



ART IN IRAN X.2 QAJAR PAINTING

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The Qajar artistic style, like the Timurid style centuries before, had its origins outside the historical period from which it derives its name. It was in the late Safavid period that a thoroughgoing Europeanized style began to oust the old native traditions, and by the beginning of the 12th/18th century the new style was completely dominant. In the middle and later years of that century its foremost exponent was Şādeq, who, like most of his successors, worked in various media—oils, miniature painting, and lacquer. Some of his large-scale works survive in the Pārs Museum at Shiraz and in the Negārestān Museum, Tehran. He seems to have had a long working life that spanned most of the second half of the 12th/18th century: Texier reports a current tradition that in 1738 he executed the large mural in the Čehel Sotūn at Isfahan depicting the victory of Nāder Shah at Karnal over the Mughal emperor Moḥammad Shah, while there are lacquer pieces bearing his signature coupled with dates in the last decade of the century (possibly the work of his pupils).

The unsettled political situation following the death of Karīm Khan in 1193/1779 left little opportunity for schools of painting to flourish and develop. But even before their rise to supreme power in 1211/1796 the Qajars had



captured the services of at least one painter who set a high standard for the first generation of their rule. Mīrzā Bābā, originally, it is said, a native of Isfahan, has left a very fine small drawing of a dragon and a phoenix, formerly in the Pozzi collection, which is signed and dated “at Astarābād” 1203/1788-89. Astarābād was the seat of the Qajar family during their struggle for the throne. Once the dynasty was established he was able to undertake various works on a larger scale. Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah (r. 1212-50/1797-1834) made him naqqaāš-bāšī, or painter laureate, and he was accordingly entrusted with important commissions, including the manuscript of the king’s own dīvān that was taken to England by his ambassador Mīrzā Abu’l-Ḥasan Khan Ēlčī (q.v.) as a present to King George III, and is now in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. The beautiful painted lacquer covers, the lavish illuminations and marginal decorations, and two very fine miniature portraits of Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah himself and his uncle, the founder of the dynasty, are all the work of Mīrzā Bābā. He also painted the life-size portrait of Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah, dated 1213/ 1798-99, that was presented to the East India Company in 1806 and now hangs in the Commonwealth Relations Office, London. Like most top-ranking artists of his time, Mīrzā Bābā showed his versatility in the various available media, including painted enamel and églomise , (under-glass painting). Virtually nothing is known of him beyond his actual works, the latest of which so far known bears the date 1225/1810.

Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah’s inordinate vanity, and admittedly handsome appearance, ensured full employment for any painter who could convey an adequately resplendent impression of the royal person. Mīrzā Bābā’s chief rivals in this field were Mehr-‘Alī, ‘Abdallāh Khan, and Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan. Mehr-‘Alī seems to have made his debut with a full-length portrait of the king sent as a present to the amirs of Sind in 1800; Sir John Malcolm’s *Sketches of Persia* describes the local governor and villagers prostrating themselves as the securely packed and boxed-up portrait was embarked for Sind at Abūšeḥr (Bushire), and a large portrait of Faṭḥ-‘Alī, signed by Mehr-‘Alī and dated 1212/1797-98, has made its way to the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta, most probably among the spoils of the 1843 Sind war. Mehr-‘Alī followed this work closely with two fine portraits of the king, dated 1218/1803-04 and 1219/1804-05 respectively, for the Hall of the Marble Throne in the Golestān Palace, and another entrusted to Napoleon’s envoy, M. Jaubert, as a present for the emperor in Paris. The latter, which now hangs in the museum at Versailles, was finely engraved at the time by Ruotte after a copy by Grégorius. Several other excellent portraits of Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah were executed by Mehr-‘Alī, the



latest bearing the date 1230/1814-15. By far the finest, formerly in the Amery collection, is now in the Negārestān Museum, Tehran, and shows the king, full-length and life-size, wearing his huge crown (compared by Texier to the crown of the Achaemenids), clad in a gorgeous robe of gold brocade, and holding a jeweled staff of majesty surmounted by Solomon's hoopoe. By this time (1220/1805) Mehr-'Alī's style had improved enormously; his early portraits give Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah a squat neck and round face, but in the later ones the proportions are much more pleasing as well as flattering. Mehr-'Alī also executed large portraits of Faṭḥ-'Alī and his sons in *églomisé*, or under-glass painting. Because the paint is applied behind the glass, this difficult technique required the image to be built up in reverse, beginning with highlights and other surface details and finishing with the background color. The idea probably reached Persia from Germany, where the art was extensively practiced. Few Persian examples have survived because of the vulnerability of the thin sheets of glass.

Like his colleagues, Mehr-'Alī was also employed in painting wall murals; Sir William Ouseley saw a series of portraits of early Persian kings "painted within ten or twelve years by ... Mehr-'Alī of Tehran" in a palace at Isfahan. He may also have been responsible for an enormous canvas depicting Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah crowned and bejeweled, hunting with a large number of his sons. This was formerly in the India Office, London, but was handed over to the government of India in 1929, and now hangs on the ceiling of the ballroom at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the former viceroy's residence at New Delhi. One last glimpse of Mehr-'Alī is provided by a small watercolor study of a man's head, inscribed as having been executed by him in 1829 for his pupil [Abu'l-Ḥasan Khan Ġaffārī Ṣanī'-al-molk](#) who became the foremost Persian painter in the mid-19th century.

'Abdallāh Khan (b. ca. 1770) grew old in the service of the Qajar dynasty. His greatest achievement was the celebrated mural covering three sides of the old Negārestān Palace interior (see ['ABDALLĀH KHAN](#)).

Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan was of a slightly lesser stature than the other three, but his work is competent and conscientious, and in a set of three portraits of princes, one with a child, now in the Negārestān Museum, Tehran, he reaches a high level. There are several pictures of young women in which his hand may be detected from his soft method of rendering the features, a fondness for a sort of foxy red, and a vase of flowers that is almost a trademark. He has also left some excellent miniature paintings, usually in the form of monochrome



portraits.

One other artist of the earlier part of Fath-‘Alī Shah’s reign deserves notice, though nothing is known of him personally, and only one composition by him is known to have survived, and that in a fragmentary state. This was Abu’l-Qāsem, who painted three of the best pictures of young women in the Negārestān Museum, and a portrait of the king, seated, in a private collection. One of the former bears his signature and the date 1231/1815-16. The fact that these all have the same continuous architectural background and are on the same scale makes it almost certain that they originally belonged to a single long composition, which may have been that described by Binning as adorning the house he occupied at Shiraz about 1855: “The upper part of the wall is occupied by a representation of his late majesty Fath Alee Shah sitting in state, and attended by ten ladies. The figures, which extend round three sides of the room, are nearly as large as life, and gaudily coloured.” The portrait of the king does not stand up to those by Mīrzā Bābā or Mehr-‘Alī, but the women are quite beautiful.

Among the second generation of court painters, active toward the end of Fath-‘Alī Shah’s reign and during that of his successor, Moḥammad Shah (1250-64/1834-48), the best is probably Aḥmad, who, to judge from his early style, may well have been a pupil of Mehr-‘Alī. Two fine portraits of Fath-‘Alī Shah carry his signature. The first, showing the king in armor seated on a chair-like throne, is dated 1234/1818-19; unfortunately the face has been almost entirely repainted. The other, dated 1238/1822-23, has been in the British embassy at Tehran ever since its establishment; here the king sits on a jeweled carpet with an elaborate qalyān beside him. Later Aḥmad’s style became much more Europeanized, as in a large painting, dated 1260/1844, of Moḥammad Shah reviewing his troops, in the Hall of the Marble Throne, and a fine bust portrait of the same monarch, dated two years later, in a Persian private collection.

Another artist of this time who stands out as an individual may have been named Moḥammad. His painting of a young woman in the Forūgī collection, Tehran, bears the inscription yā Moḥammad, presumably one of the punning invocation-signatures so popular among the Zand and Qajar painters, and the date 1258/1842. His plump, moon-faced women, somewhat resembling Renoir’s are easily recognized, and good examples may be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Negārestān Museum, and elsewhere. His male figures are less successful.



Sayyed Mīrzā makes a third in this slightly later group. His most impressive work, now in a Tehran private collection, is a very large group of Fath-‘Alī Shah enthroned with sons and courtiers; it was formerly in the Hašt Behešt palace in Isfahan. Two rather stiff portraits of princes by him, dated 1245/1829-30 are reproduced by Schulz, but his charm and skill are most evident in the Negārestān Museum painting of Yūsof, represented as a handsome young Qajar nobleman against a landscape background. Sayyed Mīrzā was also an outstanding artist in painted lacquer and has signed the front cover of the new binding commissioned by Fath-‘Alī Shah for the great Neẓāmī manuscript of Shah Ṭahmāsp in the British Museum; the subject of this high-quality work is the favorite one of the king hunting with his sons.

The back cover of the same volume, also portraying the king on a hunting expedition, is signed by Moḥammad-Bāqer, who may be associated with a group of royal painted enamels on gold bearing the signature Bāqer, since the first element of such a name might often be omitted and, with allowances made for the different medium, the styles are very similar. Several of Bāqer’s finest enamels are in the Persian crown jewels collection, and an extremely fine gold bowl, cover, saucer and spoon, enameled with astrological subjects, and bearing his signature, together with a poetical dedication to Fath-‘Alī Shah, are in a private collection (see *Iran* 10, 1972, pp. 25-30). ‘Alī was another notable painter in enamel, close to Bāqer in both style and date, who has signed what is perhaps the finest of all the painted enamels in the Persian crown jewels collection, a magnificent oval hand-mirror with handle of carved jade and the back enameled with a portrait of the king seated within a rich floral frame. He was also responsible for another portrait, dated 1233/1817-18, enameled on the gold center of a nephrite dish presented to the emperor Franz I and now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. The only other enamel painter from this period who calls for special mention is Moḥammad Ja‘far, who seems to have been much employed on objects intended for official presentation. His signature is to be found on the two massive gold enamel dishes presented by his royal master to Sir Gore Ouseley (dated 1228/1813) and the East India Company (dated 1238/1822-23), the latter now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. He also executed insignia of the Order of the Lion and Sun, instituted in honor of Sir John Malcolm, as well as lesser objects such as qalyān-bowls and snuffboxes. In general, Persian painted enamels of the Qajar period are often the most attractive manifestations of the painter’s skill; even so severe a critic as the Comte de Rochechouart was enchanted by them, and compared them favorably with imported Swiss enamels that he saw



at the same time (cf. [Plate XXVII](#)).

Lacquer painting, fully described by the Comte de Rochechouart, consisted in coating papier-mâché (or, less frequently, wood) with a fine gesso or plaster, upon whose surface the design was painted in water-colors, the whole being finally covered with a transparent lacquer or varnish, usually of a pale golden hue, which warmed and enriched the whole effect. One family may be regarded as the foremost specialists in painted lacquer during the early Qajar period. The first of them was Najaf-‘Alī, whose dated work spans the period 1230-73/1815-56, and who always signed with the punning invocation *yā šāh-e Najaf*. He was followed by his sons and a younger brother, and between them they were responsible for much of the finest lacquer produced in Persia down to about 1308/1890.

In lacquer, as in other branches of painting, the taste for European mannerisms and subjects continued unabated, but unfortunately the only models normally available to the Persian painters seem to have been French and other prints of poor quality and often execrable taste, from which are derived the dissipated young men in dressing gowns and smoking caps and the young women of dubious reputation simpering coquettishly under their poke-bonnets, which constitute such a popular element in the Persian lacquer painter’s repertory. Sometimes religious (Christian) subjects were incongruously attempted, and the Holy Family in various garbled forms had been a popular theme for mirror cases since the eighteenth century. But the most frequently encountered designs on lacquer work of all periods are variations on the rose and nightingale (*gol o bolbol*) theme.

Najaf’s younger brother Moḥammad-Esmā‘īl, and his three sons Moḥammad-Kāzem, Ja‘far, and Aḥmad, all excelled in lacquer painting; Esmā‘īl attained the title of naqqāš-bāšī. His masterpiece is a box or casket in the Bern Historical Museum covered with scenes from Moḥammad Shah’s siege of Herat and containing literally hundreds of tiny figures; it is dated 1282/1865-66. Kāzem’s painted enamels ([Plate XXVIII](#)) are almost finer than his lacquer, and examples may be seen in the crown jewels collection. It is, in fact, largely owing to the work of this talented family that the third quarter of the 19th century is the most brilliant period in the history of Persian lacquer and enamel painting. Another outstanding lacquer-painter is Āqā Bozorg Šīrāzī whose finest piece is a pen-box in the Museum of Decorative Arts, Tehran, dated 1269/1852-53. Not only is it painted with penetrating portraits of all the ministers of the governor, Farhād Mīrzā, but also—an almost unique feature—with a self



portrait of the artist, modestly relegated to the butt-end and showing him in the act of painting a *qalamdān*.

Abu'l-Ḥasan Khan Ġaffārī Ṣanī'-al-molk (fl. 1814-66) is by far the most important painter during the reign of Moḥammad Shah and the early years of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah, though some fine work was produced by his contemporaries, notably Moḥammad-Ḥasan Afšār. He designed and supervised the illustration of a Persian translation of the Arabian Nights (*Hazār o yak šab*), a six-volume manuscript in which pages of text alternate with pages of miniature painting, each page carrying at least three compositions. Many of them are of extremely fine quality with vivid coloring and imaginative treatment, with the costumes and details those of mid-19th century Iran. His second major project was a set of seven enormous wall panels for the Neẓāmīya palace, now in the Īrān-e Bāstān Museum, Tehran; they depict Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah surrounded by sons and courtiers and attended by foreign ambassadors, with each figure a life-like and lively portrait. Preliminary sketches for many of them are preserved in the same museum (see [ABU'L-ḤASAN KHAN ĠAFFĀRĪ](#)).

Lithographed books with illustrations had begun to appear in Persia in the 1840s. Many of them were popular story books, the illustrations of which, despite their naiveté and charm, are often crude and incompetent. Better, though sometimes duller, work is to be found in illustrated editions of the classics. 'Alī-qolī of Koy was prominent in this field; his Neẓāmī (1848) and Šāh-nāma (1850) are noteworthy, the former containing a full-page illustration of various stages in the lithographic process. A later Tehran *Šāh-nāma* (1891) was illustrated by the excellent lacquer painter Moṣṭafā. But in this field, as in every other that he touched, Abu'l-Ḥasan Khan had no serious rivals.

Although the art of manuscript illustration was still being practiced, with the notable exceptions of Mīrzā Bābā's *Dīvān* of Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah and Abu'l-Ḥasan's *Hazār o yak šab*, it had passed into the background. There is little of any great merit to record apart from the *Anwār-e Sohaylī* in the Mahboubian collection, dated 1203/1788-89, with unsigned miniatures possibly by Mīrzā Bābā, and copies of the *Šāh-nāma* (a voluminous epic celebrating the reign of Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah) in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the India Office Library, the Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, and the Majlis Library, Tehran, each containing fifty-odd miniatures of a somewhat routine character. The only other volume that should be mentioned is a copy of the *Šāh-nāma* formerly the property of the poet Weṣāl's family, illustrated at Shiraz between 1854 and 1864, mainly



by Lotf-'Alī Khan, but with a few miniatures by the sons of Weṣāl, some of startling originality.

Lotf-'Alī Khan was chiefly, and justly, renowned for his flower paintings, a favorite branch of the miniaturist's art since Safavid times; as a rule they were executed as separate album-pictures. He had an eminent predecessor in the field in the person of Moḥammad-Hādī, whom Claudius Rich met as a very old man at Shiraz in 1821; flower paintings of the greatest delicacy and beauty were produced by many other Qajar painters, notably Moḥammad-Bāqer.

One other considerable class of miniature paintings calls for attention. This consists of single figures illustrating Persian types, costumes, and manners, painted on plain backgrounds. The parallel with contemporary "Company painting" in India and the "rice-paper paintings" of Canton is close and striking. In all three groups genuine native styles of painting are simplified and adapted to make them acceptable to European purchasers, as a sort of superior tourist art. In Persia they were evidently a profitable line, and Sir William Ouseley relates that "many hundreds were brought for inspection to our tents, and offered daily for sale in the shops of Isfahan," though some of them were "unfortunately of such a description as precludes further notice." Actually the erotic or pornographic element in Persian art, compared with that of, say, India or Japan, is very small indeed.

The remainder of the period, after the death of Ṣanī'-al-molk in 1283/1866, does not call for extended treatment. One of the distinctions conferred by Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah on that eminent artist had been the supervision of the painting department of the newly founded Dār al-Fonūn intended by the king—himself an enthusiastic amateur—for the instruction of Persian painters in the European style. Prominent among its early alumni was Esmā'īl Jalāyer, a great favorite of the shah, and a painter of talent and originality. His style was meticulous, thoroughly Europeanized on the surface, but fundamentally Persian and touched with a sort of gentle melancholy. Among his oil paintings a group of women around a samovar (London, Victoria and Albert Museum), Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac (Tehran, private collection, illustrated by Schulz), and a representation of the handsome young dervish Nūr-'Alī Ṣāh surrounded by animals and birds in a luxuriant landscape, the last two executed entirely in monochrome, are outstanding. His miniatures of saints and dervishes are in one of the albums in the Golestān Library. But the most notable figure in Persian painting of the later nineteenth century was Moḥammad Ġaffārī, nephew of Ṣanī'-al-molk, who is usually known by the



title of *Kamāl-al-molk*, which he received in 1892. His mature style is dignified and impressive but completely Europeanized, as can be seen in many portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes in the Persian public collections. He died in 1940 at the great age of ninety-two. Another skilled painter in European style was Mīrzā Moḥammad Khan Malek-al-šo‘arā’ (Poet Laureate) who has left some almost photographic views of the royal palaces and gardens.

In the art of painted lacquer the Emāmī family of Isfahan came to prominence in the second half of the 19th century. Rezā Emāmī, for example, executed the best piece of lacquer in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection—a mirror case covered with flowers and gold scroll-work, made especially for the Paris Exhibition of 1867. Other notable Emāmīs were Moḥammad Ḥosaynī, an excellent lacquer painter in the traditional style during the 1870s, and Naṣrallāh, who displayed a penchant for introducing hazelnuts into his compositions. Faṭḥallāh Šīrāzī is yet another lacquer painter of great distinction toward the end of the century, as were ‘Abd-al-Laṭīf and ‘Abd-al-Ḥosayn, both known as Ṣanī‘-al-homāyūn, whose work continued into the early 1900s. The style of all these, was markedly European.

After the death of Moḥammad-Kāzem about 1885, the art of enamel painting declined. The same is true of lithographed book-illustration; Persian book illustrators were unable to adapt the technique satisfactorily to the more strongly Europeanized style then in vogue. Meanwhile miniature painting dwindled into a sterile imitation of Safavid prototypes, chiefly of the school of Rezā ‘Abbāsī, and it is often difficult to draw the line between conscientious pastiche and deliberate forgery. It may, in fact, be true to say that it was at the end of the Qajar period, or thereabouts, that Persian painting in its several branches, reached its nadir. The last half-century, has seen a considerable renaissance, helped by the foundation of art schools in various parts of the country.



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