

An Intertextual Reading of the Mirza Iskandar' Reverse-Glass Painting: A Case Study of the Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

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Introduction

Mi'raj-nāmas are among the most significant categories of illustrated manuscripts in the Islamic world, and over centuries, they have inspired Iranian, Ottoman, and Indian painters. The narrative of the Prophet's Ascension holds a prominent place in Persian literature in both prose and verse sources—including Nizami's *Khamsa*—and conveys themes related to the celestial journey of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This deeply rooted pictorial tradition, which reached its peak during the Safavid era, not only shaped the compositional strategies and narrative methods of Iranian painters but also through cultural exchanges, influenced Mughal art in India and Ottoman illustration. The continuation of these interactions transformed the visual representation of the Mi'raj across Islamic lands into a base of pictorial adaptations and stylistic transformations. Within this context, reverse-glass painting emerged as a new, popular art form that developed through interaction with Iranian folk culture and became a medium for expressing religious beliefs over the past two centuries. Simple but meaningful motifs were inscribed onto glass, and self-taught, non-academic artists such as Mirza Iskandar established religious iconography in the format of reverse-glass paintings. Although Mirza Iskandar's Mi'raj painting shares fundamental features with classic miniatures, they are distinguished with certain innovations in the representation of specific figures and symbolic elements.

Materials and Methods

The present research is qualitative in method, employing a descriptive-analytic approach and relying on library sources. The research corpus included religious iconography, relevant religious and literary texts, and a selection of Mi'raj paintings from the Safavid to the post-Qajar eras; the research sample was purposefully selected. This study aimed to provide an intertextual reading of visual elements in Mirza Iskandar's Mi'raj painting and to answer two main questions: what intertextual relations can be identified between the visual elements of Mirza Iskandar's Mi'raj painting and the Mi'raj iconography found in the earlier and later illustrated traditions? and which nonvisual pre-texts contributed to the formation of this work? The subsidiary questions focused on identifying the religious themes and beliefs reflected in Mirza Iskandar's reverse-glass painting, and the visual strategies employed by the artist to convey these beliefs.

Results and Findings

The findings indicated that the extra-textual reading of the artwork rested upon four axes: the social context, the author (artist), the subject matter, and the hypertexts. An examination of the social context revealed that the tradition of Mi'raj illustration emerged in the early Islamic period in accordance with religious beliefs, flourished under the Timurid, and reached a symbolic and ritualistic phase during the Safavid era. In the Qajar period, with the spread of the religious beliefs, constitutional transformations, the popularity of lithographic printing, and the spread of *Parde-negārī*, a popular style known as *khiyālī-negārī* gained prominence, of which reverse-glass painting was a significant manifestation.

From the perspective of authorship, this work of art is attributed to Mirza Iskandar—also known as “Iskandar-e Sabz”—the student of Shazdeh Afsar and a skilled artist in oil painting and shading techniques. After becoming acquainted with Mirza Abbas Shisheh-Negar, he turned to the field of reverse-glass. The establishment of his booth in the *Majma' al-Sana'i* in Tehran played an important role in the flourishing of reverse-glass painting in the capital.

The subject matter was drawn from two Qur'anic chapters, namely Isra' and Najm and grounded in Islamic and Shi'i narratives. Central elements of the narrative include the Prophet's Ascension, the witnessing of divine signs, and the symbolic presence of Imam Ali. Within the hypertextual dimension, it became evident that several later images of Mi'raj—especially the work of Mohammad Farahani—were influenced by this painting in terms of composition, color, and scene selection although there were differences in details of illumination, facial features, and arrangement.

Regarding intratextual elements, the reverse-glass oil technique and its inverted execution demonstrated Mirza Iskandar's technical skill. The spiral composition and upward movement of the narrative directly referenced Timurid and Safavid Mi'raj illustrations. The luminous halo of the Prophet and its symbolic linkage to the lion motif created a symbolic and Shi'i concept. The color scheme featured indigo blue, gold, green, and Qajar brown, and the iconography included the Prophet with a veiled face, Gabriel bearing a vexillum, ten winged angels, and a hybrid depiction of Buraq marked by Iranian, Islamic, and Mughal influences. The twelve figures alluded symbolically to the Twelve Imams. The significance of this investigation lied in its ability to reveal the reciprocal interplay of art and text, thereby offering a deeper understanding of Qajar religious art.

Conclusion

Mirza Iskandar's reverse-glass painting is grounded in a network of Iranian pictorial pre-texts, the most significant of which was the spiral compositions of Sultan-Muhammad and the illustrations of the Shiraz Khamsa 915 AH/1509AD. The addition of elements such as peacock wings and tail to the Buraq pattern reflects Mughal influence, while the simplified facial rendering corresponds to Qajar iconography as practiced by Isma'il Jalāyer. The simplification of the scene, the elimination of details, and the emphasis on key visual signs reflect the influence of lithographic printing and large religious curtains. Altogether, the technical constraints of reverse-glass painting, combined with its deep connections to religious texts and Shi'i narratives, have endowed this work with a distinctive, spiritual character.

Keywords: intertextual reading, reverse-glass painting, ascension painting, Mirza Iskander, religious iconography.