
Critical Remarks on “Mystical Aesthetics” The Case of Persian Painting

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Abstract

There are several texts pertaining to Persian painting which explain its aesthetics on the basis of mysticism and the notion of imaginal world. This point of view bears some methodological problems. Some of the prominent scholars (Corbin, Burckhardt, Nasr, Ringgenberg et al.) referring to Ibn ‘Arabi’s mystical notions, have tried to show that the specific aesthetics of Persian painting has been derived from the imaginal world. Our aim here is to show that establishing the aesthetics of Persian painting on the basis of imaginal world’s metaphysics lacks seriously the theoretical and methodological rigour. Firstly, Ibn ‘Arabi and his heirs’ conception of imaginal world was first of all ontological (hierarchy of Being) and epistemological (knowledge of God). Secondly, there is no overwhelming proof which could demonstrate that Persian painters were initiated to this notion. Thirdly, achieving the imaginal world through mystical intuition is conditioned by asceticism and purifying rituals, which were not necessarily familiar to Persian painters almost working in the court of Sultans. We will try to show that considering these paintings in themselves is the genuine way to establish their aesthetics principles.

Keywords: Persian painting, mysticism, imaginal world, visual space

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1. Introduction

Persian painting has been an interesting and challenging research subject for many researchers throughout art history. The body of research on the field has been mainly focused on Persian painting’s historical and chronological development and evolution, thus barely considering aesthetics and theoretical aspects of Persian painting. However, scholars such as Massignon, Corbin, Burckhardt, Nasr, and Ringgenberg have tried to outline a theoretical foundation for Persian painting, finally reaching the goal on their own view; an approach which is analyzed and finally criticized by the present study. Our point of departure for the present text will be criticizing the endeavor to find theoretical basis for Persian painting in mystical texts and traditions. The latter viewpoint, namely a “meta-aesthetical” approach searches for exterior evidences, signs and grounds in order to analyze and interpret Persian painting, therefore it could be said that such an approach is not essentially dealing with artworks themselves or evaluating them aesthetically and individually. We believe that the main aspect worth of consideration in the present context is a critique of the way metaphysical concepts from the realm of mysticism have been applied to Persian painting, an approach which is faced with serious theoretical and methodological obstacles when it comes to analyzing this type of painting.

The most significant formal

characteristic of Persian painting is that it is composed of a non-centralized visual space where various elements are juxtaposed on a flat two-dimensional surface beside one another, encountering the viewer with a “decentralized” space. This leads to the possibility of viewing different scenes from one event simultaneously and experiencing temporality by way of a different presentation of spatiality which on its own turn replaces an “aesthetics of depth” with an “aesthetics of surface”. Evidently, Persian painters were aware of rules of perspective since the Muslim world had already made significant advancements in scientific relevant fields such as mathematics and geometry before the European world’s advancements and its consequent effects on Renaissance art, hence the “inverse perspective” of Persian paintings is not due to any lack of knowledge (for more information, see: El-Bizri: 2010). It seems quite justified to hold that the flat visual space should have emerged from other aesthetical reasons, ones which have motivated many scholars to analyze Persian painting and its different aesthetic according to the mystical notions.

One of the first thinkers to advance such an approach, was the French philosopher Henry Corbin (1903 – 1978) who defined “vertical projection” as the most significant characteristic of Persian painting, argued that when encountering these works of art “contemplation of the image becomes a mental itinerary, an

inner accomplishment” (Corbin, 1997: 91). This approach was adopted by other thinkers such as Burckhardt, Nasr and Ringgenberg who tried to derive a theory of aesthetics for Persian painting from mystical texts and sources. It could be argued that by reducing Persian painting’s aesthetics to metaphysical theories of mysticism there is also the possibility of falling into an abyss of neglecting the works of art themselves and limiting the analysis to mystical views which despite their own value, eliminate the possibility of an original aesthetic approach. This study will explore the abovementioned theoreticians’ approaches and methods which led to the establishment of a “mystical aesthetics” pertaining to Persian painting and simultaneously demonstrating how it is impossible to make a plausible relation between these arguments and their inevitable results.

2. Mysticism and Aesthetics of Persian Painting

Many traditionalists such as Corbin, Burckhardt, Nasr et al. have argued that Persian painting’s aesthetics is based on the doctrines of Islamic mysticism which brings it close to the very source of sacred art as a result of esoteric doctrines found in this style of painting. According to them there is sufficient historical evidences indicating a relation between different mystical orders and Persian painting, such as the fact that in the same era when Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jami (1414

– 1492) was interpreting, commenting on and expanding Ibn Arabi’s mysticism, Kamāl al-din Bihzād (c.1450 – c.1535) was also creating his masterpieces. It is also claimed that these Masters themselves usually belonged to mystic circles and were in search of divine truth; and indeed it is known that in the era of Sultān Husayn Bāyqarā (1438 – 1506) ceremonies were held in Herat where painters such as Bihzād would meet famous mystics like Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jami. Consequently, it is concluded that these master painters would meet mystics in order to learn doctrines of mysticism and discover the divine truth which was supposed to become manifest later in their works, thus “it is enough to study the religious background of many miniaturists and musicians of the Safavid, Ottoman and Mogul dynasties to become aware of this fact.” (Nasr, 1987: 13). According to this approach these artists were themselves mystics whose hearts were filled with an enthusiasm to discover the truth and render it visible in their works. It follows that more than artistic skills, the painter was concerned with *exercitia spiritualia*.

Certainly, Jami, the great commentator of Ibn ‘Arabi and the brilliant Sufi of Timurid epoch, was the most reliable and eligible figure who could have guided artists in discovering mysticism and learning mystic doctrines. As the most significant figure who expanded and explained Ibn ‘Arabi’s thoughts and ideas,

he was the main figure with whom artists actually met and discussed. However, the question rises as to whether these facts could function as reliable basis for an argument supporting the idea that Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrines influenced Persian painting and formed the foundation of its aesthetics. The supporters of such viewpoint are able to find facts and tracks of such influences in every work of Persian painting, arguing that this influence is evident in both form and content of Persian paintings, supporting their arguments with examples from Ibn ‘Arabi’s imaginal world.

Indeed Ibn ‘Arabi’s mystical doctrines have had great influence on all Islamic esoteric schools. Nevertheless, is it plausible to conclude that merely friendships, acquaintances and meetings of great mystics with master painters is enough evidence to claim the emergence of Persian painting’s aesthetics from the doctrines of mysticism? Undoubtedly, many painters were familiar with mystic orders and circles and indeed many were members of such circles, however it does not follow automatically and could not be deductively concluded that the artist’s beliefs are always manifest and present in his works and are influencing his artistic approach. I will certainly call this an example of “intentional fallacy” in the sense that the artist’s intentions and beliefs are not adequate or steadfast criteria according to which one can perceive and understand the work of art

itself. According to this fallacy, there are two aspects at issue here: “the artist’s mind, which is private, and the work of art, which is open to public scrutiny. Evaluation and interpretation pertain only to the latter. Any reference to the former, hence the psychological or biographical study of external evidence belonging to the former, is irrelevant” (Guter, 2010: 106). Reference to the artist’s biographical facts or worldview not only limits interpretation, but also causes several theoretical limitations. In this regard, it should be noted that the first and most central fact – present throughout Persian painting history – is the continuation and preservation of tradition from master to pupil. Moreover, it is of great importance to remember that the most magnificent and aesthetically intriguing masterworks in the history of Persian painting were ordered by the kings and were made to please them. Hence it is improbable, if not impossible, to think of these royal clients as Sufis or mystics – from Ilkhanids to Timurids and Safavids, from Shāhrukh Mīrzā, Bāysunghur Mīrzā to King Tahmāsp – though many of them were patron and sponsor of artists and even artist themselves. The role of these royal patrons and their demands are key aspects indispensable from analysis. Finally, the choice of texts could shed a light on our argumentation, since most of the illustrated texts are lyrical and romantic poems or texts such as Nizāmi’s *Khamsa*, Jami’s *Seven Thrones* (*Haft Awrang*) or

Ferdowsi's masterpiece *Shahnama* (Book of the Kings), then it could be argued that the preliminary intention to create such works has been aesthetic pleasure and not necessarily spiritual elevation. If the latter would have been the case, then mystical texts such as Rumi's poems had to be chosen. As a final remark, the diversity of style especially in the figures' clothing from one period to another and astounding formal specifications corresponding to the artists' era reinforces the aforementioned argument that the artists were influenced by the necessities and aesthetic criteria or dominant aesthetic taste of their times rather than mystical and spiritual drives.

3. Characteristics of the Imaginal World

Many scholars (Corbin, Burckhardt, Nasr, et al) argue that Persian painting's aesthetic is rooted in the imaginal world, referring to mystics and illuminationists' descriptions of the imaginal world they consider it as the heart of Islamic art's aesthetics. According to these scholars, two-dimensional discontinuous space, vivid glowing hues, diffused light in these paintings are all evidence of the emergence of this imaginal world in Persian art, hence the reference to Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine about the imaginal world.

On the one hand, we are faced with a metaphysical doctrine, the imaginal world, and on the other, those scholars who try to justify it as a basis or theory for Persian painting's aesthetics. In a

theoretical retrospection the imaginal world could be viewed as a solution to Plato's and Platonists' theoretical aporia on relating the intelligible world (*mundus intelligibilis*) and the sensible world (*mundus sensibilis*). According to Ibn 'Arabi, the imaginal world is an intermediary one which makes possible the elimination of materiality from the sensible world and a material coloration of the intelligible world. However, the question on how this metaphysical doctrine can yield an aesthetic theory has never been distinctly and clearly addressed. It seems implausible to conclude from similarities between the painting's visual world and the mystics' description of the imaginal world that the former is influenced by or based on the latter. Water and mirror are both reflective, but could we justifiably conclude that one has influenced or formed the reflective characteristic of the other? Such conclusions put the theoretician or philosopher in danger of several methodological fallacies which could not be overcome.

Nevertheless, one of the very first endeavors to justify such a viewpoint is Seyyed Hossein Nasr's "The World of Imagination and the Concept of Space in the Persian Miniature" (1987) where he asserts that "The Cartesian dualistic view of reality left European science and philosophy, and through them the general view of Western men, with but two alternative domains of reality: the world of the mind and the world of extension or

space which became identified exclusively with the material world." (Nasr, 1987: 177). Firstly, it should be noted that the division between the intelligible and the sensible was established primarily by Plato between ideal forms and the sensible world, the relation of these two worlds is itself ambiguous and debatable. Secondly, long before the Cartesian demarcation, with the Italian Renaissance and thanks to the establishment of the theory of perspective by the Italian theoretician Leon Battista Alberti's (1404-1472) book *Della Pittura* (On Painting) (1435), the aesthetics of painting based on *perspectiva artificialis* was established and accepted.

Moreover, Nasr argues that since Persian painting's space is "non-physical", in order to present the elevated and sublime aspects of this spiritual space one should completely eliminate the realm of physicality and the representation of common material world because "as long as there is mere continuity with profane space, it is not possible to experience the transcendent dimension which leads beyond physical space and the physical world." (ibid. 178). Two points are worth mentioning here; firstly, Nasr's definition of "non-physical space" is highly ambiguous, secondly the author never explains how one is supposedly led to this space by "[the] space which is more than physical space" (178). It is extremely difficult to imagine that pictures such as Khosrow Parviz's Assassination, Zakhak's Story, Shirin's Bathing or Hoday and

Hodayoun in Garden which are created with such "space which is more than physical space" for earthly and worldly aesthetic pleasure are in fact trying to guide us to the spiritual and divine realm. Indeed, Nasr asserts that "the heroic scene is transposed above history to a 'transhistorical world' where it also acquires a gnostic ('irfani) and mystical significance" (ibid, 180). Evidently, miniatures such as Ascention of Prophet Muhammad have religious, mystical and even symbolic connotations. Nevertheless, mystical interpretations of other paintings such as those of Book of the Kings or other earthly poems with earthly themes seems doubtful and unreasonable. In fact, it is widely accepted that interpretation of any artwork is an endless process, each new interpretation being one of the numerous possible interpretations which on its own turn adds to the history and horizon of meaning of the work; thus there's no determinate, definite and final interpretation, i.e. meaning, to artworks. Despite this fact, Nasr claims that "The majority of Persian miniatures depict not a profane world but this intermediary world which stands above the physical and which is the gateway to all higher states of being." (ibid), therefore striving to prove the connection supposed to link Persian painting's space to the imaginal world.

4. The Relation between The Imaginal World and Persian Painting

The current section will deal with

the modes of the imaginal world's manifestation and appearance in Persian painting. It is said that the Persian painting is supposed to represent this world, itself as one of the key concepts to understanding Islamic art, Corbin's *mundus imaginalis* is a spiritual world with an illuminated essence which simultaneously possesses qualities of both a material substance and an intellectual one. In the same article, Nasr asserts that, "the space of the Persian miniature is a recapitulation of this space and its forms and colours are a replica of this world." (ibid, 181). It is worth noting that the intuition of the imaginal world could happen under specific conditions. According to Corbin the imaginal world with its specific autonomous reality, standing independent of the imaginer, is "'exterior' to the imagining subject, it can be seen by others in the outside world, *but in practice these others must be mystics*" (Corbin, 1997: 219; my italic). Moreover, Corbin states that according to Ibn 'Arabi to have a vision of the imaginal world (*khayāl munfaṣīl*) is "of the utmost importance for the experience *gained in Prayer*" (ibid, 224; my italic), and "only other mystics are able to perceive it" (ibid, 223; my italic). It should be noted that according to Ibn 'Arabi and Suhrawardi only mystics trained in mysticism – those who have gone through different degrees of mystical journey – can reach this imaginal world. Thus, it is highly difficult to prove that all painters experienced these degrees, have reached that level of perfection, since many of them were not even religious characters let alone

mystics. We are not told anywhere how these painters have reached a level of "spiritual intuition" where their "heart's eye" has been opened.

It could clearly be concluded that the main problem with this theory of aesthetics is the justifiability of the application of this doctrine on earthly artworks, which represent no clear and distinct element of the spiritual. Nasr argues that the Persian paintings are far from the 'objective reality' since "if it were to do so it would cease to be a depiction of the *malakut* and would become simply a replica of the *mulk*." (ibid, 181). Considering the fact that the subject matter of most Persian paintings are earthly subjects, common to daily life and depictions of various aspects of human life in general – such as building a castle, bathing, fights, hunts, picnics and etc. – it is not clear how from such pictures one can conclude that "the miniature serves as a reminder of a reality which *transcends the mundane surroundings of human life*" (ibid, 182; my italic). Assigning the highest priority and place of honor to imagination in artistic creation, after Romantics it is a widely accepted that imagination should be linked in one way or the other essentially to the creation of art and aesthetics. However, it is worth remembering that theoreticians of the imaginal world's doctrine have never dealt with artistic creation, pursuing a totally different intention than that of modern aesthetics and artistic imagination.

5. The Imaginal World’s Manifestation in Persian Painting

I. It is said that shadows and shadowing is clearly absent from all Persian paintings. Since shadow is created when light shines on a solid material or object, while transparency is the natural and essential characteristic of Persian painting’s ideal and imaginal motifs, no shadow is ever created by these imaginal forms. Imaginal world is devoid of physical and material creatures, thus transparency and spirituality is manifested in this style of painting. On the other hand, one can assume that by reference to Suhrawardi’s metaphysics of light, many painters did not depict shadow – as that level of creatures deprived of divine light – since shadow represents deprivation from divine light and negation of existence. As a result, the encompassing nature of light sheds light on every corner, aspect and object of Persian painting. In fact, in Pre-renaissance art such as byzantine and medieval art luminosity and glare were established values and elements necessary to painting, hence extensive luminosity and distribution of light all over paintings. Shading emerges in western art when artists began their endeavor to represent depth. In other words, for the representation of objects’ volume shading was a technical necessity and since such a necessity was not an issue in Persian painting, artists did not search for such techniques.

II. The unique visual space of

Persian painting is essentially and fundamentally different from perspectival space characteristic of western art after Renaissance. Some theoreticians argue that this unique visual space enables the observer to experience various horizons and witness different degrees of existence. A very critical point which none of these theoreticians explain clearly and distinctly is that how these different visual levels of a paintings are capable of representing the hierarchy of Being. On the one hand, considering different powers of perception as the power of sensibility, imagination, understanding, and pure reason, it is not clear how Persian paintings demonstrate a distinction between these levels and correspond to them. Indeed, according to the Kantian conception of perception, the aesthetic properties of the object are perceived by the sensibility and apprehended (*auffassen*) by imagination, then the power of understanding (*Verständnis*) analyzes and categorizes these data and finally a free play between these two powers leads to aesthetic pleasure from the object. On the other hand, it is an unjustified claim to consider an experience of elevation in the ontological degrees and levels in the observers of such artworks. For instance, one can hardly imagine how paintings such as “Hārūn-al-Rashid Bathing” – a masterpiece by Bihzād – could ever lead to spiritual elevation.

It is argued that in the multi-layered

space of Persian painting each layer is independent. This multi-layered quality could be due to the fact that these paintings are indeed illustrations of poems, mainly lyrical poems in which each couplet is meaningful in an independent level while being related to other preceding and proceeding couplets. Thus, one can speak of a succession of couplets rather than a continuity in classical Persian poems. The same argument applies to paintings where motifs, forms and the pictures composition and events may possess spatial succession but not necessarily subjective continuity. Moreover, this is not merely and only characteristic of Persian painting; for instance, The Miracle of the Child Attacked and Recued (1328) by Agostino Novello (1240-1309), Last Supper by Pietro Lorenzetti (1280-1348) or The Tribute Money (1425) a famous fresco by Masaccio (1401-1428) also depict interrelated events in one picture. It could be argued that in western painting temporality is single layered while in Persian painting it is multi layered, due to the fact that the former pictures are based on prose such as the holy Bible where the narrative's continuity is more logical and structured while in poetry the flexible articulation does not lean on linear narrative structure.

Art historian and theoretician Patrick Ringennberg compares visual space in byzantine iconography and Chinese painting concluding that the visual space

in Persian painting is a combination of the aforementioned styles, thus “the miniature is a synthesis between sensory vision and intellectual intuition” (Ringgenberg, 2006, 157). According to Ringgenberg Persian painting's visual space is a sort of “contemplative clearing” (*clairière contemplative*) and “supernatural horizon” (*lisière surnaturelle*) (ibid). But any visual space is essentially perceived according to sensory vision and intellectual intuition. The former condition is not difficult to explain as painting is born with vision and dies with it, a characteristic of visual arts in any culture and tradition. However, intellectual intuition is supposed to connect spiritual transcendence and human space. In other words, the observer should hopefully experience a sort of space, thanks to this intuition, which has no material or physical boundary. Nevertheless, it should be noted that many paintings and artworks possess such quality; for instance, a faithful Christian upon seeing Raphael's Madonna in Meadow (1505) does not suppose the characters as a common mother with her child in a meadow on countryside. Indeed, on the most basic level the eyes receive such pictures, however by reference to the observer's cultural and religious background all symbolic aspects of the holy family are also evoked and brought into mind. In this respect, such artworks – by encountering the observer with the supernatural horizon of Jesus Christ's

life and fate – are capable of evoking a contemplative clearing in a much stronger way than any Persian painting with a romantic subject matter. Furthermore, Ringgenberg compares visual space in Renaissance art and Persian painting, claiming that “Renaissance mathematical perspective conceptualize the space and spatialize the gaze. Persian painting flattens, decompartmentalizes and transfigures space and reconstructs the gaze to evoke the infinite of the soul” (ibid). However, Ringgenberg does not explain how perspective is capable of transforming space into concept. It might be justified to argue that “impassability of visual space” in byzantine iconography and medieval paintings is inspired by the Aristotelian concept of space, dominant in those eras since “in Aristotelian physics, space is defined as the boundary of the enclosing body around the enclosed body. And precisely this definition shows that space remains attached to bodies, and that it is merely a determination through and of bodies. In that kind of space, there can be no true freedom of movement or of thought” (Cassirer, 2000: 184). Thus, if any type of space is supposed to represent the infinite of the soul, it is indeed linear perspective with its limitless and indeterminate depth and not Persian painting with its flat, impassable and discontinuous space.

III. It is also argued that Persian

painting’s colors are vivid, luminous, glowing and pure. Also, as it was mentioned before luminous substances of the imaginal world are devoid of any worldly contamination and impurity, so, the colors of this world are also pure from such impurities. On the other hand, Persian painting’s palette is one of its unique characteristics where gold colors the sky and silver the water, rocks are pink or turquoise. It is argued that this color composition is based on Islamic art’s magical alchemy since “the colours used in so many works of art, far from being accidental, are related to their alchemical symbolism as well as the symbolism derived from the Quranic revelation and Hadith” (Nasr, 1987: 72). Alchemy is considered as the means and way by which Persian painting and Islamic art in general elevates and sublimates material and physical substance. Islamic art’s alchemy elevates the material to higher degrees and levels of existence, thereby transforming solidity and materiality to spirituality. The world of Forms or Ideas is the realm of the spiritual, accessing the purity of which is the artist’s ultimate intention and purpose. While alchemy is striving for a transformation of various metals into gold, Islamic art and Persian painting are endeavoring to transform common solidity and physicality into spirituality.

In this respect, by using the most vivid and luminous colors possible, the artists tried to approach the imaginal world as

close as possible. Using alchemy, the artists were trying to elevate earthly material in order to reach higher levels of Being. However, it is not difficult to notice that nowhere in his texts does Nasr provide us with justified evidence which proves this deep relation between alchemy and Islamic-Persian art, thus, there's no clarification of how and when did this relation begin. Hence Nasr's argument suffers from a high degree of historical evidence ambiguity and absence. Furthermore, the improbability of the artists' acquaintance with alchemy is proved by the fact that the alchemists would never share their secret knowledge with everyone, keeping it secret as much as possible. Also, before the emergence of Renaissance art and the invention of techniques such as *sfumato* and *chiaroscuro*, western art too enjoyed the dominance of vivid luminous colors, the evidences of which are present in byzantine iconography and medieval paintings. Finally, most traditional arts in all cultures pay special attention and consideration to symbolic aspects of colors, the examples of which are to be found in Chinese art (Cheng, 1989: 50). According to Ringgenberg, in Persian Painting "the colors are pure and used in a flat manner ... The uniqueness of the color evokes the oneness of God" (Ringgenberg, 2006: 219). However, the same argument sounds justified about abstract art. If uniform coloration and flat colors are symbols of divine unity, then brilliant examples could

be found in abstract art where artworks such as monochrome paintings by Yves Klein (1928-1962) are capable of creating an experience of unity much better than the colorful world of Persian painting. Theoreticians such as Ringgenberg never justify their arguments where they claim that various hues of blue could represent "unlimited content of spiritual unity" (ibid), indeed if this infinity would ever be representable. One might justifiably argue that if this spiritual content is infinite or limitless then no artwork could ever encompass it as a representable content. I believe that the problem rises from the fact that establishing an exact association or relation between a purely theoretical debate (infinity of divine essence) and a physical phenomenon (various color spectrums) could not be justified theoretically. Additionally, not only Persian painters but also impressionists applied pure, vivid and luminous colors, therefore, Persian painting is not the unique school of art where shining colors rule. A simple glance at many impressionist paintings such as *Les deux sœurs* (1881) and *Enfants à Guernsey* (1883) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) demonstrate clearly that representation of nature with its vivid colors is not exclusively the subject matter of Persian painting.

Conclusion

Through a review of theories suggested by many Traditionalists it was shown that they find Persian painting's aesthetics in mystical

doctrines by reference to Ibn 'Arabi's theory of the imaginal world; thus relating mystical concepts to Persian paintings. However, such a relation encounters many theoretical and methodological limits – while mystical doctrines have been developed for other purposes than aesthetic ones and their metaphysical aspects have barely any connection to artworks and their aesthetics – some of which were demonstrated in the present text. Despite all these facts important figures from the Traditionalist approach such as Nasr, Ringgenberg, Burekhardt and Corbin have referred to Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi and other mystics' spiritual and mystical doctrines in order to develop a theory of aesthetics for Persian paintings by deriving its elements from the metaphysics of the imaginal world. The absence of linear perspective, flat, vivid and opaque colors, diffused light with no shadow and weightless light figures are evidences for these thinkers to justify such an association. However, it is difficult and to some extent impossible to justify such an association since many of these characteristics are not unique to Persian paintings and could be found in other styles and traditions. The problem might rise from the fact that there are very few theoretical texts available on Persian painters' approaches and viewpoints, the lack of which might have led these theoreticians to "the orientalist sin of easy generalization" (Grabar, 1995: 255).

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