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# From Function to Form: *Chini-khana* in Safavid and Mughal Architecture

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Undertaking a comparative examination of a particular decorative form in the architecture of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Persianate world, this paper briefly introduces the appearance of *Chini-khana* in the Timurid era before examining its subsequent use in Safavid and Mughal structures. Originally created by Timurid patrons as a specific building or room to display precious Chinese porcelains, how the *Chini-khana* underwent parallel evolutions in Safavid and Mughal architecture is examined. While the same, or similar, architectural forms and decorative devices were at times used in different areas of the Persianate World, their evolution of form and function sometimes altered; this was the case for *chini-khana*. While both the Safavids and Mughals derived their awareness of it from the first Timurid *Chini-khanas*, each then adopted and/or adapted the original idea for their own purposes. In the architecture of both is present the continuation of an architectural device from a shared cultural history, but with differences in form, function and aesthetic desires.

**Keywords:** *chini-khana*; porcelain; Persianate aesthetic; Safavid; Mughal; architecture

## Introduction

Porcelain was an item of prestige at Muslim royal courts, collected, gifted and displayed. Renowned for its physical properties of having a pure white body, being harder than earthenware, and its translucence, porcelain was desired in the Muslim world from the ninth century onwards. In the Persianate world, the influx of porcelain and other fine Chinese wares significantly increased after the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. Blue and white designs on porcelain, particularly of the Yuan and Ming eras, became highly desired, as did celadon, a light-green-glazed stoneware. Methods of displaying and storing these ceramics differed, but the first known instance of a dedicated space created for their display in the Persianate world is from the Timurid period. Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, while discussing the constructions of his ancestor Ulugh Beg in and around Samarqand,<sup>1</sup> relates the following in his autobiography: ‘In this same small garden [outside Samarqand, by Kohak Hill] is a *chahardara* called the Chinikhana, with porcelain all around the dado. Someone sent to Cathy [China] to bring the porcelain.’<sup>2</sup>

Translated as ‘china room’, or ‘house of china’, ‘*Chini-khana*’ was a name originally given to buildings or chambers during the Timurid era created as a dedicated space for the display of Chinese ceramics, particularly porcelain. By all accounts, Ulugh Beg

appears to have been the first to create one.<sup>3</sup> Babur’s naming of the pavilion as ‘the Chinikhana’ supports the fact that the term was in use during the Timurid era, and that it was the descriptive name given to pavilions or buildings built specifically for this use. Furthermore, the description he gives of the dado being of porcelain likely means that it was tiled.<sup>4</sup> As we are also told the porcelain was of Chinese origin, it is possible that when the tiles were sent for other objects were brought and displayed in this space as well. Another Timurid *Chini-khana* was apparently built by the vizier Mir ‘Ali Shir Nava‘i (1441–1501) in his gardens in Gaurgah,<sup>5</sup> described as having ‘richly ornamented arched niches for the display of precious wares’.<sup>6</sup>

This study is on the later appearance and use of *Chini-khana* in elite Safavid and Mughal sixteenth- and seventeenth-century architecture and its adaptations. Due to their shared Persianate social and cultural history, the same, or similar, architectural forms and decorative devices were at times used by each dynasty, but with variations in their evolution of form and function. These variations depended on several factors, including, for example, climate, materials, preferred aesthetic and intended function. Used in Safavid and Mughal architecture, but for different purposes and decorative effect, this was the case for *Chini-khana*. While both the Safavids and Mughals were aware of the first creation of such a space within a Timurid context, rulers of each dynasty then adopted and/or adapted the original

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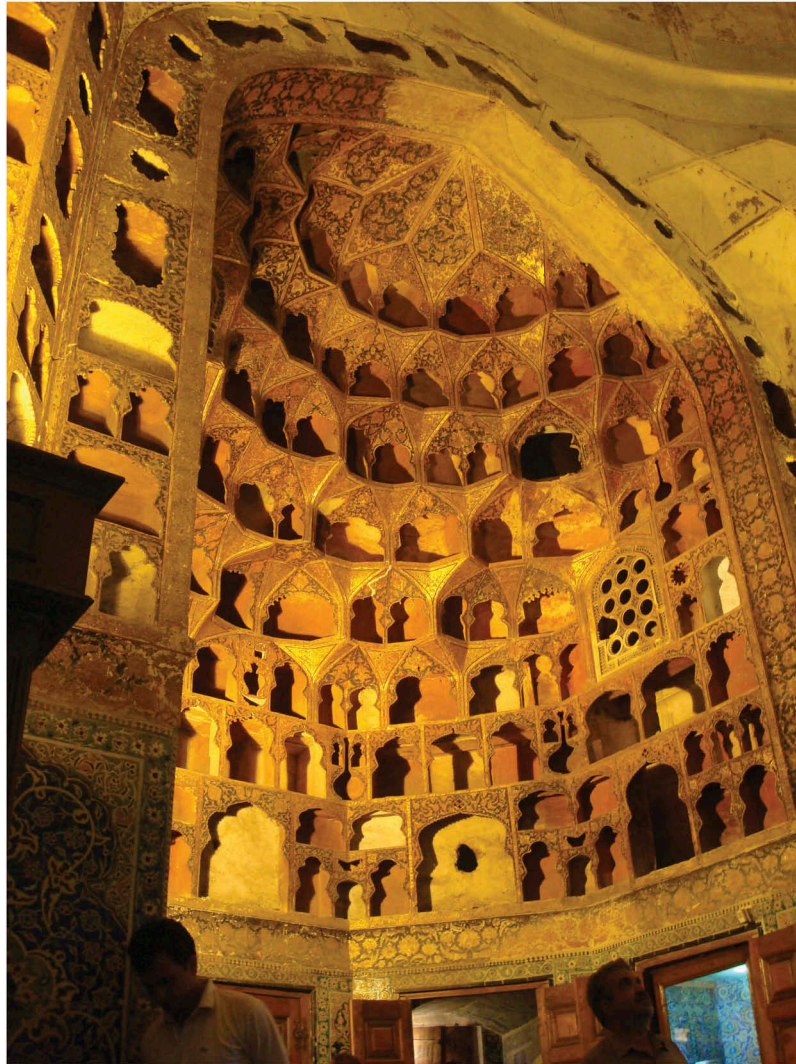
idea for their own purposes. In the buildings of both we see a parallel continuation of an architectural designation that was associated with princely aesthetic and royal patronage, but with differences in form, function and aesthetic desires.

As a result of this parallel development, the term *Chini-khana* was used and has come to be used as a descriptor for two different types of creations. The first, original one is that of the Timurid creation, a proper noun given as the name of the building or pavilion dedicated to the display of fine Chinese wares – *Chini-khana*. As noted above, this was the name given to these spaces in their contemporary periods of production. The second type of creation for which the term is used, as will be seen below, is a decorative scheme based on the repetition of niches created primarily for aesthetic effect rather than the placement of objects. To differentiate between the two

within this paper, the former will continue to be termed as a proper noun – ‘*Chini-khana*’ – while the latter will be referred to as ‘*chini-khana*’, a more general descriptor of a particular design motif. Depending on the context of the discussion, ‘*chini-khana niches*’, ‘*chini-khana motif*’, or ‘*chini-khana design scheme*’ will also be used to make clear distinctions between the formal characteristics and the architectural or decorative quality of the spaces under discussion.

### Seventeenth-Century Safavid *Chini-khanas*: Primacy of Function, Form and Aesthetic

The construction of *Chini-khanas* like that described as being created in Mir ‘Ali Shir Nava’i’s gardens in Gaurgah, with ‘richly ornamented arched niches for the display of precious wares’, occurred again in Safavid Iran



1. Interior, *Chini-khana*, Ardabil, c.1607–1611 (Photo: Nader Sayadi).

(1501–1722). The two surviving examples are independently famous in their own right: the *Chini-khana* at the Shrine of Shaykh Safi in Ardabil (c.1607–11), and the so-called ‘Music Room’ (c.1602–15) at the top of the Ali Qapu in Isfahan. At Ardabil, the Safavid ruler Shah ‘Abbas I (r.1586–1629) undertook restorations and renovations of the shrine complex between 1605 and 1611. In 1607–08 he made a decision to donate his extensive porcelain collection to the shrine as *waqf*,<sup>7</sup> and at some point between this declaration and the transfer of the collection to Ardabil in 1611 a pre-existing octagonal structure in the shrine complex was converted into the repository for the porcelain. Shortly before 1611, this building began to be referred to as the *Chini-khana*,<sup>8</sup> indicating its new purpose and function. In order to make it an appropriate space for the display and storage of the imperial collection, a decorative framework was inserted into the existing fourteenth-century building<sup>9</sup> that included carved plaster window grilles and, crucially, approximately 1200 niches made out of plaster and wood.<sup>10</sup> Of various shapes, the niches, ostensibly for the porcelain to be placed into, were created on the upper two-thirds of the walls, within the arches framing the

shallow *iwans*, and within the muqarnas facets of the *iwan* hoods (Figure 1).

The majority of the niches have arched profiles of various forms, but some were created in the shape of vessels – mostly of long-necked rose-water sprinklers, but also shallow dishes or cups (Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> While created for the display of the porcelains, some were utilised for the storage of Persian manuscripts and texts.<sup>12</sup> That the niches were actually used for storage and display, and not merely decorative, is borne out by descriptions of the space by contemporary visitors. Adam Olearius, who wrote a detailed account of his travels in Safavid Iran during the reign of Shah Safi (r.1629–42) while serving as secretary to the Holstein mission to Persia,<sup>13</sup> for example, writes of 300 to 400 Chinese objects being displayed in the niches.<sup>14</sup> The number of objects he refers to is much less than the 1200 niches within the *Chini-khana* (and also much less than the number of the items in Shah ‘Abbas’ porcelain collection, which numbered just under 1200), but possibly the upper niches were not used as they were too high or the porcelains were simply too large to fit within them. Some of the porcelains from Shah ‘Abbas’ collection at Ardabil are well published, but an idea of the



2. Detail of niches, *Chini-khana*, Ardabil, c.1607–1611 (Photo: Kazem Mokhtarnia).

porcelains acquired by the Safavid court is also given in contemporary paintings (Figure 3).

In this painting of Safavid courtiers in a garden reception from the first quarter of the seventeenth century, blue and white porcelain bowls, cups, and a vase are clearly depicted. This painting has particular resonance for this discussion as one of the individuals represented is Qarachaghay, Governor of Ardabil from 1617 to 1619, whose name is inscribed on some of the porcelains from Shah 'Abbas' imperial collection.<sup>15</sup>

As a royal commission for the display and storage of such a large group of prestigious objects, there was no doubt that the interior of Shah 'Abbas' *Chini-khana* at Ardabil would be elaborately decorated, and indeed the inserted plaster framework was painted and gilded to further beautify the interior. Kishwar Rizvi sees in the decorative repertoire employed a direct link with decoration in Safavid palaces: 'The style of the opulent renovations, comprising gilt and rich hues of red and blue, was evocative of an imperial and palatial aesthetic.'<sup>16</sup> While the functional usage of the space was the motivation for



3. *Courtiers at a Reception of Shah 'Abbas I, Iran, c.1620–25*, Painted image 12 3/16 x 7 13/16 in (31 x 19.8 cm), Walters Art Museum, W.691 (Photo: Walters Art Museum, Licensed for use under Creative Commons).



4. Interior, the Music Room, Ali Qapu, Isfahan, c.1602–1615 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

Shah ‘Abbas’ renovation of the fourteenth-century building, it resulted in the creation of an aesthetically stunning interior. This was due not only to the painting and gilding employed but also because of how the space was designed. The niches were packed together to increase the visual emphasis of, and on, display. The aesthetic effect was one of row upon row of multiple openings, of different shapes, harmoniously combined together through painting and gilding.

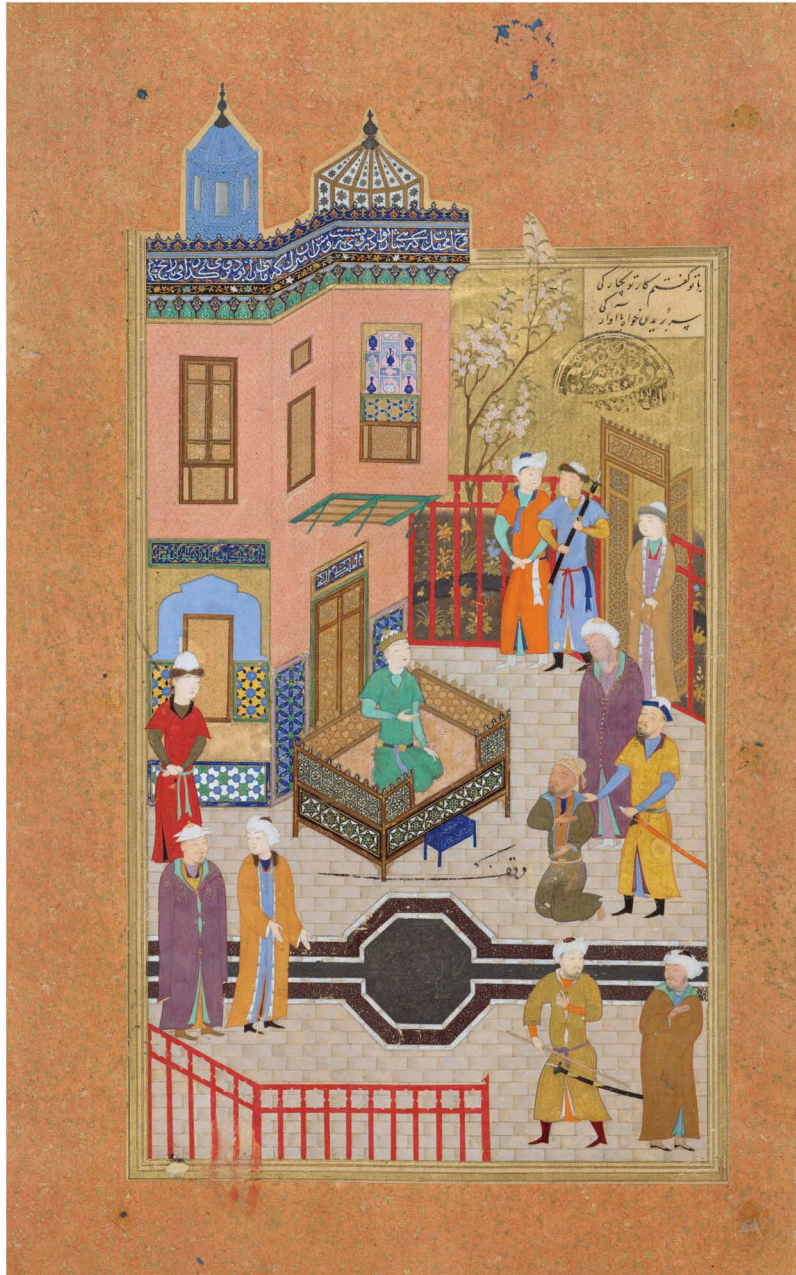
Another architectural space where *chini-khana* niches were utilised to wonderful aesthetic and functional effect is in Isfahan, in the so-called ‘Music Room’ of the Ali Qapu, the grand gateway that served as the entrance to the Charbagh avenue and the complex of royal pavilions from the Maydan-i Naqsh-i Jahan. Built by Shah ‘Abbas I during his redevelopment of Isfahan, construction on the Ali Qapu started c.1590;

the top floor, however, the location of the Music Room, dates to between 1602 and 1615.<sup>17</sup> It was, therefore, potentially built simultaneous with Ardabil’s *Chini-khana*, but if not, then certainly at a contemporary time.

In it, the four walls each have recessed arched alcoves, like at Ardabil. Large plaster muqarnas are suspended from the crown of the alcoves, and a plaster front was used to create a false surface for the recessed walls above the dado. Cut into the plaster covering the walls as well as into the different facets of the muqarnas is an elaborate series of niches, some in the form of arches but mostly in the forms of vessels including rose-water sprinklers, narrow vases, and lidded cups or jars (Figure 4). What we see here, then, is the design and placement of *chini-khana* niches as at Ardabil, albeit on a smaller scale. In contrast to Ardabil, however, the functional use of

the niches in the Music Room is debatable. It is most commonly stated that the primary reason for their creation was for acoustic effect within this small chamber, to increase the reverberation and enhance the sound of the musical performances that took place there. However, based on a reference to an imperial *Chini-khana* in Isfahan by the Safavid historian Iskandar Bayg *munshi*, Rizvi finds this debatable.<sup>18</sup> Rather, due to the similarities of design, colouring and

decorative aesthetic between the Ali Qapu's Music Room and the *Chini-khana* at Ardabil, she states that the Music Room was likely the original imperial *Chini-khana* in Isfahan.<sup>19</sup> She further adds that the acoustic quality of the niches, which has in fact been attested to, 'is an additional merit, not a programmatic architectural feature' of the space,<sup>20</sup> implying that it should not be a factor in determining the original purpose of the chamber.



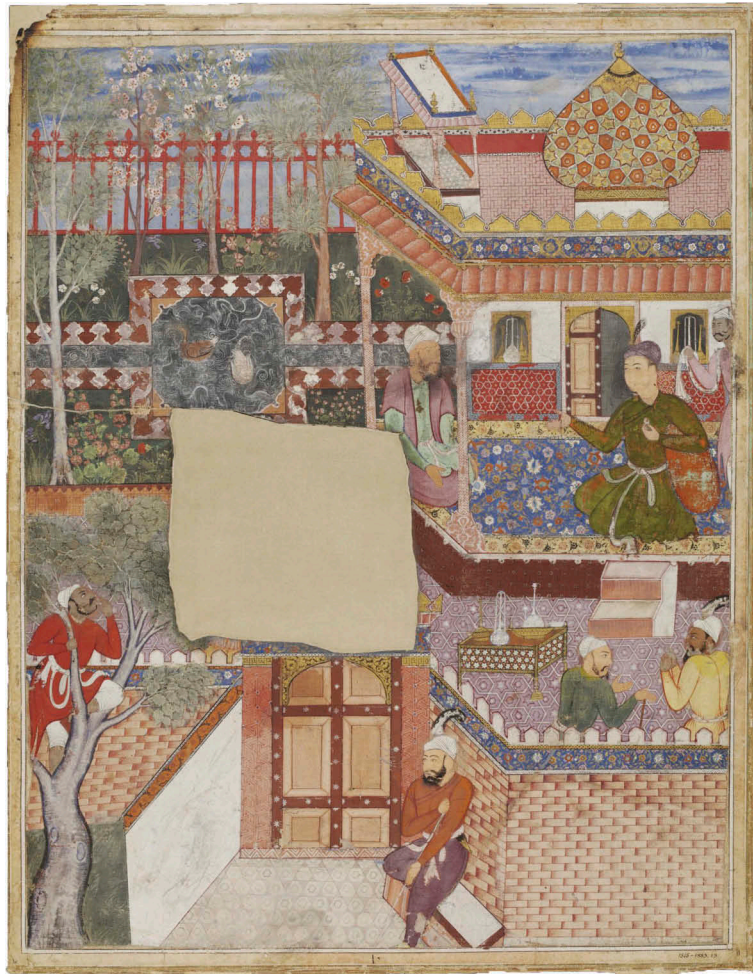
5. *The Beggar who Professed his Love for a Prince*, from a *Mantiq al-Tayr*, fol. 28r, Herat, 1487. Painted image: 8 3/8 x 4 1/2 in (21.3 x 11.4 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1963, 63.210.28 (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Licensed for use under Creative Commons).



6. *Chini-khana* panel, Jahangiri Mahal, Agra, 1565–1571 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

While the reference to an imperial *Chini-khana* in Isfahan is clear, based on the size of the Music Room and the dates of its construction, it seems unlikely that it was originally this space. There appears to be at least 600 niches created in the Ali Qapu, half the number at Ardabil, and they are also uniformly smaller than those at Ardabil. This means that the number of objects which could have been displayed here would have been limited, as Shah ‘Abbas’ extensive collection included many large objects. Furthermore, the niches created in the muqarnas facets at Ardabil remain flat and parallel to the wall, while in the Ali Qapu they follow the curvature of the muqarnas surface; this

curvature would have further limited the size of objects which could have been placed within them. These traits of the Ali Qapu niches, therefore, could indicate that this was not the space of the imperial porcelain collection. The construction dates of these structures should also be taken into consideration. The top storey of the Ali Qapu was not completed until 1615, whereas the porcelain collection of Shah ‘Abbas was moved to Ardabil in 1611. The plaster niches in the Music Room were, in essence, decorative, so likely would have been one of the final elements included, needing only to be further decorated with painting. It seems possible, therefore, to make a claim for the Music



7. In Khwaja Ashob's garden, Badi'uzzaman abandons himself to love and is overheard by the spy Kashdum, from a *Hamzanama*, Pakistan or India, c.1562–77, Painted image: 66.6 × 51.4 cm, Victoria & Albert Museum, IS.1515–1883 (Photo: the Victoria and Albert Museum).

Room being completed in the final years of the Ali Qapu's construction. If this was indeed the case, as the imperial porcelains were moved to the new *Chini-khana* in Ardabil in 1611 it would be highly unlikely that the Music Room could ever have been utilised as the imperial *Chini-khana* in Isfahan referred to by Iskandar Bayg. This is not to say that the space was never used for display, however so it cannot be completely discounted that the functional use of the niches in the Music Room paralleled those at the *Chini-khana* in Ardabil.<sup>21</sup>

Rather, it is more likely that in the Music Room we are seeing *chini-khana* niches in use as an aesthetic design choice. After all, the *Chini-khana* in Ardabil and the Music room of the Ali Qapu were under construction at similar times by the same patron, so

a visual overlap is entirely possible even if the functional purposes of the spaces differed. Indeed, Rizvi states that the *Chini-khana* was something which evolved out of a courtly environment, and as a result, it was closely linked to the princely aesthetic of early modern Iran. She also states that 'The role of the Chini Khana went beyond the housing of wares; it was itself a place of pleasure'<sup>22</sup>; this would certainly be a good summation of the *chini-khana* space in the Ali Qapu. At the top of the royal gateway, where pleasurable activities, like musical performances, took place, leading into the royal complex, it was undoubtedly a space in which the decorative designs and motifs would be intended to evoke princely splendour. Rizvi's statement also speaks to the continuation under the Safavids of the fundamental concept of the *Chini-khana* as created



8. Carved *chini-khana* panels, façade detail, Kanch Mahal, Sikandra, c.1605–25 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

by the Timurids, as a space to store and display Chinese wares.

How widespread would the construction of *Chini-khanas* have been from the mid-fifteenth into the seventeenth century, in the Timurid and Safavid empires, in order for it to become an accepted princely decorative device? It is possible that by the time Shah ‘Abbas was constructing the *Chini-khana* at Ardabil and the Music Room of the Ali Qapu in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, having such a space for the display of Chinese wares, manuscripts and other precious objects had become a common feature for the wealthy and the

elite who could afford such luxury goods in the first place. For example, it is known that earlier, during the reign of the second Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp (r.1524–76), a *Chini-khana* was built c.1560 at a palace in Na’in. Robert Hillenbrand writes that the living quarters of this palace were distributed over two floors, and that on the upper one was a room ‘with niches specially carved in pottery shapes, as at the ‘Ali Qapu.’<sup>23</sup> It is impossible to state with certainty due to the lack of surviving residential and palatial architecture from the Safavid, and, indeed, Timurid eras, but it is probable more *Chini-khanas* were created in their palaces and palace pavilions. Certainly,



9. Carved *chini-khana* panels, exterior façade, Tomb of Mariam Zamani, Sikandra, 1623–25 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

from this small number of examples it is possible to say that their creation occurred at an elite level of architecture for those who had the means to amass a collection of porcelain and desired a specific display space,<sup>24</sup> and, indeed, for those who wanted to project a courtly aesthetic. As Yuka Kadoi states, ‘What seems to be likely is that a bold idea for showcasing Chinese ceramics in the niches or walls had been already formed in the Persian world by the time of the construction of the porcelain gallery at the Ardabil shrine.’<sup>25</sup> It is therefore very possible that in the Ali Qapu, Shah ‘Abbas utilised what was, by the early seventeenth century, an established mode of architectural surface articulation, and so in the creation of

*chini-khana* niches in the Music Room we are witnessing the continued use of this decorative device, albeit one intended for a different function than that of displaying ceramics.

There is, however, something that might speak against the idea that *Chini-khanas* were a widely popular addition to elite spaces as a means of display – the evidence which can be derived from architectural spaces represented in Persian painting. When one looks through the corpus of Persian painting from the Timurid period through to the Safavid era, the time frame under discussion here, one of the hallmarks of the paintings produced



10. Detail, *chini-khana* motif, exterior façade, Mausoleum of I'timad ud-Daula, Agra, 1622–27 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

during this era was the incredible amount of detail given to architectural decoration. The exteriors and interiors represented were indicative of contemporary designs, patterns, desired aesthetics, and spaces. The incredible depictions of tile revetments, the representations of wall paintings, the minute details of interior and exterior decoration— all are elements of architectural decoration present within Persian painting from at least the middle of the fifteenth century onwards. Yet, there are so few instances of painted interiors that depict *Chini-khanas* from these periods. Those that do only feature a glimpse of a *Chini-khana* space, certainly nothing on the same scale as that which survives at Ardabil and Isfahan. Looking through numerous publications and collections of Timurid and Safavid painting, only three paintings were found which offered such a glimpse. The earliest is *The Beggar who Professed his Love for a Prince* (Figure 5), from an illustrated *Mantiq al-Tayr* made in Herat in 1487;<sup>26</sup> through a window in the upper story of the pavilion one can see a *Chini-khana* displaying

ceramic objects in nine niches. The second is the left side of the frontispiece to a *Bustan* of Sa'di, painted by Master Mirak and Bihzad, also made in Herat, dated to 1488–89;<sup>27</sup> in this painting, through a window that allows for a peek at a building interior is a display of 10 *Chini-khana* niches displaying ceramics. The final example is *Barbad plays for Khusrau*, from Shah Tahmasp's *Khamsa* of Nizami, made in Tabriz between 1539 and 1543,<sup>28</sup> in which there is just visible a building interior that shows a wall with eight niches, each with a different object placed in them, only two (or possibly three) of which are ceramic.<sup>29</sup>

When the sheer number of the many popularly illustrated literary and poetic works that featured numerous palace scenes is taken into consideration,<sup>30</sup> it seems especially surprising there are so few representations of *Chini-khanas*. This is especially true when we remember that *Chini-khanas* were linked to a princely aesthetic and emerged from the court environment. Of course, this lack of painted evidence does not conclusively mean that

*Chini-khanas* were not frequently constructed in the Timurid and Safavid eras, but it certainly could be indicative of it.

### ***Chini-khana* in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Mughal Architecture: the Desire for Form over Function**

In stark contrast to the small number of times we see *Chini-khana* as an architectural device in Safavid buildings, Mughal material culture boasts an impressive amount of examples, primarily of the motif, both in surviving structures and in painted works on paper. Through Babur's autobiography, it is clear he had knowledge of Ulugh Beg's *Chini-khana*; while there is no indication that Babur created something of the same type himself, for his descendants the notion of the *Chini-khana* clearly took hold. When in use in Mughal architecture, however, what is seen is that there is an accompanying shift in the typology and functional aspect of this feature.

The earliest surviving Mughal example is probably in the Jahangiri Mahal at the Lal Qila in Agra, built by the Mughal emperor Akbar (r.1556–1605) as the main zenana building of his palace. Constructed between 1565 and c.1571,<sup>31</sup> and therefore earlier than Shah 'Abbas' constructions but after the house in Na'in, in one of the interior chambers of the Jahangiri Mahal are two recessed wall panels that were fronted with plaster, into which *chini-khana* niches were created (Figure 6). Interesting to note is that the niches take the form of polylobed cartouches, arches, and roundels; there are none present that are in the shape of vessels, as in the later surviving Safavid examples. Also in contrast to the Safavid examples is the scale of the *chini-khana*, here restricted to two panels as opposed to covering the entire upper storey of a chamber or building. A shift in usage is thus already apparent in this instance, with *chini-khana* in Mughal palace architecture being utilised on a much smaller scale, and therefore less reflective of the literal translation of the term, 'house of china'. Instead of having the niches densely covering a room or being utilised throughout a building, they are but one part of an architectural decorative scheme.



11. Detail, *chini-khana* niche motif, exterior façade, Jahangir's mausoleum, Lahore, 1628–38 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).



12. Interior showing painted *chini-khana* motifs, Mausoleum of I'timad ud-Daula, Agra, 1622–27 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

Catherine Asher writes that the Jahangiri Mahal itself is architecturally a reflection of local, South Asian residential structures, but that certain aspects of this palace, singling out for mention the carved geometric patterns and the symmetrical layout of the plan, may have been based on Timurid precedents.<sup>32</sup> It seems evident that the use of these two *chini-khana* panels should also be included in this. Whether the niches were used in this instance for the display of Chinese ceramics is not possible to state with complete certainty, making them akin to the Ali Qapu's Music Room. However, based on numerous instances of paintings produced during Akbar's reign which illustrate filled *chini-khana* niches in palace pavilions (Figure 7), it would appear likely that objects were placed within them. In these too, the niches are not in the shape of bottles or vessels, but rather arched, mimicking the surviving Akbari example in the Jahangiri Mahal. Interestingly, in Akbari paintings, it frequently appears that the niches are built into the actual structure of the walls, which is to say as part of the masonry,<sup>33</sup> and not as carved into a plaster front as seen at Ardabil, Isfahan and the Agra Fort. Here, then, is an example of another change in the formal qualities of the *chini-khana* in Mughal architecture when compared to the Safavid ones.

It is during the reign of Jahangir, the fourth Mughal emperor (r.1605–27), that the use of *chini-khana* altered to a great extent, being utilised more frequently as a purely decorative device rather than a space that provided the function of display. On its use as a motif during his reign, Ebba Koch writes: 'The favourite motif of wall decoration, regardless of the technique, is the *chini khana* ("china room"). It consists of small blind or real niches, usually of a multi-lobed constricted shape, which contains bottles and/or flower-vases. This motif may also appear in dense configuration covering the whole surface of a wall.'<sup>34</sup> Koch's wording perfectly captures the change in the essence of the *chini-khana* when used within a Jahangiri context: a 'favourite motif of wall decoration'. Now, the niches – inscribed or real – were used primarily to create a decorative aesthetic of precious objects placed in niches without actually utilising three-dimensional niches or objects.

Indeed, this becomes a ubiquitous decorative feature of Jahangiri-era architecture, with the design being used on both interiors and exterior facades of buildings. The most common seems to be the creation of either very shallowly carved or two-dimensional *chini-khana*,



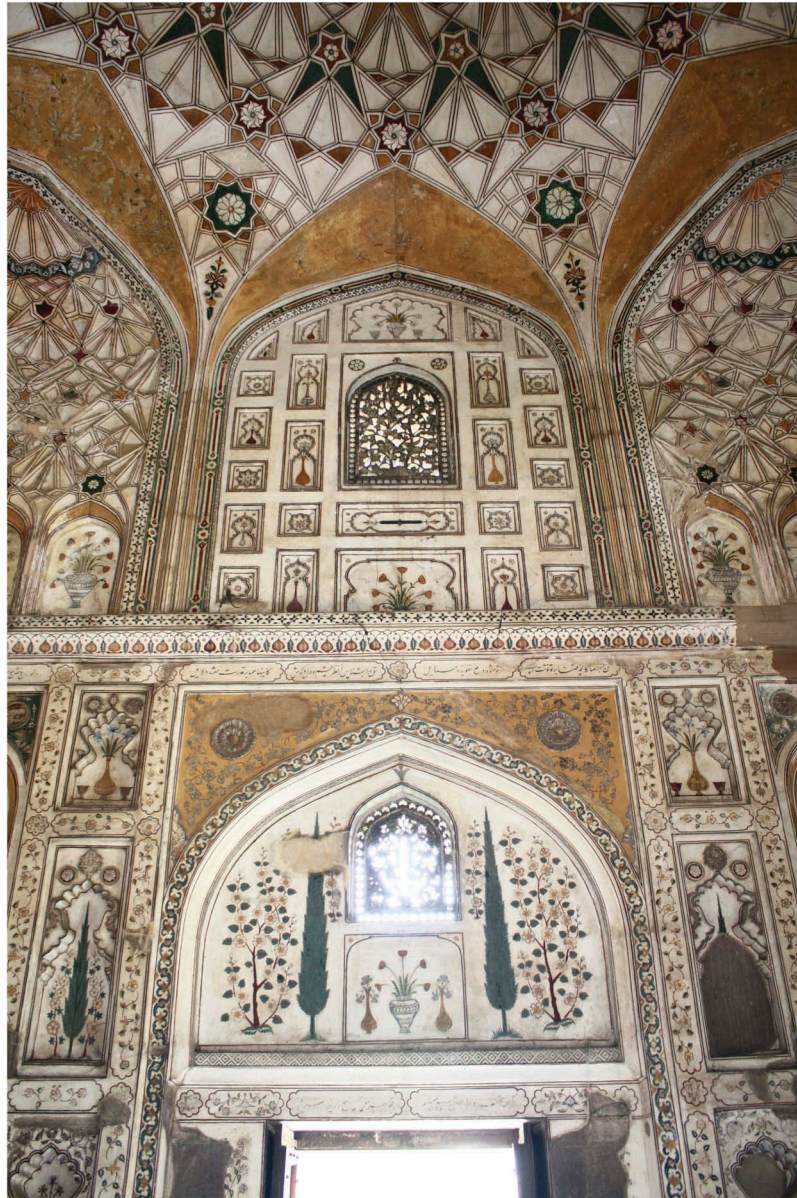
13. Interior detail showing painted *chini-khana* motifs, Jahangir's mausoleum, Lahore, 1628–38 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

creating an outline of a niche and a representation of ceramic or metal objects 'placed' within them. There are numerous surviving architectural examples of this which exist, for instance: the façade of the Kanch Mahal in Sikandra (c.1605–25), and the tombs of Mariam Zamani (1623–5, Sikandra), Sultan Nisar Begum (c.1624–5, Allahabad), I'timad ud-Daula (1622–27, Agra), and Jahangir (1628–38, Lahore), each of which was created after Shah 'Abbas' *Chini-khana* at Ardabil and the Music Room in Isfahan. On the exterior facades of the Kanch Mahal (Figure 8) and mausoleum of Mariam Zamani (Figure 9), shallowly carved, multi-lobed niches were created in rectangular panels, with vessels carved within them in shallow relief, continuing the use of the multi-lobed arch profile seen at the Jahangiri Mahal, Isfahan and Ardabil, and visualising the original function of *Chini-khana* niches.

In other instances, when employed on facades the *chini-khana* motif was inlaid, creating a completely

flat, two-dimensional version of the design, as seen on the tombs of I'timad ud-Daula (Figure 10) and Jahangir (Figure 11). Many painted versions of the same *chini-khana* scheme also exist, including on the interior of both these mausoleums (Figures 12, 13), and on the interior of the tomb of Sultan Nisar Begum, where the vessels were painted onto shallowly carved niches (Figure 14). These are just a few representative examples of the many instances of these types of purely aesthetic designs in use on and in architecture during Jahangir's reign that mimic the placement of three-dimensional objects into niches.

Interestingly, from paintings, it appears that during Akbar's reign the *chini-khana* motif was also used as a two-dimensional decorative device. In a painting from the last years of Akbar's reign, there are two distinctly different types of niches created in the pavilions represented (Figure 15). In the interior of

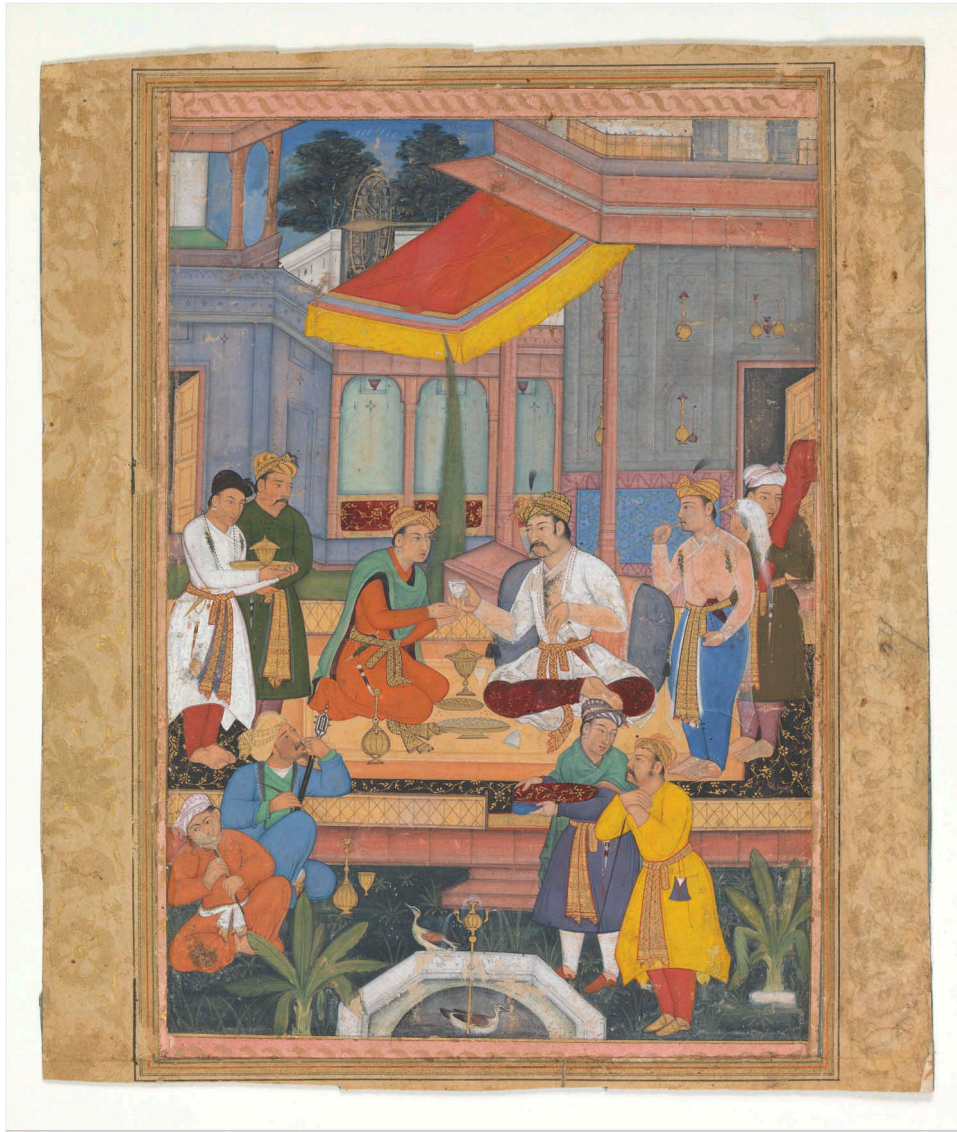


14. Interior showing inscribed *chini-khana* niches with painted vessels within them, Tomb of Sultan Nisar Begum, Allahabad, c.1624–25 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

the pavilion directly behind the heads of the two protagonists in the centre of the party, three niches built into the wall are visible, each containing a cup. That the niches are part of the masonry is evident in how the artist has depicted the recession of the niches into the wall. Conversely, on the grey walls of the pavilion to the right of the scene, gold and maroon vessels appear painted or carved onto the surface. The emphatic recession of the other niches is very much absent here.

In use as both two- and three-dimensional forms, the clear root of the *chini-khana* motif as a design

scheme, used to articulate wide swathes of walls and façade surfaces during Jahangir’s reign, was the original, functional nature of the three-dimensional niches of *Chini-khanas*. The aestheticisation that was alluded to in the Safavid Music Room in the Ali Qapu is here unapologetically utilised, emphasising the decorative qualities of, lest it be forgotten, an architectural scheme that had its roots in princely, courtly architecture. It is very feasible, therefore, that having the two-dimensional *chini-khana* motif as such a popular design element – particularly in buildings associated with the royal family, as all the



15. *Interior of a Courtyard with Figures*, India, early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Painted image 5 5/8 x 8 1/4 in, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1908, 08.124.2 MET (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Licensed for use under Creative Commons).

surviving examples given above are – created an immediate link with princely, courtly patrons.

On the use of *chini-khana* niches in palace architecture constructed by Jahangir, as most of the structures he built at the Imperial forts were later pulled down and rebuilt by his son and successor Shah Jahan (r.1628–58), there are no surviving examples from his reign that indicate he may have employed this decorative device in those locations. Painted evidence, however, indicates that the design scheme was in use, although it is at times more ambiguous if what is being represented are two- or three-dimensional *chini-khana*. For example, in a detail of a painting of Prince Khurram being weighed on his birthday (Figure 16), the palace pavilion which the

weighing is taking place in front of is depicted as having multiple niches covering the façade of its exterior wall, each of which contains many objects of porcelain and ceramic ware, including small statuettes of Chinese figures. The inclusion of the latter is most interesting as it indicates such Chinese statuettes were present at the Mughal court, not just the popular blue and white wares.

The first impression in this painting is that the niches represented are real and that actual porcelains and precious objects are placed within them. This is supported by the darker shading of the ground within the niches, creating an effect of shadow and recession of space behind the objects. It is also possible, however, that a creation of a two-dimensional *chini-*



16. Detail, *Jahangir weighing prince Khurram against gold and silver*, from a *Jahangirnama*, Mughal South Asia, c.1615, Painted image: 30 × 19.6 cm, British Museum, London, 1948,10090.69 (Photo: British Museum, Licenced for use under Creative Commons).

*khana* motif is represented. The niches and objects within them are portrayed on the exterior walls of the pavilion, akin to surviving Jahangiri buildings like those noted above that employed two-dimensional *chini-khana* designs. In addition, on the palace architecture of Jahangir which does survive, like the buildings of the Jahangiri Quadrangle in the Lahore Fort, inscribed panels articulate the exterior of the structures, not deep niches. Secondly, if the niches contained real objects, they would have been open to the elements and at a high risk of damage due to the precarious nature in which they have been placed. Many of the niches contain a variety of objects that have been stacked atop one another. In reality, such a placement of precious porcelains and

Chinese ware would be unstable and have a great chance of falling over. Most relevant, though, is that the multi-stacked nature of these depictions has a direct visual corollary with painted decoration in architecture associated with Jahangir's reign, such as, for example, at his tomb (Figure 17).

Of three-dimensional *chini-khana* niche motifs, there are some examples produced during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan; their function has, however, changed, no longer being utilised even for the illusion of display. Not only the function, but the means of production was altered as well. In the examples discussed below, the *chini-khana* niches are actually built into the fabric of the structure and faced with a permanent material, either



17. Detail, stacked motif, interior chamber, Jahangir's mausoleum, Lahore, 1628–38 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

stone or marble. From Jahangir's reign, one such example is at the Shalimar Bagh in Srinagar, built by Prince Shah Jahan at the order of Jahangir between 1620 and 1634. Here, the two rows of niches created in a *chini-khana* design scheme were built into a drop of the water channel in this terraced garden (Figure 18). At night, glass oil lamps were placed into these niches in order to beautify the effect of the water dropping from one level of the channel to the next. The lamps would not actually be seen, removing any 'display' effect of these niches. Instead, the flicker of the lamps' flames would be seen behind the cascading water. This was repeated in Shah Jahan's reign, in

a multiplied fashion, when he ordered the construction of another Shalimar Gardens in Lahore (1641–3). In that configuration, 204 niches were created to line the tank that formed part of the drop between the middle and lower terraces (Figure 19). While those arranged on the tank's wall that the water would fall over were specifically used for the placement of lamps, the other two side walls utilised the *chini-khana* niche motif purely for the aesthetic effect. These two garden settings indicate that while the formal features of the *Chini-khana* – niches for the placement of an object- has continued in Mughal architecture, in this instance for glass lamps, the original functional usage, as



18. *Chini-khana* niches in a terrace-drop, Shalimar Gardens, Srinagar, 1620–34 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

a place for the display of porcelain and other precious objects, has dissipated.

The use of *chini-khana* niches is more ambiguous in a pavilion like the Shah Burj of Agra Fort, built by Shah Jahan between 1628 and 1637. Here, both the interior chambers of the structure and the exterior facades were fitted with multiple rows of very shallow niches above the dado level (Figure 20). In this instance, were the niches – or at least some of them – used for the display of precious luxury goods? Or for the placement of lamps? Or both? Or were they included merely as a decorative scheme, which continued to be a popular use for the *chini-khana* motif during Shah Jahan's reign in many of his architectural commissions, whether religious, secular, funerary or residential. An inscribed niche, with nothing depicted within it, became one of the common means of decoratively articulating the walls and facades of his architecture. Take, for example, the iconic Taj Mahal complex. Within each arched recess of the mausoleum's exterior (Figure 21), and in and on the subsidiary structures (Figure 22), the surfaces are covered with panels within which a niche has

been inscribed. The extensive use of this decorative feature on Shah Jahani architecture stresses the fact that within a Mughal context, the *chini-khana* motif had by this time become a standard mode of imperial and courtly architectural decoration. While the term *chini-khana* was used as a descriptor, it was now far removed from the Timurid and Safavid *Chini-khanas* built to display porcelain.<sup>35</sup>

#### Persianate *Chini-khana*: Function, Form and Aesthetic

'The *chinikhana* – the visual manifestation of Persia's reception and appreciation of Chinese ceramics ...'<sup>36</sup> was, for the Timurids and Safavids, one of the means through which they visually expressed their princely quality and sovereignty. This was true also for the Mughals, even though their creation and employment of *chini-khana* was different. Speaking specifically on the Safavids and how the built space of *Chini-khanas* were one of their visual cues signifying their sovereignty, Rizvi draws attention to



19. *Chini-khana* niches in a terrace-drop, Shalimar Gardens, Lahore, 1641–3 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

the Mughals use of the *chini-khana* as a design scheme. While making no comment on the wide gulf between the Safavid constructions with three-dimensional niches for displaying porcelains and the two-dimensional-inscribed niches used as façade articulation for the Mughals, she recognises that ‘The imperial symbols of the Safavid and Mughal rulers point to the cultural markers of both dynasties, as mediated through their shared Timurid heritage.’<sup>37</sup> This shared Persianate, specifically Timurid, heritage meant that the cultural milieu of the Mughal and Safavid courts, however much they diverged in some ways, had commonalities. Reasons for variations in such commonalities are many, and in the context of this discussion, with their respective creations and employment of *chini-khana*, there are several which could account for this. While the Timurid and Safavid elite clearly created *Chini-khanas* as dedicated structures for the display and storage of porcelains, celadons, and other Chinese ceramics and precious objects, the Mughal emperors did not deem it necessary.

Like the Safavid shahs, the Mughal rulers collected, and were gifted, porcelains, jades, celadons and other

precious objects; they, however, likely stored them in the treasuries within their palaces. The desire for permanent display that took precedence in Ardabil, for example, was not a priority for the Mughal rulers. Possibly this was a matter of regional preference and aesthetic desire. For the Mughals, the surface decoration of their buildings relied on the use of sandstone and marble panels which were used to face brick cores. These panels were further enhanced by varying means, including different types of stone inlay and/or carving. In addition, building interiors, even when open to the elements, relied heavily on this type of panelling, but also included fresco painting and, at times, tilework. The use of *chini-khana* as part of the decorative repertoire became incorporated into these decoration types. It was a way of enhancing surface decoration that drew on a method of surface articulation which had clear links to a princely aesthetic in the Persianate world, and, further, one which was reflective of the Timurid legacy on which the Mughals placed so much value.

The Safavids, on the other hand, used tilework extensively to decorate the exterior facades of their buildings. Possibly this aesthetic, one of ceramic decoration, which was already very popular and



20. Vestibule, Shah Burj, Lal Qila, Agra, 1628–37 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

vastly appreciated, naturally led to the idea that ceramic objects could be displayed as a means of internal decoration as well. Returning to the description of Ulugh Beg's *Chini-khana*, the tiles of the dado which were supposedly brought from China could have been combined with the display of three-dimensional objects in the space. Because their buildings were decorated with tiles, the Safavids did not need to search for an alternate means to enhance the exterior aesthetic of their buildings. For them, the *Chini-khana* was primarily a functional space that served to denote their princely quality by displaying their acquired luxury pieces.

What appears to have occurred within the Mughal and Safavid realms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a parallel – but different – awareness and understanding of how the original concept of the Timurid *Chini-khana* could be utilised. For both dynasties' rulers, there seems to have been a recognition that the design scheme of multitudes of niches which either evoked, or actually served as, a space for displaying precious Chinese ceramic wares was one which represented a Timurid

legacy, princely space and, indeed, royal practices of collecting. In Mughal architecture, particularly during the reign of Jahangir, the idea and conceptual use of *chini khana* changed, being employed primarily as a means of two-dimensional decoration that continued to evoke the original Timurid *Chini-khana's* function and symbolic importance.<sup>38</sup> The continued use of the *chini-khana* niches as a stand-alone decorative motif, now mostly inscribed on to buildings as blind niches, continued to be seen in Shah Jahan's reign and after.

### Conclusion

The parallel nature of the creation of *C/chini-khana* in Safavid and Mughal structures was at its most direct in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. It must be remembered that the construction of Shah 'Abbas' *Chini-khana* and the Music Room of the Ali Qapu took place in the first 10 years of Jahangir's reign, and that Jahangir was simultaneously utilising a two-dimensional *chini-khana*



21. Inscribed *chini-khana* niche motif, exterior façade, Taj Mahal, Agra, 1632–36 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

design scheme in his architecture that, it should be stressed, included the portrayal of ceramic wares and vessels. In formal qualities, however, the Mughal monument that is the most like these Safavid examples is the earlier Akbari-era Jahangiri Mahal. Whereas a direct corollary can be made in form and, most likely, function in its creation, when compared with Shah ‘Abbas’ commissions, under Jahangir a new concept of how the *chini-khana* niches as a motif could be used is seen, corresponding to a difference in form that began to be more popularly employed. The original three-

dimensional nature of *chini-khana* niches did also continue in seventeenth-century Mughal architecture, but now with a different function. Throughout, however, the aesthetic quality and symbolic association of *chini-khana* continued, as a representation of princely aesthetic and the accompanying associations of royal architectural space and power.

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



22. Mihrab and surrounding wall showing inscribed *chini-khana* motif, Mosque, Taj Mahal Complex, Agra, 1632–43 (Photo: Mehreen Chida-Razvi).

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#### NOTES

1. Ulugh Beg was one of Timur's grandsons. He served as Governor of Samarqand between 1407 and 1447 before briefly reigning as the fourth Timurid ruler from 1447 to 1449.
2. Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, ed. Wheeler Thackston (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 86. In Beveridge's

- earlier translation, it is written: 'In the same garden he also built a four-doored hall, known as the Chīnī-khāna (Porcelain House) because its *īzāra* are all of porcelain; he sent to China for the porcelain used in it (*sic.*).' Zahirud-Din Muhammad Babur Badshah Ghaznavi, *Babur-Nama*, ed. Annette S. Beveridge (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2008), p. 80.
3. M. Medley, 'Ardabil; iv. Ardabil Collection of Chinese Porcelain', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (December 15, 1986; last updated August 11, 2011); <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ardabil#pt4> (accessed 21 April 2019).
  4. Lisa Golombek published a tile meant to be from Ulugh Beg's *Chini-khana* pavilion in Lisa Golombek, 'The *Paysage* as Funerary Imagery in the Timurid Period,' *Muqarnas*, 10, 1993, p. 249, fig. 12.
  5. Bernard O'Kane, *Timurid Architecture in Khurasan* (Costa Meza: Mazda, 1987), p. 12; Kishwar Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine: Architecture, Religion and Power in Early Modern Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p.149. O'Kane shares the anecdote from a Safavid historian who writes that a cat found its way into this *Chini-khana*, and after jumping up dislodged some of the porcelain from the niches in which it was on display.
  6. Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, p. 149.
  7. A. H. Morton, 'The Ardabil Shrine in the Reign of Shah Tahmasp I', *Iran*, vol. 12 (1974), p. 56.
  8. M.E. Weaver, 'Ardabil; iii. Monuments of Ardabil', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (December 15, 1986; last updated August 11, 2011); <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ardabil#pt3> (accessed 1 May 2019).
  9. Morton, 'The Ardabil Shrine in the Reign of Shah Tahmasp I', p. 56. The structure of the building therefore dates to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (p. 57). The current decorative plasterwork is largely the result of 20<sup>th</sup> century restoration.
  10. Executive Summary, Nomination of Properties for Inclusion on The World Heritage List (UNESCO), *Sheikh Safi al-Din Khanegah and Shrine Ensemble I Ardabil* (Tehran: Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organisation, 2009), p. 39; <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1345.pdf> (accessed 21 April 2019). The *Chini khana* is 165 square meters in area.
  11. The niches created in the shape of vessels and pottery pieces are termed *Tong-Bori*. Executive Summary, *Sheikh Safi al-Din Khanegah and Shrine Ensemble*, p. 25.
  12. Executive Summary, *Sheikh Safi al-Din Khanegah and Shrine Ensemble I Ardabil*, p. 179.
  13. Christopher Werner, 'Olearius, Adam', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* April 7, 2008; <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/olearius-adam> (accessed 21 April 2019). The mission took place between 1635 and 1639, and Ardabil was one of the first cities they spent time in.
  14. Adam Olearius, cited in Executive Summary, *Sheikh Safi al-Din Khanegah and Shrine Ensemble*, p. 180; Sussan Babaie and Robert Haug, 'Isfahan x. Monuments (2) Palaces', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/isfahan-x2-palaces> (accessed 21 April 2019); Yuka Kadoi, 'From Acquisition to Display: the Reception of Chinese Ceramics in the Pre-modern Persian World', in *Persian Art: Image-Making in Eurasia*, ed. Yuka Kadoi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 69.
  15. Stacey Pierson, 'The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History', *Journal of World History*, 23, 1, 2012, p. 37; The Walters Art Museum, W691 (<https://art.thewalters.org/detail/17731/single-leaf-of-courtiers-at-a-reception-of-shah-abbas-i-2/> [accessed 1 May 2019]).
  16. Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, pp. 14-15.
  17. P. P. Soucek, "'Ālī Qāpū," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, I/8, pp. 871-872, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ali-qapu-a-five-storied-building-overlooking-the-maydan-e-sah-of-isfahan> (accessed on 21 April 2019).
  18. Before moving his imperial porcelain collection to his new *Chini-Khana* in Ardabil, it is said that the objects were stored in the imperial *Chini-khana* in Isfahan. See Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, p. 143.
  19. Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, p. 153.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 237, n. 67.
  21. Kadoi, 'From Acquisition to Display', p. 70, also thinks it unlikely that the *chini-khana* niches of the Ali Qapu were used for the storage of ceramics.
  22. Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, p. 155.
  23. Robert Hillenbrand, 'Safavid Architecture', in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 6, ed. Peter Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 773.
  24. Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, p. 149.
  25. Kadoi, 'From Acquisition to Display', p. 70.
  26. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 63.210.28 (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451729> [accessed 1 April, 2019]); Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), p. 174.

27. National Egyptian Library, Cairo. Adab Farsi 908, fol.2r; Flood, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam*, p. 22, detail on p. 194.
28. British Library, Or. 2265, fol. 77v ([http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=or\\_2265\\_f36v#](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=or_2265_f36v#)), fol. 77v [accessed 1 April 2019]); Eleanor Sims and Boris Marshak, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 313.
29. After finding these images, I was very pleased to see my count of only three representations of *Chini-khanas* confirmed by Rizvi and Kadoi. See Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, who references the MET *Mantiq al-Tayr* and Cairo *Bustan* paintings (p. 150-1); and Kadoi, 'From Acquisition to Display', who references the Cairo *Bustan* painting (p. 65) and Shah Tahmasp's *Khamsa* painting in the British Library (p. 67).
30. For example, within the *Shahnama*, or Nizami's *Khamsa*, and Jami's *Haft Paykar*. The Safavid *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp, for instance, contains an astounding number of illustrated architectural interiors, none of which feature *Chini-khana*; nor does the Timurid *Shahnama* of Muhammad Juki, albeit the number of interiors in that manuscript are fewer. See Sheila Canby, *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014); Barbara Brend, *Muhammad Juki's Shahnamah of Firdausi* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 2010).
31. Catherine Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 47.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
33. This is easier to determine in the painting *Akbar fights with Man Singh*, left half of a double page composition, by Dawlat, from an *Akbarnama*, c.1600-03, in the Chester Beatty Library (CBL In 03.169); Elaine Wright, *Muraqqa: Imperial Mughal Albums from the Chester Beatty Library Dublin* (Alexandria: Art Services International, 2008), p. 256.
34. Ebba Koch, *Mughal Architecture: An Outline of its History and Development, 1526-1858* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 70.
35. It should be noted that this use of panels with inscribed niches that remained 'empty' was something that began to be used in the architecture of Jahangir's reign with some frequency. This also indicates that by the time of their abundant usage in Shah Jahan's reign, *chini-khana* had become an accepted decorative device, and no longer was an indicator of its original function.
36. Kadoi, 'From Acquisition to Display', p. 73.
37. Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine*, p. 150.
38. Asher comments upon the frequent use of images of wine vessels depicted in the *chini-khana* decoration of Jahangir's reign, noting that they were not depicted during Akbar's. Speaking of the inscribed, inlaid or carved decoration used on buildings, her interpretation is that the inclusion of such imagery was meant to be symbolic of mystical elements of Persian poetry and reminiscent of paradise. See Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, pp. 132, 148. Examining the use of this motif in Jahangiri architecture in isolation surely makes this a possible interpretation, especially when such imagery is seen on structures associated with funerary complexes. However, when examined within the wider usage of *chini-khana* in Persianate architecture, the evocation and remembrance of the first, royal Timurid *Chini-khana* and its functional purpose, as a space for the storage and display of porcelain and other wares, are more pertinent reasons for these inclusions.