Investigating the Architectural Structure and Decorations of Aligholi Agha School Mosque in Isfahan

Mohieddin Aghadavoudi1*, Dr. Ali Reza Khajeh Ahmad Attari2, Dr. Iman Zakariaee Kermani3

1MA Student in handicrafts. Department of Handicrafts, Isfahan University of Art, Iran.
2Assistant Professor, Faculty of Handicrafts, Isfahan University of Art, Iran.
3Assistant Professor, Faculty of Handicrafts, Isfahan University of Art, Iran.

*Corresponding Author: Mohieddin Aghadavoudi

Abstract

School mosques, as places where the science and worship are blended, have a particular position in Safavid era Isfahan's style of architecture; and, the study and recognition of such places is of a great importance in terms of their associated architectural structure and decorations. Among these, Aligholi Agha School-Mosque as the most important building in Aligholi Agha urban collection should be recounted as one of the aforementioned buildings featuring prominent points regarding the structure and decoration which is the significant theme dealt with in the format of the current research paper. Thus, the most important question raised herein is that what are Aligholi Agha school mosque characteristic architectural structure and decoration features? The present study is based on a descriptive-analytical method and the information has been collected based on field observations and library research. Also, the findings have been analyzed based on quantitative methods. The results of the current study confirm that Aligholi Agha blended structure, while being small in its dimensions, encompasses distinct decorations and inscriptions turning it into a tiny treasure of the Safavid Era treasure. Among the most important of these decorations and ornamentations are the embossed tiles embedded with geometrical and plant-like carvings on the façade and the sceneries bestowed upon the interior spaces. Also, there are diverse inscriptions made via seven-color techniques and mosaic and stone carvings by taking advantage of buildings' Kufi style of writing and Nasta'alygh calligraphy bearing contents such as the representation of Holy Quran's Ayat and Hadith, compliments and praising king Sultan Hussein, information about the construction and an introduction on the personality of Aligholi Agha as the founder of the building.

Keywords: Safavid era architecture, Structure, Decorations, Aligholi Agha school mosque.

Introduction

Safavid-era Isfahan is an amalgamation of magnificent cultural heritage and beautiful nature and it has a historical record as old as Iran's history of civilization and culture. The architecture of this period enjoys a variegated aspect in terms of its extensiveness and efficiency and it has proved its vivacious and dynamic presence in the entire aspects of cultural, religious, social and economical life of the people. We are bearing witness to the various sorts of schools associated with the mosque space, or, generally, an aggregation of the worship space with the education space in this era and they are proposed under titles such as school mosque [1] These places can be somehow considered as the real symbol of this honorable Aya from the Holy Quran that meaning “... recite to them its Ayat and purify them and teach them the book and wisdom” (Ale Imran:164; Jom’ah:2). Aligholi Agha school mosque is among such buildings considered as the prominent example of late Safavid, king Sultan Hussein, era
architecture at in an urban collection, bearing the same name. Besides the structure in this building, the architecture-associated decorations and ornamentations, as one of the most important functions of Safavian in the world of architecture bestowing the building with special identity and personality, are envisaged considerable; and, among the most indicative instances of the building the tiles can be pointed out.

Aligholi Agha school mosque tile decorations along with its array of inscriptions are all reflective of taking renewed measures in line with validating the Islamic arrays in this era. The current research paper, as a supplement to the valuable prior researches, attempts to, firstly, deal with the recognition of the general features of Aligholi Agha school mosque and, then, primarily, focus on the survey of the architectural structure elements of the building and, secondarily, present the readers with the ornaments and the inscriptions existent in the building in terms of the structure, contents and the bas-reliefs.

Literature Review

Among the most important source presenting historical and descriptive information regarding Aligholi Agha building, one can refer to Honarfar [2], a treasury of Isfahan’s historical works, which contains historical and descriptive information regarding the construction date of the two buildings, the dimensions, the apparent look and the texts of the historical inscriptions therein. In his book, Honarfar [2] provides a separated list of the buildings from King Sultan Hussein era; and enumerates the two abovementioned buildings as the masterpieces of the then era.

Considering the articles published in this area, one can point to the research papers such as the followings: Saffaran et al [3] wrote an article on the “role of the slaves in Safaviyeh city-building, case study: Aligholi Agha Compound” and it contains information regarding Aligholi Agha urban collection, the methods of constructions and supports as well as a presentation of the most significant results indicating that two factors, namely the appointment of a new capital and the establishment of the government on the basis of slaves, were pinpointed as the most important factors contributing to the brilliant evolution and development in Safavid era city building and architecture an excellent example of which is Aligholi Agha urban collection; Poornaderi [4] in an article called “an analysis of the secret concealed in the façade of Aligholi Agha Mosque”, provides information regarding this school mosque building and its structure and the tile decorations installed on the building façade, and the most important result put forth in the article is the mysteriousness and the versatility of the tile reliefs of Aligholi Agha building façade besides its abundant beauty and the possibility of a number of the same artists constructing the two buildings and, as for the architectural ornamentations and the tiling techniques, some information and nonintegrated, in the meantime useful, images can also be found in a five-volume book named “Maher Al-Naghsh” [5] on the methods of Iranian tile works, as well as the book by Zamarshidi [6] titled “Chinese Girih” providing information regarding Islamic architecture and Iran’s hand-made artifacts.

Based on the studies carried out regarding the background survey of the theme of interest to the current research paper it can be stated that in the area of structural recognition, ornamentations and Aligholi Agha school mosque features, especially with adopting an organized approach to the criticism of architecture, there are scarce studies and this is vividly expressive of the need and the importance of undertaking a research in this regard.

Research Method

The present study is a developmental research in terms of its objective and it is a descriptive-analytical research in respect to the nature of the study carried out herein. The general approach governing the current research paper is the descriptive and expositive criticism of the architecture based on the theory proposed by Wayne Attoe. According to Wayne Otto’s theory, descriptive criticism is based on the realities more than any other type of criticism. Such a type of criticism does not engage in making judgment or even interpretation; rather, it helps us see the things that are really there.
and, in fact, such a criticism is in a direct relationship with the process of watching and confrontation with the building [11]. In the section on reaping the study findings, there is made use of two study methods, namely field studies and library research. The field study is performed in the form of direct observation, interview and taking photos of the building. The section on the documentary-library research, as well, makes use of various sources such as the books, articles, dissertations, research proposals as well as the authentic database and information sites in the area of architectural studies, historical information and decorations.

Diagram 1: Research Method (Source: Authors)

Aligholi Agha Urban Collection and its School-Mosque

Aligholi Agha Building Collection, after the Sultanate Collection of Isfahan's Chahar Bagh, is considered as the most important urban collection from Sultan Hussein Safavi era. The structure of Aligholi Agha urban collection has been formed about the two pivots of natural water stream (material) and artificial bazaar and the other primary elements such as mosque, bath, wrestling plaza and so forth have been arranged along these two pivotal elements and, together, they have constituted a unique system of late Safavid architecture and urbanization, preserved to reach the contemporary generation in the course of history [7].

The place where Aligholi Agha collection has been situated is known as Sheikh Abu Mas'ud Razi [7] neighborhood one of the localities in Isfahan's sultanate kingdom” [3]. This urban system has been constructed by Aligholi Agha. Aligholi Agha was given an order by Sultan Hussein to begin the construction of a collection of urban services in Bid-Abad Neighborhood and it is now popular and famous after his own name to wit Aligholi Agha neighborhood central collection [8].

Based on the deed of endowment contents, the original body of the collection encompasses the followings: a mosque, including the mosque campus or the upper-floor chambers and the mosque’s drinking fountain; a bathroom, including small and big bathrooms, four ponds and/or small pools; shops, including four shops at the side of the mosque; a small bazaar, embracing a coffee shop, intinction factory, poetry weaving factory, thirty shops, twenty upper-floor chambers; and, a four-drive pathway, including four drives and a drinking fountain.

One of the main elements indicative of the originality of Aligholi Agha collection is its school mosque. The building belongs to 12th hegira century, king sultan Hussein Safavi era [9] it posses prominent points while being built on a small breadth of land. Based on the text written in the inscriptions on the mosque façade and according to Sheikh Jaber Ansari’s[10] idea, the mosque building was initiated in 1692. When Aligholi Agha, ordered by King Sultan Hussein, started the construction and completion of the collection, the building was half way through its completion. The building was finished ten years later in 1702 and this latter date has been recorded on an inscription installed on the mosque’ façade [10]. Rafi’ee Mehrabadi has the following saying about the mosque’s decorations and architecture: “minarets have been built on the entrance gate to the mosque and the mosque has been decorated with colorful tiles and geometrical bas-reliefs and girih works very much the same as the decorations used in Chaharbagh School.

The mosque's campus is in a rectangular form and its length is stretched north-southward and it does not have a pool and moonlit balconies. On the southern side, there is a porch and an adytum the plinth of
Elements and Components

Entrance: immediately post the entrance façade there is built an entrance gate and an octave vestibule which facilitates the access to the interior precinct, western porch and the lateral spaces. The aforementioned building’s entrance, besides its embodiment being a little more recessed from the passageway, has been placed post the façade and the octave vestibule, so as to provide for access to the interior precinct, chambers and the other sections.

Precinct: Aligholi Agha school mosque has a small precinct devoid of garden, ponds and moonlit balconies. It is worth mentioning that besides the simplicity of the precinct structure and the campus, there are invaluable bas-relief tiling works, featuring geometrical images and girih works acting as precinct moderators and well-preserving equilibrium between simplicity and the decorations and the positive and negative spaces.

Prayer Room and Mosque: The mosque and seraglio space, as prevalent spaces in Aligholi Agha edifice and built to serve substantial functions, are situated on the eastern stretch of the precinct (courtyard) and they enjoy appropriate vastness in respect to the other sections of the building. Seraglio or the aforesaid prayer hall, being older than the rest of the sections in the edifice, is devoid of tile works, decorations as well as eminent wooden doors.

### Architectural Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geometry</td>
<td>Rectangle Lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjacency</td>
<td>This building beside the other services buildings such as baths and Chahar Dena have made a significant urban complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Ditch</td>
<td>The refreshing existence of water ditch near the building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrance Portal</td>
<td>Long the crossover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrance Elements</td>
<td>The building has main and secondary entrances. It is necessary to mention that the usage of the secondary entrance is less and without any decorations or portal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porch structure</td>
<td>The general structure of the entrance is rectangle that the distinctive layer of the building is located in it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The condition of the connection</td>
<td>The direct access from porch to space and other parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space structure</td>
<td>Lacks summer back chambers and yards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awn</td>
<td>Awn does not have portal as usual sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposition with nature</td>
<td>Sanah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Survey of the Architectural Structure of Aligholi Agha School Mosque

Spatial Structure and Proportions

There are scarce writings about the exact extensions of Aligholi Agha school mosque and the spatial structure dimensions. One of these is the dissertation by Tabasi in which a quote has been cited from Jaberi Ansari [13]. The history of Isfahan and Rey. Tehran: Publications of Emadzadeh Jaberi Ansari, Hassan [13]. The history of Isfahan and Rey. Tehran: Publications of Emadzadeh Jaberi Ansari, Hassan [13].

The history of Isfahan and Rey. Tehran: Publications of Emadzadeh who mentions a figure of about one thousand and two hundred Zar’e for the total dimensions of this school mosque [8]. Although the interior mosque precinct is small and it features a simple and plain architectural structure the building has splendid tile decorations with systematic geometrical reliefs quite similar to what is observable in Chaharbagh School and these tile works are of significant importance in terms of Safavid era Tiling decoration typology.

It is worth mentioning that the building’s precinct does not have a porch in its precise sense as well as symbols signifying accordance to the nature such as the water streams, gardens and so forth; furthermore, the rules of crisscross segmentation or fourfold partitioning, as Safavid era’s traditional architecture principles, are less accentuated.
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Fig 1: Studying the Architectural Structure and elements of Aligholi Agha School-Mosque (source: Authors)

**Chambers**: chambers which are a symbol of scientific functioning of the school mosque along with its more accentuated aspect of the school-mosque’s function, to wit worshipping, are placed on the western brink of Aligholi Agha School-Mosque, on the semi-second floor. The number of the chambers, twelve chambers, is in accordance to the not so much vast structure of the edifice. It is worth mentioning that the aforesaid chambers have been dedicated to the religious students residing therein according to the building’s deed of endowment and they are collectively recounted as a single school [14].

The survey of the architectural decorations in Aligholi Agha School Mosque:
Among the decorations applied in Aligholi Agha School Mosque, the most predominant and the most significant ones are the decorations made of tile works. These decorations have been applied in various sections of the edifice. But, the diversity and numerosity of such decorations are more considerable in the distinctive façade as well as the interior precinct’s panorama. The decorations technique and contents of the edifice, with an emphasis on the tile works, have been evaluated and analyzed in the following sections

**Technique**

**Tile Work Decorations**

**Seven-Color Tiles**: since the late Timurid era and early Safavid era, the use of tile (uncooked bricks or seven-color tiles) has become customary in the decorations for various buildings; additionally, such decorations gradually took the place of embossed tile works. Such a technique’s decorative envelopments have been limitedly and exclusively applied to the entrance gate façade as well as on the seraglio inscriptions in Aligholi Agha School-Mosque.

**Embossed Tiles**: the highest volume of the tile work decorations in Aligholi Agha edifice belong to embossing techniques and these are reflective of the highest similarity in terms of their reliefs and technique to the tile work ornamentations applied to Chaharbagh building. This technique has been used in various sections of the building and the most prominent examples of such ornamentations can be observed post entrance gate façade, ornamented with beautiful vaults in the tile decorations laid on the backsides of the entire periphery of the building’s precinct.

**Ma’aghei**¹ Tile works: Ma’ agheli decorations account for a succinct space of Aligholi Agha school mosque building and they do not enjoy a diverse and complicated design. These decorations are mostly seen in the panorama of the edifice’s exterior spaces,

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¹ A type of Arabic handwriting with planar letters also its a kind of decorative tile works
ceiling spaces in the octave vestibules and the other interior spaces of the tiny porches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techni</th>
<th>Aligholi Agha mosque-school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four colors</td>
<td>The building has several inscriptions in the four-color mosaic which are decorated by blastas and chinoiserie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosaics</td>
<td>Less usage of historial techniques in representation of inscription such as after façade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro Mosaic</td>
<td>The small mosaic design in the front of entrance doors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 3: The study of decorations (tiles) in Aligholi Agha School Mosque. (source: Authors)

Stone Decorations

**Stone Bas-Carvings**: the most important stone decorations implemented based on bas-carving technique include the vase-like designs installed on the façade stairways and, particularly, the unique and eminent inscription at the periphery of the façade which is beautifully and skillfully sculptured on marble bedding.

**Design and Embossment**

**Geometrical Reliefs: Girih (Various Kinds of Simple and Complicated and Super Girih)**:

These are among the most original embossments applied in Aligholi Agha School-Mosque and, in fact, they are considered as the main uniqueness of the edifice’s decorations; moreover, they are most often designed accompanied by embossed tiling works. These embossments can be divided into several different types according to the frequent use of geometrical reliefs in the edifice including, the simple geometrical embossments, composite (complex) geometrical reliefs and the geometrical embossments combined with other ornamental elements like plant-like figures, inscriptions, Ma’agheli tile works and so forth. It has to be pointed out that according to the exclusive decorations installed on the precinct as well as on the entrance gate façade, the geometrical decorations and the composite girih works and the so-called super-girih works account for the largest volume of the decorations therein.

It is worth mentioning that a prominent instance of girih-in-girih decorations is visible in this edifice and they are most often observed on the entrance staircases’ entablatures and walls in such a manner that, in the first glance, the general form of the decorations seem like a very huge Allah(ع) drawn in blue on a yellow background of the embossed geometrical tile works but the considerable point here is the application of Four-Ali girih work in the center of this general format conveying a degree of mystery and secret.

**Plant-like Reliefs: Arabesque and Cathay**:

Among the regular and stelli form plant-like reliefs, arabesque and Cathay are the most widely known of them all and they are of diverse types and sorts [15]. Arabesque reliefs and Cathay embossments in Aligholi Agha edifice have been limitedly and focally applied on the peripheral sections of the entrance façade along with other naturalistic flowers as well as on the decorations at the periphery of the mosque inscriptions.

**Inscriptions**

Aligholi Agha School mosque has variegated inscriptions implemented by the use of different masonries and lines. Although the number of Bannai Kufic inscriptions on the entrance gate façade is more than the other sections one of the most unique inscriptions implemented on the entrance gate façade has been carved on a brown stone and it is written based on Thuluth calligraphy style.

The themes of such inscriptions include
information on the building construction, the sponsors and the dedicators. Besides this one, another inscription which draws the attention is the mosque’s entrance inscription implemented on a seven-color tile background in Nasta’liq calligraphy style and it bears information regarding seraglio (mosque) construction in Qajar era.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Script</th>
<th>Inscription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nastaliq script</td>
<td>The content is referred to the little about of the Holy Quran such as &quot;Sunni in the sun&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>It is inscribed in Persian and Arabic text such as &quot;Declaration of Faith&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>The use of inscriptions in decorative forms such as square, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>The presentation of the most important information about the building in the form of the prominent inscription using Thuluth script.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>The location of one of the most prominent inscriptions in the portal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>The presentation of the building’s construction in the period of Shah Sultan Moosaei and Construction text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>The use of Nastaliq script along with design and decoration, proportioning with nature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 4: The study of inscriptions in Aliqoli Agha mosque-school (source: Authors)

Analysis and Conclusion

Among the most important strong points of the architecture and urbanization in Safavid era are the urban collections; these collections most often include edifices serving variegated economic, social, cultural, scientific and religious functions. One of the most eminent of such collections is school-mosque buildings made to concomitantly serve religious and scientific functions.

The importance of these composite buildings has been to the extent that in the majority of the cases, as ruled by what was specified in deeds of endowment or the other related texts, additional elements of the collection were, subsequently, designed and dedicated for their supply of the costs and prosperity. In fact, in Safavid era, a new wave of school-mosque constructions, as centers of education-worship, as well as the ideological and political support centers serving the government, and the dedication of these sets of edifices by the Safavid Dynasty politicians and their agents has been the focus of particular attention up to this dynasty’s downfall. Based on the recognitions carried out as well as according to the study backgrounds, the authors of the present article, which has been undertaken in line with enhancing the late Safavid era urban collections, emphasizing the architectural structure and school-mosque decorations, concentrated their attention on Aliqoli Agha urban collection.

In line with this objective and in finding an answer to the main question raised in the current research paper regarding the main features of Aliqoli Agha School Mosque in terms of architectural structure and the decorations, it can be stated that Aliqoli Agha composite edifice, comprised of mosque and chambers (school), in spite of the existence of the name King Sultan Hussein recorded on an inscription on the entrance gate façade, is considered as a small building covering a small area in which regulations such as the structure of the porch and stoops, summer seraglio, dome and minaret and the other constituent elements, distinct in Safavid era have not been extensively implemented. Also, the building, as a whole, and its elements including the façade, the entrance octave vestibule, precinct, mosque (seraglio), chambers, adytum and the lesser adytum, Azan reciting place and the drinking fountain, following the building, in general, are constructed in not so much large dimensions and very simple distinguishing this building from the other eminent edifices made in Safavid era.

Regarding the architectural decorations, investigated herein from two perspectives of structural contents and themes, it has to be expressed that this later aspect of the edifice enjoys a more appropriate prestigious popularity in respect to the structure in such a manner that the distinctive decorations on the edifice’s entrance gate façade, including the embossed tile works featuring geometrical and plant-like reliefs along with the entablatures and walls’ ornamentations, have a more diverse color and relief variegation. In addition to the decorations on the façade, embossed tile works applied to the main edifice’s precinct including the false arch backsides and the ornamentations...
at the periphery of the entire precinct are also of a great significance. It is also worth mentioning that the scarce sources on this building have only sufficed to making statements regarding its similarities to the tile work masterpieces used in Chaharbagh School.

As for the building’s inscriptions, it has to be stated that there are various inscriptions installed on the entrance gate façade and the mosque for the implementation of which there is made use of seven-color techniques and embossed tile works on Banai Kufic as well as Nasta'ālīgh calligraphy background. The themes in most of these inscriptions are representation of Hadith and Holy Quran’s Ayat, compliments and praises of King Sultan Hussein, information on the building and its benefactor. At the side of these inscriptions, the most important inscription has been implemented in the form of stone carvings sculptured on marble which is installed on the entrance gate façade and it is less frequently seen elsewhere. This latter inscription’s theme offers information regarding the building as well as a biography of Aligholi Agha, as the edifice constructor.

It is worth mentioning that according to the significance of this urban collection and in line with the recognition and typological survey of the urban collections from Safavid era and based on the impossibility of doing research on the entire elements of the collection in the framework of a single article, the recognition and investigation of the other elements of Aligholi Agha School-Mosque urban collection is suggested for future research.

References