

# Context

Built, Living and Natural



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## About the Volume

Though academia and practitioners have categorised heritage as natural and cultural, tangible and intangible for their own convenience, the fact remains that all these varied aspects of heritage are experienced and lived in totality by traditional communities. For ages, these communities have overlaid their perception of nature with associational significance, expressed in the form of rituals and festivals and integrated with arts and crafts. While 'heritage conservation' was considered to be the domain of specialists few years back, recently there is an increasing realisation for community participation in the process specially in case of traditional communities who already possess this know-how. Community led initiatives direct us towards long lasting processes and solutions for conserving all aspects of our heritage.

This issue of context documents some rare expressions such as Vinod Joshi's recording of a dance festival that was started by an individual in the mid 20th century and continued over decades due to community acceptance and integration with existing festivals. Kunkuma Devi studies the interdependence of festivals and urban form. The listing process of Surat has been presented as a model for documentation of urban heritage and a prerequisite for shaping any urban heritage management policy.

P S Ramkrishnan brings to light the close link that traditional societies have with their natural ecosystems and biodiversity, resulting in an 'eco-culture' with its knowledge systems that need to be integrated at various levels with formal systems. Amita Sinha's article demonstrates the strong associations between man and his natural landscape; an overlay that has been reinterpreted and emphasised, multiple times in history.

Anwar Punekar stresses on the need for an interdisciplinary and integrated approach for conserving historic cities, indicating the streams such as urban design and transport planning as inseparable partners to urban conservation. Manu Mahajan and Kanak Tiwari emphasise on 'popular history' and 'public memory' as an effective means of conserving and maintaining our heritage and restoration of the Hussainabad Clock Tower, Lucknow is a case of city residents valuing their heritage and taking voluntary initiatives to conserve it.

Chhoti Haldwani, a village in Uttarakhand, is a self sustaining model for community led tourism, while Basgo in Ladakh is a very good example of the community conserving its sacred heritage. Both these initiatives were possible through the support of external resources, but the significant point is that the community made efforts to maintain what it 'valued'.

**-The Editorial Team**

# Heritage Album

## ARABESQUE: A VITAL ELEMENT OF ORNAMENTATION IN ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE

*Mohammad Arif Kamal and Murat Cetin*

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'arabesque' is a European word dating perhaps from the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century when Renaissance artists used Islamic designs for book ornament and decorative bookbinding (Bloom & Blair 2009). Since figural representation was forbidden in Islamic religious art, other types of decoration such as calligraphy, geometry and arabesque became prevalent. Arabesque, in Islamic architecture is a type of ornamentation in which scrolling or interlacing simple vegetal elements such as vines, tendrils, foliate and leaf shapes were combined to create decorative patterns. Arabesque designs consist mainly of a two dimension pattern which is used symmetrically over the entire surface of objects such as carpets, furniture, textiles, and in buildings such as ceilings, walls, domes or contained in bands and panels.

Dalu Jones (1995) notes that the arabesque is 'characterised by a continuous stem which splits regularly, producing a series of counterpoised, leafy, secondary stems which can in turn split again or return to be reintegrated into the main stem.' Further, Jones writes that:

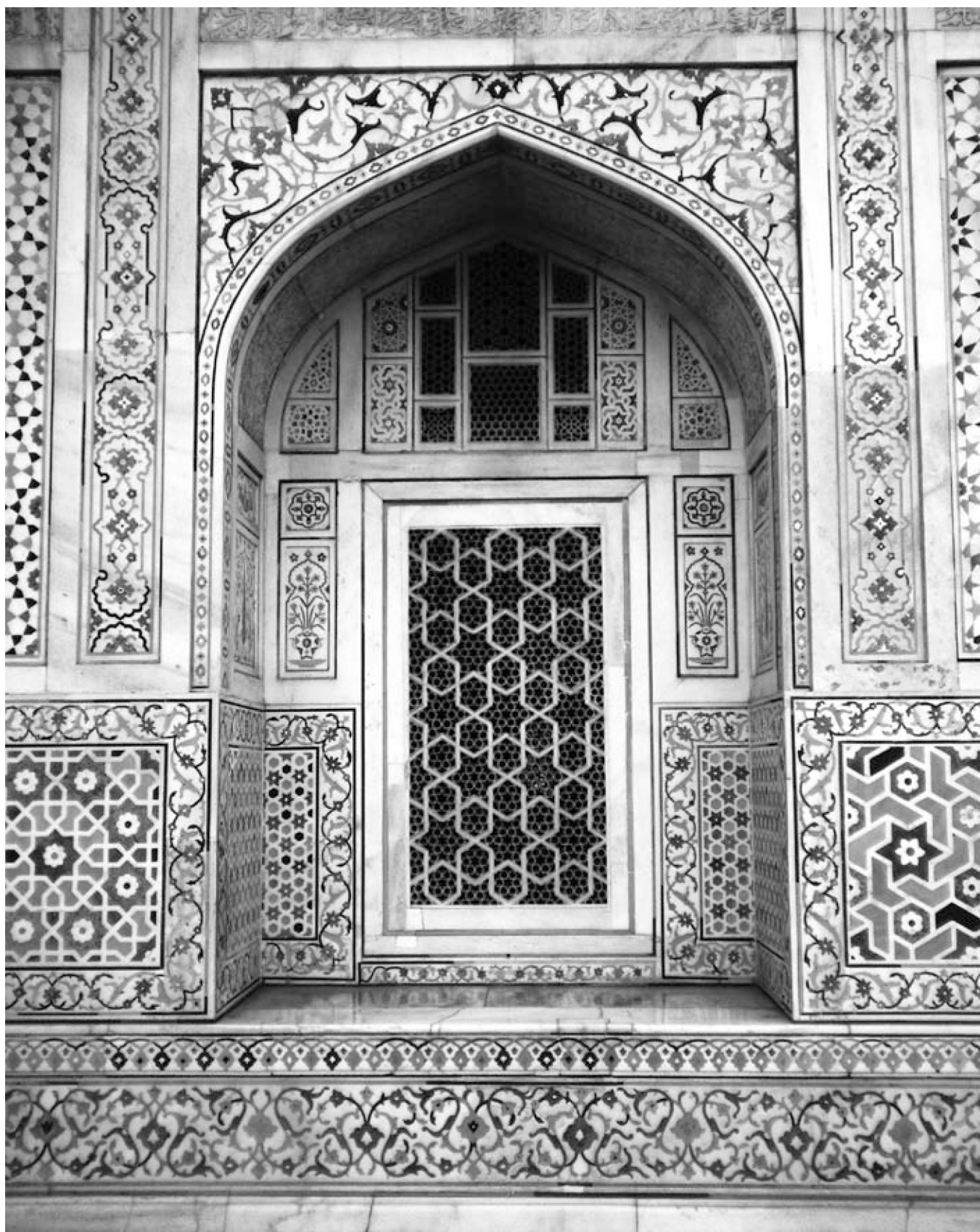
This limitless, rhythmical alternation of movement, conveyed by the reciprocal repetition of curved lines, produces a design that is balanced and free from tension. In the arabesque, perhaps more than in any other design associated with Islam, it is clear how the line defines space, and how sophisticated three-dimensional effects are achieved by differences in width, colour and texture. Shapes left in the background contribute to this effect, as in geometric patterns, adding another dimension to the overall design.

### EVOLUTION AND ARABESQUE

The first example of vegetal decoration can be traced to the mosaic decoration of the Dome of



*Lotus scroll and motifs from hindu traditions in Quwwat al Islam Mosque, Delhi*



*Pietra dura decoration with geometrical arabesque designs in Itmad-ud-Daula's Tomb, Agra*



Arabesque detail of a panel in Taj Mahal, Agra

the Rock in Jerusalem that was built by the Umayyad caliph Abdal Malik by the end of seventh century, derived from the traditions of late antiquity depicting vases, jewels and plants that form the main subject of decoration. Another example can be found in the stone carvings on the facade of the eighth century Umayyad palace of Mshatta which consists of a large band framed by elaborately decorated moulding having a series of 28 triangles enclosing curving vegetal scrolls. Each triangle contains one big rosette which is in high relief and also contains again a group of concentric design. In the ninth century when the Abbasids shifted their capital from Baghdad to Sammara, the palace walls were decorated with large panels of carved and moulded stucco. Here the artisans used foliate and floral elements within geometric frames, but they later developed a new type of ornamentation in which vegetal elements such as vines, tendrils and leaf shapes were used as per the rules of geometry rather than the law of nature. Hence the first approach towards arabesque decoration is most likely to have been developed in and around Baghdad by the middle of 10<sup>th</sup> century, where foliate motifs such as vine or acanthus scroll began to be interlaced with geometric frameworks.

Later around 965 AD, development in arabesque can be seen in the Great Mosque of Cordoba where the

beautiful carved marble panels decorate the *mihrab* (arch) with continuous arabesque having ogee motifs, half palmettes' and overlapping stems. The mature and developed arabesque pattern was widely used in both Spain and Egypt around 11<sup>th</sup> century. The classic example of arabesque of this period is on the facade of the Great Mosque of Al-Hakim in Cairo, where the square panel is decorated with interlacings built on the geometric principles.

Another example can be seen in the north portal of Great Mosque of Divrigi built around 1228 AD, where there is an array of beautiful vegetal, arabesque and geometric motifs in high relief stone decoration. At the Shah Mosque in Isfahan, two superimposed networks of arabesque design in glazed tiles envelop the bulbous dome. The blue arabesques are joined with gold floral elements and the gold ones are joined with blue and gold symmetrical leaf like elements. The popularity of arabesque art began to fade away with the introduction of Chinese motifs such as cloud bands, lotuses which were mainly copied from pottery or textiles. In Timurid period, paper pattern was extensively used to create designs which can also be applied on textiles, ceramics, manuscripts, metalwork, wall painting etc. The wide circulation of these designs in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was much appreciated from Central Asia and Egypt to India.

## ARABESQUE DECORATION IN ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

Arabesque design patterns used in Islamic architecture during different periods in India show a lot of variation. The first example of arabesque in India is known around 13<sup>th</sup> century in the Quwwat al-Islam in Delhi, combined with motifs from Hindu tradition. The beautiful, curvaceous Islamic calligraphy and arabesque designs are juxtaposed with Hindu motifs present on the pre-Islamic pillars. Hindu motifs, like tasselled ropes, bells, tendrils, leaves and the lotus scroll in particular frolic all over the mosque.

The screen of central arch is beautifully carved with borders of inscriptions and geometrical and arabesque designs, but the hand of artisans used to Hindu motifs is clearly perceptible in the naturalistic representation of serpentine tendrils and undulating leaves of its scroll-work and even in the fine characters of the Quranic inscriptions.

The tomb of Itmad-ud-Daula was completed in 1628 at Agra. Built entirely of white marble and covered wholly by pietra dura mosaic, is one of the most splendid examples of that class of ornamentation anywhere to be found in Mughal Architecture. Itmad-ud-Daula's tomb is a highly ornate edifice, which is looked upon as an imminent precursor of the Taj Mahal as far as elaborate carvings and inlay work are concerned. The tomb has exquisite inlaid marble patterns in the form of pietra dura decoration depicting cypresses, wine glasses and an amazing variety of geometrical arabesque. The decoration in Mughal buildings reflects the same principles of decoration as those in Iran. The Persian inspired style of vegetal arabesque in the Taj Mahal at Agra that was built as a tomb by Shah Jahan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century reflects the introduction of an entirely new type of vegetal decoration. Both interior and exterior of the

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tomb are decorated with a continuous dado in low relief showing flowering plants growing naturally from a stem in the ground. The same motif is repeated in pietra dura inlay on the two cenotaphs for Shah Jahan and his wife and in red sand stone on the structures surrounding the tomb. This type of naturalistic depiction was quite foreign to the Islamic tradition of conventionalised representation and arabesque. It was inspired by engraved illustrations found in European herbals that had been brought by Jesuit missionaries to India in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Blair & Bloom 2007).

## CONCLUSION

Arabesque is a vital element of ornamentation in Islamic Architecture. It is appropriate to regard the arabesque as a novelty of early Islamic art, but not all ornamentation in Islamic architecture can be considered as influenced by it. Arabesque designs varied throughout different regions because of religious and social conditions, local influence, availability of material and temporal variation in techniques of individual motifs. The present day practitioners of kinetic art aim to create the same arabesque effect, but come nowhere near the ease of Muslim artists, who played with a sort of plastic counterpart between rectilinear geometry and the algebra of curves derived from the plant world. Arabesque has lost its place in contemporary Islamic architecture due to absence or decreasing number of masters or traditional skilled craftsmen practicing this genuine building craft. In today's context, the art of arabesque is gradually being replaced by its kitsch imitations. This not only damages its relationship with the cultural context but also leads this unique element of ornamentation towards deformation, thus paving the way for extinction in future. Considering the rapid transformation processes due to globalisation in countries where arabesque has been commonly and widely used, this forms a significant threat.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Palmette is a motif in decorative art that resembles the fan shaped leaves of a palm tree.