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### Original Research Article

## The Relationship between Text and Image in the Works of Mo'in Mosavver

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** The long affinity between “literature” and “painting” in illuminated manuscripts has had an old and deep effect on the form and structure of Persian Painting. In the middle of the Safavid era, creating single-leaf miniature expanded increasingly. It seems that in this era, the connection and struggle between the medium of painting and literature found a new form; Therefore, examining the works of Mo'in Mosavver, as the last real representative of the Isfahan school of painting, is of great importance in this regard.

**Research objective:** The purpose of this study is to show how the historical connection between “literature” and “painting” evolved in at the later years of the Isfahan school of painting through a formal and structural evaluation of the relationship between “image” and “text” in the works of Mo'in Mosavver.

**Research method:** In this study, the paintings of Mo'in Mosavver were examined using an analytical-comparative approach and the findings of this analysis were interpreted with a historical approach in the evolution of Persian painting in the middle of the Safavid era.

**Conclusion:** The image of the “pregnant moment” in the illuminated manuscripts of Mo'in Mosavver represent a type of “implied temporality” that reminds us of the sequence of verbal narrative actions. also in single-leaf miniature of Mo'in Mosavver, a higher level of homogeneity can be observed between the medium, the content and the method of perception, since, apart from the narration, these works are limited to the arrangement of objects and beautiful figures. The traces of aesthetics deepening based on these works can be recognized in the miniatures of that era. These traces are seen where the number of figures and narrative micro-scripts are reduced in the images of these paintings and the painting focused more on illustrating the “pregnant moment”. As a result, it seems that in Mo'in Mosavver's works, the connection and struggle between the text and image can be considered as a movement from “text” towards “image”, his movement, which is also seen in the Isfahan school, found more chance for growth and expansion outside the court's conservative taste to create glorious and elegant illuminated literary manuscripts. This led to the creation of paintings with mimetic and stronger sensory aspects. At the time, this was reflection of a movement towards independence and further separation of the painting medium and from verbal narration.

**Keywords:** *Mo'in Mosavver, Painting, Literature, Text, Image, Narration.*

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## Introduction and problem statement

Verbal arts, including poetry and literature, has always had an important place in the hierarchy of arts in the Persian culture. The impact of these arts on form and content of Persian miniature has been evident for a long time, especially where painting used in books served to illuminate the text. Any illuminated manuscript as a single work was a combination of visual arts around the “text”. However, the range of Persian painting was not limited to illumination copies. There are independent miniatures of many books belonged to historical eras, which have been remained. Especially, from the ninth century and with the establishment of Herat painting school the single-leaf miniature became common. This method of producing painting with many difficulties went through its evolution way to “Isfahan painting school”. These paintings, in this era and especially after the reign of Shah Abbas, had become the characteristic of this school in Persian painting (Pakbaz, 2007, 33).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relation of the “painting” and “literature” medium, through investigating the reciprocal relation between “text” and “image” in the artworks of Mo’in Mosavver. Mo’in Mosavver can be considered as the last important and significant painter of the Isfahan painting school. By insisting on the inner aesthetics of Persian miniature in this era, he had been less affected by the new movement of “Farangi-sazi”. It seems that after Mo’in Mosavver, due to the reduction in demand for illuminated manuscripts and the expansion of creating single-leaf miniatures, the inner connection between “text” and “image” in the Persian painting tradition has taken on a new form. Therefore, examining Mo’in Mosavver’s works as one of the last characters of Isfahan school, which in her collection of works, there are both tendencies towards illustrations and single-leaf miniature, is of great importance. Especially if we consider the era of Mo’in Mosavver as an important era in distinguishing and distance of the painting medium from “literature” and “poem” in the traditional system of art in Persian.

Firstly, this article seeks to answer this question: How is the relationship between “text” and “image” in the works of Mo’in Mosavver? In this study, we have tried to provide a conceptual framework for formal and structural analysis, using theories of “Gotthold Lessing” and “Thomas Mitchell”. Mitchell explains the relationship between “text” and “image” in works of art and Lessing (1969) in “Laocoon” focuses on recognizing the limits of the “painting” medium versus “poetry” and literature. The answer to this question required analyzing two groups of Mo’in Mosavver’s works; first, the illuminations and second, single-leaf miniatures. In this article, the penetration and representation way of temporal action and narration as the characteristic of verbal and literary media in these two groups will be examined and then we try to explain this analysis by presenting a categorization and regular development in a historical relation and in the evolution of Persian painting in that era.

## Research background

Many analysts and art historians have considered the connection between poetry and literature with Persian painting. In “Concordance of painting with literature in Iran”, Ashrafi has examined the historical development of works and schools of Persian painting until the end of Isfahan school of painting. The focus of this work has been on formal and comparative analysis of the works of different painting schools. In the introduction of the book, he notes that in Iran “illuminating a book has had deep compatibility with poetry” (Ashrafi, 1988, 25); however, in this book, he pays less attention to the method and details of this compatibility. In addition, in the last chapter and in the description of the “Isfahan school” painting, Ashrafi states “painting will be separated from literature context in its next evolution” (ibid., 186). In “The history of Persian painting”, Binyon, Wilkinson and Gray (2004, 375), by pointing out Shah Abbas’s tendency towards constructing buildings and applied arts, discover a “decadence” in the arts related to bookmaking

at that time. Ruyin Pakbaz, in “Naghashi-ye Iran, az Dirbaz ta Emrouz” [Persian Painting, from Long Time ago to Today] mentions a stagnation in the demand for major manuscripts in Shahi workshops and asserts on the “weakening” of the connection between painting and literature in this era (Pakbaz, 2011, 124). Radfar in “Literature and Art Interaction in the Esfahan School” notes the “inner connection and inherent correspondence” (Radfar, 2006, 41) in Persian literature and Persian art, but, about the “circumstance” of this connection in terms of formal or structural, he does not enter into a case and partial analysis. In her article “Ayine-ye zaman: Mo’in Mosavver”, Farhad, had studied the course of Mo’in Mosavver’s works and by focusing on “independent miniatures”, discusses the themes, history and reading the signatures of some of them. According to Farhad, “The emphasis in these miniatures has been transferred from action to agent” (Farhad, 2013, 287). In other words, Farhad believes in the greater independence of these single-miniatures from the representation of action, which is the main characteristic of literary narration.

It seems that most researches in this field deal with the contents adaptation of the paintings or texts, or generally, have examined the conditions of the illustrated manuscripts and works from a historical perspective and in this context, the formal and structural adaptation of these two media and recognition of their limits, convergence, or separation have been less discussed. This study intends to illustrate this inner connection according to the structural relation between image and text in works of mo’in mosavver.

### Theoretical foundations

In an interesting discourse, Gilles Deleuze introduces “word” and “image” as two pure elements, base on which all ideas are regulated (Deleuze, 1988, 60). This antimony in the field of arts, especially in comparing literature (as a medium that basically deals with words) and painting (as a visual medium) had an obvious manifestation; a comparison that particularly

expanded, especially in the aesthetic texts, of the Renaissance. One of the purposes of “Paragone” discourse, or the comparison and gradation of arts in this era was promoting the painting to the field of free arts, in which “poetry” was at the center of them. The key person in this movement was “Leonardo da Vinci”. He believed that painting is superior to poetry; “Because the poet shows the beauty and ugliness of each image only consecutively and bit by bit, while the painter will display that all at once” (Wells, 2008, 18). Da Vinci considers “simultaneous seeing” as the base of painting. According to him, simultaneous seeing in painting, against to chronological succession in poetry, is the reason for its superiority to poetry (Frey, 1963, 163). In the mid-18th century, this discourse got to its peak and reached a temporary resolution in the classical work of “Gotthold Ephraim Lessing”, i.e., “Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting”. In this work, Lessing tries to separate poetry (and Literature in general) from painting by using two fundamental categories, “time” and “space”. He argues that literature is the art of time and painting is the art of space (Lessing, 1969). Literary critics usually follow Lessing’s approach and discuss the convenient relation among medium, content and reception. Reading occurs in time; the signs read are utter or inscribed in a temporal sequence; and the events represented or narrated occur in time. This homology or convenient relation also operates in the painting medium. The medium of Painting originally is spatial, where shapes, bodies and their spatial relations represented in space and the content and perception of them occur simultaneously (Mitchell, 1986, 98-99).

Despite this separation and distinction, Lessing also discussed donation and strategic concession in this regard. According to Lessing, painting can imitate actions, but only in a way that it transmits through forms (Lessing, 1969, 103). Therefore, spatial art indirectly obtains a temporal dimension. For Lessing, paintings can picture only a single moment of action in its coexisting compositions.

Therefore, it must choose one of them, one which is more fruitful and more readily understandable based on what happened before and what is about to happen (*ibid.*, 102). Lessing calls this moment the “pregnant moment”. In representation of the pregnant moment in painting, Sonesson recognizes a type of hidden and implied temporality (Sonesson, 1995). Therefore, Lessing limited the statement to “pregnant moment”, however the fruitful or pregnant moment was a concession to temporal imagination for it was suggestive of past and future actions (Lee, 1967, 20).

In the meantime, Mitchell’s opinion in Laocoon’s reread about the relationship between “image” and “word” is remarkable. According to Mitchell, artists’ tendency towards exceeding the imagined boundaries between temporal and spatial arts is not an exceptional or marginal action; rather, it is a fundamental struggle, which is not limited to a specific genre or era, whether in the theory of art or actions of art (Mitchell, 1986, 98). From this perspective, he mentions the spatial-temporal connection in arts as a dialectic struggle (*ibid.*). Therefore, the text/image issue, not exclusively between arts or media, but inevitably and unavoidably exists separately in arts and the media (Mitchell, 1994, 94).

### Research method

This study examines the paintings of Mo’in Mosavver using an analytical-comparative approach. By considering the illuminated manuscripts and single-leaf paintings as two important groups of Mo’in Mosavver’s works, this research analyzed the indicator works in this field and revealed the shape of these works, in relation to the text/image duality.

### Discussion

A large portion of the survived works of Mo’in Mosavver are miniatures that have been used for illuminating the manuscripts. In this relation, we can note to seven copies of “Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh”, which 161 leaves of these miniatures are attributed

to him. Moreover, we should refer to three illuminated manuscripts about Shah Ismail’s life, which 68 miniatures of it are probably the works of this tireless painter (Eng, 2016). The multiplicity of miniatures shows the continuation of the book’s illustration tradition until this period. These paintings are located “among” the pages of the “literary texts” and are originally “at the service” of illuminating the narrations of these texts. Although the combination of “text” and “image” in numerous pages of these works created a single work of art, known as “book”, but in the end, the dominant pole in this combination is “text” and verbal narration.

This domination is perfectly visible in Fig. 1, which is an illuminated page of “Shahnameh” by “Ferdowsi”. Here, “text” has surrounded the image; in such a way, that image is seen as separate surfaces. The subject of this miniature is “Zal coming to Rudabeh’s castle”; but the extension of



Fig. 1. “Zal in the presence of Rudabeh” miniature, painted by Mo’in Mosavver, second half of 11th century AH, preserved in the Aghakhan Museum. Source: [www.persianpainting.net](http://www.persianpainting.net)



the text has moved Zal to the edges of the page and therefore only half of the hero's horse is illuminated. As all paintings of the illuminated manuscript are surrounded by the text, in this image, too, the text has penetrated objectively into the image and dominated on its surface. Therefore, this image-text can be considered as a manifestation of the totality of Text and Image relation in illuminated manuscripts. However, Mo'in Mosavver's visual intelligence should not be forgotten here; where the tall, uniform and impenetrable walls of Rudabeh's castle are decorated with columns of text and Zal, on the left edge of the image, is looking for a way to penetrate the castle.

In many of the miniatures illuminated by Mo'in Mosavver, the objective penetration of text into image can be seen. In some miniatures, like Fig. 1, the text covers the bigger surface of the page, but in most works, the important verses of the text, which are directly related to the topic of the painting, are located in a table around the image's margin. In general, no miniature has been seen as an independent image without the existence of a textural surface. Fig. 2, which is chosen from another version of "Shahnameh", proves this point. Here, too, the text is positioned "over" some parts of the image, in such a way that at the upper part, it cuts the image of the trees. However, this image shows another manifestation of the text penetrating into the image, which is common in Mo'in Mosavver's illuminated manuscript.

This image depicts a moment of "The Seventh Labor". In this painting, Rostam is depicted while after cutting the White Demon's leg and he is about to pull out its liver with a dagger to cure Key-Kavous' blind eyes. This moment is the climax in the narration of the seventh labor. What Lessing calls the "pregnant moment" in Laocoon is a key moment in the sequences of the temporal narrative actions, which tells us about past and future events. In this painting, the simultaneous events are depicted at this moment. In Lessing's term, it can be said that this work, like many other illuminated manuscripts

of Mo'in Mosavver, is a type of historical and allegorical painting, which is faithful to the boundaries of the image's spatial medium; but, using Sonesson's concepts, it can be said that this painting, implicitly, has a kind of "implied temporality" and therefore, in a way, indicates the internalization of the temporal element of the narration.

Usually, in a single work of Persian miniature, the narrative scenes are not depicted in sequential episodes. Therefore, the narration in Persian paintings is illuminated in a "simultaneous" way; but in most of these miniatures, this implied temporality is recognizable. The comparison between Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 can reveal an important change in the composition of Mo'in Mosavver's illuminated



Fig. 2. "Rostam kills the Div-e-Sepid, The White Demon" miniature, associated with Mo'in Mosavver, middle of 11th century AH, preserved in the British Library. Source: www.persianpainting.net



Fig. 3. The "Killing Kay Khosrow" miniature, associated with Abdul-Samad, 10th century AH. Source: Welch, 1976, 185.

manuscripts. This painting is the narration of the "Killing of Key-Khosrow" in "Shah-Tahmasebi Shahnameh" illuminated manuscript. The image of the "pregnant moment" can be seen on the left of the painting, but apart from this moment, this painting has a group of figures and micro-scripts, which the audience will "perceive" them through temporal sequences. Here, we can talk about a "seeing", similar to reading. As previously mentioned, there is a homogeneity between media, content and way of perception in the temporal and spatial arts distinction. The way of perceiving or seeing this painting clearly has a temporal trace. However, what we understand from comparing this painting with Mo'in Mosavver's painting (See Fig. 2) is the reduction of subsidiary micro-scripts and micro-narratives and a greater focus on the "image" of the "pregnant moment" in the illustration of literary narratives. This can be seen in most of the illuminated manuscripts of Isfahan school, especially after the expansion of Reza Abbasi's aesthetics. In the illuminated manuscripts of this school, human figures were depicted with a smaller and larger number than is usually compared to the previous

schools. (Ashrafi, 2017, 128). Similarly, in Mo'in Mosavver's illuminated manuscripts, following the composition principle of Isfahan school of painting, micro-scripts and micro-narratives are reduced and the focus shifts to the main script of the image. Therefore, these miniatures are different in terms of "perception sequence" as a temporal notion characterizing text and literary narration. Hence, a greater "homology" established among media, content and perception of the work. In other words, the work has become more "artistic" than the previous illuminated manuscripts.

Apart from illustrated manuscripts, single-leaf miniatures are another important part of Mo'in Mosavver's collection of work and there are more than 40 such works (Eng, 2016). One interesting example of this approach involves two pages with the painting of one single figure, which is located the middle of an illustrated manuscript of "Shahnameh" (See Fig. 4). This image consists of two opposite pages, which come after the page narrating The End of Key-Khosrow's Reign and before the beginning of Lohrasb's reign (Canby, 2010, 60). The composition of two works shows the reciprocal relationship between the two paintings. However, the strange and significant thing about these lyrical works is their placement in an illustrated manuscript of Shahnameh and between two prose and epic narratives. These two miniatures have no authentic relationship with the narratives that come before and after them. Therefore, their placement can be considered as a sign of a new tendency in going beyond "text" in painting.

This tendency is recognizable in many of Mo'in Mosavver's works. In these works, like miniatures, there is no poem or word "in" the image (Figs. 4-7). In addition, painting is not a representation of verbal narrative; in these works, the movement from "text" towards "image" can be seen. In these paintings, media, content and perception homogeneously distance from the temporal sequence (the characteristic of verbal medium). On the other hand, these works have also affected the shape and



composition of illuminated manuscripts of Isfahan painting school. As previously mentioned, Mo'in Mosavver's illuminated manuscripts has included fewer figures and micro-scripts and a relative separation between the figures in that works could be seen (See Fig. 1). This impact also applies to Reza Abbasi's illustrated manuscripts. Moreover, Sheila Canby notes that in some of the illustrated manuscripts, Reza Abbasi has used faces and features of some of his own single-leaf miniatures (Canby, 2014).

However, the interesting thing in this set of Mo'in Mosavver's works is the appearance of explanation and long annotations on the margins. For example, on the margin of "Tiger attacks the Young Man" (See Fig. 5), Mo'in Mosavver has written a long text, the date and cause of this incident and the problems of the people, the market and the weather at the time. Canby attributes the importance of signatures in the Isfahan school to the fact that "the new patrons of art assumed significant importance for the originality of the work" (ibid., 16). In addition, Karimzadeh Tabrizi talk about the difficulty of "Brush Nastaliq" calligraphy, which was usually used by Mo'in Mosavver in his works. This method



Fig. 4. Two miniatures of the same version of illuminated Shahnameh, attributed to Mo'in Mosavver, second half of 11th century AH, preserved in Naser Khalili's collection. Source: Canby, 2010, 72.



Fig. 5. Painting "Tiger Attacks the Young Man" by Mo'en Mosavver, 1082 AH, Kept in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Source: www.collections.mfa.org



Fig. 6. "The Two Lovers", by Mo'in Mosavver, 1052 AH, preserved in Freer Gallery. Source: <http://asia.si.edu>



Fig. 7. "Single-head Lion with Four Bodies" by Mo'in Mosavver, 1088 AH. Source: Javani, 2011, 248.

of painting distinguishes original works from fake ones (Karimzadeh Tabrizi, 1991, 1183). Given the above discussions, it can be said that these annotations in the works such as "Tiger Attacks" (See Fig. 5) or "The Two Lovers" (See Fig. 6) are considered as the return of "text" to the image. It seems that these sentences in "The Tiger Attacks the Young Man" have occupied the vacuum left by the verbal narrative.

Generally, these annotations are ultimately considered as the penetration of the text into the image. The text is supposed to express the validity, ownership and originality of the painting next to the image. It is not surprising that many of the royal illuminated manuscripts attributed to Mo'in Mosavver do not have signatures or dates because their mere existence and creation in the royal court has already awarded their validity and originality.

A large number of these single-leaf paintings signed by Mo'in Mosavver have survived and their predominant subject is the faces and bodies

of different classes of the society. These portraits were usually single-colored and they were usually painted quickly. In this regard, he can be considered as a "photo-journalist" of his time who has tried to capture the elusive moments through words or images (Farhad, 2013, 300). The location of these paintings, is not the royal library, but is usually Mo'in Mosavver's own house, or a host's house. Although Mo'in Mosavver's interest increasing single-leaf miniatures began in the first years of his life as an artist (approximately 1044 AH), "he painted most of them after 1070 AH, approximately when had completed his plans" (ibid., 288). The eager to capture images and mimesis of beauty can well be seen in these works. These works- literally- are completely "artistic". Fig. 6 reveals this aspect of Mo'in Mosavver's works. This is the image of a woman and a man, painted by wavy and quick- slow stroke of the paintbrush. In the annotations of this work, Mo'in Mosavver has written: "On Thursday night, 11th of Muharram, the year 1052, in Asder Baghan Alley, lucky rehearsal". As it is apparent in this sentence, his preference to "see" and then "mimesis" of the visual act can be seen in many of these works. According to the distinctions mentioned in theoretical foundations, this "seeing", as a simultaneous and spatial act, is against "listening" or "reading" literary narratives. In addition, Mo'in Mosavver has painted some work based on his visual imagination, which shows his pure visual creativity. Some of these works are "Two Four-headed hours", "Two Inverted Figures" and "The Single-head Lion with Four Bodies" (Javani, 2011, 119) (See Fig 7). These works are significant examples of distancing from text and verbal narrative. In this work, a subject is painted with visual creativity in the form of games with the language of lines and geometric shapes, while external figures and objects are transformed into unfamiliar and innovative shapes.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the two poles of "text" and "image" has appeared in different form in the



works of Mo'in Mosavver. In Mo'in Mosavver's illuminated manuscripts, the verbal narrative's penetration into the image's domain is obvious. These paintings, which form a large portion of Mo'in Mosavver's works, were located in the middle of the "content" of the book and therefore, their place was "in" the book as an originally contextual medium. Objectively, it should be noted that in these illuminated manuscripts, a "surface" of the image have always been allocated to the text. There is no illuminated manuscript painted by Mo'in Mosavver where part of the image's surface is not covered with text. The traces of the penetration of verbal narrative and in general "temporal act", into content and the way of perception of these works are also evident. The text, which covers a part of the image, is considered as a guide for the contents of the painting. Illuminated manuscripts are usually limited to the image of "pregnant moment" in the temporal sequences of the narrative actions and therefore has a kind of "implied temporality". This shows the hidden penetration of "temporal act" and the representation of consecutive actions, as the basis of literary and verbal medium, into an originally "spatial" medium.

Single-leaves or portraits are another group of Mo'in Mosavver's works. The themes of these miniatures do not involve literary or historical narration; rather, they involve faces and figures. These works show a new tendency toward this absolute visual act; a tendency which has existed in the Persian painting tradition since old times, but it become much stronger with the establishment and expansion of the Isfahan school. The multiplicity of these works and long signatures by Mo'in Mosavver on single-leaf paintings shows the importance of these works in his collection. The subjects in these paintings involve people's daily lives and Mo'in Mosavver's annotations show the importance of visual subjects in transient time and space. By examining the trend of Mo'in Mosavver's works, it is understood that this "visual" tendency is directly related to shifting away from from the royal court, as the main

patron of Persian miniatures. Creating illuminated manuscripts that guarantee the comprehensive and deep connection between "text" and "image" in Persian paintings began to decrease from the mid of Safavid's era. It seems that creating single-leaf works and their resulting aesthetics indicate distancing from the royal court and its glorious illumination method. This shift in the works of Mo'in Mosavver reveals itself in the importance of "image" compared to "text" and "narrative". On the other hand, the expansion of creating and deepening aesthetics based on single-leaf works has also been influential on the composition and form of illuminated manuscripts; in such a way those subsidiary figures and micro-scripts have become fewer in these miniatures and the painting focuses more on the image of the "pregnant moment". It seems that in this era, the further painters' distances from the royal court, their subjects also go beyond the verbal narratives and the stronger their mimetic and emotional aspect would become. Therefore, in, Mo'in Mosavver's paintings through the development of Isfahan school show a shift towards the recognition and distinction of the media, of "painting" as opposed to the the medium of "literature".

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