

# Ganjali Khan Bathhouse: A historical masterpiece of Iranian architecture



## Iranica Desk

Ganjali Khan Bathhouse is a significant legacy of the Safavid era and an integral part of the renowned Ganjali Khan Complex, celebrated for its remarkable architecture and ornate decorations. Following a restoration in 1968, the bathhouse transitioned into an anthropology museum, featuring wax sculptures portraying individuals from diverse social classes in ancient times. This historical site has been officially recognized as a national heritage site, according to IRNA.

## History

Historical records indicate that the construction of the Ganjali Khan Complex was commissioned during the Safavid period by Ganjali Khan, the ruler of Kerman. Upon assuming leadership in Kerman, Ganjali Khan prioritized urban development initiatives. Notably, he oversaw the creation of a sizable public square at the heart of Kerman, spanning over 100 meters in length and 50 meters in width. Surrounding this square, Ganjali

Khan erected specific structures such as a school, mosque, bazaar, bathhouse, caravanserai, water reservoir, and mint, culminating in an exceptional complex. The gradual construction of these edifices culminated in the completion of the bathhouse in 1610, situated along the primary thoroughfare of Kerman's bazaar, south of the Ganjali Khan Complex.

Fascinatingly, the bathhouse remained in use until 1937. In 1968 it underwent restoration and subsequently transformed into an anthropology museum. Today, this complex stands as one of Kerman's foremost tourist attractions, welcoming both local and international visitors annually.

## Architecture

The architect and designer of Ganjali Khan Bathhouse was Sultan Mohammad, a Yazdi architect. This historical masterpiece was completed by Ali Mardan Khan, the son of Ganjali Khan, and has taken its present form. The Ganjali Khan Bathhouse is 26 meters long, 30 meters wide, and has an area of approximate-

ly 1,300 square meters. It features a unique architectural entrance, dressing rooms, a pool, and a *khazineh* (a place where water was heated). Prominent Iranian craftsmen and artists have used delicate paintings, colorful tiles, courtyard lighting, beautiful plaster decorations, and pleasant calligraphy for beautification and design of this historical work.

This bathhouse depicts a blend of architectural artistry and the use of various materials in a space that is proportionate and people-friendly.

## Sections

Like other ancient Iranian bathhouses, it consists of various separate sections, including a royal section, to separate different segments of society (the wealthy and ordinary people) from each other. The skilled and creative architects of that time had designed dressing rooms with six separate compartments for the comfort and convenience of the people.

Furthermore, the architects have given a striking appearance to the entire bathhouse

by using colorful and beautiful tiles and stones. The relatively high ceiling of the dressing rooms stands tall and sturdy on strong columns. In addition to the compartments surrounding the dressing rooms, a beautiful pool in the middle of these compartments showcases itself. A fountain installed in the center of this pool offers delightful music to the hearts of visitors.

The bathhouse is illuminated by skylights positioned in the center or around the ceilings, which not only allow sunlight to enter the space but also help regulate the temperature. The sunlight shining into the pool and reflecting off the walls and ceilings enhances the beauty of the bath.

Architects and engineers conducted studies and found that the bath's heat was provided by a furnace called Toon. Channels were designed and drawn under the warm room, allowing warm air to pass through, heat the floor, and remove dirty air through windows.

The water supply system of the bathhouse is interestingly con-

nected to pipelines from the nearby qanat near the square in the Ganjali Khan complex. The water in the reservoir was heated by burning wood and bushes.

## Entrance

The entrance and vestibule of the bath stand out as some of the most exquisite areas, adorned with elegant blue bricks, marble borders, captivating paintings, and decorative bands.

Continuing from the entrance, a corridor is strategically designed to shield the view into the bath and preserve its warmth. This passage leads to a small octagonal area situated adjacent to the entrance. Upon passing through this space, one is greeted by a finely carved gateway embellished with stone depictions of seabirds, guiding visitors to the subsequent areas of the bath.

## Dressing room

The dressing room, also known as Sarbineh, is an octagonal expanse featuring a central pool. Encircling the room are six alcoves for seating, each uniquely illuminated. Each alcove was

designated for a distinct social class. Within this area, everything from intricately patterned tilework to marble stones, wooden ceilings, and fountains captures the attention of on-lookers. The combination of these elements, alongside the specialized lighting, creates a delightful ambiance. The dressing room's ceiling is a captivating display of wooden embellishments adorned with Islamic paintings.

While the dressing room presents a cohesive space, it also offers secluded and intricate corners, providing suitable areas for relaxation, and conversation. Additionally, there is a space known as miandar, essentially a small dressing room designed to minimize the exchange of heat between the Sarbineh and the hot room.

Following their bathing, individuals wait in this space for a period to regulate their body temperature and avoid abrupt changes in temperature. On one side of this area lies the dressing room, while on the other side, there is a hexagonal space leading to the hot room.

## Evolution of Persian and Arabic inscriptions

The rivalry between the Persian and Arabic languages in inscriptions on objects was already noticeable during the 10th to early 12th centuries, but it developed differently on the various materials.

On bronze (brass) this process proceeded fairly slowly. Up to the 14th century there are fewer Persian inscriptions than Arabic. It must be stressed that there are few known versions of the latter, but they were very often reproduced on objects.

On the other hand, Persian inscriptions occupied a place of honour on the famous ceramics of the late 12th and 13th centuries decorated with lustre and enamels, to which we have already referred. These consist of quotations from the work both of famous poets of the past (Ferdowsi, Omar Khayyam) as well as of contemporaries (Nizami, Kamal al-Din Ismail Isfahani, Jamal al-Din Muhammad Isfahani).

Probably this bears witness to the literary taste of the craftsmen themselves, to the links between literary and artistic circles in the cities and to the

spread of Sufi poetry. The interest in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh is connected rather with some sort of anti-Mongol sentiment, for the earliest extracts from the poem appear on tiles only after 1260, i.e. during the Mongol period. But with the onset of the new phase in the mid-14th century fundamental changes take place. A set of Kashan lustre tiles dating from the 1330 bears an exact reference to the place of manufacture. After this period we know of no large-scale output either of lustre vessels or of sizeable sets of lustre tiles (the lustre tiles on tombs of that date and of the 15th century are clearly not mass-produced).

In general, the mass-production of lustreware dies out for almost 200 years. As far as one can judge from preliminary observations, the 17th-century lustreware which has survived also appears not to be mass-produced and, above all, there is no longer any reason to link it with Kashan (in late historical sources Kashan is not referred to as a centre of ceramic production).

New centres of ceramic production such as Mashhad apparently arose during the course of this new phase, beginning somewhere in the mid-14th century. The most surprising new feature of Iranian ceramics of the later period is the almost total absence of inscriptions on dishes and, probably, tiles, though the latter may not have been produced in any quantities in comparison with the preceding phase. Ceramic mosaics were widely used in the decoration of buildings. The small number of inscriptions which appear on faience dishes of the 15th-17th centuries should be regarded as exceptions, and by no means as a continuation of the tradition of the late 12th to the first half of the 14th centuries.

But the role which ceramics played in pre-Mongol and Mongol times in disseminating Persian inscriptions passes to metalwork in the new phase. The period of transition occupies the second half of the 14th century to the first half of the 15th century, insofar as the number of Persian inscriptions

also increases slowly, though often they are only benedictory Persian verses. But from the beginning of the 15th century verses of Hafez are found on copper items, and from the second half of the 15th century we see numerous extracts from the works of famous poets - Hafez, Sa'di, Jami, or such little-known authors as Salihi Khurasani.

The number of Persian verses on copper and bronze (brass) objects increases during the course of the 16th century. Arabic inscriptions meanwhile, especially benedictory ones, practically fall into disuse towards the beginning of the 16th century, but at the same time two new Arabic inscriptions appear, linked to the rise to power of the Safavid dynasty in Iran (1501-1736) - these are verses in honour of Imam Ali (PBUH) and blessings on the Shi'a imams, and they become prevalent on all types of object, in architecture and the applied arts.

Thus, in the mid-14th century a new phase begins in the history of art in Iran. The transitional period probably lasts a fairly



Kashan lustre pottery jug, late 12th century

long time, more than fifty years. One feature which characterises the art of this age is a loss of interest in the depiction of people on objects of applied art. This is indeed a surprising fact and one which has not

yet been explained, for in this phase the Persian miniature flourished (although it was perhaps not at the height of its development) and was being rapidly produced at various centres.