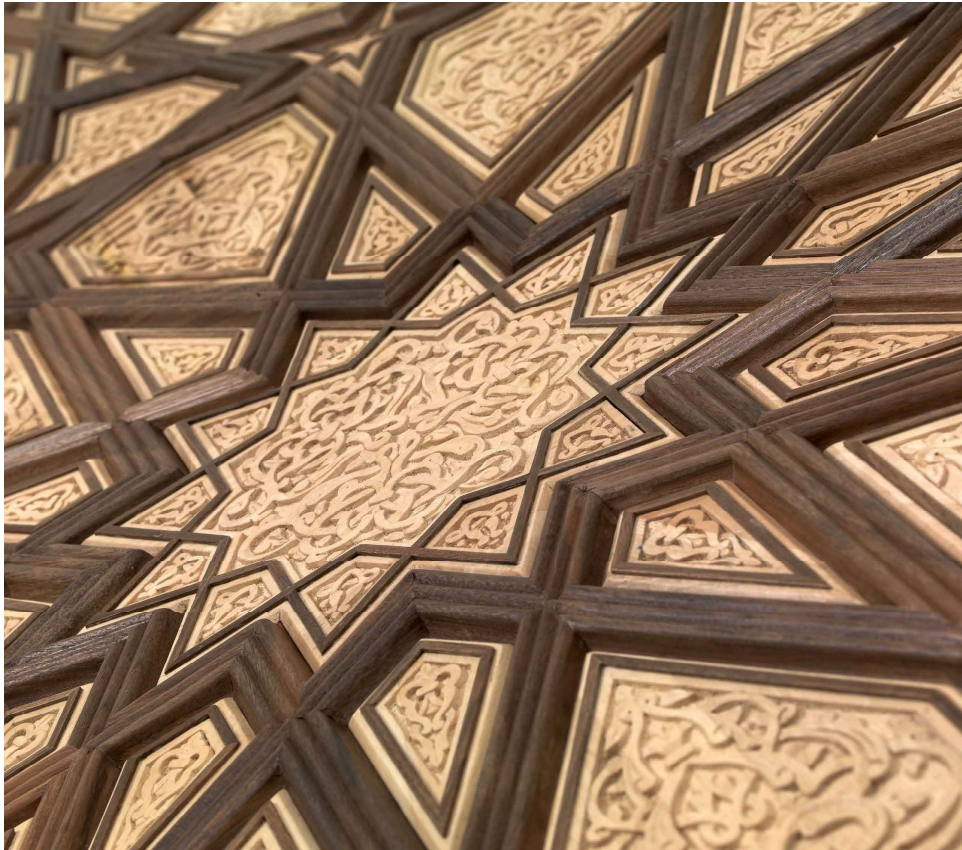


The Artists

T.M.I.WO Naser Mansori and Workshop\*

Detail: Pair of Carved Wooden Doors / 2012 / Walnut wood / H: 100 cm, W: 300 cm



## What I Talk About When I Talk About Tradition

Naser Mansori

The right blend of the scent of freshly carved wood, the sound of hammering, and the monotonous burble of the radio in the background, still transports me back to the workshop in Tehran where I first learnt carving as a fifteen-year-old refugee. With patience, perseverance and love for his craft, my first *ustad* (master) remains my role model. Like me, Hassan Arab – an Iraqi by birth – was an immigrant in Tehran. Unlike me, he had a reputation amongst the people in the trade; carving was his life, he lived for his craft.

How I ended up in Hassan Arab's workshop was pure coincidence. As the youngest son in an Afghan refugee family, I dropped out of school to help provide for the family. Without any proper training, I moved from job to job. I had no real prospects. One day, while visiting my recently married older sister, she offered this advice: that I should try to stick to one thing and give myself the opportunity to learn and master something I found meaningful. When I informed her I didn't know what I wanted to do, she told me of a woodwork shop just around the corner from her home, which she passed by several times a day. And so my sister dragged me over to Hassan Arab's workshop and asked him to take me as his student. For some reason, he agreed to take me on. I was very lucky – I found out much later that he was extremely picky with his apprentices. That is how I, an Afghan boy, learned to carve from an Iraqi master in Iran. He was a very strict master. I used to work with him sixteen hours a day and at first it was tough, and I hated it. I would much rather have gone to play football with my peers. But Hassan Arab kept encouraging me, showing me new techniques and tricks, and after only a few months I started to witness my own progress and developed an enjoyment for taking it further. I was finally relishing my work, and finally becoming good at it.

Now, in retrospect, I know that although my master instilled in me a love for my craft and taught me most of the techniques I know, it becomes clear that what I was producing in Iran was very much market-driven and commercial. At the time I hardly knew whether I was doing classical or modern carving. Nonetheless, I had my own fairly successful workshop for several years before I decided to return to Afghanistan with my family, shortly after it was liberated from the Taliban.

Starting anew in Kabul at the age of twenty-six was not easy. I found very little by way of a woodwork industry or a market for handcrafted products. For the first

year, I tried my hand on any project available, ranging from designing furniture to carving traditional doorways. Things began to pick up for me, however, when I was introduced to Turquoise Mountain. When I discovered that Turquoise Mountain wanted to focus on traditional Afghan crafts, I was curious. Initially, I did not really comprehend what their vision was but as I began to understand, I was keen to be a part of it and to lend a hand in shaping it. It soon became apparent that what I had been taught by my *ustad* was really a mixture of various Western styles. My knowledge of Afghan arts and traditions was little, so they sent me to Kabul's Old City along with some other colleagues, to examine the styles of the old buildings there. It was the first time I had ventured into that part of town. I recall walking into an old house in the area of *Ashqan* and *Arqan* on the south side of the Kabul river, which was at that time under restoration. I was greatly impressed to see that almost half the building was carved from wood. The carvings on flat surfaces consisted of very delicate repetitive shapes, spaced regularly next to each other. It was very interesting for me, because even at that point I knew that in the past, the designs had all been separately drawn on wood so that each shape tended to look slightly different from the one alongside it. However in this particular house, the carvings were very regular and uniform which attested to the skill of the carver. I also noticed that the forms and designs of the columns were also regular and well-balanced. It was an inspiration to have seen that house and I began working on my first traditionally-inspired *patayi* screen. That first piece took me about six months to complete.

After that initial visit to the Old City, I kept going back. I felt a deep thirst to learn everything that I didn't know. Unfortunately, there was no master who worked in those traditions whom I could quiz. There wasn't even anyone who had enough theoretical knowledge on the subject who could be questioned, so I set out to do my own research and make my own discoveries. I kept asking myself: how, so many centuries ago and without the aid of modern equipment, did those masters turn those columns so beautifully? Having access to the resources provided at Turquoise Mountain meant that I was able to slowly close a gap in my knowledge about Afghan traditional designs and crafts. I soon discovered the answer to some of my initial queries, such as how to turn columns without modern equipment. A brief description may give some idea of the methodical and patient approach needed: first, one determines the dimensions of the column, then divides the section of the

wood carefully into different segments. After this, one starts to plane the wood – extremely carefully – from the corners of two of its sides using hand tools. Next, one turns the column to do the same on the other two faces. This yields a very basic faceted form to the column. For the next stages, one keeps fine tuning the shape by planing the edges to create a four-sided form, then shaping them into an eight-sided form, then into a sixteen-sided form etc. until it is fully round. The process differs slightly for pilasters, but the basic steps remain the same.

In 2007 I was fortunate enough to make the acquaintance of a Nurestani Master and had the opportunity to learn from him the two main types of Nurestani carving. One, much like classical carving, uses representational floral designs that are in relief and serve as symbols on columns, cornices, and sculptures. The second type tends to rely more on geometric and abstract floral patterns with interesting names indicating the particular method of carving into the wood, such as basket weave, stars, layered petals and so on. The former type of carving requires many different types of carving tools, whereas for the latter a single rather simple carving tool is enough. Historically, Nurestani carvings not only served to decorate surfaces but often carried significance both as religious and civic symbols. Today, they are used merely as decoration on furniture or architectural elements. For me Nurestani carving with its sharp crisp edges, is a clear example of a local craft tradition, since it is very specific to the region of Nurestan in eastern Afghanistan – to its people and its history.

Over the last six years, I have also had the opportunity to visit various parts of Afghanistan to study regional traditions, and drawn inspiration from historic artifacts, allowing what has survived historically to inform my work. One such experience was my visit to the ancient city of Balkh, where the beautiful carving details on the mud and mud plaster of the columns of the *Masjed-e NohGonbad* (literally *The Mosque of the Nine Domes*) and the shrine of *Abu Nasr Parsa*, left a lasting impression on me and encouraged my development of new designs for columns and pillars, directly inspired by what I had seen in Balkh and its surroundings. The intricate Safavid designs on the remains of the *Masjed-i Noh Gonbad*, speak of a majestic and elegant architecture that continues to stimulate me in my work.

One day as I was turning some columns, I was asked by Turquoise Mountain to work on the restoration of a particular house in Murad Khane. The house was not particularly large and was located deep in what used to be a 'gated community' of a very cultured minority affiliated with the Royal Courts of the 18th and 19th centuries. Although small, it was however the first time that I had seen a Kabuli style of carving of such exquisite quality. The intricate peacock details on various architectural elements had a much more Western feel to them than anything else I had seen before, but the carving was unique and bore evidence of a pair of very skillful hands. Later, I learned that this type of carving was typical of Emir Amanullah Khan's era (r. 1919-1929 CE). We ended up naming it 'the Peacock House'. The details and findings of this particular house directly informed the design of a VIP suite we later designed and built for a hotel in Mayfair, London. The same peacock detail has become the unofficial logo of Turquoise Mountain; you will see it used in

an exquisite emerald necklace made for this exhibition. Another piece for this exhibition partly inspired by a stone *jali* I saw at the Museum of Islamic Art, and partly by my findings in Kabul Old City, is the large wooden *jali* which features a mixture of Kabul and Herati patterns, as well as some designs directly from the museum piece. The frame is carved in Nurestani style.

On a later trip to Herat, I learned about Timurid designs and style of carving. For me, the Timurid style embodies the most elegant and academic approach to design based on principles of proportion and balance. At the shrine of Khwaja Abdul-lah Ansari, I saw a carved tombstone known as the *Haft Qalam* (literally, *The Seven Chisels*), which is truly one of the most magnificent pieces of carving I have ever encountered. The carving was done on stone during the reign of Shahrokh Mirza (r. 1405-1447 CE) and it consists of three layers. For the first layer, a basic floral pattern is carved on the stone, before a layer of geometric lines is introduced to give the design its sense of balance and harmony. Finally, the floral elements are detailed and fleshed out to add a sense of finesse and elegance.

Upon my return to Kabul I was so full of ideas and motivations from Herat that I began producing a number of pieces, including a minbar and a lapis inlay column for a trade fair in Dubai. These particular pieces drew inspiration from various sources including the *Haft Qalam*, the dome of the Gowhar Shad Mausoleum, and the tile work at the *Masjid-i Jama* (literally, *The Friday Mosque*) in Herat. Since then I have made several attempts to carve something of a similar quality to the *Haft Qalam*, or the inlay work I had seen in Herat, but rendered in wood. The shamsa medallion and the pilaster that we have made for this exhibition are our latest attempts to perfect our technique. They also illustrate how we continue to draw inspiration from our remarkably rich heritage, to create new work. What I find particularly satisfying is the knowledge that for the past 700 years nobody has done what we are doing now; the knowledge that we are forging ahead with something similar to what our ancestors did so many centuries ago – producing works of art that are of exceptional quality, and have lasted long enough for us to see and touch today. It is an extremely fulfilling endeavour.

Beyond all the regional traditions and styles I have been exposed to through my long years of travel in Afghanistan, Iran and India, what I have learned and become fascinated by is how in Islamic art, there is always something familiar, something unifying. This struck me most forcefully when I was given the opportunity to visit the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha with my colleagues. Within the collection, I had the chance to witness this unifying factor at first hand, and on numerable examples in various media on display. This kind of tradition seems to transcend its geographical boundaries. It encompasses works from as far east as China and as far west as Spain. The fact that Islamic art does not aspire to emulate nature or be representational in any way, and instead relies on abstractions and geometry in an effort to reach something higher – an ideal higher than nature – seems to give all Islamic art a shared handwriting. No matter where one comes from and how one chooses to shape things and imbue them with one's own identity, the rules are such that in the end they all have a unifying factor. Things might be different in their detail

and across different media but the principles are always decipherable. This is all the more remarkable when one remembers that the *ustad* who works in Egypt, or in Syria, for example, has never met the *ustad* who works in Afghanistan. All imagination behind creativity in Islamic art comes from the same source, that of the ideal order: geometry.

For me, the large Islamic doors we have created for this exhibition represents this most encompassing idea of tradition and unity. When designing the door, inspired by the many examples I was able to explore when visiting the Museum of Islamic Art, I was constantly struck by the notion that no matter what style I used in making the doors, they would always remain unmistakably Islamic. The doors have solid cedar for their core. A layer of geometric design is directly defined on the boards using strips of wood and, finally, Timurid carved geometric panels are put into place in between the strips of wood to fill the geometrically shaped gaps. I got the idea of how to technically make the door from a Spanish ceiling I saw in the museum's permanent collection. I have been extremely lucky, as one thing I have discovered when conducting all my research, is that most of the literature one finds is either written from a scientific, or a historical perspective. There seems to be very little for people like me who are interested in the technical and practical aspects of how such artifacts were *made*. This means that I often have to reinvent the wheel when a technical question is posed in my head.

My return to Afghanistan, to my homeland and my origins, has put me on a new path professionally. With everything that I have done so far, I still consider myself at the beginning of a very long path: a path of discovery and re-discovery, of creativity and renewal, of learning and teaching.



*Naser Mansori has taught woodwork at the Turquoise Mountain Institute since 2006. He currently runs a woodworking workshop close to Babur's Gardens in Kabul, which provides employment and opportunities for many young woodworkers in the city. Naser Mansori has realised a number of prominent commissions, including a suite at the Connaught Hotel in Mayfair, London, a library at the Afghan Embassy in Tokyo, and the recent UNESCO restoration of the Gowhar Shad Mausoleum in Herat.*

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