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## The Nature of Iranian Visual Culture Represented Graphically \*

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### Abstract

Today, the dominance of modern media is growing thanks to various soft wares, graphic patterns and fonts. Although it has created a visually universal language to ease communication, it has also marginalized certain visual cultures around the globe. Such threats in Iran have appeared in the form of damaged views of cities and monumental patterns replaced with unfamiliar elements. In order find solutions to such concerns, every now and then, issues like Iranian identity, applications of Iranian pictures, and Iranian domestic content have come to the fore. The present study aimed to reach a comprehensive approach to deal with the problems mentioned and with how to represent domestic visual culture effectively. In fact, it aimed to revitalize national archetypes and to represent them in a new way based on modern graphic principles. The questions of the research include: what is the Iranian visual culture? What is meant by representation of Iranian visual identity graphically? The result indicated that Iranian visual identity is the visual similarity of a work to other Iranian works so that it is distinguished from the works of other nations. Iranian visual identity is divided into general and corporate identities. Iranian visual identity is inspired by representation and recreation of Iranian pictures and motifs. Visual corporate identity include formally approved symbols, and flags which generally follow certain norms and principles. Graphic representation of Iranian visual culture implies a given degree of similarity to Iranian visual culture so that the quality of being Iranian can be readily recognized. The present study is an applied qualitative research. Data were gathered based on library sources and media databases.

### Keywords

Identity, visual, Iranian, graphic.

\*. This article has been adopted from Mansour KolahKaj's doctoral dissertation entitled "Graphic Functions in Representing Iranian Visual Identity" under supervision of Dr. Asghar Javani in Isfahan University of Art.

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## Introduction

In the realm of visual arts, the concept of visual identity can be examined in different aspects. It seems that the issue of unity in variety in aesthetic pictures and images is closely related to the issue of visual identity. The term visual identity, especially in relation to corporate identity and brands has come to the fore since almost three decades ago. A considerably-designed visual identity may commercially contribute to recognition of corporates and firms. Today, the visual identity of corporates and firms, often represented as a trademark, helps that brands/trademarks; favourite sports items or other products can be distinguished among similar ones more easily. Similarly, specific colours-predetermined to meet specific purposes- can serve as guides in hospitals, towns, etc. Visual capabilities work also in cultural and architectural scopes and Iranian visual identity is no exception.

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of Iranian visual identity? How is it graphically characterized?
2. How is the Iranian visual identity graphically represented?

The pictures illustrated here are primarily architectural in nature implying the fact that visual identity is deeply rooted in Iranian architecture.

## Statement of the problem

Despite the fact that Iranian visual identity has a rich background, no satisfactory endeavour has been made to conserve and promote it. For example, sporadic meetings and conferences held under various names for a single issue of identity implies confusion in target in this respect. Addressing the issue of Iranian visual identity is, in fact, an endeavour to conserve and promote it. Irrespective of tritely familiar statements on identity to support or reject it, the present study has examined the rationale behind the Iranian visual identity.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In this article, examination of the nature of Iranian visual identity and how it is represented graphically has been mainly based on Barthes' ideas on semiotics

and structuralism. The core idea is that myths and values give signs objective meaning. In fact, signs help us to conserve myths and to revitalize them. When myths and values become universal, they turn into cultural identity (Mehdizadeh, 2011: 105-106). On this basis, preservation of visual symbols, in the form of Iranian visual identity, enriches Iranian cultural identity.

## 3. Methodology

The present study is an applied one in nature and was conducted inductively. Data was gathered from library sources and scientific as well as mass-media databases and were finally analyzed descriptively.

## 4. Importance of the study

According to the concept of cultural capital posed by Pierre Bourdieu, culture is a sort of economy/ market the players of which exchange four kinds of capitals. One of these capitals, that is symbolic capital, is composed a set of symbolic factors such as respect, character and individual capabilities. What cultural capital emphasizes is that the educational system of each nation nurtures and promotes its culture. The national educational system is a reflection of authorities' culture. As a result, the intended culture is reproduced again (Bourdieu, 1998). In a similar way, Iranian visual identity targeting at conserving and promoting Iranian symbols, is in line with a cultural capital. In fact, the necessity of addressing the issue of Iranian visual identity may be recapitulated as follows:

1. Recognition and conservation of Iranian visual identity may help us to apply, represent and reproduce those Iranian visual signs/symbols.
2. Recognition and conservation of Iranian visual identity may pave the way that Iranian visual signs/symbols get familiarized in the society.
3. Recognition and conservation of Iranian visual identity encourage individuals to appreciate and reflect on domestic cultural values rather than copy foreign symbols.

## Review of Literature

No serious studies have been done on the issue of Iranian visual identity. In an article, Khazaei (2009)

Table 1. Brief history of visual corporate identity has been given according to several authors. Source: authors.

In the first chapter of the book dealing with the primary human civilizations, the issue of <i>visual identity</i> has been pointed out two times: one for curved seals used in civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt and another for visual corporate identity discussed under issue of identity and corporater systems (Meggs, 1992 : 12-23).
Visual corporate identity may appear as (written) sign, slogan, design, specific colours, architecture, indoor design, song, perfume, or Masscat (Alessandri, 2009; 3-4).
In the introduction of his book, Ben Rizon states that “ visual identity is the visual essence of every thing or idea by which a product or service can be visualized. Information transfer and persuasion characterize it. (Ben Reson, 1970:10).
Visible elements of a brand, such as color, form, and shape, which encapsulate and convey the symbolic meanings that cannot be imparted through words alone. In a broader (corporate) sense, it may include elements such as building architecture, color schemes, and dress code. <a href="http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/visual-identity.html">http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/visual-identity.html</a>
Every organization has a unique identity which is an integration of principles, values and characteristics of the organization. This unique identity distinguishes the organization from its competitors (Faraji, et al, 2009).
Visual identity may include visual arrangements, marks, colours, fonts and mental images. Visual identity distinguishes the organization name in a competitive atmosphere. In order to be distinguishable, it must be consistent enough (Interbrand, 2011: 207).

has pointed out that Iranian visual identity has two main characteristics, namely form and content. In addition, in another article entitled “ Today’s Signs: Yesterday’s Motifs”, he has also addressed the Iranian visual symbols adopted from the past motifs and examined the roots and origins of them. Even those scant studies on cultural identity are limited to corporate brands and marks. Therefore, to account for the nature of Iranian visual identity, two concepts, namely identity and visual corporate identity, have been addressed. In this respect, different researchers and trade syndicates have provided different definitions of visual corporate identity and of brands. The common theme of the various definitions is that visual corporate identity is a distinctive visual representation to convey the core activity firms dealing with.

Table 1 shows a brief explanation of visual corporate identity based on several authors’ stances. In sum, theoretical issues on visual identity have been on

focus during the past three decades. The issues have mainly emphasized on visual corporate identity and on brand identity. Visual corporate identity can be defined as those visual elements by which an organization or an institution is introduced to its clients. In order to avoid promotional confusion and subjective interpretations, for each visual corporate identity, a set of norms is defined. An visual corporate identity is based on physical and abstract symbols and signs, which can create the intended image in the viewer’s mind.

## Discussion

### • Identity

Identity is characterized by two basic factors: distinctive features and similar features. In certain cases, one of these two predominates. According to Gol Mohammadi (2002: 222), identity is used in two seemingly paradoxical meanings: absolute identity and distinctive identity (not changeable during time).

• Basic concepts

In order to address different kinds of visual identity, two terms are discussed here: visual identity and visual corporate identity.

-Visual Corporate Identity

In visual corporate identity, distinctive features predominate. As Meggs ) 1992: 12-23) put it in his book *History of Graphic Design*, the history of Iranian visual corporate identity dates back to Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations and it was mainly used to convey an identity or meaning (Fig. 1). In fact, visual corporate identity conveys an identity graphically. Since 1907, the themes of ancient seals and signs have been represented graphically in a wide variety of usages (Fig. 2).

**Different connotations of visual identity**

Although the general concept of the term visual identity is understandable from its two elements, it may connote differently when used in different fields such as visual corporate identity and brand identity. While what is commonly meant by visual identity is visual corporate identity and brand identity, the general concept of it goes beyond its usage in brand and commerce; rather, in cases, it may refer to unity

and variety or even may be synonymous with other visual qualities such as rhythm. In a sense, certain aspects of visual identity are rooted in natural balance or unity. Therefore, in order to recognize different aspects of visual identity, the root of the term is addressed. Here, two fundamental features of the term, that is, similarity and distinction, previously discussed, are used to clarify different concepts of the term. In this respect, visual identity may be interpreted in two basic ways:

A) As a general rule, each picture or image has its own character; it is uniquely characterized by certain features. Given the two features of similarity and distinction, it may be said that, in this interpretation, the aspect of distinction is more conspicuously felt than its counterpart. Such character, mainly used in graphic domain, is the very common concept of visual corporate identity represented chiefly by trade marks and symbols (Fig. 2).

B) When visual elements of a picture/ image are similar to or are adapted from those of other pictures/ images, despite the distinction between them, they have similar identities. In other words, the feature of similarity, rather than distinction, is more readily recognized. A typical example of this can be seen in Iranian architecture which is very similar to its predecessor (in terms of motifs, styles, vaults and materials). At the same time, certain repetitive

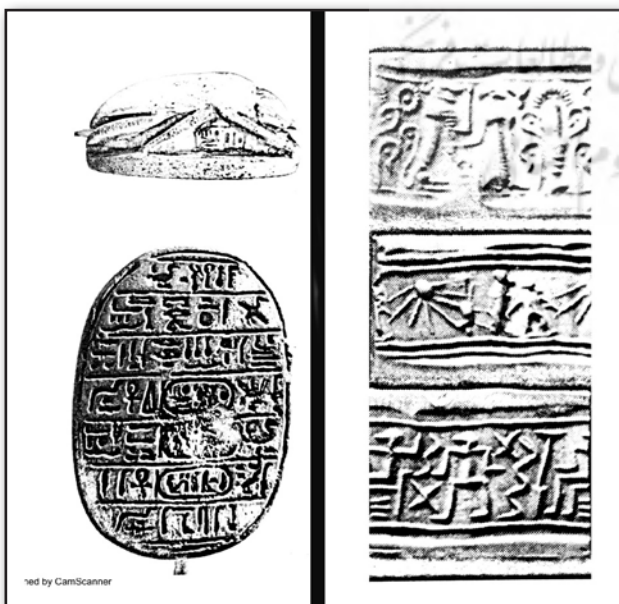


Fig. 1. Right: Curved seals used in Ancient Elam..Left: Scaraboid seal; Egyptian civilization  
Source: Meggs' History of Graphic Design.



Fig. 2. An example of distinction-oriented visual identity represented in a modern appearance. Source: author' s archive.

decorative elements can be seen creating a sense of aesthetically visual identity (Fig. 3,4). The similarity between two pictures/elements may refer to two concepts: First, when there is similarity between the visual elements of two pictures/images or when the two pictures/images are visually related to each other. Such an interpretation of visual identity is what has been called as general visual identity in this research. Examples of general visual identity abound in nature and in various visual works. In fact, it is rooted in nearly all kinds of visual arts. General visual identity may also refer to those works enjoying a sort of innate balance or visual order. In the present research, visual identity has been divided into two kinds: purposeful and non-purposeful. The former meets two aesthetic-oriented and identity-oriented needs; the latter may be still divided into natural visual identity and artificial visual identity. This research mainly has focused on identity-oriented visual identity (Fig. 5).

• **The concept of general visual identity**

Visual identity is a quality in visual arts which includes two features: similarity and distinction. In other words, a visual work may be similar to or distinct from other works. In simple terms, visual identity depends on certain degrees of similarity or distinction. In addition to aesthetic objectives, purposeful general visual identity may meet technical needs as when different structural forces are distributed in an architectural monument for the sake of stability (Fig. 3). When visual identity is represented, one of the basic features, that is, similarity or distinction, may be emphasized more than the other one. Therefore, visual identity is represented through pictures, distinguished from other ones. At the same time, They have a visual balance. The feature of similarity is the continuation of visual elements rooted in religious, ethnic or even climate-related factors formed in the course of history. It can also be defined by aesthetic-oriented visual unity among the elements of the same work. For instance, Iranian handicrafts are both visually



Fig. 3. A wind-catcher in Yazd, Iran. It is both a symbol of Iranian architecture enjoying innate visual identity (vaults and arcs) and a structure similar to other Iranian architectural monuments. Source: author's archive.



Fig. 4. In this picture, several visual features are present of which the negative space is outstanding. The view of vaults and the depth created as well as mud-straw mixture, as locally available material, are among identity-creating features of this structure. Source: author's archive.

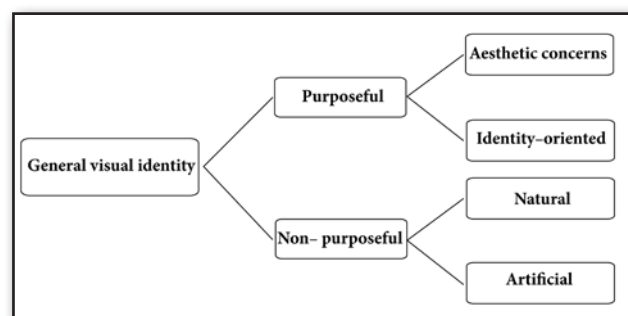


Fig. 5. Different kinds of general visual identity and its branches. Source: author's archive.

related to their precedence and are innately united. The two features, independently or interdependently, may be present in general visual identity (Fig. 6).

**• The features of general visual identity**

As was mentioned earlier, representation of visual identity may be aesthetic-oriented or may indicate element(s) symbolizing a given concept. General visual identity may be stated through applying homogeneous materials, patterns, motifs and signs. Certain items may create a sense of general visual identity including :

1. Applying vernacular materials (Fig. 4).
2. Natural elements may create a sense of visual identity (Fig. 6).
3. Balanced repetition of patterns.
4. Numerous cases of visual identity can be found in visual arts such as architecture and handicrafts.
5. Unlike visual corporate identity, general visual identity is not limited to certain predefined obligations.
6. General visual identity is under the influence of natural or human factors (in a purposeful or non-purposeful way).
7. Visual identity may be adapted from the past works.
8. Visual identity may be stated in the form of recreating elements related with a profession or of adapting a pattern/design.
9. Visual identity may be represented in the form of tangible or intangible elements such as rhythm or grid (Fig. 3 & 4).

**• The nature of Iranian visual identity**

Given what was mentioned so far, Iranian visual identity may be defined as similarity of an artwork to

other (tangible or intangible) Iranian artworks. Such an artwork is readily recognizable from the artworks of other nations or reminds the viewer of its Iranian character. If an artwork is supposed to be understood as Iranian, then there should be a certain degree of vivid similarity between the intended visual work and Iranian culture. Realization of this mainly depends on technical knowledge of the artist/designer, from one hand, and that of the viewer, from the other hand. Iranian visual identity can be divided into two parts: Iranian general visual identity and Iranian visual corporate identity.

**- Iranian general visual identity**

What is meant by Iranian general visual identity in this research includes any purposeful application of symbols, patterns and Iranian old and new pictures represented graphically. For instance, wind-catcher in architectural monuments is a typical example of Iranian visual identity. Elements applied in Iranian general visual identity can appear in a countless variety of forms; no limitation.

**- Iranian visual corporate identity**

Iranian visual corporate identity may include formal signs, signs of the governmental organizations, associations and brands. Iran Air sign is a typical example. visual corporate identity follows certain regulations and obligations such as national flags used in formal occasions. In table 2 a comparison has been made between Iranian general visual identity and Iranian visual corporate identity (Fig. 8).

**• Iranian visual identity stated graphically**

According to Richard Hollis (1997: 9-10), graphic

Table 2. A comparison between Iranian (distinction-oriented) visual corporate identity and Iranian (similarity-oriented) visual identity. Source: authors.

Iranian visual corporate identity	Iranian general visual identity
1. The elements (such as formal signs, flags, etc) are standard	1.The elements are represented in the form of pictures, design, linear and 3-D shapes and symbols especially used by graphic designers
2. Generally predefined elements are used based on certain regulations and obligations	2. The elements are based on representation and recreation.
3. The number of clients and designers in this field are limited.	3. There are numerous clients and designers with different views and tastes who are active in this field.



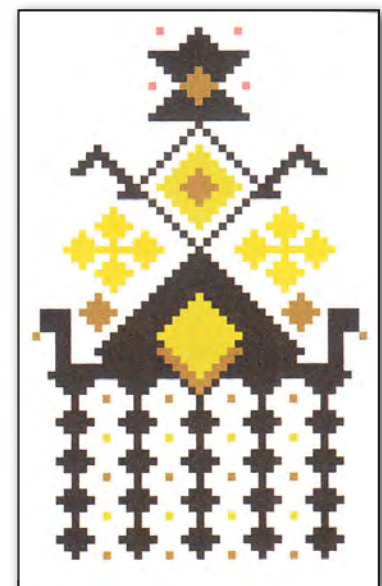
Fig. 8. A poster representing a Iranian atmosphere through applying appropriate colors and patterns. Designer: Farzad Adibi. Source: Adibi, 2005:51.

design is a language with an ever-developing grammar. In addition, he holds that graphic design has three main functions: information, identification and promotion. As such, graphic design, as a medium, has played a major role in representing Iranian visual identity. Graphically, Iranian visual identity includes those graphic works that enjoy a certain degree of visual similarity to Iranian culture. In a sense, the state of being Iranian in those works is readily recognizable. Considering the different functions of graphic design, Iranian visual identity can be stated graphically in a wide variety of ways. Graphic designs may represent different themes from music to architecture. Iranian visual identity can be stated graphically through a modern language (Fig. 8 and 9). Among the different countries which the national character of graphic design is readily recognizable, Japan is noteworthy (picture 10). Japanese art is both decorative and symbolic (Kazumasa Nagai, 2007).

Fig. 6. A reed-made house in Shadegan lagoon, Khouzeestan. Source: Mojtahedzade, 2013: 60-65.



Fig. 7. A pattern used in Islamic architecture, kelims, timeworks, etc. Although color and form of the pattern may slightly change, the overall pattern has remained unchanged. Source: Darreh Shouri, 2008: 38.



Likewise, Khazaie, M. (2009) believes that Iranian art has similar qualities. Interestingly, Nagai maintains that there are few elements in Japanese art which are originally Japanese. Japanese religious or landscape Pictures are, in essence, Chinese. However, Japanese artists have managed skillfully to enhance the quality of their works.

**• The sources of Iranian visual identity and its graphic representation**

The sources of visual identity in this research include picture of Iranian art, outstanding symbols of cities,

natural and man-made symbols as well as plant and animal symbols and the like. It deserves mentioning that certain Iranian pictures drawn recently have been, themselves, adopted from or influenced by other cultures. The discussion on distinctive features which make such works Iranian is beyond the scope of this research.

Iranian visual identity can be represented graphically in various cases such as designs of clothes, pack printing, web pages, governmental emblems, credit bonds, etc. Effective representation of Iranian visual identity depends on both sender and receiver. Senders may include designers and clients. Similarly, receivers may include foreign or domestic ones. Domestic receivers, themselves, may be general or specific. It is natural that the degree of understanding of Iranian visual identity is not the same among the mentioned

four groups, that is, client, designer, domestic and foreign addressee. It is clear that different graphic designers have different tastes. How Iranian visual identity is represented depends mainly on the designer's skills and knowledge which is obtained, in part, by training and individual practice.

### Discussion

The features of common visual identity (visual corporate identity) were addressed in review of literature. In addition, different interpretations of visual identity were discussed; general visual identity was defined and its characteristics were discussed. Accordingly, the nature of Iranian visual identity was elaborated. Finally, different kinds of Iranian visual identity were discussed and Iranian visual identity was addressed graphically.

### Conclusion

Iranian visual identity is the visual similarity to certain tangible or intangible Iranian works so that the intended work can be easily distinguished from the works of other nations. Iranian visual identity mainly depends on the designer's capabilities, from one hand, and the viewer's understanding, from the other hand. Iranian visual identity is represented graphically when there is a certain degree of visual similarity between the intended work and the Iranian culture. The graphic sources to represent Iranian visual identity include visual symbols signs adopted from or influenced by Iranian culture. The taste of designer, client, address as well as the thematic relevance all are the factors which affect the effectiveness of the representation of the visual identity. Iranian visual identity may be divided into general Iranian visual identity and Iranian visual corporate identity. Iranian visual corporate identity, like visual corporate identity, has its own norms and standards. Formal and approved signs by national government are among such identity.

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