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A Comparative Study of the Altar Design Content of the Jame Mosque and the Vank Church of Isfahan

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the design of the altars of the Jame mosque and the Vank church of Isfahan and explicate the similarities and differences of the two structures. The present comparative study shows that the aesthetic expression and visual art are different in the Islamic and Christian art. This means that the Islamic art lays more emphasis on isolated elements rather than tangible elements and the reality. This arises from the beliefs and Islamic teachings based on reluctance to iconography. In contrast, the creation of art is objective in the Christian art. On the other hand, both religions, despite their differences, have mysterious formal expressions in their manifestation. In this study, in addition to document collection for the written source, field survey, personal observation and photography of the mentioned altars have been conducted. The study results and comparison of the altars showed that religious beliefs have a significant role in the altar of the Jame mosque and Vank church of Isfahan. The Islamic art in comparison to Christian art has led to abstraction and avoidance from any portraits and iconography, while in Christianity, imaging and visual art are organized based on incarnation of God. Thus, expression and excellence in the Islamic art is the replacement of embodiment and reincarnation in its Christian counterpart.

Keywords: Altar; Jame Mosque of Isfahan; Vank Church of Isfahan

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1. Introduction

The architecture structure of church and mosque has its own unique psychology, each of which having explanation and justification of humanity-religion for the followers of the school. The altar is one common space between the two locations. A comparison and evaluation review of the similarities and differences of the architectural element in two religions (i.e., Islam and Christianity) clarifies the importance of divine religion in believers' education. Altar as the heart of mosques and churches has a special concern to the designers and builders of these structures during the design and construction process. Generally, the altar is not an independent space but rather it is sign and direction. That means the purpose and direction of human is the same. In this study, a comparison has been made between the altar decoration and the similarities and differences of the Jame mosque and the Vank church of Isfahan.

2. Research Methodology

This study is conducted using a descriptive-analytic method, by which the content of the altars of Jame mosque and Vank church are compared. The sample populations are the altar motifs of the Jame mosque and Vank church of Isfahan. The data analysis method is qualitative based on the arabesque recognition, decorative molding of the mosque altar and painting decoration on the altar of the church. The analysis aims to compare the altar design content of mosque and church. The difference of this study with previous research is that the researcher has made an attempt to implement the comparative content between the altar motifs of the Jame mosque and the Vank church of Isfahan. The similarities and difference have been examined in terms of the concept of altar of mosque and church.

3. Review on Altar Decoration and Motifs of Isfahan Mosque

In a few references, the number of the altars of the Jame mosque is nine, while 14 altars are actually seen. The fact that the altars have survived provides useful information for the researchers (Shateri, 2013: 69). The 14 visible altars of Jame mosque are located in south, east and west, while there is no altar on the north side of the mosque, which is justified based on the location and application of this side (aligned with Mecca) (Hatem, 2000: 19). In other words, it indicates the non-religious function, which pertains to the ritualistic ceremonies, justifying the absence of altar on this side. Among these three sides, most of the altars are located on the south and some to the west side of the mosque. Different materials and numerous decoration methods are implemented to construct the altar of mosque. In total, six altars are made of tiles, five altars with stone and three altars are made of plaster. However, in construction of some altars such as the one under the dome of Nizam-al-Mulk, there is the combination of tile and stone; because most of the space of the altar is occupied by tile, the altar has been changed into a tile altar. It should be noted that the main altar was made of brick during the Seljukid era about 1000 years ago when Malikshah of Seljuk ruled the city. The adjacent yard altar of Nizam-al-Mulk has also been classified as a stone altar and was decorated with small pieces of mosaic (Shateri, 2013: 70).

4. Vank Church Altar and Motifs

The altars of the church are located on the eastern side on a raised platform as compared to the rest of the building, with a rectangular chamber on both sides. Under the altar there is the tomb of the church founder (David Caliph) and the father of Iran's printing industry (Khachator Gesaratsi

Caliph) (Houspian, 2007: 74). All positions are toward the altar and the main entrance opens in the altar. Location of the altar is to the east side related to the belief that Christ will appear from the east. In fact, altar is the turning point and target pathways in the church. Altar as a platform to maintain its privacy is separated by five steps on either side. The altar has an arched ceiling with basement where the two mentioned religious leader's tomb are built and because of this reason it is a holy altar. To pay tribute to these two great people, they are buried under the altar. The altar elements include cross, candlesticks, holy book (the Bible) and curtain. Two rooms on either side of the altar are particularly for the priest to organize events (Memarian, 2008: 165).

In the church altar, large 3 x 5 meter posters are installed on firm stone slate. The oil painting poster on the canvas is related to the first half of the 17th century. The poster theme is the ascent of Jesus Christ. The painting has a golden decorative border (Ghazariyan, 2014: 178). The colors used are purple, cobalt blue, red, orange, yellow, green and brown. The yellow and gold color depicts the sanctity around the head of Jesus Christ. In this painting, Christ is riding on a dense bright red cloud for infinite heavenly fly. The inscriptions on the two sides of the altar are the photos of Apostles painted on the golden background and there is no symmetry on the two sides of the poster. Around the altar, golden plaster work projection with blue background is observed. This is Iranian style molding considered as a decorative technique during the Safavid era. This molding includes arabesque and plant design (Nazariyan, 2014: 136).

5. Altar Similarities and Differences of the Jame Mosque and the Vank Church of Isfahan

Inscription: Quranic inscription and holy names are seen on the altar wall of the Jame mosque, but there are no Quranic inscription seen in the altar of Vank church. Fig 1 shows the examples of inscriptions. The inscriptions in the altar of the Jame mosque of Isfahan represent the importance of Quran and its influence in the life of people. Often, these inscriptions are linked with arabesque patterns. The presence of a variety of Kufic and Sols calligraphy and the floral and greenery decoration with a variety of colors, as well as the geometric patterns all indicate the plant of life twisted to the trunk of reality.

Iconography: In the altar of the Vank church, human motifs are used such as the face of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, Jacob, Prophet Yunes, angels, the Holy spirit. (fig 2). However, in the altar of the Jame mosque of Isfahan there are no traces of human paintings, which are considered sinful on the walls of the mosques in Islam. From the very beginning, Islam, with the exclusion of paintings of living creatures especially human figures, gave ways for a variety of performing art and creating new decorations (Avini, 1991: 901). In fact, one of the unique features of the Islamic art is prohibition of the depiction of human and animals. One of the most important Islamic principles is rejection of any imaging and sculpture on monotheism. The first consequence of rejecting the imagery is the forbidden of idolatry (Fuladvand, 2008: 896-897).

Calligraphy: The art of calligraphy has been used in the altar of the Jame mosque but there are no work of calligraphy in the Vank church. In Islam, the art of calligraphy is sacred; in the Christian art, iconography has the same status. In Islam, calligraphy depicts the visible object of words of God, but in Christianity the divine truth is embodied based on the principle of incarnation of Jesus Christ seen as the complete man. In fact, calligraphy is an integral component of Islamic Iranian architecture and the differentiation factor is from the Cathedral architecture.

Amongst the Islamic arts, calligraphy has the closest relationship with the word of God and noblest visual art in Islam. This art has a natural propinquity with the spiritual reality of Islam; that is why calligraphy is used for decorating altars.

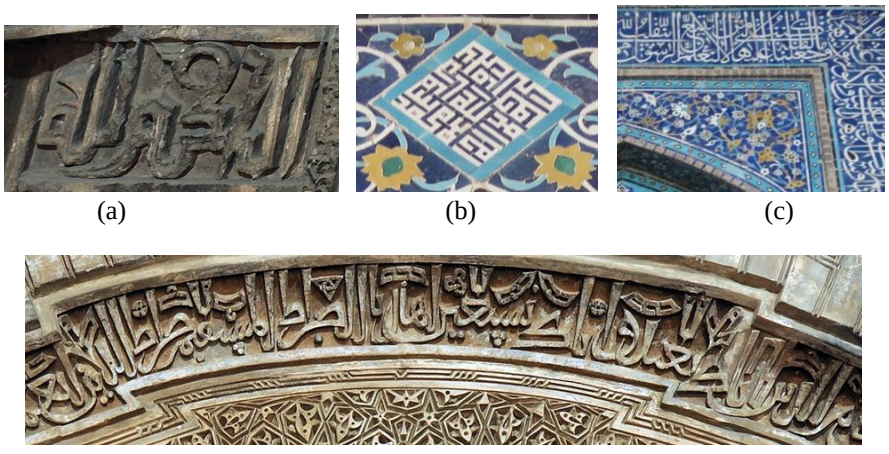


Fig 1 Inscriptions in the altar of Uljayto in the Jame mosque of Isfahan



Fig 2 Iconography in the altar of Vank church (source: www.tebyan.net)

In Christianity, the art of iconography has a relation with Christianity and hence in churches only iconography is allowed (Vaseei, 2012: 15). Inscription in the altar of the Jame mosque plays the same role as the iconography in the Vank church altar. In the altar of the Jame mosque, there is abundant use of Kufic, Mohaghegh (preliminary Naskh), Banaee and Sols calligraphy. The Kufic calligraphy is compatible with any material such as stone, plaster, brick and tile, giving satisfactory results that can be seen in the altar of the Jame mosque (fig 2a). In the Banaee calligraphy, which is also known as Moaghali calligraphy, both black and white can be read that means the black calligraphy is read as something and the white as something else. This is the art of Banaee calligraphy (Madadpour, 2008: 135). This calligraphy line includes sacred words like Allah, Mohammad (pbuh) and Ali (pbuh) and covers shapes such as squares and other geometric shapes, for example the altar of Ostad porch in the Jame mosque of Isfahan (fig 2b). The implemented Sols calligraphy has curve lines; according to the rules and regulation, it is the most difficult, complete and beautiful calligraphy in Islam created via repeated vertical and large hammed letters and induced great glory (Vaseei, 2012: 15) (fig 2c). The Mohaghegh calligraphy has been the most popular calligraphy over four centuries among the calligraphers of Quran in the entire east Islamic region. The effect of Iranian talent in this calligraphy is obvious. The Mohaghegh calligraphy is magnificent, and large letters with regular spacing can be observed, uniform and simple (fig 2d).



(a) (b) (c)

(d)

Fig 3 a) View of the east corridor altar of the Jame mosque of Isfahan with Kufi calligraphy. b) View of Ostad porch altar of Banaee calligraphy. c) View of dome house Nizam-al-Mulk altar with Sols calligraphy. d) View of eastern corridor altar of the Jame mosque with Mohaghegh calligraphy.

Decorative motifs: The decoration of the altar of the Isfahan Jame mosque includes brickwork, molding, tiling and carving; however, in the altar in the Vank church, the major part of decorations painted is on plaster and oil paint and there is no use of carvings, brickwork and molding. But around the plinth of the Vank church altar like the altar of the Jame mosque of Isfahan, tile work decoration has been used both related to the Safavid period and in both places seven colored tiles are used. On the tiles, there are repetitive patterns of leaves and floral and similar colors in both such as yellow, white, blue and green; however, a lot of differences also exist in both tiling such as the Vank church altar tile motifs of angels dressed in long skirts with bouquet of flower in their hands. In none of the tile motifs of the Jame mosque altar, images of angels and humans are seen; instead, Quranic verses with white color written on blue background and more turquoise clay tile, Persian blue and turquoise mosaic in "Sun" design framework, torpedoes' mouth arabesque and elephant trunk are used. The dominant color seen in the tile work altar of the Jame mosque is Persian blue and turquoise blue.

In Islam, one way to decorate the altar is painting; due to the sanctity of altar, the colors used in this regard are selective. In the Hadiths of the Prophet some colors such as green and white are glorified whereas the black color is disapproved. The blue color has been abundantly applied in the tiles of the altar of the Jame mosque and depicts wide clear sky and sign of peace and innocence. Blue means faith and refers to the infinite space and spirit. For eastern people, blue is a symbol of immortality. The ancient people regarded turquoise blue as sacred. According to them, the turquoise color increases the eye vision, eliminates infertility, enhances self-esteem and has a role in overcoming the darkness (Sajjad, 1993: 230). Besides the stunning colorful decoration work, the Iranian designers were well-known for the value of white color. In the majority of the altars of the Jame mosque, white color has a good influence in the work, which also increased due to its neighboring blue color. The other difference in the design of the two building is the use of geometric design, mathematical shapes and images such as circles, hexagon and triangles in some altars of the Jame mosque (e.g., Ostad porch). Yet in the Vank church altar, there is no work of geometric shapes. Due to this reason, Muslim artists have used geometric art that is a replacement for the banned human and animal images. The abstract geometric shape is used in some altars of the Jame mosque of Isfahan and has encouraged Muslims to spiritual thinking, while such images in the altar of the Vank church lead more attention to the existing incentives rather than the God willingness. Therefore, geometry became the basic fundamental component of Muslim art which allowed artists to freely use their imagination and creativity (fig 4 a-d, tiled motifs of altar of the Vank church and the Jame mosque shows the differences).

As previously stated, another difference in the decoration of these two structures is carving. In the Jame mosque of Isfahan, exquisite marbles are used (e.g., the altar of the Nizam-al-Mulk dome, the altar of both side entrances of the Nizam-al-Mulk dome, and the altar of the Shagerd porch). In some stone altars, the carved decoration in the central part is composed of a large plant pot with abstract elements of the plants elevated as bergamot. This decoration is a symbol of Tuba tree. Another striking difference noted in the two structures is elaborately decorated molding altar of the Isfahan Jame mosque that has used crowded arabesque patterns and the base with geometric motif, floral motif, snail-shaped leaves and Quran verses, while in the Vank church altar, there are no traces of molding.

The molding includes arabesque and plant motifs along with beautiful Quran inscriptions. The stucco façade is one of the main elements of Iranian architecture arrangement that has been used in altar of the Jame mosque with the highest level of innovation, for example in the Uljayto altar or the east side altar.

Mogharnas is one of the beautiful decorative Islamic arts used in Omar platform altar in the Jame mosque. However, in the altar of the Vank church inspired by Christian art, Mogharnas has no role. Mogharnas is one of the decorative elements of Islamic architecture that plays an important role in aesthetics of Iranian buildings especially mosques (Fuladvand, 2008: 402). The colors used in the altar of the Jame mosque of Isfahan are cool and bright (blue, turquoise, white, etc.). But colors used for the altar of the Vank church are hot and warm colors (red, yellow, black, etc.), and turquoise, blue or white colors are rarely seen. Lots of gold work is used in the altar of the Vank church but it is absent in the altar of Jame mosque. Table 1 shows the summary of the structures of the two altars been compared.



(a) (b) (c) (d)

Fig 4 a) Plinth tiled motif of the Vank church altar (angel motif, floral with white background) (source: www.goodreads.com). b) Tiled motifs altar of Nizam-al-Mulk of the Jame mosque (composed of mosaic, Quran verses, plant motifs and arabesques). c) Tiled motif altar of the Ostad porch of the Jame mosque (composed of torpedoes' mouth arabesque motif, and elephant trunk in the mosaic mold, geometric design, Sun, Quran verses). d) Northern corridor tiled altar of eastern porch of the Jame mosque (composed of six petal mosaics).

Table 1 Comparison of the altar of the Vank church and the Jame mosque of Isfahan

Comparison	**Altar of Vank church**	**Altar of Jame mosque Isfahan**
1. Construction time	Safavid	Safavid, Teymuri-Patriarch
2. Implementation technique	Painting on plaster and canvas, gilding, polychrome tiles	Brickwork, molding, carving, inscription, mogharnas, polychrome tiles, mosaic
3. Decorative elements	Iconography, plant and arabesques motifs	Calligraphy, Quranic verses, holy names, geometric patterns, plants and arabesques motifs. Tuba tree, sun pattern, bergamot
4. Colors	Dark and light blue, Persian blue, red, yellow, gold, pink, green, purple and brown	Persian blue, turquoise, white, yellow and green
5. Language entries	Armenian	Arabic, Persian

6. Discussion and Conclusion

As the largest base for artwork, Islam and Christian religions have offered a particular purpose to religious art. The evaluation of similarities and differences of the altars of the Jame mosque and the Vank church of Isfahan and the applied art in these altars clarifies the fact about the impact of spiritual beliefs, religious teachings and artistic motivations. It is clear from the comparative study conducted on the altar of the two structures that aesthetic expression and visual art are different in Islamic and Christian art. In Islamic art, emphasis is on isolated elements more than tangible elements and reality that arose from the beliefs and Islamic teachings based on reluctance to iconography. In Christian art, the creation of art has an objective dimension. Hundreds of years

have passed since the construction of the Isfahan Jame mosque; the most important development project was in the Aleboyeh period and then in the Safavid period. The Vank church was built in the Safavid period. Since both structures were built in the same period, it could be the reason for the similarities and differences, which can serve as a factor for the comparison of these two religious structures. The church altar symbolizes the presence of God and recalls the sacrifice of Jesus; the steps symbolize the divine and spiritual climbing toward Jesus. The altar is located toward the south, while the churche altar is located on the east and this is derived from the Christian faith. In the mosques, most of the decorative motifs are based on plants. The decorating style used in the altar of the Jame mosque is tile work, moldings, carvings, inscriptions and calligraphy as Arabic text. The colors in these places are blue and turquoise blue. These colors, especially turquoise blue are eye-catching and a symbol for heavenly peace and spiritual space for the Muslims. These spaces and colors provide more comfort to the people. In the mosque's decoration, special rule exists and the western style is anti-religious ornament that is not allowed.

It can be concluded that the common religious art is the symbolic aspect. The symbolic language is the language of religious art that expresses the inner concept. Concepts that are not expressible can be conveyed through a symbolic format. The Islamic and Christian art uses a symbolic language to express such concepts. Symbols used in each of these two arts are different according to their beliefs. Quran and other holy books like the olden and present time express the spiritual truths spoken in secret languages. By comparing the altar of the Vank church with human images and icons used in the altar of the Jame mosque, one can judge that the Jame mosque gives the presence of heart to the human.

Similarities of the altar of these two structures is the presence of holy signs; in the altar of the Jame mosque are Quran verses and holy names, while the altar of the Vank church are murals with themes of Jesus Christ. Using polychrome tiles is another similarity. The tiling method is same for both structures because both belong to the Safavid period. The type of icon (i.e., human or animal) and yellow color tone on the altar of the Vank church leads to the tiling difference between the two structures. One more difference is the use of colors in both structures; the Vank church has hot and warm colors while the Jame mosque has cool and bright colors. The blue color, because of peace and silence, has a special application in the murals of Christian religion and Islamic structure. Blue color displays faith, trust, modesty and resistance. Another difference is the presence of sun in some altars of the Jame mosque which has been considered for years by the artists. In the Islamic art, sun is inspired by the circular design with an arabesque pattern, inscription and geometric design. This icon has a lot of meanings; hence it is known as a symbol of divinity and oneness light.

The obtained results showed that Islamic art in comparison with Christian art has led to abstraction and avoidance from portraits and iconography, while in Christianity visual and sculpture art is organized with bases of incarnation of God. Thus, expression and excellence in Islamic art has been replaced for embodiment and reincarnation in Christian art. Finally, it must be said that despite large differences in both structures, both have spiritual dimensions and their decoration does not reduce the spiritual impacts; indeed, it mostly has a symbolic aspect observed in churches and mosques with its simplicity reaching high mystical and spiritual levels.

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