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Metal Decorations of Door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque in Tabriz: Azerbaijan Folk Art from Qajar Era*

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Abstract

Mosques play a significant role in the lives of Muslims in addition to acting as places of worship. One of the most significant mosques of Azerbaijan region of Iran is Saheb al-Amr Mosque in Tabriz City. The mosque has unique designs of masks, metal hands and praying tablets made of metallic plates which were installed on the mosque door. Considering the inhibition of using portraiture in mosques and holy places, the present study intends to review the technical and artistic qualities as well as reasons behind installation of such designs on the mosque door. The primary questions of present study are concerned with (a) forms and roles of metal works of art installed on the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque, and (b) reasons of installing these metallic works of art on the mosque door considering the inhibition of using portraiture in religious places. In order to answer these questions, descriptive-analytical method was adopted. The required information and data of this study were collected through field study and library review. The data analysis method is qualitative and results of this study, following collection of data and its analysis, suggest that the metal works of art were made of low-grade silver and brass by adopting different metalworking techniques which were inspired by contemporary art of Qajar era. The importance of the mosque to the public opinion led to installation of such objects in the mosque since they acted as means of indigent Muslims' vow fulfilling.

Keywords: Saheb al-Amr Mosque, Tabriz, Metal decorations, Mosque door, Mask.

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Introduction

Mosques, as main religious centers, play a significant role in lives of Muslims of Iranian-Islamic community. In such places, Muslims give up on materialistic affairs and worship their creator. From a Muslim's viewpoint, mosques are among holiest buildings where presence of God is better felt as Muslims regard mosques as houses of God. In addition to buildings and architectures of mosques, Muslims pay attention to decorations of such places too. Tiling, brickwork and metalworking decorations prove the claim. Regarding representative Iranian mosques, one should note that more artistic decorations of a mosque are associated with higher significance of and public attention to that mosques.

One of the publicly respected mosques of Tabriz City is Saheb al-Amr Mosque. In 1887, an event occurred in the mosque which led the public to believe in high holiness of the place. Nader Mirza³ refers to this in the history and geography of the Dar al-Saltanah Tabriz: "I was in Tabriz for one thousand two hundred and sixty-five from the migration. One day we went to the recreation with the prince of Mohammadrahim Mirza, and we turned to the Aji River with a light and Hawk. They said that there is a deer, lamb, ewe and chicken. It was so much the predators got farther away. It was late last night that we arrived at Sardrood. From the bridge a lot of brightness emerged from the city, and was fuss. We said that maybe somewhere there is a fire, that is the brightness of it, and this is the life of those who have fought to quench the fire. We waited. Some of the princes came out. Congratulations (the Prophet Saheb Al-Amr Miracles. Illuminated the city and the Bazar). I asked, "What was it?" They said: "The butcher took the cow to slaughter, the cow resisted and took refuge in the mosque. The butcher took the rope there, Thrown a cow and Push, One time fell and died." We ran faster and approached Saheb Abad Square. We heard the drum and cow near the house, we reached the Bazar, all the shops were bright and the songs of Salavat, and congratulated that Tabriz became the city of Saheb Al-Amr, Exempt from taxes and rulers. The people came to the mosque everywhere and respected it. The elders for that mosque took the vow and the light. Every day people would say about the miracle of cow, until the cow is dead and the importance of the story was reduced" (Nader Mirza, 1973: 203-204).

The mosque has tiling, brickwork and mirror decorations. Metalworking decorations of the mosque door differentiate the place of worship from other similar buildings. Certain beliefs after that event about the Mosque led to installation of metal masks, tablets and hands on the entrance door of the mosque. The metal works played a significant role in development of public opinion of Qajar era. The metal decorations of the door were installed about 1895 and made by local metalworking artists. The decorations represent the popular metalworking art of Azerbaijan region. This study aims to introduce the forms, roles and techniques of making such works of art and reasons behind installing them on the mosque door. The primary questions of present study are:

Q.1- What forms and designs do the metal works of art installed on the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque have?

Q.2- Considering the inhibition of using portraiture in religious places, what are the reasons behind installing the metal works of art on the mosque door?

Methodology

The present study was conducted through descriptive-analytical method. In addition, field study and library review contributed to collection of required information. The statistical population consists of all metal works attached to the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque such as masks, claws and tablets. The sampling method is choice-based and data-analysis was done qualitatively.

³ Nader Mirza Qajar (born 1827 in Estarabad, died 1886 in Tabriz) is one of the famous writers and historians of the Qajar period. The most famous work of Nader Mirza is the book of the history and geography of the Dar al-Saltanah of Tabriz (Tabatabaee Maj, 2015, Introduction and explanation).

History of Saheb al-Amr Mosque

The Saheb al-Amr Mosque of Tabriz is located next to Quri Chay and close to Tabriz Market. The historical building is one of the buildings of Saheb-Abad Square and Hassan Padshah Complex of Aq-qoyonloha which together created the ideal city garden of “Hasht-Behesht” (i.e. eight gardens). It was so-called due to proper weather, permanent water reservoir of Quri Chay and good politico-economic condition of Tabriz (Omrani & Aminian, 2007: 93).

Saheb Abad Square was developed by Ozon Hassan Aq-Qoyonlo after his dominion over Qare-qoyonlo tribes. Before that, Saheb Abad was a garden where Qare-qoyonlo tribes had established a state. During Ilkhanid dynasty, the garden was called “Saheb Divan” which was originally made by Khaje Shams Al-din Mohammad Joveini (Ibn-Karbalai Tabrizi, 2005: 470).

Nasooch Metraqchi was one of the companions of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman sultan. He accompanied sultan during military campaigns against Iran between 1562 to 1564. Apart from reporting the campaigns, he made drawings of significant cities that were targeted by the campaigns (Hanachi & Nezhad Ebrahimi, 2007: 41) (Figure 1). In one of his maps, Saheb Abad Square and Saheb Abad Mosque were drawn.

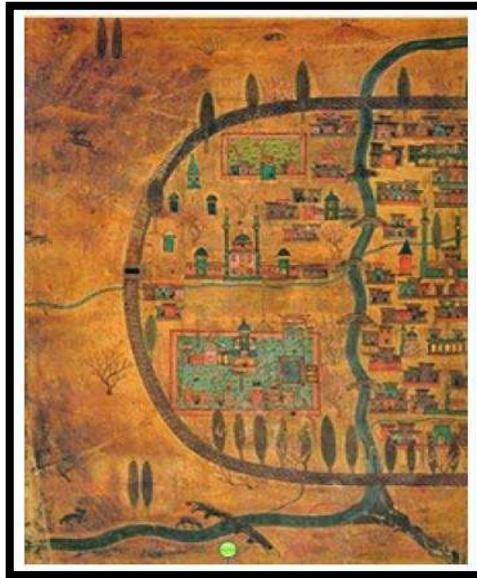


Figure 1: Map of Tabriz City with Hassan Abad Square at its right side (Metraqchi,2000: 14).

In *History of Shah Abbas the Great*, the buildings constructed by order of Tahmasp Shah of Safavid Dynasty as well as Tahmasp Shah Mosque are pointed out. In the book, it is suggested that “Among his works, one could point to construction of police station in Tehran, a fort in Mashhad as well as coating the dome of the holy Imam in gold and building a mosque in Shaheb-Abad of Tabriz City” (Eskandar Baik, 2004: 124).

There is a tablet which states, “For sure, mosques belong to Allah. So, do not take anyone for his partner. When Abdullah invited him, he was almost ready; written by Alaeddin”. As stated in the tablet, it was obviously written by Alaeddin Tabrizi who was one of the famous calligraphers during the reign of Tahmasp Shah of Safavid dynasty (Karang, 1996: 96-98). In most works of researchers, Saheb Abad Square and Saheb al-Amr Mosque have been pointed out the latter of which is claimed to have been built on remains of Shah Tahmasp Mosque. As the author of *History of Shah Abbas the Great* suggests, “In eastern part of the square

next to Central Sultan Hassan Mosque, there is another decorated mosque which was immediately destroyed by Ottoman soldiers because of its attribution to Shah Tahmasp” (ibid, 190).

Following the destruction of Shah Tahmasp Mosque by Ottomans, Mirza Mohammad Ebrahim reconstructed the mosque in 1712 (Seqatol-Islam, 1954: 27). In the earthquake of 1815, the buildings inside of Saheb Abad fell down and Saheb al-Amr Square was reconstructed in 1830 by Jafar Qoli Khan Denbeli, the governor of Azerbaijan region. The historical evidence of the reconstruction is the poetic verse “By order of Khan/ was revived the mosque” (Nader Mirza, 1973: 202).

The verse is concerned with date of building “Saheb al-Amr Mosque” in Tabriz which was done by Jafar Qoli Khan Danbali. He was son of Ahmad Khan and known as “Banmanqolij”. The verse itself is inspired by poets of the time who suggested in poetic terms “When the mosque was made in Tabriz/ by that well-intent man/ the divine order called to history/ and by Khan’s order the mosque was built” (Nakhjavani, 1965: 532).

Eugene Flandin, a French tourist, travelled to Iran in 1880 when Mohammad Shah of Qajar dynasty reigned over Iran. During the trip, he made valuable paintings of historical buildings in Iran. One of those paintings shows Saheb al-Amr Mosque (Figure 2).

In 1887, the mosque-related section was destroyed, rebuilt and called “Seqatol-Islam” (Omrani & Aminian, 2007: 102).

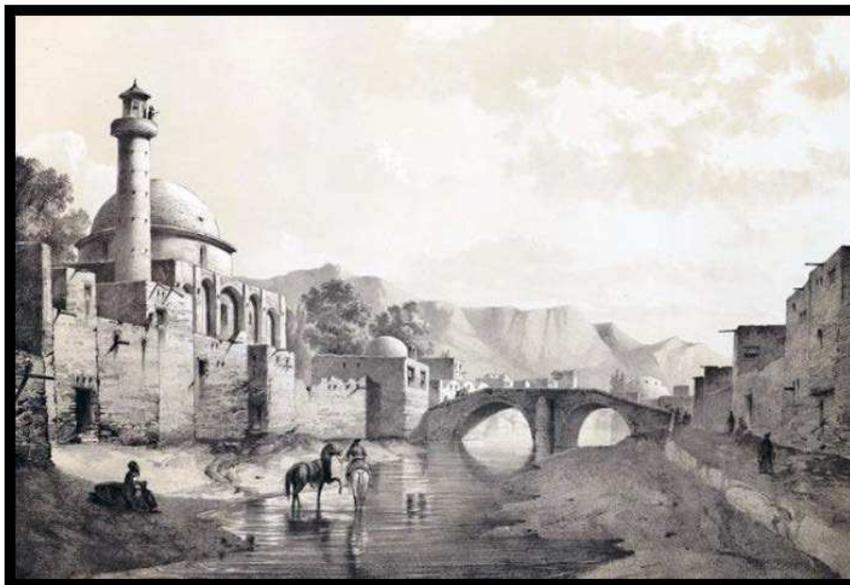


Figure 2: Painting of Saheb al-Amr Mosque by Eugene Flandin in 17th century (source: www.photos.wikimapa.org).

In some historical texts, the mosque is called, “Saheb al-Amr Tomb” but its status as “tomb” is dubious because there was only a net-like wooden box in the mosque on which corpses were put. Below the box, there was no grave and the box was only a means of attracting people and inviting them to visit (Karang, 1996: 96). Following the reconstruction of Saheb al-Amr Mosque in 1994, the box was moved out of the mosque.



Figure 3: Picture of Saheb al-Amr Mosque.

Another relevant story is concerned with its oldness. It is suggested that one of the simple-minded scholars of Tabriz dreamed of Imam Mahdi saying prayers in a definite small mosque (i.e. the same mosque which turned into a place visited by Imam Mahdi). Jafar Qoli Khan Denbeli because of his trust in that righteous man, started repairing the mosque and since then, the mosque was known as “Saheb al-Amr” Mosque (Nader Mirza, 1973: 609).

However, the event that added to public respect for the mosque is the story of a cow seeking sanctuary in the mosque.

Door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque

The door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque is not pointed out in any of the available historical books. However, In Abdol-ali Karang’s book, there is a picture of the door. The exact date of installing the decorations is not available but as history of the mosque suggests, the artistic works were installed during Qajar era and most probably, they were installed after the stories of trafficking of Imam Mahdi and cow’s escape to the mosque became publicly known. A metal tablet was installed before the door knocker and it dates back to 1895 when the door was built by Ali Ashraf Tabrizi. The information collected from local people suggests that up to early reign of second Pahlavi Shah attaching those works of art to the door was highly common. Afterward, the public belief in holiness of the mosque reduced all at once (Khaje Nasiri,2015: 23).

In terms of form, the metal works on door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque could be divided into three groups: human masks, hands, and tablets. Except for five artistic works made of brass, the rest of the artistic works were made of low-grade silver and they were attached to the door through iron nails.



Figure 4: A part of the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque.

Facial Masks

Facial masks are highest in number and except for ten brass masks, the rest are made of low-grade silver. In terms of form, the masks could be divided into four categories: circular, lozenge-shaped, oval and tear-shaped masks (Table 1). The length of largest mask is 9cm and the smallest mask is only 2cm long.

Lozenge-shaped	Tear-shaped	Oval	Circular
			
			

Table 1: Classification of Human Masks based on Facial Form.

All of the masks show continuous and protruding eyebrows common to Qajar era. The eyes are usually tear-shaped or almond-shaped and they are rarely circular. The pupils are completely visible. Around eyes and eyebrows of some of the masks, decorative lines are pressed. In some cases, the eyes lack pupils as if they

are shut. In addition, emotional differences of masks are vivid as different shapes of eyes and eyebrows contribute to conveying different feelings. Different shapes of eyes and eyebrows suggest their different emotions. This becomes evident by comparing the masks with human faces. Although most masks show sad faces as if to convey suffering, there are happy and calm faces on the masks too. The differences of faces on the masks are like differences in faces of a race. Despite of common features of facial elements, the elements are somehow different from each other. The differences are more vivid when older masks are compared. Most often, new masks show a common form. The old masks were attached to right half and top part of left half of the door. In 1994, Cultural Heritage Organization started repairing the door by removing the masks from it and they were reattached after repair. After reattaching the masks, the lower part of left half of the door remained empty and for filling that section, newer masks bought by the organization was used (Khaje-Nasiri, 2015: 28). The new masks have similar forms and because of being new, they have lighter colors than older masks. Silver reacts with sulfur when it is exposed to air and it becomes darker. The darkness of color increases gradually until it turns brown and gray. The technique of making the mask shows that they were made by pressing. In some cases, etching and engraving were used for working out the facial features.

There are decorated and eagle-shaped noses among the masks and in some cases, the noses are wide and paw-shaped.

Paw-Shaped Nose	Wide Nose	Decorated Nose	Pointed Nose
			

Table 2: Classification of Masks based on Nose Forms.

The lips of masks are bud-shaped and there are smiling and hanging lips on some masks too. The lips are the most significant facial elements and a change in their shape leads to change of facial emotion the masks convey.

Open and surprise-looking Lips	Silent Lips	Downward and sad-looking Lips	Bud-shaped Lips	Upward and smiling lips
				

Table 3: Classification of Masks based on Designs of Lips.

Some masks have wigs which are divided in half or front hairs that drop over their forehead sections. There are ring-shaped hairs at the side of the facial masks too. At both sides of some of these masks, there are jaw-shaped lines. Some masks carry certain engraved statements such as “I ask for your aid, Abbas” or “ask for your aid, Abulfazl”.

Hair Divided in Half and Decorative Forehead and Ring-Shaped sides	Hair Divided in Half and Decorative Forehead and Curve-shaped sides	Decorative Forehead Hair at Both Sides	Divided-in-Half Hair and Ring-shaped Wig at sides of face	Jaw-shaped Hair at Both side of face
				

Table 4: Classification of Masks based on Hairstyle.

From a comparative viewpoint, the masks could be compared with images and portraits of Qajar era. The remaining images of Qajar era suggest that men used to shave the middle of their heads and leave some hair near their ears. The women used to divide their hair in half and make the tip of their hairs into ring shapes. They used to put plume, flower-shaped jewelry or rings of pearls at the tip of their hair rings. The ideal beauty of the time was a circular face like that of moon, thick and continuous eyebrows, long eyelash, wide and long eyes, small nose, bud-shaped mouth, double chin and a mole at one corner of the lips (Zoka, 2004: 35). The characteristics are reflected in the portraits of sun as a female which became quite popular during Qajar era and some tiles of this era have the same shape painted on them.



Figure 5: Painting of sun on tiles of Golestan Palace (Panjebashi & Farhad, 2018: 523).

Comparison of these masks with bronze pins found in Lorestan shows their similarities. The bronze pins with decorative designs were of religious significance as they were placed as gifts between stone cracks of a worshipping place in Sorkhdam of Kohdasht. The designs on bronze objects found in Lorestan were derived from public beliefs as people thought that these magical objects point to secret, symbolic, religious and mythology-driven languages (Yasinzadeh & Afhami, 2009: 56).



Figure 6: Bronze-headed pins found in Lorestan (www. pinterest.com).

Metal Hands

The study of hand-shaped designs installed on the door suggests their differences and personalization. Known as “Fatima’s hand” or “Abulfazl’s hand”, the objects are second most used decorative objects attached to the mosque door. The length of biggest metal hand is 14cm and the smallest one is only 1.5cm long.

The hand-shaped objects are either simple or decorative. On most of these works of art, there are statements such as “I seek your aid”, “I’m your servant, Abbas”, and “Ya Hussein”. On some of the hands, verses 51-52 of Surah Al-Qalam were engraved. In some cases, the hands have spells on them. The lines and sentences on these metal hands are amateurish and without any beauty. This suggests that low-literacy people belonging to penurious classes of Qajar society used to write them. Some of the objects show a small hand inside a bigger one. In a special case, there is a ring on one of the fingers of the decorated metal hand.

In Shiite culture, hand symbolizes the first five Islamic figures as well as Abulfazl’s cut-off hand.

Hand with Spell	Hand with a Mask	Hand with a Ring shape on one Finger	Small Hand on Bigger Hand	Hand with Prayers or Devotional Sentences	Simple Hand
					

Table 5: Types of Metal Hand on Door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque.

Tablets

Tablets with writings and decorations of different forms were attached to the door. The writings on them include a verse of Quran (e.g. Surah Al-Qalam 51-52) or statements such as “Victory is God-given”, praying sentences (e.g. “You, the fulfiller of vows” and pledging to Imams such as “Ya Ali Ibn Al-Mosa Al-Reza”) or spells (e.g. repetition of the letter M).

In addition, there are eye mask-shaped decorations attached to the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque. The eye masks are either single or pair and they are made of brass or silver.

The three talismans attached to the mosque door are made of silver. One of the tablet-shaped talismans has engraved repetition of letter M on it. It is one of the letter-based spells. At the time, scholars studying the letters used to ascribe healing force to each letter if the letters were repetitive. They believed that if letters are precisely pronounced in a specific order when one is either alone or in a desert, it will exert the presumed effect. For instance, repetition of letter M for 40 times reinforces memory and understanding and writing letter M for 150 times enables reaching intended goal (Dehdar, n.d.: 67). There are also other spells that are engraved on metal hands. The second talisman is made of abjad numerals. It has hangers on which a ring could be attached and at the lower part of it, there are holes to put coins or similar items. During Qajar era, attaching coins to necklaces and jewelries was common. Decorations of that talisman are more than other tablets and masks attached to the door. At both side of the talisman, there are two bird wings and the wings surround the spell as if birds protect that spell. The last talisman consists of engraved abjad numerals on a metal hand but there is no decoration on it.

In addition to above forms, there are tablet-like silver pieces with arabesque patterns that were attached to the door. These objects are very similar to women’s necklaces made during Qajar era. It is probable that the objects were used by women before they were placed on the mosque door.

Eye mask-shaped Tablet	Decorative Tablet	Spell Tablets	Tablet with Praying Phrases	Tablet with Quran Verse
				

Table 6: Types of Tablets Attached to the Door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque.

Applications of Metal Objects Attached to the Door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque

There are masks, hand-shaped designs and tablets attached to the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque. On some of the objects, there are verses of Quran, praying phrases or spells. Due to history of the mosque as the place where Imam Mahdi stepped in, the objects could be regarded as protective spells, means of aid-seeking or fulfilling a vow. The spells and talismans used by Muslims of the time point to their root in pre-Islamic magical symbols. However, most of them are based on seeking refuge in divinity, quoting of Quran verses and religious prayers. These objects always symbolized belief in God and surrendering to him. Therefore, the essence of magical methods used in Islamic era shows fundamental differences from what was common in Byzantium, ancient Iran and other regions before spread of Islam (Savage-Smith, 2008: 48). In Islam, spell and magic were often sought to make sure of protection from natural forces and ask for divine apology. They were intended to ask God for protection against devilish temptations, jealousy and supernatural beings. Belief in existence of devilish beings is rooted in pre-Islamic societies and numerous methods for dealing with such vices were common. Based on Islamic beliefs, angels and Prophet Mohammad could be addressed and one could ask them for divine favor. In Shiite cult, one could ask the prophet’s and Ali’s family for divine favor and blessing. Quran verses and prayers that included 99 divine nouns were thought to complement the worship of God. Engraved on magical objects, these verses and prayers were accompanied by certain decorations and symbols (ibid.).

A group of spells is related to human body or body organs. The spells were placed under clothes so that others do not see it. Health, long life and attracting the other sex might have motivated the installation of such objects. Asking for salvation and healing of body organs, especially if the organ is sick or painful, were goals of making organ-shaped objects by spell makers. There are still symbols of body organs made of silver and/or tin in shops around mosques and Imams' shrines. These objects are at the sight and purchasable. They include shapes of head, hand, leg, eye and the whole body. For instance, a patient suffering from headache could buy a head-shaped object and drop it in a shrine or attach it to the tomb door. Similarly, hand-shaped objects could be bought by a person suffering from hand pain so as to convey that he is seeking divine healing (Tanavoli, 2007: 72-73).

There are tablets with Surah Al-Qalam 51-52 engraved on them that are attached to the mosque door. In Iran, the verses are recited to prevent from bad influence of others' jealousy. The two verses were engraved on a medallion and people were used to wear it around a newborn's neck or put it on his/her chest. Muslims use Quran verses to keep away from mental and spiritual harms, prevent from domination of spirits over human body and inverse effect of jealousy (Latifzadeh, 2010: 130).

In addition to above-mentioned forms, metal hands are other metallic objects attached to the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque. The hands were initially used by African, Jewish and Arabic tribes to fight against others' jealousy. Metallic hands common to Muslims had common symbols too. These objects were engraved on a big silver or brass medal which people wore around their necks. The medals were intended to protect against others' jealousy and they were usually known as "Fatemian Hand" (Mosapur, 2008: 57).

The right hand was considered as a materialized symbol of benevolence and a universal force which shows itself by touching. Hand symbolizes power and divine image. In addition, hand is used as protective force and a means of dealing with others' jealousy. The right hand, as a divine symbol or a means of protection, entered Islamic culture after it was addressed as "Fatima's hand". When Fatemians established a Shiite government in Egypt, they changed the symbol to "Fatima's hand". Here, Fatima refers to daughter of Prophet Mohammad. While keeping its essential characteristics, Fatima's hand was interpreted differently as it entered Shiite culture. The new interpretation was derived from Ashura culture. In Shiite culture, hand symbolizes the sacrifices of Abulfazl Abbas since he lost his two hands while trying to deliver water to Imam Hussein's children. Today, metal hand-shaped designs are installed at tips of flags and banners which mourning Shiite groups used. In order to fulfil their vows and solve their problems, Shiite people buy hand-shaped designs made of silver, gold or other metals and attach them to door or shrine of Imams or wall and windows of tombs. On top of some tombs and finials of some shrines and mosques, these hand-like objects with closed or open fingers were used to symbolize divine power, divine dignity or five good deeds. Inside the bronze or copper chalices of some shrines, metal hand-shaped objects were to symbolize the cut-off hand of Abulfazl (Khaje-Nasiri, 2015: 50). However, the object symbolizes other things such as top five Islamic characters (i.e. Prophet Mohammad and his wife as well as children of Fatima).

The metal decorations could be recognized as works of folk art because they show similar characteristics of folk art such as collectivity, simplicity, narrative power, sociocultural realities rooted in collective unconscious of people (Moayen Aldini, Nadalian, & Marasy, 2014: 94), and association with cultural traditions, relationship with body and materials and satisfaction of current demands.

Conclusion

On the door of Saheb al-Amr Mosque of Tabriz City, metallic objects mostly made of low-grade silver were installed. The techniques of pressing, engraving and etching were used to make the objects. The later masks were all made by pressing. These decorative objects could be classified into masks, hand-shaped designs and tablets.

Since the mosque was significantly respected during Qajar era and common people as well as low-class strata of the society associated the mosque with Imam Mahdi, it turned into destination of pilgrimage where vow fulfilment and divine help were sought. The metal works of art made by local artists of the region (some of whom still live today) were ordered by low social classes of Qajar era. Because of their simple characteristics and styles, these objects represent the popular metalworking art of Azerbaijan region. These works of art signify historical, social and religious identity of Qajar society as well as status of metalworking art of this era.

People of Tabriz considered the mosque as their worshipping center and went there to fulfill their vows. Certain phrases such as "I seek your help, Abulfazl" engraved on low-value works of art with simple lines suggest that low and middle classes of the society sought the help of Imams to deal with their problems and this is rooted in beliefs of Shiite cult. The act of seeking Imam's help is rooted in Shiite beliefs. This was symbolized by ring, chain and sometimes lock but people of Tabriz sought a different means. The metal masks they used to buy showed sad, happy or surprised faces which referred to the person and creators of the works who were impatiently waiting for divine response and fulfilling of their vows by Imams, especially Abulfazl Abbas.

The masks could be compared with bronze pins of Lorestan region as they share similar ritual and religious applications. Since such masks have not been used in other mosques and holy shrines of Iran, the influence of other religions could be presumed since it is next to neighboring north-western countries.

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