



ISFAHAN XI. SCHOOL OF PAINTING AND CALLIGRAPHY

The “Isfahan” school of painting and calligraphy generally refers to works of art associated with the city of Isfahan from about 1597-98, when the city was chosen as the Safavid capital, until the Afghan invasion of 1722. The term was originally coined in the late 1950s as part of an effort to identify and classify Persian painting of the first half of the 17th century, especially the works of Reżā ‘Abbāsi and his followers (Robinson, pp. 153-61). In the second half of the 17th century, many Isfahani artists departed from Reżā ‘Abbāsi’s style of painting and began experimenting with Europeanized pictorial concepts, such as modeling and shading. Their distinct work can be described as the second phase of the “Isfahan” school of painting.

One of the most distinguishing features of 17th-century Isfahani style is its format, which, in turn, encouraged the development of new techniques and subject matter. Artists began to focus increasingly on individual drawings and paintings, most of which no longer related to a specific text as in the case of manuscript paintings (PLATE I). Many were assembled in albums (*moraqqa*), together with calligraphic examples (*qet’a*). Although such compositions date back to the late 15th-century, they became a viable alternative to manuscript illustrations only after the 17th century.

Without the stricture of the written text, artists were now able to experiment more freely with different techniques, in particular line drawing. Using both



the pen and the brush, they combined sweeping, undulating lines with short, staccato-like strokes, highlighted with washes of color. Their works ranged from spontaneously conceived sketches to meticulously executed compositions and gave a new autonomy to the art of drawing (PLATE II). Like folios of calligraphy, these images were valued as much for their technical virtuosity as for their subject matter.

The repertoire of themes largely comprised idealized and elegantly dressed men and women, as well as elderly male figures in a contemplative mood. The figures are often shown in languid poses with certain props, such as wine bottles, cups, books, or writing materials, which help to identify them as the cupbearer, the scribe, the learned sheikh, and recall well-known poetic conceits. The portrayal of certain well-established types, already familiar from poetry, suggests that association with literary tradition was not completely severed but was now expressed in a different pictorial manner (Babaie, 2001). At the same time, the new format encouraged the development of naturalistic portraiture, and artists began to choose ordinary men and women as their subjects.

Notwithstanding the growing popularity of line drawing, Safavid artists of the 17th century did not abandon the creation of lavish manuscript illustrations and independent figural paintings. The palette is notable for its bright and saturated color scheme, often combining half tones such as purple, orange, and earth colors, lending the compositions a new visual boldness. Many 17th-century works were frequently signed and dated, suggesting the painters' growing sense of independence and self-awareness. An important factor contributing to this development was a shift in the system of patronage. Many Isfahani artists no longer relied on court patronage alone but created works for members of the affluent middle classes, who actively collected the less costly single-page drawings and paintings.

The most celebrated painter associated with the Isfahan school is Reżā 'Abbāsi, also known as Āqā Reżā (fl. ca. 1565-1635), who worked intermittently at the court of Shah 'Abbās I throughout his career. Known for his remarkable use of line and harmonious color schemes, his style became synonymous with Isfahan and Safavid artistic efflorescence during the first half of the 17th century (Canby, 1996a). His students and followers emulated his technique and compositions and often added his name to their work to enhance their importance and value.



Among Reżā ‘Abbāsi’s most accomplished followers was Afżal Ḥosayni (q.v.), also known as Afżal Tuni, whose compositions have been often erroneously attributed to the master. Mo‘in Moşawwer, active from 1040/1630 until the early 12th/late 17th century, is Reżā ‘Abbāsi’s most prolific and well-known student, who created numerous single-page figural compositions and contributed to several illustrated texts (Farhad, 1990). His style remained remarkably consistent throughout his long career, eschewing Western pictorial concepts that became increasingly popular among his contemporaries (PLATE III). Traditionally, artists, such as Moḥammad-Qāsem, Moḥammad-Yusof, and Moḥammad-‘Ali, all of whom worked between 1040-60/1630-50, have also been identified as representative of the “Isfahan” school, although they probably worked in other centers, such as Mashad. Nevertheless, their work was indebted to the style and subject matter that flourished in Isfahan in the early 17th century.

In the 1640s, a number of Isfahani painters turned to Indian art as new sources of inspiration. Mughal and Deccani paintings offered Safavid artists, such as Shaikh ‘Abbāsi (q.v.) and Bahrām Sofrakeš, new themes and pictorial conventions, which they adapted and integrated into their work. While Shaikh ‘Abbāsi continued to explore the potential of line drawing in a more “Indianized” style, Bahrām Sofrakeš’s naturalistic floral studies were clearly modeled after mid-17th-century Mughal painting (Soudavar, cat. no. 145).

For other artists, European works of art offered new themes and pictorial concepts. The large Christian Armenian community in New Julfa, a suburb of Isfahan, as well as numerous Italian, Flemish, and Dutch visitors to the Safavid court ensured the availability of Western paintings, drawings, prints, and decorative objects in Isfahan. The presence of several European painters further contributed to the development of a “Europeanized” mode of painting, best represented in the work Moḥammad-Zamān and ‘Aliqoli Jobbadār (q.v.; see also Canby, 1996b). This pictorial idiom, which flourished during the reigns of Shah Solaymān (1077-105/1666-94) and Shah Solţān-Ḥosayn (1105-135/1694-722), marks a dramatic departure from the more traditional painting style of Reżā ‘Abbāsi and Mo‘in Moşawwer. Selectively adapting Western pictorial ideals, such as perspective, modeling and shading, Safavid artists developed an innovative, hybrid style that echoed the growing internationalism of the Safavid court towards the end of the 17th century (Plate IV).

Safavid Isfahan is also associated with the art of wall painting as is evident



from the extant decoration of the Čehel Sotun and Hašt Behešt (qq.v.) palaces, as well as several Armenian private residences in New Julfa. The compositions depict reception scenes, idealized male and female figures, or iconic literary compositions, known from works on paper, but now adapted to the larger surfaces. Many of the lifesize figures are dressed in European fineries, further attesting to Persia's growing political, diplomatic, and artistic contacts with the West. During the latter part of the 17th century, artists also experimented with oil painting, a technique that was introduced from Europe and became popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. These large-scale compositions, frequently created in pairs, depict idealized Armenian and Georgian couples, who must have played a prominent role in Isfahan's economic and cultural life.

Shah 'Abbās and his successors were avid patrons of calligraphy, and during the 17th century, scripts such as *tolt* and *nasta'liq* (see CALLIGRAPHY) reached new levels of refinement and sophistication. The art of *qeṭ'a* flourished, and Isfahan's many newly erected public monuments were adorned with bold inscription panels. 'Ali-Rezā 'Abbāsi (q.v.), one of the leading calligraphers of the period, who was appointed head of Shah 'Abbās I's library in 1598, designed the monumental inscriptions of the Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh Mosque and the Masjed-e Šāh among others (Honarfar, pp. 401-2, 407-10, 428-29, 468). Written in large *tolt*, these inscriptions are notable for their densely stacked and complex designs that became a powerful visual symbol of later Safavid architecture. Although 'Ali-Rezā 'Abbāsi also excelled in *nasta'liq*, it was his rival Mir 'Emād Ḥasani (q.v.), who is considered the unequalled master of this script (PLATE V). Reserved for poetry since the early 15th century in the Persian-speaking world, Mir 'Emād brilliantly explored the potential of scale in his calligraphic compositions. His technical skill is most apparent in his monumental *nasta'liq*, where letters change from fluid, broad strokes to razor sharp lines with utmost control and elegance. Like the painter Rezā 'Abbāsi, Mir 'Emād had numerous followers, who emulated his style of writing throughout the 17th century.



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