



AN EXEGETICAL EVALUATION OF PAINTING BASED ON THE OUTWARD-ORIENTED CRITICAL FRAMEWORK DERIVED FROM THE PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS OF ŞADR AL-DĪN SHĪRĀZĪ (A CASE STUDY: THE CORONATION OF AHMAD SHAH DURRANI BY ABDUL GHAFOOR BRESHNA)

Reza RAFIEI RAD ¹ , Parisa SHAD GHAZVINI ² 

¹ Postdoctoral Researcher in Art Studies, Department of Painting, Faculty of Art, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran.

² Associate Professor, Department of Painting, Faculty of Art, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran; (shad@alzahra.ac.ir)

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Abstract: Among the diverse works of contemporary Afghan painters, certain pieces hold a particularly prominent position, such as Abdul Ghafoor Breshna's painting of Ahmad Shah Abdali's coronation (1942). The significance of this work arises from multiple factors: the historical magnitude of Afghanistan's founding, the artist's engagement with a historical event amid divergent and sometimes conflicting narratives, the visual and painterly qualities of the work, and the specific context and timing of its creation and presentation. Understanding these values cannot be achieved without a systematic study grounded in scholarly critique. Accordingly, the present qualitative research aims to introduce and analyze this painting while addressing the following questions: First, what is the unifying hypothesis of the work that integrates its elements, components, and visual qualities, and what is its ultimate purpose? Second, based on that hypothesis and purpose, what artistic and conceptual values does the work convey? This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, relying on library, online, and archival sources, and applies a four-stage external evaluative critique method inspired by the ideas of Sadr al-Din Shirazi. The study's findings reveal a clear progression. First, the work's overall nature, dimensions, and incomplete aspects were examined. Second, key analytical categories were considered. Third, the unifying hypothesis emerged from the artist's careful selection among conflicting narratives (colonial and pre-colonial, traditional and modern) and the creation of a distinctive composition. This allowed the painting to convey a coherent narrative of Afghanistan's founding, depict a grand scene with Barakzai representatives, and underscore the emerging government's religious and divine legitimacy. Finally, adherence to Classical techniques, effective use of visual elements, and symbolic devices reinforced the painting's national-Afghan content and purpose.

Keywords: Modern Afghan painting; Abdul Ghafoor Breshna; Ahmad Shah Durrani; foundation of Afghanistan.

چکیده: در میان آثار متنوع نقاشان معاصر افغانستان، برخی آثار همچون نقاشی عبدالغفور برشنا از مراسم تاج‌گذاری احمدشاه ابدالی (۱۹۴۲) جایگاه ویژه‌ای دارند. اهمیت این اثر ناشی از عوامل گوناگونی است؛ از جمله عظمت رویداد تاریخی تأسیس افغانستان، نحوه مواجهه نقاش با واقع‌های تاریخی در میان روایات متنوع و متضاد، ارزش‌های بصری و تصویرسازی نقاشانه در اثر، و نیز زمان خاص خلق و ارائه آن. دستیابی به درک این ارزش‌ها بدون پژوهشی روشمند بر اساس نقد علمی ممکن نیست. از این رو، پژوهش کیفی حاضر با هدف معرفی و تحلیل نقاشی مذکور و در پی یافتن پاسخ به این پرسش‌ها انجام شده است: نخست، فرضیه وحدت‌بخش این اثر، که عناصر، اجزا و کیفیت‌های بصری را یکپارچه می‌سازد، و غایت آن چیست؟ دوم، این اثر بر اساس آن فرضیه و غایت، چه ارزش‌های هنری و مفهومی به دست آورده است؟ این پژوهش با رویکرد توصیفی - تحلیلی و بر مبنای منابع کتابخانه‌ای، اینترنتی و آرشیوی، همچنین با بهره‌گیری از روش نقد ارزیابانه برون‌نگر چهارمرحله‌ای برگرفته از آراء صدرالدین شیرازی انجام گرفته است. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد: در مرحله نخست، ماهیت کلی اثر در ابعاد ذاتی و عرضی و علل ناقصه بررسی شده است؛ در مرحله دوم مقولات تحلیلی مورد توجه قرار گرفته؛ در مرحله سوم، فرضیه وحدت‌بخش از رهگذر گزینش آگاهانه نقاش از روایات متعارض (استعماری و پیشاستعماری/ سنتی و مدرن) و خلق ترکیب‌بندی خاص برای انتقال پیام اثر شکل گرفته است؛ و در نهایت، غایت نقاشی در ایجاد وحدت عقلانی روایت‌ها درباره تأسیس افغانستان، نمایش صحنه‌ای باشکوه با حضور نماینده بارکزیایی‌ها و تأکید بر مشروعیت دینی و آسمانی حکومت تبلور یافته است. در مرحله چهارم نیز پابندی به شگردهای سبکی کلاسیسیسم، به کارگیری مؤثر عناصر و کیفیت‌های بصری و استفاده از نمادها و نشانه‌های دلایلی، در راستای تحقق غایت و محتوای ملی - افغانستانی اثر مورد توجه قرار گرفته است.

کلیدواژه: نقاشی معاصر افغانستان، عبدالغفور برشنا، احمدشاه درانی، تأسیس افغانستان.

I. Introduction

Following the partition of Afghanistan in the sixteenth century by the Uzbek polities of Transoxiana, the Safavid state of Iran, and the Mughal Empire of India, waves of political resistance and independence movements in Afghanistan culminated in the expulsion of the Safavids and the subsequent conquest of Iran by the Hotak Empire (1709–1738) under the leadership of Mirwais Hotak. Nevertheless, the actual foundation of

Afghanistan was established by the Durrani Empire, the second major Islamic empire of the eighteenth century, which inaugurated the political history of the modern Afghan state (Balland, 2003: 12–50). The evolution of feudal structures in Kandahar, combined with the persistent struggle of the Afghan people against foreign domination, created the conditions for the emergence of a centralized state. Consequently, the Abdali polity was founded under the leadership of Ahmad Shah

Durrani, who was formally proclaimed King of Afghanistan in 1747 (Ghobar, 1989: 353).

Some historians, however, have argued that Ahmad Shah Durrani may have been complicit in the assassination of Nader Shah (Toynbee, 2016: 110; Moradi, 2024: 40). Furthermore, writers such as Munshi al-Husseini, Joseph-Pierre Ferrier, James Fraser, and Mountstuart Elphinstone, in their accounts of Ahmad Shah's elevation to kingship, make no reference to the widely circulated narrative of his election through a *Loyajerga/Loya Jirga*, an assembly comprising leaders of the Pashtun, Baloch, Uzbek, and Hazara tribes. Others have gone further, situating this narrative within broader precolonial and postcolonial frameworks of Afghan historiography (Hanifi, 2004: 19–21).

Abdul Ghafoor Breshna, one of Afghanistan's leading twentieth-century artists and intellectuals, directly engaged with the challenges of nation-building in the early modern period. Through his creative appropriation of modern artistic techniques and his rediscovery of Afghanistan's classical artistic heritage, he expanded the cultural discourse into a global arena and mapped the circulation of knowledge between Europe and Afghanistan (Wardaki, 2021: 1580).

In 1942, 195 years after this pivotal historical event, under the particular political conditions of the Hashim Khan era and during the reign of Zahir Shah, who was popularly styled as the "Father of the Nation," Breshna produced the painting *The Coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani*.

The present study investigates the aesthetic achievement and the underlying thematic and formal values of this work, with particular attention to the national, political, and cultural considerations embedded within its content, thereby enhancing its significance. Accordingly, this study seeks to introduce and critically analyze the painting, elucidating its artistic and aesthetic strategies as well as its expressive values. Methodologically, the study adopts an evaluative and extrinsic critical framework derived from the philosophical perspectives of Sadr al-Din Shirazi, employing a descriptive-analytical approach to explore the unifying hypothesis and ultimate telos of the artwork, and subsequently to assess the painting on that basis.

II. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing primarily on library and archival sources. To address the research questions and resolve related issues, the analysis is conducted through an indigenous model of art criticism derived from the

philosophical ideas of Sadr al-Din Shirazi. This model is based on Sadra's research approach as articulated in his *al-Asfār al-Arba'a (The Four Journeys)* and *Shawāhid al-Rubūbiyya*, and is grounded in his conception of the human condition within the two arcs of descent and ascent, as well as the doctrine of substantial motion (*ḥarakat jawhariyya*).

An artwork is a "child of its time,"² deeply influenced by political, cultural, and discursive contexts. This is particularly noticeable in countries like Afghanistan, where frequent political upheavals have had a significant impact on artistic production. Accordingly, the analysis of artworks in such contexts requires a "multi-categorical" or "extrinsic" approach to reveal their underlying truth. In contrast, "intrinsic" criticism, which confines itself to the technical and aesthetic dimensions of the artwork, lacks this capacity. Western intrinsic approaches and modernist art criticism often emphasize Kantian mechanisms and formalist rules, prioritizing technical and aesthetic concerns over contextual factors.

The evaluative-extrinsic framework derived from Sadra's philosophy offers the critic a systematic and taxonomic means for examining contextual categories, such as political, cultural, and social conditions, alongside other relevant factors. In comparison, many extrinsic critical models in the West remain incomplete. Some omit the evaluative stage altogether, while others, such as Feldman's four-step model (1980), including description, formal analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, lack sufficient specificity.

Similarly, Carroll's seven-step method (2008) represents a more elaborate framework, yet in the present research, the indigenous model is prioritized. The reason for this is that Breshna cannot be regarded merely as an imitator of Western art. Thus, his artworks cannot be fully encapsulated within Western schools or techniques.

In practice, this study proceeds systematically in two preliminary stages. First, it examines issues such as aesthetics, political and cultural contexts, economic conditions, and the individual and social characteristics of the artist, along with other contributing factors, to reach a comprehensive understanding of the artwork. Second, based on these findings, the artwork is subjected to critical evaluation.

The evaluative-extrinsic model of painting criticism, grounded in Sadra's research philosophy, is structured in four stages:

Stage One: Examination of general principles (*umūr āmma*), essence,³ essential and accidental universals, and

¹ Grand National Assembly

² Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944)

³ From Sadra's perspective, essence (*māhiyyah*) is the delimitation of existence and a representation or manifestation thereof (Sadra al-Din Shirāzi, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 66–180).

the partial causes (formal,⁴ efficient,⁵ final, and material).

Stage Two: Analysis of categories associated with the “second journey” in natural philosophy, including quantity (*kam*), quality (*kaṣf*), position (*wadʿ*), place (*ayn*), time (*matā*), possession (*melk*), action (*an yafʿal*), and passion (*an yanfaʿil*).

Stage Three: Interpretation of the outcomes from the preceding stages, attainment of knowledge, and constitution of essence through emanative existence (*qiyām şudūrī*), culminating in the extraction of the unifying hypothesis and the telos of the artwork.

Stage Four: Evaluation of the artwork across three domains: structural, historical, and contextual. This includes situating the artwork within its historical, institutional, cultural, and artistic conventions, as well as considering the artist’s intentionality. Through this process, the full range of values inherent in the work is disclosed, and the “received value” is brought closer to, or becomes equivalent to, the “achieved value” of the artwork (Rafiei Rad & Shad Ghazvini, 2025: 60-62).⁶

Figure 1 presents a schematic diagram of the overall stages of the evaluative-extrinsic criticism model derived through the aforementioned process.

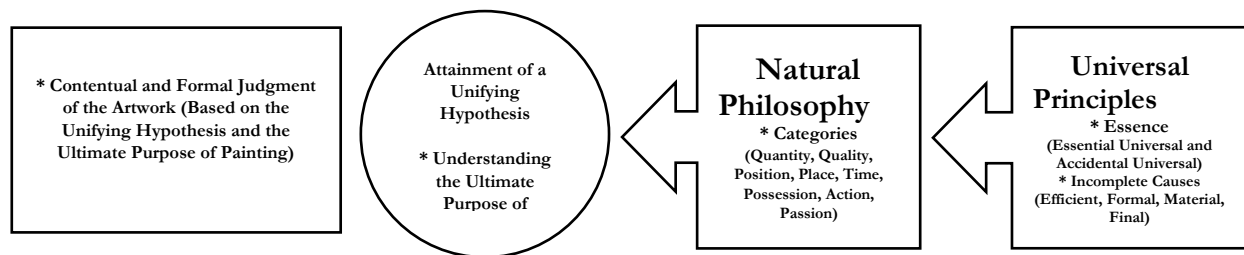


Figure 1: Overview of the stages of the outward evaluative critique model, derived from al-Asfār al-arba'a by Sadr al-Din Shirazi (Rafiei Rad & Shad Ghazvini, 2025: 62).

III. Literature Review

Research related to topics closely aligned with the present study can be categorized into several groups:

III.1. Studies on the Analysis and Understanding of Contemporary Afghan Painting

This category includes works that examine the historical transformations, discourses, and stylistic developments of contemporary painting in Afghanistan. Among these, the following books are notable: *The School of Fine Arts of Afghanistan* by Abdul Ghafoor Breshna; *Art and the Fine Arts in Afghanistan* by Mohammad Akbar Salam and Aziza Khushnasib; and *Painting and Its Historical Trajectory in Afghanistan* by Fatana Baktash Arifi.

In addition, Reza Rafiei Rad’s doctoral dissertation, *Discourse Analysis of Contemporary Afghan Painting*, and Masoumeh Mirzaei’s M.A. thesis, *The Formation of the Third Stage or the Contemporary School of Herat Miniature* (Alzahra University), not only examine the historical evolution of miniature painting but also analyze the works of five Herati artists, situating them within the context of contemporary Afghan painting (Mirzaei, 2019).

In the field of scholarly articles, notable examples include Abdul Wase Rahro Omarzad’s article (2018) *The Art of Afghanistan in the Last Century*, published in the *Journal of Fine Arts*⁷, and another article by Rafiei Rad et al. (2017), *The Function of the Human Figure in Two Decades of Afghan Painting*, published in the same journal.

Collectively, these studies have offered concise periodizations of Afghan painting history. Some have divided it into four phases: “Pre-Islamic,” “Post-Islamic,” “Realist,” and “Post-Civil War” (Rafiei Rad & Tomyris, 2017: 19–20). Others, adopting a stylistic perspective, have categorized it as: “Pre-Islamic,” “The First Golden Age (Herat School),” “The Second Golden Age (the Amanullah Period),” and “Modernism (the last two decades)” (Omarzad, 2018: 16). Still others, have classified Afghan art into three historical segments: “Greco-Bactrian,” “Medieval,” and “Timurid Herat.” (Pugachenkova, 1978: 7–9).

III.2. Studies Introducing Contemporary Afghan Painters and their Artworks

Within this domain, one may note the book *Art in Afghanistan* by Shahrani, published in Pakistan (Shahrani, 1971). Likewise, Abdul Qadir Sarwary’s article *A Study of the Art of Painting in Kabul* introduces

⁴ Form and actuality arise within matter and serve as the source of new effects therein.

⁵ The efficient cause is the cause that bestows existence upon the effect and brings it into actuality.

⁶ The critical method under discussion has been elaborated and published in *Peykareh: Visual Arts*, a peer-reviewed journal indexed in Scopus.

⁷ Faculty of Fine Arts, Kabul University (Afghanistan)

several contemporary painters, emphasizing their specifically Kabul-oriented artistic identity and works.

A master's thesis entitled *A Comparative Study of the Works of Two Artists from Two Lands* by Azita Ebrahimi (supervised by Dr. Parisa Shad Ghazvini) examines the lives and artistic production of Ghulam Mohammad Maimanagi from Afghanistan and Kamal al-Molk from Iran, offering a comparative analysis of the formal and thematic aspects of their works.

Additional contributions include articles by Rafiei Rad and Mohammadzadeh. One, *The Strategies of Afghan Women Painters in Reviving and Reinterpreting the Pictorial Heritage of Miniature Art in Afghanistan's Contemporary Painting*, was published in the *Journal of Greater Khorasan Studies* (2019). Another, *A Comparative Study of the Application of Pictorial Traditions of Miniature in the Works of Contemporary Women Painters in Iran and Afghanistan*, appeared in the *Journal of Graphic and Painting Research* (2020). Both of these studies not only introduce the works of contemporary Afghan women painters but also provide formal and thematic analyses of their art. A further article by the same authors, together with M.R. Moridi, entitled *A Thematic Analysis of Contemporary Afghan Painting*, is forthcoming in the journal *Rahpooyeh Honar*. This study applies thematic analysis to introduce several contemporary Afghan painters while also examining the central themes of their works.

Another important contribution is Marjan Wardaki's *Rediscovering Afghan Fine Arts: The Life of an Afghan Student in Germany, Abdul Ghafoor Breshna*. Wardaki examines Breshna's role in integrating media, colors, and political-cultural discourses, as well as his engagement with global concerns around nation-building in the early twentieth century. She argues that Breshna articulated a conceptual framework situated beyond the dichotomy of "traditional" and "modern." Within this framework, artistic traditions were either revived or reconfigured to construct an Afghan identity, while Breshna's extensive cultural and literary activities sought to restore Afghanistan's rightful position as a producer of cultural and artistic knowledge (Wardaki, 2021: 1580).

III.3. Studies on the History of Afghanistan, with Particular Reference to the Eighteenth Century

Among the most significant sources in this field is *On the Path of History* by Dr. Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghoobar, written with the dual purpose of examining the causes of defeats, deviations, and decline among Afghan peoples, as well as analyzing the underlying factors behind their victories and civilizational achievements. Other important works include *Mujmal al-Tawarikh ba'd Nadiriyya* by Abu'l-Hasan Gulistaneh (1782); *Tarikh-i Ahmad Shahi* by Mahmud al-Husaini al-Munshi ibn Ibrahim al-Jami (1753–1774); Mountstuart

Elphinstone's *The History of India: The Rise of the British Power* (1913–1915), commonly referred to in Afghanistan as *Siraj al-Tawarikh*; *The History of the Afghans* by Joseph-Pierre Ferrier (1858); James Baillie Fraser's *Historical and Descriptive Account of Persia* (1852); and Ganda Singh's *Ahmad Shah Durrani: Father of Modern Afghanistan* (1959). These, together with other historical studies, provide detailed descriptions and analyses of Ahmad Shah Durrani's reign.

More recent scholarship includes the article *Editing the Past: Colonial Production of Hegemony Through the "Loyajerga" in Afghanistan*, which, drawing upon Gramscian theory, argues that the Afghan state has historically employed the Loyajerga to align itself with the Pashtun majority. By promoting claims of Pashtun dominance, the state appropriated historical legitimacy and tribal symbols both to attract Pashtuns and to intimidate non-Pashtun populations. Western scholars, the article contends, often accepted these claims uncritically, thereby reinforcing the thesis of Pashtun supremacy and the quasi-tribal democratic character of the Loyajerga, ultimately contributing to its neo-colonial reproduction (Hanifi, 2004: 19–21).

Although scholarship on Afghan painting has expanded in recent years, significant gaps remain in the study of contemporary Afghan artists and the analysis of their works. The present research, employing a critical model derived from the philosophy of Sadr al-Din Shirazi, undertakes an analysis of one of Abdul Ghafoor Breshna's most important paintings. In doing so, it offers innovation both in the selection of the artist and artwork and in the methodological framework applied.

IV. Theoretical Foundations

IV.1. Abdul Ghafoor Breshna and His Artworks (1907–1974)

Abdul Ghafoor Breshna (1907–1974) was born in Kabul. He first learned calligraphy from his grandmother and, after completing his studies at Habibia School, was sent to Germany to pursue painting and lithography. His teacher, the German-Jewish painter Max Liebermann, one of the leading figures of Impressionism, had a profound influence on his artistic development. Breshna later became one of the first professors of the Kabul School of Arts and Industries (Rafiei Rad et al., 2021: 30), and he demonstrated particular mastery in both watercolor and oil painting. Although he was younger in age than other masters such as Karim Shah Khan, Ghausuddin, Khair Mohammad Yari, and Ataee, his artistic authority was universally acknowledged.

Liebermann frequently painted landscapes outdoors, and Breshna followed his lead by depicting diverse Afghan sceneries, including historical monuments, fortresses, the Shah Do Shamshira Mosque, and natural

valleys. His works, both in landscape and portrait genres (see Fig. 2), reveal considerable skill. In his watercolors, he employed a wide range of colors and used the natural

whiteness of the paper to heighten contrasts of light. He favored concision, often constructing a facial form or a landscape with only a few decisive brushstrokes.



Figure 2: (Top) *Spring Landscape of Istalif*, watercolor, 34 × 35 cm, 1964; Left: *Charchatta Bazaar, Kabul*, oil on canvas, 72 × 95 cm, 1933. (Bottom, from right to left): *Self-Portrait with Metal Pen*; *Portrait of Eid Mohammad, a Farmer from Bamiyan*, watercolor, 37 × 27 cm, 1962; *Old Man from Nuristan*, watercolor, 60 × 45 cm, 1967; *Portrait of Seyed Moqaddas Negah*, watercolor, Tajikistan, 1972 (Rafiei Rad, 2022: 109).

Another significant portion of his oeuvre is devoted to portraiture. Breshna's focus on peasants and ordinary townspeople, and villagers as portrait subjects, reflects his realist inclination. This tendency was shaped partly by his academic training in Europe and partly by the tradition of miniature painting inherited from Kamal al-Din Behzad. An example of Behzad's realism is his miniature *The Fight between the Camels* (Ahmadi & Farahmand, 2021: 15; Lal Shateri, 2016: 21).

Broadly speaking, the academic training and naturalistic standards introduced at the Kabul School of Arts represented a continuation of Behzad's realist legacy (Rafiei Rad & Tomyris, 2017: 19; Omarzad, 2018: 15).

Another parallel between Breshna and Kamal al-Din Behzad lies in their accessibility to the viewer, in terms of not only visibility and presence within the work itself,

but also through their narrative role, which is distinctly evident in their artworks (Wardaki, 2021: 1573).

In 1931, the Kabul Literary Association (*Anjuman-e Adabi Kabul*) was established under the presidency of Mohammad Anwar Basmal. One of its primary objectives was the study and documentation of Afghanistan's history. The Association subsequently published the *Afghanistan Yearbook* (*Da Afghanistan Kalami*), which contained literary, artistic, and historical reports. Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghoobar was among its members, and Abdul Ghafoor Breshna, in addition to his membership, also contributed as a designer for the yearbook. Among the works attributed to him in this publication are portraits of Afghan rulers such as Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, Ghiyath al-Din of the Ghurids, Shēr Shah Suri, Mirwais Hotak, Dost Mohammad Khan, Shēr Ali Khan, and others (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: *Portrait sketches of the Kings of Afghanistan* by Breshna, published in the *Kabul Yearbook*, 1936–1937, Kabul Literary Association, pp. 412–413.

Another significant aspect of Breshna's artworks is dedicated to depicting historical and ancient sites. Some of his works, such as his paintings of the colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan, are rendered both imaginatively and realistically. With *The Musicians of Bamiyan*, Breshna sought to reconstruct the atmosphere of this historical setting for the viewer. The inaccuracies in proportion, the use of predetermined color schemes, and the lack of clarity in representing weather conditions suggest that the artist initially relied on earlier visual sources and

subsequently incorporated his own imaginative elements, such as the two figures on the right, to fulfill the goal of illustration. By contrast, in two other paintings, the artist worked directly on location, achieving greater precision in the play of light and shadow, textures, proportions, and the realistic rendering of the sky (see Fig. 4). Finally, his watercolor painting of *The Coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani* (Fig. 5) later served as a model for imitation and a source of inspiration for subsequent Afghan painters.

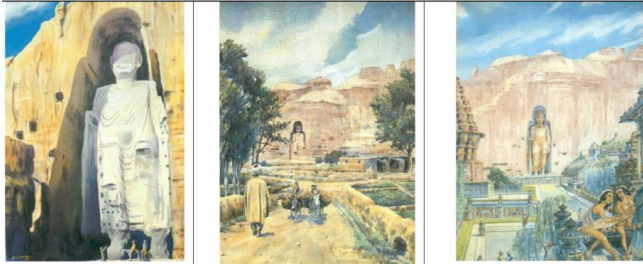


Figure 4. Right: *Musicians of Bamiyan*, watercolor; Center and left: *Bamiyan statue*, watercolor, ca. 1965 (Rafiei Rad, 2022: 111).



Figure 5. *The Coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani*, watercolor, 35 × 80 cm, by Breshna. (Ghobar, 1943).

V. Stages of External Evaluative Criticism Derived from Ṣadrā's Views

V.1. First Stage: The Critical Framework

This work (Fig. 4), in terms of its “genus”, belongs to the domain of fine arts and is classified within the field of visual arts. With respect to “species and differentia”, it can be identified, in terms of artistic form, as belonging to the medium of painting and stylistically to the tradition of classical art.

The examination of its “specific accidents” demonstrates that the painting adheres to the ten canonical principles of classical art and may therefore be regarded as a narrative work with a historical subject matter. Abdul Ghafoor Breshna is the efficient cause of this work, while the material cause is the watercolor applied to cardboard. Inquiry into the formal cause reveals that the painting is representational and narrative in character, incorporating motifs of humans, animals, vegetation, architecture, and objects. Ultimately, the final cause can be discerned as the painter's intention to depict the coronation ceremony of Ahmad Shah Durrani.

V.2. Second Stage: The Critical Framework

The quantitative examination of the work at this stage reveals that the painting measures 80 × 35 cm and comprises six human figures, six animal motifs, and eight vegetal motifs. The composition is organized around a single vanishing point and three distinct

planes: the first plane depicts the ceremonial gathering, the second encompasses the architectural structures and trees, and the third represents the pale blue sky.

From the perspective of quality, the painting possesses an expressive character. In the third plane, cool colors are enriched with shades of white and gray. The use of blue and other cool tones in the background generates a sense of greater depth, allowing the secondary hues of blue and red-orange in the garments of the foreground figures to stand out more prominently. Sunlight, falling from behind the scene, further accentuates the atmospheric quality of the composition.

In terms of position, the strongest contrast emerges between the complementary colors of blue and orange, while a weaker opposition exists between the green and red spectra. Concerning surface-area contrast, the expanse of blue is approximately twice that of the orange tones. Concerning formal contrasts, the entire work is marked by a vertical–horizontal tension: although the overall frame is horizontally rectangular, the figures, trees, railings, and minarets are all arranged vertically, creating a particular sense of stability within the pictorial space.

The setting of the painting appears to represent a shrine, temple, or mosque in Afghanistan. However, it differs significantly from any specific historical site and is therefore a product of the artist's imaginative reconstruction (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Two photographs of the actual site of the Shēr-e Surkh shrine, Kandahar, Afghanistan. The right image depicts the site in the 1940s, as published by Ghobar in *Ahmad Shah Baba Afghan* (1943: 62). The left image shows the same site, published by Ganda Singh in *Ahmad Shah Durrani* (1958; repr. 1987: 36a).

From the perspective of time, the painting was executed in 1942. Nevertheless, its content relates to the historical coronation of Ahmad Shah Abdali in October 1747, an event that the painter re-envisioned at the age

An Yanfil (أَنْ يَنْفَعِل)

In summary, the dominant artistic discourse during the period in which this painting was produced may be described as the “discourse of Western academic painting” (Rafiei Rad, 2022: 206). This discourse took shape over a span of sixty-five years in the history of Afghan painting. It began with the second stage of Amanullah’s reforms in 1923 and, after many fluctuations, including the dominance of reactionary forces, the establishment of socialism, and other transformations, it declined and receded to the margins by 1988.

At its inception, the discourse of Afghan academic painting emerged under the slogan of “progress through modernization,” positioning itself in opposition to tradition. The resulting tension between the notions of “the art of backward peoples” and “the art of civilized peoples” ultimately led to cultural, scientific, and institutional borrowing in the pursuit of progress and civilization. Nevertheless, some artists, particularly members of the Kabul Literary Association, sought to open pathways for reviving the past in a modern form.

Scholars of Afghan nationalism link this renewed interest in the past to the close relationship between Afghanistan and Germany. Historians argue that the development of modern nationalism in Europe exerted a profound influence on the emergence of nationalism in Afghanistan (Baiza, 2013: 53). Afghan intellectuals did not advocate a discourse of “complete imitation of the West.” Rather, they regarded modernization not as an inevitable process of social transformation necessitating direct importation and reproduction of Western models, but as a trajectory that could coexist with tradition. Paradoxically, they believed that tradition and change could not only exist side by side but could also work together effectively (Ahmadi, 2008: 21).

Accordingly, Breshna rarely employed terms such as “Arya” or “Ariana.” Instead, he focused on cultivating an intimate relationship with the past, a relationship that was not only tied to elite Afghan circles connected to the state but also encompassed the diverse and heterogeneous forms of national identities inherent in Afghanistan itself (Wardaki, 2021: 1568). Breshna’s exchanges with European artists are thus to be understood as an interaction defined neither by

of thirty-five. The artwork bears a title but no accompanying statement, nor is there evidence of its display in an exhibition; if it was ever exhibited, the relevant documentation is not available.

“domination and dependency” nor by “loss of self” (Mitter, 2007: 10).

An-Yaf'al (أَنْ يَفْعَل)

Afghan painting, before the Amanullah era, largely remained entrenched in the repetition of traditional principles of miniature art, particularly those of the Timurid period and the Herat school. This continuity is clearly observable in the works of Mir Ḥusām al-Dīn Naqqāsh, Khalīfa Muḥammad Riḍā Naqqāsh, Khalīfa Muḥammad Ḥaydar Naqqāsh, Khalīfa ‘Alī Aḥmad Naqqāsh, and later in the oeuvre of Ustād Sa‘īd Mash‘al, several of his students, and other miniature painters. Shahrānī classifies the modern artistic developments introduced into Afghanistan during that period into two categories: direct and indirect influences.

The direct mode was grounded in the patronage of King Amanullah and the support of UNESCO in the field of art, focusing on two main approaches to art education: one emphasizing technical skills (professional art) and the other emphasizing creative innovation (innovative art). In contrast, the indirect mode was shaped by the dissemination of artists’ ideas and theories among the public, the circulation of relevant publications, and the exhibitions of art students trained abroad. Accordingly, it was natural for this painting to exert a lasting influence on the aesthetic preferences of subsequent Afghan painters. A notable example is another painting on the same historical theme, the coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani, installed in the Presidential Palace, where it has retained its symbolic position throughout various political transformations (Fig. 7). In this later painting, several features appear to have been directly modeled after Breshna’s work, including:

- (1) the three-tiered staircase,
- (2) the soldier,
- (3) the bowed figure of the king,
- (4) the mystic in white clothing,
- (5) the saddlebag,
- (6) the figure positioned on the right,
- (7) and the two minarets on the left.

As can be observed, the compositional strategies and visual elements employed by Breshna re-emerged as formal models in the works of other painters many years later (Fig. 8).



Figure 7: The painting under discussion displayed on the wall of the Presidential Palace during the administrations of Ashraf Ghani and the second Taliban regime.



Figure 8: Oil painting, attributed to Anjurgar Foulad (or Mohammad Yusuf Asefi), measuring over 1×1 m.

V.3. The Third Stage: The Critical Model

The preceding findings in this section serve as preparatory causes and provide the foundation for identifying the final cause of the artwork through the formulation of a unifying hypothesis. The discussion unfolds in the following two parts:

V.3.1. The Unifying Hypothesis

The observations outlined in the previous two stages of critique suggest that the painting under study is associated with the historical event of the coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani, the Abdali tribal leader who is regarded as the founder of modern Afghanistan. Scholarly debates concerning this coronation ceremony have yielded two contrasting narratives, commonly framed as precolonial and postcolonial interpretations. Both perspectives will be examined in turn, followed by the articulation of a unifying hypothesis in relation to the painting.

The First Narrative (Ghobar, Tapper, Lee, Olivier Roy, Canfield, Kateb, Balland):

Until the work of Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghobar in 1941, no historian had mentioned the convening of a Loyajerga for electing Ahmad Khan as king. Seeking to legitimize the monarchy, Ghobar established a historical link between Ahmad Shah's accession and the Loyajerga. In his book *Ahmad Shah Baba Afghan*, Ghobar argues that Ahmad Shah, who had served as a commander under Nader Shah Afshar, withdrew with the Abdali forces from the Persian camp after Nader Shah's assassination in 1747 and advanced toward Kandahar and Farah. In Kandahar, tribal leaders from various Afghan groups, Pashtun, Shia, Baluch, Uzbek, among others, held eight sessions of the Loyajerga at the shrine of Shēr-e Surkh. Throughout these sessions, Ahmad Khan remained silent.

In the ninth session, Sabir Shah Kabuli, son of Ustad Likhwar, extolled Ahmad Khan's virtues and administrative capabilities, proposing him as worthy of

kingship. Ahmad Shah Sadozai was ultimately declared king, crowned with a wheat-colored diadem placed on his turban by Sabir Shah (Ghobar, 1943: 59–64).

Later, in *Afghanistan in the Course of History* (1967), Ghobar identified Kandahar as the intertribal center of Afghanistan and reiterated that Ahmad Shah's monarchy had been established through a Loyajerga composed of various Afghan groups, convened at Naderabad's military fort near the shrine of Shēr-e Surkh, where Sabir Shah placed a wheat stalk on Ahmad Shah's head as a symbol of kingship (Ghobar, 1989: 355). Subsequent historians largely repeated this account.

For instance, Richard Tapper (1983: 13) maintains that Ahmad Shah was chosen by a Loyajerga of Afghan chiefs formerly loyal to Nader Shah. Similarly, Faiz Muhammad Kateb, in *Siraj al-Tavarikh* (1952), refers to the Loyajerga and identifies Sabir Shah as a dervish (Kateb, 1952, vol. 1: 10). Olivier Roy (1985: 13), echoing this view, stresses both the 1747 Loyajerga and its re-enactment in 1929 during Nader Khan's rule. Balland (2008: 547) also attributes Ahmad Shah's election to a Loyajerga, while Canfield (2003: 356) highlights the religious dimension of his coronation by underscoring the decisive role of a prominent clerical figure.

Broadly speaking, this narrative constitutes the official version promoted in modern Afghanistan, disseminated through state institutions and even included in twelfth-grade school curricula. However, some scholars, drawing on the memoirs of Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, propose a more elaborate interpretation. According to this account, representatives of the Loyajerga, in accordance with Pashtunwali customs (Nanawati), symbolically ate grass as a pledge that their herds would henceforth belong to Ahmad Shah, and they placed ropes around their necks as a sign of submission to his authority (Lee, 2018: 106–107).

The Second Narrative (Mahmoud al-Hosaini, Ferrier, Elphinstone, Raverty, Fraser, Tate, Singh):

This narrative stands in direct opposition to the first. It considers the earlier version as a postcolonial fabrication of Afghan history, an elaborate legend constructed by nationalist historians to legitimize the Muhammadzai and Barakzai dynasties, and subsequently echoed by their European counterparts. Such narratives even suggest that Afghan soldiers, along with the twenty-five-year-old Ahmad Shah, may have been implicated in the assassination of Nader Shah and the removal of the Koh-i-Noor diamond.

The earliest version appears in *Tārīkh-i Ahmad Shāhī* by Mahmoud al-Hosaini ibn Ibrahim Jami (1753–1774), which recounts a gathering in Kandahar, a prophecy of Ahmad Khan's kingship following the death of Nader Shah, and the placing of a green blade of grass upon Ahmad Shah's turban by the Dervish Sabir. In this narrative, Ahmad Shah attains sovereignty through acts of violence and repression, including trampling his opponents beneath elephants (al-Hosaini al-Munshi, 1974, I, 23a).

Joseph-Pierre Ferrier, in *History of the Afghans* (1844–1845), describes how a dervish fashioned a handful of barley from a nearby field into the shape of a crown, placed it upon Ahmad Shah's head, and how Ahmad Shah was subsequently crowned in the mosque of Kandahar (Ferrier, 1858: 69–70).

James Fraser (1852), Henry George Raverty (1867), and Mountstuart Elphinstone (1913–1915) all note the cooperation of Durrani, Qizilbash, Baloch, and Hazara chiefs during Ahmad Shah's coronation (Elphinstone, 1915: 281; Raverty, 1867: 288; Fraser, 1852: 320).

Similarly, Tate refers to a sheaf of wheat placed by a dervish upon Ahmad Khan's turban, proclaiming him the most deserving ruler (Tate, 1911: 67–69). Singh's account likewise confirms the convening of a Loyajerga in the Shēr-e Surkh shrine, but presents Sabir Shah as a stable hand who narrated a dream foretelling Ahmad Shah's kingship (Singh, 1987: 34–39).

Significant critiques have been directed against the first narrative. Some scholars argue that European colonial writers transformed these local accounts of Ahmad Khan's accession to power into various imaginary and orientalist depictions (Hanifi, 2004: 302). Afghan intellectuals, in their writings on the Loyajerga, produced representations of the past that diverged sharply from indigenous historical accounts, yet bore a striking resemblance to distorted colonial portrayals of Afghanistan's history (ibid.: 314).

Lee's critique in *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present* (2018) further demonstrates that certain studies interpreted the placing of a plant on Ahmad Shah's turban by Sabir Shah as a parody modeled on Safavid coronation rituals. Drawing on the writings of Faiz Muhammad Kateb, historian of the Abdali dynasty, Lee disputes the very existence of a mystic named Sabir

Shah Kabuli, instead identifying him as a wandering mendicant or farrier of Punjabi or Lahori origin, and decidedly non-Pashtun. These accounts also deny the convening of a Loyajerga, attributing Ahmad Shah's selection instead to nine military officers in his retinue, thereby characterizing the event as a coup.

The title *Durr-i-Durrān* ("Pearl of Pearls"), according to these critiques, was not the product of Sabir Shah's dream but was bestowed months later upon the Abdali tribe by Hazrat Umar Baba, the Pir of Chamkani. Some scholars have gone even further, rejecting the very notion that Ahmad Shah Durrani founded the Afghan state (Lee, 2018: 116–119).

After searching and receiving information, through the first and second stages of criticism, and comparing narratives about the subject of the work (Table 1), the unifying hypothesis in this work, which connects all the visual elements in the work, is obtained. As the present painting depicts the historical ceremony of the founding of the country of Afghanistan with the coronation of Ahmad Shah Abdali, through a combination of narratives, the location of the incident in the painting, namely the "Shirsorkh Shrine", is identical to Ghobar's narrative. Breshna has separated the two religious and military spaces with a diagonal railing and illuminated the scene with light shining from the divine side (left side of the image). The character of "Saber Shah" as a prominent mystic is also in line with the narratives of Ghobar, Ferrier, and Tate. The character of "Saber Shah" as a prominent mystic is also in line with the narratives of Ghobar, Ferrier, and Tate. In this painting, Saber Shah is dressed in white and has long hair. He appears as a complete mystic, as if coming out of the light. Young Ahmad Shah is crouched at the bottom of the stairs, and Saber Shah, from the top of the stairs, places two symbolic ears of wheat on the head of young Ahmad Shah, proclaiming him king.

The image of "wheat" in the painting is also identical to Ghobar's account of the first narrative and Tate's account of the second. Given that the scene in the painting does not depict the assembly electing Ahmad Shah by the Loya Jirga, it indicates that Breshna and Ghobar do not believe in the same thing. However, Breshna, by painting military leaders with Ahmad Shah, has shown the support of "tribal leaders", as in the accounts of Kateb, Fraser, and Elphinstone. However, Breshna showed some innovations in the representation of this narrative that are important. For example, although Breshna did not depict the violence of Ahmad Shah at the coronation, like Mahmud al-Husseini, he revealed his inner personality by showing the pale blue color in Ahmad Shah's robe-like clothing. In mysticism, the pale blue color is a sign of a beginner who has not yet freed from the darkness of the soul (Razi, 1380: 306; Khaghani Sharvani, 1373: 295; Ohadi Isfahani, 1340: 382). Further, the presence of a red coat with British

decorations in the scene of Breshna's painting shows his intelligent view regarding the domination of foreigners over the fate of Afghanistan before Afghanistan's independence. This issue is not mentioned in any of the narratives and is Breshna's initiative. However, in the

background, the presence of a cypress tree is a symbol of immortality and rebirth (Hall, 2011: 292; Warner, 2007: 587), and Breshna depicted the establishment of Afghanistan with its splendor and durability.

Table 1: Comparison of Breshna's paintings with historical accounts of the reign of Ahmad Shah Durrani

	Historian	Date	Kingdom by violence	Plant grass, barley	Wheat	Mocking Ahmad Shah in comparison with the Safavids	Kandahar	Shir e sorkh Shrine	Formation of the Loya Jirga	Saber Shah, the prominent mystic	Saber Shah, the farmer	Support from tribal leaders	Colonial presence	Nanawati
First Narrative (Colonial Narrative, Modern)	Kateb	1912		☑			☑		☑		☑	☑		
	Ghobar	1941			☑			☑	☑	☑				
Second Narrative Pre-colonial Narrative, (Traditional)	Mahmoud Al-Husseini	1774	☑	☑			☑							
	Ferrier	1844		☑			☑			☑				
	Fraser	1852					☑					☑		
	Raverty	1867					☑					☑		
	Tate	1911			☑					☑				
	Elphinstone	1913										☑		
	Breshna Painting	1942	☒	☒	☑	☒	☒	☑	☒	☑	☒	☑	☑	☒
Narratives after the creation of the painting	Ganda Singh	1958						☑	☑		☑	☑		
	Tapper	1983							☑					
	Olivier Roy	1985							☑					
	Lee	2018	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑

V.3.2. The Final Cause of the Painting

The creation of this painting occurred within the context of Western academic art and under the influence of a particular historical period in Afghanistan, one that left a profound imprint not only on the arts but on all spheres of national life. The artwork was executed nine years after the accession of Zahir Shah in 1933, who presented himself as the "Father of the Nation." By this time, Afghanistan had already experienced two major historical milestones: the founding of the Afghan state in 1747 by Ahmad Shah and the achievement of independence under King Amanullah in 1919. Other key events included victories against Britain, the promulgation of constitutions, the convening of Loyajergas, Afghanistan's admission to the United Nations, a relative decline in foreign intervention, particularly from Russia and the United States, and the country's formal declaration of neutrality during the Second World War.

Following the overthrow of King Amanullah, the pioneer of modernization in Afghanistan, the country endured the reactionary and chaotic rule of "Bacha-ye Saqao," characterized by intrinsic confusion (Boyko, n.d.: 37), which pushed commerce, industry, agriculture, and both domestic and foreign policy into decline. This was succeeded by the anti-intellectual regime of Nader Shah and his Naderiyya program, which produced nothing but despotism, repression, terror, and political violence (Ghobar, 1989: 21–43). For the first time since

Amanullah's era, Afghanistan under Zahir Shah experienced a relatively extended forty-year period (1933–1973) that, however modest, allowed for some degree of internal reflection on the nation's political, social, and cultural structures.

The frequent changes of cabinets, ranging from Hashim Khan, Mahmud Khan, and Daoud Khan to Dr. Mohammad Yusuf, Maiwandwal, Nur Ahmad Etemadi, Dr. Abdul Zahir, and finally Mohammad Musa Shafiq, clearly illustrate the turbulence underlying efforts to establish stability across political, social, and cultural domains. The painting was executed in the ninth year of the thirteen-year premiership of Mohammad Hashim Khan. His government pursued policies of political purge and annihilation through the blind force of the military and domestic intelligence services, combined with a one-sided policy of friendship with Britain (ibid.: 278). Intellectuals were imprisoned during this period as well (Tanin, 2005: 76).

Intellectuals and certain artists, confronted simultaneously with political repression and economic turmoil on the one hand, and with the growing momentum of socialist uprisings, democratic movements, and calls for freedom on the other, began to articulate their demands, aspirations, and visions in fragmented ways. Debates also intensified regarding the compatibility of Islamic teachings with European scientific and technological norms (Tarzi, 1952: 142, 156).

Against this backdrop, Breshna, himself both an artist and an intellectual, formulated the final cause of the work by synthesizing divergent narratives, thereby evoking Afghanistan's grandeur and sovereignty. On the one hand, the painting recalls national unity through the foundational narrative of the Afghan state and the glory of the second great Islamic empire, the Afghan (Sadozai or Durrani) dynasty; on the other hand, it reaffirms religious legitimacy and the necessity of adherence to divine law. In the final years of Hashim Khan's despotic rule, the painting served as a reminder to both the monarch, the so-called "Father of the Nation," and the people of Afghanistan's historic destiny and spiritual obligations.

V.4. The Fourth Stage of the Critical Model

At this stage, the task is to evaluate and assess the formal and thematic dimensions of the painting based on the unifying hypothesis and the final cause established in the preceding sections. First and foremost, the content of the artwork revolves around a historical narrative which, in this case, has been rendered in a classical style with subtle details aimed at enhancing its realism. The proportionality of the figures (emphasizing the muscularity of the soldiers), naturalistic representation, adherence to the tripartite unity, and other compositional elements collectively reinforce the plausibility of this narrative.

According to the first account, the event took place during the return march of the Afghan army, comprising four thousand Ghilzai and twelve thousand Abdali and Uzbek troops, to Kandahar. It was on the proposal of Noor Mohammad Ghilzai that the leaders of the Uzbek, Abdali, Hazara, Baluch, and Tajik tribes convened a Loyajerga and elected a king. However, given the absence of visual indicators of these tribal groups and the lack of multiple figures in the coronation scene, it is evident that the painter inclined toward the second narrative, dismissing the Jerga and instead portraying the decision of a nine-member military council as a more rational account. This choice underscores the artist's attentiveness to the temporal, spatial, and contextual dynamics of historical narratives. By contrast, in the painting attributed to Foulad (also referred to as Asefi), the royal tent of the king is depicted amidst a vast crowd drawn from diverse ethnic groups.

Behind Ahmad Shah stands a muscular yet older soldier, armed with a large sword, shown in profile and positioned closest to the steps. He gazes attentively at the coronation of the young king, depicted in a three-quarter bent posture. Behind these two figures, in the

second plane and precisely at the center, stand two cypress trees, one shorter and paler in color than the other. This arrangement subtly alludes to the account of Haji Jamal Khan Barakzai's conditional withdrawal and concession of authority in favor of Ahmad Shah.

Formally, the work is executed in a manner that effectively realizes both the final cause and the unifying hypothesis. The pictorial space is divided by railing lines into two distinct domains: the religious, marked by a structure with two minarets on the left and illuminated in bright tones of saturated blues and greens; and the military, situated on the right in hues of red and orange. In the middle ground, light emanates from the religious space toward the royal sphere, while the interplay of blue and orange (with blue signifying spirituality, red materiality, and yellow rationality) heightens the dramatic intensity of the coronation scene as the climactic moment of the narrative. Moreover, the painting employs a rich array of symbolic and semiotic references, including the bird, rays of light, the white robe and long hair, Ahmad Shah's blue attire, the cypress tree, the steps, the sun in a dusky sky, the wheat, and the sword.⁸ These elements, taken together, underscore the grandeur of the coronation. At the same time, they highlight the foundational moment of Afghanistan's statehood.

VI. Conclusion

The return of Breshna coincided with the end of Amanullah's reign and the brief nine-month rule of Habibullah Kalakani. The subsequent assassinations of British officials and later of Nader Shah further signaled turbulence, instability, and the absence of consolidated authority in Afghanistan. Breshna's works, produced across the reigns of Amanullah Shah, Kalakani, Nader Shah, and Zahir Shah (1920–1974), invite an "externalist" approach to analysis, one that reveals broader realities of Afghan art through their historical embeddedness.

To address the research problem, this study employed an evaluative externalist method, inspired by the four-stage critical framework of Sadr al-Din Shirazi, to uncover the painting's final cause, propose a unifying hypothesis, and assess its aesthetic and historical value. In the first stage, the work was examined in terms of its essence, including intrinsic categories (genus, species, differentia) and extrinsic ones (specific accidents), and was analyzed through the four partial causes, efficient, material, formal, and final. The second stage reconsidered Aristotelian categories such as quantity, quality, relation, place, time, possession, passion (An-Yenfa'el), and action (An-Yaf'el) within the painting.

⁸ Symbols such as the sword and the sun in a dusky sky were incorporated into the national anthem of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, composed by Abdul Bari Jahani and ratified by the

Loyajerga in 2006. Likewise, motifs of wheat and the dome have appeared since the reign of Habibullah Shah in stamps, illustrations, and flags.

The third stage, drawing on these findings, revealed the unifying hypothesis: the work embodies a selective and synthetic interpretation by the artist, blending so-called colonial and precolonial, or, in modern terms, traditional and modern, narratives. The replacement of the tribal assembly (Loyajerga) with a military council, the substitution of wheat for green grass, the depiction of Sabir Shah as a mystic illuminated by divine light, the presence of a soldier in British uniform, and other compositional choices all point to Breshna's deliberate strategies. This unifying synthesis reflects how narratives of Afghanistan's foundation, legitimated by religion, reinforced by military power, and linked to the Barakzai dynasty, were reframed within the ideological context of Zahir Shah's early reign.

In the fourth stage, the formal and content-based evaluation demonstrated the painter's fidelity to classical academic conventions to enhance realism. He employed visual devices such as line, tonal variation, color contrasts, rhythm, and balanced composition. Furthermore, symbolic and semiotic elements, including the cypress tree, white birds, rays of light, the white robe and long hair, Ahmad Shah's blue attire, the steps, the sun against a dusky sky, wheat, and the sword, were integrated to reinforce the painting's overarching teleology.

The findings suggest that Breshna's art cannot be confined to the binaries of modern versus traditional or colonial versus precolonial. Rather, it represents a critical engagement with Western academic art and the outcome of deliberate intellectual exchanges between Asia and Europe. His practice across diverse artistic fields, such as theater and writing, also informed the

staging of historical scenes within his paintings. In *The Coronation of Ahmad Shah Durrani*, Breshna's attention leans more toward traditional narratives than toward modernist reinterpretations. Yet his balanced integration of these narratives ultimately affirms Afghanistan's political legitimacy, stability, and sovereignty. His portrayal of Ahmad Shah and his election is neither violent, as in al-Hosaini's account, nor heroic and idealized, as in Ghobar's. Rejecting the modernist emphasis on the Loyajerga, he nevertheless renders the moment when Sabir Shah places a wheat crown on Ahmad Khan's turban as both a national and a spiritual covenant. Moreover, the work attests to Breshna's acute awareness of foreign involvement in shaping Afghanistan's destiny, a theme subtly yet powerfully inscribed within the painting.

Author Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's postdoctoral research in Art Studies, conducted under the supervision of the second author as academic advisor at Alzahra University.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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