



CLOTHING CULTURE AND ICONOGRAPHIC SEMANTICS: THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PROPHETS MUSA (MOSES) AND KHIDR

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Abstract: *This paper examines clothing in the visual arts as an iconographic and semiotic system through the representations of the Prophets Musa (Moses, peace be upon him) and Khidr (peace be upon him). The study approaches dress not merely as an aesthetic component but as a medium of social identity, religious symbolism, and semiotic communication. Drawing on an iconographic methodology, it traces the transformation of Moses's attire across the successive stages of his life, from his upbringing in the royal court to his prophetic mission. The paper further offers a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western artistic traditions, demonstrating how clothing operates as a visual marker of identity and as a symbolic carrier of spiritual, cultural, and religious meaning. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of costume in the interpretation of sacred figures within the history of visual art.*

Keywords: *Prophet Musa (Moses), Prophet Khidr, clothing culture, iconography, visual art, ethnography, semiotics, visual identity, religious art, Eastern miniature painting, symbolic representation.*

INTRODUCTION

In the visual arts, clothing is not merely an element reflecting a person's outward appearance; it is a significant semiotic vehicle that conveys social standing, cultural affiliation, and spiritual condition. In the depiction of religious figures in particular, dress acquires iconographic meaning and serves to reveal the life path and inner maturation of the sacred personage. The image of the Prophet Musa (Moses, peace be upon him) ranks among the most frequently represented of the prophets in world art. The distinct phases of his life — prince of the court, exile, shepherd, and prophet — are conveyed in works of art through clothing and attributes.

The Iconographic Transformation of Moses's Attire

The life of the Prophet Musa is interpreted as a complex spiritual journey, and in the visual arts this journey is most often expressed through changes in dress. The first stage is his life in the Egyptian court. In images relating to this period, Moses is portrayed in the fine fabrics, ornamented garments, and headdresses evocative of Egyptian nobility and royal culture. Such an iconographic solution signals his connection to political power and to worldly life.

The second stage is the image of Moses as an exile who has migrated toward Midian. In depictions of this period, lavish garments give way to simple and modest dress. The plainness of the clothing expresses the protagonist's inner transformation and his withdrawal from worldly comforts.

The third stage is the image of Moses the shepherd. Here clothing takes on a practical character: loose, comfortable garments, head wraps that shield against the sun, and the



shepherd's staff become the principal elements of the depiction. From an ethnographic standpoint, this image preserves important markers of the desert culture of the Near East.

The fourth stage is the image of Moses as prophet and leader of his people. In these depictions his clothing assumes a yet more majestic appearance. Wide robes of white or blue, the halo of light, and the sacred staff emerge as iconographic signs expressing divine election.

The ancient garments of the people of Israel hold particular significance in works of visual art as a source of ethnographic information. Long tunics, belts, head wraps, and footwear suited to desert conditions reflect the people's environment and way of life. For this reason, the study of clothing in the visual arts assists in reconstructing the culture of the ancient peoples of the Near East.

Alongside clothing, the staff, the Tablets of the Torah, Mount Sinai, and depictions of light occupy an important place in the iconography of Moses. The staff in particular is interpreted as a symbol of leadership and divine power. Together, clothing and staff form an integrated iconographic system of the prophet-leader.

In Eastern miniatures, Moses is more often depicted in a spiritually exalted state, with light and symbolic signs predominating. In Western painting, by contrast, historical realism prevails, and greater attention is paid to the material detail of clothing and to anatomical precision. Both traditions reveal different facets of the image of the Prophet Moses.

In the image of the Prophet Khidr (peace be upon him), green attire constitutes the central iconographic marker. In Islamic culture, the color green is interpreted as a symbol of life, blessing, and divine mercy. Khidr's clothing differs fundamentally from that of Moses: it expresses not changeability but constancy and eternal enlightenment. Where the clothing of Moses reflects the path of life and its trials, the clothing of Khidr expresses mystery, knowledge, and hidden wisdom. In this way the two figures form a distinct iconographic pairing:

Moses — movement, search, transformation;

Khidr — stillness, knowledge, eternity.

This contrast brings to the surface philosophical layers such as “the path and the goal,” “the question and the answer,” and “visible and invisible knowledge.” Within the Islamic culture of the East, Khidr is interpreted as a symbol of eternal life (the one who drank from the Water of Life), as a spiritual helper (the one who eases hardship), and as the possessor of hidden knowledge [1]. Moses, by contrast, is the embodiment of firm law and of manifest, exoteric knowledge.

In the Shiraz and Herat schools of miniature painting, rare images survive in Persian and Uzbek miniatures depicting the encounter of Moses and Khidr by the sea, the pulling out of the ship's plank, and the rebuilding of the wall. The portrayal of Khidr in green attire — according to legend, because the ground would turn verdant wherever he sat — became a fixed convention of Eastern miniature painting.

In European visual art, the image of Moses in particular has been very widely represented, whereas the image of Khidr appears comparatively seldom, since Khidr belongs primarily to the Islamic and Eastern religious-cultural tradition.



Michelangelo's celebrated statue Moses is the foremost example of the prophet's image in European art. Moses is rendered as a powerful, strong-willed figure; the long robes and the beard signify his wisdom and prophetic standing, and the sculpture expresses spiritual force through outward form. In Michelangelo's interpretation, Moses thus appears as an embodiment of strength, wisdom, and divine authority, in keeping with the humanist ideal of the Renaissance.

Another artist who depicted the prophet in several works is Rembrandt. In his religiously themed paintings, the Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn offered a profoundly psychological and spiritual interpretation of Moses. In his work Moses with the Tablets of the Law, the prophet's clothing, his facial expression, and the contrast of light and shadow harmoniously convey both his divine status and his human experience, creating a visual synthesis of divine revelation and human emotion.

The French painter Nicolas Poussin, one of the major representatives of European classicism and the Baroque, created numerous works devoted to biblical subjects. Among them, The Finding of Moses holds a special place, depicting the infancy of Moses within the setting of ancient Egypt. In this work, dress appears not merely as an element of historical reconstruction but as an iconographic device expressing the social standing and divine destiny of the figures portrayed.

In the work of Gustave Doré — French painter, graphic artist, and illustrator, and one of the most renowned representatives of nineteenth-century European religious art — the image of Moses is likewise interpreted through dramatic visual means, with elements of clothing performing an important semiotic function in the visual expression of the prophet's sacred status, spiritual power, and divine mission.

Conclusion. While in European visual art the image of Moses is rendered according to the principles of realism and monumentalism, in the Eastern miniature tradition the images of Moses and Khidr are interpreted within an iconographic system endowed with symbolic and semiotic qualities. This demonstrates that the semantics of clothing carry different functional loads in the visual cultures of East and West. The findings indicate that, in the visual arts, clothing is not merely a visual element but a complex semiotic system — a vital communicative medium that unites historical, religious, and cultural meanings. Clothing thereby becomes a visual language that, beyond its aesthetic role, brings together historical memory, religious symbolism, and cultural identity.

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