

An Aesthetic and Conceptual Investigation of Safavid Era Brass Vessel Inscriptions (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Abstract

Traditional art works in different centuries of Iran's history, especially after the advent of Islam, have significantly reflected the ritual-religious views of their artists. This is clearly evident in the art of metalwork, which reached its peak of prosperity during the Safavid period. The use of decorative calligraphic inscriptions, which after Islam (with the emphasis of this religion on reading and writing), was widely used in most of the arts, also in metalwork of the Safavid era, not only for the purpose of decoration, but also for the purpose of expressing two important principals of national identity and the promotion of the Shi'ah belief. The metalwork of this age was formed based on the old traditions of this art, the skill of the metalworkers of this period, and based on the view of the Shia religion among the rulers and society of that day; moreover, it frequently contained the blessed names of the Almighty, verses and chapters of the holy Quran, the blessed names of the Infallible Imams, particularly Hazrat-e Ali (PBUH), the vicinity of the names of those who ordered the works, the name of the creator of the work, the name of the scribe and calligrapher, the date of creation of the work and finally Persian and Arabic poems. It is noteworthy that the content of the calligraphy of the inscription of the work has always been closely related to the function of the container. In this research, the inscriptional illustrations of eight brass vessels with different uses available in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) have been examined aesthetically. The motive for this selection is to identify the decorative elements and concepts of the phrases of these inscriptions and their influence on the religious views of the Safavid period.

Research aims:

١. Examining the calligraphy of inscriptions on Safavid brass vessels in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) concerning their calligraphy and aesthetic principles by the artists of the Safavid period.
٢. Exploring the decorative and conceptual features of the phrases included in the inscriptions of Safavid brass vessels and the influence of the religious views on their content and themes.

Research questions:

۱. What are the decorative aesthetic values, forms and themes of Safavid inscriptional decorations?
۲. What themes and contents do the inscriptions on the Safavid brass vessels in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) contain, and is there a connection between the function and content of the artworks?

Keywords: Aesthetics, calligraphy, inscriptions, brass vessels, Safavid period

Introduction

Since the beginning of the use of metal in the 4th millennium BC, metal objects have always been used as part of the essential equipment of mankind, due to its stability, durability, material resistance, lack of impact and the fact that it is unbreakable. Metalworks are used as a significant evidence to portray scientific, historical and archeological achievements of understand human civilization (Hayder Abadian, Abbasifard, ۲۰۰۹: ۱۰). Metalworking as a crafting art has constantly had a vital place among other art industries since the distant past. Likewise, decoration in Iranian art has also had a unique stance and has undergone many changes and transformations in various branches of arts during various periods of history and reached its peak of perfection and richness during the Islamic era. "One of the characteristics of Islamic decorative art is that a decorative design can be applied on any surface, including metal and provides a fine-looking decorative background that covers the entire surface" (Vaziri: ۱۹۹۴: ۵۶)

Detailing is one of the characteristics of Iranian decorative art; clearly visible in the art of metalwork. In general, the decorative themes of Iran during the Islamic era can be divided into five groups, which include: "herbal motifs, geometric motifs, human motifs, animal motifs, and decoration with calligraphy and inscriptional designs" (Mohammad Hassan: ۱۹۸۹). "The art of metalwork flourished in North-Eastern Iran, Khorasan and beyond the Nile and was able to become more prosperous with the inspiration of other arts such as calligraphy, painting, inlaying and by mixing different styles and applying herbal, animal and human arrays" (Ferasat, ۲۰۰۵: ۶۲). In the intervening time, besides its decorative role, calligraphy manifested the spirit of Islamic art and played an imperative role in expressing the artist's tendencies and feelings. One of the ways to understand Safavid era metalwork, besides the use of decorative elements and motifs, is taking into account its inscriptions and transcripts. As mentioned, apart from the splendor of the inscriptions, their themes include meanings and concepts that reflect the social, religious and cultural conditions of the time they were written, and on the other

hand, represent the creativity of metalworking artists and the emergence of their spiritual purity (Ferasat, ۱۹۹۹: ۷۹).

The use of calligraphy and inscriptional design on metal reached its ultimate during the Safavid period. In this period, the expression of mystical and religious themes using calligraphy on metal became more widely used, the artists and metal workers of the Safavid period were inspired by the two principles of Shiism and nationalism that were prevalent in the society during that period. In this sense, Persian script, especially Nastaliq, was applied as an alternative to the Arabic script (Wilson, ۱۹۹۸: ۷۸).

In the extensive researches that have been carried out on the art of metalworking in the Safavid era. Such researches include comprehensive studies carried out by Malekian Shirvani, as well as the books "Islamic Metalworking Art" written by Shahram Heydar Abadian and Farnaz Abbasi Fard and "Metalworking of the Seljuk and Safavid Periods" written by Mohammad Afrogh. and the articles "Examination of the themes of the calligraphy of candlesticks and lanterns of the Safavid era" written by Maryam Ferasat; "Qur'anic calligraphy in carpet weaving and metalwork of the Safavid period" written by Zahra Shariat, Book of the Month of Art, and "Examination of form, decoration and content in metalwork art of the Seljuq and Safavid periods" written by Alireza Nowrozi Talab and Mohammad Afrogh, Nonetheless, no comprehensive research has been carried out concerning the topic of aesthetical inscriptions on Safavid brass vessels preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This article, accomplished via a documentary and library method, intends to primary identify the historical, cultural and religious contexts of the Safavid period and the metalworks of this era, and then to examine the aesthetics of the inscriptions of nine brass works with various functions preserved at the mentioned museum.

Conclusion

In general, in metal objects of the Safavid period, herbal decorations and inscriptions are the most applied decorative elements and animal, human and geometric motifs are applied at the least. In this period, plant motifs in the form of arabesque, Khatai and vine leaves abundantly form a large part of the decorations of metalwork. According to the popularization of nationalism and revival of Iranian identity by the Safavids, the popular and mostly applied script of that time, the Nastaliq script, was the bride of Iranian scripts, which was in harmony with herbal motifs and Islamic designs, and represents the genius of the metalworking artist in the aesthetics and combination of calligraphy in perfect harmony with decorations. The dishes

are visible and convey the meaning of the word beautifully to the viewer and reader. In this period, the most used metals were brass, steel, and copper, and gold and silver were used in court and decorative cases. The content of the calligraphy of the inscriptions of these works, in terms of the dominance of Shiite thought and national identity, include most of the Shiite religious themes, Quranic verses, hadiths, Salawat-e Kabireh or praise of the Fourteen Infallibles, praise-like sentences, expressions of devotion to the Imams, prayers of Joshan Kabir and Nad-e Ali, as well as verses and Persian poems; also, the applied themes are spiritual, epic and to some extent lyrical. In all cases, the themes used in the line drawings of the inscriptions were related and coordinated with the function of the vessel.

References

Afrogh, Mohammad. (۲۰۱۰). Seljuk and Safavid period metalwork, Tehran: Jamal Hanar Publications. [In Persian].

Connell, Ernest. (۱۹۹۸). Islamic art, translated by Hoshang Taheri, Tehran: Tos Publications. [In Persian].

Demand, Maurice Esson. (۲۰۰۴). Guide to Islamic Industries, translated by Abdullah Faryar, Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications. [In Persian].

Ettinghausen, Richard and Graber, Oleg. (۲۰۰۱). Islamic art and architecture (۱), translated by Yaqub Azhand, Tehran: Samt. [In Persian].

Ehsani, Mohammad Taghi. (۱۹۸۹). Seven thousand years of metalworking art in Iran, Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications. [In Persian].

Enayat, Toufig. (۲۰۰۸). "Elements of Iranian identity and culture in works of Islamic art", Tehran, Kitab Mah Honar, vol. ۱۲۰, pp. ۲۶-۳۹. [In Persian].

Ferasat, Maryam. (۱۹۹۹). "The symbol and representation of the name of Ali (PBUH) in Safavid and Qajar metalwork art", Tehran, Book of the Month of Art, pp. ۸۰-۷۶. [In Persian].

Ferasat, Maryam. (۲۰۰۰). "Investigation of themes of Safavid era candlesticks and lanterns, National Museum", Islamic Art Quarterly, Tehran: Institute of Islamic Art Studies, vol. ۳, pp. ۷۶-۶۱. [In Persian].

Haghighat Rafi, Abdul Rafi. (۱۹۹۰). History of national arts and Iranian artists, Tehran: Arin Publications. [In Persian].

Heydar Abadian, Shahram, Abbasi Fard, Farnaz. (۲۰۰۹). Islamic Metalwork Art, Tehran: Soban Noor Publications. [In Persian].

Hillenbrand, R. (۱۹۸۰). "Art in the Persian Gulf", in The Persian Gulf States, ed. A. Cottrellet al. (Baltimore ۱۹۸۰) (at press).

Melikian-Shirvani, AS. (۱۹۷۴). "Safavid Metawork: A Study in Continuity", in Iranian Studies, VII(۱۹۷۴): Studies on Isfahan Part II.

Mohammad Hassan, Zaki. (۱۹۹۸). History of Iranian industries after Islam, translated by Mohammad Ali Khalili, Tehran: Iqbal. [In Persian].

Nowruzitalab, Alireza and Afrogh, Mohammad. (۲۰۱۰). "Examination of form, decoration and content in metalwork of Seljuq and Safavid eras", biannual journal of Islamic art, Tehran: Institute of Islamic Art Studies, vol. ۱۲, pp. ۱۱۳-۱۲۷. [In Persian].

Pope, Arthur and Ackerman, Philip. (۲۰۰۸). Siri in Iranian art, Vol. ۶, Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications. [In Persian].

Savery, Roger. (۱۹۸۳). Safavid Iran, translated by Kambyz Azizi, Tehran: Sahar Publications. [In Persian].

Sarchia, Gian Roberto. (۲۰۰۵). History of Iranian art - Safavid art, Zandu Qajar, translated by Yaqub Azhand, Tehran: Molly. [In Persian].

Shayestehfar, Mahnaz. (۲۰۰۹). "Interaction of architecture and Persian poetry in Timurid and Safavid era buildings", two-quarter journal of Islamic art, Tehran: Institute of Islamic Art Studies, pp. ۱۰۴-۷۹. [In Persian].

Shayestehfar, Mahnaz and Mohammadian, Leila. (۲۰۰۹). "Investigation of Decorative Patterns and Inscriptions on the Illumination Works of Astan Quds Razavi Museum", Culture and Art, Tehran: Jihad Academici, Vol. ۲, pp. ۴۷-۶۲. [In Persian].

Shariat, Zahra (۲۰۰۸). "Qur'anic calligraphy in carpet weaving and metalwork of the Safavid period", Tehran, Book Mah Honar, vol. ۱۲۰, pp. ۵۵-۴۴. [In Persian].

Vaziri, Alinqi. (۱۹۹۴). General History of Illustrated Arts, Tehran: Hirmand Publications. [In Persian].

Wilson, Eva. (۱۹۹۸). Islamic Designs, translated by Mohammad Reza Raami, Tehran: Samt Publications. [In Persian].