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# INTERIOR DECORATIVE ARTS USED IN MEDIEVAL MADRASAHs

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the decorative arts used in the interior of medieval madrasahs in Central Asia, including ganch carving, wall painting, tilework, wood carving, muqarnas, calligraphy, and vegetal (floral) ornamentation. Their aesthetic, functional, and symbolic significance is examined.

The study also highlights the distinctive interior features characteristic of the architectural schools of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Tashkent.

**Keywords:** Ganch carving, wall painting, tilework, wood carving, muqarnas, calligraphy, vegetal ornaments.

### Introduction

Medieval madrasahs were the paramount institutions of religious instruction and intellectual activity throughout the Islamic world. More than mere educational buildings, they were conceived as holistic environments fostering spiritual growth and contemplation. This profound purpose was deeply reflected in their architectural and artistic designs, which adhered strictly to Islamic aesthetic principles. Particular emphasis was placed on the interiors, as these spaces were envisioned not only as functional classrooms but as sanctuaries where art served as a didactic medium conveying sacred and philosophical meanings.

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**Ganch Carving (Ganchkorlik).** One of the most distinctive features of madrasah interiors in Central Asia was ganch carving—a decorative technique involving a malleable white plaster-like material made from gypsum and clay. The unique plasticity of ganch enabled craftsmen to create elaborate ornamental reliefs that combined geometric patterns, floral details, and intricate calligraphic inscriptions.

Ganch was predominantly applied to key architectural elements such as mihrabs (prayer niches), ornamental wall recesses, cornices, and the transitional zones beneath domes. Its characteristic whiteness enhanced light reflections and shadows, imbuing the interiors with a sense of purity, calm, and spiritual elevation. This delicate play of light and form invited meditative contemplation, aligning perfectly with the intellectual and spiritual aims of the madrasah environment.

**Wall Painting (Naqqoshlik).** Wall painting, or naqqoshlik, was integral to the interior aesthetic scheme of madrasahs. In accordance with Islamic aniconic traditions, artists predominantly employed abstract, geometric, and stylized vegetal motifs, deliberately avoiding the depiction of living beings. These paintings were often complemented by wooden carvings to create harmonious, multi-layered decorative ensembles that unified walls, ceilings, and other surfaces into a cohesive artistic whole.

The color palette of blue, green, ochre, and other earth tones was carefully chosen for its symbolic and psychological impact. Blue suggested divine infinity and protection, green was associated with paradise and life, and ochre evoked stability and grounding. Together, these colors forged a tranquil, reflective atmosphere conducive to scholarly pursuit and spiritual introspection.

**Ceramic Cladding (Koshinkorlik)** Ceramic decoration, known as koshinkorlik, played an equally important role both indoors and on the facades of madrasahs. Glazed, vividly colored tiles were used to finish lower walls, entry portals, domes,

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and especially mihrabs. The compositions frequently incorporated complex geometric patterns called *hirih*, leafy plant motifs, and exquisite calligraphic panels expressing Quranic verses and religious invocations.

The durability and brilliance of ceramic cladding not only elevated the aesthetic richness of the madrasahs but also signified the institution's status and enduring mission. Their reflective surfaces added subtle luminosity to interiors, enhancing spatial perception and the sacred ambiance.

**Wood Carving.** Wood carving was employed extensively in doors, columns, ceiling beams, window frames, and furniture within madrasahs. Artisans produced finely chiseled surfaces adorned with intricate arabesques and interlacing patterns, demonstrating consummate craftsmanship and artistic ingenuity.

Beyond its decorative function, wood bore symbolic resonance—representing life, growth, and the stability and transmission of knowledge. This association complemented the educational objectives of the madrasah, underscoring the living, dynamic nature of scholarship nurtured within.

**Muqarnas.** Muqarnas—stalactite-like architectural vaulting and ornamental elements—were pivotal in mediating transitions between structural planes, especially in dome bases, niches, and monumental portals. Muqarnas served both practical and profound symbolic functions. Structurally, they eased architectural transitions; symbolically, their tiered, fractal geometry embodied cosmological views that suggested a multi-layered, infinite universe reflecting divine order.

These forms animated interiors with dynamic spatial rhythms, enhancing the sense of transcendence and the soul's aspiration toward the Divine.

**Calligraphy.** Calligraphy was central to the artistic program of madrasah interiors. Various scripts—particularly kufic, naskh, and sulus—were deployed

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to inscribe Quranic verses, prophetic sayings (hadiths), and moral maxims on friezes, mihrabs, portals, and walls.

Scriptural inscriptions endowed the spaces with spiritual gravitas, affirming the sacred nature of knowledge and its role as the highest value. Calligraphy also unified the interior decor, serving as both an aesthetic and theological narrative that continuously reminded students of their intellectual and ethical duties.

**The Holistic Artistic and Semantic System.** Together, these various decorative arts—ganch carving, wall painting, ceramic tilework, wood carving, muqarnas, and calligraphy—formed an integrated artistic and semantic system within medieval madrasahs. Each element was imbued with layered meanings that transcended mere ornamentation, serving educational, spiritual, and philosophical purposes.

This holistic approach to interior design made the madrasah not only a site of learning but a lived experience of Islamic civilization's profound religious, cultural, and intellectual heritage. The interplay of art and architecture thus played a vital role in shaping the ambiance necessary for spiritual education and contemplation.

The interior decorative arts of medieval madrasahs were far more than ornamental embellishments; they represented a sophisticated visual language that communicated the core values of Islamic faith, knowledge, and spirituality. Through the masterful use of ganch carving, wall painting, ceramic tiling, woodwork, muqarnas, and calligraphy, these educational institutions created an immersive and contemplative atmosphere that nurtured both intellectual rigor and spiritual growth. This seamless integration of art and architecture not only reinforced the madrasah's role as a beacon of learning but also expressed the profound philosophical and religious ideals of the Islamic civilization. As such, the interior decoration of medieval madrasahs remains a testament to the enduring

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power of artistic expression as a means of shaping human experience and cultivating the mind and soul.

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