THE Persian CARD ROOM

A Middle Eastern Reception Hall in the Camel City

GRAYLYN MANOR
WINSTON-SALEM

BY
Anke Scharrahs, Reid Simpson, and Charles Wilkins
The Persian Card Room at Graylyn Manor presents a marvelous enigma to visitors. It is at once an alluring work of art, an escape to an imagined world, and an inscrutable artifact of a foreign culture often disparaged in the West. In these pages we aim to address three basic questions:

Why did the Gray Family want to install a room of this kind in their family home?

How was the room originally designed and then later modified for installation in its new site?

And what does the room as installed express in its decoration and inscriptions?

By exploring these questions, we may better appreciate the longstanding connections between American and Middle Eastern cultures.
In the late nineteenth century, Americans began looking to the Middle East in search of an “authentic” experience of foreign societies and cultures. In events such as the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 and the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the art, architecture, and lifestyle of the Middle East were put on display for American consumers, who were eager to purchase souvenirs and curios from distant locales in order to prove their status as sophisticated collectors. Along with the desire to view and collect artifacts came the desire to place oneself in a “real” Oriental milieu. In the Chicago World's Fair, set pieces were designed to provide fairgoers with an immersive experience taken straight from the cities of the Ottoman Empire (1300-1922). [2] Even if a set piece did not match the realities of life in late nineteenth-century Istanbul, it was important that it match the Orientalist view of what it should look like. By the early twentieth century, the trend of owning an “authentic” piece of the Middle East was readily adopted by many wealthy Americans.

Graylyn illustrates well the Orientalist habits of the time. Construction of the estate began in 1928, as America was still riding the economic high of the Roaring Twenties. As well-to-do American families began leaving the crowded cities for manors in the countryside, many sought to furnish their estates with a trendy, “Oriental” room. So-called Turkish smoking rooms became a popular feature in many wealthy residences across America, serving as places to unwind and escape...
from the stresses of everyday life. In the Graylyn manor house, the Grays created two Middle Eastern-style rooms, the Persian Card Room and the Egyptian Tent Room, as spaces for leisure and relaxation. The Persian Card Room functioned as a place for the family to play bridge and as a bar when the Gray family would throw parties. The Tent Room, which was furnished with an Egyptian tent, a real, stuffed camel, and oriental carpets, served as an intimate place for the family to relax. The Grays would sometimes retire there to enjoy a cup of coffee after dinner.

Born in Winston-Salem and raised in the city, Bowman Gray Sr. (1874-1935) came from a well-established local family. He attended school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill but then left early to
begin work as a teller in the Wachovia National Bank. At age 21, he left the bank and started work as a salesman with the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. In 1902, he married Natalie Fontaine Lyons in Baltimore, Maryland. At R. J. Reynolds, Bowman Gray rose through the ranks to top leadership positions, becoming President in 1924 and Chairman of the Board in 1931. Ever the salesman, Bowman would do business even while on vacation, going store to store to sell Prince Albert tobacco and work deals with store owners from New Jersey to Europe. A man devoted to his work, Bowman was content to leave most of the responsibility for planning, overseeing, and furnishing the Graylyn Estate to his wife Natalie, a job which she took up with great passion.

Although born in Asheville, North Carolina, Nathalie Fontaine Lyons Gray (1884-1961) spent most of her childhood and young adulthood in Baltimore and other parts of Maryland. As a young adult during this transformative period for women in America, Nathalie Gray was no doubt influenced by America’s growing engagement with the wider world, whether through the mass importation of foreign goods, the proliferation of travel clubs, or the increasing role of women as world travelers and cosmopolitan citizens. Nathalie Gray’s involvement in the planning and execution of the Graylyn Estate cannot be overstated.
Natalie worked closely with the architect, instructing him on a room-by-room basis. She even had a set of blueprints that she could take with her on trips. In an era during which many women were struggling to break out of their traditional roles, Nathalie wielded considerable decision-making power. Many sources refer to Graylyn as solely a project of Nathalie Gray, who had a final say over affairs dealing with the estate.

Though Bowman Gray spent most of his life in North Carolina, both he and Nathalie were avid travelers. The couple was fond of embarking on cruises through different locales in Northern Europe and the Mediterranean. During Bowman Gray’s tenure as an executive in the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, the company began utilizing a blend of Turkish tobacco in their flagship Camel Cigarettes. When Bowman and Nathalie made trips to the Mediterranean, Bowman would conduct business with agents in Istanbul regarding the use of Turkish tobacco in Reynolds products. This intersection of overseas business in Turkey and the Grays’ love for travel through the Mediterranean no doubt contributed to the presence of the Middle Eastern themed rooms that were present in Graylyn during their lifetime, these being the Persian Card Room and the Egyptian Tent Room.
The Persian Card Room — A Gorgeous Interior from Damascus

The Persian Card Room installed today at the Graylyn Estate in Winston-Salem was purchased by the Grays during a trip to Istanbul in 1928. Although the name suggests a connection to or origin in Iran, this interior consists of wooden wall and ceiling panels made in Syria. These panels were crafted between 1700 and 1830 and originate from at least six different interiors of various private houses in the old city of Damascus. The panels were removed from their respective homes and used to create a single, Oriental-style interior for sale to potential customers. It is likely that many of the panels were salvaged from damaged houses in the Sidi Amoud (now Hariqa) Quarter, an area in the Old City that was bombed by the French army during the anti-colonial Syrian Revolt of 1925-27. [5] The modified wood connections and features of the painted decoration of the panels indicate that a Damascene restoration company assembled this room for sale. To date it is still unclear how these panels made their way from Damascus to Istanbul prior to 1928, but presumably an antiques dealer acquired it and set the room up for sale in Istanbul.

Why the Grays chose to call the room where they played cards “Persian” is not clear. One possible explanation has to do with Arab custom. In Arabic-speaking Damascus, such interiors with elaborate wall and ceiling panels were called ‘Ajami rooms. The Arabic term means ‘Persian’ or ‘non-Arabic’ and commonly refers to foreign items from the Iranian, Persian-speaking world. The name ‘Ajami may also reflect the
influences of Iranian textile and carpet design on the painted decoration of these rooms. Thus, when the Syria-based Arab dealers were marketing the room to Western buyers, they may have translated ‘Ajami as “Persian,” and the Grays simply adopted the usage. Another, more general explanation is that in the early twentieth century, Americans popularly used “Persian” as a stand-in for most anything Middle Eastern, just as “Moorish” had been in vogue decades before.

The Design of the Damascene courtyard house

With more than 6,000 years of documented history, Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. As empires rose and fell, the city remained an important urban settlement because it was situated in a large, river-fed oasis that was at the crossroads of intercontinental trade routes. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the city saw a resurgence of mercantile activity as attested today by the large number of bazaars and khans (warehouses) built during that period. The wealth of the merchants provided the financial means to erect opulent private residences, which were praised by many visitors then and now.

Courtyard houses consisted of two or more courtyards that were surrounded by the rooms of the house. Private homes in seventeenth-to early-nineteenth-century Damascus contained rooms specifically
designed and decorated to receive guests — the iwan and the qa‘a. The iwan is a great soaring hall open on one side to the courtyard. For most of the year, it served as the main living space. Here the guests were received and welcomed with coffee, tea, sweets, or a water pipe. When the weather was too hot or too cold, an interior room or salon — the qa‘a — was used. [6] The Damascene qa‘a of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is divided into two main sections: a lower entrance area, called the ‘ataba, and the higher sitting space, called the tazar, raised approximately twelve to twenty inches above the ‘ataba level. In the wealthiest houses, a fountain in the center of the ‘ataba section

might refresh the air. Because hospitality was — and still is — highly valued in Middle Eastern societies, the reception rooms were the most lavishly decorated spaces of the house. The rooms would be furnished with precious textiles and decorated with luxurious cushions. The embellishment of these interiors reflected the financial power, social status, level of education, and self-image of the owner-builders and their families. These rooms were in a way semi-public spaces and were used for the reception of various types of guests. It could be family members, scholars, merchants, or business partners.

Significant parts of these interiors were created from elaborately painted and gilded wood, specifically for wall panels, closets, ornamental niches, and ceilings. The surfaces were decorated with a specific technique in which the artist applied a thick gypsum-based paste that when dried created a raised ornamentation not unlike the gesso and pastiglia techniques in European artwork. Syrians called the style of the ornamentation ‘Ajami, and this term was later applied to the technique and to the rooms themselves. [7] The painted motifs include a large variety of floral and geometric designs, flower vases, fruit bowls, and landscape scenes interwoven into rich patterns. But these rooms were not only splendid spaces; an essential element was meaningful inscriptions, rendered in graceful calligraphy, that could inspire guests and lead them to engage in discussion and religious devotion.
The Awakening of Western Interest in Middle Eastern Interiors

From the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, ‘Ajami rooms remained a consistent feature in the homes of the wealthy in Ottoman Syria. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, however, the tastes of affluent families changed, and their houses came to be decorated and furnished in a more European style. The traditional ‘Ajami panels were no longer esteemed and were often replaced with European-style decoration and furnishing.

In the same era, as described earlier, peoples in the Western hemisphere became fascinated with the beautiful colors and exotic appearance of these old interiors. Expanding tourism, visits to the Middle East of scholars, architects, and artists, the newly invented technology of photography, and the world fairs spurred Western interest in the “Orient” among travelers and connoisseurs. Some of these travelers were keen to buy oriental objects from the Middle East, even whole interiors.

The first interiors from Damascus found their way to Europe in the 1880s. European consuls and their Damascene business partners created a network for the trade in artifacts and other goods from the Ottoman Empire. Damascus became a hub for commerce in such objects, including tiles, carpets, wooden panels, embroidery, inlaid wood furniture, and metal wares. Craftsmen and dealers started businesses assembling “Oriental” rooms for sale by re-using wooden panels from abandoned houses in Damascus’s old city. In the decades around 1900, art dealers in the United States also became involved. One prominent Syrian firm engaged in the business, Asfar and Sarkis, may have prepared the Persian Card Room for the Grays, since they are known for having done similar work for other

![The Letterhead of the Syria-based Asfar and Sarkis Company, which sold Damascus Rooms to foreign patrons and may have possibly sold the Persian Card Room to the Grays.](Source: Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art)
wealthy American families. The decades between 1880 and 1930 were a key period in which there arose an international art market dealing in objects from the Middle East — among other exotic regions. It was during this time that the Grays purchased the Persian Card Room in Istanbul.

The Origins and Installation of the Persian Card Room

The Persian Card Room was installed at Graylyn in March 1930. The room contains not only pieces from Damascus houses built between 1700 and the 1830s, but also additional fittings and decorations crafted in the period of assemblage in the 1920s in Damascus, when the room was prepared for sale, as well as similar materials from the installation at Graylyn in 1930.

The oldest Damascene pieces of the Persian Card Room originate from a room that was made in 1700 or 1701, as indicated by the inscribed year of 1112 (Islamic calendar) in one of the panels with Arabic calligraphy. Approximately forty percent of the wall paneling in the Persian Card Room belongs to this date, including an original window, two shelf niches and two wall cabinets. It is exceptionally rare to find ‘Ajami panels crafted before the mid-eighteenth century.

9. Panel containing the inscription year of 1112 AH (1700 or 1701 CE) found on the north wall of the Persian Card Room. The central panel containing the Arabic inscription is surrounded by a frame embellished with raised metal-leaf ornaments. Credit: Ken Bennett
either in or from Damascus because the city was heavily damaged by earthquakes in 1759. Most of the existing ‘Ajami rooms were built after the earthquakes and are dated mainly between 1770 and 1830.

There are only two other ‘Ajami rooms in the world including Damascus itself that are known to date to the period around 1700. One is the Damascus Room of the Gayer Anderson Museum in Cairo. This interior is dated 1103/1692–93 and was installed in the late 1930s by the British physician, officer, and Orientalist R. G. John Gayer-Anderson (1881–1942) in his house in Cairo. The other early interior is the Damascus Room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, inscribed with the date 1119/1707–08. The fine quality of the 1700–1701 dated pieces in the Persian Card Room as well as the rich embellishment of the related framework with raised and metal-leafed motifs make this room an important example among the three preserved rooms from that time period. Only the most affluent families could have afforded such time consuming and costly decoration. It is in particular the elaborate ornament of the framework, with raised metal-leaf ornaments such as medallions, cartouche frames, vases, and blossoms that indicates the costly fabrication of this room.

Many other panels of the Persian Card Room were made between 1780 and 1830 as indicated by their stylistic details. For example, we know that the panels with landscapes interwoven into floral adornment were produced after 1775 because such landscapes did not appear before this time, as demonstrated by various other dated ‘Ajami rooms. [10]
Other panels of this period in the Persian Card Room are embellished with fruit bowls and flower vases both reflecting the importance of hospitality. The three outer frames of the ceiling contain panels that once adorned the walls of interiors made in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century as indicated by the characteristic motif of raised, sprigged flowers. All inscription panels on the ceiling also originate from the wall panels of various interiors from this period and illustrate the variety of poems and calligraphy favored in eighteenth and early nineteenth century Damascene society.

When the room was assembled for sale in Damascus prior to 1928, various pieces were retrofitted. For example, two shutters of an entrance door were integrated into the wall paneling. A window was filled with panels; open wall niches were closed with shutters; wall cabinet doors were altered to be entry doors to the room. In 1930 the interior was amended one more time to fit into the Grays’ home by inserting the doorways and a few minor wooden pieces. The process of assembling the room for the Grays constituted one of the earliest examples of an installation of this kind in the United States. The assembled Damascus Rooms now found in Cincinnati (1932), New York (1933), Pittsburgh (1934), and Hawaii (1953) were all acquired later than the room that the Grays ordered.

10. Panel with landscape scene, dating from after 1775. Credit: Ken Bennett
Hidden beauties — Changes in Surface Decoration

The Persian Card Room bears even more secrets to be revealed in the future. Today the room appears with soft, muted colors. But these colors are not the original ones. The elaborately painted details and flowers are currently covered with at least three layers of varnish that were applied when the panels were being prepared for sale in the early 20th century, in 1930, and in 1984. When the varnishes were first applied, they were clear and transparent and were intended to refresh the colors. But because they are made of natural resins, they darkened as they aged, turned brown, and became brittle. Over time, such varnish layers also tend to produce tension inside the paint layers, causing the delamination of the thin original paint layer and leading to the loss of the original decoration. The original color scheme is significantly brighter and full of vibrant, finely balanced colors. The original paint layers, tin foil, copper alloy, and gold leaf are extraordinarily well preserved in the Persian Card Room and deserve to be revealed, through proper conservation, as rare evidence of the sophisticated interior decoration of Damascene homes.
Since the panels of the Persian Card Room originated from many different interiors, it is not surprising that the calligraphic inscriptions express a variety of themes. In general, however, the inscribed verses were drawn from the overlapping Islamic traditions of devotional prayer and panegyric (praise) poetry. If there is a dominant theme, it is to admit one’s humility before God and, in times of need, to seek His help, with the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad, the final and most virtuous messenger of God. The room may even claim a miraculous power, that whoever inhabits this room and recites the inscribed poetry — that person’s prayers will be answered.

In addition, the inscribed verses share a common trait in their incorporation of elements of Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam. Put simply, Sufism is the quest on the part of the believer to know and love God; this quest is complemented by the call to obedience to the rules established by God and embodied in the Shari’a, or Islamic law. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), the pre-eminent interpreter of Sufism within the Sunni Islamic tradition, argued that the Muslim believer integrally practices both forms of faith, that is, the exploration of one’s inner spirituality and obedience to the outward rules of conduct, ritual, and speech.

The inscriptions found in the Persian Card Room are drawn from odes (Arabic qasidas) composed or inspired by four different Muslim writers. The first poet represented in the room, Abu'l-Qasim ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Suhayli (1114-85), was an outstanding scholar of Islamic Spain.
(Andalusia) and North Africa. His life witnessed the continued flowering of Andalusian culture even as European Christian armies in the twelfth century commenced their conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the so-called Reconquista. [12] Al-Suhayli’s fame rests on his biographical studies of Muhammad, but he also produced a body of poetry (collectively called a diwan) that circulated widely throughout the Islamic world. One of his odes, a twelve-line poem called the ‘Ayniyya Sughra (“The Little ‘Ayniyya”), constitutes the text for all of the inscriptions on the walls of the Persian Card Room. Inscriptions of six of the twelve lines are missing from the Persian Card Room and may have been lost or destroyed. (See the appendix for the location, text, and translation.)

In his poem of supplication, al-Suhayli extols the greatness and goodness of God, admits his own utter helplessness, entreats God to help him in his time of need, and further asks Muhammad to intercede with God for him. While conforming to strict rules of meter and rhyme — the poem is named after its rhyming letter, the Arabic ‘Ayn — the poem is notable for its realistic portrayal of a believer spontaneously and fervently seeking divine intervention. The popularity of the poem may have sprung from the story told by al-Suhayli that, on occasions when he faced a problem or suffered some malady, no sooner had he recited these verses, than God answered his prayer.

A second poet represented in the Persian Card Room expresses the same concerns as al-Suhayli but from a point of view that is not often represented in Islamic literary sources. As a woman born into a prominent family of Muslim scholars, Umm Hani al-‘Abdusiyya (d. 1455) enjoyed access to an education that many of her gender were denied. A native of Fez, Morocco, al-‘Abdusiyya most likely received tutoring at home by her father and brothers and later rose to become, in the words of one biographer, a “devout jurist (faqiha), possessing knowledge and probity.” Of her diwan, only one ode of about thirty lines survives. In three lines, which are inscribed on three of the four corners of the ceiling of the Persian Card Room and are repeated on one of the lunettes over the interior doors, al-‘Abdusiyya calls on fellow believers to entreat God in prayer and declares that they will find their hopes realized, as she did.

These verses were believed to have had supernatural efficacy when recited. According to one story, the blind could even receive sight. As a scholar, Al-‘Abdusiyya did not attain the renown of al-Suhayli, but her surviving verses nonetheless traveled long distances, from Morocco across North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula and Syria.

The final two poets whose work is represented or memorialized in the Persian Card Room focus less on supplication as found in al-Suhayli and al-‘Abdusiyya and more on exuberant praise of the Prophet Muhammad. Born in Egypt to a father whose profession was the allocation of inheritance shares according to Islamic law (al-Fārid), ‘Umar Ibn al-Fārid (1181-1235) first studied traditional Islamic sciences but then was drawn to Sufism and was for many years devoted to a life of solitary meditation and self-denial, traveling to the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment. His
diwan, consisting of odes of varying length, are mystical hymns to the Beloved, Muhammad, who as prophet mediates between God and His creation. Ibn al-Fârid stands out for his originality, arresting imagery, and penetrating psychological insights. Many of his poems can be read as both love poems and devotional hymns.

So compelling was Ibn al-Fârid’s poetry that many others tried to imitate his form and style, with some measure of success. Only in the twentieth century did scholars ascertain that a number of the poems traditionally attributed to Ibn al-Fârid were, in fact, works written by other poets in imitation, among them the poem in the Persian Card Room, called the ‘Aynîyya, after its rhyming letter ‘Ayn. The ‘Aynîyya appears in the Persian Card Room as a single half-line of verse on the ceiling and was probably joined with the other half-line in a second panel, now lost or damaged and repainted. The full line of verse, taken from the 59th line of a sixty-line ode, expresses the Islamic belief that God, whose power is limitless and has domain over all creation, chooses to cast his vision (ru’ya) over and have concern for Humankind. The actual identity of the author of this poem thus remains a mystery, but the inspiration is clearly Ibn al-Fârid.

Ibn al-Fârid’s poetry also served as a model for the fourth and final poet represented in the Persian Card room, Sharaf al-Din Muhammad al-Busiri (1212-97). An Egyptian poet of Amazigh (or Berber) origin and also a gifted calligrapher, traditionist, and reciter of the Qur’an,
al-Busiri is best known for the Burda, an ode he composed in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. The Burda is arguably the most famous poem in the history of Arabic literature as it was for centuries regularly recited at private salons, religious ceremonies, and public festivals. The poem of al-Busiri that appears in the Persian Card Room, however, is not the Burda but another long ode, of 457 lines, named the Hamziyya (the rhyming letter is the Arabic letter Hamza), which also enjoyed great popularity. Indeed, many of the same verses are also found in inscriptions in two other Damascus Rooms that are installed in museums in Los Angeles and Honolulu. In majestic language, this panegyric poem narrates the birth, life, and prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad, his leadership of the early Muslim community, and the battles and conquests won under his command against foreign powers and empires. Along the way, it describes his miraculous yet entirely human qualities and asserts Islam as a revealed religion that, according to Islamic belief, corrects the wayward adherents of Judaism and Christianity. From this long ode, four verses (Lines 6-9) were chosen and placed in the Persian Card Room, one in each corner of the ceiling; in them, al-Busiri proclaims the noble and ancient lineage of Muhammad and the foretelling of his divine mission by many generations of messengers.
The Persian Card Room constitutes a bold and imaginative project to recreate the interior of an “Oriental” palace. The Grays, seeking an alluring and elaborate souvenir of their travels, met with enterprising Middle Eastern traders, who saw a business opportunity. The traders, already experienced in the installation of rooms for other patrons, did not disappoint. Almost all of the Persian Card Room, as it came to be known, consists of exquisite authentic panels from the old Syrian city of Damascus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, artfully arranged together. The Persian Card Room remains, however, an assemblage of materials taken from several different homes and as a whole should not be taken as a historical reconstruction of a single pre-existing room; notably, the wall panels and ceiling panels are of markedly different origins. Still, a considerable number of panels on the walls are from a single, early eighteenth-century reception hall, among the oldest of their kind anywhere, and feature a relatively complete twelfth-century Arabic poem. These verses, considered along with those inscribed on the ceiling, provide insight into the broader spiritual life of Syrian Muslims over two Ottoman centuries. In ordering the installation of the “Persian Card Room” in the 1920s, the Grays not only beautified their home but also documented the culture of Ottoman Syria and may have helped save these panels from neglect, if not destruction.

Conclusion

The Persian Card Room constitutes a bold and imaginative project to recreate the interior of an “Oriental” palace. The Grays, seeking an alluring and elaborate souvenir of their travels, met with enterprising Middle Eastern traders, who saw a business opportunity. The traders, already experienced in the installation of rooms for other patrons, did not disappoint. Almost all of the Persian Card Room, as it came to be known, consists of exquisite authentic panels from the old Syrian city of Damascus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, artfully arranged together. The Persian Card Room remains, however, an assemblage of materials taken from several different homes and as a whole should not be taken as a historical reconstruction of a single pre-existing room; notably, the wall panels and ceiling panels are of markedly different origins. Still, a considerable number of panels on the walls are from a single, early eighteenth-century reception hall, among the oldest of their kind anywhere, and feature a relatively complete twelfth-century Arabic poem. These verses, considered along with those inscribed on the ceiling, provide insight into the broader spiritual life of Syrian Muslims over two Ottoman centuries. In ordering the installation of the “Persian Card Room” in the 1920s, the Grays not only beautified their home but also documented the culture of Ottoman Syria and may have helped save these panels from neglect, if not destruction.
Appendix

Transcription and Translation of the Poetic Inscriptions in the Persian Card Room

Those wishing to examine the verses in the Persian Card Room may do so by consulting the locator map provided below. The inscriptions in the Persian Card Room have been compared with the appropriate scholarly editions.

KEY TO POETS

- Abu’l-Qasim al-Suhayli
- Sharaf al-din Al-Busiri
- Umm Hani al-‘Abdusiyya
- ‘Umar Ibn al Fārid
- Unknown
Fragment of the ‘Ayniyya Sughra, an ode of Abu’l-Qasim al-Suhayli (1114–1185)

This is a twelve-line ode of supplication, praising God and asking Muhammad to intercede with Him on behalf of the believer-reciter. The poetry on the walls of the Persian Card Room is taken exclusively from this one ode; the body of poetry on the ceiling, by contrast, is taken from poems by the three other authors. Of the ode’s twelve lines, six survive in the Persian Card Room, and their order on the walls differs considerably from that found in standard textual editions of the poem. Each poetic line consists of two hemistiches or half-lines. Each hemistich has its own panel, but the two hemistiches are placed close together, either one below the other, or side by side. The verses below that are enclosed in brackets are the ones missing from the Persian Card Room.

Inscription text:

Translation: [O You who sees and hears what is in the heart, You are prepared for all that may come,]

O You in whom all hope is placed in the face of all difficulties. O You with whom redress is sought and who are a refuge,

[O You whose stores of sustenance are in the word “Be!”, be beneficent, for all good resides with You:]
[I have nothing but my need to seek Your aid, for by needing You I drive away my want.]
I have no recourse but to knock at Your door, and if I am refused, on what door can I knock?
[To whom can I pray and whose name can I call, if Your grace be denied to this one who needs You?]
Far be it from Your generosity to drive a rebel to despair: [Your] grace is more abundant and Your gifts more capacious.
In humility I appear at Your door, knowing that humbling myself at Your door brings blessing.
I have made my reliance on You one of complete trust, and I have spread out my palms in supplication and I beg.
[By him whom You have loved and sent [as a prophet], You have answered the prayers of those who intercede],
[Make for us an escape from every narrow place and be kind to us, O You to whom one can appeal.]
Then [let us] pray to God to bless the Prophet, the best of mankind and he who is sought for intercession, and his family.
[In the year of the Migration of Muhammad] 1112 [= 1700/1701 CE].

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**Fragment of an Ode by Umm Hani al-‘Abdusiyya (d. 1455/56)**

The fragment, consisting of three hemistiches (half-lines) of poetry, calls on believers to seek the intercession of Muhammad to save them from their troubles. The three hemistiches are found in each of the three corners of the ceiling, with the exception of the northwest corner, nearest the door leading to the entrance hall. One of the hemistichs is repeated on the lunette over the door leading to the drawing room; based on stylistic details, this hemistich is thought to have been added by artisans in the 1920s when refitting the panels for installation in Graylyn. The fourth hemistich seems to have been lost or damaged in the process of salvage.
Translation: [What is there for a wretch like me, a prodigy of sins, but the intercession of the best of humankind and of messengers!]
O sinners, stop at his door, implore him for your reward, and realize your highest hope!
I stopped in the shade of his protection, seeking refuge with him, [my head bowed from sin and shame].

Fragment of an Ode Attributed to the Sufi poet Ibn al-Fārid (1181-1235)

One hemistich of a poem is found in the Persian Card Room that is attributed to the great Sufi figure Ibn al-Fārid. The poem is a panegyrical ode to the Prophet Muhammad. Given below is the hemistich along with its preceding complement, found in in the northwest corner of the ceiling nearest the door to the entrance hall. Since it is the penultimate line in the poem, the final line is included in the translation as well; both lines are addressing God in a closing expression of praise.

Translation: We, along with the beloved ones, have drawn Your regard, [to which the hearts of the saints hasten].
[For Your gate is the destination, Your grace overflowing, Your goodness (ever) present, and Your pardon vast.]
Fragment of the Hamziyya, an ode of Sharaf al-Din al-Busiri (1212–ca. 1297)

This poetic fragment, in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, survives in three full lines; a fourth line that was part of an original Damascus room appears to have been damaged or lost. The three original lines are found in each of the three corners of the ceiling, with the exception of the southeast corner. In distinction from the other poetic inscriptions, a complete line (not just a half-line) is given within each wooden panel.

Inscription text:

لَمْ تَزَلْ فِي ضَمَائِرِ الْكَوْنِ نَخْتَا رُؤُوْلُ الأُمُّهَاتِ وَالْأَبَاءِ
[ما مَضَتْ قُرْطَةٌ مِن الرَّسُلِ الْأَلَّهِيَّ بَشَرْثَ قوْمِهَا بِكَ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ]
تَتَبَاهِي بِكَ الغُصْوُرَ وَتَشْمُو بِكَ عَليَاءْ بَعْدَهَا عَليَاءَ
وَبَدَا لِلْمُوْجَدِ مِنْكَ كَرِيمٌ مِنْ كَرِيمٍ آبَوْهُ كُرِمَاءٌ

Translation:

From the souls of creation, [the best of] mothers and fathers were always chosen for you;

[In no era of (God’s) messengers did the prophets not send forth good news of your coming.]

The ages boast of you and raise you up, higher and higher;

Your being is manifest as a noble one whose forebears were also noble.
Suggestions for further reading


Hirx, John, Linda Komaroff, and Anke Scharrahs. “A Room from Damascus: Context, Recreation and Conservation.” In Beauty and Identity: Islamic Art from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles and New Haven: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2016). An article that highlights the challenges and rewards of reconstructing and conserving Damascus Rooms, with the article focusing on one room installed in Los Angeles.


Stetkevych, Suzanne P. The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 2010). An informative and scholarly study of the enduring importance of praise poetry in Islamic tradition, from the medieval to the modern periods.

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About the Authors
Anke Scharrahs (Ph.D., Academy of Fine Arts, Dresden) is an internationally recognized freelance conservator with special interest in Syrian Ottoman interiors. J. Reid Simpson is a graduate of Wake Forest University (B.A., History and Political Science, 2020). Charles L. Wilkins (Ph.D., Harvard University) is Associate Professor of Middle Eastern History at Wake Forest University.