



Science Arena Publications  
Specialty Journal of Humanities and Cultural Science

ISSN: 2520-3274

Available online at [www.sciarena.com](http://www.sciarena.com)

2018, Vol, 3 (3): 14-23

# Thematic Study of Religious Iconography of Prophet's Ascension in the Qajar Period Lithography

Fatemeh Dashtestani<sup>1</sup>, Hanieh Sheikhi Narani<sup>2\*</sup>, Asya Hekmat<sup>3</sup>, Asal Zand Davoudi<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. A Graphic Design, Department of Graphic Design ,Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

<sup>2</sup> PH. D Graphic Design, Department of Graphic Design, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

<sup>3</sup>M. A Graphic Design. Department of Graphic Design, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

<sup>4</sup>PH.D Architecture, Department of Architecture, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

**\*Corresponding Author**

**Abstract:** *This article tries to study the subject of religious iconography of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) in print. The Qajar period and the visual and manifestation of this printed book of prints. However, this research faces two questions: in the design of the icons of the Prophet (PBUH), what are the special and unique features? Can the nature and design of the designs used in the simulation of the same hierarchy be the same in this regard, this research tries to examine a number of religious iconography of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) during the period of Qajarra during the period of the Qajarra period, with the historical theme and descriptive analytical method and using the collection of documents and documents. The results obtained from the semiotics of the printed edition in this area indicate that the signs of the archaeological imprint of the printed edition of the Qajar period are continuing the style and style of coffee house paintings that have been repeated in another manner. The features include: the type of payment of faces, the presence of holy shrines, tidbits, and the manner of placing personality in place of painting, paying attention to the principles of naturalism and later on in the design of works that today have become a well-known face of religious iconography.*

**Keywords:** *Religious Iconography, Lithography, The Holy Prophet's Ascension, Qajar.*

## INTRODUCTION

“Iconography” refers to the notion of presenting a plural representation of a text. The text tells about a religious story. In different cultures and societies, icons involve holy aspects and spiritual forces. The illustration of the miraculous event of the Prophet’s ascension is an example of such iconographies. This phenomenal and significant event has engaged the imagination of Muslim painters in various eras, resulting in different, beautiful content-related and visual reflections of this event in various paintings and lithographic works belonging to the Qajar era.

In creating their valuable works, the Iranian illustrators have always drawn on the transcendental, religious, mystical, philosophical, and literary ideas and themes. The presence of various artists in this process and establishment of different centers for lithography in cities further expanded the works on multiple themes and religious iconography so that all the religious characters—whether Islamic or Shia—were depicted in pictorial works in Islamic versions from different visual perspectives. This research, in addition to the personal attributes of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, studies his exalted place in the remaining rare versions related to lithography. With the aim of reciting one of the most significant pictorial sources (Miraj-Nameh), the research describes the personal characteristics of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, investigates his dressing and the pictorial and iconographic features and various principles of his depictions' designing as well as compositions.

#### **Literature review**

The subject of ascension (=Miraj) and the study of images of illustrated icons of the Prophet Mohammad has been the focus of various researches; however, there has been no study in the field of lithography. Here we refer to the studies directly related to the subject of this paper. The most prominent books in this area are: "Narrative Illustration in Persian Lithographed Books" by Ulrich Marzolph, and "the Book of Falnameh" by Masumeh Farhad in three volumes with the subject of Fal, describing the review of the image of the ascension of Falnameh. In a paper titled "The Review of Shia Themes and Icons in the Image of the Prophet's ascension in the Falnameh of Tahmasebi version", this version has been introduced, and its several images particularly the image of ascension is analyzed in terms of composition and color. However, the studies on the printed versions in the Qajar era and features of visage and icons of the Holy Prophet Muhammad especially in the images of the Prophet's ascension has not been exclusively studied so far.

#### **Research Methodology**

The data of present research was collected using a descriptive-analytical method and the library resources with reference to the original illustrated versions of lithography, all comprising the statistical population of this paper. This research will analyze the printed versions of the iconography about Prophet Muhammad belonging to the Qajar era. It is worth mentioning that a detailed review of the icons will be conducted based on the volume of the found depictions.

#### **The Analysis of the Holy Prophet Mohammad's Icon in the Lithographed, Illustrated Books of the Qajar Era**

While the printing industry, especially lithography in terms of its technical specification, was considered an emergent phenomenon for the Persians, its content had been influenced by established traditions of illustration. The evidence shows that "the exalted tradition of painting and illumination in the old versions prevalent throughout the ages, were considered as a rich backup for lithographed books" (ibid., 2012: 165). On the other hand, "the theme of the Prophet's ascension among such works which is consistent with the paintings of the Qajar era, engendered the evolution of the early Persian painting styles" (Shin Dashtgol, 2010: 219). The status of this new technology where the artistic works such as printing of images on ascension were also created out of it, "was somewhere between the exquisite miniatures and some other folklore arts" (Marzolph, 2012: 165). Therefore, another manifestation of books made iconography more in line with the religious literature. "Homiletics" (=Rozeh Khani) as an important and prominent genre took formation in this era. This naming refers to the book "Rozah-al-Shahadat" compiled by Hossein ben Vaez Kashef, which was used in the public ceremonies specially Tazieh. "With the introduction of printing technology to Iran, many popular printings like the teahouse curtains in single color were made available for the public. These printings largely contained the religious themes such as the Imam's and Prophet's icon and various scenes of Karbala accompanying with prayers and Ziaratnameh" (Fadvi, 2007: 14).

This shows that the people with more interest in religion wanted more printed works with religious themes. In fact, the popular books were illustrated with popular intentions in which the thought of people was

expressed. Among the salient examples related to the iconographies of the Prophet Muhammad are the lithographed books especially the religious ones which had become worn out due to repeated use including the illustrated books of Asaro al-Baghiye, Asrar al-Shahadat, Zobdeh al-Masaeb, Nokhbe al-Navaeb, Koliat-e-Judi, Faregh Gilani, Gnjineh, Asrar, Habib al-Osaf, etc. The most salient example is Tufan al-Abka which was frequently referred and used by homilists (=Roze Khan). Therefore, to review the features of Lithographed images of Miraj, primarily the lithography features need to be studied, as the lithographic prints of Miraj which are largely arising from the general modes and restrictions related to the general techniques of this printing, eventually lead to creation of pictures which take advantage of nearly similar esthetics (in a conventional style), with copy and multiplication having priority in it; a characteristic that further makes clear the distinction between the works in this area with those of iconography. Iconographers of Qajar era in addressing the principles of designing, composition, color, line, and depth view have acted in such way as if they had forgotten all the established and integrated principles of the past eras especially the Timurid and Safavi eras while not learning the new imported principles; thus, there seems a kind of simplistic view and ignorant perception of the predecessors in most of the printed works in this era (Fadvi, 2015: 132).

Disregard for the motion force and composition and design of doll-shaped figures is another feature of these works. Unsophisticated printing and no use of color resulted in mostly single-colored works in black ink on colored papers, this being a reason for some to color the images after the end of the printing process. It seems that due to the absence of the color element in manuscripts belonging to these eras, the element of context finds more salience in the image and the hatches get more value. Emotional expression of the main characters of story, change of line rhythm in various point of the work to create different feelings in the viewer, using dark and light colors, thickness and thinness of line, distance and proximity of visual elements and different scenes are among the roles played by the line in the printed works in the Qajar era (Fadvi, 2015: 134-135) (Figure 3).

As mentioned earlier, there are signs of the ascension tale in the Quran in Sura Asra and Najm. Yet, there is no mention of the word "ascension" in the Quran. Instead, the word Asra has been used. Since the Quran verses are ambiguous and mysterious, the tale of ascension has been developed outside the Quran and appeared in marginal religious works which has undergone many changes.

In many of versions of miniature and lithographic prints belonging to the Qajar era, the Prophet is shown while riding on a Buraq usually with his face covered while surrounded by angels. (while covering the face with Burka didn't exist in the previous era s, it was used in Qajar era as an emphasis on spirituality and holiness of the Prophet, under the influence of religious atmosphere of that era with dominantly Shia tendencies). In most pictorial examples, the angels have raised their hands for prayer and the Prophet Muhammad is shown with his hands joined together on the chest. In fact, these are showing the tradition of worship and its forms. According to the narratives, the Prophet is riding on a "Buraq". The Buraq is half human with an angel-like feather and a tail of a peacock and appears as moving with the angels surrounding him all the time to show him direction. In hadith in the description of "Buraq", it is said that it Buraq is smaller in size than a donkey, has two wings, and travels with each step a distance as far as could be seen. According to Ibne Hosham, Buraq was the very steed that the prophets before Muhammad were riding on it. In a hadith, the Prophet Muhammad said: it had a human face and its mane was like that of the horse, and its legs were like that of cow and camel. Some contemporary authors in interpreting have suggested that the word "Buraq" derives from electricity: the speed of the steed is similar to that of electricity and light. Therefore, the illustrator has tried to describe the religious beliefs and events in the unseen world by depicting these images and signs remained from narratives.

In most printed versions, the presence of only an angel (Gabriel) and/or two and seven angels is evident in either circular form or hanging on the frame in the sky or around the Prophet, each engaged in a task. In most cases, there are two angels on top of the image of the Prophet Muhammad glowing on him. Each angel has been beautifully illustrated while dressed in elaborate cloths with wings. They have been depicted in

heavenly faces yet within the form of earthly young women and girls. The Prophet is at the center and has a rank-based perspective. He is seen with simple clothes and his face illuminated in light while the details of the face are hidden. This glow may be interpreted as his wisdom and exalted place. On the other hand, the decorative tracteries and use of arabesque decorations are intended either for use on clothes or filling the space. Anyway, the compaction of figures does not prevent the visibility and emphasis on the main symbolic element of the work.

In general, it can be said that in lithographic pictures especially those related to ascension, limited elements have been used to create space for images. Therefore, the faces have been depicted in three directions; they are conventional and ideal, less expressing the inner state of the characters. It can be said that the Prophet's visage nearly in all lithographic images of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension is covered in a veil, with a halo as a ring of light in various forms surrounding his head. The forms of this halo can be generally divided into five categories, which are placed around his visage in all the printed versions (see Tables 1 and 2, the column of icons' characteristic).

Among other examples of symbolic signs used as a convention in *Merajnamehs* in consecutive eras is lion design. This symbol has been effective in most of the printed versions available from the Qajar era and puts further emphasis on it. It seems that repetitive use of lion pictures in *Merajnames* in the Safavid and Qajar era means adding a Shia concept. Lion is the symbol of Imam Ali meaning the lion of God. According to the Shia stories about ascension, it is said that a lion comes across the Prophet in ascension and prevents him from stepping forward. The Prophet gives his signet ring to the lion and it lets him enter. In his return from ascension, the Prophet sees the signet ring in Ali's finger. However, it seems that the various stories of *Merajnameh* pursue some political forms in different eras, as by the establishment of the Shia sect in the Safavid era, these Shia elements find widespread manifestation. The important and significant element is the presence of a lion in the left side of the printed version with the Prophet referring by hand to offer the ring. In the space of this version, the lion is standing in a relatively stationary position at the left side of the printed version with a blanket space around it, which also is emphasizing it. In order to express the core element of Shia, i.e., the succession of Imam Ali, the designer artist turns to this method. Lion is the most important element of this image and has a direct link to the Shia thinking; because in the Shia culture, the lion is the symbol of Imam Ali. As narrated by Anas-ben-Malek, the Prophet Muhammad called Imam Ali "the lion of God". Also, the Imam Ali's grandfather's name on the mother's side was Asad (=lion). Therefore, his mother, Fatemeh, called him "Asad" to remind the father's name and also refer to his strong body and large skeleton similar to that of a lion. As the most salient attribute of Imam Ali was his brevity and due to his heroic actions in the battles with or without the presence of the Prophet, the nickname "the lion of God" is abundant throughout the literature of all Islamic languages especially in Arabic, Persian, Ordo and Turkish poetry and prose".

It seems that the painter has involved Imam Ali in ascension tale to highlight his rightfulness as the succession of the Prophet, and since the Prophet has passed the seven heavens, the artist using the earthly symbol of Imam Ali (lion), has employed this meaning to express himself. Another reason for the symbolic use of lion in ascension relates to the succession of Imam Ali. In a part of the image in the printed version of *Merajnameh* in the Qajar era, the Prophet Muhammad is seen on top of the image and the lion—Imam Ali—is standing in the lower position of the Prophet, indicating the superior status of the Prophet. On the other hand, this shows the succession path, as the presence of Imam Ali has been narrated by the Prophet. In this narrative, "at the night of ascension, the Prophet reports about the presence of Imam Ali who was praying God in the heavens where God introduced him to the chosen Prophet as successor and leader of exonerated people". (Muhammad Eshtehardi, 2003: 199) (see Fig. 3)



**Figure 1.** Lithography, the Prophet on the Buraq and the lion (Asad), Imam Ali, Heydari Attacks, the Prophet Muhammad seated on the Buraq, date: 1269 AH, source: (www.ganjineh.kateban.com)



**Figure 2.** Lithography, the Prophet Muhammad seated on the Buraq and Gabriel in front of him, Mirajnameh of Shojaee Mashhadi, illustrator: Amal Ali Khan, date: 1268 AH, the place of maintenance: Ayatollah Golpayegani Library, Gom  
Source: (www.ganjineh.kateban.com)



**Figure 3.** Lithography, the Prophet's ascension, Johari, Muhammad Bagher, the Book of Bahr al-tavil of Mirajname, illustrator: Mirza Hasan, Date: 1273 AH, source: ([www.ganjineh.kateban.com](http://www.ganjineh.kateban.com))









**Figure 4.** Lithography, the Prophet's ascension, seated on Buraq, date: 13 AH, Illustrator: unknown, source: (Fadvi, 2015: 182)







**Figure 5.** lithography, a picture of Buraq, illustrator: unknown, date: 714 AH, source: (Fadvi, 2015: 182).







**Table 1:** A review of the features of the Prophet Muhamad's iconography in lithography, source: (authors).

Features of icons	images	Features of images	Buraq and angel	version
 Radial and heliacal halo	 Source: (Marzolph, 2015: 11)	Angle of view: face to face. flat. Light disseminated in the image. No rank-based perspective. No atmospheric perspective. No shadowy image. Composition is balanced. All visages are three-faced. The composition is diffused.	Buraq, according to narratives, Buraq belongs to beasts in paradise and moves fast, has a long body, bigger than a mule, its mane is hairy, a white body, with two wings near its thighs, each spreading up to its sight. In other narratives, it has been described as having a human-like face, having the ability to understand what he heard like a human being. Some attribute its whiteness to its extremely high speed or brightness. Also in some other Muslim beliefs, Buraq is a steed with the head of a woman or an angel with peacock tail. Borag in most Islamic miniatures and images has been used in relation to ascension (Aghdashlu, 2003: 226-231)	Mirajnameh of the Prophet Muhammad, seated on Buraq, 1268 AH.
 Circular radial halo	 Source: (Marzolph, 2010)			Mirajnameh The Prophet Muhammad seated on Buraq, 1264 AH
 Steroidal halo	 Source(Marzolph, 2010)			Mirajnameh The Prophet Muhammad seated on Buraq, 1291 AH



				Mirajnameh The Prophet Muhammad seated on Buraq, 1265 AH
Radial and heliacal halo	Source: (Marzloph, 2014: 11)			
				Leyli and Mjnoon The Prophet Muhammad seated on Buraq 1270 AH
Radial halo	Source: (www.ganjineh.kateban .com)			

**Table 2:** A review of the features of the Prophet Muhamad's iconography in lithography, source: (authors)

				Heydari Attack The Prophet Muhammad Seated on Buraq 1277 AH
Halo with two nested circles	Source: (www.ganjineh.kateban .com)	Angle of view: face to face. flat. Light disseminated in the image. No rank-based perspective. No atmospheric perspective. No shadowy image. Composition is balanced. All visages are three-faced. The composition is diffused.	The prophetic religion cannot survive without knowing angels and belief in the world of angels, because the angels guide the prophets and mediate them with the divine belief. The significance of the angel and its necessity for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is as much as it is for prophecy and belief in prophets. Mystical journey, The Prophet Muhammad in ascension is not feasible unless with the presence of angels that are the guide. This mystical journey is the outcome of an eternalized training which culminates up to Sidrat al-Muntaha by visiting the guiding angel. This is the inner guide (the path of reaching to the inner realm, the path to theology) (Shaygan, 2013, 128-130)	
				Heydari Attack The Prophet Muhammad seated on Buraq 1269 AH
Radial halo	Source: (www.ganjineh.kateban .com)			
				Unknown The Prophet Muhammad Seated on Buraq 13 AH
Radial and helical halo	Source: (www.metmuseum.org)			



## Conclusion:

The Qajar era has some unique characteristics including the attention to iconography and its expansion as an art by the public. The Prophet Muhammad's ascension is among the issues with special status in the Religious-Islamic miniatures and iconography. The ascension images originally were introduced into miniature and developed since the Ilkhani era and became the springboard for its expansion in the succeeding eras such as Teymouri, Safavieh, Zand, and Qajar. Persian iconography in line with the intellectual, cultural and religious development of the day underwent some symbolic, aesthetic, and contextual transformations. In the Qajar era, by the introduction of the printing industry and serious use of it, these kind of images became available for the public in the form of various books and religious themes. These pictorial characteristics of the Prophet Muhammad's icon survived for several generations later on. These characteristics include the Buraq, painting the angels, the Prophet Muhammad's garment, and turban. Although the pictorial tradition of iconography and displaying the facial details continued from the beginning of Ilkhani era and lasted until the next era, i.e., Teymuri, it didn't remain static and saw sudden changes in the Shah Tahmaseb era, thus the visages of the Prophet Muhammad and his decedents were replaced with a halo. This new achievement in the field of iconography increased in the next eras, i.e., Qajar era, so that in all remaining versions, various halos in new forms were introduced in the realm of illustrating the exalted Islamic and Shia characters. In these printed images, it is seen that the Prophet Muhammad has been painted without a face with only a burka. However, in other iconographies related to this era, the visages of other Imams such as Imam Ali, are seen with limited use of burka. Therefore, this approach is indicative of the exalted place of the Prophet Muhammad compared to other noble Imams. The Prophet's simple garment with no elaborate designs shows his simple and refined temper, as it is a symbol of being dependent on the vanities of the world. Therefore, simplicity in illustration left from Islamic versions can be a proof for this event. As mentioned earlier, the printed version of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension has its roots in the doctrines and beliefs of the Shia sect and its important events, the life, and history of the Prophets, and also the folklore tales, the ascension being one of its most important images in which the core theme and belief of Shiites, i.e., the succession of Imam Ali, is symbolically illustrated in the form a lion. Thus it seems that in different eras, depending on the religious atmosphere of society, the Shia elements have been manifested in the miniature paintings, and in the time when the Shia sect possessed a more powerful stance, the beliefs and doctrines found more opportunity to emerge.

## References

1. Adams, Loury Schneider, 2009, *Methodology of Art*, Translated by Ali Masumi. Tehran: Nazar publishing.
2. Adib Behrooz, Mohsen, 2002, *Ascension from the View Point of Narratives*, Tehran: Beynonmelal Publishing.
3. Aghdashlu, aidin, 2003, the Prophet's ascension, journal boukhara, no 3.
4. Akasheh, Servat, 2001, the Prophet's Iconography, Helia Darabi, No. 99 Tehran: Visual Arts
5. Azhand, Yaqob, 2014, *The Seven Principles of the Iranian Art Decoration*, First Edition, Tehran: Peykareh.
6. Azhand, Yaqub, 2007, *Paintings, and Painters of the Qajar Era*, Tehran: Il-Shahsovan Publishing.
7. Baharlou, Alireza, Fahimi-far, Ali Asghar, 2017, *Elements of Aesthetics in the Qajar Graffiti of the Prophet's Ascension (Comparison with the lithographic Images and Miniatures, and Focusing on the Scene of Meeting between Lion and the Prophet)*, Year 5, 13, Tehran: The Quarterly of Folklore and Culture.
8. Eqbal, Abbas, 1934. *The Design of the Old Iranian National Tales*, the First Report of Ferdowsi Congress.

9. Fadavi, Muhammad, 2007 *Illustration in the Safavid and Qajar Era s*. Tehran: University.
10. Johari, Mohammad Baqer, 1894, *Bahr al-Tavi, Mirajnameh* (Attached to *Tohfat al-Majales*), Scriber: Muhammad Ali, Illustrator: Mirza Hasan, Publication House: Unknown
11. Marzban, Parviz, 1980 *Iranian Painting History*, Organization for the Publishing and Teaching of the Islamic Revolution.
12. Marzolph, Ulrich, 2010. *Narrative Illustrations in Persian Lithography*. Tehran: Nazar.
13. Mehdi Zadeh, Alireza, Bolkhari Ghahi, Hassan, 2014, *The Review of Shia Themes and Symbols in Images of the Prophet's Ascension in the Version of the Tahmasebi Falnameh*, *Shiite Quarterly*, No. 46.
14. Muhammad Eshtehardi, 2003, *the Visage of Muhammad from Various Perspectives*, Tehran: Eslami Publications.
15. Nafisi, Saeed, 1958, *The First Illustrated Prints in Iran*, year 1, no. 3, Tehran: Book Guide Journal.
16. Paolonaschegva, Olympia, 2009, *The History of the Lithography in Iran*, translated by Parvin Monzavi, Tehran: Moin.
17. R.K, Mayl Heravi, Najib, 1987, *Mirajnameh Abu-Ali Sina*, Mashhad, Publishing: Astan Qods.
18. Rossgay, Mary, 2006, *Mirajname, the Miraculous journey of the Prophet Muhammad*, Translated by Meanaz Shayesteh Far, First Edition, Tehran: Islamic Studies Institute.
19. Safarzadeh, Naghme, Ahmadi, Bahram, 2014 *Comparative study of the Image of the Angels in the Islamic images in Iran with Byzantine and Renaissance Paintings in Europe*, 6th, *Specialized Quarterly of Chideman*.
20. Shin Dashtgol, Helena, 2010, *The Writing about Miraj: from Manuscripts to the Popular paintings with a look at Iconographies of he Prophet Muhammad*, Tehran: Scientific and Cultural.
21. Sobhani, Jafar, 2006, *Forogh Ebadit*, 1 volume, Qom, Boustane-Ketab.
22. Tarbiyat, Mohammad Ali, 1952, *The Origin of Iranian Studies in Europe*, *Armaghan* 12.
23. Zamani, Karim, 2011, *Illuminating Translation of Quran*, Second Edition, Tehran: Mahak Publishing.