

### Original Research Article

## The Symbolic Role of Tulip and Pomegranate Flowers in the Tiling Art of Iran and Ottoman Turkey\*

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Received; 15/02/2022

accepted; 02/03/2022

available online; 01/04/2022

### Abstract

Among different ethnic groups and nations and different cultures, significant elements have become symbols and signs, which are representative of the religion and beliefs of the nation or region and country. Some plants or animals in their borders and ecosystems for reasons such as usefulness, abundance, or other things have received so much attention that they have become a symbol and are of special importance in the culture and art of the people. Pomegranate flowers and fruits have a very important place in Iran, which in addition to beauty and prosperity goes back to the ancient Iranian beliefs of worshipping Mehr and Anahita. The purpose of this study is to investigate the evolution of pomegranate flowers in Iranian tiling and tulips in Ottoman Turkey. The present research is historical-analytical. Data including text and images were collected through a library research method. In this regard, historical and documentary studies were conducted on Iranian pomegranate and Ottoman tulip motifs. In this study, after introducing and examining these motifs, the types of flowers that adorn gardens are discussed and their special place in the decorative arts of the region are reviewed. The analysis shows that the role of the tulip is defined in relation to nature and the environment. However, its abundance and variety with the taste of artists have made the tulip a popular flower of the Ottoman sultans. Some other flowers have also been introduced in the review process. Also, some of the existing opinions about flowers have been criticized and new and analytical points have been discussed.

**Keywords:** *Pomegranate Flower, Tulip flower, Iran, Ottoman Turkey, Tiling, Symbol.*

### Introduction

The use of plant motifs of flowers and shrubs such as hair leaves, pomegranate leaves and fruits, palm and artichoke leaves (acanthus), and the role of pomegranate flowers in various decorations of the Sassanid period have been common that these

\* The idea for this research was developed based on the research course "The Relationship Between Religion and Art," which was being taught by Dr. Shohreh Javadi, Assistant Professor of Higher Art Studies at Tehran University in 2020.

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elements have continued in the Islamic period decorations.

Plant motifs used on various works during the Sassanid period later served as the foundation for plant motifs of the Islamic period, which lasted from the beginning of Islam to the 8th and 9th centuries AH. Sassanid art, which owes itself to Achaemenid and Parthian art, has grown and diversified in the field of plant and geometric decorations. Pomegranate fruit, flowers, and leaves are among the symbolic and

practical roles in Iranian art. Pomegranate is one of the oldest fruits known to man, which have grown wild at the beginning of agriculture and is one of the first fruits cultivated by man. Archaeological evidence suggests the presence of pomegranates on pottery in the fourth and third millennia BC. Pomegranate is one of the holiest trees that has maintained its high position among Iranians to this day. The pomegranate's representation is a symbol of blessing and fertility and a symbol of Anahita, the goddess of blessing and fertility. The red color of the pomegranate and the upper part of the pomegranate fruit in yellow and orange flags remain in the sun and have been associated with Mehr-Mitra. Pomegranate is a decorative symbol in Eastern art and its fruit is seen among the leaves in the decorations of the Sassanid period. Pomegranate has a high status and symbolic mission in pre-history mythology and Iranian art. The role of pomegranate in works of art indicates deep meanings of life such as infertility, abundance and blessing, and fertility.

### Research questions

1. How has the pomegranate flower been symbolized and presented in Iranian works of art?
2. How has the tulip flower been symbolized in Ottoman Turkey and even reflected in the region?

### Pomegranate flower as a symbol in Iranian tiling

Almost all the major religions in the world have sanctified pomegranate and attributed various meanings to it. Ancient Greek mythology in the story of the abduction of Persephone by Hades, the god of the underworld, considers this fruit a symbol of life, death, and rebirth. The pomegranate plant is evergreen throughout the year, and therefore, the human mind attributes the immortality of the soul to it. Many seeds in the heart of the fruit indicate blessing and abundance. Many holy books refer to pomegranate seeds and pay homage to the beauty of the blossoming pomegranate, and the taste of its fruit,

and consider this flower a symbol of prosperity and fertility.

Pomegranate fruit has a special meaning and value in architectural forms. The famous palace of Shah Suleiman had columns whose capitals were all decorated in the shape of a pomegranate. Other palaces of Jewish kings also had many walls that displayed similar decorations among the leaf forms. In Buddhist art, pomegranate has found a sacred meaning along with some other fruits. Seeing the pomegranate as a symbol of eternal life and the Day of Judgment is evident in Christian art - paintings and sculptures of Mary and Jesus around the world.

Muslims consider the pomegranate tree and its fruit sacred because they are mentioned in the gardens of Eden. Other fruits and trees such as grapes, figs, pears, apples, and olives have been also mentioned in the gardens of paradise, but why fruits and pomegranate flowers have a special and repetitive place in artistic motifs and poetry, Persian literature. According to the available historical and visual evidence, this sanctity dates back to ancient Iran, the continuation of which we see in the Islamic era. In Anatolia and the Middle East, newlyweds are still given pomegranates to bless their many children. For Muslims, pomegranate is a symbol of beauty, and eating it improves health, beauty, and freshness. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) advised pregnant women: If you want beautiful children, eat pomegranates. The pomegranate tree, along with the olive, date, and fig trees, is one of the four sacred trees in Muslim belief. Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah respects the pomegranate in many of its rituals.

In modern-day Turkey, many families throw pomegranates on the ground on New Year's Eve to be "broken" and begin the New Year in a symbolic gesture with blessings and abundance.

The symbol of fertility and beauty of pomegranate has a long and prominent history in the arts of literature and decoration of Iranian architecture. The origin of the pomegranate fruit is Iran and Afghanistan, where it

has been used as a sacred symbol and has been revered in Zoroastrian worship rituals (Fig. 1).

For example, the seven pomegranate sticks, the religious elements, and the pomegranate fruit have been a symbol of the immortality of the soul and the perfection of nature. In Iranian mythology, Esfandiar became invincible after eating pomegranate. The presence and appearance of pomegranate in ancient and modern Iranian poetry and literature, which is derived from religious beliefs, is abundant.

The pomegranate flower has had a profound and obvious effect on architectural decorations, especially Iranian tiles throughout history. “Narbala” is the original Persian name and one of the most important symbols of Iranians, literally meaning the flower of the pomegranate tree and the name of one of the beautiful and kind Persian queens, the wife of Darius the Great, which was used in inscriptions, relief stones, and sculptures of that time (Fig. 2). With a little care in the sculptures and reliefs left by Darius the Great, Narbala-pomegranate flower can be seen in the hands of the Crown Prince.

In symbolic and mythological theories, pomegranate, because of its numerous seeds, is first and foremost a symbol of fertility and reproduction and fertility and abundance of blessings. Pomegranate is sacred in Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrians used it in their religious rites. Yarsan Kurds now use this product in their

religious ceremonies (Ahangari & Hosseini, 2020).

In Iranian culture, a pomegranate has been considered a female, which is a symbol of immortality and fertility and has been attributed to Anahita, the goddess of pure and holy waters, in abundance. The pomegranate flower is one of the decorative symbols in the architecture of ancient Iran, which is mostly used in Achaemenid palaces to decorate the walls as well as the role of horse necklaces and column heads. Some archaeologists believe that these masonry flowers are lotus, while the lotus flower was a sacred plant in Hinduism, Buddhism, and ancient Egypt, but is sometimes mentioned in Persian art and culture. According to recent research, according to evidence and documents, this sacred flower in Achaemenid and Sassanid art is the same pomegranate flower that has its roots in Iranian beliefs.

In a relief from Persepolis (now in the Museum of Ancient Iran in Tehran), Darius the Great holds a pomegranate flower or two buds. In the famous painting of the Achaemenid emperor in Persepolis, also known as the “Treasury painting”, the Achaemenid king is receiving representatives of all the subordinate lands of Greater Iran in his presence, while holding a large flower as a sign of peace and friendship. This painting, which is now in the treasury building, was first in the center of the large painting of the eastern stairs of the Apadana Palace in Persepolis. The Apadana Palace is one of the oldest palaces in Persepolis, which was built by order of Darius



Fig. 1. Pomegranate is a familiar and sacred symbol.  
Source: Rafi'i, 1998, 243.



Fig. 2. Pomegranate flower symbol in Iranian architectural and tiling decorations. Source: Ghasemi & Shirazi, 2013.

the Great (522-486 BC). It was used for celebrations and ceremonies, including the reception of representatives of countries dependent on the presence of the emperor, Persepolis Palace, and residence. It was not a permanent place for kings, but a place of worship for the rituals of Mehregan and Nowruz. Some scholars, following the German archaeologist Schmidt I, attribute the image of the Achaemenid emperor in this painting to Darius the Great. As “Heidmari Koch”, the German Iranologist also considers the role of the person sitting on the throne belongs to Darius the Great and considers the flower he holds in this painting to be a “lotus flower”. He writes in the description of this painting: In the left hand of the king is a lotus flower with two buds, while the pomegranate flower with two buds is visible (Fig. 3). The Crown Prince also holds this flower, which is only in the picture of this father and son. “Lotus flower is abundant in Persepolis paintings, but not with two buds ...”

In this petroglyph, we see a large flower, with flower cups or petals in the middle of the petals or calyx, and straight stems in the emperor’s hands, with round or spherical buds on either side of the flower. By examining the role of flowers in this petroglyph and comparing it with different examples of flowers in nature, we believe that the flower is not a lotus but a flower that the king and his crown prince have in their hands is a pomegranate flower or “Persian flower”.

For centuries, tulips played an important role in world art, especially in Turkish art. The Ottomans not only decorated their gardens with tulips but also called the years (1108-1091) the “Tulip Age”. The Ottoman Turks also transferred their love for this plant to interior designs (Fig. 4).

Between 1634 and 1637, a period called Tulipomania started in the Netherlands when all the artists started using tulips in their paintings. During this period of tulip madness, which was also common in Europe, these flowers were used not only outdoors but also indoors, turning interior spaces into tulip gardens with decorations. However, tulips became popular again in



Fig. 3. Pomegranate flowers and buds, lithographs of Persepolis. Source: Kiani, 1995, 18.

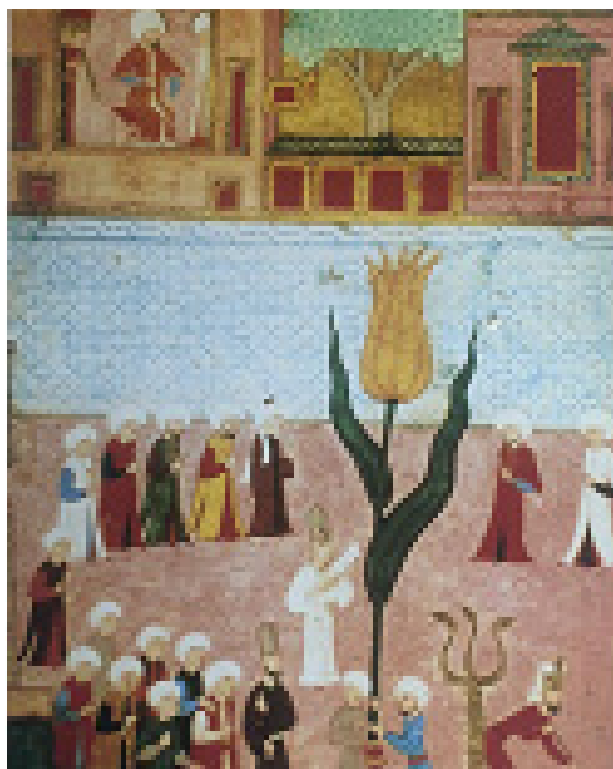


Fig. 4. Exaggerated tulips in miniature. Source: Adam, 1993.

the first quarter of the nineteenth century, when tulips were also commonly used designs.

In the design of the form, both closed and the blossomed forms of tulips were used, biomimetic is featured in this design, which also led to the new popularity of tulips. This study found that the six petals are approximately equal in shape. Beautiful and vivid colors and thin and long stems are the main features of tulips that inspire the design.

The root of the word “tile” is from the ancient Persian phrase “Çin-I” comes from The Iranian name “Kasi”

or “Kashi which is special for glazed pottery attributed to the city of Kashan (Alavi, 2011, 9). In some sources, the word tile is adapted from the name of Kashan city, which has been known as the center of the pottery industry since the early Islamic era. The same word is used in Turkish for glazed designs.

Tiling, which is very important in traditional Turkish art, has been developed over several centuries, and tiling is widely used in the architectural decoration of many Turkish monuments, monuments, as well as other Asian states (Fig. 5).

In the post-Ottoman period, especially when the empire was in its development stage, tile art was constantly improved through many of the innovative techniques introduced at the time, and this art continued after the decline of the art quality and the fall of the Ottoman Empire years later.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, craftsmen began to use a new method called glazing. The most common patterns of this time were chrysanthemums and clouds, bouquets of lavender, tulips, and roses, which are often mistaken for the role of Damascus because these patterns were first common in Damascus in the 10th century AH. The best examples of this technique can be seen in Iznik tiles. Iznik pottery represents the art of pottery in the lands under Ottoman rule (Fig. 6). Iznik

is a city in Bursa Province, located 90 km southeast of Istanbul. The body of this type of pottery is made of white clay and its fame is due to the extensive use of colored glazes (Blair & Bloom, 1994, 222).

Flowers were very popular with the Ottoman Turks. Tulips, centipedes, violets, and violets, which were very valuable in Turkish culture, were gradually used by the Ottoman elite to fill the composition of the outfit. Karamami, one of the artists of Sultan Suleiman’s court, changed the form of Ottoman gilded motifs by substituting natural flowers such as tulips, roses, lavender, and carnations instead of traditional and abstract motifs and Islamic motifs (Allan, 1991, 74).

The designs were made by court miniaturists in Istanbul and then sent to Iznik. These patterns were mostly cobalt blue, turquoise, green and white, and less brown, pink, and gray. Other colors that are occasionally seen include coral red, which is widely used for soothing underglaze. The solid black lines or black backgrounds that define the design were effective on these multiple colors (Fig. 7).

This period is also called the naturalistic period because you can see different types of flowers such as rose, carnation, pomegranate, lavender, violet, as well as designs and descriptions of tulip-like flowers. The Turkish flower of Rostam Pasha Mosque (939)



Fig. 5. Tulip and carnation flowers, Ottoman tiling. Source: Ferrier, 1995, 267.



Fig. 6. A composition of violets, tulips in Ottoman Turkey. Source: Denny, 2004, 154.



Fig. 7. The role of tulips, red flowers, and white blooms on Ottoman Turkish ceramic plates. Source: Allan, 1991, 69.

is an example of new technical development and tile patterns on the walls, altar, and columns of the mosque. Examples such techniques can be seen in Sokullu Mehmet Paşa (949) Kadırga, Takkeci Ibrahim Ağa (969) mosques.

The private room of Sultan Murad III in Topkapi Palace is probably the best place to see these high-quality tiles (Fig. 8).

The walls of the room up to the dome are covered with such tiles. On the white ground, pomegranate flowers are seen in a circle, as well as Chinese and green clouds in green and red. In the second half of the sixteenth century, such designs were very common. The composition includes spring flowers - blooms on the branches on the walls of the chamber (Fig. 9). The front of the palace circumcision room, which dates back to 1018, is also decorated with similar tiles.

The court miniaturists at that time first implemented

the design on the tile and then, in coordination with other architectural and lighting features, chose the design according to the place where the work was located (Fig. 10).

The sources refer to the wild tulip native to Turkey, but these large blue flowers are similar to the pomegranate flowers and the Iranian plantain, which have no resemblance to the tulip and are most likely derived from Persian motifs (Fig. 11).

## Conclusion

In this study, the authors discuss pomegranate, which has been one of the oldest fruits known to man, which grew wild at the beginning of agriculture and later became one of the first fruits cultivated by humans. Archaeological evidence suggests the presence of pomegranates on pottery in the fourth and third millennia BC. Pomegranate is one of the



Fig. 8. Red Arabesques - four flowers, white pomegranate flowers on an azure background. Source: Watson, 1998, 453.



Fig. 9. Samples of spring flowers and blossoms in tiling. Source: Rafi'i, 1998, 234.



Fig. 10. Sample of cloves in tiling. Source: Ghasemi & Shirazi, 2013, 53.



Fig. 11. Red tulips, pomegranate flowers, and multi-feathered blue flowers on a white background of Ottoman Turkey. Source: Carswell & Henderson, 2003, 29.

holiest trees that has kept its sanctity among Iranians until today. It has had a high status in the myths and arts of ancient Iran since prehistoric times, and its symbolic mission and full symbol. The tulip is also present in the myths and symbols of Ottoman Turkey. The symbol and execution methods in these flowers can be examined. For centuries, tulips have played a major role in world art, especially Turkish art. The Ottomans decorated their gardens with tulips because they believed they were a good symbol.

The tulip is also associated with the religions and beliefs of the people of the world, especially the Ottoman Turks, who have used this role extensively with carnations and other flowers in artistic decorations.

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#### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Darvishi, N. & Narimani, S. (2022). The Symbolic Role of Tulip and Pomegranate Flowers in the Tiling Art of Iran and Ottoman Turkey. *Journal of Art & Civilization of the Orient*, 10(35), 27-34.

DOI: 10.22034/jaco.2022.329920.1234

URL: [http://www.jaco-sj.com/article\\_147208.html?lang=en](http://www.jaco-sj.com/article_147208.html?lang=en)

