

A Study on the ‘Philosophy of Decoration’ in the Seljuk Period (5th to 6th Centuries CE) Emphasizing the Dome of ‘Taj Al- Molk’ of the Isfahan Grand Mosque

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The Seljuk period (5th–6th Centuries CE) is one of the most important historical periods of Islamic Iran in various arts formed and developed in accordance with Islamic beliefs. Brick-laying decoration is one of the most valuable types of Persian Architectural decorations, and The Seljuk period is the era of extraordinary development and progress of this art and the ‘Taj Al-Molk’ Dome of the Isfahan Grand Mosque is known as its masterpiece. In fact, the flourishing of bricklaying decoration and its relationship to Seljuk’s cultural and religious beliefs in the sphere of aesthetics is the subject of this article. Historical, descriptive-analytical methods have been used to investigate historical documents and field observation. The result shows the cultural aspects that affect the artists’ extraordinary use of decorating elements in Seljuk architecture. A confirmation of a ‘Philosophy of Decoration’ based on a common language in the aesthetic perception of pure Islamic-Iranian art as could see in ‘Taj Al-Molk’ Dome with the usage of highly evolved decorative elements such as Bricklaying tiles, Geometric patterns, and Kufic scripts. Muslim artists used decoration as a decisive role in connecting the material world (physical world) to the world of ideas in order to express their thoughts and mystical and religious ideals. With the help of elements such as rhythm, coordination, harmony, balance, etc., they realize their philosophical principles in action and create a new philosophy that transforms the material into a visualization of unity in multiplicity, as a major ideal of the “Philosophy of decoration”. A manifestation of the attributes of the Only God, who shaped the world being, as the Source of beauty.

Keywords: Philosophy of Decoration, bricklaying decoration, Seljuk art, ‘Taj Al-Molk’ Dome, unity in multiplicity.

Introduction

Problem statement

The purpose of this study is to prove the existence of a philosophy called *Philosophy of Decoration* in the Seljuk art, especially its bricklaying decoration, to discover its ornamental and content attributes as a connecticircling chain between the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods of various cultural and artistic dimensions.

Research questions:

1. What is Islamic Iranian Philosophy of Decoration and how did it appear in the Seljuk bricklaying art?
2. What is the reason for the extensive use of bricklaying decorations as the main element of decoration in ‘Taj Al-Molk’ Dome of the Isfahan Grand Mosque and its meaning and references?

Research hypotheses:

1. The nature of Iranian art is decorative, based on its religious and mystical culture. Therefore, Iranian arts have a common concept that is translated into form. The structural study of these motifs and understanding of the concepts and goals of the Iranian-Islamic artist can prove the existence of a *Philosophy of Decoration* in Persian art and philosophy that appeared in the Seljuk period bricklaying art.
2. It seems that Seljuk’s bricklaying decorations have roots in pre-Islamic architecture, and the presence of prominent Islamic philosophers and masters of Arts, who have caused the development of decorative elements to express religious beliefs. It can be a reason for the abundance and flourishing of bricklaying decorations of Seljuk era and are rooted in the beliefs of these tribes that appeared in natural and symbolic elements.

Literature review

There have been many documents on the history of the Seljuks and their art, which a limited number have been devoted to the architecture of that period. Cattelli and Hambis [1] introduced Seljuk art, but it does not comprehensively reflect the details of it. One of the most important sources of Seljuk Art is Gholam Ali Hatam’s book entitled ‘*Islamic architecture of Iran in the Seljuk period*’ [2] that shows the outstanding buildings of this period and their decorations. Zohreh Bozorg Mehri [3] introduced the bricklaying decorations in General but Maher Al-Naqsh [4] introduced the geometric motifs of brickwork in detail especially the Seljuk ones.

There are also articles about Taj Al-Molk Dome history, function and form. However, understanding the brickwork of Taj Al-Molk Dome and proving a separate practical philosophy called *The Philosophy of Decoration* is compatible with all Iranian Islamic arts as a common language. Mysticism and the concepts in the brickwork motifs of the Seljuk period have been briefly researched and can be used as primary sources of this research, but the reasons for the Seljuk artists’ excessive use of ornamental elements and their attributes have not been mentioned.

The architecture of Seljuk period recognized as one of the most important periods of Islamic Art. The political stability of the Seljuk era lets artists enable to create major works and innovations such as the complex moulding techniques and brick patterns as architectural decorations as elaborated buildings of Islamic-Iranian architecture [5, p. 54; 1, p. 9–21]. “*God is beautiful and loves beauty*” (in Arabic: *ان الله جميل و يحب الجمال*) is a *hadith* indicates the absolute beauty of God; also in Qur’an: “*He is Allah, the Creator, the Maker, and the Former. To Him belong the Best Names*” (in Arabic: *هو الله الخالق البارء المصور له الاسماء الحسنی*). God is the source of goodness and beauty, so the artwork, as a creature of the artist, indicates the

existence of the Glorious God and His beauties by showing beauty, because it deals with beauty [6, p.75]. In Islamic art, God's absolute beauty crystallization realized in Decorations. The aesthetics principle of decoration based on the reflection of God's beauty in all aspects of the world being as the main manifestation of Iranian Islamic Art [7, p.4].

One of the most elaborate architectural decorations of the Seljuk period is the brickwork of the Taj Al-Molk Dome, and its unique species of most beautiful and richly decorated brick layouts recognized as its evidence. So the manifestation of divine beauty as the main subject of Islamic art and architecture and Decoration as the main tool of showing it is Deniable through history. The link of this connection ensures the emergence of truth by *Philosophy of Decoration*. This philosophy, as a tool for unity, diversity, etc., has had a transcendental reflection in art, appeared in different historical periods with different properties and forms, and manifested in the form of decorations in Iranian Islamic art. The different concepts behind the decorations have roots in these tribes' culture and religious and mythological beliefs. All these concepts have represented in a symbolic way and gradually transformed into motifs of the Islamic era [7, p.19].

Some researchers believe many realized examples of their art such as mosque architecture are expressions of wisdom and direct expression of mysticism or the result of Islamic ideas coming into existence as a result of Iranian masters' experience through the ages.

They believe works of the Islamic era are the objective manifestations of the hidden role of works that describe it as the work of "content and the heart", the two roles that are completely compatible with each other [8, p.76; 9, p.12; 10, p.26].

Islamic architecture is a whole process of science and art, taste, trust and faith, and special skills that shape the greatest representation of truth in art through an aesthetic experience of the idea. A holy idea issued from a domain beyond matter and heaven, the continuation of a tradition that manifests pure Islamic wisdom and its spiritual teachings through symbols and mystical language in the external world materialistic body. Since meaning has considered as a mystery in the theoretical foundations of architecture and art, so the first step is to understand the relationship between form and meaning in brick-laying.

In fact, form is the apparent aspect perceived by the five senses, and the discoveries of any meaning for human are in the format of a form through which that meaning reveals itself to human. Therefore, the world of form is nothing but meaning, and they are the inner meanings of the external world that lead man to the truth [11, p.51; 12, p.70].

Influential ornamental components of Seljuk's bricklaying art

Taj Al-Molk Dome built by Taj Al-Molk Khosrow Firooz Shirazi in the northernmost part of the Jāmeḥ Mosque (also known as the Atiq Mosque) is one of the most beautiful domes that reflects brickwork and geometric patterns, floral forms, and written manuscripts of Seljuk art [13, p.53; 14, p.106]. As a part of the culture, it gives objectivity of thought through its appearance and decorations, a cultural structure, and an explanation of identity. The bricklaying of the Seljuk art was influenced by Iran's climate, economy, and cultural, social, political, religious, and educational developments. The combination of pre and post-Islamic aesthetic values of its decoration represents the physical and immaterial aspects that are dependent on each other and its physical side represents cultural values and identity.

Philosophy of Decoration in bricklaying of Taj Al-Molk Dome

All Muslim philosophers throughout history considered the state of existence as reality and fancy and considered Iranian Islamic art to be a translation of philosophy. The decorative nature of Persian art tends to be more abstract due to monotheistic values and mystical tendencies. The common culture, spirituality, and morality of pre and post-Islamic beliefs are the foundation of this rational, moral, tasteful, and decorative art.

The practical *Philosophy of Decoration* is the translation of existence, the Necessary Being, the only creator of the universe, and sacred divine essence concepts in the finite embodiment in the form of beautiful art using the element of decoration, gives it a material form and brings that invisible unity and oneness to the stage of manifestation in material forms. The relationship between abstract and coordinating the whole structure of the geometric form and content, in a way that leads the artists to represent the essence of truth and the unity as unity in plurality and plurality in unity. Artists' imagination is the origin of art and beauty that appears in the form of decoration. An adornment, something that adorns and beautifies, emphasizes the value of the material and is not a necessity of Islamic art object.

Also, the Islamic architecture themes give form to its decorations [15, p. 102]. However, in addition to meaningful ornamental motifs, Taj Al-Molk Dome shows the refinement and structural harmony and coordination of components with a single whole causes it to take on a new color and smell besides *Philosophy of Decoration*, and moves away from antiquity, and forms go beyond their material and familiar meanings and find a higher quality than their appearance. Since "decoration" means beautification and separation of a person from his individuality, and "*simulation and beautification*" as a mystical approach, has caused the formation of a special language in the structure of Iranian art. Therefore, mystical artists used it as a tool to show the beauty of God in unity, and by analogy and purification without relying on the concepts that everyone uses to decipher it, their immediate and intuitive perception of their inner course. Rather than simply imitating nature, ornaments made of geometric interpretations of nature to reduce their distance from their creator, which is rooted in pre-Islamic beliefs. Alaudoulah Simnani wrote, "This is not me, if I am, it is you / if the shirt is on me, it is you" [16, p. 99]. Hence, "the promotion of a single point of view has emerged in the combination of the art of abstract decoration, separate from matter and nature, which transcends the world and does not imitate nature completely" [17, p. 14]. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the doctrinal and religious concepts of the creators and their appearance manifestation in material forms, especially in the mosques as the most important place of Islamic religious art that serve as the bases of a wider perception through institutionalism and allegory [18, p. 49].

Bricklaying decorations of Taj Al-Molk Dome

One of the outstanding features of the Taj Al-Molk Dome is their utilization, skill, art, and creativity in the extensive use of brick for structural and decorative use. They create a beautiful, light, and weightless brick dome. The image of one of the most beautiful decorations of it has represented in order to better understand and prove the content by analyzing its patterns form and content.

1. *Geometric bricklaying decoration of interior façade under the dome from the South-West*

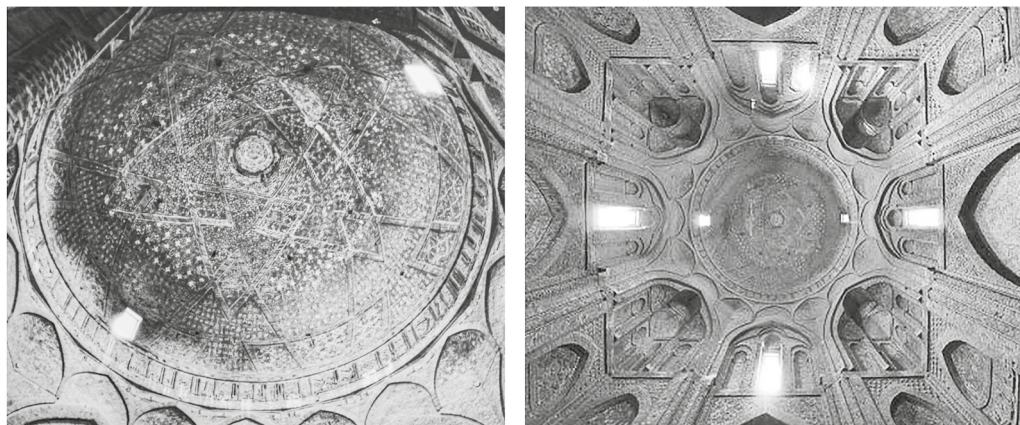


Fig. 1. Geometric bricklaying decoration of the dome

Type of bricklaying decorations: A central pentagon surrounded with large stars and integrated geometric patterns, creates a sense of order, proportion, balance, harmony, and symmetry in bricklaying (Fig. 1).

Related comments of thinkers, philosophers and researchers about these decorations. The unity of mixed motifs into a whole represents divine beauty. Geometry represents unity in the spatial order, which represents unity in the worldly order and proportion as the visible form of order that divides the dome's circle into encompassed regular shapes, which is the symbol of the unity of being, and includes all ancient forms of being» [19, p. 165; 20, p. 87; 21, p.3]. The concept of symmetry refers to the meaning of mirror in Islamic architecture that symbolizes eternity and infinity. As Mulla Sadra says: «All the entities are the mirrors of the existence of the Supreme Being and the Self-Discloser of His holy truth» [22, p.62; 23, p.356]. The decorations in Islamic architecture are not considered exoteric decorations, but it is a fundamental category, not superficial art that originates from the deep ideas of its creators [7, p. 17; 24, p. 66; 25, p. 115; 15, p. 45].

The author's inference about the artist's goals to prove the philosophy of decoration. Harmony and unity of dome structure and decoration create a focal point for spectators to seek the glory of God spread through the completely geometrical patterns of the Dome. Decorations manifesting the concept of being oneness, a materialistic manifestation from mysticism during the transition from unity to multiplicity and vice versa. A journey from the forms to beliefs expressing the sacred thoughts of a mystic artist that believes in the unity of the world being with its creator.

2. *Bricklaying decorations in the body inscriptions of corridors, arches, flanges and naves of Taj Al-Molk Dome*

Type of bricklaying decorations: The drum is shaped by three rows of Arches transforming the square plan of the prayer hall into the circle plan of the dome. All the arches and semi-columns have been decorated with bricks and intertwined moulded pieces (Fig. 2).

The *mihrab* wall arches have different repeating stellar motifs in harmony that depicts multiplicity from unity and multiplicity to unity. The eastern entrance and its arch express unity by merging repeating hexagonal stars and beautiful geometric shapes to create larger

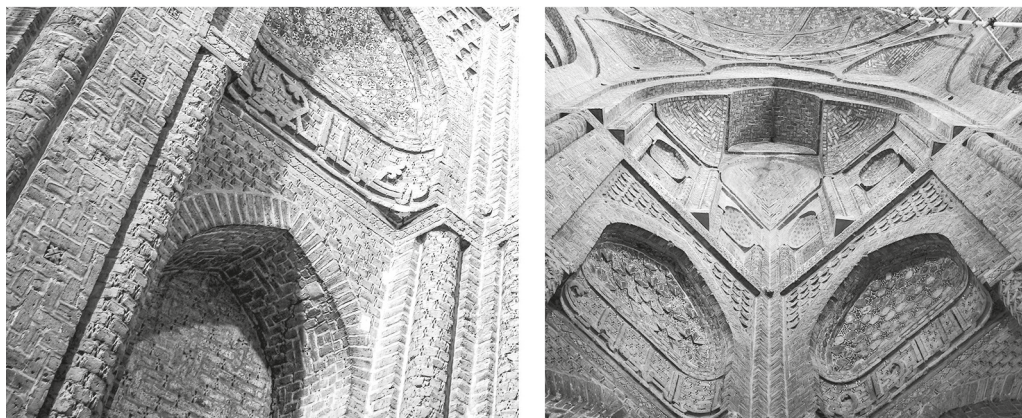


Fig. 2. Bricklaying decorations of the southwest and northeast of the Taj Al-Molk Dom

polygons. The surfaces of the building have been decorated in the form of alternative and uniform stars, and floral patterns in regular geometric patterns create a unified atmosphere. Above the inscriptions, a gypsum panel of polygons and six-pointed stars create harmony, and order between the adjacent parts and the entire walls.

Comments related to these decorations by thinkers, philosophers and researchers.

Mulla Sadra believes that «Beauty is a unique reality and the multiplicity of beauty is a degree multiplicity that better knowledge of it depends on better knowledge of existence. Existence is the best form of perceived intuition. Therefore, the exact knowledge of beauty depends on its intuitive knowledge [26, p. 235; 27, p. 101]. “Existence is neither whole, nor part, nor general, nor specific, nor unique in unity beyond its essence, nor multiplicity, but according to levels and authorities, these things accompanies it. An absolute, constrained, whole, part, general, specific, unique and plural existence without any change in it” [28, p. 4].

The author’s inference about the artist’s goals to prove the philosophy of decoration. The multiplicity of motifs created by the unity of bricks shapes a connection between the physical materialistic world and the Ideal world of transcendental origin (multiplicity in unity). Beautiful repeated and integrated geometric shapes represent mystical and spiritual expression in these pure geometric forms and echo the creative spirit and taste of the Seljuk artists who are on a spiritual journey beautifully and calmly. Emphasis on justice in Islamic thought brings the idea of aesthetics based on mathematics and proportion as a depiction of relationships in nature. Therefore, the display of geometric order with its uniformity, repetition, and mathematics, establishes a connection between the whole and parts in reaching a pleasant feeling representing the unity of creating, the unity of representing an infinite manifestation of the artist’s belief. Order, symmetry, and proportion, as one of the most important infrastructures of the “philosophy of decoration”, with their spiritual sense in the eyes of the beholder, facilitate the perception of the beautiful, calm atmosphere of the dome.

3. Brickwork decorations of Kufic inscriptions in Taj Al-Molk Dome

Type of bricklaying decoration. The Kufic brick inscriptions of the dome (Fig. 3) includes verse 54 of al-Araf Sura. 32 spandrels under the inscription has been decorated with divine names and attributes, and above the six arches in the corner filled with verses 78 and 79 verses of Al-Isra Sura [29, p. 77–78].

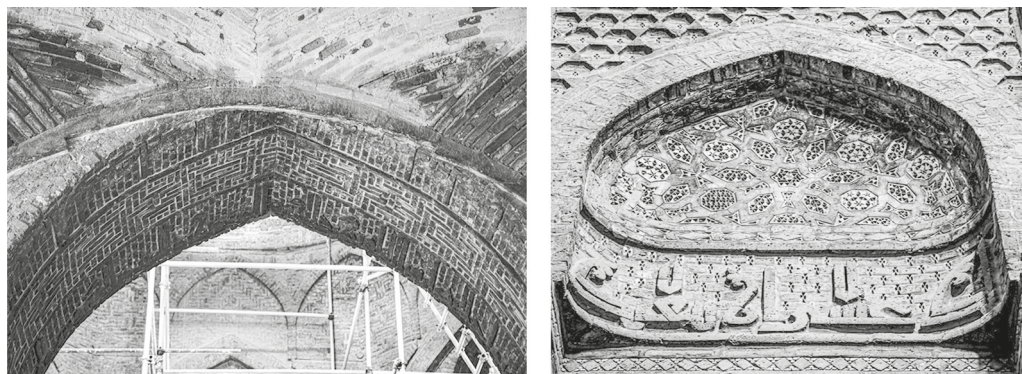


Fig. 3. Brickwork decorations of Kufic inscriptions in Taj Al-Molk Dome

Comments related to these decorations by thinkers, philosophers and researchers. According to Burckhardt, the origin of the beauty of objects is the attributes of divine beauty and perfection, and we cannot recognize perfection in anything unless we know how that thing can be the mirror of the manifestation of God. The attributes of God are the same as His essence [30, p. 25-33; 23, p. 145]. Artists by writing these verses as a sign of connection between art, religion, and the fundamental principle of existence represent the existence of divinity inside and around them [31, p. 6; 32, p. 96]. Because Islamic philosophers from the time of Farabi believed that every existing is either a possible or Necessary Being. Thus, only the existence of God is the Necessary Being and the rest are possible and depend on God, and God is a Being that subsists through its own essence [33, p. 37; 34, p. 38-45].

The author's inference about the artist's goals to prove the philosophy of decoration. Having spiritual concepts beyond aesthetic aspects of Kufic inscriptions is due to the influence of Seljuk's Sunni religion and devotion to the caliphate system and accepting the Qur'an, and tradition as the basis of the artists' life that manifests in the bricklaying of these inscriptions. Because of their inspiration from the Holy Quran, their artistic creation is based on monotheism as the main spiritual principle, and divine names, and attributes as the spiritual and sacred dimensions that were brought into the dome.

Diversity and multiplicity of motifs are like divine names and attributes that signify one existence in addition to the physical beauty, creating a mystical, thoughtful, and philosophical quiddity as the foundation of the "philosophy of decoration".

Case study

Due to the plurality of the dome decorative forms, this article focuses only on the *mihrab* wall because it can express significant issues to understanding the *Philosophy of Decoration* in the mind of the mystic Islamic- Iranian artists (Fig. 4).

The whole decorations in this part of the brickwork express Seljuk artists' thoughts such as perfectionism and a kind of idealism to create aesthetics of unity. It shows that the artist intends to depict a galaxy in the spectator's mind (as a symbol of infinity, the vast-

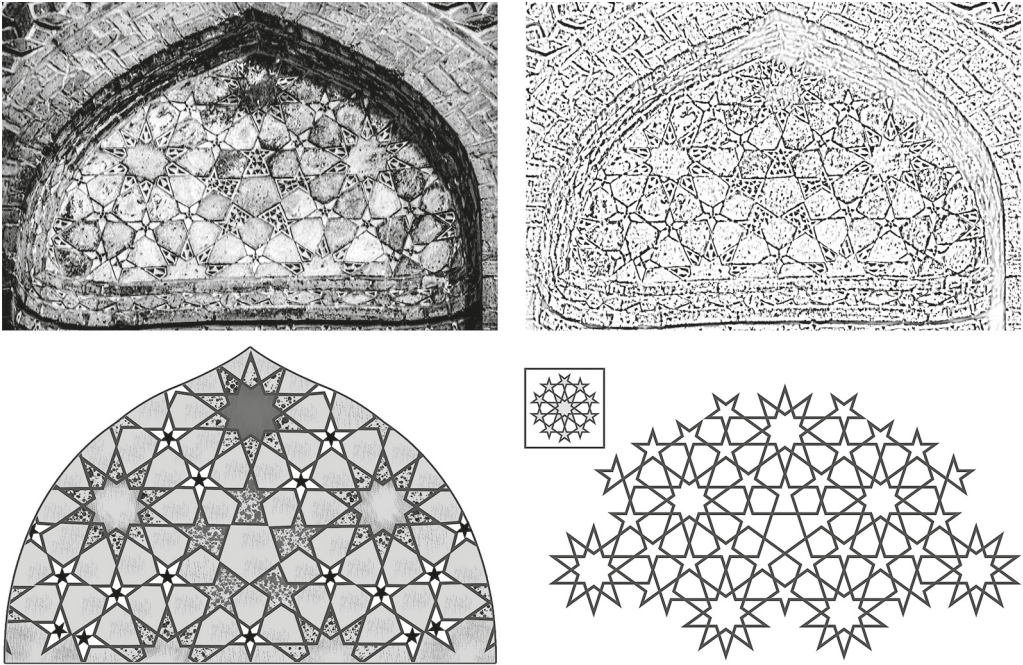


Fig. 4. Analysis of the mihrab wall decorations of Taj Al-Molk Dome

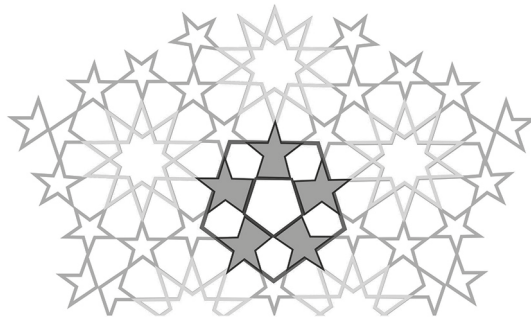


Fig. 5. Analysis of multiplicity in unity and seven geometric forms

ness of the universe, and the greatness of creation) through architectural space. The relief, which celebrated the unique creator and its attributes that have depicted in the main ten-pointed and white Pentagon stars, rotates around them in order, harmony, rhythm, and symmetry.

Under the above central ten-pointed star, there are five stars with different forms, which are combined with geometric motifs like pentagons that together create a large geometric panel (Fig. 5). The total seven geometric forms combined with five surrounding stars seem an expression of unity in plurality and refer to the holiness of this number in Islam like the seven stages of creation mentioned in verses 67–68 of Al-Ghaafir or seven

skies etc. So these unified motifs were arranged in a circular manner as if they rotate freely around each other as a metaphor for the world wheel.

By generalizing the words of some great philosophers in examining the basics of the *“philosophy of decoration”* it can be clearly stated that the decorations of all the motifs are related to each other with geometric and mathematical proportions. They unified in space to create other forms, to become multiplicity in the heart of greater unity to reach the desired perfection and create a cohesive whole. The artists use an eternal pattern instead of tangible forms, in a way that as if their imaginary forms join the apparitional figure of the Divine world and manifest «unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity» (purification from the oneness and purity of the divine essence of the most sacred), which is manifested in harmony and coordination in Iranian art. According to Islamic mysticism, it is the monopoly of the existence of God, which also includes other objects in terms of size and scope [35, p.21; 36, p.147].

Conclusion

What was collected from the research on the bricklaying art of the Seljuk period in the Taj Al-Molk Dome as one of the most beautiful brick domes and rich in decorations to prove the presence of a philosophy called the *Philosophy of Decoration*, indicates that this building and highly evolved decorations has taken the role of Iranian Islamic culture of the artist in the Seljuk period. All of them have the common feature of structural motifs and the decorative aspect. The Muslim artist of that period has used the element of decoration with the meaning of purity, as a determining role and a connecting link for joining the material world to the world of idea, not only for the purpose of beauty and as a part of architectural culture, but also in order to express his/her mystical and religious ideas and ideals. In these decorations, the artist manifests the doctrinal and cryptic dimensions of the world of idea in the material world in a valuable way with the help of mystical approach of simile and purification, as well as visual elements such as rhythm, order, balance, symmetry, balance, proportion, harmony, repetition and variety of bricklaying motifs, which is manifested with motifs in accordance with the related views of some great philosophers and concepts are revealed. A beautiful philosophy called the *Philosophy of Decoration* (basically the language of mysticism) is born from its heart. This philosophy has the ability to generalize and adapt to Iranian-Islamic arts, which has found its own color in each of them and has gone beyond its material and familiar meanings and finds a higher quality than what it looks like. It shows justice and aesthetic unity in the infinite embodiment and manifestation of unity in the best possible way and especially in relation to the parts with the whole, in the material forms of art. Thus, it becomes a relationship between form and content, in which motifs are born abstractly and geometrically, and the invisibles are revealed in art. It makes the presence of this philosophy, which is a combination of two types of theoretical and practical philosophy in Iranian-Islamic art, undeniable and causes pleasure and beauty. The result is the manifestation of the essence of the one God and understanding of the general system of the world. This manifestation of the unity of existence is certainly the main basis of the aesthetics of the philosophy of decoration in the sacred art. At the end of this research, all the obtained reports are summarized in the following tables in order to answer the questions of the article (Table 1, Table 2).

Table 1. The theoretical and practical aspects of the *Philosophy of Decoration*

Artists' Theoretical philosophy	Asking questions about existence, discovering the Necessary Being, the oneness of the Creator, and the knowing divine attributes of the most sacred one, are the main aim of the Islamic artist who tries to create sacred art
Artists' Practical philosophy	The manifestation of artists' perception of theoretical concepts in the form of the material world and integrated and diverse geometric patterns

Table 2. The decorative components and content attributes of the Taj Al-Molk Dome decorations

Influential factors in decorations	Decorations' Attributes and content	The artist's purpose of using decorations
Iran's territory	Unity, Multiplicity	Manifestation of the unity of aesthetics
Cultural infrastructure	Geometrical order, rhythm	Manifestation of justice, and unity of components through material with semantic qualities beyond appearance
Religious condition	Balance, harmony, symmetry	Relationship between form and content (A link between material world and the world of idea)
Social condition	Proportion, harmony, coordination	Manifestation of sacred truth and Unity of existence of the only one, the creator of world being
Economic condition	Repetition and variety	Infinite multiplicity of creation from a single origin

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Сельджукский период (5–6 вв. хиджры) — один из важнейших исторических периодов исламского Ирана в различных искусствах, сформированных и развитых исламскими верованиями. Кирпичная кладка является одним из персидских архитектурных украшений, период сельджуков — эпохой развития этого искусства, а купол «Тадж аль-Молк» Большой мечети Исфахана известен как его шедевр. Предметом статьи является расцвет кирпичной кладки и его связь с культурными и религиозными представлениями сельджуков об эстетике. Для исследования исторических документов и полевых наблюдений применялись исторический и описательно-аналитический

методы. Результат показывает культурные аспекты, влияющие на экстраординарное использование художниками декоративных элементов в сельджукской архитектуре. Подтверждение «философии украшения», основанной на общем языке в эстетическом восприятии чистого исламского иранского искусства, мы можем видеть в куполе «Тадж Аль-Молк» с использованием высокоразвитых декоративных элементов, таких как кирпичная кладка, плитки, геометрические узоры и куфические сценарии. Мусульманские художники использовали украшение как решающую роль для соединения материального (физического) мира с миром идей, чтобы выразить свои мысли и мистические и религиозные идеалы. С помощью таких элементов, как ритм и координация, гармония и баланс, они реализуют свои философские принципы в действии, чтобы создать новую философию, которая трансформирует материал в визуализацию единства во множественности как главный идеал «философии украшения», проявление атрибутов Единого Бога, сотворившего мир и являющегося Источником красоты.

Ключевые слова: философия украшения, кирпичная кладка, сельджукское искусство, купол Тадж Аль-Молк, единство во множественности.

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