

The Umayyads

The Umayyad Dynasty was founded by the caliph Mu'awiya I bin Abi Sufyan in AH 41 / AD 661 and remained in power until overthrown by the Abbasids in 132 / 750. When Mu'awiya came to power, he chose Damascus as the capital of the Muslim Empire. This decision had far-reaching consequences for Umayyad art as the predominant artistic influence in Damascus at that time was classical. Elements of Sassanian and Byzantine as well as Coptic art were also influential in the development of Islamic art under Umayyad rule, thus Umayyad art is an innovative combination of various decorative styles and motifs drawn from different artistic traditions in order to provide solutions for numerous new aims. Umayyad architecture is a major witness of the dynasty, with numerous buildings still extant. Extensive municipal architectural programmes were undertaken, in addition to those constructions that were built by order of the Umayyad royal family. Both the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus appear to have been built as symbols of Umayyad power and victory, and these buildings still give an impression of the grandeur of the dynasty's architecture. In addition, the remarkable palatial buildings formerly known as 'desert castles' continue to fascinate us for the window they provide into Umayyad court life and ceremonies. These and other Umayyad buildings were extensively and lavishly decorated. Both palaces and baths were adorned with figurative floor mosaics and frescoes on the walls. Other architectural motifs included skilful stone- and stucco carvings of animals and beasts, stylised floral motifs, and diverse abstract patterns. The minor arts also flourished, and surviving examples suggest that metalwork and woodwork reached a high level of achievement. Umayyad art, with its striking and vibrant eclecticism, can be considered a continuation of Late Antique art, for when the Abbasid Dynasty came to power so began a new phase in the development of Islamic art.



Dome of the Rock
Hegira 72 / AD 691
Umayyad
Jerusalem



Bronze coin (fils)
Undated, about hegira 77 / AD
696–7
Umayyad
Jordan National Bank Numismatic
Museum
Amman, Jordan



Column capital
Hegira 101–5 / AD 720–24
Umayyad
Jordan Archaeological Museum
Amman, Jordan