

Representation of Identity in Contemporary Afghan Painting Based on the Outward-Oriented Evaluative Criticism Model Derived from the Philosophy of Şadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī

Reza Rafiei Rad ¹✉^{id}, Mehdi Mohammadzadeh ²^{id},

Parisa Shad Qazvini ³^{id}

1. Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Painting, Faculty of Art, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.

2. Professor, Faculty of Fine Arts, Atatürk University, Erzurum, Türkiye.

3. Associate Professor, Department of Painting, Faculty of Art, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.

Abstract: Afghanistan's artistic heritage is deeply rooted in the Gandhara, Mathura, and Herat schools of art. In the modern era, however, the Amanullah reforms, the establishment of formal art institutions, and the widespread adoption of Western artistic education fundamentally reshaped the country's visual culture, giving rise to complex questions of cultural identity. These challenges were further intensified by Afghanistan's ethnic diversity, sectarian tensions, and ethnocentric political dynamics, all of which hindered the formation of a cohesive national identity. Nevertheless, issues of identity remain a prominent feature of contemporary Afghan painting. This study investigates the ways in which identity has been represented in contemporary Afghan painting through a descriptive-analytical approach employing a four-stage model of outward-oriented evaluative criticism derived from the philosophical framework of Şadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (Mullā Şadrā). The corpus comprises paintings produced between the Second Amanullah Reform period and the end of Hamid Karzai's presidency, from which works by twenty-six artists were purposively selected. The findings indicate that archaeological conventions, the emergence of the artistic tendency known as Between Realism and Miniature Painting, the contributions of Shahrani and Baktash Arefi, and the establishment of the miniature painting program by the students of Saeed Mashal constituted the principal forces shaping the representation of identity in contemporary Afghan painting. In particular, Saeed Mashal's students at Herat University played a pivotal role in reviving and reinterpreting Afghanistan's visual heritage. The analysis further demonstrates that Afghan identity has been articulated through sixteen artistic approaches grouped into five principal strategies: integrating miniature painting techniques into contemporary painting, modernizing miniature painting, synthesizing miniature and Western painting traditions, incorporating Western artistic principles into miniature painting, and adopting imitative approaches. Despite these developments, the aspiration to establish a distinct national contemporary painting of Afghanistan has remained unrealized owing to theoretical ambiguities, the sociopolitical transformations of the Karzai era, and challenges to the patriarchal identity embedded in the Timurid miniature tradition.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

Afghanistan, historically known as Ariana, possesses a long and distinguished tradition of painting, encompassing mural painting, miniature painting, and other pictorial forms. In the modern period, Afghan artists have likewise produced remarkable works that have received far less scholarly

attention than they deserve. Between the country's independence in 1919 and the establishment of Hamid Karzai's administration in 2001, Afghanistan experienced thirteen successive changes of government, largely as a consequence of political instability, the Soviet invasion, civil conflict, and related upheavals. During the same period, the national flag was changed nineteen times. Moreover, as a multi-ethnic society, Afghanistan has long faced challenges arising from ethnic divisions, sectarian conflicts, and ethnocentrism, all of which have complicated the formation of a cohesive national identity. These political and social transformations profoundly influenced the development of contemporary Afghan painting.

Archaeological and historical evidence demonstrates that the inhabitants of ancient Afghanistan possessed highly developed traditions of sculpture and painting as early as the first and second centuries CE. Numerous mural paintings have been discovered in the caves of Bamiyan ([Bereshna, 1954: 15–19](#); [Rahimi, 2010: 5](#); [Shahrani, 1971: 13](#)), while the artistic achievements of the Gandhara and Mathura schools constitute some of the region's most significant visual legacies. Following the advent of Islam, Herat flourished under the patronage of Sultan Husayn Bayqara and Amir Ali Shir Nava'i, emerging as a major center of artistic and literary activity. The celebrated Herat School subsequently became the nucleus of the Timurid Renaissance ([Khvandamir, 2001, Vol. 1: 3–4](#); [Mardanov, 2008: 47](#); [Habibi, n.d.: 558](#)). Although the tradition of miniature painting subsequently experienced periods of both prosperity and decline, it remained an enduring component of Afghanistan's artistic heritage until the Amanullah reforms.

The reign of King Amanullah marked a decisive turning point in Afghan art. Influenced by encounters with Western modernism, the government established the country's first schools of arts and crafts, institutions of fine arts, and teacher-training colleges, where artists such as Ghulam Mohammad Maimangi and Abdul Ghafur Breshna, together with foreign instructors, introduced modern artistic education under newly formulated regulations. Later, during the presidency of Mohammad Daoud Khan, the Faculty of Fine Arts was founded at Kabul University. However, decades of conflict, including the Soviet–Afghan War and the subsequent civil war, not only devastated Afghanistan's political, social, and cultural institutions but also inflicted irreparable damage on its cultural heritage. Archaeological sites suffered extensive destruction, including the deliberate demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the destruction of sculptures housed in the National Museum of Afghanistan, and severe damage to the unique Ragh-i Bibi rock relief. Following the civil war, art education was entirely removed from universities and schools ([Rafiei Rad & Amirpour, 2021: 30](#); [Omarzad, 2018: 15](#); [Simpson, 2011: 98](#)). It was only during the Karzai administration that opportunities for the revival and development of artistic practice gradually re-emerged.

Against this historical background, three dominant artistic orientations can be identified in the history of contemporary Afghan painting: adherence to traditional artistic practices, the adoption of Western modern art, and the complete rejection of artistic production under particular political regimes. Despite these contrasting approaches, many contemporary Afghan painters, particularly graduates of the Faculties of Fine Arts at Kabul and Herat Universities, drew upon the country's rich visual heritage, including the traditions of miniature painting and the Gandhara and Mathura schools, to develop artistic strategies aimed at preserving and expressing Afghan cultural identity.

Accordingly, this study examines and analyzes contemporary Afghan painting with particular emphasis on visual elements rooted in the country's cultural heritage, artistic traditions, and indigenous aesthetic practices. It addresses the following research question: How has Afghan identity been represented in contemporary painting?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on the Analysis and Development of Contemporary Afghan Painting

Some studies have examined the historical development and characteristics of contemporary Afghan painting. Among the most notable are *The School of Fine Arts of Afghanistan* by Abdul Ghafur Breshna, *Art and Fine Arts in Afghanistan* by Mohammad Akbar Salam and Aziza

Khoshnasib, and *The Art of Painting and Its Historical Development in Afghanistan* by Fataneh Baktash Arefi. In addition, Reza Rafiei Rad's doctoral dissertation, *Discursive Analysis of Contemporary Afghan Painting*, and Navid al-Haq Fazli's doctoral dissertation, *The Transformation of Contemporary Afghan Painting from the Beginning of Modernism to the Present*, have made significant contributions to the field. Masoumeh Mirzaei's master's thesis, *The Contexts for the Emergence of the Third Phase, or the Contemporary Herat School of Miniature Painting*, completed at Alzahra University, examines the historical development of miniature painting while analyzing the works of five Herat artists and the characteristics of contemporary Afghan miniature painting (Mirzaei, 2019: 165).

Relevant journal articles include Abdul Wasi Rahrow Omarzad's *Afghan Art in the Last Century*, published in *Fine Arts* in 2018, and *The Function of the Human Figure in Two Decades of Afghan Painting* by Reza Rafiei Rad and colleagues, published in the same journal in 2017. These studies provide concise historical periodizations of Afghan painting, classifying its development either into four periods: pre-Islamic, post-Islamic, the Realist period, and the post-civil war era (Rafiei Rad and Tomirys, 2017: 19-20), or alternatively into the pre-Islamic period, the First Golden Age (the Herat School), the Second Golden Age (the Amanullah period), and the Modernist era (the last two decades) (Omarzad, 2018: 16). Both classifications are primarily based on stylistic criteria. Other scholars have divided the artistic history of Afghanistan into three major phases: the Greco-Bactrian period, the medieval period, and the Timurid period centered in Herat (Pugachenkova, 1978: 7-9).

2.2. Studies on Contemporary Afghan Painters and Their Works

Several publications have focused primarily on introducing contemporary Afghan painters and documenting their artistic production. Among these is Shahrani's book *Honar pa Afghanistan ke*, published in Pakistan. Likewise, Abdul Qadir Sarwary's article, *A Study of the Art of Painting in Kabul*, introduces several contemporary painters, with particular emphasis on Kabul-based artists and their works (Sarwary, 2020: 18). Azita Ebrahimi's master's thesis, *A Comparative Study of Two Artists from Two Lands: Ghulam Mohammad Maimangi of Afghanistan and Kamal al-Molk of Iran*, compares the formal and thematic characteristics of the two painters following an examination of their biographies (Ebrahimi, 2018: 125-130).

Further contributions include *Strategies of Afghan Women Painters in Recreating and Reviving the Visual Heritage of Miniature Painting in Contemporary Afghan Painting* by Reza Rafiei Rad and Mehdi Mohammadzadeh, published in *Greater Khorasan Research Journal* in 2019. This study explores the increasing participation of women artists and the emergence of distinctive feminine aesthetic approaches through diverse artistic strategies (Rafiei Rad & Mohammadzadeh, 2019: 16). The same authors also published *A Comparative Study of the Application of Miniature Painting Traditions in the Works of Contemporary Women Painters in Iran and Afghanistan* in the *Graphic Design and Painting Research Journal* in 2020. In addition to providing a concise overview of Afghan painting, the article introduces several contemporary Afghan women painters and offers formal and thematic analyses of their works (Rafiei Rad & Mohammadzadeh, 2020: 104-105).

Another important contribution is *A Thematic Analysis of Contemporary Afghan Painting* by Reza Rafiei Rad, Mehdi Mohammadzadeh, and Mohammad Reza Moridi, published in *Rahpouyeh Honar*. Employing thematic analysis, the study introduces a number of contemporary Afghan painters and examines the dominant themes represented in their works (Rafiei Rad et al., 2023: 65-66). More recently, *Painting Criticism Based on the Outward-Oriented Evaluative Criticism Model Derived from the Philosophy of Şadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī: A Case Study of Abdul Ghafur Breshna's Coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani*, published in *Sistan and Baluchestan Studies* in 2026, applies this evaluative framework to the analysis of a single painting by Abdul Ghafur Breshna (Rafiei Rad and Shad Qazvini, 2026: 21-33).

Collectively, these studies have contributed substantially to documenting the history of Afghan painting and introducing its artists through biographical, stylistic, and discursive perspectives.

Nevertheless, no comprehensive study has systematically examined the representation of identity in contemporary Afghan painting through a rigorous analytical methodology. The present research seeks to address this gap in the existing scholarship.

3. Research Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on documentary, archival, and library sources. To address the research question and achieve the study's objectives, the analysis employs a painting criticism model designed specifically for the evaluation of works of art. The model comprises four sequential stages, each involving a distinct level of analysis.

Derived from Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical methodology, the outward-oriented evaluative criticism model begins with an examination of general metaphysical principles, including essence, essential and accidental universals, and incomplete causes (Table 1). The second stage, corresponding to Mullā Ṣadrā's second philosophical journey concerning the natural sciences, investigates the Aristotelian categories, namely quantity, quality, position, place, time, possession, action, and affection (Table 2). The third stage synthesizes the findings of the preceding analyses to generate knowledge through the existential realization of essence, ultimately identifying the work's unifying hypothesis and ultimate purpose. Finally, the fourth stage evaluates the artwork through three complementary dimensions of disclosure: the structural dimension, the historical and contextual dimension, including the artwork's position within its artistic, institutional, and cultural context, and the dimension of artistic intention. Through this process, the model reveals the value embedded within the artwork, thereby minimizing the gap between its perceived value and its intrinsic artistic value.

In the third stage of the criticism model, drawing upon Mullā Ṣadrā's theory of knowledge and perception as articulated in the Third Intellectual Journey, the focus shifts to the generation and ontological realization of the essence of things, wherein the existence of mental forms in relation to the soul is understood as emanational subsistence (*qiyām ṣudūri*). At this stage, the analysis is concerned with the attributes of Ultimate Reality and seeks to apprehend the world as it truly is, rather than as it merely appears through sensory perception.

Just as the mystic perceives the multiplicity of the world, with all its harmonies, contradictions, and tensions, as an expression of a unified reality, the criticism model likewise undertakes a critical analysis of how the constituent elements of an artwork function collectively toward the realization of its ultimate purpose. Building upon the findings of the first and second stages, which serve as the preparatory causes (*al-ʿilal al-muʿiddah*), this stage examines the interplay among the work's visual, formal, and conceptual components, including their harmonies, contrasts, and chromatic and formal tensions, in relation to the artwork's overarching aim. The analysis determines whether the constituent elements are coherently aligned with the realization of the work's ultimate purpose and identifies any prominent features that are incompatible with, or unrelated to, its final objective (Table 3). Figure 1 presents an overview of the outward-oriented evaluative criticism model, illustrating the sequential stages through which the analytical framework was developed.

The study population comprised works of contemporary Afghan painting produced between approximately 1923 and the end of Hamid Karzai's presidency in 2014. A nonrandom sampling strategy was employed, using purposive sampling to select the works of twenty-six artists. Specifically, the sample was drawn from painters of this period whose works exhibited the greatest concentration of identity-related characteristics and components. Additional selection criteria required that the artists be university-educated and have either a documented biography or published works in reputable scholarly or artistic publications, have been recognized in prestigious art festivals, or have participated in at least one solo or group exhibition.

Table 1. A Painting Criticism Framework Based on the Four Intellectual Journeys (al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah): Stage One.

The First Journey: General Metaphysical Concepts	Classification				Research Questions
	Essence	Universal	Essential Attribute	Species	To which category of art does this work belong—applied arts or fine arts? From the integration of which artistic disciplines have this work emerged? Within which major branch of the arts (e.g., visual arts, performing arts, auditory arts, or interdisciplinary arts) can it be classified? Among the various artistic forms, to which specific art form does this work belong?
				Genus	To which artistic style, movement, medium, or technique (e.g., mural painting, easel painting, body art, reverse glass painting, etc.) does this work belong?
				Differentia	What are the defining stylistic characteristics of this work? What are the conventional techniques of execution associated with this style? Into which artistic category, such as figurative, painterly, landscape, or other recognized classifications, can the work be placed?
			Accidental Attribute	Proprium (Specific Property)	Who is the artist of this painting? Under whose tutelage or artistic mentorship was the painter trained? Was the work commissioned or executed at the request of a particular institution, organization, or patron? Which individuals (e.g., apprentices, master craftsmen from other disciplines, or other contributing agents) participated in the execution of the painting?
	Incomplete Causes			Efficient Cause	What are the constituent materials and physical components of the work, including the types of pigments, support (e.g., canvas, wood), and other media employed? Did the artist adopt distinctive methods or innovative approaches in the selection and preparation of materials, or were conventional materials utilized? In terms of materials and techniques, what differences, innovations, or technical advancements distinguish this painting from comparable works produced within the same stylistic and technical tradition?
				Material Cause	What types of visual forms and motifs, including geometric shapes, objects, human figures, plants, animals, and other formal elements, are represented in the work? (The description in this section should be entirely objective and descriptive, avoiding any form of interpretation, symbolism, or hermeneutic analysis.) Does the work narrate a story? If so, what narrative does it depict? Is the work representational, formalist, expressionist, or of another artistic orientation? If representational, what is being represented? Which visual symbols are employed in the work, and what are their meanings? What social, political, and cultural conventions or codes are associated with particular visual forms depicted in the painting?
				Formal Cause	What motivated the artist to create this painting? Was the work completed without any particular artistic or conceptual intention? What motivations or objectives underlay the commissioning institution's decision to sponsor the production of this painting?

Table 2. Framework for the Critique of Painting Based on the Four Intellectual Journeys (al-Asfār al-Arba‘ah):
Stage Two.

The Second Journey: The Levels of Creation and Natural Philosophy	Classification		Research Questions
	Categories	Quantity	What are the dimensions of the painting? How many primary, secondary, and tertiary colors are employed in the work? How many human figures, objects, vegetal motifs, animal motifs, and other visual elements are depicted? How many geometric and organic forms are represented? What is the total number of pictorial planes? Into how many major surface divisions is the composition organized? How many focal points and vanishing points are present in the painting?
		Quality	How may the overall visual character of the work be classified (e.g., Constructivist, Expressionist, or another aesthetic orientation)? What are the chromatic qualities of the colors employed in terms of color saturation? What emotional responses might the dominance of particular colors evoke? What are the expressive qualities of the figures (e.g., exaggeration, curvature, the suggestion of strength or weakness, suffering or joy, movement or stillness, dance or rigidity, and other expressive states)? What are the conditions of the depicted objects (e.g., static, suspended, fractured, inverted, blurred, unstable, etc.)? What are the characteristics of the depicted setting, such as open or enclosed space, interior or exterior, imaginary space, flatness, absence of depth, spaciousness, confinement, brightness, darkness, and similar spatial qualities? What are the characteristics of light and its direction within the painting (e.g., artificial or unrealistic illumination, intense lighting with sharp shadows, omnidirectional (Omni) lighting, natural light, etc.)? What qualities do the line, or other significant visual elements, display (e.g., exaggerated, broken, fragmented, curved, Constructivist, Expressionist, etc.)?
		Position	Which types of color contrasts (e.g., contrast of extension, complementary contrast, light–dark contrast, saturation contrast, warm–cool contrast, simultaneous contrast, and hue contrast) are employed in the work? What formal contrasts are evident? How does the work perform with respect to visual qualities such as composition, rhythm, balance, equilibrium, proportion, and symmetry? In addition, issues such as the physical condition of the work, its conservation and restoration status, the conditions under which it is viewed (particularly in the case of murals), its installation or placement, and other comparable factors should also be subjected to careful examination.
		Place	Where is the work currently located? Which place or places does it represent? Where within the depicted scene are the constituent elements, such as figures, objects, and other visual entities, positioned? In which area or half of the composition are these elements situated? Where are the areas of light and shadow, clarity and obscurity, and similar visual phenomena located? In which part of the composition is the vanishing point situated? Toward which areas of the painting do the directions of lines, planes, forms, or visual forces guide the viewer's eye? To which geographical regions or localities do the depicted objects, figures, landscapes, and, more generally, the represented subjects belong? If the painting narrates a story or depicts customs, rituals, or related cultural content, to which geographical region or place do these narratives or traditions belong?
		Time	When was the painting created (year, century, historical period, etc.)? At the time of its execution, was the artist young, middle-aged, or elderly? Does the depicted scene represent a particular historical period or multiple temporal settings? What are the apparent ages of the depicted figures, the antiquity of the objects, and the stages of growth of the plants and animals? Are the objects represented as new, old, ancient, modern, or otherwise? What was the sequence in which the various components of the painting (visual elements, motifs, colors, etc.) were executed? The artist's earlier and later works should also be examined in order to assess their relationship to the work under investigation.
		Possession	What accompanying elements of the artwork, such as the frame, title, artist's statement, exhibition catalogue, and comparable materials, are associated with the work?
		Passion	All artistic, cultural, political, familial, discursive, legal, and other relevant contextual conditions that influenced the creation of the work should be identified and examined. Likewise, all conventions, symbols, and externally derived conceptual systems embodied in the work, insofar as they shape its meaning and interpretation, should be identified and critically analyzed.
		Action	What influence has the work exerted, both during its own period and subsequently, on painters, the history of art, artistic media, techniques, or other related aspects of artistic practice?

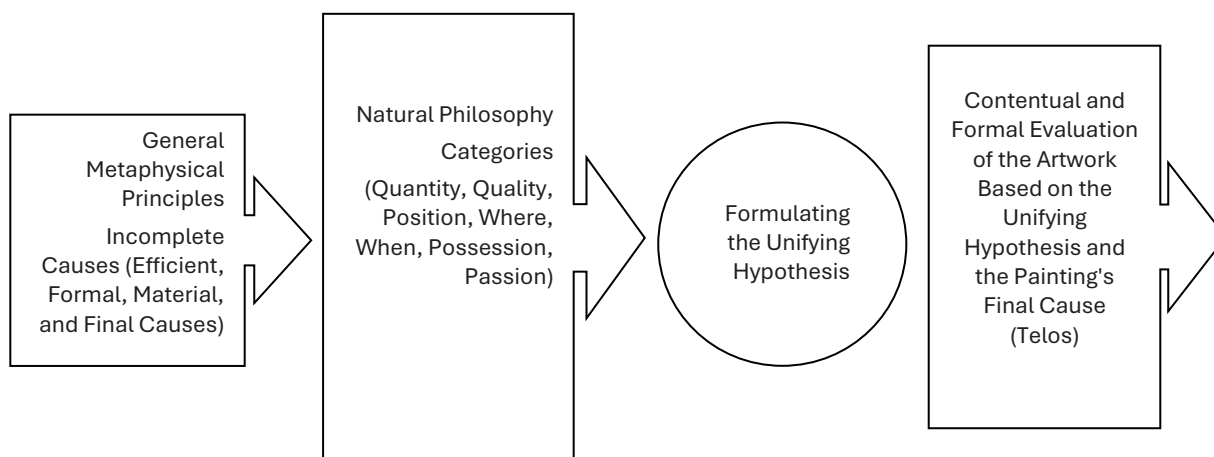


Figure 1. Schematic Representation of the Stages of the Outward-Oriented Evaluative Criticism Model Derived from Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī's Four Intellectual Journeys (al-Asfār al-Arbaʿa) (Rafiei Rad and Shad Qazvini, 2025: 62).

Table 3. Stages Three and Four of the Painting Critique Framework Based on the Third and Fourth Intellectual Journeys (al-Asfār al-Arbaʿah): Analytical aspects to be examined.

The Third Journey (Stage Three of the Critique Framework)	Consideration of the Findings from the Previous Stages as Preparatory Causes (al-ʿIlal al-Muʿiddah)	The Fourth Journey Beauty and Ugliness (Stage Four of the Critique Framework)	Resurrection and the Corporeal and Spiritual Afterlife
	Formulation of an Integrative Hypothesis (Unifying)		Judgment and Evaluation Based on the Degree of Correspondence between the Constituent Elements (e.g., Visual Qualities, the Functions of Visual Elements, etc.) and the Artwork's Telos and Integrative Hypothesis
	Discovery of the Telos (Final End) of the Artwork		
	The Death of the Artwork's Material Body and Its Rational Existence in Criticism through a New Body		

4. Contemporary Afghan Painting

Since the Amanullah reforms, Afghan artists have been more inclined to assimilate aesthetic principles derived from other artistic traditions, particularly those of the West, than to transcend the conditions of their own historical present. Their artistic practice has largely revolved around the continuation of miniature painting traditions or their synthesis with the principles of Western painting. In this sense, contemporaneity, understood as the necessity of change, the acceptance of modernity, and the recognition of the impossibility of returning to the past, constitutes the defining characteristic of contemporary Afghan painting, whose origins coincide with the Second Amanullah Reform period (Rafiei Rad, 2022a: 44-50); Accordingly, the temporal scope of the present study extends from the beginning of the Second Amanullah Reform Period to the end of the Karzai administration.

Within this conceptual framework, contemporaneity signifies not merely the acceptance of modernity but also an active engagement with its intellectual and cultural consequences. Such an understanding acknowledges that a return to the past is no longer possible. Instead, it requires the acceptance of artistic movements and intellectual paradigms that emerged beyond Afghanistan's geographical and cultural boundaries, even when these developments stand in tension with indigenous traditions, while simultaneously seeking strategies for negotiating their implications within the local cultural context.

5. Identity: Conceptual Definitions

Identity refers to the fundamental characteristics that distinguish an individual or a community from others. At the collective level, however, identity extends beyond individual distinctiveness to encompass the relationship between local identities and broader transnational identities. It also denotes the conscious process through which a nation responds to questions concerning its historical experience, origins, civilizational sphere, and the shared values and patterns that generate social cohesion within a political community (Fakouhi, 2001: 64; Hajiani, 2000: 179; Niazi & Shafaei Moghaddam, 2012: 107; Sani Ajlal, 2005: 104).

Several studies have proposed multidimensional frameworks for understanding national identity. For example, Sadowski and Czerniawska identify common international interests, shared international characteristics, a community of common history, national solidarity, political values, and a common culture its principal components (Sadowski & Czerniawska, 1999: 135). Another study identifies seven dimensions of identity, namely the social, historical, geographical, political, religious, cultural heritage, and linguistic-literary dimensions (Hajiani, 2000: 199-207). A further framework classifies identity according to three principal domains: political, cultural, and social identity markers (Khorramshad et al., 2018: 25).

Within the Afghan context, the reforms initiated by King Amanullah introduced concepts such as the state, the nation, territorial integrity, independence, progress, and national identity into the country's political, cultural, and social discourse. These developments can be traced through a range of historical indicators, including the declaration of Afghanistan's independence, the formation of the first cabinet, the transmission of diplomatic notifications of independence to the Soviet Union, Japan, the United States, France, Iran, and Türkiye, the promulgation of Afghanistan's first constitution, the establishment of the Senate (*Loya Jirga*), the formalization of national borders, the introduction of a national currency and flag, and the implementation of extensive archaeological agreements. Collectively, these developments represent significant manifestations of Afghanistan's political, historical, social, geographical, and cultural identity.

6. The Stages of the Outward-Oriented Evaluative Criticism Model Derived from Mullā Şadrā's Philosophy

6.1. Stage One of the Criticism Model: Analysis of Essence and the Incomplete Causes

With respect to species, all of the selected works belong to the category of fine arts and fall within the field of visual arts. In terms of genus, their artistic medium consists of painting, including both easel painting and miniature painting. Regarding differentia, all of the selected works are relatively small-scale paintings measuring less than 100 × 100 cm and executed using a variety of techniques.

The examination of the specific accident indicates that the majority of the works exhibit expressive characteristics, whereas no purely formalist works were identified. The efficient cause comprises artists including Abdul Ghafur Breshna, Mohammad Arshad Behzad Seljuqi, Yusuf Kahzad, Yazdgerd Kohi Samangani, Ahmad Ali Shahdad, Abdul Karim Rahimi, Latif Ahmad Ghafouri, Ghulam Jilani, Mohammad Homayoun Etemadi, Enayatullah Shahrani, Fataneh Baktash Arefi, Mohi al-Din Shabnam Ghaznavi, Mohammad Saeed Mashal, Siraj al-Din Siraj, Abdul Naser Savabi, Mohammad Towfiq Rahmani, Akbar Khorasani, Navid al-Haq Fazli, Karim Arabzadeh, Khadim Ali, Reza Hazara, Amin Tasha, Hamed Hassanzadeh, Aref Bahadari, Nadima Yousufi, and Saleha Wafa Jawad.

From the perspective of the material cause, the paintings were executed in oil on canvas, ink wash on paperboard, watercolor, and acrylic on canvas. Analysis of the formal cause reveals recurring representations of Islamic architecture, religious and Qur'anic narratives, Sufi masters and religious figures, regional ritual dances, Afghan women, symbolic motifs such as the cypress tree, Islamic geometric ornamentation, figurative conventions derived from miniature painting, as well as images of demons, women, camels, gazelles, lovers, episodes from the life of the Buddha, and related subjects. Finally, consideration of the final cause suggests, based on available

documentary evidence, that the principal motivation shared by many of these artists was the preservation and revival of Afghanistan's cultural and artistic heritage.

6.2. Stage Two of the Criticism Model: Analysis of the Categories

6.2.1. Analysis According to the Categories of Quantity and Quality

The analysis encompasses thirty-four paintings produced by twenty-six leading artists selected through purposive sampling, as described in the research methodology. These works span an eighty-eight-year period. With the exception of one painting, all measure less than one square meter. Most compositions are organized into three pictorial planes, while works containing human figures include between one and twenty-three figures.

From the perspective of quality, all of the paintings can be classified as expressive works. Paintings composed primarily of vegetal motifs adopt the visual language of miniature painting to depict paradisiacal gardens, whereas works incorporating animal imagery are generally based on religious narratives. Figurative paintings convey themes such as romantic love, devotion to the homeland, Buddhist subjects, the suffering of Afghan women, and other emotionally expressive themes.

6.2.2. Analysis According to the Categories of Position, Place, Time, and Possession

The dominant chromatic contrasts are generally based on complementary relationships between blue and orange. In certain paintings, particularly those inspired by miniature painting, illumination is rendered without an identifiable light source, whereas others employ natural sunlight or interior lighting. Compositions influenced by miniature painting typically exhibit dispersed spatial organization, while works approaching realism tend to employ centralized compositional structures.

Analysis of the category of place indicates that abstract works are commonly situated within symbolic gardens or geometric environments structured through mathematically ordered repetitions of ornamental motifs. The represented settings include deserts, occasionally accompanied by Bedouin tents, turbulent seas, domestic courtyards, the interior spaces of Eastern palaces, hunting grounds, meditation sites, and architectural monuments. The paintings also incorporate visual references to Afghan cultural traditions, including the ritual stick dance and women wearing the burqa.

Analysis of the category of time demonstrates that the selected paintings were produced between 1933 and 2021 under five successive political systems: the Kingdom of Afghanistan, the Republic of Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, encompassing the administrations of fifteen presidents and amirs, together with two monarchs. Human figures are predominantly represented as young, except in depictions of Sufi masters and spiritual guides. Likewise, animals and plants are consistently portrayed in states of vitality and youthful vigor. The internal temporality of the paintings varies considerably, ranging from ancient historical periods to the eras of Hafez and Rumi, the time of prophets such as Abraham, scenes of Mongol rulers engaged in hunting, and contemporary representations of women depicted against monochromatic backgrounds. Concerning the category of possession, the paintings are generally not accompanied by artists' statements, although the majority bear individual titles.

6.2.3. Analysis According to the Category of Being Affected

Following the Amanullah reforms beginning in 1923, Afghan painting increasingly embraced the teaching of Western art within schools and educational institutions, while traditional artistic practices and miniature painting gradually receded to the margins of artistic production. The decline of the dominant discourse of Western academic painting around 1987 marked the beginning of a period of artistic self-reflection and initiated a sustained search for the representation of Afghan identity in painting. This transformation, however, did not occur abruptly.

Rather, it emerged gradually through a series of historical, cultural, and artistic developments, the principal factors of which are discussed in the following sections.

Amanullah's Reforms, Archaeological Agreements, and the Rediscovery of Afghanistan's Pictorial Heritage

One of the most significant developments influencing the formation of identity in contemporary Afghan painting was the archaeological policy initiated during the reign of King Amanullah. In 1922, Amanullah signed the Franco-Afghan Archaeological Agreement and established the National Museum of Afghanistan in Darul Aman Palace. During the following decades, numerous archaeological expeditions revealed Afghanistan's rich artistic heritage across successive historical periods.

Among the most important discoveries were Louis Dupree's investigations of the Lower Paleolithic at Dasht-e Nawar (1974), his Middle Paleolithic excavations at Ghar-e Marda Gospand near Faryab (1970), and subsequent research in Badakhshan (1996). Additional excavations were undertaken by the Kyoto University expedition (1959-1967), Carlton Coon at Hazar Sum, Samangan (1954), S. M. Poglyzzi in Dara-i Kalan (1963), and investigations of the Late Paleolithic at Aq Kupruk near Balkh by Louis Dupree (1966). Significant discoveries from Afghanistan's historical periods include Jean-Marie Casal's excavations at Sayd Qala and Mundigak near Kandahar (1961), Roman Ghirshman's investigations at Surkh Duk and Sefidak in Sistan (1936), Tosi's Italian expedition (1967), and the Afghan-Soviet archaeological mission directed by Viktor Sarianidi (1973), whose Bronze Age discoveries were later published together with the studies of Pugachenkova and Kruglikova by the Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Other notable investigations include the Iron Age research conducted by Abdul Raouf Wardak (1966) and Sarianidi (1973), the continuing excavations at Aq Kupruk by scholars including Paul Bernard, Jean-Marie Casal, Jacques Meunié, Ria Hackin, and Roman Ghirshman, and the Afghan-Japanese excavations at Hadda directed by Mizuno in 1966. Research also demonstrated that during the lifetime of the Buddha, anthropomorphic representations of him were prohibited and that early devotional practices in the Gandhara and Mathura schools relied primarily on symbolic imagery. Both artistic traditions flourished simultaneously during the Kushan Empire and yielded some of the earliest surviving Buddhist paintings in the region (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Top row (right): Wall painting depicting a military commander or prince, together with decorative paintings from the northern wall (Kruglikova, 1979: 12). Top row (left): A Bodhisattva depicted above the head of the Buddha on the ceiling of the portico, Bamiyan, first century CE (Hackin, 1933: 197). Center: Painting of the Buddha from the Kakrak Valley, Bamiyan (Hackin, 1933: 211). Bottom row (left): Wall painting from the Bamiyan Caves (photograph by Ali Mandegar). Bottom row (right): Gouache painting on pottery from the Kushan period, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (dimensions: H. 56.8 cm, W. 52.3 cm, D. 5.4 cm) (URL 1); paintings recovered from Mes Aynak and Swat (Bavari, 2020: 15); fresco from Shah Tappeh (photograph by Khairzadeh, 1984); and a Ghaznavid-period wall painting from the reign of Mas'ud at Lashkari Bazar, Afghanistan (Necipoğlu & Bailey, 2006: 74).

Subsequent centuries likewise witnessed important developments in Afghan painting. During the Ghaznavid period, mural paintings decorated military buildings and the residences of princes and court officials, particularly at Lashkari Bazar (Porfeiz, 2016: 68; Jalali, 1972: 104; Bosworth, 2005: 107). Consequently, the Amanullah reforms created an unprecedented opportunity for artists to rediscover and reassess Afghanistan's artistic heritage. Alongside archaeological discoveries, the Herat school of miniature painting, long supported by the Timurid court, became the subject of renewed scholarly and artistic attention. The work of Afghan archaeologists, particularly Ahmad Ali Kohzad, together with the publication of newly discovered paintings, sculptures, architectural remains, and utilitarian objects, brought neglected aspects of Afghanistan's visual heritage into public consciousness. These discoveries strengthened historical identity through renewed pride in Afghanistan's ancient past while reinforcing cultural identity by encouraging the preservation and appreciation of its artistic legacy. Most importantly, they linked the relatively young Afghan state, founded in 1747, to the much deeper historical tradition of ancient Ariana, thereby providing the cultural foundation upon which later generations of artists constructed visual representations of national identity.

The Emergence of the "Between Realism and Miniature Painting" Style

Another major development in the representation of identity was the emergence of a distinctive artistic tendency during the formative years of Western academic painting in Afghanistan. Although many artists received formal training in Western painting and produced works according to Western aesthetic principles, they also possessed considerable mastery of miniature painting and consciously incorporated elements derived from Buddhist painting and the Herat miniature tradition into their artistic practice. Artists such as Abdul Ghafur Breshna, Mohammad Arshad Behzad Seljuqi, and Yusuf Kahzad worked fluently in both artistic traditions (Fig. 3).

From approximately 1971 onward, Enayatullah Shahrani introduced the expression "between miniature painting and realism" to describe works that synthesized Western representational painting, particularly realist painting, with the visual conventions of miniature painting. Although the terminology may lack conceptual precision, it reflects the continued vitality of traditional painting within the margins of the dominant discourse of Western academic art, despite its institutional marginalization. In this approach, representational compositions structured according to Western pictorial principles coexist with the abstract spatial organization and ornamental language characteristic of miniature painting.



Figure 3. Left: The Life of Buddha, watercolor painting by 'Abd al-Ghafūr Brishna. Right: Design for the mural of the Great Buddha Portico at Bamiyan, watercolor by Master Yūsuf Kahzād (Rafiei Rad, 2022a: 152).

Innovations by Two Afghan Painters During the Socialist Period

Another important contribution to the search for cultural identity emerged through the deliberate integration of the geometric principles of miniature painting into Western pictorial practice. Enayatullah Shahrani and Fataneh Baktash Arefi, later known as Mohi al-Din Shabnam Ghaznavi,

were among the leading artists who sought to develop an artistic language rooted in Afghanistan's visual heritage during the dominance of socialist ideology and Western academic painting.

Shahrani's innovation lay in his use of traditional instruments, including the metal pen and calligraphic pen, to depict indigenous Afghan subjects such as nomadic life, traditional tents, and elderly Afghan figures. Baktash Arefi, although largely overlooked within Afghanistan during her lifetime, made an equally significant contribution. Born in Kabul, she graduated from the School of Fine Arts in 1983 and from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Kabul University in 1987. In 1985, she introduced the manifesto of a new artistic movement that she termed Geometrism. According to her formulation, Geometrism adapted the two-dimensional visual language of miniature painting while combining the formal principles of realist painting with the structural laws of geometry (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Right: Artwork by 'Ināyat Allāh Shahrānī, published in the Kabul Times newspaper in 1965. Center: Fatanah Baktāsh 'Ārifi, Geometrism style, oil on canvas, 1985 (Rafiei Rad, 2022a: 156).

The Establishment of the Miniature Painting Department at Herat University

The most influential development in the representation of identity occurred with the establishment of the Department of Miniature Painting at Herat University in 2003. Founded with the explicit objective of reviving and contemporizing the Herat miniature tradition, the department was established by former students of the distinguished miniaturist and senator Mohammad Saeed Mashal. Its founders deliberately emphasized diverse dimensions of Afghan identity and elevated Timurid artistic heritage as a unifying cultural foundation capable of transcending ethnic and sectarian divisions.

The department's strategic vision identified Herat's distinguished artistic history and its role as a center for intellectual exchange and cultural interaction as central institutional values. It further emphasized nurturing the artistic potential of local students, revitalizing Herat's celebrated artistic legacy, aligning artistic education with contemporary international standards, promoting the global recognition of Herat's artistic tradition, and safeguarding the cultural and intellectual significance of miniature painting within both the university and contemporary Afghan society.

6.2.4. Analysis According to the Category of *An Yaf'al* (Agency and Influence)

Although Mohammad Saeed Mashal sought primarily to revive the classical Herat school of miniature painting, his students, including Abdul Naser Savabi and Mohammad Towfiq Rahmani, together with other faculty members who had previously experienced the dominance of Western academic painting, pursued a broader objective. Through the establishment of the Department of Miniature Painting, they attempted to reconcile international artistic standards with the Herat miniature tradition and thereby lay the foundations for a contemporary Herat school of miniature painting.

In pursuit of these objectives, faculty members and students produced a substantial body of innovative artistic work. One of the department's most significant achievements was the organization of nine consecutive Herat Miniature Biennials. During this period, artists and scholars such as Masoumeh Mirzaei, Saleha Wafa Jawad, Navid al-Haq Fazli, Rahgozar, Mashouf, Hessas, Torpeki Nabizada, and numerous younger artists, including Nadima Yousufi, actively participated in these biennials as well as in national and international exhibitions, making a decisive

contribution to the revitalization and international visibility of contemporary Afghan miniature painting ([Figs. 5, 6, 7 & 8](#)).



Figure 5. 'Abd al-Nāṣir Ṣawābī. Watercolor on cardboard, 2013, 35 × 35 cm (left); 'Abd al-Nāṣir Ṣawābī. Gouache on cardboard, from the Camels series ([Rafiei Rad, 2022a: 166](#)).

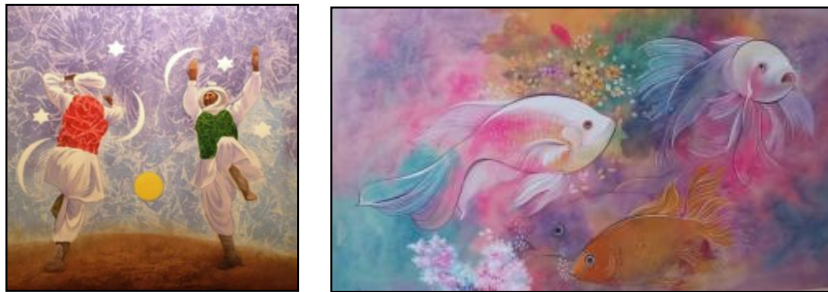


Figure 6. Muḥammad Tawfīq Raḥmānī. Whisper, 50 × 80 cm, 2018 (left); Muḥammad Tawfīq Raḥmānī. Melody of Love, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 100 cm, 2014, Faculty of Fine Arts, Kabul ([Rafiei Rad, 2022a: 164](#)).



Figure 7. Akbar Khorāsānī. Oil on canvas, 40 × 50 cm ([Rafiei Rad, 2022b: 20, Fig. 13](#)).



Figure 8. Khadim Ali. Gouache on cardboard, 100 × 150 cm. Exhibited in the exhibition Transition/Evacuation, 2016, Gandhara Art Gallery, Hong Kong.

6.3. Stage Three of the Criticism Model

The findings derived from the preceding stages function as preparatory causes (*al-'ilal al-mu'iddah*) for identifying the artwork's ultimate purpose. At this stage, they are synthesized to formulate a unifying hypothesis, encompassing the central idea, message, or thematic core of the works under investigation. The two principal outcomes of this stage are presented below.

Unifying Hypothesis

The analysis demonstrates that, following their gradual departure from the dominant discourse of Western academic painting, contemporary Afghan artists increasingly distanced themselves from exclusively Western artistic principles and turned instead to Afghanistan's rich visual heritage. Drawing inspiration from the artistic traditions of the Gandhara and Mathura schools, the Herat school of miniature painting, as well as the teachings of Ustad Mohammad Saeed Mashal and earlier generations of artists, they sought to reconstruct and represent Afghan identity through painting.

Accordingly, the sampled works reveal three fundamental transformations in comparison with earlier artistic production: changes in artistic style, subject matter, and material practice. Correlating the identified dimensions and indicators of identity with the five principal factors that shaped identity representation in contemporary Afghan painting demonstrates that all five contributed significantly to the reinforcement of Afghanistan's historical, geographical, and cultural identity. Among these factors, however, the establishment of the Department of Miniature Painting at Herat University proved to be the most comprehensive. By systematically incorporating all major dimensions of national identity into its institutional structure, educational philosophy, and artistic practice, it achieved the broadest and most coherent realization of identity markers identified in this study (Table 4).

The students of Ustad Mohammad Saeed Mashal, who became the principal founders of contemporary Afghan miniature painting, initiated this movement at Herat University and subsequently trained a new generation of artists. The unifying hypothesis underlying their artistic practice can be understood through the objectives that guided this movement: safeguarding the values of miniature painting, fostering creative expression within the framework of traditional miniature art, achieving aesthetic innovation consistent with contemporary artistic standards, and reaffirming the significance of the Herat school. Collectively, these aspirations converged on a single overarching objective: the representation of Afghan identity through painting.

Table 4. Comparison of the Influence of Historical Events on the Representation of National Identity in Paintings within the Category of Passion (An Yanfa 'il).

Components / Indicators	Archaeological Initiatives during the Reform Era and the Rediscovery of Afghanistan's Painting Heritage	Artists' Efforts to Integrate Western Painting with Persianate Miniature Painting	The Emergence of Two Painters and the Deliberate Application of Miniature Geometry in Western Painting	The Revival of Timurid Painting by Sa'id Mash'al and His Students	Establishment of the Miniature Painting Program at the University of Herat
Social National Identity	—	—	—	—	• Beliefs concerning the origins of the national community as manifested during the Timurid period. • Beliefs regarding the destiny and future of the national community in the realm of art, leading to the adoption of an approach aimed at the modernization of miniature painting.
Historical National Identity	• Definition and identification of the nation's historical period. • Sense of belonging to historical eras. • Pride in historical affiliation and heritage.	• Sense of belonging to historical eras. • Pride in historical affiliation and heritage.	• Sense of belonging to historical periods (particularly the Timurid era). • Pride in historical affiliation and heritage.	• Sense of belonging to historical periods (particularly the Timurid era). • Pride in historical affiliation and heritage.	• Sense of belonging to historical periods, especially the Timurid era. • Pride in historical affiliation and heritage.
Geographical National Identity	• Perception of the geographical boundaries of the nation. • Positive attitude toward the homeland and its territory. • Perception of the nation's geographical position in the world.	• Positive attitude toward the homeland and its territory.	• Positive attitude toward the homeland and its territory.	• Perception of the geographical boundaries of the nation. • Positive attitude toward the homeland and its territory.	• Perception of the geographical boundaries of Afghanistan. • Positive attitude toward the homeland and its territory. • Perception of the geographical position of the homeland (Afghanistan, particularly Herat) within the world. • Belief in the suitability of the homeland for life and prosperity. • Emotional attachment and sense of belonging to the homeland. • Readiness to defend the homeland and its territory. • Aspiration toward the future territorial unity of the country, in which art was regarded as a significant means of fostering such unity.
Cultural National Identity	• Evaluation and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the past. • Commitment to	• Evaluation and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the past.	• Evaluation and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the past. • Commitment to	• Evaluation and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the past.	• Evaluation and appreciation of the cultural heritage of the past. • Commitment to the

Components / Indicators	Archaeological Initiatives during the Reform Era and the Rediscovery of Afghanistan's Painting Heritage	Artists' Efforts to Integrate Western Painting with Persianate Miniature Painting	The Emergence of Two Painters and the Deliberate Application of Miniature Geometry in Western Painting	The Revival of Timurid Painting by Sa'īd Mash'al and His Students	Establishment of the Miniature Painting Program at the University of Herat
	the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.	• Commitment to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.	the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.	• Commitment to the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.	preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.
Political National Identity	—	—	—	—	Perception of the country's position within the international system. • Defense of the decisions of the national political system, whether deemed right or wrong. • Support for the country's macro-level policies.

The Ultimate Purpose of the Paintings

Contemporary artists associated with the Herat school envisioned an idealized image of Timurid Herat as the historical source of Afghanistan's artistic flourishing and as a foundation for the country's participation in contemporary global art. Their response to the marginalization of Afghanistan's visual traditions within the discourse of Western academic painting took the form of a conscious reaffirmation of the visual and conceptual values of the Herat school while simultaneously displacing many of the dominant signifiers of the preceding artistic discourse. In doing so, they constructed a new artistic narrative that sought to reconcile two complementary aspirations: engagement with contemporary artistic practice and the preservation of Afghan cultural identity.

The observable transformations in artistic style, subject matter, and material practice indicate that this emerging artistic objective was grounded in the contemporization of miniature painting within the broader modernization project initiated during the reign of Amanullah Khan. Following the experience of Western academic painting, this project gradually evolved toward the aspiration of establishing a national contemporary Afghan painting as the ultimate goal of artistic production.

6.4. Stage Four of the Criticism Model: Evaluation

The fourth stage evaluates the findings of the preceding analyses by examining the extent to which the representation of Afghan identity in painting, identified as the unifying hypothesis, contributed to achieving the proposed ultimate aim of a national contemporary Afghan painting.

The achievements of Mohammad Saeed Mash'al's students and their successors, particularly at Herat University, demonstrate that identity was represented through five principal artistic strategies:

1. incorporating the pictorial conventions of miniature painting into contemporary painting;
2. modifying miniature painting to adapt it to contemporary artistic practice;
3. integrating miniature painting with Western painting;
4. adopting Western pictorial techniques within miniature painting; and
5. employing various imitative approaches derived from established miniature traditions.

Although the relationship between contemporaneity, as understood within the Afghan artistic context, and the Herat miniature tradition was initially neither explicit nor theoretically coherent,

the pursuit of identity representation gradually repositioned many elements of traditional art outside the dominant discourse of Western academic painting and reintroduced them through innovative formal and conceptual strategies. Artists selectively transferred miniature techniques into Western-style painting, incorporated Western pictorial methods into miniature painting, modified traditional miniature conventions to address contemporary concerns, experimented with hybrid visual languages, and, in some cases, adopted approaches closely modeled on the Iranian miniature tradition.

7. Conclusion

Although contemporary Afghan painting is a relatively recent artistic phenomenon shaped by successive political, cultural, and economic upheavals, it remains deeply rooted in the artistic heritage of ancient Ariana. The visual traditions of the Gandhara, Mathura, and Herat schools have continued to inform the development of Afghan visual culture and have served as enduring sources of inspiration for successive generations of artists.

Beginning with the Amanullah reforms and continuing through the establishment of the School of Fine Arts, the Teachers' Training College, and later the Faculty of Fine Arts at Kabul University during the Daoud Khan period, the concept of contemporaneity, understood as the necessity of change, the embrace of modernity, and the rejection of any simple return to the past, led to the institutional dominance of Western academic art education. Consequently, traditional artistic practices and indigenous systems of artistic transmission were progressively marginalized. Throughout the history of contemporary Afghan painting, three principal artistic orientations emerged: adherence to traditional artistic practices, adoption of Western modern art, and the complete rejection of artistic production, whether traditional or modern.

Nevertheless, the examination of ninety-one years of artistic production, from the Second Amanullah Reform period (1923) to the end of Hamid Karzai's presidency (2014), demonstrates that Afghanistan's leading painters consistently sought to reinterpret and represent their country's rich visual heritage despite prolonged political instability and conflict.

Employing the four-stage outward-oriented evaluative criticism model derived from the philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā, the present study systematically addressed the question of how identity has been represented in contemporary Afghan painting. The first stage analyzed the essence of the selected works through their species, genus, differentia, specific accidents, and the efficient, formal, material, and final causes. The second stage examined the Aristotelian categories of quantity, quality, position, place, time, possession, being affected, and agency. Building upon these findings as preparatory causes, the third stage identified the representation of Afghan identity in painting as the unifying hypothesis and the aspiration toward a national contemporary Afghan painting as the ultimate purpose underlying the artistic movement. These two findings subsequently served as the basis for evaluation in the fourth stage.

The analysis demonstrates that several historical developments contributed significantly to the emergence of identity-centered artistic practice, including the archaeological agreements initiated during the Amanullah reforms, the emergence of the artistic tendency known as "between realism and miniature painting," and the pioneering experiments of Enayatullah Shahrani and Fataneh Baktash Arefi. However, the establishment of the Department of Miniature Painting at Herat University by the students of Mohammad Saeed Mashal proved to be the most influential catalyst in the representation of Afghan identity. Working within the broader framework of Western artistic education, these artists developed innovative approaches that included incorporating miniature painting techniques into contemporary painting, adapting miniature painting to contemporary artistic requirements, integrating miniature and Western painting, introducing Western pictorial methods into miniature painting, and adopting selective imitative strategies.

Despite these achievements, the envisioned goal of establishing a national contemporary Afghan painting remained unrealized. Two principal factors contributed to this outcome. First, no coherent theoretical framework emerged to define the relationship between traditional artistic

heritage and the aesthetic standards of contemporary art. Second, the adoption of international conventions on women's rights during the Karzai administration significantly expanded women's participation in artistic production, thereby transforming the historically patriarchal identity of the Timurid miniature tradition that had served as the cultural foundation of the contemporary Herat school.

Author Contributions

All three authors contributed equally to the conception of the study, data analysis, and preparation of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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