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## Mirrored interiors of Iran palaces and holy places

### Lustrzane wnętrza irańskich pałaców

### i świętych miejsc

#### Abstract

Typical mirrored interiors of Iran from the eighteenth to the beginning of nineteenth century are discussed in this article. Aesthetic, plastic, architectural and design peculiarities of such places in the Persian tradition are researched using examples of the Golestan and Saadabad royal complexes in Tehran, religious sights of Qazvin (the holy place Hossein Imamzadeh grave mosque and Friday mosque); the mausoleum of the descendant of Abraham, the prophet Keydar in Ostan-e Zanjan; the Sayed Alaeddin Hussein mosque, the Shah Cheragh mosque (blue or mirrored mosque), and Ali Ibn Hamzeh mausoleum in Shiraz. Peculiarities of the addition of mirrored sculptural elements, precious stones and silver plates to amalgamated glass in such complexes are clarified.

Keywords: Iran, mirrored interior, palaces, mosques, holy places, eighteenth to the beginning of nineteenth century

#### Streszczenie

W tym artykule omówiono typowe lustrzane wnętrza Iranu od XVIII do początku XIX wieku. Cechy estetyczne, plastyczne, architektoniczne i projektowe takich miejsc w tradycji perskiej są badane na przykładach królewskich kompleksów Golestan i Saadabad w Teheranie, zabytków religijnych w Kazwinie (mauzoleum Hossein Imamzadeh wraz z meczetem piątkowym); mauzoleum potomka Abrahama, proroka Keydara w Ostan-e Zanjan; meczet Sayed Alaeddin Hussein, meczet Shah Cheragh (niebieski lub lustrzany meczet) i mauzoleum Ali Ibn Hamzеха w Shiraz. Artykuł wyjaśnia specyfikację dodawania lustrzanych elementów rzeźbiarskich, kamieni szlachetnych i srebrnych płytek do amalgamowanego szkła w takich kompleksach.

Słowa kluczowe: Iran, lustrzane wnętrze, pałace, meczety, święte miejsca, XVIII wiek i początek XIX wieku

## 1. FOREWORD

Specific features of local architecture have always been of great importance in the territory of modern Iran, starting from the epoch of the great Achaemenid dynasty which gave to the world the fascinating images of creative thought and refined style of old Mazdaic Persians in Persepolis, Sus and Pasargad around the time of the fifth century B.C. (the age of high Hellenic art of Phidias period). In line with the development of arts and crafts (glass, mosaics, wood and stucco carving, art metal and textile), the architects of this state strived to decorate monuments in the process of their construction. Special attention was granted to interior spaces, which are more distant from the outer world.

The people of the East differ from the people of the West in their mindsets and their perception of the world; this is why it was always important for the people of the East to see paradise on the Earth, like Allah, looking at the pool with goldfish. In addition, it was always important for the people of the East to have all the mundane refined achievements of human thought and crafts, from precious jewellery and artistic arms and to the early Persian porcelain of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, brocade, silk and carpets with motifs of pomegranate, cypress, irises, hyacinths, tulips, anemones and Shiraz roses<sup>1</sup>.

As a result of the above, specific hierarchy of beauty was gradually formed in Iran under the influence of palaces and cult buildings with miansar gardens making the world beautiful, and badgir wind catchers<sup>2</sup>. Mirrored interiors had a special place in this entire splendour. They are rarely known by Europeans, but very important for the mentality of Iranian people.

## 2. MAIN BODY

Persians developed their aesthetic canon over the course of the centuries. Many of their creative inventions enriched the art, architecture and design of Europe, including its Eastern regions, starting from such findings as those of Darius Xerxes Apadana<sup>3</sup>, and solemn verandas and garden planning with the appearance of Mauritian art<sup>4</sup>. Decoration of the important parts of the exterior and interior of the buildings with refined and expensive materials is a part of this aesthetic canon.

Iranians improved engineering and construction skills over the centuries, they included accents which were creatively well-balanced and consistent with each other in the design of each building. In this way they managed to create their own 'music of stone' which differed from the stone art of other peoples of West Asia. Their 'music of stone' includes not only

creatively engraved stucco and fine carving, but also the thousands of artificial 'diamonds' made of glass and mirrors, put closely to each other with excellent accuracy.

The beginning of decoration with mirrors in Persian art is connected with the traditional crafts of this region. Shisha embroidery style is the ancient tradition of this region (from Persian 'shisheh' – glass); this style features the inclusion of small mirrors<sup>5</sup>, coins, buttons and cords in art composition. The function of such glass pieces was to reflect the sunlight, due to which it was possible to protect yourself from foes and envious people, and to always have a 'bright and shining' look, and together with coins, to also have plenty of money, attracting the ergregor of well-being and the sunny warmth of love. Traditions of states located closely to Indochina are under the strong influence of Buddhism and spiritual practices of energy cleaning – they reflect the ancient attitude to high-pure character of the elements. For Iranians they were primary, which is why they were holy.

There are several legends about the origin of shisha. The wife of Shah Jahan, the representative of the Great Mughal dynasty, was a legendary woman; she inspired Shah Jahan to construct the Taj Mahal, her burial mausoleum in India. She is believed to have been the first woman who started to use glass together with traditional mica, coins, tin and silver. Her name was Mumtaz Mahal, she was almost the contemporary of the Sun King Louis XIV in the seventeenth century (the years of her life were 1593–1631). There is no reliable data to confirm that this legendary woman was the first to replace simple natural materials with specially designed materials of the new style<sup>6</sup>.

According to the another version of the origin of shisha, this invention was found on the territory of Persia, where the shisha style was used for the decoration of fabric, tablecloths, garments and walls. The introduction of mirrored elements in this line seems to be more real. Therefore, it is considered that glass with an amalgam coating was used for the first time in 1557, at the epoch of Tahmasp Shah<sup>7</sup>, in the town of Qazvin, the capital of Sefevides on the territory of Iran. Now, amalgamated glass has become one of the traditional types of decoration in the internal revetment of the walls.

Later, mirrored decoration was used in Isfahan and other royal constructions of the local nobles. Thereafter, the inclusion of mirrored decorations in the design of holy places (they differ from mosques because they are open for 24 hours, not only during the hours of Mohammed prayer) and other cult constructions was started.

Mirrors for shisha were produced according to the special technology and this had an influence on the aesthetic perception of such elements of decoration in Iranian architecture. Glass balls were blown and then broken into convex pieces. Their inner part was silvered and the irregular edges were often polished. In such a manner, drop-like particles were obtained which were then sewn around with fabric. The masters did their best to produce fine work – they carefully fixed small reflectors with different types of seams of high quality and of particular delicacy<sup>8</sup>.

The exact date of when the widespread trend to make mirrored interiors occurred in Iran is not known yet. According to the legend, the mirrors seen in the newly opened workshops of Louis XIV in the Saint-Antoine suburb impressed one of the Iranian Shahs at the epoch of baroque – rococo. In the next century, the large-scale mirror import from Venetia to the East was developed. Persian glass processing masters gradually developed the skills of designing separate mirrored accessories and small architectural forms. Moreover, they learned to create particular ‘wallpapers’, the uniform coverage of walls and ceilings with ornaments consisting of patterns of large and small mirror fragments. When put together, they created shining complexes of perfectly done flat pictures and convex details with plastic solutions.

Amalgamated glass fragments were fixed on the wet whitewashing. The peak of this kaleidoscopic art in Iran was observed in the epoch of the Qadjar dynasty ruling (1779–1925). This tradition to beautifully decorate the holy places and palaces is still alive in this state. Among others, the interior of the Shah Cheragh mosque in Shiraz is striking in its beauty. Entry to this mosque for people of other religions is no longer permitted. The environment in this mosque is believed to be the eighth wonder of the world. The internal walls of this religious centre are decorated with mastery and generosity, not only with elements of glass, but also with precious stones and silver plates. The synergy of all these elements completes the variety of above-mentioned elements by the perception of really surprising colours.

The beauty of rainbow and light refraction by irregular engraved components is amplified by shining mirrored mukarnases (also called cells or stalactite vaults). Geometric accuracy is their particular feature. The function of these elements is not only to divide the ornamented pictures of structural elements, and to underline the architectonics of the building in such a way, but to additionally strengthen the structure of uniform glass coating which is rather heavy. They are mainly located at the ledges which cover the areas where the walls and ceilings meet<sup>9</sup>.

Mukarnases are the most characteristic load-bearing elements of this ‘uniform roll’ of multi-ton decorations of mosques and holy places. In addition, each such fragment of the interior was implemented according to the individual project. The shape of such connections in Shah Cheragh is similar to that of a hornet’s nest with a repeating cascade of ledges. The design of stalactite cornices is made according to certain rules primarily taking into consideration the distribution of ceiling weight in such ‘membranes’ because the whole structure is calculated by architects according to sophisticated mathematical formulas, and each millimetre of such structures should be additionally checked<sup>10</sup>.

Local masters specialised in mukarnases, engraved stucco and ‘crystal’ surfaces made sophisticated ornaments of pieces of fragile mirrors with geometric accuracy. As a result, the design of many interiors of this type in ceremonial halls of the palaces and mosques/holy places became not only refined, which is specific for the work of skilled masters in this area, but also unique and peculiar for this region because they have no equivalents in any other place in the world. Solemnity felt in such interiors impresses by magic and

delicacy at the same time, by high excellence of performance of all details in the same style and the perfect pattern of mirror lines and fractions presented as the edges of the most precious gems.

The typical example is the Talar Salam (reception hall) of the Golestan Qadjar Shah palace. One of the most well-known representatives of the Nasreddin dynasty who ruled in 1848–1896, ordered decorating the walls and ceilings in the reception hall and the neighbouring Talar Aianekh (mirror hall) with mirror mosaics. In line with this, these halls are decorated with large crystal chandeliers, their edges distribute the light all over the space of these halls (Ill. 1)<sup>11</sup>.

In other halls of this palace, the interior is also decorated with mirrored sculpture elements and stucco work, making the environment a little phantasmagoric due to the thousands of refracted sunbeams. The first hall to be noted in this context is Talar Almas (diamond hall), one of its parts is also decorated with large wooden windows of an orosi shape. These windows open not to the side, but upwards and they have grilles and coloured glass. In addition to the refined solutions of separate areas in the halls which are decorated with wall and lintel mosaics consisting of sophisticated ornaments made of glass particles, the combination of mirror and glass pictures with stucco work<sup>12</sup> in these halls is also of interest.

Many architects and designers have used interior decoration with mirror mosaic surfaces. Such interiors include several halls in the Saadabad Tehran palace (summer Shah residence), the Gavam palace in Shiraz (in combination with refined and delicate stucco), and a large number of religious monuments in different regions of contemporary Iran. At the present time, the total number of such monuments amounts to several hundred. The mirrored-style interior of some of these was designed and implemented just recently, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In this context, we should mention the following monuments. The religious constructions of Qazvin – the Hossein Imamzadeh grave mosque, in which mirror elements are also located on the front; the Friday mosque; the interiors of the mausoleum of Abraham descendant, the prophet Keydar at Ostan-e Zanzan (Ill. 2). These include Sayed Alaeddin Hussein mosque and unique monument Shah Cheragh (Blue or Mirrored mosque) (Ill. 3–4), Ali Ibn Hamzeh mausoleum in Shiraz (Ill. 5–6). Some names give an idea about the colour range of the interior of these complexes with dominant silver white, greenish and blue colour.

In addition, the Shahs of Iran left the mirrored traces on the territories neighbouring Persia. One example is the building of Tbilisi state academy of art named after A. Kutateladze. In 2019, upon completion of large scale restoration works of 2015–2018, this monument of cultural heritage received the label of national importance. This building was constructed in the eighteen-fifties by the member of Iran Shah family. It has decorated mirror halls which are unique monuments created by Persian masters<sup>13</sup>.

In general, it should be noted that mirror interiors of palaces, mosques and holy places of Iran are not only extremely picturesque and recognised on the background of contemporary design of the world. Today, they receive the nature of particularly expressive brand of this state which is traditional and innovative at the same time. Indeed, they transform the impression of the exclusively conservative and non-hedonistic sacral traditions of the Muslim world.

### **3. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS**

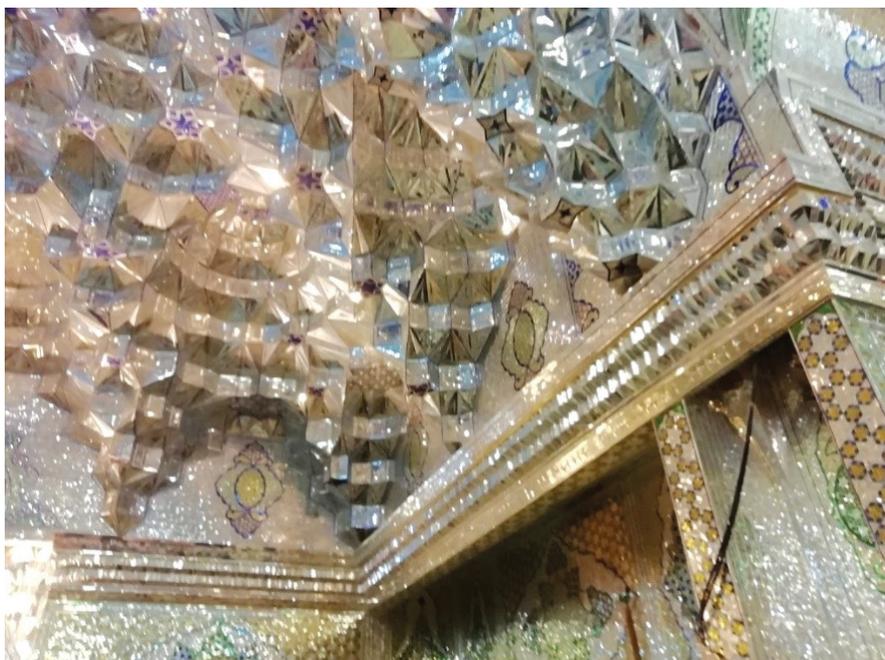
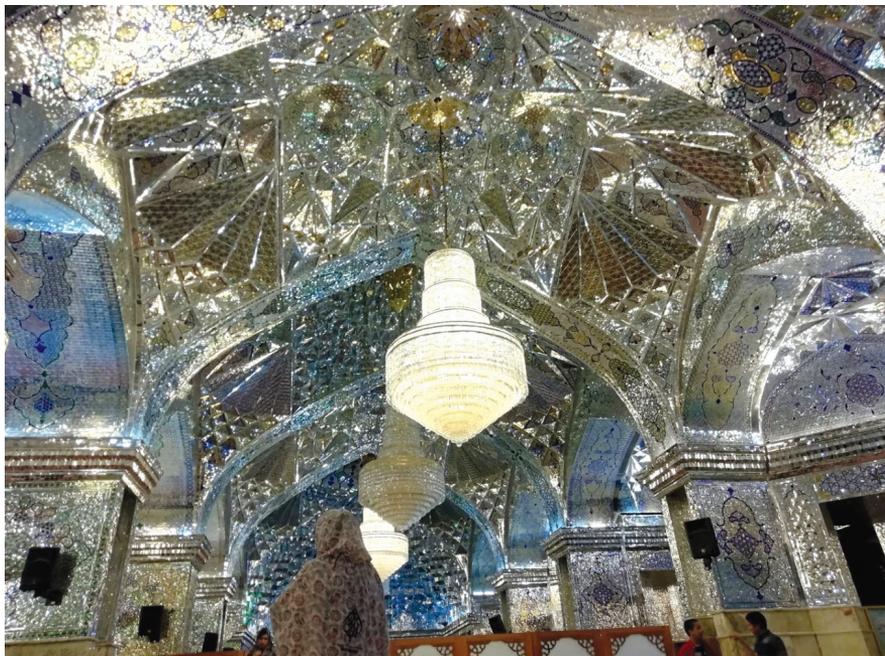
The general conclusion suggests that the tradition of such interiors which was especially popular in Persia since the nineteenth century, is alive and actively developing at the present time. Moreover, the certain unity in style and aesthetics of early prototypes and contemporary solutions should be noted because they follow the developments of the Qadjar epoch, mainly of the legendary Nasreddin Shah, with regard to construction and the peculiarities of images. In line with this, the mosques and holy places with more modest decoration have mirrored elements in women's and men's praying parts. The alcove is built inside such premises; it is often decorated with the application of friezes with glass flowers and small mukarnases.



Ill. 1. Mirrored interior of the Golestan Shah palace in Tehran (photo by O. Shkolna)



Ill. 2. Interior of Keydar mausoleum in Ostan-e Zanjan (photo by O. Shkolna)



III. 3-4. Interior and stalactite vaults of Mirrored Mosque in Shiraz (photo by O. Shkolna)



III. 5–6. Interior and mukarnases of Ali Ibn Hamzeh in Shiraz (photo by O. Shkolna)

## PRZYPISY

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- <sup>2</sup> *Memorial Colam Hossein. Familiarity with the architecture of residential buildings of a closed type*, 2nd ed., Publishing House of the University of Science and Technology of Iran, Tehran 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> T.P. Kaptereva, N.A. Vinogradova, op. cit.
- <sup>4</sup> O. Shkolna, *Moroccan Riads in the context of the development of modern tourism in Ukraine*, Problems of Arts and Culture. International Scientific Journal, 1(67)/2019, pp. 49–61.
- <sup>5</sup> *Lovely heart of things. Embroidery techniques*, part 4: *Asian embroidery 'shisha'*, <http://irinapetrenko.blogspot.com/2013/05/4.html> (access: 2.04.2019).
- <sup>6</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>7</sup> *Amazing mosque in Iran*, <http://puteshuli.ru/post/udivitel'naya-mechet-v-irane-turisty-v-vostorge/> (access: 2.04.2019).
- <sup>8</sup> *Lovely heart of things...*, op. cit.
- <sup>9</sup> *Amazing mosque in Iran*, op. cit.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>11</sup> F. Mirrazavi, *Golestan Palace*, [http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Golestan\\_Palace\\_2.htm](http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Golestan_Palace_2.htm) (access: 2.04.2019).
- <sup>12</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>13</sup> *The building of the Tbilisi Academy of Arts is recognized as a national monument*, <https://www.newsgeorgia.ge/zdanie-tbilisskoj-akademii-hudozhestv-priznano-pamyatnikom> (access: 2.04.2019).

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