

# **An Investigation of the Typology, Structural and Thematic Classification of the Tree Motif in the Chehelsoton Palace of Isfahan**

## **Abstract**

In Iranian paintings, the element of nature, particularly trees are reflected abundantly and was considered as the pillar and foundation of existence, the connection between earth and sky the basis of the universe. Moreover, the mentioned symbol was a sign of birth, growth, development, death, resurrection, stable existence and immortality. The role of the tree has been used in the historical monuments of the Islamic period. One of the beautiful structures of the Safavid period is the Chehelsoton Palace. The issue under study is the presence of the tree motif in the mentioned structure and its role and purpose. The research approach is qualitative and data analysis is accomplished via a descriptive-analytical manner. Data and information is collected from library sources, online sources, as well as field observations. The findings of the research indicate that in the paintings of the Chehelsoton Palace of Isfahan, about 110 wall paintings decorated with the tree motif are identified. Further understanding of the occurrence of the tree designs, necessitated this research. The role of the tree is mostly inspired by the tangible nature and the actual trees located in the garden of this mansion that are drawn and painted in various manners (elm, sycamore, cypress, blossom and fruit trees). Likewise, the motifs do not only bestow a purely decorative aspect due to their proximity and relationship between human beings and other elements, but also behold a thematic and conceptual aspect.

## **Research aims:**

1. A study and analysis of tree designs in the paintings of Chehelsoton Palace in Isfahan in terms of form and content.
2. A reflection on the effective sources in designing the tree motifs of the Chehelsoton Palace.

## **Research questions:**

1. What is the role and position of the tree motif in the paintings of the Chehelsoton Palace from a structural and thematic point of view?
2. What was the basis and approach of the artist in designing the various tree motifs?

**Keywords:** Isfahan school, Chehelsoton Palace, tree, structural and thematic typology.

## Introduction

The most brilliant part of the Safavid dynasty is the reign of Shah Abbas I, the grandson of Shah Tahmasb I. During this period in Isfahan, with the coming to power of Shah Abbas and the highest school of Isfahan or Safavid and with the efforts of artists such as Reza Abbasi, this school developed into one of the greatest schools. When Shah Abbas transformed his throne from Qazvin to Isfahan and all the arts gained status and achievement with his supportive orders; hence, the realm of painting entered a new stage of transformation and Isfahan became the direct inheritor of the Tabriz school; as a result, the Isfahan school became a new era of Iranian painting. In this school, influences from European and Indian schools are seen also it should be noted that Iranian painting does not provide a rational understanding of the nature of existence. The Iranian worldview is fundamentally and invariably an idealistic fantasy. According to the history of art, the processing of nature has undergone fundamental changes with the diversity of culture and thought of civilizations and societies. The arts of different civilizations represent diverse events and approaches to existence and nature. Chelesoton Palace considered as one of the most beautiful and significant buildings in the history of the Safavid era was designed for gatherings and ceremonies of the Safavid kings. In all religions and rituals, there is a special respect for nature and artists have always used it as a primary inspiration and in various arts, in a practical, decorative and even symbolic way. From ancient times until now, Iranian art has paid special attention to the landscape and elements of nature, and this naturalistic thinking is rooted in the worldview and mentality of Iranians from the distant past. In the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, the role of the tree has progressed to the level of sanctity and has been engraved in the beliefs of the Iranian people in various ways and under different titles. Although in Iranian painting, in the first stage, the theme of the tree is seen and received in a decorative way, but with a little research and reflection, its semantic roots can be distinguished. By examining the wall paintings, the building of Chehelston Palace in Isfahan, about 110 paintings decorated with tree motifs on its walls were identified. In these paintings, the tree motif is inspired by the living trees in the yard of this mansion in various types of elm, sycamore, cypress, blossom and fruit trees.

Regarding the detailed study of the tree plot, no independent research has been done in Chehelston Palace so far, but with further studies, the following researches in this track have been identified and studied. First, Yaghoub Azhand (2004) in the book of Iranian painting in a historical way has tried to introduce the above drawings in Chehelston Palace. Rahnavard (2007) in his book entitled History of Iranian Art in the Islamic Period has studied the Safavid school and has made references to this building. Penirian (2012) in an article on the subject of Chehelston has studied the iconography of the murals of Chehelston Palace in Isfahan with the theme of Golgasht and Sarvar. Honarfar (1350) has also written about Isfahan's forties in the book: Treasure of Isfahan Historical Monuments. There are also references in the field of research and study of the role of the tree in painting in various works. First, there is an article entitled "Matching the shape of a tree in nature with Iranian paintings" Shoushtari, Shirazi (2008) which comparatively studies tree species in nature with similar examples in some paintings and Najafi et al. (2011) entitled " Visual features of trees in Iranian painting "which has discussed the visual elements of trees in a descriptive-analytical manner and has presented a set of its most consistent features as research achievements. Many studies have been done on the drawings of this beautiful building, but on the theme of the tree less attention has been paid independently. This study attempts to further study and focus on the theme of the tree in the drawings of this building to be able to step in the direction of recognizing more drawings.

## Conclusion

Throughout the history of Iran, nature with all its elements from the worldview of the people has entered the culture and art of this land. Among these, the tree element has a superior place. In Persian literature, the tree is a symbol of life and due to its constant change and ascending to the sky, it is also considered a symbol of stability. On the other hand, the stripping of a leaf every year and its re-leafing is also a sign of death and its regeneration. In the art of painting, the tree is one of the main elements of painting and the positions next to man and with him have always been drawn and artists, by purposefully drawing the tree in painting, were able to create imaginary and surreal conditions by associating special meanings. Symbolic motifs in various Iranian artistic manifestations as part of understanding the symbolic language of art have always been emphasized by artists. Man in painting has evoked different meanings such as immortality, stability, height and .... Reading the structure and visual language of nature and trees in Iranian art has always been emphasized as part of understanding the symbolic language of Iranian painting due to its history of symbolic presence in painting. The results of this study showed that the repetition of the tree along with reading the structure and visual language of nature and trees in Iranian art has always been emphasized due to its history of symbolic presence in painting as part of understanding the symbolic language of Iranian painting. The outcomes of this study exhibited that the repetition of the tree next to humans has caused the association of various meanings, including the desire for immortality, stability and height, and so on. In this study, 115 paintings were identified in the building of Chehelston Palace in Isfahan, of which 32 paintings in the central hall, 4 paintings before reaching the central hall, 23 paintings in the east and west rooms, 21 paintings in the west porch, 9 paintings in the east porch and 3 in the area facing the east porch. The trees drawn are sycamore, elm, cypress, fruit tree, blossom tree and cypress; furthermore, many of the depicted trees reflect the mansion's garden area and the plants of the courtyard. Among the painted trees, the elm tree has the largest share of presence.

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