

Collecting Islam: The Western Eye

This talk looks at the fascination which European travellers have had with examples of Islamic architecture within the Near East, the Middle East and beyond. By looking at a wide variety of objects from the V&A Prints, Drawings & Paintings collection, we journey through architectural, illustrative and topographical views of peoples, buildings and landscapes from countries united by a common Islamic cultural identity.

1. **Mosque of Mohammed Ali, Cairo; Francis Frith; photograph; 19th C**

V&A: E.208:633-1994 & E.208:624-1994

Frith embarked on three professional tours of Egypt, during which he photographed not only Islamic buildings but also many ancient monuments such as Abu Simbel. This he attempted despite the problems that the hot weather created for the wet collodion photographic process Frith was employing at the time.

2. **The Fort, Palace of Akbar, Taj Mahal in the distance; Samuel Bourne; photograph; 19th C**

V&A: 53:243

Bourne arranged the composition of this image so that the viewer's eye reached the Taj Mahal via Akbar's fort, shown here in the foreground. Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal, was incarcerated in this fort for much of his later life, and spent many days of his imprisonment gazing across the fields towards this white marble dedication to his wife's memory.

3. **Views of Egypt; Maxime du Camp; volume of photographs; 19th C**

V&A: X185

The world's first exhibition dedicated solely to photography was held by the Society of Arts in December 1852. Among the 779 exhibits were views of Egypt taken by Flaubert's friend, Maxime du Camp. These were the first photographic prints of Egypt, and these were gradually acquired by the V&A in instalments, forming a foundation for what became the 'national collection of the art of photography'.

4. **Instructional drawing, Jerusalem; anonymous**

V&A: E.1264-1963

5. **Measured drawing of the Dome of the Rock; William Harvey; pen, ink and colour; 1909**

V&A: E.1267-1963

6. **The Dome of the Rock; Frederick Catherwood; engraving; 1836**

V&A: SP.258:1

The Dome of the Rock is a Muslim shrine and like the Ka'ba in Mecca it is built over a sacred stone. This stone is believed to be the place from which the prophet Mohammed ascended into heaven. It is the third most important pilgrimage site in Islam after Mecca and Medina. Jews believe the site to be where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, and to also be the site of the temple of Solomon and the temple of Herod.

7. Interior of the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus; R. P. Spiers; watercolour; 19th C

V&A: E.5-1917

Spiers was an architect, and made a tour of the near East in 1865-66 as a result of winning the Royal Academy's travelling studentship. He, perhaps more than anyone else was responsible for introducing young architectural students in the last decades of the 19th century to Islamic architecture.

8. The Mausoleum of Sultan Mahomed, Bursa, Turkey; Thomas Allom; watercolour; ca. 1838

V&A: SD.30

The popularity of illustrated books on the Ottoman Empire prompted many young self-employed British artists to travel to Western Asia to accumulate material for the ever-expanding appetite for exotic scenes. Among these entrepreneurs was Thomas Allom, who worked in Turkey, and went on to become one of the founders of the Institute of British Architects (later Royal Institute of British Architects).

9. Architecture Arabe; Pascale Coste; volume; 1837-9

V&A: SD.272

10. Egypt and Nubia, volume III; David Roberts; volume of lithographs; ca. 1850

V&A: 95.H.44

Pascal Coste's extraordinarily thorough drawings adhere to the same meticulous draughtsmanship and careful observation which distinguishes many 18th century books devoted to classical buildings. Coste's volume was the most detailed study of the architecture of Cairo to be published in the 19th century. Volumes such as this, and Roberts's, would have not only conveyed information but would have cemented reputations – an important consideration for young architects and artists. It is interesting to note the difference in approach between Roberts who takes the very romanticised topographical angle, and Coste who is rather more clinical in his process.

11. Mosque at Isfahan, Persia; Eugene-Napoleon Flandin; watercolour; 1841

V&A: SD.382

Flandin was in Isfahan on a diplomatic mission to the Shah of Persia, during which he and fellow French artist Pascal Coste were employed to record Persia's ancient and Islamic monuments. Flandin later accompanied the French military campaign in Algeria in 1837.

12. Interior of a room, Cairo; Frank Dillon; gouache; ca. 1875

V&A: SD.332

13. F. M. Good; Interior of a Cairene House; photograph; 19th C

V&A: X 470

All travellers who visited the ancient sites of Egypt began their journeys in Cairo, and it was in this city that the first awakenings to Islamic architecture took place. Compared to the colossal structures along the Nile, Cairene buildings were more domestic in scale and this would have appealed to architects whose main concerns were the design of houses rather than tombs. Another attraction would no doubt have been that these buildings had not previously been the subject of study.

14. Mosque of Sidi Bu Madyan, Tlemcen, Algeria; S. Fabrizi; watercolour; 1881

V&A: SD.374

Fabrizi was one of a group of Italian Orientalist artists working in Rome in the 1870s and 1880s who all painted numerous scenes of life in North Africa. Some however had never been there and based their compositions on photographs. This is where the topographical work of photographers such as Frith, Good and Beato becomes very significant.

15. View of the Mosque of Aya Sofia; Giovanni Borra; pen, ink, watercolour; ca. 1750

V&A: SD.123

It is fair to assume that at this time Giovanni Borra was not accustomed to drawing examples of Islamic architecture. We see here how Borra quite purposefully includes peculiar neo-classical elements to the structure of Aya Sofia, in an impulsive attempt to flatten all ornament from the façade of the building.

16. After the Indian Mutiny; Felice Beato; volume of photographs; ca. 1858

V&A: X 131

Beato, an Italian by birth, visited India during the Indian Mutiny, also known as the First War of Indian Independence. He was probably employed by the War Office, London, to make documentary photographs of damage inflicted on various buildings in Lucknow following the two major sieges. His equipment was a large box camera using 10" x 12" plates which needed a long exposure, and he made over 60 photographs of places in the city connected with the military events.