

# **An Analysis of the Graphical Features of the Ornamental Patterns of the Green Dome Tombs of Qom; with Emphasis on the Tomb of Khajeh Ali Safi**

## **Abstract**

Among the traditional arts, Islamic architecture and its associated decorations has always been the perfect setting for the presence of various visual elements, particularly decorative ornaments. A number of remaining monuments from the Ilkhanid era such as the tombs of Qom's Green Dome (the tomb of Khajeh Ali Safi which is the main focus of this research) provide a clear example of this artistic richness that due to its potential visual abilities can be found in today's art and in branches of contemporary art including graphic arts. This research is based on a "historical-comparative" method and a collection of findings based on library and documentary sources and field surveys. Firstly, a brief study of the historical background of the monument and the identification of the types of ornamentation used in the tomb, including herbal, geometric and inscriptional decorations among which the plant motifs occupy most of the ornamentation will be studied. In the following, the factors and elements of this role are discussed and their visual characteristics (rhythm, balance, symmetry, composition, unity, harmony of positive and negative space, etc.) are identified in order to understand the graphical dimensions of these motifs. Given that visual qualities and literacy are well-respected in these motifs, the above decorations can become a rich visual source for today's graphic designers.

## **Research objectives:**

1. Identifying the variety and characteristics of the motifs of Khajeh Ali Safi's tomb.
2. Extraction of motifs and studying its graphical features which can lead to revival and reuse of motifs in today's graphic arts.

## **Research questions:**

1. What are the features and visual literacy of the tombstone designs of Khajeh Ali Safi?
2. What is the diversity of the decorative elements of the tomb?

**Keywords:** Tombs of the Green Dome, Ilkhanid Era, Plastering, Decorative Motifs.

## Introduction

The patriarchal period is one of the most significant periods in the history of Iranian art. During this period, very magnificent and valuable buildings were built, both in terms of architectural structure and decorations. The architecture of this period witnessed exceptional progresses such as plastering, tiling and bricklaying that were built with special skill to decorate the building. The plaster art of this period was completely superior to the previous and subsequent periods. In the Islamic period, tomb architecture has been of special position in Iran. However, the initial Islamic societies did not consider it appropriate to build a memorial on the burial site and intended to simply end the material life of man on earth leaving nothing behind. Most of the tomb buildings are based on their appearance, which has a "cupola" or "dome". From the fourth century AH onwards, the construction of tomb buildings has become more common and it is obvious that tombs created the region of the Qom were similar to and influenced by other Islamic provinces. Due to the presence of powerful local rulers in the eighth century, Qom is witnessing the construction of numerous historical religious monuments, named "tomb towers" in Iranian architectural culture. Religious buildings and tombs in diverse Islamic periods have continuously remained a good platform for the emergence of talent and creativity of Muslim artists. In the meantime, architecture and related decorations became one of the main manifestations of Islamic art, and decorative motifs in the hands of Islamic art practitioners developed into an element to express the belief and sincere devotion to the family of the Imams. According to historical texts, there were more than 440 shrines in Qom. Among such sacred structures is the tomb of Khajeh Ali Safi.

Regarding the background of the present study, it should be said that this structure has not been introduced considerably, however, a number of brief reports exist that describe the structure of the building and its history. Among foreign scholars, Basel can be mentioned that during his ten-day stay in Qom, he listed sixteen tombs in the "Preliminary Report on the Tombs of Qom." Likewise, Donald Wilber, who in his book examines the architecture of buildings of this era, none of which went beyond a report on the architecture and location of the building. Among Iranian scholars, Modarresi Tabatabai in his book "Torbat Pakan" and Ammar Kavousi in a book entitled "Architecture of the Imams of Qom in the eighth century" have introduced the tombs of pious men of this period in terms of architecture and inscriptions. In addition, there is a dissertation entitled "Tombs of Kashan Gate of Qom in the eighth century" by the efforts of Kazem Arab, who has studied the tombs in terms architecture and planning. Therefore, so far, independent research on recognizing and examining the artistic arrays and interior decorations of the Green Dome has not been studied. In a brief description of this building, Wilber has introduced it as "Imamzadeh Ali ibn Abolmaali ibn Ali Safi" (Wilber, 1986: 199) also local monuments are to display the artistic features of each period. Recognition of these artistic features plays an important role in conveying existing philosophical concepts and applying them in new architectural works. Failure to pay attention to these works will lead to their deliberate destruction. In this paper, the method applied is a historical-comparative method and the collection of findings is based on library and documentary sources, field studies and preparation of images of decorative patterns and sketching the patterns by means of computer design software.

## Conclusion

Care and study of the visual values hidden in the decorative elements left over from the art of the Islamic period provides a wide range of decorative motifs and original designs, however, the correct and conscious application of such elements requires proper practice with necessitating the required conditions applicable with today's circumstances which involves sufficient knowledge and mastery of the structural and figurative principles of such rich arrays.

All the decorative motifs studied, including floral, geometric and inscriptional patterns were introduced in terms of structural quality and their location in the relevant building, among which the abundance of floral motifs is remarkable. In the theoretical teachings of Islam, man's attention to nature is the main reason for the significant presence of natural forms and plants in Islamic art, which the art of the patriarchal era has clearly put into practice. Rich geometric motifs with expandable features on both sides are the second priority of decorations in this tomb. Such regular plaster paintings often adorn the margins of Islamic plasterwork. On the other hand, the written arrays in the third and Kufic script have a significant presence as a visual complement among the curved and geometric ornaments. The balanced division of positive and negative spaces, which is one of the most important principles of composition in the principles of visual arts, is well observed in these motifs. The lines and motifs in these decorations often lead to symmetry and, as a result, to balance, which is seen as a unifying element in most of the designs. Contrast, movement and proportion are other elements that have been properly used in the visual structure of these motifs. The use of cool colors of blue and azure and orange-red also creates a rich and beautiful contrast that are eye-catching in combination with each other.

The presence of letters such as Allah, Al-Mulk, Muhammad (PBUH) and Ali (AS) are sacred words and meanings that have been used in the plaster decorations of this building and in most cases these combinations refer to Shiite elements and symbols that show the devotion of the Safi family to Shiite leaders. In general, it can be concluded that these decorations are not only decorative but also show a feature of symbolic expression derived from ancient and traditional Iranian elements and Islamic concepts. In fact, the artist of that period, for his doctrinal reasons, distanced himself from realistic objectification, trying to design beyond the material world and give them a spiritual perspective in order to lead his audience to another world and a beautiful paradise. Possession of geometric, plant motifs and original colors and combinations has made it possible to refer to the decorations of Khajeh Safi Ali's tomb as beautiful and meaningful graphic patterns in the present era.

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