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Original Research Article

Ironic Expression in the Critical Discourse of Iranian Calligraphic Painting (Naqqashikhat): Focusing on the Artworks of Hossein Zenderoudi

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Abstract

Introduction: The interaction between calligraphy and painting has manifested across a wide spectrum of artworks known as Naqqashikhat (calligraphic painting) in contemporary Iran, which can be categorized within various discursive frameworks. One of these frameworks is the critical discourse of Iranian calligraphic painting, developed by a number of modernist artists amid theoretical debates surrounding the tradition/modernity dichotomy. The works produced within this discourse exhibit an ironic and subversive attitude toward traditional calligraphy. A prominent example of the ironic use of script-based motifs in Naqqashikhat can be found in the works of Hossein Zenderoudi. Accordingly, this study aims to deepen the understanding of Iranian calligraphic painting through the analysis of the discursive aspects of Zenderoudi's works and his critical approach to traditional calligraphy. The central question of this research is: «How does Hossein Zenderoudi employ elements of irony in his calligraphic paintings to articulate a critical expression?»

Research Method: This study employs a qualitative approach and utilizes a descriptive-analytical method based on multimodal discourse analysis. Data collection has been conducted through library research (documentary sources) and visual analysis of selected artworks. Twelve of Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhat works were purposefully sampled, representing his key contributions to this genre between the 1950s and 1980s.

Findings: The findings include, first, the conceptualization of an ironic critical discourse within Iranian calligraphic painting, and second, an examination of the ironic elements in Zenderoudi's works in relation to the socio-cultural contexts that shaped them.

Conclusion: The ironic mode of expression in Hossein Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhat emerges from a critical engagement with traditional calligraphy. His works articulate an ironic, deconstructive, and satirical reflection on the complex relationship between tradition and modernity.

Keywords

Irony, Naqqashikhat (Calligraphic Painting), Hossein Zenderoudi, Critical Discourse, Traditional Calligraphy, Saqqakhaneh

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Introduction and Problem Definition

The interaction between painting and calligraphy in contemporary Iranian art represents a vast and recurring phenomenon. In the works of many visual artists, the use of calligraphic and script-based elements has become a defining feature. This diversity calls for a systematic categorization to identify the distinctive characteristics and discursive differences among various approaches. Some tendencies within the field of Naqqashikhat (calligraphic painting) have evolved beyond mere stylistic experimentation to generate broader artistic movements. By establishing networks of conventions and shared aesthetics, they have formed discourses that have gradually gained wide influence and followers. Among these, the ironic critical discourse stands out as one of the most significant. It emerged amid the intellectual and cultural tensions surrounding the dichotomy of tradition and modernity during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The defining feature of this discourse lies in its use of irony as a mode of expression. Irony, as a literary device, seeks to convey critical or satirical meanings by exposing the contradictions or reversals within a phenomenon. In the visual arts, irony has similarly become a powerful means for expressing critical ideas, questioning norms, and provoking reflection among audiences. This strategy has been widely employed in modern and contemporary art worldwide. For example, Marcel Duchamp's «Fountain» and Maurizio Cattelan's «Comedian» deploy irony to challenge institutional definitions of art and compel viewers to question their preconceptions about artistic value. Likewise, within the Pop Art movement of the mid-twentieth century, artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein used irony to critique consumerism and mass media. In the context of Iranian modern art, the paintings of Bahman Mohasses also exemplify the use of irony as a critical visual strategy. In general, irony functions as a potent artistic tool that allows artists to subvert conventions, stimulate thought, and engage audiences in deeper dialogues about the meaning of art, whether through critiquing social norms, reinterpreting the relationship between traditional and modern aesthetics, or exploring the tension between reality and its representation. Despite the widespread application of irony in global contemporary art, its presence and significance in modern Iranian visual arts have not been sufficiently examined. Hence, this study seeks to address the following question: «How does Hossein Zenderoudi employ elements of irony in his calligraphic paintings to construct a critical mode of expression?»

Research Method

This qualitative research employs a descriptive-analytical method grounded in multimodal discourse analysis. Data collection was conducted through library (documentary) research, and twelve of Hossein Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhat works were selected through purposive sampling. The sample represents the corpus of his major calligraphic paintings produced between the 1950s and 1980s.

Research Background

A considerable number of local and international studies have examined the Saqqakhaneh Movement and the development of Naqqashikhat (calligraphic painting) in contemporary Iran. Several of the most relevant works are discussed as follows. «Davoudi and Mostafavi» (2023) explored the relationship between calligraphic motifs in Saqqakhaneh artworks and Qajar-era calligraphy. They argued that the modernist features of these works represent a continuation of Qajar formalism and abstraction. Similarly, «Ravanjoo» (2022) examined

the Naqqashikhat movement within the broader context of Iran's modern art, concluding that it was influenced by Western Lettrism and developed along two main trajectories—traditionalist and modernist—rooted in cultural identity. «Hakim et al.» (2021) investigated the interplay between text and image in contemporary Iranian art using multimodal discourse analysis. Their findings reveal that recent artworks combine linguistic and visual forms within innovative exhibition-based frameworks. In another study, «Hooshiar and Mobini» (2023) conducted an intertextual analysis of mythological, traditional, and religious motifs in Naqqashikhat works of the Saqqakhaneh School, arguing that shared symbolic elements are deeply rooted in Iranian traditions. In a semiotic study based on Peirce's Theory, «Bani Ardalan and Yousefzadeh» (2019) concluded that Hossein Zenderoudi intentionally used Iranian religious symbols as vehicles of transcendental meaning. Likewise, «Bagheri and Mafitabar» (2023) analyzed twelve paintings from the Saqqakhaneh movement and argued that artists such as Zenderoudi employed postmodern strategies to bridge tradition and contemporary sensibility. Overall, most previous research has emphasized the integration of traditional motifs within Naqqashikhat as a means of reviving cultural identity. In contrast, the present study proposes that Zenderoudi's calligraphic paintings should be interpreted through a critical and ironic discourse, in which traditional forms are not merely revived but critically reimagined and subverted.

Theoretical Structure

1. Discourse: The term «Discourse» has become widely adopted across various academic disciplines, including sociology, linguistics, philosophy, political studies, art history, and related fields. Lexically, discourse refers to speech, dialogue, or conversation. However, in methodological and theoretical contexts, it represents a far broader concept; one that extends beyond the realm of language to encompass the implicit influence of temporal, spatial, social, cultural, and political conditions. In essence, discourse constitutes a structured set of practices that, through the imposition of shared rules upon creators of texts and artworks, defines the conditions and boundaries of what can be produced or articulated. Thus, discourse analysis enables researchers to uncover the complex and meaningful connections among text, discourse, and sociocultural processes by identifying shared features across texts or visual phenomena within a specific social context (Mills, 2009, 19). Given that this study examines Naqqashikhat artworks through the interaction between text and image, specifically, calligraphy and painting, it adopts a relatively recent methodological orientation: «Multimodal Discourse Analysis».

2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) investigates forms of discourse that are not limited to written or spoken language but instead rely on multiple semiotic systems, including visual, performative, and even auditory elements. This approach emerged primarily after 2000 through the works of linguists such as Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress, Michael O'Toole, and Kay O'Halloran, who analyzed the discursive dimensions of visual and multimodal texts. MDA developed partly in response to criticisms that traditional discourse analysis was overly language-centered and insufficiently attentive to non-verbal or visual modes of communication (Kheirabadi & Aghagolzadeh, 2020). According to Kress (2013, 97), «Mode» refers to a culturally and socially shaped semiotic resource through which meaning is made. Visual imagery, layout, music, gesture, and three-dimensional objects are among the modes used to represent and communicate meaning. In this sense, «Multimodality» typically refers to the interplay between verbal and visual components. Since Naqqashikhat artworks integrate both 'visual'

and 'linguistic' dimensions, they can be regarded as coherent multimodal texts. These texts arise within specific sociocultural contexts and are deeply intertwined with the social transformations of modern Iran. Accordingly, the multimodal discourse analysis employed in this study is based on four intra-structural components: Textuality and viewer positioning, rhetoric and expressive style, referentiality and association, and semantic dynamism and interpretive space. It also examines the social discursive background and contextual bases that shape the artworks.

Analysis of Findings and Discussion

The body of Naqqashikhat (calligraphic painting) in contemporary Iran encompasses a wide range of worldviews and aesthetic approaches toward the relationship between calligraphy and painting. These diverse orientations cannot be easily subsumed under a single stylistic or conceptual current. Over time, however, each of these tendencies has evolved into distinct movements that have inspired numerous artists and contributed to the formation of broader artistic discourses. The alignment of these artistic movements with varying degrees of public and international reception, active political and social ideologies, the art market, and systems of artistic authority indicates that Naqqashikhat in Iran should be understood as a «plurality of discourses», rather than a monolithic phenomenon. Therefore, the focus of this research is on formulating one of the discourses of Iranian Naqqashikhat, namely, the ironic critical discourse, and examining its components and characteristics, with particular emphasis on the works of Hossein Zenderoudi.

The Identity-Oriented Critical (Ironic) Discourse

Within the framework of discourse analysis, the recurrence of dominant interpretations of historical or cultural events often becomes a site of scholarly skepticism. When a particular reading is repeatedly reproduced, proposing a counter-hypothesis can open up new intellectual possibilities within marginalized or overlooked perspectives. In the case of the «Saqqakhaneh Movement», the prevailing interpretive trend in most studies has been revivalist, traditionalist, or syncretic, emphasizing cultural continuity and the restoration of Iranian-Islamic identity. However, this dominant framework tends to obscure the critical and ironic dimensions of the artists' engagement with traditional calligraphy. During the Pahlavi era, when the tension between tradition and modernity formed one of the central cultural debates in Iranian intellectual life, a distinctly critical attitude toward traditional art emerged. This approach is manifested through the representation of ironic features and components within the structure of Naqqashikhat, which will be analyzed in the following sections.

Analysis of the Characteristics of the Ironic Critical Discourse

1. Tendency toward Textuality and Viewer Positioning: The concept of *textuality* in discourse analysis refers to the degree of semantic coherence between the verbal and visual components of an artwork. As «Sorahi and Mowlaei» (2020) explain, textuality depends on the extent to which linguistic elements, such as words or phrases integrated into the visual composition, retain semantic relevance to the imagery. Thus, the more legible and semantically direct the written text is in relation to the visual elements, the stronger the artwork's textual orientation. In Hossein Zenderoudi's major Naqqashikhat paintings,

textuality tends to be minimal. His works frequently abandon semantic meaning in favor of the visual form of script (Figs. 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, & 14). In many cases, the writing loses its linguistic function, becoming a purely visual or compositional device. Even when meaningful phrases appear, they often contradict or diverge from the subject matter of the image (Figs. 5 & 14). For example, the iconic «Panğe-ye Foulad» (symbolic hand of Shi'ism) is combined with verses from Omar Khayyam's poetry, an inherently ironic juxtaposition between sacred and secular texts. As a result, Zenderoudi's works demonstrate a low level of textuality, emphasizing the aesthetic over the semantic. This distinction has also been discussed in Iranian art scholarship in terms of Naqqashikhat (painting-calligraphy) versus Khat-Naqqashi (calligraphic painting). Furthermore, textuality informs the 'viewer's positioning', a central category in discourse analysis that examines the relationship between the artwork, audience, and structures of power. In Zenderoudi's ironic discourse, where the textual meaning is fragmented or ambiguous, the viewer assumes an active and interpretive role. Hence, the viewer becomes a co-constructor of meaning, internalizing and reflecting upon the artwork's underlying critique.

2. Rhetoric and Expressive Style: The expressive style of Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhat paintings is marked by playfulness, parody, deconstruction, and subversion; qualities that align with the notion of 'irony' in contemporary art. Therefore, the most significant stylistic feature of his Naqqashikhats is their ironic expression. Given the multidimensional nature of irony, which functions like a multifaceted prism in terms of its semantic scope, each artwork may contain one or several ironic elements (Shokri & Pahlavan, 2021).

2.1. Elements of Irony in Zenderoudi's Calligraphic Paintings: In the visual arts, irony serves as a rhetorical device that disrupts direct and univocal meanings, introducing complexity and contradiction. As «Kargar et al.» (2022) argue, irony functions as a form of *witty dissonance* that reveals tensions between what is said and what is meant. Irony refers to a form of satirical implication, mockery, or the revelation of conflicting aspects within a text or an artwork. In the following section, the ironic elements present in Hossein Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhats will be analyzed.

2.1.1. The Contrast between Form and Content: Irony is inherently a conflict between «appearance and reality» or «form and essence» (Cuddon, 1999, 430). What is expressed on the surface often disguises or contradicts the deeper meaning. This tension produces a dynamic ambiguity that multiplies interpretive possibilities within the artwork. In Zenderoudi's paintings, this contrast manifests vividly. The subjects often draw from religious iconography, folk beliefs, Persian literature, and devotional objects such as «Panğe-ye Foulad», amuletic shirts, and handwritten prayers. Yet, these themes are rendered through distorted, fragmented, or meaningless letters, undermining their textual sanctity. For instance, sacred phrases are visually deformed or juxtaposed with unrelated motifs, thus destabilizing their devotional function. Even his color palettes reinforce this irony; the use of bright, saturated, and contrasting hues clashes with the somber tonalities typical of religious artifacts and traditional calligraphy (Figs. 1 & 4). The 'composition' of his works is similarly fragmented and decentralized, avoiding the geometric order and compositional symmetry that characterize classical Persian calligraphy. This visual disorder acts as an ironic inversion of the calligrapher's traditional precision, challenging conventions such as «baseline (korsi) alignment», balanced negative and positive spaces (savad-o-bayaz), and structural harmony (Comparison between Figs. 9, 7, 10, 2, & 14).

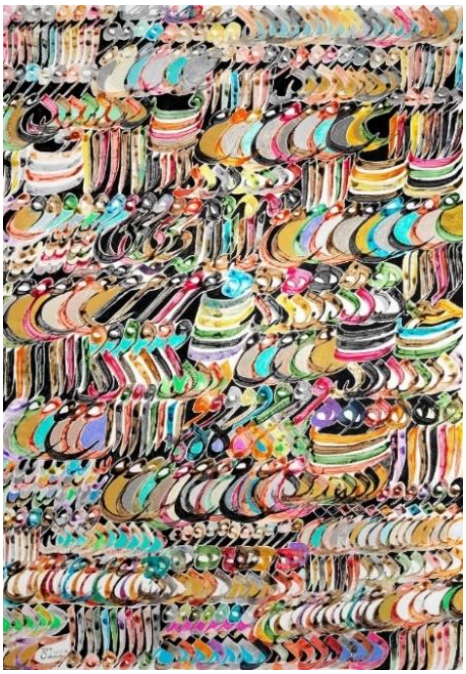


Fig 1. «Dal + Dal + Dal», 1969, Hossein Zenderoudi, acrylic on canvas, 124×212 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1969.



Fig 2. «D.J.A – D.J.A – D.A.U», 1975, Hossein Zenderoudi, 210×140 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1975.

2.1.2. The Caricatural Element: Ironic artworks typically evoke a simultaneous sense of laughter and contemplation. «In irony, emotions collide... to feel it, one must both suffer and grieve for the lost ideal. Laughter begins, but it dries upon the lips. Someone or something dear to us is cruelly sacrificed. We perceive the humor, yet we feel the pain» (Thompson, 1984, 15). In Zenderoudi's works, one can observe a caricatural expression of calligraphic letters and words that, within the traditional art context, have been profoundly bound to the strict rules and conventions of calligraphy. The caricatural confrontation, achieved through exaggeration of form and structure, seeks to express a critical stance by employing irony. Although in calligraphic paintings we do not directly encounter humorous motifs or comic forms, many of Zenderoudi's letterforms and compositions display exaggerated, caricatural qualities imbued with a subtle humor. It is as if the artist playfully subverts traditional calligraphic forms, stripping them of their sanctity within the framework of modern painting and the contemporary world. This caricatural condition challenges the viewer's understanding of the meaning and definition of calligraphy within modern art; a challenge that constitutes the core objective of irony in the visual arts (Figs. 2, 4, & 12). Among the caricatural visual features in Zenderoudi's works are: Exaggeration in the size and distortion of elongated strokes and «الف» (Figs. 2 & 11); the letter «هـ» replicated throughout the composition like wide, astonished eyes (Figs. 2, 6, 7, & 10); and overstated circles and curves (Figs. 13, 11, & 12), among others. All of this visually paradoxical play occurs within a cultural and artistic milieu deeply devoted to the classical principles of Persian calligraphy. Therefore, it appears that these works reject strict adherence to traditional calligraphic rules. As Zenderoudi himself stated in an interview with Hormoz Kamiyab: «When I write letters in my work, I don't mean good handwriting... I don't do it for beauty, and I am moving further away from beauty every day. In my early works, the

letters followed the rules of calligraphy, but now they do not. What matters to me is the general concept, not the beauty of the letters» (Kamiyab, 1972).

2.1.3. The Element of Detachment: The contradiction between what an artwork represents and the different effect it evokes in the viewer constitutes an element of estrangement, which, in a sense, is embedded within the broader characteristics of contradiction and simulation (Shokri & Pahlevan, 2021). In Hossein Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhat, Islamic, Shi'ite, and Iranian religious subjects are depicted; subjects that are typically bound by traditional and devotional paradigms. However, these works' impact on the viewer arises from the manipulation of form, color, and the structural composition of letters and words, which contrasts the sanctity of religious themes and the feelings of reverence and awe traditionally associated with sacred texts and object. Two distinct and opposing worlds are simultaneously represented within a single structure, where the visual and emotional impression conveyed to the viewer diverges from the subject being represented (Fig. 3).



Fig 3. Hossein Zenderoudi, «Five Members», 1960, ink, gouache, and metallic paint on paper, 60×30 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1960.

In terms of color composition, these works predominantly rely on the color selection strategies of modern painting and graphic art, which gained popularity in Europe, particularly through the activities of the Cubists and the Lettrism movement. These artworks often employ bright and contrasting colors, and using high-contrast, multicolored spaces (Figs. 1, 6, & 12) conveys a critical and alternative approach toward the harmonic color schemes commonly used in traditional calligraphy. In conventional calligraphy, harmonic combinations of colors, such as ochre, beige, cream, brown, gold, and black, are typically employed to convey a sense of dignity and the sacred value of the text's content. As Hormoz Kamiyab remarked: «For example, the light green seen in many of your works is by no means a color associated with our religious tradition; darker greens or brown tones are more appropriate for that atmosphere. To which Hossein Zenderoudi responded: That light green, or any other color, is used to complete the composition. I used green where I couldn't replace it with red or another color. So, if you see green, it's not because some Islamic artist used it frequently, but because the composition required it» (Kamiyab, 1972).



Fig 4. «Love», 1968, Hossein Zenderoudi, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 63.5×48.5 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1968.



Fig 5. «There Was a World Before You and Me», 1958, Hossein Zenderoudi, acrylic and ink on paper, 70×54 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1958.

2.1.4. The Aesthetic Element: Irony inherently carries an aesthetic dimension, meaning that, like a well-crafted joke, it is effective only when expressed skillfully and artfully (Muecke, 2019, 63). In Hossein Zenderoudi's paintings, this aesthetic element is evident in the composition, arrangement of large and small elements, precision of execution, and the harmonious use of colors. Their carefully constructed compositions and dynamic interplay of color and form demonstrate a high degree of artistic craftsmanship, engaging viewers through visual and graphic potency. The aesthetic impact of these works underscores the skillful balance between irony, form, and visual appeal, allowing the audience to experience the artwork both intellectually and sensorially (Fig. 11).



Fig 6. «He Havaze, Honesdale», 1982, oil on canvas, 120×150 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1982.



Fig 7. Hossein Zenderoudi, Untitled, 1970, acrylic on paper, 98×149 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1970.

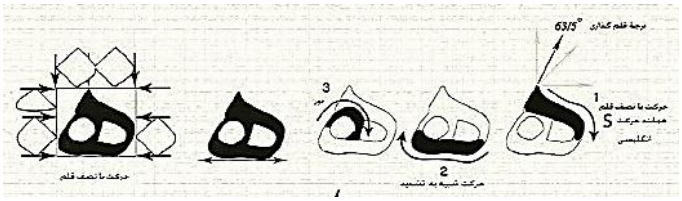


Fig 8. Comparison of the classical and traditional form of the letter «ه» in Nastaʿlīq calligraphy with its exaggerated execution in Zenderoudi's calligraphic painting. Source: Foruzandeh, 2025.

3. References and Intertextuality: In discourse studies, a discourse is often distinguished and defined through the differences it establishes via text, sentences, references, terminology, and titles (Mills, 2009, 10). The references and intertextual associations of any text or artwork serve as the primary source of its authority and its semantic continuity within a specific social context. In Hossein Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhat paintings, three main sources of reference are particularly prominent: Identity, traditional calligraphy, and modern painting. Identity, in itself, is a multifaceted concept, shaped by various sources and references that allow for multiple interpretations. Among the main reference points defining identity in his works are Iran, religion, tradition, and modernity, often combined or juxtaposed (Rajaei, 2003). However, in Zenderoudi's artworks, the predominant form of identity appears to be «traditional Iranian identity», yet it is rendered with an ironic stance rather than as an act of glorification or revivalism. For instance, the depiction of the 'Panğe-ye Foulad' (Steel Hand), a Shi'ite religious symbol, does not faithfully or reverentially resemble the original sacred form. This deliberate discrepancy between representation and reality is a hallmark of the irony present in his Naqqashikhat paintings (Figs. 3 & 5).

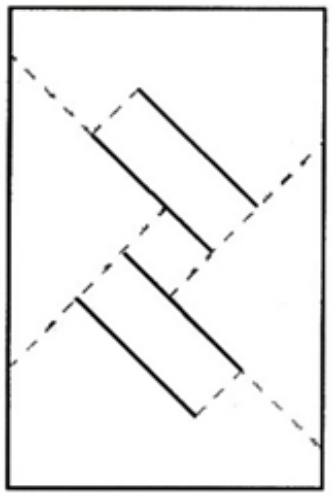


Fig 9. An example of geometric, orderly, and centralized composition in calligraphy. Source: Iran Antique, 2021.



Fig 10. Untitled, 1970, Hossein Zenderoudi, watercolor and gouache on cardboard, 108×73.5 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1971.

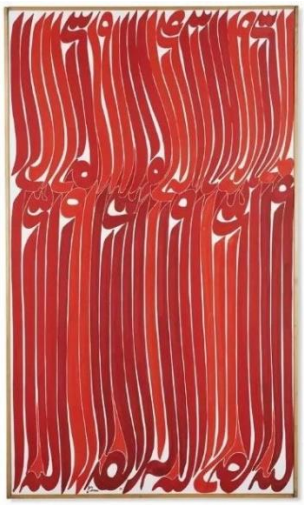


Fig 11. Hossein Zenderoudi, «Sīr va Sūr», 197, 114×195 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1971.

Hossein Zenderoudi's works often evoke intertextual associations with a wide range of traditional written motifs, including amulets ('herznāmeh'), inscribed prayer bowls, architectural inscriptions and tilework, manuscripts, marginalia, and folk or popular handwritten and painted compositions. In engaging with these sources, Zenderoudi adopts a subversive and critical approach toward the conventions, principles, and rules of traditional calligraphy. For example, in Fig. 13, which references the motif known as the «Morgh-e Bismillah» (Bird of Bismillah), both the depiction of the bird and the use of calligraphic elements reveal an ironic treatment.



Fig 12. Untitled, 1967, Hossein Zenderoudi, 71.5×51.8 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1967.



Fig 13. «Bird», 1966, Hossein Zenderoudi, gouache with gold background on handmade paper, 41×28 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1966.

Moreover, these Naqqashikhat paintings reference modern art, Lettrism, and graphic design. One of the primary associations evoked by these works is the Lettrist movement in Europe and America, with which they share striking similarities in terms of composition, treatment of visual and textual elements, and use of color (Fadaei, 2020). Another discursive reference in Zenderoudi's works that carries an ironic dimension lies in their titles. Since discourse, in the sense of language use within a specific context, such as contemporary art, produces meaning and social relations, linguistic signs external to the artwork, such as the title, artist's statement, exhibition title, artist's name and signature, pricing, and so forth, also contribute to the semantic network of the work (Hakim et al., 2021). In Hossein Zenderoudi's calligraphic paintings, there is often no meaningful correspondence between the title of the work and the motifs, letters, or textual content within the composition. This deliberate disjunction serves as an ironic manifestation of contradiction and conflict within the external linguistic signs themselves (Figs. 14, 7, 4, & 2).

4. Interpretive Space and Semantic Effervescence: Interpretive space refers to the opportunity and capacity of the audience to construct meaning from an artwork. The broader the interpretive space, the greater the potential for semantic effervescence. There is an inverse relationship between interpretive space and textuality: Lower textuality tends to expand interpretive possibilities (Sorahi & Molaei, 2020). In Zenderoudi's Naqqashikhat paintings, textual readability is often minimal, and textuality is at its lowest level. The viewer primarily encounters a visual and graphic composition, rather than a legible textual narrative. Consequently, these works offer the audience greater freedom in meaning-making, rather than directing them toward a predetermined textual interpretation. This expansive interpretive capacity is one reason Zenderoudi's works remain timeless and resonant in subsequent decades. The multiplicity of readings and the layered semantic

implications emerge from the tension between the visual and textual components, creating a dynamic, multi-dimensional experience for the viewer.



Fig 14. «Foreign Spirit», 1978, Hossein Zenderoudi, mixed media and metallic pigments on canvas, 132×195 cm. Source: Zenderoudi, 1978.

Social Contexts and Bases of Discourse

As discussed in the section on discourse, the formation of artistic movements and the distinct characteristics of specific bodies of artworks are deeply rooted in social transformations and the active discourses of each period. Two major social currents are particularly relevant to better understand the emergence of the ironic critical discourse in Iranian Naqqashikhat.

1. Critical Thinking: In general, critical approaches are regarded as among the most serious and rigorous orientations in theoretical studies of art, particularly in the modern and contemporary period. Historically, they developed alongside the ideas of «Immanuel Kant» in the nineteenth century. The main characteristic of the critical approach in artistic discourse is the critique of realism and representationalism. Within critical thought, it is never possible to attain a complete or absolute understanding of reality; rather, through a secondary, reflective gaze that reveals the conditions of possibility for images and representations of reality, one can enter phenomena's semantic and semiotic systems. For this reason, critical perspectives in art play a crucial and indispensable role in revealing mechanisms of domination, absence, exclusion, and orientation, compelling us to continuously confront the values upon which the history of art is constructed (Edwards, 1999, 13). The social experience of critical thought in Iran during the Pahlavi II era reached its height of tension and dialectical conflict between modernism and traditionalism. Among its most significant debates was the relationship between «the traditional» and «the new». Two key terms frequently used in this approach, particularly in art-related contexts, are «reinterpretation» and «retrieval». According to critical theory, the reinterpretation of

artworks, conceived as a dialectical process between past artistic traditions and contemporary art, is an inevitable choice for the modern human and artist. Thus, the critical approach is intrinsically intertwined with recovering and rereading identity. Consequently, the development of critical thinking and the analytical engagement with the past and traditional subjects became among the most significant social factors influencing Iranian art, especially under the modernist and globalizing tendencies of the Pahlavi regime during the 1330s-1340s, shaping a broad spectrum of artworks, most notably in modern Iranian painting and the early stages of calligraphic painting (NaqqashiKhat).

2. Nationalism and the Traditional/Modern Dilemma during Pahlavi II: Ethnic and national-cultural orientations have been crucial in Iran's political, social, and cultural life. From the Constitutional Revolution to the Pahlavi dynasty, significant social and political transformations shaped identity and nationalism, particularly influencing the arts during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign. Amid the global Cold War and rising independence movements worldwide, the government supported the modernization and globalization of art forms (Moridi, 2018, 91). The foundations of modern Iranian painting were laid with the establishment of the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1940, cultivating artists and scholars with modernist and critical perspectives toward traditional arts. As Aghdashloo (1964) noted: «Some seem unwilling to recognize that from the glorious past, with all its pomp, nothing can be created for today… Miniature, Naskh, and Kufic scripts can no longer be imposed on us, as they do not meet today's visual needs». The globalizing orientation of the Pahlavi II regime reinforced this trend, particularly in the late 1950s, supporting artists who engaged with modern art and presenting it internationally. By the 1960s, modern painting in Iran consolidated and expanded due to economic growth, state support, and cultural policies promoting national unity, heritage revival, and public education to foster receptivity to modernism (Hosseini Rad & Khalili, 2012, 11). These social transformations and state-supported modernist initiatives provided fertile ground for the emergence of a critical discourse in Iranian Naqqashikhat, with Hossein Zenderoudi as a key exemplar. Over subsequent decades, his approach was widely adopted and adapted by other Naqqashikhat artists.

Conclusion

The results of this study, based on the analysis of discursive features, demonstrate that a critical stance emerged in a subset of Naqqashikhat works. Despite engagement with identity, these works challenged the definitions and functions of traditional art, using irony to express a subversive and critical approach to calligraphy in modern art. Hossein Zenderoudi exemplifies this stance through exaggeration, semantic deconstruction, unconventional color and composition, and unusual titles, achieving a form of ironic critical expression. His ironic critical approach in confronting traditional calligraphy, intertwined with his time's social mechanisms and active discourses, reflects a satirical, subversive, and critical commentary on the relationship between tradition and modernity. Thus, the formulation of the ironic critical discourse and the multimodal analysis of Zenderoudi's works contribute to a deeper understanding of Naqqashikhat, highlighting the diverse discourses and worldviews present in this art form.

Author Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation in Islamic Arts, entitled «Discourse Analysis of Contemporary Iranian Painting in Interaction with Inscriptive Motifs and Traditional Calligraphy (The 1950s to the 2000s)», conducted under the supervision of the second and third authors at Tarbiat Modares University.

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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