



POSTERS

POSTERS IN IRAN. Posters have been produced in Iran since the beginning of the 20th century. During the early 1900s, the art of poster making was intimately associated with the history of cinematography (see [CINEMA](#)). Beyond film screenings and advertising, posters also promoted a wide range of cultural activities, such as art exhibitions, theater and ballet performances, literary events, and children's festivals. In addition, from 1979 onward, posters were produced with the aim to forward a number of political and religious messages pertinent to the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). In the past few decades, Iranian graphic designers also have created a variety of posters for display in annual exhibitions and competitions. These more recent efforts tackle a host of topical issues, including the occupation of Palestine, nuclear waste, environmental conservation, and mental depression. As a result, Iranian poster and graphic arts frequently contribute to greater social, political, and commercial endeavors.

From the 1910s onward, a great number of posters were produced to publicize movies (Mehrabī, 1992; idem, 2012). In their function as commercial placards, these posters' visual language draws upon a number of printed examples from Europe, Hollywood, and India. One early example is the movie *Laili Maznun* (*Leyli o Majnun*), produced in 1937 by 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Sepantā (d. 1969), a leading early Iranian filmmaker who produced sound movies (Mehrabī, 2012, pp. 7, 444). The movie was advertised through various posters and magazine covers ([Figure 1](#)). The adverts for this early "Iranian talkie" include bilingual Persian-English and English only titles in order to cater to a transnational



audience. From a stylistic point of view, the poster is reminiscent of Oriental visual tropes used in Hollywood movies, posters, and lobby cards; such tropes include desert-trekking camels, domed structures and minarets, and wind-blown palm trees. These early film posters also experiment with a variety of styles, including cut-out or silhouette compositions whose contours and colors are minimalistic. To a certain extent, it is possible that posters made for Azeri and Armenian theatrical productions in Tabriz and Isfahan enabled the introduction of Euro-American pictorial conventions (Ranjbar Fakri; Minasean).

After World War II, the Iranian film industry blossomed and a growing number of movie houses opened in Tehran and other cities. Posters of the 1940-50s were made for Iranian movies, a number of which offered cinematic renditions of pre-modern Persian epic stories. Tales from Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* proved especially popular. Their visual renditions were by no means new, however. Stories of Persian kings and heroes were produced in Iran as illustrated manuscripts and printed books from the early 1300s onward. The film industry transformed this long and rich history of still images into moving images set to sound. Such is the case for the film *Rostam o Sohrāb*, produced in 1957 by Šāhroḡ Rafī'i (Mehrrābi, 1992, p. 1332; idem, 2012, pp. 9, 428). Its poster, designed by Boris Matayov, depicts Sohrāb dying in his father's arms in the aftermath of their confrontation, within a foreboding atmosphere of red and black hues (Figure 2). Rather than following depictions of the tragedy as found within Persian book art traditions, this and other posters of the period use the dramatic chiaroscuro and movement typical of posters made for American western films. Another movie placard made for 'Ali Maḡzun's *Čādornešinhā* of 1962, designed by Moḡsen Davallu (d. 1997), shows its protagonist with one arm upraised while riding on horseback at full gallop (Figure 3; Mehrrābi, 1992, p. 1341). The Iranian poster clearly borrows the visual language of posters and lobby cards made for John Wayne's cowboy movies of the 1930s.

While films and posters have been closely intertwined since the inception of the Iranian motion picture industry, the graphic arts also contributed to other arenas of cultural, artistic, and religious production. Among these, theater plays, dance performances, and art exhibitions frequently were promoted by adverts placed in public squares and streets (Rawḡāni). The Iranian theater thrived especially after 1970, yielding a substantial body of related posters (Ḥāqiqi, 2006). While famous plays by Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and others were translated and set to stage, older Iranian tales that had been transmitted

through oral storytelling (*naqālli*) and pictured storytelling (*parda-k̄vāni*) were also adapted for theatrical production. Once again drawing upon Ferdowsi's *Šāhn-nāma*, the play Rostam's Seven exploits (*Haft K̄vān-e Rostam*), directed by Homā Jeddikār in 1990, was publicized by a series of posters. Among them, one designed by Ebrāhim Ḥaqiqi (Figure 4) promoted the play through an exhibition of puppets held during celebrations commemorating Ferdowsi and his *Šāhn-nāma* (Ḥaqiqi, 2006; idem, <http://www.ebrahimhaghighi.com/>). In this composition, Ḥaqiqi depicts Rostam fighting a demon and fiery dragon rendered as shadow puppets with red joints allowing for moveable limbs. In addition, the poster's background is stippled in rows of fading yellow Ben-Day dots typical of popular print media, including comic books and the pop art paintings of American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein (d. 1997). Drawing upon older painterly traditions, moreover, some Iranian posters promoting ballet performances, including that of the New London Ballet in 1974, include visual quotations of famous European paintings, including Sandro Boticelli's *Primavera* of ca. 1482 (Figure 5).

While 20th-century Iranian film and theater poster designers creatively adopted both historical and contemporary Euro-American pictorial and stylistic trends, a number of artists turned to Persian artistic traditions instead. This revivalist impulse typifies posters that depict a range of significant themes of Abrahamic, Islamic, and Shi'i history. For instance, a number of religious posters made during the 1940s represent Abraham's sacrifice, the Prophet Joseph, Noah's Ark, Solomon's court, and the Prophet's ascension to Heaven (*me'rāj*). Those depicting moments central to Shi'i history include Imam 'Ali's appointment as Moḥammad's successor and the Battle of Karbalā' (Figure 6), in which Imam Ḥosayn b. 'Ali was killed (Moḥarram 61/Oct. 680) in the engagement between his followers and Umayyad forces (Puin, II, pp. 434-39, III, p. 845, fig. G-1). This and other reprographic renditions of Karbalā' clearly draw upon Qajar cloth paintings (*pardas*) that storytellers used to narrate episodes of the battle pictorially, each of which is represented by a captioned vignette (Chelkowski, 1989). This popular Persian style of narrative illustration found in depictions of the Battle of Karbalā' is often referred to as "coffee-house painting" (Sayf, pp. 106-10). At the same time, Persian poster artists of the 1940s also produced other kinds of Shi'i religious "icons," including posters that depict the life and shrine of Imam Reżā (Figure 7). This type of poster may have been bought as a pilgrimage souvenir or used as a visual guide for pilgrims to the holy shrine in Mashhad. Although produced by offset printing, this poster's style reiterates a number of narrative images



found in Qajar lithographic books (Marzolph, 2001; idem, 2014, pp. 26-29, figs. 26-27; Puin, II, p. 615 III, p. 941, fig. M-17). The Qajar lithographic aesthetic did not halt in the 1940s and continued during subsequent decades. Today, this Persian “neo-traditional” style (Keshmirshakan, 2005; idem, 2006) is used in children’s books, paintings, and film posters, as can be seen in the 2008 movie advert for ‘Abbās Kiārostami’s *Širin*, a story based on the romance of *Kosrow wa Širin* by Neẓāmi Ganjavi (Figure 8).

Although Iranian posters have consistently broached cultural and religious themes, they also have proven central to the mass mediation of political ideology in the public sphere, catalyzing large-scale banners and murals along the way. Indeed, Iranian political posters are the hallmarks of the Iranian 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq War (Chelkowski, 2002; Chelkowski and Dabashi; Fischer and Abedi; Gruber; Hanaway; *Honar-e grāfik dar Enqelāb-e eslāmi*; Ja‘fariān; Ram; Rauh, 2011; Yanker). During the 1979 Revolution and in its immediate aftermath, a number of posters promoted the emerging agenda of the nascent Islamic Republic. Their graphic messages were often couched as a set of binaries, staking anti-imperialist, anti-American, and anti-Shah sentiments against pro-populace, pro-Khomeini, and pro-Islamic positions. Moreover, their iconographies vary and are inspired by street and graffiti art, documentary photography, and Soviet social realism. At times, revolutionary posters emulate the narrative vignettes and painterly aesthetic of Persian “coffee-house” painting, as is the case for the poster of the Shah’s exile (Figure 9), originally painted by Ḥasan Esmā‘ilzāda (d. 2007). While posters such as these reproduce paintings, they also creatively incorporate documentary photographs that record, for example, street demonstrations and the toppling of the Shah’s statue.

Prior to 1979, posters were largely issued by privately owned printing houses and bookstores, and they were collected and exhibited by the Museum of Modern Art in Tehran (Rawḥāni). Noteworthy among the individual producers of political posters at the time of the revolution is Kuroš Šišegarān, who designed and printed posters that showed concern for the future of Iran and its citizens. One such poster, entitled “Yesterday, today, tomorrow?” depicts a calligraphic figure screaming while strangulated at gunpoint between Imperialism symbolized by the American flag and an uncertain future punctuated by a question mark (Figure 10). Political activities led to Šišegarān’s incarceration in Evin Prison for a period of time. Thus, politically active poster designers with views questioning of the revolution were

effectively censored or silenced. In their stead, the new government's Art Bureau (Ḥawza-ye honari) of the Islamic Propagation Organization (Sāzmān-e tabliḡāt-e eslāmi) expended great efforts to produce a range of graphic arts that were deemed properly "committed" to official government ideology (Gruber, p. 687).

To a great extent, the Art Bureau was responsible for the burst of poster arts in support of Iranian military efforts during the Iran-Iraq War, dubbed in Iran as a "holy defense" (*defā'-e moqaddas*) and "imposed war" (*jang-e taḥmili*). During the 1980s, posters reiterated and echoed state rhetoric, and thus their themes were chosen in order to reinforce a carefully regulated perception of the war. The major themes in these posters include couching the war as a new Karbalā', with its young martyrs sacrificing themselves in the way of Imam Ḥosayn (Aghaie; Varzi). Such symbolic messages promoted death as salvation in the afterlife, no doubt to mobilize young men to enlist in the army and fight on the Iran-Iraq border. Posters also depict women, praising them for picking up arms and defending their cities, as is best seen in the drawings and paintings of Nasser (Nāṣer) Palangi. Women also were lauded for sacrificing their sons for the Iranian national cause and for the Shi'i faith (Chelkowski, 2005; Shirazi). Perhaps most evocative among these types of posters is *Yaqin* (Certitude of Belief), originally painted by Kāzem Čalipā, which depicts a darkly sanguine Pietà-like scene in which a mother holds her deceased son, below whom fetuses in tulips bloom into soldiers who head out to war and above whom a decapitated Imam Ḥosayn rides his horse among rows of martyrs standing in the white glow of salvation (Figure 11).

War posters were affixed to the walls of buildings, mounted on placards dotting the frontline, and used in yearly commemorations of the "holy defense." Other national days and holidays have yielded their own set of posters as well. For example, a substantial corpus of May Day posters celebrate International Worker's Day (Ruz-e kārgar; Dabashi; Zarkar), while a robust poster industry continues to thrive around Moḥarram and 'Āšurā' rituals in Iran today (Figure 12; Flakerud, pp. 109-76). A number of other religiously inclined posters also are made within the context of annual design competitions and exhibitions, including those dedicated to commemorating 'Āšurā' (Kazāyi; Waziriān, 2009) and the "Beautiful Names of God" (Waziriān, 2010, p. 26). Still others displayed within Iran tackle a host of political and social issues. For instance, while some posters provide satirical commentary on the American invasion of Iraq (Figure 13), others bemoan the ravages of



drug addiction among Iran's younger generation (Yagāna). Additionally, some Iranian graphic design shows are held abroad, including in Russia (Rašidi). Posters made for an international viewership tend to address global concerns, including population growth and environmental degradation (Figure 14).

Last but not least, in the past few years a rich body of imagery has emerged alongside the digital and poster art made by supporters and members of the Iranian Green Movement (*Jonbeš-e sabz-e Irān*), a short political outcry questioning the outcome of the presidential election of 2009. The iconography in these visuals often relies upon and updates the slogans and visual language of the 1979 Revolution (Rauh, 2012). For example, the motif of the hand (*panja*) as seen on revolutionary wall markings and metal ornaments on standards (*alam*) is sometimes aligned or conflated with the "V" (Victory) sign, as a symbolic gesture of the Green Movement. Slogans, too, invoke not just Imam Ḥosayn, but also Mir-Ḥosayn Musawi, the opposition's leader and reformist candidate who lost the presidential election (Figure 15). Beside manifestly religious motifs, a number of Green Movement posters also forward gender equality and a secular republic, a laic position that at times is articulated so forcefully that images show a fist punching through the "Allāh" calligram in the center of the Iranian flag (Figure 16). This latest output of images marks a digital turn in Iranian graphic arts while also raising questions about the country's future as various political, social, and cultural forces continue to collide.

See also [GRAPHIC ARTS](#).

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