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From Political Hostility to Artistic Exchange: A Comparative Study of the Visual Cultures of Mamluk Egypt and Ilkhanid Iran in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries A.H.

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Abstract

Introduction: Relations between the Mamluks of Egypt and the Ilkhanids of Iran in the seventh and eighth centuries A.H. have generally been interpreted through the lenses of military hostility and ideological rivalry. Historical and artistic evidence, however, indicates that networks of cultural exchange and the circulation of visual forms remained active alongside political confrontation. This study seeks to explain the mechanisms through which such forms were transmitted and reconfigured within the Mamluk discourse of authority. Its central question is how selected components of the visual culture of Ilkhanid Iran entered Mamluk artistic production at a time when official Mamluk discourse emphatically differentiated itself from the Mongols.

Research Method: This qualitative study employs a historical-analytical method and a comparative approach. Its evidence derives from two categories of sources: historical texts, used to reconstruct the political context and channels of contact; and selected works of art, comprising courtly metalwork, luxury Qur'an manuscripts, and monumental architecture. The works are analyzed in terms of the organization of visual elements, compositional structure, and symbolic function.

Findings: The findings show that sustained artistic exchange between Ilkhanid Iran and Mamluk Egypt was enabled by networks of interaction operating within a broader context of political hostility. Trade, diplomatic gift exchange after the peace of 723 A.H., and the mobility of craftsmen and Sufis facilitated the circulation of visual forms and technical knowledge. What reached Cairo was not limited to discrete motifs; compositional strategies, workshop practices, and modes of displaying magnificence also circulated across political boundaries.

Conclusion: The coexistence of political hostility and artistic exchange resulted from the operation of two distinct but simultaneous logics: confrontation at the level of legitimizing discourse and continued connectivity at the level of exchange networks and cultural production. Art thus became a field in which legitimacy could be reformulated and authority visually asserted within a context of political rivalry.

Keywords

Mamluks, Ilkhanids, Visual Culture, Artistic Exchange, Courtly Metalwork, Luxury Qur'an Manuscripts, Monumental Architecture

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Introduction and Problem Definition

In the political history of the medieval Islamic world, rival powers frequently articulated legitimacy through discursive distinctions framed by oppositions such as Sharia and Yasa, caliphal authority and Chinggisid sovereignty, or dar al-Islam and the land of the Tatars. Such distinctions consolidated not only geographical boundaries but also ideological and value-laden ones, as each polity sought to present itself as the representative of a legitimate order. Within this context, relations between the Mamluks of Egypt and the Ilkhanids of Iran have predominantly been interpreted as military confrontation and competition for leadership in the Islamic world. Official Mamluk discourse emphasized the defense of Sunni Islam and the differentiation from the Mongols, whereas the Ilkhanids grounded their legitimacy first in steppe traditions of sovereignty and later in a particular formulation of Islamic rulership. This discursive confrontation suggests a clearly demarcated political divide. Yet the surviving artistic evidence presents a more complex picture. Certain Mamluk works contain elements that relate to the visual traditions of Ilkhanid Iran. The simultaneity of political confrontation and the presence of shared visual components raise a fundamental question: if official discourse emphasized distinction and autonomy, through what mechanisms were these elements transmitted and reconfigured in artistic production? A substantial body of previous scholarship has examined the two polities either through political history or through separate analyses of their respective artistic traditions. Consequently, the relationship between discursive confrontation and the processes by which artistic elements were transferred and resignified has been treated less often as a single analytical problem. This relationship, therefore, calls for reconsideration within an integrated analytical framework. Accordingly, the central research question is formulated as follows: under conditions in which the Mamluks emphasized their discursive distinction from the Ilkhanids, how did elements of the visual culture of Ilkhanid Iran enter Mamluk art, and through what processes were they reconfigured and resignified?

Research Method

This study employs a historical-analytical method and a comparative approach. First, the historical context of Ilkhanid-Mamluk relations and the channels connecting the two regions were reconstructed based on historical sources. Examples from three domains, namely courtly metalwork, luxury Qur'an manuscripts, and monumental architecture, were then purposefully selected. These domains were chosen because of their close relationship to patronage and the display of authority and because they provide suitable evidence for tracing artistic exchange between the two regions. Selection criteria included historical contemporaneity, secure attribution, and the availability of an appropriate basis for comparison. The analysis was adapted to the specific characteristics of each medium. In metalwork, attention was given to composition and to the relationships among inscriptions, ornament, and figural imagery; in the arts of the book, to page layout, framing, and the geometric organization of illumination; and in architecture, to scale, massing, and the role of inscriptions in the representation of authority. At the comparative stage, visual similarities were considered alongside historical evidence of contact to assess the likelihood of artistic transmission and how transferred elements were reconfigured in a new context. This process is interpreted through Finbarr Barry Flood's concept of "cultural translation."

Research Background

Scholarship on Mamluk-Ilkhanid relations has generally developed along two trajectories: history and art history. Historical studies focusing on warfare, diplomacy, and political rivalry have established the broader framework of relations between the two states, while the circulation of objects, people, and artistic models has rarely been a central concern. Art-historical scholarship, meanwhile, has produced detailed studies of architecture, metalwork, and the arts of the book in both regions, without necessarily tracing the mechanisms of transmission between them. Among the studies that address this relationship more directly, «Rogers» (1972) examined Mamluk-Mongol artistic relations by bringing historical evidence into dialogue with works of art. He demonstrated that political hostility did not impede trade or the transmission of artistic elements, thereby situating Ilkhanid influence on Mamluk production within the broader history of relations between the two polities. Rogers's principal concern was the identification of such influences; the subsequent selection and transformation of transmitted elements within the Mamluk environment received less attention. «Behrens-Abouseif» (2012) approached the question through Mamluk perceptions of foreign arts. By comparing material evidence with historical accounts and drawing on the concept of «mental frontiers», she showed that political confrontation with the Ilkhanids did not preclude artistic receptivity and that diplomatic contacts, migration, and the movement of craftsmen functioned as channels of exchange. The significance of this study lies in its attention to the social and historical circumstances in which foreign art was received, although the transformation of Iranian elements after their incorporation into Mamluk works is not its primary focus. «O'Kane» (1996), in a comparative study of Mamluk and Mongol art and architecture, shifted the discussion toward monumentality and the representation of power, demonstrating that the two rival states employed comparable strategies for visualizing magnificence and authority. The strength of this approach lies in moving beyond motif comparison to consider the political function of visual forms, although the historical routes of transmission are not central to his analysis. In the field of manuscript studies, «Laclau» (2023) took the limitations of earlier stylistic approaches as a point of departure and reconsidered connections between Mamluk and Ilkhanid manuscript production through a combination of historical sources and material analysis. Her study is especially important for linking the material evidence of manuscripts to mechanisms of transmission. Its scope, however, is confined to book production and does not follow the reconfiguration of transferred elements across other domains of Mamluk art. These studies agree on the existence of artistic connections between the two regions, while differing in their explanatory paths. Despite sustained attention to various aspects of Mamluk-Ilkhanid artistic relations, the relationship among political hostility, continued artistic exchange, and the transmission and reconfiguration of visual elements has rarely been examined within a single analytical framework. The present study addresses this gap by relating the historical context of interaction to a comparative analysis of works of art.

Theoretical Foundations

The relationship between political relations and artistic production is not necessarily direct or unidirectional. A work of art may emerge within a context of political rivalry and boundary-making, while simultaneously incorporating forms that have traveled from a political adversary's territory. Explaining the coexistence of political hostility and artistic exchange between the Mamluks and Ilkhanids, therefore, requires attention to both the role

of visual objects in the representation of power and the ways in which artistic elements change as they move into new contexts. The present study draws on W. J. T. Mitchell and Alfred Gell for visual culture and the agency of art, Max Weber for legitimacy, Michel Foucault for discourse, and Finbarr Barry Flood for cultural translation. Within visual culture studies, images are not treated as passive reflections of reality but as participants in the production of meaning and the formation of social relations (Mitchell, 2005). Gell's concept of agency likewise locates the artwork within a network of relations among maker, patron, viewer, and object (Gell, 1998). These perspectives allow the works examined here to be considered not only in terms of formal resemblance but also in relation to their visual structure, composition, symbolic function, and involvement in the articulation of power and patronage. This approach is particularly relevant because courtly metalwork, luxury Qur'an manuscripts, and monumental architecture are treated in this study as objects that, beyond their artistic qualities, also served to display status and authority. To analyze political boundary-making between the two states, the study combines Weber's concept of legitimacy with Foucault's concept of discourse. For Weber, the durability of domination is tied to belief in its validity and legitimacy (Weber, 1978). Foucault, in turn, understands discourse as a system of statements and rules that conditions what can be said about a subject and what counts as valid speech (Foucault, 1972). From this perspective, the dynastic, juridico-religious, and jihadi claims advanced by the Mamluks and Ilkhanids are not treated merely as reflections of political conflict; they function as modes through which each polity articulated its legitimacy and demarcated itself from its rival. The term «discourse of legitimacy» is used here to designate this level of interstate relations. At the level of artistic exchange, transmission is not understood as direct borrowing or the unchanged repetition of forms. Flood's approach to cultural translation emphasizes the transformation of meaning and function that can occur when objects and artistic forms enter a new cultural setting (Flood, 2009). From this perspective, the presence of a similar motif or visual structure is not, by itself, sufficient evidence of transmission; its position and function within the receiving work must also be examined. In this study, «reconfiguration» refers to precisely this process: a change in the position, proportion, scale, or function of a transferred element within the structure of a Mamluk work. On this basis, historical sources are used to identify formulations of legitimacy and channels of contact between the two regions, while works of art are analyzed in terms of visual structure and the functions assumed by transferred elements. Reading these two levels together makes it possible to distinguish formal resemblance from historically grounded transmission and to assess the extent to which elements associated with Ilkhanid art were preserved, transformed, or reconfigured in the Mamluk context.

Competing Discourses of Legitimacy in Egypt and Iran

The confrontation between the Mamluks and Ilkhanids was not confined to the battlefield; it also appeared in diplomatic correspondence and historical narratives as a contest over political legitimacy. Sources such as Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah Hamadani's «Jami' al-Tawarikh» and al-Maqrizi's «al-Suluk» show that diplomatic language in this period was shaped by two different political-intellectual systems and became a means of challenging the legitimacy of the rival. Letters exchanged between Mamluk sultans and Ilkhanid rulers reflect the tension between the Chinggisid Yasa and Islamic Sharia. In a letter attributed to Hulagu and addressed to Qutuz, the Ilkhan invokes the power of the Eternal God, presents himself as an agent of divine will sent to cleanse the earth, and demands Mamluk

submission (Hamadani, 1994, 1021). The Mamluks, by contrast, emphasized their role as protectors of the caliphate and defenders of Islam, questioned Ilkhanid legitimacy, and represented the Mongols as alien rulers (al-Maqrizi, 1997, 428). After Ghazan Khan's conversion to Islam, the rhetoric of this correspondence became more complex. In his letters to al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun, Ghazan adopted an authoritative tone and asserted the need for Mamluk obedience to himself as the «king of Islam» (Wassaf al-Hadra, 1959, 348), while the Mamluks continued to cast themselves as the more legitimate defenders of Islam. This diplomatic rivalry was rooted in the different foundations on which the two states had constructed political legitimacy. Following the victory at 'Ayn Jalut in 658 A.H., the Mamluk state increasingly grounded its legitimacy in the defense of the Islamic realm against the Mongol threat. By sheltering representatives of the Abbasid caliphate in Cairo, the Mamluks presented themselves as the principal legitimate power in the western Islamic world. Mamluk sultans, who employed the honorific khadim al-haramayn al-sharifayn, framed their confrontation with the Ilkhanids through a discourse of jihad and the protection of religion (al-Qalqashandi, 1987, 47 & 120; al-Maqrizi, 1997, 356). The emphasis on Mamluk military identity in opposition to the Mongols likewise formed part of this political differentiation. The early Ilkhanids, by contrast, derived legitimacy directly from the yasa and the heavenly mandate of Tengri for universal conquest. Within the political culture of the steppe, they conceived of themselves as agents of a universal order and treated established political frontiers as temporary obstacles. After their settlement in Iran, this discourse became intertwined with Iranian traditions of kingship and, following Ghazan's conversion, was reformulated in Islamic terms. This transformation, however, did not imply recognition of Mamluk superiority, and competition for leadership of the Islamic world continued (Hamadani, 2015, 1144-1146). This opposition is also evident in historical narratives. In Mamluk sources of the seventh century A.H., the Euphrates appears as a line separating dar al-Islam from the land of the «Tatars». In al-Rawd al-Zahir fi Sirat al-Malik al-Zahir, Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir represents the Euphrates frontier as a zone for the defense of Islam and the Mamluk army's crossing of it as a jihadi act (Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir, 1976, 405-408). Rashid al-Din, by contrast, in his account of the conquest of Damascus, emphasizes Ghazan's Chinggisid genealogy and characterizes Mamluk sovereignty as contingent rather than based on rightful entitlement (Hamadani, 2015, 1143). Bar Hebraeus (Ibn al-'Ibri) likewise situates Mongol rule within a universal succession of empires rather than organizing his narrative according to the juristic division of dar al-Islam (Ibn al-'Ibri, 1958, 284). Relations between the two states may therefore be understood as a confrontation between two modes of legitimacy: one centered on Sharia and caliphal authority in Cairo, and another on the yasa and claims to universal sovereignty in Tabriz.

Continuity of Contact amid Hostility: Networks of Exchange and Interaction

Despite the consolidation of political and ideological hostility in official discourse, Mamluk-Ilkhanid relations never resulted in complete isolation. Beneath the level of political confrontation, multilayered economic, human, and symbolic networks persisted according to a different logic. The Euphrates, represented in Mamluk sources as the military contact zone with the «Tatars», functioned in practice not as an impermeable wall but as a node within shifting routes of connection. Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir, in his accounts of Baybars's campaigns along the Euphrates, records repeated incursions and withdrawals and presents the region as a zone of continuing military contact (Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir, 1976, 243-246). Ibn Taghribirdi's account of the campaigns of 699 AH similarly shows that, despite repeated

Ilkhanid attacks, neither side was able to establish lasting control over Syria or the lands east of the Euphrates (Ibn Taghribirdi, 1992, 32-36). The instability of the frontier reduced direct overland trade and increased the importance of alternative routes. A substantial portion of the exchange between Iran and Egypt moved through the Persian Gulf to Aden and then by way of the Red Sea to Cairo. This maritime network carried raw silk, Iranian textiles, and precious stones (Ashtor, 1983, 145-162). The continuity of such trade depended heavily on transregional merchant networks, particularly Armenian merchants active in Anatolia and Cilicia and Genoese and Venetian traders established in Syrian ports, who linked the markets of Tabriz and the Persian Gulf to Egypt (Ashtor, 1983, 52-60, 137-165; Jackson, 2017, 300-305). Scholars have identified the vitality of these networks as one of the conditions that facilitated the movement of Iranian stylistic elements and ornamental practices into Mamluk Egypt during the eighth century A.H. (Ward, 1993, 118-125; Blair & Bloom, 2009, 186-192). Economic contact, therefore, was not limited to the circulation of commodities; it also enabled the movement of technical knowledge and visual models.
The peace concluded in 723 A.H. between the Ilkhan Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan and al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun marked a turning point. Al-Maqrizi, in his account of the events of that year, records the conclusion of peace, the dispatch of embassies, and the exchange of luxury gifts between Tabriz and Cairo (al-Maqrizi, 1997, 61-64). Such gifts were not merely symbolic instruments of diplomacy; they were material objects bearing aesthetic values and artistic technologies. Within this context, the art object operated simultaneously as a display of royal magnificence and as a potential vehicle for the transmission of style and technique. The increased presence of certain Iranian motifs and decorative practices in Mamluk metalwork and architecture coincides with this diplomatic opening (Blair & Bloom, 2009, 192). The economic prosperity of Cairo during the long reign of al-Nasir Muhammad (r. 709–741 AH) likewise unfolded in a context of relative security along major routes and greater political stability, conditions conducive to the flourishing of artistic production. Human mobility further strengthened these networks. Ibn Battuta, describing his stay in Cairo in 726 A.H., notes the presence of Persian ('ajam) Sufis and dervishes in Egyptian khanqahs (Ibn Battuta, 1997, 204). This reference indicates that contacts between the Ilkhanid realm and Egypt were not confined to courts and diplomatic elites but extended into social and religious spheres, providing a human context for the transmission of tastes, symbols, and artistic skills.

Mechanisms of Transmission and the Resignification of Visual Elements

The preceding discussion of contact and exchange demonstrates that commodities, diplomatic gifts, individuals, and technical skills could circulate between the Ilkhanid realm and Mamluk Egypt. Yet the existence of such connective networks does not in itself explain how visual elements entered Cairo's artistic system or why formal resemblance should not automatically be equated with direct imitation or ideological acceptance of the rival. When Mamluk works display components associated with Ilkhanid traditions, it is therefore necessary to examine the position those components occupy within the overall structure of the receiving work: do they constitute the primary bearer of meaning, or do they operate in the service of a dominant Mamluk visual order? This question enables a distinction between formal similarity and meaningful transmission. The central issue is thus not simply the presence of resemblance, but the manner in which a given element was integrated and assigned a new function.

Reconfiguration and Resignification: Analysis of Three Artistic Domains

The purpose of this section is not merely to identify formal similarities between works from the two regions, but to examine how imported elements or visual models were positioned within new structures. «Reconfiguration» refers to the relocation of a model within the overall organization of a work and to changes in its relationship with other components, while «resignification» denotes a shift in symbolic function within the local discursive context. The analysis of metalwork, book arts, and architecture, therefore, focuses on how Ilkhanid artistic elements, once introduced into Cairo, were reformulated in a different cultural environment.

Courtly Metalwork and the Foregrounding of Epigraphic Authority

Mamluk metalwork reached a high degree of technical sophistication and ornamental richness in the eighth century AH, particularly during the long reign of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun (r. 709-741 A.H.). Works from this period, including ewers, trays, basins, and mosque lamps made for courtly or pious-endowment contexts, are frequently covered with dense networks of thuluth inscriptions, heraldic blazons, and vegetal and animal ornament. Studies of Mamluk metalwork have identified decorative elements from the same period with Iranian-Ilkhanid antecedents (Ward, 1993, 118-125; Blair & Bloom, 2009, 186-192). Two approximately contemporary basins, related through techniques of manufacture and surface decoration, are especially useful for assessing the mechanisms of transmission and the visual functions of such elements: a Mamluk inlaid brass basin attributed to the reign of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun in the British Museum (1851,0104.1), and a contemporary Ilkhanid basin in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (91.1.521). The objects are linked, on the one hand, by shared traditions of manufacture and surface ornamentation; on the other hand, their visual centers of meaning and modes of articulating authority differ markedly. This contrast is crucial for understanding the relationship between political hostility and artistic exchange. The British Museum basin is made of brass inlaid with gold and silver (Fig. 1). Its wide mouth and flaring rim are consistent with ceremonial use. The densest ornament appears on the exterior, where it would have been most visible. Repeated epigraphic bands, medallion frames, and richly worked vegetal grounds cover the outer surface. The composition guides the viewer's eye continuously between script and ornament, yet inscription remains the principal visual anchor. In this object, the sultanic inscription dominates the composition (Behrens-Abouseif, 2007, 41-45). The sultan's name, extended titulature, and benedictory formulas associated with political authority occupy the principal zone, while other decorative elements are organized around them. Vegetal ornaments of Iranian derivation function as a ground that enhances the legibility and visual splendor of the script. In other words, the transferred element is absorbed into a Mamluk system of epigraphic authority and acquires meaning through its relation to the sultan's name. This corresponds to the close association between luxury metalwork and mechanisms for displaying sultanic power noted in studies of Mamluk metalwork (Ward, 1993, 118-125). The Ilkhanid basin in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (91.1.521) likewise shares with the Mamluk example a taste for inlay and for densely ornamented surfaces. Its visual organization, however, follows a different logic (Fig. 2). The interior composition is structured around narrative scenes placed within geometric compartments: frames and medallions contain human figures engaged in various activities, and the design directs the eye from the periphery toward the center. Here, figural imagery and courtly narrative play a more prominent role in articulating magnificence, and the center of meaning rests less on

inscription than on the representation of actions and virtues associated with courtly culture. The comparison suggests that transmission involved more than the movement of isolated motifs. It also encompassed framing devices, ornamental density, and modes of organizing the decorated surface. Yet comparable elements did not produce identical meanings in different political and cultural contexts. In the Ilkhanid basin, magnificence is articulated primarily through image and courtly narrative; in the Mamluk basin, comparable decorative capacities are subordinated to sultanic writing, which fixes the meaning of the object around the ruler's name and legitimacy. The Mamluk basin can therefore be understood as a clear instance of resignification. Formal affinities between the two traditions must consequently be analyzed in relation to differences of function.



Fig. 1. Brass basin inlaid with gold and silver, Mamluk period, bearing the name and titles of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun, ca. 1320-1341 C.E. Source: British Museum, n.d..



Fig. 2. Brass basin inlaid with gold, silver, and copper, Ilkhanid period, Iran, early eighth century A.H. / early fourteenth century CE. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d..

Luxury Qur'an Manuscripts and the Transmission of Page-Design Schemes

In luxury Qur'an manuscript production, what proved transferable between Ilkhanid Iran and Mamluk Egypt was not simply an isolated motif, but a developed scheme of page design associated with courtly workshops: the strict symmetry of facing opening pages, multilayered framing, precise definition of the text block, placement of a central geometric field, and calibrated relationships between text and illumination. In this system, visual magnificence was generated through geometry, order, and visual concentration (Ohta, 2012). In the Ilkhanid realm, the development of organized workshop structures in Tabriz, most notably at the Rab'-i Rashidi, played an important role in standardizing the production of luxury manuscripts. Research has shown that calligraphers, illuminators, painters, and bookbinders worked within an organized collaborative framework and that specific

geometric ratios were applied to the design of illuminated openings (Blair, 2006, 173; Laclau, 2023). Analysis of manuscripts associated with the Rab‘-i Rashidi further indicates that ruling grids (mistara) and carefully calibrated height-to-width ratios shaped the arrangement of both text and ornament (Laclau, 2023). Page design thus moved beyond individual improvisation and became a form of workshop knowledge that could be repeated and transmitted.



Fig. 3. Illuminated opening of a Qur’an manuscript. Source: British Library, n.d..

The physical presence of Ilkhanid manuscripts in Mamluk territory constitutes one of the clearest conditions for the transfer of Ilkhanid book arts. The Hamadan Qur’an, copied and illuminated in 714 A.H. / 1313 C.E. for Öljaitü, was transferred to Cairo and endowed there in 726 A.H. / 1326 C.E. (Laclau, 2023). Produced in Hamadan, the manuscript was therefore physically present in Cairo and available within the Mamluk artistic environment. This evidence indicates that transmission was not limited to diffuse stylistic influence: a major example of Ilkhanid court production was directly accessible in Egypt, enabling close observation and adaptation of its page-design conventions. The structure of double-page openings and the use of a central geometric field are among the components understood to have passed from Ilkhanid into Mamluk manuscript practice. In both traditions, opening pages are organized by an outer vegetal or vegetal-like border and one or more inner frames, with a central rectangular field containing a geometric composition (Laclau, 2023) (Fig. 3). The double-page illuminated opening ultimately derives from Abbasid Qur’an production, where it was structured by symmetry and geometric division of the surface (Déroche, 1992, 23-24). In Ilkhanid Iran and thereafter, it was reformulated through a greater variety of lines, multilayered frames, and denser ornament (James, 1992, 108-113). In Ilkhanid manuscripts, the central field is often organized through networks of multi-pointed stars or polygonal combinations. Comparable schemes appear in Mamluk Qur’ans, especially in the group associated with multi-pointed star designs, where Ilkhanid illumination has been identified as an important source (Ohta, 2012). The principal difference lies in the complexity of the internal geometric subdivisions. Ilkhanid manuscripts developed compound, multi-part structures earlier, whereas early Mamluk examples tend to be simpler, with greater complexity emerging from the late 1330s onward (Laclau, 2023). Among individual decorative features, the petal-like framing around marginal medallions has been interpreted as an Ilkhanid-derived component in Mamluk manuscripts (Abou-Khatwa, 2017). The device occurs in Ilkhanid manuscripts, including works produced in Tabriz and the

Hamadan Qur'an, and later appears in Mamluk Qur'ans. In Mamluk examples, it is often accompanied by a more restrained palette and a more regular geometric organization, while its overall structural function is retained. The transferred feature is therefore not merely decorative; it defines a visual boundary and organizes the page margin. Artist mobility provides further social evidence for the transfer of Ilkhanid-related book-art practices. Scholarship documents the presence in Cairo of artists connected with Iraqi-Iranian traditions, including Ibn Mubadir, one of the illuminators of the Qur'an of Baybars al-Jashankir, whose training has been linked to the Baghdadi tradition (James, 1988, 43) (Fig. 4). Ibrahim al-Amidi's illumination has likewise been associated with traditions of Iraq or Iran, and some of his rosettes have been compared with those in the Mosul Qur'an of Öljaitü (Ohta, 2012) (Fig. 5). The presence in Cairo of Mubarakshah al-Suyufi, an artist of Iranian origin, and the use of elements associated with Ilkhanid traditions in manuscripts connected with him have also been noted (Ohta, 2012). Together, these examples indicate that the transmission of page-design conventions was not the result of vague or purely indirect influence. It developed through institutional contacts, the movement of artists, and the physical presence of Ilkhanid court manuscripts in Cairo. Design knowledge, framing practices, and geometric organization entered the Mamluk environment and were reformulated to meet local requirements, with greater emphasis on textual legibility and more explicit framing regularity.

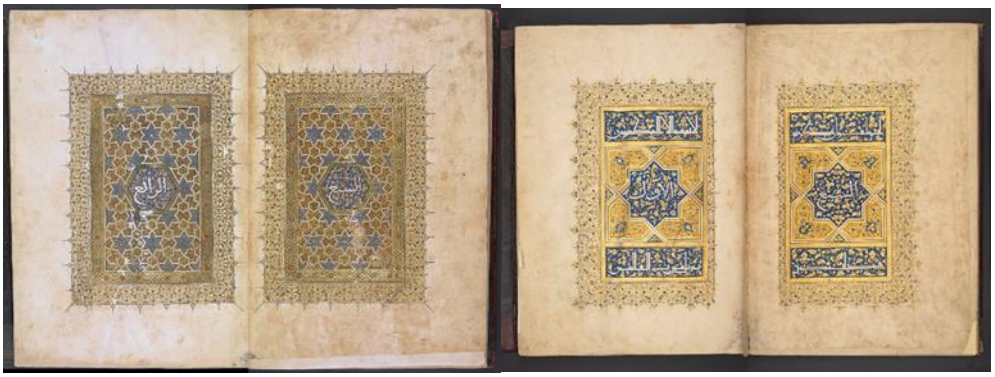


Fig. 4. Opening of the first volume of the Qur'an of Baybars al-Jashankir, 704-705 A.H. / 1304-1306 C.E. Source: James, 1988.



Fig. 5. Right: opening of Part II of the Qur'an of Öljaitü, 706 A.H. (Istanbul, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, TIEM 540). Left: half of the double-page opening of a Qur'an endowed by Sultan Sha'ban for his mother's madrasa, ca. 769-770 A.H. (Cairo, Dar al-Kutub, Rasid 9). Source: James, 1988.

Monumental Architecture and Competition in the Display of Magnificence

If, in metalwork and the arts of the book, exchange can be observed at the level of surface organization and page design, then in monumental architecture it appears at a larger urban scale. Here, the issue is not the borrowing of a specific architectural form, but the use of space, scale, and inscription to assert political authority. In Ilkhanid Iran, the mausoleum of Sultan Muhammad Khudabanda (Öljaitü) (Fig. 7) at Sultaniyya (702-712 A.H.) offers a major example. Its octagonal plan, enormous dome, and commanding height dominate the surrounding plain. Extensive tilework and monumental thuluth inscriptions across interior and exterior surfaces create an environment in which massive volume and decorative coherence define the principal visual experience. As scholars have argued, Sultaniyya was not merely a tomb but a spatial statement of Ilkhanid imperial power whose scale and concentrated mass asserted authority within the surrounding landscape (Blair, 1986, 165). In Mamluk Cairo, by contrast, some of the most prominent architectural expressions of the eighth century AH were courtly and religious complexes, particularly large mosque-madrasas and buildings associated with the Citadel. Monumental portals and elaborately worked stone façades played a central role in the visual display of Mamluk authority. These buildings served religious and educational functions, yet also operated as conspicuous signs of power within the urban fabric. Tall iwans, soaring portals framed in stone, multi-tiered minarets, and carved-stone ornament reached a high degree of development in this period, particularly in monuments such as the Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan Hasan (757-764 A.H.) (Fig. 6). A comparison of Sultaniyya and the Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan Hasan suggests that both polities turned monumental architecture into a field of symbolic competition in the eighth century A.H. At Sultaniyya, magnificence is articulated through the sheer volume of a single freestanding monument that dominates the landscape. In Cairo, by contrast, magnificence is more widely distributed across networks of courtly and religious monuments embedded in a dense urban fabric. Monumental entrances and elaborately carved stone façades capture the attention of passersby, while extended inscriptions establish the ruler's name and titles within the cityscape. Irwin likewise emphasizes that major building campaigns formed part of broader strategies through which royal legitimacy and status were asserted in public space (Irwin, 1986). Despite the structural differences between Sultaniyya and the Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan Hasan, both share an emphasis on scale, extensive epigraphic decoration, and the public visibility of the ruler's name. Such correspondences cannot simply be reduced to direct Mamluk imitation of Ilkhanid architecture. Rather, they can be interpreted as part of a broader competition over the visual representation of authority in the Islamic world. What is shared between the two regions is not a specific architectural form but a «logic of magnificence»: an approach in which monumental scale, dense ornament, and the conspicuous presence of writing establish an image of political authority. From this perspective, the circulation of architectural elements or practices within transregional artistic networks, such as the extensive use of inscriptions or the emphasis on monumental portals, could acquire different meanings in each political context. In the Ilkhanid realm, magnificence was concentrated in a singular, emblematic monument articulated through imperial claims; in the Mamluk realm, it was redefined through urban complexes closely connected to religious and charitable endowment functions. Mamluk architecture thus demonstrates that artistic interaction could entail a shared repertoire of strategies for displaying power within a field of transregional competition without implying stylistic identity with Ilkhanid architecture in Iran.



Fig. 6. Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan Hasan, Cairo, Mamluk period, second half of the eighth century A.H., 757-764 A.H. / 1356-1363 C.E. Source: The Baker Museum, Rollins College, n.d..



Fig. 7. Dome of Sultaniyya (mausoleum of Sultan Muhammad Khudabanda/Öljaitü), Sultaniyya, Zanjan, Ilkhanid period, 702-712 A.H. / 1302-1312 C.E. Source: IRCICA, 2020.

Conclusion

This study has shown that political hostility between the Mamluks and Ilkhanids did not result in cultural isolation. Commercial networks, diplomatic gift exchange, and human mobility enabled artistic models and practices to circulate between the two regions. What was transmitted was not an entire style or the rival's ideology, but selected elements, modes of organizing luxury objects, and strategies for displaying magnificence. Within the Mamluk context, these elements did not remain unchanged; they were selected and reconfigured according to the structure and function of the receiving work. In metalwork, this process is visible in the foregrounding of sultanic inscriptions; in the arts of the book, geometric page-design schemes were recalibrated in relation to text and illumination; and in architecture, shared strategies for displaying magnificence took different forms within religious, charitable, and urban complexes. These differences demonstrate that formal resemblance alone is insufficient to explain artistic transmission. It must be assessed alongside historical evidence of contact and changes in the position or function of an element within the Mamluk setting. From this perspective, artistic exchange did not signify political convergence. It developed in a context where the two states continued to compete for political legitimacy. The coexistence of political hostility and artistic interaction can thus be understood as the operation of two different levels: confrontation in legitimizing discourse and continuity in networks of exchange and cultural production. Under these conditions, artistic forms could cross political boundaries without necessarily retaining their

previous meanings. The study, therefore, argues that artistic relations within contexts of political rivalry must be analyzed through both the mechanisms of transmission and the processes of reconfiguration that occur within specific historical settings. Future research could clarify these mechanisms further through a more detailed reconstruction of artistic workshops and artisan mobility, a comparative study of endowment deeds related to artistic production in both regions, and a technical analysis of materials and production technologies.

Author Contributions

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The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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