

Original Research Article

New Qajarism in the Iranian Contemporary and Modern Visual Arts*

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Abstract

“Qajar art” in some way is the art of a transition period. Its themes and contents refer to an unborn future and merely depict the past. The art of this period shows a transient (ephemeral) condition caused by various but significant factors including the beginning of modernism in Iran, the advent of the publishing industry, the propagation of intellectualism, the establishment of “Dar ul Funun”, and the popularity of individualism. In recent decades, Iranian contemporary artists have shown a great interest in Qajar art. The major concern of this study is to understand why Qajar art has been the topic of interest. To this end, this study examines the pertinent samples and employs a descriptive-analytical method to investigate the hidden elements and signs of the works of contemporary and modern Iranian artists associated with the Qajar period. Preliminary analysis shows that most of the elements and features of Qajar art are still present in today’s art. These elements can fall into three categories: 1) Works that have directly benefited from Qajar art, 2) Works that have been affected by the motifs and symbols of the Qajar period, 3) Works whose hidden layers trace back to Qajar art. The use of Qajar art by contemporary artists includes various reasons such as, but not limited to, the arrival of the camera and picture video archives. In addition, the existence of art markets beyond Iran has had an impact on this trend.

Keywords: *Iran, Qajar, New Qajarism, Contemporary Art, New Art, Visual Art.*

Introduction

In the Modern and Contemporary art of Iran, the artistic traditions of the past have always been present along with the new movements. This legacy of the past is sometimes visible and occasionally is seen in the hidden layers of the works. Among the artistic works of Iranian contemporary artists, many motifs belonging to the Qajar period are found. In addition to using new forms and concepts, these artists have used elements and themes from the Qajar period and

sometimes have combined past and present concepts to create new works. They have always paid special attention to the decorations of this period. Perhaps, we can cautiously say that the New and Contemporary visual arts of Iran are imported phenomena and have roots in many artistic movements of the world. These artistic trends which were initially welcomed, especially by the young generation, after passing the initial excitements, are now developing and evolving on a more logical basis. Some Iranian artists by using and relying on Qajar motifs have indicated the problem of national identity and its necessity in their works, which is still a growing trend.

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Statement of the problem

Regardless of historical conditions and social realities, Qajar Art used to be described as weak and ridiculous, and Qajar artists used to be considered unprofessional. However, today by reconsidering the aesthetic dimensions of Qajar art which still exist, it is called an independent and fine art movement. We can see the presence of different hidden and visible aspects of this school of thought as we learn more about it and its aspects, which have evolved up to the present. In recent years, due to political, cultural, and social conditions, the expansion and development of artistic trends have accelerated and are mostly pursued by young artists. In the meanwhile, the use of pictorial (video) features of the Qajar period has special priority. The works created from this trend represent the presence of Qajar pictorial culture and its place in the New and Contemporary visual art of Iran. Because of the growing and improper use of this pictorial culture, it is necessary to undertake research, especially in the area of identity.

Research questions

1. How have contemporary artists used elements and motifs of the Qajar Period?
2. How are elements and motifs from the Qajar period assessed in introducing the identity of Iranian art outside Iran?

Review of the literature

Most of the present resources include scattered speeches and notes which have been published in some journals or on the internet and few have been published in a book or an article. Therefore, among available books, we can refer to Qajar Paintings (review of the aesthetics) by Bahman Jalali. This book which was published in 2004 by Kavosh Ghalam publications mostly introduces famous painters from the Qajar period and in the final section of the book analyzes and discusses the works of the

famous artists and briefly reviews the aesthetics of the works. Internet resources were mostly about artists' conversations and less has been done about the relations between the works and the Qajar period.

Research methodology

This study employs descriptive-analytical methodology. In such studies, through studying the current situation, different qualities have been explained and a probably favorable situation is suggested. Thus, in this research based on the selected samples, elements and motifs of the Qajar period are discussed. To accomplish this, some objectives are mentioned:

- To present the role of Qajar pictorial culture in the new and contemporary art of Iran
- To study the formation and the effect of Qajar motifs in identity formation in the New and Contemporary art of Iran.

To this end, more than two works by the New and Contemporary artists exhibited in the biennials in Iran and other countries were chosen. These works were selected randomly based on pre-determined criteria. Therefore, the selected works for the article include features that require more explanation. At first, based on the statistical population and considering its vastness, multiple works of New and Contemporary art which have signs of Qajar art were selected. These selected works were assessed based on the research questions. During the assessment phase, we first tried to extract all the works related to Qajar pictorial culture. Signs and features which were collected and categorized are evaluated in the data analysis section. In the data analysis three groups of works are analyzed:

- A) Works that have directly benefited from Qajar art
- B) Works that have been affected by the motifs and symbols of the Qajar period,
- C) Works whose hidden layers trace back to Qajar art.

This article examines the nature of the New and Contemporary works. For instance, what kind of

connection does it have with Qajar art? Therefore, some hypotheses have been developed to present the main points more effectively and to do the data analysis. Hypothesis 1: The works of New and Contemporary artists of Iran have been inspired by Qajar pictorial culture. Hypothesis 2: Motifs, Symbols, and Qajar signs have had a great impact on the formation of New Qajarism.

Definition of key concepts

• The concept of the “New Art”

Considering the complexity of the New Art concept and its coincidence with Contemporary Art, it is not easy to present a comprehensive definition of it. Based on the general belief, New Art is the product of Modernism, whereas it may be the result of something unconventional. The relation between the New and Contemporary is undefined because substantive differences among cultures and societies make it impossible to look at the subject from the same perspective. Shaygan believes the motive for the advent and development of the pioneer art movement was to reduce Modernism to something new (Shaygan, 2001, 278). However, Jerald Mast believes: Contemporary Art encompasses all art movements including New and Traditional. He adds: one of the general trends in all artistic fields was its special attention to movement effect both as a tool for imitative effects and as a purpose (Mast, 1997, 237). Thus it is impossible to ascertain the relation between the two, but it is possible to explain this relation in brief. For example, the presentation of an artwork which is an interaction between innovations in art with the rejection of modern aesthetics has roots in the new artistic organizations. While newness is not enough for a work to be called artistic, it is necessary. Because a new outlook is the result of creativity. Works, which do not have this quality, are just a reproduction of the past. Repetition with no purpose is not part of the art and turns into an industry product. The spirit of art is beyond pure technique.

Newness in art is not merely a new attitude toward something, but it is the new shape and form through which things can be manifested. The word ‘new’ in the New Art is a wanted or unwanted agreement; an agreement in return to something in contrast to the New Art (Amani, 2008, 43).

• “New Qajarism”

Painting in the Qajar period dates back to Safavid and especially to Zand dynasties. In fact, painting and the artistic life of Qajar court began with the second king. Fath-Ali Shah reigned for more than 35 years (1829-1834). The fifty-year ruling by Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1846-1896) was a safe and tranquil time. As such, it was possible to pay more attention to artistic affairs and luxury taste for the courtiers, princes, nobles, and wealthy people. The king himself was not a thick-witted person or at least pretended to be interested in art. He left some drawings and an itinerary. Some factors including social evolution due to the relation with the West, long but relative peace, the Shah’s interest in art, and the courtiers and nobles’ pretension to love art were reasons to promote fine industries (Meskub, 2001, 288).

New and Contemporary trends have used Qajar qualities. The word New Qajarism is a title selected by the author as an equivalent to artistic works, which have used Qajar qualities. New Qajarism is beyond art and includes all the social realities such as culture, beliefs, and customs; however, it involves genes that have had some effects on creating artistic works.

• Cultural, social and political effects of qajar art on iranian new and contemporary art

- Due to the arrival of photography in Iran, the Qajar period is the beginning of Modernism in the art history of Iran. Because of this historical event, the art concepts undergo a metamorphosis, and new structural, technical and thematic outcomes are entered into in the artistic trends of Iran. On the other hand, another phenomenon such as picture archiving took place in Iran, which helped stabilize historic authenticity and the expansion of artistic approaches.

This development is a realistic portrayal of the past, which can relate our nostalgic feelings to the past. In other words, we can say that the oldest period of realistic picture history is from the Qajar period. Prior to that time, there were no authentic pictures and the previous photographic culture was more illustrative. Nevertheless, the artist's use of the historic and nostalgic value of the photos and signs of this period is something unavoidable.

- The access of Qajar artists to new technologies of mass production of various images and art prints is another important event of the Qajar period that the proliferation of works of art, illustrated books of lithography intensifies in this period. The Qajar artist freely used monochrome and multicolor lithography, which was often with the common painting techniques of his time (Szántó, 2019, 15).

- Another significant event of this period was the "Newspaper", a modern and communication tool which is an indispensable/unquestionable part of the modern age. Newspapers not only helped promote the culture of communication but also the dissemination of different aesthetic attitudes. Thus information dissemination became free from traditional domains and accessible for all people and at the same time developed very fast. These efforts lead to a more general awareness and caused an amazing development in the social history of Iran; as a good example the "Constitutional Revolution" was one of them. Journalism conveys a special language and culture, which is the result of modernism and the new world. It releases social and cultural information from traditional domains and disseminates it among all strata of society. Qajar newspapers include pictures of social realities which are very effective in the pictorial expression of a society without TV and cinema at that time.

- The development of image-based art is one of the important changes in the culture of the Qajar period, which has played a major role in the construction and visual identity of the society and the daily life of the

people, more than the text (calligraphy), repetition of motifs. This influence has been in such a way that some of these motifs can be considered today as an element that expresses Iranian identity. That is why painting and the visual arts are now looking at this era.

• **Pictorial graphics and the presence of some repetitive motifs in the society**

Qajar paintings involve politicizing. This presence of politics in paintings has cultural, economic, and historical aspects. First, in a society in which painting was primarily illustrative and was used for books and mythology, portraiture became prevalent. In such a situation, a noble depicts himself in the paintings rather than myth. At that time, Iranian society was moving toward individualism. The type of painting of kings, despite the photography, has been a tool for instilling political concepts alongside other aspects of society. Legitimation, myth-making, and the understanding of power are among the concepts conveyed through the painting of kings. Iranian society in this period encountered many national and identity problems, such as losing some parts of the country, bitter political, military, and cultural incidents. Therefore, returning to the Qajar period is reminding instability and political defeats. Qajar art is the art of a transition period. This art not only depicts the past but also the future. Thus, the art of this period depicts an ephemeral situation that has three characteristics:

The growth and development of image-based art are one of the important changes in the culture of the Qajar period, which has played a major role in the construction and visual identity of the society and the daily life of the people, more than the text (calligraphy), repetition of motifs in such a way that some of these motifs can be considered today as an element that expresses Iranian identity. At present, that's why painting and the visual arts are now looking at this period.

Birth of a new social class and following that the

birth of a society is a characteristic of this period. Therefore, we can say the Qajar period since Amir Kabir (1807-1852) and from that time onward faced a renaissance. The arrival of the Publishing Industry, the spread of intellectualism, the establishment of Dar ul Funun, and the spread of individualism are the main characteristics of this renaissance (Sojudi, 2011).

Analysis and discussion

• Works that have directly benefited from Qajar art

These works have directly used Qajar art in their form and content and have presented their work as new artistic works through other media. To better learn about these works some of them are introduced here:

- Destruction memories

A collection by Aydin Aghdashlu which part of it is related to the pictorial traditions of the Qajar period. He meticulously tries to copy the works of this period and destroys or abolishes them by using visual tools. In such works, the artist is seeking to imitate the samples so trying to reconstruct mini cracks which are signs of antiquity and tries to recreate them (Fig. 1).

- The collection of Qajar icons by Ardeshir Mohases

Ardeshir Mohases, through using technical methods of graphics and combining these with Contemporary art, succeeded in creating a language that is familiar, bitter, dark, independent, and unique. His works began with a caricature in the Tofigh Magazine during the 60s. Through presenting sketches including dark ironies full of tiny hatchings and by displacing members of the human body Mohases has a very critical look at the Qajar period. In some of his works, the chronicles of flattery age and Qajar icons are no more than an allegory. Mohases delineates a drama that is in opposition to Modernism; among characters and customs which represent Qajar traditions. His caricatures show his contrast towards barbarism of the time, bureaucracy, and the social gap which are not based on human values. Characters wear fine



Fig. 1. Destruction Memories, Aydin Aghdashlu, 1979, Gouache on paper. Source: www.aghdashloo.com.

clothes but hollow or intellectuals are deceived by the luxuries of the Qajar period in a way that medals of Honor do not let them think and have a careful look around them (Fig. 2).

- Qajari's Bahman Jalali photos collection

Part of Jalali's job was his collection and editing of glass negatives in the Golestan Palace which with different perspectives, he then used and changed these pictures of the Qajar period in his work and exhibited them in and outside the country. His collection of images named "Imagination: black and white" imagination, "red", were made from the Qajar negatives (Fig. 3). Jalali has a strange look toward the Qajar period in his art. As if he is criticizing his own time and is taking refuge in past. Below is what the artist says about his works: This attitude is the result of 18 years of work on the photography of the Qajar period and it wasn't done overnight. What I mean is a champion in the gymnasium. As a symbol, I mean a powerful man, not one with a knife in



Fig. 2. Qajarmans, Ardeshir Mohases, ink on paper. Source: Iranian academy of art collection.

his hand. But this picture shows a woman in its background. I am looking for masculinity.

- Qajari's Shadi Ghadirian photo collection

"Qajar album" is the first collection of photos of Ghadirian with a look at women of the Qajar period. Reconstruction of the background curtains of the photography studio and the Qajri arrangement of the photographic models draw the audience's mind to the Qajar period (Ghadirian, 2011). Qajar women here are the symbol of women in traditional Iranian society holding Pepsi cans or guitar and the like, which are considered symbols of Western culture in the modern age (Fig. 4). In this collection, the artist seeks to represent the contradictions in the lives of women in modern

Iranian society.

- Qajar Graffiti

The collection of street art done anonymously in Tehran streets has used Qajar characters through graffiti. In this collection, the works of Qajar characters have been ridiculed by using hyperbole and caricatures (Fig. 5). Although the artist's idea is unknown, his critical view of the Qajar period is quite evident. Using the word "art" with a question mark beside a satiric picture of a character conjures up the comic strip which makes the artist's 'idea clear'.

• Works that have directly benefited from Qajar art

This group of works mostly includes decorative elements used in the art of this age. For example, "Boteh Jeqeh" (Paisley) is one of the motifs, which has been used repeatedly in the Qajar period. The point is that the New and Contemporary arts of Iran have used this motif in different ways. Saqakhaneh artists were among those who showed a great tendency to use such motifs and some of them used these motifs with a stencil. Zhaleh Tabatbaee (Fig. 6) has used the main features of Qajar faces including linked eyebrows, almond eyes, and black moles. Naser Ovisi's works (Fig. 7), a Saqakhaneh artist, primarily show princes with such features too. In these works, one can see the pictures of horse riders, agile princes inspired by Saljuqid and Qajar motifs. According to the artist himself, by using such features he has tried to depict Iranian identity. Parviz Kalantari is also one of these artists who has used familiar elements of Qajar art in his works in a different way (Fig. 8). Sadegh Tabrizi is another artist from this period who has created works by combining Safavid and Qajar statues as well as decorative elements.

-Championship elements and Champions

Using champions, or championship is another considerable subject in the works of the New and



Fig. 3. Imagination, Bahman Jalali, Photography. Source: www.akkasee.com.



Fig. 4. Qajar album, Shadi Ghadirian, 2002, Photography. Source: www.mia.org.qa.



Fig. 5. Qajar man, unknown artist, graffiti. Source :www.graffiti.com.

Contemporary artists. Such works can be seen in the works of artists like Bahman Jalali- who has directly used Qajar slides of champions and other elements to create new works and combinations. Mohammad Ali Taraghi Jah is another artist who has clearly used these elements. Khosro Hasan Zadeh has also combined different Qajar characters especially champions with the use of silk printing techniques and by using words related to the gymnasium and champions like “Ya Ali” has created visual contexts with calligraphy identity (Fig. 9). The presence of championship elements is also evident in the works of Sadegh

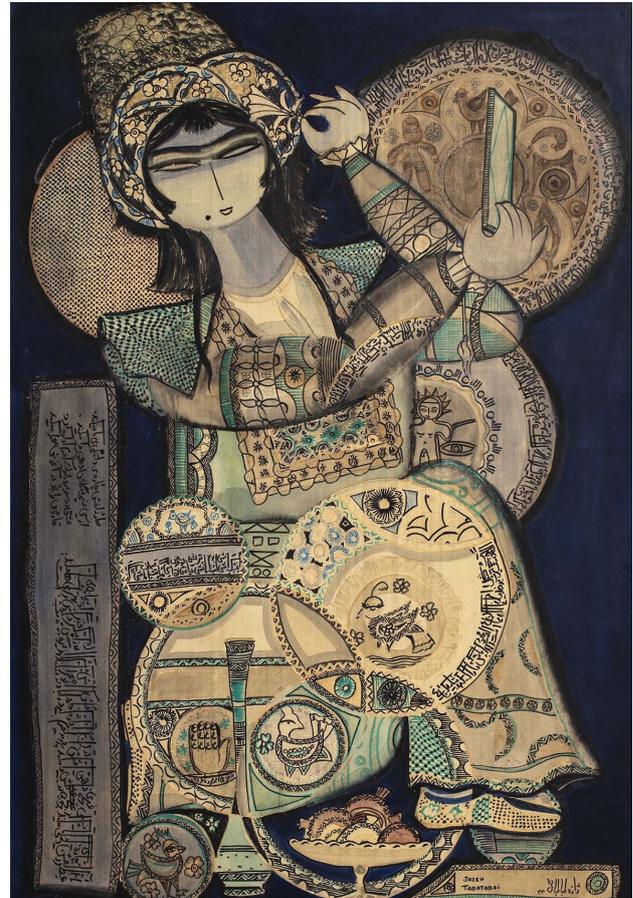


Fig. 6. Untitled, Zohreh Tabatabaee, 1965, oil on canvas. Source: <https://darz.com>.



Fig. 7. Player, Naser Ovisi, 1961, oil on canvas. Source: <https://darz.art>.



Fig. 8. Saghakhaneh, Parviz Kalantari, 2002, Photography. Source: Rasouli & Maleki, 2009.

Tirafkan (Fig. 10) and Hasan Razghandi Through reproducing his own body in the form of champions and by adding Qajar elements. In general, in such works, champions' postures/poses which were usually used in front of the camera –have been used through different techniques. Champions' statues, their clothes, and appearance are among the elements in the works of these artists which have attracted a lot of attention.

• Works whose hidden layers trace back to Qajar art.

This group of works has benefited more from the atmosphere of works in this period. Among these works, we can refer to paintings by Rokni Hayeri Zadeh (Fig. 11). In one of his works, he portrays some women who are performing dramatic gestures. This work has been inspired by a famous and popular painting that is attributed to Ahmad. Vahid Jamani is another young painter whose works fall into this category. His collection of works entitled “Amino Acids” in which the Qajar view can be seen, is a photograph of the Qajar period in which people stand in front of the camera, stunned, dry, and lifeless.

Conclusion

Elements and features of the Qajar art appear in a new form in our arts and the author has chosen the term New Qajarism for that reason. We can mention some reasons for this trend such as the arrival of photography and picture video archives of social realities, journalism, public awareness, and elimination of monopoly. Of other factors which need attention is the existence of art markets outside the country. The managers of exhibitions and collectors outside Iran have shown interest in the Qajar works and this has motivated some artists to have a new look at Qajar work and use it in new ways. Holding various exhibitions of Qajar period art in museums around the world, including the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Museum of Islamic Art



Fig. 11. Right: Dancer, attributed to Ahmad, Qajar period, oil on canvas; Left: Rokny Hayeri Zadeh, Acrylic on canvas. Source: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/rokni-haerizadeh>.



Fig. 9. Pahlavan, Khosrow hassanzadeh, 2006, mix media on canvas. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 10. Pahlavan, Sadegh Tirafkan, Photography. Source: www.chilick.com.

in Doha, and the “Rose Empire” exhibition in Paris, etc. are the results of paying attention to the art of this period. Studying the available works shows that the artists of the 40s and 50s have paid more attention to

the surface structure of the Qajar art. Perhaps, we can say the use of Qajar art in the New and Contemporary art of Iran has changed from attention to surface to the deep hidden layers of works.

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