

## Mirroring Attar's Poems in the Painting *Sheikh San'an and the Christian Girl* of the Qajar Era through Erwin Panofsky's Theory of Iconography

Elaheh Panjehbashi<sup>1</sup>

### Extended Abstract

Painting influenced by literature is one of the manifestations of the relationship between art and literature in the field of interdisciplinary research in comparative literature. The Qajar period, considering the tendency of the court towards lyrical and mystical stories, had the illustration of these concepts previously proposed. This approach can be seen in the painting "Sheikh San'an and the Daughter of Tersa" in the painting of the Qajar period as an unnumbered example, introduced at Christie's auction.

The necessity and importance of the research in terms of examining the design method, painting style, and symbolic concepts influenced by Attar's mystical literature, are worthy of study and reflect the cultural and artistic characteristics of the Qajar period. The main question of the research is as follows: How are the symbolic elements influenced by Attar's poems depicted in the painting in question, and what impact did they have on the art of painting and iconography of the Qajar court? How can it be applied to the stage of reading and studying Panofsky's image? In this study, by studying the interpretation of the Qajar painter of Attar's poems and the literary text of his poem, an attempt is made to reach the inner meaning of a work of art with the three stages of Panofsky's reading.

### Research Objective

The present study aims to identify the meaning and hidden layers of the painting

1. Associate Professor, Department of Painting, Faculty of Art, AlZahra University, Tehran, Iran  
e.panjehbashi@alzahra.ac.ir

#### How to cite this article:

Elaheh Panjehbashi. "Mirroring Attar's Poems in the Painting Sheikh San'an and the Christian Girl of the Qajar Era through Erwin Panofsky's Theory of Iconography". *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts and Humanities*, 5, 2, 2025, 21-28. doi: 10.22077/islah.2025.7443.1426



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee Journal of *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts & Humanities*. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Sheikh Sanan and the Daughter of Tersa and its relationship with literature in an interdisciplinary manner. The purpose of this study is to express the comparison of the views of Attar and the painter about the moment of meeting Sheikh Sanan and the Daughter of Tersa. In proposing the different stages of the test by the Daughter of Tersa to prove Sheikh Sanan's love, the poet has proposed tests, and the painter has depicted them.

The present study is of a descriptive-analytical type and in the field of qualitative research and is based on the iconographic reading in the theory of Ervin Panofsky with the painting Sheikh Sanan and the Daughter of Tersa and its relationship with Attar's poems. The statistical population of the present study is the painting Sheikh Sanan and the Daughter of Tersa with the property number Lot289. It is at Christie's auction. Data collection was done through library methods and by using a card-taking tool and downloading the online version of the image. The purposive sampling method was selected by examining the painting of Sheikh Sanan and the Daughter of Tersa from the Qajar period and related to Attar's poems for comparison. The reason for choosing this work is the theme of the Sheikh's exams in a single image; in the present study, the painting in question is first introduced and then its themes are discussed and analyzed with Attar's poems and Erwin Panofsky's theory of iconography.

One of the essential features of Iranian painting in the centuries after the establishment of Islam is its connection with Persian literature and poetry. The painter draws inspiration from various literary themes. He depicts the characters and scenes of stories and embodies the words of the poet or writer in the language of calligraphy and color. Farid al-Din Mohammad Attar Neyshaburi (627-537 AH), an Iranian poet and mystic, included a story in the middle of a long and unique story in "Mantiq al-Tayr". This story is mystica and is related to Sheikh San'an; Sheikh San'an's Masnavi was composed by Attar in the format of 410 verses. Sheikh San'an was one of the main characters in the mystical poem Mantiq al-Tayr and the main hero of the story. Throughout his life, he was a famous elder of his era and spent about fifty years in prayer in the Kaaba, and four hundred perfect disciples learned the path of conduct from him. He performed fifty Hajj, Umrah, and Tamattu' and did not abandon any tradition of Islam and was always performing obligatory acts such

as prayer and fasting. Among his great deeds is healing the sick. However, the Sheikh suddenly had disturbing dreams for several consecutive nights in which he traveled to the city of Rome and prostrated before an idol. He traveled to Rome to discover and interpret these dreams, and there he fell in love with a girl from Tarsus.

This painting was influenced by the culture of court iconography of the Qajar period and the favorite subjects for images in the decoration of palaces of this period. In this painting, the artist consciously approached the story; was aware of the mystery and symbolism of the image and used allegorical signs to show the different parts of the Sheikh's test in the story and tried to depict different stages in the limited space of the painting. Studying this painting in accordance with the opinion of Ervin Panofsky, a student of the science of image, determines that this painting is influenced by the visual rules of the Qajar period in its external features and is influenced by mystical literature. The main characteristic of the work is that it is decorative and represents a romantic-mystical story at first glance, but it identifies the different stages of mysticism and Attar's thoughts by considering the hidden meaning in the work with concise visual symbols and shows that behind the appearance of the love story lies a mystical meaning. The story of Sheikh Sanan tells of a love to reach the secrets of the universe and the earthly love of the timid girl was a prelude to rejecting the veil from the face of submission to the everyday and material world; this earthly love was a prelude to Sheikh Sanan's inner transformation and the necessary purification of his soul to reach divine love, and earthly love reached heavenly love. The form of the painting above is cut into a chevron, which was suitable for the arrangement and decorations of palaces in this period, and the artist consciously used it for the sacredness of the altar and the sanctity of love. The elements used in the work are allegorical and all briefly and concisely depict each stage of the test. Reading the work with Panofsky's theory, it finally seems like this: in the first stage of description; the work was influenced by the appearance and appearance of the court icon painting of the Qajar period, in the second stage of analysis; with brief and concise elements, it deals with the visual narration of Attar's poem of the story and depicts earthly love, and in the third stage of interpretation, it becomes clear that the outward trace of the story shows an earthly love, but inwardly, a mystical and divine love was intended, and the romantic and material test was for the Sheikh to reach a spiritual love.

**Keywords:** Qajar, painting, iconography, Sheikh Sanan and Daughter Tersa, Attar, semantics; Erwin Panofsky.

## References

Holy Quran (2007). Translation: Mehdi Elahi Ghomshehi, Tehran: Osvah.

Ahani, Laleh, Yaqoubzadeh, Azadeh, Hormati, Hamid (2017). Study of the visual and content effects of the story of Sheikh Sanan in Qajar visual arts, Islamic Art Studies, Vol. 27, pp. 100-55.

Ajand, Yaqoub (2009). Iranian Painting, Vol. 2, Tehran: Samt.

Ahi, Mohammad, Ghaderi, Elias. (2012). Causes and examples of breaking taboos in the story of Sheikh Sanan based on Jung's theory, Mystical and Mythological Literature, Vol. 18, Vol. 66, pp. 13-43.

Ahmadbeigi, Arezou (2013). Characterization in the story of Sheikh Sanan. Lyrical and Mystical Literature, Vol. 8, pp. 20-7.

Akhvani, Saeed, Mahmoudi, Fataneh (2018). Analysis of semantic layers in the illustrations of the Khavar Nameh manuscript with an iconological approach, Fine Arts, Vol. 2, pp. 24-34.

Anushirvani, Alireza (2013). Comparative Literature in Iran: With/Without Parentheses?, Volume 3, Vol. 2(6), pp. 1-7.

Anushirvani, Alireza (2013). Comparative Interdisciplinary Studies, Special Issue on Comparative Literature (Persian Language and Literature Academy), Year 4, Vol. 1(7), pp. 3-9.

Estelami, Mohammad (2008). Criticism and Explanation of Khaghani's Poems Based on the Versions of Badi'ozzaman Foruzanfar, Tehran: Zovar.

Ashrafzadeh, Reza (1994). Manifestation, Secret and Narration in the Poetry of Attar Neeshaburi, Tehran: Asatir.

Ashrafzadeh, Reza (2001). The Tale of Sheikh Sanan, Tehran: Asatir.

Emami, Nasrollah, Rezaei, Bahman (2016). The Kissing Bell in the Ode of Tarsaieh Khaghani, Journal of Research Poetry (Bostan Adab) University of Shiraz,

Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 40-25.

Bi-Nas, Jan (1994). Comprehensive History of Religions, translated by Ali Asghar Hekmat, Tehran: Scientific and Cultural.

Pakbaz, Roein (2008). Iranian Painting from Ancient Times to Today, Tehran: Naristan.

Panofsky, Ervin (2017). Meaning in the Visual Arts, translated by Neda Akhavan Moghadam, Tehran: Cheshme.

Chadwick, Charles (1996). Symbolism, translated by Mehdi Sahabi, Tehran: Markaz.

Javaher Kalam, Ali (1970). The Tomb of Sheikh Sanan in Tbilisi, Armaghan, Volume 39, Issue 11-12, pp. 761-764.

Damiri, Muhammad ibn Musa (1979). The Life of the Great Animal, Cairo: Shrek Maktaba and Mutaba Mustafa Al-Babi Al-Hilsi.

Dast Ghayb, Abdul Ali (1962). Sheikh Sanan, Payam Novin, Volume 5, Issue 4 (54), pp. 14-25.

Del Zende, Siamak. (2015). Visual Developments in Iranian Art: A Critical Review, Tehran: Nazar.

Reyhani, Mohammad, Abdullah Zadeh Barzo, Raheleh (2017). Analysis of the story of Sheikh Sanan based on Joseph Campbell's theory of monomyth, Mystical and Mythological Literature Quarterly, Vol. 13, No. 46, pp. 95-122.

Rouhani, Masoud, Shobakalai, Ali Akbar (2012). Analysis of the story of Sheikh Sanan Mantiq al-Tayr Attar based on the theory of action of Garmas, Researches on Mystical Literature (Gohar Goya), Vol. 6, No. 2(22), pp. 112-89.

Redenko, M., B. (1972). The jurist of the bird and the Kurdish poetry of Sheikh Sanan, translated by Aziz Asefi, Tabriz Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Vol. 104: pp. 531-537.

Rezaei, Faezeh and others. (2016). Comparison of the image of women in the art of the Safavid and Qajar eras, Archaeological Studies of Iran in the Islamic Era, Vol. 1, pp. 75-90.

Rahmdel, Gholamrez, Farhangi, Soheila (2019). Interdisciplinary Research in Persian Literature Studies, *Literary Research*, Vol. 5, Vol. 21, pp. 23-43.

Remak, Henry. (2012). Definition and Function of Comparative Literature, Translated by: Farzaneh Alavizadeh, Special Issue on Comparative Literature (Faculty of Persian Language and Literature), Vol. 3, Vol. 2(6), pp. 54-73.

Zarghani, Mehdi (2006). Another Interpretation of the Story of Sheikh Sanan, *New Literary Essays*, Vol. 39, Vol. 3, (154), pp. 63-84.

Sattari, Jalal (2019). Research on the Story of Sheikh Sanan and the Daughter of Tersa, Tehran: Markaz.

Sattari, Jalal (2008). A study on the story of Sheikh Sanan and the daughter of Tersa, Tehran: Markaz.

Salim, Abdol Amir (1976). *Sheikh Sanan*, Volume 8, Issue 4, pp. 416-395.

Shamisa, Sirous (2009). *Literary criticism*, Tehran: Mitra.

Ali Saghir, Mohammad Hossein (2002). Quran and Hadith: Prohibition of Alcohol in the Quran, *Meshkowa Magazine*, translated by Maryam Ghobadi, Vol. 20, Issue 75-74, pp. 28-8.

Attar Neishaburi, Sheikh Farid al-Din Mohammad (1999). *Mantiq al-Tayr*, edited by Seyyed Sadeq Goharin, Tehran: Elmi Farhangi.

Attar Neishaburi, Sheikh Farid al-Din Mohammad (2004). *Mantiq al-Tayr*, edited by Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani, Tehran: Sokhan.

Attar Neishaburi, Sheikh Farid al-Din Mohammad (2005). *Mantiq al-Tayr*, edited by Seyyed Sadeq Goharin, Tehran: Farhangi.

Alaei, Hossein Ali, Rezaei Adriani, Ebrahim (2013). The Wisdom of Prohibition of Pork in the Quran, *Hadith of Science, Quran and Science Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 13, pp. 49-70.

Abdi, Nahid (2012). *An Introduction to Iconology: Theories and Applications*, Tehran: Sokhan.

Abdi, Nahid (2011). Analysis of Bahram Gour's painting of killing the dragon, *Art*

Review, Vol. 1, pp. 97-83.

Alipour, Marzieh (2014). Study of the visual effects of the Akhbar al-Ridha's signs in Tahmasbi's horoscope, *Farhang Razavi Quarterly*, Vol. 7, pp. 106-81.

Sarfi, Mohammad Reza (2003). An introduction to symbolism in literature, *Farhang*, Vol. 46047, pp. 159-179.

Fraser, James George (2013). *The Golden Branch (A Study in Magic and Religion)*, translated by Kazem Firouzmand, Tehran: Aghah.

Freud, Sigmund (2000). *Totem and Taboo*, translated by Mohammad Ali Khanji, Tehran: Tahori Library.

Gholizadeh, Heydar Ali (2008). Rereading the story of Sheikh Sanan, *Kavash Nameh*, Vol. 9, No. 16, pp. 129-162.

Ghadiri Yeganeh, Shabnam, Azar, Esmaeil, Zirak, Sareh (2022). Comparative and interdisciplinary analysis of responsibility in Viktor Frankl's theory of semantic therapy and Rumi's *Masnavi*, *Interdisciplinary studies, Literature, Art and Humanities*, Vol. 2, (4), pp. 80-53.

Kazazi, Mir Jalal al-Din (1997). *Parsa and Tersa*, Tehran: Allameh Tabatabaei University.

Cooper, J. C. (2000). *Illustrated dictionary of traditional symbols*, translated by Malihe Karbasian, Tehran: Farshad.

Kanbay, Sheila (2003). *Iranian painting*, translated by Mehdi Hosseini, Tehran: University of Art.

Kafshchian Moghadam, Asghar, Yahaghi, Maryam (2017). Study of symbolic elements in Iranian painting, *Bagh Nazar*, Vol. 19, pp. 62-76.

Lahouti, Hassan (1996). *Allegory in Persian Literature (The Story of Sheikh Sanan)*, Kalak Publication, Vol. 76, pp. 19-28.

Maleki, Hormoz (2001). *The Secret Behind the Curtain (Hermeneutics of the Story of Sheikh Sanan)*, Tehran: Sahami Publication.

Moein, Mohammad (2005). *Moein Persian Dictionary*, Tehran: Mikael.

Moghadam, Mohammad (2006). *Essay on Mehr and Nahid*, Tehran: Hirmand.

Meskoob, Shahrokh (2000). *On the History of Qajar Painting*, Iran Nameh (67). pp. 405-422.

Moghadam Ashrafi, M. (2008). *The Synchronization of Painting with Literature in Iran*, translated by Roein Pakbar, Tehran: Negah.

Nasri, Amir (2009). *Approaches to Iconography and Iconography in Art Studies*, Roshd Umuoz Art, Vol. 23, pp. 64-56.

Nasri, Amir (2018). *Approaches to Iconography*, Tehran: Cheshme.

Velai, Isa (2000). *Apostasy in Islam*, Tehran: Ney.

Panofsky, Erwin (1955). *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Dobleday Anchor Books, New York.

Panofsky, Erwin (1972). *Studies in iconology humanistic themes in the art of the Renaissance*. Icon Editions, New York: Routledge.

Diba,Layla,S-Ekhtiar,Maryam (1998). *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch 1785-1925* ,Hardcover,Broklyn Museum of Art,Newyork.

Orrelle, E. & Horwitz, L. K (2016). *The pre-Iconography,Iconography and iconology of a sixth to fifth millennium BC*.

<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4892534>

<https://www.bonhams.com/>