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**The Religious Symbolism of
Mirror-Mosaic Work in Iran**

© Maryam Tabatabaei Kashani 2002

Submitted for MTh

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

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Abstract

This thesis focuses upon the religious symbolism of mirror-mosaic work in Islamic Iran. Following an introduction the thesis is divided into four chapters which investigate the symbolism of light and mirrors in the Islamic tradition. Chapter one analyses the Qur'anic heritage of light and mirror symbolism by referring to famous verses (such as the "light verse") and also by investigating the Qur'anic ontology, explaining how God, the angels, man the jinn, indeed, all things can be comprehended with reference to light. Chapter two investigates the Shi'ite tradition of light and mirror symbolism with reference to the reports from the Shi'ite Imams. The Shi'ite connection is pertinent to Iran because it was during the sixteenth century that Iran became a Shi'ite state. Since then Shi'-ism has remained the dominant Islamic denomination in Iran. The third chapter turns to the mystical dimension of Islam, Sufism, which is well known for its attention to the symbols of light and mirrors. This is carried out with reference to texts of two celebrated mystics from Iran, *Sahl-I Tustari* and *Najm al-Din Razi*. Having constructed this framework that explains the prevalence of light and mirror symbolism in Islamic literature, chapter four offers an explanation as to why mirror-mosaic work is common in interior design in Iran. Moreover, the variety of styles and usages are investigated, and an explanation (based on the preceding chapters) is offered for the nature of these styles of mirror-mosaic work. Following chapter four these are copious illustrations of mirror-mosaic work in Iran, the vast majority of which are photographs taken by the author. The thesis is then rounded off with a conclusion which summarizes the findings of these chapters.

For the world of friend ship

This work explains the art of mirror - mosaic work in Iran and its relationship with light. I have been inspired by P. Shaibani and helped especially from the guidance of Dr L. Ridgeon to build this research; I should also mention the help offered by many friends.

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Introduction

For Muslims art has always had the responsibility of being employed as a remembrance of God, to His infinite mercy and love. Islamic art is usually based on the Qur'anic verses, *hadith* literature or the *summa* of Muhammad. Sometimes Islamic art in the Shi'-ite tradition focuses upon the Imams, Muhammad's successors, and their descendants (*imamzadas*). In addition, art in the Muslim world also served the interests of the Sufis.

This thesis focuses upon one aspect of Islamic art, namely mirror-mosaic work, which is very common in Iran, and developed considerably since the 16th century once Iran became a Shi'-ite country. It will be argued that *mirror-mosaic work* utilises light for a number of reasons. Firstly that it conforms and plays with the regulations laid down in the Islamic tradition concerning representation, and secondly that it is symbolic of certain Qur'anic verses, *hadith* literature about the Imams, and also it manifests the Sufi tradition of self-reflexivity. Thirdly, mirror-mosaic work was also adopted probably because it was an expensive and luxurious material, thus something of prestige that displayed power and importance.

This thesis explains my interest in how different aspects of Islam influenced different types of art works that can be traced back to the sources of the religion and beyond. The starting part is the light verse of the Qur'an which is vital for the concept of the *mirror in interior design*. According to Nasr "Without the Qur'an there would have

been no Islamic art"¹, a statement which inspired me to investigate how the Qur'an describes light.

I have been always interested to discover a way to connect the symbolism of light with mirror-mosaic work, especially in shrines, and to describe the philosophical and religious metaphor as a kind of conceptual art. The difficulty I have faced is that this has never been described before. The thesis became complex because the mirror-mosaic can be interpreted from a variety of religious perspectives, including the Shi'ite and the mystical, not to mention the "secular-religious" perspective.

Such an experience helped me appreciate the connection between a subject's eyes and the object. Later as a painter I started to use mirrors in my painting to yield a better connection between the viewer and the art-work. That was the main reason for me to finish my undergraduate dissertation on mirror-mosaic work as seen from an artistic perspective. I found that the mirror itself has such an ingrained significance in my country (Iran) and culture. Therefore I became interested to find its origins and its relationship in religion and tradition to discover the reality of the existence of mirror-mosaic work in sacred places.

Having an art background, this postgraduate work allows me to make a comparison between art (*practical*) and the academic. The problem that I faced was that there have been no academic art surveys on mirror-mosaic work in any language (including Persian or English). Mirror-mosaic work has been given the most superficial treatment as is usually mentioned in passing in general surveys of Islamic art or Persian art.

Therefore this thesis attempts to address this imbalance, and focus on the sacred meaning of light, mirror and mirror-mosaic work, not just as a luxury decorative element for the sake of beauty, but to build a bridge between Islamic cultures, traditions, and art.

¹ See S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, (New York: Crossroad, 1997), p. 8.

Art in general is a disciplined activity that can be expanded to apply to human skill in its broadest sense. However, art can be taken exclusively in the sense of drawing, architecture, and the decorative arts but hopefully in here the bridge will connect mirror-mosaic work and the sacred. Art is often considered to be the earliest manifestation of culture; it fulfils one aspect of the innate human desire to interpret the world and is the earliest tangible evidence of spiritual belief. Art is also the expression of a creativity of pleasure in dexterity, invention, and the ingenious use of natural materials. The role of art not only as a status symbol for individuals but also as the very embodiment of state religion is seen because Islam had a tradition of a symbolic and sacred geography which was an attempt to correlate the spiritual world with the mathematical dimensions of the physical world through geographic coordinates.

This study of mirror-mosaic work in Iranian Islamic art has aesthetic, cultural and practical purposes. Its central purpose is to highlight the mystery of religious art that combines history, culture, traditions, science, mathematics and philosophy. The existence of the mirror and mirror-mosaic work in sacred and famous buildings after the emergence of Islam shows a connection with geometric patterns and the laws of symmetry. The mirror-mosaic work assists the Muslim in the realisation of the sacred which is everywhere *all at once*.

More exactly the mirror is a metaphor for the heart, and the heart is throne of God, and mirror-mosaic work transforms every human activity into an art and this art into the remembrance of God. This is particularly true of the fine arts, as it is their role to manifest the hidden qualities of things. That is why typical forms of Islamic art are rooted in the spirit of Islam. The traditional arts of Iran are genuine and popular arts, which have penetrated deep into people's lives as it goes back to vast tradition of Muslim culture. Both

aesthetically and technically this seeks to respect the deep traditions of this art in order to make authentically new, vigorous works in their spirit.

Chapter 1

The Concepts of Light and the Mirror in the Qur'an

This first section is an attempt to find a possible connection between the symbolism of the mirror and man's heart in the sacred text of Islam, namely the Qur'an. If there is connection this may help us to understand why mirror-work has been so significant in the history of art in Islam, in particular in Iran.

For Muslims the Qur'an is the word of God, the recitation of which is the remembrance of God, which is stressed over a hundred times in the Qur'an, a typical example being "O ye believe! Celebrate the praise of God, and do this often;"(33:41) The Qur'an often refers to itself simply as "The Book" which "makes things clear" (44:2). The Qur'an is its own evidence. It reveals everything in the universe, reflecting God's attributes in differing degrees. Muslims believe it is able to do this because, as Murata and Chittick remind us, "the Qur'an itself is light, as it tells us in several verses, and to embody the Qur'an through faith and practice is to become transmuted by this light and to actualise all the qualities of light, which are the divine qualities."¹

It is first a recited book, and only a written book as a matter of convenience and as a concession to human weakness. For believers it is God's word, His self-expression, which takes oral and verbal form, and is thus a full image of God. It is His speech, and a record of divine wisdom, but as an external model, which displays the image openly, just like a mirror.

Remembrance (*dhikr*) and recitation of the Qur'an is recommended in the Qur'an itself: "Then do ye remember me; I will remember you. Be grateful to me, and reject not faith."(2:152), and this is a theme to which we will return later. It is important for Muslims to study the Qur'an because it is there that one finds God's names, and thus knowledge of God. As Murata and Chittick have stated, "Each name of God designates God's reality. By coming to know the names, we come to know God's qualities and characteristics."² This

¹ Sachiko Murata & William C. Chittick. *The Vision of Islam*, (New York: Paragon House, 1994), p. 178.

² Murata & Chittick. *The Vision of Islam*, p. 121.

remembrance of God is known as *dhikr*, a crucial concept for understanding the significance of the mirror in Islamic thought. Schimmel has noted that "the *dhikr*³ has always been regarded as a means of polishing the mirror of the heart – this heart which can so easily be covered with the rust of worldly occupation and thoughts; constant *dhikr*, however, can remove the rust and make the heart clear so that it can receive the radiant Divine light and reflect the Divine beauty."⁴

Light makes everything clear and so the Qur'an does the same. "The Qur'an is light, because it displays the divine wisdom hidden in creation and concealed from people because of forgetfulness. Light makes everything clear, and judgements are made on the basis of clarity."⁵ God's light shows all truth in the same way as a mirror. It is a guide for those who seek His light, and so the person who wants to release himself from impaired vision and entanglement of the mind, has to polish his heart with faith, and to attain serenity in his vision he has to listen to the guidance of the Qur'an and engage in *dhikr*. As Schimmel reminds us, "Even he who offers the *dhikr* with his tongue only polishes the mirror of his heart so that it becomes pure enough to reflect God's beauty."⁶ For thought and reflection give life to the heart of the wise, just as the one who walks in darkness with a torch. But those who reject the Qur'an are in a danger of becoming blind: their hearts are sealed with rust. "No indeed; but what they were earning has rusted upon their hearts." (83:14)⁷

Muslims believe that God's Light is His infinite mercy that brings His words to us in the form of the Qur'an. From the perspective of God's power it is His mercy that leads us to the full rewards of its reading. Our desire and effort are the necessary means; but His will and support are the only guarantees. So Muslims should approach the Qur'an with humility, with a sense of utter dependence upon Him, with trust in Him and with supplication and devotion to Him at every step. We need His guidance and so we are assisted by the prophets and divine scripture. After all God has promised our happiness, and He is able to cleanse the heart.

³ God Remembrance: "to remember God is to put God at the centre and everything else at the periphery. All Islamic ritual is performed for the sake of remembrance. The Qur'an calls the ritual prayer (*salat*) itself 'remembrance'. Sometimes translated as 'invocation,' this term plays an important role in the Qur'an and Sufi teachings. It means keeping God constantly in mind, most often by repeated mention of divine names or certain formulae." William C. Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, pp. 173 & 199.

⁴ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p. 148.

⁵ Murata & Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, p. 183.

⁶ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 171.

And We shall remove from their hearts any lurking sense of injury; beneath them will be rivers flowing; and they shall say: 'praise be to God, who hath guided us to this (felicity); never could we have found guidance, had it not been for the guidance of God; indeed it was the truth that the Apostles of our Lord brought unto us' and they shall hear the cry: 'behold! The garden before you! Ye have been made its inheritors, for your deeds (of righteousness). (7:43)

Regarding human inability to perceive reality through their efforts alone Chittick states: "The Qur'an's beauty cannot be seen unmasked in the mirror of the heart without the rays of the self-subsistence's light."⁸

1.1 The Mirror in The Qur'an /The Qur'an as the Mirror

No indeed; but what they were earning has rusted upon their hearts. (83:14)

The word Qur'an means readings or recitations, and as such it is a recitation of truth. Thus for Muslims the Qur'an is the mirror of His truth. Mirrors of course reflect what is placed in front of them. And so when Muslims contemplate the Qur'an various issues of life are reflected back to them. Even though there is no mention of the word mirror in whole of the Qur'an, it is possible to feel its presence. There is one Qur'anic verse that speaks of rust on the heart (cited above), which suggests that the heart can be understood metaphorically as a mirror. In the seventh century CE, mirrors were made of polished metal. It was possible that rust could form a cover over the surface of the mirror that would decrease or destroy its reflective capacity. In addition, the Qur'an also states in 6:25 "We lay coverings upon their hearts" which again is suggestive of mirror symbolism. One cannot see a reflection in a veiled mirror.

The problem of a rusty heart therefore presents the same problem for humans, as noted by Schimmel: "*What they were earning was overshadowing their hearts*" could easily be applied to the mirror of the heart that was covered by rust of blameworthy actions, and thus no longer capable of reflecting the Divine light."⁹ In the words of one of the most influential Islamic theologians and Sufis Muhammad Ghazali (d. 1111): "Bad influences, by contrast, are like smoke which clouds over the heart's mirror until it is entirely veiled from God, which is the 'heart's rust' mentioned in the Qur'an."¹⁰

⁷ Translation by A. J. Arberry. Subsequent verses cited are also from Arberry's translation of the Qur'an.

⁸ William C. Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, p. 79.

⁹ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God*, p. 31.

¹⁰ Shaykh Abdal-Hakim Murad, translation of Imam Al-Ghazzali, *Disciplining the soul*, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995), p. 237.

As we see in so many verses, the Qur'an lays stress on the heart (it is mentioned 132 times), which reflects the Divine light from God like a mirror as an inner guide. This shows that the heart is an important part of the human make-up, which can carry the 'soul and spirits'¹¹. The home for all believers, it is the repository of love, perception, faith, fear, truths, and trust. However it is in danger of rusting when the individual loses faith as a result of the temptations of Satan.¹² It is remarkable that the heart is the only part of the body that suffers pain after any bad news. Finally it is, in reality, the heart that is responsible for any act, and only the individual who brings before his God a sound and whole heart deserves salvation.

God will not call you to account for what is in your oaths, but He will call you to account for what your hearts have earned; and God is forgiving, forbearing. (2:225)

Evil as an example are people who reject Our signs and wrong their own souls. (7:177)

The verse above uses the expression, "for the intention in your heart", which refers to man himself - his spirit and soul. But the word "earning" can only be attributed to man. As the verse uses the expression, "for what your hearts have earned", it implies that the "heart" here stands for the 'soul', 'spirit'. It seems that, this is the reason why people attribute reading, thinking and sentiments like love, hate, hope, fear, will, envy, chastity, bravery, etc. to the heart. But by means of the heart they mean the spirit, which runs into or is attached, to the body.

Reading, reflection upon and performing the injunctions of the Qur'an is the way to cleanse the heart. The consequence of not believing in the Qur'an is not having a chance to clean the heart from rust and disease:

But those in whose hearts is a disease, it will add doubt to their doubt, and they will die in a state of unbelief (9:125).

In their hearts is a disease; and God has increased their disease; and grievous is the penalty they (incur), because they are false (to themselves) (2:10).

The Qur'an always gives man hope that God will guide his heart if he finds faith and believes in Him and keeps his heart away from disease.

¹¹ Both term, 'spirit' and 'soul', have airy connotations: *ruh* and *rih*, 'wind', *nafs* and *nafas*, 'breath': thus the importance of the breath as a vehicle of the soul can be understood, as can the frequent symbol of the 'soul bird', the airy, flighty part of human beings. Anne Marie Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God*, p. 184.

¹² See Qur'an 4:60.

No kind of calamity can occur, except by the leave of God: and if any one believes in God, (God) guides his heart (aright): for God knows all things (64:11).

It is the heart, again, which is the centre of every good and bad thing, whether it be satisfaction and peace:

Those who believe, their hearts being at rest in God's remembrance - in God's remembrance are at rest the hearts...(13: 28)

The above verses lead us to understand that the centre of our life is our heart. If we use it, it will take us closer to God, but we will be lost if it is not employed properly. When we look into the heart (or at the mirror) we can see the image, but what we see reflected depends on light; obviously a mirror is useless without light; therefore we need to understand how the Qur'an explains light.

1.2. Light in the Qur'an / The Qur'an as Light

Light has an important function in Qur'an as a guide for all human affairs. The term light (*nur*) and its derivations such as *nur*, *nuran*, *nar*, *naran*, *nurakum*, *nurama*, *nurahum*, *munir*, have been used in 194 verses of Holy Qur'an, which indicate the relationship of light with the body and the spiritual dimension of mankind. The Qur'an itself is regarded by Muslims as light, "O mankind! Verily there hath come to you a convincing proof from your Lord: for We have sent unto you a light (that is) manifest" (4:174). It possesses an aura of sacred light for during "the night when the Qur'an was revealed first, the *laylat al-qadr*, was regarded as filled with light. Pious Muslims still hope to be blessed with the vision of this light."¹³ As mentioned above, the Qur'an is considered by Muslims as a light and it not only gives guidance, but provides the inner light with the help of which man can follow the right path and reach his goal. It can protect him from going in the wrong direction, and warn him of pitfalls and dangers that lurk in the way. In fact, all human faculties of action are two-fold, i.e., they can be utilised to do good or evil. And for those who believe in Qur'an, it will be an inner light for them.

Nay, here are signs self-evident in their hearts of those endowed with knowledge: and none but the unjust reject our signs. (29:49)

¹³ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God*, p. 12.

In addition, the Qur'an refers both to created light and to created darkness:

Praise be to God, who created the heavens and the earth who and made the Darkness and the Light...(6:1)

1.2.1 God as Light

Muslims accept God as light as the Light Verse of the Qur'an gives an explicit portrayal of such a nature:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is as there were a niche and within a lamp: the lamp enclosed in glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: light upon light! God doth guide whom He will to His light: God doth set forth parables for men: and God doth know all things (24:35).

Yet the Qur'an also mentions other forms of light, "Praise be to God, who created the heavens and the earth who made the Darkness and the Light."(6:1) So here we have a division between the uncreated light of God and the created light which pertains to things other than God. For God to be perfect, His light has to be eternal, and since the Qur'an is regarded as His speech, then the Qur'an is also regarded by a majority of Muslims as eternal (although this was a matter of huge controversy in Islamic history). It has been stated by Murata and Chittick that "all light is merely the radiance of God's light, so all light is ultimately one."¹⁴ This however, raises an important question concerning the creation of light mentioned in 6:1, cited above). Radiance is not synonymous with creation, but it is a helpful manner of thinking about light in relation to absolute light, in other words, the spiritual dimension of the world as opposed to the divine. This is a topic to which we shall return in the discussion on man.

God is the light of the heaven and the earth which are the radiance or reflection of that light. In the Light Verse, God directly explains that He is the only Light; He knows all things and knowledge. But this kind of knowledge transcends mankind. The light that humans understand is the light which is received from the sun and with which things can be seen by the eyes. But in the Qur'an God tells us that His light will enable us to see matters inwardly. It seems that now humans are separated from the form of absolute light,

¹⁴ Murata and Chittick, *op.cit.*, pp. 89-90.

and have no power to understand the essence of pure light. But God is not separated from the world. He exists in every thing: "... and he is with you where so ever ye may be" (57:4).

Yet humans cannot directly perceive the absolute light of the divine. The Qur'an tells us that humans are composed of clay, but also that God blew of His spirit (read 32: 7-9) into him (we will discuss this below). Now if we think about God's light, which illuminates the whole cosmos and which was breathed into Adam, we understand that His light's power and magnificence is beyond our imagination (which is obstructed by the clay). The Qur'an hints of this in 24:43: "the vivid flash of His lightning well-nigh blinds the sight."

In other word human eyes can only see material things but if man wants to see His light he requires a special tool. He can witness absolute light, in so far as it is possible with the eye of the heart. This is because the eye of the heart is similar to God's spirit, or God's light, as God breathed His spirit into man. Like perceives like. So it becomes clear that His light surrounds and pervades the human body as well as the whole cosmos, "The world of light is invisible, because it is too bright to be seen with eyes made of clay. The world of darkness is visible, because organs moulded of clay are able to perceive things made of their own substance."¹⁵ Humans can only see the result of light when it is mixed with darkness.

But the person who is eager to understand pure light always wants to see it with his own eye. The most powerful light that we know and have experience of in the earth is the light of the thunderbolt, which can kill in a second should it strike someone; and God in the Qur'an tells the story about unbelievers who were telling Moses that they are not going to believe in God unless they could see Him with their own eyes; so they saw and died.

And remember ye said: 'O Moses! We shall never believe in thee until we see God manifestly' but were dazed with thunder and lighting even as ye looked on (2:55).

"It is said in Islam that God's light is so bright that people have all been blinded by it."¹⁶ In this world humans need to make the heart ready for true light to be reflected in to it. The human heart was created as a mirror for God's light and this is the reason for our creation. Ghazali, considered by Watt as the greatest Muslim after Muhammad, explained the meaning and wisdom of God's creation by citing the following *hadith*: "The wisdom of

¹⁵ William C. Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, p. 30.

My creating you is to see My vision in the mirror of your spirit, and My love in your heart."¹⁷

As we read in the Qur'an the light of God will guide and save the soul from darkness.

He is the one who sends to His servant manifest signs, that He may lead you from the depths of darkness in to the light, and verily, God is to you most kind and merciful. (57:9)

Although it is impossible to witness this Absolute Light, a certain qualified light enables man to gain salvation. God will guide the individual through the real light that is Himself, because He is the only Light. Its importance has been explained by Chittick:

Light is fundamentally a divine attribute and, secondarily, a quality found in creation. Light removes darkness, which is defined as the absence of light. Light discloses, divulges, unveils, reveals, illuminates, irradiates, clarifies, makes known, makes obvious, prove demonstrates. Light takes away darkness, obfuscation, ignorance, unconsciousness, stupidity, dullness. It is inherent to God and to the great revelations of God, which are precisely illuminations, bestowals of knowledge, reminders, and means whereby intelligence is awakened and brought to life. Light is intelligence, consciousness, awakening, life.¹⁸

Yet even attaining this qualified light cannot be determined by human effort alone, as is suggested in 24:40.

Or (the unbelievers state) is like the depths of darkness in a vast deep ocean, overwhelmed with billow topped by billow, topped by (dark) clouds: depths of darkness, one above another: if a man stretches out his hand, He can hardly see it! For any to whom God giveth not light, there is no light.

This last passage has profound implications regarding the issue of theodicy, but given the nature of this relatively short dissertation, we cannot pursue that investigation further. However, what can be said is that light has always been present for man: from creation until judgement day. On Judgement Day God's light will help to make everything clear.

The trumpet will (just) be sounded, when all that are in the heavens and on the earth will swoon, except such as it will please God (to exempt). Then will a second one be sounded, when, behold, they will be standing and looking on! And the earth will shine with the glory of its Lord: the record (of deeds) will be placed (open); the prophets and the witnesses will be brought forward; and just decision pronounced

¹⁶ Murata & Chittick, *op.cit*, p. 87.

¹⁷ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 295.

¹⁸ William C. Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, p. 30.

between them; and they will not be wronged (in the least). And to every soul will be paid in full (the fruit) of its deeds; and (God) knoweth best all that they do. (39:68-70)

If people do not recognise the signs as the radiance of God's light, they have lost contact with reality. For them this world is a dark and accursed place, because it gives no news of God. When the light of God shines, people are able to see themselves with clarity, which was impossible to the same degree before. God's light allows intelligence to function correctly, and people can no longer hide from themselves or from each other:

And the Trumpet shall be blown: that will be the day whereof warning (had been given). And there will come forth every soul: with each will be an (angel) to drive, and an (angel) to bear witness. (it will be said:) thou wast heedless of this; now have we removed thy veil, and sharp is thy sight this day! (50:20-22)

1.2.2 Angels

Any discussion of light requires a section on angels because they are the only creatures made solely from God's light, and therefore it is necessary to understand the implications of this when they are compared with humans. Angels play the role of mediators between the bodily world and God. They perform God's command and have a special relationship with humans, who more often than not cannot witness them. God created angels of light and the quality of their light is similar to that of God's. But there is a difference between divine and angelic light because God is uncreated light, and angels are created of light.

The difference between "mundane" light and "sacred" light has been elucidated by Murata and Chittick: "The Angelic light is not the same as light in physics, but it shares many of its characteristics. Light is that which removes darkness, dispels shadows and obscurities, illuminates, irradiates, unveils, and reveals. Both Angelic and physical lights do all that. Physical light is lifeless, while Angelic light is alive. Physical light illuminates, but Angelic light also enlightens."¹⁹ Yet angels only enlighten inasmuch as they are permitted by God:

He doth send down His angels with inspiration of His command, to such of His servants as He pleaseth, (saying): 'Warn (man) that there is no God but I: so do your duty unto Me' (16:2).

¹⁹ Murata & Chittick, *op.cit.*, p. 90.

The angels also are special creatures in that they attend the Day of Judgement, and there are some angels with specific tasks, such as those that question the dead person in the grave, taking man's soul to God and recording every human act. By God's order they are here to protect man. Indeed, belief in angels is a vital component of Islamic faith, as testified by 2:98 which states that "Whoever is an enemy to God and His Angel and Apostles, to Gabriel and Michael, lo! God is an enemy to those who reject faith." Those who believe in angels will receive their help as the Qur'an promises.

In the case of those who say, 'our Lord is God', and, future, stand straight and steadfast, the Angels descend on them (from time to time): 'fear ye not!' (they suggest), nor grieve! But receive the glad tiding of the garden (of bliss), the which ye were promised.(41:30)

In spite of the fact that angels are created of God's light, each of them knows only one name; "the Angels have no freedom of action. They could not disobey God if they wanted to. Hence, they can be only what they are."²⁰ As the famous Persian Sufi 'Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani (d. 1131) states: "each Angel possesses a known station and remember God through a specific name."²¹ But man, or Adam knows all the names. Seen from this angle Adam is the example of the perfect man; he was blessed with the special grace of knowledge from God.

The angels are not the only creatures to emanate light, for Satan too emits light, but there is a crucial difference between the two. Whereas the angels are made of God's light, Satan is made of fire, which itself is some sort of light. But although fire gives light it is luminous and dark at the same time. Fire ascends toward heaven, yet it is earthly. Fire can never be separated from clay, since it needs fuel to burn. Most often the Qur'an refer to the creatures made neither of light nor of clay, but of fire, as "Jinn". Satan, who is the most famous member of the *jinn* race is also known as "*Iblis*". Although he was created of fire, God allowed him to mix freely with the creatures created of light. The person who thinks that he will find his way with fire's light, in fact will not find the true light.

Their similitude is that of a man who kindled a fire; when it lighted all around him, God took away their light and left them in utter darkness. So they could not see. (2:17)

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²¹ William C. Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam*, p. 209.

Iblis watched the whole process of Adam's creation, and he was the only creature who disobeyed God's command to prostrate before Adam. As a result he was sent down out of heaven.

God said: 'what prevented thee from bowing down when I commanded thee?' he said: 'I am better than he: thou didst create me from fire, and made him from clay'.(7:12)

The *Jinn* and *Iblis* are ambiguous creatures, somewhat like human beings, and somewhat like angels, because *Iblis* has both the angelic luminous nature, and a dark, deceptive, and devious nature that can only come from a lack of light. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Qur'an mentions that God's messengers which are chosen from among angels and men:

God chooses Messengers from angels and from men for God is He who hears and sees (all things) (22:75).

1.2.3 Man as a Mirror/ The Mirror of Man's Heart

Most of this section will be devoted to a reflection on man's heart as a mirror, as the best of all possible places for reflecting divine light and unseen affairs, and also the importance of polishing the heart by the tool of the *dhikr*.

The Qur'an introduces the prophet Adam as the first man, the progenitor of the human race. Adam is an Arabic word for man, and he is believed to be the first prophet. God had created Adam from the element of clay as the Qur'an affirms in 30:20. The gradual process of man's physical development is referred to in the following verses of the Qur'an:

He began the creation of man from dust. Then He made his progeny of an extract of water held in light esteem. Then He made him complete and breathed into him of His spirit and made for you ears and eyes and heart. (32: 7-9)

This verse was given more detail in the *hadith* literature and this is noted by Schimmel who summarises the Islamic view with reference to the following *hadith*: "God kneaded Adam's clay forty days before He gave him life and spirit by breathing in to him with His own breath...The form of Adam is the mirror of both worlds. Whatever has been put into these two kingdoms, was made visible in human form...This creation myth assigns an extremely high position to man: he is in every respect God's perfect work, living through

His breath, and is, thus, almost a mirror reflecting God's qualities. As the tradition says, 'He created Adam in His image'.²²

God introduces Himself as light to humans, so His spirit is pure light. So man shares with God in possessing several characteristics, including light, life, and spirit, but this spirit is ultimately borrowed from God because He calls it "My Spirit." (15:29). Adam is therefore made of clay and God's spirit. This Spirit is something special which only breathed into mankind and provides him with his rational faculties. After his creation Adam was able to teach the angels the names of things. "We taught him knowledge from Us." (18:56) Yet knowledge has a place in the heart: "The faithful spirit has brought it down upon thy heart." (26:193) Moreover, a part of the Islamic tradition went further and made the heart the receptacle of something far more precious than rational knowledge, for there is a *hadith* which states: "Heaven and earth contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant contains Me." The heart is thus the dwelling place of God. Again, Schimmel refers to mirror imagery in explaining the *hadith* cited above: "it [the heart] is, in other terminology, the mirror in which God reflects Himself. But this mirror has to be polished by constant asceticism and by permanent acts of loving obedience until all dust and rust have disappeared and it can reflect the primordial divine light."²³ As the heart functions like a mirror to reflect God's grace, if this mirror is kept pure and clean from rust then a whole world of light exists within it. The holy spirit as well as divine light will reflect into it. It is here that one can comprehend the words of S. H. Nasr: "God becomes the mirror in which the spiritual man contemplates his own reality and man in turn becomes the mirror in which God contemplates His Names and Qualities."²⁴ God is light and His quality is light which is ever perfect, but it will penetrate the breasts of men more and more and so become increasingly perfect for them. God gave man spiritual insight so that man should understand nature, understand himself, and know God through His Signs, and glorify Him in Truth, reverence, and unity.

Continuously cleaning the interior human dimension is as important as cleaning the exterior parts. In other words purification means emptying and taking out every unnecessary desire, for example love of the world and of material things. This is achieved by pious contemplation and *dhkir*, to make the heart fully prepared to receive the love and

²² Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p.188.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.190

²⁴ Nasr, S. H., *Three Muslim Sages*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p.116.

hidden treasure of God. "Constant recollection polishes the mirror of the heart to show God's hidden beauty, that 'hidden treasure' that wanted to become manifest."²⁵

Some individuals, such as prophets with a clear mirror-like heart, can reflect God's light completely. "A healthy heart is able to understand the nature of things, but many hearts are, in Qur'anic terms, 'sick' or 'rusted' or 'locked'. Only a healthy heart has faith and is able to see things the way they are."²⁶ So most people have a stain upon their hearts and they do not have the ability to reflect God's light. Adam was God's first mirror, and indeed this nature of Adam is the specific characteristic of God's vicegerent. "Human beings manifest all God's attributes, but in a weakened and dim manner, demanded by the fact that, although they are similar to God in respect of having been created in his form, they are different in respect of spatial and temporal limitation. God remains infinitely beyond any human being."²⁷ Yet God gave mankind dominion over the earth, since Adam was taught the names of things, and as Schimmel reminds us, "to know a thing's name means to be able to rule it, to use it for one's self: by virtue of his knowledge of the names, Adam became master over all created things."²⁸ Knowledge is indeed power. Clearly, Adam had been taught not only the names, but also their meaning. The imagery used in Adam's creation, light and darkness, spirit and clay also suggests why Adam should be accorded a position above the angels and above Satan. Adam possesses within himself opposites, and knowledge is gained through contemplation of opposites. There is a dialectic then in the epistemological process of man: light, darkness, knowledge (or darkness, light, knowledge).

Yet as mentioned before, there are some who have a stain on their hearts, and for this reason God sends the prophets to guide them, as a mercy for the believers. That model for Muslims, is both the Qur'an, which displays the image openly, and also Muhammad. "Whomsoever God desires to guide, He expands his breast to Islam"(6:125).

The Qur'an makes it very clear that Muhammad is a model who is to be emulated; following his example is a mean whereby one remembers God – and we know that remembrance is the desired response to God's reminder. It is not without significance that one of the many titles that have traditionally been given to Muhammad is *Dhikrallah*, "The Remembrance of God".²⁹

²⁵ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 382

²⁶ Murata & Chittick, *op.cit.*, p. 38

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁸ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 188.

²⁹ Murata & Chittick, *op.cit.*, p. 186.

1.2.4 The Messenger/Perfect Mirror

Would man know his role and purpose of his existence unless he received clear and practical instructions of what God wants him to do? For most Muslims the answer is negative, and this necessitates the sending of prophets. Therefore God had chosen from every nation a prophet or several prophets to pass on His Message to the people. Muslims believe in a chain of prophets starting with Adam and completed with Muhammad. In the early days of Qur'anic interpretation, scholars believed that Muhammad was intended as the "niche" of which the Light Verse speaks, as the Divine Light radiates through him, and again, the Qur'an had called him *siraj munir*, "a shining lamp":

Calling unto God by His leave, and as a light-giving lamp. (33:46).
There has come to you from God a light and a perspicuous book. (5:17)
...the parable of His light is as there where were a niche and within it lamp: the lamp enclosed in glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: light upon light!... (24:35)

This "light upon light" indicates there are several levels of consciousness. The light itself shines from a three-layered enclosure-niche containing a glass (something transparent), containing a Lamp. This can refer to the physical senses, the mind and soul respectively. These are not light, and may be defective to various degrees so that they radiate or transmit the light imperfectly. This would account for most human ideas, motives and activities. But the lamp mentioned here is the prophet whose heart is as clear as a mirror containing no obstruction to the light. The following passage from Schimmel reveals the centrality of light for the prophet of Islam:

As such, he [Muhammad] is charged with leading people from the darkness of infidelity and error towards the light. One of the prayers transmitted from him is therefore, not surprisingly, a prayer for light: *O God, set light in my heart and light in my tomb and light before me, and light behind me; light on my right hand and light on my left ... Give me more light! ...* Small wonder, then, that Muhammad's birth was marked by luminous appearance, and later stories and poems have never failed to describe the light that radiated from Mecca to the castle of Bostra in Syria—the luminous birth ... is a well-known theme in religious history. For light is the Divine sign that transforms the tenebrae of worldly life.³⁰

God sent the Qur'an as light through Muhammad's heart, which contains the light of knowledge. Light upon Light: "...for God hath sent down to thee the book and wisdom and

³⁰ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p. 12.

taught thee what thou knewest not (before)” (4:113). He also called Muhammad *ni'mat* (favour) and *rahmat* (mercy):

They recognise the favours of God; then they deny them (16:83).
We sent thee not, but as a mercy for all creatures (21:107).

The Qur'an is the Holy book which is recited by Muhammad to purify mankind indeed, Abraham prayed to God to send Muhammad to the Arabs:

Our Lord! Send amongst them an apostle of their own, who shall rehearse thy signs to them and instruct them in scripture and wisdom, and can purify them: for thou art the exalted in might, the wise (2:129).

Yet the special status of Muhammad very quickly extended beyond his human nature and his task to warn. Muhammad became *al-insan al-kamil* (the perfect man) and also the first thing that God created, as the Sufis were so fond of claiming, legitimising their views with reference to various *hadith* such as: “The first thing God created was my spirit” and “I was a prophet when Adam was still between clay and water.” As the Perfect Man³¹ the Prophet Muhammad is the perfect mirror of Truth. “Muhammad is the prototype of the universe as well as of man, since he is like a mirror in which each sees the other. The perfect man is necessary to God as the medium through which He is known and manifested.”³² So the dedication of the perfected human being is to awaken and to bring about the perfection in all human beings. The perfect man must be God's perfect mirror. Muhammad's heart, like a mirror, receives and reflects all the Divine Light and messages from God as guidance for mankind, only such a perfectly polished heart was able to receive and reflect all divine illumination and inspiration and truth. And because his heart was mirror-like he could not deny what he received: “The heart in no way falsified that which he saw”(53:11). God alone is the Reality, and that Muhammad, as the mirror of perfect humanity, is the Messenger of God. The proof and the light are the Qur'an and the personality, life and teaching of Muhammad.

³¹ The Perfect Man “is he who has realized in himself all the possibilities of being; he is, so to speak, the model for every body, for, in fact, every being is called to realize his innate possibilities in accordance with the divine name that is his particular *rabb*.” Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 273. The characteristics of the Perfect Man have been described in the following manner: “The first quality of the Perfect Man is that he is always existent, both in cosmological terms and also in ‘reality’ within this world. This idea reflects the distinction between the Muhammadan Reality and Perfect Man. The Muhammadan Reality is a term for the first thing that God created, which is both perfect and eternal and is empowered by God to create.” Lloyd V.J. Ridgeon, *Aziz Nasafi* (Surrey, Curzon Press, 1998), p. 174.

³² Anne Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 272.

Honest believers polish their souls with the love of the Prophet so that the purest and most transparent embroideries would be visible in their heart's mirror. Those who are beautiful wish to see themselves on a mirror. They seek an eye or a heart to love their beauty. Those who believe and trust in the oneness of God, in the Qur'an and the prophets, and those who follow the light which sent was down with him, are promised light, happiness and mercy for ever after: "...so it is those who believe in him, honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him, it is they who will prosper"(7:157). (See also other typical Qur'anic verses including 4:122 and 66:8).

Chapter 2

Shi'-ism in Iran and Light/Mirror Symbolism

2.1 The Concept of the Mirror in Iran

Art in Iran always has been religious. Looking at old examples, such as the statue of Ahura Mazda¹ in Persepolis in Shiraz, one has the idea that every symbol has its basis in religion, and such examples have maintained their significance up to now. After Islam penetrated into Iran in 641, art developed in a distinctive fashion and the ideal was a responsibility to serve Islam. Iranian artists adjusted to the needs of Arabic Islamic culture, which was in turn influenced by Iranian traditions. Architecture continued to be a major art form, but because Islamic tradition condemned the three-dimensional representation of living things as idolatrous, sculpture declined. Painting, on the other hand, not affected by proscription of the human form, reached new prominence, and the decorative arts, too, continued to thrive. For example, figurative wall paintings gave way to arabesque design (flowing decorative lines or patterns, and inscriptions that take their identity from Islamic belief, such as images of flowers or calligraphy, etc.) because Islam rejected figurative paintings. It is not easy to see figurative painting (the human body) in public and special places. But colour as well as light found greater value and played an important function, based on religious belief.

Mirror-work as religious and meaningful art, is the major discussion in this thesis, and it will be argued that this artwork is one of the original art-forms after the expansion of Islam in Iran. It mainly emerged as decorative matter for special buildings during the Safavid period (1501-1722).² It is not difficult to understand why mirror work became one

¹ Ahura Mazda was the supreme creator god in Zoroastrianism, the religion of Persia (now Iran) before the establishment of Islam in the 7th century. *Ahura Mazda* means "Lord Wisdom" in the ancient Avestan language of Persia. Contributed By: Guy Beck, *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 99*. © 1993-1998 Microsoft Corporation.

² Under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722), a vast number of mosques, palaces, tombs, and other structures were built. Common features in the mosques were onion-shaped domes on drums, barrel-vaulted porches, and pairs of towering minarets. A striking decoration was the corbel, a projection of stone or wood from the

of the most significant decorative means especially in holy places, such as shrines (or the grave of an important individuals), as well as in palaces and famous houses. The most significant reason for any art-work in Iran is based on Islamic philosophy, mysticism and theology. The meanings behind Islamic art have been explained by the philosophers and Islamic scholars who were discovering and perceiving the "truth" of Islam, and then has become a model and example for artists to demonstrate and transfer those opinions in the world of art. Artists then had some sort of religious basis behind their thought, and had the responsibility to present those beliefs to others.

Just like tile-work and ceramic-work with arabesque design, mirror-work developed especially after Islam entered Iran and was used for decoration in Islamic interior design. The mirror (as mirror-work) is worthy of examination as a meaningful object from a number of perspectives: in the art world, in the Shi'-ite religious world and the Sufi world, as the mirror itself is the subject of many stories in Shi'-ite Islam and Sufism. Most of the time the mirror is compared with the human heart and it is introduced as a symbol of truth and a tool for knowledge, to understand the books of Shi'-ite scholars and Sufi poets (which will be examined in more detail in this chapter and the next).

As an example of the continuing importance of the mirror in Shi'-ite rituals, it is worthwhile to note that traditionally in Shi'-ite marriages, the mirror is placed in a main location of the ceremony room beside the Qur'an and a candle when the promises of betrothal are made, and couples must look at the mirror. In addition, when Shi'-ite Muslims move to a new house they also carry a mirror, the Qur'an and a candle. At New Year, there is a mirror, and the Qur'an and a candle which are all placed on the main table (although this may be a ritual dating from an old Zoroastrian tradition). And there are many other examples, which exist in contemporary Iran.

The identity of the mirror, and the significance of light have been examined from the Qur'anic point of view in the first chapter. The importance of light can be summarised with reference to the Light Verse, and the number of commentaries written by Muslims on this verse, and these tend to demonstrate the belief in God's light having deep roots in human existence. Also it suggests why Islamic artists and scholars have paid so much attention to light and its relationship with the soul and mind. As mentioned above, God presents

face of a wall, used in rows and tiers. These corbels, arranged to appear as series of intersecting miniature arches, are usually called stalactite corbels. Color was an important part of the architecture of this period, and the surfaces of the buildings were covered with ceramic tiles in glowing blue, green, yellow, and red. Contributed By: Robert H. Dyson, Jr. "Iranian Art and Architecture," *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 99*. © 1993-1998 Microsoft Corporation.

Himself as light. Therefore it is clear that artists with a religious background have used this knowledge to use light symbolically, in different ways, and in important places, not just for the sake of beauty, but because of the deep meaning of light as it is portrayed in the Qur'an. Moreover, it seems that the best way to reach light was a mirror, which is the best reflector. It seems that artists have understood the application of mirror and realised how mirror-work will reflect and move light in space. Ceramic-work as mentioned above, was one of the first tools for decoration, for it was colourful, and also the shiny surface was able to reflect the light (albeit in a slight fashion). But the most effective tool was a mirror, which suggested to artists the possibility of reflection, and it could also multiply light and colour. And since the mirror does not have any image in itself, it is free of figures drawn with a human hand (and thus proscribed), however it could reflect figures that appear in front of it. So a mirror is the most convenient and suitable of all light reflectors. Mirror-work also is an art of forbearance, as to put the pieces of mirrors, most of which are small and shaped, side by side to cover the surface of a wall or ceiling is no simple task. And this type of mirror-work can break the image and constantly reflect light and colour. This art is mostly found in important places especially holy places such as the shrine of an Imam³.

One way to assess the importance of the mirror is to investigate the thoughts of scholars in the Shi'ite world, in the Sufi world and also in literature concerning mirrors and light and to understand the symbolic significance of mirror-mosaic work in Iran.

2.2 Shi'ism in Iran

Since this thesis explains the art of mirror-work in Shi'ite places, it will be useful to present a short summary of Shi'ite identity, belief and history, especially in Iran, which of course became a Shi'ite country once it was adopted by Shah Isma'il, the founder of the Safavid dynasty. However, it should not be thought that prior to the Safavid dynasty, Shi'ism was insignificant in Iran. This section offers an idea as to why artists decided to give more value to holy Shi'ite places and why they started to use mirrors.

The vast majority of Persians (native speakers of Farsi) are Shi'ite Muslims, and their understanding of Islam serves as a source of unity among Persians and other Iranian Shi'ites. According to mainstream Shi'ite (the Twelver Shi'ite) there have been twelve

³ Imam (Arabic, "leader" or "exemplar"), in general usage in Islam, the political head of the Muslim community or the person who leads prayer services. In Shi'ite Islam, the term *imam* is applied to the person who is both the political and religious leader.

Imams who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad, and this Twelver version of Shi'-ism was important in Iran well before the Safavid period:

The Abbasid Period (132/750-334/945) began as a manifestation of Shi'ism ... and ... The coming of the Seljuqs was at first a great blow to the Shi'is ... and ... Important Shi'i centre in around 540/1145 to 590/1193 was northern Iran, Tabaristan (now known as Mazandaran) and the region extending as far south as Qumm.... From about the beginning of the 4th/10th century until the middle of the 6th/12th century, the most important Ulama of the Shi'i world had been Iranians.⁴

The city of Qumm⁵ is significant in Shi'-ite history, as understood by many Iranians, for in 685 C.E. the city's Zoroastrian leaders gave refuge to the Arab followers of Ali and Husayn, the martyred son-in-law and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.⁶ Qumm was maintained as an Arab colony for a long time as a branch of the original Shi'-ite community of Kufa. Subsequently it was known primarily for its Shi'-ite Islamic theological colleges, and thereafter it became an important pilgrimage center for Shi'-ite Muslims, who visit the famous shrine of the sister of the 8th Imam. During the ascendancy of the Sunni Seljuqs (1040/1194), Twelver Shi'ism was strong in locations including Rayy, Varamin, Qazvin, Ava, and Kashan, and it was also represented very strongly in the areas south east of the Caspian Sea: Mazandaran with the towns of Sari and Ilam, Astarabad, Gurgan and Dihistan. In addition, it was during the Seljuq period that the shrine of 8th Imam 'Ali al-Rida in (Mashhad) near Tus attracted many pilgrims. And not only did they support the sayyid⁷ families but they also endowed the shrines of the Imams with rich donations. Momen argues that Shi'-ism was strong in Iran prior to the Safavid invitation of clerics:

... although it is true that the majority of Iranians were Sunni until the advance of the Safavids, this fact conceals the large number of Shi'is in Qumm, Rayy, Kashan and much of Khurasan. It is also conceals the important pro-Shi'i influence of Sufi orders such as the Kubrawiyya, who were predominant in east Iran, and the craft-guilds in the cities, which were modelled on the futuwwa. These must have played a key role in preparing the populace for the acceptance of Shi'ism under the Safavids.⁸

⁴ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to SHI'I Islam*, (Yale: University Press, 1985), pp. 71-89.

⁵ Qumm is located about 120 km south of the capital city of Tehran.

⁶ Eric Hooglund, *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 99*. © 1993-1998 Microsoft Corporation.

⁷ Descendants of the prophet Muhammad.

⁸ Moojan Momen, *An introduction to SHI'I Islam*, (Yale: University Press, 1985), P. 103.

2.3. Fundamentals of Shi'-ite Belief

The specific characteristic of Shi'-ism is the Imamate⁹. The term Imam as used in a technical sense in Shi'ism means "leader" and refers to the person who contains within himself the "Muhammadan Light" (al-nur al-muhammadi) which was handed down through Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet, and 'Ali, the first Imam, to the others Imams. Bayat explains the value of the Imamate in Shi'-ism:

The Shi'a asserted that the Imam is God's proof. He is God's choice, infallible and sinless, the most perfect individual of his age. He has inherited the prophet's cumulative knowledge and all his attributes, except divine inspiration without a mediator. The Imam's function is said to lie in the spiritual interpretation and teaching of the prophetic revelation.¹⁰

The sayings of the Imams are in many ways not only a continuation but also a kind of commentary and elucidation of the prophetic *hadith*, often with the aim of bringing out the esoteric teachings of Islam. The sayings of the Holy Prophet and the Imams have been a constant source of meditation and discussion by Shi'-ite men of learning throughout the ages. Bayat's points needs to be elaborated upon to appreciate the significance of the Imam.

2.3.1 Constant Presence of the Imam

According to Shi'-ites, at no time in human history has the world been bereft of an Imam who serves as both a guide to humans and a Proof of God and a Sign of God. The Imams span history from Adam to the present day. Again Lari cited a *hadith* from Al-Sadiq (Sixth Imam):

The world will never remain without a proof (hujjah) and an Imam, for were it to do so, the people of the world would instantly be caught up in God's wrath. The earth will never be without an Imam. Were there to be no Imam, destruction and collapse would be the ineluctable fate of the world.¹¹

⁹ Arabic word for leadership

¹⁰ Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent Scotoreligious thought in Qajar Iran*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), P. 12.

On the one hand Shi'-ites believe that the Imamate began with 'Ali and has finished with the 12th Imam, while on the other hand they believe that their mission continues with an individual who has some degree of proximity to the Imam. Such an individual is at present called the marja' taqlid (source of emulation), who through study and learning is the person who is best qualified to know the probable will of the Imam.

2.3.2 The Imams, Light and Existence from Eternity

The Imams, according to Shi'-ites were a light created before the creation—this light was the instrument of creation. Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari¹² cites a *hadith* from Al-Baqir (the 5th Imam):

I swear by God that light (al-nur) is the Imam. The brilliance of the light of the Imam in the heart of the believer is greater than that of the sun. It is the Imam who illumines the hearts of the believers. God prevents the brilliance of that light from reaching the hearts of whomsoever He wills, this being the explanation for the darkness of their hearts.¹³

The Imams themselves were keen to play on light symbolism, and the following is a *hadith* (cited by Ibn Babuyah) from the sixth Imam, Ja'far, who emphasises the significance of 'Ali, ranking him in terms of light as equal with Muhammad:

Two thousand years before creation, Muhammad and 'Ali were one light before God ..., light formed from one main trunk from which sprang a shining ray ... And God said: 'Here is a light [drawn] from my light; its trunk is prophecy and its branch is the Imamate; prophecy belongs to Muhammad, my servant and messenger, and the Imamate belongs to 'Ali, my proof and my friend. Without them I would have created none of my creation....' This is why 'Ali always said 'I proceed from Muhammad [or from Ahmad] as one clarity proceeds from another.'¹⁴

Here the Imams act like pieces of mirror. Perhaps this is one reason that artists covered the ceiling of the Imam's grave with thousands of mirrors to show the symbolism of the stars,

¹¹ Sayyid Mujtaba Musavi Lari, translated by Hamid Algar, *Imamate and leadership* (Qumm: foundation of Islamic cultural propagation in the world, no date), p. 163.

¹² Lari is one of the eminent scholars in Qumm, coming from a distinguished background of Shi'-ite clerics. He has published extensively, and many of his works have many translated by Hamid Algar. In 1980 Lari established the Foundation of Islamic Cultural Propagation in the World.

¹³ Lari, op.cit., p. 162.

¹⁴ Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, translated by David Streight, *The Divine Guide In Early Shi'ism*, (Albany: The University of New York, 1994), p. 30.

a symbol of their reality. As said above, the Imams are the continuation of Muhammad's light, so therefore there is a good reason to see why the graves of all Imams are important centres for Shi'-ite Muslims to visit, pray, and ask for cures. As mentioned in the first chapter, the Qur'an described in many verses that Muhammad is a light, and in *hadiths* he himself introduces his household as light as well.

The Prophet has said: "The stars are safety for the people of heaven and the members of my family are safety for the people of the earth. If the stars went, there would come to the people of heaven, something hateful to them. And if the members of my family went, there would come to the people of the earth, something hateful to them."¹⁵

Muhammad explained of his own and the Imam's light in a *hadith* from Ibn-Babuya¹⁶ cited by Moezzi:

We were silhouettes of light until God wanted to create our form; He transformed us in to a column of light and hurled us into Adam's loins.¹⁷

This idea is elaborated upon in another *hadith* cited by Ibn Babuya:

This light will be transmitted from Imam to Imam until the Day of Resurrection.... At the time of the creation of the human race, the single and dual Light of prophecy [the Imamate], also called the Light of Muhammad and 'Ali, was placed in Adam by God; it was because of this light that the Angels were commanded to prostrate themselves before Adam.¹⁸

Given these *hadiths* concerning the Imams and light, and given the references in the Qur'an concerning God's light it should be of little surprise why Shi'-ites hold that both the house of God (the Ka'ba) and also the shrine of the Imam are spiritual, sacred places. The Imam's light in the shrine is held to rise from the tomb, from the Imam's spirit. It is identified with God himself, since the Imam is the supreme symbol, the sign of light, and God's proof. God's light has been manifested in a human form, and the existence of this light continues to exist with the spirit of its owner in the grave. Shi'-ite artists show this belief with the use of mirrors, which are the best reflectors of light, and symbols for the

¹⁵ Moojan Momen, *An introduction to SHI' I Islam*, p.148. *Hadith* from Ibn Babuya.

¹⁶ Shi'ite scholar of 10th century

¹⁷ Cited in Moezzi, p. 40.

heart, the seat of knowledge. They covered the interior of the shrine (and on some occasions the outside of the Imam's shrine) with mirrors to reflect light as a symbol of Holy light, as guidance for peoples' hearts. This shows how the love for prophet's household has a material expression, and has been one of the best motives for artistic creation in Islamic art.

2.3.3 Esoteric Knowledge

The light provides the Imam with secret, esoteric knowledge of God and creation; the most important of these secrets is "The Greatest Name of God". This light ensures that he is free from all sin or fault (ma'sum), and is the most perfect of humans (afdal al-nas). Having secret knowledge and being sinless means that the Imam is the most suitable guide for believers, as his spirit has the means of communication with realms that lie beyond sensory and rational perception, Lari states:

The Imams received certain knowledge concerning the unseen that had been vouchsafed to the Most Noble Messenger... The Noble Qur'an declares with the utmost clarity that God Almighty gives knowledge of the unseen to chosen servants such as the prophets in various ages. The immaculate Imams can also make contact with the world of the unseen whenever necessary by seeking God's aid and support and thereby gain access to knowledge they need.¹⁹

One of the functions and attributes of the Imamate is to extend inner guidance to man. This is something different from outer guidance in matters of law and the shari'ah. Numerous traditions exist affirming the need for an Imam to be present among the people in order to guide them as long as this world exists.

2.3.4 Designation

Shi'-ites hold that the Qur'an specifies certain conditions for the office of Imamate: "And We appointed from among them leaders guiding by Our command, when they endured patiently, and had sure faith in Our signs"(32:24). Thus the Imams are designated or appointed by God (mansus).

¹⁸ Cited in Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, translated by David Streight, *The Divine Guide In Early Shi'ism*, (Albany: The University of New York, 1994), P. 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215-216.

2.4 The Imam's Light (Knowledge): The Guiding Light

There is a traditions that states as soon as the Imam is born light appears for him from God; "a lamp made of light". Then the column of that divine light fills all of space, linking God with the Imam who acquires his knowledge from it, enabling him to "see" what he wants to know. This *hadith* from Ja'far (6th Imam) continues:

God establishes a column made of light between Himself and the Imam ... When [the Imam] wants to know something, he looks into this light and acquires the knowledge of it.²⁰

Traditions give emphasis to two kinds of knowledge acquired by "vision" through this mystical light. Knowledge in the Imam's heart that allows him to know hidden thoughts and see the actions of creatures.

The Imam's light and knowledge has not only been described by Muhammad (in the *hadith* literature) but also in Qur'anic verses too.²¹ Momen claims that the Imams are those who are the sole authorised interpreters of the Qur'an, especially regarding the so-called "ambiguous verses".²² In carrying out this function, Imams have interpreted many of these verses as referring to the Imamate and its station. And, 'Ali is reported to have said that one quarter of the Qur'an is about the Imams.²³

As explained before the Imam is the Light of God and the heart of the Imam is described as the main location for the manifestation of God's light, and is a place where knowledge and love from God are received. In traditions we see Imams state that God can be seen with the heart, and this vision with the heart is the key condition of true faith. There are many *hadiths* from different Imams concerning how to see God. For example, Ali replied to a questioner who asked if he could see God? Ali replied: "Beware! The eyes cannot see Him with the glance; it is rather hearts that see Him."²⁴

²⁰ Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, p. 58.

²¹ See for example 'Therefore believe in God and His Apostle and the light which we have sent down' (64:8).

²² For example: 'No-one knows the interpretation of it (the Qur'an) except God and those who are deeply rooted in knowledge' (3:7). 'Those who are deeply rooted in knowledge' is held to refer to the family of Muhammad (i.e. the Imams). 'God is sufficient as a witness between you and me and also those who possess knowledge of book' (13:43). 'Those who possess knowledge of the book' refers to the Imams. This phrase occurs in several other places (e.g. 16:27; 29:49; 34:6)

²³ Moojan Momen, *An introduction to SHI'I Islam*, pp. 151-152.

²⁴ Cited by Kulyani and Ibn Babuya, in Moezzi, p. 47.

Moreover, the “visibility” of God’s light resembles that of the Imam’s as the following *hadith* from al-Baqir and cited by Kulyani indicates: “The light of the Imam in the hearts of the faithful is more brilliant than that of the brilliant day star.”²⁵ But it reveals that there is no access for humans to the Imam’s light except a mystical form through “the eye of the heart” which is explained by the Shi’-ite scholars. Moezzi cites several sources and claims that the “eye” of the heart is placed in the centre of the heart and is sometimes identified with Hicro-Intelligence (al-‘aql). ‘Aql is the means of vision with the heart, which is identical to the Imam, it is the interior Imam of the believer.²⁶ The significant point here about al-‘aql as Moezzi notes is that in the early Shi’-ite tradition ‘aql had the meaning of “a dialectic faculty of discernment” (reason) and also it referred to a “cosmic force”. ‘Aql, or light of the Imam was the first thing that God created. It was also the light of the Imam, found only in the hearts of the faithful. Here “faithful” refers to “true Shi’-ites,” that is, those initiated by the Imams. It is interesting to speculate as to whether or not such an understanding of ‘aql contributed to the growth and development of Sufism. However this is not the place for such speculation, the aim of this section is merely to indicate the significance of light within the Shi’-ite tradition, in particular the Imams, for it is important when we discuss the shrines of the Imams.

2.5. Shi’-ism and Pilgrimage

This thesis will attempt to explain how the belief of Iranian Shi’-ism caused or inspired Muslims artists to present their feelings toward the Prophet Muhammad and his household in the world of art, and literature. Among the most important Shi’-ite centres in Iran are the shrines of the Imam and their descendants (Imamzada), that is to say, the grave of one the main Twelver Imams and also Imam’s successors. For Muslims artists, the shrine is the best place to manifest their holy art, as they believe that the value of such a place is the same (perhaps greater than that held at God’s house, namely the Ka’ba). A saying of the prophet, related in Shi’-ite texts states that “A single visit (ziyara) to the grave was equivalent to seventy pilgrimages to Mecca.”²⁷

²⁵ Moezzi, p. 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁷ Heinz Halm, *Shiism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 60.

With this tradition in mind Shi'ite artists tried to illuminate those places as a reflection of what they perceived as true reality, - light. Momen also considers Shi'ite shrines:

Visiting the shrines of Imams become an important activity in Shi'i religious life and one in which comparatively humble persons could participate. Visiting the shrines of minor Shi'i saints and, in particular, the descendants of the Imams, also become an important activity with each shrine having its own prayer of visitation. These shrines (called *Imamzadas*) are to be found in large numbers in Iran, especially in the area around Qumm, Tehran, Kashan and Mazandaran which have been Shi'i from the earliest time.²⁸

As mentioned above, during the Safavid period there was change in faith that is reflected in artwork. This support of Shi'-ism was continued by the next major dynasty in Iran, the Qajars who were descended from one of the Turkoman tribes who supported Isma'il, the first Safavid monarch. In their quest to legitimise their rule (since they had no religious pedigree as had the Safavids who claimed descent from the eighth Imam) the Qajar monarchs were at pains to nurture good relations with the Shi'-ite clerics. Thus Fath 'Ali Shah (d. 1834) deferred greatly to the Shi'-ite Ulama. He apart from numerous pilgrimages to Qumm and Mashhad, spent much more money on the repair and embellishment of these shrines.²⁹

2.5.1 The Imam's Shrine: The Place of Secrets

As mentioned before Twelver Shi'-ites respect the prophets' household which includes 'Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husayn and all the remaining of the Twelve Imams. They celebrate their birth and bewail their death, and have established their graves as important places, building shrines for the Imams and Imamzada, which have been used for where pray and pilgrimage. The way in which Shi'-ites built the shrines - the use of mirror-work (especially in Iran) - shows their value in their religion. Mirrors were used not just for beauty but also because they discovered the symbolic connection between the heart and the mirror.

The advent of Islam in Iran (635 C.E..) gave rise to great upheavals in architecture, and laid the foundations for Islamic architecture all over the world. To be sure, no Persian

²⁸ Moojan Momen, *An introduction to SHI'I Islam*, p. 182.

²⁹ Moojan Momen, *An introduction to SHI'I Islam*, p. 130.

building from the first two Islamic centuries has survived, but from third century onward, Islamic building flourished rapidly and expanded during the next centuries. A great surge of building works together with unique decorations and calligraphy appeared in these centuries.

Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Musa, known as "The Approved One" (al-Rida), was the 8th Imam of Shi'-ite Islam. The shrine built to him has become a pilgrimage centre in Mashhad (north east of Iran). While he was with the Caliph, Ma'mun in Marv, his sister, Fatima, called "The Immaculate" (Ma'suma) journeyed to be with him but died in Qumm before reach Marv. The shrine built to her has become the religious centre of Qumm, which was founded as a Shi'-ite city in 712 AD / 94. The present shrine was built by Shah Bigum, the daughter of Shah Isma'il, in 1519. The dome was covered with gold tiles in the Qajar period. The inside of Fatima's shrine is decorated with mirrors. Momen comments:

With the advance of a Shi'i state under the Safavids and the gradual conversion of most Iranians to Shi'ism, there were, of course, many major developments in the popular religion in Safavid times. Most of these developments occurred towards the end of the Safavid era. The main trends in the evolution of the popular religion in this period was the increased importance of pilgrimage made to the Shrines of the Imams (in Iraq and Mashhad) and the descendants of the Imams (called Imamzadas).³⁰

2.5.2 The Shrine as a Grave

Basically the shrine is the location of the grave of the Imam or the Imamzada, It has great value for Shi'-ites as a place for prayer, recitation of the Qur'an, spiritual concentration, and also a place for the miraculous curing of medical ailment (shafa). In the words of Halm:

The 'sighing of the afflicted one' the visiting of Graves, flagellation processions and passion plays 'With their brows lying on the holy ground of the sacred graves; weeping incessantly, bearing the death of their lords upon their bodies'.... For the Shi'ites all the Imams – with the exception of the twelfth-suffered a violent death as martyrs or witnesses (shahada', sing. Shahid): slain, poisoned or died in prison.

In addition, self-sacrifice qualifies the martyr to assume a role of meditation (wasila) with God and to intercede (shafa'a) on behalf of the faithful."³¹

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³¹ Heinz Halm, *Shiism*, p. 139.

There are many explanations about the reality of the owner of the grave and the soul, which ultimately refer back to the *Hadith* of Muhammad and the Imams. For example, Muhammad prayed, "O God, set light in my tomb..."³² And also Shi'-ites hold that the light of Muhammad and Imams shine in their graves, for 'Ali, said, "among us [prophets and the Imams of all ages], he who dies is not dead,"³³ and so it is believed that the spirit of Imams as well as their light are present in their tomb. Moreover, it is held that the light/energy will come to the surface of the tomb, and in some fashion they will be able to absorb the light and accrue its benefits. This is necessary for the salvation of their soul. The believers see the shrine as an entrance to divine knowledge and light. S/he desires to make a connection with the owner of the grave in order to acquire such knowledge and light. The grave represents the location where the believer can pass from the concerns of the material world and reach the realities underlying them. In the words of the famous 20th century Shi'-ite theologian Allamah Tabataba'i:

A pious Muslim extends his spiritual life into every aspect of his material life. Wherever he is and whatever he is doing he is in contact with God. Everything with which he occupies himself in the material world is a mirror in which he sees God reflected.

In addition, given that the world and all it contains are the creation of God and that the phenomena of the world, each according to the measure of its own existence, are signs of the Truth and mirrors displaying God, and given that man along with the various conditions which mark his primordial nature is one of these signs, then it is necessary that in the spiritual life (the way of knowledge of self and of God) God be recognized in every situation. All of these mirrors must be utilized in the acquisition of divine knowledge and in the contemplation of God's Beauty, for if this is not the case man will gain nothing more from his labors than an imperfect knowledge or a perfect ignorance."³⁴

The mirror acts as an intermediary between the material and immaterial world. It is a complex concept, and due to its difficulty it is best illustrated in the following lengthy quotation from Henry Corbin:

As for the manner in which souls make their entrance into this world, it should be compared to the manner in which the image of the human person makes its entrance. It appears, in the mirror which reflects it, or else with the light of the sun that falls from on high on this mirror or on the surface of calm water. Neither the matter nor the form of the image you see in the mirror originates in the mineral substance of the mirror. No, this image possesses separately and in itself, its own matter and its own

³² Anne Marie Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God*, p. 12.

³³ Muhammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, p. 73.

³⁴ 'Allamah Tabataba'i, Translated from the Persian by William Chittick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Muhammad [s] in the MIRROR of Islam*, Houston: Free Islamic Literatures, Inc.

form, which are in no way part of the mirror and in no way derive from its mineral substance, for they neither blend with it nor alter it. This image has autonomous existence; it was created separately. If the mirror is there, the image is not there, the image nonetheless subsists in itself and for itself; it subsists in its own world, with its own matter and its own form. Doubtless it will be said that it is "a party of this world." But to say that it is dead "to" and "for" this world in no way means that it is dead "to" and "for" its own world. Quite the contrary; there it is indeed, living and close to the divine, which guarantees its subsistence. The phenomenon of death took place in this world, not in the world beyond ... I can now attempt to explain the way in which these eternal forms belonging to the world of the Soul come "onto the surface" of the accidental matters of the perishable world. They "come" there in the same way that light of sun "comes" onto this Earth or "into" mirrors, or in the same way that a man's reflection, his silhouette, and his image "enter", come "into" mirrors ... The image is other than the mirror, is distinct from the matter and form of the mirror. If the mirror is there, the image appears in it, if the mirror is not there, your silhouette and your image continue nonetheless to subsist through your person, without having anything to do with the mirror. It is exactly the same in the case of the world of the *barzakh*, the inner world. This world has its own independent existence; if the temporal and accidental matters of our world are there, the reflection of its image appears in them; if they are not there it continues to exist in its own "place" and to subsist, thank to the soul."³⁵

The mirror's surface, then, is not just a looking glass, but is a *barzakh*, or intermediate realm where two realms are united. This discussion of Shi'ism has included many elements more commonly associated with Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. The next chapter will focus specifically upon Persian Sufism, because the imagery of the mirror is frequently used as a tool for the acquisition of inner knowledge.

³⁵ Henry Corbin, translated by Nancy Pearson, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth, from Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), P. 247-253.

Chapter 3

Sufism in Iran and Light/Mirror Symbolism

3.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters focused on the relationship of Islam with the imagery of the mirror and light, focusing on the Qur'an and on the Shi'-ite interpretation of Islam. Chapter three analyses another major component of Iranian identity, namely Sufism, which surely bears some importance when investigating the influences upon Iranian artists, and why mirrors and light have become such significant decorative and spiritual elements within sacred places. Much has been written about Sufism in the West, indeed, the West has been undergoing something of a Sufi boom in recent years. This is typified at a popular level by the number of devotional books of Sufi poetry that have been published recently,¹ and at the more academic level by the "Sufi" series of books edited by Professor Ian Netton.²

Sufism is a huge topic of investigation and therefore we will limit our analysis to those elements that are pertinent to our thesis, namely, those aspects that pertain to light and the mirror. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue about the "Islamicity" of Sufism, or its origins. But in the preceding chapters an attempt has been made to indicate that light and mirror imagery are present in the early texts and history of Islam, and from this perspective one can argue, justifiably perhaps, that by the medieval period the Sufi utilisation of light and mirror metaphors really did rely on its Islamic heritage, even if it was also inspired by cultures outside of the Islamic tradition.

The distinguishing feature about Sufism is its belief that the individual can in some way or other communicate with the divine in this life. This stands in contrast to the more "orthodox" Islamic position that God can only be witnessed in the next world at Judgement Day. Yet Sufis went beyond this and spoke of seeing, hearing, and speaking with God in this world. By the medieval period this had reached the extent that some Sufis spoke of an

¹ See for examples the translations of Coleman Barks.

² See Curzon Press' *Sufi* series, edited by Ian Richard Netton.

existential unity with God. It has already been noticed in chapter one that God is described as *light*, and Muhammad is also a "shining lamp", while other humans also have a *light*. Given this, it is not surprising that Sufis attempted to investigate the difference or similarity in the lights mentioned in the Qur'an. Moreover, we have also noticed that the early Shi'-ite commentators, such as the 9th century Ibn Babuya and al-Kulyani cited *hadiths* from the Shi'-ite Imams, the central metaphor of which was light.

It seems that this period in Islamic history, the 8th-9th century, was crucial in the spread of the light metaphor. It was just before the period when the aforementioned Shi'-ite commentators lived that Sahl ibn 'Abdallah al-Tustari composed mystical works that elaborated mystical ideas concerning light. Prior to Tustari, as Momen notes, there were individual ascetics, but by the 12th-13th centuries Sufism had developed with its organised order and hierarchies and rituals.³ Yet speculative, theoretical Sufism seems to have matured in Tustari's era. The similarity in the views of Sufis such as Tustari and the Shi'-ites in their use of light metaphors contributed perhaps to what Momen describes as the

complex inter-relationship [between the two] of the 12th to 14th centuries AD. Shi'ism achieved political power over almost all of the Islamic world in the 10th and 11th centuries. Then in the middle of the 11th century the Seljuqs came to power and severely repressed Shi'ism. It has been suggested that Sufism, in its organised form, arose at about this time to fill the vacuum left by the suppression of Shi'ism. Certainly there is a great deal of similarity between Shi'ism and many aspect of Sufism which would tend to support this thesis.⁴

It is worthwhile examining Tustari's ideas a little here because he is the first Sufi to discuss light in a systematic and comprehensive fashion. Although it is not clear whether Tustari was of Arabian or Persian origin, his name indicates a Mesopotamian origin (for Tustar read Shushtar). And although Tustari was a Sunni, his ideas may well have been influenced by (or perhaps were influential on) Shi'-ite thinking. His mystical, Sufi inclinations, however are clear, as he allows man to approach the meeting with God, the vision of Truth, and life in the permanence of Truth.

The task of appreciating Tustari's Arabic works have been made easier by the study of Gerhard Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*. Like most Sufis, Tustari's works (such as his *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-karim*) are grounded firmly in an esoteric exegesis of certain Qur'anic verses. The pivotal idea in the *Tafsir* concerns the "Muhammadan Light" the discussion of which is "intrinsically connected with [the]

³ Moojan Momen, *An introduction to SHI' Islam*, p. 208.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.208.

terminology and imagery [of the Qur'anic light verse, 24:35].⁵ The Muhammadan Light originates in God's light. It is the pre-eternal manifestation of the "likeness of His light." The origin of the light of Muhammad in pre-eternity is depicted as a luminous mass of primordial adoration in the presence of God which takes the shape of a transparent column of divine light and constitutes Muhammad as the primal creation of God. (The mention of a column of light is reminiscent of the Shi'-ite *hadith* mentioned in the previous chapter: "We were silhouettes of light until God wanted to create our form; He transformed us in to a column of light." It is interesting to speculate that such similarities in metaphors and dogma promoted the convergence between Sufism and Shi'-ism in Iran from the 9th century onwards, noted by many scholars including Momen and Henri Corbin).

Tustari then permits the rest of humanity to share in the divine light since he believes that Adam (the archetypal human) was created from Muhammad's light. As Tustari states: "The light of the prophets is from Muhammad's light and the light of the heavenly kingdom is from his light, and the light of this world and of the world to come is from his light." And then "God created the God-seekers from the light of Adam and He created the divinely-desired from the light of Muhammad."⁶ The fact that all humans (in one way or another) share in this light is linked with the primordial covenant when humans testified in pre-eternity that God, indeed, is their Lord (Qur'an 7:172). As a result of this covenant, God desires to guide man, and therefore he does so through light. In Bowering's words:

The divine guidance, experienced by mankind, is interpreted by Tustari as "a manifestation from their Lord by virtue of the light of guidance", which leads the heart to contemplative witnessing of God and to confident self-abandonment in His presence. This light of guidance constitutes a part of the divine light by which God singularised man in His divine foreknowledge.⁷

By witnessing the divine, the human is immersed in divine light, which to use Bowering's term, is an "experience of radiation". The individual "absorbs" the divine light and in turn reflects and radiates it.⁸ This of course is an idea that was to be developed at great length in the course of Sufism. It has many parallels with the ideas elaborated by Ibn 'Arabi and his followers of the school of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of existence) which became so popular

⁵ Gerhard Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of existence in Classical Islam, The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Sufi, Sahl At-Tustar* (Berlin/New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1980), p. 153, 149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.217.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.175.

in Iran, and it also bears similarities with the portrayal by Mulla Sadra (1572-1640) of an individual who undertakes four journeys that take him from society to God and then back to society. The exact nature of the mystical experience is difficult to pin-point in Tustari's works. It would appear that identification between man and God is ruled out, as is the conjoining of two things, as Tustari rejects the words *hulul*, *jam'* and *ittisal* (translated by Bowering as indwelling, cohabitation and unification).⁹ What seems to be the case is that the mystical experience is a realisation, an understanding of God's oneness. It does not appear to be the sort of mystical experience portrayed by later Sufis, such as Najm al-Din Kubra (d.c. 1220), for whom everything in the universe, mineral, plant, animal spoke aloud. For Tustari, the mystical experience is one based on perfected faith which is connected with the "light of certitude", a "spiritual quality in mystic man which holds the divine gift of a subtle substance within man's heart."¹⁰ There are passages however, in which Tustari claims that the mystic man has a glimpse of paradise, of what is to come, the visual beholding of God.¹¹

This mystical experience is linked with the heart of the mystic man, as Tustari comments that the visual beholding of God takes place as he sees his heart in the nearness of God as being witnessed in the absolute mystery.¹² The latter is the spiritual self, which is the seat of the intellect and of the holy spirit.¹³ Thus Tustari, like so many other Sufis link the heart with the sacred. Once man comprehends the heart, he comprehends the divine. The heart is the mirror into which man must gaze in order to see things as they are.

The ideas of Tustari form the essence of what may be termed Sufi "orthodoxy", and all major subsequent Iranian Sufis developed and elaborated upon the core of such ideas which utilise the images of light and mirrors. To give an indication of this it is useful to choose a specific example from the Sufi tradition of Iran. Selecting an example is difficult as there are numerous major figures who would be worthy. However, I have chosen to omit the poetic tradition in Iran because more often than not the major poetical works, such as those of Rumi and Hafiz, are not as systematic as prose compositions. It might also have been useful to examine the works of Suhrawardi (also known as the *shaykh al-ishraq*, or master of illumination) the twelfth century Persian mystic. His writings are underscored by his understanding of light, and an investigation of his thought would be particularly

⁹ *Ibid.*, P. 208.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, P. 214.

¹² *Ibid.*, P. 214.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

revealing especially as he discusses pre-Islamic, Iranian sages. However, such an examination would require more time than the scope of this thesis allows. His works and his thought have, however, been investigated by a number of scholars.¹⁴ Instead I have chosen a work by Najm al-Din Razi (1177-1256), a Sufi of the Central Asia Kubrawiyya *silsila* of Sufis, and a student of the famous shaykh, Najm al-Din Kubra. The selection of Razi as an example of how Sufis used metaphors of light and mirrors is due to the systematic and coherent style of his writings. It is also significant to note that his major work, *The Path of God's Bondsmen From the Beginning to the Return (Mirsad al-'ibad min al-mabda' ila'l-ma'ad)* has been used in Iran right up to the present day to instruct those interested in Sufism.¹⁵

3.2 Case Study of Najm al-Din Razi

Razi's use of the metaphors of mirror and light reflect his preoccupation with theological anthropology (the heart) and within that a epistemology or theory of knowledge (light). As one might expect of any Muslim, Muhammad is the model for the believer, although for the Sufi, he is the mystic model, the man of light *par excellence*:

What you have heard concerning Muhammad, upon whom be peace, being shadow less, is because he had become entirely transmuted into light and light has no shadow. When the prophet had been delivered from the shadow of his self, the whole world took refuge in his light, for 'Adam and all who come after him shall stand under my banner on the Day of Resurrection; yet I take no pride therein.' The Muhammadan Light had marked out the first boundary of being, for 'the first that God created was my Light'.¹⁶

All things are then created from this light, a typical Sufi belief found in the writings of mystics such as Ghazali (d. 1111) and 'Aziz Nasafi. As a result, all creation is permeated with this light which can be manifested in the heart, the seat or throne of knowledge. Progress in the spiritual quest involves removing the innumerable veils of light and darkness that constitute humanity's forgetfulness of its original condition, of its possession of the sacred light. Razi states that purification of the heart can make it become the seat of

¹⁴ See S. H. Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, in particular chapters 12, 13, 14. (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996). See also I. R. Netton, *Allah Transcendent*, in particular chapter 6. (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994).

¹⁵ See H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (New York: Omega Publications, 1994), p. 103.

¹⁶ Najm al-din Razi, translated by Hamid Algar, *The path of God's bondsmen from origin to return*, (New York, Dalmarc: Caravan Book, 1982), p. 177.

the divine quality of compassion. Hence the goal of the science of hearts is to provide the means and motives for maintaining the utmost clarity in one's spiritual perceptive faculties. The means of purification is by following Sufi practices such as the *dhikr*, which can result in the manifestation of signs, witnessed internally and externally. These often take the form of "natural phenomena":

Know that when the mirror of the heart is gradually burnished by the workings of *la elaha ella llah* (there is no god but God). And when the rust of instinctual nature and the darkness of human attributes are erased from it, it will become receptive to the lights of the unseen world, and the wayfarer, in accordance with the purity of his heart and the degree of manifestation of lights, will behold lights. Initially the lights will be mostly in the form of lightning, of gleams and flashes.

O lightning flash leaping forth!

From which guarded shrine comes thy light?

As the polishing of the heart increases, the lights will strengthen and multiply.¹⁷

Once the mirror of the heart is cleansed of the rust of instinctual nature, it becomes fit to receive the rays of the sun of the beauty of the oneness.¹⁸

The *dhikr* is a method which yields its results gradually because there is a hierarchy within the heart itself. Razi delineates the specific characteristics of the heart, dividing it into seven categories which accord with the seven heavens mentioned in the Qur'an. This is hardly surprising given that the medieval Sufi world-view perceived humans to be microcosms to the macrocosm of the universe. Razi's seven-fold classification reveals the piety needed to progress towards spiritual perfection which cannot be reached by human effort alone. Ultimately, God bestows his grace on whomsoever he pleases:

The first aspect of the heart is called the breast, ... it is only the breast that, being as it were the skin of the heart, can thus become the seat of whispering and enticement, for these have no access to the interior of the heart ... The second aspect of the heart is called *qalb*, and is the mine of faith, it is the seat of the light of the intellect... The third aspect is the pericardium, which is the mine of affection, love, and compassion toward mankind... the fourth aspect is called the *fu'ad*, and is the mine of witnessing and the seat of vision... the fifth aspect is known as the grain of the heart, and is the mine of love for Divine Presence... the sixth aspect is known as the core of the heart, and is the mine of unveilings of the unseen and of God-given knowledge... the seventh aspect is called the blood of the heart, and is the mine for the appearance of the lights of the manifestation of the divine attributes.¹⁹

Razi also discusses how the mystic can perceive seven different forms of light, so one is tempted to speculate that these lights are the signs that the mystic witnesses on attaining to perfection within the hierarchy of the heart. The first light is white light and is the sign of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

islam. The second light is yellow and is the sign of fidelity in faith (*iman*). The third is dark blue and is the sign of "doing what is beautiful" (*ihsan*).²⁰ The fourth is green which is the stage of the pacified soul. The fifth light is azure blue which is the sign of certitude (*iqan*). The sixth light is red which is a sign of mystical gnosis, and the seventh light is black, the sign of passionate love (*'ishq*).²¹

Just as the mystic is dazzled by sacred lights, one wonders whether the use of broken mirrors in the shrines of Sulī "saints" that reflect the colours that appear before them serve the purpose of reminding the pilgrims of the colours and "photisms" that can be witnessed in the spiritual path.

As the heart/mirror becomes purified through the *dhikr*, these signs will appear in the mystic whether he/she desires them or not. As stated above God manifests whatever attribute He desires in the heart/mirror, and at the same time, the mystic's own attributes are manifest too.

Know that man in truth is the mirror of the essence and attributes of God. When the mirror is purified, God becomes manifest in it with whatever attribute He chooses. Whatever attribute is apparent in the mirror derives from the source of the manifestation and does not belong to the mirror as such; all that belongs to the mirror, once purified, is the capacity to reflect. The secret of man's viceregency is this, that he is the means and the instrument for the manifestation of God's essence and attributes.²²

On reaching perfection the mystic witnesses God, that is to say, he reaches a stage when he realises the meaning of the saying cited repeatedly by Sufis (including Razi) that "He who knows himself knows his creator."²³ For some Sufis this meant that the divine was within the self, yet other Sufis were careful to stipulate that it was problematic to speak of an identity between man and God. Razi can be considered among those who maintained some form of distinction between the two. This is apparent in his discussion of the "photism" that the mystic witnesses. Razi claimed that the first six coloured lights represent God's attribute of Beauty, whereas the last Black light is the divine attribute of Majesty. These two divine attributes Beauty and Majesty bring to mind the distinction made by Sufis of Ibn 'Arabi's *wujudi* school of thought, namely that there is a similarity between man and God

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-10.

²⁰ There is a hierarchy within Islamic tradition, based on the "Hadith of Gabriel" which posits *islam* (submission) as the lowest form of adherence to Islam, then faith (*iman*), and then "doing what is beautiful" (*ihsan*). See Murata & Chittick, *op. cit.*, pp. xxv-xxvii.

²¹ For Razi and spiritual witnessing see H. Corbin, *The Man of Light, op. cit.*, pp. 103-110.

²² Najm al-din Razi, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

²³ Cited by Razi, p. 86.

(through the spirit of which God breathed into man) and which appears as the attribute of Beauty, but at the same time there is the transcendent, incomparable dimension of the divine (as the Qur'an states in 42:11, "Nothing is like him").²⁴

This theological discussion is relevant to our topic of the mirror, because the nature of man's relationship with the divine (the similarity/incomparability) reflects that of man and his mirror-image. Is the subject the same as the mirror image? The answer, to use a phrase beloved by Ibn 'Arabi (and his contemporary interpreter, William Chittick) is yes and no.

It is inevitable that Razi's work contains more passages that discuss man's similarity with the divine (how is it possible to elaborate on incomparability?), and Razi's presentation of the mystics visions hint of an ontological unity between the light of man and God:

If the light rises in the sky of the heart taking the form of one or of several light-giving moons, the two eyes are close to this world and to the other. If this light rises and, in the utterly pure inner man attain the brightness of the sun or of many suns, the mystic is no longer aware of this world nor of the other, he sees only his own Lord under the veil of the spirit; then his heart is nothing but light, his subtle body is light, his material covering is light, his hearing, his sight, his hand, his exterior, his interior are nothing but light, his mouth and his tongue also.²⁵

The end of the station of inspiration consists of God's light establishing itself in the heart, so that whatever man looks upon he looks upon with God's light: 'The believer gazes with God's light.'²⁶

The notion of identity, the sense of "I" created by looking into a polished mirror is all the more confusing in that on reaching perfection God looks into the mirror and witnesses himself. Again this is a fairly typical Sufi belief of the time, reflected in the works of 'Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani (d. 1132).²⁷ Razi himself states, "When the light of God casts its reflection on the light of the [human] spirit, man's witnessing of God becomes mingled with the taste of God's witnessing of Himself."²⁸ And he cites a verse attributed to the famous Sufi, Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910):

In my lifelong search for thee, my head has been my foot,
And with my eyes I have swept up the dust of thy foot.

²⁴ The *wajudi* worldview has been discussed at length in the books and articles by William Chittick, see for example, *Imaginal Worlds* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

²⁵ Henry Corbin, translated by Nancy Pearson, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, p. 107.

²⁶ Razi, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

²⁷ See H. Landolt, "Two Types of Mystical Thought in Muslim Iran," *Muslim World*, Vol. 68 (1978).

²⁸ Razi, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

Thus I am now the mirror to thy face,
And with thine own eye I gaze on thy face.²⁹

The multiplicity of identities when looking in a mirror is multiplied when one considers Razi's argument that each person considers God from their own unique, individual perspective. This is because the manifestation of God (although determined by God) is conditioned by the human, creaturely make-up of the individual. The process of divine manifestation (*tajalli*) is routed from the mystic's heart to the soul, and from the soul to the body. In other words, the divine manifestation of any attribute will take a form that is determined by the physical constitution of the mystic. This is discussed in more detail by other mystics of Razi's era, such as Nasafi (also linked to the Kubrawiyya *silsila*), who describes how divine manifestations are given form and take shape through the images that are stored in the individual's mind.³⁰ Because of this, each divine manifestation is unique, and as Razi states below, infinite in number:

In each beauty-displaying mirror that was placed in Adam's being was set too a beauty-perceiving eye, so that as God might behold Himself in the mirror, through a thousand and one apertures, so too Adam might behold Him with thousand and one eyes.³¹

To make his point concerning the infinite number of divine manifestations Razi cites a poem attributed to the Persian poet Anvari (d.c. 1190):

Those who look on Thy fair face,
When they gaze in from the horizons,
See their own image in the mirror,
And thus arise these many different signs.³²

On reaching perfection, the mystic not only sees God within himself, but all the world becomes a mirror that reflects the divine.³³ As Razi states, "if man then looks into himself, he sees only God; and, indeed, if he looks into all beings, wherever he looks he sees only God ... At this stations, only the gaze of the witness can perceive the beauty of the witness,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

³⁰ See Nasafi's treatises, translated by L. Ridgeon, *Persian Metaphysics and Mysticism* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002), pp. 102, 168.

³¹ Razi, *op.cit.*, p. 101.

³² *Ibid.*, p.86.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26.

in the mirror of man."³⁴ Identity here becomes exceedingly confusing from the perspective of the "profane" world. But with regard to perfection, Razi returns to the mirror metaphor:

Mirrors were affixed to him on both the outside and inside, to the number of the divine attributes, each one being a manifestation of a separate attribute. It is generally believed that a thousand and one mirrors were put in place, to correspond to a thousand and one attributes. Now even though the possessor of beauty may have gold and silver ornaments in abundance, in her view nothing has the same value as a mirror. For gold and silver ornaments are subject to damage which the beautiful one cannot set aright; but if the slightest dust alights on the face of the mirror, immediately and with the utmost care she will wipe it clean with the sleeve of generosity. Moreover, even if she has a thousands hundredweights of gold jewellery, she can do little with it but store it in her dwelling, or use it to adorn her hands and ears. Hence she turns away from it all, and remains face to face with the mirror- Kaqani wrote:

*We are infatuated with thee-and thou, with the mirror;
Our gaze is fixed on thee-and thine, on the mirror.
When the mirror glimpsed thy beauty and thine own fairness,
Thou wert enamored of thyself; still more was the mirror.*³⁵

3.3 Persian Sufis, Visiting Shrines and Light/Mirror Imagery

I have not been able to verify whether tombs of Sufis located in Iran have been decorated with mirror work. However, even if Sufi shrines were not, and are not decorated with mirrors, this does not belittle the importance of the metaphors of the mirror/light. This can be demonstrated with references made by Sufis to what happens when a mystic visits the tomb of a saint. 'Aziz Nasafi makes the connection explicit, as he states that the pilgrim must circumambulate the tomb, and pay full attention to what he is doing. His heart must be free of all distractions, as the "mirror of the heart" must be clean and pure if it is to encounter the spirit of the saint through the tomb.³⁶ The pilgrim is thus able to encounter the spirit of the saint and receive guidance and it is through the saint that the pilgrim can have access to God.

Pilgrimage to a shrine stimulated the pilgrim to adopt a certain spiritual perspective, where the metaphors of mirrors and light were paramount. Such visitation was widespread in Iran, and the remarks in the following, although they were written in the Indian context, apply equally well to Iran:

The visitation of the Shrines is a very common practice in Islam, and has its origin in the Sufi belief that 'the saints of God die not, they merely depart from one habitation to another.' In consequence the excessive honour paid to saints and Pirs in their lifetime

³⁴ Razi, p. 86.

³⁵ Razi, *op.cit.*, p.101.

³⁶ See 'Aziz Nasafi, *al-Kitab al-Insan al-kamil*, ed. M. Mole (Tehran: Maissonneuve, 1963), 18:4.

is continued to them after their death. The shrine itself is called a *mazar*, a place of visitation ... such a shrine may, at times, not contain the remains of a saint at all, but is merely a place dedicated to some saint.³⁷

3.4 Persian Sufis and the Symbolism of Mirrors

Razi's use of mirror/light imagery to depict his ontology and epistemology reflects the tropes that were used by medieval mystics, and which continued to be used even at later stages of Sufi history. Persian Sufi literature is saturated with the use of mirrors and light, and it is worthwhile to offer several examples of this taken from the works of Persian Sufi masters to demonstrate just how influential such metaphors are, and how they certainly contribute to the construction of an *ishraqi imaginaire*.

One of the most famous mystics to utilise the metaphor of the mirror and light is 'Attar (d. 1220), who composed both didactic poetry and prose. His "Conference of the Birds" (*mantiq al-tayr*) tells the story of how the birds go in search of a king, a fantastic bird called the Simorgh that can be found only after a long, difficult, perilous journey. (The name of this bird appears to have pre-Islamic Iranian origins,³⁸ however, the Simorgh was made famous by Fidawsi (d. 1020) in his *Shahnama*, although the bird (and its name) did not have the same Sufi connotations given to it by 'Attar). So thousands of birds set out to find the Simorgh, but one by one they drop out as a result of various obstacles they find in their path. Eventually, having past seven valleys (paralleling Razi's seven mystical photisms?) only thirty birds are left to witness the Simorgh – a pun in Persian, as Simorgh can be divided into two Persian words: *si*, meaning thirty, and *murgh*, meaning bird:

There in the Simorgh's radiant face they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
They were the Simorgh and the journey's end.
They see the Simorgh – at themselves they stare,
And see a second Simorgh standing there;
They look at both and see the two are one
That this is that, that this, the goal is one.
They ask (but inwardly; they make no sound)
The meaning of these mysteries that confound
Their puzzled ignorance – how is it true
That "we" is not distinguished here from "you"?
And silently their shining Lord replies:
"I am a mirror set before your eyes,

³⁷ John A. Subhan, *Sufism its Saint and Shrines*, (Lahore, Lucknow publishing house, no date), p. 106.

³⁸ *Simargl* was a mythical Slavic deity (depicted as a winged lion or dog). The *Saena* bird (*Senmurv* in Pahlavi) is found in Zoroastrian scriptures, where she sits in a Tree of All-Remedies, or the Tree of All-Seeds. See "Simurgh" in *Encyclopedia Mythica* (Leiden: Brill, 1960).

And all who come before my splendour see
 Themselves, their own unique reality;
 You came as thirty birds and therefore saw
 These selfsame thirty birds, not less not more.
 If you had come as forty, fifty – here
 An answering forty, fifty would appear.³⁹

In the same work ‘Attar also includes a short story entitled “A King who Placed Mirrors in his Palace” which pre-figures the ending of the poem. The King was so beautiful that on riding around the city he was forced to veil his face for whoever saw it would have their heads cut off. However, the King ordered a mirror for his palace whereby the viewers would be able to gain some inkling of his beauty.⁴⁰ Moreover, in ‘Attar’s hagiographic account of the Sufis (*Memoirs of the Saints*), we are told that Bayazid Bastami (d. 874) declared himself to be the blacksmith of himself until he turned himself into a pure mirror.⁴¹ Whether Bayazid made such a claim is unverifiable, but given that mirror and light imagery can be found in the Qur’an and in early Shi’-ite literature, there seems no ground to suppose that the earliest generation of Islamic mystics would not have used such metaphors.

A story more well known and celebrated appears in the *Mathnawi* of Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273),⁴² namely that of the Chinese artists and the Greek polishers. Although this story seems to originate with the Persian poet Nizami (d. 1209) in his *Iskandar-nama*, it has been popularised by Rumi. In this story both the Chinese and Greeks claimed to be better artists, and so a competition was arranged by the Sultan to discover which of the two was right, and each was given a room in which to work with a door separating them. The Chinese requested paints whereas the Greeks claimed they needed nothing, as they would only remove rust. The Chinese finished their work with great fanfare and the King came to inspect it. And when the veil was drawn aside from the doorway, the King beheld everything that he had seen in the Chinese room, yet it had a certain lustre and seemed to shine more brilliantly. As Rumi states:

The Greeks, o father, are the Sufis: (they are) without (independent of) study and books and erudition,

³⁹ ‘Attar, *Conference of the Birds*, translated by Alkhani Darbandi and Dick Davis (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 219.

⁴⁰ See *The Speech of the Birds*, translated by Peter Avery (Cambridge Islamic Texts, 1998), pp. 101-102.

⁴¹ *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, R.A. Nicholson (ed.), Vol. 1, (London: Luzac, 1905), p. 139.

⁴² Rumi’s *Mathnawi* has been translated by R.A. Nicholson. The story of the Chinese artists appears in I. 3467-3499.

But they have burnished their breasts (and made them) pure from greed and cupidity
and avarice and hatred.
That purity of the mirror is, beyond doubt, the heart which receives images
innumerable ...
(They receive) a hundred impressions from the empyrean and the starry sphere and the
void: what impressions? Nay, 'tis the very sight of God.⁴³

No discussion of Persian-Sufi mirror symbolism would be complete without reference to the *Jam-i Jam*, or Jam's chalice. In Firdawsi's *Shahnama*, there is a section on the pre-Islamic Iranian king Jamshid, who possesses a chalice in which are reflected all the events that appear on earth. The Sufis adapted this image to accord with how mystical knowledge is acquired. Thus, *the jam-i Jam[shid]* becomes the heart, the mirror that is able to reflect knowledge emanating from the celestial realms. (It is also worthy to note another mystical connection with Jamshid, as he is attributed with the "discovery" of wine, which became such a significant trope in Iranian mystical literature).⁴⁴ There are so many references to the *Jam-i Jam* in Persian literature, and all the Iranian poetic masters play with the term. The following from Hafiz is typical:

For years my heart roamed around in search of the *Jam-i Jam*.
What it possessed itself it sought from strangers.⁴⁵

3.5 The Marriage of Sufism and Shi'ism

A comparison of the preceding chapter on Shi'ism with the contents of this chapter on Sufism might suggest either a conflict of interest or else a re-enforcing of spiritual sentiments. The major area of similarity is the utilisation of the mirror/light metaphor, yet there are structural similarities which have on occasions been the cause of conflict between Sufism and Shi'ism. Momen cites the example of the Sufi Perfect Man, or *Qutb* (the spiritual pole or axis), and the Imam of Shi'ite Islam.

One of the most important doctrines of Sufism is the concept of the Perfect Man (*al-Insan al-Kamil*). This doctrine states that there always must exist upon the earth a man who is the perfect channel of grace from God to man. This man who is called the Qutb is considered to be in a state of *wilaya* (sanctity, being under the protection of God). It can already be seen that there are great similarities between the concept of the Qutb in Sufism and Shi'i Imam.⁴⁶

⁴³ Nicholson's translation.

⁴⁴ See Julie Scott Meisami, *Nizami's Haft Paykar* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 305.

⁴⁵ Hafiz, *Diwan*, ed., Anjuwi (Tehran: Javidan, 1967), p. 87.

Some Shi'-ites have seen little cause for hostility between the two, and this position is reflected in the works of Allamah Tabataba'i (d. 1978).⁴⁷ Aside from the Sufi Qutb, there is another Sufi individual who has been the subject of some Shi'-ite misgiving, namely, the Sufi shaykh. The reason for such misgiving is that the shaykh is the person that the Sufi novice must obey in all situations. The shaykh is the person who is best able to interpret or understand mystical visions and the appearance of lights, etc., and for this reason the novice must obey him at all times. This stands in opposition to the "orthodox" Shi'-ite belief that obedience must be given to a *marja' taqlid*, that is, a high-ranking Shi'-ite cleric, who through learning and reason is best able to understand the probable will or intention of the Hidden Imam. The tension between the two has been resolved somewhat by some Sufis with their claim that the Hidden Imam was a "solar pole", while the Sufi shaykh was a "lunar pole" deriving his authority from the Imam. Since the Imam is in occultation, "his guiding functions devolve practically upon the *qutb* [shaykh], just as his juridical functions devolve practically upon the mujtahid [Shi'-ite cleric]."⁴⁸ (It is interesting to add that the terms given by the Sufis to the two once again are luminous, and indeed, the sun and moon were included in the spiritual visions depicted by Sufis such as Najm al-Din Razi⁴⁹).

However, for political reasons, there have been periods of dispute between Shi'-ites and Sufis, in particular, once Shi'-ism was adopted by the Safavid state as its official religion, and Shi'-ite clerics had been "invited" to assume important positions and functions in Iranian society.⁵⁰ Yet it is probable that many Iranians have regarded and still regard Sufism and Shi'-ism (their structures and metaphors) as complementary, and strengthening each other.

⁴⁶ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to SHI'ITE Islam*, p. 208.

⁴⁷ See in particular his remarks in *Shi'-ite Islam*, translated by S. H. Nasr, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), p. 114.

⁴⁸ H. Algar, "Religious Forces in 18-19th century Iran," *Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. VII (Cambridge University Press).

⁴⁹ Razi states: "When the mirror of the heart is pure, it sometimes happens that these witnessing are beheld in the world of the unseen, proceeding from the world of the heart by means of the imagination; and sometimes that they are seen in the manifest world, proceeding from the outer world by means of the senses. They are seen in some suitable form that can serve as locus for the manifestation of the divine lights: thus the sun, the moon, and the stars receive the reflection of the ray of God's lights," p. 239.

⁵⁰ On anti-Sufi literature of the Safavid Shi'-ite elite see A. Newman, *Sufism and Anti-Sufism in Safavid Iran*, Iran, XXXVII, 1999, pp. 95-108.

Chapter 4

Light, Mirror and Mirror-Mosaic in Religious Art

The previous chapters investigated the importance of the light in the Qur'an and the symbolism of the light and mirror especially in the Shi'ite and Sufi traditions and in the world of literature. This chapter focuses upon the hidden power of the art of mirror-mosaic work in Islamic art within Iranian, Islamic sacred places.

The composition of shaped mirrors creates a centre for light and image reflection. It is clear that plain mirrors reflect the image (image 1) but by looking at the mirror-mosaic work an abstract image is reflected (image 2). Mirror-mosaic work is a sort of tile work, which usually follows two different patterns: geometric design (image 3-5) and ornamental design (images 6-7) and on some occasions both designs come together (image 8). The variety of geometric and ornamental patterns can be manifested by mirror-mosaic work. Every pattern, which is the base for mirrors, creates different reflections because of the angles and size of the mirrors. Mirrors can be cut into different shapes and each shape has its own meaning in the Islamic and mystical traditions (image 9/1, 9/2). They can be installed on two different surfaces: a flat surface (image 10) and sometimes that cover part of the surface (image 11) or *muqarnas* (see below) surfaces (images 12-13), and sometimes they cover part of the *muqarnas* (image 14). Sometimes mirror-mosaic work appears with plaster-work (images 15-16) or gypsum work is used on the mirror (image 17-18). The mirror may also be combined with wood-work and maybe adjacent to coloured mirror or glass (image 19). Mirrors may also be used for calligraphy (image 20).

Mirror-mosaic work is suspended on the frontiers of structure and non-structure. Even though it follows geometric patterns it seems to ignore the limited images because the reflections are broken by the mosaic work. The language of form in this artwork hovers between abstract and geometry and modes of expression based on nature. Mirror-mosaic work transfers the everyday aesthetic of life. The images are so real and at the same time they transcend the real. Considering the Qur'anic prohibition on the "creation" of animal and human figures (see below), this art of mirror-mosaic work has never been trapped by

the limitations imposed on painting such figures, yet paradoxically it is able to reflect human forms, albeit in an abstract way, and it is this that renders them "lifeless". It is probably for this reason that "orthodox" theologians do not regard mirror-mosaic work as a contravention of Islamic doctrine. With mirror-mosaic work colours also preserve their depth and originality. Colours, like light, move and change all the time in the front of the viewer's eyes. Mirrors reflect images in unlimited ways and those images are not even like the abstract paintings of modern artists.

4.1 The Boundaries of Islamic Art and Architecture

From an Islamic point of view art, in general, is a special act towards God. Islamic religion and tradition are among the most significant sources of inspiration for artists, therefore Muslim artists have used their imagination to show God's beauty and glory, and for this reason art in Islam may be termed "sacred art". Islamic art encompasses the appearance of beauty, and in addition it presents the viewer with a meaningful art-work which contains outer and inner messages, especially in sacred places. In traditional art, beauty means inward beauty, beauty of the soul or of the heart, which necessarily emanates outwards, transforming every human activity into an art and every art into the remembrance of God. Islamic art is usually known as esoteric in nature because natural figures have a single, obvious meaning compared with abstract art. On the other hand Islamic art has also been known as one which creates for the setting of daily life, thus most religious architecture functions as a place where people can best express their piety and learn the precepts of the faith, in addition to being purely decorative. Islam has wide and comprehensive social application, and feeds religious art. Islamic art was born almost a century after the Prophet's life and it is a contemplative art, which aims to express above all, an encounter with the divine presence; it is also almost purely subjective. Art and architecture are aids to the appreciation of the spiritual and the divine. Therefore Islamic decorative artworks were generally created not as ends in themselves but to help explain a scientific text, its concept or to enhance the pleasure of inner knowledge. In the field of decorative arts the Islamic style is distinguished by the novelty and extraordinary quality of techniques used in the making of utilitarian objects.

For Muslims, Islam is a religion of beauty, and since God is conceptualised as beauty, artists present their purest sentiments and most exquisite imagery and visual works

to God. Their art has been greatly expanded and embellished in the construction of sacred buildings and these artists have used their tastes and innovative talents to beautify sacred places. Indeed, it is human nature to love beautiful things. Irwin reflects the popular conviction expressed in the *hadith* from the prophet, especially dear to Sufis: "God is beautiful and loves beauty."¹ God, for Muslims, encourages believers to beautify both the spiritual and physical dimensions of human life, as art is intermingled with life. This is particularly true of the fine arts, as it is their role to manifest the hidden qualities of things. The art of Islam receives its beauty not from any ethnic genius but from Islam itself and just as Islamic science has its roots in the Qur'an and *hadith*, so the typical forms of Islamic art are rooted in the spirit of Islam. From an Islamic perspective art consists in fashioning objects in a manner conformable to their nature, for that nature has a virtual content of beauty, since it comes from God; all one has to do is release that beauty in order to make it apparent.

Islamic art is based then on the Qur'an, and in general sacred art is always comprehended as an attempt to glorify the divine. But light is required to appreciate such art. Since it is God who bestows light, the appreciation of art is through the divine, and as such it is a divine mercy that allows the individual to enjoy art. The Qur'an lays great emphasis on aesthetics and the beauty of nature, and it always advises humans to open their eyes and hearts and to assist mankind to breathe in this vital nature.

Islamic art and architecture is the reflection of the opinions and styles of unknown artists, interior designers, and architects who devoted their lives to achieve unity, a concept that is central to the Qur'an. In the words of S.H. Nasr,

Islamic spirituality could not but develop a sacred art in essence. The doctrine of unity which is central to the Islamic revelation combined with the nomadic spirituality which Islam made its own brought into being an iconic art wherein the spiritual world was reflected in the sensible world not through various iconic forms but through geometry and rhythm, through arabesques and calligraphy which reflect directly the worlds above and ultimately the supernal sun of Divine Unity.²

The problem for artists of course, is how to represent in image form this Qur'anic teaching of unity. Although unity is a mental phenomenon, it can have a physical manifestation and

¹ Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art* (London, Laurence King, 1997), p. 52.

² Foreword by Seyyed Hosain Nasr, in Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983), p. 6.

art is the most expressive venue. Thus, Islamic art as a whole aims to help man to recognise God's unity; it therefore avoids everything that could be an 'idol' even in a relative and provisional manner - nothing must stand between man and the presence of God. The ultimate barrier between man and God is *shirk*, and it seems that painting or image-making was considered a danger leading to *shirk*. The Qur'anic commandment concerning images is in fact quite vague: "O believers! Wine, games of chance, idols and divining by arrows are an abomination of Satan's handiwork; then avoid it," (5:92). Also of relevance is the Qur'anic story of Jesus who moulded some clay into the shape of birds, blew into the clay, and the birds became animated and flew away (5:110). This seems to be referred to in a *hadith* that states, "Those who make these pictures will be punished on the Day of Judgement by being told: make alive what you have created."³ Yet the *hadith* literature can be interpreted in a number of ways. There is the *hadith* which suggests that there was a picture of Jesus and Mary in the Ka'ba and was left unscathed by Muhammad,⁴ and yet there is also the *hadith* that states "angels will not enter a house in which there is a picture or a dog."⁵

The early Muslim theologians were scared that painting could lead to idolatry, or *shirk*. They may also have been influenced by the Jewish attitude towards painting, and also by the iconoclastic movement in the Byzantine Empire. (In 726, the Emperor Leo III removed the figure of Christ from the gates of his imperial palace in Constantinople and replaced it with a cross. The prohibition on making images lasted until 843).

The formative period of Islamic theology resulted in a grave suspicion of artists and an abhorrence of pictures of humans and animals among the theologians. It was not until the medieval period that pictures of Muhammad appear in manuscripts (and this was largely the influence of the Mongols who had a tradition of painting their leaders). Yet the "Islamic" prohibition remained secure in certain quarters, and history is littered with examples of theologians rounding against artists. One of the most dramatic examples occurred during the reign of the Ottoman sultan, Mahmud II (1808-1839), who had his portrait hung up in the military barracks, and the populace, at the instigation of the theologians, rose up in revolt. It was estimated that 4000 people were killed in the clashes between the Sultan's forces and the masses.⁶

³ Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art*, p. 81.

⁴ See F.E. Peters, *The Hajj* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 48.

⁵ Cited in T. Arnold, *Painting in Islam* (New York: Dover, 1962), p. 6.

⁶ T. Arnold, p. 38.

Depicting the image of someone's face may also have been considered somewhat dangerous, at least at the "popular" level of belief. Arnold observes that

... once being promulgated, this theological prohibition found a ready acceptance in the minds obsessed by the superstition common in the East, that an image is not something apart from the person represented, but is a kind of *double*, injury to which will imply corresponding suffering to the living person.⁷

Even in the modern period the mirror-image, such as the photograph has been regarded with suspicion by some Muslims. There are some notable examples of this, such as Mulla Omar, the leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan. During the recent crisis in Afghanistan the Western media were at pains to produce a photograph of Mulla Omar, and one wonders whether this absence of a clear photograph was because of Mulla Omar's adherence to "Islam" rather than for "political" considerations (i.e. not to give his opponents the chance to capture his identity). Given that the Taliban banned television in Afghanistan, it is probably the case that Molla Omar was more concerned with maintaining his "Islamic" credibility. Another interesting example was cited by the famous Iranian film-director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who commented that as a child he was influenced by his grandmother not to go to the cinema because of her fear of the punishments of hell.⁸

The magical properties of pictures, although from one perspective might have been regarded with suspicion, were also used for positive purposes, and particularly pertinent was the use of mirrors and the mirror image:

Mirrors, made of polished metal rather than a glass, also had magical associations and they were often used for magical purposes, and commonly had magical or zodiacal imagery on their backs. According to text ascribed to Jabir ibn Hayyan, mirrors made from a Chinese alloy called *kharshini* (copper, zinc, and nickel) could be used for the magical cure of the eye disease.⁹

It is clear then that Islamic art had to operate within certain boundaries from its formative period, and only slowly were those boundaries shifted. "Islamic" art had to be one that was a form of devotion that attempted to present the inner spirituality of Islamic belief. Decorative arts served to adorn or embellish the conceptual. From the Islamic point of

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ L. Ridgeon, *Makhmalbaf's Broken Mirror*, (Durham Middle East Papers, 2000), p. 9.

view, the main scope of art is not the imitation or description of nature, as the work of man will never equal the art of God. In fact artists were concerned how to express, exhibit and build things, and their general aim was to justify their designs and not to imitate nature. Arabesque designs,¹⁰ completed in tile, mosaic, wood, and stonework functioned to express God's unity on the one hand, and on the other achieved rhythm and continual change (symbolic of God's infinite, transcendent nature). Arabesque plays with the surface, and geometric forms fill it to completion. In fact it is clear that many of these abstract themes and patterns also originated in Iran and developed in the Islamic period.

Aside from Arabesque, there are other features that have become so typical in Islamic art and style. These include arches, onion domes¹¹, and walls decorated with carved stone and wood, painting, inlays, or mosaic and mirror tiles. This suggests that art in the Islamic world enjoys a large scope, and as long as the embellishment and beautification of Islamic places of worship and shrines do not damage the spirit of unity and concentration on God, not only it is permissible, but should be encouraged. Through time, Muslims developed forms, structures, elements or images which could convey and represent religious values and beliefs. In fact it was art, which flourished in the mosques and shrines, as these were suitable areas to present sacred art, and Muslim artists believed that the spirit of understanding in religion was connected with committed art. However, Islamic art concentrates on clarity, balance and dignity. As Islamic society developed, different types of buildings emerged to express particular needs. Also decorative art became an important concern in these places. Clevenot states:

Architecture is the most immediate visual testimony of this (Islam) civilization. Although Islamic architecture has experimented with various stylistic orientations in different regions during its history, it has always preserved those characteristics which distinguish it from other architectural traditions. Among various recurring traits, the fundamental role given to surface decoration is undoubtedly the most important.¹²

⁹ Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art*, London, Laurence King, 1997, P. 210.

¹⁰ "The arabesque (a design based on curious intertwined foliage) seems to have evolved from the decorative use of acanthus and vine scrolls in the eastern Mediterranean area prior to the coming of Islam. Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art*, p. 199.

¹¹ Archetypically, the dome is the Divine Thorne, passive to the intellect, maternal and timeless.

¹² Dominique Clevenot, *Ornament and Decoration in Islamic Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), introduction.

The Iranian Islamic examples show different types of decorations used for those buildings in most times and cities. Through the use of reflecting and shining materials and glazes, the repetition of designs, the contrasting of textures and the manipulation of planes, Islamic decoration becomes complex, sumptuous and intricate.

Aside from Qur'anic considerations, such as God's unity, Islamic artists were also influenced by other considerations such as Shi'-ism and the light symbolism included within the sayings of the Imams, and also by Sufism which taught that it was possible to consider everything created as a mirror for the divine. The Islamic traditions utilized such mythic understanding as a basis for its art and architecture. It aimed to transform the universe into an icon which could be contemplated and which would become a mirror of God. Not only the universe, but man too was an icon, a mirror, for contemplating God, as Papadopoulo states: "Because man is the most beautiful work of God, his beauty bears witness to his creator better than any other reality in the world."¹³

After studying the meaning and concept of the mirror in Shi'-ite and Sufi traditions it becomes clear why mirror-mosaic work became an integral part of decoration in sacred art, especially in the Shi'-ite shrines or mausoleums of important individuals. Because of this, Islamic art must therefore be considered in its entirety as these building embody to some extent identical principles, namely the importance of the existence of light and its beauty. Pure light is unity and the spectrum is symbolic of the diversity and variety of existence.

Mirror-mosaic work and light are significant because they lead the viewer to God. (Indeed, it is perhaps unwise to use the word viewer for the person who visits the shrine or tomb, because such an individual is not merely passive, but actively engages in an action, even if it is being aware of the significance of the mirror-mosaic work and the light, or even if not intellectually aware, such a person may be devotionally active through prayer). The artist who has decorated the shrine may in some way be considered as a guide to God. According to a saying of the Prophet, a craft can be good only to the degree to which it aids in this remembrance of God, directly or indirectly. God is light and God is beautiful; therefore light is beautiful. In fact in its physical form light provides illumination and attracts human eyes. And what mirror-mosaic work does in shrines is to reflect and increase light. It reminds believers how man can remember God as light. It speaks directly about the symbolism of this meaning and displays an aesthetic manifesto unique in Islamic art.

Mirror-mosaic work shines like stars and this resembles a passion for creating infinite, decorative tiling of star-shapes, which is a common Islamic theme.

The reflection of images, colours, and light and their movement on pieces of mirrors give an indication of the symbolism life. Living images on pieces of mirrors change every moment and as such it is not a fixed art. Mirror-mosaic work leads the viewer to the realisation of the infinity of life-possibilities and of the divine nature. Because of this infinity, it is essentially a personal statement; mirror—mosaic work offers viewers the opportunity of interpretation and self-expression in a religion that is usually categorised as one in which the emphasis is on the community rather than on the individual.

A plain mirror reflects the image as it is, but mirror-mosaic work reflects the same image differently and the reflection depends on the type of mirror-mosaic pattern. Reflection in mirror-mosaic work balances the space and the harmony of colours to bring a balance to the viewer's mind. This is one of the main responsibilities for an interior designer. Also colours and light which are present in mirror-mosaics change with every movement of the viewer and present a new balance which is unique to every viewer.

Religion plays a remarkable and influential role in Islamic arts and architecture. Religious art in Islamic countries finds its fullest expression in the architecture of the mosque and the tomb of the saint, in which the followers of Islam or the architects they employed worked out a scheme of building construction and of decoration in harmony with the boundaries of their faith and its ritual and forms of worship.

4.2 Geometry and Ornamental Figures in Islamic Art

A fundamental characteristic of much Islamic art is in its power as decorative art. A variety of geometric, floral, or other types of designs such as the interlaced arabesque tend to predominate over specific motifs taken from nature or from an idealised version of the natural world like geometric design, which originally came from the shape of natural crystals. With regard to geometric ornamentation Clevenot asks,

¹⁵ Alexandre Papadopoulos, translated from French by Robert Erich Wolf, *Islam and Muslim Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p. 121.

What meaning might be given to Islamic geometric ornamentation? It is difficult to offer a clear and precise response to this question because there are interpenetrations of different levels of meaning-aesthetic, philosophical and symbolic.¹⁴

For S.H. Nasr the interpretations are spiritual:

The great masters of this art were certainly motivated by and versed in spiritual disciplines that gave both content and meaning to their work and placed it in the tradition of aiding the viewer to raise his or her spiritual understanding... Islam's concentration on geometric patterns draw attention away from the representational world to one of pure forms, poised tensions and dynamic equilibrium, giving structural insight into the workings of the inner self and their reflection in the universe.¹⁵

Geometric art flourished in the Islamic world for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most obvious was the interpretation of Islamic scholars that the Qur'an prohibits the realistic representation of human beings and animals. It seems that with mirror-mosaic work artists could follow the Islamic instruction to not use images, instead they reflected images abstractly (images 1-2). At the same time artists followed patterns which are one of Islam's distinctive artistic forms. Yet the main point was to obtain and increase the light in the sacred place. Although I do not fully agree with the following point by Irwin, it is worth noting all the same:

The artistic development of pattern in the wider Islam world is generally best understood in terms of the practical experiments of designers and artisans with such basic devices as repetition, and reflection, rather than as *conscious* attempts to make abstract statements about the harmoniously patterned nature of a divinely ordered universe.¹⁶

The Islamic artistic prohibition resulted in representations of nature that were non-realistic, yet geometric designs permitted the imaginations of artists to soar to new heights, and this commenced from a very early period in Islamic history:

¹⁴ Dominique Clevenot, *Ornament and decoration in Islamic Architecture*, p. 147.

¹⁵ Foreword by S. H. Nasr, in Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns*, p. 8.

¹⁶ My italics. Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art*, p. 198.

Our knowledge of geometry as an independent discipline is more substantial, however, Muslims viewed geometry as an important field of knowledge and continued the classical tradition of placing it at the same level as mathematics, astronomy and music. The development of geometry and other scientific fields of inquiry in the Islamic world was initiated during the eight and ninth centuries by traditions of ancient text from languages such as Greek and Sanskrit in to Arabic.¹⁷

These patterns exemplify the Islamic interest in repetition, symmetry and continuous generation of patterns in the world of art. In other words, the geometric interlace possesses an existence which goes beyond material reality. It is, properly speaking, a conceptual art. Geometry has its own rules that inspire the viewer to contemplate the structure, order and design of the pattern, no matter how complex. One is lead to contemplate the order and design of the universe, and of course, the viewer is lead back to its creator. Moreover, geometric patters lend themselves to growth, as new patterns are easily made, and can be included and inserted into existing patterns. In this respect, symmetry assumed great importance, and can be regarded as symbolic of the power and infinite nature of the divine. Just as one side of the pattern reflects another through symmetry, so too is the divine reflected in all existing things. (Indeed, it has been claimed that symmetry is the most fundamental manifest aspect of Islamic geometric art).¹⁸ The assurance of the Islamic designers is demonstrated by their masterful integration of geometric overlapping and under passing strap work, and a skilful use of colour and tone values. More than any other type of design geometric patterns permitted an inter-relationship between the parts and the whole of an Islamic religious building complex, the exterior and the interior spaces and their furnishings. The key of course is inter-relationships, which can be seen on the one hand in the ideal social commitment of the individual to the *ummah*, and on the other as the individual relationship with God which is unique to everyone.

Symbolic representation in geometry became very important and was relatively easy to use. Since shapes such as triangles, squares, pentagons have points, or corners, it was very easy to see in this symbols of those individuals highly esteemed in Islamic history, such as those in the Shi'ite tradition.

¹⁷ Edition by Martin Frishman and Hasan Uddin Khan, *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 55.

¹⁸ Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns*, p. 74.

Pattern like numbers, is one of the fundamental conditions of existence and is likewise a vehicle of archetypes. As arrangements both emerge from simplicity and unity and return towards it, they exhibit some fundamental relationships which become hierarchical...¹⁹

Forms exit from their physical and familiar boundary and expand into a wider range and each of these represents a value or an ideological manifestation of the artist. For example as an architectural foundation the square serves as the base of the building, and through that base the artist tries to arrive at the circle, which represents the heavenly and celestial world, which belongs to the soul that has deserted the body. Critchlow states: "The circle surpasses all other geometric patterns as the symbol of cosmic unity."²⁰ Moreover, this kind of reflection became more significant once Sufism had become established and popular in the Islamic world:

Some Sufi groups consider numbers as the principles of being and the root of all sciences; they express them as the first effusion of the spirit or intellect upon the soul...The creation of shapes through the use of numbers and geometry, as mathematical expression, recall the Archetypes reflected through the world of symbols.²¹

Another possible reason for the prevalence of geometry in Islamic art is its simplicity, as Wilson states:

Geometry became highly important in the Islamic world as its figures and constructions were permeated with symbolic, cosmological and philosophical significance...In decoration geometrically-based designs covered entire surfaces, typically with a geometrical framework leaving spaces to be filled with interlaced and stylised leaf and floral design. Geometrical designs are basically very simple: they may be constructed with only a compass and a rule and the knowledge of certain procedures, which produce triangles, squares, hexagons, stars, etc. The designs may be reduced and enlarged with great ease.²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

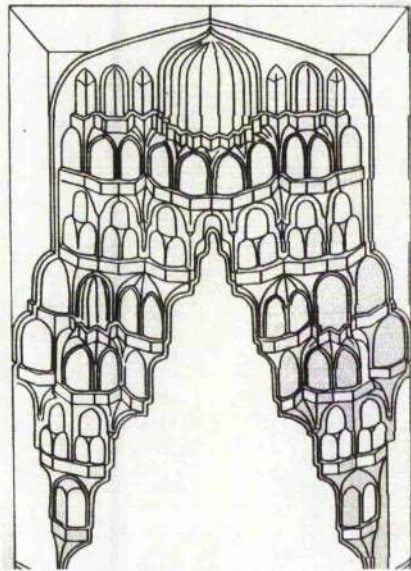
²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²¹ Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 104.

²² Eva Wilson, *British Museum Pattern Books Islamic Design*, (London: British Museum Publications Ltd, 1988), pp. 14-15.

The design of mirror-mosaic follows geometric rules. Geometric designs and shapes have been used in interior decoration and architecture of shrines. The designs have been created by using small mirrors strips which have been cut in different angles and put together to make a geometrical shape. This also functions as a type of ornamentation to cover the entire wall and ceiling.

The best examples and most valuable mirror-mosaic work can be seen on the elaborated *muqarnas* arches²³ (images 21-22) especially on the top of tombs (image 23) or at the entrance of a sacred site (image 24). *Muqarnas* (i.e. honeycomb) is a decoration in stalactite form, so characteristic of Islamic architecture. It originated in Iran,²⁴ and became a typical Islamic design involving various combinations of three-dimensional shapes, corbelling, etc. It can be of terra-cotta, plaster, or tile. It contains symbolic meanings which reflect Islamic ideals, as Clevenot notes: "The exegesis by one of Islam's greatest authorities, al-Ghazali, of the Qur'anic sura entitled 'The Bees', specifies that the geometrical perfection of the honeycombs that bees create is a tribute to the Divine intelligence from which they originated."²⁵



An example of Muqarnas structure

Muqarnas has its own complex design. Analysis of Islamic patterns by famous scholars reveal its importance in the world of Islamic arts and the essence of mathematics

²³ Dominique Clevenot, *Ornament and decoration in Islamic Architecture*, p. 148.

²⁴ Alexandre Papadopoulo, *Islam and Muslim Art*, p. 246.

²⁵ Dominique Clevenot, *Ornament and decoration in Islamic Architecture*, p. 148.

and Islamic thought contained within it. The vaulted arches are geometrical manifestations of light, which becomes even more significant when the *muqarnas* are covered in mirrors, which reflect light and colour. Colour symbolism assumes its own significance in the Iranian Sufi world where the symbolism of light colours was a major element in the thought of medieval mystics of the Kubrawiyya order (such as Najm al-Din Kubra and Ala al-Din Simnani),²⁶ which later developed into the Khaksar order, one of Iran's major Sufi orders, right up to the present day.

4.3. Iranian Art and Architecture and Shrines

Soon after Islam triumphed in the Iranian heartland around 1400 years ago, Iran developed an Islamic culture and now boasts some of the most wonderful examples of Islamic architecture and visual arts in the world. Subject to invasions from both east and west, the Persian speaking world has over the centuries blended many influences to create a rich diversity of arts, styles, and techniques. Persian art is particularly noted for its architecture and production of exquisite miniatures, although perhaps it is best known today for ornate carpets. Although the wide diversity of outside influences make it difficult to pin down distinct characteristics, Persian art is generally characterised by its firm lines, extensive detail, and bold use of colour. Hass states:

Without belittling the greatness of Persian architecture it may be said that the significant artistic genius of Persia excels in the art of decoration. As used here, decoration has a particular and profound meaning which separates it from mere adornment and embellishment. The mosaic faience of the facades and cupolas of the mosques are not mere additions. They melt the beauty of the architecture into one whole, just as in Persian crafts the decorative colour, ornament or representation of the pottery transform the object. Indeed this decorative element divests the object, be it large or small, of its objective character and brings it nearer to the viewer, to his inner life and his need, by penetrating into its essence.²⁷

One place where Islamic art came into its own was at the shrine and at the mosque - locations where light is very important. The shrine became the major type of building in Shi'-ite Iranian architecture as Renard indicates:

²⁶ On these two mystics and colour symbolism see H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, pp. 61-98, 121-144.

For Shi'ite Muslims the most important are the tombs of the martyr-imams and members of their families ... These elaborately decorated structures function as sanctuaries within which devotees can express their grief over the loss of the holy ones; many leave behind as a type of votive offering some symbol of their deepest needs and prayers ... significantly, Islamic tombs seem to function religiously as images of Paradise and as shrines.²⁸

The shrine for Shi'ites is a place for healing. To some extent this is the work of psychotherapy, a process that is a "healing of the soul." It is believed that while the effects of past wounds can be mitigated by bringing contents into consciousness, and psychotherapy, an authentic spirituality can awaken the healing forces of humbleness, gratitude, and love. For these qualities, however, to be authentic and spontaneous, and not merely the outcome of a moral obligation, it is necessary to live from the heart. The complete healing of the soul is possible through the soul's contact with wholeness through the heart. And the heart is a mirror that can receive the light of the sacred soul in the tomb, and thereby inform or heal as required. A similar process is believed to be at work in the Sufi tradition, as explained by the 13th century Sufi, 'Aziz Nasafi:

If [the wayfarer] pays a pilgrimage to the tomb of a friend, and requests help from the spirit of the friend, it will be obtained. The manner of paying pilgrimage and praying is in this way; he must walk around the tomb and concentrate, freeing his mind from everything, thus making the mirror of the heart clean and pure so that his spirit can encounter the deceased through the grave. Then, if the wayfarer desires knowledge or wisdom, the solution to [his] problem will be manifested on his heart in that very hour.²⁹

It is intriguing that the use of mirror-mosaic work is not found in mosques, although the symbolism of light, and the use of light is significant. Light is of paramount importance to Islamic architectural decoration as it generates additional layers of patterns and it is able to transform the interior space. The artists' use of light was assisted in the glazed, coloured tile-work, and it is generally accepted that mosque decoration was inspired by the Qur'an:

²⁷William S. Haas, *The Destiny of the Mind East and West* (London: Faber and Faber), pp. 204-205.

²⁸John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996,) pp. 66-67.

²⁹Cited in I. Ridgeon, *'Aziz Nasafi*, p. 146.

The form and effect of lighting in a mosque was of great importance ... From at least the twelfth century onwards these verses [from the chapter of light in the Qur'an] were given a mystical interpretation, and mosque lamps often had these verse painted on them.³⁰

However, there is no sign of decoration or use of mirror-mosaic work in mosques. A possible reason is that mirror-mosaic work may appear to be a luxury decorative object; it may look like shining jewellery, and it may even be interpreted as the human body. One of the aims of the mosque is to focus the believer's attention towards the divine, and it is perhaps for this reason that all distractions (mirror-mosaic work) are absent. Kuhnelt states in this regard:

The earliest successors of the prophet inherited his scrupulous concern to avoid all superfluous luxury. Their religious and political strength grew year by year, but they deliberately abstained from giving it material expression in proud palaces or splendid temples.³¹

However, the mosques of Iran with their lustrous, glazed tiling could equally have been a distraction to the believer, so the mystery of the absence of mirror-mosaic work in mosques will have to be left unanswered.

The Safavid period (1501-1722) is crucial for our discussion of mirror-mosaic work in Iran. This is because it was with the start of the Safavid dynasty that Shi'-ism became the officially recognized Islamic denomination, and this meant of course, greater respect and "veneration" was given to the Imams, and more attention was paid to the doctrines surrounding them, such as the Imams existing pre-ternally as light. Equally important was that the Safavids were originally a Sufi order, and although there was an attempt to control Sufism during the reigns of the Safavid shahs, Sufism thrived in one form or another. Perhaps more significantly, it was during this period that mirrors made of glass (and thus mirror-mosaic work) were used in shrines and other places.

During the Safavid era, especially between 1524-1629, there was a renaissance for architecture and art and new ideas for decoration developed: "The arts of the Safavid

³⁰ Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art*, (London, Laurence King, 1997), P. 62.

³¹ Ernst Kuhnelt, translated by Katherine Watson, *Islam Art and Architecture*, (London, G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1966), P. 31

period show a far more unitary development than in any other period of Iranian art."³² A great number of mosques, palaces, tombs and other structures were built. But the principle achievement of the Safavids was architectural. It may be argued that decoration with mirrors during the Safavid period gradually assumed a more general aspect by virtue of the special beauty which was added to the building. It seems that mirror-mosaic work became popular among the rich during this period. The origins of mirror-mosaic work are unclear, but certainly within the Safavid period European travellers mentioned that European glass-work was imported to Iran and used for architectural decoration.³³ It was used in the royal palaces, and one such example is the Chihil Sutun palace in Isfahan which was decorated brilliantly with mirror-mosaic work in the 17th century (Image 25). From one perspective it is problematic to call this palace a "secular" building because the palace was the residence of the Shah (who claimed descent to 'Ali and Muhammad through Imam Rida, and who also played on his position as head of the Safavid Sufi order), who claimed to be the "Shadow of God on earth." Thus, the mirror-mosaic work of the Chihil Sutun could be seen in a religious light. However, it seems that many regarded the Safavid Shahs, especially in the later years, in a less spiritual light, so the mirror-work in Chihil Sutun was probably designed to impress the viewer, rather than being a symbol of the Shah's religious distinction. (It is worthwhile to note here the views of Sims whose discussion of Chihil Sutun's mirror-mosaic work ignores any spiritual understanding of mirror-mosaic work³⁴).

The "secularisation" of mirror-mosaic work became more pronounced during the reigns of the shahs of the next major dynasty in Iran, the Qajars (1796-1925), as many great individuals and architects, regardless of paying any attention to the religious and gnostic symbolism of the mirror, used mirror-mosaic work in different buildings, restaurants and private homes.

As mentioned before the shrine or mausoleum is a sacred place for Shi'-ites and Sufis. It is believed that the shrine is a place for prayer, the reception of light, and healing because present in the shrine is the soul of the sacred individual and sacred light. The use of mirror-mosaic work in shrines was both symbolic and functional.

³² *Encyclopaedia Iranica* Volume 2, edited by Ehsan Yarshater, (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 620.

³³ See E.G. Sims, "A'ina-Kari," in E. Yarshater (ed), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 692.

³⁴ "Such mosaics of small pieces may be explained by the fragility of the decorated sheets of glass. Some undoubtedly broke in the caravan-transit to Persia; and once broken, their unimpaired light-refracting and vision diffusing qualities – not to speak of their great intrinsic value – must have dictated their reuse in a traditional Persian manner." Sims, *op. cit.*, p. 693.

From a functional perspective, light acts decoratively by modifying other elements or by originating patterns. Light viewed directly is blinding; it is through the harmony of colours that we witness the divine nature, which bears every visual phenomenon within itself. For this reason, the Muslim artist seeks to transform the very stuff he is fashioning into a vibration of light. Thus in covering the interior surface of a shrine with mirror in tiles, for example, the lining is often confined to the lower part of the walls, as if to dispel their heaviness. It is for the same purpose that the artists transform other surfaces into perforated reliefs to filter the light. "Stalactite" also serves to trap light and diffuse it with the subtlest gradations, and with the proper light, pierced facades can look like lacy, disembodied screens. Light can add a dynamic quality to architecture, extending patterns, forms and designs into the dimensions of time. And the combination of light and shade creates strong contrasts of planes and gives texture to sculpted stone, as well as stocked or brick surfaces.

The significance of light can be appreciated when we consider the different parallel mirror-like surfaces reflecting light from the rays of the sun in different shades. As the visitor traverses the terraces, each perspective will provide him with myriad shades of light together with the strong symmetry of the parallel lines and surfaces, and will serve as an instrument to comfort, discipline and organise thoughts, and bring about spiritual uplift.

The movement of the rhythm from the floor to the wall, and finally to the interior dome (found in Sufi and Shi'ite tombs) should make a harmony and give the viewer a feeling of balance and proportion for the entire space. From the artistic stand-point the mirror-mosaic work on ceilings or walls reflect the ornamentation of the ceiling or wall (which may be carved and painted stucco, mosaic tiles with gold and calligraphy) and this encloses the visitor in the atmosphere to create a wonderful harmony which is the aim of the interior designer (image 26). The viewer is surrounded by such a beautiful space, and is moved to hear the inner call of silence and peace. The movement of light and colour play a fascinating role in the space to dazzle the eyes, making the spirit fly between those lights and colours (image 27). To make it simple, mirror-mosaic work assists in the contemplative exercises of Muslims.

4.3.1 Mirror-mosaic work in Iranian shrines

I. Mashhad: The Shrine of Imam 'Ali b. Musa al-Rida in Mashhad

The greatest example of mirror-mosaic work can be seen in the shrine of Imam Rida in Mashhad which is the capital of Khurasan province in the North East of Iran (892 km away from Tehran). It grew from a small village called Sanabad, 24 km away from Tus. After the martyrdom of Imam 'Ali ibn Musa Al-Rida and his burial there in 203 A.H., the place came to be known as Mashhad al-Rida and his holy shrine became a place of pilgrimage for the world's Shi'ites. *Astan-i Quds-Razavi* (the name given to the physical buildings comprising the *Haram*) is one of the most beautiful and glorious religious places in Iran.

With the coming to power of the Safavid dynasty (1499-1723) the city of Mashhad served as a centre for the promotion of Shi'-ism. Since then many of the *Astan-i Quds* buildings have been expanded. The shrine of Imam Rida consists of 33 buildings embodying Iranian Islamic architecture through 5 continuous centuries. Halls, porticos, iwans, minarets, and belfries of religious buildings and mosques have been decorated with a great number of arts-work such as tile work, inlay, mirror-mosaic work, stucco carving, stone carving, painting, illumination and *muqarnas*.

II. Qumm: The Shrine of Hazrat-i Ma'suma

Qom is a sacred city for Shi'-ite Islam and has a golden - domed shrine from the 9th century, that is built around the tomb of Fatima, Imams Rida's sister. This is the centre of an annually pilgrimage. The main outer *iwan* (entrance to the shrine) has been decorated with mirror - mosaic work (image 28).

Multiple mirrors with etched and painted mirror - glass frames provide the traditional rectangular units for facades. Where the flat panel are oval, as on the upper register of the portal *eyvan* of the shrine Hazrat - e Ma'suma in Qom, they are often enclosed in a rectangular frame. Curvilinear designs may fill the horizontal and vertical interstices of such panels, or they may compose whole decorative programs without the inclusion of framed mirrors. Mirror - pieces set at conflicting angles emphasize the architectonic *muqarnas* of an *eyvan*, as at the portal of the shrine in Qom.³⁵

III.a) Shiraz: The Shrine of Shah-i Chiragh

This shrine is the third most important holy shrines in Iran (after Imam Rida's and Hazrat-i Ma'suma's shrines). Sayyid Amir Ahmad, known as Shah-i Chiragh (King of Light), was the brother of Imam 'Ali ibn Musa al-Rida, who came to Shiraz in the latter half of the 8th century. He passed away in the city and his tomb is now a respected place of pilgrimage. The structure, tile work and the dome of the mausoleum have been rebuilt and repaired during Safavid and Qajar dynasties on several occasions over the centuries. The tomb, the beautiful silver doors and the exquisite mirror-mosaic works are the handicrafts of master artists of Shiraz (images 29 to 36).

III.b) Shiraz: The shrine of the Imamzada Ibrahim

Imamzada Ibrahim was a brother of Imam 'Ali ibn Musa al-Rida. This shrine also has been decorated with mirror - mosaic work on wall and ceiling (image 37).

III.c) Shiraz: The Shrine of Sayyid 'Ala al-din Husayn

This shrine (belonging to the son of the 6th Imam Musa ibn Ja'far) contains fascinating examples of mirror-mosaic work (images 38 - 39).

IV.a) Kashan: The Shrine of Shahzada Ibrahim

The mausoleum of Shahzadeh Ibrahim was built in (1894 A.D.) during the Qajar period. This structure is highly interesting and attractive for possessing a turquoise tile cupola, lofty minarets, a pleasant courtyard and an *iwan* decorated with mirror-mosaic work and paintings (image 23). The interior of the shrine is also decorated with mirror-mosaic work. The outer *iwan* depicts ample paintings of a religious nature on a plaster background. The interior of the mausoleum possesses elaborate mirror-mosaic work.

IV.b) Kashan: The Shrine of Muhammad Hilal Aran

This shrine belongs to one of the sons of Imam 'Ali. The outer *iwan* is decorated with mirror-mosaic work on the *muqarnas* (image 40).

³⁵ E. Yarshater, *Encyclopaedia Iranica Volume 1* (London and Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan

4.3.2 Mirror-mosaic Work in Iranian Palaces

There are many rooms, halls, and *iwan*'s in palaces in Tehran, which have been decorated with mirror-mosaic work, and most of them were constructed during the Safavid period and beginning of the Qajar period. They include the following.

I. The Gulistan Palace:

The Gulistan palace, though unassuming from the outside, is still one of the architectural wonders of the old city of Tehran. Its complex of buildings, including the Shams al-Imara, which contains marvellous mirror-mosaic design work (image 41), are among the few buildings remaining that provide us with a good example of what Qajar royal architecture was like. *Iwan Takht-i Marmar* is another section of the Gulistan Palace, which is decorated with mirror-mosaic work (image 42). *Talar 'Aina* (the Mirror Hall) is another famous example of mirror-mosaic work in this palace (image 43).

II. Niyawaran Palace

Another example of Qajar building is the Niyawaran Palace, which also includes a hall of mirrors (*Jahan-nama* hall). Fine mirror-mosaic work, superb stucco carving further add to the beauty of this building (image 44).

4.3.3 Mirror-mosaic Work in Iranian Houses

Good examples of mirror-mosaic work can be found in private houses. One of the most remarkable private houses which contains mirror-mosaic works is in Shiraz, and is called Ghawam garden (*Naranjistan-i Ghawam* or *Bagh-i Ghawam*), which was designed during the Qajar period. This building includes the main outer *iwan* (images 45-46) which are decorated with pieces of plain and convex mirrors, painting and plaster work (image 47-49). There are a few inner rooms, which are also decorated with mirror-mosaic work (image 50).

There are many old examples of other private house with mirror-mosaic work in different cities, but space does not allow a detailed listing or examination. The best

examples include the old house belonging to Hisam Tabatabai (around 18th 19th centuries) in Kashan, which has mirror-mosaic work in combination with plasterwork (image 51).

4.3.4 Other Examples of Mirror-mosaic Work

Mirror-mosaic work also appears in the Shi'-ite, Iranian tradition when the outside of houses are marked by a structure called a *hijla* (literally a bridal chamber) which is used to indicate that the young son of the house has just passed away. This structure is decorated with mirror-mosaic work (images 52-53).

Other places where mirror-mosaic work appears include the *zurkhana* (an ancient institution where traditional martial arts are carried in an atmosphere which is charged with Shi'-ite and Sufi symbolism). The *iwan's* of *zurkhanas* are often decorated with mirror-mosaic work (images 54-55).

Mirror-mosaic work also appears in modern Iran in locations that are purely "secular". This is because modern interior designers have paid increasing attention to light and lighting. There are companies that work to increase the amount of interior space, allowing interior designers more scope in their work. Persian artist like others tried to use light in public places. Muslims artists on one hand know the story of light in their religion and on other hand they are familiar with the concept of the mirror in traditions and literature, and therefore they return to the original mirror decoration and bridge the gap between the art modern interior design and the Iranian spiritual tradition. In contemporary Iran it is difficult to find good mirror-mosaic work because this artwork has been sucked into the commercial world, and this perhaps has reduced the quality of the art of mirror-mosaic work. In modern Iran mirror-mosaic work can be found in restaurants, hotels, and shops (images 56-60).

Images

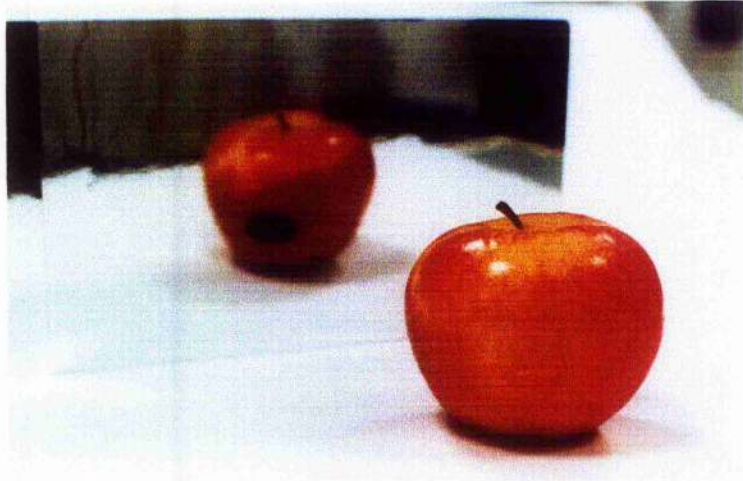


Image 1: Reflection in natural mirror.

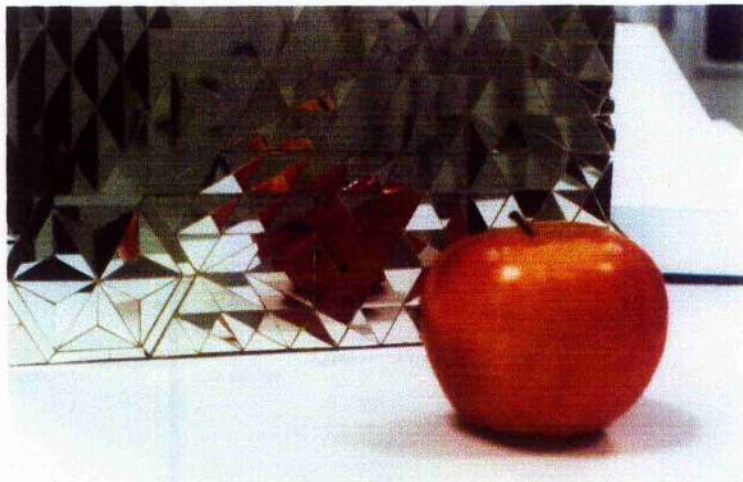


Image 2: Reflection in panel of mirror - mosaic work.

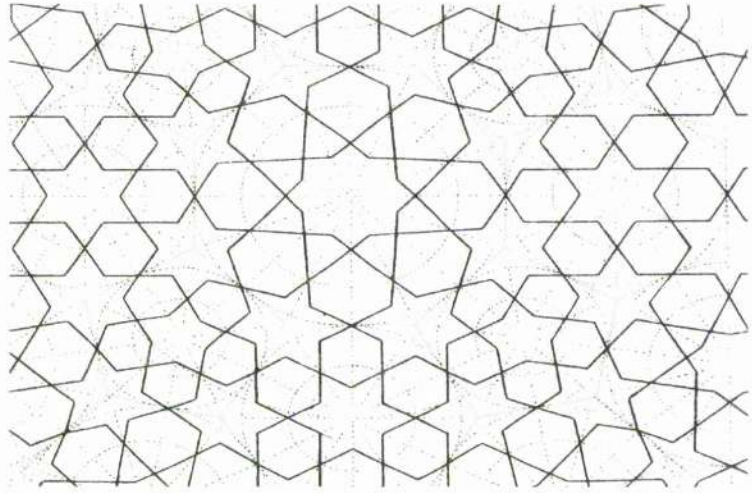


Image 3: An example of geometric pattern.

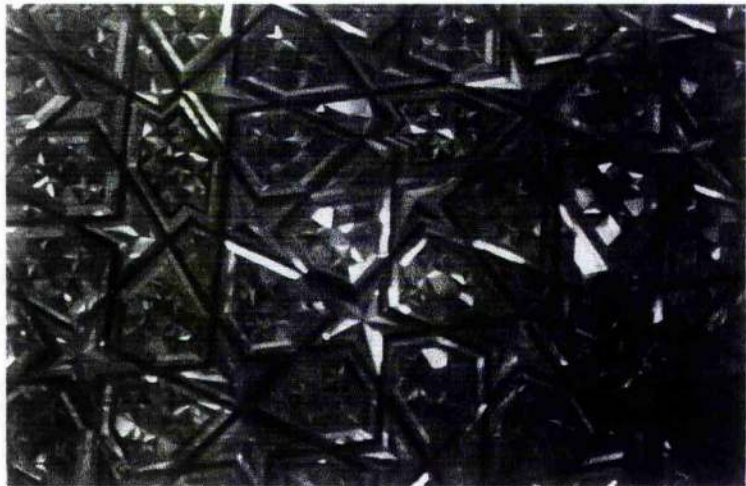


Image 4: An example of mirror - mosaic work with geometric pattern.

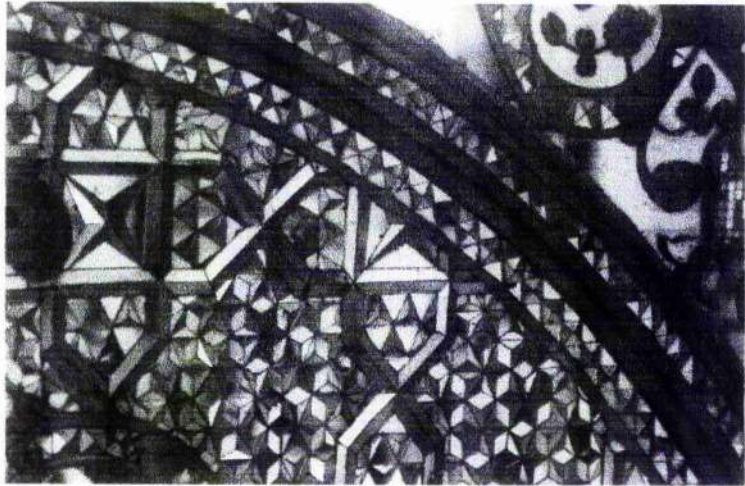


Image 5: Another example of mirror - mosaic work with geometric pattern.

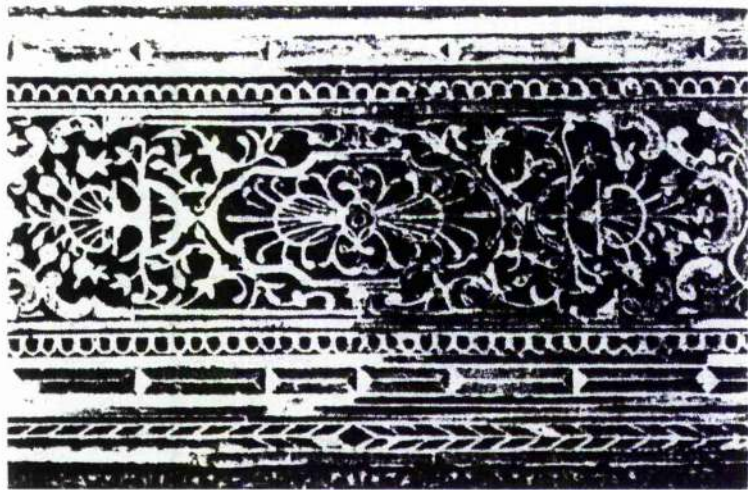


Image 6: An example of mirror - mosaic work with ornamental pattern.

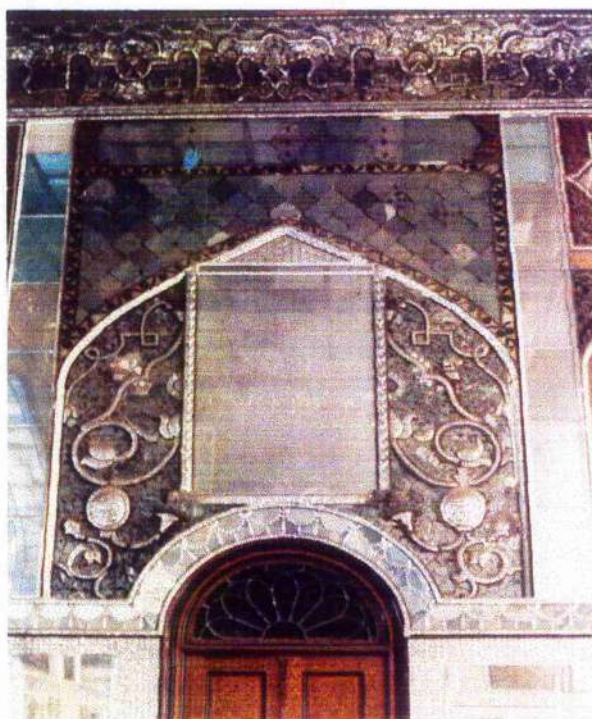


Image 7: Another example of mirror - mosaic work with ornamental pattern. Gulistan palace, Tehran.

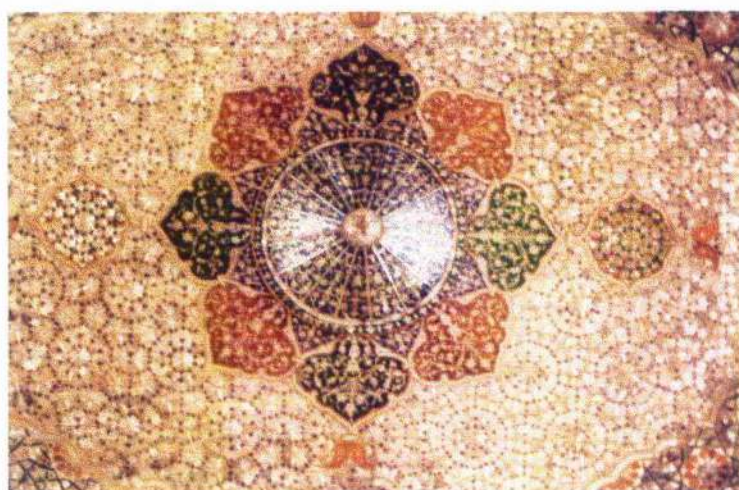


Image 8: An example of mirror - mosaic work with ornamental and geometrical pattern. The house of Ghawam, Shiraz.



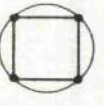




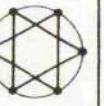


Number	Geometry		MACROCOSM		MICROCOSM		MATHEMATICAL ATTRIBUTES
	Static	Dynamic	Divine Essence		Divine Essence		
0							
1		•	Creator	One Primordial Permanent Eternal	Creator	One Primordial Permanent Eternal	The point The principle and origin of all numbers
2			Intellect	Innate Acquired	Body divided into two parts	Left Right	One-half of all numbers are counted by it
3			Soul	Vegetative Animal Rational	Constitution of animals	Two extremities and a middle	Harmony First odd number One-third of all numbers are counted by it
4			Matter	Original Physical Universal Artifacts	Four humors	Phlegm Blood Yellow bile Black bile	Stability First square number
5			Nature	Ether Fire Air Water Earth	Five senses	Sight Hearing Touch Taste Smell	First circular number
6			Body	Above Below Front Back Right Left	Six powers of motion in six directions	Up, down, front, back, left, right	First complete number The number of surfaces of a cube
7			Universe	Seven visible planets and seven days of the week	Active powers	Attraction Sustenance Digestion Repulsion Nutrition Growth Formation	First perfect number

Image 9/1: Table of numerical correspondence.







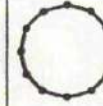
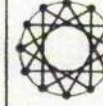
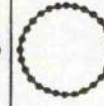
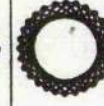

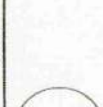
Number	Geometry		MACROCOSM		MICROCOSM		MATHEMATICAL ATTRIBUTES
	Static	Dynamic	Qualities		Qualities		
8			Cold, dry Cold, wet Hot, wet Hot, dry	Cold, dry Cold, wet Hot, wet Hot, dry	Cold, dry Cold, wet Hot, wet Hot, dry	First cubic number and the number of <i>n</i> notes	
9			Beings of this world	Mineral Plant Animal (Each containing three parts)	Nine elements of the body	Bones, brain, nerves, veins, blood, flesh, skin, nails, hair	First odd square and last of single digit
10			The Holy Tetractys	First four universal Beings	Basic disposition of the body	Head, neck, chest, belly, abdomen, thoracic cavity, pelvic girdle, two thighs, two legs, two feet	Perfect number First of two-digit numbers
12			Zodiac Aries, Leo, Sagittarius Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn Gemini, Libra, Aquarius Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces	Fire, hot, dry, east Earth, cold, dry, south Air, hot, wet, west Water, cold, wet, north	Twelve orifices of the body	Two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, two nipples, one mouth, one navel, two channels of excretion	First excessive number
28			Stations of the Moon (divided into four quarters)	Each quarter equals one week, seven days represent seven planets	Twenty-eight vertebrae		Second complete number
360			Number of solar days		Number of veins in the body		Number of degrees in a circle

Image 9 / 2

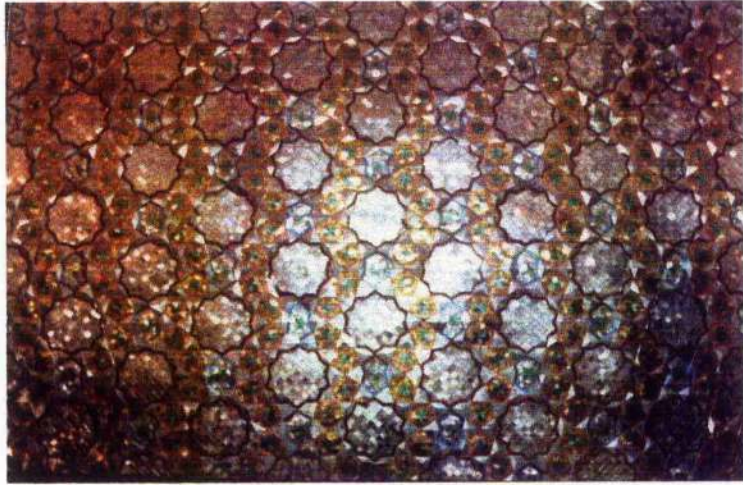


Image 10: Mirror - mosaic work on flat surface. Imamzada Taj al-din, Shiraz.

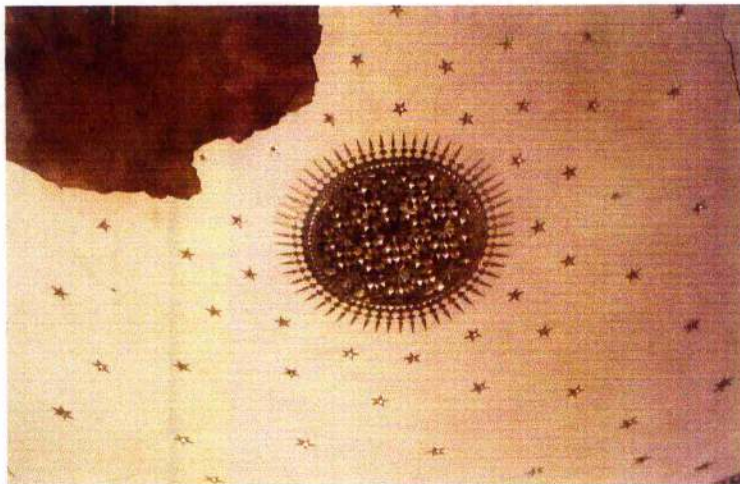


Image 11: Mirror - mosaic work on some part of the flat ceiling. The house of Hisam Tabatabai, Kashan.

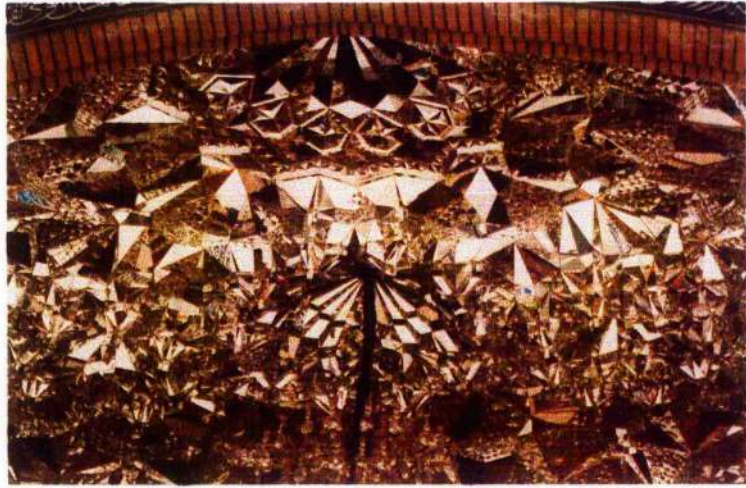


Image 12: Mirror - mosaic work on *muqarnas*, entrance iwan. Imamzada Salih, North Tehran.

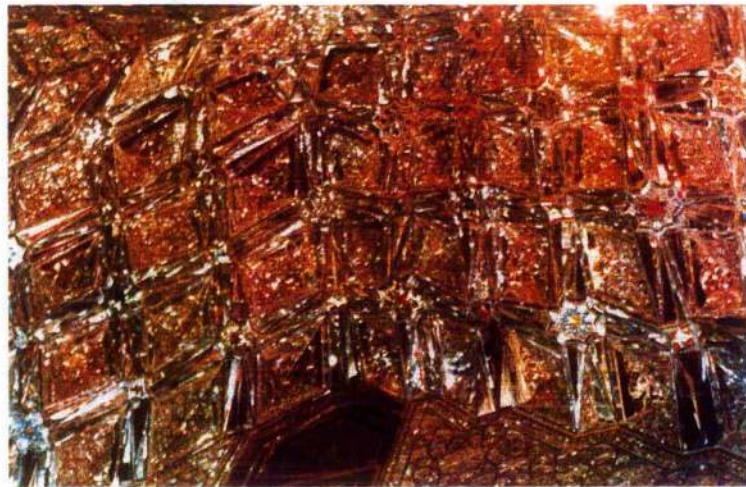


Image 13: Mirror - mosaic work on complex *muqarnas*, inner iwan. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.

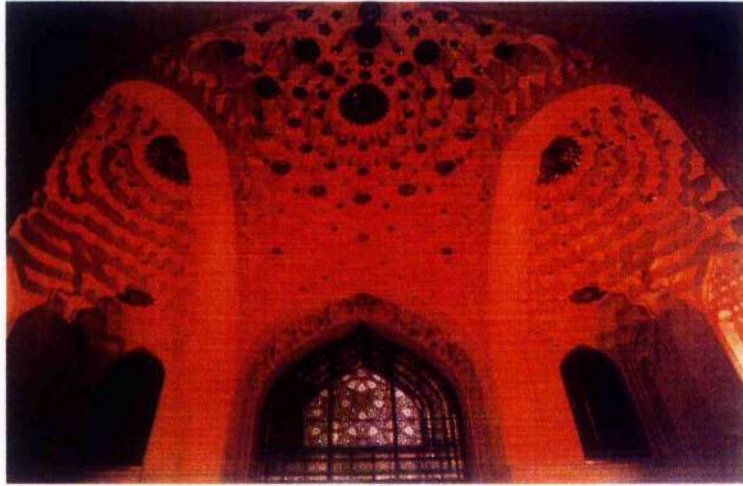


Image 14: Mirror - mosaic work on some parts of *muqarnas*. The house of Akhawan Hagigi, Isfahan.

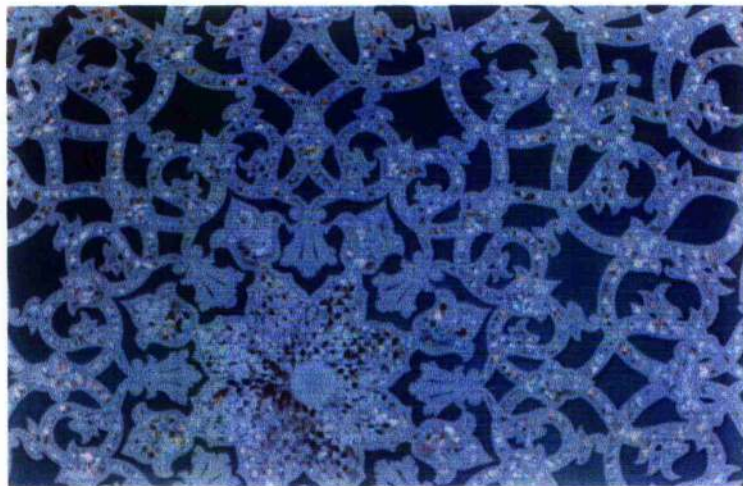


Image 15: A combination of mirror - mosaic work with plaster work. A private house in Tehran.

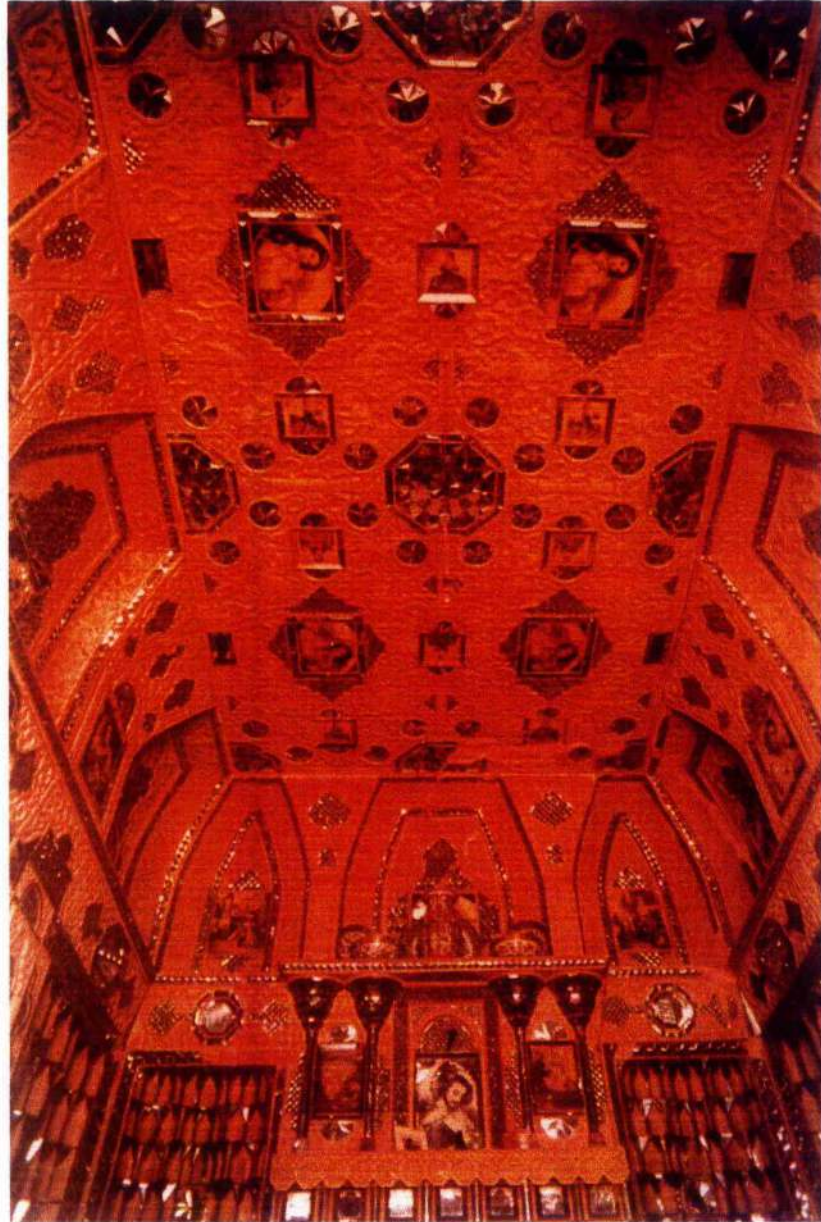


Image 16: A combination of mirror - mosaic work with plasterwork. The house of Shahshahani, Isfahan.

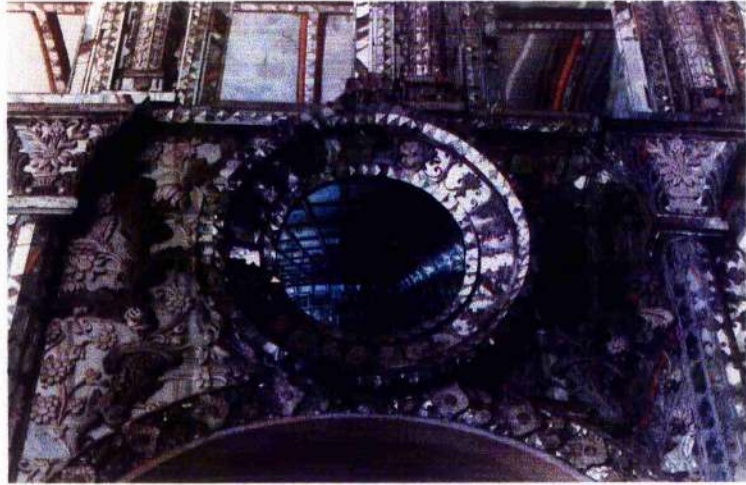


Image 17: Plasterwork on mirror and mirror - mosaic work. Shams al-Imarat palace, Tehran.

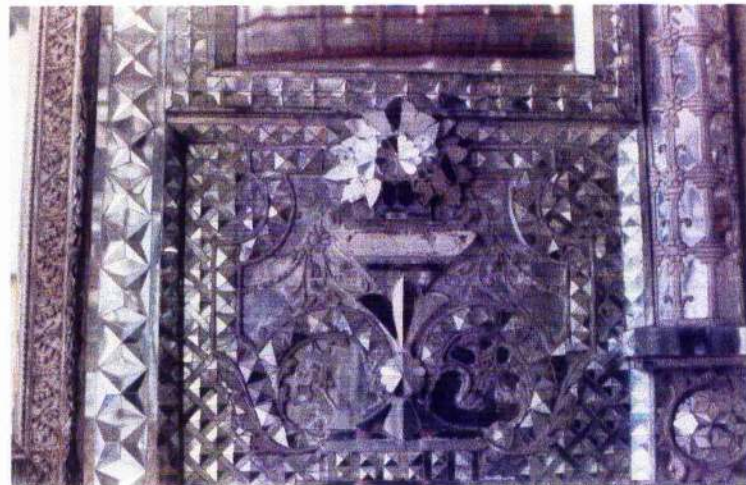


Image 18: Plasterwork on mirror and mirror - mosaic work. Shams al-Imarat palace, Tehran.

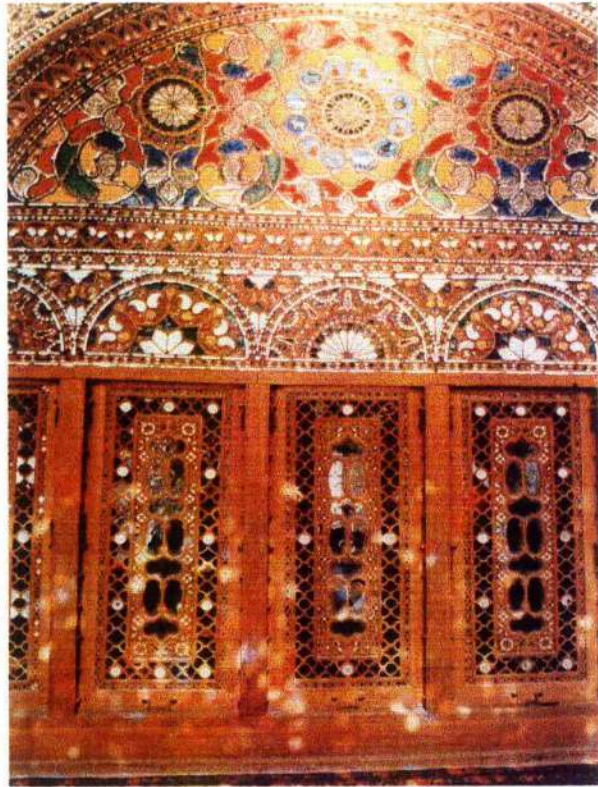


Image 19: Combination of mirror - mosaic work with woodwork, coloured mirror and glass. Hossayniya Amini, Ghazwin

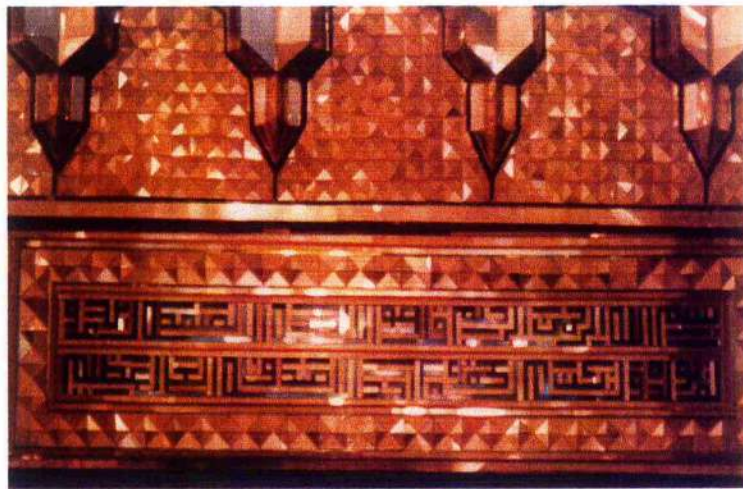


Image 20: Calligraphy with mirror. Shrine of 'Ali ibn hamza, Shiraz.

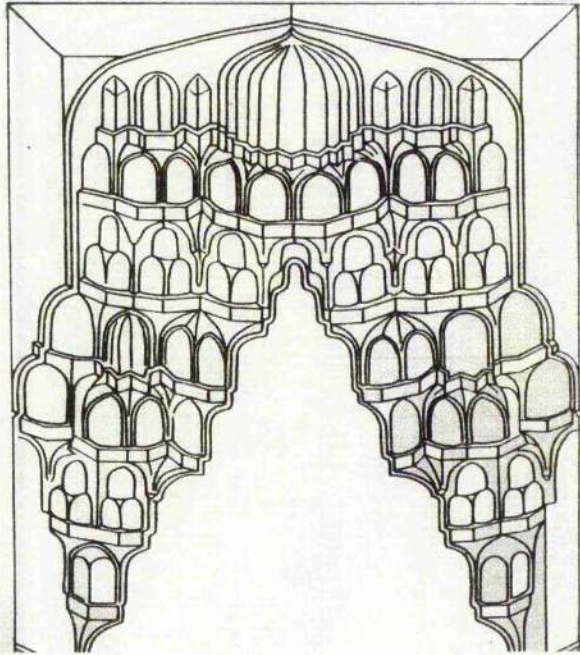


Image 21: A diagram of *muqarnas*.

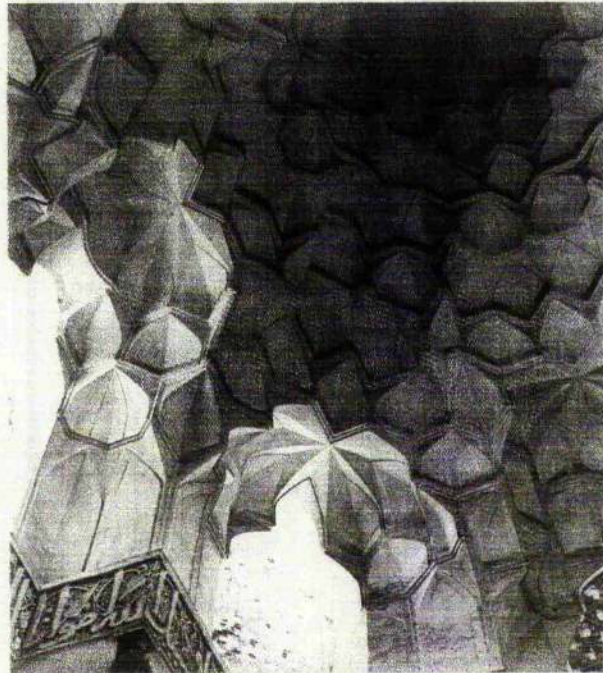


Image 22: An example of *muqarnas*.



Image 23: An example of mirror - mosaic work at the entrance iwan. Shrine of Shahzada Ibrahim, Kashan.

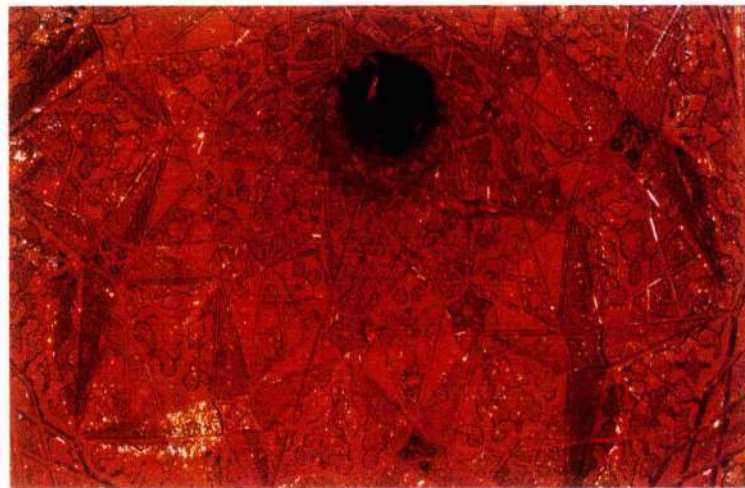


Image 24: An example of mirror - mosaic work above the tomb. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.

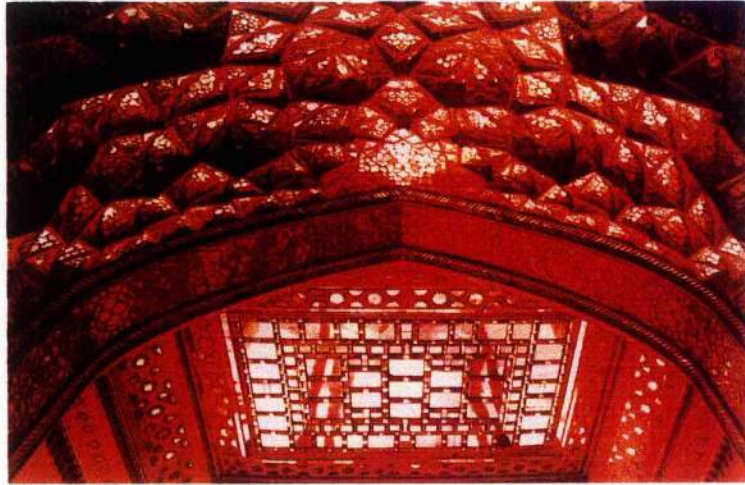


Image 25: Mirror – mosaic and plain mirror in combination with woodwork. Chihil Sutun palace, Isfahan.

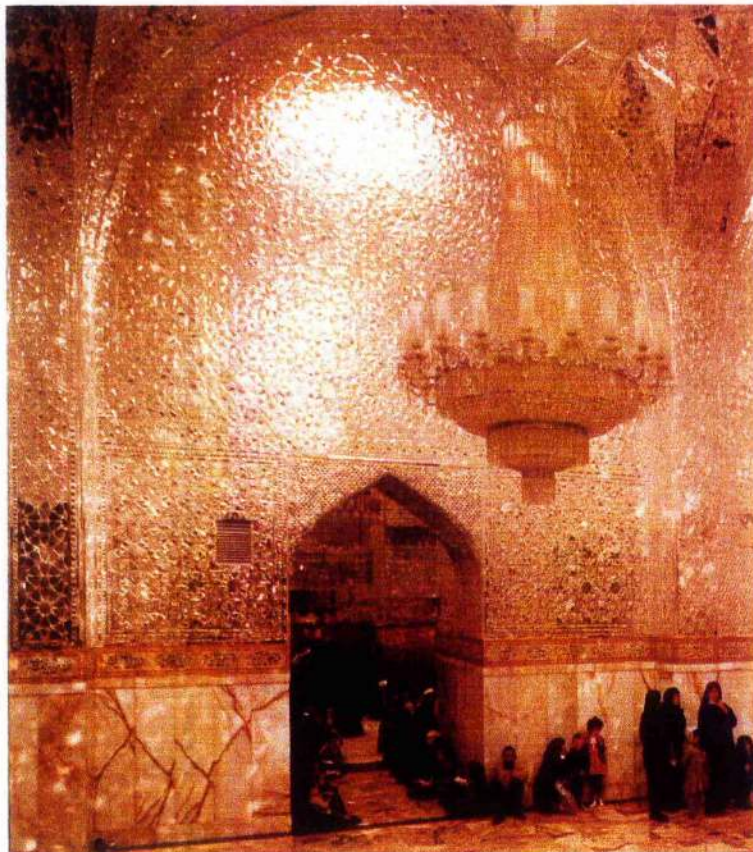


Image 26: Mirror - mosaic work gives a feeling of balance of colour and proportion for the entire space. Shrine of Imam Rida, Mashhad.



Image 27: The movement of light and colour play a fascinating role in the space to dazzle the eyes, making the spirit fly between those lights and colours. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.

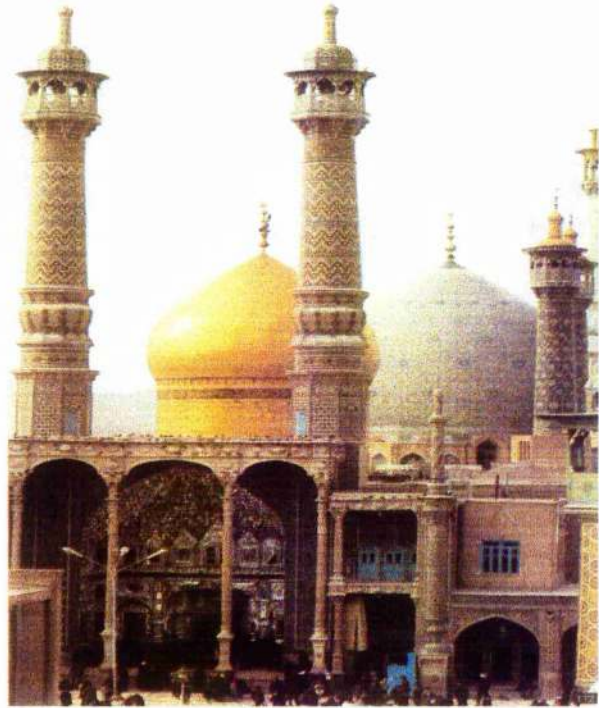


Image 28: The entrance iwan decorated with mirror - mosaic work. Shrine of Hazrat-i Ma'suma, Qumm.

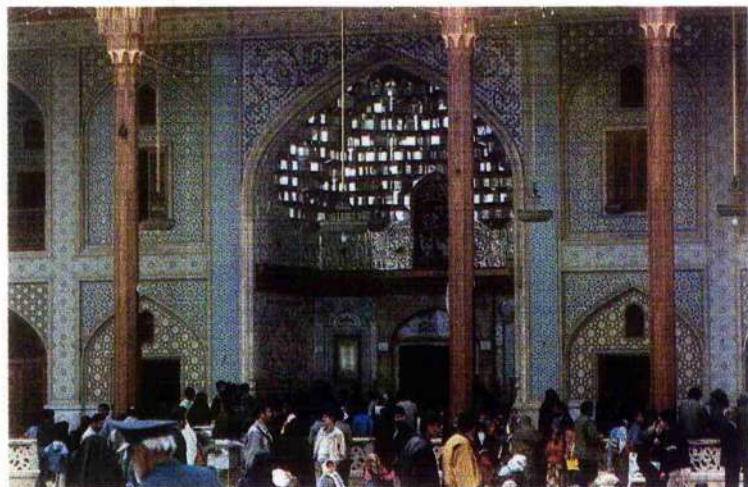


Image 29: The entrance iwan decorated with mirror - mosaic work. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.



Image 30: Mirror - mosaic work on *muqarnas* inside an arch, plasterwork on mirror combine with coloured mirror. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.

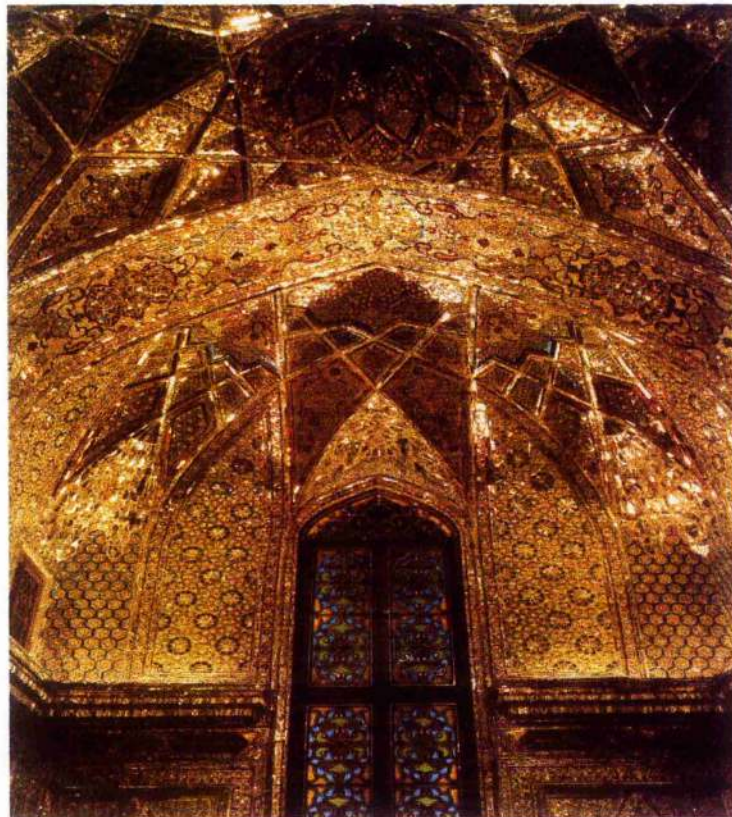


Image 31: Mirror - mosaic work with geometrical design inside the tomb combine with coloured mirror. shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.



Image 32: Mixture of geometric and ornamental design in combination of coloured mirror. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.



Image 33: Another example of geometric and ornamental design in combination of coloured mirror. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.

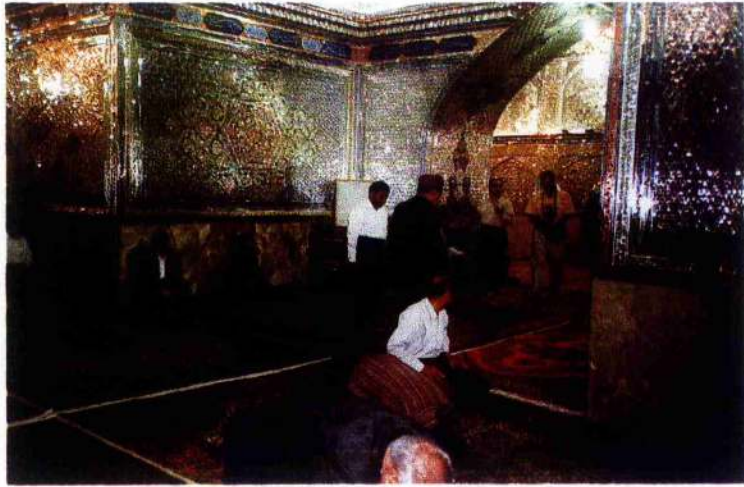


Image 34: Facing of mirror - mosaic work on the wall around the tomb. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.



Image 35: Closer image of mirror - mosaic work on the edge of the wall. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.

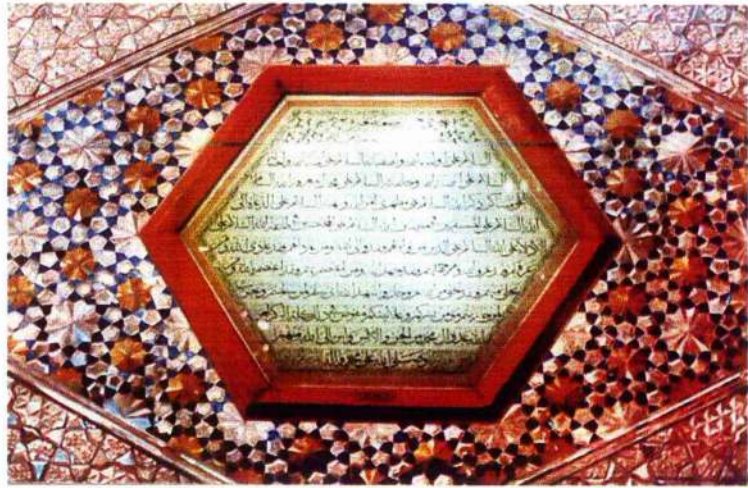


Image 36: Another example of mirror - mosaic work on the wall with geometrical pattern in combination with coloured mirror. Shrine of Shah Chiragh, Shiraz.

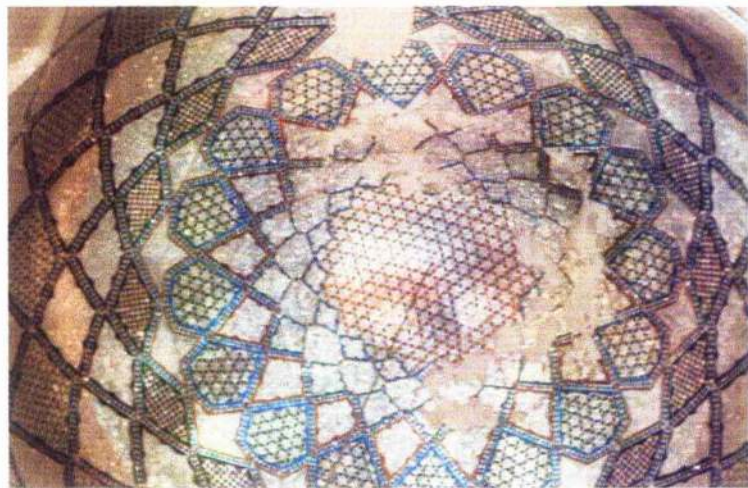


Image 37: Mirror - mosaic work in combination with coloured mirror in side the dome on top of the tomb. Imamzada Imbrahim, Shiraz.

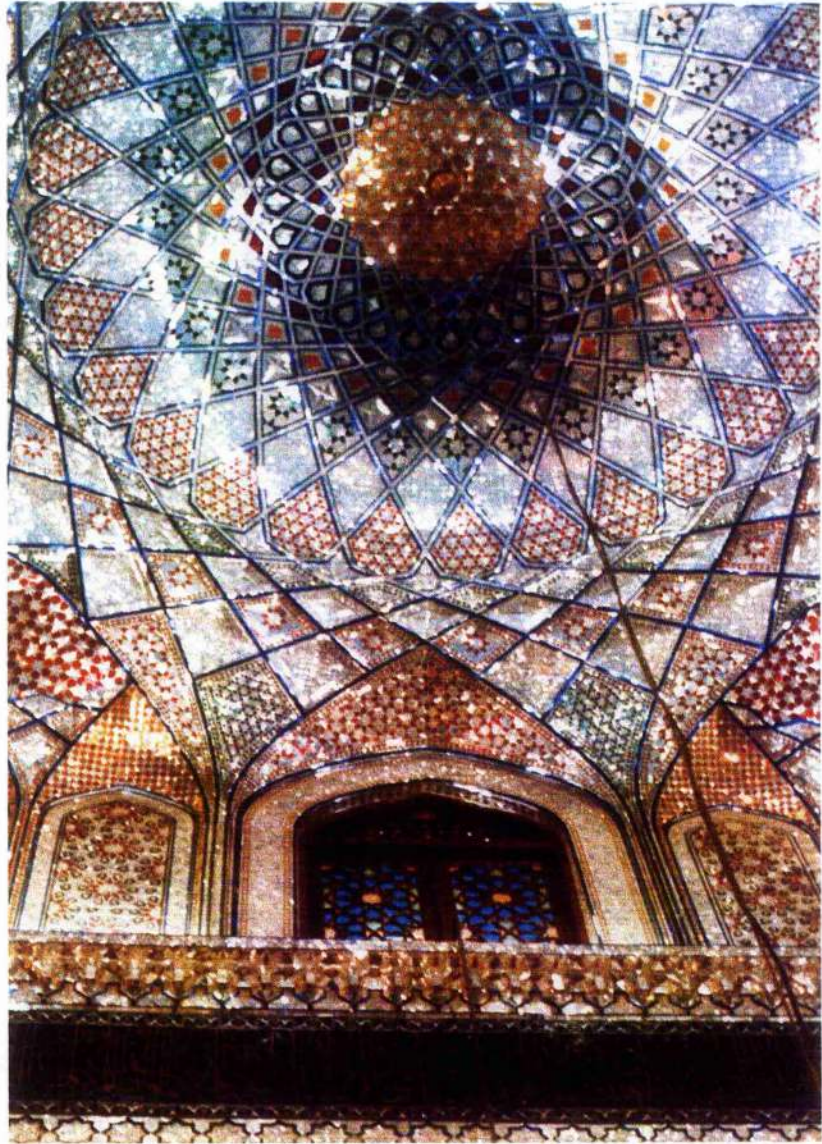


Image 38: Mirror - mosaic work with geometrical design inside the tomb in combination with coloured mirror. Shrine of 'Ala al-din Husayn, Shiraz.



Image 39: Further example of mirror - mosaic work. Shrine of 'Ala al-din Husayn, Shiraz.

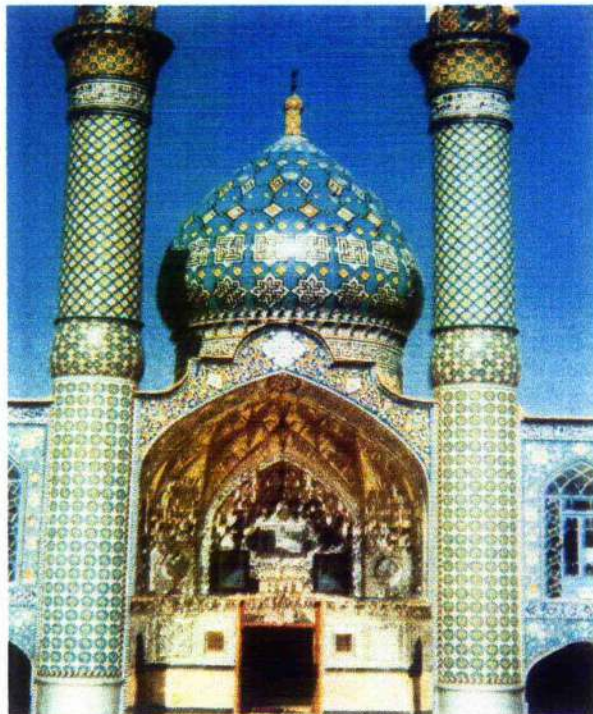


Image 40: The entrance iwan decorated with mirror - mosaic work. Shrine of Muhammad Hilal Aran, Kashan.

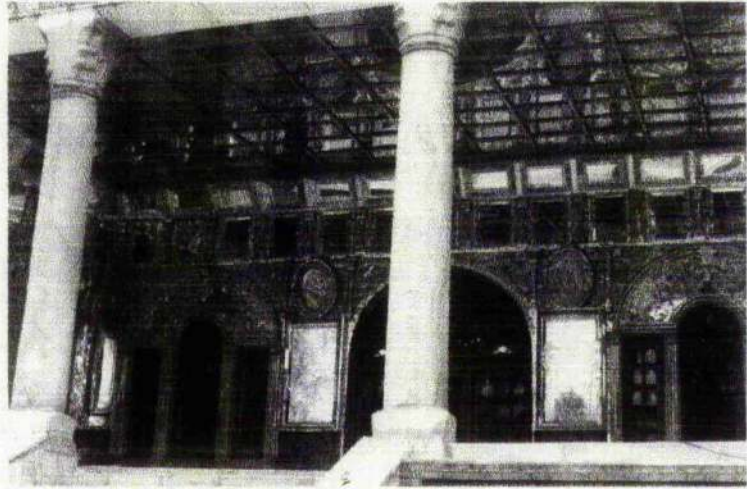


Image 41: Mirror - mosaic work in combination with plasterwork on walls, and plain mirror on ceiling. Shams al-Imara palace, Tehran.

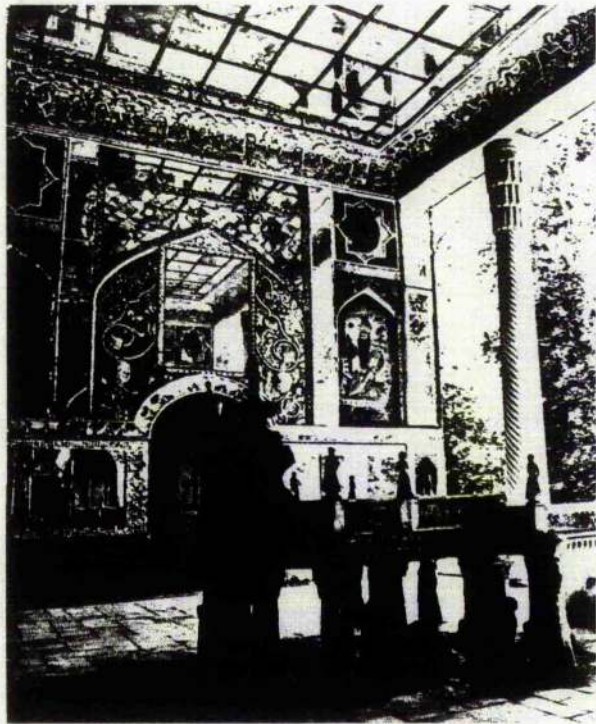


Image 42: Mirror - mosaic work on wall with geometrical and ornamental pattern and plain mirror on ceiling. Gulistan Palace, Tehran.

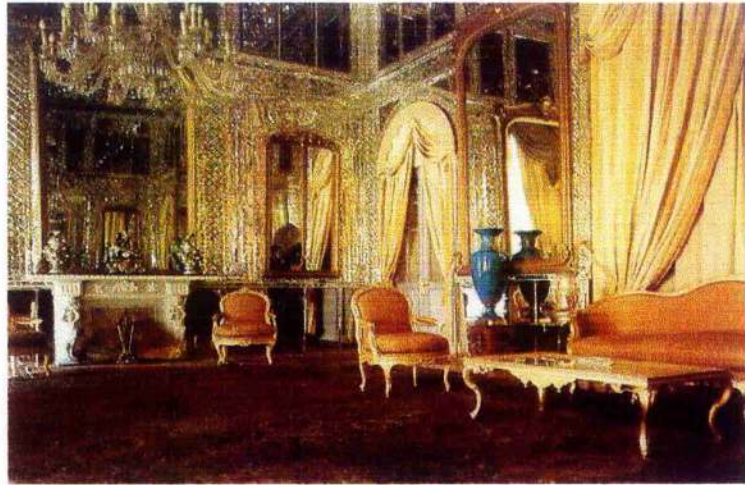


Image 43: Talar 'Aina (The Mirror Hall) is a famous examples of mirror - mosaic work from the Qajar period. Gulistan Palace, Tehran.

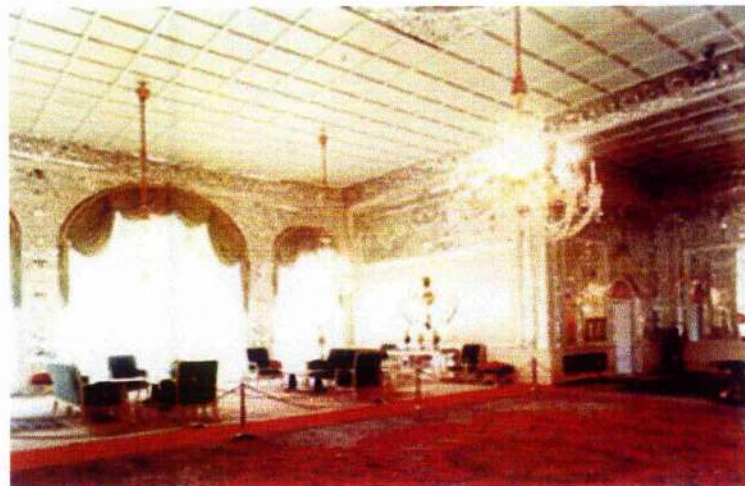


Image 44: The hall of mirrors (Jahan - nama hall) with fine mirror - mosaic work, superb stucco carving further add to the beauty of this building. Niyawaran Palace (Sahebqaraniye), Tehran.

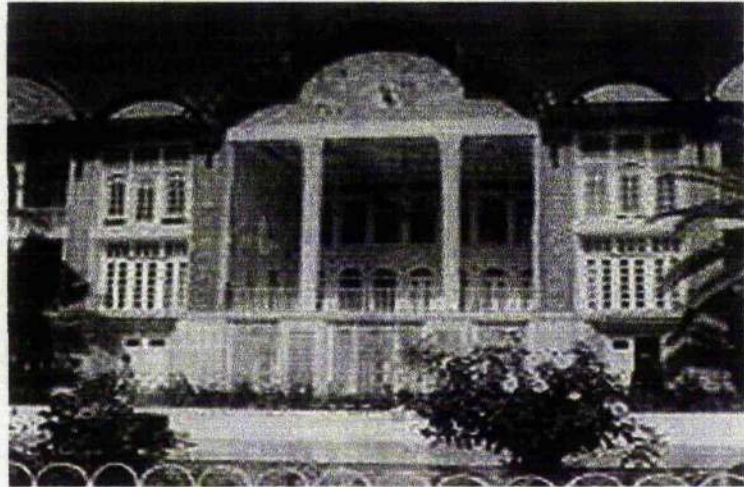


Image 45: Outside view of the iwan House of Ghavam which is entirely decorated with plain mirror, coloured mirror and glass, and mirror - mosaic work. "Narenjestan - i Ghawam or Bagh-i Ghawam", Shiraz.



Image 46: Closer view to the entire iwan. "Narenjestan - i Ghawam or Bagh-i Ghawam", Shiraz.

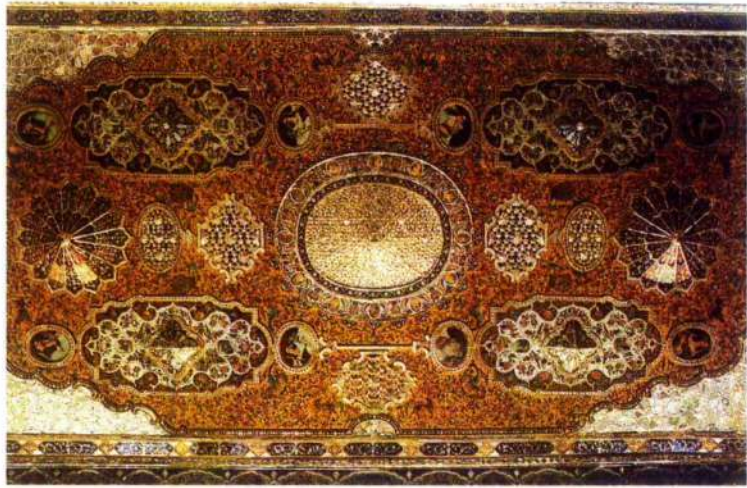


Image 47: Mirror - mosaic work in combination with painting and woodwork on the ceiling. The house of Ghawam, Shiraz.

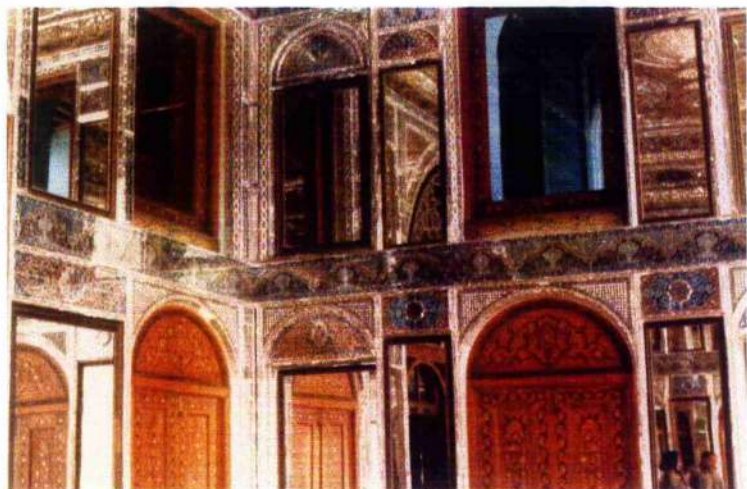


Image 48: Mirror - mosaic work in combination with coloured glass and woodwork on the wall. The house of Ghawam, Shiraz.



Image 49: Mirror - mosaic work in combination with coloured glass and woodwork on the wall. The house of Ghawam, Shiraz.



Image 50: One of the inner rooms which is wholly decorated with mirror - mosaic work in combination with coloured glass and woodwork on the wall and ceiling. The house of Ghawam, Shiraz.

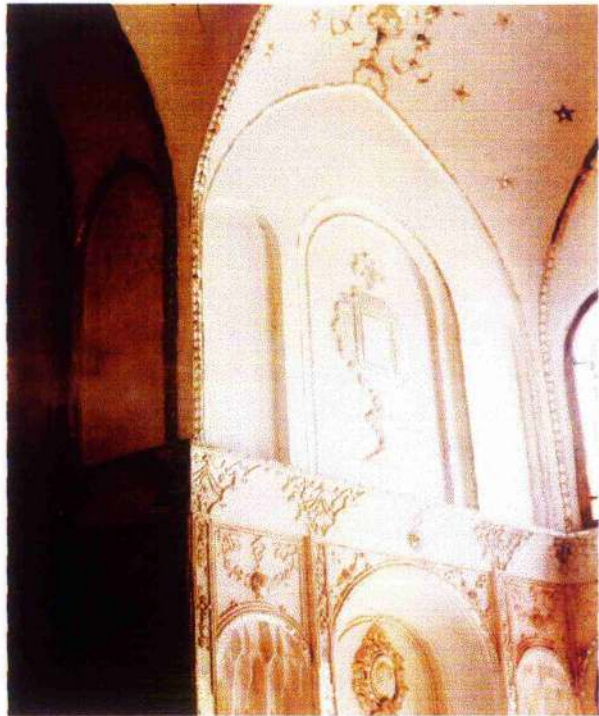


Image 51: Mirror - mosaic work in combination with plasterwork on the wall. The house of Hisam Tabatabai, Kashan.

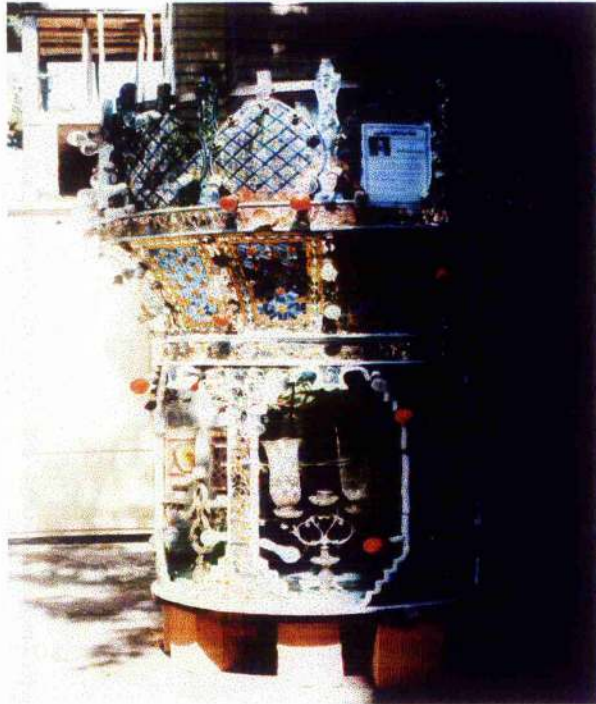


Image 52: Traditional death notice (*Hijla*) in the street for a male youth, decorated with mirror - mosaic work.

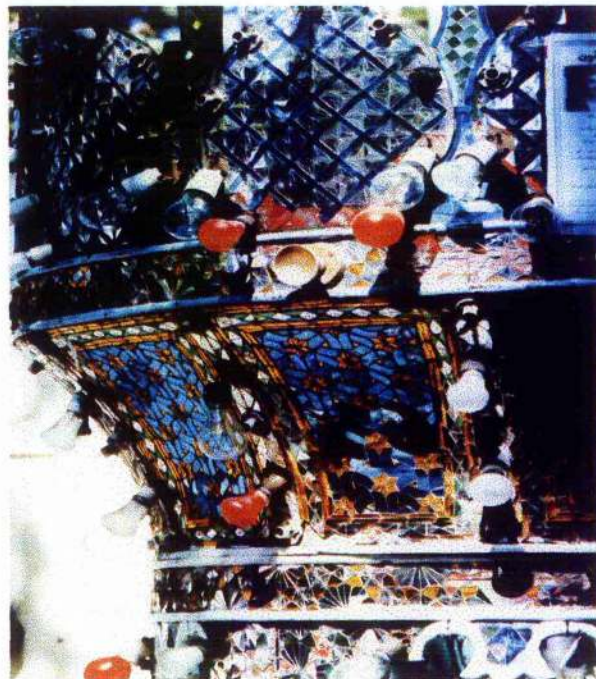


Image 53: Detail picture of the above Image, shows the mirror - mosaic work.



Image 54: An example of mirror - mosaic work on in a Zurkhana. The mirror - mosaic work is above the entrance (door) and within the iwan to the side. Zurkhana Muhammad Fahmida, Park-i Shahr, Tehran.



Image 55: Closer picture to the mirror - mosaic work on top of the entrance, Muhammad Zurkhana Muhammad Fahmida, Park-i Shahr, Tehran.

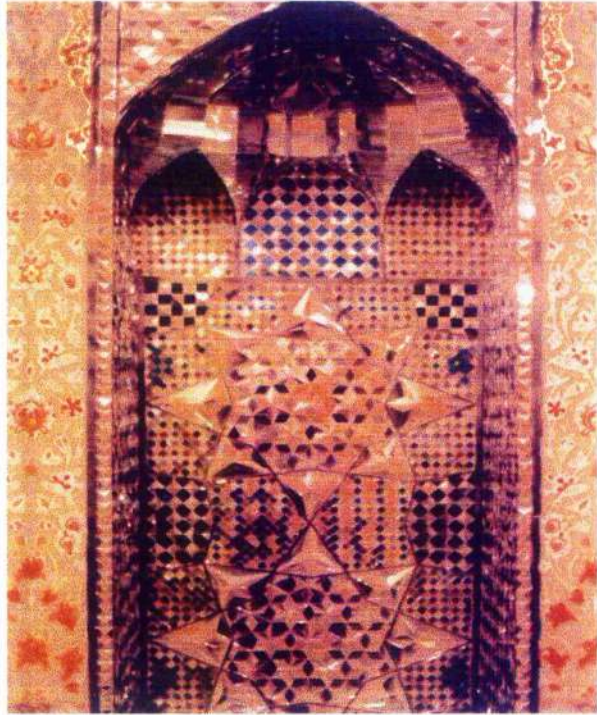


Image 56: The use of mirror - mosaic work for decoration in public places. Part of the conference room in Hotel Laleh, Tehran.



Image 57: Mirror - mosaic work on wall. Restaurant in Hotel Laleh, Tehran.

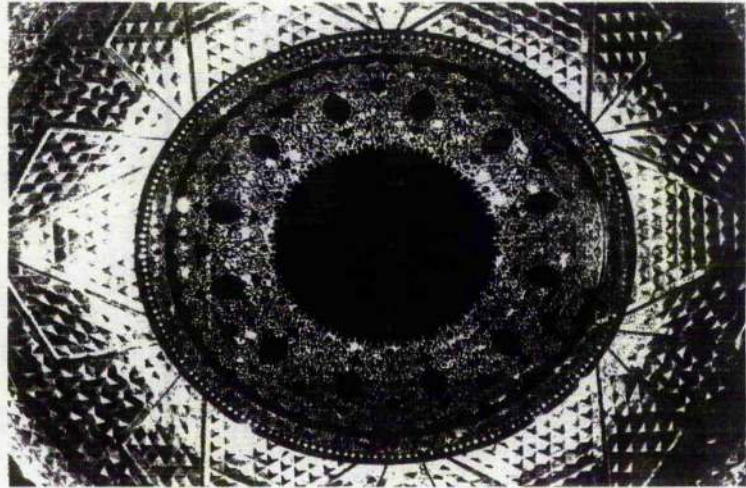


Image 58: Mirror - mosaic work on the ceiling of Hotel Shah Abbas, Isfahan.

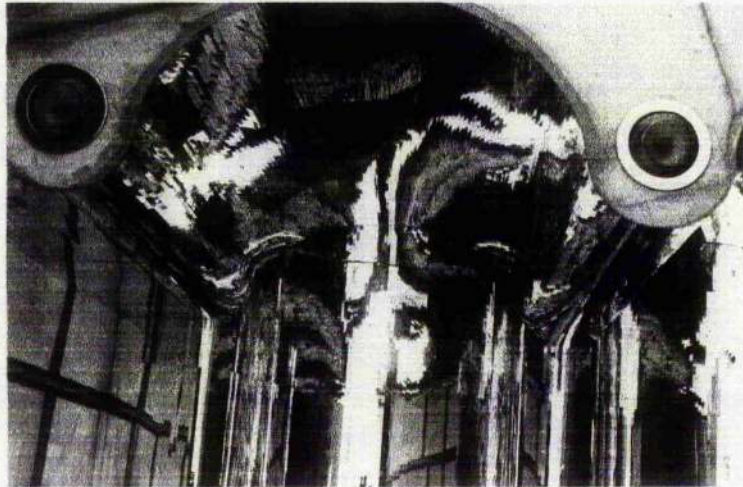


Image 59: Recent mirror - mosaic work on the ceiling of an entrance of one apartment. Pasdaran Street, Tehran.

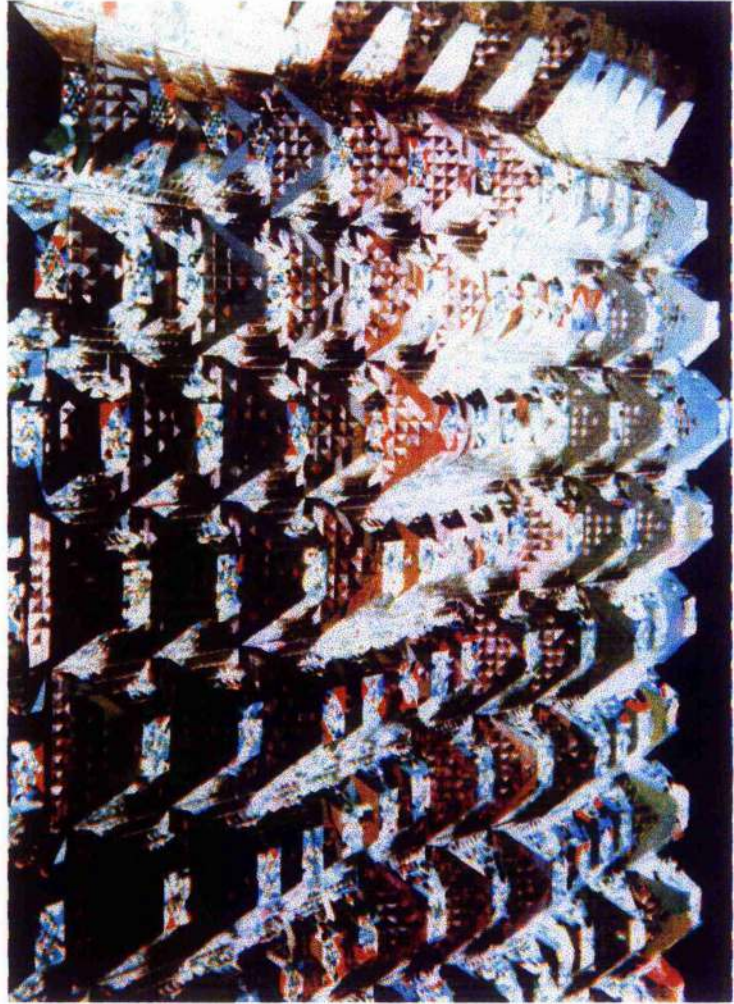


Image 60: Panel of mirror - mosaic work, the front of the coloured window reflects the colour when the viewer moves and so can experience the movement of light and colour, created by Mr. Deljo. Swedish Embassy, Tehran.

Conclusion

The aim of dissertation article has been to find the specific reasons for using mirrors as a noticeable and meaningful decoration, not just for luxury or fashion in sacred Shi'ite places in Iran. The first chapter focused upon the symbolism of light in the Qur'an, and it was shown that light symbolism permeates all creation, from the divine down to man. In effect, it can be said that the Qur'anic portrayal of light serves as a bridge between human art and the divine, and this helps to explain why light and lighting is/was very dear for artists in the area of the religious art. The Qur'anic verse which speaks of rust forming on human hearts is crucial in this regard for it offers the symbol of the human heart as a mirror that can reflect God's light if it is cleansed. Moreover, the first chapter also indicated that the Qur'an views humans as the best of God's creation, therefore they are best able to perceive the divine light.

The second chapter took a more specific focus on light in the Iranian tradition, namely, the Shi'ite tradition. An examination of the hadiths from the Shi'ite Imams reveals that light symbolism was hugely important. Although Shi'ism was not the state religion in Iran until the Safavid period, it has been shown that there were large pockets of Shi'ites in Iran from its very inception. As a result of the light symbolism in the Shi'ite tradition one can speculate that the shrines that were built for the Imams and their descendants utilised mirror-mosaic work to reflect such symbolism.

The third chapter investigated the Sufi tradition in Iran which many scholars recognise as being one of the major components of Iranian identity. The Iranian Sufi

tradition is pregnant with references to “men of light”, “mirror of the heart”, “the manifestation of lights” (or photisms, to use Corbin’s term), so it is not surprising that mirror-mosaic work has struck a certain resonance among Iranians. The third chapter highlights the light symbolism in the Persian Sufi tradition by looking at the works of two Persian Sufis, Sahl ibn ‘Abdallah al - Tustari (who was one of the first to write about light and witnessing God – albeit in Arabic) and Najm al-Din Razi (whose mystical writings are still used by students as basic Sufi texts in Iran). Finally an indication was given of the influence of light/mirror symbolism by referring to the poetry of Rumi and Attar. Such poetry is enjoyed by virtually all Iranians, regardless of the religious/spiritual inclinations. And so it could be argued that such symbolism may be deeply embedded, subconsciously in the Iranian imagination, and this leads to an appreciation of mirror-mosaic work.

Chapter four investigated the restraints that Muslim artists have faced when composing their art-works. It was also explained how and why mirror-mosaic work was able to avoid such restrictions, and how the geometric and symmetrical features of mirror-mosaic work have profound spiritual significance. Chapter four was illustrated with examples of mirror-mosaic work so that the reader would be able to appreciate the scale of this art-form. The vast majority of the images are my own, as very little references or pictures appear in other works on Iran or Iranian art.

One possible objection to this thesis is that there is no evidence of mirror-mosaic work in Iran prior to the Safavid period when glass and mirrors were imported on a large scale from Europe. It may have been the case that mirror-mosaic work was used in palaces and shrines purely as a means to exhibit wealth and therefore power. This is a valid argument, but there is no conclusive proof of this. It may be the case that the reason for the use of mirror-mosaic work was both spiritual (drawing on the Shi’-ite and Sufi heritage) as well as political. And it is even possible that the motive was purely spiritual. I have no conclusive proof to offer for any of the three possibilities, and further research needs to be

carried out (a good topic for a doctoral thesis) in order to determine the real motives for using mirror-mosaic work (although my hunch is that it was a combination of political and spiritual motives).

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