

# The Vank Cathedral and the influence of Persian Design: A comparative study

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## ヴァンク大聖堂に観るペルシャデザインの影響 —比較研究—

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### Abstract

After years of turmoil, Persian art finally reached new levels of excellence during the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722/37). This paper attempts to compare and contrast the interior/exterior design of urban space of this era. The focus is on a place of worship: the Vank Cathedral.

The design of the Vank Cathedral and the Sheikh Lotfolla Mosque is studied and evaluated in order to demonstrate how two different philosophies and cultures create a unique juxtaposition when they come together. Close examination of different elements of these two buildings clearly demonstrates that tolerance and necessity can give the designers a free hand to achieve harmony. The focal point is on the shapes and colors of interior/exterior surface design rather than structural and technical aspects of architecture.

**Key words:** comparative study, urban space, juxtaposition, interior/exterior design, the Vank Cathedral

### 要 旨

幾多の困難の後、ペルシャ芸術は、サファヴィイ王朝時代に新たなる局面に到った。本研究では、この時代の公共建築物の内・外装デザインの比較・対照を試みた。特に、宗教建造物であるヴァンク大聖堂を中心に分析をした。

ヴァンク大聖堂と同時代に建造されたシェイク・ルトフォラーモスクを比較・分析し、異なる哲学と文化背景を有する両建造物が、いかにして共存し得たのかを分析・考察した。詳細な分析の結果、その時代の寛容さと必要性が、デザイナー達に調和を達成させる為の手法を授けた事が明確に示された。本研究の分析は、建築物の構造や建築技術よりも、内・外装にみる形や色を中心に進められた。

**キーワード:** 比較研究, 公共物, 並置, 内・外装デザイン, ヴァンク大聖堂

### Foreword

This research is mainly based on survey and analysis during and after a field trip taken last summer. The necessary library study was done for historical background. Initially the trip was planned to study another subject, namely garden design. However, After, the author encountered the Vank

Cathedral for the first time, the urge to explore this subject was so compelling that ultimately it overcame the intended research. As a field of study, obviously, both subjects are very much related. Nevertheless, the experience of visiting the cathedral was so fresh that this study could not be postponed.

The focus of this paper is on the Vank Cathedral and the reason to compare it mainly with the

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque is the mosque's characteristics. It is modest in size with a single chamber and no precinct, unusual of a mosque, and a Pre Islamic Sasanian shape dome. Also, the proximity of construction both in terms of geography and history is important.

## Background

American archaeologist and historian of Persian art, Arthur Upham Pope writes

Architecture in Persia has a continuous history of more than 7,000 (sic) years, from at least 5000 B.C. to the present, with characteristic examples distributed over a vast area from Syria to North India and the borders of China, from the Caucasus to Zanzibar. Persian buildings vary from peasant huts, teahouses and garden pavilions to some of the most beautiful and majestic structures the world has ever seen. In meaning and purpose, monumental Persian architecture was primarily religious - at the beginning, magical and innovational in character - by which man was brought into communication and participation with the powers of Heaven.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Safavid Empire (1501-1722/37) was the first dynasty whose identity was based on the religion and ideology of Shi'ism that created political unity and national identity in Iran since the establishment of Islam there. The Safavid era was economically strong and politically stable. Under Shah Abbas the Great (1587-1629), the capital of the empire was moved to Esfahan, and this city became one of the greatest cities in the world impressing many European travelers. It also became the center of Persian art.

The architecture of this era evolved with new patterns based on geometrical networks in the development of cities, which gave order to open urban spaces, and took into account the conservation of natural elements (water and plants) within cities. The establishment of distinctive public spaces is one of the most important urban features of the Safavid period, as manifested, for example, in The

Naghsh-e Jahan square, Chahar Bagh (the world's first boulevard), and the royal gardens of Esfahan. Other extensive development of urban spaces, which is rooted in Persian culture are found in the form of schools, baths, caravansaries, places of worship, and bazaars (Ferrier 45-48).

Among places of worship in the Safavid era are the Vank Cathedral and the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, which are focused upon here.

## The Vank Cathedral

Vank means "cathedral" in the Armenian language. The Vank Cathedral (Figure 1), also known as "All Savior's Cathedral", was one of the first churches to be established at Esfahan's Julfa district by Armenian immigrants after the Ottoman war of 1603-1605. Shah Abbas the Great founded new Julfa as a settlement on the southern bank of The Zaynadehrud River, for the Armenians of the Old Julfa on the Araxes, who were consequently rescued from the dangers of Turkish attack and brought to the Shah's new capital. He gave the immigrant Armenians special privileges and formal guarantees concerning their religious freedom.



Figure 1. Vank Cathedral courtyard

Construction of the Vank Cathedral began under the supervision of Archbishop David in 1606. Some alterations occurred around 1655, and the cathedral was finally completed in 1664 during the reign of Shah Abbas II (1633-1666). The cathedral was one of the many churches established in the city's Julfa quarter across the Zayandehrud River (figure 2).

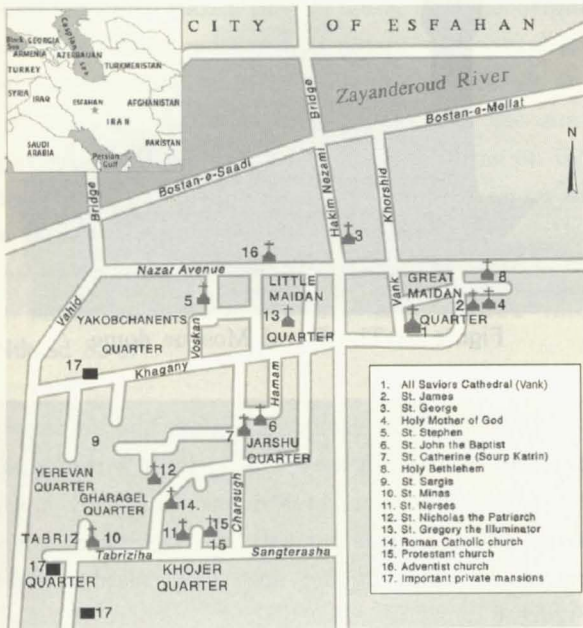


Figure 2. The Armenian community of Julfa (Armenica)

### The Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

The Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque (figure 3) was one of the earliest structures to be built along the Royal Square between 1590 and 1619. It consists of a square chamber crowned by a dome and an entry, which is hidden by a two-storey arcade. The moderately pointed dome rises in an unbroken contour from a circular drum: swirling floral arabesque on a warm buff-colored ground are done in faience mosaic. The interior is clad in glowing tile work; blue predominates at the lower levels, while the dome culminates in a sunburst of golden yellow. The Mosque was dedicated to Shah Abbas's father-in-law, Sheikh Lotfollah, who was from Lebanon. He was among many shi'at scholars asked by Shah Abbas to move to Isfahan, as the Safavid kings were determined to promote shi'ism. (Boyle 100-101).

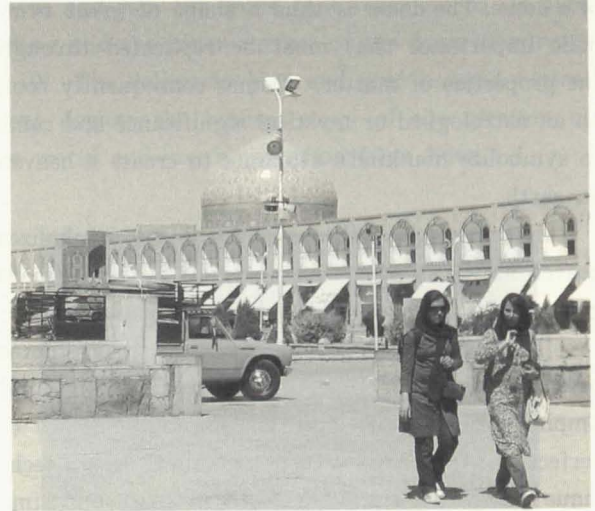


Figure 3. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

In comparing the Vank Cathedral and the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, we start by evaluating the overall interior and exterior designs.

### Interior/Exterior

The dome and the facade walls are the main elements of the exterior while the chamber walls and the interior surface of the dome form the interior. The dramatic contrast between the interior and exterior of both the Vank Cathedral and the interior and exterior of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque is remarkably similar. This is noteworthy for a mosque since both exterior and interior of the Safavid mosques are often highly decorated. However, while the interior of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque is decorated the exterior (dome and facade) is simple, although decorative design was added to the facade centuries later. The exterior of the cathedral is covered with relatively modest brickwork with exceptionally plain design while the interior is profusely decorated.

### The Dome

The dome symbolizes a mystical attempt to depict heaven on earth. The sanctuary or chamber is the place where God and mankind meet and converse. The natural symbol for this is the universe, which expresses the infinite creativity of God while enclosing mankind in a protective space. Amongst the innumerable possibilities of concretizing the universe, the architects of Iran developed the concept

of a dome. The dome is thus a shape of great symbolic importance that must be replicated through the properties of matter. Domes consequently took on an astrological or mystical significance and came to symbolize mankind's attempts to create a heaven on earth.

In orthodox cathedrals the dome symbolizes heaven and it is intended to remind the worshipers god's assent and their deliverance through Christ.

Designing domes in Persian architecture dates back to pre-Islamic time. In particular the Sasanid Empire (226-651) developed the designing domes to perfection. Accordingly, their structural design technique penetrated the world both in space and time until the present.

A Persian dome is often double layered, and can have various shapes: semi-spherical, partial spherical, onion shaped, paraboloid, polygonal conical, and circular conical. In pre-Islamic times, the dome was a sign of imperial grandeur for the king. In Islamic times, the tradition continued, and the interiors were made to simulate the celestial dome, reminding the muslim of Man's place in the cosmos vis-a-vis God and creation (Shayesteh 96-97)

The dome of Sheikhlotfola Mosque is unusually simple both in terms of color and shape (Figure 4). This simplicity is apparent when one compares it with contemporary dome of the Royal Mosque (Figure 5).

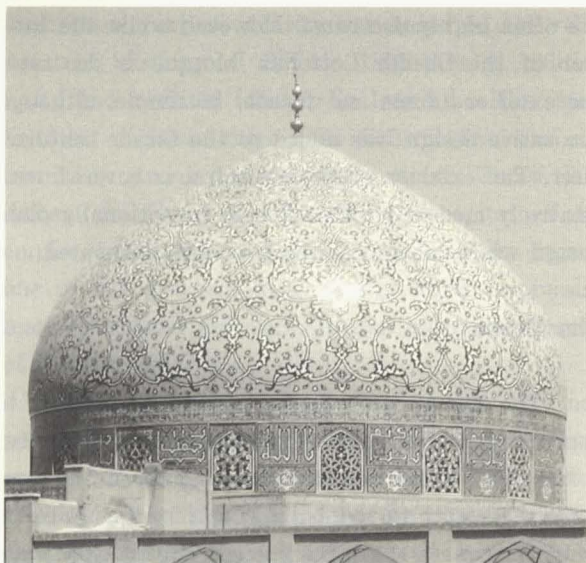


Figure 4 . Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque dome

The mainly buff color tiles on the dome change color from cream to golden yellow and pinkish brown according to light conditions.

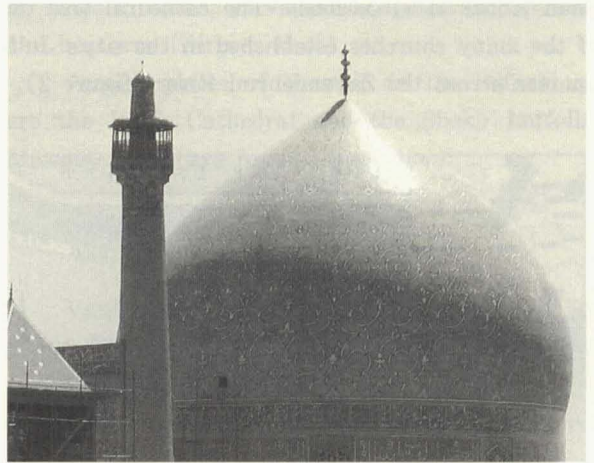


Figure 5 . The Royal Mosque dome

In order to be easily recognized and respected, the places of worship were usually built with domes. The cathedral consists of a domed sanctuary much like a Persian mosque but with the significant addition of a semi-octagonal apse and raised chancel (Figure 6).

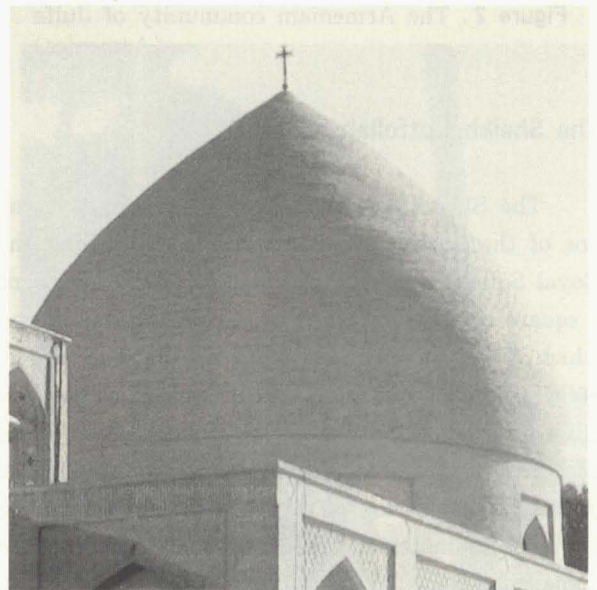


Figure 6 . Vank Cathedral dome

Although the dome is built in the traditional Islamic form, decorative surface treatment, which is typical in designing a mosque, is almost absent here. It is precisely this which makes the role of shape much more important. There are some brick designs

and a few patches of ceramic on the walls.

### The Chamber

Unlike the exterior, the interior of both the Vank Cathedral and the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque are highly decorated.

The walls of the entrance have been entirely decorated with glazed tiles (Figure 7). The height of the dome of the mosque is 32 meters in the interior, and its tile-work under the dome there is an abstract shape of a peacock. At noontime, the sunlight enhances the peacock's tail. The designs on the tiles become ever smaller, and towards the center of the mosque, the peacock disappears entirely. The whole ceiling and the walls of the corridor (Figure 8) have been decorated with seven-colored tiles (Nikzad 82-87).

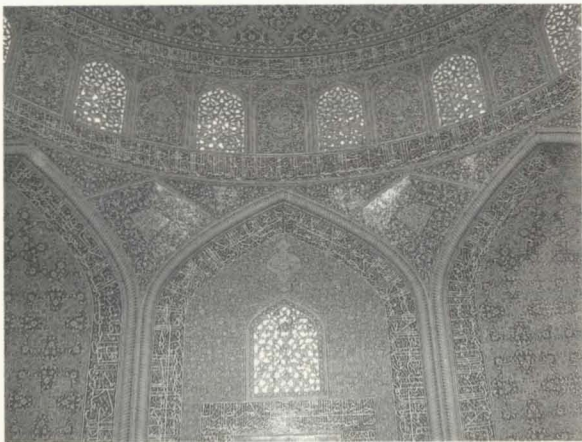


Figure 7. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque interior (Wikipedid)

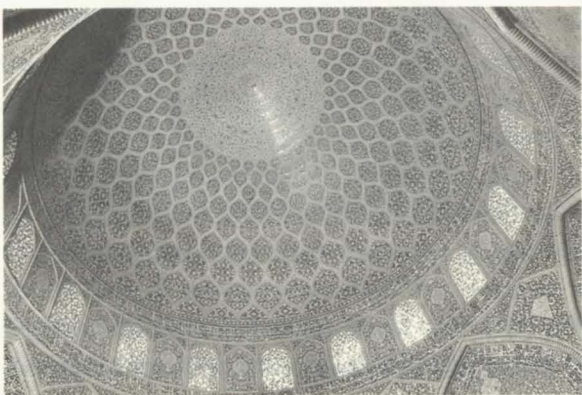


Figure 8. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque interior dome (Wikipedid)

The interior of the Vank Cathedral is ornately decorated with wall paintings and covered with gold

leaves and rich tile work that reach up to its high ceiling and the inner surface of the dome (figures 9 & 10). The delicately blue and gold painted central dome depicts the biblical story of the creation of the world and man's expulsion from Eden.



Figure 9. Vank Cathedral interior wall

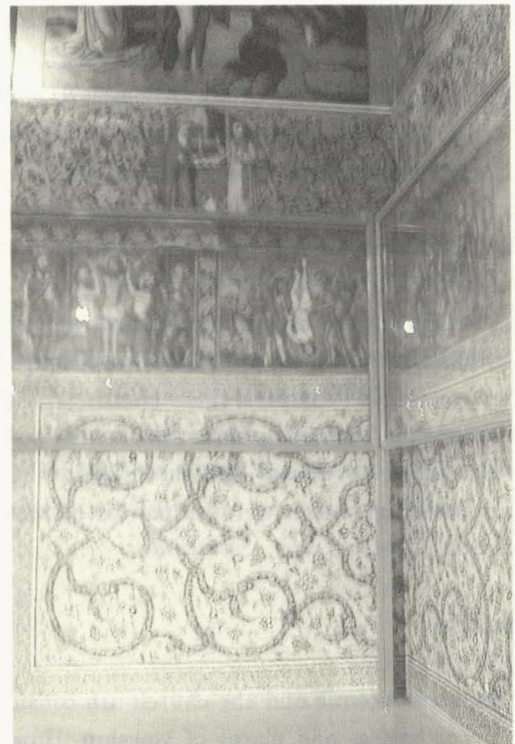


Figure 10. Vank Cathedral interior wall

The cathedral has greatly influenced the architecture and decorative treatment of many subsequent and smaller Orthodox churches in the entire Persian-Mesopotamian region: that is to say present Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.

### Wall Paintings

According to Gray

There was no real tradition of wall painting (sic) in Safavid Persia; but it might have been expected that the royal taste which directed the sumptuous brocade-weaving and tile designing (sic) not to speak of the famous carpet weaving (sic) in the royal factories might have required something more noble from his painters to decorate the private apartments of his palace. But these paintings of young pages and courtiers do represent the background to the Shah's own life.

(168)

During the Safavid era, the art of painting expanded both in quantity and quality with greater freedom and skill. Images of human and their activities are treated rather naturally. The most outstanding example of these paintings exists in palaces such as Alighapoo (Figure 11). The themes of the paintings are life in the royal court, nobles, courtiers, scenes of battles and banquets. Reza Abbassi, the court painter of Shah Abbas I, was the main artist responsible for creating the wall painting in the palace of Alighapoo. A depiction of flora and fauna beside the human figure is another aspect of these paintings (Wilber 44-48).

The paintings in the corridor of the Vank Cathedral are similar to those of Alighapoo (Figure 12). It is interesting to compare these paintings - which are very much influenced by Reza Abbassi and perhaps even were done by one of abbassi's pupils - to the interior paintings which were influenced by western art.

### Conclusion

Both the mosque and the church are considered to be urban spaces and places of worship. However, in terms of architectural design they are different.



Figure 11 . Alighapoo interior wall

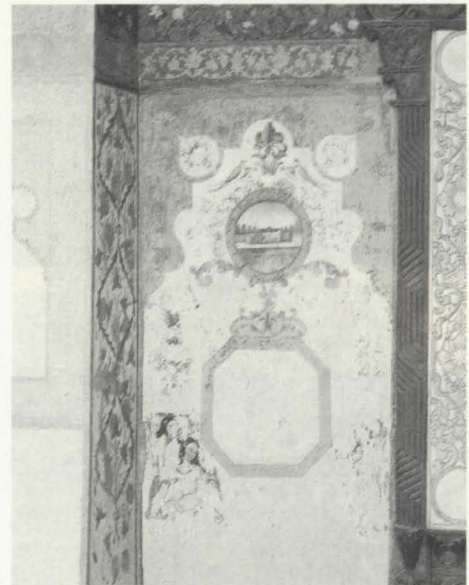


Figure 12 . Vank Cathedral corridor wall

They are not only represent different religious tradition but also they were developed under the sway of different cultures. The design of churches has developed under the influence of Christianity and primarily in the West, while; the design of mosques has developed according to Islamic needs and mainly in the East. Needless to say, in both

cases, there are differences in style according to history and geography. For instance, a Romanesque church is different from; let's say, a Gothic church, or a Persian style mosque is different from a Turkish one. But these differences do not hinder the fundamental idea of a church or a mosque. The best example is Hagia Sophia (532-537) in Istanbul, which was designed as a church and later on turned into a mosque. Without the four minarets that were added later, it cannot be anything but a Byzantine church (Figure 13).

Christians in the beginning of seventeenth-century Iran built the Vank Cathedral for their place of worship. It was built in a Moslem country, which was not only tolerant of Christianity but also encouraged its practice. Contemporary mosques such as the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, which was built just a few years earlier, heavily influenced both the interior and exterior design of the Vank Cathedral.

The interior of the Vank Cathedral is decorated with fresco paintings on the ceiling as well as on the walls. The painted scenes portray the life of Christ and other biblical subjects. These paintings are obviously of western styles. And although they are not very well painted, nevertheless, they resemble European style fresco painting. Beside these paintings there are richly and ornately decorated tile work and gold leaf ornamentation, entirely done in Persian style.

Unlike a mosque, the exterior of the Vank cathedral, both the dome and the facade, are very simple in terms of color and shape. Although the shape of the dome is basically Persian, the lack of decoration distinguishes it from typical Persian domes. The exterior walls and the dome harmonize in terms of materials and color and with no visible decoration. This creates a clear contrast against the interior, which is excessively decorated.

It is obvious that the use of certain material for building the Vank Cathedral came of necessity. By looking at contemporary buildings such as the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, one can conclude that materials such as bricks and tiles were also used in the Vank Cathedral because they were readily accessible and fit the climate. However, the application of these same materials results in the creation of a cathedral albeit overwhelmingly influenced by Persian design.

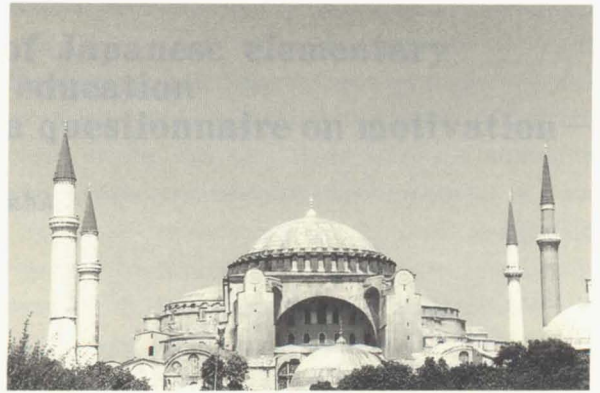


Figure 13 . Hagia Sophia  
(The great buildings)

#### List of illustration

Photographs, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author.

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