
Review of Books

THE TENTMAKERS OF CAIRO: EGYPT'S MEDIEVAL AND MODERN APPLIQUÉ CRAFT By SEIF EL RASHIDI and SAM BOWKER, pp. xv, 249. Cairo and New York, The American University in Cairo, 2018.
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Until forty years ago, the colourful tradition of appliqué-work tentage in Cairo, ubiquitous at marriages, circumcisions, funerals, and religious festivals, had received almost no attention as a form of applied art. Only in 1982 did a chapter by B. Wass in *Islamic Art from Michigan Collections*, and in 1986 an article by J. Feeney in *Saudi Aramco World* give a comprehensive idea of the subject. This book sets out to correct that neglect, and does much to satisfy it. Unusually for a university publication, although it is equipped with detailed footnotes and bibliography, it is written in an easy, colloquial, entertaining and discursive style which, while providing a wide range of information, should appeal not only to academic readers, but to the lively interest in the craft that has recently been fostered in the West.

Seif el Rashidi is a graduate in Islamic art from the American University in Cairo, who has been active for more than a decade in programmes for cultural preservation, and Sam Bowker a lecturer in art at an Australian university, who has published on the subject since 2012, and curated an important exhibition in Malaysia in 2015–16.

The book sets out to provide an outline history of tentage, *khayamiya*, from the Fatimid to Khedival times, a discussion of the trade and its practitioners in Cairo, including its transformation to meet the demands of tourists, an exposition of design and technique, and finally a forum for the recorded comments of the tentmakers themselves in these changing times.

Its historical chapters labour under the usual difficulty that most chroniclers did not bother to record material culture, so that references are few, and tend to note only outstanding or even notorious tents, which acquired sobriquets such as, under the Fatimids, *al-Qatul*, the tent of the Caliph al-'Aziz that killed a tent-pitcher, or *Dar al-Batikh* "the House of Watermelons" named surely after its shape with a central dome surrounded by four smaller ones, rather than its gaudiness as suggested, and one made at Tanis, with a central column of six crystal cylinders, and a covering of gold brocade, that cost the Caliph al-Zahir 14,000 *dinars*. The main source for such details remains a tent-man, Abu'l-Hasan, cited by al-Maqrizi, whose criteria of height, capacity, richness of materials and cost were later resumed by the Mongols, the Timurids and the Moghuls. It is still not generally realised how remarkable these structures must have been, when for example, one recorded was 500 cubits in circumference, 65 cubits high, on a central pole 6.3 cubits in diameter: if the cubit is taken, as here, at a little less than 50 cm, they were enormous [curiously, the height of a Moghul *bargah* in AD 1653 is also given as 32.5 m]. Consequently they engendered celestial imagery, which in turn became a literary *topos* that outlived the fabric itself, symbolic of power. Where poems have survived extolling them, they are

well translated. Terms for different types are given as *fustat*, *mustatih* and *suradiq*, (*bilma*, said to be Turkish, is probably derived from *bölmə*) but one longs for precise definitions and data which no historian seems to have provided. Nor is there any visual record, other than the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, not notable for its technical accuracy. In contrast to later Islamic work, figurative designs including men and animals seem to have been prominent under the Fatimids, besides bands of inscriptions. Oddly, the authors do not cite R. B. Serjeant's *Islamic Textiles* of 1972, or D. Behrens Abouseif: *Ceremonial Tents in Medieval Egypt*, pp. 51–58 in M. Baha Tanman, (ed.), *Nurhan Atasoy'a Armağan*, (Istanbul, 2014).

It emerges that no examples of Egyptian tentage have survived from earlier than 1880–90, that is the khedival period, though appliqué-work from the Fatimids is preserved at the Ashmolean Museum. No continuity, then, can be demonstrated between this earlier tradition and what we know of the khedival style, though, as elsewhere, in the absence of contrary evidence, we may assume it. The authors attempt to supply a connection by examining Mamluk and Ottoman architecture, though these passages seem to me not particularly useful. Equally it may be misleading to compare the coverings of the Ka'ba and *mahmal* with the possible appearance of Mamluk tents, when these were entirely different in Ottoman times.

The authors have done their best to track down the known specimens in both private and public collections, and even refer to press reports of those which have subsequently disappeared. In 2015 they examined 200 specimens, primarily it seems, to record their epigraphy. In writing of these, they do not refer often enough to the relevant plates, and, although the book is well-illustrated in colour, in several cases there are no illustrations of pieces mentioned. A more serious defect is that there are no drawings, let alone detailed measurements, of surviving tents, so that our understanding remains inevitably vague.

A section on the omnipresent inscriptions, mostly in *thuluth*, is useful in setting out their range, but should perhaps have been placed in an appendix, with full texts and translations from different periods.

The authors do provide details of textiles, colours, stitching and patterns, showing how these have changed over the last 150 years, and especially since 1975, as more economical silk-screen printing came to replace hand-stitching. A small error is an anachronistic reference to the use of cochineal for red: the colour was most probably derived from insects, *Kermes vermilio*, found on the Mediterranean coast and near Ararat, or else from madder.

The technical continuity between khedival tent making and present practice is evident, but the style is undergoing a variety of pressures that have transformed it from geometric forms with their characteristic foliate surrounds and counterset 'arusa cresting: snobbery at what is "old-fashioned", tourists' demand for ancient Egyptian motifs, Islamist wishes for Qur'anic calligraphy, and the craftsmen's own exploration of new motifs, often floral.

A powerfully direct final section of the book allows the tentmakers to speak for themselves, about their training, the stages of their apprenticeship, the distinction arising between design, execution, and handling, financial strains, the shift toward individual production of small panels, and the decline of their trade, which may be saved by interest abroad.

They explain how traditional coloured tentage has become unfashionable in Egypt, giving way to white, and even to tents imported from Germany. Concomitantly they note how completely this tradition has been ignored in Egyptian museums: an irony when more and more specimens are acquired by collections outside the country, and attention is attracted by exhibitions such as Bowker's impressive exhibition in Malaysia, or the display at Doddington Hall. An indication that the authorities have responded at last to this stimulus could be seen in the display, with lectures, at the Egyptian Cultural Centre, London, in May 2017. <peteraandrews@outlook.com>

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