

Visual Analysis of Kamal al-Din Behzad's 'Shaikh Mahneh and the Villager' Folio from an Illustrated Manuscript of Attar's 'Conference of the Birds'*

Painting is among the oldest means of expression noticed for its significance since time immemorial, and artists, at different epochs of times, have employed this art form to express the views and ideas of their own or the community.

While serving literature through the art of book illustration and also by the grace of its unique features and the philosophy with which it is woven, this art has been a platform for the manifestation of the artist's genius and has provided a medium for the expression of thoughts and outlooks of the Muslim artist.

In addition to the artistic value of the images, these works, just like any pictorial document, contain abundant material on the social, political, religious, etc. conditions of the society where they were created. The bonds existing between literature and painting and their concomitance becomes more controversial when the painter goes beyond sheer painting of romantic poems, epics or scientific texts and tries to illustrate the abstract mystical concepts.

Due to the distinctive character of such types of literature and the complexity involved in the translation of its concepts into proper images, painters of different periods have paid little attention towards the depiction of such notions; for that reason, illustration of such literary genres are rarely found in Iran.

Of the remaining literary texts of this genre is Attar's «Conference of the Birds». Brimming with texts capable of being transformed into pictures and enjoying a rich symbolical ambience, Attar's «Conference of the Birds» is one of the exceptions among mystical texts that has attracted the attention of artists.

The Metropolitan Museum's «Conference of the Birds» is one of the few, rarely illustrated manuscripts of this text. Due to the unique artistic quality of its paintings, this manuscript is considered as one of the most valuable illustrations surviving in Iranian painting and is of course of prime importance in terms of research. Thus, the methodological analysis of the aforesaid pictures within its historical context may open up new possibilities to study the cultural characteristics of its era.

The current study focuses on the analysis of one of the Kamal al-Din Behzad's fine paintings called «Shaikh Mahneh and the Villager». Belonging to the Herat School of miniature, the painting was created during the adolescence of the artist at the time of the reign of Hussein Bayqara. It is one of Behzad's three paintings in this priceless version of Attar's «Conference of the Birds» which has received little attention to date.

On this basis, and given the importance and value of the aforementioned manuscript in general and this painting in particular, conducting of the present study deems necessary. Through studying the prevailing religious and mystical traditions of the time as well as the religious ideologies of the artist, the author has attempted to analyze and identify the symbols used in the image and their association with the text.

To this purpose, the painting has been divided into two sections based on composition. A list of substantial similarities

Jamal Arabzadeh,
Assistant Professor, Painting,
Faculty of Visual Arts, University of Art, Tehran
Email: jamalarabzadeh@yahoo.com

Toktam Hosseini,
(Corresponding Author)
M.A. Illustration, Faculty of Visual Arts, University of Art, Tehran
Email: toktam.hosseini@gmail.com





and differences of the elements employed both within the image and the narrative text has been devised followed by a discussion to prove the theoretical assumptions right or wrong.

The research has been conducted through descriptive-analytic method and data collected through desk studies. It primarily questions the artist's adherence to the text and then surveys the origin of the symbols and visual elements used therein. The questions include: will the translation of a mystical text into an image necessarily result in a mystical image? Do the personal, religious beliefs of the painter play a role in the selection and use of symbols? Has the artist, taking note of the social and political conditions of the society, made use of special and sometimes controversial symbols to convey a particular concept? The answers to these questions and more of this sort, as well as various assumptions attributed to each symbol that will be discussed in detail, helps the reader to understand the miniature better.

Hence, in addition to the abovementioned points, this study examines the effects of religious beliefs and social conditions related as well as the neighboring cultures in the selection of symbols and their drawing.

The results indicate that the artist's doctrines and religious views has a major role in creating this image and each of the elements and symbols used therein is in line with and completely related to the text. Moreover, it is rooted not only in Sufi beliefs but also the artist's religious ideas as a Sufi-oriented painter.

Keywords: Conference of the Birds, symbols, mysticism, Iranian painting, Kamal al-Din Behzad, Herat style.

References:

- Azhand, Yaghoob (2008). *Herat School of Painting*, Tehran: Academy of Arts.
- Davis, Dick (1998). *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum* New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Estelami, Mohamad (2014). *Tazkerat Al- owlia*, Tehran: Zavar.
- Farid al- Din Attar the Canticle of the Birds* (2013). Diane de Selliers (Ed.), Paris: Editions Diane de Selliers; Slp edition.
- Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum* (1998). New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Muncie Sorkhe, Maryam; Talebpour, Farideh; Goudarzi, Mostafa. *Clothing and symbols painted on Islamic mysticism*, Honarhaye Ziba magazine, Winter 2010, No. 44, pp 14 - 5.
- Nikobakht, Naser; Ghasemzadeh, Ali, *Light and Color Symbolism in Iranian-Islamic Mysticism*, Motaleat Erfani magazine, Autumn and winter 2008, No 8, pp 212-184.
- Pakbaz, Roeen (2001). *Iranian Paintings from Ancient Times until Today*, Tehran: Zarrin & Simin.
- Shafiee Kadkani, Mohammad Reza (2009). *Beyond Words & Sound (excerpt Asrar al-Tawhid)*, Tehran: Sokhan.
- Shafiee Kadkani, Mohammad Reza (2009). *Attar Neishabouri's Conference of the Birds*, 5th ed., Tehran: Sokhan.
- Shafiee Kadkani, Mohammad Reza (2008). *Qalanadriyeh in the Course of Transformations of an Ideology*, 2th ed., Tehran: Sokhan.
- Samii, Mehdi, *The Naqshbandi Sufi Order in the History of Islamic Sufism*, Rudaki magazine, June 2008. No 24, pp 134 - 124.
- The Holy Quran
- Switochowski. Lukens, Maria (1976). *The Fifteenth- Century Miniatures*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Zamani, Ehsan; Lilian, Mahammad Reza; Amirkhani, Arian; Okhovat, Hanieh, *Recognition and Analysis of the Elements in the Iranian Garden with an Emphasis on the Principles of Religious Ritual*, Bagh-e Nazar magazine, Spring and summer 2009. No 11., pp 38 - 25.