

Nowruz Aesthetics: The Interplay of Myth and Ceremony

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Nowruz, meaning “new day” in Persian, is an ancient celebration marking the arrival of spring at the vernal equinox. Far more than a mere commencement of a new year, this tradition, with its origins stretching back over three millennia to the era of Zoroastrianism, embodies a profound reverence for life, rebirth, and the perennial triumph of light over darkness. Celebrated by diverse ethno-linguistic and cultural communities across a wide geographical expanse, Nowruz presents a rich tapestry of visual, auditory, and ritualistic elements. Its aesthetics, encompassing the meticulously arranged Haft-Seen table, the vibrant hues of traditional clothing, the resonating sounds of celebratory music, and the symbolic acts of fire jumping and communal feasting, are deeply intertwined with the foundational myths that have shaped this enduring tradition. This report aims to explore the intricate relationship between these underlying mythological narratives and the rich ceremonial aesthetics of Nowruz, illustrating how these myths are visually, audibly, and symbolically represented in contemporary practices across various cultures.

The aesthetic expressions of Nowruz are fundamentally shaped by several key mythological narratives that resonate deeply within the cultures that observe it. One of the most prominent is the legend of King Jamshid, recounted in the epic *Shahnameh*. This mythical king is credited with establishing Nowruz as a day of celebration to commemorate his ascension to the throne and the dawn of a golden age. According to the legend, as Jamshid ascended on a jeweled throne, elevated to the heavens by supernatural beings, the world’s creatures gathered in awe and scattered jewels upon him, proclaiming this day the “New Day”. This myth imbues Nowruz with a visual motif of brilliance, light, and preciousness. The act of scattering jewels can be interpreted as an early aesthetic expression of joy and abundance, setting a precedent for the emphasis on bright and celebratory decorations that characterize Nowruz today. The imagery of Jamshid shining like the sun while seated on his jeweled throne directly correlates with the focus on light and brightness evident in Nowruz decorations, such as the lighting of candles and the use of reflective surfaces like mirrors on the Haft-Seen table. Another significant myth shaping the aesthetics of Nowruz is the Kurdish legend of Kawa the Blacksmith. This heroic tale recounts Kawa’s revolt against the tyrannical King Zahak, a figure of darkness and oppression. Kawa’s victory, achieved through his forging of chains and the lighting of a massive bonfire atop a mountain, symbolizes the triumph of good over evil and the promise of a fresh start. This myth provides a narrative foundation for the prominent fire rituals of Nowruz, most notably Chaharshanbe Suri, the festival celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz. During this ritual, participants jump over bonfires, an act that visually and symbolically represents casting away the darkness and negativity of the past year and welcoming the light and warmth of the new year. The red glow of the flames and the act of leaping over them are potent aesthetic expressions of this triumph and renewal.

The festive and theatrical aesthetics of Nowruz are further enhanced by the mythical characters associated with the celebration. Amoo Nowruz, or Uncle Nowruz, is depicted as an old man with a long white beard who brings gifts to children, much like a Persian counterpart to Santa Claus. He is often accompanied by Haji Firuz, a young man whose face is traditionally painted black and who wears red attire. Haji Firuz sings and dances, heralding the arrival of the New Year and spreading good cheer. While the practice of blackface by Haji Firuz has faced scrutiny in modern times, its historical context in ancient Persia associates black with good luck. Another character, Naneh Sarma, or Grandma Frost, is portrayed as the beloved wife of Amoo Nowruz, adding a romantic element to the mythology. The distinct visual appearances and roles of these figures contribute to the overall aesthetic experience of Nowruz, appealing to different age groups and conveying various aspects of the celebration, from the anticipation of gifts to the joyful announcement of the New Year's arrival. The contrast between the wise, benevolent elder and the energetic, colorfully dressed messenger enriches the visual narrative of Nowruz.

These myths collectively establish core themes of renewal, the victory of good over evil, and the welcoming of spring, which are visually and symbolically represented throughout Nowruz. The recurring motif of light triumphing over darkness, deeply rooted in Zoroastrianism and reflected in these narratives, serves as a central aesthetic principle. This theme manifests in the emphasis on bright colors in clothing and decorations, the lighting of fires and candles, and the overall joyful and optimistic atmosphere that permeates the celebration. The foundational myths and their aesthetic expressions are profoundly influenced by Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion that predates Islam. Zoroastrian cosmology, with its inherent dualism of good and evil and its deep respect for natural elements such as fire and water, significantly shapes the symbolic language and aesthetic practices of Nowruz. The fire rituals, the emphasis on purity and cleansing, and the celebration of the spring equinox as a time of cosmic balance and renewal are all deeply rooted in Zoroastrian beliefs. The Zoroastrian tradition also welcomes back Rapithwina, the spirit of summer and noon, at noon on Nowruz, further reinforcing the theme of light and renewal.

The ceremonial aesthetics of Nowruz provide tangible manifestations of its underlying myths and values, unfolding in distinct phases before, during, and after the arrival of the New Year. The pre-Nowruz period is marked by specific aesthetic preparations. Spring cleaning, known as *Khaneh Tekani*, is a significant visual and symbolic practice. This thorough cleaning of homes represents a fresh start, mirroring the spiritual renewal sought during Nowruz, and results in a visually ordered and refreshed living space. This act of physical purification aligns with the theme of new beginnings, creating an environment that reflects the hope and optimism for the year ahead. Another key pre-Nowruz aesthetic event

is Chaharshanbe Suri, the Festival of Fire, celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz. The vibrant display of bonfires and the sounds of crackling flames and fireworks create a powerful multi-sensory aesthetic experience that embodies the triumph of light and energy over the darkness of the past year. Participants leap over the flames while chanting, "I give you my yellow colour, I take your red colour", adding an auditory and symbolic layer to this ritual of purification and renewal, directly reflecting the core myth of light conquering darkness. The aesthetics of Nowruz Day itself are most prominently embodied in the Haft-Seen table. This meticulously arranged spread features seven (haft) symbolic items whose names begin with the Persian letter "seen" (S), each representing a specific hope or blessing for the new year. The visual arrangement and the individual symbolism of these items create a focal point for reflection and aspiration.

Core Haft-Seen Items	Symbolic Meaning
Sabzeh (sprouts)	Rebirth and growth
Samanu (sweet pudding)	Affluence and fertility/power/strength
Senjed (dried fruit)	Love
Seer (garlic)	Medicine and health
Seeb (apple)	Beauty and good health
Somāq (sumac)	Triumph of good over evil/sunrise
Serkeh (vinegar)	Age and wisdom/patience

Beyond these core items, the Haft-Seen table often includes additional symbolic elements that further enrich its visual and metaphorical significance. A mirror symbolizes reflection and self-awareness, while candles represent light and enlightenment. A bowl containing a live goldfish signifies life and movement, and painted eggs embody fertility. Coins are placed on the table to symbolize wealth and prosperity, and a holy book (such as the Quran) or a book of poetry (like the works of Hafiz or the Shahnameh) represents spirituality

and wisdom. Sometimes, an orange floating in a bowl of water is included to symbolize the Earth in space. The meticulous arrangement of these items on a decorated cloth (sofreh) transforms the table into a visual representation of hopes and aspirations for the coming year, serving as a focal point for family gatherings and reflections.

Traditional clothing worn during Nowruz also contributes significantly to its aesthetic. The act of wearing new clothes symbolizes a fresh start and aligns with the themes of rebirth and renewal. Often, these clothes are vibrant and colorful, reflecting the joy and optimism of the occasion. Traditional attire can also serve as a powerful expression of cultural identity and heritage, with specific styles and fabrics representing different regions and ethnic groups. It is common to avoid wearing black or gray, as these colors are associated with mourning and are considered inauspicious for the New Year. The visual spectacle of people adorned in their finest, often traditional, garments enhances the festive atmosphere of Nowruz. Auditory aesthetics are another crucial dimension of Nowruz celebrations. Music plays a vital role in creating the celebratory mood, with traditional songs often revolving around themes of spring, renewal, and joy. Melodies known as the “Nowruzi” airs, some believed to have originated in the Sasanian period, highlight the historical depth of this auditory tradition. Historically, the arrival of the New Year was heralded by the sounds of instruments like drums and horns played by local musicians. In various regions, traditional singers and storytellers perform Nowruz songs, and competitions between bards who improvise tales about Nowruz also take place. The vibrant and often melodious sounds of Nowruz music contribute significantly to the overall aesthetic experience and reinforce the festival’s themes of joy and new beginnings.

The post-Nowruz phase culminates in Sizdah Bedar, celebrated on the thirteenth day after Nowruz. This day of outdoor picnicking emphasizes the connection with nature and the symbolic release of the old year’s burdens. A key ritual involves taking the Sabzeh from the Haft-Seen table and throwing it into flowing water, symbolizing the letting go of misfortunes from the previous year. Young single people, especially women, often tie knots in the leaves of the Sabzeh before discarding it, expressing a wish to find a partner in the new year. The outdoor setting, the act of releasing the sprouted grains back to nature, and the hopeful ritual of knot-tying create a final aesthetic expression of Nowruz that underscores its themes of renewal and optimism. While the core themes and many aesthetic elements of Nowruz are shared across cultures, their specific expressions vary significantly from region to region. In Iran, Nowruz is deeply intertwined with the meticulous preparation and display of the Haft-Seen table and the lively traditions of Chaharshanbe Suri. Celebrations here emphasize family gatherings, community solidarity, and the artistic expression found in poetry and music.

In Afghanistan, Nowruz, known as Nawroz, is celebrated as both a cultural and an agricultural holiday. Beyond family feasts and ritual dances, the day holds particular significance for farmers, marking the commencement of the agricultural cycle. Distinct aesthetic traditions include the preparation of Haft Mewa, a dessert made from seven dried fruits, and Samanak, a sweet pudding made from germinated wheat, often prepared communally with singing and stirring throughout the night. The "Jahenda Bala" ceremony and the Gul Surkh (red flower) festival in Mazar-e-Sharif are prominent visual aspects of Afghan Nowruz celebrations.

Azerbaijan is renowned for its grand public festivities, traditional games such as Kos-kosa (symbolizing the coming of spring) and Khidir Ilyas (representing fertility), communal feasts, vibrant street performances, and regional music. Preparations for Nowruz begin a month in advance and include house cleaning, planting trees, making new clothes, painting eggs, and baking national pastries like shekerbura, pakhlava, and shorgoghal. The four Tuesdays preceding Nowruz, each dedicated to one of the elements (water, fire, wind, earth), are particularly significant with their own rituals and beliefs. A central visual tradition is the decoration of the festive table with "khoncha," a large tray adorned with Samani (sprouted wheat), candles, and dyed eggs.

In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Nowruz, often called Navruz, is marked by grand public festivities, traditional games like Kopkari (a form of Central Asian polo), communal feasts, vibrant street performances, and regional music. A key aesthetic and communal tradition in Uzbekistan is the preparation of Sumalak, a sweet paste made from germinated wheat, often cooked in large cauldrons with the participation of family, friends, and neighbors. In Tajikistan, a unique tradition involves children gathering wildflowers, dressing in colorful attire, and presenting the flowers to villagers while singing old folk songs a week before Nowruz.

Kurdish communities across the Middle East celebrate Nowruz, often referred to as Newroz, with distinct aesthetic expressions that emphasize national pride and resilience. Colorful traditional costumes are worn, folk dances are performed, and fire-jumping rituals, echoing the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith, are central to the celebrations.

For diaspora communities around the world, Nowruz is maintained through family gatherings and the setting of Haft-Seen tables. Increasingly, large-scale public festivals are organized in cities with significant Persian and Central Asian populations, featuring live music and dance performances, Nowruz bazaars with traditional food and crafts, cultural workshops, and public Sizdah Bedar picnics. Modern adaptations, such as digital Haft-Seen displays shared online and Nowruz-themed gift boxes, also reflect the evolving aesthetics of the celebration in a globalized world. Contemporary Nowruz aesthetics

demonstrate a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in art, design, and popular culture. While the core symbolic elements of Nowruz, such as the Haft-Seen items and the symbolism of fire and renewal, remain central, their visual presentation is often reinterpreted to align with contemporary design sensibilities. Modern Haft-Seen sets may incorporate materials like glass, crystal, and metallics, often featuring minimalist decor and bold color palettes. Persian calligraphy, a traditional art form, is frequently integrated into Nowruz decorations, including Haft-Seen dishes, mirrors, and even painted eggs, adding a layer of sophistication and cultural depth. Jewelry design also continues to draw inspiration from Nowruz motifs, incorporating symbols of renewal, prosperity, and nature into contemporary pieces.

Globalization and technology have significantly impacted the visual and auditory representation of Nowruz. The ease of online sharing allows individuals to showcase their Haft-Seen displays and other Nowruz decorations to a global audience, fostering a sense of virtual community among celebrants. Virtual Nowruz celebrations have also emerged, enabling people to connect and participate in festivities remotely. Furthermore, digital platforms provide widespread access to a vast array of traditional and contemporary Nowruz music, allowing individuals to curate their own auditory experiences of the festival. This accessibility contributes to the continued vibrancy and evolution of Nowruz aesthetics in the modern era.

In conclusion, the aesthetics of Nowruz are deeply rooted in its foundational myths, with the legends of King Jamshid and Kawa the Blacksmith, along with the symbolic roles of Amoo Nowruz and Haji Firuz, providing a rich narrative framework for its visual, auditory, and ritualistic expressions. The ceremonial aesthetics, from the preparatory spring cleaning and the fiery spectacle of Chaharshanbe Suri to the symbolic arrangement of the Haft-Seen table, the wearing of traditional clothing, the sounds of Nowruz music, and the nature-centric rituals of Sizdah Bedar, all serve to convey the core cultural values of renewal, hope, unity, and resilience inherent in this ancient tradition. Across diverse cultures, while the fundamental spirit of Nowruz remains consistent, its aesthetic manifestations take on unique regional flavors, reflecting local customs and historical influences. In a globalized world, contemporary artists and designers continue to draw inspiration from traditional Nowruz aesthetics, reinterpreting them through modern lenses while technology facilitates the sharing and adaptation of these traditions across generations and geographical boundaries. The enduring power of Nowruz aesthetics lies in their ability to visually, audibly, and symbolically communicate the timeless message of renewal and the perennial hope for a brighter future.