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Modalities in Arabic



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XVI

Modalities in Arabic



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2016

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THE SOGDIAN HORSEMAN: VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF A HUNTING SCENE IN PRE-MODERN CENTRAL ASIA AND IRAN

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Abstract: Silver dishes from pre-modern Near East are not unique. Yet, their iconography is sometimes puzzling and may be easily misinterpreted. In this paper, I analyze the reasons for such misinterpretation drawing upon western art historian methodologies and Russian theories of iconology and suggest a probabilistic approach to deconstruction, interpretation and attribution of the elements of the image to a particular style, period, and place. The silver dish to which this analysis is applied came from the crossroads of Near Eastern cultures and represents a hunting scene. I suggest that unlike in mathematics, the simplest explanation is not always the best. The analysis of an art object should take into consideration the long and arduous road leading to its inception: the multitude of the external influences exerted on the creator, and the observer, of the art piece and their corresponding context.

Keywords: *Near East, iconology, image interpretation, Central Asia, Iran*

Introduction: The Question of Methodology

As we entered the 21st century, art history became an increasingly integrated discipline. It has gone through a constant evolution since its inception: art historians have been using art specific methodologies as well as applying those of other fields: psychoanalysis, social history, and linguistics – to name a few. The latter approach raised a question of the transferability of methodologies across various fields. Should we transfer the psychoanalytical doctor-patient relationship to critic-artwork à la Freud, or should we reverse this relationship to artwork-critic as Bal and Bryson (1991) suggest, since critics do all the talking and thus they are analogous to patients, not doctors?

The idea of an art object acting as a silent psychoanalyst is particularly interesting because it suddenly grants art historians acting in the role of patients a license to conduct the intellectual exercises of analysis and deconstruction. The more enigmatic and complicated the object of analysis is, the larger and more controversial is the corpus of the scholarship and more heated are the discussions around it.

Central Asia, having been the center of active trading and migratory routes that spanned more than a millennium from the dawn of the Common Era, became a melting pot of cultures and art production techniques and motives. The objects coming from this

region, often referred to as the Silk Road, confront scholars with a constant challenge of deconstruction and proper identification as they ponder over the questions of transferability of methodologies: How can we break down a continuous image into discrete elements in order to apply a language-based structuralist approach to it?

The intellectual discipline of *semiotics* attempts to address similar shortcomings by providing “discipline-free” tools that can be used across the board. In Mary Douglas’ (1982) definition, semiotics is “*a technical analysis of structures in which the meaning is produced.*” It challenges the positivist view of knowledge such as authentication of oeuvres and the social history of art, and raises important new issues of the polysemy of meaning; problems of authorship, context, and reception; the relationship between the image and the narrative, and others. Through a series of “mini-revolutions”, semiotics breaks down incumbent paradigms of privileged positions of a context, an author, and a male and establishes a more “democratic” relationship between the stakeholders of the process of art creation *and* the process of art consumption. Semiotics increases the complexity and objectivity of the analysis by moving from a binary approach to a multi-dimensional space where ‘zero-sum’ judgments no longer make sense. Finally, it adds temporality to the equation in the form of *semiosis* (Peirce cited in Bal and Bryson (1991: 182)), transforming the subject of the analysis into a complicated dynamic system of *Sender-Object-Receiver-Context* whose relationship and interaction are manifested through sign-events. Although the *Sender* (an artist, or a craftsman) and *his/her* context have chronological and causal precedence over the *Object* and its contemporaneous and extra-temporaneous *Receivers* (viewers and users) and *their* context, the quest for meaning usually starts with the *Object* because this is what is usually available to the art historians first. The object to be discussed in this paper has been the subject of analysis for several decades, and therefore represents an excellent example of art acting as a psychologist for the art historian community across different continents.

The Object: A Silver Dish Representing a Horseman

I would like to start by giving a formal description of the object without any attempts to attribute it to a particular place, time, or style. The subject of this paper is a dish made of silver with golden elements (Fig. 1), which belongs to the collection of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. It represents a horseman aiming an arrow at a lion while the wounded wild boar runs away in the lower part of the image. The dish has an inscription of a name written in *Pehlevi*. It was first described in the reports of an archaeological expedition in 1867 (Ремпель, 1959).

The Hermitage already had a very similar object (Fig. 2) – a silver dish dated 310-320 CE and positively identified as a representation of the Sasanian king Shapur II, who ruled from 309 to 379 CE (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1982). Therefore, our focal subject had been initially attributed to *the Sasanian silver* because of its similarity with Shapur’s dish¹. Indeed, the similarities are striking and catch your eye instantly: space

¹ Although there are continuous references to this attribution “*in the Hermitage catalogues and publications*” in the Russian sources (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1959, 1965, 1982, 1987), I could not

composition, the galloping horse, and the turned back horseman with a bow and a sword, aiming at a lion. Coupled with an inscription in Pehlevi, it makes an almost perfect case for Sasanian silver. So why may this attribution be wrong?

The Reasons for Misattribution: Irrelevant Analogy

In the early days of the 20th century, the scholars in Russia used the art historian method of *iconography*, description and classification of images were based on style, identifying the objects through *analogy*. I believe that the *irrelevance* of this analogy was the main reason for misattribution of the subject dish. What is an irrelevant analogy?

When arguing for the existence of God, Paley (1987) uses the probability theory in the following way: he compares finding a rock on the beach with finding a watch. While nobody immediately supposes that the rock is man-made, the statement is exactly the opposite for the watch, because the *probability* of all watch parts to randomly fall together on the beach in *a meaningful way* is virtually zero. This argument is then continued through teleology (analogy) whereby the Universe is compared to human artifacts (e.g. watch) in its complexity.

Although Hume (1987) and Dawkins (1987) rejected Paley's argument, it failed not because of the probability premises but because of the *irrelevant analogy* between the Universe and the watch. Interestingly, we can use both the true probability premise and the false analogy premise, to highlight some of the art interpretation issues in our area of interest.

Thoughts on Using Probability for Denotational Analysis

When addressing the *polysemy of the meaning*, Barthes (1977) breaks it down into *denotational* (non-coded, iconic-literal), and *connotational* (iconic-symbolic) types. While both types are polysemic depending on the point of reference (artist/context/viewer), the former is more straightforward than the latter. For this reason, I have chosen to start the deconstruction of the enigmatic horseman in Fig.1 by the denotational analysis enhanced by the mathematical principle of probability.

Quite often authors imply *causality* where there can be a mere *coincidence*, or use irrelevant analogy (e.g. "*a podium and a man are similar because they both take space*"). I would argue that any argument for causality or influence should start with the determination of the *probability of a coincidence*. The compositions that have high probability of occurring independently should not be used to draw conclusion about dependencies. Such compositions should be first taken at their "*face value*"² and the onus should be on the researcher to prove their relationship through textual or other scientific evidence.

find any primary source where this position is stated, so I am using Rempel's reference in Ремпель (1987) to *Imagery Royal: silver vessels of the Sasanian period*. 1981. vol. 1, New York, fig. 44.

² I.e. that what Roland Barthes calls "denotational meaning" in Barthes (1977)

Although we cannot precisely quantify this probability, its *relative magnitude* is within our reach. For example, objects and creatures that are encountered in the normal *everyday life* of an artist will most certainly find their way into the artist's work. Some shapes are so *universal* (squares, circles, triangles, crosses, curves) that the high probability of them appearing in any culture without outside influence should be expected. Other shapes and creatures can be *local* i.e. types of trees, animals, human features. The probability of independently depicting a palm tree in Africa is as high as that for universal shapes. However, the presence of a palm tree in Central Asia would definitely call for a further investigation of the genealogy of the image. In Varaksha, a mural painting (7th-8th centuries) depicts a tiger and an elephant, animals which are not local to Central Asia; therefore, it must have experienced South Asian influence. The white tombstone in the Archangel Cathedral in Moscow has an obvious *islimi*³ arabesque, so foreign to Russia that its provenance must be from the East (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1965).

Consider an example of *a curvy line* known from ancient times. Curves exist in nature in various objects; therefore interpreting them without context should not be done. However, if it is found on an object belonging to people that live next to water, it might be interpreted as a wave, while if its makers were steppe nomads, we might suppose it depicted a horn (Ремпель, 1987). But what if it were the Bactrians, a Central Asian culture that combined Hellenistic artistic features with that of the nomads? In this case we cannot definitely say whether it is a wave or a horn ornament, or maybe even something totally different such as a cloud.

Let us take *an eight-petal flower* – one of the most common flower shapes in nature. Should we draw conclusions about complicated links between cultures based on the appearance of this flower on the Ishtar gates in Mesopotamia from 575 BC, on the 9th century Samanid Mausoleum in Bukhara and on the 13th century metalwork? I think it would be more prudent to start by assuming that it was just an image from the world around the artist.

The case is exactly the opposite for *the lotus flower* images found in the Altai Mountains. Since there are no lotuses in this area, we must search where they could come from. The lotus grows in warm climates such as India and Egypt. The latter is farther away geographically and had no known contacts with the area; therefore it would be safe to assume South-Asian influence.

Another example of the images from the world around us is a case of *a predator catching its prey*. That is all that predators do. Therefore some other evidence beyond the content of the image itself should support the conclusion about definite links in the images representing such scenes.

Russian scholar L.I. Rempel, in several of his works (1959, 1965, 1982, 1987) warns his colleagues against over-interpretation, seeing more than just the representation of reality (e.g. in animal/hunting scenes). He says: "*The craftsmen did not invent something that didn't exist in the nature around them, but simply united images from around them into a whole.*" Rempel's fundamental work *The Chain of Times* (1987:73), based on a painstaking analysis of thousands of art pieces, explains how similar visual

³ An *islimi* arabesque is a freehand biomorphic motif used in Islamic decorative arts.

representations are possible because of *the common human psychology and similar socio-economic conditions of the development of a society*, without being influenced or caused by each other. He notices that similar forms appear in different cultures that are undergoing a similar stage of development and quotes O. Miller, saying that “*fixed formulae appear without any particular reason, in parallel, as a result of convergence whereby similar conditions create similar results because of commonality of: 1) human motivation, 2) ways of reflection of the nature in human consciousness and 3) nature of human imagination*” (1987:152).

Rempel compares the unevenness of historical processes to the picture of the sky. Some stars already died, but their light is still visible because of large distances, while other stars are just being born and their light will reach us only in the future. He argues that an art image is a combination of “*eternal images*” («вечные образы»), and “*vagabond motives*” («бродячие сюжеты»). When an image crosses its chronological and geographical limits, it becomes not only eternal but also vagabond.

As per Rempel, *the eternal images* include: 1) symbols of world genesis; 2) astro-animal symbols; 3) anthropomorphous gods; and 4) mythic semi-gods. Many scholars think that the first images of world genesis (often composed of universal symbols discussed above) are the results of the technology of weaving, fabric-making and mud bricks positions that created natural patterns that were later applied onto other objects (e.g. pottery) for beautification. One example of universal signs can be the Swastika.

On the other hand, *the vagabond motives* are: 1) compositions with a “goddess”; 2) compositions with “the tree of life”; 3) animal styles (see the example of the predator catching its victim discussed previously); 4) cult and religion representations; 5) epic themes; and 6) court themes. The vagabond nature of these motives makes them *les faux amis* for art historians who use analogy of style to attribute an art object to a particular place and period. The example of misattribution of the subject dish of this paper to the Sasanian period is a case in point.

Hunting Scene as an Example of a Vagabond Motif

Horseback riding became possible in the second half of the second millennium BC, when the steppe people introduced bits and bridles. Slowly but surely, it spread across the continent, becoming a part of the culture. A so-called “*hunting scene*” becomes a vagabond motif, in Rempel’s definition: it does change its meaning across time and space but the visual representation remains. The steppe nomads expressed themselves in what became known as an animalistic style characterized by realistic images of a plethora of the wild animals of the steppes. The antique artists depict anthropomorphous gods hunting mythical animals: griffons, hydras and dragons. Buddhist and early Zoroastrian movements fill the mythical animals with cosmological meaning of Dark Forces fighting the Light. Gods transform into epic heroes. Kings are godified to boost their authority, and all of them are on a horse striking their animal-looking adversary.

Therefore, the mere fact of hunting the same (even atypical for this geography) animal with the same bow should not be used as a point of reference in our case. So far, the denotational analysis of our object didn’t shed much light on its provenance, meaning

or purpose due to the very generic (vagabond) style of the scene. Let us now look at the next level of analysis: *connotational*.

Thoughts on Using Context for Connotational Analysis

The art specific method of *iconography*, that deals with description and classification of images, is being complemented by *iconology* – the science of discovery and interpretation of symbolic values (Panofsky, 1955). Signs, the main analytical operands of semiotics, are classified as icons, indices and symbols (Peirce cited in Bal and Bryson, 1991). Their relationship with other elements of semiosis (ground and object) is defined in terms of syntax, semantics and rhetoric (Mukarovsky cited in Bal and Bryson (1991)), where the rhetoric of image is its connotational meaning (Barthes, 1977). Being a coded structure, the connotational meaning has a higher degree of complexity than the denotational one and is produced by the interpretative function of the sub-consciousness. Further, as Derrida determinately puts it: “*No meaning can be determined out of context*” (cited in Bal and Bryson (1991:182)). The plethora of connotational meanings is almost endless – as it depends on the context of conception, creation and “consumption” of the art object, which is not any simpler or more legible than the object itself.

In our case, the context is unknown and needs to be reconstructed through what Nietzsche calls a “*chronological reversal*” (cited in Bal and Bryson (1991:190): we have to identify the cause based on the effect (i.e. the object at hand). This task is not a trivial one, given the problems of granularity of the image, and the complexity of the preceding influences in the Silk Road area. In order to reconstruct a particular context (hopefully, the most probable one) that could lead us to a meaning we should first break down the image into individual elements. Then, applying the Peirce formula⁴ to the elements of the image acting as signs, we can attempt to arrive at the potential meaning by mapping these elements into the stylistic groups identified in the region of our interest. The starting point for this exercise is to draw the road map.

Stylistic Groups in Central Asia and Iran

Shapiro (1969:231) defines style as “*a constant form, elements, and quality of art of an individual or a group.*” Central Asia, being at the crossroads of migratory and trade routes from the second half of the first millennium BCE, became the place where cultures mixed and matched centuries after centuries. I propose that the assimilation and association process, which had been going on in the region, can be presented graphically (Fig. 3). *Persian* and *Turkic* heritage in *Sogdian* art, and *Hellenistic* and *Buddhist* motives in *Bactrian* art were well analyzed by Gyul (1998-2002) and are beyond the scope of this paper. Knowing the chronology of this development and the differentiating

⁴ The referent (object) is the representamen (sign) transformed by an interpretant (mental image) (Bal & Bryson, 1991).

features of the identified stylistic groups, we can now map the elements of the image into these groups.

Deconstructing the Horseman's Image

Textual evidence is usually more telling and provides better material for deconstruction because of its relative ease of separation into discrete elements (letters, syllables, words). Maybe this is why the structuralist analysis was proposed by Levy-Strauss for text first (1963), and only later transferred to the deconstruction of art. However, in our case, the inscription on the dish is not an unambiguous guide. Quite the opposite: it led the scholars to an erroneous conclusion. Indeed, the Pehlevi inscription on the dish is one of the most interesting elements of the object. On one hand, it is the most “clear” element, being a text and not an image. On the other hand, it is potentially the most misleading evidence. As explained in Ремпель and Пугаченкова (1982), the inscriptions on objects from Central Asia do not always correspond to the stylistic type of the object itself. The Russian academic Galina Pugachenkova identified four combinations: Sogdian style with Sogdian inscriptions, Sogdian style with two types of inscriptions: Sogdian and Near Eastern, not Sogdian style but with Sogdian inscriptions, and not Sogdian in style with Sogdian and/or Persian inscriptions. Our dish seems to belong to the fourth group. But what is written? It has been identified that the name on the dish is not the one of the craftsman, but that of the owner. Moreover, the early Islamic origin of the name helped to date the dish as 8th-9th century as opposed to the previously suggested period of 6th-7th.

Now let us turn to the image. Scholars have discovered that *the turned back posture* of the horseman is a nomadic feature found on the art pieces with Turkic, i.e. Northeastern, influence, while the Persian horsemen usually face forward (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1959). On the other hand, lions do not live in Central Asia, thus they should have come from the closest location – South Asia. The “royal” status of lions in the Sasanian art and the striking compositional similarity of the animal on both images (Fig 1 and Fig 2) has probably led the earlier scholars to the wrong association.

Upon looking closer at the horseman, his facial features (Fig. 1) appear quite different from that of a Persian man (Fig. 2) and are much similar to the Sogdian terracotta from Afrasiab: a full-face and not a profile position of the head, a lack of beard and, most importantly, a lack of headdress (crown). In art history there are no examples of a Persian king or nobleman depicted with a casual ribbon on his head. The argument that such objects might not have survived is not acceptable because the lack of a crown as a status symbol would have undermined the whole glorifying spirit of royal Persian art.

Additionally, the horseman's face (Fig. 1) has a peaceful, removed expression, which is quite uncharacteristic for a solemn and determined attitude of the Persian figures. However, it is rather similar to the Bactrian images in which the Hellenistic lack of expression⁵ is mixed with the Buddhist peacefulness.

⁵ Gombrich (1960) argues that the aesthetic beauty of the classical Greek images comes from the lack of expression on their faces.

The straight sword attached to the double metal belt and accompanied by a short dagger is a known element of the Sogdian style as seen on other silver dishes and mural paintings in Pandjikent (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1965). But the conclusive evidence is in the fact that *the horse has stirrups* that only appeared in 6th – 7th century among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and was unknown to the Sasanians (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1959). Finally, the whole theme of the composition is quite different: instead of the victorious pathos of a superior king over the beast, our dish tells a story of what might be a real hunting episode. While the horseman got busy with the lion, the wounded wild boar is escaping his fate.

Indeed, the beginning of feudalism in Central Asia gave rise to a new knightly class of *dihkans* for whom the elegant dress code depicted on the dish seems quite appropriate, unlike the formal figures on Sasanian images. For the *dihkans*, hunting was no longer a challenge - it was an entertainment (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1959).

Pugachenkova and Rempel (1959) took their connotational analysis even further. They suggest, citing textual evidence from a medieval Chinese encyclopedia, that it might have been a representation of a pre-Islamic festival, Mihrjan, that was popular in Samarkand, whereby young men were competing in bow shooting and the winner got the title of “king” for a day. Alternatively, they suggest, it could have been the epic hero Ramin from the poem “Visa and Ramin”⁶. I would have probably not have gone this far, as there is no concrete evidence pointing to these specific feasts, but just conclude the case by calling the image “*A Sogdian Hunter*”. To double-check this conclusion, we can verify that this attribution places our object in a logical place in the evolutionary chain of the hunting scenes between 5th and 10th centuries CE in the region of Central Asia and Iran.

The Evolution of the Hunting Scene during 5th and 10th Centuries CE

The Sogdian fellow fits quite well in to the evolutionary chain of horseman images on Fig. 4. The naturalistic fervor of the Hephthalite hunter is replaced by the posing celebratory stance of the Sasanian king (A), followed by a more realistic hunter in a double-horned headdress (B-C). Although this last dish has inscriptions in Sogdian (Ремпель и Пугаченкова, 1982), it is not yet Sogdian by style; the hunter is still quite royal, bearded and has the typical Persian profile. The situation is reversed in our subject dish where the style is Sogdian but the inscription is in Persian Pehlevi (D). However, it is worth remembering the historical factors of that time, when Persian was the language of choice for the administration. Suddenly all the pieces of the puzzle fit together and we can consider our case closed and well supported.

Finally, the last picture represents a piece from the Islamic times (E). The change is remarkable. Although the level of craftsmanship is quite high, the image looks more like a cartoon. The horse has stopped galloping. The hunter’s arms are twisted rather unnaturally. He looks idealistically content, rather than tense (which you should normally expect from a hunter). The lions lost their animalistic nature; one of them is even laughing under the feet of the horse. The old steppe, antique, Sasanian, and even recent

⁶ One of the oldest surviving Persian romances, ascribed to Nizami of Samarkand.

Sogdian influences were being replaced by the Islamic tendencies which shy away from the naturalistic representation of animated creatures. The realistically depicted mythical creatures of the antiquities are substituted with the schematic visuals of real men and animals.

Soon, we will not find the hunting scene on murals and metal objects in the orthodox Islamic milieu. But it will not disappear completely: it would vagabond away into manuscripts and will find its asylum in the regions with a more tolerant attitude towards human representation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to analyze the reasons for the misidentification of a silver dish from the Hermitage Museum representing a hunting scene. Drawing upon the advanced western art historian methodologies and Russian theories of eternal images and vagabond motives, I have suggested a probabilistic approach to the deconstruction, interpretation and attribution of the elements of the image to a particular style, period, and place. The object chosen for this paper came from a crossroads of cultures and thus proved to be a good material for such an analysis. This analysis has demonstrated that unlike in mathematics, the simplest explanation is not always the best. The analysis of an art object should take into consideration the long and arduous road leading to its inception: the multitude of the external influences exerted on the creator and the receiver of the art piece and their corresponding context. These influences can be decoded by analyzing the signs that an object conceals in itself but is ready to reveal to an inquisitive mind.

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Figure 1: A Silver Dish in Hermitage Collection



Figure 2: *Sassanian Dish in Hermitage Collection*

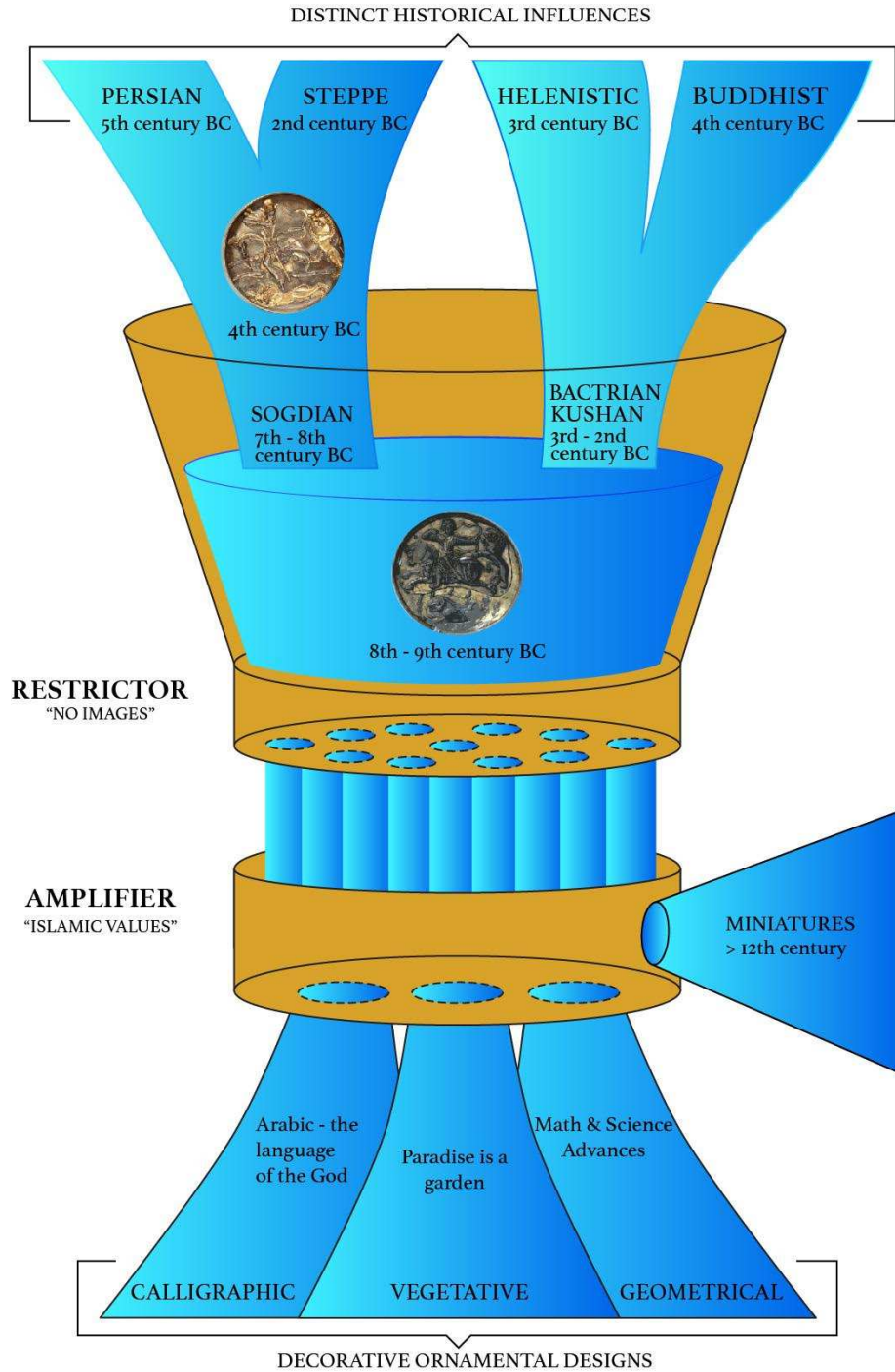


Figure 3: Stylistic Groups in the Near East. Source: developed by the author



A. Sasanian style, IV c



B. Sasanian style, VI c



C. Transitional style, VI-VIIc



D. Sogdian style, VIII-IX c



E. Islamic style, IX-X c

Figure 4: *Evolution of the Hunting Scene in the Near East*