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Nature, Man and Art

An Irano-Islamic Perspective

An exploration of any subject must begin, as a matter of logical progression, with a definition of that subject. And so it is with Art.

Many thinkers believe that art cannot really be defined. As a consequence they shy away from definitions in the usual scientific and operational sense. There are others, however, who do not feel comfortable about art having no clear, accurate definition. An exact definition convinces the scholar that all is known; all elements have been observed and understood. Hence, definitions are attempted and art is duly analyzed. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has this to say concerning the definition of art, "In any attempt to arrive at a clear and comprehensive definition of the meaning of art, it is necessary to disregard all philological and etymological derivations which, in the past have led to much confusion of thought and to an expansion of the human activities embraced by this term, which oversteers the limitation imposed upon it by the modern conception of its meaning."

The Modern View of Art

Scholars of art are agreed that art cannot be understood in isolation from that which has created it; a concept stated quite simply by Kandinsky in the words, "Every work of art is the child of its age". While it is well accepted that any definition or description of art must take into account the period and the culture within which it came into being, most academic conceptualizations of art have tended to be Western in character. Conceptualizations that encompass both the Western and the Eastern quintessence of art are few, if any. Furthermore, the view of art today, perhaps reflected a fast-changing world-view, is becoming increasingly superficial. There is an inclination to regard altogether the complexity and ambiguity inherent



in art, thereby diluting its essence and significance. Ultimately, then, this view is more of an exercise in aesthetics, taking no account at all of the basic philosophy and ethics of art.

The modern view of art is molded by man's view of nature. It has become the habit of science and modern thinking to view nature as an adversary, as a dimension to be conquered. Man, in the course of his progress and civilization, has ravaged nature to such an extent, that he can no longer consider himself one with it. In many ways, man has violated nature and its laws. He has taken from it, more than enough to meet his needs and has given nothing back. This alienation from nature is reflected in the view of art today. Whereas art once represented nature, purity and harmony, it now reflects agitation, restlessness and the frenzied pace of modern living.

Art is an inseparable part of being human. Not only is art almost as old as man himself, it has travelled with him the misty paths of pre-history, through centuries and civilizations, to remain until the present time. Contemporary thought that overlooks the fact that art springs from nature, tradition and spirituality cannot but be cursory.

Modern thought focuses on a concept of beauty based only on aesthetics, forgetting that there is an ambiguity and complexity inherent in beauty as well. Replacing one concept that is as yet poorly understood, by another, which is equally, if not more poorly understood, serves little purpose. In the words of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Aesthetic pathology is an excrescence upon a genuine interest in art which seems to be peculiar to civilized people". Margaret Mead puts the same idea forward in a more harsh manner, "The concept of the artist and the related concept of fine arts are both specially bad accidents of the local European tradition."

The modern view of art also spotlights the new. Whatever is 'new' is valued *per se*. Novelty has in itself become a value held more sacred than cultural heritage, tradition and the spiritual. Beauty, nature, ultimate truth, and purity of thought and spirit bear no relevance to this modern view.

The Traditional View of Art

The oldest examples of art are the ancient cave paintings. Art historians have discovered that primitive man painted pictures deep in the hidden recesses of his cave dwellings. This meant that he did not paint only to decorate or satisfy his aesthetic sensibilities or even to record events. Caveman used drawings to rehearse the events of a hunt. Drawing wild beasts, the caveman used them as targets to practice his



hunting skills. However, this alone does not explain the beauty of these paintings nor why they were hidden in the deepest parts of the caves. It is obvious that simpler geometrical forms would have served the same purpose. While there is ample evidence that primitive man used his paintings to practice hunting events, the truth is that he believed that the soul of the creature he painted was captured within the paintings. With the cardinal spirit of the creature in his power, the creature would become weakened and would be easily destroyed. Despite the functional aspect of the ancient paintings, one cannot ignore the relation between man and the spiritual element inherent in these paintings. In truth, man's urge to paint is born from a communication with a greater and unseen power.

The traditional view of art shares little with its modern counterpart. The Islamic view of art is diametrically opposed to the modern view. Central to the Islamic and traditional view is a belief in the oneness of nature and man. Nature and man are of the same origin, and like man, nature is alive and intelligent. According to Islam, nature is beautiful because it is infused with the light of the Almighty. The idea of conquering nature is entirely blasphemous and comprehensible. A view of the close relationship of nature and man is found in the East, particularly in the Islamic tradition and is reflected well in the words of Rumi:

جمله اعضای عالم در نهان باتو میکویند روزان و شبان
ماسمیعیم و بصیریم و هشیم باشمانا محرمان ماخامشیم

Every small bit of the world tells you secretly, day and night

We listen, we see, and we are conscious. But, to you Na-Mahams (strangers to the secret of existence) we are silent.

According to this view every atom in nature is believed to be living and conscious. Man may commune with nature through this consciousness and share its secrets. Man and nature, being of one origin, can interface in spirit. Separation from nature is again, reflected in Rumi's words:

جون شماسوی جمادی میروید همدم جان جمادان کی شوید
از جمادی در جهان جان شوید غلغل اعضای عالم بشنوید



As you drift towards soullessness, how may you become intimate with the soul of the inanimate?

Enter from the intimate (state) into the world of the soul. Only then, may you hear the whisper of the parts of this world.

Ancient civilizations and religions have evolved from the conviction that nature has consciousness and power. In India, the Vedic gods, *Surya*, *Vayu*, *Agni*, and so on represented forces of nature; forces that were elevated to the status of divinity because of the reverence accorded to them. This reverence for nature was by no means confined to Eastern thought. The ancient Greeks too deified the forces of nature. The Vedic god *Mitra* is also the Avestic god *Mithr* or the Persian god *Mehr*. In the *Avesta* of pre-Islamic Persia, one may find the characteristic of *Indra*, the all powerful god of Vedic India.

It is a veneration of nature that has led to these divine forces assuming shapes of beauty in paintings and sculpture.

Historically, the view of art has been influenced by religious belief. With the advent of Islam the polythesian view gave way to the monastic view and the worship of idols was condemned. This, however, did not diminish reverence for nature. In the Islamic tradition, nature is a creation of *Allah* and the *Quran* devotes chapters pledging an oath to nature. Some of these chapters are even titled after natural forces, such as *Shams* (Sun), *Qamar* (Moon) and *Ra'd* (Thunder). Such is the Islamic veneration of nature that it is believed that:

بركِ درختان سبز در نظر هوشیار
هر ورقش دفتری است معرفت کردگار

A single leaf of a green tree is in itself a complete book of the wisdom of the Creator.

It is an interesting fact, that one of the many names of *Allah* is 'Musawwer' or, 'The Artist'. Further, man is considered the greatest work of art created by *Allah*. In Islamic art, representing the complete human form is frowned upon for it may lead to man becoming idolised and his evanescence being forgotten. Art, in the Islamic tradition, extends beyond nature, into the wisdom contained in its depths, depths which can only be reached by the pure in mind and spirit. In the Persian tradition, art or *Honar* is a holy act. The most exalted form of Islamic art is epitomised in calligraphy, particularly the transcription of the *Quran*,



and Islamic architecture such as is embodied in mosques. For such magnificent beauty to be regarded as mere objectified aesthetic appreciation seems blasphemous for, surely, there is a more profound truth incarnate in such art, a truth unapproachable through analytical procedure and unexplained by mere appropriateness of form, line, shape and colour.

Today, the word *Honar* and the concept it represents has been adapted to the Western approach to art. *Honar* may connote art, but originally the meaning of the word extended beyond art to include insight, wisdom, grace, excellence and truth. An encyclopedic definition of *Honar* describes it as being a degree of perfection great enough to embrace insight, knowledge and vigilance. Thus, the *Sahib-Honar* or artist, is no ordinary person, but an exalted being.

Persian literature contains many examples of the use of the word *Honar* in its classical sense. In the following lines, the word *Honar* may be replaced by art for a better understanding of the ideology of art,

در همه چیزی هنر و عیب هست عیب محو تا هنر آری بدست

In everything there is *Honar* (art) and there is *Ai'b* (defect)

Do not be open to defect and *Honar* (art) will come to you.

(Nizami)

هست صد عیب طالعم را لیک یک هنر دیده ام ز طالع خویش

In my fate are a hundred flaws, but in my fate too, I see one *Honar* (art). (Khaqani)

ظرافت بسیار هنر ندیمان است و عیب حکیمان.

Naivete is a *Honar* (art) with an intimate friend but a fault in the prudent and wise.

(*Qulistan-e-Sa'id*)



تکیه بر تقوی و دانش در طریقت کافری است
راهرو کر صد هنر دارد توکل بایندش

Relying on virtue, knowledge, and obedience in the path of perfection is out of infidelity. A traveller of this path may have a hundred *Honar* (art) but he must have trust and faith in god. (Hafiz)

In the above examples, *Honar* (art) is the antithesis of defect. *Honar* connotes perfection of form as well as moral and noble attributes.

It is interesting to note that the word *Honar* also means great danger, or an event of significance. Observe the following examples:

هنر بزرگ آن است که رود بزرگ جیحون در میان است.

No mistake can be made as the big *Honar* (art) is that this great river of Jaihum is on the way (Beihaqi)

هنر بزرگ این است که در جهان دیگر روز قضا خواهد بود.

The great *Honar* (art) is that there will be a day of judgement in the other world. (*Ibid.*)

In some instances, *Honar* is used to denote skilfulness of soul and body, worthiness and potential. The word is also used for industry, profession and vocation. In the modern sense, art is used similarly, to indicate skill or distinction in painting, sculpture, drawing, music, writing and so on. The artist is one who has achieved mastery in creative fields such as the ones mentioned above whereas in the classical connotation the artist is one who is perfect and able in the highest moral sense. Till the present-day, in Iran, the reverence and respect accorded to *Honar* is not lost. No painter, musician or writer would profess to being a *Honar-mand* (artist), for this would mean that he is claiming to be flawless in morality and ideals. Instead, they would call themselves *Naqqash* (painter), *Tarrah* (designer), or *Ahang-saz* (composer) and so on.



Art and Man's Values

It is clear from a comparison of the traditional view with the modern that the profundity of meaning and the exalted values associated with art have diminished over the years. This change began to take place as far back as the sixteenth-seventeenth century, with the advent of industrialization. The industrial progress of man brought him into direct conflict with nature, which he began relentlessly and greedily to destroy. The reverence accorded to nature, its beauty and its powerful forces shifted instead to an unquestioning worship of science. Entire value systems changed, ideals were replaced by hard facts, and intuitive knowledge was replaced by statistics. Gradually, science was believed to be the only medium through which the world could be understood. The philosopher August Comte declared that from then on, science would be the religion of the world.

Until the sixteenth century, the boundaries demarcating religion, art, spirituality and nature were nebulous. A work of art that was not founded in the spiritual and the natural was inconceivable. The catastrophe that is Modernism has meant man's estrangement from his basic origin, nature, and has resulted in all his values, moral, religious, ethical as well as artistic, being radically changed.

We look back into the past and see art and religion emerging hand in hand from the recesses of pre-history. For many centuries they seem to remain indissolubly linked and then, in Europe, about five hundred years ago, the first signs of definite break appeared. It widens and with the high Renaissance we have an art essentially free and independent, individualistic in its origins and dimming to express nothing beyond the artist's own personality. The history of Western art since the Renaissance is chequered and distorted . . . and finally we begin to think that there can be no great art or great periods of art without an intimate link between art and religion. (Herbert Read)

Indeed, the history of art through the ages is lamentable. Much like a tree that has been struck by lightning and has been burned and hollowed, but still is a little green and alive, art too has been impoverished of its beauty and basic meaning. Modern and post modern art have been likened to a powerful body with no soul. Perhaps this, more than anything else, describes accurately the condition of mankind today.

Art and Era



When Kandinsky stated that art was the child of its age, he was surely referring to more than just a chronological relationship. Children everywhere are heir to the characteristics, both psychological and physical, of their parents. Yet, there exists a difference between the old generation and the new. This difference is reflected in art. Studying the characteristics of each generation, can steer us towards a better comprehension of the art created in that generation.

The above analogy can be useful in understanding art from a socio-cultural perspective. We may examine a child by studying the process of birth, physical growth, and from the psychological and spiritual dimension.

The process of childbirth was once fraught with difficulties. Infant mortality was high because of unsophisticated methods, an ignorance of hygienic methods and because science and medicine were as yet undeveloped. Today, the process of childbirth is easier, less dangerous and babies survive to become adults. In much the same way, creating a work of art was once difficult because materials were not easily found or even known of, and when they were, not everyone could afford them. Methods of studying nature too were not known or accessible. It is possible that many a great work of art remained caged in the imagination of the artist, never reaching tangible fruition.

Earlier, the growth of children was as difficult as was their birth. Science had not as yet developed methods of enhancing growth and illness was not readily overcome. Children today are growing better, more healthily and are stronger. Art too, grows faster in the present-day. It gains in popularity because of better communication methods, easier methods of display, etc. Techniques are aided by science and technology to make the production process swifter. The use of computers today, has opened up a new world altogether. While science has advanced enough to make accurate analysis possible and while all elements of art, such as line, form, composition and so on, can be closely studied, both artists and admirers of art have lost sight of the fact that excessive analysis destroys beauty. So closely are we able to examine the separate elements of art that the whole loses its identity and the essence fragments and the meaning is diluted. The closer the artist comes to each constituent of art, the further he moves away from its meaning. Again, this may well reflect man's relationship with the world today — the more closely and minutely he scrutinises the elements of the world, the less he understands it.

To return to the analogy of the child and art, it may be observed that the family unit and social support structures are tending to become less stable and secure. Close family ties have given way to marital discord and children today grow up with more psychological problems than they did earlier. In the same



way, the student of art once had a strong relationship with his teacher. Master and disciple had a special relationship wherein the disciple was humble and entirely receptive to the teachings of his master. Learning to be an artist was not a mere matter of learning the techniques of sketching or painting, but learning a way of thinking and a way of life. It involved self-discipline, learning to be pure in spirit and to revere nature and the highest power. Because these values have changed today, the harmony and balance in art, the deeper significance and unity of the work has been diminished, if not lost.

Art and Humanism

Any major influence on man's thought has also been an influence on man's art. For many centuries, religion and spirituality have resulted in art being monopolised by those who wielded religious power. Gradually, humanistic values gained importance and the very subject-matter of art changed to include the human element. Paintings of the regal splendour of courts gave way to those of ordinary people and their lives. The depiction of pain, poverty and stark reality gained acceptance. By portraying severity and deprivation, the artist tried to fulfil a social and moral duty. This is true of Vincent Van Gogh, who in his letters to his brother, said, "My only anxiety is how can I be of use in the world? Can't I serve some purpose and be of any good?" Van Gogh's painting, *The Potato Eaters*, is an example of a painting influenced by humanistic values. Regarding this work, the artist writes, "I have tried to emphasise that those people eating their potatoes in the lamplight have dug the earth with the very hands they put in the dish and so it speaks of manual labour and how they have honestly earned their food. I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilised people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for anyone to like it or admire it at once . . . it might prove to be a real peasant picture, I know it. But he who prefers to see the peasants in their Sunday best may do as he likes. I personally am convinced I get better results by painting them in their roughness than in giving them a conventional charm."

This approach to the subject-matter of art soon gained wide recognition and became an ideology in itself, Socialism. Art reflected the ideology of 'Social Realism', particularly in Russia and the Soviet Union.

In a sense, the status of art regressed from being rooted in truth to being based on reality — not reality as a whole, but merely social reality. Works of art from this period show a muscular, aggressive man, struggling for existence in a universe of which he is the nucleus. Man, is shown as a working machine against the harsh backdrop of factories, tool in hand and resentment in his face. The finer qualities of grace, beauty and love, are absent.



Art: A Protest Against Alienation

One of the hallmarks of modern living is speed. There is perhaps no sphere of life today that remains untouched by the hunger for speed. It has become so crucial to move as fast as possible, man has forgotten where he is going.

Speed, today is an ideology of civilised life and like all other ideologies that assume an importance for mankind, it has affected art. To begin with, the compulsion for speed has robbed man of his time for reflection and introspection. Nor has man left himself room for ease and rumination. So absorbed is man in the speed of his travel that he does not have time to enjoy the journey. For example, rarely does a person stop to enjoy the sights on his way to work, or revel in the nature that surrounds him. The faster a journey becomes, the less one is able to attend to the elements that one passes. It is a limiting of experience and of the essence of living. Man has forgotten that the journey is more important than the destination, just as living is more important than either birth or death.

When one considers that art is a kind of journey, a seeking of truth and beauty, one immediately realises that speed can serve as a destructive force.

In the Islamic tradition, spiritual travel with two stages, the first *Sayr liallah*, is a search for truth through an understanding of the self-leading to enlightenment, and the second *Sayr Fillah*, (Seyyed Jafar Sajjadi, *Farhang-e Maaref-e Islami*) is oneness with the infinite vastness of the source of enlightenment, Truth. Since there is no concrete destination, the concept of speed is superfluous. In art which is after all, a spiritual journey, today the quest for speed has destroyed identity and has left in its place estrangement. Through the years art has lost its support in religion and spirituality, humanistic values have declined, and there no longer exists a principle for beauty. Instead, there is alienation.

Today, the artist protests against the alienation by protecting his world. He does this by turning inward. Seeking stability and credibility, he begins to rely exclusively on himself. Thus, he is often found to be a recluse or a rebel, unable to conform to the norms of society. Gaugin renounced the world he knew and retired to the island of Tahiti from where he wrote, "I want to forget all the misfortunes of the past. I want to be free to paint without any glory whatsoever, in the eyes of others and want to die there to be forgotten here". In a letter to his wife he writes, "May the day come, perhaps very soon, when I will bury myself in the woods of an ocean island to live on ecstasy, calmness and art. With a new family and far from the European struggle for money."



Post Modernism and Future Art

Alienation and the turning inwards to the self may have resulted in individuality in art. However, the artist, living in a society unable to cope with the stress and pace of modern life is uneasy and restless. This feeling has led to a new form of art known as Post Modern art. As yet vague and inexplicit, post modern art is thought to have freedom from restriction of form, colour, plane, volume, and content. One may well wonder whether this also means a freedom from meaning, for the artist expresses without responsibility for meaning. Devoid of form, content and meaning, post modern art is soon striving for a freedom from existence altogether. With this, the rift of man from nature is almost complete. It is a dead end.

It is interesting to note that the concept of Post Modern art is applied with some difficulty to architecture, since architecture must necessarily have form and content. The fact that traditional elements may be used along with modern style is perhaps a hopeful sign of recovery from the pseudo-freedom of post modernism. The words of Rumi represent this hope:

هر کسی کو دور ماند از اصل خویش
باز جوید روز کار وصل خویش

Whoever has fallen apart from his origin will again find (search) the fortune of his unity.

Art is not a sum total of its period plus material needs. Art was born with man and is a part of his nature. Though art may be passing through a severe winter, the soil does not die, but awaits spring and rejuvenation. As for the future of art, time in nature and in art is not linear but cyclical. The signs that we may go full circle again are already evident. An Easternisation of the West is taking place and all over the world the synthesis between East and West, between one extreme and the other, and between spirit and matter is being sought.

Chapter 24, Verse 35 of the Holy *Quran* states:

Allah is the light of heaven and earth . . . Neither Eastern nor Western . . . *Allah* guides through his light whom he pleases . . . and *Allah* is cognizant of all things.

Man seeks tranquility and equilibrium and when he finds it, so will his art.

