The retrofitted Damascus Room prior to its shipment to Honolulu. Photograph dated August 1, 1954. Shangri La Historical Archives, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

TWO LAYERS OF AUTHENTICITY: THE DAMASCUS ROOM AT SHANGRI LA

Anke Scharrahs

SLWPIA, No. 8, November 2014
This article reveals the connections among various Damascene interiors that are preserved today in collections in the United States. They all were sold to American customers in the 1930s to 1950s, a business in which the Damascus-based antiquities firm Asfar & Sarkis as well as the Damascene family restoration workshop al-Khayyat were both involved. Both companies were famous for their skills. This article sheds light on the relationships between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interiors of private residences in Damascus's Old City and their second life as twentieth-century orientalizing interior creations in western collections. The rich archival documents relating to Doris Duke's Damascus Room, as well as the room itself provide insight into the two layers of authenticity of this particular interior.

Dr. Anke Scharrahs is a conservator specializing in research and conservation of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century interiors of Syrian private residences. During the past fifteen years she was involved in various projects related to Damascene 'ajami interiors in Germany, Syria, and the United States. She has a Ph.D. from the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, Germany, and is the author of the book Damascene 'Ajami Interiors: Forgotten Jewels of Interior Design published in 2013.


© Anke Scharrahs
DAMASCUS ROOMS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY ORIENTALISM

Increased European presence in the Middle East at the beginning of the nineteenth century led to a wide-ranging fascination with “Oriental” culture, which found its expression in fine and decorative arts as well as in architecture constructed in Oriental or Moorish styles.1 Orientalist paintings,2 exhibitions of Arabic and Persian Art,3 and international fairs,4 as well as popular travel accounts5 and tourist guides, provided audiences in Europe and America with glimpses into this “new” world, influencing the perception of Near Eastern and North African architecture and culture. Collectors and museums gathered carpets, metal objects, tiles, and glass from Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, among other places, and, toward the end of the nineteenth century, many sought to purchase entire interiors. Their interest was presumably spurred by photographs taken in historical homes in Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem, or Aleppo,6 which appealed to

The research on the Damascus Room and its relatives in New York, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati was supported by a number of individuals. Without them the article would be impossible. I want to express my deep thanks to Mecka Baumeister and Beth Edelstein from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for sharing many years of research on the eighteenth-century Damascus Rooms; Maxine Bruhns and Jane-Ellen Robinet from Pittsburgh University for their generously provided photographs; Elisabeth Macaulay Lewis for sharing her research and images with me; Keelan Overton for the inspiring exchange of research and ideas; Cincinnati Art Museum for permission to reproduce images; and of course the staff at Shangri La for their unflagged support, in particular Deborah Pope, Maja Clark, and Dawn Sueoka.

1 Examples include the Royal Pavilion in Brighton (1815–22), the water pump house in Potsdam (1841–43), Tivoli in Copenhagen (opened in 1843), the Leighton House in London (1865–81), the New Synagogue in Berlin (1866), Olana in New York (1867–91), and the Jerusalem Synagogue in Prague (1904–06).
3 For example, the 1885 exhibition of Persian and Arabic art at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London; Exposition d’Art Musulman at the Palais de l’Industrie in Paris (1893); and Exposition des Arts Musulmans at the Pavillon de Marsan du Louvre in Paris (1903).
4 For example, World’s Fairs in Antwerp (1885) and Chicago (1893).
6 For example, by Ernest Benecke, Francis Frith, Peter Bergheim, Othon von Osheim, Wilhelm Hammerschmidt, Francis Bedford, Sulaiman al-Hakim, the Bonfils family, and Jean-Baptiste Charlier.

Westerners because of their atmosphere of luxury and exoticism. Between 1880 and 1920 at least nine rooms or large portions of interiors originating from important historical private homes in Damascus were sold, primarily to European dealers, collectors, or museums. In the 1930s a remarkable number of Damascene interiors were purchased by American collectors, all of them sold by the Damascene antiquities firm Asfar & Sarkis—as this article reveals for the first time—and many (if not all) restored or retrofitted by the al-Khayyat family of Damascene artisans.

A CREATIVE ENDEAVOR: COMPOSING ORIENTAL INTERIORS FOR DORIS DUKE AND OTHER WESTERN CUSTOMERS

It was in the mid-1930s that Doris Duke fell in love with the arts of Syria, Iran, and India, an interest spurred by her around-the-world honeymoon trip in 1935. On another trip to the Near East, in 1938, she traveled to Damascus and met the antique dealers Georges Asfar and Jean Sarkis, to whom she was introduced by Arthur Upham Pope, an American expert on Persian art. With Asfar and Sarkis, she visited historical houses in Damascus, in which she was surely invited to rest and enjoy tea or coffee in a lavishly adorned room traditionally used for the reception of guests. Following this first Damascus visit, she purchased many objects from Asfar & Sarkis, and her interest in acquiring an Oriental room, as well, is indicated by negotiations over the purchase of a nineteenth-century Iranian interior in the late 1930s and further considerations for a

---

7 Rooms were purchased by the Victoria and Albert Museum London (1880); the Museum for Applied Arts, Budapest (1885); F. A. Krupp for the Kunstgewerbemuseum Düsseldorf (1890); Pierre Loti, today installed in his house in Rochefort (1894); Karl Ernst Osthaus, today the Dresden Damascus Room, Völkerkundemuseum Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (1899); Count Pálffy, today installed in Bojnice castle, National Museum Slovakia (1902); Herbert M. Gutmann, today the Arabicum in the Villa Gutmann Potsdam (ca. 1902); Lockwood de Forest, purchased in 1918 by the Brooklyn Museum, whereabouts currently unknown. Furthermore, in 1912 the Aleppo Room was purchased from Bayt Wakil in the Christian quarter of Aleppo, today installed as one of the highlights in the Museum of Islamic Art, Pergamon Museum, Berlin.

8 One interior was purchased in 1932 by Andrew N. Jergens, and is today installed in the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1933/34 two interiors were purchased by Hagop Kevorkian (one room is today installed as the Damascus Room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the elements of the other Kevorkian interior are in four collections: New York University, Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies; Shangri La, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art; Princeton University; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Another interior was installed in the Vester Galleries in New York (Walter R. Storey, “The Near East Influences Our Decorative Arts,” New York Times Magazine, March 6, 1938) before it was purchased for the University of Pittsburgh (R. Crawford Mitchell, The Syria-Lebanon Classroom in the Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1943]). Recent research by the author revealed that all of these interiors were sold by the Damascene antiquities firm Asfar & Sarkis.


10 Telegram from Arthur Upham Pope to Asfar & Sarkis, January 28, 1938, Shangri La Historical Archives, Doris Duke Historical Archives, Honolulu, Hawai‘i (hereafter SLHA).


12 Research by Keelan Overton, based on archival material.
Spanish interior in the early 1940s. Her plans were interrupted for a number of years by the Second World War, which kept her away from her Honolulu home until 1946. Finally, in late 1952, she purchased from Asfar & Sarkis a set of Damascene wood panels to refurbish one of her guest rooms. In 1955 the paneling was installed, lining the walls and ceiling of the room with the exquisite, elaborately painted, metal-leafed elements of a late-eighteenth-century upper-class residence from Damascus.

The historical panels, doors, wall cabinets, and niches had to be rearranged to fit the existing space in Shangri La, as the dimensions of and location of windows and doors in Duke’s guest room differed significantly from those common to historical homes in Damascus. The ambitious task of re-creating an Oriental interior for the space in Honolulu was given to the Damascene master artisan Abu Sulayman, also known by his full name, Mohammad ʿAli al-Khayyat. The family name al-Khayyat refers to one of the most famous family workshops in Damascus, known for producing highly decorated polychrome wooden interiors called ʿajamī rooms. The measurements of Duke’s guest room were sent to Damascus in June 1953, and al-Khayyat’s preparation work lasted approximately one year. After completing the structural adaptation and restoring the surface decoration, al-Khayyat and his team temporarily assembled, mounted, and photographed the panels—still in Damascus—for Duke in August 1954 (figs. 1–2). After being approved by Duke, the room was dismantled, packed, and shipped via Beirut and New York to Honolulu, where it was installed at Shangri La in 1955.

---

13 “Doris Duke seems to have been interested in acquiring an historical interior early on. In the late 1930s she was offered a nineteenth-century Iranian interior of the Qajar period, but declined to purchase it. In the early 1940s she sought to purchase a Spanish interior, but was likely daunted by the enormous number of choices made available at the sale of William R. Hearst’s collections. Any plans to purchase and install an interior were postponed following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the advent of US involvement in WWII—Duke was prevented from returning to Hawai’i until the late 1940s. Acquiring a historical interior must have still been in her mind when Duke was offered a Syrian interior in the early 1950s from the dealers Asfar and Sarkis of Lebanon and Damascus” (Sharon Littlefield, “Notes on the Turkish and Damascus Rooms,” unpublished internal DDFIA report, March 2005).

14 In a letter from George Asfar to Doris Duke dated December 12, 1952, the payment of $4,000 for “boiseries anciennes” is mentioned. Doris Duke Papers on the Shangri La Residence, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Historical Archives, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University (hereafter, DDPSL).

15 Date stated by the author based on stylistic and technical comparison to two interiors in Bayt as-Sibāʾī, Damascus: the qāʿa in the north wing of the main courtyard, dated 1187/1773–74, and the qāʿa in the west wing of the south courtyard, dated 1183/1769–70.


18 The work was completed in summer 1954, as stated in a letter from Charles Asfar to Doris Duke, August 17, 1954, DDP.

19 Many parts of the historical surfaces were re-painted; historical metal-leafed details were overpainted with bronze paint; and the entire surface was coated with a transparent brownish varnish.

20 Twenty-three black-and-white images are preserved in the SLHA.

21 In November 1954 the paneling was in Beirut, as stated in a letter from Charles Asfar to Doris Duke, November 22, 1954, DDP. According to an invoice of merchandise dated November 30, 1954 (DDPSL), the nine boxes with the panels were shipped from Beirut to New York on November 29, 1954.
At this time Charles Asfar, Georges’s brother and a partner in the firm, recommended in a letter to Duke: “It will be necessary to recommend to your interior designer to conserve the oriental atmosphere with a very simple decoration: with very beautiful Persian blankets over the couches and any other artistic objects with value on the windowsill; this simplicity will balance out the beauty of the wooden lattice and I am certain that you will have the most beautiful oriental-inspired interior in America.” 22 The Damascus Room was thus furnished with textiles, a divan with cushions, a central carpet, and curtains selected to create a cozy, warm atmosphere. A small table, 23 as well as the four enameled metal lamps 24 shown in Asfar & Sarkis’s 1954 installation photographs, were also ordered from Damascus (fig. 3).

---

22 Letter from Charles Asfar to Doris Duke, October 5, 1955, DDP. Translated from French by Rubenstein Library staff, February 2012.
23 The table is listed in the invoice of merchandise from November 30, 1954, DDPSL.
24 Receipt and letter from Asfar & Sarkis to Stuart Hawkins, December 3, 1954, DDPSL.
Fig. 3: Damascus Room at Shangri La with its furnishings in the 1960s. Shangri La Historical Archives, Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

Duke’s new room was representative of a type of interior decoration that was widespread in Damascē between the late seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, and most likely earlier.25 Al-ʿajamī is the Arabic term for this decorative technique, which is characterized by raised relief motifs (called pastiglia in Western contexts); the technique was developed to its highest quality in seventeenth- to early nineteenth-century Damascus.26 The most important rooms in private houses were decorated in this manner, as were numerous ceilings in public buildings. The oldest dated rooms with ʿajamī wall paneling27 include the Damascus Room in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1119/1708–09); fragments of an interior currently stored in Bayt Farḥū/al-Muʿallim in Damascus, dated 1119/1708–09; and a few elements of the Damascene interiors in the

25 Due to the continuous renovation and rebuilding of homes, as well as to the two devastating earthquakes in 1759, securely dated examples from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries are rare.
Cincinnati Art Museum (1123/1711–12)\(^{28}\) and in the Gayer-Anderson Museum, Cairo (1103/1692–93).\(^{29}\)

The al-Khayyat family had been producing and restoring \textit{'ajamī} rooms at least since the mid-nineteenth century.\(^{30}\) Records reveal that this family of artisans collaborated with Asfar & Sarkis\(^{31}\) between 1933\(^{32}\) and 1959\(^{33}\) to restore and adapt \textit{'ajamī} rooms for potential customers in Europe and America. According to written and photographic documents, at least three other Damascene interiors were sold by Asfar & Sarkis to American customers prior to Shangri La’s Damascus Room: the interiors in the Cincinnati Art Museum; the Syria–Lebanon Room in the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh; and the “Quwatlī house,” elements of which are now on display or in storage at four locations across the US: New York University, Princeton University, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Shangri La.\(^{34}\) It seems clear that the al-Khayyat family was also involved in the adaptation and restoration of many, if not all, of these interiors.

The earliest evidence of Asfar & Sarkis’s activity in the American market is related to the Damascene interior displayed in the Cincinnati Art Museum since 1966. This room was purchased in 1932 by the soap magnate Andrew N. Jergens and was installed in his villa in Cincinnati before he donated it to the museum.\(^{35}\) The connection to Asfar & Sarkis is evident via a photograph from the early 1930s that depicts the large wall cabinet door (fig. 4) in this room (fig. 5). This photo was included in a set of photographs of the so-called Quwatlī house\(^{36}\) sent by Asfar & Sarkis in the early 1930s to

\(^{28}\) An inscription panel contains the date 1123/1711–12. Based on the technical and stylistic observations of the author, only a few elements belong to this early eighteenth-century date. Some parts clearly belong instead to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century—for example the two arched landscape panels above the large wall cabinet and the large cabinet shutters themselves. Many details show evidence of further changes: incomplete frames of wall cabinets, shortened door shutters, and newly created frames and borders integrating original panels.

\(^{29}\) Between 1935 and 1942, the British major and art collector John Gayer-Anderson restored and furnished a house in Cairo, the so-called Bayt al-Kretliya. He installed a Damascene interior in one of the rooms. In his book on the house, he mentions an inscription bearing the date 1103/1692–93. See John Gayer-Anderson and Sulaiman al-Kretli, \textit{Legends of the Bayt al-Kretliya} (Ipswich: East Anglian Daily Times, 1951), 20, 23. It is obvious that this interior contains parts of various historical interiors. The painted landscapes on the large wall cabinet doors are certainly made later than this date, most likely in the late eighteenth century.


\(^{31}\) After Jean Sarkis’s death in 1955, his son Khalil John Sarkis became partner, usually appearing in correspondence as Khalil Sarkis.

\(^{32}\) The first known evidence of collaboration is the room bought by Andrew N. Jergens in 1932, which was moved in 1966 to the Cincinnati Art Museum.

\(^{33}\) For a letter from Charles Asfar to Doris Duke, December 10, 1959 (DDP), mentioning Abu Sulayman, which is the tekhnyym for Muhammad ʿAli al-Khayyat (1880–1960), see Khouri, “Room for Tradition,” 11.

\(^{34}\) Another Damascene interior was sold by Bishara Asfar and Ernst Lüticke to the German art collector Karl Ernst Osthaus in March 1899. This interior was donated to the Dresden Ethnological Museum in 1930. See Scharrahs, \textit{Damascene ‘Ajami Rooms}, 248–9.


\(^{36}\) This set contains two types of black-and-white images. Nine photos show an \textit{iwān} and a reception hall with two raised seating platforms; these images were said to be taken in Bayt Quwatlī in Damascus (it is still unclear to which of the five Quwatlī houses this small secondary courtyard and the reception hall
Hagop Kevorkian, an American dealer, as part of the negotiations for his 1933/4 purchase of the Quwatlī house elements as well as a second Damascene interior, which later became part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection. The Damascus Room at the Cincinnati Art Museum is clearly a creative reinvention of an “Old Damascus Room,” composed of parts of different historical interiors—both early- and late-eighteenth-century elements—by Asfar & Sarkis, most likely in collaboration with a Damascene ʿajamī company, presumably the al-Khayyat family.


38 Scharrah, Damascene ‘Ajami Rooms, 262–4.
The above-mentioned set of images is also connected to another Damascene interior, the Syria–Lebanon Room in the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh. One of the wall panels depicted in the historical photographs (fig. 6) is installed today in the Pittsburgh interior (fig. 7). This provenance is confirmed by archival records at the University of Pittsburgh, dating from the late 1930s and containing the signature of Georges Asfar and the letterhead of Asfar & Sarkis.  

---

39 Thanks to Elisabeth Macaulay Lewis for sharing her archival research with me. Cathedral of Learning's Archive on the National Rooms. University Archives, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.
The assembly of these two interiors in Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, using elements of various historical rooms as well as pieces newly fabricated to accommodate the re-arranged historical elements, clearly reveals the hand of the al-Khayyat family, which is familiar from their work in the Pharaon collection, Beirut (today the Robert Mouawad Private Museum),\textsuperscript{40} the National Museum in Damascus,\textsuperscript{41} and the Damascus Room at Shangri La. Documentary evidence of the involvement of the al-Khayyat family in Asfar & Sarkis’s dealings in Syrian interiors also exists, specifically that related to the dismantling and packing of the so-called Quwatlī house interior, sold to Kevorkian in 1933/34. This interior remained in storage facilities in New York for more than thirty-five years, and it was only after Kevorkian’s death in 1962 that it was donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and to New York University in 1969. Various papers pertaining to the interior, including a letter and six photographs confirming the involvement of the al-Khayyat family in the preparation of this room for sale and export, are held in the Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Islamic Art. In a letter dated July 25,


\textsuperscript{41} On the creation of the Damascene Hall in the National Museum in Damascus in the late 1950s, see Khouri, “Room for Tradition.”
1969, Mohammad Munir al-Khayyat states that the company of his father, Mohammad 'Ali al-Khayyat, had removed and packed the elements of the so-called Quwatlī house decades earlier. It is clear that elements of this house have found their way into a number of interiors in collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Damascus Room, the decoration of the entrance hall and library at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University, and Shangri La; several marble mosaic pieces, stones decorated with paste-work, wooden 'ajamī panels, and ceiling elements of this Quwatlī house are now installed at Shangri La, as Doris Duke purchased them in 1976 from New York University.

**TRACES OF CHANGE: ABU SULAYMAN’S ASSEMBLY OF A DAMASCENSE INTERIOR FOR DORIS DUKE’S GUEST ROOM**

Mohammad ‘Ali al-Khayyat (1880–May 1960), better known by his teknonym Abu Sulayman, was the master artisan who carried out the adaptation of a historical Damascus interior to fit Doris Duke’s guest room. In his late seventies when he accepted this challenging task, al-Khayyat brought decades of experience in this field to the task of rearranging eighteenth-century Damascus wall and ceiling panels into an Oriental interior that would be delivered to the other side of the world. Some of his alterations are immediately discernible to those familiar with Damascus residences, but many amendments are subtle and difficult to recognize. Detailed study of the layout, style, replacements, newly painted boards and panels, and historical as well as new wood joinery reveals the alterations that were required and realized to create Duke’s Damascus Room.

The original ceiling’s largest dimension nearly matched the length of Duke’s guest room. To fit the new space, some ceiling panels and cornices were extended and others shortened. The long sides were shortened by cutting the wide frame panels (marked with yellow in fig. 8) and the curved cornice boards in the middle, removing a section just under seven inches (17.5 cm) in length, and fitting the boards together again (figs. 8–9). The marks of the saw in the wood as well as in the painted decoration, and the broken design of the inset panels with the light yellow background, clearly indicate this alteration. The ceiling’s central panel was shortened on both short sides (marked with

---

42 He was at that time part of the General Directorate of Antiquities, Beirut, as indicated by his letter to Bayly Winder, dated July 25, 1969, preserved in the files of the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
43 The name of his father is not mentioned in this letter, but a letter from Charles Asfar to Doris Duke, dated December 10, 1959 (DDP), mentions the son of Mohammad 'Ali al-Khayyat, who worked at the Beirut Museum. This person is Mohammad Munir al-Khayyat.
44 Mentioned in a letter from Mohammad Munir al-Khayyat to Bayly Winder, July 25, 1969, preserved in the files of the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
45 Letter from University Architect Joseph Roberto to Doris Duke, April 6, 1976, DDPSL.
46 Using a computer, a 17.5 cm piece was digitally inserted into the yellow inset panel depicted in figure 9, and the resulting shape was similar to that of the red inset panels. The digital reconstruction of the panels is depicted in figure 13. When studying historical Damascus ceilings it is evident that the design scheme is based on alternating the shapes of the inset panels—small ones and longer, more rectangular ones—with each type being the same size or proportion. The central cuts through the light yellow inset panels are very uncommon.
violet in fig. 8), as evidenced by the truncated pattern.\textsuperscript{47} The panel with the central carved motif could not be cut in the middle because the entire design would be destroyed; the shortening of the edges was preferred because the alteration would be less immediately noticeable. On the other hand, the width of the ceiling had to be extended by inserting two new replacement boards adjacent to the long sides of the ceiling (marked with light blue in fig. 8). A similar extension was required for the short sides of the cornices. They were cut in the middle, and a piece of 32.5 inches (82.5 cm), comprising three of the small arched cornice decorations, was inserted in both short cornice sides (marked with red in fig. 8).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{damascus-room-ceiling.png}
\caption{Ceiling of the Damascus Room at Shangri La, with marked alterations: extensions in blue and red, shortening cuts in yellow and violet. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. (Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann, 2005.)}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{ceiling-cuts.png}
\caption{Cuts through various ceiling boards and panels resulting from the shortening of the ceiling. See the cuts marked in yellow in fig. 8. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. (Photo: David Franzen, 2013.)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{47} On other ceilings of this type with strewn flower designs, the edges do not cut the design; see, for example, figs. 35–36.
In Duke’s room, the ceiling cornice rests directly on the upper edge of the wall paneling, whereas in Damascus there is customarily a plastered and whitewashed expanse of wall between the wall paneling and the ceiling (fig. 10). This adjustment, made to compensate for the lower height of Doris Duke’s room, resulted in some additional changes. The original corner brackets (fig. 11) could not be used, and the original wall cornice, which once bordered the upper edge of the wall panels, was also excluded. The empty spaces in the corners of the ceiling cornices (from the missing corner brackets) were filled with new replacements following the curved shape of the cornice. The original brackets were used almost twenty-five years after their shipment to Shangri La, when Doris Duke created the Syrian Room in the late 1970s. Here, the pieces were installed in the four corners of the small ceiling section, above the raised seating platform (fig. 12). The cornices were made for this space by copying those from the Damascus Room. Incorporating all of this evidence, the historical layout of the original ceiling can be virtually reconstructed, as shown in figure 13.

---

48 The preserved corner squinches demonstrate that the cornice of the ceiling was used and the wall panel cornice had been excluded.
49 Letter from Asfar & Sarkis to Stuart Hawkins, June 3, 1955 (DDPSL), announcing the shipment of the four corner pieces and the related payment receipt, DDPSL.
Fig. 11: One of four corner squinches not used in Doris Duke’s Damascus Room due to the height of the ceiling. Shangri La Historical Archives. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

Fig. 12: The corner squinches were installed in the Syrian Room at Shangri La in the late 1970s. (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2013.)

Fig. 13: Virtual reconstruction of the Damascus Room ceiling before the alterations for Shangri La. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. (Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann, 2005.)
The different sizes and locations of windows and doors in the room also presented difficulties. Adaptations and new arrangements uncommon to Damascene interiors were required in order to allow for the two large windows in Duke’s guest room. The smaller window in the makai (south) wall (fig. 14) was created by using the width and interior space of a former wall closet or open niche, both common architectural elements of Damascene interiors (see figs. 15–16). The former wall closet or niche interior was removed, and a decorated framework border was added to surround the window. The framework surrounding the large and extraordinarily wide window in the Diamond Head (west) wall (fig. 17) was created with various decorated boards, including three adjacent inscription panels, an arrangement that would not be seen in historical Damascene rooms. The three historical windows of the former room in Damascus were transformed to serve as two doorways and one shelf niche, all in the mauka (north) wall (fig. 18); these are recognizable to an attentive observer due to their narrow red-painted edges, with a fine profile of three grooves (fig. 19). This profiled border is characteristic of window frames in many Damascene houses. The doors in the mauka wall—the entry door and the door to the dressing room—are actually historical window shutters, as indicated by their size and design (fig. 20). Their original function was to close windows in the lower wall zone that opened to outdoor and courtyard spaces (figs. 21–22). The usual height of doors in private homes in the West is about 6 feet, 6 ¾ inches (2 meters), while doors in Damascus are commonly 7 feet, 9/16 inches (2.30 meters) high (Damascene homes are generally taller overall). Thus, window shutters were a better fit for the existing height of the guest room’s doorways. Examples of taller original doors are also found at Shangri La; for instance, the door to the electrical room in the Large Syrian Room was once the entry door to the reception hall for guests in the so-called Quwatli house.

Fig. 14: Makai wall of the Damascus Room at Shangri La. The former large open niche or wall closet serves as a window at Shangri La. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. (Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann, 2005.)

50 The narrow fitted frame with the diamond-shaped design.
51 The left shelf niche.
52 For example, in Bayt Nizām, Bayt as-Sibā‘ī, and al-‘Azm palace.
53 Window shutters of a similar type and style are seen in the Damascus Room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and in various residences in Damascus, for example in Bayt as-Sibā‘ī.
Fig. 15: Bayt al-Hawrānīya, Damascus, showing characteristic layout of a wall with a large wall closet. Photograph by Bryan Whitney. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 16: Bayt al-Hawrānīya, Damascus, showing characteristic layout of a wall with a large open niche, called a youk. Photograph by Bryan Whitney. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 17: Diamond Head wall of the Damascus Room at Shangri La with its large window. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. (Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann, 2005.)
Fig. 18: Mauka wall of the Damascus Room at Shangri La. The two doorways and the left shelf vitrine were originally windows. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. (Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann, 2005.)

Fig. 19: Historic profile of the former window frame. (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2013.)
Fig. 20: Door to the Damascus Room at Shangri La, originally a pair of window shutters. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai`i. (Photo: David Franzen, 2003.)

Fig. 21: Window shutter in Bayt as-Sibāʿī, Damascus, raised qāʿa in the west wing of the main courtyard (the red frame was repainted during the 1980s restoration). (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2009.)

Another feature that is immediately noticeable to those familiar with historical Damascene interiors is the Koko Head (east) wall (fig. 23), where a sequence of three vertical panels is placed on each side of the central niche. Such an agglomeration of panels is completely uncharacteristic of original Damascene wall paneling, which is nearly invariably guided by a basic layout of alternating vertical panels and architectural units (niches, closets, windows, or doors). In Shangri La’s Damascus Room we find this system in the makai and mauka walls (see figs. 14, 18).

Many elements of the current installation are new replacements created by the al-Khayyat workshop (figs. 24–28), closely following the historical style. Frames with diamond-shaped decoration are additions, as are the curved boards above shelf niches and the above-mentioned additions to the ceiling. All of these amendments and additions were made to provide the historical Damascene panels with a new life in Doris Duke’s Hawai’i retreat and to accommodate them in a new architectural space.

The two pairs of adjacent panels in the main wall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Damascus Room indicate an alteration of this room. The central shelf unit differs significantly from the other shelf units of the room in style and decoration technique as well as in inscription content and scriptstyle. These differences indicate that the former central niche or wall closet was changed—either while still in use in Damascus or by the dealers and their collaborating ʿajani company prior to the sale of the room. In contrast, sequences of three adjacent panels are common in houses in Aleppo.
Fig. 24: Makai wall of the Damascus Room at Shangri La, showing new material fabricated by the al-Khayyat workshop in yellow. Drawing by Brett Headley, updated by Anke Scharrahs.

Fig. 25: Diamond Head wall of the Damascus Room at Shangri La, showing new material fabricated by the al-Khayyat workshop in yellow. Drawing by Brett Headley, updated by Anke Scharrahs.
Fig. 26: Mauka wall of the Damascus Room at Shangri La, showing new material fabricated by the al-Khayyat workshop in yellow. Drawing by Brett Headley, updated by Anke Scharrahs.

Fig. 27: Koko Head wall of the Damascus Room at Shangri La, showing new material fabricated by the al-Khayyat workshop in yellow. Drawing by Brett Headley, updated by Anke Scharrahs.
The theoretical reconstruction of the historical layout of the Damascus Room is not yet complete, as further examination of the altered sequences of the cartouches and blossom medallions adorning the wall framework is required. Comparable rooms reveal that the blossom medallions usually were placed in all locations where connections between framework boards were intended. The width or length of the cartouches was determined by the dimensions of inscription panels, wall closets, shelves, or niches. This system is partly recognizable today, but many alterations to wood joinery and redecorations of the surface impede the study.

The historical appearance of Shangri La’s interior in its first life is further clouded by darkened varnish layers, applied to refresh the colors while the room was in its original Damascene setting but now darkened due to the aging of the natural resin components. A historical living room in late-eighteenth-century Damascus would have appeared significantly lighter and brighter in tone than the room on view at Shangri La today. Indeed, it would have been brighter than most of the other interiors now in Western collections. Only a few well-preserved interiors, without heavy varnish layers, remain in Damascus as quiet witnesses to the nearly forgotten atmosphere of such interiors.\(^55\) However, the true colors of a historical Damascene room can now be experienced at Shangri La through two small windows into the past (figs. 29–30): in these areas of the room, the darkened varnish layers have been removed, revealing the original bright, brilliant colors. These two small openings into the former life of the Damascus Room, together with its current installation, provide insight into the two layers of authenticity that we can experience today in this beautiful space.

\(^{55}\) See examples of such original rooms in Scharrahs, *Damascene 'Ajami Rooms*, 194–215.
A SIBLING TO THE DAMASCUS ROOM’S PANELS

When studying a large number of Damascene interiors from the 1750s to the 1820s, it is rare that clear similarities among the details—technical as well as stylistic—can be identified. In the case of Duke’s Damascus Room, however, a clear connection can be drawn to one of the most famous houses in Damascus’s Old City. The ʿajamī interiors in Bayt as-Sibāʾī—two of them dated to 1183/1769–70 and 1187/1773–74—reveal some surprising parallels, including a particularly unusual painted blossom, which indicates that the same hand was involved in painting the flower cartouches of both interiors (figs. 31–32). The repetition of this blossom, with one hanging petal, is remarkable because the flowers painted in the rooms generally vary widely. Artists rarely painted the same bouquets; their aim was to surprise and delight visitors with new details. Guests would stay in such a reception room for many hours and would thus have time to discover new and clever details during their visits; the artist would not want to bore them with the same flower repeated many times. In each room, the entire program of decoration is planned and refined to an extraordinarily sophisticated level, which often makes identifying workshops difficult. The chosen patterns and decorations vary widely and, of course, reflect the influence and taste of the owner, who wishes to represent himself through such a room. The similarities between Duke’s interior and Bayt as-Sibāʾī are thus all the more intriguing and surprising (figs. 31–40). Another identical pattern can be found in the central panel of the Shangri La ceiling and in the ceiling of the north ʿazar of the hall in the north wing of the main courtyard in Bayt as-Sibāʾī (figs. 37–40). Given these connections, the date of production of Doris Duke’s Damascus Room can be assigned to around 1770.
Fig. 31: Damascus Room, Shangri La, detail of the makai wall. (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2013.)

Fig. 32: Bayt as-Sibāʿī, Damascus, qāʿa in the north wing, main courtyard, dated 1187/1773–74, panel on the north wall in the east ṭazar. (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2012.)

Fig. 33: Damascus Room, Shangri La, detail of the Diamond Head wall. (Photo: DDFIA, 2014.)

Fig. 34: Bayt as-Sibāʿī, Damascus, qāʿa in the north wing main courtyard, dated 1187/1773–74, panel on the north wall in the east ṭazar. (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2012.)
Fig. 35: Ceiling in Bayt as-Sibāʿī, Damascus, room in the upper floor of the east wing of the main courtyard, above the house’s entrance. (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2009.)

Fig. 36: Bayt as-Sibāʿī, Damascus, ceilings of the qāʿa in the north wing of the main courtyard, dated 1187/1773–74. Photograph by Bryan Whitney. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 37: Bayt as-Sibāʾī, Damascus, ceiling of the north ṭazar, qā’a in the north wing of the main courtyard, dated 1187/1773–1774. (Photo: Shadi Khalil, 2014.)

Fig. 38: Detail of the ceiling shown in fig. 35. (Photo: Anke Scharrahs, 2009.)

Fig. 39: Damascus Room, Shangri La, ceiling center. Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, Honolulu, Hawai‘i. (Photo: Philipp Scholz Rittermann, 2005.)

Fig. 40: Detail of fig. 37, Bayt as-Sibāʾī, Damascus, ceiling of the north ṭazar, qā’a in the north wing of the main courtyard, dated 1187 H/ AD 1773–1774. (Photo: Shadi Khalil, 2014.)