

**Original Research Article****An Introduction to and Examination of Arabesque Motifs in the Decorations of Islamic Period (A critique of the book “Eslimi and Medallions”)\***Negin Khosraviyani<sup>1\*\*</sup>, Shohreh Javadi<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract**

Arabesque is one of the most eminent ornamentations of Islamic art. Though based on existing documents this form of decoration dates back to the Sassanid era, some researchers have regarded interlacing forms as arabesque and traced their origin to ancient Greece and Rome. In Iran, the rise of Arabesque began in the Seljuk period and came to its prominence in the Safavid period. Taking an evolutionary approach to arabesque through time, this study aims to introduce the oldest examples of this pattern in Iranian decoration, which later were borrowed by other areas in the Islamic world. In this research, a historical-analytical method was used to analyze the collected data from library documents, texts, and images. In this regard, scrutinizing the book entitled “Arabesque and Signs” that contains several contradictory comments on Arabesque was taken into consideration to resolve ambiguities.

**Keywords:** *Arabesque, Criticism, Recognition, Sassanid, Safavid.***Introduction**

Not only are Arabesque ornaments important and prevailing decorative elements in all arts, but they also stand out in Islamic art. Western researchers first came across such patterns in the Arab world and attributed them to Arabic patterns. They called them “Arabesque” which means Arab-like.

However, later they found out these patterns have nothing to do with Arabs and have their root in Sassanid and Hellenic art. In the art of the Hellenistic period, these patterns have a naturalistic form of ordinary plant motifs whereas, in the Islamic period, they were drawn into abstraction and gained a

considerable variety as well. However, the most widespread use and richest variety of Arabesque is seen in the Safavid era (Eskandaripour Khorami & Hayat Nosaid, 2018, 2).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the existing findings on arabesque and scrutinize its historical origin based on the book “Eslimi and Medallions Carpet, Tile, Ornament”. Though the book attributes arabesque to an unworldly and abstract origin, it claims such ornaments are inspired by nature. That is why the main aim of this research is to present thorough information about the origin of arabesque and remove ambiguous, biased, and partly poetic comments.

**Questions about the Arabesque patterns**

Where does Arabesque trace its root back to?

\* This article is based on subjects discussed at the Islamic art doctrine class held by Dr. Shohreh Javadi at College of Fine Arts in Tehran University, January semester 2020-2021 which focused on analyzing the traditionalist world view.

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What basis has the book “Eslimi and Medallions Carpet, Tile, Ornament” been written on?

### Research background

Arabesque is known to be Arabic and Islamic ornaments that seem to have been innovated in the Islamic era. However, such patterns were more or less used ahead of the advent of Islam and some writers have pinpointed its presence in the art of different regions.

Georges Marseille, the author of the book *Islamic art*, believes that some forms of arabesque are derived from Hellenic (Greek) ornaments. In Larusse Arbessque’s encyclopedia, arabesque is attributed to the Roman emperor who has been revived in the Italian Renaissance. “These ornaments must have become popular with the Italian Renaissance” (Zamani, 1973, 21). Given such descriptions, any plant-like patterns have been called arabesque.

Plant motifs, which are the prevailing elements of the Sasanid era, formed the base of plant-like patterns of the early Islamic period. These patterns are derivatives of Achaemenid and Parthian art that according to some art scholars were inspired by the Achaemenid acanthus leaf (Moshabaki Esfahani & Safaei, 2016, 34).

In the book “Introduction to Islamic aesthetics” by Oliver Lyman, the author believes that Islamic art has no unique designs and cannot be called religious art (Lyman, 2016, 40).

Daneshvar attributes Arabesque motifs to the Sassanid period. “European art scholars call these designs Arabesque which does not seem to be a right term because such designs are not Arabic at all. The reason these patterns are called Islamic art is that the artists of the Islamic period preferred to employ such long-existing patterns that date back to the Sassanid era because they were in accordance with their religious thoughts” (Zamani, 1973, 21).

Dimand, the author of “Guidebook of Islamic industries”, relates arabesque to the Sassanid period.

“a half leaf and branch combination of a palm which is a prominent figure of Islamic art is quite observable here. Motifs of palm leaf and other similar Sassanid patterns become the main source of inspiration for the creation of early Islamic architectural landmarks like the palace of Al-Mashti, Qairwan Mosque, and Syria’s marble column (ibid., 21).

Seemingly, Larusse encyclopedia, Daneshvars’ points, and Dimand’s findings are not in contradiction with Georges Marseille’s notes because the Roman Empire inherited the traditions of ancient Greece and Sassanid art, which according to some art historians, was influenced by Hellenic art. However, it needs to be mentioned that defining arabesque as decorative interlacing leaf scrolls and stylized plant forms dates back to pre-ancient Greece in most civilized countries (Zamani, 1973, 22).

When Seljuks came to power in Iran (1038-1194), a new chapter in the decorative arts began. This period brought many already innovated decorative designs to perfection. Arabesque motif is the most important decorative element that became popular in this period (Khazaei, 1996, 141). There is also no doubt, that arabesque was used in Ilkhanate decorations as well. Later, during the Timurid period, arabesque motifs appeared in the tiles. But the spread and prevalence of these ornaments date back to the Safavid period during which many decorative arts and related motifs rose to prominence in this era.

Since many arabesque related articles have referred to old sources that are based on western thinkers and traditionalists, the author of this study aims to introduce arabesque through historical documents and images. It is hoped that this documentary study will serve as a reference for valued lecturers, students, and analysts.

### Theoretical foundations of research

This motif owes its origin to nature. The created forms are a simple perception of natural forms around human beings, which is often called Geometry. This

perception of nature continued in later periods and was given more attention during the Islamic period (Wilson, 1998, 138). In the Persian encyclopedia, Mashaheb states: “Arabesque is a significant component of Iranian stylized designs, consisting of spiral curved lines that are used in the field of tiling, plastering, etc.” (Mosaheb, 2008, 576). Such interpretation of interlacing plant-like forms as arabesque is not correct.

Arabesque is a Western and Islamic word for Arabic which the former is attributed to the Arabs” and the latter to Islam. This mostly plant-based decorative motif has been employed in almost all works of the Islamic era. Consequently, it can be regarded as a factor of artistic unity and commonality in the Islamic world; like Arabic calligraphy. At the same time, this design is not a purely Arabic or Islamic decoration but was also common in the pre-Islamic period in various countries including Iran (Zamani, 1973, 17). Like other comments about Arabesque, this saying is not accurate and can include plant motifs in general.

Art scholars consider Arabesque derivatives of natural elements such as flowers, shrubs, leaves, and tree branches that have been simplified and briefed

to avoid simulation and imitation (Competition with the Creator) (Azami, Sheikh Al-Hokamaei & Sheikh Al-Hokamaei, 2013, 19).

In early Islam, picturizing humans or animals was prohibited but plants had a different story and they were on the safe side. Simplification and sterilization imply the taste and aesthetics of Iranian artists from ancient times, who due to special attention to nature (based on naturalistic beliefs and ideas) depict surrounding natural elements simply and uniquely through geometry.

### An overview of the book of “Eslimi and Medallions”

There are several contradictory points in the mentioned book by Iskanderpour Khorami. For instance, its 25-page preface lacks page numbers and is only marked in alphabetical order from A to F. The rest of the 497 pages presents a variety of Arabesque images (Fig. 1). The reason this book was chosen to study and criticize is that it has collected and compiled western traditionalists’ ideas on arabesques, which seem quite irrational and biased. In the first stage, the contradictions of the book are mentioned and then they will be criticized and

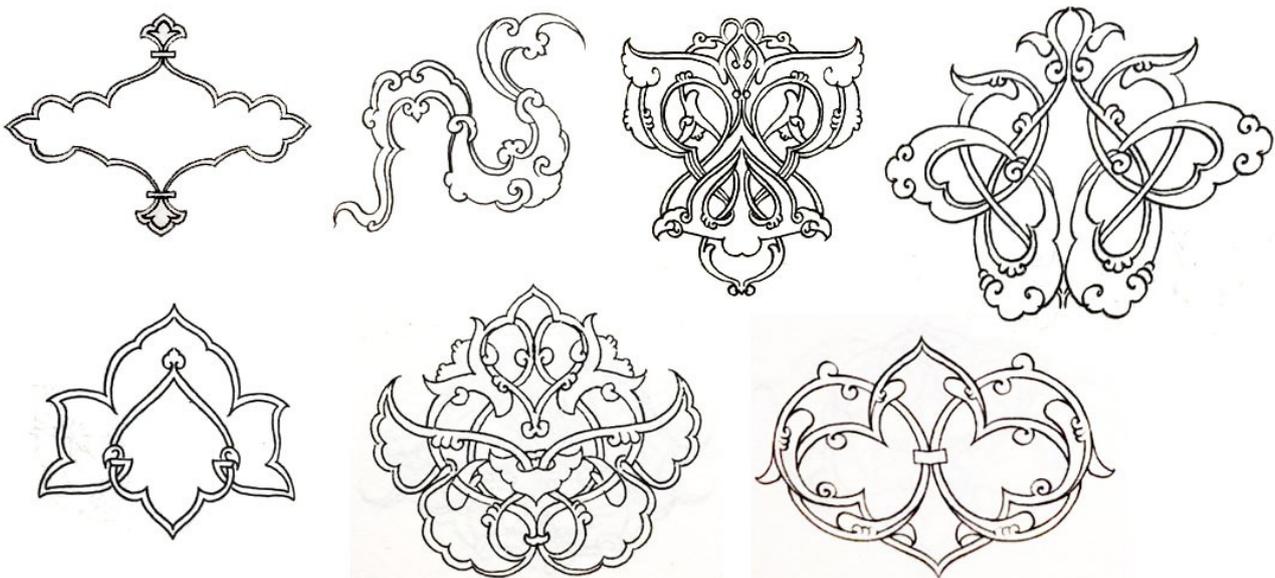


Fig. 1. A sample of Arabesque book pictures and signs (from page 25 onwards to the end of the book, page 497, there is no explanation and introduction of Arabesque types). Source: Eskandaripour Khorami, 2018.

responded to. According to the available documents and evidence, this book has taken an emotional, poetic, and rather western philosophical approach that seems to have no rational base.

“Throughout the Arabesque and Khatai motifs, there is no dealing with the material and tangible world, and everything is centered on a spiritual world that is only found beyond the physical world” (Eskandarpour Khorami, 2018, P). “Arabesque looks like nothing in the physical world and there is no equivalent for it. It is a mysterious form that encompasses the simplest mathematical-abstract forms (ibid., S). “To liken arabesque in the world of being, it looks like a cedar that bows and admits its submission (ibid., T).

In the first interpretations, it was said that arabesque is not like any material in this world and has a mysterious and abstract form, while in the following pages; Arabesque is likened to a Cedar that has a curved stature that is a sign of submission and consent in the circle of existence. Such contradictions have led to an ambiguity that unfortunately, has been ignored, reinforced, and spread for years in art articles and courses.

In many parts of this book, vague and incomprehensible descriptions and sentences are used, which in the end do not offer any logical analysis about the motifs to the readers. For instance, the author says that sacred art flourished during the Islamic period and reached a lofty place in Islamic art; however, its signs and mysteries are yet to be figured out. The author continues that neither westerners nor easterners have managed to understand the beauty and hidden meaning in such signs.

In Islamic art, these interlacing and intertwined motifs are a simplified picture of the infinite and higher world. In other words, the Muslim artist transforms that great lofty universe into a tiny and tangible world that can be depicted and understood through pictures; heavenly moves turned into earthly ones to be perceived in a human-centered atmosphere (ibid., Z).

These poetic descriptions and sentences that are partly taken from Islamic philosophy and mysticism have nothing to do with the art and artistic designs of the

Islamic era. However, unfortunately, the translation of such opinions by Western and Eastern theorists has been employed for years and has caused severe damage to the truth and reality of Islamic art. These ambiguities have been answered in several articles and thorough and documented critiques have been provided as well.<sup>3</sup>

“This eternal noble art that has no beginning based on its honorable base, has a special place among all nations and ethnicities due to its deep spiritual content” (ibid., Z). Based on what document such claim is made? How is it eternal while having no start and end? This is while just a simple study about the design and historical root of such motifs can reveal their beginning and end. Of course, this group of theorists draws attention to circular and interlacing spirals and talks about the notion of multiplicity in unity by attributing them to the beginning and end of creation. Again, such interpretations are logically baseless.

“The quality of Islamic painting in a world detached from the shadows and embodiments of the material that manifested in the light of color gives it such an alchemy of form and color that everything takes on the color of absolute. In the art of gilding, which is the culmination of this feast of light, the colors create harmonious collections and open the doors of a world full of secrets. This light depends on the manifestation of truth, and everything in their existence depends on light. In such atmosphere an attractive celestial light is created; It is both the center and the environment; It is both inside and outside; That is why everything in it is infinitely wonderful and unique” (ibid., C).

Thus, in the knowledge of Islamic arts, sacred motifs with large and wide forms that encompass thousands of shapes and motifs deep inside appear as the most unbelievable and purest art and show a world that is all an invitation to poverty. It is full of silence; a silence that amazes a person; an astonishment that is the result of observing all this glory and splendor of the universe” (ibid., C). Such poetic statements are based on mystical and partly philosophical interpretations that have nothing to do with artistic designs.

“All Arabesque curves have an inward outward side which is the nature of Arabesque. A tendency to the inside and a tendency to the outside, both inclined to an infinite direction that implies the eternal conduct in art” (*ibid.*, S). This claim is completely wrong because first, the direction is used in Arabesque design, and second, two directions are never used simultaneously (inward tendency and outward orientation). All these interpretations, which attribute artistic forms to philosophical and mystical thoughts come from the same point of view and are rooted in the attitude of Westerners who have explained Islamic art and architecture based on Hinduist, Buddhist, and Christian theoretical foundations.

Etymologically speaking Arabesque comes from the word “salam” meaning reconciliation, peace, and health. Salam is a prayer word derived from Arabic, which means greeting. Islam has also been interpreted with the literal root of surrender. Surrender to the divine commandments. It has also been interpreted as reconciliation.” (*ibid.*, Z). In Dehkhoda’s encyclopedia, “Salm” is defined as a tree with very healthy and healing fruits (*ibid.*, Z). “Salam is the name of a board and tablet on which scribes write and recite. It is called tablet in Arabic.” (*ibid.*, D). Based on the meanings mentioned in this book for arabesque the wisest definition that can make sense might be the tree in Dehkhoda’s encyclopedia.

In another part of the book, it is claimed that arabesque motifs are adapted from Manichaeans, Mithraists, and Zoroastrians motifs and achieved their perfection in the Islamic period. It is also added that the prominence of the heavenly feature of arabesque occurred in the same era (*ibid.*, T). To back up such claim, no pictorial documents about the role of Manichaean, Mithraic, and Zoroastrian sources of inspiration have been presented. Moreover, the relation between Islam and arabesque looks vague. There is also another saying that claims Imam Ali (PUHB) has drawn the first arabesque. However, like other parts, there is rational evidence for such a claim.

### Examining the Arabesque motif

Having highlighted the vague and contradictory points

of the mentioned book, the next step will be introducing and examining the arabesque motifs based on the existing motifs in some early Islamic landmarks including the ancient buildings of Siraf, Seymareh, Neishabour (school hill, green-clad hill), the nine dome mosque of Balkh, Nain mosque, Neyriz mosque, and Samarra mosque. What is discussed in this part of the research is the background of such motifs that given their similarity to the works of the Sassanid period, it can be concluded that they have existed long before Islamic art. However, the most prevailing and various use of arabesque is seen in the Safavid period. The collected images show the existence of an Arabesque as a rudimentary bifurcated motif that evolved during the Islamic era.

Though *Figs. 2 & 3* has been interpreted as a palm leaf, it looks more like a rugged acanthus leaf. Unfortunately, the available translated books are full of ambiguities but it is fair to take such form as an arabesque.

In the early works of Islamic buildings, a leaf-shaped pattern can be seen. This pattern exists almost from the Seljuk period until the Ilkhans. These leaf-shaped motifs, which are often bifurcated, can be attributed to the early Arabesque or might be regarded as a model for their creation and diversity in later periods (*Fig. 4*).

In this plasterwork, two horizontal leaves are seen at the bottom with two vertical leaves between them, which are rugged Acanthus leaves (*Fig. 5*). This form of motifs can be considered arabesque prototypes, which of course were not called arabesque at that time (*Figs. 6 & 7*).

The most important motifs used in the green-clad hill plasterwork include Sassanid-type palm leaves with five or six pendants and simplified palm leaves without pendants. There are also heart-shaped palm leaves, which are well known in early Islamic decorations. Some motifs consist of birds’ heads with a palm leaf hanging from their beaks (*Figs. 9 & 10*). A bird holding a palm leaf in its beak is an entirely Sassanid motif that shows an Arabesque form.

Geometric tendril has been used in green-clad hill plasterwork to draw such a pattern. Such a combination



Fig. 2. Silver Cup decorated with plant motifs, 5th-6th century, Art Sassanid, in this Arabesque picture - a leaf with two branches from which a Cedar has emerged. Source: Lukonin, 2015, 151.



Fig. 3. Sassanid metal plate, a bird with palm leaves in its beak. Source: Mohammadi & Dini, 2018.

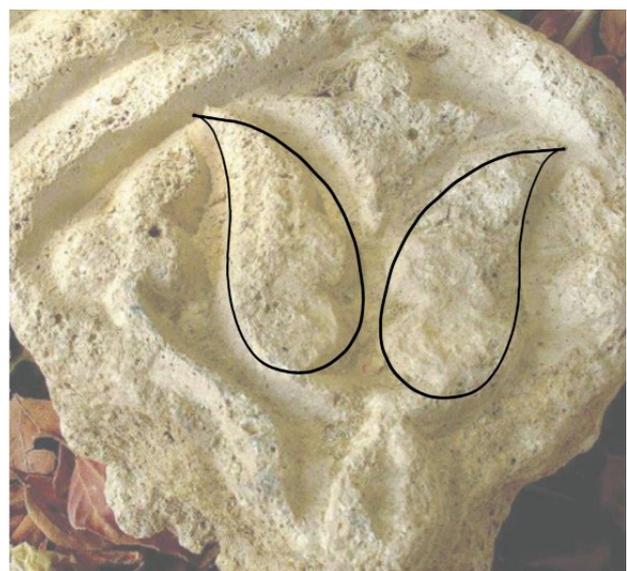


Fig. 4. Plant reliefs with ornaments - Preserved in the Siraf Museum, two patterns of cedar or paisley, which are the same size can be seen. Source: Panjeh Bashi & Dolab, 2017.



Fig. 5. Plant motifs of plasterwork decorations of Seymarch Mosque. Source: Lakpour, 2010.



Fig. 6. Plant motifs of the bed decorations of Seymareh Mosque, Arabesque motif can be seen in it. Source: Lakpour, 2010.



Fig. 7. Plasterwork of Seymareh Mosque, Arabesque motif can be clearly seen. Source: Lakpour, 2010.

of bird and scroll ornaments has fallen under the influence of Iranian decorative motifs in the art of the Abbasid period. This pattern reaches perfection during the Seljuk period, which is sometimes upside down, meaning that the bird's head lies at the bottom of the palm leaf (Fig. 11). Images of the plasterwork from the green-clad hill, which is an example of early Arabesque (Figs. 12 & 13).

The plasterwork of Seymareh Mosque is directly inspired by the decorative designs and ornaments of Sassanid plasterworks that include various types of palm leaves, acanthus leaves, etc. Also placing such

works in multi-shaped geometrical forms, which plays a pivotal role in creating Symmetry and movement, indicates the imitation and transformation of decorative Sassanid plasterwork both in form and shape (Fig. 8).

The most important feature of the Balkh nine dome Mosque is its plasterwork decorations. The decorative motifs used in this mosque consist of geometric designs and plant-like shapes (Naji, 2007, 396). The principle of symmetry and repetition of motifs is one of the most important decorative features of Balkh Mosque plasterwork (Fig. 14). In this mosque, the primary arabesque motif can also be seen. Visual examples illustrate this (Figs. 15-18).

All in all the plasterwork patterns of the above-mentioned mosques are a combination of geometric and plant-like patterns that the principle of symmetry and repetition is their leading feature. In these decorative surfaces, like the ones in Balkh nine dome mosque and Samarra mosque, there is a tendency from realistic motifs to abstract motifs. Accordingly, each of the plant species of Seymareh Mosque, while being initially influenced by plant motifs of the Sassanid era, has been simplified and linked to other complex species. A process that can be taken as the beginning of the creation of arabesque motifs in Islamic art.

Based on historical documents, the similarity of the decorative motifs used in the plasterwork decorations of Seymareh Mosque with the decorative motifs of the



Fig. 8. Seymareh frames, in these Plastering, Arabesque-like leaves can be seen. Source: Lakpour, 2010.



Fig. 9. Plasterwork from the green-clad hill of Neishabour. Source: Mohammadi & Dini, 2018.



Fig. 10. plasterwork from the green-clad hill of Neishabour. Source: Mohammadi & Dini, 2018.



Fig. 11. Plasterwork from the green-clad hill of Neishabour. Source: Mohammadi & Dini, 2018.



Fig. 12. plasterwork from the green-clad hill of Neishabour, the existence of the pattern of the paisley in the middle of the plastering. Source: Mohammadi & Dini, 2018.



Fig. 13. Plasterwork from the green-clad hill of Neishabour. Source: Mohammadi & Dini, 2018.



Fig. 14. Examples of the plasterwork decorations of the nine domes of Balkh Mosque, Late eighth century, designed designs have taken the Arabesque form out of the designs. Source: archnet.org

plasterwork of Samarra Mosque shows the influence of Iranian art (Fig. 22).

Gradually in the first Islamic centuries (Figs. 19-21) and the works of the Seljuk period approach the Arabesque

form we see today (Fig. 23). It transforms through different periods and finally can be seen in the works of the Safavid period like gilding and miniature, etc. (Fig. 26).

There is more variety in the plasterwork of the Seljuk period, which is the continuation of pre-Islamic motifs. As the size of the building is reduced, decorations are

more delicate and such plasterworks along with Ilkhan ones are excellent examples of diversity and beauty (Figs. 24 & 25).

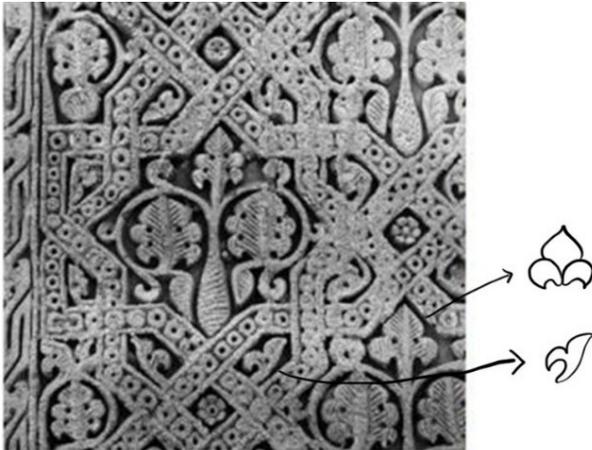


Fig. 15. Examples of the plasterwork decorations of the nine domes of Balkh Mosque, Late eighth century, the leaves of the two branches can be considered a simple Arabesque. Source: Archnet.org



Fig. 16. Examples of plasterwork decorations of nine domes of Balkh Mosque, Late eighth century, simple Arabesque in the form of two-branched leaves. Source: Archnet.org



Fig. 17. Examples of plasterwork decorations of nine domes of Balkh Mosque, Late eighth century, early Arabesque in the form of bifurcated leaves. Source: Archnet.org.



Fig. 18. The columns of the southeastern wall of the nine domes of Balkh Mosque, the Arabesque motif can be clearly seen. Source: Archnet.org



Fig. 19. The elasticity of the exterior arch of Neyriz Mosque, the first centuries of Islam, the Arabesque motif can be seen here. Source: Taghavinejad & Moazani, 2016.



Fig. 20. Part of the side and front view (interior of the arch) of Neyriz Mosque, the first centuries of Islam. Source: Taghvinejad & Moazani, 2016.



Fig. 21. Under the false arch (Arabesque head of the hollow lattice) of Neyriz Mosque, the first centuries of Islam. Source: Taghvinejad & Moazani, 2016.



Fig. 22. Samarra Mosque, Arabesque motif that is quite similar to the motifs of the Nine Dome Mosque and Seymareh. Source: Mobini, Shakarami & Sharifinia, 2018.



Fig. 23. A hollow Arabesque used in the margin of the altar, Urmia Grand Mosque, Seljuk period. Source: Motafker Azad & Zakavat, 2018.



Fig. 24. Altar of Marand Mosque in Urmia, Ilkhanid period, Arabesque motif can be seen in this plasterwork. Source: Lastsecond.ir



Fig. 25. plasterwork with Arabesque motif, Al-Jaito Altar. Source: Rice, 2007.



Fig. 26. Different types of Arabesque on the floors of Aali Qapo Palace, Safavid period. Source: Amin al-Roaya, 2020.

## Conclusion

Arabesque motif has long existed in Iranian traditional arts but it was not referred to as arabesque until the Safavid period. Though many sources refer to plant motifs as arabesque, they are simply rudimentary leaf and branch designs that used to exist in pre-Islamic plasterworks and later arrived at mosques and other Islamic buildings in a perfected form. This research aims to study the evolution of this motif from the Sassanid to the Safavid era. Many mosques of the Seljuk period and earlier eras are decorated with this design. However, the repetition, diversity, and perfection of arabesque belong to the Safavid period, which can be seen in tiling, carpets, fabrics, and other decorative designs of this era. Much has been written about Arabesque so far, which is summarized in the book “Arabesque and signs”. In this article, this book has been criticized to remove ambiguities and biased

irrational opinions.

A group of theorists, especially traditionalists, have developed theories about the signs and symbols of Islamic art including arabesque which are deeply biased and lack logical explanation. The study of the historical course of the Arabesque motif in the decorative motifs of Iran from the Sassanid to the Safavid period, based on the images, showed that the arabesque is a particular bifurcated leaf pattern that has a plant and natural root. Thus, awkward and sometimes poetic and emotional interpretations that link arabesque to signs and contradictory comments are baseless. The images of arabesque and its varieties from the Sassanid to the Safavid period clearly show one single motif. A bifurcated leaf whose stem and root are known as the Arabesque strap and move with a spiral rotation.

## Endnote

1. Arabesque
2. Cedar is a conical and evergreen tree that is famous for its height, this tree is also called Cypress and Sarvanaz. Although Islam is of nature and matter.
3. See Javadi, 2004 and Mansouri & Teymouri, 2015.

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