

MAIN DECORATIVE ELEMENTS, THEIR FORMULATION AND ARTISTIC TECHNIQUES IN GJIROKASTRA BUILDINGS OF THE XIX CENTURY

Dashmir Cuberi, Ph.D. candidate

Faculty of Architecture and Urban Desing

Rruga “Muhamet Gjolllesha” 54 Tirane

E-mail: dashamir.cuberi@fau.edu.al; dashocuberi@live.com

Abstract

The paper treats the decorative folk art in the urban building from the theoretical and practical aspect. There is treated the art of decoration and the space where it is referred to and the relation of the building with the decorative elements of the ornaments. Furthermore, there is also emphasized the role of the folk master and the community psychology and understanding. We are talking about the similarities and features of the folk art, about the motifs, the handcrafting and different artistic techniques applied in the Gjirokastra building of the XIX century. The art of decoration displays the symbols of the traditional belief in its esthetical and artistic way. The techniques of decoration reflect the similarities and differences among the two kinds of the visual art i.e. painting and carving. Conclusion: the high level of the artistic masterpieces and their harmonisation with the values of the architecture of the Gjirokastra building, show a high level of development of the art of decoration. This artistic activity is distinguished for its physiognomy in the whole heritage of the past in this field of the folk art.

Keywords: decoration, heritage, artistic techniques, folk art, Gjirokastra building.

1 Introduction

The wide and diverse variety of decorations of the ornaments is found and is displayed with traditional forms in the interior of the characteristic buildings of Gjirokastra inhabitants. The ornament like in other Albanian territories flourished as a need to complete the missing part of the exterior and interior of the building that had already taken its architectonic shape. It also came out as a spiritual and esthetical need that was connected with the emancipation and the level of needs of the urban society of that time. The artistic activity of the decorative ornament, by being a complimentary part of the urban dwelling and closely related to it has cohabited for a long time up to nowadays and in a natural way cannot be treated separately from it, but it must be considered as part of the whole organic part of the building and a historical companion. The

territory where this folk artistic activity was extended shows that it was developed as united in a solely national type (Shkupi, 1976), with highlighted regional characteristics being created by the devoted and self-conscious work of the local masters.

Gjirokastra being conditioned by the climate and the sloppy hilly terrain recognises familiar developments in the construction and artistic style. The end of XVIII century and beginning of the XIX century is connected with the domain of Ali Pashë Tepelena, a period in which the town recognises qualitative achievements in the richness of the premises with decorations and ornaments of the traditional techniques, being used by local masters and craftsmen organized in groups based on their specialties. Based on oral data it is said that these masters were coming from Opari, Lunxhëria e Konica.

The first decades of the XIX century are recognized for their incorporation and organization of all the techniques in the large premises of the rich families. This period is characterized by the development and exchange of socio-economic relations, which strengthened more the rich strata of society, who were interested in new ways to various aspects of life. Hence, this important process of urban building's evolution was conditioned from the understanding and folk psychology, which brought among other things a new mentality and new attitudes in the way of living, by also requesting a new standard, which obviously included the ornaments that was the transmitter of the new concepts.

The mural painting and ornaments being important elements of the ornament are intermingled with the architecture combined with new forms of living together in harmony and unity.

2 Traditional decorations and architecture

The ornament will use the urban architecture in the background of its motifs. The decorative art and architecture, even though they have different goals, they naturally coexist and mutually interfere to each other by clarifying the typological and artistic identity of the building

The decoration in the architectonic plan is found in the decorative modeling of the work, in the relations of the elements of the form, in the compositional ways of placement and treatment of the stone and wood, as important elements to create the figures with decorative effect in the external and internal view of the buildings. It is very much visible in the buildings of Kikino, Bakiri and Fico, where the ornaments of stone and wood play their decorative game in comparison to the object. The building of Fico is very much rich and original in the work done by the masters of the wood carving that is very visible in the eaves of the roof, in the windows of the external facades making this building have a very special character, with an original designing style.

Looking at the interior and exterior of the Gjirokastra building, the divisions inside them, we also understand the proportional game that is used by the masters of design and decoration. To them, the ratio between the building and the decoration were very important to realize a compositional balance on the decoration. To ensure the proportional decorative ratios and to spread them accordingly were in the Masters' special attention as they considered them to be the main elements to achieve the esthetical beauty. This distribution of the proportional balance is seen in the ratios created between the wooden pieces of the mural painting with the empty spaces of the surface in the living rooms, but not only here. The proportional harmony also touches the exterior as an inseparable part of the decoration, being sensitive to the decorative composition of the first and second floors. The front windows above which stand the colourful windows (Figure 3) are accompanied around them with mural paintings having figures of lions and floral motifs.

In the external facade, the symmetric and architectonic view of the windows is accompanied by paintings. It is combined with the stony material that creates the decoration from the rhythm of its placement in different forms and special places, for example in the frames of the internal windows, in the arches of the

doors and windows. In their complexity, all these elements create the external decorative unity, being a characteristic of the well-known buildings of Gjirokastra.

The works clearly show about an education of the masters of the rich artistic tradition being inherited from the past. These masters were well known not only in the country but the whole Balkan region. Undoubtedly, they have been guided from very skilful architects that were able to implement such important works. One of them was Petro Korçari, the chief architect of Ali Pashë Tepelena that directed the works in some buildings in Ioannina, Gjirokastra and Korça (Shuteriqi, 1978). Among the teams of the constructors were the masters of the stone and wood carving and the painters of the walls (Shkupi, 1986).

As an important figurative element was used the ornament with a variety of forms that served for the realization of the unique compositions. Hence, the ornament is developed in the function of the decorative goal in different geometric versions, in the spiral style forms of the floral and plant motifs where is seen the oriental influence.

3 Decorations in the good guests' room

The decoration with its ornament, based on the purpose that has, is spread in the majority part in the living premises that are placed in the main volumes of the building. Here is included the premise where the family stays and that of welcoming the guests. On regard to the decorative treatment, the daily living premises are distinguished from a simpler artistic load in comparison with those of guests' reception premises.

The main representing living premise where every functional element was done a transmitter of the decorative values was named in different ways such as "guests' room", "big room", "summer room" or "good room". In this premise, where are intermingled the elements of the cultural, ethnographic traditions and customs were organized family feasts, ceremonies, weddings, anniversaries and different receptions (Figure 1 a, c). Hence, the place of joy, happiness and sorrows, where many people enter and go out, had to be the place of the introduction of the highest values of the family, of their economic power, of the wellbeing and prettiness and in each corner it had to reflect brightness. The artistic works in the guests' rooms are the best achievements of the decorations that answer to the big concepts and changes through the times that happened in the Gjirokastra building and which clearly show the taste and the way of living for the rich families. Up to nowadays there have remained few guests' rooms of this character having full artistic indicators. When we say full artistic coverage, we understand the participation and intermingling of the different artistic genre in a harmonic and balanced way, characteristic this of the first decades of the XIX century, which later became simpler gradually up to the end of this century where we do not have developments of the decorations especially in the mural painting of the guests' rooms.

The classic treatment, if we could name like this the highest point of the decoration achieved in the guests' room, has to do with a wide artistic breathing in the relations between the mural painting and processing via carving and coloring of the wood, in their expression to create the visual harmony and warmth. These premises are the most dominant, very rich and very much peculiar in their artistic forms. We see them the tendency to retain the peculiar decorative elements on different concepts. The guests' rooms have their development through the time regarding their internal treatment. They do not undergo equal developments in the compositional elements. If we refer to the development of the Gjirokastra building according to Emin Riza (Riza, 1984), in the decorative treatment of the inner part of the Good room, we distinguish three main groups. In the first one, we have to do with the prevalence of the painting on the wooden elements that seems to have lasted until the 20ies of the XIX century. In the second group, the decoration with colour is not used anymore, and it is replaced with the carving on the wood and the plastering of the fireplace in the technique plaster-relief. This treatment includes approximately the period from 1820 to 1850. Later, by the second half of this century, there are seen new tendencies in the decorative

treatment of the guests' room that are related to the detailed treatment of the decoration and at the same time, it is seen the tendency towards its simplification.

If we refer to the Good room of the well-known building of Zeko family (1811-1812) in the centre is developed the main volume of the environment with the special ceiling of a bigger dimension that relates to the siding facades of the painted parts, among which remains the solid fireplace on the shape of half prism with a crown being decorated with the well-known floral motifs in the technique "alseco" (work done on dry surface), whereas its upper part has been realized with the technique plaster-relief and at the same time being painted with the ornament with plants' motifs (Figure 1 b,3 c).



Figure 1. a) Guests' room

b) Floral motif

c) Fragment of Good room

The spread of the wooden ornaments (in the arches of the doors, in the wooden pillars, in the ceilings, wall closets, in the non-functional sideboards) and in the painting (in the main fireplace, painting pieces, coloured small windows), bring a balance in the general composition of the Guests' room. All these elements have in their content the various motifs that distinguish either in their form or their colour. We can see the geometric shapes of square, triangles, the motif of star, floral motifs and plants' motifs that are widely used in the mural paintings. The doors, wall closets, trunks and chests with swastika forms are places in a symmetric way and together with the functional windows and those with colours above them, surround the vast space of the guests' room. Their presence completes very well the end part of the room with the carved and at the same time the painted ornaments (figure 1c). Despite the Guests' room, the decoration is treated less in the usual rooms and supportive environments (such as the living rooms) with specific functions. Their decorative load is simple. This differentiation is seen due to the lack of the mural paintings. The fireplaces are functional and without decorations. The decorative elements are found only in the wooden pieces.

4 Ornaments and artistic techniques

Painting on wood, the characteristic Baroque style being applied to the premises of the Gjirokastra buildings has its development phases. Until the first quarter of the XIX century there dominates the painting of the wooden elements (Riza, 2004). The mastering of painting on wood represents qualitative achievements in the construction and painting of the floral motifs on this material (Figure 2 c). The decorative effect was created through the combination of the warm and cold colours. The surface of the wood was covered firstly with the characteristic red colour that was more to the orange colour, which was making more evident the other colours: white, light blue, green, pink and blue.

This characteristic painting was including especially in all the works done in wood in the guests' room where can be mentioned the ceilings, rosettes, closets in the walls, trunks, sliding parts of the windows, trunks and chests.

The period in which the painting is widely used is the period of the creation of the most distinguished art of decoration in the Gjirokastra buildings that dates back to the first decades of the XIX century. After this period in the urban buildings, the decoration with colours on the wood and the inner facades of the walls

are unrepeatable as the building of Zekate, Baco and Çuberi, by marking this way the start on leaving aside this overload in decorations. Specifically, the withdrawal from the painting inside the house is partly seen to the Skëndulaj building and more depicted to the Resaj and Kikino's buildings. The decoration with colours in the well-known building of Skëndulaj is concentrated only to the fireplace, at a time that it is not used on the surfaces of the walls or the wooden pieces. Later, the Good room, in general, gets a new dimension with a simpler view by leaving aside the details and the treatment of the baroque style. A special importance is given to the technique of carving with geometric shapes (Riza, 1984). This phenomenon is related to the development of the building and the new concept of a style or the treatment of the other elements in the Good room.

Wood carving is one of the techniques in the art of decoration that is depicted for its peculiarities of the creation and practice. The carvings in wood within the context of the building with a special character are destined to be put into practice in the ceilings, sills, rosettes, wall closets and doors. In the modeling of the wooden elements are seen the regular geometric forms, rectangle, squares of different dimensions by creating decorative surfaces with the volume of the small forms. These forms often pass into decorative simplifications and scaling in several plans. The surfaces of the ceilings are formulated from the geometric motifs in the shape of a square. In some of them, the squares have the star in the centre or an anemone modeled flower (Figure 2 a).

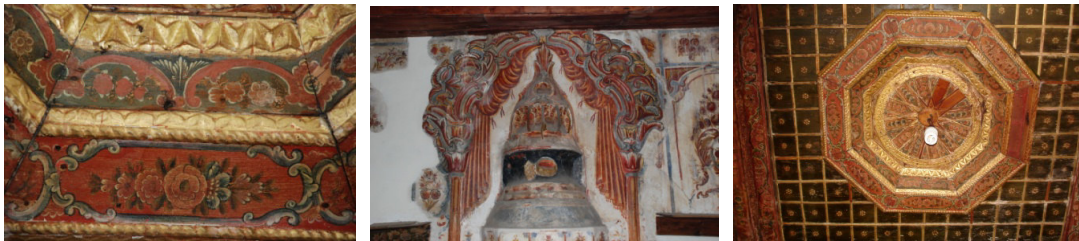


Figure 2. a) Painting of wood b) Fragment of fireplace c) Decoration on wood

This characteristic square decoration in all the ceilings is done with a certain purpose from the masters to assess better and split more clearly the backgrounds of the ceilings from the rosettes, but to enrich the decoration in general as well. In comparison to the square shaped field of the ceiling, the rosettes are created from a circle filled with motifs of carved leaves or geometric motifs of the bordering frames that are usually on octagonal or hexagon shapes in some steaks. The wooden rosettes of the living room (guests' room) compared to the other rooms have greater coverage with geometric and floral motives (Figure 4 b).

In this technique of carving, the motifs can be found within the inherited symbolic of the belief towards the natural phenomenon for example: we can mention the motif of the moon and the sun (Figure 3 b) as a positive power of the nature being used in the upper part of the space on the inner doors, the motif of greenery that symbolises the cult of production or the motif of the snake that symbolises the cult of the predecessors as protectors of the family life.

Furthermore, as very distinctive elements of the remnants of the cult of the sun are the swastika, concentric circles, waving lines, broken parallels and other motifs of the sun. These motifs come from the simplest forms up to the most complicated ones (floral forms, zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, etc.). The doors, fireplaces, stone arches of the doors being the places where these motifs and symbols have been fixed show the religious, magical and protective character that these decorations had time ago (Tirta, 2004).

The mural painting in Gjirokastra building holds a considerable importance in the organization and general decorative harmonization. In general, the main dominant motifs of the decoration are floral, fruits and geometric forms. The painted landscapes are composed clearly and in a symmetric way on both sidings

of the guests' room. Inside of them are painted the floral and fruit motifs being grouped into different relations with each other (Figure 3 a). At the meantime, they express the idea of abundance and well-being. The colours that contain these motifs are transparent, fresh and with contrast, to serve the thought in creating an environment as much esthetical and cheerful as possible. The folk masters through the game of the opposites, between the warm and cold colours, have fixed in a visual way the voluminous shapes with plastic and light shade contrasts. They apply the free technique by displaying the variety and the delicate and sensitive transferees of the tones with colours. The specific peculiarity of the mural painting is closely related to the technique of the watercolours being applied directly on a flat plastered surface consisted of limestone, sand, stone powder and partly gypsum.

To the ornament, it seems as if the motifs either are repeated or look like each other, but what makes it being noted in an artistic work is the style, imaginative power, usage of the techniques and artistic expressions. It is enough to compare the composition and the colors of the paintings that are found in the upper half of the guests' rooms in the buildings of Zekate, Belaj and Çuberaj, where can be seen the same general solution of the composition. The usage of the free spaces with coloured decorations is very similar to these buildings and the variety of colours used to them, whereas the technical expressions are represented with different values. The spreading and the threaded treatment of the motifs are similar to the motifs of the folk costumes.

This influence explains better the fact of being supported by the local tradition. In general, there has been preserved a compositional feeling that tries to highlight the different relations between the decorative motifs. All the motifs are placed into grouped moves in a very safe and precise way (Figure 4 c). The painting is very skilful and agile. Such factors of the creative process are an important feature of the folk creation. The frequent movements of the masters, the tendencies of the rich people for borrowings in the decorative treatment show a certain oriental influence. Some motifs of the ceilings bring you back into the Eastern countries (Riza, 2013).

In the Zekate building there are cases where in the artistic paintings placed between the windows of the Good room, in a certain period of time due to the damages through their refreshment, was interfered with the tones of the colours with contrast in the constructive frames of the motif, by making present a variety of colours of another style. The presence of both styles as a result of these interventions makes this part more visible from the rest of the artistic paintings (figure 3 a). We think that this has happened by the end of the XIX century or by the beginning of the XX century based on the fact of the existence of a lower artistic level of the reworking.



Figure 3. a) Fruits motifs



b) Motif of sun



c) Decorative fireplace

The stone in Gjirokastra does not make the basic construction element, but its qualities have been used for decorations as well. The artistic carving of the stone with decorations has acquired a talent and a long time experience. In the outer decorative planning of the buildings, the ornament being realized in stone is represented in the simple geometric shapes that are created by the rhythmic placement of the carved stone with indented decorations that are visible; we can stress here the front frames of the sitting room in Kikino building that is a peculiar example. Whereas in the arches of the stone doors of this building are found carved in the shape of basso-relief, motifs and symbols with a clear figurative aim and special meaning such as the figures of animals, birds, motifs with different symbols of the tradition, the tree of Laurel, the star and the moon (Figure 4 a).

The decorations that cover the outer walls being protected by the eaves of the roofs and in a majority part they have been saved from the interference of the atmospheric agents are also part of the ornaments. Many of these decorations have been created on the plaster placed on wooden structures. We find in them floral motifs, figures of birds, the figure of the lion, elements of the landscape and sequences of hunting. Such an example is found in Kiki no's building above the small window, where on its siding appears the painted complex with these motifs. We see here the different phases of painting that belong to two special styles.



Fig. 4 a) Stone motif

b) wood motif

c) painting motif

This folk cultural heritage had to cohabit with the atmospheric conditions and with several generations and very often not with their owners. Many layers of limestone plaster have covered the painted surface. In the Skendulate's building after the restoring interventions, the cleaning of the upper part of the fireplace from the plaster throws light to its drawings by bringing back its previous value. Despite the good restoration work done, there are still fragmented parts that have been destroyed. There is possible that inside the plaster must be still traces of the original formulation. This is clearly given to the latest discoveries in the building of Jaho family (Babaramo) of the motifs realized in a rare technique of leaving traces on the wet plaster and of the mural paintings in Kikino building from the restoration interventions in 2011.

By following the activity of the masters and influenced by the high level of the artistic works in the heritage buildings we can say that in the XIX century Gjirokastra town has had a high level of development especially in the genre of decorative ornaments art, which is explained with the wide values of the works created during this period.

5 Conclusions

Ornaments are a value of dwellings that belong to the richest and medium classes. It has served as an attractive factor for human requirements to beauty. Due to the economic character this ornamentation lacking in the housing for the poor. In dwellings of rich layers, we can say that it has been more open to influences and borrowings.

The artworks in Gjirokastra dwellings have distinct features developments, which distinguish the high values that they carry. The premises are decorated according to the hierarchy with wood and mural painting, mainly in the chamber of friends and the daily residence.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, in wood works geometric floral motif are replaced with carved motifs and figures of birds: the eagle and the dove. But wall paintings takes a new concept in the decorative formulation. It loses traditional features forms of composition and goes to the free forms.

In their entirety the motives belong to the national heritages. Ornaments of housing distinguish their character especially for the provincial and national colors, not excluding oriental influences of the time.

Decorative motifs used to decorate the houses looked not only as master creating fantasy, who knows very well the traditional motives and demands. They come in artistic forms to reflect the psychology of the people interested in their presence at home.

These creations with different degree of artistic values appear with Balkan and Oriental themes, in addition to ancient Illyrians and pagans.

Universal, different motives, the pagan and Jewish religious are reflected almost in all Ornaments of Gjirokastra houses. These motifs are associated with myths and beliefs about things, objects of species present in the apartment.

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