


The social action of art in the reflection of the face of power (a case study of the relief of Fath-Ali Shah hunting a lion)

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Abstract

The advantage of the power of the works of art to lead political, cultural, economic, etc. actions are carried out by the community of its audience, political, cultural, economic, etc. actions are carried out by the community of its audience. This article uses a hybrid approach to read a petroglyph of Fath Ali Shah hunting a lion in order to answer the question that it reflects the social action of the mentioned petroglyph on the one hand, based on the examination of the pretexts effective in its formation, and on the other hand, due to the impressive power of the works. What was on the public mind? The purpose of the upcoming research is to analyze the social functions of Fath Ali Shah's imitation of the petroglyphs of the kings before him. This article is qualitative and analytical. The method of gathering information is based on library data and study of visual documents. The result of this article indicates that the re-creation of lithographic art by Fath Ali Shah, like his predecessors, was not only aimed at a social reflection, i.e. showing the face of power, but was responsible for several social actions, including the king's right to reign, his power in defeating enemies, expanding the belief that his position is divine, equating his ability with the ability of ancient Iranian princes, and the mutual interaction of art and politics in the service of the ruling system, each of the mentioned cases played an effective role in gaining his political authority in the society. In deeper analysis, it can be seen that the ruling power provided the platform for the formation of this range of art to become the servant of his goals and at the same time, this spectrum was formed to support the ruling power. This feature is a reflection of interaction and bilateral connection between art and politics.

Keywords: petroglyph, reflection, intertextuality, Fath-Ali Shah, the social function of art.

1. Introduction

The art of rock relief in Iran, which has a long history, was revived as a public visual medium during the Qajar era by the second Qajar king, Fath Ali Shah, after a long hiatus. The reliefs he commissioned were carved on a huge scale onto mountain surfaces and rocks outside palace walls.

The location of these reliefs was critically important; they needed to be accessible to the public and were therefore primarily situated along caravan routes.

Some researchers have considered the implementation and revival of this art by Agha Mohammad Khan's successor to be a reflection of his tendency toward archaism (Shad Qazvini & Abdullah Zadeh Nasodi, 2022).

Others believe that, from a holistic view, the social nature of art places it at the service of the ruling system, beyond the role of prominent figures alone (Esna Ashari, 2023). Given the particular ability of art, including reliefs, to convey messages and concepts to an audience, these works must be examined from perspectives that go beyond visual and formalistic approaches.

A more complete understanding can be achieved by interpreting their hidden dimensions. Therefore, this article selects one of these works—the rock relief of Fath Ali Shah hunting a lion—and analyzes it using a hybrid approach to answer the following question: what social action did this relief reflect at the societal level?

Although numerous noteworthy studies have been conducted on artworks from the Qajar era, especially paintings, they typically focus either on historical studies or on purely visual and formalistic analyses.

To develop a more accurate understanding and to enrich the theoretical literature in this field, research beyond historical and visual approaches—such as sociology, semiotics, and intertextuality—is necessary to determine the latent functions of these works. Accordingly,

this article examines the social action of the relief of Fath Ali Shah hunting a lion to answer the question of what social actions this relief reflected. The purpose of this article is to analyze the issue from the perspective of the social application of the artwork and its reflection within society. Therefore, moving beyond purely visual and formalistic analyses, it examines, on the one hand, the pre-texts that formed the foundation of the reliefs through an intertextual approach.

2. Literature Review

A review of the literature reveals valuable research on the subject of Qajar reliefs. One study explains Fath Ali Shah's inclination toward ancient Iranian culture and identifies his intended goals in reviving the art of rock reliefs (Haji Alilu, 2007). In another study, the authors argue that the purpose of producing these works was to express the discourse of power and create a mythical character for Fath Ali Shah (Yousefian & Javani, 2011).

Other researchers, by examining the visual elements and geographical locations of two reliefs, concluded that the hunting relief in Taq-e-Bostan aimed to present a visual representation of a musical-religious banquet, while the one in Tang-e Vashi intended to depict a musical performance alongside the perpetuation of the Shah's lineage (Heidari Baba Kamal et al., 2012). Another study concluded that Qajar rulers drew inspiration not only from ancient Iranian and Safavid relief art but also from Western styles (Mortezaei et al., 2014, p. 27).

Another researcher posits that the Qajar kings' goal in reviving Iranian identity, including rock relief art, was the political unity of Iran and the survival of their monarchy (Taqvi, 2014, p. 60). In a comparative analysis of three reliefs from the Sassanid period and three from the era of Fath Ali Shah, the authors concluded that representing Fath Ali Shah among ancient kings served as propaganda media aimed at validating his reign and

displaying the glory of the Qajar court (Dasmardi et al., 2010). Another comparative study concluded that political unity and the continuation of the Qajar monarchy were Fath Ali Shah's primary goals in commissioning his reliefs (Shadaghzveini & Abdollahzadeh Nasudi, 2022). While all the aforementioned studies are valuable, this article distinguishes itself by specifically examining the social actions reflected by its subject.

3. Research Methodology

Mixed methods generally provide greater analytical richness, allowing for a deeper understanding of artworks. Therefore, the theoretical foundation of this article is based on a combination of two approaches: intertextuality and reflection. The reflection approach in the sociology of art encompasses a wide range of research, all based on the common belief that art is a mirror of society or is conditioned and determined by it. In this approach, the researcher must have a complete understanding of the research topic and identify the contextual factors that influenced it. Therefore, in this study, the researcher's focus is on recognizing both the pre-texts influential in the formation of the artwork and the prevailing social conditions. Given the numerous intermediary factors, including cultural backgrounds, that play significant roles in the production of art, part of this research is dedicated to the theory of intertextuality. Intertextuality describes the creative use of previous works in the production of new ones. The intertextual nature of a text not only serves as its foundation but also enriches it and enhances its qualitative content. Considering this framework, the following article attempts to analyze and interpret the reliefs of Fath Ali Shah based on a combination of these two approaches.

4. Research Findings

Analyzing the relief of Fath Ali Shah hunting a lion through a combination of intertextual and reflective approaches reveals deeper dimensions of the subject. The research findings show that the main pre-texts for this relief are based on the revival of ancient Iranian artistic traditions and pre-Islamic civilizations. From the perspective of the reflection approach, the relief served a purpose beyond simply depicting a royal hunt; it functioned as a propaganda tool to consolidate and legitimize the political and divine power of the Shah, reflecting this purpose within the society of the time.

Based on the intertextual approach:

Continuity of pre-Islamic pictorial traditions: From Assyrian to Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian periods, lion hunting has been used as an allegory of royal power and ability. Fath Ali Shah's relief revives this tradition, drawing direct inspiration from these historical pre-texts.

Influence of specific pre-texts: Given Fath Ali Shah's residence in Shiraz during his crown prince years, the hunting reliefs at Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam can be considered primary pre-texts for this work.

Adaptation of the theme of royal splendor: Unlike in Mesopotamian civilizations, where lion hunting was associated with divine myths, in Iranian art the hunting theme acquired more political dimensions, serving as a tool to demonstrate the king's power within an absolutist system.

Based on the reflection approach:

Social and political reflection: The relief presents an image of the king's undisputed power and his victory over opposing forces. This visual narrative emphasizes the legitimacy of Fath Ali Shah's reign. Its roots in ancient tradition equate his power with that of pre-Islamic Iranian kings, though the narrative shifted from the mythical (Assyrian) to the political (Iranian).

Reflection of the divine nature of kingship: The work implicitly recalls the concept of divine

"Farr" (glory) and introduces the king as God's vicegerent on earth.

Reflection of the needs of the ruling system: In the context of expanding European influence and military defeats against Russia (which led to the loss of northwestern territories), this work was an attempt to restore the Shah's legitimacy and equate his power with that of ancient Iranian rulers.

The relationship between art and politics: This relief is a clear example of the interaction between art and the political structures of the Qajar era, produced to support the absolutist system and demonstrate the Shah's power.

5. Conclusion

The decree for the creation of large-scale royal hunting reliefs, issued for the first time in post-Islamic Iran by Fath Ali Shah, is analyzed through two lenses. On one hand, based on intertextuality, the work is formed through a network of relationships with previous texts. On the other hand, based on reflection, it implied numerous social actions. The relief of Fath Ali Shah hunting a lion was not merely a reflection of power; rather, it reflected other social actions, such as asserting his entitlement to rule and defeat his enemies, representing the sovereignty of the absolute monarchy, and acquiring political authority. It also reflected the belief in the divine nature of the king's position—a fabricated legitimacy that enabled him to overcome the symbols of his enemies. Another social action is the evident thematic and content convergence between this work and those of ancient Iranian kings, identifying Fath Ali Shah with his predecessors. From a holistic perspective, this work reflects the mutual interaction between art and politics in service of the ruling system. Fath Ali Shah, as the ruling power, revived an art form to serve his goals, and simultaneously, this art form was created to support his power. This characteristic is indicative of the long-standing, bidirectional connection between art and politics.

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Authors' Contribution

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Conflict of Interest

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