

THREE QAJAR EASEL PAINTINGS AND THEIR JOURNEY FROM TEHRAN TO SOFIA

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The reserve collections of the National Art Gallery of Bulgaria include three large-scale oil paintings showing full-length depictions of elaborately-dressed personages. One of them holds flowers and a fruit-basket, while the two others are shown playing musical instruments, i. e., *daf* and *santur*, respectively. The paintings belong to a genre of Qajar art which has sometimes been conveniently considered as portraiture although these representations are certainly too generic to qualify for true portraits. In fact, we know several related “portraits” from the Qajar period, of which some are still preserved in Iran, while others scattered in international collections. A few of them had reached Eastern and Central Europe as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. While connections between Bulgaria and the Qajar dynasty has been established much before Bulgaria’s declaration of independence in 1908, it seems that the artworks under scrutiny would find their way to Sofia later, in the middle of the twentieth century, reflecting the evolving personal, political, and cultural contacts between the two countries. Questions pertaining the iconography, style, authorship, and provenance of these artefacts will be discussed in this paper.

Key words: art, oil painting, Qajar, Sofia

INTRODUCTION

The past decades have seen a renewed interest in the arts of Qajar Iran, at least as far as painting is concerned, and the traces of the negative attitudes towards these arts which characterised much of the twentieth century have mostly disappeared. From the 1940s, first in museums of what was then the Soviet Union, then, from the 1990s and early 2000s onwards, in American and British institutions, and ultimately even in Iran, more and more surveys and exhibitions were devoted to this previously undervalued chapter of Persian art history.¹ Central and Eastern Europe preserves much less material, but it has also contributed to this tendency by major exhibitions in Kozłówka (Poland) and Budapest and a smaller one in Brno.² Now Sofia is hoped to join this series, by the planned restoration and exhibition of three exquisite paintings that are published for the first time in this essay. Apart from admiring their beauty, the three artworks in the National Art Gallery of Bulgaria should also be appreciated from the perspective of the gradual international re-emergence

¹Amiranashvili, Sh. (1940): *Iranskaya stankovaya zhivopis*; Robinson, B. W. – Guadalupi, G. (1990): *Qajar. Court Painting in Persia*; Diba, M. S. – Ekhtiar, M., eds (1998): *Royal Persian Paintings. The Qajar Epoch, 1785-1925*; Sharifzada, M. A. (2003): *Diwarnigari dar Iran (Dawra-yi Zand wa Qajariya dar Shiraz)*; Kelényi, B. – Szántó, I., eds (2015): *Hunar-i Iran-i asr-i Qajar dar majmu'a-ha-yi Majaristan, 1210-1343 q.*

² Majda, T., ed. (1996): *Katalog wystawy sztuka perska okresu kadżarskiego, 1779-1924*; Kelényi, B. – Szántó, I., eds (2010): *Artisans at the Crossroads: Persian Arts of the Qajar Period, 1796-1925*; Dvořáková, S. (2011): *Příběhy tisíce a jedné noci.*

of early modern Persian art: with their introduction to the world, Bulgaria has now repaid its debt in sharing its Qajar treasures with global audiences.³

DISCUSSION

The panels belong to a category of monumental painting which can be described as pseudo-portraiture. Functionally they are early Iranian examples of the European-inspired usage of paintings: no longer being small-scale miniatures on paper, they are framed easel panels to be displayed in luxurious interiors. In a way, they not only imitate the European practice of displaying images but also mimic the European principles of depiction: the three panels appear to depict real persons, but what we see are in fact archetypical representations of courtly characters, not identifiable persons. Hence their designation as pseudo-portraits. Their function is to add to the splendour of the owner who must have been a member of the highest elite of Qajar society, judging by the quality of the artefacts. Despite this, the person of the commissioner is no less elusive to us than the identity of the models. Likewise, no information is currently available about the painter. There is, however, a slight chance that a careful restoration reveals a signature and / or a date, as it happened elsewhere.⁴

On the first painting (inv. no. 1328, fig. 1) we see a female musician playing the *santur* (dulcimer, known in Bulgaria as *cimbal*). Confronting the viewer's gaze, she is shown in a three-quarter profile, clad in a magnificent red robe which is richly studded with pearls and gems at the lower sleeves and the collar (tailored in the Chinese-inspired cloud collar format). The figure is kneeling on a carpet inside a building, in front of an openwork wooden screen and a raised curtain.

The second painting (inv. no. 1329, fig. 2) is the pendant of the first. Its female protagonist, holding a *daf* (tambourine; known in Bulgaria as *dayere*), is similarly positioned in a three-quarter view but, unlike the previous image, she turns to the right, suggesting that the two "pseudo-portraits" may have formed a set and they may have been arranged in their original location in a way so as to face each other. The backgrounds of the paintings are also identical.

Sharing many characteristics with the first two and clearly related to them, the third example (inv. no. 1330, fig. 3) displays marked differences as well. It depicts a standing male figure wearing a pearl-studded crown; he is holding roses in his right hand and a flower basket in his left. While his dress is even more decorative than those depicted on the other paintings, the background is less ornate, partly because of the rather darkened surface of the panel which requires cleaning. Another difference is the square format of this painting as opposed to the pointed top of its counterparts.

The wooden frames of all three panels follow the same scrollwork pattern; most probably they are contemporaneous with the paintings and certainly made in Qajar Iran.

The type of Qajar pseudo-portraits into which the Sofia examples belong are well known, but there are very few close analogies in European public collections. This is because European

³ In addition to the conference at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski", the paintings have been presented by Iván Szántó at the National Art Gallery of Bulgaria "KVADRAT 500" on 31 May, 2016, and in a programme of the Bulgarian Radio which was broadcasted on 27 June, 2016 (*В огледалото на иранското изкуство*, <http://binar.bg/46799/v-ogledaloto-na-iranskoto-izkustvo/>)

⁴ See, for example, Szántó, I. (2012): „Allāh-Wirdī Afshār, Court Painter of 'Abbās Mīrzā”, in Jeremiás É. M., ed.: *At the Gate of Modernism. Qajar Iran in the Nineteenth Century*, 165.

and American museums were not interested in acquiring them during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, having considered them to be too crude for European tastes. They did not fit into the stereotypical Euro-American notion of Persian painting which until recently was almost synonymous with book painting, commonly known as miniature.

In addition, this type of painting is not known to have been presented to European dignitaries by the Qajar rulers themselves. It was typically commissioned for private display in aristocratic or mercantile residences. When the Qajars presented paintings to Europeans those were almost exclusively real portraits of the rulers. Starting with Fath 'Ali Shah in the early nineteenth century, the sending of official portraits to foreign courts became part of the reformed diplomatic practice of the Persian court and remained so until the second half of the nineteenth century. In this way the likenesses of Qajar monarchs have reached St. Petersburg, Paris, London, Vienna, and even New Delhi. Towards the end of the long rule of Nasir al-Din Shah, the spread of photography rendered commemorative portraiture obsolete and the practice came to an end. Thus, when Mozaffar al-Din Shah, the son of Naser al-Din, visited Bulgaria on his way back to Iran in 1900, using the new railway lines, he may not have presented anything than state orders. However, it should be noted that although Mozaffar al-Din Shah did not consider Bulgaria a destination, other than a stopover on his first official European journey, it would still be interesting to carry out research about the material evidence of his stay. As Bulgaria was just about to regain its long-lost independence and Iran feared it would lose its own, both countries were in the process of redefining themselves between east and west.

Turning back to the paintings, there are only a handful of related artworks in Central and Southern Europe, which makes the Sofia examples particularly valuable. The only region where such paintings survive in considerable numbers is the former Russian Empire where they ended up as war-booty during the Russo-Persian wars that lasted until 1828. This is why there are similar examples not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also in Tbilisi, which was the capital of the Caucasian Governor-Generalship. The paintings were chiefly obtained from the palaces of Yerevan and the Tabriz area by governor-generals Aleksey Yermolov (r. 1816-1827) and Ivan Paskevich (r. 1827-1831).⁵ We may single out one example: the "portrait" of a woman with a tambourine (Tbilisi NG, sxm/ag 856) is corresponding to the composition of the Sofia tambourine player.⁶ However, the Tbilisi version is less elaborate, and is later than the Sofia painting. Unlike the Sofia version, it bears the signature of an otherwise unknown painter identified as Shirin(qalam?). Whereas in Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Austria, and modern Hungary we do not have evidence for Qajar "pseudo-portraits", there are two examples in Slovakia, at the Betliar (Betlér) estates of Count Manó Andrassy (1821-1891), a Hungarian aristocrat, who amassed a large collection of exotica during his travels in Asia and Africa in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ The paintings are undated and unsigned but an inscription on one of them identifies the bearded king as Kay Kavus, a legendary king of ancient Iran. While the other painting lacks inscriptions, we immediately recognize there a variation of one of the Sofia paintings, the standing male figure with the flower basket. Although in Betliar he is holding a sceptre in his right hand, instead of roses, his contours are almost the same as in Sofia and the two paintings apparently go back to a common prototype.

⁵ Koshoridze, I. (2008): „Two 18th-Century Royal Palaces in Georgia and Armenia”, *Journal of Persianate Studies*, vol. 1/2, 243–248.

⁶ Koshoridze, I. (2012): *Oriental Collections of the Georgian National Museum*, 113.

⁷ Kelényi, B. – Szántó, I., eds (2010): *Artisans at the Crossroads: Persian Arts of the Qajar Period, 1796-1925*, 46-47.

The Betliar paintings were brought to Europe by an aristocratic adventurer. They were set up in an “oriental room” separate from the collection of European fine arts which signifies that the owners considered them incompatible with the latter, and regarded them disparagingly as oriental fancies, rather than high art.⁸ This was often the fate of even those *real* portraits of Qajar shahs who, aspiring to equal status, sent their likenesses to European rulers. The shahs seldom succeeded, given that their depictions usually ended up far from the imperial portrait galleries. For example, an 1814 gift of Fath ‘Ali Shah to the Prince-Regent of Britain, a huge hunting scene showing the mounted ruler himself, probably by Mehr ‘Ali, was taken to the India Office in London, instead of the royal collections. Later it was sent to New Delhi to decorate with it the ceiling of the newly built viceregal palace. However, instead of glorifying the shah, his name was overpainted, thus he became depersonalised: the designers of the hall were only interested in the oriental, „barbarous” splendour of the ruler, not in his true identity.⁹

But how did the three paintings find their way to Bulgaria? Unfortunately, documents concerning the acquisition have been unavailable in the gallery so far, although it has been suggested that the artefacts may have come from the Boyana Film Studios which were opened in 1962, following the merger of earlier companies. This suggestion could not be confirmed. With respect to their earlier history there is even less certainty, yet we can assume that they stayed in Iran throughout the nineteenth century at least until the end of the Qajar period in 1925. In light of the gifting policy of the dynasty, it is highly unlikely that they made their way to Sofia through the channels of Qajar diplomacy. Nevertheless, the relationship of the Qajar dynasty and Bulgaria did not end with the fall of the dynasty. Quite the opposite, it grew stronger, and ultimately this might serve with a clue regarding the provenance of the paintings. Prince Feridun Mirza (1923-1975), the son of the last Qajar shah, married the daughter of the industrialist Ivan Slavov Guevrenov (1884-1966), and they lived in Bulgaria for a short period. Unfortunately, I could not find any material vestiges of their stay so far, but without doubt such paintings could have been the most poignant decorations for a Qajar residence in exile.

Alternatively, they could have been presented to Bulgaria during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty, the arch-rivals and successors of the Qajars. Given that according to the museum inventories the paintings do not seem to have entered the collections before 1967, the donation could have formed part of a cultural agreement that was set between Bulgaria and Iran in the same year. Signed by foreign ministers Ivan Hristov Bashev (in office: 1962 – 13 December 1971†) and Ardashir Zahedi (in office: 12 January 1966 – 12 September 1971), and published by ‘Ali Akbar Velayati, paragraph no. 4 of the agreement stipulated that cooperation in the field of museums must be strengthened.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

⁸ Basics, B. (2005): *Betlér és Krasznahorka. Az Andrássyak világa*, 114-115.

⁹ Diba, L. S. (2006): „An Encounter Between Qajar Iran and the West: The Rashtrapati Bhavan Painting of Fath Ali Shah at the Hunt”, in Behrens-Abouseif, D. – Vernoit S., eds: *Islamic Art in the Nineteenth Century*, 281-295.

¹⁰ „Muwafaghatnama-yi farhangi bayn-i dawlat-i Shahanshahi-yi Iran wa dawlat-i jumhuriya-yi Bulgharistan”, in Wilayati (Velayati), A. A., ed. (2002): *Asnad-i mu’adilat-i du-janiba-yi Iran ba sayir duwal*, vol. 3, 169: *madda-yi panjum: tarafayn muta’ahidin dar hudud wa imkanat-i khud dar rishtaha-yi zir khahand kard: 1. Sinima, 2. Warzish, 3. Radiyu wa tiliwisyun, 4. Muza wa kitabkhana*.

Could this giving away of Qajar heritage be a sign of the Pahlavi disdain for the previous dynasty? Or there were no ideological motives behind presenting three splendid artefacts to a friendly country?

Probably neither: the Pahlavi donation of the three Sofia paintings is rendered unlikely by the fact that there is no documented case when this kind of pseudo-portrait was presented to a foreign state by the state of Iran during this (or any) period. While the Qajars liked to present their own contemporary portraits and the Pahlavis preferred for gifts archaeological treasures (to underline the immense antiquity and prestige of the land they ruled), it could make little sense to give these paintings to Bulgaria by either dynasty. They could have been inappropriate in content for the Qajars; for the Pahlavis they were irrelevant. In both Iran and Europe, the 1960s were the period when the deflation of Qajar art reached the bottom. Of the two possibilities, namely that 1) Iran officially presented these panels from a reserve collection or 2) that the paintings entered Iran in private hands, no. 2 seems to be the more plausible assumption. The paintings were possibly brought out of Iran by someone for whom they were important, valuable, and probably deeply personal.

In either case, Iran, Bulgaria, and the world seemed to have completely forgotten them until this conference. As soon as they entered the museum, the paintings quickly disappeared from public eye and remained hidden for decades. Thus, now that finally they have come to light, it is my hope that they will stay there to inspire Bulgarians, Iranians, and others alike. Let them express what they are destined for: namely, that true friendship between countries must be constantly maintained and cherished.

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Fig. 1: Woman playing the *santur*. Iran, first half of 19th century, National Art Gallery of Bulgaria, Sofia, inv. no. 1328. Photograph: Iván Szántó, with permission of the National Art Gallery.

Fig. 2: Woman playing the *daf*. Iran, first half of 19th century, National Art Gallery of Bulgaria, Sofia, inv. no. 1329. Photograph: Iván Szántó, with permission of the National Art Gallery.

Fig. 3: Youth holding roses. Iran, first half of 19th century, National Art Gallery of Bulgaria, Sofia, inv. no. 1330. Photograph: Iván Szántó, with permission of the National Art Gallery.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3