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## Study of Motifs in Zoroastrian Needlework Based on Anthropological Aspect of Art

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### Abstract

**Problem statement:** The art of “Zoroastrian needlework” is a sort of traditional needlework clothing design, belonged to Zoroastrian ladies, dating back to pre-Islamic Iran. Majority of the Zoroastrian needlework motives contain some meanings and roots from religious culture and aesthetics point of view which are not explained so far and identification of these motives can reveal their meanings which some believe they are just simple designs without any hidden meaning.

**Research objectives:** This study attempts to assess and understand the ornamental motifs of the Zoroastrian needlework from cultural and social point of view of the artists.

**Research method:** This anthropological study of art tries to answer the following question: what is the cultural iconography, aesthetic items and function of the motifs of the Zoroastrian Needlework? In order to answer this question based on anthropology of art views, the motifs of the Zoroastrian Needlework were studied using descriptive-analytical method by considering their iconography, aesthetic, and functions.

**Conclusion:** The results show that based on iconography analysis, many of these motifs remind us of old archetype such as mother and trees, and using them on wedding dresses is a symbol of goddess of fertility. This shows a relation between concept and application. In addition, based on aesthetic analysis, the structure of color, form, texture and composition are according to their sewing patterns and poses balance, difference and rhythm. In function analysis, motives were used mostly for women’s clothing, especially their wedding dress which is exactly according to its function and shows view of Zoroastrian religion in which living happily is the human mission.

**Keywords:** *Anthropology of Art, Cultural Iconography, Aesthetic, Functionalism, Motifs of Zoroastrian Needlework.*

### Introduction and statement of the problem

Iranian Zoroastrians are among the people who

have maintained their traditions, rituals and art despite the passage of time and one of their valuable historical art is a unique art of needlework which

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its ancient and local name among the Zoroastrians is “flower and motif” or Gol-o-Naqsh, and today it is known as “Zoroastrian Needlework”.

Zoroastrian Needlework is a type of subtle needlework that is done on fine-sewed textiles with colorful fibers. Tradition of purchasing and wearing the Zoroastrian clothes decorated by this art was prevalent in Yazd City and to some extent in Kerman and Tehran since time immemorial but unfortunately now it is of limited use in Yazd and Kerman. After subtlety, which is one of the key features of the art of Zoroastrian needlework, its various and specific themes are among the other features of this art. This needlework includes specific motifs and symbols each one of which has a specific content in Zoroastrian beliefs. Zoroastrian embroidered these motifs on their clothes for ceremonies including the wedding dress in order to show their beliefs such as fertility, happiness, eternal life and so on and so forth.

In this essay, it was sought to answer the question that: what are the cultural meanings, aesthetic criteria and cognitive function of motifs of Zoroastrian needlework? Then, by the method of anthropology of art, the formal analysis of these motifs have been conducted and their relationship with effective factors like culture, thoughts and beliefs of Zoroastrians have been investigated; because art works become meaningful by the means of a determinate understanding of the thought of their creators. Decline of this art and lack of professional and cultural studies on the motifs of Zoroastrian needlework art was the reason for choosing this subject to be studied.

### **Background of the study**

The number of comprehensive studies that have been conducted regarding the art of Zoroastrian needlework in the view of its unique features as compared to other types of needlework in Iran, are truly limited. The studies conducted concerning Iranian clothing Ziapour (1964), Ziapour (1966), Gheybi (2008), Pope and Ackerman (2008) and

they only focused on the evaluation of clothing in historical eras of Iran or in those books in which Zoroastrian clothing has been noted like travelogues Chardin (1958), Figueroa and Silva (1984), Tavernier, (1990), Sanson (1998), Della Valle (1991), Careri (2004), in which they have only sufficed to the introduction of various types of clothes of Zoroastrian women. Among them, only one study Ja'fari, (2012) has been conducted regarding Zoroastrian women's clothing in Iran in Safavid era. Moreover, in some cases Iran International Women's Association (1973), Gluck and Gluck (1977), Bezhgi (2012), only embroidery on the clothes of religious minorities, i.e. Zoroastrian needlework art, has been mentioned. The studies conducted on Iranian needleworks including the works like Saba (2000), Yavari (2006) and such theses as Mazdapour (2007) have merely provided a short introduction of various types of Iranian needleworks including this art. It needs to be mentioned that the most of these and articles that have been published concerning Iranian traditional needlework have only focused on Baluchi's needlework and Turkmen's needlework. The only comprehensive research that has been conducted so far is considered to be the book entitled Mazdapour and Mazdapour (2017) which has studied the history, production method, introduction of Zoroastrian clothing and also a number of works of Zoroastrian needlework. Given the aforementioned points, the main objective of the current research was to understand the cultural and aesthetic meanings and functions of the motifs used in Zoroastrian needlework in view of their visual variety and to investigate their symbolic concepts which has not been dealt with in the previously conducted studies.

### **Theoretical foundations**

Anthropology of art is a branch of anthropology that seeks to understand art from the point of view of the culture of its creator. It is the task of an anthropologist to show how artworks are produced in the culture of a specific society and what function does it

have for that culture (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, 15). According to Howard Morphy<sup>1</sup>, the general principle that should be the central proposition of anthropology of art consists of the fact that “one’s understanding of the work requires it to be set in a wider possible context. The understanding of immediate effect or importance of a work is neither sufficient nor possible without understanding the historical, social and cultural preconditions of its production” (ibid., 17). He has offered the following definition for art works: “those works which have iconography and aesthetic features and are used for presentation or representation” (Morphy, 1994, 655). According to the issues noted for the anthropology of art, artworks are analyzed from three major points of view: iconography, aesthetic and functionalism (ibid.). From the iconography point of view, artworks are means which encrypt the meaning or represent something or create a certain meaning. From an aesthetic point of view, artworks are analyzed in relation to aesthetic work or their rhetorical features and from functional point of view, the artwork is studied as a commodity in view of its application and decoration. In iconography aspect, art is depicted as an iconography system, which, through visual signifiers, is seeking to convey various signifiers or concepts. In the current study, it was sought to assay “how do motifs signify something and what do they signify?” (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, 325) In anthropology, if we want to reach the meaning of art symbols, we need to consider the motif in their cultural context. Moreover, for a mutual understanding of culture “which is a set of meanings that is understood and interpreted through the symbols and signs” (Fakouhi, 2009, 254), we should first turn to the analysis of cultural and artistic symbols. “Artistic symbols particularly in ritual, convey a meaning that is transferred from the artist to the audience, and through this transfer a relationship is established between the artist, artwork and the audience” (Ghani, 2016, 25).

The main concern of an anthropologist is aesthetics

of object within the context of the producer’s culture (Morphy, 1994, 655). Features of objects, in themselves, are not aesthetic features but these features change into aesthetic features through contextualization inside the value and meaning systems, which turn them to a part of cultural processes (Morphy, 1992, 10). Thus, Morphy has used aesthetics at least in two domains: “1. How something is felt and 2. How something is understood” (ibid., 11). Morphy considers aesthetics as studying the influence of form (generally including form, texture, light, shadow, taste, smell and etc.) On sense (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, 293). To fulfill these goals, anthropology of art must be focused on the explanation of form. Concentration on form provides a basis for understanding other aspects of art and in general, understanding cultural processes (Izadi Jeyran, 2014, 13). Morphy has defined form in a more extensive sense which includes both figure and the details of composition and construction.

## Methodology

The current study is of qualitative type which has been conducted based on descriptive-analytic method with the anthropology of art approach. The method of data collection was based on library studies, field observations and study of existing samples as well as conducting interviews with relevant informed people. The method of sampling in this study was purposeful and statistical population included 27 works of Zoroastrian needlework that date back to Safavid, Qajar and contemporary eras. Finally, according to analysis of anthropology of art based on iconography, aesthetic and also functional aspects of artworks, an analysis was provided regarding the motifs of Zoroastrian needleworks. According to Fig. 1 first in iconography analysis, given the fact that “analysis of form can be a basis for understanding the methods of encryption of meaning in art” (Morphy & Perkins, 2006, 324), subjects of motifs and understanding their symbols have been assayed. Then, in an aesthetic analysis,

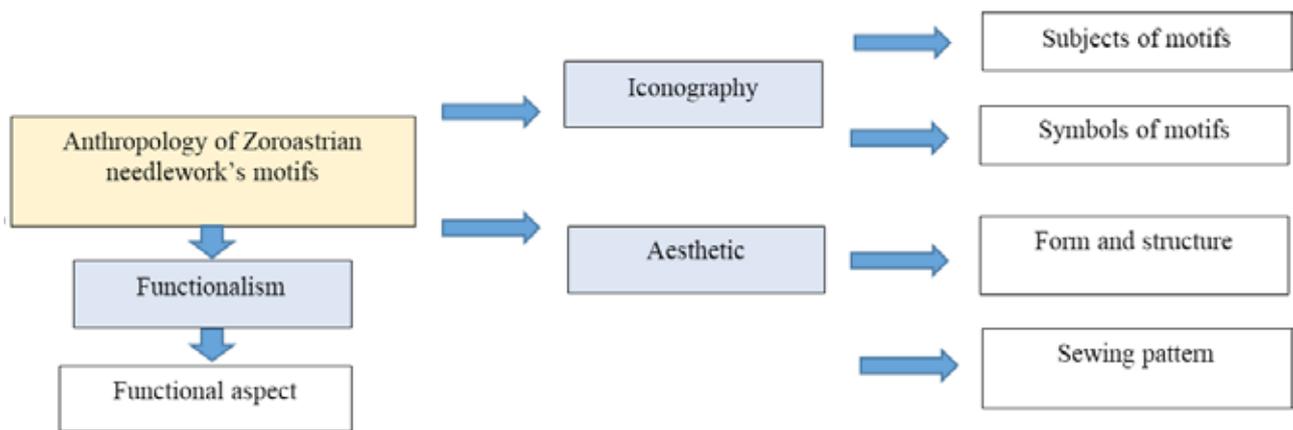


Fig. 1. Process of anthropological analysis of motifs of Zoroastrian needlework. Source: authors.

form, structure and sewing patterns of this art have been studied and finally function of this art in the target society was analyzed.

### Data Analysis based on the anthropology

#### of art approach

##### • Iconography Analysis

##### - Subjects of motifs used in Zoroastrian needlework art

The subjects of the Zoroastrian needlework art motifs can be divided into three general categories according to the samples studied <sup>2</sup> (Table 1, Fig. 2):

1. Motifs that represent and are inspired by the nature of the surrounding area; they are divided into two categories: fauna and flora. Fauna motifs in this art include:

- Bird motifs: Peacock with closed wings, peacock with stretched wings, rooster, hen, chicken, hoopoe, and others.

- Fish motifs: In various kinds, and in a motif known as “water pond and fish”.

- Others animal motifs: Horned animals such as (ram, deer, goat, butterfly, cat, a camel-like motif, snake and an abstract beast).

Various types of flora motifs in two categories of tree and flower:

- Tree motifs: Standing Cypress, bended Cypress (paisley), and the tree of life.

- Flower motifs: Shilouneh<sup>3</sup> (an early modern

Persian word for jujube), multi-feather flower (Chand-par), “pomegranate” flower or qolnari, flower and flower-vase, various flowers with leaves in the shape of a bush (boteh).

2. Geometric motifs: including circle, rhombus, triangle, square, oblique lines, and a wavy motif known as “haft-o-hasht”.

3. Conceptual motifs: In two categories of motifs drawn from the surroundings and combinatory motifs:

-Motifs drawn from the surroundings include: khorshid-khanoum’s motif (“the lady sun”) and a motif like Barsom-dan<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 3); Due to the importance of Barsom in Zoroastrianism, it may be concluded that inclusion of such motif in Zoroastrian

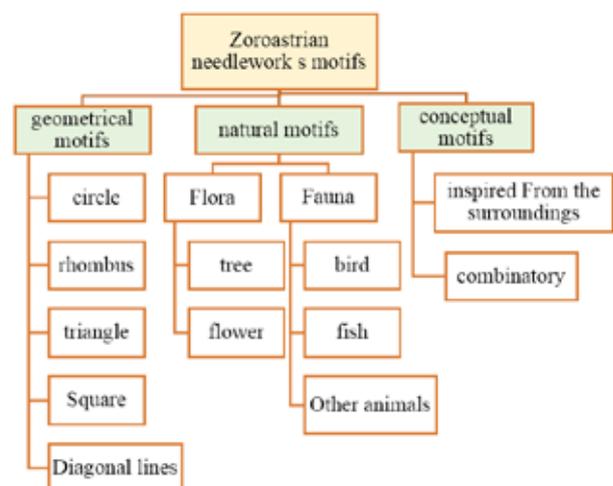


Fig. 2. Zoroastrian needlework's motifs. Source: authors.

Table 1. Zoroastrian needlework's motifs. Source: authors.

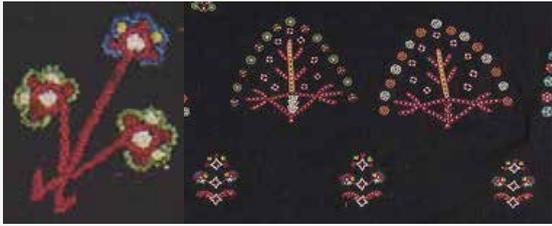
Motifs		Sample	Explanations
Natural motifs	Bird		From right to left: Peacock with closed wings, peacock with stretched wings, rooster, chicken
	Fauna Fish		Types of fish motifs
	Other animals		Horned animals, cat, butterfly
Flora	Tree		Types of tree motifs
	Flower		Types of flower and shape of a bush flower (boteh) motifs
geometrical motifs			Types of geometric motifs
conceptual motifs			Types of conceptual motifs



Fig. 3. Right: Picture of a Zoroastrian ritual ceremony, Barsom-dan used by the Zoroastrian priest. Source: <http://iusnews.ir>  
Left: Barsom-dan and Motif of Barsom-dan. Source: authors.

needlework is nothing but a symbolic expression of praise and bless for the eatable plants growing.

- Combinatory motifs are created by combining two or more motifs, and most of the combinatory motifs in this art include: The motif of the two animals on the sides of the tree, the role of the water pond and the fish, which is sewed more to the center of the design, with circles in the middle and the motifs of the fish around it (Fig. 4) and two face-to-face seated humans (Fig. 5) represents part of a Safavid period wedding dress including two face-to-face



Fig. 4. Scarf with Zoroastrian needlework, possibly Yazd, Qajar era, centrifugal design of fauna, flora and geometrical motifs with Persian inscriptions and a motif known as "Water Pond and Fish". Source: "Victoria & Albert museum" [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

motifs, ostensibly the bride and groom, with a set of such motifs as peacock, sacred Zoroastrian plant of Mourd, fish, a geometric design like star or flower between the two, and a pattern like a snake beneath them, which can collectively be interpreted as a fertility and prosperity amulet worked on the bride's dress.

#### - Symbols of motifs used in Zoroastrian needlework art

Symbols appeared in cultural and artistic monuments were usually originated from social believes dating back to the origins of the society and culture itself. Persistence of such symbols and codes is a peculiarity of oriental arts manifested through words, images, and motifs in an apparently simple manner, but in fact they refer to very deep and complicated ritual, socio-folkloric, and cumulative unconscious concepts. This is what Carl Gustav Jung has referred to it as Archetype. He believes that "the origin of myths is through human sense of self-unconscious, and believes that seemingly forgotten Archetypes reappear periodically in the cultural arena" (Jung, 1989, 22). These motifs are repeats of spiritual, mental, and ideal paradigms representing human experience (Snowden, 2014, 97).

Birth, death, mother Archetype, water, tree, sun, circle, and others have their own conceptual placements within human mentalities by intuition, and manifest themselves through monumental



Fig. 5. Right: Zoroastrian wedding dress with Zoroastrian needlework ornaments. Left: part of a wedding dress with Zoroastrian needlework, Safavid era, 1800 CA.. Source: <http://textileasart.com>

artifacts as the arena of unconsciousness. Thus, since the motifs in the art of Zoroastrian needlework had their roots in ancient Iranian archetypical believes and cultural symbols, they bring a reflection of happiness and optimism that are dominant in Zoroastrian worldview. And as this art was the ornament of the clothes worn in ceremonial feasts, the motifs and colors were also in concordance with those occasions. Thus, one sees the motifs of such auspicious lives as rooster, fish, peacock, and cypress and variety of flowers, together with cheerful and alive colors like green, white, red, and yellow. It seems that much of these motifs were derived from both peripheral environment and the Archetypes as well. The artist has employed unconsciously the same symbolic motifs with their origins in such concepts including fertility, love, and friendship, and with their mutual correlation with water, plant, and earth.

**- Anahita, the ancient Iranian goddess of fertility, Mithra (Mehr), and their relation with some of the motifs**

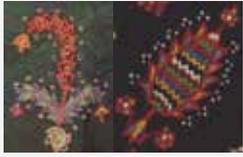
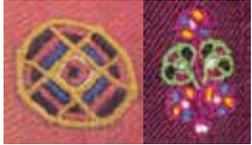
Some of the myths and symbols have had such important dominance in daily life that have been referred to for a long time in different cultures.

Water has been commonly regarded as the origin of life in many ancient cultures especially in central desert city of Yazd and Kerman's Zoroastrian people due to its hot and dry climate. Appearance of water as a symbol in the artifacts seems natural, as it endowed the residents with purity and made life possible. Thus the corresponding motifs maybe related to the goddess of fertility and love. Even if the artist didn't exactly know the meaning of the motif, but has worked it out according to a hereditary artistic repertoire or through concepts formed in his/her unconscious sense. "Anahita was known as the mother goddess with close correlations with water and fertility" (Boyce, 1989, 1009). The symbols of Anahita have appeared explicitly in the motifs of Zoroastrian needlework and in what follows, we shall dwell on the links between these symbols and the fertility goddess (Table 2).

**- Flora motifs**

- Tree: one of the most employed motifs in Zoroastrian needlework. "Tree is an incarnation of life and fertility continuation, enjoys a "feminine" identity, is somehow related to the mother Archetype which is drawn in some motifs instead of a woman who denotes its feminine and

Table 2. Classification of Zoroastrian needlework motifs and some sample pictures. Source: authors.

Motifs	Feature	Concept	Sample
Flora motifs	Tree	The symbol of fertility. The cypress tree is associated with Anahita because of the attribute of freedom	
	Flower	Four-, and eight-petal bushes symbolizes Mithra and Anahita	
Fauna motifs	Peacock	Anahita goddess's bird that is known in Zoroastrianism as a holy bird	
	Rooster	Considered as the symbol of sun	
	Fish	The symbol of fertility and the association of the mother goddess	
	Horned beast Like a goat	Horned god symbolizes fertility and power	
Geometric motifs	Rhombus and triangle	Women's symbolism and the representation of the mother goddess. Triangle is derived from number three and number three had been a symbol for goddesses.	
	Circle	Symbol of unity, totality and perfection	
Motifs From the surroundings	The sun	In relation to Mithra	
	Khorshid-khanoum ("the lady sun")	A genesis of two elements of sun itself and femininity as well	

motherly character” (De Beaucorps, 1989, 29). One of the important issues concerning the tree is the sacred triple including the goddess of earth placed between two guardian elements. This holly triplet is evidenced in most cultures such as Iran. In Iranian arts, the guardians are lion, peacock, goat, birds and others, and each playing the role of protectors of the sun. Due to its longevity and ever-green nature, tree is named as life-giving one among many peoples of ancient world and enjoyed a very powerful mythological status. “Some scholars believe that Cypress was related to the goddess Anahita, that is identified in the Iranian mythology as liberal and noble person” (Yahaqqi, 1996, 460).

It is also the cypress tree that mostly appears at Zoroastrian embroideries sewn on the women clothes and wedding dresses in particular, which seems to be a conscious choice related to women, fertility and Anahita itself.

- Flower: One of the flower motifs is Shilouneh In Zoroastrian needlework the Shilouneh is imaged with a circle-like pattern divided into four-, six-, and eight-petal flower and is interpreted as a symbol of life’s or world’s “wheel”. “Most scholars also identify the eight-petal flower as lotus which is the symbol of both Mehr and Nahid. This flower is related to water and goddess of Nahid from the one hand, and to sun and the god of Mehr from the other” (ibid., 840). In the art of Zoroastrian needlework, the eight-petal flower motifs may be symbols of Anahita and Mehr.

Sun-flower: It was the symbol of blessing, auspiciousness, worship, and captivation, as slavishly follows the sun. The sun is the divine symbol of the cult of Mehr (Cooper, 2007, 8).

#### - Fauna motifs

- Bird: Peacock: This motif is profusely used in Zoroastrian needlework in two shapes of closed or stretched wings. “Peacock enjoyed a sacred stature in Zoroastrianism, and ancient Iranians believed that the bird has enjoyed immortality due to drinking elixir of life. They also identified

the peacock as the Anahita goddess’s bird (Sabbaghpour & Shayestefar, 2010). The bird has been drawn in several Sassanid reliefs aside with Nahid goddess. “On the issue of Zoroastrian fire temples survived up to 3rd century of Islamic calendar, Tabari, the historian mentioned a place devoted for keeping peacocks close to the Bokhara fire temple” (Gelfer-Jorgensen, 1986, 131). Peacocks standing on two sides of the tree of life are incarnations of duality and dual nature of human beings (Cooper, 2007, 252). This motif is attested in several pre-Islamic monuments such as Taq-e Bostan stone-reliefs, cotton clothes, and gypsum tablets in Ctesiphon from Sassanid period, within ornamental patterns or flanked the tree of life in pair. In an amulet motif (See Fig. 5) two peacocks have been embroidered over the bride’s and groom’s heads, which confirms our viewpoint on its identification as a symbol of fertility and the goddess Nahid.

- Rooster: this bird is also attested in needlework motifs. The rooster was considered sacred in the Mazdayasna culture wherein enjoyed a sort of partnership with the divine motif, Bahman5. “[it was believed that] with its dawn voice, the rooster deters the demon of darkness and calls people for worship and daily jobs” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, vol. 3, 91). The rooster is closely related to the god Soroush.

- Fish: This is widely used in Zoroastrian needlework. Fish is a symbol of fertility (Hall, 2001, 100) and prosperity and heralds all mother goddess concept as a fertilizer (Cooper, 2007, 342). In Yazd, with its hot-desert climate, this symbol is related to rain and goddess of fertility, as one finds it over pottery vases and jewels of the region. In the amulet image (See Fig. 5) one sees two fishes at the highest point after the bride and groom, once again as a symbol of fertility and blessing.

- Snake: “It was the symbol of fertility among Elamites during the matriarch era; and many goddesses in pre-historic era were represented with a snake wrapped round the body or mouth”

(Bahar, 2014, 140). “Snake was known as a lunar beast, as the goddess Nahid was also associated with moon” (De Beaucorps 1989, 55). “People related the apparent periodic size-difference of moon to a sort of pregnancy and birth process, and it was for the same reason that “lunar” goddesses supervised and supported married women” (Eliade, 1975, 306-307). We see in Fig. 5 that a motif of snake has been embroidered beneath a scene of face-to-face groom and bride, thereby revealing its association with fertility and Anahita, as it is used here as an amulet on the wedding dress.

- Horned beast: Another motif employed in Zoroastrian needlework is the motif of horned animals. “In ancient Iran a horned god was a symbol of fertility and power, an in ancient near east in general, horn was itself considered as a divine power” (Warner, 2007, 536). In some of the famous Sassanid silver dishes, the goddess Anahid has been engraved with a horned hat, a similar tradition to represent its Mesopotamian counterpart, namely the Ishtar. The relationship between the horned animals and the goddess of fertility and water can be found on the basis of the above.

#### - Geometric motifs

- Rhombus and triangle: Rhombus and triangle are one of the repetitive motifs in Zoroastrian needlework. “Long and stretched form of rhombus is composed of two triangles that are connected to each other from the bottom side, and this is a symbol of meeting and exchange of sky and earth, the higher and lower worlds and even it is the symbol of copulation of two genders” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, vol. 5, 31). “Rhombus is constituted of two triangles and triangle is the abstract form of the goddess of Fertility” (Baring & Cashford, 1993, 33). “Triangle is derived from number three and number three had been a symbol for goddesses. Rhombus also belongs to this class and this motif is also considered to be a representation of the goddess of mother” (Black & Green, 2004, 176).

- Circle: Circular motif is a symbol of one of the most important aspects of life, i.e. unity, totality and perfection (De Beaucorps, 1989, 77). Circle is the most natural form, for this reason, it is sacred (Cooper, 2007, 141).

#### - Motifs from the surroundings

- The sun: This motif enjoys most explicit links with Mithra. The goddess Anahita and the god Mithra were two partners of the supreme god, Ahura-mazda. The cult of Mithra or the same Mithraism of later centuries was the most significant pre-Zoroastrian religion in ancient Iran. In this cult Mehr was identified with the sun, as the “Mithra’s birthday” was nothing but the sun’s “birthday” (Zomorodi, 2003, 50). Sun was source of heat and brightness, a symbol of life, and the origin of human power and capability (De Beaucorps, 1989, 78).

- Khorshid-khanom (“The lady sun”): Among motives employed in Zoroastrian needlework is a sun-like pattern figured in an abstract, ornamental, and brilliant manner which have an opened hair, attached eyebrows, and tiny lips feminine face. In other words, “the motif is a genesis of two elements of sun itself and femininity as well, thereby justifying its designation as khorshid-khanom in literature and pictorial arts” (Bakhtortash, 2001, 244). “It was highly praised and respected by the people, and since women were considered as the origin of earth’s fertility in pre-Islamic Iranian believes, the sun was also equated and analogized with most the powerful, fertile, and brilliant heavenly object” (Farravashi, 2013, 21). The face of khorshid-khanom was often engraved over circular and square amulets, themselves to be hanged from wall surfaces, in kid rooms in particular, or used in such occasions as wedding ceremonies to be protected from evil eye (Gluck & Gluck, 1977, 235).

#### • Aesthetic analysis

For aesthetic analysis of the motifs used in Zoroastrian needlework, an analysis of the form and structure of the motifs have been provided and

the sewing pattern in Zoroastrian clothing has been analyzed.

**- Form and structure of motifs used in Zoroastrian needlework**

Form and structure of motifs in Zoroastrian needlework include a series of artistic elements and qualitative principles<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 6). Each one of these elements and principles has been independently explained in Tables 3 and 4.

**- Sewing pattern in Zoroastrian needlework art**

In aesthetic analysis of the motifs due to special pattern of the sewing of each one of the Zoroastrian clothing including Makna or Maknu<sup>6</sup> [silk scarf worn by the Zoroastrian women] and lachak<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 7), shirt (Fig. 8), Shaval 8 [trousers] (Fig. 9), and hat (Fig. 10), an independent evaluation has been offered (Table 5). It needs to be noted that Zoroastrian needlework is done only on some parts of the Zoroastrian clothes which are naturally visible to others when they are used.

**• Functional analysis**

In functional analysis, artwork is studied from function and decorative aspects. The art of Zoroastrian Needlework has enjoyed a functional aspect in the course of time rather than mere decorative aspect. The cases of application of this art have been mentioned in Fig. 11. It needs to be mentioned that this art is used mostly on women’s clothes. The evidence and remaining works show that needlework on the men’s clothes is restricted

to the ceremonial hats including the groom’s hat for wedding. Perhaps this art was also used in the past times on other clothing items for men like qaba, too, though there is no evidence available that would endorse this issue. Moreover, this art was also used for the decoration of the hood or the textile that covered the baby’s cradle. Application of this art in Zoroastrian society was made in certain times and special occasions including wedding parties. This art should be considered as the decoration of clothes of happiness and for this reason, figured images used on the clothes were colorful and the design also reminds this. Composition of the colors that picture this art and a series of symbols that create the motifs and also the occasions in which these clothes are worn in, can be understood as the key place of happiness in the very religious creed of Zoroastrianism (Mazdapour and Mazdapour, 2017, 20).

**Conclusion**

This research sought to answer the following question: what are the cultural meanings and aesthetic and functional criteria of Zoroastrian needlework? The results of this study showed that thematic motifs used in Zoroastrian needlework include elements that are in some ways closely related to geographical, cultural and religious contexts. These motifs, despite they might seem to be a simple form in their first glance, have been

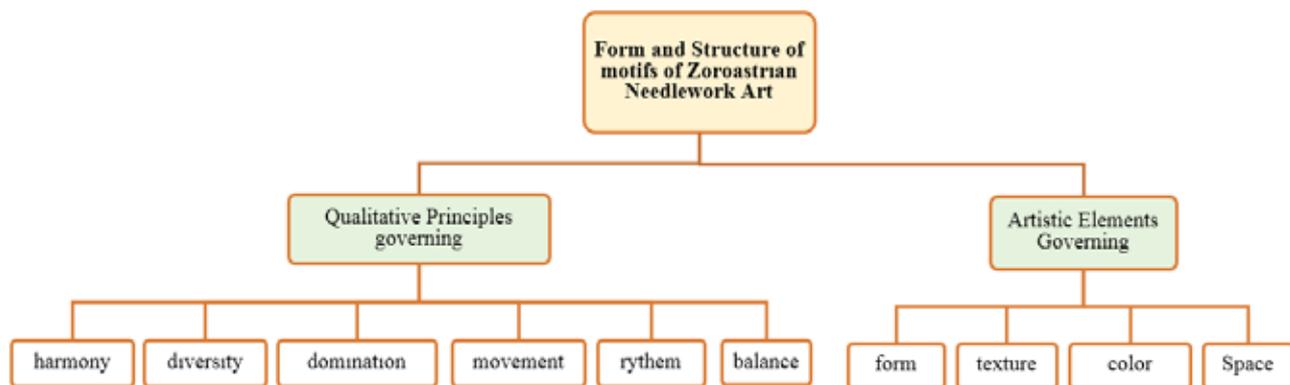


Fig. 6. Method of analysis of form and structure of Zoroastrian needlework motifs. Source: authors.

Table 3. Artistic elements governing in motifs of Zoroastrian needlework. Source: authors.

Artistic Elements	Explanations
Space	Motifs were sewed in compact spatial intervals and this shows a type of relationship between them; avoidance of void space and the arrangement of motifs alongside each other is in a form that most of them have been drawn from the opposite side; of course, the motif of fish is drawn from the above
Color	Use of warm, light and bright colors (including green, red, yellow, blue, and orange)
Texture	Very soft texture on the textile due to the subtle needlework
Form	Distinguishing between the drawn world and the real world through abstraction of motifs and avoidance of realism

Table 4. Qualitative principles governing the motifs of Zoroastrian needlework. Source: authors.

Qualitative Principle	Explanation
Balance	The design in the total context of the work is balanced from the point of view of composition
Movement	Motifs are static and without any movements
Domination/ Focus Point	Concentrations of motifs around a central core which is mostly the motif of sun or a water pond and fish
Diversity	Specific arrangement of diverse motifs which has been repeated in the course of years in this way
Harmony	Composition of motifs is of appropriate universality and order – lack of similarity in details of the motifs given the artist’s taste
Rhythm/ Repetition	Motifs have an ordered rhythm and are repeated alongside each other

used by artist without having any special patterns in mind, certainly have a specific intention. Three aesthetic, iconography and functional aspects in this art have close relationships with each other and the artist has not only taken advantage of the principles of artistic form and structure

rather even in the selection of subject, meaning and function have sought to retain the cultural beliefs of the Zoroastrians like happy life. What can be inferred from the themes and motifs of Zoroastrian Needlework in iconography aspect is the meaningful relationship between the motifs



Fig. 7. Right: A Makna with Zoroastrian needlework ornaments belonging to a set of wedding dress, 328 by 93 cm, 20th century A.D. Source: [www.qajarwomen.org](http://www.qajarwomen.org) Left: lachak, Yazd, 19th century A.D. Victoria & Albert museum. Source: [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)



Fig. 8. Two sets of Zoroastrian dress of a woman including a scarf (lachak), Makna, shirt, Shaval (trousers), with Zoroastrian needlework ornaments, Yazd, 19th century A.D. Victoria & Albert museum. Source: Right: [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk) Left: Indianapolis Museum of Art, Newfields: <https://discovernewfields.org>



Fig. 9. Shaval of a Zoroastrian lady with fauna, flora and, as well as geometric needlework ornaments, Kerman, 1921-23. Source: “The National Museum of Scotland” [www.nms.ac.uk](http://www.nms.ac.uk) Left: Part of Shaval with Zoroastrian needlework ornaments.



Fig. 10. Groom's Hat with Zoroastrian needlework motifs, Qajar era, 26 by 18 cm. Source: www.qajarwomen.org

and the application of the clothes; in other words, most of these motifs like fish, peacock, rhombus, Mrs. Sun, cypress tree, and combinational geometric motifs or a combination of man, plants, and animals on the clothes of women and the bride's wedding dress are not only the symbol of belief in happy life but also they carry the ancient notions and symbols of mother pattern and are related with the goddess of fertility and water. It seems that the artist in designing these motifs, whether in conscious or unconscious ways, has depicted the beliefs of ancient religions. In aesthetic aspect, colorful motifs with balance,

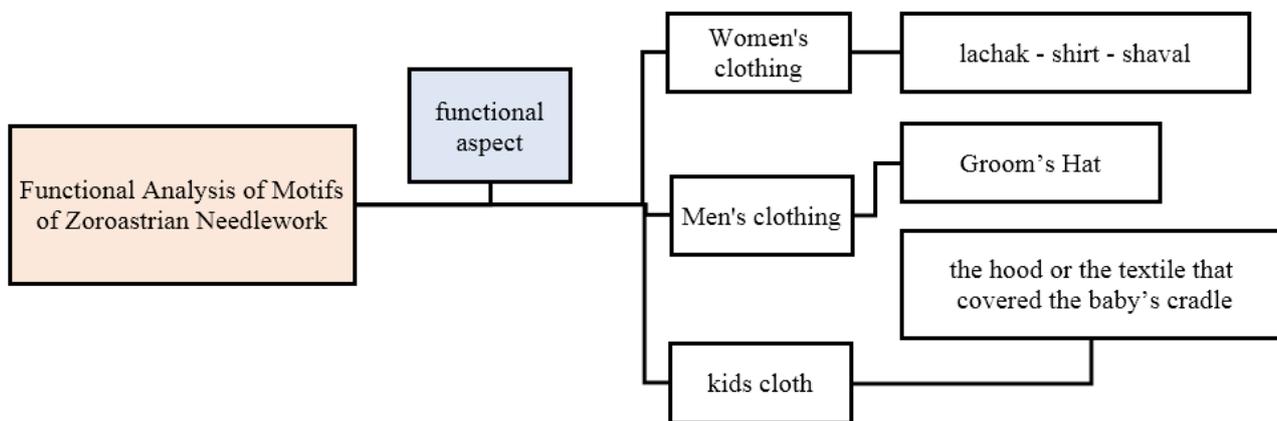


Fig. 11. Functional analysis of motifs of Zoroastrian needlework art. Source: authors.

Table 5. Special sewing pattern in Zoroastrian needlework. Source: authors.

Clothes Type	Explanation
Scarf (Lachak)	In needlework design for silk scarf, a pattern is usually followed; the motif of circle in the symbol of sun or the so called motif of pond and fish are needed in the center of silk scarf while other motifs are symmetrically needed around the work
Shirt	The textile of the shirt used by the Zoroastrian women is usually cut in several independent pieces and are stitched together and this pattern is called "Tir va Sikh". Motifs are sewed (needed) on these pieces in an ordered fashion and in a symmetrical form
Shaval (trousers)	The textile of shaval is cut in several pieces and are sewed together. Motifs are needed on these pieces in an ordered fashion
Groom's Hat	Motifs on the groom's hat are needed within circle like divisions and based on a special order

rhythm and order and it is noteworthy that there is no asymmetry in the motifs even in a partial form. The motifs are in harmony with the sewing pattern of clothes, and depending on the form of the clothes, they are used in somewhere which are most visible. For example, in silk scarf, composition is circle like or in the headdress, the motifs are used in the front. In functional aspect of motifs, one can note that these motifs were sewed on ceremonial clothes and have had the highest application for the women's clothes particularly those of the brides and symbolized the beliefs of Zoroastrianism and also the ancient rituals of Iran.

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### Endnotes

1. Howard Morphy: an expert in the domain of Anthropology of Art.
2. It is necessary to note that in these classifications, some names have been noted that in our field of work, they were named by the Zoroastrian old women.
3. Shilouneh is the Zoroastrian name for jujube.
4. Barsom-dan is a device with two steel pillars and two crescent like branches on which Barsom is set and Barsom denotes the branches of pomegranate tree, Mourd, cypress and the like which are used by the Mobads of Zoroastrianism in their ceremonies (Farhang-e Amid, 2000).
5. As to the qualitative principles and artistic elements governing the works of visual art we have used the work by Charles Jansen entitled "Studying Art History".
6. It is a scarf like piece of garment which is almost 3.5-meter-high while its width is less than one meter and is used over the silk scarf.
7. A triangular piece of textile which is worn under the Makna.
8. It is the trousers of Zoroastrian women. Zoroastrian trousers is the mostly decorated piece of garment in Zoroastrianism on which needlework is done. It is referred to as "Shaval Naqsh".

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