



THE TRADITIONAL METHOD AND TECHNIQUES OF
'AJAMI HANDMADE ART FROM A SYRIAN MASTER
ARTISAN

BY

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ABSTRACT

Technique of painted wood panelling in the art and craft of 'Ajami, has been popularly practiced in the seventeenth to the late of eighteenth century especially during the Ottoman period. 'Ajami is used to describe the technique of painted wooden wall panel as well as the decorated interior as a whole. The 'Ajami decoration became very prominent throughout the Ottoman empire after the decline of tile production and rose to a sophisticated level of art in Syria. 'Ajami decoration is almost universal in the interior adornment of Syrian houses and palaces, especially during the late eighteenth century. Nowadays, it can be seen that this beautiful decorative painting technique is now-forgotten by modern generation and would gradually become one of extinct arts in Syria. This deep-rooted art has a rich history in the country, however, the production technique of 'Ajami has not been fully embraced and recorded in the past studies. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the traditional method and techniques of making 'Ajami with emphasis on the method and techniques used by Syrian master artisan from Damascus. The first objective of the study is to identify and document the traditional method of 'Ajami production. The second objective of this study is to determine the materials and techniques which are used for making the 'Ajami as painted wood panelling and decorations. The third objective of the study is to propose a manual based on traditional 'Ajami production for interior decorations. A Syrian master artisan who is actively involved in the craft industry, namely Abdulraouf Baydoun was selected for face-to-face interview. His works and opinions that served as inferential evidences were obtained through the semi-structured interviews that were conducted within an informal environment including his workshops and galleries. The interview focused on the aspect of fabrication of 'Ajami with particular emphasis on method and technique in relation to the visual attributes of the 'Ajami components and the traditional techniques used. Field observation and photographic documentation of his works were necessary measures to complement the interview. Hence, examination of the works produced by the artisan which exemplifies his distinctive craftsmanship was also conducted in this study. The study found that the most profound works produced by him are inspired and derived from natural elements that were produced with the raised three-dimensional effect of painting done in four different stages. These include foundation stage, designing stage, painting stage and finishing stage. Different steps and materials involved in each stage that determines the purpose and function of the 'Ajami product. The finding also signifies his strong preferences for the application of floral and geometrical design. This implies that the Islamic religious belief has become the most influencing factor that governs his craftsmanship and selection of painting materials. Apparently, the physical and practical values of the 'Ajami technique extracted from the past traditions are still practiced in his works. Additional values including artistic and design skills further enrich the products of the master artisan from Syria which not only provide stimulus for admiration but also serve as valuable references for the present and future generation of Syrian artisans. As such, the findings of this study could serve as educational guides in the form of a manual to produce 'Ajami as painted wood panelling for interior decoration. The manual is useful for present and future generations of Syrian artisans in order to save their heritage.

خلاصة البحث

إنّ تقنيّة ألواح الخشب الملوّنة في فنّ وحرفة العجمي مورست بشكل شائع في القرن السابع عشر إلى أواخر القرن الثامن عشر وخصوصاً خلال العصر العثماني. يُستخدم الفن العجمي بهدف تجسيد وشرح تقنية صنع الألواح الخشبية الجدارية الملوّنة بالإضافة إلى التصاميم الداخليّة المزخرف. ارتقت زخرفة الفن العجمي خلال الفترة العثمانية بعد تراجع إنتاج القيشاني وقد تقدّمت صناعة العجمي وازدهرت إلى أعلى مستوياتها مقارنة بالفنون والحرف السوريّة الأخرى. إنّ زخرفة وحرفة العجمي أو ما يسمّى بالدهان الدمشقي هو فنّ عالمي يستخدم في الزينة الداخليّة للمنازل والقصور خاصة خلال القرن الثامن عشر. وقد نرى في وقتنا الحاضر كيف أنّ تقنية الزخرفة النافرة في فنّ العجمي صارت منسيّة ومهملة من قبل الجيل الحديث وسرعان ما صار هذا الفن في عداد الفنون المنقرضة في سوريا. إنّ هذا الفن يملك تاريخاً عريقاً في سوريا والعالم إلّا أنّ تقنيّة صنعه لم تكن موثّقة في الدراسات والبحوث. لذلك السبب فإنّ هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى التعرّف على التقنيات التقليدية التي استُخدمت في صناعة العجمي في سوريا. إنّ الهدف الأوّل من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد وتوثيق الطريقة التقليدية في صناعة العجمي للديكورات الداخليّة، أمّا عن الهدف الثّاني من هذه الدّراسة فهو تحديد المواد والتقنيات المستخدمة في تطبيقها لتساهم في صناعة الألواح الخشبية المزخرفة والموثّقة. الهدف الثالث من هذه الدراسة هو تزويد الباحثين في مجال الفن عامة والفن التراثي بشكل خاص بدليل بناءً على إنتاج فن العجمي التقليدي لتزيين الديكورات الداخليّة للمباني. إنّ إحدى كبار الفنّانين السّوريين التشكيليين والذي لا يزال يعمل في حرفة صناعة العجمي يدعى عبد الرؤوف بيضون قد اختير ليخضع لمقابلة أُجريت وجهاً لوجه كما قد زوّد هذا الفنّان الباحث بالعديد من أعماله وآرائه التي أخذت كأدلة استنتاجيّة من خلال المقابلات الشبه منظمة التي أُجريت في بيئة غير رسمية بما في ذلك ورش العمل الخاصة به والمعارض التي أقامها وشارك فيها. وقد كانت المقابلات تركز على كلّ جوانب ومراحل تكوين العجمي مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الخاصيّات والسّمات البصريّة لمكونات العجمي والتقنية المستخدمة لذلك. وقد كانت المراقبة الميدانية والتوثيق الفوتوغرافي لأعماله من التدابير اللازمة المتخذة لاستكمال المقابلات التي قد أُجريت. وبالتالي، فقد تمّ خلال هذه الدراسة فحص العديد من الأعمال التي أنجزها كبير الفنّانين والحرفيين السيّد عبد الرؤوف بيضون والتي تمثّل براعته المميّزة وإتقانه في صنعها. لقد وجدت الدراسة أنّ أكثر الأعمال المعقّدة والعميقة التي أنجزت من قبله ما هي إلّا نتاج وحي وإلهام استمدّه من عناصر الطبيعة وبذلك تمّ تشكيلها في لوحة بتقنية ثلاثيّة الأبعاد وذلك خلال ثلاث مراحل مختلفة. وتشمل هذه المراحل مرحلة التأسيس، مرحلة الرسم ثمّ مرحلة التشطيب. وفي كل مرحلة هناك خطوات مختلفة ومواد معيّنة يحدّد فيها الغرض من استخدامها ووظيفتها التي تساهم في تكوين لوحة العجمي. كما يدلّ نتاج هذه الدراسة أيضاً على تفضيلاته القوية في تطبيق التصميم باستخدام الزخرفة النباتيّة والهندسيّة وهذا يعني أنّ المعتقد الديني الإسلامي قد أصبح العامل الأكثر تأثيراً في حرفيّة واختيار مواد الطلاء المستخدمة في هذا الفن. على ما يبدو فإنّ القيم المادية والعملية لتقنيّة العجمي المستمدّة من التقاليد والآثار الباقية لا تزال تُمارس في أعماله، وكذلك فالقيم الإضافية التي تكمن في المهارات الفنية والتصميمية التي يستخدمها الفنان السوري السيّد عبد الرؤوف بيضون زادت من قيمة أعماله وأضافت طابعاً مميزاً. علاوةً على أنّها تشكّل حافزاً للإعجاب فإنّها أيضاً تعتبر مراجع ثمينة للجيل الحاضر وحرفيي المستقبل. وعلى هذا التحوّ فإن نتاج ما توصل إليه هذا البحث يمكن أن تكون دليل تعليمي على شكل كتيّب صغير لإنتاج وصناعة فن العجمي على الألواح الخشبية للتزيين الداخلي. هذا الكتيّب مفيد للأجيال الحاليّة والمستقبلية من الحرفيين السوري من أجل الحفاظ على تراثهم

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The city of Damascus, the capital of Syria, ushers' visitors to a magnificent piece of human history. This city is considered by many historians to be one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world (Masterman, 1898). Damascus is a major culture and religious center that has many historical buildings, including palaces, houses, and mosques. In 705 CE, substantial parts of the Damascus Christian Temple were converted into the Great Mosque of Damascus using the most beautiful Islamic artworks consisting of geometric and floral elements (Yahya & Embi, 2013). One of the most beautiful works was 'Ajami, an ancient woodwork technique that has become an artistic phenomenon that is unique to Damascus. It has been estimated that between the 17th and 19th centuries, thousands of 'Ajami rooms were built and existed within the walls of the ancient city. In Syria, the rich painted and metal leaf covered wooden interiors are named 'Ajami rooms (Khalil, 2011).

The Arabic term 'Ajami means Persian or Non-Arabic and is used to describe the technique and the ornaments as well as the interior as a whole. 'Ajami refers to painted wooden wall panels and the oldest surviving of 'Ajami comes from the reception room of a grand house in Aleppo, which is inscribed with the dates 1600/01 and 1603 (Hattstein & Delius, 2007). This decorative style of 'Ajami is also called "Pastiglia" (an Italian term meaning 'paste work') in Europe and has appeared as early as in Omayyad times (Scharrahs, 2010). The 'Ajami decorations became very prominent throughout the Ottoman Empire after the decline of tile production and rose

to sophisticated levels in Syria. This kind of interior decoration reached its peak in the 17th century in town houses in the Syrian province (Hattstein & Delius, 2007).

Today, approximately 100 houses comprising of ‘Ajami rooms still exist in the Old City of Damascus and around the world, many of which are hidden treasures. For example, the Aleppo Room (1600-1603) existing in a villa of a rich Aleppo merchant has magnificent painted wooden paneling with Arabesque work. It is now situated in the Museum of Islamic Art, in Berlin, Germany.

The purpose of this research is to discover the traditional method and techniques of ‘Ajami, which is painted wood paneling for interior decoration. In addition, this research also will cover the origin and development of this unique type of woodwork art and describe the steps of production of ‘Ajami in the form of interior decoration.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Difficulty of production is one of the problems that has caused a severe decline in ‘Ajami art lately. This is mainly because the production of ‘Ajami requires a high level of skill and specialized workmanship (Scharrahs, 2010). In other words, ‘Ajami requires an expert artisan to produce this type of woodwork. Also, the production of ‘Ajami is time-consuming and involves specific processes to prepare the materials required. Usually, only gifted artisans who are familiar with the traditional ‘Ajami and having long years of experience could perform this job in the best way possible. Therefore, the ‘Ajami art is considered as one of the most difficult applied arts in the world. Figure 1.1 summarizes the problems related to ‘Ajami handmade art starting from difficulty of production and it ends with destroyed and stolen artefacts during the war now in Syria.

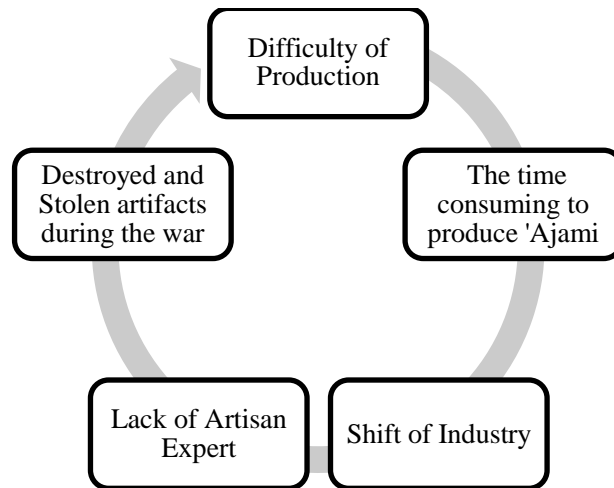


Figure 1.1 Summary of the problem statement

Furthermore, many industries have shifted from producing ‘Ajami to focusing more on the contemporary and modern workshops due to insufficient knowledge and experience of existing artisans. An example of modern workshop is a carpentry wooden craft which only requires basic woodwork skill. The wooden crafts are usually less complex and not as significant as ‘Ajami.

Nowadays modern machines such as laser machines, printers, carving machines and many other machines can copy any design, and that substitutes handmade artwork. Furthermore, the current generation is interested in other modern craft and artwork. Nevertheless, ‘Ajami art requires professional people who are well trained to draw, apply 2D and 3D materials, and colour the design of decorative wood panels. According to Travers (2010), the art of ‘Ajami is facing the lack of expert artisans with such skills and recognitions. Thus, the researcher believes that the declining number of specialised artisan is due to the lack of interest among the current generations.

In addition, many places were destroyed during the war in Syria since 2011, which also affected the Damascene traditional houses and palaces. A great number of ‘Ajami works from the buildings were also stolen because ‘Ajami arts are very valuable

due to its historical value. Hence, an effort must be exerted to discover the traditional technique of making ‘Ajami before it disappears. It is vital to document the old technique from the highly-experienced artisans who are the remnant of the pride of the old days and who are still alive. This would ensure that the artwork can be preserved for the next generations to ensure its continuity of production.

1.3 RESEARCH AIM

The research aims to investigate all the steps involved in the ‘Ajami production by focusing on its traditional method and techniques. The research rediscovers the technique through a semi-structured interview with a prominent Syrian master artisan in Syria.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1- What is the traditional method used in the ‘Ajami production?
- 2- What are the steps involved in the making process?
- 3- What are the materials and techniques used for making ‘Ajami?
- 4- How the traditional ‘Ajami technique can be applied in interior decoration.

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

- 1- To study and document the traditional method of ‘Ajami production.
- 2- To analyse the materials and techniques which are used for making the ‘Ajami as panting wooden panelling for interior decoration.
- 3- To propose a manual based on traditional ‘Ajami production as painted wooden panelling for interior decoration.

1.6 RESEARCH GAP

Many works of local and international scholars have emphasized on the application of the Syrian Ottoman art in Turkey and Syria, including Hali (1997), Luran Fair, Beth, Edelstein and Rizzo (2004), Shadi Khalil (2011), Anke Scharrahs (2014) Kirsten Travers (2009) Atasony Nurhan (2008) Mathews (1997). This has become a trend of research in a visual image of the traditional man-made art applied on the wood in the Syrian Ottoman houses. However, many fell into a discussion of using Islamic art into man-made art, including ‘Ajami art as a part of the interior decoration in the Damascene houses in Syria.

The studies look into the meaning and significance of applying ‘Ajami art and preserving this inherited art from devastating effects of the war in Syria. Also, to keep ‘Ajami art in terms of preserving the civilisations and the identity of Syria during its flourishing period.

The literature survey indicates that there was a lack of in-depth research on traditional ‘Ajami art on wood panelling-Most of the literatures generally focus on art and decoration in the Damascene houses. There is a limited amount of research that elaborates on the types of method and techniques used for ‘Ajami art's basis while some of them like Yaser Tabbaa (1989) specializes his researches on one technical way of using wood in the Damascene houses, that is called Al-Muqarnas.

Many aspects of art of the Syrian-Ottoman period were not preserved and documented by local people. Very few studies about art and ‘Ajami in general could be found in the years 2002, 2003 and 2013. Many emphasized the handmade art in general, mentioning its application in the interior decoration of the houses. Other researchers documented some heritage buildings, from houses to other types of old traditional buildings. The lack of investigation together with the absence of intellectual discourse

via specific literatures created sufficient opportunities for a deeper research. This explorative approach of study should be carried out toward a deeper understanding of the method of applying handmade art, namely ‘Ajami, as interior decorative elements for homes, palaces and museums. Found in the old cities of Syria like Damascus, Aleppo and Hama. This research approach will allow us to delve deeply into the precise technique of making ‘Ajami painting on wood panelling of interior decorative components. The materials involving the wood and the colours used in the traditional ‘Ajami art have not been clearly examined before. Hence, this research took a stride to fill this gap. As such the research is formulated based on the four major research questions as mentioned in page 4 which are relevant to the objectives of the study.

1.7 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

This research focuses on the method and techniques and production of ‘Ajami by a prominent Syrian artisan who has long years of experience in the making of decorative wooden panelling for interior components, including doors, ceilings, walls, Cornice and Muqarnas. The focus of the research is on the materials and how these materials are used to give 3D and 2D effects on the wood with painting composition. The selected artisan is one of the few remaining experts in Syria who produce ‘Ajami as an inherited Syrian art.

This technique is now considered unique and historical. Only a handful of master artisans with substantial experience remain today. In fact, many skilful artisans in this art form have passed away and those are still alive aged 70 and above. Also, to obtain information about the ‘Ajami art from those artisans is difficult because of their secrecy revolving around the traditional ‘Ajami technique. The difficulties of applying ‘Ajami, the huge efforts and the need to spend a long time to produce ‘Ajami art have

made it rarer, unique and limited. Therefore, to find the artisans with great patience and high interest to create the masterpieces using the traditional technique is also difficult.

1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Generally, Syria is one of the oldest civilizations and is a home to many types of arts. In fact, one of the most unique and exclusive art in Syria was ‘Ajami handmade art. It is considering as an essential, traditional and historical handmade art in Syria.

The significance of this study is to support the preservation of ‘Ajami value thus, saving it from becoming extinct. Also, this effort would help sustaining ‘Ajami as Syrian art with its historical and cultural value.

It is expected that the study would reveal the prominence of ‘Ajami technique as a unique art used in interior decoration. This study explains the meaning of ‘Ajami as an appreciated art since it was pertaining to Syrian tradition and civilization.

In the perspective of design, the results and findings of the study also disclose the patterns and motifs that were used in ‘Ajami design which could be useful for the related specializations, for example: interior designs and architectures, and for future references.

In short, this study focuses all aspects of the method and techniques of ‘Ajami in order to propose a production manual of ‘Ajami product as an output of the study. This manual can be developed into a course which can be taught in art and heritage universities in so that ‘Ajami can survive for future generations.

1.9 STRUCTURE OF THESIS

This thesis is divided into five chapters, namely introduction, literature review with theoretical framework, methodology, followed by interview and interpretation, results and findings. Lastly, the conclusion and recommendations.

Chapter One is an introduction of the research that focus on ‘Ajami art in brief including the problem statements, research aim, research questions, research objectives, research gap, scope and limitation of the research, significance of the study and the structure of thesis ending with conclusion.

Chapter Two discusses the related literatures and researches. Reviews on Syrian history, art in Damascus and Aleppo and art in Ottoman and Omayyad period connected to the interior ornaments are presented. This chapter provides the theoretical framework of the research after discussing the art and handcraft of ‘Ajami involving the design and the technique definitions and how these two terminologies are related to ‘Ajami art.

Chapter Three contains a discussion on the research methodology which is related to the research structure. This chapter includes the discussion on methods of data collection through the semi-structured interview.

Chapter Four discusses the analysis, results and findings that were obtained from semi-structural interview with the Syrian master artisan including the interpretation of the interview.

Chapter Five presents the conclusion of the research that summarizes the finding and discussion of the propose manual of the ‘Ajami production, the chapter also includes the recommendations for future researches. Figure 1.2 illustrates the thesis structure and the division of the five chapters.

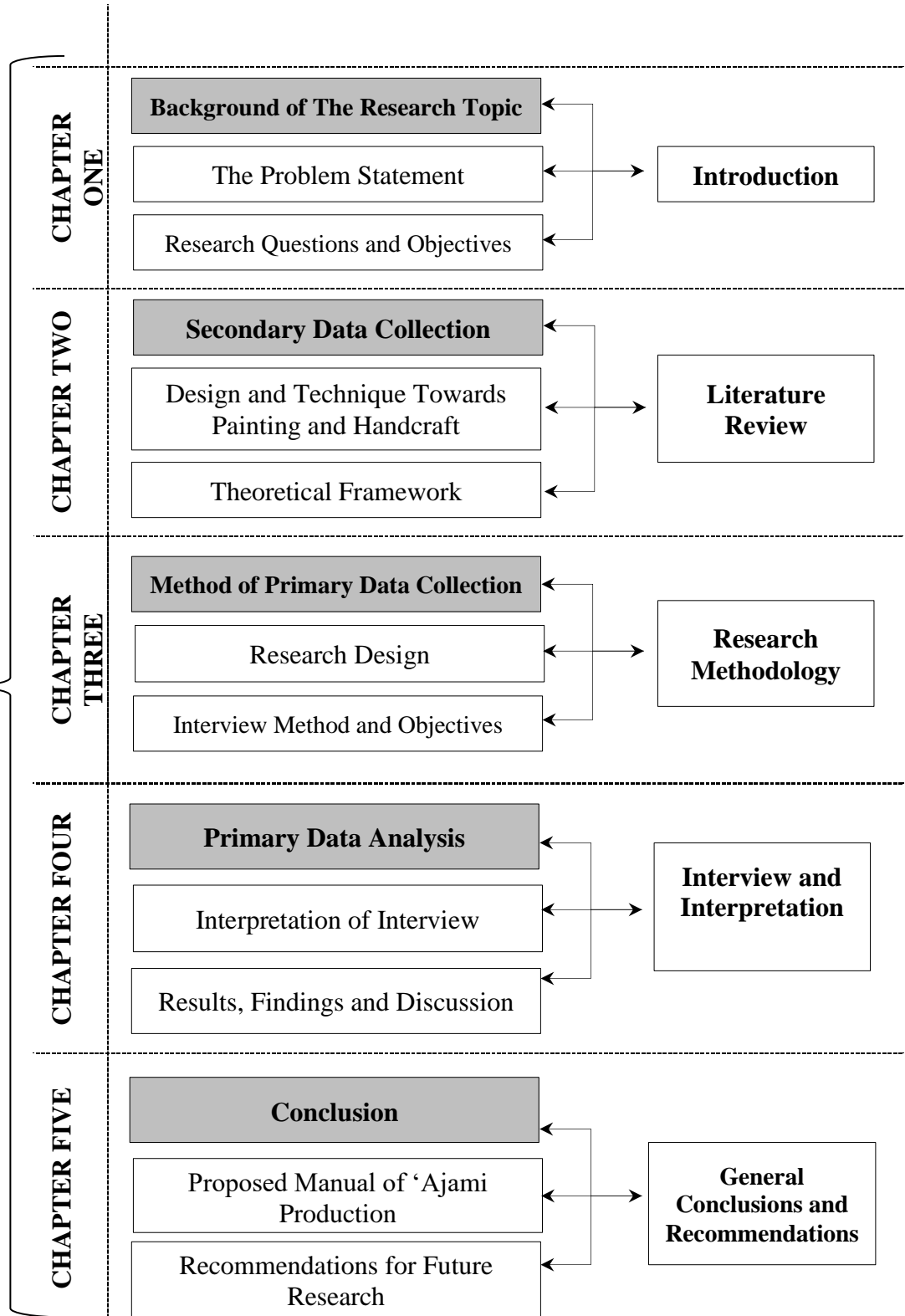


Figure 1.2 Structure of Thesis