

## **AESTHETICS OF ISLAMIC MINIATURE ART DURING THE PERIODS OF SAFAVID AND TIMURID RULES IN IRAN**

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### **Abstract**

Islamic art represents the spiritual and physical aspects in the lives of Muslims. Meaningful beauty in Islamic art expresses Islamic aesthetics. Islamic aesthetics is the connection between beauty and the sacred. The article is devoted to the Islamic art and miniature paintings of Timurid and Safavid periods in Iran. Miniature art is one of traditional forms of Islamic art. The aesthetics of Islamic miniature art came to being as the result of the marriage of pre-Islam painting arts and Muslim aesthetic ideals. The article discusses the aesthetic qualities of the Islamic painting art and highlights the history of miniature painting art in Iran. The Iranian miniatures of Timurid and Safavid eras are compared while their common features are identified. The author emphasizes the aesthetic characteristics of Tabriz and Herat miniature paintings. The article presents an overview of contemporary Iranian art.

**Keywords:** The Timurids, the Safavids, *hadith*, miniature art, Islamic art

### **Introduction**

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that investigates beauty. Aesthetics includes not only visible beauty, but also palpable and intellectual (cognitive) beauty. In the middle ages, religious views on the world had a strong impact on the aesthetics.

The medieval Muslim works of art reflected the artist's sense of beauty and the aesthetic ideals of society. For this reason Islamic art reflects the Islamic view of the world and the aesthetic ideals of the Muslim. Therefore figurative representation is not important for Islamic art because in Islamic thought, original beauty belongs to God and His beauty is not viewable. His beauty can only be comprehended. Therefore, Islam gives more importance to the comprehended aesthetic beauty.

It is known that in Islam, the image of God cannot be described. In the middle ages, the description of human faces was also forbidden in the Muslim world. It is said in the Hadiths (traditions of the Prophet of Islam and his comments on the Qur'an) that a person, who portrays a man, will be punished on the last judgment day. At least, the sacred verses of the Qur'an were so explained. The portraying of a living being was considered as an imitation against the will of Allah, (or it was considered that portraying of a living being was an imitation against the will of Allah) and such an action was considered the greatest sin in Islam<sup>1</sup>.

However, the image of man has not been left out of the field of attention of artists, although appealing to it was extremely limited due to religious prohibitions. Images of people were described as illustrations in the manuscript books and also in the patterns of the crafts. And figures of people were most of all depicted in the ornamental compositions that became an integral part of the design. Despite the religious prohibitions and threats by Muslim religious circles, the artists of the medieval Muslim world attempted to create masterpieces that included even taboo topics such as images of men and all living things. It is known that some statues or portraits were seen even in the early centuries of the spread of Islam in the caliph palaces.

All the nations that converted to Islam contributed to the formation of Islamic art and their pre-Islamic art techniques are reflected in this art. It means that the early Islamic art was a combination of different civilizations and historical circumstances.

According to Yakovlev's writings, the impact of Islam on the art of Central Asia was more external. It was not "Arab" and "Islamic" art in Central Asia. It was the art of the towns which were the trade and craft centers of IX-XIII centuries. This art was based on nationality which always was the greatest factor in the progress of culture<sup>2</sup>.

Some miniatures of the end of XIII and the beginning of XIV centuries were created under the influence of Mesopotamian and Far Eastern traditions of painting. These arts affect each other, and early Islamic miniature art of XIII – XIV centuries under the influence of local artistic traditions had begun to acquire a new quality.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the art of miniature painting had just begun to develop and therefore the art has not yet fallen under the influence of Islam. So, in the paintings dating from that period the Islamic and the pre-Islamic or non-Islamic painting techniques were used together.

The early Iranian-Islamic art also had developed under the influence of the pre-Islamic aesthetic visions. However, gradually, emerged new specific forms of Islamic art, and one of them was an Islamic book-miniature art.

### **Miniature painting art and its aesthetics**

The word "miniature" comes from the word of "minimum natural" in French, meaning small and thin nature. It is believed that this word came into Persian language during the reign of the Qajars<sup>4</sup>. Currently, any ancient art having a traditional characteristic painting is called traditional miniature painting in Iran<sup>5</sup>.

The main type of paintings which developed in the Middle East in the middle ages was the illustrating manuscripts having mundane content. Masters created not only ornamental adornments, but also excellent miniatures which were rich in the images of the literary heroes.

The main objects of miniature art were classical works of oriental poetry - "Shahnameh" of Ferdowsi, "Khamsa" of Nizami, Dehlevi and Navai. Although

in these miniatures were reflected the content of literary works, they had a decorative nature. Despite the mundane nature of these images, the ban of Islam had influence on the techniques of painting art. Man's face was not clearly illustrated in miniatures. Actually the miniatures were created to decorate books.

The development of the miniature art in Iran began in the period of the government of the Seljuks. Brand notes in her studies in the field of miniature painting, that the development of the Arab (the oriental) miniature school began in the early thirteenth century. But the level of development of miniature painting before this time is an object of debates.<sup>6</sup> We note that in the period of Seljukian (XI-XII centuries) were created the miniature paintings in Iran, but this art had not yet developed at that time. The miniature painting in Iran began to develop in the Mongol and Timurid period. The establishing of the Tabriz painting school and the Shiraz miniature art is associated with the name Reshidaddin, the Vizier of the Elkhani empire (XIII century).

The first examples of books with miniature images were created in the cities of Tabriz, Maragha and Hoy. The miniature paintings on well known manuscripts such as "Varga and Gulsha" (XIII century) (Fig.1) and «Jami -at tavarikh" (XIV century) (Fig.2) are the evidence of the establishment of a new art school in the Middle East. At the same time, with the development of Tabriz miniature art was continued Timurid miniature traditions in the Herat. At that period, Herat was the capital of Timurid state. Miniature painting continued its development also at the Karakoyunlu and Aghkoyunlu periods and entered a stage of higher development in the Safavid period.

Miniature paintings have specific characteristics. There were no resemblance between the real world and the world depicted in miniature images. The artists of that period did not pay attention to factors such as volume, shadow and light and many rules of miniature painting. The objects that were in close proximity were pictured at the bottom part and the objects that were in a long distance, at the top of the picture. You can see only the third part of a man's face and the size of the face was equal to the distance between an eye and one ear. Sometimes the face of a man was not completely portrayed and sometimes it was described from the rear. Artists were interested in garments much more than the exact features of a human body. The artists emphasized the sleeve of clothes and the legs of a man to demonstrate the form of clothing and they described the figures as tall to pay attention to their position in the society. In miniature images of people, the differences of age and gender were not felt. However, these differences attracted attention in the images of older persons<sup>7</sup>.

Brand writes that the illustration art developed in two different directions. According to the first, the Seljukians' miniature tradition took a special place like the rulers' images looking similar to each other in the face. On the other hand, new art style portrayed the Arab population, with an aquiline face, wearing comfortable clothes and they described impatient gestures<sup>8</sup>.

Artists depicted bright summer sun, often filled with fruit or flowering fruit trees. But the image of bare trees also occurs. Mostly, horses are depicted in the miniatures from the side, but rarely can one see a horse depicted from the rear or front<sup>9</sup>.

The artist used techniques of "kalemkari" - the art of designing jewelry, writing on paper and fabric, or hammering on metal to decorate the edges of miniature painting. These elegant and beautiful decorations consist of long and short curved lines, which used one or two colours along with gold colour to draw them. Looking at these decorations one can determine that a special place was given to the lines and colours.

Artistic tastes and presentation of artists did not always coincide with the aesthetic norms of the ruling elite and orthodox Muslim theology. The art tried to express its position by special language of decoration<sup>10</sup>. So the symbols occupy a special place in Muslim visual arts.

The illustrators of medieval East created a special artistic style, which perfectly meets the style of poetry - visual equivalent of speech and thought, based on common ideological, aesthetic, moral and ethical concepts of that era, poet and artists, whose main goal was to make them think about the eternal beauty<sup>11</sup>. Artists of medieval Central Asia, at those times, created remarkable examples of painting, crafts and decorative arts not going beyond the medieval ideology, and some times boldly stepping over them. The main features of this art were determined not so much by a religion, but by ideological and aesthetic problems proposed by the development of society in the feudal era<sup>12</sup>.

### **The relationship between Timurid and Safavid miniature art**

The period of Hossein Baikara's rule in Herat is considered to be the pinnacle of the Timurids culture. The works of Kamaletdin Behzad, the famous Herat miniaturist of the last quarter of the fifteenth century and who lived in Baykara's palace, were a sample of logical development and achievements of the early Herat miniature school. In his miniature paintings we can feel the spirit of that time and court processes<sup>13</sup>.

The role of Behzad is undeniable in the history of miniature painting in the Muslim East. Even in the XVI century, the masters of Herat school began to spread his style throughout the East. The subjects of his works are rich and varied. An examined sample of the portrait miniature of that time shows how great was the role of Behzad in the development of portraiture art. His works are distinguished by the fact that the man was pictured in action in his paintings (Fig.3).

The miniature painting art of Safavid period is associated with a number of painting schools. The best known school among them is the Tabriz school of painting.

Generally, oriental art was characterized by a strict adherence to tradition. All artists of that time with some additions continued the work of

previous masters, because innovations and variety of images were not accepted. Each master had his own method and style. Looking carefully at the miniature works of different artists, we can easily identify these differences. For example, Khalil Bey, the son of the founder of Aghgoyunlu dynasty, who ruled for only 8 months was a refined esthete and the "Diwan" of Hidayat was created according to his order (1468). The peculiar style of his miniature art is quite different from Herat miniature art and is rooted in the rich pictorial tradition of Tabriz miniature school. The Poetry Anthology, rewritten in Shamakhi and illustrated in Tabriz also belongs to the same time<sup>14</sup>.

From the end of the XVI century, Herat traditions begin to penetrate into Tabriz miniature painting style. This is due to the fact that Herat in 1510, the city fell into the hands of the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail I, after which Behzad moved to Tabriz. And there, Behzad was appointed the head of the court library.

It is known that before Behzad, the head of the library was Sultan Muhammad, the representative of the Tabriz school of painting. Sultan Muhammad was not a student of Behzad or of Mirak Naccache, head of the Herat school of painting. That is why we can not see in his works, the influence of the miniature traditions of Herat school. Sultan Muhammad's paintings are more ornamental and decorative, and more abundance of life energy in his painting is felt. But the psychology and the mental impressions in his painting are weak (Fig.4). However, one of the achievements of the Herat school was an expression of gestures and postures of living humans. In addition, the colour and brightness of colours attract attention.

Portrait miniature principles inherited in the art of Behzad, were continued in the XVI-XVII centuries in the Safavid period in Iran - (Tabriz, Qazvin, Isfahan) and Turkestan (Samarkand, Bukhara) schools. They coexist with the concrete individual images in the miniature works, written on separate sheets of paper, from the books: the figure of beautiful girl in an elegant turn, a charming young man, or the lovers. However, the masters along with such idealized images of oriental poetry were giving the individual face of characters even in group scenes, where the faces of the participants are very small<sup>15</sup>. The green, blue, red, yellow, grey and the treated sapphire colours are the dominant colours in Iranian art. These colours tell us about the beauty and tenderness of the other world.

The French philosopher and the researcher of Sufi mysticism Henri Corbin notes that "these colours take a man to the world of emotions"<sup>16</sup>. Portrait miniatures create a poetic representation of the fantastic world of the middle ages. As mentioned above, brightness of the colours and the colourful miniature books attract all attention of the reader and take him to the fabulous world of art works. This feature of the Middle Eastern miniature works distinguishes it from the Western. However, gradually in some paintings was felt the disappearance of

this colourfulness. It is considered that the reason for this change was the influence of the western European art.

It is believed that there is an original connection between the painting and the meaning. The Iranian artwork takes its form from the meaning. The colours and shapes of these art works do not correspond with real colours of Iranian world. For example, the colour of the mountains and the desert is different from the colours of the real world. And generally, there is no rule concerning the original colours of the world in Islamic art<sup>17</sup>. The main purpose of the Muslim artist is showing the meaning and beauty hidden in the form and not the exact shape of the object image. In the view of a devout Muslim, any image of God is seen as a copy. Because the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Muslims says about God: " He ... did not give birth, was not born, and there is not an equal to him ". Iranian researcher Gudarzi believes that the hidden obedience of the Muslim artist before the object, which was portrayed by himself also impacts on the viewer. The Muslim artist shows so much simplicity and devotion that he feels himself helpless or weak before the Great Creator (God). The miniature art displays the universal relationship between God and man<sup>18</sup>. The thought of the artist is removed from the material world and is directed into space<sup>19</sup>.

The school of painting of the Shah Abbas I Safavid period was established in Isfahan and the art school of Isfahan occupied a special place in Iran miniature art. However this school also continued the traditions of Tabriz painting school.

The research of different murals shows that there was no difference between the descriptions of male and female clothing in the early miniature paintings. In the period of Shah Abbas Safavi, the clothing depicted in Iranian miniatures has been replaced by long and wide *gaba* or *nimtana* (the kinds of the long robe). The edges of these garments, the length of which reaches to the knees, was sutured in the skin, and the belt tied above it. At that time, was added the shawl to women's clothing which was fastened on the shoulders with one end used as a headdress<sup>20</sup>. But we can say that we are not always given the characteristics of the depicted historic period in these pictures. In the miniatures one can see the image of, for example, the tenth century human wearing the clothing of the time of the artist.

## **Conclusion**

About the current situation of miniature art in Iran, we can say that the miniature art is being revived as the most vivid reflection of religious consciousness and manifestation of national spirituality, after the Iranian Islamic revolution. But some features of medieval miniatures are not characteristic of modern Iranian miniatures. The art works by contemporary Iranian artists Mahmoud Farshchian, Amir Tahmasibzade, Masud Honarkar and Mehrzaman Farrukh Monfarid reflect the full range of problems existing in the modern miniature painting of Iran. Farshchian<sup>21</sup>, the first of contemporary artists who

separated this form of art from a literary source, converts it into an entirely new art in which the personal perception and vision prevail over the traditional – canonical<sup>22</sup>. There is a difference between the faces and the clothes of the people depicted in modern miniature paintings. Shade, volume and other factors are taken into account in these paintings (Fig.5). Now, this tradition is being adopted by many artists of Iran. However contemporary Iranian art is the unity of traditionalism and modernity.

In Iran, the tradition has always been perceived as one of the foundations of thinking. In contemporary Iranian art is a process of balance between traditional Iranian- Islamic thought, aesthetic views and modernism.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



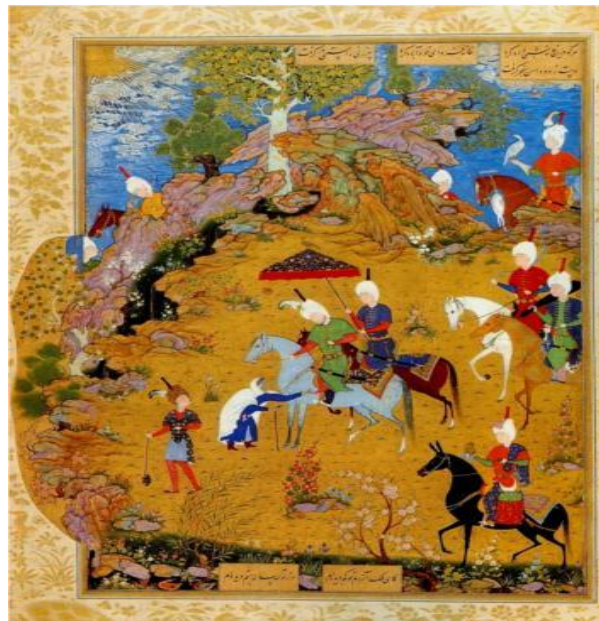
**Figure 1.** Illustration from manuscript “Varga and Gulshah”. The Ruler of Damascus and Gulsha is bidding farewell to Varga (on a horse). Istanbul Topkapi Museum Library, Treasury 841, p.62. Source-  
<http://www.altinoran.com/2012/03/30/anadolu-selcuklu-donemi-turk-minyatur-sanati/>



**Figure 2.** Mongols besieging Chinese town of Tcheng-du, from Persian manuscript, “Jami at-tavarich”(“Compendium of Chronicles”), compiled by Rashid al-Din, 14th century copy, Iran | Stock Photo 4069-518. Source-  
<https://www.superstock.com/stock-photography/Jami%60%20al-Tawarikh>



**Figure3.** Kamaladdin Behzad. Haroon ar-Rashid in the bathroom. XV century. Britan library, London. Source- <https://setodeh.wordpress.com/2009/08/page/2/>



**Figure 4.** Sultan Muhammad. From khamsa of Nizami. An old Woman complaining to Sultan Sanjar. 1539-43. Source: <http://www.artarena.force9.co.uk/safavidart.htm>



(a)



(b)

Figure 5. a) Farshchian M. Go free oh bird, 1989; b) Morning star, 1988  
Source- Farshchian M., The selected paintings, Tehran: Zarrin and Simin Press:  
2013, p.36 and p.38