

Investigating the influence of pre-Islamic civilizations (with an emphasis on stucco arts and bas-reliefs) on the art of the Qajar dynasty

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Abstract

One of the most beautiful and delicate architectural decorations in building spaces is stucco art, which has always been the focus of architects and artists throughout history due to its special capabilities and ease of execution. This art evolved during the Parthian era and replaced the previous styles in the decorations of later periods. On the other hand, bas-reliefs are one of the most important artistic works for narrating historical stories, military struggles, victories, gatherings, and expressing sacrifices. They are considered the most important archaeological documents for understanding various aspects of the culture of ancestors. With the emergence of Islam in Iran after the Sassanids and the prohibition of sculpting and image-making in the subsequent periods, the art of stucco continued with thematic changes, while bas-relief art was largely obsolete. It was not until 1,200 years later, during the Qajar dynasty, that these two arts were revived by employing the execution methods used in ancient Iranian civilizations, becoming two main arts of this dynasty. In general, this article examines the reasons behind this emulation and modeling, the general and specific similarities and differences between bas-relief and stucco arts during the Qajar period and pre-Islamic art in Iran. It also investigates the factors influencing the Qajar kings' inclination towards pre-Islamic Iranian civilization and their goals in reviving these arts. The research method is historical-analytical, and the data collection method is documentary (library-based).

Keywords: Islamic civilizations, Qajar dynasty, Persian Art , ancient Iranian civilizations, pre-Islamic Iranian civilization

Introduction

At the beginning of Iranian architecture from the start of history and the era of the Elamites and Achaemenids, and especially during the Parthian and Sassanid periods, stucco art and bas-reliefs received significant attention. By studying and examining the remaining bas-reliefs and stucco arts from pre-Islamic civilizations, one can understand many of the Iranians' expression methods, techniques, and viewpoints. Likewise, throughout history, the art of stucco has always been the focus of architects and artists due to its unique execution capabilities. However, after the emergence of Islam in Iran and the prohibition of sculpting and image-making, the art of bas-relief faced many limitations and was largely neglected. Furthermore, the overall themes of stucco arts underwent changes, differentiating them from pre-Islamic art. It was not until the rise of the Qajar dynasty, especially during the reign of Fath Ali Shah, that these two arts were revived in the same style employed in pre-Islamic times. In addition to being welcomed by the Qajar court and monarchs, they became popular among the general public and intellectuals of that era. The similarities between the arts of these two civilizations were sometimes even greater than merely emulating the style and execution method. For example, in the subject matter of some bas-reliefs, ancient Iranian works were also emulated. The reasons for this emulation include demonstrating the greatness and splendor of their own sovereignty like pre-Islamic governments, consolidating the foundations of their rule, interest in the history and renowned past kings of Iran, and suggestions from European travelers and archaeologists.

Due to the significant similarities between these works and ancient Iranian art, this article examines, analyzes, and compares the works of these two civilizations. Stucco art is among the works that have held a special place in the interior and exterior decorations of buildings during different periods in Iran and is considered an artistic phenomenon in Iranian architecture. Archaeological evidence shows that the history of gypsum and the production of gypsum dates back to before the construction of bricks and their firing into clay bricks. Among its uses, one can refer to plastering walls and adorning the interior surfaces of buildings. The use of gypsum decorations in wall decorations was a common practice in the cities of Iran and Iraq. The Achaemenids and then the Sassanids were the first people in Iran to undertake this work. The most important surviving examples of gypsum work date back 900 years ago in Anatolia and Syria. Also, early examples of the use of gypsum have been discovered in the pyramids of Egypt. The Greeks also used selenite gypsum as windows for their temples. The decorative elements of stucco art are divided into four main

categories: geometric patterns, plant patterns, animal and human patterns, and calligraphic patterns. And of course, the combination of animal/human/plant and geometric patterns, which in post-Islamic civilizations continued with an emphasis on abstract and geometric patterns. Essentially, a bas-relief refers to a three-dimensional work executed on a surface in such a way that the motifs or figures protrude to some extent from that surface (Mirzaei Mehr-1397).

The earliest rock bas-reliefs in Iran belonged to the Lullubians (Zagros mountain dwellers - 3rd millennium BC). The Elamites continued this tradition, depicting royal assemblies and religious scenes on rock faces. In turn, the Medes, Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sassanids also created bas-relief works. Bas-reliefs are among the most important artistic works for narrating historical stories, military struggles, victories, gatherings, and expressing acts of sacrifice. They are considered the most crucial archaeological evidence for understanding various aspects of the ancestors' culture. The Sassanid bas-reliefs are excellent examples that demonstrate the glory of the king, his victory over enemies, the humiliation of enemies, and the connection between the king's power and the power of Ahura Mazda. Similarly, in the Qajar civilization, Sassanid bas-reliefs were often emulated. The subjects of these bas-reliefs mostly centered around the majesty of the king's army, victory over enemies, and the bond between the king's power and the power of Ahura Mazda. A prominent feature of Sassanid bas-reliefs is their naturalism and the increasing similarity of these works to reality. In general, Sassanid art represents the final stage of ancient Eastern art. This art embodied the principles of aesthetics inherited from the arts of ancient Asia and was the result of a long evolution. It had a force that left its mark on the arts of neighboring nations. This art serves as a bridge between the ancient civilizations of Asia and the new civilizations of Islam and the medieval West (Ghirshman). The main reason this article focuses on the Sassanid era's bas-reliefs is due to the striking similarity between these works and the bas-relief art of the Qajar period. Geometric Shapes and Stylized Patterns: This type of pattern usually features straight and broken lines in various states within stucco frames. They were commonly used on the borders of stucco panels (Mehran Montasheri-1396). The use of these patterns was prevalent during the Parthian era. Parthian stucco had a particular method that differed from the techniques employed for this decorative element during the Sassanid period. During this time, circular geometric shapes containing four-petaled flowers were commonly used, with equal-sided lozenges placed among these four-petaled flowers (History of Stucco Art in the Sassanid Period and Its Influence on Islamic Art Works - Jamal Ansari).

Calligraphic Inscriptions in Stucco Works: These include combined works of the aforementioned patterns. The Sassanids also popularized the use of calligraphy in stucco designs, always employing the initial motifs (Maryam Mohammadi-1396). The use of calligraphic inscriptions in stucco works became common since the Parthian era.

Vegetal Motifs: The widespread presence of vegetal motifs in Iranian art should be sought in the ancient belief of sanctifying plants and the profound respect and depth Iranians had for nature. In all eras, flowers and decorative motifs have been depicted on objects and buildings (Nadim, 17, 1386). In some stucco works, vegetal patterns are observed in combination with geometric patterns. An excellent example of this combination exists in the Tisfun Palace. In general, the vegetal motifs used in the stucco art of ancient Iran include palmettes, lotus flowers, the tree of life, vines, and oak patterns (Maryam Badaghi-1391).

Animal and Human Figures: In the stucco works of ancient Iran, especially during the Sassanid era, animal motifs that employ a particular, precise, and astonishing method of abstraction can be observed, such as depictions of boars, peacocks, and gazelles. These reveal the skill of the stucco master and also trace the influence of stone carving art and its associated experiences (Ghirshman's History). Furthermore, by studying the stucco artworks discovered so far, we find a considerable number of stucco works featuring human motifs. Overall, the execution of animal and human figures was more common in bas-reliefs (Maryam Badaghi-1391).

From the Sassanid dynastic rule, 34 bas-relief works have remained that were executed with narrative or symbolic themes on mountain rocks and cliffs (Mirzaei Mehr-1397). Most of the surviving Sassanid bas-reliefs date back to the early Sassanid period, with a few from the late period. Thematically, these works often depicted subjects such as the investiture of the shah by Ahura Mazda and Anahita, worship scenes, victories over enemies, glorification of court figures, family scenes, cavalry battles, and hunting scenes (Rezaei Nia-1386).

These bas-reliefs were created to depict the present time and are celebratory in nature, somewhat competing with painting. They gradually superseded sculpture through a steady progression (Ghirshman).

During the Sassanid and Qajar eras, these works were considered independent artistic creations, self-sufficient and not dependent on any other art form. In contrast, during the Achaemenid period, this art had a high status but was subordinate to and served the art of architecture. However, in the Sassanid and Qajar periods, the desired themes were carved on the rocky breasts of mountains (Mirzaei Mehr-1397). Some historical sources mention that the Sassanid bas-reliefs were also painted (Mohammad ibn Zakariya al-Qazwini, in his 8th century AH book "Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-'Ibad," writes about the reliefs at Taq-e Bostan in Kermanshah, describing the masterful use of various

colors like red and white that have not faded over the long years). The bas-reliefs of this period lacked perspective. The artists made efforts to show depth and the third dimension in some reliefs by dividing the scene into multiple framed sections, overlapping figures, or rendering the background in a convex manner (Rezaei Nia-1386).

Statement of the problem

The art of the Qajar period reflected three fundamental characteristics and features: the increasing separation of Iranian culture from the great Islamic tradition as a result of the victory of Shia Islam and rivalry with the Ottoman Empire, the increasing introduction of folk and popular artistic elements, and the growing dependence on the influences of Western art. Although lower in quality compared to the art of previous eras, the art of this period displayed a completely independent and purified identity and characteristic (Eskarchian, 35:1384). Traditionally, Iranian kings had a penchant for art since ancient times, and many kings, besides their personal tastes, considered supporting art and artists as part of the virtues of kingship. In Iran's monarchical system since ancient times, the king was not only a powerful ruler and politician but also a learned individual and connoisseur of art (Moayene-dini-1394). Since ancient times, Iran's monarchical system has been one of the oldest in the world, employing art to display power and preserve political and cultural identity. The Persepolis Terrace, Bistun Inscriptions, and Naqsh-e Rostam from the Achaemenid era, the rock reliefs of Taq-e Bostan and others from the Sassanid period are among the most well-known examples not just in Iran but globally. After Islam, this practice continued, but due to jurisprudential prohibitions on depictions, fewer visual examples can be seen. Instead, there was more support for art in the form of architecture, book illustrations, and patronage of poets and artisans. However, from the Safavid era onwards, with the re-formation of a great Iran under the official Shia faith and nationalism, there was a return to the ancient artistic models such as murals and the use of art's propagandistic dimension. Even after the Safavids, despite lacking political stability, this practice was pursued at the Zand court, and art's media power continued to be utilized until the Qajars came to rule Iran. Despite many mismanagements in ruling Iran, the Qajar kings enjoyed the privilege of being art lovers. Among them, two Qajar kings, Fath Ali Shah and Naser al-Din Shah, who ruled longer than other Qajar kings, were the main patrons and promoters of various arts, to the extent that their tastes and manner of supporting art greatly influenced the evolution of Iranian art after them. In this context, Fath Ali Shah and his approach to art occupy a special place in the history of Iranian art. The historical and political situation of Qajar Iran, along with Fath Ali Shah's personality, taste, and ambition, created conditions for him to be remembered as one of the greatest court patrons of Iranian art, especially painting. Despite his many failings in governing the country, Fath Ali Shah was considered a main patron of the art of his time. He alone was the material and spiritual patron of the art of his era and provided the necessary motivation for the creation of many court arts, particularly painting (DaneshShow website 1396). Factors Influencing the Revival of Ancient Iranian Arts by Qajar Kings The companionship of Fath Ali Shah with Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar influenced his interest in the history and renowned past kings of Iran.

Factors Influencing the Revival of Ancient Iranian Arts by the Qajar Shahs

Fath Ali Shah's companionship with Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar influenced his interest in history and renowned past kings of Iran. Additionally, Fath Ali Shah's (Baba Khan) time spent in Shiraz and his familiarity with pre-Islamic sites like Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, and Nishapur drew his attention to Iranian history and had an impact (Loft, 2001:41). Moreover, the inclination of Qajar intellectuals towards the pre-Islamic era, considered the golden age of Iranian culture, can be cited as one of the most important factors. They saw a return to the customs and culture of ancient Iran as the solution to Iran's backwardness.

Qajar Stuccowork

During the Qajar era, a new style in the art of stuccowork, called the Qajar style, emerged which was a blend of Iranian and European styles. The art of stuccowork flourished extraordinarily during the Qajar period. The travels of Qajar kings to Europe led them to imitate European stuccowork and replicate it in royal palaces, especially in column capitals, squinches, and ceilings in palaces such as Golestan and Eshrat Abad, among others. However, it can be said definitively that these imitations could never replace the genuine and beautiful Iranian art, especially the Eslimi and Khatai floral patterns originating from the ingenious Iranian artists. Nevertheless, during this period, there were remarkable innovations and creativity in stuccowork by stucco artists in buildings and especially traditional Iranian residential houses, both exterior and interior. Indeed, each of the remaining works is a precious and valuable tableau of art imbued with the philosophy, wisdom, and culture of Iranian artists. Additionally, in this era, there were remarkably stunning innovations in the stuccowork of various buildings, particularly Iranian residential houses. Abstract forms such as Eslimi, Khatai, French flowers, and bird-and-vase motifs were among the main decorative patterns of Qajar stuccowork. Among the numerous stuccowork pieces of this period, one can point to the exceptional stuccowork of Eram Palace and Naranjستان Ghavami in Shiraz, as well as the stuccowork of Tabatabai House and Shahri Atari House.

The Art of Relief Sculpture in the Qajar Civilization

The last example of relief sculpture art has a time gap of more than 1200 years from the first Qajar relief sculpture, which is quite remarkable. From the Qajar era, 9 relief works with characteristics similar to Sassanid works have remained. Eight of them belong to the reign of Fath Ali Shah, and one is from the Naseri era.

Fath Ali Shah, in order to display his fearless bravery, commissioned his court artists to create paintings and carvings depicting hunting scenes, which was an ancient theme in ancient Iranian art. On many occasions, these murals were publicly displayed, and the court storytellers would narrate tales of his bravery in front of them. Due to the ignorance among the commoners, a supernatural notion of the monarch's status was instilled in them. He was considered the direction of the world, and the courtiers and court clerics called him the shadow of God. The king's portraits were frequently displayed with utmost respect and special ceremonies before the public gaze, and people were obliged to show respect and prostration before these images.

Qajar relief sculptures can be categorized into four themes

The king's coronation and depiction of the king and courtiers in Cheshmeh Ali Shahr in Rey, near Khwaju Kermani's tomb, at Qur'an Gate in Shiraz, at Tangehye Borideh of Haraz Road (related to Naser al-Din Shah), Abgineh Bridge in Kazerun, and Taq-e Bostan in Kermanshah.

Hunting scenes in Tangeh Vashi in Firuzkuh, near Khwaju Kermani's tomb, and at Qur'an Gate in Shiraz.

The king's battle with a lion on Kuh-e Sareh or Tabarak in the city of Rey.

The depiction of Rustam, the legendary Iranian hero, near Khwaju Kermani's tomb at Qur'an Gate in Shiraz.

In these reliefs, the influence of ancient Iranian art (Sassanid and Achaemenid) is evident, and an effort was made to portray the king in the guise of ancient Iranian monarchs. The reliefs depicting Fath Ali Shah's coronation and his sons and grandsons bear a resemblance to Sassanid reliefs, especially those of Bahram II. In the depiction of Rustam, they drew inspiration from the stone carvings of Zand-era buildings, and Rustam's appearance closely matches his representations in illustrated books. Additionally, a group of Qajar relief sculptures is framed with inscriptions in Nasta'liq calligraphy, such as the reliefs at Tangeh Vashi, Kuh-e Sareh, and Tangehye Borideh. The second group of reliefs is framed using half-columns, such as the relief sculpture at Cheshmeh Ali Shahr Rey and the relief at Khwaju Kermani's tomb. The third group of reliefs is placed within arched ceilings, like the relief sculpture at Abgineh Bridge. (Rezaee Nia - 138)

Similarities and differences between Qajar stucco carvings and ancient Iranian artworks:

Ancient Iranian art was replete with spiritual and symbolic concepts. For example, the sacred tree symbol from the Sassanid era was repeatedly used in Islamic art. In most Qajar stucco carvings, similar to ancient Iranian motifs, the symmetry rule was applied. This rule was not only used in depicting the elements, but also in creating the overall compositional layout on architectural surfaces, with designers aiming to achieve balance through symmetrical compositions. (Fariba Shapourian - 1396)

In some Qajar stucco carvings, the principles of traditional stucco carving with symbolic value were abandoned, and floral and fruit motifs were represented in a naturalistic manner, with the use of bands. In terms of execution methods, the reliefs were almost at the same level of low projection.

Similarities and differences between Qajar reliefs and ancient Iranian artworks:

During the Sassanid and Qajar eras, the reliefs were colored. The processes of determining the location for executing the carvings and the execution methods used in Qajar reliefs were generally similar and modeled after Sassanid art. As mentioned earlier, the subjects and compositions of Qajar reliefs bear a remarkably noticeable resemblance to ancient Iranian artworks, particularly from the Sassanid civilization. Unlike the Sassanid era, none of the Qajar reliefs depicted high-ranking state and government officials alongside the Shah. These similarities have drawn more attention from researchers and scholars to these works. However, in the surviving reliefs from the Qajar era, the explicit emphasis on the connection between the Shahs and divine power is not seen, and the subjects of the artworks mostly took on a material aspect, revolving around themes such as the court, kingship, hunting, banquets, and so on.

Conclusion

The Qajar dynasty embraced ancient Iranian customs, culture, and art forms as a means to compensate for Iran's perceived backwardness and decline. Fath Ali Shah and Nasser al-Din Shah, both renowned as art-loving Qajar monarchs, actively promoted and revived various aspects of Iran's pre-Islamic heritage.

This revival resonated with the common people, who enthusiastically embraced the resurgence of ancient Iranian arts and traditions. One of the most significant revivals was the revitalization of sculpture and relief carving after a hiatus of nearly 1,200 years following the Islamic conquest.

Unlike the Sassanid era, when high-ranking state officials were often depicted alongside the shah in reliefs, emphasizing their close ties to the monarch, the Qajar reliefs focused solely on the shah himself. This shift in subject matter underscored the Qajar shahs' desire to project an image of absolute sovereignty and break from the power-sharing dynamics of the Sassanid period.

The Qajar era witnessed an extraordinary flourishing of stucco carving, with intricate gypsum reliefs adorning the interiors of palaces, mosques, and other buildings. These stucco carvings, much like their ancient Iranian counterparts, adhered to the principle of symmetry, both in the depiction of individual elements and in the overall compositional balance of the designs.

This conscious effort to revive and integrate ancient Iranian artistic traditions into Qajar art and architecture served not only as a means of cultural revival but also as a strategic move to bolster the dynasty's legitimacy and link it to the glorious pre-Islamic past of the Persian empire.

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