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War Painting and Pilgrimage in Iran

Alice Bombardier

The Iraqi army entered the border town of Khoramshahr, in Iranian territory, on September 22, 1980, triggering a war that lasted for eight years. The Khoramshahr mosque houses a mural painted by Nasser Palangi (born 1957) after the liberation of the city in 1982. This work is becoming the pictorial support of a pilgrimage. I seek to understand—through its modes of elaboration, its contents and the echo that the painting still receives in Iran today—what this war painting shows. To this end, I build my analysis on another work, the triptych *War* (1929–1932), painted in Europe, following the First World War, by the German artist Otto Dix.

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AFTERMATH OF THE IRAN–IRAQ WAR

The elite Iraqi army entered the Iranian border town of Khoramshahr on September 22, 1980 (1359 AH).[1] The inhabitants had resisted Iraqi troops for several days, especially on the city bridge, before the Iranian national army was mobilized. Khoramshahr was also the only part of Iranian territory to be occupied by the enemy for a year and a half, during a war that lasted eight years. For this reason it remains a ''martyr'' city in the minds of most Iranians. Today, over twenty years after the end of the conflict, the town has been rebuilt. The Khoramshahr Mosque however still houses a mural painting [Figure 1] that is viewed as the strongest testimony to this period. It was painted by Nasser Palangi in the euphoria of victory, after the liberation of the city on May 24, 1982.

This painting has acquired an important place in the minds of many Iranians, as well as within the political and artistic movement of ''war painting'' which developed in Iran in the 1980s. The increased flow of visitors has not relented, and in 2007 the city museum dedicated a room to the origin and composition of this work.[2] Furthermore in the same year a film about the painting and its author was shot. Why has this mural entered into the collective consciousness of Iranians?

After a discussion of the origins of the work, the technique used and the overall composition, I will go on to a detailed description and analysis of the work,

ALICE BOMBARDIER *studied History at the University of Sorbonne—Paris 4. She also graduated in Persian language at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO, Paris). After doing a master's thesis on* The activities of Iranian painters under Reza Shah (1925–1941), *today she is studying Sociology and Art History at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris) and at the University of Geneva. Her research deals with issues of painting in Iran in the 20th century (1911–2009). E-mail: alice.bombardier@gmail.com*

Figure 1 Nasser Palangi's mural, Khoramshahr's mosque, 1982. (Photo © Nasser Palangi; color figure available online)

placing it in its historical and sociocultural context. The analysis will develop with the support of another war painting: the triptych *War*, produced in the different context of World War I (1914–1918) and created in Europe during 1929–1932 by the German painter, Otto Dix. I will show that thirty years after its creation the mural in Khoramshahr's mosque has become a pictorial medium representing a ''war pilgrimage,'' at the crossroads between a war memorial and a religious or political commemoration.

ORIGINS OF THE KHORAMSHAHR MOSQUE MURAL

The Iranian trend in war painting is included in the artistic movement known today in Iran as ''Art of the Revolution.'' The original members of this movement held a founding exhibition of paintings in Iran on February 11, 1979, in which Nasser Palangi took part, shortly after the proclamation of the Islamic Republic. As the exhibition was received with enthusiasm it moved to other provincial cities, resulting in many artists, poets and writers contacting the group of painters and expressing their desire to contribute to its creations. This led to the founding of the Center of Art and Islamic Thought (*howze-ye honar va andishe-ye eslami*).

The main idea of this Center was to democratize art, to establish a close relationship with the people. In order to do this it was necessary to live with them [Khosrojerdi 1999: 91]. Immediately after the early confrontation with Iraq, the Center participated in the war effort by directing its creations towards the challenges of the conflict. Initially non-governmental, in 1982 the Center of Art

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and Islamic Thought became part of the Organization of Islamic Propaganda (*sazeman-e tabliqat-e eslami*) [Jalali-Naini 1998].

On the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war Nasser Palangi (born in 1957 in Hamedan) was twenty-three years old and in his second year of painting studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran. He joined the front as soon as the war was declared and remained there until May 1982, when Khoramshahr was liberated. He did not participate directly in the fighting but talked with the soldiers and drew their portraits. During the summer of 1982, after the liberation of the city, he painted the mural in the Jame mosque in memory of the fighters he had known in Khoramshahr. He used car paint, as this was all that was available in a time of war; it was brought from the nearby city of Ahwaz by ambulance.

At that time there were no religious representations left in Khoramshahr's mosque, so Nasser Palangi presented the idea of painting a memorial in the mosque to the municipality (*farmandari*). The Prefect of Khoramshahr—who was involved in the war, during which he lost a leg—accepted this proposal and assumed the costs of paint and brushes, despite the difficult times: the city had been completely destroyed. Thus there were no objections to Nasser Palangi's wish to paint a mural in the mosque.[3]

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TECHNIQUE AND COMPOSITION

The Jame mosque, the main mosque in Khoramshahr, was built in the 1870s. Renovated in 1964, it became a center for religious and political rallying during the revolution (1978–1979). At the beginning of the war against Iraq, the mosque was converted for thirty-five days into headquarters for the city's popular forces. During the first month of fighting it represented the nerve center of the Iranian defense; for the coordination of forces, exchange of information, care of the wounded, rationing of food, etc. However, it was partly destroyed on October 4, 1980 and fell to Iraqis on October 26. On the day of the liberation of Khoramshahr (May 24, 1982), this mosque was again at the center of the fighters' celebrations. Thus nowadays it is regarded as the symbol of Iranian resistance. The Guide of the Islamic Republic, the Ayatollah Khameneyi, came to meditate at this mosque in 1996, once the restoration of the building and reconstruction of the city were completed.[4]

The work of Nasser Palangi is a mural polyptych in five parts, painted in the courtyard of the mosque on an inner wall [Figure 2]. A painter, to present his work, usually starts with the technique. We will do the same: we cannot totally ignore the context imposed by techniques. The technical means are often chosen to increase the expressiveness of the work.

The mural painting uses techniques that can also be used in easel painting; only fresco painting is specific. Indeed, there was originally a linguistic difference between ''mural painting'' and ''fresco.'' *Fresco*, in Italian, means ''fresh,'' the Italian word referring to a specific technique of mural painting which involves using colors diluted with water on a coat of fresh mortar. However, by extension in contemporary language, the word *fresco* has taken the general sense of mural painting, regardless of the technique used. On the contrary murals, like easel paintings, are applied to a dry coating. Both practices require the pigments to

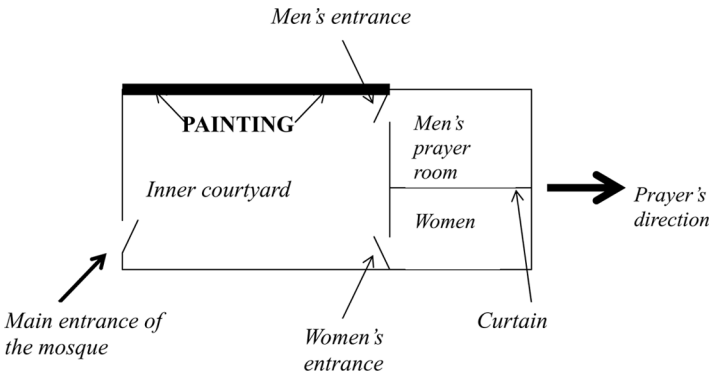

Figure 2 The location of Nasser Palangi's mural in the Khoramshahr mosque. (If the room is full, prayer also takes place in the courtyard.)

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be thinned down with a liquid, then spread onto the dry coating [Rudel 1992: 760]. In the case of Nasser Palangi's painting, car paint applied directly to a cement wall in the courtyard of the mosque, the term ''mural'' is more appropriate.

The main characteristic of mural painting is probably the challenges imposed on the painter by the architecture of the building. Indeed, Nasser Palangi had to deal with subdivisions of the original side-wall of the mosque. This wall was decorated with several columns connected by broken arches. Columns and arches appeared in relief on the wall and were overhung by a covering of ceramic foliage, followed by a calligraphic frieze. This configuration obliged the painter to cut his work into five separate paintings of three by three metres that would fit into the limited space between the columns and under the broken arches.

Initially these five paintings were made with car paint. However, a restoration was carried out by Nasser Palangi himself in 2007, in which he used oil colors applied directly to the cement. Oil painting (which spread across Europe in the 15th century and Iran in the 19th) facilitates the association of neighboring tones and therefore allows painters to play with color gradients. In the five paintings different shades of red, the dominant color, intermingle. We notice the joint presence of crimson red, bright red, orange, beige or ochre. However, the chromatic composition of the whole mural is ternary, based on red, green (its opposite primary color), and white, like the national Iranian flag. Touches of black are visible in the corners and in some of the details. The whole work is covered with a shiny varnish.

Each painting has a different subject, although all are linked to a central theme; but the overall composition of this mural, as indicated at first glance by the unity of color, is unitary. The interrupted perspective, almost broken by a very high skyline, highlights the elements of a fragmented landscape. In fact, each painting is divided into three parts. At the base, one or two or a small group of characters appear vertically or horizontally, almost life-size, painted with circular brush strokes. This base of the painting is the place of the ''symbol,'' according to Nasser Palangi.[5] The middle is devoted to the narrative, shown in miniature. Finally, again on a large scale, at the peak there is ''an abstract or spiritual entity,'' which is illustrated by a flag or by a portrait of one of the Shiite Imams,

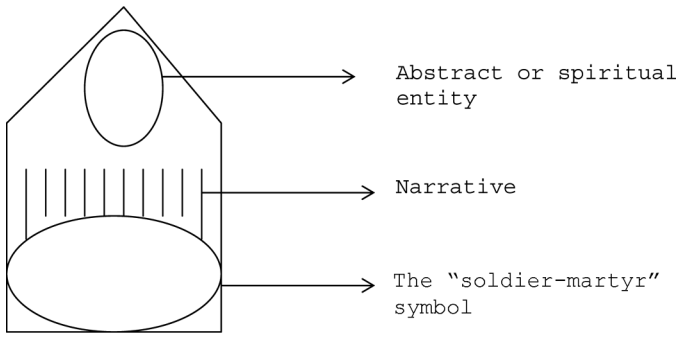

Figure 3 Inner structure of Nasser Palangi's mural.

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whose face, according to the precepts of Islamic figuration, is veiled. The top of the central third panel shows the Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution: half of his face is partly visible behind his two hands. The top of the final painting, located on the left, following the direction in which one reads the Persian script, is bathed in light, which is the mystic symbol relating to God. We could represent this ternary structure as in Figure 3.

DESCRIPTION

Colors and form link the various parts of the mural. However, from the point of view of content there is also a unifying theme: the episodes are all organized and attached to the same set of facts, which relate to war, acts of resistance, death, martyrdom and faith in God or Shiite Imams. We will proceed with a detailed description of the five paintings simultaneously, as the mural appears visually to the visitor. We recommend that you read Table 1 from right to left and in an upward direction (see Table 1).

The first painting [Figure 4] shows a soldier, in the space devoted to the ''symbol.'' This man wears a green uniform and carries a rifle with bullets. Isolated, he prays alone in a trench, dug in crimson red earth. He holds the Koran in front of him, as if he had just taken it and opened it. This soldier is praying, not fighting. He stares at heaven, not at the enemy. In the background the group of armed men behind him are not the enemy moving forward. This second level represents a flashback: the same soldier, surrounded by other fighters, brandishes a flag, exalted in the bustle of his departure to the front. The flag raised at arm's length is green, the color for Islam. Rather than the Iranian national flag, which is green, white and red, this flag seems to portray traditional Islamic insignia. Immediately it appears that the fighting is religiously motivated, which brings into question the national tone of the painting.

The second painting [Figure 5] portrays predominantly a woman—the only part of the work where a woman is shown. Below, it is probably a mother, wife or sister who is lying on the chest of a soldier, one hand on the heart and the other behind the head of the supine man. Her veil (*chador*) acts as a mortuary shroud because the soldier, with a pale face, is dead. In the second panel the soldier,

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TABLE 1 Descriptive grid of the five panels composing the mural painting of the Khoramshahr mosque (Read from right to left and upward)

5. *Shahidan–e maktab-e eshq*. The martyrs at the school of divine love.	**4**. *Shahid Muhammad Jahanara va yaran-e hamrah*. The martyr Mohammad Jahânârâ and his fellows.	**3.** *Khoramshahr-e maktab-e moqavemat*. Khoramshahr at the school of resistance.	**2**. *shahedan-e sabour*. Tough martyrs.	**1**. *arefan dar sangar-e eshq*. Believers in the trench of divine love.	**The posted title**
5. *rah-e shahidan*. The path of the martyrs.	4. *Sama-ye asheqan*. Sufi dance of the worshipers.	3. *Shahadat va moqavemat*. Martyrdom and resistance.	2. *zanan-e jonubi*. The women from the South.	1. *do'a*. The prayer.	**The title in the painter's mind**
God, symbolized by light.	The Imam Hoseyn, face veiled, third Imam of Shiism, died as a martyr in the battle of Karbala in 680 CE.	The Ayatollah Khomeini in prayer, half of his face hidden by his joint hands.	Fatemeh, her face veiled, daughter of the Prophet and mother of the second and third Shiite Imams.	A plain green flag.	**The national or spiritual entity**
A long line of martyrs, which stretches up to the light, God.	From right to left: 1. A group sitting on a train, en route to the front.	1. Three groups of fighters from Khoramshahr brandish weapons.	From left to right: 1. The character of the mother prays, standing among other women.	The soldier, surrounded by other fighters, is waving a green flag.	**The story behind the symbol**

(*Continued*)

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TABLE 1 Continued

	2. Six soldiers are carrying another soldier, who is wrapped in a shroud. Above the center: The martyr raised up by soldiers, surrounded by light, is bowing down before the Imam Hoseyn.	2. Two symbols of the area. On the left: a field of beheaded trunks of date palms. On the right: Khoramshahr's mosque.	2. The martyr, as a child, and his mother, stand side by side. 3. The martyr is lying among other dead men. His mother comes to see his corpse.		
A soldier is walking, the Koran and a rifle in his hands. He seems to enjoin the visitor to follow him. Written on his arm: "In the name of Hoseyn, martyr."	A man is directing a dance, which will lead the group to martyrdom. Representation of the rite of Ashura, the day commemorating Imam Hoseyn's Martyrdom.	A soldier is lying down, his hand on the Koran, staring at the visitor serenely. On his armband is written in Arabic: "Mediocrity spare us forever!"	A woman, eyes closed, is lying on the chest of a dead soldier.	In a trench a soldier is holding the Koran, absorbed in prayer, the eyes looking skyward.	**The symbol**
Panel no. 5	**Panel no. 4**	**Panel no. 3**	**Panel no. 2**	**Panel no. 1**	↑

Figure 4 Nasser Palangi's mural, first panel, Khoramshahr's mosque, 2007. (Photo © Alice Bombardier; color figure available online)

the central figure of Nasser Palangi's mural, is shown as dead. We note that his expression in death remains calm and relieved. Behind them, three scenes set at three different times retrace the journey of this woman, so confirming she is the mother of the soldier. On the left, she stands praying among a group of kneeling women. In the center, overhanging the area of the ''symbol,'' this woman and her martyred son, in his childhood, are represented as in a Christian nativity scene, with a star glittering above their heads. Finally, on the right, the mother is standing again and looking for her son among the rows of bodies of dead soldiers. The symmetry of the two vertical silhouettes of the woman, left and right, throws the eye of the visitor to the top of the painting where we can see, represented in *chador* and the face covered with a white veil, Fatemeh, mother of the Imam Hoseyn, an important symbol of martyrdom in the tradition of the twelve Imams revered by many Shiites.

The pain of the mothers who lost their sons during the Iran–Iraq war is evident (from the second panel) and immediately glorified by the identification with a Saint, Fatemeh. The artist emphasizes the suffering of these women who nobly accept their sons' sacrifice. Death affects them too. In the foreground, the character of the mother is portrayed with her eyes closed and an inexpressive face, as if she had joined her son, their two bodies outlining the symbol of infinity, united for eternity.

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Figure 5 Nasser Palangi's mural, second panel, Khoramshahr's mosque, 2007. (Photo © Alice Bombardier; color figure available online)

The third panel [Figure 6], in the center of the mural, is the closest to the experience of Nasser Palangi, who witnessed the first two years of this war. The artist pays tribute to Khoramshahr and the people who resisted until death. In the foreground, a soldier is spread-eagled. He seems to be preparing himself to die quietly, the Koran placed in front of him, closed. On his arm is written in Arabic:[6] *heyhat men al-zelah*, ''Mediocrity spare us forever!,'' which was an exclamation commonly used in Iran during the war. The eye of the soldier, even though turned towards the visitor in front of him, has the fixity of an inner gaze. The man lying down is surrounded by three small squads of fighters from Khoramshahr. On the right one of the fighters is brandishing a submachine gun and is pointing his weapon at a setting, which, on both sides of the face of the Ayatollah Khomeini, appears as tiny in the background; with the Khoramshahr Mosque on the right and damaged trunks of date palms on the left.

The mosque is self-referential, for the artist represents in his painting the monument that houses his work. The field of date palms is another characteristic feature of the region of Khoramshahr. It probably refers to the locality called Arvand Kenar. It is, in the mural, the only negative reference to the war and its ravages. In his testimony on the destruction of Khoramshahr, Nasser Palangi stresses the courage, exaltation and spirit of sacrifice shown by the fighters of this

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Figure 6 Nasser Palangi's mural, third panel, Khoramshahr's mosque, 2007. (Photo © Alice Bombardier; color figure available online)

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border town. Finally, on the top the Ayatollah Khomeini is represented as a Saint in the process of praying, his hands joined before his face. The ultimate tribute made by the painter in the third painting is for the sanctified leader of the revolution.

According to the title, the martyr Mohammad Jahanara (1954–1981) is the hero of the fourth panel [Figure 7]. He was a Major till his death in 1981 during an attack by the enemy's aircraft, at the head of the Revolutionary Guardians in Khoramshahr. However, the panel is no longer set precisely in Khoramshahr. A group of five soldiers led, it seems, by Maj. Mohammad Jahanara, commemorate the Imam Hoseyn, who died as a martyr in Karbala in 680 CE. The miniature scenes on top of this group represent the cyclical chain of martyrs' fates: on the right, the soldiers arrive by train at the front, and on the left a dead soldier is carried by his companions. The corpse seems to have attained the status of a martyr because he is shown higher in the light and communing with the Imam Hoseyn at the top of the panel. The direction in which one reads this panel is ascending towards greater holiness. Thus the veiled figure of the Imam Hoseyn overlooks the prostrating martyr, who himself overlooks the fifth soldier headed by the fighter Jahanara. The heads of the four other soldiers converge on this ''axis of holiness.'' The commemoration of the Imam Hoseyn's martyrdom is

Figure 7 Naser Palangi's mural, fourth panel, Khoramshahr's mosque, 2007. (Photo © Alice Bombardier; color figure available online)

famously ritualized during the month of Moharram, with processions that culminate in the day of Ashura. The worshipers of these processions hit their chest, as in this panel, or strike their backs with chains.

The fifth and last painting [Figure 8] seems to represent the culmination of this ritual: a long line of dead men rising to a source of light, God. *Ya Hoseyn, shahid*, ''In the name of Hoseyn, martyr,'' is inscribed in Persian on the armband of the soldier in the foreground. This fighter could be about to step in the direction of this chain of martyrs, of whom he is the first link. With the Koran and a submachine gun in his hands, he looks straight ahead with the same self-reflective fixity as the soldier from the third painting.

The titles that have been placed near the works have an educational tone. Those of the third and fourth panels are built from the expression ''at the school of,'' which explicitly makes the work a source of teaching. It can be assumed that these terms were chosen in part by the city of Khoramshahr. The artist presents his paintings in a more thematic way. By Worshipers' Dance (*sama-ye asheqan*, the title he gave to the fourth panel), he means a Sufi dance, where the worshipers turn on themselves and beat their breasts quickly. This explains the intense impression of movement generated by the six characters in the foreground.

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Figure 8 Nasser Palangi's mural, fifth panel, Khoramshahr's mosque, 2007. (Photo © Alice Bombardier; color figure available online)

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The figure of the soldier who has died a martyr or is waiting for death is the main character in the five paintings of this mural. He represents, as the painter says, the ''symbol,'' which appears on a large scale in shades of green and immediately catches the viewer's attention. A symbol is by definition ''an imaginary object or fact, which evokes, by its form or nature, a natural association of ideas in a particular social group, with something abstract or absent'' [Robert 1967: 1729, trans.].

What is the analogical correspondence meant by Nasser Palangi when he painted the character of the soldier–martyr in the five panels? The artist seems to associate this character with a hero, whose life embodies a model, and with a religious figure who inspires veneration. In the Iranian war painting, the character of the martyr–soldier represents at first sight the soldier who died on the battlefield to defend his country. When one looks again, however, he seems to be someone who defends the power of his religious faith. That is the basic meaning of *symbol*, ''sign of faith,'' in Latin. The martyr–soldier becomes the symbol of such a faith and the painless sacrifice of his life leads to his immediate sanctification.

Through war Nasser Palangi's mural praises religious faith. War is portrayed in a special way: death in front of the enemy, like Crusades, is only meaningful as

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an act of faith.[7] The Iraqi enemy is completely absent from the work. It would seem that the fight is only to put one's faith to the test.

If the Iraqi enemy is ignored, the reality of the front, the devastation and suffering, are also ignored. The war, which seems to be the framework of four out of five of the paintings, is actually represented in an indirect manner: in a metonymic way, through the submachine gun, bullets, uniform and, in panel No. 1, trenches. The reality of the battles is totally eclipsed. On the one hand, we face a war aestheticized by the force of spirituality, of which war is the new generator. On the other hand, we face a war veiled in its horror. There is neither fear nor pain, and destruction is only suggested in the distance of the central panel by the representation of mutilated palm trunks. Death itself looks like merely entering into sleep. We notice that the painter does not depict the legs of the character–symbols, but only their busts; the soil does not exist. The bodies that appear in their entirety are solely those of the dead, martyrs. However, these bodies are obscured by a shroud, wrapped like cocoons ready to transform into pupae. The sacrifice of life is denied for the benefit of another life. The death instinct merges with the drive for life; with the desire for a *sacred* life. Death is identified with a spiritual flight and rebirth in the afterlife, the ''real life.'' This death is individual in the first three panels. In the last two it is collective and transfigured; i.e., radiating a heroic and glorious shine.

That an artist, a witness of fighting, conveys in his work such an idealized vision of war is partly explained by the context of the war that he experienced, even though not as a soldier. Nasser Palangi did these five paintings in the euphoria of victory, after the liberation on May 24, 1982 of the border town of Khoramshahr. He painted when the Islamic regime was affirming its pugnacity and enjoining the Iranians to continue the war, despite this victory [Hourcade 2002: 119].[8]

Farhad Khosrokhavar describes the system of ideas that prevailed in Iran in this post-revolutionary era marked by war as ''deadly Islamism.'' In his view this system of ideas has the distinctive feature of interlinking death, religion and politics in an original way. Death, omnipresent, is described by him as ''martyropathic,'' because it escapes from the traditional view of the afterlife, the earlier belief in Iranian society. Indeed, Farhad Khosrokhavar notes that suffering and passivity give way to activism and self-perception as a subject, the expressed wish being to accept one's death as an individualized character emancipated from his community. This death reunifies the religious and political fields, which were separated before the revolution under Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979).

One also notices that Shiism gives way to a new religion which Khosrokhavar calls ''shiiste,'' ''a form of religiosity characterized by a new identity among young people who break with the traditional Shiism in asserting themselves as political and religious actors'' [Khosrokhavar 1995: 26]. Consequently, young people even imitate in act, not only from a ritual point of view, the Imam Hoseyn, martyred in Karbala. This sacred death of the Imam symbolizes for the Iranians the refusal of injustice by death.

In addition, it appears that the wave of martyrdom of young people has also been linked to the emergence of a new form of mysticism: the ''shiiste'' martyr

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expresses a feeling of following the same path as the mystical to the ''dissolution in God.'' However, in Sufism the concept of ''dissolution in God'' means ascension to God and the loss of individual identity by mystical enlightenment, not death in God.

Nasser Palangi does not refute having sympathized with what he calls ''the ideals'' of this period.[9] As an artist who was a witness to the fights at Khoramshahr and involved in them, he was ''worked out'' by the war and bore it from the patriotic and religious values of Iran in 1982. His painting *of* war glorifies death and sacrifice in reference to nationalism and Shiite religion. In 2008, at a conference on the images of war in Iran and Afghanistan,[10] he said that whatever the artistic styles they require three different perspectives: propagandist, artistic and pacifist.

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DIX'S *WAR*

To deepen the understanding of Palangi's polyptych, it is interesting to draw a parallel with a wood triptych, entitled *War*, that was composed during 1929–1932—ten years after the Great War—by Otto Dix (1891–1969), considered as one of the most important masterpieces that the First World War inspired in Europe.[11]

The 1920s in Germany were marked by hyperinflation and economic instability. Its artists had a pessimistic view of their time. At first, Otto Dix took part in the artistic movement known as Expressionism. This movement highlighted the subjectivity of the artists, distorting reality to achieve the highest expressive intensity. In response after the war Otto Dix founded the movement, New Objectivity. The work *War* is based in this new artistic movement, which developed an uncompromising realism [Karcher 1989].

Having volunteered to fight at the age of twenty-two, Otto Dix is distinguished from Nasser Palangi by the extreme denunciation of violence in his painting, which directly reflects his horrific vision of the trenches. In his work he does not hold back in representing the destruction and carnage generated by war. He accuses, grossly exaggerating rather than depreciating, the annihilation of humanity by itself. While Nasser Palangi has brought to his work an atmosphere of consolation, transfiguring death, Otto Dix has imagined a more provocative painting, bluntly exhibiting war in all its abomination.

The triptych of the German painter describes three moments of a day spent on the front. On the left, in the first panel, the soldiers are divided into two military columns, one represented from behind, the other face on, and are shown advancing into the morning mist under a threatening sky. Their bodies or their legs (as well as the soldiers painted by Nasser Palangi) are hidden by a mist, which is very thick in places. The artist stresses the disproportionate burden that weighs on the shoulders of these men: they disappear under heavy and multiple packages and carry bayonets of inordinate length, like an extremely sharp metal gate. These columns of men walk towards their destiny, as suggested by the wheel and the upward movement, to a leaden and glowing sky.

The center of the triptych has two parts: a central square and its lower part, the predella (a platform for an altar). The central square describes the result of the

carnage in its climax after the fighting: near an upside-down shelter, in a destroyed area, the sole survivor of these clashes can only breathe with the aid of a gas mask. Corpses piled up to right and left in a disemboweled trench decompose, while a skeleton is seen at the top, hanging from scrap metal, pointing at the massacre. Only the bodies of dead soldiers are detailed. A pair of legs pointing skyward stands out clearly on the right, while the head and arm of a corpse disappear into the mud. Otto Dix renders details of worms and gangrene, purulent wounds of the rotting flesh of both legs. In the background the houses are broken and nature, including trees, destroyed.

The predella, the lower part of an altar triptych, shows, as in Nasser Palangi's painting, a line of dead men, but in darkness. They are lying down side by side, as though buried, under a blood-red cloth, and are enclosed by planks.

In the right panel a man, the figure of the painter, rescues an injured person at night, moving himself between a burned tree and a dead man covered with a gas mask. The light of the moon gives them a ghostly appearance, but in the distance the sky is still ablaze. The unleashing of explosions and destruction has not yet ceased. The blood continues to flow. However, we note that a positive touch is introduced in the last part of the triptych: Otto Dix puts the emphasis on human solidarity.

Unlike Palangi, Dix expresses his aversion to war, showing insistently and thoroughly victims, not heroes. The German artist refrains in his testimony from any political reference. War is sufficient in itself; it feeds on human blood and refers to the Apocalypse.

However, war has definitely marked the awareness of the two artists. Both were motivated by the same desire to testify. The similarity of some patterns brings the two paintings closer together, as in this exceptional file of the slain represented in the fifth panel in Nasser Palangi's work and in the predella, under the central panel, by Otto Dix. There is also the pattern of shredded trees that haunts the backgrounds of the two compositions vertically (panel No. 3 by Nasser Palangi). The tree is often seen as a generational symbol. Humans, like leaves, disappear to give way in the life-cycle to new generations. A shredded tree breaks the trans-generational balance. It refers to the sacrifice of a generation wounded by the bullets.

The two artists have also both opted for a narrative figuration. A polyptych tells everyone a story. Otto Dix punctuates his work with the life of a soldier and tries to capture the daily cycle of attacks, this continuous cycle of death and desolation in a static atmosphere. In the polyptych of Nasser Palangi, on the contrary, the movement is at the forefront: propulsive movement of people without legs, curved movements of the brush, which assembles the different parts of the same panel by long arabesques and animates the draped clothes (especially the *chador* [Painting No. 2] and dresses [No. 4]), which seem to bend in the intense unrest of the protagonists. However, the overall composition of this painting—the correlation of episodes, fragmented or continuous, the dramatic sequence—reinvents narration in Iranian painting.

There already existed in Iran since the 19th century a pictorial movement called ''coffee-house painting'' (*Naqqashi-e qahvehkhaneh*), a real ''art of storytelling.'' This popular style of painting illustrates episodes from the main Iranian mythical epics, or tells religious stories in pictures, showing in particular the

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Battle of Karbala where Imam Hoseyn and his companions died in 680, or depicting scenes from everyday life. Storytellers, who mostly remained anonymous, liked to illustrate their stories with these works [Pakbaz 1999: 576].

In Nasser Palangi's mural, the narrative movement is complex: it follows routes that are linear, circular and vertical. The progression is not evident in the five panels because from the second panel the soldier represents death. Each panel changes its register and shows a different facet of the war. However, their sequence is not totally devoid of a guiding principle. The death of the soldier in the second painting can be understood as the logical outcome of the first, where the martyr prays in the trenches. The same escalation in death, now collective, is identifiable between the fourth painting, representing the soldiers communicating in a religious dance, and the fifth, with the row of dead men.

In the section called by the painter ''spiritual or abstract entities,'' the linear progression is clearer: the Islamic flag gives way to three holy figures and leads to the divine essence. In five enclaves, the artist has made five partitioned portraits, but he has also juxtaposed several small temporal plans in the same composition. These flashbacks are anecdotes highlighting the central story and throwing light on the mindset of the characters. Finally, in the last panel, the artist has resorted to a form of ''progressive figuration'' [Gassiot-Talabot 1965: 5–40],[12] by the metamorphosis of soldiers into martyrs' corpses, whose line-up of bodies is explicitly directed towards the sky. From this, pictorial narration becomes a persuasive force.

WAR PAINTING AND PILGRIMAGE

Thirty years after its creation, the mural of Nasser Palangi still captures the attention of many visitors. At the Iranian New Year they come in crowds to Khoramshahr to pray at the mosque and meditate before this painting,[13] which has in itself become the incentive for a pilgrimage.

How could we understand the force of attraction this work exerts? First, it is a mural painting: the choice of this style includes the artist's intention to communicate with a wide audience. It can be seen from Figure 1 (the plan of Khoramshahr's mosque) that the work is visible to all from the entrance: men and women have equal access before being separated by a curtain in the prayer room. It also testifies to Iranian resistance and evokes the memory of missing soldiers, making this locality a place of commemoration. Moreover, the painting is signed by an artist who was there, physically engaged alongside Khoramshahr's resistance fighters. In addition, the evocative power of the composition, which resorts to an art of storytelling—by definition a popular means of expression—touches the visitors more effectively. This art of storytelling allows an extended representation and the best identification possible for the visitor with this representation. Last but not least, the mosque, the place of the epiphany, concentrates and increases the religious emotion.

After one enters the mosque, the first part of the mural appears immediately and grabs the attention. A visitor starts to walk in front of the five panels and tries to follow the inner journey of the martyr, which culminates in the light, in the dissolution in God. According to Christian faith, this course is parallel to the Way of

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the Cross. Nasser Palangi himself said he had been inspired by the iconography of Christian churches.[14] He might have staged, whether consciously or not, a form of ''the Passion of the Shiite martyr.'' In addition, the painting, which fixes the sacral load, is here—against all odds in a Muslim place of prayer—anthropomorphic. This is like the Christian cult of Saints' images. The human presence on a large scale, of the martyr–soldier, who twice stares at the visitor, encourages the inner meditation of the pilgrim and his identification with the character.[15] The pilgrim cries or prays, and custom often immortalizes this emotion, both aesthetically and religiously, with the pilgrim having himself photographed in front of the work.[16]

If this war painting moves a big part of the Iranian population, it is because there is a convergence between what Nasser Palangi has painted and what preoccupies the collective consciousness. This convergence between the work of the artist and its audience exists on two levels: the evolution of Iranian painting itself and the feelings that this mural conveys.

Indeed, the fundamental fact is that war painting persists today in Iran even after fighting has ended. Consequently this artistic trend has to be considered as a step in Iran's art history. As the movement of Narrative Figuration or New Figuration gave a new impetus in the 1960s to French painting [Ameline and Ajac 2008: 3],[17] so too the rejection of abstract art in Iran, at the time of the revolution, revealed the serious crisis that shook Iranian painting. Regarded as inauthentic in its most modern forms, it was misunderstood by the majority. The war could have provided Iranian art an opportunity to re-anchor within the scope of present life. In wartime the artist has drawn from an old folk tradition of narrative figuration and—an event that merits emphasis—brought contemporary art into a mosque.

On another level, paradoxically, we have seen that Nasser Palangi's mural omits expressing the war directly, in contrast to Otto Dix. War activity is suggested and staged by multiple symbols, the final outcome of which, as in Dix's work, is the sacred. The sacred is understood by everyone from his own culture. Nasser Palangi adds a politico-religious dimension to his work, bringing the warrior closer to his God by faith, even to the point of sacrificing his life. The triptych structure, like an altar painting, allows the European artist, Otto Dix, to replace the Crucifixion in Christian iconography, ironically, with the slaughter of the First World War. Passion is secularized: there is no hope of resurrection, only the naked and brutal fact of death. However, the complete analysis of Otto Dix's triptych, in reference to the fundamentals of Western culture, is the subject of another work. We will notice only that Nasser Palangi, along with Otto Dix, outlines a parallelism between the Passion of Christ and the Martyrdom of the Imam Hoseyn in Karbala to express, in support of an intercultural reference, the immensity of pain.

In most wars there have been artists accompanying armies and facing the same risks as soldiers [Jonas 1917]. Today, of course, we smile at the idea of a ''war painter.'' To be a photographer or a cine-operator would appear less anachronistic. With modern warfare, military painters seem to have become inadequate. Are the photographer and the cinematographer sufficient to document History? Does not war painting complete cinematography and photography in featuring war in a specific way? The mural of the Khoramshahr mosque interrogates the enigma that war and evil are for humanity: the painting replaces this enigma

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in its relationship to real, imaginary and symbolic levels as they were articulated at that time in Iranian culture. That is the specificity of war painting: no other technique is so combinatorial, integrating the real, the image and the symbol with each another. Painting transposes the real, moves space forward and reflects a vision of the world.

NOTES

1. Khoramshahr is a port city in the Iranian province of Khuzestan. It lies some 10 km. north of Abadan, on the Iranian side of the border with Iraq. The city stands on the east bank of the Arvand river, at its confluence with the Karun river (the river in Cooper and Schoedsack's film *Grass*).
2. *Markaz-e farhangi-e defa-e moqadas-e Khoramshahr*, i.e., ''Cultural Center of Khoramshahr Sacred Defense.''
3. According to Nasser Palangi, interviewed on April 19, 2008, in Tehran.
4. Information collected on the commemorative board placed at the entrance of Jame mosque in Khoramshahr.
5. According to the painter, during an interview on April 19, 2008, in Tehran.
6. Arabic is widely spoken in Khoramshahr and is the dominant language in Khuzestan. This region, bordering Iraq, is home to a large part of the Arab minority in Iran.
7. However, the Iran–Iraq war mainly resulted from a territorial dispute and the Iraqi enemy, certainly led by a Sunni minority, was Muslim, and even in its majority Shiite.
8. After the liberation of Khoramshahr on May 24, 1982, Iraq was ready to capitulate. Then Saudi Arabia proposed to pay Iran more than $100 billion in war reparation. But the Islamic Republic asked that Saddam Hussein and his regime should be morally condemned for the attack by the United Nations and the international community. In violation of its own rules, the United Nations refused, considering that Iran had gone against the international laws by holding U.S. diplomats hostage. Thus the war was prolonged for six long years [Hourcade 2002: 119].
9. According to the painter in an interview, April 19, 2008, in Tehran.
10. Conference held by Agnès Devictor and Camille Perréand, ''Iran-Iraq War, War in Afghanistan: what kind of images?,'' French Institute of Iranian Research (IFRI), Tehran, 16 April 2008.
11. It is visible at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQiKQvKNidQ]. The original is a triptych, of mixed media on wood, 264 × 408 cm. It hangs in the Gemäldegalerie, Neue Meister Museum, Dresden.
12. The new ways of storytelling in the painting were categorized in 1965 by Gérald Gassiot-Talabot. He was a theorist of the pictorial movement of New Figuration or Narrative Figuration, which dawned in France in 1964 during a pivotal period—when abstraction seemed to be running out of steam—in the exhibition ''Daily mythologies.'' Gassiot-Talabot distinguishes four types of narration: ''The anecdotal narration,'' with a continuous style or with successive scenes; ''the progressive figuration,'' which stages mutation or metamorphosis of characters or objects, indicating movement and leadership; ''the narration by juxtaposition of temporal plans'' in the same composition; and finally, ''the narration by portraits or fragmented scenes,'' a variant of which is the polyptych. It turns out that Nasser Palangi has combined these four modes in an original manner [Gassiot-Talabot 1965: 5–40].
13. The battle of the ''Liberation of Khoramshahr'' is seen as a turning-point in the Iran–Iraq war: it is officially celebrated every year in Iran.

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14. According to the painter, interviewed on April 19, 2008, in Tehran.
15. The line of the martyr's face and eyes should also be noticed in this work of Nasser Palangi. In general the war murals in Iran put forward faceless martyrs or else realistic portraits painted from soldiers' photos.
16. Whoever goes to the mosque sees these photos taken with a smile, with family, in front of the mural (according to a survey conducted in Khoramshahr in August 2007).
17. In July 1964 in France, a group of young painters tried to find a new path and turned to figuration. Among them, Bernard Rancillac, Hervé Télémaque and Eduardo Arroyo, with whom the movement of New Figuration or Narrative Figuration originated. ''They had a common desire to reinvent painting, incorporating the images that had transformed the pictorial universe of the 1960s: cartoon, film, photography . . . In that sense, the narrative figuration accompanied social, political and economic upheavals of this period. It also participated in raising the question of the role of the artist in society'' [Ameline and Ajac 2008: 3].

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