JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND DIDACTICS IN



DOI: 10.4458/5970-11

The Evolution of Ideology and Politics in Iran from the Early Days of the Islamic Republic. Notes for a Topography of Muralism in Tehran

Raffaele Maurielloa

GEOGRAPHY

^a Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran Email: mauriello@atu.ac.ir

Received: February 2023 – Accepted: April 2023

Abstract

In the late 1970s and with the advent of the Islamic Revolution (1977-79), muralism became a key feature of Iran's landscape. Since the revolution and later the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the walls of the streets of major cities became the locus of ideological struggles and political propaganda. With shifts in political tides, the Iranian state's propaganda art underwent various mutations. The location of the murals within the city landscape through topography represents a critical element of their message. No other city as Iran's capital, Tehran, has been the theatre and witness to the political and ideological developments of the country. Within Tehran, District 6 is of paradigmatic value. It is situated at the city's geographical centre, hosting important buildings and institutions, and it has been the theatre of important events in the country's contemporary history. Therefore, localising its murals is critical to revealing their message and the country's ideological landscape and faultlines. The work is based on an archive developed by the Author on the field and a survey conducted in 2011 by the Organisation for the Beautification of the City of Tehran. The topographic localisation of the murals was developed using Google My Maps.

Keywords: Mapping, Topography, Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, Muralism

1. Introduction

Mitchell (1994) argued that the emergent digital revolution created a "pictorial turn" that took over the previous "linguistic turn" of the 1960s, leading many scholars to treat all cultural forms as language (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 5). With the pictorial turn, "the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16) - what he called spectatorship - would be as crucial as

various forms of "decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc." – what he called *reading*. In this framework, he contended that the exclusive use of the "model of textuality" would not suffice to explain (modern) "visual experience" or "visual literacy". Further elaborating on this perspective, he argued for the necessity of fully understanding pictures' message to grasp modern visual propaganda (Mitchell, 2005).

Throughout time, different scholars have

proposed to integrate mapping and geography into the humanities and social sciences within the labels of "spatial turn" and "geographical turn" (Warf and Arias, 2009), particularly concerning art (Cosgrove, 2006; D'Ignazio, 2009; Field, 2009; Hawkins, 2011; Panneels, 2018).

Revolutionary states and their institutions like to project themselves and their ideologies onto city maps (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2000). Streets, avenues, squares, parks, and other public spaces, therefore, become critical venues of the ideology and policies they try to instill in the minds of the citizenry. Under the influence of leftist internationalist revolutionary iconography and Latin American and Russian revolutionary art, in the late 1970s and with the revolution (1977-79), the advent of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and later the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), muralism became a prominent feature of the country's landscape (Mauriello, 2023a). As a form of public art par excellence, muralism is anti-elitist and claims to represent the masses. It is particularly suited for expressing the ideals of anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, solidarity, internationalism, and Third World relations that characterised Iran's revolution. Later, following the passage from revolution as movement to revolution as outcome (Mauriello, 2023a), muralism was successfully adapted to display the ideology and propaganda of the newly established IRI (Mauriello, 2020). Mixing pictorial and linguistic elements, murals have represented a potent vehicle of the IRI's art of state persuasion (Chehabi and Christia, 2008).

In this framework, the walls of the streets of major cities also became the locus of ideological struggles (Gruber, 2008). No other city as Tehran, the capital of the country, has been the theatre of the IRI's political and ideological developments. Therefore, localising Tehran's murals within the cityscape is essential to revealing their message and the country's ideological landscape and faultlines. Within Tehran, District 6 is situated at the city's geographical centre. It hosts significant buildings and institutions: university campuses, foundations, cultural institutions, ministries, embassies, hospitals, museums, parks, art galleries, cinemas, theatres, mosques, churches, synagogues, and a Bus Terminal. It is crossed

north-south by Valiasr St (formerly Pahlavi St), the longest street in the Near East with its 19 km. Its southern "border" can be considered Enghelab St (Revolution), the east-west artery of Tehran, formerly known as Shahreza. It hosts a prominent residential middle-class neighbourhood. The southern section is of paradigmatic value as it has witnessed momentous events in the country's contemporary history.

A survey conducted in 2011 by the Organisation for the Beautification of the City of Tehran (OBCT) showed data for 169 murals in this district: 151 paintings, 8 mosaics, 5 prints, and 5 others (Naggashi-ye divari-ye Tehran, n.d.). Their subjects were decorations (110), images of martyrs (24), cultural-religious symbols (13), political-social figures and messages (12), advertisements (8), and others (2). Among them, 107 were exhibited on streets, 26 in parks, 25 on highways, and 11 in alleys. Moreover, 131 were found in an urban section of the district, 36 were residential, and 2 urbanresidential. Regarding the use of buildings, 45 educational, were 33 residential, administrative, 14 commercial, 9 cultural, and 48 can be labelled as "others". Regarding the target, 20 were addressed to pedestrians, 12 to drivers/motorists, and 137 to both. Regarding the type of walls, 156 were on a street façade, 9 on a false façade, 4 on a residential façade, and 1 on a temporary façade. Among all the districts, District 6 was the second in terms of the number of murals (169), preceded by District 2 (183 murals) and followed by District 3 (163 murals). These three districts had appreciably higher numbers of murals than other districts.

During my on-the-field research between 2019 and 2023, I could verify the persistence of this presence and even noticed an increase in its numbers. In this respect, the article will also refer to murals not included in the survey carried out by OBCT. The topographic¹ localisation of

¹ In cultural geography and in visual culture studies, topography has a lot to do with the idea of searching for connections, assemblages, and relationships between spaces. In the limited space of this short article, topography is primarily linked to the idea of the location of the murals, on the one side, within the city's landscape and geography and, on the other

the murals was developed using Google My Maps (Figure 1)². The borders of District 6 are marked in black, and the Markers of the murals' location are in brown. The murals described and analysed in this article are marked in purple.

2. Taking over the U.S. Den of Espionage

On November 4, 1979, hundreds of Iranian students seized the compound of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. They kidnapped 52 U.S. diplomats and officials for 444 days. Nowadays, the U.S. has no Embassy or official (direct) representation in Iran, and the main building of the compound of the former Embassy serves as a museum. The Embassy is on Talegani St., served by a metro Station. The surroundings include two churches (Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Mary and Nicholas Church), the Shiroudi Sport Complex, the Honarmandan Park - which hosts the Iranian Artists Forum and the Iranshahr Theatre -, and the Martyrs Museum. The presence of countless cafeterias also characterises the neighbourhood.

Images of the murals painted on the walls of the Embassy have appeared numberless times in media reports. Representing a kind of palimpsest, these murals have three different layers (i.e., they were painted at different times on the same wall) and will be described below.

Third layer. The current 16 murals were unveiled in November 2019, among local and international clamour (Marker 203c, AFP, 2019a). They are revised (pop) versions of the previous murals and an updated representation of the "imperialist enemy". The designer, 33-year-old Saber Sheikh-Rezaei, stated that although the new images are fresher in technique and reflect more recent Iran-U.S. events, they share the old political message (AFP, 2019b). They exclusively portray and criticise the U.S. and what it represents in the eyes of the IRI: imperialism, capitalism, and arrogance. For

example, a work (Figure 2) recalls the image of an Iran Air passenger jet shot down by a U.S. warship over the Persian Gulf in July 1988, killing 290 people, with white doves flying out of it. According to many, its downing fostered the end of the Iran-Iraq war (Danby, 2021). Another mural (Figure 3) shows an American Global Hawk drone that was shot down by Iran in June 2019 over the Strait of Hormuz, with bats flying out of it.

Second layer. The iconic murals (e.g., Figures 4 and 5; Marker 203b) of the second layer were erased to make space for the new ones. In their aesthetic features, these murals represent the residue of the revolutionary tradition: painted at eye level, horizontally elongated, and predominantly symbolic, though sometimes calligraphic and caricatured, they recover part of the visual vocabulary of the revolutionary struggle of the late 1970s. The pictorial story is told from right to left. The Statue of Liberty's face turns into a metallic skull (Figure 5), while the red stripes of the U.S. flag behind her slide to transform into the barbed wire as they zoom in and across the map of Iran, whose limits to the north are represented by the Caspian Sea and by the Persian Gulf to the south (both included into the map). This geographical geopolitical projection represents the standard map of the IRI and expresses its perceived "natural zones of influence". The mural takes advantage of its location and, without using words, relies only on the semiotic language of form and what we might call the semiotic language of topography. It transmutes the quintessential U.S. symbol of freedom into an instrument of death and destruction.

In line with their revolutionary prototypes, these murals rarely bear the author's signature or any logo (this means that they were not sponsored by any official institution). To a certain extent, they are symbols of the spontaneous volition of the revolution's first years. Today, few examples of this kind of murals still exist – and Iranians look at them – as the graphic history of a bygone era.

First Layer. Despite being considered by many as the "original" murals of the time of the revolution, the Second layer took the place of the "real" murals of the revolution (Marker

side, within the IRI's ideological and political landscape.

² It is available at the following URL: https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1od9RrT Zn2R99mQnHj4mUfinK1drOnHM&usp=sharing.

203a). The latter represented what is known in Iran as the *mardomi* (popular) style. Such murals are characterised by a socialist-realist and mostly figurative-expressionist disposition, a lack of attention to detail, a fluid and easy execution, and contrasting and symbolic colours (Mauriello, 2023b). With the clarity of drawing and brightness of colours, and an expressionist and figurative style, they reveal that the artists were influenced by the Latin American and Russian revolution's visual (and political) cultures. This is visible, for example, in the attention given the machinery of modernity and the technological and industrial civilisation as a symbol of the oppression of men under the capitalist society led by the U.S. This is represented by the encoding machines painted in the mural. At the same time, they refer to the numerous classified documents recovered in the Embassy by the Muslim Student Followers of the Line of the Imam, who led the attack on the walled compound. The documents have been published in several volumes under Asnād-e Lāne-ye Jāsusi (Documents from the Espionage Den) (Abidi, 1985).

Furthermore, the presence of a priest recalls a time when the revolution involved wider sections of the population. Relevant is also an image painted on the right of Figure 6. It reproduces a famous photo taken in Saigon by Eddie Adams on February 1, 1968, during the Vietnam War, of the execution of a Viet Cong officer. The image circulated worldwide, and its reproduction on the wall represents the Third-Worldist perspective of the revolutionary movement, when events such as Vietnam, Algeria, Palestine, and Cuba played a significant role and inspired young Iranian the revolutionaries.

3. Balancing: Modernist calligraphy versus symbolism

Contrasting with, and to a certain extent balancing, these highly ideological layers, in more recent years, a mural was executed on the west façade of a building (Figure 7; Marker 207), opposite the former Embassy in Taleqani St. As indicated by its logo³, OBCT

commissioned it. It reproduces a calligraphic painting titled Rain in the Wheat Field by Mohammad Ehsaei (b. 1939), a renowned Iranian calligrapher and graphic artist. This stylised and large-scale calligraphic work is in line with the modernist experimentations that took place in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s. Although European and U.S.-inspired modernist forms of art were not supported, and in several respects even opposed, by the new authorities of the IRI, with the presidency of Mohammad Khatami these works began to reappear in the public domain. They were later integrated into the cityscape by being reproduced on a large scale as murals with OBCT's support. That was a time when art galleries boomed beautification murals bloomed, revolutionary mural tradition transforming itself from political propaganda art to a light-hearted, playful style (Grigor, 2014, p. 24). In the case of Ehsaei and calligraphic works of art, these were judged even more permissible in the new system, given both the religious association with the Arab script (Arabic is the language of the Quran) and the rich tradition of Persian poetry, but also for their abstractness and seeming lack of conspicuous ideological connotation.

4. The SAVAK former headquarters

Painted on a multi-storey building on Karim Khan Zand St., fifteen minutes' walk from the former U.S. Embassy and to the north of Honarmadon Park, we find the most iconic and well-known example of the "imperialist enemy" (Figure 8). The surroundings include a church (Saint Sarkis Cathedral), a small public park (Saint Mary Park), an embassy (Lebanon), the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade, and the Administration of Cultural Heritage. After Enghelab St., Karim Khan Zand St. is Tehran's most important street for book lovers. It hosts the main bookstores of some of the country's leading publishers. The presence of numerous cafeterias also characterises the neighbourhood.

With great symbolism, the mural is housed

³ The use of a logo is in line with the Iranian tradition of coffeehouse painting, where the patron's name was

imprinted in the picture plane's corner to immortalise the pious act of patronage (Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2000, p. 61).

on the east façade of the former headquarters of the SAVAK, Shah's notorious security agency (Grigor, 2014). This choice implies the will to identify and denounce the local "internal" hand of the imperialist enemy. Indeed, SAVAK was established with the help of the CIA (and Mossad). Oriented vertically, the U.S. flag is depicted with skeleton heads and falling bombs instead of stars and stripes. The sign in English reads: "Down with the U.S.A.". In truth, the one in Persian reads: "Death to the U.S.A.". The smaller sign below the mural reproduces a famous statement by Khomeini: "We will never come to terms, not even for a single moment, with the U.S.".

5. Tripartite, composite messaging

As witnessed in the case of the former Embassy of the U.S., opposite the building of the former SAVAK headquarters and down on the street level, we find two "balancing" and more recent murals (Figures 9 and 10, Marker 200). The mural on the western façade of the opposed building bears OBCT's logo (Figure 9). It is a reproduction of the calligraphic painting by Esmaeil Khan Jalayer, a prominent Iranian painter of the Qajar era who lived during the reign of Naser-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96). This calligraphic work has a marked Shi'i religious connotation, mainly through the enlarged word "Ali", the name of the first Shi'a Imam. As already mentioned, calligraphic works of art are particularly appreciated in Iran (and Muslim societies in general). A traditional work characterised by a strong religious connotation, is even embraced by the IRI.

The mural on the street level (Marker 200) is painted at eye level and horizontally and, in this respect, recovers part of the revolutionary mural tradition. It was executed with the support of OBCT. The work celebrates the figure of Rostam, the most prominent and complex character in Ferdowsi's Persian epic poem Shahname (Book of Kings), which depicts Iran's legendary and historical origin from the dawn of civilisation to the Arab conquest of the Sasanian Empire (651). Rostam is considered Iran's (native) greatest folk hero. Known for his extraordinary strength, bravery, and loyalty, he steadfastly assists weaker and less courageous kings against their enemies, particularly the people of Tūrān to the east (usually associated with Turkic peoples). Rostam is painted as he appears in modern oil on canvas and in the Oahvekhane (Coffee House) painting. He is portrayed with his horse Rakhsh (the Persian word for lightning), with whom he had many adventures. The mural represents what the Shahname describes as "The First Trial". On his quest to rescue King Kavus from demons, Rostam had to succeed in various trials of his courage and strength. In this trial, painted in celebrated miniature illuminations. Rostam is asleep near a thicket of reeds inhabited by an aggressive lion. The lion thinks it should attack Rostam's horse Rakhsh, before attacking his master.

Nevertheless, Rakhsh, who has incredible strength, swiftly fights off and kills the lion. Then Rostam awakes and scolds Rakhsh for foolishly getting into fights with savage lions. The mural's fauna and flora are an enlarged execution of miniature illuminations.

⁴ We find the same slogan on a small mural on the eastern end of the walls of the compound of the former U.S. Embassy (Marker 206), the first thing to be seen out of the northern exit of the Taleghani metro station. The mural was still there in 2018 and was later removed to make space for a shop.

6. Conclusion

Since the establishment of the IRI until today, murals and their messages have appeared, disappeared or were reframed to adapt to the country's changing political landscape and ideology. As argued and described in this article, the murals' pictorial, linguistic, and topographic elements provide essential keys that reveal Iran's ideological landscape and faultlines.

Tehran's murals appear to be well-planned and well-placed. The IRI's visual politics takes shape within urban policies and planning schemes that carefully consider the murals' location. From this perspective and in the framework of the change in paradigm from a "linguistic turn" to a "pictorial turn", this article provided further evidence of the practicality of integrating these paradigms with topography to explain the visual (public) experience within the "spatial turn" or "geographical turn".

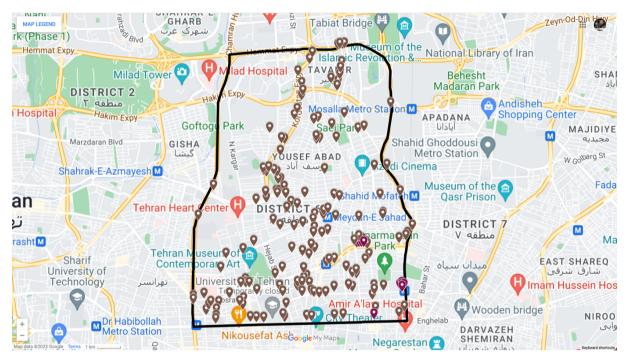


Figure 1. Map of Tehran signalling the location of the murals.

Raffaele Mauriello 137





Figures 2 and 3. Examples of the "Third layer". Murals on the external walls of the former Embassy of the U.S.A, in Tehran on Taleqani St. Photos by Raffaele Mauriello.



Figures 4 and 5. Examples of the "Second layer". Murals on the external walls of the former Embassy of the U.S.A. in Tehran on Taleqani St. Photos by Raffaele Mauriello.



Figure 6. An example of the "First layer". A mural on the external walls of the former Embassy of the U.S.A. in Tehran. Courtesy of Iraj Eskandari.

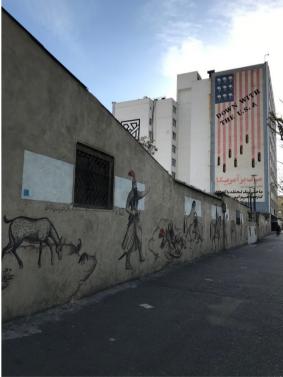


Figure 7. Mural on the western façade of the building opposite the former Embassy of the U.S.A. in Tehran on Taleqani St. It reproduces a calligraphic painting titled *Baran dar Gandomzar* (Rain in the Wheat Field, 1352/1973-74, oil on canvas) by Mohammad Ehsaei (b. 1939). Photo by Raffaele Mauriello.



Figure 8. Mural on the easter façade of the former headquarters of the SAVAK Karim Khan Zand St. Photo by Raffaele Mauriello.





Figures 9 and 10. Mural on the western façade of a building opposite the former headquarters of the SAVAK Karim Khan Zand St. reproducing a calligraphic painting by Esmaeil Khan Jalayer and a mural on the street level celebrating the figure of Rostam. Photos by Raffaele Mauriello.

References

- 1. Abidi A.H.H., "The Tehran Documents", *India International Centre Quarterly*, 12, 3, 1985, pp. 273-285.
- 2. AFP, "Iran's iconic anti-US murals make way for a new generation of artwork", *Yahoo*, 2019a, https://news.yahoo.com/irans-iconic-anti-us-murals-way-generation-artwork-191634753.html.
- 3. AFP, "New murals, same tension at ex-US embassy in Tehran", *France24*, 2019b, https://www.france24.com/en/20191102-new-murals-same-tension-at-ex-us-embassy-in-tehran.
- 4. Chehabi H.E. and Christia F., "The Art of State Persuasion: Iran's Post-Revolutionary Murals", *Persica*, 22, 2008, pp. 1-13.
- 5. Chelkowski P. and Dabashi H., *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, London, Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2000.
- 6. Cosgrove D., "Art and Mapping: An Introduction", *Cartographic Perspectives*, 53, 2006, pp. 4-5.
- 7. Danby N., "How the Downing of Iran Air flight 655 still Sparks US-Iran Enmity", *Responsible Statecraft*, 2021, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/07/02/how-the-downing-of-iran-air-flight-655-still-influences-us-iran-enmity/.
- 8. D'Ignazio C., "Art and Cartography", in Castree N., Kitchin R., Thrift N., Crang M. and Domosh M. (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, vol. 1, 2009, pp. 190-206.
- 9. Field K., "Art in C'art'ography", *The Cartographic Journal*, 46, 4, 2009, p. 287.
- 10. Grigor T., Contemporary Iranian art: From the Street to the Studio, London, Reaktion Books, 2014.
- 11. Gruber Ch. J, "The Message is on the Wall: Mural Arts in Post-Revolutionary Iran", *Persica*, 22, 2008, pp. 15-46.
- 12. Hawkins H., "Dialogues and Doings: Sketching the Relationships between Geography and Art", *Geography Compass*, 5, 7, 2011, pp. 464-478.

- 13. Mauriello R., "El muralismo y la guerra de las imágenes en México e Irán. Representación, imaginario y memoria de la revolución", in Camacho Padilla F. and Fernando Escribano M. (Eds.), *Una vieja amistad. Cuatrocientos años de relaciones históricas y culturales entre Irán y el mundo hispánico*, Madrid, Sílex, 2020, pp. 459-484.
- 14. Mauriello R., "Latin America's Visual Culture and Committed Art in Iran in the Advent of the Islamic Revolution: Lost and Hidden Murals of Iran's 1977–1979 Revolution", in Mauriello R., Camacho Padilla F. and Escribano Martín F. (Eds.), The Islamicate and Ibero-American Worlds: Mapping South-South Connections during the Decolonization Process and Cold War (1810-1990), Leiden, Brill, forthcoming 2023a.
- 15. Mauriello R., "The Visual Culture of the Revolutionary Processes of Latin America in the Islamic Revolution of Iran: The Street and the Studio", *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, forthcoming 2023b.
- 16. Mitchell W.J.T., *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- 17. Mitchell W.J.T., What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- 18. Mirzoeff N., *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd edition, London and New York, Routledge, 2009.
- 19. Naqqashi-ye divari-ye Tehran [Mural painting in Tehran] (vol. 6), Organisation for the Beautification of the City of Tehran, Tehran, n.p., n.d.
- 20. Panneells I., "Mapping in Art", in Kent A.J. and Vujakovic P. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Mapping and Cartography*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2018, pp. 517-552.
- 21. Warf B. and Arias S., "Introduction: The Reinsertion of Space in the Humanities and Social Sciences", in Warf B. and Arias S., (Eds.), *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2009, pp. 1-10.