

Art from East to West

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Abstract

The Eastern sources of Western art have long been identified. Emile Mâle, Henri Focillon and Jean Baltrusaitis have traced back the major characteristics of this influence to their origins. They have explored the meanders of this river, which have been the feeding source of European art in the middle Ages and the fountainhead of its prosperity. Therefore, repeating it would be pointless here. Yet, how is it possible, in a collection dedicated to the investigation of the main aspects of Persian art, to not mention, at least through a few examples, this phenomenon which has an astonishing expansion, originality and novelty? Western culture has greatly benefited from Iran's influence in the domain of decorative arts. Persia acquired symbolic and decorative motifs from the most ancient civilizations, filtered and analyzed them, and then propagated them across the entire Mediterranean basin. Occasionally the rules and standards of the iconography developed on the Iranian Plateau reached north of the Alps indirectly, through bases such as Muslim dominated Constantinople, Sicily and Spain. According to Ghirshman, "these passed through the same course which leads through Sumer and Babylon and Ninive to Achaemenian and Samanid Persia, and there from reaches the Byzantine Empire, Islam and Roman Europe."

The Muslim conquests, the Crusades, pilgrimages, diplomatic relations and trade exchanges wove a dense, intricate network from the North Sea to the Persian Gulf, the first manifestations of which appeared during Carolingian rule.

That was when the Western world first discovered, liked and appreciated Eastern textiles. The superb silk fabrics which Harun al-Rashid sent for Charlemagne and the ones found in Scandinavia, France and Britain in tombs and reliquaries of the saints and rulers dating back to after the 11th century, indicate the popularity of original Eastern motifs in Europe. Motifs such as mythical, imaginary animals on Roman capitals, or patterns of pomegranate trees or

acanthus shrubs on the velvets of Tuscany³ and Venice from the Renaissance period, are just a few examples of the multitude of decorative patterns that originated in Iran.

Patterns of mythical animals, griffins standing face-to-face, back-to-back or fighting, winged lions, two-headed eagles, imaginary mythical animals and birds, equally appear on Byzantine, Coptic and Islamic textiles (making it sometimes difficult to spot their place of origin) All these figures were created in Sasanian Persia, often in combination with elements belonging to Achaemenian art. The same process was repeated in much later periods in the case of flowers and foliage.

It would suffice to select and consider a few examples of the west's direct adaptations from Persia art, to identify the decorative originality and quality of Persian art. Examples of western distortion of Persian art demonstrate the simple, sincere and non-academic imagination, skill and mystical East which they could observe.

A comparison of the different changes which some motifs underwent while traveling along the Mediterranean shores before reaching a scriptorium in Paris, a weaving workshop in lower Saxony, or a Roman church in Poitou, is also interesting. Undoubtedly, one of these major stations was Arabian (Muslim) Sicily, whose Norman rulers and the silk-weaving workshops established upon the orders of Roger II were the inheritors of the Persian tradition. After the uprising of the Sicilian people against the French on March 30, 1282 (Sicilian Vespers), the craftsmen of Palermo migrated north to Lucques, carrying with them a collection of oriental motifs. The next stage of this progress took place when the Ghibellines plundered the city in 1314, causing the closure of its workshops and the flight of its workers to Ghent or their crossing the Alps to take refuge in Avignon and Lyon.

Some of the stopovers on this meandering path are not unknown, but some others may yet come to light with the discovery of artifacts not yet encountered. Therefore, this investigation, which at times resembles a delicate autopsy and at others appears as a game, can be continued. Indeed, detecting the age-worn echo of an Iranian motif in a painting of the Fontainebleau School, put at the disposal of the sculptors of the Rouen cathedral at an earlier date and visibly consistent with Iranian art up to the 16th and 18th centuries, is akin to a game.

However, in order to complete the analysis of the relations between the East and the West, the opposite trend, i.e. the penetration of some elements of European art into Asia Minor should also be investigated. This current took Italian lithographs to Constantinople, familiarized Iranian painters with French illuminated paintings, and eventually attracted such artists as Gentile Bellini to the Ottoman court. Other instances of this infiltration are known. Undoubtedly, Charlemagne had earlier reciprocated Harun al-Rashid's gifts. The ambassadors of King Edward and Jacques II of Aragon had not visited Persia empty-handed in 1292 and 1300 respectively. Many objects "made in the overseas styles" are found in the detailed list of the properties of a collector such as Duc Jean de Berry. We also know that the penalty Philip the Bold paid to Bajazet for the release of his son, John the Fearless, taken prisoner in Nicopolis in 1396, included weapons, saddles, hawks, falcons and textiles. This textiles included fabrics woven in Reims, ornate purple cloths woven in Brussels, and rugs from Arras illustrated with ancient stories, of which the Sultan was extremely fond. Incidentally, one of these drapes depicts the conquests of Alexander: a tit for tat. Is not the myth of Alexander and the story of vultures lifting his chariot into the sky, context borrowed from the east by Italy and Northern Europe?

1-The pattern of this Byzantine cloth of the 7th century (Vatican Museum) is an adaptation of a Sasanian theme the origin of which dates back to the Achaemenian era. Consisting of a hunting scene in which kings and paladins, mounted or on foot, are shown fighting against lions, boars and fantastic imaginary animals. This scene was frequently depicted on Sasanian ivory tablets, vessels and imperial seals, and also appeared on bas-reliefs at Persepolis (6th century BC) and Sar-Mashhad (3rd century). This motif, drawn on Sasanian cloths in a symmetrical layout within circular medallions, was taken to Europe via the Byzantine Empire. The original Achaemenian and Sasanian wild animals assumed a much freer violent nature in Roman sculpture.

2-The 11th century scene depicted on this capital in the church of Saint-Hilaire de Melle, at Deux-Sèvres, is an adaptation of two Sasanian themes. First, a hunting scene and second, animals shredding each other. Seen abundantly in Achaemenian art (Persepolis bas-reliefs, plates and goblets of the 5th century BC), these were later displayed as elaborate patterns in Sasanian art.

3- Decorated cloth inspired by Sasanian art apparently woven in Egypt in the 7th century and belonging to the Berlin Museum. Lions standing face to face and the battle between animals depicted on the cloth are indicative of the currency and propagation of the two subjects referred to earlier. This an adaptation of a typical Sasanian motif, i.e., that of riders looking at each other from either side of a Tree of Life.

4- Eastern Persia: Fighting lions, 8th-9th century, the Vatican Museum. This decorative motif, i.e., that of lions standing face to face or back to back, whose source of inspiration in the West is Sasanian art, is abundantly found on works of art ranging from the Roman stone capitals of Moissac and Toulouse to the colorful cloths woven in the 14th century at Lucques. The picture of an unquestionably Egyptian copy of this motif on a piece of cloth woven in Egypt and kept in the Berlin Museum is reproduced here.

5 & 6_ The “lion passing” motif adorns this Sasanian cloth (7th-8th century), and the famous Persepolis bas-relief (5th century BC) with two motifs: animals in a single row and a strip of small, elaborate flowers in another. This is indicative of the continuity in Iran of an art whose very ancient examples can be referred to on gold goblets and tablets of the Ziviyeh treasure (7th century BC) and the relief of Susa (Louvre Museum). This subject expanded to southern Siberia (the 4th - 3rd century BC Pazirik carpet, which in fact was a horse mat), and was also used in sculpture and icons relating to family and knighthood and miniature icons of the West.

7- The decoration of the Book of Gospels of Echternach (11th century). The origins of this decorative subject can be traced through several centuries, from Persepolis bas-reliefs to Sasanian fabrics decorated with “passing” or face to face lions.

8 & 9- A Roman capital in the Chauvigny church (Vienna) and the gold tablet found in Ziviyeh (Kordestan) in a Scythian grave of the 7th century BC (figure 9). Undoubtedly the origins of the theme of two fantastic winged creatures with a single head are the decorative figures of animals seen on Persian goblets. Here, the figures of the lions or ibexes are engraved on the bodies of the goblets with their (common) heads quite conspicuous. The oldest example of such decoration is a 3rd millennium BC bitumen goblet found in Susa. In medieval sculpture, as can be seen in figures 8 and 9, this theme was often engraved on the corners of column capitals. However, it was also occasionally used on thresholds, tympana or door frontispieces (for example in Saint-Gilles de Beauvais church (7th century).

10, 11 & 12. The juxtaposition of two creatures so that one's head meets the other's tail, as in the case of the majestic door of the Rouen cathedral (1290-1300), is an adaptation of an ancient Persian theme (which in turn may have been derived from the twin bull-head capitals of Persepolis). Safavid artists were also successful in employing it, and in fact, several examples similar to the figure reproduced here are preserved in the Guimet Museum (figure 12). On the same basis, and around the same time, an artist of the Fontainebleau school painted a small painting showing "two musicians" (private collection) in which the pictures can be "read" either horizontally or vertically according to the rotation of a plaquette which spins in the center of the painting. The composition of two horses is not unprecedented in the West either, as can be seen in the margin of the Petersburg Book of Psalms, dating back to the late 13th century.

13- Persian silk fabric, 16th century. Blair collection, Chicago.

14- Virgin Mary enthroned, by Carlo Crivelli. Detail of painting. The Vatican Museum.

15- Etching on wood with floral motif. Tehran Museum.

16- Duc de Berry dining. Detail of painting. Miniature manuscript

17- A piece of silk cloth woven in Persia. 16th century, Paris, Museum of Decorative Arts.

18- A part of the frame of a wooden shutter. Tehran Museum. The development of the pomegranate flower motif in Persian art (figures 13, 15, 17 and 18) can be traced through very ancient extant examples. The relations between Venice and the Orient and the resulting boom in the trade of textiles explains why the Virgin Mary is wearing a precious dress in Crivelli's painting (figure 14) and why the Easterners in Gentile Bellini's paintings are wearing floral cloaks even more splendid than those of the figures in Persian miniatures. The beauty of Oriental textiles did not inspire only the Venitians. Particularly in Florence, and also in France and Spain, precious fabrics were woven in imitation of Oriental textiles. Thus, in the famous miniature of the Très riches heures (figure 16), the motifs on garments, the details of which are precisely depicted, speak of the fame and popularity which textiles with Oriental decoration enjoyed in the court of the Duc de Berry.

In creating this work, the artist has either been influenced by original textiles or by the engravings similar to the one reproduced here (figure 18). Besides, the detailed list of the possessions of Duc de Berry is comprised of numerous objects, including textiles, metal or glass vessels in the “Overseas” or “Saracen” styles, the major part of which were undoubtedly made in imitation of Oriental examples.

19- The hem of a cloth woven in the 14th century in Lower Saxony. Hannover Museum.

20- The capital of a column in Saint-Hilaire de Melle church in Deux-Sèvres.

21- Costume of Roger II, woven in the 12th century in Palermo (from an 18th century lithograph).

22- The illuminated margin of Saint Louis’s Book of Psalms (about 1260).

23_ Sasanian cloth (10th-11th century). Cluny Museum.

24- Decorative plaster shutter frame (fragment). Iran. 13th century. Seattle Museum.

25- Composition of birds with intertwined necks. Gold thread and silk cloth. Palermo. 14th century. Turin Museum.

26- A tablet from Persia, decorated with intertwined floral scrolls of green enamel. The intertwining arabesques and patterns of Oriental art are among the greatest Eastern sources of inspiration for Western sculptors and decorators, who at times imitated the most complex patterns, and at times reproduced them in simple compositions. These examples show that the motif of animals with intertwined necks, found in Persia from the 6th century to the 13th century, were not only transferred to the Muslim (Arab) workshops at the service of Roger II in Palermo, but were also inherited throughout Europe by Roman sculptors, Parisian decorators and Saxon and Italian weavers.