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The restorations of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe in Egypt: "Conservation" or "reinvention" of monuments? = Les restaurations du Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe en Égypte: « conservations » ou « réinvention » des monuments?

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Summary

This PhD dissertation scrutinizes and analyzes the restoration works of the *Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe* (hereafter *Comité*), *Laġnat Ḥifẓ al-Ātār al-ʿArabiyya al-Qadīma*, The Commission for the Preservation of Monuments of Arab Art. The *Comité* was established in Egypt in December 1881 under the Ministry of *Awqāf* [Islamic religious endowments] and operated under it until 1936, when it was transferred to the Ministry of Public Instruction. The *Comité* was the government agency in charge of the conservation and restoration of Islamic (and later also Coptic / Egyptian Christian) monuments and remained active till the 1950s. It was not officially abolished but laws and decrees issued in the 1950s could be considered as steps leading to its 'transformation' and eventual 'end' as initially established. Its responsibilities then fell under the newly established Administration of Antiquities [*maṣlaḥat al-ātār*]. Throughout its history, the *Comité* members were composed of Egyptians and Europeans, who were specialists and scholars as well as ex-officio officials and civil servants.

The dissertation questions whether the *Comité's* restorations could be considered from the art historical perspective as 'conservation' or 'reinvention' of monuments. It researches the interventions on minarets, domes and *minbars* [pulpits] of Mamluk mosques, examining the rationale behind the restoration decisions, and investigating how the analysis of the *Comité's* modern layer impacts our present comprehension of these historic structures and their 'authenticity'.

In the introduction, I explain that my interest in studying the *Comité's* work on Islamic monuments stems from my professional experience and academic background as an engineer and art historian specializing in cultural heritage conservation and management. This is followed by a brief overview of the main theories and protagonists of the international conservation and restoration movement in Europe during the nineteenth century. Attention is drawn that in the past and the present, each restoration intervention is a decision, taken based on certain sets of values and within specific political, social and cultural contexts. It is within this framework that the work of the *Comité* is discussed in this dissertation.

Chapter Two, "The *Comité's* work under scrutiny" frames the angle of this dissertation and its contributions. Previous scholarly works related to the *Comité* within the disciplines of art history, social sciences, heritage conservation and post-colonial theory are presented. Building on this, gaps in the research are identified and notions that need to be readdressed are discussed. It is highlighted that although art historians do indeed sometimes identify and list the *Comité's* modern layer on historic monuments, a study on how its analysis impacts our understanding of these buildings is so far lacking. Moreover, despite the wealth of research conducted on the *Comité*, its members and its work, many of its restoration methodologies await to be further researched; to date they are not placed within the international history of architectural conservation. Finally, it is suggested to explore what kind of information could be obtained on the *Comité* when moving beyond the post-colonial framework, within which it has been so far placed.

Chapter Three, "The *Comité* in context and in action", contextualizes the foundation of the *Comité* and discusses its history and activities. For centuries, Egypt, and especially Cairo, was a source of fascination for travelers and visitors, who documented the city and its monuments

through travelogues, maps, drawings, paintings, and later on, photographs. The nineteenth century saw a growing interest in Cairo but at the same time many of its historic architecture were in danger. These buildings, many of which were endowed [*waqf*, pl. *awqāf*] structures were in a bad state of conservation although the essence of the *waqf* system stipulates their regular upkeep and maintenance to ensure the perpetuity of their benefit; some renovation works were also changing the monuments historic fabric, and modernization was putting many of them at risk of being destroyed. The fascination with these monuments along with the concern for their protection led eventually to the foundation of the *Comité*. In addition, the chapter discusses the *Comité's* mandate, initial regulations, organizational structure, activities and work procedures, as well as its corpus of archival material (with written and iconographic sources). The *Comité's* discussions, activities, reports and studies (including some drawings and photographs) were regularly disseminated to a wider Egyptian and international audience through the publication of the *Comité* Bulletins as well as other publications written by its members. All this qualifies them to be considered as significant patrons and forefathers of the study of Islamic art and architecture in Egypt.

The case studies discussed in chapters four, five and six are presented in chronological order in order to trace how the restoration methodologies developed and/or changed over time, linking them whenever relevant to significant international circumstances and events. Each chapter provides art historical background information on the architectural element in question. Then the rationale used by the *Comité* for the restoration and/or reconstruction proposals is explored.

Chapter Four, “The *Comité's* interventions on Mamluk minarets”, demonstrates the damage incurred on several Cairene minarets as a result of earthquakes and other weaknesses of the structure, noting that the decisions to intervene on minarets were mainly triggered by the necessity to protect lives. It classifies three types of interventions, linking them to the conditions of the minarets when the *Comité* started its work: 1. dismantling and reconstructing the upper pavilions, which were still *in situ* but at risk of collapse; generally the same dismantled stones were reused in the reconstruction (long before ‘anastylosis’ was described in the 1964 Venice Charter); 2. reconstructing upper pavilions that were missing; 3. removing Ottoman pencil-like caps from Mamluk minarets and reconstructing them in Mamluk style.

Chapter Five, “The *Comité's* interventions on missing domes”, discusses the reconstruction of seven domes belonging to Mamluk buildings and the Nilometer’s cover using (with the exception of two cases) reinforced concrete. The rationale for the *Comité's* decision to use this new emerging material and system as opposed to other traditional materials is explored, presenting the international and local firms involved in the process. The reconstruction of these reinforced concrete domes took place arguably much earlier than others reconstructed in historic buildings in Europe, and certainly before the issuance of the Athens Charter (1931), which “approved [its] judicious use”.

In addition to domes and minarets, whose restorations involve structurally and technically complicated methodologies, chapter six explores “the *Comité's* interventions on Mamluk wooden *minbars*”. The *minbars'* intricate decorative features and importance for the religious sermon entail different challenges and restoration requirements. The condition of each

specific *minbar* governed the restoration methodology; in some cases, missing panels were replaced by newly manufactured decorative ones whose design was based on the original. Today, the description of a *minbar* as ‘authentic’ requires specifying whether reference is made to the ‘authenticity’ of the material, design, shape, and/or craftsmanship.

The dissertation concludes that the decisions taken by the *Comité* show that the overarching aim and philosophy was to respect and be faithful to the original structure and design. The most favorable approach was to find strong evidence, either through *in situ* material or earlier historic data, that inform on how the original shape looked like. When this was not available, the *Comité* reverted to a design in analogy with buildings from the same period and typology. In the absence of both possibilities a new design was adopted that today could either be considered as close to what the original might have looked like or as a reinvention and an anachronism.

It is argued that regardless of the nature of the intervention, its analysis is an indispensable undertaking for the comprehension of these architectural palimpsests composed of historic and modern layers. Such an endeavor is encouraged, especially because the *Comité* ensured that this information is faithfully transmitted to future generations through the traces it left in the archives and in publications as well as on the monuments themselves.

The research also demonstrates that the *Comité’s* approach was to balance on the one hand between the monuments’ historic and artistic values, and their functional and religious ones on the other.

Finally, it is emphasized that the factual and careful investigation of the specificities of the *Comité’s* actions and actors in a contextualized manner, without making *a posteriori* judgements and moving beyond the post-colonial discourses, reveals new nuanced narratives and interpretations.