

THE DESTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF ALEPPINE ‘AJAMI ROOMS OF JDAYDEH’S HOUSES

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Aleppo is the commercial capital of Syria, the second most significant city after Damascus, Syria’s political capital. Aleppo has a long history, extending from the third millennium BC to the Islamic era. The remains are monuments to these great civilizations. *Jdaydeh* is one of the historic neighbourhoods in Old Aleppo City, noted for its winding narrow alleys and richly decorated houses from the Ottoman period. These houses belonged to the Aleppine bourgeoisie, who creatively decorated them. This paper will focus on nine houses (Wakil, Dallal, Balet, Sader, Ghazaleh, Kebbe, Ajek-Pash, Zamria and Basil) that date back to 17th and 19th centuries and have unique examples of the polychrome wood decorations that known as ‘ajami, which were documented in 2006 by the first author. Since 2012 much of Syria’s architectural heritage has been destroyed due to the conflict in Syria. In Aleppo, the losses in both ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous. Some traditional houses have been damaged and some of the ‘Ajami panels have been stolen. This research employs a historical and descriptive approach to document the history of each house with the ‘ajami, determine the location of the ‘ajami rooms or panels of each house, and investigate the current situation of the houses and rooms. This paper also will propose the plan for reconstruction with some recommendations to restore the traditional houses in Aleppo for future use.

Introduction

Ottoman style houses in Syria have become the icon of Ottoman Syrian art and architecture due to their unique design and decorations. The decorative art found in these houses includes several geometric designs, floral motifs, and inscriptions. Impressive polychrome wood panels (‘ajami) dating from the 17th to the 19th century have been preserved in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama (in Syria). The academic field has not studied this subject enough, especially the ‘ajami rooms of Aleppo. Since 2012 the conflict in Syria has destroyed much of Aleppo’s architectural heritage. The losses in both the ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous. Old Aleppo city has been bombed many times and many of the ‘ajami rooms of the houses have been destroyed, burned or stolen. It has become urgent to bring awareness to this subject and cover it scientifically. The objectives of this paper, first to document the date of ajami rooms in the five case studies, second to locate the ‘ajami rooms in each house and finally to document the damage of each house. In the following sections, this paper will elaborate Aleppine Ottoman houses, the history of ‘ajami, and the current situation of five houses in Aleppo, by using the photos that were shot before the war and the data collected exclusively for this research.

Ottoman Houses in Aleppo

Syrians always tried to make their houses like heaven, and oriental design helped them. The design of Aleppine traditional houses depend on the description of the paradise found in the Quran: *{But those who feared their Lord will be driven to Paradise in groups until, when they reach it while its gates have been opened and its keepers say, "Peace be upon you; you have become pure; so enter it to abide eternally therein," [they will enter]}* Surat Az-Zumar; 73, and in other verses: *{Those will have gardens of perpetual residence; beneath them rivers will flow. They will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and will wear green garments of fine silk and brocade, reclining therein on adorned couches. Excellent is the reward, and good is the resting place}* Surat Al-Kahf; 31. Just as walls and gates surround Syrian cities, Aleppine houses also have walls and a gate, replicating the walls and gates of Heaven.

When walking through the alleys, one sees only simple walls and doors. But, upon entering the gate through an indirect corridor, they will reach the courtyard, an earthly paradise, adorned with plants, trees and a water fountain. The most important feature of the courtyard is the *iwan*, a room with an open wall facing the courtyard sometimes as tall as two stories. Here the family prefers to sit with its open view of the courtyard and its moderate temperature, especially during the summer. Surrounding the courtyard are the ground rooms, *sealmlik*, customized to receive men, and usually the upper rooms, *haramlek*, private for the family. All the rooms open to the courtyard with big windows, which rarely face the outside. The house also includes a kitchen, service rooms, a toilet, and a cellar to save food. The house rarely includes a bath. Due to the importance of hospitality in Islamic and Arabic culture, guest rooms (*qa'a*) are more carefully decorated and furnished. Such rooms consist of one or three *tazars*; raised seating area of the room formed as T-shaped hall, and one *'ataba*; low entry space of the room. Ottoman *tazars*, containing the largest treasure of polychrome wooden decorations *'ajami* (Alafandi & Rahim, Aleppine Polychrome wooden ('*ajami*) Rooms In Syria, 2015, p. 13).

All traditional Aleppo houses are courtyard houses built of white limestone, whose color changes over the years into light gray. The most obvious feature of the living quarters is the windowless and undecorated appearance of the house's outer facade, noted by almost all the travelers who visit Aleppo. (Mollenhauer & Karzon, 2001, p. 193)

Polychrome Wood ('Ajami)

According to (Scharrahs, 2013, p. 110) and (Kayyal, 2007, p. 270), these Syrian wooden elements are elaborately decorated with a particular relief technique, known as *pastiglia* in Europe but called polychrome wood ('*ajami*) in Syria. '*Ajami* is the Arabic adjective applied to an '*Ajam*, a Persian or (relative to Arabic speakers) alien. The term *al-'ajami* ('*ajami*) is used to describe this decorative technique as a whole as well as the raised ornaments individually, and also provides a commonly used name for this type of interior, termed polychrome wood ('*ajami*) rooms; even though other materials and decorative techniques are also used in the rooms.

'Ajami In Aleppine Houses

Jdaydeh district houses belong to 17th - 19th century. They were the houses of the Aleppine bourgeoisie who creatively decorated their houses. This paper will focus on nine houses (*Ghazaleh, Kebbe, Ajek-Pash, Zamria, Basil, Wakil, Dallal, Balet* and *Sader*) that date back to the Ottoman period and have unique examples of '*ajami*, which were documented and photographed by the first author from 2006- 2010.

Ghazaleh House

Is located in the extramural *Jdaydeh* Quarter (Hadjar, 1998, p. 121) and was built in 17th century (Sauvaget, 1941, p. 51) by *Khajadour Bin Murad Bali* in 1691AD/1102AH written in the northern room

ceiling (Figure 1). Later the family *Saba 'Aidaa* lived in this house 1737AD/1150AH (Figure 2), followed by the *Ghazaleh* family (Al-Ghazzî, 1992, pp. Vol: 3, 203) with more than 45 people living in it, the inscription in northern room wall cornice mentioned the owner *Rezq-Allah Ghazaleh* and the date 1834AD/1250AH (Figure 3). In the early 20th century, the house was converted into a school for Arminians. By 2007, the Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate refurbished the Ghazaleh House transforming it into a historical museum for the City of Aleppo. In conjunction with this endeavor, they restored its *'Ajami* panels from 2009-2011. The locations of *ajami* were documented during the visits between 2006-2010 and photographed as the following: western room, northern room, T-shaped *qa'a*, winter room, the kitchen rooms, *Iwan* with sunshade, and small southern room (Figure 4). In 2013, Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate (AAMD) reported to Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) and to UNESCO: “the *'ajami* panels were stolen from the Ghazaleh House”, but neither DGAM nor UNESCO published the full reports or the photos of the Ghazaleh House after the damages (Alafandi & Abdul Rahim, *The Aleppine Ottoman 'Ajami Rooms, Destruction And Reconstruction*, 2016, p. 172). On August 20, 2016 a team from DGAM was able to take external photos of the house and publish it, which show the destruction in the eastern section of the house (Figure 5).



Figure 1. Northern room ceiling (1691AD/1102AH), Rami, 2009

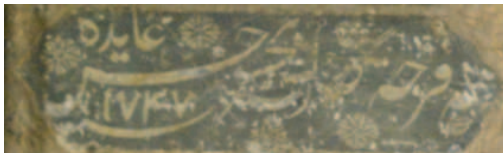


Figure 2. qa'a wall (1737AD/1150AH), Rami, 2006



Figure 3. Northern room wall cornice (1834AD/1250AH), Rami, 2006

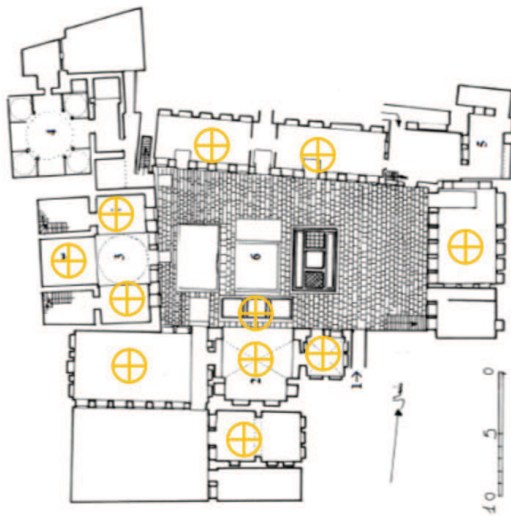


Figure 4. Ghazaleh plan with *ajami* locations, AAMD



Figure 5. The destruction of the eastern section

Kebbe House

Located near *Farhat* Square in the *Jdaydeh* Quarter, the house was built in 1718AD/1130AH according to the '*ajami*' inscription on the ceiling of the upper room (Figure 6,7). The owner was *Fateh-Allah Kebbe* (De Sallé, 1840, p. 112) and in 2004 this house was left by the inheritor who emigrated to America. The locations of *ajami* were documented during the visit in 2006 and photographed as the following: *Iwan* sunshade, northern upper room and southern upper room (Figure 8). The house has been partially looted prior to the conflict. The wooden frieze in the northern upper room, with painted glass have been stolen (Alafandi & Abdul Rahim, *The Aleppine Ottoman 'Ajami Rooms, Destruction And Reconstruction*, 2016, p. 179).

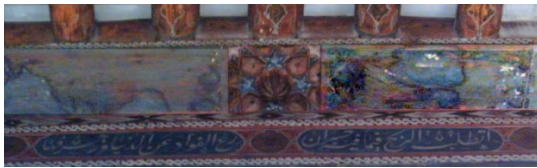


Figure 6. Kebbe, the ceiling of Iwan, Rami, 2006

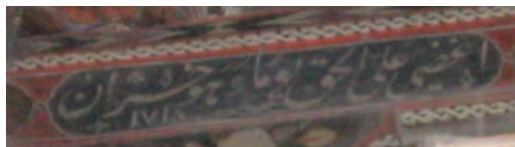


Figure 7. Kebbe, inscription date, Rami, 2006



Figure 8. Kebbe plan with *ajami* locations, AAMD

Ajek-Pash House

Located near the Jasmine gate in the *Jdaydeh* Quarter, and according to the inscription (Figure 9) it was built in 1757AD/1171AH by the grandfather of *Yousef-Karaly* (De Sallé, 1840, p. 115), then owned by *Ajek-pash*. Later the Syriac Catholic Church owned the house and used it as hostel for the poor. In 1967, the Aleppo Antiquities and Museums Directorate transformed it into a traditional museum for Aleppo City (Figure 11). The locations of *ajami* were documented during visits and photographed as the following: *Iwan* sunshade and ceiling, the two rooms on both sides the *Iwan*, and the rectangular *qa'a* in the north (Figure 10).

On August 20, 2016, the photos from DGAM show the major destruction of the *Iwan* with the *Ajami* ceiling and sunshade, and also show that most of the '*Ajami*' panels were stolen, in addition to a destruction in the upper floor in south-west (Figure 12,13,14,15).



Figure 9. Inscription with date 1757AD/1171AH , Rami, 2006



Figure 10. Ajek-Pash, qa'a, David

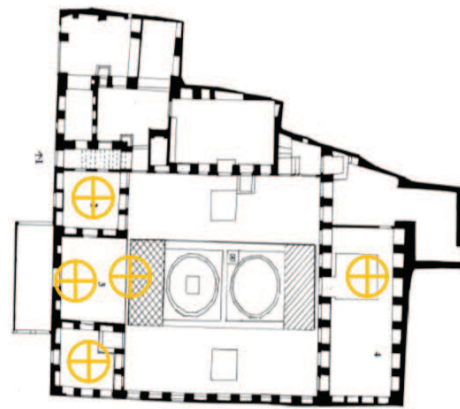


Figure 11. Ajek-Pash plan & ajami locations, AAMD



Figure 12. Iwan of AJEK-PASH 1991



Figure 13. Iwan of AJEK-PASH 20/Aug/2016



Figure 14. Room of AJEK-PASH 20/Aug/2016



Figure 15. Room of AJEK-PASH 20/Aug/2016

Zamria House

The house located in *Jdaydeh* quarter and was built in 1733AD/1145AH (David, 1975, p. 23) by *Khazdar Osmani* (Burabeh, 2009, p. 24). In 1808AD/1223AH the *Zamria* family owned the house (Figure 16). In 1997, Martini Co converted the house into a traditional hotel and restaurant (Burabeh, 2009, p. 24) (Figure 17). The locations of ajami were documented during the visit between 2006-2010 and photographed as the following: *Iwan's* sunshade and ceiling, the two rooms on both sides of the *Iwan* , and the rectangular *qa'a* in the south (Figure 19).

During the conflict in Syria *Zamria* house was shelled many times (2012-2013), and the house was partly damaged (Figure 18), then completely burnt and many parts were destroyed (Figure 14), All polychrome wooden decoration were burned, and none of the pieces remains have been found (Alafandi & Abdul Rahim, The Aleppine Ottoman 'Ajami Rooms, Destruction And Reconstruction, 2016, p. 176).



Figure 16. Inscription date, Rami, 2006



Figure 17. Zamria courtyard, Rami, 2006



Figure 18. Destruction of courtyard, Zamaria.com



Figure 19. Zamria plan with 'ajami locations, AAMD

Basil House

This is located in *Bahira* Monk lane in the *Jdayeh* Quarter and according to the 'ajami's inscription the house was built early in 1772AD/1186AH and decorated in 1785AD/1199AH (Figure 20) by the *Basil* family. In 2002, the house was converted into an institute for languages and art (Burabeh, 2009, p. 24).

The locations of ajami were documented during the visit in 2006 and photographed as the following: *Iwan's* sunshade and ceiling and three ceilings (Figure 21) of the T-shaped *qa'a* (Figure 22). The house has been vandalized during the conflict, but until now, it seems that no fixed items have disappeared (Alafandi & Abdul Rahim, The Aleppine Ottoman 'Ajami Rooms, Destruction And Reconstruction, 2016, p. 178).



Figure 20. Inscription date, Rami, 2006



Figure 21. 'Ajami ceiling, Basil House , Rami, 2006

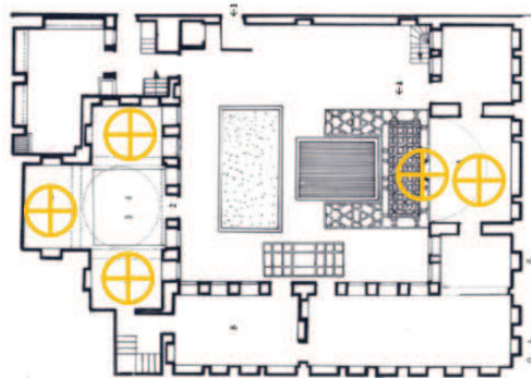


Figure 22. Basil plan with 'ajami locations, AAMD

Wakil House

It is located in *Al-Sissi* alley in *Jdaydeh* quarter. *Wakil* house is one house but historically and architecturally it wasn't all built at the same time, but it was built in multiple stages and periods. It was normal constructed for traditional houses to be extended, divided, or demolished depending on the family's activities. *Wakil* house was transformed to a Greek Orthodox infirmary, to an orphanage, and eventually to a restaurant and hotel (Figure 23).

The southern house: The most unique and oldest polychrome wooden panels in Syria are found in this house; the date of the panels are indicated twice in the inscriptions, 1600/01 and 1603. These dates make the *Wakil's qa'a* panels the oldest known surviving example and marking the beginning of a long tradition of decorative wooden interiors in Syria (Figure 24). The former owner was a merchant, 'Isa ben Buṭrus, whose identity is mentioned on the inscriptions. (Kröger & Gonnella, 2008, p. 13)

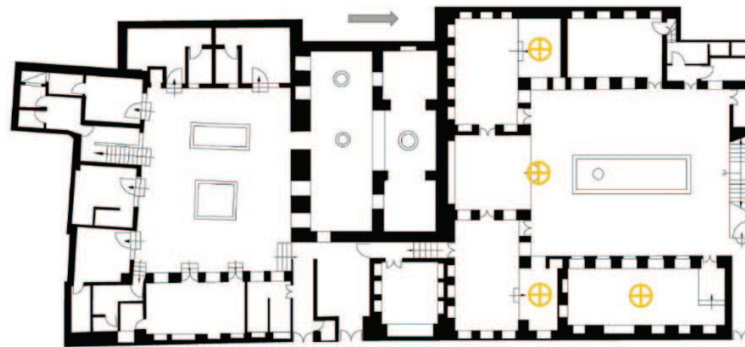


Figure 23. Plan of Wakil house

This room is not in the house anymore; it was bought from the heirs, the *Shoukri wakil* family, by Martha Coch in 1912 for Friedrich Sarre. The panels were shaped in 14 boxes, 2526 Kilos, from Tripoli, Lebanon, to Hamburg, Germany, then to Berlin (Kröger & Gonnella, 2008, p. 12).

First, originally the panels were displayed in Bode Museum. Then, in 1932, the Pergamon Museum opened the panels were moved there, and displayed in the square hall. During World War II, the panels were dismantled and preserved in boxes. In 1945, part of the panels were moved to Soviet Union, then returned to Berlin after WWII. These panels were preserved better than the other panels which stayed in Berlin, because the storage rooms in Berlin were damaged and the panels were exposed to environmental impacts. Ultimately, in 1960, the panels restored and were displayed again in Pergamon Museum in the original T-shaped hall until today (Gonnella, 1996, p. 10). The house consist of the T-shaped *Qa'a* on the northern side and open to the rectangular courtyard from the south (Figure 25). The courtyard contains a fountain and plants, and six rooms surrounding the courtyard from the west, south and east. The second floor has six rooms also with terrace on the southern side opening to the courtyard which could be reached by stairs from the southern side. Two stores of the southern section are not original but it was the addition for the infirmary. The second floor contains an original terrace with two lancet arches standing on a Muqarans crown in the middle which supported by a cylinder column.



Figure 24. Wakil's qa'a, Pergamon Museum.



Figure 25. Southern courtyard & qa'a

The Northern houses: According to (David & Rousset, 2008, p. 56): “This part of the house can be dated to the second half of 18th century”, matching the ‘*ajami* inscription panel which I found in 2006 (Figure 26) with an inscription of the year 1158AH/1745AD with no mention of the owner’s name. This part was built north of the *qa’a* and attached to it. Large rectangular courtyard oriented roughly north-south along an axis. This rectangular courtyard contains a fountain, *Iwan* on the southern side opening to the north, two corresponding rooms on the sides of the *Iwan*, one rectangular *qa’a* in the east, one room in the west, facilities in the northern west, and a big underground cellar that more of a cave. (David & Rousset, 2008, p. 59)



Figure 26. Inscription date panel 1158AH/1745AD

The locations of this house’s ‘*ajami* were documented during the visit in 2006 and photographed as the following: ‘*Ajami* cornice and ceiling in the room west of the *Iwan* (Figure 27), ‘*ajami* cornice and ceiling in the room eastern of the *Iwan* (Figure 28), the rectangular *qa’a* in the north-east contains an ‘*ajami* ceiling with inscriptions in the ‘*ajami* panels (Figure 29) and the *iwana*’s sunshade (Figure 30).



Figure 27. The room west of the Iwan



Figure 28. Room east the Iwan



Figure 29. rectangular *qa’a* in the north east



Figure 30. Iwan’s sunshade

Photos by *Hagop Vanesian* shows the damages in the *Wakil* House (Figure 31) after the conflict; many of the doors have been destroyed and the fountain in the northern courtyard have been partly destroyed but the situation of the 'Ajami panels are not known yet.



Figure 31. Damages in the Wakil House, northern courtyard, Hagop Vanesian

Dallal House

Bayt *Dallal* is located in *Al-Sissi* alley in the *jdaydeh* quarter. According to *Talas* (1956, p. 292) and *Sawaf* (1958, p. 142) it was built in the 17th century and according to *Hadjar* (1998, p. 50) it was built in 18th century but no date can be found on the 'ajami panels. The eight rooms of the house are arranged around a square courtyard containing a fountain with a podium for musicians and two rectangular beds for lemon and orange trees on the sides of the fountain. The *Iwan* face the north-west. The women's quarter, located on the second floor, has a five rooms, a terrace and another podium for musicians (Figure 32). In 1921 the house was converted to *Kilikiya* Elementary School (Hadjar, 1998, p. 50).

Many authors and scholars came from *Dallal* family (Bakhash, 1985, pp. 115, Vol. 1); *Ibrahim Dallal* was famous during the 18th century (Shiekho, 1991). *Abd Allah Dallal* was also a famous author for Arabic literature during the 19th century (Bakhash, 1985, pp. 115, Vol. 1), *Abd Allah* was a noble man in his community who lived in the *jdaydeh* quarter (Bakhash, 1985, pp. 45-46, Vol. 1) probably in this house. He was a good friend of *N'aoum Bakhash* who mentioned him a lot in his diary whereas they used to go for fishing and hunting (Bakhash, 1985, pp. 115, Vol. 1). *Abd Allah Dallal* died in 1847, leaving behind two sons *Gebreail* and *Naser Allah* who both became great scholars (Bakhash, 1985, pp. 275, Vol. 2).

The locations of ajami were documented during visits and photographed as the following: The ceiling (Figure 33) and Sunshade (Figure 34) of the *Iwan*, two ceilings in the south-west *qa'a* (Figure 35,36), inscription panels in the north-west *qa'a* and inscription panels in upper *qa'a*.

Until this paper there have been no reports and photos of Dallal house that can explain is the current situation.



Figure 32. Dallal house plan, DOC



Figure 33. Iwan ceiling, Rami, 2006



Figure 34. Iwan sunshade Rami, 2006



Figure 35. Qa'a small ceiling, Rami, 2006



Figure 36. Qa'a ceiling, Rami, 2006

Balet House

The *Balet* House is located in the *Al-Sissi* alley. Though there is no date found on the 'ajami panels; the stone inscription in the *Iwan* mentions the date 1170A.H/1757A.D (Figure 37). However it is not apparent if it is the date of the original building or the renovated house. The rooms arranged around an elegantly decorated courtyard contain a square fountain, an *Iwan* facing the west, and a women's section occupying the upper floor on the north and east sides (Figure 38). The house was later reused as an orphanage for the Armenian community. *Bakhash* calligraphed the sunshade of the *Iwan* on Sunday the 29th of August 1847 (Bakhash, 1985, pp. 65, Vol. 2). *Yousef Balet* was a Catholic Arminian pearl and coral merchant who resided in this house early 18th century (Al-Sied, 2015, p. 289).

The locations of ajami were documented during visits and photographed as the following: the sunshade of the *Iwan* (Figure 39), the upper stairs sunshade (Figure 40) and the ceiling in the room west of the *Iwan* (Figure 41).

Until this paper there are no reports and photos for *Balet* house that can explain the current situation.

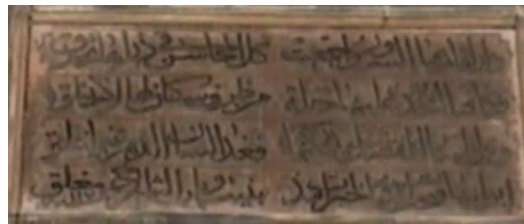


Figure 37. Iwan stone inscription, Rami, 2006

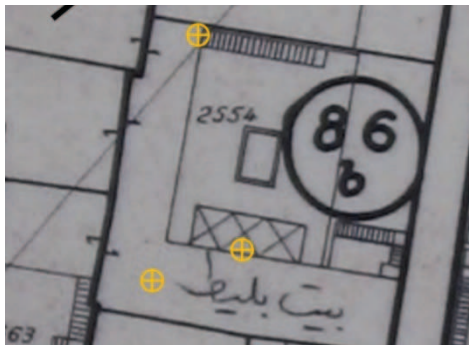


Figure 38. Balet plan, DOC



Figure 39. Iwan's sunshade, Rami, 2006



Figure 40. Stair's sunshade, Rami, 2006

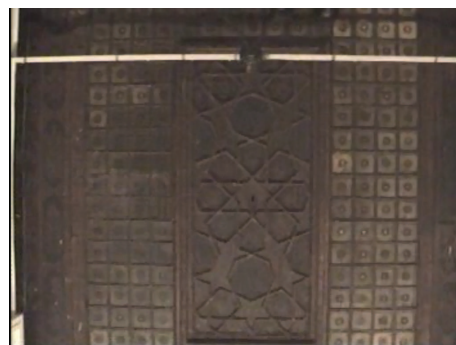


Figure 41. Western room's ceiling, Rami, 2006

Sader House

It is located in *Al-Hosrom* alley. In the *Iwan* is a stone inscription with the date 1711//1123AH. The central fountain and garden were removed to make room for a school playground. Two story surround the courtyard. The house still has three original of its interior facades; the *Iwan* and the two other sides facades (Figure 42). The façade in front of the *Iwan* was modified when the function of the house changed to be a high school for the Catholic Syriac community.

The '*ajami*' panels in *Sader* house did not survive due the neglect when the house turned into a school. The *Iwan*'s sunshade devastated completely and the situation of the ceiling in the room next to the *Iwan* was also destroyed partially but there was a gorgeous ceiling that was moved to Aleppo museum in the fifties from *Sader* house. The '*ajami*' cornice remained in the room which was decorated by the illustration of fruits inside dishes containing animals, birds and knight on his horse. Until this paper there are no reports and photos for *Sader* house that can explain the current situation.



Figure 42. Sader's Iwan and courtyard, Jebrail Saoud, 2010

Discussion

- The Ghazaleh house contains the highest number of a'jami rooms; 6 a'jami rooms and T-shaped *qa'a* of '*ajami*'.
- The six studied houses are dated by the '*ajami*' panels. The oldset is Wakil Room in Berlin (1600-1601AD) then the '*ajami*' panels in the Ghazaleh house (1691AD/1102AH), the Kebbe House (1718AD/ 1130AH), the Zamria House (1733AD/1145AH), the north part of Wakil House (1158AH /1745AD), Ajek-pash House (1757AD/1171AH) and Basil House (1772AD/1186AH). Two house dated by the stone inscription Sader House (1711AD/1123AH) and Balet House (1757AD/1171AH). Dallal house not dated.
- Ghazaleh and Basil houses are only houses with a T-shaped *qa'a* (the *qa'a* with three *tazars*). Ghazaleh house is the only one with bath.
- The major styles of the '*ajami*' in the nine houses are Hatayi, Rumi, Saz and Şukufe which were influenced by Ottoman art and the geometrical designs found on the ceilings and shutters.
- Some of the '*ajami*' motifs did not originate in Syria but came to the Middle East via the trading roads from Asia (Hatayi, Rumi & Saz) and Europe (Şukufe). The Ottoman adopted, developed, and used some motifs which came from Europe. Ottoman art and architecture were also directly impacted by Rococo and Baroque styles from Europe in 18th century.
- The Ottomans synthesised all the previous skills and knowledge of craftsmen and artists from the Islamic world and other cultures.
- Whether the owner was Muslim or Christian, there are no significant differences in the design or the decorations, especially in the houses studied above (except the Wakil Room in Berlin).

Restorations And Recommendations

During the recent conflict in Aleppo, the '*ajami* panels were destroyed in Zamria, Ghazaleh and Ajek-Pash houses, and stolen from Kebbe House. The efforts to restore and renovate cannot succeed until the fighting stops. In the meantime, a plan for restoration and renovation can be prepared. This requires doing the following:

- Accurately monitoring all the physical, social, and economic damages to estimate the cost of restoration and renovation.
- Collecting all the related data on one online platform to make it easier for the researchers and restorers to find all the original documents and photos.
- Using digital technology to document the physical damages in the houses such as 3D scanning, drones, and satellite.
- Preparing archaeological studies on each house with comprehensive analyzation for their art and architectural elements.
- Determining who will finance this project and how much funding will be needed.
- Finding competent consultants and experts who will participate.
- Learning from similar previous local and global experiences.
- Establishing faculty of traditional Syrian art composed of specialists in this field who will document the knowledge and techniques of the traditional Syrian art to be used that for professional restorations.
- The documenting and description of the '*ajami* panels can be used to monitor the rooms and the panels in the market in case these panels show up so we will able to identify it.

Conclusion

This study is one of the few studies which have investigated and documented the '*ajami* rooms of Aleppine houses, particularly, those that have been eroded and in some cases have been destroyed, especially in the last three years during Syria's internal war. These '*ajami* panels with the motifs not only show the owner's aesthetic taste but represent the evolution of Islamic art and architecture during the Ottoman rule in Aleppo. The documentation of the houses in this paper can be helpful to restore these damaged historical structures.

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