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The Saqqa-khaneh Calligraphy-Painting Movement in Iran

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Abstract

This article aims to describe the Saqqa-khaneh calligraphy-painting movement in Iran. This School was a significant movement in modern Iranian art that became influential in the formation of a modern approach toward prevailing traditional heritage. This artistic movement came about in the midst of the country's modernisation, in an endeavour to link traditional Iranian culture with contemporary aspects of the visual arts, and with contemporary western paintings in particular. Abiding by Iranian tradition was not the primary engine driving Saqqa-khaneh art, nor was it to emulate western art. Contemporary Iranian artists have enriched Persian script endowing it with variety and aesthetic intention and have produced many masterpieces, particularly when calligraphy is combined with pictorial language. In the last six decades, this movement has gained a nation-wide significance in contemporary Iranian society and culture, leading to an increasing number of practitioners, collectors and a presence of calligraphy-painting-inspired advertising and design. Moreover, it has gradually found a position in the global art world. In the current art market, Persian contemporary calligraphy-painting stands out among Middle-Eastern productions.

Keywords: saqqa-khaneh school, traditional art-modern art, national art

El movimiento de pintura caligráfica Saqqa-khaneh en Irán

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Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo describir el movimiento de pintura caligráfica Saqqa-khaneh en Irán. Esta escuela fue un movimiento significativo en el arte iraní moderno que tuvo una gran influencia en el desarrollo de un tratamiento moderno de la herencia tradicional dominante. Este movimiento artístico surgió en plena modernización del país, en un esfuerzo por vincular la cultura tradicional iraní con los aspectos contemporáneos de las artes visuales y, en particular, con la pintura occidental contemporánea. Cumplir con la tradición iraní no fue el motor principal que impulsó el arte de Saqqa-khaneh, como tampoco lo fue emular el arte occidental. Los artistas iraníes contemporáneos han enriquecido la escritura persa dotándola de variedad e intención estética y han producido muchas obras maestras, especialmente cuando la caligrafía se combina con el lenguaje pictórico. En las últimas seis décadas, este movimiento ha cobrado relevancia a nivel nacional en la sociedad y la cultura iraní contemporánea, lo que ha llevado a un aumento en el número de profesionales y coleccionistas y a la aparición de imágenes publicitarias y de diseño inspiradas en la pintura caligráfica. Además, el movimiento saqqa-khaneh ha ido consolidando su posición mundo artístico a escala global. En el mercado del arte actual, la pintura caligráfica persa contemporánea ocupa un lugar destacado entre las producciones de Oriente Medio.

Palabras clave: escuela saqqa-khaneh, arte tradicional-arte moderno, arte nacional

The very first evidence of the Western influence on Iranian artists and art can be seen in the late *Safavid* era. Two main factors resulted in the East's and West's respective effects on Iran's arts in the late *Safavid* dynasty quite noteworthy. First, in the Shah Abbas I era (r. 1588-1629), diplomatic and economic relations with Europe and India were developed and foreign ambassadors and merchants were welcomed in Iran (Canby, 1999, p. 96). Second, in the Shah Abbas II era (r. 1642-1666), artists were actually sent to Rome to learn about European painting (Falk, 1972, p. 19). Hence, the foundation of Iranian modern and contemporary arts was set down under the influence of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European schools.

The first direct contact with modernity and Iranian society goes back to the *Qajar* era (1781-1925), specifically to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The modernisation of Iran was accelerated by the accession of Nassir al-Din Shah in 1848 and under the premiership of Amir Kabir.¹ At this time, a large number of students were sent abroad who, upon return, were engaged as specialists, managers, instructors and artists. The founding of the *Dar al-fonun* (*Tehran Polytechnic School*), the first modern institution of its kind in Iran in 1851 by Amir Kabir was a noteworthy moment in Iran's educational system. European professors (mainly French, Austrian, and Italian) trained students from the upper classes in the fields of medicine, engineering, military sciences, music and foreign languages (Keddie & Amanat, 1991, p. 182). In the late *Qajar* dynasty, the idea of nationalism was promoted as one of Western inspiration. "The nationalism as it developed towards the end of the *Qajar* era and the Pahlavi period was itself a product of the Western influence and nationalism." In this respect, modern national sentiments developed under the influence of the Western ideology of nationalism. As Mostafa Vaziri (1993) argued:

European orientalist highlighted the pre-Islamic and old national elements amongst Iranians. This was achieved through the transformation of Iran, as a geographical label, into a people endowed with all kinds of national and racial characteristics, which was partly done in order to advocate for the European political and racial ideology, arising from the authority of European orientalism. It can thus be argued that pre-Islamic Iran's emphasis on the romantic nationalist perspective is a direct result of the European influence. The resulting interest in antiquity awakened (or perhaps engendered) the pre-Islamic and ancient national consciousness of Iran. (p.3)

The “historians and historiography in Iran have been deeply affected by Western historical, archaeological, and philological finds and have put very little effort into developing their own systematic study of history, whether about Iran or about the outside world” (Vaziri, 1993, p. 152).

The Background: Kamal-al-Molk as a Stimulus for the Modern Iranian Art

The Academy of Fine Arts, *Madrese-ye sanaye-e mostazrafe*, was established in 1911 by Mohammad Ghaffari, known as Kamal-al-Molk (1852-1940). He was the first artist in Iran to change Iranian art radically, and though he himself was not a modernist, he is said to have been the instigator of modern Iranian art. Kamal-al-Molk’s distinctiveness was that he completely detached himself from Iranian traditional techniques of painting and even, apparently, from conventional ways of seeing his surroundings. He was fundamentally influenced by European painting, in a way that cannot be found in the paintings of other artists of that period. In his naturalistic paintings, he developed a style of almost photographic realism, yet one which does not slavishly submit to the rules of perspective. According to the art historian Ruyin Pakbaz, this event marked the beginning of contemporary and modern Iranian art (Pakbaz, 1999, p. 168). In this period, when mimicking Western culture was so fashionable, Kamal-al-Molk did so in terms of visual art by importing Western ways of seeing and portraying reality and by distancing himself from the non-realistic ways of his ancestors. However, his paintings had more of his own imaginative originality and less of naturalistic representation than is ordinarily assumed (Daftari, 2002, p. 43). After Kamal-al-Molk’s retirement from teaching at the school of applied arts and crafts in 1927, his influence endured in the painting and sculpture style of his students and adherents, up to the 1940s; some artists still practice it today.

The Western Impact: Modernism

Opening art schools and offering scholarships to Iranian students for further studies in Europe continued. When Reza Shah, the founder of the *Pahlavi* dynasty, came to power in 1925, Reza Shah’s modernisation policy influenced a spectrum of Iranian social life. With the advent of this “traditionalist, nationalist, and modernist” ruler, a new political agenda for Iran was set into motion. The artistic and architectural heritage of the country was deemed a worthy indicator of the rich history and great civilisation embodied by the

nation and became a subject of an investigation by Iranian intellectuals and the foreign scholars they invited to Iran. Through their interpretations, antiquity was “discovered” to cohere with the ideals of the new nation. The antiquity of Iran’s roots had already been established by European historians and archaeologists; what remained was to marshal that information in rhetoric that would serve the nationalist goals of self-legitimacy and racial identification. The government policy in the *Pahlavi* era (1925-1979) was a decisive factor in the creation of a unified nation. Iranians thus started to define themselves as one national collective. Consequently, substantial changes were witnessed in different fields such as the settlement and disarmament of the tribes. Modernisation was reflected in armed forces and the bureaucracy, the introduction of Western clothing, the construction of roads, railway lines and port facilities and the beginnings of industrialisation and the introduction of European-style legal and educational systems (Hambly, 1991). This policy encouraged Iranian society to westernise itself. However, it was not easy to convince people to change their ideology and lifestyle. In many cases, the government had to use force to make people abide by the new rules.

No less significant, the state implicitly declared its secular character by projecting typically Western material goals; by interference in the people’s daily lives with regard to street attire, the unveiling of women and female education; by the introduction of such innovations as European-style family names and a non-Islamic calendar; and by pronouncements and legislation which made it clear that women and members of religious minorities were now to be regarded as full citizens of the state on an equal footing with Muslim males (Hambly, 1991, p. 233). It is important to mention here that although the Iranian state tried to import the appearance of modernity, it did not accept one of the basic tenets of modernity, namely, a system of democratic rule. Rather, the Iranian state’s aim was to sustain hegemony over the country. The result was a society that modernised some cultural and economic practices, but never gave up its old and traditional ways of thinking along the political dimension. In other words, Iranians were confined within the old social structures while attempting to adopt modernity, which created contradictions and eventual fractures in Iran’s socio-political practices. The *School of Traditional Arts* (*Madrese-ye Sanaye-e Qadima*, 1929), *The University of Tehran* (1934), and the *faculty of Fine Arts* (1939) were established. By founding these universities and accepting the Western designs and methods in teaching and studying, Iranian students under Western-based educational systems learned to see their society and culture the way their teachers did. By

the late 1940s, contemporary artists such as Mahmoud Javadipur (1920-2012), Ahmad Esfandiari (1922-2013), and Jalil Ziapur (1920-1999), through their exhibitions, lectures, and articles, had exerted a substantial influence on modern art in Iranian society. The first exhibitions of modern art were held in foreign cultural institutes, such as the Irano-Soviet Cultural Relations Society (Voks) and the Franco-Iranian Cultural Institute. Later, outstanding Iranian artists such as Hossein Kazemi (1924-1996) and Javad Hamidi (1918-2002) exhibited their works in private galleries such as the Apadanna gallery² and the Saba gallery. Meantime, Jalil Ziapur, Gholam- Hossein Gharib (1923-2004) and other leaders in art, literature, theatre and music published magazines such as *Khorus Jangi* (*Fighting cock*), the *Kavir*, and the *Panje-ye Khorus* (*Claws of the cock*) to expose Iranian society to modern art (Mujabi, 1997, pp. 16-18). The triumph of modernist art over the “obsolete” traditional modes of representation, either miniature or more recent naturalistic painting, resulted from the examination of diverse Western styles and applying them to the Iranian context. These trends followed a range of modernist styles, from impressionism and post-impressionism to cubism, expressionism, symbolism and abstract art. In the 1960s, as Boqrati points out, three distinctive currents shaped the new modernist aesthetics: the first followed European abstractionism applied geometrical forms and set aside presentational elements and expressivity. The second group attempted to incorporate traditional Iranian elements in their modernist forms, among whom were included the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists. The third group favoured expressionism and symbolism, including different types of modernist figurative artists such as Hanibal Alkhas, Bahman Muhassis, Abolqasem Sa’idi and Sohrab Sepehri (Boqrati, 2009, as cited in Moussavi-Aghdam., 2014, p. 139).

The founding of the Tehran Biennials³ in 1958 proved the official support of modern artists by the regime. During the Tehran Biennials, calligraphy emerged broadly in artworks. Although calligraphy in the artistic sense has always been a section of Iranians artistic Tradition and can be traced in different historical periods in Iran, only gradually, over a long period, did it become a predominant artistic style among Iranian artists. Calligraphy, as a traditional form of art, is very important to Iranians. This can also be seen in the remains of relics from the pre-Islamic era, which has since become a foundation part of Islamic art. These facts display why and how calligraphy found its fundamental position in the Iranian modern and contemporary arts. It also shows that in depicting Iranian identity in the visual arts, artists found calligraphy as one of the appealing ingredients in Iranian heritage. These characteristics make the Persian calligraphy, which Iranian artists started to

use in their works, a particular element in their works. Artists during the 1940s and 1950s endeavoured to qualify their works as Iranian rather than Western. They tended to use subjects that would be immediately recognized as Iranian (Keshmirshekan, 2009, p. 15). Thus returning to their traditions and heritage to reinforce local identity and distinguish themselves from Westerners in international festivals. Contrary to the Iranian government's official ideology, which highlighted pre-Islamic Iran's heritage and ignored the Islamic tradition. Most Iranians made use of the Islamic legacy to construct their identity. As a result, emblems of the mid-twentieth-century arose popular culture. Analyses of the artworks exhibited in Tehran Biennials display a significant influence of the religious narratives on artists. For instance, the well-known *Saqqa-khaneh* art movement in the 1960s, which appeared in the works exhibited in the third Tehran Biennial, was inspired by Shiite⁴ religious elements represented in abstract form. In these works, artists tried to find a balance between their Islamic legacy and the modern styles Western of art.

Saqqa-khaneh Movement

The most important organised group in contemporary Iranian painting in the 1960s was *Saqqa-khaneh* School. The name was used for the first time by the art critic, Karim Emami (1930-2005). The name was initially applied to the works of artists, both in painting and sculpture that incorporated elements of votive Shiite art. It gradually came to be applied to various forms of contemporary Iranian painting and sculpture that used elements of traditional decoration. The practitioners of the *Saqqa-khaneh* school looked to rituals and products of folk culture for inspiration. They gave an abstract style to these cultural references to create a distinct artistic expression that they felt would embody the national spirit with a contemporary language. The movement itself was meant to enhance Iranian identity and give it a place in the contemporary art scene.

The Persian word *saqqa-khaneh* refers to a specific type of public fresh water fountains. Traditionally in the older quarters of cities, each *saqqa-khaneh* consisted of a small and inconspicuous niche within which were supplied a water tank, a copper or brass bowl and a candle and other elements (Yarshater, 1979, p. 368). To convey an atmosphere of sacredness, the inside of the *saqqa-khaneh* niches was often decorated with the portrait of an imam and metal trays to which candleholders were attached. A metallic grid would often enclose the niche and would have padlocks or pieces of rag fastened or tied for votive reasons. The *saqqa-khaneh* were made in commemoration of a

historical episode in which the religious Shiite leader Imam Hussein and his companions were denied drinking water during the tragedy of Karbala in 680 AD.⁵

The practitioners of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement took Iranian folk art and literary traditions beyond their original context, producing a style that fused western and Persian artistic conventions and integrating popular symbols of Shiite Muslim culture in Iran. One of the main founders of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement sculptor Parviz Tanavoli (b.1937), describes the beginning of the school:

One day, Hossein Zenderoudi and I went to Abdul Al-Azim Shrine;⁶ some primed pictures which were for sale attracted our attention. In that period, both of us were searching for some special Iranian raw materials for use in our artworks; and those religious pictures seemed appropriate in our minds. We bought some of them and brought them home. We liked their simple forms, repetitive motives, and bright shining colours. Zenderoudi created the first sketches of *saqqa-khaneh* inspired by those pictures (Tanavoli, as cited in Maleki., 2010, p. 65).

From Emami's point of view, however, the official birth of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School was when Zenderoudi's canvases were exhibited at the third Tehran Biennial in 1962. Emami explains the reason for choosing the name *Saqqa-khaneh* for painting in this manner. He states that a viewer of Zenderoudi's canvases would be reminded of Shiite shrines and assemblies (Emami, 1977, p. 3).

During the period when the *Saqqa-khaneh* school was formed and became mature, there were similar movements in the Western world such as Pop art,⁷ Lettrism and Op art. The artists of this school intended to have an up-to-date expression of their native art regarding to their own homeland heritage. Furthermore, since there were many artists of any kind in their artistic circle, the artistic spirit that existed in various forms of Iranian arts of that era can be studied and found the links, impacts and the interaction between them. Kamran Diba believes:

Saqqa-khaneh movement can be compared to the Pop Art movement in the West. He claims, "if we simplify Pop Art as an art movement which looks at the symbols and tools of a mass consumer society as a relevant and influencing cultural force, *Saqqa-khaneh* artists looked at the inner beliefs and popular symbols that were part of the religion and culture of Iran and perhaps, consumed in the same way as industrial products

in the West (but for different reasons and under dissimilar circumstances).” He named the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement “in reference to Western art, ‘Spiritual Pop Art’.” (Diba, as cited in Keshmirshekan., 2005, p. 629)

Though the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists are referred to as a school, their stylistic diversity speaks to the true nature of the movement: a fluid outpouring of practices and ideas, rather than one that was organized or philosophically driven (Ekhtiar & Rooney, 2014). The *Saqqa-khaneh* movement tried to find and establish a “national” Iranian school of art. The general perception was based on the belief that the artists could achieve a “modern-traditional” synthesis that included an Iranian identity and character. In the brochure of *Saqqa-khaneh* artists published in 1977, Karim Emami wrote:

Long before *Saqqa-khaneh*’s artists, existing a national school was just a dream. *Saqqa-khaneh*’s artists showed that it is possible and easy to create a national school with familiar and available raw material. (Emami, as cited in Godarzi., 2001, p. 108)

There should be a question for innovative artists: What are qualities and properties which can specify and highlight their artworks from the others which are belonging to the other places in the world? What was the Iranian character in their artworks and what connected their painting and sculpture to the past culture of their country? The cultural supporters of Iran also promoted these investigations because they wanted to see the starting of a national art school in Iran. The school would have a clear connection to the great eras of Iran: Achaemenid, Sassanid, and Safavid (Emami, as cited in Pakbaz., 2011, p. 214).

For Emami, the term *Saqqa-khaneh* reflected this spirit: the works became their own metaphoric repository of Persian objects. Ideologically and artistically, many of these artists were searching for a way to embrace both their cultural roots and their individual identities as international, innovative, and above all modern artists. They wanted to be perceived as cosmopolitan, contemporary, and relevant. They were in search of an art form that would speak for the country’s masses and embody elements of Shiite visual culture (Ekhtiar & Rooney, 2014). The *Hunarkadeh-ye hunar-hay-e taz ini*⁸ (College of Decorative Art) Continued to function as a breeding ground for many artists who would come to be affiliated with the *saqqa-khaneh* movement. It was there that they learned traditional applied arts and were exposed to symbols, iconography, and craft techniques drawn from popular Persian culture.

Outside of the sphere of formal education, the Atelier *Kaboud*⁹ served as a gathering place for writers, artists, and architects. Biennials, exhibitions, and local galleries gave artists a platform to show their work locally. Five Tehran biennials held from 1958 to 1966 showcased the work of more than 100 Iranian artists to an international audience. The unique combination of national support, local contact between artists and international curiosity fueled the rapid growth of the *saqqa-khaneh* movement. These Biennials Helped the Iranian state and artists developing their unique identity and introduced them to national and international art media and markets. Notably, during this period, artists and the government had similar objectives. They both wanted to revive the Iranian heritage, modernise national identity and promote an understanding among different communities and sectors of the Iranian society. The analysis of the works exhibited in the Tehran Biennials showed that the Iranian artists were influenced by the need to create new self-images woven from essential strands-Iranian pre-Islamic and Islamic heritages, national sentiment, and Western influence. Since Biennials are a historically Western art event, studying them can explain the role of the Western in Iranian's understanding and representation of their identity.

During these years, Queen Farah Pahlavi¹⁰ became a new cultural force and the leading supporter for Iranian art. The Queen and her advisors became a locus for innovative ideas, which spurred the surge of local modernism. Local artists and intellectuals played a significant role in developing her policies, culminating in the genesis of The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, which was intended as a showcase for Iranian as well as international modern art. Farah Pahlavi Foundation provided an appropriate ground for more diverse activities in different fields of the arts, through the support of contemporary Iranian artists, collections of invaluable artworks (either Iranian or Euro-American), renovation of old houses and monumental buildings, and managing various artistic events and festivals. These official plans not only provided an atmosphere for a more interactive relation between Iranian artists and the West but also sought to construct a new national identity through retrieving certain traditional values (Moussavi-Aghdam, 2014, p. 138). All the elements necessary to a vital modern art scene had been set in place, but so had the conditions for dissent. By the late 1960s private initiative flourished and informal arts clubs and galleries blossomed and artists' studios became independent sites for the exchange of ideas. Local art criticism developed; at this juncture, criticism of the West through anti-western movements was growing among some Iranian intellectuals. The major similarity of these movements was to encourage Iranians to discover their identity, tradition, and

national roots. The voices of well-known leftist writers such as Simin Daneshvar and Jalal Al-e-Ahmad were heard. Al-e-Ahmad, in *Gharbzadegi* (*Occidentosis or Westoxication*), castigated Iranian artists and critics for their mimicry of European and American modernism (Diba, 2013, p. 55). Dariush Ashoori (b. 1938), an Iranian researcher, believed that the *Occidentosis* theory -as a historical criticism of the relation between “us” and “West” was a form of our “historical consciousness” in the contemporary era. He also argued that Al-Ahmad’s book represented an intellectual position which counterposed the world of traditional culture and the modern world, which he called a “third world” position (Ashoori, 2009). Iranians from all walks of life questioned the roles of Tradition and modernity in their society. At that time, the question of identity imposed itself heavily, making a balance between the traditional world and the modern one an important issue for Iranians. Through the traditional world, Iranians shared historical memory, heritage, and culture. However, it has to be said that although the great presence of nativist beliefs can be recognised in the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement, none of these artists were anti-western. Rather, it was the issue of cultural identity that motivated them to refer to their own roots without turning away from the West. *Saqqa-khaneh* artists conformed to the “universal” principles of modernist aesthetics as well as incorporating Irano-Islamic art forms and native cultural elements. These artists, including Massoud Arabshahi, Nasser Oveisi, Faramarz Pilaram, Mansour Qandriz, Zhazeh Tabatabai, Sadeq Tabrizi, Parviz Tanavoli and Hossein Zenderoudi, all developed their careers in relation to the Tehran College of Decorative Art. The students of the college were encouraged to apply local symbols and emblems in their work while learning the “universal” language of modern art since the appropriate hybridisation of the traditional elements of Iranian culture with modernist aesthetics had become the dominant discourse for many Iranian artists in that period (Moussavi-Aghdam, 2014, p. 146). What is important here is that the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement and its governmental patrons were aware of the predominant Euro-American art and somehow attempted to overcome the sense of inferiority caused by the Orientalist attitude of Westerners towards “Third World” art and culture.

The Main Authors

The influential artist and leading member of the group, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937) trained first at the Tehran *Hunarkadeh-ye hunar-hay-e taz ini* and since 1961 continued his artistic career mainly Paris. He focused

on abstract structures in his early works; later, at the peak of his career, he achieved a very personal calligraphic style and reached his widest colour range. He also created works inspired in abstract repetitive elements of ancient Iranian crafts, such as metal charms and frame ornaments around paintings, which were rooted in the historical memory and beliefs of the people. The progress of this endeavour brought him to blur the boundary between figurative and abstract painting, a feature that would become a key point in the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement. Zenderoudi's interest was centered not on the content of letters and lines, but on their formal aspect and the fundamental plastic values of the words in the construction of a composition. It is clear that among the founding members of the movement, Zenderoudi must be considered the pioneer of the calligraphic approach in terms of the use of calligraphy as the sole compositional element.

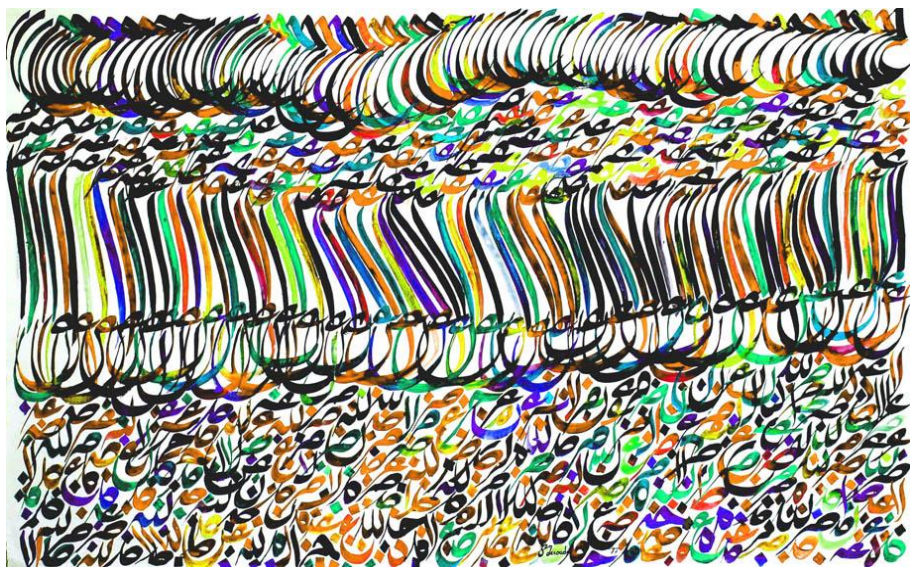


Image 1. Zenderoudi, H. (1977). *First Name*, Ink, gold on fabric, 130 x 195 cm. Retrieved from Pakbaz, R., & Emdadian, Y. (2001). *Pioneers of Iranian Modern Art*: Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi, Tehran.

Massoud Arabshahi (1935-2019), who also graduated from the *Hunarkadeh*, went further back for inspiration to the art of pre-Islamic Persia, specifically the motifs of Achaemenian, Assyrian, and Babylonian rock carvings and scripts. His drawings, inspired by Zoroastrian texts, resemble archaeological maps of ancient cities. Unlike other artists in the *Saqqa-khaneh*

group, he did not employ religious folk-art, and his different outlook and spirit set him apart from fellow artists. However, his early works, and even some of the later ones, conform to some major *Saqqa-khaneh* aesthetic characteristics. In particular, one can cite the permanent presence of various motifs and ornaments and the multiplicity of elements in most parts of the canvas. He avoided calligraphy as a modernist strategy in order to delve into the abstract potential of ancient Iranian art forms. His practice was not influenced by western art, but it shares the concerns of some American abstract expressionists who were searching for art that takes itself as its principal subject.



Image 2. Arabshahi, M. (1986). Untitled, Oil and Mixed media on canvas, 120x130 cm.

Faramarz Pilaram (1938-1983) was among the first group of Iranian artists who focused on Iranian heritage and mythical motifs and was one of the founders of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement. His early works were characterised by a distinct method of using stamps and repetitive decorative ornaments. He favored two-coloured gold and silver on paper in many of his works, which recalls a similar use of colour in calligraphy and illumination. Pilaram's later calligraphic work presents more affinity with the calligraphy-painting tendency, demonstrating his creativity and skill in the use of different forms of script, from the elegant and graceful *Nastaliq* (full of energy and weightlessness and pure color) to wide, twisting forms recalling *Naskh* and *Kufic* scripts (which emphasise the flatness of the canvas). In some paintings, which are part of the collection of the Tehran Museum of contemporary art, in these paintings, rhythmical words play visual movements in a symphonic space. Rather, He invented a musical notation with calligraphy forms. In fact, the homogeneous Quality of indigenous arts, music, poetry, and decorative painting consciously emerge with harmonic symmetries in his works.

Mansur Qandriz (1935-1965), One of the founding members of the *Saqqa-khaneh* school, Qandriz was instrumental in formulating a modernist and yet ethnic visual language. During his *Saqqa-khaneh* period, Qandriz abstracted many ethnic ornaments and simplified geometrical design characteristics of Persian and Islamic art. Human and animal forms, found in traditional and ancient manuscripts, along with Persian tiles and ceramics, became a particular source of inspiration. However, unlike many *Saqqa-khaneh* artists, he did not incorporate calligraphy in his work. Qandriz specifically searched for beauty in Iranian motifs and popular art. He was also among the first Iranian artists to use mythical motifs, tribal textile designs and metalwork. In his various artistic efforts, he attempted to offer an abstract language to elaborate and define a truly Iranian style.



Image 3. Pílar F. (1962). *Mosques of Isfahan (c)*, Ink, Paint and Printed seals on paper, 34x33 in.



Image 4. Pialaram, F. (1972). *Untitled*, Ink on canvas, 170x200 cm.



Image 5. Qandriz, M. (1963). *Untitled*, Oil on canvas, 80x115 cm, Tehran, Museum of contemporary Art.

Nasser Oveisi (b. 1934), works produced closely related to the Iranian painting and traditional book illustrations but he brought them to a contemporary sensitivity. He used Western techniques and elements together with Iranian painting ones, and also employed typical Iranian painting subjects such as the lover's couple, the hero on horseback, the female musician and others. Actually, Oveisi can be considered a postmodern artist who combines traditional and modern sources to create his masterpieces. In his paintings using Persian poetry and calligraphy, he intends to convey pleasant feeling.



Image 6. Oveisi, N. (1968). Persian odalisque, Oil wash on canvas, 28/5 x 36/5 in.

Sadeq Tabrizi (1939-2017) is one of the influential personalities in Iranian modernism. He was knowledgeable in traditional and folklore arts and made use of the collection of Iranian national, religious and cultural arts in his works. Trained in the tradition, he used to work as a professional calligrapher, although, in his artwork, calligraphy is present as an abstract ornamental resource, secondary to the figurative elements of the paintings, which are motifs of Persian folklore.

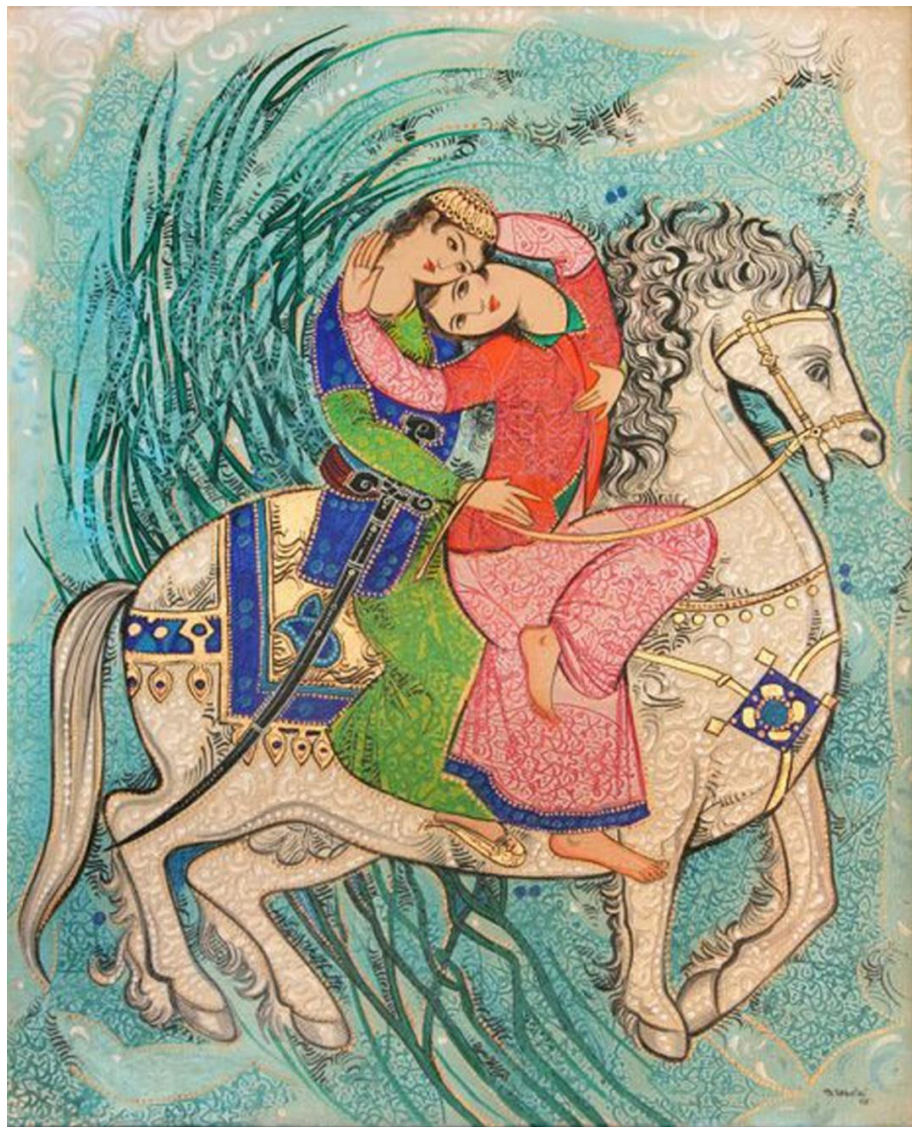


Image 7. Tabrizi, S. (2014). Untitled, Oil on canvas, 100x80 cm.

Zhazeh Tabatabai (1931-2008) is a hard-working artist whose continued effective presence along four decades of contemporary Iranian painting and sculpture has greatly contributed to the prosperity and wealth of this country's art. He is most known for the assemblage figures and sculptures created from metal parts of cars, fragments of industrial machinery and iron scrap. But in the field of painting, he should also be considered one of the pioneers who, like many other painters who exhibited their works from the early 1930s, sought to combine indigenous/tribal and national elements of Iran with modern techniques. His paintings and sculptures carry symbols and signs present in Iranian mythology, folkloric culture and traditional Persian arts and crafts.



Image 8. Tabatabai, Zh. (1959). Two figures, Oil on stretched canvas, 111/5x65 cm.

Sadeq Tabrizi, one of the members of the school, believes that:

Saqqa-khaneh artists started their artistic careers independently. Every one of the school's members was fascinated with different traditional sources in various ways. When the group assembled and their works were exhibited together, a relationship between their works emerged, although the works had been created separately and none of them could be considered as following in the steps of the other. (Tabrizi, 1999, pp. 93-95)

If we regard Emami's explanation in the introduction to the *Saqqa-khaneh* exhibition's catalogue in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, it can be adduced that the school had existed in a different manner, at least until that time. He argues that:

What is the status of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School today? Is it dead or alive? All but one of its members are luckily alive, [¹¹] though some of them may not be currently in their best productive years. The mere fact that the present exhibition is assembled on the occasion of the opening of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is itself an indication that the *Saqqa-khaneh* School is a living presence in the arts of modern Iran... (Emami, 1977, p. 5)

Discussion

One way of thinking about Western influence upon Easterners is in the manner of Edward Said's discussion of orientalism. European culture managed and produced the Orient at the sociological and ideological levels (Mackenzie, 1995, p. 9). As raised by Said, "the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth" (Said, 2003, p. 46). In light of this slippery and multifaceted conception of identity, the Easterners' self-perception and, therefore, their understanding of their identity includes how the Western world defines identity. The clash of cultural understandings manifests in the idea of the artist's role and the ways that artists present themselves socially. In their attempt to balance the pre-Islamic and the Islamic Iranian identity with modernity, artists faced the problem of maintaining a balance between the material and spiritual aspects of the society. The Iranian definition of the material world was based on Western values, which were not consistent with the artists' spiritual values. This inconsistency arose due to an exaggerated attempt, on the Iranians' part, to

compensate for lack of material achievement (Banani, 1961, p. 157). As the author William Millward states:

Iranians have been waging their own battle with the complex forces of change. They have tried to shape new order in terms of their own values and preferences. Diverse and often unfamiliar forces of modernism – such as new industries, technologies, arts, and systems of organising knowledge and data and putting them to use for society at large – have elicited a wide range of responses and reactions. At one end of the spectrum, there were those who maintained that if Iran aims to take over any of the fundamental structures of modern Western society, it should go all the way and adopt its systems in all areas of life. At the other end of this spectrum – who believed that whatever is exotic is bad and should be resisted. Somewhere between these two extremes came a typical moderate Iranian reaction which tended to accept the inevitability of the acquisition of new forms and structures, new techniques and systems. According to Millward, the main doctrine of this group is that they will borrow the external forms but keep their own values, heritage and traditions and infuse the new external structure with their own character and identity (Millward, 1971, pp. 2-3).

This is the main essence of a major art genre in modern Iranian art too. The artists of *Saqqa-khaneh* School looked to cults, rituals, and products of folk culture for inspiration. In their view, these roots had to be linked to modern styles and fused to create a distinctly national, artistic expression. It was meant to create an experience relevant to the age in which Iranian artists found themselves with a contribution from the world art scene. On the other hand, some researchers believe that: The endeavor of *Saqqa-khaneh* artist for relating modern art with traditional motifs was inadequate and superficial and had no deep influence on their viewers (Afsharmohajer, 2005, p. 199). These researchers think *Saqqa-khaneh* artists, in their investigation for an Iranian style, sometimes have a superficial attitude toward ancient sources. So, their desire for adapting traditional elements to new form sometimes has no appropriate outcomes. For some, the period marked a return to their traditions and heritage to recognize and distinguish their national identity from Western art. For others, the new challenges enabled new representations relevant to Iran in the twentieth century. Between these poles, there were many types of “return” and re-emergence, some to Iranian and Islamic heritage, and others to earlier hospitality for international influence.

Conclusión

With the *Saqqa-khaneh* School, Iranian painting finally found its national style and authentic visual language. Artists on the periphery of the *Saqqa-khaneh* explored the figurative idioms Iranian painting and the abstract possibilities of ancient Iranian art forms and delved deeply into popular culture to form individual styles in a dazzling display of creativity and vitality. The school with the purpose of being a national art school, which supported by the former government, was not considered until several years after the Islamic revolution of 1979 and following political, cultural and social transformation in Iran. As a matter of fact, this revolution, not only made the *Saqqa-khaneh* School without support but also caused the fundamental changes in the relationship between Iran and the world, however, after about a decade in the post-revolutionary period, modern Iranian painting was regenerated. Here again, one can witness that the post-revolutionary modernist artists are seeking to identify the specific characteristics of Iranian art, and it is in this continued quest that the essence of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement still lives on. the Iranian contemporary calligraphy-painting artists, in their quest to define an identity for the art of the national character, have searched in the local, historical-artistic and cultural treasure of Iran and have appropriated the artistic manners of past together with current movements of their era. One of the significant achievements of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement has been to introduce Iranian art to international art markets and festivals that continue to this day.

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Notes

¹ Mirza Taqi Farahani (1807-1852), entitled Amir Kabir (the great prince) was chief minister to Nassir al-Din Shah Qajar (Shah of Persia), is one of the greatest politicians in the recent two centuries of Iran. He initiated reforms that marked the effective beginning of the modernisation of Iran.

² Apadanna Gallery (Home of the Fine Arts) was the first private gallery in Iran; it was founded by Javadipour, Kazemi, and Ajudani in the spring of 1949.

³ There were five Tehran Biennials before the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The first Tehran Biennial was held with the recommendation and artistic advice of Marcos Grigorian in 1958. This was in fact an influential event in introducing modern art to Iran. The first four biennials included the works of Iranian artists which reflected official sanctioning of the modern artistic movements. The fifth Tehran Biennial was a regional exhibition in 1966, which included artists from Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey.

⁴ Shiite is the second largest religion in Islam. Historically, Shia Islam was divided into numerous branches, but today there are only three main groups

(Shiite twelve Imams, Shiite Ismaili and Shiite Zaidi). The common beliefs of all Shiites are the appointment of Ali Ibn Abi Talib as a successor of Muhammad -the first prophet of Islam-, and the emanation of the Imamate from Allah.

⁵ The tenth day of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) is known as Asura, it commemorates the day of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (the third Shiite's Imam). For this branch of Islam, it is a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, and for Sunnis, it is a day on which fasting is recommended.

⁶ A shrine in the town of shar-e Rey in the south of Tehran that today forms part of Greater Tehran.

⁷ Short term for "Popular Art." This term has been applied to two phenomena that emerged simultaneously in Britain and the United States, although they were virtually independent of each other. Pop Art is more associated with the early 1960s. The movement was both a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, which was seen as too elitist and nonobjective, as well as a celebration of post-war consumer culture. The work of American Pop artists, often graphic designers by training, was based on illustrations of objects produced by mass culture. The expression "Pop Art" should not, however, be interpreted too literally. These artists did not "manufacture" "popular pictures;" they provided a sophisticated artistic commentary on some of the activities and effects of the culture of the mass media. By appropriating marketing techniques and accepting the changed role of the artist, Pop Art was the first movement to clearly take into account the relationship between art and commerce.

⁸ The institution was established in Tehran in 1961 with the purpose of training experts in the applied arts. Offered a chance for art graduates from secondary school, but it also reacted to the needs of the new generation by establishing some alternative fields of study. Several modernist painters, sculptors, and designers who played a crucial role in the development of contemporary Iranian visual art were trained here under the direction of foreign and Iranian instructors. Varied fields of Studies such as decorative painting, graphic design, sculpture, interior architecture, and painting with a major emphasis on applied arts were taught in this institution.

⁹ Atelier Kaboud was founded by Parviz Tanavoli with some financial support from the Department of Fine Arts in 1960. Gradually, this Atelier became an artistic center for modernist artists such as Zenderoudi, Grigorian, Melkonian, Sheybani, Saffari, and Sepehri. The pioneer of *Saqqa-khaneh*, Hossein

Zenderoudi, held three exhibitions there (with the encouragement and support of Tanavoli).

¹⁰ Farah Pahlavi, (b, 1938) is the widow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and was the Shahbanu (Empress) of Iran. While studying architecture in Paris, she was introduced to the Shah at the Iranian Embassy, and they were married in December 1959.

¹¹ Mansur Qandriz, one of the major members of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School, died in a car accident in 1965.

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