Women’s Position in the Works of Reza Abbasi (The Safavid painter and the Founder of “Isfahan” School of Painting)

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Abstract

This research investigates Reza Abbasi’s role in changes in paintings in the history of Iran with the aim of studying his life and painting style as a famous artist and the founder of “Isfahan” school of painting. The changes in paintings had lots of opponents from among the courtiers and artists during Reza Abbasi’s age. The most important deconstruction of Reza Abbasi was the attention he would pay to women in his works and independent painting of women with a central role. The women who despite forming half of population were either not present or had a peripheral role in paintings before Reza Abbasi’s. Although this deconstruction would show Reza Abbasi as a philanthropist and committed, it entailed social consequences for him. This research investigates the role of Reza Abbasi as a pioneer and deconstructive artist who paid attention to women in paintings of Iran.

Keywords: Reza Abbasi, Isfahan school, Woman, Painting, social.
Ali Asghar Kashani who was a prominent painter was sent to Mashhad by the government in 1561 in order to start painting for Ibrahim Mirza, Shah Tahmasp’s brother (phalsafi, 2001). In 1565, a son was born to him in Mashhad who was named Reza. Reza learnt painting since childhood under the supervision of his father and other instructors, especially Sheikh Mohammad. In 1577 he moved to the court of Shah Ismail II in Qazvin with his father. He worked on art in Qazvin and under supervision of Sadeghi Beik Afshar. In 1591 he moved to Isfahan in order to continue art works in the court of Shah Abbas I. Isfahan as the center of attention of Shah Abbas I was an appropriate place for Reza to reach the peak of painting in his unique style.

Reza got to know different cultures and beliefs such as mystical thoughts and Sufism in Isfahan, one of the most active and great cities of that time. This fact influenced his works and behavior (Talbot Rice, 1997).

After a while, his close friend, Miremad the calligrapher was killed. This incident and the change in Reza’s attitude towards life led to his avoidance from the courtier for a decade. After the death of Shah Abbas I in 1038 AH, Reza returned to Safavid courtier and started painting his favorite subjects beside the courtiers’ orders. He passed away in 1635 (Tahvilyan, 2008).

In fact, painting for Reza was more important than the courtiers’ orders and demands. He was the first person who paid serious attention to lower classes of society in his works and deregulated the subject of painting from the courtiers (Azhand, 2006).

In fact, “Isfahan” school of painting was formed by attempts of Reza Abbasi and was extended through his teachings of students. He was interested in recording the facts surrounding him and created portraits and single figures besides maintaining Iranian design practices. Although his artistic style was a reflection of our ancestors, it was not similar to them. Compared to the artists before him, Reza had more freedom of action in following his artistic interests and he himself would define his art direction. Apart from trying to satisfy his fans by his paintings and drawings, he had aimed at satisfying himself. He was an innovative and modern artist as the founder of “Isfahan” school of painting and one of the greatest traditional Iranian artists. He proved his courage and independence over his life and works.

“Isfahan” school of painting, especially the art of Reza Abbasi can be a humanistic art in which the artist tries to depict aesthetic perfection of human beings. This attempt is, in fact, a manifestation of Iranian mysticism humanism in which human beings are the noblest of the creatures and are indebted to God for their beauty.

The most important action of Reza Abbasi which distinguishes him from all other Iranian painters is dealing to women as a unique and central issue (as it can be seen in the some
examples portrait in attachment); the women who were either absent or peripheral in paintings of all social changes in Iran. In “Isfahan” school of painting and in Reza’s works, women were considered an independent gender of men and Reza Abbasi did not consider women as a second-rate gender. Reza paying attention to paint women face as identical and important characters was a kind of deconstruction in the society at that time. The women, who were peripheral in daily life and people’s beliefs, gained a central role in paintings of Reza.

The pictures of women painted by Reza were different from the pictures of women in the works of other painters. In Seljuk, Patriarch, Heart and Tabriz schools of painting, women were depicted peripherally in the poem or storylines. However, they are different in the works of Reza Abbasi. In his paintings, young women are at times present in alleys and bazaars. In terms of appearance, their dresses were without veils and to some extent transparent and their scarves were very short. In Reza Abbasi’s paintings, women are often doing works based on their gender as if they are the only heroines of the scene and are not only observers. However, in paintings of old art schools, women were servants occupied by cooking and sewing or they were curious and surprised observers who were standing beside windows and behind doors to get information about news and events so that maybe they can reduce the boring life of everyday. They were as if they had no role but serving the men and being curious.

In fact, Reza did not focus on the real status and value of women in his works, but he could start a deconstruction and paint women independent and cannot be painted in the context of the story. They seem reckless and bold and instead of being prone to judgments, they impose themselves to the audience as a model.

One of the most important reasons that lead to this deconstructionism about women in Reza’s works is the expansion of mysticism culture in Safavid society that had also influenced Reza. It gave him some kind of freedom of action and led him above the fixed religious framework. On the other hand, the western countries’ communication with Iran in Safavid era and creation of an open society helped this deconstruction (Hillenbrand, 2001).

Perhaps the most important factors in iconoclasm in women paintings by Reza Abbasi were the complexities of his soul and his liberal character. Throughout his life, he showed several times that when social traditions are in contrast with his own beliefs, he prefers to follow his own beliefs and paint his own ideas. Researchers who study the history of changes in Iran state that Reza Abbasi is certainly one of the people who had a significant effect on presenting the position of women in art throughout the history of Iran who played an effective role in reviving the real position of women by studying issues related to them as the central idea of his paintings. He attracted people’s attention to this group.
Conclusion:

If the criterion of being an artist is social commitments and attempting to move the society forward, Reza Abbasi can certainly be considered a great artist who could significantly influence the history of painting in Iran by establishing “Isfahan” school of painting and expanding it. On one hand, his attempts in creating portraits made Persian painting gain an independent identity and get separated from literature as an art, while before Reza Abbasi, painting was used to visualize the content of books as a complementary art. By reviving single page paintings, he managed to create an independent art which was no longer dependent on the content of the books.

On the other hand, by investigating his drawings and his way of using forming, curve lines and linear borders, Reza Abbasi can be considered the initiator of graphic art in Iran. One of the most important actions of Reza Abbasi was that he left the courtier issues in paintings and focused on the life of people on the streets; an action that was not welcomed by the courtiers. Drawing portraits of the youth, ordinary people, dervishes and other groups made a social change in the art of painting. Depending on a kind of realism, he focused on various classes of the society as the subject of his paintings.

Despite all these innovations, the most important action of Reza Abbasi in the history of painting in Iran is undoubtedly his attention to women in his works. Paying attention to a group that was always peripheral in all pillars of the society and throughout the history of Iran and was never accepted as a complete human being like men. The study of the history of Iran and the deplorable condition of women throughout the history indicates the magnanimity of Reza Abbasi’s action. In a period during which on one hand, the social pressures and on the other hand, religious beliefs restricted women, Reza liberally pays attention to the women and paints them in many of his works as the main subject.
References


Attachment: Some Women’s portrait painted by Reza Abbasi.
Fig. 1  Dreamer woman. 1036 hegira (1630 A.D) watercolor. 7.6*17.8 cm. kept in Detroit Institute of Arts Museum
Fig. 2 Woman counting with her fingers. 1037-39 hegira (1628-30 A.D) watercolor.18.9*9.2 cm. kept in National Library of Paris
Fig. 3  Woman in hijab. 1008 hegira (1600 A.D) watercolor 16.5*8 cm. kept in Texas Foundation for the Arts
Fig. 4  Muhammad Beig Gurji the prince. 1029-32 hegira (1620-3 A.D) color design. 16.8*8.8 cm. kept in Museum of Islamic Arts, Berlin