



# SAQQĀ-KĀNA SCHOOL OF ART

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Referring to a contemporary art movement in Iran, the appellation was first used in 1962 by Karim Emami (Emāmi; 1930-2005), the art critic, journalist, and lecturer in English at the Tehran College of Decorative Arts (*Honarkada-e honar-hāy-e taz'ini*). It was initially applied to the works of artists, both in painting and sculpture, which used already existing elements from votive Shi'ite art in their own modern work. It gradually came to be applied more widely to various forms of modern Persian painting and sculpture that used traditional-decorative elements. The prominent artists and pioneers of the School are Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (Charles Ḥoseyn Zendarudi; b. 1937), Faramarz Pilaram (Farāmarz Pilārām; 1938-1983), Massoud Arabshahi (Mas'ud 'Arabšāhi; b. 1935), Mansur Qandriz (Maṣsur Qandriz; 1935-1965), Nasser Oveisi (Nāšer Oveysi; b. 1934), Sadeq Tabrizi (S'ādeq Tabrizi; b. 1939), and Zhazeh Tabatabai (Žāzeh Ṭabāṭabā'i; b. 1928). As Emami himself wrote in the Saqqā-kāna exhibition's catalogue in 1977, and also as attested by statements by such artists as Oveisi and Tabatabai, some of the artists were later unhappy about the inclusion of their names as members of the School. However, they are listed here because of the aesthetic affinities and similarities of their works to the Saqqā-kāna style, the presence of their works in the formal exhibitions of the group, and above all, because they appear to share the same artistic program as those of the Saqqā-kāna School. The School became gradually more and more popular and was joined by several other artists. In particular, artists such as Siah Armajani



(Siyāmak Armajāni; b. 1939) in the 1960s and in the 1990s Jafar Rouhbakhsh (Ja'far Ruḥbaḳš; 1941-1996) demonstrated close affinity with the School's aesthetics.

According to Emami, the display of Zenderoudi's canvases at the Third Tehran Biennial in 1962 marks the official birth of the Saqqā-kāna School (Emami, 1987, p. 642). In these paintings, external lines of forms were shaped in a geometric pattern with the alphabetical characters in the background written carefully and the squares, triangles, rectangles, and circles colored in hues of red, green, yellow ochre, and sometimes mild blue (FIGURE 2, FIGURE 3, FIGURE 4, and FIGURE 6, FIGURE 7, and FIGURE 8).

On the whole, the use of tradition by these artists was mainly a reference to the "pictorial" tradition rather than to subject matter and content. This quality is particularly apparent in the abstract branch of the School. In other words, they concentrated on the "formal" traditions, including forms, motifs, colors, etc. that could altogether create an identifiable traditional and sometimes religious atmosphere. Apart from this interest in the formal aspect of traditional images, however, the presence of the artist's attention to the traditional subject matter can be found very occasionally in the works of some artists. One could mention the mythical, traditional, and literary subject matter exhibited in the *Robā'iyāt* of 'Omar Ḳayyām, the work of the legendary sculptor Farhād, and in the folk proverbs with modern outlooks found in Oveisi, Tanavoli, and Tabatabai's works respectively. Religious content of the initial works of Zenderoudi, before the establishment of the School and during early Saqqā-kāna period, and also some of Pilaram's later works (in the late 1970s when he illustrated some Qur'anic subject-matters) were other examples.

Parviz Tanavoli (b.1937), a sculptor, painter, lithographer, collector, and scholar of Persian art, has been a central figure of the School. He emerged as a fervent believer in a modernism attained through forms of popular visual culture and used folkloric expressions as his inspiration. Tanavoli has chosen a successful path to evoke the multiple allusions and imagery of Persian language and literature. Such literary references appear for example in the hands of "Farhad the Mountain Carver," Tanavoli's tribute to the legendary Iranian artist who, for love, accepted the impossible challenge of carving a channel through a rocky mountain, materialized in a series of sculptures in the early 1960s. A graduate of the Barrera Academy of Milan, where he studied with Mario Marini, he was in 1960 active in the establishment of the College of



Decorative Arts as sculpture tutor. Reworking tropes from classical Persian literature, Islamic folk-art, and calligraphy, he produced works that provocatively unite style and meaning. His sculptures “*Hič*” (the Persian word for nothing)—mainly created in the 1970s—in fact transformed a nihilistic existentialist cry into a Persian allegory (FIGURE 2). The word had a spiritual dimension here, alluding to the theme of annihilation (*fanā*), an important concept in Persian Sufi poetry. The *Hič* suggests a mystical condition beyond nothingness.

The influential artist and leading member of the group, Zenderoudi (b. 1937), studied briefly at the Tehran Faculty of Decorative Arts, but left Iran in 1961 for France where he has continued his artistic career, mainly in Paris. Though he had started with some votive Shi‘ite iconography, geometrical patterns, talismanic shapes, numbers, colors of religious folk-art and calligraphic ornaments, he shifted to using calligraphy as a major element of his canvases in various ways and stages (FIGURE 1). The freshness, intuitiveness, and originality found in his early works—inspired by these talismanic forms—were breathtaking and unique. Later, in Zenderoudi’s calligraphic paintings, with his pseudo-scripts, the characters in and of themselves carried no meaning but were meaningful as organic elements of visual art and alive with cultural connotations. At the juncture of calligraphy and geometry, we find the optic art-like compositions of letters and the purity of calligraphic elements in which Zenderoudi intellectually refines the graphic geometry of the script. It is, however, worth noting that the artist’s presence in Paris and the influences of such contemporary movements as *lettrism*—the Paris based avant-garde movement which was still at its apex when Zenderoudi moved there—could have had a definite impact on him. He seems to have developed the talismanic and calligraphic trends into a personalized pseudo-script of signs.

The artistic development of Pilaram (1938–1983), a graduate of the Tehran Faculty of Decorative Arts, at one stage ran parallel to Zenderoudi’s, encompassing words, letters, and geometrical forms inspired by Shi‘ite iconography (FIGURE 3). Pilaram, whose use of old seals was a feature of the first part of his artistic career, used these in his works as a connective texture in geometrical compositions. An accomplished calligrapher, he later experimented with various styles in which calligraphy, especially the *nasta‘liq* script, played the main role. During the late 1960s and the early 1970s, he created several expressionist calligraphic paintings and colorful free-hand



*šekasta*-like canvases, which can be associated with some traditional inscriptions. In the subsequent stage of his painting, calligraphic elements played a role as the connective textures in geometrical compositions, as if they had been slid onto the transparent surfaces in the background. In this way, the geometrical background combined with the reflexes of the calligraphic elements causes his art to appear as if it were three-dimensional. In some paintings, which are part of the collection of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, rhythmical words play visual movements in a symphonic space. In fact, the homogeneous quality of indigenous arts, music, poetry, and decorative painting consciously emerge with harmonic symmetries in his canvases.

While the two artists mentioned above concentrated exclusively on exploring calligraphy, some other artists used mystical symbols to combine traditional and modern elements into abstract designs. Another student of the Tehran Faculty of Decorative Arts, Qandriz (1935–1965), was a semi-abstract painter who used stylized Persian motifs, emphasizing tribal forms, Iranian textiles, and ancient metalwork by the employment of limited colors. He was a painter, who “had struggled in the various stages of his artistic development, with obsessive care and hesitancy, to elaborate and define a truly Iranian style” (Pakbaz, 1974, p. 33). His early figurative images—before he joined the Saqqā-kāna School—reveal the influence of Matisse, Picasso, and Persian miniatures. Later in his Saqqā-kāna period, using traditional textile and designs, he developed an individual semi-abstract style characterized by geometric patterns and stylized images such as humans, birds, fish, the sun, swords, etc. (FIGURE 4).

Arabshahi (b. 1935), who also graduated from the Faculty, delved back further into history for his inspiration and was inspired by the art of pre-Islamic Persia, as depicted in Achaemenid motifs, as well as by Assyrian and Babylonian rock carving and script. His drawings, inspired by Zoroastrian texts, resemble archaeological maps of ancient cities. Unlike other artists in the Saqqā-kāna group he did not employ religious-folk-art, and his different outlook and spirit set him apart in Saqqā-kāna gatherings and exhibitions. However, his early works, and even the later ones, conform to some major Saqqā-kāna aesthetic characteristics. In particular, one can cite the permanent presence of various motifs and ornaments and the multiplicity of elements in most parts of the canvas. Also to be noted is the use of the color schemes of Iranian folk-art consisting of gold, green, red, black, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and



vermilion. A close relationship with Islamic architectural forms and crafts can be found in the forms and sometimes the colors that he employed in these works (FIGURE 5). During 1970s he decorated walls and facades of public and private buildings with bas-reliefs of his own design.

At the same time that the above-mentioned artists were dealing with abstraction, others like Oveisi chose figurative art. Motifs inspired chiefly by Persian paintings, ceramics, *qalamkārs*, and calligraphy are featured in the canvases of Oveisi (b. 1934). While he creates complex designs, the themes of his paintings are few and simple. They include human figures, horses, and painted pottery, inspired by ancient Persian pottery. His women—single or in groups of two or three—with large oblong eyes and joined eyebrows are reminiscent of the portraits of the Qajar large-scale paintings (FIGURE 6). His male figures, whether polo players, lovers, or riders with falcons perched on their arms, bring to mind some standard types of Iranian pictorial tradition and forms of Persian painting (Yarshater, 1979, p. 370). In all cases, however, different sections of the figures are mostly adorned and illuminated by calligraphic or decorative patterns.

The horseback riders and lyrical couples populating Persian miniatures and ceramics are the themes of Tabrizi's painting too (FIGURE 7). The works of Tabrizi (b. 1939), which were first inspired by traditional symbolic articles found in such folk-art as “blue beads, old keys and locks, loose pages from manuscripts, penmanship practice sheets, old-fashioned signature seals, metal bowls with engraved rims, *qalyān* or *nargila* tops, colored glass or bits of semiprecious stone,” (Yarshater, 1979, p. 370) also draw upon Persian painting, Qajar portraits, and forms of religious and folk paintings of coffee-house (*Qahva-kāna*). In his works, one can see the rhythmical repetition of motifs and calligraphic forms. From his exhibitions in 1970–71, Tabrizi too started to utilize calligraphy as the sole element in his paintings.

Tabatabai (b. 1928), who was one of the pioneers of modern art in Iran, also started with Qajar patterns in the late 1950s, earlier than most others, but “he hovered halfway between the caricature and the more serious exponents” (Emami, 1971, p. 357). A serious sculptor and a prolific painter, Tabatabai has a wide scope and has tried different styles; however, he is recognized best for his bold re-statements of Persian patterns such as Qajar females, decorative forms, calligraphic shapes, and imaginative scenes. “He attempts to capture and perpetuate the types and shapes which are bound up with a vision of the last phases of traditional Persia” (Yarshater, 1979, p. 370). He drew upon forms



from Iranian folk culture and art a few years earlier than the School was named. His sculptures are also combinations of various elements found in the scrap heap but imaginatively and humorously put together (Emami, 1987, p. 645; FIGURE 8).

Through a survey of the cultural atmosphere of Iranian artistic gatherings and also some written pieces in art publications and exhibitions during the fifties and, especially, the sixties, such as the introductions to the Tehran Biennials and *Tālār-e Irān*'s magazines, it can generally be found that they focused on two main topics: the importance of success in the international art scene on the one hand, and the formation of national and Iranian art, on the other. This coincided with the cultural policies of the state during Mohammad-Reza Shah's reign (1941–1979). Through the five Tehran Biennials (Emami, 1987, pp. 641-42), supported by the Department of Fine Arts, the aim was to foster the development of contemporary arts while at the same time presenting the ancient heritage and civilization of the country. The Tehran Biennials attempted to emulate famous European Biennials such as the Venice Biennale, and the organizers aimed at the introduction and propagation of a kind of modern art that included the state's cultural agenda. The issue of "national" and "Iranian" identity was highlighted, promoted both by officials concerned with cultural matters and by individual artists who were also themselves interested in past traditions. The Saqqā-kāna movement was therefore attractive to all sides.

As the major sponsors of artistic activities at that time, the governmental cultural departments tried to establish, through patronage of individual artists and movements, a "formal art" that would form the basis of a sort of national school of art. Gradually, during the 1960s, this type of art was extensively propagated and supported by governmental patronage. These external agents are therefore of significance in the formation of the Saqqā-kāna movement, which was regarded as a possible prototype for such a formal art. These implications can be discerned in the introduction to the Third Tehran Biennial and its declaration that "a vein of independent art with local coloring is giving birth." The introduction to the Fourth Tehran Biennial also contains similar sentiments.

The state's sponsorship, support from other institutions such as the Iran-America and the Iran-Italy Cultural Association, the Goethe Institute, and the Sirus (Cyrus) Gallery in Paris where modern Iranian painting, sculpture, and design were exhibited, and private galleries in Tehran, including Saba, Mes,



Litu, Borghese, Zarvan, Zand, Saman, *Honar-e Jadid*, and *Tālār-e Qandrīz*, and the creation of several museums and artistic clubs in Tehran and other cities, including Isfahan and Kerman, the establishment of the Faculty of Decorative Arts, making links with international associations, employing some foreign instructors, and transformation of the old educational curriculum to a modern one, all had combined to help modern Iranian visual arts to become, like modern Persian poetry, a significant entity in the cultural life of the country. Like modern poetry, it was basically an urban art and limited to the middle classes. But in contrast to modern poetry, visual arts benefited from extensive state support. Gradually, many government institutions and private companies became patrons of modern art; in particular one can name the Farah Pahlavi Foundation. Others, including Ministries, National Iranian Radio Television, banks, corporations led by the Behshahr Industrial group, the Lajevardi Foundation, and the Prime Minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, were all effectively patronizing visual arts.

The issue of identity in art (as in other fields of intellectual and social activities) was discussed in some artistic and intellectual gatherings before the onset of the state-assisted propagation of art in the 1960s. During the 1940s and 1950s, the term “national art” or “school of national art” was repeatedly mentioned by both modernist artists and cultural administrators and some attempts had even been made by artists to produce this kind of art. In other words, since the 1940s when modernism began to be adapted by Iranian artists, many of those pioneers had tried to look at modern western art from an Iranian point of view (The approach to local material as a reference to the self and cultural specificity dated back to the pioneers of modern Iranian art such as Jalil Ziyapour (Ziāpur, 1920-1999) and Houshang Pezeshknia (Hušang Pezeškniā, 1915-1972). Faced with the complexities of their artistic identity, the young artists of the 1960s generation were engaged in intensive experimentation, both intellectually and artistically. They began to draw on Shi’ite pictorial folk culture, still a living tradition and highly popular, especially among the middle and lower classes. These artists believed that these sources had a connection with their artistic roots. At this juncture, criticism of the West through anti-western movements was growing among some Iranian intellectuals. It can be said that this kind of perception with regard to art was paralleled with the nativist and nationalist debates that were prevalent in both intellectual and political arenas of Iran at that time. The major impetus of these movements was to encourage Iranians to attempt to discover their own identity, tradition, and national roots. This belief was also



growing among Iranian elites and the effect of this milieu on this group of artists should not be underestimated. These tendencies among the intelligentsia, which had originated in the 1940s and 1950s, manifested themselves in criticism of the insatiable desire among the majority to imitate and emulate the West and its products. This was known as *Ġarb-zadegi* (Westoxication) in various walks of life, literature, and art. One of the direct reactions to this thought was the return to traditions, local, folk and national cultures, and national-traditional identity. However, it has to be said that although the great presence of nativist beliefs can be recognized in the Saqqā-kāna movement, none of these artists and their followers were anti-western in outlook or artistic stance. Rather, it was the issue of cultural identity that motivated them to refer to their own roots without turning away from the West (Keshmirshekan, 2005, p. 628).

Due to the modernistic nature of their art, the question can be posed whether—as Kamran Diba believes—the Saqqā-kāna movement can be compared to the Pop Art movement in the West. He claims, “if we simplify Pop Art as an art movement which looks at the symbols and tools of a mass consumer society as a relevant and influencing cultural force, Saqqā-kāna artists looked at the inner beliefs and popular symbols that were part of the religion and culture of Iran, and perhaps, consumed in the same way as industrial products in the West (but for different reasons and under dissimilar circumstances)” (Diba, 1989, p. 153). He names the Saqqā-kāna movement “in reference to Western art, ‘Spiritual Pop Art’” (Diba, 1989, p. 153). Although his assumption cannot be rejected outright, it cannot be fully justified either, considering the artistic circumstances of that period (the 1960s) in Iran and individual statements of the artists exploring their individual motivations as well as the socio-political context, which was quite different from the West.

Although no one has claimed any exact date for the demise of the Saqqā-kāna School yet, it has been stated that the main School did not survive because of the lack of concord between the members of the group (Jowdat, 1965, p. 10; Aghdashloo, 1993, p. 44). At present, the School’s main doctrine (there was no actual doctrine written by the Saqqā-kāna School. Rather, here, the word “doctrine” is used to express the main principles of the School’s aim, including its attention to the issue of cultural and artistic identity by reference to pictorial heritage with consideration of complex realities of modern life with a neo-traditional approach) is continued through the individual artists of the School and other artists who were influenced by it in different ways. If we



consider Emami's explanatory statement in the introduction to the Saqqā-kāna exhibition's catalogue in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in August 1977, it can be adduced that the School had existed in a different manner, at least until that time. The exhibition consisted of works of the major Saqqā-kāna members, including Zenderoudi, Tanavoli, Pilaram, Qandriz, Arabshahi, Tabrizi, Tabatabai, and Oveisi. Yet, it can be said that although the group's concrete activity together (we know that there were no special organization for the group to share their ideas together) did not last until the mid-1960s, the Saqqā-kāna main founders have continued their radical aim, even now, through their individual and diverse styles. In other words, even if each of the artists of Saqqā-kāna chose a different manner and proceeded on their way beyond the movement's initial boundaries, their subsequent stages cannot be considered distinct from the original School's main destination. Furthermore, one could see that from the mid-1960s onwards, the Saqqā-kāna movement witnessed increasing numbers of artists joining it. In particular, many used calligraphic forms as the basis of their work. Distinguished figures such as Mohammad Ehsai (Eḥsā'i, b. 1939) and Reza Mafi (Māfi, 1943-1982) belong to the genre which was then named "*Naqqāši-katt*." Hence the Saqqā-kāna School resulted in the emergence of other homogeneous tendencies in contemporary Iranian art in which these tendencies all dealt with the issue of identity. Such movements as "Easternism," and "Gnosticism," emerged, with each one playing a part in the history of contemporary Iranian art.

Since the advent of the Saqqā-kāna School, there has not been any similar movement in Iran on a national basis. In particular, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and following political, cultural, and social transformations in Iran, art was also radically affected. The Revolution brought to an abrupt end the previous regime's official policies on art. One of the important impacts of the Revolution on such movements as Saqqā-kāna, (whose lack of commitment to the Islamic Revolution and its aspirations and whose works with their modernist aspects had been strongly supported by the pre-revolutionary state as a formal art) was that the School's artists mostly migrated abroad and those who stayed behind had no opportunity to present their works. However, after about a decade in the post-revolutionary period, modern Iranian art was regenerated in the beginning of the 1990s. It coincided with the re-introduction and analysis of the Saqqā-kāna artists and their works in the artistic centers. Some eminent Saqqā-kāna artists, such as Zenderoudi, Tanavoli and Arabshahi who had cut their ties with the Iranian art scene after the Revolution, were now invited to the Tehran Museum of



Contemporary Art to exhibit their works in solo or group exhibitions. Here again, one can witness that the dominant preoccupation of the post-revolutionary modernist artists is to identify what constitutes the specific characteristics of Iranian art, and it is in this continued quest that the essence of the Saqqā-kāna movement still lives on.

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See also the website of [Charles Hossein Zenderoudi](#) (accessed 15 August 2009).

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