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The Expression and Exhibition of the Mystical Features of Islam through Iranian Epigraphic Objects

Introduction

As a researcher in the field of Islamic calligraphy, as well as a graphic designer interested in typography and type design, I have always been passionate about collecting epigraphic objects in line with the evolution of my research. In my recent lecture presented at the conference titled 'Creating Holiness', the sacredness of the word *Allāh* was discussed based on Derrida's cultural graphology, where the scholar Jonathan Elukin recommended that I broaden my viewpoint to include Baruch Spinoza. By analyzing epigraphic objects through the lens of Spinoza, this study reveals a spatial-temporal convergence of practice and belief stemming from believers' mystical desires. Particularly, it is obvious in a wide range of everyday objects decorated with inscriptions. Ranging from a small coin to a large *Mihrāb* (prayer niche), most of these objects carried inscriptions, which directly or indirectly refer to God. Spinoza's concept of mind-body unity inspired this study to propose a curatorial exhibition, as mind-body parallelism provides a meaningful connection between spirituality and practices that can be curated through the exhibition of inscriptions and objects.

This essay proceeds in three stages, following the programme of workshop on 'Museum Charges: Curating Spiritual Presences'. In the first stage, a general synopsis of the exhibition was provided, a selection of ten objects, samples of analysis, and a draft plan of exhibition were the results of two early sessions, when I did not have the chance to present. The latest session, on which I took the opportunity—particularly with the support of Valentina Gamberi—to develop my plan based on other participants' creative and inspiring comments. They shared with me

references and ideas based on which I could elaborate my theoretical approach as well as my curatorial project. Consequently, I interpreted the relationship between inscription and objects in both the mind-body concept and the Sufi's interpretation. Moreover, the exhibition plan evolved into a honeycomb-like structure based on Ipek Mihrac Sur.

Theoretical Framework

The framework of this study is built on two theories: Gill Deleuze's theory of difference and Baruch Spinoza's concept of the Body-Mind. For analyzing the differentiation of ten selected objects, the study focuses on the representation of both repetition (contraction, passive synthesis, and active synthesis) (Deleuze 1995, 71) and difference (conceptual identity, predicate opposition, judgmental analogy, and perceptual resemblance). Moreover, investigating the mystical aspects of objects, it demonstrates how Spinoza's tripartite ontological systems, namely substance, attributes, and modes, play a role in creating various spiritual expressions.

Gill Deleuze—a French Post-World War II thinker of the late 1960s—reintroduces the difference as a concept that cannot be thought in itself, so long as it is subject to the requirements of four iron collars representation: 'identity in the concept, opposition in the predicate, analogy in judgement, and resemblance in perception' (Deleuze 1995, 262). From the ontological view, he exemplified difference as the univocity of Being in all of individuating differences or intrinsic modalities. He emphasized that 'Being is the same for all these modalities, but these modalities are not the same'. In fact, he believes that univocal Being 'is immediately present in everything, without mediation or intermediary, even though reside unequally in this equal being' (Deleuze 1995, 36–37).

Baruch Spinoza (b. 1632) also described God as a being absolutely infinite, free, and eternal as he believes that 'God is the indwelling and not the transient cause of all

things', he added that 'God is not only the effecting cause of the existence, but also of their essence (Spinoza 1910/1941, 18–21). Three definitions of Spinoza are particularly implemented in my proposed exhibition: substance, attribute, and mode. He defines substance as that which is conceived through itself, explaining attribute as the essence of substance, and considering mode as a modification (affection) of a substance. He added that 'two or three distinct things are distinguished one from the other either by the difference of the attributes of the substances or by the difference of their modifications' (Spinoza 1910/1941, 1–3).

Considering Spinoza a pantheist philosopher—who believes in the singular nature of Reality—some scholars draw a connection between Spinoza and Sufism, in particular Ibn 'Arabi, since they cannot see God and the world as distinct from each other. While Spinoza attempted to express his ideas in discursive rationalistic arguments, Sufis and particularly Ibn 'Arabi 'often employ the terminology of theology to describe the nature and attributes of God'. Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabi called this single Reality 'Existance' (*wahdat al-wujūd*), and it is 'Substance' in Spinoza's words. Spinoza proposes the divine attributes to define God, constituting God's essence. Likewise, Ibn 'Arabi puts divine names (similar to divine attributes) forward to state how the essence of God can be manifested through those names (Kamal 2017, 409–410, 417).

Topology of Differences between Epigraphic Objects

Analyzed the first principle of difference representation, it is recognized that testimonial (figs. 2, 3, 5, 8, 10), divine names (figs. 1, 7, 9), and blessing words (figs. 4, 6) are the conceptual identities of these objects. In this study, since the second principle, namely predicate opposition, is considered mainly in relationship with conceptual identities and actually in contrast to those concepts, it can be defined as the atheism (fig. 5), mundanely (figs. 4, 6, 9), and punishment inscriptions (fig. 9).

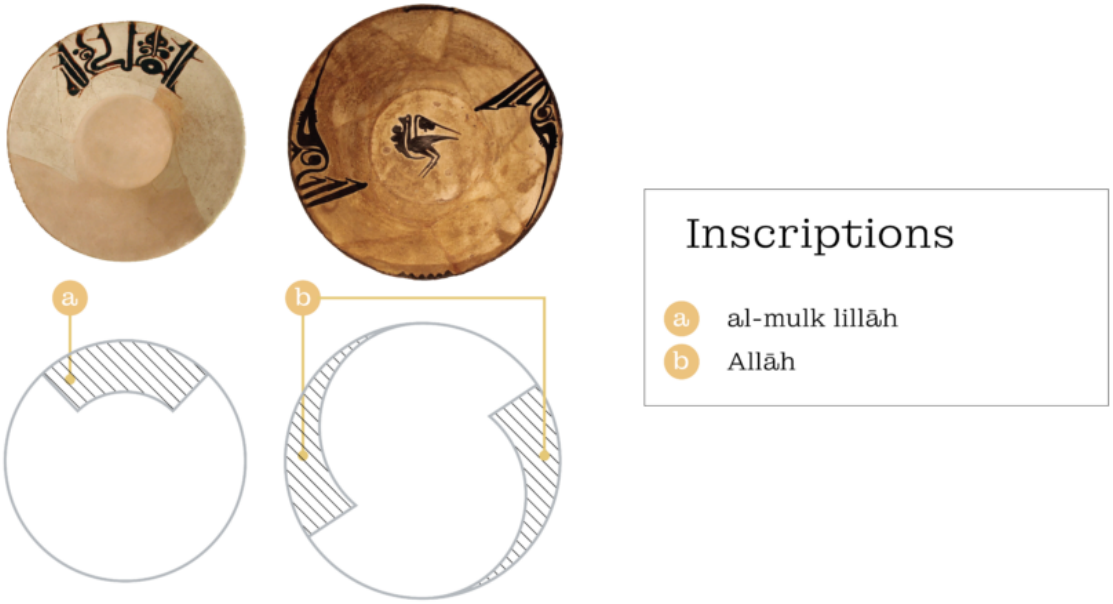


Fig. 1 Nishapur Ceramics, circa the 9th-10th C., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 38.40.118, 38.40.142

Judging the analogy between the aforementioned three inscription categories, it is implied that testimonial inscriptions were placed in the prominent part of objects, for instance, middle, top, etc., as well as in square/rectangular shapes, each of which is differently composed and stylized in the artworks. On the contrary, the divine names were designed in diverse shapes, usually following the shapes or patterns of the artefacts. Moreover, the blessing inscriptions were decoratively and rhythmically scrolled around the objects.

Ultimately, the other principle of difference representation, resemblance of perception depends on the similarity of inscriptions both in forms and compositions to the Islamic symbols, for instance, the composition of trinity words '*Allāh*, *Muhammad*, '*Alī*' in the form of cypress refers to the Sufi's concept of perfect human (fig. 8). The cypress tree was frequently used as a metaphor for God's presence in the medieval poetry of Hafiz (1325–1395), a Persian poet. For instance, in the opening of

the poem 223, ▫āfi▫ referred to the Sufi who remembered 'the eternal covenant that was made between God and man', utilizing the metaphor of 'strutting Cypress' to illustrate God: 'Thy from shall never leave the tablet of my heart and soul; that strutting cypress tree shall never leave my memory' (Nasr 1972, 41).

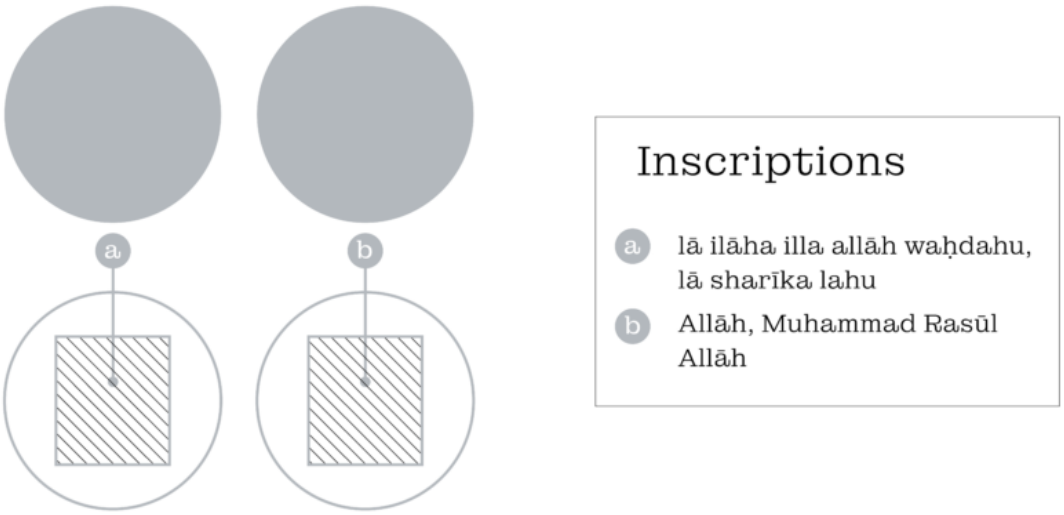


Fig. 2 A Samanid Dinar – Nuh II ibn Asad; 892 AD, Stephen Album, 2011, C1442

Focusing on the testimonial inscriptions, the *Samanid Dinar* (fig. 2) displays one of the earliest instances of such inscriptions, carrying a square composition of testimonial words '*Allāh Muhammad Rasūl Allāh*' in the middle. Furthermore, on the back of this coin, other testimonial words were cast in the form of a square, representing '*lā ilāha illa allāh wa▫dahu, lā sharīka lahu*'. The Rectangular form of these kinds of inscriptions shows that there might not have been an alternative extension for the core Islamic belief. This inconsistency between form and content seems to have continued in the following centuries. About two centuries later, a testimonial inscription appeared in a horizontal rectangular form on top of a *Seljuk* tombstone with the name *Allāh* placed in the middle of both the rectangular frame

and the middle top of the tombstone (fig. 3).

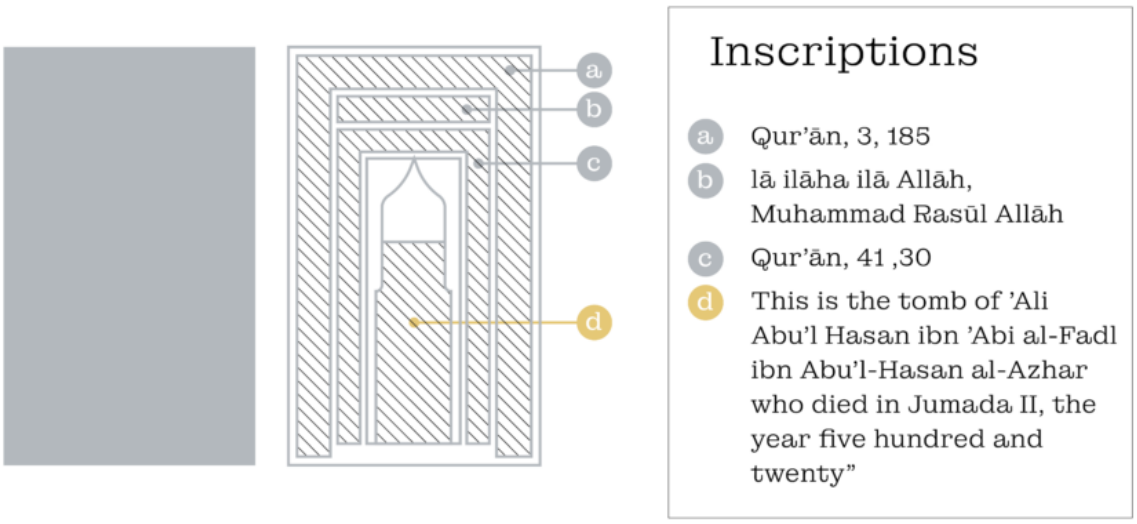


Fig. 3 A Seljuk Tombstone, Yazd, Iran, Dated 516/ 1122 AD, From this source

Two centuries later, the *Mihrāb* represents an opposition in both the form and contents of the testimonial inscriptions. The content of the testimonial inscription was broadened to include three other pillars of Islam, namely prayer, giving alms, pilgrimage, and fasting, in addition to believing in God and Muhammad. Additionally, the form of the inscriptions follows the pointed arch of the *Mihrāb*. It is worth mentioning that rectangular inscription was devoted to the Qur'ānic verse describing the values of belief's level ranging from atheism to faith (fig. 5). From the 14th century onwards, it can be seen that these two trends of compositions have been synthetically implemented in the ways that sometimes rectangular compositions were dominated (fig. 10) and some other times, the form of frames were remarked (fig. 8). Even though, two trends have frequently been presented simultaneously in the same artwork.

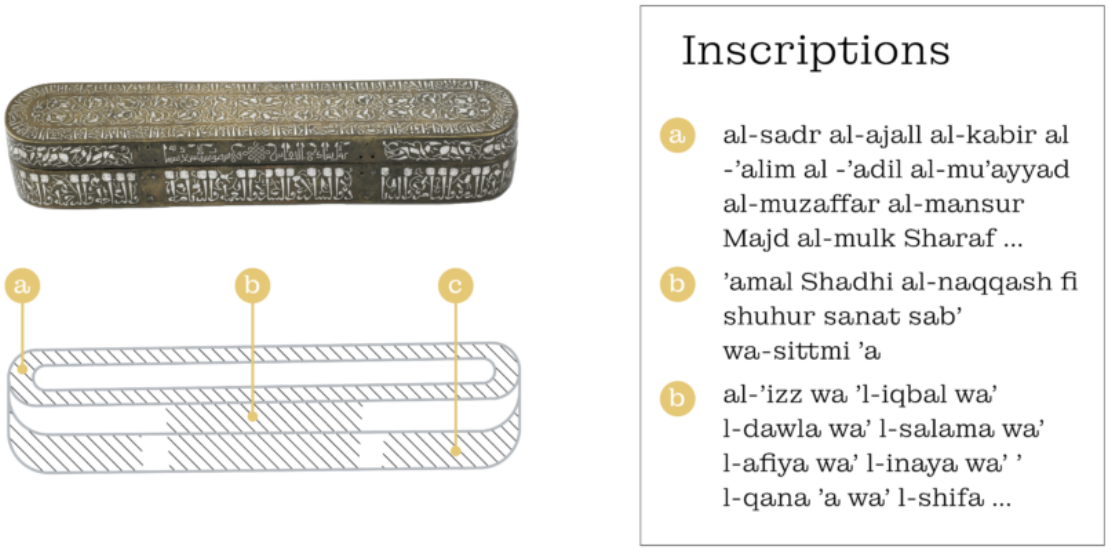


Fig. 4 A Saljuk pen box. 13th century (1210-11), National Museum of Asian Art, F1936.7

In the realm of divine name inscriptions, figure 1 is considered among the earliest bases on which this kind of inscription was written. As it is obvious in the picture, the words '*al-mulk lillāh*' (sovereignty belongs to God) refer to the Qur'ānic name of God '*Mālik al- Mulk*' (the Owner of the Kingdom) (Qurān, 3, 26; Sam'ani 2011, 444). Likewise, the name of '*Allāh*' in the other *Samanid* ceramic (fig. 1, right), which was elaborately designed and floriated, was repeated twice around the rim of the bowl. These two *Samanid* bowls display how these divine name inscriptions are more flexible both in decoration and composition, in contrast to testimonial inscriptions. It will be even more tangible if Figures 7 and 9 are included, since in the prayer rugs, divine names were substituted with patterns on the medallion design-corners. Moreover, the inscribed words on the signet ring (fig. 9) are '*Hūwa al-Nāser*', which means 'he is champion (supporter) originating from the Qur'ānic divine name *al-Fattāu* (the All-Opening). A notable feature of this inscription is the name *Nāser*, which was the name of the *Qajar* king, the owner of this signet ring. It also draws a

connection between the divine name and blessing inscriptions since both of them were formed with regard to the owners of objects. The *Seljuk* pen box (fig. 4) is one of the first examples of these relationships, as it consists of two inscriptions, one in honor of *Majdul-Mulk al-Muzaffar* (d. 1221), and another was devoted to the owner for receiving glory, good fortune, power, good health, etc. The *Turban* helmet (fig. 6) shows a similar memorial inscription on the glory of *Abu al-Mu'azzam*, the greatest Khaqan (Sultan), as mentioned in the inscription. Back to the signet ring, there is another inscription, which is a poem on the instability of the kingdom and the crown. This inscription, in contrast to the divine name '*Hūwa al-Nāser*', which placed the king on God's throne, exposes a predicate opposition as Deleuze mentioned in the representation of difference.

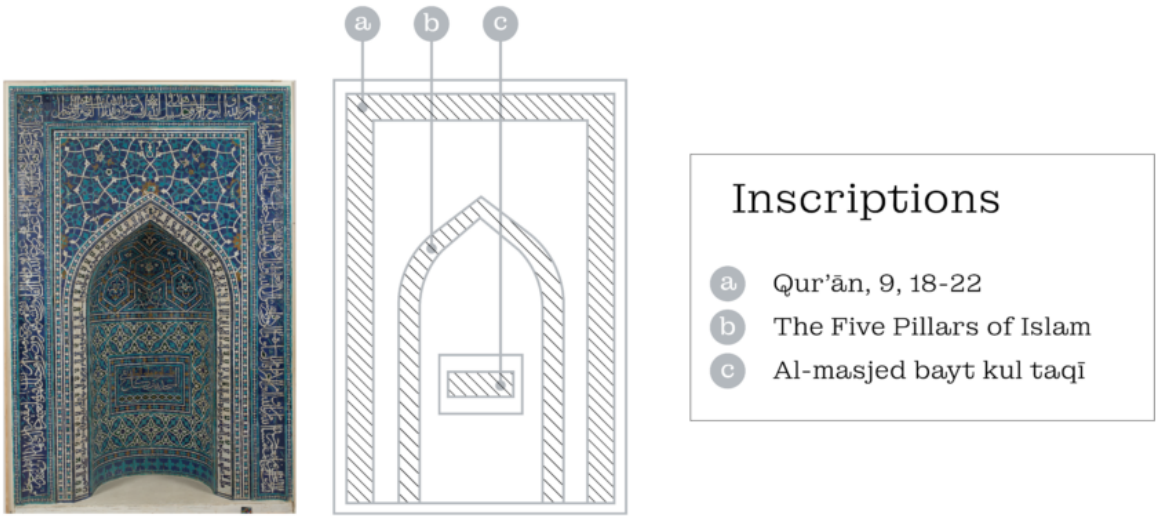


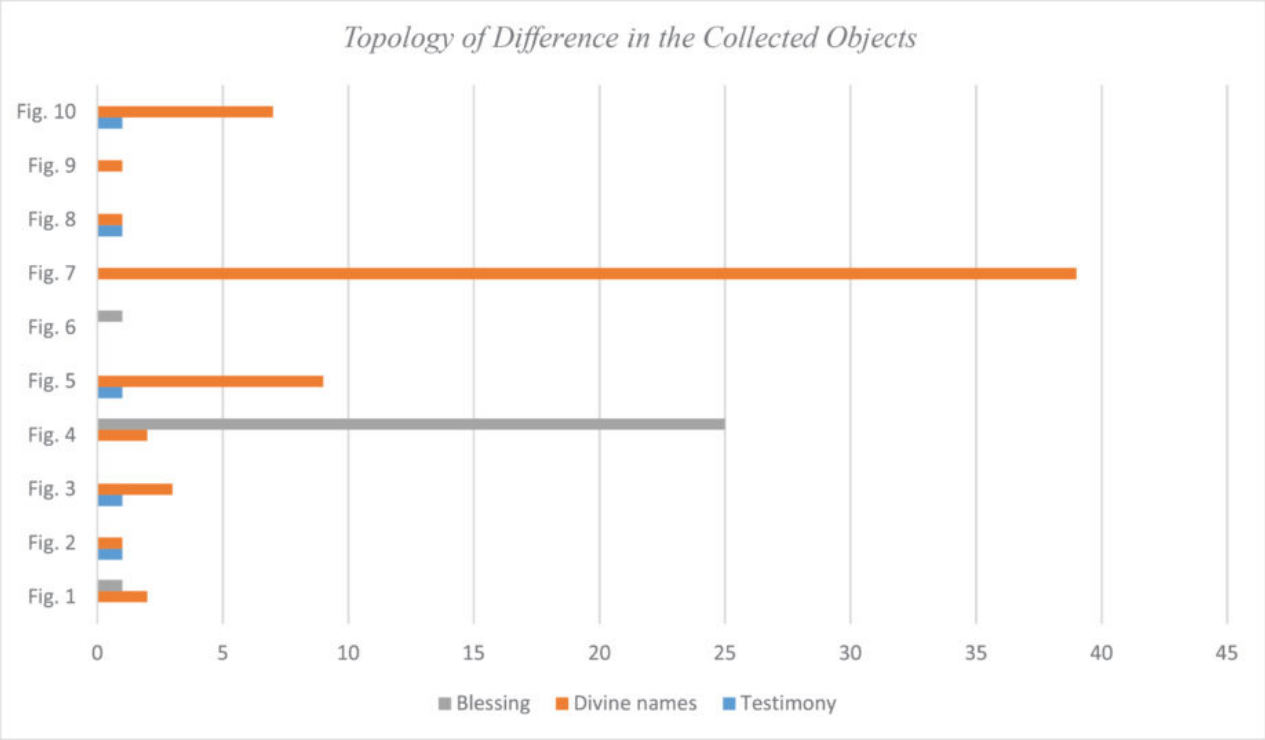
Fig. 5 An Ilkhanid Mihrāb (prayer niche), 1354–55 (A.H. 755), Isfahan, Iran, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 39.20

To display the representation of differences between the collected objects on the diagram, two groups of inscriptions, namely Testimonial and Divine Names/Blessing,

are extracted, and then it is multiplied by the number of times it is repeated. Diagram 1 demonstrates the frequency of the presence of the testimonial and the divine names/blessing inscriptions in the collected objects.

Expressions of Iranian Epigraphic Objects Based on Spinoza's Mind-Body Concept

From then on, this study investigates what expressions (based on Baruch Spinoza's concept of mode) each diverse epigraphic object might have given to the Iranians in the spiritual sphere of the time. First of all, it is noteworthy to know that in view of Spinoza's mind-body parallelism, every mode of Thought and its relations is connected with a mode in Extension and its relations, and vice versa. It can be said that attributes come in pairs; for instance, each object-like attribute is coupled with a thought-like attribute (Shein, 2023). The contents of inscriptions are assumed to be the attribute of Thought, and the compositions of inscriptions and their relationships with the objects are supposed to be the attribute of Extension.



As a consequence, the inscriptions of divine names on objects not only allow us to conceive the expression of God's essence but also enable us to recognize the relationship of contents and forms in the representation of the spiritual meaning. Take the *Nishapur* ceramic for example (fig. 1, left), the content of inscription (highlighted the Kingdom of God) in association with a bowl that might have been used for donation in religious rituals, can be interpreted as another expression of the mode of the King, generosity. The baseline of the inscription was formed based on the circular bottom of the bowl, and it covers one-fourth of its edge. In contrast to the free baseline of benedictory/divine names inscriptions, the testimonial inscription conveys the negative affirmation of God like '*La ilaha illa Allāh*' (there is no god but *Allāh*) on the *Samanid* coins (fig. 2), was composed in more rigid forms, e.g., a squared form of inscription in the *Qajar* amulet (fig. 10) or a rectangular baseline of inscription on *Ilkhanid Mihrāb* and a *Seljuk* tombstone (figs. 3, 5).

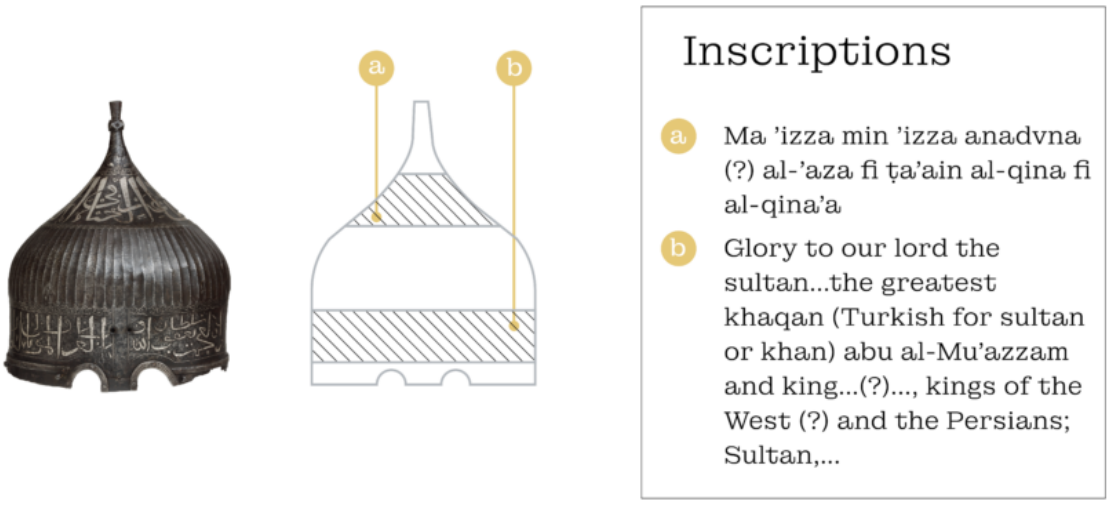


Fig. 6 Turban Helmet, the 15th C, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 04.3.211

As Deleuze pointed out, negative theology 'combines the negative method with the

affirmative, and claims to go beyond both'. He explained that 'negative theology can therefore only be defined by its dynamics: one goes beyond affirmations in negations, and beyond both affirmation and negations in a shadowy eminence' (Deleuze 1992, 54). In Sufism, these two directions (negativity and positivity) are reflected in the implication of *tawḥīd* (the Unity), particularly when a person must give a testimony to convert to Islam. The assertion of God's incomparability and God's similarity are called *tanzīh*and *tashbīh* in Sufi tradition (Sam'ani 2019). Benedictory inscriptions, which were more compatibly adopted to the objects, are the example of Spinoza's univocal being; while the square and formal use of scripts on the socio-political objects might originate from a negative theological viewpoint.

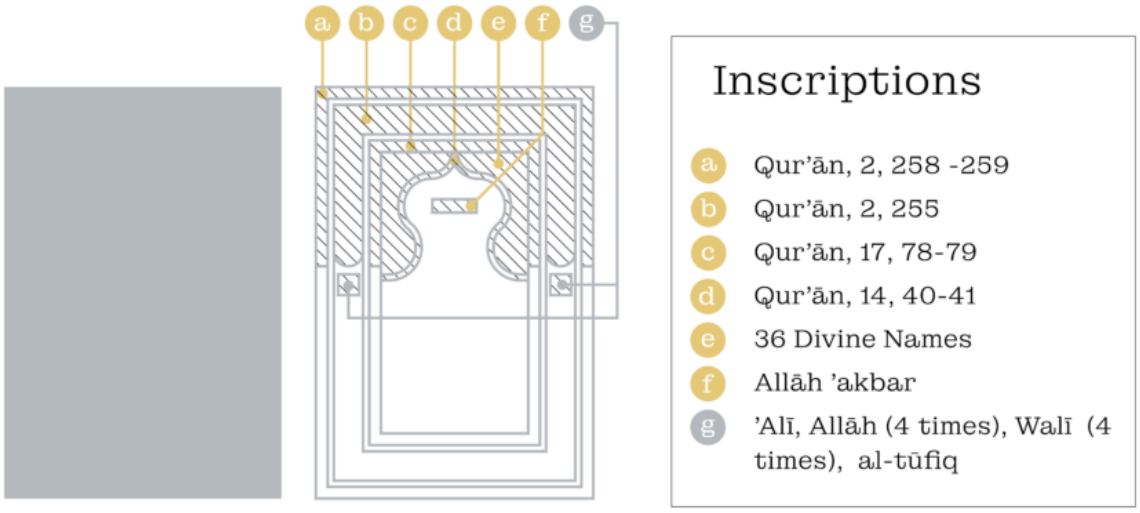


Fig. 7 A Safavid Niche Rug, Iran, mid-16th C, From this source

Regarding figures 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, more personal objects can be tracked. These objects, including a bowl, a pen box, a helmet, a prayer rug, and a signet ring,carry various inscriptions directly or indirectly related to divine names. What can be comprehended is the expression of generosity which the owner of the *Samanid* bowl (fig. 1) connoted

through considering the world (bowl) as the kingdom of God. The guests might, thus, feel free to eat or drink from the bowl. The pen box (fig. 4) is indirectly referred to god, as the divine names *al-Kabīr* (the great) and *al-Alīm* (the knower) are attributed to the owner. This content, in addition to the inscriptions written on the edges of the objects, reminds us of another divine name, *al-Ẓāhir* and *al-Bāṭin* (the Outward and Inward), since the object will be recognizable through the forms and the contents of the inscriptions, even if the object is eliminated. Accordingly, the expression of internal and external respect is therefore given to the knowledge of both the owner and God.

Figure 6 is a *Turban* helmet decorated with a blessing inscription, particularly for bringing good fortune to the owner (*Sultan Ya'qub of the Aq Quyunlu*, White Sheep Turkoman, ruled from 1470 to 1490). The divine name '*al-'Aziz*' (the Exalted) is attributed to the owner, which, in association with the form of inscriptions written around the edge as well as on the pointed top of the helmet, brings to mind the time of battle in which the owner expresses the divine privilege granted by the Lord.

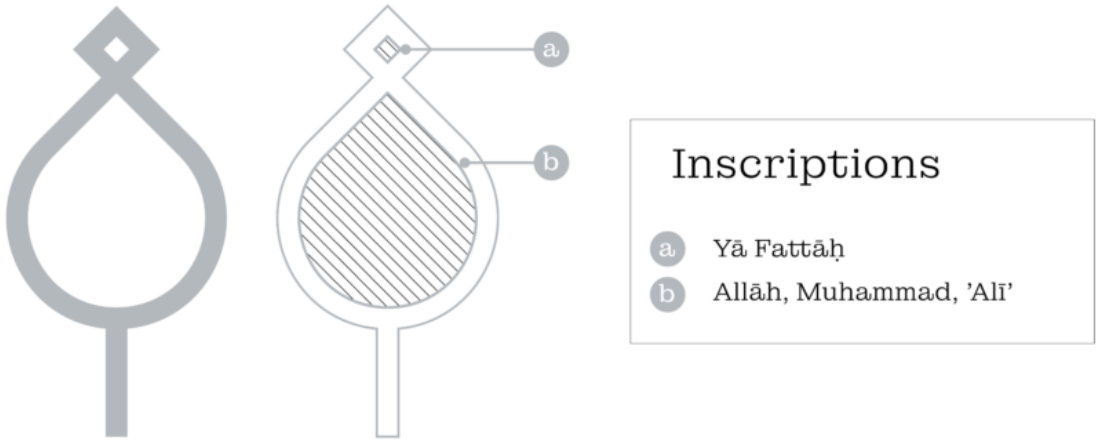


Fig. 8 A Safavid Cut-Steel Processional Standard (‘Alam); Iran, Mid-17th C, From this source

Figure 7 is a *Safavid* prayer rug consisting of 36 divine names in addition to the throne verse (*Āyat al-Kursī*), which illustrates the time of prayer when the Muslims stand side-by-side facing toward Mecca and reading the opening verses of the Qur’ān. This rug can be considered an expression of what Muslims mention in their prayers.

Figure 9, similar to the figures 3 and 6, carries an inscription in which a non-Qur’ānic divine name, *Nāser*, is loaded with double entendre: it simultaneously connotes as the king (*Nasir al-din Shah*) and God. As *Nāser* means the all opening, the helper is equivalent to a Qur’ānic divine name, *al-Fattāḥ*, used frequently in the epigraphic objects (see figs. 8, 10). This content corresponds to the function of the signet ring, particularly for sealing contracts or decrees. It can be interpreted as an expression for the requirement of God’s help/support in opening doors, particularly for the management of official affairs.

The other groups of objects are those related to socio-political production more than personal ones. The *Samanid* coin (fig. 2), the *Seljuk* tombstone (fig. 3), the *Ilkhanid Mihrāb* (fig. 5), the *Safavid ‘Alam* (fig. 8), and the *Qajar* amulet (fig. 10) were produced for commercial, cultural, and political purposes of the governments. For instance, the *Samanid* coin carried a testimonial inscription that implied the Islamic tradition in business, where false swearing in selling is disapproved. In fact, there is a belief in Islamic commercial tradition that ‘false swearing will cause the loss of the blessing’ (Haji Hasan 2007, 27).

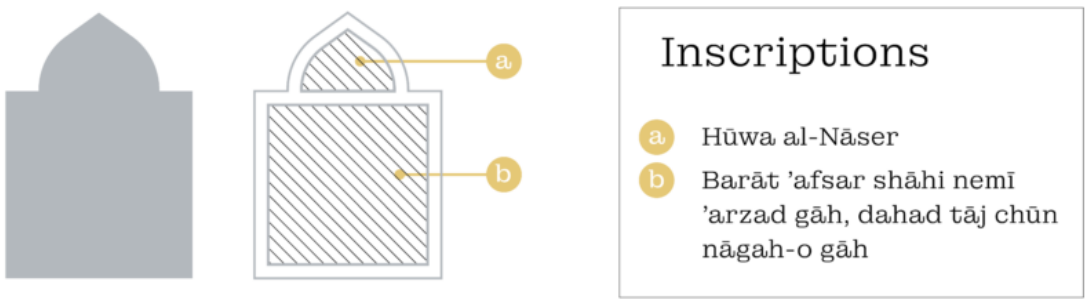


Fig. 9 A Personal Seal of Nasir Al-Din Shah Qajar (R.1848-96) Qajar Iran, Dated AH 1303/1886-87 AD, From this source

The other socio-political object is the *Ilkhanid Mihrāb*, which consists of an inscription mentioning the five pillars of Islam (Including daily prayer). The content of a common testimonial inscription was extended in this inscription to include the prayer, which directly related to the function of the *Mihrāb*. It is essential to know that *Mihrāb* is a niche on the wall of the mosques, emphasizing the direction toward Mecca, in front of which Muslims stand to pray. In contrast to other testimonial inscriptions, the words on this niche were not only written on the edge of the internal arch but also designed with rhythmically decorated ascenders, the distinguished characteristics that are more commonly seen in the blessing inscriptions. As a matter of fact, this niche was built for a prayer room of *Imāmīye* School (also known as *Bābā Qāsem Madrasa*), a theological college in Isfahan, where future Islamic governments were studied. This niche can, thus, be interpreted as an expression of the unified Muslims who are common in pillars, purposes, and religious

policy.

The other three objects (fig. 3, 8, 10) are social expressions of hopefulness for life after death, cultural expressions of commemoration of Hussein's death during the month of Muharram, and cultural expressions of security concerns. In the later objects, the testimonial inscription was extended to include *ʻAlī* as Shia Muslims regard him as the perfect human. All of these objects with testimonial inscriptions focus on the community instead of individuals. Moreover, these are the objects that were used for more abstract thoughts, such as economy, politics, society, religion, and security. Accordingly, the inflexibility both in baseline forms and content of these inscriptions might have designed based on common sense.

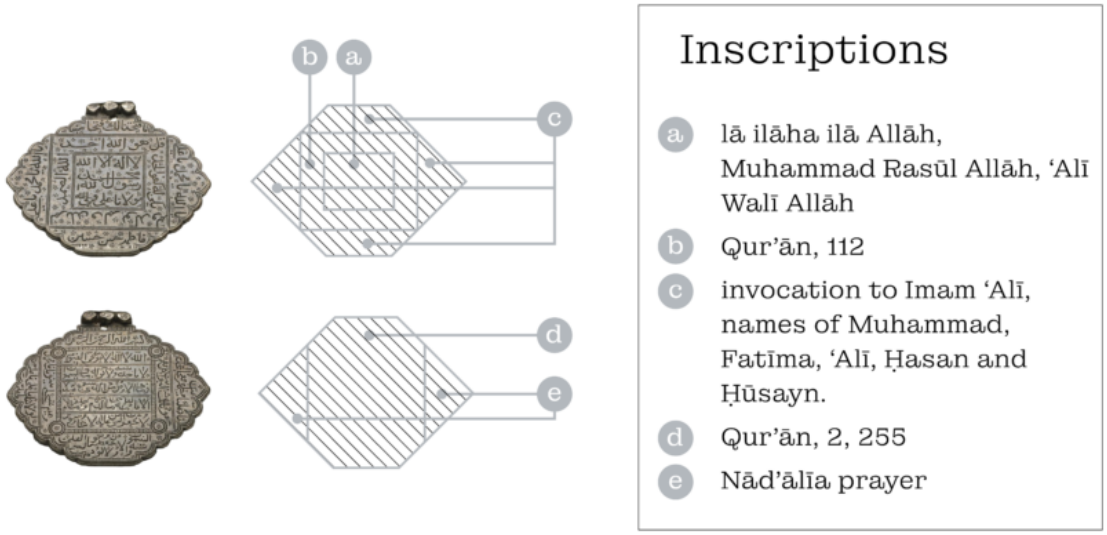


Fig. 10 A Qajar Amulet; 19th-20th C, The British Museum, OA+.7431

The Plan of Exhibition

As the differences and the expressions of the collected have been analyzed so far,

the next issue is how to exhibit the mystical desires of Iranians through a series of epigraphic objects so as to provide a comprehensive perception of the cultural dimensions of Islamic societies in the past and present Iran.

To plan an exhibition, two sets of objects can be proposed: the first set is a collection of more personal objects, which provides the attribute of Iranian Thought in various daily practices. These were likely designed to nurture Iranian mystical desires such as divine generosity, divine protection, and divine supervision. The more creative inscription's composition, in addition to various ways of expressing divine names, indicates that the modes of Iranian Thoughts and Extensions were expressed in a more subtle way when politics apparently did not matter (fig. 11, golden numbers).

The second set is a collection of more socio-political objects, which demonstrates different aspects of Iranian social life where they had to declare their unity, for instance, in businesses, funerals, Friday prayers, ritual mourning festivals, and during a battle. The constant use of inscription with the same content and nearly the same composition in the second set of objects highlights a spiritual unity that Iranians have been tending to show in their socio-political community (fig. 11, silver numbers).

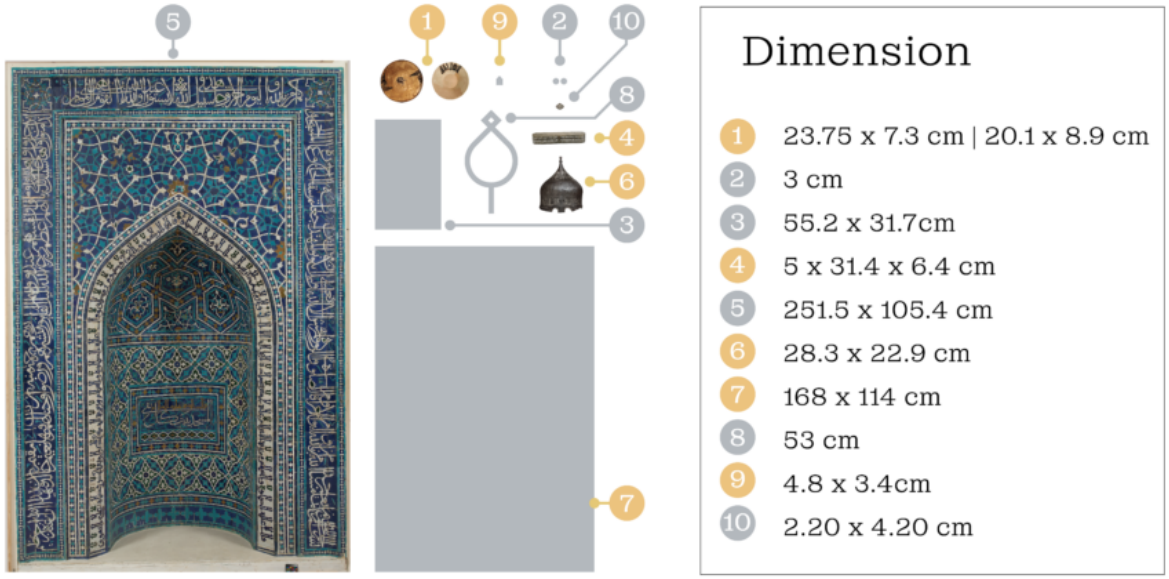


Fig. 11 Two groups of inscriptions in the collected objects ranged from a small signet ring to a large Mīhrāb

To exhibit these two approaches, I came up with an idea which was originally proposed by Ipek Mihrac Sur during the workshop. As she put forward an idea of a honeycomb for structuring the exhibition, I designed a mini-honeycomb with six surrounding hexagonal partitions centered by a hexagonal platform at the middle of which the audience can go up and see the artworks by turning around (fig. 12). The chronological order of the objects is distinguishable through their descriptions hung on the nearby wall. The silver and gold colours are marked to show whether the inscriptions belong to the testimonial words (silver) or divine names (gold).

The visitors are encouraged to turn left once they enter the exhibitions since it starts with the personal objects, and it can be followed in this way. The second part of the exhibition is continued as the first part is finished. In the second part, the socio-political objects are exposed and can be compared to the previous part if the visitors go up the central hexagonal platform.

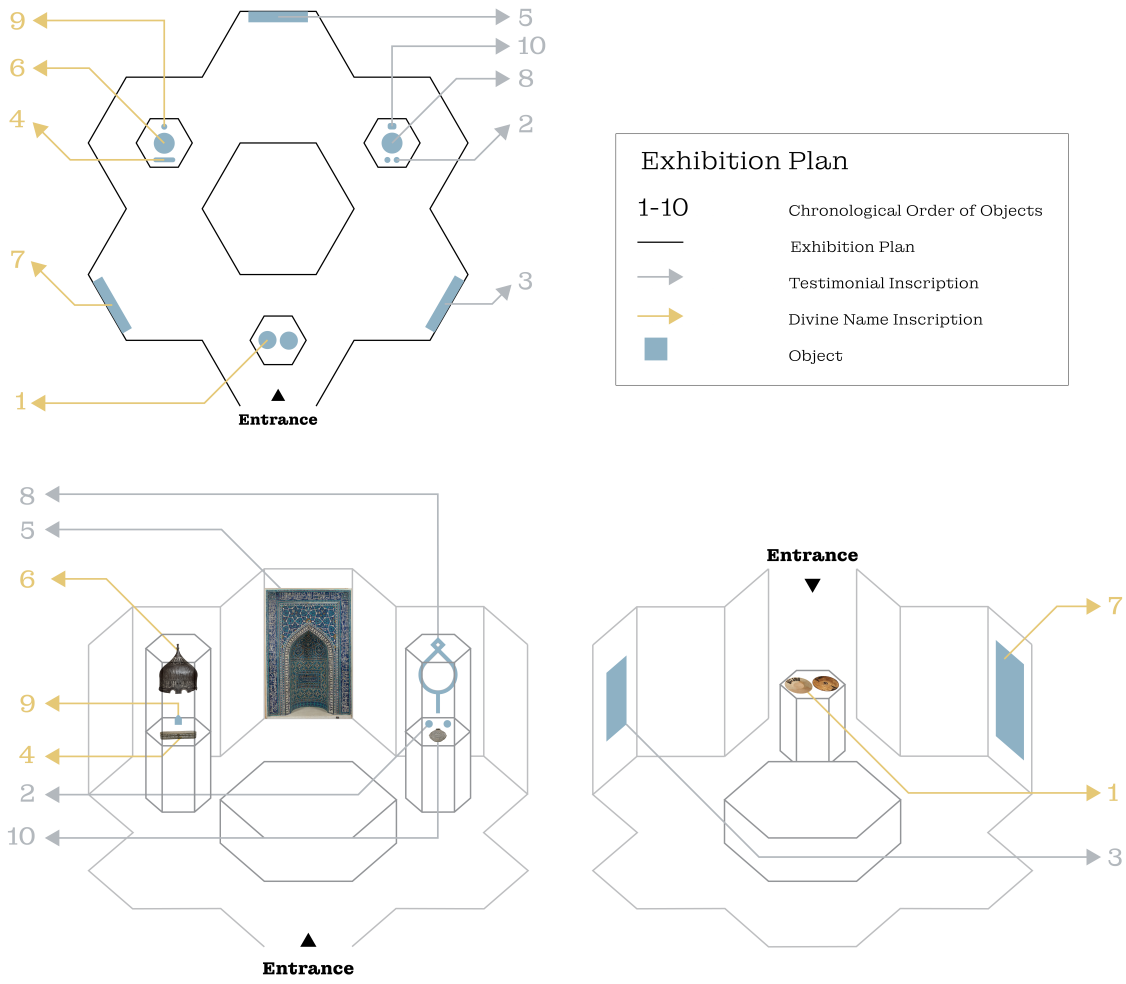


Fig. 12 The plan of exhibition 'The Expression of the Mystical Features of Islam through Iranian Epigraphic Objects'

Discussion and Conclusions

To sum up, it can be broadened to encompass the spiritual attributes, expressions (modes), and exhibition features of Iranians through their epigraphic objects. The spiritual attributes of Persians can be revealed in two passages: through the passage of divine names, and through the passage of Islamic testimony. As the expressions of

Persians were inferred from the relationship between objects and inscriptions, it can be concluded that the relationship between more personal objects and divine names has expressed the various tangible meanings of divine names, while the relationship between more socio-political objects and Islamic testimony has expressed the inaccessible meaning of the Unity. Ultimately, based on both inscriptions' contents and the relationship of objects and inscriptions, two sets of collections can be exhibited.

This curatorial project brings spirituality into the physical realm through shedding light on the dialectical relationship between inscriptions and objects. In this view, each epigraphic object of Islamic art can be considered as a spiritual expression of believers (not exclusive to Muslims) served to remind the Lord. Since the inscriptions of epigraphic objects ranged from personal ones e.g. signatures, ownerships, and blessing to more socio-political inscriptions e.g., testimonial, Prophet saying, and Qur'ānic verses, this project might be challenging in authoritarian theocratic regimes.

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