

The Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

Consolidating Shi'ism, forming spirituality, and creating the infinite dome

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The truly unique Sheikh Lotfollah mosque in the *Naqsh-e Jahaan* Square¹ (henceforth “the Square”) in Esfahan, Iran is situated in the heart and centre of the city. One enters the mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah through heavy wooden doors laden with geometric carvings with intense anticipation. Not a single façade or inch has been left without some sort of tile work. The colourful portal skilfully hides, for the person outside, the ‘maze’ before the main room that leads one to immediately face the *qibla*, the direction that Muslims face to pray. With a foundation in the same rare marble employed throughout the square; the entire colour scheme of the mosque is refreshingly joyful and inviting.

Sheikh Baha’i was a cleric and polymath instrumental in formulating the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I’s new religious policy of consolidating Shi’ism in Iran,² partly through the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, which along with the rest of the Square “gave form to Shah ‘Abbas’s goal of disseminating normative Twelver Shi’ism as broadly as possible.”³ Designed by

Sheykh Baha’i, the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque was the first monument of the Square to be finished; an inscription by the chief calligrapher of the Shah on the tile mosaic of the entry gateway to the mosque sets the starting date to 1012 AH/1603-04 CE.⁴ It was completed in 1028 AH/1618-19 CE, at the same time the Square itself was completed.

Used by the Shah himself for prayer, the mosque has had various names, though it currently bears the name of a learned Safavid scholar.⁵ Exquisite, yet small, the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque is located on the east side of the Square. Of the Safavid mosques, this is a unique building; its single dome is surrounded by resting rooms and service areas, yet lacks the typical features such as a court, and even minarets. As such, it is closer in shape and form to Iranian mausoleums than to other typical Safavid mosques.

The method of decorating buildings in Iran often involved using faience mosaics (which are glazed using tin oxide), but although they are used several places on

1 The Square goes by many names. *Naqsh-e Jahan* means “Image of the World”. Before the revolution in 1979, it was often called the “Royal Square” (Meidan-e Shah); after the Revolution it has been called the “Imam Square” (Meidan-e Imam).

2 Sheila Canby (ed.), *Shah Abbas and the Remaking of Iran*. (London: British Museum, 2009).

3 Canby, 28.

4 Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 422.

5 Ali Asghar Bakhtiar, “Reminiscences of the Maidan-i Shah” in Mitchell (ed.), *New Perspectives on Safavid Iran: Empire and Society*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

and inside buildings of the Square, the primary method of decoration for the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque was the *haft rangi*, otherwise known as *cuerda seca*. This tile method has been called *haft rangi* (seven-coloured) because it allows for the painting of tiles in up to seven colours, with subsequent burning. The term *cuerda seca* is Spanish for “dry cord” and is a reference to the oily string that would be placed between the different colours so they would not run into one another during burning. As the string would be dipped in a substance mixed with manganese, this leaves the characteristic black outlines between each of the colours, which is all that is left of the string after burning.

Some⁶ argue that such tiles do not have as intense colours as faience mosaics do. Sometimes scholars classify this as an easier ‘shortcut,’ a quicker method that they explain was employed due to Shah Abbas being in a hurry to complete the mosque. It is not, however, necessarily self-evident that such a method is a less refined way of decorating, with mosaic tiles being superior. The surface area that would have to be covered on the buildings of the Square were very large; it makes sense that a technique that allowed for bigger, more stable panels to be made was employed. It may not be as exquisite as mosaics, but how often does one see the entire surface of a mosque - and indeed *two* mosques, as is the case in Esfahan’s Square - decorated in any form of elaborately designed, multi-coloured tiles? It is indeed a rarity, which is one of the reasons why these mosques are regarded as so extraordinary.

Although not visible from the outside, the magnificent dome, covered in arabesque-patterned tiles on a cream coloured base, is supported by buttresses, allowing it to span the antechamber. The dome’s mosaic

tiles skilfully go from glazed to unglazed, “which gives a fitful glitter to the surface as the sunlight strikes it.”⁷ The white, deep blue and azure arabesques outlined in black “sweeping in majestic curves across the buff ground”⁸ are very reminiscent of Persian carpets, especially the carpet style called Abbasi.

Compassing the drum of the dome are Quranic inscriptions in mosaic tiles, white *thuluth* writing on a deep blue background. Done by the calligrapher Ali Reza Abbasi, “his majestic *thuluth* is notable for its strong sense of order and proportion” and makes “long texts clear and legible by dividing the inscription into two tiers, typically separated by the long tail of final *ya* which extends backwards and to the left.”⁹ With this long and horizontal style of writing, the tall, extended, and horizontal letters on the bottom tier become further elongated in an exaggerated way so that they sometimes replace the same or similar (in form or shape) letter in the upper tier, creating a balance and consistency that is aesthetically pleasing to the eye. This technique has also been employed in Ali Reza Abbasi’s vertical signature that stands out from the rest of the text, running around the semidome of the mosque’s portal. The dado of the drum of the dome also has, beneath the *thuluth* bands, square kufic inscriptions in white, outlined in black on turquoise praising Allah using His various names, for example “the Generous” (*al-Kareem*) or “the Merciful” (*al-Raheem*).

The portal of the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque extends beyond the *ivan* itself, and the intensely blue decorations cover the contiguous walls. The extraordinary ocean blue forms the background to

7 Wilfrid Blunt, *Isfahan, Pearl of Persia* (London: Pallas Athene Ltd, 2009), 85.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Blair, 421-422.

6 Bakhtiar, 158.

the many panels, most of which are in the aforementioned *cuerda seca* tiles. The panels form cartouches that almost look like windows, though they offer no openings into the mosque or its corridor.

The patterns range from vases with arabesque and flowers springing out from them, to medallions with more abstract patterns of flowers, individual petals, and suns. The colour range is, besides gearing towards the very blue, loaded with white and green, and yellow dandelion flowers adorn some of the larger panels. There are a lot more greens and white here than anywhere else in the mosque; it makes the portal look like a field of flowers, surrounded by the sky or the ocean, giving the impression of abundance and fertility. The *ivan's* semi-vault is adorned with *muqarnas* in a very dark blue, with many white flowers (chrysanthemums or perhaps chamomile) littered on top - perhaps conveying prosperity and joy, and spring, the most important season in Persian culture. The *ivan* itself is framed by thick, blue spirals that we also find inside the mosque. These ones end in vases that have been carved out of marble. The corridor is entirely decorated in *cuerda seca* tiles in prominent ocean blue, along with the greens and yellow. The patterns are similar to those found on the portal; typical arabesques, medallions and vases. The skirtings are mosaic tiles in the *banna'i* style, in deep blue, turquoise and, completely absent elsewhere in the decoration of the Square, a murky red.

The walls of the domed main chamber are 43 metres high, and are decorated with *cuerda seca* tiles that create "an intricate sunburst pattern against a blue ground."¹⁰ The mosque decorations are nothing short of incredible. Whatever one prefers when it comes to tiles, whether it be faience

tiles or *cuerda seca*, the fact that the *entire* interior and exterior of the mosque - from the corridors leading to the main room to the antechamber itself - are decorated in tiles, is nothing short of unprecedented. The experience of entering the main room and taking in the beauty of the work cannot be adequately described in words. It is similar to the euphoria one might experience when looking up at the sky on a clear day; breathtaking and reminding us of how vast the world is. The drum of the dome has carved window grilles that provide the only source of light, apart from three other similar windows, one on each of three of the walls. In addition to this, there is a vaulted opening above the entrance to the room where light can flood in at certain times of the day.

Different verses from the Quran are inscribed on the corners of the walls, with *Surat al-Shams* (Q91, *The Sun*) being among the most prominent. Some other verses that appear in the mosque are *Surat al-Insan* (Q76; *Man*), *Surat al-Kawthar* (Q108; *Abundance*), *Surat al-Bayyina* (Q98; *The Clear Proof*) and *Surat al-Intifar* (Q82; *The Cleaving*) - these verses serve to reinforce messages of who the righteous and pious are the Shi'i Safavids. Canby¹¹ suggests that references to those who incite hatred are actually aimed at the Ottomans, who were bitter enemies of the Safavids. Tradition has it that as the sun rises and sets, the rays hit different verses that coincide with the time of the day, thus reinforcing the symbolism of the entire architecture and design of the mosque, and bringing it all together. The calligraphy bands on the walls facing East and West are poetry written by Sheikh Baha'i. Each corner is semi-vaulted, framed by thick spiral ceramic framework painted in turquoise blue; the vaults are covered by mosaic tiles forming lively yellow and

10 Bakhtiar, 159.

11 30.

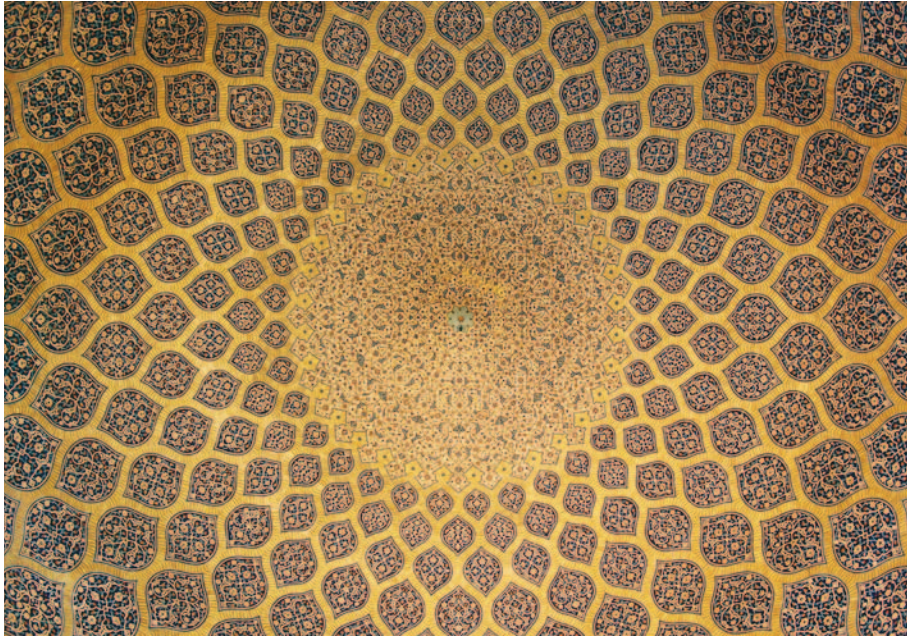


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deep blue pendant shapes, which again form yellow crosses and saltires, covered in floral arabesques in black, white and light turquoise.

Framing these tiles are bands of deep blue and white calligraphic poetry and Quranic inscriptions; underneath; the dados in *cuerda seca* in the style of blue carpets with green and yellow floral motifs, occasionally with white medallions with yellow arabesques. Each side wall has a similar but slightly different pattern of mosaic tiles on a yellow background with big, looping arabesques and framed by thick, spiral, azure blue ceramic spirals. Oddly enough, apart from the *mihrab* wall and the entrance, the other two sides also have a rectangular decoration separate from the rest of the pattern on the wall, interrupting the dados. The wall facing east resembles a carpet without a medallion as centrepiece or focus point, or perhaps it is more reminiscent of a playing card, with its repeated diamond-and-floral pattern in mostly two different hues of blue, with moss green and a lighter shade of yellow.

The beautiful semi-vaulted *mihrab* directly opposite of the entrance is intensely blue, with muqarnas from its little ceiling. The background of the *mihrab* itself is decorated with arabesques and medallions, in both *cuerda seca* and mosaic tiles, the variation probably due to matters of geometry and what was physically most feasible and convenient. We see a lot more green and black used on this part of the mosque, with yellow only on the arabesques and on some thin, striped bands.

The walls of the main chamber elegantly flow into the dome; as they are mediated from wall to drum of dome by the ingenious use of decorative tiles, it is almost like there is no knowing where one part ends and the other begins - the transition is so

skilfully done, enhancing and increasing the experience of a tall, never ending sunny sky enclosing the person. The apex of the dome, from the inside, features a symmetrical turquoise flower. From it, elaborate loops of arabesques unfold, spreading out to approximately two metres in radius and ending in cartouche-like medallions that are interlocked with the ensuing rest of the decoration of the dome.

They form an almost domino-pattern around lemon shaped medallions. These medallions are the same deep blue as employed elsewhere, with prominent white and yellow arabesques; their size and impression appears augmented by additional flowers in between the loops. The medallions grow in size with the smallest towards the apex, growing as one looks towards the drum of the dome. It is an ingenious way of artificially magnifying the size of the dome and make it look even more endlessly tall, almost giving the impression of disappearing at the apex. With each level of medallions the arabesque-floral pattern changes; no band of "lemons" has the same pattern. The symmetry of the arrangement becomes increasingly obvious as a result of this.

The mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah is possibly one of the most remarkable mosques in the world, which is probably why it, along with the rest of the Square, is on UNESCO's list of world heritage sites. The building demonstrates a skillful and sophisticated use of space despite practical challenges. "From Zoroastrian times, the beautiful was integrally associated with light; [i]t was an essential component of divine personality,"¹² and so the tremendously beautiful tile work invites the visitor to an ambient, spiritual journey as one looks to the divine, 'infinite' dome. 🕌

12 Arthur U. Pope, *Persian Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 3.