
Thematic Analysis of the Script and Calligraphic Motifs on the Two Historical Wooden Doors of Imamzadeh Sultan-Ali in Mashhad Ardehal, Kashan

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The village of Mashhad-e Ardehal is renowned for housing the shrine of Imamzadeh Sultan-Ali and hosting the annual carpet-washing ritual (Qali-shuyan). Historical evidence suggests the original structure of this shrine dates to the Seljuk period, with tilework from the 6th century AH. The complex also preserves Safavid-era tiles, plaster inscriptions from 1318 AH, Qajar-era paintings, Safavid stalactite vaulting (Muqarnas), and Qajar mirror-work. While various artistic elements of this complex have received academic attention, its historical wooden doors have never been independently investigated. Although historical documents indicate that the shrine originally possessed more wooden doors, only have two genuine examples survived. This study examines these two remaining doors in terms of their decorative motifs and textual inscriptions, addressing two questions: What are the primary thematic contents of the inscriptions on the Timurid and Safavid doors of Imamzadeh Sultan-Ali?, and what types of artistic decoration have been applied to these doors?

Materials and Methods

This study employs a descriptive-analytical and historical methodology. Data collection involved field research, including physical examinations and high-resolution photography of surviving artifacts. It was complemented by archival research, using historical documents and library resources. The research conducted for all surviving historical doors of the complex: (1) the former school entrance door, currently at the women's courtyard entrance; (2) the Soffat al-Safa portico door at the men's entrance, and (3) the Cheragh-Khaneh (Lamp House) mosque door. The third door could not be located on-site and was studied entirely through historical texts. The remaining two doors were directly examined and photographed by the authors.

Research Findings

The entrance door of the former school (Dated 830 AH): This door was one of the numerous Timurid- wooden artifacts survived in Kashan, reflected strong patronage of religious construction after the 9th century AH. Timurid woodwork typically combines abstract plant ornaments with calligraphy. This door exemplified the same ornaments, along with a text—in Thuluth and Rika-like scripts— as the primary decorative element over plain backgrounds.

- **Inscriptional Themes:** The door includes eight Quranic verses, the names of the Ahl al-Bayt (with "Ali" repeated ten times, notably in a cruciform pattern), a salutation upon the Fourteen Infallibles, and two Hadith by The Prophet— including "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate." These inscriptions reflected clear Shiite devotion. They also recorded the names of woodworkers (Master Abdul-Aziz and his colleague Husein), the donor (Ala al-Din Huseini Qomi), seven lines of Persian poetry, and a date, 830 AH — corresponding to the reign of Shahrukh Shah Timurid.

- **Decorations:** The central panels featured geometric patterns based on the eight and four-pointed star knot (Gereh), filled with simple arabesque (Eslimi) carvings. The use of number eight carried Islamic symbolism, referring to the eight angels that bear the divine throne (Surah Al-Haqqah, Verse 17).

The Entrance Door of the Soffat al-Safa Portico (Dated 950 AH): Unlike the Timurid door, this door contained no Quranic verses or Hadith. Its inscriptions focused entirely on historical and political data. Four round plaques provided identical historical information, while upper and lower panels recorded the name of the ruling monarch, the date, and the donor. The text mentioned Shah Tahmasp Safavi and named Ali Beg Takalu as the regional governor. Shah Tahmasp used Shiism as a political foundation and actively supported Persian arts. Woodcarving under his rule developed distinct stylistic traits, particularly the use of bold Thuluth scripts combined with intricate ten-pointed knot patterns (Gereh-e Dah-e Tond).

- **Decorations:** Both doors featured a ten-pointed sunburst knot (Shamsheh) decorated with floral motifs. The borders were considerably more complex than those of the Timurid door, integrating dense arabesque (Eslimi) and floral scroll (Khatai) patterns, resembling the margins of Shah Tahmasp-era court carpets. Prominent motifs included the Shah-Abbasi flower, cloud arabesques, and cypress structures. These decorations closely parallel 16th-century Safavid vase-technique carpets, confirming a shared visual language between Safavid textiles and woodwork.

Conclusion

The two doors have revealed clear epigraphic and decorative shifts across periods. The Timurid door (830 AH) has prioritized religious and Shiite content — Quranic verses, prophetic traditions, and devotional blessings — alongside records of the donor and craftsmen. The Safavid door (950 AH) has shifted toward political content, documenting the artist, donor, governor, and Shah Tahmasp, using Safavid administrative titles.

In terms of ornamentation, the Timurid door has relied on calligraphy and simple arabesques within basic geometric structures. The Safavid door has displayed an advanced combination of complex geometric, arabesque, and Khatai floral patterns across multiple nested frames with metal fittings. This reflects the mature influence of the Safavid court arts on Kashan woodcarving —an evolution toward greater complexity while preserving spiritual and cultural implications within its geometry.

Keywords: wood-carved door, Kashan woodcarving, Timurid woodcarving, Safavid woodcarving, Imamzadeh Sultan Ali (peace be upon him), Mashhad-e Ardehal