


# Assessment of Engraving on Plaster and its Designs in Herat

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## Abstract

*The craft and art of plastering has played an important role in internal and external spaces of historical and modern constructive components. This elegant industry is always flaunted on walls and ceilings to take part in decoration of the monument. Plastering is another field of decorative, which is used along with other kinds of decorative arts such as tile, sculpture and woodcarving, that are often over seen in modern and classic buildings nowadays. Goal: The assessment is on cornice engraving methods and its designs in Herat Buildings and complexes. This article stated various methods of engraving on gypsum, as well as designs applied by this art and craft in Herat buildings in a clear and comprehensive way. The research method is based on library and field studies. In library methods the focus is on using of authentic scientific reference books and field studies methods is an emphasis on observation and taking photos of gypsum decorations by the researcher, applied on modern and classic buildings of Herat. And finally the results of the study show that art and craft of plastering in Herat buildings and complexes has been applied in various positions by different methods while containing variable decorative elements.*

**Keywords:** Plastering, Herat, Ghowr Era, Timor Era, Cotemporary Era.

## Preface

Plastering is one of the delicate crafts of the ancient land of Herat, which has been used to decorate the interior and exterior of buildings in every age and time. If you take a look at the buildings of the Ghowr era and followings in Herat, it is clearly seen that plastering was used to beautify the buildings with different methods. Some buildings are decorated with Kufic and Thuluth scripts are decorated with plaster, and in some parts of the buildings there are Geometric and slimy patterns. Therefore, art and craft of plastering is considered one of the most ancient values of this land.

## Statement of the Problem

Lack of recognition of plaster decorations of eras and different methods in Herat’s buildings.

## Significance of Research

Plastering is a type of decoration that was used in houses, Castles, palaces, mosques, monasteries, private and personal places in Herat in the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, and these decorations considered as a part of the value of the land, therefore, the investigation and introduction of this art and craft is important and it shows the artistry and craftsmanship of this border and landscape.

## The Purpose of the Research

Investigation methods of engraving on plaster and its motifs in Herat’s buildings.

### Research Questions

- What methods were used to engrave on plaster in Herat's buildings?
- Which periods or era do the plaster decorations in Herat buildings belong to?
- Which decorative elements have been implemented by plaster on the buildings?

### History of Plastering

Use of plaster in building's decoration has a long history, which even goes back to the Kushan era. Using plaster to whitewash interior parts of building has been common since 1700 years ago, and little by little, its use to decorate buildings has been come to consideration with the better understanding of this material and its usage (Farhad).

Use of knots (geometric gesture) in plastering can be considered at the same time as the use of brick knotting works, because facade construction by means of plastering was also common during the Sassanid era (Zamershidi).

The art of plastering flourished in architectural decorations especially after Islam, a good example of this art can be seen in Ghaznavi, Ghowr and Timor era (Farhad).

This fine art is still used to beautify religious and non-religious complexes such as: mosques, schools, monasteries, palaces, residential houses, and shops (Hasas).

### Ghowrera Plastering Types in Herat

As a result of the research; plaster decorations can be seen in existing building and complexes in Herat from the Ghowr era onwards, including: Herat Great Masjid Jama (Blue Mosque) and Chisht district Khanqah or school in Chisht district of Herat province.

From the era of the Ghowr, there are plaster motifs and lines in Masjid Jama, and these motifs and lines are located in the north and south corridors, inside the porch of Maqsurah (Maqsurah is an enclosure, box, or wooden screen near the mihrab or the center of the qibla wall in a mosque). This beautiful example is a combination of petals and the excellent Kufi script of the Ghowr era, which was worked from plaster prominently (Picture 1). The script of this inscription is very worn and some parts of it have been lost, and

often the date of the construction of the mosque was written in it (Ghawas).



**Figure 1 Decorative Kufi Inscription, Plaster of Ghowr Era, Maqsurah Porch of Herat great Masjid- Afghanistan**

The aforementioned plastering designs were made at the end of 1361 A. Hand was discovered from under the gypsum plaster of the porch of Maqsurah (Fekri Seljuqi).

Kufic inscriptions and Aslami motifs can be seen in the plastered decorations of the Ghowr era, as mentioned earlier.

Kufic inscriptions have been used in variety of types on the walls of Maqsurah porch of the Herat city Great Mosque, some of them are in the form of Muaqli Kufi and some types of Muaqli Kufi is used in the form of a denticulate. (pictures 2 and 3).

The decorative Kufic inscription can also be seen in this building, where decorative elements is used between plastered Kufic inscription on a rope in a shape of spiral arch such as a torpedo, a crown and a half crown.



**Figure 2 Inscription of Muaqli Kufi, Plastering of Kufi Era, Herat great Masjid- Afghanistan**



**Figure 3 Kufi Muaqli Denticulated Inscription, plastering of Ghowri Era, Maqsurah Porch of Herat great Masjid- Afghanistan**

In the plastered decorations of Ghowr era, Aslami motifs are used next to Kufic inscriptions or separately from Kufic lines in which are arranged together with elements like: cam, crown and torpedoes, in some parts with slime movement and in some parts without slime movement (pictures 4 and 5).



**Figure 4 Aslami Motifs, Plastering of Ghowri Era, Maqsurah Porch of Herat great Masjid-Afghanistan**



**Figure 5 Plastering Decoration of Ghowri Era, Maqsurah Porch of Herat great Masjid-Afghanistan**

Chisht monastery and school, which was built in the 12th century by the order of Sultan Ghiasuddin Ghowri, two tall domes of the complex have just survived. Chesht Monastery looks in square shape and highly elevated. Inside-around one of these buildings, there is a common Kufic inscription of Ghowr era in which is plastered and decorated with flowers. The context of this inscription is as follows: There is no god, He is the Holy King, peace, the believer, the dominant, the mighty, the arrogant [He commanded] that this be renewed for the buildings during the days of the state, the great king Al-Muwayd, Al-Muzaffar Al-Mansur, the just scholar, the sun of the world and religion

Also, on the edges of the four porticoes of this Ghowr era complex, verses of the Holy Quran

are plastered in Kufic script and in a special style (Farhad).

### **Timor era Plastering Types in Herat**

As can be seen in the references and resources, Timor era related complexes also had plastered decorations. Because plaster decorations have less resistant to natural disasters compared to stone and tile decorations, therefore, nothing remains of the plaster decorations in the historical monuments of the Timor era except for the moqarnas (cornice) works inside Goharshad Begum's dome.

In collection Divan of Maulana Nooruddin Abdul Rahman Jami, there are poems in which was written to describe Sultan Hossein Baiqara and his mansion, which proves that plaster was used as a decoration in the complexes of the Timorera.

It's not water and mud, it's the heart of everyone's heart, what a lovely home this is

She/he has never seen such a house in her/his life, there is enough fog on the horizon of the house

The poison of the tulip did not go to the roof of that sample, the wailing of beautiful tulips

On the wall, on the plaster, there are cut flowers, a camphor flower is blown from mud.

This house was built by the efforts of the king, what a glorious history of the mansion (Jami)

Also, Mohammad Alam Farhad wrote in his book entitled "Patterns and Decorations in the Historical Complexes of Afghanistan": "During the Timor era, a large number of plaster decorations were observed in the complexes related to that era, in which sometimes motifs were plastered and sometimes they were placed on the fields where plaster was smooth, painted and has given a special softness to the complex" (Farhad).

"Herat Nagin Khorasan" published in 2010, writes on page 59: "The greatest buildings of Herat's renaissance era were the Madrasa and Khanqah of Sultan Hossein Baiqara, which was bigger than Goharshad and Amir Alishir Nawai's Madrasa from the point of view of size and glory. The presence of a large dome, arches and porticos decorated with tiles and plaster, large naves, lower pavilions and the clear water of the Injil River flowing through the middle of the school and the presence of thousands of scholars and famous professors of science and literature from all over the world is an added dignity and gesture for such complexes (Bahreh).

“Herat in Timor era” written by Mohammad Aslam Afzali, published in 2011, page 120, and “Khyaban” (Avenue) written by Fekri Seljuqi, published in 1964, page 27, and also in the book “Architecture of Timor era in Iran and Turan” written by Donald Wilbur, published in 1995, page 497, they all talk about the moqransbandi (Cornicing) of the roof of Goharshad Begum’s mausoleum (picture 6) and Mullah Kalan monastery in Herat and mentioned: “The roof of the dome is most elegantly moqransed (Corniced) by plaster” (Afzali).

The above mentioned writings cleared that, plaster and stucco were used to beautify buildings in Timor era. However, nothing else has been observed since the Timor era, except long plaster columns of the dome of Goharshad Begum’s mausoleum.

There are other plaster decorations in the buildings of Herat, which back dated to two centuries ago. These decorations have been used in Herat Great Mosque and entrance portico in the courtyard of Khawaja Abdullah Ansari’s tomb. Inside the south porch of Herat Great Mosque, center part of the porch, an inscription can be seen, which Mohammad Aalam Ghawas, in his article edition No. 10 of Ancient Herat Magazine, published 1982, considered the above mentioned inscription for two centuries ago (Picture 7). The text of this inscription is Surah Fatah of the Holy Qur’an, which is plastered in great Thuluth script and the background of this plaster is painted in azure color (Ghawas).



**Figure 6 Plaster Cornicing of Timori Era, Roof of Goharshad Begum’s Mausoleum**



**Figure 7 Plastering Inscription, Fatah Surah, Thuluth Script, inside of south porch of Herat great Masjid-Afghanistan**

In the entrance porch of Khawaja Abdullah Ansari’s mausoleum, plaster works can be observed, which contains Aslamimotifs, petals and bergamots. The elements used in these plasters are influenced by the tiling motifs of this building and are of relatively good quality (Picture 8). These plaster works have been preserved since Amir Dost Mohammad Khanregime [1222-1242 A.H], the kingdom of Afghanistan (Fazli).



**Figure 8 Plastering of Amir Doost Mohammad Khan Kingdom Age, Entrance Porch of Khawaja Abdullah Ansari’s Mausoleum, Herat-Afghanistan**

## Research Findings

### Modern Plasters in Herat

Plaster decorations in the buildings of Herat in the current era can be recognized in different ways.

- Decorations cut on hard and dry plaster.
- Patterns executed on loose plaster.
- Premade or molded decorative stucco or plaster.
- Plaster decorations that are used together with metal and wooden shelves as cornice.

### Plastering on Dry and Hard Plaster

Plaster decorations, which are cut on dry and hard plaster in the current age, are mostly seen in the hall of the Herat Governor’s building (Herat House) and also in the winter altar (the northern side of the Great Grand Mosque of Herat).

Modern’s plaster decorations are cut on dry and hard plaster and are mostly seen inside the Herat provincial hall (Herat house) and also winter Mihrab (north side windows) of Herat Great Mosque.

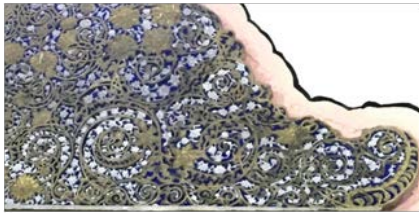
The plaster decorations inside the Herat house include geometric patterns, Aslami patterns, and Waq;Waq is a term that was applied by Prof. Mohammad Saeed Meshaal to plasters in which designs are a combination of animals and Aslami



designs. The above-mentioned decorations, colored and also non-color (white), are used on the top of the gates and next to the windows for decoration (pictures 9-11).



**Figure 9 Geometric Patterns, Plastering of Contemporary Age, Herat Provincial Hall, Afghanistan**



**Figure 10 Plastering of Contemporary Age, Above the Entrance Door of Herat Hall**



**Figure 11 Plastering on Dry and Hard Plaster, Contemporary Age, Waq, Combination of Aslimi Patterns with Animals, Inside of Herat Provincial Hall, Afghanistan**

The plaster motifs inside the Herat house have been worked with different methods and techniques, some motifs have been painted around the elements of the pattern with black paint after carving patterns, and some have been framed without painting. And some parts had been painted with gold, silver and azure colors.

The winter altar of Herat Great Mosque is also decorated with hard and dry plaster. The above-mentioned altar motifs were created and designed by Prof. Mohammad Saeed Meshaal Heravi in 1989

and plastered by students of the mentioned master (picture 12).

Plastering of this altar has been done in different ways. For example, some of the motifs were carved background first, and the motifs were written in the next step. Some parts of the stucco, its background was carved and later it was framed like Haft Qalam stone; That is, on the elements and ropes of the pattern, instead of penning, was created carves and protrusions to beautify patterns. And some plasterwork of the altar is also decorated with color (pictures 13 and 15).



**Figure 12 Plastering of Contemporary Age, The Winter Altar of Herat Great Masjid- Afghanistan**



**Figure 13 Plastering on Dry and Hard Plaster, Contemporary Age, Altar of Herat Great Masjid**



**Figure 14 Plastering on Dry and Hard Plaster, Aslimi Patterns in Two Ways, Contemporary Age, Altar of Herat Great Masjid- Afghanistan**



**Figure 15 Plastering on Dry and Hard Plaster, Contemporary Age, Above of Herat Great Masjid Altar**

The decorative elements used in the winter altar of Herat Great Mosque, there are used Aslami patterns like torpedoes and half-torpedoes, petals, cams and leaves in different shapes and sizes in addition to geometric patterns.

#### **Plaster on Damp or Loose Plaster**

Plaster decorations on damp plaster (loose plaster) can be seen in abundance in different places of Herat such as: mosques, schools, wedding halls, hotels, houses, offices and shops. The decorations used by this type of plaster include: geometric patterns, Aslami patterns, Kufic and Thuluth inscriptions, and moqransbandi (Cornicing). Also, the natural landscapes and historical monuments of the country have been executed in semi-embossed with plaster on some walls of Herat buildings (picture 16).

#### **Prefabricated Plastering**

Pre-made or molded decorative stucco is used in the buildings walls of Herat, above the gates, columns and roofs of the houses. This type of plastering is done in contrast to the plastering that was mentioned. It means that all the stages and construction of this type of plastering, such as design and molding, are done in the workshops, and install in required place and then painted. The motifs used in this type of stucco and plaster are Aslami motifs including bergamot, lach, shamseh; It is used on the boarder side for surface of the walls, ceiling of the rooms, on the columns and next to the windows in different sizes (picture 17).

#### **Decorated Cornice Plaster**

In addition to the above-mentioned methods, nowadays plaster and stucco are used to decorate

the ceilings and walls of rooms, community halls, restaurants and home kitchens in a new way called “Ravizbandi” (a type of cornicing). take This method can be implemented at a lower cost than the previously mentioned plastering, and it is more common today, and by embedding hidden light next to the plaster tools, it makes the plaster decorations stand out and more beautiful (Picture 18).



**Figure 16 Plastering on Damp Plaster, Aslami Patterns of Ceiling Vault of Military Museum (Manzar Jihad) Contemporary Age, Herat-Afghanistan**



**Figure 17 Prefab Plastering/Molding, House Ceiling, Contemporary age, Herat**



**Figure 18 Ravizbandi Plastering, Ceiling of Qasr Royaha Hall, Contemporary age, Herat**

#### **Dispute**

One point should be noted in this article, plaster decorations are less durable and resistance than tiles, stones, and bricks; because plaster material is softer with less durable life than tile, stone and brick. It is the softness and impermanence of plaster materials that today we have very few plastered decorations of the Timor era, and we have none of the decorations of

several centuries after the Timor era in the historical buildings of Herat. But the discussion is here, when there are no plaster works after the Timor era, why and for what reason there are the plaster decorations of the Ghowr era in Herat Great Mosque, who governed in Herat two centuries before Timor era.

Relatively it should be mentioned that: as remaining brick and plaster works of the Ghowr era can be seen, the aforementioned decorations (Ghowr era) were covered and hidden under the plaster decorations and plaster of the Timor era, and these plaster works in the contemporary period, was discovered from lower plaster; that's why Ghowr related works remained in Herat Great Mosque.

Fekri Seljuqi discussed this issue in his book titled "Part of the History of Herat" published in 1983 and pointed out: during the time of Amir Alishir Nawai, the beautiful motifs and lines of the Ghowr related works were hidden under the decorations of the Timor related works. Fortunately, after searching by researchers in the contemporary time, the mentioned decorations came out from under the Timor related plasterwork. He also wrote that at the end of 1982 Kufic figures and lines plasterwork were discovered under the plasterwork of Maqsurah porch, and belongs to the Ghowr era.

Therefore, if today we see the plaster works of the Ghowr era, it is all due to the blessing of the Timor related era, who kept the mentioned motifs under the plaster for many years.

## Conclusion

The results obtained from the study of stucco and plaster after library and field study are as follows: plaster decorations and stucco that can be seen in the buildings of Herat, both historical and current buildings, have been used in four ways in which all are as follow: Plastering on rigid plaster, plastering on wet plaster, molded plasters (prefabrication) and plaster decorations that are worked along with the corncicing.

Most of plastered decorations that were observed in Herat belong to the Ghowr era and the

contemporary period, which are engraved on the walls, ceilings, altars, religious and non-religious with geometric, plant, moqrans, Kufic and thuluth inscription.

It should be noted that after the Timor era until two centuries before today, plaster works have not been observed in the historical buildings of Herat.

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