Reviews of Books

Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary: Reconfiguring the Architectural Past in a Modernizing Empire. By Ahmet A. Ersoy. pp. 313. Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington, 2015.

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Since the publication in 1986 of Zeynep Çelik's seminal book *The Remaking of Istanbul*, the history of nineteenth-century Ottoman architecture has emerged as a viable and growing field of study. Buildings once broadly dismissed as products of the Ottoman Empire's decline and overreliance on Western models have finally been reexamined in their proper context by such scholars as Turgut Saner, Alyson Wharton, and, in particular, Ahmet Ersoy, whose new study (and first monograph) is the long-awaited fruit of his superb doctoral dissertation.

Ersoy's subject is the shift in Ottoman architectural culture that occurred in the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (1861–76), when the Tanzimat—a comprehensive programme of Westernising reforms initiated in 1839—entered its latter phase. It was in this political context that Ottoman architects, who had been working in a style tied to European Neoclassicism, moved to an eclectic historicist mode in which traditional Ottoman motifs were combined with Orientalist and even Gothic elements. Much denigrated in twentieth-century scholarship, this new style is reappraised by Ersoy in the light of its written manifesto, the *Usul-i Mi'mari-i 'Osmani* ('The Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture', henceforth the *Usul*), a lavishly illustrated trilingual treatise published in Istanbul for the 1873 World Exhibition in Vienna. The *Usul* aimed not only to present Ottoman architecture as a rational system worthy of comparison with its European counterparts, but also to describe the tradition's development as a cyclical narrative in which the monuments of Abdülaziz's period—with their ostensible return to Islamic principles—heralded an Ottoman Renaissance. Through close analysis of this text in relation to the buildings themselves and to broader historical and artistic contexts, Ersoy dispels the view that the architecture's patent relationship to contemporary European Orientalism is evidence of uncritical and self-exoticising acceptance of Western fantasies. He seeks instead to demonstrate 'how Orientalism was embraced by its very objects, the self-styled "Orientals" of the modern world, as a marker of authenticity and as a strategically located aesthetic tool to project universally recognizable images of cultural difference' (p. 4).

This ambitious reassessment is divided into four chapters that form two complementary pairs, as Ersoy explains in his excellent introduction. Chapter 1 establishes a global context for Ersoy's study by examining the Ottomans' participation in the Vienna World Exhibition, a locus of international competition with multiple stakeholders. Challenging traditional East-West binaries, Ersoy presents Austria itself as a troubled imperial power attempting to win the admiration of its Western neighbours, an aim shared by the Ottomans in their 'quest for affirmation and recognition in Europe' (p. 88). The *Usul* was one of a series of exhibitory products by which the Ottomans consciously represented

themselves at Vienna in terms that were at once individualised and internationally comprehensible. The book's authors—a motley crew of state servants and artists led by the Frenchman Victor Marie de Launay—are the subject of the second chapter, which investigates the multiple voices and networks involved in the late Tanzimat project of establishing a style by which to glorify the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire.

Chapter 3 examines the *Usul* itself, demonstrating the book's close affinity to European architectural taxonomies and its clear bias towards the medieval Ottoman tradition, whose rich stylistic syncretism was, Ersoy argues, consistent with the ecumenical ideology of the Tanzimat. The architectural outcome of this movement is discussed in the final chapter, which is, appropriately enough, the book's culmination. Here, Ersoy provides convincing answers to the conundrum of why, contrary to the *Usul*'s assertions, the buildings of this ostensibly indigenous revival are so heavily informed by European Orientalist models. He argues that such architecture, like revivalist movements in the West, was the result of—and an intended answer to—romantic yearning for an imagined past in the face of the vicissitudes of modernity. Evoking the empire's history alongside a more generalised notion of the medieval heyday of Islam allowed the Ottoman intelligentsia to remedy the extreme cultural realignment of the early Tanzimat and 'to promote an image of complete autonomy and sovereignty in the eyes of its local and foreign onlookers' (p. 236). That this image continued to make use of European models was ultimately what ensured its international relevance and legibility. The renewed appeal of such politically motivated Ottoman nostalgia in today's Turkey—specifically as co-opted by the ruling AKP—is briefly explored in the book's epilogue, imbuing the preceding chapters with heightened topicality.

As this summary should indicate, Ersoy's study is neither simple nor simplistic. He takes on a difficult topic and does not shy away from the uncertainties and contradictions inherent in it, handling the material in a manner that is assured yet balanced. Above all, he resists 'wishful postcolonial sentiment' (p. 5) that would explain Ottoman self-exoticism as an attempt to subvert the hegemonic Orientalism of the West. His analysis instead 'aligns the Ottoman case with broader histories of cultural introspection, syncretism, and improvisation in the modern world' (p. 5) and acknowledges that the Ottomans pursued their aims in assertive dialogue with, rather than in outright defiance of, European discourses. Ersoy's ability to develop his thesis cogently without getting bogged down in its attendant complexities owes much to his choice of subject. By concentrating on a single but far-reaching source and a small group of buildings related to it, he has crafted a coherent and focused argument whose implications go well beyond the case studies in question, a reflection of his own interdisciplinary interests and approaches. This is a study that is as persuasive as it is informative, and one that will enrich and nuance our understanding not only of late Ottoman visual culture, but also of multiple fields ranging from global art history to post-Saidian Orientalist theory.

The book's compelling clarity is further bolstered by its lucid and descriptive prose. Indeed, Ersoy's writing might be criticised for being at times excessively explanatory, with certain points being over elaborated or too frequently repeated, particularly in the first chapter. The same belabouring tendency reveals itself in the continual (and often needless) use of scare quotes, which are not always easy to distinguish from actual quoted matter. Conversely, certain terms—for instance, '"T-type" convent-masjid' (p. 233)—that are unfamiliar to non-specialists are not defined for the more general reader. These are, however, minor flaws in a study that is overwhelmingly well articulated and explicated. Perhaps the only real shortcoming of the book is the relatively little attention it gives to the non-Muslim Ottoman architects who were responsible for designing the buildings: the extent to which they were implicated in the period's written discourse, and the means by which they mediated between theory and practice, are questions that warrant more consideration than they receive.

Ersoy's discussion is effectively served by a generous number of illustrations that include images of buildings as well as reproductions of the *Usul*'s plates. Though these illustrations are all in black and

white, they are more than fit for purpose, and well arranged on the pages of what is a modestly sized but handsomely produced publication. There is no doubt that Ersoy's book will prove an influential and much-used work among scholars and students of Ottoman art history; but more than that, it deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in the visual and cross-cultural dimensions of global modernity in its formative years. (ur221@cam.ac.uk)

Ünver Rüstem
Johns Hopkins University
University of Cambridge (until summer 2016)

The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy. By Liana Saif. pp. 278. Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave, 2015
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The attractive cover of *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy* features a man seated on air and floating above the back of a bull. He is stripped to the waist, wears a turban and loincloth and holds an enormous key. The image is a detail from one of frescoes executed by Francesco del Cossa for the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara in 1469 or 1470. In Hellenistic times the zodiac was divided into thirty-six parts, known as decans, each sign being assigned three decans. What is featured on the cover of Liana Saif's book is the second decan of Taurus, for the month of April, under the governance of Venus. Some of the decan imagery frescoed on the walls of the palace's Hall of the Seasons derived from a magical treatise known as *Picatrix* and *Picatrix* was in turn a thirteenth-century Latin translation of an Arabic magical text, the *Ghayat al-hakim*, or 'Goal of the Sage'. The compiler of the *Ghayat al-hakim* appears to have been an Andalusian *hadith* scholar and magician, Maslama al-Qurtubi (not to be confused with the famous Andalusian mathematician, Maslama al-Majriti). Al-Qurtubi's work was apparently compiled in the tenth century (a century earlier than used to be thought).

The *Ghayat al-hakim* has a long history with London University's Warburg Institute. Helmut Ritter, who had been in close contact with the Warburg Institute's members since his time as a university lecturer in Hamburg (where the Institute was originally based) produced an edition of the Arabic text in 1933, *Das Ziel der Weisen*. The Institute's founder Aby Warburg (1866-1929) had become fascinated by the way in which Renaissance artists rescued the monstrous shapes of the decan figures conjured up by medieval western texts on sorcery and how they were able to reconstitute them in Classical forms and he published an article on the iconography of the Palazzo Schifanoia. Martin Plessner, Fritz Saxl, Frances Yates and David Pingree, all of whom were associated with the Warburg's programme to one degree or another, went on to make important contributions to *Picatrix* studies and Pingree edited the Latin version of the text.

Maslama al-Qurtubi's compilation was one of six key Arabic authorities that had an influence on early modern occultism in Europe. The other five discussed by Saif are the astrologer Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhi (787-886), the philosopher and physician Ibn Sina (d.1037), the polymath al-Kindi (d. after 865) whose treatise on rays *De radiis* survives only in its Latin translation, the ninth-century so-called *Theology of Aristotle* (actually anonymous) and the *Sirr al-Asrar* ('Secret of Secrets') a tenth-century mirror- for-a-prince that contained many occult elements and which was also spuriously attributed to Aristotle.

The truth of astrology seemed to be attested to by the Qur'an: "In the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the rotation of night and day, are sure signs for those people possessed of minds". In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle had identified the stars as the efficient causes of generation and corruption.