

INNOVATION OF TECHNIQUES IN 'AJAMI AS PAINTED WOODEN WALL  
PANELLING FOR LIVING SPACES OF SYRIAN HOUSES

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**Abstract**

Technique of painted wood paneling in the art and craft of Ajami has been popularly practiced in the seventeenth to late eighteenth century especially during the Ottoman period. 'Ajami is used to describe the technique of painted wooden wall panel as well as the interior as a whole. Nowadays, it can be seen that this beautiful decorative painting technique is subjected to threats and would gradually become one of an extinct art in Syria. This paper discusses the rediscovering of traditional techniques of 'Ajami and its visual attributes in the painted wood paneling products of two Syrian master artisans who are actively involved in the craft industry, namely Abdulraouf Baydoun and Fadiraed. Their works and opinions were obtained through face-to-face interviews that served as inferential evidences and primary data for this study. The interviews focused on the aspect of fabrication and innovation of 'Ajami as painted wood paneling with particular emphasis on visual components and techniques used. Field observation and photographic documentation of their works were necessary measures to complement the interviews. Hence, examination on the works produced by the artisans which exemplifies their distinctive craftsmanship is also addressed in this paper. It was found that the most profound works produced by them are 'Ajami for interior application with distinctive techniques and visual attributes. The finding also signifies their strong preferences to the application of floral and geometrical design for innovative wood paneling. This implies that the development of new ideas based on the traditional techniques has become the most influencing factor that governs their craftsmanship in sustaining the applied art and design of 'Ajami in Syria.

**Keywords:** Ajami; Syrian houses; craftsmanship; painted wood paneling.

**1 Introduction**

In the 1570s until the early 1580s, paintings of Ottoman court began to appear. The technique of painted wood paneling in the art and craft of 'Ajami has been popularly

practiced in the seventeenth to late eighteenth century especially during the Ottoman period. The original wood paintings during this era were imported from Italy (Fetvacı, 2013). ‘Ajami is defined as a technique of 2D and 3D drawing on the surface of wood panelling. This type of woodwork possesses the most similar elements to ‘Ajami. Wood painting is a piece of wood that is drawn over by 3D and 2D techniques. It slightly differs from the other techniques.

‘Ajami handmade art are produced to be exterior and interior decoration. The production of ‘Ajami verses with multiple actions to innovate perfect knowledge in order to produce the artwork with visual ingenuity (Shaw, 2011). According to Atasoy(2008), Scharahs(2010), Yvonne, Dold-Samplonius, & Harmsen(2005) it was found that the decorative of interior houses in Syria consist of ‘Ajami interior decoration, and it is divided into rooms, halls and open spaces. Each room has several elements such as doors, windows, ceiling and muqarnas (wooden cornice). All these elements are decorated by wooden ‘Ajami handmade art and considered as an indispensable part for each room.

‘Ajami is a handmade art that can only be produced by experts and it requires a number of materials applied on wood panels. The ‘Ajami art is very valuable and consists of various design elements, such as geometrical, floral, calligraphy and more. There has been a great decline in ‘Ajami art, and the knowledge of its techniques have diminished with each generation. That is because there is limited documented information and analysis remaining about Ajami technique that can educate people about the art. Therefore, an investigation about the traditional technique of ‘Ajami art is necessary through a qualitative research. The objectives are to document the technique of ‘Ajami from two Syrian master artisans, and to determine the visual attributes of the ‘Ajami as painted wooden wall panelling for leaving spaces of Syrian houses.

## **2 The Origin and Development of ‘Ajami art**

‘Ajami art as a type of wood painting art and decorations was famous in Ottoman period during 17th and 18th century. ‘Ajami art is a creation by the Syrian society during the Mameluke period. It flourished during the Umayyad period to reach its peak in the Ottoman time, when the Muslim world was in the process of achievement and success. ‘Ajami art is a kind of abstract painting using floral and geometric designs. It is an exclusive art and its uniqueness lies in the raised 3D effect of the painting patterns and motifs. This unique art is a heritage, a memory, and a documentation of the Muslims’ success and richness.

SitiZainon(1997)highlighted that the design of handcrafted products involves two groups of important elements namely tangible elements and intangible elements. Tangible elements are things like color lines, texture and shapes which is seen and can be touched and admired. Intangible elements on the other hand involve emotional expression, intuition, mind and other spiritual matters.A painter knows what to manipulate with the brush, dragging along the oil mixture, the motif is done via pressure of charcoal powder on the partially flexible paper, also the viscous slip of the oil colours among the objects. Artists have become experts in differentiating between grades of polish and moisture they achieve this by instinct, without understanding and knowing how they accomplish it, or how elements innovate their effects.

### **3 Methodolgy**

This study was conducted as an explorative and interpretive research for which a field observation, photographic documentation of the informations were gathered during the face to face interview with the two master artisans: First, Mr. Abdulraouf bin Abdulqader was born in 1958 in the city of IdlibKafrTakharim (Syria). His passion for art guides him to Damascus in order to hone his artistic endowment in the Arabic Cultural Centre that specializes in the complex and Syrian traditional 'Ajami Art. He is among the oldest generation of 'Ajami artisan who is extremely recognized for his brilliant artistic talent, nowadays he is also one of the most skilful 'Ajami in Syria. He is highly recognized as a distinguished 'Ajami artisan who has long and valuable experience for almost forty years. He inherited this art skill from his family.

Second, Mr. Fadi bin raeed was born in 1963 in the city of Damascus. He was working by producing 'Ajami art since he was 10 years old, following his family business by restoring and producing this exquisite art. He opens his own workshop 20 years ago. He concentrates on teaching Islamic art and calligraphy in that workshop. Also, he involved with many restoration projects and a number of private homes in Syria.

The face-to-face semi-structured interview was conducted to get the information from the two master artisans. The researcher used a video camera to record the interview and another one to get the photographic documentation while the artisans was talking and doing their works. The researcher had conducted the interview in the workshop of each artisan. A set of interview questions were the same instrument used for both artisans and their answers were obtained as primary data. Mr Fadi's answers and explanations are more on modern perspective and innovations in 'Ajami production and Mr Abdoulraouf has provided a

complementary opinion focusing on the traditional techniques of 'Ajami with reference to his original works.

#### **4 Finding and Discussion**

##### **4.1 Materials and Technique of 'Ajami Handmade Art**

According to the interview with Mr. Abdulraouf and Mr. Fadi, 'Ajami art has two types of application, namely three-dimensional and two-dimensional techniques. The production of the woodwork components dated back to the early 18th century, reflect some changes occurred to them by time through the original historical perspective (Kenney, 2011). Many researchers have conducted different analyses regarding the various layers of the paintings of 'Ajami art. According to Lauren, Edelstein and Rizzo (2010), the analysis of the pigments required some specific recipes, supplements, and techniques which are inspired from historical treatises and guided by the chosen materials for restoration.

In the early stage of 'Ajami production in 3 D technique, the drawn design is transferred from a tracing paper to the prepared wooden surface. That will cause adding a new layer of charcoal powder on the wood to provide the design outline of the painting. The black carbon as mentioned by Scharrahs (2010) is a type of pigment that had been used in many 'Ajami paintings. In the next stage, the raised material Nabati is added to fill up the charcoal outline and is left until it dries up.

Applying the layer of basic colours is done in the later stage in order to clarify the relief background and later adding a new layer which consists of metallic pigments (such as silver and gold). The recognized paint pigments are usually used including minium, vermilion, basic verdigris, smalt, carbon black, and lead white glaze colorants containing aloe (orange), verdigris (green) and cochineal (red) (Fair et al., 2010). These metallic pigments distinguish the flowers and the leaves of the design rather than leaving it as mere ordinarily-coloured floral shape. The silver and gold layers sometimes are followed by a layer of Missione for the gold colours which is a kind of plaster and is used in form of paper and not in form of powder. The colour detail layer enhances the aesthetic value and creates balance in the colour of the background. A finishing fine black line is drawn on the borders of the raised areas to determine the final shape of the design supported by colourful shadowed fine lines on the painting. The colours of the shadow are chosen based on the overall colours of a painting. This line is used to create the final balance of the mixture of colours. The dark orange colour is added to the entire painting as a contour line to create a contrast and balance to the colours'

value. The final layer of lacquer is applied to protect and preserve the colours plus making it shiny.

#### 4.1.1 'Ajami in 2D and 3D appearances

Mr. Fadi mentioned that there are several steps involved in the production of 'Ajami art and also there is a slight difference between the 2D and 3D appearance, as agreed by Mr. Abdulraouf. A 3 D appearance in 'Ajami is achieved by the application of a white paint mixed with Nabati which is added as the relief layer in the 'Ajami. A layer of liquid Nabati painting is added by painting on the wood surface which gives relief effect. The application of raised Nabati in 'Ajami art consists of many layers which represent the 3D forms of this handmade art which can be distinguished from those in 2D form. Figure 1 illustrates the appearance of 'Ajami in 2D and 3D form.

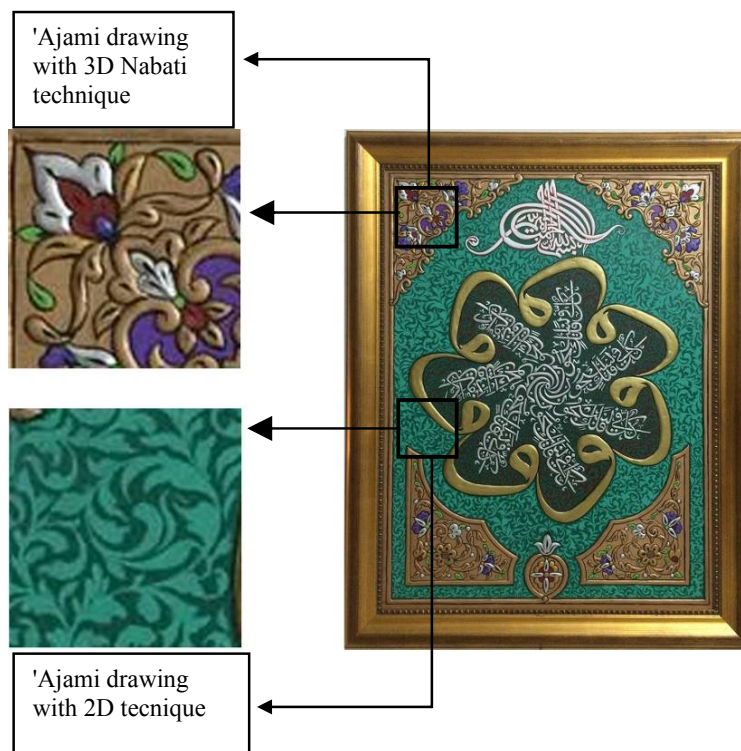


Figure 1: 3D and 2D appearance

#### 4.1.2 The Design of 'Ajami Handmade Art

The inspiring ideas, symbols of 'Ajami gives it an identity, and as the artisan Abdulraouf mentions the 'Ajami artwork also have religious, documental and historical purposes. Its purpose is to attract people to see and understand the Syrian historical phenomena and legend. He adds that 'Ajami art is a book, a calendar, and a prestigious interior. Abdulraouf and Mr Fadi state that the design is the combination of the flowers and fruits which the master artisans see around him. The painting of these flowers is done by following the 'Ajami steps and guidelines and it is not a mere abstract painting without meaning or soul, but rather tells a story of beauty, history and glory. The artist creates designs according to the geometrical and floral 'Ajami guidelines supported by their imaginative creativity.

##### 4.1.2.1 Floral Design

From the start, 'Ajami art used common, meaningful flowers, modified and simplified to add to paintings and forming different shapes. The most indispensable flowers which were applied through 'Ajami Art are Lotus flower symbolizes purity, faith, and greatness. According to Mr Abdulraouf, the Tulip flower denotes the Ottoman caliphate power The Lily flower indicates the elegance kindness and love. Arabian Jasmine references to the nature and beauty while Cherry Blossom symbolizes nature, land and sincerity. Jasmine refers to class, elegance, and beauty. Meanwhile, Cloves flower refers to elegance, kindness, and love. Figure 2 illustrates the Cloves flower that contains of many leaves of petals and how the artisan used this flower in a simple way when painting.

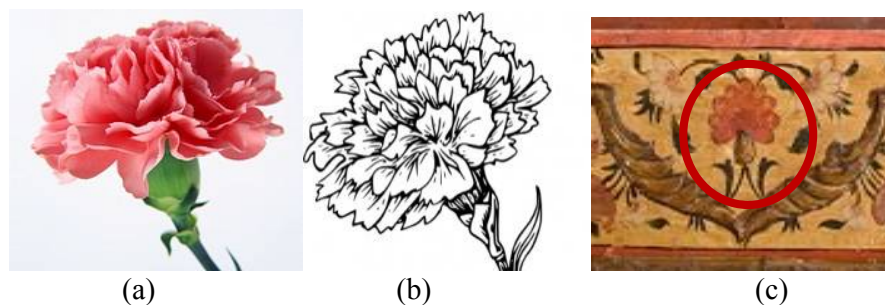


Figure 2: Cloves flower with compound petals, (a) real picture of Cloves, (b) the outline of Cloves, (c)'Ajami panelling showing Cloves flower



The artisans indicate that the depiction of flowers in ‘Ajami Art are in cross-sectional image, including horizontal and vertical one. Sometimes, the artisan uses parts of flowers especially the tiny ones in order to fill the empty spaces of paintings with aesthetical elements. The depiction of Cherry Blossom and Apricot flower, for example, gives a sense of balance in the design. Mr Abdulraouf added that the depiction of floral design in the paintings depends on the number of petals that determine the aesthetic quality. In addition, the artisan draws the formulation by starting on different parts of the flowers which are of many sizes. It is worth mentioning that flowers and fruits are not chosen randomly; rather, the artisan selects it based on place, time and weather. Every flower and fruit serves medical, psychological, and religious purposes. Another example is that many artisans use the date fruits in the ‘Ajami panelling in the Ottoman and Umayyad periods to refer to the importance and sacredness of dates in Islam.

Occasionally, the artisan Mr Abdulraouf through his designs depends on adding symbols of poetry, stories, Al Hadith Nabawi, Quran, and wisdom to emphasize the identity of the house owner and to venerate him as well. As for the guestroom, the artisan uses poetry and Al Hadith Nabawi (Prophet Muhammad’s sayings) which speak about generosity and morality. As for ornaments, its basic forms begin from a point, bracket, and circle in order to form repetition formulation. This is the basis of all floral decorations.

#### **4.1.2.2 Geometric Design**

Geometry is the fundamental part of formation of a design in the ‘Ajami painting. It is basically used to divide the drawing into symmetrical and consecutive spaces to give the subject an ornamental shape which is suitable with the artwork environment. Therefore, the ‘Ajami artisan always depends on geometric designs such as triangle, square, pentacle, hexagonal, heptagon, octagon, decagon, and dodecagon. Figure 3 shows a geometric shape (the hexagon) used in the design of an ‘Ajami ceiling.

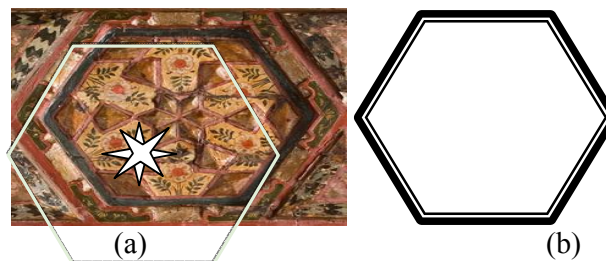


Figure 3: (a) Part of ‘Ajami ceiling (b) The geometric hexagonal shape used in 'Ajami design

The painting relies on these geometric shapes in order to create symmetry, repetition and harmony in the painting. For instance, the artisan repeats triangular shapes to get a hexagonal shape. Similarly, squares are repeated to form an octagon. When the formation of the geometric design is done, the artisan starts to fill the spaces with the floral ornament, using the high and low relief technique. Mr Abdulraouf explains “all shapes and designs in the painting are symbols of a philosophy and astronomy that expresses the culture of the designer. For instance, if the top of triangle is up, that will refer to the strength of Allah SWT, and if the top of triangle is down, that means the ability of Allah SWT through creating the earth and people”. Figure 4 illustrates the red triangle to symbolize the strength of Allah SWT and the green one is the connection between Allah and the creation on the earth.



Figure 4 'Ajami panelling showing the triangles design

Referring to Figure 4, Mr Abdulraouf further explains that when the two triangles come together, they form a hexagonal shape which symbolizes to the connection between Allah SWT and people. Whereas a heptagon refers to the seven skies and the pentacle denotes to the five prayer times in Islam. Also, a dodecagon denotes to the number of the months in the Islamic year.

#### 4.2 ‘Application of ‘Ajami technique for the leaving spaces

Abdulraouf added that the early human developed and improved his interior decoration ability and building houses when he left the cave. During the human development and his movement between countries and exchanging ideas to improve interior decorations, he recognized the flower shape and colours, the symbol of each country and the meaning of every flower and animal and its parts in the different seasons and natures around the world. With the existence of Islam and Christianity and through their spread around the world, Muslim artists started to give the Islamic stamp to all their painting and interior decorations, leaving out the imaging of the soul. This is in contrast to Christian artwork in which there



exists soul-imaging in combination with floral and geometric decorations. Mr Abdulraouf mentioned that the 2D and 3D designs makes 'Ajami art a unique art. People can find drawings in every civilization applied flat on the surface while the high relief in 'Ajami makes it special and different which is apparent in the interior space of wall, window, door and ceiling as illustrated in Figure 5. The painting seems alive with all its different textures, colours and ridges as explained by Mr Fadi. 'Ajami art has its own criteria and is mainly identified by having the reliefs and raised surface of the colourful and gilded painting (Mathews & Annie-Christine, 1997).

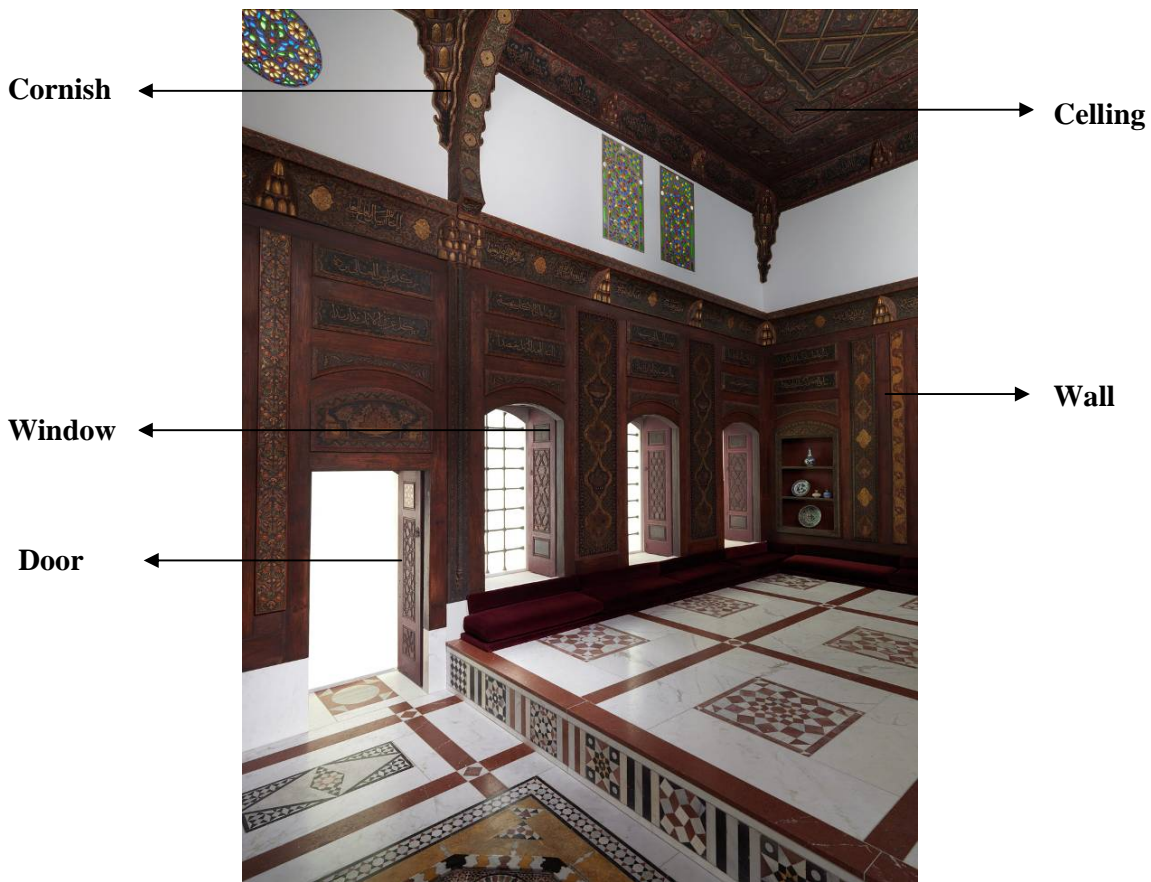


Figure 5: Damascene 'Ajami room in metropolitan museum shows 'Ajami art

Abdulraouf states that the old artisans used science and chemistry in creating the raised material Nabati (نباتية) which are derived from natural materials and materials taken from animal's skin. Abdulraouf posits that the raw materials that is used in 'Ajami art painting are taken from animals' skin and the nature, whether its usage is for colouring or for making the raised material, the covering, and the foundation. Mr Fadi added that using wood carving in

‘Ajami art is a kind of innovating the 3D appearance, the wood carving reliefs can help the artisan to give very high relief objects on the face of each ‘Ajami panel. While the raised Nabati material gives the low relief of 3D appearance in the modern ‘Ajami artwork application.

## **5 Conclusions**

The study found that the ‘Ajami painting are produced in two types of technique application, namely three-dimensional and two-dimensional techniques. As a result, ‘Ajami is found in 3 D and 2D appearances. The 3D appearance in ‘Ajami is achieved by the application of a white paint mixed with Nabati which is added as the relief layer. A layer of liquid Nabati painting is added to give relief effect in the 3D painting which is not applied in the ‘Ajami with 2D appearance. The application of raised Nabati through many layers gives a sense of 3D forms in ‘Ajami art. In the context of design form of Ajami, colors, shapes and spaces are primary visual elements as seen in the ceiling and walls design in the interior decorations in Syria. The combination of different shapes of floral and geometric motifs and colors gives a sense of variety in unity in the interior spaces. ‘Ajami handmade art is a historical and valuable technique shows the combination of floral, geometrical and calligraphy motives with full of colors which carry a big meaning of Islamic philosophy.

## **6 Recommendations**

As a recommendation for future research Mr Abdulraouf mentioned that each color and motifs is an important part of the heritage story, not just randomly add, so it is necessary to not only study about the technique, but also the motives and the colors combination should be added.

## **7 Acknowledgment**

I would love to give very special appreciation to Mr Abdulraouf Abu Ziad and Mr Fadi Abu Raed for giving me such great and helpful information for my research paper. It was a perfect to get very pure and clear data to explain very well about ‘Ajami technique.

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