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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Tadjvidi, Akbar M. メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15021/00003108">https://doi.org/10.15021/00003108</a>

## Persian and Chinese Art Exchanges Along Silk Roads

AKBAR M. TADJVIDI

*Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran*

By and large the nature of barriers formed by most international frontiers is conventional: Crossing the border from one politically constituted state to another does not necessarily imply glaring differences in culture or radical and abrupt changes in lifestyle—even at the level of language or mores. Where there are such differences, it is due in most cases to such natural barriers as mountain chains or sea. Even then, there are cases where such obstacles have failed to prevent manifest reciprocal penetration. The Japanese and Chinese civilizations and cultures provide a good example, in spite of the fact that each of these nations has its own individuality in the cultural, scientific and artistic fields. It is also relevant to point out that natural obstacles no longer suffice to preserve differences in regional cultures because of the way intensive sea and air traffic brings the whole world together, making it a single unit. This is what makes some authors argue that there will very soon be a single, unified and universal culture in which specific characteristics will be largely blotted out. Whether we should try to arrest this process or encourage it, for the enriching effect of mutual exchange and reciprocal contributions, is another question. Here we shall refrain from trying to predict the future and confine our field of inquiry to existing facts and the exchanges that have taken place in this field between China and Iran.

There is no distinct and sharp frontier to be traced between Chinese and Persian art. The art of each of these two nations has acted upon the other over the whole region of Central Asia with its countless specific cultural and ethnic features. It is the many intermediate states between them that we shall discuss in this brief account, and it is the unquestionable links between them that we shall attempt to identify.

Except for the Himalayas, and even they offer many passes, there is no natural barrier separating China and Persia. Here we have two cultures belonging to the continent of Asia—of which it could be said that, geographically, the European peninsula is simply prolongation. Before the coming of modern man with his many ways of moving from one place on the planet to another, history tells us there already was intensive traffic along Silk Roads, linking regions lying between the Pacific and Indian oceans with those on the shores of the Mediterranean. From earliest times, caravans loaded with all kinds of goods wound their way across these

lands, playing their part in cultural and artistic intercourse by linking various countries on their way. It is not unreasonable to imagine that, from dawn of history, in addition to artists and craftsmen traveling in wake of these caravans, troupes of theatrical and musical performers also went along, spreading their art while themselves being influenced by art of countries they traversed. Of course, it was not until the twentieth century that we started to have international festivals and fairs that brought about such phenomena as mass movement of large groups in various disciplines, intense activity in media, cinema, reproduction of works of art and large-scale distribution of magnetic tapes. In this intense exchange between various disciplines throughout the world—where even ritual dances, which at one time were held to be sacred and taboo to the profane and uninitiated, are now performed before audiences with widely varying traditions.

The two Iranian dynasties of Parthians and Sasanids, contemporary with Han dynasty and its successors, reigned over an area extending from China to the Mediterranean. At that time (third to seventh century A.D.), Silk Roads spanned more than 2,000 kilometers of Iranian territory. We know that first extension of Silk routes into China was the work of Han Wu Ti (141-87 B.C.) but, in fact, the origin of these roads goes back very far in history. All along them, different ideas, cultures, arts and traditions were conveyed and exchanged. Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Judaism, two forms of Christianity (Monophysitism and Nestorianism, but particularly the latter), plus Islam, all traveled to China and ferried Chinese culture and art to the West. All these beliefs came to China through Iranian carriers or were influenced by Persian culture. Even Buddhism is known to have come to China by way of Iranians. Generally, all beliefs of these areas—except for Shintoism and Zen, followed in Japan, and Taoism and Confucianism, practiced in China—could be said to have been colored by Iranian influence.

In those times all regions having advanced cultures were shared by two great empires: China in the East and Rome, and later Byzantium, in the West. In the center, Parthian empire and later Sasanids filled the whole of the Iranian Plateau, plus part of Central Asia to east and extending westward often to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. There was keen rivalry between Iranian dynasties and Romans and Byzantines for control of the latter regions.

As evidence of the existence of trade and cultural exchange between China and Iran as early as Parthian times, we shall quote the following report by historians of the time. During the war between the forces of Parthian sovereign Orodes II, commanded by Surenas, and those of Crassus, proconsul of Syria, the Romans remarked upon the brightness, and brilliant and exceptional colors of the flags of the Parthian army—good grounds for concluding that the flags were made of silk cloth.

Some 10 years later, silk garments began to be used at the Roman court.

Here we may make the sad comment that sometimes wars too contribute to the progress of human culture. A Parthian bronze from the same era, now at Iran-

Bastan museum, is a good example of the uses of silk in vestimentary art. Whichever way the statue is looked at, the representation of the Parthian general's trousers is an interpretation in bronze of a material that cannot be anything but silk.

In the third century A.D., Sasanid empire was the rival of Rome and Byzantium, and sought to monopolize silk trade. At the same time, Mazdaism and Manichaeism were brought to China by the Iranians. The first translators of Buddhist text into Chinese were also Iranian.

In the seventh century, the southern Mediterranean fell to Islam. Persia, possessor of the secret of the silkworm, became Islamic. It was now producing, weaving and selling silk to the whole West. Because Iranian production fell short of demand, however, silk was still exported from China by both land and sea, and sericulture spread as far as Sicily and Lyons.

Islam was also spread in China by Iranians and Chinese Muslims who mainly used Persian vocabulary in their rituals. It is also known that when troops of Zaid Ben Saleh clashed with those of Kao Siang Tche in Kazakhstan, a large number of prisoners were taken by the Muslim army and shipped to Kufah in Mesopotamia. These prisoners included weavers of silk. Others, who were settled in Samarkand, helped build papermaking factories. The great Sasanid kings were already transferring whole communities of weavers to Iran, particularly to Gondishapur and Shushtar in Khuzestan and to Syro-Phoenician workshops. Bas-relief rock carving of Taq-e Bustan give an idea of decorative work on silk cloth of the time.

Sasanid art inspired painters of Central Asia, whose style had affinities with Chinese art. It is in these geographical areas that intermediate stages between Chinese and Persian art are found.

There are many traces of Sasanid art in Central Asia and Chinese Turkistan. Examples include discoveries made in Turfan, Vraksh, Khwarezm, Afrasyab and Pandjikent of vestiges of artistic expressions related to Persian culture.

Chinese art and civilization reached Iran by passing through the same regions. In some cases, Iranian sovereigns of Muslim era even sent delegations to China to acquaint themselves with Chinese art and science, or they arranged for Chinese artists to come to Iran.

In Samanid period (902-1004), for example, Amir Nasr ben Ahmed asked Rudaki to translate the verse of Kalilah wa Dimnah. Chinese painters also were hired to illustrate the text with descriptive pictures to make it more easily understood.

After conquest of Iran by Mongols (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries), peace and security that followed for the whole empire resulted in Iran's becoming more exposed to Chinese influence. Genghis Khan was such an admirer of Chinese art that he ordered artists from China to accompany him on all his travels. From this period, Persian painters were in direct contact with those of China.

Timurids were also greatly interested in art, and some were real patrons. Baysungur, one of the princes of this dynasty, gave particular encouragement to painters and calligraphers. He even became highly skilled in calligraphy. Pages of

one famous Koran, now scattered over many museums and private collections throughout the world, were lettered by him. He is also known to have dispatched a scientific mission, led by Ghiyathuddin, to China with instructions to draw pictures of, and make written description of, everything they found of interest on the way. When he came back, Ghiyathuddin had a number of Chinese painters accompany him. In Persian miniatures of Timurid period, their influence is unmistakable, with certain features of paintings of Ming period detectable in them.

After this brief historical, geographical and cultural outline we propose to deal briefly with the essence of Chinese and Persian art, although we must limit our scope here to the art of painting. In what follows, we shall endeavor to identify points of comparison and essential similarities in these two schools of artistic expression.

A first point to be made is that, in Persian literature and popular Iranian tales and folklore, there are many examples of China being represented as the center of pictorial art and Chinese painters as models for artists.

One of the greatest of Iran's poets, Hafez, referring to the impossibility of grasping the world of creative imagination without being initiated into symbols of the supersensory world, wrote: "He who is unable to comprehend explicit of this imagination-stimulating pen will draw nothing but preposterous pictures even if he be the Chinese Painter himself."

Conversely, according to Iranian Manichaean tradition, Manes—founder of the Manichaean religion—was a renowned painter who traveled as far as Chinese Turkistan to propagate faith by means of pictures he drew. Certainly documents discovered at Turfan include some regarded as examples of paintings in Manichaean style. Influence of Persian style is also apparent in many examples of wall paintings discovered in Central Asia, Turkistan and as far away as Mongolia. One example of this would be paintings by Ch'ing Liang Liao in eastern Mongolia, in which the style is of Mongolian and Chinese origin but also seems to take its inspiration from imagery of Iran under Sasanids. The motif of two legendary animals and the style in which they are represented show influence of pictorial art of ancient Persia [Tamura Jitsuzo and Kobayashi Yukio, *Tombs and Mural Paintings of Ch'ing-ling*, Kyoto University, 1952.]

Sasanid influence is also detectable in frescoes of Ming-oi Buddhist sanctuary in Chinese Turkistan [R. Ghirshman, *L'Iran des Origines a l'Islam*, published by Payot, 1954, Paris, pp. 308-9]. These are just two examples but there is also mention, concerning Mani's journeys to the east, of inspiration he took from Chinese art. Indeed, what has been found of pictorial art attributed to Manichaeans book illustrations shows all these influences.

The type of beauty described as ideal of aesthetic inspiration in Persian poetry meets criteria for beauty prized among peoples of Central Asia and China: such features as a round face recalling the beauty and whiteness of the full moon, black almond eyes, rosebud lips and arched eyebrows.

Persian and Chinese painting belong to the same pictorial family. In both

there is use of flat colors with no chiaroscuro or modeling, basically two-dimensional organization of composition with no linear perspective from any single viewpoint (with space being suggested by a series of screens) and importance of graphic element, sign of the importance and preeminence of calligraphy. These processes would later influence all Western painting techniques; also witness Japanese prints discovered by Van Gogh, Matisse and others.

An anecdote illustrates the scorn in which Eastern painters held use of chiaroscuro: When a painter of Caravaggio school showed his first attempt at a portrait of the emperor of China to the ruler's high vizier, the latter—shocked to see half of his sovereign's face painted in dark colors—asked the artist why. He was told that the dark part represented the side of the face that was in shadow. Displeased with this explanation, the vizier replied curtly, "On the emperor's countenance, there is no shadow."

Indeed, from the start, Western painting tried to represent relief, realism or even naturalism and surface irregularity. Early signs of quasi-realistic painting are present in the Cretan frescoes, and modeling and chiaroscuro are found in murals in Pompeii and Herculaneum. Albeit tentatively, artists were striving to imitate sculpture and the rounded curve. Same is true of perspective. In sculpture, conversely, the Western artist aimed at narrative, description, anecdote—witness Trajan's column in Rome. Chinese art is at the opposite pole of this more or less realistic style, and Persian art holds middle ground between the two. Although narrative is found in certain Chinese scrolls, essence of what is conveyed is wholly different from that in Western art. In rock sculpture and in Persian painting, experience is instantaneous. Historical time has been shrunk, halted and reduced to a fixed moment that no longer flows into the next. It represents eternal instant. Between Western art and Chinese art, Persian art is, from the outset, a kind of arabesque bridge. It is more concerned with ornamentation than with structure, resulting in decorative art par excellence. Arrival of Islam and development of Islamic decorative art strengthened this trend, and set a deeper and stricter stamp on this type of artistic expression.

Common feature among Chinese and Persian pictorial styles, as has been mentioned, is their attachment to the graphic element—calligraphy. Indeed, combination of painting and calligraphy, in one and the same work, is shared by both schools. In painting, graphic element is in fact a vehicle of expression rather than of sensation, and possibly becomes a decorative element of which thorough analysis would also lead to rediscovery of certain expressiveness.

Chinese calligraphy, which should not be systematically dissociated from Chinese painting, and Arabo-Persian calligraphy, which is present in practically all forms of artistic expression of Islamic Iran, have the following in common: They are both vehicles of thought that make use of graphic symbols.

According to Chinese cosmogony, as in Sufism of Islamic Iran, the universe is in a state of becoming, nothing is stable and fixed. Poet, artist and artisan are all striving to capture the moment to give it eternity, to seize the fleeting instant that

then becomes everlasting; their goal is what is timeless. Hafez wrote: "Sit down by the stream and watch water flow, and let this suffice as symbol of passage of time in the world."

Indeed, in commentaries on Hafez, it is said that gazing at a river and waves that are continually re-formed as they go by gives us insight into the fluid nature of things, on one hand, and their perennial character, on the other. Each wave of a river that is renewed is representation of the permanence of the wave that precedes it but is not, for all that, the same.

In Chinese painting, the artist uses lines that represent life and motion—curved, oblique, wavy—to show movement of clouds, rivers and space. In other words, the artist uses lines that change, but not in narrative, illustrative or descriptive manner. The artist is seeking out the essence of elements that are fluid in their nature but he also strives to take hold of them and represent everlasting and perpetual nature of these changings, hence predominance of oblique over horizontal and vertical lines. Persian miniatures also employ these devices to some extent but add straight lines, right angles, geometrical forms and squares that are graphic expressions of the stability of crystal or matter. In harmonious proportions, Persian illumination combines graphic symbols of vital elements: circles, curves, curving lines and arabesques, together with geometric forms and straight lines of the mineral world.

In general terms, both Persian and Chinese art seek expression that interprets the essence of the cosmos. Both are representations of cosmic entities, of the universe. While influence of Taoism in China sways pictorial art toward attainment of a certain communion with the cosmos, in Iran the Path of Sufism, with its symbolism of mirror and archetypes from the world of suspended images, creates in the artist a certain feeling of affinity with this intermediate world. This world, *malakût*, is the world of autonomous images lying between sensory and supersensory, where "the material is spiritualised and spiritual is materialised".

The iconography of Persian art is not a medium of discursive intellectualization but a vehicle of contemplative meditation. In both Chinese and Persian art, the place of logic that is based on argument and language is taken by symbols which are generative and not sterile and frozen, as are allegories.

Along Silk Roads all these trends interacted and were already influencing Byzantine art during Sasanid period, well before rise of Islam. With the advent of Islam and Muslim conquest of old Roman colonies, Persian art began to influence the whole eastern Mediterranean basin and, at the same time, became carrier of artistic tendencies from China. Similarly, contact between Persia and the West meant that Persia was already exposed in ancient times to influences of Western artistic tradition, which it then passed on east. Just as Persia lies geographically between East and West, its art also stands somewhere between Western and Eastern art. This is paralleled, as we have just said, by its search in the field of cosmology for an intermediate world linking, like a bridge, the sensory world with that of the intellect: the *mondus imaginalis*, the *malakût* of things.

From the time of Achaemenids, Persian art was exposed to Greek, Egyptian and Assyrian influence and, in return, it influenced art of those countries. In Parthian era, Hellenism spread and, by way of Iran, gave rise to such movements as the Greco-Buddhist school. Most Persian art movements in Iran is Sasanid art (third-seventh century) but it was in Islamic times that Persian art reached its peak of expressiveness and development. Above all, it was under Mongols that art of Islamic Iran attained maturity, inspiring the whole of the Muslim world. At that time, mystic poetry of Iran, Persian language and Sufi thought predominated throughout Central Asia. It is known that intermittently under Mongol empire the official court language in China, India and Iran was Persian. As far as philosophy is concerned, Najm Kobra school in Central Asia would be most representative of the period. On artistic level, the period of Mongol school witnessed most intensive exchanges between Islamic art, as a whole, and Persian art. All these tendencies are visible in Persian miniatures of the time, which were used to illustrate manuscripts of *Djame-ul-Tavarikh* de Rashid-ul-din Fazlollah, Iranian minister at the Mongol court. These miniatures, incidentally, show Mongolian landscapes and representation of an almost abstract world. At this time there was extensive interpenetration of all artistic trends, beliefs and traditions. One sees influence of Uighurs, Turks, Tibetans, Sogdians and all peoples of Transoxiana. All the nations along Silk Roads took their inspiration from one another.

A final point about art of China and Persia is that certain motifs in Chinese art do not have the same meanings when used by Iranian artists. The dragon, for example, ceases to represent power and eternity of the cosmos. In Persian illumination, it is confronted with other forces such as griffin, *senmurv* and other legendary animals. Similarly, the motif of two animals face to face, found in Persian art along Silk Roads does not always have the same meaning in Iranian iconography. The most curious thing about all these signs is the almost constant presence of yin/yang symbolism in the decorative art of Iran.

Careful analysis of arabesques, *khatai*, frets and foliated patterns used in Iranian ornamental art brings this symbolism to light. It is to be found in glazed tile design, wood carvings, carpets, illuminated book illustration and other artifacts made and decorated in Iran, particularly during Islamic period. According to Persian masters of decorative art, involution of any correctly drawn arabesque should result in division of a circle whose two incurved parts fit together. The shape of the motif known as "bouteh", generally present on all cashmere cloth and on printed fabrics of Isfahan is, in fact, one half of yin/yang symbol. This same shape, reversed and fitted to another within a circle, constitutes the symbolism in question, but how and when this traditional symbol of both the egg of the world and of primordial androgyny was introduced into Persian art is impossible to say at present.

Nor are we able to answer the question of the meaning of this symbolism and its interpretation by Iranian masters. The fact remains that, ever since earliest times, the symbolism of "Ten Thousand Beings" was known to Iranians. Primeval



tradition must be the origin of this symbolism (see all works by R. Guenon). The Sufism school that developed in Central Asia and the school of Alaud-dawlah Semnani in Persia constituted a synthesis of all these traditions in the Islamic era, with painting the field in which it soared to its epiphany.

At the eastern end of Silk Roads, Japan, in its turn and, with its artistic traditions and specific beliefs, acted upon and influenced artistic and cultural style of this world. Japanese painting, with its particular features, richness and unequalled delicacy, and later Japanese prints, played a major role in development of pictorial art throughout the world.

Unfortunately, we do not have the time to go more deeply into these aspects. We are very pleased to be here in the land that gave birth to so many artistic treasures and delighted to have this opportunity to learn even more about them.