

The Effect of Mithraism on Safavid Tangled-Fish Design Carpets

Abstract

Carpets have undergone one of the stages of prosperity and richness during the Safavid period. In this historic period, the establishment of large royal workshops under the support of the Safavid government paved the way for the creation of beautiful designs with ancient patterns of the carpets of this era. By studying the carpet designs of the Safavid period, the existence of religious and non-religious notions is exposed. The issue under study is the influence of ancient religious beliefs of Iran on the carpet designs of this period. Mithraism is considered as a belief in which the emergence and continuity of its symbols are observed in many of the arts of the Islamic period. The research in hand is conducted via a descriptive and analytical method while relying on library data. Findings indicate that the appearance of tangled fish motifs in Safavid carpets is influenced by the beliefs of Mithraism. The appearance of the tangled fish subsequent to flower motifs has also been one of the artistic features of antiquity abundantly perceived in Safavid carpet designs. The motif of the tangled fish or "Herati" design is the appearance of two fish amidst the face of the "Mehr".

Research aims:

1. An analysis of the effect of the Mehr religious symbol on the carpet designs of the Safavid period.
2. An investigation on the presence of the tangled-fish pattern in Safavid carpets.

Research questions:

1. Under what religious impact was the tangled-fish design generated in the carpets of the Safavid period?
2. What were the characteristics of the tangled-fish design in Safavid carpets?

Keywords: carpet design, Safavid period, tangled fish, Mithraism

Introduction

Carpet and carpet weaving has a long history in Iran and dates back to ancient times. Carpet has been an accessory of the royal court since Assyrian times. During the Achaemenid period, beautiful designs and patterns were created in carpet weaving along with exquisite carpets woven during this period. With the arrival of Islam in Iran and in the Islamic period, the carpet weaving industry continued to exist, although it experienced alternations due to the political and economic conditions of society. During the Safavid period, in line for economic growth and prosperity and the solemn support of the Safavid kings, carpet weaving reached its peak of prosperity and affluence; hence, various designs were manufactured in the royal and non-royal carpet workshops during this period. During this period, the carpet weaving industry flourished in diverse cities of Iran such as Tabriz, Kashan and Hamedan. During this period, several designs such as lotus flower, centipede, various types of Shah Abbasi and Khatai flowers were designed and woven by artists; also, older patterns were also woven. Recognition of the designs of this period displays that many of these designs and maps have been formed in close connection with the Iranian intellectual and cultural system. Therefore, a number of such designs were related to religions influences of ancient Iran, especially Mithraism; accordingly, the need to study the designs of this period, namely the tangled fish design, is raised as a symbol of Mithraism.

Regarding the subject of this research, it should be said that so far no independent research has been written on this subject, but several researches on the design of tangled fish in Iranian handmade carpets have been written. An article entitled "Research on the evolution of the role of tangled fish in carpet" by Zahra Teymouri (2016) has been written to study the formation of the role of tangled fish from ancient times to study this role in carpet and it is believed that this plan has historical origins that are rooted in the religious beliefs of Iranians. An article entitled "Interpretation and clarification of symbolic meanings of fish motifs in Safavid period carpets with the view of Rumi's spiritual Masnavi" has been written by Tayebeh Sabbaghpour and Mahnaz Shayestehfar (2009). In this article, it is stated that in addition to the important role the motif played in the beliefs of the ancient Iranians, it also had a special place in the culture and beliefs of the Iranians in the Islamic period. Another article entitled "Fish Identity in Iranian Carpet" written by Mahboubeh Elahi (2008) expresses the view of the author that the variety of fish-specific maps and letters in Iranian culture indicates that this symbolic theme with various concepts and perceptions is embedded within various ethnic groups in terms of design and shape. Despite the unity of the design, it is very diverse in terms of principles and basis and in terms of details, and this certainly shows the power of its attractiveness and high visual expression. Fish in unlike forms has the ability to change and modify the shape of designs and motifs since it is attractive to dissimilar ethnic groups, they have their own cultural and artistic perception, thus the theme is rich in terms of the impact of views and the variety of designs and shapes. The influence of visual expression of the role of the fish has empowered this motif, which now and then goes beyond the initial flow of a simple scheme and becomes part of an exceptional design that has the aptitude to cover a space. Conversely, in this study, there is no reference to the effect of Mithraism on the theme of tangled fish in the Safavid period, thus the present has sought to investigate this issue. The present study written in a descriptive and analytical method based on the data of library sources seeks to investigate the carpets of the Safavid period and the philosophical and cultural foundations of this art.

Conclusion

The prosperity of carpets and carpet weaving in the Safavid period led to the emergence of numerous designs and patterns in this era. This occurred as elements of the new designs were rooted in the symbols of the past beholding religious identities. The design of the tangled fish used in Persian carpet is a surviving

symbol of Mithraism in ancient times. In this religion, fish is a symbol of dynamism, movement and vitality, and tangled fish in line with this interpretation means a constant movement towards the source and continuity in life. This symbol has been evident in other arts such as pottery and painting in Iran during the Islamic period and was more or less visible in carpet designs, but since the Safavid period we have witnessed the presence of the symbol of tangled fish in various forms in carpet designs. In the carpet of this period, due to the sanctity of using plant motifs, the transformation of fish into leaves is apparent which is more visible in geometric and ordinary designs. Unquestionably, as seen in studies, this design has eventually transformed into a flower and has moved away from the obvious shapes of the fish. By considering such interpretations, it can be said that the religion of Mithraism and its symbols has extended to works of art such as carpets particularly during the Safavid era. Among the reasons for the widespread use of fish designs in the mentioned epoch, it should be said that the map of dirham fish or Herati design had a special place in Iran, and that this role conveyed the concept of paradise in the design of carpets.

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