

Splendor of Hasht Behesht Palace in Isfahan



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Isfahan, the capital city of the central province of Isfahan, is renowned for its wide array of historical buildings, making it an exceptional destination for both domestic and international tourists. Throughout the city, served as the capital of the Safavid dynasty, one can witness the enduring legacy of Safavid craftsmanship in its palaces, gardens, and mansions. Among these architectural marvels stands the Hasht Behesht Palace.

Introduction

Hasht Behesht Palace is known as one of the most significant attractions in Isfahan, boasting magnificent and artistic decorations from the Safavid era that continue to captivate visitors. Situated on Bagh-e Goldasteh Street, it is recognized as one of the most

beautiful palaces in Iran. In 1934, the Hasht Behesht Palace was designated as a national heritage site. Today the palace is surrounded by Shahid Rajaei Park, a popular recreational area in Isfahan.

History

Construction of Hasht Behesht Palace in Isfahan was completed in 1669 CE, during the third year of Shah Suleiman Safavid's reign, and stands as a prime example of Safavid architecture. Under the rule of Nasser al-Din Shah Qajar and Zell al-Sultan's governance of Isfahan, the palace was repurposed as the Homayouni School. In her travelogue, Jane Dieulafoy, a French archaeologist and explorer, mentioned the name of Homayouni School in her description of the garden and mansion of Hasht Behesht. The garden and palace were later entrusted to Nasser al-Din Shah Qa-

jar's daughter, Ozma Eftekhari, with the condition that its state and appearance remain unaltered. Following her passing, the garden and palace underwent significant alterations by subsequent occupants. Similar to Ali Qapu and Chehel Sotoun, the original decorations of painting, gilding, and mirror works were concealed under a layer of plaster.

Since 1964, the remaining portion of the garden and the palace have been officially entrusted to the Ministry of Culture. Hasht Behesht continues to be preserved under the supervision of the Cultural Heritage Organization, alongside other historical buildings and monuments in the country.

Architecture

This mansion measures 35.26 meters by 30 meters, standing

two meters higher than the neighboring garden, and accessed through two staircases. Beyond the entrance, there is a porch adorned with two tall wooden columns, leading to the central hall. The hall features a dome-shaped vault culminating in an octagonal skylight with eight wooden windows. At the center of the hall, there is an octagonal pool with a 30.3-meter diameter and a fountain. Doors surrounding the hall lead to octagonal rooms specifically designated for the reception of women.

The primary entrance of the mansion faces north and takes on an octagonal shape, featuring two imposing cedar wood columns. At the heart of this entrance there lies a pool measuring 80.2 meters by 30.2 meters, with a fountain at its center. The ceiling of this area is intricately adorned, while the interior walls

of the palace showcase a display of paintings, gilding, bird motifs, vibrant flowers, glasswork, and mirror embellishments.

Within the central hall, two grand paintings depict Fat'hali Shah Qajar seated on the throne, surrounded by some of his descendants. The entire structure is erected upon a foundation crafted from exquisite marble sourced from Tabriz, serving as the bedrock of this magnificent edifice.

The rooms on the first floor of the mansion, located in each of the four corners, are adorned with ornate plasterwork and paintings. The second floor of the mansion further enhances its beauty with a series of corridors, rooms, domes, and windows. This level is divided into multiple hallways and rooms, each featuring its own unique decorations. Some rooms include water basins, while others are equipped with

wall-mounted heaters. Additionally, the walls are adorned with numerous mirrors.

The mansion's significant feature is the relationship that has developed among its various spaces and parts. This connection results in the mansion having a remarkable sense of unity and coherence despite the diversity and variety of its spaces and decorations.

The exterior of the mansion is adorned with hard stones and, at its center, there is a small courtyard paved with stone, through which the overflow from the fountains inside and outside the mansion flows. This water flows into two large pools, each 8 meters wide and 50 meters long, situated in front of the western and eastern porticos of the mansion. The palace grounds are surrounded by tall plane trees, and its flower gardens enhance its beauty with roses and jasmine.

Cross-cultural interaction between Rome and Sassanid

It is useful to look at the problem of the cross-cultural interaction between Rome and Sassanid Iran from one final perspective and consider which types of objects and spaces enticed the kings to appropriate them and which proved to be the most popular venues for the two realms' debate.

Overall, those architectural features, urban spaces, or sites of performance that defined royal identity within one of the two empires consistently show evidence of visual or ritual expressions that have to do with the two

rulers' and realms' relational identity.

Sites where the sovereigns showed themselves to their own people and to envoys, such as hippodromes, banqueting and audience halls, urban spaces that hosted processions, regal iconographies (such as nimbus-es), ornamental motifs, games, luxury items (like silk shoes and robes), and audience-hall technologies, were the privileged venues for the two courts' debates. The objects and activities that defined each emperor's identity, and ensured his dominance of the social hierarchy, tended to carry polemical

messages about the place and identity of the other king.

On the other hand, these same visual, urban, and spatial environments were also the prime targets of appropriation by their rival.

In a similar sense, the emperors' physical bodies could be simultaneously objects of appropriation and places of debate. The imperial body, and thus identity, were constantly manipulated and adjusted in pictorial spaces, ranging from sculpture to icons to numismatic representations. One can find statements on the two sovereigns' relational identity on their clothing and regalia,

and even the ornamental designs that embellished them. This was the case occasionally in real life, too — most glaringly in the case of the captured Roman emperor Valerian, whose identity was manipulated by the ritual humiliation he was forced to endure, but also, vicariously in the treatment of the other emperor's envoy.

Although the two empires' courts and urban centers, under the auspices of diplomacy, were the commonest locations of symbolic display and identity manipulation, similar events took place far afield and by proxy. The consolidation of symbolic capital took place on an international level, too, and it was a tool that the emperors utilized to gain control over client states, as well as to negotiate their relationship with each other.

Within cultural systems as globally minded as the Roman and

Sassanid empires these symbolic trappings became very important, because they were unifying elements that facilitated the functioning of socially and culturally diverse societies.

Both empires subsumed many sociopolitical systems and thus systems of conferring honors. The Romans and Sassanids, with their compulsory rites of investiture and robing ceremonies, conflated these various systems of symbolic capital into a single system.

The two powers codified, delegated, and guaranteed, even bureaucratized, this system of symbolic capital.

When a client king traveled to the court of the Roman or Sassanid king, he received insignia of office that marked at once his relationship to the Roman court and his membership in the Roman or Sassanid cultural sphere.

The above is a lightly edited version of part of a chapter entitled, 'The Art and Ritual of Kingship Within and Between Rome and Sassanid Iran', from a book entitled, 'The Two Eyes of the Earth', written by Matthew P. Vanepa, published by University of California Press.

✓ Taq-e Kasra, a remnant of the former Sassanid palace in Ctesiphon

