

Original Research Article

Examining and Identifying the Components of Self Taught Expression in Qajar Coffeehouse Paintings

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Received: 05/10/2025

Accepted: 04/04/2026

Available online: 01/07/2026

Abstract

Coffeehouse painting, as an independent stream of Iranian popular art, is a manifestation of self-taught artistic practice and reflects the cultural and religious identity of its society. Despite numerous studies on the history and themes of this tradition, the components of self-taught expression within its visual structure have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This study aims to identify and systematically analyze the components of self-taught expression in coffeehouse paintings in the Qajar Period, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the artistic and cultural characteristics of this tradition. This research adopts a descriptive-analytical and developmental approach. The sample works were purposively selected from four prominent coffeehouse painters to encompass a diversity of religious, epic, and folkloric themes. The methodological framework combines content analysis, case study, and hermeneutic interpretation. Data were analyzed qualitatively, leading to the extraction of key components of self-taught expression. These include: departure from realism, simultaneous narrative composition, the use of intense, high-chroma colors, shifting viewpoints, and the absence of classical proportions. The components were then organized into a structured analytical table. The analysis reveals that coffeehouse painters, relying on lived experience and individual creativity, deviated from classical rules of perspective and proportion. Instead, they employed a hierarchical perspective and expressive approaches. The concurrent presence of multiple narratives, shifting viewpoints, the symbolic and exaggerated use of color and light, and the disregard for natural anatomical and spatial proportions all signify a departure from realism and a distinct tendency toward vivid, high-chroma palettes.

Keywords: *Self Taught Art, Components of Self Taught Expression, Coffeehouse Painting, Qajar Painting.*

Introduction

The art of the Qajar period represents one of the

* This article extracted from Ph.D. thesis of "Parisa Golaghaei" entitled "Critical Discourse Analysis of Folk Painting in the Construction of National Identity in the Post-Constitutional Qajar Era" that under supervision of Dr. "Javad Aghajani Keshteli" and "Mahmoud Ashari" and in consultation of Dr. "Hojat Amani" which is in progress at Department of Art Studies, Faculty of Art and Architecture, University of Science and Art, Yazd.

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most significant phases in the history of Iranian art. During this era, social, political, and cultural transformations found broad expression in artistic production. Painting of the Qajar period manifested primarily through two parallel currents: first, the courtly tradition, which—supported by political and financial patronage—served to depict the authority

and grandeur of the monarchs; and second, the popular tradition, in which national ideals were represented through traditional visual modes and expressed as scenes drawn from the Iranian epic heritage. Within this context, narrative painting with religious and epic national themes emerged in the form of coffeehouse painting, created by self-taught artists outside formal academic institutions. As the first independent movement of popular painting in Iran, coffeehouse painting—unlike academic or courtly traditions—was shaped by artists who relied on lived experience, imagination, and individual creativity to re-envision religious narratives, such as the events of Ashura, and epic stories from the *Shahnameh*. In doing so, they produced a distinctive form of pictorial narration. The components of self-taught expression in the works of these artists are noteworthy not only as stylistic features but also as markers of a popular artistic identity and as an intentional distancing from official art. The central question of this study is: What are the components of self-taught expression in coffeehouse painting in the Qajar period, and how are they reflected in the visual structure of these works? The significance of this research can be considered from two perspectives. First, as a visual heritage, coffeehouse painting played an essential role in preserving and transmitting religious, national, and folkloric narratives within Iranian culture. Examining its self-taught components enriches our understanding of the popular foundations of Iranian art. Second, although previous scholarship has addressed the history, themes, and style of coffeehouse painting, the notion of self-taught expression as an independent analytical framework has received relatively little attention. Thus, by emphasizing the identification of these components, the present study seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature and contribute to a deeper understanding of the position of self-taught artists within the history of Iranian art.

Literature Review

A review of the existing literature indicates that no comprehensive study employing the combined conceptual framework adopted in the present research has yet been undertaken. Nevertheless, a number of scattered but relevant studies can be found across adjacent scholarly fields. Although in terms of its subject matter and overall architecture, the present study is distinguished by its comprehensiveness and internal coherence, it nonetheless shares conceptual affinities with several earlier approaches. The following section highlights the most significant studies that have laid the necessary theoretical and empirical foundation for constructing the framework of the present research. One of the earliest written sources on this artistic movement is the book *Coffeehouse Painting*, which examines the historical development of coffeehouse painting, its social and ideological foundations, and the lives and works of its most prominent practitioners (Seif & Kaboli, 2021). Another important source is *Coffeehouse Painting: Selected Articles and Interviews*, a collection of papers and interviews presented at the exhibition of “*Khayal Painters*” (a genre derived from coffeehouse painting) held at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in Spring 2010. This volume provides an introduction to the art of coffeehouse painting and includes interviews with the exhibition curator as well as several coffeehouse painters (Abdolhosseini & Hamed, 2020). The article “A Study and Analysis of Outsider Art and Its Entrance into the Art World Based on Arthur Danto’s Views” discusses the acceptance of self-taught artists within the institutional art world. Drawing on Danto’s theory, it argues that the recognition of such works as “art” depends largely on the decisions of influential members of the art world (Mortazavi et al., 2020). Another study, “An Examination of Shi’a Iconographic Symbols in Coffeehouse Painting,” traces the historical origins of these motifs—dating them

back to the Buyid period—and emphasizes their significance in reinforcing Shi'a identity, patriotic sentiment, and the defense of religious beliefs (Hosseinabadi & Mohammadpour, 2016). The article “An Analysis of Folkloric Narratives in Religious–Coffeehouse Paintings” identifies and interprets several popular narratives represented in these works. It concludes that the artists of this tradition were, for the most part, largely unschooled and rendered these stories primarily to make the narratives more accessible and engaging for a popular audience (Mehrnia & Gorosi, 2022). The article “The Manifestation of the Ashura Epic in Qajar Period Coffeehouse Paintings” examines both the direct and indirect influences of the Ashura narrative on the creation of these works (Kazemnejad et al., 2017). Another study, “Reflections on National and Religious Themes in Coffeehouse Painting,” explores the reasons behind the tendency of Khayal painters toward written and oral epic literature, heroic narratives, and religious themes (Chalipa et al., 2011). In “Reading Coffeehouse Painting and the Wall Paintings of the Isfahan School Based on the Concept of Dialogue in Gadamer’s Modern Hermeneutics,” the authors argue that the artist, through engaging in a dialogical encounter with the visual legacy of the Isfahan School within the intellectual artistic climate of the Constitutional era—an era heavily shaped by the spread of Western artistic elements—creates his work in response to this expanded visual horizon (Taherian et al., 2023). Overall, the review of these studies reveals that although research has been conducted both on coffeehouse painting and on self-taught art, there remains a scarcity of comprehensive studies that meticulously and systematically analyze the constituent elements of self-taught artistry within the coffeehouse painting tradition.

Theoretical Framework

• Painting in the Qajar period

The Qajar period (1789–1925) stands as a transformative juncture in Iranian political and cultural history, characterized by direct encounters with the West, shifts in power structures, urban development, and the emergence of modern media. Within this historical context, the art of painting ceased to be a mere continuation of established traditional canons; instead, it evolved in alignment with profound social changes, becoming a domain for the reconfiguration of cultural motifs and functions. Scholarly evidence suggests that painting during this period, contingent upon its origins, patronage, and intended audience, bifurcated into two distinct and significant streams:

- **The first phase: official and court painting (royal portraiture)**

Primarily taking shape during the reigns of Agha Mohammad Khan, Fath-Ali Shah, and Mohammad Shah, this phase was largely driven by courtly interests and the royal mandate (Khan Salar, 2017, 113). During this period, painting diverged from ancient epic and mythological narratives, transforming into an instrument for projecting the grandeur of the monarchy and projecting political power. The visual characteristics of this school include an anthropocentric approach—emphasizing the visages of the Shah and the princes—alongside the adoption of a Western-influenced perspective, three-dimensional spatial construction, and landscape backdrops.

However, the essence of this art gravitated toward a particular aesthetic; as Afsarian (2023, 30) asserts: “From the early 18th century, official Iranian painting shifted toward a hedonistic, body-oriented, and entertainment-oriented representation.” This transition in courtly painting caused the image to detach from its social function of embodying collective ideals, serving instead exclusively the visual gratification of the elite.

- **The second phase: popular art and the**

emergence of the coffeehouse school

In the latter half of the Qajar period (the Nasserite era and beyond), as the currents of modernity intensified, the limitations of courtly art became increasingly apparent; official painting could no longer satisfy the cultural and emotional needs of the general populace (Modarresi, 2008, 32). The void created by the alienation of courtly art from the core of society paved the way for a new mode of visual expression that emerged from the heart of public culture and communal spaces. Consequently, the dichotomy between “aristocratic” and “popular” spheres became pronounced. As Afshar-Mohajer (2005, 43) notes: “Court art functioned in the service of visual pleasure and the representation of royal power, whereas popular art possessed a collective, ritualistic, and identity-constructing nature.” Thus, national and religious ideals were redefined through epic imagery, and “Coffeehouse Painting” emerged as a narrative, imaginative, and concept-driven style intended to reflect the cultural memory and the values of the masses (Khan Salar, 2017, 76).

• Coffeehouse painting

Coffeehouse painting is a distinct, late-emerging movement in the history of Iranian art that arose from the heart of society. It emerged concurrently with the Constitutional Revolution, rooted in the traditions of popular and religious art (Hosseinabadi & Mohammadpour, 2016, 38). Pakbaz (2013, 201) characterizes this style as a form of narrative painting encompassing martial, religious, and festive themes. Although it employs the medium of naturalistic painting (oil on canvas) in its technique, in essence, it reflects the ideals, national interests, and religious beliefs of the urban middle class. The genesis of this art form must be sought in the profound connection between the Qahveh-Khaneh (coffeehouse) and the Zurkhaneh, two contiguous institutions tasked with nurturing both body and soul. If

the Zurkhaneh fortified the body with the meel and kabbadeh (traditional athletic tools), the coffeehouse infused the audience’s soul with the spirit of chivalry through the oratorical words of the Naqqal (traditional storyteller) and the visual impact of narrative canvases (Rasteh, 2023, 35). Furthermore, the historical lineage of this art traces back to the ancient traditions of storytelling, elegy recitation, and Ta’zieh (passion plays). The coffeehouse painter essentially acts as the “silent narrator” of the very tales that the Naqqal vocalized (Zokralizadeh, 2021, 42). Structurally, coffeehouse painting is considered one of the most prominent branches of folk art, predicated on the principle of Khayalsazi (imaginative painting). The artists of this school, though predominantly unschooled, possessed an overflowing natural talent. They created their works based on personal beliefs and experiences, completely unconstrained by scientific perspective or the principles of academic anatomy. In this pictorial space, “narrative” takes precedence over “visual reality” (Hosseini, 2023, 15). In this stylistic approach, the painter utilizes specific semantic conventions; these include depicting central figures (saints and heroes) larger than antagonists (hierarchical perspective), utilizing symbolic and vivid colors, and fracturing conventional time and space—such that an entire narrative, from inception to conclusion, is often portrayed on a single canvas (Khan Salar, 2017, 118). Their primary objective was to evoke a profound emotional response from the audience, paying little heed to academic aesthetic or technical parameters (Zokralizadeh, 2021, 10). The principal subjects of these works comprised tales from the Shahnameh and the Khamseh, the tragedies of Karbala, Quranic stories, folkloric legends, as well as scenes of daily life, customs, and public festivals (Abdolhosseini & Hamedi, 2020, 23). This art form reached its zenith through masters such as Hossein Qollar-Aghasi and Mohammad

Modabber, subsequently influencing contemporary art. Their legacy was carried forward by disciples like Fathollah Qollar, Hossein Hamadani, Hassan Esmaeilzadeh, and Abbas Boloukifar (Seif & Kaboli, 2021, 14). Ultimately, the paramount goal of this art was to preserve cultural authenticity, awaken public consciousness, and keep the heroic myths and the epic of Ashura alive in the Iranian collective memory. It is an art form where apparent defeat finds no place, and the countenances of the forces of good are perennially depicted with solemnity, dignity, and a sense of spiritual victory (Abdolhosseini & Hamed, 2020, 56).

• Self-taught art

Self-taught art, occasionally referred to in art historical texts as innate art or Outsider Art, encompasses works created by individuals entirely devoid of formal or academic training. These works are forged spontaneously, relying solely on personal experience and inner impulses (Gol-Aghaei, 2024, 162). Liberated from the constraints of art history and intellectual currents, this genre is the product of the artist's purest, most unmediated encounters with the surrounding world (Rousseau, 2014, 96). To achieve a deeper understanding of self-taught art, one must examine its roots in Primitive Art and its manifestation in Naïve Art. Primitive art refers to creations originating from early societies or non-Western cultures, distinguished by their simplicity, directness of expression, and profound connection to ritualistic and magical forces—qualities that are vividly reproduced in modern self-taught art. Much like early humans, the sources of inspiration for these artists stem from instinctual needs, environmental imperatives, or a responsive engagement with metaphysical forces (Zahedi, 2021, 21). Within the broader context of global art history, Jean Dubuffet, by introducing the concept of Art Brut (Raw Art), emphasized the aesthetic value of works that remain unprocessed and untouched by official, mainstream

culture. Following this trajectory, “Naïve Art” emerged as the most prominent manifestation of self-taught artistry. Although Naïve painters reside within civilized societies, they consciously or subconsciously disregard the tenets of scientific perspective, precise anatomical rendering, and academic color theory. Their works are characterized by features such as non-realistic proportions, the application of flat and luminous colors, an obsessive attention to detail, and a sincere, almost childlike narrative quality (Pakbaz, 2013, 585). In essence, rather than objectively reproducing reality, the self-taught artist reconstructs their own subjectivity and imagination, establishing visual rules predicated on the inner logic of the artwork and their personal emotions. These characteristics share a profound affinity with the visual structure of Iranian folk and coffeehouse paintings, where emotional authenticity similarly supersedes scientific accuracy.

• Components of self-taught artistry in painting

Glimcher (1987, 67) defines the general components of self-taught artistry in painting as encompassing “the representation of psychological and mental states rather than the visual world, the repetition of personal patterns, the use of microscopic or macroscopic symbols, the negation of perspective, the application of unconventional scales and proportions, the use of natural and non-academic colors, the integration of images with text, and the use of unconventional materials in the creative process”. In the paintings of Iranian self-taught artists, these components are also observable in a localized manner. The works of these artists are often characterized by the simplicity and uncluttered nature of the pictorial space, the non-symbolic nature of colors and characters, the absence of chiaroscuro (shading), and the two-dimensionality of landscapes. “Inaccuracy in details, disregard for the rules of Naskh and Nastaliq calligraphy, incomplete arabesques (Islimi), and human figures far removed

from anatomical proportions are among the other features of these works. These characteristics stem from the painter's mind and imagination, formed without reliance on educational models or foreign themes; such that non-academic techniques, particularly in perspective and anatomy, serve as indicators of the artist's independence and individual creativity" (Abdolhosseini & Hamed, 2020, 70).

Research Method

In terms of purpose, this is a developmental study, and in nature, it is descriptive-analytical. It was conducted to identify the components of self-taught artistry in coffeehouse paintings in the Qajar Period. The samples were purposively selected from the works of four prominent artists, encompassing a variety of themes (martial, festive, religious, and folkloric). Data analysis is conducted qualitatively. In this method, the artworks are first meticulously examined and coded; subsequently, the visual signs and elements associated with each component of self-taught artistry are extracted. Specific indicators have been determined for each component; for instance, "departure from realism" encompasses non-realistic spaces and the distortion of forms; "multi-narrative structure" involves the simultaneity of several narratives within a single frame; "the use of vibrant colors with high saturation" entails expressing emotion and movement through color and form; "variable viewing angle" refers to portraying characters from different perspectives; and "absence of classical proportions" implies the symbolic alteration of the size and scale of objects. These components are organized in Table 1 to facilitate comparative analysis and the identification of common patterns.

Discussion

• Recognition of self-taught components in coffeehouse paintings

In this section, focusing on four quintessential works by coffeehouse artists, the components of

self-taught artistry—including departure from realism, multi-narrative structure, the use of vibrant colors with high saturation, and variable viewing angles—are identified and analyzed. The objective is to demonstrate how these components have manifested within the core of the visual and content structure of coffeehouse painting.

- The painting "The Tragedy of Karbala" by Mohammad Modabber

The painting "The Tragedy of Karbala" (Fig. 1) is one of the most prominent examples of the visual narration of the Ashura event within the coffeehouse painting tradition. Employing a distinct visual language far removed from academic rules, Mohammad Modabber has orchestrated a sprawling, multi-layered scene. In this work, main and subsidiary events coexist simultaneously within a single frame—ranging from armies engaged in battle to the encampments and groups of women and children—without adherence to a classical visual hierarchy. This structure is a clear manifestation of the departure from realism, a concept that Danto (1997, 21) defines not as a violation of reality but rather as the freedom to represent meaning and artistic experience. Here, Modabber's compositional approach, with its focus on a comprehensive narrative, demonstrates the realization of this component. One of the most distinctive features of the painting is its multi-narrative structure; the simultaneous presence of multiple story levels and the depiction of various events of Ashura within one frame is a conspicuous example of multi-layered storytelling. From Bourdieu (1993, 39)'s perspective, such a structure not only reflects the interaction between the social and cultural spaces of the artist and society but also enables the representation of a collective religious experience. In this painting, the concurrent narration of battle scenes and the encampment, in addition to creating a multi-narrative structure, conveys the social and religious worldview of its contemporary

Table 1. Identification of Self-Taught Artistic Components in Coffeehouse Painting. Source: Authors.

Artwork	Artist	selftaught Component				
		Departure from Realism	Multi-Narrative Structure	Use of High-Chroma/Vivid Colors	Variable Perspective	Lack of Classical Proportions
The Tragedy of Karbala	Mohammad Modabber	Multi-layered composition; lack of linear perspective; all elements unified without spatial hierarchy	Simultaneous representation of primary and secondary scenes (warriors, women, children, tents).	Symbolic lighting and high-chroma colors to convey intensity and spiritual emphasis.	Figures depicted from frontal, profile, and aerial views; scale adjusted for spiritual significance.	Disproportionate and exaggerated figure sizes
Bahram Gur's Hunting Ground	Hossein Qollar-Aghasi	Scattered placement of elements across various planes; focus on narrative-driven rather than realistic depiction	Co-occurrence of multiple scenes (fleeing animals, riders, women in the background).	Lighting without a distinct source; highlighting faces and attire with bright, high-contrast colors.	Figures and animals from multiple angles; scale corresponding to narrative importance.	Non-anatomical proportions and simplified forms.
The Court of Kay Khosrow	Abbas Boloukifar	Composition based on narrative hierarchy rather than perspective; absence of clear boundaries between foreground and background	Inclusion of diverse narratives (feasting, dancing, commanders, and advisors) within a single frame.	Use of saturated and contrasting colors to convey grandeur; absence of naturalistic shading.	Characters from frontal, profile, and aerial views; scale based on storytelling value	Unrealistic and exaggerated proportions of figures and horses.
Sizdah Bedar in the Old Days	Fathollah Qollar-Aghasi	Horizontal arrangement of figures without spatial proportions; absence of a singular focal point	Simultaneous presence of multiple actions (playing instruments, preparing food, dancing) in one frame.	Bright and vibrant colors; exaggerated color contrast to evoke communal joy and vitality.	Host and banquet depicted from an aerial view; characters in profile and frontal poses; varied scales.	Larger size of primary figures relative to others.

society, illustrating how the painter was deeply connected to his collective and cultural experience. The use of vibrant colors with high saturation is starkly evident in the artwork. The visages of Imam



Fig. 1. The tragedy of Karbala, signed by Mohammad Modabber, oil on canvas, 181×211 cm. Source: Seif & Kaboli, 2021, 108.

Hussein (PBUH) and his close companions are accentuated with halos and luminous colors, while other sections are cast in shadow. According to Glimcher (1987, 25), this choice is not a realistic representation of natural light, but rather a device for evoking emotion and guiding the viewer's gaze. Vivid colors and high contrast, particularly the use of red in scenes of bloodshed, convey the intensity of the event and religious fervor, demonstrating the self-taught painter's creative freedom in utilizing color to transmit meaning. The variable viewing angle is another crucial component of the work; characters are viewed frontally, in profile, and from above, with their sizes scaled according to their spiritual stature (hierarchical perspective). For instance, Imam Hussein's (PBUH) horse is depicted larger than its realistic proportions.

Danto (1997, 43) emphasizes that altering the viewing angle in artworks serves as a means for semantic prioritization and emphasizes key elements of the narrative. This variation in perspective not only aids in the legibility of the scene but also facilitates the foregrounding of narrative meaning and the induction of emotions.

- The painting “Bahram Gur’s Hunting Ground” by Hossein Qollar-Aghasi

The artwork “Bahram Gur’s Hunting Ground” is a quintessential example of representing national-epic tales in coffeehouse painting, wherein Hossein Qollar-Aghasi has creatively rendered a dynamic and highly detailed scene of Bahram Gur’s hunt. A meticulous examination of Fig. 2 reveals that the elements of the scene, including riders, animals, and nature, are dispersed across various levels of the picture plane; however, the narrative connection among them is carefully preserved. The composition is designed in such a way that the viewer’s gaze is first directed from the bottom of the image (fleeing animals) to the center of the painting (Bahram on his white horse) and then to the upper section (other characters). This visual sequence is not based on realistic spatial logic but is rather shaped around the narrative and the semantic priorities of the artwork. Such a structure is an instance of the departure from realism, a concept Danto (*ibid.*, 20) considers a means for freedom in representing meaning and emphasizing



Fig. 2. Bahram Gur’s Hunting Ground, Golandam Palace, signed by Hossein Qollar-Aghasi. Source: Seif & Kaboli, 2021, 103.

the key elements of the narrative. The illumination throughout the artwork is almost uniform and lacks a specific light source, yet the faces and garments of the main characters are highlighted with brighter colors. This conscious choice not only distances itself from realistic representation but also guides the viewer’s gaze toward the key elements of the narrative. Glimcher (1987, 31) argues that such an approach to light and color serves a purpose beyond physical verisimilitude, contributing to the evocation of emotion and directing the audience’s attention toward the significant elements of the work. The painting’s color palette is diverse and vibrant; red, green, and white colors in the heroes’ attire and the surrounding nature are repeated in an exaggerated manner, contrasting with the background, thereby creating a highly charged and symbolic atmosphere that reinforces the epic grandeur of the narrative. A variable viewing angle is also evident in the work; wild animals are seen in profile, riders from various angles, and certain parts of the image from a bird’s-eye view. The scale of the elements is correspondingly adjusted based on their narrative importance; for example, Bahram’s white horse is depicted larger and more prominently than the other animals and riders. These choices exemplify the painter’s narrative-driven and liberated mindset, which, by altering the viewing angle, assigns semantic priority to the core elements of the artwork. Furthermore, the simultaneous presence of multiple scenes—the movement of animals, the pursuit by riders, and female spectators in the background—is an instance of a multi-narrative structure, which, from Bourdieu (1993, 41)’s perspective, reflects the interaction between the artist’s social and cultural space and the collective experience of the audience. The absence of classical proportions is also conspicuous in the work; the hero’s horse and key elements are depicted larger and more prominently than subsidiary components, and the anatomy of

certain horses and riders has been distorted for narrative legibility and emphasis. From a semiotic standpoint, this magnification and alteration of scale reinforce the semantic and epic message of the artwork, indicating that the painter was mindful not only of the visual dimension but also of the social and cultural impacts of the narrative.

- The painting “The Court of Kay Khosrow” by Abbas Bolouki-Far

The artwork “The Court of Kay Khosrow” (Fig. 3) is one of the prominent examples of representing historical and royal themes in coffeehouse painting, created by Abbas Bolouki-Far, a student of Hossein Qollar-Aghasi and Mohammad Modabber, with a self-taught and narrative-driven approach. In this painting, the artist has orchestrated an expansive and heavily populated space, such that the grandeur of the monarchy and a variety of subsidiary scenes are displayed simultaneously. The main axis of the composition is Kay Khosrow, seated on an ornate throne in the center of the painting, surrounded by courtiers, generals, and musicians. The simultaneous presence of various narratives—from festive scenes and dancing to councils of advisors and commanders—is a clear manifestation of a multi-narrative structure within the artwork’s composition. From Bourdieu (*ibid.*, 42)’s perspective, such a structure reflects the interaction between the artist’s social



Fig. 3. The Court of Kay Khosrow, signed by Abbas Bolouki-Far, dimensions 90×120 cm. Source: Rasteh, 2023, 93.

and cultural space and the collective experience of the audience, representing power dynamics and social hierarchies within society. The arrangement of elements is based not on the logic of perspective or depth projection but on narrative importance; almost all characters are situated on a single plane, with no distinct boundary between foreground and background. This approach exemplifies the departure from realism prevalent in coffeehouse painting. According to Danto (1997, 21), such a departure from realism serves as a tool for freedom in representing meaning and narrative prioritization. The illumination in the painting lacks a specific source, and light is distributed almost uniformly across the canvas surface; however, the face of Kay Khosrow and the main characters are highlighted with lighter, more luminous colors. The absence of natural shading and the symbolic use of light indicate an emphasis on the spiritual and political stature of the prominent figures. As Glimcher (1987, 30) posits, such an application of light and color is employed to create an emotional impact and guide the viewer’s gaze toward the key elements of the narrative. The artwork’s color palette is rich and diverse. Garments, crowns, and courtly adornments are rendered with saturated and contrasting colors—particularly red, green, blue, and gold. These exaggerated choices are intended not for naturalistic representation but to convey a sense of grandeur, magnificence, and the excitement of the scene. The viewing angle is not fixed; characters are depicted frontally, in profile, and even from above, and proportional sizes are altered in accordance with their narrative importance. This choice is an instance of a variable viewing angle and the deliberate absence of classical proportions aimed at focusing on the symbolic significance of the main characters and guiding the viewer’s gaze. Thus, by altering the scale and viewing angle, the artist directs the semantic priority and the visual attention of the audience.

- The painting “Sizdah Bedar in the Old Days” by Fathollah Qollar-Aghasi

This artwork (Fig. 4) by Fathollah Qollar-Aghasi, the adopted son and student of Hossein Qollar-Aghasi, is one of the rare examples that depict popular festivals and folk rituals; unlike religious or epic works, it revolves around an everyday, social theme. Examining this painting with a focus on narrative and semiotic aspects reveals that the ritualistic behaviors and festivities of the people are represented as cultural signs, and the composition, actions, and interactions among the characters contribute to an understanding of the social structure and collective norms. From Bourdieu (1993, 45)’s perspective, this structure reflects the interaction between the collective experience and the cultural space of the society, demonstrating the representation of the people’s social and ritualistic relations within self-taught artistry. The horizontal arrangement of the characters and the disregard for spatial proportions exhibit a facet of the departure from realism; this departure not only enables freedom in representing meaning but also facilitates a focus on semantic values and the sensory experience of the audience (Danto, 1997, 21). The illumination in the artwork lacks a specific source, and light is distributed almost uniformly across the canvas surface so that all details remain visible.



Fig. 4. Sizdah Bedar in the Old Days, signed by Fathollah Qollar-Aghasi, oil on canvas, dimensions 65×9565 cm. Source: Seif & Kaboli, 2021, 110.

The rudimentary and symbolic shading is utilized primarily for the separation of elements rather than for realistic representation. Colors and composition further serve to reinforce these narrative and sociological analyses. The selection of bright, joyful, and high-contrast colors—especially green, pink, and red—represents the collective exuberance and enhances the guidance of the viewer’s gaze toward the primary festive actions (Glimcher, 1987, 28). The viewing angle is variable and non-realistic; the host and the spread (sofreh) are viewed from close up and from above, while the characters are positioned in various states of profile and full-face. The alteration of proportional scales is also clearly evident; for instance, the woman in the foreground is depicted larger and more prominently than the others, without any classical spatial logic to justify such a difference. These choices are exemplars of a variable viewing angle and the deliberate absence of classical proportions, implemented to focus on key actions and establish visual emphasis, aiming to fortify the sociological and narrative analysis of the artwork.

Conclusion

The present study aims to identify and analyze the self-taught artistic components in coffeehouse paintings in the Qajar period by examining four prominent works by artists Mohammad Modabber, Hossein Qollar-Aghasi, Abbas Boloukifar, and Fathollah Qollar-Aghasi. The findings reveal that these works systematically exhibit distinct self-taught features, including departure from realism, multi-narrativity, use of vivid colors with high chroma, variable perspectives, and a lack of classical proportions. In all the works, a departure from realism is observed; the painters, disregarding linear perspective, organized spatial composition based on the narrative and spiritual significance of elements. However, perspective is applied according to a visual hierarchical tradition, commonly found in informal

and self-taught art in Iran and other cultures; more significant elements are rendered larger and more prominent, while subordinate elements are smaller and placed in the background. The absence of classical proportions is also notable in most works; the sizes and ratios of figures do not conform to spatial logic but emphasize the symbolic and expressive importance of elements. Multi-narrativity is manifested by the simultaneous presence of various levels and scenes within a single frame, enabling the transmission of multiple events concurrently to the viewer, underscoring the narrative-driven approach of the artists. Furthermore, the use of vivid colors, high contrast, symbolic lighting, and exaggeration in emphasizing key elements amplifies the spiritual, epic, and social messages of the artworks. Variable perspectives are present throughout; artists represent figures and elements from multiple viewpoints, disregarding physical realism, in accordance with their narrative and spiritual significance. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that the self-taught components manifest not only in form and technique but also in content and subject choice. By depicting social life, rituals, and popular festivals, these works reflect the cultural resistance of coffeehouse painters against the dominant discourse of academic art. The artists' self-taught status empowered them to preserve their popular identity and artistic autonomy through their visual style and pictorial narrative, thereby reproducing folk art as an independent cultural movement. Comparative analysis of the works indicated that the aforementioned components coherently and distinctively characterize the style and pictorial narrative of painters within this school. This coherence and reflection of self-taught creativity, alongside reinforcing spiritual and social messages, attest to the high capacity of this style to express cultural and social identity.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this study.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Golaghaei, P., Aghajani Keshteli, J., Ashari, M., & Amani, H. (2026). Examining and Identifying the Components of Self Taught Expression in Qajar Coffeehouse Paintings. *Journal of Art & Civilization of the Orient*, 14(52), 72-83.

DOI: [10.22034/jaco.2026.551402.1499](https://doi.org/10.22034/jaco.2026.551402.1499)

URL: https://www.jaco-sj.com/article_242610.html?lang=en

