

ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱԼՍԱՐԱՆ  
ԱՐԵՎԵԼԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՖԱԿՈՒԼՏԵՏ

ԱՐԵՎԵԼԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՀԱՐՑԵՐ

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**Հրատարակվում է Երևանի պետական համալսարանի  
արևելագիտության ֆակուլտետի  
գիտական խորհրդի որոշմամբ**

**Խմբագրական խորհուրդ՝**

Մելքոնյան Ռուբեն բ.գ.թ., պրոֆեսոր (խմբագիր)

Մելիքյան Գուրգեն բ.գ.թ., պրոֆեսոր

Խառատյան Ալբերտ պ.գ.դ., պրոֆեսոր, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ թղթակից-անդամ

Սաֆրաստյան Ռուբեն պ.գ.դ., պրոֆեսոր, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ակադեմիկոս

Հովհաննիսյան Լավրենտի բ.գ.դ., պրոֆեսոր, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ թղթ.-անդամ

Հովհաննիսյան Դավիթ բ.գ.թ., պրոֆեսոր

Սաֆարյան Ալեքսանդր պ.գ.թ., պրոֆեսոր

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Կարապետյան Ռուբեն պ.գ.դ.

Տեր-Սաթևոսյան Վահրամ պ.գ.դ.

Գրեկյան Երվանդ պ.գ.դ.

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## IRANIAN POST-MODERNISM: THE SAQQA-KHANEH ART MOVEMENT

**Keywords:** *Saqqa-khaneh, Vernacular Culture, Religious Motifs, Nihilism, Commercialism*

Saqqa-khaneh refers to a special space in public areas, a sort of water fountain designed by Iranians with the intention of offering water to people who pass by. They are significant not only for their secular role, but also their religious symbolism.

In Shi'a culture, Saqqa-khaneh are built in honor of Hazrat Abbas who was killed during the battle of Karbala, while bringing water from Euphrates River for Imam Hossein and his family who were deprived of water. The religious role of saqqa-khaneh paved the way for including them in the mourning ceremonies of Shi'a. After a while symbols were added to saqqa-khaneh and they became a place where the art of ornaments and symbols flourished.

There is another side to the art of saqqa-khaneh, which is not related to their architecture or the ornamental designs of them. Saqqa-khaneh were not only important for their architectural and cultural role, but also for inspiring a group of Iranian contemporary artists who started the Saqqa-khaneh Movement in 1950-60s.

The third Tehran Biennial took place in 1962 and art critic Karim Emami used the term Saqqa-khaneh for a group of artists who exhibited their works during that exhibition. He resembled their works to saqqa-khaneh both because of their symbols and for the visual forms. This was a look backward to the Iranian culture, which was faded in the shadow of

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<sup>1</sup> PhD., Associate professor, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Department of Iranian Studies, Yerevan State University, e-mail: noonik.darbinyan@ysu.am

elite art. The Saqqa-khaneh art was modern and meanwhile it contained decorative items, colors and iconography, which was specific to Iranian culture. This form of art was a mixture of calligraphy, colors, shapes, stamps and etc. The art was not art itself, but also contained political messages. Although, Saqqa-khaneh artists had similarities in their style and inspiration sources, but they had diverse imaginations and the mixture of secular and religious was what made them distinguished.

This paper examines saqqakhaneh, the architectural and ornamental characteristics and the Saqqa-khaneh Art Movement in the context of post-modernist art, starting from 1950s until the reflection of this art in Iranian contemporary art of today.

### ***Iranian Postmodernism: The Saqqa-khaneh Art Movement***

The contemporary art scene of Iran is brimming with new innovative forms of expressions and colors; some of them exact borrowings and imitations of western art and some of them so specific to Iranian culture. The roots of this cultural expression and freedom of forms and colors go into an art movement, which originated around 1960 in Tehran and bears the name of Saqqa-khaneh Art Movement. The importance of this movement resides in the artistic and ideological value that it holds. History shows that the crucial aspect of Iranian culture is the inner ideology, and art without ideology is rarely specific to Iranian culture.

Before analyzing the artistic characteristics of this movement the question rises about the etymology of the word “Saqqa-khaneh”. The word saqqa-khaneh comes from the Arabic words saqqa (the one who gives water) and Persian khaneh (house). Saqqa has been coined with the most famous saqqa in Shiite religion, saqqaye-dasht-e-Karbala (The water-bearer of Karbala), Abbas ebneabi Taleb, who during Karbala battle, went to Euphrates to bring water. Although his thirst was unbearable, upon reaching the river he did not take any sip of the water, and on the way back to his peers, enemies cut his hands and he never managed to provide water to his friends. The emotional impact of Imam Hussayn and his 72 friends suffering from severe thirst is so great that the term saqqa has been conjoined with Islamic religious beliefs and terms. The incident gave an

idea to Iranians for building religious architectural structures called saqqa-khaneh, with the intention of giving water to the passengers, so the devoted Muslim-builder will receive eternal reward from God for remembering the martyrs of Karbala. This structure is very specific to Iranian culture. It is a small room or cave like structure, sometimes a tall building, in the wall of a public area, like bazaar, tekyeh (tent like temporary structures built during month of Moharram for Shiite mourning ceremonies), passages, mosques or even residential homes. So, the structure can be temporary, like the ones built inside or near tekyeh for the entire month of mourning, or permanent. There are elements, which are specific to Saqqa-khaneh, the sliding door made of wood or iron, and the artistic metalwork, which is similar to Jali structures seen mostly in Indian subcontinent. There is another element, which is the copper or brass bowl with religious inscriptions like “YaHusayn” (Oh Husayn) or “Laanat bar Yazid” (Curse upon Yazid), chained to the outside metal wall. The bowl usually contains a hand-like structure, which is a metaphor to the lost hands of Hazrat-e-Abolfazl-el-Abbas. The inside and outside walls of saqqa-khanah are decorated with religious paintings, Iranian tiles and calligraphy. In front of the structure candles are lit. The tradition of lighting candles comes from the idea that thirsty passengers will find their way to saqqa-khaneh during the night. Today, lighting candles has become more of a religious thing. As we see, in the span of time, saqqa-khaneh not only kept their water providing role, but also became a place of worship where people besides praying and lighting candles were attaching dakhils (Rags), locks, chains, religious puppets, and khamsa (hamsa).

The moral message of saqqa-khaneh builders, the devotion of the people, the beauty of midnight candles and decorations on the wall, the golden shining of the brass bowl and the movement of Arabic words under these lights, gave inspiration to a group of young Iranian artists, who were fascinated by modern art of the western world, but knew deep inside that they are not going to succeed in this scene, if they fail to bring their cultural heritage into it. This was a time of great change in the world. In western world people were stepping foot on moon, Peter Fechter was lying shot in

no-man's land during a failed crossing attempt to west Germany (the inspiration to many artworks), it was a time when first computers were built, new forms of literature were being experimented (like the works of Beat Generation), it was the time of Vietnam war and all the consumerism tendencies, insurance and house building companies bringing new set of values to the western world.

In the other side of the world, 1962, was the year when Iranian prominent writer Jalal-al-Ahmad published his famous work "Occidentosis: A Plague From the West". The book was about the main concern of the nationalistic wing of intellectuals: the loss of Iranian identity through imitating the western culture, system of education, and lifestyle, all that seemed modern and western. Iran was a scene of geo-political intrigues, where the colonial-national clash was manifesting in art and culture also. As Jalal-al-Ahmad mentioned in his work, in the way of surviving the westernization process, Iran was supposed to become a producer, not a consumer. He believed that "These cities are just flea markets hawking European manufactured goods"<sup>2</sup>. Iranian modern artists knew that they should have their share of saying in this clash. They were convinced that the key to the cultural success was keeping western art culture and Iranian traditional side by side. In result, an Iranian wave of modernism in art started to flourish, mainly because artists came to the conclusion that Iranian modern art could not exist without an underlying meaning or keeping of the traditional values. This view was different from the previous traditional approaches to the art. The traditional elements of art existed in the Iranian artwork, but were never combined with western technics. The artists had a keen eye and found art in the vernacular culture, in the shops of blacksmith, miniaturists, calligraphists and goldsmiths, in flea markets and pawnshops. Pottery, jewelry designs, carpet designs, ancient metalwork, ethnic artwork all started to pave way into the art.

The pioneer artists were a group of students and lecturers of the "HonarkadehyehonarhayehTazini" (Faculty of Art), who started experimenting with these vernacular cultural objects and forms. Around 1962, during the Third Tehran Biennale, Iranian art critic and lecturer

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<sup>2</sup> Mottahedeh R., *The Mantle of the Prophet*, Oneworld Publications, 2014, p. 298

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KarimEmamifirst used the term Saqqa-khaneafter viewing their artworks. Art critics started applying this term to the works of artists both in painting and sculpture, which were mainly using elements of Shiite art in their works.<sup>3</sup>

Calligraphy, considered one of the highest points of Islamic art or the art of spoken word, was the first element, which these artists started to integrate into their artworks. One of the prominent artists of this movement Charles Hossein Zanderoudi, started to use this form of art in his works. The alphabetical characters were not only the main subject of his pictures, they were also written in the background of his works or like the artwork named “The Golden Shower” spread on the canvas. His paintings contained also religious elements. One of his works shows the religious hand of Abolfazl in a brass bowl (the exact form derived from saqqa-khaneh) and again some calligraphy in the background, his other famous work represents a picture of saqqa-khaneh with locks on metalwork.

The point of using these symbols was because there was a tendency of engaging in a more universal art, pay attention, not “Lower” art and these symbols were intertwined with the lives of middle and lower classes in Iran. It is important to mention that Saqqa-khaneh artists were emphasizing not the content of the texts used in their works, but the visual characteristics. They used letters and poems to fill the background of their pictures and by this they removed the semantic meaning of the words. Saqqa-khaneh art was full of religious texts and insights, e.g. in the works of Faramarz Pilaram, where the Nastaaligh and Shekasteh forms of calligraphy are arranged in a way that gives a three-dimensional feeling to the artwork, but it is important to mention that the use of words and letters in the works of art was not always done with the intention of giving a religious message; one of the artists, Naser Oveisi brought extracts of children fables or talismanic spells, which were scribbled on a surface, giving the work an abstract feeling. Massoud Arabshahi went back into the

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<sup>3</sup> آیتینگه‌اوزن ریچارد، یارشاطر احسان، اوج‌های درخشان هنر ایران، ت. عبداللهیهرمز، پاکبازروئین، نشر آگاه، ۱۳۷۹، ص. ۸۲

history and was inspired by pre-Islamic art of Persia and Assyrian rock carvings. His works are like territorial maps of ancient cities.

Internationally renowned Sculptor and one of the founding members of this movement Parviz Tanavoli indicates that he and H. Zanderoudi became fascinated with this form of art by observing talismanic seals, religious arts and posters. Tanavoli is considered an artist who created something out of nothing and his creation was sold for 2 million dollars in Christies. From 1970s the “Hich” (Nothing) sculptures, jewelry and ceramic works of Parviz Tanavoli was a nihilistic cry into Persian allegory. The creation of these sculptures was an artistic reaction to the commercialism of some elite artistic circles, where works of arts were valued based on their connection to the western standards. Tanavoli art was the materialization of the fact that the world has a spiritual dimension, eluding the theme of annihilation (fana), one of the important concepts in Sufism. God created everything out of nothing and Hich suggests a mystical condition behind nothingness, a moment when even “nothing” can be a creation and considered a work of art.

Besides sculptures, Tanavoli created several works on canvas. “Oh Nightingale!” canvas is a mixture of modernism and traditionalism. It is the picture of a robot kneeling in front of a desk holding a nightingale. The robot is a true example of what Jalal-al-Ahmad pointed as western machines, a silent machine, incapable of expressing itself. But nightingale is the bird that has adorned Persian poetry with the beautiful voice. This voice is the expressing nature of Iranian art, Iranian culture. On the canvas we see a calligraphy mentioning the name of God and Hazrate Ali. This work of art is a mixture of Islamic elements, Iranian literature, rugs, and calligraphy, which brings the core of the Iranian identity to the surface.

As we mentioned, the world was fascinated by contemporary modern art during 1960’s; it was the heydays of pop art in the western world. Some academics gave rise to the idea that “The influence of pop art outside of the western world is what is considered the Saqqa-khaneh art movement”<sup>4</sup>. But lets oppose to this idea and mention that Saqqa-khaneh art movement has a spiritual meaning behind all the mass productions and everyday elements of

<sup>4</sup> حسینی مهدی، سقاخانه یک جنبش ملی، فرهنگستان هنر، مؤسسه فرهنگی هنری و پژوهشی صبا، ۱۳۵۹، ص. ۱۲

life. The major problem is that pop art is concentrated on simple objects defined for the use of masses in the era of consumerism, but Saqqa-khaneh art movement is not using the consumerism object in the art. Although one of the main figures of Saqqa-khaneh Movement insists that Saqqa-khaneh art is a form of “spiritual pop-art”<sup>5</sup>, we believe that coining Saqqa-khaneh art with pop art is one of the main mistakes, besides the exact differences of painting style and objects used, Saqqa-khaneh became prominent just after pop-art was losing its place in the western art scene.<sup>6</sup> Pop art was a reaction to the ideas of Abstract expressionism, although we see exact traces of this Abstract expressionism in Saqqa-khaneh Movement. Pop art was using the exact objects, which were currently used in advertisements, like logos, movie posters, but Saqqa-khaneh artists used objects and forms from the past. The main point of pop-art artists was destroying the hierarchy of “low” and “high” art; which was not the tendency in Saqqa-khaneh Movement.

Iranian artists, during 1960s-1970s were engaged in the search for problem of culture under capitalism. In this conditions it was important for artists to reproduce art that was universal, Iranian, it holds traditions and brought a new idea into art. They brought books into canvas, words into visual art, included new artistic forms and sight in Iranian art, but also they started a school of art criticism, established art galleries and started to have exhibitions, which was new to Iran. The art galleries of Mahmoud Javadipour, Marcos Grigorian, and Sirak Melkonian were being used as the artistic hub of these people. These artists not only shared some similarities in the form of art, but they all had affiliation with Tehran College of Decorative Arts. The Honarkadeh had a strategy of encouraging students to find art in local sources and familiarize them with Iran’s decorative heritage.

The voice of these artists was heard on an international level by the attempts of one of the main contributors to this movement Monir Sahroudy Farmanfarman. She left Iran in 1950s for pursuing her

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<sup>5</sup> عابد دوستحسین، کاظم پور زیبا، جامعه شناسی مکتب نقاشی سقاخانه ای، کتاب ماه هنر، ۱۳۸۹، ش. ۱۶۶، ص. ۱۰

<sup>6</sup> Keshmirshakan H., Neo-traditionalism and modern Iranian painting: The Saqqa-khaneh school in the 1960s. *Iranian Studies*, 2005, 38 (4), pp. 607-608.

education, established a precious friend circle, which included representatives of pop art Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, and etc. Although she returned to Iran in 1957 and started creating works with mirror mosaics, her connections opened the doors of western galleries for the rest of the artists in Saqqa-khaneh movement. Her friend Abby Weed Grey was the biggest collector of contemporary Iranian Art outside of Iran. Since then every year works from Grey's collection are chosen for exhibitions around the world, a practice, which still continues.

Parviz Tanavoli once said, "Before us people were proud to follow Picasso or Cezanne, but we were different, we had our own schools, our own art"<sup>7</sup>. Saqqa-khaneh art was a trigger, which gave rise to Iranian modern art on an international level. The movement started, because the national Iranian identity was growing among elites during that time. The artists never followed a mutual technic; there were no specific ideological similarities or a mutual manifest. It seems the only mutual aim was to evaluate Iranian art and bring it to the surface with whatever cost, with whatever items they found in the vernacular culture. Saqqa-khaneh art can be coined with postmodern art because of some specific characteristics like going back to the past cultures or the semiotics of the forms. This Movement was a national form of art, very specific, very local, which paved its way into the international art scene.

## **ԻՐԱՆԱԿԱՆ ՊՈՍՏ-ՄՈԴԵՐՆԻԶՄ ՍԱԳՂԱԽԱՆԵՆԷՆԶ ԱՐՎԵՍՏԻ ՇԱՐԺՈՒՄ**

### **Նունիկ Դարբինյան (Ամփոփում)**

Սաղղախանեհը հանրային շատրվան է՝ նախագծված իրանցիների ձեռամբ, որի նպատակն է ջուր մատակարարել անցորդներին: Տվյալ կառույցները կարևոր են ոչ միայն իրենց սեկուլյար նշանակությամբ, այլև՝ կրոնական սիմվոլիզմի տեսանկյունից: Շիայական մշակույթում սաղղախանեհները հիմնականում կառուցվում են Հազրաթ-ե-Աբբասի հիշատակին, ով նահատակվել է Քարբալայի ճակատամարտի ընթացքում՝ ջրից

<sup>7</sup>اعتمادی احسان، «سقاخانه» هنر های تجسی، شماره سوم، ۱۳۷۷، ص. ۲۹



գրկված Իմամ Հոսյենի և նրա ընտանիքի համար Եփրատից ջուր բերելու ժամանակ: Սաղղախանեհների կրոնական դերը պատճառ դարձավ, որ վերջիններս գաղափարական առումով ընդգրկվեն շիայական սգասածության մեջ: Ժամանակի ընթացքում սաղղախանեհի բուն կառույցին ավելացան ուրիշ սիմվոլներ, որոնցից են մոմերը, կողպեքները, սրբերի նկարները, և սաղղախանեհները վերածվեցին մի վայրի, ուր դեկորատիվ և սիմվոլիկ արվեստը սկսեց զարգանալ:

Սակայն սաղղախանեհը կարևոր է ոչ միայն գուտ ճարտարապետական և մշակութային առանձնահատկությունների առմամբ, այլև արժևորվում է իր ազդեցությամբ այն ժամանակակից արվեստագետների վրա, որոնք սկսեցին «Սաղղախանեհ» արվեստի շարժումը 1950-60-ականներին Իրանում: 1962 թվականին Թեհրանում կայացած արվեստի երրորդ բիենալեի շրջանակներում արվեստի քննադատ Քարիմ Էմամին սաղղախանեհ բառը գործածեց նկարագրելու համար այն նկարիչներին, որոնց աշխատանքն օգտագործված սիմվոլների և պատկերների առումով նմանակում էր սաղղախանեհի կառույցը: Սա հետադարձ հայացք էր իրանական մշակույթին, որը երկար ժամանակ էր ինչ գտնվում էր «էլիտար արվեստի» ազդեցության ներքո:

«Սաղղախանեհ» արվեստը ժամանակակից էր և միաժամանակ պարունակում էր իրանական մշակույթի դեկորատիվ տարրեր, գույներ, և պատկերապատումներ: Արվեստի այս ձևն իր մեջ պարունակում էր և՛ գեղագրություն, և՛ երկրաչափական պատկերներ, և՛ կրոնական տարրեր: Այն ոչ միայն արվեստ էր արվեստի համար, այլ նաև իր մեջ քաղաքական պատգամներ էր պարունակում: Չնայած սաղղախանեհ ոճում աշխատող արվեստագետներն ունեին եզակի և խորը երևակայություն, սակայն սեկուլարի և կրոնականի համաձուլումն էր, որ նրանց դրեց արվեստի նոր հարթակի վրա: Մույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրում ենք «Սաղղախանեհ» շարժման ճարտարապետական և դեկորատիվ առանձնահատկությունները պոստմոդեռնիստական արվեստի կոնտեքստում՝ սկսած 1950-ականներից մինչև այսօր: