

# The study of Cypress appearance in the Persian art and architecture in the light of Gestalt theory

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**ABSTRACT:** The impetus behind this study is to discover the aesthetic and semantic patterns of the cypress tree and show how this element has been employed by Iranian artists. The question of this research is how a constant element (the cypress tree) has been transfigured in different Iranian arts. Four categories of miniature, carpet, textile and architecture decoration. The present research is qualitative in nature and is descriptive-analytic and mainly uses the available published data. Data were analyzed inductively and interpreted in the light of Gestalt theory. Exploratory results reveal that the cypress as a constant element in Iranian art has been transfigured differently in different arts. With the aid of Gestalt laws, the visual appearance of the cypress tree was analyzed in the different samples a few of them are presented in the study. It was found that distinguishing the cypress element has been made: by highlighting the role of the cypress and reducing the visual significance of the field while increasing the visual emphasis of the cypress. Application of different gestalt laws such as proximity, figure, and ground, similarity, continuity in Persian carpet mostly makes the cypress at the center of attention and reduces the visual importance of the other elements. In some of the other Persian carpet designs, this element has semantic and extraterrestrial concepts and sits in the center (eg. Mehrabi carpets. In the miniature and fabric textiles, cypress tree has not received the urgent priority and often been on the margins of the image.

**Keywords:** Cypress tree, comparison, carpet, Persian miniature, fabric textile.

## INTRODUCTION

Trees as the main components of the landscape have been the focus of different scholars. Unlike humans in the modern world, people were more in the physical contact with nature. The close association with nature has always been the source of inspiration, fantasy, and reflection about the mystic world. Through the course of history, human beings have associated the trees and vegetation with heavenly features and supernatural powers. Such beliefs were also common in prehistoric times. The fear of death, natural, and human disasters have reinforced humans to realize the necessity of extraordinary or extraterrestrial forces. The influence of this overwhelming need has been so much so that humans have gone astray in the worship of nature. Human history shows that some plants and trees have been revered by various

tribes. Such reverence reflects the humans' perception of the universe. Divine religions including Islam reject the doctrine of worshipping nature or trees. They argue that nature reflects the power of God and guide us to his essence. In fact, with the advent of Islam, the elements associated with nature have not been eliminated from Iranian arts, but their conceptualization has gone through changes from "sacred in pre-Islamic culture to symbolic in the Islamic era" (Mansouri, 2005, 58).

Among the plants, for Iranians, the cypress tree has been of great importance since the ancient times and has frequently appeared in various literary arts and architecture. This element reflects the thoughts of the people of each period. So far different studies have attempted to justify the frequency of this tree in Iranian arts and architecture. However, no studies have drawn upon the aesthetic principles to examine how this element has

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been transfigured in different Iranian arts. The present study emphasizes the role of the cypress in understanding the fixed elements in different arts. By addressing the above questions, the application of Persian motifs in different arts will be revealed. Various artworks such as carpet, painting, cloth, and tile can be used to shed light on the topic under discussion because they reflect Iranian identity. For this purpose, available databases were searched to find the related research to cypress in Iranian art, and the results were presented in detail.

## Literature review

### The history of cypress from ancient times to now

Among the trees, cypress has received wide attention in the beliefs, arts, and literature of Iranians for its special features such as being tall, evergreen, and adaptable to the warm and dry climate of Iran (Jahan Pour, 2016). It is said that every tree goes through perfection, or falls into gradual decline. Unlike any other tree, the cypress is always green. On this ground, the word cypress is used to describe free-minded people" (Al Ibrahim Dehkordi, 2016,107). Through the course of Persian history, the word cypress has been used to refer to different things. The meanings of cypress represent its mythological and symbolic dimensions." In the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods, the cypress tree was known as the tree of life. The craved reliefs of this tree in Persepolis underscore their importance as symbolic objects (Farbod & Tavousi, 2002). In ancient times, some researchers referred to the cypress as an immortality symbol. With the advent of Islam, the symbolic world went through some changes. After Islam, the art field of wisdom and philosophy in Iran was inspired by some form of ancient thoughts and beliefs. This arena along with its own arts and worldview promoted a value through which Iran was recognized as the pioneer of wisdom and art" (Farbod & Tavousi, 2002).

### Cypress in various arts

The earliest history of Persian carpet dates back to the Achaemenid period. The components of national identity are presented in three forms using three symbols: vegetation motifs (garden, plant, trees), animal motifs, ancient and historic monuments (Afrough 2011). In the Persian rugs, the vegetation motifs include trees such as willow, cedar, pomegranate, vine, and animals consist of peacocks, lions, deer, fish, partridge, and phoenix (Chitsazian, 2009). Among different plants, the cypress has received much attention in Iranian carpets. "The cypress trees in their abstract forms are sometimes presented as a simple triangle attached to the stem, and sometimes they are in the form of the candle flames with a flower in the middle. This image is used either separately or in combination with a flower pot and the birds are on the flower branches. Sometimes like the carpets in the Fars region, the image is accompanied with two birds on its sides (Azarpad & Heshmati, 2004, 123). This tree is also frequently seen by mountains. This pattern is dominant in the oldest Persian carpets. (Abeddoost & Kazimpur, 2011). "The abstract forms of cypress trees or

paisleys which are the rouge figures of Iranian carpets come in different sizes and colors "(Nasiri Khorram, 2016, 85). Many believe that the conversion of the cypress to paisley occurred when Islam entered Iran.

Iranian miniatures are the symbol of the outside world and the expression of the mental and symbolic concepts that the Iranian artist adopt to illustrate the book texts. Later, this art was recognized as an independent art. The integrity of components in Persian art is about expressing a concept, a story. Landscaping and nature are only inseparable element of most of Iran's paintings. Naturalism and the integrity of man with nature, which is rooted in the ancient beliefs of the people of Iran, has always been the essential element of aesthetics in miniaturists" (Javadi, 2004). In fact, "Green spaces and Iranian gardens have played key roles in developing many Iranian historical miniatures"(Najafi & Afshari, 2011, 82). Not surprisingly, various species of trees and plants are often observed in Iranian paintings. Comparing the state of the trees in the Ilkhani School with the Safavid miniatures shows some changes. While trees in the Ilkhani miniatures were withered, in the Safavid miniatures were vibrant and exaggeratedly twisted. Until the Ilkhani periods, the trees were drawn very close to each other. In subsequent periods, they occupied less space compared to the other elements in the entire image, and their size started to diminish. Even sometimes they appeared as a single tree. In all periods, especially in the Ilkhani and Jalayerian periods, the features of trees used to be defined in the proportion of animals and rocks. Even in the various schools, the trees were used to guide the eyes to move through the entire picture or to a particular direction. The drawn trees were in harmony with other parts of the image. In the miniatures, two main types of the tree are generally considered to be of mythological nature. Evergreen and everlasting tree, like the cypress, refers to immortality, and the other trees such as plantains and the blooming trees signify youth and rejuvenation in spring "(Qasemieh et al., 2016). When miniature art was not recognized as an independent art, it was at the service of poetry. It was used to portray the pictures of poetry books. This tree has long been used for the decoration of Iranian cloth. In the majority of Iranian cloth, the motif of Paisley is much more prominent than other designs. According to many scholars, paisley that is commonly used in embroidery and calico printing artworks are the simplified form of the cypress tree. This tree has always been linked to Iranian religious culture and belief. The garden scenery and shade trees such as cypress and sycamore were the common images printed on the cloth of this period (Tavassoli, 2008). Even in pre-Islamic times, due to its high resistance to unfavorable weather conditions, the cypress was known as the tree of life symbolizing persistence and life and joy. On the Sassanid cloth, this tree was a symbol (Zaboli Nezhad, 2011). In addition, studying the existing samples from the Achaemenid period and the Parthian periods show that the cypress tree was not used for the decorative purpose and the artist used the trees symmetrically facing each other and in combination with animal; the cypress was

used for its ethereal feature, that is, eternal life and endurance (Mousavi & Ayatollahi, 2010). The cloth samples from the Samanid period show that Arabesque motifs such as flowering and leafy plants and cypress trees or the tree of life also were presented in geometric frames (Hakam Abadi et al., 2015). The cypress motif was used extensively in the art of Sassanids and Al-Bouyeh, and later was revived in miniatures and cloth in the Safavid period (Khalilzadeh Moghaddam & Sadeghpour Firouzabad, 2011). On the Qajar cloth, the motif of the cypress tree was prevalent. For example, Isfahani calico printing artworks with plant motifs such as the cypress trees were produced in various colors. Kermani handmade woolen shawls were also famous for the cypress trees and plant cones. (Shadkam, 1999). Another type of cloth which was popular in the Safavid and Qajar era was cashmere. This valuable cloth used extensively in girls' dowry. The motifs used on cashmere artworks were plants and curved trees (Koohzad, 2010). The image of the cypress were used in the embroidery of Kerman, or Pateh (in Persian) along with other flower designs, paisley, broken lines, and geometric shapes. In the past, the motifs of plant were very common on tiles and pottery artworks. The motifs were of different types used in combination with objects, human beings or animals.

Plant motifs on tiles and pottery were most important to humans. The plants were the source of human nutrition and were cultivated by them. Probably, the plants such as wheat were drawn for the sake of blessing. Later in Islamic times, the artists continued drawing the plants, and among them, the cypress tree was quite important. The cypress trees on tiles and pottery were used either in combination with human or animals. In the first case, the image of the cypress tree was drawn next to humans to signify spiritual status and symbolize freedom and stability. In combination with animals such as birds, a symbol of freedom and liberation, the cypress was used to present sanctity (Koohzad, 2010).

### Gestalt Laws

Gestaltism or Gestalt psychology is the name of a school of thought, founded in the 20th. Gestalt psychology has been used for the modern study of perception. This psychology attempts to rule out how human is able to maintain a sensible perception of the chaotic world around him. "The word Gestalt does not have an exact equivalent in English but it defines the way an object or a thing is put together or placed" (Safizadeh et al., 2019,7). Gestalt principles are originally developed by Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), an Austro-Hungarian-born psychologist but they were improved later by Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Metzger. According to Gestalt psychology, the whole is different from the sum of its elements. Based on this belief, Gestalt psychologists developed a set of principles to explain perceptual organization or how smaller objects are clustered and form larger ones. These principles are often referred to as the "laws of the perceptual organization". The Gestalt laws have been introduced as follows: Figure-ground, Proximity, Similarity, Continuity, Closure, Past Experience,

Good Gestalt, Common Fate, Law of Symmetry/ Balance, Uniform connectedness, Common regions, Parallelism, Focal points. "The Figure-ground principle addresses the connection between positive and negative spaces, the positive being the object and the negative referring to the space around it. This principle describes the tendency for the eye to separate the figures from their background in order for the viewer to know what is being seen" (Safizadeh, et al., 2019, 10).

Proximity describes the idea that objects which are located close to one another will be perceived as a group that are related to each other. "Similarity principle, also called "Invariance", states that things with the same or similar visual characteristics such as color, shape, size, texture, orientation or value will be understood as if they belong together in the human mind" (Safizadeh, et al., 2019, 11). Continuity law states that when the human eye begins to track along one element, it will continue following that direction until it meets another element. Accordingly, the elements that are in the similar direction are perceived related. Encloser law addresses "perceptual continuity as the mind is expected to complete a form or pattern even when some parts are missing" (Safizadeh et al 2019, 14).

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research is qualitative in nature. The research method is descriptive-analytic, and data were analyzed inductively. The main part of the studies is based on available published data. To this purpose, the concept of the cypress was examined in some samples of the carpets, miniatures, and cloth and tile artworks. The aesthetic analysis of the cypress element was carried out through the law of the perceptual organization of the Gestalt. The first step in the study of the aesthetics aspects in Persian carpets and painting was to determine the exact scope of the research. After a careful examination of the samples in the research environment, we found that the cypress was more abundant. This repetition demonstrates the symbolic significance of the element among the Persian artworks. The next step was to select the scope of the research and the samples. Since the study attempted to find various examples of the cypress concepts, Persian carpet and painting samples were not limited to a specific time period. The selected samples were compared for their common characteristics. Using the perceptual laws of the gestalt, the array patterns of the cypress element in miniature and Persian carpet samples were examined. The purpose of this comparison was to grasp the perceptual law that has been implicitly contributed to the significance of the cypress element. In other words, the results of this section deal with the aesthetics of the cypress element in Persian art and carpet. The present research attempts to discover the aesthetic aspect of the cypress element in Persian artworks and carpets rather than to justify why the patterns are as they are. This study does not intend to generalize the results to all Persian drawings and carpets in a limited number of images. The present study seeks to discover new aspects in relation to Persian carpets and miniatures and serve as a basis

for larger research.

This study is an attempt to know whether the shared elements in diverse arts are transfigured differently. Because the cypress has always been of special importance among Iranian people since ancient times, this study is an attempt to investigate this element in different forms of arts including miniature, carpet, tile, and texture from an aesthetic perspective. The rationale for conducting this research is that in the contemporary period, the use and reproduction of the decorations and designs of an art are highly recommended in other artworks. The present research attempts to show that such an issue is not observed in Iranian arts and even the fixed elements are not used in the same way either aesthetically or semantically.

However, this research does not intend to generalize the results to all Iranian arts, because of the limited number of samples used in qualitative research. The main purpose of this research is to hypothesize that the fixed elements in Iranian arts are not used in the same way. The present research also does not seek to explore the reason beyond this assumption in various Iranian arts. "The why question is to study the history in its context and beliefs of the tribes producing the artwork" (Mansouri 2017:5). Therefore, future research is needed to investigate the reasons from the aesthetic perspective.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The cypress element is portrayed in different types of arts such as miniature, carpet, texture, and tile. A total of 4 artworks were analyzed and the features of the cypress element in different artworks were compared in the light of the law of the perceptual organization of the Gestalt. The following images show the samples analyzed in this study.

Figure 1 shows the part of the battle of Rostam with the devil from Baysunqur's Shahnameh. The Iranian artist consciously has used the law of figure and ground in order to distinguish Rostam and the cypress tree from the background. Based on the law of figure and ground, the human brain tends to perceive some of the elements of an image as the focal point and the rest as its background. The artist draws the attention of the

audience by darkening the background of the battle of Rostam and demon and using the white color for the demon, which contrasts with the dark field. The background of the battlefield is cleverly composed of small plants and trees with similar colors. Applying the similarity rule to the objects similar in terms of color, size and texture makes the audience perceive them of the same visual value. This value of the elements of the ground draws the audience's attention towards the location of Rostam. While the cypress tree is more visual in comparison to other trees, the role of the elements in the image is complementary than essential. Table 1 shows Selected samples of painting, carpet, cloth, and tile.

The cypress is often featured in Iranian rugs. The main difference between carpet and painting in terms of aesthetics is the domination of the cypress element in the carpet. It is rare it is not happening in Iran, it is rare. In general, distinguishing the cypress element has been made in two ways: By highlighting the role of the cypress and reducing the visual significance of the field while increasing the visual emphasis of the cypress.

Figure 2 shows the design of a Kermani rug where the cypress tree is in the center. The designer has used similarity law for a visual emphasis on the cypress. Highlighting the difference between the cypress with other elements of the carpet in size, color, contrasting the cypress with the adjacent field and having an equal emphasis on the visual value of the field show that the artists have used the laws of the figure-ground, and similarity. Next to them, two peacocks are symmetrically placed next to the cypress tree and oriented toward it. This has increased the visual acuity on the cypress. Based on the proximity law, peacocks are perceived to be related to each other. The edges of the carpet reflect the integrity rule. According to this rule, the viewer perceives different parts of the entire image related to each other. The margin is one of the main features of Persian carpets. It is like the Persian Garden, which is always enclosed, no matter what is the climate like (Mansouri, 2005). It is disconnected from the outside world is related to the interior world, it offers the infinite landscape in a limited area as if the landscape has been framed in the margin of the Iranian carpet.

Table 1: Selected samples of painting, carpet, cloth, and tile

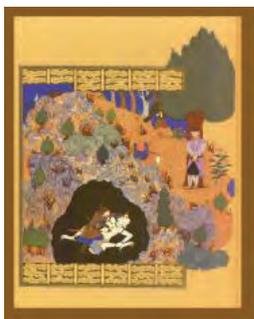


Fig 1: Part of the Battle of Rostam with the white demon, Source: Baysunqur's Shahnameh1971,101)



Fig 2:Kerman Rug with a tree design, Source: Joleh, 2002,49)



Fig 3: A Sample of the Safavid cloth (Source: Khalil Zadeh and Sadeghzadeh, 2011)



Fig 4: The entrance of the Noria hospital in Kerman (Source: Authors)

Table 2: Cypress element in various arts from aesthetics perspective

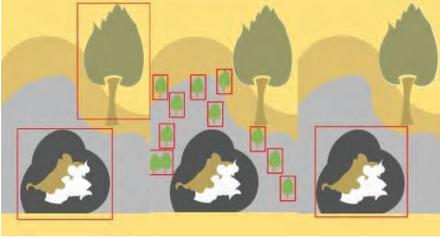
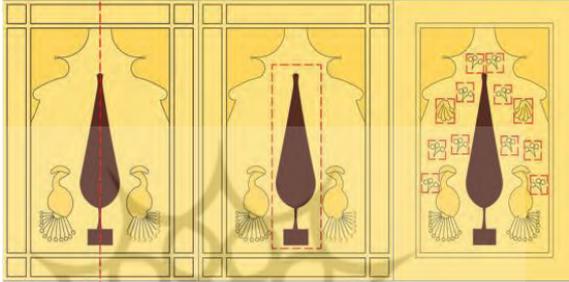
Battle of Rustam and Devil			
	Fig 5	The law of Figure-ground helps the viewer identify Rustam and the Cypress tree from the background.	The law of similarity in color and size give the viewer this impression that they are of the same visual value.
Kerman carpet with the design of a tree			
	Fig 6	The use of the similarity law in the field of carpet draws the attention of the viewer to the cypress	The distinguished color and size of the cypress from the other components of the carpet highlight the law of Figure-ground.

Figure 3, shows a sample of the Safavid cloth. Using contrasting colors for the repeating elements, the cypress, and the background of the cloth shows the designer has applied the law of figure and ground to distinguish the cypress from the background. Moreover, two Peacocks, which are symmetrically placed on both sides, are much closer to the cypress than the rest of the elements. Based on the law of proximity, the viewer would perceive each cypress and two peacocks as a cluster. The similarity of the elements with each other (e.g. color and form) also makes the viewer perceive them as a group.

Figure 4 shows the transom of Nooriyeh hospital in Kerman with tile works, which date back to the Qajar era. Using the law of figure-ground, the cypresses, along with the figure between them and the name of the hospital can be easily distinguished from the rest of the elements or the background. The cypresses are more visible to the viewers because of the contrast between their shapes and sizes with the background. However, the law of focal points and a very strong contrast between the inscription on which the name of the hospital written, and the field draw the attention of the viewer. The symmetrical shape of the transom creates a visual balance. Table 2 shows Cypress element in various arts from aesthetics perspective.

As mentioned above, this tree has been often featured in various arts. The motifs used in carpet, in other Iranian handicrafts, are

not used for decoration and each implies wonderful concepts. "Woven patterns in the textures and backgrounds of Persian carpets are symbolic. The roles of visual language elements are not limited to decoration because Iranian weavers, besides the decorative features of symbolic designs, reflect on the Iranian soul embodied in these motifs and beliefs of its ancestors. The Iran weavers attempt to preserve and introduce the beliefs, ideals, and the elements of their identity or the subjects of Iranian identity through the weaving and try to fix them in the textures and the margin of its carpet" (Afrough 2011). The cypress turns into the main composition of the carpet and is placed at the center, representing the tree of life, two animals woven at the two sides of carpet are pillars of the altar and are associated with architecture and religious concepts. Unlike the carpets, the cypress in a miniature is real and exists in the real world. In the Qajar era, the motif of cypress was used in the miniature behind the window. In Seni'-al-Mulk's paintings, known as one hundred and thirty days, the cypress is drawn on the inner walls and in the background and has a decorative function. On cloths, the cypress is mostly drawn in the form of a paisley or flowering bush. The paisley is a curved cypress tree blended with flowering bush. The cloths on which there are human-like figures, the cypress looks more real but wherever it presents an abstract concept and serves as a motif, it does not

look real anymore. On the other hand, the cypress is seen in the caves of various buildings such as Shah Nematollah and the Prince Mahan Garden, on the tile or minaret. Since the cypress is connected to the minaret, it is drawn on the minaret.

## CONCLUSION

The result of this study shows that the fixed elements in Iranian arts are not used in the same way. In miniatures, the cypress is mainly used in the background and looks more real. It is characterized by the images that fill the background and the cypress look bigger than other trees. In the Persian miniatures, the cypress element is abundantly used. It is part of the landscape and is used in combination with the mountains, rivers, trees, and buildings and this makes the active scene of the landscape more different. In the images, the other elements of the scene are not oriented toward the cypress tree, and the cypress is not the most significant element of the artwork. The human beings are visually emphasized in a variety of ways. Sometimes the attention of all figures in a miniature are drawn to others, and occasionally the status of trees and clouds in the miniature guide the eyes towards the main characters of the story. In other words, in Iranian miniatures, there is a combination of human figures, plants, and trees, and the cypress is an element of this landscape. However, in the carpet, the cypress is its central element, and the arrays of visual elements draw all attention to the cypress. Perhaps the most important difference between the aesthetics of the cypress element in Iranian miniature and carpet lies in their positions; being in the text or the margin of artworks. In the designs of a Persian carpet, the cypress gets an urgent priority. The great difference in the sizes of the color shades makes the cypress the most significant element in some Iranian carpet designs and let the designer communicate with the audience without any explanation. The main aesthetic similarity shared by Iranian miniatures and carpets is the high frequency of the cypress element in comparison to other plants. Compared to Iranian carpets, the dominance of this element is not quite tangible in the miniatures at first glance. It is because the human element is absent there. Nonetheless, the fact is that cypress as the most important visual element is still at the center of attention, and the Iranian designer, with a deep understanding of the law of perceptual organization, establishes a deep connection with the audience and sends his message. In the Persian carpet, the removal of the cypress element can affect the entire design. Despite the differences in the Iranian miniature and the carpet, they as the constituents of Iranian identity hold an identical attitude towards nature. Nature is a creature and is at the service of man. It is manifested by God's signs. In tiling, nature is associated with architecture and symbolizes the ascension and appears on the minarets. On the cloths, it often turns into a paisley. It is to say that an element such as the cypress has been transfigured in different ways or fixed elements of Iranian arts are not used in the same

way. It must be noted that the study doesn't mean to generalize the findings due to the limited number of case studies, it rather attempted to shed light on an important aspect of Iranian art design.

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