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## **Artwork Interpretations in Old and Contemporary Epic Iranian Miniatures**

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### **Abstract**

Artwork interpretation in a simple word is an explanation of the meaning of art. The audiences play an important role in art and forms one of the three vertices of artwork triangle: artist, artwork and audience. If we consider artwork as a process, the audiences are the outcome of the work and is the one that created for and to be seen by them. Therefore, feedbacks or interpretations and readings of them have an important place in art critique. Iran's miniatures in different eras have experienced a variety of audiences from kings to ordinary people that affect this art. Therefore, it is expected that different kinds of interpretations have been observed. The research carried out through descriptive-analytical method, by comparing old and contemporary Iranian epic miniatures seeking to answer the question of what are the kinds of artwork interpretation in old and contemporary Iranian epic miniatures? The findings of this research shows that old paintings have created interpretations based on the author's intention and contemporary painting with a hermeneutical approach made multiple interpretations of the artworks.

**Keywords:** Audience, Old and contemporary Iranian miniatures, Interpretation, Epic.

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## **Introduction**

The concept of the audience at first was the sum of simultaneous recipients at the end of the linear transmission of information process. These audiences were usually the target of the media and the media's influence. The above perception of the audience gradually replaced the attitude of media recipients who were more or less active, resistant to the effects of the media and sought after their interests and desires - with regard to their cultural and social backgrounds. The communication process has also been redefined, especially as a consultative, two-way, and interactive process (McQuail, 2010: 324-330). Therefore, encountering the artwork as a media, the audiences form one of the elements of artwork, alongside the artist and the work. Iranian miniatures during long times encounter many audiences that affect the interpretation of it. This research studies the types of interpretations of the artwork of Iranian epic miniatures in old and contemporary works. The method of this research is a descriptive-analytic one with a comparative approach. Examples from the old and contemporary epic Iranian miniatures (five works for each one) selected to examine the audiences' position and interpretation of artwork.

## **Persian Miniature and Artwork's Interpretations**

Persian miniatures depict religious, literary and mythological themes in a detail painting. It is one of the most significant of Iranian art and culture. Ruen Pakbaz considers three distinct periods: old (1<sup>st</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century), flourished (late 13<sup>th</sup>- 17<sup>th</sup>), and eclectic (late 17<sup>th</sup>- 19<sup>th</sup>) (2008: 575-7).

For centuries, miniatures in Iran followed a general trend and, according to the general laws that the painters of each region belonged to, were known as the schools of that area, for example, the works of the Herat, Baghdad, Shiraz, Khorasan, Isfahan, Qazvin, Tabriz school and others.

The first images obtained from this type of paintings are the sheets of Arjang's book, illustrated by Mani, which has continued with a continuous process and only differences in performance, until the time of Kamal al-Din Behzad. The most important event at this historic time, on the other side of the border, occurred in Italy, and that the Renaissance was born in Europe, Europe has undergone medieval imagery and entered the space of large-scale wall and floor paintings. Therefore, with the presence of Kamal al-Din Behzad in the two courts of the Timurid (Herat school 2) and Safavid (Tabriz school), it is possible to change the imaging before and after him and the formation of new painting in Iran from the previous miniatures that became known as Behzad's school.

After Behzad, Reza Abbasi was the most deconstructing artist of his period. He broke all the previous traditions in the schools of Tabriz and Herat and created works known as the "Reza Abbasi" school. Abbasi's greatest engagement in drawing was the use of single figures on paper pages, which had rarely been applied before. Considering that in the 17th century, Europeans traveled to Iran and Western influences came to the country, Reza Abbasi did not engage in shadowing and western perspective in his paintings, but using pen, he drew lines with different thicknesses. In his works, he gives full attention to the nature. In the works of Reza Abbasi, we encounter fewer faces, and the emotional states of people in their pictures are remarkable. After Abbasi, Afzal al-Husseini, Mohammad Qasim, Yusuf and Mohammad Ali followed his style (Tavousi, 2011: 112-116).

Mohammad Zaman Ibin Haji Yusuf Qomi was also one of the most influential artists in the continuation of the Iranian miniatures to modern painting. He was active in the years 1650 to 1694 or until 1701. Mohammad Zaman, due to his free copies of Western paintings, has played a significant role in promoting Iranian painting, meaning the use of perspectives and shadowing in works. In the 17th century, the Persianization of Persian art was slowly moving, but the quality of the paintings was also diminished. In the court, the miniature style was preserved with slight variations, and in the market, women's single faces, lovely couples, a compilation of romantic verses and Christian narratives had found their supporters.

In Qajar era, what we knew as Persian painting was less visible. The combination of traditional space with the West created the Qajar painting school. Wall Painting started in this period and changes in dimensions reflected in the works. Once before, the paintings were drawn onto the paper to illustrate the book, but in this period, we are encountered with great dimensions. The paintings were mounted on large screens and on walls. Paintings on canvas, fashion and fans of portraits increased.

Previously, in Iranian graphic arts, the high and the inner world, sublimation, flat colors, circular and spiral compositions, etc. (in general, spiritual space) was posed. However, the paintings of the Qajar period went to the outer environment, renaissance combinations, perspective, bright shades, etc. (material paintings). Of course, one of the most important issues that influenced the traditional painting of Iran, which caused a general change, was the entry of a camera to Iran at the time of Naser-al-Din Shah Qajar. The printing industry was also popular and the illustration of the book flourished again. The lithography also was current at this time in Iran.

Nevertheless, what we know as new painting is by Hadi Tajvidi. He was born in 1893 in Isfahan, with the foundation of Tehran's Miniature School, creating a connection between the traditional paintings with today's generation. Tajvidi painted most of the national issues. He became a master in nature with watercolor. He was the first young-fashioned miniature teacher at the Higher School of Industrial Arts "The High School of Arts and Arts of Iran." Adding bright shadows to the faces of his images and using perspective, Tajvidi changed the way of painting.

Hossein Behzad also worked hard on Iranian painting. The common style of Mongolian images changed in Iranian miniatures, all of which were similar to each other, and introduced Iranian forms into his work. He avoided the details in the previous miniatures and depicted the states and spirits in his paintings. He used the color in the painting. He did not use the small size of the miniatures and presented a large-scale painting. Behzad returned the painting to his own direction and cleared the effects of Russian and foreign works from Iranian painting (Pakbaz, 2008: 577-601).

During these periods, many changes occurred in Iran's art, one of the most important of which was the change of the audience(s). In the old age, Iran was ruled by the kings and they were the main sponsors of art and culture. In contemporary times, due to the revolution and the change of the government system, art came to the people and the exclusive audience gave its place to the public. Therefore, inevitably the various interpretations and different perspectives emerged. Before examining the various types of interpretations of Iranian art, we briefly discuss the types of interpretations of artwork.

### **Interpretations of Artwork**

From Abram's point of view, interpretation of a work is "to specify the meanings of it by analysis, paraphrase" and also "make clear the artistic features of artworks" (Abrams & Geoffrey, 2012: 176).

The three items, the text, the audience and the reader, have, over the course of history, a different value and significance in relation to each other, according to the thinking conditions of each era. Until the twentieth century, the author and the text are more valuable at different times, but in recent years, with the transformation of thought that leads to revisions in the analysis of philosophical and artistic opinions, the readers has become more and more honored and important than the other two. So that they understand the meaning of the reader's perception of the text, not what the author considered (Nozari, 2009: 654-655).

Michael Krausz in his introduction to "Is there a single right interpretation?" views about interpretation branch into two major camps: intentionalism and anti-intentionalism. The first ones give the value to the author's intention but the other one focus on the work itself (Krausz, 2001: 8-10). In the anti-intentionalist, based on Szu-Yen Lin, artist's intention is "neither necessary nor sufficient for meaning determination" (Lin, 2019).

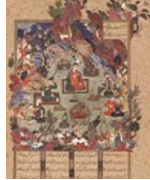


Aron Varga Kibedi introduces two forms of artwork interpretation: automedial and allmedial. Automedial use “the same media as the artwork” and allmedials are the “transpositions of an artwork into another media” (Varga Kibedi, 2003: 1). In other words, from his point of view, writing an essay about a poem is automedial because both of them use the same thing: words. Making a film based on a novel is allmedial because it uses different media. In this essay, the question is how the Iranian Miniatures can interpret according these two group (intentionalism/ anti-intentionalism and automedial/allmedia).


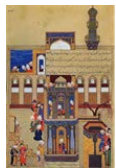
### Types of Interpretations in Epic Iranian Miniatures

Iran's miniature is one of the oldest elements of the Iran's art and culture. According to different economic, political, social and cultural conditions, it encountered different types of styles, and schools. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the king supported this precious art and the artists performed it at workshops under supervision of the king. The audience of these works was very limited and monopolized by the king and the court especially the works with epic themes. Since the tenth century, major changes happened. One of them was the change of audience from the court to the public and people gradually became the focus of art.

The miniatures, which portray the Iranian national epic of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, were one of the most important themes in Iran, and the artists benefited from this valuable book in their works. During the contemporary times, watching narratives with a national and religious theme in coffeehouses were the hobbies of the people and gradually penetrated their memory and heart. Artists, who were arrogant in this regard, began to paint different works of old miniatures. There is no inscription in these works, and the artists, according to their impression of the story, portrayed them. Table 1 and 2 respectively compare the old and contemporary epic miniatures.

**Table 1.** Old Iranian Miniatures

	Work	Title/ Book	Theme of Text	Explanation
1	 (Welch, 1972: 94)	Sadeh Feats/ Tahmasbi Shahnameh	Houshang, the successor to Keyumars, and describing the importance of fire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use the inscription in the Image</li> <li>- Complete synchronization between text and image</li> <li>- Using full text in the image</li> </ul>
2	 (Welch, 1972: 165)	Golbad was killed by Fariborz/ Tahmasbi Shahnameh	Iranian and Turan, fighting on the sidelines of the war. Iranian commander raised his flag	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is only one interpretation of the work of art</li> <li>- Allmedia and Automedia forms of interpretation</li> </ul>
3	 (Ferdowsi,1971:257)	Battle of Rostam/ Biysonqori Shahnameh	Battle of Rostam in the war between Iran and Turan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Passive role of the audience</li> <li>- The important position of the text in understanding the artwork</li> </ul>

4	 <p>(Ferdowsi,1971:163)</p>	Siavash was killed/ Biysonqori Shahnameh	Siavash was killed in a handshake and on the orders of the captain	
5	 <p>(Yazdi,1972: 159)</p>	Arresting Qutb al-Din Gherami bringing him to the Aqiq Mosque of Shiraz/ Zafarnameh	Arresting of one the ruler of Timur because of taking money from people of Shiraz more than before	

In the old paintings, we see works that often include inscriptions on the margin that the artist portrays the same text, and it seems that the artists' intentions are the same as those described in detail in the image. For example, the fig. no 5 shows the arresting one of Timur's ruler, by the name Mowlana Qutb al-Din Gherami because he had taken money from people for a gift to Timour. The text of this image as follows:

"...Mowlana Qutb al-Din had dared to commit it, not according to the statement of the king almighty, and as the sentences joined and the congregation reached Shiraz, they pulled down Arghun and on Friday, when the inhabitants of the city and province had gathered in the Aqiq Mosque and under the roof of Jame, and Mowlana Qutb al-Din was filled with arrows and two branches at his foot, and Mowlana Saed went to the top of the pulpit and spoke the words of the king almighty...".

This painting, titled "Arresting of Mowlana Qutb al-Din Gherami", was one of Zafarnameh miniatures. Qutb al-Din was appointed by Timur as the Ruler of Shiraz. In 1527, he collected regional products and Shiraz accounts. He summoned 300,000 dinars from the people and businessmen of Shiraz. When Timur heard that the sum was brought to his camp as a gift, he immediately ordered to arrest and dismiss him (Abrow, 2001: 1012-1011).

The miniaturist has done his work in full harmony with the text. Mowlana Saed is on the pulpit, the audience from all sides, while listening to his words, depicts the main elements of the mosque, such as the minaret and the courtyard and the pulpit, interrupted by Qutb al-Din Gherami, and located next to the pulpit.

As we have seen in this image, an example of old Iranian miniatures, the description of an event in the text portrayed fully and in detail. In other words, the artist accurately captured the text and portrayed the image based on it. In relation to the interpretation of works of art, such works are closely related to having a single interpretation of the work of art, meaning that the work of art is the only representation of the inscription in the picture.




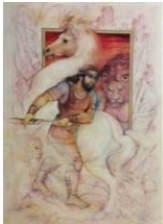

Old Iranian miniatures are the representation of Persian literature. In other words, this valuable art used to depict literature, i.e. applying painting as a media for the expression of literature. According to Varga Kibedi's aforementioned division, both forms of interpretation have been used here. Automedia, because of using the same thing – here words- to interpretation of artwork. In other words, the artist depicted the same verses that brought in the image. Therefore, in these artworks two medias were used; words (automedial) and image (allmedia).

### Contemporary Iranian Miniatures

As mentioned, in the contemporary era, miniatures' audiences changed and the public could benefit of them. The work encountered with a wide range of audiences, resulting in a large number of interpretations.

The other aspect of these works is the removal of the text and the inscription of these works, which eliminates only one interpretation of the works and includes some interpretations but the correct one. Table 2 examines the examples of contemporary works of art.

**Table 2.** Examples of Epic Iranian Miniatures

	Work	Artist/ Title	Text	Explanation
6	 (Naseripour,2005:115)	Hosein Behzad/ Kaveh Blacksmith's uprising	×	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Picture in general form</li> <li>- The important role of the title in understanding the work</li> <li>- Works without text</li> <li>- There are several interpretations of the artwork</li> <li>- The active and dynamic role of the audience</li> <li>- Allmedia form of interpretation</li> </ul>
7	 (Islamorient.com)	Majid Mehregan/ Battle of Rustam and Div	×	
8	 (Ferdowsi,2010: 90)	Ardeshir Takestani / Siavash	×	
9	 (Aqamiri,2011: 220)	Mohamad Baqer AqaMiri/ Sohrab	×	
10	 (Rashidi,1991: 34)	Mahmoud Farshchian/ Sohrab's Campaign	×	

Examples from contemporary Iranian art include four artists who have worked in separate methods. As seen in these works, there is no text or inscription on the work, and the artist depicts a narrative or story based on his own perception. Therefore, only one interpretation of these works cannot be considered, but some right interpretation of each work will be acceptable. In the image No. 8, as well as other examples of contemporary Iranian miniatures, there is no inscription. In this image, we see only a young man next to his

horse, and according to the martial arts such as swords and dagger, it shows a person who is ready to fight or is a champion of a land. Contemporary Iranian painting with epic themes includes two parts: national and religious. Therefore, an audience familiar with these themes, at first glance, without regard to the title, may not properly recognize the main subject. Because in national epics there are characters such as Sohrab, Siavash and such as Ali Akbar in religious epic, that it can result in some interpretations. So several readings of this work formed in the minds of the audience.

Here, allmedia form of interpretation can be considered. Contemporary Iranian miniaturists just use the image in order to convey the message of the artwork; despite the old one, they do not apply the text in their artworks.

## Conclusion

The audiences have become an important contributor to art and artwork's interpretation. Creating an artwork is a process that begins with the artist and leads to the audience. Art has undergone dramatic changes since the modern era, which is the most important change in the position of the audience from the passive consumer, to the effective one in the formation and meaning of the artwork. In connection with the interpretation of the work of art in different periods, various discussions and theories have become common. The proponents of the author's intention believe that there is only one interpretation of the artwork, which is the same intention of the author. Roland Barthes (1977), on the other hand, has removed the author and his intention from the interpretations, and has entrusted the main task of the commentary to the audience. In hermeneutical discussions that care about different readings of a work, any readings, though contradictory with other readings from the work of art, are important and valid. This trend can be seen in the miniatures of Iran in old and contemporary times. In old times, there is only one interpretation of the work, because the image is in perfect harmony with the text, which is the intention of miniaturists. In contemporary Iranian miniatures in which there are no texts such as old paintings, and the artist, according to his impressions, depicts a narrative of it, and so the interpretations of them are various. If the title of the work is removed from the works, we will have various, and even conflicting interpretations of the work. Therefore, contemporary miniatures have considered the audience's role more important while in the old miniatures, the works were created with the support of the kings and there was only one interpretation of the work. In the other division, Old Iranian miniatures used both forms of interpretation: automedia and allmedia, both of literature itself and images applied to represent the literary works. Nevertheless, in contemporary art, only artwork without any texts used to depict and portray literary works.

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