

A Thematic Analysis of the Painting, “Two Conflicting Sages” attributed to Aqa Mirak in *Khamsa Tahmasbi*: An Iconological Approach

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Extended Abstract

1-Introduction

In Iranian painting, the interpretation of an artist can also be studied through investigating the illustrations of fixed themes and texts by prominent painters. From this perspective, an artist’s interpretation of a literary text holds significant importance. Painters have used their personal interpretation of the original text in illustrating its various versions and have created additional meanings besides the theme of the work in the images.

2- Aim

With the aim of identifying the meaning of the hidden layers, the present research analyzes the painting “Two Conflicting Sages” from the *Khamsa Tahmasbi* version within the framework of the iconology method and answers the question: What hidden layers of meaning are present in the painting ‘Two Conflicting Sages’?”

3- Theoretical framework and research methodology

The stage of pre-iconography involves the description and recognition of the apparent aspects of the artwork and the identification of the existing elements within the complex world of artistic structures. In the descriptive stage, there is necessarily no reference to the external world beyond the artwork itself. In the iconography stage, the world of codes hidden in the heart of the artwork is opened. This stage is entering the field of meaning, which is also known as metaphysical meaning, and is the result

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of the reactions induced in the viewer to the initial awareness of the art work. It connects artistic elements and motif compositions with their themes or concepts. In the stage of iconology, which is also known as content or intrinsic interpretation, the final destination is in a deep iconographic investigation; more precisely, this stage seeks to identify how iconic symbolic values are selected within images, legends, stories, and oral literature.

4- Discussion

In this painting, initially, the lizard-like smile and the clapping of the victorious sage capture our attention, then our focus shifts towards exploring the intricately drawn flowers, fruit bowls and turbans that are carefully wrapped. Another noteworthy aspect of this painting is its detailed description of clothing, nobility, and the atmosphere of Shah Tahmasb's court. The composition of this painting has been formed in such a way that the main story with its living colors is placed at the bottom of the counter to immediately catch the eye. The painting is actually a painting of a corner of paradise in this world. The flowing water that flows on both sides of the Majlis headquarters, with flowers and basil and fresh colors, all create a heavenly scene. Here, the issue of understanding the conflict of two sages is much more appropriate for the king (Shah) himself than for others who are amazed at that picture or the audience who watch the picture. Changing the painting style and atmosphere to a courtly and aristocratic one was due to the supervision of the ruling aristocracy and the implicit acceptance of the fact that conflicts between mutually beneficial parties has been a natural thing, and past kings were also aware of this fact. The conflict between reason and imagination is evident in this artwork; a human who lives in abundant fantasies may die in the realm of imagination. It is an imagination which can bring destruction to the body and also troubles the soul, closes the path to truth and the discovery of realities for humans. Here, the beautiful appearance and the ugly essence deceive and destroy the person, and in a way, the spell of illusion takes root in the human mind and drags him/her towards ruin. The necessity of fighting against this force is through rationality and thinking, and humans can save themselves from this swamp with thought and contemplation because the deceptive appearance is like Halahel poison. (Sadri 2014: 43). In this painting, the artist has used visual and thematic symbols, which we will analyze each separately to reach the innermost meaning of this painting.

5-Findings and Conclusion

The interpretation of the iconology of the painting "Two Conflicting Sages" with the contrast between reason and illusion indicates that this painting was influenced by Agha Mirak's mystical beliefs; It is an artwork created in accordance with those beliefs. Agha Mirak was not only technically skilled during the Safavid era, but he also harbored political, religious, and philosophical thoughts. This reality means that his artworks from this period are not merely reliant on literary texts; instead, they

attain a richness of meaning through the artist's incorporation of diverse perspectives and ideas. The results of this research indicate that this painting represents the main conflict between reason and illusion. He conveyed moral messages to the Shah and the courtiers of the Safavid period by subtly and indirectly depicting the conflict between two sages before the courtiers. This matter itself is a kind of warning symbol for the existence of excessive prejudice and anger in the Safavid era, which will lead to the downfall of the monarchy. In fact, the creation of this artwork stems from spiritual and religious perspectives rooted in the profound beliefs of Islam. This spirituality is always evident in the inner being and conscience of a knowledgeable artist. Agha Mirak has chosen the texts aligned with the central theme ensuring that, in addition to the main story and its interpretation, when necessary, he can express the narrative added to the main story in such a way that the coherence of the picture is not lost.

Keywords: Tabriz school of painting, iconology, *Khamse Tahmasbi*, Hikmat, Aqa Mirak

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