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**A STUDY OF SKETCHES AND DECORATIONS IN TABRIZ'S GRAND MOSQUE'S
MIHRAB**

MEHRNAZ OSTOVAR¹

¹Student of Master's Degree in the field of Architectural Engineering, Department of
Architecture, Payamnoor University, Tehran, Iran, mehrnazostovar@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This research examines design, decorations, and inscriptions in Tabriz's Grand Mosque's Mihrab. Research method is a descriptive-survey method. During Ilkhani era, most of the inscriptions have been performed by stucco-working and is written in Koufi calligraphy. Flexibility of plaster along with unique features of Koufi type of writing with its various compositions puts the inscriptions among the best Mihrabs of all times in Iranian architecture. There are 42 Mihrabs left from Ilkhani era each of which having specific characteristics. Tabriz's grand Mosque's Mihrab is one of the most beautiful of them. The art works evolution shows that in every era some changes have happened to it. The changes are related, for the most part, to the material, type and quality of scribing, and in some cases, in the content. Results show that generally sketches in the Mihrab include: Arabesque sketches (nature oriented forms such as flower and bush, branches of trees, and simplified fruits), and curved and angled geometrical forms. Furthermore, Koufi calligraphy's composition is a vertical and horizontal one while letters and words do not overlap but they have a horizontal long movement that ends at the end.

Keywords: Ilkhani era, Mihrab, Architectural Decorations, Grand Mosque of Tabriz

INTRODUCTION

The prayer niche of a mosque or Mihrab is considered as the heart of mosque and as a bright light that shows the Kaaba; the way of God. It resembles the Hara cave and Prophet Muhammed's and anyone's seclusion with God (Burkhart, 1365). Mihrab is being built in the south-western corner of mosque and toward Kiblah, the point where all Muslims turn toward when praying. In its building, a recession is being made in the wall in a quadrangle shape and by excavating the point in the ground just where the niche stands. By various forms of Islamic decorations on it, Mihrab looks glorious in southern side of mosques.

Inscriptions of the mosques can be examined from many different aspects such as artistic, historical, technical, content related points of view. The historical process they have been through demonstrates that they have changed in different eras; the changes have been related to the material, type and the quality of scripts, and in some cases, the contents. In Ilkhani era, most of the inscriptions have been implemented by stucco and are written by different types of Koufi calligraphy.

The plasticity and flexibility of stucco in combination with unique characteristics of Koufi calligraphy in its various forms puts these inscriptions among the most beautiful

and exquisite one in Iranian architecture. There are about 42 Mihrabs left from Ilkhani era each of which having unique qualities. One of the most beautiful of the inscriptions is the Mihrab inscription of the grand mosque of Tabriz. Proportionality and composition is very significant features in any work of art and stables principle in calligraphy and inscription; the two are of such importance that the beauty of any inscription is totally bound to them. In this paper, Proportionality and composition will be examined in Tabriz grand mosque's Mihrab by a descriptive-analytical research method (Macinejad & et al, 1388).

Many different materials and methods have been utilized for beautification of architectural spaces of Ilkhani era, but stucco-work is the most important known element in the architecture of the era. Almost "for three decades tridimensional stucco has been frequent" (Poppe, 1386). In this time the most elaborated and delicate inscriptions, Mihrans, and stuccos. There are 42 Mihrabs left from the Ilkhani era, some of them being preserved in known museums" (Ghorbanzadeh, 1386).

Donald Wilber has implemented some researches on the architecture of Ilkhani era and its decorations; he has shed light on

some techniques and methods of stucco at the time (Wilber, 1346), but his researches are cut short of comprehensive demonstration of different styles and methods of the art in Iranian architecture and its prevalence through the following centuries. In recent years, some case-study and scientific researches have been done that are limited as they solely describe decorations, designs, and inscriptions, compare them with other works of the era, and the formation of the techniques (Dadvar, et al, 1385; Hamidi et al, 1390; Zeymal, 2008, Blair, 2009).

Theoretical Foundations

Any work of art follows specific structures that are based on some regulations and principles. Plant and geometrical forms and lines are the most important elements in any inscription but, apart from them, the overall structure of inscriptions is relative to the situation, proportions, and its way of counteracting with the surrounding environment in architectural environments.”

The art of calligraphy does not limited to individual images’ containment but is also depends on the forms relationship to the surrounding context” (Ardalan, 1380, 45). If a beautiful inscription locates in an inappropriate place, or it is inharmonious to the building’s architectural theme, not only does the beauty of the inscription and the

atmosphere suffer, but the two also will affect each other negatively. Plant and geometrical decorations are based on some principles that are being assessed and examined relative to line and in accord with their own specific geometrical patterns. The most important issue in the inscriptions is the application of all these elements through all the phases from design to performance; this is exactly what makes an inscription magnificent and turns in into an art work.

Considering the fact that the grand mosque is registered as a universal heritage, it is imperative to examine design, inscriptions, and proportions of their Mihrabs for getting to better understanding of them. The impression of the inscriptions, the composition of the texts, beautiful context and coloring and their locating as strips looks like to be a part of a bigger decorative design. Close to these diverse designs and motifs, there exist another aspect: meaning (Halen Brand, 1377). Thus, the examination of these elements of cultural heritage looks necessary toward a better understanding of them and preserving them better.

The Inscriptions of Mihrabs in Ilkani Era

From among all arts, calligraphy should be considered as the most important symbol of Islamic art’s soul. The Holy Quran, in this respect, emphasizes the act of writing many

times. That's why Muslims were used to write Guran in a form that is parallel to its heavenly beauty (Shimmel, 1381). The most important place of inscription in Ilkhani and Saljoughi eras were Mihrabs, apart from their function as a direction toward Kiblaa. Mihrab was the main location of leader of congregational prayers and was determining his position toward Kiblaa; Hence, it has been of a great importance. In Mihrabs' decorations, all around Mihrab was full of marginal inscriptions that were being made on a context of Islamic flower and bush. Usually, there were rectangular inscription at the top. Around Mihrab, some borders were being alternatively repeated. The texts were some of Ayas in Guran related to the importance of prayer. The text of the inscriptions' borders included one or more Ayas written consecutively. Sometimes, a long part of a Soureh was being consecutively inscribed in one or more borders. Inscriptions started from the lower part of Mihrabs on the right. The date on Mihrabs' building was being inscribed without being interfering Guran's texts. Sometimes there were holy persons' names or dedication texts as well. (Sahebi Bazzaz, 1389).

Iranian stucco originates in Sasani Art and Ilkhani inscriptions and stuccos' backs to

Saljoughi art. The inscriptions of the era were being performed in Koufi method of calligraphy and, for the most part, via stucco or bricks. Plaster Islamic arts are of special value and more applicable, various and of more delicacy partly because of unique potentials of plaster. In Iranian art and architecture, calligraphy has been of high status. Inscription is one of the main branches of calligraphy. The art has its own special principles and rules. It emerged in architecture as Islamic era started and have had the function of transferring parts of meanings while recording them historically. Inscription, like any other art branch, has had its own ups and downs, but it has been very important in different historical eras as a result of its content and role in providing people with identity (Maccinejad et al, 1387).

High Delicacy and Elegance in Stuccos of Ilkhani Era

In Ilkhani era, building elements and details of Saljugi era have become more delicate and elegant. The following changes can be seen in the buildings: On the one hand, vertical lines became more stretched and on the other words, the building body became more delicate and light (Poppe, 1373). Mihrabs followed the same rule and became stretched in a way that Mihrab was cutting the round beltway. Distinguishing the difference

between general composition of stucco Mihrabs of the Ilkhani and Saljughhi eras is difficult. Mihrabs have a general composition: a gothic arc over two narrow vertical columns surrounding a recessed space that there are three decorated rows with inscription and arabesque from three directions all around it. This was fashionable before Saljughhi era began (Sajadi, 1375). Stucco decorations are affected by decoration of Saljughhi er. Of course there are differences between the two (Wilber, 1346); Tendency toward elegance and delicacy in design and reliefs in implementation that exist in most of the era's buildings are two of these differences. Mihrab decorations in grand mosque of Tabriz are one of the best examples in this regard.



Figure 1: Parts of inscription of grand mosque of Tabriz Mihrab of Grand Mosque of Tabriz

It is not clear exactly when grand mosque of Tabriz backs to. The primary core of it has been a place for prayer named Tabriz's grand; during different eras some elements has added to it. In the current mosques

underground, there are signs of color stuccos of Mihrab from Saljughhi era. "The old place for prayer has a stucco-worked Mihrab from Ilkhanan era that were covered after earthquake of 1193" (Ganjnameh, 1383). The Mihrab, right now, is placed in the main sanctuary and the restoration process has been completed by experts of Cultural Heritages Institution. Considering the fact that the start point is from the point zero, the current courtyard's floor, some changes have happened over it probably because in other Mihrabs, the line does not start from the zero point but a meter higher. It looks logical that God's words wouldn't be put somewhere moist and harmful. Considering the harmony among linear, geometrical, and plant sketches along with careful performance, powerful calligraphy of Koufiletters, proportions, and utilizing simple as well as complex compositions of the inscriptions, they are some of the most outstanding remained inscriptions of Ilkhani era. The scripts of the inscription are a combination of knotted and layered Koufi which is in an appropriate harmony with plant decorations. Unfortunately, due to the destructions of parts of Mihrab, the name of the maker and the date of building are unknown.

The text of the first inscription includes the first to seventh Aya's of the Soureh Mo'menoun:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ قَدْ أَفْلَحَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ (1) الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي صَلَاتِهِمْ خَاشِعُونَ (2) وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنِ اللَّغْوِ مُعْرِضُونَ (3) وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِلزَّكَاةِ فَاعِلُونَ (4) وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِفُرُوجِهِمْ حَافِظُونَ (5) إِلَّا عَلَىٰ أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ (6) فَمَنْ ابْتَغَىٰ وَرَاءَ ذَلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْعَادُونَ

The inscription encompasses 38 words, the word "اللغو" is located in the center and on the vertical axis of Mihrab, and the words "حافظون و للزكاة" are written on the left and right corners of it. One of the most important facts about the inscription is the harmony and connected system that goes beyond the verbal and plant systems moving toward a general unity. The three are being defined in connection with each other, but all have their own value per se. For instance, we can examine the scripts of the inscription apart from the sketches as an art work but the general harmony demonstrates an ordered and coherent structure where the scripts immerse among plant sketches and, like a tendril, connect warp and woof of scripts and plants. The width and length of the pen is of a key importance in inscribing; the width of the pen is 6 cm. In Koufi inscriptions, the letters A and L along with K² are of an important role in the beauty and general and

detailed composition of the scribing. In koufi inscriptions, dots are not important and it is not used in the inscription mentioned. It is not true in scriptions such as Sols, Naskh, and Nasta'ligh; in them, dots are of high importance in composition.



A view of Grand Mosque of Tabriz. Source: Author.

A beauty of the inscription of grand Mosque of Tabriz's Mihrab if related to the imaginative motions and coquetries of each of the letters and details per se. In this inscription, the details are of the same notice of the general work; this originates from theoretical bases of Islamic art that says details of the same importance as the whole. That is, everything in Islamic art, either small

²In Persian: الف، لام، و کاف

of large, and either details or the whole, are of value.

Arabesque Elaborated Sketches and Flower and Bush in the context of Ilkhani era’s Mihrabs

Often including Guran or statements from prophet Muhammed or the holy Imams and encompassing the date of the work or the name of sponsor or the artist, Koufi inscriptions were being used as a form of decoration and blessing in different buildings since the first centuries of Islamic era (Imani, 1385). In the Ilkhani era, the inscriptions became more delicate, adorned and ornate by

Islamic sketches and flowers and leaves of different forms elaborated with great reliefs (Shekofteh, 1391).

Each of the plaster inscriptions of Ilkhani era can be considered as a unique artwork and it is good to assess them one by one. The inscription of Tabriz’s grand Mosque is considered as one of the most prominent of those of the era. The inscription is a connected composition made up of three harmonious systems: the sketches, geometry, plants. In the following table, different decoration of the Mihrab are provided.

Grand Mosque of Tabriz	Building Name
	Documents related to Mihrab
Koufi scribing: the context is made of plant sketches; the sketches and inscriptions are combined together	Mihrabs Inscription’s scribing
The Sوره of Mo’menoun (Ayahs from 1 to 23, The 18 th Part of Guran)	The Sوره written on the Mihrab
Mihrab has 24 margins and the Sوره of Mo’menoun is written in the second one around the Mihrab	Numbers of Margins around the Mihrab
The height of the Mihrab is 6.28 meters and its width is 5.48 meters.	Mihrab’s dimensions

Plaster	Mihrab's material
Berheshteh	Scutto Type
Five and Seven Kand	The type of Mihrab's Arc
Gholi Hossein Gholi Khan Danili, Haj Mohammad Bagher Kalkatechi, Taleb Khan the son of Ishagh Khan Tabrizi, and Mullah Mohammad Aghani	The mosque Founders
These names can be seen in the inscription: Alaeddin Mohammad Tabrizi, Momen Tabrizi, Mirza Agha, Mohammad Bagher & Mohammad Rasoul Naghash	The Mosque's calligraphers
These named can be seen: Alaeddin Mohammad Tabrizi, Momen Tabrizi, Mohammad Bagher & Mohammad Rasoul	The Calligrapher's Name

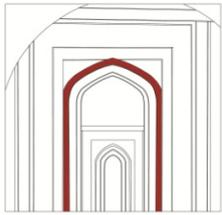
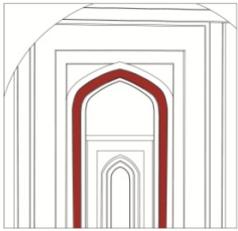
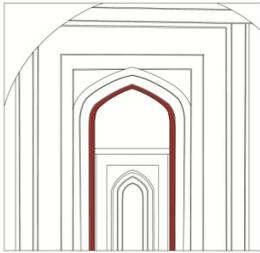
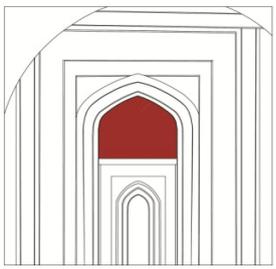
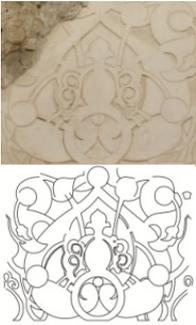
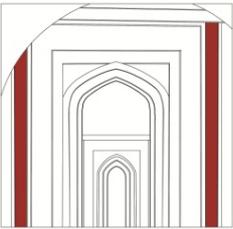
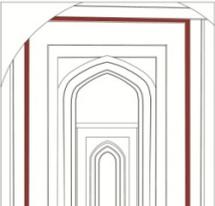
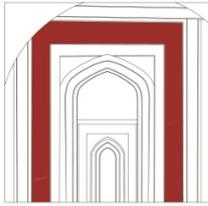
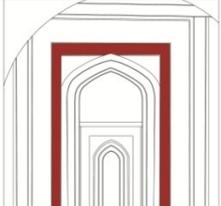
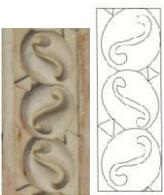
Plaster decorations in Saljoughi era are being categorized based on different types of it: flat, solid and hollow, reliefs, more outstanding reliefs, Ajdeh (ordered polygon), and colored stuccos. Of one the common technique in the era is relief scutto with Ajdeh. Coloring of plaster decorations has been prevalent since Saljoughi era when contexts and plaster decoration sketches were getting colored. The most frequent color of all has been ultramarine or Lajavardi. It has been used for instill depth and make more effects. Other colors have been cyan, white, beige, and red (Ahmadi, sheofteh & oudbashi, 1389). In some parts of the mentioned Mihrab where it is less mended, hues of ultramarine can be detected.

In Saljoughian era, the art of scutto working progressed and experienced some changes that resulted in its prosperity in Ilkhani era. Since decorative styles grow slowly and often are depend on previous eras' decorations, it can be mentioned that the stuccos of Ilkhani era originates from

Saljoughi era's artists' efforts. Stucco decorations of Saljoughi era gradually altered in Ilkhani era; elaboration and utmost adornments became a feature of the architecture of the era. The formations of stucco Mihrabs with different kinds of calligraphy specially various types of Koufi, Utilizing different geometrical knots, arabesque and Chines-style floral scrolls sketches amidst inscriptions with wide flowers and leaves along with reliefs and carvings of them, all resulted in the arts prosperity in Ilkhani era. During Saljoughi era, architecture and design was experiencing sort of trial and error while during Ilkhani era, the issue was around combination and composition of the decorations and buildings' forms (Wilber, 1346).

Different levels of Mihrab in Grand Mosque of Tabriz

Decorations of each level of Mihrab



Generally speaking, the designs in the Mihrab include: Arabesque (nature oriented forms like flowers and bushes, trees branches and simplified fruits), geometrical curved and angled designs.

In completing Mihrab's decorations, forms like grape and vine leaves and geometrical designs using more curved lines have been used. Like other plaster Mihrabs, here plant-like designs are used as well.

CONCLUSION

Ilkhani era's stucco-working originated from that of Saljoughi era. But gradually some changes and innovations happened in design, decoration, and performance of plaster. The Mihrab's examination of stucco demonstrates that the decorations are deeply affected by stuccos of previous eras particularly Saljoughi and Kharazmshahi eras. Examination of the sketches in decorations of Tabriz's grand mosque shows that where

Koufi calligraphy is used, the composition is being formed in vertical and horizontal axes while letters and words do not overlap despite other types of calligraphy; they make a horizontal and long movement and sit on a lower seat. Of other features of the Mihrab, we can mention high delicacy and ornamentations in stuccos, and the inscriptions more effect as a decorative element. The calligraphy in inscription is in Koufi way of knotted and layered; it has a favorable association with plant decorations. Unfortunately, due to the destruction of parts of the Mihrab, the name of the builder and the date of building remain unknown.

Considering the importance of calligraphy in seventh and eighth centuries, stucco artists applied calligraphers work increased the beauty of the inscriptions by making the context full of designs and remaining the background simple since the beginning of the

eighth century. Grand Mosque of Tabriz's Mihrab has not been an exception in this regard. Koufi calligraphy has been performed with excessive beauty of plant decorations. All in all, Inscriptions have occupied an important location in decoration of the buildings of the era along with plant and geometrical elements.

Plant sketches of Ilkhani era are of more delicacy, ornamentation and adornments in comparison to other eras. Thus, some of the characteristics of the architecture of Ilkhani era used in Tabriz's grand Mosque's Mihrab can be summarized in this way: designing by scribing, using inscriptions as an important element for Mihrabs, using plant decorations and extreme delicacy in stucco and adornments in Mihrab decoration.

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