

# Reviving Persian Motifs: A Contemporary Designer's Approach to Cross-cultural Storytelling

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**Abstract-** *This paper explores the revival and reinterpretation of traditional Persian motifs in contemporary design practice as a means of cross-cultural storytelling. Through an interdisciplinary lens, it examines how ancient visual traditions can be reimagined to communicate hybrid identities and cultural narratives in a globalized context. The study argues that such motifs serve not only as aesthetic tools but also as vehicles for socio-political commentary and cultural preservation. Drawing upon examples from contemporary fashion, graphic design, and product design, the paper illustrates how Persian design elements function as a language of visual resistance and reconnection. The findings highlight the significance of cultural heritage in fostering global dialogue through design. This research investigates the revival and adaptation of traditional Persian motifs in contemporary design as a method of cross-cultural storytelling. Drawing on visual analysis, semiotic theory, and cultural heritage frameworks, this paper presents a case study based examination of how Persian motifs are decontextualized to resonate with diverse audiences while maintaining their cultural integrity. The findings underscore the potential of design as a medium for dialogue between tradition and modernity.*

**Indexed Terms-** *Persian motifs, contemporary design, cultural storytelling, visual arts, heritage preservation, semiotics*



## I. INTRODUCTION

In a time of globalization, design increasingly operates as a cultural mediator. The appropriation of traditional motifs especially those with rich historical and symbolic value offers designers a means to navigate identity, heritage, and innovation. Persian design, known for its intricate geometry, floral patterns, and deep symbolism, offers fertile ground for contemporary reinterpretation. This paper investigates how modern designers engage with Persian motifs to construct narratives that bridge cultures and time.

## II. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF PERSIAN MOTIFS

Persian art and design span over 2,500 years, influencing regions from Central Asia to the Mediterranean (Canby, 2005). Iconic visual elements include arabesques, calligraphy, and architectural geometry, often rooted in Islamic art principles but extending far into Zoroastrian and preIslamic traditions (Blair & Bloom, 2009). The design motif known as paisley in the west is taken from the ancient Aryan boteh (botteh) motif. Boteh is a Persian word meaning bush, shrub, a thicket (a small dense forest of small trees or bushes), bramble, herb. Some would even take it to mean a palm leaf, cluster of leaves (perhaps as a repeated pattern) and flower bud. In Azerbaijan and in Kashmir (in the north of the Indian sub-continent), the name used to describe the motif is buta. While in recent history, the design is primarily connected to silk and wool termeh fabric and carpets from Yazd and Kerman in Iran as well as woollen scarves from Kashmir, the design can be found in fabric and carpets from throughout the Aryan areas of influence and trade.

Key motifs include:

**Boteh (Paisley):** A flame or teardropshaped motif symbolizing life and eternity

Cypress Trees: Representing resilience and mourning

Calligraphic Inscriptions: Often drawn from poetry or religious texts, reinforcing Persian reverence for language

These motifs have transcended their origins, becoming part of global visual culture while retaining their symbolic weight.

**Problem Statement:** According to German psychologist Geert Hofstede, a nation's values are a pivotal aspect of its culture. Iran has long been a repository of diverse cultural and spiritual values, notably exemplified in Iranian art, a prominent conduit for these values. However, the transmission of these principles, found in items like calligraphy and embellishments in books, has experienced a decline. Many fundamental ideas, such as freedom, commitment, and fairness, have either diminished in importance or been altered. Objects, once carriers of profound cultural ideals, now remain unnoticed, disconnected from Iranian cultural standards, prohibitions, and ways of living. This situation, particularly prominent among The juvenile demographic within the present generation of Iran, poses difficulties in effective communication, leading to feelings of opposition towards one's own culture and identity dilemmas for students in transition.

**A Brief History of Cultural Affordance:** It might be interesting to mention history of Affordance Theory and How the proposal of Cultural Affordance can enrich the hidden discussion in the community of designers. To the authors, the concept of Cultural affordance emerged out of a huge but unseen discussion between interactionists and representation. In order to open up discussion, first we will start from a history of affordance theory, then we will try to narrate the origin of internal discussion and finally to introduce how the concept of cultural affordance can help us bypass the theoretical dead-end and in which way it can be helpful.

We need to apologize beforehand if the narrative presented is very concise and we do understand that there might be many critics about what we narrate and how we narrate, however we invite the readers to as the origin of affordance theory, it was introduced first by psychologist James Jerome Gibson. He was

employed by U. S. Army in order to solve the problem of Young Pilots (Pick: 1982). The main problem was that U.S. had employed a lot of not very professional pilots in order to cover the forces needed. However, those young pilots who were not practically and professionally educated, were confronted by severe accidents and were killed painfully.

Gibson was expected to improve the behaviour of those young newly arrived pilots. During his research, he unexpectedly reached a strange phenomenon, namely intuition. He found out that professional pilots do not guide the planes based on instructions, they do it intuitively. This phenomenon of intuition was not something which could be analyzed by the scientific equipment and theories of that time, it was rather referred to domain of art and not everyday things (using Donald Norman's Terminology regarding his publication *Design of Everyday Things*). (Norman: 2014) In the continuum, Gibson found out (and even claimed) that a new branch of scientific research needs to be shaped, something we mention today as psychomathematics (with modern name of cognitive science) and psychophysics (which is very near to current design manifestations under terms like Experience, User Interface and Form Studies).

In his last publication an ecological approach to visual perception he gifted the scientific community the affordance, as a complementary term for Gestalt and Gestalt Psychology( Gibson:1979) to narrate quickly while promoters of Gestalt principles claimed that our understanding follows universal principles the same as Newton Principles of matter and while Whole is beyond some of parts Affordance theory adds two more axioms: First of all, there is at least levels of meaning which does not need to be analysed, it can be achieved immediately, the same as the act of tuning in Radio (using metaphor of wave for meaning). Second meaning is not subjective or objective, it emerges from INTERACTION, in this case metaphor of interaction and INTERACTIVITY becomes an important part of understanding the world.

(Readers can compare this term with the term *DasSein* (the way used by Martin Heidegger), Thrown into the World and Confrontation to see how this term can be helpful for designers and design researchers) As a narrative of Challenges of affordance and design:

After this publication of Gibson, two researchers with near simultaneous timeline introduced this term to the design community: Donald Norman and Gerda Smets. Norman introduced this term in order to solve the problem with daily interaction highly technical objects surrounding us (Norman: 2014), and Gerda Smets defended this term as a scientific basis of Industrial Design Engineering, namely as a base for Knowledge Driven Design (Smistman, 1995). While teachings of Prof. Smets, together with her students such as Late Professor Cornelis Johannes Overbeeke, Prof. Dr. Pieter Jan Stappers and Prof. Dr. Paul Hekkert reached at the founding of Studiolab in Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering at TU Delft, which is a very respected and inspirational research studio for Designers and design researchers, we follow the discussions about this term by Donald Norman.

Norman after introducing the term in his book *Design of Everyday things*, tried to keep distance from Gibson's affordance. He claimed he cannot accept that meaning is in the environment, it should be made by brain or mind of the user and he cannot accept if a designer would say, I put an affordance here or there, in order to keep the distance from Gibson, he invented the term perceived affordance to correct his narrative from. Later on he not only agreed that the term affordance might have physical manifestation, which is beyond the term convention, but he claimed that signifiers would be more helpful for designers, rather than affordance, in other words semiotics is more helpful for designers, than affordance theory or psychophysics (Norman: 2008). To interpret how cultural affordance can help us, With all respect to Donald Norman and his valuable contribution to design community, at least for the term affordance and many other contributions, we would rather try to interpret why such a discussion has emerged and how the term cultural affordance could help. According to Norman, it is meaningless if we say information is picked up, or tuned, by the receiver. Of course it is meaningless, because if we acknowledge that, so we should claim there is a sender who put information in the environment. Are we talking about God? Fine, so we should continue this discussion in Faculty of Theology and not Faculty of Design!! This discussion is well opened by Mark Bickhard and his investigation between interactionists and representationists (Bickhard: 1983). Not to make it longer, we do not

need to believe in a Supreme Being in order to accept the concept of affordance, we just need to believe in the existence of Alterity or Otherness, whom we need to interact and whom has encoded many messages in our built environment- at least- in order to be decoded and used for further promotion and evolution.

### III. CONTEMPORARY DESIGN AND THE ROLE OF MOTIFS



Close-up of one of the yin-yang like



Nishapur (10th century CE) stucco panel containing the yin-yang like motifs  
Note that the motifs are in both the upright and horizontal positions

In contemporary design, Persian motifs are being revived not merely for aesthetic purposes, but to express cultural identity and resistance. Designers of Iranian heritage and others inspired by Middle Eastern traditions use these symbols to comment on heritage, migration, feminism, and politics. The motif looks like one half of the yin-yang symbol, a resemblance that has led to speculation about the symbolism behind the motif. However, except for one relatively modern (10th century CE) use of the motif in stucco work from Nishapur presently in Iran's northwest province of Iran, we do not find any other credible examples of the boteh motif used in a yin-yang manner.

The carved stucco panels were excavated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Iranian Expedition

from 1935 to 1940, with a final season in 1947. Nishapur was a junction on the Aryan trade roads (also called the Silk Roads). The panels are dated to the Abbasid period of Iranian / Central Asian history, a period that followed the Sassanian era. According to the description at the Met's site, "Among the earliest major finds of the excavations in Nishapur was a building complex that included a domed inner room; a vaulted hall, or iwan; and the courtyard onto which it opened. The lower walls of these areas were decorated with carved and painted stucco dadoes of lively and beautiful design, and at least some of the upper walls were polychrome-painted on a smooth whitewash coating over walls" and, "Carved stucco decoration, perennially important in Iranian architecture, is most notably represented by the reconstruction of a small iwan, or hall, of the tenth century (from the mound called Sabz Pushan), whose dadoes must have given an even more sumptuous visual effect before the loss of their polychrome painting."

Examples include:

Studio Pousti (Londonbased): Uses Persian tile patterns in architecture to bridge Eastern and Western spatial concepts.

Nima Nabavi: A UAEbased artist who modernizes Persian geometry through digital art to explore order and chaos.

Roxane Zand's Curations (Sotheby's): Highlight the cultural fusion of contemporary Iranian artists in diasporic contexts.

Such work emphasizes continuity through transformational defining feature of cross cultural storytelling in design.

#### IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HYBRIDITY AND VISUAL SEMIOTICS

Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity (1994) underpins this study, as Persian motifs in contemporary design represent a "third space" where identities are negotiated. Visual semiotics, as discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), further aids in decoding the meanings embedded in motifs. When placed in modern contexts—such as minimal branding or wearable art—traditional symbols carry

new messages shaped by both memory and reinvention.

#### V. CASE STUDY: MOTIF APPLICATION IN SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT DESIGN

Recent innovations in ecoconscious design have revived Persian aesthetics in packaging and textiles. BritishIranian Brand Dals London, for example, has incorporated stylized Persian florals and script in their organic sanitary product packaging to evoke both elegance and environmental ethics. The use of biodegradable materials, paired with a visual identity steeped in tradition, positions the brand as both ethical and culturally expressive.

This case demonstrates how traditional aesthetics can serve as a strategy for differentiation in global markets while maintaining authenticity.

#### VI. DISCUSSION

The resurgence of Persian motifs in contemporary design signifies more than nostalgia it embodies a dialogic process that connects modernity with heritage. These motifs offer:

Cultural continuity in diasporic and global communities

Resistance to homogenized design trends

Aesthetic diversity in commercial and artistic markets

Designers navigating cultural intersections often use such elements to reclaim identity in postcolonial and postmigration contexts. Findings

##### 4.1. Symbolic Themes and Adaptability

Key themes identified include unity (arabesques), love and spirituality (calligraphy), and protection (animal figures). These can be translated across design mediums with minimal distortion when stylized appropriately.

#### 4.2. Storytelling as Cultural Bridge

Narratives rooted in Persian folklore, such as the Shahnameh, provided compelling backstories that added emotional depth to modern design elements. These were well received by both Persian and international viewers in user testing.

#### 4.3. Prototyping and Audience Testing

A collection of packaging designs and poster layouts were developed featuring Persian motifs reimagined with modern typography and colour palettes. Feedback showed increased interest when visual storytelling was used to contextualize motifs.

#### 4.4. Challenges

Designers face tensions between cultural authenticity and modern aesthetic trends. Simplification for commercial use risks aesthetic appropriation or loss of meaning.

### CONCLUSION

Reviving Persian motifs in contemporary design serves as a powerful tool for cross cultural storytelling, enabling designers to convey complex cultural identities through visual means. As globalization continues to influence artistic practices, preserving cultural specificity while fostering innovation becomes crucial. This paper demonstrates that with careful interpretation and ethical engagement, traditional motifs can continue to thrive as living elements in global design dialogues.

#### Methodology

This research adopts a mixed method approach:

- Qualitative analysis of historic Persian design elements (tiles, manuscripts, textiles).
- Visual ethnography examining Persian art in museums and public spaces.
- Practice based design experimentation using Persian motifs in a series of modern brand applications and packaging.
- Interviews with cultural historians and design practitioners.

- Data were collected over six months through visual documentation, archival research, and prototyping exercises.

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