Development of Fine Arts under Abbasids

The Arabs were famous for art and architecture in a similar way as they were famous for their poetry. During the early period of Abbasids art, architecture and painting progressed somewhat slowly.

Baghdad, the capital of Abbasids, was the centre of administration and military organisation and the centre of culture, art and architecture. Abu Ja'far al-Mansur constructed an imperial palace known as Palace of Eternity (Qasr al-Khuld) having golden gate (Bab al-Dhahab). The Rusafah Palace, built for al-Mahdi, the palaces of the Barmakids, the palace of the Plicades (al-Thurayya), on which al-Mu'tadid spent 400,000 dinars and many others like them. These got destroyed due to the civil war between al-Amin and al-Ma'mun and also by the invasion of Halagu in 1258. Today it is very much difficult even to identify sites of most of these palaces.

Al-Mutawakkil, son of al-Mu'tasim was the builder of a great Masjid. It costed him 700,000 dinars, and was rectangular and its architecture suggests that some sort of Indian influence was there. Outside, the great Masjid of Samarra was a tower (see fig 1 at the end). A distinctive type of Persian architecture was developed, having elliptical domes, semicircular arches, spiral towers, glazed wall tiles and metal covered roofs. This type of art and architecture became one of the most important factors in the development of the art of ‘Abbasids. Masajid were constructed throughout the length and breadth of the empire. Their structures outstanding and and their design heart touching. Each town throughout the whole empire had a beautiful constructed Masjid of its own.

It should be kept in mind that there was opposition from the side of theologians to all forms of representational art and still there are lot of examples, which suggest that it never stopped them in developing and refining it. We come to know that al-Mansur had set upon the dome of his place the figure of a horseman serving as a weather cock. The caliph al-Amin had pleasure boats fashioned like eagles, lions, and dolphins on the Tigris. Al-Mustasim, the builder of Samarra had the walls of his palace tinted and adorned with frescoes of female figures and hunting scenes. Caliph Al-Mutawakkil, under whom the capital (Samarra) reached its zenith, employed Byzantine painters for mural decoration of his palace and these frescoes represented court scenes. Al-Muqtadir in his palace had a gold and silver tree with eighteen branches planted...
in a huge tank. On either side of the tank were statues of fifteen horsemen, dressed in brocade and armed with lances, seeming that they are moving in a combat.

The art of calligraphy were developed in the second or third Muslim century and within a brief period became the most highly prized art. Good handwriting came to be regarded as a gift of Allah. Calligraphy was the most refined art of all the arts that the Muslims developed and cultivated. It developed as a decorative art and through it; Muslims sought a way for aesthetic expression. A great degree of dignity and admiration was given to a calligrapher and had a position far above than a painter. One of the famous and principal calligraphists was ‘Ali bin ‘Ubaydah al-Rayhani, patronized by al-Ma’mun and flourished under him. He invented a new style of calligraphy known as *Rayhani script*. ‘Abbasid wazir, Ibn Muqlah, whose hand was cut off under the orders of caliph al-Radi, yet he was able to write stylishly and gracefully with his left hand and also by attaching a pen to the stump of his right one. Another well-known calligraphist, Ibn al-Bawwab, son of a porter of the audience chamber was the inventor of ‘*Muhqqaq Style*’. It was an improved and modified form of *Rayhani Script*. The last distinctive and famous calligraphist and penman of the ‘Abbasid period was Yaqt al-Musta’simi, the court calligraphist of the last ‘Abbasid caliph al- Musta’simi and from his name *Yaquti Style* derives its designation. Calligraphy seems to be the only Arab art that has today Christian and Muslim representatives in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, etc whose productions shine in elegance and beauty than any masterpieces that the ancient ever produced.

In Damascus, that legists disapproval and condemnation of music was very effective, but in Baghdad situation was very different. ‘Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdi was a patron of music and patronized Siyat of Makkah, who was one of the famous musicians and whose song warmed the chilled more than a hot bath. His student was Ibrahim al-Mawsili who after his master became head and patriarch of classical music. While very young, Ibrahim was kidnapped outside al-Mawsil and during detention learned some of the brigands’ songs.

The refined, purified and overwhelming court of Harun al-Rashid gave patronage to music and songs, like science and art, up to that limit where it became a centre of galaxy of musical stars. Salaried musicians in combination with men and women prospered in it, supplied, and provided the theme for numberless fantastic anecdotes immortalized in the pages of the *Aghani, Fihrist, Nihaiyah* and others. Under caliph’s patronage, about two thousand singers took
part in a musical festival. Al-Amin in a similar manner held night entertainment in which the staff of the palace, both male and female, danced until dawn.

Al-Ma’mun and al-Mutawakkil had a very close companion Ishaq Ibn- Ibrahim al-Mawsili, who was dean of the musicians of his age. After his father, Ishaq personified the spirit of classical Arabic music. He claimed, like his father and Ziryab, that it was Jinn who prompted his melodies. These people were singers, musicians, composers, poets and scholars. Under them stood the instrumentalist (*darib*), among whom the lute was generally favoured, inferior performers used the voil (*rabab*). Then came the turn of girls, who as a rule performed, but behind curtains. Such girls became an important adornment of the harem and their training developed into an important industry.

The house of the caliph in Baghdad developed many distinguished lutanists, singers and composers. Of all of them al-Mahdi, brother of Harun al-Rashid gained the maximum reputation as musician and singer. Al-Wathiq, who was the first caliph musician, used to perform on the lute and composed a hundred melodies. However, the real caliph musician was al-Mu’tamid.