

Original Research Article

An Analysis of Architectural Representation in the Paintings of Afghanistan over the Last Four Decades

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Abstract

Afghanistan offers the platforms required for the emergence of architectural representation in modern art due to its history in the creation of technically, functionally, and aesthetically architectural remarkable buildings. In addition, there has been a necessity for examining the functions of architectural representation in contemporary paintings and the continuity of this visual perspective in the present era. Such a necessity has been reinforced by the unique perspective of Herat school on the representation of architecture in paintings, such as the transformation of buildings and nature into locations for the action of humans, as well as the use of architecture in this school's paintings. This study is qualitative research employing a descriptive-analytical method. To investigate what semantic and aesthetic roles architecture has played in the paintings of this nation during the previous four decades, data was gathered from the library, the internet, and archival resources. The findings revealed that architectural representation emerges in many forms. Sometimes it is used to describe the locations of events. Sometimes it is used as a painting pattern in naturalistic works to enhance the aesthetics of buildings. It is also employed as a visual document in history or ethnography, and it underlines the difference between tradition and modernization. Examples of cubist, surrealist and abstract representations of architecture can also be seen in the works.

Keywords: *Representation, Afghanistan Contemporary Painting, Architectural Representation.*

Introduction

The large territories of Khorasan and Transoxiana (Vararvadan) were located on the Silk Road and served as crossroads for compromise, the transmission of ideas, concepts, culture, and art, linking the domains of civilization of Iran, India, China, and Mesopotamia (Javadi, 2014, 12). From

Afghanistan's independence (1919) until Karzai's ascension to power in 2001, the country's rule has changed thirteen times owing to ethnic, religious, and political turmoil, the Soviet Union's war, and later the civil war. Each of these political and social shifts has had a significant influence on the development of art in Afghanistan. As in the Amani era, great emphasis was placed on the establishment of a faculty of arts, schools, and high schools, the invitation of foreign professors from a variety of countries, including

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Germany, the United States, the Philippines, and Japan, and the encouragement of women to participate in artistic activities. In the era of the Mujahideen and the Taliban, however, art and its education were restricted or banned, and art colleges and museums were set on fire. Nevertheless, contemporary Afghan paintings have presented valuable works to the art world with the advent of painters since the beginning of the Amani Reformation. Afghanistan, a country with an Islamic Republic government, has a history stretching back several thousand years. This is one of Asia's most controversial and divisive countries from a political standpoint. The political and social climate in this country is so volatile that its flag, the country's most important national symbol, has changed nineteen times in one hundred years. From Afghanistan's independence (1919) until Karzai's ascension to power in 2001, the leadership of the country changed thirteen times owing to ethnic, religious, and political conflict, the Soviet Union's war, the civil wars, and other factors. Each of these political and social changes has had a great impact on the arts in this country. For example, in the Amani era, much attention was paid to the establishment of the Faculty of Arts, schools, and high schools. Foreign professors from several countries, such as Germany, the USA, the Philippines, and Japan were invited to teach, and women were freely engaged in artistic activities. In contrast, in the era of the Mujahideen and the Taliban, art and its education were restricted or banned, and art colleges and museums were set on fire. Despite this, contemporary Afghan painting has contributed to the art world with the advent of painters since the beginning of the Amani Reformation. The point is that the life of the Afghan people has been influenced by the cultures and arts of different ethnic groups due to their important geographical location, and this impact has been accompanied by observations and understanding of aesthetics, including architecture. The oldest architecture in Afghanistan started in Bokhdi city.

Through its interactions with Indo-Chinese, Greek, Arabic, and European architectural art, it has taken different forms (Popal, 2014, 12). Examining pre-Islamic architecture, including French archaeological excavations in Mandigak (fifty-five kilometers north of Kandahar) in 1951, shows that the people of Afghanistan have settled in villages since 3,000 BC. They used to build houses of raw clay on half-columns. Most of the architectural works from pre-Islamic times belong to the art period (Greco-Bactrian Kingdom), which dates back to the fourth century BC. An example of the architectural monuments refers to the city of Ayhankhom, which has remained from the time of Alexander the Great and is related to the art and architecture of the West Greek era in Afghanistan. Takht-e Rostam in Samangan is also one of the architectural masterpieces of the Kushan period, and the temples discovered in the Bagram area represent the glorious architecture of the period (Buddhist Greece) in Afghanistan (Ghobar, 1989, 55-34). Also, in the post-Islamic period, architecture and calligraphy were the most important Islamic arts in Afghanistan. The culmination of Islamic art has been reflected in the dome-shaped mosques with four porches and columns. One of the earliest Islamic buildings in Afghanistan is the Noh Gonbad Mosque (known as Haji Piyada) in Balkh, which was built in the middle of the ninth century AD in the Samanid style. Architecture in Afghanistan flourished during the Ghaznavid period and was characterized by the most magnificent minarets, mosques, gardens, and schools in Ghazni city. The Minaret of Jam and the Grand Mosque of Herat, among the remnants of the Ghorian dynasty in Afghanistan, also reflect the richness of architectural art in this period (Shahrani 2014, 113). The life of the Afghan people has been tied up with aesthetics and architectural uses reflected by the architecture of houses, mosques, bazaars, and other buildings. In the most important visual legacy of this country, there is a representation of architecture. In Herat school, a logical relationship

was established between human beings, objects, and the environment, resulting in a proportionate and dynamic composition in the small and paper-sized drawings (Behnesi, 2006, 514).

In this respect, architecture in the Herat school, as an organizer, played an important and functional role in the structural composition of the drawings. In many contemporary Afghan paintings, the presence of architectural monuments is evident. Based on what has been discussed, the question is what semantic and aesthetic functions architecture has played in the painting of this country over the last four decades?

Research method

This study is qualitative research employing a descriptive-analytical method. Data was gathered from the library, the internet, and archival resources. The collections of eighty-five painters in the last forty years were examined, and the samples in which there was an architectural representation (about 150 works) were separated and purposively selected and analyzed.

Literature review

Examining two studies by Abdul Wase Rahro Omarzad (2018) entitled “Afghan Art in the Recent Century Research and Rafieirad & Tomiris (2017, 19-20) entitled “The Function of the Figure in Painting Two Decades of Afghanistan “ show that the historical course of Afghan painting falls into four periods: «before Islam», «after Islam», «period of realism» and «after the civil wars» Another division through a stylistic lens includes «pre-Islamic», «first golden period (Herat school)», «second golden period (Amani government)» and «modernity (last two decades)» (Omarzad, 2018, 16).

Also, in studies by Rafiei Rad and Mohammadzadeh (2020) entitled “Strategies of Afghan women painters in recreating and reviving the visual heritage of painting in contemporary painting”, and “Comparison of the methods of applying visual painting traditions

in the Works of Contemporary Women Painters in Iran and Afghanistan”, they made brief references to the history of painting in Afghanistan, presented the works of contemporary women painters in this country, then analyzed their forms and content (Rafiei Rad & Mohammadzadeh, 2020, 31–35).

The article entitled “Adaptation of the representation of the image of women in the contemporary painting of Afghanistan and Tajikistan” in 1400, written by Rafiei Rad & Amirpour (2021). focused on the painting history of these two countries. 39). In his article, “A Study of the Art of Painting in Kabul”, Abdul Qadir Sarwari attempted to introduce some contemporary painters, such as “Gholam Mohammad Meimangi” and “Abdul Ghafoor Breshna” and their works (Sarwary, 2020, 17–20). However, none of these studies has examined the representation of architecture in paintings so far. Another available resource was written by Rahimi (2010). Rahimi examined the historical course of painting and miniature in Afghanistan, as well as Manichaeon painting and Timurid miniature. In the book of Timurid art and its aftermath, Abdul Hai Habibi presented comprehensive information about Timurid art (Habibi, 1988, 120–140). Also in the book entitled “History of Afghanistan” (from prehistoric times to the fall of Moria) Kehzad (1976) provided a brief explanation of the art of Afghanistan. In “Reconstructing War-Torn Societies, Afghanistan”, Dupree in 2004 examined the challenges of cultural heritage and national identity in Afghanistan (Dupree, 1977, 977-980).

Theoretical foundation

Representation in art in general means that the artist recreates the sensory experience in the outside world through artistic tools such as color, words, or sound. Some see the artist as incapable of presenting the representation of truth and the ability to embody the true nature of things in painting and make it appear to be imitations rather than truth (Plato, 1974, 21).

Newer theories do not consider representation to be merely an imitation of an object, but a paradoxical meaning of “the object itself.” In the Platonic sense of representation, similarity is considered a necessary condition for representation (Carroll, 2002, 51). However, according to the new concepts of representation, the representative feature of all works of art is their common feature; that is, all works of art are a type of representation (Kivy, 2001, 50). He examined and analyzed a work by Picasso in which he showed that creating a resemblance is only one of the purposes of representation. And by analyzing Picasso’s caricature of a rooster, he shows that representation may serve purposes other than similarity (Graham, 2004, 117). Thus, in the following section, the forms of architectural representation in contemporary Afghan paintings are examined. The representation of architecture in the remnant visual work on Afghanistan’s past can be traced to the few archaeological discoveries in this country. Paintings from the historical period in Afghanistan can be found on pottery in Sayyid Qala, near Kandahar and the Mandigak area. In these works, the method of geometric design by line and including the design of love flowers and animals such as goats and geometric shapes such as rhombuses, squares, and parallel lines, has been and is. Artifacts from the Achaemenid era in Afghanistan can be seen more in the form of architecture in various areas, such as Balkh, Cheshmeh Shafa, Delberjin, Bala Hesar, Talatpeh, and several other areas. In the Bronze Age, most of the artifacts are sculptures and architecture in the town of Aikhanoum (Frankfort, 2014, 55). In these works, the method of geometric design includes lines, love flowers, animals such as goats, and geometric shapes such as rhombuses, squares, and parallel lines. Artifacts from the Achaemenid era in Afghanistan can be seen more in the form of architecture in various areas, such as Balkh, Cheshmeh Shafa, Delberjin, Bala Hesar, Talatpeh, and several other areas. In the western Greek Age,

most of the artifacts are sculptures and architecture in the town of Aikhanoum. From the Kushan era, a tablet with the title Jataka Scene was obtained, representing a minaret-like structure in the image. Architectural representations are less common during the Kushan period in Afghanistan, and murals in western Balkh depicting commanders and princes (Kruglikova, 1979, 12) and paintings of Bamyán caves and Mes Aynak Logar often represent Buddha (Yavari, 2020, 15) and rarely represents architecture.

In the paintings of the Timurid era, the representation of architecture brings order to the structure of the paintings and the place of the characters in the painting. Also, the more realistic view of architecture, the use of details and decorations on the architectural surfaces, and the change in the taste of selected illustrated texts are some of the factors that have improved Herat school miniatures in terms of architectural displays and given them a more practical aspect on the page (Mohammadzadeh & Messina Asl, 2016, 27). In fact, in this school, architecture and nature have become the place for the action of figures (Pakbaz, 2007, 105). An example of this is Behzad’s works, the construction of Khornagh Palace (Figs. 1&2).

• Contemporary painting of Afghanistan

From the establishment of the modern state by Ahmad Shah Abdali until the Amani reforms, Afghan painters devoted themselves to miniatures such as miniatures on pencil cases, table painting, and decorating the margins of the Qur’an and watercolor painting. In this period, the cultural policies of the country were aimed at developing handicrafts and teaching ancient sciences in mosques and schools (Ghobar, 1989, 410) under the sectarian monarchy system (Sayar, 2013, 15-17). Amanullah Shah’s reforms attempted two goals: progress and independence (Mohseni, 2014, 9). Apart from changing the absolute monarchy to constitutionalism, important steps were taken to modernize Afghanistan (Omrani, 2007, 156–157). After returning from Germany, Ghulam Mohammad

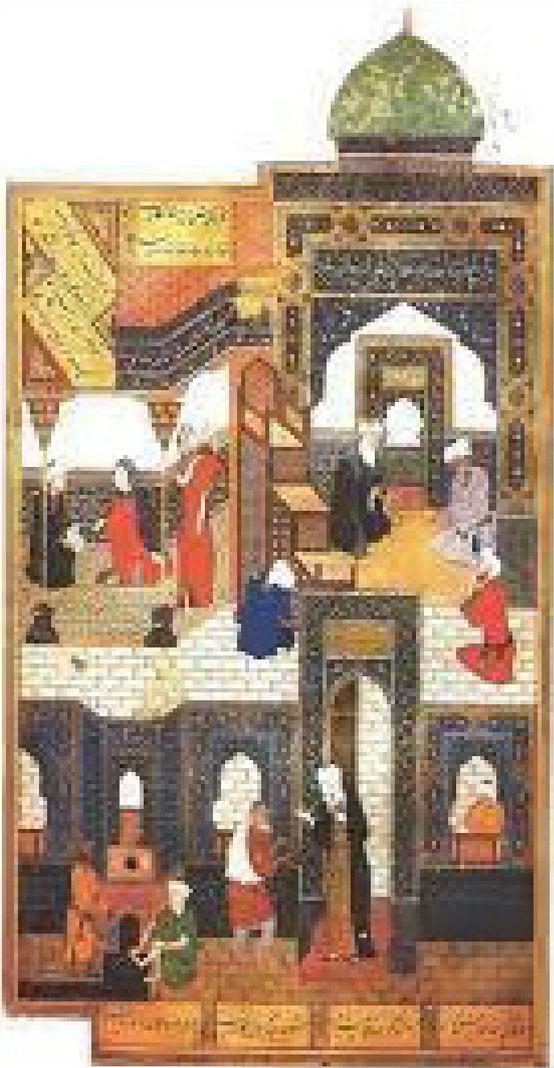


Fig. 1. A beggar at the door of the mosque. Source: Graber, 2004, 108.

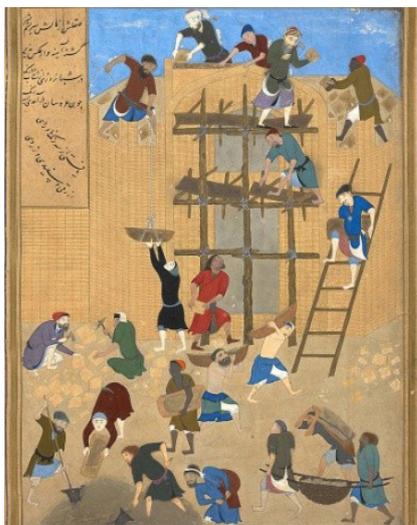


Fig. 2. Construction of Khornagh Palace. Source: Graber, 2004, 108.

Maimangi, known as the “father of Afghan painting,” established the Nafiseh School of Crafts in Kabul (Kashkaki, 1924, 34), and all of the recent Afghan painters were trained by him, and the vast majority of them graduated from that school.

Despite all the ups and downs of this period, including Hashemikhani’s tyranny, painters who graduated from Nafiseh School of Crafts made great progress. The Faculty of Fine Arts started working independently in 1966, and except for Amanullah Heidarzad in the sculpture department, Enayatullah Shahrani, Mohammad Hamed Navid, Ahmad Tamim Etemadi, and Ruhollah Naqshbandi, were among the first teachers in the painting department in this faculty. This period is featured with the continuity of the realism of the Herat school (Rafiei Rad & Tomiris, 2017, 19).

In this period, the works of professional painters, such as Breshna, are more focused on a realistic view of nature, old alleys, mud houses, and people’s lives. This period is characterized by academicism, acceptance of naturalistic standards and their absoluteness in the fields of education and creation, continuity, and reflects conservative uniformity in the form and artistic content of Afghanistan (Omarzad, 2018, 15). The coup d’etat of Haft Saur in 1978 and the change in the form of Afghanistan’s government from the Republic to the Democratic Republic led to the stagnation of Afghan art.

Hamed Navid and Amanullah Heidarzad were resettled as refugees in the United States. In mid-1981, the management of the College of Fine Arts was handed over to two former Soviets, and most of the faculty went to the United States. After that, the political changes in the country, and the domination of the Mujahideen and then the Taliban, nullified all the efforts of the country’s artists.

When Dr. Najibullah came to power, Soviet troops left Afghanistan. Then, the war between the Mujahideen and the Soviet Union led to the destruction of artistic, cultural, and educational centers, and then, in 1996,

with the end of the war and the rise of the Taliban, the organized destruction of Bamiyan Buddhists occurred in March 2001. Although it had a global reflection, the Taliban ordered the destruction of the statues in the newly renovated Kabul National Museum and also destroyed a unique rock relief at Ragh-i Bibi (Simpson, 2011, 98). The Taliban also deleted art education from school curriculums and prohibited the practice of arts like sculpture, music, photography, film, and painting (Rafiei Rad, Tomiris, 2017). When the Taliban were defeated and Hamid Karzai came to power, there was a period of painting boom from 2001 to 2014. Due to a greater emphasis on the fundamentals of Western art during this era, orders for contemporary-style paintings increased but interest in painting decreased (Mohammadzadeh & Rafiei Rad, 2020, 2). In the last twenty years, a new space for modernization has emerged, and women have found a chance to work in the realm of art. After this period of transformation, creativity, emphasis on the power of thought, innovation, modernity, and freedom of expression in art have been emphasized more than ever, and the pioneering of women in this period is one of the features of this new era (Omarzad, 2018, 16).

• Forms of architectural representation in the paintings of the last four decades of Afghanistan

According to what has been said about the history of the emergence of architectural representation in the visual heritage of Afghanistan, particularly the school of Herat and the ups and downs that contemporary painting has gone through so far, the following functions of representation in Afghan painting over the past four decades are as follows:

- Description of the time and place of events

In some paintings, the artist attempts to recreate reality by employing architecture to provide a more authentic representation of the scene. For example, in a work entitled “Buzkashi” by Sam Massoud, the location in the national game of Afghanistan becomes more physical reality and its time limit is determined

by the existence of structures in the background (See Fig. 3). Because Buzkashi is a national and collective game played by Afghan tribes since the time of the Scythians (Azoy, 2011, 3-4), and the painter aims to depict its continuity in today’s urban and rural locations,

• Accurate attention and emphasis on the aesthetics of the architectural building

Architecture is always immobile and, unlike human and animal figures or other moving objects, it stands still and does not move. This is a very important and necessary feature in painting and drawing. For this reason, both professional and non-professional painters in Afghanistan use architectural structures as models for painting. Sometimes it is used to practice and acquire skills in using painting tools and sometimes to show a professional painter’s skill in using tools and his knowledge of form, light, and other capabilities of painting. The shrine of Sultan Agha in Herat (Fig. 4) and Shah Dushamshireh mosque in Kabul City (Fig. 5) are painted with watercolor by Rashid Rahmani.

• Presenting genre and historiographical paintings

Some works, intentionally or unintentionally, in addition to showing the painter’s expertise in architectural aesthetics, also reflect a kind of ethnography and historiography. For example, in another work (Fig. 6) entitled “Moradkhani Alley,” by the contemporary painter “Sam Massoud,” the artist refers to one of the most important old parts of Kabul, which was formed during the time of Timur and has survived to this day. Moradkhani Alley is located next to the Presidential Palace and ten houses in that alley have been registered as cultural heritage during Karzai’s time. Also, the untitled painting of Naqshband Heydari (Fig. 7) portrays the place of the mosque and its centrality in the city in the painting. The painting not only points to the religious and Islamic images of architecture along with today’s market but also shows economic and commercial interactions and the presence of cars.



Fig. 3. "Goat slaughter" by Sam Massoud. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 4. "Shrine of Soltan-Aqa" by Rashed Rahmani. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 5. "Shah-Doshamshireh mosque" by Rashed Rahmani. Source: Author's archive.

In the untitled painting (Fig. 8), the artist has used the architecture of Daralaman Palace as a model. This palace was constructed during the reign of Amanullah Shah based on the political relations between the Afghan government and Germany at the beginning of the fourteenth lunar century. This architectural structure was built under the supervision of a German engineer named Walter Harton. In this type of painting, architectural work may emerge in two forms of signs. In that area of the painting

where there are formal similarities, lies an iconic sign, and in that area where the architecture refers to something ethnographic and historical, it may appear as a symbolic sign. For example, a bazaar, a mosque, a playground, or a modern building, each represents a symbol of things like the inner world, spirituality, life challenges, or the world of capital.

• Nostalgic and poetic expression

Some of the paintings also show the artist's yearning for ancient spaces or scenes that evoke memories in humans. These architectural renderings might be abstract or realistic. An example of this can be seen in the untitled work shown in Fig 9, which is suggestive of antique buildings with latticed and handcrafted doors.

• Cubist representation of architecture

Some artists have also sought their cubist expression through architectural representation. These architectural representations are inferential, recognizing the similarity between meaning and form. An example of this can be seen in the untitled work by Abdul Nasser Swabi (Fig. 10).

• Portray of the contrast between tradition and modernity

One of the main concerns for contemporary artists refers to the course of developments that have taken place in the political, cultural, and technological history of the Orient. Modernity, with its mesmerizing rationality, challenges aspects of tradition, and the reflection of these challenges can also be seen in the paintings. As shown in Fig. 11 of the untitled painting, the work of "Tawfiq Rahmani", the national game of Afghanistan, is painted in front of modern towers in the sky, which shows a contrast between tradition and modernity. There are many such works in contemporary Afghan paintings.

• Surrealist expression

In some cases, the realistic aesthetics of the architectural building give way to surrealist expression, and the artist tries to express his inner being and spiritual revelations through the presence of architecture. As

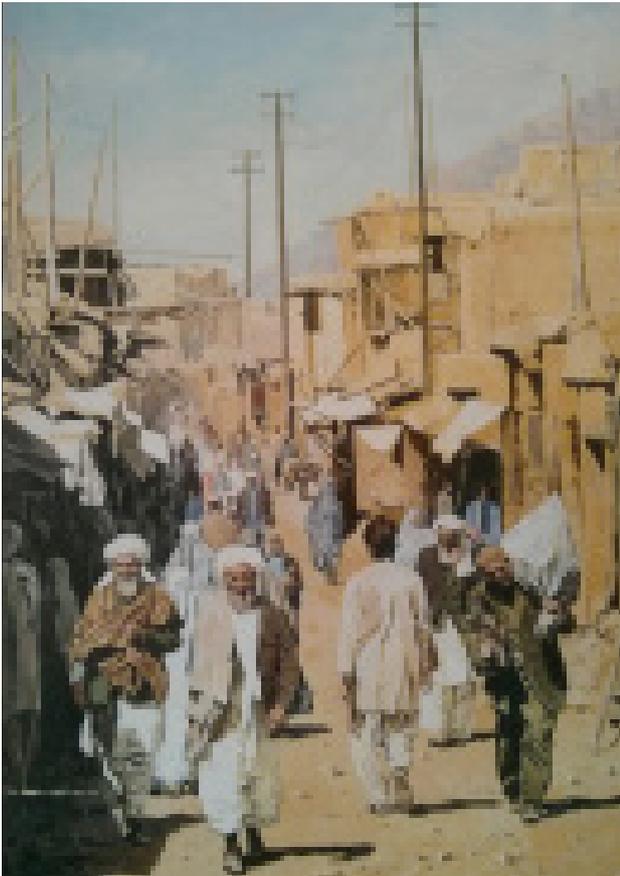


Fig. 6. "Moradkhani alley" by Sam massoud. Source: Author's archive.

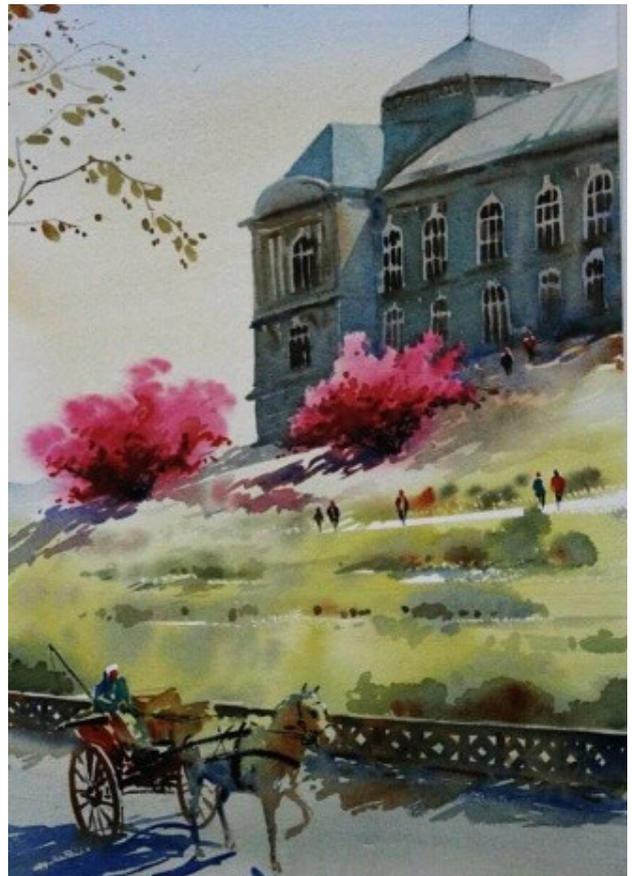


Fig. 8. "Dar-Ol-Aman castle" by Kayhan Hamidi. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 7. "Shah mosque" by Naqshband Heydari. Source: Author's archive.

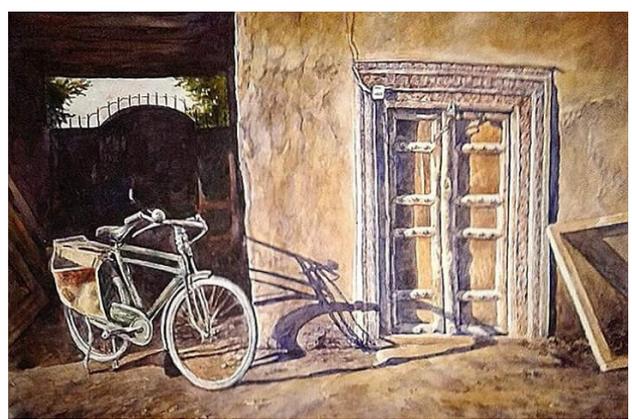


Fig. 9. Painting by Naqshband Heydari. Source: Author's archive.

shown in **Figs. 13 & 14**, untitled paintings by Hafiz Pakzad and Akbar Khorasani, the formal similarity between face and meaning is not trusted by the artist, and the representation of architecture is placed in an unreal space and contributes to creating the surrealist expression of the artist.

Some of the paintings also indicate a kind of artist nostalgia for old spaces or scenes that evoke memories in human beings. These representations of architecture can be abstract or naturalistic. Like the untitled work in **Fig. 9**, which is reminiscent of old houses with latticed and handmade doors.



Fig. 10. Painting by Abdul Nasser Swabi. Source: Author's archive.

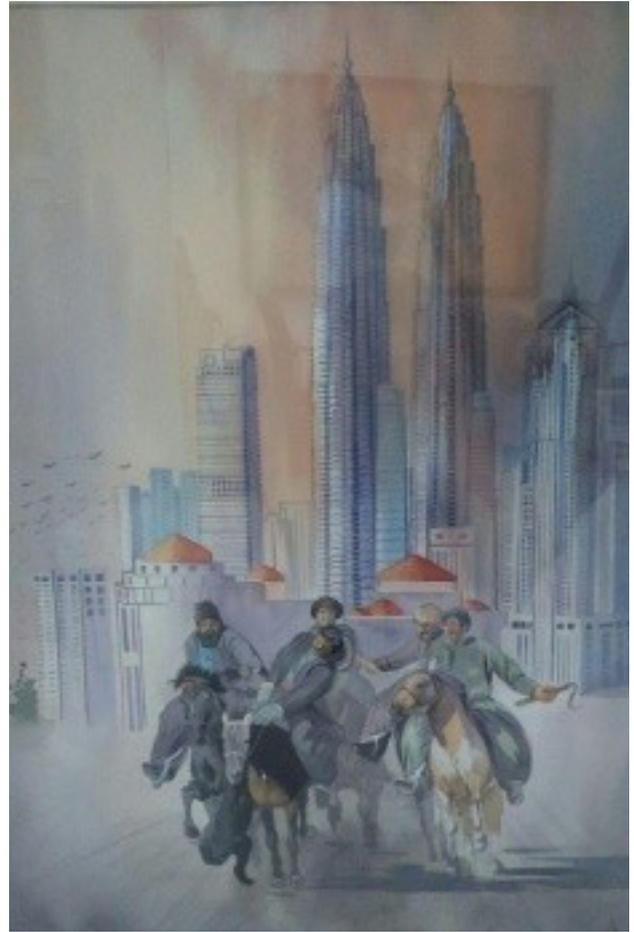


Fig. 11. "Goat slaughter" by Tawfiq Rahmani. Source: Author's archive.

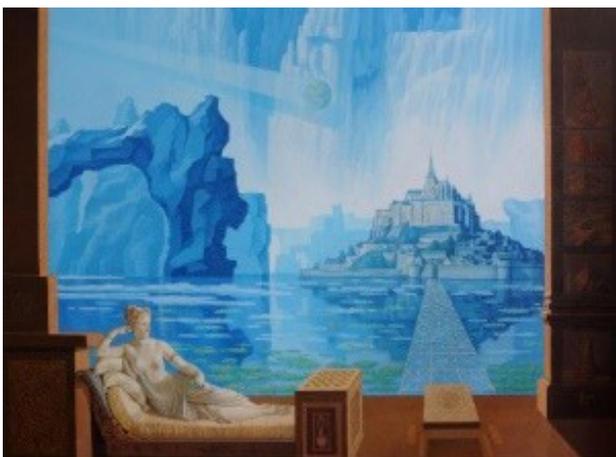


Fig. 12. Painting by Hafiz Pakzad. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 13. Painting by Akbar Khorasani. Source: Author's archive.

Abstract representation of the architectural structure: Some works also emphasized the abstract aspects of architecture. In some of these works, the building

assumes functional architecture as a visual element. For example, in the untitled work of Amin Tasheh (Fig. 15), dark and bright colors contribute to a



Fig. 14. Untitled, Amin Tasheh.. Source: Author's archive.

visual combination, and architecture plays a shallow, dark role rather than a functional element in human life. In an untitled work by Salehe Vafa Javad, architectural representation appears in several curves in the form of arches (Fig. 16), and in the untitled work of Shamsieh Hassani, architectural buildings are in cube forms (Fig. 17), and in Asieh Mohebbi's painting entitled Revelation, architectural buildings are abstracted in the form of vertical colored surfaces and lines (see Fig. 17).

Conclusion

In addition to being a functional structure in people's lives, architecture has also emerged as an expressive and hidden symbol in the art of painting in Afghanistan. The representation of architecture in Afghan painting can also be seen in the Herat school. In the initial drawings, only elements of architecture were drawn, such as part of the facade, but later it was gradually completed and reached its peak and became a dynamic space.

In addition to being a functional structure in people's lives, architecture has also emerged as an expressive and hidden symbol in the painting art in Afghanistan. The representation of architecture in Afghan paintings can also be seen in the Herat school. In the initial drawings, only elements of architecture used to be drawn, such as part of the facade, but later it was gradually completed and reached its peak and became a dynamic space. Structures such as religious and public buildings had practical aspects. A contemporary Afghan painter also understands the

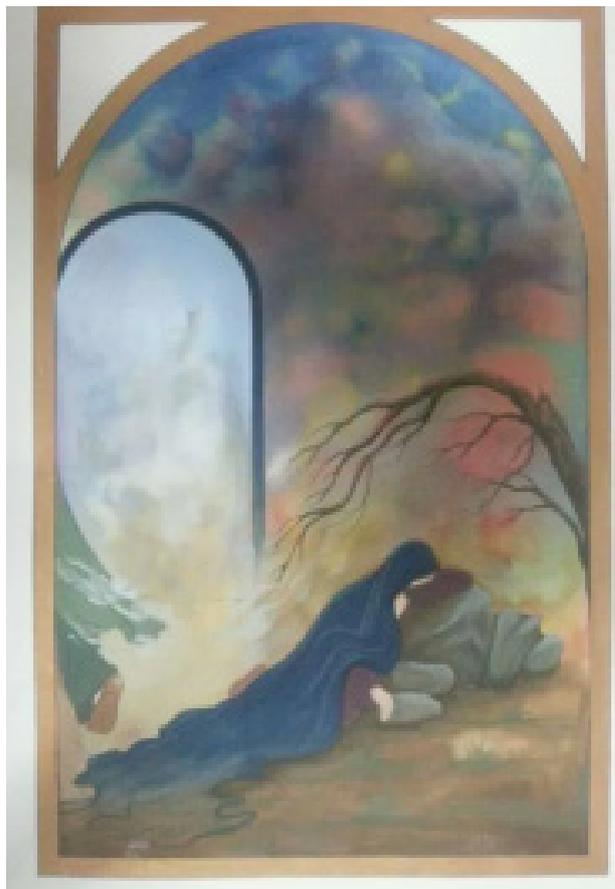


Fig. 15. Untitled, Salehe Vasfa Javad. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 16. Untitled, Shamsieh Hassani.. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 17. Reunion, Asieg Mohebbi.. Source: Author's archive.

aesthetics of traditional and modern architecture and reflects it in his painting. Sometimes he creates new meaning and various semantic and formal functions for architectural representation through changes. Such semantic and aesthetic functions in this country's painting over the last four decades can be reflected by depicting the time and place of the event, the formal aesthetics of architecture, ethnography, historiography, nostalgic and poetic expression, cubist representation, depicting the contrast between tradition and modernity, and surrealist and abstract expression. Contemporary Afghan painters have used the painting techniques reflecting the country's artistic heritage and combined them with Western art styles, using a wider range of architectural representations in paintings.

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