Fragment of wall decoration

Place of origin: Samarra (made)

Date: 836-900 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown (makers)

Materials and Techniques: Plaster, carved and incised

Credit Line: Given by H.M. Government

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Museum number: A.80:1-1922

Gallery location: In Storage

Descriptive line

Fragment from a frieze (one of two elements), plaster, carved and incised with a Samarra bevelled-style foliate motif; Iraq (Samarra), 9th century.

Physical description

Two fragments from an ornamental architectural wall element, plaster, carved with a repeating pattern undulating stylized foliate designs of conjoined spirals with pierced bosses in the Samarra Bevelled Style. The back has of a coarser gypsum layer, very grey in colour and full of small airholes. The carved decorative layer is thick (3.5cm) and the rough supporting back is 6.7cm. There are wooden pegs in the larger piece.

Dimensions

Height: 24.5 cm, Width: 21 cm, Thickness: 9.2 cm

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Object history note

The German Archaeologist, Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948) chose Samarra as the site for the first large-scale archaeological investigation into Islamic antiquities. Two excavations took place, in 1911 and later from 1912-1913. The list of Herzfeld's finds numbered in excess of 1161 objects. These included wall paintings, plaster (stucco) wall revetments, carved and painted woodwork, architectural details carved from marble and alabaster and smaller finds of glass, ceramics, steatite and mother of pearl.

All of the finds were stored at Samarra except for 100 panels of carved plaster which were shipped back to Germany and are now in the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin. After Samarra was captured by the British in World War I, the remaining finds were moved to Basra via Baghdad, where Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) as honorary Director of Antiquities in Iraq, acted as the art advisor to the V&A. Due to the efforts of the directors of both the V&A and the British Museum, the finds were eventually shipped to London in 1921.

The Foreign and Colonial Office convened a commission at the British Museum, which Herzfeld was invited to preside over to divide the Samarra finds into type sets. These were later offered to over twenty different museums and collections including the V&A which received several hundred objects in all media, accessioned in 1922.

Historical context note

Samarra was founded by the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tasim (r. 833-842) in 836 AD to serve as his imperial capital. The sight chosen was about 125km upstream from Baghdad on the left bank of the Tigris. The founding of new cities was an important way of displaying values of kingship. Al-Mu'tasim ordered the construction of a planned city including a network of canals, streets, monumental mosques, palaces, gardens and racecourses. He also allocated land to military and court officials, who built richly decorated palace complexes and greatly increased the size of the city. His son and successor, Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) ordered the construction of the famous spiral minaret at the great mosque. Construction halted at Samarra in about 880 AD and later was abandoned by the Caliph and his court in 892. At 57 km², Samarra is today the largest Islamic archaeological site in the world.

The construction of the many mosques and palaces at Samarra fostered an early flowering of architectural decoration. What mainly survives today are wall revetments in carved stucco and wall paintings on fine gypsum surfaces. Earlier Iranian (Sassanian) decorative styles influenced much of the carved stucco panels found at Samarra. The decoration was primarily based on vegetal forms but later developed into more abstract motifs. The wall paintings illustrate a wide range of subjects such as geometric patterns and courtly scenes with figurative representations of listening and playing music, banqueting and dancing. Depictions of animals, especially camels and birds also feature on fragments recovered from the site.

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