



COLOR

COLOR (Pers. *rang*).

- i. Color symbolism in Persian literature.*
- ii. Use and importance of color in Persian art.*

i. Color Symbolism in Persian Literature

Colors are defined as “the attempt of light to become visible.” They act as a kind of veil through which the colorless light can be perceived. Hence colors have always played a symbolic role in religion, poetry, and daily life. That is true for Islam and Persian culture, as for other areas of human understanding. Neẓāmī’s *Haft peykar* is doubtlessly the most fascinating expression of the “spirit” of colors in Persian literature, and other poets, in particular Kāqānī, have skillfully combined allusions to and description of various colors. Sufi imagery is permeated with the experience of colors, as Henry Corbin has shown in *L’homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien*. The three basic colors are white, black, and red, although black and white are not hues in the technical sense. Yet they perfectly serve to express the contrasts between good, pure, radiant, on one hand, and evil, dark, and dangerous, on the other. In earlier times color designations were not as exact as in our own. The area of blue-green was often indeterminate, simply suggesting something dark, whereas the red-yellow hues often formed a single, light category.



The importance of white is clear from the Qur'ān where it is related, as it was in ancient Arabia, to goodness and nobility. The equation of white with noble was known in Persia and in Turkish areas as well. White is the color of the faces of the blessed on Doomsday, and the inhabitants of paradise are dressed in white and green silk, indicating the heavenly light in which they are clad. White is also the garment of priests in many religions, including Zoroastrianism. The miracle of Moses' "white hand" (*yad bayẓā*), mentioned in the Qur'ān (7:105), became in Persian and related traditions the symbol of prophetic power, the power of love, and transformation through love, as it is still mentioned in the poetry of Moḥammad Eqbāl (ca. 1293-1357/1876-1938). On the other hand, black is connected with the black looks and black faces of the sinners on Doomsday. To blacken a culprit's face was a common punishment, for *sīāh-rū* "black-faced" meant "dishonored." The black tresses of the beloved were likened to, or symbolized, the manifestations of this created world as contrasted to the radiance of the divine. As black is generally a worldly color, the *nafs*, the lower self, is often seen as a black dog, and the world (*donyā*) is described as skillfully hiding her black legs to seduce men. Black cats play an important role in magic.

The saying that poverty, *faqr*, means to be "blackfaced in both worlds" was sometimes interpreted as pointing to the beauty spot that averts the evil eye from the lover's face. Black is also connected with India: From antiquity the Hindu was generally described as black. The famous *kāl-e hendū* (beauty spot), mentioned in a poem by Ḥāfeẓ, belongs to this category. Persian poets could liken everything black (tresses, eyelashes, mole, etc.) to a Hindu. As black is also the color of Saturn, the most distant of the planets, he is often called the "Hindu doorkeeper of the sky." Black, being the color of misfortune (*sīāh bakt*), a common Persian expression is *bālātar az sīāhī rangī nīst* "there is no color beyond black." The color is often connected with nonconformism and rebellion: Certain *bī-šar'* (antinomian) groups of dervishes wear black, and the flags of the 'Abbasids were black. Nāṣer-e Kōsrow compared the black crow to the 'Abbasids who usurped Fāṭema's inheritance.

Yet there exists also a spiritual black beside the material one. That is the black light, the *mīr-e sīāh*, *šab-e rowšan*, which cannot be seen but causes one to see; it is the complete blackout during ecstasy, *fanā*, which plays an important role, for example, in the mystical works of Šabestarī and Najm-al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī. Black can be softened to dark blue or violet (the reason why hyacinths usually represent the black curls of the beloved). More frequent is the change to dark



blue, the color of mourning and asceticism; hence the tendency among Sufis to wear dark-blue garments. The violet is connected with a pious ascetic on the green prayer rug of the lawn, while the dark-blue sky is frequently characterized as a blue-clad ascetic who acts treacherously: Blue is a negative color, connected with blue eyes; their evil has to be repelled by wearing blue beads.

On the other hand, red carries all the power of blood and energy. It is the color of the *redā' al-kebrīā*, the divine cloak of glory, under which some Sufis, for example, Rūzbehān Baqlī Šīrāzī, experienced the divine presence. It is connected with activity and strength but also with wrath, and a Sufi who radiates power is called *sorkpūš* (red-mantled). Sohravardī's *'aql-e sork*, too, comes to mind. Bridal dresses are often red, signifying life and fertility; therefore the rose may appear as a bride dressed in red. But red may also be the color of martyrs, and the tulip can wear the martyrs' bloodstained cloak. *Sork-rū*, "red faced," is another term for "honorable" in 'Aṭṭār's moving story (II, pp. 143-44) of Ḥallāj's rubbing the bleeding stumps of his arms over his face in order to color his pale cheeks and become truly *sork-rū*. Precious objects were often called *la'l* "ruby," and in the verse of such poets as Mīrzā Gāleb (d. 1286/1869) the colors of wine, roses, flames, and blood are developed into one large fabric of red hues.

Whereas energetic red is the color of the beloved, the lover is pale and yellow like straw, experiencing the attraction of the *kahrobā* (amber, lit. "straw robber"). Yellow bile is visible in all kinds of ailments from which the longing lover suffers until he becomes "golden," like metal, in the crucible of love. A different shade of yellow, visible in autumnal leaves, reminded poets like Farroḳī, Nāṣer-e Ƙosrow, and Ƙāqānī of the yellow robes or patches worn by Jews.

In contrast to red and yellow, green is the color of life-giving water and of the plants that appear as signs of life. It can therefore be legitimately connected with resurrection or paradise, where the blessed rest on green pillows and wear green silk. "The ones who wear the green" (*sabzpūš*) are either the inhabitants of paradise and the spiritual world or the angels who convey good tidings to human beings. The green parrot, too, is in a certain way connected with heavenly intelligence, contrary to the black crow.

Green has been connected with the Prophet Moḥammad and Islam, and in Sufi lore it is the color that appears on higher stages of the mystical path. In



Semnānī's Sufism, however, it is the color that is reached once the Sufi has passed through the "black light" and emerges at the emerald mountain, the symbol of divine proximity and eternal duration, *baqā'*. This association is all the more fitting as the green emerald was considered to have healing powers and to blind the eyes of serpents and dragons: The mystical guide was thus sometimes compared to such a wondrous emerald.

As central as colors were in life and poetry, still the observers knew that they were veils, or vessels (which color the water according to their own hue), and that to change color meant also to change one's character: Rūmī's story of the jackal who jumped into a dyeing vat in order to reach a higher rank is a good example of this view. The final goal is "the vat of unicoloricity," usually referred to by the Koranic term *ṣebḡat Allāh* (Sura 2:138) "the coloring of God." God is compared to a dyer who finally dyes everything in his own color, that is, the invisible, radiant light, and, once this state has been reached, color distinctions are bound to disappear.

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ii. Use and Importance in Persian Art

Color is an area of Persian Islamic art that has been little studied, though there is considerable literary and material evidence that specific notions about color played a significant role in the creation of works of art and the aesthetic appreciation of patrons. Literary evidence includes schemes of color symbolism drawn from astrological texts, and colors are mentioned in a wide variety of sources (see i, above). Such evidence, supplemented by modern scientific and historical analysis, is particularly crucial for understanding the



role of color in objects made from gems and precious metals, as well as in textiles. Material evidence is more extensive and probably also more representative for ceramics and manuscript illustration and illumination. When the role of color in Persian Islamic art is viewed as a whole, two somewhat contradictory elements are apparent. On one hand, there was a preference for brilliant colors like red, turquoise, and deep blue and for such strong contrasts as those between red and white or blue and yellow. At the same time detailed color gradations in gems and pearls, as well as fine shading in manuscripts, attest that delicate nuances were also savored. Because of disparities between the color potentials of various techniques and materials a functional, rather than a chronological or dynastic, categorization will be presented here.

The symbolism of color. The major system of color symbolism noted in texts is of astrological origin, in which specific colors are linked to particular heavenly bodies and days of the week and secondarily to regions of the world or other attributes. In his *Ketāb al-tafhīm* Bīrūnī (pp. 240-41, 396-406) mentioned colors among the many qualities and objects associated with heavenly bodies: Saturn was linked to black and Saturday, the sun to gold and Sunday, the moon to green and Monday, Mars to red and Tuesday, Mercury to sky blue and Wednesday, Jupiter to tan and Thursday, and Venus to white and Friday. This scheme of color symbolism was also repeated in literature, particularly in Neẓāmī's *Haft-peykar* and Amīr ẖosrow Dehlavī's *Hašt behešt*, and it was applied in illustration of these texts. For example, painters depicted the visits of Bahrām(-e) Gōr to seven princesses, one on each day of the week; his clothing and that of his companions, as well as the architectural setting, were depicted in colors appropriate to the day and its planetary protector (*Nizami*, pls. 85, 93-103; *Miniatures*, pls. 11-12, 14-15, 45-51, 67-73, 75). Aside from this very specific application of a scheme of color symbolism, only the association of the sun with gold appears to have had wider artistic currency. The popularity of gold and its analogue yellow for furnishings and clothing associated with rulers is widely documented in texts. In some instances the use of golden or yellow fabrics was considered a royal prerogative (Lombard, pp. 129-30; Qaddumi, p. 216).

Textiles. The importance of dyestuffs in the trade and economy of the medieval Islamic world is testimony to an enthusiasm for brightly colored fabrics, especially those made from wool or silk, which were more easily dyed than the vegetable fibers of linen and cotton (see [carpets ii](#)). Saffron was a widely



cultivated source of yellow, several different insects yielded a brilliant red, and indigo was the most powerful and popular blue colorant. These dyes and others that produced variants of the same basic colors, as well as green, black, and brown, were used to create a wide variety of tones (Lombard, pp. 117-50; Edwards, pp. 31-34; Wulff, *Crafts*, pp. 188-94). In one account of an ‘Abbasid court ceremony the participants are described as wearing garments of 700 distinct colors (Qaddumi, p. 130). For robes of honor (*kal’at*) the ‘Abbasids normally used black (Helāl Šābe’, pp. 61, 63-66; cf. Serjeant, p. 24). In Persia the *ākūnd* was distinguished by garments of black and white, and, as elsewhere in the Islamic world, *sayyeds* (descendants of the prophet Moḥammad) were entitled to wear green. Both textual descriptions and surviving examples suggest that deep red tones were most popular as the background color in carpets or other textile furnishings, especially those produced in Armenia, where sources for several red dyes were abundant (Serjeant, pp. 60, 64-67).

Gems and metals. Discussions of gems and precious metals in various texts include repeated reference to three preferred materials: rubies, pearls, and gold. Descriptions of ceremonial objects and personal ornaments suggest that combinations of all three were especially coveted (Qaddumi, pp. 23, 31, 33, 40-41, 292). Turquoise played a more limited but still significant role. The close physical kinship between rubies and sapphires was recognized, and both were frequently designated by the same term, *yāqūt*. It was, however, rubies of a deep red color known as *rommānī* that were especially prized (Ṭūsī, pp. 29-51). Those from India and Ceylon (Sarandīb), known for their brilliance and color, were the most prized of gemstones, though spinel rubies from Badaḡšān, usually identified by the term *la’l*, could also be quite valuable if their color was intense. In poetry the terms *yāqūt* and *la’l* were used as synonyms, and both became metaphors for the redness of wine or the lips of the beloved. That the separate identities of these stones and their distinctive properties were recognized is clear from technical descriptions, however (Vesel). Rubies were also prized for their luminosity, and some were believed to glow in the dark (Qaddumi, p. 184; Vesel, pp. 150-51). Pearls were graded according to color, surface quality, and size. “Royal” (*šahvār*) pearls were of a pure, milky-white color, said to be as limpid as a drop of water, whereas the least valued had a “brazen” (*noḥāsī*) color and poor luster. The value attached to the luminous reflective surface of the pearl is clear from the epithets “star” (*najm*) or “night-illuminating” (*šab-afrūz*, *šab-čērāgī*)

Fīrūza (Ar. *fīrūzaj* “turquoise”) was appreciated for its color, as well as



perceived prophylactic qualities and broader association with good fortune. Intensely colored stones, known as *abū-eshāqī* or *solaymānī* and mined in the vicinity of Nīšāpūr, were particularly prized (Ṭūsī, pp. 76-77). Small chunks of turquoise were widely used in rings, earrings, necklaces, and other jewelry, and the stone was also combined with rubies, gold, and occasionally pearls on ceremonial arms and armor, as well as on bookbindings and other luxury objects (Köseoğlu, pp. 193, 200-02, 207 nos. 37, 38, 74-77, 81, 121). The treasuries of various Persian rulers in the 10th and 11th centuries are said to have contained objects carved from solid turquoise, including a table or stand with legs and several bowls, one of which was alleged to have had the capacity of one *raṭl* (Qaddumi, pp. 87-88, 199-201; the *raṭl* was a unit of both weight and capacity, here probably the Baghdad *raṭl* = 406 g, approximately a liquid pint; Helāl Šābe', pp. 60, 78; Hinz, pp. 27-33). The carving of such objects, perhaps inspired by the discovery of unusually large pieces of turquoise, may also have been connected with the carving of vessels from opaque turquoise glass, of which one famous example is now in the treasury of San Marco in Venice (Alcouffe, pp. 209-10 no. 29).

Ceramics. Abundant surviving vessels, as well as quantities of sherds, demonstrate that medieval Persian [ceramics](#) (xiii, xiv) were often made colorful through the application of pigments and glazes; in particular the use of turquoise alkaline glazes was a long-established tradition. Technical, aesthetic, and cultural factors all seem to have played a role in the evolution of this medium. Chinese ceramics were also highly regarded, and Persian craftsmen sometimes emulated them. Often, however, the link between Chinese precedent and Persian taste was indirect and mediated by both technical and aesthetic factors. Excavations carried out at Sīrāf in Fārs and at other sites have revealed the character and quantity of Chinese ceramic imports and have provided a context for studying their impact on local taste (Tampoe; see [chinese-iranian relations xičīnī](#)). Recent studies have also stressed the strength of the indigenous Persian and Iraqi ceramic traditions, helping to clarify the relations between local and imported wares (Keall and Mason).

Especially in the 9th-10th centuries Persian assimilation of Chinese shapes, color schemes, and decorative techniques was highly selective. The earliest Chinese imports found at Sīrāf were predominantly heavy jars and small bowls of gray-glazed stoneware, probably from kilns in Zhejiang province (Tampoe, pp. 47-54, 63-64). They seem not to have inspired local imitation,



however, and potters continued to produce utilitarian vessels covered with bright turquoise glazes (Tampoe, pp. 31-33). The most influential early Chinese vessels were relatively rare: white porcelain bowls probably produced in an area of Hebei province later famous for its white porcelain “Ding ware” (Medley, pp. 99-100 and fig. 69; Tampoe, pp. 58, 66 and figs. 84-85). Persian and Iraqi potters produced bowls of similar shape and color but using an indigenous white-glaze technique (Keall and Mason, pp. 63-65). Such locally produced bowls gradually came to be decorated with loosely executed green or blue designs, some of which are analogous to those on another unusual Chinese bowl type that probably came from a region north of Changsha in Hunan province. Persian patrons apparently preferred the green-and-white color scheme to the brown-on-gray tones of a more widely exported type of Changsha painted stoneware (Medley, pp. 88-89 and fig. 61; Tampoe, pp. 57-58, 65-66, 93-94 and figs. 80-83; Guy, pp. 7-12 and figs. 4-6). Near Eastern potters also covered white-glazed bowls with painting in metallic luster, one variety of which combined red and gold tones recalling objects made from gold, pearls, and rubies (Keall and Mason, pp. 52-61; Sarre, pp. 85-86, pl. XVII). Contemporary with these white wares derived from Chinese prototypes were other kinds of Persian glazed vessels. One of the most widespread types was glazed yellow and green, a color scheme that appears to be of Near Eastern origin, though some shapes may have followed Chinese models. In a variant yellow, green, and brown streaks were combined on a white ground, often with incised decoration as well (Tampoe, pp. 37-41; Rosen-Ayalon, pp. 166, 199-200; Wilkinson, pp. 54-89, 205-12).

Significant quantities of Chinese white wares have been excavated at Sīrāf, at Ṣoḥār in Oman, and at Fostāṭ in Egypt, and much has been made of their importance for the subsequent development of Persian ceramics in the 11th-12th centuries (Lane, 1948, pp. 29-32; Tampoe, pp. 59-62, 67-68, 79-81; Pirazzoli-t Serstevens, pp. 88-89). Nevertheless, although individual Persian vessels of this period may emulate the shapes or decorative techniques of Chinese wares, both white and green, most seem to owe little to Chinese taste. The main innovation of the period, the adoption of a hard, white siliceous ceramic body, was almost certainly of Near Eastern origin, and it was most often combined with strongly colored glazes: turquoise, blue, purple, and brown (Wilkinson, 1973, pp. 259-89). White-glazed wares seem to have been valued primarily as surfaces for various kinds of painting (Bahrami; Mota, nos. 1-16, 19-21, 23, 25-30, 33-34). It is thus clear that, despite Persian admiration for Chinese vessels, the ceramic tradition of the area remained



distinctive in both decorative and chromatic preferences until massive importation of Chinese blue-and-white wares during the Timurid and Safavid periods spawned a considerable volume of close imitations, especially the blue-and-white vessels made in Persia in the 15th-19th centuries (Lane, 1971, pp. 88-101; for ceramics in architectural decoration, see below).

Architectural decoration. For the decoration of buildings certain colors seem to have been consistently popular throughout history, reflecting both practical considerations and aesthetic preferences. For instance, the most common decorative technique for interiors was the painting of plaster or wood. Excavations at medieval Nīšāpūr revealed that wall decoration there, whether painted or carved, involved a limited number of colors used in predictable fashion. The most common colors were mineral pigments: yellow ocher, red from cinnabar, and blue from lapis lazuli. Carving seems to have been used primarily to enhance the sense of depth and volume; outer frames were painted in light colors like yellow or white, but the background was consistently colored deep blue. Red was used to highlight designs and as a counterpoint to blue. Green was used sparingly and only on flat surfaces (Wilkinson, 1986, pp. 107-15, 126, 159-61 and passim). It is not certain that this color scheme was typical of other areas in medieval Persia, but the color schemes of later painted plaster and tile revetments are somewhat analogous. There, too, color was used to distinguish levels in a decorative scheme and to render the design more intelligible. Inscriptions are often white or buff-colored against a deep blue ground. Touches of gold, yellow, or turquoise draw attention to more intricate details (Seherr-Thoss, pls. 53-55, 76, 85-87).

For exteriors glazed ceramics provided an important source of color, especially in the 13th-19th centuries. Areas of intense color, especially turquoise or bright blue, were typically used to highlight certain parts of a building, for example, the dome, entrance portal, or courtyard facade. Domes reveted on the exterior with bright turquoise tiles were visual metaphors for the sky above them (Seherr-Thoss, passim).

Manuscripts. The role of color in the production of luxury manuscripts was parallel to that in other media. Some lavishly produced books were provided with covers embellished with gold, rubies, and turquoise and were thus analogous to other precious objects (Köseoğlu, no. 81). Pigments made from gold or silver, as well as from mineral substances like lapis lazuli, were also used extensively in manuscript illumination and illustration (Dickson and Welch, pp. 263-66). Most manuscripts from the early centuries displayed a



restricted palette: gold illumination, black or brown script, and red or green orthographic signs on a white or light ground. Gradually illumination became more colorful, with the addition of blue, white, and other hues. Beginning in the 14th century, illumination was dominated by the counterpoint of an intense blue produced from lapis lazuli against areas of gold (Lings, *passim*). An innovation of the 15th century was the use of paper colored with the same dyestuffs used for woven fabrics; it provided a more varied visual counterpoint to the written text. Paler tones could be used for whole pages, but papers in deep blue, red, or green were normally used as frames for writing on a lighter surface (Porter, pp. 187-89); the paper was spliced together by splitting the heavier marginal paper horizontally and inserting the edges of the inner page between the resulting two layers.

Mineral pigments of both natural and man-made origin, as well as some organic dyes, were used for illustrations. A few basic ingredients—white lead, coal black, ultramarine (lapis lazuli), indigo, cinnabar, orpiment, verdigris, and various earth pigments for orange and brown—were combined according to different formulas to achieve a wide variety of tones (Qāzī Aḥmad, tr. Minorsky, pp. 196-201; FitzHugh). Normally small areas of intense, saturated color were carefully distributed within a composition and balanced with larger areas of more neutral tones to highlight certain details and give the composition a dynamic balance (Titley, *passim*). Paintings produced in a specific period or place often exhibit idiosyncratic uses of color: preference for certain tones or a distinctive pattern of color distribution over the painted surface. Scientific analysis of the pigments used in a given group of manuscripts and systematic study of their role in creating compositions, though still very rare, could provide important information about a range of artistic, social, and economic factors involved in the production of luxury manuscripts.

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