

## Association of Decorative Elements in Haj Agha Ali House, the Largest Adobe House in the World

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### Abstract

Historical houses in Qajar era are among the most significant works of that time which represent specific features of that time having a close relationship with daily life of people. The houses are important for their plans and architectural spaces and they are also culturally and aesthetically unique because they contain many decoration and elements which are treasures of art and handicrafts. In this development, research was conducted in a library. Here motifs used in Haj Agha Ali house have been categorized after analysis and comparison. In fact, decoration is an integral part of traditional architecture in Iran as they show the type of using space and they also represent the dominant mind set of that time. Qajar art as occasion served was exposed with western elements and reacted upon them. The result of such reaction in architectural decoration is that in many cases imported elements are created with traditional elements in an associated combination. Although in some cases, the full unity is not the case but generally, the artists of that time could get to a general unity in architectural decorations with a combination of different cultural elements. Because there have been no comprehensive studies about the decorations of the house, the present study can introduce aesthetics features and concepts and open the doors of modern plans for the younger generations.

**Keywords:** Artistic, historic works, Qajar period, decorative elements, Haj Agha Ali house

### Introduction

Although architecture experts believe that Qajar era was a time of architectural decline era but some houses were built at this time that represent the glory and magnificence of Iranian architecture including: Haj Agha Ali house located in Rafsanjan county. Art during Islamic era is the continuous of traditional art in a modern look. This continuity is a result of Iranian unitary spirit which shaped as a monotheistic viewpoint with emerging of Islam and developed Islamic arts to the fullest (Sadri Afshar, 2003, 63). Evaluations show that the peak of Qajar architecture which reflects its features is clear in the architecture of houses. Many researchers say that it's the peak of architecture in Iranian houses for paying attention to space (Qasemi & Memarian, 2010: 132). Regarding internal decoration of the houses at early Qajar period, stucco and tile-work is obvious in internal views of the buildings. Qajar architecture was seen in palaces and street buildings of Tehran long after the Qajar was down. The same forms and style existed for 100 year. Qajar coincides the time when modern architecture was founded in Europe and some outstanding modern architecture buildings were emerged but in Iran a basic transformation was not found as the foundation of modern architecture in Qajar era (Godarzi, 2008:31). Human has consistently tried for reaching eternity and has recorded this effort with creating art works, creating buildings and inscriptions, composing songs and anecdotes and so on. The present study tried to study and introduce Qajar historical and artistic works in Rafsanjan County and take a step for our eternal Iranian identity.

### Background of the study

Rafsanjan County covering a land of 12722 Km<sup>2</sup> is located in south east of Iran and is the north east border of Kerman province. It included 4 districts: Central district, Nuq district, Koshkuiyeh district, Ferdows district. Qasem Abad village is located in the central district which is Haj Agha Ali village in Rafsanjan. His house and bath are built there. Qasem Abad village is the center of Qasem abad rural district and is located at the east of Rafsanjan city with a 4 km distance.

### Haj Agha Ali House

Haj Agha Ali house was built at the end of Qajar era by Yazd and Rafsanjan architectures. At this time Iran architecture was under the influence of western architecture which is obvious in Haj Agha Ali house. The architecture of the house is a combination of Iranian, Rome, Greek, Indian and European architecture.

The house is a four season house which will be explained. It is surrounded by rather tall walls and a monitoring tower and the way in the tower is from the roof. The house is completely surrounded and introverted which is a common feature among houses in Iranian plateau. For example the introversion is obvious among for season homes.

Haj Agha Ali house known as “Vaqfi” house which is the most beautiful part of the building and is mostly similar to palace and mansion house because there are many rooms and halls at the four corners of the yard each designed for one specific season. All rooms’ have stucco and the external view is a disciplined and rhythmic brick view. Generally all features of side desert houses are evident in this building which is one of the interesting features of it.



Figure 1: HajAgha Ali house

The history of the beautiful house which is under reconstruction these days goes back to 150 years ago. The adobe house of Haj Agha Ali had an 8000 m<sup>2</sup> land and 4000 m<sup>2</sup> substructure at three storeys: ground floor, basement and “ashkoob” (floor) [3].



Figure 2 (a,b) and 3: Haj Agha Ali house

The yard covers a 1000 m<sup>2</sup> area, the walls are 10 m high and 4 portholes guarded the house. The mastery center was only used for formal, peerage and trade of Haj Agha Ali. The house has 110 rooms all equipped with fire place, niche and racks. Also two big and some small vestibules were considered as the divisions of the space the first big vestibule was the so called today's waiting room. The adobe center was a four season building for use in spring, summer, autumn and winter.

### **The Position of Decoration and Decorative Arts in Global Art**

In Wikipedia encyclopedia defines decorative arts like this: The decorative arts are arts or crafts concerned with the design and manufacture of beautiful objects that are also functional. It includes interior design, but not usually architecture like ceramics, wood, glass, metals, and textile and so on. Generally, decorative arts phrase is not used as much for describing the so called new "designs". In the history of art, the term secondary arts (in other words, arts with lower ranking and secondary importance) were used to address decorative arts. There are significant documents in this regard from the past which will be mentioned here. In the sequence of European art, painting and sculpting are the highest ranks and referred to as pure art but architecture is placed in lower ranking conditioned to technical requirements and the ranking of decorative art is even lower than that (Bokhart, 1991, 30).

The general conclusion can be drawn as follows:

1. The meaning of decoration in Iranian culture points to both visual and visible aspects like inside out aesthetics and as actual decoration point to a transcendental order and the similarity with decoration is only in the visual and visible aspects and reveals a basic cultural difference because of its general position.
2. Decoration mostly refers to visual and visible aspects.
3. In the field of visual arts the performance of decorative arts is further than architecture and its artistic position is lower in comparison with other visual arts like: painting, sculpting, architecture and so on.
4. Iranian works of art –only defined this way- although are unique and highly transcendental in artistic view but their position and artistic value in global arts is at last defined as decorative art which is the lower artistic ranking.

### **Findings**

Stucco arabesque and geometry are the main internal and external decorations of Haj Agha Ali house that characterizes Qajar stucco style. Decorations in the Haj Agha Ali house including: brick works and stucco, with motifs like: plants, geometry and animals, are the Qajar stucco works in this building. There are great influence from western embellishment arts resulting from Iran-Europe relations (Godarzi, 2009:241).

#### ***Plants and animals motifs***

In the photo of Shahneshin's (king's room) shelves, motifs are in a rectangular frame. In the vase motif two birds are symmetrically at two sides and also the second margin of the design with are European elements are so bound that are no longer strange and look Iranian. In fact, arabesque motifs make a balance between motion and equilibrium with two "static" and "dynamic" turns. This contradiction is obvious in all stuccos of the building. In Taj Khanum back yard motifs include: tree, flower, plant, singing and luck birds. The choice is due to a lack of alive and natural existence of these objects and the pathway like this must be appropriately glorious and well-designed (Kabari, 2009:23). All the stuccos of the building show that rectangle or square frames are linked with vertical lines. In fact, this characterizes arabesque motifs with had a great influence on western architecture. It is worth noting that leaves and branches curve lines and other arabesque motifs go back to Sasanian Empire used in stucco and metal works of that time.



**Figure 4: Khalwat-Taj-Khanum**



**Figure 5: Shahneshin Shelf**



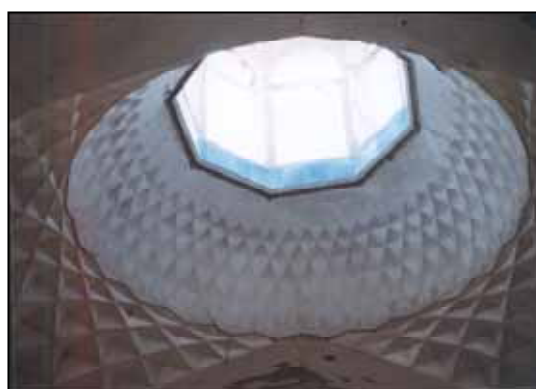
**Figure 6: Shams-Al-Emare stucco with arabesque and bird related to Qajar era**

***Geometry motifs***

Kar-bandi<sup>1</sup> in Haj Agha Ali house is made of plasters and mud bricks. The pond and second vestibule is plaster works. Another kind of plaster decoration is abzar-zani<sup>2</sup> in parts of the doom famous for “Shotor Geloie”. In margins of the dooms in seven-door rooms and five-door rooms plaster decorations “Ghatar-bandi” is used with a rhythmic style.



**Figure 7: The spring house**



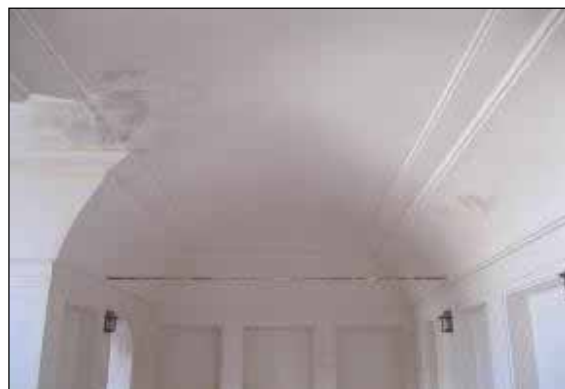
**Figure 8: Second vestibule**

<sup>1</sup> 'Karbandi' refers to the iconic roof structures in iranain/islamic classic architecture esp in bazars where the decoration and structure go hand in hand in the formation of the space.

<sup>2</sup> Kind of plaster/stucco work



**Figure 9: Qatar-bandi of seven-door rooms**



**Figure 10: Western Iwan (porch)**

### **Brick Works**

The art of brick works in Qajar era was not Renaissance era of brick works neither in Seljuq dynasty nor in the range of various art creations in Safavid dynasty. In Qajar era, brick works with different and new motifs were common, bricks and motifs were used to give a beautiful view, although the background of the bricks were sometimes, tiles, tile motifs and other materials developed or used as a frame. What is documented in all brick buildings is “repetition”. Repetition of “lines” or repetition of “nodes” basically creates a sense of peace and makes an eye movement. The external brick works decorations are finishing at all sides. These are Sleeping and Order, flowering, blocking-course. The Sleeping and Order is seen in the eastern view of the outside yard. The directions of the bricks look zigzag. The brick work view has vertical symmetry line. The horizontal bricks look darker than vertical bricks due to visual error.



**Figure 11. Eastern view**



**Figure 12. Southern Iwan (porch)**

Using colorful tiles at the bottom of the pond and kiosk are among the other decorations in this building. They add to the fragility of the space and actually added to the pond harmony more than its actual harmony and changed the color of the water all the way through the house. The floor surrounding the pond is paved with turquoise ceramics. The same ceramics are used in doom sidewalls in skylights. It reflects a light on Kar-bandi beneath the doom. This area was used in hot seasons and for celebrations and gatherings. This is one of the most beautiful areas of the house and good sample for recognizing architecture values in Iran.



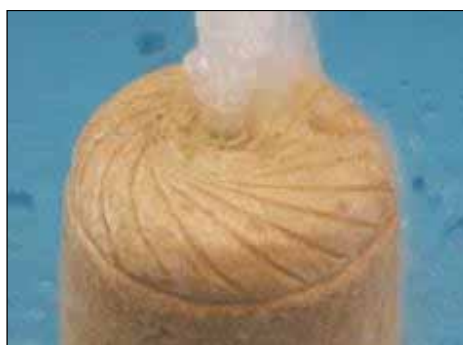
**Figure 13: The doom of the springhouse**



**Figure 14: Northwestern view**

### *Stone Works*

A stone is used in the pond eighth the most fragility and harmony of the environment. Stone walls and fountain are specific features of the beautiful pond. The point is the similarity of beneath design of the doom with the fountain which is alongside each other. Using marble stone in the Khalwat-Taj-Khanum pond are the mending design. It was originally made of mortar and clay.



**Figure 15: The fountain of the springhouse**

### *Doors and Windows*

A door is made of different parts. All doors have “baho”, “shakhak” and “pashnegard”. The external view of the door consists of star flakes called “Gol-e-mikh”. There are ring knockers.



**Figure 16: The eastern view of Khalwat-Taj-Khanum**



**Figure 17: Entrance**



**Figure 18: The window to Khalwat-Taj-Khanum room**



**Figure 19: Springhouse Gole-Jaam**

The lighter knockers were used by women and the heavier were used for men. Overdoor was made up of door frame and the frames on it. If the door was wide the middle frame was a square shape. Long time ago window was referred to as gates that were not opened or closed but what we call window today was hole. Windows were gates made of metal, brass and copper. The holes at the top of the doors were called “Gol-e-Jaam” and in Haj Agha Ali house these holes are made of wood or glass, blue, green, lemon or red. The colors were popular in Qajar period.

#### **Symbolic Elements Used in Stucco Decoration**

Plant motifs make an association with nature and in many insights and cultures are a sign of life and existence (Bahar & Kasraeiyan, 2007: 83).



**Figure 20: Lotus and sunflower**



**Figure 21: Pentas and sunflower**



**Figure 22: Pentas and sunflower**



**Figure 23: Three leaves flower and lotus**

Flower in hand made knitting is a sing of fertility. The goddess of flowers in eastern and western culture is feminine (Isonis, 1994; 157). The artist have used a combination of flowers in stuccos of the Shahneshin area and Khalwat-Taj-Khanum: lotus and sunflower, pentas and sunflower, pentas and lotus, three leaves flower and lotus.

### Animal Motifs

In ethnical and mythological beliefs, the first fish brought out some clay from the sea and the land started from that piece of clay so it is a sign of beginning and start. The fish placed that piece of clay on his back which is a sign of preservation and protection (Dadvar & Mansouri, 2011:96). The fish is used in Shahneshin's stucco design because the region is a dry part of the country and it's a symbol. Hoopoe is a passerine species bird with a sharp beak, long and bent and as small as a starling (Rajabi, 2001:328). Native people believe that hoopoe is good for avoiding evil eye curse. Many of them tied to taxidermy the bird in many different ways and hung it from the entrance door. The motif of hoopoe is seen in many types of stucco in Khalwat-Taj-Khanum building. Rooster, hen from poultries with different species are seen also (Homan: 323). Native people believed that rooster is a symbol of bravery, warrior and being early bird. The motif of rooster is seen in Khalwat-Taj-Khanum building.



Figure 24: The symbolic motif of fish



Figure 25: The symbolic motif of fish



Figure 26: The symbolic motif Hoopoe



Figure 27: The symbolic motif Ali rooster

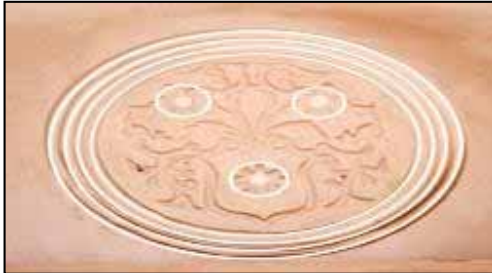
### Geometry Shapes

Circle is a linked and closed round shape It is the set of all points in a plane that are at a given distance from a given point, the centre (Dandis, 1989:78). Symbolism or symbol interpretation included the concepts of maturity, integrity and lack of any distinction and distinguish (Dadvar & Mansouri, 2011:228). Some kind of its use is seen in stuccos of Khalwat-Taj-Khanum building. A Rhombus is a flat shape with 4 equal straight sides. All sides have equal length. Opposite sides are parallel, and opposite angles are equal. One can use nodes as a shape of stuccos on the doom Using



Rhombus and drawing lines and geometric shapes (Geraminezhad, 2007:46). Rhombus is used in Kar-bandi, doors and stuccos of Haj Agha Ali house.

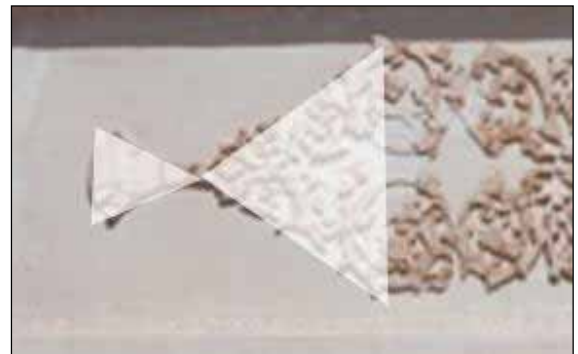
A triangle is a polygon with three edges and three vertices. Angles are opposite in any direction. It is an extroverted shape. It is one of the most static shapes in geometry when placed on one edge. (Afsharmohajer, 2000:56). Because of the symbolic motif of triangle and the related concepts, the artist has used the shape in many parts. A polygon means having many angles and more than 4 angles. Octagon is an 8-sided polygon with eight sides and eight angles (Geraminezhad, 2007:37). This is used in house vestibule skylights and pond.



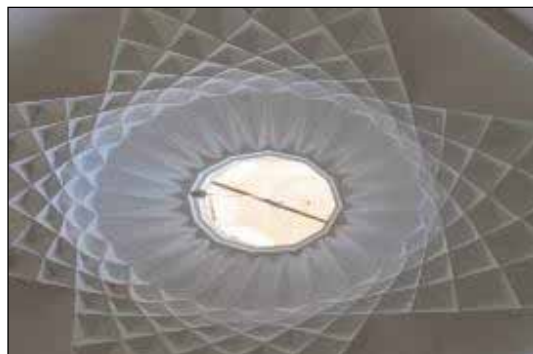
**Figure 28: Circle in stuccos**



**Figure 29: Rhombus in Kar-bandi**



**Figure 30: Rhombus in doors**



**Figure 31: Dodecagon in Haj Agha Ali house**

#### **Decorations of the House Based on Visual Arts**

“Dot” is the most simple and inevitable visual element. The most natural and common shape, for dot is roundness. Placed anywhere by nature or by human, dot grabs the eye (Dandis, 2007: 71). In stuccos of the house, this element is abundant. Dot is used as the eye of the birds and fishes. Also the independent use of dot is sometimes observed in the compositions of the motifs for emphasis. It

is very abundant is motifs of the Shahneshin. Line normally represents emotions, thoughts and ideas of the artist. Lines express mental state features that are used in artistic creations by the artists (Nami, 2004: 16). In stuccos of Haj Agha Ali house curved lines are used, which characterizes the arabesque and angelica. Sometimes straight lines are not used but in compositions we see the association of lines. The use of straight and bent lines is abundantly observed in Kar-bandi. Volume is a three dimensional element consisting of length, width and height. As the move of line creates surface in the space the move of surface creates volume (Aghakhani & Montazeri Rodbaraki, 2007: 66). Volume is commonly used as decorations of the house.



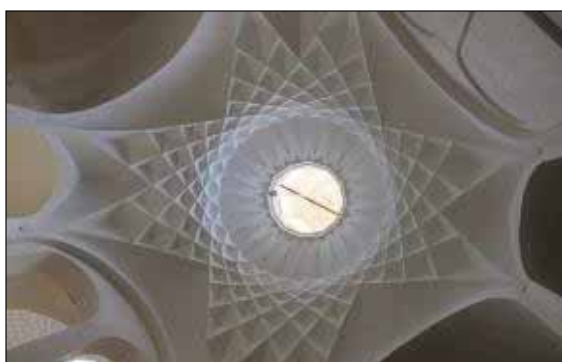
**Figure 32: Dots in the Shahneshin shelves**



**Figure 33: Bent lines in stuccos**



**Figure 34: Zigzag lines in brick works**



**Figure 35: Diagonal lines in Kar-bandi**



**Figure 36: Volume in stuccos**

### Texture

The feel, appearance, or consistency of a surface is texture. This element is felt and seen in rifles and are simultaneously able to be experienced and recognized. So the wider aspects of visual concepts are able to be understood (Halimi, 2004: 124). If we visually divide texture to three types of soft, luster and rough, stuccos are among the soft ones. The artist has rhythmically created plants and geometry motifs on the surface to create visual sensitivity. Brick works and pavements in the house are rough. The artist has added to the visual sensitivity using various rhythms.



**Figure 37: Texture in pavements**



**Figure 38: Texture in pavements**

### Margin

Margin is the limits of any art work that has collected all visual elements and shaped them. Margin is often square, rectangle and circle as visual artists say. Margin is a criterion for evaluating visual elements (Nami, 2004: 58).



**Figure 39: Horizontal rectangular margin in stuccos (Authors)**



**Figure 40: Vertical rectangular margin in stuccos**



**Figure 41: Circle in stuccos**

Rectangle is all close to square with a difference that in square shape direction is not being paid attention to but in rectangle shape one dimension point to a direction due to the length (Haman: 249). In Haj Agha Ali house the artist has used horizontal rectangle and vertical rectangle margins. Using circle depends on the situation. It grabs the attention in the center more than square margin does (Haman: 58). Decorations of this house especially in Shahneshin and Khlawat-Taj-Khanum are circular.

### Visual Qualities of Decorations

Rhythm includes the repetition of any similar shape, condition and motion with discipline (Dekhoda, 1346: 250). The general rhythm of a work is the quality made of color, line and shape (Aghakhani & Montazeri Rodbaraki, 2007: 194).



Figure 42: Steady-alternative rhythm in brick works



Figure 43: Wave-evolving rhythm



Figure 44: Symmetry balance in stuccos



Figure 45: Symmetry balance in brick works

This visual element is commonly used in stuccos and brick works of the house as combinations, steady-alternative rhythm and wave-evolving rhythm. Balance is a dynamic status resulting from power reduction in s structure. Due to neutralization of affecting powers, creates a sense of stability and equilibrium (Pakbaz, 2000: 165). Analogy is one of the characteristics of Iranian art. Motifs, asymmetric decorations of all dots, shapes and designs are made equal with a vertical or horizontal line (Zaka & Semsar, 2004: 12). Using asymmetric balance in all decorations of Haj Agha Ali house is evident especially in stuccos and brick works.

### Conclusion

Due to the influence the western art had on Iranian art at Qajar era, original principles and methods are observed. So we can say that the strongest structural element linking the house to past centuries is symmetry principle. Paying attention to composition, balancing motifs, motion and harmony added to the beauty of the motifs. These are clearly obvious in all of the stuccos and other decorations of the building. In stuccos of the building attention was directed towards functionality other than aesthetics. Each motif is placed in a position. For example the cypress trees are drawn on external columns of the porch (Iwan), vases are drawn on storage and shelves of the back yard. The most magnificent and glorious stuccos in the house are in the northern back yard. There are various types of stuccos because here was a place for women to stay and it was of great importance. With numerous advantages the Haj Agha Ali house –being the biggest adobe house in the world in a 7000 m<sup>2</sup> land, having beautiful stuccos and brick works- is ignored by cultural heritage officials. Stucco decorations are not documented and in case some parts of the building are devastated there are lost too. Also the mending process has not been completed appropriately so the pond is not strengthened while the mending is over. This results in time to time appearance of active cracks on the decorations. To test the hypothesis we can say that although brick is one of the traditional materials in desert architecture, nowadays it is used as building face and internal design in modern architecture. So the first hypothesis regarding impacts of traditional brick works and stucco on architecture and graphic art is proved. To prove the second hypothesis we can say that decorations of the house root back in religious and native beliefs. It seems that motifs have a symbolic meaning other than the decorative function. The artist expresses his interests, beliefs and thoughts of the nature surrounding him to create art works Iranian artist are qualified for. The third hypothesis depends on the fact that decorations, motifs and decorations of the subject building are similar with other contemporary buildings in Rafsanjan and Kerman among which are Haj Agha Ali complex in Kerman, Aminian and Taghizadeh hous in Rafsanjan and Haj Agha Ali complex in Bahreman Nug Rafsanjan.

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