



Margaret S. Graves. *Arts of Allusion: Object, Ornament, and Architecture in Medieval Islam.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 352 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-069591-0.

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At the time of writing, the accolades that have been heaped upon *Arts of Allusion* include the International Congress of Medieval Art Annual Book Prize (2019) and the Medieval Academy of America's Karen Gould Prize in Art History (2021). Beyond the field of medieval art, however, the book deserves to be better known, particularly among those interested in material culture. Much as Jonathan Hay's *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (2010) offered a new theoretical vocabulary for the applied arts in the guise of a study about Ming and Qing decorative works, attracting readers from diverse fields, Graves's *Arts of Allusion* articulates an innovative framework for understanding ornamental effects that cuts across specializations in the field of material culture.

The compelling phenomenon that animates *Arts of Allusion* and holds together diverse medieval objects from the Islamic world is architectonic ornament: how medieval craftspeople embellished functional objects like inkpots, incense burners, storage jars, and jar stands to underscore implicit architectural parallels without seeking to obscure or disguise their intended uses. Works throughout the book reflect key communities of makers active between Egypt and Iran during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but Graves often incorporates objects from beyond these borders as

comparative examples. In tackling a phenomenon that crosses geographical, dynastic, and material boundaries, *Arts of Allusion* recalls groundbreaking thematic studies such as Oleg Grabar's *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), even as its narrower scope reflects a disciplinary turn toward deeper historical context.

The book grows out of Graves's dissertation, completed in 2010, and incorporates conceptual refinements that emerged as she co-curated the 2011 exhibition *Architecture in Islamic Arts: Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum* with Benoît Junod. Her accompanying catalog essay surveyed the use of architectonic elements as graphic framing devices in manuscripts and visual conventions for representing three-dimensional buildings in a variety of two-dimensional media. In *Arts of Allusion*, by contrast, Graves draws attention to less literal design choices in the manufacture of three-dimensional objects, which emphasize loose resemblances to parts of buildings.

As Graves points out, specialists of ornament employ terms like zoomorphic and anthropomorphic for decorations that evoke animal and human forms, yet there is no widespread English term for the more general material practice of "making something functional resemble something else" (p. 60). Nor does such a term appear to have existed in medieval Arabic or Persian. She

coins the phrase “architecturally allusive objects” to refer to her subjects, and goes on to identify the intellectual theorization of craft that coincided with their making, the phenomenological effects that they set into motion, and the playful systems of meaning in which they operated.

Chapter 1, “The Intellect of the Hand,” reconstructs the cultural contours of craft attested in extant medieval Arabic sources. To understand the medieval contours of design thinking, Graves assembles the scarce references to architects and craftspeople in surviving texts. The most eloquent of these sources is a tenth-century philosophical treatise from the neo-platonic Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, understood to have been composed in Iraq, which deemed “making” (*al-ṣāniʿa*) a fundamental cognitive faculty comparable to imagination and memory. Although some medieval elites disdained craft as mere manual labor, Graves excavates a strand of thought that recognized making as a kind of embodied thought and conceptualized God as “the artisan of the universe” (p. 44).

Subsequent chapters are grounded in specific groups of motifs or objects. Chapter 2, “Building Ornament,” traces the shifting interest in miniature doors and arcades, which structure the surfaces of a variety of medieval Islamic objects and buildings, culminating in a group of twelfth-century molded storage jars produced in Syria and Iraq. Chapter 3, “Occupied Objects,” analyzes the power of the human form to transform the sense of spatial perception that users bring to their interactions with objects. Focusing on ceramic stands and metal inkwells from Iran that evoked buildings and tents, the chapter constitutes a master class in how a whole category of medieval Islamic objects was experienced. Graves notes the sensory bifurcation that users undergo when rotating, opening, and imaginatively exploring objects that simultaneously elicit two distinct scales of user engagement, and concludes the chapter by showing how designers also used textual inscrip-

tions to orient users within the virtual spaces that decorated objects.

Chapter 4, “Material Metaphors,” identifies a set of medieval Arabic and Persian rhetorical devices such as metaphor and analogy that Graves sees “embodied” in allusive objects. Turning her attention to incense burners and lanterns that echo the forms of domed, centrally planned buildings, Graves proposes poetic verbal substitution (*istiʿāra*) as the closest conceptual parallel attested in medieval rhetorical treatises to these miniature “mobile monuments.” Chapter 5, “The Poetics of Ornament,” argues that twelfth-century marble jar stands produced in Egypt evoked full-scale fountains found in elite residences and palaces throughout the Islamic Mediterranean. Graves juxtaposes the process of transferring elements from buildings to jar stands with the fragmentation of architecture that characterizes verbal ekphrasis. The book closes with the tantalizing observation that the emphasis on plastic allusion represented by medieval objects gives way to an early modern interest in finished surfaces and two-dimensional images, hinting at another study on the horizon.

As a whole, *Arts of Allusion* faces problems common to studies of early medieval craft: the sources that survive are few, and many touch only indirectly on the topic. Graves deftly weaves together an interpretive framework from extant documents, but scholars accustomed to more robust archives may find her conclusions strained. Readers may also be left wondering how the cognitive, symbolic, and rhetorical mechanisms of architecturally allusive plastic arts differ from those of full-scale architecture. As Graves herself acknowledges (p. 198), her emphasis on metaphor and allusion as privileged modes of meaning offers an alternative framework to Richard Krautheimer’s “iconography of architecture,” with implications that fall outside her goals for the book. The 125 illustrations that illustrate the book are essential, but their quality is compromised by the

decision of the press to cut costs with uncoated paper and mediocre inkjet printing (compare to the comparably priced e-book).

The strengths of the project outweigh any weaknesses. Graves has managed to assemble fragmented and disparate evidence into plausible arguments that suggest compelling new trajectories for the study of medieval material culture. Her nuanced readings of particular objects, informed by phenomenological insights about how miniaturization transforms spatial cognition and temporal experience, will give many readers their first glimpse of the sophisticated sensory manipulations effected by medieval craftspeople. Art historians have tended to elide the role of these nameless makers, attributing agency to better-documented patrons and consumers. By highlighting the creative choices of artisans, *Arts of Allusion* provides a medieval counterpart to recent works that center modern and contemporary craft practices in the Islamic world, such as Marcus Milwright's *Islamic Arts and Crafts: An Anthology* (2017).

Graves deserves all of the recognition that she has received for bringing such insightful analysis to a largely unrecognized trend. Her argument that art history and material studies lack a discursive framework for understanding the role of metaphor in design choices represents an opportunity for future interdisciplinary research. Given the remote geographic and temporal scope of this book, some readers may be inclined to pass over it. They will miss an exciting study of how medieval craftspeople used evocative ornament to delight the viewers of their works.

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