

## INTERSECTING IDENTITIES: CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL ALLEGIANCE IN *PORTRAIT OF AN EMIR*

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In Iranian history, the period between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries can be best described as an era of monumental change. Transformations in economics, technology, military administration, and the arts reverberated across the Persian Empire and were further developed by the Qajar dynasty, which was quick to embrace the technological and industrial innovations of modernism.<sup>1</sup> However, the Qajars were also strongly devoted to tradition, and utilized customary Persian motifs and themes to craft an imperial identity that solidified their position as the successors to the Persian imperial lineage.<sup>2</sup> This desire to align with the past manifested in the visual arts, namely in large-scale royal portraiture of the Qajar monarchy and ruling elite. Executed in 1855, *Portrait of an Emir* (Fig. 1) is a depiction of an aristocrat that represents the Qajar devotion to reviving traditional imagery through art in an attempt to craft a nationalist identity. The work portrays a Qajar nobleman dressed in lavish robes and seated on a two-tone carpet within a palatial setting. The subject is identified as Emir Qasem Khan in the inscription that appears to the left of his head.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1. Attributed to Afrasiyab, *Portrait of an Emir*, 1855. Oil on cotton, 59 x 37 in. Brooklyn Museum, accession number 73.145. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles K. Wilkinson, Brooklyn, New York. Image courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

In this paper, I argue that Emir Qasem Khan's portrait, as a pictorial representation of how he presented himself during his lifetime, is a visualization of the different entities, ideas, and traditions that informed his carefully crafted identity as a member of the Qajar court. Through conscious methods of representation and emblematic iconography, the emir's portrait makes discernable connections to traditional, tribal, and contemporary sources, concepts which I define below.

I begin my study with a brief overview of the historical and cultural circumstances surrounding the Qajar ascension to power and the ideological factors that constructed their legacy. After introducing the potential identity of the portrait's sitter, I provide an analysis of *Portrait of an Emir*, which involves examining and interpreting the portrait's various pictorial components and the ways in which they relate to the subject's identity. In this regard, I argue that the portrait draws upon imagery from three main sources: traditionalism, which entails the appropriation of symbols and themes from Persian history; tribal affiliations, which refer to the emir's connections with the tribal Zand dynasty; and contemporary ideas, which constitute the occidental interests of the Qajars and their own artistic innovations and manners of representation. To conclude, I will situate *Portrait of an Emir* within the context of two other Qajar-era portraits to highlight the uniquely personalized nature of this extravagant portrait of a man who certainly must have held an important role in the royal court.

## **Historical and Cultural Development of Qajar Rule**

First, it is important to address the factors that contributed to the formation of a divided Qajar identity, which, in turn, produced the cultural context in which Qasem Khan lived. The first component is the modernist framework within which the Qajars rose to power. After the disintegration of the Safavid Empire in 1736, Persia collapsed into disarray, and two interregnum dynasties, the Afshars and the Zands, respectively governed a fractured kingdom until the Qajars ascended to the throne in 1785. The Qajars unified the Persian Empire by restoring centralized authority to the fragmented territories.<sup>4</sup> Despite their humble origins as nomads, the Qajar monarchs quickly adopted the elaborate court protocol and formalities of earlier Persian court culture in an attempt to legitimize their rule and heighten their reputation.<sup>5</sup> The commissioning of opulent portraits by members of the monarchy and aristocracy, combined with splendid ceremonies and an elaborate displays of wealth, were symbolic of the Qajar consolidation of power and served as ways of maintaining it.<sup>6</sup> Due to the relative stability that came with the Qajars' ascent and the end of the tumultuous eighteenth century, the arts flourished and fulfilled several key political and social purposes.

Portraiture, in particular, not only aided in glorifying the Qajar name but also served as a testament to the ruling elite's wealth and prestige, particularly during the time of Fath-Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834).<sup>7</sup> The Qajars' rise to power came during a time of monumental change in Persia, when developments in technology and industrialization challenged and transformed existing social, political, and economic structures. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also times of increased contact with Europe, particularly with Great Britain, France, and Russia.<sup>8</sup> Cultural exchanges with Europe and contemporary artistic innovations

played central roles in the formation of Qajar identity, as the shahs were adamant about modernizing their empire in areas including formal education, taxation, and urban development.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, as Basil W. Robinson notes, it is significant that much of Qajar painting, while political in nature, was also created with the intention of providing aesthetic pleasure to patrons and viewers alike.<sup>10</sup>

The other side of the Qajar imperial identity was molded by the revival and reconstruction of Persian history through artistic commissions. The rise of Persian nationalism and its close ties to its Zoroastrian roots led to the adoption of pre-Islamic identities and imagery by the modern Qajar rulers.<sup>11</sup> By aligning themselves with the ancient histories and customs of pre-Islamic and early modern Persia, the Qajars legitimized their rule and distanced themselves from the Arab Muslims who had conquered the Sassanian Empire in the seventh century; this trend is sometimes called the movement to reclaim “Persian purism.”<sup>12</sup>

Traditional artistic conventions were highly valued at the Qajar court due to their connections with the esteemed past of Iran. The Qajar monarchy took the revival of traditional imagery to new heights, significantly due to the contributions of upper-class aristocrats.<sup>13</sup> The aristocracy, composed of affluent elites ranging from physicians to merchants, was an integral part of the Qajars’ court who attained immense levels of wealth and power that they frequently exercised through ostentatious displays. As a result of the religious hierarchy’s consolidations of power under Fath-Ali Shah—a systematic change that commenced under the Safavids and culminated under the Qajars—a wealthy aristocracy emerged that had the ability to independently commission art to an unprecedented degree.<sup>14</sup> Because they possessed the financial means, the aristocracy patronized art that reflected contemporary interests while also incorporating elements from traditional sources.<sup>15</sup> Qasem Khan’s portrait is thus substantially tied to earlier Persian ideas of visual splendor and court culture, namely those of the Sassanian and Safavid eras.

## **An Examination of Identity**

Before proceeding with an analysis of the portrait, it is critical to examine the emir’s possible identity, as the details of his character shed light on the multifarious nature of his artistic portrayal. As Michael Chagnon states, it is possible that this man is Emir Mohammed Qasem Khan-e Qajar Qovanlu, a military officer in the Qajar army from the Qovanlu branch, who served during the time of Fath-Ali Shah and was the grandfather of Naser al-Din Shah.<sup>16</sup> He was also the father of Malik Jahan Khanoom, Naser al-Din Shah’s mother and one of the most influential women of the Qajar era.<sup>17</sup> As his title indicates, Emir Qasem Khan was a high-ranking officer who served the Qajar royal family for most of his career. In 1833, he was entitled *Emir-i Kabir*, a senior rank equating to “grand commander.” His father was a chief of the Qajar tribe in the eighteenth century, while his mother was a Zand princess, which perhaps accounts for his Zand turban.<sup>18</sup> The emir continued to enjoy close relations with the Qajar royal household throughout his life, marrying the second daughter of Fath-Ali Shah, Princess Begom Jan Qajar.<sup>19</sup> As an esteemed member of the Qajar aristocracy who valued the legitimacy that came with invoking Persian

tradition, Emir Qasem Khan sought to align himself with artistic and representational tropes from Persian history.

### Traditional and Historical Modes of Representation

The emir's portrait parallels *Shah Suleiman I and His Courtiers*, a Safavid painting from the Saint Petersburg *muraqqa*, in a number of ways that construct perceivable aspects of his identity (Fig. 2). Safavid cosmopolitan culture and art, both in terms of iconography and painterly style, served as models for Qajar emulation and formed the basis from which the Qajar artistic tradition emerged.<sup>20</sup> In his portrait, Qasem Khan kneels on a carpet with dark blue and yellow intertwining floral motifs. In the foreground of the composition sits a still life containing bowls of pomegranates, apricots, oranges, and spices, in addition to kabob skewers and a piece of bread, all components of royal feasts and ceremonies (Fig. 3).<sup>21</sup> Two books stacked on top of one another are also placed to the emir's left. These items reference Persian rituals and domestic observances, and their symbolic incorporation creates another connection to the past.<sup>22</sup> While the presence of fruits, food, and spices allude to the opulence of the royal court, the books act as social identifiers, providing clues to the role that Qasem Khan played in the Qajar administration. They also indicate wisdom and the acquisition of knowledge, both theological and temporal, and demonstrate that the emir was a member of the educated cultural elite.<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of these items perceptibly links Qajar-era portraiture with earlier artistic renditions of royal court gatherings.

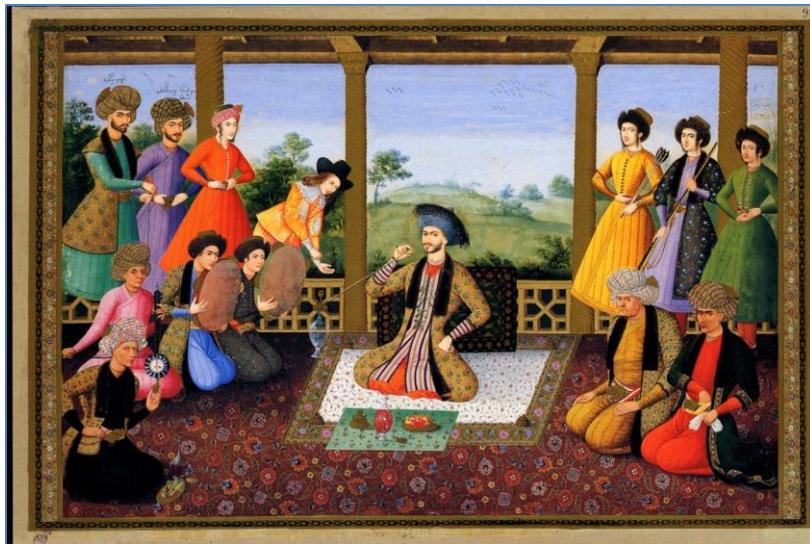


Figure 2. Aliquli Jabbari, *Shah Suleiman I and His Courtiers*, Isfahan, Iran, folio 89a, ca. 1660s–1670s. Opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper; 11 x 16.5 in. Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg, Russia. Image as published in Oleg F. Akimushkin, *The St. Petersburg Muraqqa: Album of Indian and Persian Miniatures from the 16<sup>th</sup> Through the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and Specimens of Persian Calligraphy* (Milan: Leonardo Arte, March 1997), np.



Figure 3. Detail of Afrasiyab, Portrait of an Emir, 1855. Still life objects including pomegranates, spices, and fruits.

In *Shah Suleiman I and His Courtiers*, a still life, comparable to what is presented in the emir's portrait, appears in the center of the composition. Gilded trays and bowls carrying various fruits, including pomegranates, and a flask containing a red liquid are symbolic of the Safavid court's abundant luxuries. Additionally, the carpet the emir sits on, while darker in color than many other Safavid-era examples, is a contemporary adaptation of popular Safavid designs. Patterns featuring entwined leaves, flowers, palmettes, and other symbols from nature, as seen in *Shah Suleiman I and His Courtiers*, were popular in carpets produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> The symbolic items found in the Safavid painting represent the lush vitality and luxuries of the Safavid royal court, a lifestyle that the Qajars sought to emulate and contrived through the manipulation of aesthetic artifice.

In addition to the palatial adornments that surround him in his portrait, Qasem Khan's attire reflects traditional customs shaped by patterns, accessories, and garments that exude sartorial elegance. Early Qajar court dress, particularly during the time of Fath-Ali Shah, can be considered a revival of Safavid formality, a style of dress that had lost prominence in the Afshar and Zand periods.<sup>25</sup> The emir dons a floral-patterned coat inlaid with golden thread made out of either brocaded wool or silk, known as a *kordi*, over long red robes. A *kordi* is a men's short, hip-length overcoat with short sleeves that was fastened across the chest, a garment that had been worn by the Persian elite for centuries, including by the Safavids.<sup>26</sup> The emir's *kordi* is decorated with the pastel pinks and blues popular in clothing during the early nineteenth century in Iran, a color scheme commonly seen in Safavid court costume.<sup>27</sup>

The sartorial Safavid precedent can also be seen in *Shah Suleiman I and His Courtiers*, in which many of the aristocrats and even the shah himself wear *kordi* with similar floral patterns in an assortment of colors. As I have suggested, Qasem Khan's style of dress was adapted from the Safavids and altered by the Qajars. By dressing in garments typically associated with the Safavid dynasty, the emir aligns himself with a particular era of Persian court culture that exudes sophistication and refinement. This manifests not only in what he wears, but also the manner in which he carries himself.

Emir Qasem Khan's body language creates a recognizable link with ancient Persian culture. His shoulders and chest are frontally positioned towards the viewer, while his head and the rest of his body are presented in three-quarter view.

His left hand rests on the hilt of his dagger, while his right hand is suspended against his overcoat and held close to his body. His broad shoulders and the positioning of his arms convey strength, confidence, and kingly power. The mixing of frontal and three-quarter views is a defining trait of the Sassanian style, and can be seen in a Sassanian silver plate depicting the king Yazdegerd I slaying a stag (Fig. 4). As the king thrusts his spear into the animal's side, his head is presented in strong three-quarter view, while his shoulders, chest, and torso are frontally positioned. A significant convention of Sassanian art, this combination of perspectives is another way in which Qasem Khan visually evokes traditional artistic conventions.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 4. Plate of the King Yazdegerd I slaying a stag, Sassanian, Iran, ca. 399–420 CE. Silver with mercury gilding; plate diam. 9.1 – 9.2 in, h. 1.2 in, thickness at rim .09 in, foot diam. 2.9–3 in, h. 0.4 in, thickness .08-.1 in, weight 25.15 oz. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1970, accession number 1970.6. Image courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In a fashion that mimics Yazdegerd I, the emir's body language is utilized to recall a specific identification with pre-Islamic power and authority. Emir Qasem Khan sits in a manner commonly seen in Persian painting that was adopted by both royals and non-royals alike throughout the centuries.<sup>29</sup> The noblemen that surround Shah Suleiman in *Shah Suleiman I and His Courtiers* sit in this same fashion, with their knees close together upon the ground. This position is a hallmark of Persian portraiture that demonstrates the emir's respect and admiration for traditional practices; individuals continued to kneel in this manner for portraits through the mid-nineteenth century. The visual connections to tradition, formed through physical gestures, further the emir's cultural, psychological, and political alignments with earlier, prestigious periods in history.

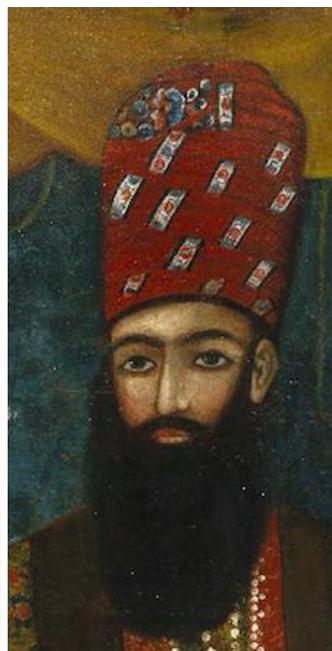
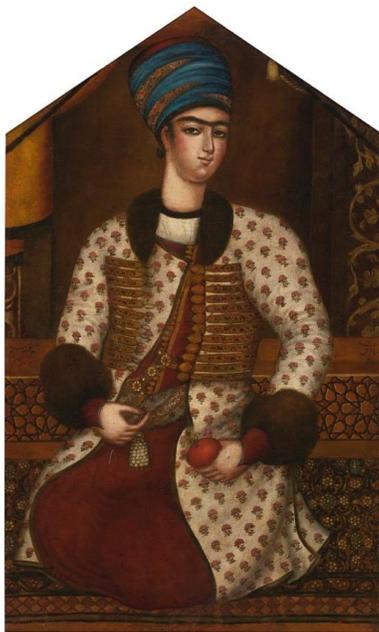
It is, however, critical to remember that these historical inclinations were also rooted in political intentions. Because the Qajars originated from a Turkic Oghuz tribe and were not ethnically Persian, they found themselves in the midst of an identity crisis; they perceived that they needed to find ways to assert authority and prove that they were the rightful successors to the Persian imperial lineage.<sup>30</sup> The ethnic disconnect between the Qajars and the populace they ruled led to increased anxieties regarding their public persona.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the need to craft a sense of nationhood amongst the Qajars was tied inextricably to their desire to connect to the histories and traditions of the Persian Empire through artistic endeavors. Art

produced during this time was effective in magnifying the Qajar name and cultivating a public image of dynastic legitimacy.<sup>32</sup>

The Qajar emulation of traditionally sanctioned court practices was as much about identity and social order as it was about material wealth. Thus, illustrated by his appearance, Emir Qasem Khan's allegiance to his tribal origins coincided with his growing devotion to adopting native Persian customs of dress, accessorizing, and posing. While the structured compositional arrangement is a pictorial innovation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the palatial backdrop and adornments of the interior space, including the books, bowls of fruit, and carpet, recall traditional court scenes from Persian history.

### Tribal Affiliations with the Zand Dynasty

The portrait, however, also evinces visual connections to the Zand tribe that act as indications of the emir's personal ties and allegiance to this group. The Zands, who also drew upon traditional practices while forming their own artistic identity, ruled Persia from 1750 to 1785 and were considered illegitimate usurpers of the throne in the eyes of the Qajars. Royal portraiture produced in the early Qajar period (ca. 1785–1848) was thus meant to recall the recent Qajar victory over their tribal rivals.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the emir's portrait incorporates several distinctly Zand motifs, most notably the tall turban and formulaic arrangement of the composition. To account for this seeming visual discrepancy with Qajar ideology, Chagnon postulates that Emir Qasem Khan had a personal connection to the Zands through his mother, whom he believes was a princess of the Zand tribe.<sup>34</sup> In comparing Emir Qasem Khan's portrait to *A Portrait of Rustam Khan Zand*, a depiction of Zand military commander Zaki Khan's grandson, we can best ascertain the visual similarities that exist between the portraits of the emir and the Zand elite (Fig. 5).<sup>35</sup>



Left: Figure 5. Muhammad Sadiq, *A Portrait of Rustam Khan Zand*, Shiraz, Zand period, ca. 1779. Oil on canvas, 58 x 35 in framed. Private collection. Image courtesy Sotheby's.

Right: Figure 6. Detail of Afrasiyab, *Portrait of an Emir*, 1855. The cylindrical Zand turban worn by the Emir is a hallmark of the Zand dynasty's otherwise simplistic attire.

In *Portrait of an Emir*, Qasem Khan kneels in a courtly interior, defined by loose yellow curtains that hang in front of a window and a decorated arch that frame the scene. His surroundings are similar to those of the young Zand prince, whose palatial setting is suggested by the elaborate geometric and floral patterns of the background. Both men kneel on intricately woven carpets and sit with their torsos frontally positioned and their faces in three-quarter view. Their paralleled postures, with their heels tucked underneath them and their knees resting on the floor, is a gesture reminiscent of centuries of traditional Persian customs.<sup>36</sup> Rustam Khan's portrait notably exhibits characteristics representative of royal depictions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably the elongated proportions, rich colors, and elaborate patterns.<sup>37</sup>

These stylistic conventions were later adopted by the Qajars, who appropriated Zand-era manners of representations for use in their own artistic contexts.<sup>38</sup> In the positioning of his body within the center of the composition, the manner in which he carries his arms, his kneeled gesture, and the mixing of three-quarter and frontal views, Emir Qasem Khan's portrait follows a formula that distinguished Zand portraiture during the course of the eighteenth century.<sup>39</sup> He further connects himself to the Zands through his choice of headgear: a red, cylindrical turban wrapped in brocaded wool closely associated with the Zand tribe (Fig. 6).<sup>40</sup> As can be ascertained from their portraits, the two men wear different iterations of the same type of headgear; *Portrait of an Emir* thus displays unmistakable connections to the eighteenth-century culture of the tribal Zands. Furthermore, Qasem Khan's conscious choice to don an archetypal Zand turban, combined with the structural arrangement of the pictorial space, demonstrates an allegiance to the Zands and publicizes this aspect of his identity. And yet, even though the emir aligns himself with the expelled Zand dynasty in his portrait, he simultaneously differentiates himself from them by evoking traditional conceptions of royal conduct, as previously discussed. The traditional and tribal components of Qasem Khan's multidimensional character presently give way to the portrait's perceivable contemporaneity with nineteenth-century artistic innovations that the Qajars proudly touted.

### **Contemporary Ideas and Western Interests**

During the nineteenth century, cultural and industrial transformations that had been occurring in Europe began to have repercussions across the world.<sup>41</sup> While the allure of economic, technological, and domestic modernization was strong for the Qajars, who sought to appear as influential as the Western powers on a global scale, the pull of tradition was just as strong.<sup>42</sup> The Qajars thus found themselves caught in a precarious position as traditional customs collided with technological inventions and Western ideas. Motivated by European innovations, the Qajar monarchy felt compelled to respond through parallel modernization. This entailed government-funded developments in science, education, technology, military tactics, and the arts. Within these circumstances, the Qajars' magnificent revival of the Persian past was rooted in an attempt to craft a collective identity that breached temporal and cultural boundaries.<sup>43</sup>

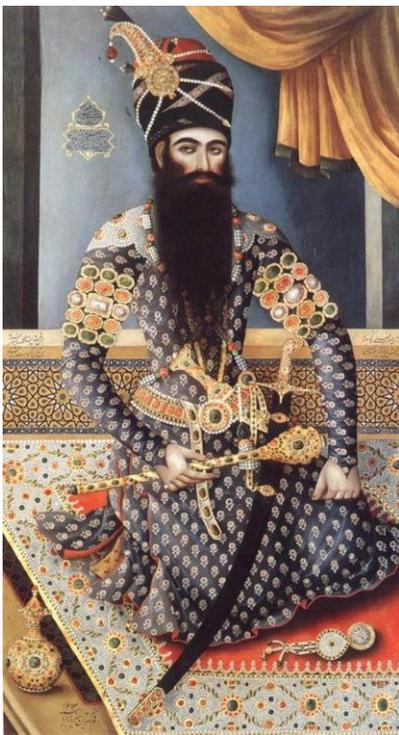
In stylistic technique and pictorial disparities, Emir Qasem Khan's portrait displays attributes that originated out of the European artistic canon and were adopted by many eighteenth and nineteenth-century Persian painters—namely, the use of perspective and oil paint, and European-inspired patterns and ornamentation.<sup>44</sup> The artist of *Portrait of an Emir, Afrasiyab*, employed compositional perspective to construct the space in a manner that creates an illusion of depth. This is evident in the layering of domestic furnishings, specifically the window and curtain, and in the carpet, which recedes backwards into space; this three-dimensional construction of space is innovative for this time. Similarly, Afrasiyab's use of oil paint and the rich, dark colors it produces were valued even more during the Qajar period even though they had been used in the ateliers of preceding periods.<sup>45</sup> Through increased contact with Europe and the desire to proclaim dynastic legitimacy, the Qajars developed a unique visual language that informed their imperial identity and political legacy.<sup>46</sup>

A growing European presence in Iran, as well as the Qajar openness to Western motifs and artistic devices in the nineteenth century, incited an occidental fascination with European material culture.<sup>47</sup> As a result, many Persian craftsmen, artisans, and weavers manufactured their products with European décor in mind, for many such objects were produced with the intention of being sold in European markets.<sup>48</sup> This is evident in Qasem Khan's portrait through the presence of decorative objects that reflect European tastes. The bolster pillow that sits behind him, which is adorned with a translucent, gauzy material and intricate golden-embroidered fabric, is reminiscent of nineteenth-century European floral silks in color and patterning. Additionally, the bowls in the foreground, known as *sahan* bowls, are decorated with colorful rose arrangements; they were also inspired by European paradigms and produced for European consumption.<sup>49</sup> An example of a *sahan* made for Fath-Ali Shah around 1820 bears similar bright pink and blue polychrome roses and floral decoration (Fig. 7). Thus, the complex relationship between the Qajars' traditional society and contemporary Western paradigms bred a dynamic that was rooted in the validation of identity through reconciling these two ideas.



Figure 7. A gilt and painted covered dish (*sahan*) made for Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, Persia, ca. 1820. Polychrome between gilt foliate details; 7.4 in diameter, 6.1 in height. Private collection. Image courtesy Sotheby's.

To highlight the Qajar visual vocabulary as a synthesis of old and new, it may be useful to compare Qasem Khan's portrait to *An Early Portrait of Fath-Ali Shah*, an important painting of the Qajar king executed several years after his coronation (Fig. 8). The two portraits bear several similarities that showcase the artistic propensities of Qajar court painters. The compositional formula used for royal portraiture can be seen in both portraits, thus grounding the emir within the Qajar artistic framework and specifying the identity that the emir associated himself with; even the locations of the inscriptions on Fath-Ali Shah's portrait match the two inscriptions on the emir's. In the same manner as the emir, Fath-Ali Shah kneels within a royal setting, surrounded by luxurious objects and palatial decorations. Similarly, the king's posture exhibits the same combination of three-quarter and frontal views, and he is dressed in exquisite robes with jewels and accessories adorning his arms and torso. While Qajar court dress was rooted in the traditional, refined splendor of Safavid attire, it was modified by sumptuous jewelry and ceremonial weaponry—accessories meant to symbolize royal legitimacy and superiority.<sup>50</sup> In his portrait, Qasem Khan is adorned with bejeweled armbands, a pearled necklace, a decorated sword and dagger, and a belt covered in pearls, objects all meant to convey his status and identity as a Qajar elite. By virtue of his personal ornamentation, Emir Qasem Khan is aligning with the strategic pictorial practices of the Qajar royalty, to which he was closely connected through both professional and familial ties.



Left: Figure 7. Mirza Baba, *An Early Portrait of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar*, 1798–1799. Oil on canvas, 74 x 42 in. Private collection. Image courtesy Annenberg Learner, accessed <https://www.learner.org/courses/globalart/work/8/index.html>.

Right: Figure 9. Abu'l Hasan Ghaffari, *A Portrait of a Seated Nobleman*, 1855. Opaque watercolor on paper; drawing 8.7 x 7 in, leaf 14.7 x 9.6 in. Private collection. Image courtesy Sotheby's.

Other similarities between the emir's and Fath-Ali Shah's portrayals further elucidate Qasem Khan's alignment to Qajar royalty, and also reflect Qajar notions of masculine charm and elegance. Qasem Khan's long, black beard is one of his most prominent features, and is characteristic of the court of Fath-Ali Shah.<sup>51</sup> While the beard regained its popularity during the Qajar period, it was a considerable change from styles worn by members of earlier dynasties, who either donned short beards and mustaches, as in the case of the Afshars and the Zands, or went completely clean-shaven, as in the case of the Safavids. In addition to the similarities in facial hair, the thick, dark eyebrows that frame the emir's almond-shaped eyes are conspicuous and strikingly similar to those of Fath-Ali Shah.<sup>52</sup>

To better understand the highly personalized conception of Emir Qasem Khan presented on the cotton canvas, it is useful to compare his portrait to a contemporaneous depiction of another Qajar nobleman, also from the mid-nineteenth century. *A Portrait of a Seated Nobleman*, also painted in 1855, is a portrait of a Qajar aristocrat of comparable rank that illustrates the variances in stylistic and pictorial representations during this period (Fig. 9).<sup>53</sup> The nobleman wears the novel Qajar black cap that became customary in the nineteenth century, as well as a short beard, popularized by Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896). He is dressed in long robes decorated with a simple pattern and is devoid of any adornments or accessories, contrasting sharply with Qasem Khan's luxurious garments, which bear intricate floral motifs and designs. Differences in size and medium are also apparent, as the emir's portrait is comparable in size to those of the Qajar monarchs, such as Agha Mohammad Khan and Fath-Ali Shah.<sup>54</sup> In this regard, Qasem Khan's attire is more characteristic of the first three decades of the nineteenth century and indicates his affiliation with the court of Fath-Ali Shah, as compared with the more modest styles of dress that emerged in the latter half of the century.<sup>55</sup> Lastly, the nobleman is portrayed against an austere backdrop that provides no indication of setting, while Qasem Khan is positioned in a clearly defined palace interior. It is clear that *Portrait of an Emir* represents a different type of aristocratic portraiture—one that intended to highlight the subject's unique identity, rather than conform to the standardized formulas of representation of his time.

## Concluding Thoughts

The portrait's pictorial elements and circumstantial evidence—namely, the synthesis of Zand and Qajar components—corroborate the hypothesis that this man could indeed be Emir Mohammed Qasem Khan-e Qajar Qovanlu. As part of two royal families, a leading military officer, and blood relative of one of the most distinguished Qajar monarchs, the luxury of this portrait is befitting of a man of Emir Qasem Khan's status. The work in its entirety is a painterly manifestation of Emir Qasem Khan's multilayered identity, which is grounded in select interpretations of traditional and personal loyalties. It draws visual parallels to tribal, traditional, and contemporary sources that highlight the nuances of his individuality and demonstrate his allegiances. While Qasem Khan could not have been the patron of this work, the visual evidence suggests that this self-referential portrait depicts him as he was during his life: a courtier caught in the crossroads of

continuous traditionalism and occidental impressions, who also attempted to adhere to his familial lineage.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For decades, the study of Qajar art history was largely ignored by historians. However, within the past several decades, there has been a significant surge in scholarship on Qajar art. The Brooklyn Museum was the site of the first international conference on nineteenth-century Persian art in 1987. This symposium established the groundwork for further inquiry into the art of Qajar Iran, which manifested in the groundbreaking exhibition *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925*, held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1998–1999 and curated by Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar. See the exhibition catalogue: Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar, eds., *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925* (Brooklyn, NY: I.B. Tauris in association with the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, use of the word “tradition” refers to the time-honored artistic, cultural, and social practices used in Persia since the first millennium BCE by the ruling dynasties of the Persian Empire.

<sup>3</sup> This portrait of Emir Qasem Khan was completed after his death, as indicated by the Persian word *marhoom*, meaning “the late,” preceding his name in the inscription. In his biography of Naser al-Din Shah, Abbas Amanat states that a man by the name of Emir Qasem Khan died in 1831 and was posthumously awarded the title *Emir-i Kabir* in 1833. See Abbas Amanat, *The Pivot of the Universe: Nasir Al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831–1896* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), 102. In his article “Both Royal and Religious: 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Iranian Art in the Brooklyn Museum Collection,” Michael Chagnon presents a hypothesis for the emir’s identity, although this theory has not been confirmed by textual or physical evidence. Chagnon also offers a theory surrounding the work’s patron, hypothesizing that it could have been the emir’s daughter, Malik Jahan Khanoom, who commissioned the work as a memorial portrait. See Michael Chagnon, “Both Royal and Religious: 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Iranian Art in the Brooklyn Museum Collection,” *Arts of Asia* 34 (2004): 117–118. There is an additional inscription, located in the bottom left corner of the painting, which presumably bears the name of the artist. It reads in Persian, “Bandehe-ye Shah-e Jahan Afrasiyab,” which translates to “Servant of the king of the world Afrasiyab.” The identity of the artist by the name of Afrasiyab remains unclear, but his identification as the “servant of the king of the world” implies that he served in the royal workshop. All translations were provided by the author with assistance from Dr. Mika Natif.

<sup>4</sup> For a general overview of the Qajar period, see Abbas Amanat, “Qajar Iran: A Historical Overview,” in *Royal Persian Paintings*, ed. Diba and Ekhtiar, 14–29; Clifford Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand, *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Change, 1800–1925* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Ehsan Yarshater, “The Qajar Era in the Mirror of Time,” *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 191.

<sup>6</sup> Layla S. Diba, “Images of Power and the Power of Images: Intention and Response in Early Qajar Painting (1785–1834),” in *Royal Persian Paintings*, ed. Diba and Ekhtiar, 31, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Oleg Grabar, “Reflections on Qajar Art and Its Significance,” *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 185.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer M. Scarce, “Ancestral Themes in the Art of Qajar Iran, 1785–1925,” in *Islamic Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Tradition, Innovation, and Eclecticism*, ed. Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2006), 232.

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- <sup>9</sup> Sussan Babaie, "In the Eye of the Storm: Visualizing the Qajar Axis of Kingship," *Artibus Asiae* 66, no. 2 (2006): 35.
- <sup>10</sup> Basil W. Robinson, "Qajar Paintings: A Personal Reminiscence," in *Royal Persian Paintings*, ed. Diba and Ekhtiar, 12.
- <sup>11</sup> Touraj Atabaki, *Iran in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Historiography and Political Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 10.
- <sup>12</sup> Atabaki, *Iran in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 18.
- <sup>13</sup> Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 116. The Qajars revived not only traditional images and artistic customs, but also traditional mediums such as monumental rock reliefs, an art form that lay dormant since the days of the Sassanian Empire. For information on the rock reliefs of Fath-Ali Shah, see Judith Lerner, "A Rock Relief of Fath 'Ali Shah in Shiraz," *Ars Orientalis* 21, no. 1 (1991): 31–43.
- <sup>14</sup> Babaie, "In the Eye of the Storm," 37–38; Amanat, "Qajar Iran: A Historical Overview," 21. Many aristocratic portraits produced during this time were intended to act as generalized representations of wealth and power, favoring such outward appearances over more individualized representations.
- <sup>15</sup> Layla S. Diba, "The Qajar Court Painter Yahya Ghaffari: His Life and Times," in *Persian Painting: From the Mongols to the Qajars: Studies in Honour of Basil W. Robinson*, ed. Robert Hillenbrand (London: I.B. Tauris in association with the Centre of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, 2000), 86.
- <sup>16</sup> Chagnon discusses the life of Emir Mohammed Qasem Khan-e Qajar Qovanlu and provides an argument for his identity in "Both Royal and Religious," 116–118. In the early sixteenth century, the Qajar tribe divided into factions, one of which was the Qovanlu branch. In 1789, Agha Mohammad Khan, a Qovanlu chieftain, founded the Qajar dynasty, thus establishing the Qovanlus as the preeminent faction of the tribe.
- <sup>17</sup> Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 117.
- <sup>18</sup> Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 117.
- <sup>19</sup> For more on Emir Mohammed Qasem Khan-e Qajar Qovanlu and his role in the Qajar family, see Amanat, *The Pivot of the Universe*, 30–35, 102–104; Soltan Ahmad Mirza Azod al-Dowleh, *Tarikh-i 'Azodi* (Tehran, 1888). Reprinted in Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar, trans. *Tarikh-e Azodi, Life at the Court of the Early Qajar Shahs* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2015); Heribert Busse, trans. *History of Persia Under Qajar Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 160, 163, 200, 281; Also, for a family tree of the Qajar royal house and Naser al-Din Shah's maternal line, see Amanat, "Qajar Iran: A Historical Overview," 17.
- <sup>20</sup> Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*, 101; David J. Roxburgh, "Troubles with Perspective: Case Studies in Picture-Making from Qajar Iran," in *In the Wake of the Global Turn: Propositions for an "Exploded" Art History Without Borders*, ed. Aruna D'Souza and Jill Casid (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 118–119.
- <sup>21</sup> Pomegranates have held longstanding significance in Persian culture, symbolizing fertility, strength, and invincibility. They were also used in Zoroastrian rituals and domestic practices, including religious rites and marriage ceremonies. For more on Zoroastrian symbolism, laws, and practices, see Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith* (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1998).
- <sup>22</sup> It is worth noting what exactly an individual holding the title of emir does at the royal court. An emir is an aristocratic title that has traditionally referred to the positions of prince, governor, or commander in the Arab and Persianate worlds. In Qajar Iran, it was used as a military title, referring to a high-ranking officer of the imperial army. See Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 117.
- <sup>23</sup> As symbols of learning, books also appear in portraits of non-royals, notably members of the *ulama*, scholars of Islamic law and theology. While they lived more modest lives in comparison with the revelries of the royal court, the religious elite held important positions in Qajar administration and were therefore also able to commission such portraits of themselves. Books presented in this artistic context serve as indications of theological knowledge and status as a member of the *ulama*. For more on this symbolism, see Stephen Vernoit, *Occidentalism: Islamic Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: The Nour Foundation, 1997), 180–186. Examples of portraits of the religious elite include Agha Rajabali Isfahani, *Portrait of Soltan al-Olama Haji Mirza Hassan*, mid-nineteenth

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century, oil on canvas, 45 x 33 in, private collection, Isfahan; and Rajab'ali, *Portrait of Mir Mohammed Mahdi-ye Imam Jom'e*, oil on canvas, 1840, 47 x 33 in, private collection, Isfahan.

<sup>24</sup> The Safavid period is often considered the golden age of carpet production in Persia. This was mostly due to extensive royal interest in carpets, the availability of materials and dyes, and the market demand for such objects outside of the Persian Empire. See Daniel Walker, "Carpets ix. Safavid Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 4, 866; Carol Bier, ed., *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1987), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Layla S. Diba, "Clothing x In the Safavid and Qajar periods," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 8, 785–808, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-x>.

<sup>26</sup> Robes, coats, and other garments were mostly decorated with floral patterns during this time, and were produced in a wide assortment of color schemes. In the nineteenth century, there was a revival of the silk industry in Iran, and the popularity of silk-brocaded coats grew. Fur was used for the linings of robes, which began at the top of the coat and continued down until the waist; fox fur, squirrel fur, and sheepskin were often used, along with marten and sable, all of which were imported from Russia. Fabrics used for the *kordi* were characterized by floral designs in bright pastel colors, namely pink and blue, and the edges of the robes were trimmed with gold and silver. See Diba, "Clothing x In the Safavid and Qajar periods," 789–793.

<sup>27</sup> Diba, "Clothing x In the Safavid and Qajar periods," 789–790.

<sup>28</sup> For more on the Zands' artistic practices, see Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*, 147–149.

<sup>29</sup> This pose can also be seen in portraits of the religious aristocracy, figures who did not partake in the revelries and luxuries of the royal court, but who were still significant members of the governmental elite. Due to its usage in a variety of social and cultural contexts, this pose is not only exemplary of confidence and political supremacy, but also a motion of respect, employed by the monarchy, aristocracy, and religious community alike.

<sup>30</sup> Abolala Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Yarshater, "The Qajar Era in the Mirror of Time," 191.

<sup>32</sup> Grabar, "Reflections on Qajar Art and Its Significance," 185. The need to secure dynastic legitimacy was also connected to the political doctrine of *farr-e izadi*, known as divine glory, or the divine right of kings. For the Qajars, public art commissions were another way to invoke *farr-e izadi*. For more on the divine right of kings, see Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings*.

<sup>33</sup> Abbas Amanat, "The Kayanid Crown and Qajar Reclaiming of Royal Authority," *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 29.

<sup>34</sup> Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 117.

<sup>35</sup> Regarded as the ultimate depiction of the Zand imperial legacy, Rustam Khan Zand's portrait embodies the quintessential conceptions of Persian masculine beauty, youth, and imperial grace. For more on this portrait, see Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*, 154–155.

<sup>36</sup> Roland Barthes, "Pose, Gesture, and Objects Held by the Sitter," in *Local Portraiture: Through the Lens of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Iranian Photographers*, ed. Carmen Pérez González (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 75.

<sup>37</sup> Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*, 154.

<sup>38</sup> Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 108–122.

<sup>39</sup> Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*, 136–138, 146–147.

<sup>40</sup> The Zand turban is a modification of Afshar headgear introduced in the early eighteenth century. Nader Shah Afshar, the first Afshar monarch who was also Sunni, introduced the *kolah-e naderi*, a four-pointed cap that represented the first four Islamic caliphs. These caps were usually red and covered with either wool or a silk fabric known as *sal*. Nader Shah's choice of headgear was subsequently modified by Karim Khan Zand, who replaced the *kolah-e naderi* with his signature tall, cylindrical turban. These turbans could be worn bare of accessories, but were also often decorated with strands of patterned cotton fabric in an assortment of colors. See Michael Spink and Jack

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Ogden, eds., *The Art of Adornment: Jewelry of the Islamic Lands* (London: The Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions, 2013), 576. Because both the Zands and the Qajars were Shi'ites, it is justifiable that they sought to eradicate the wearing of the *kolah-e naderi* in favor of another style of headgear that did not reflect Nader Shah's Sunni beliefs. For more on the revival of Shi'ite sentiment in the Zand and Qajar periods, see Pedram Khosronejad, *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2012). For more on the varying styles of Persian headgear, see Layla S. Diba, "Clothing x In the Safavid and Qajar periods," 792–793.

<sup>41</sup> Vernoit, *Occidentalism*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Amanat, "Qajar Iran: A Historical Overview," 19, 24–25.

<sup>43</sup> Scarce, "Ancestral Themes in the Art of Qajar Iran, 1785–1925," 231–232.

<sup>44</sup> This shift in style reflects the cultural, historical, and political changes that were occurring during the early Qajar period as contact with Europe increased. Persian artists were exposed to European techniques and styles through the establishment of the Dar al-Funun. The Dar al-Funun was Iran's first modern institution of higher learning, modeled after the Western model of higher education. Naser al-Din Shah sought to bring European ideals to Iran in order to ensure that the next generation of Iranians would be adequately educated in the arts and sciences, including the military sciences and fine arts. Driven by Naser al-Din Shah's own passion for photography, painting was introduced into the college's curriculum in 1861; one of their objectives was to teach students how to paint in the European academic style. In their painting classes, students copied works by widely respected European Renaissance masters, such as Titian, Rembrandt, and Raphael. For more on the Dar al-Funun, see Maryam Ekhtiar, "Nasir al-Din Shah and the Dar al-Funun: The Evolution of an Institution," *Iranian Studies* 34, no. 1 (2001): 153–163; Amanat, *The Pivot of the Universe*. It is also important to acknowledge that the Zands indeed contributed in bringing stylistic innovations to Persia, notably the use of oil paint and the commissioning of life-size paintings, but it was the Qajars who thoroughly championed modernist inventions not only in the arts but in aspects of everyday life. See Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 108.

<sup>45</sup> Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*, 146.

<sup>46</sup> Scarce, "Ancestral Themes in the Art of Qajar Iran, 1785–1925," 246.

<sup>47</sup> For more information on cultural exchange between Europe and Qajar Iran, see Vernoit, *Occidentalism*.

<sup>48</sup> Decorative objects, such as textiles, carpets, and ceramics, were often traded with European nations, and given as diplomatic gifts. Europeans valued the "oriental exoticism" of the East, and as a result, these items became highly coveted by European markets and collectors. For more on this, see Willem Floor, *Traditional Crafts in Qajar Iran (1800–1925)* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Spink and Ogden, *The Art of Adornment*, 589.

<sup>50</sup> Nader Shah Afshar's conquest of India in 1738–1739 provided Iran with an unprecedented supply of pearls, emeralds, rubies, gems, and other precious stones that the Qajars fully utilized upon ascending to power. See Diba, "Clothing x In the Safavid and Qajar periods," 786; Spink and Ogden, *The Art of Adornment*, 573–576.

<sup>51</sup> Under Fath-Ali Shah, the king's sons and all members of the royal court grew long beards; they were considered a sign of virility, courage, and masculine power. See Vernoit, *Occidentalism*, 155.

<sup>52</sup> According to Chagnon, when *Portrait of an Emir* first entered the collection of the Brooklyn Museum, it was in such poor condition that it was thought to be a low-quality portrait of Fath-Ali Shah, presumably due to their strong resemblance. It is important to remember that much of Persian painting is idealized, and both Fath-Ali Shah's and Qasem Khan's portraits conform to physical ideals of male beauty conventional of the times. See Chagnon, "Both Royal and Religious," 117; Diba, "Clothing x In the Safavid and Qajar periods," 786.

<sup>53</sup> This work was purchased at auction at Sotheby's London on April 22, 2015 in its Arts of the Islamic World sale, lot 158. For more examples of mid to late-nineteenth century portraits of Qajar noblemen, see Mirza Baba al-Isfahani al-Imami, *A Qajar Nobleman with His Kinsmen*, ca. 1846–56, at Sotheby's London: Arts of the Islamic World, October 7, 2015, lot 298; Abu'l Hasan Ghaffari, *A Portrait of Farrokh Khan Amin al-Dowleh*, ca. 1851, Sotheby's London: Arts of the Islamic World,

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April 9, 2014, lot 93; Yahya Ghaffari, *A Portrait of a Man*, 1877, Sotheby's London: Arts of the Islamic World, October 19, 2016, lot 198.

<sup>54</sup> Standing at 59 x 37 inches, *Portrait of an Emir* embodies the royal movement of commissioning large-scale oil portraits that would line the walls of the Golestan, Negaristan, or Sulaymaniya Palaces in Tehran. Such portraits were intended to be viewed from a distance to effectively convey their dominance and continuously remind viewers of the political power and triumph of the Qajars. See Amanat, "The Kayanid Crown and Qajar Reclaiming of Royal Authority," 29; Diba, "Images of Power and the Power of Images," 33.

<sup>55</sup> More modest styles of dress and accessorizing emerged in the 1850s under Naser al-Din Shah, who replaced the sumptuous jewels and opulent ceremonial robes characteristic of Fath-Ali Shah's court (r. 1797–1834) in favor of Western modes of dress, such as trousers and ties. At this time, the formula for portraiture also changed, as sitters would now either sit in chairs or stand, and would no longer surround themselves with traditional palatial adornments. For more on the evolution of Qajar portraiture, see Diba and Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings*, 239–240.