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ISFAHAN XIII. CRAFTS

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Isfahan has maintained its position as a major center for traditional crafts in Persia. The crafts of Isfahan encompass textiles, carpets, metalwork, woodwork, ceramics, painting, and inlay works of various kind. The work is carried out in different settings including small industrial and bazaar workshops, in the homes of craftsmen and women, and in rural cottage industries.

Isfahan's crafts are clearly rooted in the city's royal past, but to suggest a direct and uninterrupted link to the Safavid era would be too simplistic an assumption. The passing of skills from one generation to the next has been disrupted many times, beginning with the Afghan invasion of 1722, and by later wars, famines, plagues, tribal pillages and the resulting depopulation. During the Qajar period there was a steady outflow of skill and talent from Isfahan to Tehran and Tabriz, where the Qajar court and administration were major consumers and patrons of various crafts (Philipp). Equally detrimental to the crafts of Isfahan was the cheaper mass-produced European merchandise that flooded the Persian markets in ever increasing quantities throughout the 19th century. Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan Taḥwildār reports repeatedly on how the pressure to maintain competitive prices vis-à-vis imports had an adverse effect on the quality of various local products and dented the reputation of Isfahani artisans (p. 97, *passim*). Some crafts

disappeared or were significantly reduced due to changes in fashion, market demand, and technology. In particular, changes in fashion hurt those crafts that produced various kinds of embroideries that were only used in traditional clothes and home decorations which were no longer worn or used after 1925 (Floor, 1999a). Changes due to market demand had consequences, for example, for those making helmets, swords, guns, and chain-mail, which given the suppression of the possession of firearms, the development of better modern arms and fighting techniques, and the imposition of general security, had become obsolete (Floor, 2003). This also held for those making copper pots, and of those who tinned them, due to the import and/or local manufacturing of mass-produced metal pots and pans, although by 1920 there were still 200 copper workers (*mesgar*) and 40 tin smiths (*safidgar*; see Janāb, p. 79). Other crafts became obsolete because of the quasi-disappearance of their product such as the water pipe, which was almost entirely displaced by cigarette smoking (Floor, 2002). Other crafts were transformed, such as those that made products for animals, like saddles and horseshoes. These have all disappeared and been replaced by other crafts that serve modern means of conveyance such as carts, cars, and lorries. In short, the result was that in number, output, and quality the craftsmen in Isfahan, like elsewhere in Iran, were on the verge of extinction (for a discussion of these and other crafts in the 19th and early 20th century see Floor, 2003; and 2006).

In the 20th century new social currents and market forces began to interact with traditional techniques and styles to produce new types of objects as well as variations on existing features. In the 1930s, in an attempt to preserve and encourage the local production of handicrafts, the government established a school of arts and crafts (Honarestān) in Isfahan. The growing economy after 1950 had a further positive impact in the area of handicrafts. Between 1952 and 1962 the number of craftsmen doubled, while their output almost quadrupled. To provide structural support to the craftsmen, the government established the Handicrafts Center (Markaz-e sÂanāyeʿ-e dasti) in 1963, to provide loans to craftsmen for the purchase of raw materials and other inputs, organize training courses to acquaint craftsmen with the latest technical developments, to provide them with new designs and other ideas on how to improve their products, and to assist them in marketing their products around the world. In 1974 the Center's export of handicrafts represented ten percent of the total export of handicrafts. The Center's formula of promoting traditional designs and crafts, produced with better quality using traditional as well as modern techniques, worked both abroad and at home (Echo of Iran,

Iran Almanac, Tehran, 1974, p. 243).

The emphasis on tradition received fresh impetus in the 1960s when Western-educated art students began to return home, eager to revive some of the styles and techniques of the past. Moreover, for emerging middle-class consumers, decorative value was as important as functionality of the crafts. Architectural decoration, which had begun with restoration of public monuments, was sustained by market demand on the part of neo-traditionalism. As the city grew into a center of tourist attraction, handicrafts flourished. Master craftsmen, working with their apprentices in small ateliers along the bazaar, the Royal Square (Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān), and Čārbāḡ avenue (see Č(AH)ĀRBĀḠ-E EṢFAHĀN; and Soltani-Tirani, pp. 29 ff.), became a tourist attraction themselves.

Architectural decoration. In the past, Isfahan was home to many craftsmen who excelled in the decoration of buildings such as plaster molders, mirror makers (*āʾinasāz*), colored-glass window makers (*orusi*), and tile makers (*kāšipaz*), but whose crafts had languished during much of the 19th century. Although the building crafts and their related ancillary crafts in general had seen improvement in their numbers during the second half of the 19th century, the insecurity reigning between 1900 and 1920 stifled their development. For example, in Isfahan in 1920 there were only six tile makers, six mirror makers, and 12 master builders (*meʿmār*; see Janāb, pp. 77-79).

The history of the revival of this craft is closely related to the restoration of the Saljuq and Safavid monuments that had been left to decay for centuries. One of the earliest cases was the refurbishment of the Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh Mosque at the Royal Square in 1926, and the subsequent replication of its dome at the Marmar Palace in Tehran, reviving the abandoned art of mosaic faience (*moʿarraq*) in the process (Gluck et al., pp. 392-93). Many kilns flourished through tile-making in the ensuing decades when a new generation of tile makers, miniature painters, wood-carvers, calligraphers, and other artists emerged thanks to the extensive and longterm program of rehabilitation of the city's historical architecture (Wulff, pp. 118-71).

A milestone in the history of architectural decoration was the renovation and conversion in the 1960s of the Mādar-e Shah caravanserai into a modern hotel named after Shah ʿAbbās the Great—the present-day ʿAbbāsi Hotel (Borjian, 2002). In contrast to the restoration work on mosques, which were carried out by traditional masters, the craftsmen and artists who took part in this project

were mostly graduates of the Honarestān. The latter tended to promote innovative techniques and motifs within the framework of traditional decorative arts such as geometric mirror-mosaics, stucco, stained glass, wood, and various combinations thereof that succeeded in welding modernity with tradition, and transformed the modern hotel into a veritable museum of the contemporary and vibrant decorative arts of Isfahan (see Arthur Upham Pope's letter in Borjian et al., p. 10). The hotel decorations were soon imitated in other public buildings, and have had a growing influence on the interior design of private residences as well (Borjian et al.; Gluck et al., pp. 400-402 ff.).

Carpets. Contrary to popular belief, carpets had never been a major export item of Iran, but when almost all other crafts experienced a downturn in their output and numbers in the 19th century, demand for carpets fortuitously increased enormously after 1873 due to a boom with the arrival of a new client—the European and American middle class (Floor, 1999a; Wirth; see CARPETS). The boom spread from the northwestern provinces, and by the 1920s Isfahan had become a major center of carpet weaving (*Camb. Hist. Ir.* I, p. 550; Soltani-Tirani, pp. 75-76 ff.) In this process of renewal, the carpet-weaving tradition in Isfahan adapted itself to new market realities and the requirements of commercial production, leading to Isfahan's own characteristic design that had distinguished itself by 1940. In that year there were 2,000 looms in the city and 500 in its environs (out of some 70,000 looms in the country; Floor, 1984, p. 32). During World War II the carpet industry of Isfahan suffered heavily from the loss of the international market. In the early 1950s the number of looms in the city had fallen to a mere 400, established in about 300 home factories that wove 5,000 m2 of carpets annually (ʿĀbedi, p. 138). It regained a foothold in the market due to the increasing demands of Tehran market (Edwards, p. 308), and by the 1980s mass production had seen a substantial increase. Among the districts of the province, only Isfahan and Nāʾin produce quality carpets suitable for export (Table 1). Silk carpet weaving workshops are mainly located around Qom, Isfahan, Kāšān and Nāʾin.

The production techniques and organization and commercial practices vary within the province itself (Soltani-Tirani, pp. 75 ff.). Larger factories employing weavers in double figures are few; cottage production has been the norm and is sponsored by subcontractors who supply labor from their own families or other sources, while less than a third of weavers worked for themselves in the early 1980s (ibid, p. 95); weaving of carpets as well as *gelim*s (see KELIM) and *jājim*s (q.v.), chiefly by women, constituted the bulk of the home industries

that existed in 14.1 percent of the houses in the province (*Markaz*, p. 13; Soltani-Tirani, p. 7). As the importance of the cottage industries diminished in the city of Isfahan, where workers preferred the higher wages in other and more modern industries, Isfahani businessmen began to invest in the surrounding rural areas (*Farhang*, p. 18 *passim*) where the carpet industry continues to play a dominant role. It seems that only rug weaving has outlasted the vanishing rural handicrafts. In recent decades, however, the carpet industry of Isfahan has experienced a major setback (Ansāri, pp. 157-60) and machine-made carpets have increasingly replaced hand-woven ones (see CARPETS).

Qalamkār or the craft of woodblock-printing on cotton tablecloths, bedspreads, and curtains has been a specialty of Isfahan for the last two centuries (Gluck et al., pp. 186-88). Indian imports had dominated this branch of the textile industry in the pre-1800 period. Impoverishment and insecurity in the 18th century had created a situation where domestic output had to compensate for the shortfall in imports. As a result there was an initial increase in the output of the textile industry in general, and of *qalamkār* in particular, during the early part of the 19th century, when security returned to Iran. However, this period of growth did not last, for after 1840 domestic *qalamkār* production suffered a structural decline, albeit less so than all other branches of textile crafts, due to the import of fabrics of cheaper and better quality (Floor, 1999a).

In the 1870s the guild of the *qalamkār* makers had four connecting bazaars and between the bazaars there were five caravanserais and *timča*s with 284 shops and offices, but not even half of their number have remained, because trade had declined sharply due to foreign competition and lack of demand at home (Taḥwildār, p. 94). The reason was that the Isfahan output of *qalamkār* was not comparable in quality and price with British and later Russian imports. Production could initially only survive by importing unbleached fabrics from Great Britain and India that were then printed in Iran. This delayed the inevitable decline of the craft for some time, but lack of innovation, continued inferior quality, and the use of chemical dyes meant that by the beginning of the 20th century the craft had all but disappeared (Floor, 1999a). In 1920 there were only 46 *čitsāz* left in Isfahan, where once there had been hundreds (Janāb, p. 78).

Government support seems to have helped another short-lived revival of this labor-intensive craft in the 1920s, just before it declined to the verge of total

extinction (Phyllis Ackerman in *Survey of Persian Art*, pp. 2155-56). The craft of *qalamkār* was revived again after World War II thanks to the US Aid program and demand from the international market (Gluck et al., p. 192). In the 1950s in Isfahan and Najafābād there were about thirty *qalamkār* workshops with an annual production of 40,000 pairs of drapery, and 10,000 tablecloth pieces (ʿĀbedi, p. 139). Supported by the Handicrafts Organization, the number of workshops and guild masters multiplied in the bazaar in the next twenty years and new products and techniques were put into practice (Gluck et al., p. 192). The implementation of anti-pollution laws in the 1970s led to another slowdown of the *qalamkār* industry, but as a result better dyes were developed and production was standardized. Limitation on imports after the 1979 Revolution resuscitated the industry, and *qalamkār* resurfaced as perennial favorites in the bazaar of Isfahan. The main firm involved in the *qalamkār* manufacture is the Čitsāz Company, exporting large quantities of merchandise (see also CRAFTS).

Metalwork. Isfahan's prominence in decorative work on metal objects continues today, achieving the highest standards within the country in the past century. The revival of the art in Isfahan was achieved partly thanks to an exodus of artisans from Kerman and Yazd. The metalwork in Isfahan is mainly embossing and engraving (*qalamzani*) on various metals such as iron, copper, brass, and nickel alloys as well as gold and silver (Wulff, p. 35; Westphal-Hellbush and Burns, p. 90).

New market demands in the second half of the 20th century encouraged Isfahani engravers to shift their efforts to silver objects. In the 1950s, chisel work in silver was practiced by more than 800 skilled craftsmen in 110 workshops, while there were 86 silversmith shops with 450 workers making utensils, vases, mirror framing, and the like to be carved or incised by engravers (ʿĀbedi, p. 140-43). Unlike other crafts, that of goldsmiths (*zargar*) did not suffer very much decline, as they were able to compete effectively in both price and product with any foreign import; they also adapted and changed their output in line with market conditions. In 1920 there were still 160 goldsmiths in Isfahan as well as an unknown number of related craftsmen such as gold- and silver-wire drawers (Janāb, p. 78). This number compares favorably with the 500 workers in 169 shops employed by the goldsmith industry in the 1950s, the most notable of which were situated in the Armenian quarter of Julfa (ʿĀbedi, p. 141; Gluck et al., pp. 126-28). A more recent development in the metalwork of Isfahan is the production of large-

scale copper sheets for use as interior wall decoration in public and private buildings in the city, and in Tehran. However, the production of copper pots and pans is in decline (Soltani-Tirani, pp. 55-64).

Ḵātamkāri or *ḵātamsāzi*. This most typical of Persian wood-inlay work has been a specialty of Shiraz and Isfahan since the time of the Zand dynasty in the latter half of the 18th century. During his visit to Persia in 1811, Sir William Ouseley (q.v at *iranica.com*) writes that *ḵātam* "ensured considerable profit to many artists of Shiraz and Isfahan" (Ouseley, III, p. 65). By 1877, the industry had declined: Taḥwildār reports low quality and poor sales, so much so that European artifact collectors sought old *ḵātam* pieces, and exports were limited to Anatolia and Istanbul (Taḥwildār, no. 130). However, inlay work was slowly but surely falling out of favor, mainly due to the changing tastes of the elite who wanted fashionable European implements rather than traditional Persian ones. Because the elite were the main market for high-quality inlay work, this had serious consequences for the craftsmen who did not adapt their product. Like Tahwildār, in the beginning of the 20th century Radimsky opined that the quality of work left much to be desired (Radimsky, p. 55). As a result, the craft dwindled, and by 1920 only six master inlay workers remained in Isfahan (Janāb, p. 78).

The industry began to flourish again when Reza Shah awarded high wages to master *ḵātamkār*s for the decoration of the walls and furniture of Tehran palaces. But the dominant position of Isfahan was largely due to the migration of the Shirāzi master, Golriz, to the city where he taught at the Honarestān for 36 years, re-establishing the craft in Isfahan (Gluck et al., p. 368). In the 1950s Isfahan had about 100 *ḵātam* craftsmen working in 40 workshops (ʿĀbedi, p. 144); the numbers had increased to 256 craftsmen and 81 workshops by 1975 (Markaz-e āmār-e Irān, pp. 719-20). According to another estimate there were some 50 masters and 300 skilled workers engaged in the *ḵātam* industry just prior to the 1979 Revolution (Gluck et al., pp. 362-68). In addition to commercial production, Isfahani artists have decorated several Shiʿite mausoleums with *ḵātam* decorations and coverings, either through royal benefactions, commissions by wealthy patrons, or at their own cost as an act of faith and devotion (ibid). *Ḵātam* is also widely used in decorating musical instruments, the prominent maker of which at the outset of the Pahlavi era was Yaḥyā, an Armenian from the Julfa district who later moved to the capital. (See also Faryād; Soltani-Tirani, pp. 65-75.)

Enamel and painting. Practiced since the 18th century in Isfahan, the art of

enamel (*mināākāri*) thrived in Isfahan under the Pahlavis. In the early 1950s there were 15 workshops with 20 enamellers who painted on utensils, vases, frames, bottles, badges, and other objects (ʿĀbedi, pp. 143-44). The trade expanded enormously owing to increasing demand, so that by the 1970s some 500 skilled enamel painters in Isfahan were engaged in decorating a wide variety of objects, from earrings to vases and chandeliers. Many of these artists were apprentices of the master miniaturist Šokr-Allāh Ṣaniʿzāda, who set the standard of the art, and introduced new motifs. Many holy shrines in Persia and Iraq received enamel decoration, some commissioned by the royal family (Gluck et al., pp. 164-66).

In previous centuries, Isfahan had been a major center of the art of painting, where paintings of all kind (miniature, canvas, water colors, lacquer, fresco) were produced for the market, including the tourist trade, and as a consequence the trade employed scores of painters. In particular, the painting of pen-cases (*qalamdān*) was a very popular craft in which many were employed (Floor, 1999a; and 2005). However, this craft was also hit by changes in fashion and a downturn in the economy due to political upheavals between 1900 and 1921, which was inimical to a trade that mainly served the middle-class. As a result, by 1920 only 35 master painters were left in Isfahan (Janāb, p. 79). Government support for this traditional craft prevented its disappearance until the expanding economy and the resultant growth of the middle-class re-ignited the market for Isfahan's painters.

As a result, Isfahan is home to professional painters from different schools of painting, from traditional miniature to modern designs that are painted on canvas, bone, ivory, wood, and other materials. The number of professional artists—some 100 painters in 28 workshops in the early 1950s (ʿĀbedi, pp. 142-43)—rose noticeably with increasing interest from the growing middle-class residents of the city (cf. Gluck et al., pp. 381-82).

Needlecraft. Isfahan is known to have excelled in a wide variety of needlework that was often produced in the context of home industry.

In the late 19th-century list of Taḥwildār, however, we find *zaribāf*, *golābatunduz*, *naqdaduz*, *qollābduz* (nos. 39-42), *naqšduz*, and *dahyakduz* (nos. 56-57) among the professions practiced in Isfahan.

After a period of decline, the art of embroidery was revived in 1920s in Isfahan where traditional designs were applied to homemade or imported

materials in old and new techniques (Wulff, p. 219). In the mid-20th century needlework (*sokmaduzi*, *qollābduzi*, *maliladuzi*, *naḵduzi*, etc.) was performed in about 500 homes by individual women, typically widows who would sell their artwork to dealers who were mostly Jewish (ʿAbedi, p. 145; for marketing, see Anṣāri, pp. 137-46). Production has been on the rise in recent decades as national demand has risen for luxurious drapery, tablecloths, bedspreads, and the like. At the same time, imports from South and Central Asia seem to be flooding the domestic market. Older pieces are traded as artifacts that have been handed down from generation to generation in Isfahani families as marriage dowry (see also Gluck et al., pp. 217-35).

Plate I. Ornamental ceramic on the dome, Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh Mosque.

Plate II. Mosaic panel with calligraphy, Shaikh Loṭf-Allah Mosque.

Plate III. Metalwork detail, doors of Shah (Imam) Mosque.

Plate IV. Isfahan carpet.

Plate VI. Silver ewer, 1976.

Plate VIII. Table-top with wood inlay (*ḵātamkāri*).

Plate IX. Enamelwork interior of the dome, Shah (Imam) Mosque.

Plate X. Painting on embossed leather, 1961.

Plate XI. Painting on parchment for book cover.

Plate XII. Needlework on leather hammock, 1976.

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