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NARRATIVE PAINTING AND PAINTING RECITATION IN QAJAR IRAN*

The large-scale paintings on wall and on canvas that depict mainly religious Shi'ite martyrology and are now referred to as naive, primitive, folk, or coffeehouse paintings were first produced in Qajar times, and not, as is often argued by Iranian and Western scholars, at the end of the Safavid period. They are, however, the result of some eleven hundred years of gradual evolution and development in Shi'ite mourning rituals.

In Iranian art and culture the people and the court have always lived in close proximity, but since the artistic flow went from rustic and tribal to urban and courtly, in the final product of this amalgam the folk aspects were usually hidden in courtly appearances. In the case of the paintings I will consider here, however, the situation was reversed. It was the folk Shi'ite mourning rituals and related arts that were encouraged and supported by the court and well-to-do, after Shi'ism became the state religion of Iran. The Karbala mourning rituals proved to be an effective means for spreading Shi'ism across the land, and they retained their popular features and appeal. Only during the time of Nader Shah, for sectarian reasons, and the Pahlavis, for modernizing ones, was this not the case.

Since Western scholarship in Islamic art has by and large been devoted to *Hochkunst*, these folk paintings have not been much studied. Even the few Westerners who were interested in them ignored their iconographic and artistic value until Samuel Peterson's dissertation in 1981.¹ Although they lack the refinement and the delicate touch of the miniature paintings of the Timurid and the Safavid periods, which were intended for a small group of cognoscenti and are now favored by Western academia, they are vibrant reflections of the aspirations and the *Weltanschauung* of the Iranian people. While our artistic sensitivity may be offended

by the often crude and clumsy brush strokes of the *ta'ziya* painters, their work should still be studied because it struck out against Islamic taboos and restrictions concerning figural representation of the holy personalities and brought Iran into a very interesting pan-Asiatic painting recitation tradition.

Painting religious personalities for the masses was a major development in Islamic art. To understand its meaning, purpose, iconography, and technique we must look to Shi'ite martyrology and its related rituals. In 680 a battle took place in the desert of Karbala in what is now Iraq. There the ritual and myth of Imam Hussein, which persist in all the Shi'ite communities, originated. Hussein, the champion of the Shi'ites, the son of 'Ali and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was, according to tradition, on his way to join the community at Kufa when he, his band of seventy-two followers, and his entire family were overtaken by the hordes of the Sunni caliph Yazid and killed in a bloody battle on that arid desert on the day of 'Ashura, the tenth of the month of Muharram. All Shi'ites, but particularly the Shi'ites of Iran, congregate each Muharram and the following month of Saftar in a passionate reenactment of the Karbala scene. There they merge past with present in the firm belief that suffering all the agonies of Hussein will facilitate their own salvation on Judgment Day.

In the course of thirteen centuries the myths and legends that have grown up around this episode of martyrdom have found expression in processions of mourners who wail, weep, strike their heads, and otherwise mortify themselves to demonstrate their grief for the martyrs of Karbala. This ambulatory ritual in the main streets and squares of towns and villages in Iran has by now grown into an extraordinary pageant.

The account of Salmons and van Goch in 1737 describes the procession then:

Triumphal arches here and there display victory and honor with their decorations showing Hussein's every attribute. Outstanding in the large public processions

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are the big theatrically arranged wagons showing scenes of his life, his deeds, his battles, and his death. These wagons are often pulled about accompanied by people in armor, flags, and emblems of war and victory, depicting some of Hussein's deeds. For example, a wagon representing the death of Hussein has a deck-like cover coated with sand to represent the arid battlefield. Underneath people are lying thrusting their heads, arms, and hands through holes in the cover so they will lie on the sand above to appear as dismembered limbs, sprinkled with blood or red paint and colored with a deathly pallor so as to look most natural. Hussein, pallid and bloody, is lying on another wagon. Several living doves sit on his body, while others are nesting in his blood. After a while, the men under the cover release their bonds, two at a time, so that they can "fly to Medina" to announce Hussein's death to his sister. Wherever this wagon passes, the people set up such wailing to show their grief in so many ways and with such conviction, imitation, and naturalistic representations that one wonders at their capacity to give vent to such appropriate signs of suffering so realistically. Their spirit shows through plainly in these impersonations, nor do they spare their bodies: in zeal or desperation, they shed their blood, wound themselves, or are wounded in fights with others; they carry out these intentions with such zeal that it sometimes leads to their own death. It is not possible to tell the difference between feigned dizziness, fainting, and the real thing. One must consider what the stricken people on these tragic wagons endure while presenting their limbs, decapitated heads, hands, and legs in such an uncomfortable position, while lying there as if they were dead themselves. [They do this] in all kinds of weather during the processions. Still they suffer rather than move or do something which would disturb that verisimilitude which might be lost.

[On the fringes of the procession] ... men in armor fight with each other or wound themselves and shed their blood in honor of the Holy One. Others lie down in the street and pretend to be the dying Hussein, looking so miserable that they seem to be *in extremis*. It is remarkable how they imitate the thirst Hussein is supposed to have suffered in the arid desert and in battle. Their tongues protrude, and they sigh and groan with such baleful looks and appear so weak that they really look as if they were pining for a drop of water. If it is offered, however, they refuse it so as to imitate the Holy One's restraint. About him there is a legend that when the angel offered him a cup of water, he refused it, saying, "Since it is determined that I must die, I must do it; otherwise I would only have to stick my finger in the earth and a fresh spring of water would issue forth. Indeed, I could produce a whole stream of water for myself." An armored man fends off help in the same way as Hussein would have done when, it is said, a legion of angels wished to stand by him against his enemies. Meanwhile they call out, "Hussein, Hussein," to the passersby in a fading voice.

Some are naked and paint themselves with blood or blood-colored paint. Others are painted black, in mourning for Hussein. Some really wound themselves

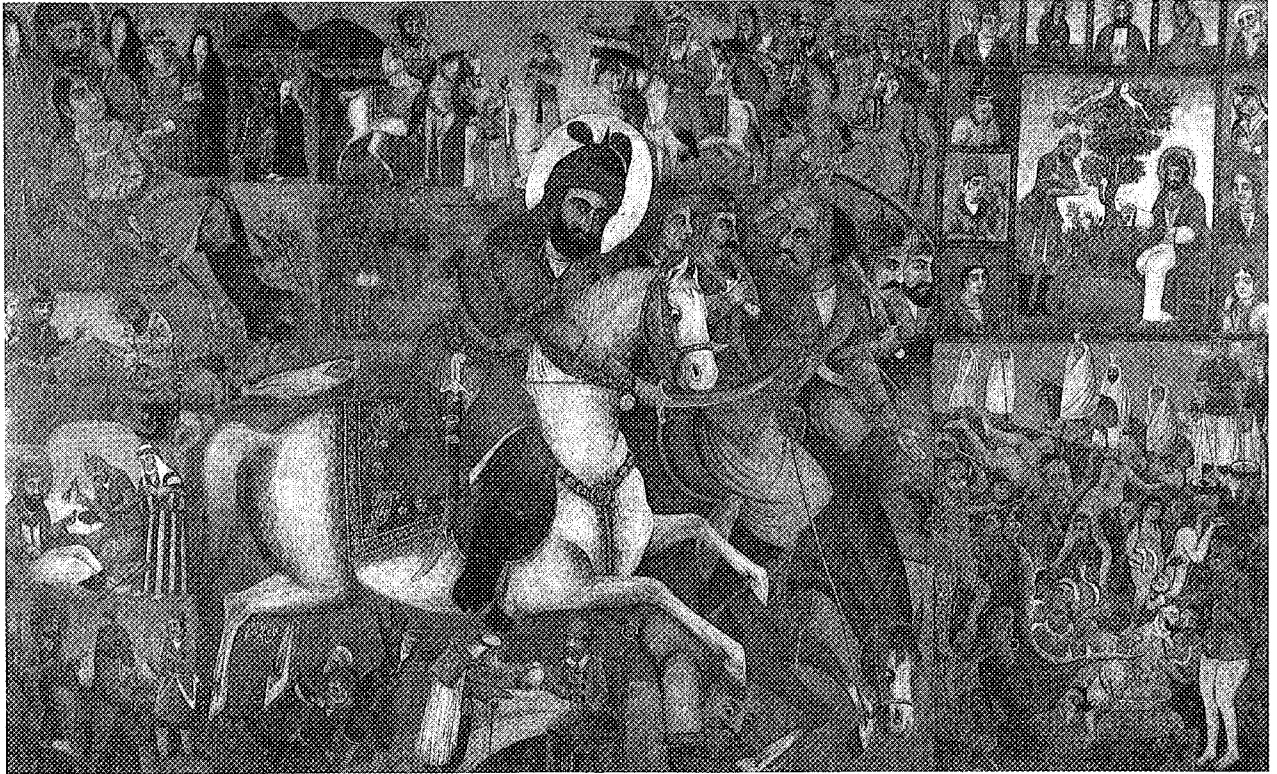
and bleed. Still others bury themselves in the earth and dust with only their heads sticking out, with a pot or jar covering it; a second man stands by to remove the jug and show the passerby the dead Hussein and to collect alms. Some rush about with pitiful cries and expressions; others with enraged screams of revenge.²

The Karbala tragedy had a great impact on the literature of the Islamic world, especially on a genre known as *maqatil*.³ The *maqatil* in turn gave birth to a stationary Karbala ritual known by various names. In Iran it is called *rowza-khani*. The origin of this name goes back to the title of a Persian-language masterpiece of *maqatil* called *Rowzat al-Shuhada*.⁴ This ritual of public recitation and chanting of elegies which recount the suffering of Hussein and other Shi'ite martyrs takes place in public squares, under a tent, or an awning, in private residences, caravanserais, and in buildings especially erected for this purpose. Despite the fact that the *rowza-khani* is usually contained by the walls of a building, a courtyard, or a tent, the emotions run as high as they do in the processions. The *rowza-khan*, or the man who runs the show, can manipulate the mood and emotions of the audience, through voice modulation, chanting, crying, and gesture according to the content of the story.

Around the middle of the eighteenth century the ambulatory and the stationary rituals fused together, giving birth to the only indigenous drama in the world of Islam—*ta'ziya-khani*, known also as *shabih-khani*. The story lines of *rowza-khani* were converted into the dramatic texts of the *ta'ziya*. The movement of the parade was changed into the motions of the actors; the parade costumes became stage costumes. In the begin-



1. Typical *parda* used for a one-man show. White cloth on both sides can be drawn over entire picture like a curtain and drawn back as the story is told.



2. *Parde*-like painting (292 × 175 cm), courtly example, used to hang on walls of private residences. From the collection of F. Hoveyda.

ning the passion play was nothing more than a short playlet integrated into the procession and performed at street corners. Soon, however, it was separated from the parade and became an independent event performed in the open, in the courtyard of caravanserais, private houses, and special buildings called *tekiya* or *husseiniya*. It may share the space with the *rowza-khani*. In the second half of the nineteenth century these buildings became a major feature in Iranian towns. European travelers of the time tell us that structures for the purpose were being erected in every neighborhood. *Tekiya* and *husseiniya* were mainly built by the well-to-do as a pious act and a public service. Some could seat thousands of spectators, but most accommodated only a few hundred. Many were temporary structures erected especially for the Muharram observances.⁵

In the Qajar period and especially during the reign of Nasr al-Din Shah, *ta'ziya* were turned out in abundance. No one knows how many there are, but the Cerulli collection has 1,055 from all over Iran, representing some 200-250 story plots.⁶

Although all the Karbala massacres took place on the day of 'Ashura, in the dramatic representations each of the major characters in the event has his own play. The



3. Imamzada Shah Zayd. Two foreigners in nineteenth-century clothes.



4. Imamzada Shah Zayd. 'Abbas in Shroud. Women and girls with covered faces beg for water. Next to 'Abbas's head is written "*shabih-i Hazrat-i 'Abbas*"; in the right upper corner 'Ali Akbar is seen fighting the enemy.

series is performed in succession during the first ten days of Muharram. As the repertory grew and incorporated Quranic stories and legends, the plays were performed all year round.

Originally large paintings on canvas illustrated the dramatic scenes of the *ta'ziya* productions often separated or grouped into various events. According to Peterson, "Once it was publicly accepted, to the general dismay of the orthodox, that the roles of the martyrs and their adversaries were enacted by devout Muslims, the step toward the public's acceptance of paintings depicting the same narratives was not a major one. To illustrate that the Qajar genre of Karbala painting was essentially a translation of *ta'ziya* productions into the visual arts, one need only compare the paintings with productions and texts of the dramas."⁷

These portable paintings are called *shamayel* or *parda* (fig. 1). The ritual accompanying their use is called *shamayel-gardani* or *parda-dari*. This ritual of visual and verbal narrative is

a one-man show with a backdrop painting depicting the scenes of the battle of Karbala, from left to right, painted in cartoon style. There is a haphazard sequence of events of the battle. On the right side of the painting are scenes of the hereafter, which represent the fate of Hussein's supporters in the beautiful vista of paradise, while his opponents are tortured in hell. This oil painting is generally $3\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ meters, on canvas, and is easily rolled up for transportation. The *parda-dar* (storyteller) goes from one locality to another, hangs the paintings, and sings and recites the story, using a pointer to elucidate the scenes.⁸



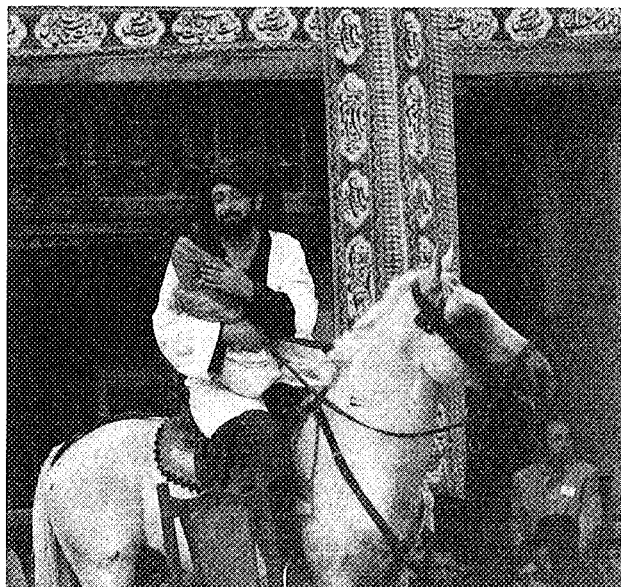
5. Imamzada Shah Zayd. Imam Hussein Holding 'Ali Asghar.

Parviz Mamnoun in his book *Ta'ziya*, describes the painting-recitation scene as he remembers it from his childhood:

... a cloth, called *shamayel* (picture), was nailed to a wall in an open space by the storyteller (*parda-dar*). In front of this [wall] a crowd of observers gathered, some squatting on the ground, others standing behind them. ... The story of the *parda-dar* proceeded somewhat in this fashion: he first sang in praise of the Prophet and his family. Thereafter he invited the public to send a salutation to the Prophet Muhammad. In this fashion he created a dramatic bridge between his song and the story. In the introduction to an episode he presented the characters [who would appear in the story] and then he would point to various people [in the painting] with his stick as he hoarsely described the battle on the painting. Naturally the *parda-dar* utilized the tricks of declamation while he told the story. He knows the importance of changes in tonality in his speech, of imitation, and of gestures. During the following battle scenes he described

the proceedings with a rough voice and a much faster rhythm. In order to stir up his public to the tragic fate of the Hussein family, he would march up and down clapping his hands and twirling his stick in the air. If it was necessary he would even weep.⁹

Ta'ziya were usually performed in towns and required elaborate preparations and considerable expense: the outlying villages in the countryside could therefore not participate.¹⁰ Consequently the *parda-dari* ritual came into being for their benefit. To the traditional storyteller or *rowza-khan*, a visual element was added—an itinerant painting narrator or painting singer or painting reciter with a pointer followed the story on the painting from start to finish as it was recited and sung. Subsequently narrative paintings were utilized in *husseiniyas* and *tekiyas* as decorative wall hangings. Even in the Tekiya Dawlat, the famous royal



6. A *ta'ziya*, "The Martyrdom of Imam Hussein," held at Husceiniya Mushir, Shiraz in the summer of 1976. Hussein in a white shroud is holding 'Ali Asghar.

theater built by Nasr al-Din Shah, these canvas paintings were utilized to increase the splendor and dramatic setting of the theater.¹¹

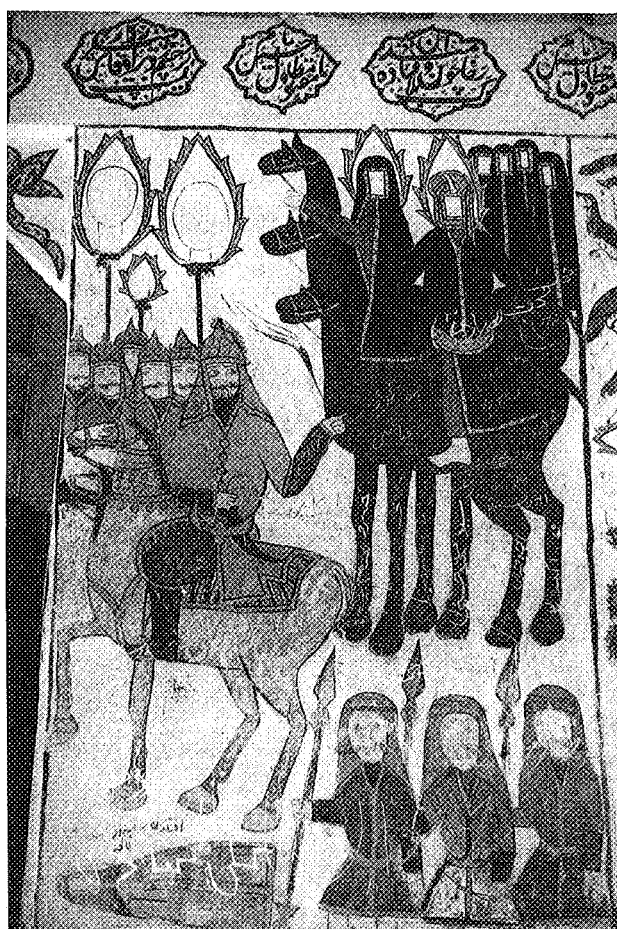
People from the upper classes became interested in the narrative paintings and commissioned them to decorate their residences. The nineteenth-century painting by 'Abdallah Musavar (fig. 2) can serve as an example of this courtly *parda*-like style of painting. It



7. Imamzada Shah Zayd, Isfahan. Hussein's female relatives and his only surviving son Zayn al-Abedin (the Fourth Imam) being taken as prisoners to Yazid in Damascus.

differs from paintings used for the painting recitation, which are cruder both in color scheme and in the overcrowded placement of various scenes. In the courtly "*parda*" both coloring and mood are less violent, and the scenes are more subdued, the protagonists more princely and stately. In figure 2 the protagonist on a white horse is the central figure in the foreground; later an attempt was made to show scenes taking place in the background as well. In either case, however, the hereafter is always placed on the right side of the panel, with heaven above and hell below.

The next step in the development of narrative painting was to paint the scenes directly on the walls, thus making the first religious murals in the Islamic tradition. An example is the Imamzada Shah Zayd in



8. Agha Saied Muhammad, *buq'a* in Pincha Astana village in Gilan. 20th century. Hussein's females and Zayn al-Abedin being taken to Damascus. (Photo: Sima Kuban, 1975).

Isfahan, painted in the second half of the nineteenth century. The long passage quoted above from Salmons and van Goch's report providing an elaborate and detailed description of the Muharram rituals in the year 1737, tells us that theatrical *ta'ziya* were not yet performed at that time. Although Parviz Mamnoun tries to prove that the wagons described by Salmons and van Goch that were pulled in the processions should be considered a theatrical performance,¹² there was no action or dialogue. Salmons and van Goch describe the people's passion for reenacting the scenes of Karbala and representing the dead Hussein, but the result was closer to pantomime than it was to drama.

Yedda A. Godard in "L'Imamzadè Zaid d'Isfahan," says, "The frescoes that decorated this little sanctuary form a rare collection of Muslim religious pictures. They illustrate the Shi'ite Passion rather like theatrical representations in showing various episodes in succession."¹³ In this passage Mrs. Godard is saying that the murals of the Imamzada Shah Zayd of Isfahan illustrating a theatrical representation of the passion plays of Imam Hussein and his followers are in fact a translation of the *ta'ziya* productions into visual art. When it comes to assigning a date to these murals, however, Mrs. Godard assumed that they date from the restoration of the shrine in 1685-86. "Above the entrance gate of the Imamzade is an inscription noting the restoration whose Safavid date matches the style of the pictures."¹⁴ Further on she says, "Doubtless the frescoes which decorate the interior of the building were executed at the same time as the repair work, around 1097/1685-86. They run around the room up to the cupola without interruption, below the inscription band, and represent various episodes in the Passion of Husain."¹⁵

J. Michael Rogers follows Mrs. Godard's dating of the murals. Although he could find no reference to the murals in European travel accounts, he writes, "We are, of course, almost entirely dependent upon observant travellers for reports, but many observant travellers, for example Chardin, who actually devotes a whole chapter to the state of painting in Persia and yet does not mention the paintings in the Imamzade Zayd at Isfahan, which he almost certainly saw, utterly fail to mention them."¹⁶ He also says, "My purpose in the present contribution, therefore, is not to go into questions of iconography, but to discuss briefly the process by which such an exceptional genre of painting might have come into being, not the pictorial sources upon which it drew, but the reasons which led in the

late Safavid period apparently to a breakdown of the Muslim prejudices, Shi'a as much as Sunni, which it is customary to believe so inflamed the 'ulama against painting in a religious context."¹⁷ Had he been interested in iconography, he would not have concluded that these paintings belonged to the Safavid period; I have found no evidence that either the *ta'ziya* drama or its illustration existed at that time.¹⁸

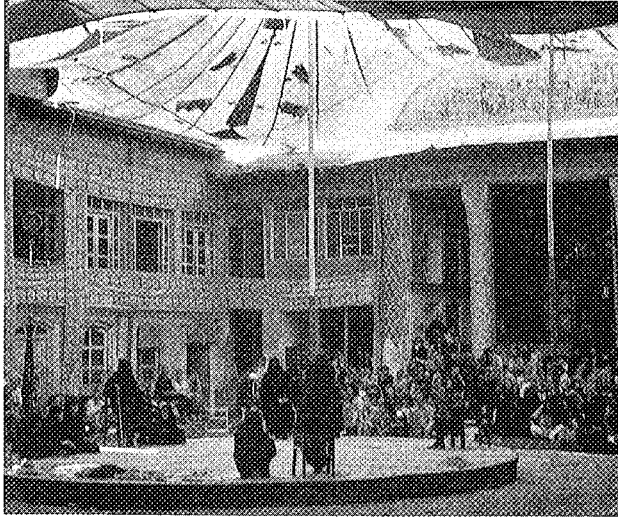
These paintings must be dated almost two hundred years later, in the second half of the nineteenth century. The date was discovered by Peterson in the 1970's on the mural itself:

Although not mentioned by Godard and Rogers, the date 1323 (1905-6) appears once among the murals. That various scenes are painted on different wall surfaces suggests that the paintings date from two periods. Apparently the later artist recoated sections of walls before painting them. Also, the earlier artist seems to have used an oil-base paint rather than the tempera used in the second period. The earlier work is generally finer in modulation and modeling. As judged here, the earlier work dates perhaps as early as the mid-nineteenth century; the 1323 date may well date to the second period.¹⁹

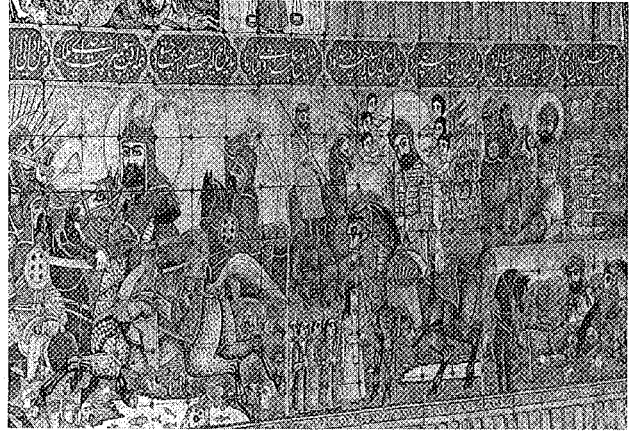
Iconographic analysis confirms that these murals should be attributed to the late Qajar period. The costumes are reproductions of the standard *ta'ziya* performances of the time, and the foreigners are dressed, not in seventeenth-century clothing, but rather in the style of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It was customary for the *ta'ziya* actors to borrow clothing from the foreign residents who were in town at the time of the performance (fig. 3).

Several things indicate that these paintings illustrate *ta'ziya* productions. Many of the characters in the paintings are labeled *shabih* ("impersonator" or "likeness of"), a term which refers to an actor playing a role in which he will be designated "*shabih* of so and so" to ensure that he does not pretend to be the character but only the role player. Certain devices are repetitive: the major protagonists wear shrouds over their armor, as in *ta'ziya*, to show readiness for self-sacrifice. In this fashion, the actor can bring the audience to tears twice, once when he puts the shroud on and the second time when he is killed in front of the audience. As in the plays, so in the paintings all women have covered faces. This is a stage device, as all female roles are played by men. Peterson says:

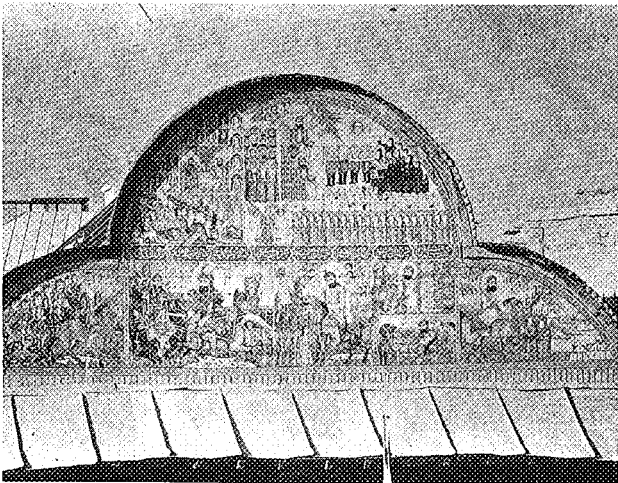
A more general effect the *ta'ziyeh* had on religious paintings is demonstrated by the use of the veil. During the late Timurid period when it was in several instances an attribute of prophets, and then frequently in the Safavid



9. A *ta'ziya* performance at Husseiniya Mushir, Shiraz, summer 1976. Pediment is faintly visible over the box reserved for important dignitaries.



11. Pediment, Husseiniya Mushir, Shiraz. Detail of the lower register.

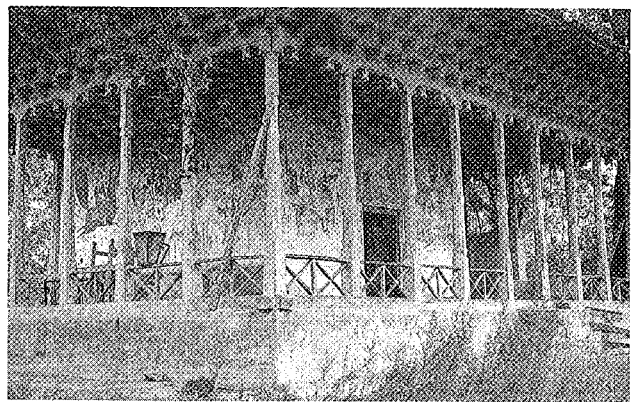


10. Pediment depicting the Last Judgment and the Karbala tragedy. Husseiniya Mushir, Shiraz.

period of the prophet Muhammad and the imams, it was not used to cover the faces of women. ... No longer used consistently as the sacred symbol it formerly had been, the veil in Qajar religious painting is ascribed only somewhat arbitrarily to holy figures; thus faces of Shi'ite imams and also prophets appear veiled and unveiled.²⁰

In *ta'ziya* the only obligatory use for veils, aside from covering women's faces, is representing ghosts.

The Imamzada Shah Zayd in Isfahan is a tomb, putatively of a descendant of Hussein, which serves as a local shrine for pilgrims and a stopping place for Muharram parades. When a procession is on the move, the participants can inflict pain upon themselves with chains, or with breast and head beating in the customary fashion, but in front of the shrine the ritual acts are intensified as during these stopovers a crowd assembles and chants dirges. Not until the middle of the nineteenth century were the murals painted in the inside walls, as if to remind people what the Muharram parades were about. Although the participants in the procession, organized by districts, could not all enter this small shrine at once, the people of that district would certainly be familiar with its interior.



12. *Buq'at*, in Kuya Ranekuh village. (Photo: Sima Kuban, 1975.)



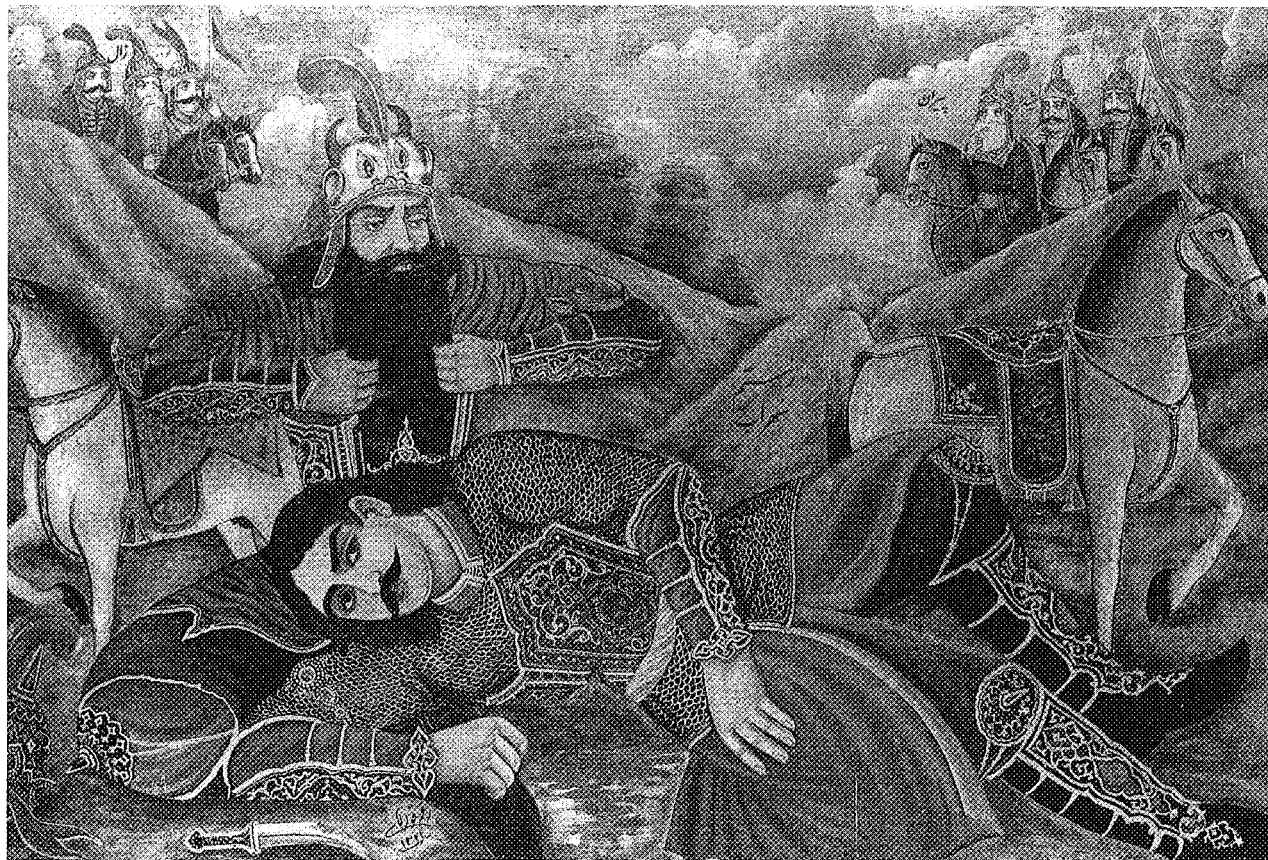
13. Hussein Qular Aqassi. Rustam Killing Ashkabus. (Photo: Marco Gregorian)

The paintings around the interior of this shrine follow the major events of the Muharram Karbala tragedy from the time Hussein and his followers were trapped in the desert and cut off from their water supply until the time when the women and the severed heads of the martyrs are taken to Damascus. This sequence follows the *ta'ziya* repertory. Despite the fact that all the male followers of Hussein except Zayn al-Abedin, Hussein's son who was ill and in the women's tents, were killed in one battle, the pictures are painted as individual encounters and episodes.

We therefore see Qassem, Hussein's nephew, bravely charging a whole detachment of the enemy. In the same fashion 'Ali Akbar, the oldest son of Hussein, is fighting, armored and on horseback. This is followed by a scene in which Hussein comforts the dying 'Ali Akbar. There is a panel in which the mounted 'Abbas, Hussein's standard bearer, is besought by women and children begging for water. He wears a white shroud over his armor (on this expedition to the Euphrates he was killed), and carries a waterskin on his lance (fig. 4). There is also a painting of Hussein on horseback holding up the infant 'Ali Asghar, dying of thirst, to

show the enemy how urgently water was needed (fig. 5). Instead of water, the enemy sent an arrow that pierced the infant's throat (fig. 6). Then Hussein readies himself for battle and is met by foreigners and an army of genies who offer him help (which he refuses because he knows that he is fated to die). In the next painting, Hussein, riddled with arrows, is astride his horse. Below is the assisting friendly lion. In the final scene of this battle Hussein's head is severed by Shimr, and the lion is standing guard over the mutilated bodies of the martyrs. Finally Hussein's female relatives on camelback and his only surviving son are being taken as prisoners to Damascus; the severed heads of Hussein and his men are carried on top of lances by the soldiers of Yazid's army (figs. 7-8).

In the case of a *husseiniya* or a *tekiya* designed for participation by many people in the Muharram rituals inside the walls, the paintings serve as backdrops for the *rowza-khani*, *sina-zani* (breast-beating), and as a reflection of *ta'ziya* dramas. While the preacher tells the story, the people can see it taking place, and can therefore more easily express their grief and shed tears. In *ta'ziya* plays, the paintings serve as a permanent reflec-



14. Hussein Qular Aqassi. Rustam Comforting His Dying Son Sohrab. (Photo: Marco Gregorian)

tion of the *ta'ziya* performance. This reflection can well be seen in the pediment of the Husseiniya Mushir in Shiraz, where the paintings have been created on tiles, which are considered to be some of the best made in the nineteenth century (fig. 9). This *husseiniya* was erected as an act of piety and service by a wealthy philanthropist, Mirza Abdolhassan Khan Mushir al-Mulk, in 1876. The pediment overlooks the courtyard in which *ta'ziya* plays and other Muharram rituals are performed and is immediately above the box on the north side of the courtyard where the important spectators sat.

The scenes depicted are approximately those of the *parda*, except that the hereafter is divided not vertically but horizontally and is separated from the lower band of pictures by a frieze of eight cartouches (fig. 10),²¹ which contain a poem about Hussein and Karbala, written in fine calligraphy in white letters on a blue background. They differ from the *parda* in that there is

no large central protagonist on a white horse. The Last Judgment is the centerpiece of the upper register.

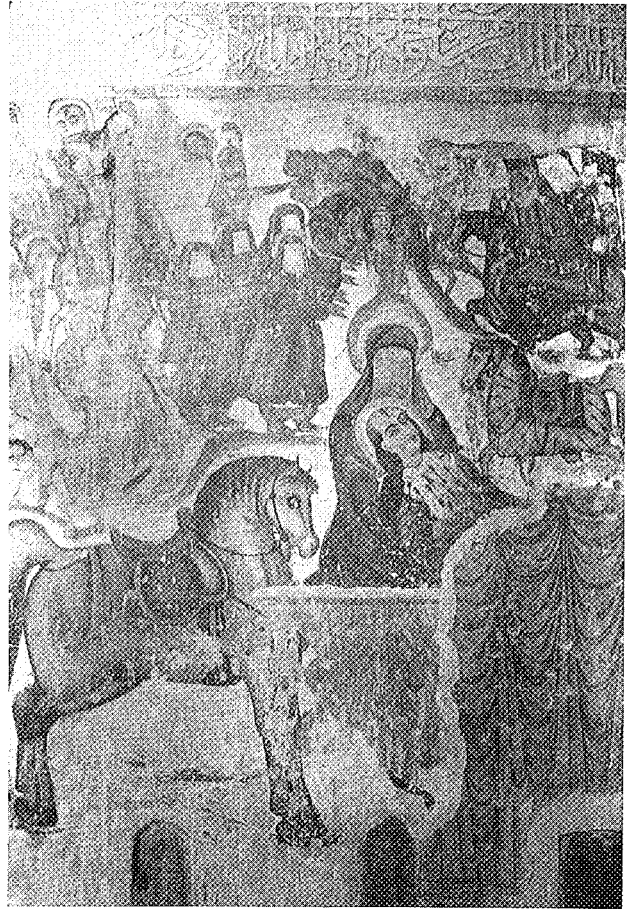
On the lower register, from left to right, the commander of the enemy surrounded by his soldiers admires the bravery and gallantry of Hussein and his followers. The admiration by the commander, on horseback under a parasol, is indicated by the index-finger-in-the-mouth astonishment used since antiquity in Iranian art.

In the next scene, numberless spears and trumpets emphasize the magnitude of the enemy forces opposing 'Abbas, who is charging them on horseback; he still carries a goatskin waterbag as he kills the enemy with his sword. In the foreground is the water of the Euphrates, filled with fish. The decapitated heads and bodies of the enemy surround the horse's hooves. Just to the right of center, Hussein is preparing himself for the final attack and his own death. He too is on

horseback carrying a lance, and is surrounded by angels. Genies, Gabriel dressed as a dervish, and an Arab emissary are unsuccessfully trying to assist him. In the two small vignettes which follow, one above the other, Hussein is seen comforting Qassim his nephew and 'Ali Akbar his son, both mortally wounded (fig. 11). The last scene of the lower register shows Hussein with a shroud over his armor, riding in front of the women's tents, bidding the women farewell. The infant 'Ali Asghar is held in his right arm. Seven angels fly around his halo.

In the upper lunette-shaped half of the panel is a scene of hell on the left, over which the *sirat* bridge spans the distance between the Last Judgment and the hereafter. As they traverse it some souls fall to hell, others go to heaven. Heaven is depicted in allegorical terms, showing the cleansing waters of Kausar and a tuba tree. The prophet Muhammad sits above Imam 'Ali on the steps of the minbar. Flying angels with wings of green—the color of Islam—fly about the Prophet's huge golden halo. Behind and to the left of the pulpit stand a group of ancient prophets. In front and to the right of the pulpit stand the decapitated bodies of the Karbala martyrs, some of whom are holding their own heads, and the women of Karbala, who demand justice for the atrocities inflicted upon them. Beneath their feet are three rows of malefactors contained by a low wall of angels in red and blue gowns and golden crowns. Between these standing angels and the wall of hell on the left a crowned and winged angel holds a pair of justice scale pans. An astonished sun watches over the entire proceeding.²²

The best examples of rustic Karbala wall paintings are to be found in the northern province of Gilan. The most important building in many villages there is the one devoted to the tragedy of Karbala. It is a medium-sized rectangular edifice called the *buq'a* (mausoleum). Many of these *buq'as* were erected toward the end of the Qajar period. A portico usually surrounds these buildings and protects the outer walls (fig. 12). Both the outer and the inner walls are painted. Some of the paintings are in their original state; others have been restored or repainted. Sima Kuban, who has studied more than thirty of these buildings in Gilan, writes: "It is almost a rule that one wall is devoted to 'Ali Akbar, one to Qassem, and one to 'Abbas. Their bravery, struggle, and active fight are close to the class struggle of the simple people of Gilan. ... The features of protagonists in the paintings are not gloomy, but full of vigor and hope, they are vibrant and powerful."²³



15. Imamzada Shah Zayd, Isfahan. Imam Hussein Comforting His Dying Son 'Ali Akbar.

In the area of Bidpish alone there are more than forty of these structures. Every village has one because it is the village communal center. All the villagers share in its upkeep, and villages compete to have the best. Peripatetic painters attend to the paintings in the whole neighborhood, and the villagers supply them with eggs and other supplies for the purpose. They are entertained every night by a different household in the village.

The teahouses—in fact inns, and traditionally called “coffeehouses” in Iran because tea was not grown there until the second half of the nineteenth century—also serve as the locus for many activities and rituals, both secular and religious. *Naqqali* or storytelling has for centuries been performed in coffeehouses. When *parda* painting was popular in Iran, they served as the

ateliers of the painters. The *parda* painter was housed and fed by the owner of the inn who also supplied him with painting materials, canvases, and pocket money. The painter was commissioned either by the same hotelier or by outsiders. The name of the commissioner appears on the *parda* painting to immortalize his pious act. Surrounded in the coffeehouses by storytelling and religious rituals, the painters began to paint scenes from Karbala, from Quranic stories (which had entered the repertory of *ta'ziya* drama by the first half of the nineteenth century) and from the national epic *Shahnama*. The genre of the painting remained the same, and so it came to be known as coffeehouse painting.²⁴



16. Imam Hussein Comforting His Dying Son 'Ali Akbar. A *ta'ziya* of the "Martyrdom of 'Ali Akbar" at Husseiniya Mushir, Shiraz, summer 1976.

A painting commissioned by the 'Abbas Tekiya coffeehouse²⁵ showing Rustam killing Ashkabus (fig. 13) is a typical example. Rustam's standard is inscribed with a Quranic quotation (sura 61:13), which reads, "Help from God and a speedy victory," a motto generally found on flags in the *ta'ziya* performances. This painter, influenced by Shi'ite religious performances and paintings, had forgotten that the legendary hero Rustam lived many centuries before Islam.

In another painting in the same manner, Rustam is again seen, this time comforting his dying son Sohrab (fig. 14), just as Hussein cradles the dying 'Ali Akbar in other paintings (fig. 15), and in a photograph of a 1976 *ta'ziya* performance of a play called *The Martyrdom*

of 'Ali Akbar, at the Husseiniya Mushir in Shiraz (fig. 16).

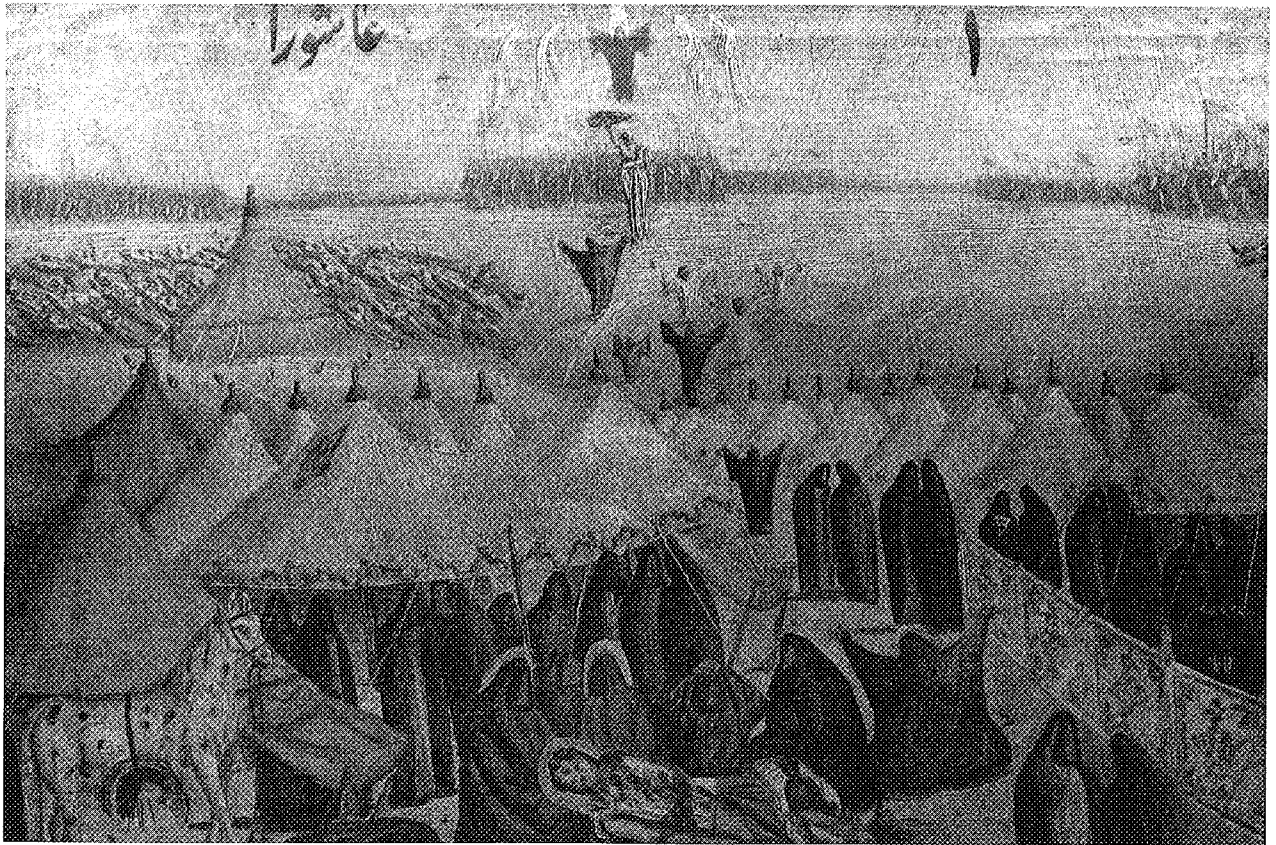
The tradition persisted into the 1960's when Muhammad Modaber, the last great painter of the genre, died. His painting of 'Ashura shows certain modifications of the style of painting, but the subject matter remains the same (fig. 17). In the same decade, an interesting development took place among the painters of the modern generation who were trained both in Iran and in the academies abroad and called themselves the Saqqakhana school.

A *saqqakhana* is a small water dispenser located in the alley of the bazaar and in the streets in any old quarter of an Iranian town. It is always dedicated to Hussein's standard-bearer 'Abbas, and usually placed in a tiled niche decorated with pictures related to Karbala.²⁶ The painters of the rather modern school named after these fountains did not really continue the coffeehouse tradition, but they did make use of the symbolism related to the Karbala tragedy and its rituals.

The imprint of the coffeehouse tradition can still be seen in the contemporary graphic arts of Iran. William L. Hanaway, Jr., in his article on "The Symbolism of Persian Revolutionary Posters," gives excellent examples of contemporary posters that are executed in the coffeehouse style.²⁷

It is clear that a certain dynamic lay behind the development of large-scale paintings deriving from the theatrical productions of *ta'ziya* in the Qajar period. *Ta'ziya* inspired the narrative paintings on canvas, which became the backdrop for a one-man show called *parda-dari*. Paintings were also hung on the walls of the buildings to serve the Karbala rituals as well as on those of a private residence. In time, instead of hanging the paintings against the wall, it became customary to paint directly on the walls. Small paintings on glass also became popular. Whatever the medium, however, the subject was always Shi'ite martyrology, at least until Quranic stories and pre-Islamic themes were introduced, and even they reflected the *ta'ziya* tradition. Were it not for the Qajar court and especially Nasr al-Din Shah, this genre, more popular than courtly painting, would not have achieved so high a state of development. The Qajar period must be considered as the high point of Shi'ite popular rituals, which in turn were reflected in the visual arts.

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17. Muhammad Modaber. 'Ashura. (Photo: Marco Gregorian)

NOTES

1. Samuel R. Peterson, "Shi'ism and Late Iranian Arts," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1981.
2. Salmons and van Goch, *Die heutige Historie und Geographie: oder der gegenwartige Staat vom Königreich Persien* (Flensburg and Altona, 1739), pp. 249-53.
3. See Peter Chelkowski, "From Maqatil Literature to Drama" in *Alserat* 12 (Spring-Autumn 1986): 227-64.
4. The composition of this *Maqal* by Hussein Wa'ez Kashfi coincided with the Safavids coming to power in the year 1501. See Peter Chelkowski, "Popular Shi'ic Mourning Rituals," in *Alserat* 12 (1986): 209-26.
5. See Jean Calmard, "Le mécénat des représentations de ta'ziye," in *Le Monde Iranien et l'Islam* 2 (1974): 73-126, and 4 (1976-77): 133-62.
6. Ettore Rossi and Alessio Bombaci, *Elenco di Drammi Religiosi Persiani* (Vatican City, 1969).
7. Peterson, "Shi'ism and Late Iranian Arts," pp. 111-12. Sir Lewis Pelly, translator of 37 ta'ziya plays into English, writes: "A Persian artist at Shiraz painted for me in oils, six pictures, eight feet by four, illustrative of incidents described in the play. These paintings are full of quaint interest" (Sir Lewis Pelly, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain* [London, 1879], preface, p. 5). Since Pelly left his post in Iran in 1873, the paintings had to have been painted before that date. 'Abbas Bulukifar, one of the last painters in the coffeehouse tradition, believes that this genre originated in ta'ziya production, Sadeq Humayuni, *Ta'ziya va Ta'ziya-khani* (Festival of the Arts) (Tehran: n.d.), p. 28.
8. Chelkowski, "Popular Shi'ic Mourning Rituals" pp. 218-19.
9. Parviz Mamnoun, *Ta'zijaschi'Sitisch-persisches Passionspiel* (Vienna, 1967), pp. 19-21.
10. Non-professional community Muharram ta'ziya performances take place in even the most remote villages of the country.
11. Yahya Zoka, *Tarikheyya Sakhtemanhaya Ark-i Saltanati Tehran* (Tehran, S. 1349), p. 294. It is interesting to note that neither ta'ziya performance nor Karbala painting recitation found a fertile ground among the Shi'ites of India, though India is famous for its Hindu religious drama and painting recitation. Juan R. I. Cole writes: "... in the late nineteenth century Mawlavi Mihi Husayn did introduce painted curtains in the mourning session. The women in his household even staged dramas similar to Iran's ta'ziyaks. But these late innovations were a tem-

- porary fad, having no lasting impact in North India. ... Ulama in Awadh gave rulings against the use of tableaux or religious paintings as backdrops during mourning sessions." Juan Ricardo Irfan Cole, "Imami Shi'ism from Iran to North India, 1722-1856: State, Society and Clerical Ideology in Awadh," Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1984 (University Microfilms), p. 201.
12. Mammoun, *Ta'ziya shi'itisch-persisches Passionspiel*, p. 24.
 13. Yedda A. Godard, "L'Imamzadè Zaid d'Isfahan, un edifice décoré de peintures religieuses musulmanes," in *Athar-e Iran* 2 (1937), pt. 2, p. 341. (Though Mrs. Godard uses the term "fresco," it is misleading terminology, since the paint is applied only to the surface of the wall.)
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 343.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
 16. J. Michael Rogers, "The Genesis of Safavid Religious Painting," in *Memorial Volume of the Vth International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology, April 1968* (Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Arts, 1972), vol. 2, p. 169.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 18. Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York-Tehran, 1979), pp. 255-68.
 19. Peterson, "Shi'ism and Late Iranian Arts," p. 146.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
 21. See Sadeq Humayuni, *Husseiniya Mushir*, Festival of the Arts (Tehran, S.1355), p. 40.
 22. For details, see *ibid.*, pp. 18, 24, and 41-49.
 23. Sima Kuban, "Namunai az bastab-i mubarezat-i tabaqati dar hunar-i naqqashi" (Tehran, July-August 1360/1981), pp. 14-17. I have only a photocopy of this article and do not know where it was originally published. Another interesting article from the same author has the title "Shakhai nashenakhta az hunar-i mardumi" and was published in the second volume of a journal called *Bustan*. Its place and date of publication are also unknown to me. I presume that it was published in Tehran sometime between 1979 and 1982. One of these murals from the north of Iran is reproduced in the *National Geographic Magazine* of April 1921. On page 379 under a black-and-white photograph is written: "The mural decorations, done in vivid color, represent scenes of Hoscin's ill-fated attempt to gain the caliphate."
 24. See *Les peintres populaires de la legende persane*. This is a catalogue published for an exhibit of coffeeshouse paintings at the Maison de l'Iran in Paris (no date).
 25. 'Abbas Tekiya was a famous teahouse in Tehran in the 1950's. Its name indicates that the owner had a great reverence for the heroes of Karbala. Marco Gregorian, a famous contemporary Iranian painter who now lives in the United States, sponsored many of the artists who were associated with the 'Abbas Tekiya. Gregorian's collection of coffeeshouse paintings formed the core of the Paris exhibit. Later this collection was purchased by the Naragestan Museum in Tehran.
 26. See Chelkowski, "Popular Shi'i Mourning Rituals," pp. 213-14.
 27. William L. Hanaway, Jr., "The Symbolism of Persian Revolutionary Posters," in Barry M. Rosen, ed., *Iran since the Revolution* (Boulder, Colorado, 1985).