

THE ARTISTIC DESTINY OF IRAN

BY DR. LÉO BRONSTEIN

American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology

IN SPEAKING of the general tendencies of any civilization, one easily risks falling into the emptiness of imaginative phraseology. The personal quality in each individual creation, intangible in the last analysis, and the essential variations which the complexity of the material life of a people introduces into that civilization, force us to be constantly on guard against lapsing into generalizations. Yet there is, nevertheless, one sphere where generalization is permissible, where it is almost required, and even induced by the facts themselves. This is the sphere in which all artistic cultures, no matter how varied they may be in their final expression, stylistically and technically, no matter how distant they may be, one from the other, in their physical geographical locations, participate in the same universal psychological source of man's creations, which is: the manner with which the human eye grasps the external world and guides the hand in the artistic representation of that world. Two qualities have always marked this work of the human eye. One of these is the "stable" quality, where the forms are clearly defined, seriated, stable, each individual and distinct from the other; the second is the "mobile" quality, where the forms appear to the visual consciousness indissolubly attached to each other, one continuing the other, and together forming a kind of collective ensemble, a dynamic whole.

We might say that art through the ages has passed through great cycles, in which sometimes one and sometimes the other of these tendencies has been dominant, and in some rare historic achievements, both tendencies have united to create an art at once complex and of supreme harmony.

What more stable, indeed, than the artistic creations of the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean areas and of Western Asia? There was Egypt, where we find from the dawn of her culture (for instance, the ivory comb handle and an ivory handle of a flat knife decorated with processions of very naturalistic animals and birds of



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BRONZE HARNESS (?) ORNAMENT CRIMEA.

A typical example of the art of outer Iran. A mare twisted around to bite her tail with a foal alongside. A vivid expression of vitality and at the same time a powerful and original pattern.

the Pre-Dynastic period, before 3200 B. C., in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and throughout her history this tendency to stability, an art that affirms the existence of objects and living beings and depicts them well defined in space. There was Sumer and Akkad, in whose art we find the supreme and most powerful expressions of stability (for instance, the series of animals, one following the other, yet detached from each other, on the monuments of the Jemdet Nasr epoch, or again, the statues of Gudea, the great prince of the Dynasty of Gutium): and later, there was

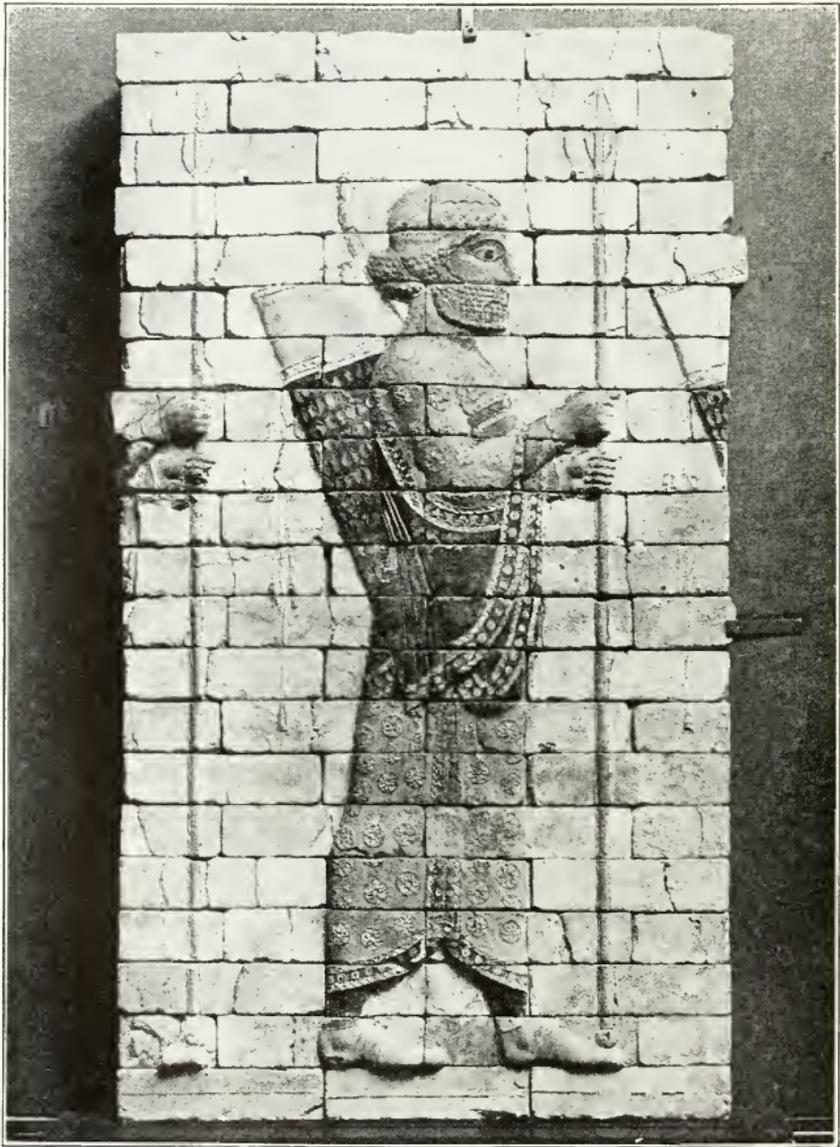
Assyria, who, even in her most fluid imaginings, established a world of seriated forms (for example, the bas-reliefs so rich in movement of the Assurbanipal epoch). There was Upper Syria (sculptures from the Palace of Zandjirli, about 850 B. C.); Anatolia (stone bas-reliefs at Ivriz, eighth century B. C.); and at last, Hellas, whose art glorified movement in its fullest expression, yet who did not know mobility itself.

Directly opposed to this widespread movement of the static in art, there appeared, beginning historically about the eighth to seventh century B. C., this other tendency, which imposed its law of dynamics over a large geographical area stretching from South Russia to the Caucasus and spread from there over Siberia, Mongolia, and even China (the end of the Chou period and transition to the Han, third century B. C.). This is the art known as Scytho-Sarmatian or Scytho-Siberian, or as Rostovtzeff terms it of the "Central Asiatic group." However enigmatic the origin of this art may still be, no matter how diverse its various local manifestations, its "mobile" character remains unquestionable. This "animal style" is indeed one of forms which are fused, continuous, not serialized in space. It is one of collective ensembles, not subordinated to the canon of naturalism, but forming all together strange, complex objects (page 154), so different from the fantastic monsters, symbolic or magic, of Mesopotamia, which, in spite of the various single parts of the different animals, griffons, winged bulls, etc., of which they are formed retain an absolutely individual character. Whether these innumerable Scytho-Sarmatian objects, chiefly in gold (belt buckles, open-work plaques, etc.) come from the region of Perm, from Bulgaria, from the Kuban or the Altai, or even Mongolia, they all bear the imprint of one marked historical tendency.

Between these two major tendencies, yet partaking of the nature of each, there arose in Asia a cultural force, a synthesis of the two: Iran.

It is impossible here to trace even summarily the economical and political history of this participation. It exists and is known to historians. Its artistic history also exists, and it remains for the historian of Asiatic art to explore it further.

The art of Pre-Islamic Iran provides little information along these lines. (The archaeological work being conducted at present



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ARCHER IN ENAMELLED TILES.

Susa. From the Palace of Darius, Fifth Century B. C.

in Luristan, whose bronzes appear to have embodied both tendencies simultaneously, will probably supplement our knowledge.) The art of Elam which has come down to us is hardly distinguishable in its style from the temporary arts. And that of the Medean Empire, what do we know? In the Achaemenid art (559-331 B. C.) we find a remarkable flowering of the "static" tendency. The admirable stone reliefs at Persepolis or the enamelled brick reliefs of Susa (page 156) provide full proof of this: well-defined silhouettes, regular and processional rhythms, a conscious and smooth form. Yet we know that during this period there was definite artistic contact between Iran and the northeast of Nomadic Asia: the famous Oxus Treasure bears witness to this. And what precisely do we know of the times of the Parthians (248 B. C.-A. D. 226), that Oriental dynasty which was so Hellenized? Very little. Yet the humble "graffitti" discovered on the walls of the houses at Dura-Europos reveal an art of popular character in which the bizarre cannot be explained away merely as technical flaws. In Sasanian art (226-641 A. D.) the established heritage of "stability" was continued. The impetuosity which characterizes Sasanian representations (bas-reliefs of the grottoes at Taq-i-Bustan, for example, showing the royal hunt and the masses of animals in flight) is related fundamentally to its Mesopotamian models. And yet among the Sasanian metal treasures which have survived, we sometimes sense the essence of another spirit, a spirit "mobile" and continuous (page 159).

With the coming of Islam the equilibrium between the two tendencies became firmer and more complete. It is curious to note here the well-known fact that from the first Abbasid period (ninth century) and following through the two great successive waves of invasion—the Seljuq and the Mongol—it was Central Asia, this still mysterious region, with which the Scytho-Siberian culture must have had direct contact, which provided a great source of life for Iran, paralleling the Greek, Hindu, Egyptian, Chinese, and other influences.

In all the artistic creations of Islamic Iran there was an effort to attain a perfect fusion of these two psychological tendencies. This effort at fusion is, basically, the whole imagery of Persia and her science of ornamentation: the personages, the animals, the plants, and the inanimate things, all lead a strange life there: sometimes they are free of all geometric stylization (stability) and sometimes

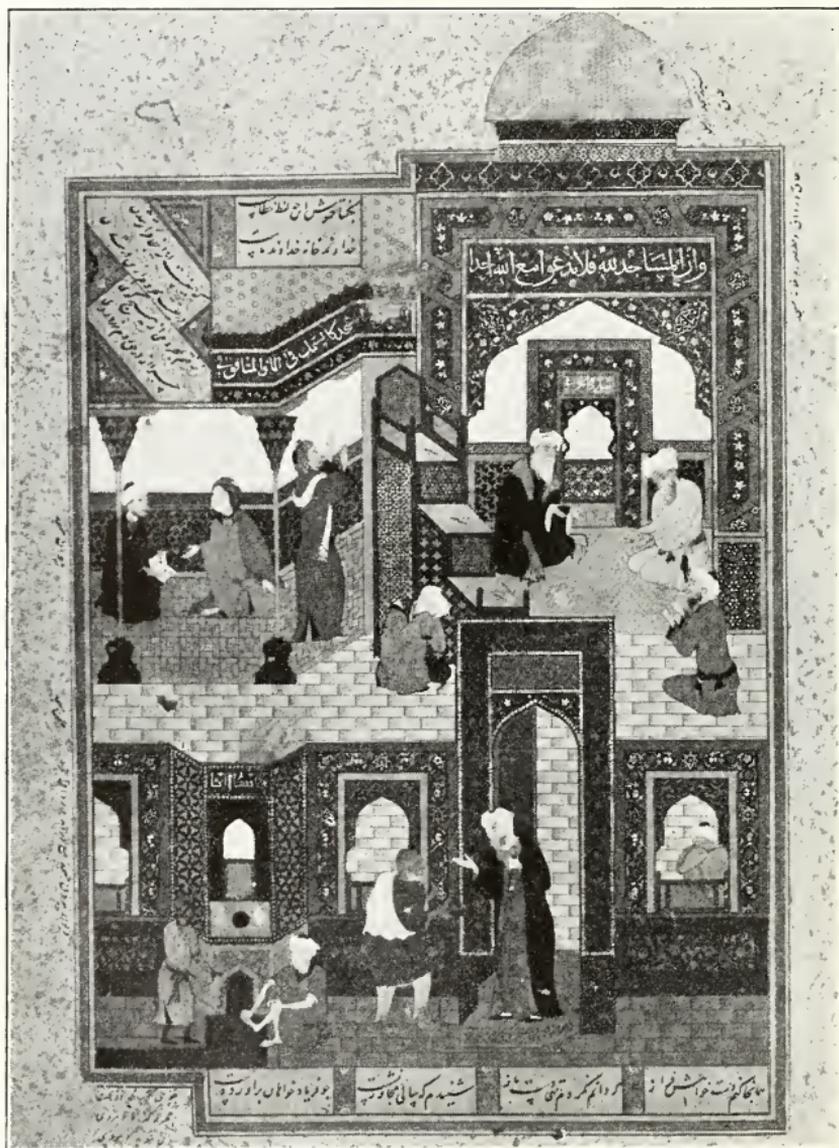
they incorporate themselves in "mobility"; not, however, losing their distinctive outlines, yet, at the same time, within those outlines, they are deformed. Stone, stucco, faience, wood, ivory all are equally precious and suitable for the Iranian artist, who elaborates instinctively this formula of the visual synthesis.

But it is in Iranian paintings (miniatures) that this is perhaps best revealed. Two things stand out clearly in the very first approach to this art, especially of the most opulent period, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (the Timurid, and particularly the beginning of the Safavid periods). One is the precision with which the shapes are silhouetted and above all, their coloring; the second, and dominant, is the strange conception of space and perspective. This later cannot be the effect of technical ignorance. Intellectual curiosity and the advancement of mathematical sciences in Iran, the constant contact with the art of other countries, especially of Western Europe and of China, whose pictorial canons were directly opposed to these of Iran, make such a supposition unacceptable. The construction of perspective in Iranian painting is determined. We know what it is in principle: a slipping of one perfectly flat surface into another, one behind or above the other, creating thereby a rich and highly decorative imagery, a fanciful depiction of the feudal life of those times: the floors of the royal halls, the palace gardens or the fields are represented vertically, on the first plane of the panel, and then immediately the eye passes on to succeeding planes, which follow each other vertically or at opposite angles with their princely banquets, hunting, battle, or love scenes. Two methods, sometimes very simple and sometimes more complex in their construction, seem to dominate all other. According to the first method, most often rectilinear scheme, a scene or, rather, part of a scene is continued in parts of other scenes, which mutually complete each other by an apparent juxtaposition (stable) but actually because they follow a conscious rhythm of intertwined surfaces, lines, and colors. An *active*, "mobile" perspective is thus created, a perspective which is not given to us statically at first (as in the perspective created by the Italian Renaissance) but which we, the spectators, must reconstruct for ourselves by our own participation, by our visual participation (page 160). And in this lies the distinction and contribution of Iranian creation. The second method, cyclic or swirling, is no less intense. Two



Courtesy of American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology.
SILVER PLATE—SASANIAN

centers are given: for example, a circular or square basin is posed vertically at the foot of the panel, and a richly ornamented canopy is set obliquely, in the upper part, and all around there is a circling dance of objects and personages so arranged that the two spheres of action thus created are fused and by their persuasive poetry induce the eye to create a mobile perspective (for example, the beautiful scene of the presentation of the portrait of Khosru to Shirin, in the famous manuscript of the Shah Tahmasp period, painted between 1539 and 1543, illustrating the poems of Nizami which is in the British Museum).



Courtesy of American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology.

MINIATURE PAINTING FROM SA'DI'S BUSTAN

Fifteenth Century. Mosque Scenes.

Often it is not the objects themselves but the patches of color which provoke this fruitful effort of the eye: for example, in the same manuscript, on the page showing the mad lover, Majnun, brought in chains by a beggar woman to Laila's tent, the intense blue of the sky above and the stark white of the tents, on the first plane, by making the spectator participate, succeed perfectly in helping him to dominate the three-dimensional space. The distance of the sky and the proximity of the tents mutually complement each other and thereby transform the representation to dimensions even more persuasive and more concrete than words could express.

But all this, considered from this angle and transferred to a different field—painting and its laws—what is it but this same bizarre mobility which in Scytho-Siberian art created from the fusion of animals and their complementary parts such unexpected and new images?

Only, and this is the synthesis of Iran, by introducing at the same time the sense of "stability" (seriated forms, their outlines separated one from the other, precision, clarity of line and of segments of pure colors), Iran succeeded in removing the too violent quality of the barbarian vision and introducing that aesthetic element which we call grace.

The art of Iran in subsequent centuries underwent a gradual, and what seems today to be a final, decadence; it no longer created, but merely repeated unintelligently. But having once been so universal and so new, hence inexhaustible by virtue of its synthetic form, is it possible that this art will not be reborn? Iran gave birth without realizing it to a unique aesthetic form; it remains for Iran to find it again, but in full consciousness of its worth. Such a revival could have universal repercussions. It is sufficient to think what such a renaissance, which would truly continue its great past, could give anew to the artistic searchings of the modern West, searchings which are at the same time so akin to the Iranian past: the art of a Van Gogh, for example, or that, so entirely opposite, of a Picasso.

The economic and political decline of Iran in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, due more to the internal contradictions and chaos of a decaying system, than to the violence of wars, carried along with it impoverishment of thought and of art. A complete rehabilitation of the material life of the Iranian people will surely bring about a renaissance of its creative consciousness.