

# The Image of Heaven in Islamic Arts of Iran

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**ABSTRACT:** Associating certain forms and designs in Islamic Arts with the promised Heaven may be widely observed in the works of many historians and critics of the field. It is believed that Islamic Art has been derived from the imagination of the Paradise as depicted in Holy Quran. To express this meaning in technical words it should be said that the main concept in Islamic Arts has been the gardens of heaven generally described as containing the green trees (the tree of life), colorful flowers, flowing rivers, the ethereal drinks and foods, and even Huries (beautiful young virgins dressing in green fine silk) at the service of those who are permitted to meet God.

**Keywords:** Islamic art, Paradise, Beauty, Tree of life.

## INTRODUCTION

However, it is clear that realization of this concept in earthly and sensuous manner, even according to the literal meanings of Quran, is not at all the whole meaning of paradise. This very narrow understanding of heaven is closer to Romantic visual arts and modern entertainment centers rather than to Islamic arts and architecture. Therefore, the main questions are: a- What is the secret of Islamic arts that not only illustrate the heaven in diverse forms or structures of the space, planning and decoration but also express its content? b- Why the Islamic arts and architecture arise no sensual desire but spiritual pleasure? However, it does not mean that no sensual beauties could be found in Islamic arts; rather it leads the audience to a higher level of ecstatic pleasure, taking them to the upper stages of being. On the other hand, the Islamic arts are considered as symbolic interpretations of the above-mentioned paradise. However, the author believes that Islamic Art is not symbolic, because in presence of truth, everything is present. It means that things are not symbols of Truth in its absence, but it is the truth itself in the confined sensuous reality. This certain art is the fruit of ultimate knowledge which is defined as activating the inner potential which is granted to the humankind. The purpose of practicing in various fields of art is to transcend one's being through returning the "given trust" to its main owner, God. This is the full meaning of art and the rich content of the very heaven. So it can be expressed that the main goal of Islamic art which has been manifested in the work of art is to achieve the culminating point of knowledge as the Perfect Man.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Referring to the Holy Quran and Sufi's texts of Iranian literature, this article attempts to define this particular perception of Paradise in Islamic Arts and elaborate on some

of its main elements such as numbers and colors and also natural beings such as trees, flowers, rivers (Fig.1).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No wonder that the mystery of everlasting Islamic art, with no mere instinctive enjoyment but exalted spiritual and certain beauty, is folded in a pure knowledge of the Truth, lower stages of which manifest in physical world as Islamic art works.

Understanding this excellent beauty is followed with a special ecstasy that does not end in intoxication but leads toward a complete awareness; an exclusive rapture that one in search for its truth has to ascend higher and higher toward the kingdom of heaven. Ghazi Saeid Ghomi, a thinker of Safavid period, writes that there is a world of wholly wisdom and spirituality as similar as this sensual world, although it has nothing earthly. Everything there is bright and shining, nothing dark or opaque because there is light in light. Since the vision is not a result of external aspects of being, every present being could be seen with the heart's eyes and not of head or sense (Ghazi Mofid Ghomi, 1987, 128).

To understand the Islamic Arts and claiming that it is the result of a true knowledge, one should refer to the mystery of creation in sufi's texts. There is a famous Hadith called "Kanze Makhfi," (Hidden Treasure) which reveals the "secret of creation"; love as the cause of God's action (Amoli, 1996, 406). It reads that in wish to watch His own beauty, God created the world of beings (Iraqi, 1384, 46). Therefore, the first lover and the first beloved simultaneously gather in one who is nothing but God Himself, Great be His Glory, He was alone with no definition. Love is what does appear as the first epiphany, the brightest mirror to reflect the beauty of God immediately. In Sufism, the essence of love and the messenger are the same, so this stage of being is named Haqiqate Mohammadiyah (the Truth of Mohammad). Not only is it the first but the highest level of God's epiphany and

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Fig. 1: Allah is the light of the Skies and the Earth, Hašt Behešt, Isfahan

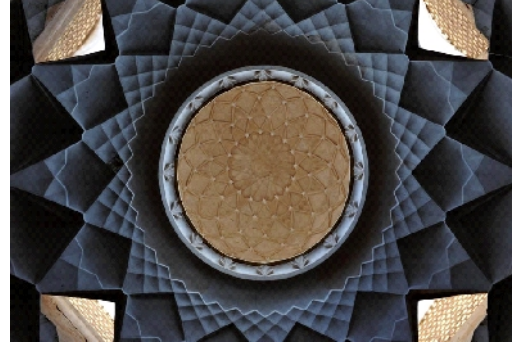


Fig. 2: The Sun, The Ceiling of Ameri's House, Kashan

the ultimate knowledge simultaneously. The very light of all beings derive from it, so it is the Great Sun (Khorshide A'zam), (Kashefi sabzevaari, 1971, 6), the world of pure light, or the Kingdom of Heaven. These three stages of being are the spiritual worlds having no form (Fig.2).

Everything in this systematic world follows its hierarchical principal, so does the Heaven. The fourth stage of this system is the imaginal world, the mediated world between the upper three spiritual worlds and the fifth one, the physical world which is considered as the lowest level of being (Shayegan, 2003, 194-5). All of immaterial creatures take a form from the imaginal world in order to descend and appear in the real world. So each of these embodied forms are reflections of the Truth according to their capacities, a mirror to show its god as its own expansion. It means that a special image of the Truth is reflected throughout each of real creatures and the reality is the mirror of the Truth. That is why nothing is duplicated in this play of mirrors as seen in the various forms of Islamic arts in which there may not be found two works exactly the same although they bear a unique true meaning. In other words, Heaven is nothing but the highest level of knowledge, thus the paradise will be the same as one's perception of the truth objectively. The limits of people's perception limit their beliefs as well (Chitick, 2005, 237). Everyone will be present before God with the face that shows the confined truth of its owner. In fact, the Hell is nothing except one's ignorance while the heaven is the award for a perfect knowing (Fig.3).

In order to know God, a power is granted to all creatures that let them to reveal their potential. As much as every subject's inner potential is actualized the God will act on behalf of

theirs uncompleted being and action; the God whom infinite number of beings adore him. According to Holy Quran, everyone will come back to his/her own god and will dwell in the very paradise where he/she would have been under its authority. This has been narrated that in the Day of Judgment, God will show himself to people in many forms infinitely, but he will be denied times and times, not be recognized till they figure out the very sign by which they had believed him as their own god. The difference between the Perfect Man and the others is in the vast knowledge that he/she knows the God through his infinite manifestations and does not restrict Him in any limitation (Ibid, 239- 40), since he/she has been taught all the names of God (Ibid, 242- 43). Being blind, deaf and mute in Resurrection Day, according to the Holy Quran, could be understood as lack of knowing the Truth in the final Judgment Day.

From this point of view, the meanings of beauty and ugliness could be defined as well. Getting approach to God gives one the power of seeing him more and more unveiled as the most beautiful being. The ultimate measure of beauty is completely revealed with no hidden point in presence of God, the highest place of heaven that is called the Truth of Mohammad, the Perfect Man. One who tries to actualize the granted power in her/his heart will be honored to be accompanied by God in the promised paradise<sup>1</sup>. So the residents of Heaven are allowed to see the divine beauty, the absolute beauty. Accordingly, the knowledge is equivalent to conceiving the beauty. As much as the former goes higher, the latter follows it exactly as specified. Thus dwelling in Heaven means to gain the ultimate knowledge in order to obtain the ability to see the beauty (Fig.4).



Fig. 3: Mirror's game in the sacred space, Shâh-e Cherâgh, Shiraz



Fig. 4: The House of Ameries, Kashan

### The Forms of Paradise

One of the known forms in Islamic arts and architecture is the octagonal form not only used in decorative arts but in planning and structure of Islamic architecture. There is a strong relationship between the forms, numbers and letters in Islamic knowledge as in other religions and rites. According to Holy Qur'an, eight angels bear the Throne of God in the Promised Day<sup>2</sup>. So, it is perceived that the Highest Heaven does have eight dimensions. Also, the eight wings stars have been known as the special sign for the sun in many cultures. The Prophet, Mohammad, the Perfect Man, is considered as the Great Sun too. Thus, he is the very representative of the Highest Heaven and the sun as the main source of light at the same time. This concept is shown in geometric shapes of sun and stars that in Islamic arts are called as Shamsheh. Although these forms are usually found in planning, structure and various decoration of Islamic architecture in octagonal shape, but it could be found also in other symmetric forms as hexagon, decagon and particularly dodecagon shapes.

The Prophet is known with three dimensions, the religious "Law" (shari'ah), the esoteric principals as the path (tariq'ah) and the journey that leads to the Truth (haghighat). These three dimensions shape a triangle, while its imagination is also shown with three homocentric circles. That is why three names are seen everywhere in mosques repeatedly: Allah, Mohammad, Ali. These are various reflections of one character. The first epiphany of God is the truth of Mohammad, the Perfect Man. His next epiphany is the light of being, Ali. It can also be seen in the shape of Shiite Mosques with a dome and two minarets around it. The Perfect Man appears in two faces: the Prophet and the Imam ( Fig. 5 ).

On the other hand, one of the mystical names for God is Hu that equals 11 for the total numbers of its letters according to Abjad alphabetical order. Due to the matter that each wing of the prophet's three aspects personality equals 11, another mystical number could be found: 33. In ancient Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism, at the threshold of heaven Da'ena, the inner self of everyone who has been a righteous person during his/her earthly life appears as a 15 years old girl of a supreme beauty who says to her owner: "give me your hand to lead

you to one of the 33 gates of heaven!" (Farahvashi, 2004, 133). So the paradise is considered to have 33 gates. May it be the secret of construction of a famous bridge in Isfahan with thirty three openings called 33 Bridges (Si- o- Si Pol) during Safavid dynasty? (Fig.6).

There are some verses in Quran describing the gardens of paradise in which four flowing rivers of water, wine, milk and honey derive from the root of a tree in the heart of Heaven that is called the tree of life. It could be perceived that Heaven does have four gardens with four rivers (Stierlin, 1998, 179). One more time the imagination of this concept is not only used in programming the city of Isfahan but has shaped the main passage of the city that is called accordingly The Four Gardens Avenue (Châhâr Bâgh). The tree makes one of the well-known motifs in Islamic arts as a pattern, a decorative form, a constructive space and so on. It is used to cover the interior surface of domes, as the main motive in carpets pattern, and as the building of dome It is noticeable that according to Quran, the one who has deserved to see this Tree in the heart of Heaven is just the prophet Mohammad who is himself the tree.<sup>3</sup> His role is connecting the earthly life to eternal life, the same way a tree has its roots in the earth and its branches are starched towards the Heaven. There can be found another resemblance between the tree and a flower: Lotus. According to Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism, the roots of the Tree of Life which is created by Ahuramazda, are in the waters of mythological sea of Iran (Bahar, 2008, 152). Here it resembles to Lotus (water Lily) that its root is in the earth, its stem in the water while its face is toward the sun (Fig.7).

Mohammad is the one who extends from the embodied human on the earth to the Heaven, the God; a historical person as the Prophet to the Perfect Man as the source of being. Now we reach another element of Heaven: bridge as a road from earth to Heaven that is called Chinwad puhl in Zoroastrianism and Serqt in Islam. In Sufism, the Perfect Man is the straightway from earth to Heaven who is no one but Mohammad. Here a similarity between Mohammad and the bridge (33 Bridge) may be observed again. Lotus is a mediatory being between clay, water and light as the source of life. Hence it is



Fig. 5: the tree aspects of The Truth as the Tree of Life with its two guardians which is realized as the gate or the dome with two minarets, The Mosque of Imam, Isfahan



Fig. 6: Si- o- Si Bridge, Isfahan



Fig. 7: Tree of life on the tiles of the Ivan of Masjed-e-Vakil, Shiraz



Fig. 8: the Great Sun in the circle of prophets, on the ceiling the house of Boroujerdies, Kashan

representative of eternal response of human to “the god question.”<sup>4</sup> This means final return to the main homeland, the Heaven.

## CONCLUSION

According to the text, the Islamic art works of Iran depict nature as the physical incarnation of the ultimate anthropological truth. The belief in a cosmological structure in which there is a dynamic move from unity to plurality constitutes the basis for Persian art as an important branch of Islamic Art. Features like the numbers, colors, and also natural beings such as trees, flowers, rivers transfer into each other referring to the upper meaning of the being as the truth. In other words, Paradise plays a key role in this structure as the culminating point of reference. Hence, the paradise is meant embracing the first unity that is the source of Good, Knowledge and Beauty. It is clear that Islamic Art has been considered the actualization of the inner divine power of human heart, highest level of which is Mohammad epiphany as a sacred being, the Perfect Man. He is the very imagination of paradise through appearing as love, knowledge and beauty in the world. He, himself, is called as the straightway, the bridge from earth to paradise, the Tree of Life, the Great Sun in the circle of prophets, the Lotus, the certain love and the like. In other words, what makes the presentation of Islamic Arts as a spiritual form is that Muslims believe in Mohammad as the very paradise by their heart perception which is differentiated from representation of the artist subjective innovation (Fig. 8).

## ENDNOTES

1. Holy Qur'an, 27-30
2. Holy Qur'an, Al-Haagha, 17
3. Holy, Qur'an, Al-Najm, 13-15
4. Holy Qura'n, Al-Ara'f, 172

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