



The Symbolic Connotations of Traditional Architectural Decorations in Al Majma'ah Governorate "Al Tuwaijri House as a Model"

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ABSTRACT

Traditional architecture in the Najd region is one of the most prominent manifestations of cultural identity in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Its material and decorative components bear vivid evidence of the aesthetic and social values that have characterized Najdi society throughout history. This research aims to analyze the symbolic connotations of Najdi architectural decorations in Al Tuwaijri House in Al Majma'ah Governorate. The study used a descriptive and analytical approach to uncover and analyze these connotations. To achieve results related to the research objectives, a sample of eight decorations, distributed among geometric, botanical, and symbolic motifs, was studied. The results demonstrated that the Al-Tuwaijri House is distinguished by its unique decorative richness, combining a variety of elements with meticulous execution, making it one of the most important examples which embody the artistic character of Najdi architecture in Al-Majma'ah. The research revealed the integration of the house's decorative elements, as the decorations were not executed in isolation from the building itself, but rather harmonized with the architectural rhythm of the entrances, portico, and majlis. This reflects the craftsman's awareness of the relationship between decoration and the architectural space and the financial capabilities and status of the Al-Tuwaijri family.

The Gypsum decorations embody a symbolic and cultural dimension, reflecting the system of social values in Najd, such as generosity, solidarity, and religiosity. Based on the results of the study, the current study reached a set of recommendations, the most important of which are: digital documentation of the Gypsum decorations and their restoration using traditional materials, while employing the traditional decorative vocabulary in contemporary designs that contribute to preserving authenticity and reviving local identity.

الدلالات الرمزية لزخارف العمارة التقليدية في محافظة المجمعة (بيت التويجري انموذجاً)

بدور عبدالله منصور التركي¹

الملخص:

تُعَدّ العمارة التقليدية في منطقة نجد أحد أبرز مظاهر الهوية الثقافية في المملكة العربية السعودية، إذ تحمل في مكوناتها المادية والزخرفية شواهد حيّة على القيم الجمالية والاجتماعية التي ميّزت المجتمع النجدي عبر التاريخ. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل الدلالات الرمزية لزخارف العمارة النجدية في بيت التويجري بمحافظة المجمعة استخدمت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي؛ للكشف عن هذه الدلالات وتحليلها؛ للوصول إلى نتائج مرتبطة بأهداف البحث، من خلال دراسة لعينة من ثماني زخارف موزعة بين الهندسي والنباتي والرمزي، وأظهرت النتائج تميز بيت التويجري بثراء زخرفي فريد يجمع بين تنوع الوحدات ودقة التنفيذ، مما يجعله أحد أهم النماذج التي تجسد الطابع الفني للعمارة النجدية في المجمعة، وكشف البحث عن تكامل العناصر الزخرفية في البيت، إذ لم تُنفذ الزخارف بمعزل عن البناء، بل جاءت منسجمة مع الإيقاع المعماري للمداخل والرواق والمجلس، مما يعكس وعي الحرفي بعلاقة الزخرفة بالفراغ المعماري وقدرة اسرة التويجري المادية ومكانتها.

وقد تجلّى في الزخارف الجصية بُعد رمزي وثقافي يعكس منظومة القيم الاجتماعية في نجد مثل الكرم والترابط والتدين، وعلى إثر نتائج الدراسة توصلت الدراسة الحالية إلى مجموعة من التوصيات، من أهمها: التوثيق الرقمي للزخارف الجصية وترميمها باستخدام المواد التقليدية، مع توظيف القاموس الزخرفي التراثي في تصميمات معاصرة تساهم في الحفاظ على الأصالة وإحياء الهوية المحلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: زخارف جصية، الزخارف النجدية، العمارة التقليدية، العمارة النجدية، الدلالات الرمزية.

Chapter One: The Methodological Framework of the Research

Introduction:

Decorations have occupied a prominent position in the arts of architecture and are one of the most prominent features associated with traditional architecture across various civilizations. Decorations are considered an aesthetic element that adorns buildings and simultaneously reflects the economic, social, and cultural status of a society and its time period. They also carry intellectual, social, and religious connotations. They represent a visual language through which the artist communicates with society. From this perspective, decorations in Najdi architecture have acquired a special status, forming a comprehensive picture that expresses the society's identity and artistic and economic richness.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is distinguished by the diversity of its geographical and social environments, which is reflected in the differences in traditional decorative patterns between its regions. This diversity has influenced the construction and formation of the decorations specific to each region. In this regard, Al-Mansour (2023) stated that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia enjoys a diversity of regions and environmental potentials, which has led to differences in social aspects and contemporary decorative patterns. This difference in geographical and climatic environmental potentials and social aspects has made the decorations in the Eastern Province different from those in the Southern Region, and also differing from them according to the decorations of the Najd region.

Among the cities of Najd, Al-Majma'ah Governorate stands out, as it is one of the cities that includes a number of distinctive historical buildings, embodying the features of Najdi architecture, including gypsum decorations and architectural elements derived from the environment and representing the identity of Najdi society. Nabawi (2018) emphasized the distinctiveness of decorations in Najdi architecture; Because it is derived from the surrounding environment, and because it is characterized by spontaneity, distance from complexity and affectation, and is characterized by abstraction and brevity, it is also distinguished by the arrangement of its repetitive appearance from other traditional arts, and it is influenced by the thinking of the craftsman who performs it, and by the material used in its implementation.

One of the most prominent examples of the distinction of Najdi architecture and gypsum decorations is the Tuwajri House, which is considered a rich witness to the symbolic connotations of traditional architecture in Najd. This house constitutes a visual record that documents the practices and values of Najdi society through geometric and plant decorations, and the cultural, religious and social meanings they carry. From this standpoint lies the importance of researching the symbolic connotations of traditional architectural decorations in Al Majma'ah

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Governorate (the Tuwaijri House as a model) as an introduction to understanding the cultural and aesthetic dimension of Najdi architecture.

Research Problem

Decorations in Najdi architecture are one of the most prominent elements which carry within their components symbolic and cultural connotations that express the human relationship with their environment and social and religious values. This was confirmed by the study by Al-Ubailan et al. (2022), which aimed to document decorations in traditional houses and the meanings and connotations they reflect in Unaizah Governorate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Despite this dimension, many studies, such as Al-Anzi's (2017), view decoration solely from an aesthetic perspective, ignoring its intellectual and cultural dimensions that give it its distinctive character within the architectural structure. Hence, the need for a study that addresses the symbolic connotations of gypsum decorations in traditional architecture in Al-Majma'ah Governorate arose as a model that embodies the interaction between art and identity. The Al-Tuwaijri House is a rich example of this interaction, combining artistic authenticity with cultural connotations that express the identity and values of Najdi society. This study seeks to uncover the symbolic meanings inherent in these decorations and their role in expressing local culture and Najdi architectural identity.

The research problem can be defined in the following question:

What are the symbolic connotations of Najdi architectural motifs in the Tuwaijri House in Majma'ah Governorate?

Research Objectives

uncovering the symbolic connotations of Najdi architectural motifs in the Tuwaijri House in Majma'ah Governorate.

Research Importance

Theoretical Importance

The theoretical importance of this research lies in identifying the symbolic connotations of traditional architectural motifs in Majma'ah Governorate, particularly in the Tuwaijri House. This contributes to re-reading Najdi architectural heritage and motifs, understanding social, cultural, and aesthetic values, and strengthening architectural cultural identity by enriching heritage studies specializing in traditional arts.

Applied Importance

The applied importance lies in documenting the Tuwaijri House motifs through analysis, considering them a heritage landmark threatened with extinction. This contributes to the preservation of heritage and traditional arts in Majma'ah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Research Limits:

Subject Limits: Symbolic connotations of traditional architectural motifs in Majma'ah Governorate (the Tuwaijri House as a model).

Time Limits: 2025 AD.

Spatial boundaries: Beit Muhammad Al-Abdullah Al-Tuwaijri in Al-Majma'ah Governorate - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Defining Terms

Symbolic Connotations:

connotations are derived from the word "dalal." Rajab (2000) stated that "Dallal" refers to something, meaning "to guide." A thing is signified, and connotations are guidance. Mahmoud and Hamdi (2022) added that a symbol is a semantic sign with an environmental character, encompassing the historical dimension and depth of a society. Connotations give things semantic depth, transforming them into symbols. Symbols are events and experiences embodied in an abstract form which provides a meaning consistent with society until it becomes part of that society's language.

The current research defines symbolic connotations as the intellectual, social, and cultural meanings and values inherent in the traditional architectural motifs of Al Al Majma'ah Governorate, transforming these motifs from mere aesthetic elements into symbols expressing the identity and historical specificity of Najdi society.

Traditional Architectural Motifs:

Traditional architectural motifs are "any decorative composition of lines, dots, geometric, plant, animal, or script shapes, whether raised, sunken, or shaped, which ultimately creates a distinctive form used to decorate traditional houses in the Najd region" (Al-Ubailan et al., 2022, p. 60).

Al-Mousa (2017) referred to motifs as a prominent feature of the visual folk heritage. This art is associated with architecture or buildings, both external and internal cladding. It is called gypsum engraving, and is characteristic of large houses and is cared for by wealthy people.

The current research defines traditional architectural motifs as geometric, plant, or script motifs and engravings, formed using sunken or raised techniques and incising on materials such as gypsum and clay. Motifs in Najdi architecture are characterized by abstraction and simplicity, and the artist derives their philosophical connotations, materials, and tools from the surrounding environment. They constitute an integral part of Saudi architectural heritage.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework of the Research

Based on the importance of traditional architecture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a reflection of cultural and social identity, the study of the gypsum decorations in the Al-Tuwajiri House in Al-Majma'ah Governorate is considered an artistic model that reflects the aesthetic and symbolic features of Najdi architecture. In this context, decorations not only play a decorative role, but also carry symbolic connotations that express the values, customs, and ways of thinking of ancient Najdi society. From this perspective, the theoretical framework of this study addresses the symbolic connotations of Najdi architectural decorations in the Tuwajiri House through a series of topics that seek to analyze the historical, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions of these decorations and uncover their symbolic connotations.

The First Topic: Traditional Architecture in Al Majma'ah and the Tuwajiri House

Decorations played a pivotal role in shaping the architectural character of the Najd region and neighboring areas, clearly expressing the depth and uniqueness of Najdi culture. Architectural decorations resulted from social, religious, economic, and environmental factors. Najdis used building materials available in their surrounding environment, such as clay and gypsum, to create architectural designs that express the cultural identity of Najdi society, meet its needs, and adapt to the harsh climate of that region. Al Naim (2023) stated that the traditional architectural elements in the Najdi environment represent a rich cultural heritage that reflects the history and identity of the region. These decorative elements combine aesthetic and functional aspects and constitute an important part of the design of buildings and dwellings in the Najd region. Najd is a plateau located in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula. Najd is known for its harsh desert geography and its rich and diverse culture, as it was the center of many ancient kingdoms and emirates that extend back to pre-Islamic times, most notably the Kingdom of Kinda, which was founded in the village of Al-Faw in the fourth century BC (Al-Ghazzi, 1999).

The desert environment of Najd played a fundamental role in shaping traditional architectural style. Najdi architectural components and decorative elements were designed to be internally open and externally closed, helping to reduce the effects of environmental factors and provide protection from the desert climate, winds, and sandstorms. These design characteristics demonstrate the ability of traditional craftsmen to harness architectural design and decoration to adapt to the natural environment. The Najdi environment, with its climatic and geographical characteristics, formed an influential framework for the architectural style and development of Al Majma'ah, as these characteristics were reflected in its traditional architectural styles and decorations.

Al Majma'ah is one of the cities of Najd, rich in agriculture, palm trees, and abundant water. As Al-Haqil (2015) explained, it is geographically central to the Arabian Peninsula, which has had an impact on its growth. Al Majma'ah is known for its focal location, representing the intersection of transportation and traffic lines coming from the east, west, north, and south. Al-Sulaiman (2020) indicated that Al-Majma'ah was founded by Abdullah bin Saif Al-Shammari in the year 820 AH, and it was called Al-Majma'ah because it is located at the confluence of a number of valleys. It was also said that it was called Al-Majma'ah because it brought together many families such as Al-Thamari, Al-Rabi'ah, Al-Tawajer, and others. Among the most prominent landmarks of Al-Majma'ah and its most beautiful houses is the Al-Tuwajiri House, and as Nasrallah (1974) mentioned, the house of Sheikh Muhammad Al-Abdullah Al-Tuwajiri, where King Abdulaziz, may God have mercy on him, stayed when he was a guest of Al-Majma'ah, as shown in Figure (1).



Figure (1) Al-Tuwajiri House in Al-Majma'ah, Source: Abdul-Ilah Al-Tuwajiri, October 4, 2025

Abdul-Ilah Al-Tuwajiri added (in a phone call on Saturday, October 4, 2025) that Al-Tuwajiri House was built approximately in 1354 AH, and its owner, Muhammad bin Abdul-Muhsin Al-Tuwajiri, lived there for approximately three years. In 1357 AH, King Abdulaziz Al Saud appointed him to assume the position of Emir of the Namas region, and he moved there immediately. After his departure, Abdulaziz bin Abdul-Muhsin Al-Tuwajiri asked permission to reside in the house and continued to care for it.

The Tuwajiri House is considered an artistic masterpiece that still maintains its authenticity and the beauty of its decorations and engravings to this day, despite being built nearly a hundred years ago with mud, gypsum and stone. The Tuwajiri House, as described by Nasrallah (1974), consists of two floors and three huge decorated gates made of tamarisk wood and palm trunks. The lower floor includes the council, the office, three warehouses, public facilities and the bedroom. In front of these rooms extends a courtyard and a corridor supported by 14 stone and gypsum columns, 5 metres high, and ascends to the upper floor by a wide stone staircase that leads to the window. Figure (2)

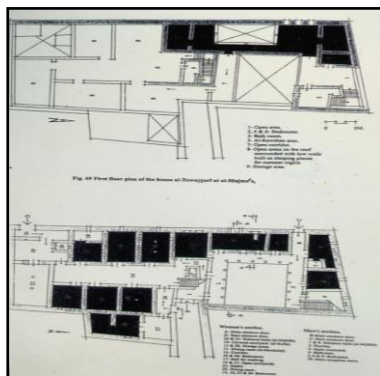


Figure (2) A plan of the Al-Tuwajiri House in Al-Majma'ah. Source: Abdul-Ilah Al-Tuwajiri, October 4, 2025.

It is clear that the Al-Tuwajiri House is one of the most influential houses in the city of Al-Majma'ah. It served as an important social space, hosting numerous weddings for the people of Al-Majma'ah. This is due to its spaciousness, artistic beauty, and ability to host large numbers of guests, in addition to the generosity of its owners and their commitment to strengthening social ties. The house is also distinguished by its rich decorative features and spacious areas, with gypsum decorations and engravings clearly visible in the sitting room, the corridor, and the gates. Figures (3), (4), (5).

Reflecting the level of artistic craftsmanship and aesthetic taste in Najdi architecture at that time, the majlis in the Tuwajiri House, as described by Nasrallah (1974), is distinguished by its large area, measuring 8 meters in length, 4 meters in width, and 12 meters in height. Its walls and ceiling are decorated with gypsumwork, and its floor is covered with patterned carpets and sofas with small mirrors. A fire glows in the center of the room, and the cloakroom is lined with shelves of shiny coffee pots and teapots of all sizes and shapes. In front of the majlis is a spacious corridor and courtyard, Figure (6).

The Tuwajiri House represents a distinctive model that embodies Najdi social values, customs, and traditions, such as generosity, strengthening family ties, and preserving the privacy of family members. Traditional decorations and engravings also represent an essential element of Najdi architecture, bearing cultural symbols and artistic connotations that express the spirit of traditional society and the depth of its connection to its environment.



Figure (3) The Majlis hall of the Al-Tuwajiri house in Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)



Figure (4) The gate of the Al-Tuwaijri house in Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)



Figure (5) The portico of the Al-Tuwaijri house in Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

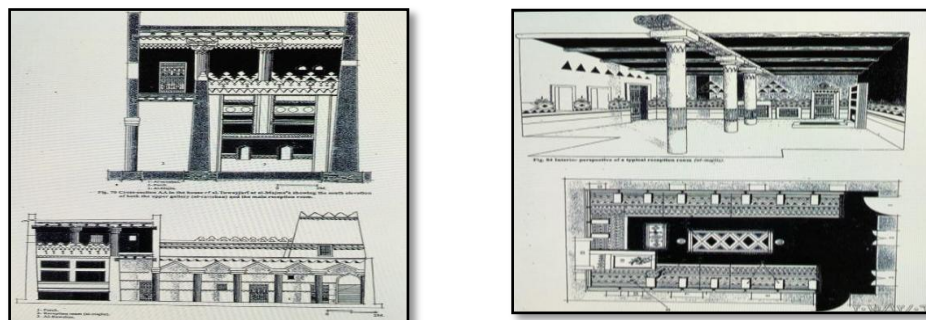


Figure (6) A plan of the Al-Tuwaijri House Majlis in Al-Majma'ah. **Source:** Abdul-Ilah Al-Tuwaijri, October 4, 2025.

The second topic: Traditional Najdi Architectural Decorations:

Najdi decorative elements are a primary source of artistic heritage and traditional architecture in Najd, reflecting social and religious values and local environmental factors. Najdi decorations include geometric elements such as triangles, circles, and squares, in addition to plant elements inspired by nature, such as leaves, flowers, palm trees and their fronds, grape clusters, and script elements such as invocations and Quranic verses, demonstrating the connection of the Najdi people to their environment and culture.

Najdi artists used these decorative elements to decorate doors, windows, and walls, adding beauty to traditional architecture. Architectural decorations serve an aesthetic purpose, which is to beautify the space. They are often found in guest rooms, and a functional purpose imposed by the climatic factors in the Najd region due to the high temperatures in the summer. (Heritage, 2024)

Simplicity dominated decorations such as the exterior facades, while interior decorations were characterized by spontaneity and simplicity. Both the artist and the homeowner were keen to ensure that these decorations remained within religious, social, and economic boundaries. Decorations in the Najd region were distinguished by their unique creativity. Nabawi (2018) noted that the artist was able to employ the decorative landscape within an interwoven visual fabric characterized by abstraction, a creative product that shaped the features of Najdi heritage. Traditional decorations and engravings express the feelings of the inhabitants and their direct influence by the features of the surrounding desert environment, such as the sky, the moon, the stars, and palm trees. We find them

reflected on the surfaces of walls, entrances, and interior walls, such as those found in the guest house (Al-Nuwaier, 1999).

Al-Omair (2007) pointed out that the craftsman sought to add an artistic and decorative touch to some architectural elements, even if they were originally constructed for a functional purpose. He also resorted to beautifying the interior facades with decorative elements, and he tried, as much as possible, to derive his themes from his local environment and natural scenes, which are characterized by simplicity and a lack of complexity. Najdi architecture and its decorations are somewhat similar to those of Islamic architecture, and may be related to them in terms of abstraction, repetition, and the use of geometric and plant motifs. They may also differ from them in their tendency toward simplicity and a lack of detail. Islamic architecture is distinguished by artistic and aesthetic characteristics that, in turn, are reflected in the features of Najdi architecture, most notably the emphasis placed on the interior decorations of the building more than the exterior. Abu Al-Ayoun (2016) indicated that Islamic buildings have become adorned internally with decorative masterpieces spread across walls, lintels, and cornices, in addition to attention to the design of structural elements such as columns, arches, and domes (p. 7). Al-Wael (2015) notes that most of the characteristics and features found in traditional plaster decorations are typical of Islamic architectural motifs, such as repetition, reproduction, symmetry, space-filling, and the transformation of natural elements into decorative forms. These are also inherited styles from generation to generation, with each generation adding to its findings according to prevailing circumstances (Al-Wael, 2015).

Qaniwi (2020) noted that the most prominent features and characteristics are:

- * **Privacy and uniqueness:** They emerged almost exclusively due to their geographical distance from centers of civilization.
- * **Achieving utility and beauty:** Architectural decorations were created for both aesthetic and utilitarian purposes.
- * **Part of the traditional artistic system:** Upon reviewing the traditional arts system, it became clear that they may carry meanings that explain decorative formations and their symbols.

Al-Wael (2011) also stated that the characteristics of traditional decorations include:

- * **Stereotypical arts:** Stereotypical arts predominate over decorations due to the repetition of forms familiar to society.
- * **Collective arts:** Decorations are inherited and express a community's culture. They are a collective activity and behavior influenced by the community.
- * **Use of decorative elements from the local environment:** Using elements adapted from nature in a geometric style, such as tree leaves, plants, cosmic phenomena, and everyday objects.

Characteristics of traditional decorations include:

- * **Influenced by the teachings of Islam:** As a result of the aversion to depicting animate beings, decorative systems inspired by plants and geometric shapes were created, featuring systems of repetition, juxtaposition, symmetry, and overlapping (Al-Shahrani, 2020).
- * **Simplicity and spontaneity:** Najdi decorations are characterized by simplicity and spontaneity, far removed from complexity and affectation, reflecting the nature of life in that region. Typically, popular drawings, as Qanso (1995) noted, are characterized by a spontaneous and simple nature, popular with the general public. This is far removed from reality due to the neglect of detail, repetition, and apparent symmetry in the repetition of decorative and formative elements and units, exaggeration and distortion of proportions, and spontaneity.

It becomes clear that Najdi decorations represent an integrated artistic system that combines simplicity, spontaneity, and aesthetic function, reflecting the religious, social, and environmental values of Najdi society. These characteristics have contributed to the formation of a unique architectural identity characterized by authenticity and a balance between beauty and utility.

The Third topic: The Concept of Symbolic Connotations in Traditional Architectural Decorations

The study of symbolic connotations is one of the fundamental foundations for understanding the visual arts and traditional architecture. Decorative elements and units are not limited to being aesthetic formations, but also represent a visual language that conveys intellectual, cultural, and social meanings. Hence, the importance of distinguishing between connotation and symbol. Quraitem (2010) pointed out that he uses a language replete with symbols that may be abstract, such as a word, name, or even an image or shape familiar in our daily lives, but which contain additional connotations in addition to their clear, explicit meaning. The meaning refers to the direct or clear meaning that the element or decorative unit carries, while the symbol is that the symbol goes beyond this apparent meaning to express social, cultural or religious dimensions. The researcher explains the difference between the meaning and the symbol in Table (1):

Item	Connotation	Symbol
Expressive Style	Direct & Clear	Requires Interpretation & Explanation
Meaning	Realistic or sensory, linked to the apparent form	Intellectual or cultural, transcending the physical form
Aesthetic & Communicative Role	Illustration – refers to the thing itself	Expressive - refers to a deeper meaning than the thing
Example	The palm tree represents an agricultural environment	The palm tree symbolizes goodness, blessing, and generosity

Table (1) An illustrative table of the difference between meaning and symbol (researcher)

It is evident that Najdi architectural decorations are not merely an aesthetic element; rather, they contain symbols that express the identity, belonging, beliefs, and culture of the community. Through the description and analysis of decorative symbols, the concepts of aesthetic and social thought of the society that created them can be revealed, giving traditional architectural decorations a philosophical and cultural dimension stemming from Najdi society.

Previous Studies:

Abu Hasna and others study (2025) entitled *"Artistic and Technical Characteristics of Traditional Gypsum Decorations in the Hail and Al Majma'ah Regions"*

The study aimed to identify the artistic and technical characteristics of traditional gypsum decorations in the Hail and Al Majma'ah regions through a descriptive, analytical, and comparative approach. **The study focused on analyzing two main cases:** the Al-Saif Majlis in Hail and the Coffee Majlis in Beit Al-Tuwajri in Al Majma'ah. The results concluded that Hail's decorations are predominantly vegetal, influenced by the agricultural environment and some influences from the Ahl al-Mashhad school in Iraq. Meanwhile, the decorations of Majma'ah are characterized by their reliance on geometric elements, with a limited presence of plant and symbolic elements such as the almond and crescent.

The study demonstrated that the gypsum decorations are not merely an aesthetic element; they also perform architectural functions such as thermal insulation and wall reinforcement. The importance of this study lies in its field documentation and comparative analysis, which provides subsequent research with a scientific basis for understanding the symbolic and artistic connotations of the decorations in the Al-Tuwajri House in Majma'ah.

Alnaim's (2023) study, *"The Typology of Courtyard Space in Najdi Architecture, Saudi Arabia: A Response to Human Needs, Culture, and the Environment"*

"Courtyard Space Classification in Najdi Architecture, Saudi Arabia: According to Human Needs, Culture, and the Environment."

The study aimed to identify the important characteristics of traditional Najdi architectural courtyards in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This was done to understand the classification and applicability of courtyard typologies in Najdi urban neighborhoods. The research followed an ethnographic approach through observation, cultural documentation, and interviews. The study included six residences in three cities in central Saudi Arabia. The results indicated that courtyards in Najd represent a form of local architecture, as well as the general characteristics of traditional Najdi houses.

Al-Mutlaq's (2023) study, *"The Origins of Decorative Forms and Patterns of Their Development in Traditional Ahsa Architecture: A Critical Documentary Study"*

This study focused on decorative forms in traditional Ahsa architecture with the aim of understanding their origins and patterns of decorative transformation. The study followed a phenomenological approach based on observation and induction, and conducted a survey of the decorative forms that represented the study sample. The results revealed the presence of Classifiable decorative families. Through the survey, it was found that there is a system for the development of decorations, starting with decorative nuclei, units, elements, motifs, and combinations, and ending with decorative fields. The results also confirmed that decorative development is linked to the formal and decorative structure, in addition to the craftsman's skills and awareness of the formative relationships between the elements.

A study by Al-Ubailan and others (2022) entitled: *"Visual Characteristics and Different Dimensions of Decorations in the Design of Traditional Najdi Houses"*

The study aimed to document the decorations in traditional houses and the meanings and connotations they reflect in Unaizah Governorate in the Qassim region. The study relied on a qualitative approach to analyzing the interior and exterior decorations of a sample of traditional Najdi houses, in addition to interviews. The study results concluded that there is a diversity of decorations in terms of composition, type, shape, size, and location.

A study by Al-Anzi (2017) entitled: *"The Aesthetic Characteristics of Najdi Heritage Decorations and Their Role in Promoting National Identity - A Proposed Program in Aesthetic Appreciation"*

The study examined heritage decorations in the Al-Bujairi neighborhood and sought to identify and analyzing its aesthetic characteristics. The descriptive-analytical approach was followed, along with a quasi-experimental approach, to test students' artistic taste. The results showed that the decorations in the Al-Bujairi neighborhood are distinguished by an aesthetic uniqueness distinct from other forms of art, and that the use of technology has become important in developing them and producing contemporary artworks. The study also demonstrated that these decorations contribute to enriching visual arts and emphasize their importance in strengthening national identity. From the above, it is clear that previous studies have addressed traditional architectural decorations in various regions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, such as Al-Ahsa, Al-Qassim, Hail, and Al-Majma'ah. These studies focused on documenting the formal, aesthetic, and technical characteristics, in addition to studying the associated cultural and social dimensions. Research methods varied between descriptive-analytical, phenomenological, qualitative, and comparative, and contributed to highlighting the value of traditional decorations and their role in strengthening cultural and national identity. However, these studies did not address in-depth the symbolic connotations of the traditional decorations in the Al-Tuwajiri House in Al-Majma'ah. This makes the current research important in bridging this gap by analyzing the gypsum symbols and revealing their aesthetic and intellectual dimensions within the context of traditional architecture.

Chapter Three: The Research Procedural Framework

Research Community:

The research community consists of traditional gypsum decorations in Al Majma'ah Governorate, specifically in the Tuwajiri House, which is a prominent example of Najdi architecture.

Research Sample:

The research sample consisted of (8) selected gypsum decorations from the majlis and gate of the Tuwajiri House, including symbolic, floral, and geometric motifs. These motifs were selected according to specific criteria, such as the clarity of their structure, the diversity of their patterns, and the extent to which they represent the aesthetic and semantic characteristics of Najdi architecture.

Research Methodology:

The research relies on a descriptive and analytical approach by observing, describing, and aesthetically analyzing the architectural decorations in the Tuwajiri House, and studying some of the symbolic connotations of the plaster decorations in the Tuwajiri House to uncover the artistic and aesthetic characteristics and arrive at the symbolic connotations of the decorations in Najdi architecture.

Sample Analysis:

Description and Analysis of the Symbolic Connotations of the Decorative Units in the Al-Tuwajiri House:

Decorative units in Najdi architecture combine aesthetic and symbolic values. They reflect the cultural and environmental identity of society. These decorations are distinguished by the diversity of their artistic elements and their significance, which include:



Figure (7) The Bidhanah or Hayla from the Al-Tuwajiri House in Al-Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

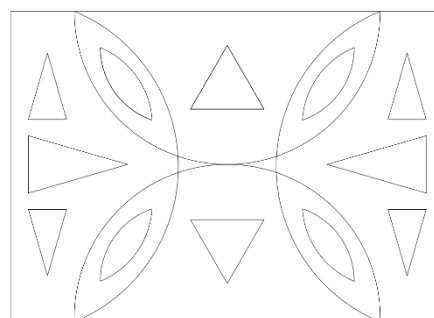


Figure (8) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The Bidhanah or Hayla

Decoration Type: Plant Decoration

Description and Meaning: The Bidhanah is one of the distinctive decorative elements in Najdi architecture, often used in sitting rooms, doors, and even fences. This decorative unit is distinguished by its diversity and richness, and it is possible to achieve numerous visual results through it.

The decoration on the bedhana consists of a composition that combines geometric and botanical motifs engraved on the gypsum in a sunken style. Its center is divided into a horizontal axis around which are distributed triangular

shapes and leaves that resemble almonds when inflated and cardamom pods when they are thin. The decorative elements are arranged symmetrically, with two decorative units, the upper and lower, facing each other in the form of outward arches that end in triangular heads, giving the impression of an outward opening movement. The basic composition is surrounded by small triangles. Al-Wael (2011) indicated that it is possible to come up with several solutions for decorating the bidhana "by assembling or disassembling the bidhana or inserting it into decorative bands in many different patterns. Some craftsmen call it (Hayla), and it is either quadrilateral, pentagonal, or hexagonal, depending on the number of buds that compose it. The bud in the bidhana is bulging in the middle and pointed at the edges, and it results from the intersection of a group of circles" (p. 145).

Al-Jabri et al. (2023) stated that the shape of the bidhana decoration is taken from the shape of the almond tree seed, which is known in India as the bidhana tree. This tree was widespread in India, and due to trade and cultural exchange, this decoration was transferred to the Gulf region. The decoration of the "bidhana" is carried out in plaster units or on doors and wooden decorations. If the buds are swollen, they are called "bidhana," and if they are thin, they are called "hayla" (as Al-Wael mentioned in a phone call on Monday, July 17, 2025). Hayla is the cardamom pod that has been used since ancient times in preparing coffee, which makes it a symbol of welcome and generosity. The abundance of cardamom in coffee is an indication of good hospitality and the prestigious social status of the host. Therefore, the presence of "hayla" may be noticeable in coffee and Najdi decorations, a symbolic indication of welcome and generosity.

Abstract and repetitive plant forms (leaves and branches) reflect common symbols in Islamic architecture, signifying continuity and growth. The quality and precision of the ornamentation, as well as the use of plant and geometric motifs, may indicate the homeowner's social standing and priorities. This aligns with what Al-Anbar (1999) pointed out in his study on traditional door decorations in Najdi architecture, where he explained that the richness and precision of the ornamentation reflect the level of affluence and social status of the building owner within the local urban context.



Figure (9) The Najdi rose from the Al-Tuwajri House in Al-Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

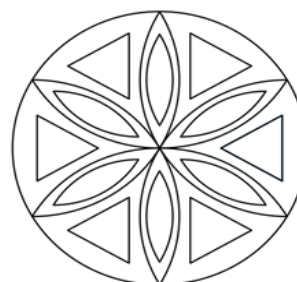


Figure (10) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The Najdi rose

Type of decoration: Plant decoration

Description and significance: The craftsman employed the Najdi rose in architectural decorations in Najd to express nature, beauty, and love. He began drawing the Najdi rose decoration from a central point, dividing the circle into six decorative units in the form of radially symmetrical petals extending toward the circumference of the circle. Between each leaf, triangular spaces appeared, filled with smaller, repeated triangular decorations, creating visual balance and a repetitive rhythm, as the units were repeated in the same size and direction, reflecting a sense of harmony and balance.

The shapes of the Najdi rose vary according to the craftsman's idea and the homeowner's request, but it is often executed with white plaster decorations or painted with pigments on Najdi doors. The Najdi rose is not just a random decorative element, but rather an expression of beauty, love, and happiness, and of the balance between natural beauty and the symbolic dimension in Najdi architecture. Sanusi and Fayoumi (2023) mentioned that the Najdi craftsman used flowers because they bring joy and happiness to the soul. Flowers touch the feelings, stir emotions, and also symbolize love. Perhaps the Najdi craftsman used them abundantly in his decorations to fill the house with love and happiness.

The rose or flower element did not appear only in Najdi decorations and the local environment. It is considered "one of the beautiful elements that most peoples have excelled in drawing and engraving since ancient times in various forms and varieties, demonstrating human love and optimism for them. The most common appearance of flowers in engravings was in a modest geometric style based on highlighting their petals by engraving their surroundings, or defining their external features with compressed lines. The Baydana can be considered the most famous example of a flower" (Al-Wael, 2011, p. 147). This ornamentation is one of the radial geometric patterns prevalent in Islamic and Najdi architecture, reflecting the principle of unity in diversity, a hallmark of Islamic arts. This ornamentation may also allude to what Al-Naeem's study (2021) confirmed: that the various patterns, shapes, colors, and levels of ornamentation in Najdi architecture were all used as tools for indirect visual communication,

helping residents distinguish houses and the different functions of doors within the traditional Najdi urban environment.



Figure (11) The crescent and star from the Al-Tuwaijri House in Al-Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

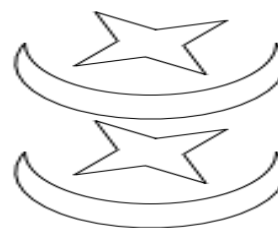


Figure (12) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The The crescent and star

Type of decoration: Symbolic decoration

Description and meaning: The decoration is based on the formation of a sunken wall representing the crescent and star. It was executed with gradual curved lines that trace the shape of the crescent in a horizontal direction, thus giving a sense of movement and curvature. In the center of the composition and above the crescent, the star appears in a simple form composed of intersecting diagonal lines, achieving visual prominence and making it a focal point of attraction.

The crescent and star are considered symbols associated with the Islamic religion. Qanso (1995) stated that the crescent and star "are two Islamic symbols that often appear in religious images. They signify optimism. Muslims are optimistic about the crescent moon at the beginning of the month, and they determine the times of their holidays based on the crescent moon. Their Hijri calendar is divided based on the lunar year" (p. 108).

Sanussi and Fayoumi (2023) indicated that the symbolism of the crescent and star was known during the era of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) through their use on banners, due to the crescent's association with the Islamic nation and itself. It also has philosophical significance, symbolizing goodness, fertility, perfection, completion, and a connection to collective feeling.

The shape (X) appears as an abstract symbol of the shape of a star or it may be a symbol of the four directions (north, south, east, west). It is likely that these decorations do not necessarily carry intended symbolic meanings, as they are likely to have been passed down through generations as inherited artistic traditions, rather than as an expression of specific meanings or symbols with intellectual significance. Moreover, their continued use has been linked to the aesthetic and craft customs of the inhabitants of the Najd region, without full awareness of their original meanings or symbolic backgrounds, which has made them a decorative element inherent in the visual identity of Najdi architecture rather than a symbolic indication



Figure (13) The sprinkler from Bayt al-Tuwaijri in Al Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

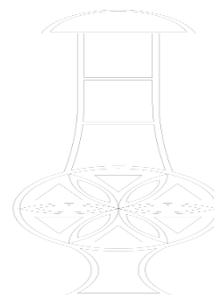


Figure (14) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The sprinkler

Decoration type: Symbolic decoration

Description and meaning: The visible decoration represents a sunken plaster composition in the shape of a sprinkler (a traditional tool for sprinkling perfume and water), crafted in a simplified decorative style that combines symbolic and abstract forms. The design consists of an extended cylindrical base ending at the top with a small circular cover. In the center of the base is a large circular disc filled with radial decoration divided into triangles and opposing internal spaces in the shape of a Najdi rose or a bidhana. Al-Wael (2011) indicated that the sprinkler is the vessel in which rose water is placed and sprinkled on guests. It is characterized by a long neck, and its

composition relies on small slanted lines or other decorations, with a semicircular base often decorated with geometric patterns, especially the central circle, which the craftsman uses to engrave the star, flower, or bidhana.

The craftsman may have employed the “marsh” as a visual symbol that reflects good reception in particular, and hospitality and welcoming visitors are considered among the most important social aspects in Najd. Therefore, the “marsh” may be one of the decorative symbols that embody the values of welcome and generosity in Najdi architecture in particular, and it is often drawn at the entrance of guests. According to Al-Suwaih (2024), “drawing the decoration (marsh) at the top of the door frame indicates welcoming the guest and receiving him with the most beautiful way that can be given to him” (p. 131). Thus, the “marsh” in Najdi decorations was transformed from a tool with a function into a decorative unit with social connotations in the traditional architectural scene.

The decorative motif of the sprinkler can reflect a symbolic meaning of the social value of hospitality and welcoming guests, a cornerstone of social identity in Najdi society. This may explain the placement of the decoration on house facades or at entrances, reinforcing its meaning as a visual sign of welcome. The circular shape in the center of the motif symbolizes perfection and unity, while the vertical extension of the neck reflects the continuity of giving. These visual connotations reinforce the meaning of generosity within a visual semiotic system that expresses social meanings through geometric composition and reinterprets everyday objects within an artistic decorative language that expresses the identity and aesthetic values of the community .



Figure (15) The chain or qitan from the Al-Tuwaijri House in Al-Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)



Figure (16) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The chain or qitan

Type of decoration: Symbolic decoration

Description and meaning: There are many names for the repetitive gypsum decoration, which is usually used to frame the firewood house, niches, and windows. This decoration usually consists of interconnected units resembling chained rings or interlocking links. The decoration may represent a qitan, which is a rope or decorative ribbon. This decoration consists of a decorative plaster band extending in the form of a repetitive wavy line that defines the edges of the wall and frames the interior spaces. This decoration forms a regular visual rhythm resulting from the succession of small, identical curves, which gives the surface vitality and breaks the monotony of the flat wall. It is characterized by its visual sequence and rhythmic repetition.

These sequential motifs surrounding the architectural elements have been given various names. Al-Wael (2011) stated that "decorative bands woven into a chain-like pattern are among the elements that connect the elements. Chains are also found in door frames" (p. 154). As Al-Suwaih (2024) pointed out, this type of Najdi motif is called "qaitan," which are ornamental bands running along the entire length of the coffee table in a straight line. Qaitan is a zigzag band resembling an embroidered thread, executed in white plaster. This motif may carry symbolic connotations reflecting concepts such as interconnectedness, unity, and continuity, perhaps derived from its interconnected and continuous form.

Cord ornamentation represents a sequential visual system based on the principle of unity through repetition, as it can symbolize connection and continuity both on a formal level (the connection of lines) and on a cultural level (the interconnectedness of the components of the home and society). This repetition of the decorative unit highlights the craftsman's ability to transform simple lines into a decorative language with visual and cultural significance.



Figure (17) The diamond of Bayt al-Tuwajiri in Al Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

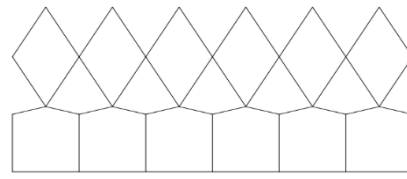


Figure (18) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The diamond

Type of decoration: Geometric decoration

Description and significance: Geometric shapes are elements of Najdi decorative composition. Among these shapes is the diamond, known as the diamond shape, which is widely used in plaster and woodwork. Diamonds are usually arranged in a sequential manner, and the diamond may be formed from the combination of other decorations. The composition consists of opposite, semi-triangular shapes that alternate to form a continuous row that resembles diamond units when they overlap.

Formally, the design is based on a regular linear rhythm through the equal repetition of units, giving the surface a sense of harmony and continuity. According to Al-Wael (2015), "Diamonds are complementary shapes to the other elements in geometric decorative units. In many cases, the diamond acts as a repetition point used between units as a separator, or as a row of diamonds in the middle of triangular shapes that harmonize with them. Rows of diamonds may extend to form a network or cell" (p. 91). Both Sanusi and Fayoumi (2023) also pointed to the symbolic dimension of the diamond geometric shape, as the diamond connotes symbolic connotations related to stability, steadfastness, and balance. This reinforces the presence of these shapes in traditional architectural decoration as visual symbols with symbolic dimensions. It is clear that the use of diamonds in Najdi decorations confers stability and rhythm when the diamond is repeated within the traditional decorative landscape.

This repetition can be considered a visual metaphor for the idea of continuity and intergenerational communication in Najdi construction, where the craftsman reproduces the same form generation after generation as a distinctive mark of the local environment.



Figure (19) The circle from the Al-Tuwajiri House in Al-Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

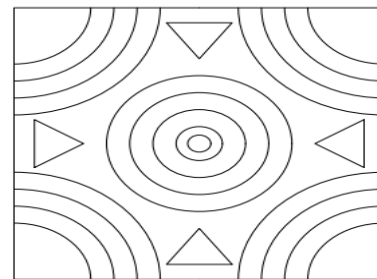


Figure (20) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The circle

Type of decoration: Geometric decoration

Description and significance: The apparent decoration is based on a central circular composition consisting of several concentric circles engraved in a recessed manner in the surface of the wall. The formation begins from a small point in the middle, representing the center of the composition, and the circles gradually expand outward, creating a sense of circular movement and visual gradation.

The circular shape is considered one of the most prominent geometric shapes in the decorations of all civilizations, especially Islamic art. The circle is the origin of all geometric shapes in Islamic art, and as in Najdi decorations, it is the basis for the drawing of the Najdi rose and the beydhana, and some other geometric shapes. Al-Muhammadi (2023) added that the circle symbolizes eternity, continuity, and permanence. It has no beginning or end. In all cultures, it refers to the sun or the earth, the universe, and the planets. Circles are used to represent familiar objects such as circles, spheres, manyfruit shapes, shells, and galaxies. Craftsmen also frequently used the circle, sometimes alone, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes adjacent. The circle is a shape that cannot be drawn

without a centre, and it is the fixed relationship between the center and all points on the circumference. In ancient civilizations, the circle symbolized God Almighty, as He is the center and the first (Sanussi and Fayoumi, 2023).

This ornamentation may reflect a profound geometric vision linked to the idea of order and integration. It is a visual composition that transcends mere decoration, reaching a philosophical dimension connected to humanity's understanding of the world and its place within it. Furthermore, its use in Najdi ornamentation is a fundamental visual structural element, forming the basis for the Najdi rose or the baydhanah motif. This reflects the artisan's understanding of the repetitive system, which is based on a balance between unity and multiplicity—a core principle in Islamic arts.



Figure (21) The triangle from the Al-Tuwajiri House in Al-Majma'ah (photographed by the researcher)

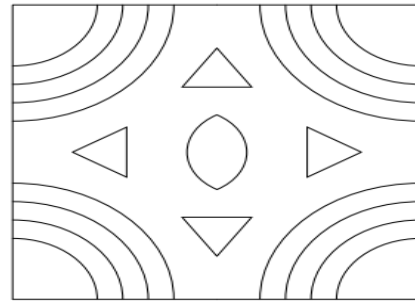


Figure (22) Analytical drawing of the decoration of The triangle

Decoration type: Geometric decoration

Description and significance: The visible decoration represents a gypsum composition based on the triangle as the basic decorative unit. The triangles are repeated regularly in successive horizontal rows, creating a linear visual rhythm that enhances the continuity of the composition along the wall. The regularity of the sizes and consistency of the directions also give the composition a strict geometric character, reflecting the organized simplicity of Najdi decorations.

The triangle is one of the most prominent aesthetic and functional decorations in traditional Najdi architecture. The triangle shape is used in Najdi architecture to strengthen traditional construction and add architectural solutions such as the lahuj decoration, which is the hollow triangles that allow the sun and air to enter. Triangles in plaster decorations also play a role in filling the spaces between decorations and occupying space, as confirmed by Al-Wael (2015). Small triangles fill the spaces between large decorative units, and are a basic element that enters into the composition of complete decorative units. They are characterized by the ability to move, shift, and flip, as well as to pull any of its corners without losing its characteristic as a triangle. It is a solution for correcting irregular shapes with extreme precision because it is a manual and not mechanical work.

The triangle is an important geometric shape in Najdi ornamentation and has multiple connotations. In general, the triangle can symbolize stability and strength, especially when its base is at the bottom and its apex at the top. For craftsmen, the triangle symbolizes integration and balance. The position of the triangle also has connotations. When upright, it signifies stability, strength, and standing on firm ground. When upside down, it represents conflict, tension, and nervousness. In the Najdi home, the triangle may represent the mother, father, and children, as they constitute the three sides of the triangle in the home (Sanussi and Fayoumi, 2023). The triangle may represent the Najdi craftsman's structural thinking before it becomes mere ornamentation, reflecting his concern for balancing technique and aesthetic sense. Triangles also embody a spirit of simplicity, spontaneity, and unpretentiousness, which are fundamental characteristics of Najdi architecture in general. The triangle can be a simple geometric shape with a positive connotation in popular memory, as Al-Shuqair (2023) noted, linking it to the number three. The proverb "A pot only rests on three" emphasizes the chances of success and sound judgment. The number three is also used to confirm the existence of something and eliminate the possibility of chance, as in the proverb "The third time's the charm."

An analysis of the sample of gypsum decorations in the Al-Tuwajiri House (geometric, vegetal, and symbolic) reveals that Najdi architecture in Al-Majma'ah is not limited to decoration, but rather constructs a visual system that conveys the values of society and its environment. The study revealed a predominant presence of rhythmic and symmetrical geometric shapes (rhomb, circle, triangle), reinforcing the meanings of stability and balance. This is contrasted by the selective use of plant motifs (such as the Najdi rose and the beydhanah/hayla) as metaphors for life and abundance. Symbols (the crescent and star, the marsh, the qitan) revealed direct religious and social

connotations, such as religiosity, hospitality, and cohesion. These results confirm the interplay of aesthetics and functionality; the decorations contribute to the treatment of climate and surfaces, while preserving identity and highlighting the uniqueness of the complex within the Najdi space. Thus, the house demonstrates the ability of decorative symbols to transform into a visual language whose meanings can be read through form, composition, and context.

Chapter Four: Results and Conclusions

Results:

The current research reached several key findings that illustrate the traditional architectural motifs in the Tuwajiri House and their symbolic connotations:

1. The Tuwajiri House is distinguished by its unique decorative richness, combining a variety of elements with meticulous execution, making it one of the most important examples embodying the artistic character of Najdi architecture in Al Majma'ah.
2. The study revealed the integration of the house's decorative elements. The decorations were not executed in isolation from the building, but rather harmonized with the architectural rhythm of the entrances, the portico, and the majlis. This reflects the craftsman's awareness of the relationship between decoration and the architectural space and the financial capacity and status of the Tuwajiri family.
3. The gypsum decorations in the Al-Tuwajiri House embody a symbolic visual discourse that unites the aesthetic and functional dimensions, expressing the identity of Najdi architecture as a semantic language that reflects the visual consciousness of the local community.
4. The gypsum decorations embody a symbolic and cultural dimension that reflects the system of social values in Najd, such as generosity, solidarity, and religiosity. These values have been transformed into visual symbols within the traditional architectural framework of Najd.
5. The gypsum decorations in Najdi architecture constitute an integrated symbolic and semantic system that transcends the aesthetic function to an expressive one, acting as a visual medium that conveys social and cultural values.
6. The gypsum decorations in the Tuwajiri House represent a living artistic and architectural memory, expressing the interaction of Najdi craftsmen with their environment and documenting the practices and aesthetic styles of the local community.
7. The study confirmed that the Najdi decorative dictionary, with its formal systems and symbolic connotations, is a rich resource that can be employed in contemporary design without compromising authenticity.

Recommendations:

The study concludes with a set of recommendations that can contribute to the preservation of heritage architecture, the development of methods for studying it, and the analysis of its aesthetic symbols.

1. High-resolution photographic and digital documentation of the Tuwajiri House decorations (site maps, sections, measurements, drawings, and 3D imaging).
2. Preparing a restoration guide that takes into account the original materials (gypsum) and traditional implementation techniques, along with a periodic maintenance protocol.
3. Developing contemporary design models inspired by geometric/plant/symbolic elements within educational projects, museums, and facades.
4. Conducting comparative studies within the Sudair region and the rest of the Najd region to measure the variation in connotations depending on the environment, function, and time period.
5. Creating explanatory panels at the site of the house that explain the symbolic meanings to visitors, supporting cultural tourism.

Conclusions:

This study reveals that the gypsum decorations in the Al-Tuwaijri House in Al-Majma'ah Governorate were not merely superficial aesthetic elements, but rather embodied an integrated symbolic and cultural system reflecting the social, religious, and environmental values of Najdi society. The results showed a rich diversity in decorative units, encompassing geometric, floral, and symbolic motifs. Geometric shapes were associated with stability and balance, while floral motifs symbolized life and abundance. Symbols such as the crescent, star, and sprinkler expressed piety, generosity, and family cohesion.

The study also demonstrated that the decorations in the house were integrated with the architectural elements, reflecting the craftsman's awareness of the relationship between decoration and space, and underscoring the role of Najdi architecture in expressing the identity of the local community.

From this perspective, the Al-Tuwaijri House can be considered an architectural and cultural model that documents the decorative arts of Najd and provides a rich foundation for re-employing decorative values in contemporary designs without compromising their authenticity.

الاستنتاجات:

يتضح من خلال الدراسة أن الزخارف الجصية في بيت التويجري بمحافظة المجمعة لم تكن مجرد عناصر جمالية سطحية بل جسدت منظومة رمزية وثقافية متكاملة تعكس القيم الاجتماعية والدينية والبيئية للمجتمع النجدي، وقد كشفت النتائج عن تنوع ثري في الوحدات الزخرفية بين الزخارف الهندسية والنباتية والرمزية حيث ارتبطت الأشكال الهندسية بالثبات والاتزان، في حين حملت الزخارف النباتية رمزاً للحياة والوفرة، أما الرموز مثل الهلال والنجمة والمرش فقد عبرت عن التدين والكرم والترابط الأسري.

كما أظهرت الدراسة أن الزخارف في بيت التويجري جاءت متكاملة مع العناصر المعمارية، مما يعكس وعي الحرفي بعلاقة الزخرفة بالفراغ، ويؤكد دور العمارة النجدية في التعبير عن هوية المجتمع المحلي، ومن هذا المنطلق، يمكن اعتبار بيت التويجري نموذجاً معمارياً وثقافياً يوثق فنون الزخرفة في نجد، ويوفر قاعدة غنية لإعادة توظيف القيم الزخرفية في تصميمات معاصرة دون الإخلال بأصالتها.

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