"Aesthetic of Color and Connotations of Spiral Structure"  
(An Assessment of Medieval Persian Miniature)  

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Abstract The medieval era of 14th to 17th centuries A.D. in Islamic land of Persia is prominent for the abundant schools of thought, mysticism and theosophy. The era is also significant as the zenith of Persian art as the great miniature schools, such as those of Herat and Tabriz, flourished in this period. The enigmatic and symbolic notion of color, alongside form, plays an intrinsically deep role in achieving this prominent status, whose allegorical meaning should be deciphered according to the cultural and spiritual mood of that era. Notably, several miniature masterpieces of this period are wrought in spiral structure, a mystical symbol for mapping the cosmic journey of the soul. The present article underlines this mystical formation as an integration of the color aptitudes, as well as the aesthetical resemblance of the attainment of the knowledge of Reality (ma'rifat ul-Haq), which is the ultimate objective of the Islamic mysticism and theosophy. It is argued that artistic elements of color and spiral structure are not employed in Persian miniatures merely as decorative apparatus, but also enjoy certain symbolic rationale behind its high iconographic pretense. The aesthetics of color in Persian miniature, including the visionary effects, the symbolic connotations and accentuation, and the induced sense of harmony, balance and motion, are discussed and the spiral structure is argued to integrate these sentiments, by bridging to the spiritual ascent and its threefold manifestations in the religious code, Gnostic way and reality, resulting in a unification of inside and outside and coalition of the horizon and the soul.  

Keywords Persian miniature, Color aesthetics, Spiral structure, Islamic mysticism  

1. Introduction  

Persian art, in general, and miniature, in particular, place a high value for beauty. This is accentuated with such devotion throughout centuries that it has fabricated a counterfeit impression that Persian miniature is primarily an art of decoration. The royal patronage and sustained excellence have paved the ground for the conclusion to be taken for granted.  

In Persian painting, life and art are amalgamated with mutual inspiration, lending each other a hand to accord the splendor to the highest status, absorbing the artist's uttermost, with incredibly little thought of individual pride and glory. Here, decoration is more a resource than a goal, as it endeavors to entertain the mind more so to merely delight the eye. It skillfully mingles, with delicate sensitivity, and solid stance with free rhythmic flow, yet it is well aware of its limits.  

One characteristic of Persian miniature, which makes it hard to comprehend, is the symbolism behind its full-fledged iconographic appearance. Symbolism at the same time clarifies and interprets reality and controls it. In this sense, it is capable to conceal as much as it reveals, and this is more so, when it is sanctified by custom and religion. In Persian miniature, the twofold character of the underlying symbolism is yet enriched with a third mode, a universal untold principle unifying the exoteric and esoteric, by recalling the principles that govern the order of life. This is where logical meets the beauteous and the banal duality between body and soul fade away.  

The color aesthetics and the symbolic connotations of structural elements in the medieval Persian miniatures are subject of long standing debate. Many scholars, including S.T. Arnold, B. Gray, L. Binyon, and J.V.S. Wilkinson, more or less regard the medieval Persian illuminations as a royal art with mere decorative incentives, "that is an expression of the taste, idiosyncrasies, power, prestige, and political assertiveness of a given prince or dynasty." [1]  

A perusal analysis of the medieval Persian miniatures suggests various functionalities for color. This could shed a light on existing contrary advocates on the role of color in Persian painting. In assessing the influence of color in painting, some like A. Popes go as far to claim that "the color is but an adornment of the pattern." [2] Nonetheless, the contemporary scholar, Michael Barry acknowledges that
"the very existence of Persian miniatures with careful usage of variant colors addresses the innermost religious enigma of Islam." [3]

The debate on the connotation of artistic elements in Persian miniatures is not restricted to color. There is also a wide range of interpretations on the significance of form and structure. Spiral is a structural element whose possible connotative implications is ignored by some critics, while others like Purce, noted that "the spiral is the natural form of growth, and has become, in every culture and in every age, man's symbol of the progress of the soul towards eternal life...It constitutes the hero's journey to the still center where the secret of life is found. As the spherical vortex, spiraling through its own center, it combines the inward and outward directions of movement." [3]

This article discusses color aesthetics and symbolic connotations of the spiral structure in the medieval Persian miniatures. The discussion is based on the aesthetical effects of color and its role in stimulating a sense of accentuation and harmony, as well as movement and change. The spiral structure is argued to function as a mean to convey all the above sentiments, via making a bridge to the spiritual ascent with its threefold manifestation in the religious code, Gnostic way and reality, and resulting in a unification of inside and outside and convergence of the horizon and the soul.

The main features of the aesthetics of color in Persian miniature, as listed below, include the visionary effects, the symbolic connotations and accentuation, and the induced sense of harmony, balance and motion.

2. Aesthetics of Color

2.1. Generating Visionary Effects

Regardless of any sophisticated connoisseurship, Persian miniature is simply beautiful, extensively due to its illuminating splendid colors. In this way, aesthetic attitude encounters two approaches:

2.1.1. Expression of Quality (as in Figures 1 and 2)

Figure 1. Ardeshir and Gahān, illustration to Buysonghorl’s Book of Kings, Herat, 833 A.H.

Color is a natural characteristic of any object, and miniaturists, based on this fact make things anonymous or acquainted. Color also reveals the object’s status, for instance redness of a flower calls out freshness, whereas a green tomato conveys that it is not ripe. In sum, color like smell, taste, sound and shape is a qualitative and not an intrinsic characteristic of the object.

2.1.2. Decoration (as in Figures 3 and 4)

Commissioned by royal palace or major political authority, many flamboyant illuminations prospered to depict the ruling Sultan or Caliph of the day. This accounts for employing rare and precious color pigments to embellish these exuberant illuminations.

Color tinctures, such as lapis lazuli pigment and "the many flecks of silver and gold which the artists burnished with polishing instruments fashioned out of ivory, onyx, or jade, are what in actual effect turn Persian miniature into a jeweler’s art." [1] Nevertheless, the Islamic art critic, Oleg Grabar, declares that this ornamental treatment of colors is a connotation of the divine principle which asserts that subsistence is the absolute domain of Allah. [4]