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# Book Reviews

**Fatimid art at the Victoria and Albert Museum.** By Anna Contadini. 138 pp. incl. 54 col. pls. + 39 text figures. (Victoria and Albert Museum Publications, London, 1998), £60. ISBN 1-851-77178-6.

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,<sup>1</sup> qualifies her well for this wider survey. To it she brings the same qualities of thoroughness and informed intelligence, 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 receive thorough treatment; but there is no jewellery; and woodwork, ivory and metal-work occupy a disproportionately small space to their 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 deservedly 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 only to S. Marco in Venice. Among these is a real find (plate 2), a balsarium (M.78.1910) with English silver-gilt mounts of c.1540–50, which had remained hidden in the Museum's Department of Metal-work. Three inscribed pieces dateable to 975–1036 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 late tenth or eleventh century<sup>2</sup> – 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 Fustāt. In fact a cameo-cut glass ewer now in the Corning Museum, saddled, however with a dealer's provenance 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<sup>3</sup> – 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-Hākīm (996–1021 A.D.), and with the work of the painter Muslim, they had established their own distinctive style; and in the twelfth century they 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 inter-relations of decorative 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 it.

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 sent by potters and glass-blowers ready-made artefacts for decoration and firing in muffle kilns; this is an important contribution to our knowledge of practice at Fustāt.

The study of Fatimid *ṭirāz*, that is, fabrics manufactured in bulk at towns such as Tinnis under varying degrees of court control and often bearing official inscriptions (*ṭirāz al-Khāṣṣa*), 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 discounting their destination for the Caliphal wardrobe or for presentation as robes of honour (*khil'a*), regular inspection must have been essential for coordinating 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 *ṭirāz al-ʿamma* (a public *ṭirāz*, 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 Fustāt, in whose inventories they sometimes 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 relationship of the *ṭirāz* 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 *nashī* Koran (Chester Beatty Library MS 1430) dated 428/1036–37, to Iraq (Baghdad) or Iran; pages from a multi-volume blue Koran,<sup>4</sup> to Spain or the Maghrib but to the ninth, not the tenth, century; and a page in the Victoria and Albert Museum (MS L.31–1985), to the ninth century too.<sup>5</sup> For completeness she briefly considers Fatimid painting. Our knowledge of manuscript illustration is restricted to scraps, some little more than caricatures, from the rubbish heaps of Fustāt. Contadini rightly emphasises the relevance of the twelfth-century paintings of the Cappella Palatina at Palermo and the cathedral at Cefalù, which makes it surprising that she does not also consider later medieval Coptic illustrated liturgical manuscripts, such as the well-known Gospels dated April 1178–January 1180 in the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.<sup>6</sup>

The volume is enriched by contributions from A.H. Morton on glass coin-weights (104–08), and on the technical analysis of the *ṭirāz* fabrics by Linda Woolley. Especial praise is due to Anne Searight for her drawings of *ṭirāz* inscriptions. It is good that the V. & A. is now publishing its own books again, but this volume is in some respects rather amateurish. There are no lists of either plates or figures at the beginning of the volume – though readers (unlike the present reviewer) may not need to be told that the numbering of the plates follows that of the catalogue entries. The figures, reproduced in black and white in the margins, 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.

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<sup>1</sup>A. CONTADINI: 'Islamic ivory chess pieces, draughtsmen and dice', in *Islamic art in the Ashmolean Museum*, ed. J. ALLAN, Oxford [1995], pp.111–47.

<sup>2</sup>Al-Ṣūlī's memoir of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Rādī (934–40 A.D.) relates that he was the finest connoisseur of rock-crystal carving of his time.

<sup>3</sup>A sherd of this type dated *khamasamī'a wa . . .*, hence 504, 507 or 509 (1110–15 AD) was published in G. WIET: 'Inscriptions mobilières de l'Égypte musulmane', *Journal Asiatique*, CCXLVI [1958], pp.237–85, esp. pp.237–39.

<sup>4</sup>The 'documentary evidence' to which she refers for an attribution to Fatimid North Africa c.940 A.D. is better described as *argumentum ab ignorantia*.

<sup>5</sup>F. DÉROCHE: *The 'Abbasid tradition*, Azimuth and Oxford [1992], no.19. On the other hand, she ignores *prima facie* more relevant material, such as the Palermo Koran of 372/982–3 (*ibid.*, no.81).

<sup>6</sup>Copte 13(a); see J. LEROY: *Les manuscrits coptes et coptes-arabes illustrés*, Paris [1974], pp.113–48. This omission, it is fair to say, reflects the marginal rôle 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.