

Distinctive Features of Zekate House Decoration-Gjirokastra



Arts and Culture

Keywords: decoration, technique, motive [designs and themes], house, painting, composition, artistic value, carving.

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Abstract

The decoration described by this study displays the artistic reality expressions of the 19th century, delivered with mastery and fairness in the interior of the renowned Zekate House of Gjirokastra. Regarded as one of the most typical examples of Gjirokastra decoration, the study aims to display the developments of this artistic genre over a certain period of time, to give an overview of the overall ornamental values, unfold its particular details and to elaborate on the composition of the basic elements permeating the composition of motives and traditional symbols. The subject matter will be covered both in the introduction section as well as in sections and subsections. The first section deals with the decorative features of the façade. It covers the relationship of the architectural element and the ornamental aspect of the façade. The second section elaborates on decoration of the house interiors, including sub-sections such as Oda e Miqve (the chamber/guestroom), murals, the ornamental fireplace, paintings on wood and the ceilings. In this arrangement, we encounter styles and techniques like: murals and paintings on wood, wood and stone carving. The traditional floral and geometric motives have been used extensively by these techniques and handled in conformity with their features. Decoration is revealed by the hierarchical rank of the rooms, where Oda e Miqve (the chamber) displays the most artistic prominence. The welcoming areas reflect the social class and affluence of the family. Decorations of this House are the mere reflection of its most prosperous times. The study, discussion and propagation of these values are all contributing towards the conservation of cultural traditions.

1. Introduction

Of all the outstanding examples of ornamental conservation in existing and old Gjirokastra houses, the Zekate House holds a special place and is renowned for its characteristic features. The house is situated in "Palorto" residential area at a pretty distinct location by comparison with other dwellings.

The Zekate House was built in 1811 – 1812, and it is the most typical representative of Gjirokastra residences²¹. It can undoubtedly be considered as one of the most notable achievements in Gjirokastra's residential construction of the classical period (1800-1830)²². In addition to its architectural values, the House conserves the artistic values of decoration to a good extent. The house is renowned for its monumental character and the original decorative elements which exhibit clear artistic developments and outstanding local features (Figure 1 a).

This study intends to elaborate on the distinctive features of the house's decoration in general by its main genres: mural painting, wooden artwork by painting, wood and stone carving techniques, by determining the position of each and the connection between house architecture and its decoration. The decorations of the living areas are gradual and by their function, ranging from the simple decorative element to the comprehensive artistic concentration.

Various techniques can be observed, principally at the interior while the outdoors artistic techniques tend to be limited. They can present in aesthetic and artistic forms, in bold graphic tonality, faded away in part due to atmospheric agents. Restoration work has had an impact onto their enhanced sustainability and longevity.

²¹ Riza, E. "Qyteti – Muze i Gjirokastrës", ["Gjirokastra Town Museum"], Toena Publications, 2004, Tiranë, pg. 302.

²² Riza, E. Arkitektura dhe restaurimi i banesës së Zekatëve – Gjirokastrë, "Architecture and restoration of Zekate House – Gjirokastra, "Monuments", Tirana, 53/2015, pg. 103.

2. Decorative characteristics of the house's exterior façade

Different techniques have been applied for decorating the Zekate House, with the intent to concord with the architecture, its interior and exterior areas. The balanced ratio of architectural design and ornamental elements is well thought out and well applied by experienced artisans. The intervention with decorative elements significantly improves the architecture and adds artistic and aesthetic value to this construction.



Figure 1. a) The Zekate House b) Wooden window fence railings c) Engraved stone designs

The House is supplemented with architectural elements in its façade; round arches, pillars, stairs, doors and windows in stone relief arches. They express architectural value which, at the same time, adds to the house's aesthetic value. The archway embraces windows of various sizes and complements the outer stone walls of the façade. Their symmetric distribution and location generates an aesthetic view which concurrently works as a source of ornamental value. Stone, as a decorative element, is set above the entrance door at the archway-pillar system. The three-centred framework consists of stone plates and voussoirs forming a jagged appearance which repeats at regular intervals in a two-row shape which resembles chains.

In the exterior, timber is mostly used in windows, for *testekë* (wood frame support under the roof connecting the roof and windows) and at the fences, having a widespread use in some of its functions. Whilst the *testekë* are adorned at their corners with sharp geometric shapes, they create ornamental effects and, at the same time, enhance sustainability of the wooden material, which is, in this case, the load bearer for the shelter and roof. Wood, as an important element in construction and décor, can be seen in the window frames, serving both to protect and add an aesthetic element to the outlines of window fences. (Figure 1b). Concurrently, the intertwining and combination of wood and stone in the façade represents an ornamental display as part of the overall peculiar, yet appealing, graphic composition. The ornamental element of the outer walls can be simple and geometric shapes and by variation. Geometric shapes such as rectangles of different formats, small prismatic dimensions, quadrants, single or parallel lines (*as we might conceive in testekë and çardak (a garret, usually outside the perimeter walls, consisting of many windows; a living area where people stay to freshen up)*), archways and angles that complement the overall façade of the house.

Important ornamental elements can be found at the stone archway of the main gate. Their composition relates to the general public mentality regarding beliefs on phenomena and items/ omens which bring good luck or bad luck²³. According to these superstitions, the motives, symbols and their meanings would have to be lifeguarding and would bring prosperity to the masonry. The carved elements are the traditional and universal symbols and motives, such as: the sun, the star, plants, cypress tree, etc. (Figure 1c). The exterior includes parts of the overall decoration on plaster and stone surface, rectangular windows or arched windows of various sizes, arched porches, stone frames which separate the lower and upper floor, and the vertical support-archway-arch vault system. All these components come to generate an entirety of graphical shapes of aesthetic setting,

²³ Tirta, M, "Mitologjia ndër shqiptarë", ["Mythology of Albanians"] "Mësonjëtorja" Publishing House, Tirana, 2004, pg. 53

altogether in symmetry with one another within the format of the façade by developing from the ground floor to the higher ones.

Timber (wood) is widely used both indoors and outdoors. We, however, only find the painting of walls in the interior of the house. We cannot rule out the probability of the presence of mural paintings in the façade. Floral designs are present in facades of other similar buildings. The intensity of artistic representation in the interior, family social status, the damages and restoration of the building during the ages tend to generate thoughts on such possibility.



Figure 2. a) *Qoshku* b) Mural painting c) Rear part of *oda* chamber

3. Development of interior decoration

The Zekate House has numerous rooms and areas, decorated with taste according to the importance and functions they had. The most striking area is undeniably the “**Oda e Miqve**” (the Chamber/ guest room). It has the most ornamental weight, consisting of the central part and *qoshku*. The biggest space has been awarded to the central part, which includes the largest ornamental ceiling, painterly compositions, ornamental fireplace and *musandër-dhipato* (vaulted storeroom) areas. *Qoshku* (the open central gallery and principal area of the chamber) includes two juxtaposed ornamental ceilings, high windows and porthole windows of painterly themes. The Chamber was the area where the family held various occasions and family rituals i.e. weddings, anniversaries, various receptions and funerals processions. This is the area which attracted most attention and was devoted special care by its owners. This room radiates wellbeing, lifestyle, economic power and the status and aesthetic taste of its family members.

This area, through its splendour and decorations, represents the highest achievements of Gjirokastra house decor. (Figure 2 a, b, c). As in other areas, we face here a peculiar presentation of intense and unique décor of great artistic standards. This room has a wide and luminous area; its decorations stretch out across the room, a cultural intercourse between mastery and genuine creations, folk motives transmitted generation by generation. Decorations of such content are renowned for harmonious arrangements and balanced ratio of wood carving and painting, with painterly wall designs. All four sides and ceilings of the chamber is the groundwork for decoration to be built around it. Ornaments and their characteristic features are applied in mural paintings, ceilings, doors, fireplace, and *musandër* [a large holdall storage area for bedding and other items] and *dhipato* [women’s quarter, a step-ladder facing the divan through a fenced window]

The mural painting. This decoration has only been applied in the reception area. The decoration is executed in the *secco* method, a technique of colouring work subjected directly on the wall surface. Unlike fresco which is executed upon wet plaster, *al secco* method is only executed on dry plaster surfaces. Before

initializing the work, they had to ensure that the wall surface was suitable in terms of levelling (lean) and purity, and then covered with wet lime mixed with white stone dust or powder and painted with a number of layers. This mixture became more robust and, after the coating, the whitewashed dry wall background was ready for the mural.



Figure 3. A mural of the oda

The mural paintings are situated round the room at the upper half of the chamber walls, between *Sergjeni* (the ledge) and the ceiling. The prismatic fireplace in coloured pattern is situated in the northern part of the room. Opposite it, there are eight fully preserved pictorial compositions which are equally separated. Each part is a separate composition, its themes and design patterns do not have the same nature of repetition. Compositions border down with *Sergjen* (the ledge), with *dhipato* on its left, *qoshk* on its right hand side whereas the floral theme mural is above them running in parallel with the composition. This band, on its upper part, borders with the ornamental ceiling and through the three main sides of the chamber walls, starting at one side of the *dhipato* and ending on the other. Figuratively, the band represents the element which adds value to the compositions and better highlights its design (Figure 3). All parts of the coloured designs retain this linear base attached to the ledge. Above it, they have an arched shape in light blue silhouette. Arched silhouettes are joined with one-another at the ledge, thus creating the image of pillars. The space between pictorial patterns is joined with *çardak* archways. The blue pillars are surrounded by two ochre lines marking the separation of these two themes. The pillared shape is uniformly used in all areas of the Zekate House. They are also present in its architecture.

The overall composition of the mural painting was thought out to be an integral part of the chamber's ornamental aspect, unified with works on carving and wood painting. Coloristic harmony and the preserved ratio of correctness and proportionality reveal a highly technic and artistic standard of the artisan. The motives of this composition are mainly floral and fruit, leaves and ivy of various shapes (Figure 4 *a* and *c*). Designs are not repetitive, despite the densely used shapes i.e. apple, pomegranate, pear, peach, various flowers. Inside each pattern, the master skilfully manipulates with colour, creates visual artistic forms by introducing dynamic motives.

The mural at the Chamber has a huge artistic density. It stands out because of its free hand technique and striking style of decoration. Motives are characteristic in their coloration, dynamic composition, freely designed detailed patterns and the repetition of design clusters. Other groups of motives of different shapes combined in the upper band of painterly compositions, form groups of ivy and floral themes (Figure 3). Located, respectively, in stretched rectangles, their appearance complements the overall decoration structure of the chamber. Skilful technical work by brushstroke has produced bright and fresh colours. They are characteristic for their colour match and for the balance between warm and cold colours.

We notice colours like: ochre, red, pink, blue, burgundy, green, dark green, deep blue, etc.



Figure 4. a) The murals b) The ornamental fireplace c) Fruit theme designs

Mural paintings attest to the quality work of talented artisans who were successful in generating high artistic value in significant local folk features. The mural of the Zekate House chamber is representative to one of the best examples and an example of coloured decoration of Gjirokastra houses, whereby the leading decoration techniques marry up with artistic mastery. We encounter here the principal decoration features of the first period of the 19th century. The combination of artistic forms of carving and painting is one of the main features of ornamental compositions in this house, which makes it both special and unique.

The decoration is famous for the abundant diversity of motives and artistic values they retain. We observe various work patterns in murals, which can be a result of teamwork or individual rework of subsequent periods. These interventions appear to be modifications which aimed to freshen up the murals. This can be noticed in the ratio between colours and the technical application of the designs. Nonetheless, there is an organic continuity of composition amid the ornamental composition clusters painted in the central section of the Chamber.

The decoration of walls with pictorial decoration is a mastery possessed early in the days in Albania. The earliest days of this skill can be traced as far back as to the Middle Ages. Artisans working in towns and religious constructions shaped a rich tradition in this field. In dwellings, this artistic tradition presents accentuated rational features, notably diverging from the religious trend of murals of religious nature. This tradition was tailored according to the lifestyle and the new requirements of the period. Painters of murals in residential areas brought a new spirit, nothing to do with the religious spirit. Their work mostly revolves around elements of everyday life. The interiors would include floral and fruit themes while the façade would even reproduce hunting scenes, birds, animals and silhouettes of human beings in folk costumes, as we can witness in Kikino and Bakiri houses. Coloured decorations in residential homes are artistic occurrences arising during the 18th century and they arrive at their peak in the first half of the 19th century.

The non-functional *ornamental fireplace* is a prism-shaped chimney located in the central part of the northern wall of the chamber. This is the object which connects the elements of the pictorial decoration of the northern wall with the ornamental ceiling. The centrepiece of the semi prismatic shape is located below the *Sergjen* (the ledge). Both sides of the base include a functional *kamare* (niche) with painted motives. The remainder part of the fireplace is at ledge height, with complex voluminous shapes. The half-crown of plastic shape and expressive movement is evident. The ornamental action is executed in stucco relief method and colouring (Figure 4 b). The crown includes painted ornamental ivy leaf and sickle-shaped elements.

The top part of the fireplace is between these decorations and includes various semi conical and semi spherical figures. At the top, we have the half dome of five areas, within which we observe painting with floral motives. In the framework of the recognized national traditions, there are particularly typical elements which have been executed here which are a personal property of the town's ornamental compositions²⁴

Wood art (Painting on wood) represents the period of the most distinguished artistic accomplishments of Gjirokastra house décor relating to the first few decades of the 19th century. In the 18th and 19th century, artistic woodwork had had high achievements, nearly all across Albania²⁵. The *Oda* (chamber) of this residence has acquired the layout of a premise fully with comprehensive artistic weight, a representative of high values of some traditional decoration techniques, and close to the characteristics of Baroque art. The coexistence of carving and painting onto the same base is an artistic combination of high demands, rarely encountered in residential homes.

In Zekate house, we find this blend of techniques in all the wood art in the chamber: in the ceilings, on the wall-mounted cabinets, on doors and windows, *musandër* or *sergjen*. The physical condition of the painting in the two ornamental ceilings is of two different settings. The mastery or painting on wood artistry represents a qualitative achievement in the construction and painting of floral and botanical themes. In wood paintings, the shapes of floral motives are simplified and adapted to unite with geometric shapes of carved ornaments. The use of contrasting warm and cold colours generates an ornamental effect. The wood surface was skewed with the characteristic red to burgundy colour, which accentuated other colours; white, light blue, pink, green and blue. This painting technique was used in all wood art at the Chamber: the ceilings, *rosettes (ceiling medallions)*, mounted cabinets, doors and windows, *musandër*, *sergjen* (the ledge) etc.

As important visual elements, decorations were used in a diversity of forms and shapes. Henceforth, they were developed for ornamental purposes in various styles and variants of geometric shapes, of floral and vegetation designs influenced by the oriental themes. Flowery decoration, blades and apples are painted in gilded colours on brown or red backgrounds in Rumi style with matching Hatai wide leaf ornaments of Islamic art²⁶.

The *Qoshku* ceiling is the most comprehensive demonstration of maintaining the original values by comparison with the bigger central room ceiling. *Qoshku* ceiling colours are clean and clear, with spared ornaments and variation in nuance.

Pure colours exert a type of psychological and physiological impact on humans. The green colour is (physiologically) pleasing to the tired eye, and it is soothing to the psyche²⁷. To use colours as a means of valuing the aesthetic motives through painting, the painter also needs to accentuate the values by of wooden engraving. Hence, colouristic combinations coexist with motives carved in wood, bringing out the best of the true aesthetic and artistic value of ornaments.

²⁴ Shkupi. F, Zbukurimorja e disa banesave gjirokastrite, [Ornamentation of some Gjirokastra houses] "Monumentet" 2/1986, Tirana, pg. 104

²⁵ Gjergji. A, "Ligjërata për etnologjinë shqiptare", ["A presentation on Albanian Ethnology"], "Lilo" Publishing, Tirana, 2004, pg. 183.

²⁶ Hahn. V, - Les courants des styles dans les métiers d'art des artisans chrétiens en XVI et durant les premiers décennies du XVII siècle dans les régions des balkans, Balcanica 1- Beograd 1970, pg. 240-245. Shkupi. F, Zbukurimorja në disa banesa gjirokastrite, "monumentet", Tiranë, 2/1986, pg. 103.

²⁷ Uçi. A, "Labirinthe e modernizmit", ["Mazes of Modernisation"], "N. Frashëri" Publishing House, Tirana, 1978, pg. 241.

This work is a unique case of concurrent ornamental conception of both motives of two artistic genres; carving and painting on wood.



Figure 5. a) A fragment of rosette b) A Fragment of the ledge c) The central ceiling

Floral motives can be seen in paintings of tulips, roses and other flowers, represented by pink, blue and purple colours in white contours. Flowers have special profiles, in clusters, ranging from the open petals, angled and pointed forms to the closed buds. Floral motives of violet flowers are in a white outline whereas the pointed centre is painted in ochre. The white colour contouring separates the motive from its background and marks its silhouette (Figure 5 b). Wood painting, as a characteristic feature, involves the use of aquarelles / watercolours, tempera and powdery clay soil, extensively used in Europe. Varnish is used both for hardening and luminosity (Figure 5 a).

For consistency, the artisan picks a limited number of colours, manipulating with hues and tones. The observed colours are: red, green, pink, white, light blue and ochre colour as a transitional tone. Floral motives are in cluster styles of various dynamics and soft harmonious hues. It is important to highlight that the wooden coating was handled with an overall coloristic harmony and stylized inspiration. We can underline here the use of local vegetation and flowers such as: roses, tulips or spring flowers of multiple sizes and shapes.

Such works of wood art demonstrate high standards of Albanian house décor development in the 18th and 19th century. We find numerous examples of such work both in the exterior and interior designs, in wall cabinets, casement windows, ceilings and *musandra* in the towns of Shkodra, Berat, Elbasan, Peja, Prizren etc.

The ceiling of the central dwelling area has lost the bulk of its colours, only visible now at the rosette fragment. Almost all areas and borders of the large ceiling have undergone restoration work and we observe occasionally the presence of original touches. We notice hederia (ivies) of certain shades of blue, which have faded away with the passing of years, framing the wide edging of the picture in the rosette. Hedera are painted in free form and by variation. Stylized and coloured floral designs are a mix of plastered concentric circles, painted over in creamy tones and metallic gloss to acquire bold and more distinctive ornate properties. By doing this, circles do not fade away inside the rosette; they develop into striking decorative elements instead.

The layout of eight small circles with a larger circle at its centre seems to have been designed with the purpose to create the image of a flower where small circles play the role of petals and the large circle is the centrepiece. In this case, the floral motive is of a larger scale, conceived and stylized in geometrical forms (Figure 5 c). Hence, the artisan does not go beyond their original intention of the overall concept of floral decoration.

On a first glance, the qoshk ceiling is marked by its dark green background colour framed with moulding profiles. The centrepiece rectangles have interlocked white petal flowers, stylized in circular forms and red stems. White flowers and moulding soften the green colour of the ceiling.

Their presence harmonizes the ceiling with its painted edging, instantly producing a quadratic grid of graphic contrast and unique ornamental effect. The carvings of the two Oda ceilings occupy a large area and the use of soothing colour and fresh tones is intentional. To this end, the artist has selected green as a soothing colour. The coloristic arrangement and engraved adornments of the ceiling have largely been preserved.

4. Conclusions

The Zekate House decoration is an example of major accomplishments of Gjirokastra house décor, which stands out for its visual figurative art techniques rich in expressive forms and fresh tones and colours, diverse aesthetic forms, rhythm and harmony of motives, considered to be the sweeping statement of the House decorative values. Motives marry up with universal decoration thus crafting a soothing harmony and visual warmth. Coloured murals and wooden decorations of the *Oda* represent the richest period of decoration in town dwellings. Wooden artwork retains their original style, harmony and stylistic unity, what attests for skills exceeding the ordinary artisans'. The ornamental formulation encompasses two approaches in relation to the motives of artistic techniques. Geometric designs are mainly used in volumetric timber processing, while wood drawing generally depicts floral designs. The latter features contain local vegetation and they are composed in horizontal and vertical threads.

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