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The *Ahl-i Beyt* Bodies: The Mural Paintings of Lahijan in the Tradition of Persian Shiite Figurations¹

Pedram Khosronejad

*Thy face uncovered would be all too bright,
Without a veil none could endure the sight;
What eye is strong enough to gaze upon
The dazzling splendor of the fount of light?*

Abusa'id Abulkhayr (Ruba'iyat 519)

In modern Iran and throughout their entire history, the majority of Persian Shiite visual arts in which one can observe the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad, his *Ahl-i Beyt* (Imam 'Ali, Fatimah Zahra, Imam Hassan and Imam Hoseyn) and other saints are deeply connected to the folk narration (*rivayat-i 'amiyanih*) and popular literature (*adabiyat-i 'amiyanih*) of the history of the Iranian version of Twelver Shiism (*Ithna'ashari*).² One of the main functions of these illustrations, which appeared for the first time in royal books (Gruber 2008) during the Timurid Dynasty (1370–1506) and were seen up to the Qajar period (1785–1925), in the popular Shiite lithograph books of the period (1785–1925), was to depict visually related religious events and stories. These series of illustrations (*tasvirsazi*) are mostly decorative (*taz'ini*) and function as a bridge between the text and the reader and, as far as we know, were never used as devotional devices.

Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (b. 1831–d. 1896) should be considered the most important patron of Shiite popular rituals, performances and related material religion in modern Iran. It was during his reign (1848–96) that visual representations of the Prophet Muhammad, the *Ahl-i Beyt* and other Shiite saints were depicted in different forms (paintings, lithograph prints, photography), on different media (paper, canvas, murals, glass, tiles) and for different functions (ceremonial, devotional, decorative) in Iran. Several political, cultural, religious and artistic elements of previous centuries must have cooperated together and dissolved into each other to provide such stable ground for the flourishing of the figural depictions of these unseen Shiite holy figures (Gruber 2016).

Therefore, this period should be considered a unique time in Iranian history during which the country's supreme leader (Naser al-Din Shah), Shiite clerics ('*ulema*'), artists and public adherents (*ummah*) were in an exceptional religious position and harmony. This led to the acceptance of this genre of figurative religious art in both private sectors and public spaces (temporal and permanent), such as *Hoseyniyehs*,³ *Tekiyehs*⁴ and *Imamzadehs*.⁵ Here the most important function of these Shiite holy figurations is the act of religious provocation and devotion through special modes of visual communication (Ekhtiyar 2014: 2015).

After the end of the Qajar period began the Pahlavi regime (1925). The first Pahlavi king, Reza Shah Pahlavi (b. 1878–d. 1944), based on his secular and anti-Shiism ideology, severely banned Shiite public rituals and *Ta'ziyeh* performances and destroyed many *Hoseyniyehs* and *Tekiyehs*, including the most important one, *Tekiyeh Dowlat*, the royal theatre hall. This moment of history should be considered the end of the mass usage of visual representations of the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt* as Shiite devotional devices in modern Iran.

With the rapid development of print technology and the circulation of images on a massive scale, a new genre of visual depictions of Shiite holy figures came to the market during the reign (1941–79) of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (b. 1919–d. 1980). This time, visual representations of the Prophet Muhammad and other Shiite saints were used mostly in saints' shrines as votive objects (*nazri*, *ehdayi*, *taqdimi*) and in non-religious places (shops, supermarkets, taxis, etc.) as visual souvenirs only to be seen and to provoke 'the sensations of the heart' (*hes-i qalbi*) of public viewers.

Since the Iranian revolution of 1978, the establishment of the Islamic Republic and the immediate eight-year war between Iran and Iraq (1980–8), major elements and ideologies of Iranian Shiism that are nourished by the concept of Shiite martyrdom and the commemoration of holy martyred saints again became popular in Iranian society (Khosronejad 2012a). Here again we observe the mass production, circulation and usage of Shiite holy figures (the Prophet Muhammad, Imam 'Ali, Imam Hoseyn and Hazrat-i Abolfazl) in different forms (temporary banners, mural paintings, posters and flyers), but mostly as propaganda and political tools in the service of the Iranian regime (Khosronejad 2015a, b, c). One of the very new and unique innovations of the Iranian government in this regard is the production of religious fiction films about the lives of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam 'Ali and other Shiite saints in which we can observe them first as humans and then as saintly figures.

To better understand the meaning and function of visual representations of Shiite holy figures and saints in modern Iran, we need to look at them as part of the wider Iranian Shiite cultural heritage (Khosronejad 2012b), which includes the visual, textual, vocal and performative forms (rituals, ceremonies, etc.) of expression. This may help us to explain how related Persian Shiite iconographies are created and developed historically and are situated socially and culturally (Khosronejad 2012c; Suleman 2015).

In modern Iran (since the 1840s), visual depictions of the Prophet Muhammad and other Shiite saints are based on the polysemic quality of a series of visual signs and codes. These figurative iconographies appear as multilayered with signs taking on iconic, indexical and symbolic meanings. Here, viewers' interpretive strategies (including devotees, pilgrims, mourners) are inspired by their personal sentiments and

reverence for saints, their knowledge of the Iranian version of Shiite history, as well as by hagiographies and the holy figures' positions in the Shiite perception (Flaskerud 2010). The popular usage of Shiite iconographies in modern Iran is deeply embedded in votive acts (*nazri*) and devotional practices (*manasik-i mazhabi*). Visual representations of the Prophet Muhammad and other Shiite saints could serve as invocational gestures to declare the faith and express the praise of a devoted community (Khosronejad 2012b).

In this context, both visualization and seeing have representative and transformative qualities. These Persian iconographies spiritually evoke the holy Shiite saints in the hearts of believers and provoke their genuine religious sensations. This is how cognitive processes transform devotees' emotions and engender their pious behaviours to facilitate making contact with the unseen Shiite holy figures. Therefore, special types of visualization and modes of seeing are necessary and significant to the dissemination of Shiite knowledge to better understand related spiritual and religious values for devotees. Within the context of the Shiite doctrine of redemption in modern Iran, both visualization and seeing function as special modes of venerating holiness and reinforcing personal piety.

The origin of Shiite mural paintings in Iran under Muslim dynasties

One of the important testimonies for the justification of the role of figurative art in the context of Twelver Shiism in Iran is the evidence of religious mural paintings. It is beyond the scope of this study to enter into the complexity of placing these paintings in a cultural, social and historical context (Khosronejad 2018). Often considered as having a status equal to that of manuscript illustration, its material remains are scarce, and it is literary evidence that in large part has fashioned current notions of the function, extent, and significance of painting programmes on interior wall surfaces (Lentz 1993: 253).

Previous studies have not only repeatedly stressed the continuity of this ancient practice from the Sasanian period (224–651 AD) into the Qajar era, but have also viewed it as a formal extension of manuscript painting (Gray 1979: 315). In this regard, Stchoukine posits:

Iran has seen a succession of revivals of its Sasanian tradition, under Buyids [934–1062] and Samanids [819–999], under the Seljuq [1037–1194], and again under the Timurids and the Safavids [1501–1736]. When Timur [b.1336–d.1405] wished to revive the practice of celebrating his victories with mural paintings, he had to turn to artists trained in book illustration. The miniaturists were transferred to his new capital at Samarqand and put to work decorating the palaces which he was erecting in all haste. They portrayed his battles, his feasts, his court, the princes of his family, and even the ladies of his harem. (1954: 3)

Visual investigations prove that pre-Timurid mural paintings were mostly non-figurative, mostly found in western Iran on the walls of mosques and funerary

constructions, often as painted stucco reliefs (Wilber 1969). Therefore, the majority of these series of mural paintings as found in surviving evidence would appear to be not only decorative, but also non-narrative in their orientation (Lentz 1993: 253). Evidence from the Timurid period proves that figurative art became part of Timurid mural painting programmes, 'but in a different guise', as Lentz suggests:

Its genesis was obviously in the illustrative idiom, and like that idiom, was ideally suited to repetition and standardization. Its presence on walls instead apparently served a dual purpose, one evoking narrative and other non-narrative connotations. The formal visualisation in the manuscript illustration of Timurid elite life through the lens of Persian poetry and literature endowed the illustrative idiom with implications beyond the limits of the text, for it elevated and inserted Timurid royal activity into the rarified ethos of the Persian literary tradition. This visual grafting was one of a series of devices, like the dynasty's architectural programs or their relentless religious propagandizing, that encouraged an image and behavior capable of obscuring brutal political and military policies. (1993: 262)

This new genre of mural paintings was no longer strictly illustrative. In the process of moving from manuscript pages to walls, figurative paintings obviously increased in size and were engaged in some type of theatrical function. Therefore, they could be redesigned in a special visual form to express an idiomatic expression, evoking the illustrative idiom in a new and different context (Lentz and Lowry 1989). Furthermore, in the process of moving from manuscript pages to murals, these illustrative paintings were divorced from their original narrative context, but continued to exploit the linkage of the visual world and words that loaded manuscript illustration with new messages which could be cultural, political or religious. The audience of these mural paintings was probably enlarged compared to those of manuscript illustrations, but the interplay and interaction between the visual and the viewer certainly was still an exclusive experience, available only to those allowed entry into the royal complex.

During the Safavid period, Twelver Shiism became the state religion of Iran (1502), and inevitably was to have its effect on the patronage, production and usage of visual and performing arts to reflect the religious messages and sentiments of the period. Therefore, the history of the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt* were embedded in the textual and visual explanations designed to justify the Safavid claim to rule, and served in some sense as a proto-history of the new dynasty (Ruhrdanz 2000: 201). As Welch asserts:

It was a traditional Shiite teaching [during the Safavid period] that an aspirant should strive for personal sanctity through imitation of the lives of saints and martyrs. Thus these images imply a social relationship of great importance and can be seen as statement of adherence to a religious ideal, even if it is a little vague and attenuated: they supply visual documentation that some well-dressed and well-fed Safavi aristocrats considered themselves or wished to be seen as 'Sufis at heart' who through artefacts, stigma, poetry, and pictures sought to emulate the examples set

for them by saints. Though these distant images, midway between entertainment, were not intended to be iconic or devotional or even blatantly didactic, they were consciously allegorical and could serve as oblique reminders of the ideal. (2000: 302)

One of the main vehicles which provided this new – and the fullest – expression of Shiite visual regime (figuration of the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt*) was the public performance of *Ta'ziyeh*, the popular form of Shiite ceremony in Safavid Iran (Peterson 1979: 80), whose origins are believed by many to date back to even earlier periods.⁶ During these periods, the purpose of participating in or watching *Ta'ziyeh* performances was to lament the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn, his family members and loyal companions. When little by little *Ta'ziyeh* performers included the Iranian version of Shiism into their repertoires and dramatized them for the public on stage, figural representations of Shiite holy figures and saints came to be widely accepted by adherents. However, one should not forget that *Ta'ziyeh* stories are not only about Shiite Islam, covering as they do a large corpus of Abrahamic sacred events, catastrophes, deaths of prophets and also the destiny of human society after their death on Judgement Day.

Michele Membre, a Venetian envoy to the Safavid court (1539–42), reported that ‘the Sophians [Shiite Iranians] paint figures, such as the figure of [Imam]’Ali, riding on horse with a sword’ (Membre 1993: 52), and Calmard’s study of popular Shiite ceremonies of the Safavid period documents the usage of portable paintings of Imam ‘Ali and other Shiite saints associated with the *Ta'ziyeh* performance as vehicles of state policy (Calmard 1996).

From the viewpoint of the school of large-scale religious paintings and its development during the Safavid period, we should not forget two important points which are crucial to our topic here. Firstly, the mass arrival of European paintings in the Safavid court, which was situated in the city of Isfahan; certainly these series of European oil paintings could have been good sources of inspiration for Safavid painters, encouraging them to experience new techniques and styles of painting.⁷ These European oil paintings could have had two major impacts on Safavid painters and their artworks: first, the usage of full-size human figures in their paintings, and secondly, adding new topics of Christianity to their visual corpus. The second important point in this regard is the massive forced migration of Armenians from Tabriz to the city of Isfahan. While there were many important influences that the Armenian community had on the pictorial art of the Safavid period, my main interest is in their religious art, especially the mural paintings of the churches that they constructed in the city of Isfahan.⁸

Certainly, by the Safavid period, Iranian painters had inherited a good tradition of mural paintings from their predecessors. However, with the arrival of Armenians in the city of Isfahan and the construction of their churches, and additionally the decoration of their own houses in the Jolfa district, they introduced new styles and techniques of production of religious mural paintings to local painters. Those painters who decorated with murals the churches of the newly arrived Armenians of Isfahan were definitely not Iranians, but rather came to Isfahan from countries such as Armenia

and Georgia. There are rumours that this group of foreign painters used the locals as their assistants and apprentices, and this is how they transferred their knowledge to the local community of Isfahani painters who trained the future generation of masters of Shiite mural paintings of saints' shrines in Qajar-era Iran. This could be confirmed by the existence of the most important and the best executed Shiite mural paintings of saints' shrines in Iran which are located today in the city of Isfahan.⁹

Therefore, the Safavid period is the key and the most important arrival point for the naissance of Persian Shiite mural paintings. But it was only during the late nineteenth century that Qajar painters depicted figures of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam 'Ali, other Shiite saints and their folk histories on a massive scale intended for the viewing of the entire public community. During the Qajar dynasty, the veneration of Shiite imams' and saints' shrines was represented by both the increasing influence of Shiite scholars of Islamic jurisprudence (*'ulema*) and, most clearly, by the fact that the public ritual of mourning for the third Shiite imam, Hoseyn ibn-'Ali, Prince of Martyrs, was conducted progressively throughout Iran.

The patronage of Qajar kings – especially Naser al-Din Shah – of Iranian Shiism, and consequently the substantial development of the physical environment of Shiite rituals and ceremonies, changed the Iranian landscape. Permanent and temporary ceremonial architecture and spaces were erected for performing public Shiite rituals and popular performances such as *Ta'zieh*. During the same period, for the first time *Ta'zieh* performances and their related Shiite folk stories inspired Qajar popular visual artists, including painters, to depict those sacred scenes in the form of narrative paintings (*naqashiy-i ravayi*) on large oil canvases called *pardeh* (curtain) or *shamayil* (pious icon).

This new genre of religious paintings became the focus of a type of public narrative recitation (*qisikhkhaniy-i revayi*) called *pardehdari* (holding the curtain), *pardehkhani* (narrating the curtain) or *shamayilkhani* (narrating pious iconography), which was primarily for the benefit of outlying villages and poor communities in the countryside that could not participate in Muharram rituals and *Ta'zieh* performances.

Pardehkhani or *shamayilkhani* was a genre of self-employed ambulatory seasonal Shiite performing art (visual recitation). Normally the *pardehdar* (curtain holder) or *shamayilgardan* (pious icon turner) was a humble Dervish (sufi), who knew very well the stories of *Ta'zieh*. He had one or two large oil paintings (*pardeh*) of the relevant scenes in his possession and travelled from village to village all around the country. During his visits, the storyteller could install his ambulatory station in the cemetery or shrine of a holy saint to attract pilgrims, devotees and the public so that he could recite some parts of Shiite stories for them and in exchange receive some money. The main topic of the majority of these oil paintings was the scene of the Battle of Karbala, depicted in a polyscenic composition in which more than one moment of Shiite stories were depicted. This group of popular Shiite storytellers had a profound knowledge of the entire stories of *Ta'zieh*, and by beginning their recitation, for example, from the Battle of Karbala, could visually and mentally transfer their audiences to the scene of the Day of Judgement.

During the same period and based on Shiite popular histories, a specific genre of illustrated religious lithographic books was also published and widely circulated in Iran. These illustrated books were used particularly during *rowzikhkhan* (Torab

2006), a type of Shiite ceremony which was very popular during the Qajar period and particularly concerned the dramatic stories of *Ta'ziyeh* performance. Here the main function of illustrations was to depict visually popular stories of the Iranian version of Shiism in a monoscenic composition in which only one moment of Shiite stories was depicted.

My fieldwork, long-term observations and examination of many Qajar Shiite paintings (*pardeh*, *shamayil*, lithographic books) impels me to conclude that *Ta'ziyeh* performance, ambulatory Shiite paintings and also illustrated religious lithographic books were the main vehicles for the justification and the usage of visual representations of the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt* during the Naseri period. Gradually saints' shrines became the main venues for hosting Shiite figurative mural paintings. During the same period, permanent Shiite mural paintings began to be executed and displayed on the internal and external walls of Shiite shrines and saints' mausoleums in certain cities of Iran, such as Lahijan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Kashan and Shushtar.¹⁰

Lahijan mural paintings

The few surviving nineteenth-century religious mural paintings of saints' shrines around the city of Lahijan in the north of Iran provide crucial information regarding the role of this religious popular art in evoking the senses and feelings of devotees by depicting the major holy figures of Twelver Shiism in different sacred scenes, such as the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (*me'raj*) (Figure 9.1), the tragic epic of the Battle of Karbala (Figure 9.2), or the passing of the *Sirat* Bridge (*al-sirat*) on the Day of Judgement (*ruz-i qiyamat*) (Figure 9.3).



Figure 9.1 The Prophet Muhammad's *Mi'raj*. Qajar mural painting, Seyed Davar Kiya Shrine, Lahijan, Iran, 1997. © Pedram Khosronejad.



Figure 9.2 Imam Hoseyn holding his infant son Ali-Asghar in his arm while preparing for the final battle. Qajar mural painting, Aqa Seyed Ibrahim Shrine, Babajan Dareh, Lahijan, Iran, 1997. © Pedram Khosronejad.



Figure 9.3 Passing the *Sirat* Bridge. Qajar mural painting, Aqa Seyed Ali Shrine, Mot'alegh Mahaleh, Lahijan, Iran, 1997. © Pedram Khosronejad.

Based on my fieldwork and interviews with local devotees since 1997, I can confirm that one of the key reasons for the patronage and consequently the execution of these mural paintings on the walls of saints' shrines was to visually narrate major stories of Shiite Islam and the *Ahl-i Beyt* for devotees – local communities who were profound Shia believers and loyal to their saint's shrine, but mostly illiterate. Therefore, one of the best methods to educate them in the main topics of religion was through using such pictorial storytelling. Another reason for the execution of these Shiite visual narrations, as I discussed with the local informants, could be the absence of *Ta'ziyeh* groups, *pardehkhān* and *shamayilgardān*. The costs of performing *Ta'ziyeh* are very high, and even today not all communities can afford to bring such large performing groups to their village. Consequently, the walls of saints' shrines could be considered as one of the best supports for the visual recitation of selected Shia narratives which are the main sequences of *Ta'ziyeh*, *pardehs* and *shamayils*.

In contrast to the saints' tombs and the main doors of saints' shrines, no one touches, kisses or even approaches closely these Shiite mural paintings to receive blessings. Their sanctity is not in their materiality, but in their sacred visual reflections (*baztab-i qodsi*) in the heart (*qalb*) of devotees to evoke special feelings concerning the sacred moment depicted and to transfer mentally to those very scenes.

These mural paintings were created under the patronage of local wealthy believers (*waqif*) as an endowment act (*waqf*) and votive gesture (*nazr*) to the local saints' shrines, and executed by unknown seasonal ambulatory folk artists (*naqash-i dowrihgard-i fasli*). Not much is known about these painters, their origins, their techniques of production or even their world of aesthetics. The physical characteristics of Shiite holy figures and the composition of major scenes executed by these artists follow the illustrations of some of the previously mentioned lithographic books. My observations suggest that a majority of the artists of these saints' shrines used such pictorial samples for the creation of the main body of their artworks.

During my post-fieldwork visual analyses, I found that the visual order of most of these mural paintings rarely followed literary prototypes of Shiite histories and related events, and probably out-of-order visual sequences followed an unwritten rule rather than the exception in the majority of cases. I think artists deliberately did not follow step by step what the stories narrated. Here, artists were free to visually express their own world view with the creation of new compositions, exaggeration in the size of



Figure 9.4 Front-door mural painting. Qajar mural painting, Seyed Ali Kiya Shrine, Rankouh, Lahijan, Iran, 1997. © Pedram Khosronejad.

figures, or even the use of unusual and provocative colours. As long as they could visually convince the patron of the artwork and the viewers that this scene depicted the Battle of Karbala and these beheaded bodies belonged to the companions of Imam Hoseyn, in the rest of their work they were free (Figure 9.4).

I also found that in some cases the visual order of the stories or protagonists is closely related to the design and architectural form of the saint's shrine building, rather than the topic of painting or style of the artist. In such cases, the cycles of stories and their heroes were usually divided into neatly framed fields that corresponded directly to the basic structural parts of the shrine and not the real story. When a door or a

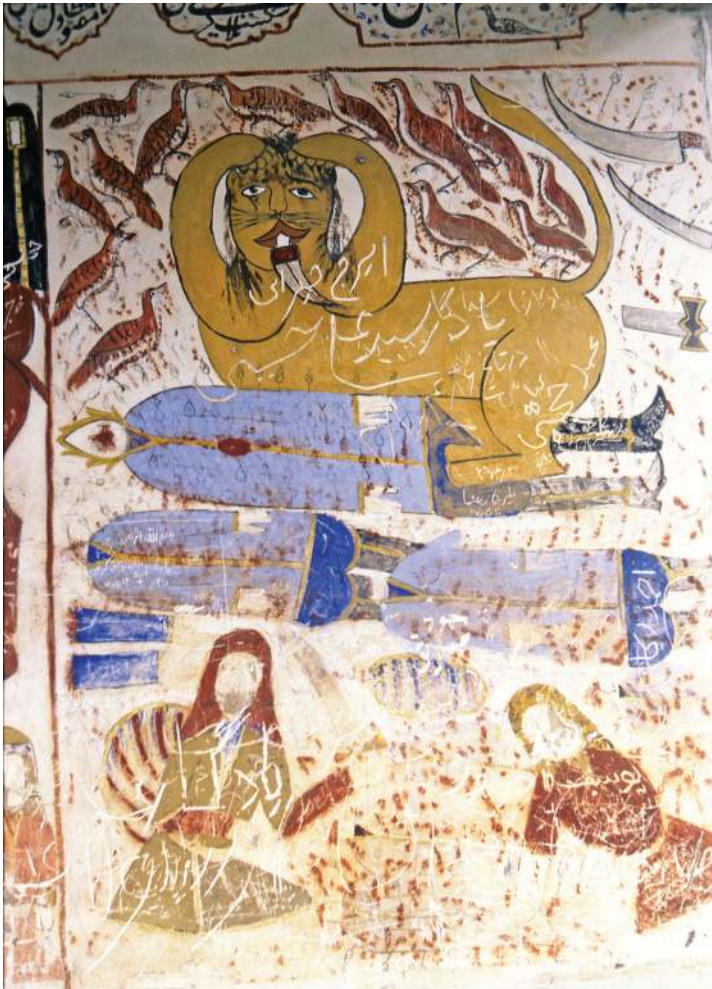


Figure 9.5 Lion guarding decapitated bodies, one of the episodes of the Battle of Karbala. Qajar mural painting, Aqa Seyed Muhammad Shrine, Pincha, Astaneh Ashrafiyeh, Iran, 1997. © Pedram Khosronejad.

window appeared in the middle of a work or when a wall was smaller than the painting, artists had no choice and had to employ their creativity to finish their work.

Here, the function of visual depictions of the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt* is close to the 'vision by the heart' (*al-ru'ya bi l-qalb*), a ritualistic practice performed by some Sufi brotherhoods of the Dhahabiyya in the city of Shiraz, Iran. This practice involves focusing the devotee's eye on the *shamyil* of Imam 'Ali while concentrating on one's own heart and performing the *zikhri* 'Ali (Amir-Moezzi 2012: 28). The main point in this ritual is that without the physical aid (a painting of Imam 'Ali), new arrival devotees are incapable of visualizing the face of Imam 'Ali in their hearts. Like the above ritualistic practice, the religious mural paintings of Lahijan's saints' shrines function as physical media to strengthen the interaction between the devoted viewer and Shiite sacred stories and events. During my fieldwork in these saints' shrines, on several occasions I observed that many pilgrims and devotees were able to internalize the sacred moments of those Shia stories through lamenting for Imam Hoseyn, while at the same time looking at these mural paintings and virtually transferring to the scene of the battle. For example, the series of mural paintings which depicts the scene of the massacre of Karbala will help mentally and assist emotionally worshippers in their virtual journey to imagine themselves accompanying Imam Hoseyn. Mostly during the Muharram rituals, by lamenting in the saint's shrine which is accompanied by deep nostalgic Muharram music, devotees find themselves beside the beheaded body of Imam Hoseyn and his martyred companions.

As most of these mural paintings are depicted according to Shiite narratives, they will have their most profound emotional impacts (*ta'sir-i rouhi*) on devotees during the related ritualistic ceremonies. This does not mean that they cannot evoke the emotion (*shur*) and feelings (*hal*) of viewers outside the ceremony periods. As soon as Shiite believers see the visual representations of the beheaded body of Imam Hoseyn, they will spontaneously cry and beat their chests in memory of the sufferings of the Prince of Martyrs (*Seyid al-Shohada*) (Figure 9.5). However, as mentioned previously, such visual provocation requires a background story which is already deeply engraved in the heart of the viewer.

Concluding remarks

The theological objections to figurative visual art have been active from the early periods in Islam's history and have successfully prohibited the entrance of visual representations of human beings into any part of the religious life of the Muslim communities. Religious figurative paintings are not found in Islamic monuments outside of Iran, and orthodox religious sentiments have always been active in the prohibition of pictorial representations of human beings. Generally speaking, it has been stated that the paintings of human beings is forbidden in the Qur'an; but there is no specific mention of such prohibition in the 'Word of God'. The only verse (Q 5.90)¹¹ which theologians may quote in support of such condemnation of figurative visual art makes it clear that the real object of the prohibition is the avoidance of idolatry. The fact is that Shiite theologians condemned visual representations of human beings just as

severely as Sunni theologians. The explanation of these facts is that the condemnation of the painting of living figures was a theological opinion common to the whole Muslim world, and the practical acceptance of it largely depended on the influence of the theologians and of course political leaders on the traditions and beliefs of a society at any one particular time. Therefore, despite the hostility of the theologians and the unsympathetic attitude of the main body of orthodox believers, there have been certain aspects of Islamic religious thought which have found expression for themselves in the form of figurative art, and the painter has been called up to depict the various scenes of Muslim religious history (Arnold 1965). As Flaskerud states (2010), aniconic attitudes prevail among Sunni theologians and Sunni popular practices, although exceptions to such positions among the Sunnis are many. Adherents to the Twelver branch of Shiism in Iran have taken a different position and can look back at a long history of producing figurative imagery, with themes from Shia hagiography to be used in the service of religion.

The stories of Shiite holy figures – the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt* – in Qajar Iran cannot be told without thoughtful consideration of the visual culture (*farhang-i tasviri*) and the culture of seeing (*farhang-i didari*) developed and practised to enhance and propagate the cult of the visual veneration of saints. In this chapter, I have endeavoured to demonstrate how the experience of seeing and visualizing Shiite holy figures could be brought to the viewer, and the viewer to the holy figures, by means of envisioning different episodes of these mural paintings. Through the power of representing the ultimate sacred figures of Shiite Islam in a great variety of visual modes and scenes, ranging from the magnificent to the most humble, believers of every class can participate in the spiritual experience of visual devotion in the proximity of the sacred locus, or from a physically distant vantage point. These series of Persian visual art allow and induce greater participation by all laity.

Visual depictions of the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt* in the form of mural paintings as described above call our attention to the existence of a figural imagery of holy figures in Persian Shiite visual culture and the importance of their sacred meanings and religious functions in the devotional life of viewers, topics which have until recently received no attention. While any type of visual representation of the Prophet Muhammad and Muslim saints is often considered non-existent by scholars of Islam, Iranian Shiite Muslims hold divergent views on the production, circulation and the usage of holy figurative imageries, particularly in the context of devotional practices.

Lahijan's mural paintings of saints help the devoted audiences to experience the unseen holy figures visually (Khosronejad 2018). Certain aspects of pilgrimage and devotional sites signalled nuances of meaning and importance to pilgrims. These Shiite mural paintings dignify and enhance the sacred spaces, thereby eliciting appropriate responses from their viewers. Taking devotees on a mental and visual excursion to Shiite sacred sites, Lahijan's mural paintings of the Qajar period bid the believer to circumambulate the shrine and follow the story in both body and soul, to look through the image itself.

In the case of Lahijan's mural paintings in saints' shrines, devotees are present with locally (*bumi*) created and culturally (*farhangi*) embedded multifaceted sensory

experiences in which visualization, seeing and sensation are part of the complex Shiite visual aesthetic. To many observers, visualization and seeing are central to the recollection of holiness and saintly power; to the dissemination of religious knowledge; to the transformation of emotions; to cultic behaviour; and to the understanding of ethical values and spiritual experiences. Therefore, there are complex relationships between the visual, the unseen and Shiite aesthetical practices and sensory experiences.

The majority of the mural paintings of Lahijan are designed to create the hopes (*omid*) and shape the beliefs (*bavar*) of adherents, while at other times particular depictions help to fulfil their expectations by marking the goal of the excursion and giving physical form to spiritual aims. Indeed, anticipation colours the actual act of devotion, and visual features help to intensify the experience. These Persian mural paintings make the inaccessible accessible; they mostly illustrate the non-visible, the ethereal, and the infinite by explaining and sometimes endlessly reproducing aspects of the material and the finite.

Therefore, pilgrimage practice and devotion to the saints' shrines of Lahijan is not defined merely by the physical boundaries of travel and the shrine building, but also by the intense seeing and visualizing experience, including mural paintings, to enhance the viewers' feelings of awe (*ehtiram*) and respect (*tavaazo*) for the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt*, while at the same time teaching them the legendary specifics regarding the history of the Iranian version of Shiism.

Through visual interpretations of Shiite events and related histories, the mural paintings of the saints' shrines of Lahijan engage the mental and emotional participation of devoted viewers. By representing the figures of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam 'Ali, Imam Hoseyn and other Shiite saints in a multitude of sacred stories within panoramic views, these mural paintings allow the Shia viewer to travel virtually and spiritually in both time and space, to participate emotionally in all related sacred events.

Just like saintly persons, these mural paintings likewise play intermediary roles in constructing knowledge and faith, in turn helping devotees conceive of and communicate with the realm of the sacred bodies and their related stories. Figurative representations of the Prophet Muhammad and his *Ahl-i Beyt* have fulfilled such roles in cultural traditions, tending to manifold devotional and pedagogical needs.