

Research Fellowship in Dresden 2015

Damascus Room - Daily life in 19th century Syria and Palestine (Levant /
Bilad al-Sham)

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January 15, 2016

Introduction

Reception rooms for guests were used for family gatherings, negotiations with Business partners, legal disputes, weddings, musical performances, recitations of poems, prayers and other activities. Clothing, upholstery, carpets, furniture, tableware, and other items show what could have been present in the Damascus Room in its original context. The imagery reflects the richness of the religious and ethnic diversity in the 19th century society of the Levant (Bilad al-Sham) as well as activities of daily life: smoking, coffee drinking, and sharing food.

Summary of Research Findings

Clothing and Diversity in Levant society

Clothing reflect the diversity of Levant society. Levant society combine Muslim, Jewish, and many different sects of Christianity, beside the different religious groups that lived in the society, there was also many ethnic groups in the Levant society.

The diversity of the clothing that can be observed in imagery, it is not only because the diverse society, but also because the tendency towards localism in 18th century under the rule of Ottoman Empire each town and region boasted its own distinctive style and tastes. Strong local identities manifested themselves in buildings, costume, even the smallest consumer goods, and that because the barriers of the flow of the news and information, which make most of the production and consumption relied on material which were obtained from local or regional sources. This tendency towards localism didn't arise from the Ottoman decentralization of 18th century, it was the outcome of long-term technological deficiencies in transport and communication.¹

The second half of the 19th century, have a remarkable changes in clothing style in Levant, we can note that if we compare the images and illustration in the late of 18th century and the beginning of 19th century with the ones taken in the second half of the 19th century, and the notes of the historian in these periods could help to reveal the reasons of this change, the main two reasons of this change are the Industrial Revolution in Europe which combined with trade agreements with the Ottoman government that make the European textile invade the markets in Levant and take the place of the local textile. The second reason of this change that people Affected by the Egyptian army Ibrahim Pasha and European travels. ²

¹ (Grehan, Everyday life consumer culture in 18th century Damascus , 2007) See: pp 53-55.

² (Qasatli, 1982) see: p 126.



Costumes and portrait, Inhabitant of Damascus. Dutertre, André (1753-1842).

Source: <http://gallica.bnf.fr>



Damascus, Syria. Men are wearing fezes. Photographer unidentified, c.1890 – 1900.

Source: <http://collections.si.edu>

The Furnishing of Damascus Reception Rooms

The furnishing of the Damascus reception rooms reflect the social and economic status of the house owner, rich people have larger and much ornamented reception room, Mr. Mackintosh described the furnishing of the reception room she said “The furniture of a native house, free from European innovations, is simply a raised divan round the three sides of a room, generally low along the two sides and high at the end, the place to which honoured guests are always invited. The divan is covered with silk or cloth, or a bright–coloured chintz with a strip of white calico, edged with lace or crochet, laid on it to keep it clean. The back is formed of hard stiff cushions; but directly a guest enters he is entreated to rest on the divan, and little soft pillows are placed at his side on which to rest his elbow ”³.

Like the clothing, in the late of 19th century the European innovations start enter the Levant houses we can note that from the images and written resources, also Mr. Mackintosh described this change in her visit to a rich Jewish banker house in the Jewish Quarter she said: “the walls and ceiling of the principal room are much ornamented. They are furnished grandly according to their owners taste, with partly Eastern, Partly Western furniture”⁴. Many things stored in the niches of the reception room like: Nargilehs, lamps, and case of the Quran.



A late 19th / early 20th Century Islamic Koran Box, Damascus, Syria, Brass with silver and copper inlay and finely engraved background.

Source:

<http://www.capitalantiques.com>

³ (Mackintosh, 1883) p 12.

⁴ (Mackintosh, 1883) p 42.



Inner courtyard of the Pasha of Damascus House: [drawing] / [François-Marie Rosset], date: 1790.
Source: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8529008z.r=Damas>



The Stambouli Jewish house, Damascus, Syria. Ca 1880. Photograph.
Source: <http://www.artres.com/>

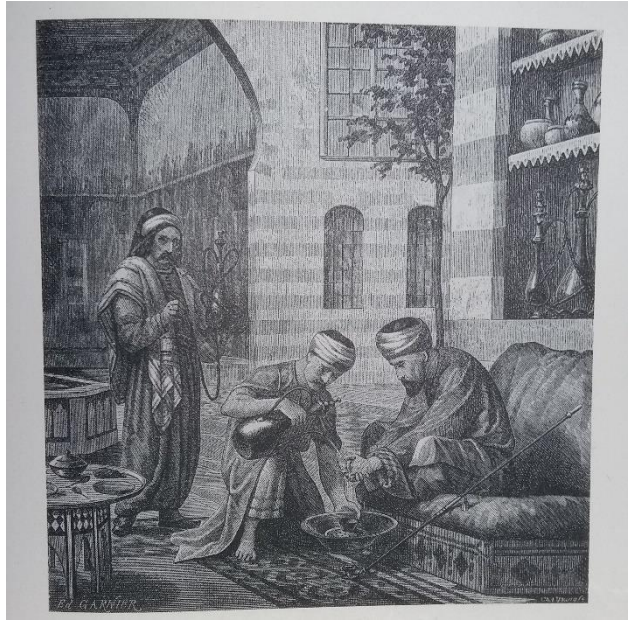
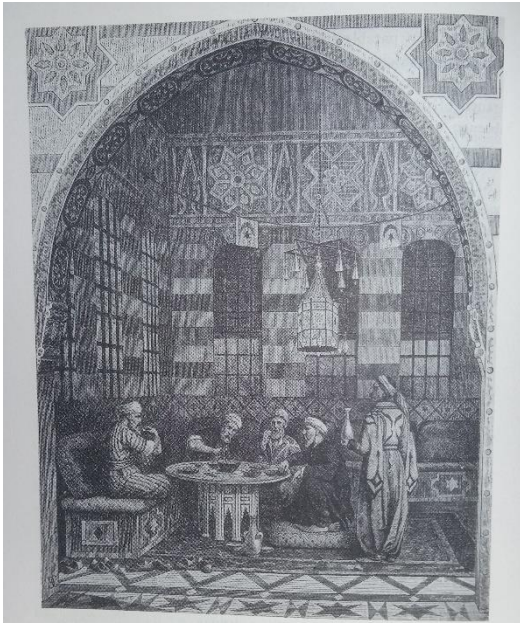
Everyday Food and other activities happened in the reception rooms

The reception rooms were full of life, many activities took place in these rooms like, marriage arrangements, rich feasting, consolation, weddings, musical performances, and other activities.

Cereals were very important in Damascus and Levant diet, wheat and rice were the most expensive grain, only rice had a reputation comparable to wheat, appearing as favorite compliment, to feast and celebration, but as relatively pricey import from Egypt it never established itself as a regular feature of the daily diet, and for many people remained a luxury dish. Daily consumption of meat was restricted mainly to well to do households, for whom meat advertised social status as effectively as riding a horse, fine clothes, or buying a big house. Also meat was a powerful expression of hospitality, and often being served on special occasions such as weddings, circumcisions, and religious feast. In short it was part of the very image of the good life.⁵

In her book Mr. Mackintosh described eating rituals inside Syrian houses s “For such a feast, when served in true Syrian fashion, the cloth will be spread on the floor, and a scamla, or stool, placed in the middle. On this scamla rests a circular tray, on which all the dishes are sit on the ground cross-legged. The meal will be eaten quickly, and almost in silence, except that the host must urge his guests to eat, and, with his own hands, occasionally take a titbit of meat or fowl, and hand it to one of his chief guests. After the first course, the gusts will frequently rise, and the servants will pour water over their hands, for, of course, they have note used knives and forks, and then they will return for the puddings and fruit. Soon after the meal is conclude, little cups of black coffee are handed round”

⁵ (Grehan, Everyday life consumer culture in 18th century Damascus , 2007) **Luxury & variety / Everday food**



Source: William Thomson, *The land and the Book*. New York, 1886.



Syria: Musicians of Aleppo (Haleb), late 18th century
Source: <https://www.bridgemanimages.com>

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