A CHANGE OF EMPHASIS
1576–1629

Shah Isma‘il II (r. 1576–7) and Shah Muhammad Khudabande (r. 1577–88)

Shah Tahmasp was succeeded in 1576 by his second son, Isma‘il II. As a punishment for insubordination, Isma‘il had been imprisoned by his father for nearly twenty years, and was released only upon Shah Tahmasp’s death. Incarceration had hardly prepared Isma‘il for leadership. His reign was marked by intense cruelty, aimed in particular at members of his own family. Having killed or blinded five of his brothers and four other royal princes, Isma‘il also tried to eradicate any officers who had been loyal to his father. His Qizilbash supporters soon turned against him, and it was probably they who arranged his death from poisoned opium.

Isma‘il spared only those princes who were either too young or too dim-witted to be considered a threat. Muhammad Khudabande, his successor, belonged to the latter category. Although he was Shah Tahmasp’s oldest son, he had been passed over because he was half-blind and deemed unfit to govern. Years of self-indulgence in the harem had rendered him weak and uninterested in ruling Iran. For several years his powerful wife ran the affairs of state, but the Qizilbash faction which opposed her had her murdered. While various tribal groups and Safavid princes were rebelling against the Shah, the Ottomans invaded again in 1578 and over the next decade took much of northern and western Iran. The Uzbeks, meanwhile, moved back into Khurasan and besieged Herat. By 1587 the parts of Khurasan still free of Uzbek control threw their support behind the governor of Mashhad, Murshid Quli Khan Ustajlu, and his ward Prince ‘Abbas, the Shah’s adolescent son. Their revolt spread and soon they entered Qazvin, where Muhammad Khudabande abdicated in favour of ‘Abbas.

The reign of Shah ‘Abbas I, which will be discussed at greater length below, has been considered a golden age in Iranian history. Coming as it did on the heels of a period of decline, the forty-year rule of a vigorous, creative Shah stimulated almost every field of endeavour, not least the arts. However, the direction in which miniature painting moved under Shah ‘Abbas was largely determined by the events and artistic climate under Isma‘il II and Muhammad Khudabande. Despite his severe personality defects, to Shah Isma‘il’s patronage may be assigned a Shabnameh, now dispersed and most likely unfinished. Although the illustrations do not equal those of Shah Tahmasp’s Shabnameh in grandeur or beauty, they prove the continuing employment of some of Tahmasp’s and Ibrahim Mirza’s artists, such as ‘Ali Asghar, and the introduction of several artists of the younger generation. Stylistically the paintings of Shah Isma‘il’s Shabnameh do not break with the recent past. Like the illustrations to the 1573 Garshaspnameh, the 1576–7 Shabnameh paintings demonstrate the retreat from the excessive mannerism of Ibrahim Mirza’s artists to simpler compositions, harder figures and a palette of pastel hues punctuated by passages of intense primary colours.

A painting of ‘Rustam slaying the White Div’ from an unknown Shabnameh relates closely to the illustrations in Shah Isma‘il’s manuscript, especially those by the artist Murad. By including only the two protagonists, the artist has heightened the drama of the scene. The windswept clouds and soaring rocks reinforce this effect, although their subdued colours ensure their secondary function. The majority of the illustrations, however, contain more figures and otherwise carry on the tradition of Safavid manuscript painting. Yet the illustrations with fewer figures anticipate a trend which flowered more fully in the reign of Shah ‘Abbas I.

The death of Shah Isma‘il II in 1577 dealt royal manuscript production a nearly fatal blow. Since Shah Muhammad Khudabande did not possess the fundamental requirement of a patron of paintings – decent eyesight – he could hardly be expected to prize illustrated manuscripts and the artists who produced them. As a result of the Shah’s disinclination, the court artists of Qazvin were forced to seek their living elsewhere. While some must have emigrated to India or Ottoman Turkey, others such as Habibullah,
Muhammad, Shaykh Muhammad and probably Sadiqi Beg moved to either Herat or Mashhad. 'Ali Asghar, father of the great artist Riza, either returned to his native city of Kashan or journeyed to Mashhad. In the decade of Muhammad Khudabandeh’s tenure the former court artists turned increasingly to single-page works, as few, if any, patrons could afford lavishly illustrated manuscripts.

Several artists, however, appear to have adapted to the strained conditions of the Muhammad Khudabandeh period and pioneered or popularised new genres. One of these, Muhammad, worked for ‘Ali Quli Khan Shamlu at Herat. In addition to portraits, Muhammad produced tinted drawings of country scenes, such as shepherds in the wilderness tending their flocks or courtiers picnicking or being entertained as fresco. While the latter scenes derive from illustrations to lyrical manuscripts, the former represent a new subject in Persian painting. Both types of composition were accorded the highest respect by Muhammad’s contemporaries and
followers, who copied and adapted them. In 'A picnic in the mountains' the combination of polychromy for the figures, faces, turbans, belts and various props and landscape elements with drawing for outlining the figures derives from a technique introduced by Muhammad. Whether this technique was born of economic necessity - a partly drawn, partly painted work would cost less than a completely painted one - is debatable. Whatever the reason, the technique continued to be used well into the seventeenth century, when wealthy patrons once again abounded.

Two other artists, Shaykh Muhammad and Sadiqi Beg, exerted a strong influence on late sixteenth-century painting in Iran. The elder of the two, Shaykh Muhammad, had worked for Shah Tahmasp, Ibrahim Mirza and Shah Isma’il II, spending the Muhammad Khudabandeh years in Khurasan. In addition to his demonstrable ability to adjust his style to suit the taste of the day, Shaykh Muhammad introduced a distinctive form of draughtsmanship. The ends of sleeves form worm-like folds that fairly wriggle up his figures' wrists. In some drawings the free calligraphic rendering of hems and sashes implies movement and puffs of wind. Despite Qazi Ahmad's remark that Shaykh Muhammad 'made some mistakes' in portraits (Qazi Ahmad, p. 187), his likenesses must have borne a strong resemblance to his sitters as they differ markedly from one another and do not conform to any set type. By the time Shah 'Abbās I came to power in 1587, Shaykh Muhammad would have been too old to be director of the royal workshop, but certainly would have enjoyed a position of great respect, as its 'artist emeritus'.

Sadiqi Beg, born in 1533, contributed his first known royal commissions to the 1573 Garshaspnameh. After the death of Shah Tahmasp, he remained in Qazvin, where he worked on illustrations for Shah Isma’il II’s Shahnemah. Like so many other court artists, Sadiqi Beg seems to have drifted eastwards to Khurasan after 1577, but upon the accession of Shah 'Abbās I he was appointed director of the royal kitab khaneh at Qazvin. Sadiqi Beg's early manuscript illustrations and single-page portraits adhere to the established style of Qazvin: figures are tall, slim and elegant, with pursed lips but otherwise generally idealised features. Yet, on his return to the royal workshop, his draughtsmanship gained an unexpected mastery and freedom. Either the more intense exposure to the influence of Shaykh Muhammad or the competition of the younger artist Riza could have caused this development, but the result was a novel technique of drawing in which lines of varying thickness define forms. This method, combined with Shaykh Muhammad's freedom of line and incisive characterisation, laid the foundation for the prevailing style of the late sixteenth century. As if liberated by the new, calligraphic approach to drawing, artists of varying levels of skill experimented with the technique and produced many studies in addition to finished works.

Shah 'Abbās I (r. 1587–1629)

Depleted coffers, Qizilbash conspiracy, Ottomans threatening in the west and Uzbeks looming in the east – this was the state of affairs Shah 'Abbās I inherited in 1587. With speed and determination the young Shah set about confronting these problems. First, he ordered the execution of an insurgent band of Qizilbash who had tried to murder his chief minister, Murshid Quli Khan. Having gained confidence that he could control his kingdom without ministerial interference, he had Murshid Quli Khan executed. From 1590 onward Shah 'Abbās consolidated his power within Iran by undercutting powerful Qizilbash and other tribal groups and forming a standing army of Georgians and Circassians loyal only to him. To ensure one peaceful boundary, he signed an unfavourable treaty with the Ottomans in 1590, ceding to them Azerbaijan, Shirvan, Baghdad, Tabriz and parts of other western and northern regions. By 1598 he was ready to take on the Uzbeks, and as a result the Safavid regained Khurasan. Such a victory would have been meaningless had Shah 'Abbās not also stimulated the economic recovery of Iran by transferring much of the former Qizilbash territory to direct royal control and by encouraging production and trade of textiles and other commodities. From 1603 until his death in 1629 Shah 'Abbās I managed to regain all the lands his father had
lost to the Ottomans, as well as Hormuz, a strategic island in the Persian Gulf, then under Portuguese control.

The symbol of Iran’s prosperity and stability under Shah ‘Abbas I was his new capital, Isfahan. A city of gardens, elegant palaces, extensive markets and all manner of public monuments, Isfahan had existed as a cultural centre long before Shah ‘Abbas made it his capital. Yet, under his and his architects’ direction the city became not only the seat of government but also a major hub of commercial activity and a microcosm of the new Iranian social order. The administrative move to Isfahan took place gradually during the 1590s and was virtually complete by 1598. While the start of the ‘Isfahan style’ of painting is usually assigned to the late 1590s, the changes had in fact begun early in the decade. Single-page portraits, both painted and drawn, remained in vogue, but the range of types depicted expanded to include working men, shaykhs and dervishes as well as a variety of courtiers and courtesans. With prosperity emerged a new class of dandies – elegantly clad, seemingly idle youths whose portraits were collected for inclusion in albums or murazzi’s. The album from which the ‘Rubab player’ comes was

62 ‘Rubab player’, signed by Muhammad Ja’far, Safavid, Qazvin, c.1590. Painting 13 × 11 cm. Under Shah Tahmasp musicians were all but banished from court for their potentially corrupting influence on the royal princes. Shah Isma`ll II revived court patronage of musicians and at least one who served him was still active in the time of Shah ‘Abbas I. This portrait is the only known signed work by Muhammad Ja’far.

63 opposite ‘Rustam striking the door of Afrasiyab’s palace’, from a Shahnaneh of Firdausi, Safavid, Isfahan, c.1610. Painting 22.7 × 15.4 cm. Rustam and his Iranian warriors stormed the castle of Afrasiyab, their greatest Turanian enemy, in the dead of night. With one blow Rustam smashed open the gate and then entered the palace, looting and routing the Turaniacs, though Afrasiyab escaped to fight another day.
A CHANGE OF EMPHASIS: 1576–1629

compiled in India and includes Indian and Persian paintings and calligraphy. Released from the strict *kitab khane* system, artists who in another era might have been patronised solely by members of the court now sold their works to anyone who could afford them, either locally or abroad.

In the period of economic expansion and artistic revival under Shah 'Abbás I, one artist towers over all others as the most innovative figure of the age. The son of 'Ali Ašghar, an artist at the court of Shah Ismā'īl II, Riza was born around 1565 and joined Shah 'Abbás's atelier around 1587. Called 'Aqa Riza' and later 'Riza-yi 'Abbāsī' after his master, Riza was once thought to have been two people, not only because of his name change but also on account of the marked stylistic developments during his long career. On a drawing of 1591 Riza noted his debt to Shaykh Muhammad, but by the mid-1590s he had forged a new style, more dynamic and expressive than that of the Qazvin atelier. 'A Man attacked by a bear', which has two inscriptions to Bihzad but which is attributed here to Riza, embodies many of the qualities of Riza's early drawings. First, he has chosen to depict a moment of high drama and has not shied away from showing the man's anxiety, as he furrows his brow and glares at the mauling bear. To heighten the sense of movement, Riza has employed a line of varying thickness, which some scholars believe he, and not Sadiq Beg, introduced to Persian draughtsmanship. Finally, the drawing contains trademarks of Riza's work in the 1590s, such as the clenched fist, fray ed turban and sash ends, and the light wash on the rocks. A similar verse characterises most of his paintings of the 1580s and 1590s, including several single-page paintings and four illustrations to an unfinished *Shahnameh* presumably produced for Shah 'Abbās I upon his accession. Not only did the young Riza demonstrate remarkable technical skill in rendering textures of cloth and fur, motion, and the personalities of his sitters, but he introduced new subjects to the repertoire of Persian painting, including half-nude recumbent women and meditating shaykhs. As at each stage of his development, his drawings of the 1590s inspired a raft of imitators, many of whose works were bound into albums with his own.

By 1600, when the capital was established at Isfahān, Riza's style had matured and had lost some of its spontaneity. Although he continued to portray youthful courtiers, his more insightful portraits from this period are those of figures such as the 'scribe'. Often his middle-aged sitters have the glint of intelligence in their eyes and even a slight smile on their lips. By 1600 Riza had retreated somewhat from his earlier, calligraphic line, and increasingly the contours of sitters in formal portraits are closed. About 1603 Riza received the title 'Abbāsī', which he appended to his name. However, soon after that date he chose to leave the court atelier and to consort with wrestlers and other lower-life types. A remarkable series of drawings of anguished men in the wilderness dates from this period (c.1603–10) and must reflect the artist's troubled state of mind and a reaction against the claustrophobic life at court.

Eventually, perhaps for lack of funds, Riza returned to the court atelier. With the exception of a few works from about 1610 in his earlier style, his oeuvre now became more ponderous. Not only did his palette change—half-tones such as rust and purple-brown replaced primary colours—but immobile, heavy-jawed, thick-thighed figures supplanted his earlier nimble, bright-eyed youths.

Although Riza did illustrate manuscripts in the second decade of the seventeenth century, the great majority of his works were single-page portraits. Other artists contributed to illustrated manuscripts in this decade, but most were painting in a style based on Riza's mode of the late 1590s or reviving the late fifteenth-century mode of Bihzad. Such pseudo-Timurid works usually give themselves away by large, floppy mid-Safavid turbans and occasionally extreme poses.

During the 1620s Riza himself looked to the works of his predecessors for inspiration. In addition to a group of drawings after originals by Bihzad, perhaps intended as a tribute to the great and famous master, he painted a portrait after an original by Muham madi. A young man of far more svelte physique than Riza's other
sitters in the 1620s is seated on a spindly seat typical of the sixteenth century. Only his face, with its almond eyes and heavy brow, and the wispy gold vegetation adhere to seventeenth-century norms.

Riza outlived Shah 'Abbas I, who died in 1629. His latest works were mostly portraits, except for one illustrated Khamsah of Nizami in which many miniatures are the work of his students. In these compositions Riza reduced the number of figures and enlarged their scale, placing them close to the picture plane. His late portraits, from 1630 until his death in 1635, exhibit an abiding interest in character and in novel subject-matter, such as a woman seated in her lover’s lap or a European feeding wine to a dog. By the late 1620s the trickle of European visitors to the court at Isfahan had increased to a steady flow, introducing the Iranian public to European styles of art, dress and behaviour, and although Riza

never attempted to borrow the European artistic techniques of shading or perspective, he seems to have been amused by the appearance and actions of the foreigners. Ironically, for some of Riza’s followers European art proved irresistible and its introduction ultimately changed the course of Persian painting.