

The "Gate of Heaven" (Sha'ar Hashamayim) Synagogue in Cairo (1898-1905): On the Contextualization of Jewish Communal Architecture

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The *Sha'ar Hashamayim* synagogue (1898-1905) was built in the prestigious new quarter *Ismailiyya* by the Jewish architect Maurice Cattai, who had been educated in Paris and the Austro-Hungarian Eduard Matasek, with the support of the Sephardi Jewish elite of Cairo.

Like many other buildings in the city's affluent quarters, the synagogue is decorated in an eclectic style, introduced from Europe by foreign architects. Its façade, pillar capitals and the two obelisks standing in front of the building allude to a neo-Pharaonic style. The Hebrew inscriptions, the Stars of David and the Tablets of the Law indicate the Jewish identity of its worshippers.

The present article focuses on the confluence of three elements: First, the urban European-architectural narrative of Cairo during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries; second, a specific elite, a wealthy Sephardi Jewish group, some of whom had been "local" from time immemorial, and others who were emigrants and who propelled Egypt's economic and intellectual dynamic forward, (like the Cattai family); and the third element relates to the construction of the *Sha'ar Hashamayim* synagogue. Beyond the synagogue's eclectic decoration, which can be explained within the historical-colonialist-economic context of Cairo during that period, the article explores whether within the framework of the architectural and visual elements, and in the choice of the decoration's subjects – both exterior and interior – there is any evidence or indication of a Jewish political-national conception, or any specific identity. To what extent did the Cairo community of elite, wealthy and intellectual Jews perceive themselves as belonging to the Egyptian society and, at the same time, what were the forces that molded their unique Jewish cultural identity?