

The idea of kingship and the regalian image in Early Qajar Iran (ca.1797-1840)

Over the past decades, scholars have often examined Iranian art through a binary lens, asserting that it reached a "Golden Age" during the Safavid dynasty and that subsequent dynasties, such as the Qājārs (1789-1925), attempted but were unable to replicate the same degree of magnificence, leading somehow to an overall decline in its quality (Canby, 2008)¹. In fact, the rise of the Qājārs as the new ruling power was simultaneous with a blossoming of the arts, which manifested in the continuation and the improvement of pre-existing artistic techniques, such as fresco painting and, more stinkingly, in a revival of ancient Iranian dynastic traditions with monumental *bas-reliefs* depicting court audiences or hunting scenes as seen during the Achaemenid and Sassanian times. In most images, the sovereign is placed at the center and is surrounded by his heirs or subjects in a visible *mise-en-scène* that emphasizes his function as ruler. Therefore, within the framework of my thesis, I shall explore the use of the regalian image to express the idea of power and kingship in the early Qājār years through large-scale projects, including *bas-reliefs* and mural paintings. In other words, I will investigate how images are being used to convey and assert authority. The chronological frame of this research is 1797-1840 and corresponds to the reign of Fath 'Ali Shāh Qājār, during which most of the visual material under study was created.

Although several publications addressed Qājār art and the reign of Fath 'Ali Shāh from the 1990s and set the foundation of our knowledge on the period², there has been no comprehensive study on monumental commissions yet³. Additionally, we lack a precise inventory of all existing reliefs and murals, along with other fundamental elements, such as their size, geographical implantation and state of preservation. Consequently, my intended project as part of the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Graduate Scholarship application is to go on a 30-day trip to Iran in the summer/early fall of 2024 and conduct an on-site photographic campaign of the Qājār heritage. These photographs will be used as my thesis's study material and will be incorporated into my analysis. The money from the scholarship would help me cover the main costs of the trip, namely the round-trip airfare from Toronto to Tehran, the visa fees, the accommodation for one month in a regular hotel in the center of Tehran, food expenses and the transportation within Tehran and from Tehran to the neighboring provinces.

¹ CANBY Sheila R., *The Golden Age of Persian Art (1501-1722)*, British Museum Press, London, 2008.

²DIBA, Layla S. and EKHTIAR, Maryam, *Royal Persian Painting: the Qajar Epoch 1785-1925*, I.B Tauris, 1998. FARMAYAN Hafez and ELTON L Daniel. *Society and Culture in Qajar Iran: Studies in Honor of Hafez Farmayan*. Mazda 2002. Floor Willem M. *Wall Paintings and Other Figurative Mural Art in Qajar Iran*. Mazda 2005

³ See Luft J. P. "The Qajar Rock Reliefs." *Iranian Studies*, 2001, pp. 31–49. This article attempted to gather information on the known rock reliefs but did not provide a precise reading grid nor address the geographical environment in which these reliefs are located.

In the current state of my research, the places that are to be visited can be summed up but are not limited to: the Palaces of Suleymanieh (Karaj), Golestan and Negarestan (Tehrân), the Museum of Islamic Art (Tehrân) and the reliefs in Taq-e Bostan (Kermânshâh), in Chechmeh 'Âli and Sorsorre (Ray), in Firûzkûh (Tehrân province), in Shirâz and in Kâzerûn (Fârs province).

A duration of 30 days for the photographic campaign is ideal as it would allow me enough time to run the photographic campaign of the artworks that are already known and allow ample room for unexpected discoveries. A month-stay would also make it possible to consult the Qajar royal archives housed in the Golestan Palace and the National Library and look, if they exist, for the accounts from the royal workshops mentioning the names of the artists and artisans involved in the projects. Although access to these institutions is typically challenging for Western audiences, my good integration into Iranian cultural circles and connections with scholars should facilitate the process.