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Ornamentation & British Era Lahore

Abstract

In the context of the cultural and regional history of Lahore, various rulers left their mark in the form of built heritage. Ornamentation and its connection with the buildings cannot be ignored. This paper is focused on the designs observed in one of the Courtrooms of the High Court building, Lahore. The descriptive research in a historical setting is applied. It aims to bring in light the design ornamentation present in the interior of this historic monument. It also aims to explore the context of these motifs with a link to the regional style of Lahore. Chief Court building interior ornamentation was selected as the sample for this paper. This research is helpful for art historians, design students as well as heritage conservatives. The paper also identified various motifs carrying inspiration from local floral patterns, a variation of the acanthus motif. It was quite interesting in developing an understanding of the philosophy behind using various patterns. Further in-depth research on designs to preserve them for the future generations is need of the hour.

Keywords: British, Lahore, High Court, Quatrefoil, Ornamentation, Motifs, Acanthus.

Introduction

Ornamentation has been discussed in many perspectives but focusing on the building and that of a British period was quite intriguing for the researcher. Ornamentation was used extensively in the Mughal architecture of Lahore,¹ but observing the ornamentation from a foreign ruler's perspective naturally became significant. The history of Lahore brings out various cultures that once made this imperial city a hallmark in the sub-continent. Many rulers exemplified their strength in the form of architecture and later added decoration to it. Therefore the subject of this research becomes more important to document the extensive decorative ornamentation. The built structure in India in the British period held the philosophy of constructing a symbol of power and strength. They established an architectural philosophy that had its own distinctive features. The architecture built during the British period had its characteristics with the ideology of a British symbol of power. High Court, Lahore is an example of their civic and administrative culture.

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¹ Anjum Rehmani, *Lahore, History and Architecture of Mughal monuments.* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 15

Literature is available on several British monuments in Lahore but lacks when it comes to this particular building and the design repertoire it inherited. The paper thus highlights the following main objectives to find out the impact on design patterns, this consists of the analysis of the patterns, to articulate an understanding about the materials and styles existing in these ornamentation motifs, and developing an understanding about it.

Administration under British aimed for a change in the building construction style² and it was not limited to the centers like Madras or Delhi. The idea of this philosophy³ spread to other areas like Lahore as well. High Court Lahore was built with all the cultures in mind. The designer behind it was probably aiming for an architectural as well as an artistic icon. The changes being experimented at Lahore were also linked with the upgradation of the presidency of the British in India. The process of choosing a design was not entirely a one-person show but it went through different phases. British were aware of the impact of the *Mughal* Dynasty and their affiliation towards their ancestral heritage of architecture. The structure relies on ornamentation for its identity and cultural meaning. Therefore the study of ornamentation becomes essential when looking at a building and its architecture. This also became an aim to add in the current knowledge of design ornamentation for students, art historians, educationists, and even textile designers to explore the heritage motifs and identify with their own culture of ornamentation especially concerning Lahore.

Ornament

The ornament has been an important part of almost all the cultures; its motifs are so widespread that many of its patterns have a variety of different names. Like for example, a different vocabulary is used for motifs in architecture and those in primitive arts and other fields. Another branch under the ornamentation is heraldry. It has evolved an entire language of its own. The basis can be summarized on geometric and floral characters for ease in understanding.⁴ Jones came up with various discussions in his book, *Grammar of Ornament*. He elaborates as to how the traditional art formulates an outline for decorative art.⁵ According to his principles whenever a style of ornament is based on a concept to be appreciated, the ornament will therefore be designed by its form in nature. However varied the expression, the idea on which the original design is based goes through moderation and transformation.⁶

Ornamentation has been a topic of exploration for years; therefore, a study of the ornamentation style was much needed from the perspective of the British especially at Lahore. Over the centuries ornamentation became the most distinguishable art practice. To observe any community and its cultural setup, the

² Kamil Khan Mumtaz, *Architecture in Pakistan*, (Concept Media, Singapore 1985).45

³ Thomas. R. Metcalf. *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and British Raj*, (London: Faber and Faber Publications, 1989).12

⁴ Bernard S. Myers. *Encyclopedia of World Art*. (London: MccGraw-Hill, 1958).846

⁵ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*.(London: Beernard Quaeitch,1856),45-46.

⁶ Ibid,47.

embellishment of built structures becomes an expressive aspect.⁷ Ornamentation was not limited to the basic structure of the buildings but its various other parts depicted the impact of a design ideology.

This characteristic element linked with architecture makes it easy to adapt and has left a mark in ornamentation on South Asian art. Latif thought that such activity of built heritage adds to a feeling of sovereignty in the lands taken. It was a common practice to construct lofty and magnificent structures in the conquered lands as this re-enforced the strength and power of the rulers.⁸ An idea prevalent in the early years in Central Asia, Asia Minor, or even in Iran. Architecture with ornamentation takes the observer back into the historical context.

Khan explains the 18th century British period architecture and focuses on buildings like Lawrence and Montgomery halls, Aitchison College, Exhibition center, etc. He explains how a series of different styles could be observed during the British era and left behind a blend of Gothic to Classical period revivals like the Punjab Assembly and Sindh High Court. His description of the Lahore High Court is focused on the exterior features only.⁹

Studies of ornamentation lead the researcher to also observe the various patrons of the topic including Owen Jones and Louis Sullivan. *Lahore, Architectural Remains and Antiquities*, is one of the frequently referred books about Lahore, is about environmental and architectural changes. A few architectural elements about High Courts' exterior details and several materials used are also discussed.¹⁰

The local architecture was admired but not followed upon; architects were usually brought from Britain.¹¹ Research on the architectural heritage shows the increasing interest in this process due to great developments in technology and tools but to summarize the literature review, it is concluded that research is available on British monuments and their architectural style. But despite the historical, architectural, and national significance of the High Court building, there is a dearth of available literature pertinent, to it. This research was focusing closely on the patterns and motifs to bring to light the experimentation and design study of this building.

Various catalogs and manuals are observed carrying ornamentation design patterns used by different cultures that existed. A few carry the design and history as well as the style by architecture. Reference in connection with architecture is readily available with the impact of the climatic environment and materials available. The objective was to add in the existing knowledge of design ornamentation to explore and identify with our own culture of ornamentation designs.

⁷ Wornum Nicholson Ralph, *Analysis of Ornament* (3rd ed). (London: Chapman & Hall 1856).

⁸ Muhammad Syed Latif, *Lahore, Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities*. (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1882)

⁹ Kamil Khan Mumtaz, *Architecture in Pakistan*, (Concept Media, Singapore 1985).45

¹⁰ *ibid.*47

¹¹ Pervaiz Vandal and Sajida Vandal, *The Raj, Lahore and Bhai Ram Singh*.(NCA Publications, 2006).25-26

The planning guidelines¹² by Ireland, are interesting to learn from since they focus on building structures in terms of its style, proportion, and ornamentation. Since the focus of this research is on the ornamentation of the architecture. The policy highlights the appropriateness of the style and nature of the structure under consideration. An important factor to consider here is the fact that different architectural styles vary from those which deliberately avoided such decorative embellishment. Some buildings are significant because of the quality and detailing of the ornamentation styles. The features of such a historic and cultural building also signify with particular features, prominent from others. Another highlighting feature can be their high artistic quality. One important aspect to be considered here is the quality of the interior space of the built structure is kept by the authorities intact in terms of quality and standard of features like ceilings, pilaster, marble & woodwork, etc. All this concludes to the fact of the importance of such buildings.

Historical research was observed for this study for it helps explore the events of the past with an effort to understand the facts.¹³ The analytical process is detailed and based on how the researcher can highlight the details. This will help analyze the characteristics of the subject.¹⁴ The qualitative research design was focused on. The data was collected using photographs and infra-red images were derived, they were later examined while working on the critique. Line drawings were generated based on the original symmetry and pattern. A list of materials used was also developed. Original ornamentation patterns built during the 19th century were taken as the population of the study. The focus was kept purposefully on the motifs present in the original Chief Court building interior.

Discussion

An initial survey revealed that the whole building of the Lahore High Court is covered with ornamentation designs in various materials including bricks, marble, masonry, sandstone, and wood. This paper is focused on the Chief courts' ornamentation designs only.

Recording the ornamentation designs was a tedious effort and brought into light materials like wood, black schist, brick, and marble. Few motifs were found recurring in the exterior and interior locations. The use of Islamic geometric ornamentation on the marble trellis in the corridor of the Chief Court is quite visible. The marble arch is patterned with geometrical designs, carved out making a tracery. The ornamentation is designed in a way as if they are filtering sunlight

¹² Planning Policy Statement 6 'Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage' (PPS6) was published in March 1999. PPS6 sets out the Department's planning policies for the protection and conservation of archaeological remains and features of the built heritage, and embodies the Government's commitment to sustainable development and environmental stewardship. Annex C of PPS6 provides the criteria under which buildings of special architectural and/or historic interest are listed. http://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/policy/planning_statements_and_supplementary_planning_guidance/pp_s6_-_revised_annex_c__criteria_for_listing.pdf

¹³ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Research*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 2007).173-175

¹⁴ *ibid*.178

for the interior space adding not only aesthetic beauty but also enhancing the exterior space. One cannot ignore the local cultural influence linked with the tracery. Mughal monuments like Lahore fort, *Badshahi* mosque, *Jahangir's* tomb all show use of marble. The main wooden door of the Court is kept simple with design patterns only on each corner of the stiles. The wall inside the Chief Court has ornamentation in the form of blind arches, made just below the wooden ceiling as if the ceiling is going beyond the sky. Its columns are with lotus inspired capitals, such columns date back to the Egyptian period ornamentation.

The fireplace at the Chief Court features four compositions. The ornamentation understudy is the central panel where a pedestal flat surface fruit dish is carved in the middle, with pomegranate and two bunches of grapes placed on it. The ornamentation has a further symmetrical pattern of the scroll of stylized flowers and buds. The ornamentation is in relief carving and painted in gold. Since there are two fireplaces in the Chief Court, both the panels are photographed and compared for details. Both the fireplaces exhibit a replica of one another designed in marble which has been painted golden in a few areas. The height of the fireplace is approximately 124 inches. The ornamentation patterns are carved on the front in six blocks. Three blocks on each side of the hearth are also present. The designs are carved in a square (12inches x 12 inches) block, next to it is a rectangular space measuring 35 inches x 12 inches right next to it is the same square block pattern again repeated. A floral pattern is carved between the brackets. For an understanding of the development of the ornamentation design, similar motifs in the Mughal and Sikh buildings in Lahore were also studied to see what impact and to what extent they laid influence on the later ornamentation style developed by the British.

Studying different examples made sense that fruit dishes and flowers were often recurring themes in the surface decorations by the Mughals. It was present in the decoration of caravanserais, tombs, palaces, and mosques. A similar subject matter is found at *Gulabi Bagh*, gateway, Lahore, a rose garden laid by a Persian noble, *Mirza Sultan Baig*.¹⁵ The regional trend of depicting fruit dishes and flowers existed in the ornamentation designs in the forms of mosaics, frescos, and carvings. The individual style however varied as in the Mughal and later Sikh era. Continuous use of such decorative motifs and their use with combinations surely must have left an impact on the architects of the British period.

The Acanthus leaf motif carved can also be identified on the right and left sides of the fireplace. The style of exquisitely ornamented brackets can be found in the Hindu and Muslim architecture in previous eras.¹⁶ The conception and treatment of the margin and shape of the leaf is the principal characteristic of the different period styles.¹⁷ Jones establishes a very interesting statement, he explains that Greeks used to specially prepare the surfaces to receive an ornament.¹⁸ The

¹⁵ Muhammad Syed Latif, *Lahore, Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities*. (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1882)

¹⁶ Bernard S. Myers. *Encyclopedia of World Art*. (London: MccGraw-Hill, 1958).846

¹⁷ Franz. Sales. Meyer, *A Handbook of Ornament*. (New York : Architectural Book Pub. Co.,1849)

¹⁸ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*.(London: Beenard Quaeitch,1856),4-5

Egyptian concept of ornament was different from the Greeks, as for them it could be made part of the construction of it and could be removed without affecting the structure.¹⁹ Its application however, leaves an impact on the viewer. The acanthus motif on the Chief court seems to serve the same purpose. The different forms existing in Western art can also be compared. Although the central focus is on the serrated outline of the acanthus motif. The same kind of acanthus style can be observed at the *Badshahi* mosque Lahore, acanthus ornamentation is present in the frescoes and relief carving of columns. The difference in the style of leaf serration adds variety. Later design restoration also seems to make a difference in the original motif of the acanthus. The main facade of the mosque has also central ornamentation of the acanthus motif. Latif shed light on the fresco ornamentation of the *Sunheri* mosque built-in 1753 A.D at Lahore²⁰. It also depicts the use of the acanthus motif from the local perspective. Here a slight curve and pointed tip are visible on the base of the carved golden dome. It appears in the painted ceiling of the dome and on the columns as well. The historical connection of this motif is evident in its existence in various patterns and shapes. Acanthus long occupied a place in the art of Buddhist sculptures also.

The style of brackets used in the Chief court is rather simple and the point of its projection kept plain. The front and side brackets have a leaf attached in an inverse style.

The decorative devices used at the Court were altered according to the demand of time, revealing boundless creative activities & artistic approaches. The use of technological context, adapting flora as widespread devices of decoration over the centuries, some of these few styles are in use since long. The use of acanthus leaf has been an integral part of the Mughal design repertoire. This element has a long history of assimilation into South Asian.

The Ceiling Ornamentation

The ceiling of the Chief Court is double pitched constructed in timber and covered with clay tiles. Two separate design patterns are used in the ceiling. One of the designs is repeated three times and the other twice forming a border design. A total of five panels covering the whole structure with ornamentation inspired by Islamic geometric patterns. Each panel is approximately 260 inches in length x 110 inches wide.

An interesting characteristic is a fact that these five panels are enclosed in a border that has a different design from the large basic panels of wood. Flowers with four petals can also be identified on the four corners of each panel. A concave style interior is observed especially at the transition from the wall to the ceiling. Two types of geometrical designs are found in the ceiling, one with the hexagon and the other has an octagon motif. The ceiling has seven hexagons repeating forming a network of continuous patterns inside a border. The border is further marked by the engraved wood embossing technique. The layering of designs is an integral part of the Islamic geometric ornamentation.

¹⁹ *ibid*,7

²⁰ Muhammad Syed Latif, *Lahore, Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities*. (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1882)

The geometric patterns observed here are used within borders constricting the eyes for overall surface decoration. The embossed wooden pattern is hinged on a base layer of diagonal wooden planks joined together forming the background of the whole ceiling.

The geometric patterns form a border on the ceiling patterns, made up of floral carved motif, one of the characteristic styles of vegetal motifs. Plane wood is carved out in an eight-petal flower shape. Each petal has two patterns carved in its structure. The center of each flower has a small rosette. This ornamentation pattern is repeated in the whole border design. If one analyses the flower motif closely, its leaves and floral petals depict an interesting flow of slight curves, around the tulip-shaped flower and leaves. The technique at the Court's ceiling is kept very simple.

Another stylized floral motif can be identified in the base of an intricate panel of an eight-petal flower. The technique is the same as used in the pattern for the border on the ceiling.

The art of floral patterns cannot be limited to one area; few motifs go on for centuries. The artisans working at the High court must have been familiar with the technique of carving so delicately that a tracery like an appearance is given to the solid wooden plank.

The stylized foliage has four petals if looked closely; the carved petals have a motif resembling two lotus leaves inside it. The style of heaping up architectural ornaments one over another was the traditional style of Hindu buildings²¹. Each corner is raised higher than the background ceiling. The motif of the eight petals of a flower is surrounding the circle in the style of a bull's tongue ornament.²²

The kind of technology applied in the carved piece of wood on the ceiling is also reminiscent of the style of the marble columns carved in the Jain temples in India. The stylized ornamentation of the ceiling has intricate detailing in the slightly curved lines of foliage. The design has simple ornamentation as compared to the earlier stone ornamentations of the Muslim era in Mughal architecture.

The rosette is an ancient motif existing through the Cretan-Mycenaean ornament²³ that existed during the era of Indus valley civilization and even the Gandharan period. A motif that kept on developing in various shapes left an influence on the architects and artists working on the Chief Court as well.

The double arches found on the niche behind the dice of the Chief also have an acanthus motif at edges. Interesting comment of Jones gives us thought about the use of acanthus leaf by different civilizations in a way not appropriate to the justification of its shape.²⁴ The fatal facilities which the Roman system of decoration gives for manufacturing ornament, by applying acanthus leaves to any form and in any direction, is the Chief cause of the invasion of this ornament into most modern works.²⁵ On the double arches at the Chief court, the carving of the

²¹ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*. (London: Beuard Quaeitch.1856)

²² Bernard S. Myers. *Encyclopedia of World Art*. (London: McGraw-Hill, 1958).836

²³ *ibid*.

²⁴ Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*. (London: *Dorling Kindersley*, 2001).14.16

²⁵ *ibid*.25

acanthus also exhibits the Greco Roman influences. The use of acanthus ornament on the edge of the arches is carved in wood material. Various techniques and the quality of delicately applying these motifs have been exquisite in the Chief court when it comes to designs in wood and marble. The high quality of craft skills was a hallmark of the Mughal artisans in these materials. It seems that the focus on one major source of inspiration was not the target but on the harmony of various other elements. Like the different techniques and mediums applied in the ornamentation of the original building, this historic design style focused on the grand eclectic ideology behind them. An eclectic taste for borrowing from historic styles prevailed during Colonial time. The analysis was based on the research questions which helped in investigating the exact information required like influences on the High Court ornamentation, types, and materials used. This monument is full of historical facts in the form of designs and patterns; which are hard to ignore, be it the exterior or the interior part of the building. The present patrons of the Court are consistently striving to preserve the building by regular maintenance. Focus is required on the preservation of design motifs and their drawing documentation. This study is aimed to preserve these elements.

To conclude, the original High court building is more than 100 years old. It is an asset for Lahore and its residents. It is also an important source of our regional design history and culture. The ornamentation used here reflects Mughal, and local Indian influences besides some British designs. Its value from the aspect of its design repertoire echo the diversity of motifs in British periods and its artistic endeavors, something that cannot be left unnoticed and undocumented.