



Restoration of Folk Murals of Shia’s Religion in Iran: The Influences of the Expectations of their Public Audiences and the Preference of the Values of these Paintings on the Process of Reconstruction

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(117-140)

Abstract

Murals of Shia’s history from the late Safavid period and its culmination from the Qajar period onwards as the historical religious culture of the public in religious historical sites to this day by continuity of use, cause the emergence of a special attitude to the outstanding features of these paintings and the expectations of their general audience in the restoration. The majority of the murals of such buildings were based on Shiite religion traditions. Overall, the combination of a number of factors namely the significance of the values that have made a connection with the target audience of the heritages in use and the focus on their perception in the last decades, led to this study to pursue this goal to investigate the effects of the characteristics of folk-art paintings in Iran and the needs of their audiences, on their perception of the narrative during the reconstruction. This research has been done due to the development of value-based approaches in the restoration’s contemporary theory at the international level and the importance of the sociological issue of audiences, and the lack of academic research in this field in Iran. This article used purposeful and semi-structured interview techniques with 13 experts and library studies in a qualitative method and performed the analysis with the Colaizzi phenomenological approach by categorizing the interviews. The findings led to the achievement of 6 auxiliary categories and 11 subcategories, that auxiliary categories as factors affecting the reconstruction of the loss of religious-narrative folk murals based on value preference and the expectations of their general audience are: 1) the place of special values of folk-art paintings of Shia’s history, 2) factors affecting the perception of public audiences 3) factors affecting the mental retelling of public audiences 4) definition of target audiences (stakeholders), 5) the expectations of the public audience from reading the images of historical-religious narratives, and 6) the expectations of the public audience from the restoration and reconstruction of the paintings;

Keywords: Religious Folk Murals, Values, public audiences (Target Audiences), Restoration and Reconstruction, Shia’s History of Iran.

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Introduction

Drawing folk murals concentrating on national-religious themes peaked during the Qajar dynasty.(figs: 1-4) Given the significance of these artworks' social function and the fact that most religious monuments still have their target audiences– especially during mourning rituals– when restoring these murals, special attention should be paid to the target audiences. This study aims at investigating two factors that impact the audience's narrative perception of Shiite murals throughout the restoration process: the particular values of the folk paintings and the contemporary public audiences' perception.

In this regard, semi-structured purposive interviews were analyzed using the descriptive-survey technique and the Colaizzi phenomenological approach. The respondents were 13 experts specialized in the field of restoration and painting. To achieve the conclusions, interviews were used along with desk research and the field study method. According to Colaizzi's seven-step analytical approach, the researcher first reviews the source text to extract the meaning and then starts taking notes and turning them into statements. The meanings of these statements must next be formulated and coded to achieve the major and minor categories as well as sub-categories. Finally, the findings should be incorporated to explain the fundamental phenomena, and they need to be returned to the respondents for confirmation. (Sanders, 2003: 294-301)

A total of 6 minor categories and 11 sub-categories were derived from interviews with experts. These include 1) the significance of particular values of folk painting in the history of Shiism: 1-1) Priority given to narrative and religious values above aesthetic values. 2) Factors affecting the public audience's perception: 2-1) Religion's impact on perception; 2-2) The impact of the audience's mental background (mentality) on perception; 2-3) The impact of narrative on perception. 3) Factors affecting the audience's mental re-interpretation: 3-1) The association between the audience's mental reconstruction and visual features; 3-2) The association between the audience's presumptions and his/her mental reconstruction. 4) Identifying the target audience (stakeholder): 4-1) The target audience's characteristics. 5) Audience expectations from reading images of historical-religious narratives: 5-1) Narrative relationship and audience perceptions; 5-2) Audience expectations based on understanding paintings. 6) Audience expectations about the restoration of paintings: 6-1) The impact of the audience's presumptions on the reconstruction; 6-2) The association between the target audience and the extent of visual reconstruction. When the interviewees' comments are compared to the study literature, it is reasonable to conclude that the murals in tombs are visual translations of religious narratives. Given the intense focus on narrativity in murals (Mirzaei-Mehr, 2007: 98), coloring and theme - as standard representations of aesthetic values - are not important since these artworks aim at affecting the audience. According to experts, the aesthetic values of these paintings are less relevant than the target audiences' narrative perception or religious values. Respondents stated, the religious narrative motifs– which also are cultural and ideological-oriented– have no significant aesthetic value without the narrative's meaning and context. The Constance school theorists suggest that a religious audience's images of a text vary from those of a non-target audience (Meghdadi, 2005: 20). Furthermore, cultural heritage may link people and places via collective memory and shared narratives (Avrami & others, 2019: 184). This highlights the significance of the target audience's presumptions to understand them. The audience perceives the picture while using the memories connected to such presumptions. (Ahmadi, 1995: 407). These presumptions include the audience's understanding of the repeated narrative motifs in such murals, which experts mentioned. Characters, especially sacred idols, are depicted via symbolic portrayals and conceptual symbolism of limited colors (Shad Ghazvini, 2018: 64). This enables the target audience to interpret the painting by referring to their mental background. This is a point brought up by the respondents. It was also stated that if the painting's lack of contextual clues is not

remarkable, or if the deficiency is not in a significant and critical part of the painting, the target audience can usually form a general narrative in their mind by referring to their presuppositions. Regarding the concerns about the audience's interpretation, experts stated that religious tendencies are the primary objective of the murals' stakeholders. When referring to the audience's preference in cultural aesthetics, the respondents noted that these audiences must have a cultural or religious aesthetic perception of such paintings (Akhavian, 2012: 195). Experts highlighted the target audience's non-museum-based perspective regarding the group's expectations. Therefore, analyzing the stakeholders' expectations should be based on the "aesthetic values of the audience" (Taylor & Cassar, 2008: 8). On the other hand, one of the key characteristics of these paintings is "the tendency to repeat common forms and create extremely simple pieces," which sometimes reaches the level of primitivism (Marasi and Nadaliyan, 2014: 59). It is normal for this perspective to drive the target audiences to simplified narratives. Respondents stated the public audiences focus on the elegance of the sacred idols' facial features. As a result, they often tend to give priority to restoring of these characters. The public audience prioritizes mental association when it comes to determining the degree of restoration in the large scale or key parts of the painting. Since the target audience perceives these works based on presumptions (Wilson, 2009: 64), the form and color of the figures should only change at a level that facilitates the social interaction between the audience and the artwork. The murals should be reconstructed to minimum extent that the audience can associate it with his/her background knowledge.

The findings indicate that the following factors affect and estimate the level and quality of mural restoration: recognizing the value of murals; audience expectations or beliefs about these works; audience mental background; knowledge and understanding of the narrative motifs; identifying symbols and visual contracts and the work's contemporary functions.