Abstract

The objective of this paper is to show the importance of the forgotten architectural and artistic heritage of Aleppo, Syria, particularly the polychrome wooden (`ajami) rooms. Aleppo is the second largest city in Syria (after the capital Damascus) and is the commercial capital of Syria. Aleppo has a long history, extending from the third millennium B.C to the Islamic era. The remains and monuments are evidence from those great civilizations. Many pieces of literature mention that the Amorites were the first inhabitants in Aleppo during the third millennium BC. In 223 BC, the Greek commander (Seleucus Nikator) re-organized and planned the city. Later, Islamic rulers made Aleppo great by re-building its walls, gates, towers and citadel. The Muslims also built mosques, schools, houses, inns, markets, hospitals, bathrooms, and public facilities. Consequently, Aleppo flourished and became a very important station for the Silk Road; the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire after Istanbul and Cairo. Aleppo was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to 1918. As part of this empire, local Aleppine craftsmen combined their techniques and cultural heritage with Ottoman architecture and design. Due to growth in population the Ottomans expanded the city, provided facilities, and established neighborhoods outside of the walls. These neighborhoods outside the walls were mostly for rich people and contained the biggest treasure of polychrome wood (`ajami) in Aleppo, which has become the icon of Ottoman-Syrian art. Polychrome wood includes several geometric, floral motifs, and inscriptions. These motifs have rich symbolic backgrounds, originating from house owners, artists, their native culture, and religion. This research employs a historical and descriptive approach to explore the thought and principles exemplified in the polychrome wooden (`ajami) motifs, and to analyze the connection between different types of Islamic art and polychrome wooden motifs. In 1986, UNESCO added Old Aleppo City to the World Heritage List. Since 2012 much of Syria’s architectural heritage has been destroyed due to internal war. In Aleppo the losses in both the ancient and modern parts of the city have been tremendous. Some traditional houses with polychrome wooden interior room have been damaged. This paper will highlight some recommendations to protect and restore the traditional houses in Aleppo for future use.

Keywords: Aleppo city, Aleppo heritage, Polychrome wood, `ajami, Islamic art