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MURAL PAINTING
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MURAL PAINTING. The tradition of wall painting in the Iranian world, extending back at least to the Parthian period (late 3rd century BCE to 226 CE; see ARSACIDS), apparently continued through all historical eras. Textual sources suggest that Achaemenid palaces, temples and house walls were decorated with figural scenes (Marshak, 2002, p. 8). Tangible evidence for the earliest murals is, however, archeological. The most significant early examples are at sites on the western and eastern fringes of the Iranian world, such as Dura Europos, Syria (Marshak, p. 8; de Waele), and Kuh-e Ḵˇāja in Sistān, where wall paintings range from the late Parthian to the late Sasanian period (i.e., 3rd to 6th or 7th cent. CE; see Faccena, p. 83, n. 1; Kawami, pp. 13-52).

The earliest murals from Kuh-e Ḵˇāja's South Gate include a Buddhist figure with attendants, associated with the early function of this part of the site as a Buddhist shrine (Kawami, p. 25). Elsewhere two rows of overlapping male figures in profile have modeled features rendered in a rich palette (Faccena, pp. 85-87). This fragment has been dated variously to the 1st and 3rd century CE (Faccena, p. 93; Kawami, p. 40). The most extensive wall painting consists of two registers of the so-called Painted Gallery. Iconographically the paintings mix Classical, Sasanian, and Kushan elements. The style is equally eclectic and includes carefully modeled, sturdy figures probably of early Sasanian date, later ones with more attenuated forms, and those rendered in cruder brushwork and flat blocks of color. Two surviving fragments from the North Tower (Figure 1) exhibit the late Sasanian style: figures in profile

outlined in black and painted in a limited palette without the modeling of the earlier murals.

The most impressive murals of the 6th to 8th centuries from the Iranian world come from Central Asian Sogdian sites. At Afrāsiāb, the site of medieval and ancient Samarqand, a complex scene from the 650s includes the local king enthroned and in procession, the Chinese emperor and empress possibly based on Chinese scrolls (Grenet, p. 112), a Greek astronomer, and the Hindu god Krishna. The placement of figures on several planes against a blue background suggests spatial recession. While details of garments are accurately portrayed, the figures are not highly modeled and appear somewhat static.

Panjikant has yielded the most complete set of 5th- to 8th-century murals found in temples and houses. The subject matter ranges from local deities to hunts, feasts, and epic tales. More dynamic than the murals at Afrāsiāb, the 5th-century paintings reveal modeling and three-dimensionality, followed by more mannered, complex 6th and 7th-century images, and forceful but two-dimensional paintings in the 8th century (Marshak, 2002, pp. 15-19; idem, "Pendzhikent").

With the advent of Islam in the 7th century, murals with figures continued to be executed on the walls of domestic and non-religious official buildings. Ornamental painting would have been permitted in mosques and *madrasa*s, but few remnants are extant from the 7th to the 11th century (Wilkinson, pp. 42, 159-61), after which glazed wall tiles took prominence. A room in a 9th-century house at Nishapur contained remarkable square and rectangular painted dado panels (Figure 2). The square panel contains fourfold designs of intertwined ribbons or serpents' bodies terminating in round 'eyes' and 'hands' of indeterminate meaning set within blue and brown ferns or feathers and scales. The rectangular panels contain lozenges with scales and designs that may imitate marble. This decoration marks a departure from Sogdian and Sasanian figural murals and embodies the abstracting principles of early Islamic art.

Notable figural murals from Nishapur include a highly detailed 10th-century painting of a mounted falconer and a standing attendant in black and grey on white (Wilkinson, pp. 206-16**).** This mural suggests a taste for non-narrative human imagery also found in the figural pottery of Nishapur. Numerous fragmentary, polychrome paintings of humans, demons, and animals were

found in other parts of the site, including a bathhouse. Eyes were outlined in black and eyebrows form heavy black arcs, while noses were drawn in red, all devoid of modeling. These have been dated to the 10th century (Wilkinson, pp. 282-86)

Extant murals from the Saljuq period are exceptionally rare. In Tomb Tower I at Ḵaraqān, dated 1067-68, the eight sides of its interior are painted with a mosque lamp suspended from the apex of a keel arch. Between the panels are painted pomegranate trees with birds perched in them. In the upper registers, medallions enclose peacocks and starburst motifs (Stronach and Young, pp. 9-13). The presence of such murals in this tomb may be a remnant of a once-common form of paradisiac funerary decoration. While the Saljuqs dominated Iran from the mid-11th to the mid-12th century, other Turkic dynasties, including the Qarakhanids, controlled Central Asia. Over 500 fragments of wall paintings discovered in one pavilion at the citadel of Samarqand have been assigned to the Qarakhanids during their occupation from the 11th to the early 13th century (Karev, pp. 45-84). A 12th-century monumental image of a Turkic warrior in three-quarter view holding a bow and arrow recalls the Nishapur falconer in the highly detailed patterns and the precise drawing of his caftan, belt, and bow and arrow. The artist used red to outline the figure's hand and black for his bow, while his caftan was painted yellow and white. Gradations of color and the sensitive use of line lend volume to the figure. Identified as an armor bearer whose emblem was the bow, the figure may have been from a local royal family that submitted to the Qarakhanids (Karev, p. 73).

Of the same period, a reception hall in the Ghaznavid palace at Laškari Bāzār, Afghanistan, contains a polychrome mural of Turkic royal guards, holding maces with bodies facing frontally with feet in profile against a ground of flowers, fruits, and birds. The guards' belted caftans are lavishly decorated and their now-damaged heads were haloed and in three-quarter view (Schlumberger, pl. 262). According to Juzjāni (p. 272; see MENHĀJ-E SERĀJ), Sultan Maḥmud (r. 998-1030) had four thousand Turkish slaves who stood on either side of the throne at audiences. In the 11th-century audience hall, painted slave warriors served as emblems for their live counterparts and may have 'guarded' an enthroned image of the ruler Sultan Masʿud I (r. 1031-41), who built the palace (Knobloch, p. 118).

With the Mongol invasion of Central Asia and Iran starting in 1219, figural wall painting effectively disappeared. The richly ornamented mausoleum of

Öljeytü (r. 1304-16) at Solṭāniya near Zanjān includes painted and gilded decoration added after 1313 (Blair, p. 124). The dome of the Boqʿa-ye Sayyed Rokn-al-Dīn, dated 727/1325, in Yazd is adorned with an assortment of painted decoration including a sunburst at its apex surrounded by a band of split palmette-leaf vine scroll, trefoil and multiple leaf pendants (Kadoi, pp. 217-40), and tear-shaped painted inscriptions and medallions on its sides. A trompe l'oeil relief effect is achieved in the squinches. The painted ornamental elements in the mausoleum resemble Il-Khanid manuscript illumination and possibly textiles (Kadoi, pp. 223-24). The patron's choice to decorate the tomb with paintings rather than tiles may be connected to their relative cost but also could reflect a close relationship of wall painters and illuminators or weavers.

Ornament in many Timurid mosques and mausoleums included the type of stylized floral and vegetal motifs and trees found in manuscript illumination (O'Kane, pp. 224-27). However, most early 15th-century murals were rendered in blue on a white plaster ground. In the mausoleum (1440-41) at the complex of Tumān Āḡā at Kuhsān (also written Kohsān) near Herat, blind arches contain 'landscapes' of trees and shrubs (O'Kane, p. 224, fig. 14.1). Here and in mosques, trees serve as paradisiac symbols (O'Kane, p. 227), an iconography that probably was not intended when such murals appeared in illustrated manuscripts.

Although no wall paintings survive in extant Timurid palaces, texts, manuscript and album paintings attest to the existence of a range of murals in the 15th century. Ebn ʿArabšāh described wall paintings in Timur's palaces in Samarqand as portraying the ruler in his many roles (Lentz, p. 253). Timurid and Turkman manuscript illustrations contain murals, usually above the dado level in blue on white plaster with chinoiserie motifs or animals in landscape (Soudavar, p. 75, fig. 27e). In the late 15th century, wall painting declined, replaced by polychrome tiles that often covered the whole surface of a wall. In late Timurid Herat paintings, white plaster areas of walls are usually unpainted, while in Turkman paintings chinoiserie wall ornament is more common (Diba, p. 11).

Although the Safavids rose to power in 907/1501, evidence for wall painting dates to the mid-16th century, when the capital shifted to Qazvin and new palaces were constructed. According to the poet ʿAbdi Beg Širāzi (921-88/1515-80), who described Shah Ṭahmāsb I's (r. 1524-76) new buildings in detail (Diba, p. 12), the walls of the Dawlat-ḵāna, or Government Palace, were decorated with animals and birds in landscape. The Čehel Sotun, a

private royal pavilion, contained arched panels decorated with scenes from Persian literature, a hunt, a polo match, a feast, and beautiful women in a garden (Figure 3). In addition to commissioning the court artist Moẓaffar-ʿAli to paint the walls of both the Dawlat-ḵāna and Čehel Sotun, Shah Ṭahmāsb himself designed a mural of Yusof (Joseph) and the Egyptian ladies (Canby, p. 69). The polychrome paintings in the Čehel Sotun conform to the Qazvin style of lithe, long-necked figures (Echraghi, p. 122, fig. 54).

A house in Nāʾin from around 973-83/1565-75 demonstrates the influence of the royal complex in Qazvin on its wall decoration (Luschey-Schmeisser, pp. 69-71). Here an *ayvān* contains eleven niches with painted scenes of hunts, feasts, and stories from literature. Unlike the Čehel Sotun, the pictorial elements are whitewashed plaster with green and red details in relief, whereas the background has been carved away, leaving light brown unpainted plaster and an overall impression of an intricate, bichrome composition.

Surviving buildings in Isfahan, the Safavid capital from 1598, exhibit the range and development of wall painting in the 17th century. Murals in the ʿĀli Qāpu (built 1590-1615), the administrative and ceremonial heart of Shah ʿAbbās I's (r. 1588-1629) capital, feature polychrome floral and vegetal motifs, latticework, birds, and animals on the ground to third floors, and small painted male and female figures on the third floor. On the fifth floor, paintings of young men and women enjoying themselves adorn the walls. Here the palette is brighter and more varied than on the walls of the lower floors. The building as a whole symbolizes the legitimacy of Safavid rule, and its wall paintings incorporate are in the prevailing style developed under Shah ʿAbbās II (r. 1642-66; Babaie, 2008, pp. 148-49).

With the Čehel Sotun, a palace building completed around 1057/1647 by Shah ʿAbbās II, the program of wall painting incorporates large murals of historical events in which the magnanimity of the Safavid shahs is stressed, while in subsidiary rooms paintings refer to literary texts such as *Suz o godāz* by Nawʿi Ḵabušāni (Babaie, 1994, pp. 125-42). On the exterior porch walls, paintings of Europeans appear between windows.

Armenian merchants in 17th-century Isfahan (see JULFA i. Safavid Period) also decorated their houses and churches with murals. While many of these images portray Christian subjects, their bright palette follows that of the ʿĀli Qāpu and Čehel Sotun. Artists of religious murals relied on European prints, and

illusionistic techniques were more prevalent than in the Safavid buildings (Boase, figs. 64-65).

With the increase in the 18th century of life-size oil paintings on canvas, less evidence of wall paintings has come to light. Paintings of non-figural medallions, buildings in landscape and figures, dating to the 19th century, appear in the pavilion of the Bāḡ-e Fin in Kashan. The most impressive Qajar mural was the painting on three walls of the Negārestān Palace of Fatḥ-ʿAli Shah (r. 1797-1834) enthroned with 118 life-sized courtiers, sons, and foreign ambassadors in attendance on either side of him. This composition by the court artist ʿAbd-Allāh Khan is no longer extant, but portable copies have memorialized it. Although the style would have incorporated the familiar elements of Qajar painting, the choice of subject and the arrangement of the figures in two rows have a history that goes back to pre-Islamic times (Robinson, p. 228, fig. 5).

Despite the destruction of so much of Iranian mural painting, what remains from the 3rd century BCE to the 19th century CE reveals a deep-seated desire to embellish the surfaces of walls, at times with images of local deities or stories, at other times with neutral landscapes or medallions and in palatial settings with complex tableaux that glorify the ruler in war and at peace.

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