

Viewpoint/ Critical Review

Nature in the Murals on Vali-E-Asr Street in Tehran Influenced by the Identity of the Environment or a Purely Decorative Attitude? Evaluating the Relationships Between the Presence and Position of Nature with the Identity of the Environment in the Murals' Context

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Abstract | The first trace of the changed living structures caused by the evolution of the new world in the city has emerged in the separation between humans and the surrounding environment. Subsequently, art has become responsible for filling a part of this gap, especially in improving the quality of urban life regarding the connection between the dualities. In this case, murals are the most efficient urban art that deals with the public audience and is formed as an artwork in the city within the interaction between painting context conditions, the subjectivity and perception of the artist, and the audience's understanding. Among the infinitely diverse topics of the motifs depending on the city walls, as a landscape foundation emphasizing the mentality of the audience community and influencing the thought and collective unconscious of the audiences, "nature" has been one of the major role players in the topic of murals. However, the position of nature and its relationship with the mentality and demands of citizens have not been explained accurately. Studies imply that after the decorative approach was elaborated given mural art practitioners, nature and its bases in the urban murals of Tehran, particularly in Vali-E-Asr Street, have been based on the decorative approach principles used in the exhibition of works. In this regard, nature has been shaped as an indicator of naturalistic lived experience in the minds of citizens beyond this interaction with the visual environment and being inspired by the context's landscape identity.

Keywords | *Mural Painting, Nature, Urban Landscape, Vali-E-Asr Street.*

Introduction | What kind of connection has the place of nature as a landscape base for the visual expression and its representation in the frame of murals in Tehran's Vali-E-Asr Street created with the environmental conditions of this identity street in Tehran?

As non-verbal content, the mural is the platform for the most rooted visual interaction between humans and the city's body which is not only considered urban art but also plays a role in conveying the specific concepts in the city. The tastes and needs of citizens sometimes influence

these concepts and are also affected by the practitioners' willingness to organize the urban landscape. Nature is one of the topics that must be applied in urban art due to changes in the structure of urban life and its connection with human life. When we consider mural painting as an art used for the optimal arrangement of the cities, this art smooths the spaces and integrates the objective-real and abstract elements in the image frame. In other words, the underlying factor explaining how a mural is created in the space and environment where this image has been illustrated realizing the context for audience reading.

Mural painting is one of the most common terms in

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the art of Iran. According to Persian references and the encyclopedia, Divarnegari is defined as the equivalent Latin term for “Mural Painting” regarding its meaning and content (Alavinejad, 2008, 20). The major difference between mural painting and painting on canvas is seen in the relationship between mural painting and the surrounding space and context in which painting is done. The difference that distinguishes mural painting and painting is the difference between movable and immovable, dependent and independent, and irresponsible platforms of these two art frames, which are canvas and wall (Kafshchian Moghadam, 2004, 69-70). Hence, it can serve as a powerful medium for conveying the concepts. On the other hand, as a place for human living, nature can play a role in landscape aesthetics, and this is a substantial issue as a main basis for improving the quality of urban life, particularly in the current period when the concern for infrastructural and underlying cases for living in cities has been eliminated. Therefore, it is essential to consider how to increase the quality of urban life, including its beauty and strategies to achieve it (Mansouri, 2010). On the other hand, nature has been discussed as an art frame, especially in mural painting since human life began¹. Therefore, it can be considered that urban murals are a part of the built body but also reflect the city culture through a natural process of serving and influential media sending their message to citizens (Pakzad, 2013, 4). However, the important point is how much the content of these effective urban media influences the audience in a connection with the identity of the environment and context.

Structure of Criticism

Nature's presence as the main topic of the murals in the city has coincided with a movement called the decorative mural and landscape painting approach after the period of 1988-1996 after the war under the surveillance of the Tehran Beautification Organization (Pourbakhsh, 2013). There was again a tendency towards decoration and beautification in urban mural painting for the first time after the revolution so the first decorative mural painting and mural landscape painting were designed and implemented at that time to beautify the urban space making it happy by the Beautification Organization (Kafshchian Moghadam & Royan, 2007, 108). Despite this attention and attendance, however, the structure is highly preferred to the content in this approach, and the natural landscape did not make a relationship with its visual and conceptual environment (ibid., 109).

The second period of the connection between mural painting and nature is the approach selected as the agenda by practitioners in 1996 when the landscape motifs and Persian painting ornaments that also comprised natural foundations were used in urban spaces for decoration

following aesthetic principles. This process continued until the end of the 2010s (Pourbakhsh, 2013).

Vali-E-Asr Street in Tehran is one of the first streets considered as one of the urban natural heritages along with the modernization process and a commanding attitude, with predetermined regulations and urban management (Atashinbar, 2013, 15). In addition to the communicational role and being considered as a structural foundation in the spatial organization of the city due to the specific geographical and natural conditions of this street. Regardless of the current function of this street, its historical and nature-oriented identity has made it one of the most important streets of Tehran, which has been one of the focal and leading areas for art activities in the city, so that mural painting art has not been an exception in this case. However, available studies have not examined the accurate nature of proportion and its presence in the heart of Valiasr Street.

Hence, the authors have studied the artworks and their relationship with nature by dividing this street into three main areas from the southernmost to the northernmost zones as mentioned below:

1. Rah Ahan Square to Vali-E-Asr Square
2. From Vali-E-Asr Square to Vanak Square
3. From Vanak Square to Tajrish Square

First Zone: Rah Ahan Square to Vali-E-Asr Square

Few murals are available in the southernmost zone of Vali-E-Asr Street for many reasons.

The dense urban fabric and fine-grained plaques in the street margin that are mainly assigned to microscale businesses have prevented the murals from being illustrated on the walls. The reason is the lack of desired conditions for creating paintings because the proper urban walls to allocate them to such artworks are not available.

The second layer of assessment of paintings indicates the dominance of social and cultural perspectives in this area of the street. In other words, the traditional social fabric of this zone has led to the formation of some paintings with belief-oriented topics. The content of the paintings has been directed toward painting pictures of martyrs in nature. In these paintings, nature plays a ritual and symbolic role, using two realistic and abstract aspects in showing nature as an expression of “verse” and an allegorical image of heaven, where martyrs live. Hence, murals' social content has been transformed, so they do not express the dominant presence of nature.

On the other hand, the dense fabric at this edge of the street (the southernmost zone of the area) is seen in addition to reduced natural fabric density (trees), so practitioners do not aim to separate natural components and are not reluctant to represent them in the painting because there is no objective natural representation in the surrounding

environment. This critical case can be considered a sign of separation between content and environment identity so that the content is not influenced by this identity.

The practitioners could not show their connection with nature in the content and structure, or establish communication with the visual environment.

Second Zone: From Vali-E-Asr Square to Vanak Square

The middle zone of Vali-E-Asr Street provides a different condition than its southern area since the number of murals gradually increases when moving from the first area in this zone towards the southern areas.

Changed conditions of the urban fabric and density of plaques located in the street margin of this zone, as well as the more open structure of the urban body, have provided the field for illustrating more paintings in this zone.

Moreover, reduced physical density in this zone has led to the distinguished presence of nature in the image frame, so that the density of natural elements in the street margin is greater than in the first zone, and the continuity

of the objective nature presence exists in this zone. The topological structure of this area of the street is another aspect considered in the analysis of the murals. Relatively high slope-based structures in some areas of this zone—longitudinal slope and transverse slope—and subsequently the creation of a proper urban context for examining the murals are other reasons leading to numerous murals seen in this area. Accordingly, artists have selected nature as the core topic of their works regarding the available natural structure in the street (Fig. 1).

This density and presence influence both the number and content of the murals. Hence, it has been attempted to pay attention to the correlation between the objective presence of nature, its representation in the artistic frame, and its narration in the zone. This case has emerged and is realized through the representation of the nature components in a realistic frame titled “painting content.”

Granulation of urban fabric and open urban bodies and provided art platforms in addition to natural density have led to simultaneous content-structure correlation then presented to the audience, so less separation exists



Fig. 1. A part of the paintings in the second zone, in which the content and shape of murals are realistically influenced by the need for constant protection of nature, so nature is the core subject of murals. Photo: Sina Naseri, 2023.

between them. In this zone of the street, therefore, “nature” has been away from a topic abstracted from identity and structure, and it has been attempted that the paintings are influenced by the identity-based structure and links of the context regarding the “subject,” “content,” and processing context.

Third Zone: From Vanak Square to Tajrish Square

The third and last zone of Vali-E-Asr Street in its northernmost part has a different condition compared to the other two zones. The murals available in this area indicate some factors, including geographical conditions of the zone and “street slope,” as well as coarse granulation of urban scale such as Mellat Park, Broadcasting Organization, and several medical centers and commercial complexes are factors restricting the context of paintings that affect the number of murals. Despite the mentioned constraints, one of the largest murals on Vali-E-Asr Street can be seen on the eastern wall of Mellat Park, located in this zone. In this mural, the artist has illustrated the nature extension in the

urban structure, mixing the objective and subjective aspects and exhibiting them. In addition to the mentioned factors, the density of natural elements in this zone is greater than in the first zone and less than in the second zone, and the expressive content of this zone is a combination of realistic and abstract representation. Under such conditions, nature is present in the murals with plurality, diversity, and dispersion of nature expression and representation in different frames only with its decorative approach, so that the content of these paintings is less connected to the identity available in the context (street). Also, this separation between the content and structure of the murals is obvious (Fig. 2).

Conclusion

According to Iranian ritual thought, naturalism, integration, and human mental tendencies towards nature are rooted in the ancient beliefs, and sacredness of the natural elements. This trend was not disconnected after the advent of Islam, and this component is seen as an identity base in artworks after Islam. Accordingly, architecture and painting have created artworks



Fig. 2. Murals in the southern zone of Vali-E-Asr Street are fewer under the influence of the urban fabric of this zone and changed the functional nature of the street becoming a commercial zone compared to the similar sample (second zone). Photo: Sina Naseri, 2023.

based on such beliefs (Javadi, 2004, 31). Since the artist is inspired by the environment in the creation of the artwork, it is an impossible or incomplete process to create artworks that are publicly accepted without considering the factors available in the context. A review of the murals painted on Vali-E-Asr Street indicates that the quantity and quality of the artworks on this street are affected by various factors. However, it is a vague case because the practitioners of these artworks could not form the content and structure in a correlated whole connected to the context's identity regarding the "representation of nature" topic. However, a narrative mural in a street whose identity depends on the natural structure aims to fill the gap of the lack of attendance in the missed nature through different methods, including presenting nature through subjective counterparts in an artwork (Table 1). However, this attitude is firmly a

single apparent and decorative approach. The dominance of the decorative attitude of murals in Tehran City and the use of the shapes and themes leading to visual smoothing of urban walls make nature at the center of attention, which must be found based on the Iranians' two attitudes towards nature and its sanctity and respect and the confirmed connection of this attitude leading to a context for creating of artworks in Tehran's landscape art where nature has made a live experience for the mental geography of citizens. Unfortunately, the practitioners of urban mural painting art in Tehran have expressed "nature" as one of the expressive components of the art without adhering to the necessity of the relationship between the visual environment of the content and the context inspired by it. This is a context that has a unique identity, social aspects, and landscape (Fig. 3).

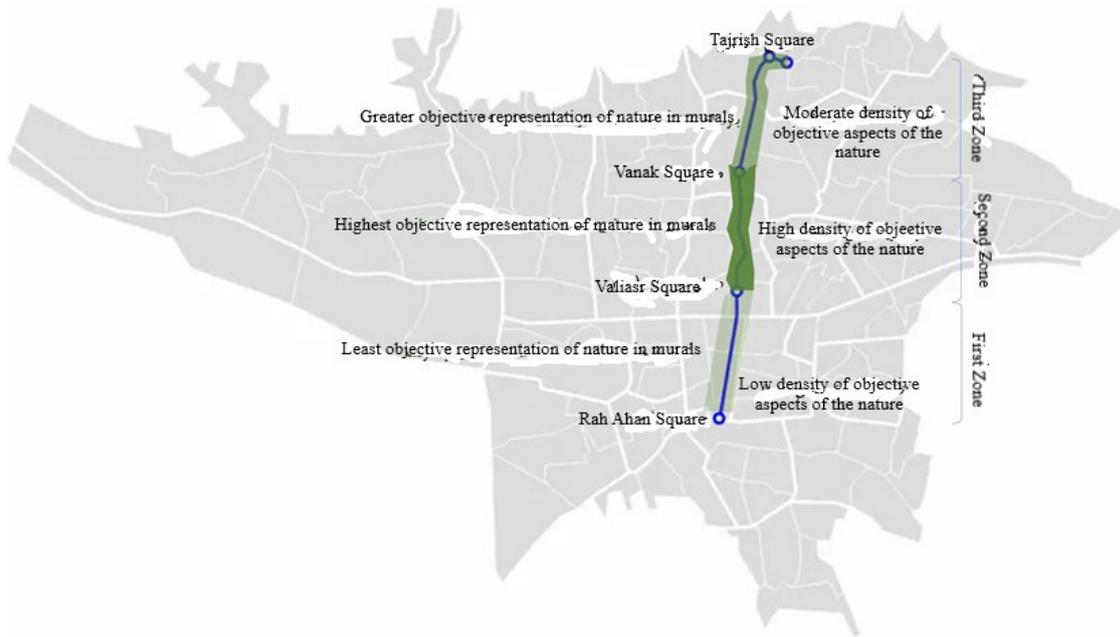


Table 1. Comparative study of structures forming the murals, influence, and impression of them on the quantity and quality of murals. Source: Authors.

Fig. 3. Relationship between and effect of nature's objective aspects in the zone and their expressions and representations in frame murals. Source: Authors.

Zone	Physical-environmental conditions	Objective rate of natural components	Number of murals with a nature theme	Nature presence	Overall representation
-First zone: from Rah Ahan Square to Vali-E-Asr Square	-Dense with low slope -Lack of proper context for environmental art, especially mural painting	-Relatively low due to changes in the structure of the street in the area	-Few	-Mainly in the margin of the painting	-Abstract
-Second zone: from Vali-E-Asr Square to Vanak Square	-Open structure based on the alignment line -Suitable context for environmental art particularly mural painting	-Relatively high Open urban structure next to the green spots Large scale	-Many	-Mainly context	-Mainly, realistic
-Third zone: from Vanak Square to Tajrish Square	-Structure with moderate density	-Moderate	-Average number	-Mainly, the margin for expressing other concepts	-Mainly, abstract

Endnotes

1. Cave paintings can be named as the first signs of nature's presence and its pillars in human life, paintings painted in Lascaux and Altamira caves can be named.

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