

The Concept of Representation in Traditional Arts

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Introduction

This study examines the conceptual evolution of 'imitation' (**taqlid**) and **mimesis (muhākāt)** from classical Greek philosophy to the Iranian-Islamic intellectual tradition, focusing on the ways these frameworks inform artistic creation, imagination, and symbolic representation. In Greek thought, Plato presents mimesis as epistemologically problematic: art imitates the world of senses as it is a copy of the intelligible Forms; thus, art misleads the soul. Aristotle reinterprets mimesis as a natural human capacity for learning, emotional refinement, and cognitive understanding, positioning art as ethically and which is psychologically valuable. Islamic philosophers, including Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Nasir al-Din Tusi, inherited the Aristotelian thought, but they expanded it significantly while emphasizing imagination (*takhayyul*) as a mediating faculty between the sensory and intelligible realities. This study aims to clarify the conceptual differences between Plato's and Aristotle's mimesis and to distinguish between 'taqlid' and 'muhākāt,' thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the role of imagination, imitation, and representation in shaping traditional aesthetics through the lens of Islamic philosophical thought.

Research Method

This study employed a **conceptual-comparative analysis** to trace the evolution and reinterpretation of imitation and mimesis across Greek and Iranian-Islamic philosophy. The approach focused on philosophical texts by Plato, Aristotle, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Nasir al-Din Tusi to examine definitions, theoretical frameworks, and applications of imitation, imagination, and representation. The analysis emphasized four dimensions: 1) **ontological/epistemological status**, imitation/ imaginative creation, and sensory/intelligible realities; 2) the **role of imagination**, and the way *takhayyul* mediates between perception and metaphysical truths in Islamic thought compared to Aristotle's cognitive-emotional interpretation; 3) the **artistic purpose and the ethical dimension** as evaluating the ways artistic creation integrates ethical and spiritual considerations; 4) **terminological clarification** as distinguishing between 'taqlid' (technical imitation) and 'muhākāt' (symbolic, imaginative representation). By systematically comparing these frameworks, the study identifies both the continuity of Aristotelian reception and the transformative impact of Islamic metaphysical and ethical perspectives on the theory of art.

Research Findings

The research findings demonstrated a significant conceptual evolution in the understanding of imitation and mimesis as it emphasizes the interconnected dimensions as follows:

- 1) **Transformation of Greek concepts:** in Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle present contrasting approaches to mimesis. Plato's hierarchical ontology casts art as epistemologically inferior since it reproduces appearances, creating a "copy of a copy" that cannot convey true knowledge. Aristotle rehabilitates mimesis, framing it as a natural human capacity linked to cognitive understanding, emotional regulation, and ethical development. Artistic imitation is, thus, structured and purposeful, contributing to moral and intellectual cultivation. This Aristotelian reinterpretation lays the foundation for Islamic philosophers to reconceive the scope and purpose of mimesis.
- 2) **Islamic reinterpretation--From imitation to imaginative mediation:** Islamic thinkers transform mimesis into a process of imaginative mediation. Al-Farabi

integrates Aristotelian mimesis with a metaphysical perspective, emphasizing imagination (*takhayyul*) as a faculty that shapes sensory input to reflect intelligible truths. Ibn Sina expands this framework, presenting imagination (*quwwat al-mutakhayyila*) as a synthesizing faculty connecting sensory perception with metaphysical meaning, and even functioning as a conduit for prophetic knowledge. Nasir al-Din Tusi further situates artistic creation within the ethical cultivation of the soul, conceptualizing it as an intentional and spiritually informed act. Across these thinkers, mimesis evolves from a simple replication into '**muhākāt**,' a symbolic representation that conveys metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual realities.

- 3) **Redefining the role of the artist:** In this framework, the artist becomes an active mediator rather than a passive imitator. Artistic creation aligns human perception with cosmic and divine order, embodying ethical and metaphysical insight. While Aristotle emphasizes catharsis as emotional purification, Islamic philosophers extend this to include metaphysical purification, situating art as a vehicle for spiritual and intellectual cultivation. The artist functions as a mirror of higher truths, guiding understanding and ethical awareness through imaginative mediation. Collectively, these findings clarify the distinction between '**taqlid**' and '**muhākāt**,' showing how Islamic philosophical reinterpretations expand, deepen, and ethically enrich the original Greek concepts of 'imitation' and mimesis, ultimately shaping a sophisticated traditional aesthetic framework.
- 4) **Reframing the role of the artist:** in the Islamic philosophical framework, the artist functions as an **active mediator** rather than a passive imitator. Artistic creation aligns the soul with divine order, embodies ethical and spiritual insight, and communicates transcendent realities. While Aristotle focuses on catharsis as emotional purification, Islamic philosophers extend the concept to include **metaphysical purification**. The artist, thus, becomes a mirror of higher truths, shaping forms that cultivate understanding and spiritual awareness.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the concepts of **mimesis**, '**taqlid**,' and '**muhākāt**' have undergone substantial conceptual transformation from Greek to Iranian-Islamic thought. Plato positions mimesis as a limited and potentially misleading process, while Aristotle reframes it as a morally and cognitively beneficial activity. Islamic philosophers follow Aristotelian principles, but they expand the scope emphasizing imagination (*takhayyul*) as a metaphysical and ethical faculty mediating between sensory perception and intelligible realities. Through this lens, artistic creation is not mere replication but a symbolic, contemplative, and ethically oriented act, reflecting a deeper engagement with metaphysical and spiritual truths. The study has also clarified the conceptual distinction between '**taqlid**' and '**muhākāt**.' 'Taqlid' refers to external, technical imitation, whereas *muhākāt* involves imaginative and symbolic mediation, integrating metaphysical, ethical, and intellectual dimensions. By redefining the role of the artist as an active mediator of truth rather than a passive imitator, Islamic philosophical thought elevates the purpose of artistic creation, aligning it with ethical cultivation and spiritual insight. Ultimately, the findings have illustrated how Greek philosophical foundations, when reinterpreted in the Islamic intellectual tradition, produce a sophisticated framework for understanding art, imagination, and representation. This framework emphasizes the interrelation of metaphysical knowledge, ethical reflection, and symbolic mediation, offering a nuanced understanding of traditional aesthetics. The study highlights the enduring relevance of philosophical inquiry into imitation, imagination, and artistic creation, revealing how classical and Islamic perspectives jointly shape a comprehensive theory of art that transcends mere visual replication, serving as a medium for intellectual, ethical, and spiritual development.

Keywords: imitation, mimesis, representation, imagination, 'taqlid' and 'muhakat', traditional arts.