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Arthur Millner

## **Damascus Tiles (Compact Edition)**

Mamluk and Ottoman  
Architectural Ceramics from  
Syria - Compact Edition

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Seiten: 320

Erscheinungstermin: 10. September 2025

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## Zum Buch

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**Now repackaged in a smaller, reduced priced edition, this highly acclaimed book by a leading Islamic art expert explores one of art history's most overlooked treasures—the vibrant ceramic tiles of Syria and especially its capital Damascus.**

Architectural ceramic decoration is one of the most celebrated manifestations of the arts of Islam.

Spanning a period from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, the tiles featured in this book exhibit a rich range of influences from Persia, Turkey, China and even Europe. A renowned specialist in the fields of Islamic and Indian art, Arthur Millner explores the historical context that allowed the uniquely creative achievement of Syrian craftsmen to flourish, and why tiles from this region are less restricted in artistic expression than those from better-known centers of production. The complex and interconnected nature of tile designs, techniques and color palettes is explored, highlighting what is distinctive about Damascus ceramics and how they relate to tiles produced in other parts of the Islamic world. Finally, the author traces the journey made by many of these tiles to the West, embellishing the interiors of wealthy clients as Islamic art became both fashionable and influential in late nineteenth century art and design.

This edition has been updated with additional information, as well as reflecting recent academic research and events in the region.

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ARTHUR MILLNER writes and lectures widely on Indian and Islamic Art and is a member of the Indian and Islamic Vetting Committee at Frieze Masters art fair, in London. He works as a consultant to Olympia





665-1897





# Damascus Tiles

Mamluk and Ottoman  
Architectural Ceramics from Syria

Arthur Millner

PRESTEL  
Munich · London · New York

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Fig. 1

Blue and white tile now in the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, unusually depicting a building as well as more typical leafy plants. The stylised depiction of this building recalls some of those in the mosaic decoration in the Umayyad Mosque courtyard. Mamluk, probably Damascus, first half 15th century, 20.5 cm square

## Foreword

Among the glories of Damascus, a city over five thousand years old, are its glazed tiles. From the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ottoman tiles still on the façades of historic buildings to the earlier tiles to be found in the National Museum, and of course those in many museums and collections outside of Syria, Damascus tiles bring pleasure to the eyes of beholders. The book that follows, the first to deal exclusively with the tiles of Damascus in all their manifestations, examines the historic development and distribution of these objects. As with other arts of the Islamic world, Damascus tiles reflect the complex interaction of Arabs, Persians and Turks which operated on many levels: political, social, religious and artistic. Like the apparel of an individual, tiles clothed buildings, providing a durable yet colourful covering and, with their various designs, a suggestion of gardens, sky or conviviality.

As the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate from 661 to 750, Damascus played a significant role in the development of Islamic architecture and its decoration. The Great Mosque, commissioned in 706, occupies the site of the Christian basilica in which the head of John the Baptist is housed and is embellished on its façade with magnificent mosaics produced by artists who only decades earlier would have been working for Byzantine patrons. Although the mosaic technique was largely abandoned in Islamic architecture by the tenth century, the idea of enhancing architecture with colour survived and thrived. In Abbasid Samarra stucco surfaces carved in relief were painted in polychromy, as were flat walls. However, Samarra is also the earliest Islamic site at which the use of glazed tiles is attested. Apparently as a by-product of the highly successful production of lustre-glazed ceramic table wares, potters in Iraq made polychrome lustre-glazed tiles to decorate the newly constructed palaces and other monuments at the ninth-century site. Lustre-glazed tiles are also found in the ninth-century mosque at Kairouan, Tunisia, where they were employed only in the *mihrab* (prayer niche), underscoring how special this form of ornament would have been in that period.

By the eleventh century, in Iran and Central Asia architects were experimenting with different forms of ornament, particularly designs and epigraphic friezes formed of baked brick and small numbers of glazed bricks. Although a strict chronology of the introduction of glazed bricks in Eastern Islamic architecture



remains to be established, the germ of what would become a defining characteristic of Iranian, Central Asian and ultimately Ottoman architecture began with discrete segments of turquoise-glazed brick placed amidst the decorative bands near the tops of tomb towers. The Seljuqs, under whom this innovation occurred, appeared to place more emphasis on architectural elements than surface ornament.<sup>1</sup> Two developments in the twelfth century led to major changes that would have a lasting impact on architectural decoration. First, a new ceramic body called “stonepaste” or “fritware”, composed of a large amount of ground quartz, that had originated in the eleventh century was adopted from Egypt to Iran and led to a technical revolution in the production of pottery across the region, including at Raqqa in northern Syria. Second, the Fatimid Caliphate that had ruled Egypt and Syria, fell in 1171, causing the emigration of specialist craftsmen to Syria and Iran. The result of these occurrences, one technological and one political, was a period of exceptional creativity in ceramic-making, including the development of underglaze painted decoration and new styles of lustreware. Yet only in Iran and Central Asia in this period did potters apply their skills to tile-making, producing monochrome-glazed, moulded tiles at Ghazni (Afghanistan) and lustre-glazed tiles in Iran for the interiors of their buildings.

In Damascus, architectural decoration in the twelfth century did not extend to the use of glazed tiles, with a few exceptions. Moulded and glazed ceramic tombstones were produced in Raqqa in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, presumably for placement in the interior wall of a funerary or other structure. In the same period, hexagonal floor tiles with turquoise glaze reveal the awareness of Syrian potters of new tile shapes being used in places such as Iran. Yet the inferior quality of the Syrian glaze and friable nature of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century ceramic body appear to have held back the more extensive use of glazed tiles for decorating walls.

Fig. 2

An exceptionally fine calligraphic panel composed of three large tiles from a funerary monument in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was acquired, along with other items, by the South Kensington Museum from the collection of Gaston de Saint-Maurice (1831–1905) in 1884, following its display in the 1878 Paris International Exhibition. Saint-Maurice had worked in Cairo in 1868–78 as a court official. Ottoman Damascus, c. 1570–90. Each tile 36cm high.

Moreover, as part of the Mamluk Empire, Syria adopted architectural conventions that were distinct from those of their Mongol adversaries to the east. This situation would eventually change, again as a consequence of political upheaval and the introduction of new artistic motifs. The destruction wrought upon Damascus by the assault of Tamerlane and his armies resulted in the mass forced emigration of artisans from Damascus to the Timurid capital Samarkand and the eventual reconstruction of Damascus itself.

With the fifteenth century, Damascus tiles came into their own. The vogue for Chinese blue and white porcelains led to a range of hexagonal, square and cartouche-shaped tiles with floral, vegetal, geometric and other designs in underglaze blue on a white ground. Some include black or turquoise, but all of them reveal a creativity and freedom of design and execution. While evidence exists for the presence of Iranian tile-makers in Damascus in the first half of the century, the number of extant tiles of this style and period suggests that local artisans were also producing tiles to clad the walls of new and renovated buildings.

Following the Ottoman conquest of Damascus in 1516, a new impetus for building stimulated tile production. Starting around 1560, a new polychrome style of tile began to appear in Damascus in which the forms and palette of Iznik pottery were adapted for tiles decorating Damascene buildings, both public and private. The completion of the Ottoman renovation of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in the 1550s led to the dispersal of potters to various parts of Syria. To the technique and palette of cobalt blue, turquoise, sage green and purple, borrowed from Iznik, the designers of Damascus tiles brought an ebullience that surpasses that of the Turkish examples. Lively and beautiful tiles continued to adorn Damascus architecture for three hundred years, attesting to the skill and taste of potters and their patrons. The book that follows will shed new light on this special aspect of one of the world’s greatest cities.

Sheila R. Canby

Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 3  
Floral designs on an  
Ottoman tile,  
Damascus, c. 1570–80,  
27 x 21.5 cm (private collection)

## Preface

People are the most important component of a nation, but the art and culture which survive from earlier generations underpin their sense of continuity and belonging. The impact of the recent years of violence and upheaval in Syria on the people and fabric of the land and the country's artistic heritage is impossible to quantify. The city of Aleppo has suffered particular devastation and several of the monuments in this book either no longer stand or have faced major damage and losses. It is hoped that this book will celebrate a happier aspect of Syria and serve to document an important aspect of its cultural history.

Ceramic decoration is central to Islamic architecture; almost wherever the faith predominates, a tradition of tile-making has sprung up. The Islamic world has produced a bewildering array: cut-tile mosaics, carved and square tiles, glazed in numerous variations of colour and technique. As well as these there are quasi-tiles in the form of glazed bricks. Despite this rich variety, there are two consistent features: use of brilliant colour and a sense of geometry. Nowadays, we tend to view the role of tiles as primarily practical; they provide an easily cleaned and durable surface for a fireplace, kitchen, butcher's shop, public house or underground station. Even the exquisite, hand-painted Delft tin-glazed tiles had a core practicality, so we should not overlook the practical in Islamic tilework. On an exterior wall, the glazed tile provided a protective cladding, resistant to fading in the strong desert sun, while inside palaces and mosques, crowds of pilgrims, courtiers or supplicants could touch or brush past tiled walls with minimal wear and tear. They provide relief from the desert heat through an appearance of wetness, and coolness to the touch.

Tiles were expensive items to produce, requiring copious time, fuel and raw materials. In the imperial capitals of Turkey and Persia, where court patronage ensured abundant funds, they were used in such quantity that they often almost entirely covered interior surfaces, but in Syria they were used more sparingly, as a way of enlivening plain masonry or enhancing the architectural effect. The designs of these panels are often exceptionally lush and overgrown, suggesting a dreamlike view through a window. For many Muslims these verdant scenes evoke the garden of paradise, but for artistic inspiration it is tempting to imagine that artists drew on sources closer to home. Damascus is hemmed in by dry grass semi-desert on one side and rocky mountains on the other, but the often snowcapped Anti-Lebanon mountains have always ensured plentiful fresh water supplies delivered by a system

of aqueducts originating from the very earliest times. After supplying the needs of the inhabitants, the waters fan out to irrigate the Ghouta, an area of fields and orchards to the east of the city.

Perhaps this miracle of well-watered abundance was at the back of the artists' minds. Dr William Wright, a missionary in Damascus in the late nineteenth century, evokes the charm of this landscape in May, 1874: "Our shady lane, through the orchards of Damascus, was overhung with great spreading walnuts, trellised with vines, and on either side were apricots beaded with new fruit, and thickets of pomegranate with scarlet blossoms bursting forth like handfuls of crumpled milk".<sup>1</sup> This description encapsulates the unique qualities of Damascus tiles; less technically accomplished than those from Turkey, less elegant than those from Persia, perhaps, but incomparable in the way they convey a human attachment to an idealised natural world.

Syrian tiles, despite their relative abundance in Western museums and collections, have been widely overlooked by Western scholars; with one notable exception, John Carswell. Most reference books devote barely a paragraph or two to the subject, usually as a footnote to a discussion of Turkish Iznik tiles. Museums give them scant display space; in the Victoria and Albert Museum, for example, they hardly feature in the main Islamic Gallery, although fortunately most of the museum's unrivalled collection has recently become accessible in the new Ceramics Gallery. This lack of scholarly attention is partly explained by a tendency to overlook "provincial" art. During both the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, Damascus, despite its regional importance, was ruled from distant capitals, Cairo and Constantinople. From a traditional standpoint, the tiles fall between two stools, interpreting metropolitan designs too loosely and yet not asserting indigenous ceramic traditions sufficiently strongly. Fortunately, we are moving away from this view. Just as the colonial artefacts produced in India during the European period are now admired for their mixed pedigree, so we can appreciate the work of the Syrian craftsman, combining local traditions with imported styles and techniques to produce something distinctive and inventive. They were working under less onerous stylistic restrictions than their colleagues nearer to the centre of power, and influences from closer to home insinuated themselves into standard patterns, producing a notable exuberance, and even humour, which is part of what makes Damascus tiles so delightful.

The term "Damascus Tiles" is generally used to refer to those produced under Ottoman rule (1517–1918), but the earlier, equally interesting tiles from the Mamluk period (1260–1516) are just as important, and although Damascus is the focus of this book, other cities and centres of tile production must be drawn into the story, as the production of tiles certainly did not take place in isolation. The web of interconnection is complex and still not fully understood, but it takes us to Cairo, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Diyarbakır, Tabriz, Samarkand and many other places in Anatolia and Persia. As the story approaches more modern times when Ottoman power and wealth faltered, a new phase in the story of Damascus tiles opens up: interest in the Middle East and Islamic world on the part of Europeans and Americans during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the growth of collecting and scholarship.



Fig. 4  
Damascus tile with "leafy medallion" design.  
Ottoman, probably c. 1600, 20.5 x 26.5 cm x 1.8 cm thick (private collection)

# 1

Introduction



Fig. 1.1

Two tiles from a larger panel with "vertical wave" design. Ottoman Damascus, c. 1570–80, 28 x 30 cm each (private collection)

## Construction and Colours

Islamic art is often considered to be dominated by an orderly sense of geometry and proportion, something which is not at first sight so evident in the case of Damascus tiles, with their tangle of naturalistic plant forms. Yet, even though not overt, the geometry is always there, even if it is somewhat obscured. The particular appeal of these very painterly designs lies in the sense of competition between adherence to standard rules of composition and the artists' restless creativity.

A typical Damascus tile produced during the Ottoman period (1516–1918) is sturdily constructed with a typical thickness of about 2–3 centimetres and sides measuring typically 22–30 centimetres. As a general rule, as the Ottoman period progresses, tiles tend to get thicker and smaller. During the Mamluk period (1260–1516) most tiles, but by no means all, are hexagonal, while the Ottomans preferred the square or rectangular form.

The body ranges from off-white to yellowish buff and has a brittle, gritty texture; surprisingly, it contains only a small proportion of clay, little more than ten per cent; in fact Damascus tiles along with other Islamic underglaze decorated tiles and vessels are made of a much more complex composition. This material goes under a number of names, most commonly "fritware" or more recently "stonepaste". It is first described in a treatise by Abu'l Qasim, written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, but the technique seems to have originated in Fatimid Egypt (969–1171), in the potteries of Fustat, near Cairo. It was soon after adopted by the tile-makers of Persia. Abu'l Qasim was from a family of Persian tile-makers in Kashan, a city south of Teheran on the route to Isfahan, and his chapter on the composition, preparation and production of ceramics is part of a larger work on precious stones.<sup>1</sup> Another written source is that of the late nineteenth-century Persian potter, Ali Muhammad Isfahani of Teheran, whose account, included in a volume on pottery and glazes by William James Furnival, accords with the earlier treatise.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest Islamic pottery, such as the Persian "Nishapur" slip-decorated ware, was simple fired clay painted with coloured slip. The first lustre pots and tiles from eighth-century Mesopotamia and North Africa also have terracotta bodies, but under the Fatimids in eleventh-century Egypt, the new material was developed.

## Damascus Tiles

In fact it is very similar to the glazed composition, known as faience, used in ancient Egypt for small objects such as scarabs and shabti funerary figures, as well as for some tiles; fragments with polychrome glaze, for example, have been discovered in Tell el-Amarna dating from 1350–30 BC.<sup>3</sup> Faience was also used for tile revetment during the New Empire, in the building of palaces. (This should not be confused with faience produced many centuries later in Western Europe, which is made of fine clay with painted tin-glaze decoration.) The impetus for this technical innovation was a desire to emulate the much-admired qualities of Chinese porcelain, particularly its hard white body, which, when painted and then coated in a clear glaze, produced a very luminous effect.

Recent technical analysis of Middle Eastern ceramics has shown regional variations and alterations over time, but the recipe described by Abu'l Qasim sums up the essential elements as produced over several centuries in Persia and Anatolia. Clay makes up just 10 per cent of the total mass, the remainder being chiefly composed of silica (quartz), from ground flint river pebbles, with another 10 per cent or so made up of glaze frit, which forms a glass-like binding during firing. The frit is made from equal parts of soda and more ground quartz, the former derived from glasswort ashes or, in the case of Iznik ceramics produced in western Anatolia during the sixteenth century, collected and prepared from the sediment in hot springs, known as *bora*. The plant-derived soda comes from species that survive in a salty environment, such as places close to the sea, by concentrating the mineral in the stems and leaves. This is then easily extracted by burning. The two components were melted together in kilns and tossed into cold water, forming small grains which were then ground to powder. In Iznik, lead was added to the mix, which acted as a flux, lowering the firing temperature, and scientific analysis has shown that Iznik fritware is distinct from all other Islamic fritware, including that of Damascus. Earlier Turkish ceramics from the Seljuk and even early Ottoman period are much closer in composition to Iranian and Syrian fritware. Once the ingredients were ready, the clay was mixed with enough water to give it a runny consistency and then combined with the ground powder by lengthy hand-pounding. The result was a tough and unyielding material which presented a considerable challenge to the skill of the craftsman. Examination of Iznik vessels suggests that they were often made by being pressed into moulds or turned with a template, and made in sections to be joined together, rather than thrown on a wheel, such was the intractability of the material. We have no account of how the tile shape was actually formed, but they were probably cut from rolled-out slabs of silica and clay mixture, and dried to a leather-hard state. Mamluk and early Ottoman tiles usually have a slight inward taper to the edges towards the back, to allow visible grouting to be kept to the minimum, although the smaller, thicker tiles of the eighteenth century often have straight perpendicular sides. Very often chiselled chunks have been removed from the back edges, post-firing, in tiles of all periods, in order to achieve the same result. For edges and spaces where only a half tile was needed, the smaller tile was either produced specially or was made as a stock item. This is clear from the rounded edge of the glaze on loose examples. However, for irregular or quarter sizes, larger tiles were cut and filed down to fit the space. There are many examples which have been reduced by cutting or filing in order to help ease the tile into a tight position. Edges of broken Damascus tiles are generally of a whitish-grey colour, often tending towards a yellowish or pinkish

Fig. 1.2 (Above)

Fragment of a broken tile of "Dome of the Rock" design, said to have been found in Aleppo, showing cross-section of the body. Ottoman Syria, probably Aleppo, mid 16th century

Fig. 1.3 (Below)

Reverse of an 18th-century Damascus tile, 22 cm square



