



Original Article

Islamic Patterns in Persian's Herat School of Painting: A Study on Baysonghori Shahnameh

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ABSTRACT

One of the characteristics of the Herat School is that it has continuously used various decorative motifs in painting. That is why in the present paper some samples from the Herat School have been selected and analysed to illustrate and explain the difference and superiority of the Herat School over other Persian painting schools. The paintings of Shahnameh-y-Baysonqori contain many decorative motifs such as plants, animals, geometrical motifs, decorations of inscriptions and other architectural elements with highly precise and detailed drawings and decorative patterns. The Persian painters in the Timurid dynasty have used Islamic patterns including arabesque and geometric motifs as decorations. Iranian painters used arabesque shapes to create movement, rhythm, emotion, and space to represent the beauty of objects inherent in the beauty of God.

Keywords: Persian Painting, Herat School, Shahnameh, Motifs, Arts, Islamic Civilization.

Introduction

Persian miniature paintings are small paintings on paper. Although there is an equally well-established Persian tradition of wall-painting, the survival rate and state of preservation of miniature paintings are better, and miniatures are the best-known form of Persian painting in the West. Miniature paintings became a significant Persian genre in the 13th century, receiving Chinese influence after the Mongol conquests. The highest point in the tradition was reached in the 15th and 16th centuries. The tradition continued under the Western influence to have attracted many modern exponents.

The Herat School is the most important school in the Timurid dynasty and Persian history. It has played a significant role in developing Persian forms and colors with Chinese influence during the Mongol dynasty. However, there has yet to be a comprehensive research on this era. The majority of research on paintings of the Herat School and the Timurid dynasty are introductory. It confines the research to forms, certain shapes, and colors'. To date, there has been no study that analyzed the shape of the arabesque and geometric design used in the Herat school of painting using iconography and iconology.

The present research identifies arabesques motifs known as Islamic patterns to show a better understanding of differences of the Herat school from other schools. The present project analyses selected paintings from the *Shahnameh-y-Baysonquri* that uses Islamic patterns based on the Panofsky theory of iconography and iconology. It explores the meaning of arabesque motifs in the Herat school of painting.

Literature Review

Islamic Art

Burckhardt developed many comprehensive theories concerning the lack of illustration due to man's status in Islam.¹ In Islam, there is a clear attribute of the uniqueness of God as the Creator and man as His beloved creation. Man is directed by God and follows His will. A fundamental principle of Islamic arts is that there is no God except God and there is nothing like him. There is no God except Allah. The nature of His existence is Himself, and He is eternal and everlasting. God is the highest and has the most sublime power (Surah Al Imran, verse 255).

Islamic art does not need to offer figurative meanings. How can one describe a God that cannot be seen and nothing is like Him? Islamic artists have found an expression about its correctness through geometric shapes and paintings of plants as well as calligraphy patterns. Al-Faruqi believes that Islam is the only religion that does not require illustrations to prove its beliefs.²

Unlike Western art which has realistic visuals, Islamic illustrations are more abstract where the plants, branches, leaves, and flowers are woven and put together.

Khazaie reviewed the artworks of the early centuries of Islam until today and concluded that you could see that the "ornament" has a special position in Islamic art.³ One of the major forms of art in Muslim countries throughout different periods, especially in Iran, was decorative motifs that are rooted in the religious beliefs and traditions. Artists were eager to offer their works in the form of beautiful designs. These artists believed that although people might not understand the message and the value and the symbolic implications of their works, they would at least decorate rooms and achieve a special value and status one day.

Khazaie described abstract motifs in the art of the Muslim world as a symbolic display representing the basic principles of culture and identity.⁴ These are not just limited to one Muslim country, but are prevalent in all Islamic countries from Iran to Algeria and from Pakistan to Beirut and are recognized as an important element of Islamic art.

The Herat School of Painting

Pakbaz believes that morals are rooted in the ancient history and civilization of Iran.⁵ According to Ghirshman, the recording of decoration and visualization of manuscripts can be

¹ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*. (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc. 2009).180

² Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, *Al Tawhid: Its Implications on Thought and Life*. Vol. 4 (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought.1992).69

³ Mohammad Khazaie, "The arabesque: Its formation and religious devotion in early Islamic art of Persia" *Goya* 312, no.312 (2006):131.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Roein Pakbaz. *Persian Painting from the Past till Now*, (Tehran:Zarrin and Simin.2006).69

traced to the Manichaeism and the Sassanid dynasties in Iran.⁶ The remarkable progress of Manichaeism in this field was a result of ancient Iranian beliefs and traditions preserved for several centuries after the advent of Islam.

Ayatollahi stated that paintings and book illustrations flourished over three centuries from the 14th to the 17th century in Iran.⁷ This period was dominated by the Mongols and coincided with the climax of the Timurid and Safavid powers that formed after the Mongolian rule. This period contained foreign influences and reappeared in Persian paintings.

In Shayestehfar view, kings and princes during this period supported artists by conducting workshops in their courts to illustrate the literary works of Persian poets.⁸ The kings and rulers of the Timurid and Safavid eras admired and enjoyed Persian arts and literature. Establishing the royal workshops and supporting the best artists, they played a significant role in the progress and development of Persian painting. Artists seized this golden opportunity to express their aesthetic views and commemorate the sublime.

Marzban believes that from the 15th to the end of the 17th century in the Timurid and Safavid dynasties in Iran.⁹ According to Taheri, Timur founded the Timurid dynasty in the late 8th century.¹⁰ Timur invaded the northeast of Iran in the late 15th century. After the reign of the last king of the Timurid Sultan Husayn Bayqra, Shah Ismail, the founder of the Safavid dynasty conquered Tabriz in 1501 and called himself the king of the Safavid dynasty.

Marzban described the position and development of Persian painting during the Jalayerian and Mozaffarian eras when a great number of Iranian people became acquainted with the essence of abstract art.¹¹ The Timurid dynasty played a key role in helping to create a new collection of Iranian art and culture. In other words, the political, social and cultural conditions during the Timurid rule of Persia, the formation of the royal workshops and the gathering of the best artists and painters from all over the country led to significant advances in painting and book decoration.

The Timurid court supported artists presenting formal and informal styles of Persian works of art in painting. This meant that the king's tastes and desires were in illustrating manuscripts were satisfied, and several restrictions were imposed on the artists in the court.

According to Canby, the first era of the Timurid dynasty in Shiraz was safe from the invasion of Temuchin and became a centre for the preservation of cultural and artistic traditions of the past.¹²

The continuous evolution of modern paintings started with the migration of many artists from other important centers to the imperial workshops in Shiraz during the reign of Sultan

⁶ Roman Ghirshman, *Persian Art: The Parthian and Sassanian Dynasties, 249 BC-AD 651*. Vol. 3. (New York: Golden Press. 1962).87

⁷ Habibollah Ayatollahi, *the Book of Iran: The History of Iranian Art*. (London: Alhoda. 2003). 247.

⁸ Mahnaz Shayestehfar. "Relationship between Religion and Painting in Timurid Dynasty." *Paper presented at the University of Tarbiat Modarres*. 2000. Tehran.

⁹ Parviz Marzban. *A summary of the History of Art*. Vol 16th. (Tehran: Elmifarhangi. 2007). 89-90.

¹⁰ Abolghasem Taheri. *Political and Social History of Iran from Timor to Shah Abbas*. (Tehran: Elmifarhangi. 2006). 126-127.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Sheila Canby. *Islamic Art in Detail*. (New York: Harvard University Press. 2005). 120.

Iskandar(1412 AD). The exchange of experiences between different painting schools like Baghdad, Tabriz, Shiraz and the use of new ideas and tastes contributed to this evolution.

In the first half of the 15th century and at the time of Baysonqur, Persian painting was growing and the Herat School was born by gathering artists from schools in Shiraz, Baghdad, and Tabriz. The most striking characteristic of the Herat and Shiraz Schools was the utilization of Persian decorative motifs instead of Chinese.

In his viewpoint, Gray stated that the 14th century witnessed the complete development of Persian miniature painting.¹³ The painting in this era was extended beyond merely illustrated books and expanded to the decorative art in response to satisfying the wishes of the rulers.

The rapid growth and development of painting helped Persian painting flourish once again in the 15th and 16th centuries. This led to the creation of the Timurid and Safavid royal workshops of the best manuscripts in Persian poetry in Iran. Despite the influence of Chinese painting at the beginning of this period, the process of excluding foreign elements in Iranian paintings was observed in some schools, including the Schools of Shiraz and Herat in the Timurid period. Moreover, due to the artists' tendency towards realism in the 15th century, aesthetics in painting specific to Persia came into existence.

Robinson stated that in the 15th century, Iranian painting indissolubly linked with the name of Herat was known as the Timurid School of painting.¹⁴ Baysonqor Mirza, the son of Shahrukh and the grandson of Timur, was a man of letters and great calligrapher. He founded a library in Herat where he gathered the most talented painters, illustrators, calligraphers and bookbinders of his time. Baysonqor Mirza invited the most prominent scholars and artists in his court to create their artworks. Jafar Tabrizi (a prominent calligrapher), Mowlana Qiam-O-Dinn (illuminator), Pir Ahmed Bagh, Khajeh Mir Khalil and Qias-Al-Din are among the outstanding artists that started working in his court.

The Timurid court was a major centre for supporting artists, especially painters. This was supposed one of the reasons for the rise of book illustrations and manuscripts at that time. Among the manuscripts, Shahnameh was the most important and was repeatedly illustrated.

Hoseinirad explained that with their original composition, the rich palette of their natural elements, their indigo blue or golden skies, their interesting bushes, shining blossoms and luxurious trees, their narratives, at times intense and at others serene, the masterful design and execution of their characters and sponge-like rocks, their decorative architectural elements, and their attention to landscaping details meant that the paintings of this manuscript constitute masterpieces of their time.¹⁵

¹³ Basil Gray. *Persian Painting*. (Delhi. Gyan Publishing Pvt Ltd. 1930). 58.

¹⁴ Basil Robinson. *Fifteenth-Century Persian Painting: Problems and Issues*. (New York: NYU Press. 1933). 67.

¹⁵ Abdolmajid Hoseinirad. *Iranian Masterpieces of Persian Painting*. 2nd. (Tehran: Tehran Contemporary Art Museum. 2011). 8.

Islamic Patterns in the Herat School Painting

Hussein believes that although unity is an objective fact, it appears as a subjective and abstract concept to man.¹⁶ This and the spirit and mentality of the Semitic race are the reasons for abstractness of Islamic art. Islam is based on monotheism and unity cannot be constructed or stated with any diagram.

In these paintings, there are some visual features such as symmetry, bright and rich colours, bodies with bright and colourful clothes, gorgeous ceramics, long horizons, blue and golden sky, twisting rivers with abundant grass and beautiful landscapes with plants, flowers and blossoms and geometric relationships between the various levels and shapes.

Joharchi clarifies that an arabesque is a form of artistic decoration consisting of surface decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils or plain lines.¹⁷ Arabesque motifs refer to repetitive circular shapes and a maze of rules whose designs are often symmetrical and to some extent similar to twisting stems of plants. They are a design of a combination between plants and animals, or a combination of regular divisions that developed in the modeling of the Parthian period. Arabesque motifs are linked to each other with a line called sling. The sling of arabesque connects motifs to each other, making them non-uniform.

Sadati believes that abstraction means being free from the material.¹⁸ Worldly concerns had been seen in Iranian art before Islam. Use of abstract motifs and symbolism were normal in the past in Iran, and the related principles were formed and evolved on the subjective perception of the universe. Here the arabesque motifs named "Khataae" were developed and used as decorative motifs in the painting of Baysonghor Shahnameh.

These motifs include a bunch of flowers, buds, and leaves on twisted stems. They consist of beautiful combinations with a repeated mono-pattern like arabesques. They come from natural patterns and are less abstract than arabesque. They are designs of plants and floral motifs which move amidst an arabesque sling.

According to Naghani, geometric designs are abstract forms using a visual language of form, colour and line to create a composition which may exist with a degree of independence from visual references in the world.¹⁹ Abstraction along a continuum indicates a departure from reality to depict imagery in painting. This departure from accurate representation can be partial or complete. Art that aims the highest verisimilitude can be considered as abstract, at least theoretically, since perfect representation is likely to be exceedingly elusive.

Farid believes decorative elements in Persian painting are aligned with the overall effects and will lead the audience to the world of dreams.²⁰ These shapes and lines can be considered as a particular approach to expressing ethnic features. Generally, these shapes will remain in the subconscious mind of people of all ages.

¹⁶ Ahmad Awaad Mohamed Hussein. "The development of acoustics in the religious architecture of Cairo from the Arab conquest through the Ottoman period 640-1914". (MA. Diss). American University of Cairo. 2016. 14.

¹⁷ Ali Joharchi. *The World around Arabesque and Painting*. Vol.1st. (Tehran: Farayand. 1997).29.

¹⁸ Naser Sadati. "Comparative Geometric Patterns between Art of East and", *Art Bulletin* ,No 136.(2009):18.

¹⁹ Hosein Ebrahimi Naghani. "Abstract Motif of Herat School Painting, *Fine Art*, No 31. (2011):25.

²⁰ Amir Farid. "Curve in Persian Motifs", *Fine Art*, No 46. (2011):30.

Pattern Analysis in the Baysonghor Shahnameh

According to Nadarlou, the Baysonghor Shahnameh is the most important version of the Shahnameh of Herat School during the Baysonghor time.²¹ The famous Baysonghor Shahnameh which dates back to 1430 contains 22 paintings attributed to three artists: Mowlana Ali, Mowlana Qias-Al-Din, and Amir Khalil. It must be noted that its format is a folio, 38×26 cm with 700 pages. This version was registered as part of the spiritual heritage of Iran by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2007. The Baysonghor Shahnameh is kept in the Golestan Palace Library in Tehran, the capital city of Iran.

The paintings of the Baysonghor Shahnameh are elegant and luxurious because of the emphasis on clothing, tile and carpet designs. The images of the buildings are painted so small that the fitting and proportion between them and humans seems to be irrational. In fact, the images are an excuse for the use of decorative motifs. In other words, to design the building, artists applied unreasonable proportions by decorating and displaying two-dimensional pictures in bright colours, reducing the heaviness of the buildings in these paintings.

As for the two-dimensional images, inside and outside of the buildings are shown at the same time. The exterior of buildings was covered with colourful tiles and a dome with decorative motifs, and inscriptions are covered by Kufi, Reqae and Reyhan calligraphies. The entrance and arches are designed with arabesque motifs. Further, the wooden lattice windows have been implemented with great precision.

Each page of the Shahname-y-Baysonqory consists of a drawing of a great table. Each table has six horizontal and vertical lines. The first line is blue, longer than five other lines. The other lines are located between four other gold lines in bold type. The distance between lines is painted by the gold teeth known as the Dandan Mooshi and the drawing of the table called Morassae. Gold is used in these paintings to paint abstract and geometric designs. Occasionally, a golden hue is also used to colour the sky. In most paintings, birds are painted with different colours in different modes of flying and nature features prominently.

Some of these paintings include designs that spill out of the text and on to the margins and are part of the original story. Also, the walls of the buildings and their entrance are decorated with abstract and geometric designs and lattice windows. The layout of the structure of the castle and the entrance to the congress building are magnificent. Moreover, inscriptions decorated on the walls include the Soles calligraphy with a blue background.

In the picture in which Faramarz mourns the death of his father, and his uncle, Zavareh (Figure 1), a variety of arabesque, geometric and Khataee motifs were used for decorating clothes, buildings, and coffins. At the top of this painting are more geometric motifs and a dome covered with arabesque and Khataee motifs.

Beneath the dome, there is a margin divided into three parts, and in the lower part, there is a design containing a mixture of arabesque and calligraphy. This design has been repeated around the walls of the building. Under the margin, there is a part which is divided into three sections with two columns designed as a sanctuary by arabesque motifs.

As is shown in the middle of the image, there is a Khataee, arabesque and geometric design. This part is divided into three parts as three sanctuaries in which the artist has used more spiral stems due to more space. The variety of designs and sizes in green motifs are less than golden

²¹ Mostafa Nadarlou. "Book's Art of Baysonghor Shahnameh.", *Art Bulletin*, No 101(2006):71-77.

motifs, but green stems have a greater spiral than golden stems. The background of the corners is azure. On Faramarz's clothes, golden Khataees in the red background can be seen.

There is a kind of arabesque form on the golden part which is like a chandelier. Arabesque forms in this design of chandeliers show the autonomy of the arabesque motif by the artist. The base of this design is formed by arabesque painted outward. This design was repeated six times and coloured light blue. Around the pot and behind it was shaped with brown from dark to light.

A small pot was designed between the distances of two pots which are also arabesque but smaller. This indicates that the artist painted arabesque motifs to show objects. The symmetrical line can be seen in all these designs. To show the ground, the artist has used the stars and cross images as well as green, gold and blue colours in geometric motifs. Geometric designs applied outside this part have green hexagonal images.

This image shows one of the three main themes of humans, nature, and animals. It is the most important imaginary world in Persian painting of the Herat School. Iranian luxurious court style designs, strong composition, and Iranian identity, are clearly observable here. Tashakori describes a "dome" in Persian painting as a symbol of the alliance between the sky and the ground and the artist showed "death" as a departure from the earth to the sky.²² As earlier mentioned, the Herat School was the renewal of Persian painting from China's influence. Pashazanous argues the arabesque forms came from the Parthian period and the Khataee motif was from the Sassanid period.²³

In the image of Lohrasb Ascends to Throne (Figure 2), which is composed of two parts, the outer part is a quarter of the whole picture and shows a human environment and natural daylight with bright clear colours, while the part is night and is covered by a blue sky with shiny stars. In this painting, Khataee has been used on clothing and in the upper part of the image.

As far as the artists are concerned, decorative elements or patterns, including Khataee motifs, geometrical designs, and arabesques indicates unity in diversity. It means that the geometric coloured patterns and shapes represent the existence of Allah the Omnipresent. In other words, the geometric motifs and arabesques are a display of spectacular divine beauty and grace which is present everywhere at all times. It must be noted that although these motifs have been painted and taken for mosques and people in the past, it seems that they are of practical use in our modern world.

To conclude, arabesque motifs painted in Shahnameh are based on Vagireh designs and patterns. Although Khataee motifs are painted less frequently, methods of their performing are more diverse rather than arabesques. To be more precise, Arabesques and Khataee motifs are designed, painted or coloured is completely different and distinctive style.

²² Fatemeh Tashakori. *Symbolization in Islamic Art*, Wisdom and knowledge, No 6 (2011):34-39.

²³ Moharamali Pashazanous. "Illumination in Herat School Painting". *Art Bulletin*, No 130(2009):10-19.

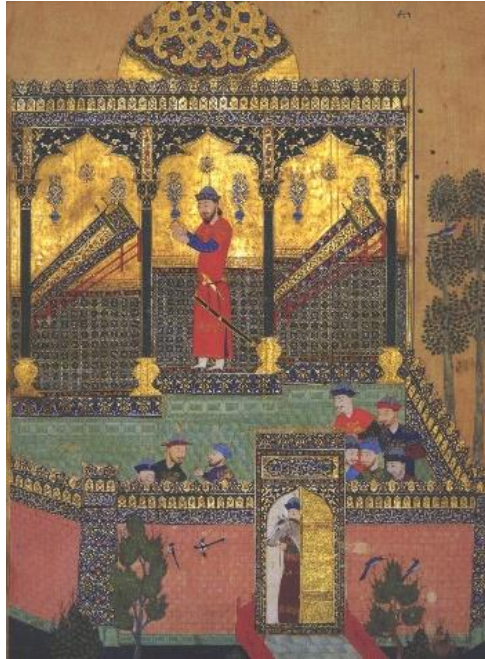


Figure 1. Faramarz Mourns Death of his Father and his Uncle, Zavareh. Source; Master Pieces of Persian Painting. (2005. P. 44)

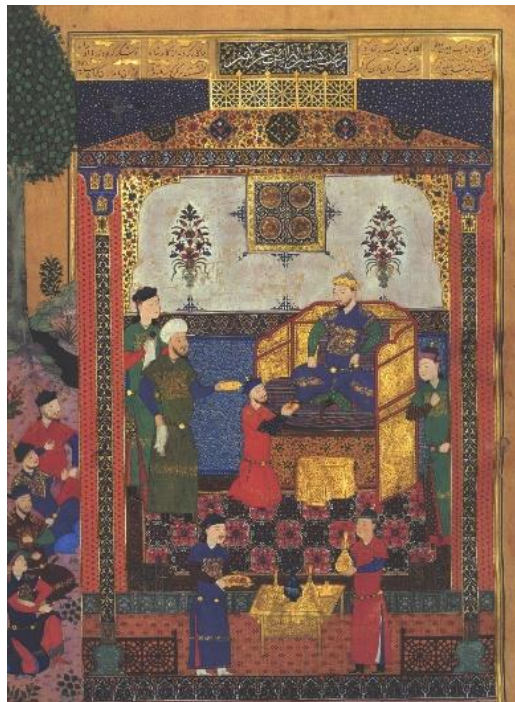


Figure 2. Lohrasb Ascends to Throne. *Shahnameh-y-Baysonquri*. Source; Master Pieces of Persian Painting. (2005. P. 45)

Conclusion

The paintings of Shahnameh-y-Baysonqori contain many decorative motifs such as plants, animals, geometrical motifs, decorations of inscriptions and other architectural elements in precise drawing and decorative patterns. Various colours such as gold, silver, and azure, grey are used in different levels and proportions.

Compositions of decorative motifs are selected as a margin. Khataee motifs were used less, but they have more diverse methods of execution than arabesque. The geometric precision and clarity of these pictures and illustrations are unique. Further, the arabesque and Khataee styles in these paintings are quite distinct since each is painted in an individual frame and coloured blue and/or gold.

Different colours and decorative shapes have created a close relationship between different parts. Decorative motifs, geometric patterns, and arabesque designs provide a certain context for painting, separate space and light from the dark and change two-dimensional parts into three-dimensional parts.

Abstract designs in Persian painting are being repeated. To create movement, rhythm, emotion, space and the relationship among them, Iranian painters used abstract shapes and patterns to show the glory of objects that served to remind them of the beauty of Allah.

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