

Original Research Article

Mohadase Saber<sup>1</sup> Samira Royan<sup>2</sup>

Received: 28 August 2023

Revised: 18 December 2023

Accepted: 22 December 2023

DOI: 10.22055/PYK.2024.18758 URL: [https://paykareh.scu.ac.ir/article\\_18758.html](https://paykareh.scu.ac.ir/article_18758.html)

How to cite this article: Saber, M., & Royan, S. (2023). An Archaeological Study of the Historical Painting Transformation from Neoclassicism to Postmodernism. *Paykareh*, 12 (34), 91-106.

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

دیرینه‌شناسی تحول صورت و محتوای نقاشی تاریخی در گذار از نئوکلاسیسیسم به پست‌مدرنیسم

## **An Archaeological Study of the Historical Painting Transformation from Neoclassicism to Postmodernism**

### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** Historical painting is not a realistic recording of a historical event but a tool to represent a historical event through visual media. In the visual representation of history, both the details that cannot be expressed verbally are depicted, and the attitude of the societies towards the nature of the historical event is revealed. Studying the works of the European and American historical painting genre from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows several points of transition and transformation. These turning points can be recognized in the transition from Neoclassicism to Modernism and Modernism to Postmodernism. Therefore, the current research aims to explain how historical painting changes in the transition from Neoclassicism to Postmodernism concerning the episteme. The problem is that the shift in society's attitude toward the concept of history has caused a change in the characteristics of the visual representation of history in the mentioned periods.

**Research Method:** This research is qualitative and was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method and a historical approach. The data collection method was citation studies. Accordingly, the samples were selected from a limited statistical population based on the definition of historical painting in the mentioned time frame and representativeness in the desired criteria. They were analyzed using an archeological approach. Picture archeology is a method of historical analysis with an emphasis on «points of discontinuity» rather than «continuity» and «repetition».

**Results:** The analysis showed that the style and content of historical painting have changed in the transition from Neoclassicism to Modernism and Modernism to Postmodernism. The depiction of mythological and historical themes related to the past period in the paintings of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century gave their place to the depiction of contemporary events. In artistic Modernism, the styles of depicting history, and in Postmodernism, the subject and audience of this genre had been changed fundamentally. Also, the function of historical painting changed from mythologizing and idealizing a historical event to normalizing and even challenging it.

**Conclusion:** The depiction of history has had a direct relationship with the concept of history in different periods. Since history was considered a recurring cycle before the Age of Enlightenment, the idealization and mythologizing of the past can also be observed in historical painting. The threshold of the modernity of history was considered the course of events moving towards a specific result. However, with the collapse of the concept of progress, multiple and localized historical narratives became important. The same approach is reflected in the style and theme of the historical paintings of these periods.

### **Keywords**

Archeology, Neoclassicism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Historical Illustration, Historical Painting

1. Master of Painting, Faculty of Art and Architecture, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.

2. Corresponding Author, Assistant Professor of Painting Department, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.

Email: [s.royan@modares.ac.ir](mailto:s.royan@modares.ac.ir)

## **Introduction**

Illustrating important people, events, and ideas of every era has always been one of the main functions of visual arts. Interestingly, even with the advent of modern image recording technologies, which led to the development of different methods of photography and videography, painting is still considered one of the media for illustrating and displaying history. Accordingly, it seems that the historical painting genre has not been considered a mere documentation tool in the past or the contemporary era. The premise of the current research is that societies' approach to recording and displaying their history is not neutral in any way, and the illustration of history, even in the most superficial details, expresses the discourse components that define the characteristics of historical paintings of each era. Therefore, the historical painting is a phenomenon that, when faced with it, instead of the common question «What does this work say?», we can search for the answer to the question «What does this work show concerning its society and time?». To answer this question, the researcher, like an archeologist, starts from the most superficial layer, which is the form and subject of the work, and penetrates the inner and invisible layers. The archeological approach considered in this research is one of the methods of historical studies. This approach is essential in current research because Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and the founder of archeological studies in human sciences, introduced archeology as a suitable method for analyzing paintings. What distinguishes archeology from traditional methods of historical studies is its emphasis on «discontinuity». From this point of view, every phenomenon is a unique product of its time, and even in the most obvious details, it can represent its generator discourse system. It seems that the Western genre of historical painting, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to today (the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century), has had a fundamental transformation and rupture at several points, which can be seen in the transition from Neoclassicism to Modernism and Modernism to Postmodernism. Therefore, the current research aims to introduce the characteristics of historical painting in the three mentioned periods to explain the turning points of the genre of historical painting and its relationship with the political and social contexts of its time. By studying the genre of historical painting in the specified range, we try to answer the question of how the change in society's approach towards the concept of historical events is reflected in the paintings. It is worth mentioning that although these developments can indicate a change in the discourse system, the purpose of this research is not discourse analysis.

## **Research Method**

The current research is among the qualitative studies with a historical approach, which uses a descriptive-analytical method regarding documentary data. The data analysis is based on the archeological approach. This approach examines each phenomenon as an event based on its unique characteristics. The historical painting genre, based on Western art history, forms the statistical population of the current research. The most important feature of this genre, common to all works, is the reference to a specific historical event. Based on the purpose of the research, three distinct periods of Neoclassicism (mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century), modernism (the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), and postmodernism (the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century) were considered as a time frame. Obviously, since this research is based on a theoretical concept, the condition of selecting the samples is to have specific criteria in the theoretical definition (here, historical painting) and to be indicative in the determined category (Lynn, 2016, 251-252). On the other hand, since archeology is basically a historical study emphasizing discontinuity (Tanke, 2009, 50),

examples from each period were chosen to show different aspects of detaching from the principles and rules before them.

### **Research Background**

Despite the importance of historical painting before Modernism and the continuation of this genre in Modernism and Postmodernism, the studies conducted in this field have often analyzed the characteristics of historical illustration in the Neoclassical period, and modern and contemporary historical painting has received less attention. However, the few sources that introduced contemporary historical painting and the evolution of historical painting subjects in a specific period provide the basis for the discussion in the present research. In the meantime, the article «Wind» (1938) entitled «The revolution of history painting» is significant because he has addressed the process of subject evolution of historical painting by looking at the state of literature in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well as history writing in this era and has explained the first evolutions of the historical genre by analyzing the contrasts between historical painting from a new approach versus a traditional perspective. The book entitled «What was historical painting and what is it now?» is a collection of articles compiled and edited by «Salber Phillips and Bear» (2019). This collection consists of three main parts: The first chapter deals with human figures, the second chapter deals with the crisis of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the final part with the changing themes of historical painting. As an artist and researcher of the genre of historical painting, «Dalwood» (2019), in one of the articles of the same book entitled «What is history in contemporary historical painting?» by analyzing three study samples, briefly shows the way of illustrating contemporary subjects of historical painting. According to Dalwood, traditional historical painting, which was mainly limited to the objective representation of specific subjects and people in the contemporary era, has turned to creating images derived from modern man's mental challenges. Also, «Conn» (2002), in an article entitled «Narrative trauma and civil war history painting», discusses American historical painting and how to narrate war in this art genre. He argues that the success of these works was due to breaking the framework of traditional historical painting. «The history painting and its changing subjects» written by «Carrier» (2020), which refers to the description of the change in attitude towards historical painting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and concludes that the change in the subjects of historical painting shows the change in the importance of themes in the past. In an article entitled «History painting and its critics», «Hart» (2015) deals with historical painting in the modern era and examines the period of decline of this genre from the point of view of critics. Hart showed that even in its decline, historical painting has attracted the attention of critics and can be a suitable tool for expressing contemporary issues. Since Persian sources were not found in the study of Western historical painting, and the mentioned sources have also dealt with a part of the subject, it is hoped that, by emphasizing the turning points of the evolution of historical painting in recent centuries, the present research will open the way for a better understanding of this genre as one of the points of objectification of the history of contemporary societies.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

**1. Archeology of Image:** «Michel Foucault» (1984-1926), the founder of the archeological method, introduces painting as one of the areas that can be analyzed archeologically. While pointing out the ineffectiveness of linguistic methods for image analysis, he has written and lectured about paintings and visual works on several occasions. The remarkable point of his approach is the realization of painting as a science, the materiality of which is formed based on a specific discourse. By referring to the features of painting in different periods, he has pointed out the visibility of «epistemic<sup>1</sup>» changes in painting. The archeological method in the painting analysis departs from hermeneutic, psychological, and phenomenological approaches to art. It emphasizes the occurrence of painting and the relationship between the material properties of the image and the conditions of its display with a specific discourse; how the work rejects or confirms the rules before it is the central aspect of this method (Royan, 2020). The primary emphasis of archeology is on discontinuities rather than continuities in historical studies; in this method, it is believed that what shows the nature of special and unique events are differences, not similarities. Archeological analysis of paintings seeks to find out whether space, distance, depth, color, light, the proportion of space, and lines were not created, announced, and perceived in a discursive act in the period in question and whether the knowledge that this discursive act has caused is not likely to be found in the theories and rules, educational methods, and executive principles, as well as in the processes, technique, and even the gesture of the painter. The goal of archeology is not to attribute a specific meaning or content to the painting but rather to show that, at least in some aspects, this act of discourse is embedded in visual elements and arrangements (Royan, 2020). The archeology method, in relation to visual culture, shows how specific examples of visual products - those considered discursive, visual, sensory, and economic resources - replace those that existed before them. By examining these works that show the moment of transition, it is possible to understand how new methods are presented for the distribution of the visual elements of painting, how they establish a different relationship with nature, and how, in turn, changes are made in the approach of producers and viewers (Tanke, 2009, 7). In this method, examples that contradict the principles and rules before them are emphasized and known as the primary source of new trends. In this research, after explaining the main features of historical painting in the style of Neoclassicism, referring to samples in the periods of Modernism and Postmodernism that show the change and discontinuity in the established principles of the past, the pictorial way of representing the rupture in the concept of history through historical painting is investigated.

**2. Historical Painting:** It is challenging to define historical painting because identifying its subjects - historical events - has a vague boundary. Accordingly, if we consider the characteristic of representation in these works, the simplest definition of this genre can be regarded as works that represent «historical events». However, the illustration of history has undergone many changes throughout the era. A considerable part of these changes depended on the definition of historical events. In a traditional and familiar sense, «historical events» are important events related to the relatively distant past. This concept was used in the era of Classicism when the genre of historical painting had high prestige and was referred to by titles such as «great historical painting» or «traditional historical painting» - until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

As shown in Fig. 1 by «Nicolas Poussin», the prominent painter of the Classic period and the prominent model of the great historical painting genre, we face a symbolic

representation of a national subject- the military success of the Roman General Germanicus. In this period, heroes were praised and sanctified in national, religious, or mythological narratives with a significant time interval; this period of historical painting paid attention to finished history (Cullen, 2015, 85). Historical painting was traditionally committed to specific rules designed for how painters painted and how audiences saw them (White, 1987, 24). The traditional style of this genre in the 18<sup>th</sup> century tried to illustrate the heroism of individuals with moral messages in certain scenes that were more taken from the Christian and classical traditions. The purpose of this genre can be considered to illustrate the past with the approach of teaching established moral truths (Conn, 2002). The artists of this method tried to load the works as best as possible to achieve the goals of historical painting. Most of these efforts, as seen in these works, were directed toward using classical visual vocabulary. In fact, painters considered the best way to achieve the goals of traditional historical painting to be inspired by classic works. Figure 2, by «Gwynn Hamilton», entitled «Achilles lamenting the death of Patroclus», is a depiction of a Greek myth, and the enormous dimensions of the work, the robust bodies, and the glorious death of the hero indicate the commitment of great historical painting. The use of classic scenes in the historical genre was significant from two perspectives; first, it emphasized the timelessness and idealistic view of this genre, and second, the classic scenes were considered allusions in sync with the periodic view of the history of that time. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they understood the concept of history based on the fact that societies and governments were established based on fixed laws, which grew and eventually fell, and this cycle was repeated in the next government. The principles and rules of traditional historical painting gave a visual and objective form to the cyclical attitude toward history.



**Fig 1.** «Death of Germanicus». Nicolas Poussin. 1627.

Source: [collections.artsmia.org](https://collections.artsmia.org) (access date: 2021/06/21).



**Fig 2.** «Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus». «Gavin Hamilton». 1760.

Source: [nationalgalleries.org](https://nationalgalleries.org) (access date: 2021/06/21).

**Historical Painting During Neoclassicism (mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century):**

Around 1770, with the change of the concept of the historical event - from something related to the past to everything that happened at a specific time - the first developments of the historical painting genre appeared in the themes of the works. The first transformation in the subject of historical painting can perhaps be seen in the work of «Benjamin West» called «Death of General Wolfe» (1771) (Fig 3). Until this time, some rules were the criteria of this genre, such as that the subject of historical painting emphasized on finished and distant history or that the heroes should not have a familiar face to the audience (Wind, 1938). The public opinion was that if it is otherwise, the greatness of the representation of history as the best genre of painting would be reduced; however, in this work, the image of General Wolfe, a prominent soldier in the British Kingdom, is represented, who did not return alive from the war command in 1759. The hero is a familiar soldier - contrary to the rules of the great style - and the scene shows the space of war, but the place in this painting is unclear - that is, it remains faithful to the placelessness of the great painting. On the other hand, it is evident to the audience that no soldier will wear such magnificent clothes on the battlefield. The hero's death is depicted in this scene, but is there any sign of death? There is no blood stain on the tissue on the general's body, and no sadness is represented. It is as if the lead actor is performing a theater scene and gets up after the performance. This is the sublime aim of the great historical painting, which is preserved in this scene despite the remarkable transformation of the subject. The tradition of the glory of the ideal hero in the great historical painting has not been questioned with factors such as blood, whimper, or captivity. For a better understanding of the courage seen in the scene of General Wolfe's death, we can refer to the «Oath of the Horatii» (Fig 4). A government-ordered work related to a legend from Rome is a scene where even the background columns and the placement of the figures are entirely reminiscent of the magnificent theater scenes. In the design of the clothes, specifically, the dress style of the ancient Greek and Roman statues has been used.



**Fig. 3.** «Death of General Wolfe». «Benjamin West». 1771 Source: gallery.ca (access date: 2021/06/21).



**Fig. 4.** «Oath of the Horatii». «Jacques-Louis David». 1784 Source: artsandculture.google.com (access date: 2021/06/21).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many other artists also turned to contemporary subjects in the genre of historical painting, and the most famous of these works is «The Third of May» (1808-1814) by «Francisco Goya». This work depicts the shooting of Madrid citizens by the soldiers of the French Empire during the years of occupation of Spain by Napoleon; a thoroughly

contemporary subject and perhaps the first revolutionary work. Historical painting, once a propaganda tool for the interests of governments, has been used contrary to its former use. In Fig 5, a contemporary European revolution is illustrated as a large-scale historical painting. In this work, the hero is a black man, and the lighting in the work is entirely in favor of the people under fire. Even though emotions such as fear, suffering, and cruelty are objectified in this work, the hero's courage is still the most essential concept displayed in the work. Considering that the two features of time interval and mythmaking were the two main techniques based on which the typical person could take the place of the hero (Kohle, 2014), in the mentioned painting, despite breaking the time interval rule, lighting methods and color and spatial composition are still used to mythologize the hero. The effect of these developments was so significant that even «Jacques-Louis David», an artist who enjoyed the support of the government, also associated himself with the wave of developments in the historical genre amid the French Revolution with the work «The Death of Marat» (1793). The painting «The Death of Marat» shows the murder of a journalist, which is a contemporary subject; however, in the sense that despite the representation of the murder scene, the mythologizing of the main character has been considered through the use of visual effects, it still shows the influence of the tremendous historical painting.



**Fig 5.** «The Third of May». «Francisco Goya». 1808-1814. Source: artchive.com (access date: 2021/06/21).



**Fig 6.** «The Death of Marat». «Jacques Louis David». 1793. Source: ageofrevolution.org (access date: 2021/06/21)

**Historical Painting in the Modern Period (first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century):** Modernity and, consequently, artistic Modernism was the achievement of the Industrial Revolution. This period started with rapid construction, transportation, and technology changes from around the late 19th century until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the genre of history illustration, which was very popular and essential in the previous era, declined in the modern era due to two main reasons; the commentators of the modernist period believed that historical painting belongs to the events of the past and cannot express the spirit of its time (Kohle, 2014). As a result, many great artists showed less interest in the subjects of traditional historical painting or even no interest at all. Perhaps the best and most well-known sample

of the modern historical genre is the work of «Guernica» (Fig 7), which refers to the bombing of the military forces of Hitler's army in a Spanish city. The subject is entirely contemporary, and the work was created to emphasize the tragedy that happened; however, the play of forms is noticeable in the work of «Guernica» at first glance. It is no longer a change of subject representing a fundamental transformation of the historical genre. Many of the existing rules in the fantastic genre are challenged. The element of the single hero, which was an essential principle in depicting history in the past, disappears. Some lines and forms encourage the audience to see. There is no sign of a specific face anymore; not even a prominent symbol can be seen; it is only based on the name of the work that it is clear what event the work refers to. The predominance of formalism in the modern period is visible in the works. Guernica does not show the final moment, as seen in a finished event in «The Death of Marat». Modernism depicts the events in its framework; more precisely, the history illustrated in Modernism is the history in progress.



**Fig 7.** «Guernica». «Pablo Picasso». 1937  
Source: pablocicasso.org (access date: 2021/06/21).

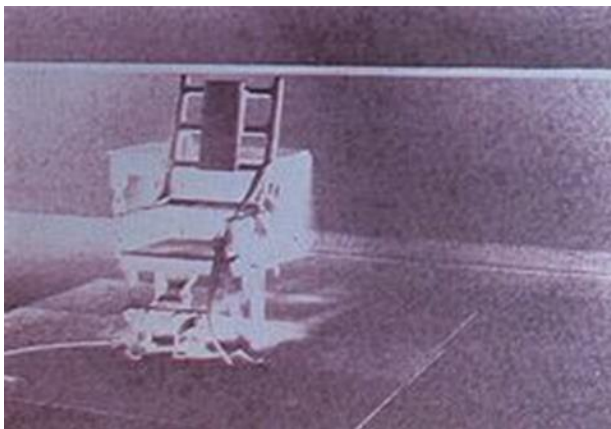


**Fig 8.** «Robert Motherwell». «The Little Spanish Prison». 1944  
Source: moma.org (access date: 2021/06/21).

To explain the claim raised, a work by «Robert Motherwell» entitled «The Little Spanish Prison», which can be seen in Fig. 8, is a suitable example. This work depicts neither a prison nor any other recognizable figure. There is nothing but vertical lines and a horizontal segment. Here, «formalism<sup>2</sup>» decisively shows its dominance of pure abstract forms. Even playing with colors has become trivial. The audience of this work is wholly immersed in the innovation of form. However, in a closer look, you can see the visual signs indicating the subject of the work in the work of «Motherwell»: The vertical lines reminiscent of prison bars are in perfect harmony with the title of the work and the subject. These works were not created for the praise of the general public, and they are not meant for everyone to understand the event. Modern historical illustration is in line with the approach of art for art and represents the rationalism of Modernism. At the end of this period, the first steps were taken for further development. «David Joselit» in the book entitled «American Art: Since 1945», argues that «in abstract expressionism, the canvas should be seen as a microcosmic reflection of the larger public area». He adds: «American art after the war is a combination



of people's new experiences that began with the explosion of visual mass media with television in the 1940s and continued through the Internet in the 1990s» (Joselit, 2003). If Joselit's analysis is acceptable, then the abstract paintings of «Jackson Pollock» and his counterparts, as well as some pop works of «Andy Warhol» and his counterparts, can be called historical paintings. However, Warhol used images representing the civil rights movement and other contemporary political events (Carrier, 2020). The proof of this claim is quite evident in Warhol's collection of electric chairs. This collection repeats the image of an electric chair created with different color prints. Andy Warhol's famous images of the electric chair were first created in 1964 as a painting on silk screen. The electric chair was originally a form of capital punishment created to replace hanging. Convicts were strapped to chairs and subjected to various sequences of electric currents until they were fatally injured. The image based on which the artist created this collection was a press photo of the Death House in the Correctional Facility in New York in 1963. That year, two American citizens were executed for passing confidential information about the atomic bomb to Russia during World War II (tate.org.uk). Although the subject is the death of two American citizens, neither a body nor a human trace can be seen (Fig 9). It is no longer the subject of a huge national event, and even at the same time, it was not as newsworthy as the selected subjects of the traditional historical painting genre. However, the artist clearly creates this collection based on an event. Why a set of color prints? Is one picture not enough? Why does it create different effects with different colors? This is precisely the same argument that prioritizes form over content. Of course, the plurality of works also emphasizes the subject; however, the variety of prints makes the audience more aware of the form. In this work, a panel on the right side is barely visible, on which is written: Silence. Not only is the figurative tradition of the past not seen, but it also seems that different strategies, such as writing, have been used to convey meaning. The critical point is that this work is executed in a pop art style, which essentially questions the frameworks of great historical painting. Pop art is rooted in popular culture and everyday life and is produced for a large general audience. Accordingly, modern historical painting rejects many established principles of the past and is presented with new subjects and formats for new audiences.

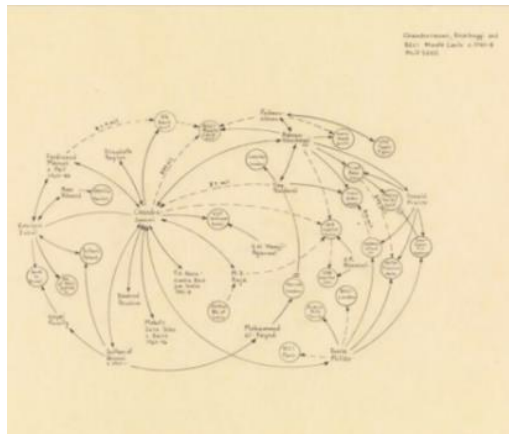


**Fig 9.** «Electric Chairs» «Andy Warhol». 1971. Source: tate.org.uk (access date: 2021/06/21)

**Historical Painting During Postmodernism (1970-2020):** Denial of absolute truth and relativism and doubts about everything previously considered specific are the characteristics of the Postmodernism era, and its influence on the illustration of history is also significant. As it was said before, in the view of history in the traditionalist style, such beliefs prevail that history has a linear structure, and the historian records the events, and the materials of history oversee what incident or event happened in each period. On the other hand, from the modern historiography perspective, not only the linearity of the structure of history is rejected, but also, through relying on the historian's biased writing of events, it denies historical data in terms of actual reality and instead considers the works of historians as a historical text. Moreover, it confirms that this text can be read and interpreted like any other (Rostambeigi & Zavieh, 2014).



**Fig 10.** «I want a president». «Zoe Leonard». 1992. Source: hauserwirth.com (access date: 2021/06/21)



**Fig. 11.** «Chandra Swami», Khashoggi and BCCI Monte Carlo. Mark Lombardi. 1985 Source: whitney.org (access date: 2021/06/21).

Figure 11, by «Lombardi», illustrates the case of the sale of arms by «Adnan Khashoggi». In this work, the relationships between the members of the arms sales gang are clearly mentioned, and all the names are related to people. This work is more than created based on aesthetic principles; it is an unveiling of the mafia involved in selling illegal weapons. These works have been helpful even for researching FBA agents (sputniknews.lat). This painting is a public awareness means, not a depiction of a specific event. In fact, it is the data that becomes visible, and the audience draws conclusions. As mentioned earlier, in the work of Guernica, which is related to the modern era, clear effects or emotions resulting from an event are shown; however, only data transfer takes place here. This work is complete when the audience reads it. There is no pre-defined message here; only data and relationships are exposed. The same approach can be seen in the work «I Want a President» by «Zoe Leonardo» (Fig 10) - which was a reaction to the 1992 U.S. presidential election. When his friend Eileen Myles was nominated as a candidate in the same period, he stood as an independent candidate against George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot. The artist of this work is a person from a deficient social class who has suffered a lot due to poverty, AIDS, and rape (hauserwirth.com). The work is a number of sentences that begin with the phrase «I want a president who ...» and raises the question, why are presidents always from the rich people of the upper class of society? Why don't people who have poverty, social trauma, rape, disease, and many other terrible experiences become

president? Leonard's work is an open criticism of the politics of presidential elections in America. This work is created to raise awareness and criticize political power. In this work, neither a story is told, nor a well-known figure is shown. Interestingly, in this period, the importance of the work of art as a unique and precious commodity is challenged. In this regard, the work «I Want a President ...» has been reproduced in a large amount; a reproduction that is different from the reproduction of form in Warhol's work. In fact, the publication of the work here emphasizes the mission and social commitment of art in the direction of public awareness.



**Fig 12.** «Reflection on three weeks in May». «Rita Donagh». 1971. Source: tate.org.uk (access date: 2021/06/21).



**Fig 13.** «Aleppo, help has arrived». «Augusto Ferrer. Dalmau». 2019. Source: sputniknews.lat (access date: 2021/06/21).

It is pretty clear that the subjects of the historical genre no longer only include the dominant class of society but can also be environmental phenomena, local protests, political events, or any other specific issue. The work must be explicitly created around the desired event. The same variety of topics causes variety in the way of presentation and execution because, in these works, priority is given to the transfer of concepts and data and other features of the work -manifesto, arrangement of the work in place, artist's book accompanying the work, and such issues- are created under the influence of this component. In the contemporary era, historical painting rejects almost all its traditional limitations. The execution method and style of works of the genre of historical painting become completely individual and have many proportions with the subject, content, space in which the work is created, and the lived experience of the artist; this is why it is almost impossible to define the boundaries of contemporary historical painting. The work of «Rita Donagh» is considered a worthy sample in the present discussion. This work refers to the incident of shooting students by the National Guard, which is called «Reflection on Three Weeks in May» (Fig 12). The process of creating the work is such that a group of students perform a memorial for another group who were victims of the intended event. The work is done in an abstract style and with visual conventions, and the artist has placed a complete manifesto next to the work to inform the audience. In contrast to Donagh's work, which was done in a completely abstract style, there is the work of «Dalmau» (Fig 13), which showed the historical event with a kind of hyperreal objective realism. The illustration of history in Postmodernism rejects all previous rules and, at the same time, has a playful return to previous approaches.

**Discussion**

Based on the theoretical approach of this research, painting is a materiality that gives objectivity to the knowledge of its time. Therefore, it can be expected that changes in theoretical concepts will lead to changes in the form and content characteristics of painting. Western culture revised many of its fundamental ideas in a revolutionary period that lasted from around 1750 to the early 19th century and is known as the Age of Enlightenment. The effects of this period in politics led to the French and American revolutions, the overthrow of monarchies throughout Europe, and the establishment of republican and democratic ideals (Gelernter, 2022, 215). Until the Age of Enlightenment, the world as a whole was continuous and complete. According to this approach, history had a cyclical and repetitive nature. The illustration of events related to the distant past before the 19th century reflects this thinking. The representation of heroes and great historical events can teach people lessons. Since, in this period, there are values such as great people and great events, it is obvious that the general public is not the audience of historical painting because historical painting has a memorial function, and its purpose is to legitimize and glorify the dominant class (Foucault, 2003, 68-69). In historical painting, not only the subjects that always show power and divinity but also the formal features such as large dimensions of the canvas, idealism in the representation of figures, centrist composition, richness of color, dramatic lighting, and attention to detail, are all in line with this function. However, since the late 18th century, the way of understanding history has changed. The secular and humanistic spirit of the Age of Enlightenment did not accept any past theories for history (the theory of repeating cycles prevalent among the ancient Greeks and the theory of linear graph moving towards the ultimate goal in which Christians believed). For them, history resulted from the play of human wills and emotions (Gelreuter, 2022, 229-230). Meanwhile, the growth of «Secularism<sup>3</sup>» also diminished the importance of Christian sacred scenes, and classical education focused on Greek and Latin culture declined (Carrier, 2020). In this attitude, the present is given priority over the past because it shows a more advanced position in the evolution of thought. Accordingly, in the late 18th century, a traditional historical painting lost importance due to representing an event related to the distant past. On the other hand, with the emergence of the intellectual middle class and the formation of the public art museum, the patrons and audiences of art changed. Historical painting used contemporary events as an example. It mythologized the present and social events of its time by resorting to the illustration styles of classical historical painting. A fundamental change in the historical painting genre occurred in the transition from Neoclassicism to Modernism. The theory of Relativity, which was proposed in the early 20th century, profoundly affected the history of thought. Modernist philosophers wandered between Relativism and Determinism. The conflict between relativists and those who sought certainty is evident in the art of the first decades of the 20th century. Classicists sought objective and timeless principles of design, while Romantics praised individual freedom (Gelernter, 2022, 313). The noteworthy point is that both approaches led to distancing from reference to the tangible world and emphasis on form. Finally, the Structuralist<sup>4</sup> wisdom of modernity was manifested in art as pure formalism. With the acquisition of the theory of formalism in the modern era, the works of historical painting, following the knowledge system of their time, distanced themselves from the representation of objective reality and started creating images equivalent to historical events. The materialism of this era led painting to focus on matter and form instead of theme and content. Modern historical painting is not an open window to ancient history, but it implies contemporary history;

common and universal events are expressed with universal visual language - the language of pure form - (Figs 7-9). The artist takes responsibility for his artistic creation, and works of art are produced and presented in the art world. Hence, the ease of understanding of the works is not very important. Modern history painting neither mythologizes nor moralizes but presents a form that is the visual equivalent of a moment that presents itself as part of history. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed that the damages of this century were so great and the course of events so misleading that the fundamental belief of the Age of Enlightenment in progress was questioned. Instead of this belief, we are increasingly faced with a kind of Postmodern disillusionment that rejects any attempt to systematically explain the course of modern world history. This issue is accompanied by avoiding all universal forms of political commitment, which are now considered repressive (Rosenberg, 2017, 156-157). Postmodernism is the result of the definitive victory of Relativism over Absolutism. While «Ward» considers Postmodernism to conflict with the ideas of progress, optimism, and rationality of Modernism, he considers the most important characteristic of this period to be the belief in the end of history, the end of man, and the death of reality. Postmodernists question the idea of progress and show that historical events are not unified and directional (Ward, 2005, 27). Discussing historical painting in Postmodernism is a difficult task because separating painting from other art forms and historical events from events in this period is more difficult than ever. Postmodernism is a cultural paradigm whose perhaps most important feature is desegregation/eclecticism. If modernization was a process based on segregation, in Postmodernism, all the separation boundaries are distorted or erased. For example, the aesthetic realm conquers theoretical and moral-political domains (Lash, 2004, 29). In postmodern historical painting, subjects, execution methods, audiences, and display methods are more diverse than can be placed under any category. However, as it was clear from the analysis of research samples, Postmodern historical painting abandons the claim of aesthetic neutrality and emphasizes the social function of art. The common feature of the works of this group (Figs 10-13) is to avoid any mythology and rely on the audience's perception.

### **Conclusion**

The definition of historical painting in each period is directly related to the definition and philosophy of history. The study of the evolution of the Western historical painting genre in the transition from Neoclassicism to Modernism and Modernism to Postmodernism shows two turning points where the concept of history, historical events, and, as a result, the characteristics of historical painting have undergone transformation and rupture. The transition from Neoclassicism to Modernism and Modernism to Postmodernism are the turning points of historical painting. The first fundamental evolution of historical painting can be seen in the transition from Neoclassicism to Modernism. At this time, history changed from a predetermined blueprint beyond human control to a series of events resulting from human choices and behaviors. Subsequently, the genre of historical painting, which was traditionally associated with the representation of religious, mythological events, and the life of past nobles undergone critical changes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the contemporary history was considered the main issue of historical painting, for the first time. Neoclassicist artists sought to find objective principles for art. Still, these principles were not based on objective nature but on the subjective perception of beauty. Therefore, despite innovation in historical painting subjects and prioritizing contemporary history, the form of historical painting remained unchanged. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the development of

democratic revolutionary movements, the intellectual principles of the Age of Enlightenment became more popular among different strata of society, to the extent that belief in rationality and progress are known as the principles of Modernism. According to this belief, the present takes precedence over the past. In this way, the premise that only the events related to history are worth showing was abandoned, and contemporary issues that show human domination of the world are taken into consideration. Modern historical painting not only abandoned the content and function of classical historical painting but also rejected its representation methods. Neoclassical fundamentalist objectivism turned into pure Formalism in Modernism. In modern historical painting, form is more important than content. Instead of a visual representation of a historical event, modern historical painting creates its visual equivalent. The second turning point in the Western historical painting genre occurred in the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism, whose one characteristic is the end of history. Determining the features of Postmodern historical painting is as tricky as defining Postmodernism itself. In this period, historical painting can only be known from its samples. Postmodern historical painting confirms and reproduces some of the rules of modern historical painting but rejects others. Accordingly, in the continuation of the evolutionary process of the historical painting genre in the Postmodern era, it can be seen that the representation of history is purposefully made available to the public for social awareness. A critical look at history shows the preference for individual perspective over institutional rules. Postmodern pluralism can be seen in the works of this genre in different ways. The variety of style and theme, the way of execution and arrangement, and most importantly, the variety of audiences are among the apparent changes in historical painting of the Postmodern era. Postmodern historical painting sometimes reduces history to a mere visual subject, and sometimes, by defamiliarizing image elements and the boundaries of reality, it emphasizes the ambiguity and uncertainty governing the epistemic system of the era. In this period, the purpose of illustrating history is not to represent a specific event nor to draw conclusions and convey a clear message. Still, it can only challenge and expose to doubt a moment of the individual or collective life of a contemporary human being, which is as significant as a mythological narrative.

### **Author Contributions**

This article is extracted from the master's thesis of the first author supervised by the second author.

### **Acknowledgment**

Not applicable.

### **Conflict of Interest**

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

### **Research Funding**

The author (s) did not receive any financial support for conducting the research, writing up, and publication of this article.

## Appendix

1. Foucault first used the word episteme to indicate a set of relations and laws of transformation that organize all discourse functions at a given time. The basic premise of Foucault's archeological method is that intellectual and cognitive systems are guided by rules beyond grammatical and logical rules that operate under the awareness of individual subjects and create a system of conceptual possibilities that define the boundaries of thought and the conditions of accepted truth in each era (Rashidian, 2014, 25).
2. A term to describe an approach in art in which the autonomy or superiority of the formal qualities of the work of art is emphasized. It is believed that the existence of elements such as line, shape, and color in an artwork is enough to understand and evaluate it, and other considerations such as representational, moral, or social aspects are unimportant or redundant (Pakbaz, 2005, 1004).
3. Secularization is a process that leads to the decline of social status or the reduction of the role of religion as an institution (Birou, 1996, 334).
4. A point of view that considers the understanding of cultural elements and phenomena as possible only in their connection with a wider system or structure. According to some writers, structuralism was a kind of French revolution for the study of constructed pluralities, which marked one of the most important intellectual movements in Western thought since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Rashidian, 2014, 365).

## References

- Birou, A. (1996). *Dictionary of social sciences* (B. Sarukhani, Tehran). Tehran: Keyhan. **[In Persian]**
- Carrier, D. (2020). History painting and its changing subjects. *History and Theory*, 59(3), 471-481. DOI:10.1111/hith.12175
- Conn, S. (2002). Narrative trauma and civil war history painting, or why are these pictures so terrible? *United State: History and Theory*, (41), 17-42. DOI: 10.1111/1468-2303.00218
- Cullen, F. (2015). *Visual politics in 1780s Ireland: The roles of history painting*. Chinese University of Hong Kong. DOI: 10.1093/oxartj/18.1.58
- Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the College De France (1975- 76)* (D. Macey, trans. & ed.). New York: Picador.
- Gelernter, M. (2022). *The origins of architectural form* (P. Rouhi, Trans.). Tehran: Gilgamesh Publishing. **[In Persian]**
- Hart, I. (2015). History painting and its critics, ca. 1870–1910. *Nineteenth-century Art Worldwide*, 14 (2), 85-102.
- Joselit, D. (2003). *American art since 1945*. England: Thames & Hudson.
- Kohle, H. (2014). *The modernity of history painting: The case of Adolph Menzel, intellectual history review*. Routledge: University of Munich, 135-151. DOI: 10.11588/artdok.00000980
- Lynn, P. (2016). *Principles of sampling*. In Tony Greenfield & Sue Greener (ed.), *Research Methods for Postgraduates*. United States: Wiley & Sons Ltd. DOI: 10.1002/9781118763025.ch24
- Lash, S. (2004). *Sociology of Postmodernism* (Sh. Behian, Trans.). Tehran: Qoqnoos Publications. **[In Persian]**
- Pakbaz, R. (2005). *Encyclopedia of Art*. Tehran: Fargang Moaser Publishing. **[In Persian]**
- Rashidian, A. K. (2014). *Postmodern culture*. Tehran: Ney Publishing. **[In Persian]**
- Rosenberg, J. (2017). *Hobsbawm's century* (A. Shaygan, Trans). From the collection of essays on Postmodernism in Criticism, selection and editing by Khosrow Parsa, first edition 1375, Tehran: Aghaz publication. **[In Persian]**
- Rostambeigi, S. & Zavieh, S. (2014). Philosophy of history and art historiography from traditional and modern perspectives. *Kimiya-ye-Honar*, 3(10), 35-45. **[In Persian]**
- Royan, S. (2020). Examining Foucault's archeology as a practical method for painting (picture) analysis. *Journal of Visual and Applied Arts*, 13(27), 88-69. Doi.org/10.30480/vaa.2020.2326.1349 **[In Persian]**
- Salber Phillips, M & Bear, J. (2019). *What was history painting and what is it now?* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. DOI: 10.1515/9780228000358
- Tanke, J. J. (2009). *Foucault's philosophy of art: A genealogy of modernity*. London: Continuum. DOI: 10.1093/fs/knq056

## PAYKAREH

Journal of Art Faculty, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

**An Archaeological Study of the Historical Painting Transformation from Neoclassicism to Postmodernism**

Volume 12 Issue 34 Winter 2023 Pages 91-106

**106**

- Ward, G. (2005). *Postmodernism* (Q. FakhR Ranjbari & A. Karmi, Trans.). Tehran: Mahi Publishing. **[In Persian]**
- White. H. (1987). *Narrative discourse and historical representation*. United State: The Johns Hopkins University Press. DOI: 10.2307/2504922
- Wind. E. (1938). The revolution of history painting. *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 2(2), 116-127. DOI: 10.2307/750085



©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)