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BAGHDAD ARCHITECTURE, 1920–1950

MINA MAREFAT, PH.D.

Book Review: Caecilia Pieri, *Bagdad Arts Deco: Architectures de Brique, 1920–1950*, L'Archange Minotaure, Paris, 2008.

In 1961, geographer Pierre Marthelot wrote of the “paradox” of Baghdad as a historically prestigious “city without a past.” Caecilia Pieri’s respectful engagement with twentieth-century Baghdad definitively challenges and puts to rest perceptions of Baghdad as a once-glorious, long-stagnant city. In *Bagdad Arts Deco*, she shines a light on the multilayered architecture of Baghdad from its days as a secondary provincial capital in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire through three decades of British occupation and influence on the map and buildings of the city, including, in the second part of the book, details of domestic architecture in brick.

Compared to other capitals in the region, modern Baghdad has suffered from a lack of photographic and cartographic documentation. With every regime change, street names reflected new political meanings; maps, reminders of past powers, were intentionally

effaced, particularly during the decades of the Ba‘th regime. Pieri’s meticulous work retrieves the fractured record of twentieth-century Baghdad building, enabling architectural historians to compare it with other capitals during

an important period when colonial architectural conventions met a variety of cultural contexts and paradigms of “modernization.” Having documented architectural changes in Tehran for the same period, it is clear to me that

such comparisons will shed new light on regional architectural developments that have been so far studied only in relation to Western counterparts and with limited theoretical perspectives.

Bagdad Arts Deco begins with three short articles by the writer Naim Kattan, the architect Rifat Chadirji and the architect and professor Ihsan Fethi, all of whose contributions to the history of Iraq are well known. Part One offers a strong visual survey of the city proper from 1920 to 1950; Part Two is a series of perspectives on houses, even into their rarely seen interiors. The result is an almost epigraphic history in brick of a surprisingly tactile, almost touchable city that speaks to specialists and non-specialists alike. During nine trips

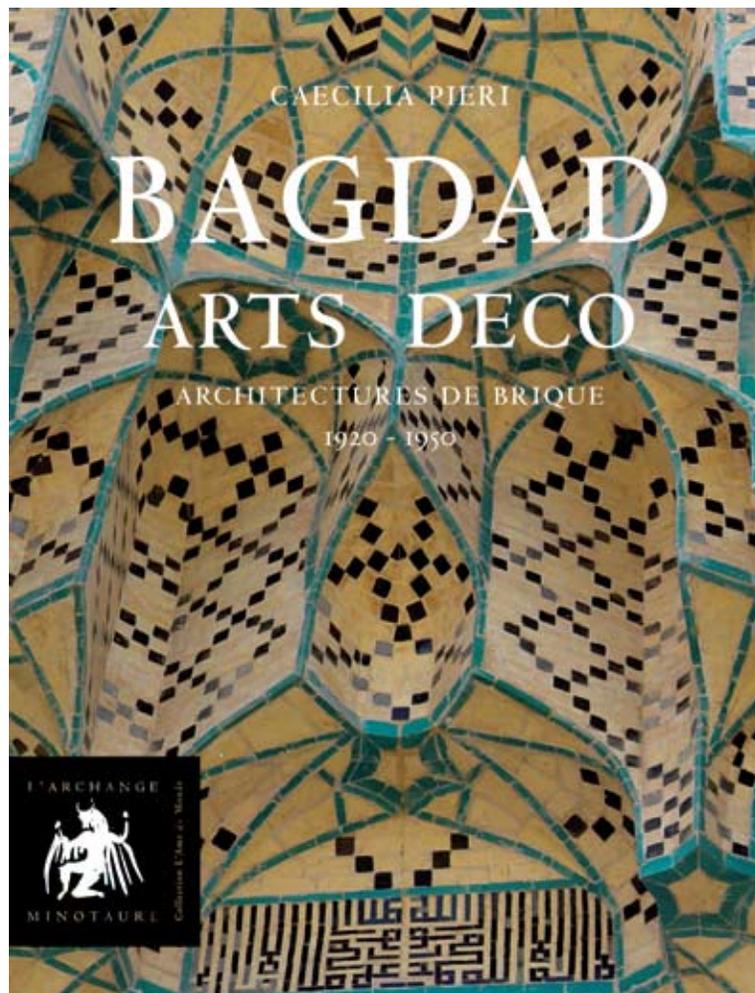


Figure 1.1. Cover of *Bagdad Arts Deco*.

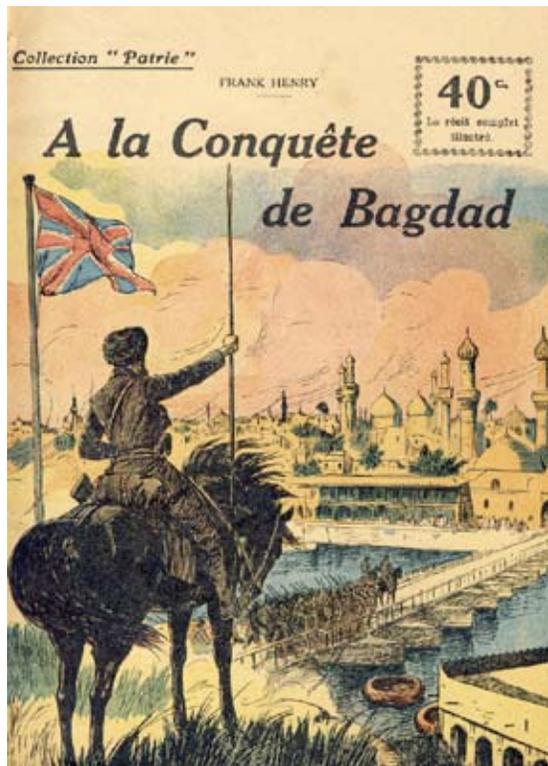


Figure 1.2. “Conquering Bagdad.” Front cover of a theater play by Frank Henry, 1914. Colonial iconography mixed real and imaginary artifacts: the Union Jack Flag, the soldier of the Indian Army dominating the city from a hill overlooking an absolutely flat landscape. The symbols of Baghdad — the Kadhimiya Shrine and the Old Bridge with *guffas* (antique round boats recorded by Herodotus) — have been artificially condensed within the same perimeter. (Pieri 2008: 36)

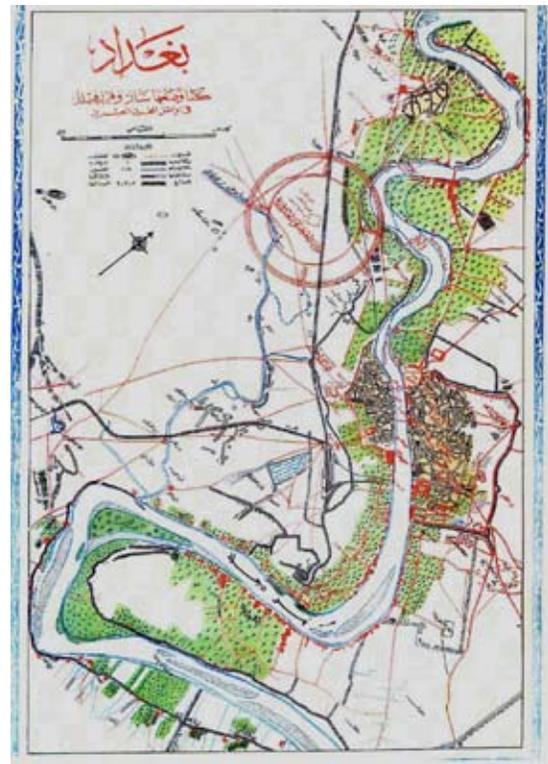


Figure 1.3. Map of the four historical cores of Baghdad: left, the west bank including Karkh and Kadhimiya; right, the east bank, including Adhamiya and Rusafa. The circle shows the supposed location of the “round city” founded by Al-Mansour in A.D. 762. (Atlas Ahmad Susa, 1957; Pieri 2008: 37)



Figure 1.4. Postcard (droits réservés) featuring equestrian statue of Faysal I, located in Karkh, west bank, at the crossing of Haifa Street and the street that continues to the bridge originally named King Faysal Bridge, today Al-Ahrar Bridge. (Pieri 2008: 49)



Figure 1.5. Baghdad, Abu Nuwas Street, east bank. Street facade of Art Gallery Dijla. The house, said to have been built in 1932, shows a typical hybridity of styles, techniques, and materials. (Pieri 2008: 85)

to Baghdad between 2003 and 2009, Pieri, a senior editor of France's *Éditions du Patrimoine*, creatively captured the physical imprint of the city through research that sometimes took her to unlikely places to find maps, postcards, and rare photographs in private collections. Her own beautiful photographs constitute primary documentation that sets a standard for other students and scholars in Iraq.

It is Pieri's interpretation of what she documents, however, that makes *Arts Deco* a captivating read. The story of colonialism imposed but subtly shaped and changed in local contexts is still being written. Pieri rejects the simplistic notion that colonialism, particularly the reigning Beaux Arts paradigms, imposed standards that killed architectural localism and creativity. Baghdad was not a blank field on which colonialism erected standardized monuments but, as she aptly puts it, a palimpsest, a layered urban space of materials, spatial relations, decorative styles, and craftsmanship displaying a long history of excellence in the use of native materials. Indeed, it is clear that handcrafted brickwork, reflecting knowledge of geometry and form passed down through generations of apprenticeship, is interesting and worthy of study in its own right. What the brick architecture of Baghdad reveals is not the imposition of imperial control under British rule, but the nuanced appropriation and formal manipulation that marked colonial architecture with the character of indigenous talent. It reveals freedom of expression in its most subtle forms. To recognize that, one must abandon the notion of a one-way relation of oppression and domination.

Certainly, monumental architecture in Baghdad and elsewhere has and will always function as billboard. Fortunately, the physical forms of the private house, so well represented here, testify to the impulse to reinterpret



Figure 1.6. Baghdad, Sinak, east bank. Continuity between the transitional houses of the late 1920s, of brick and wood, and the houses of the 1940s, brick coated with cement. (Pieri 2008: 72)



Figure 1.7. Baghdad, Waziriya, east bank. One of the first "Bauhaus"/"moderne international" houses, brick, late 1940s. (Pieri 2008: 99)



Figure 1.8. Sculpted detail in brick, Battaween, east bank. Most façades mix Art Deco stylization and revisited traditional forms, circa late 1920s. The gutters of cast-iron and wrought-iron balcony fence were imported from England. (Pieri 2008: 133)

and personalize even imposed forms. The transformation of the house in the twentieth century is indeed a story of combined social, technological, political, and psychological forces. With the inclusion of internal views of houses, Pieri has eloquently opened the door for additional research in this rich and minimally charted past. *Arts Deco* will be essential to any future effort to tell a more detailed story about Baghdad's built environment in and after the colonial period. As an architectural historian working on Baghdad in the following period, I found in it invaluable context for understanding what was happening in the capital city in the 1950s. Just as important, Pieri's photographs disclose the city that still exists, the qualities that can be built upon in the future, when remaking a war-torn Baghdad becomes possible.

If one were to quibble with anything, it would be the use of the term "Art Deco" to encapsulate complex forms, even if the addition of "s" to Art subtly distinguishes it from the period known as Art Deco in the West, so closely related to the early industrial tendencies that reshaped the Beaux Arts imagination of past forms. Using the phrase for Baghdad seems somewhat gratuitous — even if it is undeniably effective in piquing interest. The other problem for serious scholars is



Figure 1.9. Baghdad, Sarrafiyah, east bank house, built in 1935. The covered central hall with circular mezzanine is a modernized version of the former hosh, an open-air central courtyard). (Pieri 2008: 102)

simplified references. The good news is that the author is preparing a scholarly edition of Baghdad's architectural history, with complete documentation. But these are small matters. As an original and engaging attempt to open the richness of Baghdad's twentieth century built past to those who have

an interest in Baghdad's future, Caecilia Pieri's *Baghdad Arts Deco* is a complete success.

Mina Marefat is a Fulbright Research Scholar, Paris, spring 2009 and former TAARII fellow; she will be teaching at Georgetown University this Fall.

ANNOUNCEMENT

As part of the U.S. State Department sponsored Iraq Cultural Heritage Project (IHP), in which TAARII is a partner, a National Institute for the Preservation of Iraqi Cultural Heritage is being established in Erbil, Iraq, by International Relief and Development (IRD). The Institute will be operated under the professional guidance of the Walters Art Museum, the Winterthur Museum and Country Estate, the University of Delaware Art Conservation Department, the U.S. National Park Service, and the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH).

By the end of the two-year grant period, the Institute will be maintained and operated fully by SBAH. Training for professionals in archaeology, historic preservation, conservation, and collections management will be offered, with formal classes beginning in October 2009.

Experts in archaeology, historic preservation, conservation, and collections management who wish for further information may contact GansellAR@state.gov.