'Harmandir har(i) jio sajya merae Lal jio
Har(i) tis mein rahiya samaye Ram'

'My Lord has Himself created this Harmandir and He has merged in it'
(Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Panna 542)

IDENTIFICATION AND LISTING
OF DIFFERENT KINDS
OF SURFACE DECORATIONS
The golden embellishments of the walls and ceiling of the sanctum are a magnificent example of the gilding work done anywhere in the world as the sheer golden impact is irresistibly amazing to the common eye as the devotee reflects upon the Divine glory of the Creator.
CHAPTER 3

The grandeur of the workmanship takes one beyond the realm of the mortal and provokes one to contemplate the celestial and the pristine, giving credence to the lines from the *Holy Guru Granth Sahib* – indeed the Lord Himself seems to have created the Harmandir and merged with it. As one looks at the embellishments of the sanctum sanctorum one is truly spellbound with the exquisite beauty and superb execution. It evokes devotion and piety in the soul as one sits in the inner chambers. One is mesmerized by the delicacy of the embellishments in various hues and myriad forms. The sight in itself is enough to transport one to the heights of Divine ecstasy.

With art coming into contact with the Sikh mind, there emerged in the Punjab a distinct style of architecture. This style has been interpreted by Percy Brown as a ‘late’ form of the Mughal style of architecture. But the Sikh architecture is at once striking and attractive and presents a certain character of its own although its exponents adopted the Muslim architecture and harmonized it with the Hindu style. Specimens of this style are the Sikh shrines at Amritsar. The most striking example of the synthesis wrought by the Sikh mind in Muslim styles of architecture is the Golden Temple which may be said to represent Sikh architecture in all its distinctive features. It testifies to the fact that the Sikhs had acquired skill in adopting patterns and motifs suiting their own taste, philosophy and way of living with the upper half of its exteriors covered with golden plates and the lower sheathed in marble, and with the interiors profusely decorated with fresco-paintings and filigree embellishments, the Golden Temple is without doubt, the acme of Sikh architecture.
The Structure, Architecture and Decorations of the Edifice

The main entrance porch has a dome in modern structure with a big clock fixed just below it. The sacred tank which holds the temple in its midst like a lotus flower, is 150 metres square and 17 feet deep. Running around the outer edge of the tank is a marble pavement (Parkarma) 60 feet wide, with marble slabs of various shapes, designs and colours arranged in vivid, geometrical patterns.

“The architecture of the Darshani Deorhi is extremely impressive. The kiosk like architectural features on the top of the Deorhi is modeled on the Bengal-Mughal chhatri style. The gate frame of the Darshani Deorhi is 10 feet by 8 feet. The wooden portals attached to it are made of shisham (Dalbergia sisoo) wood, and are six inches thick, covered with silver. The sides of the door have square and rectangular panels inlaid in artistic ivory work. There are geometrical and floral designs. Birds and animals (viz. lions, tigers and deer) are depicted in these designs. Green and red colours are used in the ivory inlay of the Darshani Deorhi. The overall effect of the craftsmanship is extremely rhythmical.

According to one version, the portals were got prepared by one Bhai Des Raj in AD 1765 i.e. during the misl period out of voluntary contributions made by the people, and the inlay in ivory was done by Muslim craftsmen of Chiniot [now in Pakistan].

A causeway, about 60 metres long, spans the water on the western side of the tank to connect the Temple with the Darshani Deorhi. The causeway has balustrades on either side. Each balustrade is crowned with elegant lanterns made of copper-gilt. They number nine on each side. Reaching the centre of the

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tank, the causeway opens into a platform, 20 meters square, over which the Temple (52-meters square) stands.

**The Harmandir Sahib Premises**

Special features of the central structure of the Harmandir Sahib are the balconies of the windows which are literally perched on carved brackets, low fluted domes and arches and other structural embellishments of similar order. The square building of the Harmandir has a dome-shaped roof, plated with copper-gilt. The central shrine is a two-storeyed structure over which rises a low-fluted majestic dome in copper covered with gold. The dome is designed as a lotus flower.

Architecturally, the dome presents neither exclusively the Hindu form nor the Muslim one. It shows an evolution of its own, which can be called a synthesis of the two styles. The central dome presents a splendidly sparkling appearance in sunshine. The glittering beauty of the dome has been a subject of absorbing interest for Punjabi poets, singing the *mahima* (glory) of the Harmandir.

The combination of several large, medium and miniature domes of gilded copper create a unique and dazzling effect, which is rendered all the more ethereal by the reflection in the waters of the *sarовар* below. Four *chhatris* (umbrella like structures) with fluted metal cupolas stand at each corner. The floor of the upper storey is paved with *Nanak Shahi* bricks [old bricks which have a typical size and structure that is unique of that period]. These red bricks are broad on the top and narrow at the bottom, and stand exquisitely laid in very fine brick-mortar and lime. They have a fine black clay lining too. The frequent introduction of windows supported on brackets and the enrichment of arches with numerous foliation on the first floor give a picturesque appearance. Intricate designs on marble inlaid with stones of different hues on the entrance to the inner sanctuary, are eye-catching in their excellence. The Darshani Deorhi,
infact, prepares the pilgrim for the glorious sights to come. A large hall forms the interior of the Harmandir. The holy Granth rests under a magnificent canopy in the centre of this hall. Fine filigree and enamel work in gold decorate the interiors of this hall. The door on the southern side of the central hall provides the approach to the water in the holy tank. The steps there are called Har-ki-Pauri. The staircase adjoining Har-ki-Pauri leads to the first floor of the shrine.

There is a small square pavilion surmounted by a low-fluted golden dome in this storey. The interior of the pavilion is set with pieces of mirrors of different sizes and shapes. These vie for attention with the semi-precious stones of many colours. The hall is 42 square feet in area. Its mezzanine has been designed so as to leave a square opening in the centre to facilitate a view of the ground floor from the balconies. This ratifies the Sikh tenets that there can be nothing above the Holy Granth Sahib. It is said that originally the first floor was a pavilion where the Sikh Gurus sat in meditation. The hall was profusely embellished with floral designs during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The inlay work on the ceiling as well as the walls of the Shish Mahal, is reminiscent of the great skill of our artists. This part of the building is now used for akhand paths by devotees from all over the world. The walls of the hall are decorated with floral designs and its arches are ornamented with verses from the Guru Granth Sahib. These are reproduced in letters of gold. This seems to be an imitation of the Muslim practice of engraving verses from the Holy Quran. The Sikh artists, however, have maintained the excellence of their art and juxtaposed it with tasteful renditions from the Gurbani which are given pride of place. The walls of the hall stand inlaid with figures and floral designs adorned and studded at places with precious stones. This Jaratkari (craftsmanship) reminds us of the pietre dura tradition. It somewhat resembles the Mughal technique used for the decoration of the Taj Mahal at Agra. But the Jaratkari of the Golden Temple has an edge over the Jaratkari of the Taj because the former has human figures also besides the usual floral designs so characteristic of the Taj. The Sikh artists seem to have evolved
Marble Flooring

Courtesy: Walking with The Golden Historical Gardens of Punjab
these motifs from their concepts of life as human figures in yogic poses can be glimpsed in these panels.

The walls of the first floor contain fine art work in plaster of Paris too. It has been technically called gagch work. The ceiling of the central dome is admittedly a work of great craftsmanship. The surface decorations on the porch of the first floor display fine naqqashi executed in gold and are embedded with semi-precious stones of various colours and mirrors of different shapes and varieties. Likewise the walls of the stairs leading to the second floor abound in some of the rare master pieces of Sikh paintings.

Speaking of the lavish embellishments and the colourful decorations of the Golden Temple, Percy Brown opines: “As an example not so much of architectural style but of religious emotion materialized in marble, glass, colours and metal, the Golden Temple at Amritsar is equaled only by the Dragon Pagoda in Ragoon; the former symbolizes the faith of the Sikhs and the latter is the highest expression in a very similar range of material of another Indian religion, that of the Buddhists”.

The desire to see their temples gloriously constructed impels the devotees even today to present their offerings in the form of marble slabs and gold. The

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5 Ibid
6 Till very recently no attempt had been made at any level to systematically document the various forms of embellishments of the Golden Temple from the perspective of any art historian. Because of their great intrinsic value it is necessary that a meticulous record be maintained of the workmanship, the techniques, the materials, the artisans, the themes and the specific areas of attention as regards the contents and composition of the embellishments. No doubt there may have been articulate registering of the people involved in the work done on the embellishments at some earlier date or when they were being made. The artisans must have some tracings, drawings etc, to go on, but with the passage of time these have been lost to history and at present no documentation remains, underlining all the more, the absolute significance of the present study in carefully putting together a record of the various embellishments. It is with this intent that the present scholar proposes to showcase the surface decorations within the Harmandir, its ancillary shrines and see how these embellishments have become the role model for subsequent Sikh shrines around the world.
slabs are laid at various places in the Temple with inscriptions carved on them giving the names of the donors and the amounts donated by them.

As already mentioned, the Harmandir owes its present structure to the joint efforts of the misls. It began to take shape from the year AD 1765 when the Sikhs had successfully beaten back Ahmad Shah Abdali and his hordes. The philanthropy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh contributed greatly to the ethereal beauty of the Golden Temple through the marble laying and gold-plating which came much later through the great reverence of the Maharaja for this nerve centre of Sikh ideology and power.

The architecture of the Golden Temple is marked by the beauty of its superb setting. The overall effect of the Temple is very striking. The Central shrine rising from the midst of a big tank, with its enchanting reflection in the clear water, with only a single bridge to reach it, imparts the entire edifice a heavenly look.

The Surface Decorations and their Techniques

There has been no chronicle testifying to the documentation of the embellishments being planned and carried out at any stage in history. Even during the times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh the artisans were drawn from various regions and enjoyed royal patronage but there was never any record of the drawings done or the later work being improved upon in any manner. The workers carried out their tasks as if doing so with a devotion that would attain them spiritual gain and not mere monetary inputs and earthly fame. The present study has delved deep into the living and recorded evidences of the different types of work done to give the embellishments their present day shape. The surface decorations can be categorized into various types and forms. Although requiring great skill of the artiste they are evidently remarkable for being pure
The animal and human figures are so enmeshed in the trellis work of floral patterns that they seem at one with them. This is almost symbolic of man's equity with his environment.
labour of love or sewa. These surface decorations must really have been and continue to be remarkable in their beauty whether it is gach work or kach work, peitra dura or the golden gilding work.

It is pertinent here to attempt a detailed listing of the different types of techniques used in the surface decorations within the Golden Temple Complex. It is also necessary to identify the sites where these techniques have furbished the décor and elan’ of this most sanctified of shrines in Sikhism.

1. **Gold Plating or Mohra Kashi i Chittrai**: This is the art of plating a surface with gold leaf and embellishing it further with embossed patterns in relief that stand out with a beauty all their own. There have been different techniques of gold plating used in the Golden Temple.

2. **Marble inlay work or Jaratkari**: Also known as peitra dura. It has been used on the exterior of the lower half of the sanctum. It has been directly influenced by the existing Mughal buildings of Agra in Uttar Pradesh. In this technique the inlay work was done by using various precious and semi-precious stones for inlay in marble.

3. **Flooring [Marble]**: The entire flooring within the Golden Temple Complex is of marble of various hues and many interesting geometric patterns. It is most evident around the parkarma or circumambulatory path around the Harmandir and the sarovar.

4. **Kach or Mirror work**: The technique of embedding circular, small mirrors in plaster of Paris [PoP] / gypsum in a myriad of delicate patterns is rooted in traditional Mughal, Pahari and Rajasthani themes. The size of the kach or mirror varies. This work can be seen on the walls and ceiling of the upper storey.
5. **Gach work or embossing in PoP / Gypsum**: It is the technique of embossing patterns on PoP or gypsum base with the help of moulds. These embossed patterns or mouldings are decorated and embellished further by being painted in beautiful, rich colours most commonly red, gold, green and royal blue. This work is found extensively in the upper areas of the inner sanctum.

6. **Wood work**: There are references to the woodwork in the Golden Temple but at present most of the surfaces have been plated or have been replaced.

7. **Frescoes / Murals**: Fresco is a technique of wall painting. In the Golden Temple we find these frescoes on the walls of the first floor of the inner sanctum. These are beautiful panels of painted floral patterns in vivid hues done on a light base. Murals depicting episodes in the lives of the Gurus are used in the Baba Atal shrine. These frescoes take root from the Mughal, Pahari and Rajasthani techniques.

8. **Brick work**: Glazed bricks have been laid in interesting geometric patterns that tantalize one with their uniqueness and exquisite attention to detail. This work is found on the roof of the top floor of the Harmandir.

9. **Marble carving**: This is the technique of delicately carving relief patterns onto the marble panels around the peitra dura work. Another interesting aspect of this carving is the lattice work or the carving out of lacy patterns in marble and cutting out artistic spaces in the marble to allow the air to circulate through. This technique of *jaali* work was very popular in the Mughal era.
The ceiling of the sanctum is a saga of beauty that could have been equaled only by a resplendent display of jewelry and ornaments placed together closely on a surface. The colours of the surface and their positioning are most pleasing to the eye and show the dexterity of the artisan in reflecting his devotion onto the surface decorations.
10. **Calligraphy:** Around the ceiling worked into the *gach* is very fine calligraphy in gold painted letters of *Gurmukhi* in a running hand that decorate the arches of the first floor. The calligraphy is of incantations or *patth* which are elaborately picked out in magnificent designs with intricate borders all around in a vivid kaleidoscope of colours.

This research study is, thus, an examination of how the above techniques have been used singly and in combination all over the precincts of the Golden Temple Complex. The extent of each technique, its merging with other techniques to bring out a well balanced façade and how these techniques are being cared for and supplemented in the present day will all be discussed subsequently to obtain a rationalization of the embellishments in terms of maintenance and preservation. Recent trends in the preservation of this significant historical edifice will also be gone into and the expertise being used will be detailed appropriately.

Till very recently no attempt had been made at any level to systematically document the various forms of embellishments of the Golden Temple from the perspective of any art historian. Because of their great intrinsic value it is necessary that a meticulous record be maintained of the workmanship, the techniques, the materials, the artisans, the themes and the specific areas of attention as regards the contents and composition of the embellishments. No doubt there may have been articulate registering of the people involved in the work done on the embellishments at some earlier date or when they were being made. The artisans must have some tracings, drawings etc, to go on, but with the passage of time these have been lost to history and at present no documentation remains, underlining all the more, the absolute significance of the present study in carefully putting together a record of the various embellishments. It is with this intent that the present scholar proposes to showcase the surface decorations
within the Harmandir, its ancillary shrines and see how these embellishments have become the role model for subsequent Sikh shrines around the world.

Presented in the subsequent chapters is the detailed discussion of the various forms of embellishments, their location and their content. As the surface decorations are placed at specific sites within the Golden Temple a large number of slides were needed to adequately capture the true glory of the magnificent work.
The calligraphy visible amongst the embellishments makes one reflect upon the word of the Guru as one is transported into the deepest state of rapture when faced with the splendour of the gash work in Prussian blue, crimson, emerald green and gold.