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Original Research Article

Typology and Analysis of Animal Combat and Hunting Motifs in Qajar Art

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Abstract

Introduction: Animal combat and hunting motifs have been a prominent theme in Iranian-Islamic art and civilization from pre-Islamic times through the Qajar period. Although these motifs have been depicted similarly across various eras, their meanings have evolved in accordance with the sociocultural and religious contexts of each period. Consequently, this study seeks to examine the meanings of animal combat and hunting motifs in Qajar art, with specific attention to their spatial contexts and functional positions within architectural or artistic works. The central research question addressed herein is: What are the origins of animal combat and hunting motifs in Qajar art, considering the nature of the structure and the artistic medium, and how do they differ from similar motifs found in the Seljuk to Safavid periods?

Research Method: This study adopts a developmental approach in terms of its objectives and employs a descriptive-analytical method in its execution. Data collection involved both library-based research, utilizing primary and relevant sources, and field studies examining artistic elements such as stucco work, tilework, ceramics, metalwork, wood carving, painting on wood or plaster, seal engravings, and illustrated manuscripts. The study identified 52 examples of animal combat and hunting motifs across a variety of artistic media, classifying them into 14 distinct types.

Findings: Among the analyzed examples, tilework motifs (particularly polychrome «haft-rang» or under transparent glaze painting) and stucco (low or high relief) were the most frequently represented media. Beyond the type of structure or artifact, the artistic medium, visual characteristics of the motifs, and the decorative elements surrounding or adjacent to them significantly influenced their symbolic meanings.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that the roots of animal combat and hunting motifs lie in a synthesis of earlier beliefs and the popular consciousness of the Qajar era. These motifs symbolically reference the repulsion of evil forces, popular narratives, and prevailing cultural beliefs. In essence, the motifs not only align with public sentiment but also emphasize the legitimacy of the king and his absolute and victorious power in triumphing over falsehood.

Keywords

Animal Combat and Hunting Motifs, Qajar Period, Origin Analysis, Painting, Tilework, Stucco

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Introduction and Problem Definition

Animal motifs, due to their forms, representational contexts, and their interactions with human figures, hold significant value in the field of iconography. Deciphering animal symbols within each cultural epoch is influenced by that period's ideological and political conditions, and their meanings may vary across time. Artists have therefore employed symbolic and allegorical languages to convey ethical and social teachings that are otherwise difficult to articulate explicitly. One of the defining features of Qajar art is the diverse and lifelike portrayal of animals and birds—whether in groups or as portraits—sometimes rendered literally and other times symbolically. Among the most popular and widely respected motifs during the Qajar period was the animal combat and hunting motif, which held notable significance given the religious, social, and cultural fabric of the time. The meanings attributed to these motifs varied depending on their spatial context and the patrons' intentions, aligning with both the interests of the general public and the court, while also resonating with religious narratives. To achieve this, Qajar artists utilized allegorical and symbolic visual language. This study, therefore, aims to conduct a descriptive-analytical investigation into the meanings of animal combat and hunting motifs in Qajar art. The primary research question is: What are the origins and functions of animal combat and hunting motifs in Qajar art, considering the nature of the structure and the artistic context in which they appear? How do these motifs differ in meaning from similar ones in the Seljuk to Safavid periods, and what accounts for their notable variety during the Qajar era?

Research Method

This research is fundamentally developmental and adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. In addition to fieldwork—including photographing aristocratic residences, tile murals, stucco decorations, ceiling paintings in Qajar-era homes, and motifs on movable objects—the researcher consulted library sources to identify and interpret the meanings of animal combat and hunting motifs in Qajar art.

Research Background

To date, no dedicated study or monograph has focused exclusively on animal combat and hunting motifs from a specific historical period. Related research includes «Taghavinejad» (2008), who in «The Manifestation of animal combat and hunting Motifs in Safavid Carpets» explored symbolic depictions of animal combat and hunting motifs—particularly hunting scenes—in Safavid-era carpets. «Arman and Zakerin» (2015), in their study «Ritual – Mythological Reading Representations Engaging in Persepolis and Baisonghor's Kelileh and Demneh», analyzed similarities and differences between the two and linked them to Mithraic rituals. «Davoudi Moghaddam et al.» (2015), in «Analyzing the Lion-Bull Combat and Hunting in Persian Carpets Based on Myths and Literary Texts», examined the symbolic meanings of lion-bull confrontations from ritualistic, epic, and mystical perspectives. «Nayebzadeh and Sohrabi Nasirabadi» (2023), in «symbolism on concurrent presence of lion and dragon in Iranian Arts of Islamic period», provided a mythological and Shia-Islamic interpretation of these depictions. As evident from prior studies, most research on animal combat and hunting motifs—particularly those featuring dragons or lions and bulls—has concentrated on periods other than the Qajar era. Given the diversity and prevalence of these motifs in Qajar art, a focused and independent investigation is both necessary and timely.

Animal Combat and Hunting Motifs in Islamic Art

Animal combat and hunting motifs depict two animals engaged in combat or power display. These motifs are typically rendered symbolically, conveying meanings that transcend their literal visual form. Over time, their connotations have evolved in response to the political and social circumstances of each historical period. The most salient feature of animal combat and hunting motifs is the dynamic motion and vitality of the animals, shaped by the artist's cognitive imagery and technical expertise (Taghavinejad, 2008). Such motifs, imbued with diverse symbolic meanings, have appeared in artistic works across all historical periods and cultures. In Mesopotamia and ancient Iran, the victory of the stronger animal over the weaker one symbolized the triumph of spiritual forces over base and instinctual impulses (Cirlot, 2010, 351). A prominent example of this is the bas-relief of a lion overpowering a bull on the staircases of Persepolis. Numerous other examples in Parthian and Sasanian art underscore the continuity and symbolic significance of these motifs in ancient Iranian visual culture. With the advent of Islam, animal combat and hunting motifs did not lose their significance; instead, they adopted new meanings in accordance with Islamic ideology. One illustrative example is the mosaic depicting a lion overpowering a gazelle beneath the Tree of Life on a wall of the Khirbat al-Mafjar palace in Jericho, Palestine. This work, dating to the early 2nd century AH and commissioned by the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik, symbolizes the power and victories of the Islamic empire, as well as the immortality and tranquility derived from the expansion of this power (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Symbolic depiction of a lion overpowering a gazelle on the right, and two tranquil gazelles on the left beneath the Tree of Life. Mosaic, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Umayyad era, Jericho, Palestine, early 2nd century AH. Source: Behrens-Abouseif, 1997.

Although the early Islamic depictions of animal combat and hunting motifs were influenced by Roman and Sasanian models, from the Islamic Middle Ages onward a distinct Islamic aesthetic in the design and execution of these motifs becomes evident—accompanied by evolving symbolic interpretations. Illuminated manuscripts of «Kalila wa Dimna» contain some of the most notable examples of such representations. A common feature of many animal combat and hunting motifs, both pre-Islamic and Islamic, is the attacking animal, typically the lion. However, the prey is not always a bull, and the symbolic interpretation of each scene also differs. While at first glance these motifs may appear to represent the binary conflict between good and evil, further analysis—particularly of Qajar-era works—reveals alternative symbolic meanings that differ not only from pre-Islamic times but also from the Seljuk and Safavid periods.

Types of Animal Combat and Hunting Motifs and Their Interpretations in Qajar Art

Animal combat and hunting motifs reached an unparalleled level of diversity and thematic richness during the Qajar period. Based on the analysis of 52 examples from various Qajar-era artistic and architectural contexts, 14 distinct types of animal combat and hunting motifs were identified.

1. The Combat between Lion and Dragon: The depiction of a lion slaying a dragon symbolizes the destruction of evil forces, the triumph of the human spirit over base desires, and the victory of enlightenment over ignorance (Cooper, 2007, 18). Within Iranian culture, dragon-slaying symbolizes the confrontation of humans with obstacles on the path to their ultimate goal. An examination of the documented examples (Table 1) reveals that representations of lions grappling with dragons were more prevalent in the Qajar era than in any previous period. These motifs were employed extensively in the decoration of both religious and secular buildings as well as in other artistic contexts. Notably, the symbolic meaning of the lion-dragon motif varies depending on the type of space it occupies. In religious settings, the motif signifies the need for spiritual purification—where the individual must cleanse the self of evil in preparation for prayer and devotion to the Imams. In contrast, in secular spaces such as bathhouses and bazaars, the motif serves more apotropaic functions, such as warding off the evil eye. Although human figures grappling with dragons are not depicted during the Qajar period, the recurring image of lion-dragon combat symbolized royal authority and the power of the Qajar dynasty, the grandeur of the homeowner, control over one's environment, and the expulsion of malevolent forces such as misfortune, storms, or drought. These scenes also reflect the eternal struggle between good and evil—where neither force achieves absolute dominance. In some cases, dragons are portrayed standing alone or in a non-combative posture, which generally signifies protection rather than malevolence. Thus, in Qajar art, the dragon—whether battling a lion or depicted in isolation—is not necessarily a symbol of evil.

Table 1. Depictions of Lion-Dragon Combat in Qajar Art and Their Symbolic Interpretations Baesd on the Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Wooden chest lid from Abadeh, Fars; wood carving	The motif is enclosed within a rectangular frame adorned with arabesque and vegetal motifs, including a sunflower, symbolizing equal power between the two entities. Happiness, the coexistence of good and evil, and the creation of balance.
 Reception iwan of the Marble Throne Hall, Golestan Palace; stone carving.	Equal power, the sculptor's signature inscribed on the lion's right paw, positioned within a lobed arch. Royal authority and the Qajar monarchy, protection against the evil eye, and guardianship of the king.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Façade facing the courtyard, Borujerdi House, Kashan; high-relief stucco. Source: Behdani & Mehrpooya, 2011, 8.	Naturalistic style; placed on floral motifs resembling lotus flowers, similar to Sassanid stucco designs—conveying protection, grandeur, and the power of the building's owner, as well as the removal of obstacles.
 Exterior of Shams-ol-Emareh, Golestan Palace, Tehran; polychrome tile panel.	The motif is depicted within a circular frame with vegetal decorations around it. Repelling malevolent forces; authority of the Qajar government and monarchy
 Moghaddam House and Museum, Tehran; molded and glazed tile panel.	Right panel: an armored figure in Western attire observing the scene, placed within an octagonal frame; the lion's piercing gaze confronts the viewer Lower panel: framed within a multi-lobed medallion design. Mastery and serenity, repelling insecurity, overcoming adversities
 Sarbineh (dressing area), Haj Shahbaz Khan Bathhouse, Kermanshah; wall painting on plaster. Source: Mozaffari, 2013.	Somewhat simplified depiction; devoid of any background ornamentation; lion's gaze is penetrating and direct. A warning of impending drought; efforts to create balance and remove obstacles
 Semicircular entrance arch of Sardar Mofakham Mansion, Bojnord; polychrome tile panel. Source: Nayebzadeh & Sohrabi Nasirabadi, 2023.	Depicted in a circular frame with an eggplant-colored vegetal background; two armed guards on either side; a re-interpretation of a Shams-ol-Emareh scene. Royal power, protection of the building's inhabitants, and warding off evil.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Northern façade of the main hall, Golestan Palace, Tehran; polychrome tile panel	Framed within a circular border against a purplish background. Authority of the king and the Qajar monarchy.
 Glazed earthenware vessel from a private collection, featuring painting beneath a transparent tin glaze.	No decoration in the background or surrounding space; both figures appear equally powerful. Coexistence of good and evil; the concept of prosperity and happiness.
 Ceiling of Saber House, Shiraz; wood painting. Source: Safaei, 2015.	Plain background; the motif is placed within a medallion-shaped design. Dominance and sovereign power; protection against the evil eye and talismans.
 Courtyard façade of a noble house, Tabriz; polychrome tile panel. Source: Seif, 2010, 191.	The motif is set within a mihrab-shaped frame, flanked by two winged angels, two peacocks, and vegetal motifs—imitating Sassanid prototypes. Respect, unity, royal power, sanctity, and prosperity.
 Fireplace room of the Moghaddam House and Museum (winter section); reverse glass painting	Cream-colored circular background; naturalistic rendering of the lion in realistic hues. Creation of visual unity, contrast between cold and warm elements, and representation of balance.

2. The Combat between the Lion and the Bull: The combat and hunting motif of the lion and the bull has a long-standing history in Iranian-Islamic art and culture, with its symbolic significance evident across various artistic periods. The depiction of the lion alone in different historical eras reflects the monarchs' ideology regarding the protection of royal territory and the reinforcement of dynastic continuity and immortality. The lion, more than any other creature, appears either in naturalistic form or as part of composite figures with other animals. In Iranian-Islamic art, the bull is typically portrayed in symbolic conflict with the lion and, in poetry and literature, often represents carnal desires and attachment to materialistic concerns. However, the lion's dominance over the bull is sometimes interpreted as a symbol of blessing and abundance, or even given astrological significance. In ancient Iran, it was regarded as emblematic of the triumph of warmth over cold—symbolizing the arrival of spring, fertility, and renewal of life—as well as the victory of good over evil and light over darkness (Hunter, 2005, 72). According to Table 2, in the Qajar period, the image of the lion's dominance over the bull does not signify the destruction of the bull by the lion; rather, it suggests a mutual dependency between the two. Given the stronger presence of sunlight in Iran, the risk of drought was higher, necessitating the presence—or invocation—of more water and rainfall to establish a form of balance. Accordingly, within this conceptual framework, the lion (representing the sun) is portrayed as more powerful than the bull (symbolizing water and rain). The diversity of architectural contexts in which the lion-and-bull motif appears—public spaces (such as bathhouses), private settings (like aristocratic residences), and religious sites (including the Atiq Courtyard of the Imam Reza Shrine)—demonstrates its widespread function across social strata and underscores the positive and respected symbolic status of the lion's victory over the bull in Qajar-era art.

Table 2. Depictions of the Lion-Bull Combat in Qajar Art and Their Interpretations Based on the Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Stone dado of an aristocratic house, Taq-e Bostan Stone Museum, Kermanshah – Relief carving.	Realistic style; the image is enclosed within a circular frame with dense vegetal decorations. Representation of power and immortality; increase in sustenance and prosperity
 Ceiling of the men's bathhouse in the Chahar Fasl Public Hammam, Arak – Polychrome tile painting. Source: Farshchi et al, 2021.	The motif is framed within an irregular octagonal border; background in eggplant color. Dominance of the sun and heat; presence of water scarcity and drought.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Exterior view, Atiq Courtyard of the Imam Reza Shrine, Mashhad – Polychrome tile painting.	Naturalistic style; the motif is enclosed in a medallion-shaped frame with a dense white vegetal background and vibrant, natural colors. Mystical themes: overcoming the carnal self (nafs al-ammārah), spiritual purification.
 Santoor (gable) of the Saadat House, Shiraz – Polychrome tile painting. Source: Aganji Shirazi, 2015.	Background landscapes featuring densely built European-style houses, with hierarchical perspective employed in the composition. Royal power and immortality.
 Moqaddam House and Museum, Tehran – Luster-painted tile	Naturalistic style; circular pearl-like frame similar to Sassanid examples; background filled with dense vegetal motifs. Royal power, reverence, awareness, and mastery.
 Ceiling of Saber House, Shiraz – Painting on wood .Source: Safaei, 2015.	Light blue background with no ornamentation; enclosed in a circular frame; vivid and dynamic execution. Blessings, triumph of wisdom over ignorance, Qajar ruling authority.
 Courtyard wall, Moqaddam House and Museum – Stone carving	Realistic style; undecorated background; confined within a circular frame. Royal power, continuity of life, and immortality.
 Ceiling of Zinat al-Molk House, Shiraz – Raised stucco work. Source: Zohourian, 2009.	Undecorated background; medallion-shaped frame; elaborate vegetal decorations surrounding the motif. Display of royal power; flow of blessings.

3. The Combat between the Lion and the Deer or Gazelle: The motif of the lion fighting a deer or gazelle gained attention in Islamic art from the early Islamic period, particularly within Umayyad art. Although it appears less frequently than the lion's combat with a dragon or bull, it remained a favored motif in Qajar art. Its visual diversity, repetition, and symbolic depth distinguish it from other animal combat and hunting scenes. For example, in the deer-hunting relief at the Borujerdi House in Kashan (Table 3), two foxes holding prayer beads are depicted on either side of the scene. This alludes to the fable of the lion hunting in the forest in the presence of a wolf and a fox—a story that illustrates the fox's flattery toward the lion and the presentation of the prey to him. Thus, the scene assumes an allegorical function, with its narrative recounted in the verses of the first book of Rumi's Masnavi-ye Ma'navi (Rumi, 2008, 136). The depiction emphasizes devotion to the Divine and encourages reflection upon the moral lessons drawn from such events.

Table 3. Depictions of the Lion's Combat with the Deer or Gazelle in Qajar Art and Their Symbolic Interpretations Based on the Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

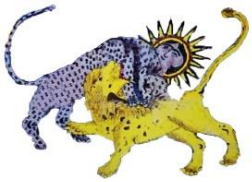
Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Interior vestibule of the entrance to Borujerdi House, Kashan – Low-relief stucco carving. Source: Zohourian, 2009.	Naturalistic style; symmetrical depiction of two foxes holding prayer beads flanking the central motif; enclosed in a medallion-shaped frame; the lion gazes piercingly at the viewer. Allegorical narrative of ancient stories; moral lessons from the passage of time.
 Steel axe head in the Polish art collection – Engraving and carving. Source: Maida, 2013, 228.	Realistic style; background adorned with dense natural floral motifs; motif set within a medallion. State authority; bravery and courage of Imam Ali (peace be upon him).
 Interior courtyard of the Masoudieh Mansion, Tehran – Polychrome tile painting.	Plain turquoise background; motif enclosed in a circular frame with pearl-like decorations similar to Sassanid examples. Representation of the power of a Qajar prince (Zell al-Sultan).
	Naturalistic style; motif situated within an arched space; palm tree motifs in the background resembling Sassanid prototypes. Enhanced power, alertness, and immortality.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
Entrance portal of the Sultan Amir Ahmad Hammam, Kashan – Raised stucco work. Source: Zohourian, 2009, 165. 	Motif placed on a twelve-petaled green lotus, resembling Sassanid and Achaemenid designs. Prosperity and blessings; detachment from worldly attachments.
Northern portal of the main hall, Golestan Palace – polychrome tile painting 	Use of natural colors; light blue, plain background; motif enclosed in concentric circular frames. Financial well-being of the homeowner; abundance and sustenance.
Ceiling of Saber House, Shiraz – Painting on wood. Source: Safaei, 2015. 	Realistic style; symmetrical composition akin to Sassanid prototypes; background filled with dense natural vegetal motifs; presence of a human-shaped sacred tree motif; lion's gaze directed at the viewer. Sanctity, spiritual purification, Sufi beliefs, and self-sacrifice.
Ceiling of Hariri House, Tabriz – Painting on plaster combined with mirror work. Source:Rahimi, 2011.	

4. The Combat between the Lion and the Tiger or Leopard: In Iranian culture, the leopard has traditionally held a prominent place in royal symbolism and was highly esteemed by monarchs, who commissioned silver collars, bejeweled ornaments, or golden bracelets for the animal. A notable representation of the lion-leopard combat and hunting scenes can be found in the polychrome tilework of the Golestan Palace. There, the image of Khorshid Khanom (Lady Sun), adorned with a Kiani crown, appears at the top of the composition, symbolizing the absolute power of the Qajar king and his triumph over all forms of evil. What is particularly noteworthy is the historical association between the leopard and goddesses in pre-Islamic civilizations. It is plausible that the adjacent figure of Khorshid Khanom reflects the persistence of these ancient archetypes. While the leopard in pre-Islamic contexts was linked to fertility, fecundity, and rain, in Qajar art it came to symbolize the unity and strength of kingship. Another layer of meaning in the lion-leopard battle involves allegorical tales, such as the one featuring the fox's deception against the lion, depicted in the stucco relief of the Borujerdi House in Kashan (Table 4). These narratives criticize flattery, portray the repulsion of evil forces through the immortal power

of the Qajar monarch, and caution against the dominance of base desires (nafs-e ammāra) in the spiritual journey toward enlightenment. Furthermore, the recurring symbolic presence of the fox in various Qajar-period combat and hunting scenes may be interpreted as a commentary on the widespread sycophancy and cunning behavior of the time—reflected and critiqued through the art of this period as a reminder of the ethical vice it represented.

Table 4. Depictions of the Lion's Combat with the Tiger or Leopard in Qajar Art and Their Symbolic Interpretations Based on the Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Entrance corridor of Golestan Palace, Tehran – Polychrome tile painting. Source: Seif, 2010, 152.	Realistic style; includes the motif of *Khorshid Khanom* along with a Kiani crown; densely packed vegetal motifs in yellow and purple fill the background; scene framed within a pointed arch. Authority of the Qajar monarchy and government.
 Art collection room, Moqaddam House and Museum, Tehran – Painting on plaster.	Depicted within a medallion-shaped frame; plain, undecorated background. The struggle between good and evil; the Qajar king's combat against malevolent forces.
 Western spandrel of the first-floor entrance, Borujerdi House, Kashan – High-relief stucco carving. Source: Nozari Ferdowsiyeh & Tahouri, 2021.	Background without ornamentation; vegetal motifs of acanthus leaves around the scene, reminiscent of Sassanid prototypes. Folkloric tales of the fox's cunning; moral lessons; warning against flattery.

5. The Combat between the Lion and the Donkey: In Persian literature, and based on a collection of narratives and tales, the donkey has traditionally symbolized ignorance, heedlessness, base desires, and laziness (Majd Khafi, 1966, 163). Over time, it has become synonymous with these traits in popular discourse. In Islamic art, representations of donkey hunting are rare. One notable example appears in the illustrated scene of Bahram and Azadeh from the Shahnameh of Qavam, dating back to the Safavid period (Karbasi et al., 2005, 167), in which, amidst a dense hunting composition, the lion overpowers the donkey, and an arrow is shown piercing both animals. Nevertheless, Qajar-period examples (Table 5) are found in two notable haft-rang (polychrome) tileworks: one from the Golestan Palace and another from the Takyeh Mo'aven-ol-Molk in Kermanshah. Unlike earlier periods, these representations are rarely found in illustrated manuscripts. In the Golestan Palace tile panel, the inclusion of Khorshid Khanom above the composition and the Vaq Tree in the

background suggests symbolic layers. Moreover, the placement of the donkey hunt motif at Takyeh Mo'aven-ol-Molk alongside depictions of kings, gift-bearers, and soldiers from Persepolis emphasizes the Qajar king's intelligence, wisdom, and triumph over ignorance, while also highlighting divine favor and abundance. The scene at Takyeh Mo'aven-ol-Molk reflects a synthesis of folk beliefs with ancient Iranian artistic traditions. The artist seems to have intended to simultaneously display the dominant cultural trend of the time—namely, neo-classicism in art and literature—and the king's interest in aligning himself with pre-Islamic Iranian heritage, while also symbolically representing the religious and moral ideals of the populace (sacrifice, purification of the soul, overcoming ignorance, and attaining awareness).

Table 5. Depictions of the Lion-Donkey Combat in Qajar Art and Their Symbolic Interpretations Based on the Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 North side of the courtyard, Golestan Palace – Polychrome tile painting.	Blue background devoid of ornamentation; motif enclosed in a double concentric circular frame; the *Khorshid Khanom* motif attached to the upper part of the circle; sacred tree (*vâq*) and dense flora surround the scene. The king's wisdom, abundance of blessings, and avoidance of ignorance.
 North wall of the Abbasiyeh Hall, Takieh Moaven al-Molk, Kermanshah – Transparent Underglaze-painted tile.	The lion gazes piercingly at the viewer; adjacent to images of gift bearers, soldiers, and royal figures from Persepolis; accompanied by inscriptions such as "Figures in Chehel Sotoun, Shiraz," "Equestrian Figures at Persepolis," and "Inscribed Figure of Darius on the Palace Gate." Self-sacrifice, triumph over ignorance, and the power of the Qajar king.

6. The Combat between the Elephant and the Dragon: In ancient Iran, particularly during the Sassanid period, the elephant featured prominently in both the military and the arts, largely due to the amicable relations with India. The elephant is vividly depicted in Sassanid-era textiles and stone reliefs, most notably those at Taq-e Bostan. In the Qajar era, however, visual representations of elephant combat and hunting scenes appear only sporadically in lithographic prints and tileworks (Table 6). One lithographic print portrays the elephant being swallowed—a motif rooted in the fantastical and wonder-driven imagery characteristic of the Qajar imagination. Such motifs, which had always captured popular attention in Iranian culture, persisted into the Qajar period, often appearing in lithographic books that emerged contemporaneously. In other words, the genre of «wonder narratives» merged with popular belief systems to symbolically express people's worldview, finding expression in both religious and surreal contexts. The image of the elephant being swallowed by a dragon is among the rare Qajar-period animal combat and hunting scenes

devoid of naturalism or realism. Instead, it emphasizes the purely symbolic dimension of the image (Table 6).

Table 6. Depictions of the Elephant-Dragon Combat in Qajar Art and Their Symbolic Interpretations Based on the Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Lithographic print (anonymous author). Source: Fathollahi, 2015.	The elephant is depicted smaller than its real-life scale; no decorative elements in the background or surrounding areas. Protection from the evil eye and magical spells.
 South wall of Zeynabiyeh Hall, Takieh Moaven al-Molk, Kermanshah – Underglaze-painted tile.	Equal power of both creatures; two trees depicted in the background; motif framed in an eight-pointed star. Strength, resilience, courage, and balance.

7. The Combat between Two Birds: Symbolic depictions of birds, much like those of animals, have held significant importance in pre-Islamic and Islamic art, with their meanings evolving in accordance with the prevailing beliefs of each era. A notable feature of most bird combat and hunting scenes in Qajar art is the consistent presence of the falcon as the dominant or predatory bird on one side of the battle. In pre-Islamic tradition, the eagle or falcon symbolized power, majesty, and the struggle between celestial forces and evil entities. However, in Islamic contexts, the falcon came to signify the afterlife, elevated ambition, or—particularly within Sufi thought—liberation from corporeality and detachment from worldly ties (Debuquois, 1994, 165). In Qajar art, the defeated birds often include ducks, storks, seabirds, or swans. Thus, the depiction of a battle between a falcon and a stork, as found in the Imam Reza Shrine (Table 7), symbolically underscores themes of servitude, submission to divine truth, and piety.

Table 7. Depictions of Bird-Bird Combat in Qajar Art and Their Symbolic Interpretations Based on the Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
	Realistic style; both birds depicted with equal power; motif surrounded by dense vegetal and arabesque designs. Sanctity or personal power.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
Dado of the courtyard, Narenjestan-e Qavam Garden, Shiraz– Carving (depiction of two fighting ducks). Source: Meraji, 2024.	
 Second chamber, Enqelab Courtyard, Imam Reza Shrine (Falcon overpowering a stork?) – Polychrome tile painting. Source: Hosseinabadi, 2016.	The motif is enclosed with pearl-like decorations reminiscent of Sassan. Auspiciousness, Liberation from Bodily Captivity, Piety, and Servitude.
 Men's Dressing Area, Chahar Fasl Public Hammam, Arak (Eagle overpowering a swan) – Polychrome tile painting. Source: Farshchi, Ansari & Ataei, 2021.	Realistic depiction; irregular lozenge-shaped frame surrounding the image. Lofty ambition, royal authority, and Qajar governmental power.
 Changing room, Biglarbeygi Hammam, Kermanshah (Falcon overpowering a duck) – Polychrome tile painting. Source: Mozaffari, 2013.	Realistic style; circular frame adorned with pearl-like beads. Wisdom, aspiration toward perfection, and the authority of the Qajar ruler.
 First-floor balcony, Borujerdi House, Kashan (Falcon overpowering a duck) – Raised stucco carving. Source: Zohourian, 2009.	Naturalistic style; the motif is placed between two vases containing sunflowers and painted over three chamomile blossoms. Loyalty, perseverance in pursuit of union, immortality, and longevity.
	Vibrant and realistic depiction; motif framed by a pearl-like circular border; densely filled yellow background with vegetal motifs. Happiness, ambition, piety, and bravery.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
North wall, Khalvat-e Karimkhani, Golestan Palace (Falcon overpowering a stork). Polychrome tile painting.  Courtyard of Borujerdi House, Kashan (Falcon overpowering a duck) – Low-relief stucco carving. Source: Khosheh-Charkh, 2015.	Symmetrical layout within the spandrels; arched frame reminiscent of Sassanid prototypes. Governmental authority and Qajar sovereign power.
 Steel axe head from a Polish art collection (Dove overpowering a duck) – Engraving and carving. Source: Maida, 2013, 287.	Naturalistic style; densely adorned vegetal background; motif positioned within a medallion. Courcourage and strength, peace and friendship, and blessing.
 Private collection carnelian seal (Falcon overpowering a duck) – Engraving and carving. Source: Ehteshami, 2006, 570.	Non-naturalistic style; plain background; motif enclosed within a circular frame. Assertion of the seal owner's power.

8. Depictions of Other Animal Combat Scenes: Similar to earlier periods, Qajar art occasionally features less common animal combat and hunting scenes, which appear with lower frequency. Some of these are entirely novel, such as the depiction of a lion battling a camel at the Borujerdi House or birds attacking a deer at the Takyeh Mo'aven-ol-Molk in Kermanshah—motifs introduced for the first time in Qajar art. The image of a lion and a dog attacking a goat in the tilework of the Golestan Palace is also relatively rare (Table 8). The goat, in pre-Islamic art, was generally associated with fertility, the repulsion of evil forces, and the embodiment of deities. In Islamic contexts—especially in combat and hunting scenes with lions—it came to represent abundance and fecundity. However, in the scene of a dog attacking a goat, the symbolism shifts: in Persian literature, the nafs (lower self) is likened to a vile dog drawn to the refuse of the world, and the path to liberation lies in the cultivation of the soul. Accordingly, the dog-goat combat and hunting scenes metaphorically signifie the struggle to transcend worldly attachments and undergo spiritual purification. Other examples, such as the lion-camel combat and hunting scenes in the stucco reliefs of the Borujerdi House, are depicted within lotus flower motifs—symbols of

peace, invincibility, perseverance, and aspiration. In two additional scenes, the leopard replaces the lion in its conquest of the bull and the deer, each instance offering distinct symbolic interpretations (see Table 8).

Table 8. Depictions of Miscellaneous Animal Combat Scenes in Qajar Art and Their Symbolic Interpretations Based on Spatial Context of the Motifs. Source: Author.

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Combat and Hunting Scenes between Two Crows and a Deer – North Wall, Zeynabiyeh Hall, Takieh Moaven al-Molk, Kermanshah – Transparent Underglaze Tile Painting.	Realistic representation; natural landscape in the background; star-shaped frame; three crows in the distance attacking. Foresight, auspiciousness, good news, and rationality.
 Leopard Fighting a Bull – Entrance Portal, Narenjestan-e Qavam Garden, Shiraz – Polychrome Tile Painting. Source: Panjebashi & Dolab, 2018.	The leopard gazes directly at the viewer; background densely filled with vegetal motifs. Governmental authority, protection of the estate, and repulsion of evil forces.
 Leopard Fighting a Deer – Courtyard of Golestan Palace – Polychrome Tile Painting.	Realistic style; cream-colored background adorned with vegetal decorations; motif enclosed within a medallion-shaped frame. Royalty and kingship.
 Lion Fighting an Elephant – Malek Museum – Lithographed Children's Alphabet Book (Alef-o-Bā-ye Mosavvar) by Mirza Abbas the Painter.	Naturalistic depiction; the background features detailed forest scenery with full observation of the jungle animals. Guardianship of knowledge, banishment of evil, flourishing, and glory

Image Details	Visual Characteristics – Decorative Elements in the Background or Surroundings- Symbolism Based on Building Type and Image Placement
 Lion Fighting a Goat – North Side of Golestan Palace Courtyard – Polychrome Tile Painting.	Naturalistic style; simple blue background; motif enclosed within concentric circular frames; a sun motif at the top and vāq trees around. Victory of the Qajar monarch, abundance, and fertility.
 Lion Fighting a Camel – First-Floor Entrance, Borujerdi House, Kashan – High-Relief Stucco Carving. Source: Nozari Ferdowsiyeh & Tahouri, 2021.	Depicted atop an eight-petaled lotus flower, reminiscent of ancient Iranian motifs. Invincibility, peace, the struggle against evil and triumph over it, endurance and resistance.
 Dog Fighting a Goat – West Wall of Golestan Palace Courtyard – Polychrome Tile Painting.	Realistic representation; background filled with verdant village landscapes; motif framed within a medallion. Abundance and creativity; moral instruction toward liberation from the ego.

Discussion

The animal combat and hunting motifs in Qajar art were shaped by the prevailing beliefs of the time and executed through the visual techniques common in the artistic practices of the era. These motifs, while ornamental in appearance, are imbued with symbolic meanings. The Qajar artist's insistence on preserving traditional symbols alongside the integration of contemporary beliefs produced a renewed and distinctive semantic framework for these animal combat and hunting depictions. Notably, Qajar illustrations—despite being influenced by Western art—simultaneously drew upon historical legacies, addressed the cultural needs of the common people, and conveyed complex meanings through symbolic visual language, thereby safeguarding these motifs from oblivion. Among pre-Qajar periods, the Safavid era is particularly notable for the frequency of animal combat and hunting motifs, which in turn influenced similar representations in Qajar art. However, significant differences exist between the two. For instance, Qajar compositions are markedly more elaborate than those of the Safavid period. Qajar motifs tend to be more realistic and exhibit a vernacular aesthetic, reflecting popular sensibilities. All examples analyzed in this study display strong tendencies toward naturalism and realism, with exceptional attention to detail on the part of the artist. Additionally, the use of fantastical

and hybrid creatures is more prevalent in Safavid animal combat and hunting scenes—such as the battle between the dragon and the Simurgh. Another notable distinction is the Qajar artists' adoption of motifs from Sassanid and Achaemenid iconography, either in the background or in adjacent elements of the composition. Examples include the lotus and water lily flowers, acanthus leaves, symmetrical detailing, circular frames adorned with pearl-like decorations, and winged angels flanking the central image. These features, strongly associated with the revivalist tendencies of Qajar society, reflect the inevitable influence of the era's neoclassical movement. Before the Qajar period, animal combat and hunting motifs primarily appeared in limited formats such as manuscripts, carpets, royal seals, and, occasionally, tilework. However, neither the diversity nor the proliferation of such motifs across artistic media reached the scale seen in the Qajar era. This expansion was partly driven by the increased freedom of expression and the articulation of folk beliefs, and partly by the popularity of visual representations across a range of scales and contexts, which allowed for symbolic meaning to be communicated more vividly and tangibly. In earlier periods, such motifs generally reflected the ideologies of the ruling elite rather than those of the broader populace. Certain motifs—such as the bull hunt—can be traced to ancient Iranian and neighboring cultural archetypes. Their persistence and intensification in the Qajar period may be attributed to a revival of literary and artistic interest in pre-Islamic Iran, alongside the political and social transformations of the time. Some of the animal combat and hunting motifs in Qajar art originate from the miniature traditions of the Seljuk and Ilkhanid periods and reflect the continued influence of the artistic schools of those eras—such as depictions of the lion fighting a dragon or attacking a donkey—though they do not necessarily retain the same original meanings. Other motifs, such as the lion's triumph over the bull in sacred spaces (e.g., the Shrine of Imam Reza), are rooted in religious symbolism, representing the expulsion of evil forces and the conquest of the lower self in the path toward the Divine. These were often placed above entrances or prominently on courtyard façades. Some motifs, like the lion's battle with the leopard in the presence of a fox, or the fox's deceit against the lion in the scene of the lion overpowering the deer at the Borujerdi House, take on allegorical significance. The use of cunning and deception in allegorical literature is widespread, indicating the historical and practical relevance of such themes in human social experience. The visual expression of allegorical themes coincided with the Age of Awakening (asr-e bidari) and the Qajar era's rising spirit of self-awareness and national aspiration for independence. These ideals found articulation not only in prose and poetry but also—more prominently than in any prior period—in visual allegory, where the boundary between symbol and allegory often blurred, with allegory functioning as a symbolic system in itself. At the same time, Western influence is evident in Qajar art, and likewise in its allegories—especially through the adoption of the fable, a prominent Western narrative form. As a result, the visual narration of stories and fables became a characteristic feature of Qajar art. One key reason for the diversity and richness of animal combat and hunting imagery in this period is the influence of popular literature and religious narratives on vernacular painting. Authors of folk literature—like maktabkhaneh (traditional school) painters—typically emerged from the general population and illustrated stories and beliefs aligned with the values of the people. Another important factor was the social class of the patrons and artists, who were often of humble backgrounds. Consequently, the motifs appeared widely in public and semi-public spaces, such as communal bathhouses, residential homes, takyehs (religious gathering spaces), gardens, and highly frequented sacred sites like the Shrine of Imam Reza. This widespread visual presence reflects the positive stance of the Qajar-era clergy, who supported vernacular artists in creating imagery

rooted in religious themes and did not oppose the depiction of human and animal figures when used to convey meaningful content. The artists behind these works approached the religious significance of their motifs with sincerity and aimed to preserve the people's beliefs through visual expression. In other words, the extensive representation of symbolic animal combat and hunting scenes across Qajar art—particularly in sacred or religious contexts—owes much to the tolerant and supportive attitude of the clergy toward art during this period. The settings for these motifs were highly diverse. Among the 52 studied animal combat and hunting scenes, 25 were executed on polychrome tiles or underglaze-painted ceramics; 8 were found in raised or low-relief stucco; 4 were ceiling paintings on wood; 4 were carved on stone plinths; 3 were painted on gypsum interior walls; 2 were engraved or incised on metal (e.g., axe heads); 2 appeared in lithographic prints or reverse glass paintings; and 1 example each was found on a glazed ceramic vessel, a carved agate seal, and a piece of wood inlay. The animals were rendered with a high degree of naturalism. Lions were generally painted in ochre yellow, bulls in shades of black or brown, and deer in ochre or cream tones. In some instances, efforts were made to depict them at realistic proportions. Symmetrical compositions, meticulous attention to detail, rich and mature coloration, innovative figure designs, and harmony between form and ornamental background elements are among the defining features of animal combat and hunting scenes in Qajar art, regardless of the medium in which they were executed.

Conclusion

Similar motifs across different cultural periods and historical timelines do not necessarily convey identical meanings or serve the same functions. Their symbolic expression is often shaped by the specific political and cultural context of their time. The animal combat and hunting motifs are a prime example: although rooted in the pre-Islamic period, they do not carry the same meanings or functions as those found in the Islamic era. According to the findings of this study, the spatial contexts of animal combat and hunting motifs during the Qajar period differ significantly from those of antiquity, when such images were closely tied to religious ideology and predominantly featured in royal or sacred spaces. In contrast, during the Qajar period, these motifs extended beyond palaces and religious sites into more public domains, including private residences and communal spaces such as public bathhouses and takyehs. Compared to Islamic medieval and Safavid examples, Qajar-period animal combat and hunting motifs show a noticeable reduction in spiritual content and the use of composite or fantastical creatures. Instead, they appear more frequently in tilework panels, which functioned as a form of popular media, used to communicate positive and material themes. Another key finding of this study is that, unlike their older counterparts, Qajar animal combat and hunting motifs were grounded in the oral traditions and popular religious and literary culture of the time. These motifs absorbed the artistic innovations of Qajar artists, ultimately developing a distinctive style that served a dual function: they affirmed the authority of the Qajar monarchy while simultaneously catering to the tastes of the general public. In other words, the socio-religious climate of the Qajar era fostered a notable convergence between the artistic preferences of the court and those of the common people, rooted in shared folkloric and religious traditions. This cultural overlap meant that no significant contradiction or tension existed in the design or execution of animal combat and hunting motifs, regardless of the diversity in their form or context. The most significant factors contributing to the thematic diversity of animal combat and hunting scenes in Qajar art include a rising sense of nationalism in art and literature, inspiration from ancient Iranian imagery—particularly bas-reliefs—the renewed popularity of classical epic and didactic

tales such as «Kalila wa Dimna», «Nizami's Khamsa», and «Attar's Conference of the Birds», as well as the influence of photography and lithographic printing.

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