

On the investigation of the relationship between imagination and wonder painting in Iranian-Islamic painting

Abstract

Problem Definition: Wonder painting is one of the obscure and deep-rooted terms used in relation with the artistic and literary traditions of various nations and civilizations. In this study attempts have been made to discuss and emphasize the analysis of the relationships between theoretical foundations and wise principles governing the tradition of wonder painting in Iranian painting with a focus on “imagination”. The wise foundations refer to theoretical origins derived from deep-rooted religious, ritual and cultural concepts in the context of theoretical knowledge and mysticism. The question of this research is as follows: “What is the relationship between imagination and wonder painting in Iranian-Islamic painting?”

Objective: The purpose of this study is to achieve a specific manner in explaining the relationship between illusion and wonder painting in Iranian art and to analyze this tradition from the perspective of “imagination”.

Research Method: The present study is of a fundamental type and has been prepared by reviewing previous researches in the field of history, literature, cultural studies and history of Iranian painting with reference to historical studies and descriptive and analytical methods, taken from library and electronic resources.

Results: Wonder painting in Iranian-Islamic art has clear foundations about “imagination” and “imaginary” functions in the opinions of sages such as “Farabi”, “Ibn Sina”, “Sheikh Ishraq”, “Sadr al-Muta'allehin” and others, and is manifested in the artworks of Iranian-Islamic painting.

Keywords: Imagination, Wonder painting, Iranian-Islamic painting.

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Introduction

One of the common features between the art of ancient and Islamic Iran is paying attention to the image of supernatural beings and wonders. The creation and embodiment of fictitious creatures and wonders in the visual arts of Iran has numerous and varying manifestations. The implementation methods of visual elements in the structure of these creatures, regardless of the common artistic traditions in each period, are influenced by special theoretical and wise foundations, each of which has affected the artist's point of view and imaginary actions of his mind. Here, the wise principles refer to the elements such as metaphysics, mysticism, religion, myth and literature, the combination of which has given rise to an intellectual system for the artists of different periods, and finally provided the element of "imagination" as the main motivation for creating strange and imaginary creatures. The historical course continuation of this enduring tradition is known today as "wonder painting" which has been manifested in the artworks of Iran in various forms such as reliefs, statues, textiles, paintings and illustrated manuscripts. The present research has discussed and focused on the intellectual roots and wise foundations governing the origins of the wonder painting tradition in Iranian painting relying on the imagination. The aim is to achieve a specific context in explaining the relationship between imagination and wonder painting in Iranian-Islamic painting and to explore this tradition from the perspective of imagination. Imagination is known as one of the most important motivations for the creation and emergence of strange forms and examples in the Iranian painting tradition. Identifying the function of this ability among the human forces, maturation and formation of combinative and imaginary images based on it, is one of the most effective ways to recognize the ancient traditions of Iranian visual arts. The formal and content analyses of Iran's artistic heritage can be used as an inauguration of the artistic taste windows arising from the spirit of history governing this land as well as an update on the novel arts and media. The present study seeks to answer the following question: What is the relationship between imagination and wonder painting in Iranian-Islamic painting?

Research Method

The present study is a fundamental one and has reviewed the previous researches in the field of history, literature, cultural studies and history of Iranian painting according to the historical studies and descriptive-analytical methods, adopted from library and electronic resources. In this regard, the present study relies on the wise foundations governing the imagination and at the same time explains the corrective subject of wonder painting from a specific and general point of view. Furthermore, attempts are made to explore the relationship between the two mentioned corrections based on the verses of the Holy Quran and views of the sages with a special look at the forms of wonders in Iranian-Islamic painting.

Research Background

Mohammad Ibn Mahmoud Ibn Ahmad Tusi (2012) in the book entitled "Marvels of creatures and strange things existing" mentioned and introduced the wonders of the world in different countries as well as the creation of creatures, animals, objects and plants. A text with the same title and similar theme is left from Zakaria Ibn Mohammad Ibn Mahmoud Qazvini (1982). The mentioned text has been written and illustrated in several versions. The images left from the manuscript of this book, one of the most prominent of which is the copy of the Munich Library in 678 AH belonging to the Ilkhanid period, are among the important content resources and visual images of wonder painting in Iran. Listing the characteristics of illustrated lithography manuscripts of the Qajar period, especially Qazvini's marvels of creatures, Rahmani Garmaroodi (2018) examined the amount of compatibility between text and image in the mentioned versions. Also, Mozafarnejad (2015) in his master's thesis entitled "Structural and conceptual reading of wonder painting in Iranian painting (Case study: strange paintings of Mohammad Siyah Qalam and some contemporary Iranian painters since 1958 til now)" investigated the category of wonder painting from mostly formalistic and, to some extent, hermeneutic perspective with a comparative approach. Ali Alboshoke in his master's thesis entitled "A Comparative study of wonder paintings attributed to Mohammad Siyah Qalam with those of Zakaria Mohammad Qazvini's Wonders of Creatures" (2015), has addressed the wonder painting issue in the art of Iranian painting with a comparative approach. Kiani Nejad (2013) in a dissertation entitled "Comparative study of the manuscript of Qazvini's marvels of creatures with the lithographic version (manuscript available in the library of the University of Cambridge and the lithographic version of Ali Qoli Khoie)" concerned with the subject of wonder painting from the perspective of manuscript adaptation and historical approaches. Ashkvari et al. (2017) provided a useful classification in relation to the historical course of the wonder painting tradition in Iran and Islamic civilization. However, their approach was a text-based one and they did not specifically refer to the painting stylistics derived from the mentioned texts. In an article entitled "Matching text and image in the paintings of imaginary creatures of Qazvini's marvels of creatures, a case study on the Princeton University's version, Mehrizi Sani and Mohandespour (2011) emphasized the quality of the painter relying on public perceptions of those creatures and its conformity with the author's descriptions. In another article entitled "Imagination and wonder painting in the artworks of Sultan Mohammad and Pieter Bruegel (2008)", Atefi illustrated the forms of wonders in the painting and Renaissance artworks using a comparative technique and relying on the element of "imagination" and imaginary forms. Also, Parvizi (2007) in the series of articles entitled "Wonder painting in Iran" under the general title of "Iranians' contribution to the Islamic civilization heritage" mentioned the aesthetics of the manuscripts illustrated in this area while recalling parts of the wonder painting history in Islamic-Iranian civilization. All the

mentioned researches have been conducted only based on visual aesthetics and finally in some cases text and image matching.

Research concepts

1. Imagination: The subject of imagination, as one of the most important branches of Islamic wisdom, can be considered and explored from various perspectives. The mystical, philosophical, psychological, literary and artistic contexts forming the concept of imagination, require independent perceptual approaches on the one hand, and, on the other hand, include intertextual relationships and intellectual commonalities with other theoretical contexts. Imagination and imaginative power is important as one of the basic motivations of human beings in imagining and visualizing forms of wonders. Imagination is the power which records the perceived concepts of the common sense resulting from tangible forms after the concealment of matter.

2. Wonder painting: In this study, wonder painting refers to any approach to the creation of strange and imaginary images and metaphysical forms, and from this perspective, the ancient tradition of miracle writing as a part of this term is evaluated and studied as well.

The place of imagination in the human realms

Based on the ontological sense, imagination belongs to the human being's existence realm. Accordingly, human, similar to the universe, enjoys a fictitious realm further to his material and intellectual aspects. The example of this realm in the world is dreams while being the purgatory life of human or his exemplary body in the world after death (Mulla Sadra, 2001, 254). The triad of tangible, imaginative and rational worlds conform to the three anthropological foundations of physical, sensual and spiritual. The talking self, can become intellectual with the actuality of its talents and turn into the rational world with the help of the active mind. In the prophetic wisdom (Ibn Sina & Mulla Sadra), the inside and outside of human find their initial unity and true individuality with the help of the angel. Angel and human psyche need a world that can have an image of each other and that is the world of mere imagination (Babaei, 2015, 115). The spiritual powers of human are including: 1. Imagination: which receives tangible forms and delivers them to the power of contemplation, 2. Contemplation: which separates the senses from each other and distinguishes between right and wrong, correct and incorrect, profit and loss, and then leaves them to the power of memory, 3. Memory: which stores the resulting information for the required time, 4. Speech: the tongue speaks on its behalf and expresses what it thinks of the sciences and necessities, 5. Creation: whose center is in the hands and fingers and is obtained from the movement of the soul, such as writing and all other arts, skills and industries (Bolkhari Ghehi, 2009, 95).

As would be observed, the imagination, while taking on the role of mediator between the senses and the intellect, is considered as the starting point of artistic,

literary and theological creations. As declared by The Articles of Ikhvan-al-Safa "And similar to these are the works of illustrators and painters who draw motifs of demons and wonders of the sea, some of which are true and some others are not ..." (Brethren of Purity, 2005, vol. 3, 340). Another characteristic of imagination is that it is incapable of imagining something that has not reached the self through senses. For example, a living being that is deprived of the eye does not have the power to imagine the colors, and that which has no ears is incapable of imagining the sounds. For this reason, imagination is possible through sensory perception, just as intellect is inferred via self reason. In the meantime, human may not perceive a word, but can imagine its meanings as described. Another characteristic of imagination is its power through which one is able to perform astonishing acts. An example of this according to Ikhvan-al-Safa is the actions of some Indian ascetics who are able to arouse illusions in the minds of people that the majority actually deny, or the Greek sages and philosophers who are able to observe things in their human self that are quite unlikely to others. Another characteristic of this power is its ability to combine analogies, without examining or observing them, and then ruling on the truth of things (Ikhvan-al-Safa, 2005, vol. 3, 98-100). In explaining the place and importance of imagination in the structure of human perception of the surrounding world, the prepatetics, and especially Sheikh al-Ra'is, go beyond the mediation of imagination and attribute the context of human thought and understanding to the existence and activity of imagination. He writes in "References and punishments": "The human self does nothing via perception, except through sensation and imagination ..." (Ibn Sina, 1989, 54).

Creation of wonder images in the imagination

Among the powers of the self, only the imagination is able to illustrate based on both feelings and perceptions. It can even present mimesis of perfect perceptions, such as the first origin and celestial beings. However, it illustrates them through the highest and most perfect sensations, including beautiful objects, and instead presents mimesis of imperfect perceptions through imperfect and ugly feelings. Imagination, is then the ability to record, analyze and combine the forms of the feelings and uses them in the mimesis of the sensible and reasonable affairs. Farabi has also used other interpretations such as comparison, occasion and exemplification for the mimesis. Accordingly, the unique feature of the imaginative force is explained in the formation of surreal forms based on the abstract concepts mimesis belonging to the world of perceptions or their combination with the forms of sensations. These forms are the product of the manifestation of images that cast a shadow over human from the world called the world of "exemplification". Another point that should be noted here is the relationship between reality and imagination, and their manifestation in the illustration. Ibn Arabi believes that the whole of existence is "imagination within imagination", and on this basis, while reality is not a wonder thing, but cannot be considered as the truth (Babaei, 2015, 186).

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This essential difference between reality and truth explains the place of imagination in achieving truth. If one considers the human mind processes to arise from human nature and thinks that the way is open to the world of intellects, the mediation of imagination between reality and truth will be perceived. However, this does not state that reality is worthless. The reality is not the same as truth and reflects a degree of truth in the imagination in a complex and vague way. In other words, it is a symbolic representation of the truth (Izutsu, 1999, 28). The main theme of the artist's work in an imaginative illustration is the capture of observations and sensory perceptions of the world of feelings and surrounding nature. The poet's mind capture in the normal concepts and relationships between human life and nature, or between nature and nature, is the result of a kind of awakening against the perception of these relations (Shafiee Kadkani, 1996, 2). Ibn Arabi also believes that bounded imagination has a window to the world of absolute imagination and another one to the world of objects. Emphasizing the process of illustrating the mind from the realm of reality, he attempted to distinguish between pure images from the world of perceptions and mixed images due the realms of perceptions and sensations, arguing that the motif observed in the imagination mirror from above is a true dream, but Sometimes that motif is mixed with images of the down world and the result is the disturbed dreams. The true dream is sometimes in the form of an abstract discovery which has full clarity and purity and is immune from the damage of the possessions of human imagination. However, sometimes this is not the case and the human mind influences its mapping and illustration and calls it "imaginary discovery". The abstract discovery does not need interpretation, but imaginary discovery needs interpretation - transition from a form seen to something else - (Ibn Arabi, 2006, 357) (See Figure 1).



Figure 3.

Sleeping Rostam and the battle between Rakhsh and lion, attributed to Sultan Mohammad belonging to the unfinished Shahnama, around 925 AH Source: Canby, 1999, 82.

This manifestation occurs in different forms and the resulting images are in the order of the self and the context of its imagination. Imagination is able to convert the data due to feelings into imaginary codes. In fact, it is able to translate matter into meaning, and, in other words, reject the appearance and reveal the invisible interior. Passing through the physical existence of the things, imagination can provide transcendental and optical existence of them. Thus, such an imagination is not just a lie but decrypts an invisible reality, and from this point, the imagination basically enters the imaginary world and opens the interior gate of the world of martyrdom to the human. Therefore, if the imagination is in the service of intellection, it becomes the observer's perception and thought, and if it is a function of illusion, it produces nothing but an eerie face (Kamalizadeh, 2013, 62). In Sheikh Ishraq's thought, the self perceives and imagines the images through the light. Just as it perceives what is in the eyes based on the presence knowledge and with the power of sight, observes the exemplary forms in the world of exemplification through the power of imagination (Suhrawardi, 1977, 78).

Relationship between power of imagination and wonders

Based on the manifestation of images through the activity of the power of imagination, the forms created and embodied in the artworks, including Iranian paintings, sometimes are depicted in strange forms due to distance from the tangible realities of the physical world. The maturity and formation of these images is influenced by different variables such as the structure of the reference literary text, painting's theme, artist's taste, common style in each period and beyond. However, from a wise point of view, basic thought-centered infrastructures can be counted for it, the most important of which is the special way of imagining the artist's self. From Mulla Sadra's point of view, the effective factors in the process of imaginary perception include: 1. Human soul, 2. Exemplary abstract faces. He believes that the self is an example of God and creator in the process of sensory and imaginary perceptions, and is more like the inventor than the attribute. Unlike the material subject who acts on the basis of material rules, Imagination, which is one of the powers of the self, can create a mental being without being bound by external conditions, even from non-existence, or create new forms by entering and possessing and changing external forms which do not exist outside in this way. This further testifies to the abstraction of the imagination (Akbarzadeh & Kadivar, 2008, 12-13). This feature provides the extraordinary nature of imagination in the creation of wonder beings, which on the one hand is rooted in the mutual perception between abstract categories and observations of sensations, and, on the other hand, creatively and independently creates new and strange illustrations in the process of analyzing and combining them. However, in this path, it is inevitable to receive external influences such as the collective unconscious, artistic, ritual and mythological legacies.

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From Sheikh Ishraq's point of view, the formation of super-tangible beings has an intelligent and delicate distinction. According to Suhrawardi, imagination sometimes appears as an "angel" and sometimes as a "demon". Imagination is in a transition between intellection and illusion, and if originates from reason and speaks under its command, it is an active imagination and in the form of an angel. In this case, the imagination is called introspective and rational. However, if illusion overcomes it, it is a distasteful fantasy and manifested in the form of a demon whose intellection's product is hallucinatory. In this case, the imagination creates degrees of inconsistent and disturbing imaginations in the minds so that one gets into terrible nightmares and see multi-headed creatures with disturbing and delusional scenes. On the opposite point, in the case of imagination as a function of intellection, the spiritual beings are revealed to human in the form of "character" by means of this intellection force. This imagination process benefiting from the intellection allows the elders to observe the spirits of the prophets and saints in their privacy, as the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) met Gabriel and appeared to him in the form young Dahyah al-Kalby (See Figure 2).



Figure 2.

Carrying the Prophet on the shoulders of Gabriel, by Ahmad Musa, Merajnameh, Ilkhanid, 8th century AH, Topkapi Museum, Istanbul. Source: [Sims, 2002, 147.](#)



Figure 3

The ascension of the Prophet (PBUH), by Sultan Mohammad, Khamseh Nezami Shah Tahmasebi, 946-950 AH, British Library, London. Source: [Kevorkian & SiCar, 2012, 43.](#)

Active imagination, which is under the command of intellection, creates pure images in our senses that are spiritual in nature, like the meeting with the angel and Mount Sinai that happened to Moses. However, this power always has a mediating function, connects the tangible to the subtle realm of meaning and returns the reasonable to the tangible in a covering commensurate with its

luminous nature. This two-way process of communication between two different things always takes place at a level called spiritual water and mud level (Shaygan, 2013, 297). The ikhvan al-Safa considers the actions of painters and illustrators to be mimesis of this “And similar to these are the works of illustrators and painters who draw motifs of demons and wonders of the sea, some of which are true and some others are not” (ikhvan al-Safa, 2005, vol. 3, 340). Then, by expressing the virtue of the power of imagination, they mentioned that imagination has many wonders as it is one of the most astonishing powers of human, and for this reason, most scholars have not yet perceived it. Using this power, one is able to travel east and west of the world, cross mountains and seas, imagine the infinite space of the heavens and even imagine the beginning of the universe creation and then its end and arises in a phrase from the soul of existence (Bolkhari Ghahi, 2009, 101) (See Figure 3).

Conclusion

The subject of imagination, as one of the most important branches of Islamic wisdom, can be investigated from various perspectives. The mystical, philosophical, psychological, literary and artistic contexts which form the concept of imagination, on the one hand, require independent perceptual approaches and, on the other hand, include intertextual connections and have intellectual commonalities with other theoretical contexts. Imagination is of high importance as one of the basic incentives of human beings in imagining and visualizing the forms of wonders. According to what stated above, imagination is a force that records the perceived concepts of the common sense resulting from tangible forms after the concealment of matter. The consensus of philosophers and sages is the reliance of the imagination place on the sensory perception and its two-way relationship on the human intellection process. Thus, the three imaginary actions including the preservation of sensory perceptions after the cessation of the sensory communication process, analysis of the perceptions together and, finally, mimesis and illustrations of the forms obtained from the previous stages, explain the unique feature of the imagination power in the formation of surreal forms based on the mimesis of abstract concepts belonging to the rational world or their combination with sensory forms. These forms are the product of the manifestation of images which cast a shadow over human from the world known as the world of exemplification. From the Islamic wisdom’s point of view, the emergence of strange creatures in the art can be explained as mentioned above. In addition, the method of maturation and formation of wonders and supernatural beings in the tradition of Iranian-Islamic art stems from religious concepts and cultural heritages arising from the text. On the other hand, the characteristic of localization index, which has been institutionalized in the art of this land throughout history, allows the artist to combine visual elements and create transcendental beings based on the circumstances of his time and, of course, based on the current context of the imagination inferring the composition of the images received from observation.

The roots of the views of many scholars, including Ibn Arabi, Sheikh Ishraq and Brotherhood of Al-Safa also provide a pristine background for the contemporary artist to translate the text into image. In general, the influential factors in the process of formation, imagination and visualization of wonder forms in Iranian painting are: the function of three stages of imagination power including the observation and perception of the images, recording images and their associated concepts, combining images based on the cultural variables of the time, common artistic traditions in each period, mystical backgrounds, Quranic concepts and individual performance of the artist's mind. These factors, in combination with each other under the guidance of the imagination, have been manifested and embodied in various wonders and imaginary forms.

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