

Persian translation of this paper entitled:  
انتزاع نمادین در زیبایی‌شناسی هنر بلوچستان  
نمونه موردی: سوزن‌دوزی بلوچ  
is also published in this issue of journal.

## Symbolic Abstraction in the Aesthetics of Balouchistan Art A Case Study of Balouchi People's Needlework

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Received: 17/06/2018 ; revised: 09/01/2019 ; accepted: 30/01/2019 ; available online: 22/12/2019

### Abstract

**Problem statement:** Balouch tribe can be considered one of the genuine Iranian tribes who has continued the livestock breeding and nomadic life in Iran. Various arts are common among this tribe, but the most important one is the art of needle-working. This art, with its geometric and highly abstract designs, displays the history of tribal Balouchi lifestyle. Like other Iranian nomadic arts, Balouchi life has a very high geometric dimension. One can also refer to the similarity of the geometric patterns of this art and the Neolithic arts. Balouch needlework art designs are categorized and studied in various humans, animals, plants, geometric shapes and marginal types.

Research question: What is the most important aesthetic aspect of Balouchi's art of needle-working

**Research objective:** The aim of this study is to recognize of the aesthetic elements of Balouchi needle working as the most important native art of the Balouchistan region.

**Research method:** The research method is qualitative using logical reasoning. Library data and observation were taken into consideration in data collection of this research and also the objective observations of the writer and field information were effective in achieving research findings.

**Conclusion:** The most important aspect of these designs is their geometricity and excessive abstraction. The aesthetics of this native art can be examined in the form of a line (right and with an angle), shape (based on the shape of the triangle), texture (dense and prolific), rhythm (alternating) and color (with the domination of the red color and combination of strong and powerful colors). Symbolic abstraction can be considered as the most important aesthetic aspect of Balouchi's art of needle-working.

**Keywords:** *Balouchi Needle Work, Abstraction, Symbol, Aesthetics.*

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## Introduction

Identity studies about traditional Iranian veil knitting, including Balouchi peoples' needlework, has not attracted much attention. This is while Balouch is one of the few Iranian tribes that still continue to emphasize the daily and frequent use of traditional patchwork in home decorations and women's clothing. In studies related to this traditional knitting, less attention has been paid to identity issues in understanding its aesthetic properties and only limited descriptions of the names of designs, colors and probabilities in its geometricity have been mentioned. However, according to the authors of the present study, the strong identity link that this veil knitting can establish with the identity of this people's background, as well as the extension of the ethnicity dimensions of the Balouch tribe in the present era, have expanded the application of this veil knitting in their current daily life. Balouchi knitting, as the most important native art of this region, recognizing its aesthetic elements and extracting the most important components of this aesthetic, constitute the goals of this study.

The most important factor in the aesthetics of Balouchi needle-work can also be identified as its identity-making factor in comparison with other Iranian archeological and nomadic arts. In order to answer the question by collecting library information as well as personal observations in Balouchistan region, by qualitative method and analysis of samples of needle-working patterns, arguments have been made in describing the factors affecting the response to the research question.

## Literature review

The explanation of the features of Balouchi peoples' needlework can be studied in books such as that of Rigi (2012) and the book of the same name from Sadeghidokht (2010). In the latest book of this field entitled "Balouch Story" by Mahmoud Zand (2018) Moghaddam published in seventh edition, various aspects of the cultural life of this tribe, including their craftsmanship and needle knitting, are described.

In relation with scientific research in this field, can refer to the article "Balouchi Local Clothes and its Integration

with the National Identity" (Mousavi Haji, Mahmoudi & Ghasemi, 2014), in which the degree of attachment of Balouchi people to their local garments was examined. Hamideh Yaghoubi, in the article "Balouchi Women's Garment's Needle-Works, Pattern and Color" (2014), considered the interconnection of its geometric and broken designs. In the article "The visual structure of natural designs in Balouchi women's needle-working" (Ghasemi, Mahmoudi & Mousavi Haji, 2013), it was found that Balouchi women besides the design of natural patterns, while paying attention to aesthetic relationships and the surrounding environment, also take into consideration function of their role in proportion to the geometric design.

Mobaraki & Mobaraki (2016) examined the color and form in an article in this art and analyzed aesthetics in this regard. Also, Gorgij (2016) in the article "Review of the Noble Balouchi Needle-Work Patterns" introduced a variety of Balouchi needle-working designs in a systematic categorization.

Also, in a thesis entitled "Classification and Introduction of Motifs and Symbolism of the Balouchi Needle-Working", this opinion suggested that motifs and elements of nature had a direct relationship with Balouchi needle-work (Alizadeh, 2014).

Despite numerous articles and theses in this field, the symbolic signs and the geometric abstraction of this art have never been considered as an expression of the abstraction of their culture and identity. In some instances, such as "local Balouchi people's clothing and its affiliation with the national identity," the issue is identity, but the emphasis is on Balouch people's clothing, and there is no particular emphasis on the aesthetics of the needle-working designs of this garment and its relationship with identity (Mousavi Haji, Mahmoudi, & Ghasemi, 2004).

## Research Questions

This study is an attempt to investigate Balouch needle-working identity dimensions to answer this question: which of the aforementioned aspects of Balouch aesthetics can better reflect the identity of the knitting art of this tribe?

## Research Methodology

The research methodology is qualitative research using logical reasoning. To collect data of this research, library information, observation and field information was used.

## Aesthetics in Traditional Arts

Aesthetics can be considered as the new science that considered the study of beauty from the sensual dimension and adaptable to different types of art and beauty<sup>1</sup>. The Encyclopedia of Britannica considers aesthetics to be open to examination from three perspectives; the scientific perspective, the historical perspective and the technical perspective (systematic)<sup>2</sup>. According to the works of Gaut and McIver aesthetics, among the ancient ones, Aristotle's emphasis on beauty was further emphasized the elements of the harmony of order and size, and Socrates sought this good in giving profit. In the meantime, Plato established philosophical aesthetics<sup>3</sup>. Some have considered aesthetics as the philosophy of art and others as the philosophy of beauty<sup>4</sup>. Some people have considered art and beauty to be equal, but Herbert Read considers "This unity of art and beauty as the basis of all problems in understanding art" (Read, 1995, 3). On this basis, aesthetics can be found on all domains, including those areas related to human life, and not limited to beautiful things. Beauty is present in everyday traditional life in all the respects and "the difference between applied products and beautiful products in traditional arts cannot be distinguished" (Nowroozitalab, 2004, 16).

According to Kant, beauty is the result of pleasure resulting from the interaction and tangible harmony of imagination and understanding (Rogerson, 2015). The obvious attribute of these aesthetic experiences is the complete activity of the sensory, cognitive and emotional forces in understanding the subject. "This unique experience takes place not only in understanding the work of art but also in understanding nature, everyday life, the environment and etc" (Dewey, 2012, 56). It can be said that "aesthetics is the art of distinguishing and judging a person who extends his taste by developing the ability to distinguish good

from evil" (J. Douglas, 2012, 33). The beauty criterion varies from time to time and is controlled by common rules. Also, aesthetics has changed in relation to the geographic location. Therefore, in order to understand the beauty of traditional arts, the view of cultural history should also be involved in order to understand all the aspects of their beauty that may be incomprehensible or even unbeautiful for modern humans in the first sight.

One of the traditional arts in Iran is the variety of traditional veil knitting that are used to decorate garments and to enrich the color and pattern of the fabrics. In this article, traditional veil knitting of Balouchi tribe has been considered aesthetically. To analyze the beauty of this art, it is necessary to analyze the conceptual aspects of its most important features, namely abstraction, based on its cultural context.

## Abstraction and Symbolism in Traditional Arts

Traditional art and handicrafts are blended with decoration. These decorations can be regarded as a type of abstraction and symbolization. Because "different meanings and concepts are hidden beyond the ornaments, which are usually rooted in the mythological and religious beliefs of the tribes" (Javadi, 2005, 51). The twentieth-century artists used the symbolist word for artistic expressions that "escape from naturism, transforming natural appearances in a simplified way, making art work using non-simulant elements, and imitating the reality of objects and away from representing the facts of objects" (Pakbaz, 1999, 652). But it should be noted that art is intrinsically contractual and therefore interpretable<sup>5</sup>. Symbol<sup>6</sup> can be called the same as "symbol". Abstraction<sup>7</sup> refers to the summation of the object in question, so that it does not get away from its original nature, in such a way that the minimal relationship between the object and its abstraction remains.

In many examples of traditional arts, the abbreviation of the symbol has past beyond the limits of abstraction to reach abstraction. There are different views on abstract and symbolistic symbols in traditional arts. Some scholars point out that "the abstract

patterns of the symbol have not been something else, but a result of the primitive mentality<sup>8</sup> and representative of the primitive level of the civilization” (Hangeldin 1996, 28). But Amini (2006, 106), in the carpet and symbol article points out that “these motives, although are more prevalent among the primitive and uncivilized tribes, are the visual product of the cosmology is a view that in its every form, turns into something mathematical and symbolic.” Perhaps, in some cases, abstraction<sup>9</sup> and symbols of the manifestations of nature are much more difficult than those of its imitations.

The most important feature of such symbols is that they can be regarded as a symbol of the cultural and native identity of their people. The symbolic content of abstract artistic patterns can be presented by metaphors. In this concept, the image is a way of seeing and some kind of image rather than any other kind. Because “metaphor essentially means transference, the metaphorical and abstract motifs have the ability to express phenomena and absent meanings” (Summers as cited in Gaut & McIver, 2005, 212). For this reason, the recognition of symbolic concepts of traditional art motifs is very complicated.

### Balouchi Embroidery

Balouchi people are from the Iranian tribes living in the south-east of Iran<sup>10</sup>. These people lived from growing livestock in the past and lived in animal hair tents (Ibn Hughel, 1966, 75; Estakhri, 1968, 141; Moghaddasi, 1982). Although agriculture and rural life were also present among them, we can notice the sustainability of nomadic culture in today’s life and even the urbanization of Balouch community<sup>11</sup>. Balouchistan’s people are popular with handicrafts more due to the unique style of women community’s embroidery. Balouch embroidery is also known as Suchandoozi or Balouchi knitting. This art is formed by the repetition of numerous geometric patterns.

The knitted pieces of women’s clothing are called as “Astindar” and in some areas the “Goethe man”. Ziastin consists of chest pin, pocket, gauntlet and scuff (Sadeghidokht, 2010, 67); (Fig1).

The motifs used in this art are divided into human,

animal, plant and marginal designs (Figs. 2 to 7).

In different types of motifs used in this embroidery, all the lines are smooth and angled, and it is rare to find a curved line in it. Different factors have been introduced as the bases for the formation of these motifs. The type of nature, climate, minds, morals, and customs and traditions are considered to be effective in determining the type of these patterns, and this is due to the difference in sewing and the role of knitting in each region from the other regions<sup>12</sup>. The knitting of these motifs is based on the count of fabric warps and, therefore, fabrics with vertical warps in them.

### Aesthetics of Balouch Embroidery Patterns

We can summarize “the basis of the aesthetics of this native art in its being geometric”. The geometricity of this art can be seen as the next of abstraction that has attracted attention in Balouch’s visual culture. But this art contains color, texture and other visual features that need to be considered in its aesthetic study. The line is considered as the most important visual aspect in the Balouchi visualization. In this art, only straight lines and broken angles are used, and this is why this art has a different visual identity than another traditional Iranian veil knitting such as Pateh of Kerman, Rashtidouzi of Gilan and Turkmen embroidery have found a different visual identity.

In Balouchi embroidery, we are faced only with geometric patterns, and therefore the aesthetics of the form should be examined from this dimension. These shapes consist of triangle, square (checkered), a diamond, and a very small circle, respectively. The shape of the triangle<sup>13</sup> is one of the most widely used geometric patterns in the Balouchi embroidery, which largely includes aesthetic extract in this art. By joining these triangles to each other, other commonly used forms in this art include squares and diamonds.

The texture<sup>14</sup> can be classified into dense and semi-dense forms in terms of density. The texture in Balouchi embroidery is created by compacting, repeating and combining different types of lines and geometric shapes along with colored textures. In the aesthetics of Balouchi knitting, individually, it can be considered as





Fig. 1. Ziastin (Balouchi women's clothing embroideries) and its components. Source: www.bing.comimagesearchq 01.04.2018.

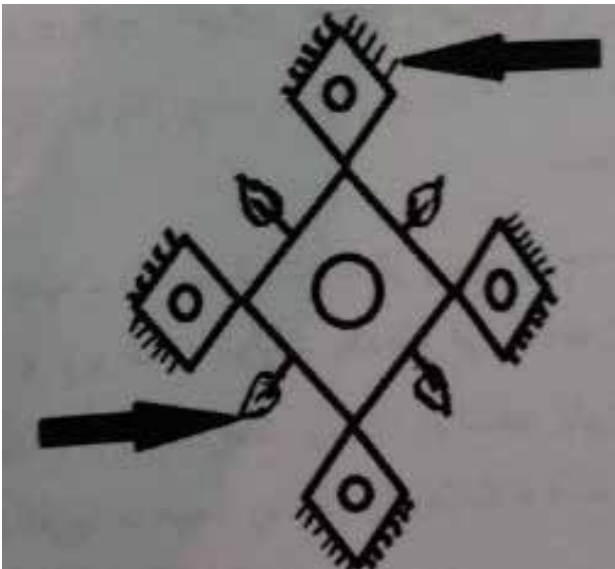


Fig. 2. The pattern of bride's tears, eyes, eyelashes are depicted as simple, geometric and metaphorical. Source: Rigi, 2012.



Fig. 3. The pattern of hen (chicken) punj (paw), is similar to chicken paw. Source: www.bing.comimagesearchq 01.04.2018.



Fig. 4. Floral pattern of Sarvak (small cypress). Source: Mobaraki, 2016.



Fig. 5. Flower of Sohr (Red) an example of Balouch floral embroidery motifs, Source: Mobaraki, 2016.



Fig. 6. Time (Season) of proximity. Source: Gorgij, 2016.



Fig. 7. The Geometric pattern of Bekalouk, Source: Gorgij, 2016.

a densely compacted type. But since the use of these embroideries needles are to decorate garments, the texture of these needle works should also be considered in Balouchi people's clothes (Fig. 8).

Given the geometricity and the brokenness of Balouchi embroidery, the rhythm in it cannot be called a wave repetition<sup>15</sup>. There is also no uniform repetition in this art, and the variety used in patterns and colors prevents its uniformity. Evolutionary repetition has never been seen in this traditional veil knitting. The dominant rhythm of the Balouchi embroidery is obtained by alternating through the repetition of geometric patterns and colors (Fig. 9).

After geometric shapes, color can be considered as the most important element in the aesthetics of Balouchi embroidery. In research conducted in 1960 by two American anthropologists named Brent Berlin and Paul Kaye in the study of the color terms of 98 languages, it showed that in many cultures there were commonalities in the evolution of colors. The results of this study showed six commonalities:

1. There is no language in which at least two black and white (darkness and brightness) are not specified.
2. If there is a third color, it will be red.
3. If there is a fourth color, it is green or yellow.
4. If there is a sixth color, it is blue.
5. If there is a seventh color, it is brown.
6. If there are an eighth-color or more colors, then the colors are, respectively, purple, pink, orange and gray (Bakhtiari Fard, 2009, 20).

Similar to the studies in Berlin and Kaye, black and white can be distinguished clearly in all the works of the Balouch embroidery. The third color is very important in this art is red, which has been considered as an identity giving color in genuine embroideries. Of course, pure red is used less in old embroideries, and what has been more common is pomegranate red, or Hum. "Green, yellow, blue and brown are, respectively, the other colors, which are used in the next levels for giving importance and meaning to the red color" (Ranjdoost, 2008, 244). But among the colors of the Balouchi needlework, "the orange color is dominant over the rest of the colors, and the details of the design



Fig. 8. Balouchi embroidered shirt. Source: <https://scontent-sea1-1.cdninstagram.com>.



Fig. 9. A Sample of Alternate Rhythm in Balouchi Embroidery. Source: <http://media.shahnavazi.ir>.

are more determined by the colors of green, black and brown" (Yavari, Mansouri & Soltani, 2011, 36).

In Balouchi embroidery, both groups of the original<sup>16</sup> and complementary<sup>17</sup> colors are available. Red and blue are the main colors, and also green and brown are complementary colors. Red and green as well as red and blue can be complementary to each other. Red and green make complementary contrast<sup>18</sup> and red and blue together make the simultaneous contrast<sup>19</sup> and the shadows. In sum, also in Balouchi embroidery color compositions, the shadow contrast<sup>20</sup> can be distinguished. The combination of colors used in Balouchi embroidery can be described in terms of attributes such as strong, lively and energizing (Sutton & Valan, 2013).

## Discussion

After studying the generalizations of the aesthetics of Balouchi needlework, it is necessary to examine the aesthetics of its geometric designs from the abstract dimension. The occurrence of abstraction in this art necessitates its aesthetic cultural and historical study.

Abstraction in the history of Iranian art has always been considered as an aesthetic features. These symbolic designs can be distinguished in two types of broken (with straight lines and angles) and circular (with curved and non-angular lines). The second type is observed mostly in urban and rural areas due to the complexity of implementation. "The antiquity of motifs with straight lines is more than those with turning designs and curves and is more related to the early forms of human social life (livestock breeding)" (Edwards, 1948, 43). In the life of animal husbandry, it is necessary mentally and the symbolic expression is the solution to this projection. This symbolic and subjective expression began at the stages of the gradual evolution of man from the vivid and poetic art of the Paleolithic era, and reached the symbolic and geometric art of the Neolithic era (the prevalence of animal breeding and nomadic life) (Read, 1983). Balouchi embroidery, with its predominantly geometric patterns, can be considered as a reflection of the mental thoughts of this tribe in a geometric way from their time of nomadic life. The similarity of geometric patterns in the animal breeding life of Iranian tribes can be sought in the comparison of the art of the nomadic tribes of Iran with each other. For example, there is a great deal of similarity between Bulochi needle work patterns and Ardebil's varnishes, and Shahsavan's Kilims (Fig.10). The psychological aspects can also be involved in the formation of the symbolism of the geometric patterns of Balouchi embroidery; such as the natural adversities of the living environment. Balouchi embroiders have designed a colorful and beautiful nature with the patterns of geometric flowers and floral motives and a combination of colors, as they wished. As in the ancient culture of China and Japan, they have also believed, the artist does not imitate nature by drawing the flower and plant image, but actually adds to the real flowers and plants of nature (Saito, 2003).

All the patterns of Balouchi embroidery motifs cannot be precisely regarded as abstract motives and abstractions, because many of these motifs have nothing to do with their themes. Like the pattern of "spring season, such patterns can be regarded as a symbol. The major symbols used in Balouchi needle works are composed of three straight vertical, horizontal, and skewed lines, and sometimes very small circles. Therefore, geometric shapes, square, circle and triangle, or its derivatives such diamond and zigzag shape, and sometimes horizontal and interaction of vertical lines with each other, have the main role in the symbolization of Balouchi art, and these basic patterns are also used in the abstraction.

The symbolic content of art can be used as metaphors with other components or symbols. The patterns of Balouchi needle works can be considered as metaphors of the cultural, climatic and aesthetic concepts of these people. For David Summers, the term metaphor essentially means transference. Metaphorical and abstract patterns are capable of expressing and transmitting phenomena and absent meanings (Gaut and McIver, 2005, 212). For example, the forms of zigzag and triangle in the motifs of the early civilizations especially on the potteries, are associated with the concept of mountain (Pope, 2008, 15 & 16). Balouchi art patterns initially were the result of abstraction presented by geometric lines, and the colors were limited and simple, and gradually they transformed and had a stronger symbolic dimension (Mahmoud Zehi, 2013, 33). The more conventional the relationship between these patterns and their symbols is established only through their cultural background with their intended theme and not their apparent similarity. Similar abstraction is also observed in other nomadic cultures in Iran, for example, the motif of the "Charcham" in Balouchi people's needle works is comparable to the pattern of pond on the kilim of the nomad tribes of Lorestan (Fig. 11). However, in the art of other nomadic tribes in other parts of Iran, it is sometimes possible to distinguish abstractions and more primitive subtleties that are not found in Balouchi motifs (Fig. 12).

No matter how abstract is the patterns of Balouchi art, they are formed on the basis of the abstractions



of the elements of surrounding nature, and unrealistic imaginations are not in them. Abstraction from the viewpoint of this tribe poses a kind of construction. Balouch embroider blends nature with the permissibility and ultimately establishes a proper visual connection between the motifs so that the produced technical aesthetics of traditional art can be also preserved. But the principle of beauty of this traditional art is the cultural symbolism of those who have turned abstraction into its most important aesthetic aspect.

### Conclusion

The study of the Balouchi needlework patterns revealed that geometric shapes are considered as its most important aesthetic element. But more precise studies of the aesthetic elements in this art stated that all elements

of the line, shape, texture, rhythm, and color were organized on the basis of a more general criterion which is named symbolic abstraction in this art. Among the cultural components affecting this abstraction, it was also referred to the nomadic life background of this tribe that historically seemed to be influenced by the severity and weakness of abstract aesthetics in this art. Livestock breeding lifestyle demands geometric symbolism, which has been endorsed by scholars such as Edwards and Read, and elsewhere in Iran some cases of this have been referred to. Symbolic abstraction with exaggerated geometric and abstract features occurred proportionately to the historical background of livestock breeding of this tribe. Thus, the research hypothesis which emphasized the importance of abstraction in the symbolization of Balouchi needle working patterns as its most significant aesthetics aspect, was confirmed based on the research findings. The special aesthetical feature of this art in abstraction and highly abstract and unique symbolization can be introduced as a kind of identity document for the embroidery of this tribe.



Fig. 10 . A Varnish sample (needle Kilim from Ardebil with geometric patterns and straight lines. Source: <http://aranick.com>.



Fig. 11. The pattern of the pond on Kilim of Lorestan nomad tribes, similar to the pattern of the (four-eyed) Charcham in the Balouchi needle work. Source: <http://digikalafarsh.ir>.



Fig. 12. A sample of Kilim of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad nomad tribes is depicted with animal drawings in such a way that no mere abstraction and abstract motive is achieved and the theme of the motifs is recognizable. Similar to such a painting cannot be observed in needle works or other indigenous Balouchi arts. Source: [www.abartazeha.com](http://www.abartazeha.com).



## Endnote

1. The term aesthetic was first used by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the eighteenth century to mean the recognition of the senses. The essay on the aesthetics of Berys Nigel Gaut, and Dominic McIver Lopes (Gaut & McIver, 2005). has dealt with explaining the concept of aesthetics.
2. Encyclopedia Britannica is available at [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com).
3. The greatest theoretician in recognizing and introducing aesthetics is Plato (429-347 BC). The division of beauty, sensibly, and rationally starts with him, because Plato finds original beauty in the universe of likes.
4. Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who proceeded to classify sciences in the new way, put aesthetics into philosophy component (Ashihara, 2012). He considers philosophy to be four things. Psychology, logic, ethics, and aesthetics, which include the study of beauty, arts, and types of art. We also know other great philosophers who have considered aesthetics as the fundamentals of philosophy.
5. For further study on the role of the contract in semiotics and also art, refer to Daniel Chandler's Book of "Foundations of Semiology" (2008).
6. "Symbol in the general sense of literary or artistic representation, industrial or in situ, by the mediation of a sign and in a particular sense, visual interpretation of an abstract subject by transforming the dynamic characteristics of that subject into special traits, shape, color, and movements" (Pakbaz, 1999, 604).
7. Abstraction and secession can have similar concepts. Because abstraction also means abandonment, emancipation and loneliness: "abstraction is a mental action, which describes the attributes of something or reminds a part of semantic components and causes the neglect of the traits of other components" (Moein, 2003, 726).
8. A mentality that has not yet gone through the trials from the subject.
9. Abstraction means "breaking away from a place, pulling out, giving, taking, breaking down, and fulfilling a part of a whole" (Moein 2003, p. 253). "Abstraction" is the subject participle of abstracted and is meant to be detached and summarized.
10. Balouchs are a branch of Aryan race and have very strong racial relationships and ties with other Iranians of the southeastern and central Iran (Seyed Sajjadi, 1999, 55).
11. "Although nomadic migration is limited to a small minority of the country's population today, nomads settled in villages and cities have retained their tribal cultural patterns in a large part of their lives" (Fakouhi, 2004, 351). It should also be noted that Balouch means nomadic (Rigi, 2016).
12. For more study on this topic, refer to Hussein Yavari's (2011) book "Introduction to Traditional Iranian Arts".
13. In the local language, it is called "Kop" and in some parts of Balouchistan this is called "Kuhak" (Rigi, 2016). The name Kuhak reminds us that the pattern of the triangle among the many tribes has been a symbol of the mountain and steadfastness and endurance.
14. Texture is another element of visual arts that is usually associated with tactile sense, while its importance is more related to the specific force of vision. The visual texture is especially for two-dimensional surfaces and can only be recognized through the eye. Although sometimes they can be distinguished from each other with a sense of touch (Nami, 2001).
15. In general, there are four main rhythms in visual arts: uniform repetition, intermittent repetition, evolutionary repetition, wave repetition (Hosseini Rad, 2003, 36).
16. From main colors, the colors that are not obtained from the combination of any other colors, but other colors are obtained from their combination.
17. Each second-order color is usually a mixture of two main colors. Each of the second-order complementary colors is complementary to one of the main colors. For this reason, second-order colors are also called complementary colors.
18. When two complementary colors are placed side by side of each other, they promote each other to the highest degree in terms of shine and power of shade. The two complementary colors in the twelve-colored cycle are in the opposite diameters, like red and green.
19. The eye will create a complement color when simultaneously seeing a color.
20. Pure colors like red, yellow, and blue are contrasting with shadow or shades.

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#### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Keshavarz, G. & Javadi, Sh. (2019). *Symbolic Abstraction in the Aesthetics of Balouchistan Art, A Case Study of Balouchi People's Needlework*. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 16(79), 5-14.

DOI: 10.22034/bagh.2019.136223.3638

URL: [http://www.bagh-sj.com/article\\_98941\\_en.html](http://www.bagh-sj.com/article_98941_en.html)

