

An Explication of the Artistic and Technical Features of Iranian Woodcarving in the 7th and 8th Centuries AH

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Introduction

In the 7th century AH, Iran faced profound cultural and economic upheavals following the devastating Mongol invasions. However, the emergence of the Ilkhanid dynasty, along with its policy of religious tolerance, especially the conversion of Ghazan Khan to Islam, laid the groundwork for a significant revival of Iranian culture and arts. Within this context, religiously affiliated arts, particularly wooden crafts such as pulpits, Qur'an stands (Rahl), cenotaphs, and wooden doors, were revitalized as both spiritual expressions and cultural symbols. Among these, woodcarving (Monabbat) emerged as one of the most prominent branches of sacred wooden art, rooted in religious and spiritual traditions. Surviving examples across Iran attest to the widespread influence of this craft during the Ilkhanid era. While the 7th century marked its foundation, stylistic continuity into the late 8th century AH has led scholars to refer to these developments as the Ilkhanid style. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the aesthetic and technical characteristics of Ilkhanid woodcarving in both centuries, focusing on this question: what are the visual and technical hallmarks of this period's woodwork? Despite previous case-specific studies, this study offers a comprehensive characterization of woodcarving from these centuries, which remains necessary to assist in proper identification and stylistic recognition.

Research Method

This research is fundamental in nature and employs a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were collected through both library and field studies. The statistical population was defined via complete enumeration and includes fifteen preserved wooden artifacts dating to the 7th and 8th centuries AH. These comprise: the door of Bala-Sar Mosque; the Qazi al-Hajat door (735 AH); a door from the Central Museum of Astan Quds Razavi in Mashhad; the tomb door of Sheikh Qutb al-Din Haydar in Torbat Heydariyeh; the cenotaph of Imamzadeh Mahruq in Nishapur (736 AH); the pulpit of Nain Jameh Mosque (711 AH); the door of Yazd Jameh Mosque; the pulpit of Suryan Mosque in Bavanat (preserved in the National Museum, 771 AH); a Qur'an stand in the Metropolitan Museum (761 AH); the cenotaph of Sha'yaNabi in Isfahan; pulpits from the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan, Arangeh village (704 AH), and Jovin-e-Sorkheh (727 AH); the cenotaphs of Saruq and Sahl ibn Ali in Arak; and the main wooden door of Sheikh Jam complex in Torbat Jam (733 AH). After an overview of Ilkhanid history and their contributions to the arts, these works, including five doors, four cenotaphs, five pulpits, and one Qur'an stand, were examined to extract stylistic and technical features of their woodcarving.

Research Findings

The findings reveal a set of visual and technical characteristics that define the identity of woodcarving in this era. The use of geometric knots, often softened with arabesque (islīmi) or natural plant motifs, played a central role. These combinations reduced the rigidity of earlier geometric patterns and are comparable to early illuminated Ilkhanid Qur'ans. Twisting, intricate arabesques

sometimes appearing as button-like central motifs, became prominent. Such designs can be seen on the cenotaph of Imamzadeh Mahruq, the Bala-Sar Mosque door, and the pulpit of Isfahan's Jameh Mosque. Calligraphy in this era was typically executed in bold relief using three scripts—Riqā', Thuluth, and Naskh—which adorned the wood with Qur'anic verses, prayers, and inscriptions. In early 8th-century AH examples, arabesques took on abstract and multi-dimensional forms, resembling elements such as human skulls, flowers, and trees. These highly creative designs are exemplified in the pulpit of Nain's Jameh Mosque. As time progressed, plant-based motifs became more dominant, culminating in dense leafy patterns that would later mature during the 9th century AH. These motifs were applied both in central compositions and borders, frequently in beveled (sloped) relief. Early 8th-century carvings with convex and abstract arabesques gradually gave way to floral and vegetal designs with dancing stems and stylized blossoms, a shift likely influenced by the presence of Chinese artists at the Ilkhanid court. Another contributing factor was the rise of Sufism, which provided space for Shia artists to create works for shrines and tombs. These works often included motifs such as cypress trees, the tree of life, and inscriptions referencing famous mystics and dervishes. A notable example is the door of the tomb of Sheikh Qutb al-Din Haydar in Torbat Heydariyeh. Additionally, ancient Iranian elements, such as rows of lilies echoing Achaemenid and Sasanian motifs, were integrated into new compositions, as seen in the pulpit of Nain's Jameh Mosque.

Conclusion

The woodcarving of the 7th and 8th centuries AH in Iran represents a stage of consolidation and refinement. While rooted in earlier traditions, it developed distinct technical and visual attributes that laid the foundation for the golden age of Iranian woodcraft during the Timurid and Safavid periods. The convergence of mystical philosophy, foreign influences (notably Chinese), and the evolving creativity of Iranian artisans fostered the emergence of symbolic iconography, symmetrical compositions, and sophisticated relief techniques. The frequent use of calligraphy in Riqā', Thuluth, and Naskh scripts, as well as softened geometric structures with arabesque flourishes, created a richly spiritual aesthetic. Floral and plant motifs, including delicate button-like arabesques and convex carvings, conveyed both visual beauty and symbolic meaning. Motifs like the cypress and lamp possibly reflected Sufi symbolism, while certain elements clearly drew inspiration from pre-Islamic Iran. The widespread adoption of beveled carving and semi-gilded textures also marked a technical advancement. From the mid-8th century AH onward, plant-based designs proliferated, leading to the stylistic maturity that would characterize Iranian woodcarving (Monabbat) in subsequent centuries.

Keywords: Woodcarving, Ilkhanid era, Wooden cenotaph, Wooden pulpit, Wooden Qur'an stand, Wooden door.