

Sharaf Caravanserai: A museum of brick and plasterwork on the Silk Road

Iranica Desk

The Sharaf Caravanserai is also known as the Museum of Brick and Plasterwork. This magnificent caravanserai was situated on the Silk Road and served as one of the important residences along this ancient route, occupying a special location. As you travel from Mashhad towards Sarakhs, you can find this historical site located 140 kilometers northeast of Mashhad. The caravanserai is situated in the midst of a plain, about six kilometers from Shurloq village. The site where this caravanserai was constructed was once a significant stop along the Silk Road. The caravanserai was built during the Seljuk era (1050-1300 CE), adjacent to an older caravanserai, whose remains can still be seen on the southeast side. The older caravanserai was likely established during the early Islamic centuries. The Sharaf Caravanserai was built in the 12th century CE. Hamdollah Mostofi named it Abgineh in 1340 CE. In the 9th century CE, Ibn Khordadbeh referred to Abgineh as a resting place between Mazduran and Sarakhs. The Sharaf Caravanserai is a magnificent architectural complex that includes two large courtyards measuring approximately 32 x 32 meters, as well as a smaller courtyard with dimensions of around 17 x 32 meters. These courtyards are arranged in a rectangular shape, spanning over 4,860 square meters in the southeast-northwest direction. The caravanserai boasts a variety of spaces, including a mosque, porch, stalls and

rooms, stable, portico, and underground water reservoirs.

The entrance of the caravanserai is located in the southeast direction, which opens into a small courtyard from the end of a high-fronted portico. On the left side of the entrance, there is a mosque with a *mihrab* decorated with plasterwork.

Each of the two courtyards has four *ivans* that face each other. On the two courtyards of the caravanserai, there is a series of vaulted arcades that overlook the courtyards. These arcades, in addition to providing shade, have added a special beauty to the interior space of the building. They have now been destroyed and only their foundation remains. Behind the arcades are rooms and stables.

A wall separates the first courtyard from the second, in the middle of which there is an *ivan* with two circular tower-like pillars that takes up the center of the courtyard. The second courtyard is larger and has more space.

It seems that creating multiple and diverse spaces in the caravanserai was intended for the accommodation of nobles such as kings, emirs, and aristocrats.

This structure is

a true gem of brick architecture and plaster decorations. Kufic inscriptions in brick adorn the high *ivans* of the caravanserai, while plaster decorations and inscriptions can be found on the *mihrabs* and interior spaces. The end *ivan* of the large courtyard boasts the most elaborate decorations, with plasterwork featuring complex and intricate Islamic patterns.

After the Safavid era, which was probably the last period of use of this caravanserai, it gradually fell into ruin and suffered extensive damage. In recent years, the restoration of the building has been carried out continuously by the Cultural Heritage Organization of Khorasan Razavi Province.

Director General of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization of Khorasan Razavi Province said that the Sharaf Caravanserai is a museum of brick decorations and plasterwork. This magnificent and valuable building holds a special position in the history of architecture, and can be considered a significant cultural heritage site.

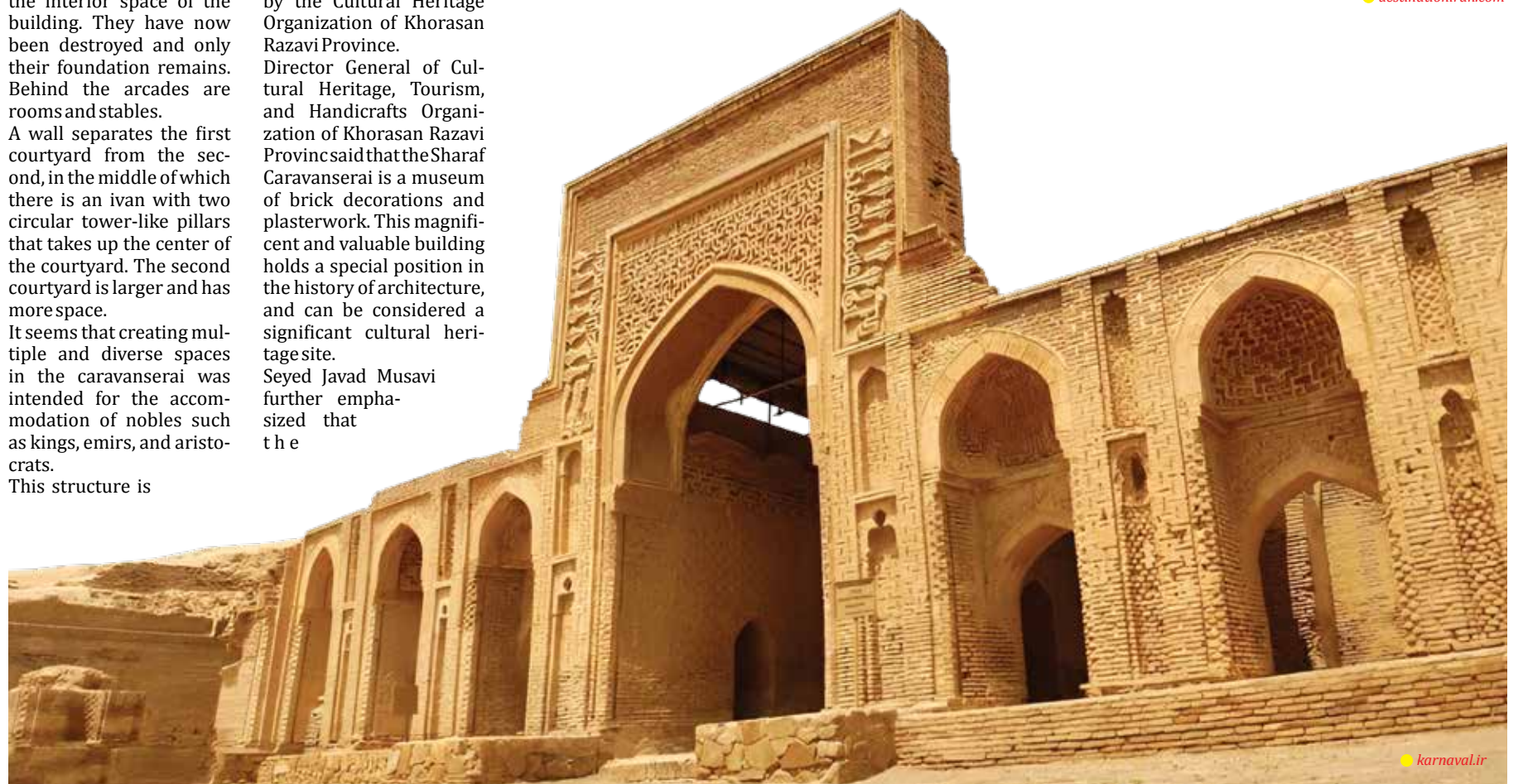
Seyed Javad Musavi further emphasized that the

caravanserai was an essential element and facility of the Silk Road. He suggests that it is appropriate to open it for global tourism, allowing visitors to appreciate and explore its historical significance.

This caravanserai was officially added to Iran's National Heritage List on June 10, 1942. Thanks to the dedicated efforts made by the Cultural Heritage Department of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, along with the Cultural Heritage Organization of Khorasan Razavi Province, it was recently included on the UNESCO World Heritage List.



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Persian Art in Romania: Exploring cultural interactions and influences



A Qajar dagger

When only few Romanian art collectors looked for Islamic art at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, most Romanian museums and private collectors showed an ethnographical interest in oriental objects rather

than appreciated their artistic quality. In 1873 Romania participated in the World's Fair in Vienna, which is supposed to have initiated the oriental carpet boom in the West. The objects that Romania had exhibited in

Vienna were given to the Museum of Antiquities in 1874 which exchanged them for a collection of folk art from Greece, Tunisia, Sudan and Japan. By the end of the 19th century, there had been a growing interest in folk

art, especially Romanian, with the result of establishing the Museum of Ethnography, National Art, Decorative Art and Industrial Art in 1906. In 1909, this museum was granted more than 1,000 objects, part of a collection gathered by the colonel Dimitrie Papazoglu (1811-1892) who had organized a small museum in his own house by 1864. The inventory also lists a few Turkish arms, Balkanic jewelry, and, under number 954, "a big dagger and its sheath covered with red cloth with golden embroidery." This arm, now in the Oriental Art Department of the NMAR, is a Qajar dagger from about the end of the 18th century, with an ivory handle and

watered steel blade, decorated on both sides with a scene representing a feline hunting a deer. The dagger is signed, probably Hasan. The fact that the inventory does not identify its origin proves that Persian objects — arms in this case — were less familiar in Romania than Turkish ones whose origin is identified in the inventory. The erroneous description of two other Persian objects from the same ethnographic museum, but with a different provenance, leads us to a similar conclusion. It is the case of a Safavid armour plate with gold damascened inscriptions, registered as "a fragment of an Arab shield," and likewise, of a hookah with

ceramic base, described as "Chinese porcelain". The latter is in fact a 17th-century Safavid hookah base in the shape of a kendi, with a later addition of the silver mount; its underglaze Chinese style decoration including a deer by a fence and under a cloud, painted in two shades of blue, as well as the Chinese-like square mark on the bottom, may have caused the confusion. The ethnographic museum, later called the Carol I National Art Museum, also possessed 19th-century Persian metalware, Seneh (Sanandaj) kilims (two of them are now in the NMAR) and fragments from several enameled Qajar hookahs. Although these fragments were part

of Romania's national art treasury sent to Russia in 1916, this does not mean that they were carefully selected as objects with the value of national treasures; this was rather due to the state of urgency which made it difficult to conduct a more careful selection. Established in 1990 as the follower of the Carol I National Art Museum, the Romanian Peasant Museum holds not only a very valuable collection of Romanian folk art, but also a significant amount of ethnographic objects from different parts of the world. The ethnographic materials have not yet been thoroughly studied and may thus offer surprises in terms of non-European art.