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***Carbonization of the Aesthetic and Aestheticization of Carbon:
Historicizing Oil and Its Visual Ideologies in Iran (1920–1979)***

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Abstract

The protracted history of consuming carbon-based energy sources in Iran culminated in 1908 with the momentous discovery of the inaugural oil field in Masjed Soleyman. This newfound carbon-based source not only brought a lot of revenues to Iran but also, brought forth a multitude of materialities like pipelines, roads, bridges, refinery factories, tankers, and rigs into Iran. This new materiality exerted a profound influence on the perception and imagination of Iranians, particularly Iranian artists. Consequently, carbon permeated diverse manifestations within Iranian artworks assuming various artistic approaches; in other words, carbon was inevitably introduced into aesthetics. Serendipitously, the ascension of Reza Shah Pahlavi to power in Iran almost coincided with the discovery of oil. Reza Shah and his successor, Mohammadreza Shah, sought to position themselves as a novel international force governing a "developed" nation for which they needed to lubricate the production-consumption cycle in Iran. To achieve this objective, they championed extensive governmental propagandas that celebrated carbon-based consumerism, and with that, they introduced aesthetics into carbon. Drawing inspiration from Walter Benjamin's notions "politicizing aesthetic" and "aestheticizing politics" and insisting that in Iran, oil/carbon is politics, this paper aims to historicize the process of carbonization of aesthetics in Iranian art realm on the one hand, and aestheticization of carbon in governmental propaganda on the other hand. This paper focuses on visual ideologies in visual artworks, including architecture, painting, and sculpture in the artwork realm and postal stamps, postcards, and paper moneys, on the other hand.

Keywords: Aestheticization of Carbon, Carbonization of Aesthetics, Iran, Pahlavi Monarchy, Visual Ideology

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Introduction

The Middle East serves as a geographical and economic bridge connecting Europe, Africa, and Asia. Its abundance of oil, a globally significant commodity, positions the region as a key economic hub for production and The impact of oil on the world economy is substantial, influencing various indicators worldwide (Taghizadeh-Hesary & Yoshino, 2014). The flows of this commodity connect local, national, and global scales, symbolizing the mobility inherent in globalization (Hein & Sedighi 2017). In the Middle East, oil plays a decisive role in shaping both the physical environment and the perceptions of those involved in its dealings.

Iran was the first country in the middle east in which Oil was discovered, starting with the drilling of Oil Well No.1 in Masjid Soluiman in 1908 by the First Exploration Company (Nazari & Khajoo, p. 305). This marked the beginning of the region's oil history and the raise of carbon's impact. The discovery triggered significant socio-political changes in Iran, including wars, revolutions, coup d'états, and regime change from the Qajar dynasty to Pahlavi with Reza Shah Pahlavi's crowning on December 25, 1925 (Rahnema, 2011: 115). Reza Shah, a military leader who seized power through a coup, used oil money to project Iran as an international power, following what Foucault called a modernization agenda (Afary & Anderson 2005: 80). The Pahlavi regime, including Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah, promoted a carbon-based lifestyle through propaganda to modernize Iran and boost the production-consumption cycle. This paper explores the historicization of the Pahlavis' carbon aesthetization through visual propaganda tools like stamps, postcards, and paper money.

The discovery of oil, a new carbon-based source, not only transformed physical landscapes “producing spaces like warehouses, factories, and skyscrapers” (Iturbe, 2019) but also influenced the artistic imagination of Iranians, manifested in new paintings, sculptures, movies, etc. Similar to the industrial revolution, which “was at the same time an aesthetic and artistic revolution, and it became increasingly urgent that the arts approached the new urban-industrial context and its impact on culture” (Fraga, 2018) this new revolution in energy sources attracted artists' attentions too. The process in which oil as a carbon-based energy impact designers and artists' aesthetic is what I call “carbonization of aesthetic”. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's theory of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the concept emphasizes the reproduction aspect in relation to two way of production consists of the oil economy and the media used by the governments to aesthetize carbon. Following, I will historicize the process of carbonizing aesthetic, examining it first at the urban scale and then within the artworks produced by Iranian artists.

Carbonization of Aesthetic

Oil industry, as Carola Hein (2022) has showed, due to its needs to new kinds of spaces have played a significant role in shaping the environment in “visible” and “recognizable” ways. This huge visible impact of oil industry, was accompanied by a new sense of aesthetic since that carbon “must be understood beyond its technical capacity, viewed instead as a political and cultural force with inevitable spatial repercussions” (Iturbe, 2019). All the rules and regulations for designing spaces and infrastructures for extracting, refining and distributing the oil, based on scientific “positivism” needed a correspondence aesthetic. The omnipresence of the oil as the main commodity flow for Iranian governments during 20th century, has resulted in the introduction of its relevant aesthetic into the world of art. In other words, supplementing Stephanie LeMenager` (2012) argument, I would say “the

inescapability of petroleum infrastructures in the twentieth century has entered” not only “literature”, but also any visual arts. This effect or I would say “carbonization of aesthetic”, has manifested in many examples during Pahlavi era.

Urban Design

Abadan, situated in the southwest of Iran, stands as a prominent example of the carbonization of aesthetic in the country's urban fabric. The city's significance emerged with the discovery of oil in Iran, leading to the establishment of a refinery factory in Abadan due to its proximity to the sea. The Anglo-Iranian oil company, in response to the growing population, constructed housing projects for its employees and workers (Bavar, 2022: 371 & 372). “In this process, the first building to be erected was an iron structure lined with wood” (Crimson, 1997). This iron structure, one of the first of its kind in Iran, reflected the tangible imprint of carbon on physical spaces, challenging the notion of carbon as a mere fuel. The carbon aesthetic extended beyond construction materials and even influenced the rational grids that shaped the entire city of Abadan at the urban scale with the huge impact of Refinery factory on the city.

The grids in Abadan conveyed a message of “scientific efficiency” aimed at optimizing labor and production rather than minimizing energy consumption. Unlike green movements that focus on energy conservation, these grids aimed to maximize production within a specific timeframe. The oil company implemented a panopticon-like system, dividing the city into three zones based on race and class (Zandieh et al, 2020) treating workers as elements of a machine to enhance production efficiency. Although the use of a panopticon for labor discipline is not new, Abadan's scale was unprecedented, with the entire city designed as gears of a single factory. Even, the Oil College's clock tower, resembling refinery chimneys, was serving to remind students of their working hours. Comparing to the cases like American “petrotopias” in the framework of LeMenager’s work (2012), Abadan at that time still lacked “now ordinary US landscape of highways, low-density suburbs, strip malls, fast food and gasoline service island, and shopping centers ringed by parking lots or parking towers”, but still the urban planning “represents itself as an ideal end-state, repressing the violence that it has performed upon”. In other words, it represents a disciplined utopia concealing the exploitation inherent in the carbon-based system, presenting itself as an idealized end-state.

Abadan, Iran's primary oil city, embraced the carbonization of aesthetic and disseminated it to other cities through diverse visual ideologies. Beyond the panoptic spatial organization mentioned earlier, a broader theme of celebrating production and technology emerged in various forms across Iran. Unlike later governmental propaganda that framed technology as a symbol of progress, here, technology and production were valued intrinsically for their beauty. An illustrative example is Houshang Seyhoun's design for the Canadady soda factory in Tehran.

Seyhoun, the first Iranian architect to incorporate iron and concrete in residential designs, showcased transparency in both façade and plan, notably in his design for the Canadady soda factory in Tehran (Haghir, 2020: 457). Situated on a bustling street, the factory's fully transparent façade invited onlookers to observe the production process, resembling a museum. This celebration of technology and production, influenced by the carbon-based approach, featured characteristics such as exposed pipelines, large scale, transparency, and disciplined spatial order. It represented the carbonization of aesthetic, celebrating technology for its intrinsic beauty while overlooking its environmental impact. This aesthetic, part of the Anthropocene aesthetic, serves to distract from the destruction to the biosphere, as suggested

by Nicholas Mirzof to “allow us to move on, to see nothing and keep circulating, commodities, despite the destruction to the biosphere” (Mirzoeff, 2014). As the last but not least point I should say, Seyhoun's transparent façade aimed not to distract but to captivate attention towards the perceived "beauty" of industry. Seyhoun' approach initiated a trend of designs that later was manipulated in governmental propagandas which I will discuss them later.



Figure 1- Canadary Soda Factory. Source: <https://aoapedia.ir/>

Painting and Sculpture

In various art forms, carbon has uniquely influenced aesthetic expression. Drawing from Thomas S. Davis' (2016) concept of Anthropocene aesthetic, I can say “some of the visual arts” in Iran “configures a more dialectical version of insecurity that figures nonhuman natures as more than a context”. An early example of this influence can be seen in Hossein Behzad's painting "Oil Poverty (The Black Gold)." The artwork portrays a man in distress, surrounded by oil rigs in a dark background, symbolizing the harsh impacts of the oil industry on people's lives. Zeinab Rajabi and Khashayar Qazizadeh (2018) have shown, this painting as part of a series of paintings aims to criticize the oil industry as a phenomenon which despite its huge impacts on people's life, financially was not of any help for them. All that carbon has brought up was misery, poverty and ecological crisis. In other words, “carbonization of aesthetic” here has invoked a radical criticism in artists.

Carbonization of aesthetic found broader critical expressions in the works of artists like Houshang Pezeshknia, a pioneer in the move toward "modern" art in Iran. Working in Abadan during a time when it was by so many considered “the capital of art and literature” (Kiaras, 2009), Pezeshknia, employed by the Anglo-Iranian Oil company, created numerous paintings depicting life in Iranian oil districts. One notable piece of him, "Scientific Theory," portrays an oil city dominated by a giant rig against a dry landscape with a red-orange sun. Some mathematical drawings on the sky cross the center of sun with some scientific descriptions. The land is all dry and it is hard to find any trace of a life in the painting. This painting with its composition, balancing the sun with the oil, with using the color of fire, and with its insistence on positivism, is a great example of carbonization of aesthetic. Again, contrary to the LeMenager `s work (2012), here we have an artist who have questions for “physicists or engineers” not for artists. Also, contrary to Seyhoun's approach, with a sense

of irony, Pezeshknia criticizes positivism of the science and carbon aesthetic. Pezeshknia's dialectical stance, aligns with Walter Benjamin's theory, revealing the emancipatory potential within the criticism of carbon modernization and aesthetic.

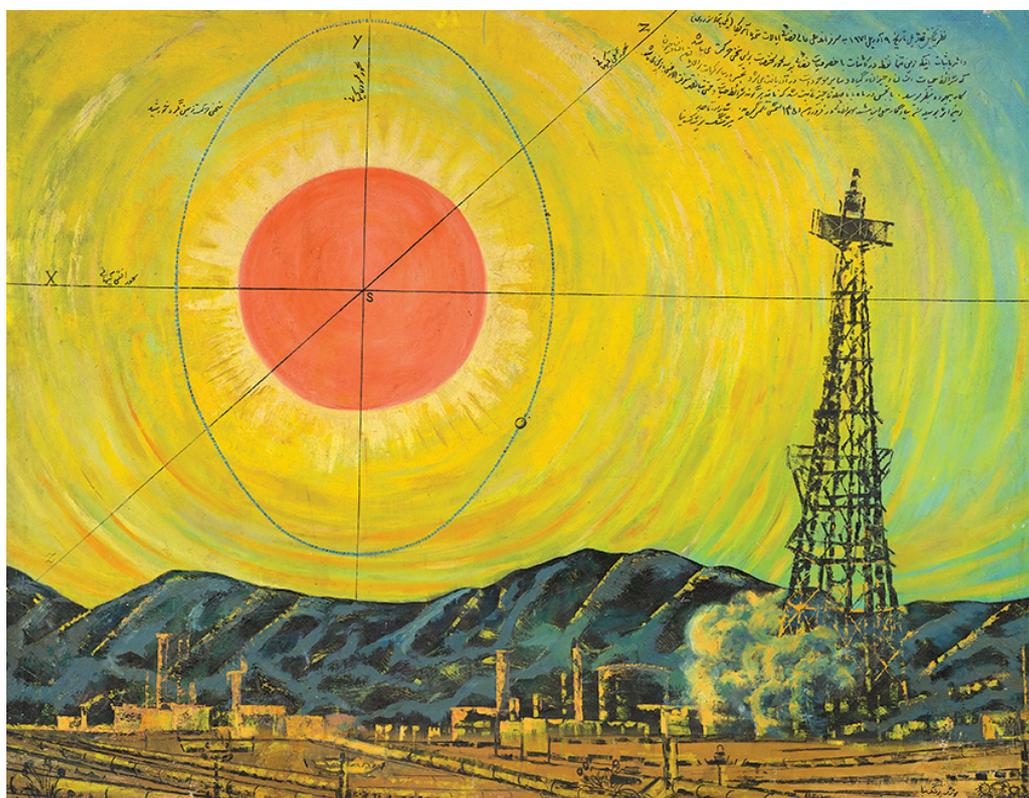


Figure 2- "Scientific Theory", Houshang Pezeshkian. Source: Wikipedia commons.

Other than Pezeshknia who showed this dialectical approach in all of his works, there were artists who showed this impact in few of their works and not in their whole career. Of these artists, it worths mentioning Iran Daroodi and Bahman Mohasses.

Since Iran Daroodi, contrary to Pezeshknia, was from an upper-class family and did not work for the oil company, we can say her work was in a relative distance from the real situation in Iranian Oil districts. However, her painting, "Our Veins, the Earth's Veins" (also known as "Iran's oil"), commissioned by the Italian company ITT in the oil industry (Ravanjou & Samadi Raad, 2018), adopts a heavily critical stance. Using red, white, and black as main colors symbolizing blood, oil, and coldness, Daroodi depicts oil pipelines as veins carrying blood from an industrial city, criticizing carbon for causing pain and suffering. The painting portrays a blast in the pipelines with dark smoke rising globally, and roots spreading from the blast on the ground, emphasizing the city's indifference to the suffering. While Daroodi's works often feature ruins and frozen landscapes (Aghaie & Jafary, 2021), "Our Veins, the Earth's Veins" uniquely blames fossil fuels and the carbon industry for these afflictions. Unlike her other paintings that depict abstract forms in distant frozen landscapes, this work details an industrial city with pipelines, giant tankers, and even structures like oilrigs.

Bahman Mohasses, like Daroodi, hails from a wealthy background, keeping his works somewhat distant from Iranian oil districts. Despite this, he remains critical of carbon. In his dual sculpture "Oil Spill," Mohasses offers an ecological critique of carbon modernization. The sculptures depict dying animals, a fish and a turtle, held in a human hand. The darkness

and the narrow pipeline attached to the hand distinctly highlight carbon aesthetic. Mohasses, with a broader perspective on carbon, addresses a significant ecological issue. As he himself has suggested: “Ultimately, what is the meaning of a painter in a world whose sky lacks any birds, whose sea lacks any fish, and whose jungle lacks any animal” (Montazemi, 2011). His work also like Pezeshknia and Daroodi, embodying a dialectical criticism of carbon modernization, exhibits the influence of carbonization of aesthetic.

Beyond the cases of artists like Hossein Behzed and Bahman Mohasses, the carbonization of aesthetic is evident in the works of numerous Iranian artists, including Ebrahim Golestan (the movie “A Fire”), Shokrollah Manzoor (An untitled painting in a 1964 exhibition named “Southern Oil infrastructures”), Nosratollah Moslemian (a painting entitled “Oil Industry workers’ strikes”), Manoochehr Safoorzadeh (in a series of painting), and even in Noriyuki Haraguchi’s work for Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts (entitled “Oil Pool”) or more recently exhibitions like “The Black Gold” (at Shirin Art Gallery, 2021), and “Joyful Snow Spray” (By Amin Roshan at Homa Gallery). In these works, oil and carbon is so omnipresent that, similar to what LeMehager (2012) suggested about “Euro-American imagination”, “Oil has become implicitly synonymous with the world, in a large, Heideggerian sense of the human enframing and revealing of earth, thus the world we know”. The carbonization of aesthetic is an inherent consequence of Iran’s interaction with the oil industry, leading to dialectical criticism that unveils the emancipatory potentials of carbon and the oil industry. However, as we explore further, the aestheticization of carbon may not carry the same emancipatory potential.

Aestheticization of Carbon

The oil wealth convinced the Iranian Shahs of their international influence, prompting the Pahlavis to launch an extensive plan of propaganda. Internally, they promoted a consumer lifestyle to boost the production-consumption cycle. Externally, they presented a new image of Iran through ideological propaganda using various formats such as postcards, stamps, flyers, money designs, exhibitions, ceremonies, competitions, and symposiums to aestheticize carbon. I will explore this aestheticization using three mediums—postal stamps, postcards, and paper money—attempting to weave them into a cohesive narrative.

Stamps

In 1915, during the Qajar dynasty, the Iranian National Parliament passed the first postal laws, granting the exclusive right to the government for the publishing, distributing, and selling of stamps (Rahimi & Fathi, 2018). Initially, under the Qajar rule, Iranian stamps featured either a Qajar Shah’s image or the national symbol “Lion and Sun.” However, when Reza Shah came to power in the early 20th century, he replaced the old Qajar stamps with new designs.

Initially continuing the trend of featuring the king’s image and the national symbol, Reza Shah gradually introduced more diverse designs into the stamps. In these new designs, despite the absence of cultural-historical event of this era, like the establishment of first modern university in Iran, or cultural monuments built for Iranian poets (Avery, 2007: 51,64, 65 & Agheli, 2005: 771), there was an implicit attempt to depict an industrialized image of Iran. For instance, in the tenth year of Reza Shah’s crowning, a series of stamps were published which contained pictures like a train crossing a bridge, a factory, a ship, and an

airport. While not heavily emphasizing the oil industry, these stamps reflected the promotion of a "petromodern" lifestyle centered around consumerism.

During this period, Reza Shah prioritized promoting industrial achievements over cultural ones, reflecting his stance on carbon aesthetic. Stamps, as a governmental tool, aimed to convey a message not only within the country but also beyond national boundaries—a message of a "new industrial Iran." This message had dual interpretations: for foreigners, it showcased the power of the new Shah, while for Iranians, it represented a new lifestyle. Essentially, these stamps served to aestheticize carbon for Iranians, preparing them for the shift toward a carbon-based lifestyle. Bridges, airplanes, factories, and ships symbolized elements of a larger system made possible by the seemingly endless sources of oil as a carbon-based energy.

Following the forceful abdication of Reza Shah by the allied powers, all of these plans stopped for a year. In 1942, Mohammadreza Shah aimed to honor his father and assert his own rule by releasing 18 stamps. Ten depicted the Shah, and eight showcased landscapes, including the White Bridge in Ahwaz, Veresk Bridge, a train, a factory, and government buildings. This series expanded to include stamps featuring modern and historical buildings, as well as Tehran Train Station too (Rahimi and Fathi, 2018). This continued until 1951. With numerous stamps featuring bridges, trains, and industrial symbols, it is evident that the aestheticization of carbon remained a significant part of governmental propaganda, albeit subtly.

In 1951, with the nationalization of oil in Iran, significant changes occurred. Although Prime Minister Mohammad Mosadegh spearheaded the nationalization (McMurdo, 2012), Mohammadreza Shah utilized it to bolster himself and the Pahlavi monarchy. In 1952, on the anniversary of oil nationalization, five new stamps were issued, accompanied by three others on oil during 1951-1952. These, along with four additional stamps published on different occasions, formed a series of eleven stamps solely focused on oil (Rahimi & Fathi, 2018). This series highlights the increased importance of carbon for the Iranian monarchy post-nationalization and Mohammadreza Shah's concerted effort in aestheticizing carbon for society. Unlike his father, Mohammadreza Shah made oil a canonical factor in portraying Iran, following a more overt approach to the aestheticization of carbon, facilitated by the prevailing sense of nationalism. This approach extended to other mediums such as postcards and paper money too.

Postcards

Carlson (2009) highlights that postcards serve sociopolitical purposes, offering insights into the mindset of their era. Baum (2003) describes them as a form of "soft news," allowing governments to convey messages subtly. Iran is also no exception in this rule, and both Reza Shah and Mohammadreza Shah utilized the modern postal system to spread their messages. Regarding this, first focusing on a famous postcard/picture, I will discuss how Reza Shah utilized postcards to aestheticize carbon and then, I will discuss aestheticization of carbon during Mohammadreza shah's reign.

The picture I'll discuss, while not an actual postcard, functions similarly. It's the sole image of Reza Shah visiting Abadan's refinery in 1930, widely circulated and significant for understanding the political climate in Iran at the time. Initially seeming like a straightforward

image of authority at a crucial site, further historical and visual analysis unveils the deeper importance of this postcard-like picture.

Historically, this picture captures a pivotal moment in 1929, amid negotiations between the Iranian government and the Anglo-Iranian oil company to amend their contract. The existing agreement granted Iran 16 percent of the company's profits, but lacking transparency led to calls for changes (Ford, 1954: 17). Reza Shah's visit to the Abadan oil refinery during this critical period symbolized a reclaiming of power. In the image, Shah, leading a group in his new dress code, strides confidently to the right, overshadowing others, including British managers. In the background we see pipelines and tankers forming a cadre for the picture in balance to each other. And in the middle of the picture two oil pipelines are cutting the crew, showing the sudden disrupt that could happen due to the oil negotiations. However, Shah having a wooden cane (symbolically as a punishment tool) in hand is represented as the one who will not let this disruption happen: the arrow in the left side of the picture pointing to him and far away distance where he is looking at, is an insistence on his progress and victory in the future. Indeed, a year after this picture Reza Shah gained enough self-confidence to completely cancel the contract (Mirtorabi, 2017). The immanent result of this cancellation was 4 percent increase in Iran's share of the oil profit. However, beyond immediate gains, this aestheticization of carbon aimed to propagate the idea of progress through the new carbon-based source.

Mohammadreza Shah intensified the aestheticization of carbon compared to his father, publishing numerous postcards. Among them, four stand out—one colorful and three black and white. The colorful postcard depicts Abadan as the "City of Oil," presenting a picturesque scene of the refinery against a blue sky and green landscape. Despite factory smokes, it neglects socio-ecological concerns. The three monochromatic postcards share a similar visual ideology, portraying Abadan as an organized city in a "beautiful" natural setting, reinforcing the aestheticized image of the oil industry.

In fact, these pictures are depicting a utopia or following LeMenager (2012) I would like to say a "petrotopia". LeMenger for explaining this term, refers to Harvey who "recognized the implementation of utopianism to result in political systems" that "strictly regulate a stable and unchanging social process" such that "the dialectic of social process is repressed" and "no future needs to be envisaged because the desired state us already achieved" (ibid). The petrotopia or carbotopia described in these postcards is an utopia that is constituted based on the same discourse of abundance that as Herbstreuth (2016 :10) shows shape a major part of politics in countries like America where with the claim "that the country richly blessed with natural resources and that American ingenuity and the power of the free market would make US oil reserves essentially limitless". This aestheticization of carbon based on limitless of energy sources, illustrated in the postcards with endless streets and housing rows, reflects a consumerism where the entire city becomes the consumer object. Additionally, the postcards emphasize the notions of "community" and "neighborhood," highlighting the segregation lines between different areas in Abadan, designed by James M Wilson's company (Crisnon, 1997), reinforcing a critique by David Harvey regarding similar ideas in a distinct context.

"The presumption here is that neighborhoods are in some sense 'intrinsic,' that the proper form of cities is some 'structure of neighborhoods, that 'neighborhood' is equivalent to 'community' and 'community is what most Americans want and need (whether they know it or not). It is further presumed that action at the scale defined by this new urbanism is

effective and sufficient to solve problems that exist at all other scales. The nostalgic and spatially limited strain of the utopian dream resurfaces” (Harvey, 2000: 171).

These neighborhoods that supposedly are the solution for all the countries` problems are actually means for covering other problems one of which is (as Harvey also describes) destroying everything for the sake of carbotopia consisting of all the parkways as “scenic drives” LeMenager (2012). If in Benjamin`s Paris people were walking in Passages to get distracted, in the carbotopia depicted in these postcards, people should drive to nowhere to get distracted. The streets are endless and the houses are repeated continuously.

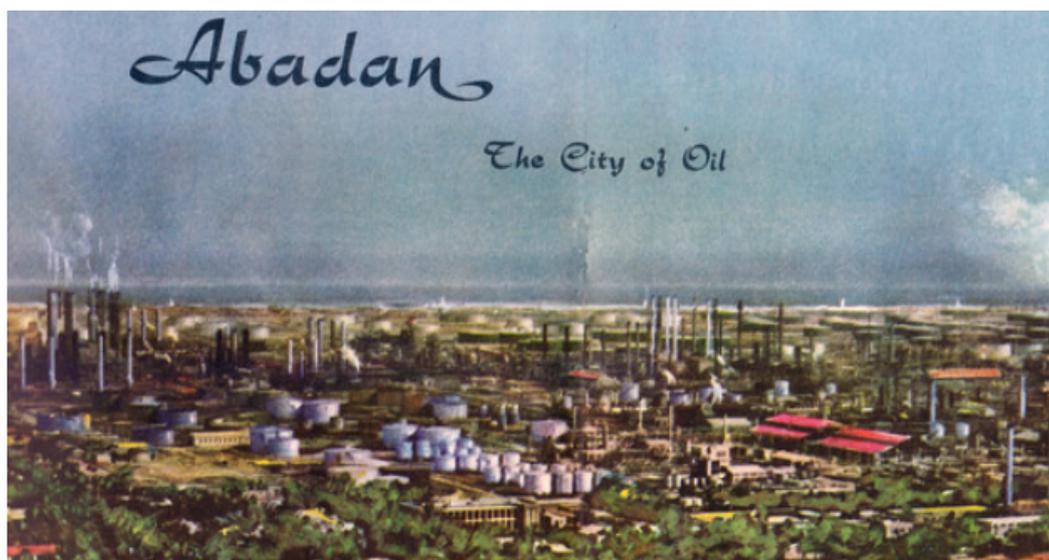


Figure 3- Postcards from Abadan. photo:wikipedia commons.

Paper Money

In the aestheticization of carbon driven by capitalist principles and fueled by oil money, money plays a crucial role as the visible embodiment of capital. Recognizing the significance of paper money, which, as Frances Robertson (2005) notes, magically retains authenticity through mechanical reproduction in Walter Benjamin's framework, the Iranian monarchy strategically employed paper currency as a tool for ideological propaganda and the aestheticization of carbon.

Although the explicit representation of carbon aesthetic, as seen in the Abadan Oil Refinery Factory, only appeared on Iranian money after the Oil Nationalization in 1951, the notion of industrial progress through carbon-based energy was a consistent theme in political propaganda since the era of Reza Shah Pahlavi. In a series of Iranian paper currencies from 1936-38, images of the national railway on the 20 Rials and the Royal Ship on the 100 Rials were featured alongside the portraits of the king and historical architectural landmarks. However, in 1951, the Abadan Oil Refinery made its debut on the 100 Rials note, sharing space with modern buildings like Ibn Sina's Tomb on the 10 Rials, the Iranian National Bank Headquarters on the 20 Rials, and Koohrang Dam on the 50 Rials. Subsequently, the image of the Oil Refinery became a recurring motif until 1974 when a new 100 Rials note, commemorating the 50th anniversary of Mohammadreza Shah's coronation, briefly featured the museum of the Pahlavi family.

Jason Stanley (2015) highlights that propaganda can convey truths sincerely while also expressing something true that communicates something false. Similarly, the Pahlavi-era paper money did not depict falsehoods, showcasing real sites like airports, modern buildings, and factories reflective of an ostensibly thriving economy which at least based on numbers was true (See: Esfahani, 2008). However, the communicated value embedded in these depictions, both collectively and individually, fluctuated over time. Following the nationalization of oil in Iran, over 50 percent of the paper money designs prominently featured symbols of this carbon-based source, with the Abadan Oil Refinery appearing on the 100 Rials note. This design, presenting bird-view perspectives of the refinery with interconnected pipelines, aimed to convey how oil enriched Iran and how the government utilized the funds for constructing "modern" buildings. This representation, according to Stanley (2015:43), reflects a "flawed ideological belief," emphasizing the notion that carbon is the true liberator of the country. This observation underscores the thin boundary between "carbonization of aesthetic" as an inherent consequence of oil's existence and "aestheticization of carbon" as ideological propaganda. The critical dialectic prompted by the carbonization of aesthetic in Iranian artists' works offers a glimmer of hope in recognizing the potentials of carbon.



*Figure 4- Aestheticization of Carbon through Paper moneys during Pahlavi Era.
Source: Wikipedia commons.*

Conclusion

The discovery of oil in Iran initiated a carbon-based lifestyle, influencing first aesthetics in the realm of art and then governmental propaganda. Carbonization of aesthetic unfolded across diverse scales, shaping urban structures and individual artworks. Simultaneously, aestheticization of carbon became a tool for the Iranian monarchy, disseminating ideological messages through stamps, postcards, and paper money. While this paper delves into a fraction of these processes, there is potential for broader exploration across various fields.

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