

An Analysis of Formal and Decorative Features of Henna-Ceremony Footstool in the Qajar and Pahlavi Eras in Iran

Mehdi Arjmand Inaloo

Assistant Professor, Department of Arts, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran/
Mehdi.arjmand@saadi.shirazu.ac.ir

Received: 17/05/2025

Accepted: 11/07/2025

Introduction

The use of henna has been widespread among Iranians. This ritual has had diverse functions, including cosmetic, medicinal, and religious ones. The use of henna is manifested through its own specific rituals and objects. It appears that across the vast geography and ethnic diversity of Iran, these objects and rituals exhibit differences. Varied ritual characteristics have undergone changes and evolution in the way henna ceremonies were performed. Corresponding to these changes, the tools and equipment used have also transformed. In most regions of Iran, these objects are fabrics with unique decorations, especially prepared for each celebration. Another item used in these ceremonies is the henna-ceremony footstool. The henna ceremony footstool is an ornate bench used in henna ceremonies, placed under the feet. As one sits on a chair or stool, he/she places the soles of both feet on the concave arches designed as a footstool.

Materials and Methods

Henna ceremony footstools show little variation in the overall form and function. Their primary differences lie in the materials used and decorative patterns. In all texts reviewed by the author, only stone footstools were mentioned, implying a lack of awareness of the other types made from different materials. Given that stone, wood, and metal footstools existed in the Qajar period and the sources and knowledge about these objects were limited, research in this area is essential. Both the Qajar and, to some extent, the contemporary specimens of these objects are available for study in terms of the number and the quality of decorative patterns. Furthermore, these objects are deeply connected to the realm of popular culture. The present research, aiming to identify, classify, and analyze the formal and decorative features of these objects in the Qajar and Pahlavi periods, deployed a descriptive-analytic method with a developmental approach.

Numerous specimens of henna ceremony footstools were found in anthropological museums and private collections. Since the customs related to henna ceremonies in Iran were fading, the use of these objects has also become limited. Collecting the images of these footstools required extensive field research across the vast geography of Iran. Accordingly, the statistical population of this research included all henna ceremony footstools produced in Iran. The statistical sample, selected purposively based on accessibility, included all artifacts (or their documented images and sources) belonging to the Qajar and the early Pahlavi eras, which were extracted from anthropological museums and private collectors in ten locations across Iran (provinces of Fars, Yazd, Kerman, Isfahan, Lorestan, Arak, Tehran, and Mazandaran).

Within the framework of its documented findings regarding the triple interaction of raw material type, socio-economic variables, and popular culture in the formation of henna ceremony footstools, this research investigated the following central question: how could the key factors affecting the artistic quality and decorative features of henna ceremony footstools (stone, metal, wood) be explained within the framework of the interaction of these three materials?

Results and Findings

Based on the research findings, from a quantitative perspective, the highest frequency in the studied dataset belonged to stone samples. This finding, consistent with the evidence documented in

historical texts and contemporary research, indicated the prominent position of stone as the primary material in the production of these artifacts. Metal samples, primarily made of copper, ranked second in frequency. Although the use of these samples in humid environments like bathhouses presented limitations, the significant number of surviving metal artifacts from the Qajar era indicated their continued use during specific time frames. In contrast, wooden samples had the smallest share in the studied collection.

The patterns used on henna ceremony footstools were executed at three different levels, depending on the material:

1. **Stone Henna Footstool:** Limited, geometric decorations.
2. **Copper Henna Footstool:** Numerous decorations, medium production quality.
3. **Wooden Henna Board:** Numerous decorations, high-quality production. These artifacts were primarily made from local marble at low cost. The simple, unsigned construction method, along with inattention to non-visible surfaces, suggested mass production and pure functionality. Evidence, including oral histories, raised the possibility of their production by non-specialists (such as housewives). The consistent design of these stones over time indicated the priority of popular ritual function over artistic aspects, presenting them as the evidence of ritual practices and perhaps a reflection of social hierarchy. In contrast, copper footstools from regions with copper mines exhibited greater decorative diversity, adorned with busy and local engravings (likely influenced by popular taste in regions like Kerman or Yazd). These artifacts were more expensive and probably targeted a middle-class clientele. The most distinctive samples were the wooden henna boards with delicate marquetry, influenced by the Abadeh marquetry traditions and Gol-o-Morgh (flower and bird) paintings. Their delicacy and use of high-quality wood indicated production for an affluent consumer market in the late Qajar period. Although historical samples were rare, the limited production of these boards in the north of Fars province continued as part of dowries, demonstrating their functional flexibility and symbolic traditional identity in contemporary ceremonies. Overall, these objects carry the socio-cultural weight of their period and had largely lost their primary function in contemporary era.

Conclusion

The results of this research have shown that henna ceremony footstools are not mere ritual tools, but they are the cultural documents of the interaction between popular arts, social classes, and the geographical environment in Iran. These objects were identified based on raw materials into three groups: stone, wood, and metal, each of which reflected the economic conditions, aesthetic taste, and the technical skills of their makers. While stone samples signified simplicity and functionality among the general public, wooden and metal samples reflected artistic skills as well as a tendency toward more refined decorations. From a semiotic perspective, the floral, animal, and human motifs used in these works conveyed meanings such as fertility, purity, auspiciousness, and the protection of the bride against the evil eye—concepts rooted in feminine beliefs and rites of passage to marriage. The continued production of wooden samples in Abadeh also indicated the dynamism of material culture and the continuity of indigenous traditions within contemporary society. Accordingly, henna ceremony footstools can be considered a 'cultural medium' in which popular arts, social rituals, and ritual symbolism are interwoven. Continued ethnographic and laboratory studies regarding the origin of raw materials and the symbolic meanings of their motifs can lead to a deeper understanding of the place of women's ritual arts in Iranian culture.

Keywords: popular culture, henna, traditional arts, handicrafts, henna ceremony footstool.