

## **A Revision of Forms and Concepts in the Representation of Figural Motifs in Imam Reza's Shrine in the Safavid Era with an Emphasis on the Allahverdi Khan Dome Portico**

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### **Introduction**

The Holy Shrine of Razavi is one of the most important religious places in the world of Shia and a unique combination of architects and artisans from different periods of Iranian art. Islamic art has always been in conflict with the figural representation, especially in the realm of religious arts. This research aims to investigate the reason for the presence of figural representation in the tile decorations in the threshold of Razavi's holy shrine, especially the image of more than 450 painted animals on the portico of Allahverdi Khan dome in the Safavid era, despite the legal prohibitions found in jurisprudence books and viewpoints.

### **Research Method**

This paper has adopted a descriptive-analytical method. It has been carried out through library study and field observations along with historical studies in a comparative way. The findings have been examined and analyzed. Statistical domain in this study includes all 486 figural motifs represented in the tiles of the Allahverdi Khan Dome portico, and the figures of five selected Manuscripts of Aja'ib al-Makhluqat and Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat, a book by Mohammad Zakaria Qazvini that was illustrated in the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries AH. such as Princeton university library Manuscript written on 865 AD, Chester Beatty's Dublin Library Manuscript written on 952 AD, the Manuscript in Cambridge University Library written on 974 A.H., the Library Manuscript of Manchester University written on 1040 A.H., and the Manuscript of Harvard University written on 1055 A.H.

### **Research Findings**

The figural motifs representation on the portico tiles of Allahverdi Khan Dome was not similar to any animal decorations of other religious buildings in terms of the number and variety of motifs. The juxtaposition of mythological creatures such as dragons and Simorgh with birds such as peacocks, parrots, and pheasants, which cannot apparently be compared with religious concepts, indicated the need for further investigation to discover the possible reasons of their occurrence. The studies carried out on the jurisprudential views and opinions of powerful and influential scholars of

the Safavid era, such as Mohaghegh Karki and Sheikh Baha'i, indicated that they emphasized the abhorrence of decorating the place of pray (Allahverdi Khan Dome porch as a building adjacent to Hazrat Reza's tomb was the place to pray) with plant motifs, being another figural motif forbidden for representation. The significant difference in the number of animal images and motifs in the decoration of the portico, compared with other buildings of the holy shrine, indicated the lack of prevalence of such subjects in the decoration of religious buildings of the Safavid era. Due to the numerous visual and content commonalities, among these images and the illustrations of different versions of *Aja'ib al-Makhluqat and Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat*, it seemed that the selection and the use of these images and motifs were formed in a completely conscious manner. Zakariya Qazvini is a Shia historian and geographer who visited Ibn Arabi and was influenced by his belief of unity of existence. The late Agha Bozorg Tehrani considered him Shia in his book, *Al-Zariya*. The book of *Aja'ib al-Makhluqat and Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat* is known as an educational and encyclopedic text about creation and various creatures. The most important purpose of its writing could be the attention it could draw from the audience towards the essence of God. Another point is, Allahverdi Khan's devotion to Mulla Sadra, who himself was one of the philosophers believing in the unity of existence. The association of the previous topics with Christianity and iconographic thought of Allahverdi Khan, as a new Muslim with Armenian background, along with the differences in the implications of the inscriptions written on the tiles of the portico of Allahverdi Khan's dome remind one of its functional similarity with the religious icons in the church. In comparison with other religious buildings and even the adjacent porticoes in The Holy Shrine, this building has a different content and is education-oriented.

### **Conclusion**

Among all the religious buildings of the Safavid era, including mosques, imamzadehs, monasteries, and tombs, there are few buildings that can be compared with the Allahverdi Khan portico in terms of the amount of use of figural motifs. According to existing similarity and the religious position of Razavi Holy Shrine and buildings in the religious beliefs of the Shias in the Safavid era, it seems that architects and others involved in the construction and decoration of the Allahverdi Khan portico have made a conscious effort with the aim of the mitigation of the possible objections of religious men and ordinary people to the figural motifs represented on the building. To gain the satisfaction of Allahverdi Khan, as the founder and orderer of the portico, they used images from the characters and images in books such as *Aja'ib al-Makhluqat va Ghareeb Al-Mawatyat*.

**Keywords:** decorations of Islamic architecture, figural representational motifs, Allah Vardi Khan, Aja'ib al-Makhluqat & Ghara'ib al-Mawjudat, Imam Reza's shrine.