
COFFEEHOUSE PAINTING: ART, FAITH, AND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Coffeehouse (Qahveh-Khaneh) painting, a vibrant Iranian folk art form flourishing during the Qajar era (18th-20th centuries), has been primarily studied through its aesthetic or sociological aspects. This research uniquely investigates its multimedia nature, revealing a dynamic interplay with the oral storytelling tradition of Naqqali and the theatrical performances of Ta'zieh. To analyze the historical development, artistic characteristics, social functions, and cultural impact of Coffeehouse painting within the Iranian context, highlighting its multimedia character and its relationship with Naqqali and Ta'zieh. A qualitative thematic analysis of existing scholarly literature, predominantly in Persian, was conducted. Sources were reviewed, translated, and analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns. Coffeehouse paintings served as a powerful medium for disseminating religious beliefs, shaping national identity, and bolstering morale during a period of colonial influence. The art form's visual conventions and narrative strategies were deeply intertwined with Naqqali and Ta'zieh traditions. This study reveals Coffeehouse painting as a significant force in shaping Iranian cultural identity and underscores the importance of studying multimedia art forms within their specific socio-historical contexts.

KEYWORDS

Coffeehouse Painting,
Ta'zieh., Naqqali,
Religious art.

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Introduction

The enduring influence of religion on artistic expression is a well-documented phenomenon, and Iranian art provides a rich case study. Within this tradition, Coffeehouse (Qahveh-Khaneh) painting, a dynamic folk art form flourishing during the Qajar era (18th-20th centuries), offers a compelling example of the complex interplay between faith, national identity, and artistic practice. While previous scholarship has primarily focused on its aesthetic or sociological dimensions, this study examines its largely overlooked multimedia character.

This research addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship by focusing on the interconnectedness of Coffeehouse painting with the oral narrative tradition of Naqqali and the theatrical performances of Ta'zieh. This integrated approach allows for a deeper understanding of the art form's role in disseminating religious beliefs, shaping national identity, and bolstering social morale, particularly within the context of Qajar

Iran's colonial challenges. The study further explores the artistic techniques and visual conventions employed to maximize the impact of this unique multimedia art form, which combined storytelling, theatrical performance, and visual art.

The increasing homogenization of culture in the digital age underscores the urgency of this research. As global digital networks propagate dominant cultural narratives, this study highlights the importance of preserving and understanding lesser-known, culturally significant art forms. Coffeehouse painting, with its rich blend of visual art, oral storytelling, and theatrical performance, offers valuable lessons for contemporary artists and cultural preservationists alike. This analysis utilizes a thematic approach to existing scholarship to illuminate the art form's historical trajectory, its societal impact, and its potential contribution to contemporary cultural understanding. This research is the result of collecting, translating, and editing articles and books published from Persian into English.

Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method to provide a comprehensive description of Kecak Dance learning in Pasraman Widya Santhi, Sabtu Village. The qualitative descriptive approach is one of the research methods that aims to provide an in-depth and detailed understanding of a phenomenon or event based on the data collected [8]. This approach is designed to answer research questions about who, what, where, and how an event or experience occurs. Furthermore, the event is analyzed in depth to identify emerging patterns [9].

In this research, there were several main steps taken. The first step is observation, which is direct observation of the Kecak Dance learning process in the pasraman, including the methods used by the teacher and the learners' responses. The second step is interview, which is an in-depth interview with students and pasraman managers to obtain information about their experiences, constraints, and views regarding Kecak Dance learning. The third step is documentation, which includes collecting relevant documents such as practice schedules and photos or videos of learning activities.

The data obtained were analyzed using a qualitative approach by identifying important themes and compiling descriptive narratives. This analysis aims to describe the conditions and dynamics of Kecak Dance learning in Pasraman Widya Santhi Sabtu Village comprehensively.

This article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Coffeehouse painting by:

- 1) Investigating its stylistic characteristics and visual conventions;
- 2) Analyzing its integral relationship with Naqqali and Ta'zieh, revealing the multimedia nature of the art form;
- 3) Exploring its social and political functions within Qajar-era Iran and assessing its impact on national and religious beliefs;
- 4) Demonstrating the ability of this unique form of folk art to engage with contemporary discussions on preserving cultural identity while embracing innovation.

Method

This research used a qualitative approach based on a thematic analysis of scholarly literature. The data consisted of existing articles and books, mainly in Persian, which were reviewed, translated when needed, and analyzed to identify recurring themes regarding the history, artistic style, and social context of Qahveh-Khaneh painting and its connection to Naqqali and Ta'zieh. Data collection involved a thorough review and translation of the identified sources. This involved translating Persian texts into English to allow for systematic analysis. Data analysis proceeded in two stages: First, a detailed reading of the translated texts was carried out to develop a comprehensive understanding of the sources. Second, thematic analysis was employed to identify and categorize recurring themes, patterns, and relationships between Coffee House painting, the oral tradition of Naqqali, the theatrical performance of Ta'zieh, and the socio-political context of Qajar-era Iran. While this provided valuable insights, the reliance on secondary sources and a primarily single-language corpus represents a limitation for future research.

Discussion

1. History and Origins

Coffeehouse painting cannot be studied without understanding its context. The artistic roots of Coffeehouse painting can be found in the performances of Ta'zieh and Naqqali. In addition, the coffee house" as the main place for the public display of these paintings and its social function has formed an important part of this school's identity and social function.

Ta'zieh:Ta'zieh literally means mourning and in terminology, it is a kind of religious performance that has been performed among Shiites for a long time. The subject of Ta'zieh is the remembrance of the hardships and sufferings that befell the family of the Prophet of Islam [1].

Despite the fact that the subjects of Ta'zieh are related to prominent figures of Islam and especially the Shia religion. The roots of this Iranian show go back to before Islam, and many similarities can be seen in it with Mithra's sufferings, Siavash's mourning, the myth of Tammuz from Sumerian civilization, the myth of Gilgamesh from Ur civilization and the myth of Marduk from Babylonian civilization.

The influence of Ta'zieh can be seen in the Coffeehouse paintings. For example, the similarity of the type of clothes worn by the Ta'zieh actors and their hats and the feathers placed on them, with the coverings of the characters painted on the screen, different colors for different characters (green for "Ahl al-Bayt", yellow for "Hur", red for "Shamr", etc.), or the occurrence of several narrations and assemblies in one screen, etc [2].

Naqqali: "Naqqali is the narration of an event or story, in poetry or prose [or a combination of both], with appropriate gestures, postures, and expression for audiences. A "Naqqali" piece is more about the emotions of the audience than their logic. Since the subjects of the stories are supernatural heroes or do not have a purely realistic intention, it is different from a sermon" [3].

At first, the narrators (Naqqals) did not have a specific location and would perform in the most crowded places of the city. However, with the emergence of coffee houses, they also found a permanent place to hang out, and it was from there that painters emerged among the people. In order to further influence the narrators' words on the people, relying on their imagination and surrendering to the narrator's words, they began to draw pictures that later became known as Coffeehouse paintings. [4]

One type of Naqqali is Paradeh-khani (screen reading). In this method, audiences, while listening to the narrator's story, see different scenes of the story on painted screens; its three main elements are story, painting, and Naqqali. Paradeh-khani, mainly in epic scenes, seeks to arouse feelings and emotions. [5]

One of the working principles of prominent narrators, who were also called "Morshed," was to remind audiences of moral themes and points of advice during stories. They sought a blend of entertainment and spiritual guidance. [6]

Despite facing condemnation and bans from religious authorities, storytelling, deeply rooted in popular culture and national themes, remained an inseparable part of Coffeehouse paintings. It thrived during the Qajar era and the early Pahlavi period, reaching its zenith around the mid-Pahlavi period.

These two art forms so shaped the consciousness of the common people during the Qajar era that individuals lived their lives intertwined with specific characters and narratives found in the scrolls. The tale of Rostam and Sohrab, the recounting of the assembly where Sohrab met his end, and the associated rituals and behaviors clearly demonstrate the significant role of storytelling and storytellers in a specific period of Iran's socio-cultural history. [7]

Coffee House: Coffee houses were built in the best and most populated neighborhoods of the city. A place where a large number of people from different social classes gathered together. During the Safavid era, with the establishment of relative security in the country and the increase in the level of prosperity, coffee houses gradually emerged. At first, the coffee house was just a place to drink tea and coffee and enjoy hookah. Over time, they became centers for spreading news and political discussions. Also, various forms of entertainment and recreation also became popular in these places. [8]

One of these entertainments was the storyteller, who would walk on a stage in the coffee house with a stick in his hand to show the painted images or to synchronize his movements and entertain audiences. [9] In addition, mullahs, dervishes, and poets also took turns in the coffee house. [10]

During the Qajar era, among the audience of these tales in coffee houses, amateur artists founded Coffeehouse painting. To make the narratives more impactful, these artists depicted them based on what they had heard from Naqqals and with the help of their imagination."

2. Coffeehouse Painting

Screen painting (Pardeh Negari) has a long history in Iranian art, but its public emergence dates back to the Safavid era. This trend continued until it reached its peak of flourishing and popularity during the Qajar period.

The Qajar period is considered the peak of religious painting. The efforts of Qajar kings to unite Shiites and claim the leadership of Shia Islam were accompanied by supporting religious ceremonies and activities in places such as shrines, mausoleums, Takyehes (A takyeh is a building where Shia Muslims gather to mourn the death of Imam Hussein), and Saqqa-khaneh (ablution fountains). Public support was another factor in the growth of religious painting. [11]

A prominent example of religious painting during this period is the Coffeehouse paintings. These paintings were painted in oil-colored technique on large canvases, often due to their quick and easy transportation by a Naqqal or Morshed who would present the depicted subject in a dramatic manner. [12]

"The painters themselves had chosen the title "Khiali-sazi" (which literally means Imaginary) for their works to distinguish themselves from painters who dealt with objective reality." [13]

These paintings were exposed in coffee houses, and people who spent their leisure time in the coffee house would listen to the Naqqal's narrations. For this reason, this art was called "Coffeehouse painting". This style of painting was created by amateur and novice painters who had jobs such as plastering, tiling, etc. "Hossein Qollar-Aghasi" and "Mohammad Modabbar" were among the leading masters of this style of painting. [14]

What distinguishes Coffeehouse painting from other art movements is that it emerged from the grassroots, deeply rooted in the culture of the common people. Today, art historians and critics often refer to this style as "A'miyaneh" (popular painting.) These works are most notable for their stark contrast to courtly art. They are far removed from the refined tastes and sensibilities of the royal court. It is only in the depiction of clothing that we can faintly discern a lingering influence of the Safavid court style. [15]

The subject matter of Coffeehouse paintings can be divided into two main categories:

National epics: These can further be subdivided into martial themes (primarily stories from the Shahnameh) and festal themes (some stories from the Shahnameh and the Khamsa of Nizami).

Religious stories: These are primarily divided into Quranic tales and the story of Ashura.

Therefore, based on their themes, Coffeehouse paintings can be categorized into three groups: "festal," "martial," and "religious."

3. Stylistic Features

Qajar-era painting exhibited the characteristics of a transitional period, meaning it was a bridge between traditional and modern art. It was something that was leaving and something that was coming. This art was generally dependent on the court. Court portraits were painted by combining traditional Iranian elements with inspiration from Western painting. Coffeehouse painting, contrary to the academic trend of the Qajar era, avoided approaching Western painting traditions. "During this period, with the widespread growth of elegy and Ta'zieh performances, Coffeehouse painting, which combined Iranian religious and national values and primarily depicted national heroes and religious leaders, flourished." [16]

"In imaginary narrative painting, adherence to the narration of events was of paramount importance; however, it did not hinder the painter's imagination and symbolism. The goal was clarity, simplicity of expression, and maximum impact on the viewer. Therefore, they often wrote the names of characters next to their images in the painting, depicted the main character larger than secondary characters, or used specific visual conventions to emphasize the positive and negative aspects of characters. They more or less employed kind of a perspective and depth of field, and depicted scenes in a free and spontaneous manner without using a model." [13] For this reason, realism cannot be seen in the depiction of figures. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. The Dervish Curtain, a significant artwork by Hossein Dastkho Shohmdani, created in 1971 CE [17]

One of the distinctive features of Coffeehouse painting is the placement of the main character in the most prominent part of the frame. By depicting the central figure larger than the others, the artist ensures that they command the most attention. In portraying facial expressions, the emphasis is on highlighting the positive or negative aspects of a character. This allows the artist to visually represent the character's personality traits. Protagonists are typically depicted in an idealized manner, without any signs of defeat, especially in religious themes. Conversely, antagonists are portrayed with piercing, shameless gazes and ugly facial features.

Coffeehouse painting adopts two primary approaches when depicting women. In paintings with martial themes, such as those based on the Shahnameh, or in those with festal themes, like the Khamsa of Nizami, women are depicted with their faces visible. However, a different approach is observed in paintings with religious themes. In illustrations of Quranic stories, like the story of Yusuf and Zuleikha, women are depicted. Yet, in stories related to Ashura and the Prophet's family, women's faces are covered with veils and are not depicted at all. (Figure 2)



Figure 2: "The Court of Yusuf and Zuleikha," oil on canvas, commissioned by Qolr Aghaasi, painted by Abbas Takieh. Collection of the Reza Abbasi Museum. Dimensions: 111x182 cm [18]

In Coffeehouse paintings, faces are typically depicted in a three-quarter view. Additionally, in paintings with religious themes, the faces of antagonists are often depicted within a halo of light, or their faces are made brighter and more luminous than other characters. "They are depicted in a calm and completely indifferent state, seemingly oblivious to the battle scene, and in some cases, they face the viewer directly." [18]

Escaping from reality and delving into the realm of imagination are fundamental characteristics of a fantasy work. Perspective in these works is employed intuitively rather than based on scholarly principles. In Coffeehouse paintings, a single central light source is not evident. Shading is minimized, and faces are depicted in full light. The illumination of faces does not adhere to specific traditional art principles, and a halo of light is often depicted around the faces of saints figures. [16]

In these works, the logic of time and space is disrupted, and multiple places and times are depicted within a single frame. Given that Persian is written from right to left, the sequential order of images on the canvas typically progresses from right to left and from top to bottom. Artists in this style, "when narrating historical tales, aim to convey the richest possible meaning and significance by merging different times and places. By combining visual symbols from various historical periods and regions, they depict their intended universal and elevated concepts within a single subject." [16]

4. Social Impacts

Certainly, over the past few centuries, various styles of painting inspired by rural culture have grown alongside official and courtly art; however, the so-called Coffeehouse painting is a distinct and later trend. This type of painting reflects the aspirations, beliefs, and the specific cultural spirit of the middle class in urban society. [19]

In all Coffeehouse paintings, whether they depict national mythology or religious myths, symbols of night and day are employed. [20] The artist, drawing from the subconscious mind or archetypes, uses these symbols to convey a universal theme: the battle against evil. These symbolizations, shaped by the specific social and historical context, reflect the prevailing concerns of the time. The Qajar era, marked by resistance against oppressive rulers and colonial powers, and by popular uprisings, is reflected in the symbolizations of coffeehouse painters. While the battle between good and evil is a timeless archetype, its specific manifestations vary across different historical periods. [21]

It must be noted that the flourishing period of the Coffeehouse painting school coincides with the colonial presence of Russian and British forces in Iran. On the other hand, Iranians were gradually becoming acquainted with liberal ideas, and Iran was on the verge of the Constitutional Revolution. These events coincided with a period when the concept of the 'nation-state' was being redefined worldwide. In such a context, Coffeehouse painting became a powerful element in defining the national identity of Iranians, and by focusing on epic stories and religious narratives, especially the story of Ashura, it strengthened the spirit of solidarity and freedom-seeking in Iranian urban society.

It can be said that the emergence of this style of painting was a response to the turbulent social conditions of that era, which were characterized by Iran's repeated defeats against colonial armies on the one hand, and internal despotism on the other. [22] The narration of epic stories, particularly the story of Karbala, which was associated with the defeat of Imam Hussein but celebrated resistance and non-submission, greatly helped to maintain the morale of Iranians and create motivation for fighting against despotism and colonialism. On the other hand, epic narratives from the Shahnameh instilled a spirit of patriotism in Iranian society.

It should be noted that Coffeehouse painting, in conjunction with storytelling, created a multi-media art that played an important role in acquainting the people of Iran with their historical background in a society where the majority of the audience did not have the literacy to read written texts. It was a very important factor in shaping the Iranian identity, especially in Iranian urban society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Coffeehouse painting emerges as a significant phenomenon in Iranian art history, transcending its seemingly simple aesthetic to become a powerful reflection of socio-religious life during the Qajar era. Developed from existing narrative traditions like Ta'zieh and Naqqali, and flourishing within the public sphere of the Coffeehouse, this art form democratized access to visual storytelling.

By analyzing the visual conventions, the interplay with performance art, and its socio-political context, we see that Coffeehouse painting was far more than mere decoration; it was a vibrant medium for cultural transmission, social commentary, and the reinforcement of collective identity, illustrating the profound influence art can exert on shaping a society's values and resilience.

The study of Coffeehouse painting highlights the importance of preserving and celebrating folk art forms. It encourages us to appreciate the richness and diversity of cultural traditions and to find ways to keep them alive and relevant in the modern world. We can take inspiration from the way these traditions were adapted and creatively renewed over time.

The creation and appreciation of Coffeehouse paintings during a time of colonial oppression serves as a testament to the human spirit's capacity for resilience and hope. This inspires us to maintain hope and to find strength even when faced with difficulty.

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