

Symbols and Signs in Paintings of the Timurid Era¹

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Abstract

Humans constantly try to communicate their ideas. To achieve their goals, they use symbols and signs that represent their mental images and desires. These symbols and signs are sometimes influenced by political factors, including government interests, serving as powerful tools. Understandably, the Timurid government used the art of painting and its symbols to address crises and challenges to legitimacy, which were significant concerns for those in power at the time. During its golden age, this art form encompassed a world of ideas, depicting themes such as national identity, Iranian culture, justice, glory, power, and religion in a distinctive manner. Research indicates that the Timurids mainly used these symbols to express immortality and power across various domains. Analyzing the politics behind the paintings from this period reveals that artists employed specific symbols aligned with Iranian-Islamic values to promote and uphold the policies of the Timurid rule.

Keywords: Paintings, Symbols and Signs, Timurid Era, Legitimacy

Introduction

The use of signs and paintings on walls and rocks represents one of the earliest forms of human art. The art of painting, as an applied form that utilizes symbols, encompasses a range of ideas and can be a powerful means of communication, shaping culture and politics within a society.⁴

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⁴ In the lexical definition of "symbol", it is said that a sign or a thing that suggests another thing or thing, as well as a word or form that indicates something more than its obvious and direct meaning (Makkinejad, 2008: 85). In the

Despite its bloody face, the Timurid government is notable in the field of art, especially in painting. During this period, government policies catalyzed the rise of art centers and schools across various regions. As a result, along with religious and political influences, these policies played a crucial role in the flourishing of painting. Meanwhile, using symbols and signs to create a greater impact and communicate ideas was a common practice. These symbols reflected the beliefs, culture, thinking, and tastes of society, including both the people and rulers. In this context, the Timurid government effectively convinced public opinion by utilizing painting, an integral part of any culture, along with symbols and signs to convey concepts, to pursue political goals, gain or reinforce legitimacy, and justify its actions.

Therefore, the present research has sought to answer this fundamental question: what is the relationship between the "symbols and signs" present in the Timurid period paintings with "politics" and "religion"? Also, in the sub-question, what symbols and signs did the Timurid rulers use to legitimize their government?

Regarding the background of the research, Asghar Kashfchian Moghadam and Maryam Yahaghi, in their article "A Study of Symbolic Elements in Iranian Painting," only addressed the topic in general terms and did not focus on

a specific period. Maryam Keshavarz Afshar's thesis, which examined the role and symbolism of the horse among different ethnic groups, and the article "Characteristics of the Dragon in Painting of the Safavid Era" by Bahareh Barati and Asghar Kashfchian Moghadam, which only examined the symbol of the dragon. In other words, the research conducted mostly explored one or two specific symbols, and even then, in a general manner. Therefore, no comprehensive scientific study has yet been conducted on the subject that explores the mutual effects between "symbol," "politics," and "religion." Meanwhile, the present research, which is itself derived from the thesis titled "Investigating the Political-Religious Themes of Paintings in the Timurid Era" (2014 - Arak University), aims to analyze the symbols in paintings and their relationship with politics and religion, as well as the influence of Timurid ideological perspectives on these symbols. In terms of methodology, the study involves a description followed by an analysis of the symbols. The findings of this research could offer new insights into understanding and analyzing the political and religious developments in Iran during the Timurid period for historians in the field. Additionally, it could provide practical support to art graduates in interpreting motifs and symbols.

idiomatic sense, a symbol is defined as a visual interpretation of an abstract subject by transforming the dynamic characteristics of that subject into special attributes of shape, color, movement, etc. (Pakbaz, 2001: 78).

A. Backgrounds for the emergence of symbols in the art of painting

As beings that create symbols, humans constantly generate, nurture, identify, and introduce symbols to understand what they cannot define or fully comprehend; in this way, they can assign meaning to everything in their minds or around them, or see it as a symbolic element. As Carl Gustav Jung states: The history of symbolism shows that anything can hold symbolic meaning; such as natural objects (stones, plants, animals, humans, mountains, sun, moon, wind, water, and fire), manufactured items (house, ship), or even abstract forms (numbers, triangles, squares, and circles). With the help of imagination, spiritual exploration, and a shift toward intuition, the artist seeks to shape, mold, and allegorize hidden truths and exemplary forms of phenomena.

However, since realism's limitations hinder the expression of such truths, it turns to symbolism, aiming to communicate the whole through a meaningful part. This is where abstractionism steps in, removing features to give symbols a transcendental quality and turn them into beautiful works of art. Through this process, the artist, by transcending logical appearances and everyday reality in pursuit of the mysterious causes of phenomena with a transcendent and intuitive vision, creates symbols that reflect their perspective, whether mythical or religious (cf. Makinejad, 2008: 84-86).

Throughout its long history, Iranian art has consistently exhibited a symbolic and abstract quality, striving to convey its intended concepts in an appropriate form, namely, abstraction. Although the art, as mentioned above, has approached the realm of

naturalism in some cases, it has still conveyed its intended concepts through symbols and codes. It is thanks to this feature that Iranian culture and art, despite encountering terrible events, have remained immortal throughout history and have become popular using symbolic forms.

Furthermore, what makes this art stand out to the point of perfection is the duplicate content and hidden internal quality, as well as a symbol that can be traced beyond its formal and visual beauty. In other words, in paintings, art is a visual element with both an appearance and an interior, a combination of quantity and quality that together sets each piece apart from others. Naturally, in paintings, composition also inevitably relates to its subject, concerning the set of qualities, quantities, and symbolic coherence of visual elements, linking them with transcendent concepts (Kafeshchian Moghadam and Yahghi, 2011: 67).

B. Symbols and signs in the paintings of the Timurid period

Symbols are among the oldest methods of expressing ideas in the history of Iranian painting. Iranian artists have consistently used symbols and signs to convey their messages, thereby communicating with others. In the Timurid era, regarded as a golden period in Iranian painting history, numerous diverse and meaningful symbols emerged due to the influence of religion, culture, and politics. These symbolic elements can be analyzed through geometric, composite, natural, and religious motifs, as well as animal symbols and representations of war tools.

1-Geometric symbol

The primary shapes used in Iranian art's geometric patterns were triangles, squares,

and circles. Iranians have shown their creativity in combining, intertwining, and incorporating these shapes into other forms (Mohammad Hassan, 2009: 251). A collection of these geometric shapes, such as checkered surfaces, six-pointed stars, and slimies, is considered a geometric symbol of Iranian art. In Iranian painting, the use of geometric shapes in combination and the creation of specific geometric motifs are commonplace, and they are consistently employed to decorate spaces while maintaining symbolic value (cf. Shayesteh Far [and others], 2013: 22-24).

The mentioned geometric patterns in Islam symbolize celestial concepts; geometry and mathematics represent the rational world and the ultimate example from which God created the physical realm in which we live. It also serves as a reminder of the divine center that is always present (Larijani, 2019: 71, 82). In this context, it appears that the artists of the Timurid era, often linked with the ruling elite, sought to embed their art with an Islamic identity by incorporating geometric symbols. Consequently, it is no coincidence that such a symbol can be seen in the depiction of Sultan Hussein Bayqarah's (875-911 AH) coronation ceremony from the Herat school (Figure. 1). The ceremony takes place in a garden with a wall painted in azure, decorated with geometric designs of hexagons, rhombuses, squares, and rectangles. An inscription in green on the door reads "La ilaha illallah Muhammad Rasoolullah," which reflects their religious beliefs and support for the Shia faith.



Figure 1.

These geometric symbols also appear in other paintings, such as Ghazan Khan in front of his tent, which is a copy of Jame' al-Tawarikh al-Rashidi from the Herat school. Other examples include Rukn al-Din Khurshah's surrender to Hulegu, a copy of Jame' al-Tawarikh al-Rashidi from 826 AH; Prophet Muhammad with his companions, a copy of Heyrat al-Abrar Navai from the Herat school in 891 AH; Prophet Ali (PBUH) in the Battle of Khaybar, a copy by Hafiz Abro from 818/818 AH (Shayste Far, 2005: pp. 71 and 80); Prophet Joseph (PBUH) escaping from Zulaykha, a copy of Bustan Saadi from the Herat school; the Prophet and his companions, a copy of Kalila and Dimana from Nasrullah Abu al-Maali dated 865-870 (Shayste Far, 2005: 68); and Bahram Gur in the Hall of the Seven Figures, a copy of the Iskander Sultan anthology from the Shiraz school, made in 813 AH (Pope-Ackerman, 1378: 10/869).

Additionally, under the influence of prohibiting realistic painting, Islamic motifs evolved to become more diverse. Generally, Islamic motifs include decoration, whether as

stylized⁵ plants or intricate geometric lines (Burckhardt, 1986: 72).

Examples include *The Escape of Prophet Joseph (PBUH) from Zulaykha*, painted in the Saadi's Bustan and Herat School, now housed in Cairo's Dar al-Muktab Library (Hosseini-Rad, 2004: 480). Other symbols appearing in images such as *Toward the Gardens of Paradise*, a copy of the Timurid Miraj Nameh from the 9th century AH (Shayste Far, 2009: 76); *The Beggar at the Mosque*, a copy of Saadi's Bustan from 894 AH (Pope-Ackerman, 1999: 10/887); *Good and Bad Muslims*, a copy of the Timurid Miraj Nameh; and *The Conquest of Mecca by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)*, a copy by Hafez Abro from the Herat school in 818819 AH (Shayste Far, 2005: 71 and 79)- these symbols reflect the religious and political developments of that period, as artists in the Timurid court aimed to connect art, religion, and politics. Since art serves as a powerful tool for religious propagation, they chose images with Islamic symbols to promote religion and advance their political goals. Meanwhile, they displayed the Timurids' proclaimed devotion to Islam, which helped them gain and strengthen their legitimacy.

It appears that the artists of the Timurid era, following the government's artistic policies and aiming to influence public opinion, incorporated sacred symbols into their paintings, using the powerful language of art. As shown in the image mentioned above, the subject matter, architecture, and decorations of the buildings all reflect Islamic elements, which are inherently tied to religious propaganda from a government that is itself a

religious entity and supports Islam, thereby reinforcing its religious legitimacy.



Figure 2

2- Combined Symbols

In the process of inventing symbolic forms, humans have focused on specific features in each structure, including animal, plant, human, natural, and geometric shapes. Their efforts have been to highlight the unique features of each structure and to refine or remove excesses to develop new conceptual and symbolic forms (Rishar, 2004: 62). These combined symbols include the angel, depicted as a winged human; the demon, which combines a human body with an animal; and the dragon, a mix of a snake and a bird, all of which can be seen in paintings from this period.

1-2-Angel in the form of a winged human

⁵ Summarizing plant and natural shapes along with a combination of geometric shapes and representing
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them in conventional forms and shapes - see:
AkbariKashani, 2008: 24.



Figure 3.

In Islam, based on the Quran and authentic hadiths, there is no doubt about the existence of angels. Angels are responsible for delivering revelation to divine prophets and serve as guides for humans toward goodness and perfection. Therefore, it is no surprise that they have been depicted in religious paintings numerous times across different eras and schools (Shin Dashtgol, 1973: 13). Angels are winged messengers who act as intermediaries between the divine and humans. Their wings also symbolize power, protection, and a sign of God (Hall, 2001: 30, 260).

In the meantime, Gabriel is depicted as a winged human figure, dressed in clothing and makeup appropriate to each era, often accompanied by a golden crown and belt, which symbolize holiness. For example, in the painting of the Ascension of the Prophet (PBUH), which is a copy of the Ascension of the Prophet (PBUH) from the Herat school in 840 and is currently housed in the National Library of Paris, he is shown as the guide of the Prophet (PBUH) during his heavenly journey, constantly present before him in this form (Shin Dashtgol, 1973: 8788).

In (Figure 3), the symbolic role of the angel, depicted as a winged human being, has been preserved from the distant past in Iranian art. The image of the Ascension of the Prophet

(PBUH) from the Herat School, dating back to 840 AH and housed in the National Library of Paris, is a copy of the Ascension Book, where Gabriel is shown as an intermediary between God and the Prophet in the form of a winged human. Other works from this period also use this symbol. For example, we can mention illustrations such as "Towards the Gardens of Paradise,"⁶ "Exploiting the Property of the Orphans," a copy of the Ascension Book from 840 AH from the Herat school, "The Prophet and His Companions," a copy of Kalilah and Dimana from 865-870, "The Ascension of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH)," a copy of Khamseh Nizami from 845 AH, and "The Twelve Imams in the Field of the Day of Judgment," a copy of the anthology from 813 AH from the Shiraz school (Shayste Far, 2005: 84).

In analyzing this painting and the symbol mentioned above, it seems that, like other religious symbols, it was used to promote Islamic identity and gain religious legitimacy. To support this, we can highlight the undeniable influence of politics and government on artistic development. In this context, understanding how government thinkers viewed the inherently religious Iranian society and, consequently, advancing political goals through the expressive and impactful language of art is crucial. Additionally, there were challenges to the legitimacy of Timurid rule. Perhaps images from the Timurid court suggested their government was religious, linked to the Prophet and his family. Presenting a divine image of this government, despite their violent actions and the lack of national legitimacy in Iran, further justifies such actions.

⁶ It is currently available at the National Library of Paris.

2-2-Demon

In Iranian art, the depiction of fantastical animals has been common; creatures with

eagle wings, cow horns, lion bodies, or human heads (cf. Shams Hosseini, 2004: 63). For example, the demon is shown as a hybrid of a human body with the head, hands, feet, and other parts of animals, symbolizing the unattractive nature of humans (Akasheh, 2001: 142). This symbolism is evident in images such as (Figure 4) "Demon Musicians,"⁷(Figure 5) "Demon in Chains"⁸ (Blair [and others], 2002: 76), and "Exploiting the Orphans' Property," which dates back to the 9th century AH. To portray the ugliness of demons, they are depicted as frightening figures, often combining a human body with a lion's head or large feet. This can be interpreted as illustrating that combating evil and sensual forces is only carried out by divinely chosen individuals; perhaps the Timurid rulers exemplified this. A government striving to fight evil and demons across its vast territory, following God's will, features these hybrid animals. Of course, this imagery may have also fostered a positive and idealized view of the Timurid government among Iranian society over time. Meanwhile, generating security and suppressing rebels or those threatening social stability could have been another purpose exploited through such political imagery, ultimately bolstering the government's political legitimacy as a primary concern.

Figure 4



Figure 5



3-2- Dragon

The term "Dragon" combines a snake and a bird, and in the East—particularly in China—it symbolizes power, happiness, and divine authority. However, in the West—especially in monotheistic religions—it has become associated with a destructive, evil, and dirty creature (Cooper, 2000: 17-18; Shams Hosseini, 2004: 64).

⁷ Available at the Freer Museum in Washington. ⁸

Available at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

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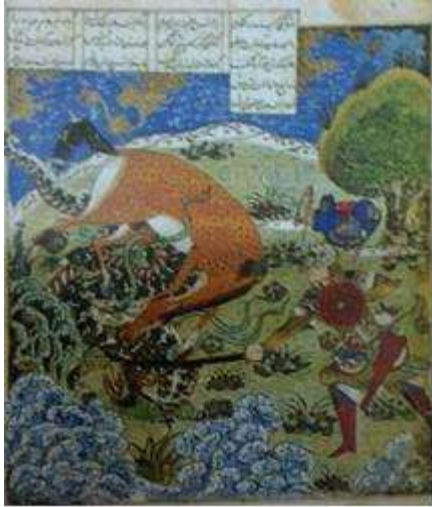


Figure 6.

During the Timurid period, the image of the dragon was common in their artworks. For example, we see Timurid paintings depicting the theme of “Rostam slaying the dragon” (Figure 6) (848 AH in the Shiraz school, now housed in the National Library of Paris) and “Battle of Bahram Gur fighting the dragon” (a copy of the military khamseh from the Herat school in 839 AH) (PopeAckerman, 1999: 10/885). In these artworks, the dragon is shown as a creature with horns, long teeth, wings, and strong claws, symbolizing evil and malevolence. It seems that portraying such mythological symbols was intended to connect the Timurid rulers to ancient Iranian culture and to gain national legitimacy—an important goal, given the Timurids’ distance from their native race and culture. Creating these works was likely aimed to inspire a sense that the rulers sought to revive Iran's glorious past and its values, while also projecting a positive image of themselves through imitation. In these images, the dragon, representing evil, filth, and the devil, is contrasted with an Iranian mythical hero symbolizing power, goodness, and blessing. This battle may have been inspired by the hero’s representation, serving as a test of the Timurid rulers’ strength, a demonstration of power, and, most importantly, a reflection of

their divine authority. Such popularity was achieved by fostering security across Iranian lands. **3. natural symbols**

Nature and its elements, which demonstrate how humans connect with the natural world, have long inspired artists. This importance was so significant that some rituals and celebrations took place in natural settings. Many of its elements also served as symbols and signs conveying different concepts and meanings in Iranian paintings, which we will examine below.

1-3-Plantain

Iranian artists achieved artistic excellence in plant patterns and enjoyed significant success in this field. These patterns surpassed other Islamic styles during their peak. To appreciate the beauty of the plant elements in Iranian decorations, it is enough to examine the plant arrangements, as well as the flower and tree patterns in the paintings of the Herat school or the valuable pottery and textiles produced in Iran during the 10th and 11th centuries AH. Iranian plant decorations from the 8th century AH, coinciding with the Timurid era, gradually evolved into accurate representations of nature, reaching their highest level of achievement in this area. Although Chinese artistic styles influenced artists of this period, they were highly successful in using plant motifs, flower images, and integrating them with other decorative elements, especially in paintings.

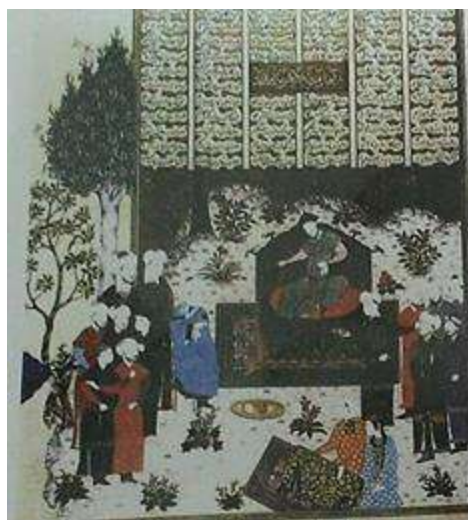


Figure 7

The word "Plant" symbolizes glory and education in Iranian culture (Cooper, 2000: 115). (Figure 7) "The Sassanian Yazdgerd's Giving of the Robe to Nu'man ibn Mundhir" in the Baysonghori Shahnameh⁸, created in 833 AH at the Herat School, "Baysonghori in the Garden," a copy of Kalilah and Dimana from the Herat School in 833 AH, "Taymur's Hunting" from 839 AH, a copy of Zafarnameh of Yazdi from the Shiraz School, "The Coronation Ceremony of Sultan Husayn Bayqara' from 873 AH at the

Herat School, and "The Battle of Gozan and the Elders" from the Baysonghori Shahnameh of the Herat School in 833 AH (Pope-Ackerman, 1999, 10/869)—along with "The Attack of the Lion on the Cow," another copy of Kalilah and Dimana from the Herat School in 833 AH—are prominent examples of how this natural symbol was used in Timurid-era paintings. This symbol evokes the glory and majesty of the Timurid government during these grand celebrations. Analyzing this, it appears that the religious and political attitudes of that period viewed it as a symbol

of the rulers' glory and majesty. It served to project a worthy image of the rulers and likely helped reinforce their legitimacy.

2-3-Cypress

"Cypress" is a symbol of immortality, representing life after death and hope for the future (Hall, 2001: 293). This tree, which holds mythological significance, has been one of the most frequently depicted symbols in paintings and other artworks since ancient times. In the painting "Siavash's Mourning" from the Herat school in 833 AH, related to the Baysonghori Shahnameh, and in "The Battle of Kaykhusro and Afrasiab Among Their Troops"—a copy of the Baysanqari Shahnameh from the Herat school in 833 AH (Pope-Ackerman, 1999: 10/872-873)—as well as in (Figure 8) "Rostam Killing the Dragon" from a 848 AH copy of the Shahnameh from the Herat school, the image of this tree is used. The presence of this tree may symbolize that figures like Siavash, as sacred characters in ancient Iranian culture, have eternal names as epic creators. Perhaps this is why the policies of gaining national legitimacy, connecting to Iran's national history, and emulating ancient and beloved Iranian heroes were essential to the Timurid rulers.

⁸ The painting is currently in the Golestan Palace Museum.



Figure 8

3-3-Garden

With Timur and his successors rising to power, efforts were made to promote the growth of art, architecture, and urban planning. Among these initiatives, the construction of gardens, such as the Delgosha Garden (see Yazdi, 2008: 1/861, 858), stands out. Later, their image became prominent in paintings from this period, which, despite Iran's hot and dry climate, emphasize concepts and symbols drawn from nature.



Figure 9

In (Figure 9) "Baisonghor in the Garden" (833 AH in the Herat school), which is currently

housed in the Top Kapi Palace Library in Istanbul, "Koyuk Khan"—a copy of the history of the conquest by Juwayni related to the Shiraz school in 841 AH—, "The Coronation Ceremony of Sultan Hussein Bayiqra" from 873 AH of the Herat school, "Sama' of the Dervishes" attributed to Behzad around 895 AH, and "The Sufi Assembly in the Garden," a copy of the Khamsa of Mir Alishir Navai related to the Herat school in 890 AH, all feature beautiful garden depictions. In the philosophy of using such symbols, it is essential to note that, in addition to the geographical location of Iran and its reflection of the Iranian people's enduring connection with nature, the Islamic-Iranian worldview of paradise as a reward for good deeds is represented through the "garden." Here, the garden symbolizes the paradise of Kausar, with trees, flowers, and streams where one can rest in its shade. Additionally, verses 46-75 of Surah Ar-Rahman in the Holy Quran, describing paradise, interpret the heavenly garden promised to the pious as conveying the idea of continuous pleasure and happiness. This interpretation made the garden images in Timurid period paintings tangible symbols of the divinely promised paradise. Overall, the Iranian garden, exemplifying material perfection, embodies the beliefs and spirituality of the Islamic worldview, serving as a symbol of the ultimate paradise (cf. Goodarzi-Mokhtabad, 2013: 62).

4. symbolic religious signs

Religious symbols with many interpretations, which are rooted in the Iranian religious-political vision, have been part of the intellectual system of artists of the Timurid era - and in fact, its users, namely the Timurid government.

1-4-Holy halo

Many theories exist about the origin of the halo around the head, which was depicted around both religious and non-religious figures throughout the Islamic era. Some believe this sacred symbol originates from the Buddhist religion and art, which, through Chinese influence, entered Central Asian painting and later Iranian art. Of course, the holy halo has also appeared in Manichaean paintings, especially around the head of Mani, and in Byzantine artworks around the heads of Jesus Christ (PBUH) and Mary. This sacred symbol is also found in Iranian Islamic-period paintings surrounding both religious and secular figures, such as lovers and warriors. For instance, the symbolic halo appears in paintings from the Khwarazm-Shahi and Ilkhanid periods, as well as in the form of flames around the heads of religious figures and Timurid-period paintings (Akbari-Kashani, 2008: 8788).

This halo, seen around the heads of human figures, reflects Islamic thought rooted in holiness and symbolizes the radiant divine light from a holy figure. This divine light is a combination of fire or divine energy that signifies spiritual power, the power of light, the holiness of the universe, genius, and virtue (Cooper, 2000: 378). Examples from this period featuring this symbol include (Figure 10) "The Escape of Prophet Joseph (PBUH) from Zulaykha," a copy of Bustan Saadi belonging to the Herat school; "Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) with his companions" by Hayrat Al-Ibrar Navai, also from the Herat school in 891 AH; "The Ascension of the Prophet (PBUH)," a copy of the Ascendance Book from the Herat school in 840 AH; "Towards the Gardens of Paradise" from the Ascendance Book of the Timurid period in the 9th century; "Exploiting the property of Orphans," another Ascendance Book copy from the Herat school in 840 AH; and "The

Conquest of Mecca by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)" by Hafiz

Abro, also from the Herat school in 818819. In the image of Prophet Joseph (PBUH) escaping from Zulaykha, a luminous halo surrounds his head. Here, the artist aimed to distinguish the status of divine saints from ordinary people and convey a sense of holiness to viewers by using symbols like the halo of light, which is rooted in societal beliefs. This belief emphasizes the superior position of these saints as divinely chosen individuals. In this context, it can be interpreted as portraying a religious image of sovereignty by the Timurids, with such symbols potentially serving to promote their political and religious objectives.

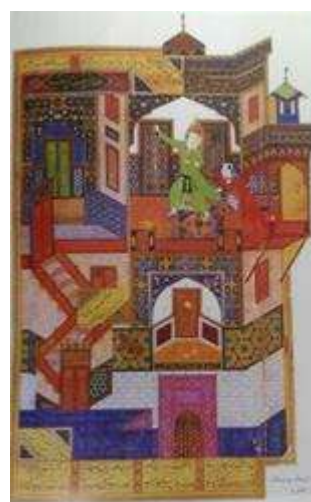


Figure 10

2-4- Mosque

Islamic architecture reflects religious beliefs and political motives. Meanwhile, the mosque, as a manifestation of God, is the highest symbol and icon of Islamic architecture. This divine structure has always been the center of religious, political, and social activities throughout the history of Iran and Islam. Each of its elements also served as a symbol in the minds of the Islamic community; for example, the courtyard connected to its large door represents the

transition from the worldly to the spiritual realm, symbolizing the connection between heaven and earth in the prayer hall. At the same time, the central corridor leading to the altar signifies the “straight path” and the pinnacle of sacred places. The minaret symbolizes the axis of the world and the unlimited power and generosity of the one God. Additionally, the mosque’s spacious courtyard represents the garden of paradise (Larijani, 1999: 68-69).

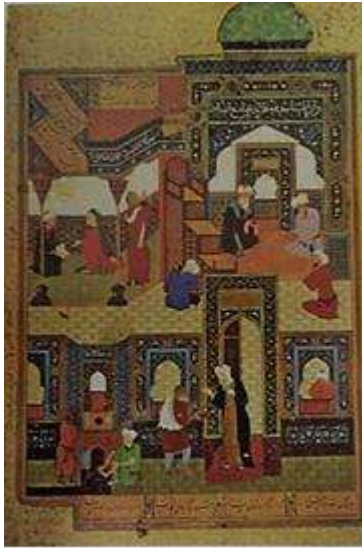


Figure 11



Figure 12

The dome symbolizes heaven, while the altar also holds a hidden symbolic meaning and can be seen as the gateway to paradise. The pulpit, serving as the seat of prophets, saints, and their successors, represents the ladder of the world that ascends through both worldly and spiritual stages to reach the absolute and pure spirit (Burckhardt, 1986: 104). The center of the dome reflects the principle of unity and, at a lower level, symbolizes the 'soul.' Its octagonal walls stand for the divine order of heaven, while its four-sided bases represent the earth or the earthly realm (Nasr, 1986: 45-46).

Therefore, it is not without reason that part of the artists' efforts at the Timurid court—alongside their mosque-building policy—focused on depicting mosques. (Figure 11) "Beggar at the Mosque Door," which was drawn in 894 AH at the Herat School and based on a copy of Saadi's *Garden*⁹ (Weiss, 2004: 328), and (Figure 13) "Samarkand Grand Mosque," created in 890 AH by the Herat School and now housed in the John Garth Library in Baltimore, USA (Strong, 2004: 400), along with "Painting of Good and Bad Muslims," a copy of the *Ascendence Book*, and the painting "Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) with his Companions" (Figure 12), produced in 891 AH at the Herat

⁹ The painting is kept in the Dar al-Muktab in Cairo.
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School (Shayeste Far, 2005: 70), all depict the mosque as a significant element.



Figure 13.

Analyzing the presence of this Islamic symbol suggests that it was intended to draw the attention of religious scholars and, ultimately, the Islamic community. Aligning religious beliefs with society and, as a result, leveraging political interests by presenting an image of a legitimate government supporting Islam—and thereby gaining and reinforcing religious legitimacy—helps explain this artistic approach. Timur and his successors, in consultation with thinkers allied with the Timurid rule, exerted efforts in harmony with

the beliefs and culture of the public to pursue and strengthen their political and religious goals through practical artistic expression. The importance of this becomes clearer when considering that these paintings could serve as effective advertisements for the Timurids' mosquebuilding efforts across their territory.

3-4- Shiite symbols

The use of Islamic symbols, particularly Shiite symbols, in Timurid paintings demonstrates another way in which art intersects with politics and religion. The religious policy of the Sunni Timurids surprisingly involved engaging positively with Shiites and gaining their support. In this context, art also served to reflect their link to this religion. Shiite elements, including the phrase "Ali Wali Allah," are visible in (Figure. 14) "Towards the Gardens of Paradise,"¹⁰ which dates from the ninth century AH during Shah Rukh's reign (811850 AH). This image depicts the Prophet's journey to the banks of the Kauthar River, guided by Gabriel. The inscriptions include the phrases (La ilaha illallah), (Muhammad Rasulullah), and (Ali Wali Allah). Their theme is the Shahadah, incorporating Shiite symbols. Additionally, the elements of this painting can be interpreted as suggesting that those who love the Prophet and his descendants, considered guides of Muslims by God, can use the doors shown to enter Paradise (cf. Shayesteh Far, 2005: 34-35, 75, 76).

¹⁰ Available at the National Library of Paris.



Figure 14

Additionally, images from the "Coronation Ceremony of Sultan Hussein Baiyqra" 873 AH, "Good and Bad Muslims" from the Shah Rukh era, "Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) with his Companions" from Behzad in 891 AH, "Madman in the Kaaba" from the Khamseh Nizami attributed to Behzad around 895 AH, and "Battle of Hazrat Ali (PBUH) in the Battle of Khaybar," which belongs to the Herat school and dates from 818-819 AH, further confirm the policy stated during this period.

5- Animal Drawings

Since the earliest times, humans have selected animals as models for painting and carving. They have depicted fierce images of animals and predators. It appears that humans created these drawings for magical reasons or believed that drawing them would help ward off predators (Benyon, 2004: 16).

In most cases, these motifs carry mythological and symbolic meanings. Motifs such as lions, eagles, boars, peacocks, and Simorgh symbolize the greatness and authority of the kingdom. Generally, two main themes are considered in the use of animal motifs: one is the symbolic and stylized form, where animals are depicted in various ways, such as evolutions or parts of their bodies, like a lion's head, a boar, or uplifted wings, or alongside other animals and motifs. Sometimes, they

are combined with other creatures, including humans and various animals; for example, lions and Simorgh are depicted in different forms and natural poses, such as scenes of battle and hunting. In any case, animal motifs, like human motifs, were prominent in court art and used to decorate the palaces and residences of Islamic caliphs (Makki Nejad, 2008: 71-72). Among these symbolic animal elements in Timurid period paintings, we can mention the lion, cow, and horse, each carrying hidden meanings.

1-5- Horse

Animals hold a special place in Iranian painting. This symbolic significance has made them essential elements in the art. For example, the horse is a key figure in many Iranian pictorial themes, alongside main characters, across diverse religious, historical, and epic contexts. Examples can be seen from the Achaemenid period in the reliefs on the Apadana stairs; from the Sassanid era in Naqsh-e Rostam; and later in the depiction of the Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Shams Hosseini, 2004: 58). The horse has played a prominent role in the myths and religious ceremonies of many civilizations, symbolizing courage, strength, and speed as a vehicle for warriors and heroes (Hall, 2001: 24, 30). Paintings from the Timurid era highlight this symbol used in various themes. For instance, the Spanish traveler Clavijo, who visited the Timurid capital of Samarkand, reported that inside the Timurid palace's great hall, the frescoes of horses and riders engaged in battle scenes were so skillfully done that they looked as lively and real as living people (Clavijo, 1957: 26, 28, 164, 185, 187).



Figure 15

In (Figure 15), "Taymur's Hunting,"¹¹ depicted in 839 AH and associated with the Herat School; "The Battle of Tamouchin with the Khotai Army" from Asadi Tusi's *Garshasnameh*, belonging to the Shiraz School in 800 AH; "Alexander and the Construction of the Dam of Gog and Magog" from the *Shahnameh*, belonging to the Shiraz School in 844 AH; "The Old Woman's Request to Sultan Sanjar," a copy of the Persian War from the Shiraz School in 823 AH; "Taymur's Attack on the Castle" from Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnameh*, belonging to the Herat School, in 872 AH; "The Battle of Jihoon" from Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnameh*, again

from the Herat School, in 872 AH; "Battle of Jeyhun" from the same source and school in 872 AH; "Bahrām Ghor Fighting the Dragon" from *Khamseh Nizami* in 839 AH, belonging to the Herat School; "Bahrām Ghor's Hunting" from *Khamseh Nizami* in 849 AH, also from the Herat School; "The Killing of Siavash" from the *Baysonghori Shahnameh* of the earlier Herat school in 833 AH; "The Killing of Esfandiar by Rostam," "The Battle of Kayqubad and Afrasiab" from the *Baysonghori Shahnameh* belonging to the Herat school in 833 AH; "The Battle of

Kaikhosrow and Afrasiab" from the same source and school in 833 AH; and "The Battle of Godarz and Piran" from the *Baysonghori Shahnameh* of the Herat school in 833 AH. These images, which depict horses, indicate the interest of the Timurid rulers in warfare, hunting, and horsemanship. Additionally, from a politicalmilitary perspective, the role assigned to horses in these images likely reflects the power, courage, and ferocity of the Timurid army. This was especially relevant given the military focus of the regime, as it served to both motivate and rally soldiers and to promote psychological and propaganda efforts against enemies. Furthermore, it likely confirms that the core of the Timurid army consisted of cavalry.

2-5. The Battle of the Lion and the Cow

As mentioned earlier, in the Iranian perspective, animals symbolize superiority and strength. In this context, scenes like the battle between the lion and the cow, which have been depicted in Iranian art across different periods, represent concepts such as power, the greatness of the kingdom, and the victory of good over evil.



Figure 16

The use of the lion motif in "The Battle of the Lion and the Cow"¹² (Figure 16), created in

¹¹ The painting is kept in England today.
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¹² Available in the Topkapı Palace Library, Istanbul.

833 AH and belonging to the Herat school (Hosseini Rad, 2004: 482), often symbolizes heroes and kings, expressing their power and pride. Here, the lion, as a symbol of strength, can be seen as reflecting the status of the Timurid rulers as protectors of the land, ultimate heroes who instill fear and terror in the hearts of their enemies, acting as a deterrent. Additionally, it is essential to remember that the lion has historically served as a totem for the Iranian people; therefore, these metaphors can effectively connect these rulers, who were originally of Turkish descent, with Iranian identity and thus help establish their national legitimacy. **6-Symbolic war tools**

In the paintings of the Timurid period, many of these images feature themes related to war and battle; a set of war tools can be seen, which are not only necessary for these scenes but can also serve as symbols conveying various messages. It appears that the artists of this period, influenced by the ideology of their rulers, used such tools not only to depict external concepts but also to reflect the power and glory of the Timurid government and rulers. Conversely, they

also symbolized the humiliation of their enemies. Additionally, more broadly, these images reinforced the idea among the Muslim audience that the army of faith stood against the military of unbelief. These scenes undoubtedly played a role in shaping the mindset of Iranian-Islamic society and aligning it with the policies of the Timurid government, despite racial differences.

The “bow” and arrow were special attributes of the gods of war and heroes, symbolizing unstoppable courage. For instance, stringing a large bow was a test of bravery (Hall, 2001: 176). This weapon was wielded to fight evil forces, whether in the form of animals or

enemies. That is why many images from the Timurid period feature this weapon of war. Such images include (Figure 17) "Battle of Bahram Gur with the Dragon" from 839 AH, "Battle of Temujin with the Khotayan army," "Battle of Jeyhun" from the Herat school, "Hazrat Ali (AS) in the Battle of Khaybar" by Hafez Abro of the Herat school, "Battle of Bahram Gur Hunt" from Khamseh Natami, 849 AH, "Killing of Siavash" from the Baysonghori Shahnameh, "Killing of the Dragon by Rostam" from the Shiraz school of Shahnameh, "Killing of Esfandiar by Rostam," "Battle of Kayqubad and Afrasiab" from the Persian War, "Battle of Kaykhosrow and Afrasiab" from the Baysonghori Shahnameh, and "Battle of Goodarz and Piran" from the Baysonghori Shahnameh. The bow held by heroes in these images can be linked to warriors of the Timurid state, those chosen to fight evil forces and prevail. Additionally, figures like Bahram Goor or Bahram the Fifth, epitomes of hunting, courage, bravery, wisdom, and rationality, have long served as symbols for Iranians throughout history (cf: ShabaniZarei, 2012: 32). Therefore, their depiction and the Timurids’ artistic policies—beyond the previous analysis—support their quest for legitimacy on a national level by linking them to Iran’s glorious past during the Sassanid era.



Figure 17

The "helmet," which was used as a tool to protect heroes in war, has been regarded as a symbol of faith, perseverance, and endurance (Hall, 2001: 263). In numerous Timurid-era battle paintings, the helmet is an integral part, for example, (Figure 18) depicting the Battle of Hazrat Ali (AS) at Khaybar, created at the Herat School in 818819, and currently housed in the Top Kapi Palace Library in Istanbul.



Figure 18

The "sword" in (Figure 19) is another weapon of war that, in addition to its apparent meaning, has appeared as a symbol of invincible power, strength, ability, justice, overcoming the forces of darkness, and also as a sign of gods and heroes (Hall, 2001: 155-157); symbols that could all serve the politics and religion of Timurid rule.



Figure 19

The "spear" in (Figure 19) has long been a symbol of power, serving as a standard weapon for warriors and hunters (Ibid.: 190191). Its frequent appearance in images related to battle highlights the demonstration of Timurid authority in the military sphere. **7-Colors and symbols**

Another element that holds both symbolic and meaningful significance is "colors." Colors are a vital and influential aspect of Iranian paintings, each carrying a specific semantic load. Every color has its own unique symbolic meaning, derived from its characteristics. The spiritual and emotional states of humans and how beings and things in the world are perceived have always been expressed through symbolism in art. Therefore, since red was considered a symbol of anger, rage, war, and lust, demons and evil spirits were often depicted wearing red clothing. Conversely, colors like green, white, and blue symbolize freshness, purity, heaven, and independence. However, in religious and mythological art, the symbolic meanings of colors extend beyond this; in Islamic culture, for example, the symbolism of green encompasses the highest mystical meanings. Living within the Islamic world makes every

religious and worldly matter a symbol of faith for individuals.

Consequently, in painting, the artist is somewhat influenced by the overarching spiritual framework of Islam (cf. Madadpour, 1995: 232-233). Thus, each color in Islamic art embodies several concepts rooted in religious beliefs and Islamic thought. From this perspective, colors possess an essence that stems from the realm of imagination; for example, the symbolism of white and green connected to light and the illumination of truth in the existence of the Imams indicates that these colors are among the most prominent in Islamic sources—especially the Holy Quran—where verses such as verse 106 of Surah Al-Imran, verse 63 of Hajj, and verse 31 of Surah Al-Kahf reference this idea (Asgari-Iqbali, 2011: 65).

Additionally, in the composition of Iranian works, yellow symbolizes perseverance, stability, thinking, and reasoning; brown and orange represent vitality and life. Blue, green, and purple signify completeness and freedom. It is no coincidence that in the art of schools like Tabriz and Herat, the combination of colors and the coloring of works by artists such as Kamal al-Din Behzad, Sultan Mohammad, and Mirak

Heravi clearly convey these symbols. In this context, artists have infused new life into their work by using gold and silver for the sky, sea, and water, aiming to demonstrate the divine spirit of Iranian painting through the liberation of light (Shams Hosseini, 2004: 83).

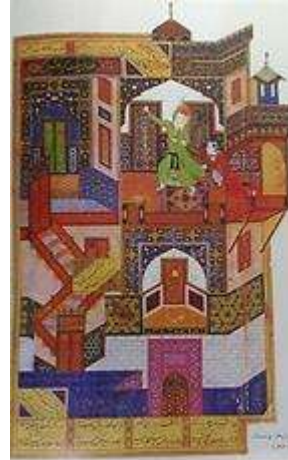


Figure 20

For example, Behzad - a famous painter of the Timurid era and perhaps in the entire history of Iranian painting — used colors to express his concepts in (Figure 20) "Yusuf and Zuleykha." To depict Zuleykha's character, he used red for her dress and green, which symbolizes holiness and faith, for Prophet Yusuf's (AS) dress. Additionally, the color gold, signifying splendor, glory, wealth, and nobility, was employed to highlight Zuleykha's superior position as the wife of Pharaoh.



Figure 21

The colors used in Siavash's painting ¹³are also symbolic. In (Figure 21), more than two colors—primarily black and red—were used, with black being dominant. The black shields, the soldiers' clothing, their circling Siavash, and the background all reflect the story's sadness. These color choices convey a sense of sadness to the viewer.

In (Figure 22), "Taymur's Attack on the Castle," ¹⁵created in 872 AH and associated with the Herat School, red is used—just as in the Quran in Surah Taha, verse 102—to depict sinners and those in hell. Here, red symbolizes war, destruction, violence, and sinful or bad-natured people. The likely purpose of this symbolism was to suggest that the Timurids' violence and killings were intended to combat evil and that they perceived themselves as executing a divine mission. Thus, Timurid artists, through their skill and creativity, aimed to soften viewers' perceptions of the bloody and brutal Timurid regime, which they linked to the legacy of their Mongol ancestors.



Figure 22

¹³ The depiction of Siavash's story by artists of the Timurid era could indicate the Timurids' need for legitimacy in attributing themselves to Iranian
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Conclusion

A brief examination of the political-religious developments in Iran during the Timurid era reveals a clear and direct connection between the art of painting and the political-religious needs of that era. The challenges to the Timurids' legitimacy across national, political, and religious aspects led to the creation, design, and execution of artistic policies aimed at protecting their political interests. Additionally, the interest and even skill of some artists contributed not only to the flourishing of painting but also to its politicization during that time. In this context, efforts to align society politically and religiously were communicated through the subtle yet powerful language of art. Building public belief in the Timurid government and ultimately establishing sovereignty with popular support required such a tool. Therefore, art serving politics helped sustain power.

The art of painting associated with the Timurid government aimed to present an ideal image of the ruling authority in various ways, aligned with the Iranian-Islamic identity. During this effort, the use of symbols—given their significant influence on the public mind—became a key focus. Religious and ancient symbols were employed to convey a fitting image of the

Timurids and their government, incorporating hidden messages. Political symbols highlighted the grandeur of the monarchy, while religious symbols, especially Shiite ones, aimed to reinforce religious legitimacy. Ancient symbols were used to connect this sovereignty to Iran's ancient past, thus supporting the Timurids' questionable national legitimacy. Therefore, understanding

mythical figures, especially their beloved ones. ¹⁵
The painting is held in the Garth Baltimore Collection.

the meaning and creation of symbols by artists of this period requires a grasp of the religious and political preferences and tendencies of their supporters.

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