

Investigating the Characteristics of the Epic in the Paintings of Haft Khan-e Rostam in the Shahnameh of Paris (953 AH)

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Abstract

Epic narratives represent significant moments in the history of ancient civilizations and nations. Generally, the preservation of territorial borders and national integrity is achieved through the creation of epics centered on a hero or a group of heroes, whose deeds are recorded in history for their greatness and grandeur. The remembrance and retelling of such events strengthen national self-confidence and enhance collective courage and bravery. Ferdowsi compiled many Iranian epic narratives in his monumental work, the Shahnameh, in which the renowned hero Rostam emerges as the central figure of Iranian epic tradition. Numerous artists involved in illustrating Shahnameh manuscripts have sought to recreate the story of Haft Khan-e Rostam from an epic perspective. The Paris Shahnameh dated 953 AH is among these works and, owing to the clarity and richness of its images, constitutes a suitable case study for examining epic characteristics in Safavid-era painting—the so-called "Golden Age of Iranian painting." This study addresses the following question: To what extent did the illustrator of the Paris Shahnameh (953 AH) employ epic features in depicting Haft Khan-e Rostam? It is hypothesized that, by relying on the epic conceptual indicators embedded in the Shahnameh text and narrative painting traditions, the artist successfully utilized visual elements to create an epic atmosphere in the depiction of Haft Khan-e Rostam. The present research aims to investigate the degree to which the epic paintings of Haft Khan-e Rostam in the Paris Shahnameh (953 AH) correspond to the defining characteristics of epic art. The study adopts a documentary-analytical approach, with data collected through library-based research. The findings indicate that the illustrator, drawing upon considerable artistic skill, established a meaningful and effective relationship between visual representation and epic indicators. Research of this kind contributes to the broader field of the sociology of art.

Keywords: Epic painting; Ferdowsi's Shahnameh; Paris Shahnameh (953 AH); Haft Khan-e Rostam; pictorial elements.

1. Introduction

A significant part of the history of nations lies in epic narratives and the defense of collective aspirations and ideals, as reflected in epic literature. Given the historical prevalence of military incursions by dominant powers into the territories of other nations, the remembrance of historical epics remains essential. Epics typically portray a confrontation between good and evil, in which good ultimately prevails under divine protection. At times, epic narratives intersect with the mythological history of civilizations; due to temporal distance and the absence of visual records, illustrated manuscripts serve as a crucial medium through which audiences encounter a two-dimensional visual reconstruction of ancient history.

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, owing to its epic content, has consistently attracted painters working within the tradition of epic illustration. Among the surviving manuscripts from the Golden Age of Iranian painting, the Paris *Shahnameh* dated 953 AH—associated with the reigns of Shah Ismail I and Shah Tahmasp—stands out as a particularly suitable example for examining epic characteristics because of its visual clarity and compositional strength. This manuscript contains seventy paintings, seven of which depict the episodes of Haft Khan-e Rostam, narrating Rostam's journey to restore the divine order and defeat the White Demon.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following question: To what extent did the painter of the Paris *Shahnameh* (953 AH) employ epic characteristics in the depiction of Haft Khan-e Rostam? The primary aim of this research is to examine the relationship between the epic paintings of Haft Khan-e Rostam in the Paris *Shahnameh* (953 AH) and the defining features of epic art.

2. Literature Review

The close relationship between epic narratives and the histories of civilizations and nations has resulted in numerous scholarly studies in this field, including

research on artworks that visually represent epic themes. One notable study is "A Comparative Study of the Visual Elements of Epic and Mystical Paintings" (Esmati & Rajabi, 2011), in which the authors distinguish the characteristic visual elements of epic and mystical paintings based on thematic analysis, presenting each as a distinct visual model. However, the Seven Khans of Rostam from the Paris *Shahnameh* (953 AH) are not included in their analysis. Another relevant work is the thesis "Description and Study of Clothing in the Paris *Shahnameh* (953 AH)" (Zamani, 2017), which examines the forms and structures of clothing associated with different social classes of Safavid society as depicted in the manuscript's illustrations, including the battle attire of warrior figures. Nevertheless, as indicated by the title, this study focuses exclusively on clothing and does not address other aspects of epic painting.

3. Research Methodology

The statistical population of the present study consists of seven paintings depicting Haft Khan-e Rostam. It is assumed that the artist, relying on the epic conceptual indicators found in the *Shahnameh* text and the tradition of narrative painting, successfully employed visual elements to create an epic atmosphere in the Paris *Shahnameh* (953 AH). The research adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology, with data collected through library-based sources. Examining the visual relationship between epic painting and epic characteristics contributes not only to the sociology of art but also to studies concerned with the sociological structure of warfare as reflected in visual culture.

4. Findings

Based on descriptive and analytical examination of the epic features in the selected images, it is necessary to distinguish the visual elements within the paintings. The analyses focus on the placement and posture of Rostam and Rakhsh as the two principal

figures, as well as the depiction of weapons in relation to narrative content.

The findings indicate that weapons are present in all seven images. Additional objects appear in only three scenes, including Rostam and the Witch and The Battle of Rostam and the Descendants. In the latter, the presence of flags—classified as war objects—serves to identify the opposing army, with the descendants depicted as carrying a large banner. Rostam's posture is consistently alert and vigilant across the images, except in The Battle of Rakhsh and the Lion, where he is shown asleep. Sleep here may be interpreted as part of initiation rituals, symbolizing the "survival of the conscious body and soul," comparable to Ahura Mazda's act of placing Kiyumars into prolonged sleep to protect him from evil. Ferdowsi may similarly have employed sleep as a protective device for Rostam. In five paintings, Rostam is positioned on the right side of the composition in an alert stance. Rakhsh appears in six paintings; however, in Rostam and the Witch, only his head and eyes are visible, and in Rostam and the White Demon, only his head and face are shown. These partial depictions emphasize Rakhsh's constant awareness and vigilance.

Analysis of weaponry reveals a wide variety of maces, with Rostam's distinctive bull-headed mace appearing as his personal weapon, though it is not actively used in combat in any scene. Swords are visible in most paintings, while bows and arrows are among the most frequently depicted weapons. Notably, only in The Battle of Rostam and His Sons is the bow shown in use by Rostam's sons and companions. Shields are depicted exclusively as Rostam's equipment, while daggers appear least frequently. Rostam is consistently shown wearing distinctive battle attire, including a leopard-skin cloak and leopard-skin headgear, along with a helmet, armbands, leggings, and boots. The witch, due to her magical nature and feminine role, lacks battle attire. When Olad confronts Rostam in battle, he is depicted wearing armor, including a helmet, armbands, leggings, and boots, whereas Olad's companion wears similar gear but without full

armor. When Olad later becomes Rostam's guide to the White Demon's dwelling, he is shown wearing only a helmet and armbands. King Kay Kavus, reflecting his royal Kayanian status, lacks battle attire and instead wears a crown. The commanders accompanying Kay Kavus are portrayed as warriors wearing helmets and armbands. This suggests that the painter deliberately employed helmets and armbands as symbolic indicators of warrior identity. Full battle attire appears only during direct combat scenes, emphasizing the narrative significance of warfare. Helmet forms vary across the paintings. When Rostam is not actively engaged in battle—such as in The Battle of Rakhsh and the Lion or The Meeting with the Captives—his helmet lacks accessories. Other figures' helmets are either plain or adorned with small flags. In The Battle of Rostam and the Descendants, feathers appear on the descendants' helmets, symbolizing resistance and martial valor. Rakhsh is depicted wearing a cloth covering in all scenes. In The Battle of Rostam and the Descendants, an iron helmet appears on the enemy's horse, reflecting the intensity of hand-to-hand combat between heroic opponents. In all paintings featuring Rakhsh—except The Battle of Rostam and the Dragon—a white feather pendant is visible beneath his neck.

5. Conclusion

The illustrator of the Paris Shahnameh (953 AH) omitted the depiction of the second Khan in the visual cycle of Haft Khan-e Rostam, possibly to preserve the grandeur and symbolic integrity of the Seven Khans. Instead, the artist emphasizes Rostam's ultimate goal: the liberation of the Iranian king. Closely following Ferdowsi's narrative, the painter visually conveys the epic characteristic of "breaking habitual norms," portraying extraordinary confrontations such as Rakhsh's victory over the lion, the human triumph over the dragon, and Rostam's defeat of demons endowed with physical form.

Another defining epic feature—"the protection of the divine lineage"—is emphasized by depicting Rostam's encounter with Kay Kavus and the captured generals, underscoring Rostam's role in restoring divine legitimacy. The climactic battle with the White Demon is illustrated at the moment of decisive victory, symbolized by the demon's defeat and the restoration of the king's sight. To convey the expansive spirit of Ferdowsi's epic vision, the painter employs a wide range of weapons, including swords, maces, shields, bows and arrows, daggers, and spears, emphasizing both variety and symbolic significance. Rostam's bull-headed mace, rooted in narrative painting traditions, serves as a distinctive emblem of his heroic identity. The artist further reinforces epic characterization through battle attire, drawing from Ferdowsi's descriptions while incorporating visual conventions such as the leopard-skin headgear as a symbol of victory.

Helmet accessories—flags symbolizing armies and feathers symbolizing resistance—are carefully deployed. In the battle with the demon Arzhang, three feathers adorn Rostam's helmet, signifying perseverance and triumph over demonic forces. The addition of a falcon feather in the final battle reinforces divine authority, as the falcon symbolizes royal and divine power in Persian painting.

Rakhsh, depicted as a heroic figure in his own right, consistently appears vigilant, even when only partially visible, reinforcing his role as the guardian of Rostam's life. His confrontation with the dragon visually represents the eternal struggle between good and evil, culminating in the triumph of good. The presence of magic—another hallmark of mythological epics—is conveyed through the depiction of the female magician in the third Khan, whose unconventional attire signifies her marginal and deceptive nature. Additionally, divine presence is symbolized through water, representing Anahita and purity, further reinforcing epic themes. Overall, the artist skillfully integrates epic narrative elements with visual composition, using landscape features such as rugged

terrain to intensify the harsh and heroic spirit of Ferdowsi's epic world.

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Author's Contribution

The research was conducted solely by the author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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