

Cubism in Iran

Jalil Ziapour and the Fighting Rooster Association

Katrin Nahidi

In 1948 the Iranian painter Jalil Ziapour (1920–1999), together with his artistic colleagues, the writer Gholam Hossein Gharib (1923–2003), playwright Hassan Shirvani (birth/death date unknown), and composer Morteza Hannaneh (1922–1989), founded the Fighting Rooster Association (*Anjoman-e Korūs-e Jangi*) to promote the new emerging modernist arts in Iran. Jalil Ziapour and the Fighting Rooster Association were the leading representatives of cubism in Iran, which arose as a movement in the 1940s and offered Iranian artists like Ziapour a suitable vocabulary to elaborate an artistic subjectivity based on Iranian heritage. At the same time, it also helped to promote the Fighting Rooster Association's aims to foster democratic hopes for the Iranian nation. This article focuses on Ziapour's works and texts in light of Orphic cubist theory and highlights the beginnings of modernist art in Iran, the global entanglements of modernism, and the search for an Iranian art beyond orientalist painting traditions and exotic depictions of being the "other."¹

Ziapour's artistic practice illustrates how experiences of migration and transcultural processes of translation shaped the development of modernist arts in Iran. He became familiar with European modernist art during his studies at the École des Beaux-Arts, and with cubism, in particular, at André Lhote's private art school. As one of the representatives of Orphic cubism, Lhote provided his students with an insight into the cubist language of forms. Orphic cubism was strongly shaped by the writings of the philosopher Henri Bergson. The anti-rationalist and anti-positivist underpinnings of Bergson's thought helped to establish cubist artistic language and theories of visual

perception. Bergsonian theory also provided the basis for their political efforts to articulate an alternative, leftist nationalism before World War I. The strong connection between political commitment and artistic expression played a crucial role for the activities of the Fighting Rooster Association, and a closer examination of their writings demonstrates that their aesthetic principles were also informed by Bergson, translated in the Iranian context through tropes of Sufism. The recourse to Bergson's metaphysical ideas enabled the Iranian artists to proclaim an alternative cultural identity rooted in Iran's spiritual heritage, in order to counteract the adopted rationality of modernity as practiced in Iran.

Methodologically, I would like to situate this essay in line with the critique of formalist approaches to modernist art history, in order to suggest a sociopolitical interpretation of the artistic practice of cubism in Iran. Generally speaking, a basic methodological divide between formalist criticism and contextual perspectives shapes the reception and analysis of modernisms in art history. The art critic Clement Greenberg especially played a decisive role in establishing formalism as the dominant methodology for the aesthetic interpretation of modernist arts, leading to the exclusion of social and political concerns. For Greenberg, the sociopolitical context of art compromises his ideas of modernisms' aesthetic autonomy and artistic pureness. Due to the continuous dominance of formalism, non-formalist approaches began to flourish from the 1950s, and a counter-movement started in reaction to the formalist agenda. The proponents of non-formalist art history followed a more contextual and synthetic approach by taking the historical circumstances of the artistic productions into account. The debate about formalism and politics in art history reached new heights in the 1990s, when the advocates of non-formalism criticized formalist art history as a means of depoliticizing artistic practice and neutralizing critical implications of art.² The art historian Deniz Tekiner, for instance, has stated that formalism contributes to the whitewashing of modernist arts:

Through formalist criticism, which subjected all modern art to purely aesthetic standards of evaluation, artworks were relieved of ideational content and were brought into accord with the prevailing system of art commodity exchange and its ideology. Formalist criticism thus facilitated processes by which art objects were reified, or assumed their principal identities and statuses as objects in commodity relations, rather than as products of human relations. In this process, the social contexts of artworks were forgotten.³

The existing historiography of modernist arts in Iran, as will be discussed later on, also fits this formalist practice and has the effect of producing a streamlined and apolitical understanding of modernism. In this context, tropes like formalist art criticism and stylistic development became decisive means to categorize Iranian art as modern, and to participate in a global modernity.

Jalil Ziapour's painting *Zaynab Khatoun*

Jalil Ziapour's painting *Zaynab Khatoun* (1953, repainted in 1962) is a prominent example of his translation of cubist aesthetic principles in a local context, and helped to spread cubism as a modernist language of expression in Iran (fig. 1). *Zaynab Khatoun* was displayed at the first Tehran Biennial in 1958, where Ziapour was awarded the gold medal for this painting.⁴

Zaynab Khatoun shows a woman combing her hair in a public bath, a so-called *hamam*. The figure crouches in an unnatural, twisted pose in front of a yellow, green, and bluish tile panel. While the strong grid structure of the tile pattern creates a geometrical linear composition, the yellow part of the background illuminates her naked and cubic sculptural body. Her bronze-colored body and her dark hair, which waves around her silhouette like a sheet, take center stage. The figure stretches both her arms in a triangle above her head, while holding a turquoise comb in her hands. Against the illuminated yellow tile background, the turquoise comb moves into the spotlight and contrasts with the female's red, henna-colored hands and feet. The color palette of the female's body is mainly composed of shades of brown and black. The depiction of the female model from various viewpoints makes her posture appear unnatural and twisted. Even though the woman's sculptural body and the way she balances on an indicated frame suggest a certain three-dimensionality, the painting remains flat and void of any depth of perspective. Due to the strong lines of the ornamentation of the tiles, the flatness of the pictorial space and the emphasis on the tile structure create a geometrical impression. The strong lines of the tiles are the dominant feature of the image, simultaneously disassembling and reassembling the painting. The tiles (which are used in the Iranian tradition for both ornamentation in mosques as well as the depiction of high-ranking personalities in palaces) are not only a geometric pattern but also turn into an independent pictorial element, which breaks up the space of the painting.

A closer look at the painting reveals a text banner surrounding the female figure, with the lines of a children's poem by the poet Parvin Dolatabadi (1924–2008). This use of scripture is an important feature of *Zaynab Khatoun*, because the interplay between text and image reveals the picture's complex textual and visual program. For Persian-literate viewers, the poem indicates that Ziapour illustrates a bathing scene in the *hamam*:

*Chamchomak the autumn leave,
Zaynab Khatoun is my mother,
Her hair is as long as a bow,
It is longer than a bow,
It is blacker like sabagh,
She wants to stay thirty days in the hamam,*

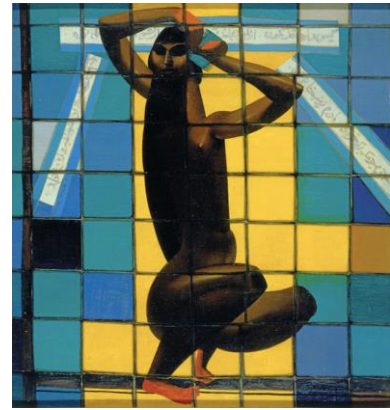


Fig. 1. Jalil Ziapour, *Zaynab Khatoun*, 1953, repainted in 1962, oil on canvas, 127 x 117 cm. © Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.

*She wants a turquoise comb.*⁵

With his reference to the *hamam*, Ziapour's painting offers an alternative depiction of oriental bathing scenes and stands in stark contrast to orientalist painters like Jean Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). In this manner, Ziapour deconstructs the orientalist erotic imaginary of public baths, as created by Ingres, for instance, with his painting *Turkish Bath* (1862).⁶ Instead, Ziapour offers an unconventional concept of a bathing scene that is rooted in a local pictorial tradition. This is very significant, because an earlier generation in Iranian art, namely Qajar photography in the nineteenth century, undoubtedly borrowed from orientalist image conventions, as Ali Behdad states: "Having internalized the discourse and practices of Orientalism, Nasir al-Din Shah depicts himself and his wives in the same stereotypical way as European artists represented Middle Eastern women and the oriental despot."⁷

In the Persian painting tradition, the depiction of a female bathing nude often also refers to the iconography of Khosrow and Shirin. The legendary love story between the Sasanian King Khosrow and the Armenian princess Shirin dates back to the poetry of Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), who became very popular for the stories in his famous poem collection, *Khamseh*. One of the climaxes of the narration is Khosrow's discovery of Shirin bathing in a pool. This very popular scene has been depicted in miniatures, tiles, and many other visual productions throughout the centuries of Iran's visual art production.⁸

Textually, the work's title, *Zaynab Khatoun*, and the employment of the poem open an ambiguous space of interpretation. The combination of poem and image not only connects religious and national discourses with one another, but also forms a new moment of transgression. By doing so, different interpretations are possible, because the religious implications of the Shi'ite figure of Zaynab are connected to the familial imagery of modern nations, personified in this case by the mother. This enables Ziapour to express his idea of a possible Iranian national identity rooted in local traditions. By naming his painting *Zaynab Khatoun*, Ziapour evokes different religious and cultural associations in the mind of the viewer. For instance, Zaynab is an important figure in the Iranian Shi'ite context; she is often represented in hagiographic literature because of her significant role during the tragic events of the battle of Karbala, a defining paradigm in Shi'ite belief. After the brutal murder of Husayn and his followers, Zaynab became a prominent exponent of the Shi'ite message.⁹

Ziapour's painting could also be a visual implementation of the Qur'anic figure of Zaynab bint Jahsh, one of prophet Mohammad's wives. After the prophet had arranged a marriage between Zaynab and his adopted son, Zaid ibn Harithah, Mohammad accidentally saw Zaynab taking a bath and immediately fell in love with her.¹⁰ In the context of the painting, the topic of religion is not, however, an expression

of belief, but rather functions for Ziapour as a manifestation of cultural belonging, as evidenced by the second line of the children's poem in this painting-poem: "Zaynab Khatoun is my mother." The allegory of the mother alludes to the process of modernization in Iran, mainly in the Constitutionalist era (1906–1910), when new terms had to be created to name political entities, like nation, politics, citizenship, and homeland. The articulation of the modern nation often employed familial metaphors, especially in the Iranian context, where the idea of homeland as "mother" had a special significance for the construction of a national identity.¹¹ As Afsaneh Najmabadi has shown, in modern Persian literature there is a deeply rooted tradition, which can be traced back to motifs from Sufi literature, of metaphorically portraying the homeland as the mother. These familial metaphors played an important role in the process of identity formation and helped to create a specific sentiment of Iranianness based on certain similarities, in order to overcome religious and ethnic differences. In this discourse, the sentence "Zaynab Khatoun is my mother" becomes very powerful and transforms Zaynab Khatoun into a personification of Iran, epitomized in the allegory of the mother. Thus, Ziapour's painting *Zaynab Khatoun* can be read as an artistic manifesto locating Iranian modernist art within a local cultural tradition.

Stylistically, with *Zaynab Khatoun*, Ziapour clearly breaks with earlier Iranian painting traditions and demonstrates that he was familiar with modernist European arts. In this work, he employs aspects of the cubist language of forms, such as the flatness of pictorial space, multi-perspectivity, and the abandonment of naturalism. The sculptural portrayal of the female figure evokes associations with Alexander Archipenko's bronze statues; the assemblage of different artistic means, such as tiles, sculpture, and miniature, resonate with the characteristics of the cubist collages; and the representation of the bather recalls Pablo Picasso's depictions of bathers.

Jalil Ziapour belongs to the first generation of modernist artists who deliberately abandoned the realistic-naturalistic styles of earlier generations of Iranian painters who had adopted Western painting techniques and aesthetic principles. Due to his artistic innovations and experiments with modernist European expression, Ziapour became known in Iran as a "pioneer," and even the "father of modernism."¹² Especially in recent years, Ziapour's decisive role and his agency in the development of modernist expression in Iran has been widely discussed in English, French,¹³ and Persian publications.¹⁴ Hamid Keshmirshakan, who extensively researched modern and contemporary Iranian art, and has contributed tremendously to the study of Iranian modernism in a global context, considers Ziapour's art "as the practical application of the artist's proposal for developing a modern visual language on the basis of Iran's national heritage."¹⁵ Most historiographical renditions follow a formalist approach, and see Ziapour's style as one of the first attempts to adopt

modernity in the visual arts and to connect Western means of expression with Iranian content.

Nevertheless, Ziapour's works of art are often understood as belated imitations of European modernist art, resulting from an artistic immaturity with regard to Western art and the belated practice of cubism in Iran. In this regard, the art historian Roueen Pakbaz states that the adaptation of Western art occurred primarily on a stylistic and technical level, without a deeper understanding of Western modernity. Especially Ziapour's artistic practice of merging cubist expression with Iranian elements, such as mosques and bazaars, represents for Pakbaz an irreconcilable conflict with an assumed universal modernity.¹⁶ For the art historian Fereshteh Daftari, Ziapour's adaptation of cubist formal language was an immature attempt to nationalize Iranian art. She argues that, during Ziapour's migratory experience in the postwar years in Paris, cubism and fauvism were undergoing a renaissance as part of an effort to reconnect with France's prewar and pre-German-occupation cultural past. Thus, cubism provided Ziapour, according to Daftari, with a suitable vocabulary to establish an Iranian modernist art in the service of nationalization.¹⁷ The art critic Bavand Behpoor affirms that the adaptation of cubist style was a way to connect to the artistic legacy of Picasso, who served as role model for many Middle Eastern artists, and thus made working in a cubist style a mere signifier of avant-gardism.¹⁸ Morteza Godarzi goes one step further and harshly criticizes Ziapour's attempt to link cubist elements with Iranian ones as a massive failure, and accuses the painter of harming the reputation of French cubism in Iran.¹⁹ Iranian art historiography occasionally also interprets cubism in Iran as a belated copy of Picasso's artistic practice. This phenomenon applies not only to the Iranian context, but is a wider phenomenon in the study of non-Western art history, which the art historian Partha Mitter described as the so-called "Picasso manqué syndrome."²⁰ The Picasso manqué syndrome stems from Western art history's epistemology of creating a history of artistic influence, which also includes the study of artistic production outside the West. Producing a history of Western influence also carries power-political implications, and thus contributes to the establishment of a colonial art history. This history tends to present Western artists and their practice of cultural appropriation as superior, whereas the practice of "borrowing by artists from the peripheries becomes a badge of inferiority."²¹

Orphic Cubism in France

Both for a better understanding of the practice of cubism in Iran and in order to alter the perception of it as imitation and belatedness, however, it is important to note that French cubism was a pluralistic enterprise with a highly diverse form of expression creating artistic innovation, which was practiced by various artists. After Ziapour graduated in 1945/46 from the newly founded Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran, the Ministry of Culture honored his achievements with a state-sponsored fellowship to continue

his art education in the French capital.²² During his stay in Paris (1946–1948), Ziapour studied at *l'Académie André Lhote*, a private art school, where the French painter and theoretician André Lhote (1885–1962) trained more than 1,200 students from all over the world. In this way, cubism became a global enterprise that traveled to Iran and different parts of the world, and subsequently underwent various local changes and produced a diversity of modernist expressions. At the beginning of his career, Lhote worked in a fauvist style, but in 1912 he joined the Section d'Or, an association of cubist artists also known as the Puteaux Group or Orphic cubists, with prominent members such as Jacques Villon, Juan Gris, Robert Delaunay, Marcel Duchamp, Fernand Léger, Jean Metzinger, and Albert Gleizes. Due to their writing and exhibition practice in major venues in Paris, such as the *Salon des Indépendants* and the *Salon d'Automne*, the Puteaux Group became the public representative of the cubist movement. The popular master narrative of modernist art heralds cubism, in particular, for its sharp break with past pictorial traditions and artistic innovation. This becomes even clearer through the prevailing stylistic distinction in art history between analytical and synthetic cubism, based on a focus on Pablo Picasso and George Braque. It was the art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler who first introduced this conceptual differentiation in his text *Der Weg zum Kubismus* (*The Rise of Cubism*), published in 1920. In his book, Kahnweiler promoted the idea that especially the works of Picasso and Braque relied on a “celebration of radical subjectivity and the temporal qualities of consciousness” shaped by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.²³

After the war, this approach became the dominant reading of cubist works, and erased the political engagement and aspirations of French cubism. In his studies about cubist aesthetics, the art historian Mark Antliff, however, demonstrated that this art movement was less an expression of radical subjectivity, but instead an artistic reaction to “this atmosphere of rapid change and impending war, shaped partly by a number of artists committed to an idealistic conception of society opposed to war.”²⁴ With their artistic production and theoretical writings, the Puteaux cubists, in particular, contributed to the discourse about French cultural identity. The debate was strongly shaped by the *Action Française*, a royalist and far-right political movement founded by Charles Maurras in 1899 as a consequence of the Dreyfus Affair. This movement strongly opposed republican politics and demanded the reestablishment of the monarchy. The members of the association advocated a return to a golden age of rationality that they saw realized during the reign of Louis XVI.²⁵ In opposition to the *Action Française*, many leftist parties, including the Puteaux Group, tried to establish an alternative, leftist nationalism. In their political writings, they adopted the French philosopher Henri Bergson's concept of intuition, in opposition to the Cartesian rationality of the *Action Française*, and correlated it to the spiritual aspirations inherent in their ideological writings. Bergson's anti-rationalist ideas and his concept of intuition were welcomed among artists and critics of the Parisian avant-garde who considered themselves Bergsonians. Orphic cubism,

especially, developed under the impression of Bergson's philosophy and became the manifest against the depiction of a recognizable world in response to a general disappointment with nineteenth-century thought, epitomized as it was by positivism, determinism, and materialism.²⁶

The Fighting Rooster Association and the Practice of Cubism in Iran

As one of the members of the Puteaux Group, André Lhote introduced Jalil Ziapour to Bergsonian cubism's body of thought. Lhote and his intellectual circle strongly advocated the artist's active role and the importance of painting in shaping societal processes through theory, as he pointed out in his 1919 treatise, *On the Necessity of Theories*.²⁷ Lhote's artistic self-conception as theoretician, teacher, and painter became a decisive model for Ziapour. Ziapour's extensive practice of writing and his self-understanding as an active educator were integral parts of his definition of the new social functions of art in Iranian society.²⁸ Ziapour tried not only to achieve "true" Iranian art in his own artistic works but also elaborated on these issues in his theoretical writings. In 1948 Ziapour published his artistic manifesto *Refute of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism*, which circulated widely in magazines and newspapers.²⁹ This piece of writing is an important example of theoretical expressions about modernist art in Iran, yet it has not received the full scholarly attention it deserves.³⁰ In this text, written at an early stage in his professional career, Ziapour formulates his guidelines for accomplishing the true purpose of painting, which comprises anti-representational styles, the satisfaction of spiritual needs, the self-expression of the artist, and the fulfillment of the requirements of its society. For Ziapour, painting epitomized a political means of expression with the important social function of educating the masses, for which reason he strongly criticizes the concept of *l'art pour l'art*, as he stated in the following words:

*We must remember that the painter cannot totally stay indifferent to social themes, because for him and all the people who live in a community it is impossible to run away from the beliefs and the reactions of the others because of the mutual impacts it all has [...]. We need to know that nothing is created without the need of the environment; and no request can be further than one of its time, because each request has a cause; and naturally the cause of each request is from the necessities in the society, therefore my request is not beyond the need of our present time.*³¹

After his return from Paris, Ziapour's studio became a place of gathering, where the Fighting Rooster Association discussed theoretical issues of contemporary culture.³² The years in which the Fighting Rooster Association was active cover a crucial era in Iran's modern history. With Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, an era of democratic promise began that lasted until the 1953 coup, which overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. When Mohammad Reza Shah took the crown

and succeeded the Pahlavi throne in 1941, he fully cooperated with the Allies, presenting himself as a constitutional monarch who respected basic law. During this period, political prisoners were released and nationalist and socialist groups reorganized. Intellectuals started to reconnect to the central discourse of the Constitutional era, namely, the demand for equality between the monarchy and the people, and started to express their hopes for liberal and democratic processes. The establishment of the communist *Tudeh* party (“masses of people”) was a part of the historical background of the year 1941.³³ Many intellectuals joined the *Tudeh* party, including members of the Fighting Rooster, such as the poets Nima Yushij and Manouchehr Sheybani. In 1949, however, the parliament voted for the immediate abolishment of the communist party. Despite the ban, *Tudeh* members did not cease their political activities, but rather engaged in the political struggle of Iran’s oil nationalization. The nationalization of oil was not only financially motivated, but also epitomized national independence and the end to imperialist and colonialist interferences. During this time, nationalism was used as means of liberation from foreign occupation and became a prime factor of social mobilization, especially in the arts.³⁴

It was in this historical context that the Fighting Rooster Association published five issues of their eponymous magazine between 1948 and 1950, which was censored and suspended only shortly after its publication because government officials equated cubism with communism and accused the association of socialist propaganda. To circumvent censorship and spread the aesthetic principles of their new art, the association published their magazine under new names, which were also quickly suspended because Ziapour was “suspected of being a communist sympathizer or Communist Party member,” and particularly because “the association between cubism and Communism was known in Iran,” as Aida Foroutan explains.³⁵ A close reading of the *Korūs-e Jangī* magazines demonstrates that the group was deeply engaged in articulating new aesthetics, with the idealistic goal of educating the masses. Ziapour’s concept of painting was based on a socialist understanding of art, as Alice Bombardier discerns from his article in the fourth edition of the magazine. Bombardier observes that Ziapour appropriated communist ideological language not only to demand an overcoming of earlier representational conventions but also to promote cubism as a suitable artistic language to mobilize the masses.³⁶ In other words, Ziapour promoted cubism as a manifestation of modernism, and furthermore also as a cultural and political ideology.

In a black-and-white print on the magazine’s cover, Ziapour gave the association the face of an aggressive rooster angrily looking down its tong-like beak, with its forked tongue darting out (fig. 2). The subtext within the image and its framing is a structural reference to Iranian miniature painting, which creates a strong interconnection between text and image, as the picture’s caption, *horus changi* (“the fighting rooster”), specifies. Strong lines shape the rooster’s



Fig. 2. Jalil Ziapour, cover of *Korūs-e Jangī* magazine, vol. 1, Tehran, 1948.

body; the indicated platform and the walking motion of the rooster suggest a certain three-dimensionality, reinforced by its claw, which extends beyond the frame and brings the bird to life for the viewer. The strong, curved lines suggest a similarity to calligraphy. In comparison to zoomorphic calligraphy, which writes in the guise of animals, Ziapour reverses this idea. His abstract calligraphic forms function as a deconstruction and division of the pictorial surface.

By using the shape of a bird, Ziapour alludes to the iconographic tradition of writing the word *bismillah*, “in the name of God.” Many calligraphers have used such bird-shaped calligraphy as an expression of God’s beauty (fig. 3). *Bismillah* is the first word in the Qur’an, and the short version of *b-ismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi*, “in the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful.”³⁷ The immense and timeless importance of this expression can be very clearly observed in the Islamic Republic Iran of today, where official and legal actions, as well as documents, have to bear this confession. Even though it serves as a political co-optation of Islam, it demonstrates an obvious importance for the identification of being Islamic.

In this work, Ziapour mixes traditional iconography with modernist European art. In this print, he merges the religiously loaded symbol of the bird calligraphy with Picasso’s political depictions of the rooster.³⁸ Picasso’s series of roosters, painted during the German occupation, demonstrates his political engagement and represents the possibilities of artistic resistance.³⁹ Picasso’s triumphant rooster as a “messenger of dawn and resurrection” refers to the Gallic rooster, which has a long history of being a symbol of French patriotism, and was used as a figurehead by the French Resistance during World War II.⁴⁰

Significantly, the first issue of the *Fighting Rooster* magazine starts with the poem “About the city of the morning” by the avant-garde poet Nima Yushij (1895–1959) (fig. 4). The poem narrates the journey of a rooster accompanying a caravan through Iran. The rhythm of the movement follows the rooster’s crow, “cock-a-doodle-doo,” and is an invitation for the audience to join the caravan, to escape night and darkness and strive for a new morning. With his poem, Nima illustrates the artist association’s goal to educate the audience and to change and revitalize society, as one can also discern from the cover: “Our declared aim: Increasing the culture of Iranians by the association of Fighting Rooster.”⁴¹ Nima also communicates in this poem his political ambitions through a reconfiguration of familiar images of Islamic literature, Sufi metaphors, and motives of traditional Persian literature. The usage of images and metaphors from Persian literature made the *Fighting Rooster*’s political messages comprehensible to the Iranian masses, for whom poetry is part of a living tradition and always has been a widely practiced part of Iranian cultural identity, regardless of class or education.



Fig. 3. *In the name of the merciful*, calligraphy in the form of a hoopoe, Iran, 17th/18th century, ink on paper, 42.4 x 35.6 cm. © bpk / Museum for Islamic Arts, Berlin, SMB.

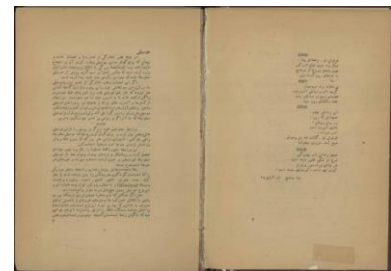


Fig. 4. Nima Yushij, “Az shahr-e sobh” (“About the city of the morning”), *Korūs-e Jangī* magazine, vol. 1, Tehran, 1948.

“About the city of the morning” (1948) demonstrates significant similarities with the well-known Sufi poem *The Conference of the Birds*, by the twelfth-century poet Farid ud-Din Attar.⁴² In his poem “About the city of the morning,” Nima transforms Attar’s Sufi metaphors of the unification and annihilation of the self into the secular political context of an empowerment of the masses.⁴³ Thus, Nima’s poem becomes a political manifesto, reflecting a historical moment in which Iran’s monarchy seemed outdated, and political action by individuals appeared to be a serious possible alternative to the century-long royal dictatorship.

The incorporation of local and vernacular elements in Iranian cultural production became an important tool to counteract universalist conceptions of Western modernity as it was practiced in Iran. In the discourse of modernization, the inclusion of *erfan*, the spiritual teaching of Shi’ite Islam, became for many Iranian intellectuals a “potential discursive device for constructing a modern and authentic Iran.”⁴⁴ In this context, however, it is important to note, as Ali Mirsepassi explains, that the recourse to Iranian and Islamic tradition in twentieth-century Iran happened not only through a revival of local traditions but also through the reflection of the Western episteme. Though intellectuals such as Ahmad Fardid made decisive contributions to “the revitalization of Iranian *Erfan* in the modern context,” this happened largely through his philosophical encounter with Henri Bergson’s anti-rationalist concepts. The connection between *erfan* and Bergson’s philosophy and its significance for the process of Iran’s national formation were widely discussed, for example, by Taghi Arani (1903–1940), the leading Marxist thinker and ideologue of the communist *Tudeh* party, who elaborated in 1933 the relationship between Bergson’s teachings and Sufi spiritual theology.

Although Arani argues in his article that dialectic materialism has the ideological power to dissolve the need for mysticism, he understands Sufism as a means of political opposition towards the ruling systems.⁴⁵ Sufism, thus, becomes an instrumental strategy of resistance and a form of political expression during the Pahlavi rule, when modernity was widely understood as a secularizing process based on the principle of rationality. Revisiting the Fighting Rooster’s artistic productions and the practice of cubism in Iran, one can discern how transcultural processes of translation decisively shaped the development and formation of a local modernism in Iran. The formation of a local modernism can be attributed to the artistic encounter of modernist expression, which happened mostly when Iranian artists went to Europe for educational purposes. Especially the individual agency of Jalil Ziapour, who became, after his return from France, a spokesperson of modernism, supported the dissemination of modernist expression. Throughout his career, Ziapour consistently emphasized that his stay in Paris and his encounter with Western art spurred his artistic innovations and inspired him to “to try to find in our own indigenous culture something that was still living and had some compatibility with the universal language of painting.”⁴⁶ The iconographic analysis of Ziapour’s artistic

works outlines that André Lhote and the political implications of French cubism played a crucial role for the development of a politically engaged art in Iran in the late 1940s and into the 1950s. The adaptation of cubist language was by no means only a formalist experiment with Western modernity, but enabled local artistic innovation, which became a critical tool to reflect the sociopolitical discourses of its time. This leads to the conclusion that cubism was not only an aesthetic manifestation of modernism in Iran, but Bergsonian cubism also provided a political ideology for the Iranian artist.

Katrin Nahidi is an art historian living in Berlin. She is a PhD candidate at the Free University of Berlin in the department of art history. Research for her dissertation *Iranian Modernism Revisited: Exhibitions and art historiography of modern art in Iran* was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. In her dissertation, Nahidi revisits Iran's modernist arts and examines the sites of knowledge production about Iranian modernism, while critically reflecting on the dominant narrative patterns that have established the art historical canon.

1. For further examination of the theoretical terms of "orientalism" and "exoticism" in relation to Iranian art, see Hamid Keshmirshakan, "The Question of Identity vis-à-vis Exoticism in Contemporary Iranian Art," *Iranian Studies* 43, no. 4: 489–512. Also see, Hamid Keshmirshakan, "Globalization and the Question of Identity: Discourses on Contemporary Iranian Art During the Past Two Decades," in *Amidst Shadow and Light: Contemporary Iranian Art and Artists*, ed. Hamid Keshmirshakan (Hong Kong: Liaoning Creative Press, 2011), 64–81.
2. For a further discussion and summary of the debates about formalism in art history, see Deniz Tekiner, "Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning," *Social Justice* 33, no. 2, "Art, Power, and Social Change" (2006): 31–44. See also Johanna Drucker, "Formalism's Other History," *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 4 (December 1996): 750–751.
3. Tekiner, "Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning," 40.
4. *The First Exhibition of Tehran Biennial*, exh. cat. (Tehran: General Administration of Fine Arts, 1958).
5. Translation by the author from the painting. See also Mehdi Hosseini, "Obituary on Jalil Ziapour," accessed April 26th, 2019, <http://www.ziapour.com/?p=1076>.
6. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath (Le Bain turc)*, 1862, oil on canvas, 108 x 110 cm, Musée de Louvre, Paris.
7. Ali Behdad, "The Power-ful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-Century Iran," *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1/4, "Qajar Art and Society" (2001): 141–151, 148.
8. Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami*, exh.cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975).
9. Zaynab is the daughter of Fatima and Imam Ali, the sister of martyr Husayn and the granddaughter of the prophet. She was part of her brother's resistance against the tyrant Yazid, and witnessed the killing of seventy-two men and boys in the Battle of Karbala. Zaynab's character stayed alive because the mourning of the martyrs is a major feature in Ta'zieh, the Iranian passion plays performed every year that reenact the battle of Karbala during the month Moharram. See Barbara

- Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qu'ran: Traditions and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
10. Stowasser, *Women in the Qu'ran*.
 11. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "The Erotic Vatan [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, to Possess, and To Protect," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 3: 442–467, 442.
 12. Javad Mojabi, *Pioneers of Contemporary Persian Painting, First Generation* (Tehran: Art Press, 1996), 3–21. See also Alice Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran. OEuvres méconnues, activités novatrices et scandales au tournant des années 1940* (Bern: Peter Lang 2017).
 13. For further study of the subject, see a selection of important contributions, Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran*. See also Aida Foroutan, "Why the Fighting Cock? The Significance of the Imagery of the Khorus Jangi and its Manifesto 'The Slaughterer of the Nightingale,'" *Iran Namag* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2016): XXVIII–XLIX.
 14. I am grateful to Alireza Labeshka and Haleh Heydari Asil for providing a copy of the most recent publication on the topic for this article. See *Horus-e changi, Pazuheshi darbarezeh-e anjoman-e honari* [The Fighting Rooster, Research about the artistic association], *Poshtebaamag.ir*, eds. Farshid Parsikia et al. (Tehran: 2019).
 15. Hamid Keshmirshakan, *Contemporary Iranian Art, New Perspectives, Contemporary Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 60.
 16. Roueen Pakbaz, *Contemporary Iranian Painting and Sculpture* (Tehran: High Council of Culture and Art, Centre for Research and Cultural Co-ordination, 1974), 14.
 17. Fereshteh Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," in *Picturing Iran, Art, Society and Revolution*, eds. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, (London/New York: IB Tauris, 2002), 39–82, 47.
 18. Bavand Behpoor, "Introduction to 'The Nightingale's Butcher's Manifesto' and 'Volume and Environment II,'" *ARTMargins* 3, no. 2 (June 2014): 118–128, 123.
 19. Morteza Morteza, *Chostoochooy-e hoviât dar naghashi-e moaser-e Iran* [The Search for Identity in Iran's modern painting] (Tehran: 2002), 13.
 20. Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism, India's artists and the avant-garde 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2007), 7.
 21. Ibid.
 22. Mojabi, *Pioneers of Contemporary Persian Painting*, 12.
 23. Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 204.
 24. Ibid., 8.
 25. Ibid., 112.
 26. Ibid.
 27. Daniel Robbins, *André Lhote, 1885–1962, Cubism*, exh. cat. (New York: Leonard Hutton Galleries, 1976), 5.
 28. During his career, Jalil Ziapour became a spokesperson of modernist art and advocated his views about modernism through his teachings, lectures, and publications. Ziapour published more than twenty books on a wide range of historical and sociological topics, such as the history of ancient art in Iran, the history of costumes, and ethnographical studies about rural people in Iran. His books include *Antique Costumes in Iran – from Antiquity to Sasanians* (1343/1965), *The Woman. From her Origins to Today* (1344/1965), and *Painting and Sculpture in Iran* (1343/1965).
 29. Jalil Ziapour, *Teory-e jaded-e ziapour dar naqashi, loqv e nazarha-ye makateb-e gozashte va moaser az primitif ta surrealism* [Refute of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism], accessed April 4, 2019, http://www.ziapour.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/jalil_ziapour_theory.pdf.
 30. Ziapour's text, *Refute of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism*, has not

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- yet been fully translated into English; for a translation into French, see Alice Bombardier.
31. Ibid.
 32. Mojabi, *The Pioneers of Persian Contemporary Painting*, 18–43.
 33. Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 97–122.
 34. Ibid.
 35. Foroutan, “Why the Fighting Cock?,” XLI.
 36. Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran*, 163.
 37. Examples of bird calligraphies can be found, for example, in the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran, *In the name of God*, 870 CE, signed by Asghar.
 38. Foroutan, “Why the Fighting Cock?,” XXXV.
 39. Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973), *The Cock of the Liberation (Le Coq de la Liberation)*, 1944, oil on canvas, Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley M1959.372.
 40. Gertje R. Utlej, *Picasso: The Communist Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 60.
 41. See the cover of *Fighting Rooster*, no. 1 (1948).
 42. In his essay “From Allegory to Symbol,” Houman Sarshar compares Nima’s poem “The Amen Bird” with *The Conference of the Birds*. Sarshar’s conceptual comparison was used here for the further interpretation of Nima’s poem “About the city of the morning.” See Houman Sarshar, “From Allegory to Symbol,” in *Essays on Nima Yushij, Animating Modernism in Persian Poetry*, eds. Ahmad Karimi Hakkak and Kamran Talatoff (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 99–137, 125.
 43. In this story, Attar illustrates the pilgrimage of thirty birds, believed to possibly have been the mythological bird Simorgh, to seek a new king. Their arduous expedition to Mount Qaf, the supposed location of Simorgh’s dwelling, leads the birds through the seven valleys of quest, love, insight into mystery, serenity, unity, awe and reverence, unity and nothingness—all essential Sufi concepts. But when they arrive at the destination of their journey, they do not find a new king, rather only their own reflection in a mirror. Through their own reflection the birds understand that the long-awaited savior Simorgh is just their own image, something etymologically attested to by the Persian name *Simorgh*, which can be translated as *Si*, meaning “thirty,” and *morgh*, meaning “bird.”
 44. Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought, The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 78.
 45. Lloyd Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator, Ahmad Kasravi and the Iranian Mystical Tradition* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006), 28.
 46. Jalil Ziapour, “Naqashi” (painting), *Fighting Rooster*, no. 1 (1948): 12–15. 12.