

A Research on the Structure and Decoration of Molla Abdollah Mosque-School

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Abstract

Molla Abdollah mosque-school is one of the oldest samples of such architecture style as well as one of few scientific-worshiping monuments built in the Shah Abbas I era. In this regard, in the present study, it has been tried to study and identify the typology of architectural structure and decorations of the mentioned building during the integrative process to answer the main question raised in this study: what specific features does Molla Abdollah mosque-school have in terms of architectural structure and dependent decorations? In terms of method, the present study is descriptive-analytical research. Also, the data was collected by desk research and field observations, and the data was analyzed qualitatively. The results show that in terms of structure, Molla Abdollah's two-Iwan buildings including schools (chambers), mosques, and two Iwans, had been distinctly built from other similar buildings and has many notable points. Also, in terms of decorations, the largest share belongs to the exquisite mosaic tiles with big plant motifs and arabesques that their instances have been seen less within the same building. Also, in terms of materials, the inscriptions of this building are on the bed of tile and stone with Bannai Kufic, Thuluth, and Nasta'liq scripts and in terms of contents, Kufic inscriptions are exclusively for the praise of Imam Ali (AS), Thuluth inscriptions have Quranic themes, the hadith and narratives and Nastaliq script was used for the only stone inscription of the building with the theme of the deed of an endowment.

Keywords: Safavid era architecture, structure, decoration, Molla Abdollah mosque-school, architectural review

INTRODUCTION

Arising of Safavid Empire in the early 10th century A.H. was a turning point in Iranian history because, in addition to establishing unified governance, the Twelver Shi'a Islam was formally recognized in Iran. One of the most important ways of influencing people in the aforesaid period was using religious schools and buildings among which the common features were the dominant Twelver Shi'a, fine architectural structure, figured ornaments, and salient inscriptions [1]. Molla Abdollah Mosque-school is one of the outstanding examples of art and architecture related to the Safavid dynasty and Shah Abbas I era that in addition to preservation of its original formation in terms of structure and decorations. In the present study, it was tried to study Molla Abdollah mosque-school in terms of structure and decorations with a coherent approach. Therefore, most of the drawn and written documents about this school were studied. Then, its architecture and decorations were studied by field observations. The mentioned steps are presented in the forms of texts and illustrated tables with the preservation of overall coherence in the present study.

Literature Review

One of the most important resources in which Molla Abdollah mosque-school was mentioned, is the book "Treasures of monuments in Isfahan" written by Honarfar (1965). Also, Riahi (2016), in a book entitled "The results of days", presented the information on monuments and especially

schools and mosque-schools [2]. Attoes work (2012) "Architecture and Critic View" can be mentioned here [3]. The other research is "the Position of Criticism in Iran Architecture in Comparison with Topography of the Criticism in West Architecture" by Kochakyan, et al. (2014) [4]. Many studies have been conducted on symbols and semiotics of Islamic-Iranian art including a paper by Tashakori (2011) titled "Symbolism in Islamic art" which generally tackles the symbol foundations in Islamic art and relevant divine causes, and investigates briefly several pictorial samples with a symbolic position in Islamic art [5]. Another paper in this connection has been authored by Davazdah Emami & Zakaryaei (2017) titled "Peacock symbol and its media role in Shiite architecture" and provides useful information on the basics of symbolism in religious buildings of the Safavid era focusing on the role of a peacock [6].

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There is also a book by Mollazadeh (2015) titled “Religious schools and monuments” which deals with external features and significance of Islamic schools including Molla Abdollah mosque-school [7]. In conclusion, it should be noted that less research has been done on the historical monument of Molla Abdollah.

Figure 1 presents the characteristics of the general structure of the building as well as the decorations. The present study is developmental in terms of goal and it was conducted using the descriptive-analytical method. To collect the data, in addition to a desk study and various references including books, articles, theses, research projects as well as valid databases and sites and other similar references in the fields of architecture, decorations, historical information, and architectural review, field studies including observation, photography, and interview were used in the present study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

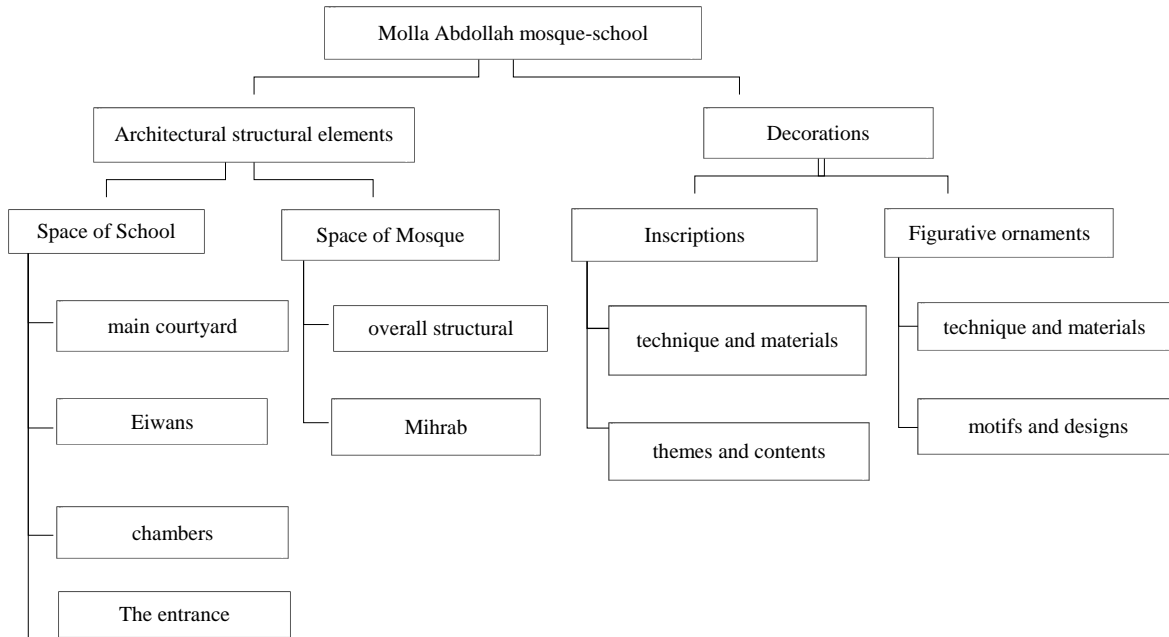


Figure 1. Structure of research elements (Source: Authors)

Religious art and architecture of the Safavid era

Shiism and its ruling were some of the most important characteristics of the reign of the Safavid which made it distinct from its other contemporary Islamic rulers [8]. In such a community where Shi’a was the official religion of the country, specific characteristics and elements representing Shiite culture and belief were observable. On account of the unavailability of comprehensive researches on an exploration of Shiite symbols and themes, no distinct boundary has been completely recognized between Islamic art and Shiite art in Iran. The elements of Shiite art which have affected the Islamic art include a combination of beliefs, myths, and historic events of Shi’a. [9]. As the most important ideological centers of Safavid era, schools held three elements of politics, religion, and beliefs and attitudes of laypeople and their leaders and marāji. Accordingly, making effort to include names of the Imams and particularly Imam Ali (PBUH) in the schools of the aforesaid period is completely explanatory in terms of political semiotics and semiotics of Shiite art [10].

A brief introduction of Molla Abdollah mosque-school

This mosque-school is one of the buildings for students to stay and it was constructed in 11th century AH with the order of Shah Abbas I so that Molana Abdollah Shoshtari, who was one of the first-rate scholars in the Safavid era and had much dignity to Shah Abbas I, taught in it. The exact date of its construction is not specified. However, using the stylistics of famous tiles used in the building can be attributed to the era of Shah Abbas I [11]. About this monument, Sharden writes: “Molla Abdollah school is the greatest and widest school in Isfahan and a great scholar like Allameh Mohammad Baqer Majlisi fully qualified jurist in divine Science is responsible for its management” (The same). After passing its portal, one can enter an open space in front of a building facing the street (this entrance was originally a part of Chahar suq (market place)) and after traversing a long corridor, one can enter its courtyard. The main space of the school was formed around the square-rectangle-shaped courtyard. Due to rectangular stoops, its angles were chamfered. This school, unlike many schools built in the Safavid era, was constructed as a two-Iwan building and one reason for this may be to avoid the 4-Iwan style to create a greater number of chambers. The height of the two main Iwans is approximately equal to the height of the buildings next to it and this reduces

the importance of the Mihrab as a little. It must be noted that southwest iwan had been paid more attention compared to other iwans due to its position in the direction of Qibla. The chambers were constructed on two floors around a central courtyard. 27 chambers were built on the ground floor and 23 chambers were constructed on the first floor (The same: 21). This building has been registered on the list of national monuments on 22nd December 1934 (Figures 2 and 3).

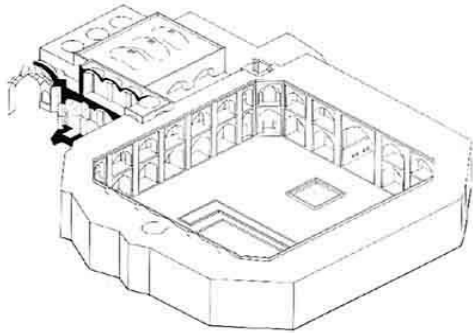


Figure 2. The three-dimensional image of the building [12]

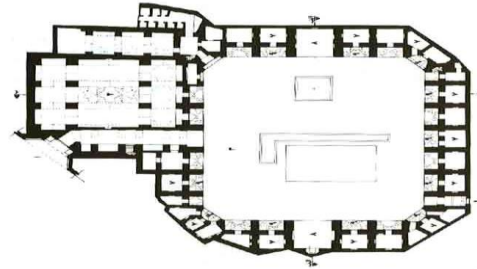


Figure 3. Plan of the building [12]

Architectural ornaments review
Technique

Among the ornaments used in this building, the main and the most important ornament is tiling which can be observed on most surfaces of the building. Given its importance, all the surfaces cannot be addressed in the form of the text. So, an overview of these decorations is listed in Figure 4 in terms of technique.

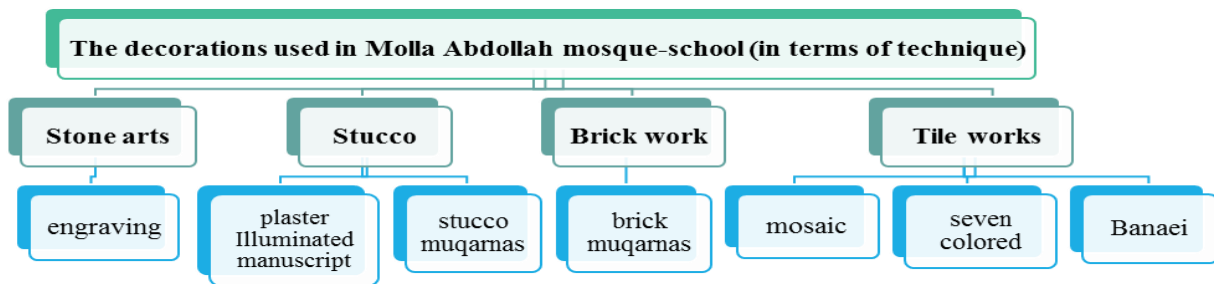


Figure 4. The techniques used in Molla Abdollah school-mosque (Source: Authors)

Motifs and designs

In addition to materials and technique, the types of designs and motifs used in the decorations painted in the Molla Abdollah monument are important in their turn. Due to the

multiplicity, diversity, and dominance of tiling in the building, classification and typology of designs and motifs have been done based on decorations names, as shown in Figure 5.

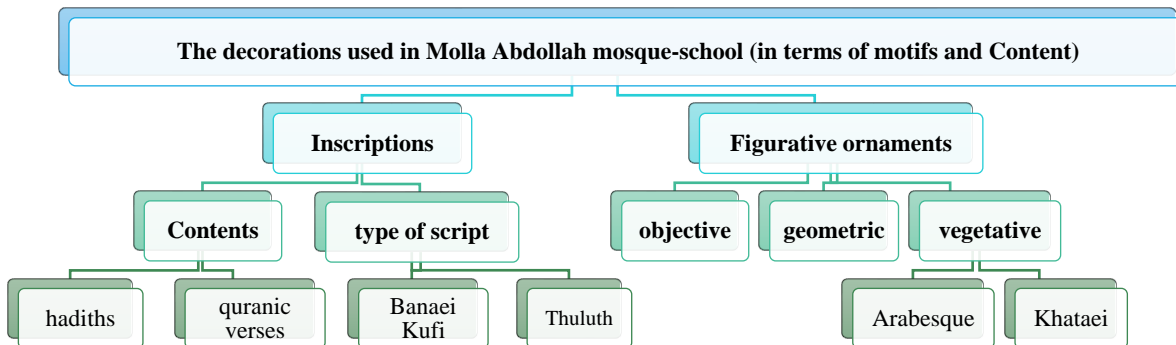


Figure 5. Content review of arts used in Molla Abdollah mosque-school (Source: Authors)




According to the concentration and centralization of decorations on the exterior façade of the main courtyard of the building and chambers, the designs of colors of tiling decorations used in a mentioned building can be briefly

described as follows: the spandrels of iwans were decorated using mosaic tiles with torpedo mouth arabesque designs in azure, turquoise blue with foliage and black, white, green, brown and cream flowers. The spandrels of chambers were

decorated with mosaic tiles on azure background with fawn-colored arabesque designs and foliage and turquoise and white flowers and also on a turquoise background with fawn-

coloreds arabesque designs and foliage and azure, green and white flowers. A review of decorations of Molla Abdollah shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. A review of decorations used in Molla Abdollah mosque-school

Technique	Type of motif	location	Sample photos
mosaic	Vegetative	Decoration of exterior façade (spandrels), chambers and iwans and interior façade of the mosque, mihrab and interior façade of iwans	
	Geometric in combination with muqarnas form	Muqarnas in zigzag form of mihrab	
	Kufic inscriptions	In a symmetry form on the exterior façade of iwans and also, in the combination with other decorations in the mihrab	

(Source: Authors)

Inscriptions

Type of the script

The types of scripts used to write the inscriptions of Molla Abdollah mosque-school were Banaei Kufic, Thuluth, and Nastaliq scripts, more than half of them were written by Banaei Kufic script, and 6 of 15 scripts were written by Thuluth script. Statistically, more than 50%, 40%, and 10% of inscriptions were written by Banaei Kufic, Thuluth, and Nastaliq scripts, respectively. It must be noted that the oldest inscription is a stone inscription of the deed of endowment placed on the southern iwan and related to 1088 AH and written by Nastaliq script and it is described more in following.

Contents and themes

Since the Safavid dynasty was based on love and willingness to Imam Ali (as) as the 1st Imam of Shiites, the manifestations of this love can be frequently seen in different Safavid schools, including Molla Abdollah mosque-school. In this regard, four of eight Banaei Kufic inscriptions placed in exterior space, spandrels of southwest and northeast iwans have the following themes: “Glory GOD is daily proud of his angels who are close to Ali ibn Abi Talib” and “Ali ibn Abi Talib is the door of Bani Israel who comes in through it, he/she is faithful and who goes out through it, he/she is an infidel.”. Additionally, four other inscriptions which are a set in four separated frames placed in the space underneath the Muqarnas of Mihrab, have similar contents and themes as follows: “love of Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS) is a shield of fire”, “Ali (AS) is the leader of the jinn and humankind”, “Ali (AS) is the successor to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)” and “Ali (AS) is a divider of hell and heaven” [13]. According to the

themes of inscriptions, it can be found that all the inscriptions were written in praise of Imam Ali (AS).

Of the Thuluth inscriptions, 5 inscriptions were placed in the middle part of Mihrab and their contents are hadiths about the necessity of prayer and repentance, the glory of the God, and declaration of faith, as follows: “hurry to say payer before its

setback”, “hurry to repent before death”, “as you deserved, we didn’t serve, glorify and sanctify you”, “we didn’t know you as we should” and “I testify there is no god but God. I testify Muhammad is the messenger of God. I testify Ali is a friend of God” and only one inscription was placed in the interior space of northeast iwan and parts of Sura “Friday” were written on it [13]. Conclusion of characteristics of Molla Abdollah mosque-school was shown in **Table 3**.

Table 2. Conclusion of characteristics of Molla Abdollah mosque-school

characteristics of Molla Abdollah mosque-school in terms of architectural structure and decorations

Overall building structure	1- unique two-iwan structure, building on two floors and impressive fit between the structure and the land use
	2- four divisions (cruciform) governing the components of elements of the building
	3- Application of the principle of symmetry in all components from the largest components such as iwans and portal to the smallest ones such as arches in chambers
	4-Representation of Iranian Chaharbagh archetype in the building through combining gardens in the cruciform form and passing water stream through them
	5- integration of educational spaces such as schools and chambers with liturgical space of the mosque located in the northwest of the building.
	6- proportionality between length and width and dimensions of components with their applications as well as a greater emphasis on areas such as iwans and main portal by large size and volume of decorations
	7- Breaking direct entry to the building and creating entry process through breaking the way along the corridor
	8- rectangular chamfers of the main courtyard that were used to increase the number of health and services spaces that it is good that there are on the periphery of the building.
Decorations	1- High-quality implementation of decorations with different methods and materials which fits with the support of the king, including a. the use of the most original and noble designs and the most durable tiling techniques, i.e. arabesques and Khataei designs on mosaic tiles which have more flexibility in proportion to space. b. the use of techniques such as engraving on the implementation of the most prominent inscriptions of the building
	3- the use of various symmetries such as reflective, transitive, and rotational symmetries on all parts of the surfaces decorated from the composition of decorative elements on a specific surface to used motifs
	4- the proportionality between used techniques and motifs and their locations and land use of the building
	5- the application of aesthetics governing all the decorations through observing all the factors addressed in Islamic aesthetics at whole and detail scales
	9- observation of negative and positive spaces in the background
	10- appropriateness of the materials and types of the script used in the implementation of the inscription and their locations and also the themes used in the inscriptions
	11- The impressive balance between themes and concepts used in the inscription and scientific and religious nature of the building
12- The balance between dimensions of colored surfaces and type of paint used in decorations	

(Source: Authors)

CONCLUSION

Accordingly, to answer the most important question raised in this study, it can be said that in the field of the overall structure, the architecture of this building has specific characteristics and there are clear differences between it and other similar buildings. The mentioned building consists of schools and chambers on two floors and shabistan and mosque and also, it was built in two-iwan form. Also, unlike other buildings of this era, specializing the iwans and other elements and separating them based on their importance have been not more emphasized using various decorations and dimensions. But in the field of architectural ornaments that

the majority of the results are assigned to it, it can be said that this building was decorated with the support of the king using the valuable mosaic tiles. The interesting thing about this technique was applying the color combination of glazed and unglazed tiles that give special visual effects to the courtyard. Also, these decorations are unique in terms of technique, the combination of designs, and motifs. Mentioned decorations were often implemented in spandrels of chambers, exterior and interior facades of iwans. They were designed as large arabesques and, in some cases, they were combined with elegant and simple khataeies on two floors. The majority of the Safavid buildings, especially the Shah Abbas era, were

full of tiling decorations and they have a special place in terms of the diversity and frequency of motifs and techniques. It must be noted that aesthetic principles governing all the decorations, studied in the present study were the use of various reflective, transitive and rotational symmetries, observing positive and negative space of background, the balance between colors, the impressive proportion between motifs and inscriptions, and their locations as well as land use of the building, etc. Also, another specific characteristic of the building, in terms of decorations, is the replacement of stone inscription with the theme of the endowment. And this was less observed in other buildings of the Safavid era. Finally, it can be said that Molla Abdollah mosque-school as one of the famous scientific-religious buildings related to the Shah Abbas I era, has specific characteristics in two aspects of architectural structure and decorations and the research on it can strengthen the individuals' information about it as well as the typology of mosque-schools of the Safavid era. Due to the paucity of space and grandeur of the building, all aspects of the building cannot be addressed in the present study. So, it is suggested to conduct other studies on it to promote people's information, who are interested in Islamic-Iranian art and architecture and to identify structural and content patterns used in this building and the relationships between different elements and their roots.

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