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Original Research Article

A Comparative Study of the Concept of Abstraction in Islamic and Western Art (Based on the Traditionalist Theories)

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Abstract

Problem statement: Islamic philosophy and art theoreticians, such as Burckhardt, considered Islamic art as abstract since it presents divine mysteries in Eastern art through symbolization. Hence, traditional art is sacred art with an abstract model of expression that avoids figurative and naturalistic representation. On the other hand, in Europe during the 20th century, Kandinsky started a movement in the visual arts to discover the visual features beyond the visual-narrative realm of the real world. They believed that painting, like music, should set itself free from the boundaries of mimesis or imitation of nature and narratives and influence its audience merely through forms and colors. Both of these attitudes have their theoretical foundations and reasons that are different from each other. The present study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the meaning, function, and characteristics of the word “abstraction” in both the abovementioned perspectives? What are the concepts of traditionalists and Western art critics from the term “abstraction” and how are they related to each other?

Research method: This basic research used a descriptive-analytical method and first attempted to find the exact meaning of the word “abstraction”. Afterward, it examined and compared the characteristics of Islamic art from the traditionalist thinkers’ points of view and the concept of “abstraction” in Western artists’ opinions.

Research objective: This study discusses art and stylistics in the theoretical field of art research and can be effective in the development of discussions on “the nature of art”.

Conclusion: There are similarities and differences in the use of the word “abstraction” in Islamic and Western art. In both of them, the artist and the audience are detached from the material and objective world. Both of these perspectives try to present something beyond what is visible and for this reason, the artists try to employ mysteries and symbols to present their artworks.

Keywords: *Abstraction, Islamic art, Western abstract art, Narrative, Figurative art.*

Introduction

Using the word “abstraction” in the context of Islamic and traditional art stems from the basic

concepts of the philosophy of Islamic art. Mystical and intuitive aspects of the traditional art, regarding its spiritual atmosphere that leads to spiritual transcendence, dissociate it from naturalism. The

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presence of the transcendent or the sacred existence is common in the various definitions of Islamic art. “A review of the history of art, from the early humans’ art to the present time, shows that the transcendent or sacred in a religious art has always tried to provide deep meaning and religious feelings, faith, and experiences. These meanings have been expressed in various modes, such as pure abstractionism (e.g., geometric shapes and decorative forms), naturalism, expressionism, symbolism, allegories, or severe deformations” (Hauser, 1998, 22).

Therefore, religious art always aims to represent the sacred, whether it uses symbolism and allegory or figurative expression. However, the spirit of Islamic art is considered to be derived from spirituality and its dissociation from the material world. “Burckhardt considered the characteristics and origins of the Islamic art to be stemmed from the spirit of Islamic and provided evidence of the unity and conformity of the form and content of Islamic art to prove his claim. This evidence is mostly based on the architecture of religious buildings” (Sartipipour, 2008, 46). Using symbols in the development of Islamic concepts and themes is one of the most important means of conveying the message in traditional arts which connects heaven to earth. “Every theoretician provides a different definition of religious art according to his/her perception or interest in symbolism, objective reality, abstractionism, or experimental and figurative expression” (Schrader, 1998, 7).

Moreover, religious art, due to the dominance of spirituality over materiality and the objective nature of the artwork, often appears in the form of mystery and symbols. “Islamic art presents its true language in the form of signs and symbols. Each color symbolizes a part of religious mysticism that evokes internal intuitions of intangible perception of immaterial worlds” (Asgari & Eghbali, 2013, 43).

To present mystical and spiritual worlds, Islamic art adopted a concise manner of expression and used symbolic language for this purpose. Traditionalist thinkers believe that only the symbolic language

can bear the heavy burden of the heavenly and spiritual message of the religion during the period of traditionalism; therefore, the language of traditional art is embellished with the symbolic language. This is one of the factors that promote abstract concepts in the form of art. It seems necessary to know the tradition since it is the realm of concepts, mysteries, rituals, and rites that are full of spirituality. Moreover, it provides a refuge for the emergence of cognition and metaphysical¹ knowledge without being overshadowed by the doubts of the modern world that have dominated everything, from object to subject. To explain the traditional world which is based on religious teachings, one must first examine the rites and rituals that carry meanings and experiences. Consequently, it will be possible to understand the messages of tradition and its development into various forms of art” (Ravanjoo, 2012, 10).

The concept and term “abstraction” in Western modern art was used with the aim of liberation from the representation of the visual aspects of naturalism in any visual style and school. This was the beginning of a movement named “abstractionism” by artists in the 20th century. In this regard, abstract artists believed that they could depict other human aspects, including mental actions, spirits, emotions, and specific human thoughts without the help of any object of the external world.

In this regard, a movement was formed in the Western visual arts of the 20th century, which sought liberation from naturalism. After the innovations of the visual artists of the 19th century, the 20th century experienced another development in this regard, known as “abstract art.” The emergence of the initial ideas which declared that painting should separate itself, the classic style, was followed by several new styles, such as impressionism, expressionism, and surrealism. These styles originated from realism and gradually deviated from realistic and detailed forms of expression.

Abstract painting emerged along with this trend, completely abandoning naturalistic representations.

The abstract expression was limited to color, form, and geometry, and stands completely in opposition to figurative art. One of the pioneers of abstract art was Wassily Kandinsky² who sought mysticism and spiritualism in painting to achieve a status similar to that of music.

“Kandinsky was living in Munich at the time, and like many of his German friends, was a true mystic who did not accept the values of progress and science and longed for the re-creation of the world through pure art originating from the inner world of the artist. In his exciting and rather chaotic book (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), he emphasized the psychological effects of pure color and explained how a bright red color can affect us like the sound of a trumpet. He believed that it was possible and necessary to establish such a connection between the minds of humans. This belief gave him the courage to make his first attempts to achieve colorful music and led to a movement that initiated the path of abstract painting” (Gambrich, 2000, 558).

Kandinsky and those artists who desired to reflect the spiritual and non-material aspects of life in modern art tried to manifest the hidden side of life through visual elements. “Spirituality in art, which emphasizes art as the manifestation of human’s inner life, became one of the main themes of abstract art. Indeed, Kandinsky’s painting moved towards abstraction around this time [1910 and the years after]. Kandinsky believed that art could achieve spirituality through abstract compositions and poetic appearances rather than through a completely representable approach to the visible world” (Lynton, 2003, 58).

In this regard, the intellectual foundations of abstract art and the desire for not imitating nature by not using figurative representations are evident in both Islamic and Western art. Both of them seek abstraction to evoke feelings and create meaning, and in a word, move away from the representation of the external world towards the abstract and non-material expression of spirituality in art. However, can it be said that these two approaches are alike? If not, what are the differences? This article aims to answer

these questions and specify that Western abstract art differs significantly from Islamic abstract art.

The meaning of the term “abstraction”

There are several definitions for the word abstraction in different dictionaries. In addition to the word *Enteza*, the word *Tajrid*, which is sometimes used interchangeably, has come with the same definitions. The word *Enteza* in the *Dehkhoda* dictionary is defined as the following:

“1) Prevention and refusal, 2) detachment and removal, 3) withdrawal, 4) departure, 5) capture, 6) detention, 7) extraction of a part of the whole” (Dehkhoda, 1963, 290).

Moreover, the word *Tajrid*, which is synonymous with the word *Enteza* is defined as 1) to isolate yourself, 2) to refine, 3) to strip, 4) to pull the sword from the sheath, 5) withdrawal, 6) refinement, 7) to eliminate the material constraints and dark veils and pay attention to the essence of oneness, 8) a mental action that separates one attribute from the attributes of something or one part from its semantic components and causes neglect of the other attributes or components, while that component or attribute cannot exist alone. For example, imagining the shape or diameter or color or weight of a book, regardless of other attributes and characteristics is *Tajrid* [abstraction]” (ibid., 390-391).

Moin dictionary defines abstraction as “to detach”, “to withdraw”, “to retrieve”, and “to capture and remove a part of a whole”. *Dehkhoda* has added refusal, prevention, and departure to these words. *Enteza* or *Tajrid* or the process of abbreviation, compression, and abstraction refer to summarizing information through identification, extraction, separation, and concealment of details from generalities.

“According to *Dehkhoda* dictionary, abstraction means to separate, to capture, to take out one part of a whole, prevention, refusal, to detach, to withdraw, to capture and departure. Abstract in English is derived from the French word *Abstraite*. In Persian, we do not have a specific equivalent; therefore, we

use the Arabic words Tajrid and Enteza (Zamani Babgohri, 2014, 56). The general meaning of the word abstraction, as it is used in Eastern and Western art, is “the isolation of an attribute or property that is common among several things and emphasis on this common attribute.”

For example, a circle can be considered the abstract form of every round thing. Abstraction in art has different methods and is defined as selecting the best parts of nature. The shared characteristic of many abstraction methods is disregarding the tradition of representation of the obvious or tangible reality or considering it insignificant. Moreover, abstract art regards the basic function of art to be the invention of a new reality for visual perception” (Pakbaz, 2007, 49). Historically, such meanings have been common in Western thoughts during the development of art in the 20th century.

The concept of “abstract” in Islamic art refers to a kind of art that avoids pure imitation of nature and originates from the imaginary cognition and imaginal world. This fictitious world which differs from the real world results in the creation of literary texts or geometric and calligraphic patterns that have their specific abstract features.

In the 20th century, “modern abstract art” has its special context. “Abstract art is a general term for the radical art styles of the twentieth-century that stood in opposition to the tradition of naturalism” (Pakbaz, 2009, 653) Abstract art was formed in the context of Western visual culture, where flourishing styles, such as Classicism, Baroque, Romanticism, Impressionism, and Cubism were experienced with an ostentatious visual culture based on literary schools.

Literature Review

“Abstract art” carries special concepts and meanings, each of which offers a special culture and discourse to the researcher. Abstraction in traditional art conveys special concepts of this discourse that are in line with the Eastern culture. On the other hand, in Western modern art, we arrive at abstraction with

its logical and historical requirements only after the experience of styles that were based on reality and naturalism. However, the discussion of traditional abstract art is based on the opinions of traditional thinkers as has been suggested by theoreticians, such as Titus Burckhardt.

The book “Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods” written by Titus Burckhardt and Islamic art as abstract art. In Burckhardt’s opinion, religious art is symbolic and carries a heavenly message that invites man to salvation; therefore, it is the reflection of the sacred art in Eastern religions and traditional art. For him, the symbolic art of Muslim artists, including Arabesque patterns, calligraphy, miniature, geometric patterns, and Islamic was abstract and then he mentioned their characteristics.

He considered the Arabesque pattern as one of the pillars of Eastern art and believed that: “for Muslims, Arabesque is not just about the creation of art without the depiction of particular images. For them, it is directly a means of dissolving the realistic representation or its corresponding image in the mental realm, just as the repetition of some Quranic words with rhythm and melody dissolves the fixation of the mind on their subject. In Arabesque, any individual form dissolves the rigidity of the mind regarding wishes or their favorite subjects. The repetition of single motifs, the flare-like movement of lines, and the equal decoration role of prominent or recessed shapes that are inverse but similar to each other reinforce that strength” (Burckhardt, 2013a, 146-147).

Dr. Seyed Hossein Nasr³ in his article on Persian miniature entitled “The World of Imagination and the Concept of Space in the Persian Miniature” declared that the imaginal world of the Iranian artist is the basic concept of space in such paintings. In this article, he elaborated on the separation of the visual world of the artist from the real world.

“The purpose of the art that has spiritual originality is to present a space other than the normal space of the material and physical world through symbols

and allegories and special methods of this art. This space differs from the one that human beings are accustomed to and experience in their daily lives. If there is a connection between these two types of space, meaning the normal space and the space of the realm Al-Malakut (which is also a real but immaterial world), it will be impossible to depict the transcendent dimension of the second space furthermore guide humans from the ordinary space to the transcendent world and the heavenly space by the same color, shape, and forms that are in the hands of the painter” (Nasr, 2010, 365).

Persian painting has remained faithful to the two-dimensional representation and has not intended to provide depth and modeling through the representation of perspective, and in other words, false three-dimensional representation. This is one of the significant characteristics of Islamic Arabesque abstract art. “During its golden age, the Persian miniature always remained faithful to these laws and principles. One of the characteristics of Islam is realism which is also reflected in Islamic art since it never tried to betray the two-dimensional nature of the paper by representing it in a three-dimensional manner. However, the art in the Renaissance period and the period of the declining miniature, used the rules of perspective, as opposed to the science of Euclidean geometric landscapes, to make the two-dimensional surface of the paper look three-dimensional” (ibid.).

The naturalistic representation of phenomena has no place in the visual world of Muslim artists. They abstract all the events and objects around them from nature, which means they separate and simplify their intended elements and put them in a new order in the imaginal world of their minds with the help of their heavenly imaginations. “The Persian miniature inner movements; from one horizon to another, as well as between two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces. However, this movement never leads to a mere three-dimensional space since that would cause the miniature to fall from the realm Al-Malakut and become the image of the realm Al-

Mulk, reduced to nothing but a faulty representation of the natural phenomena. In that case, it would be involved in the tendency to repeat the elements of nature or ‘naturalism’ that Islam has always avoided” (ibid.).

The book *Abstract Art* by Mel Gooding (2013) described the concept of abstract art in modern Western art in detail. Gooding in this book stated that abstract art includes no natural image or form of the external world and uses only allegorical, mental, and unnatural colors and forms to express its basic concepts. These words are commonly used in contrast to naturalist and figurative art and in general, can be applied to any art that does not represent objects and realities. What refers to modern artistic creations that avoid any representation and reproduction of nature or copying in the conventional sense of European art.

The book has nearly a historical approach and mostly focuses on abstract paintings and sculptures, like objects with a history that each researcher studies in his/her special manner. The history of abstract art began when the artists had decided to abandon the depiction of nature and objects. During this period, a variety of abstract art styles emerged with different approaches, intentions, and results.

However, “Abstract art” did not have a definite beginning point in terms of time and place. Its formal movements with their different intellectual foundations were at times distant close, intersected, or coincided with each other. Abstract artists with a decorative art approach, have learned from architecture, beautiful mathematical and geometric structures, common art, and various objects, particles, and repetitive structures that emerged through photographic techniques, and innovative mechanical technologies. More importantly, music provided an example of non-representational art with a great variety of formal structure and great emotional power.

Abstract art has proved its ability to be an effective means for the expression of immaterial experiences and thoughts. Abstract artists created many works and

went through various experiments and attempted to free themselves from the representation of nature. In the context of Western figurative art, “abstract art” offered a different path and did not tend to be a substitute for representational art. In this regard, it discovered new visual features and showed that the world could be seen and discovered from a different angle.

An article entitled “A Reflection on the Recognition of Abstract Art” written by Mostafa Goodarzi and published in the *Journal of Honar-ha-ye ziba* (2001) is a research on the knowledge of abstract art and its history. Goodarzi declared that “The whole history of art, until the early 20th century, has witnessed the powerful presence of figurative and pictorial painting. Non-visual arts were mostly used in the field of applied and decorative arts” (Goodarzi, 2001, 30). Given that abstract art emerged in the 20th century in the world of art, this article discussed the concise history of abstract art beginning from the modern period in the 20th century. The author believed that artists seek to reflect their emotions and represent their inner worlds. In this article, Goodarzi provides an analytical description of the works of artists and the concepts they followed.

Another reviewed article is “Abstract Art and Narrative Elimination” published by Vida Farahmand and Saeed Haghiri (2014) in the *Journal of Fine and Visual Arts*. This article focused on the removal of the narration from the visual forms of “abstract” art and the manner of their visual expression. The authors present “abstract art” as an escape from the narration, desire for silence, and the attempt to innovate a new language which is the silent language of unspoken abstract forms. The omission of literary and narrative features from abstract art opens up new visual possibilities for the artist and his/her innovative experiences. Modern abstract artists owe to modern literary and linguistic theories more than the artists of any other period, and this is contradictory to the belief of modern artists suggesting that visual arts should not imitate real life.

“Abstraction in modern art is a sign of alienation from reality in the traditional sense. Even before the beginning of the 20th century, theorists and artists always portrayed art as superior to reality, and shifted from “art is the imitation of life” to “art is the imitation of art” and then to “life is the imitation of art”. The movements and tendencies that became important in the 20th century shared only one feature, and that was the refusal of natural manifestations; however, not all painters of this period desired such a rupture” (Farahmand & Haghiri, 2014, 16).

Summary of related literature indicates that, based on the opinions of traditional thinkers who apply the word “abstraction” to Islamic and Oriental art, this word becomes famous for following religious traditions with the characteristics of symbolic art and carrying a transcendental message that leads humans to salvation. Since religious art avoids the naturalistic representation of the phenomena and has some attributes of abstract art, such as being two-dimensional, not exactly imitating nature, and misusing the perspective, it is categorized as abstract art. Regarding Western abstract art and its historical development, it can be observed that abstract art offered a different path and did not seek to replace figurative art or the representation of nature and created new visual possibilities. It made people realize that the world can be seen from a different point of view without conventional imagery since it provided a way for the expression of immaterial experiences and thoughts.

Throughout the history of art, until the beginning of the 20th century, figurative painting was common which relied on the imagery of the external world. Afterward, the artists began to create visual works in a different way that had nothing to do with the natural manifestations of things. Regarding the narrative, the elimination of that literary aspect offered new visual features for the artists and their innovative experiences. This is why abstract art owes to the ideas of modern philosophers, and

abstract artists have become aware of the issues of artistic cosmology and philosophical perspectives.

Meaning of the word abstraction in religious art

Works of traditional thinkers are the most important introductory literature regarding the traditional arts, especially those of thinkers who acknowledged the presence of wisdom in the foundations of traditional works of art. The term abstract is used in Islamic art to refer to the characteristics of the work of art.

“Burckhardt strongly emphasized the symbolic expression in religious art and considered it as a part of its nature. In his opinion, religious art should narrate the divine mysteries and be the symbolic, metonymical, and allegorical reflection of the divine creation. Due to its tendency towards mystery, religious art cannot be naturalistic since it reveals the divine nature of things as they are. In religious art, the operation of the divine spirit should be the example which is inexplicable except through symbols” (Rahnavard, 2015, 20).

Burckhardt confirms the symbolic nature of religious art and believes that sacred and religious art should be religious in form as well as content. “Therefore, a religious theme that is expressed in a realistic form, such as Renaissance art, cannot be called sacred and religious art since it lacks the specific stylistic symbolism and allusion that give meaning to religious art” (Burckhardt, 2013 a, 7).

Burckhardt did not consider the arts that express a religious subject in a non-original and non-religious form as religious and sacred since spiritual vision is necessarily expressed in a particular formal language. Without spiritual vision, the so-called (quasi-) sacred art acquires the forms it needs from non-religious art which reveals that there is no spiritual understanding of the affairs (ibid.). In other words, a religious appearance and subject are not enough for making an artwork religious and celestial. Works of art that do not induce holiness and spirituality, and whose language and expression are not inspired by a spiritual and celestial origin or whose creator did not have a

spiritual experience are not considered religious since religion is based on a kind of heavenly and spiritual understanding of the world and humans. Moreover, every religious matter is intrinsically sacred and everything sacred and spiritual has a religious and silent aspect (Motahari Elhami, 2005). Moreover, regarding the purgation of Islamic art from worldly and naturalistic themes, “Religious art narrates religious themes and spiritual mysteries. Religious art stands against worldly art and the traditional art stands against non-traditional art” (Nasr, 1994, 69).

Another feature of religious art is that it is not satisfied with physical beauty and seeks a higher level of beauty, which is spiritual beauty. Therefore, its beauty has a kind of spiritual knowledge and wisdom that cannot be found in non-religious arts (Fig. 1). This means that it is not merely delightful or pleasant; rather, it conveys knowledge or spiritual delight. In the preface to the book *Art of Islam. Language and Meaning*, Burckhardt Stated that:

This should not seem surprising or strange since the external manifestation of any religion, civilization, or culture should be a reflection of its inner world. The essence of art is beauty, and beauty should be inside of a beautiful object (the inner aspect or inner coherence) rather than in its objective and physical manifestation or its external appearance. In religious and Islamic terms, this is referred to as having a divine and heavenly quality (Burckhardt, 2013 b, 16). Orientalists (e.g., Burckhardt), emphasize the two-



Fig. 1. Shamsheh and Arabesque motifs, an example of Islamic abstract art, Imam Mosque, Isfahan, Iran. Source: <https://en.imna.ir>.



Fig. 2. The ascent of Muhammad to heaven. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Miraj_by_Sultan_Muhammad.jpg.

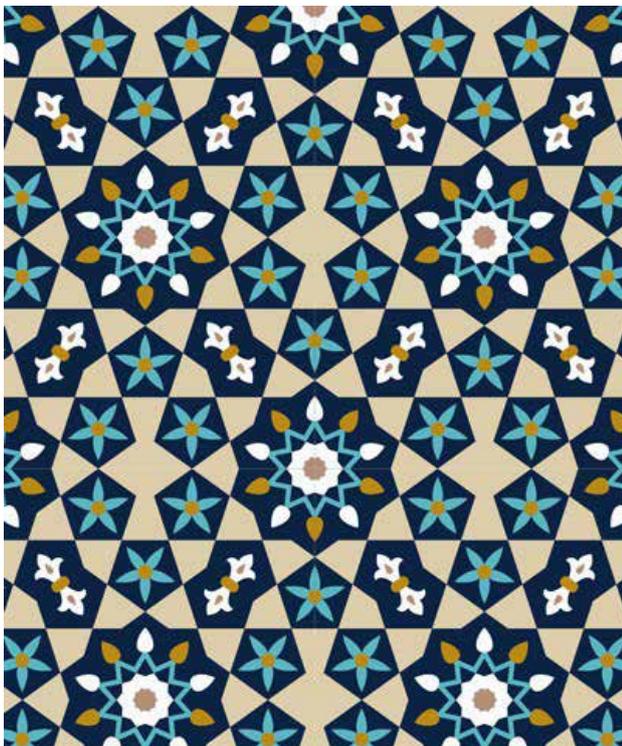


Fig. 3. Islamic geometric patterns, an example of Islamic abstract art. Source: <https://en.imna.ir>.

dimensional form of the applied visual elements, in addition to the symbolic nature of abstract art, in such artworks. According to this group, these features can be seen in only a kind of art that contains spiritual and intangible concepts. Oriental miniature, calligraphic inscriptions, traditional motifs on the tiles of religious buildings, and calligraphic works that rely on two-dimensionality and lack of depth and perspective have features that traditional thinkers attribute to abstract art. This style is far from realism and naturalism and emphasizes the spiritual aspects of art; therefore, the artworks that contain religious features are tended to be regarded as abstract art.

Although the essence of oneness is completely 'objective and concrete', humans consider it an abstract concept, and this issue, in addition to some factors related to Semitic mentality, indicates the abstract nature of Islamic art. The central axis of Islam is the essence of oneness which cannot be expressed through images; however, illustration is not completely forbidden in Islam. Plane imagery is permitted, as non-religious art, provided that it is neither the image of God nor that of the Prophets. Nevertheless, 'the image that casts a shadow' is exceptionally tolerated, only if it depicts an illustrated animal. Such an issue may happen in the architecture of palaces or illuminated manuscripts. In general, the depiction of imaginary plants and animals has been explicitly accepted, while only plant decorations with engraved shapes have been considered as sacred art" (*ibid.*, 131) (Fig. 2).

The transpersonal aspects of art based on spiritual inspiration, while demonstrating unity in pluralism (Fig. 3) and even using symbolism derived from nature, can be considered as the features of abstract art. Similarly, Burckhardt considers Islamic geometric motifs and Arabesque patterns 'with their cumulative and spiral expansion among the words of the inscriptions as Islamic abstract art.

"... The fact that masters of Islamic art declare that art originates from reason or science does not mean that art is rational and not related to spiritual intuition. On the contrary, here reason does not invalidate

inspiration but rather is accepting of impersonal beauty. Here we must distinguish Islam abstract art from modern “abstract art”. Modern abstract artists find more direct, fluid (at the same time easy yet difficult to imitate), and individual answers for the irrational impulses of the subconscious. However, for Muslim artists, abstract art has rules and regulations and illustrates unity in plurality in the most direct way.

The author of these lines, confident of his experience in European-style sculpture, once asked the Western decorator to hire him as an assistant. “If you wanted to decorate a part of this wall, how would you do it?” The master asked him. “I would draw intertwined leaves with gazelles and rabbits in the curves and spirals,” he answered. “Gazelles, rabbits, and other animals of nature are everywhere, why should I depict them?” the Arab replied, “the art is to draw three geometric rosette patterns here, one with eleven and the other two each with eight sides and join or nest them as they fill this wall!” (Burckhardt, 2013 a, 133- 134). Art in pre-Islamic Iran was also symbolic and influenced by Eastern cultures, literature, and religions.

“Throughout the history of Iran, there has always been a very close relationship between art and religion. Religion has been one of the most important factors that shaped art, and art has been the language of the deepest human wisdom. Many pre-Islamic artworks are based on symbolic and abstract concepts. Muslim artists, in addition to creating symbolic motifs following Islamic culture, modified many of the symbolic motifs of ancient Iran, such as the Sun (Shamseh), Simurgh, and Peacock, and revived them by adapting them to the Islamic worldview.

Some symbols of pre-Islamic Iranian art, such as the role of the angel, were transferred to the Islamic period without unchanged. The figure of the angel is based on the figure of a human being with two wings added to his shoulders. Throughout the history of art, this figure has been considered as one of the innovations of Iranian artists, who by adding

two wings to a human figure, turned it into a symbol of heaven and heavenly beings” (Khazaei, 2011, 131). Moreover, “Traditional art never imitates the external form of nature and is always against naturalism” (Jahanbegloo, 2010, 336); (Fig. 4).

Symbolism in religious art

For traditional thinkers, abstract art is based on symbolism. “According to Burckhardt⁴, religious art is based on the knowledge of shapes and forms.” Religious art uses a symbolic, mysterious, and allegorical expression since the mystery is an existential condition, and the universe and existence are based on symbolism. Indeed, these mysteries and symbols originate from knowledge and insight whose intrinsic interpretation forms the foundation of creation, divine revelation, and spiritual attitude towards existence and human beings” (Motahari Elhami, 2005, 144). In religious art, the supreme truths are degraded into these allegorical beings;



Fig. 4. Tawqi script. Calligraphy of the Holy Quran, an example of Islamic abstract art. Source: <http://blog.arthibition.net/content/show/106>.

since creation in mysticism means degradation and manifestation of the main and incorporeal truths in the imaginary forms of the imaginal world. “For the real artist, there is no escape except symbolism. This term expresses the type and quality of the connection of incorporeal worlds with this world, the material world” (Avini, 1998, 38).

Regarding the prohibition of illustration at the beginning of Islam, “illustration and sculpture are forbidden in Islam. That is, the supreme truths are presented through abstract art, not natural figurative representations. Prohibition of sculpture, illustration, and the depiction of living beings, both human and non-human in Islam in Burckhardt’s opinion was due to two factors. First, the eternal dignity and glory of humans, which are reflections of the divine attributes, should not be imitated. Moreover, nothing should create an obstacle between man and the invisible presence of God, even in a relative and the transitory way” (Motahari Elhami, 2005, 147).

Avoidance of illustration in religious art means avoidance of grasping the sacred. Since whatever is known is redefined in the system of human understanding, and this causes the sacred not to be considered sacred any longer. The inexplicable nature of the sacred allows the audience to move towards spirituality by detachment and separation from the material world, according to their desire. The most prominent form of religious art is completely abstract architecture. The temples and sacred mosques have been built to create a sacred experience. The forms and patterns on the walls, high ceilings, minarets, and domes are abstract works of art. None of the geometric patterns, such as medallion and Shamsheh, have an equivalent in the real world. They are mental concepts that have not imitated nature; they are completely symbolic.

Calligraphy is also based on lexical symbols, creates a real and mental distance from the material world by relying on the literary and mental features of the words and their underlying labyrinth of meanings. This is why the art of calligraphy is one of the pillars of abstract and symbolic art. “The most honorable

visual art in the Islamic world is calligraphy, and writing the Quran is considered a sacred art. Calligraphy in Islam plays a role similar to the depiction of Jesus in Christian art since it represents the visible body of the divine word” (Burckhardt, 2013 b, 151); (see Fig. 4).

Intellectual underpinnings of modern abstract art

In this section, we examine the formation of abstract art in Europe from two historical and theoretical perspectives.

Kant’s Copernican Revolution refers to Kant’s innovations in philosophy and epistemology. With a rational approach in his philosophy, Kant⁵ was able to end the war between rationalists and empiricists. He forged new terms in language, such as the “a priori knowledge” and argued that the world is not as “sensible” as empiricists believe, nor as rational as rationalists declare. That is, the world is neither entirely objective nor entirely subjective since it is both objective and subjective.

Discussion of Kant’s philosophy is out of the scope of this paper and may distract us from the main topic; however, we briefly refer to it. Kant believed that the world as a whole is divided into two parts; one part being the thing-in-itself and the other part being what is provided for us by the thing-in-itself. This “provision” is a function of the pre-existing rules that govern our minds, such as our understanding of time and place. Human beings understand three dimensions of space and one dimension of time; therefore, we only understand objects in these four dimensions, no matter what dimensions that object exists in. This means that the world is not limited to what we see; however, we can only see a limited part of it.

In short, what we see and understand in the world is the result of the essential cooperation of things and our understanding of them. For example, a table has a shape and volume; however, we can only see it in a maximum of three dimensions. The preconceived notions that rule our minds act like glasses that we

always have to use. Kant believed that we can never achieve knowledge of the thing-in-itself as it is.

Kant's philosophy, unlike what it seems, takes man out of the center of existence. Man indeed understands the world through his hermeneutic⁶ glasses; however, this does not mean that the world is the only thing that man has come to know since there are things in the world that we cannot see. Things that are not presented visually in the world that we can understand and represent.

This is why Kant's Revolution has been called the Copernican Revolution since Copernicus also took the man and the earth out of the center of the universe and proved that, contrary to traditional beliefs and the Bible, it is the earth that revolves around the sun, not the sun around the earth.

An attempt to understand Kant's philosophy helps us recognize the factors and roots leading to the formation of Western abstract art. The relationships and emotions that govern them and many other things that people are completely involved and entangled with are by no means visible. We cannot see psychological actions such as pain, sadness, happiness, spite, resentment, hatred, that we are completely involved in our daily lives. They are not seen; however, we cannot deny their existence.

Moreover, we experience countless other emotions other than the above-mentioned ones; however, we cannot name them since there are no words for them in our language. For this reason, language is not able to capture them and they will always remain unknown. We might even try to utter those feelings into the previously existing words; for example, the feelings we have on our wedding day, after the birth of our child, and when we are accepted to enter a university are all called "happiness." But are all three of these feelings the same? Or do we use happiness since we do not have the exact words for them in our language? All of these are limitations that language cannot cover and organize. However, one language may have more equivalents for the word happiness than another one; accordingly, its

speakers can express their happiness in different and more precise ways.

Music is a completely abstract form of art since it is full of emotions that we cannot either see or name. It presents such emotion to us that have no external manifestations; emotions that affect us and we affirm their existence. It must have happened to everyone at some point or another to experience a completely unknown feeling after hearing a piece of music or entering a building. How are such perceptions represented in the art of painting with all its visual possibilities? Is it impossible to deal with invisible emotions in the painting since it is limited to visual factors or objects? Does the art of painting have to deal only with what is visible in the world? Is it allowed to only represent sadness and happiness? Is it possible to expand its imagery beyond the usual visual format used in the painting? and go beyond the limits of object-oriented imageries?

In summary, modern abstract art is a response to the existing demands. It is an attempt to be free from boundaries that limited art to the representation of reality, naturalism, and restricted images for centuries, as the history of art suggests. The paintings that create feelings only through colors and lines are completely realistic (naturalistic) since they deal with things that exist in the external world. However, based on the experience of abstract artists, paintings with a non-figurative expression, attempt to show what exists but cannot be seen.

These paintings are about subjects, not objects. "In that era, modern paintings no longer wanted to deceive people, and instead of claiming that they were narratives or windows to another world, they attracted people's attention to the fact that all of those paintings were nothing but flat colorful surfaces on canvas. Therefore, the painting was able to successfully define its unique nature and as a result, it no longer had to justify itself. Now painting, like nature [and without the need for it], was the reason for its rightfulness." (Farahmand & Haghiri, 2014, 16); (Fig. 5).

Another attempt by modern artists is the gradual

elimination of style. Accordingly, Ernst Gombrich writes in his book *The Story of Art*: “Ever since painters became sensitive to the concept of ‘style’, they became skeptical of traditional contracts, and pure mastery and skill (based on a style) became a burden for them. They wanted a form of painting that was free from the taught skills. They wanted to dismiss the limitations imposed by adherence to any ‘style’ and allow themselves to express their human passion and emotions” (Gombrich, 2006, 529).

Comparison

Islamic and Western abstract art, both of which carry the name of abstraction, have similarities and differences, the most important of which are as follows. Since there are both similarities and differences for each topic, they are not divided into two separate topics and each title includes both the similarities and differences.

Imitation

One of the valid definitions of abstract art is lack of imitation of nature; “To depict the characteristics of everything that is in the mind, but has no external reality.” It should be examined whether this statement is true for Islamic and Western art.

Both of them lack the imitation of nature; neither

the muqarnas used in the architecture, miniatures, geometric shapes, Shamseh in Islamic art nor shapes, and paintings by modern abstract artists, such as Malevich, Kandinsky, and Pollock⁷, have equivalents in nature or imitate an external object. However, there is a difference between them since although Islamic artists do not imitate nature, they imitate the ancients and the sacred guidelines in the context of traditional art.

In other words, abstract Islamic art does not imitate nature; however, it imitates the pre-existing artifacts through the use of symbols that signify the external world. The subject of such an artwork does not naturally exist in the world; however, it artificially appears in the objective world. The repetitive patterns that are common among the artworks of different centuries are created due to the tradition of imitating the ancients. Therefore, there is imitation in Islamic art while it is not the imitation of “something” in the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, Western abstract painting imitates neither nature nor previous artworks. This term [abstract] is often used in contrast to figurative art, and in its broadest sense can refer to any kind of art that does not represent identifiable objects and events. However, it generally refers to those modern artworks that avoid any kind of imitation or simulation of nature in the conventional sense of European art (Lynton, 2003, 500). This difference leads us to the next topic.

Refusal

Another valid definition of abstraction that Dekhoda referred to is “refusal and prevention.” In art, it means the refusal of self-conscious matters. Refusal, prevention, or detachment from what happens to us in the real world and can be observed objectively.

“In the early 20th century, the European painters refused to depict the tangible and objective world, avoided identifiable objects, elements, and forms of the visible world, and reflected their inner worlds. The shift from the external world to the inner world, from the representation of the objects to the representation of forms, was the starting point for the development

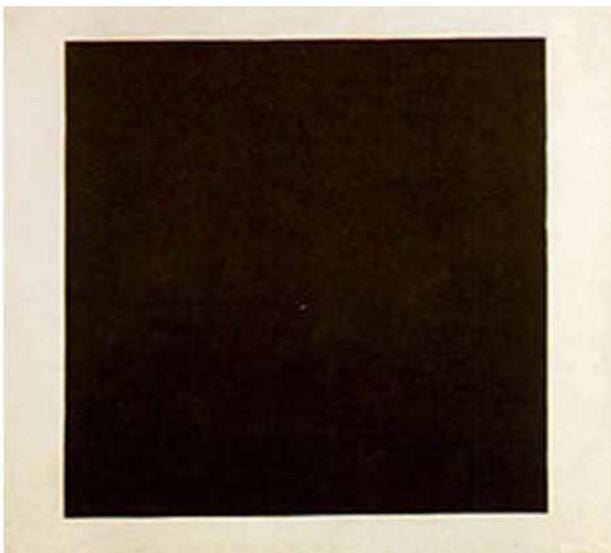


Fig. 5. Black Square. Source: Malevich, 1915, Photograph in the public domain. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>.

of modern artistic expression and the beginning of the emergence of non-pictorial or abstract painting. The art of painting was no longer just a representation of the visible world. The reflection of pure color forms could provide the painter with the means to visualize the inner reflection and motion of things in the human soul. During this period, the painter was convinced that if pure visual harmonies were free of objective or metaphorical images, they could be inspiring just like pure musical sounds. Therefore, the artist completely ignored the natural images and devoted their thoroughly to the expressive power of colorful forms” (Goodarzi, 2001, 30).

This means that the artist abstains from his/her subconscious. To avoid misunderstandings, it should be mentioned that it is not a matter of technique and tools available to the artist. Accordingly, anyone who abstains from his/her subconscious is not necessarily an artist. The techniques and craftsmanship required for the creation of artwork are a conscious process that can be learned and will always be with the artist (Fig. 6). The abstract painters allow their subconscious and unexplained emotions to be revealed; however, this is not the case in Islamic art. There is a clear and preconceived structure in Islamic art, like the sacred rules and religious laws that the artist has to faithfully observe and adhere to and deviation from them is unacceptable. This is why Islamic artworks have common characteristics. The geometric motifs in the traditional artworks of illuminated manuscripts, rugs, and mosaic tiles all follow the law of repetition of a specific motif. All of these artworks are in the form of quadrilaterals, pentagons, or hexagons and are considered non-imitational expandable patterns. Therefore, Islamic artists do not abstain from their subconscious, while the modern Western painters let their uncontrollable subconscious manage the psychological aspects of a work of art. As a result, the artists do not know exactly what is to be created and complete their artwork gradually since it is their subconscious that leads them. This is also true about the other styles of art; however, it is much more common in abstract art. Even in a novel, although



Fig. 6. Impression III (Concert). Source: Kandinsky, 1911 Retrieved from <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/year-1911.php>.

there is a plot from the beginning, the characters develop themselves during the process of writing and are completed gradually.

On the other hand, a master of traditional miniature already knew exactly what her/his painting was based on and what process s/he was going to face. This was the difference between craft and art in the 18th century. Pierre Sauvanet discussed this issue in detail in the first chapter of his book *Basics of Aesthetics*. According to him, the craftsman already knew exactly what s/he was going to face, while it was not the case with the artist. For example, a blacksmith knew all the aspects of a hammer that he was going to make and had made many times before. However, it was not like this for the artist since his opinion could change many times during the development of an artwork (Sauvanet, 2017, 17).

In general, Islamic art is more similar to craftsmanship, not art in its modern sense since the craftsman already knows what s/he is going to face and what stages s/he will go through and proceeds step by step to achieve the final process. Nevertheless, this statement is somehow strict and needs to be further researched, while here in general it can be concluded that the Islamic artist does not abstain from her/his subconscious, while the Western artist does.

Hermeneutics

The perception and interpretation of the audience from these works were also investigated in this research. Since these artworks do not imitate anything in nature, it is not possible to have a definite and fixed perception of them. However, we can claim that the Last Supper painting reminds the whole world of Christ and his apostles, while there are certainly differences among the details of interpretations of different people. This is not the case in abstract art since it does not deal with a specific and objective concept. "Abstract art is the expression of the personal experience of the artist which is scarcely similar to reality. Accordingly, the relationship between the visual elements does not try to convey a visual message to the viewer since they are a collection of lines, shapes, and colors that maintain a harmonious connection and have visual aesthetics. Concepts that are presented through lines and colors are such that each viewer must rely on

their perceptions to understand them" (Akrami, 2011, 236).

Therefore, it is not possible to determine what the work of art is about and each person can have a different interpretation according to their worldview. For example, Kandinsky's "Composition 10" (Fig. 7) may cause fear in one person and confusion in another. Similarly, in Islamic art, attending the mosque or any other sacred temple can create different feelings for different people. Even though the spiritual stimulus of a sacred place creates a common spiritual sense in the audience, the quantity of the sense differs in people. It also has a more limited range, compared to Western artworks and that is their difference.

Religious art is associated with wisdom due to its holiness and transcendence. In fact, "religious art is a kind of personal and intuitive wisdom in terms of content and is distinguished from wisdom and mysticism only in terms of expression" (Motahhari Elhami, 2005, 142) That is why, the wisdom of



Fig.7. Composition X. Source: <https://www.wassilykandinsky.net/work 62.php>.

religious art determines certain meanings for these religious artworks and even though they do not represent anything in nature, they were created for specific purposes. Therefore, the audience confronts such works with a background of religious and ideological teachings which is due to the collective subconscious that has been created by religious teachings. It should be noted that it is always possible for the non-ideological audience to have a formal approach to the work; however, if one wants to understand the meaning of a work, they have to interpret it in terms of the sacred.

Nevertheless, this is not the case in Western abstract paintings since they refer to material, psychological, and humanistic concepts and the audience has more freedom in their interpretation.

Conclusion

“Separation and detachment” are the common features of abstractionism in the two uses of the word “abstraction” since, in both arts, the artist and the audience are detached from the material world. Both perspectives seek something beyond what we see and what is offered to us; hence, artists have turned to symbolism to fulfill this purpose. In both categories, the work of art calls us to pay attention to something beyond the objective world. The goal of both groups of artists is to achieve spirituality, dreams, and transcendental feelings to make us have new transcendental interpretations through discovery and intuition.

However, each of these two categories, after separating us from the material world, pursues a different destination. Religious art leads us toward divine purposes while Western art reveals the inner, psychological, and invisible relationships between individuals. This is the most important difference between these two approaches which has led to all the other differences.

According to what has been said, this article aimed at showing the use of the word abstraction is correct and appropriate for both of the studied art styles and has different intellectual roots and foundations.

Moreover, they had minor differences that were addressed as well.

Endnote

1. Metaphysics: either metaphysics or early philosophy that sought to understand the nature of existence; that is, a rational understanding of the basic principles of the reality of existence.
2. Wassily Kandinsky (born December 4, 1866 - died December 13, 1944) was a Russian painter and theoretician. He painted the first modern abstract paintings.
3. Dr. Seyed Hossein Nasr: Born on April 10, 1961, in Tehran, he is the son of Valiollah Nasr and the grandson of Sheikh Fazlollah Noori. He is an Iranian traditionalist philosopher and theologian and a professor of Islamic sciences at George Washington University in the United States. He has written numerous scholarly articles and books. He is a follower of the views of traditionalism and is influenced by the thoughts of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon. He studied philosophy of science and the history of science at Harvard University and the George Sarton School.
4. Burckhardt: Titus Burckhardt, a Swiss-born German who was born in 1908 in Florence, Italy. He was a researcher in the field of Islamic arts, architecture, and civilization.
5. Kant's Copernican Revolution: Immanuel Kant, in explaining his philosophy, called it the “Copernican Revolution.” Kant's revolutionary view is that our understanding of the world we are in depends on the qualities of the mind of the perceiver and is not completely separate from our minds. Kant is against the rationalist view that it is only through reason that we can understand the world. He believes that relying solely on reason about epistemology will not be fruitful. Therefore, knowledge requires both sensory experience and the concepts that the subject cognitively experiences.
6. Hermeneutics: The methodical theory of text interpretation is called hermeneutics or the knowledge of hermeneutics. The purpose of hermeneutics is to discover the messages, signs, and concepts of a text or event. Hermeneutics examines the principles of interpretation of texts, especially literary, religious, legal, political, and social texts.
7. Paul Jackson Pollock: He (born January 28, 1912 - died August 11, 1956) was an American painter and pioneer of the Abstract Expressionism movement.

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