

# A Reflection on the Wisdom of Art of Design and Decoration in the Iranian Traditional Architecture

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**Abstract:** Iranian traditional arts are based on deep spiritual traditions. Art is one of the fundamental components of culture and the emergence of cultural factors in the history of a community. The art of any society is shaped in the context of its intellectual and cultural grounds, religion and beliefs in accordance with the historical, social and geographical situations. On this ground, it can be said that architecture is in coordination with other arts. This article is an attempt to represent the presence of a mystical Islamic feature in the artistic works i.e. the manifestation of inner originality in the architecture. The aim is to view the architectural decorations in the light of inner originality and meaning as a celestial feature of them. The question raised by this study addressed the importance of meaning and concepts in the architecture: whether the presence of meaning and establishing it within the contemporary architecture can make this architecture transcendental as its antecedent? The researchers used a descriptive-analytic method and explored the references, concepts and application of designs and decorations in the historical architecture and introduced its related culture and meanings as sacred values of this period of time. Also, a review on the previous literature and library references are provided in this study.

**Keywords:** wisdom of art, designs and decorations, traditional architecture, exploration of thoughts, Iranian architecture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between art and religion has been blooming and developing in the Islamic period more than any other time. Under the teachings of Islam, Muslim artists represented many spiritual concepts in the form of decorative designs based on aesthetical principles. In Islamic art of design embellishments, arabesque tracteries emerged. The live and pervasive presence of these gardens and designs can be observed in every manifestation of Islamic art. From the delicate illuminations to hard carving of wood, stone, and metal in inscription and inlay arts; from the grandeur, resistance, and magnificence of architecture to the spiral designs of the carpets in which beautiful twists and medallions speak.

Employing the floral, geometrical, and animal shapes and designs in Islamic architecture testifies very well the faith of the Muslim artist. A Muslim artist uses such designs as a tool to express his religious beliefs. The involvement of these arrays with the religious beliefs and faith reflects a kind of eternity, originality, and purity in them. Reception and comprehension of the concepts of such designs in the decorative Islamic architecture and finding its roots can give access to the mind and thought of architects, and ultimately the culture, ideology, and ideals of the Islamic society.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The present study uses a descriptive-analytical design in which data are collected from library documents and available references.

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### 3. SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

The most important factor which affects the feelings, emotions, and thinking of citizens is “urban landscape”. The type of architecture, use of color, quality and quantity of urban elements, etc. are the factors that could have an impact on the quality of everyday life in cities. Islamic Iranian architecture has a dominant spirit that can be involved in the modern urban architecture and use it based on the present requirements. Architecture and urban planning has a mission to fulfill: to preserve the ancient cultural values and be respected as an element of identity in the cultural structure; similar to its status in the modern culture and architecture in the world (Habib et al., 2008, 15).

### 4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND RELIGION

The important point about art and religion is that in a historical view of these two phenomena we can see that art and religion are ancient correlations of each other. As Hegel, the idealist German philosopher speaks “primitive people retold their belief in the metaphysical powers by a material form i.e. art. The manifestation of this can be found in the cave paintings and most artistic pieces created by the primitive man. For Hegel, the first form of creation of artistic forms for expression of beliefs was through sensory forms. This point is clear in all religious rituals and ceremonies of primitive man. Even, the art of dance as proposed today has had a ritual ground in the primitive tribes and the masks which are observed as an artwork in the modern museums typically had a religious function. The more important point is that the rituals of worship and religious acts were often held in a symbolic form<sup>1</sup>. Likewise today, that the worship ritual in Islam and Christianity has a symbolic face and every work that a Muslim does in a hajj ritual such as throwing stones at Satan, seven circulations around the Kaaba in Mecca, etc. have a symbolic meaning. On the other hand, all elements in a mosque—the place of Muslims’ worship—represents an inner meaning.

### 5. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MYSTICISM AND ARCHITECTURE

Mysticism is one of the most important intellectual and spiritual that affected Iranian art. During history, it had a profound significant effect on the creativity of artists which resulted in masterpieces of art and architecture. This effect with regard to the different approaches in different countries—with different cultures and traditions and beliefs—and new cognitions which were originated from a mystical cognition definitely would not be the same. Particularly, due to the increase of technology, in the recent century it is only observable in the holy sites which are less affected by the modern architecture. It’s certain that there is a close relationship between architecture and mysticism of monotheism and faith from these structures. One of the mystical aspects of Iranian architecture is the effect of thought in Islamic architecture that represents the orders of mysticism of awakening, desire, knowledge, love, etc. in the sanctuary architecture of mosques, domes, houses, tiling, and etc. Thus, it is necessary to understand the place of Sufism in Islamic architecture because its manifestations in the Islamic architecture are very considerable. If we believe that beyond every material body there is a meaning, and any type of content needs a template; hence, we must seek to identify the form and structure that Islamic art has created. These elements are more spiritual than structural: geometry, color, light, and water.

### 6. MANIFESTATION OF ISLAMIC ART AND WISDOM IN ARCHITECTURE

“Islamic art represents the concept which is retold by its name, without any doubt” (Burckhardt, 1986). Islamic art is manifest in all aspects of the life, where the inclusion of art in a life of Muslim is greater than philosophy and mysticism (A’vani, 1996, 342). Islamic art is the conclusion of manifest of unity in plurality and the balance and coordination following that has a manifestation of human liberation from the bondage of plurality and makes it closer to the almighty God and experience the boundless joy and exhilaration (Nasr, 1996, 190). Art is one of the most mysterious aspects of human culture and civilizations which has dominated the human life. Wherever excavations of history and archeological studies of civilization discover a sign of human civilization and human culture and its manifestation has wondered the scholars of human civilization and art and their hidden mysteries made the sage to think and reflect. Despite the diversity and variety of forms, Iranian traditional art has always spoken of a unified meaning. Since traditional art is to import transcendental concepts from the high intellectual concepts to the form

and content. So, the effort in traditional art is to change matter to meaning and meaning to matter, because the matter is rendered to spiritual concepts, and spiritual concept to the matter (Rahnavard, 2001).

Roles and geometric decorations which have a similar function in accordance with the spirit of Islam an Islamic philosophy and its core is based on the oneness of Allah and his eternal power has a special status in the traditional arts. Geometric decoration is full of secrets and codes in which mobility, and dynamism refers to decentralization of the plurality of components as its most striking feature. The mysterious signs which is hidden in the geometric decorative arts are in fact the image of world and the inner origin of existence, a source which inspires revelation, since “a secret is the same as its essence” (Burckhardt, 1990). Due to its strong dependence on the tradition, geometrical designs “transfer the sacred patterns and guarantees the spiritual credit of forms” (ibid). In the thought of Burckhardt, Islamic art relies on the fundamental truths which are expressed by a range of organized words beside each other, and God’s monotheism is the center of these words. In his view, Islamic art is an aesthetical and impersonal experience of world unities and pluralities in which all pluralities turn into a new order to unify. In this definition, Islamic art is defined in a way that can illuminate the world and help human to flee from the plurality of concerns and return to the clear peace of endless unity.

## 7. ISLAMIC ART AND ITS FEATURES

Islamic art refers to the art that is performed by a Muslim artist. Islamic art takes its life from Islamic aesthetics which is the main discussion of mysticism and the Muslim artist could or has recognized how to create works from this perspective. Islamic art is the crystallization of feelings and intuition of the Muslim artist. He regards art as worship and a tool to get closer to god; Islamic art does not represent disappointment but it is like wings of hope to take the weepy bird to be united with his god. Islamic art is other than the art of Muslims; its origin must be from the constructive teachings of Islam.

Islamic art should not be regarded equivalent to the religious art. Since, in Islam the religious art is a part of Islamic arts and the Islamic art includes all kind of arts which are produced in the cultural geography of Islam, and embraces different forms such as sacred traditional art, religious art, etc. Some features of the Islamic art are:

1. Fruit of divine knowledge: Islamic art is the fruit of a divine knowledge that is the product of manifestation of unity in the world of plurality, its strongly monotheistic, and refers everything to a unified origin. The things that are seen in the architecture of mosques, calligraphy of Quran, poetry, etc. are good instances of it.
2. Islamic artist in the path of evolution: The Islamic artist is in the path of evolution and his work has a divine spirit within itself that every particle of it calls toward the Great Allah. The spiritual nature of is an inherent and inseparable characteristics of Islamic art and indeed full of wisdom.
3. Sublimating the audience: If western art has stepped toward creating a sense of joy and pleasure for the audience, the main essence of Islamic art is guidance and sublimating the audience. In fact, useless entertainments are not called art and even such things have been criticized. Teachings of Islam educate its followers in a way that thy benefit from every moment of their life and toward the perfection i.e. the eternal happiness and proximity to God, they are reprimanded for the hours spent in vain and purposelessness.
4. Symmetry with mysticism: Islamic art has a strange fitness and convergence with mysticism; because the Muslim artist steps toward unity by creating divine pieces and with the goal of giving sublimity to the audience. Hence, both the artist and the audience move toward the ultimate Islamic art. on the art we say that “art begins when a human being with the intention of conveying a feeling that he has experienced it tries to invoke the feeling and express it thorough well-known apparent signs”.
5. The sense of servitude as the starting point of artist: The Islamic art starts from a sense of servitude or the so-called expansion of the soul, because in Islamic art both sensory - emotional and cognitive factors are effective and these factors create the Islamic art. Hence, this feeling is sometimes the result of reason and reflection, Islamic artist uses the power and ability of emotion and intuition elements and leads the audience to ponder.

To create the right environment, first the features of a suitable place of residence for living of Muslims should be defined based on Islamic principles. In fact, Islam has not determined a physical fixed body for the architecture and urban planning but it defines a principled way for life, for humans' interaction with each other, human-nature relationship, god-human relationship, and god-creature relationship (Naqizadeh, 2004, 65).

### 7.1. Arabesque trceries (Islimi)

The word Islimi (in Persian) is a word derived from Islamic art. Selecting Islimi word for this kind of design (arabesque) is associated with different ideas and opinions which are not clear in terms of origin. Some people believe that because this design is observed in most of Islamic arts such as tiling, illuminating the book covers, etc. hence, this term (Islimi) is given to such designs and forms. Another group believes that the origin of arabesque design is Kufic Calligraphy. But this seems unlikely because the root of this type of motifs is found in the years before Islam in a pre-historical period, as its basic forms are observed clearly in the works discovered from Persepolis and the carvings of this massive building. More scrutiny reveals that these motifs are developed in the Sassanid and Parthian era.

Islamic art is one of the most glorious periods of art history and one of the most valuable human achievements in the field of art. It includes a variety of arts, including architecture, calligraphy, painting, etc. Humans have always used designs and images to express meaning or interpretation of the world. Meanwhile, each culture and civilization utilized specific and unique designs for their intended purpose with various causes.

The pictures are an important factor in identifying the cognitive psychology, religion, culture, habits and interests of various ethnic groups through out history. Iranian artists through out the years and centuries created and developed various forms including arabesque trceries (Islimi motifs) to express their inner world and feelings. We can find the traces of these forms in the Iranian art. From the monuments to the figures, covering the books, the illumination art etc., all retained these beautiful and abstract motifs and presented to the public.

Doctor Hussein Nasr writes: using arabesques allows the material bodies to become transparent against their spiritual idea-where the ideal examples become embodied in the existential level. Therefore, the material objects manifest their own special spiritual quality through fidelity to their nature (Zamani, 1984, 821). Thus, the floral and



Figure 1: The artistic designs and lines in the unique beautiful dome of Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, Isfahan, Iran.

twisted tree designs symbolize the creation process which started from the macrocosm to the microcosm and its abstracted leaves and flowers testify the heaven that has been in this process (Ahmadi Maleki, 1999, 14).

Islamic mosques are a representative of visual beauties and a prime example of the combination of beauty and symbolic forms with deeply held beliefs. The pattern forms and symbolic communications in all aspects and features of mosques can be seen clearly. Essentially, religious art, particularly in the Islamic mosques have a common feature and it is their symbolic aspect; because in all arts the world is a shadow of truth and an exalted example of it.

Therefore, each symbol becomes real beyond this world. So when symbols are in a visual place, they declined from their order to express a transcendent meaning. These meanings are not expressed except with the symbols and metaphors; as the Quran expresses spiritual truths in secret language of allusions and metaphors. The architecture of mosques, as well as stucco designs, brick works and tile works are selected based on symbolic meaning of the truths and beautiful dynamic feeling of public popularity. Artists and designers in the mosques like other Islamic architectures focused on the contrast between inside and outside. When the man enters the building observes the most obvious difference between inside and outside, that this contrast atmosphere is in its ultimate perfection, which means that a man with a circulation inside and outside the mosque journeys in the course of the unity and diversity.

## 8. THE PATTERN OF PEACOCK

The pattern of peacock and the Tree of Life play an important role in the art of Iran. This role is often associated with religious concepts. Peacock is not only as a symbolic form in Islamic art, but it has been used in the ancient times as a sacred bird in Zoroastrianism (Khazaiee, 2010).

One of the important elements of Islamic art are symbols which are divided to the 4 categories of human, animal, plant, and abstracts. Among the most important animal symbols is the symbol of the peacock which entered Islamic architecture of the Safavid era and was used in tile inscriptions at entrance of the shrine of Aaron Imamzadeh for the first time. Over time, this design became more popular and was drawn in inscriptions on the Chahar-Baq's school entrance and Abbasi Mosque in the Safavid and Sayed Mosque in Qajar era. In fact, it has been the common symbol in Islamic architecture for 400 years, since Safavid period. For example, drawing the Peacock design in the inscriptions of the entrance of a contemporary building i.e. Hosseiniye Razavi or the inscriptions above the entrance door of the ordinary houses indicates the importance of it in Islamic architecture. Peacock has not been described in the Qur'an, but in Nahj al-Balaqat, sermon 165 of Imam Ali (AS) it is described as the most amazing bird in the creation and compares the colors of the peacock feather with beautiful fabrics and colorful Yemeni curtains (Nahj al-Balaqat, 2000). Hakim Sanai resembles the Prophet Muhammad to the peacock of divine garden in his poetry:

*With his kingly feathers, the peacock  
Has appeared in the divine garden<sup>2</sup>*

Peacock pattern is among the decorative designs of mosques and religious places and has a significant presence since the Safavid period.

### 8.1. Bannaie (Ma'qali) Calligraphy

The art of calligraphy that has been used in today's Islamic monuments, is an important factor in architectural decoration which in many ways represents the voice of God and the words of great figures. It is a continuous reference to God and the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad and other religious figures. Bannaie calligraphy is considered by some researchers in the category of Ma'qali calligraphy who believe that the word Ma'qali refers to the thinking (ta'aqol in Persian, both of which are derived from the root Aql i.e. thought) and there should be enough time to read the Ma'qali calligraphy carefully.



Figure 2: The design of peacock in the decorations of entrance doors in the Iranian-Islamic architecture.

Ma'qali calligraphy is the same as Bannaie calligraphy which represents itself in another form on the surface of the buildings. In Iranian tiling work motifs are carved on brick or tile and organize them into square or diamond shapes next to each other so that they form a shape which is known as Ma'qali calligraphy. Since these designs are made of squares and diamonds in diverse colors, the tiles with the same color are tangent to each other from the top.

### 8.2. One-lined Ma'qali calligraphy

The background of geometric shape is tabulated with a desired shape using angular squares method. Ma'qali calligraphy is written on the checkered background of the square, like the simple lines but with this difference that the top of the squares should be along each other.

### 8.3. Three-lined Ma'qali calligraphy

This method is the same as above description. However, the thickness of calligraphy line consists of three squares (angular adjacent), where the central squares are in one color, and turquoise squares are in central angular outlined along each other and two rows of black side-squares follow each other from vertices, in a way that the color of turquoise is inscribed in black.

### 8.4. Drawn-text Ma'qali calligraphy

Drawn-text Ma'qali calligraphy is done on the angular square like the two ways explained above; but three squares are attached along each other, so that the continuation of it reveals a coil in the calligraphy: the angles are perpendicular and writings are always inclined to one direction.

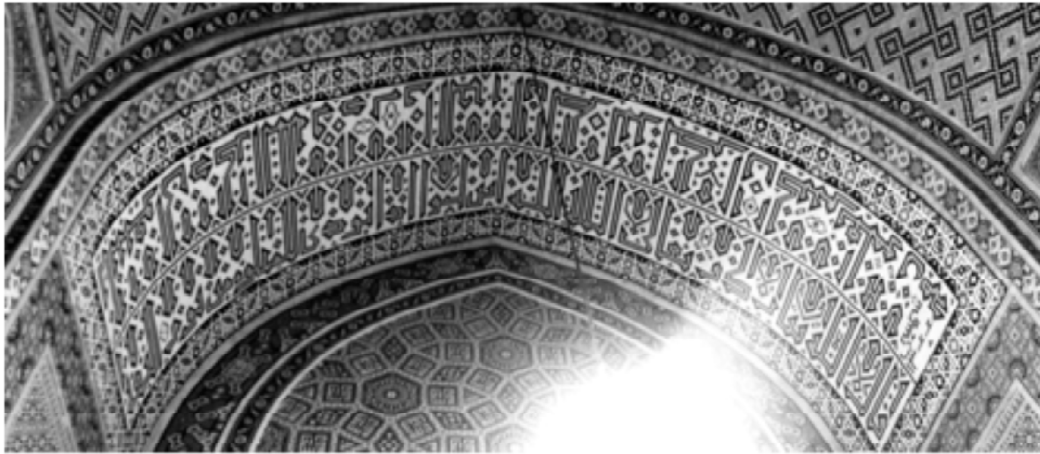
## 9. THE CONCEPT OF SQUARE

Visually, square is a balanced, strong and static shape, a diagram of determination, courage, calmness, logic and the sign of earth. This figure is remarkable in Islamic architecture and has a special place in this culture.

Its four equal sides could symbolize the four elements of wind, water, earth and fire or four directions of North, South, East and West or four seasons or four phases of life from childhood to adolescence, adulthood and aging or

fournatures of coldness, warmth, dryness, and humidity. Plato considers square beautiful in the absolute sense. Abu-Yaqub regards 4 as the most perfect number because the number of letters of God is four.

Square is ascribed to blue color; in design and Graphic sciences any form suggests a special meaning. To know the properties of shapes helps to better understand the meaning and concept intended by the designer through the language of pictures and visual arts. Square symbolizes the earth against the sky (circle) and at another level symbolizes the created universe (heaven and earth against the non-created and creator; in other words, it is the anti-thesis of the transcendental world.



**Figure 3: the decorations of Ma'qali calligraphy in the roof of Dar al-Siadat porch, the northern porch of Goharshad courtyard, Imam Reza holy shrine, Mashhad, Iran. The writing is the text of Juma'h surah.**





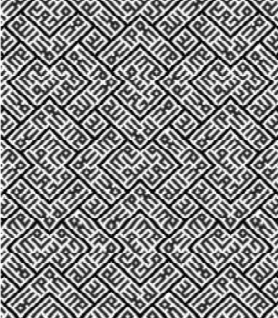



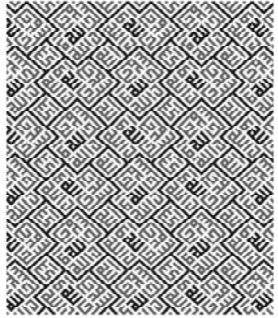


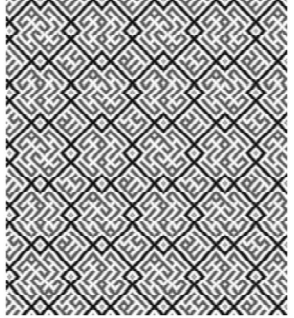




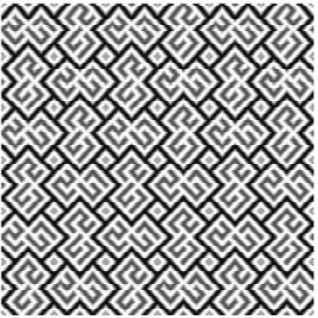
**Figure 4: Ma'qali letters (Bannaie calligraphy) made by square geometry, Shahadatein phrases, available in Istanbul's Topkapi scroll. In black box is written there is no god but Allah; and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah is written in orange.**

## 10. CONCLUSION

In a general definition of the architecture, William Morris 4 writes:

Architecture is all the physical environment that includes human life; and as long as we are considered as a part of the civilized world, we cannot make it out of its domain, because architecture is a set of reforms and changes that

**Table 1**  
**Ma'qali letters and its component writings, the decoration of Shar-Dur<sup>1</sup> School in Samarkand**

Component element 3	Component element 2	Component element 1	Decoration
			
	Muhammad is his messenger	There is no god but Allah	
			
Akbar (the Greatest)	Allah	Subhan Allah, Alhamdulillah	
			
	ORahim (the compassionate)	ORahman (the merciful)	
			
	Akbar (the Greatest)	Allah	
			
		O Rabbi (my lord)	



has been created on Earth required by human needs, and only barren deserts have been deprived of it. One of the main characteristics of Iranian culture, art and architecture, thus, is sadly neglected in recent years due to its adherence to Western culture and experiencing alienation and confusion.

A little thought on the rich traditional architecture of Iran, we realize that all created elements and spaces were in their appropriate place, based on the needs and the culture of these people and traditional architecture was intertwined with the culture and beliefs of people. The impact of culture and beliefs in their architecture has made the architectural monuments of that period and area valuable. As a result, the identity derived from the behavior of these people is manifest in their architecture and their architectural identity emerges here. There are decorations and ideas originated from the ideology and culture of society and the combination of religion and architecture in the magnificent Iranian-Islamic architecture inspired by the mystical and spiritual values and belief in extraterrestrial place. And how beautiful it following this path and the relating between culture and people needs with modern architecture, where the result will be the elimination of lack of identity in the modern architecture. Thus, the architecture will go toward transcendence.

According to Shiite beliefs and their application in the forms and designs, issues related to space and environmental psychology such as the principles of architecture in traditional buildings including privacy, hierarchy of presence, the spiritual atmosphere and etc. can help us in this matter. It should be noted that any space and any place should be considered according to its function; and each space be used according to the needs of the region, employer, work, and cultural and other issues.

### *Notes*

1. Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity, p. 26.
2. The peacock as a symbol of the Prophet of Islam can be found on gold coin (20R) of Qajar period which was coined in 1210H. in Tehran. In this coin, the words "Oh Muhammad" (PBUH) was written on the peacock.
3. Shar-Dur School is located in the Rajasthan sq. in Samarkand. This school was built in the eleventh century Hijri between 998 and 1,015H. According to an inscription, the building was constructed by Abdul-Jabbar and decorated by Mohammed Abbas.
4. Modern architectural history written by Leonardo Benevolo; Maurizio was born on March 24, 1834 in Walthamstow, Essex, England. He continued his studies at Oxford University and studied architecture for a short time. He was one of the founders of "Oxford and Cambridge Magazine" in 1857.

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