James Wild, Cairo and the South Kensington Museum

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In his recollections of the great Prussian expedition to Egypt and Nubia in the 1840s, Carl Richard Lepsius described James Wild as “a young architect, full of genius, [who] seeks with enthusiasm in the East a new field for the exercise of the rich and various gifts with which he is endowed”. These words were praise indeed. However, other accounts reveal some of the early frustrations felt by this precocious, ambitious architect:

“Although considered successful by his contemporaries, [Wild] was profoundly discontented with his work. He chafed at the various restrictions which in those days prevented the Gothic designer from following the leading characteristics of the style... Another cause for his discontent was the parsimonious expenditure on sculptured and coloured ornamentation, both of which he considered essential to the proper rendering of the Gothic style.”

Having built six Gothic churches by the age of twenty six, it is significant that for his next building project – Christ Church in Streatham, south London – Wild collaborated with Owen Jones and Joseph Bonomi, two men with extensive experience of travel in the Near East. Bonomi had spent ten years in Egypt as a salaried artist, and came home in 1834, the same year that Owen Jones returned from his ground-breaking studies of Islamic decoration at the Alhambra Palace. Wild was one of the subscribers to Jones’s seminal Alhambra publication, produced in parts between 1836 and 1845, thus coinciding with the period of the Christ Church project.

James Wild, wearing a turban, is standing behind the man waving his hat under the Prussian flag. Source: Berlin (Deutschland), Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung (SMPK).

3 Jones became Wild’s brother-in-law when in 1842 Jones married Wild’s sister Isabella. The two men became great friends, and it seems that they also shared many of the same opinions on design reform. Jones published his theories in the celebrated design sourcebook, *The Grammar of Ornament*. It is interesting to note the following statement in Jones’s preface: “*The principles discoverable in the works of the past belong to us; not so the results. It is taking the end for the means*.”

4 This elegant passage, summarising Jones’s disapproval of the “unfortunate tendency” towards copying and historicism, echoes the sentiments of a letter which Wild wrote one month after the consecration of Christ Church:

> "I object in the first place to the adopting [of] any style. This word style... seems to be the chief source of all our architectural failures. Those who can really appreciate what is beautiful in ancient architecture... know why it is in vain to imitate the more prominent features as a sort of decoration to new buildings without all the circumstances which created the architecture it is wished to imitate. We must study from all sources and adapt and apply our knowledge with invention, as our forefathers did, or we can but produce caricatures of their works."

5 Christ Church has been described as Early Christian in plan, Italian Romanesque in composition, Ottoman in its bay elevations, and Alhambresque, Mamluk, Sevillean, and Ancient Egyptian in its ornament. This hybrid approach seems in keeping with Wild’s earlier statements, and hints at a restless mind exploring the thresholds between conventional style categories. Jones was responsible for the decorative scheme of the column capitals and apse which were executed with a liberal mix of Byzantine/Turkish and Alhambresque ornament. In 1840, Wild wrote to Bonomi asking for advice on the design for the church “which gets more Egyptian every day”.

6 Bonomi was invited to join Lepsius’s Prussian expedition to Egypt after a chance encounter in the British Museum with the Prussian crown prince and Lepsius himself. Wild was soon recruited as an architectural draughtsman for the expedition, doubtless encouraged by Jones, the supportive brother-in-law who had returned from his own Near Eastern travels only eight years previously. The group departed in 1842, with the objective of completing extensive surveys of Ancient Egyptian monuments (ill. 1). The surviving drawings by Wild from this period illustrate a clear aptitude for rigorous and sustained investigation. Meticulously observed sketches of ceiling decoration, elaborate wall friezes and tomb details offer a tantalising promise of Wild’s later studies of Arab ornament in Cairo (ill. 2). Tellingly, Bonomi described Wild at this time as “dull” but...
“determined”. An early indication of Wild’s interest in Islamic design presents itself in a sketchbook marked ‘Nile vol. II’ where, nestled amongst the usual Egyptological drawings, we find ten pages dedicated to sketches of ornament from mosques and private houses in “Girgeh” [Girga]. It is possible that this burgeoning curiosity was encouraged by the Egyptologist and Orientalist, Edward Lane. Wild, Bonomi and Lepsius were frequent visitors to Lane’s Cairo house. When Lane had first arrived in Egypt in the 1820s he lived exclusively in the Muslim areas of Cairo, learnt to speak Arabic fluently and adopted the “native” dress\(^{12}\). This desire to blend in with the local population pre-empts the strategy applied by Wild a number of years later in 1847 when he became the first Westerner to gain access to the Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus. Wild had obtained a decree from the Ottoman Porte granting an “inspection of the Great Mosque”\(^{13}\). The British Consul official in Damascus was “horrified” by the prospect of a “desecration of the sacred building by an infidel”, declaring that Wild’s tenacity would lead to “death at the hands of the Mohammedan custodians if discovered”. Not to be deterred, Wild forged ahead with his “Arabic language, native dress” and a “certain ascetic appearance” providing an “ample disguise” to enable the “gratification of seeing the Holy Place without exciting the slightest suspicion”. Wild took his leave of Lepsius in April 1844 and resolved to settle in Cairo, where for the next three years he dedicated himself to the study of Arabian architecture and decorative design. A letter written by Lane later that year, noting that Wild now seemed to be “more industrious”, attests to the renewed vigour with which Wild applied himself in this new branch of his Near Eastern studies\(^{14}\). Wild had also grown frustrated with the expedition, complaining to Bonomi that “[Lepsius] cares to talk about nothing that does not directly tend to be useful for himself”\(^{15}\). An account describing Wild’s residence in Cairo notes that “drawing in the East involves no inconsiderable amount of inconvenience, not to say danger, from the great suspicion of the natives of the use which may be made of their treasures”. It appears that Wild took many precautions when recording the Arab architectural details of Cairo:

“What could not be done in the daytime had to be accomplished at night. From time to time in his wanderings he “marked in” the objects he desired to copy, prepared his damped paper for squeezes, and in the darkness set forth and obtained impressions with such perfect exactness of details as could not be obtained by drawing under an umbrella without intrusion\(^{16}\).”

7 While acknowledging Wild’s night-time heroics, we should not lose sight of the fact that his focus on domestic, secular architecture was a relatively rare and refreshing approach. As one of his protégés, Caspar Purdon Clarke, stated:

[Wild] “cared more for dwellings of burgher people than for temples or palaces, and as these houses were selected for careful study on their merits rather than for their history, in his sketch-books an invaluable record has been preserved of domestic interiors, especially of Cairo and Damascus, which have long since been swept away before modern improvements\(^{17}\).”
Years later, the architectural historian John Summerson pondered upon the legacy of Wild’s Cairo and Damascus sketches, stating that “it would be interesting to know whether any of Wild’s work here has been preserved, for his drawings would form a valuable record of much Arab work which has since been swept away.”

Thankfully, nine of Wild’s Cairo sketchbooks survive in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum. They were donated as a group to the Museum by his daughter Elizabeth Wild in 1938, nine years after Summerson wrote his article. Miss Wild wrote to the Museum authorities stating that she should like to offer a “collection of his drawings and notebooks on art in Cairo and Damascus – of great value now as so much has been swept away since then.” The Museum considered the drawings to be “extremely competent... neat, well-glossed with technical information and measurements...excellent records of every kind of Moslem architecture...A great part of the drawings is concerned with interior decoration (stained glass, woodwork and ceramic etc.) and many of the examples from which they were taken will have disappeared.”

Source: Oxford (United Kingdom), Griffith Institute, University of Oxford (Wild MSS, II, Volume A, p.61).
The Cairo sketchbooks are a wonderfully detailed and faithful record of Arab architecture and design (ill. 3-4). The pages are populated with carefully observed drawings of stained glass windows, marble mosaics, *muqarnas* vaulting, stone carving, and numerous architectural plans, sections and elevations which record key examples of both religious buildings and, most notably, domestic dwellings. Purdon Clarke noted that Wild “possessed, [to] a remarkable degree, the necessary analytical power” to collect in his sketchbooks “a mass of delicately drawn details which more properly reflect the ideas he sought than any of his subsequent works exemplified.” Foreshadowing an obituary for Owen Jones in which he was recognized for the “examples and writings [which] have done more to implant a knowledge of true Art than if he had left us a magnitude of buildings,” Purdon Clarke seems to be identifying much of the common ground between these brothers-in-law. In his preparation for the Grammar, Jones consulted Wild on the Egyptian chapter, and based the entire Arabian section on Wild's Cairo drawings. Jones considered Wild’s sketches to be “very faithful transcripts of Cairean ornament.” In the preface, Jones expressed the hope that this modest collaboration might lead to a more comprehensive publication of Wild’s drawings:

“In the formation of the Egyptian Collection I received much valuable assistance from Mr. J. Bonomi, and from Mr. James Wild, who has also contributed the materials for the Arabian collection, his long residence in Cairo having afforded him the opportunity of forming a very large collection of Cairean Ornament, of which the portion contained in this work can give but an imperfect idea, and which I trust he may some day be encouraged to publish in a complete form.”


6. Plate “Arabian No. 5” from The Grammar of Ornament by Owen Jones, 1856.

Reflecting the value of Wild’s studies as a lasting, reliable source for writers, the fifth edition of Lane’s Modern Egyptians, which included an appendix on “Arabian Architecture”, came supplied with references to Wild’s sketches. In a footnote relating to the mosques of Cairo, Lane’s nephew Edward Stanley Poole, stated that “careful drawings of this ornament have been published in the ‘Grammar of Ornament’, from the collection of Mr James Wild.” Singling out a particularly impressive group of architectural details, he encouraged the reader to “see especially the series from the mosque of Ibn Tulun, plate XXXI.” The majority of Grammar’s Arabian chapter consists of architectural features, including examples of woodwork, plaster and stone mosaic (ill. 5-6). Many of these samples of ornament can be traced back to the Wild sketchbooks in the V&A. However, there is one plate consisting of designs “traced from a splendid copy of the Koran in the Mosque Barquqyya (ill. 7-9).” Up until now it had been unclear which Wild drawings Jones had based this page on. Recent research has confirmed that some of the
source material for this plate resides in a volume of “Islamic drawings” by Wild held in the collections of Sir John Soane's Museum. The volume also includes drawings of Persian ornament (possibly taken from manuscripts) and examples of Chinese decoration.

Soon after settling in Cairo in 1844, Wild received a commission to design a British cemetery for the local expatriate community. The British consul in Cairo, Alfred Walne, wrote to the Consul-General, Charles John Barnett, to explain that “the want of a British Protestant burial ground has long been seriously [felt] by the residents, but has become quite indispensable in consequence of the overland communication between Europe and India.” A subsequent letter from Barnett to the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen, reveals that the Pasha had been “well disposed to assist” but that “no piece of ground, the property of the Government, could be found suitable to the purpose.” Thanks to negotiations initiated by Barnett, a portion of land, set aside for a French Roman Catholic cemetery, was ceded by the French Consulate to the British residents. The local residents raised a substantial sum of money through voluntary donations and deposited this with the British Consulate. Walne wrote to the Consulate in June 1844, enclosing “plans of the Cairo burial ground, and of the gateway and lodges for the pastor, as prepared by Mr Wild the architect with the connaissance of the resident subscribers.” In response to a request for matched funds, the Foreign Office granted £150 towards construction costs the following month. It appears, however, that the project was never executed. The designs, which survive in The National Archives, indicate a simple gateway which on the internal side incorporates a cavetto cornice flanked by twin pylon-like lodges, and on the street-side boasts double doors inset with wooden mashrabiyyah grills (undoubtedly sourced from the numerous domestic dwellings that Wild was studying at this time). As Mark Crinson has previously noted, the gate represented, on one side, the association of ancient Egyptian architecture with death, and on the other side, Wild’s new-found interest in the Arab architecture of the medieval streets of Cairo.

7. Drawing by James Wild, taken from a 14th-century Cairo Mamluk manuscript; contained in an album of drawings of Islamic ornament.
8. Drawing by James Wild, taken from a 14th century Cairo Mamluk manuscript; contained in an album of drawings of Islamic ornament.

9. Plate “Arabian No. 4” from The Grammar of Ornament by Owen Jones, 1856.

The same year, 1844, saw the recommencement of discussions regarding a proposed Anglican church in Alexandria. In a personal letter to John Bidwell, the Superintendent of the Consular Office, Barnett outlined the case for urgent action:

“I am frequently asked a question which embarrasses me very much, it is this – “When is your church to be built?” Above four years ago the Pasha gave [us] a piece of ground for the purpose, and all that we have yet to show towards a Church is one stone upon which the Arabs copulate, and a trench in which they perform a dirtier process. A plan for a Gothic church was some time ago sent to us by the [Cambridge] Camden Society, approved...by the Residents, and...submitted to Government. I individually entirely disapprove of a Gothic building, as unsuited to the climate, and likely to be little in harmony with the other buildings which will surround it...It is little to the credit of us as Christians that we have not taken advantage of the tolerance shown us by the Pasha.”
Wild won the commission for the church of St. Mark in Alexandria in 1845, although the project was not completed until ten years later, in 1855, after many delays and long periods of inactivity. Barnett had indicated in his letter to Bidwell that he would have liked “a simple Greek building” – however Wild, in an echo of his scheme at Christ Church, decided to employ a hybrid approach. John Summerson described the result as “a church of considerable originality in a strongly Europeanized version of the Saracenic style”. According to a contemporary report in The Builder, the Pasha, Muhammad Ali, had “expressed a wish that the structure should harmonize with the neighbouring buildings, and be worthy of the English people”. Wild published a statement declaring that the design of this church was intended “to conciliate the opinion of the Arab inhabitants, and to meet the comprehension of native artificers” while also representing a scheme which “carries out a general sentiment of Arabian detail”. Wild’s ambition to channel the Arabian ornament of Cairo is perhaps best illustrated by his unrealised proposal for a campanile adjoining St. Mark’s. There were two successive designs for the tower. The first resembled a minaret to some extent, with levels half-screened with mashrabiyyah, a balcony complete with mabhara pavilion and muqarnas cornice, and a “summit in the form of a cupola, in the Arab style”. Crinson has previously remarked that the second proposal, with its Venetian campanile and pyramidal spire, represents a transfer of the scheme’s Islamic details from the tower to the external ornament of the church. Alluding to the growing collection of architectural details filling up Wild’s sketchbooks, Crinson has also pointed out that the church’s carved crenellation and cusped archivolts might all be based on the ornament that Wild had been studying in Islamic Cairo at that time. He noted also that the muqarnas-decorated beams of St. Mark’s wooden roof were close to those that Wild had drawn in several Cairene houses.

10. Drawing of windows in coloured glass set in plaster, from domestic houses, from James Wild Cairo sketchbook, 1844-48.

Despite the unrealised ambitions for his ‘Islamic’ campanile, Wild may have found comfort in the successful completion of his Water Tower at Great Grimsby docks. Built in 1852, soon after Wild’s return to England (via Constantinople, Italy and Spain) the tower’s mix of western and eastern influences was not lost on the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner who observed that Wild had been “gathering in his sketchbooks ideas of which he put some to use here in Grimsby” and stated that “the tower...is straight from Italy, but the crowning minaret is Oriental”.

It is likely that Wild received the tower commission through Henry Cole, a leading figure in the design reform movement, who in 1847 had been asked to manage the public relations for the Grimsby docks project. Cole had employed Wild as decorative architect
at the 1851 Great Exhibition, and in 1863 he invited Wild to become an expert adviser for
the South Kensington Museum (later renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum), where
Cole was Director. Wild’s knowledge was particularly valued in matters relating to
Arabian art. His knowledge of Arab architecture proved useful when in 1871 the
Museum’s Assistant Director, Philip Cunliffe-Owen, recommended that “Mr J. W. Wild,
Architect, who has been for some time a resident at Cairo, be employed to draw up a
report upon the Buildings and Architectural Ornament in the City” and “receive [the]
usual fee for professional assistance”44. Wild’s services even extended to designing built
projects for the Museum. In 1865, Wild wrote a letter offering to execute a “pierced Arab
window” for the sum of £ 1045. In October of the following year, Henry Cole approved the
order for Wild’s Arabian stained glass window to be “placed in the upper compartments
in the Oriental Courts”46. These galleries had been completed recently by Wild’s brother-
in-law, Owen Jones, and included Indian and Chinese & Japanese Courts. Wild’s first-hand
knowledge of the traditional craft techniques employed in the creation of Arab windows
was revealed during a meeting at the Royal Institute of British Architects (ill. 10). In
response to the architect George Aitchison’s description of the windows of Cairene houses
as “more enchanting and fairy-like than the stained glass of the Duomo of Florence or of
Chartres cathedral”, Wild recalled an episode from his own time in Cairo:

“I caused to be executed when I was living at Cairo a window similar to those
described. An old man came to my house and brought with him a frame, something
like a frame to hold a slate for pencils. The frame was laid on the ground, filled with
plaster, and then left for the plaster to dry. Next day a diagram was made upon it,
and the plaster was cut like cheese. The whole thing was soon finished, and on the
afternoon of the same day the workman inserted the glass by sticking it in at the
back”47.

11. Design by James Wild for a window in Arab style for the South Kensington Museum’s Oriental
Courts; ca. 1866.

Records indicate that Wild was not paid for his Oriental Court Arab window until eleven
years after the original commission48. It appears that other options may have been
considered during the intervening period. Wild wrote to Cole in 1867 to inform him that a
“Mr. J. Spencer Bell has offered to lend to the Museum a perforated plaster window from
Cairo, filled with stained glass”49. The window was duly received and registered as a loan
object, but existing correspondence suggests that it was never exhibited due to its
dilapidated state50. Wild’s window was eventually installed (ill. 11), and was fabricated by
the stained glass manufacturers Powell & Sons who also provided the stained glass
windows for Wild’s church in Alexandria51. Years later a commentator in The Times would
describe the “miscellaneous windows at the opposite side of the South Court, with Mr.
Wild’s admirable imitations”52. Wild continued his role as the Museum’s resident Arabian
expert, albeit on an occasional basis, even during his later years when serving as curator of Sir John Soane’s Museum. In an Art Referee report from 1881, Wild advised on the potential acquisition of a perforated brass lamp which had been offered to the Museum by a Mr Mohammed Joseph for the sum of £30. Describing this “large domed lantern” as being “probably about A.D. 1700, and of Cairo or Damascus work...probably taken from some mosque or tomb”, Wild went on to recommend that the offer be declined, explaining that “the general design is very good but the perforated brass work is not particularly fine in execution”.

In addition to acting as an occasional Art Referee, Wild had an impact at South Kensington by selling objects directly from his own collection. As an example, in October 1866 Wild sold to the Museum a group of eight “Indian illuminated drawings” for £30. However, the Museum’s most significant acquisition from Wild came in 1860 with the purchase of a “Saracenic glass lamp” for the considerable sum of £200. This was the first mosque lamp to enter the Museum’s collections (ill. 12). Amongst the Wild drawings held at the Soane are two sketches of this lamp, including a detailed study of the underside body decoration (ill. 13, 15). It is possible that staff had seen this lamp a few years previously when it had been on loan to the 1857 Art Treasures Exhibition in Manchester (ill. 14). Writing on 'Vitreous Art' for the exhibition catalogue, the British Museum’s expert on Oriental glass, Augustus Wollaston Franks, had singled out Wild’s mosque lamp for particular praise:

“Among the specimens which have come to us from the East, there are few more elegant than the lamp represented [here]. It was obtained by its present possessor, Mr. Wild, in Cairo, and has been supposed to have been taken from the mosque of Sultan Hassan [Sultan Hasan], in which still hang several lamps of the same kind, shedding a dim light over its magnificent vaults.”

Franks also noted that “another lamp, very similar in form, has been recently brought from Egypt, and is destined to be placed in the Louvre”. Interestingly, Matthew Digby Wyatt’s chapter on ‘Metallic Art’ included a woodcut illustration of a “full-size specimen of Medieval Arabic damascening, from a bowl” which also came from Wild’s collection, and was presumably also acquired during his time in Cairo. Later accounts testify to the continuing prestige attached to Wild’s mosque lamp. Describing a group of lamps that were soon to be acquired by the Museum as part of the Meymar Collection of Arab Art, Reginald Stuart Poole in 1867 stated that “these lamps do not equal in beauty or in preservation the lamp purchased of Mr. James Wild”. Almost twenty years later his nephew and fellow Orientalist, Stanley Lane-Poole, concurred with this assessment, expressing the opinion that Wild’s mosque lamp was the “gem of the collection”. To get a sense of how the lamp related to other objects on display in the Museum, we only have to turn to Moncure Conway’s 1875 account of a stroll through the Ceramics Gallery. Contemplating the decoration of a neighbouring Urbino plate, Conway notes that “It is curious to compare such arabesques with the ornament on a piece of real Arabic work, such as the accompanying ancient lamp.” An illustration of Wild’s lamp is included, together with the caption: Glass Lamp from an Arab Mosque – Fourteenth Century. Two years after this purchase from Wild, a further four mosque lamps appeared in the galleries (albeit temporarily) as part of the South Kensington Museum’s major Loan Exhibition of 1862. The lamps came from the distinguished collections of Hollingworth Magniac, Francis Baring and Felix Slade. Magniac contributed a particularly fine 14th-century Mamluk lamp from the Mosque of Sultan Hasan in Cairo, and was therefore of similar date and from the same supposed source as Wild’s mosque lamp.
12. 14th century enamelled glass mosque lamp from Cairo, sold by James Wild to the V&A Museum in 1860.

13. Drawing by James Wild of his Cairo mosque lamp, contained in an album of drawings of Islamic ornament.

15. Drawing by James Wild of his Cairo mosque lamp, contained in an album of drawings of Islamic ornament.

Source: London (United Kingdom), Courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum (Vol.108/69).

20 Like Wild, Frank Dillon was another artist-traveller whose Arabian objects found a home in the South Kensington Museum. In 1865 he donated some examples of “Cairene” ceramics, described as “wall tiles, with foliage pattern on white ground”\(^6^5\). Dillon visited Egypt a number of times, from the 1850s through to the 1870s. Living in Cairo for extended periods of time he was keen to study modest domestic dwellings, rather than focus exclusively on the more obvious religious buildings and public spaces. Like Wild, Dillon sought to create faithful records of Arabian architecture. His paintings conveyed the intricacies of Islamic design, avoiding the inventive embellishment and fanciful romanticism exemplified by other Orientalist painters who had visited Cairo before him, such as David Roberts and John Frederick Lewis\(^6^6\). Dillon built an Arab studio at his house in Kensington to aid the completion of paintings which were worked up from original drawings and sketched watercolours made in Cairo. As evidence of Dillon’s commitment to accurate Islamic decorative details, the studio was furnished with a number of Arabian objects, some of which were likely to have been sourced from Wild’s own collection. In a letter dating from the 1940s, Wild’s daughter Elizabeth wrote to the South Kensington Museum offering to donate a number of “Near Eastern works of art” that had been in her father’s possession; namely a “beautiful rosewater bottle, 16th-century inlaid pearl table, Koran stand, brass ewer and basin\(^6^7\).” Miss Wild revealed that these “were lent at one time to a Mr Dillon, and were meant to be left to your Museum, but unfortunately were sent to me here when the roads were so bad.” Objects fitting the description of these that belonged to Wild do crop up in a number of Dillon’s paintings. Sadly, the South Kensington authorities declined Miss Wild’s offer. The Museum’s Director stated, rather dismissively, that “we have a good deal of that inlaid mother-of-pearl stuff; and beautiful as it is I doubt if we should be justified in accepting more\(^6^8\).” Dillon’s Arab studio was illustrated in Georg Ebers’s Ägypten in Bild und Wort (ill. 16), and it is tempting to wonder if the inlaid pearl table, Koran stand and brass basin depicted therein are in fact the very same objects that were lent from Wild\(^6^9\). In 1878, not long after Dillon had built his Arab studio, Wild was appointed curator of Sir John Soane’s Museum, where he busied himself with many alterations to the house. One of his final projects was the construction of a new ‘Egyptian’ anteroom which was started in 1889, just three years before Wild’s death\(^7^0\). Decorated with “ornamental pitch pine work”\(^7^1\), the room’s architectural details faithfully reproduced many examples of Arabian woodwork with which Wild was familiar from his time in Cairo over forty years before (ill. 17). Wild’s obituary in The Times noted that Wild “did much for the Soane Museum, particularly in the construction of a...new room, in the building of which he showed his learned acquaintance with the principles of that leading..."
Arab feature”. As Michael Darby has previously observed, Wild’s choice of a Cairene style for the Egyptian Room may have been “the action of an old man re-living the days of his youth when he spent several years in Cairo producing hundreds of drawings of similar woodwork”. However it is also possible that Wild had wanted to create a room similar in atmosphere to Dillon’s Arab Studio in Kensington, but one that here at Lincoln’s Inn Fields would be intended for a public audience.

16. “Mr. Frank Dillon’s Studio”.

A number of Dillon’s paintings were placed on display at the Royal Institute of British Architects during a lecture entitled “The Arab House of Egypt”. The paper dealt with the architecture of Cairo and reflected a burgeoning interest in Arab construction techniques. It is the ensuing discussion that is particularly interesting, shedding light as it does on the wider debate regarding preservation and collecting that had been ongoing during the 1880s. The architect Richard Phené Spiers, who as a young man had spent over a year travelling through the Near East, stated:

“I can only join...in bewailing the destruction of these beautiful works of art, many of those in Mr. Frank Dillon’s drawings having already been pulled down, and their decorative features broken up or stolen. In this respect I am afraid Europeans are to blame, and even Count St. Maurice...is responsible for the destruction of a great deal, having been given a free hand (so I am informed) to appropriate for his own house any little accessories he might come across which attracted his fancy.”
In response to the question of whether “the exportation of the woodwork of Cairo is still going on at the rate which it did some ten or twelve years ago”, the architect Richard Herbert Carpenter replied that this was now “by no means easy”, but declared that in 1876, while in Cairo, he had “a whole house-front offered...at a wonderfully cheap rate”, adding that the only difficulty was that of it “being taken down for sale to Christians”.

Despite having earlier mourned the looting of Arabian architectural features, Spiers confessed that “two years ago I got a rather interesting shop-front” and bemoaned the fact that “it has now become very difficult to get fine examples”. He also recounted a tale of Dillon visiting Cairo’s ‘House of the Mufti’ in 1869 where he painted “two large panels of Persian tiles” which “some years afterwards” were gone. It appears that Dillon “found [the tiles] afterwards in the shop of a bric-a-brac dealer in the 1878 Exhibition at Paris”. It is interesting that, despite the criticism earlier directed towards Count St. Maurice, Spiers failed to mention the role of the South Kensington Museum in these matters. According to contemporary accounts, Gaston de St. Maurice held an “official position in the household of the ex-Khedive Ismail” which gave him “unusual facilities for acquiring objects of art in Cairo” and he “employed his opportunities well”. St. Maurice had been commissioned by the Khedive to form a collection of Islamic art for the Arab section of the 1878 Paris Exhibition. He wrote to the South Kensington Museum in 1882 with an invitation to examine the collection in detail at Paris’s musée des Arts décoratifs, where the objects were on display at that time. He also mentioned a house that he had built in Cairo “in antique style with materials brought from the finest palaces of the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries...ceilings – carved, painted and gilt, mosaics of marble and mother-of-pearl...” He stated that “it might be feasible for [the Museum] to purchase and collect either in whole or in part the ancient materials in question” before concluding that “they would certainly form a unique collection, such as it would be impossible to form again at any price”. James Wild was consulted, and subsequently advised that this “very fine collection” would be “most valuable to the students of Eastern Art”. Caspar Purdon Clarke, in reference to the Meymar Collection of Arab Art (procured at the previous Paris Exhibition) declared that “…to add this [St. Maurice] collection to that purchased in 1867 would form a Museum of Arabian Art of a character so complete that little would be left possible to improve it, and one which would in the future increase in value when in the not too far distant future the Arab Quarter with its merchant palaces and inimitable monuments has been improved off the map of Cairo.” This last line resonates with the sentiments expressed in an article published earlier that year, in...
which the author had wistfully recalled the “good old days” in Cairo when the “forest of these minarets seemed to vie with the forest of palms around and about them”:

“Hardly a tile now glistens on the domes of the tombs of the Caliphs... the other tombs seem, with few exceptions, to have been swept away, and the streets of Cairo are being widened with a ruthless hand to admit the streams of hackney carriages which have, with the wealthier classes, superseded the donkeys of their fathers. Straight boulevards have taken the place of the endless turns, the infinite variety of house...Flat, illmade Venetians have driven away the Musharabia lattices; the pickaxe and the crowbar seem at work from morning to night in every quarter of Cairo, and its former inhabitants are flying from their demolished houses...”

23 Stanley Lane-Poole concurred with this assessment. In his St. Maurice report he stated that “the collection is of the greatest value and rarity and it is extremely unlikely that the Museum will ever again have such an opportunity of acquiring so many rare and highly interesting examples of an art that is yearly becoming more difficult to study, of which specimens are fast disappearing”85. The collection, duly purchased, was described in The Times as comprising “some of the rarest and most exquisite specimens [from Cairo] that have ever been seen in Europe”86. The negotiation of this major acquisition came in the immediate aftermath of the 1882 Anglo-Egyptian War, which saw Wild’s church of St. Mark narrowly escape destruction during the British fleet’s three-day bombardment of Alexandria. In early 1883 Lane-Poole was sent on a “special mission” to Cairo by the South Kensington Museum “with the view of discovering whether the disturbances had brought many objects of Saracenic art into the market”87. A substantial collection was acquired, including examples of metalwork, ceramics and woodwork. The highlight was a “room from Cairo”, purchased for £ 39 from the Cairo dealer Gasparo Giuliana (“Négociant de Mucharabie & d’Antiquités”)88, complete with carved wooden ceiling, mashrabiyyah and “a row of stucco lights filled in with pieces of coloured glass”89. The room was displayed just inside the Museum’s side entrance, but unfortunately was “squeezed behind the turnstile, decapitated as to its cupola, and contracted to three-fourths of its natural width in order to leave space for the footway”90.

24 The enduring value of Wild’s Cairo sketchbooks, even forty years after their creation, was demonstrated by Lane-Poole in the introduction to his 1886 book, Art of the Saracens:

“I have to acknowledge much private assistance from friends who have made Saracenic art their study. Mr. J. W. Wild, the curator of Sir John Soane’s Museum, than whom there lives no better authority on the architecture of Cairo, has kindly read and approved the...chapters on architecture, stone and plaster, and mosaic, and has generously placed his interesting Egyptian notes and sketch-books at my disposal90.”

25 The swift and sudden changes witnessed in the Arab quarter of Cairo assigned a new significance and importance to the architectural records preserved in Wild’s drawings from the 1840s. Wild’s sketches proved particularly useful when they enabled the Museum to reunite two groups of carved wooden panels belonging to the same minbar from the mosque of Ibn Tulun:

“The removal [of the minbar] must have been effected in comparatively recent times, for when Mr James Wild...was in Cairo, about 1845, the older pulpit was still standing; and he made a drawing of the geometrical arrangement of the panels, which is still preserved in his sketch-books, and which was turned to some advantage some years ago, when the fragments of the pulpit-sides were acquired by the South Kensington Museum from M. Meymar...The pulpit did not arrive in England in its original shape, but consisted merely of a collection of loose panels, which Mr Wild, with the help of his sketch, arranged in a square, which now hangs
on the walls of the Museum...When the Museum acquired the magnificent collection of M. de St Maurice, in 1884, I was able to identify the fine panels which the late owner had fitted into the framework of a modern and ill-proportioned door as portions of the same pulpit19.

26 Wild died on the 7th of November 1892 at Sir John Soane’s Museum. It was noted at the time of his death that “visitors, especially students, will miss his kindly courtesy and great readiness to help them”93. Wild’s impact may not necessarily be measured by an extensive list of built works, or by an abundance of publications. However, through a steadfast dedication to the study of Arabian design, his specialist knowledge which earned the respect of esteemed colleagues, and the legacy that resides within his meticulous sketches of buildings long since altered or demolished, James Wild remains a figure who deserves admiration and, most importantly, further study. Reflecting his originality and dogged determination, one of his obituaries summarized:

“The great characteristics of Wild as an architect are knowledge without servility. He was never a copyist or imitator, but always employed his learning in the spirit of the masters whom he understood. His conscientiousness was extreme, almost to a fault, if a virtue can so be characterised”94.

NOTES

3. Owen JONES, Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra (issued in parts, 1836-1845). This was a landmark publication not only for the meticulous, detailed records of Islamic architectural details, but also for the fact that Jones laboured and experimented over a number of years, producing the first ever book to boast a sustained use of chromolithography.
5. Ibid., Proposition 36.
10. The Griffith Institute (University of Oxford) holds a collection of drawings by Wild from his time on the Lepsius expedition, consisting of two portfolios of drawings and plans, and three notebooks with sketches.
19. The drawings presented by Elizabeth Wild also include sketches from Italy, Spain and Damascus (V&A: E.3644 to 4084-1938).
20. London (United Kingdom), V&A Archives, Elizabeth Henrietta Mary Wild nominal file, MA/1/W1860.
21. Ibid.
23. Obituary for Owen Jones, Building News, 8th May 1874.
25. Ibid. (preface), 15th December 1856.
28. See James WILD, Volume 108, Sir John Soane’s Museum collections, catalogued as “Volume containing designs for tiles...designs for wallpaper...studies of Islamic ornament from manuscripts, silks ceramics etc. (95 items)”. I am grateful to my colleagues Mariam Rosser-Owen and Moya Carey in the Middle East section of the Asia Department at the V&A, for their assistance in identifying these drawings as copies of 14th century Mamluk Quran manuscripts.
29. Richmond, Surrey (United Kingdom), The National Archives, Letter from Alfred Walne to Charles John Barnett, 18th March 1844, Foreign Office records, FO 78/583.
31. Ibid.
32. Idem, letter from Alfred Walne to Stoddart, 18th June 1844.
34. Mark CRINSON, op. cit. (note 6), 56.
35. Richmond, Surrey (United Kingdom), The National Archives, Personal letter from Colonel Charles John Barnett to John Bidwell, 22nd March 1844, Foreign Office records, FO 78/583.
37. The Builder, 5th September 1846, p. 421.
38. Ibid., as cited in Mark CRINSON, op. cit. (note 6).
40. Mark CRINSON, op. cit. (note 6), p. 60.
41. Ibid.


44. Board Minutes of the Department of Science & Art, The National Archives, ED 28/27, 22nd December 1871.

45. Precis Minutes of the Department of Science & Art, V&A Archive, 23rd March 1865.

46. Ibid.


48. Precis Minutes of the Department of Science & Art, V&A Archive, 10th April 1877.

49. Letter from James Wild to Henry Cole, 11th February 1867, RP/1867/3299, on J. Spencer Bell nominal file, MA/1/B1022, V&A Archive.

50. London (United Kingdom), V&A Archives, Request to repair window, Departmental minutes, 18th October 1869, J. Spencer Bell nominal file, MA/1/B1022.


52. “Saracenic Art at The South Kensington Museum”, The Times, 23rd October 1884.


54. London (United Kingdom), V&A, Word & Image Department, 1866 Accession Registers; these Mughal paintings currently reside in the collections of the Asia Department: AL.4935 to 4942.

55. Precis Minutes of the Department of Science & Art, London (United Kingdom), V&A Archive, 26th January 1860.

56. Inventory of Art Objects Acquired in the Year 1860 (South Kensington Museum: 1868). The lamp is currently on display in the V&A’s Jameel Gallery of the Islamic Middle East (V&A museum number 6820-1860).


58. See J. B. WARING, Art Treasures of the United Kingdom from the Art Treasures Exhibition, Manchester; London: Day & Son, 1858.


60. Ibid., “Metallic Art”, p. 32.


66. See Briony LLEWELLYN, “Frank Dillon and Victorian Pictures of Old Cairo Houses,” Ur: The International Magazine of Arab Culture, no.3, 1984, p. 3-10, for a detailed study of Dillon’s time in Cairo, including his association with Wild.

67. Elizabeth Wild nominal file, op. cit. (note 20), letter from Miss Wild to the Museum, 18th February 1941.

68. Ibid., correspondence from Sir Eric Maclagan to colleagues, March 1941.


73. Ibid.
75. See “Monuments of Arab Art in Cairo,” The Times, 3rd January 1882.
77. For a verbatim account of the discussion, see the R.I.B.A. Journal (Proceedings), vol. 6, p. 355-358.
78. Ibid., p. 357.
79. Ibid.
80. “Saracenic Art at The South Kensington Museum”, The Times, op. cit. (note 52).
82. Ibid., letter from Wild, 21st November 1883.
83. Ibid., letter from Purdon Clarke, 28th October 1882.
84. “Monuments of Arab Art in Cairo,” The Times, op. cit. (note 75).
85. Report by Lane-Poole, 8th November 1883, in Gaston de Saint-Maurice nominal file, op. cit. (note 81).
86. “Saracenic Art at The South Kensington Museum,” The Times, op. cit. (note 52).
87. Ibid.
88. London (United Kingdom), V&A Archives, Invoice from Gasparo Giuliana, in Stanley Lane-Poole nominal file, MA/1/2257.
89. List of Objects in the Art Division, South Kensington Museum, Acquired during the Year 1883, London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1884, 126 (V&A museum number 1193-1883, subsequently disposed).
90. “Saracenic Art at The South Kensington Museum,” The Times, op. cit. (note 52).
91. Stanley Lane-Poole, The Art of the Saracens in Egypt, op. cit. (note 62).
92. Ibid., p. 111-117.
94. Ibid.

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