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Art Research or Art Eulogy?

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Abstract

What is known today in Iran as "Islamic Art Studies"—setting aside the controversies surrounding the title itself—has been more or less dominated by a faction that refers to the artistic activities of the Islamic period as "sacred art" or interprets them through an exclusively mystical lens. In opposition, a group adhering to a scientific approach grounded in the methodology of art studies insists on the necessity of studying and understanding art within its actual socio-historical context. This latter group considers the discourse of the sacralist/Traditionalist faction to be gratuitous assertions, devoid of historical evidence and context. This note provides a brief overview of this prevalent debate within the academic sphere of art research in Iran. The author challenges some of the claims made by the sacralists from the perspective of art studies methodology, arguing that their discourse is not art scholarship (Honar-pazhuhi) but rather a form of "art eulogy" (Honar-sarayi) or a poetic description in romantic admiration of the artistic works of the Islamic period.

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What Strategy Does the Comprehensive Plan Propose for the Redevelopment of Tehran's Deteriorated Urban Fabric?

Extended Abstract

This article analyzes the methodological dichotomy in contemporary studies of Islamic art, critiquing the dominant "Traditionalist" approach, which the author identifies more precisely as "Symbolism" or "Esotericism." Rooted in the works of thinkers like René Guénon, this school views Islamic art and architecture as material manifestations of spiritual and esoteric truths. Adherents believe Muslim artists consciously created works where every element holds a symbolic meaning derived from Islamic mysticism (ʿIrfān). For example, domes are interpreted as diagrams of "Platonic purity" and the lack of perspective in painting as a representation of the "spiritual hierarchy of the cosmos." This approach frames Islamic art as having a sacral, trans-historical identity rooted in the Perennial Philosophy (Sophia Perennis). In opposition stands the "Historicist" approach, which relies on archaeological evidence, historical documents, and contextual analysis. Historicists challenge the Symbolists on several grounds. First, they argue that systematic mystical theories, such as those of Ibn ʿArabī, were codified long after many artistic masterpieces were created, making a direct influence unlikely. Second, they highlight the continuity of pre-Islamic Sasanian, Roman, and Byzantine traditions in many Islamic art forms, which Symbolist interpretations often ignore. Third, historical records show most artisans were from ordinary social classes, not the idealized "artist-mystics" envisioned by Traditionalists. The most crucial critique is the Symbolists' lack of methodological accountability. By claiming their subject is "trans-historical," they evade the scholarly requirement to provide historical evidence for their interpretations. The article concludes that while poetic approaches are valuable, they must not be conflated with scientific scholarship. Insisting on subjective, unverifiable interpretations as "academic research" damages the field's credibility and blurs the line between appreciative "art-eulogy" (Honar-sarāyī) and methodical "art research" (Honar-pazhūhī). Therefore, adherence to scholarly ethics and methodological integrity is essential for preserving the health of the discipline.

The fantastical and captivated depictions of what they call "Islamic art"—proffered by sacralists, mystics, and the so-called Traditionalists—fail to qualify as scholarly output by the standards of art history, methodology, and research. Instead, they must either be viewed benevolently as tantamount to poetry or aesthetic literary works, or, with greater critical rigor, be identified for what they are: unsubstantiated, mind-forged pronouncements.

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