



KAMĀL-AL-MOLK, MOḤAMMAD ĠAFFĀRI

KAMĀL-AL-MOLK, MOḤAMMAD ĠAFFĀRI (b. Tehran, , widely acclaimed Iranian painter of the European academic style during the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods ([Figure 1](#)). This entry is divided into the following three sections:

i. Life.

ii. Style.

iii. Works.

i. Life

Early life. Moḥammad was the second son of Mirzā Bozorg Khan, an official and farmer from the noted Ġaffāri family of Kashan and Ḥājieh Maryam Beygom from the noted Šaybāni family of the town. Kamāl-al-Molk's exact date of birth is a matter of controversy. Various estimates by his friends, students, and biographers range from 1848 to 1863. The date of 1848 is widely acknowledged by most biographers, and the date of 1863 implied in the newspaper *Šaraf* in an obituary of Kamāl-al-Molk's brother, Abu Torāb Khan, in 1890, was convincingly rejected by Foruḡi (pp. 786-87). It appears that the date of 1848 was first publicized and widely disseminated in the mid-1940s by Ḥasan-'Ali Vaziri, Kamāl-al-Molk's loyal student and successor as the dean of



his Academy of Fine Arts (Vaziri, 1946). This is largely due to Kamāl-al-Molk’s own imprecise answers to questions about his birth date, indicating that “he was born during the early years of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah’s reign” (r. 1848-96; Ğani, V, pp. 11-12).

However, sufficient evidence exists to arrive at a more precise conclusion. First, Kamāl-al-Molk “frequently stated that he was born in a year when Nāṣer-al-Din Shah camped at Solṭāniya . . . which happened in 1853 and again in 1859” (Foruġi, p. 787; also Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 29; for the two journeys of the Shah to Solṭāniya, see E’temād-al-Salṭana, 1888, p. 133). Second, Ğolām-Ḥosayn Ğaffāri Ṣāḥeb Eḳtiār, a noted relative and peer of Kamāl-al-Molk, confirms the year 1859 as his birth date (Ğolām-Ḥosayn Ğaffāri, p. 807). Third, his maternal cousin, who appears to be a knowledgeable and judicious person, stated that Kamāl-al-Molk lived “no more than 82 years,” which supports a birth date of circa 1859 (Tābeš, p. 45). Fourth, the year 1880-81, which is likely the first year of Kamāl-al-Molk’s service at the royal court coincides with his “approximately 20th birthday” (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 28), which lends further credence to the year 1859 as his birth date (Kamāl-al-Molk [p. 29] noted, “when I joined the court, it was the beginning of the rise of Mirzā Ebrāhim Amin-al-Solṭān,” which was circa 1880-81 [see Bāmdād, I, pp. 3-5]; furthermore, one of his first paintings in the court is dated 1881 [see Sohayli Ḳvānsāri, p. 247]). It would therefore seem very probable that Kamāl-al-Molk was born circa 1859.

Kamāl-al-Molk spent his early years at his father’s estate near Kashan. At the age of 12 he was sent to Tehran to stay with his maternal uncle, ‘Ali-Moḥammad Mojir-al-Dawla Šaybāni (later Deputy Minister of Publications [Wezārat-e enṭebā’āt]). He attended the Dār-al-fonun (q.v.) college for eight years and was taught painting and drawing by ‘Ali-Akbar Naṭanzi, Mozayyen-al-Dawla (1847-1923; q.v.). After his second year, he was granted an annual stipend of 20 tumāns (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 28).

The artistic lineage. Kamāl-al-Molk descended from a family that had produced a number of artists since the Afsharid period, including his paternal great-grandfather, Mirzā Abu’l-Ḥasan Mostawfi, a court painter during the reign of Nāder Shah Afshar (r. 1736-47) and Karim Khan Zand (r. 1750-79). Mirzā Abu’l-Ḥasan Mostawfi’s grandson, Abu’l-Ḥasan Khan Ṣani’-al-Molk, who became the chief court painter (*naqqāšbāši*) under Moḥammad Shah (r. 1837-48) and Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, was Kamāl-al-Molk’s uncle. Ṣani’-al-Molk’s three sons were also painters of some importance. Kamāl-al-Molk’s father used to be an amateur painter, and Kamāl-al-Molk’s elder brother, Abu Torāb (d. 1890), was



also an artist, primarily known for his lithographed portraits of Qajar notables (Kamāl-al-Molk, pp. 26-27; cf. Moṣṭafavi, pp. 30-44; Narāqi and Ġaffāri).

Accounts of his first audience with Nāṣer-al-Din Shah vary. Kamāl-al-Molk himself relates, “at the school, I had made a portrait of E‘tezād-al-Saltāna, modeled on his photograph. Having seen it at Mirzā Aḥmad Ṣani‘-al-Saltāna’s atelier of photography at Dār al-fonun, the Shah summoned me” (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 28). Having formally joined Nāṣer-al-Din Shah’s court circa 1980-81, Kamāl-al-Molk received the honorary titles of Khan, *piškedmat-e ḥożur-e homāyun* (reflecting his honorary role as the monarch’s personal attendant), and *naqqāšbāši* in 1883 (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 29; see also Bāmdād, III, pp. 263-67). In 1894, on the recommendation of the Grand Vizier, [Mirzā ‘Ali-Aṣḡar Khan Amin-al-Soltān](#), the Shah bestowed on the painter the honorary title of *Kamāl-al-Molk* (Perfection of the Realm; the title was suggested by Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Khan Ḍakā‘-al-Molk Foruḡi; see Foruḡi, p. 790; Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri, pp. 19-21).

Although he was the beneficiary of many favors from the Shah during this period, an unfortunate incident when he had been questioned about the theft of some precious gems from the royal throne located in the Hall of Mirrors (*Ṭālār-e ā‘ina*; see [Figure 2](#)), where Kamāl-al-Molk worked for almost five years to create his masterpiece, left a bitter taste. Even though the matter was finally resolved and the culprit found, Mirzā Moḥammad never forgot the incident (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 28). The completion of a painting of the Hall of Mirrors, commissioned by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, coincided with the Shah’s assassination in 1896 and the ascension of Moṣaffar-al-Din Mirzā (r. 1896-1907) to the throne.

Journey to Europe. Although neither his involvement in artistic matters nor his personal skill in painting matched that of his father, Moṣaffar-al-Din Shah nevertheless continued the tradition of courtly patronage. He commissioned Kamāl-al-Molk to produce a painting, depicting his father as crown prince at its center, surrounded by pictures of Moṣaffar-al-Din Mirzā at different stages of his life. When the painting was finished, the Shah left it to him to decide his reward. Kamāl-al-Molk, who may have been seeking some way out of the court, requested permission to go to Europe to improve his technical mastery of the craft, and his wish was granted (Mo‘ayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 276).

In 1898, one and a half years after Nāṣer-al-Din Shah’s demise, Kamāl-al-Molk set off for Europe through Russia by way of Qazvin and the port of Anzali,



residing first at Vienna and later at Florence and Paris. In retrospect, he admitted that he had chosen to go to Europe because of his uneasy relations with the new sovereign. He stayed in Europe for three years, mostly in Florence and Paris (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 31; for his studies in Europe, see ii and iii, below).

Return from Europe. In 1900, when Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah was in Paris, Kamāl-al-Molk showed the paintings he had copied from the works of Titian and Rembrandt to the sovereign. His work won the shah's admiration, and the monarch gave him 500 *tumāns* as a reward. He was then commissioned to paint the scenic views around the hotel where the king was staying. Having completed these paintings, Kamāl-al-Molk returned to Iran in 1901 (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 32).

In 1902, the newspaper *Šarāfat* published an enthusiastic biographical account of Kamāl-al-Molk (with his portrait drawn by Moṣawwer-al-Molk), announcing the return of the painter from Europe, his receiving the Lion and Sun decoration, first-class (see [decorations](#)), with the complementary green sash (*ḥamāyel-e sabz*), and being given his own special accommodation at the royal court (*Šarāfat* 60, 1902).

But soon difficulties emerged. Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah's fondness for, and his commissioning of, erotic paintings were not acceptable to Kamāl-al-Molk. In contrast to Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's time, when the painter received encouragement and praise in many ways, under the new Shah he was constantly pestered by unwelcome demands from the sovereign and his entourage, which he did his best to evade in various ways. In 1902, when his job dissatisfaction coincided with a tragic love affair, Kamāl-al-Molk left Tehran for Baghdad and Karbalā, where he stayed for about two years (Kamāl-al-Molk, pp. 32-33; for his love affair with Anna, see below). Finally, in Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah's last years, Kamāl-al-Molk had to feign a debilitating stroke, which had supposedly paralyzed the right side of his body and necessitated the use of a walking stick (Foruḡi, pp. 793-94; Ḥakimi, p. 803).

The Constitutional Revolution. Kamāl-al-Molk was a freedom-loving artist and an ardent supporter of the [Constitutional Revolution](#) from the very start, often making sarcastic asides aimed at those opposed to constitutional reform (Foruḡi, p. 796). In spite of facing severe financial difficulties during this period, Kamāl-al-Molk refrained from painting the portrait of Moḥammad-'Ali Shah, heedless of pressure from the courtiers and the monarch's offer of a



substantial sum for the work. (It is said that once he became so desperate that he went to the house of a friend to borrow five tumans; see 'Aṭā'i, p. 813; see also Foruḡi, p. 796; Ḥakimi, pp. 803-4.)

In the midst of the Constitutional Revolution in November 1906, a number of active constitutionalists founded the Freemasonry Lodge Réveil de l'Iran (Loḡ-e bidāri-e Irāniān), affiliated with the Grand Orient de France, the first regularly affiliated lodge to operate in Iran (see [freemasonry ii](#)). A number of Kamāl-al-Molk's friends were among the founding members of the Lodge, including [Moḥammad-'Ali Foruḡi Dakā'-al-Molk](#) and [Ebrāhim Ḥakimi Ḥakim-al-Molk](#). On their recommendation, Kamāl-al-Molk joined the Lodge as a member (for a list of 130 members of the Lodge, which includes Kamāl-al-Molk, see "Majmu'a-ye asnād-e montašer našoda . . .," pp. 6-7; [PLATE I](#) shows a photograph of Kamāl-al-Molk with his friends and co-members of the Lodge Bidāri). An indication of his interest in the constitutional movement is his exquisite portrait of 'Aliqoli Khan Baḳtiāri Sarār As'ad (d. 1918; see [baḳtiāri](#); see [Figure 4](#)), one of the two revolutionary leaders who led the successful march on Tehran in 1909 during the Constitutional period (see [constitutional revolution ii](#)).

The Academy of Fine Arts. The founding of the Madrasa-ye šanāye'-e mostaẓrafa (the Academy of Fine Arts; see [faculties ii. faculty of fine arts](#)) in Tehran was one of the achievements of the Constitutional movement. Ḥakim-al-Molk, the education minister and a friend of Kamāl-al-Molk, was aware of the painter's aspiration to create a painting school and set about helping him in 1911 (see [Ḥakimi](#), pp. 804-5). He had the site for the school and the necessary budget approved by the Majles, allocating a piece of the Negārestān Palace property (one of Faḥ-'Ali Shah's palaces, to the north of the present Bahārestān Square) to the project (Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri, p. 43; Foruḡi, pp. 796-97).

At first all went well, with the education ministers giving him a free hand in managing the school. Problems arose later when, in the 1920s, as part of the general process of modernizing the administration, the ministers of education began to implement new regulations in the school. Kamāl-al-Molk, regarded himself as above such regulations and was unable to adjust to the new situation. Having hitherto received orders solely from the sovereign himself, he thought it below his dignity to follow instructions from others. To solve the problem, Ḥakim-al-Molk promoted him to the position of deputy minister of education in charge of fine arts in 13 December 1920; he held the position until 1926 (Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri, pp. 50-51, 69; for his business card as deputy minister,



see [PLATE II](#)). Yet, any word or action instigated by others would be deemed malicious and would infuriate him as a result. In time, his perennial hot temper and growing distrust of authorities spread from the officials of the ministry of education to his own circle of friends, and finally maltreatment of the school by Moḥammad Tadayyon, an infamous minister of education, led to Kamāl-al-Molk's resignation in 1927 (Foruḡi, pp. 797-800).

This frustrating period for Kamāl-al-Molk coincided with the rise to power of Reza Khan Sardār Sepah (later Reza Shah) and led to a myth of Kamāl-al-Molk's struggle against the dictatorial regime that even attributed the accidental injury of his eye to a possible plot by the regime (Dehbāši, 1989, pp. 9-11; see further below, under *Romantic image*). Nevertheless, it should be noted that Reza Khan himself showed deep admiration and deference toward Kamāl-al-Molk on a number of occasions, including the visits he paid to the art school (see Āštiāni, p. 14; Vaziri, pp. 22-28). In 1922, when Reza Khan was minister of war, he assured Kamāl-al-Molk, in a respectfully worded letter (beginning with the reverential expression, *fedāyat šavam*), of the continuation of the budget for the art school (for the text of the letter, see Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri, p. 59). When Reza Khan assumed the premiership, he expressed his full support for the school in another encouraging letter to him in 1925 (Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri, p. 62) and told Solaymān Mirzā Eskandari, the minister of education: "You should obey whatever Kamāl-al-Molk says" (Vaziri, pp. 22-24; Āštiāni, pp. 14-15). In 1933, when a forged petition attributed to Kamāl-al-Molk was received by Reza Shah's chief-of-staff, the shah ordered the prime minister to comply with Kamāl-al-Molk's demands immediately (Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri, pp. 105-9).

Family life. In 1884 Kamāl-al-Molk married Zahrā Khanom, the sister of Meftāḥ-al-Molk from the Malelek-al-Tojjār family of Tabriz. They had one daughter, Noṣrat, and three sons, Mo'ezz-al-Din, Ḥosaynqoli, and Ḥaydarqoli. Following in the family tradition, the three sons all found employment at the ministry of finance (Wezārat-e Māliya; see Maḥmudi, pp. 722-24; Āštiāni, pp. 11-12).

As an artist skeptical of many traditional values, Kamāl-al-Molk often came into conflict with the more traditional views of the time; in particular, his relationship with the elders in his extended family was not without tension. Following a number of bitter disputes with senior members of his family, who were austere religious, Kamāl-al-Molk severed all ties with them and even left his wife, albeit without formally divorcing her. Having immersed himself



in his own world of art and intellect, living with his students in the school, and with his social interactions limited to a close circle of friends, Kamāl-al-Molk apparently was not a strong presence in his own sons' lives (Tābeš, pp. 41-42).

During his stay in Vienna, where he made two portraits of Anna, the daughter of Narimān Khan Qawām-al-Saltāna, an Iranian-Armenian Minister Plenipotentiary of Iran to Vienna, a love affair developed between the two, which, despite Narimān Khan's opposition, ended in their marriage in 1901. Anna joined her husband in Tehran and stayed at a summer house in Šemirān, north Tehran. The marriage, however, was short-lived. The contrast between life in Tehran and in Vienna—or, as Foruḡi has put it, the contrast between “the Šemirān and the paradise of Vienna”—led to disagreements and eventual separation. They both left Iran, Anna for Vienna and Kamāl-al-Molk for Baghdad and Karbalā (Foruḡi, pp. 794-95).

Character traits. Tall and handsome, with a cheerful countenance, Kamāl-al-Molk has been described as an imposing figure in appearance and manners. At the same time, he was said to have been compassionate and generous. He was a thoughtful and resourceful teacher in dealing with his students, much more so, possibly, than in his relations with his own family. He lived in a room by the gates of the Academy of Fine Arts (usually allocated to the doorman) and had his lunches with the students, paying for them as his guests. He even provided stipends from his own salary to needy students (Maḥmudi, pp. 708-9; [PLATE III](#)).

Kamāl-al-Molk's friends have characterized him as very good company, pleasantly eloquent and witty, with a fount of anecdotes and stories with which he regaled his friends in their gatherings (Ġani, V, pp. 15-16; Foruḡi, p. 788).

Kamāl-al-Molk was well acquainted with Italian and French literature and was an admirer of Dante, Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Racine, Montesquieu, and Chateaubriand. He had a thorough knowledge of Persian poetry and was a great admirer of [Hafez](#). He knew many verses by Ferdowsi (q.v.), Hafez, and Sa'di by heart and often recited Hafez's ghazals in the presence of his friends. He was also a lover of Persian classical music and would sometimes sing in social gatherings with his close friends (Ġani, X, p. 683; Foruḡi, p. 788; Ḥakimi, p. 805; Maḥmudi, p. 709).

Romantic image. The romantic perception of Kamāl-al-Molk as a heroic artist



was bolstered by *Čašmhāyaš*, a much influential and debated novel by the noted Iranian writer Bozorg ‘Alavi (q.v.; Tehran, 1952; tr. John O’Kane as *Her Eyes*, London, 1989). Influenced by the vogue for socialist realism popular at the time, ‘Alavi creates a heroic image of “Mākān-e Naqqāš” as a celebrated artist and an activist leader of a clandestine revolutionary movement. Some critics maintain that ‘Alavi’s portrayal of Mākān may have been drawn from Kamāl-al-Molk (Mir‘ābedini, I, p. 234; Hillmann, p. 298). Others see traces of [Taqi Arāni](#) (1903-40), the leading Marxist political activist of the 1930s, in Alavi’s depiction of Mākān (Golširi, p. 507). Still others have viewed Mākān as an amalgamation of Kamāl-al-Molk and Arāni: a character who represents Kamāl-al-Molk as an artist and Arāni as a political activist (Dastgāyb, p. 124).

The popular image of Kamāl-al-Molk as a great artist who stood up to and resisted the authorities, born out of Bozorg ‘Alavi’s depiction, appears to have originally been created and disseminated by Ḥasan-‘Ali Vaziri, in a partly fictional and emotional biography of Kamāl-al-Molk of about 100 pages, published and distributed during the turbulent years of the mid-1940s. Vaziri portrayed Kamāl-al-Molk as a man of dignity with a heedless attitude towards the powerful ministers of education, and more specifically in his dealings with Rezā Khan Sardār Sepah, the increasingly influential statesman of the time. It appears that Vaziri’s book, and his frequent narration of stories about Kamāl-al-Molk’s dignified and powerful character traits, became a source of inspiration for his close relative and friend, Āqā Bozorg ‘Alavi, in plotting a popular novel with a painter as its main protagonist (A. Ashraf, personal communication with Bozorg ‘Alavi, Tehran, Spring 1979, as well as information gathered from Rowšan Vaziri, a niece of both ‘Alavi and Vaziri, New York, April 2010).

‘Alavi’s creation of a dual character for Mākān is probably drawn from his own direct relationship with Arāni as well as his indirect knowledge of Kamāl-al-Molk’s life and character traits constructed from numerous stories narrated to him by Vaziri.

Mākān is portrayed in the first part of novel (pp. 5-93), as “the greatest artist of the last 100 years . . . who was among a few people who had the courage to fight against the regime” (p. 6). When Sardār Sepah pays a visit to his school of painting, Mākān does not receive him warmly, which leads the government agencies to thereafter ignore his artistic center (pp. 16-17). While Mākān refuses to paint a portrait of Reza Shah (pp. 11, 20-21), he makes twenty-two portraits of his servant and doorman, Āqā Rajab, as well as paintings of



landscapes showing work conditions and the destitution of the peasantry in villages (pp. 17-18). “He struggles with tyranny through his paintings, he is a socially conscious artist” (p. 32). This portrayal of Mākān may have been in part drawn from Kamāl-al-Molk.

The heroic image of Kamāl-al-Molk was again popularized in a film by ‘Ali Ḥātami, *Kamāl-al-Molk*, released in 1984, which focused on his role in the Constitutional Revolution and in his encounter with Reżā Khan Sardār Sepah (for a critical review of the film, see Ḥesāmi, pp. 327-30; it should be noted in this context that although, as Ḥesāmi points out, Kamāl-al-Molk did not play an active part in the Constitutional Revolution, nevertheless, as described earlier in the entry, he deeply sympathized with the movement and remained detached from Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah’s regime).

The myth of Kamāl-al-Molk’s resistance vis-à-vis the rising and powerful government apparatus in the 1920s has even entered the realm of Persian [conspiracy theories](#), where a belief has emerged that attributes the accidental injury to Kamāl-al-Molk’s eye to a possible plot by Reżā Khan’s regime (Dehbāši, 1989, pp. 9-11; Ġani [V, pp. 17-21] convincingly demonstrated that his eye injury was caused by a personal accident).

Refuge at Ḥosaynābād. Kamāl-al-Molk had been entertaining the idea of finding a refuge far from Tehran for his final years. He had even entrusted his savings to Moḥammad-‘Ali Foruḡi, earmarked for the purchase of a rural estate later. According to existing documents, this money was used towards the purchase of Ḥosaynābād in 1924. This was a remote rural estate in Khorasan, which, with its hot dry climate and views of the desert, appealed to the painter’s eye (Foruḡi, pp. 800-801; for the title of the estate, see Sohayl-Ḳvānsāri, pp. 92-94).

Unfortunately, rural life from the beginning led indirectly to a personal accident. In a trip to Nišābur in the summer of 1926, in an accident at Taqiābād a piece of glass from his broken spectacles irreparably damaged his right eye. He was taken to Tehran for treatment in a few days (Ġani, V, pp. 17-19; it should be noted that different dates are reported for his trips to Nišābur and the date of accident in Taqiābād; a more accurate date, however, would be the date of his letters from Tehran to Ġani in the summer and fall of 1926, when he provided Ġani with medical reports from the beginning of the treatment of his right eye in Tehran [see Ġani, V, pp. 47-50]).



Kamāl-al-Molk died at the age of 81 in Nišābur on 18 August 1940 and was buried by the shrine of the celebrated 13th-century mystical poet, [Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār](#).

ii. Style

Kamāl-al-Molk’s art was the culmination of a trend towards the adaptation of a European naturalistic style in Persian art, which led to the emergence of a Euro-Persian style in Iran. This hybrid approach began to take shape during the latter half of the 17th century (see [art ix. SAFAVID TO QAJAR](#)). This period marked the advent of numerous Iranian contacts with European commercial and diplomatic missions, the presence of a large Armenian community in [New Julfa](#) with a variety of European-influenced murals decorating the churches, the arrival of European artists and craftsmen at the royal court in Isfahan, and the influence of new, Western-oriented Indian art on Persian art (see [isfahan xxi. school of painting; india xi. indian influence on persian art](#)).

Iranian painters who adapted European perspectives and themes in their hybrid style on paper and papier-maché in this period included such painters as Sheikh ‘Abbāsi, who produced paintings from 1650 to 1684, under the influence of new Indian painting with certain European elements (see [‘abbāsi, šayk](#)); MoḤammad Zamān (1649-1704), who was apparently sent to Rome to study the Western classical style (Zoka, 1994; MoḤammad Zaman’s trip to Italy, however, has been questioned by scholars since Zoka; see Layla Diba, “Selseleh: Artistic Dynasties In Persian Painting,” forthcoming). ‘Aliqoli Jobbadār (1657-1716) was another pioneer of Euro-Persian style. He was a European (termed *Farangi*) convert to Islam who became a court official and painter, and his son, MoḤammad-‘Alī Beg, rose to the position of Naqqāšbāši under Nāder Shah Afshar (r. 1736-47; see [‘ali-qoli jobba-dār](#)).

The Euro-Persian style is also in evidence during the Afsharid, Zand, and Qajar periods. In the Qajar period it was practiced by such artists as [Abu’l-Ḥasan Ġaffāri Sani’-al-Molk](#) (1814-67) and Mirzā ‘Ali-Akbar Khan Mozayyen-al-Dawla, who preceded Kamāl-al-Molk as court painters. But Kamāl-al-Molk’s strong tendency towards naturalism appears to have toned down the Persian elements in his paintings. While Kamāl-al-Molk’s shift from a hybrid Euro-Persian to a purely European style was praised by his students and admirers as revolutionizing Persian painting, it has been criticized by modernist critics for draining Persian painting of the valuable, anti-naturalistic elements which are close to the essence of modern art (see below).



LEARNING AND PRACTICING ACADEMIC PAINTING

Learning academic painting. Kamāl-al-Molk’s early training as an artist likely included an apprenticeship with his uncle, the court painter Ṣani‘-al-Molk, who had been sent to Europe by Moḥammad Shah and received training there in classical painting and in the use of the lithographic press. He was appointed chief court painter (*naqqāšbāši*) and provided with an official studio (Naqqāškāna-ye Dawlati) to work in and train students. He taught lithography and painting, partly based on European academic principles, at the Dār al-fonun, Iran’s first modern school of higher learning, where he was director of the state press and editor of the court newspaper until his death in 1867 (see abu’l-ḥasan ḡaffāri; see also Moṣṭafavi, pp. 30-44).

Kamāl-al-Molk continued his studies at Dār al-fonun during the 1870s, where he studied painting with Mozayyen-al-Dawla, Ṣani‘-al-Molk’s successor. Mozayyen-al-Dawla was himself a graduate of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He faithfully applied the methods of the French Academy and probably maintained aspects of the curriculum instituted by Kamāl-al-Molk’s uncle. Mozayyen-al-Dawla was also a prolific author of textbooks, including several treatise on painting (Ekhtiar, p. 175). Although he relates that his teacher, “Mozayyen al-Dawla was a trained artist in academic art,” Kamal-al-Molk maintained that “I learned the art of painting from no one but myself” (Kamal-al-Molk, p. 35).”

The court painter. Kamāl-al-Molk’s skill soon caught the attention of the shah, who appointed him court painter in circa 1880 at the age of “approximately 20” and generously rewarded him with salaries and court sinecures and offered premises in the Golestān Palace for his studios (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 28). During the next ten years, Kamāl-al-Molk primarily executed portraits of the ruler and notables of the court, and palace and landscape views that surpassed his contemporaries in their almost photographic naturalism, attention to detail, and color sense. His renderings of the Hall of Mirrors, the *Takya-ye Dawlat* (Figure 4 and Figure 5), and the *Ḥawẓ Kāna* are considered among his masterpieces and were universally admired in his day. Yet he also showed an interest in genre scenes, producing a painting of a geomancer (Figure 8) and two women during this period (for details, see iii, below; see also Kamāl-al-Molk, pp. 29-35).

Kamāl-al-Molk often accompanied the ruler on his trips throughout the provinces, and he executed landscape and encampment scenes paintings *en*



plein air, not back at the studio (according to inscriptions on the paintings). Photography played a role in his practice, particularly in portraiture and memorial portraits, but it was his extraordinary skill as a painter even before his trip to Europe, where he would study the old masters directly, which is revealed in the works he produced in the decade when he was working for the court (Kamāl-al-Molk, pp. 29-30).

Learning and practicing in Europe. After the shah's assassination in 1896, Kamāl-al-Molk briefly worked for his successor Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah, who commissioned him to paint a group portrait with his father at the center and images of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah at various ages. Many of the portraits were based on photographs in the royal collection taken by Jules Richard (1816-91), one of the early court photographers, who had lived in Persia since 1844 and had converted to Islam, assuming the name Mirzā Reẓā Khan (see dār al-fonun; see also Adle and Zoka, pp. 249-80). At this time the ruler accepted Kamāl-al-Molk's request to go to Europe to study painting for about three years (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 31; Mo'ayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 276). He worked in ateliers in Florence and in Paris, and while there he made copies of the old masters, such as Rembrandt's *Saint Matthew and the Angel* and Titian's *Entombment of Christ* (Louvre Museum). He also executed portraits of his fellow artists, such as Henri Fantin-Latour, the French realist painter (1836-1904). His main achievement in Europe was to advance his knowledge of perspective, which he had learned by his own practice before (for his works, see iii, below; see also Kamāl-al-Molk, pp. 35).

Although Kamāl-al-Molk worked as court painter for a year on his return, he did not like Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah or his questionable taste in art. Kamāl-al-Molk retired himself to Baghdad and Karbalā for over two years. It is from this period that a shift in subject matter occurs, with greater attention paid to urban scenes and images of the everyday lives of ordinary people (see Table 6, below). This represented a major evolution in the imagery of Persian painting and would have a lasting effect on its subsequent development (Kamāl-al-Molk, pp. 32-33). With the death of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah in 1907, the system of court patronage of official art, which had endured since the Safavid period, collapsed.

Academy of Fine Arts. In 1911 Kamāl-al-Molk was given permission to establish the Academy of Fine Arts (Madrasa-ye ṣanāye'-e mostaẓrafa), under the aegis of the ministry of education (Ḥakim-al-Molk, pp. 804-5). He was to remain its director through the turbulent times of the Constitutional period and Iran's



political turmoil during the post-Constitutional period and World War I, through to the early 1920s (Foruḡi, pp. 797-805; for useful information concerning the school's directors, instructors, students, and alumni in 1918, see Ġani, X, pp. 698-702, 736-39). The school's alumni formed the nucleus of the school of painters who were the followers of Kamāl-al-Molk's naturalistic style of painting, known as *Maktab-e Kamāl-al-Molk* (Āštiāni, pp. 17-18; for samples of the works of Kamāl-al-Molk and a number of his students, see bibliography under *Maktab-e Kamāl-al-Molk*).

The Academy's primary mission was to teach academic-style easel painting. The school continued the tradition, initiated at the Dār al-Fonun, of an annual exhibition of artists' works, which were for sale. Also taught were such applied arts as carpet weaving and lithography. This mixed curriculum reflected the policies and needs of the time. Many schools were founded at this time to supplement the teaching of the Dār al-Fonun, which had significantly declined. Local arts and crafts were also in decline due to foreign imports, and the need for better standards and controls in the carpet weaving industry undoubtedly lay behind this curriculum. The lithographic press had evolved into a tool for the dissemination of constitutional ideals and propaganda, contributing to its predominance at the school.

Kamāl-al-Molk trained the next generation of Persian painters and was greatly respected by Iranians for his character, dedication, and leadership. His students, such as Ḥasan-ʿAli Khan Vaziri and Esmāʿil Āštiāni, continued to direct the school and championed the cause of the classical academic painting which dominated the art scene for the next generation of Iranian painters, for better or worse. Another prominent alumnus of the school was ʿAli-Moḥammad Ḥaydariān, who was considered by some observers to be even superior to his master in portraiture (Vaziri Moqaddam, p. 35). Other students and alumni of the school included Abu'l-Ḥasan Khan Ṣadiqi (Ṣadiq-al-Dawla's son); Ḥasan Neʿmat-Allāh, a poor boy whom he brought up; Moḥsen Khan Moqaddam (Eḥtesāb-al-Molk's son); and Ṣaniʿ-al-Solṭān, a talented painter who produced relatively few works (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 35; for a sample of the works of leading artists of this school, see bibliography under *Maktab-e Kamāl-al-Molk*).

KAMĀL-AL-MOLK'S ART STYLE

Kamāl-al-Molk was a student of European academic painting, first at Dār al-Fonun and the royal court, and later in Europe. When he was working in



Europe, the academic painting that adhered to Neoclassicism and Romanticism was still dominant institution in visual arts—not only in Europe but also in the periphery of the West. The challenges of such modern currents as Impressionism and, more specifically, Expressionism and Cubism, to academic painting only began to gather force during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus it would stand to reason that Kamāl-al-Molk remained untouched by the modernist movements.

But another current of the time that appears to have further buttressed Kamāl-al-Molk’s belief in the Renaissance masters is Naturalism, which has largely been neglected by those who have criticized his European experience (see below, art critique). Naturalism is a broad movement intended to apply to the humanities specific scientific laws that govern the natural sciences. Thereby, the target of the Naturalistic artists is to portray the real world as exactly as possible by using the precise methodology of the natural and physical sciences. In the history of art, Naturalism is a current that appeared during the late 19th century when Kamāl-al-Molk visited European academies and museums. As observed by his disciple, Esmā’il Āštiāni, “Kamāl-al-Molk chose nature as his model, science as his guide” (Āštiāni, p. 18).

Although undoubtedly influenced by Rembrandt, Kamāl-al-Molk appears to have also been an admirer of Raphael’s style of painting, while, like Edouard Manet (1832-83) and other painters of the latter half of the 19th century, he chose subjects from the events and circumstances of his own time. He observed: “I am inherently inclined to Naturalism. In early life I was enamored by Raphael. Later, when I became more cultivated, I became more attracted to Rembrandt. In painting my ideal was Rembrandt, although I admit that out of a hundred students only two may come equal to Raphael, and ten turn out as Rembrandt, because there are minute points about Raphael that are indescribable. However, I am a great admirer of Rembrandt, and have copied his *St. Matthew*, which is a great work. To sum up, I believe that Raphael was greater than Rembrandt, but I am attracted and charmed by Rembrandt. I may add that, in terms of color, school of painting, and style I have tried to model myself on Italian masters, the likes of Raphael, emulating Rembrandt to a much lesser extent” (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 35).

ART CRITIQUE

Discussion on Kamāl-al-Molk’s life and works began in the mid-1940s (a few years after his death) by a number of artists and scholars who in various ways



praised him as a great master of Persian art (see, e.g., Vaziri; Qarābegiān; Navā'i; and Ġani). The same category of favorable criticism was continued by his students and admirers in the 1950s-60s (see Ġani; Jamālzādeh; Hejāzi; Āštiāni). Although the challenge to Kamāl-al-Molk's school of painting came in the late 1940s and early 1950s from modernist painters of different political and artistic orientations, it did not lead to a more methodical criticism of Kamāl-al-Molk and his school until the period of the 1970s-80s (for the advent of post-Kamāl-al-Molk modernist painting in Iran during the late 1940s and 1950s, see Yarshater, pp. 363-77). In the period of the 1970s-80s, in addition to admiring reviews (see, e.g., Šayk; Eskandari; Yusofi), a number of more relevant critiques from both supporters of European academic art and modernist artists and art critics were published.

Kamāl-al-Molk's work has been critiqued from different perspectives in the 1970s-80s: loyal students and admirers who believe that he revolutionized Persian art through his meticulous photographic sense of reflecting the object in its natural form and color; modernists who bitterly criticized Kamāl-al-Molk for his preoccupation with emulating nature and thereby discouraging innovative art; and finally those who saw in the rise of his school a deterrent to the revival of such authentic, yet innovative, Persian traditional painting as the works of Rezā 'Abbāsi or such innovative, popular art as [coffeehouse painting](#) (*naqqāši-e qahvaḵāna'i*).

Students' praise. Ḥosayn Šayk, in an interview entitled "Painting means the emulation of nature" ("*Naqqāši ya'ni taqlid-e ṭabi'at*"), praises Kamāl-al-Molk for founding the Persian school of painting by presenting the beauties of nature (Šayk, pp. 32-33; see also Vaziri, pp. 13-99; both were Kamāl-al-Molk's loyal students).

Esmā'il Āštiāni, a former student and associate, believes that "in accuracy of design, richness of color, and painstaking attention to detail, Kamāl-al-Molk was greater than all contemporary artists." Āštiāni says that, if we were to compare painting with photography, we could say that Kamāl-al-Molk's eyes resembled a camera. The teacher frequently said: "I am able to draw a painting of an object so accurately that it would show no difference from its photograph." Āštiāni also admires Kamāl-al-Molk for his ability to discover the basic rules of perspective on his own, which he later perfected in Europe. But he observed two weaknesses in his painting. First, he believes that Kamāl-al-Molk was so preoccupied with accuracy of design and mellowness of color that "he little cared about composition and its various modes." Second, "he paid



little attention to the poetical aspect of painting.” Despite these shortcomings, Āštiāni believes that Kamāl-al-Molk “revolutionized Persian painting” during a relatively short period at the Academy, turning the previous styles into decorative arts. Consequently, “the two so-called ‘traditional arts’ or ‘national arts,’ on the one hand, and ‘modern arts,’ on the other, became separate” (Āštiāni, pp. 16-18).

Modernist critiques. The modernist critics of Kamāl-al-Molk’s style focus their assessments on precisely what his supporters highlighted as the achievements of his school. Aidin Aghdashlou (Āydin Āġdāšlu), a modernist artist and art critic, maintains that Kamāl-al-Molk was able to gain a good command of Western painting, understand the rules and norms of naturalistic art, and assimilate all the achievements of post-Renaissance Italy. However, this was not a very significant triumph, because Western art at the turn of the 20th century was discarding these achievements and their foundations, and moving toward a subjective, flat, pure, and abstract kind of art; that is to say, it was heading in the same direction from which Kamāl-al-Molk had come (Aghdashlou, p. 232).

Dissuasive effect on Persian art. Moḥsen Vaziri-Moqaddam, another modernist critic, focuses his criticism on the obstacles that Kamāl-al-Molk and, more specifically, his mediocre students, created to the revival of authentic, yet innovative, Persian art. He believes that Rezā ‘Abbāsi created pictures “that promised a new stage in the art of painting and portraying.” For the first time, Vaziri-Moqaddam says, pictures of nature and human beings were combined with Iranian architecture. Rezā ‘Abbāsi’s innovations, including new proportions, dimensions, and color schemes, were transformed in Zand and Qajar painting; that is, “geometrical lines and *eslimi* decorations gradually gave way to natural elements,” while they continued to show traces of the old Iranian miniatures (Vaziri-Moqaddam, pp. 34-35). In Vaziri-Moqaddam’s negative assessment, instead of receiving inspiration from Rezā ‘Abbāsi’s style and combining it with an innovative understanding of European classical art, and instead of giving a fresh spirit to Qajar mural drawings and paintings, “Kamāl-al-Molk set about photographing Nature, painting things exactly as all people see them” (Vaziri-Moqaddam, p. 35).

In praise of naturalism. Rui’in Pākbāz, who was enchanted by Kamāl-al-Molk’s naturalistic outlook, believes that he made a breakthrough in Persian art. He maintains that the canvas “The Hall of Mirrors” (*Tālār-e ā’ina*; Figure 2) was a starting point in modern Persian art. It shook the pillars of the “Qajar School,”



which according to Pākbāz focused on Persian miniature traditions, increasingly receding into mere imitation and unoriginality. Pākbāz believes that Kamāl-al-Molk pursued, to the end of his life, a continuation of the “The Hall of Mirrors.” In this way, Kamāl-al-Molk represented the ending of a tradition and the serious beginning of another current, which was inspired by Western art. Though the process of receiving influence from Western art had started at a much earlier time, the effects of such art, before Kamāl-al-Molk, were somehow absorbed into the works of traditional Persian painters, while in Kamāl-al-Molk’s works, the traditional standards of Iranian painting were gradually pushed aside and replaced with the norms of European art. Pākbāz believes that traditional Iranian painting had always moved in an anti-naturalistic atmosphere, essentially due to its mystical motifs. Nonetheless, following the efforts made by his predecessors toward Naturalism, Kamāl-al-Molk completely set aside the symbolic view of nature and gradually advanced to a mature form of Naturalism (Pākbāz, pp. 241-42).

iii. Works

Genres and quantity of works. A meticulous artist with a naturalistic obsession, Kamāl-al-Molk was not a prolific painter (Qarābegiān, pp. 81-92). His available works in collections and catalogues and those mentioned in various lists amount to about 122 known paintings produced over a span of 50 years, stretching from his earliest known dated painting at the turn of 1880s, when he reproduced a portrait of Eʿteżād-al-Salṭana circa 1880 and a portrait of Crown Prince Nāṣer-al-Din Mirzā in 1881, both from their photographs (Kamāl-al-Molk, p. 28; Zoka, 1997, p. 7; the latter portrait is printed in Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri, p. 247), to his last works in the early 1930s (some remained unfinished due to his deteriorating vision). Kamāl-al-Molk’s works must have exceeded 122 known works, and some have mentioned as many as 150 works without producing a list of his 150 paintings (see below). Kamāl-al-Molk’s works are mainly in the genres of portraits of courtiers and officials (44 paintings), landscapes (37 paintings), social genres (18 paintings), and royal palaces (6 paintings). He also produced a number of portraits of friends and colleagues and studies of nude models, and he also copied the works of classical masters when he was in Florence and Paris (about 13 paintings). His works include a canvas of Karbalā Square, which constitutes his only work on an urban theme (Figure 10). He produced no works on religious and historical subjects, and only a few still-lives (see Table 8 below).

Table 1. Frequency of Works by Genres



Kamāl-al-Molk's works may be divided into three periods: before his trip to Europe (1880-97), during his studies and works in Florence and Paris (1897-1901), and after his return from Europe (1901-32). Some art critiques—from his loyal students and admirers to some of those who are critical of his works—maintain that most of Kamāl-al-Molk's works before his studies in European museums may be considered “mediocre,” but that they flourished after his return from Europe (Āštiāni, p. 16; Pākbāz, pp. 243-44; Aghdashlou, p. 231). Pākbāz believes that even during the first period Kamāl-al-Molk's works gradually developed from a weaker technique in reflecting nature to a more mature one, enabling him to make a careful photographic rendering of the natural models (Pākbāz, p. 243).

Assessment of works. Evaluating his own works, Kamāl-al-Molk observed that he regarded *Ḥawẓkāna-ye Šāḥebqerāniya*, Hall of Mirrors (*Ṭālār-e ā'ina*; see Figure 2), his own self-portrait, and Karbalā Square (*Meydān-e Karbalā*; see Figures 1 and 10) as his masterpieces. He adds: “the painting I made of Karbalā Square resembles those of the Rembrandt School” (Kamāl-al-Molk, pp. 36-37). On another occasion, he also mentioned *Takiya-ye Dawlat* (Figure 3), Landscapes of Zānus Valley (Figure 6), *Ābšār Doqolu* (Figure 7), *Rammāl* (Figure 8), and *Lār* landscape as his favorite works. He indicated his desire to have photographs taken of some of his portraits, including those of Nāṣer-al-Molk, Mošir-al-Dawla, Woṭuq-al-Dawla (Figure 5), Šani'-al-Dawla, and Atābak (Amin-al-Solṭan), and a landscape showing Tehran to the Bibi Šahr-bānu mountain as seen from the roof of Šāḥebqerābiya Palace (a letter from Kamāl-al-Molk to Mirzā 'Ali Khan Maḥmudi, in Sohayli-Ḳ'ānsāri, pp. 140-41).

Esmā'il Āštiāni, Kamāl-al-Molk's student and colleague, believes that it was during the latter period of his life, when he established the Academy of Fine Arts, that the quality of his works flourished. In his view, the following works are Kamāl-al-Molk's masterpieces. For their composition: “The Baghdadi fortune-teller” (*Fālgir-e Baḡdādi*), “The Baghdadi goldsmith” (*Zargar-e Baḡdādi*; see Figure 9), The Villager's cottage (*Ḳāna-ye dehāti*), and “The Hall of Mirrors.” As portraits: those of Sardār As'ad (Figure 4), Ḥājj Sayyed Naṣr-Allah Taqavi, and three of the master's self-portraits. As landscapes: “Moḡānak garden” (*Bāḡ-e Moḡānak*), “Shemiran sunset and the Alborz mountain” (*Ġorub-e Šemirān va kuh-e Alborz*). Watercolors: The portrait of Mawlāna Mirzā Hādi Khan Ḳoṣnevis at work, and Kamāl-al-Molk's self-portrait (Āštiāni, pp. 16-18).

Ru'in Pākbāz, an ardent admirer of Kamāl-al-Molk, believes that his most accomplished work immediately after his return from Europe is “Goldsmith



and his apprentice,” which shows the elegance, power, and skill that he acquired in Europe, revealing the influence of Rembrandt. Following this work, Pāk̄bāz believes Kamāl-al-Molk produced two powerful paintings that constitute the culmination of his career: “Jewish fortune-teller” and “Karbala Square” (Pāk̄bāz, pp. 244-45).

In an assessment of Kamāl-al-Molk’s works, Idin Aghdashlou notes that at the beginning of his work he showed affinity with early Qajar painting, for instance in *Takkiya-ye Dawlat* (Figure 3). In some of his early works a close relation with Ṣani’-al-Molk’s style is traceable, for instance in “Royal Musicians,” in which the figures are simply aligned next to each other on a flat plane. He soon developed a deep understanding of the luminosity, tonality, and intensity in the use of color that is manifested in many Persian landscapes and gardens, royal edifices, and halls, where a pleasant and delicate feeling of color is presented. In all likelihood, part of his understanding of the richness of color is traceable to the works of such early 19th-century masters as Mehr-‘Ali and Mirzā Bābā (Aghdashlou, p. 231).

Aghdashlou observes that themes in Kamāl-al-Molk’s works are limited, he did not execute religious or epic paintings, and that what he painted varied during the different periods of his life. When the painting is a courtly one, says Aghdashlou, it naturally depicts such things as figures of kings, princes, dignitaries, musicians, and the royal palaces. It is towards the end of this period that Kamāl-al-Molk shows interest also in painting social types, such as “Uncle Ṣādeq Ṣirāzi” (*‘Amu Ṣādeq Ṣirāzi*) and “Used clothes peddlers” (*Kohna-foruṣhā*). With two exceptions, he made no portraits of women. He produced mediocre and less accomplished paintings as well, e.g., “Cat and the canary cage” (*Gorba va qafas-e qanāri*) and the copy portrait of “Beggars: mother and daughter” (*Mādar o doḳtar-e gadā*). However, after returning from Europe, Kamāl-al-Molk produced beautiful, lively landscapes with poetical atmosphere and color. Some of the works he has created in this period are worth mentioning: portraits of the Qajar ‘Azod-al-Molk, Sardār As‘ad Baḳtiāri, and Ḥājj Naṣr-Allah Taḳavi. He shows little interest in urban scenes, the only work of the kind being Karbala Square (*Meydān-e Karbalā*; Aghdashlou, p. 231).

The following seven tables present a list of 122 paintings, constructed from approximately 73 paintings of Kamāl-al-Molk as recalled by the artist himself with additional works from Sohayli-Ḳvānsāri’s catalogue of 75 Kamāl-al-Molk’s paintings, published in *Kamāl-e honar* (pp. 213-366). Also consulted are a list of 102 works prepared by Karimzādeh Tabrizi (III, pp. 1052-58), and a list of 37



dated and 11 undated works, as well as photographs of 6 works in color, presented in *Maktab-e Kamāl-al-Molk* (pp. 10-11, 23-35). It should be noted that the number of works by Kamāl-al-Molk must have exceeded 122 works as listed in the following seven tables (for an estimate of 150 works by Kamāl-al-Molk, see Karimzādeh Tabrizi, III, p. 1052, although he introduces only 102 works in his list). The works are rearranged here by genre.

[Table 2. Paintings of Palaces](#)

[Table 3. Portraits: Nāṣer-al-Din Shah Period](#)

[Table 4. Portraits: Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah and Aḥmad Shah Periods](#)

[Table 5. Landscapes \(Part 1, Part 2\)](#)

[Table 6. Works in the Social genres](#)

[Table 7. Works in Florence and Paris \(1897-1900\)](#)

[Table 8. Other Works](#)

Final remarks. Kamāl-al-Molk was aiming to develop a national school of European naturalistic art, much as his intellectual peers were aspiring to westernize the country and to promote the Persian language and pre-Islamic Iran in search of an authentic national cultural identity. His themes of the common man and popular subjects sometimes tended towards the “self-orientalizing.” In the works of followers of more modest talent, Kamāl-al-Molk’s style became anecdotal and derivative, even verging on kitsch—developments which were the ambiguous result of pseudo-modernization and production for the tourist trade.

Nevertheless, with his charismatic personage and romantic image as a revolutionary hero and a great modernizer at a time of national decline, Kamāl-al-Molk remains a towering figure in the history and mythology of Persian art from Mani to Behzād and Rezā ‘Abbāsi, and is popularly perceived as the father of modern Persian Painting.



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