

REVIVAL, REPLICAS, AND REUSE: FASHIONING ‘ARABESQUE’ FURNITURE IN KHEDIVAL CAIRO

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Mamluk Revival – or rather “Arab style” as it was called at the time¹ – is a genre that Max Herz (1856–1919), the Hungarian architect so dear to István Ormos, eagerly embraced for a few building commissions he carried out in Cairo at the turn of the 20th century, on top of his engagement in the service of the conservation and restoration of the city’s magnificent monuments. Many fellow architects had preceded him on this path during their Cairene days, others followed. In most instances, their Mamluk Revival designs benefitted from their proximity to the very sources of the style. The structures they conceived were not vague tributes to a building art seen from afar, as exoticism had made us familiar with, but gestures deeply aware of the riches of Mamluk architecture.

Extensive sketching and photographing made the monuments and ornaments familiar to those who resided for long periods in al-Maḥrūsa (‘the well-guarded’, as the Egyptian capital continued to be named throughout the 19th century). The results of their picturing campaigns are visible today in numerous European archival collections (Volait 2013). In a few cases, the source and its imitation, that is, tangible heritage and architectural design, were literally embedded into one another through the practice of reuse. The French architect Ambroise Baudry (1838–1906) made a speciality of designing with antiques for the houses he conceived in Cairo between 1871 and 1886, and subsequently for the interiors he arranged in France once back home. The principle consisted in incorporating authentic fragments into the edifices being erected, such as authentic carved ceilings or Mamluk marquetry inserted into the modern frames of doors and cabinets. The most spectacular achievement of architectural reuse in modern Cairo was the house built between 1875 and 1879 for the grand equerry of Khedive Ismā‘īl (r. 1863–1879), the aristocrat Gaston de Saint-Maurice (1853–1905). Visual records of these achievements show that the Mamluk touch went into every detail of the arrangements, including many of the vessels and furniture (Volait 1998).

¹ This phrase was commonly used in a number of languages, including Arabic, since the French conquest of Algeria starting in 1830.

While the subject of Mamluk Revival in architecture has received scholarly attention in the last decades,² its counterpart in interior design remains woefully neglected. The present piece is an attempt to reconstruct the rise, fall, and recent reappraisal of Mamluk-style furniture in Khedival Cairo, based on a scattered corpus of evidence, be that visual, material, or textual in nature, gathered somewhat haphazardly.



Fig. 1. Ambroise Baudry's drawing-room in his house in Cairo, built in 1875–1877. (© Andrew Dickson White Architectural Photographs, Cornell University Library).

1 Parvis's pioneering work

Before engaging with the Mamluk Revival in modern furniture, some framing regarding pre-modern fittings is due, even though our background knowledge on domestic equipment in late Ottoman Egypt is scarce. A few clues are provided by the

² See, for instance, Sakr 1992; AlSayyad, Bierman and Rabbat 2005; Ormos 2009: 369–480; Volait 2017b.

classical ethnographic account penned by the Arabist Edward William Lane (1801–1876). Houses were mainly furnished with mattresses and cushions; vessels were stored in recessed shelves sometimes decorated with marble or tiles; meals were eaten on a tray placed upon a low stool. Lighting was provided by suspended chandeliers (Lane, *An account*, 18–27). That was about it in the 1830s. Conversely, four decades later, official statistics registered some 7000 Egyptian carpenters and woodturners across the country, besides 21 ‘chair-makers’ based in Cairo (Delchevalerie, “L’Égypte” 432). In the meantime, manufactured wooden domestic furnishing had seemingly become an industry.



Fig. 2. Cupboard commissioned from Giuseppe Parvis for the Egyptian section of the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris, dated 1866, today in Marriott Hotel in Cairo (photo by the author, 2017).

One early craftsman in Cairo was the Piedmontese Giuseppe Parvis (1831–1909), alternatively named Joseph in the sources (Tronquois and Lemoin, *Rapport* 33). He was one of the few cabinet-makers established in Egypt for whom some data is available today.³ Born in the Italian city of Breme, and trained in Turin and Paris, Parvis

³ Danovaro, *L’Égypte* 292–293; Wright, *Twentieth century* 370–371. For further information, see Ricco 2012; Selvafolta 2015.

settled in Egypt in 1859. Starting purportedly as a simple journeyman, in 1866 he received the prestigious commission to make a “suite of Oriental furniture” for the Khedival participation in the 1867 Paris Universal Exposition.⁴ Beside a restored ancient window (probably a *mašrabiyya*), Parvis sent to the French capital several doors, a large *dikka* (similar to those where the Holy Book was stored in mosques), a cupboard for vessels, a bookcase, a mirror, a tripod stand in ebony, an alabaster table with rosewood legs and chibouk-holders to be fixed on the wall (Édmond, *L'Égypte* 335–336). Composed of a central body modelled after a Mamluk portal and featuring symmetrical panels inlaid with bone and wood and topped with crenellations, the cupboard bore an Arabic inscription versified by one “Moustapha Salam” (*Illustrierter Katalog*, 202), most probably the *šayḥ* Muṣṭafā Salāma an-Nağğārī (d. 1870), one of Khedive Ismā‘īl’s panegyrists (Mestyan 2019). Thanks to an engraving published in 1868, the cupboard can be identified as the one standing today in a corridor of the Marriott Hotel (the former Khedival palace of Gazīra) (fig. 2). It is dated 1866, and signed by Parvis together with an illegible name, possibly of a local associate. Its public text praises the ruler for guiding Egypt towards the restoration of the past splendour of its crafts and arts. Parvis is most probably also the author of the case made for the arms of the Khedive and a large Qur’ān that stood in the Egyptian pavilion in Paris. The furniture featured an original Mamluk inlaid wooden panel as its back (Édmond, *L'Égypte* 196-197). This is the first known piece of modern furnishing incorporating *spolia*.



Fig. 3. Parvis’s showroom in Cairo, undated photograph (collection of the Parvis family).

⁴ Wright, *Twentieth century* 370 (the text erroneously says 1869 instead of 1867).

2 Reconstructing the Parvis catalogue

The Mamluk Revival furniture illustrated in publicity for international world's fairs, as well as in the views of Parvis's showroom in Cairo (fig. 3), allow some reconstruction of the catalogue and speculation on its outreach. Variations of the published models, such as the mirrored consoles or the large cupboards, can be easily spotted in Khedival palaces: the grand dining-room of the 'Ābdīn Palace (built between 1863 and 1874) rearranged after the 1891 fire clearly encompasses Parvis's furniture (*Abdeen Palace* 97–99); the same holds true for the Manyal Palace (built between 1901 and 1929). A marked interest for anything “belle époque” in present-day Cairo has driven the curators of the Gayer-Anderson Museum to display many similar furnishings of unknown provenance (probably from the royal palaces), and possibly not all made by Parvis, in the rooms of the 18th-century houses fully rearranged for the Irish Major in the 1930s.⁵ One suspects that the invented tradition imagined by Parvis and his followers did not exactly correspond to the folk art and period furniture Gayer-Anderson was inclined to promote. But the fact that such Revival furniture is being reintroduced today in a historic site testifies, however, to the recent reappraisal of Parvis's production and related works. Their success extends beyond Egypt through international auction houses. While less valued than Carlo Bugatti's orientalisising Art Nouveau furniture, recognisable Parvis pieces are becoming collectibles in the Gulf, for instance in Qatar (fig. 4).⁶

The identified specimens help us to characterise the main elements of Parvis's furniture. One recurrent feature is the use of woods of contrasting colours, such as ebony and golden mahogany. Another is the inlay work in bone and mother-of-pearl. Some pieces bear metal plating in the form of roundels. Most furniture display Arabic inscriptions, carved on ebony and painted in gold – their repertoire is to be established one day. The deliberate juxtaposition of elements of different nature and scale is a typical feature of these furnishings. The cupboard exhibited in Paris in 1867, and its variation sent to the United States in 1876, feature inlaid lateral panels reproducing Mamluk elements to scale, while their central part is a reduction of the three-lobed portals to be found in many Mamluk mosques or madrasas. Another typical feature is a horseshoe serrated arch used indiscriminately for openings. Its shape was described as Moorish, rather than Egyptian, at the time of the Egyptian exhibits at the 1867 Paris Exposition (Édmond, *L'Égypte* 196). But in fact this type of arch can be spotted in cupboards extant in late Ottoman houses in Cairo, e.g. at Bayt al-Sihaymī. Although the exact date of production of such furnishings is unknown, their

⁵ Personal enquiry, 2017.

⁶ Personal observation of a Qatari interior in Doha, 17 November 2012.

presence in late Ottoman domestic architecture suggests that the Moorish type serrated arch possesses a longer Egyptian history than one suspects. In any event, it became a standard and indeed a marker, of Parvis's furniture.

At a closer glance, Parvis's decorative syntax appears quite limited: thin columns, light and dark stripes, stalactites (generally in black), marked pediments, turned wood, epigraphy, etc. Some pieces were made as replicas of artworks in the collections of the Arab Museum (today the Museum of Islamic Art) in Cairo. In 1892, Parvis formally requested the permission to copy one of its caskets (*Procès-verbaux* 9, 17–18). He himself was a collector of Islamic artworks, from which he donated several specimens to the museum from 1903 onwards.⁷ These objects would have served as models for his craftsmanship.



Fig. 4. Mirrored console probably by Parvis, today in the vestibule of a Qatari residence (photo by the author, 2012).

Parvis's furniture is spectacular (not only for its large size) and always over-worked. It is little attuned to viewers today, as extreme kitsch is seldom valued. But

⁷ These donations are mentioned in successive issues of the *Procès-verbaux* of the Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe. The whole collection can be accessed and searched online at <http://www.persee.fr/collection/ccmaa> (accessed 17 July 2019).

his formula appealed and continues to appeal to many, internationally as well as domestically, and its past and present success is to be taken as significant. Not every piece was for high end means; smaller furnishings, such as a typical *tabouret*-table, were also on offer in his showroom. There were few Egyptian homes arranged in the 20th century that did not encompass an Arab room, often with Parvis or neo-Parvis furniture. The “drawing-room in Arabic style”, conceived around 1930 by the architect ‘Alī Labīb Gabr (1898–1966) for the villa of Muḡīb Fathī Bey in Cairo, is a telling example of an Arabesque installation designed for an Egyptian patron (fig. 5). The large cupboard standing in the background of the photograph, in the far corner, can be a late piece made by Parvis. If the arrangement conceived by ‘Alī Labīb Gabr for this villa differs from earlier ones made for expatriates in Egypt or clients abroad, it is not so much in essence than in temporality. Workmanship shifts over time; what could be produced in the 1930s was not identical to what had been handcrafted three decades earlier. Wood supply and treatment, tools, and labour constraints changed, and so did the likeness of the handmade objects.



Fig. 5. “Drawing-room in Arabic style”, villa Muḡīb Fathī Bey, Cairo
(*Photographs of various buildings*, pl. 32).

The room of Muḡīb Fathī Bey is not a unique instance of Arabesque-style interior designed for an Egyptian patron (Volait 2009: 181–226). The discontent voiced by some in respect of such elaborate interiors indirectly demonstrates their popularity. As Jacques Hardy (1889–1974), who was a French architect teaching at the Higher

School of Fine Arts in Cairo at the time and an exponent of Modern Classicism in his architectural activity, put it in 1938: “There is no vestibule in Cairo that does not have a *māšrabiyya* turned into a coat rack”.⁸ A few remnants of the Arabesque furniture from the house of Hudā Ša‘rāwī (1879–1947) could be viewed in Spring 2019 at the Aisha Fahmy Arts Complex in Zamalek, within the framework of an exhibition devoted to the arts and crafts under the Khedives.⁹



Fig. 6. Mamluk Revival cupboard from the collection of Ernest de Blignières, auctioned on 23 Mai 2017 in Paris by Ader Nordmann, lot no. 296, hammered 38.000 € (photo by the author, 2017).

⁸ “On a abusé du moucharabieh au point d’en faire des porte-manteaux dans toutes les antichambres du Caire”, Letter from Jacques Hardy to the French ambassador.

⁹ “Features of an Era”, exhibition curated by Ehab Ellaban, Center of Arts, Zamalek, Cairo, 27 January–27 April 2019.

3 Adapting salvages “à la clunisienne”

Parvis seems to have been the first to create Mamluk Revival woodwork in Egypt. Others followed suit. Giuseppe (1852–?) and Nicola (1858–?) Jacovelli (also spelled Iacovelli) are a case in point. Actually trained in the Parvis workshops, the Jacovelli brothers established their own business in 1885, and for the next 17 years produced exclusive furniture for princes and pashas, besides their extensive work as restorers of Cairo’s historic monuments (Balboni 1906: III, 355–357). The driving force behind their artistry was not so much a ‘renaissance’ ethos, but rather the great opportunity of restoring the Cairene monuments after 1881, when the Comité de conservation des monuments de l’art arabe was formed. The brothers also assembled a large collection of Islamic artefacts and salvages through, and for, their restoration activity, and possibly even as models for their designs. Their collection, rich in marble mosaic, woodwork, and tiles, was eventually donated to the archaeological museum in Palermo (today the Antonio Salinas Regional Archaeological Museum) (Paribeni 2014).

In 1891, a commercial guide listed no less than five firms producing “Arab Style” or “Arabesque” furniture in Cairo: the Furino brothers, Gasparo Giuliani, Elias Hattoun, Paglierini, and the Jacovelli (*Annuaire égyptien*). These firms were private initiatives that had developed in parallel, and, for what is known, in total independence. As already mentioned, the French architect Ambroise Baudry made a speciality of designing with antiques, a technique in which Parvis had experimented for a few early pieces presented at international expositions, possibly for the request of the Khedive. Baudry reused not only salvaged carved woodwork, but also ancient tiles and marble *opus sectile*, in order to lend authenticity to his reconstructions of Egyptian medieval architecture. He combined the repurposed material with plaster casts of Mamluk ornaments, and also painted facsimiles. These techniques were widely available in Paris at the time, and known as “à la clunisienne”, in explicit reference to the Musée de Cluny in Paris, a medieval mansion that has been refurbished and refurnished anew by the collector and archaeologist Alexandre du Sommerard (1779–1842) in the 1830s. Sommerard is credited with inventing the practice of combining ancient fragments and new imitated parts in order to produce historicising pieces or modern fittings with an authentic antique flavour. However, this practice soon strived at satisfying a demand for old items: it became so vigorous that there were no sufficient number of originals to accommodate it (Charpy 2010: 536–538). The reference to Cluny was not lost to Paul Baudry, a celebrated artist of the Second Empire, when he visited his younger brother Ambroise in 1876. He wrote enthusiastically:

Ambroise’s house is a gem. We would be rich if the building were located in the surroundings of the boulevard Saint-Germain, or simply at the Batignolles.

The doors and the ceilings, the marbles, and the tiles come from 16th-century houses, it is an Arab Cluny.¹⁰

Accordingly, Baudry's architectural manner can be understood as his own adaptation of a French historicist genre to the Egyptian context, although the idea of repurposing historic fragments might have come via other channels to Parvis and the Khedive.



Fig. 7. Cupboard designed by Ambroise Baudry, displayed in the Mamluk Galleries of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (photo by the author, 2017).

Baudry and his friend Ernest de Blignières (1834–1900), who was posted in Cairo from 1878 to 1882, had many pieces of furnishing and decoration made out of spolia for their residences both in Egypt and France (fig. 6). Carpenters were employed permanently at their homes for that purpose. At Baudry's, it was a Maltese craftsman with the name Peppe Gliveu, who worked at reshaping salvaged woodwork for future use. He subsequently established himself as a “contractor of carpentry in Arabesque style”. Significantly, the last of these words are translated to Arabic as *šina* ‘

¹⁰ “La maison d’Ambroise est un bijou. Nous serions riches si l’immeuble était situé dans les environs de boulevard St Germain, ou simplement aux Batignolles, les portes et les plafonds, les marbres et les faïences viennent des palais du 16^{ème} siècle, c’est un *Cluny arabe*” (my italics); Letter from Paul Baudry to Louise Garnier, 22 December 1876; see also Volait 2017a.

baladī, literally meaning ‘indigenous’ or ‘vernacular’ crafts.¹¹ That is, ‘Arabesque style’ was not perceived as alien to the culture, as postcolonial theory would have it today; it was deemed a local craft. It would be decisive to examine how the work of Parvis and Baudry intersected with one another, but no evidence of contacts exists in the extensive correspondence of the French architect. To be certain, the end-users of their arts differed. Parvis’s furniture was meant for public display, and it can be hypothesised that it served the purpose of enhancing the legitimacy of the Muḥammad ‘Alī dynasty in Egypt. The works designed by Baudry were for private consumption. Mamluk Revival was not univocal; it could serve distinct purposes. Their artistry contrasted as well: Parvis’s style was overtly Baroque, while that of Baudry belonged to a more Classicist vein.

4 Reuse as an enduring tradition

Reuse is strongly dependant on supply; in Cairo, its modern acme took place during the last third of the 19th century, when the administration of public works engaged with the numerous ruined buildings in the city, while itself producing rubble when opening new streets in the historic quarters. Salvaging and reuse are practices that collide with the current understanding and international doctrines governing the conservation of tangible heritage. One can argue that reuse has a history across millennia in Egypt, known to all archaeologists.¹² On the other hand, the business of dismantling buildings and selling their parts for repurposing is still a lively one in Cairo in 2019, employing skilful workers. It is perfectly legal, and thus offers second lives to handmade pieces initially meant to last longer than they actually did. When the late Ottoman mosque of Fāṭima an-Nabawiyya in Cairo was dismantled in 1999 to give way to a new Mamluk-style mosque inaugurated in 2003, its stonework was properly dismantled and resold by the Ministry of Endowments (Awqāf). The portal of the mosque was subsequently reused in a house in the Fayyūm, designed by the architect Omar El-Farouk, one of Hassan Fathy’s disciples, and completed in 2015 (El-Batraoui 2015: 57–60). This practice fits the recycling motto of ecologists.

Mamluk ‘archaism’, to borrow the term that Egyptologists use to qualify the way present times play with previous eras,¹³ is not specific to modern Egypt; Mamluk-style buildings were also erected in Ottoman Cairo to assert a local identity (Behrens-Abouseif 2007: 74–75). Assembling elements of different date (and place of production) is fascinating because it blurs the frontiers between local and alien, authenticity

¹¹ It reads “entrepreneur de travaux de menuiserie en style arabesque” on the letterhead of an invoice dated 31 March 1898, Administrative Archives, Institut français d’archéologie orientale, Cairo (no Accession number).

¹² For a recent overview of spolia in Mamluk monuments, see Abdulfattah 2017.

¹³ See, for instance, Tiradritti 2008.

and artificiality, past and present, replica and reuse, creation and restoration. It produces hybrids and oxymora that deserve to be better acknowledged and comprehended. A typical example – and a fine one in proportion and execution, for that matter – is a cupboard designed by Ambroise Baudry around 1875, which currently stands in the Mamluk galleries of the Museum of Islamic art in Cairo (fig. 7). The piece bears reused and replicated epigraphy mentioning a sultan who reigned in the late 14th-century, *aẓ-Zāhir Sayf ad-Dīn Barqūq*. It also incorporates Mamluk marquetry set into modern frames, decorated with revival inlaid bone. The piece is described in the guide of the museum as unusual, and possibly dating from 19th-century;¹⁴ as a matter of fact, it postdates the reign of the Circassian ruler by nearly five centuries. Before reaching the museum, the cupboard had been in the collection of Prince Yūsuf Kamāl (1882–1967), who had it installed into an ‘Arab room’ at his palace in the Maṭariyya district, according to a photograph showing the piece after it had lost its crenellations (fig. 8). The prince most probably secured it as a salvage from Baudry’s house, when the building was demolished in the 1930s. This has been a missed opportunity to tell the specific story of a Mamluk Revival piece, the enduring tradition of salvaging and reuse in Cairo, and the broader history of reviving Mamluk art for public assertion and private consumption.



Fig. 8. Cupboard designed by Ambroise Baudry, as displayed in an ‘Arab room’ of Prince Yusuf Kamal’s palace, Cairo (*Architetto Antonio Lasciac*, pl. 28).

¹⁴ Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, inv. no. 23767; O’Kane 2012: 134.

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