

Highlights on the Use of Acanthus as an Ornamental motif from Greco-Roman to Islamic period

Mofida El-Weshahy

Esraa Ahmed Mohamed Ellabban

Tour Guidance Department, Faculty of tourism and hotels, Suez Canal University

ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Acanthus; Greco-Roman art; Coptic art; Islamic art.

The research aims to study the acanthus plant as an ornamental motive, since the Greco roman period passing by the Coptic period till the Islamic one, by showing the various examples of the plant as a decorating unit to understand its creation and innovation, and the artistic background which influenced the craftsmen in their decorations weather in antiques or architecture, This research gives an inclusive guide for the evolution of the use of acanthus plant as a decorating motif through these different periods. The research aim to Study the use of the acanthus as a decorating motif in Greco-Roman, Coptic, and the Islamic arts; identify the religious purpose of the artist in using the acanthus plant in his works; and Study the relationship between the acanthus and the surrounding decorations used in artistic works, whether carved or painted

(JAAUTH)
Vol. 22, No. 3,
(June 2022),
PP. -.

1. Introduction

Acanthus is one of about thirty kinds of herbaceous plants belonging to the Acanthaceae family, these plants usually grow in tropical and warm areas, The highest types of diversity are usually grown in the regions of Asia and the Mediterranean Basin. The leaf of the plant has a serrated or sinuated edge and slightly involuted. There many other species of acanthus grown for ornamental purpose like acanthus balcanicus, acanthus mollis and acanthus spinosus. (Quattrocchi, 2000, p. 23).

In ancient Egypt, Acanthus was an ancient city on the River Nile's western bank. Located in the site of the current village of Dahshour, it was an old town in the Memphite Nome dedicated for a temple of Osiris. Its name was due to a sacred enclosure composed of the acanthus plants.

In the Ancient Greek-Roman art and architecture, the use of Leaf borders and scroll motifs were common. Foremost of these was the acanthus plant motif, which was one of the oldest known leaves in the Mediterranean region, it was believed to be a symbol of long life. The plant was traditionally displayed at funerary celebrations Throughout most of its lengthy history, the leaf ornament known as acanthus has been a fictitious leaf adopted in the motif for different purposes.

In early Islamic art, Plant-scroll motifs were frequently used in ornamentations, its style was like the one used by Byzantine artists. The plants used in ornaments were usually versions of the acanthus, with the different leafy forms of it, accompanied by the curling stems of vine. By the eleventh century AD, these patterns had evolved into a distinctive

Islamic type, having begun in works like as the *Mshatta* Façade in the eighth or ninth centuries AD. After words the acanthus plant ornamental decorations became simpler and more stylized.

2. The Acanthus Ornamental Motive

Acanthus was one of the most prevalent plant forms displayed in leafy ornamentation and vegetal decorations. Hellenistic art has known it since the first century AD. Then it was inherited by Roman art (Lewis. Gillian, 1986) (Fig. 1).

The embellishments in architectural structures were commonly carved on wood or stone and depict leaves from Mediterranean Acanthus spinosus varieties. with its deeply cut leaves.

The acanthus mollies and the more deeply cut Acanthus genus types, have been cited as the major model, and specific occurrences of the theme may resemble one or the other species more closely in shape. In any event, the leaves of both are somewhat varied in shape (Fig. 2).

The relationship between acanthus ornamental leaves and scrolls and the shapes and varieties of acanthus plants has long been a source of debate. In his book *Stilfragen*, Alois Riegl argues that acanthus adornment was originally intended to be a sculptural rendition of the palmate, but that it eventually began to resemble the Acanthus genus (Riegl, 1992).

2.1 Acanthus in Greco Roman Period:

In the second century BC, the acanthus was a clear reference for life emerging from the grave. It was not intended to be a resample of resurrection in Christian sense, but in a sense that life is cyclical. In the fifth century BC, the use of acanthus started by a Greek artist who carved elegant leaves on the top of a column using acanthus leaves in its decoration, since that time, this design became common as the Corinthian style of column decoration (1996، جيرة،؛ 1980، علام).

Acanthus was commonly utilized in Ancient Greek architecture, especially in the capitals of Corinthian columns, as well as friezes, dentils, and other decorative elements. The Temple of Apollo in Arcadia, c. 450–420 BC pears the oldest example of Corinthian column, in a style that was employed sparingly in Greece before the introduction of Roman era (Fig. 3) (Strong, 1960).

The use of acanthus in decorating the capitals was revived in the Romanesque architecture. After centuries without decorating capitals, Curling acanthus-type leaves can be found in the borders and decorated initial letters of illuminated manuscripts, as well as in woven silk textiles in combination with palmettos. In the Renaissance, classical models acanthus continued in the same line of decoration, and it was greatly recognized in the decorations (2010، نورالدين).

The Romans developed the order with the curled leafy ends, It was their preferred method in constructing huge structures, using their own innovation of the Composite, which first appeared during Augustus' reign; who was the founder of the Roman Principate and considered the first Emperor, ruling over the Roman Empire From 27 BC to 14 AD. Acanthus decoration continued its Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic

architecture all make extensive use of it. It was revived during the Renaissance epoch and is still in use today. (طالو، 2000).

Corinthian capitals were one of the favorite styles in the architecture of the Greco roman period in Egypt (عزیز، 1995، ص 19؛ نور الدين، 2010، ص 149)، it was used in a single or composite forms, formed from Acanthus, Papyrus, lotus flowers, Palmetto Scrolls and vine leaves (نور الدين، 2010؛ فرج الله، 2015)، like that in the Philae temple in Aswan (Plate 1) and that in the catacombs of Kom al-Shoqafa (Plate 2) (Hölbl, 2004).

In Philae temple a very unique scene was found to the left of the entrance for goddess Isis standing protecting Osiris with her wings, while the king Ptolemy III is burning incense for her, below them a high relief curving for the acanthus flower (Plate 3) (فرج الله، 2015).

2.2 Acanthus in Coptic & Byzantine Period:

Egypt was under a roman invasion, in which the Coptic artist had to hide the religious purpose of his work (Gabra, 1993, pp. 8, 19, 20).

The beginning of the Coptic art was from the first century AD (صليبي، 1999، ص 11)، but the true start was since the third century AD, where the Bible was translated to the Coptic language (نور الدين، شهاب الدين، 2008، ص 27).

The Coptic art was the first art to have the popular character rather than the royal one used before, it did not have a political orientation but only a religious one, it was highly affected by the ancient Egyptian art and its common units, in addition to the Greco-Roman one (روتشو فسكايا، 2000، ص ص 11-17).

The artist used only what was appropriate to his nature. Some of the units were elaborated and modified other ones, like the acanthus which was widely used in this art and shows the effect of the Greco roman art on the Coptic one (Plates 4, 5)، (لويس، 1994، ص ص 24، 25، 122).

The thorny leaves were used to signify agony, sin, and retribution in Christianity. In Mediterranean cultures, acanthus was thought to represent immortality. Some of the most complex and elaborate acanthus design may be seen in Byzantine architecture's most notable structures. where the leaves are drilled, undercut, and spread out over a large scale of decoration (الغامدى، 2004). This theme was also used in mediaeval art, especially in sculpture and wood carving, as well as friezes. (Plates 6, 7, 8, 9)، (قادوس، 117، 118، ص ص 2002، Although it was frequently stylized and generalized, to an extent that the one doubt that the artists associated it with any specific plant. (عزیز، 1995؛ نور الدين، 2010).

2.3 Acanthus in Islamic Period:

The acanthus in the Islamic art was used as an intricate for arabesques without any religious connotations. The acanthus leaf has been an essential decorating motif in architecture and crafts since the 7th century AD. It was usually formalized, stylized and generalized, so that one doubts that the artists inspired it from any particular plant (شافعي، 1952، ص 152؛ غالب، 1988، ص 35)، almost all the capitals of the columns in architecture bears an acanthus decoration, mostly due to the reuse of old columns from Christian constructions, but we can't recognize or state accurately the actual dynasty of

constructing the column as it was not mentioned in the sources or *waqf* of the Islamic buildings.

In the Umayyad era the use of acanthus in decorations was generalized and sometimes interlacing with vine leaves and palmetto scrolls to an extent that we sometimes can't recognize each one from the other. (Plate 10) (كوتل، 1966، ص 26) .

The Dome of Rock (691 AD), al-Aqsa Mosque (709 AD), and Umayyad Mosque (709 AD) are among the oldest surviving structures in the Muslim world of architecture. They are embellished with realistic floral and vegetal themes, mostly inspired from the arts of Sassanid and Byzantine culture (Plate 11) (Blair, 1988, p. 28; Flood, 2001).

The Abbasid art was characterized by its vegetal ornamental designs. it was usually geometric and repetitive, featuring swirls, lines, and shapes, and much abstracted than before, the decorations bear a clear examples of Byzantine acanthus leaves, (Plate 12) (Khoury, 1996).

In the Tulunid era, which was brought to Egypt by Ahmed bin Tulune 868 AD, the vegetal ornaments generally were highly influenced by the Abbasid style of Samarra, it was widely found in the stucco decorations of Ahmed bin Tulune Mosque in Cairo (1989 احمد،) (Plate 13).

During Fatimid Egypt, the samara style continued to be used like the decorations of Al-Aqmar Mosque and that of al-Šāliḥ Tala'i' (Plate 14), in which the Coptic craftsmen who worked in the constructions used many motifs from the Hellenistic tradition (ديماند،) (1947).

The Ayyubid art was a mixture of the Fatimid traditions and the Seljuk effects which was common in that time, the vegetal ornaments were depicted in different levels of curving (Plate 15). The Ayyubid art of stucco vegetal ornaments seemed to have taken another approach. It became more delicate in its appearance and more complex like that of the dome of *Imam al-Shafi'i*.

The early *Baharī* mamluk period (1250–1382 AD) was influenced by Seljuk ways of developing vegetal decoration, which had reached Egypt by the mid-13th century AD., it was found in different monuments like the mosque of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars 1267 AD in which the decorations of the entrance lentil bear acanthus in lozenges and the columns were decorated with curved acanthus leaves (Plate 16)(Yeomans, 2006).

Acanthus was found in the capitals of columns and decorations of many constructions like the *Madrasa* of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun (1303 AD) which was designed by Persian artistes, it was found in the capitals of the columns of the *Qibla* wall which was very remarkable for having three different styles of acanthus leaves (Plate 17) and stucco decorations of the *mihrab* (Plate 18)(D'Avannes, 2008).

Mamlukes generally followed their predecessor's styles, their acanthus embellishments were further enhanced by offset leaf blade curves and smaller leaves. Floral ornaments remained vintage during the early *Burjī* Mamluk (1382–1517). Floral motifs in architectural ornamentation became the vogue from the middle of the fifteenth century onwards, especially during Sultan Qaytbay's reign, intertwined vegetal and geometrical

pattern became a common feature during the late Mamluk art in Egypt (Plate 19) (Abdullhai and Embi, 2015). The use of floral patterns decreased with time, and the most remarkable monument in terms of floral embellishments in late *Bahrī* Mamluk architecture is the magnificent Sultan Hassan Mosque (1363 AD).

In the Ottoman era, Floral ornaments were either designed by Persian artists or developed under their guidance. Ottomans not only introduced a new level of naturalism and precision to floral design in Islamic ornamental motifs, but they also enhanced it by introducing new types like as the Tulip and Hyacinth to pre-existing floral decorations including lotus, lily, peony, chrysanthemum, and carnation. During late 16th century protruding cornices formed of acanthus leaves replaced the Islamic *muqarnas* in some mosques, palaces and *sabīls* (Plate 20) (Abouseif and Vernoit, 2005).

3. Conclusion

- The study showed the symbolic purpose in using the acanthus leaves and scrolls from Greco roman, Coptic, and Islamic periods.
- A long-running debate has raged about the relationship between acanthus decoration and the acanthus plant.
- The acanthus ornament started out as a sculptural representation of palmettos, only later it started to resemble Acanthus different vegetal types.
- The study showed the elaboration of the use of acanthus in decoration from Greco roman to Islamic art proves the influence of the successive civilizations on each other.
- In the Islamic art the acanthus decoration was abstracted from its original form.

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5. List of Figures & Plates

5.1 Figures

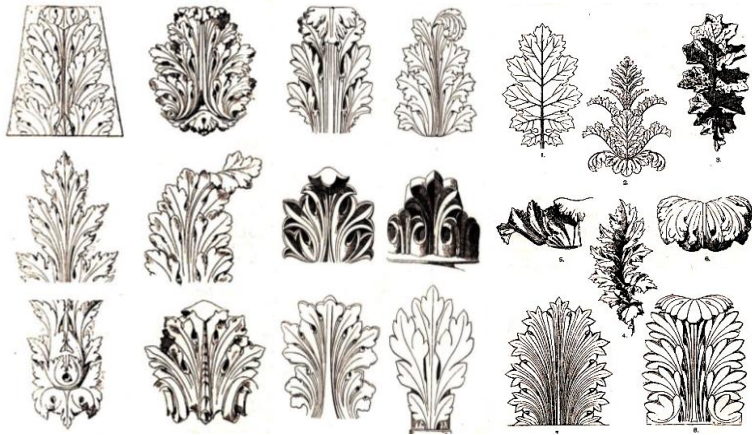


Fig.1. General shapes of acanthus leaves
Meyer, (1920), pp. 36-38.

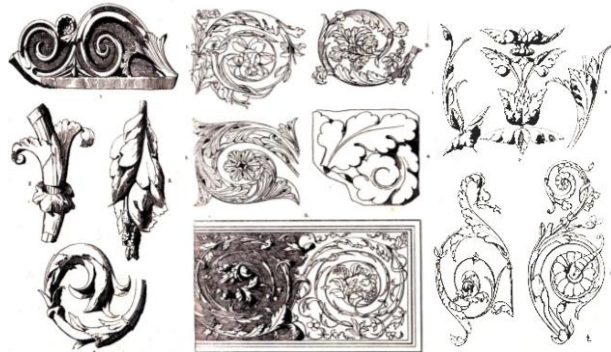


Fig.2. General shapes of acanthus Scrolls
Meyer, (1920), pp. 40-42.

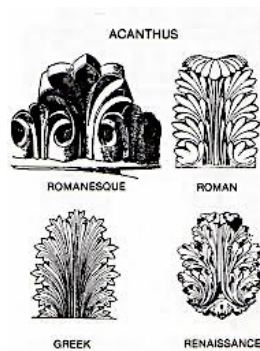


Fig.3. Styles of acanthus leaves in decoration
زينهم، (2014)، ص 192.

5.2 Plates

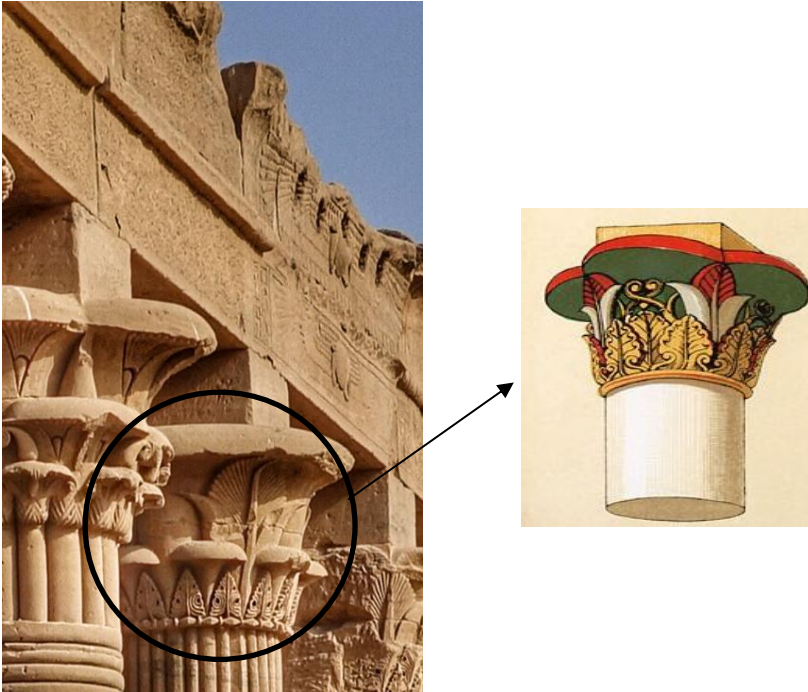


Plate.1. The capital is in the Greco-Egyptian temple of Philae, but it dates to the Roman period. The Papyrus in two phases of growth, with the Acanthus leaf and Honeysuckle tendrils, is particularly noteworthy for combining Egyptian and Greek characteristics.

Owen, Jones (1868), *The Grammar of Ornament*, Bernard Quaritch, London.



Plate.2. The catacombs of kom al-Shokafa, with composite capitals bearing a decoration of acanthus leaves with protruding and curling ends.

(Captured by the researcher)



Plate.3. A unique scene in Philae temple was found to the left of the entrance for goddess Isis standing protecting Osiris with her wings, while the king Ptolemy III is burning incense for her, below them a high relief curving for the acanthus flower.

فرج الله، 2015، شكل 72.



Plate.4. A composite limestone Corinthian capital, from Bawit, preserved in the Coptic Museum no. 7179, with abstracted acanthus leaves and branches bearing a green color.

جبرة، جودت (1996)، المتحف القبطي وكنائس القاهرة القديمة، القاهرة، ص 61.



Plate.5. A composite capital of a column from the hall of Bawit in the Coptic Museum, topped by the cross between two olive branches, below it three rows of acanthus cluster with curling ends.

(Atallah, p. 83)



Plate.6. A limestone frieze from the intermediate period, depicted in high relief and influenced by the ancient Egyptian art, especially the top which resample the sun disk of the god R^C between two acanthus leaves, below it the cross, symbol of Jesus surrounded by the Ankh sign. the bottom is filled by a boat sailing in the eternal horizon.

Atalla. Nabil Selim, (1990), Coptic Art / L' art Copte, Vol II, Sculpture. Architecture, Cairo, p. 70.



Plate.7. Fragment of a byzantine church dating to the fourth century in the open courtyard of Dandara temple, with a frieze of wavy acanthus leaves.

علام، 1980، ص 108، شكل 96.



Plate. 8. A wooden panel of a wooden box, from the Coptic Museum no. 10519, Dates to the sixth or the seventh era, the scene depicts a lion preying on a deer, surrounded by scrolling acanthus leaves and branches.

Gabra. G., Krauss, Marianne, *The Illustrated Guide to the Coptic Museum and Churches of Old Cairo*, 2008, no.98, p.180; Gabra. G, *The Coptic Art*, 1993, no. 43, p. 99.



Plate.9. A shell-carved horizontal stone beam above a door. On each side of the shell, four branches are turned upward. Acanthus leaves, a species of prickly herb, are used as ornaments in the middle.

http://www.eternalegypt.org/EternalEgyptWebsiteWeb/HomeServlet?page.refresh=Y&element_id=50036&ee_website_action_key=action.display.element&module_id=&story_id=&ee_messages=0001.flashrequired.text&language_id=3&new_language_id=1,

accessed in 1/7/2020



Plate.10. Bronze engraved ewer of Marwan II ibn Muhammad, 2nd AH/ 8th AD century, Umayyad era, preserved in the Museum of Islamic Arts, the neck is characterized by its open work which ends with a decorative design in the form of an acanthus leaf, depicted in a straight form.

(Captured by the researcher, MIA no.9281; Ali, (1999), pl. 17.)



Plate.11. An ivory panel Museum of Islamic arts, 7th-8th century, Umayyad era. A vine scroll emerging from a vase at the bottom with vine leaves and acanthus scrolls.

(Captured by the researcher, MIA)



Plate.12. Glass goblet with lustre painted ornamentation, dated between 136 and 137 AH/ 753 and 755 AD, it is perhaps the oldest piece of lustre painted glass in the Moslem World., in the name of the ‘Abd al-Şamad bn ‘Ali, who died in 185 AH/801-802 AD. He was the most honored by the caliphs of the Abbasid period, and the brother of Şālih ibn ‘Ali, Simple acanthus leaves are repeated in a row on its body inside a heart shape.

(MIA no. 23284, <https://www.miaegypt.org/en-us/museum/home/gallery-item-details/glass?product=vessel>, accessed in 15/6/2021)



Plate.13. Mosque of Ahmed ibn Tulune 879 AD, with stucco decorations on the columns of the open court of interlaced spiral acanthus stems sculptured in relief.

(Captured by the researcher)



Plate.14. Stucco arched window from the mosque of al-Şāliḥ Tala'ī, decorated by quoted Quran verses from *sourat al-Tawba*, surrounded by interlaced and curled acanthus leaves.

(Captured by the researcher, MIA no. 2388)



Plate.15. An incense burner dating back to the Ayyubid era, with curved decorations of acanthus leaves under a green glaze painting.
(Captured by the researcher, MIA no. 16163)



Plate.16. *Madrassa* of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars, 1362-1363 AD, the entrance arch bears a band decorated by interlaced acanthus leaves.
(Captured by the researcher, Monument no. 37)



Byzantine



Roman



Renaissance

Plate.17. columns from the Qibla wall of al-Nasir Mohamed Ibn Qalawūn *Madrassa* 703AH/ 1303 AD, shows three different styles of acanthus leaf decoration dating to different periods the Roman, byzantine, and Renaissance, these capitals did not belong to the Islamic art and probably reused from earlier Greco-Roman and Coptic constructions.

(Captured by the researcher, Monument no.44)



Plate.18. The Complex of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawūn, the acanthus was highly curved in the molds of the *mihrab*.

(Captured by the researcher)



Plate.19. Marble medallion from the *madrasa* of Sirghatmish al-Nasiri dating to 757 AH/ 1356 AD, with swirling acanthus leaves in the inside the middle circles and the frame, this object has been selected to be the main logo of the MIA.

(Captured by the researcher, MIA no. 2788)



Plate.20. Sabīl of Mohamed 'Aly dating to the Ottoman era 1236 A.H/ 1820 AD, decorated by sharp and highly curved protruding acanthus leaves from the renaissance style of it.

(Captured by the researcher, Monument no.401)

أضواء على استخدام نبات الأكانتس كعنصر زخرفي من العصر اليوناني الروماني حتى العصر الإسلامي

إسراء احمد محمد اللبان

مفيدة الوشاحي

قسم الإرشاد السياحي، كلية السياحة والفنادق، جامعة قناة السويس

المخلص	معلومات المقالة
<p>يعتبر نبات الأكانتس من النباتات الإغريقية التي استخدمت في الفن الهيلينستي في مصر القديمة اعتباراً من القرن الثالث الميلادي، خاصة في العمارة والمدن والعملات الإغريقية، واعتبر من النباتات التي تمثل الانتصار في الديانة الإغريقية القديمة ومن ثم ظهر في الفن القبطي لسهولة رسمه ونقشه فضلاً عن الغرض الديني للفنان القبطي من هذا الفن، وبالتبعية انتقلت الي الفنون الإسلامية في مراحلها وعصورها المختلفة. يهدف البحث إلى دراسة استخدام زهرة ونبات الأكانتس في الفن اليوناني الروماني، القبطي والإسلامي، للتعرف على الغرض الديني للفنان من استخدام الأكانتس في مختلف تلك العصور، ودراسة العلاقة بين هذه الزهرة وما حولها من نقوش مستخدمة في الأعمال الفنية سواء منحوتة أو مرسومة.</p>	<p>الكلمات المفتاحية نبات الأكانتس؛ الفن اليوناني الروماني؛ الفن القبطي؛ الفن الإسلامي.</p> <p>(JAAUTH) المجلد 22، العدد 3، (يونيو 2022)، ص -.</p>