

Features of Architectural Decoration of Religious Buildings of Uzbekistan in the Middle Ages (9-16 Centuries)

Barsukova Elena Georgiyevna

Tashkent Architecture and Construction Institute, Tashkent city, Navoi Street, 13, Uzbekistan

Abstract: *This article is the result of a scientific study, which is devoted to the analysis of the features of ornamental art in the Islamic architecture of Uzbekistan in the middle ages. We have considered some religious buildings (the ensemble of the Registan square, the Bibi-Khanym mosque) and their decor.*

Keywords: Colour, Islamic art, sacred architecture, symbols, Sufism.

1. Introduction

The current state of civilization can be characterized by one capacious word – “globalization”, which, along with the provision of new opportunities for unprecedented development of science, technology, art, at the same time has also some negative trends. In particular, it is observed in the progressive loss of national identity and culture of many ethnic groups, which could not resist the negative trends of globalization. It is in this context the work on the revival and full preservation of the spiritual and cultural values of Uzbekistan people is becoming more urgent and topical. It is known that modern Uzbekistan is the heir of a huge, priceless spiritual and cultural wealth. And our primary task is to preserve and multiply what we have inherited from our great ancestors. The policy of Uzbekistan is aimed at exploring and reviving this spiritual and cultural wealth; that’s what all the scientists in many fields of science, art and culture of the country are trying to accomplish. An important place here is the revival of cultural heritage in the field of architecture and applied arts.

We have studied religious buildings (sacred architecture: mausoleum, mosque, madrasah, khanakakh) of 9-16 centuries.

The present investigation is concerned with the architecture and decor as a specific form of artistic thinking, which is considered by taking into account Islamic aesthetics, philosophy and religion. The author of the article analyzes the transforming symbolic concepts preserved in ornamentation, taking into account the characteristics of various Sufi schools in detail.

2. Research Methods

There were used several methods, such as semiotic – search for specific information, signs, meanings expressed in architecture; philosophical – in other words, a set of logical methods based on cause and effect, which is used to establish astronomical, symbolic, cultural and other kinds of relationships between concepts, images, epochs, which are affected in this study; graph analytic – drawing diagrams and

tables based on the analyzed material.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1. Analysis of documents

We have analyzed some medieval documents, such as treatises “On craft” [1], “On calligraphers and artists” [2], “The Charter of the workshop of painting masters” [3]. It is revealed that professional architects-ornamentalists were pupils of Sufi schools, where they were trained for a long time before the beginning of their practical activities in the field of architecture and art. It is also pointed out by a contemporary representative of the Naqshbandiya Sufi movement – the master of calligraphy Haji Abdulgafur Razzak Bukhari [4] (the leading teacher of the Mir-Arab madrasah and the keeper of the Bahauddin Naqshband memorial), as well as some modern researchers [5]. The statutes we have studied (Risala) set forth the legendary history of the craft, the founder and patron of which usually declared one of the most revered Muslim saints. The Charter also served as a kind of religious and ethical code regulating the duties of the members of the workshop. The basis of medieval Islamic art is the sacred idea of the harmony of the world. Initiation into Usto (The Master) was preceded through spiritual preparation, after which the initiation took place with girding and commemoration of the Holy feasts [6]. There are given the instructions concerning what should a master do entering the workshop room, preparing the brush to work, etc. The Charter contains the duties – there are seven of them as seven steps (“Makams”) [7, p. 100] of becoming a student, suitable for working as an artist. In the “Charter of the workshop of pictorial affairs of masters” there are presented 12 outstanding masters (which are peculiar to 12 main maternal brotherhoods in Sufism) of painting, who have reached completeness of perfection.

The next document indicating the influence of Sufism on art is the treatise “On craft” prepared by Mir Findiriski (dates of life approximately 1572-1640), the analysis of which was carried out by Shahram Pazuki [8, p. 199]. He writes that, the concept of “craft” (san’at) for Muslim philosophers and mystics had a special meaning.

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3.2 Attributes of Sufi techniques: color and symbols

Every religion, ideology brings its own understanding to the theory of color. Theologians of Islam, and especially Sufism, associate it with the mental state of a person. In Muslim mysticism (Tasavvuf), the theory of color acquires a different development, where it plays an important epistemological function, characterizing the state of the soul, its mystics, the degree of soul's purity [9]. Upon reaching each stand (Maqam), the Sufi contemplates the light veils, painted with different colors, which are an indicator of the degree of his spiritual perfection. One of the famous figures of Sufism in Central Asia is Najmi ad-din Kubra [10]. The nature and features of Central Asian mysticism and Sufism are that Najm ad-din Kubra, as one of the first Sufi mentors, turned his attention to the phenomena of color insights or photisms [11]. He created and carefully developed a system of color-light symbolism, each color of which meant the achievement of a person (student) a certain step on the path of knowledge.

The symbolism of color and form in the Sufism tradition exists throughout its history. In the philosophy of Sufism, color appears as an essential structural element of the Universe, i.e. here to the cosmological semantics there are added meanings, which were attached to color in the pre-Muslim tradition. According to their presentation, there are seven colors in total.

In the architecture of Central Asia, color has always remained as one of the effective means of forming the artistic image of architecture. The combination of seven "divine" colors in a single scale of architectural decoration means the expression of heavenly, paradisiacal harmony, which became the personification of the harmony of the earth, and the buildings themselves – a symbol of Paradise, divine beauty on earth.

3.3 Ornament of religious (sacred) buildings

The architectural ornament of religious buildings such as Bibi-Khanyim mosque (Samarkand), Tillya-Kari Madrasah (ensemble of Registan square, Samarkand) was considered in this article.

The richest ornamental decor of religious buildings, created by masters of Sufism, has a huge psycho-emotional impact on people. This is both due to the different types of architectural decoration (Girih, Islimi, Epigraphy, etc.) and the use of color palette in architectural structures. Islamic architecture, thanks to the colors used in it, has a powerful energy charge that affects the psyche of the viewer, as well as it is more informative, due to the concentration of signs on the surface, which the view covers entirely in a small period of time. As its known, each individual color has the power of influence and a certain character of impact on a person: physiological, psychological (emotional), symbolic (informative), aesthetic, environmental (formative – in the architectural and compositional solutions).

It is revealed in the article that along with the external

manifestation of the decorative pattern (Zahir), which can be observed firsthand, there is also an internal, "hidden" (Batin) essence, which is not manifested externally, however, is an essential part of the ornament. In this case, the external, "explicit" (Zahir) is manifested exclusively in artistic performance (patterns, color), where the internal (Batin) part is the hidden essence of the ornament, manifested in the geometric constructions.

The process of observing the external (Zahir) manifestation of the pattern and simultaneously comprehending the hidden (Batin) part, i.e. the geometric basis of construction (drawing), leads to the simultaneous work of left-and right-sided thinking, which causes them to merge into a single whole; the result of this merger is the achievement of super consciousness, which according to the masters of Sufism leads to the true goal – the dissolution of a man in God. Ornament is the key to understanding Islamic art and the main exponent of the principle of uniqueness – Taukhid. Islamic ornament covers the building as a mantle, the purpose of which is to hide the structure of the building rather than revealing it and it expresses the spiritual concepts of Muslims.

4. Conclusion

Thus, ornamental art, in addition to aesthetic impact on a person, also carries psychological and ideological (religious) functions. The masters of Sufism expressed their religious and philosophical knowledge of the world in the esoteric language of art and considered sensual and intuitive knowledge to be the highest form of knowledge in general. Therefore, every Sufi Sheikh considered it necessary to develop in his disciples the ability to metaphysical thinking. Metaphysical, imaginative thinking, being a field of art, naturally led to the fact that ideas of Sufism found their expression in architecture and ornament.

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Author Profile



Barsukova Elena the B.S. and M.S. degrees in Tashkent Architecture and Construction Institute (Republic of Uzbekistan) in 2006 and 2008, respectively. During 2008-2017, she stayed in the Department of Design of Architectural Environment as a Senior Lecturer. During 2017-2019 she is a doctoral student of the Department "History and Theory of Architecture", Tashkent Architecture and Construction Institute.