Mamluk metalwork fittings in their artistic and architectural context

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Conclusion

The aim of this study was to present a hitherto largely neglected body of metalwork objects and to trace their development throughout the Mamluk period. The very nature of metalwork fittings – functioning as they do within architecture – offered the opportunity to study metalwork in the context for which it was originally intended, a situation that is lost for most portable objects. These metalwork fittings embody a certain dualism. On the one hand they were connected to, and inspired by, the techniques and designs employed on portable metalwork objects and especially lamps. On the other hand, their installation in the façades and entrance portals of public buildings gives them a heightened visibility and relates them closely to the patronage of architecture and the different media used in it.

Symmetry and repetition are the keywords by which the aesthetic of Mamluk metalwork fittings is defined. On the whole, the surface of doors, grilles, and window shutters is subdivided into compartments in a symmetrical layout. Each of these clearly defined spaces is filled with small repetitive decorative motifs, be they geometric, such as star patterns, or foliate, such as winding scrolls with bifurcated leaves. The metalworkers were fond of using the suggestion of infinite patterns that were strictly bordered by circles or rectangles. Where the patterns touched the borders, they were halved, or even quartered, evoking the illusion of infinity even more as the pattern was only momentarily stopped.

The decorative motifs most profusely used on Mamluk fittings are geometry, foliate designs, and epigraphy. Although the meaning of star patterns and foliate motifs is still a topic debated among scholars – besides their strong optical effect, their import escapes us somewhat – the message conveyed by the inscriptions is loud and clear. They consist for the most part of bold statements of ownership. Mamluk metalworkers must be credited with concern for the legibility of these texts, distributed as they are in two oblong bands at the top and the base of doors and window shutters. This arrangement – in which specific locations were reserved for epigraphy – became standardized quite early in the Mamluk period. Irrespective of the type of ornament, the decorative motifs transformed the two-dimensional surface into something that was alive, full of movement, with a sense of infinity, and into something that had a three-dimensional quality through the addition of relief or openwork plaques.

When the development of Mamluk metalwork fittings is traced throughout the Mamluk period, a certain archaism makes itself felt. Not only do the designs of most doors, doorknockers, and window grilles adhere to a limited set of types, but a restricted range of decorative motifs and techniques can also be discerned. This continuity of types and styles hinders the attribution of dates and provenances for detached objects.

Different explanations might be proposed for this conservatism. A clearly recognisable design did offer the benefit of identifying the function of the object within a building: the recurrence of doors of the overall star pattern or the medallion type at the entrance of religious buildings in Cairo could thus act as an exclamation mark to draw people into a building. In addition, a fashion for this style might have stimulated the continuous use of certain designs, certainly when they were deemed to be successful for their optical effect. Simultaneously, it had the financial advantage that there was no need for time-consuming design. Thirdly, their installation in a rather conservative and public environment might have inhibited metalworkers

from integrating entirely new ideas into these showpieces. And finally, the use of *topoi* that were understood by both the Mamluk elite and by the public as being connected to the upper echelons of society might have been a strong argument for the continuation of certain types and designs.

The adherence to an approved style in combination with the patron's names identifying the individual donor connects the patron not only to the Mamluks of his time but also to his predecessors. This desire for historical continuity is most obvious when certain designs are purposefully revived, as in the case of the overall star pattern doors that reappear during the reign of Sultan al-Ghūrī. The implicit reference to the grandeur of the Baḥrī sultans, or even to preceding dynasties, can also be observed in other media in Mamluk architecture.[1] The archaism that has been interpreted by modern critics as a sign of weakness in the art of Mamluk metalwork was used intentionally to represent signs of strength and to evoke the world of the elite.

For all this archaism, it is, however, important to note that in the details Mamluk metalworkers did conduct experiments and introduce innovations. On a technical level, there was experimentation with an increase in the quantity of inlaid precious metals, and with an alternative use of inlay as a means to hide nails, a feature surely related to woodwork. For optical effect, metalworkers played with the concentration and distribution of nails on a surface. They examined various ways in which to suggest depth: by playing with the effect of light, by using contrasting designs in the fore- and background of openwork, and by juxtaposing densely engraved areas with areas that were hardly touched. It is in the details that metalworkers distinguished themselves from their colleagues, thus creating a more personalised object. Patrons might have stimulated such experiments by providing the necessary financial back-up. Irrespective of who was ultimately responsible for these innovations, a balance between innovation and the individualisation of an object on the one hand and an adherence to archaism on the other hand can be seen in Mamluk architecture at large.[2]

Mamluk metalworkers introduced and developed a number of new types, among which were the medallion door and the doorknocker that consisted of a large embossed disk. They should also be credited with the increased importance of inscriptions, which were even integrated on such small surfaces as the bosses of a grille. For the most part, however, the decorative repertoire that characterises Mamluk fittings consisted of the already approved – and clearly much appreciated – types of ornament used on pre-Mamluk fittings. Mamluk metalworkers were inspired by and built upon the experience of pre-existing metalworking traditions of fittings, on the techniques and designs used on contemporary portable metalwork objects, and on the designs displayed in various other materials used for doors and window grilles, such as wood, stucco, and marble. In addition, there was a vast array of identical designs and ornament shared by other media, such as illuminated frontispieces of Qurʾāns and leather bookbindings, and woodwork and marble *minbar*s.

It seems that a concerted effort aimed at stimulating the wide use of certain motifs, such as an institutionalised *kitābkhāna*, was absent in Mamluk times. A less formal exchange of ideas might have been encouraged by the use of pattern books or of designers, whose presence in the markets of Cairo is referred to by al-Maqrīzī.[3] Furthermore, the actual layout of Mamluk cities, where large groups of craftsmen were located in close proximity, facilitated the dissemination of decorative motives. Inspiration could also be

[1] Meinecke (1985), 169–70; for the deliberate revival by the Mamluks of the vine-frieze and the use of glass mosaics, both extensively used by the Umayyads in the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, see Flood (1997), 71–74.
[2] Asfour (2000), 239.
[3] Maqrīzī (1853) II, 101, 105.

gained from the designs used on pre-Mamluk and Mamluk religious and charitable monuments, open to the public, that were scattered around the selfsame locations where the workshops were established. The appearance of similar designs on a wide variety of media during the Mamluk period gives evidence of a Zeitgeist in which craftsmen in different *métiers* were drawn to a single aesthetic.

What are the implications for the visibility of fittings in fixed positions? In the façade, doors often act as showpieces, visually dominating the space because they belong to the most exuberantly decorated parts of the building, not least since they are framed by portals which, by their often excessive height, are visually dominant. The visual intention of both portal and door is the same: both aspire after verticality, symmetry, compartmentalization, and playfulness owing to the use of colour and relief. Their overlaps are generic only. These generic links are accounted for by their obedience to the 'Mamluk style', not by precise orders to integrate the design and decoration of both the door and the portal. There seems to have been no deliberate programme intended to fine-tune the decoration of the door to the portal that framed it.

A lack of visual integration is also apparent between metalwork fittings that share the same space, such as doors and their attached doorknockers. Not only do doorknockers block part of the decoration on a door once they are attached but, more importantly, they were only seldom designed as an entity. They are on the whole conceived independently from one another as far as the design and decoration is concerned, for each adheres to the characteristics of its specific type. The hope that a clear visual integration between fittings that share the same space, such as doors and doorknockers do, would permit the attribution of detached doorknockers to specific doors on the basis of overlaps in design, decoration, or even technique has therefore proved illusory. This lack of coherence between two objects that take in the same space is not entirely foreign to Mamluk art or architecture. A similar observation has been made about Mamluk buildings in general by Grabar: "A Mamluk building is very rarely perceived as a whole building [..], but rather as a small number of repetitive parts (dome, gate, minaret) which presuppose a building but are not necessarily visually integrated into it". [4]

The size and location of fittings in conspicuous locations does more than enhance their visibility. The intricate parts of the decoration, especially in the higher zones of these fittings, are lost to the viewer. In addition to this, the tradition common in Cairo of attaching doorknockers at an unattainable height, which also excludes their use for knocking on the door, hampers one from admiring their finer points, while their location makes it impossible to read the circular inscriptions on their suspension disks. Irrespective of the final destination of the composite parts, all segments were treated equally. Here the public element expressed in the size of the fittings, and their strong lines that facilitate the grasping of the greater design from afar, contrasts with the minute rendering of the surface that calls for close and private observation.

On the whole, the industry of fittings should be understood as a local craft. Not only was a wide variety of skills available in such centres as Cairo and Damascus, as mentioned by contemporary travellers and chroniclers, but local production also seems more practical, for the dimensions of the fittings were intimately related to the buildings in which they were installed. Moreover, vast quantities of these fittings were needed to keep up with the frenzied building activities of this period. This image of the craft as being entirely city-bound can, however, be modified. A workshop from Aleppo was sent for to restore the doors of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus during the late 15th century, while in the same period metalworkers were dispatched on the order of Sultan Qāitbāy from Cairo to Medina to help rebuild large parts of the mausoleum

[4] Grabar (1984), 9.

of the Prophet. In addition, patrons showed a willingness to transport fittings of extraordinary make over vast distances, as exemplified by the technically virtuoso inlaid door installed in the *qibla* wall in the *madrasa* of Sultan Ḥasan but made in Damascus, and the huge grille manufactured in Cairo for the *maqṣūra* in the mausoleum of the Prophet in Medina. It exemplifies the attitude of Mamluk patrons at large to engage workshops of repute irrespective of their domicilium, money permitting.[5] The transfer of workshops and fittings from Damascus and Aleppo shows that the craft of fitting-making in these centres was more diversified that the extant body of material in these two cities disclose.[6]

The scale of the industry of Mamluk metalwork fittings as it presents itself to us today in the extant objects is unprecedented in any other contemporary dynasty. A dramatic loss of objects in the Eastern Islamic world, exemplified in the city of Sultaniyya newly erected by the Mongols between 705/1305 and 713/1314, where according to the encyclopaedist al-Nuwayrī 3000 smiths were employed to work sheets of metal (*ṣafā'iḥ*), windows (*shabābīk*), and nails, warns us not to minimise the scale of the fittings industry elsewhere.[7] More systematic research on the fittings of other contemporary dynasties such as the Mongols, Timurids, Nasrids and Marinids would not only help to complement the picture of their respective metalworking traditions, on the one hand, but it could also serve as a tool for comparing the craft of metalwork fittings within the Mamluk period with other contemporary and earlier crafts elsewhere, on the other hand. Topics such as a possible exchange of ideas and motives, and the differences in quantity and quality of the output, might thereby be addressed.

Be that as it may, the large number of Mamluk metalwork fittings extant today is intimately connected to the building frenzy of the Mamluks whose prolific building activities were intended not only to consolidate their ties with the population as a foreign elite and to show their inclination towards Sunni belief but also to vie visually with their predecessors and contemporaries, to allow their names to live on and to grant their families, who could not inherit from them, a means of livelihood. This high demand explains the preference for techniques such as casting that helped to multiply fittings easily. As objects were needed in bulk it does not seem improbable that parts of fittings were kept in store. In addition to this, the continuous habitation of cities like Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo and Jerusalem safeguarded the conservation and upkeep of religious monuments vital to Islam.

The picture of a large industry connected to lavish patronage needs to be modified on two points. Firstly, there is a clear discrepancy of extant fittings between Cairo and other centres like Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem, and Tripoli. Partly, this mirrors the actual situation, as the quantity of buildings constructed in Cairo – and thus the fittings incorporated in them – exceeds that of the other centres by far. It is the combination of royal and amiral patrons alike that pushes the craft of metalwork fittings in the main capital city to another level. In addition, the picture is partly distorted by the loss of objects and the depredations visited on Damascus and Aleppo in particular.[8] Attacks by foreign invaders not only inspired

[5] For the 'international' approach in Mamluk architecture, see Meinecke (1992) I, 106–52.
[6] In addition to this, the uniform picture of Damascus using doors of the panelled type only in the Mamluk period seems to be too restricted, especially when taking into account that this city already harboured a pre-Mamluk overall star pattern door in the *bīmāristān* of Nūr al-Dīn b. Zengī. The presence of plaques resembling those on medallion doors and overall star pattern doors on a ship that had set sail from Syria in the early 15th century and which had wrecked, recorded in Misch-Brandl (1985), 17 and pls. 34, 38, also suggests a more varied picture.
[7] Little (1978), 173.
[8] The original hope was that different centres of metalwork production could be distinguished on the basis of parameters such as the use of specific techniques, the employment of distinct decorative motifs, or specific layouts of objects. The scarcity of fittings in the regional centres, unfortunately, simply does not allow such distinctions.

destruction and looting – also of fittings – but necessitated a flow of money to the reconstruction of entire neighbourhoods instead of to the embellishment of individual monuments.

The picture of continuous lavish patronage also needs to be modified for Cairo, as different phases in the development of fittings can be distinguished. The decline of the industry in the first half of the 15th century, visible not only in the sheer reduction of the quantity of extant material, the restriction of the locations in which fittings were installed, but also in the lack of experiments, mirrors the economic, political, and social crisis of the period at large. This temporary decline might be explained by a dearth in copper as Allan has suggested, but a far more compelling reason for this lies in the absence of patrons who were able, and willing, to invest profusely.[9] Sultans and amirs did continue to commission constructions, but these were on a lesser scale and of a more modest impact. Strangely enough, the use of silver inlay pops up occasionally during the first three decades of this century, albeit in a far less pretentious way than in the late 14th century. Was its continuation connected to the visibility of these fittings in the public sphere that underlined the glory of the patron even in times of distress? Or was the craft of inlaying still alive, irrespective of the remarks made by al-Maqrīzī about the decline of the craft during this period and the simultaneous total dearth in extant portable inlaid objects?

The types, designs, and decorative motives that define Mamluk metalwork fittings continued even in post-Mamluk times. Their role in Ottoman buildings continued, if on a lesser scale and in a different direction, for a shift is discernable from the patronage of metalwork doors to the commissioning of baroque-like window grilles. This is not surprising, given their favoured patronage of the less costly but symbolically very important building type of the *sabīl-kuttāb*, in which the windows were the main focus of the façade. A conscious revival of Mamluk metalwork fittings in the 19th century as part of a much larger movement which sought to resuscitate decorative motifs from the past into newly built secular or religious buildings brought about a renewed flowering of the Mamluk manner. Many of these were inspired by conscious admiration for the Mamluk period and its crafts. Thus the tenacious hold of the Mamluk style on the imagination of Egyptian and Syrian craftsmen has continued right into modern times.

[9] Allan (1984). Future research on metalwork fittings can perhaps benefit from scientific analysis of the composition of the alloys of fittings produced throughout the Mamluk period, as has been done for portable objects in a limited number of studies, such as those of Craddock (1983); Atıl [*et al.*] (1985); Craddock [*et al.*] (1983); Heidemann (2002); Heidemann (2006). This might elucidate such matters as the debasing of materials, which would be related to the economic situation. Moreover, it could help to differentiate Mamluk metalwork objects from post-Mamluk fittings and thus supplement arguments based upon stylistic and technical comparisons alone.