

The Study of Plant Designs in Painting (Beginning of Islam to the Early 8th Century AH)

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Abstract

The use of plant designs in artistic works of different nations since a long time ago indicates a close relationship between religion, culture, traditions and rituals in any nation with nature. These designs were usually depicted with a symbolic approach and ritual attitude. In ancient Iran, using plant designs has found a mythical aspect or has been used with a symbolic-decorative approach in different works.

With the arrival of Islam to Iran, this attitude has gradually changed and using plant designs was not done only to express symbols, myth-making or shows its holiness but also it found a scientific and typology aspect in the remaining works of the 3rd to 8th centuries AH. Now, a question arises that were the plant designs depicted in painting of the above periods merely with the aim of expressing the symbolic or decorative aspect or were the other aspects considered? This paper was aimed to answer the above question and confirm the hypothesis that the designs of nature in painting of the 3rd to 8th centuries AH were done due to the sanction of portrait painting at the beginning of Islam with a focus on the introduction of the performance of useful plants. The tangible representation of them and decoration of literary texts and the expression of the symbolic aspect of plant were not considered. In this regard, it was attempted to refer to little documents in library to describe and analyze the plant designs in painting (the beginning of Islam to the early 8th century AH).

Keywords: painting, plant designs, functional Plants, the beginning of Islam to the 8th century AH

1. Introduction

Plants have attracted the attention of human beings since a long time ago as one of the important elements of nature and have been depicted in different ways on daily and functional objects. The use of plant designs can be observed as symbolic to decorative patterns in the artistic works of all nations. With the development of nations, the prosperity of human thoughts and the emergence of religions, the attitude of plants' holiness and their depicted patterns gradually changed. One of the main reasons of change in attitude is the use of natural elements like plant in the creation of different patterns, the emergence and acceptance of religion and rules of portrait painting inhibition at the beginning of Islam. The cultural-business expansion and transactions and using different sciences required the necessity of writing and recording them. Civilized and knowledgeable human decided to depict and illustrate the texts and also write in order to transfer his knowledge to the next generations and also better understand the subject.

According to many studies on different aspects of plant designs in painting, it seems that the other aspects of plant designs in illustrated books-that are considered as the important scientific documents-have been less fortunate. In this regard, the study of the origin and functions of plant types alongside the resources related to painting were considered necessary and the images of the early periods of the emergence of Islam, Abbasid School, and Seljuk period were selected as case studies. The obtained results confirmed the hypothesis and achieved an appropriate answer. It seems that the plant designs used in the remaining documents from the beginning of Islam to the 8th century AH were performed mostly with the aim of expressing the performance of plants' functional features and creating decorative coverage in literary texts and the expression of the symbolic aspect of plants was not considered so much.

In order to exploit and use the results of similar studies, some versions like the study of plant designs in Islamic arts: Hadi Arefi the visual feature of trees in Persian painting, Maryam Najafi and the study of symbolic elements

in Persian painting: Hussein Kafashchian Moghadam and ... were studied.

This study first examined the beliefs and attitudes of painter and then introduced the images related to the subject under discussion in order to confirm the hypothesis.

2. Plant Designs in Line with the Beliefs of Muslim Artists

As we know, with the establishment of Islamic governments in different occupied areas, the cultural status and its effect on arts changed. The emergence and expansion of Islam in the east, created a culture and civilization that led human from Secularism to ideationalism by increasing the national abilities of these areas. The concept and meaning that Islam gave to these nations created specific artistic features that are unique and can be studied. Islamic art was created in line with the intertwined Islamic beliefs and ideas with national traditions and rituals of these nations and tribes. Thus, on the one hand the infrastructure of Islamic art was founded on the basis of the religious worldview of Islamic beliefs and on the other hand was created on the basis of national and ancient traditions, civilizations and cultures and taste and tendencies of nations that caused a variety of Islamic art in different areas. (Ghazvini, 2003, p. 62)

It should be said that no image can certainly express unity that is the basis of Islamic Muslim painter with his deep thoughts tried to display special images to express divinity and unity of God without depicting God or His prophet directly. Muslim artist has always attempted to use the natural elements to depict a beautiful face of spirituality, monotheism and all things related to the ability of God. In the mind of Muslim artist, the beauty of everything is in the expression of God's attributes, as the prophet of Islam said: the perfection or beauty of everything is in the praise of God. (Burckhardt, 1970, p. 19) According to this belief, Muslim artist accepted new beliefs about unity and then found out that his art should make the world bright and smooth and help the soul to disconnect from the disorderliness and distress about itself and move toward unlimited unity. Thus, one of the most important tasks of Islamic art is to serve Islamic religion and beliefs. In this regard, the artist should have a creative and active mind to leave the tangible world and real nature and achieve a mystical intuition with a deep look and attitude. (Ghazvini, 2003, p. 62)

The law of sanction in the early Islamic period caused the recession of painting to some extent in Islamic countries and often was revealed in the form of geometric shapes and Arabesque and Khataei patterns in religious centers. However, despite the severe religious inhibition, Iranians and even the artists of Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties never left the art of painting. (Vaziri, 2004, p. 185)

It seems that among the created artistic branches, the law of sanction created a limitation at least from the 3rd to 5th centuries AH, but the Muslim artist especially Persian painters created innovative ways to continue their works. In this regard, a special aesthetics, that was the result of Interference between past traditions and new Islamic attitudes, was established in traditional painting. (Pakbaz, 2004, p. 54)

It should not be forgotten that in the holy Quran there is not a verse that implicitly or explicitly inhibited the art of illustration, but there are some reasons for the sentence of sanction. For example, the prophet has narrated that: if someone depicts the picture of living creatures, he will go to the hell unless he could make the picture alive. However, according to some believers, such narrations read interpretations by qualified priests. (Akbari & Kashani, 2008, p. 41)

The necessity to use visual elements according to this view and created events like the sanction of portrait painting made the objective phenomena in nature especially plant elements to be used more than ever and with a different attitude in the creation of different works such as painting.

It should be said that abstracting has been a kind of basic and fundamental tendency in Persian art that was not canceled even at the time of Roman and Greek traditions. In fact, the Persian painter tried to show his mental expressions before achieving an Islamic attitude and the mere imitation of the real world and its appearances were considered as target in his mind. Although with the arrival of Islam many attitudes and executive methods changed but enjoying the objective aspects of a natural element like plant and transformations of form remained in the base of an image or any artistic work. Following this fact, using plant designs was doubled due to specific visual and semantic abilities but the increasing trend of using this natural element especially in executive method continued for centuries so that the peak of its evolution can be seen specifically after the 7th century. (Pakbaz, 2004, p. 54)

3. Painting in the Early Centuries to the 4th Century AH

From the emergence of Islam and The Rashidun Caliphs (11-41 AH) no painting or painting work was observed that was probably due to the inhibition of portrait painting in Islam. But with the arrival of Umayyad dynasty (41-132 AH) and the construction of palaces, the art of painting was used to decorate buildings according to the

past traditions. The first resources of Islamic illustration were mosaic panels with the theme of plants, flowers and bushes in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and wall paintings of Umayyad palaces in Syria and modern Jordan with plant decorations- while painting on paper was not observed in the Umayyad era. With the emergence of Abbasid dynasty in 132 AH that continued until 656 AH using decorative paintings in the palaces of this era was like before with the difference that painting was done in books in addition to wall images.

One of the works in Samaria is a damaged picture on the wall of Josaq Al Khaqani palace in which a human carries an animal. Naturalism in animal motifs is observed well. The illustration of the details of animals' head and feet shows the skill and proficiency of the artist in simulation while the human form was depicted as unrealistic that is perhaps due to the laws about the sanction of portrait painting. The depiction of plant growth next to the body-that is probably related to the biological place of human and animal- and the flowers on the clothes, although seem hastily and primary in terms of implementation but is close to the nature and was merely used with the aim of decoration. (Picture 1)



Figure 1. Wall painting of Josaq Al Khaqani palace in Samaria the first quarter of the 3rd century AH (Pakbaz, 2001, p. 50)

According to some experts, although in such examples there are similarities on clothes, faces and facilities to the Middle Asia; it should be considered that the school of Middle Asia has been highly influenced by Sasanian for a long time. In the 3rd and 4th centuries AH the artistic language dominated Transoxiana was affected by the primary Greek-Persian style. But gradually, not only local concepts found priority on the Persian-mythical concepts but also western attitudes and tendencies became more obvious in artistic style. It should be considered that the Christians illustrated angels and Saints and the Manichaeans also illustrated their holy book that probably inspired Muslim artists in the art of painting and illustration of books. (Pabaz, 2001, pp. 37-49)

Following the teachings of Mani, painting was considered as a tool of teaching and advertising for the Manichaeans. The pictures available in the paintings of the Manichaeans were mostly done with the help of contract motifs as symbolic, soft lines, abstract forms and bright colors. Selected Manichaean characters were often depicted sitting on lotus flower. In general it can be said that plant designs were one of the most important elements that were used in their paintings. The tradition of Manichaean's book remained in the Middle Asia for a while and then was developed by the Seljuks throughout Iran. (Ibid 46)

One of the illustrated works of Manichaeans in which plant designs were used is picture 2. In configuration of this picture, the element of plant has the highest domination. If we accept that the above work is in the vertical triangular frame, there are some texts in middle Persian script, that were written from right to left, on the right and there is a plant depicted in a semi-realistic way on the left there are some players at the top horizontally. Plant designs on the clothes of players are similar to the decorations of the carpet they are sitting on. The clothes, faces and hairstyle are similar to the people of the Middle Asia. The interesting point about the decoration of clothes and carpets is that the plant designs of carpet are as abstract flowers in the rectangular frame while the decorations of clothes were formed proportional to the size of body that are more obvious in the feet and hands of the right player. Another point about the two players is their left feet outside of the carpet's margin that is perhaps in order to show the type of their sitting while playing their instruments. The person on the left that is a little below the two players is not much obvious due to the damaged part of the picture. It seems that the

difference is between the decorations of clothes and the way of sitting but this difference is perhaps related to his social status than the other two players. The most important decorative element in this painting is the two plant stems that are seen as suspended in the air. Leaves, five-leaf flower and buds were depicted realistically with the help of different lines while an abstract flower has grown among the leaves. However, the more important thing is the obvious feature of painting by the Manichaeans i.e. the presence of decorative plant element next to the human forms that became an important base for illustration in the next periods.



Figure 2. An image of Mani's book, players with plant decorations, Turpan, 2nd or 3rd centuries AH (Pakbaz, 2001, p. 47)

It should be said that there is a little awareness and source from Persian painting in the first four centuries AH. Perhaps in this period, Sassanid and Middle Asia illustration has had fundamental effects on the Persian paintings of the first centuries. Most available works related to these periods include little wall paintings. The books related to painting include "Al- Tanbih" by Masoudi (302 AH) and Panchatantra. With the advent of the Saffarids, Samanids and painting had a good fortune among the development of arts. (Akbari, 2009, pp. 48-50)

Plant designs in painting (4th to 8th centuries AH)

The reign of Mahmud Ghaznavi (389-421 AH) coincided with the prosperity of poetry in the style of Khorasani and preparation of Ferdowsi's Shahnama. The Ghaznavids like the Samanids showed an interest in painting and probably used artists from the middle Asia to decorate their palaces where the empty spaces of figures were filled with flower and fruit in most of the times. After the domination of the Seljuks in Iran, the performed contracts in portrait painting that were done with Mongolian model entered from the east to the western areas. (Ibid)

It seems that not only there were no pictures containing the symbolic use of plant designs in this time but also they were used as decoration in order to fill the background.

As was mentioned about the effect of the Manichaean art, the importance of paintings remained from the oldest Persian illustrated books is because they help to find the primary roots of painting in Iran that its continuity in the painting of the Seljuk period is obvious. The Seljuk era (428-552 AH) is one of the most important historical periods of Persian art and literature. In this period, Khamse, by Nizami, was written and architecture, metalworking and Pottery reached to the peak of prosperity. Although, different types of usual art were probably common during the Seljuk period, only a few wall paintings and a few numbers of illustrated versions have been left from that period. This is while the characteristics of visual art in Seljuk era can be found from the paintings on crockery and especially the containers called Minai. The very important script version of the Seljuk is the illustrated book of Varqa u Gulshāh in the early 7th century AH that was probably written in Azarbaijan in the early 7th century AH. Its images are very simple and derived from Manichaeism. These paintings are considered as one of the best examples of visual art in these periods. The simple parts of the text were decorated with flowers, birds and a variety of decorative ivies. (Pakbaz, 2009, pp. 55-56)

In some pictures like picture 3, plant elements play a major role in the picture. In fact, they are like a view which transfer happiness to the total atmosphere. Configuration in this primary image is simple and movements are

very few but meaningful. Two lovers have embraced each other beside a tree above which a bird is flying. Cypress as a symbol of spring, freshness and permanent love is placed at the center of the frame between two columns of verses that shows the main theme of the story. Two bushes that look like Arabesque branches are placed differently on both sides of the frame that play a symbolic role in addition to decoration and filling the background. There is a boudoir in the corner of a garden which participates in the love of the two lovers. The two birds on the left corner of the frame symbolically show the presence of lover and beloved among the bushes are consistent with the rotating movement of rooster's tail and plant stems. Probably, the presence of them next to each other, the flight of birds and Arabesque stems are the symbols of rebirth and eternity of their love.

Among the plants in the picture, Cypress is placed on the ground with a static body and its connection to the ground is shown with the grass below the picture. It seems that the painter attempts to show a ground or space to approach the picture to the nature in the story but the two twisted plants (ivies) around the two lovers imply a romantic atmosphere in an unreal situation as if their dream has come true. It should be known that all these motifs to text royalty were created with the aim of the visual demonstration of the story's theme in a not much skilled way whether in configuration or implementation and the introduction of the symbolic aspect of the plants was not considered highly.



Figure 3. Varqa u Gulshāh, about 596 AH (Akashe, 2001, p. 65)

As was mentioned, illustration was done rarely at the beginning of Islam. Baghdad was a scientific and artistic center since the 2nd century AH to the formation of The Ilkhanate reign in the second half of the 7th century AH and several books were written in this period. Translation of different scientific texts especially medicine was done from Greek to Arabic by translators but it is certain that a few number of illustrated books in Abbasid school or Baghdad school mostly included medical dissertations or benefits of plants, the application of useful varieties of plants or the introduction and study of animals or the report of travel stories by special people. Among different scientific subjects, the illustration of botanical and medicinal texts was more fortunate and welcomed (Akbari, 2008, pp. 42-46) that were probably done due to the inhibition rules and laws of illustration or the easiness of plants illustration.

For example, the images of the book Galen's medical book that is considered as the best indicator of painting style in middle centuries and the Seljuk period. The current pictures are related to the contexts of the book al-Diryaq (version 1199 AH) that dealt with the preparation of Antidote potions and amulets and charms and is very important in terms of scientific pictures and historiography. Pictures include 12 images about snakes and 13 scenes about the benefits of plants which include Greek examples. The scenes related to the process of the story were illustrated successively in the images of this book. (Akashe, 2001, pp. 310-312)

Another example is the pictures related to the book al-adwiya al-mufrada by Dioscorides. In these images, the illustration of plants o show a special symbol was not considered but also they express the useful benefits of plants that play an important role in human life. For example, the pictures related to the above documents in pictures, 4,5 and 6. In picture 4 of the book al-Diryaq, the story of a man who was saved from the bite of snake was illustrated. So that two snakes entered a vase that was filled with the extract of a medical plant and then died after drinking the water inside the vase, While the sick man became well after drinking a little of that water. Configuration in that picture is like the similar examples of these periods without considering the performed

view and scenes and only dealt with the subject. The fish in the river moved due to the wavy and intertwined lines. Plants also introduced the type of their efficiency and were used to fill the middle surfaces of other elements like humans and animals. The interesting point in this picture is how the horses enter and birds exit the frame. The snakes that are at the top of the vase, another snake that frightened the horse on the left and duck's wing, the Scale of the fish and the placement of the stand of the vase that is in front of the tree show the awareness of painter to volume and it was not observed in demonstration of human elements and decorative plants on the man's clothes. The junction point of the stand of the vase and the plant behind it and the placement of both at the center of the picture explain the main subject and the other elements play a subsidiary role. Plant's branches that were depicted without any connection to the ground among the empty spaces of other elements are totally for the decoration and coverage of the background. It should be added that although the scene of a garden can be seen in this picture, this subject shows the place of the plant's growth and its need to water not displaying a enlivening space and a special symbol of a non-terrestrial space.



Figure 4. Freedom of a man from the bite of snake, al-Diryaq, the end of the 6th century AH. National library of France (Akashe 1380, p. 150)

Picture 5 shows another example of this book that includes 5 plant examples and 5 non-plant examples. The illustrator in this image introduces the appearance of specific plants that respectively from right to left include Roasted alum and Balsam plant and shows a man opening the stem of a tree and collecting its extract in a bowl. Then, Gentianaceae and Nardin plant that is an efficient and aromatic are placed and then Hindi Teak is seen at the middle part below the picture as decorative and unreal. Finally, black pepper is placed at the end of the frame. Among each row of these frames, plant elements were used as abstract only for decoration. The appearance of plants in each frame was illustrated as primary only to introduce some parts of a plant like leaf, stem, body and root.



Figure 5. Display of plant table, al-Diryaq, the end of the 6th century AH (Akashe, 2001, p. 204)

In another example that is related to the book *al-adwiya al-mufrada* by Dioscorides its illustration includes the introduction of features in plants and the way to prepare drugs, surgeons at the time of working and a scene of unreal trees. (Vaziri, 2004, p. 188)

It should be said that Dioscorides studied the medical and drug advantages of plants for 40 years and then found the effects and advantages of seeds, shell, and kernels of plants. In the Arabic version of this book, two pictures should be considered that illustrated some parts of the book about the advantages of medical drugs. The introduction of vine and lentil plants that is shown in picture 6 is that: vine plant was depicted with a naturalistic and skilled style, so that it shows all parts of the plant from branch to leaf as real and all the plant was depicted as float in the space. The present study is totally consistent with the example in the original version while the depiction of lentil plant on the left of the picture is totally different from the picture of vine plant on the right. There are no details of leaves' Nervure and verisimilitude of the plant in the depiction of lentil plant, as if the painter copied it from a stereotype. Also, the display of the appearance of the plant as real was neglected so that the lentil plant was drawn horizontally on the paper, namely opposite of the direction of the plants' natural growth.



Figure 6. Introduction of vine plant (right) and lentil plant (left), *al-adwiya al-mufrada*, Attributed to Dioscorides (Akashe, 2001, p. 251)

Picture 7 introduced Fern plant that is described as: full of root, without flower and fruit, its leaves were grown from a single branch and stem and then were spread on the surface of the soil. This plant has a disgusting smell and astringent taste and grows on desert highland areas.

It seems that the Muslim painters who illustrated such a version paid attention to simplification and transformation more than illustration and this is perhaps due to their high attention to illustrating plants and especially transforming them in comparison to human pictures.



Figure 7. Introduction of Fern plant, *al-adwiya al-mufrada*, Attributed to Dioscorides (Ibid)

It should be said that the pictures in this version were illustrated due to the scientific and educational importance to progress natural sciences. But in most cases, these pictures were illustrated in a primary and different style compared to original examples. So that it did not create a specific method in painting, thus it is clear that this method could not continue, while Islam emphasized the knowledge and awareness of people in scientific fields. Thus, according to Ettinghausen, one of the features of script books in the middle ages was the existence of different sources that were used both in the east and the west. Also, writing books and texts derived from the

most famous references such as historical or natural sciences books were full of reports and points that differed in the description of an event and the author did not provide his/her opinions on the superiority of an event or another one to the reader. (Akashe, 2001, p. 251) Thus, it can be said that the presence of different people with different ideas and nations, different translations and type of ordered played a very important role in the lack of pictorial (visual) cohesion in this version.

The last selected image is from the book *Maqamat hariri*. The pictures in this book have a special attraction because they have comic, funny and instructive themes. (Kanbay, 2008, p. 115) Among the pictures in this book, there is an example in which plant element is shown in a more clear way.

In picture 8, the hero of the study named Abuzid Al Soruji with Hares Ibn Hemam and his friends are sitting in a Promenade and singing together. Next to them, on the right of the picture, there is an ugly man who is not allowed to be with the group, but he says beautiful and interesting words about the interpretation of lyric words singing by the group that makes them surprised.

The atmosphere in the picture seems unrealistic, although the placement of human elements altogether, the style of their body and face and linear implementation of the objects like containers and instruments clearly indicate the theme but the total atmosphere especially the plant element that allocated half of the picture to itself implies an unreal expression. The plants in the picture are more similar to food plants than trees. The form of stem, leaf and bud was depicted by using the current form in the nature but in an unrealistic way. On the left, right and middle they totally moved toward abstraction, as if the Arabesque stems primarily indicate a promenade that included a group. In addition, the existence of two different birds on the right and left sides of the plant's stems shows the geographical status. On the right, there is a Seagull that shows the existence of water, freshness and purity of that place while there is a bird-probably crow - on the left that describes the place and is probably the symbol of the ugly man.

In general, new leaves, the plant element in the picture and the wavy state of stems, new leaves, its bud and 3 abstract flowers are a symbol of green space that encourage some young people to sing. In this image, the depiction of plants is the display of an enlivening space in a not-skilled configuration with the aim of filling the empty surfaces and does not discuss a special symbolic aspect.



Figure 8. Hares Ibn Hemam and Abuzid Al Soruji in Promenade *Maqamat Hariri*, 738 AH (Akashe, 2001, p. 251)

4. Conclusion

In general, it can be said that according to the study of the mentioned pictures and such examples, in order to confirm the hypothesis, using plant element in the images of these periods the beginning of Islam to the 8th century AH was done to introduce the appearance, food features, decorate empty surfaces, intervene in the pictorial description of a story and was not the certain and clear expression of a particular symbol. It should not be forgotten that in a few cases like picture 3, the plant element was used with a symbolic expression in order to display the subject of the story. It seems that having the symbolic aspect of a plant, as was common during the ancient period, was very little in the images of the beginning of Islam and the next centuries. Because the attitude of Muslim artists changed with the emergence of Islam and then their aim of using natural elements especially plants was performed to complete the artistic work (painting) and show the unity of God not to express the holiness of a particular plant. It should be considered that this fact is clearly seen in most images of the Seljuk

period and Abbasid School. Although we see the use of plant designs in painting of these periods, but this trend was performed gradually and precisely so that it led to the creation of great works in the next periods.

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