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Original Research Article

The Alchemy of Words in the Hall of History: A Critical Analysis of Dominant Discourses in Storytelling at the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum

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Abstract

Statement problem: Museums of Islamic arts face the challenge of reproducing meaning and effective storytelling when engaging with contemporary audiences. Despite the visual richness of calligraphic works, traditional display methods in museums remain largely object-oriented and neglect the underlying discursive layers. The research gap indicates that systematic storytelling models capable of forming the basis for deep audience engagement have not yet been precisely extracted. Therefore, the main issue of this article is to identify and codify the discourses that constitute the foundation of storytelling in specialized calligraphy museums.

Research objective: The aim of this article is to critically analyze and extract the dominant storytelling patterns at the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum from the experts' perspective, in order to achieve a conceptual framework for redesigning the museum experience.

Research method: This research has been conducted using a qualitative approach and a case study strategy. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 experts (managers, curators, and senior researchers in Islamic art) selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data analysis was performed using qualitative content analysis in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding (based on 92 initial concepts and 18 axial categories).

Conclusion: The research findings led to the identification and formulation of six dominant discursive patterns in the storytelling of artworks: aesthetic (focusing on formal aspects), historical-civilizational (identity context), religious-mystical (sacred dimensions), interactive-media (new technologies), narrative-storytelling (storytelling about the artist's life), and audience-centered (adaptation to visitor needs). The results indicate that storytelling in this museum has the potential to move beyond a static display toward a "multi-voiced dialogue field," in which each discourse represents a different layer of meaning for different audiences.

Keywords: *Discourse Analysis, Museum Storytelling, Islamic Calligraphy Art, Mir Emad Museum, Qualitative Content Analysis*

Introduction

In the contemporary era, museums have transcended their conventional roles as mere repositories and exhibitors of artifacts, evolving instead into complex arenas for the production and exchange of meaning

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(Chourmouziadi, 2025). Within these discursive spaces, power, knowledge, and ideology are shaped through ostensibly objective mechanisms of display and interpretation (Khan & Iqbal, 2025). In this context, storytelling—functioning as the vibrant core of the museum experience—plays a pivotal role in shaping audience perception, interpretation, and engagement. This process extends far beyond the mere transmission of information, as it unveils the semantic layers of artworks through spatial arrangement and curatorial design (Kjørholt, 2024).

Islamic arts, as magnificent manifestations of civilization, have consistently borne profound cultural, religious, and historical messages. Museums are thus entrusted with the responsibility of serving as connective bridges between this heritage and the contemporary audience (Arik, 2026). Within this domain, the art of calligraphy occupies an unparalleled position; it is not merely a writing technique but rather a unique mediator between the "word" (as the embodiment of divine discourse) and "form" (as the aesthetic manifestation of creation) (Zakeri, 2025). Nevertheless, many museums in this field face considerable challenges in fostering intellectual engagement for today's audiences, who have been raised in media-saturated environments (Gonzalez, 2022). The dominant approach in many of these halls remains persistently "object-oriented," thereby overlooking the concealed discursive layers embedded within the works.

The Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum, serving as a treasury of Persian calligraphic flourishing, constitutes the primary site of this investigation. The fundamental question pertains to how the narratives governing this museum are organized. Discourse analysis, as an analytical paradigm, enables the systematic examination of meaning-making processes within this context (Hovenden et al., 2025). Despite the richness of the collections, the research gap indicates that critical studies on museum storytelling within Iran's cultural context remain exceedingly limited. Accordingly, this article aims to explore the hidden layers in the storytelling practices of the Mir Emad Museum, in order to elucidate how words within this hall of history are transformed into an alchemy for transmitting meaning. The identification of these patterns constitutes the initial step toward transitioning from the paradigm of static object display toward the design of meaningful, multi-voiced human experiences (Luo & Wang, 2023). On this basis, the central research question is: What are the dominant discourses governing storytelling at the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum?

Theoretical Framework

In the field of museum studies, discourse analysis transcends mere methodology to function as a paradigm grounded in the thought of scholars such as Michel Foucault[1] (1972) and Laclau and Mouffe[2] (1985). This perspective emphasizes that meaning is a product of power relations and socio-cultural structures, and does not emerge in a vacuum (Hovenden et al., 2025). In museums of Islamic art, the representation of works has often been influenced by an "Orientalist" discourse, which portrays Islamic civilization as a static "other" confined to the past (Ciotti, 2023). Critical analysis reveals that many museums, by focusing on the discourse of a "great frozen civilization," have severed the connection between historical artifacts and the dynamic, contemporary societies of the Islamic world, thereby reducing Islam to mere "history" (Grigor, 2020). Consequently, museums are obligated, through the clarification of curatorial processes, to move from a "frozen temple of aesthetics" toward a "field for critical dialogue and identity reconsideration" (Castellano, 2020).

The art of calligraphy in Islamic civilization constitutes a system of written signs organized around a "theology of writing." In this tradition, the first act of creation is conceived as "writing," and calligraphy itself is regarded as a symbolic imitation of divine creation (the Tablet and the Pen) (Prochwicz-Studnicka, 2025). The aesthetics of this art are founded upon a sacred geometry, which Abu Ali Muhammad ibn Muqla al-Shirazi (commonly known as Ibn Muqla) systematized in the third century AH by establishing rules based

on the "dot" and the "circle." These rigorous rules represented an endeavor to manifest divine perfection and the equilibrium of the created universe in material form (Yusof & Azalie, 2025). The evolution of this art from regulated scripts (such as Kufic and Thuluth) toward sensory and intuitive scripts (such as Nasta'liq) reflects the balance between "rule" and "taste," which constitutes the very essence of Persian-Islamic aesthetics. Within this framework, a calligraphic page is not merely a technical artifact, but rather a "mirror of the universe," in which the unity of letters represents the plurality of existence (Yunita, 2022).

However, a fundamental question arises: What is the relationship between the theology of writing in the Islamic calligraphic tradition and discourse analysis in museum studies? The answer is that both epistemic domains regard "meaning" as something non-natural and constructed, rather than intrinsic and necessary. In Islamic theology, the word (qawl) takes precedence over form (fi'l), and meaning is represented through the semiotic system of writing (the Tablet and the Pen). In discourse analysis, likewise, meaning is understood as the product of power relations and linguistic structures, and no text or artifact inherently carries a final or definitive meaning. Therefore, an Islamic calligraphic work in a museum cannot be regarded merely as a "beautiful object" or a "historical document"; rather, it must be understood as a "system of signs" reproduced at the intersection of two discourses (the sacred-religious discourse and the aesthetic-historical discourse). The museum, as a discursive institution, either harmonizes these two layers (for example, by emphasizing the simultaneous mystical nature of the beauty of the script) or places them in opposition (for instance, by prioritizing the technical and historical aspects of the work while omitting its spiritual dimension). This research precisely seeks to identify this "manner of managing the connection" between these two epistemic domains in the storytelling of the Mir Emad Museum.

Storytelling in museums is a systematic process encompassing elements such as actors, spatialization, and point of view, which elevates the visitor's experience from mere observation to deep engagement (LeBlanc, 2022). Successful storytelling, through the utilization of "framing before and after" (visual and interpretive organizing elements), shapes a chain of events that constitute the museum's narrative discourse (Morcos & Morcos, 2025). Developments in this field have led to a transition from the "historical timeline" toward "contextualized storytelling"—a shift in which, instead of displaying objects as stylistic specimens, emphasis is placed on the artist's life story, emotional relationships, and the social functions of the work (Eiranen et al., 2022). This multi-voiced approach, employing multiple media and creating space for questioning, transforms the visitor from a passive spectator into an active participant in the construction of meaning (Šuvaković, 2009). The development of "critical museology," which examines the role of power, ideology, and identity in the display of works, alongside the further integration of the "wisdom of Islamic art" with contemporary museological knowledge—such that the museum space can provide both aesthetic experience and knowledge enhancement—as well as the expansion of empirical research on audience behavior and preferences, particularly among younger generations and non-Muslim visitors, for designing more effective educational and emotional experiences, can elevate the role and status of museums. Attention to cultural and economic sustainability, through establishing connections with creative cultural industries and developing heritage tourism, represents another key orientation in art museums. Along this path, Islamic art museums can transform into living laboratories for intercultural dialogue and the promotion of mutual understanding, in the service of enhancing Islamic insight and developing Islamic values and beliefs.

- **Spatial semiotics in museum storytelling**

Museum storytelling is not limited to what is "said" (the texts of labels, audio guides, catalogs), but is also profoundly influenced by what is "shown" and "how it is shown." Spatial semiotics examines how meaning

is produced through the arrangement of objects, lighting, wall colors, the distance between display cases, the visitor's movement path, and even the height of the frames. In museums of Islamic art, spiritual spatialization (soft lighting, silence, symmetrical arrangement) can reinforce the religious-mystical discourse, while exhibition-lighting with an emphasis on technical details highlights the aesthetic discourse. Similarly, the arrangement of works according to historical sequence (from oldest to newest) reproduces the historical-civilizational discourse, while thematic or narrative-storytelling arrangements (such as placing together works related to an artist's life) activate other discourses. Therefore, in analyzing the dominant discourses in museum storytelling, "physical space" carries meaning to the same extent as "written text," and this research, in its findings (particularly in the religious-mystical and interactive-media discourses), has pointed to the concrete applications of spatial semiotics.

Literature Review

Position of the Present Research: This dissertation, by bridging the gap between discourse analysis of artworks and museum storytelling, seeks to establish a new discourse in the museology of Islamic art, providing practical knowledge for enhancing the educational-social role of these cultural institutions. It offers an integrated, interdisciplinary framework that connects critical discourse analysis of artworks—with a focus on Islamic calligraphy—to theories of museum storytelling, enabling the examination of how intra-textual discourses of artworks (religious, historical, aesthetic) are transformed into exhibition discourses in the museum. The focus on the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum as a specialized museum distinguishes this research from more generalizing studies. Examining the relationship between narrative and audience in a museum that inherently deals with texts possessing both artistic form and rich semantic content lends particular complexity and depth to the findings, offering a model that can be generalized to other similar specialized museums (such as Qur'anic museums). This is while previous studies, as outlined below, lack such an integrated, critical, and focused approach:

In a study entitled "The Role of Museum Discourse in Cohering Conflicting Discourses (A Case Study of the Exhibition 'A Future for the Past')," exhibitions were analyzed based on the critical discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. The findings of this study indicate that museums, utilizing their institutional credibility, organize micro and conflicting discourses (such as historical, artistic, and ethical discourses) and achieve semantic stability and legitimation in the narrative of artworks (Dashtizadeh & Mesbah, 2025). Although this study effectively demonstrates the museum's role in cohering conflicting discourses, its focus is on the "exhibition" as a temporary event and does not address specialized museums with permanent collections of Islamic art. Furthermore, this research lacks an analysis of the intra-textual layers of the artworks themselves.

In another study entitled "Narratological Analysis of Art Museums with an Emphasis on the Concept of Framing as a Dimension of Events Based on the Views of Mieke Bal[3] and Seymour Chatman[4]," the researchers examined the chain of events in the narrative discourse of museums based on the views of Mieke Bal and Seymour Chatman. By introducing the two concepts of "prior framing" and "posterior framing," they identified visual and interpretive organizing elements (such as texts and media) as the main factors shaping the exhibition narrative in art museums (Rezaei Mahvar & Nazeri, 2024). The strength of this research lies in introducing the concept of "prior and posterior framing." However, this study is mainly focused on modern art museums and has not attended to the specific characteristics of sacred art and Islamic calligraphy—a gap that the present research addresses by focusing on the specialized Mir Emad Museum.

A case study on the work "A Calligraphic Piece by Nādalī Mir Emād" examined new educational approaches in museums. The results of this research indicate that creating a sense of empathy in the audience

through ethical and aesthetic narratives of calligraphic works directly influences learning outcomes and attitude change in visitors, facilitating the transmission of the works' messages (Fadaei Tehrani et al., 2023). This research is valuable for its attention to "empathy" in storytelling, but the work under study (the calligraphic piece by Nādalī Mir Emād) is only a single artwork, and the findings cannot be generalized to the entire museum storytelling. Moreover, the research method was quantitative and did not address the hidden discursive layers.

In a doctoral dissertation entitled "Analysis of Narrative Discourse in Exhibition and Arrangement of Art Museums," emphasis was placed on how narrative is created through architectural design and arrangement. The findings indicate that storytelling tools (such as the order and levels of narrative) and the role of the narrator (curator or architect) provide an experience beyond mere visitation and lead to effective storytelling in art galleries (Rezaei Mahvar, 2023). This dissertation mainly emphasizes architectural aspects and spatial arrangement and pays less attention to the content analysis of narratives (what is said). The present research, as a complement, focuses on the semantic and discursive layers of museum texts and interpretations.

Another study examined the influence of audiences on semiotic components. The findings show that components such as "the necessity of reconstructing the past" and "the symbolic role of elements in the physical manifestation of concepts" have the greatest prominence in the audience's mind and contribute to a deeper perception of the meaning embedded in museum works (Rostami, 2024). This research is valuable in the field of war semiotics, but due to thematic differences (war museum versus Islamic art museum) and differences in audience type, it cannot be generalized to the context of the present research. Nevertheless, its emphasis on "deep perception of meaning" inspired the design of the research questions in the present study.

In a study entitled "Examining the Relationship between Islamic Collections and Their Audiences: A Comparative Study of Two British Museums," the accessibility of Islamic works in British museums was analyzed, and the researchers concluded that the lack of clarity in labeling and the inability to establish semantic connection with the collections are among the main obstacles to audience engagement, emphasizing the necessity of accurately understanding demographic characteristics to increase participation (Ibrahim, 2023).

In a study entitled "Influencing the Presentation and Interpretation of Islamic Art in Museum Settings," the stereotypical and Orientalist representation of Islamic art in Western museums was critiqued. The researcher argues that museums should distance themselves from homogenizing media narratives and, by employing new interpretive methods, present a more accurate and critical image of Islamic culture and art (Gazi, 2022).

In a study entitled "Enhancing Museum Engagement through Virtual Reality, A Case Study: The Egyptian Museum in Cairo," the impact of new technologies on audience engagement in the Egyptian Museum was examined. The researchers demonstrated that the use of digital narratives and 360-degree video, by overcoming physical limitations, provides a more interactive and personalized experience and creates a deeper understanding of history and culture in the audience (Hassan et al., 2025). In another study entitled "Instagram Trends: Visual Narratives of Experiences at the Museum of Islamic Art," over 4,000 images from the Doha Museum were analyzed, and the findings showed that visual narratives produced by users in virtual spaces reflect their social performance and cultural identity, possessing high potential for co-creating museum narratives (Arias, 2018).

In a study entitled "Using PR Tools and Activities in Museums for Better Community Engagement: Egypt Vision 2030" regarding community participation in Egyptian museums, the role of digital media in promoting the museum's message was emphasized, concluding that the use of digital public relations strategies and storytelling on social networks leads to increased visitor satisfaction and transforms them

into cultural ambassadors for the museum institution (Ahmed et al., 2025). A review of international studies indicates that foreign research has primarily focused on two axes: first, critiquing the Orientalist representation of Islamic art in Western museums (Gazi, 2022; Ibrahim, 2023), and second, examining new technologies and social media in audience engagement (Hassan et al., 2025; Arias, 2018; Ahmed et al., 2025). Despite the richness of these studies, none have specifically addressed the "analysis of intra-textual discourses of calligraphic works" or "presented a systematic model for storytelling in a specialized calligraphy museum." The main gap lies in the failure to integrate discourse analysis of artworks with museum storytelling theories in a non-Western context (Iran).

A careful examination of the research literature at both national and international levels reveals a broad focus on communication tools and representation in major museums. However, a significant gap exists in the systematic analysis of discursive layers embedded in individual calligraphic works and the empirical assessment of the impact of these narrative patterns on audiences within the context of specialized museums in Iran. The innovation of the present study, in response to this gap, is manifested through the integration of "critical discourse analysis of artworks" with "theories of museum storytelling" and the application of an exploratory method, so that for the first time, it formulates and presents an optimal discourse-oriented storytelling model based on the cultural and civilizational identity of the works at the Mir Emad Museum.

Research Methodology

The present research is developmental in terms of its objective, and in terms of nature and method, it constitutes a qualitative study with an inductive approach. The paradigm governing this study is pragmatism, which emphasizes the resolution of practical problems and the applied implications of the findings. The primary strategy adopted in this research is a case study (the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum) utilizing an exploratory qualitative content analysis method to extract the indicators of storytelling discourse. The statistical population comprises all experts and key opinion holders in the fields of museology, curatorship, and Islamic arts who are involved in the design, implementation, or interpretation of the narratives at the Mir Emad Museum. These individuals were divided into three groups: managers, curators, and specialized guides/researchers. Purposeful sampling with a snowball technique was employed. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, which in this study was accomplished through in-depth interviews with 15 experts. In this research, theoretical saturation was defined as the point at which new interviews no longer added fresh information to the pre-established categories and the data merely repeated previous concepts. After the twelfth interview, initial signs of saturation were observed. However, for further assurance, three supplementary interviews (up to the fifteenth participant) were conducted, in which no new concepts or categories beyond the previously identified 92 concepts and 18 categories were extracted. By the end of the fifteenth interview, the researcher was confident that adding further interviews would not alter the coding structure. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to preliminary analysis within a maximum of 48 hours following their execution, in order to facilitate the timely identification of saturation. All sample members possessed more than 15 years of professional experience in the relevant fields. The data collection instrument in this research consisted of semi-in-depth and semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol comprised questions organized into five categories: identity-related (work history), contextual (museum mission), sensory (challenges of conveying sacred concepts), directive/guiding (the process of designing the arrangement), and judgmental (evaluating the success of the current narrative and future proposals). The interviews were conducted over a duration of 50 to 60 minutes, recorded with the participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed for

analysis (the characteristics of the experts are presented in Table 1). To assess the quality of the qualitative findings, the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba[5] (1985) were employed, and the practical implementation of each criterion was carried out as follows:

Credibility: Following the transcription and initial analysis of each interview, a summary of the extracted codes along with several key quotations was provided to the same interviewee within a maximum of one week, and they were asked to confirm or correct the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation. In 13 out of 15 interviews, full confirmation was received, and in 2 cases, minor corrections were applied.

Transferability: A detailed and descriptive report of the research context characteristics (the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum), the criteria for selecting experts, and the specifics of the analytical process was prepared, enabling the reader to judge the generalizability of the findings to similar contexts.

Dependability: To precisely calculate the agreement between two independent coders, Cohen's Kappa coefficient[6] was utilized. For this purpose, two coders (the research author and another researcher familiar with qualitative content analysis) independently coded 30 randomly selected initial concepts. The observed agreement rate was 89%, and the chance agreement rate was 21%, resulting in a Kappa of 0. 82 (at an excellent level).

Confirmability: All research documentation, including audio files of the interviews, transcribed files, the NVIVO software project file, and coding reports, were systematically archived and recorded. To manage, organize, and facilitate the coding process, the qualitative data analysis software NVIVO was employed. This software enabled the systematic storage of codes, convenient review across texts, and the extraction of coding reports. All stages of open, axial, and selective coding were performed and documented within this software environment. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis in three coding stages: open coding (identifying meaningful segments and extracting 92 initial concepts from the interview texts), axial coding (categorizing similar concepts into 18 axial categories), and selective coding (integrating the categories around a core category), which led to the extraction of six indicators of storytelling discourse (aesthetic, historical-civilizational, religious-mystical, interactive-media, narrative-storytelling, and audience-centered). The coding process was carried out systematically and step-by-step under the supervision of two researchers familiar with qualitative content analysis:

Step One (Open Coding): Each of the 15 transcribed interview texts was examined line-by-line and phrase-by-phrase. Each meaningful segment (a sentence or several related sentences) was assigned an initial label (open code). In this stage, a total of 185 initial codes were extracted.

Step Two (Review and Integration of Codes): The initial codes were examined for synonymy and overlap. Similar codes were grouped into a single concept. For example, codes such as "emphasis on the delicacy of the pen," "description of the movement and fluidity of the script," and "admiration of the rhythm of letters" were integrated into the concept of "attention to visual aspects." This process resulted in the reduction of 185 initial codes to 92 concepts.

Step Three (Axial Coding): The 92 concepts were organized into larger categories based on thematic and semantic similarity. For instance, concepts such as "attention to visual aspects," "feeling of aesthetic pleasure," and "understanding of artistic complexities" were grouped together under the axial category of "aesthetic indicator." This stage yielded 18 axial categories.

Step Four (Selective Coding): The 18 axial categories were organized around six central cores, which constituted the six final discursive indicators of the research. Table 2 in the findings section provides an overview of this process.

Findings

Derived from the content analysis of the expert interview texts, aimed at the systematic exploration of

Table 1. Characteristics of the Expert Participants in the Interviews. Source: Authors.

Characteristics of Interviewees	Type	Number
Highest Educational Degree	PhD	3
	Master's Degree	12
Official Organizational Position	Senior Manager	2
	Middle Manager or Deputy	3
	Expert/Specialist	10
Executive Work Experience	Official/Administrative Post	10
	Artist	5
Work Experience	All sample members possessed more than 15 years of artistic or managerial experience in the field related to the research topic.	-

Table 2. An Example of the Coding Process from Interview Text to Discursive Indicator. Source: Authors.

Selective Code (Discursive Indicator)	Axial Code (Category)	Open Code (Initial Concept)	Sample Interview Text (Direct Quotation)
Aesthetic	Attention to Visual Aspects	Description of Movement and Fluidity of the Script	"When I look at this piece, it's as if the pen breathes on the paper; this fluidity of the script is pleasurable to me."
Historical-Civilizational	Sense of Belonging to Cultural Heritage	Reference to the Iranian-Islamic Identity of the Work	"This work recalls the zenith of Safavid art; when I stand before it, I feel proud of my Iranian identity."
Religious-Mystical	Motivation for Contemplation and Reflection	Creation of a Space of Silence for Thought	"The soft lighting and silence of this section make one reflect; it's as if you are speaking with God."

hidden semantic layers in the context of storytelling at the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum, and the three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective), the study led to the identification of 92 initial concepts and 18 axial components, which were ultimately organized into six discursive indicators: "aesthetic," "historical-civilizational," "religious-mystical," "interactive-media," "narrative-storytelling," and "audience-centered." These discursive patterns provide a theoretical framework for transitioning from traditional object-oriented display toward meaning-centered storytelling.

The aesthetic discourse indicator focuses on the formal and sensory aspects of Islamic art works in the museum, and its main components include attention to visual aspects (such as the delicacy of the script, composition, and pen movement), the feeling of aesthetic pleasure arising from color harmony and technical perfection, and the understanding of the artistic complexities of the work (the rules of Nasta'liq and innovations within the tradition). The purpose of this indicator is to measure the extent to which the audience is drawn to aesthetic elements and their deeper understanding of the artistic subtleties embedded in calligraphic works. Table 3 presents the codes related to the aesthetic discourse indicator.

The historical-civilizational discourse indicator addresses the context and position of works within Islamic civilization and includes components such as increasing historical awareness (period, dynasty, contemporary events), a sense of belonging to cultural heritage (Iranian-Islamic identity and collective

Table 3. Extracted Codes Related to the Aesthetic Discourse Indicator (Selective Code). Source: Authors.

Subcategories (Axial Coding)	Semantic Concepts (Open Coding)
Level of Attention to Visual Aspects	-Emphasis on the delicacy and fineness of the pen
	-Description of the movement and fluidity of the script
	-Reference to the balanced composition of the page
	-Admiration of the rhythm and repetition of letters
Feeling of Aesthetic Pleasure	-Describing the work with adjectives such as beautiful, pleasant, mesmerizing
	-Reference to color harmony (ink, paper)
	-Emphasis on the technical perfection of the work
	-Creation of a sensory experience of beauty
Understanding the Artistic Complexities of the Work	-Elaboration on the strict rules of Nasta'liq
	-Reference to the artist's visual innovations within the framework of tradition
	-Comparison of Mir Emad's personal style with other masters
	-`Revealing subtleties that are not visible at first glance

memory), and understanding the influence of Islamic art in the history of world art (cultural interactions and the mediating role). Its purpose is to evaluate the extent to which the museum's narrative succeeds in placing the work within a civilizational trajectory and strengthening the visitor's sense of cultural identity. Table 4 presents the codes related to the historical-civilizational discourse indicator.

The religious-mystical discourse indicator focuses on the spiritual and transcendental dimensions of the works, and its components include the experience of a spiritual or religious feeling induced by sacred themes and spatial atmosphere, the understanding of ethical-religious messages embedded in the text, and the motivation for contemplation and reflection on profound mystical concepts. The purpose of this indicator is to measure the depth of the spiritual and moral impact of the works on the audience and to encourage them toward transcendent thinking. These spatial components, which can be analyzed within the framework of spatial semiotics, demonstrate that museum storytelling is not limited to text alone. Table 5 presents the codes related to the religious-mystical discourse indicator.

The interactive-media discourse indicator examines modern and technological methods of audience engagement and includes components such as the level of active visitor participation (through tactile tools and games), attractiveness and innovation in presentation (with media such as animation and augmented reality), and increasing the duration of stay in the museum (through the design of interactive and challenge-oriented pathways). Its purpose is to measure the effectiveness of technology in enriching the visit experience and deepening engagement. Table 6 presents the codes related to the interactive-media discourse indicator.

The narrative-storytelling discourse indicator addresses the power of storytelling and narrative construction in the museum. Its components include: emotional attraction to the presented narrative (through biography and symbolic stories), the pursuit of narrative sequence during the visit (via story-based arrangement and visual cues), and the retention of

Table 4. Extracted Codes Related to the Historical-Civilizational Discourse Indicator (Selective Code). Source: Authors.

Subcategories (Axial Coding)	Semantic Concepts (Open Coding)
Increasing Historical Awareness	-Mention of the historical period of the work (Safavid, Qajar, etc.)
	-Reference to the year or century of the work's creation
	-Mention of the dynasty or government of the work's era
	-Description of important contemporary events of the work
	-Reference to the evolution of style within a period
	-Comparison of the work with earlier or later examples
Sense of Belonging to Cultural Heritage	-Emphasis on the Iranian-Islamic identity of the work
	-Reference to the work as part of collective memory
	-Connecting the work to symbolic civilizational places (Isfahan, Qazvin)
	-Describing the work as a shared heritage of the Islamic ummah
	-Mention of the preservation and transmission of the work across generations
	-Reference to the universal value of the work alongside its local roots
Understanding the Influence of Islamic Art in the History of World Art	-Reference to the influence of the style on other schools
	-Mention of cultural interactions (such as influence on Ottoman or Indian calligraphy)
	-Description of the uniqueness of Islamic art's achievements
	-Comparison with non-Islamic art of the same period
	-Emphasis on the mediating role of Islamic civilization in the transmission of art
	-Reference to the global reflection of Islamic calligraphy art

narrative details (through repetition of symbols and summarization). The purpose of this indicator is to measure the extent of the audience's emotional and cognitive engagement with the museum's integrated narrative. Table 7 presents the codes related to the narrative-storytelling discourse indicator.

The audience-centered discourse indicator emphasizes the adaptation of the museum experience to the diverse needs of visitors, and its components include the feeling of relevance to the content (through dual-level explanations and tangible comparisons), satisfaction with the level of information provided (balance between depth and simplicity), and the flexibility of the visit experience (optional pathways and personal guidance). The ultimate goal is to evaluate the extent to which the museum succeeds in responding to the varying expectations and capabilities of its audiences. Table 8 presents the codes related to the audience-centered discourse indicator.

Although all six in Fig. 1 identified discourses are present in the storytelling of the Mir Emad Museum, a deeper analysis reveals that these discourses do not follow a uniform hierarchical structure, and there are significant semantic tensions among them. For example, the "aesthetic" discourse, which primarily emphasizes the formal aspects and technical perfection of the works, is in some cases in tension with the "religious-mystical" discourse, which attributes authenticity to spiritual experience and transcendence; this is because the former directs the

Table 5. Extracted Codes Related to the Religious-Mystical Discourse Indicator (Selective Code). Source: Authors.

Subcategories (Axial Coding)	Semantic Concepts (Open Coding)
Experience of a Spiritual or Religious Feeling	-Display of Quranic verses and Hadiths
	-Use of religious spatialization (soft lighting, silence)
	-Emphasis on the sanctity of the written text
	-Reference to the content being a form of prayer or dhikr
	-Description of the artist's spiritual states during creation
Understanding of Ethical-Religious Messages	-Ethical interpretation of the themes of the scripts
	-Connection between the beauty of the script and good morality
	-Emphasis on the Islamic teachings embedded in the text
	-Mention of the admonitions and counsel in the supplications
Motivation for Contemplation and Reflection	-Invitation to reflect on meanings
	-Creation of a space of silence for thought
	-Posing philosophical-mystical questions in the descriptions
	-Reference to the mystery and enigma hidden in the scripts

Table 6. Extracted Codes Related to the Interactive-Media Discourse Indicator (Selective Code). Source: Authors.

Subcategories (Axial Coding)	Semantic Concepts (Open Coding)
Level of Active Visitor Participation	-Existence of touchscreens for exploration
	-Educational games related to calligraphy
	-Possibility of digital voting or commenting
	-Interactive workstations (e.g., calligraphy practice)
Attractiveness and Innovation in Presentation	-Use of interactive projectors
	-Explanatory animations on the works
	-Story-based audio guides
	-Augmented Reality (AR) for viewing details
Increasing Duration of Stay	-Design of digital discovery pathways
	-Step-by-step challenges to complete the visit
	-Provision of optional in-depth content
	-Digital reward system for full engagement

Table 7. Extracted Codes Related to the Narrative-Storytelling Discourse Indicator (Selective Code). Source: Authors.

Subcategories (Axial Coding)	Semantic Concepts (Open Coding)
Emotional Attraction to the Presented Narrative	-Narration of the artist's eventful life
	-Reference to the artist's love, suffering, or ambition
	-Description of the artist's emotional relationships with contemporaries
	-Expression of symbolic stories behind the works
Pursuit of Narrative Sequence During the Visit	-Arrangement of works based on the chronological timeline of life
	-Existence of narrative titling for each section (beginning, climax, end)
	-Use of visual cues to advance the story
	-Unified audio narrator throughout the path
Memorability of Narrative Details	-Repetition of key roles in the narrative (such as the master or patron)
	-Use of tangible and recurring symbols
	-Summarization of the main plot at the end of the visit
	-Provision of digital story flashcards

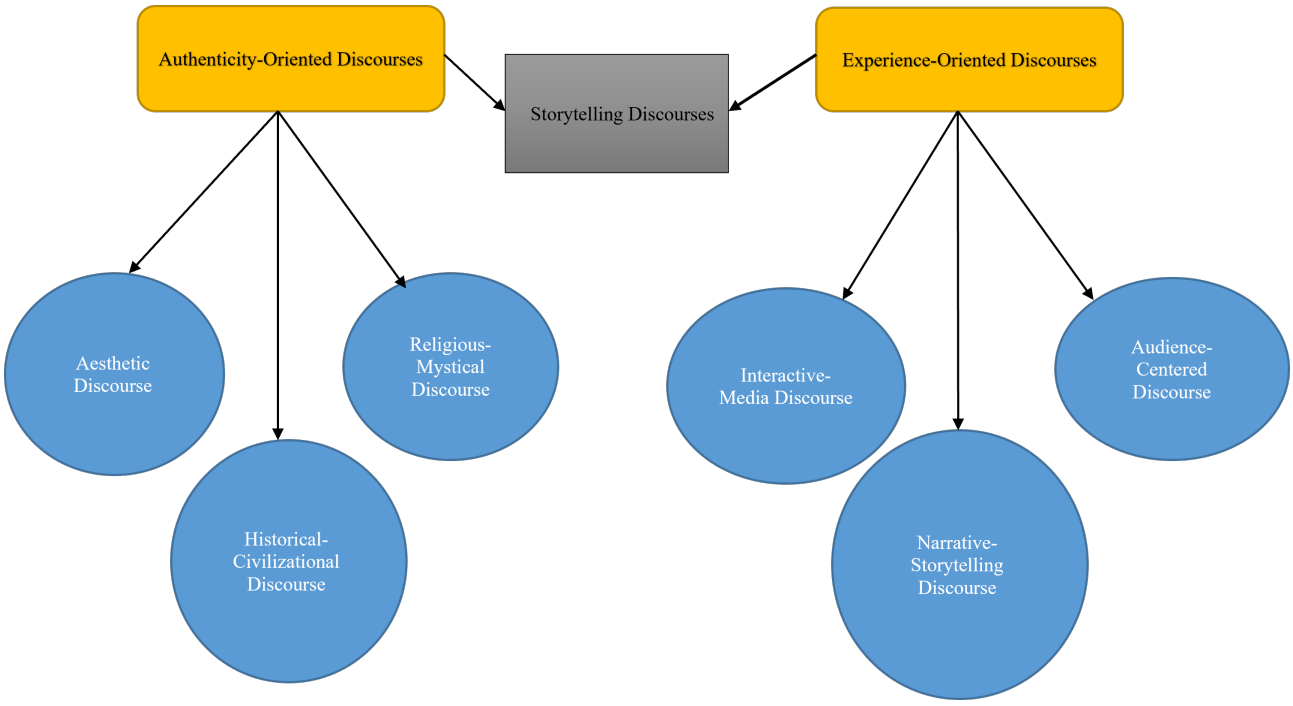


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model of the Research - "From the Freezing of Discourses to the Multi-Voiced Dialogue Field" Source: Authors.

Table 8. Extracted Codes Related to the Audience-Centered Discourse Indicator (Selective Code). Source: Authors.

Subcategories (Axial Coding)	Semantic Concepts (Open Coding)
Feeling of Relevance to the Content	-Provision of explanations in both simple and specialized language -Use of tangible comparisons for understanding concepts -Attention to the general audience's mental presuppositions -Posing introductory questions based on common concerns
Satisfaction with the Level of Information Provided	-Existence of one-paragraph summaries for those in a hurry -Provision of in-depth texts for researchers -Additional accessible resources (QR Code) -Balance between technical information and public appeal
Flexibility of the Visit Experience	-Existence of different suggested pathways (short, full, child-friendly) -Possibility of optional skipping of certain sections -Benches and rest areas along the path -Adjustable personal guidance system

gaze toward the surface of the work, while the latter directs it beyond the work. Similarly, the "historical-civilizational" discourse, with its emphasis on collective memory and past-oriented identity, may not have complete semantic overlap with the "interactive-media" discourse, which seeks a dynamic and present-oriented connection with the audience.

The codes related to the "historical-civilizational" discourse accounted for 34% of all extracted codes, while the "interactive-media" and "narrative-storytelling" discourses carried the least weight in the expert interview results (8% and 11%, respectively). This situation indicates that the historical-civilizational narrative—or in other words, a perspective based on the background of artifacts through narrating the history of each object, along with documentation and archiving of their records—holds more weight compared to participatory and story-centered narratives. This represents a gap that the extracted six-fold framework can systematically address.

Analysis of Relationships among Discourses: An examination of the theoretical relationship among the six discourses (based on the co-occurrence of codes in the interview texts) shows that the three discourses of "historical-civilizational," "aesthetic," and "religious-mystical" have the highest degree of concurrence with one another; that is, experts who referred to one of these three discourses typically also implicitly or explicitly raised the other two. These three discourses can be termed the "hard core of traditional storytelling" in the museum.

In contrast, the "interactive-media" and "audience-centered" discourses were often raised in opposition to the traditional discourse, and experts who emphasized these two discourses considered the historical-civilizational discourse to be insufficient. Interestingly, the "narrative-storytelling" discourse

functions as a bridge between these two groups, as it can both be situated within the framework of traditional narrative (such as the story of Mir Emad's life) and be redefined in an interactive and audience-centered manner.

The main tension lies between the discourse of "preservation of authenticity" (which is primarily tied to the first three discourses) and the discourse of "renewing the audience experience" (which is associated with the second three discourses). The proposed model of this research introduces the museum as a "multi-voiced dialogue field" that should not privilege one of these two groups over the other, but rather create space for dialogue between them.

The proposed model demonstrates that the six extracted discourses can be organized into two general clusters: "authenticity-oriented discourses" (aesthetic, historical-civilizational, religious-mystical) and "experience-oriented discourses" (interactive-media, narrative-storytelling, audience-centered). The tension between these two clusters, if consciously managed within the framework of a "multi-voiced dialogue field," can lead to constructive dialogue rather than opposition. The outcome of this dialogue is a museum experience that both preserves the authenticity and identity of the work and enables active and meaningful engagement with the contemporary audience.

Conclusion

This research demonstrated that the "alchemy of words" at the Mir Emad Museum lies not in the preservation of objects, but in the capacity to create living and multi-layered narratives. Moving beyond the paradigm of "object-oriented display" toward a "dialogue field of discourses" necessitates a reconsideration of unconscious curatorial priorities. The proposed six-fold framework provides a roadmap for this transition; however, its realization requires institutional determination and subsequent empirical research to measure the impact of each discourse on different audience groups. The "multi-voiced" model, although seemingly idealistic, is the only option available to museums that seek to transform from a "frozen temple" into a "living cultural laboratory."

From a theoretical perspective, this research, by integrating the framework of critical discourse analysis with theories of museum storytelling, offers a comprehensive and systematic perspective for understanding and analyzing the process of meaning-making in specialized museums of Islamic art. This finding not only fills the existing gap in critical museological studies within Iran's cultural context, but also, by emphasizing the multiple aesthetic, historical, religious, and interactive dimensions of the works, provides a multi-dimensional and deeper understanding of the museum's function as a cultural-discursive institution. The focus on the Mir Emad Museum as a specialized case enabled the research to move beyond generalization and present a model applicable to other similar museums (such as Qur'anic or calligraphy museums).

At a practical level, the findings of this research provide a practical roadmap for managers, curators, and museum experience designers. The extracted six-fold framework can serve as a basis for redesigning arrangements, planning thematic exhibitions, designing multi-level interpretive content, and integrating interactive and media technologies to enrich the visitor experience. In particular, emphasizing audience-centered and interactive-media discourses offers concrete strategies for attracting younger generations and international audiences, while simultaneously attending to the religious-mystical and historical-civilizational discourses preserves the museum's authenticity and spiritual depth. This integrated approach enables the museum, while fulfilling its educational and preservational mission, to become a dynamic space for intercultural dialogue and the reinforcement of cultural identity.

This research demonstrates that the "alchemy of words" in the hall of history at the Mir Emad Museum lies not in the freezing of objects, but in the revival of living and multi-dimensional narratives. The future success of Islamic art museums depends on their ability to create experiences that bridge tradition and innovation, beauty and meaning, and audience and artwork. The results and proposed framework of this study, by establishing an organic connection between the theoretical analysis of discourses and the practical needs of contemporary museology, not only lead to a better understanding of the museum's role as a cultural agent, but also provide a strategic tool for its transformation toward a participatory, learning, and meaning-making institution. The realization of this vision requires institutional determination to apply the findings of this research and the continuation of empirical research on the impact of narrative patterns on diverse audiences.

This research also had certain limitations. One limitation was related to the qualitative method and the sample size. Although sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, the qualitative nature of the study and its focus on experts ([15] individuals) limit the broad statistical generalizability of the findings. Another limitation was that the present study focused solely on a specific case (the Mir Emad Calligraphy Museum). While the findings can serve as a model for similar museums, the unique characteristics of this particular museum may have influenced the results. The final limitation worth noting is the time constraint, as the research was conducted within a specific timeframe, and the museum's discourses may be subject to change due to managerial developments, temporary exhibitions, or social shifts. Studying the dynamics of these discourses over time would require longitudinal research.

Based on the results of this study, the following practical and operational recommendations can be offered:

Design of Multi-Layered Arrangement and Narrative Pathway: It is recommended that, using the identified six-fold framework, the museum's visit pathway be divided into thematic or discourse-oriented sections. For example, creating an "Aesthetic Passage" with special lighting emphasizing visual aspects, a "Civilizational Hall" with interactive maps showing the evolution of scripts, and a "Mystical Space" with the recitation of the Quran and spiritual atmosphere; this allows the audience to have a personalized experience based on their interests.

Development of Smart Interpretive Content: Designing labels, audio guides, and the museum application in such a way that for each work, different informational layers are provided (concise for the general public, specialized for researchers, storytelling for children). The use of QR codes for access to deeper resources, short animations about calligraphy techniques, or podcasts about Mir Emad's life can be effective.

Integration of Interactive and Non-Invasive Technologies: Establishing Augmented Reality[7] stations that allow viewing the details of penmanship or the stages of creating the work. Creating Virtual Reality[8] environments for the symbolic experience of the "Tablet and Pen" or a journey to the historical period of the work; also, designing simple digital games (such as completing a sentence with calligraphy pieces) to engage children and adolescents.

Planning Thematic Periodic Exhibitions: Organizing temporary exhibitions with titles such as "Nasta'liq and the Philosophy of Unity," "Calligraphy and Music," or "The Evolution of Thuluth Script," each of which deeply explores one of the discourses (for example, mystical, aesthetic, historical), and inviting contemporary artists to create a dialogue between tradition and new art can also be appealing.

Continuous Measurement of Audience Satisfaction and Engagement: Establishing digital feedback

systems at various points in the museum and analyzing data related to the duration of stay in each section, the rate of use of interactive tools, and visitor comments; this data is vital for evaluating the effectiveness of each discourse and continuously optimizing storytelling.

Empowerment of Guides and Educators: Holding training workshops for museum guides based on the six-fold framework, so that they can provide flexible narratives tailored to the audience's background (foreign tourists, students, families).

For researchers interested in continuing research in this field, the following suggestions can also be offered:

Quantitative Research and Impact Assessment: Conducting quantitative studies (with questionnaires or systematic observation) to measure the impact of each of the six discourses on indicators such as satisfaction, learning, attitude change, and audience engagement with different demographic characteristics (age, belonging to different generations such as Generation Z, religious background). Comparative Study: Conducting similar research in other specialized museums of Islamic art in Iran or reputable international museums (such as the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha) in order to compare dominant discourses and extract best practices in storytelling across various contexts.

Focus on Specific Audiences: In-depth research on the experience and expectations of specific audience groups, such as "children and adolescents," "non-Muslim tourists," or "Islamic art researchers" at the Mir Emad Museum, and designing customized narrative patterns for them.

Analysis of Visual and Spatial Discourse: Using methods such as "behavioral mapping" or "semiotic analysis of museum space" to understand how meaning is shaped through architecture, light, color, and physical arrangement, beyond textual content. Research in the Field of Creative Economy and Museums: Examining practical strategies for operationalizing the multi-discourse model in the form of developing creative-cultural products (applications, games, documentaries), generating sustainable revenue, and strengthening the Mir Emad Museum brand in the digital space.

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Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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