

STEALING FROM THE SARACENS How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe by Diana Darke

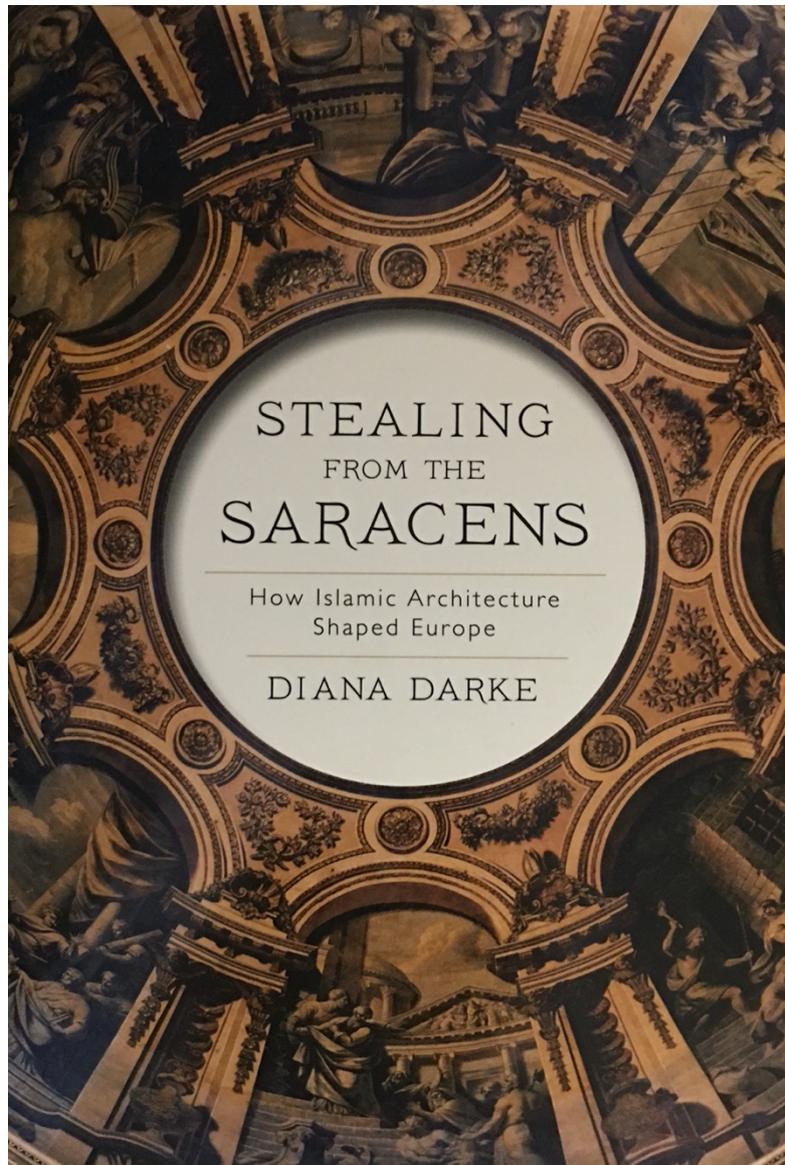
Reviewed by Rosemary Hart



Rosemary Hart is a retired city lawyer, a charity trustee and a lifetime Anglican. A regular church goer and a lover of the Book of Common Prayer and Choral Evensong, she lives in London and Dorset.

In this fascinating book Diana Darke explores the influence that Arabic and then later Islamic buildings have had on the development of the great gothic style churches, cathedrals and other buildings of Europe. Secular buildings in the gothic style which are also considered include The Houses of Parliament in Westminster and the Doges Palace in Venice. Starting first with the earliest Christian churches in the now ruined dead or forgotten cities of the Idlib province of Syria through to more familiar structures of Andalusia, Jerusalem and Istanbul she builds up the connections and stories of how Christians from Europe encountered and brought back home the ideas and forms of these magnificent buildings.

It is a revelation to learn of the early churches of Byzantine Christianity in Syria, which date from the 1st to 7th centuries AD with their triple arches, cornices, columns, clerestory windows, mosaics and stained glass windows. These ruined ancient buildings have been recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site since June 2011 but are now, sadly, in an area of conflict that cannot be visited. Diana Darke as an Arabist and cultural expert who has lived and worked in the Middle East for over thirty years has been able to visit them many times from the 1970s until her last visit in 2010. Her familiarity with them enables her to draw the parallels that she does so powerfully in this book.



Those who have visited the Islamic sites and buildings Darke refers to in Sevilla, Granada, Cordoba, Toledo and Istanbul will have been struck by their magnificent beauty but perhaps only seen them as exotic and “other”. However, she is able to demonstrate how our much-loved Anglican gothic churches have taken so many of their elements from these earlier buildings.

Architectural features that are the hall mark of our beautiful historic churches, from pointed arches, delicate tracery, ribbed vaulting, trefoil arches, double arcades, apses, delicate finials, rose windows to domes and towers can be traced back to their roots in Saracen architecture.

Diana Darke takes us through the various opportunities that Europeans had to encounter Saracen architecture over the centuries. This included the Holy Land Crusades from 1095 to 1492, the Islamic occupation of Spain, Sicily and Turkey as well as contact through the great trading routes across Europe that passed through Venice. She considers also the popularity of the Grand Tours of Europe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, which were formative in developing an understanding of different and novel architectural styles. The huge army of unknown builders of our ancient cathedrals were early users of Saracen techniques that were later openly acknowledged by architects such as Christopher Wren, whose dome in St Paul's Cathedral copied Saracen vaulting techniques as "the best". Other even later 20th century work is also famously evident in Gaudi's great unfinished Sagrada Família in Barcelona.

'Stealing from the Saracens' is evident architecturally everywhere not least with the influential Gothic style of building that has come to be almost synonymous with Christianity itself. Frequently replicated in Anglican churches and cathedrals across the world from New Zealand to New York, many will be surprised that it has grown out of styles and forms first developed in the Arabic world of Islam.

This is a beautifully written and well-illustrated book. The 151 photographs and diagrams with footnotes, glossary, bibliography and index, tell the story well. Destined not for the coffee table but rather as a consulted handbook, it will appeal equally to the scholar as to a casual reader.

Rosemary Hart

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