

A Comparative Study on the Relationship between Spiral forms in Sufi Spiral Dance (Sama) and Persian Islamic Paintings

Tala Azizi Koutanaei¹

Abstract

Iranian painting enjoys an external beauty to which is added the internal spiritual purity and exquisiteness. This painting which is saturated with mystery and secrecy is in close relation with Iranian mysticism. The present article was an attempt to investigate the comparative relationship between spiral forms in Sufi spiral dance (Sama: the Arabic word Raqs) which takes its name from the order of the whirling dervishes in Konya where Mawlawī (Rumi) used to practice it with his disciples and Persian Islamic paintings. To do so, the quality and quantity of spiral and whirling movements was scrutinized in both of these art forms. The present research employed both the library research and content analysis to collect the data and analyze them, respectively. The paintings of famous Iranians in the Islamic era, especially those of Kamala Din Behzad (a famous painter of Heart school) were meticulously surveyed and compared with the principles of Sufi dance and the results revealed that Iranian artists and mystics have taken inspiration from each other and one of the common points between their art forms is "the movement". The results also showed that the spiral Iranian miniature art form named Arabesque (Islamic art) involves the development of the movement and rotation of dancers seen in Sufi dancing. While turning around them, the dancers dance around their mentor, and this way they represent the particles associated with movements around the world. The present findings are in line with the findings in Physics as well. The findings of this study can be used by those interested in Iranian-Islamic art, architects, painters, researchers in mystical literature, and fine arts students.

Key words: Iranian-Islamic art, Spiral Forms, Sufi Spiral Dance, Sama, Persian Paintings

Introduction

Iranian painting enjoys an old tradition and background and its painters have always been trying to find a way towards revelation and perfection through illustrating the God's creatures and creations in their works (Pour Isaac, 1980). As the Iranian art has held great and deep roots in religion and religious beliefs, it has been vastly influenced by Sufism and such a permanent effect on the art of painting cannot be denied. Iranian Sufism perhaps is what distinguishes this art from the similar ones in other countries (Kropf, 2013). Sufism in Iran enjoys several thousand years of existence and probably at the advent of Islam, and especially in the middle ages, reaches a peak power (Burckhardt, 2009). Its originality is based on monotheism and its main theme is the human journey to achieve perfection in itself. Sheikh Farid al-Din Attar, the wise sage and mystic poet of the seventh century, defines Sufism in the regulation of these seven steps: first; fever, second; love, third; knowledge, fourth; self-sufficiency, fifth; unity, sixth; amazement, and seventh; poverty and ruin (Hakemi, 1991). Considering such background knowledge of Sufism in the art of painting in the Iranian traditions, one does not find it so strange to see that the Iranian artist works in conjunction with the intended audience through mysticism. It seems that this view presents a common ground based on which this art is developed and recognized.

¹ M.A. in Art Research, Arts and Architecture College, Tehran Central Branch, Islamic Azad University, Teheran, Iran. Email: azizitala@gmail.com

The present article mainly focuses on the principles shared by Sufism and Iranian paintings through reviewing the concept of movement in both Sufi dances of Konya and Iranian paintings in the Islamic era.

Problem Statement

The drawings and paintings of the Islamic Iran present such growing and moving figures and lines that absorb the viewers and inspire them in a special manner. This type of line that is formed on the substrate, arcs and curves represents the structure of the universe. It shows the way the earth and the stars are moving and signifies the fact that as the Earth rotates on its axis and around the sun, the dancers turn around and move about their master to show the unity of the world and its creator, God the almighty (Hakemi, 2001). This is shown through the whirling movements of the dervishes who seem to be so senseless and drunk with the joy of the dance that they see nothing but the presence of God and unity with Him. Spiral movement in Iranian painting, which is called arabesque, is a symbol of evolution and creation of the world in a live and moving mode. However, in the present study, the key question is whether Spiral Dances at Sama of Konya (Sufi Dance) and Iranian paintings in the Islamic era share common grounds and principles in the structure and form.

Review of the Related Literature

The literature presented here is mostly based on the works of Iranian scholars and mainly focuses on the concepts of movement, arabesque, the curve lines in arabesques, Physics and the curve lines, the relationship between beauty and the curve lines, and lines in Iranian paintings.

Movement

For a closer look at the concept of movement, irrespective of its clear literal definition, we should consider its culture-bound entity and the way it covers spiral motions as the symbol of defending another and keeping him/her safe, or receiving all his/her pains so as s/he can go on safe and sound. It seems that sacrificing is also timing and inherent in this word as the verbs "whirl and move around" are frequently used to show the willingness to get sacrificed for others in the Iranian traditions (Rahnavard, 1999). In Iranian particular culture, a movement against the rest of the gradual withdrawals of the world signifies living, existing, being, and feeling love and passion towards others and eventually, towards the creator of whatever we pay attention to and love, that is God the Almighty. The meaning shows that the concept is quite concrete and tangible, though it could be used in various objective or subjective discussions. Iranian artist feels a need to move towards excellence and knows that this movement takes him/her to an eternal source. "It seems that the concept of movement in Islamic traditions can be compatible with the objectives of the dynamic motion of the spiral decorations enriched with arabesques" (Foroughi, 1988, p. 40). Shay (1995) discusses that Raqs in Iranian culture is a unique phenomenon based specific movements, something which is different from the ones seen in other parts of the world. He then asserts that "many activities in which the participants perform patterned movements are devotional and spiritual in their own view, while observers from outside, and sometimes inside the society unquestioningly term this type of activity dance, because of its patterned, rhythmical movement" (Shay, 1995, p. 61).

Arabesques

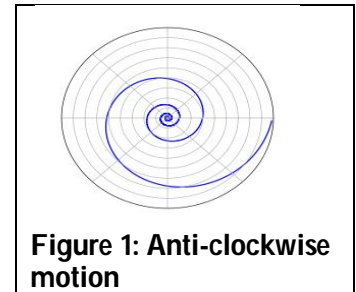
The free dictionary defines arabesque as a) a ballet position in which the dancer bends forward while standing on one straight leg with the arm extended forward and the other arm and leg extended backward, b) a complex, ornate design of intertwined floral, foliate, and geometric figures, c) an ornate, whimsical composition especially for piano, which is definition in the musical sense, and d) an intricate or elaborate pattern or design (www.thefreedictionary.com). Pope, Ackerman, and Besterman (1964) presented that arabesque is an inseparable section of Iranian motifs and tiles of the mosques, and Quran pages. In the Iranian art works, arabesques as decorating figures, are considered much too dialectic in nature as they consist of both floral motifs and continuous movement in a circular form. It seems that they are presenting a non-stop and endless pattern representing the unity and endlessness of the universe circulating around a specific energetic center which absorbs the peripheries really highly. Amoozgar (1997) argues that arabesques' origin should be pursued in ancient Iranian symbols and themes, as a lot of floral shapes, blossoms, and religious signs are visible in the vestiges of the time. Any arabesque represents a specific movement, but all the shapes continue to be a regular pattern of qualities. Hynlz (1998, p.145) "in the Islamic art the patterned shapes show a diversification and variety which has held unity as well".

Spiral Curves in Arabesques

Dynamic effects of arabesque spiral curves result in an evenly perfection from both spiritual and material views. "Motion" and "movement" is considered essential in a step towards perfection and revelation and seeking the truth. Achieving excellence is also bound to 'seeking the truth' and the journey to the truth is considered a significant stage in mysticism. Leibniz (1989, p.235) asserts that "the truth is the very force of which the drama and theme is the movement. There is no absolute rest, nor is it possible to move an object from the resting position without any impetus or existing energy. The stationary and rest, hence represents a measly and valueless action".

Physics and Spiral Curves

Resnick, Halliday, and Walker (1988, p.22) present that "if the rotation is clockwise, it initiates a secondary motion and in case the rotation is anti-clockwise it creates a top Z or a downward axis motion or a motion to the depth." Figure 1 below best represents such a motion. It is also known as the right-hand rule in physics. Spiral motion, with respect to the very law of physics, enjoys rises and falls. Upon entering the mental and spiritual world Arabesque finds varied and wide interpretations which acknowledge that in addition to the scientific and legal concepts, Arabesque has proved to be of great significance in aesthetics.



The Relationship between Beauty and Spiral Arabesque

Like those of beauty and arts, the concept of truth is a very complicated one. Leibniz (1989) argues that truth, which exists as a force, is bound to movement and motion. On the other perspective, Heidegger (cited in Ahmadi, 1996, p. 53) argues that "the truth is inferred from the intuitive meanings coming from unfathomable mystery of existence". Both of these views are well understood in the concept of Arabesque and the spiral curves. Rising and falling motions create a virtual space fixed in a two-dimensional surface. Obviously, the subjective cyberspace, in turn, can bring about spiritual worlds. Intellectual and spiritual space hence coordinates with the material world and here comes in the concept of aesthetics. Arabesque shapes moving inwards influence the development of an inner sense of life that knows the true spirit of the movement and represents a dynamism in which the life cycle can be considered equivalent to Arabesque. Philosophically speaking, the spiral motion is a movement towards purification and leaving out the bad, undesired, and destructive thoughts, and giving way to the presence of truth, beauty, and the true love. This way, the spiral motion, which is an integrated part of Sufi dancing, finds its way to the paintings illustrated in the Islamic era. Aristotle believed in goodness as a matter of perfection, so is the emblem of Arabesque in presenting 'beauty', meaning that in case beauty represents perfection, the Arabesque shapes present a movement towards perfection and elevation through the spiral forms they are entangled with. Visual analysis of the lines and curves in Arabesque shows the presence of strong and active lines which could promote the translation of Arabesque into abstract visual enjoyment of nature, embodied by the rhythm, balance of components, and a feeling of pleasure. This is in line with Hume's definition of beauty. If Kant's definition of beauty is considered significant here saying that beauty is "an overall fun, independent, free from prejudice and self-interests, and aimed at the public consent", we might claim that joy and beauty are amalgamated in the realm of metaphysics. Arabesque, as an elemental concept in aesthetics presents such a situation, a united whole with a lot of diversity. In a very consistent way, it is able to create a sacred and liberated atmosphere to enjoy and get connected to the spiritual world. The balance of flowers and leaves, the united movements, and the forces that shape and define the direction and alignment are all representing a unity energized by diversity.

Spiral Forms in Kamala Din Behzad's Paintings

Miniature is considered significant in Iranian arts, as it represents the inner feelings of the artist manifested through curve spiral lines which eventually present beautiful shapes combined of heavenly colors and shapes. Iranian miniaturists mainly use spiral forms and curve lines in their paintings and this could be vastly seen in the works of Kamala-Din Behzad and his disciples as it was a norm at the time. Miniature then was paid more attention to and the attention continued until the Safavids (Nasr, 2004, p.18). (See figure 2 for Spiral forms and lines in Behzad's).

Scholars and art historians agree that Behzad has vastly had on the realistic and naturalistic tendencies in his works. Based on careful observation, he has illustrated humans and animals while demonstrating naturalism. Realism and naturalism must be well-understood in the context of Islamic art because Iranian painters have never relegated to create the real forms and sizes found in nature, which is forbidden of course, but this specific sort of naturalism relies on free compositions and articulations, departing from the old traditions and presenting a new inflexible style; the style in which the natural sizes and form are not exactly followed, but appraised and valued enormously through curve and spiral lines. This unique feature in Iranian miniature represents a mystic perspective to which is added firm religious belief of "creation must be done only by God the almighty" (Hadith). That is why real size statues are never worked out in Iranian academic art centers even nowadays. Nor can one find them in practice in the Islamic world. Poor Isaac (2000, p. 128) asserts that "in Behzad's paintings lines are in movement as they cannot stand still. They move towards a specific direction, rise and then fall, bent down, move about, and attract the viewers' eyes as one can't stand moving and following the lines magically created". Together all the lines he draws are dancing in the pursuit of truth. The atmosphere he creates through clouds and shades as well as dynamic scripts energized with spiral forms and moving elements, reminds the viewer of the real nature (see Figure 3).

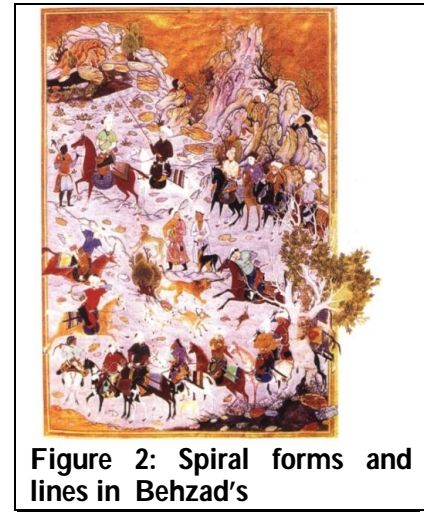


Figure 2: Spiral forms and lines in Behzad's

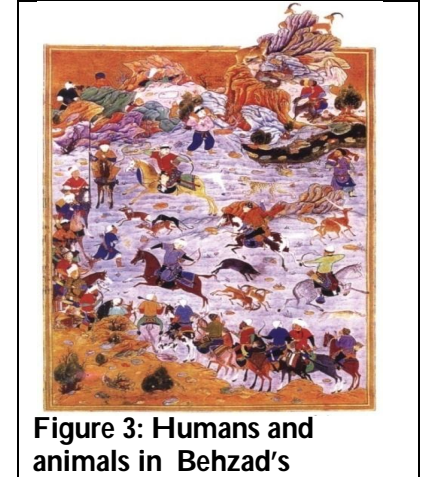


Figure 3: Humans and animals in Behzad's

Sufi Dance (Sama)

Sufi whirling (or Sufi spinning) is a form of Sama or physically active meditation which originated among Sufis, and which is still practiced by the Sufi Dervishes of the Mevlevi order. It is a customary dance performed within the Sema, or worship ceremony, through which dervishes (also called semazens) aim to reach the source of all perfection, or kemal. This is sought through abandoning one's nafs, egos or personal desires, by listening to the music, focusing on God, and spinning one's body in repetitive circles, which has been seen as a symbolic imitation of planets in the Solar System orbiting the sun (Heidarkhany, 2001, pp.25-27). Sufi dance (Sama) is considered a mystic movement in whose creation the dancer plays no specific intentional role, but it is initiated and continued based on an energy coming from a mystic effect; something whose emergence is bound to "being" and "ecstasy" as very strong factors. As Sufis explain:

In the symbolism of the Sema ritual, the semazen's camel's hair hat (sikke) represents the tombstone of the ego; his wide, white skirt (tennure) represents the ego's shroud. By removing his black cloak (hırka), he is spiritually reborn to the truth. At the beginning of the Sema, by holding his arms crosswise, the semazen appears to represent the number one, thus testifying to God's unity. While whirling, his arms are open: his right arm is directed to the sky, ready to receive God's beneficence; his left hand, upon which his eyes are fastened, is turned toward the earth. The semazen conveys God's spiritual gift to those who are witnessing the Sema. Revolving from right to left around the heart, the semazen embraces all humanity with love. The human being has been created with love in order to love.

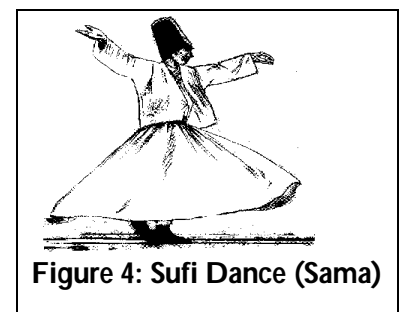


Figure 4: Sufi Dance (Sama)

Mevlāna Jalāluddīn Rumi says, "All loves are a bridge to Divine love. Yet, those who have not had a taste of it do not know!" (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). (See Figure 4 for Sufi Dance).

Method

The research method employed in the present study was mainly a comparative content analysis in which the paintings of famous Iranians in the Islamic era, especially those of Kamala Din Behzad (a famous painter of Heart school) were meticulously surveyed and compared with the principles of Sufi dance pointed out in Sufi traditions and available documents. Similarities and differences were taken into consideration and then the eye-catching emblems and symbols affecting both Sufi dance and Iranian paintings were focused on.

Findings

The content analysis of the data revealed that "spiral movement" is vastly shared by Sufi dancing (in the form of whirling or spinning) and the paintings studied (in the form of lines and shapes presented and drawn). Both of these art forms are benefitted from Islamic thoughts and have employed similar trends in their development. The second point found in the analysis was the quality of the movement in the art works under discussion: In both of them "movement" is aimed at presenting a super natural mode; something to show leaving the material world and joining the spiritual eternity. In the Sufi spinning the dancers are moving and turning as if they are not the natural bodies around anymore. The same occurs when the Persian miniatures are closely looked at; the lines and colors energized by the order and spiral forms take the viewers' eyes and mind to a world of fantasy; some where beyond the natural, materialistic world visible around. Corbin (1993) argues that Islamic arts move towards spirituality and finding a way to get connected to the real 'spirit'. The third priceless point shared by the Sufi traditions and Iranian paintings could be pursued in their 'sprit'. It seems that both are used to represent a virtual revelation. The spinning motions in the Sufi dance and the curved spiral lines in paintings, both show a sense of virtual rising and falling; "something imaginative, but firmly established in the mentality of the doer and the observer" (Mansoorbeigi, 1999, p. 25).

The forth concept which is worth discussing here is the 'colors' used in paintings and Dervishes's clothing. Sufis wear "a camel's hair hat (sikke) representing the tombstone of the ego, a wide white skirt (tennure) symbolizing the ego's shroud, and a black cloak (hırka) which is removed to show a spiritual reborn to the truth" (Schimmel, 1975, p.325). Though nowadays in the public arena some people play the roles of Sufis with colorful garments to absorb tourist through street dances, as it is vastly seen in Turkey, Dervishes' garment has continued the same trend referred to. The colors used show purity, oneness, and simple orders of unity. The same is found in the paintings as the colors are similar to the real ones seen in the nature and not them exactly, and these colors are trying to represent a truth forgotten and gone in the materialist world man is living in. The colors of Persian miniatures, therefore, remind the viewer of his originality, his living in the heaven before the 'fall'. The fifth point visible in both Sufi dancing and Iranian painting is the concept of "generatively", as in both cases the new forms are generated from the previous ones and any new action or motion is firmly bound to the previous ones. In the paintings the order of lines, curves, forms, and colors present a whole which enjoys diversity in the shapes and lines used. The same is with the Sufi dance; the movements might not be exactly the same when performed but they are shaping a whole comprehensive view and are developed based on their previous motions. In both of these art forms the movement is both transcending and ascending, which represents the reality of creation of the world and the joys and sorrows man has gone through in his journey from the heaven to the earth.

Conclusion

The present article aimed at investigating the comparative relationship between spiral forms in Sufi dance which takes its name from the order of the whirling dervishes in Konya where Mawlawī (Rumī) used to practice it with his disciples and Persian Islamic paintings. To do so, the quality and quantity of spiral and whirling movements was scrutinized in both of these art forms. The present research employed both the library research and content analysis to collect the data and analyze them, respectively. The paintings of famous Iranians in the Islamic era, especially those of Kamala Din Behzad (a famous painter of Heart school) were meticulously surveyed and compared with the principles of Sufi dance and the results revealed that Iranian artists and mystics have taken inspiration from each other and one of the common points between their art forms is "the movement".

The results also showed that the spiral Iranian miniature art form named Arabesque (Islamic art) involves the development of the movement and rotation of dancers seen in Sufi dancing. While turning around them, the dancers dance around their mentor, and this way they represent the particles associated with movements around the world. The present findings are in line with the findings in Physics as well. The findings of this study can be used by those interested in Iranian-Islamic art, architects, painters, researchers in mystical literature, and fine arts students.

References

- Ahmadi, B. (1996). *Truth and beauty*. Tehran: Markaz Publication.
- Amoozgar, J. (1997). *Mythical history of Iran*. Tehran: The Organization for Researching and Composing University Textbooks in the Humanities (SAMT).
- Burckhardt, T. (2009). *Art of Islam: Language and meaning*. World Wisdom, Inc.
- Corbin, H. (1993). *History of Islamic philosophy*. London: the Institute of Ismaili Studies.
- Dervish, Encyclopedia Britannica. 2009. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 21 October. 2014
- Foroughi, M.A. (1988). *Seire hekmat dar Orupa (Philosophy trend in Europe) (2nd ed.)*. Tehran: Alborz Publication.
- Hakemi, I.V. (1991). *Songs of Sufism (4th ed.)*. Tehran: Tehran University Press.
- Hakemi, I.V. (2001). *Mevlana and Sama*. *Pezhouhesh Nameye Farhang va Adab*, 9(5 &6), 24-27.
- Hynlz, J. (1998). *Understanding the mythology of Iran*, translated by Jaleh, Amoozgar and Ahmad Taffazoli, Tehran: Cheshmeh Publication.
- Isaac Pour, J. (2000). *Persian miniatures*. Translated by Jamshid Arjmand. Tehran: Farzan Rooz publication.
- Kropf, E. (2013). *Research and technology guides: Islamic manuscript studies*. Reading Lists.
- Leibniz, G. W. (1989). *Discourse on metaphysics* (pp. 303-330). Springer, Netherlands.
- Mansoorbeigi, N. (1999). *Rhythm in visual arts*. *Faslnameye Honar*, 41(3), 23-38.
- Nasr, S.H. (2004). *Arts and spirituality: Collection of articles on philosophy of arts*. Translated by Rahmati, E. Tehran: Art Academy Publications.
- Pope, A. U., Ackerman, P., & Besterman, T. (1964). *A survey of Persian art from prehistoric times to the present: Arthur Upham Pope, editor; Phillis Ackerman, assistant editor (Vol. 6)*. Oxford University Press.
- Pour Isaac, J. (1980). *Persian miniatures*. Persian translation by Jamshid Arjmand. Tehran: J. venerable Farzan Rouz publication.
- Rahnavard, Z. (1999). *Hekmate honare Islami (Islamic art philosophy)*. Tehran: SAMT Publications.
- Resnick, R., Halliday, D., & Walker, J. (1988). *Fundamentals of physics*. London: John Wiley.
- Schimmel, A. (1975). *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Shay, A. (1995). *Dance and non-dance: patterned movement in Iran and Islam*. *Iranian Studies*, 28(1-2), 61-78.
- <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/arabesque>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sufi_whirling
- <http://www.britannica.com/>