

Original Research Article

Arman Davoudi Abkenar<sup>1</sup> Shams al-Molok Mostafavi<sup>2</sup>

Received: 15 February 2023

Revised: 25 August 2023

Accepted: 29 August 2023

DOI: 10.22055/PYK.2023.18442 DOR: 20.1001.1.23224622.1402.12.33.2.5

URL: [https://paykareh.scu.ac.ir/article\\_18442.html](https://paykareh.scu.ac.ir/article_18442.html)

How to cite this article: Davoudi Abkenar, A & Mostafavi, Sh. (2023). Genealogy of the Calligraphic Designs in the Saqqakhaneh Movement. *Paykareh*, 12 (33), 36-49.

The Persian translation of this article is published in the same issue with the following title

تبارشناسی خط‌نگاره‌های جنبش سقاخانه

## **Genealogy of the Calligraphic Designs in the Saqqakhaneh Movement**

### **Abstract**

**Problem Definition:** Although more than half a century has passed since the emergence of the Saqqakhaneh movement in Iranian modern art, it is still a subject of debate and disagreement as a symbol of modernism. Saqqakhaneh artists have drawn on ritualistic patterns, folk art symbols, and the artistic heritage of the past, particularly the visual elements of traditional Iranian calligraphy and formalistic aspects of the alphabet. This research focuses on the historical analysis, evolution, and visual language of works influenced by the calligraphy of Saqqakhaneh artists.

**Objective:** This research aims to conduct a comparative study of the artworks of prominent Saqqakhaneh artists influenced by traditional calligraphy and ancient works in a historical context (from the Qajar period to the mid-1950s) in terms of style, execution method, and attention to the visual values of the script.

**Research Method:** An analytical-historical method has been employed to achieve the desired results. Data collection, images, and documents, as well as the verification of the authenticity of Saqqakhaneh artists' works and ancient works, have been conducted by referring to sources such as museums, private collections, and several official websites. The statistical population of the study includes calligraphers from the Qajar period and Saqqakhaneh artists in the field of visual arts.

**Results:** Some prominent artists and pioneers of the Saqqakhaneh movement have created works inspired by traditional calligraphy and the script writing method (specifically calligraphic pieces from the Qajar era). This process, conducted with a formalistic approach and in contrast to the traditional function of calligraphy, exhibits prominent features of abstraction in these works. While possessing an independent identity, the works of this group of artists are considered to be an extension of the experiences of calligraphers during the Qajar era. The transition from tradition to modernity in the process of creating calligraphic designs in the Saqqakhaneh movement is a significant transformation in the history of Iranian modern art.

### **Keywords**

Saqqakhaneh Movement, Traditional Calligraphy, Qajar Calligraphy, Iranian Modern Art

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Art, Islamic Azad University, Islamshahr Branch, Tehran, Iran.

2. Corresponding author, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Islamic Azad University, Tehran North Branch, Tehran, Iran.

Email: [sha\\_mostafavi@yahoo.com](mailto:sha_mostafavi@yahoo.com)

### **Introduction**

Although the history of Iranian art is not limited to the Saqqakhaneh movement, the emergence of this movement marks a turning point in the formation and expansion of a distinct and progressive visual language in contemporary Iranian art. The artists of the Saqqakhaneh movement sought the identity of their works in the traditions of past cultural richness and drew upon the rich heritage of their predecessors in terms of subject matter and execution methods. They mainly focused on visual arts and employed various traditional and folk elements to create distinctive works. Their efforts to represent the authentic Iranian content and inner essence through harmonizing with the language of progressive art evoke folk legends, literary epics, and ritualistic symbolism, reflecting premodern thought in art. From a historical perspective, many calligraphic works of the Saqqakhaneh movement are stylistically and conceptually influenced by the works of Qajar-era calligraphers, which will be described further. The creation of modern compositions adopted from calligraphy elements, patterns, carpet motifs, architectural decorations, and a different approach towards visual folk art and familiar elements of ceremonial art are considered characteristic features of the prominent artists of the Saqqakhaneh movement. While presenting a modern visual display, this approach, which incorporated traditional and local symbols and components, led to the emergence of a form of patriotic pop art and became one of the most important trends in contemporary Iranian art. The artists of the Saqqakhaneh movement brought a fresh perspective to elements related to historical backgrounds and the audience's memory, including religious symbols, coffeehouse-style paintings, beautiful calligraphy forms, and even some typical objects such as locks, talismans, tombstones, and motifs of embroidered fabrics. In this way, the transformed and reshaped versions of these symbols and functional objects gained central attention in the artworks of Saqqakhaneh artists, presented through a new visual language. Perhaps the claim that the Saqqakhaneh artists rediscovered traditional visual elements and represented them with a new language is not an exaggeration. In general, the Saqqakhaneh movement can be interpreted as a combination of the essence of modern art with unpretentious folk art elements and motifs of traditional and ritualistic nostalgic elements, presenting an original and native reading of a universal narrative. Reviewing the works of this movement, one must acknowledge that the pioneering Iranian artist, even in abstract expressions that imitated Western modern art, does not solely rely on the treasury of valuable and accessible images and does not simply adhere to Western modern art. Instead, they resort to the rooted and authentic artistic traditions.

### **Research Method**

To investigate and study the works of prominent artists in the Saqqakhaneh movement using an analytical-historical approach, the first step involves collecting authentic original works of Siyahmashq (drawings made on old practice notebooks) and distinguishing them from forged samples. Following that, the selection and classification of certificated decorative calligraphic works in traditional calligraphy were carried out. Then, by reviewing the historical development of calligraphy and comparing the method of creation and stylistic approach of these works with the formalist and sometimes abstract approach of the Saqqakhaneh artists, their commonalities and shared visual language were examined. The overall research structure of the text is based on the comparison of the selection of style and attention to the visual structure of the works of Saqqakhaneh artists with the works of previous calligraphic artists based on the selected samples. In the selection of works, reference was made to reputable library sources, official art websites, and prominent

museums such as the Calligraphy and Typography Museum of Mir Emad, in the Sa'dabad Collection in Tehran, the Archaeology and Islamic Art Department of the National Museum of Iran, and the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran.

### **Research Background**

With a brief look at the history of modern art in Iran and the evolution of the Saqqakhaneh movement, we find that some prominent artists of this movement have paid particular attention to elements of popular art and the cultural heritage of the past, especially traditional calligraphy. The available research works have not extensively and comprehensively addressed this topic, and significant related visual documentation has not been included in these studies. Some of the reliable research works that have briefly and mostly approached the subject from a historical perspective can be considered as the background for the proposed research. «Rahmani» (2020) in the book entitled «Fancy Scripts in Iran» has discussed the topic of calligraphy decoration from the beginning to fancy scripts and calligraphic painting in the Qajar era from a historical perspective and has also addressed the typology of fancy scripts and traditional calligraphic painting. In the book entitled «Modern Trends in Qajar Calligraphy» «Mo'tamedi and Godarzi» (2020) discussed the various styles and methods of decorative scripts in the Qajar era, presented with examples of the first Taraz. «Shari'at Panahi and Yamini» (2016) have presented an extensive article entitled «Investigating the Effective Factors in Changing Nastaliq Script Style in Qajar Calligraphy» regarding the return of artists to the traditions of calligraphy. They have also discussed the application of visual elements and visual effects of the heritage of the past in the Saqqakhaneh movement. In the article entitled «Saqqakhaneh Movement, Development, and the Opening of Beautiful Cognitive Measures of Ancient, National, and Traditional Arts of Iran» «Ebrahimi Naghani» (2010) discussed how visual elements and visual effects of the heritage of the past are used in the Saqqakhaneh movement. Additionally, in the article entitled «The Saqqakhaneh School, a Postcolonial or Orientalist Look?» «Khurshidian and Zahedi» (2017) have taken a perceptual approach to the Saqqakhaneh movement. In this article, they have referred to the influence of social changes on the Saqqakhaneh movement and the use of local symbols and themes by the artists, which have similarities with the main approach of the present article. In the article entitled «Archaeologism, an Expressive Method for Modernists with a Look at the Works of the Pioneers of the Saqqakhaneh Movement» «Dadvar and Kashmiri» (2017) have addressed the analysis and deconstructing method of ancient motifs in modern works, which is related to the present research topic to examine the process of creating Saqqakhaneh works. In the article entitled «Saqqakhaneh» «Etemadi» (1998) discussed the goals and process of the formation of the Saqqakhaneh movement from a historical perspective.) In another article entitled «Letterism or Calligraphic Painting?» «Fadaei» (2018) has presented an analysis of Iranian modern artworks that use calligraphic elements. Also, in the article entitled «Calligraphic Painting or Calligram» «Qhelichkhani» (2015) discussed the controversial view of calligraphy from theoretical and practical aspects. «Ravanjo» (2022) in the article «Investigation in Iran's modern art movement in calligraphy based on the trend towards traditional and modern art» discussed that calligraphy follows the modern movement of letterism<sup>3</sup> in the West, in the Saqaqhana movement with an identity approach The axis was widely welcomed by artists, which has been divided into two types, traditional and modern, or calligraphic and painting approaches.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The formalist approach, which can be observed in a significant portion of the works of the pioneers of the Saqqakhaneh movement, reflects the concept of aesthetic judgment and the theories of disinterestedness and non-intermediary in the third critique of «Immanuel Kant», with an emphasis on a pure form that corresponds to the characteristics of artistic formalism. Techniques such as Siyahmashq (drawings made on old practice notebooks), which have survived as prominent examples from the late Qajar period, have established an undeniable influence on the postmodernist artists of subsequent generations in Iran as independent artistic works detached from inclusionary concepts. These rhythmic and yet non-functional writing forms (in terms of the nature of the script) have an aesthetic purity, which, from this perspective, overlap with a part of Kant's theory in criticizing the power of judgment, where purposive forms and object forms are considered the main basis of aesthetic judgment.

### **Formalism of Kant and the Nature of Traditional Calligraphy**

The formalist interpretation of Kant finds its meaning in considering aesthetic judgment as solely derived from the formal qualities. In other words, the aesthetic pleasure that arises from the harmony of the viewer's comprehension with the unity of the formal elements of beauty distinguishes aesthetic judgment from cognitive judgment. According to Kant, if the judgment about beauty is mixed with the slightest interest or bias, it will not be considered a pure aesthetic judgment. In his belief, a phenomenon is known based on its formal qualities, and the role and purpose of the artwork are not considered in this evaluation. This point is actually the point of intersection between modern formalism and Kant's aesthetics (Ventsel, 2016, 26). In art, expressive, utilitarian, and even abstract forms have their own particular expressive language, and the artist's mental process is the creator of the form. The aesthetic aspect of form has been a significant focus over different historical periods and in various artistic contexts. The visual language of representational forms, deriving its philosophical nature from Kant's perspective, has manifested itself in various forms, including calligraphy. The independence of calligraphy from inclusionary meanings and its inclination toward pure form (as seen in techniques like Siyahmashq) practically resulted in distancing from traditional calligraphic concepts and principles, creating a suitable ground for the emergence of modernist movements such as the Saqqakhaneh movement in the history of contemporary art in Iran.

### **Historical Evolution of the Saqqakhaneh Movement**

The emergence of the Saqqakhaneh movement in Iran coincided with the influx of various Western art movements, but the intellectual framework of these intellectual trends did not align with the cultural heritage of Iranian art as a whole. The inclination towards Western culture and civilization during the Qajar period, particularly from the early nineteenth century onwards, in conjunction with the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar and the influence of Abbas Mirza (the Crown Prince) and some political figures in the court, led to outcomes such as the organization of the military, the establishment of the School of Fine Arts, the employment of European teachers and experts, the publication of newspapers and books, and so on (Afsarian, 2018). Following the Constitutional Revolution and the emergence of the first signs of Iranian modernization, during the time of the First Pahlavi and simultaneous with extensive political, economic, social, and cultural changes by the government, contemporary art in Iran also underwent various transformations. In this historical juncture, the transition from tradition to modernity can be identified in various aspects of social life, particularly in the evolution of Iranian art. In fact, the series of changes

started since the Constitutional Movement provided suitable grounds for the independence of court art and a change in the traditional art education system. These factors, along with government support for Western models in cultural affairs, enabled pioneering movements in literature, dramatic arts, and visual arts to find a platform for presenting their works. During this time, the most prominent Iranian modernist artists achieved remarkable syntheses of aesthetics, despite the visible and hidden boundaries of these efforts compared to the achievements of Western modernism, whether in terms of emergence, method, or even results. The process of reclaiming cultural identity with a Western art narrative tone was a winding path that the Saqqakhaneh artists took as prominent representatives of the Iranian modernist art movement. The visual works of the Saqqakhaneh artists had a significant role in the structure of contemporary Iranian art and the transition process from tradition to modernity, yielding remarkable outcomes beyond the promotion of Western art's formal influences. Although the endeavors of these artists did not gain widespread acceptance in society, they were interpreted in most intellectual circles as a completely different and deconstructive approach.

### **An Overview of the Heritage of Traditional Calligraphy in Iran**

Based on historical evidence, the earliest signs of the emergence and development of Iranian calligraphy were observed during the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods. However, calligraphy gained its distinct Iranian identity during the Timurid era. During this period, Iran was considered the major center and hub of calligraphy in the Islamic world. Simultaneously with the rise and dominance of the Timurid rulers (who themselves had a hand in traditional arts, particularly calligraphy), the Nastaliq script established its position as a serious rival to the older scripts in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.H. The rise and expansion of the Nastaliq script during this period owed much to the taste and efforts of «Mir Ali Tabrizi» (d. 850 A.H., 1446 C.E.) and «Soltan Ali Mashhadi» (839-926 A.H.), known as the «Soltan of Calligraphers». In the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.H., with the passing of «Soltan Hussein Bayqara» (842-911 A.H.) and losing power and credibility of the Timurid rulers, many calligraphers sought support at the glorious Safavid court. In a short period, Tabriz (the first capital of the Safavid dynasty) transformed into a base for various artists, and various artistic disciplines, including calligraphy and manuscript writing, received support during the reign of Shah Abbas Safavi. Among the prominent calligraphers of this period and contemporaries of Shah Abbas was the great Iranian calligrapher, «Mir Emad al-Hasani» (961-1024 A.H.). He refined the scripts of previous masters, removed inelegance and impurities from the body of the Nastaliq script, and purified and beautified the proportions of letters and words. During the Safavid era, the «Chalipa» script, which apparently had been influenced by the Nastaliq script from the beginning, developed and gradually transformed its practice of black exercises into a splendid and artistic form (Kermani Nejad, 2012). After the Qajar dynasty came to power and established its rule during the Fath Ali Shah period, due to his interest in calligraphy, skilled artists were summoned and engaged in fulfilling the court's orders. In this period, the Nastaliq script received more attention than other calligraphic styles. Support for artists continued in subsequent periods, especially during the Naser al-Din Shah period, and calligraphers developed their own unique style and approach. In this period, in Nastaliq script, they followed the style of Mir Emad, in broken (Shikasta) script, the style of «Dervish Abdul Majid Taleghani», and in Naskh script, the Iranian style of «Neyrizi». « In the mid-Qajar period, calligraphers, especially in Nastaliq script, like «Mir Hossein» (Turk), «Mirza Gholam Reza Isfahani», and «Mirza Mohammad Kazem», developed their own styles (Shariat Panah & Yamini, 2016) (Figs 1&2).



«Siyahmashq pieces of calligraphers of the Qajar era, especially Mirza Gholamreza Esfahani, show an abstract attitude and a formalistic approach to calligraphy which in different periods of the history of Iranian calligraphy, no other example of them can be found in terms of aesthetic and aristocratic attitude to the elements of calligraphy (a great manifestation of Savad and Bayaz, Khalvat and Jelvat). The Siyahmashq of this period has a unique visual and structural identity and is independent of the content (text). From this point of view, and according to some traditional critics, Qajar writers have deviated from the inherent function of calligraphy, i.e. writing and narrating a readable and beautiful text. During the Qajar period, another style of calligraphy gained attention, known as «Tafannuni» or fancy scripts. Examples that depicted phrases in the form of human, animal, plant, etc., figures emerged, and gradually, other decorations were added, sometimes accompanied by the use of colors. Some of these decorative scripts included «Golzar», «Toaman», «Mosalsal», «Moamma», «Mosana», «Nakhoni», etc. (Rahmani, 2020). Among the calligraphers known for their decorative and ornamental scripts during the Qajar era were «Malik Mohammad Qazvini» and «Mohammad Ali Khiaraji» (Figs 3 & 4).



**Fig 1.** Siyahmashq Nastaliq by Mirza Mohammad Kazem Tehrani, Qajar era.  
 Text: دلقت به چه کار آید و تسبیح و مرقع.  
 Source: Iranian calligraphers association website



**Fig 2** Siyahmashq Nastaliq by Mirza Gholamreza Esfahani, Qajar era.  
 Text: مجمع خوبی و لطف است عذار چو مهش (حافظ)  
 Source: Malek National Library and Museum website.



**Fig 3.** Decorative calligraphy of Allah, Muhammad (PBUH) and Ali (PBUH) by Malik Muhammad Qazvini, Qajar era.  
 Source: Shia Art Center website.

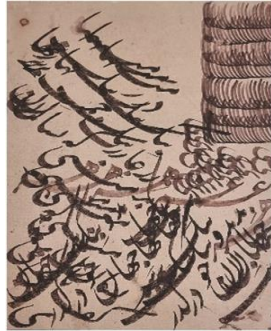


**Fig 4.** The names of five holy people with Ayah al-Kursi by Mirza Mohammad Ali Khayarji Qazvini, Qajar period.  
 Source: Shia Art Center website

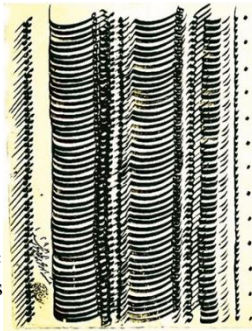
**1. Manifestation of the Independent Identity of Calligraphy in Formalism:** The rise of the Siyahmashq in Nastaliq script during the Qajar period, by the efforts of calligraphers such as «Mirza Gholam Reza Isfahani», «Mir Hossein Turk», and «Mirza Mohammad Kazem Tehrani», was realized in the best and most complete form possible. The remaining works from this period, especially in the late Qajar era, are irreplaceable Siyahmashq pieces that demonstrate the genius and complete mastery of calligraphers in calligraphy

techniques. They show a mastery of the principles and foundations of visual arts, as well as observing rhythmic composition and arrangement (equivalent to eloquence, whiteness, seclusion, and prominence) and other executive principles in a self-taught and intuitive manner. Special attention to the juxtaposition of different letter forms and prioritizing form over content (text) in Siyahmashq works is a distinctive feature of calligraphers in this period. According to the traditional teachings of calligraphy, the inherent function of calligraphy is to convey integrated concepts and ideas, and the visual forms of the script in the arrangement of letters do not conduct a specific semantic load. The primary function of calligraphy is considered to be the writing of the text, not the creation of abstract forms detached from content. Therefore, the creation of artistic Siyahmashq that became prevalent in the late Qajar period was entirely different from the practice and purpose of practice-based Siyahmashq, which represented another perspective in contrast to the views of deconstructive calligraphers and traditional critics. Conceptually, these works were considered a kind of departure from the traditional foundations of calligraphy, where the manifestation of the independent identity of the script was achieved without relying on the attributed values of the text. When the legibility of individual letters of the alphabet is not expected in a calligraphy piece, the narrative aspect of language gives way to pure visual form. In this process, calligraphy attains its inherent independence through the arrangement and combination of letters, which, despite preserving their visual form, are detached from their semantic and even phonetic significance. The formalist approach in calligraphy, as a tendency towards the pure form, where there is no intention, utility, or function in creating the desired effect, represents Kant's views on the critique of aesthetic judgment. This new perspective on calligraphy, which has always been regarded with special respect and sanctity in the writing of exquisite and sacred texts throughout the history of traditional arts in Iran, can be considered a cornerstone of avant-garde thinking in a significant part of Iran's pioneering art.

**2. From Practice-Based Siyahmashq to Artistic Siyahmashq:** The inclination towards Siyahmashq writing in the Qajar calligraphy tradition gradually developed through various writing styles. However, a generation of calligraphers, notably «Mirza Mohammad Reza Kalhor» and «Imad al-Ketab», introduced a type of practice-based Siyahmashq that could be evaluated as independent and artistic works (Figs 5, 6, & 7). The Siyahmashq produced by this group of calligraphers were intriguing and delightful due to their arrangement or repeated writing of letters, rather than the intention of the calligrapher as the result of a master calligrapher's practice, without the text playing a central or influential role. In fact, these works are a particular kind of practice-based Siyahmashq that eventually transformed into artistic Siyahmashq through a historical evolution and from another perspective. Although it is possible that the calligrapher did not have an initial intention to create an abstract composition in mind, the resulting works can still be classified as independent visual works. The focus of these calligraphers primarily lies in line writing, chalipa writing, or overall techniques other than Siyahmashq. Kalhor has left behind some exquisite examples of his writing, but a few remaining Siyahmashq by him demonstrate his explorations in the visual structure of the script. Similarly, Imad al-Ketab, alongside his exploration of various calligraphy styles, paid special attention to Siyahmashq and the visual form of letter writing, which became the basis for new perspectives in contemporary art in Iran through his efforts.



**Fig 5.** Siyahmashq Nastaliq by Mirza Mohammad Reza Kalhor, Qajar era. Source: A collection of scripts of the Mirza Mohammad Reza Kalhar (Fakhr al-Ketab), Publications of the Islamic Propaganda Organization's artistic field.



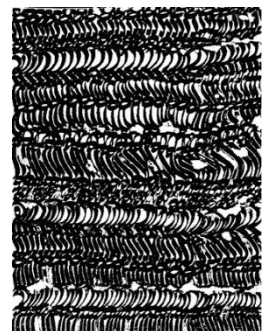
**Fig 6.** Siyahmashq Nastaliq by an unknown artist, Qajar period. Source: Korsi calligraphy exhibition, a review of calligraphy visual developments in Iran (June 2022), authors.



**Fig 7.** Siyahmashq Nastaliq by Emadal Kitab Seifi Qazvini, Qajar era. Source: Mohammad Hossein Emadal's book, Saifi Qazvini's book, Publications of Iran National Library and Records Organization.



**Fig 8** Calligraphic design by Charles (Hossein) Zendaroudi E+SE+1+BE, 1970s. Source: Mana Jalalian Group.



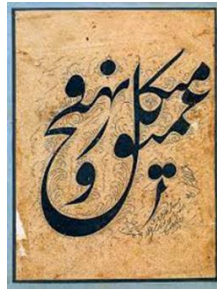
**Fig 9.** Calligraphic design by Charles (Hossein) Zendaroudi Composite Letters. Source: Treasure of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts.

**3. Decorativism; A Fresh Perspective on Calligraphy:** The style of decorativism in the Qajar period has been associated with calligraphers such as Malek Mohammad Ghazvini, «Ismail Jalayer» (Fig 11), and Mohammad Ali Khiaraji. Prominent features of Malek Mohammad Ghazvini's works include his unique perspective on conventional narratives of calligraphy and traditional painting, as well as conscious and innovative alterations in Nastaliq, broken (Shikasta) Nastaliq, Naskh, and Tughra scripts. His unique approach in combining painting, design, and calligraphy with remnants of Kufic script decorations from the early centuries of the Christian era presented a new visual language. Malek Mohammad Ghazvini's works are considered authentic and rooted in their historical identity, while also displaying signs of deconstructing the traditional structure and style of calligraphy. Mohammad Ali Khiaraji's combined works also represent the earliest attempts in the style of calligraphic painting with delicate arrangements and the use of authentic Iranian patterns. Overall, decorativism in Qajar calligraphy was seen as a turning point in fancy scripts and a kind of deviation from the principles of traditional calligraphy. It was not considered as a branch of calligraphy, but rather as visual changes in the six Arabic scripts writing while still preserving the text. «The works that were previously referred to as «Golzar» script (Fig 10) and reached their peak popularity during the Qajar period, many of which exhibit intertwining lines and decorative elements such as Islamic patterns, latticework, and knotted Kufic script, should be regarded as precursors to contemporary calligraphy» (Qhelichkhani, 2015).





**Fig 10.** A piece of Nastaliq decorative calligraphy in the style of Golzar, by Hasan Zareen, Taj Al-Shaara'a pen (Qajar period) with the theme of Nowruz greetings (Eid Saeed Nowruz with kind greetings). Source: Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum, Saad Abad Collection, Tehran Authors.



**Fig 11.** Calligraphic painting by Ismail Jalair, Qajar period Source: [Motagedi and Guderzi, 2020, 20.](#)



**Fig 12.** Hich statue (bronze) by Parviz Tanavoli Source: Pasargad Bank Museum of Visual Arts.

### **Emergence of Progressive Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Calligraphy**

The inclination of some Qajar calligraphers towards artistic and fancy scripts, Siyahmashq, and unconventional forms, compared to the prevalent mindset of that era, can be considered as a historical foundation for the creation of works within the Saqqakhaneh movement. It should be noted that the term «Calligraphic Painting» refers to the act of painting with letters and words, and the creation of patterns using the form of words is referred to as «Calligram» ([Qhelichkhani, 2015](#)). The primary elements of Saqqakhaneh works are visual elements of the script, and it is important to acknowledge that most of the creators of these works were not ranked calligraphers or even familiar with the art and skill of calligraphy. Thus, it is evident that the works of «Hossein (Charles) Zendehroudi», which are the most significant creations in this style and context and are based on the aforementioned tradition, have been produced by an artist who did not adhere to the traditional teachings of calligraphy but instead focused on the visual language of calligraphy and the discovery of its visual manifestations through recurring forms, similar to what we see in Saqqakhaneh (Figs 8 & 9). It can be said that some Saqqakhaneh artists, who tended to combine letters as forms and arrange visual elements of calligraphy in their works, indirectly or directly drew inspiration from Qajar calligraphy. They were influenced by the fancy scripts and Siyahmashq works, and their works demonstrate a trace of Qajar calligraphy. The main difference between the deconstruction movement of Saqqakhaneh (under the influence of calligraphic elements) and the distinctive and tradition-avoiding works of the Qajar period is attributed to the existence of favorable cultural, social, and even political conditions that enabled the emergence and growth of the Saqqakhaneh movement within approximately fifteen years. On the other hand, the influence (perhaps inevitable) of Saqqakhaneh artists from pioneering schools of Western art and their Iranianization, along with the combination of local and folk symbols such as talismans, traditional and ritualistic motifs, specifically goes back to calligraphic elements; while Qajar artists did not have such an opportunity or possibility because of the lack of historical synchronicity. However, the overlooked point here is that the common aspect between late Qajar calligraphy art and the calligraphic works of the Saqqakhaneh movement is the departure from conventional principles and a different perspective on calligraphy.

### **Reflection of the Visual Language of Calligraphy in the Works of the Pioneers of the Saqqakhaneh Movement**

Among the prominent artists of the Saqqakhaneh movement who have created innovative and deconstructive works based on the forms and visual elements of calligraphy, the names of Hossein Zendehroudi, «Faramarz Pilaram» (Fig 13), Sadegh Tabrizi (Fig 14), and Parviz Tanavoli (Fig 12) stand out more vividly than others. Hossein Zendehroudi, with sufficient knowledge of the structure of Iranian calligraphy tradition, has created modern works while being rooted in the artistic heritage of the past. By detaching the letters of the alphabet from the integrated content (including religious, sublime, or colloquial texts) and focusing on their basis and inner essence, he showed the most flexible and liberated approach to dealing with the line by creating suitable movement and rhythm. His works are filled with traditional and festive elements, such as talismans, parts of a carpet or an Islamic pattern, or a creative interpretation of a calligraphic sample, similar to the cases of the past, such as the inclination towards ornamentation and the use of visual intricacies, which were considered characteristics of Iranian art. Therefore, «the details and ornaments of Hossein Zendehroudi's paintings, with delicate embellishments of diverse and sometimes heterogeneous patterns, remain like a carpet or a rural cloak that aims to infuse joyous colors into its living environment through the combination and utilization of each delightful and impressionable element, and the observer's observation and selection have no interference» (Ebrahimi Naghani, 2010). In Zendehroudi's works, the control of positive and negative spaces and the specific composition observed in Siyahmashq and fancy scripts of the Qajar era was not imitated directly. Instead, what creates this historical connection in the viewer's mind is mainly based on the observance of the visual expression tone and the executive rhythm of calligraphy, which first manifested the sparks of its independence from the rigid teachings of the Qajar era. «Although he was not inherently a calligrapher, he produced balanced and rhythmic combinations of fragmented words, chained together in an area of scattered colors. His initial works took the form of geometric structures that were covered with writings, designs, and vibrant colors. Gradually, he abandoned the constraining geometric shapes and turned to the calligraphic element. He employed calligraphy not in the calligraphic sense, which involves the general composition of individual letters, words, and sentences without necessarily pursuing meaning and concept, but in his own way. It can be said that Zendehroudi was fascinated by the old Siyahmashq» (Etemadi, 1998). The works of Sadegh Tabrizi are also influenced by a specific visual language from a formalistic perspective, to which Hossein Zendehroudi also paid special attention. From the earliest experiences of creating calligraphic compositions on ceramic pieces to the use of collage techniques and the combination of various decorative elements and their integration with Iranian patterns, as well as inspiration from figures derived from coffeehouse painting and drawing, one can generally evaluate the works of Sadegh Tabrizi's calligraphic paintings. These works were presented with the aim of bridging the gap between tradition and the contemporary world, providing a practical foundation for the influential movement entitled «Contemporary Calligraphy Painting» from the heart of the creative searches of the Saqqakhaneh artists. «Faramarz Pilaram», who is recognized as a prominent artist in Iranian modern art, successfully created a collection of modern works using the formalistic aspect of Iranian calligraphy, which cannot be overlooked in the history of contemporary Iranian art. The view of contemporary calligraphic painting in Iran owes much to the Neo-Traditionists like Pilaram, who introduced a painterly look at calligraphy by observing the visual language in the form of unreadable visual forms. In his exploration of Nastaliq and broken (Shikasta) Nastaliq scripts, Pilaram achieved a form of modern improvisation based

on the foundations of traditional calligraphy through free movements of the pen and repeated words, resulting in a new approach and transformation in pioneering Iranian art. Parviz Tanavoli, in his series of «Hich (هیچ)» sculptures, approached an abstract perspective of the visual possibilities of Persian calligraphy by eliminating dots. Unlike other artists of the Saqqakhaneh movement who had a noticeable inclination towards deconstructing language and writing, Tanavoli never separated the three letters of this word «Hich (هیچ)» but, on the contrary, endeavored to create figurative representations inspired by its visual form that evoke meanings for the viewer. With a reductionist approach to language, he attempted to establish a reaction against his contemporaries' abundant use of calligraphy in the Saqqakhaneh movement. This effort was primarily focused on the visual revelation of the word «Hich (هیچ)» as well as the simultaneous exploration of the formal and aesthetic identity of functional objects, such as locks and cages. Tanavoli, more than his fellow sculptors, was a steadfast modernist, and his works possess an Iranian identity that surpasses many of his modernist counterparts. With an impressive mastery of elements from traditional and folk arts, cultural rituals, Shia spirituality, and Iranian mystical literature, he combined them with a modern approach in sculpture to embody a fluid experience between local modernism and a kind of Iranian post-modernism in his works (Samii Azar, 2017, 99-105).



**Fig. 13.**  
Calligraphic painting by Faramarz Pilaram.  
Source: Official website of Sotheby's London auction



**Fig. 14.**  
Calligraphic painting by Sadegh Tabrizi.  
Source: Exhibition of Sadegh Tabrizi's works at Sohrab Gallery

### **Letterism and its relation to the works of the Saqqakhaneh movement**

Before Saqqakhaneh artists inclined towards using letters in their works, other scattered efforts were noticeable in the rise and fall of the formation of Iran's modern avant-garde art. Despite being contemporaneous with the pioneers of this movement, these efforts are not considered part of the (Fig 15) Saqqakhaneh movement. However, they are still regarded as an important part of the history of modern art in Iran. The various uses of letters in the works of «Sadegh Barirani», «Gholamhossein Nami», «Behzad Golpayegani», «Mohsen Vaziri Moghdam», «Mohammad Ahsaei», (Fig 16) «Kamran Katozian», «Kamran Diba», «Serge Avakian» (painting with Armenian letters), Reza Mafi, and other painters and designers testify to this fact. It is this diversity and variety of approaches to calligraphy in Iranian avant-garde art that has led to differences among researchers in their interpretation, and of course, controversial conversations among artists regarding the naming and categorization of these types of works. As a result, most researchers, and sometimes even pioneering artists, have distinguished between two categories of works within this context. The first category includes works created by avant-garde painters using calligraphy and

typographic elements (such as Hussein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilaram, and Sadegh Tabrizi). The second category includes works by those who were primarily focused on traditional calligraphy principles and initially approached creating their works based on the principles and observance of calligraphy etiquette and style (such as Reza Mafi and Seyyed Mohammad Ahsaei). According to the aforementioned perspective, the term «Calligraphic Painting» has been applied over time to a wide range of similar works with historical precedence and variations, leading to casual and non-specialized associations of many inferior and low-quality works with calligraphic painting. This has caused reluctance among prominent artists to use this term and has also fueled the commercial enthusiasm of opportunistic art dealers. The application of this term to Saqqakhaneh works also stems solely from a simplistic viewpoint, leading to a group of avant-garde artists to name their works «Letterist». By considering the distinction made by traditional art historians between traditional and avant-garde art and the internal and external sources of nourishment for avant-garde artists, a clearer and more cohesive analysis of works that have utilized typographic elements in Iranian avant-garde art and their relation to calligraphy traditions and movements like Letterism can be achieved. Letterism is a movement in French art and literature that emerged in the early 1950s, characterized by the rejection of meaning and the use of (often invented) letter forms as separate units. According to Isidore Isou (the major figure of the movement), language, words, and numbers are dead and letters should be used instead in a meaningless or symbolic and allegorical manner. «Historical evidence not only does not agree with those who wish to attribute a Letterist quality to a significant number of Iranian avant-garde works but also shows the influence of various other movements such as abstract expressionism or pop art in working with letters. It is possible to differentiate between the works of artists who have used typographic elements without necessarily using the term Letterism» (Fadaei, 2018).



**Fig 15.** Calligraphic painting by Sadegh Berrani.

Text: هرکسی از ظن خود شد یار من

Source: Exhibition of Sadegh Berirani's handwriting, Ben Gallery



**Fig 16.** Calligraphic painting by Seyyed Mohammad Ehasaei.

Source: online visualization website

### Conclusion

The first signs of the deconstruction of principles and rules, as well as the inherent function of traditional calligraphy, which was perceived as transferring incorporated content, date back to the Qajar era, specifically the late period of this era. Calligraphers who gradually moved away from the framework based on the principles and rules of calligraphy, with inclinations towards decorative and ornamental styles, Siyahmashq writing, and similar



approaches, provided the groundwork for creating pioneering works that were both innovative and inspired by visual signs of the past. Since calligraphy was considered a carrier of exquisite literature, especially divine words and special eloquence, any changes or modifications that in any way distorted the sanctity of the script were criticized by traditional critics. These changes specifically focused on works that, through a set of techniques and methods, aimed towards abstract expression and finding an independent identity for the visual language of calligraphy. Calligraphers such as Malek Mohammad Qazvini, Mirza Gholam Reza Esfahani, and Emad al-Ketab, in the Qajar era, represent inclinations towards decorative and ornamental styles, artistic Siyahmashq (which were considered common practice-based Siyahmashq in terms of visual language and performance), and spatialization and new explorations in the structure of Nastaliq Siyahmashq. This process historically provided the foundation for the emergence of modern tendencies in contemporary calligraphy and, more generally, Iranian avant-garde art. The transition from tradition to modernity in the evolution of Iranian art, following the Constitutional Revolution and the fading of courtly art with the process of modernization in the Pahlavi era, gained more momentum with the support of governmental institutions (especially in the 1960s and 1970s) for pioneering arts in Iran to introduce Iranian identity beyond borders. Although Iranian avant-garde art had some influence from the achievements of Western modernism, it is clear in history that the most prominent avant-garde movements in Iranian art, such as the Saqqakhaneh Movement, paid special attention to past symbols and visual elements as the main foundation for creating their innovative works. Artists of the Saqqakhaneh Movement, through their slow and meticulous exploration of the treasury of Iranian indigenous art and culture, and the combination of popular cultural and ritualistic elements with modern approaches, sought to give identity to contemporary Iranian art. Some of these artists and leaders of the Saqqakhaneh Movement, including Hossein Zendehtroudi and Faramarz Pilararm, focusing particularly on calligraphy in their innovative perspective, drew on the experiences and practices of the predecessors and, in particular, nonconformist calligraphers of the Qajar era, to create works that were primarily a fusion of local and traditional elements and unreadable letters, relying on the rhythmic repetition of words, such as the style of Siyahmashq writing or letters adorned with various elements related to that era. The efforts of the Saqqakhaneh artists led this movement to become the most important avant-garde art movement in Iran at the same time as the cultural and social conditions of the second Pahlavi era. Prominent examples of these artist's works and a multitude of derivative works still attract a large audience in galleries both inside and outside the country, as well as in the most prestigious international art auctions.

## References

- Afsarian, I. (2018). *In search of a new time* (Vol. 1 & 2). Tehran: Herfe Honarmand. **[In Persian]**
- Dadvar, A. & Kashmiri, M. (2017). Antiquarianism: An expressive method for neo-traditionalists (with a look at the works of the pioneers of the Saqqakhaneh movement). *Jelveh Honar Journal*, (18), 61. Doi: 10.22051/JJH.2017.133. **[In Persian]**
- Ebrahimi Naghani, H. (2010). Saqqaqkhanh movement, the development and openness of the aesthetic arrangements and techniques of ancient, ethnic, and traditional Iranian arts. *Fine arts (visual arts)*, (41), 39-53. **[In Persian]**
- Etemadi, E. (1998). Saqqaqkhanh. Tehran. *Visual Arts Studies*, (3), 29-40. **[In Persian]**
- Fadaei, M. (2018). Saqqaqkhanh: Letterism or calligraphic painting?. *Posht-e Bam Specialized Journal of Visual Arts*, (1), 168-171. **[In Persian]**
- Kermaninejad, F. (2012). *The art of calligraphy in Iran*. Tehran: Aban Publication. **[In Persian]**

- Khorshidian, R. & Zahedi, H. (2017). Saqqakhaneh school: A post-colonial or oriental perspective?. *Bagh Nazar*, (53), 41-52. **[In Persian]**
- Motaghedi, K. & Gudarzi, S. (2020). *New trends in Qajar calligraphy*. Tehran: House of Book and Literature of Iran. **[In Persian]**
- Qhelichkhani, H. R. (2015). Calligraphic painting or calligram. *Tandis Journal (Visual Arts Bi-weekly)*, (302), 4 -5. **[In Persian]**
- Rahmani, T. (2020). *Fancy scripts in Iran*. Bojnourd: Aghrabe Publications. **[In Persian]**
- Ravanjo, A (2022). A survey in Iran's modernist art movement in calligraphy based on the trend towards traditional and modern art, *Paykareh*, (28), 53- 66. Doi: 10.22055/PYK.2022.175400. **[In Persian]**
- Samii Azer, A. R. (2017). *The birth of Iranian modernism*. Tehran: Nazar Publication. **[In Persian]**
- Shariatpanahi, S. M. & Yamini, M. (2016). Investigating the effective factors in changing the style of Nastaliq calligraphy in Qajar calligraphy. *Islamic Art Collection*, (12), 20-32. Doi: 10.22077/NIA.2018.1275.1085. **[In Persian]**
- Ventsel, Ch H. (2016). *Kant's aesthetics, concepts and main issues*. Tehran: Naqsh Jahan.



©2023 by the Authours. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0 license) [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.en\\_GB](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/deed.en_GB)