



TABRIZ X. MONUMENTS (1) THE BLUE MOSQUE

The Blue Mosque (Pers. *Masjed-e kabud*), also known as Masjed-e Moẓaffariya, was built during the rule of the Qarā Qoyunlu dynasty (1351-1469) and completed in 1465. The only major Qarā Qoyunlu structure still standing in the dynasty's capital, it illustrates the artistic brilliance of Turkman Tabriz. The extant tilework documents artistic connections with contemporary architecture in Timurid Khorasan and in the Ottoman Empire.

History. The Blue Mosque belongs to the architectural complex which is known as Moẓaffariya. Kātun Jān Begom (d. 1469), a wife of the Qarā Qoyunlu ruler Jahānšāh (r. 1439-67), established the mosque's endowment (*waqf*; cf. Karbalā'i Tabrizi, p. 43; Ṭehrāni, p. 523; cf. Werner). The inscription of the portal (*pišṭāq*) gives 4 Rabi' I 870/25 October 1465 as the date when the construction was completed. The building complex served multiple functions, but only the mosque and the mausoleum (*qobba* lit. "dome") are still standing. The vanished buildings and structures (Ṭehrāni, p. 523; Werner, pp. 100-101) include a sufi convent (*kānaqāh*), an underground canal (*qanāt*, *kāriz*), and a garden called Begom-ābād or Bāḡ-e Begom, as well as perhaps a madrasa (see EDUCATION v. The Madrasa in Shi'ite Persia) and bathhouses. Next to the Moẓaffariya was a bazaar (*bāzār*) with 55 shops, where the founder's daughters also owned property (Werner, p. 104). The building complex was first consecrated to Kātun Jān Begom, who was buried with her children in the mausoleum (Werner, pp. 102-3). Jahānšāh is also said to have been buried



there (Qazvini, p. 71; Teḥrāni, p. 471, 523). All tombs have vanished, and there are merely traces of three graves in the mausoleum's crypt (Aube, p. 243 and note 4).

The Blue Mosque was still under construction when the [Āq Qoyunlu](#) conquered Tabriz. After the death of Jahānšāh and Kātun Jān Begom, their daughter Šāleha Kātun oversaw the construction work, and during the reign of the Āq Qoyunlu ruler Ya'qub (r. 1478-90), the mausoleum's cupola (see [DOMES](#)) and its main parts were completed (Kārang, pp. 284-85; Werner, p. 108). A few details from the mausoleum's interior, such as alabaster pieces from the wall panels and the main prayer niche (*meḥrāb*), reveal that the mausoleum was never completely finished (Golombek and Wilber, p. 407; Aube, p. 248). Nonetheless the Blue Mosque itself served as a mosque during the first half of the 16th century, when Tabriz became the first capital of the [Safavid dynasty](#) (1501-1732) between 1501 and 1555. Since the military conflicts with the Ottoman Empire had weakened the Safavid defense, Ottoman troops looted Tabriz, as well as the Blue Mosque, in 1514, after their victory in the battle of Chaldiran ([Čālderān](#); see [OTTOMAN-PERSIAN RELATIONS i. Under Sultan Selim I and Shah Esmā'il I](#)). The troops of Selim I took at least eight carpets from the Blue Mosque to Istanbul, since in 1530 Selim I offered some of these to the newly built Gazi Hüsrev Bey Mosque in Sarajevo (Herrmann and Herrmann, IV, pp. 16-17, 240-41; Aube, p. 249). While it is not known whether the building complex itself was attacked during the Ottoman occupation, violent earthquakes damaged the Blue Mosque between the 16th and 18th centuries (Melville, pp. 159-77). Already in the 17th century, the Blue Mosque was completely destroyed and abandoned, and in the 19th century the people of Tabriz plundered its ruins (Dieulafoy). In the 20th century the monument was finally restored by rebuilding its cupolas and missing walls and by replacing its beautiful tile panels.

BUILDING

Building materials. A stone foundation supports a structure of fired bricks (see [BRICK](#)), which is completely covered with tiles and decorated fired brick panels. Alabaster was used for the mausoleum's dado and the three meḥrābs ([Figure 4](#)), and probably also for the door to the mausoleum, of which a fragment has been preserved, and the windows in the gallery. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-89; q.v.) observed that the alabaster slabs created a warm red light inside the building (Tavernier, pp. 57-59, esp. p. 58).



Spatial organization. The T-shape floor plan is unusual for an Iranian mosque (Figure 1; cf. line drawings 2.284-85 in Hillenbrand, pp. 115, 492). The pištāq in the middle of the north side is flanked by two minarets at the corners (Figure 2). The main entrance leads to an antechamber which forms the center of a gallery that surrounds the central dome chamber on three sides, and whose two arms lead to the two mehrābs on the south side of the building. The gallery supports nine cupolas, three on each side, and each arm ends in a vault above a mehrāb. The central great dome (h. 22 m) rests on eight arches (Figure 3). The description of the two pulpits (sing. *menbar*) by Tavernier (p. 58) indicates that the imam led the prayer (see EMĀM-e JOM'A) from this central room. In the corner pillars of these eight arches there are four upper galleries. On the south side, the central dome chamber abuts the mausoleum (Golombek and Wilber, pp. 407-8; Aube, pp. 245-46). Its wooden door was usually closed (Tavernier, p. 58) so that the mausoleum was invisible from the prayer room, though it could be accessed through two disguised openings flanking the door. Four arched bays support the tall dome chamber (h. 15 m), and a crypt is below the *mehrab* (Figure 4).

Ottoman influence. The Blue Mosque seems to fit better into Ottoman than Iranian architecture. The façade with two tall minarets, the two successive rooms, and the T-shape floor plan, as well as the use of domes for the complete roof area, recall, for example, the Green Mosque in Bursa, which was built between 1419 and 1424. Among the craftsmen who worked on Green Mosque's decoration were 'Ali b. Ḥājji Aḥmad al-Tabrizi and a group of "ostādān-e Tabriz" (Gabriel, p. 92). The names suggest that these craftsmen were Iranian, and it is known that they were employed for many other 15th-century building projects in the Ottoman Empire (see, for example, Bernus-Taylor, Gabriel, and Riefstahl, as well as Necipoğlu, 1990, 1992, and 1995). While the experience of Iranian craftsmen with Ottoman architecture explains the artistic link between the Blue Mosque and contemporary Ottoman mosques, yet it raises the question why these Ottoman features were not adopted for other buildings in 15th-century Iran. The other Iranian mosque with a T-shape floor plan stands in Timurid Khorasan (q.v.): the Masjed-e Šāh (1451) in Mashad. Its architect was probably Aḥmad Šams-al-Din Moḥammad Bannā' al-Tabrizi (O'Kane, 1987, p. 230), and it has been suggested that this architect was also involved with the construction of the Blue Mosque (Hinz, pp. 421-22). Yet for the Blue Mosque two signatures are known from the building's foundation, and one of these belongs to 'Ezz-al-Din Qāpuči b. Malek, a *ḥājeb* of Jahānšāh. It seems plausible that 'Ezz-al-Din directed ("beh sar-kāri-



ye”) the building’s construction (Karāng, p. 291).

Decoration. While much of the architectural ornament has vanished, the remaining decoration reveals a high level of craftsmanship. In all decorative panels, from the pištāq to the back wall of the mausoleum, [calligraphy](#) plays an important role. The only craftsman whose signature has been found in the Blue Mosque is Ne‘mat-Allāh b. Moḥammad al-Bawwāb, a pupil of ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm Kālvati and the teacher of Mowlānā Šams-al-Dīn (Qaḏi Aḥmad, p. 67). He is mostly remembered as for his *tolṭ*, but was also well known for his kufic.

Tile mosaics. The whole monument was decorated with tile mosaics of a very fine quality and combined with brick for relief effects. The tiles show a wide range of chromatic shades, ranging from cobalt blue, turquoise, white, brown, and black to green, yellow, almost red, and gold. The vase panel with its brilliant blossom composition documents the high refinement of the tile mosaics ([Figure 5](#)). The vase shows a skillful combination of unique elements with traditional Turkmen patterns—see for example the Masjed-e Jāme‘ (1457, 1459, and 1486) in Yazd, or the Darb-e Emām (1453) and the mausoleum (*boq’a*) of Abu Mas‘ud (1489-90) in [Isfahan](#)—set within a varied and flourishing scrollwork. Furthermore, technical variants are introduced into the tile mosaics. In some designs, mortar is used to obtain very unusual relief structures ([Figures 6–8](#)). In others, ornamental tiles are set against a background of fired brick ([Figure 9](#)). The use of relief can be traced to Timurid models from Khorasan. The first Iranian examples for the use of relief in geometric panels can be found in the Gowhar-šād Mosque in Mashad (1418), and in the pištāq to the shrine complex of Shaikh Aḥmad b. Abu’l-Ḥasan (Shaikh Aḥmad-e Jām, 1440-43, q.v.) in Torbat-e Jām. In Central Iran, relief panels (Aube, pp. 253-55) are more typical for Turkmen buildings, such as the Darb-e Emām, mentioned above, and the Masjed-e Jāme‘, dated 1475-76, in Isfahan (see [ISFAHAN x. Monuments \[3\] Mosques](#)). In the Blue Mosque, relief is even employed for calligraphy, which is very unusual. Another rare example of such a practice is again preserved in Timurid Khorasan: the Masjed-e Mawlānā (*boq’a* of Zayn-al-Dīn, 1444-45) at Tāybād (O’Kane, 1979, p. 89).

Gilded tiles. Nowadays only a few gilded tiles are still on site within the mausoleum, but between the 17th and 19th centuries European travelers (Tavernier, p. 60; Dieulafoy, p. 22) observed that hexagonal blue and gilded tiles covered the mausoleum’s walls and dome ([Figure 10](#)). Since Timurid times, this type of tilework has been often employed on dados in Iran, but in



the Blue Mosque its use for a mausoleum and its color—cobalt blue instead of the traditional turquoise—both are very unusual, as there is just one more known example for this type of decoration in Iran. In the already mentioned Masjed-e Šāh in Mashad, the walls of the central dome chamber are covered with hexagonal green and gilded tiles (considered “a breathtaking innovation” by O’Kane, 1987, p. 67).

Blue-and-white tiles. On the exterior walls of the Blue Mosque there are many interesting under-glaze tiles, which are adorned with a black line and painted in white on a dark blue ground. Most of these are square blue-and-white tiles (5 × 5 cm) with floral or geometric ornaments, inserted into *bannā’i* panels (Figure 11). Although it has been documented that triangular and lozenge-shaped blue-and-white tiles (Figure 12) were found in the Blue Mosque during the 1960s restoration (Torābi Ṭabāṭabā’i, p. 166; Aube, p. 259), there are currently no Blue Mosque specimens in any known collection. Similar blue-and-white tiles (Figures 13–14), which may be related to those of the Blue Mosque, have been identified in some collections (Aube, pp. 259-60 and fig. 6). Blue-and-white tiles were not widely used in 15th century Iran, and the Blue Mosque constitutes an outstanding example of blue-and-white tilework. In Timurid Khorasan, blue-and-white tiles similar to those of the Blue Mosque were used in the aforementioned Gowhar-šād Mosque in Mashad and the Ghiyathiyya Madrasa (Madrasa-ye Ġiāṭiyya, ca. 1436-43) in Kārgerd (O’Kane, 1976, p. 88, pl. VIIb; 1987, p. 65-66, pl. 2.13; Golombek, Wilber, p. 322). In 1464, the Ishrat Khana Tomb (‘Ešrat Kāna) in Samarqand became the second building, after the Blue Mosque in Tabriz, that employed blue-and-white tiles in the Timurid-Turkmen lands. The buildings in Tabriz and Samarqand, both might be influenced by the Ghiyathiyya Madrasa in Kārgerd (O’Kane 1976, pp. 79-92; 1987, p. 66). While an Iranian influence on the decoration of Ottoman buildings is suggested by the square blue-and-white tiles (Figure 15) of the Çinili Köşk (1473) in Istanbul, for an exceptional group of blue-and-white tiles from the Blue Mosque minarets there is not any known parallel, anywhere in the Islamic lands (Aube, pp. 261-65). These tiles had floral forms, and stood in relief on a tiles mosaic (Figure 16a, b). These unusual blue-and-white ornaments demonstrate the vitality of ceramic production in Tabriz.

Luster tiles. At the bottom of the Blue Mosque’s pištāq columns there are remnants of small luster tiles (Figure 17a, b, c). Their white blossom design is painted on a brown background, and enhanced with blue (Aube, pp. 267-68). These luster tiles are very remarkable, since luster tiles were also not widely



used in the 15th century. The Blue Mosque's luster tiles recall four Turkmen luster tiles from [Kashan](#). They indicate that the luster technique was not yet completely forgotten, and demonstrate once more the high standards and the importance of the ceramic tile production in Turkmen Tabriz.

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