

Analysis of the Bouquet-in-Vase with fruit motif in the Sethi Havelis vis-a-vis the Paradigms of Decorative Motifs of Mughal India

SAMRA M. KHAN

Abstract

The Sethi *havelis* were constructed by the trading family of the Sethis in the early 19th century near Gor Khatri, Peshawar. The *havelis* were decorated internally with *naqqashi*, *aina-kari*, *gachbori* and *pinjra-kari* work, which have never been documented properly in terms of the underlying principles of the decorative designs. This paper attempts to study the motifs of floral bouquets-in-vase of the *havelis* and to compare with paradigms of floral motifs in Peshawar dating from the Mughal period. The primary objective is to understand the influences and sources of this motif and to see what hybrids were developed by the artisans at work in the *havelis*. The present work analyses the motif in the Sethi *havelis* and their origins and the specific meanings they embody.

Introduction

Peshawar is one of the oldest cities in South Asia (Hussain 1993:5) and has been serving as an important trade centre between India and Central Asia. It connects Central Asia and Afghanistan to the markets of Lahore, Amritsar and Kashmir (*Gazetteer of the Peshawar District 1897-8*:229). Hailing from India, the Sethis were among the prominent mercantile community of Peshawar (Dale 2002:3). They had established trade offices in Central Asia, Samarkand, Tashkent, Bukhara and Russia (Pers. comm. with Nisar Sethi 2008). The seven Sethi *havelis* were built in Peshawar near Gor Khatri from 1832 to 1920 (Qizilbash 1991:11). They were built in the grand architectural fashion of 18th and 19th centuries, which borrowed heavily from elements prevalent in *havelis* and palaces of Mughal India on one hand and Central Asia on the other.

The Mughals were instrumental in bringing and sponsoring the Persian influence in India (Michell 2007:24). Over the years this influence underwent changes to reflect the local taste and traditions (Okada 2003:22). These hybrid forms were unique to its regional orientations but the original influences could still be traced. The underlying elements of composition, harmony, symmetry and balance were similar to their counterparts of the Muslim world from Iran to Morocco (Africa) and further to Spain (Europe). But the real brilliance of Mughal art and architecture lies in the fact that the local flavor of art and architecture was fused with the Persian style and a new decorative tradition was created in the Mughal art.

The artists of Iran and Central Asia in the mid-14th and 15th century incorporated the bouquet-in-vase design. The underlying intention was to domesticate the tree (Baer 1998:90) by planting it in the vase. The addition of the potted plant or vase with flowers in a niche also carried the same tradition. There were different fruits added to this motif in various parts of the Islamic world. In the context of Mughal association with Central Asia, the most commonly used fruits in Mughal frescos were pomegranate and grapes.

The stylistic variations and various hybrid styles developed by the artisans of the *havelis* are analyzed in this paper to examine the development of this genre in 19th and early 20th century Peshawar. The bouquet-in-vase with fruits is studied within three *havelis* of the Sethi *imuhallah*; Haji Gul Ahmad Sethi *Haveli* (built in 1823) Karim Buksh Sethi *Haveli* (built in 1889) and the Abdul Rahim Sethi *Haveli* (built in 1906). The bouquet-in-vase with fruit motif underwent a change in its use in India as shown by the use of the motif in the Sethi *havelis*; it changed some of its elements prevalent in Central Asia to adopt a more Indian version of the motif.

Development of the Floral Bouquet-in-vase motif under the Mughals

The aesthetic sensibilities of the Mughals can be visualized in their architecture and beautiful gardens. The laying out of lush gardens filled with trees, flowers and water, in the dry hot weather of India was in a way re-creation of their ancestral home of Central Asia (Michell 2007:24). Similarly, the decoration and ornamentation inside buildings also followed a similar theme of a variety of floral motifs and geometrical patterns. The artists of Persia and Central Asia had incorporated the bouquet-in-vase design around the middle of 14th century. They depicted both floral bouquet-in-vase and the whole tree planted in a vase. The bringing in of flowers (through painting a vase with bouquet) into a domesticated setting indicated that in a sense the garden was being brought inside and with it its spiritual connection with Paradise. Baer (1998:93) emphasizes that flowers are a vital part of an Islamic garden, both in this world and the hereafter. The depiction of floral bunches and bouquets thus alluded to both kinds of gardens and became an important element of decoration. The vase with flowers and fruits was also used in Islamic art to symbolize the tree of life. This heavenly tree suggests the concept of hereafter and good fortune in the life to come (Baer 1998:93). The flowering plants blossom in fancy vases, arched niches framing vases and intertwined floral bunches and motifs became part of the Mughal tradition, adopted from the Safavid style (Michell 2007:24). These motifs were used and developed in India in palaces, forts, tombs, mosques (Fig. 1) and gardens.

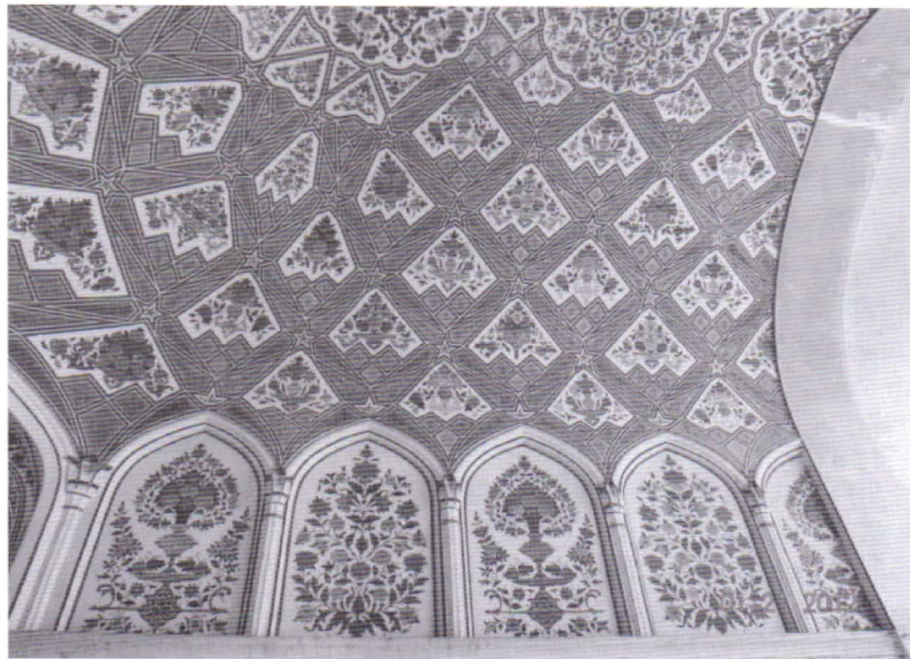


Fig 1. Bouquet in vase with fruits. Mahabat Khan Mosque. (Photograph courtesy of M. Waqas. Jan. 2012)



Fig 2. Arch of the Sarai Jahan-Ara (Gor Khatri, Peshawar) showing floral bouquet. (Photograph: Author, November 2009)

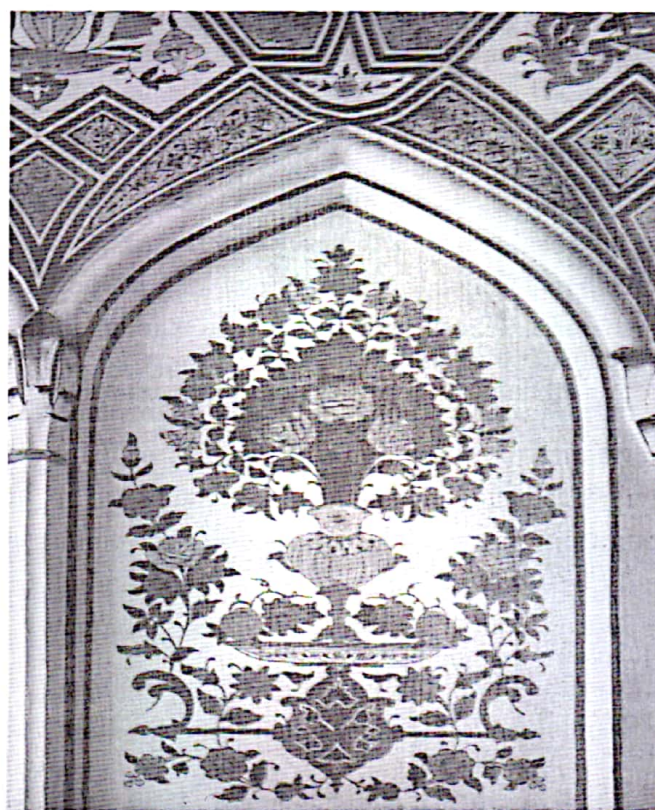


Fig 3. Arch of the Sarai Jahan-Ara (Gor Khatri, Peshawar) showing floral bouquet. (Photograph: Author, November 2009)

The rendering of the flowers and fruits became more naturalistic in the time of Shah Jahan (**Fig 2**). It was due to the amalgamation of the style of the European Renaissance and that of the Persians as the Mughals had an interest in European art and their exploration of the genre for artistic purposes (Koch 2001: xxvii).

In Peshawar, the construction of Sara'i at Gor Khatri in 1641 (<http://www.world-archaeology.com/features/peshawar-gor-khuttree/>) by Jahan Ara Begum (daughter of the Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan) in the heart of the walled city provided an important reference point for the decorative traditions of the city. The Serai incorporated Mughal techniques such as decorative brickwork, *gachbori* (stucco work), *pinjra-kari* (wooden lattice work) and *naqqashi* (fresco work).

The Mahabat Khan mosque, built in about 1670 by Mahabat Khan, the Mughal governor of Subah-i Kabul-wa-Peshawar (Shah 1993; 1995) was profusely decorated with fresco work displaying the earliest influences of this decorative tradition (cf. Shah 1997). This style was established in the time of Jahangir who adopted many renaissance influences (Koch 2001:8) in paintings including the fruit in bowl motif, which decorated buildings of the later days extensively.

The vast repertoire of the bouquet-in-vase motif depicted in the paintings of the Mahabat Khan mosque indicates a central Asian heritage consisting of carnations and blue bells. The fruits include grapes and apples (**Fig. 3**). The identification of these decorative elements of royal architecture with prestige and cosmopolitanism led to further diffusion of that culture among aspiring ruling houses of the city.

Analysis of the Bouquet-in-vase with Fruit in the Sethi *Havelis*

The Sethi *havelis* demonstrate the extensive use of decorated inner surfaces of the *bālākhānas* and *dālāns*, referring to these decorative traditions in the nearby Mughal Sarāi at Gor Khatri and the Mahabat Khan Mosque as the main influences. The rich decorations of the Sethi *havelis* have various kinds of patterns and motifs, which can be divided into three distinctive elements: geometric, floral and vegetal. These motifs are incorporated through various traditional techniques such as *Naqqāshi* (fresco paintings) and *Aina-kāri* (mirror work) on the walls, elaborately carved *pinjra-kāri* (carved wooden panels) in the *bālākhānas*. Floral patterns including the bouquet-in-vase decorate rooms of all the seven *havelis*, giving them a rich and majestic look. The depiction of these patterns was both realistic and stylized. Qizilbash (1991:63) identifies Ustād Majīd as among some of the *Ustads* who worked on the *naqqashi* work of the earlier Sethi *havelis*. The artists used naturally occurring colours and dyes, and mixed them with wet plaster to achieve the intense hues of the work.

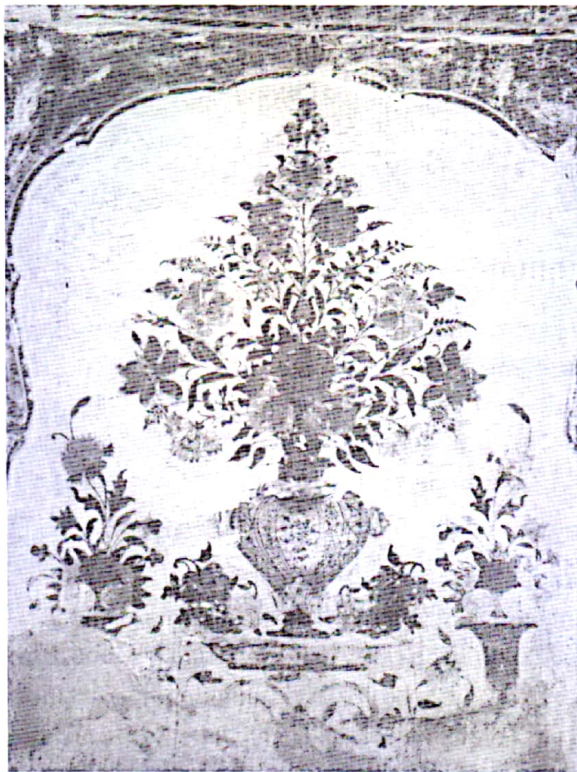


Fig 4. Bouquet-in-vase with mango plant (Photograph: Ms. Aisha Imdad, November 2009)



Fig 5. Bouquet-in-vase with grapes and pomegranate (Shah Nashin room) (Photograph: Author, November 2009) (right)

Early Development

Haji Gul Ahmad Sethi Haveli (1832)

This *haveli* is filled with decorative floral motifs in *naqqāshi*, *āinakāri* and gild. The entire surface of the walls of various rooms, the roof, doors and windows is filled with decorative floral patterns of various kinds. The most dominant pattern is the floral bouquet-in-vase in varying sizes and shapes. The floral bouquets in the private rooms are painted in water-based paints and have elaborate vases and flowers.

The frescos inside the rooms surrounding the main courtyard show more realistic floral bouquets and fruits, and the vases are simpler and more realistic. The fruit are shown lying on a platter along the base of the vase and sometimes growing out of a vine in other motifs (Fig.4). The fruits include grapes, figs, peaches, pears and pomegranates, indicating the Mughal or Central Asian influence.

The stylistic variations of the motif include the bouquet-in-vase motif teamed with mango fruit on both sides of the vase (Fig. 5). The mango is growing as part of a plant with red flowering buds. The mango here replaces the pomegranate in a composition, used predominantly in the Muslim world. The fruit growing from a vine represents the heavenly fruit of the tree of life in the garden of paradise. The inclusion of local indigenous fruits of India like mango shows local influence on the traditional fruit bowl.

The rooms of the *haveli* surrounding the courtyard have naturalistic renderings of the motif while the master bedroom on the first floor known as the *Shah-nashin* (abode of the king) has more formal and stylized versions of the motif. This room is covered with *naqqashi* work with gilded motifs. The fruits depicted in this room are grapes, pear and pomegranates, in line with the formal decorative traditions of the era (Fig. 6).

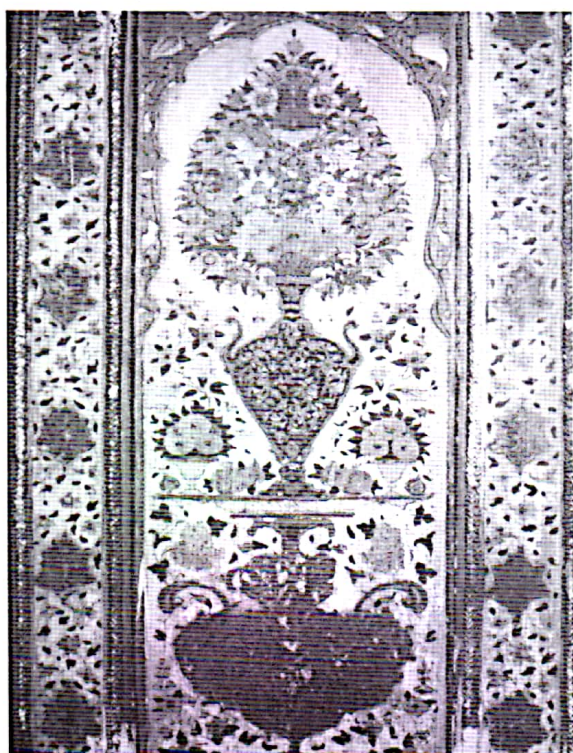


Fig6. Bouquet-in-vase and fruit arrangement in fruit bowl (Photograph: Author, November 2009)

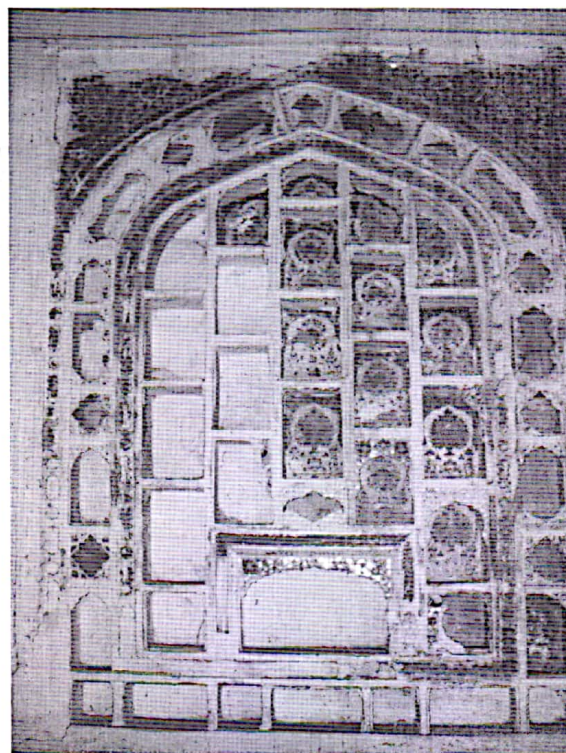


Fig 7. *Chinikhana* with bouquet-in-vase and peaches (Photograph: Author, October 2009)

Intermediate Development

Karim Buksh Sethi Haveli (1889)

Floral motifs have been used in the Karim Buksh Sethi *haveli* extensively, but the bouquet-in-vase motif is used sparingly. Here the development of the stylistic traditions finds the bouquet-in-vase motif placed within the niches of *chinikhāna*. The *chinikhāna* becomes more than just a back drop to place decorative

elements in; it becomes an ornamental entity itself. The niche of the *chinikhāna* also alludes to the gates of the Paradise and decorating them with floral bouquet is reminiscent of the decorative *chinikhānas* used at the tomb of Itimad ad-Daulah at Agra (1632). In this *haveli* only the *chinikhāna* of the northwest *bālākhāna* has the combination of the bouquet-in-vase with fruit (Fig. 7). The fruit here are peaches and they are not lying inert on a platter, but are springing from a branch, appearing vital and growing. The arrangement is reminiscent of the tree of life.

Later Developments

Abdur Rahim Sethi Haveli (1906)

This *haveli* was constructed in the early 20th century, which reflects the aesthetic and design norms of the British period. It has floral bouquets-in-vase with fruits above the doorways of the rooms (Fig. 8).

The fruits depicted here are grapes growing on vines and apples placed in a fruit bowl holding the bouquet-in-vase. The grapes are highly stylized and the colours used are bright and slightly kitschy compared with the colours of motifs of the earlier *havelis*. The arrangement gives the look of commercially produced art. The style is reminiscent of the contemporary style, where photographic representations of objects and a more pop art style of painting were adopted.

Discussion and Conclusion

The earliest *haveli* of Gul Ahmad Sethi took its influence from Gor Khatri and rendered nearly all bouquet-in-vase motifs in a naturalistic style. The innovative addition of the mango fruit within the classical fruit vocabulary suggests a major development within the existing paradigm. Using a local fruit in conjunction with previously established types of decoration helped in creating a new hybrid style. This era indicates a desire for innovation and experimentation. There is also a sense of confidence shown by the artisan using the indigenous mango on the tree of life. Clearly, the artisans are confident in replacing an indigenous fruit in place of the traditional renderings of grapes and apples as a heavenly fruit.

In the Karim Bakhsh Sethi *haveli*, the bouquet-in-vase motif was condensed and placed within the *chinikhāna*. This traditional Mughal design of the decorated *chinikhāna* was used during Jahangir's time and afterwards in his tomb at Lahore. The major change in the Karim Buksh *haveli* is the use of the bouquet-in-vase with the fruit tree of life. Here the combination of the bouquet within the arch with the tree of life makes strong references to the fruits and gardens of Paradise. The use of the motif is limited to a more contained space (*chinikhāna*) rather than previous era, where a larger area of the wall was covered by the motif. The materials of decoration also went on changing with the passage of time as gilding in the *Shah-nashin* room has been replaced by mirrors here.

The last stage of the design within the Abdur Rahim Sethi *Haveli* shows the more modern influence of the British period. The floral bouquet is set within the Euro-inspired fruit bowl, which sits on the top of a doorway. Hence the decorative pattern which was used extensively in the earlier eras has been restricted in one part of the room. The overall decrease in the elaborative use of decorative elements on the walls depicts the socio-historical decline of the bouquet-in-vase motif. There is also the use of European inspired fruits (apples and grapes) in the arrangement. As colonial influences take over the traditional design, the use of the decorative motifs is limited and changes occur in the style and color palette of the design.

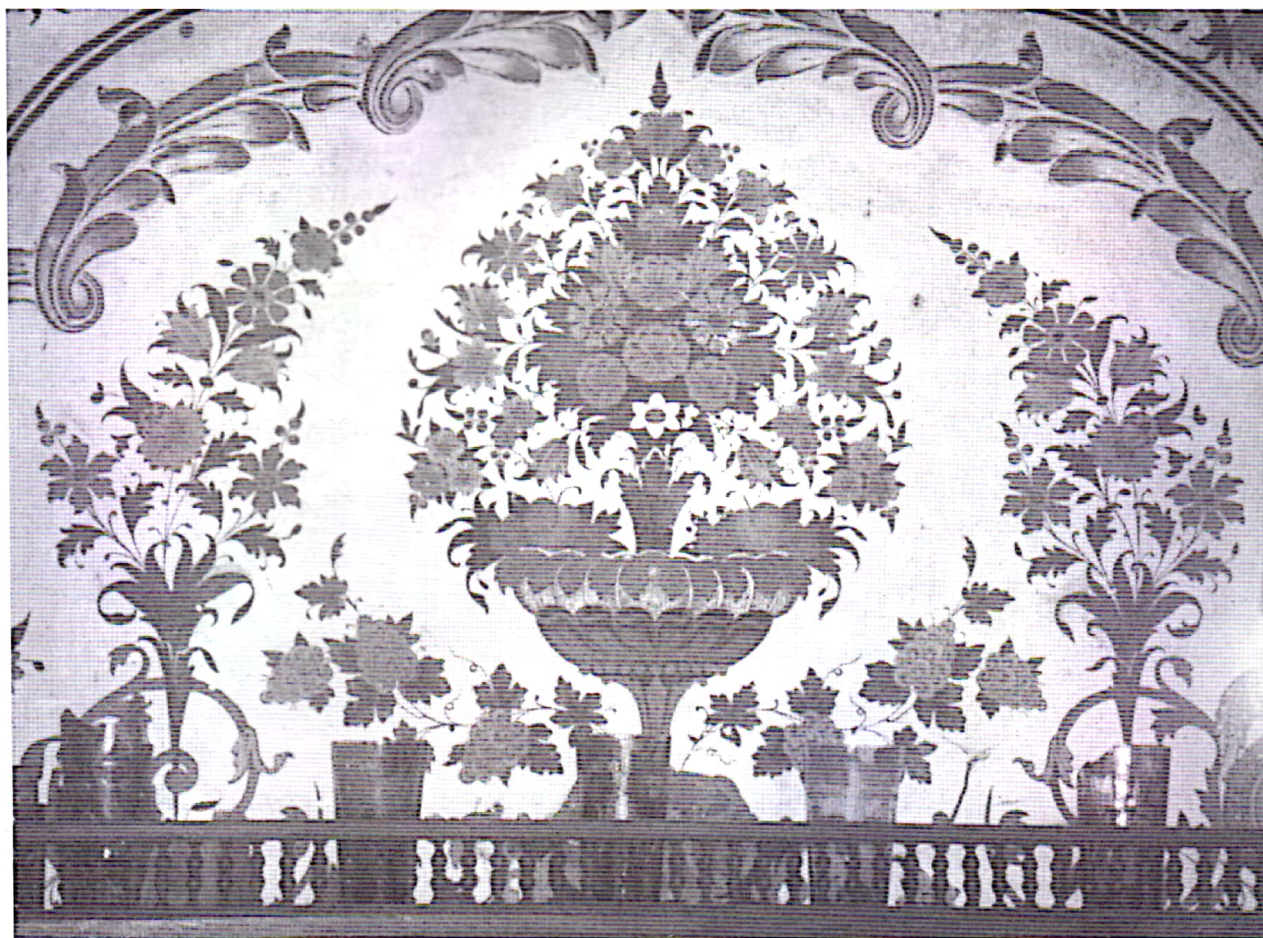


Fig. 8. Bouquet in vase with flowers above door. Author, Nov. 2009.

The motifs in the *havelis* of the *Muhallah* Sethian are amalgamation of many styles, they are indicative of the era they were made in, reflecting the values of society and the people who commissioned them. They provided visual, aesthetic and spiritual pleasure to their surroundings. They were coveted by society and the genre was passed on from generation to generation, chronicling the changes in cultural and aesthetic values. The bouquet-in-vase motifs of the Sethi *havelis* through transformations and innovations in their styles produced new hybrids within the existing paradigms of the genre in the Mughal India. A newly introduced feature (like the mangoes in the Sethi *havelis*) might acquire its own distinctive niche within the existing repertoire and was used in conjunction with previously established types of decoration, each of which retained its visual identity, thus contributing to a distinctive historical rhythm of episodic innovation against a stable background. In such a tradition, the ornamental bouquet-in-vase with fruit motif became both a vehicle of continuity and the source of subtle variations on familiar themes.

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