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ZAHER VA BATEN
OUTER FORM AND INNER MEANING IN IRANIAN TEXTILE DESIGNS

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The distinction between *zاهر* and *baten*, outer and inner, is a fundamental duality encountered in the philosophical, psychological, religious and mystical aspects of Iranian thought. The metaphysical desire to go beyond sensory apprehension of transient external forms to intellectual comprehension of their lasting inner significance may be considered the central theme of Iranian visual art including textile designs. A close examination of four textiles from the modern period reveals some of the concealed personal motivations and cultural meanings embodied in their patterns. Beyond all practical concerns, these weavings have in common the aim of unifying the duality of ordinary sight and insight and the related duality of aesthetics and ethics. Achieved by different means, the textile designs accomplish this by encouraging an imaginative journey from *zاهر* to *baten*, from material form to spiritual essence.

1. In the study of Iranian textile designs, there comes a time when most questions concerning materials and techniques have been answered. The difficult problems of origins of particular designs and their evolution have been resolved to the extent possible. The primary concern then becomes something less tangible. Have these designs served and do they continue to serve as carriers of significant personal and social meanings? In what ways have they responded to or commented on their cultural contexts? By asking these challenging questions, we are beginning one form of the spiritual journey. We seek to travel in imagination from knowledge of the outer forms of Iranian textiles to an understanding of their inner meanings.

The English traveler Edward G. Browne made a famous observation in *A Year Amongst the Persians*, his record of a year of discovery in Iran in 1887 and 1888; "The most striking feature of the Persians as a nation is their passion for metaphysical speculation. This passion, so far from being confined to the learned classes, permeates all ranks, and manifests itself in the shopkeeper and the muleteer, as well as in the scholar and the man of letters". Allowing for the disappearance of mule drivers, the same observation could be made after more than a century has passed. Its present-day relevance may be tested and demonstrated by engaging in some passionate metaphysical speculations of our own. In this spirit, we examine the personal motivations and common meanings of four textiles including one that dates from the period when Edward Browne was first in Iran.

2. A small textile from the region of Zabol in eastern Iran (Fig.1) takes us immediately from general observations to the definite and particular. An old city near the Afghanistan border, Zabol's importance in ancient Zoroastrian times was recorded one thousand years ago by Ferdowsi in the *Shahnameh (The Book of Kings)*. The textile (c.1950) was probably not made to be sold immediately in the local bazaar or to fulfill an order from a traveling merchant. It is more likely that significant personal meanings found expression in the choice to weave this simple design.

Some elements of the apparently naive design are relatively easy to interpret. As in larger rugs and carpets, the prominent border creates a protected space and imagined feelings of refuge. Reinforcing this meaning, the peacock is conventionally seen in Persian poetry and folklore to be living a privileged life in an enclosed garden sheltered from the dangers of the surrounding world. However, this image is almost always intended to convey some different metaphysical meanings. The peacock's raucous cry is a discordant element that signals the sorrow of exile and expresses a longing to return to its original home in paradise. In this design, the solitary peacock gazes at its reflection or contemplates its dual nature.



Figure 1

In Sufism, the common name for the practices of Islamic mysticism, the vase is an external physical form concealing an inner spiritual essence. Like all material forms, it is a *zaher* that encloses a *baten*. Growing from the vase, a vine or tree reaches from earth to heaven. The modesty of the woven image does not prevent it from having an ambitious cultural intention. The light-seeking vine and the upward-growing tree model the lifelong journey of Sufi dervishes to union with the One. In the imagery of this spiritual tradition, the cosmic tree symbolizes the possible union of matter and essence. It represents the vertical path joining earth and cosmos, human and divine.

The sword-bearing lion and the awkwardly drawn sun behind the lion are together a centuries-old symbol of Iran and the refuge of Shi'a Islam, the national religion. In folk beliefs, the fearless lion protected the home. Many locks guarding family possessions were made in the form of a lion. In Iranian folk art, the lion and sword symbol with the rising sun is a reminder of Ali and his double-edged sword *Zulfiqar*. The first of the twelve Imams of Shi'ism, Ali has traditionally been called the "lion of Allah" for his courageous defence of Islam in the difficult first years.

In this combination of images, we detect the concerns of the weaver. In a time of confusing changes, she returned to the religious vision and comprehensible way of life that gave order and meaning to her experiences. At the time of weaving, some members of her family may have urgently needed the special protections provided by the lion and Imam Ali. The peacock seeking to return to a remembered happiness echoed her heartfelt longings. We may believe that the strongest private emotions and desires came into focus in the making of this ordinary object.

These intuitions become less speculative with some additional cultural knowledge. In times not long past, one ordinary talisman found in the countryside and villages of Iran was the *ganjnameh* or "treasure writing." At their simplest, they may have consisted of little more than the lion and sun image drawn on paper. This key symbol in the *ganjnameh* was more frequently surrounded by other mystical images which often included sacred words and numbers with concealed meanings.

In popular beliefs, hidden treasure or *ganj* could be found by considering the uncertainties of life with the aid of these powerful talismans. By puzzling over the meanings of these images, hidden connections and

previously neglected possibilities became apparent. One purpose was to create feelings of safety by calling in this way on the resources of religion and folklore traditions. Like a *garjnameh*, the Zabol weaving invoked protections for home and family represented by deeply-held beliefs of Shi'a Islam. In the original environment, contemplating these familiar images answered a current need by creating feelings of stability and reassurance.

This weaving may have been made for the weaver's family with the hope of avoiding all possible dangers and misfortunes. Very probably, a principal motivation was to bring tranquility and good fortune to the home at an uncertain time. Separated by time and space from the original contexts, it still retains the power to evoke these universal human concerns. Without knowing all details of its creation, a simple weaving invites viewers to meditate on the circumstances of their lives and respond in culturally meaningful ways. By encouraging a participating response in the present, a textile weaves new connections and continues to create.

3. Deeply-embedded attitudes to cultural communication based on concealment followed by revelation are encountered in all areas of Iranian life. The two small textiles or *poshtis* illustrated were made c.1970 in Tabriz, the capital of Azerbaijan province in northwest Iran. They are not typical or conventional examples of Iranian weaving although they certainly display the creative imagination of the designer and the technical abilities of the weaver. By examining them closely, they will give some indication of the extensive cultural resources needed to interpret more standard designs.

At first glance, both textiles copy familiar images from European paintings of farmyard scenes and conventional still-lives. Few connoisseurs would give them a second glance after spending a few moments admiring the evident technical skills involved in making them. However, a suspicion gradually increases that important cultural values are intentionally concealed in these seemingly innocent scenes. Is it significant that one image is a representation of a rapidly changing scene while the other conveys a feeling of stability and rest? One is a dynamic display of spontaneous life and the second gives the opposite impression of a carefully considered static composition (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) .



Figure 2, left. Figure 3, right.

With repeated viewings, the suspicion increases that conventions of European decorative art have been assimilated to another culture and put to new creative uses. To state the obvious, the enterprising birds of one textile appear to have just turned over a large woven basket. This common achievement required a range of skills including curiosity together with tenacity and ingenuity. It is reasonable to believe that a hunger for sustenance and a desire for new experiences also played important roles. After their cooperative effort, the birds have discovered the green cabbages the basket contained. They are now busily engaged in examining and consuming their prize.

This image recalls the abstractly drawn birds found in the designs of many Persian tribal and village rugs. They are commonly shown bent over as if to peck at seeds or to look for scraps of food. In Shi'a Islam and Iranian folk beliefs, this conventional image has a well understood significance. For the believers, it is a reminder of the obligation of prayer. Some with longer cultural memories will recall another metaphor that may apply here. Plato compared the mind to a cage full of birds.

In the poetry and visual art inspired by Islamic mysticism, birds are traditional images of human souls on the spiritual journey. The goal of the Sufi mystics was to annihilate self in union with the One, the divine reality concealed behind the veil of appearances. In Sufism, a material object is an external form or *zahir* that conceals an inner essence or *baten*. Seeing any container, the spiritual traveler strives to go beyond surface understandings to comprehend what it truly contains.

Any image showing many birds together has another cultural association for Iranians. Such a scene will always be a visual reminder of the long poem *Mantiq al-Tayr (The Conference of the Birds)* by Attar. Written in the twelfth century, the classic work is a complex parable describing the trials and adventures of thirty birds embarked on the seven stages of the arduous journey to find their true King. This is a metaphorical account of the seven-staged path of the Sufi mystics to complete union with the Divine.

To appreciate the historical context, it should be recalled that Attar's personal life journey ended less happily. Unlike the birds in his parable, his travels did not end fortunately with a transforming personal revelation. He is believed to have perished in 1221 during the destruction of his native city Nishapur by Mongol invaders sent by Genghis Khan. Against the background of contemporary events, *The Conference of the Birds* may be read as urgent social commentary.

In the pictorial design of the Tabriz textile, the birds have somehow managed to knock over the round container to discover only cabbages. This is sufficient treasure in ordinary material terms but perhaps they have inadvertently revealed something more. In the interconnected cultural logic that produced this design, there are always other possibilities to join knowledge, memories and experiences. In Sufism, everything in the created world perceived by the ordinary senses symbolizes a reality to be conceived in its true nature by the inner senses.

In this more connected way of symbolic understanding, the green color of the cabbages may be a cultural reference. It brings to mind the color associated with the Prophet Mohammed, the holy green color of his cloak and flag. In a concealed symbolic way, the innocuous image suggests a possible religious motivation. On their journey to understanding, the birds or human souls they represent may have rediscovered the revelation of Islam and its life-sustaining qualities.

Another borrowing from European conventions is the signature Tabriz – Yusuf Azimi on the second textile identifying the place of origin and designer of both weavings. Stating the obvious again, the two containers are round and square woven baskets containing an abundance of fruit. The peaches and grapes are themselves external forms or containers, each one concealing a precious inner essence. The peaches enclose large seeds that may become beautiful trees heavy with fruit. The image of grapes has a well-

known mystical meaning in Sufi poetry and philosophy. The grapes enclose a spiritual wine which will inspire ecstasy in the traveler.

In many cultures, the square or rectangle is a traditional representation of human presence and identity while the round shape is a conventional symbol of divine perfection. By showing them together in the design, it is strongly suspected that Yusuf Azimi intended receptive viewers to reach a spiritual understanding. They were being encouraged to contemplate the nearness of earth and heaven or the ideal unity of human and divine.

Another symbolic interpretation is more elusive. Viewers will notice the round woven baskets in both designs and recall that every physical object is a container. At some point, observers open to other interpretations realize there are more woven containers quietly on display in both textiles. These additional rectangular containers have been neglected until now in our restless scanning of the designs. However, these signs of human presence are possibly even more important to the interpretation of these patterns.

This time the inconspicuous containers are not cleverly hidden in the designs. They are not concealed at all since they are the woven textiles themselves. By a meaningful visual pun, the designer recalls a spiritual truth. In this metaphysical understanding of reality, material objects are first encountered as forms with conventional surface meanings. When seen with inner vision, these textiles become external forms that enclose precious inner essences. In two Tabriz textiles and all other material objects, outward attributes are a veil concealing the interior forms and meanings which are their true significance.

After our wandering exploration through the material and mental worlds created by these objects, we are invited to reach an imaginative understanding. In this creative tradition, the essence of each textile is to be found in its design. Two rectangular woven containers which are the textiles themselves each enclose or contain in their designs a round woven container. Expressed more abstractly, the designs convey in a disguised way the primary meaning in Sufism that substance encloses essence. Every material form or *zاهر* perceivable by ordinary sight encloses an inner essence or *باطن* that may be seen by means of the internal vision of an intellectual understanding.

The design portraying the sudden meeting of birds and cabbages may be seen more abstractly. It shows symbols of air and spirit encountering symbols of earth and matter. This poetic image is first a meaningful reminder that the practical life of the birds is an endless searching for what will sustain them. At the same time, it suggests the true language of birds is unending prayer and praise. This is the proper language for spiritual travelers and it is the true sustenance needed for the longest journey. The broom in the background echoes this religious understanding by reinforcing the theme of purification necessary before prayer.

The emphasis on realistic shading is another suggestive element in both designs. It is not only the solution of a challenging technical problem. Within the conventions of Iranian art, the duality of light and shade is a reminder of the dual nature of existence. Expressing the philosophy of life that gave rise to this cultural form, these textiles are an unobtrusive visual showing of a fundamental way of apprehending the world. A container reveals the contained. An external form encloses an inner essence.

The apparent modesty of these designs and their indirect communication of cultural meanings are essential parts of their common message. The impressive display of visible beauty and the evident weaving mastery are not the central meanings. These creations were intended to display an ideal unity of matter and spirit, a meeting place of substance and essence, an inseparable union of human and divine. Like the patterns of many larger Persian rugs and carpets, these textile designs express this passionate

metaphysical understanding of the nature of reality. They may be understood as portrayals of the mind engaged in processing sensory experience and then going further to give meaning to it.

4. A traditional design is found in the antique Senneh rug made c.1880 at the beginning of the modern period of carpet production and near the time when Edward Browne was in Iran. Located in the Kurdish region of western Iran, the small city Senneh (now renamed Sanandaj) has been known for finely woven textiles produced in a limited range of designs. Judging from the intricacy of this nineteenth-century Senneh pattern and the fineness of the knotting, this rug would have taken a skilled weaver many months to complete.

The design repeats the familiar *boteh* pattern (Fig.4) that appears in countless versions in Iranian visual art. Regular patterns formed from small repeated elements are known to produce a calming or hypnotic effect. In designs inspired by Sufism, they recall the *zikr Allah* or “remembrance of God” of the dervish. These were short phrases repeated endlessly to enter a mental state of abandonment of this world. When total forgetfulness was reached, only divine reality remained present to the consciousness of the dervish.



Figure 4

The most common *zikr* was the exclamation *ya hu* (Oh He!) or simply *hu* (He!). By endlessly repeating *ya hu* or *ya Ali* (Oh Ali!) or another *zikr*, the desired state of unawareness was produced. In the visual art inspired by Sufism, small repeated patterns recall this spiritual exercise of the dervishes. By bringing to mind the constantly repeated *zikr Allah* of the holy wanderers, they create a similar state of forgetfulness in spiritually aware viewers. The repetitions many times of a *zikr Allah* or a small image in a pattern have another metaphysical significance. They are intended to lead the spiritual traveler from the ordinary perception of a finite experience to a contemplation of the unbounded.

The rounded form of the *boteh* with its small opening is a reminder of Sufism in another meaningful way. It recalls the similar form of the *kashkul*, the bowl for alms that was one of the few possessions of the wandering dervishes. The shapes alone of the *boteh* and *kashkul* have a primary significance due to the way they create enclosures or protected spaces. Their forms recall the basic duality of container and contained, inspiring profound thoughts in susceptible viewers about the duality of outer form and inner meaning.

Number symbolism is frequently employed in Iranian visual art to convey significant meanings in a concealed way. In the Senneh rug, there are sixteen rows containing thirteen *botehs* plus a puzzling fractional *boteh*. Sixteen is a number arrived at by doubling four times from one. In Islamic mysticism, this is another subtle reminder of the origin of all things in the divine unity. The extra fractional *boteh* is very probably not a repeated flaw in the design or a mistake in the weaving. That would be unlikely in a tightly woven Senneh rug from this period. For Iranians, each row may serve as a poignant reminder of the *chahardah ma'sum*, the “fourteen pure ones” of Shi'a Islam who were Mohammed, his daughter Fatima and the twelve Imams. The twelfth Imam did not complete his life and remains in concealment, waiting for the time to return.



Figure 5

With these interpretations, the completed work (Fig.5) acquires a different significance. It should not be seen primarily as a luxury object intended for purposes of opulent decoration. This finely made Senneh

rug was not necessarily intended as a visual display of the designer's or the owner's refined appreciation of external beauty. It should convey to the sensitive viewer more than a conspicuous demonstration of evident wealth and power. We suggest this textile may be better understood in a less material way. In ethical terms, it should be viewed as a lasting memory and permanent display of the personal sacrifices and patient devotion necessary to complete it. It displays a way of apprehending and comprehending the visible and invisible worlds.

In Sufism, these ethical dimensions of meaning are essential components of the true beauty of any humanly created object. The detailed making of the Senneh rug undoubtedly responded to many conflicting motivations. Ideally, the considerable sacrifices involved in creating this textile were undertaken with sincere humility in the service of spiritual and religious values. Most importantly, its creation enacted a comprehensive cultural understanding and the completed object has value primarily as an embodiment of that understanding.

That is the content or essence of this material object, the sublime *baten* enclosed by the beautiful *zaher*. For the spiritually aware, that inner meaning is its genuine beauty. Properly understood, the design is a forceful reminder of a fundamental value in Iranian culture. The temptation to remain at the level of transient surface appearances must be challenged and overcome. Enduring aesthetic value and true reality are to be found in ethical meaning.

Reversing our first emotional understanding, this textile comes to represent the abandonment of ordinary perceptions and a loss of awareness of self. What it outwardly affirms as a material object, it inwardly denies. Expressed in an obvious sign of material wealth, the Senneh rug serves as a concealed sign of the spiritual poverty necessary to achieve the total vision that combines sight and insight. In this way of perceiving, the material form is always most profoundly experienced as a veil concealing its inner significance. A spiritual inspiration derived from the philosophy of Sufism has brought the dualities of substance and essence, emotion and meaning, and aesthetics and ethics to a comprehensible unity in a beautiful and lasting physical form.

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