

Original Research Article

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Adaptation of the use of plant motifs in Armenian miniatures and Iranian paintings

Abstract

Problem definition: With the invention of the Armenian calligraphy, the visual language of the Armenian miniature underwent significant changes as manifested in the schools of Vaspurakan, Cilicia, Hayek, Ney, Crimea, Goldsor and Dato. One of the Armenian miniature's characteristics is the abundant and diverse use of plant motifs to decorate the religious texts such as the Bible, Jashots, Sharakan as well as other books related to the medicine, history and similar topics. From the fifth century onward, with the division of Armenia into western and eastern parts under the governance of Iran and Byzantium, cultural and artistic commonalities were emerged between Iran and the Caucasus. According to what has happened, the question is how many plant motifs are depicted in the Armenian miniatures and what are its similarities with Iranian painting?

Objective: Better understanding of Iranian and Armenian motifs, their similarities and differences.

Research Method: The current research is a comparative study whose findings are presented in a descriptive-analytical manner. The sources of this research include the library and information taken from internet sites.

Results: The current study indicated that the plant motifs are present in the Armenian miniatures in five ways, including: the role of the plant to exactly illustrate the text, role of the plant to describe the narrative, summarized and geometric role of the plant to fill the void, role of the plant as a symbol and the use of its abstract role for the aesthetic purposes. The present investigation also showed that there are similarities between the Armenian and Iranian miniatures in four forms of the plant motifs illustration. However, the third form, namely the geometric summarization of the plant motifs form with the aim of brevity, is not visible in the Iranian miniatures.

Keywords: Armenian miniature, plant motifs, Vaspurakan, symbol.

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Introduction

Before becoming Christians, the people of Armenia, used to worship Mehr, the moon, Venus and other angels of Mazdayasna. They have followed Christianity since 301 and combined their symbols and pictorial traditions with Christian concepts. In Asian visual culture, especially Manichaean visual tradition, the fictitious and semantic relationship between image and text have been emphasized and calligraphy and painting were considered as complementary arts (Pakbaz, 2000, 25-26). The cultural life of Armenia before accepting Christianity was influenced by the cultures of Greece, Rome and Iran. After the conversion into Christianity during the fourth and fifth centuries, the Armenian culture in this country became more stable and flourishing under the influences of the church and attempts made by two clergymen named "Narses I" and his son "Bishop Sahak I". From the fifth century onward, the political division of Armenia into western and eastern parts caused a cultural and artistic segregations in the Armenian people life due to the differences between the two countries dominating the two parts, namely Byzantium and Iran (Adontz, 1970, 3-10). Thus, the cultural and artistic impacts of Iran on the culture and art of the Caucasus region are a matter of concern and create the outlines for conducting a comparative study between Iranian painting and Armenian miniature. Nersisian mentions "Kostandin I" as the main face of the Armenian miniature progress in the thirteenth century (Maxwell, 1997, 1160). Among the inventions of the Armenian miniature, one can mention complete paintings on one page, plant and animal decorations in the margins and capital letters in the beginning of the first sentence (Abrahamyan, 1959, 125). Book visualization in Armenia entered a new era with the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mashtots in the fifth century (Sevak, 1962, 13). In addition, Armenian miniature works were mostly used for the decoration as well as visual interpretation of the religious texts. Hence, many of these miniatures are available in the form of "the Bible", the Holy Scripture and a few handwritten copies are also found in the collections of "Jashots" and "Sharakan" belonging to the traditional church in Armenia. In addition to religious books, there are a handful of manuscripts on other topics such as history, medicine, astronomy and philosophy which use miniature art in order to interpret and explain more the scientific topics in their texts more precisely (Nersessian, 2001, 25-53). The significant manifestations of Armenian miniatures have generally remained in the form of the Holy Scripture visualizations in the Gospels entitled "Echmiadzin Gospel" (989), "Bible Mughni" (1038) kept in St. Gevorg Church, "Gospel vyapar" (10th century), "Gospel of Haghpat" (1211), "the Gospel of Targmanchats" (1232), "Jashots" (1286), "Gospel of Eight Painters" (13th century) and the like. The main subject and element used in the decoration of Armenian miniatures were plants and flowers, which were drawn in a special shape in the margins of the pages. During such decorations, the artist were drawing different shapes of the plants according to the

dimensions of the pages and empty spaces (Korkhmazian et al., 1984, 34-41). Now the question is, how and in what forms are plant motifs manifested in the Armenian miniatures and what similarities can be found between these applications in comparison with the Iranian painting?

Research method

The present research is a comparative study whose findings are presented in a descriptive-analytical manner. The sources of this research include the libraries and information taken from the internet websites.

Research background

Most of the Armenian miniature artworks are kept in two places of "Yerevan State University Library" and "Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts" in Yerevan. Other collections are also available in the "Library of the Armenian Diocese" in Jerusalem, "National Library of France", "Library of the Mekhitarists Congregation" in Venice and the University of California (Nersessian, 2001). An article entitled "Miniatures in the Kingdom of Armenia" has been published in 1993 with the aim of clarifying the relationship between manuscripts and their images through the study of colophons, texts and examination of the ornaments and sculptures as well as the important role of individuals (Der Nersessian, Agemian, 1993, 20). Kurdian introduced a copy of the Armenian Bible written in Western Armenia since the middle of the 12th century (Kurdian, 1942, 1-16). In another study titled "An Armenian MS. with Unique Mongolian Miniatures", he proved that the personal archive of an Armenian copy's painter lacks any information or affiliation with Armenian culture (Kurdian, 1941, 147). An article written by Mousavi Lor and Mehr Mohammadi in 2015, titled "Introduction to Hovanes Bible with Emphasis on the Visual Analysis of Patterns and Introduction to the Vaspurakan School", examines 50 drawings from a Bible and the Vaspurakan school. Several articles have been also published in The Cultural Quarterly of Peyman concerning Armenian miniatures by Marutkhanian (2003), Dikran Zahraban (2002) and Tiraroturnian (2001). The reader is also referred to the master's thesis titled "Armenian motifs and decorative letters", written by Tirartornian in 2006. In addition, several other researches can be found in the literature dealing with the plant motifs in painting, such as Parvin (2017), Zamani et al. (2009), Mobini et al. (2015), Ghasemieh et al. (2016), Javadi (2004), Kashiegarzadeh (2000) and Mahmoudi (2012). The present study aims to investigate the methods of using the role of plants in Armenian miniatures in comparison with their Iranian examples.

Armenian miniature schools and their visual characteristics

According to Maxwell, there are an estimated number of 30000 Armenian manuscripts which are mostly prepared by the church (Maxwell, 1997, 1159). Abgaryan mentioned that the Armenian miniature was made upon the order of the kings or by the artists themselves with less facilities and by thinking freely (Abgaryan, 1969, 70). Armenian miniatures are divided into two categories in terms of the relationship between form and content. In the first approach (Vaspurakan School), the simplification of forms, avoidance of scenes and figures multiplicity and focus on the content were performed by trained painters who were highly skilled in expressing the emotions and inducing inner excitements through arranging the pages. The second category (Cilician School) is more rich in terms of the visual effects, observance of details in clothing and buildings, proportional concentration of colors and their harmony with golden one (Tiraratonian, 2006, 34-37). Other schools such as Hayek, Annie, Crimea, Goldsor, Dato are also combinations of the above-mentioned two main ones.

1. Vaspurakan School

Among the obvious features of the Vaspurakan School (13th and 14th centuries), one can point out to the fixed pictorial patterns in the representation of personalities, expressive adornments, ritual display of the organs, distance from Byzantium and proximity to the Abbasid School, simultaneity, narrative composition, cryptography, representation based on the Armenian religious interpretations, callowness and depiction of sub-personalities (Mousavi Lor and Mohammadi, 2015, 99).

1. Cilician School

One of the characteristics of the Cilician School is its amalgamation with Byzantine art. In this school, the images are not painted apart from the text, the plant motifs are illustrated with fictitious images of birds and humans and the use of penumbra for elegance, gold for making details of clothing and backgrounds and illustrating figures for realism are from other features of these art works (Tiraratonian, 2006, 141).

Plant motifs in Armenian illustrations

In all the above-mentioned Armenian miniature schools, plant motifs are used relatively more than other forms, and although a pattern may be repeated several times on different pages, elegant distinctions protect them from the risk of becoming stenciled (Marutkhanian, 2003, 40). Several examples of these forms are presented in the following.



1



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Figure 1

The sacrifice of Abraham Painter:

Hovhannes Khizanetsi

(Avetisya,1910, 1)

Figure 2.

Entry into Jerusalem (gospel), Artist: Avag

(Der Nersessian and Agemian,1993, 425)

1.The role of the plant for the identical illustration of same text

In this form of illustration, the role of the plant is an important and indelible element in the narrative. In Figure 1, in which Abraham sacrifices his son, the tree is depicted in such a way to meet the demands of the text: "Then Abraham saw a ram whose horns are stuck in a bush. So, he took the ram and sacrificed it instead of his son as a burning gift" (Genesis, 22, 13). In The same plants are again observed in Figure 2. To illustrate the part of the text which describes the cutting of a tree branch, the artist shows a man at the top of a tree holding a saw and another one at the bottom raising a cut branch from another type.

2. Using the plant role to describe the narrative

In Figure 3, the artist has used the plant as one of the arrangements in order to indicate the space and position. "Some of the people spread their robes on the road in front of Jesus and some others cut down the branches of the trees and threw them on his way" (Mati, 21). No tree branch has been thrown under the feet of Jesus in this image. However, the plants that are obliquely depicted (also the wavy shape of the plants) under the feet of Jesus are to emphasize the accompaniment as well as his path from outside the city and intensify his movement.

3. Summarized and geometric form of plants to fill the vacuum

As can be seen in Figure 4, the painting is from the Gospel of John, depicting the baptism of Jesus by John: "I did not know him. However, I came to immerse the people in water in order to introduce him to the Israelis. Then, he said: I saw the Spirit of God coming from heaven in the form of a dove and falling on Jesus. As I said: I did not know him either, but whenever God sent me to baptize people said to me: Whenever you see the Spirit of God coming down from heaven and falling



Figure 3.
Entry into Jerusalem (gospel), Artist: Avag ,
1958 , Fol 69 Sultanije
(Der Nersessian and Aghemian,1993, 431)

on someone, be sure that he is the one you are waiting for. He is the one who will baptize people with the Holy Spirit." (John, Chapter 1). On the left, there are connected triangles with brown color spectrum while polygons with green color spectrum are observed on the right. The paper size limitation in simultaneously showing generalities such as baptism and details such as vegetation and rock cover has led the painter to develop new techniques in illustration in which the plant forms (as well as rocks) are presented in a summarized manner. This has caused the main event to be shown in the most important part of the frame, i.e. in the middle of the screen and where the diameters meet. On the other hand, the lack of details in the illustration of vegetation and rocks do not occupy the audience's mind. In Iranian painting, much attention is paid to the details of vegetation. Based on the issue of vacuum phobia raised by Ettinghausen (Lyman, 2016, 71-72), many paintings can be observed that are full of plant motifs and with many details in the space (Figures 5 and 6).

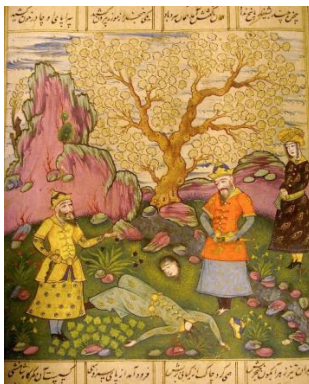


Figure 4.
Baptism of Jesus, The
Targmanchats Gospel Grigor ,
1232



Figure 5.
The Div Akvan throws Rustam
into the sea Firdawsi's
"Shahnamah", 11th centur,
Library of Congress ww.loc.gov



Figure 6.
The murder of Iraj by his
brothers Tur and Salm in a
16th century Shahnamah
partly illustrated by
Muhammad Yusuf. www.bl.uk

4. Plant as a symbol

In Christianity, trees are considered as a symbol for the circulation of life, death and ascension through four seasons (Dikran Zahraban, 2002, 11). Figure 7, is related to the text adopted from chapter 1 of the "Gospel of Luke" where it says: "Maryam asked the angel: But how is such a thing possible? No man's hand has ever reached me. The angel answered: the Holy Spirit will come upon you and power of God will overshadow you. Hence, that baby is sacred and will be called the child of God." The painter of this manuscript, who was probably one of the students of "Grigor Tatevatsi" in the Dato School, conveys the good news of a lasting generation from the lap of Mary to the audience through the tree symbol. Although, the trees were mostly in decorative forms in Christian art, sometimes a specific tree was an essential component in conveying the divine meaning of the image (Dikran Zahraban, 2002, 12-20).



Figure 7.

Gospels, Grigor, Armenian Manuscripts of the 13th and 14th centuries, Matenadaran Collection, Leningrad, 1984

In Iranian painting, a tree is sometimes placed between two bodies. Some studies have considered the tree in the symbolic sense, while others do not believe in the existence of symbolism in these scenes. In other words, in Iranian miniature, the painter emphasizes the preservation of privacy through placing trees and flowers between the lover and the beloved. This issue is highlighted in the painting "Homay and Homayoun" (Figure 8) which has been illustrated in the Herat School (Yassini, 2014, 178). In addition, a tree is sometimes located between two bodies in the enamel pottery of the Seljuk period as exhibited in Figure 9 (Pakbaz, 2000, 25). According to Figure 10, in a drawing of the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp, the marshmallow flower is placed between two bodies. This pictorial convention, whether symbolic or otherwise, reveals undeniable similarities in both Armenian and Iranian miniatures.

5. The aesthetic use of the plant's abstract role

The abstract plant motifs, along with tables and Khorans, double the painting's beauty like plants that grow next to the architectural structures. The decoration of the page margins full of floral and animal motifs and absolute attention to the nature, material elements, splendors of the court and liveliness of the life, are from

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Journal of Art Faculty, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Adaptation of the use of plant motifs in Armenian miniatures and Iranian paintings

Volume 9. Issue 19. Page 1-12

8

the features of the Cilician School (Dournovo, 1967, 11-13; Der Nersessian and Agemian, 1993, 67). In the Bible Mughni (Figure 11), plant motifs can be seen alongside animal ones (Manoukian, 2014, 124). The abstract floral decorating inside the pages has been performed by many painters, including "Rossellin" (13th century) and "Toros Darontsi" (14th century). In the modern way of drawing Khorans and marginal decorations, Darontsi has depicted a part of the religious narratives of the church and face of saints among lots of plants and animals, with a special description or concept which is full of meaning.



8



9



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Figure 8.

Hodaya and Hodayan meeting, Herat school (Adamova & Bayani, 2016, 4)

Figure 9.

Enamel bowl, Seljuk period, Metropolitan Museum

Figure 10.

Marshmallow flowers and tree bloom, Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran.

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Figure 11.

Part of Khoran decorations (Bible Mughni, 11th AD) (Manoukian, 2014, 134)

Some researchers consider the "Tree of Life" as the most important motif in plant paintings (Figure 12). In these motifs, there is sometimes a leaf which can be

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Journal of Art Faculty, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Adaptation of the use of plant motifs in Armenian miniatures and Iranian paintings

Volume 9. Issue 19. Page 1-12

9

observed around the main flower with special twisting and rotational movements (Figure13). Sometimes the seed and its flowers are surrounded by a circle (Figure 14) and in some cases the seed is outside the circle accompanied by the flower (Figure15). Similarities can also be found in Iranian painting in the form of Khatai and Tashir motifs.

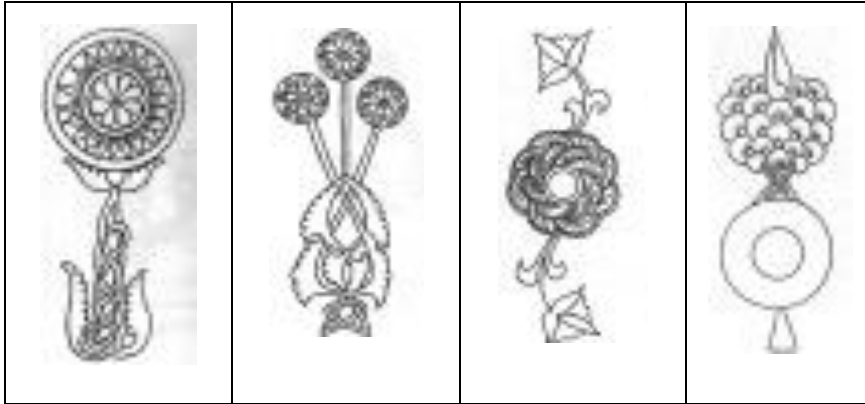


Figure 12.

Figure 13.

Figure 14.

Figure 15.

Some types of plant motifs in Armenian miniatures (Marutkhanian, 2003, 40-60)

Khatai(Figure16), is called the decorative motifs of flowers and bushes with Islamic (Navidi, 1974, 108) and one of the two techniques of "Seven decorative principles" (Munshi Qomi, 1359, 132). It is also called a summary design with repetition and sequence from the Neolithic era (Wilson, 1998, 138) as well as ornaments and spiral shapes, simplified with circular motions (Burkhart, 1990, 140).

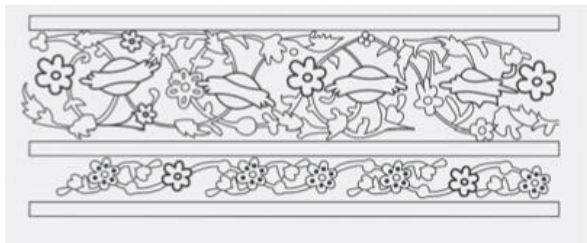


Figure 16.

A Khatai pattern, (Machiani, 2001, 203)

Conclusion

One of the most important purposes of Armenian miniatures has been the decoration of religious texts with various motifs, including plant ones. Plant motifs are present in Armenian miniatures in five forms, including the loyalty to the text elements and exact visualization of the plant, describing and deepening the narrative by enhancing the visual richness via plant motifs, summarizing the plant motifs into geometric form for the sake of brevity and draw attention to the depth

of the event, symbolic function of the plant motif, abstraction of the plant motif to fill the gaps in the background and use their aesthetic aspects. The present study indicated that there are similarities between Iranian painting and Armenian miniature in four forms. However, in the third form, i.e. the summarization of plant motifs into geometric form, the Armenian artist achieves brevity in a different manner using geometric summarization. Such a summarization of plant motifs can not be observed in Iranian painting.

Endnots

1. Kostandin1.
2. Jashots: A book that is read at noon. And includes the daily prayers of the traditional Armenian Church.
3. A collection of religious hymns in the traditional Armenian church.
4. The Echmiadzin Gospels (Yerevan, Matenadaran, MS. 2374, formerly Etchmiadzin Ms. 229) is a 10th-century Armenian Gospel Book produced in 989 at the Monastery of Bgheno-Noravank in Syunik.
5. Bible Mughni
6. gospel vyapar
7. The Gospel of Haghpap
8. Targmanchats
9. Vaspurakan
10. Cilicia
11. Hayek, Ani, Crimea, Goldsor, Dato.
12. It was a religious concept and a symbol of the sanctuary of the church, drawn in a crescent-shaped frame, based on several columns, often to include names, numbers and dates .
13. Prominent representative of the Art School, Gladzor Monastery

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PAYKAREAH

Journal of Art Faculty, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Adaptation of the use of plant motifs in Armenian miniatures and Iranian paintings

Volume 9. Issue 19. Page 1-12

11

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Journal of Art Faculty, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Adaptation of the use of plant motifs in Armenian miniatures and Iranian paintings

Volume 9. Issue 19. Page 1-12

12

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