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An Iconological Study of the “Tent-Pitching of Nomads in the Foothills” Painting, Attributed to the Safavid Tabriz School

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Abstract

Throughout history, Persian painting has consistently been regarded as a refined art within royal courts, closely tied to classical literature. The painting "Tent-Pitching of Nomads in the Foothills," from the Khamsa of Tahmasbi, also known as "Encounter of Tribes," "Encampment," or "Life in Summer Pastures", depicts a caravan encampment in nature, framed in an unconventional manner. Ethnographic and realistic depictions of nomadic culture from the artist's era are clearly evident in this work. This study primarily seeks to trace the foundations of these transformations in Persian painting, most notably seen in the works of Mir Sayyid Ali. By examining the visual indicators of the painting, alongside an objective approach, this research analyzes and interprets its subjective dimensions to reveal hidden truths within the work and the artist's worldview. The "iconological" approach—a systematic, logical, and multi-faceted method involving three stages of description, analysis, and interpretation—is employed to understand meaning in contrast to form. The results indicate that the arrival of foreigners and ambassadors at the Safavid court introduced a tendency toward Western art, which merged with the Sufi-influenced perspectives of painters remaining from the Timurid school. Transformations during the Timurid era, influenced by Kamal al-Din Behzad and Timurid religious tolerance, form the basis of these changes, becoming more pronounced under Shah Tahmasb due to his neglect of artists. Consequently, the artist's intellectual world shifted toward ideas and values related to nature and human life, moving the interpretation of existence away from the exclusive domain of religious interpreters and courtly tastes. Given the iconic form of the "Tent-Pitching of Nomads", created for one of the most prominent royal manuscripts, and through a systematic examination of details, the likelihood that it represents an actual scene observed by the artist is reinforced.

Keywords: Tabriz Safavid School, Iconology, Khamsa of Shah Tahmasb, Tent-Pitching of Nomads Painting, Mir Sayyid Ali.

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Introduction

Art and artworks are part of the history of ideas that, to express the feelings and rationality of their time, rely on the power of imagination or are accompanied by a kind of inspiration and enlightenment that human reason is often unable to fully comprehend. For a better understanding of these multifaceted phenomena, the iconographic approach, as one of the qualitative research methods, seeks to decipher meaning within its historical context by employing the stages of description, intertextual analysis, and interpretation.

In the Tabriz school of miniature painting (second period), literary themes, as in the past, provided a field for the creativity of artists such as Sultan Mohammad, Aqa Mirak, Mir Sayyid Ali, and Mozaffar Ali; artists who were among the most prominent miniaturists of this period, some of whom were direct students of Behzad. By blending Western (Tabriz) and Eastern (Herat) traditions, a new style emerged, whose brilliant manifestations can be seen in the Shahnameh and Khamsa of Tahmasp. The miniaturists of the new Tabriz school, following Behzad's tradition, developed a naturalistic tendency and showed great interest in depicting everyday life and environments. In the naturalistic approach, away from three-dimensional tricks, the tradition of conceptual spatialization is maintained, and all themes are defined with abstract signs derived from the real world (Pakbaz, 2010: 91).

The Timurids' influence from Iranian culture, the relocation of Iranian and other artists and scholars to the capital, and their unwavering support, alongside connections with neighboring countries through active trade and exposure to foreign arts, coupled with the influence of Chinese art characteristics and religious tolerance mixed with Shiism and Sufism, created a link between the court and society and transformed the simplicity of daily life into artistic grandeur (Ajand, 2008: 224). The manifestation of this artistic renaissance came to fruition during the Safavid period. The Safavids expanded their diplomatic relations with Europeans, which led to the exchange of ambassadors and the establishment of tolerance with Armenian, Georgian, and Indian communities. The creation of new markets and the influx of Italian paintings and printed images brought about a new perspective (Ajand, 2010: 482), which was further strengthened by the expulsion of artists from Shah Tahmasp's court, the formation of albums (morraqqas), and a shift in the miniaturist's viewpoint.

The prevailing method of this period diverted miniaturists from depicting courtly subjects and opened new horizons for them. The realism dominant in this school encompassed the multiplicity of relationships and events, leading to the complexification of the pictorial space and the formation of multiple layers of meaning in the use of symbols.

The painting "Encampment," attributed to Mir Sayyid Ali, within Behzad's naturalistic style, depicts a popular-rural scene whose theme encompasses a branch of cultural history and ethnography. The depiction of several scenes of simple interactions or the daily routines of mass/common life in a single image has made him a painter of everyday life scenes. Without glorifying heroes or seeking to express a significant event, he skillfully portrayed a moment of life.

In this research, with the aim of studying the iconography of the painting, first, the theoretical foundations of Erwin Panofsky's iconography are explained, and then, by combining various data, the conditions of the work's creation are reconstructed, and its hidden meanings are analyzed to provide appropriate answers to the following questions:

What are the prominent visual characteristics in the "Desert Encampment" painting?

What implicit concepts and themes do these visual characteristics contain?

Research Methodology

Given the nature of this research, qualitative approaches have been employed, with propositions developed based on a fundamental theoretical analysis method. By nature and method, this is historical, descriptive, and analytical research. Examining the image with this method, given its greater capacity for explanation

and interpretation, helps clarify various aspects of the era in which the work was created. The study's results are obtained after passing through the three stages of description, analysis, and interpretation. Data collection was conducted through library and documentary methods. The iconological approach, associated with Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) of the Warburg School, distinguishes between "theme or meaning" and "form" across three stages: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation. This step-by-step approach identifies three layers of meaning to uncover hidden messages beyond tangible elements. The unit of meaning production is the "icon," created by referring to the cultural and social conditions of the time. Panofsky believed that all forms, motifs, images, and narratives are interpreted as symbolic values, the meaning of which might be unknown even to the artist himself.

Discussion

1. Visual Characteristics and Pre-iconography

The initial perception is the representation of an encampment and daily activities. The space is organized by tents, with an unconventional framing. The upper frame shows people in ordinary clothing performing tasks like cooking, washing clothes, milking (an elderly woman depicted naturalistically), and preparing drinking water. Nine tents with various decorations are present. A stream divides the upper frame, guiding the viewer's eye toward a tent where conversation occurs. Women with jewelry and attire indicating social status are depicted. With a high horizon and deep field of view, all scenes are significant. The painting features 33 figures (11 women, 21 men, one infant). Key scenes include elders visiting another tribe's chief. The use of lapis lazuli, red, and gold, along with warm color balance and realistic placement of figures, are prominent features. Multi-perspective space (top, front, side views) is used, exemplified by a prayer rug depicted from above, decorated with a Nasta'liq inscription featuring verses by Hafez. The artist's signature, "Work of Mir Sayyid Ali," appears above a woman washing clothes.

2. Iconographical Analysis

The painting likely illustrates Layla and Majnun. An elderly figure and other men converse in a large tent. A girl in a green robe inside a red tent decorated with arabesques and Simurgh motifs secretly listens—possibly Layla anxiously hearing marriage negotiations. The Safavid era was a period of pastoral nomadism. Shah Ismail united Turkic tribes as the Qizilbash, for whom the Safavid leader was the "Perfect Guide." Nomads were a crucial military resource. Ibn Khaldun considered nomads morally superior, more courageous, and closer to natural virtue than urban populations. The painting reflects this reality: women dyeing hair with henna, wearing traditional ornaments (noh), tending animals, and even breastfeeding. Milk, a symbol of abundance and knowledge, appears. The inscription "Ya Mofattah al-Abvab" (O Opener of Doors) on Layla's tent—a prayer for opening fortune—confirms the courtship context. The Simurgh motif on her red tent symbolizes the mystical beloved or divine essence. The painting visually recreates the unspoken aspects of the poetic space, including the bashlough (courtship gifts) ceremony shown at the bottom left. The artist integrates a verse by Hafez around the rug: "In the end, you will become the potter's clay / now think of the jug, that you may fill it with wine." This reflects realism fused with mysticism. The artist goes beyond Nizami's poetry, depicting animal husbandry, wood gathering, and an old woman spinning—innovations based on direct observation. The stream symbolizes fleeting time, and the youth drawing water represents humanity's limited opportunity to benefit from life.

3. Iconological Interpretation

According to Carl Jung, symbolic elements in art can emerge from the collective unconscious. Adorno noted that art draws from both the artist's subjective spirit and the world's objective spirit. The intellectual transformation of the Timurid period, due to religious and cultural tolerance, changed the artist's vision.

Mir Sayyid Ali moved away from purely courtly themes, focusing on his surroundings. The boundary between high art and popular culture blurred. The artist's unstable position at court may have turned his gaze toward other powerful groups (the nomadic tribes), taking the first steps toward ethnography in Persian painting. The painting's focus on portable dwellings symbolizes the transience of the world, the cycle of birth, and power. Courtly tastes gradually gave way to the artist's perception of reality. The lack of focus on a single protagonist (Layla) and the attention to details not found in Nizami's poem create a lyrical space. The artist's signature is prominently placed—a sign of his awareness of breaking tradition and his innovation.

Conclusion

The visual characteristics of the "Tent-Pitching of Nomads" were analyzed using iconology, revealing truths about the artist's worldview and the transformations of his era. The pre-iconographic stage focused on visual description, the iconographic stage relied on written texts and cultural context, and the iconological stage explained the reasons for using specific visual symbols. The research confirms that art is not created in a vacuum; social and cultural conditions influence both the depiction of themes and their reception. Initially, the painting appears as a simple rural scene of nomadic life. However, Mir Sayyid Ali used the everyday space of powerful nomads to illustrate Layla and Majnun, subtly referencing the influence of this minority. His unstable court position likely turned his gaze toward other power structures. The main feature of Persian painting is its profound insight. Mir Sayyid Ali, influenced by the previous school, created a new art that recorded the most minute details of daily life. When freed from the court and rejected by it, he began to experiment, leaving behind grand courtly art and finding aesthetic moments in everyday life. The central focal point became meaningless as he sought to depict simultaneity. The choice of nomadic life, symbolized by tents and a flowing stream, reflects the transience of the world and human distraction. Encountering foreign cultural currents and Sufi thought, combined with the lack of a patron, led to the creation of muraqqas with diverse themes. Ultimately, in the Tabriz Safavid School, the artist's intellectual world focused on natural and human life, and the interpretation of existence moved away from the exclusive domain of religious interpreters. Art retained much of its sacred, symbolic character, but its meaning also became grounded in simulating the material world and portraying the realities of human life.