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The Functions of Calligraphy Art in Non-Ritual Architecture

Abstract

Calligraphy is one of the most important arts in Iranian culture and civilization, having played a significant role in Iranian architecture and in shaping its identity. The history of using script in Iranian architecture dates back to ancient Iran. In other periods of Iranian history as well, the art of calligraphy entered Iranian architecture as a decorative element and sometimes in the form of inscription writing. In addition to mosques and religious buildings, calligraphy has also been used in the decoration of other structures such as palaces, water reservoirs, caravanserais, bathhouses, bazaars, and so on.

The aim of the present article is to explain the most important functions of calligraphy and inscription writing in non-ritual Iranian architecture (non-religious buildings) and to introduce the types of scripts that have been used in this architecture. The research method of the present study is descriptive-analytical. The findings of this research show that the use of calligraphy in non-ritual Iranian architecture, in addition to reflecting aesthetic elements, has also had identity-forming, blessing-seeking, and didactic functions.

Keywords: Calligraphy, Architecture, Non-Ritual Architecture

Introduction

In Islamic culture and civilization, calligraphy enjoys a special importance and status due to its unique characteristics, such as possessing technical rules, spiritual dignity, and its influence on other arts. Its capacity to integrate with painting and its manifestations in various artistic works have further increased its importance and impact. The compilation of treatises on calligraphy and numerous works on its etiquette and rules also demonstrate the achievements of this art in Islamic civilization.

Calligraphy in Iran, from the early Middle Ages, has had a profound impact on other arts such as painting, pottery, illumination, and architecture. In this regard, Pope considers calligraphy to be the main basis of architectural decorations. Thus, calligraphy has provided the necessary binding principles for painters, illuminators, and designers, and is also regarded as the main basis of decorations in the art of architecture (Pope, 1375: 226). In Iranian architecture, one can find diverse and abundant evidence regarding the use of calligraphy in buildings. One of the areas of calligraphy use is in non-ritual architecture (non-religious buildings). The present article has been written with the aim of examining the application of the art of calligraphy in non-ritual

buildings. This article, compiled using a descriptive-analytical method, seeks to answer the following question:

How has calligraphy been applied and what are its functions in non-ritual (non-religious) Iranian architecture?

In reviewing the background of the present research, the following works can be mentioned:

Hamidi (1401), in an article titled “Evaluating the Position of Calligraphy and Inscription Writing in the Decorations of the Mausoleum of Sahl ibn Ali (AS) in Astaneh City (Markazi Province),” while showing the use of various scripts in this building, has spoken of two historical and conceptual functions alongside its decorative aspect.

Pirzadi and colleagues (1404), in an article titled “The Influence of Script and Calligraphy in Islamic Architecture,” have shown that the art of calligraphy is not only a tool for conveying religious and cultural meanings but also establishes a deep visual communicative language with the soul and identity.

Ataei Ashtiani (1404), in an article titled “Calligraphy in Islamic Funerary Architecture: A Discursive Analysis of Memory, Space, and Legitimacy,” has demonstrated that calligraphy is not merely an artistic element but a social and discursive medium in shaping identity and legitimacy in Islamic architecture.

The distinguishing feature of the present article from the published works is its focus on the application of calligraphy in non-ritual architecture (non-religious buildings) with emphasis on the functions of this art.

Architectural Scripts

With the arrival of the Arabs in Iran, Pahlavi script was used alongside Arabic script until the fourth century AH. The Arabic script underwent many transformations by Iranians. Iranians gradually separated their writing styles from those of the Arabs. Iranians and Arabs commonly used Kufic script until the fourth century AH. From this time, Eastern Kufic script (cursive, Iranian) branched off from it, which was more elegant, thinner, and more dynamic than the Arabic style. Iranians combined Iranian scripts with Arabic or combined several Arabic scripts with each other, adapting them to their own spirit and making them independent of Arabic scripts. Thus, they created Nasta’liq from the combination of the new Naskh script with Ta’liq, and Ta’liq from the combination of Tawqi’ and Riqā’ (Abedinpour & Sammaei: 72).

Kufic script is the first well-formed and rule-based script in which numerous copies of the Holy Quran were written. Gradually, with the development of Kufic script, it was used in architecture, in tilework, stucco, and wood carving (Loqmani, Vali Beg, & Mazahrian, 1403: 541–542).

Functions of Calligraphy in Architecture

In addition to its decorative and aesthetic qualities, calligraphy and inscription writing in architecture have had various functions such as information dissemination, propaganda, blessing-seeking, and identity formation. In fact, writing has had a dual function: both for reading and for adornment (Farid, 1399: 147).

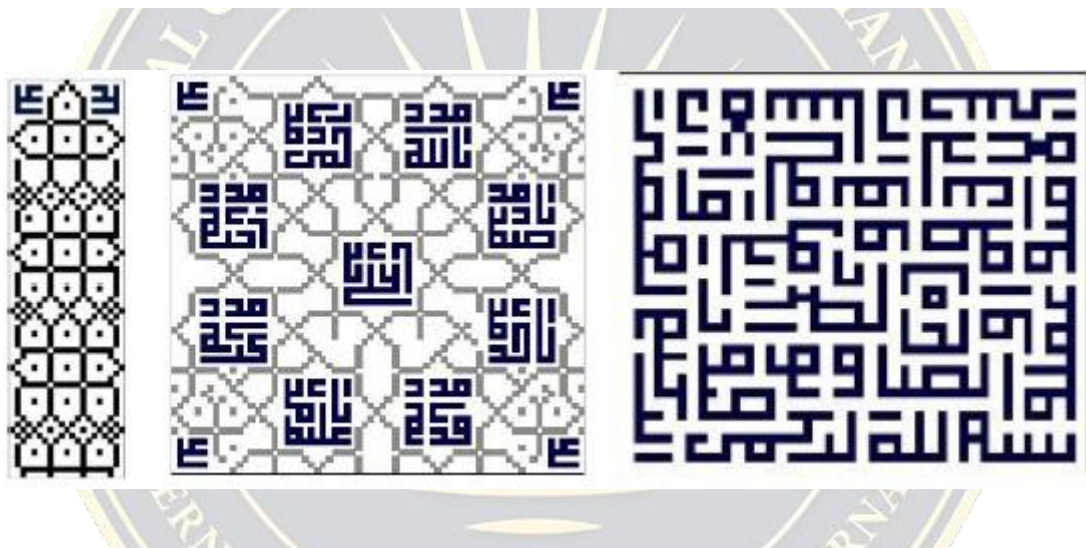
Aesthetic Function

The invention of the calligraphy alphabet should be considered one of the most prominent creative activities in the field of aesthetics (Pope: 234). The inscriptions on buildings are among the important physical elements in which the aesthetic function of calligraphy is manifested.

In addition to their decorative function, inscriptions are important due to the political-social information and extensive knowledge they provide in the fields of paleography and linguistics (Zand, 1395: 16–17). In the early Islamic centuries, building inscriptions were written in angular Kufic script. At the beginning of the fourth century AH, this simple script was written in various styles and with different motifs. The shift from angular to cursive script in the writing of inscriptions on buildings can be observed before the sixth century AH. The most famous cursive script used for inscription writing in later centuries was Thuluth (Kardar Tehrani, 1395: 61).

Inscriptions can be divided into four general categories based on function and content: Religious inscriptions, whose greatest use can be found in religious places. Didactic or moral inscriptions that have an educational function. Commemorative and construction inscriptions are a category that, in accordance with their function, are more message-oriented, with the main purpose of recording and describing an event for remembrance, commemoration, and also providing information about the opening of a place. Decorative inscriptions, whose primary goal is to adorn the building. This classification can change during the cultural and political events of each period, both in terms of text selection and script type. These changes indicate the influence of the ruling ideology of that era (Farid, 1403: 107–110).

Various scripts such as Kufic, Muhaqqaq, Thuluth, and others are used for writing inscriptions. Inscription writing with Nasta'liq script became common in Iranian architectural decorations from the ninth century AH and continued during the Safavid period (Hashemi Nejad, 1402: 74–75). In addition to the type of script, other factors in inscriptions cause the distinction of architectural inscriptions. One of these factors is the shape of the background and the frame of the inscription. Inscription frames have various shapes such as geometric shapes (square, rectangle), shamsa, and four-pointed, five-pointed, and seven-pointed stars (Loqmani, Vali Beg, & Mazahrian: 550).





The variety of frame shapes and the diversity of scripts used in them, as a decorative element, give a special character to the building. In this regard, calligraphy is one of the main pillars in representing the beauties of the building.

Identity Function

One of the functions of calligraphy in architecture is its identity-forming role. This function is realized through the themes and content of the scripts that refer to the date of construction, the purposes of building creation, and the name of the patron. The use of calligraphy in historical houses provides evidence of the identity-forming function of calligraphy.

In this context, one can refer to the Dekhanchi House in one of the old neighborhoods of Shiraz from the Qajar period. In this house, frames with seven-color tiles featuring hunting and battle scenes can be seen. Above the building entrances, the verses “Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim,” “Nasr min Allah wa Fath Qarib,” the Divine Names, and the names of Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan, and Hussein are written in Nasta’liq script on tiles. Alongside these writings, there are phrases on the courtyard tiles that indicate the name of the commissioner and the time of the tile production (Safaei & Mirza Abolghasemi, 1398: 90).

Another piece of evidence in this regard is the ceiling woods of the Mir Mohammad Sadeq Mansion in Khansar from the Qajar period. The motifs used in the ceilings of residential mansions in Khansar vary somewhat according to the social character of their owners. In houses whose owners were clergy and religious individuals (such as the Ashrafi House and Mir Mohammad Sadeq Mansion), only geometric, vegetal, floral and avian motifs, and religious calligraphy were used on wood. However, in houses with non-clerical owners (Shah Heydari House and Soulat al-Molk), human and animal motifs, and sometimes non-religious poems, appear alongside some religious phrases such as “Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim.” The motifs on the woods were executed on red ochre, yellow, black, and blue backgrounds and enjoy considerable variety (floral, bird, human figures, Persian or Arabic poems, etc.) (Sedighian & Sabzi, 1395: 39).

Inscriptions on house entrances, in addition to visual beauty, serve as an indicator for identifying cultural characteristics, religious beliefs and convictions, and, in general, the identity, class base, and social status of the builders and owners of the houses (Mohammadi & Rajabi, 1389: 19). In addition to old houses, the most important non-ritual buildings where the identity function can be observed are water reservoirs, caravanserais, timchehs, coffeeshouses, bathhouses, and ribats. A table refers to some of these buildings.

Blessing-Seeking Function

The word “barakah” (blessing) is one of the most frequent terms in the branches of Islamic culture (Mohammadzadeh, Gohari, & Janipour, 1388: 44). Commentators consider barakah to mean beneficial good and an imperceptible matter, both material and spiritual (ibid.: 58).

The use of calligraphy in Iranian architecture has also been for seeking blessing and goodness for the residents of the buildings. Attention to letters and their spiritual value dates back to the early Hijri centuries. The science of letters (ilm al-huruf) holds a special position and importance in Islamic culture. Some examples of the importance of letters and the attitude toward them in Iranian-Islamic culture are listed below:

- The importance of the disconnected letters (muqatta’at) in Quranic surahs;
- Naming Surah 68 of the Quran as Surah al-Qalam (The Pen);
- The spiritual etiquette of calligraphy;
- Writing sources about letters and their hidden meanings;
- Extracting numerical connotations from letters;
- The meaningfulness of scripts and the connection of script with various sciences in Iran;
- The growth of ideas based on the value of letters among Sufis, such as the thoughts of the Hurufiyya and Nuqtaviyya sects in Iran (Hashemi Nejad, 1389: 265–267).

The existence of mystical tendencies among calligraphers and viewing calligraphic works as manifestations of divine knowledge (Hashemi Nejad, 1389: 273), along with the writing of the Word of God and Quranic verses in the art of calligraphy (Salehi Kakhki et al., 1396: 123), led to the spiritual valuation of this art in Iranian-Islamic culture. The spiritual position of the art of calligraphy also caused patrons, owners of buildings, and architects to use this art to obtain blessing and goodness for themselves.

Inscription writing is one of the characteristics of Iranian-Islamic architecture that, in addition to beauty, contains valuable information for historical documentation (Salehi Kakhki et al.: 124).

The art of calligraphy, which had developed from the fourth century AH in a discourse filled with mathematical and geometric interpretations, took shape in the seventh and eighth centuries AH under the influence of Sufism and mystical thoughts. The religious policies of the Safavid government also influenced the religious perception of calligraphy. It was in this discursive space that beliefs such as calligraphy being a form of spiritual journey and conduct emerged (Vatan Khah Khanqah & Maziar, 1400: 117–118).

Didactic Function

One of the missions of Islamic art, due to its connection with the sacred, is its didactic dimension. Calligraphy, as one of the most prominent Islamic arts, from the early centuries gained a worthy position for expressing spiritual concepts, ethical and educational teachings in all arts, especially in architectural decorations. This didactic function, which aims at educating the audience and society, is observable in architectural inscriptions. Examining the themes of Iranian architectural inscriptions reveals the presence of ethical themes, religious beliefs, and messages about seeking knowledge and science. The use of Quranic verses and hadiths to strengthen the content of the didactic message is one of the essential features of inscription writing in Iranian buildings. Another feature in Iranian architecture is the harmony between the didactic themes of the inscriptions and the function of the building. For example, in the inscriptions of the Chaharbagh School in Isfahan, various verses, hadiths, poems, and themes about the importance of seeking knowledge and science can be observed (Aghadaoudi et al., 1395: 14–16).

Table 1: Examples of the Application of Calligraphy Art in Iranian Buildings

Site / Building	Fig. No.	Content of the Inscriptions / Calligraphy	Source
Hazrat Imam Hasan Water Reservoir, Baba Vali Quarter, Kashan	Fig. 1	Records the date of restoration, the patron of the renovation, and the naming of the structure.	Niazi, 2007 (1386): 201.
Abbasqoli Khan Water Reservoir, Zanzan	Fig. 2	Mentions the patron, the year of construction, and the purpose of the foundation.	Nourollahi & Alilu, 2016 (1395): 113.
Haj Mir Hasan Qazvini Bathhouse	Fig. 3	A <i>Nasta'liq</i> inscription indicating the year of restoration and the patron.	Monazzam Esmaeilpour & Darvari: 7.
Qaraei Water Reservoir	Fig. 4	Mentions the benefactor (waqf donor) and includes a prayer for the patrons.	Anani, Mohammadian & Sharif Kazemi: 19.
Ganjali Khan Caravanserai, Kerman	Fig. 5	Records the name of the patron and the calligrapher (Reza Abbasi).	Javadi & Rabro: 39.
Alimardan Khan Water Reservoir, Kerman	Fig. 6	A poem describing the quenching of the thirsty.	Hasheminejad: 77.
Entrance Portal of Chahar Bagh School, Isfahan	Fig. 7	A <i>Nasta'liq</i> inscription containing a poem praising the patron of the building.	Hasheminejad: 78.
Dar al-Fonun Inscription (Pahlavi Period)	Fig. 8	A quotation attributed to Ardashir I (Ardashir Babakan) emphasizing the importance of wisdom.	Farid: 114.
Entrance Inscription of the	Fig.	Emphasizes the importance of	Farid: 114.

Site / Building	Fig. No.	Content of the Inscriptions / Calligraphy	Source
Tabriz Boys' Teacher Training College (Pahlavi Period)	9	knowledge and its relationship with ability.	
Eastern Wall of Rudsar Municipality Building (Pahlavi Period)	Fig. 10	A poem encouraging assistance to the needy.	Farid: 113.
Wooden Calligraphic and Floral-Bird Decorations in the Ashrafi House	Fig. 11	Records the construction date, the patron, and the calligrapher.	Sedighian & Sabzi: 39.
Inscriptions within the Muqarnas of Nim Avard School	Fig. 12	Mentions the name of Imam Ali (A.S.) and the Divine Names (<i>Asma' al-Husna</i>).	Loqmani, Valibeyg & Mazaherian: 548.
Inscription of Nim Avard School	Fig. 13	Surah Al-'Asr from the Qur'an.	Loqmani, Valibeyg & Mazaherian: 549.
Jalaliyeh School Inscription	Fig. 14	The Divine Names and the name of Imam Ali (A.S.).	Loqmani, Valibeyg & Mazaherian: 549.
Baqeriyeh School Inscription and the Entrance Spandrel	Fig. 15	The names of Imam Ali (A.S.) and Imam Husayn (A.S.), together with the invocation " Ya Allah. "	Loqmani, Valibeyg & Mazaherian: 549–550.
Bannā'ī Script Inscription on the Drum of the Dome of Kasehgaran School	Fig. 16	A Qur'anic verse concerning the construction of mosques.	Loqmani, Valibeyg & Mazaherian: 552.
Dome Chamber Inscription of the Sayyid Rokn al-Din Complex (Rokniyeh School) – Qur'anic Verses	Fig. 17	Qur'anic verses from Surah Al-Baqarah up to verse 137, addressing monotheism, the Hereafter, the Qur'an, warning, and glad tidings.	Shishehbari & Farahmand Boroujeni: 72.
Dome Chamber Inscription of the Sayyid Rokn al-Din Complex (Rokniyeh School) – <i>Al-Mulk Lillah</i>	Fig. 18	The phrases " Al-Mulk Lillah " ("Sovereignty belongs to God") and " Allahu Akbar " ("God is the Greatest"), emphasizing God's greatness and majesty.	Shishehbari & Farahmand Boroujeni: 72.
Shrine Inscription of Sayyid Shams al-Din (Shamsiyeh School) – Saying of Imam Ali (A.S.)	Fig. 19	"Do not look at who speaks; look at what is said."	Shishehbari & Farahmand Boroujeni: 73.
Shrine Inscription of Sayyid Shams al-Din (Shamsiyeh School) – Hadith of the Prophet (PBUH)	Fig. 20	"People are asleep; when they die, they awaken."	Shishehbari & Farahmand Boroujeni: 73.
Dome Chamber Inscription of Gonbad-e Hasht Shrine (Hosseinian School) – Divine Names I	Fig. 21	Divine Names and attributes emphasizing reverence, fear of God, and hope in Him.	Shishehbari & Farahmand Boroujeni: 76.
Dome Chamber Inscription of Gonbad-e Hasht Shrine (Hosseinian School) – Divine Names II	Fig. 22	Divine Names and attributes emphasizing God's mercy, sovereignty, supremacy, goodness, and excellence.	Shishehbari & Farahmand Boroujeni: 77.

Site / Building	Fig. No.	Content of the Inscriptions / Calligraphy	Source
Names II			

Conclusion

The use of script in Iranian architecture has a long history. In fact, this antiquity and the frequency of script use in non-ritual architecture (non-religious buildings) are due to the capacities of the art of calligraphy. The capacities of calligraphy—such as possessing technical rules, spiritual dignity, and the ability to integrate with painting—have led to its application in Iranian architecture. Calligraphy in non-ritual Iranian architecture has had diverse applications, including decorative and aesthetic functions, blessing-seeking function, identity function, and didactic function. From an aesthetic perspective, the various forms of scripts, the diversity of inscription techniques, and the influence of factors such as the shape, background, and frame of inscriptions have played a significant role in the use of calligraphy in architecture. In addition to what has been said, the themes of the inscriptions, as an identity-forming element along with didactic themes, have given a special position to the art of calligraphy and its application in non-ritual Iranian architecture.

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Figures

Fig. 1. Calligraphic inscription of the Hazrat Imam Hasan Water Reservoir, Baba Vali Quarter, Kashan.

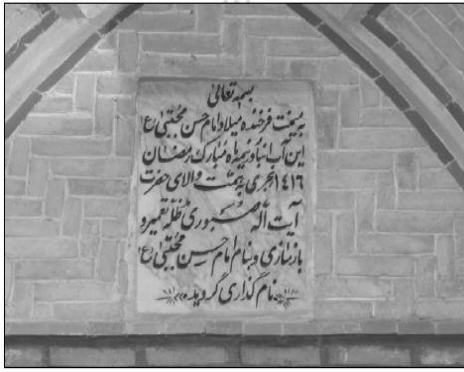


Fig. 2. Calligraphic inscription of the Abbasqoli Khan Water Reservoir, Zanjan.



Fig. 3. Nasta'liq inscription of Haj Mir Hasan Qazvini Bathhouse.



Fig. 4. Calligraphic inscription of the Qaraei Water Reservoir.



Fig. 5. Calligraphic inscription of Ganjali Khan Caravanserai, Kerman.

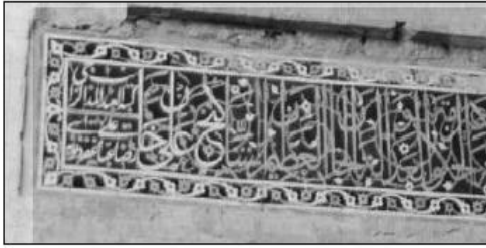


Fig. 6. Inscription of the Alimardan Khan Water Reservoir, Kerman.



Fig. 7. *Nasta'liq* inscription on the entrance portal of Chahar Bagh School, Isfahan.



Fig. 8. Dar al-Fonun inscription (Pahlavi period).



Fig. 9. Entrance inscription of the Tabriz Boys' Teacher Training College (Pahlavi period).



Fig. 10. Inscription on the eastern wall of the Rudsar Municipality Building.



Fig. 11. Wooden calligraphic and floral-bird decoration in the Ashrafi House.



Fig. 12. Muqarnas inscriptions of Nim Avard School.



Fig. 13. Inscription of Nim Avard School (*Surah Al-'Asr*).



Fig. 14. Inscription of Jalaliyeh School.



Fig. 15. Baqeriyeh School entrance inscription.

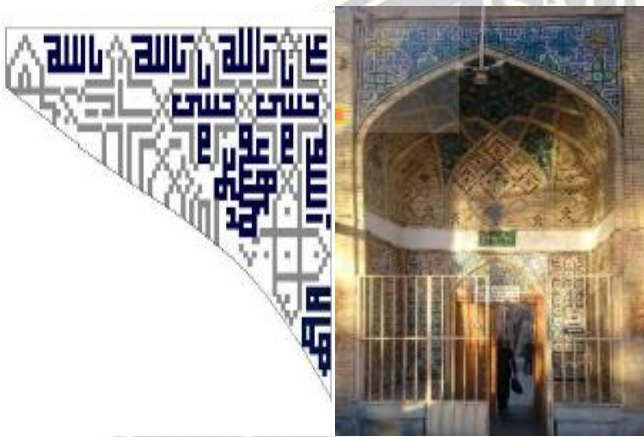


Fig. 16. *Bannā'ī* script inscription on the dome drum of Kasehgaran School.



Fig. 17. Qur'anic inscription in the dome chamber of the Sayyid Rokn al-Din Complex (Rok-niyeh School).



Fig. 18. "Al-Mulk Lillah" inscription in the dome chamber of the Sayyid Rokn al-Din Complex.



Fig. 19. Inscription bearing the saying of Imam Ali (A.S.) in the Shamsiyeh School.



Fig. 20. Prophetic hadith inscription in the Shamsiyeh School.



Fig. 21. Divine Names inscription in the dome chamber of Gonbad-e Hasht Shrine (Hosseini-an School).



Fig. 22. Divine Names inscription (second panel) in the dome chamber of Gonbad-e Hasht Shrine (Hosseinian School).

