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Neo-Traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: The *Saqqa-khaneh* School in the 1960s¹

This article aims at providing an understanding of the concept of neo-traditional art in Iran during the 1960s. It concerns the period of time in modern Iranian painting when there was an increasing tendency to confront conflicts between past and present and when the quest for a national artistic identity coincided with forces of modernity. This was a significant era in modern Iranian art that became influential in the formation of a modern approach toward prevailing traditional heritage: the so-called neo-traditionalism.

The first question that needs to be asked is: what is neo-traditional art? Its accepted definition involves a reinterpretation of the formal value systems that govern art, usually denoted by either a set of style markers, technique, or content. However, it also involves the legitimization of a claim to authority over the future by those artists who interpret the values of the past. Reference to social aspirations focused on religion, politics, or more broadly, on nationalist ideologies are reflected in this debate.

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¹ This article is based on a section of my PhD thesis—*Contemporary Iranian Painting: Neo Traditionalism from the 1960s to 1990s*—carried out under the supervision of Dr. Anna Contadini, to whom I am very grateful, at the Department of Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, 2000–2004.

Unlike other fields of modern Iranian studies, such as socio-politics and economics, one of the immediately obvious problems in the compilation of a well-balanced body of research on different aspects of contemporary Iranian art is the scarcity of any precedent. This article has drawn upon what little Western and Persian literature on the history of modern Iranian art exists. However, it provides a scholarly discussion of certain aspects of the subject for the first time. Kamran Diba in *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, edited by W. Ali and E. Bisharat (London, Amman, 1989) writes a very brief but helpful basic introduction to pre-revolutionary Iranian art in the twentieth century. Among others, the best documented and reliable sources that have been used in this article are those of Karim Emami and Ruyin Pakbaz. An art journalist and critic active mainly during the 1960s and part of the 1970s, Emami has written materials on the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement. He is also the writer of “Art in Iran, XI: Post-Qajar,” (1987) in *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Although Emami’s information about *Saqqa-khaneh* artists and their works is original and the main source of the few similar works, it lacks analytical and critical arguments and, above all, the parallel socio-political contexts. Pakbaz, an intellectual art critic and art historian who has been active mainly since the early 1960s, has produced invaluable works on modern Iranian art, among others, the *Encyclopedia of Art* (1999). The point that makes this work very precious is the presentation of documented sources, though encyclopedically, while there is a great lack even of well-balanced descriptive historical materials such as dates, events, and names required for research in this area.

Deeply affected by their contemporary intellectual, social, and political atmosphere, the neo-traditionalists attempted to create a synthesis between a pictorial heritage of the past and the new language of contemporary art. How then did the modern Iranian artist undertake this exploration? Where and how did he find his new vision in contemporary life? Can it be discovered outside the contemporary cultural influence? For example, neo-traditionalists realized that through the modernist form, an expression (distinct individualism) formed an essential component of the artist's identity. This visual individual experience of an artist includes some icon or sign from his own background.

The most important organized group in modern Iranian painting in the 1960s was the neo-traditionalist movement of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School. The most basic purpose of this group of artists was to find an artistic reaction and solution to the above-mentioned issues. The role of patronage as well as the nature of the artistic and intellectual circles of the period will be examined. Special attention is also paid to the interpretation, analysis, and categorization of the artistic works of the group as a whole and to such relatively neglected aspects of modern Iranian art as the relationship between artistic attitudes and external agents including socio-political and intellectual contexts. Also under discussion will be the issue that all these phenomena could have led, in various ways, to a debate about how modern Iranian art and culture are affected by these external agents.

It is more than half a century since Iranian artists began to adopt modernism in their works. *Modernism* here signifies the broad philosophical framework within which the modern art movement took place in the twentieth century, with all its diversity and disunity of forms and styles, and which also provides theoretical discourse for the evaluation and legitimization of modern works of art. During this period, Iranian avant-garde artists as well as intellectuals in other fields were caught between two polarities—traditionalism and modernism. The debate over these issues resulted in the growth of various new tendencies and movements.

The name *Saqqa-khaneh* was used for the first time by the art critic, journalist, and lecturer in English, Karim Emami at the Tehran *Hunarkadeh-i hunar-hay-i taz'ini* (College of Decorative Arts). The name was initially applied to the works of artists, both in painting and sculpture,² that used some elements that existed in votive Shi'ite art in their modern work. It gradually came to be applied to various forms of modern Iranian painting and sculpture that used traditional-decorative elements.

One of the main founders of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement, sculptor Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), describes the beginning of the School.³ Tanavoli recalls how one day he and Zenderoudi took a trip to the Shrine of Shah `Abd al-`Azim⁴ in the late 1950s and found (and were fascinated by) some religious printed posters, talismanic seals, and

² Although the *Saqqa-khaneh* School includes two distinguished sculptors, Parviz Tanavoli and later Zhazeh Tabatabai, it is remarkable mainly for painting rather than sculpture. Here, our emphasis is also on painting as the main content of the article.

³ This narrative is quoted from Karim Emami, *Saqqakhaneh: Saqqakhaneh School Revisited*,” (*Negahi dubareh beh maktab-i Saqqa-khaneh*), *Catalogue of the Exhibition* (Tehran, 1356/1977), 3. It might be that the artists mentioned now contest the story. However, it was undoubtedly the outcome of the friendship of these two artists and their joint searches in Iranian folk culture that resulted in the formation of this new style.

⁴ A shrine in the town of Shar-i Rey in the south of Tehran that today forms part of Greater Tehran.

images. At that time, he declares, they were looking for local Iranian raw material to be used and developed in their works. The simplicity of forms, repeated motifs, and bright colors attracted them (See [f]fig 2 here[/f].) Tanavoli believes that the first sketches Zenderoudi created on the basis of those materials were in fact the first examples of *Saqqa-khaneh* works.⁵ From Emami's point of view, however, the official birth of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School was when Zenderoudi's canvases were exhibited at the Third Tehran Biennial in 1962. In these paintings, external lines of bodies were shaped in geometric order with the alphabetical characters in the background written carefully and the squares, triangles, rectangles, and circles colored in hues of red, green, yellow ochre, and sometimes mild blue. These colors, accompanied by black, had made up the collection of Shi'ite mourning colors⁶ (See [f]fig 3 here[/f].). Emami then explains the reason for choosing the name *Saqqa-khaneh* for painting in this manner. He states that a viewer of Zenderoudi's canvases would be reminded of Shi'ite shrines and assemblies. The atmosphere of the paintings was religious though not as lofty, grand, or spacious as some of the distinguished Iranian mosques, but as familiar and intimate as that of the (traditional) *Saqqa-khaneh*.⁷

Saqqa-khaneh literally are votive foundations with charitable structures that are installed for public drinking which can still be seen in Iranian towns and cities. Traditionally, in the older quarters of cities, each *Saqqa-khaneh* consisted of a small and inconspicuous niche within which were supplied a water tank, a copper or brass bowl, and some other equipment.⁸ Small locks or pieces of rag were fastened to the metallic grid in the exterior part of some *Saqqa-khanehs* for votive reasons. Often the inside of the *Saqqa-khaneh* was decorated with the portrait of an imam, metal trays to which candleholders were attached (for those who wanted to dedicate a candle to the memory of a deceased relative), all imparting a sacred atmosphere (See [f]fig 1 here[/f].). Also, some objects of vague religious significance might enhance the devout mood of the *Saqqa-khaneh*, including a hand cut out of sheets of brass or tin (associated with Abbas, the Shi'ite martyr in Karbala), a string of beads, mirrors, black or green draperies with prayers or verses of the Qur'an embroidered on them, and small pictures or prints of the events of Karbala or some other popular religious episodes.

Within traditional Shi'ite folk culture, *Saqqa-khaneh* (including a continuous link with *Zamzam*⁹) had an ultra-historical relationship with the martyrdom of Imam Hossein at Karbala in 680 A.D. Peter Lemborn Willson describes *Saqqa-khaneh* as:

...the "house" or "place of the water-bearer" and a symbolic tomb, a reminder of God's Mercy—which is epitomized for the dry lands of the

⁵ Emami, *Saqqakhaneh: Saqqakhaneh School Revisited*, 2–3.

⁶ Emami, *Saqqakhaneh: Saqqakhaneh School Revisited*, 3.

⁷ Emami, *Saqqakhaneh: Saqqakhaneh School Revisited*, 3.

⁸ This description of *Saqqa-khaneh* is quoted from Ehsan Yarshater, "Contemporary Persian Painting," *Highlights of Persian Art* (New York, 1979): 368, and it refers mainly to the traditional form of *Saqqa-khaneh*. Today, the simple form of *Saqqa-khaneh* (not including the decorative or traditional elements) with the same origin still exists in most cities in Iran.

⁹ According to the Islamic belief, *Zamzam* is the name of the spring of eternal life, which flows in paradise.

Islamic world in the primordial symbolism of the life-giving water of rain and rivers—and a reminder of the passion of Karbala [tragedy].¹⁰

The artists of *Saqqa-khaneh* School looked to cults, rituals, and products of folk culture for inspiration. In their view, these roots had to be linked to modern styles and fused to create a distinctly national, artistic expression. It was meant to create an experience relevant to the age in which Iranian artists found themselves with a contribution from the world art scene. The *Saqqa-khaneh* movement in the sixties tried to find and establish a “national” or “Iranian” school of painting. Kamran Diba noted that “what made this movement revolutionary was the modernistic [approach to] tradition and sense of freedom from the bonds of past cultural clichés.”¹¹ If the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that “originality” is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence. On the other hand, as John Clark maintains, “An important feature of avant-garde practice found elsewhere in Asia is that artists who adopt avant-garde positions feel free to explore indigenous art forms alongside—rather than in opposition to—the discourse they operate on.”¹² In this, the School was undoubtedly the most influential avant-garde movement in the formation of the neo-traditionalist art in Iran at the time.

The general perception of the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists was based on the belief that they could achieve a “modern-traditional” synthesis that included an Iranian identity and character. It is the seminal nature of their work in opening the intense creative debate directed at the issue of identity that concerns us here. The artists, with their exploration of art movements and trends of western art, were striving after universal validity between inherited specifics and pragmatic modernism that marked Iranian art of their time.

One of the common characteristics of most members of the group was that they had studied at the Tehran *Hunarkadeh-i hunar-hay-i taz'ini* whose role in the emergence of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement cannot be ignored. The institution was established in Tehran in 1961 with the purpose of training experts in the applied arts. The *Hunarkadeh*¹³ (college of art) not only offered a chance for art graduates from the secondary school,¹⁴ but it also reacted to the needs of the new generation by establishing some alternative fields of study. Several modernist painters, sculptors, and designers who played a crucial role in the development of contemporary Iranian visual art were trained in this *Hunarkadeh* under the direction of foreign and Iranian instructors.¹⁵ Varied fields of study such as decorative painting, graphic design, sculpture, interior architecture, and painting with a major emphasis on applied arts were taught in this *Hunarkadeh*. Here,

¹⁰ P.L. Willson, “The Saqqa-khaneh,” *Catalogue of the Saqqa-khaneh Exhibition* (Tehran, 1356/1977): 18.

¹¹ Kamran Diba, “Iran,” *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World* (London, Amman, 1989): 152.

¹² John Anthony Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (North Ryde, 1998), 219.

¹³ Its name was changed to *Danishkadeh-i* (faculty) *hunar-hay-i taz'ini* a few years later.

¹⁴ Ruyin Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art* (Tehran, 1378/1999), 893. These graduates could not easily enter the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran. The system at the Faculty mainly preferred other secondary school graduates who were more successful in the Entrance Examination because they had a better theoretical background than art graduates.

¹⁵ Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art*, 893.

students were encouraged to seek local sources of inspiration, symbols and idioms, and to familiarize themselves with Iran's decorative heritage through various courses.¹⁶ As a result, *Saqqa-khaneh* artists, most of whom studied at this School, turned to the visual elements of Iranian folk culture and decorative forms as their sources of inspiration.

Exploring the various resources of traditional Iranian arts and crafts, including decorative arts and designs, rewarded the artists with the capacity to create characteristic innovative works. According to Emami, the artists of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School discovered a source in which they could experiment, analyze, and combine those forms, colors, and textures.¹⁷ Because of their flexible potentiality for the artistic performance, these elements from Irano-Islamic art were used by artists educated at the *Hunarkadeh* in a variety of forms and numerous structural compositions. During their search, many forms of traditional arts and crafts were used, including motifs from the local craft (rug, carpet, etc.); talismanic and magical seals, pictures, and shirts; ancient pottery motifs; Nishapur glazed figs; *Jam-i chihil kilid* (forty keys cup); *panjeh-i panj tan* (the five holy ones' hand); elements of Qajar art; enamelled bowls from Rey adorned with horse-riders; and Persian calligraphy and painting, Achaemenian and Sasanian inscription or epigraphy, and Assyrian bas-reliefs. The use of Iranian poetry and Eastern Gnosticism appeared in works by subsequent artists.

The other face of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School was the attention paid to the modern language of art. Whereas all the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists had expressed modern language through adapting various traditional forms to their purposes, the pioneers attempted to profit from traditional Persian art, while still finding some harmonic familiarity with modern Western art (especially Abstract art), and made a connection between these. As Ehsan Yarshater remarks:

This occurred as a restatement of those sources or a re-working of them into new visual statements, or the conjuring-up of a vision of the past lost to modernized Persian life such as a Qajar dancer, a woman in veil, an old-time musician, or an arrangement of votive objective and religious symbols in a non-religious context.¹⁸

As fully explained before, the term *Saqqa-khaneh* was first used for works such as Zenderoudi's that employed some votive Shi'ite folk elements, but later was extended to all the artists, both painters and sculptors, who drew directly on the traditional art forms of Iran as raw material for their work. Hence, the movement can be classified into two periods: early (from 1962–c.1964) and late (from 1964 onward). However, on the whole, the *Saqqa-khaneh* included the works of the modernist artists who each dealt with traditional art in different ways. The prominent artists and also pioneers of the School consisted of Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937), Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), Faramarz

¹⁶ The Dean of the *Hunarkadeh*, Houshang Kazemi, himself lectured on "decoration" and acquainted the students with the treasure-house of Iranian ornamental ware.

¹⁷ Emami, *Saqqakhaneh: Saqqakhaneh School Revisited*, 3.

¹⁸ Yarshater, "Contemporary Persian Painting," 356.

Pilaram (1938–1983), Mansur Qandriz (1935–1965), Nasser Oveisi (b. 1934), Sadeq Tabrizi (b. 1939), Zhazeh Tabatabai (b. 1928), and Massoud Arabshahi (b. 1935).¹⁹

Sadeq Tabrizi, one of the above-mentioned members of the School, believes that the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists, including himself, started their artistic careers separately. Each of the School's members was fascinated with different traditional sources in various ways,²⁰ although they were probably aware of each other's activities because of their contact at the *Hunarkadeh-i hunar-hay-i taz'ini* and also in artistic clubs, including the *Kaboud Atelier*.²¹ Tabrizi adds that when the group assembled and their works were exhibited together, a relationship between their works emerged, although the works had been created separately and none of them could be considered as following in the steps of the other.²²

The neo-traditionalist *Saqqa-khaneh* eventually seems to have been established later by two main tendencies. Such artists as Zenderoudi, Pilaram, Qandriz,²³ and Arabshahi believed in the apparent proximity and similarity between the *tajridi* (stylized) aspect of Iranian traditional decorative art and Abstract art.²⁴ Various abstract forms were created in which the ornamental elements and geometrical shapes of Irano-Islamic art and Persian calligraphy were selected and then spread throughout the whole space of the canvases mostly in symmetrical constructions ([f]igs 3, 5, 7 here[/f]). On the other hand, some artists (including Tabrizi, Oveisi, and Tabatabai) found their inspiration in the existence of figurative forms such as human bodies and animals of different types in traditional Iranian painting from ancient manuscripts to the painting of the Qajar period. They attempted to use these to present the modern and transformed types through a multiplicity of elements in a decorative mode with a generous use of calligraphic motifs in their canvases ([f]igs 9–11 here[/f]).

¹⁹ According to Emami's declaration in the *Saqqa-khaneh* exhibition's catalogue, and also statements by such artists as Oveisi and Tabatabai, they were later not satisfied that their names should be included as members of the School. However, they are listed here because of the aesthetic affinities and similarities of their works to the *Saqqa-khaneh* style, the presence of their works in the formal exhibitions and, above all, their intentions were identical with those of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School.

²⁰ Sadeq Tabrizi, "Interview with Artist," *Hunar-hay-i tajassumi*, vi (1377/1998): 93.

²¹ Manijeh Miremadi, "Parviz Tanavoli," *Quarterly Tavoos*, i, (1999): 62. *Kaboud Atelier* was founded by Parviz Tanavoli with some financial support from the Department of Fine Arts in 1960. Gradually, this Atelier became an artistic center for modernist artists such as Zenderoudi, Grigorian, Melkonian, Sheybani, Saffari, and Sepehri. The pioneer of *Saqqa-khaneh*, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, held three exhibitions there (with the encouragement and support of Tanavoli).

²² Tabrizi "Interview with Artist," 93.

²³ Although he is preferably categorized as an abstract artist in his *Saqqa-khaneh* period, he himself and some critics considered him a figurative artist who looked at subjects in an abstract way. In fact, his name can be put between abstract and figurative artists among the other members of the School. Mansur Qandriz, "Man beh suhulat-i bayan va azadi-iradeh iman dalam," *Firdawsi*, dccxiv, (1344/1965): 16.

²⁴ N.Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art* (Oxford, 1980), 2. "...the most familiar use of the term in a contemporary context is as a minimal negative definition, to denote works of art that are not 'representational', that is, which do not seem to represent other bodily objects. [...] An attempt at a positive consensus definition might be that an abstract work of art is a production that creates a highly singular and effectively unprecedented visual experience."

On the whole, these neo-traditionalist artists' use of tradition can be considered a reference to the *pictorial* tradition rather than to associational subject-matter and content. This quality is especially more obvious in the abstract branch of the School.²⁵ In other words, they concentrated on the *formal* traditions, including forms, motifs, colors, etc. that could altogether create an identifiable traditional and sometimes religious atmosphere rather than specific subject matter.²⁶ Apart from this interest in the representational aspect of traditional images, however, the presence of the artist's attention to the traditional subject matter can be found in the works of some artists (although quite rarely). Hence, we could mention the mythical, traditional, and literary subject matter exhibited in the *Ruba'iyat* of Omar *Khayyam*, the work of legendary sculptor Farhad, and in the folk proverbs with modern outlooks found in Tanavoli, Oveisi, and Tabatabai's works.

The following instances can be highlighted as *pictorial* characteristics of the *Saqqa-khaneh* works including the permanent presence of decoration with use of various motifs and ornamental elements (or the ornamental quality of most of the group's paintings) and the multiplicity of elements in most parts of the canvas. Other features to be noted include the use of the coloring system of classical Persian painting and color schemes of Iranian folk art consisting of gold, green, red, black, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and vermilion. Moreover, these artists mostly used calligraphic elements in various ways, sometimes as a major element and sometimes as decorative elements that fill different parts of the canvas.

We turn now to consider the major artists of this movement. The influential artist and leading member of the group, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937), trained first at the Tehran *Hunarkadeh-i hunar-hay-i taz'ini* and since 1961 continued his artistic career mainly in Paris. Though he had started with some votive Shi'ite iconography, he shifted to using calligraphy as a major element of his canvases in various ways and stages. He was initially interested in Abstract painting with geometrical patterns, talismanic shapes, numbers and calligraphic ornaments, accompanied by references to the Shi'ite iconography (See **[f]fig 3 here[/f]**). In those works, he presented the canvases using written forms of alphabetical characters in the background as texture-producing material for the squares, triangles, rectangles, and circles juggling with them, then tinting them with the characteristic colors of religious folk art: gold, green, yellow ochre, orange, and red. The freshness, intuitiveness, and originality found in his early works—inspired by these talismanic forms—were breathtaking and unique. Later, Zenderoudi's interest in calligraphy increased and he began experimenting with pure calligraphic elements.

²⁵ J. Evans, *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London, 1999), 11. This kind of viewpoint might have been influenced by the major concept of Abstract painting. According to Evans, "one of the modernist characteristics in terms of artistic expression of the art work is that [...] modernist painting has, for example, sought to create nothing more than the 'pure' self-referential image—abstract, non-verbal, free of representation, reference and narrative—although this interpretation of modernist works was fortified by elaborate verbal discourses of modernist art theory."

²⁶ The initial works of Zenderoudi before the *Saqqa-khaneh* period included a series of images that illustrated the different events that occurred at Karbala. Also, in some of Pilaram's later works (in the late 1970s), he illustrated some Qur'anic subject matter. Therefore, both artists chose the religious content of their works quite deliberately.

It is clear that among the founding members of the movement, Zenderoudi must be considered the pioneer of the calligraphic approach in terms of the use of calligraphy as the sole compositional element. With Zenderoudi's pseudo-scripts, the characters in and of themselves carried no meaning but were meaningful as organic elements of visual art and alive with cultural connotations. At the juncture of calligraphy and geometry, we find the optic art-like compositions of letters and the purity of calligraphic elements in which Zenderoudi intellectually refines the graphic geometry of the script²⁷ (**fig 4 here**). He seems to have developed the talismanic and calligraphic trends into a personalized pseudo-script of signs.

The artistic development of Faramarz Pilaram (1938–1983), a graduate of the Tehran *Hunarkadeh-i hunar-hay-i taz'ini*, at one stage ran parallel with Zenderoudi's, encompassing words, letters, and geometrical forms inspired by Shi'ite iconography (**fig 5 here**). Pilaram, whose use of old seals was a feature of the first part of his artistic career, used these in his works as a connective texture in geometrical compositions. An accomplished calligrapher, Pilaram later experimented with various styles in which calligraphy, especially the "*Nasta'liq*" script, played the main role. What is most common in his paintings is the compositional use of the *Nasta'liq* and *Shikasteh* scripts in which one can distinguish few dominant forms of words or letters such as "*salla*" and "*la*," etc. During the late 1960s and the early 1970s, he created several expressionist calligraphic paintings and colorful free-hand *Shikasteh*-like canvases, which can be associated with some traditional inscriptions. In the subsequent stage of his painting, calligraphic elements played a role as the connective textures in geometrical compositions, as if they had been slid onto the transparent surfaces in the background (**fig 6 here**). In this way, the geometrical background combined with the reflexes of the calligraphic elements causes his art to appear as if it were three dimensional. In some paintings, which are part of the collection of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Pilaram discovered musical compositions by use of calligraphic forms. In these paintings, rhythmical words play visual movements in a symphonic space. In fact, the homogeneous quality of indigenous arts, music, poetry, and decorative painting consciously emerge with harmonic symmetries in his canvases.

While the two above-mentioned artists concentrated exclusively on exploring calligraphy, some other artists used mystical symbols to combine traditional and modern elements into abstract designs. Another student of the Tehran *Hunarkadeh-i hunar-hay-i taz'ini*, Mansur Qandriz (1935–1965), was a semi-abstract painter who used stylized Persian motifs, emphasizing tribal forms, Iranian textiles, and ancient metalwork by the employment of limited colors. He was a painter, who "had struggled in the various stages of his artistic development, with obsessive care and hesitancy, to elaborate and define a truly Iranian style."²⁸ His early figurative images (before he joined the *Saqqa-khaneh*) reveal the influence of Matisse, Picasso, and Persian miniatures. Later in his *Saqqa-khaneh* period, using traditional textile and designs, he developed an individual semi-

²⁷ It is, however, worth noting that the artist's presence in Paris and the influences of such contemporary movements as *lettrism* (the Paris based avant-garde movement which was still at its apex when Zenderoudi moved to Paris) could have had a definite impact on him.

²⁸ Ruyin Pakbaz, *Contemporary Iranian Painting and Sculpture* (Tehran, 1974), 33.

abstract style characterized by geometric patterns and stylized images such as humans, birds, fish, the sun, swords, etc. ([f]fig 7 here[/f]).

Massoud Arabshahi (b. 1935), who also graduated from the *Hunarkadeh*, went back further and was inspired by the art of pre-Islamic Persia, by the motifs of Achaemenian, Assyrian, and by Babylonian rock carving and script. His drawings, inspired by Zoroastrian texts, resemble archaeological maps of ancient cities.²⁹ He was the only artist in the *Saqqa-khaneh* group who did not employ religious-folk art, and his artistic relationship with others was exhibited in his outlook, spirit, and his attendance in *Saqqa-khaneh* gatherings and exhibitions. I also argue that his early works (and even the later ones) conform to some aforementioned major *Saqqa-khaneh* aesthetic characteristics.³⁰ A close relationship with Islamic architectural forms and crafts can be found in the forms and sometimes the colors that he employed in these works (See [f]fig 8 here[/f]).

At the same time that the above-mentioned artists were dealing with abstraction, others like Oveisi chose figurative art. Motifs inspired chiefly by Persian paintings, ceramics, *qalamkar* (hand-painted materials), and calligraphy are featured in the canvases of Nasser Oveisi (b. 1934). While Oveisi creates complex designs, the themes of his paintings are few and simple. They include human figures, horses, and painted pottery, inspired by ancient Persian pottery (See [f]fig 9 here[/f]). His women—single or in groups of two or three—with large oblong eyes and joined eyebrows are reminiscent of the portraits of the Qajar large-scale paintings.³¹ His male figures, whether polo players, lovers, or riders with falcons on their arms, bring to mind some standard types of Iranian pictorial tradition and forms of Persian painting.³² In all cases, however, different sections of the figures are mostly illuminated by calligraphic forms.

The paintings of Sadeq Tabrizi (b. 1939), which were first inspired by traditional symbolic articles found in such folk art as “blue beads, old keys and locks, loose pages from manuscripts, penmanship practice sheets, old-fashioned signature seals, metal bowls with engraved rims, *qalyan* or *nargila* tops, colored glass or bits of semiprecious stone . . . ,”³³ also draw upon Persian painting, Qajar portraits, and forms of religious and folk paintings of *Qahveh-khaneh* (coffee-house). In his works, one can see the rhythmical repetition of motifs and calligraphic forms: “He often keeps the details of traditional objects identifiable, so that the viewer’s eyes may roam through his work discovering familiar details containing tales of the past.”³⁴ ([f]fig 10 here[/f].) From his exhibitions in 1970–71, Tabrizi started to utilize calligraphy as the sole element in his paintings.

²⁹ Rose Issa, *Iranian Contemporary Art* (London, 2001), 20.

³⁰ In particular, one can cite the permanent presence of decoration with use of various motifs and ornamental elements and the multiplicity of elements in most parts of the canvas. Also to be noted the use of the color schemes of Iranian folk art consisting of gold, green, red, black, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and vermilion.

³¹ One of the favorite subjects of Qajar court painting was representation of young female dancers, musicians, and acrobats. The facial features of the females with joined eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes, puckered lips, and flamboyant hair-styles reflect these paintings, which depict the ideal form of beauty in that period.

³² Yarshater, “Contemporary Persian Painting,” 370.

³³ Yarshater, “Contemporary Persian Painting,” 370.

³⁴ Yarshater, “Contemporary Persian Painting,” 370.

Zhazeh Tabatabai (b. 1928), who was one of the pioneers of modern art in Iran, also started with Qajar patterns in the late 1950s, earlier than most others, but according to Emami, “he hovered halfway between the caricature and the more serious exponents.”³⁵ A serious sculptor and a prolific painter, Tabatabai has a wide scope and has tried different styles; however, he is recognized best for his bold re-statements of Persian patterns such as Qajar females, decorative forms, calligraphic shapes, and imaginative scenes. ([f]fig 11 here[/f].) “He attempts to capture and perpetuate the types and shapes which are bound up with a vision of the last phases of traditional Persia.”³⁶

With a survey of the cultural atmosphere of Iranian artistic gatherings and also some written pieces in art publications and exhibitions during the fifties and, especially, the sixties, such as introductions to the Tehran Biennials³⁷ and *Talar-i Iran*'s³⁸ magazines, it can generally be found that they focused on two main topics: the importance of contemporary artistic achievements in the international art scene, on the one side, and the formation of national and Iranian art, on the other. In the introduction to one of the magazines produced by *Talar-i Iran*, it was written:

[T]here is no doubt that an artist in any place in the world has to confront such problems as determining his personal perceptions, artistic ideologies and strategies. [...] To do this, he must, at first, have complete knowledge of his expressive manner and be aware of the new artistic searches and discoveries in order to be able to take part in these achievements.³⁹

What is emphasized here (prevalent in those years) is the importance of the issue of current discoveries and awareness of what was happening on the artistic scene, which mostly referred to Euro-American art, and considered by these writings as one of the cultural and political policies of the state during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (1941–1979). On the other hand, the issue of “national” and “Iranian” identity was also an emphasized subject, promoted by cultural custodians and motivated by the thought of individual artists.

The state's sponsorship and support of other foreign and private institutes fostered the active development of art in the 1960s in the country. Here, the governmental cultural

³⁵ Karim Emami, “Modern Persian Artists,” *Iran Faces the Seventies* (New York, 1971): 357.

³⁶ Yarshater, “Contemporary Persian Painting,” 374.

³⁷ There were five Tehran Biennials before the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The first Tehran Biennial was held with the recommendation and artistic advice of Marcos Grigorian in 1958. This was in fact an influential event in introducing modern art to Iran. The first four biennials included the works of Iranian artists which reflected official sanctioning of the modern artistic movements. The fifth Tehran Biennial was a regional exhibition in 1966, which included artists from Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey.

³⁸ It was the name of the gallery which started its activity in Tehran in 1964. With attempts of Mohammad Reza Jowdat and Ruyin Pakbaz, this gallery was founded as an active cultural center holding painting, graphic, photography, and sculpture exhibitions, introducing the young artist's works, translating and publishing various art and architecture books and artistic anthologies (until 1977) over a period of thirteen years. This *Talar* was first called “*Talar-i Iran*” after the death of Qandriz (1965), and in honor of his memory named, “*Talar-i Qandriz*” (Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art*, 154).

³⁹ R. Pakbaz & M.R. Jowdat, *Fa'aliyyat-i ma keh dar Talar-i Iran shikl migirad, Talar-i Iran (Qandriz)*, Ketab-i sal-i *Talar-i Iran (Qandriz)*, clxxxviii, (1341, 1965), 1.

sections were the major leaders of artistic activities at that time. They tried to establish, through patronage of individual artists and movements, a “*formal art*” that would form the basis of a sort of national school of art.⁴⁰ Gradually, during the 1960s, this type of art was extensively propagated and supported by governmental patronage. If we consider the circumstances of selection of artists’ works, awarding of prizes, and the manifestos written in the formal exhibitions, such as the Tehran Biennials, supported by the government, this trend could be easily distinguished. Therefore, these external agents should be considered in the formation of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement that could also be an initial sort of Iranian *formal art* and was confirmed by the cultural organizers.⁴¹

One example of formal artistic activities started and supported by the *Idareh-i hunar-hay-i zibay-i kishvar* (Department of Fine arts of the Country)⁴² was the holding of the Tehran Biennials. Through the Tehran Biennials, which tried to emulate other famous European Biennials such as the “Venice Biennale,” the organizers considered the introduction and propagation of a kind of modern art that included the state’s cultural purposes.

It has been said that during the 1960s, modern Iranian painting could propound itself as much as modern poetry.⁴³ Just as modern poetry, painting was basically an urban art and was limited to the middle classes. But in contrast to modern poetry, painting benefited from extensive support of the state.⁴⁴ Holding biennials, awarding prizes and scholarships for study abroad to the selected artists in the exhibitions, making links with international associations, employing some foreign instructors, transforming the old educational curriculum to the modern one, and establishing the *Hunarkadeh-i hunar-hay-i taz’ini*, each played an important part in the development of Iranian painting during the 1960s. In fact, one of the roles of *Nawsazi-i farhangi* (Cultural Revolution) in the 1960s was to formalize modern art. The Fine Arts Department (subsequently named the Ministry of Culture and Art) employed many of the modernist artists. Some foreign associations played a role in the formation of an active and motivated art movement. Some key players in this were the Iran-America Cultural Association, the Iran-Italy Cultural Association, the Goethe Institute, and the Sirius Gallery in Paris (where modern Iranian painting, sculpture, and design were exhibited), several museums, artistic clubs in

⁴⁰ According to their viewpoint, having a national characteristic presented by the modern language of art was the main criteria that could make an ideal national school of art. And the *Saqqa-khaneh* was an example typical of this art.

⁴¹ This issue was specifically described in the introduction to the Fourth Tehran Biennial. This point mentions that the *Saqqa-khaneh* School can include all characteristics that the contemporary Iranian painting needs. *Introduction to the Fourth Tehran Biennial*, (Tehran, 1343/1964).

⁴² The Department of Fine Arts of the Country was established in the Ministry of Culture in 1949. This department changed to Ministry of Culture and Art in 1964. It was in charge of preparing and supporting the development of art and culture and presenting, improving, and introducing the ancient heritage and civilization of the country.

⁴³ *The Catalogue of the Third Tehran Biennial*, (Tehran, 1341/ 1962).

⁴⁴ In addition to organizing the five Tehran Biennials, two exhibition galleries (Aftab and Mitrshad) were set up. Gradually, many government institutions and private companies became patrons of modern art. Some of them included the Farah Pahlavi Foundation, Ministries, National Iranian Radio Television, banks, corporations led by the Behshahr Industrial group, Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida, Ehsan Yarshater, and the Lajevardi Foundation.

Tehran and other cities, including Isfahan and Kerman, and active galleries in Tehran, including *Saba*, *Mes*, *Litu*, *Borghese*, *Hunar-i Jadid*, *Zarvan*, *Zand*, *Saman*, and *Talar-i Qandriz*.

As already mentioned, before this state-assisted propagation of art in the 1960s, the issue of identity in art (as in other fields of intellectual and social activities) was discussed in some artistic and intellectual gatherings. During the 1940s and 1950s, the term “national art” or “school of national art” was repeatedly mentioned by both modernist artists and cultural administrators and some attempts had even been made by artists to produce this kind of art. In other words, since the 1940s when modernism began to be adapted by Iranian artists—although modernism and its acceptance by artists and Iranian society was the main issue—many of those pioneers had tried to look at modern western art from an Iranian point of view. Here, the relationship between some intellectual and governmental debates respecting the problem of national identity was the effective agent in influencing the artistic atmosphere of that era.

Faced with the complexities of their artistic identity, the young artists of the generation of the 1960s were engaged in intensive experimentation, both intellectually and artistically. They now referred to Shi’ite pictorial folk culture, which was still alive and highly popular, especially among the middle and lower classes. These artists believed that these sources had a connection with their artistic roots.⁴⁵ At this juncture, criticism of the West through anti-western movements was growing among some Iranian intellectuals. It can be said that this kind of perception with regard to art was paralleled with the nativist and nationalist debates that were prevalent in both intellectual and political arenas of Iran at that time. The major similarity of these movements was to encourage Iranians to discover their identity, tradition, and national roots. This belief was also growing among Iranian elites and the effect of this milieu on this group of artists should not be underestimated. These tendencies among the intelligentsia, which had originated in the 1940s and 1950s, manifested themselves in criticism of the insatiable desire among the majority to imitate and emulate the West and its products. This was known as *gharb-zadigi* (Westoxication) in various scopes of life, literature, and art. According to Borujerdi (1996):

This period also represented the heyday of nativism and anti-orientalism in Iran. During this time, the question of self and other came to the forefront of intellectual deliberations and stayed there for good.⁴⁶

One of the indirect reactions to this thought was the return to traditions, local, folk and national cultures, and national-traditional identity. However, it has to be said that although the great presence of nativist beliefs can be recognized in the *Saqqa-khaneh*

⁴⁵ An example of this belief is Zenderoudi’s statement. Explaining the way in which he used the folk art, he declares: “I took the inspiration from numbers, astrolabes, metal plates’ prayer writing, etc. and came to know that these humble treasures of alleys and street, coloured by all civilizations, are the origin and basic essence of Iranian civilization. [...] Those treasures existed before. They are only materials, objects, places or cultural values in need of one who can summarise them and add polished elements.” (Zenderoudi, www.zenderoudi.com/eng/inter/html)

⁴⁶ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York, 1996), 132.

movement, none of these artists and their followers were anti-western in either their mind or artistic manner. Rather, it was the issue of cultural identity that motivated them to refer to their own roots without turning away from the West. In other words, these neo-traditionalist artists intended to Iranicize their works and to create an artistic style born in Iran. However, due to the modernistic nature of their art, the question can be posed whether—as Kamran Diba believes—the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement can be compared to the Pop Art⁴⁷ movement in the West. He claims, “if we simplify Pop Art as an art movement which looks at the symbols and tools of a mass consumer society as a relevant and influencing cultural force, *Saqqa-khaneh* artists looked at the inner beliefs and popular symbols that were part of the religion and culture of Iran, and perhaps, consumed in the same way as industrial products in the West (but for different reasons and under dissimilar circumstances).”⁴⁸ He names the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement “in reference to Western art, ‘Spiritual Pop Art’.”⁴⁹ Although his assumption cannot be ignored completely, it cannot be fully justified either, considering the artistic circumstances of that period (the 1960s) in Iran and individual statements of the artists exploring their individual motivations as well as some background in socio-political context, which was quite different from the West. Indeed, emphasis should be placed again on the influence of the intellectual and artistic atmosphere, on the one hand, and on the remarkable role of government and custodians of culture in leading artistic activities, on the other.

Although no one has claimed any exact date for the demise of the *Saqqa-khaneh* School yet, it has been stated that the main School did not last because of the lack of concord between the members of the group.⁵⁰ In contemporary times, the School’s main doctrine⁵¹ is continued through the individual artists of the School and other external artists who were influenced by it in different ways. If we consider Emami’s statement in the introduction to the *Saqqa-khaneh* exhibition’s catalogue in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in August 1977 (which explains the *Saqqa-khaneh* status), it can be concluded that the School had existed in a different manner, at least until that time. He argues that:

⁴⁷ Short term for “Popular Art.” This term has been applied to two phenomena that emerged simultaneously in Britain and the United States, although they were virtually independent of each other. Pop Art is more associated with the early 1960s when *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* all ran cover stories on it. The movement was both a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, which was seen as too elitist and non-objective, as well as a celebration of post-war consumer culture. The work of American Pop artists, often graphic designers by training, was based on illustrations of objects produced by mass culture. The expression “Pop Art” should not, however, be interpreted too literally. These artists did not “manufacture” “popular pictures;” they provided a sophisticated artistic commentary on some of the activities and effects of the culture of the mass media. By appropriating marketing techniques and accepting the changed role of the artist, Pop Art was the first movement to clearly take into account the relationship between art and commerce. (M.L., *The Time and Hudson Multimedia Dictionary of Modern Art*, Times and Hudson).

⁴⁸ Diba, “Iran,” 153.

⁴⁹ Diba, “Iran,” 153

⁵⁰ M.R. Jowdat, “Nimayishgah-i dasteh jam`i-i naqqashi,” *Talar-i Iran (Qandriz)*, clxxxviii, (1344/1965): 10. See also Aydin Aghdashloo, “Baqi hameh harf ast,” *Hunar-i mu`asir*, ii, (1372/1993): 44.

⁵¹ There was no actual doctrine written by the *Saqqa-Khaneh* School. Rather, here, our use of the word “doctrine” is to express the main principles of the School’s aim, including its attention to the issue of cultural and artistic identity by reference to pictorial heritage with consideration of complex realities of modern life with a neo-traditional approach.

What is the status of the Saqqakhaneh School today? Is it dead or alive? All but one of its members are luckily alive, [⁵²] though some of them may not be currently in their best productive years. The mere fact that the present exhibition is assembled on the occasion of the opening of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is itself an indication that the Saqqakhaneh School is a living presence in the arts of modern Iran ...⁵³

The exhibition consisted of works of the major *Saqqakhaneh* members, including Zenderoudi, Tanavoli, Pilaram, Qandriz, Arabshahi, Tabrizi, Tabatabai, and Oveisi. Yet, what could be definitely observed is that although the organization of the group (if there were any special organization) did not last until the mid-1960s, the *Saqqakhaneh* main founders have continued their radical aim, even now, through diverse styles. In other words, even if each of the artists of *Saqqakhaneh* chose a different manner and proceeded on their way beyond the movement's initial boundaries, their subsequent stages cannot be considered distinct and discrete from the original School's main destination.

It also ought to be noted that the *Saqqakhaneh* movement resulted in the emergence of other homogeneous tendencies in contemporary Iranian art in which these tendencies all dealt with the issue of identity. Such movements as "Easternism," "Gnosticism," and "*Naqqashi-khatt*" emerged, with each one playing a part in the history of contemporary Iranian art.

Since the *Saqqakhaneh* School, there has not been any similar movement in Iran on a national basis. In particular, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and following political, cultural, and social transformations in Iran, art was also totally affected. The Revolution brought to a sudden end the previous regime's official policies on art. One of the important impacts of the Revolution on such neo-traditional movements as *Saqqakhaneh*, (whose lack of commitment to the Islamic Revolution and its aspirations and whose works with their modernist aspects had been greatly supported by the pre-revolutionary state as a *formal art*) was that the School's artists mostly migrated abroad and those who stayed had no opportunity to present their works. However, after about a decade in the post-revolutionary period, modern Iranian painting was regenerated in the beginning of the 1990s. It was then that another neo-traditionalism was about to be born, which coincided with the re-introduction and analysis of the *Saqqakhaneh* artists and their works in the artistic centers.⁵⁴ Here again, one can witness that the dominant preoccupation of the post-revolutionary modernist artists is to identify what constitutes the specific characteristics of Iranian art, and it is in this continued quest that the essence of the *Saqqakhaneh* movement still lives on.

⁵² Mansur Qandriz, one of the major members of the School, died in a car accident in 1965.

⁵³ Emami, *Saqqakhaneh: Saqqakhaneh School Revisited*, 5.

⁵⁴ Some eminent *Saqqakhaneh* artists, such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi who had left Iran and cut their link with the Iranian art scene after the Revolution perhaps, because of lack of attention to their works, were now invited to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art to exhibit their works in solo or group exhibitions.