
The spectacular remains of Fatimid art in Egypt have received surprisingly little detailed attention. Anna Contadini’s recent study of ivory gaming pieces, many of them Fatimid, qualifies her well for this wider survey. To it she brings the same qualities of scholarly informed interest in the subject and the publisher’s claim that this is the best accessible account of Fatimid art is well justified — though its balance is primarily determined by the material in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s collections. Thus, rock-crystal, textiles, ceramics and glass are well covered, though there is no jewellery; and woodwork, ivory and metal-work occupy a disproportionately small space to its importance in Fatimid art. In addition to historical documentation and stylistic evolution, Contadini considers problems of technology, innovation and workshop-practice. She has much to say that is new and her work will deserve to be much consulted.

Of particular interest is Contadini’s reconstruction of the manufacturing techniques of Fatimid rock-crystals, many of which found their way via Byzantium or the Holy Land to European treasuries and in which the Museum’s collection is second, and only to S. Marco in Venice. Among these is a real find (plate 2), a balsamarium (M.78.1910) with English silver-gilt mounts of c.1540–50, which had remained hidden in the Museum’s Department of Metalwork. Three inscribed pieces dateable to 975–1035 A.D. are decisive evidence for a Fatimid court workshop. However, the author persuasively argues that the abundant literary evidence for other centres where rock-crystal was worked — notably in Iraq where the tradition established by late Sasanian workshops survived right up to the eleventh century — considerably complicates the precise attribution of the hundred and eighty or so extant rock-crystals of medieval Islamic date.

In Contadini’s view the continuity in Mesopotamian and Iranian glass from the Sasanian to the ‘Abbasid period is also relevant because of the similarity of cutting techniques. The Museum’s most famous piece, a ewer (plate 7) which she dates to the period 1036–61, has significant contemporary parallels in eleventh-century relief-cut and cameo-cut glass, some of it excavated at Fustat. In fact a cameo-cut glass now in the Corning Museum, saddled, however, in whose immediate connexions to Persia, is a virtual copy of it. Even if the provenance is accepted, however, it tells us little of what contemporary Iranian rock-crystals might have been like.

Contadini rightly observes that the treatment of Fatimid ceramics has so far concentrated overwhelmingly on lustre wares and their chronology and stylistic history. After brief discussion of unglazed pottery and of incised monochrome frit-wares — a late eleventh- or early twelfth-century development of major importance which, the author argues, was an Egyptian invention — she too turns to lustre wares, discussing them in terms of an early mass-production industry, with workshops persisting over time, as demonstrated by significant variations in the decoration, glaze and body-type of sherds bearing the name Sa’d, for example. By the reign of al-Hakim (996–1021 A.D.), and with the work of the painter Muslim, they had established their own distinct and early ninth-century tradition and were to bring about lustre-painting in Syria and Iran. Unfortunately the richness of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s sherd collection has precluded an exhaustive discussion of workshop practice here, so that Contadini’s perceptive remarks on the unexplained variation of degree in the repertoire, variations in lustre colour, technique, body composition and glazes remain programmatic. Despite the scarcity of material from stratified contexts, the investigation is potentially extremely promising and it is much to be hoped that she finds time to complete her study.

Also relevant is lustre painting on glass (pp.96–98). Contadini allows that the same kilns must have been used, which has certain implications for the appearance of the same craftsmen’s or workshop names, such as Sa’d, on glass and pottery. That can only have been because these were specialised lustre painters, who were probably glass-blowers ready-made artefacts for decoration and firing in muffle kilns; this is an important contribution to our knowledge of practice at Fustat.

The study of Fatimid tiţaz, that is, fabrics manufactured in bulk at towns such as Tinnis, updated to varying degrees of court control and often bearing official inscriptions (tiţaz al-khâss), is still at a fairly primitive stage. Here they are considered both as epigraphic documents and as evidence for textile history. Those in the Victoria and Albert Museum are almost all linen. Even outside the great manufactory for the Caliphal wardrobe or for presentation as robes of honour (khiţ‘a), regular inspection must have been essential for coordinat ing the exceptionally large and heterogeneous work force — spinners, weavers, dyers, fullers, sizers, and embroiderers or painters. That is to simplify. An intractable problem is the existence of another manufactory, the tiţaz al-tamna (a public tiţaz, whatever that may mean). This category covers, Contadini helpfully suggests, textiles made to court specifications but without official inscriptions, accessible to a wider public, such as the rich Jewish merchants of Fustat, whose inscriptions do not appear. The difference thus relates not to quality but to the lower social status of those who bought the pieces. Her well-informed discussion is an important contribution to a controversial subject. It raises in particular the question of the relationship of the tiţaz organisation to Byzantine and Coptic control of official fabrics (though the status of ‘Coptic’ tapestries vis à vis ‘Alexandrian’ silks needs further discussion).

Contadini’s brief discussion of the Fatimid arts of the book is less easy to follow, partly because it could have done with more argument. The manuscripts she claims as Fatimid have all recently had other attributions: a nasikâ Koran (Chester Beatty Library MS 1430) dated 428/1036–37, to Iraq (Baghdad) or Iran; pages from a multi-volume blue Koran, to Spain or the Maghrib but to the ninth, not the tenth, century; and a page in the Victoria and Albert Museum (N.668-L.31–1985), to the ninth century too. For these, she briefly considers Fatimid painting. Our knowledge of manuscript illustration is restricted to scraps, some little more than caricatures, from the rubbish heaps of Fustat. Contadini rightly emphasises the relevance of the twelfth-century paintings, which are often at too small a scale to be legible. But, such minor criticisms apart, Contadini’s study, clearly written in an admirably easy style, is not merely a serious scholarly contribution to a fascinating but difficult subject but an excellent (if expensive) introduction for the interested amateur.

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London


A. Dèroche: ‘The Abbassid Caliph al-Ra‘îdî (934–40 A.D.)’, plates that he was the finest connoisseur of rock-crystal carving of his time.


2The documentary evidence to which she refers for an attribution to Fatimid North Africa c.940 A.D. is bet ter described as argumentum ad ignominiam.

3See J. Lévêque: Les manuscrits copistes et copistes arabes illus. (Paris [1974]), pp.113–48. This omission, it is fair to say, reflects the marginal role of Byzantine or Coptic art in Contadini’s study — although she gives full importance to the Hellenistic legacy, of which it was, very probably, the vehicle, in Fatimid decoration.

Book Reviews