

From its inception in thirteenth-century Cairo, the Mamluk dynasty (1250-1517) distinguished itself from other Islamic polities in its engagement in Mediterranean politics. The rulers were slaves from the Caucasus and Central Asia, denigrated as unrefined parvenus in comparison to the culturally sophisticated and powerful regimes to the East, and initially viewed with suspicion as a hostile Muslim adversary by western Europeans. The location of Mamluk territories at a cultural crossroads, in between east and west, has contributed to the marginalization of the Mamluks as a topic of scholarly research. The aim of this presentation is to reintegrate the Mamluks into a broader historical and art historical discourse by emphasizing their role in Mediterranean politics, economics, and culture. Instead of looking to the east and the visual culture of Islamic civilization, I will argue that the Mamluk dynasty turned instead to the west and the Mediterranean context of its empire to create a distinctive aesthetic characterized by the use of *spolia* (the reuse of objects and materials from past and foreign cultures), the staging of spectacle, and active participation in a shared culture of objects in the Mediterranean. This western orientation allowed the Mamluks to distinguish themselves from rival Islamic territories with whom they vied for cultural and political predominance. The circulation of ideas, artisans, artistic techniques, and visual forms around the sea provided this new and unproven dynasty with a visual vocabulary with which to define its artistic production and its role in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern politics.