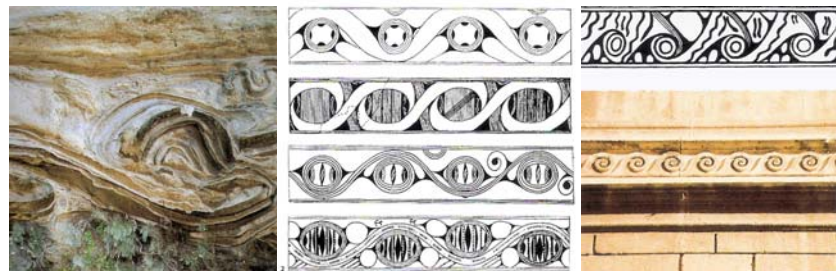


Fig.15 Natural forms & geometry [11]

supporting columns of the Acropolis in Athens (Fig.16). The well-identified pattern of the comb composed of superimposed rhombi symbolizes the flight of the butterfly and the spiral, all symbols associated with the regeneration. Other patterns representing water and waves are connected to the idea of femininity and generation such as zigzag, parallel, straight and curved lines that are often inserted in boxes. In some cases the pubic triangle is interpreted as the final sprout of a twig with numerous branches capturing the similarity of human and plant fertility.



Fig. 16 Genesis of the Ionic Order [11]

The work of historians in this domain tends to be both difficult and deceptive due to the presence of non-synchronic phases between forms and their meaning. The evolution of these patterns is sometimes associated with the change of taste in the productive process of creative and artistic spirit [11].

The calligraphy, an expressive artistic form extensively developed, was the centre of attention of the Arab culture. It found its way into the architectural decoration in form of epitaphs and chronograms. By analyzing the characteristics of writing style, the meaning of its content and hidden symbols; it is possible date the edifice, identify its patron and the occasion celebrated by its construction (Fig.17). The calligraphy was popular during the Mamluk period which accompanied the large scale of construction and ornamentation.



Fig. 17. The translation reads: “*The pious slave of God, Muhammad al-Sukkar, may God forgive him, has ordered the construction of this blessed mausoleum. It was completed at the beginning of the month of Ramadan in the year seven hundred and sixty-six (May A.D. 1365)*”. [12]

The first script used during that period was the *naskh* with the *thuluth* within the same calligraphic composition. The second *al-Tiraz* characterized by a written text in a frame coupled with ornament inserts to fill up the gaps between the words. The *kufic* style was rarely used during that period unlike other Islamic stages. Some of the concerns of the local authorities were expressed through inscriptions with the intention of sending a message to the ruling authority [12] (Fig.18).



Fig. 18. The translation reads: “On the date of the first tenth of Rabi' al-Awwal of the year eight hundred and twenty-one (April 8-17, 1418), the royal edict of Sultan al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad Abu al-Nasr Shaykh arrived which decreed that nothing should be levied from the Inhabitants of the waqf of Jami' al-Attar by the inspectors; that there should be no auctions and no injustices; that the requests of those praying may be granted. Those who comply would be compensated, and those who oppose would draw upon themselves the anger of God and the maledictions of all angels and all men. Amen.” [12]

During the Christian spread in Lebanon, different artistic forms were found in churches and monasteries. Stained glass, inscriptions, icons, sculpture, etc. all were increasingly elaborated with the development of culture. The rationale behind the development of such art forms is in the glorification of God, indication of the power of the church and attracting pagan people to convert to Christianity. Churches and monasteries were architecturally fortified due to their purpose of sanctuary in times of war, persecution and natural disasters. Similar to the Islamic elaboration and attention to inscription, the dating carved in stone or wood guided historians and archeologists in their quest for tracking the development and overlapping of cultures. In the West Church of Bakirha the inscriptions found upon the gateway indicates the earliest dated example of the use of pilasters in the Christian architecture of Syria [14]. The following examples illustrate a sample of these epitaphs and chronograms (Fig.19, 20, 21).



Fig. 19 Epitaph (left) St. Quzhayya - Wadi Quannoubin and Epitaph (middle and right) Church of our Lady – Aajaltoun – Photographed by H. Melki 2008

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WADI QUANNOUBIN

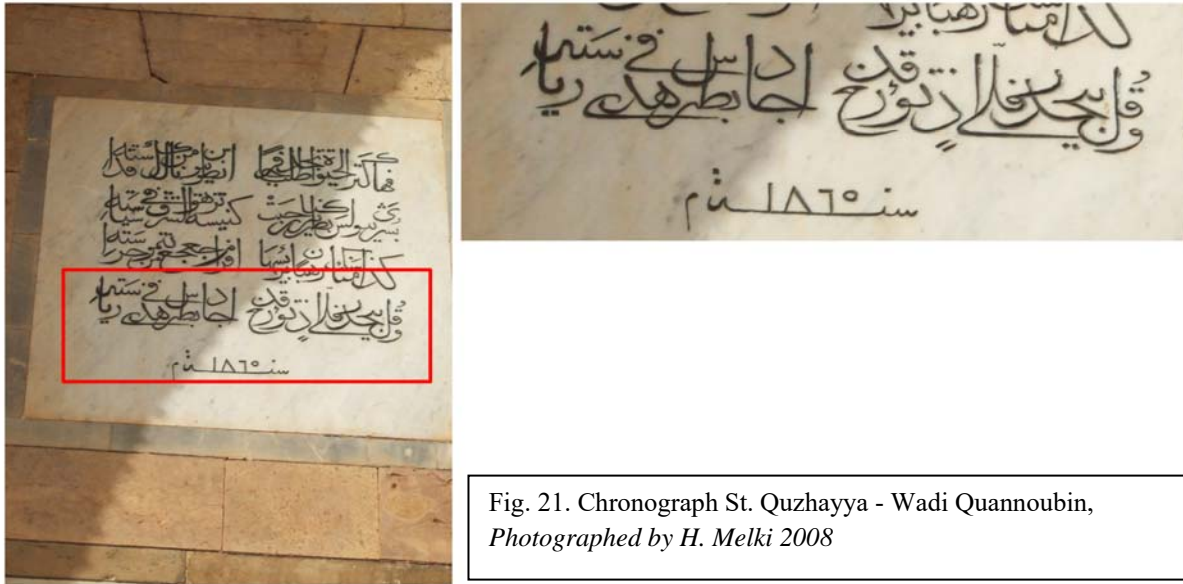


Fig. 21. Chronograph St. Quzhayya - Wadi Quannoubin, Photographed by H. Melki 2008

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Church of our Lady - AAJALTOUN

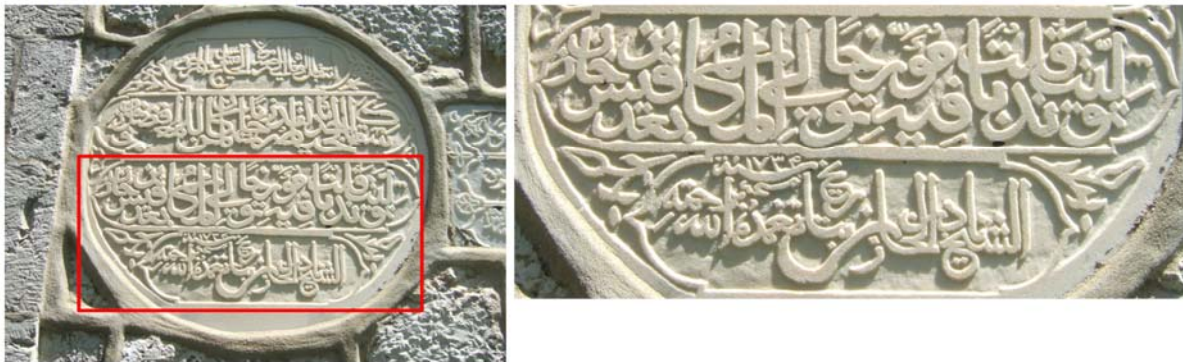


Fig. 20. Chronograph: Church of our Lady – Ajaltoun – Photographed by H. Melki 2008

By closely analyzing the ornamentation in Lebanese architecture it is possible to link the forms and patterns used to different cultures. The house of a commoner did not bear ornamentation and its presence reflected the financial status of its occupants (Fig.22). Some basic decorative elements engraved into the wooden supporting posts were mainly geometric repetitive carvings from different origins. The Younine in Kfar Nabrah holds several decorative elements in its interior partitions. The twisted cord was used by Byzantine craftsman and later copied by the



Fig. 22 Ham, H. Melki 2009

Mamluk. Its use continued to appear in several decorations later on. The repetitive patterns were copied from the ornaments that appeared earlier in Roman temples depicting the offerings seeking approval of gods for prosperity and fertility. While in the Christian structures, the cross symbol dominated patterns within the ornamentation in the aim of God's blessing and protection.

The century of Frankish domination and the strong connections with Italy were responsible for saving the Christian minorities of Lebanon from isolation. The eagerness to copy the artistic forms of the West manifested their relatedness. The Byzantine fortification technique was continued by the Crusaders by adding pointed vaults and Gothic details. This created instruction for the local craftsmen which resulted in perfect execution of pointed groin vaults. In the Middle-Ages, the Venetian architecture was very popular. The similarity of details is particularly striking in the carefully executed stone-masonry construction. Doors stone frames were either segmental or pointed arches (Fig. 23). The windows were grouped in two or three elements. During the fifteenth century the trefoil arch with an ogee ending became frequent. The window-sill either projecting, or resting upon corbels and is used as a shelf for flower pots. The triple windows reached the floor and had railings or small balconies attached. The framing of some windows or groups of windows was decorated by friezes and round medallions between arches [15].

The most fragrant feature of Lebanese architecture is the arch element used in openings (doors/windows), partitions, passageways, structure (vaulting) and decoration. The different forms, within the Lebanese framework, come from different origins and the overlapping of different influences (Fig.24).



Fig. 23a Segmented (top) and 23b Pointed Arches – H. Melki

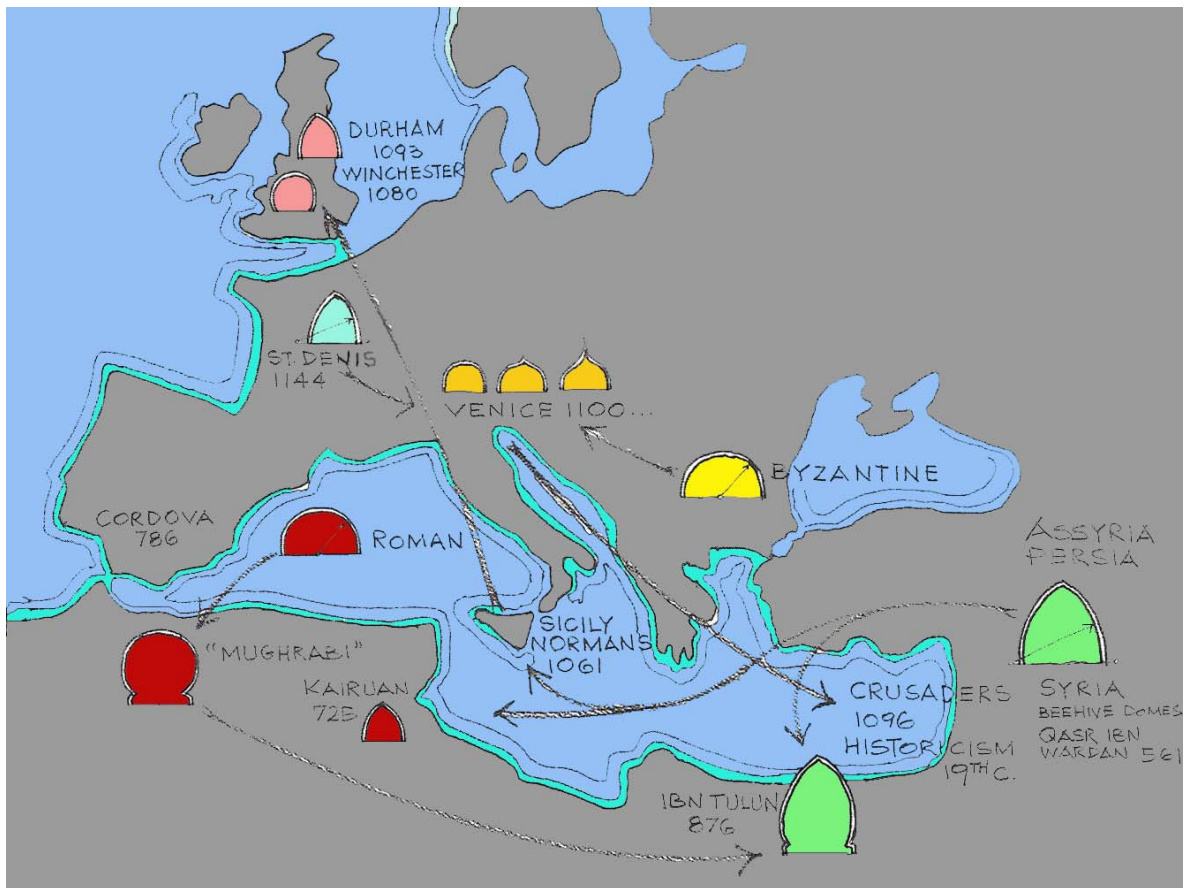


Fig. 24. Migration of Arch Forms [15]

The Roman arched semi-circular window (Fig.25b) borrowed new features from the Islamic style and became the pointed arched window (Fig.25a), a particularity of Lebanese architecture [16]. The arch-shaped windows and the introduction of columns in the configuration are indications of Roman, Italian and Venetian architecture at different intervals of time.

By following geographic location and commercial inclination it is possible to trace the influences and development of arch styles. The pointed arch was grafted on to the semicircular arch, bringing about the ogee and trefoil arch (Fig.25, H. Melki) characteristic



Fig. 25a The Pointed Arch



Fig. 25b The semi-circular



Fig. 25c The Ogee Arch



Fig. 25d Trefoil Arch

of Gothic Venice. The horseshoe arches, the pointed arch, the ogee and the multi-foil arch are all of eastern heritage. Regarding the round horseshoe arch, it's the true home is Spain and North Africa. It is not surprising for the pointed and horseshoe arch combination to occur in Egypt (Fig.24) [15].

The handling of facades as one continuous surface; the free distribution of openings and a structural superposition or arcades, the shifting of axes, the tendency to increased openness in the upper floor and the finishing of walls in geometric patterns are all oriental traits. After the exile of Fakhreddin to Tuscany, Italian craftsmen worked on embellishments and modernization of the palace according to European taste [15].

Due to the presence of classical Roman architecture, Lebanese architecture retained its non-classical medieval character by continuing the use of pointed or multi-foil arches, plain cylindrical column shafts of very slender proportions and some ornamentation [15].

From the middle of the nineteenth century, Gothic elements appeared in the details. The capitals with foliage decoration, the pointed or double curved forms of divisions in the lights of the triple arcade, and appearance of mouldings are indicative of this tendency [15].

Conclusion

Lebanese richness in color and ornamentation, in regards to architecture, was the subject of many studies by historians and artist on the national and international levels. It is with no doubt that that this area of research has not been fully explored and understood. Due to uncertainties and lack of written documents, speculations and assumptions sometimes must be made to fill the gaps and missing links.

Preserving the Lebanese culture comes at precedent times for our new generation. We must emphasize on linking our past to the future in order to establish cultural continuity. It is by opening their eyes to the richness and diversity of our culture that we unlock the door of curiosity and inquisition that raises questions about its existence.

It is our duty as educators to expose venturing minds in directions were they can discover the diversity of the colorful and beautiful land we live in.



Fig. 26 Aalma El-Chaab - H. Melki 2009

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