Architectural Decoration in Traditional Houses of Central Region of Saudi Arabia: Symbolism, Abstraction and Tradition

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Abstract. The decoration of space and facade is one of the most identifiable architectural features of the elite residential buildings in the central region of Saudi Arabia. The purpose of decoration and coloring is to attract viewer’s attention and to enhance the aesthetic quality of space. The ornamentation of these houses is the product of an age of hospitality. A warm welcome and the best food and drink are complemented by an attractive space in which to entertain the guest. Decorated architectural elements include interior walls, alcoves and cupboards and the ornamentation and coloring of doors and windows in the guest reception area. Exterior facades are decorated with mud motifs. Such architectural treatment is considered a system of beautification of space and an aesthetic dimension. The origin, typology and evolution of architectural decoration may be traced fairly well for the period prior to 1932, “the traditional period”.

This paper argues that the origin, typology and evolution of the decorative motifs and colors of Saudi Arabia’s central region were rooted in culture though there was a steady flow of influences from both indigenous nomads and far countries. The central region’s physical insulation from the outside world had never stopped the retention of strong cultural ties with Muslims, even though it was politically disintegrated for a long time. Therefore, it was not by accident that the central region emerged as a major source for various forms of indigenous arts.

The conventional images and stock metaphors of ornamentation are drawn mostly from rooted beliefs, myths and fable which were dated to pre-Islam; the desert scenes and nomadic life. They ideally served as inspiration for the artist and as a source of fascination for the viewers. To appeal to the aesthetic and visual sensibility of the viewer, the indigenous artist infused his composition with strands and colors of desert life. Whether settled or nomad, the artist most likely showed in his composition, the beliefs, the social values, the oasis, and nature. The beliefs as ritual practices, the nomadic social values as liberal hospitality, the oasis in its palm trees, and nature in its stars, lune, and mountains are the vocabulary that the artist revolves around. Beliefs in Arabia, as in other cultures are not limited to magic and talkesman power in driving away the evil but were linked with heavenly religions. In the cultural set-up of the central region, the indigenous art components follow their own course of development as cultural symbols. Evolution is achieved through modification of the original forms into abstract ones. Such abstract shapes become pure motifs before they
finally become tradition. This establishes the fact that once a certain decorative motif gains popularity, it becomes an important part of the craft vocabulary. The author suggests that the typology and evolution of the decorative art must be approached contextually because when materials are removed from the context, they become resplendent with false impressions and misleading information. The contemporary art arrives at history based on probable sequential reconstruction rather than on proven chronology.

**Introduction**

Worldwide, geometric and decorative patterns have been studied by archaeologists, anthropologists, mathematicians, and architects [1-15]. The decoration of space and facade is one of the most identifiable architectural features of the elite residential buildings in the central region of Saudi Arabia. The purpose of decoration and coloring is to attract viewer attention and to enhance the aesthetic quality of space [16 & 17]. The ornamentation of these houses is the product of an age of hospitality. A warm welcome and the best food and drink are complemented by an attractive space in which to entertain the guest. Decorated architectural elements include interior walls, alcoves and cupboards and the ornamentation and coloring of doors and windows in the guest reception area. Exterior facades are decorated with mud motifs. Such architectural treatment is considered a system of beautification of space and an aesthetic dimension. The origin, typology and evolution of architectural decoration may be traced fairly well for the period prior to 1932, the “traditional period.”

This paper argues that the origin, typology and evolution of the decorative motifs and colors of Saudi Arabia’s central region were rooted in culture though there was a steady flow of influences from both indigenous nomads and far countries. The central region’s physical insulation from the outside world had never stopped the retention of strong cultural ties with Muslims, even though it was politically disintegrated for a long time. Therefore, it was not by accident that the central region emerged as a major source for various forms of indigenous arts.

The decorative elements for material culture as an implementation can be linked to vanity, superstition and/or beliefs. Pre-Islamic decoration has superstitious associations while Islamic decoration had religious significance.

The indigenous art in the central region is made of decomposable materials. It is not signed, dated, or recorded. It used checks, squares, triangles, circles, stripes and other geometrical patterns during the period of development. In addition, floral shapes were incorporated into elaborate patterns. The purpose of this study is to identify the decoration, ornamentation, and coloring used in the elite houses of the central region of Saudi Arabia and to attempt to give an understanding of their physical typology and evolution through time.

In the cultural set-up of the central region, the indigenous art components follow their own course of development as cultural symbols. Evolution is achieved through modification of the original forms into abstract ones. Such abstract shapes become pure