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**Review**

## The neglected Middle Eastern Art: **Painting**

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History, especially in lands where the arts are immediately associated with court patronage, can be very much clarified and better apprehended by looking at the material culture of the period in question. In this series of articles dealing with the arts and the material culture of Middle Eastern lands, the immediate aim is to represent the connection between history, religion, ethnic/royal identity, politics, norms, society and how these are mirrored through art. A second aim is to highlight near-hidden gems of the Islamic artistic repertoire, bringing into question widespread assumptions that Islam may have prohibited the blossoming of artistic production.

In this first part of the series, the medium chosen is a rather neglected art form of the Islamic world: painting. Iranian (Persian) manuscript production has a very long history which both precedes and influences the Islamic era. Through antiquity, Persian painting has been saved on walls and ancient artefacts and there remains a fair amount of manuscript pieces from the Abbasid period. But the widespread use of manuscript painting is witnessed after the 1219 Mongol invasion and the establishment of the Ilkhanid Empire. This period saw an immense artistic flourishing, in which Chinese craftsmen were employed along local ones and a beautiful synthesis of Persian and Chinese artistic trends created new artistic forms.

The illustrated book became a very important medium for the dispersal of knowledge for the traveling Mongol dynasties, but had a profound effect on later Iranian arts too. After the fall of the Ilkhanate, book production continued to prosper and was commissioned by royal courts almost without a break.

The most important book to be commissioned throughout Persian (non-religious) history is the Shahnameh, or "Book of Kings"; an epic poem written down by the poet Firdausi ca. 977-1010, which narrates the history of Iran including both mythical and historical occurrences. These fables and stories became the basis for the launching of the imagination of many court ateliers which produced large, illustrated manuscripts with famous Persian his-

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torical scenes such as battles, marriages, conflicts, celebrations, court affairs, religious ceremonies and even mythical encounters and creatures. Apart from the Shahnameh, various other manuscripts remain, such as the various Kalila wa Dimna (a counterpart to Aesop's Fables) and other educational and zoological texts, such as the Manafe-e Hayawan, which outlines the usefulness of organs and animal parts for medicinal purposes.

However, the inspirational pool for book production started getting richer as time went by. The Safavid dynasty, roughly lasting from 1501 to 1722 (but having its Sufi roots in the Safaviyya order in the city of Ardabil since the 1250s) at its peak controlled what is today Iran, Azerbaijan, Armenia, most of Iraq, Georgia, Afghanistan and the Caucasus, including parts of Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Turkey. It managed to establish itself over the whole of the ancient Persian kingdoms, and is the main reason for the Twelver Shi'a Islamic prominence in contemporary Iran.

In the late 16th - early 17th century, under the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas, a turn is taken towards a more 'calligraphic' style in the art of painting; but Shah Abbas's commissioning of the arts was part of a larger successful campaign in reordering and empowering the empire. By building the 'new Isfahan' next to the ruins of the ancient one he not only created a new capital, but refreshed an already prominent power in the region into a fully fledged force in Asia, by restructuring the army, keeping the Ottomans away from Safavid lands and improving relations with the Europeans.

The arts were not revamped under Shah Abbas for the first time; his predecessor, Shah Tahmasp (in the first Safavid capital, Qazvin) commissioned fine arts and manuscript creation fervently; Shah Abbas took these passions, together with a renewed interest in grand architecture and the help of Qazvin's ateliers, and created a unique imperial architectural and artistic project due to his enlarged financial cache.

In this climate of cultural and economic flourishing, Reza Abbasi, one of the most famous and revered artists in the history of Persian painting, made a name of himself and directed the Isfahan atelier. His most attributed style is portraiture in the 'calligraphic' style, even though a closer look into his work will reveal a diverse and very rich stylistic personality, as well as a sensitive hand almost unparalleled in the region's artistic history.

Historically, painters and craftsmen worked in guilds, under the direction of atelier chiefs and usually had little space for personal growth and recognition. It is quite rare to come across signed work and 'famous painters' that predate the 17th century, unlike 'western painting' which remained largely centered on the artist's own signature. Signatures are indeed found in many manuscripts, but they are sparse and sometimes confusing since the names are mostly connected to townships, guilds, or even later art historians who discovered the books, rather than artists' names. Reza, however, did sign his work, and – as he was influenced both by the earlier Safavid court painter Shaykh Mohammad and by European painting – created full-page portraits and scenes with his signature vividly placed on the bottom. His earlier work is signed 'Aqa Reza' (confusingly so, since a Mughal Indian painter also shared this name at the time), while he worked under the direction of the guild's head, Sadiqi Beg. But with the move of the capital to Isfahan, Reza became the head calligrapher of the atelier and was renamed Ali Reza Abbasi.

After a period in which he left the royal atelier and started drawing on his own, being preoccupied with non-courtly figures (dervishes, old men, wrestlers) he returned to the court. Upon this return, his style changed markedly. Thicker lines, melon-shaped bodies and less naturalization together with the use of yellow and purple characterize this last phase of his, which we now call the 'calligraphic style' for which he has been so prized.

Even though to many art historians' views (including myself) Reza's paintings outside the court atelier (in pencil and unfinished, at times) might be even more interesting and eso-

teric, the court-commissioned works' stylistic superiority for which he is revered are truly a tribute to the material culture and the aesthetic milieu of courtly and non-courtly life of the 18th century. Gold garments, flower motifs, as well as European influences (which in the late 17th and 18th centuries become much more apparent in Iranian arts) are all recorded in his painting, giving historians and art historians alike unprecedented and more personal detail in the social ways, the fashions and the various currents flowing through Isfahan. Moreover, it is one of the few instances in Middle Eastern art history where the biography, artistic tendencies and changes in style of a single artist are so well documented and visible.

Contrary to popular belief which has Islamic arts preoccupied with Quranic production, as well as the prohibition on drawing the human image, such artists surface to negate the stereotypes about Middle Eastern art which remains extensive, rich and diverse. Also, such paintings are an emblem of the centrality the arts held for the courts of Islamic dynasties, contrary to popular belief, from Islam's inception, across its hundreds of dynasties, to this day.

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