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# A Study of Contemporary (Modern) Painting in Herat. Case Study (Faculty of Fine Arts, Herat University)

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## Abstract

*Painting in Herat in the last two decades has achieved new achievements and approaches to the past traditions. These achievements were mostly in terms of form, color and technique, first influenced by modern Western painting, but then painters and students presented works with a combination of Eastern and Western painting based on the culture and traditional patterns of our society.*

*The purpose of this study was to examine the contemporary (modern) painting within the framework of Herat College of Fine Arts, which can be important for students, artists and art lovers. In this research, two methods of library method and field method have been used. Authentic books and articles have been used in background. In field method, the data collection was based on observations and interviews with several professors of the Faculty of Fine Arts and pioneers of contemporary painting in Herat, which the result is summarized as follows.*

*Contemporary painting was introduced to the audience academically for the first time by presenting the works of two painters from the Faculty of Fine Arts of Herat in an exhibition entitled Gardoun. By observing the pictures and interviews that were conducted, in the early days of its formation, contemporary painting was influenced by the Cubism style, but in recent years, contemporary painters have presented works with a new look and a combination of Eastern and Western art based on culture and civilization and indigenous environmental patterns of our country, which some unique methods can be seen in the works of a number of masters.*

*Contemporary painting in the Faculty of Fine Arts of Herat began academically in 2009 and went through good stages and in the last decade found its place among students, but unfortunately by the change of government, some restrictions arose on the art of painting and establishing exhibitions which caused the lack of motivation of artists and students to art, and this process caused a number of artists and students to go abroad. What will be the future of art and the artist is a question that will be answered in the future.*

**Keywords:** Herat, Painting, Contemporary, Modern, Academic, Faculty, Fine Arts

## Introduction

Herat is the most important artistic and cultural center of *Afghanistan* and is known as the city of science and culture.

*Herat* is famous as a cultural and artistic center because of the poets, writers and artists who have grown up in this city from the past to the present and have left some works from themselves. *Herat painting* flourished in the 15th century during the reign of Sultan Hussein Bayqara. Since then, many painters have appeared and their works may be available in many parts of the country, but their fame has not been such that they last forever.

In this research, an attempt has been made to study the *contemporary painting* in Herat and especially in the *Faculty of Fine Arts* of the *Herat* university, the result of which can be useful for students and those interested in *contemporary painting*.

The research is done based on descriptive and qualitative methods in two sections: library and field. At background of the subject Authentic books and articles have been used.

In the field research method, data collection was performed based on observation and interviews with a number of professors.

To achieve the goal, the following questions have been prepared, which answering to that will make clear the results of the research.

1. In which year, did the contemporary (modern) painting form in Herat?
2. Has contemporary painting in Herat influenced by modern Western painting, or does it have unique characteristics?
3. Which year did the contemporary painting in the framework of Herat College of Arts start and how was its growth?
4. How has been the interest of the students of the Faculty of Fine Arts in contemporary painting?
5. How has the community received contemporary art from the beginning until now

### Herat

Ariana or Aria is the name of a province located in the northwest of Afghanistan, which from the north it is connected and restricted with the Margiana (Badghis) province, from south to Darangiana province (Sistan and Farah), from east to Ghor province (Hazarajat), and from west to neighboring country (Iran). According to the narrations the name of Herat is mentioned in Avesta as *Heravia* or *Haraieva* and in Greek as *Arya*.

This prosperous and rich city puts its most glorious era in the Timurid era (1:10).

The beautiful city of *Herat* is famous for its magnificent minarets and architecture. Fifteenth century AD, was the golden era of *Herat* and it became famous as *Florence of Asia* in terms of educating painters, architects and musicians. (185:5)

*Herat* was on the Silk Road before the discovery of the Indian Ocean; It played a major role in trade between the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe. In terms of geographical location, *Herat* has historically been a suitable platform for Eastern and Western civilizations. Hence *Herat* is known as one of the civilization cradles of the today *Afghanistan's* (previously called *Khorasan*) prolific history. (3: 8-9)

The most brilliant era of Herat was the period of the Timurid dynasty, when Shahrokh and Sultan

Hussein Bayqara, in the attention of Amir Ali Shir Navai, Goharshad Begum and Maulana Abdul Rahman Jami, marked the Eastern Renaissance in *Herat* (2:11).

At that time, *Herat* was considered a paradise of Asia and this period was opposed to the Renaissance period in Europe as Florence was the example of glorious in the West and the name of paradise adorned with all kinds of science and technology, so *Herat* invaded the East like a shining star in the atmosphere of grace and art, and as a result of encouragement and expansion of the Timurid kings, a wide field of art was opened. (1: 90)

### Herat Art School

The Timurid period is one of the special and noteworthy periods of art. During this period, the *Herat school* was established which due to its characteristics, it has caused numerous discussions and issues. Most of art historians and scholars believe that this school is the culmination of *Khorasan* [Afghanistan] painting and its artists achieved that degree of artistic ability that not only influenced the schools and artists of their predecessors, but also the artists and schools of the subsequent Ages.

In the time of Shahrokh, who was a magnanimous, dignified and interested in culture and art prince, due to the created security and tranquility, the city of *Herat* became a center for craftsmen and artists. It was in this city that the *Herat school* was formed with the support of Shahrokh. And *Herat* emerged as one of the largest centers of *miniature painting* in the Timurid era.

The reign of Sultan Hussein Bayqara is another brilliant period of Timurid art. The ingenious Minister, Sultan Hussein, and his loyal childhood friend, Amir Ali Shir Navai, were as much a supporter of literature, poets, and artists as he was. In addition to his literary taste, Amir Ali Shir Navai was also a painter, religion and musician. *Herat* at this time became a gathering place for great masters such as Kamaluddin Behzad (7: 111-113.)

Kamaluddin Behzad is one of the most prominent artists and painters of *Herat school*. Behzad as a leading painter of the Timurid period in *Herat* has been the focus of virtuosos and artists, an artist who in Eastern sources have considered him as an

irreplaceable figure and an unjust painter »in fact he was compounded with legal capacity, capability, and ability, and brought the tendencies which were followed in the Timurid period and especially by the Herat school and paved the way for future developments» (6: 300).

Many painters appeared in *Afghanistan* after Behzad's era and their works may be found in many parts of the country, but their reputation was not in such a way that lasts forever (4: 8-9)

### Formation of Contemporary (Modern) Painting in Herat

*Contemporary (modern) painting in Herat* began in 2009 and is the pioneer of this type of painting were professor *Abdul Nasser Sawabi* and Professor *Sayed Navid al-Haq Fazli* (Rahmani).

The first exhibition of me and my colleague *Sayed Navid al-Haq Fazli* was held in 2008 and this exhibition was the first *modern painting* approach that we learned from the address of academic knowledge of *modern art*, in which 17 *modern paintings* of me were exhibited (Sawabi) (Images 1-3).



**Image 1 Work of Sawabi. Dimensions: 70×70cm  
Materials Acrylic. Photographer: Sawabi**



**Image 2 Work of Sawabi Dimensions:100×100  
Materials Acrylic. Photographer: Sawabi**

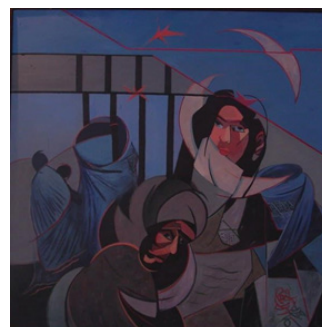


**Image 3 Work of Sawabi Dimensions:100×100  
Materials: Acrylic. Photographer: Sawabi**

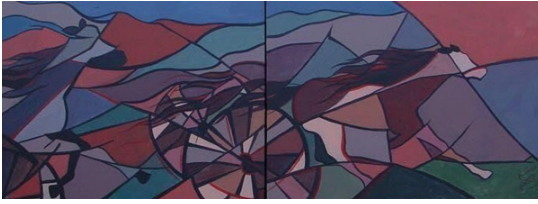
In the summer of 2008, Professor Sawabi and I organized an exhibition called *Gardoun*. This exhibition was the result of experiences in the field of new trends in the field of painting that was obtained in one of the universities of Iran during the study of master degree. This exhibition can be considered as the first exhibition of contemporary academic painting in Afghanistan, which was held after some decades of war (Images 4-6).



**Image 4 Instead of Buddha Work of Fazli  
Dimensions:100×100cm. Acrylic. Photographer:  
Fazli**



**Image 5 Captive Work of Fazli  
Dimensions:100×100cm. Acrylic. Photographer:  
Fazli**



**Image 6 Horses Work of Fazli**

**Dimensions: 120×50cm. Materials: Acrylic.**

**Photographer: Fazli**

However, a number of works in this field have already been performed by some painters in *Herat* and throughout *Afghanistan*, but the *Gardoun* exhibition, which was held in Herat, had a wide reflex and a very effective impact on audiences and artists, and was able to open the door to *contemporary* or modern *painting* for eagers and lovers of this field. As, one or two years later, the *Herat faculty of Art* established this field for the first time in its *painting department* and it was taught *academically* (Fazli).

If we are going to consider academic places that operate outside the *Faculty of Art*, the Kamaluddin Behzad Institute is also of interest. The functions of the professors such as Arbabzadeh, Professor Heidari and even recently Mr. Behrang can be considered. In 2004, in one of the exhibitions of the Kamaluddin Behzad Institute, which at that time was called the Kamaluddin Behzad Professional High School, Professor Karim Arbabzadeh had exhibited works of surrealism and abstract that the history should not forget it. Or in the exhibitions before 2009, the collage works of Mr. Heidari could also be used as a contemporary painting in *Herat* at that time.

If the background concept of the question is, when did *contemporary painting* begin at the *Herat faculty of Art*? And is it going academically? It should be written without hesitation, after the completion of the master's course of *professors Fazli* and *Professor Sawabi* in 2008 and the holding of the first exhibition of *contemporary* art in the exhibition hall of the *Faculty of Fine Arts of Herat University* (Ebrahimi).

### **Contemporary Herat Painting, a Combination of Eastern and Western Art**

What I can say about my work is that it is a combination of Western and Eastern art. For two reasons: First, that art is the combination of objects.

Secondly, because I have a long history in Oriental (eastern) art, these two have been integrated into my work and I have created my own unique style (Sawabi).

The basis of the type of contemporary painting taught in college and the works of professors who have promoted this trend has been a combination of Cubism style. But later, especially in the works of Mr. Sawabi and me, many changes have been made, from which it is difficult to find that combination, his style and manner of work has become personalized, and both of us try to make our works have a regional color and smell. That this attempt was not in vain and a very noticeable successes have been achieved in this field (Fazli).

*Contemporary painting* is naturally influenced by modern Western painting, but it mostly uses environmental patterns (Rahmani).

### **Faculty of Fine Arts, Herat University**

*The Faculty of Fine Arts* started its activity in 1988 with a *calligraphy and painting department* at the same time as the establishment of *Herat University*.

In 2003, the Miniature Department was established within the framework of this *faculty*, and in 2011, it succeeded in obtaining the purpose of the Graphic Department from the Ministry of Higher Education. Right now, this *faculty* has three active departments and 564 students, including 113 males and 371 females. *The Faculty of Fine Arts* is a state institution whose aims are clear based on the laws and regulations of the *faculty*, and all the affairs of the *faculty* are regulated and implemented with considering these laws (Faculty teaching archive).

### **Painting Department**

*The painting department* was established at the same time as the establishment of Herat University in 1988. This *department* started its teaching and activity with 6 students and 3 professors with basic theoretical and practical subjects.

In the early days, the teaching methods of painting *realism* were based on the *classical* style. With the arrival of the Taliban in 1995 restrictions such as depriving girls of the right to education and eliminating the subject of *face painting*, which

caused the *art of painting* to diminish for 6 years until 2001.

In the 2001 decade, due to the concentration of the directorate of the department and professors and the presentation of *painting* exhibitions, changes in students' work techniques were appeared that were effective in developing this art. In 2009, the subject of *contemporary painting* was established in a coherent manner, based on a precise and regular program, with the support of the Faculty directorship and the responsibility of the *Painting Department* (author).

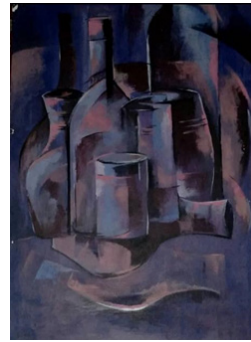
### Contemporary (Modern) Painting in the Framework of the Faculty of Fine Arts

*Contemporary painting* in the *Faculty of Fine Arts* of *Herat* started in 2009 and has gone through good stages and has found its place among students (Rahmani).

In 2009, this trend was established in a very coherent form and taken from a precise and regular program in the *Herat faculty of Fine Arts* with the support of the *dean* of the *faculty* and the responsibility of the *painting department*. Initially, the program started with a theoretical background so that students could gain more theoretical knowledge. Later, we started working with students on a practical program (Images 7-8.) From the beginning students showed great interest in it. And it can be boldly said that in a very short period of time, this field grew very well and could easily open a very strong foothold in the art of *Herat* and *Afghanistan*, and was promoted not only in *Herat*, but also in *Kabul*, and many exhibitions were held in and abroad of *Afghanistan* by its supporters (Fazli) (Images 9-10)



**Image 7 A Deformed Sketch, Works of Students Painting Archive**



**Image 8 Contemporary Painting, Works of Students Painting Archive**



**Image 9 Blacksmith, Contemporary Technique, Materials: Acrylic. Works of Students Painting Department Archive**



**Image 10 A Girl with Red Dress, Contemporary Technique, Materials: Acrylic. Works of Students Painting Department Archive**

### Students' Interest in Contemporary Painting

The interest of students of *Herat Faculty of Arts* was low in the beginning, and the students had many questions in the field of contemporary art, and it was difficult for the students to understand it, but it was gradually accepted (Rahmani).

At the beginning, because it was a new method, but with the knowledge given to the students, it gradually flourished (Sawabi).

In the early years, some students felt themselves not sure, due to the negative publicity of some who were not very optimistic about this style influenced their thoughts from the outside, but lately interest of students is a lot and promising (Fazli).

If the student understands what s/he is being educated and for what s/he is being educated, s/he will undoubtedly become interested and advance science with great interest. In the early days of *contemporary painting* arrival, students were passionate about this style and were really trying to learn something new so that they could convey their message easily and clearly in less time. That interest was directly related to the programs of the professors of that time, which were codified and step by step. But today it is felt that dealing with this style of art has become a window to escape from realism. Today's student just for not trying to paint the hand, is thinking how to deform it while s/he does not know what the deformity is. This view will create more humiliation for the history instead of bringing values to it. Because the artist unknowingly creates and a period will be questioned. I see the process of *contemporary painting* in the faculty very well, but serious and significant attention should be paid (Ebrahimi).

### **The Community's Acceptance of Contemporary Painting from the Earliest Times to the Present**

Herat community's acceptance of *contemporary painting* has been faced with challenge from the beginning and *contemporary painting* has been an incomprehensible phenomenon for the people and they could not communicate with it because *contemporary painting* in European countries formed during the fifty years along with the industrialization of their lives, but in Herat instantly. (Rahmani)

At first, *contemporary painting* was an ambiguity among the people, but after the spread of its knowledge, it slowly flourished (Sawabi).

In the beginning, this tendency was not well received even by some artists in *Herat* and *Afghanistan*, and some artists even took a stand against it, but later, with its worldview and great

capacity, it was able to attract even its stubborn opponents. Because a *contemporary painting* can easily retell the words of thousands of audiences and has a lot of meaning and content, but a realism expresses only the fact that is visible in the appearance of the work and it is difficult to write different interpretations for it. But in *contemporary painting*, the circle of analysis and interpretation is very wide (Fazli).

Traditional societies that are committed to past traditions and commit themselves to them, find it difficult to accept and adapt to new artistic trends soon. Because they feel that their originality, which is their traditional view of existence, is being questioned and that everything may be lost. So, *contemporary painting* among the masses is still not acceptable, today people in the exhibition are looking for a scene full of realism to see and enjoy. If I want to give an example for this claim, I can well point to people's interest in Buzkashi paintings, women in veil, monuments, street children, etc.

But when a conscious process enters a society with scientific support, willingly or unwillingly, it is accepted and finds its place well. I believe that the honorable people of Afghanistan deserve to embrace and enjoy the new artistic trend (Ebrahimi).

### **Discussion**

In this section, the author for analyzing the issue, in response to some of the interviewees has done the dispute and discussion which is discussed below.

Regarding the formation of contemporary painting in Herat, Ms. Ebrahimi referred to the works of Professor Arbabzadeh and Professor Heidari as contemporary painting, which were exhibited in one of the exhibitions of the Kamaluddin Behzad Institute in 2004.

The author does agree with Ms. Ebrahimi that the mentioned professors presented new works in the same year. But it cannot be considered as the first works of contemporary painting. Because those paintings were tastefully worked and did not continue. However, in Faculty of fine arts in Herat, this process academically began on the basis of contemporary arts and later it continued.

Regarding the community's acceptance of contemporary painting, Ms. Ebrahimi said: "Contemporary painting among the masses is still not acceptable, today people in the exhibition are looking for a scene full of realism to see and enjoy. For this claim, she pointed Buzkashi paintings, women in veil, historical monuments, and street children.

Author does agree with Ms.Ebrahimi about contemporary painting is not acceptable among the masses. As Isabel Domzon Rouge says in Contemporary Art book: "Contemporary art seems impenetrable to those who have not studied in the field and are unable to understand what they see." Only a certain group of people are the audiences of contemporary art exhibitions." (8:5). According to the author, the special group of contemporary painting audiences are professors and students of universities and people with high knowledge and understanding. This group of audiences who are more fully aware of art can better and more easily communicate with contemporary painting.

### Findings and Conclusions

Contemporary (modern) painting for the first time was introduced academically with the presentation of works of two painters, Abdul Naser Sawabi and Sayed Navid al-Haq Fazli to the audience in an exhibition entitled Gardoun. By observing the images and interviews that were conducted, in the early days of formation, contemporary painting was influenced by the Cubism style. But in recent years, contemporary painters have presented works with a new look and a combination of Eastern and Western art based on the culture and civilization of our country's indigenous and environmental patterns, which unique methods also can be seen in the works of a number of professors.

*Contemporary painting* has been formally and academically included in the curriculum of the *Faculty of Arts of Herat University* since 2009, and it continues to be taught up to now. More contemporary painting enthusiasts in *Herat* were students of *Fine Arts and the academic community*.

As common people were not fully aware of *contemporary painting*, everything was questionable for them. The process of *contemporary painting* in the *Faculty of Fine Arts* was getting better day by day. The presentation of biennial exhibitions was an incentive and motivation for the growth and introduction of this art, especially in the late 1400s, the *art of contemporary painting* grew significantly, which unfortunately with the change of government and the creation of some restrictions, this trend diminished. What will be the future of art and the artist is a question that will be answered in the future.

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