

Seljuq Art and Architecture

The Great Seljuqs

Architecture

The surviving examples of Great Seljuq architecture, mostly mosques, mausoleums, and a limited number of caravanserais, are found primarily in Iran and Turkmenistan. The almost universal building material is brick, and often high-quality baked bricks. These bricks were used not only as a building material, but, by altering recessed and protruding bricks as well as changing the orientation of the bricks, they could also be used to create complex decorative effects. Such brickwork could also be combined with glazed tiles in various colors and/or carved plaster or stucco decoration to achieve spectacular results.

Another distinctive feature of both Great Seljuk and Rum Seljuk architecture is the extensive use of *muqarnas* (مقرنص Arabic, مقرنس Persian), a form of ornamental vaulting sometimes referred to as “honeycomb vaulting” or “stalactite vaulting”. While the exact time and place of their origin is still debated, *muqarnas* became a popular form of decoration on vaults, domes, squinches and cornices (all zones of transition) across the Islamic world in the 11th century. *Muqarnas* could be constructed from stone, brick, stucco or wood and created a dazzling effect with the play of light and shadow on surfaces that would otherwise be bare and indistinct. These features can be seen in the Masjed-e Jam’e in Isfahan, Iran.



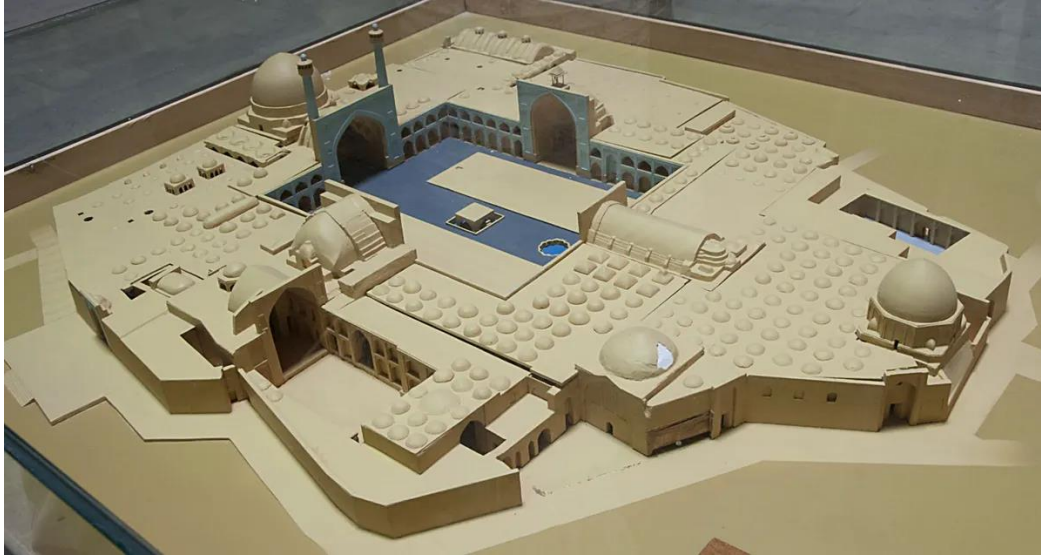
Muqarnas in the northeast iwan (Archnet)



Iwans and pishtaqs (Archnet)

Mosques

The Seljuq period witnessed the development and spread of what became the classic Iranian mosque, sometimes referred to as a “kiosk mosque”. This mosque plan consisted of four *iwans* (ايوان, Arabic *īwān*, Persian *ivān / eyvān* – a rectangular vaulted space walled in on three sides and open on the fourth) around a rectangular courtyard with the entrance aligned with the *ivan qibli* (the *ivan* aligned with the *qibla*, the direction of Mecca) and a large dome on this axis in front of the *mihrab* (the niche in the mosque indicating the *qibla*). The entrance to the mosque and the entrance to the *ivan qibli* often featured a *pishtaq* (پیشطاق), a formal gateway consisting of a flat brick or masonry structure that framed the two sides and top of the entrance. In addition, there were generally two smaller entrances at each end of the perpendicular axis. The minarets were generally tall, thin and cylindrical.



Model of the Masjed-e Jam'e in Isfahan showing the arrangement of four iwans around a rectangular central courtyard. (Archnet)

Mausoleums



A number of monumental mausoleums from the Seljuq period have survived to the present day. Like the mosques, the mausoleums were constructed from brick and used brickwork, colored tiles and carved stucco or plaster for decorative effect. Some were constructed in the earlier cylindrical "tower tomb" style.

Tughrul Tower, Rayy, Iran

However, during the Seljuq period a number of monumental mausoleums were constructed with square or polygon bases covered by a dome (گنبد, *gonbad*). Examples of this style of construction include the Sultan Sanjar mausoleum (*below right*) with a square base and the Kharraqan Towers (*below left*), two mausoleums constructed with a polygonal base.



Kharraqan Towers, Qazvin, Iran



Sultan Sanjar Mausoleum, Merv, Turkmenistan

Caravanserais

In addition to mosques and mausoleums, there are a limited number of examples of Seljuq caravanserais. One of the most famous is the Ribat-e Sharaf (*below*), constructed around 1114 on the road between Merv and Nishapur. The surrounding walls give it a distinctively fortress-like appearance, but the interior construction shows numerous features shared with contemporary mosques. Among these are brick construction, *pishtaqs*, four *iwans* surrounding a rectangular courtyard (in this case two courtyards, smaller *iwans* surrounding the courtyards, the use of small domes).



Minor Arts

The art of the Great Seljuqs is represented primarily by metalwork and ceramics with fewer examples of wood carving and book illustration. While based on Iranian models, Seljuq art combines Persian and Turkic elements in unique ways to create objects of great beauty and quality with a very high level of technical skill and craftsmanship. While decorative elements found in architecture such as interconnected star patterns, epigraphic bands and arabesques are used to cover surfaces, small objects also use elements not commonly found in architecture. The most distinctive of these are figural representations of mythical beasts, scenes from court life, astrological figures, and depictions of episodes from literary works such as the *Shahnama* by Firdawsi.

Metalwork

Bronze objects such as spoons, pen cases, oil lamps, bowls and ewers have survived in considerable numbers, and are display the skill and craftsmanship of their makers. Some are made from cast bronze, while later ones are often made from hammered sheet metal. The surfaces of these objects are often elaborately decorated, as seen in the 12th century objects below.



Bronze Bottle Fragment
(Museum für Islamische Kunst)



Ewer with calligraphic band
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Seljuk oil lamp
(Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe)

A decorative technique that was widely employed for metal objects in the Seljuq period was inlay, generally silver, although copper and other materials were sometimes used. An example of the use of silver and copper inlay is this early 13th century pen box.



Ceramics

Like metal objects, a fairly large number of Seljuq ceramics have come down to the present day. These pieces show that ceramic making was a major artform in the Seljuq era and that this period witnessed major innovations in shape, design, decoration and glazes. The Iranian city of Kashan (کاشان) was a major center of ceramic production, and the name of the city became the basis of the Persian word for “glazed tile”, *kashi* (کاشی).

Much of the ceramic ware from this period was made from **frit** (stone paste) that allowed the production of white, hard body ceramics that were much like Chinese porcelain. However, it was in the exterior decoration that the true sophistication and artistry of Seljuq ceramics was most obvious. In particular, ceramic artists of the Seljuq period excelled in two techniques in particular.

The first was the production of luster ware. Luster ware is made painting decorative elements on a light-colored ceramic piece with paints made with metal oxides. When the piece is baked in the kiln, the oxides return to their metallic state, producing reflective effects in the painted decoration.



Luster Bowl with Winged Horse, late 12th c



Side view of same bowl showing inscription

The second was the production of what is generally termed *Mina'i* (مینایی, “enameled” in Persian) ware, also called *haft rang* (هفت رنگ, “seven colors” in Persian). Produced between the late 12th and early 13th centuries, *Mina'i* ware employed several techniques in its production, but was the first to use **overglaze**, where the decoration is painted on a previously glazed and fired surface, and then fixed by firing the piece a second time, but at a lower temperature. Since the number of colors that could withstand the heat needed to fire ceramics was limited, this technique allowed the artists to use a much wider variety of colors in their decoration.



Mina'i ware bowl, late 12th-early 13th c



Lobed Mina'i ware bowl, early 13th c



In addition to the advances in glazing and decoration, ceramic artists in the Seljuq era also experimented in using other techniques to produce novel effects in their works. One example is this jug (left) dated to 1215-16 in the characteristic Seljuq blue-black color scheme whose outer surface has had sections cut away to make the figures and designs stand out. The pierced section has epigraphic bands above and below it.

Almost no large-scale painting from the Seljuq era and no miniature painting prior to the Mongol conquest has survived. As a result, the painted decoration on ceramics is a primary source of information on the styles and techniques of Seljuq painting and illustration. In addition, the depictions of people found on many of these pieces provide a wealth of information on the dress, ornaments, hair styles,

customs and lives of the upper classes.

The Seljuqs of Rum

Architecture

Compared to the Great Seljuqs, the appearance of Rum Seljuq architecture came relatively late. Although the Seljuq conquest and settlement of Anatolia followed their victory over the Byzantines at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, distinctive Seljuq structures only begin to appear in any number in the second half of the 12th century. This lag between conquest and construction is most likely due to the unsettled conditions and lack of economic stability in Seljuq territory in the late 11th and early 12th centuries. In fact, distinctive architecture was not the only thing that appeared relatively late in the Sultanate of Rum – the first Rum Seljuq coinage, dinars minted in Konya, only appeared in 1175-76.

The surviving architecture from the Seljuq Sultanate of Rum falls into three broad categories. The first is made up of large public buildings such as mosques, madrasas, hospitals and caravanserais. The second is mausoleums which served as both burial sites and monuments for members of the upper classes. The final category consists of the more limited number of surviving structures that fall outside of the first two groups. Among these structures are bridges, palaces, public baths, fortifications, and fountains.

Rum Seljuq architecture has a number of characteristics that distinguish it from the architecture of the Great Seljuqs. One of the most obvious differences is the primary building material – stone. While brick was the primary building material used in the Great Seljuq architecture of Iran and Transoxiana, Rum Seljuq buildings generally have outer walls constructed from large blocks of dressed stone, with brick mostly restricted to the construction of minarets. These surfaces of these stone structures are generally undecorated, with elaborate carved decoration concentrated around the main entrance, and, in the case of mosques, the mihrab. Less commonly, in addition to carved decoration, the technique of *ablaq* (ابلق), alternating light and dark stone for a decorative effect is employed.



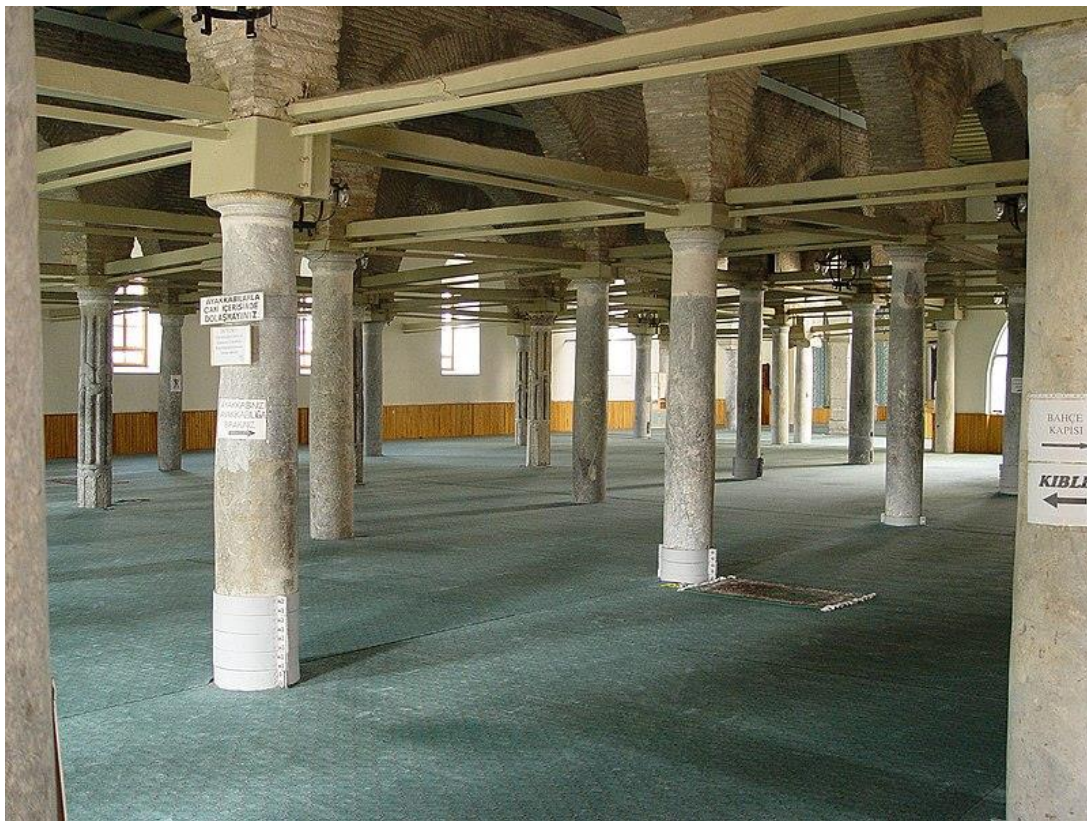
Susuz Han, on the Antalya-Burdur road, showing unadorned walls and entrance decorated with muqarnas and ablaq.

Mosques

Rum Seljuq congregational mosques (large mosques for communal Friday prayers known as a جامع *jāmi'* or مسجد جامع *masjid jāmi'* in Arabic and *cami* in Turkish) generally fall into two stylistic categories. The most common is a rectilinear, flat roofed hypostyle structure with a dome in front of the *mihrab*. Interior decoration, stone carving and ceramic tiles, is restricted to the *mihrab* and the dome. These features are all found in the Alaeddin Mosque in Konya, constructed in 1235.



Alaeddin Mosque, Konya, showing the hemispherical dome in front of the mihrab and the conical roofs of the royal mausoleums.



Interior of the Alaeddin Mosque, Konya, showing the hypostyle construction. Many of the columns are re-used Roman and Byzantine columns.



(Left) Mihrab and (right) restored dome of the Alaeddin Mosque, Konya.



Smaller mosques (Arabic, مسجد, *masjid*; Turkish *mescit*) from the Seljuq period were generally constructed according to a simple plan of a square chamber topped by a dome, and the entrance opposite the *qibla*. An example of this type of structure is the 13th century Hoca Hasan mosque in Konya (left).

However, there is another category of small mosques from the 12th century, citadel mosques (Turkish, *kale mescidi*), that exhibit a more complex interior plan with interior arches and pillars. These features can be seen in the photographs of the citadel mosque in Erzurum.



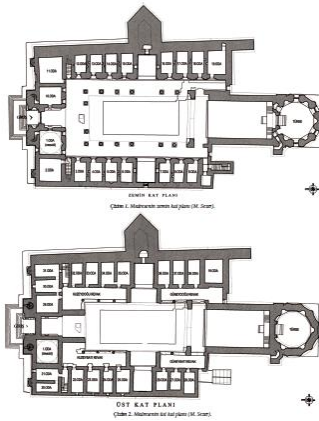
Exterior of the Erzurum citadel mosque



Interior of the Erzurum citadel mosque

Madrasas

Like congregational mosques, Seljuq madrasas in Anatolia were generally constructed in one of two patterns. Large madrasas were built as rectilinear structures with a series of chambers that surrounded an open central courtyard, as in the Çifte Minareli Medrese in Erzurum and the Gök Medrese in the city of Sivas.



Plans of the upper and lower floors of the Çifte Minareli Medrese in Erzurum (drawings by M. Sezer, in H. Gündoğdu, "Erzurum Çifte Minareli Medrese'nin Son Restorasyonunda Ortaya Çıkan Yeni Bulgular." Restorasyon Yıllığı Dergisi, 10 (2015).



Exterior of the Çifte Minareli Medrese



Interior of the Çifte Minareli Medrese

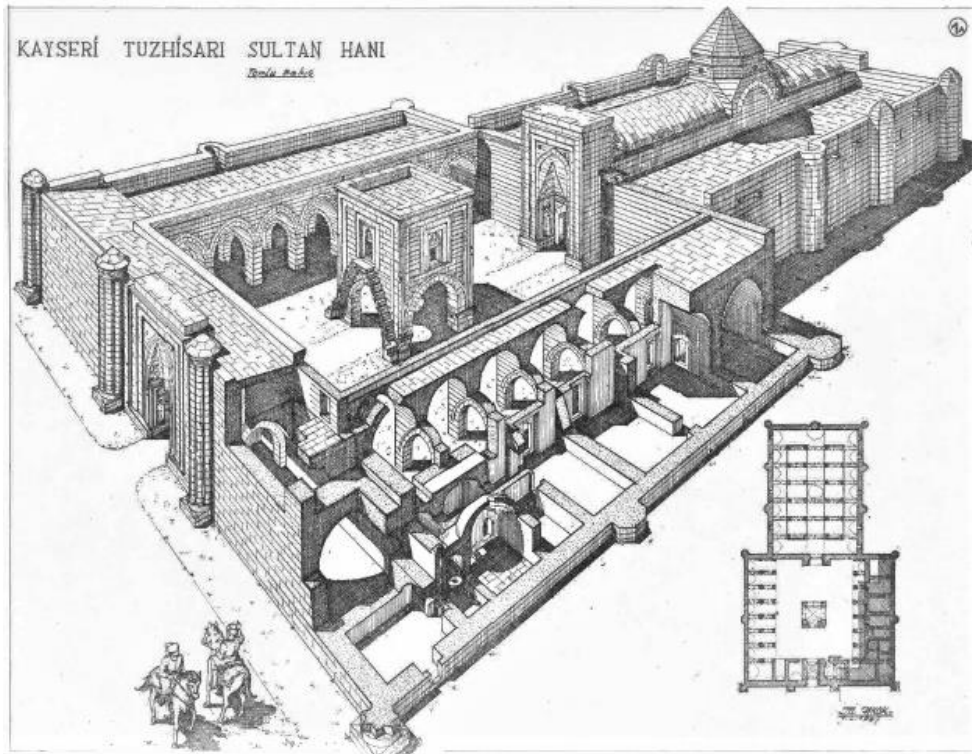
Smaller madrasas were also constructed around a central courtyard, but the courtyard was covered with either a dome or a vault. The İnce Minareli Medrese and the Karatay Medresesi, both in the city of Konya, are examples of madrasas constructed according to this plan.



Exterior of the İnce Minareli Medresesi



Interior of the İnce Minareli Medresesi



Cut-away drawing and plan of the Kayseri Tuzhisari Sultan Hanı (Mahmut Akok, Türk Arkeoloji Dergisi XVII/2 (1968))

Caravanserais

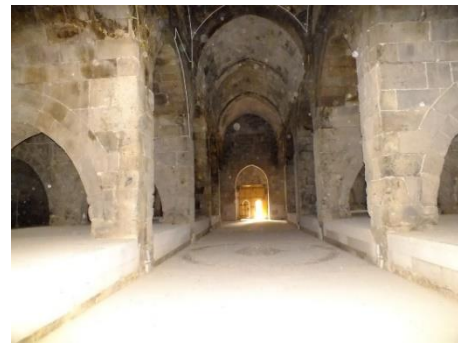
One of the most widespread Rum Seljuq structures is the caravanserai (کاروانسرای *kārvānsarāy* in Persian, *kervansaray* in Turkish), also referred to as a khan (خان *khān* in Persian, *han* in Turkish), particularly in an urban setting. Caravanserais were intended to provide security for merchants, their animals, and their goods, and the features of these buildings reflects this. Rum Seljuq caravanserais were constructed with thick stone walls that were often crenellated, only one entrance and high, narrow slit windows. There was no exterior décor, except around the sole entrance, and the entrance to the covered hall.



Exterior walls and windows of the Alayhan, near Aksaray

Exterior walls and windows of the Alayhan, near Aksaray

The single entrance led into a rectangular courtyard surrounded by various chambers on two or three sides and a covered hall on the side opposite the entrance. In some caravanserais there was a small, raised mosque in the center of the courtyard. The covered hall had several aisles of columns and one dome. The floor in the interior of the covered hall was built on two levels; the lower one was for the animals, and the raised one for the men and their goods.



Interior of the Sultanhanı, Kayseri showing the two-level floor (Kayseri Valliği)



Mausoleums

Mausoleums are another commonly found structure from the Seljuq era. Seljuq mausoleums (*kümbet* or *türbe* in Turkish) are generally either round or polygonal (octagonal plans are more typical) with a conical roof. Most have two levels; the lower one is the the actual burial site and may, or may not, have external access. The upper level, reached by external stairs, is a small *masjid* with a *qibla*.

A typical example of such Rum Seljuq mausoleum construction is the Döner Kümbet, constructed in Kayseri in 1276 as the burial site for Shah Jihan Hatun, daughter of Sultan Keykubad I. This cylindrical tomb is set on a square base and has double stairs leading up to the small prayer room situated above the grave, located in a small, square room below. The door is decorated with muqarnas, and the 12 exterior panels with a variety of geometric, vegetal and animal reliefs.

Bridges

One other class of structures that has survived from the Seljuq era is bridges. Following earlier Roman and Byzantine models, Seljuq bridges were either single-span or multi-span bridges, and the type of construction chosen was generally based on the depth and strength of the currents of the river. Rivers with weak currents could be crossed by multi-span bridges that used pointed or alternating pointed and rounded arches to form the spans create a relatively flat surface for traffic. Single-span bridges were constructed over rivers with strong currents or rivers where constructing a multi-span bridge was impractical. These bridges were almost always constructed with a pointed arch and a surface that ascended from each bank to meet at the highest point over the arch.



The multi-span Köprüpazar Bridge, 13th c.



The single-span Malabadi Bridge, 1146

Minor Arts

Compared to that of the Great Seljuqs, the quantity of surviving artwork and objects from the time of the Seljuqs of Rum is considerably less. Metalwork and ceramic objects in particular are poorly represented. However, stonework, woodwork, glazed ceramic tiles, and a unique example of manuscript illustration all provide a good indications of the style and sophistication of Rum Seljuq art.

Stonework

As previously mentioned, art carved as stone relief is an integral element of Rum Seljuq architectural décor, but the use of abstract designs, animal, human and vegetal figures, and epigraphic bands in architecture mirrors that found in other art forms. As an example of this mix of elements, the Döner Kümbet in Kayseri, built in 1276, uses abstract designs in some exterior panels, while animal and vegetal images predominate in others.



Décor of the exterior panels of the Döner Kümbet, 13th c, Kayseri, Turkey

Animal figures carved in relief are frequently used by themselves as elements of external décor. The example on the left from the Great Mosque in Diyarbakır shows a lion attacking a bull, one of a pair that flank the entrance to the mosque. The example on the right from the mosque in Divriği depicts a double-headed eagle, a design found in other forms of Rum Seljuq art.



Lion and bull, Great Mosque of Diyarbakır, 12th c



West portal of the Divriği Great Mosque, 13th c.



On a grander scale, the entrance to the İnce Minareli Medrese in Konya (left), constructed in the mid-13th century, has a unique combination of abstract designs, epigraphic bands and vegetal that is designed to fill the space, highlight the entrance and impress those who enter or even pass by.

Not found as an element of Great Seljuq architectural decor, human figures are the least common decorative element in Rum Seljuq architecture. The surviving examples are all from Konya, perhaps indicating that they were most popular in the Seljuq capital. One example, of uncertain provenance and now in Berlin, depicts a lute player carved in marble. Another, from the İnce Minareli Medrese, is one of a pair of winged angels that flanked an entrance.



Lute player, Konya, early 13th c



Winged angel, Konya, mid 13th c

Woodwork

The surviving examples of Rum Seljuq woodworking are limited primarily to doors and *minbars* (منبر), the pulpit in a Friday mosque from which the *imam* (إمام, prayer leader) stands to deliver his weekly *khutba* (خطبة), sermon or other talks. Unlike the pulpits in churches, the minbar consists of a doorway opening to a staircase topped by the "Prophet's seat". Although the Prophet Muhammad and the first caliphs after him delivered their sermons from the minbar's seat, today it is left empty and the imam speaks standing a point approximately halfway up the stairs. Because of its association with the Prophet and the early caliphs, the minbar became a symbol of authority, and Muslim rulers often spent large sums to commission richly crafted minbars for the Friday mosques in their cities.

The Seljuq Sultans of Rum were no exception to this tradition and a number of exquisitely crafted minbars from the Seljuq era have survived. The minbar of the Alaeddin Mosque in Konya (below), dating to 1155-56, is a representative example of Seljuq woodworking. Like many minbars from this time it was constructed using the *kündekâri* technique. This means that the large side panels (at a minimum) were constructed of numerous, individually worked pieces that were then fitted together, like a mosaic, on an internal frame without the use of nails, glue or pins.



Minbar of the Alaeddin Mosque, Konya

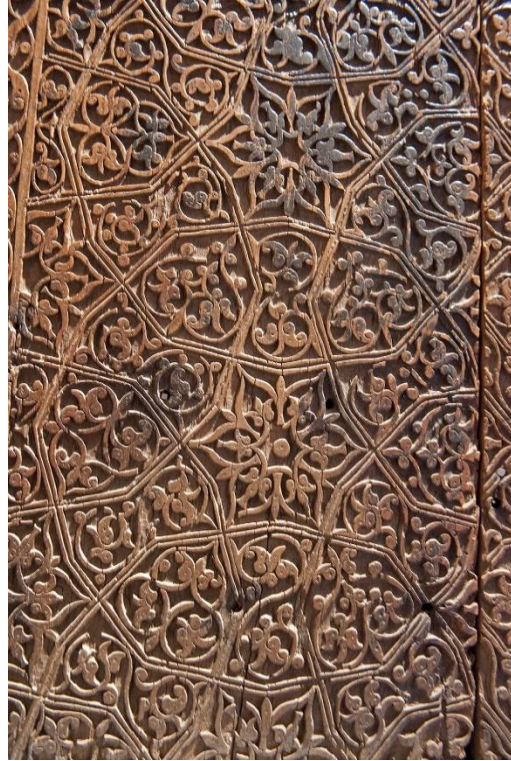


Kündekâri detail, Alaeddin Mosque, Konya

The designs used in the surviving examples of Seljuq woodworking are generally repeating, interlocked star designs similar to ones that were carved as surface decoration on stone structures. However, there are also examples of intricate, carved floral/vegetal designs used to cover the surface of window doors.



Minbar doors, Eşrefoğlu, Mosque, Konya



Window door, Eşrefoğlu Mosque, Konya, late 13th c.

Ceramics



While numerous examples of ceramicware from the lands of the Great Seljuqs have survived to the present day, comparatively little ceramic ware has survived from the time of the Seljuqs of Rum. In design the Anatolian pieces show similarities with those from the Great Seljuqs, but the use of color and the style of decoration are more limited and less sophisticated. This green and black 13th century bowl from Anatolia (left), for example, is far simpler in its decoration than many Great Seljuq wares produced in the same period.

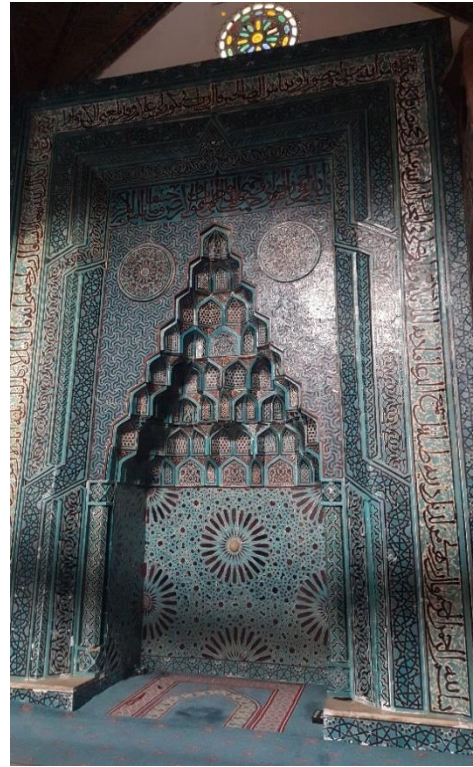
Although the surviving examples of Rum Seljuq ceramicware may suffer in comparison with Great Seljuq ceramicware, the true genius of ceramic artists in the land of Rum was in the production and use of glazed tiles as a decorative element of Seljuq architecture.

Numerous examples of the use of decorated, glazed tiles, often in the blue and black color scheme that was so characteristic of Rum Seljuq ceramic decoration, can be found in place in Seljuq-era mosques, or have been found in archaeological excavations of Seljuq buildings.

The glazed tiles used to decorate the entrances and *mihirabs* of mosques often create designs that echo those carved in stone. Repeating geometric designs, repeating interlaced star designs and epigraphic bands in blues, black, yellow and white focus the attention on the entrances, domes and *mihrab*, and contrast sharply with the sparse décor of the walls.



Interior entrance, Eşrefoğlu Mosque, Beyşehir



Mihrab, Eşrefoğlu Mosque, Beyşehir

Secular architecture, such as palaces, also used glazed tiles to cover and decorate walls. While the tiles used in such structures could employ all the elements found in mosques, it could also include tiles with human and animal figures. Some of the finest and most varied examples of such decorative glazed tiles have been found at the site of Qubadabad Palace (Turkish, *Kubadabad Sarayı*), the summer palace of Sultan Kayqubad I (r. 1220-1237) located on the southwestern shore of Lake Beyşehir. Excavations that have been conducted there since the 1960s have revealed numerous tiles that once adorned the walls of the palace.

The majority of these tiles are painted in shades of blue, black and white, but some are painted in brown lusterware, while a few echo the *haft-rang* style of Great Seljuq ceramics. Numerous types of birds, a variety of animals, mythical creatures, men and women are all depicted on the tiles. Calligraphy is rare, but there are examples of both pure calligraphy and figures with calligraphy.



A peacock, horse, and harpy with two fish – Qubadabad Palace, 13th c.



Figure of a young man in lusterware, a hunter on horse with muse, and double-headed eagle with calligraphy.

These star-shaped tiles were separated by blue cross-shaped tiles decorated in a variety of floral, leaf and abstract patterns.



Reconstructed wall from the Qubadabad Palace



Miniature Painting

While no pre-Mongol miniature painting has survived from the lands of the Great Seljuqs, one manuscript of the epic poem, *Varqa and Golshah* (ورقه و گلشاه) in the İstanbul Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi (Hazine 841) may give some indication of the style of manuscript illustration in the Sultanate of Rum in the first half of the 13th century. Written in Persian by the poet Ayyuqi (عیوقی) in the early 11th century the manuscript of the romance of Varqa and Golshah in İstanbul contains 71 illustrations. In the sixty-first illustration there is an inscription attributing the artwork to Abd al-Mu'min bin Muhammad al-Naqqash al-Khuwi, a name also found in a document from Konya dating to 1253. This indicates that the illustrations were likely to have been done in the Seljuq capital in the mid-13th century.

Some similarities with book-painting in Fatimid Egypt have been noted, and comparisons with a 13th century Great Seljuq beaker from Iran depicting episodes from the *Shahnameh* have been made.

However, the illustrations from the manuscript of *Varqa and Golshah* appear to have no connection to the style of book illustrations in Baghdad, nor does their style of illustration appear to continue in slightly later Ilkhanid works.



Three miniatures from the romance of *Varqa and Golshah*

Readings

Canby, Sheila R., et al (eds.). *The Seljuqs and their Successors: Art, Culture and History*. Edinburgh, 2020.

McClary, Richard P. *Rum Seljuq Architecture, 1170-1220: The Patronage of Sultans*. Edinburgh, 2017.

Discussion Questions

1. What influences can be seen in the art and architecture of the Great Seljuqs?
2. What factors made the art and architecture of the Sultanate of Rum different from that of the Great Seljuqs?