

## An Expressionistic Survey in Oriental Aestheticism: The Application of Expressionism on a Sample Iranian Ghashghaei Rug

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### Abstract

Expressionism emerged as a Twentieth century Avant-guard phenomenon which concerned itself with the subjective expression of an artist, as the sheer version of reality. In terms of Aesthetic criteria, modern Expressionism believes that a work must be regarded primarily as an inter-definable cultural artifact, and later on as a culture-universal art. Rejecting those previous conventions of bourgeois art, Expressionism appreciates works which are intended for the public. This article seeks to analyze a sample Ghashghaei rug, as an instance for a creatively non-routine, self-expressive and non-conformist art of nomadic tribe as an expressions of a sub-culture, with regard to the theoretical horizons in Expressionism, further to prove the Iranian aesthetic inter-definability and universality in art. For this to happen, the current article has enjoyed various theories of Expressionism and modern Aestheticism, using the eclectic approach as its methodology in its application of Expressionism as a Western theory on an Iranian Oriental art.

**Keywords:** Expressionism, Twentieth century, Aestheticism, Ghashghaei nomadic tribe, Inter-definability, Culture

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### Introduction

Primarily popularized by a German editor in the Twentieth century, Expressionism is recognized to have been originally emerged as a painting style; opposing basics of the Impressionistic art through the years of WWI. Having its roots deepened in “great social and emotional crisis of Germany” (Pakbaz 438), Expressionism is considered as a socially loaded artistic style intended for the public and “a hunger for life” (Kellner 16). As two of the most prominent practitioners of Expressionism, France and Germany sought to introduce their own definition of the term, appreciating the vitality of artistic expression and the rebellious nature of an Expressionistic art, meanwhile de-settling the artist from his traditional Symbolist and Romantic virtues of ivory tower and intellectualism by rejecting elements of Realism and Impressionism in art. However, what differentiates the French school of Expressionism from its German counterpart, lies in the French concentration on modality and issues of expression and form in art.

Expressionism developed as an Avant-guard form of modern art; opposing the traditionally loaded institutions and realism by deconstructing the previous natural order through distorting reality in a subjective manner, thus insisting on emotionality rather than physicality. Borrowing its focal traits from the theories of Fredrich Neitzsche, Expressionism was “the flight into inwardness” (Kellner 14). However, unlike Cubism and other artistic *isms* of the Avant-guard, which considered itself solely as a “visionary art,” (Pakbaz 440) Expressionism has been practiced in various forms of art, naming painting, cinema, architecture, literature, sculpture, etc. Expressionism emerged as an artistic style for the people and by the people. It was an anti-bourgeoisie form of art, “through which the artist felt social and artistic responsibilities,” demanding a “brand new discipline to replace the former one” (Pakbaz 439). As a result, Expressionism is highly concerned with sociopolitical issues, hence a dualistic vision in approach seems quite natural in Expressionistic art. Still, it wasn't until the end of the WWI, that the Expressionistic art shifted its focus away from a “less revolutionary and harsh,” (ibid) toward an anti-traditional view of society. Donald Gordon introduces an Expressionist as the one who “wishes, above all, to express himself,” (Gordon 175) through the rejection of the Impressionistic immediacy in perception “which rids them of all substantial accretions to produce their clear essence . . . and condense[d] into more general forms, into types, which he transcribes through simple short-hand formulae and symbols,” in favor of a more “complex psychic structures” (ibid).

Having been practiced in both Classic and Modern sense, it worth pointing out that Expressionism has borrowed a lot from “traditional metaphysical and religious doctrines” (Kellner 13). The Classical approach defined a gothic sensation of mankind, as being confronted with a wild reality of the world toward which he is defenseless. While, Modern Expressionism, was an effort toward the vitality of a new sense of Aestheticism. The artistic movement is characterized as subjectively self-expressive, spontaneous and highly emotional in its apprehensions and reflections of the surrounding atmosphere, using intense vivid colors and provocatively dynamic forms to connote the emotional

exaggeration and fantasy in a work of art. Hence, contrary to Impressionism, an Expressionist artist seeks to bring on and represent his own definition of reality, which might sometimes disregard the natural existing harmony of the forms, in line with their rejection of "the materialistic values of bourgeois society" (Cockcroft 39). Barbara Jaffee refers to Expressionism as an art of "Spontaneity and an innovative use of line" (Jaffee 69). Further, she points out to the theory of lines and the way they are used by Expressionist artists as;

In Part I of his "Mechanics" Benton focused on relationships of line and mass in two dimensions. These consist of the qualities of equilibrium (in which "static" horizontal and vertical lines and "dynamic" diagonal lines are deployed across the picture in carefully calculated juxtaposition), sequence (arranging lines and shapes so that there is the appearance of paths that, to the empathetic viewer . . . and rhythm (an equilibrium achieved by using measured intervals between dynamic sequences, suggestive of repeating patterns) . . . Regarding equilibrium, Benton recommended compositions be built asymmetrically. In terms of sequence, he emphasized that the artist should capitalize on a viewer's "natural" tendency to imagine incomplete forms (like arcs) as complete and to reconcile even the most dramatically opposed elements into singular movements. In his discussion of rhythm, Benton called particular attention to a form he described as "centrifugal." Unlike more common, "centripetal" forms, in which the intervals between opposed elements are designed to lead a viewer imaginatively into the center of a composition, centrifugal designs coerce the viewer's eye away from implied surfaces. The most demanding of these are compositions that extend horizontally, necessitating the clustering of rhythms into a series of loosely interwoven sets. (71)

In the same manner, Expressionism is recognized to be characterized as "the use of various anti-naturalistic or abstracting devices, such as syntactical compression or symbolic picture-sequences . . . [along with] the choice of the theme of spiritual regeneration or renewal and the adoption of a fervent declamatory tone" (Kellner 4). As previously noted, Expressionism sought to bring about a new definition of Aestheticism in art. The term was primarily introduced "by the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten to refer to cognition by means of the senses, sensuous knowledge" in the Eighteenth century (Goldman 181). However, Aestheticism in modern sense covers a wide range of "properties, attitudes, experience, and pleasure or value as well, and its application is no longer restricted to beauty alone" which are "inter-definable" (ibid). Modern Aestheticism is above all the matter of subjective taste and relativity, hence "aesthetic properties are to be analyzed in terms of the shared responses of competent subjects with particular tastes to the intrinsic (usually formal) properties of objects" (Goldman 184). Kant believes that "judgements about artistic beauty, which he called 'judgements of taste,' are more than expressions of merely personal, subjective liking: they have the necessary property of demanding universal agreement from the rest of mankind" (Dutton 205).

In terms of Aesthetic experience, Goldman refers to Kant's view of "free play and felt harmony of the imagination" which brings about "the experience of pleasure" as a result of a "subjective harmony in the presence of an object" (Goldman 185), which would be applicable solely by "the full exercise of all our sensory, cognitive, and affective capacities in the appreciation of works of art" and that is what we call the Aesthetic experience (ibid). Denis Dutton introduces the notion of Aesthetic universals, regarding art as a "cultural universal" (Dutton 203). The author further tends to define universal features of art in its aesthetic sense, as;

All such attempts to identify universal features of art share an element in common: they presuppose or posit the existence of a fundamental human nature, a set of characteristics, including interests and desires, uniformly and cross-culturally present in the constitution of human persons. In aesthetics, the emphasis on a stable human nature has been taken to entail two further ideas: first, that artistic activity of some kind will be a predictable component of any society (as predictable as, for instance, the use of language, the making of moral judgements, the existence of family organization and etc.), and second, that art will itself have predictable content identifiable cross-culturally. (204)

Nevertheless, to have a better understanding and evaluation of a work of art, one must definitely point out to the two significant Aesthetic theories of *Local quality theory* and the *Arousal theory* to say that "expressive qualities are logically independent of acts of expression . . . [that is to be analyzed] independently of the state of mind of their creator" and that the "expressive properties are 'response-dependent': that is, that they depend for their nature and existence on the response of the audience" (Matravers 357-8).

### **The Genuine of Design in Persian Oriental Rugs**

Stylistically speaking, Persian rugs are categorized as Oriental. Still, Baumann believes that "in a restricted sense, only rugs from Turan and Iran are implied by the term 'Genuine Persian'" (567). The art of rugs have been existed among Persians for more than 2500 years, however, it wasn't until Safavids' era in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries that the

Persian art of rug-weaving reached its pick. Persian rugs are significantly famous for their depiction of rich colors, vivid images along with broad categories of complex patterns and of course for the existing aesthetic symbolism and cultural, religious and mythical background designs used in their process of creation. The mystique nature of Persian rugs "owes a lot to the tales and fables that have been built up around the different design elements" (T. Ahmadi 62).

It must be noted that Persian rugs are also significant in terms of their depiction of knots and source materials. The knots used in Oriental Persian rugs are called "Senne knots" (Baumann 568), while the raw material vary based up on the "climatic conditions and the pasture for the wool-bearing animals. The quality of the wool – aside from the design and tightness of weaving – determines the value of a rug. Such wool material may be soft, flexible, lustrous and silky, or hard, bitter, dull and rough" (ibid). Interestingly enough, Baumann reports that "[t]he chemical composition of the Persian wool and the climatic influences the dry regions can probably be regarded as the main cause for the lustrous, silky, elastic-flexible, light but durable wool, which gives the rug good resilience, sheen, richness of colors and durability" (569). However, it must be noted that in terms of source materials, Persian rugs are also famous for using "the hair of Angora – or Persian goat – the Kurk" (ibid) and Camel hair.

Art critics believe that design can be subdivided "into routine and non-routine (or creative). In routine design, the knowledge relating forms to satisfaction requirements is available while in non-routine design there is a lack of such knowledge and it highly relies on human's creativity. Design in different domains of art is mostly creative or non-routine type" (Dalvandi et al. 2). Persian Classic Rugs can be classified into three main categories based on their design as; "rectilinear (sometimes called geometric) designs; curvilinear and floral designs; and pictorial designs" (Dalvandi et al. 1). To analyze it from a thematic perspective however, it must be mentioned that generally speaking, there are at least nineteenth Persian Oriental patterns recognized, among which the bellow patterns are recognized to be specifically associated with the current field of research in Persian rugs which follows as;

One of the most common themes in Classic Persian rugs is *Floral*. The image of a lush garden is one that is deeply rooted in both the religious and cultural heritage of the Persian design. In a region of the world where water is a precious commodity, it is perhaps not surprising that the garden, with an abundance of flora and fauna, is the Muslim symbol of paradise. The weavers were further inspired by their belief in the Islamic afterlife, which promises that the faithful will dwell in paradise. Floral themes are generally divided into three categories of All over floral, Garden, and Panelled design. All over floral designs feature floral forms without the addition of a medallion, vase, or other primary motif. The All over floral design is not, strictly speaking, a design. Rather, it is the name used to describe any pattern that has no focal point. Garden design is usually based on the formal gardens of ancient Persia with their abundance of flora separated by pathways and ornamental panels. In Panelled design the field is divided into panels or compartments containing individual motifs. (T. Ahmadi 62)

The second associated pattern is the "*Herati design*," originated from the town of Herat in Afghanistan. The pattern is "composed of a single floral head within a diamond framework flanked by four outwardly curling leaves," (ibid) symbolizing "small fishes that, at the time of the full moon, come up just beneath the surface of the water to swim in the moon's reflection" (ibid). Also, the Herati design is sometimes called *Mahi* (an equivalent word for Fish). Mahi pattern is applied "in either an allover medallion-and-corner format" (ibid). The third controversial Persian pattern to be discussed is *Boteh*, about the Persian or Indian origin of which scholars disagree. Defined as "a cluster of leaves" (T. Ahmadi 63), however, Jerehian associates the Boteh design with Persian ideology of Paradise and Immortality (ibid), as it is "commonly used across the base of the prayer arch together with flowers as part of the symbol for the garden of paradise" (T. Ahmadi 62). Many critics assume that the pattern covers a wider area of concepts, such as "a pine cone, a cypress tree, a leaf, a foetus . . . a Zoroastrian flame" (T. Ahmadi 63).

The next pattern to be analyzed is the *Prayer*, as the concept plays an "integral part of the religious experience of the Islamic world" (ibid). T. Ahmadi further describes the pattern as;

The design affords an extremely convenient way of ensuring that this direction is obeyed. In its simplest form the prayer rug is a rectangle design woven parallel to the edges of the rug. The most common version has its corners angled off at one end to form a pointed arch, a *Mihrab*. Prayer rugs made by nomadic tribes or in small Persian villages often have centers which are either plain and undecorated or are filled with small stylized flowers and stars, or they may have a stylized tree of life, symbolic of the garden of paradise . . . The trees grow from the base of the rug, starting just within its borders and continuing to fill the entire field. The leafy branches are spread and dotted with flowers and birds. Often there

will be a stream or pool at the foot of the tree and, perhaps, a few small animals. The tree-of-life is based on one of the oldest and most universal of all religious and mythological symbols, predating both Islam and Christianity. (63)

As the fifth Oriental pattern, *Vase* patterns can be applied in two general forms of ZelalSultan and Floral which can be depicted both in single manner and/or in groups symbolizing "peace and tranquility" (T. Ahmadi 63). Critics assume a Chinese origin for this pattern. The composition of *Vase* is a "one way design, and the vase is shaped like a Grecian urn which may or may not have handles" (ibid). The vase is situated at the bottom of the rug, with "tallest flowers in the center reaching up towards the top of the arch – a variation of the tree-of-life design" (ibid). The next design is called *Hunting design* which manifests a hunting scenery. Being classified as a Pictorial design, the pattern is an allusive revelation of a life scene, mythology or a historical event.

Finally, the last and the most famous design in Persian rugs is *Medallion*; a pattern enjoying a domineering central artistic element located at the center. It is interesting to note that there are different views on the aesthetic and metaphoric meaning of the design. Many critics regard Medallion as a symbol for "the eye of an all-seeing deity" (ibid), while some scholars associate the Medallion to the religiously sacred Lotus flower, besides the idea of Solar system and Universe (the centrality of life and the sun), as the earliest pattern to be depicted. In case of the Solar system theory, it must be mentioned that Man's awareness of the four basic directions of North, South, East and West led to the drawing of "cross-shaped designs" which "gradually developed into the symbol of an eight-petalled flower . . . used at the center of rug medallions to mark the focal point of Creation" (ibid). The Medallion pattern can be further classified into *Medallion-and-corner* and *Amulet*. The first has originated from an Islamic religious tradition of covering Quran in "leather covers" (ibid) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while Amulet "posses an overtly radical quality and appears to come from some ancient tribal emblem and its totemistic quality of the forms and frequent repetition of the dominant motif" (T. Ahmadi 63).

#### **Ghashghaei Rugs, Genuinity and An Application of Aesthetic Expressionism**

Ghashghaei is the name attributed to an old nomadic tribe of Iran, who conquered Iran in the Fifth century AD. Ghashghaei tribe used to migrate throughout central districts of Iran, specifically Fars Province. It worth noting that nomadic living is high based on rancher and its products, as a result of which nomadic tribes' arts of weaving has improved quite impressively. Ghashghaei tribe speaks in Turkish language and its people dress in special tradition of their tribe. Kühnel refers to one of the most significant points in discussion of Ghashghaei rugs, that is the thematic design of the rugs, as following Turkish patterns which are consisted of either a connected geometric sketch or a group of ordered lines with eight-cornered patterns, repeated throughout the sketch. The edge or margin in Ghashghaei rugs is decorated with a set of obscure incomprehensible lines of *Kufi* calligraphy (Kühnel 92-93). In case of Ghashghaei knots, Kühnel asserts that the knots in Ghashghaei style is still quite rough (ibid), while the choice and application of bold intensive colors, such as red, yellow and orange which stand for joy of life, faith, beauty, courage and piety together with the depiction of opposing colors like black (usually found in outlines of the original pattern), dark blue and brown, each symbolizing mourning, solitude and fertility are suggestive of a full-awareness of cognitive color aestheticism. These colors are used for the sake of reaching the utmost expressive sensation and depth.

This is highly in line with Expressionism's aim in providing a new taste in Aestheticism, which is intern an inter-definable criteria. The choice of bold intensive colors along with depictions of abstract forms in Ghashghaei rugs is considered to be in sharp contrast to the previous Classic art of Persian rug- weaving in which a complicated labyrinth pattern comes in association with pale yet tuneful use of colors. Following the *Local quality theory* and the *Arousal theory* Ghashghaei rugs are famous in terms of their artistic creations and diversity in forms (Rugs, Gabbeh, Gelim, Jajim, etc), most of which have been considered to be a spontaneous overflow of its creator's emotions and the appreciation of their visitors. Each Iranian nomadic tribe enjoys its own developed artistic design and pattern, while in general terms it seems that living in free deserts and lands of the mother Nature has been reflected in almost all of the patterns of Ghashghaei rugs, which seems to be a way of deconstructing former traditions in Classic rug-weaving art, by trying to provide a subjective image of reality and by being an art for people. However, living far from the rural life hasn't alienated the Ghashghaei art, traces of metaphysical and religious doctrines is highly evident in design of the artifacts, which is indicative of the socio-artistic responsibilities that the rug-weavers (as artists) have felt while creating their cultural artifact.



A Sample of Ghashghaei Rug  
Reference: <http://isfahanfarsh.blogfa.com>

Referring to the above picture as a sample of Ghashghaei pattern, the first absorbing point is the Medallion pattern of the rug which is must be regarded as a religiously sacred design. It is highly notable to mention that the current rug is recognized to be a non-routine design for its creative images, while enjoying a Medallion patter. One must further pay attention to the depicted central figure in the rug, which is highly expressive of the major role and the importance of the leading creator (rug-weaver) in the creation of the current rug, as it the figure is reflected at least four times larger than its other counter parts which are woven in each of the fourth corners, while at the same time insisting on the vitality of other assisting weavers' presence. The central figure is also indicative of an eye of all seeing deity. It is also noteworthy to mention that the choice of colors used in the depiction of the central figure (creator), seems more complicated in comparison with those of the others, which is highly suggestive of the maturity and experience of the leading creator. For instance, the blue color in the center of the ring is a flight into the subjective inwardness, it reveals the religious idea of paradise rewarding of the faithful believers.

One can find expressions of the tree-of-life in the current Ghashghaei rug, as being linked with the central ring, which is quite assertive of the artistic creator's immortality, happened as a result of her artifact (the rug); meaning art brings immortality. The use of diverse floral elements and the way it represents the scenery reminds us of wild lands drawn on a painting which in turn provides us with a religious fantasy image of the Garden of Eden. Floral elements with different colors of white and red symbolize the co-existence of passion and innocence along with an appreciation of youth represented in a mixed-colored blossoms, insisting on the dual nature of the world and mankind. Also, the existence of snake around the tree-of-life is significantly indicative of the great wisdom of the central creator and her guardianship while reminding us of the mythological story of the Adam and Eve and the Paradise. The central space is filled with a shape of a chicken or rooster, as a protection from the evil eye. There are also instances of a form similar to Eagle around the central ring, which symbolizes a domineering power of the creator over the artifact and her surrounding while concentrating on the creator's free spirit, harmony and free play of imagination, toward which the sky is the limit. A depiction of a form similar to a Swan or Peacock along with a leaf shape in two colors tells us about the fertility, marital life and the endless regeneration of both genders under a divine protection. It is believed that one can reach immortality as a result of participating in fertility which is the continuation of generation. Finally, the creation of a Diamond shape within the heart of each five weaving figures in general sense signifies women and female creative power. It worth pointing that there are two forms of Boteh located on each hands of these female weavers that symbolizes the sacred power of artistic creation and the existing internal passion within each of these figures. It is also interesting to issue a comb element located in the center of the main creator's figure that stands for a fine art, harmony, since it is highly assertive of cleanness, and maturity in the creator's artifact.

### Conclusion

To view it from a conclusive perspective, one must point out that Expressionism was an Avant-guard effort in deconstructing the previously settled criteria of Aestheticism, seeking to define a new sense of harmony and order which was highly subjective and culturally inter-definable. Having its roots deepened in intellectual theories of Nietzsche, Expressionism was a subjective depiction of inwardness on art. As an anti-bourgeoisie artistic style, Expressionism tended to reject immediacy in perception Impressionistic, while insisting on the authenticity of the artist's reported version of reality, as the original, even though the represented artifacts enjoys sensations of fantasy, exaggeration and subjective expressiveness. Aiming to provide a new modern definition of Aestheticism, Expressionism still enjoys the mythological symbolism and religious horizons of thoughts. In this regard, the Aesthetic theories of *Local quality theory* and the *Arousal theory* have

helped a lot in discussions of artistic evaluations and analysis by constructing mutual dynamic links between the artist and the receiver in a context of universal culture. Persian Oriental rugs are recognized to be as one of top-rated famous rugs worldwide, for their richness in source materials and their highly beautiful stylistic designs. Analytically speaking, patterns of Floral, Herati, Mahi, Boteh, Vase and Medallion are classified as the most recurrent themes and designs in Persian rugs. However, it is noteworthy to mention that Ghashghaei rugs are significantly famous for their non-routine style while at the same time enjoying a specific Oriental pattern, besides their exclusive use of color and expressive motifs which has been discussed through the article in terms of an application of modern Expressionism on a sample Ghashghaei rug to reach the discussion of cultural or better to call it national inter-definability of Aesthetic features.

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