Architecture fragment

Place of origin: Iraq (Found in excavations at Al-Hira in 1931, and probably made and carved on site, found)
Date: 750-800 AD (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown (maker)
Materials and Techniques: Lime plaster, carved
Credit Line: The research, cataloguing and digitisation of the V&A's Samarra collection has been made possible by a pilot project grant from the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (2013).
Museum number: A.29-1932

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

Al-Hira was an ancient city in south-central Iraq, which played a significant role in influencing the development of early Islamic architecture, for example at Samarra. Excavations of several of the raised mounds at the site were carried out during an Oxford expedition in 1931 under David Talbot Rice (1903-1972). Initially occupied during the Sasanian period, the site of a fortress-like palace structure was in continuous use until the second half of the 8th century based on numismatic and other archaeological evidence. Its layout shows affinities with the Palace of Ukhaidir, built during the Abbasid Caliphate.

Carved stucco work decorated a number of the door jambs, several of which survived in situ, as well in fragments found on the floor. These are among the earliest examples of Islamic stucco to have been identified. Significantly they are made of true stucco using lime plaster, characterised by a white, hard, stone-like appearance, unlike the greyish gypsum plaster employed at Samarra. There are stylistic parallels with similar stucco work found at Ctesiphon, excavated by a German expedition in 1928-29.

The stucco finds in the Victoria and Albert Museum are associated with the decoration found on wide door jambs (30 cm in width) found in Building I as well apparently as cornices and pilasters. The stiff deep carving was created with a steep-cut (Tiefendunkel), using a hand drill which is distinct from the slant-cut characteristic of Samarran carving.

In 1932, David Talbot Rice presented the stucco finds from Hira to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, but offered a selection to Richard P. Bedford, Keeper in the Department of Architecture and Sculpture (the Middle Eastern Department was not created until 2002), as ‘important examples of designs’ along with photos of a door jamb from Hira. Rice described the stucco finds as being from three restorable door-jambs, a portion of a small frieze and a few other fragments. A selection of ‘half-a dozen of the best specimens’ were requested. As Bedford explained to Talbot Rice in a letter of 16 April 1932, ‘We should like to be able to choose from specimens of artistic rather than purely archaeological interest’. In the end, of the fragments sent, it was felt that it was not possible to ‘reconstruct anything like a large panel from the pieces’ and only five were selected.

Descriptive line

Fragment from a stucco work frieze with a running foliate band, Iraq (Hira) 8th century.

Physical description

Fragments from a small frieze, deeply carved with a plain outer border framing a pearl or interlaced inner border, which frames a vegetal pattern with scrolling palmettes and stylised grape and vine leaf motifs. The lime plaster is in two distinct layers, one thinner and darker at the back, visible in the profile section, probably the lime mortar from the wall and a second much whiter and thicker where the carving was executed. A thin layer of plaster represents modern gypsum added to consolidate the whole.

Dimensions

Height: 23.3 cm, Width: 21 cm, Depth: 7 cm

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URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O449050/architecture-fragment-unknown/