

## A Study of Application of Iconology Approach in Pre-Modern Persian Painting

### Abstract:

Visual appearance has always dominated the focus of scholars in the study of Persian paintings, which has led to – at times totally – neglecting their content. Few studies that have so far addressed the content of Persian paintings are mostly subjective with un-systematic approaches that are, in the best instances, based on methodologies that are formulated with reference to European art and cultural history. In this article, Iconology is discussed as one of the methodologies that has been frequently applied to Persian paintings unconditionally – by employing the method exactly as it is applied to European paintings during the past years. This article deals with the limits and shortcomings of the Iconological approach in analyzing the content of Persian painting – particularly pre-modern ones. In case we intend to examine the content of paintings from an Iconological point of view, then a primary question is how to define and delimit the unit of meaning generation. As a tentative delimitation for practical purposes, this paper shall define an icon, the carrier of meaning and the object of Iconological study, as a presented object which transfers a concept or a notion or suggests a person or a thing. Obviously, in this definition, the unit of meaning is not necessarily singular and could be formed by various associations among presented objects to form clusters. Also, given the referential element implied in the definition, it should be clear that the presented object is examined in terms of previous representations of the same topic with regards to the culture it was created in: as such, an icon gains significance from outside of the painting and carries an established meaning that helps identification in other contexts. With this understanding of a unit of meaning in the Iconological approach, the analysis of the

method shall be developed with reference to Panofsky's tripartite phases of understanding, which are also fundamental to the approaches proposed after him: the pre-iconographical, the iconographical and the iconological stages of interpretation. The three levels of Iconological meaning detailed are intended to describe how the method is a step forward from the descriptive approach in analyzing paintings, but they cannot be turned into a pre-established grid to be imposed on various paintings. They explain potential layers of meaning, but they do not imply that the actual processes of mind are being described. This could be highlighted by the fact that the formation of a visual tradition in Persian painting underwent a transformation in its history which challenges tradition as such. Books of poetry were frequently illustrated and calligraphed under the patronage of kings, making royal book illustration a tradition. At the same time, the subjects of royal books were mostly the canons of Persian literature. Due to constant repetition of the same well-known subjects and their visual conventions, the formation of a presentational tradition was facilitated and Iconological study of illustrations seems to be justified.

From the sixteenth century onwards, Persian kings gradually decreased their commissions on royal books and sup-

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port of the royal libraries for various reasons. This put an end to the collective artistic work and led to the production and proliferation of other forms. One result was the emergence of other art patrons and subsequently new subjects, characters, narratives, concepts, etc. in Persian paintings. This put an end to a continuous artistic and visual tradition not only because unprecedented subjects were introduced, but also because the collective memory that sustained the tradition disappeared.

Since Iranian culture was fundamentally orally oriented, it is not hard to imagine that some stories or themes were illustrated but were not documented, one way or another, fully or partially, thus making them currently unidentifiable. At the same time, since the subjects of paintings become more varied, hardly any non-royal subjects were portrayed more than a few times. This decreased the possibility of the formation of visual conventions by relying on former presentations of the same subject by its repetition for recognition. Besides, the aesthetic of visual representation in itself, emerging in the relationships that are thus produced, are excluded from Iconological analysis. Moreover, what we know about a specific period's culture is sometimes very limited and practically unhelpful in Iconological analysis.

Due to lack of sufficient social and cultural data that would lead to recognition of the symbolic value of presented objects, the Iconological study of paintings encounters difficulties. As a result, the three levels of Iconological meaning cannot be turned into a pre-established grid to be imposed on all the pre-modern Persian Paintings. Hopefully, this way the necessity of introducing systematic methodologies for the study of the content of Persian Painting, based on culture and history of Persian art, will be felt by scholars who are studying Persian art.

**Keywords:** Persian Art, Pre-Modern Painting, Painting Content, Iconology, Panofsky.

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