

The Impact of the West and Modernism on the Persian Paintings of Flowers and Birds

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Abstract: Flower and bird painting is a form of Iranian art whose registration has been put off for so long. This type of painting includes two simple elements which could be found all over the world, namely flowers and bird. To develop this form of paintings, Iranian artists have been inspired by Chinese paintings. Flower and Bird painting reached its pinnacle in Safavid era, a period that is contemporary with botanical paintings in Europe. However, botanical paintings were more assumed as a scientific depiction rather than a form of art. European painters aimed to draw the plants precisely as they were. Iranian background in literature signifies that this form of art belongs to Iran as well, however, negligence of Iranian officials led to a point where demonstration of this belonging took a lot of effort and pain. In this study, the social situation of the 12 and 13th centuries (Hijri calendar) as well as the impact of the Western art on Iranian paintings will be the point of focus. It seems that the form and content European mode of painting and Modernism had a major influence on Iranian painting in 11 and 13th centuries, yet with respect flower and bird painting, this influence has been form-related.

Key words: Flower and bird, modernism, painting, belonging, painting

INTRODUCTION

Bird and flower painting is a form of Iranian art, named as such because the two elements (i.e., birds and flowers) come in proximity in this type of painting. One of the oldest Iranian mythical elements could be found in this form of art. The influence of its Chinese counterpart on flower and bird painting cannot be denied. It has been influenced by European painting as well. In this study, we will deal with the impact of modernism on flower and bird painting.

Statement of the problem: In Safavid period, Iran relationships with Europe took a rise and Iranian artists travelled to European countries. Sending Iranian artists to Europe with the purpose of education began to happen as a popular trend. Meanwhile, industrial and social revolutions in Europe were on their way to unfold. These conditions gave way to the emergence of modern art. Iranian painters, merchants and politicians met Europeans and hence were affected by them, exposing Iranian art to change and evolution. Some have condemned these changes and believe that modernism had a negative impact on Iranian art, yet some have praised the same thing. Academics and non academics have made numerous efforts to popularize flower and bird painting as

a style of Iranian Art. A prime instance of such endeavors is Shahdadi's book of flower and bird. Yet it is necessary to analyze the popularity and pinnacle of this art form between 11 and 13th century (16 and 18th AC) with the purpose of understanding western and modernist influences.

DEFINING FLOWER AND BIRD AND MYTHICAL APPROACHES TOWARD THEM

Flower and bird painting is one of the major and novel types of art including the painting of flower and bushes alone or the combination of flowers and seed-eating birds such as nightingale. Some believe that flower and bird painting is naturalist form of Iranian painting, however, it does not conform to the basic order of flowers, the layout of flower components and how they should fit together in nature.

Shadadi believes that flower and bird painting began in 11th century (17th AC). However, mythical approaches reveal that the basic elements of this form of art, i.e., bird and flower find Iranian origins. Here, we will briefly touch upon the origin of these elements.

Bird's mythical origin is Simurgh (Saene Moro derived from Avestan). Simurgh's nest is on Vispobish tree (a tree that carries the seed of all plants). The

relationship between Simurgh and tree is the continuation of the social mentality in the form of plant and bird myth. A tree that is specifically named in Shahname (Book of Kings written by Ferdowsi) is Gaz which also exists in Rostam and Esfandiar tale. Gaz has a relationship with Simurgh which is a symbol for divine wisdom, logic and treatment. In Bondahesh (a brief version of Avesta), we can also observe other trees such as Tagh, Gokran and Hoom used in Zoroastrian rituals. In Shahnameh, Simurgh uses Gaz to kill the immortal Esfandiar. In Islamic context, Sadreh, Tubah and Olive tree are used frequently. Ibne Sina states that "Olive tree is a metaphor for thought since it is able to return to its origin. After a lot of effort and struggle, it is able to accept the light and become shining" (Sajjadi, 1985).

This is one of the deepest and most exquisite concepts that a tree may possess. It can increase the symbolic value of trees. However, the most benign narration is given by Sohrevardi. He gave all he could revive Persian philosophy and mystics. In his book, *Fi Hale Tofooliete*, he likens the people of darkness to those who suffer from heart illness. To cure the illness, they have to pass three stages.

"The first stage is passing the mean animal stage which the consideration of spiritual light and illuminating factor. The second is the complete passing of animal stage when love, the night light (moon), finds root at heart of a man (knowledge from the coherence of logical self to active mind). The third stage is going to Ghaf summit and eating the fruit of Tuba tree on which Simurgh nests. After the third stage, there is no need for tools and help since the patients themselves become doctors and lapwing becomes a Simurgh" (Soltani, 1994).

THE POPULARITY OF FLOWER AND BIRD

A few works of bird and flower painting (as in common form) from Seljuk, Ilkhanid and Timurid era still exist. Saffavid period is when Iranian civilization was at its apex of art. Flower and bird painting just like other forms of art became popular in Saffavid period. Goudarzi (2013) believes that at the end of Saffavid era, birds were painted with more care and following the same period, no serious change could be observed in this mode of art. Mohajer believes that Iranian culture at those times as two-fold: "one aspect was the tendency to have relationship with other countries and the other was the tendency toward synthesis. These two features distinguished Iranian culture from other cultures of the world where Iran managed to become the center of relationship between Asia and the West. Meanwhile, Isfahan was the political and economic capital of Shah Abbas dynasty. During the

rule of Shah Esmael I, in Saffavid period, the Portuguese started to get into Persian Gulf which lasted for many years. In 16 and 17th centuries, Britain and Netherland and later Russia and Spain took to establish business relationships with Iran (Afshar, 2012). These relationships had impacts on Iranian economics and politics as well as Persian culture and art.

THE WEST AND MODERNISM

Before modernism, European art was engaged with great traditions for five centuries. These traditions dated back to Roman Empire and were a collection of Renaissance and Baroque figure's achievements. The fundamentals were based on the stimulation of nature. However, the modern age turned over traditional values. Finally, modern art emerged with new aesthetic principles. The emergence of modern art was not simple and straight forward. It was not derived from a specific tradition but the artists could fulfill the needs of their time and they could not predict how art would progress in the future. Their achievements in a very short time reached successful results (Pakbaz, 2005). Modernism had common features in different art forms. The examples of these features are attending the inner world of men, tendency toward subjectivism instead of realism in art before the 20th century, inclination toward abstraction and distance from concretion and traditional narrative structure, self-reflexive approach to art, art as a vehicle for self-expression, considering the language of art not as a neutral means but as an active element for transferring the meaning (Afshar, 2012). Europe never denied the use of this method or accused it as a reason of the regression of art. However, many Iranian experts on art have looked down on modernist painting.

THE IMPACT OF THE WEST AND MODERNISM ON FLOWER AND BIRD

Magnificent Persian architecture in Saffavid period on the one hand and Persian painting from the other were at the center of European focus. The existence of all these beauties in one city (Isfahan) which was the center of business, tourism, political ambassadors, religious leaders and European artists, transferred Iranian art into Europe and at the same time made European influence on Iranian art. Therefore, "Iranian miniature painting was accompanied by highlighting, perspective and complete dotting with its physical and concert aspect taking over" (Rahnavard, 2008). It was when Reza Abbasi began his work and established his specific principles. Under the influence of western painting, he sometimes took the

Europeans as his subject matter, yet he did not use shadowing and perspective principles. His designs showed the apex of a change began in mid-tenth century (Hijri). After the demise of Abbasi (1044 Hijri), his student Mohammad Shafie Abbasi, a flower and bird painter, followed his principles (Pakbaz, 2005). Meanwhile the bond between literature and painting had grown so weak. As a result of imported European art, ordinary people and their routine life became an interesting topic for the artist. Besides book illustration, painting had other functions as well and painters began to receive projects from outside King's palace. Pakbaz states that the popularity of painting in 11th century was manifested in wall painting in public and private sites. The reports of European tourists also approve that subject and structure of paintings at that time was analogous to that of the same century in Europe. The change of the King's attitude could be traced in Golestan palace wall paintings; it shows two main tendency of the 11th century: the first is Moeen Mosavar who followed Reza Abbasi's tradition and the second is Mohammad Zaman who was attracted to European natural paintings. The latter found great number of fans in rather short time and became official and formal. "Reza Abbasi's paintings were at first flawless and brilliant in color, however during the reign of the blind king, Soltan Mohammad Khoda Bande, art was wholly neglected thus causing a major change in Reza Abbasi method. As time passed on, the figures of his paintings became less delicate and the precious faces were pictured under a billow tree. Then Shah Abbas II ascended the throne. He was the first to understand that Persian art was deeply engaged with style and tradition of Reza Abbasi. He believed that if any change was desired, new incentives had to be at work. The most suitable way was to educate young pupils in Western schools of painting. Therefore, he sent a few young talented students to Rome (Rahnavard, 2008).

Rahnamoud believes that when Mohammad Zaman visited Italy and thus affected by the paintings therein, the whole paintings in his age became heavily under the influence of the West. In his paintings, western highlighting, body organ structure, eye shadow, perspective, using structured border lines and depth view could be observed. His son, Mohammad Ali and his students Ali Gholi Jobedar, Sheikh Abbasi and his son Alinaghi and Ali Ashraf followed Mohammad Zaman. These people have a number of magnificent works of flower and bird where shadowing and perspective is visible. Mohammad Zaman passed away in 1112 (Hijri). Various stories exist about Mohammad Zaman. Many believe that Shah Abbas sent him to Rome to learn painting. Karimzade Tabrizi, Aiding Aghdashlou, Rouyin

Pakbaz and Abol Ala Soudavar believe that he never left Iran and his familiarity with European art was because he became familiar with European people in Isfahan. Professor A. Ivanov however believes that he had gone to Europe. This is also shared by Yahya Zaka. The foreignizing tendency of 11 and 12th century describes the incomplete modelling of European painting. Foreignizing was at work in two major manners. The first was an Iranian method with foreigners as its subjects and the second was a European method with Iranian or European subjects (Afshar, 2012). Foreignizing affected images, perspective, shadowing, planning, simulation and naturalism as well as the instruments painters used. Many painting tools including oil color, fabric canvas and popular European colors were imported to Iran (Mohammadi, 2011). The beginning of foreignizing trend began in Reza Abbasi period and became popular by Alinaghi Jabadar. He was inclined to naturalism since he was trained in Europe (Afshar, 2012). Foreignizing was common in Zandieh and Qajar era. Mohammad Zaman pace up this movement and put it at the center. He was very skilled at processing and flower and bird paintings. Ramona Mohammad as cited in Afshar Mohajer, describes the Saffavid paintings influenced by Europe as follows.

The use of oil color despite traditional Iranian paintings. Paintings of enormous size. Natural sizes of human body. The observation of perspective principles. The existence of landscapes on the backgrounds. The use of these paintings to decorate buildings, to satisfy the King and to record his achievements. The lack of realism in organs and faces. The influence of the contemporary book formatting. Painting people in an artificial, rigid yet relaxed posture (a firm chest, slim waist, powerful arms, delicate fingers and hands). The use of delicate lines and figures to fill the surface and covers (Mohammad, 2011). These impacts could also be observed in flower and bird painting especially a little shadowing and conforming to the size of the bird and flower.

Oil color painting of birds and flowers confronted a number of foreign impacts during Qajar and Zandieh era. Pakbaz believes that in Qajarih since art found its way out of King's palace and the artists had to search for funds to survive, they began to be affected by Western art and thus less attempts were made to conform to traditional Persian culture (Afshar, 2012). As a consequence of artist leaving the palace, they had not support from kings. This also led artists to work for themselves, other or solely for the sake of art. The other consequence was the interaction between artists and society. Influence by the West, artist became more engaged with social issues and thus abandoned

kings. They started to work for customers who were middle-class; hence they were more close to ordinary people lives. As a result of whole this change, art became under the influence of buyers who from different social strata. From Saffavid period onward, a number of chambers in Isfahan Bazar sold European paintings. Iranian artists were inspired by Europe with regard to technique and subject (Azhand, 2015). Ajand as cited in Delavale in Isfahan Painting School writes: "Shah Abbas stopped after the chamber of our Venetian compatriot, Aenader Scondelli. It was the second chamber from right and was full of paintings and mirrors. The King praised him and welcomed him with his sweet words. He also showed the paintings to the Indian ambassador". This reveals that other chamber which sold European paintings also existed. Since, there was less than a century between the end of Saffavid period to the end Zandieh and in Zandieh period, there was more peace in our relationship with Europeans, these chambers were still active in that period and their impact upon Iranian artists (inside or outside King's palace) is by no means deniable.

Shahdadi believes that in period when the governmental figures did not support art, the artist began to paint birds and flowers. That was because these paintings were on a single page and their size was dependent upon the taste of the buyers. The subject of bird and flower paintings did not depend on the buyers' taste but it was influence by Iranian literature and poetry. No more than one painter was needed to work on it. The subject of the paintings was understandable to all social classes and thus the audience related to them easily (Shahdadi, 2006). If we understand these issues, we can understand the changes more easily. The production of single-page paintings happened in time of Soltan Mohammad (Behzad's student) due to the lack of permanent user or sponsor in Shah Tahmasb palace. Flower and bird painting was at its pinnacle at that time. The second generation of flower and bird painters includes Moein Mosavar, Mohammad Shafi, Mohammad Zaman, Ali Ashraf, Mohammad Bagher, Mohammad Sadegh and Mohammad Hadi. They were under the influence of change of attitude in 12th century. This period coincides with the expel of Mulla Sadra from Isfahan yet his acceptability and popularity among artists of his age. Mulla Sadra was a fan of Sohrevardi's ideas which were derived from ancient Iranian philosophical theory. One of the tenets of Mulla Sadra metaphysical thinking was fictive theory as a spiritual talent and independent from body, i.e., his theory of renewal of archetypes. Mulla Sadra believes that this world includes both material and spiritual objects. He thinks that the world is non-material and exists only in our minds, e.g.,

Simurgh exists in our minds but not in matter. The knowledge of people especially artist of that time began to progress more than before. They knew more about the ancient myths. Meanwhile, European artists in 16 and 17th century were inclined toward naturalism and realism. It can be argue that since they insisted on images from botany and zoology, flower and bird painting originally belongs to them as claimed by researchers such as Shila Kenbai. To reject this assumption, Shahdadi argues that the structure of botanical and zoological images is completely scientific and realistic; they have not been viewed as artistic. He states that when European experts explain this mode of Iranian art they forget how it is affected by Chinese as claimed by their older colleagues (Ekerman and Pop), yet instead they insist on botanical and zoological images as the source of this mode of art. It goes without saying that Iranian artist's attitude toward art is charged with mystics motives while their European counterpart's views are realistic and independent of mysticism. At the end of 10th and the beginning of 11th century, Armenian painters brought European painting principles into Isfahan. Europe was still under the rule of Feudalism in 16th and 17th century and aristocrats and church held sway. Looyi XIV had France under control. It should be noted that French revolution happened in 1789. Jahanbaglou (2002) believes that Iran became under the influence of modernism after defeat in Golistan and Tukmenchay contract. However, the beginning of flower and bird paintings was long before 1802. Therefore it can be formulated without a shred of doubt that flower and bird painting is an originally Iranian form of painting rather influenced by pre-modern European paintings than modernist art. As cited in Afshar Mohajer, Shayegan states that Iranian artists besides their desires for other cultures had synthesis power. This shows the ability of an artist to combines the different cultures and gives birth to a new artistic work.

Shahdadi (2006) believes that these features of flower and bird paintings belong to 11th century: "the works produced in the beginning of this century, there is no background, yet after the evolution of this form, little by little backgrounds find a place in the paintings. "In Zandieh period, Iranian painting changed: the use of embellishment decreased and more opaque colors were utilized just like European paintings (Afshar, 2013). Aghdashlou states that painting in 12 and 13th century shall be used instead of painting at the end of Saffavid, Zandieh, Afshar and Qajarih since this type of painting happened between 1100 and 1300. Changes happened in this period reveal that Iranian panting never failed but it took another form to continue its life just as the end of expressionism in European panting does not indicate the

demise of European painting. Therefore, 12-13th painting should not be called the demise of Iranian painting but it should be known as new era which demands urgent analysis and consideration. One of the areas of focus is the impact of West on Iranian art.

Mohammad explains that Iranian painting in Afsharieh period had the following characteristics: “the existence of wall painting, non-creativity of painters, desire for foregrounding and ambience, conforming to Western art, lack of success in copying Western artists, the popularity of oil color, spreading westernization by using bird, flowers, parks and women faces in paintings and the spread of realism” (Mohammadi, 2011). From the view point of Afshar Mohajer, the characteristics of Iranian painting in 12th and 13th century includes symmetrical structure based on vertical lines, arches, the use of limited colors which makes it look dull at the first look, the importance of human body representation, ideal beauty, the lack of will to show psychological features and the absence of light” (Afshar, 2012). In flower and bird painting in 13th century, women and men bodies exist as well. In 13th century liberalism, enlightenment and positivism found their way in Iran due to the education of students to Britain. Fathali Shah was interested in book illustration especially full width painting. They were similar to Achaemenian and Sasanian lithography. In this era, a rather weak influence of perspective and penumbra could be seen in the paintings and paintings were more oriented to traditional forms. In Mohammad Shah period, empty sky was more visible in the paintings and Iranian perspective was more in sight. However the perspective is different from that of European paintings where empty and sometimes cloudy sky is drawn in western manner. Mohammad Hasan Beyk Afshar is one of the painters of this period and he has a number of flower and bird paintings on penner. During the reign of Naser Aldin Shah, French Revolution and the fall of Napoleon took place. That is exactly when Iranian traditional society moved toward modernism. Dar ul-Funun was established and Amir Kabir employed a number of skilled European professors to teach. Abu Torab Ghaffari, Esmail Jalayer, Ali Akbar Mosaver and Mohammad Ghaffari were among the graduates of Dar ul-Funun. The subject of paintings were landscapes and face portrait. Pakbaz believes that in the 12th and 13th century, in a challenge between Iranian and European elements, Europe wins.

During the kingdom of Fath Ali Shah, Lotfali (portrayer) painted nightingales and flowers. He painted flowers, bushes and birds in a variety of ways. In some of the paintings, a simple black and white design forms all of the work some of which is shown by brief processing. In a few works, the processing increases so much and a few

blue or red lines could be observed. On some occasions, the whole painting is colorful using canvas (Aghdashlou, 1998, 2000).

In 13th century, flower and bird painting had a few changes including the painting of flowers with 100 leaves and red roses. These works were done in Isfahan or Shiraz where lilies and roses were popular. The painters used colors such as red, purple and pink. The flowers were painted from the bottom of their bushes to the top. All of the stage of flower growth could be observed in only one bush. Birds were also small such as nightingale, pigeon or lapwing in sleep or while singing. Birds are on the flower twigs or under their leaves. Other flowers such as iris are also seen in the painting between 11th and 13th century. Shahdadi believes that lotfali shirazi knew about the symbolic meaning of iris and rose. The reason why he sates so is because in some paintings, the half body of women is painted by a rose. It is the first painting in which a female face is painted instead of a male thus the work is called “Lady Sun”. Shahdadi believes that the very first works of flower and bird are the result of naturalism and those painted in 13th century are because of the fact that painters were aware of ancient Persian myths such as Mitra, Simurgh and Life Tree. Therefore, he totally rejects the impact of modernism on these paintings. Thus, he assumes a different type of aesthetics for the paintings of 12th and 13th century.

Shahdadi states that Iranian painter used these methods to manifest light in flower and bird paintings. However, he approves the impact of modernism on these paintings. “The work has been done with the brightest colors, bright matters, processing techniques, regardless of sheer shadows of objects on each other, free use of colors that show light such as red, pure white, azure and their combination with bright colors, neglecting the shadow of the painting subject on the ground and not using opaque colors are the features of flower and bird painting” (Shahdadi, 2006). However, in a simple comparison with book illustration in previous centuries, it can be observed that sky was painted with gold and rivers with silver, yet in bird and flower painting, colors specially the background colors are close to natural colors.

CHANGES IN THE FORM OF FLOWER AND BIRD PAINTING

Flower and bird painting were done by a painter, thus it was considered as an independent form of art but not like book illustration where different painters focused on one design. Therefore, they had the chance to use their own taste in the works. In the analysis of their works,

differences in style could be observed. In Mohamad Shafi Abbasi's works, several styles could be seen.

“Between 1647 and 1637, Mohammad Shafi Abbasi worked on flower and bird painting. Reza Abbasi had previously painted birds on rocks and in some works of 16th century he painted both flowers and birds. In one of his works (a bird on a dry twig), Shafi Abbasi used ink brown. In this work the whole trunk and leaves are inspired by European painting. It shows how the flower had grown from the beginning to the end. Some of his paintings are two-dimensional with no shade and perspective, influenced by Iranian traditional painting. In another painting in 1674, the freedom of lines is inspired by European painting. In designing an Aqua regia painting, due to the type of flower, jar and water, he used a European technique. He also used European technique with respect to the use of half-shadow, covered areas and highlighting with the goal of showing perspective. Some of these designs are completely different from the popular flower and bird painting. During the rule of Shah Abbas II, in reality the clothes were more magnificent, yet in painting they were simple. Face and personages were those of ordinary people. The plants were low in gold color and more vivacious and artist did not make that much effort to make their paintings magnificent. Works done at the end of 18th century or during 19 century indicate a higher range of influence. During the reign of Fathali Shah and at the end of 18th century and the beginning of 13th century, painting became under the influence Europe and no trace of precise miniature could be observed in them. Before then, heavens, timelessness, flat colors, spiral and circular combination, etc., (generally speaking spiritual atmosphere) were used in Persian paintings. However in Qajar period, outer environment, renaissance structuring, perspective, highlighting, etc., (material world) was in focus. The “19th century saw the kingdom of Fathali Shad and the increase of luxury in the life of kings and princes together with the decoration of king palaces. In any city where a prince ruled, their majesty became a reason for competition and thus painters found a superior place by painting on frames, mirrors, books, etc., (Kamareyi, 2011).

Modernism changed the European society. European Society accepted that everything even people are a tool for material production. Therefore, artists try to bring back true human value to his existence using art as a means. Society rejects artists and they turn their back on the society's demands. This separation between artists and their recipients is manifested as a tension between modernism and traditionalism. An artist who is hates the social relations governing his society desires creativity as a means to use against the traditional taste and interests

in his society (Pakbaz, 1996). The concept of new world was first formed in Europe but it was spread quickly throughout the world and changed the history of other nations as well. The fate of different societies became interdependent and art was no exception. As a consequence of scientific and technological development and the change of attitudes toward the material world, industrial revolution came into being and modernism took over all countries. The age of machines started. From the end of the 18th century, political revolutions emerged and with it the fall of feudalism, royal dictatorship and the rule of the church and democracy, nationalism and social justice replaced them (Pakbaz, 1996). However, in Iran modernism did not emerge until Pahlavi era. During the kingdom of Pahlavi Kings (18th and 19th century) when Iranian painters had left the palaces and they were closer to society, in the West, the relationship between the artists and society grew weaker. Therefore, the events unfolded in the West could not be consistent chronologically with those happened in Iran.

CONCLUSION

When Iranian artists and business men became familiar with Europe, Iranian artists became aware of European art of Renaissance and modernism. Enlightenment, nationalism and positivism found its way among Iranian artists and thinkers. Social synthesis is unavoidable and on the other hand, art and artist could not grow in a limited framework. The freer the social and political sphere is, the better artist may grow and develop they work. Iranian painters of flowers and birds had been influenced by Chinese painting a few centuries before in the period of Mongol rule but they adapt it to Persian culture. They popularized flower and bird painting in Saffavid period when the situation was suitable for the improvement of art. The same synthesis could be observed with regard to the West and Europe. Persian painting was mostly influenced by European in terms of form. Formal influence in flower and bird painting included technical factors such as margining, perspective, the position of the picture elements (birds and flowers), identifying light as a reflection from flowers as if they are the source, processing, black pen and monochrome, the use of color spectrum, realistic colors, taking heed of details, spiral and curve structure of vertical or horizontal lines.

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