

Jaame Mosque of Saveh demonstrates layered history of Islamic architecture

Iranica Desk

Jaame Mosque of Saveh is one of Iran's most prominent historical monuments and among the most valuable works of Islamic architecture in the country's central plateau.

Seyyedeh Maryam Navabi, head of the Jaame Mosque of Saveh National Heritage Site, wrote in a note published by chtn.ir that the structure has undergone multiple transformations over more than a thousand years of existence and is now recognized as a unique complex representing layered stages of Islamic architectural development.

Architectural studies indicate that the mosque's earliest core was formed as a hypostyle structure, with prayer halls arranged around a central square courtyard. In this original layout, the southern, eastern, western, and northern sides of the courtyard featured eight, eight, seven, and nine bays respectively. Over time, this initial configuration was altered and expanded in response to the religious, social, and artistic needs of successive periods.

The first major phase of transformation dates to the 4th-7th centuries AH (10th-13th centuries CE), when a maqsura and a brick dome adorned with fine stucco decorations were added

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to the complex. Although much of this domed structure has not survived, its foundations and examples of fine stucco work on the northern brick base of the current dome chamber remain visible. The construction of multiple mihrab-like niches, painted Kufic inscriptions on mudbrick and clay columns, and the erection of a dated minaret are among the key architectural developments of this period. The Ilkhanid era marks one of the most significant phases in the mosque's evolution. In the 8th century AH (14th century CE), the western ivan was constructed as the largest architectural project of the complex. To achieve this, part of the western prayer hall was modified, creating a deep and prominent space on the western side



of the courtyard. A new spatial section was also added in the southeastern corner of the mosque through alterations to the original structure.

Other developments during this period includ-

ed the reconstruction of the northern façade of the dome chamber and the organization of courtyard elevations. A unified façade featuring decorative brickwork and stucco inscription elements was ex-

ecuted across the mosque. The creation of multiple mihrab-like niches on the northern side and the use of the so-called Mohrkobi technique are among the most distinctive features of this phase. In this deco-

orative method, brickwork and stucco were combined to form geometric and ornamental patterns, incorporating the sacred names "Allah," "Muhammad," and "Ali," giving the space a unique artistic character typical of Ilkhanid architecture.

During the Safavid period, the Jaame Mosque of Saveh once again received considerable attention, and significant parts of it were restored. The construction of the current dome chamber in 922 AH (1516 CE) atop the remains of the earlier structure represents the most important development of this era. Safavid architects reused parts of the previous structure while creating a space suited to the needs of their time. The open southern area of the earlier dome chamber was also roofed,

forming the present southern ivan. A tile inscription at the end of the eastern wall of this ivan records the date 936 AH (1530 CE), attributing this work to the reign of Shah Tahmasp I. The western ivan was also restored during this period.

Despite its architectural significance, one of the lesser-known aspects of the mosque complex is the extensive historical area surrounding it. This valuable zone contains the remains of the ancient city of Saveh, which has been buried under successive layers over centuries.

Evidence and historical aerial imagery suggest that this archaeological area extends at least one kilometer around the mosque and once formed a major part of the ancient urban fabric of Saveh. Unfortunately, portions of this area have been damaged in recent decades due to illegal excavations and human interference.

Today, the Jaame Mosque of Saveh is more than a religious monument; it is a valuable ensemble of Iranian history, architecture, and urban identity. Protecting this monument and its surrounding archaeological landscape is an essential step in preserving the country's cultural heritage and historical memory.

Reading Room

Coffeehouse painting in Iran's collective memory

Coffeehouse painting (Naqqashi-ye Qahveh-Khaneh) is one of the most authentic and popular expressions of Iranian art. Unlike courtly art, which flourished in royal workshops and palaces, this artistic tradition emerged among ordinary people and became a visual language for the beliefs, ideals, and collective memories of Iranian society.

Also known as "imaginative painting" or "folk painting," coffeehouse painting is deeply intertwined with oral traditions, storytelling, religious passion plays, and Shi'a rituals, making it one of the most significant manifestations of popular art in Iran, according to IBNA.

Researchers trace the earliest roots of this art form to the Safavid era, when Shi'a Islam became the state religion and religious and epic narratives gained unprecedented prominence in public culture. Although what is recognized today as coffeehouse painting largely flourished during the Qajar period—particularly alongside the Constitutional Revolution—its intellectual and narrative foundations can be found in the religious banners, Shi'a iconography, and storytelling traditions of the Safavid age.

In his book *Painting in the Coffeehouse*, Hossein Mirmostafa describes the origins of the genre as follows: "Coffeehouse painting emerged from the working-class and lower social strata without any formal academic training and independently of official artistic schools, gradually developing into a distinctive and self-sufficient style."

This characteristic has led many art historians to regard coffeehouse painting as Iran's first truly popular artistic movement.

The emergence of the style was closely linked to the tradition of Naqqali—the art of storytelling. In past centuries, coffeehouses were not merely places for drinking tea and socializing; they functioned as important cultural and social centers. Storytellers recounted episodes from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the events of Ashura, and religious tales, while painters enhanced these narratives by depicting key scenes on large canvases and panels.

As a result, these works were often monumental in scale and designed so audiences could clearly see their details even from a distance. In essence, coffeehouse painting served



as a form of visual storytelling that complemented the art of oral narration.

The themes of these paintings can generally be divided into three main categories. The first—and by far the most prominent—consists of religious subjects. The tragedy of Ashura, the battles of Imam Ali (PBUH), the martyrdom of Abbas ibn Ali (PBUH), Ta'zieh performances, and episodes related to the family of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were among the most frequently depicted themes.

The second category includes epic and national subjects, largely inspired by Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Scenes such as the battle between Rostam and Sohrab, the struggle of Rostam

and Esfandiar, the Seven Labors of Rostam, and other heroic narratives ranked among the most popular topics.

The third category encompasses festive and historical themes. Though less common, these works portrayed scenes from the lives of legendary heroes, romantic tales, and selected historical events.

One of the defining characteristics of coffeehouse painting is its departure from the conventions of courtly art. Most artists working in this tradition lacked formal academic training and focused less on conveying emotion and narrative.

Multiple scenes often appear within a single composition,

while different times and places are represented simultaneously. Heroes are painted larger than other figures to emphasize their significance, and vivid, striking colors are used to heighten emotional impact.

Nevertheless, during the late Qajar period, some painters came under the influence of Western artistic traditions and began incorporating perspective, chiaroscuro, and volumetric modeling into their works. Before the rise of modern media, coffeehouse painting served as one of the most important vehicles for transmitting religious ideas and values. A considerable portion of Iranian society during the Qajar era and earlier periods was illiterate, making visual imagery an essential medium for communicating religious concepts. In this context, coffeehouse paintings became a form of popular visual media that narrated historical and sacred events for the public.

These paintings also played a significant role in shaping the collective memory of Shi'a communities. During the months of Muharram and Safar, coffeehouse banners and painted panels were displayed in Tekyehs, Hosseiniye-

hs, and mourning gatherings, becoming an integral part of commemorative rituals. From this perspective, coffeehouse painting fulfilled both social and ceremonial functions, helping preserve and transmit the culture of Ashura and the Shi'a identity of Iranian society. Although epic themes derived from the *Shahnameh* occupied an important place within the tradition, many scholars argue that the enduring popularity of coffeehouse painting stemmed primarily from its profound connection to the culture of Ashura. Through dramatic depictions of the Battle of Karbala, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein's (PBUH) companions, and the sufferings of the Prophet's family, artists evoked powerful religious emotions while illustrating concepts such as sacrifice, justice, loyalty, and resistance against oppression.

For this reason, coffeehouse painting can be regarded as one of the most important forms of ritual art in Iran—an art that transcended aesthetics alone and became a vehicle for transmitting beliefs, values, and religious identity, maintaining its place within Iranian culture for more than a century.