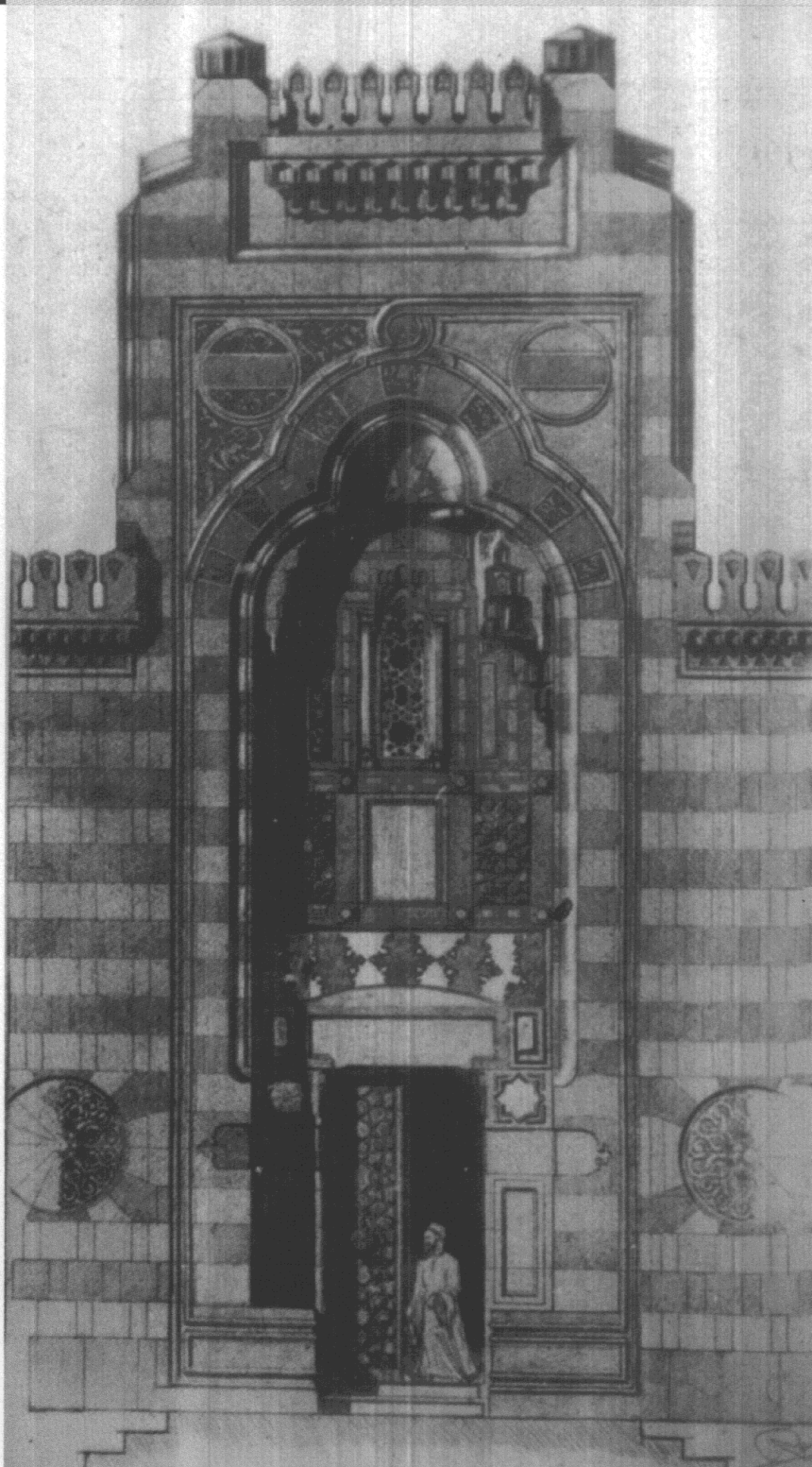


MARIO ROSSI (1897-1961) STARTED his career in Egypt in 1921, as one of the many Italian architects who enriched Egyptian architecture with their neo-Renaissance, Revival, Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles. Verruci Bek, the decorator of `Abdin Palace, selected him to work as his assistant in Egypt. Rossi graduated from the Academia di Belle Arti in Rome in 1917. He also assisted on a freelance basis, some well-known architects, such as Antoine Lasciac, while working in the Royal Palace during the reigns of King Fuad and King Faruk.

From 1921 to 1929, Rossi designed and participated in various projects patronised by the Royal Palace, such as the redecoration of Ras al-Tin Palace in Alexandria; the design of al-Haramlik Palace in al-Montazah, Alexandria, and the design of both the northern and southern tea-kiosks in `Abdin Palace in Cairo. Away from the Palace, Islamic monuments fascinated him, many of which he analysed, sketched and photographed in Cairo. Rossi's most significant contribution was his work for the Awqaf, the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments.

In 1929 the Awqaf announced an international architectural competition to fill the position of chief architect of the Awqaf. The subject of the competition was a portal in the Mamluk style for the extension of the Awqaf building in Bab al-Luq. About 37 architects from the different countries of Dar al-Islam, Islamic countries, from India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Morocco, and even Spain registered for the competition. Rossi faced two challenges. He was from a non-Islamic architectural background and Verruci Bek requested he give up his post in the Royal Palace to apply for the competition. He risked his career and resigned, in spite of his personal obligations and, with only one month to finish all the drawings for the competition. "Rossi spent long hours drawing, frequently until he lost the ability to sense his palm and fingers," recounts Mrs. Rosa Rossi, his wife.

Rossi won the competition and the post of chief architect of the Awqaf. Rossi's design for the competition shows an assured handling of form and composition although it belongs to no



Rossi's design for the Portal of the Ministry of Awqaf shows an assured handling of form and composition. Although it belongs to no particular Islamic style, it mainly relies on inspirations from Mamluk vocabulary.

The Mosque of al-Mursi was meant to be the main congregational mosque in Alexandria, accommodating the mausoleum of the most popular Muslim saint there. The design of al-Mursi, consequently, needed to be as elegant and impressive as possible.

particular Islamic style. Rossi employs various motifs and innovative elements, such as crenelations, reflecting an eclectic preference in his style. Yet, it also reflects a high degree of inspiration and the effective application of many historic architectural elements, mostly from the late Mamluk Qaytbay period.

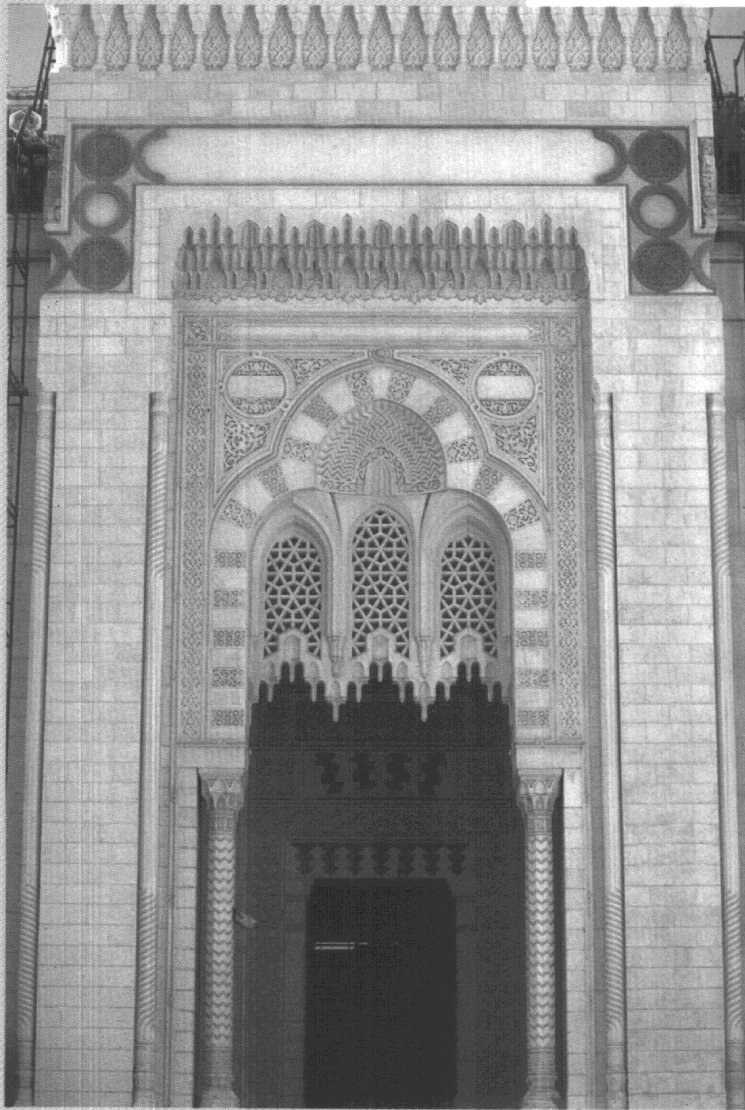
James Dickie, who extensively researched Rossi's work in Alexandria, classifies Rossi's designs at the Awqaf from 1929 to 1955 into two phases. The first is the historical phase that dominates his work during the 1930's in which he employs and mixes various elements of different Islamic monuments, giving most emphasis to the ornamentation and orders of the traditional mosque elements. In this phase, Rossi employs minarets, domes, portals and other traditional elements from Mamluk and Ottoman mosques in their original composition and proportions, as in the cases of al-Mursi and al-Tabbakh Mosques. He displays his decorative mastery using calligraphy and traditional Islamic elements, such as stalactites and blind niches in a system derived mainly from Mamluk architecture, while his underlying forms are simple and highly symmetrical, in line with the classicist principles of the Beaux Arts.

Al-Mursi Abu al-`Abbas Mosque in Alexandria was Rossi's first design as the chief architect in the Awqaf and his first challenge. Alexandria was almost a European city, exhibiting many lavishly decorated churches, but with no mosques on the same scale. This exaggerated the challenge for Rossi, since the Mosque of al-Mursi was meant to be the main congregational mosque in Alexandria and to accommodate the mausoleum of the most popular Muslim saint there. The design of al-Mursi, consequently, needed to be as elegant and impressive as possible. James Dickie described it as a "Muslim cathedral" in Alexandria. It took the Awqaf 16 years, from 1929 to 1945, to build this mosque; its construction used up the Awqaf's budget, about 140 000 L.E. During these long years of construction the work stopped several times, mostly in WW II, during which many Alexandrine citizens used the unfinished mosque as a shelter from Nazi bombing.



Rossi's design is a gigantic octagonal mosque. According to Dickie, this type of plan is uncommon in mosque architecture since the Shari'a suggests quadrangular plans. The octagonal plan is normally limited to mausoleums and commemorative buildings, such as the Dome of the Rock and Timurid tombs. These could have been the source influencing the al-Mursi mosque plan. Another source of inspiration that is much closer to Rossi's architectural background is Vitruvius' principle of the ideal temple; the Renaissance

principle of architecture, revealed by Leon Batista Alberti ca. 1450 in his book entitled Ten Books of Architecture, specifying the ideal proportions of the temple. According to this, the octagonal, ten and twelve-sided polygons are the best forms for places of worship. In 1755, this principle was reactivated by the republishing of Alberti's book. It is likely that this rule influenced Rossi when laying out the plan of al-Mursi mosque, at least in that it is a design principle for places of worship. It also matched Rossi's classicist approach to

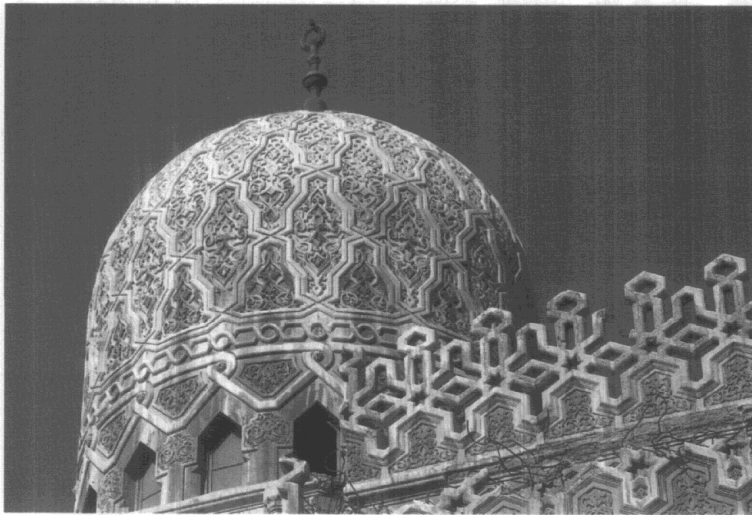


Al-Mursi has many elements that were direct copies of Mamluk or Ottoman mosque features such as the trefoil portal with dripping stalactites.

design. The section of al-Mursi reveals that the mosque also has a strong Renaissance influence in the main central double-shell dome resting on eight columns. The central dome, however, was replaced by a lantern that was common in Mamluk madrasa-type mosques.

Al-Mursi copies many elements from Mamluk or Ottoman mosques. The trefoil portal with dripping stalactites resembles the brick portals of the Ottoman mosques in Foua, Alexandria, and Rosetta, modified by adding three geometrical stucco grills, a mixture of the provincial Ottoman mosques in the northern Delta and the Cairene ones.

The art historian, Al-`Amrusi, who studied the buildings from the period of `Abbas Hilmy II, observes Al-Mursi is a rational continuation of the neo-Mamluk mosques erected at the turn of the twentieth century. He finds



The crenelations of al-Mursi are copies from the Fatimid ones used in al-Hakim Mosque. They also appear in the Ayyubid Mausoleum of al-Imam al-Shafi.

One of Rossi's first phase mosques is al-Tabbakh Mosque, built in 1933, close to `Abdin Square, Cairo.





fenestration another interesting feature in al-Mursi. Sophisticated stucco decoration reflects Rossi's understanding of Islamic ornament, which can be compared with the Andalusian influenced minaret of the Qalawun complex, on Bayn al-Qasrayn Street, Cairo, built by al-Nasir Muhammad in the early 14th century.

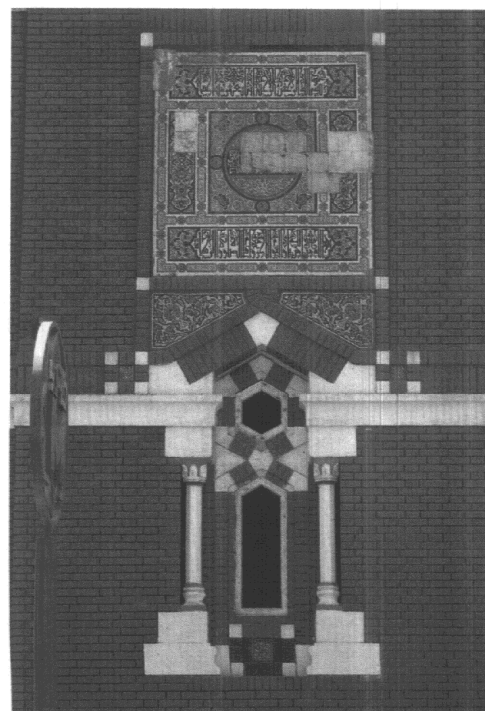
The crenelations of al-Mursi are copies of the Fatimid ones used in al-Hakim Mosque. They also appear in the Mausoleum of al-Imam al-Shaf'i built during the Ayyubid period. The minaret with its various tiers and decoration is a typical Circassian Mamluk style. Rossi varies these elements from one mosque to another, the only consistent feature being the elongated, pointed arch inspired from Fatimid examples, resembling the arch used in the 12th century al-Aqmar Mosque on al-Mu'iz Street in Cairo.

Another early example of Rossi's first phase mosques is al-Tabbakh, built in 1933, close to `Abdin Square, Cairo. According to Su`ad Mahir, it replaced a ruined 14th century mosque, which could explain Rossi's street alignment and the slightly bent entrance.

The most important design criterion of the mosque elevation was to harmonise it with the surrounding Cairo governmental buildings and the `Abdin Palace. Rossi sought to find a visual link between the mosque and its neo-classical surroundings. The al-Tabbakh Mosque design specified brick constructional and decorative material to complement the facing brickwork decorating the nearby municipality buildings. Rossi uses Persian techniques, pointed arches and tile mosaic to decorate the spandrels and the minarets. He also alternates red brick and white stone to decorate the elevation and give a Musahhar effect common in Mamluk architecture. The minaret is a direct copy of the 14th century minaret of al-Nasir Muhammad in his mosque in the Citadel. In the 1930's, Rossi also participated in restoring several royal mosques in Cairo, such as al-Rifa'i, al-Husayn, al-Fath and Muhammad `Ali Mosque in the Citadel.

The 1940's marked a dramatic period of conflicts and changes in Rossi's life. In 1941, he was captured along with many Italians by the British and kept in a camp in Fayed as a prisoner of war. He was not released until 1944. During Rossi's captivity he lost his post in the Awqaf along with his entire savings.

Rossi uses Persian techniques, pointed arches and tile mosaic, to decorate the spandrels and minarets of al-Tabbakh Mosque.





Yet, he measured up to his new circumstances and helped with engineering work in the camp. He also produced many plays and a comic magazine, full of his cartoons. He continued designing villas and mansions for his many clients while in captivity, communicating with them through correspondence with his wife. The major change in Rossi's life, however, occurred in 1946 when he converted to Islam.

After his release, Rossi rejoined al-Awqaf as a consultant, designing some of his best mosques despite technical changes. After the war, the quality of the craftsmanship in al-Awqaf declined and the craftsmen were unable to execute the densely ornamented work Rossi used in his earlier mosques. The long-adopted principles of the Beaux Arts in Egypt were in eclipse, while modernists with their functional asymmetrical architecture became more prominent. These factors led to the second phase of Rossi's work. The main characteristics of this phase were avoiding unnecessary symmetry and maintaining the traditional elements of the Mamluk mosque, although in a stylised, modified manner.

One of the early mosques of the second phase is al-Qa'id Ibrahim, in al-Raml, Alexandria, built in 1948. This mosque is a transitional example between the first and second phases. It preserves strong symmetry in its plan, but its decorative and architectural elements of modified orders are characteristic of the second phase. The mosque features a stretched minaret to establish itself as a landmark among the surrounding

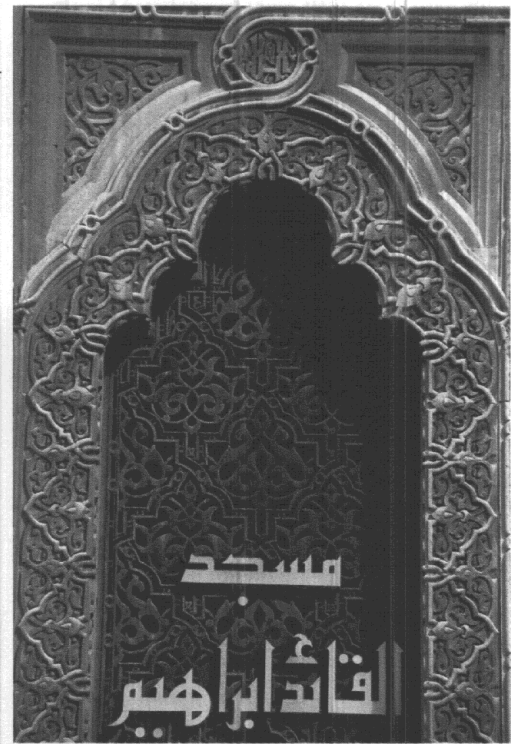


The minaret of al-Tabbakh Mosque is directly copied from the 14th century minaret of al-Nasir Muhammad Mosque in the Citadel.

The portal is a reinterpretation of the traditional Mamluk style stalactite portals.



The Mosque of Al-Qa'id Ibrahim, in al-Raml, Alexandria, built in 1948, is a transitional example, preserving strong symmetry in form, but bearing modified decorative and architectural elements characteristic of the second phase.



high-rise buildings. Rossi simplified the crenelations and ornaments, yet preserved the context of the Mamluk style. The portal is a reinterpretation of traditional stalactite portals.

Another second phase mosque, also built in 1948, is `Umar Makram at Tahrir Square, Cairo, replacing a ruined mosque known as al-Shaikh al-`Abit. It has a main praying space off a porticoed court and a combined form, a semi-circular, rectangular and squared plan. A significant feature is the corner entrance surmounted by a modified minaret.

Al-Zamalik Mosque, designed in 1953, shows a typical second phase plan. Its design significance lies in its portal and minaret. The portal resembles that of al-Sultan Hassan complex although al-Zamalik portal has stepped masonry, a modern interpretation of the traditional elaborated tiers of stalactites common in Mamluk mosques.

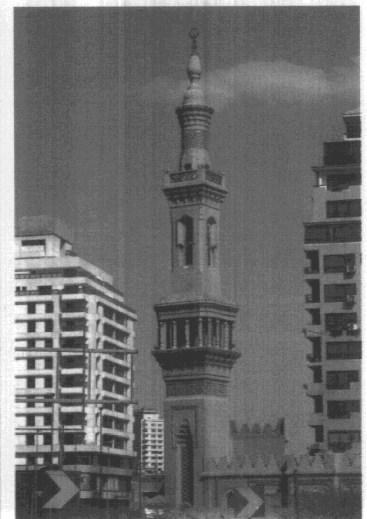
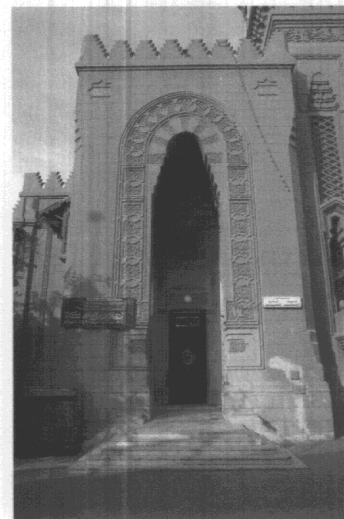
Rossi's final work is the Muhammad Kurriym Mosque, in Ras al-Tin, Alexandria, begun on the eve of the collapse of the monarchy and finished in 1953. Rossi designed the building as the royal mosque of Ras al-Tin Palace. The planned conical finial of its composite minaret and the buttressed central dome, inspired from al-Fath Mosque, the royal mosque of `Abdin Palace, were meant to give a royal character to the mosque. It was to be decorated with lavish materials. The revolution and the nearby harbor regulations forced Rossi to modify his design, using artificial stone masonry and a short minaret with a Mughal-like



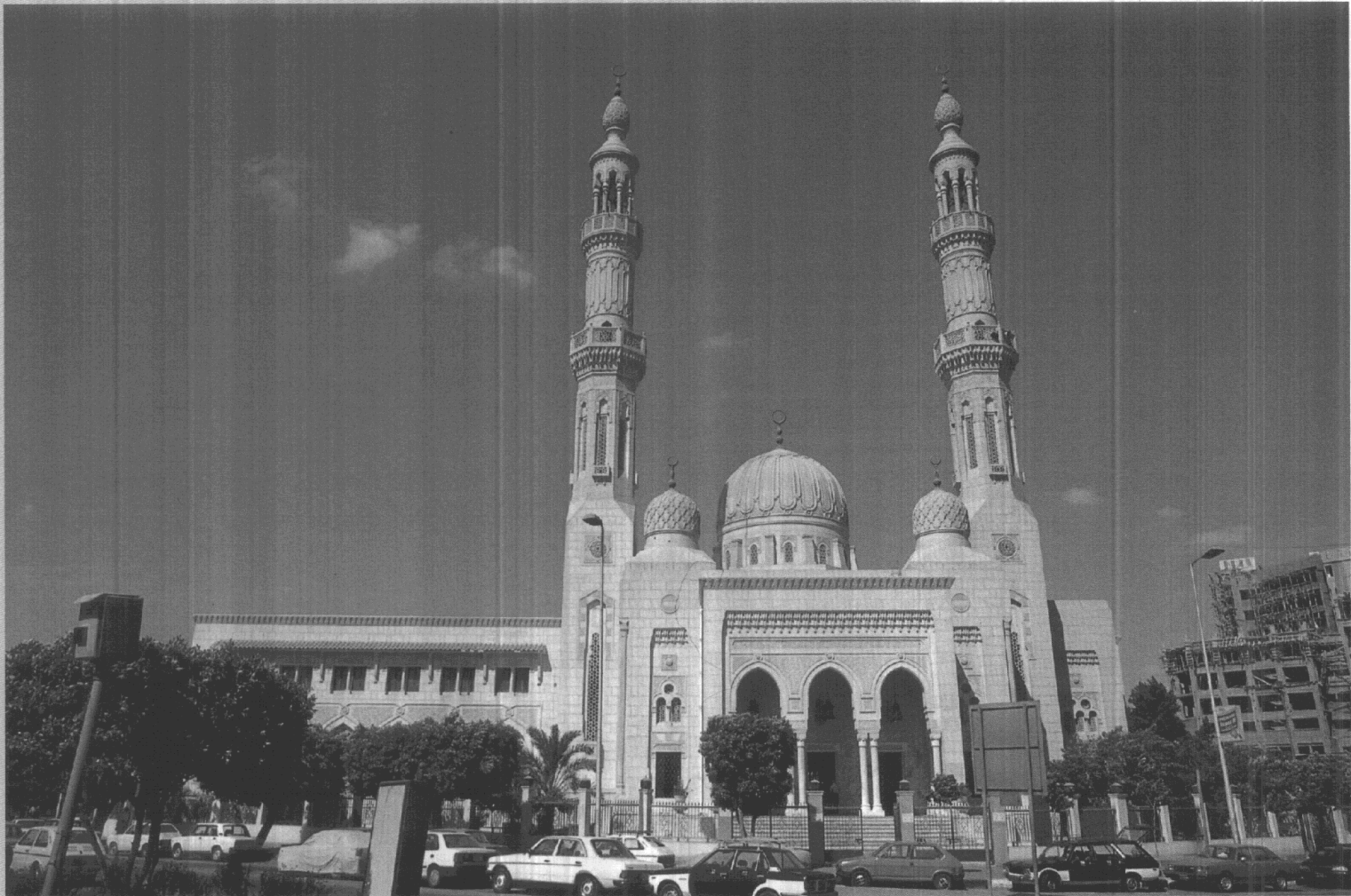
The Mosque of `Umar Makram at Tahrir square, Cairo, built in 1948.



The corner entrance is surmounted by a modified minaret, a significant feature of the `Umar Makram Mosque.



Al-Zamalik Mosque, designed in 1953. Its principal significance lies in its portal and minaret. The portal resembles that of al-Sultan Hassan complex, although al-Zamalik portal has stepped masonry, a modern interpretation of the traditional elaborated tiers of stalactites common in Mamluk mosques.



pavilion. The innovative form of this mosque, a central dome flanked by two smaller domes with a projected porticoed entrance became extremely influential in later mosque design.

"I have designed 260 mosques of which no one is like the other", said Mario Rossi. His work became an open catalogue for architects of the Awqaf, especially his student `Ali Khayrat, who later became the architect of many Awqaf prototype mosques, such as the Salah al-Din Mosque, in al-Manial, Cairo, finished in 1959. Inspired by Ras al-Tin, the only difference is to employ two typical Qaytbay-type minarets instead of Rossi's modified single minaret. Until the present time, the mosques of the Awqaf preserve this form with slight changes, employing four small domes instead of two flanking the central one

Rossi's style represents a renaissance in the Egyptian mosque, at least during the first phase of his mosque design. He sought to compromise between symmetrical, classical, Italian plans and traditional Cairene madrasa-type mosques. In his second phase, Rossi attempted a more effective expression

of Islamic architecture in the mid-twentieth century by employing traditional, Islamic, architectural elements and motifs in more simplified and modified orders to match the modern movement and changes in Egyptian society and architecture. Rossi designed his mosques to integrate with their surroundings visually, through their minarets and the finishing materials of their elevations. At the same time, he was a traditionalist who strove to find a twentieth century interpretation of Islamic architecture through his cultural background, creativity and talent.

The author thanks Dr. Mahmoud Zaqqouk the Minister of the Awqaf, Mr. Abdelhamid Said and the Engineering Office of the Awqaf for their great help. He also extends his gratitude to Mario Rossi's son, Mr. Alessandro Rossi, and his wife, Mrs. Rosa Rossi who provided primary sources in interviews conducted during February and May 1997.

Rossi's work inspired many architects. His student, Ali Khayrat later became the architect of many Awqaf prototype mosques. A clear example is Salah al-Din Mosque, in al-Manial, Cairo, finished in 1959.

أعمال ماريو روسي في الأوقاف

ماريو روسي معماري عمل على إثراء العمارة المصرية من خلال عمله أولاً في القصور الملكية من ١٩٢١. ١٩٢٩ ثم من خلال إتحاقه بالأوقاف من ١٩٢٩. ١٩٥٥. خلال هذه الفترة ساهم روسي بالكثير من الأعمال خاصة عمارة المساجد. وقد اشتهر باستخدام كثير من العناصر المستجدة على العمارة الإسلامية مما جعل النقاد يصفون أعماله بالتقليدية. من أهم أعمال روسي في مصر جامع المرسى أبو العباس والقائد إبراهيم بالأسكندرية ويظهر فيهما قدرته على تركيب عناصر من حقب مختلفة وإعادة صياغتها في قالب جديد. أما في القاهرة فأهم أعماله جامع الطباخ بمنطقة عابدين وجامع عمر مكرم بالتحرير ومسجد الزمالك بالزمالك. وأخيراً يمكن القول أن ماريو روسي نهض بالعمارة المساجدية في مصر من خلال تشكيلاته الجديدة التي ناسبت أفكار الحداثة التي طرأت على الساحة المعمارية مع البقاء على روح العمارة الإسلامية من خلال مفرداتها وعناصرها الزخرفية الإسلامية.

Photography

Francis Dzikowski, Cairo buildings
John Samples, Alexandria buildings