

## **Introduction**

The Umayyad period is often considered the formative period in Islamic art. At first, even though Arabic became the official language and Islam the principal religion of the conquered lands, artists continued to work in their established manner. The main artistic influence came from the later antique classical naturalistic tradition, which had been prevalent on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean; the lands of Syrians and Byzantines. It is said that the Umayyad style of art is an interim era between the Christian and the Abbasid Art styles. Also the ornamental elements of this period were a mixture of several elements inherited from former civilizations like Hellenistic, Byzantine and Sassanian.

## **A brief to Byzantine Imagery**

### **(Icons)**

The word "icon" derives from the Greek "eikon" and means an image, any image or representation, but "in the more restricted sense in which it is generally understood, it means a holy image to which special veneration is given. Even though the word "icon" applies to all kinds of religious images -- those painted on wooden panels (icons proper), on walls (frescoes), those fashioned from small glass tesserae (mosaics) or carved in stone, metal or ivory -- we associate it most often with paintings on wood.

Icon painting appeared not as art for art's sake, but for the Church. Thus, its content was determined directly by the

needs and the purposes of the Church. These purposes were not material but spiritual.

The purpose and the ideal of Byzantine icon painting was the expression of the category of holiness, which was not made to appeal to the senses by being physically beautiful. In Christian art the beautiful is not determined by the natural form of the objects, but by its sublime content. Byzantine icon painting did not copy nature nor seek the form or the color as an end, but taking such technical and artistic elements as were necessary for the believers to become familiar with its spirit, succeeded, through an exceptional abstraction.

When we look at icons, we are struck by their apparent simplicity, by their overemphasized flatness, unreal colors, lack of perspective, and strange proportions.

Icon painting strikes us by the frontality of the figures. This frontality brings the figures in direct relationship with the viewer and gives the fullest expression to the faces. The faces of the saints have large, almond-shaped eyes, enlarged ears, long thin noses, and small mouths. Icon painters attempt to indicate that each sensory organ, having received the Divine Grace, was sanctified and had ceased to be the usual sensory organ of a biological man.

Icon painting deliberately disregards the principle of natural perspective in order to avoid at any cost the illusion of three-dimensionality. Instead, it gives the impression of complete flatness and the lack of perspective. However, icon painting does use a perspective, called by scholars either reversed or inverted, just to indicate that this perspective is different than the illusionistic perspective of the Italian masters. Inverted perspective depends on multiple points of view. But these multiple points of view are placed in front of the painting, not behind it, which results in background objects often being larger than the foreground ones and in distortions in shapes of some of the objects.

In addition to the inverted perspective, icon painting uses the so-called psychological perspective which is based on the principle that the most important figure in the composition should be the largest and centrally placed. The viewer's attention is drawn to what is central and larger rather than to what is marginal and small.

When icon painters depict an event which took place inside, in an interior, they place all the participants in the event outside, indicating in the background the walls of the house, church, palace, or city. This allows them to "uncover" the very essence of the event and give due to the participants instead of having to deal with various interior elements which could obscure the meaning of the events happening inside. Since icon painting is not realistic, it shows no natural source of light and does not represent shadows. The only light in icons is the inner light of sacred figures and the divine light of Christ. Icon painting has the ability to represent several moments of the same action (story) on one panel. In the scene of the Nativity we can see not only the birth itself, but also the arrival of the Magi, the shepherds spreading the good news, Joseph being tempted by the devil, and even the servant women washing the baby. Some scholars call this the "continuous style."

Other features of are simplicity, clarity, measure or restraint, symmetry or balance, and symbolic colors

## **Islamic Umayyad Imagery in Qusayr Amra**

Qusayr Amra is an Umayyad bath house complex *in the eastern desert* of Jordan famous for its painted frescoes consist of more than 250 human figures, hundreds of animals, princely scenes and daily activities are represented. The frescos of Byzantine influence, but financed by a Muslem prince, show that the human figuration existed during the first century of Islam. It was build by the caliph al-Walid.

The murals of Qusair Amra are considered a good example of Islamic Umayyad imagery because of its variety, historical significance and distinguished art style. Also because it clarifies different aspect of life in the Umayyad state.

### **Human Figures:**

The human is the most dominant element in Amra's murals. Through these figures we can distinguish three different types:

- 1- The human figures of the middle part of the main hall which take abnormal situations and looks defective with their inharmonic proportions.
- 2- The figures of the eastern parts of the main hall basement that represent various crafts and industries. They seem more realistic and well

proportioned through the flexible movements of their bodies and especially the drawings of the athletes. But it is noticeable that the bodies were flat and no attention was given to perspective or third dimension.

3- In other parts of the palace the figures were drawn standing still with wide gazing eyes that gives an impression of sadness, confusion and thorough thinking. This type was influenced by the Byzantine and Coptic iconography.

Communicating with the image at the southern section of the west wall, another depiction renders six lavishly robed figures, three of which lie in the foreground with extended arms to their right and three others positioned behind them. The first four figures in the painting are the Byzantium emperor, the Persian Shah, the Ethiopian Negus, and the Visigothic king, Roderick, confirmed through Greek and Arabic inscriptions super scribed over each leader. It has been posited that the remaining two figures are the emperor of China and the Khan of the Turks, and that these two frescoes together symbolize the Islamic caliph's ascendancy over a powerful assembly of contemporaneous kings. This picture of the Caliph sitting on his throne is very similar to the Byzantine icon of the (Pantocrator).

The maids and the dancers were influenced by the ancient Syrian art and are very close to the dancer shown in the mosaic of Madaba which goes back to the early Byzantine era.

### **Animal Figures:**

Some of the animal figures that can be seen in Amra's murals:

*Lion:* lions had been represented frequently in Byzantine mosaic based on the stories told by monks of deserts about this wild animal.

The oriental artist used to represent the spiritual aspect of his drawings by concentrating on some characteristics and neglecting others to reach the desired spiritual impression. So he used to change the appearances; as for lions the most important characteristic to be emphasized is brutality and savageness, so they were always drawn in a constant struggle with concentration on widening their mouths and enlarging teethes and nails.

*Rabbit:*

Rabbit is found on the mural of the eastern wall of the bathroom in Qusayr Amra. It was drawn between circles of vineyard branches. It looks thrilled with its ears leaning backward due to fast running.

This type of rabbits was seen in the Byzantine mosaic of Madaba.

*Peacock:*

Peacock was a sign of immortality in classic art of Rome and Greece due to the legend which says that its meat does not go bad. And later on in the Christian Byzantine art it signified Jesus.

*Partridge:*

This bird that inhabits the oasis of the Levantine desert was previously seen in the Byzantine mosaic ornament, also in the mosaic of the Umayyad palace of khirbet el mafjar.

In Amra it appears as a group of birds surrounding the (enthroned caliph).

*Fish:*

There are few fish that can be found on the murals of Amra along with other sea creatures. The fish was a symbol of Jesus in the Byzantine Art.

**Plant figure:**

The plant ornaments were another dominant element in the oriental arts, and especially the arts of Romans and Byzantines in which they were used to fill the undesired space.

*The grapevines:*

It was one of the most common ornaments of the east, it is found on almost every roman or Byzantine ornament or mosaic.

In Amra they were used to decorate walls and domes in the shape of circles.

Beside vineyard other figures of palm trees and some kind of bushes and small trees were used as a background in other murals of Qusayr Amra.

Architectural figures:

These elements like arches, doors, domes, balconies and clearly reflect a Syrian Byzantine type of architecture.

## **Properties of the Umayyad Murals of Qusayr Amra:**

1-Variety of subjects: The paintings depict a variety of subjects including hunting scenes, athletic activity, mythological images, and astronomical representations.

2-sudden transformation from a subject to another.

3-multiple influences and art styles: It is clear that the Umayyads tried to derive their style from the former cultures of Syria and Egypt that is a mixture of local, Hellenistic and Byzantine arts.

4-dividing murals into square units: This property is noticeable in many murals of Amra by specializing each unit (square) for a specific craft or sport.

5-stability and quiescence, e.g.: murals of (the enthroned caliph) and (the six Kings) that are influenced by Byzantine iconography.

7-Avoiding Space:

No space was left unfilled with murals or ornament. This tendency to avoid empty spaces is common in Christian-Byzantine and later in Islamic art for spiritual causes.