Encyclopædia Iranica

Article by **Eleanor G. Sims**

Published: December 15, 1984
Last Updated: June 13, 2018

ĀĪNA-KĀRĪ

Āʾīna-kārī, the practice of covering an architectural surface with a mosaic of mirror-glass. It is often dismissed as a gaudy and decadent kind of Persian architectural decoration, and there is no study of its forms and techniques, or survey of buildings decorated with it (or formerly so decorated, for many have disappeared). Yet in many ways it is a typically Persian mode of architectural decoration (verbal parallels for its reflecting and refracting of light may be found in Persian Sufi literature). *Āʾīna-kārī* should be interpreted as the turning of an intrinsically valuable substance to an intense, decorative purpose by reduction of the physical material—reflecting glass—to simple but flexible elements, from which were recomposed decorative ensembles on large surfaces. These equal in complexity and surpass in dazzling effect the earlier Persian mural coverings of glazed ceramic mosaic or luster-glazed tile.

Venetian glassmakers were producing small mirrors in the 15th century by cutting open blown glass cylinders, which were then polished and “silvered.” By 1507 they had perfected an amalgam of tin and mercury to use in coating sheets of glass (G. Mariacher, *Vetri italiani del cinquecento*, Milan, 1959, p. 26). The production of plate glass followed in the late 17th century. Persian glassmaking, on the other hand, had declined to the state of resmelting old glass to produce a distinctly inferior product (*Sir John Chardin’s Travels in Persia*, London, 1927, p. 275). Shah ʿAbbās I is said to have revived the industry (as he did ceramics and textile weaving), inviting Venetian glassmakers to Iran (H. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia*, Boston, 1966, p. l69).

Chardin and other observers provide valuable information concerning the

import of European mirror-glass and its use for architectural decoration. Sir Thomas Herbert, in 1628, saw three arched and richly furnished rooms in the palace of Shah ʿAbbās I at Faraḥābād, on the Caspian coast, with looking-glasses that illuminated the ceiling and the curving upper surfaces with reflected light (*Travels in Persia 1627-1629*, London, 1928, pp. 174-75). Adam Olearius and his party were entertained in November, 1637 in a hall in Isfahan whose walls "were set about with looking-glasses, to the number of above two hundred of all sizes . . . . a maŋin the midst of the Hall . . . might see himself of all sides" (*The Voyages and Travels of the Ambassadors Sent by Frederick Duke of Holstein* . . . , London, 1669, pp. 368-69). Father Raphaël du Mans, writing about 1675, says that looking-glasses, as well as colored glass for windows, were brought from Venice by the Armenian silk-traders who traveled by caravan via Smyrna and Aleppo (*Ēstat de la Perse en 1660*, Paris, 1890, p. 181). Chardin, too, mentions Venetian looking-glasses, and also sash-glass (casements) and snuff-bottles (*Chardin's Travels* . . . , p. 275). In an audience granted to Europeans in September, 1666, Shah ʿAbbās II received from the Russians, among other gifts, nine small looking-glasses with painted frames; a week later, the French envoy offered the shah crystal lusters (chandeliers) and four mirrors, each five feet in height and one with a glass frame as well (op. cit., pp. 86, 93). Finally, Ambrogio Bembo includes in his own manuscript of his travels in Persia in 1674-75 a drawing by G. G. Grélot (no longer extant), probably of the Āʾīna-ḵāna on the far side of the Zāyānda-rūd in Isfahan where Shah Sultan Ḥosayn was crowned on 14 Ḏu'l-ḥeǰǰa 1105/6 August 1694 (Bembo, *Viaggi* . . . , p. 246 and facing illustration; see A. Welch, *Shah ʿAbbas and the Arts of Isfahan*, New York, 1973, pl. 70). From the drawing it can be seen that already at that time *āʾīna-kārī*—seemingly so typical of the Qajar epoch—was being used in several distinctively Persian ways. Imported European mirrors, rectangular with curvilinear, decorated glass frames were used either as costly focal points resembling immense gems, or as a complete revetment of mirrors, on facades that were usually exterior or at least marked the passage from outside to inside. Such early *āʾīna-kārī* can still be seen on the entrance *ayvān* of the Čehel Sotūn. The present facade may, however, represent restoration of 1118/1706-07, done after the fire of the previous year; it was seen by the Carmelite bishop of Isfahan in an audience in 1721 (see *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia*, . . . , London, 1939, I, p. 557). Grélot's drawing of the Āʾīna-ḵāna also indicates that myriad small pieces of specially cut and shaped mirror-glass were used to cover the convex surfaces of the *moqarnas* of the dome which was partly visible over the circular fountain within the Āʾīna-ḵāna. That Grélot's drawing is in some respects fanciful may be seen by

comparing the three views of the same pavilion published by Coste and Flandin in 1851 (*Voyage en Perse . . . , Perse Moderne*, Paris, 1851, pls. 43-44) and 1867 (in *Les Monuments Modernes de la Perse*, Paris, 1867); yet the mirror-mosaic sheathing the enormous *moqarnas* units of the Čehel Sotūn *ayvān* and catching and dispersing light from all angles suggests that Grélot's drawing is truer in detail than in overall conception. Such mosaics of small pieces may be explained by the fragility of the decorated sheets of glass. Some undoubtedly broke in the caravan-transit to Persia; and once broken, their unimpaired light-refracting and vision-diffusing qualities—not to speak of their great intrinsic value—must have dictated their reuse in a traditional Persian manner.

The semi-domed *ayvān*s so characteristic of Persian architecture, opening onto *tālār*s, courtyards, gardens, or reflecting pools, were the preferred surfaces for *āʾīna-kārī*. In the Zand and Qajar periods, mirror-decoration gained wide popularity for portals, overdoors, window-frames, walls, ceilings, and columns in pavilions and private houses, tea-houses and *zūrḵāna*s, as well as royal buildings and shrines. Multiple mirrors with etched and painted mirror-glass frames provide the traditional rectangular units for facades. Where the flat panels are oval, as on the upper register of the portal *ayvān* of the shrine of Ḥażrat-e Maʿṣūma in Qom, they are often enclosed in a rectangular frame. Curvilinear designs may fill the horizontal and vertical interstices of such panels, or they may compose whole decorative programs without the inclusion of framed mirrors (which are often placed too high on the facade for the reflection of anything but the opposite architectural surface); these designs are executed in smaller, flat, specially cut and shaped pieces of mirror-glass, or—for maximum brilliance—in square tesserae with pyramidal, faceted surfaces. The latter occur in varying sizes and are used to compose emphatic panels within an ensemble of flat glass designs, as well as to provide a fluid line or to articulate an area of molded relief, such as the vases, flowers, and lotiform elements set in rectangular panels on the *tālār* of the shrine of Šāhzāda Ḥosayn in Qazvīn. The surfaces of columns and their *moqarnas* capitals may be mirror-coated, creating the effect of spurting white fountains. Mirror-pieces set at conflicting angles emphasize the architectonic *moqarnas* of an *ayvān*, as at the portal of the shrine in Qom, or simply help to define an area; an example is the frieze executed in small pieces of cut mirror-glass on the *tālār* sheltering the Taḵt-e Marmar in the Golestān Palace in Tehran. Smaller-shaped pieces in combination with faceted tesserae are commonly used to create dazzling but highly traditional geometric ensembles on a larger

surface, such as the octagonal star-and-cross pattern on a corridor wall in the Golestān Palace. Etched or painted component panels of mirror glass are used for borders, as on the *tālār* of the pavilion of the Nāranǰestān Garden, in Shiraz, or to provide soft accents within an ensemble of harsher forms, as do the gilt arabesques on the eight-pointed stars of the geometrical ensemble in the Golestān Palace. Rococo panels of faceted mirror-tesserae adorn a Qajar painted ceiling with a bright yellow ground in the pavilion of the Nāranǰestān just as diamonds must have sparkled against a 19th-century ball-gown. Some Qajar domestic *āʾīna-kārī* included mirrors actually intended to be used as looking-glasses; these are often found in the same ensembles as mirrors on which were painted pictures of the pretty girls and handsome youths, the birds and flowers, so characteristic of the entire decorative repertoire of the Qajar period.

By contrast, the *tālār*s, and especially the interior chambers of the great Shiʿite shrines of Iran, were enriched in the 19th century by ensembles of *āʾīna-kārī* that reflect nothing but the illumination of chandeliers infinitely refracted, so complete is the coating of small-scale mirror mosaic (see *Survey of Persian Art* II, p. 1363, on the Dār al-saʿāda in the shrine of Imam Reżā in Mašhad). Such bejewelled architectural effects, even in the holiest of holy places, are somehow not inappropriate expressions of a dynasty that delighted so greatly in precious stones.

Āʾīna-kārī of the Pahlavi period appears most notably in the modern equivalent of the *tālār*s and the *ayvān*s of the 17th century—in the remodeled Coronation Room of the Golestān Palace, and in the Reception Hall of the Marble Palace. The latter is an interior of highly traditional Persian formal language expressed in a decorative medium perfected in the 19th century for a completely enclosed 20th-century rectangular hall. If it is not so moving as the great shrine in Mašhad, it is as glitteringly resplendent as the *āʾīna-kārī* of the Safavid pavilions of 17th-century Isfahan.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Given in the text.