

Traditional, Western, or Both? Concurrent Usage of Persian and European Elements in Qajar Royal Art

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In his article “From the Prophet to Postmodernism,” Finbarr Barry Flood writes of the “bias for the historical,” a concept that refers to scholars’ preference for studying the distant past.¹ He argues that in the field of Middle Eastern art history, scholars “seem to take it for granted that no art worthy of comment was produced in the Islamic world after 1800.”² Similarly, art historian Oleg Grabar has argued that “Islamic creativity may have meaning for Westerners only if it dates from before 1700.”³ Art produced during the time of the Qajar dynasty, which established itself in the late 18th century, sits on the threshold of “the historical” and, by default, “the modern” or “un-historical.” The presence of a “bias for the historical” in Qajar art scholarship is evident in Laurence Binyon’s chapter on Persian painting in *Persian Art*. Binyon writes that royal paintings produced during Qajar ruler Fath Ali Shah’s reign “have no claim to very serious consideration, but are often amusing and sometimes charming.”⁴ Since the Qajars came to power on the brink of modernity, which brought with it increased globalization, they experienced great societal, political, and technological changes throughout their rule. Therefore, Qajars adapted their art to match the new needs brought on by these changes. Qajar art is characterized by the concurrent usage of European artistic styles, techniques, and technologies and traditional Persian images and forms. Persian art historians have suggested that this hybrid nature of Qajar art has caused it to be considered tasteless and inauthentic. Flood writes that Qajar art is criticized for a “lack of authenticity in blending ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity,’ two states of being usually spatialized as the local and the (Euro-American) global, or temporalized as past and present.”⁵

¹ Finbarr Barry Flood, “From the Prophet to Postmodernism?” In *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2007), 33.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴ Laurence Binyon, “Persian Painting,” in *Persian Art*, ed. E. Denison Ross (London: Luzac and Company, 1930), 71.

⁵ Flood, “Prophet to Postmodernism,” 43.

This has resulted in Qajar art being considered “bad and impure” and, as Binyon argues, not worthy of serious study.⁶ The European elements of Qajar art preclude it from the interests of scholars biased towards “the historical.” When scholars dismiss Qajar art as unworthy of serious study, they fail to address two important questions that may lead to a deeper understanding of the Qajar dynasty’s objectives and motivations: how did the Qajar shahs integrate both European and traditionally Persian elements into the art produced under their rule, and why did they go to great lengths to do so?

For Qajar rulers, especially Aqa Muhammad Shah, Fath Ali Shah, and Naser al-Din Shah, visual art was a key element of their project to fashion and maintain a royal dynasty. Like any aspiring royal family, they wished to be seen as the legitimate rulers of their country. They made use of Persian imagery, style and mediums from the Safavid and pre-Safavid eras to establish legitimacy among their subjects, who would have been familiar with these types of images and their connotations. At the same time, increased European contact and involvement with Iran during the reign of Fath Ali Shah and Naser al-Din Shah created the need to establish their country as a legitimate player on the world stage, especially in the face of potential European domination. This situation led to the appropriation of “different techniques and technologies” which were then “assimilated to preexisting tastes and traditions” to appear both on par with European powers and sensitive to Persian traditions.⁷ Scholars disagree somewhat about whether European elements or traditional Persian ones are more characteristic of royal art during the Qajar period. In her article “Wall Painting and Imagery before the Qajars,” Persian art historian Layla Diba minimizes European influences on Qajar paintings, presenting her reader with examples of ancient Persian wall paintings to argue that Qajar painters “inherited a diverse and rich tradition of visual representation which originated in antiquity.”⁸ Other works emphasize Naser al-Din Shah’s western approach to both painting and photography as characteristic of Qajar art. It is important to remember that the Qajar dynasty

⁶ Ibid., 35, 43.

⁷ Nile Green, “Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-Century Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 51, no. 5 (2018): 798.

⁸ Layla Diba, “Wall Painting and Imagery Before the Qajars,” *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1-4 (2001): 15.

spanned 136 years, during which much change occurred, particularly in terms of contact with European powers and the availability of new technologies, such as photography. With this in mind, it appears that neither modern European nor traditional Persian elements alone are characteristic of royal art during the Qajar period; rather, the mixing of the two is the essential quality of this art. Qajar art was neither “an off-shoot of European easel painting”⁹ nor solely informed by Persian antiquity, but was a constant negotiation between the two which changed over time. Thus, as the relationships between European powers and Iran progressed, European elements became more prevalent in Qajar art, peaking during Naser al-Din Shah’s reign. Though art in this period experienced change, the intention behind the shahs’ royal images remained consistent. Therefore, Qajar rulers used traditional and western elements to display the power and legitimacy of their position and their dynasty.

The Qajar period began in the late 18th century, when with the backing of Turkic tribal forces the notoriously cruel Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar eliminated the potential heirs of the Zand dynasty, established his capital at Tehran, and crowned himself shah. Aqa Muhammad Khan was a member of a sect of the Qajar tribe, a Turkic shepherd-warrior people from northern Persia. The first Qajar ruler was assassinated in 1797, living less than a year after his coronation. It has been noted that Aqa Muhammad Shah died “before his royal image makers were able to formulate a personalized iconography of power for him.”¹⁰ There are few images of him available for analysis, however, there are a handful of portraits from late in his reign, as well as records of images he used to decorate his royal spaces; both, of which can be used to form conclusions about his use of art. Although Aqa Muhammad Shah’s royal art does not show much European influence, his use of traditional Persian imagery is worth discussing because it laid the foundation for artistic themes that his successors would use in combination with European elements. An important aspect of the art produced under Aqa Muhammad Shah

⁹ Diba, “Wall Painting,” 5.

¹⁰ Layla Diba, “Images of Power and the Power of Images,” in *Royal Persian Painting*, ed. Layla Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar (London: Tauris, 1998), 53.

was its visual connections to the Safavid dynasty, which had ruled Persia from 1501 until being driven out by an Afghan army in 1736. The Qajar tribesmen had been supporters of the Safavid rulers, and thus saw their people as the Safavids' rightful successors.¹¹ Two short-lived dynasties ruled between the Safavids and the Qajars: the Afsharid dynasty and the Zand dynasty, which overlapped in time but operated in different areas of Iran. The new Qajar shah presented himself as the rightful successor to the Safavids using two visual techniques: first, by depicting himself with Safavid artifacts, and second, by displaying his victory over the usurping Afsharid and Zand dynasties. Portraits of the shah demonstrate both of these strategies. In the few images of the shah produced during his reign, he is pictured with a Safavid sword.¹² Shortly after his coronation, he symbolically removed this sword from the tomb of Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili, the patriarch of the Safavid dynasty, pledging to continue the Safavids' legacy by using the sword to defend Shi'ism.¹³ He is also pictured wearing the Kayanid crown, created at his request for his coronation. In his comprehensive article about the history of the Kayanid crown, Abbas Amanat points out that the shah refused to wear Nader Shah's crown, preferring to have a new one made on the model of the late Safavid Qizilbash fabric cap.¹⁴ Nader Shah was the founder of the enemy Afsharid dynasty, with which Aqa Muhammad did not want to be associated. Instead, he made a "leap into the past" by creating a crown "inspired by Safavid headgear."¹⁵ The shah is also pictured with jewel-encrusted armbands that had belonged to the Safavids. Besides simply linking him with the Safavid rulers, Aqa Muhammad Shah's regalia helped establish his position as rightful ruler because he had defeated the Afshar and Zand rulers to obtain the armbands and the Kayanid crown's jewels. Amanat writes that Aqa Muhammad "had fought long and hard for these paraphernalia of power, killing, torturing, and blinding at least two contenders from the vanquished houses of Zand and Afshar."¹⁶ The gemstones and pearls that decorate the Kayanid crown were

¹¹ Diba, "Images of Power," 33.

¹² Abbas Amanat, "The Kayanid Crown and Qajar Reclaiming of Royal Authority," *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1-4 (2001): 23.

¹³ Amanat, "Kayanid Crown," 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶ Amanat, "Kayanid Crown," 20.

most likely taken from the Zands, and the armbands were stolen from the Zand crown prince Luft Ali, who was subsequently blinded and executed. The first Qajar ruler thus aimed to emphasize his connection with the Safavids both by appropriating “the visual language of Safavid power” through his use of Safavid regalia,¹⁷ and by demonstrating his superior power when compared with false successors to the Safavids through displaying his spoils of war.

In addition to employing the visual language of the Safavids, Aqa Muhammad Shah integrated the visual language of the mythical Persian past in his decorative projects. In the palace he built at his birthplace, Astarabad, an image of the legendary combat between Persian heroes Rustam and Isfamiyar adorned the gateway.¹⁸ Paintings of the adventures of Rustam and those of various other Persian heroes decorated the palace’s audience hall.¹⁹ According to Layla Diba, Rustam was “traditionally considered as the protector of Persian monarchs and was instrumental in their rise to power;” thus, the presence of his image acted “as a visible reminder of the Qajars’ legitimacy.”²⁰ Being the founder of a dynasty built through force and violence, the new shah was not fully established as legitimate ruler of Persia, forcing him to lean on already established imagery associated with power and glory. To this end, he employed both symbolically significant mythical figures and Safavid imagery in his royal art. The shah aimed to identify himself both with “the victories of his immediate predecessors and the glories of ancient rulers.”²¹ The association of oneself with one’s predecessors, both immediate, ancient, and mythical, continued to be part of royal art during the reigns of Fath Ali Shah and Nasir al-Din Shah.

Fath Ali Qajar became shah upon the death of his uncle, Aqa Muhammad Shah. The numerous colourful and lavishly ornamented portraits of the second Qajar ruler are perhaps the most famous works of Qajar art. Despite accusations of frivolity and decadence by scholars such as Laurence Binyon, Layla Diba argues that Fath Ali Shah “fully understood the power of images and used them

¹⁷ Diba, “Images of Power,” 33.

¹⁸ Diba, “Images of Power,” 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

²¹ Diba, “Images of Power,” 34.

systematically to consolidate his dynasty.”²² He had the means to invest in royal art, as his uncle had left him a relatively stable country, money, and an assembly of artists at his disposal.²³ He commissioned many monumental portraits, wall paintings, and rock-reliefs depicting himself and his court, leading both royal and public spaces to function “as a lavish stage for images designed to convey the pageantry and splendor of Qajar rule.”²⁴ Fath Ali Shah’s lavish spending on artwork, among other things, contributed to a decline in his reputation in the 1830s.²⁵ The cursory and dismissive nature of art history covering his artistic endeavours can perhaps be attributed to this deteriorating public opinion about his competence as shah. His overspending and excessive production of royal artwork also caused him and by proxy his art, to be viewed as frivolous and superficial, inviting comments such as Laurence Binyon’s. Extravagant spending aside, however, Fath Ali Shah’s artistic endeavours must be understood as a concerted “quest for dynastic legitimacy” that ultimately missed the mark.²⁶

Like his uncle before him, Fath Ali Shah sought to link himself with his immediate predecessors to establish his position as legitimate ruler. While Aqa Muhammad Shah linked himself to the Safavid dynasty, Fath Ali Shah emphasized his connection with Aqa Muhammad himself to showcase the hereditary nature of the new Qajar dynasty. In 1812, the shah commissioned two larger-than-life group scenes, one featuring himself and the other his uncle, to be painted side-by-side in the citadel palace of Sulaymaniyah in Karaj. In one wall painting, Aqa Muhammad was seated and encircled by thirteen chiefs of the Qajar tribe in military garb. In the other, Fath Ali Shah sat surrounded by twelve of his sons, all of whom wear crowns.²⁷ Diba writes that the image of Aqa Muhammad Shah lent Fath Ali Shah “historical legitimacy” by acting as a genealogical tree.²⁸ This painted genealogical tree demonstrates that Aqa Muhammad earned the right to rule through his military valour (implied through the tribesmen’s

²² Layla Diba, “Qajar Photography and its Relationship to Iranian Art,” *History of Photography* 37, no. 1 (2013): 85.

²³ Diba, “Images of Power,” 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*.

²⁷ Diba, “Images of Power”, 39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

military outfits), and like any legitimate king he passed that right on hereditarily. The adjacent image of Fath Ali Shah and his sons demonstrates that the dynasty will persist into the future; the crowns that his sons wear imply that one day Fath Ali Shah will pass on the kingship to one of them. Images of Fath Ali Shah often feature his children alongside him. The shah had over one hundred children, and sought to demonstrate his virility and fruitfulness by depicting them in art. By showing off his progeny, he assured viewers that there was no shortage of heirs to the Qajar throne, lending the dynasty an appearance of stability and “continued prosperity.”²⁹ Fath Ali Shah also emphasized his connection with the Safavids, and by doing so solidified his link to Aqa Muhammad, who had so avidly adopted their image. In a 1797 portrait by Mirza Baba, Fath Ali Shah is depicted with the Safavid sword that Aqa Muhammad retrieved from the Safavid tomb, as well as the jewelled Safavid armbands (see Fig. 1).³⁰ The shah also redecorated and restored Safavid structures in Isfahan, the former Safavid capital, including the Hasht-Bihisht pavilion.³¹ His investment in Safavid regalia and monuments demonstrates his desire to maintain a connection with them as well as with his uncle, proving himself the legitimate king of Iran.

Fath Ali Shah also employed ancient Persian images, both historical and mythical, in royal artwork to reinforce the legitimacy of his position. The shah’s artists mined the art of the Persian Achaemenid and Sasanian dynasties (550-330 BC and 224-651 AD, respectively) for elements to use in their own art. Particularly striking are the seven rock reliefs depicting the shah and his sons that he commissioned to be built throughout Iran. These reliefs were modelled after the Sasanian and Achaemenid rock reliefs scattered across Iran, and were “deliberately situated in proximity to Sasanian and Achaemenid sites”³² and “locations associated with Persia’s ancient past or religious practices;”³³ for example, one was located at the Qu’ran gate in Shiraz through which pilgrims pass on their way to shrines. These images were important because they were publicly located and widely visible,

²⁹ Ibid., 36.

³⁰ Amanat, “Kayanid Crown,” 23.

³¹ Diba, “Images of Power,” 40.

³² Diba, “Wall Paintings,” 16.

³³ Diba, “Images of Power,” 41.

unlike art commissioned for the shah's royal spaces. The reliefs utilize a Sasanian and Achaemenid medium (rock), and they also appropriate the style of the ancient reliefs. In both the old and new reliefs, figures are uniform, frontal and flat. The Qajar rock reliefs also borrowed content from the Sasanian and Achaemenid reliefs to "articulate a visual display of power."³⁴ Fath Ali Shah commissioned a rock relief in the Tangeh Savashi mountain pass depicting himself and his sons engaged in a hunt. This relief is reminiscent of the Sasanian rock relief at Taq-i Bustan which depicts the boar hunt of Khusraw II, a Sasanian king.³⁵ The Qajar relief at Rayy depicting Fath Ali Shah taming a lion shows a connection to Achaemenid reliefs, which often included lions and sometimes depicted a ruler battling a lion, for example in a relief at Persepolis.³⁶ Both the Qajar and the ancient rock reliefs aimed to "evoke a masculine world of virility and strength" by picturing rulers in combat with animals.³⁷ Qajar usage of the medium, content, and style of ancient art, as well as the strategic placement of the new reliefs, was an attempt to gain legitimacy by identifying with the greatness and glory of two ancient Persian empires.

Wall paintings that decorated Fath Ali Shah's palaces also drew on the Sasanian and Achaemenid traditions, primarily by appropriating artistic forms and content from ancient rock reliefs and Sasanian wall painting. The majority of royal wall murals "showed the shah in monumental group scenes of enthronement, hunting, and battle crowded with numerous supporting figures."³⁸ Various scholars have discussed the visual similarities between the configuration and organization of Sasanian rock reliefs and wall paintings and Fath Ali Shah's wall paintings. The mural depicting a seated Fath Ali Shah surrounded by his sons and various members of his court at the Negarestan palace in Tehran exemplified these formal similarities. In her article "Wall Painting and Imagery Before the Qajars," Layla Diba notes that the Negarestan mural's "constant repetition" of tightly packed courtiers arranged in uniform frontal poses "bespeak[s] the influence of of ancient rock reliefs."³⁹ The flatness and rigidity of the figures, isolated

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ J.P. Luft, "The Qajar Rock Reliefs," *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1-4 (2001): 31-32.

³⁶ Diba, "Images of Power," 40.

³⁷ Diba, "Images of Power," 40.

³⁸ Ibid., 36.

³⁹ Diba, "Wall Painting," 6.

from each other yet close together, also revive characteristics of what little is left of Sasanian mural painting, especially the murals at the Sasanian palace of Kuj-i Khwajah in southeast Iran.⁴⁰ Remains and descriptions of the wall paintings decorating the reception hall of this palace match the composition of Fath Ali Shah's Negarestan palace painting. Both were composed of rectangular murals that spanned three walls, and featured the ruler at the centre surrounded by courtiers. Figures in Fath Ali Shah's painting also demonstrate similar physical characteristics and costumes to those in reconstructions of the Kuj-i Khwajah wall paintings. In both works the figures "display heroic and regal proportions (broad shoulders, tapering waists), attributes (beards and crowns), and costumes (elaborate robes with borders)."⁴¹ Both the Sasanian and Qajar murals' size, large number of courtiers, regal figures, and "lavish patterning and gilding" were intended to demonstrate the "magnificence and rigid ceremonial of the imperial court" according to Layla Diba.⁴² As in the case of the rock reliefs, Fath Ali Shah aimed to associate himself with the ancient Sasanian dynasty to establish the legitimacy of his reign.

Like his uncle, Fath Ali Shah drew on the mythical Persian past by identifying himself with well-known heroic warriors and rulers from a distant Persian "golden age." Layla Diba notes that the "golden radiance of the shah's robe and his jewelled regalia evoke the sacred aura (*farr-i izadi*) of Persia's ancient kings." This technique is evident in Mirza Baba's 1798 painting "Fath Ali Shah Enthroned."⁴³ The shah followed in his uncle's footsteps when he commissioned painter Mih'r Ali to decorate his new Isfahan palace, *Imarat-i Naw*, with images of legendary Persian heroes. The previously discussed rock relief at Rayy also evokes ancient Persian mythology through the image of the lion. The lion is a significant symbol in Persian myth, as heroes and rulers like Rustam, Alexander, and Bahram Gur often proved their strength by fighting lions and "sometimes had to defeat lions to attain the throne."⁴⁴ Thus, Fath Ali Shah uses a familiar mythical narrative to associate himself with these heroes, and to imply that his abilities and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Diba, "Wall Painting," 6.

⁴² Diba, "Images of Power," 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

right to rule matched those of mythical Persian figures.

The royal art that Fath Ali Shah commissioned also involved European elements. Increased European contact influenced Qajar royal art in a variety of areas, affecting the art's medium, content, and intended audience. Advancing relationships with European powers and Russia in the early 19th century led the shah to orient aspects of his artistic projects towards European tastes and conventions. During Fath Ali Shah's reign, large-scale oil painting on canvas became a common medium for royal paintings.⁴⁵ This differed from earlier Iranian painting conventions, which had typically included large-scale wall painting, manuscript illustration, and miniature-scale painting. The use of oil paint and canvas was a European import that the shah used in tandem with traditional Persian mediums such as wall painting and rock reliefs. Royal paintings under Fath Ali Shah also featured Europeans, an uncommon practice in earlier Persian painting. European visitors to the Qasr-i Qajar palace in Tehran noticed paintings of Westerners in various niches, as well as larger portraits of European women.⁴⁶ At the Qajar citadel palace in Tabriz, Europeans and Persians were featured together in a mural cycle that portrayed Fath Ali Shah's military victories over Russian troops.⁴⁷ Depictions of Europeans in painting demonstrate both increased contact with and understanding of European culture, as in the case of the Qasr-i Qajar paintings, and a propagandistic attempt to depict the Qajars "as equal or perhaps superior participants" to Europeans on the world stage, as in the case of the Russo-Persian war murals.⁴⁸ This goal is also evident in the wall paintings of the Negarestan palace's audience hall, which picture foreign envoys and officials paying homage to the shah,⁴⁹ suggesting his equal status with the rulers of the foreigners' home countries.

An important aspect of Fath Ali Shah's external orientation of royal Persian art was the gifting of royal portraits to foreign rulers and officials. He often gave portraits of himself as presents to visiting dignitaries and ambassadors. Between 1798 and 1822, the shah sent more than fifteen portraits to the rulers of England, Russia, France,

⁴⁵ Flood, "Prophet to Postmodernism," 35.

⁴⁶ Willem Floor, "Art and Artists in Qajar Persia," *Muqarnas* 16 (1999): 137.

⁴⁷ Diba, "Images of Power," 39.

⁴⁸ Diba, "Images of Power," 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

and India.⁵⁰ These paintings “acted as portable vehicles projecting the image of Qajar authority abroad,” and were a response to the “very real possibility of foreign domination.”⁵¹ According to Layla Diba, the threat of foreign interference in Iran “necessitated the formulation of an image of Persian power abroad.”⁵² To this end, Fath Ali Shah employed the common European convention of portrait gifting to convey his wealth, implied through his lavish regalia and costumes, his military prowess, and his always conspicuously displayed Safavid sword.⁵³ Much of Fath Ali Shah’s royal art demonstrates a shift from the royal art of his uncle and other earlier Persian rulers in terms of its intended audience. Though both Fath Ali and his predecessor used art to portray themselves as powerful and legitimate rulers, the former’s art was often intended to impress important Europeans, both visiting and abroad. The European elements of his royal art, especially those that suggested his equality with European rulers, were also intended to give Iranians confidence in their ruler’s ability to navigate world politics. The targets of his artistic projects were both internal and external, Persian and non-Persian.

Naser al-Din Shah continued Fath Ali Shah’s attempts to impress both Iranians and the world through art. His royal art differs from Fath Ali Shah’s, however, in that it displays increased usage of European and modern artistic styles and techniques. In his article “The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,” Ali Behdad describes Naser al-Din as “a ‘modern-minded’ (mutajaddid) king” who was “fascinated by western technologies and European literature and paintings.”⁵⁴ Naser al-Din Shah was the longest reigning Qajar shah, ruling from the time of his father Muhammad Shah’s death in 1848 until his own death in 1896. Photography, which became popular during Naser al-Din’s rule, played a critical role in his artistic endeavours. He “eagerly adopted” most modern European technologies, and photography was no exception.⁵⁵ His enthusiastic embrace of photography did not, however, completely

⁵⁰ Floor, “Art and Artists,” 135.

⁵¹ Diba, “Images of Power,” 40.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ali Behdad, “The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography,” *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1-4 (2001): 147.

⁵⁵ Oleg Grabar, “Reflections on Qajar Art and Its Significance,” *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1-4 (2001): 185.

overtake royal painting and other more traditional mediums. The shah “recognized the potential of photography...to project an image of a modern monarchy,” but he continued to use “more traditional forms of visual imagery.”⁵⁶ He used a combination of modern and traditional, European and Persian art forms and technologies to “construct an image of the ruler in much the same way that Fath Ali Shah had,” and that Aqa Muhammad Shah had done before him--an image of power and legitimacy.⁵⁷

Naser al-Din Shah’s royal artists adopted elements of European painting in a variety of ways. Portraits of the Shah possess an increasing level of Western artistic qualities when compared with Fath Ali Shah’s royal portraits. In “Architecture and Decoration of the Gulistan Palace,” Jennifer Scarce writes that many of his portraits depict him “with an increasing simplicity of dress far removed from the flamboyance of Fath Ali Shah.” Thus, clothing similar to European military uniforms replaced Fath Ali’s lavish robes, and a black lambskin cap “replaced the extravagant headdresses of the early Qajar period.”⁵⁸ Unlike Fath Ali Shah’s portraits, Naser al-Din Shah’s display subdued colours and minimal gilding and ornamentation. The mood of the paintings is generally more somber and austere. Finbarr Barry Flood argues that Naser al-Din’s artists “mined European royal portraiture for inspiration,” which involved appropriating colouring and costumes, as well as poses.⁵⁹ Naser al-Din Shah is always pictured either seated in a chair or standing, whereas Fath Ali Shah was often seated on the floor in his portraits, which was perhaps too “oriental” a pose for the modern-minded monarch.

Naser al-Din Shah went to great lengths to provide his painters with the ability to integrate Western artistic conventions into their work. During his reign he sent many artists to Europe to study, including court painters Abul Hasan Ghaffari and Mirza Ali Akbar. Ghaffari was sent to Italy in 1861, and upon his return he was commissioned to teach painting at the Dar al-Funun school in Tehran, from which promising artists would be selected to work for the Qajar court.⁶⁰ In

⁵⁶ Diba, “Qajar Photography,” 88.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Scarce, “Architecture and Decoration of the Gulistan Palace,” *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1-4 (2001): 112-113.

⁵⁹ Flood, “Prophet to Postmodernism,” 35.

⁶⁰ Layla Diba, “Muhammad Ghaffari: The Persian Painter of Modern Life,” *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2012): 647.

“Muhammad Ghaffari: The Persian Painter of Modern Life,” Layla Diba notes that Ghaffari made his students copy prints of works by Italian artists such as Titian and Raphael, “instead of the works of Persian master manuscript painters.”⁶¹ Akbar’s career followed a similar trajectory in that after studying at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris, he taught a “Europeanized academic” style of easel painting to students at the *Dar al-Funun*.⁶² By appointing painters trained in European academic painting to teaching positions, the shah built a new artistic tradition and ensured that it would be passed on to the next generation of painters. The shah also imported European teachers to work at the *Dar al-Funun*. The skill level of Naser al-Din’s painters and that of their students was increasingly measured by their ability to paint in a style of “perfect European realism,” achieved in part by European techniques such as *chiaroscuro* and the law of proportions, which reduced the characteristic flatness of Persian painting.⁶³ The shah created “picture galleries based on the European model” in his royal spaces,⁶⁴ and often asked artists to paint copies of European landscapes to hang in these galleries.⁶⁵ The replica landscapes were often “proudly displayed alongside the European originals” to demonstrate that his artists’ abilities were on par with those of their European counterparts.⁶⁶ He shared with his predecessor the desire to display equality with European powers.

Despite this Europeanization of painting, royal art under Naser al-Din Shah continued to include traditional Persian elements. Artists of this period often blended European and Persian elements within a single painting. In various paintings, including Ghaffari’s 1854 and 1857 seated portraits, the shah layers a robe of “patterned Kerman shawl fabric” on top of a European style coat and pants.⁶⁷ In Bahram Kirmanshahi’s 1857 portrait Naser al-Din Shah looks particularly traditional, as he is pictured with diamond armbands and a sword, accessories based on the Safavid regalia worn by his ancestors. These clothes and accessories, however, adorn a body that appears stylistically

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Diba, “Qajar Photography,” 86.

⁶⁴ Floor, “Art and Artists,” 138.

⁶⁵ Diba, “Qajar Photography,” 95.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Scarce, “Gulistan Palace,” 113.

different from the bodies of Fath Ali Shah and Aqa Muhammad Shah. A new focus on light and shadow gives the shah's body a depth that is absent from earlier royal Persian portraits. This hybrid nature of painting under Naser al-Din Shah is the result of an attempt to impress a variety of people with diverse opinions. In a changing global landscape, the shah needed to demonstrate that he was able to keep up with modern European techniques, conventions, and styles, both to Europeans and to fellow Persians in favour of modernization and reform. At the same time, and often within the same pieces of art, he attempted to appeal to Persians with more traditional tastes.

Photography under Naser al-Din Shah displays similar trends as does painting. It is important to briefly address photography when discussing Naser al-Din's artistic endeavours, as photography was a favourite medium of the shah. This may be explained in part by the fact that it was also a hobby of his; the shah himself took about half of the approximately 40, 000 photographic prints in the Gulistan Palace Library's collection.⁶⁸ Both Queen Victoria and Emperor Nicolas I gifted photography apparatus to Muhammad Shah, Naser al-Din's father.⁶⁹ The increased contact with European powers and threat of domination during Naser al-Din's reign provided him both opportunity and the impetus to "adopt certain innovations and technologies, such as photography" to demonstrate that Iran was "a modern nation-state" that would not be easily taken advantage of.⁷⁰ Naser al-Din Shah set out to use photography in the same way as European royals did; it was used to "record court life, document architectural monumental and archeological sites, to chronicle the shah's trips, and to illustrate pictorial reports documenting his domain."⁷¹ His artists also used it to assist them in creating a naturalistic and realistic style of painting. Photography was used as a tool to assist artists in producing art in the style of academic European realism that the shah was so fond of, specifically by helping artists learn "perspective, simulation, chiaroscuro and the application of the law of proportions."⁷² Artists employed these techniques in both landscape and portrait painting in an attempt

⁶⁸ Diba, "Painter of Modern Life," 651.

⁶⁹ Behdad, "Powerful Art," 144.

⁷⁰ Diba, "Painter of Modern Life," 645.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 651.

⁷² Zahra Fanaei et al, "An Analytical and Comparative Study of Male and Female Images in Qajar Dynasty Paintings," *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 3 (2016): 420.

to meet the standards of European painting.

As in painting, photographs commissioned by Naser al-Din Shah blended European and Persian elements. In the case of photography, a modern technology imported from Europe, the medium itself acted as a sign of the shah's Western orientation. Ali Behdad aptly describes photography of this period as a tool that "helped visually inscribe Iran in colonial relations of power, and an efficient vehicle for the indigenous monarch to empower himself within Iran."⁷³ The shah appealed to tradition-conscious Iranians by commissioning many photographs of his harem, a symbol of power that likely would not translate well in Europe, where rulers had a single consort. He had himself photographed by Antoin Sevruguin while seated in front of the Peacock Throne, built by Nadir Shah Afshar, which acts as "a symbol of his monarchical power" familiar to Iranians.⁷⁴ He used photography to connect himself with the Achaemenid and Sasanian dynasties, continuing his predecessors' project in a new medium. He commissioned photographers "to build a large photographic archive of Persian antiquity," which included images of significant Achaemenid and Sasanid sites such as Persepolis and Takht-i Jamshid.⁷⁵ Like Fath Ali Shah and Aqa Muhammad Shah, Naser al-Din "understood the power of affiliations" with the historical Persian past.⁷⁶ He also understood the potential benefits of combining these affiliations with western mediums, such as photography, and European painting techniques. To a greater extent than his predecessors, Naser al-Din Shah had to project an image of power and legitimacy to a heterogeneous audience. To solidify his position as ruler he had to demonstrate his ability to lead the country into a new modern era to Europeans and fellow modern-minded Iranians. At the same time, he drew on traditional and familiar Persian imagery to demonstrate his legitimacy among tradition-minded Iranians.

Continuity and change are particularly salient concepts in the history of Qajar royal art. It is difficult to argue that either one or the other best characterizes Qajar art, as both were constant features of the period that acted side by side. Though the extent to which

⁷³ Behdad, "Powerful Art," 151.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷⁵ Behdad, "Powerful Art," 150.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Qajar rulers employed Western artistic conventions, techniques, and styles increased later in the Qajar period, both European and Persian elements are significant aspects in the art of this dynasty. The Qajar period is marked by continuity in the intended effects of royal art. The use of traditional and Western elements, though varying over time, aimed to present the Qajar shahs as powerful and legitimate rulers, deserving of kingship and competent enough to handle the position. For Qajar rulers, particularly Fath Ali Shah and Naser al-Din Shah, simply linking themselves to a glorious Persian past was not enough; they had to demonstrate that they could successfully lead their country into the future, which was increasingly modern and Western. Their attempts to prove themselves to a diverse audience has sometimes led scholars and critics to condemn Qajar art as an ugly, chimerical school of art that is undeserving of the serious attention given to pre-Qajar art. Casting aside the belief that Qajar art is tainted by its European aspects, however, opens the door to a fascinating discussion about the changing world that the Qajars faced and how they adapted to it.

In a broader sense, the history of the hybrid nature of Qajar art could contribute to a discussion of the tensions between Westernization and traditionalism that are so prevalent in various arenas of Iranian society.

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