The Long Decline

1629–1722

The Late Safavid Shahs

In a sense Shah ‘Abbas I and Riza left similar legacies. The organisation of the state and the territorial boundaries established by Shah ‘Abbas were maintained more or less intact by his successors, in spite of the limited abilities of some of them. Likewise, Riza’s followers used his style as a point of departure for their own works. Indeed, Riza set the stylistic parameters for much of seventeenth-century Safavid painting, to which the only alternative was working in the European mode.

Having murdered his son, Shah ‘Abbas I was succeeded by his grandson, Shah Safi I (r. 1629–42). Reared in the harem, Safi was not only addicted to drink and drugs but also had little sense of how to rule. Fortunately, he had an able chief minister who kept the country solvent, so upon his death Iran remained stable. Like Isma‘īl II, Shah Safi was cruel and suspicious, and numerous high officials and Safavid princes were put to the sword. The young were spared, so when Safi died from the effects of alcohol in 1642, his ten-year-old son ‘Abbas was able to succeed him.

On the whole, the reign of Shah ‘Abbas II (1642–66) was peaceful, just and prosperous. He avoided most military embroilments, except for a battle against the Mughals for control of Qandahar, which the Safavids won in 1648, and played a far more active role in the administration of Iran than had Shah Safi. Only on a personal level did ‘Abbas II demonstrate weakness. He, too, was addicted to wine, drugs and sex, tastes strongly frowned upon by the religious classes of Safavid society, who were, however, powerless to dissuade him and his court from such decadent activities. His proclivities led to his premature death in 1666 at the age of 33.

With the accession of Shah Sulayman (r. 1666–94) the decline of the Safavid dynasty began in earnest. Sulayman’s disinclination to busy himself with affairs of state led to the mismanagement of the economy and to corruption and injustice. Luckily he had no military or territorial ambitions save maintaining the status quo, so Iran did not suffer at the hands of its traditional enemies. Nevertheless, the country decayed from within. With a Shah who retreated to the harem for months on end, and a shadow government of scheming eunuchs and concubines, neglect of the social, military and administrative structures was inevitable.

Two main factors influenced Persian artists between 1640 and 1722: the work of Riza and European art. Although only artists’ inscriptions and not biographical texts mention Riza’s role as a teacher, his late work most certainly served as a model for many court artists under the later Safavid Shahs. One of these, Mir Afzal Tuni, also known as Afzal al-Husaynī, produced single-page paintings which show a strong affinity with those of Riza. In fact, Afzal’s early unsigned works may have resembled Riza’s late paintings so closely that they have been accepted erroneously as the work of the elder master. ‘A lady watching a dog drink wine from a bowl’ demonstrates how Afzal used Riza’s oeuvre as a point of departure. Riza had already depicted a dog drinking wine, but in the company of a fully dressed European man, not a seductively posed young woman. Moreover, when depicting a semi-nude female, Riza gives the impression of having just happened upon a sleeping woman, rather than of her having hiked up her dress to expose her fancy undergarments and soft belly. For whatever reason, be it the influence of European painting, the desire to outdo Riza, or the slackening of public moral standards, renderings of nude figures and erotic poses increased throughout the seventeenth century.

While Afzal al-Husaynī contributed to a Shahnāmeh manuscript of 1642–51, commissioned by an official for presentation to Shah ‘Abbas II, several of his leading contemporaries were working simultaneously on a Shahnāmeh completed in 1648 for the shrine of Imam Riza at Mashhad. One of these artists, Muhammad Yusuf (Mir Yusuf), also distinguished himself by portraying youths dressed in elegant gold brocades and stylish hats. His figures’ long
67 opposite: 'Prince being entertained in the countryside', attributed to Muhammad Qasim. Safavid, Isfahan, c.1650. Timed drawing, 25.2 x 17.4 cm. Before the late 16th century al fresco princely entertainments appeared primarily as double-page frontispieces to manuscripts. However, in the hands of Muhammad and his followers such scenes were removed from the context of manuscripts and produced for inclusion in albums.

68 above: 'A lady watching her dog drink wine from a bowl', signed by Mir Afzal Tursi. Safavid, Isfahan, c.1640. Painting, 11.7 x 15.9 cm. In Persian poetry a dominant theme is the yearning for the absent loved one, suggested in this painting by the sitter's dreamy gaze.

69 left: 'Young dandy', signed by Mir Yusuf [Muhammad Yusuf] and with effaced owner's seal in lower left corner. Safavid, Isfahan, c.1640-5. Painting, 17 x 13.5 cm. The manufacture and trade of sumptuous carpets and textiles, including brocades like those the dandy wears, greatly stimulated the Iranian economy in the 17th century.
70 BELOW LEFT ‘Man holding an album’, signed by Muhammad Qasim, Safavid, Isfahan, c. 1650. Drawing 10.9 x 8.1 cm. Drawings of this type were included in albums, not of the oblong type seen here, but either in codex or concertina form.

71 BELOW RIGHT ‘Youth in a landscape’, signed by Muhammad ‘Ali, Safavid, Isfahan, c. 1650–60. Drawing 11.8 x 6.7 cm. Portraits like this one often contain details, such as the wine-bottle supporting a cup and saucer, which shed light on Safavid daily life.

Wispy locks fly in the wind in contrast to their immobile, somewhat comatose-looking faces. Accoutrements such as the European hat and the bottle with a face gazing at the sitter had also appeared in Riza’s works of the 1620s and 1630s and continued to be included in paintings by most of his mid-seventeenth-century followers.

Muhammad Qasim, who also worked on the 1648 Shabnameh, may have been somewhat younger than Muhammad Yusuf, for he developed a distinctive style that derives from but does not slavishly imitate the work of Riza. A small drawing of a ‘Man holding an album’ follows the well-known genre of the shaykh or poet in countryside. Yet, the wry upward glance of the man and the dramatic sweep of the hills formed by striated lines and a subtle grey wash have no precedent in the work of Muhammad Qasim’s great predecessor. Moreover, while his line shows a similar variation in thickness, it lacks Riza’s spontaneity and virtuosity.

A fine tinted drawing of a ‘Prince being entertained in the countryside’ reveals other traits of Muhammad Qasim’s style. Instead of drawing tufts of grass, he has used light green strippling, a technique much in evidence in the 1648 Shabnameh. His slightly smiling figures have very round cheeks if young, and are more square-faced if middle-aged. Although textures and the designs of textiles are not as faithfully rendered as in the painting by Muhammad Yusuf, this meticulous tinted drawing must have been appreciated, as it is stamped with an owner’s seal. Finally, it demonstrates that the fashion of combining polychromy and drawing introduced by Muhammad and continued by Riza still found favour in the mid-seventeenth century.

Muhammad ‘Ali, the son of Malik Husayn Isfahani who painted the frontispiece of the 1648 Shabnameh, exhibits closer affinities with the style of his contemporary Muhammad Qasim and his forebear Riza than with that of his father. Like Riza and Muhammad Qasim, he favoured such subjects as elegant young men and women or shaykhs in the wilderness. Yet, certain formulae distinguish his style from that of other artists. His youths’ sidelocks constantly have wavy undulations on the edge nearest the ear, while the hair along the cheek is straighter and hugs the contour of the face. The nostrils of Muhammad ‘Ali’s figures are often quite large and flared, in contrast to those of Muhammad Qasim’s sitters. In the place of backgrounds with defined horizon lines and naturalistic vegetation, Muhammad ‘Ali often places his figures in an undefined space with sprays of floating foliage in the middle and upper ground below billowing, streaky clouds. Generally his sitters appear more serious-minded and less happy than those of Muhammad Qasim, but both artists’ work demonstrates the final maturing of ideas introduced in large part by Riza.

Two other artists should be mentioned in connection with the school of Riza. First, Riza’s son Muhammad Shafi ‘Abbasi apparently completed works left unfinished at the time of his father’s death. Then, during the reign of Shah ‘Abbas II, he was involved in a variety of projects. If authentic, a large drawing of ‘Yusuf appearing before Zulaykha’ may well be a cartoon for a wall-painting in a palace such as the Chehel Sutun, built at the behest of Shah ‘Abbas II about 1647. Although the actual paintings in the palace are composed of fewer figures, such drawings may have been trial pieces from which vignettes were excerpted. The figure style accords with the prevailing mode of the 1640s, in which shading of faces was in use but did not function to model forms in the European manner.

Through the 1640s and 1650s Muhammad Shafi ‘Abbasi made his name painting exquisite ‘portraits’ of birds and flowers. Although Riza had painted single birds on rocks in landscape, and a few studies of flowering plants appear in albums which may date from the sixteenth century, paintings of anatomically correct birds, butterflies and bees on or near plants of definable species
represented a new genre in Persian painting. A bird and flower study (falsely dated and attributed to Muhammad Zaman) and an album of drawings, of which some are signed by Muhammad Shah, strongly suggest a European source of inspiration. By the mid-seventeenth century trade with Europe was well established and Europeans of all types visited Iran. Presumably to show Iranian textile weavers the types of designs preferred by Europeans, traders from England brought pattern books and perhaps herbarials with them to Iran. Thus, while Shah's study may have begun as a sketch in brown wash of a bird on a bare branch, the extension of the branch and addition of other plants must derive from a European herbal, in which blossoms of the same plant are shown from different points of view and in different stages of maturity. Whereas Shah's bird and flower paintings mask their source of inspiration in their very Persian use of colour and adherence to two-dimensional space, his drawings of the same subject often suggest a borrowed source. A tinted drawing of violets made in 1642 exhibits freedom of line, but still may ultimately reflect a European model. By comparison, another drawing by Shah 'Abbas in the same album, dated 1671–2, relies on a European prototype, most likely an etching, for its subject, a floral spray in a European-style jug. Moreover, its technique, in which grey washes and cross-hatching are employed to indicate shading and define three-dimensional
form, suggests that Shafi‘ Abbasi was looking beyond the mere subject-matter to try to grasp the mechanics of his European model.

Mu‘in Musavvir, the most prolific, long-lived and traditional of Riza’s students, produced a body of paintings and drawings that ran the gamut of genres available to seventeenth-century Persian artists. Already active in the 1630s, Mu‘in illustrated six known Shahnamehs between 1650 and 1667, as well as a few histories of the life of Shah Isma‘il I. An illustration to one of the Shahnamehs, dated Ramazan 1059/September 1649, is typical of Mu‘in’s work. In an essentially static composition the two protagonists, Rustam and his dying son Sohrab, have been placed front and centre while their pages and horses stand in the middle ground behind them. Despite his mortal wound, Sohrab remains emotionless. Only the turbulent sky, the restless black horse and the standard gesture of astonishment—a finger held to the lips—suggest that the event portrayed is a tragic one. While Mu‘in’s figural types relate closely to those of Riza, deviating only slightly in the treatment of eyes and mouths, his painterly, moody sky characterises his work alone.

In addition to manuscript illustrations, Mu‘in painted and drew large numbers of single-page works. His drawings are free and
sketchy with a distinctively loose quality of line, more like a brush and watercolour technique than pen and ink. His subjects range from portraits to depictions of actual events, accompanied by inscriptions describing the circumstances in which the works were done. Brilliantly coloured fanciful subjects, such as ‘A dragon attacking a man’, are also to be found in Mu’in’s oeuvre, alongside more conventional portraits of men and women. Completed in 1676, ‘A dragon attacking a man’ gives only the slightest nod to the ever more prevalent external influences of European and Indian art. Aside from some subtle shading on the man’s cheek and eyelids, the rendering of his clothes and the dragons maintains a firm twodimensionality. The subject of dragons attacking heroes is deeply rooted in Persian epic literature; Mu’in would have had no need to borrow such a composition from abroad. In fact, of all Riza’s followers Mu’in adhered most closely to a Persian pictorial canon which allowed him the scope to develop his own style and depict a broad range of subjects.

Despite a career spanning two-thirds of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, Mu’in Musavvir did not inspire a school of followers as had Riza. In fact, by the 1680s no single style of painting prevailed in Iran. Some artists, of whom the best known is Muhammad Zaman, had adopted far more than the superficial trappings of European painting. In ‘A prince on horseback with a courtier and servants’, attributed to Muhammad Zaman, working in the 1670s or 1680s, certain passages, especially the winebearer’s blue trousers, exhibit the use of highlights and shading to depict folds and suggest the form beneath the cloth. The lightly rouged cheeks and shaded eyelids of the figures also represent an effort to achieve three-dimensionality. Yet the prince’s luxurious gold brocade garment and the exquisite turquoise gold, red and white saddle-cloth contrast with the Europeanising modelling by stressing flatness and ornament over form. Muhammad Zaman’s oeuvre ranges from illustrations added to sixteenth-century royal Persian manuscripts to copies after European prototypes and even botanical paintings.

Lest one forget, not every artist in late seventeenth-century Isfahan painted for wealthy or high-born patrons. Travellers such as the Dutchman Engelbert Kaempfer commissioned artists to paint local animals, people or scenes from daily life, singly or in series. Dr Kaempfer, who spent the year 1684–5 in Isfahan, had an artist fill about forty-five pages of a sketch-book brought from Europe with such paintings. As in European pattern books, two specimens of people or animals are shown on most pages. The artist, Jani son of Bahram, calls himself ‘Farangi Saz’, that is a painter in the European style. Thus, he invariably includes shading on the ground around figures and makes various attempts at modelling. In one instance he depicts a landscape with European-style leafy trees and sky, but the work itself would hardly be taken for a European portrait. Presumably the motivation for Jani to paint in a European style was commercial and resulted from the demand of foreign travellers for mementos and visual documentation of what they had seen in Iran, a sort of pre-modern photograph or postcard album. By using some European techniques, Jani and his ilk were either following or anticipating the wishes of their patrons for pictures in a more or less familiar mode. For artists such as Muhammad Zaman and his more limited contemporary Shaykh ‘Abbasi, on the other hand, European paintings and prints presented a point of departure from which to forge a new style of Persian painting. By the 1670s such artists may have felt that the prevailing style of Riza and his school offered no room for innovation or modernity. As in previous centuries artists looked to foreign sources for inspiration. The difference in the seventeenth century was that the source was Europe, not China.

In 1694 Shah Sultan Husayn succeeded his father, Shah Sulayman. A weak ruler like his father, Sultan Husayn allowed the religious class, the ‘ulama, to gain great influence in the government, and a period of increasing religious intolerance ensued, with
Christians, Jews, Sunni Muslims and Sufis all subject to discrimination and punitive measures. By 1722 revolts had broken out along most of Iran’s borders. Such instability was an invitation to foreign invaders, and in 1722 the Afghans under Mahmud Ghilzai defeated the Persians in battle near Isfahan and then besieged the capital. Inefectual as ever, Sultan Husayn did nothing to counter them. After a seven-month siege he abdicated, and the Safavid dynasty came to an end.

Perhaps as a reflection of the lacklustre era of Shah Sultan Husayn, artistic trends that had begun in the reigns of Shah 'Abbas II and Shah Sulayman continued, but very little that was new was introduced to Safavid painting. Nonetheless, certain paintings capture the mood of the time. The distribution of New Year presents by Shah Sultan Husayn', painted by Muhammad 'Ali, son of Muhammad Zaman, and dated 1721, communicates the moribund state of the dynasty as no written account could. The Shah, seated in the midst of a crowd of fawning courtiers, is portrayed expressionless in deep shadow. By contrast, an unknown source of light illuminates the rest of those present. Whereas Muhammad Zaman used European methods of shading on some but not all areas of his paintings, Muhammad 'Ali displays a greater preoccupation with the play of light over the whole surface. Furthermore, his atmospheric treatment of sky, his modelling of drapery folds and his placing of figures in tiers exhibit a concern with naturalistic effects and three-dimensional forms receding in space. That the artist should have implied a light source from both the left and the right that does not reach the Shah may have been symbolic, but it also demonstrates the tenacity of the indigenous Persian way of seeing and rendering what was seen, in which all that was portrayed was assumed to be visible and equally illuminated.
The ‘Distribution of New Year presents’ provides a fitting epitaph for both the Safavid dynasty and its style of painting. What had begun in the sixteenth century as a synthesis of prevailing court styles moved in the seventeenth beyond the vocabulary of Timurid painting. Certainly, manuscripts continued to be illustrated and artists continued to emulate Bihzad. Yet major artists such as Riza clearly preferred portraying their contemporaries in modern dress and settings to masking them in the hats and helmets of Bahram Gur and Rustam. With the decline of late seventeenth-century artists to emulate European art, traditional Persian painting fell further out of fashion. The final two centuries of Persian painting before the modern era focus on the somewhat uneasy marriage of European and Iranian styles.

Afgans to Qajars
The abdication of Shah Sultan Husayn ushered in a period of instability and fragmentation to match that following the fall of the Ilkhanids. Although the Afghans controlled parts of Iran, they did not eradicate the whole Safavid house, so in 1722 a Safavid prince proclaimed himself Shah Tahmasp II in Mazandaran. This announcement hardly heralded a renaissance of the Safavid dynasty, but it conveniently enabled Nadir Khan Afsar, an astute general of one of the Qizilbash tribes, to rise quickly behind the Safavid mantle. By 1739 Nadir Khan had overthrown the Afghans and had initiated a series of conquests, the most spectacular of which was his sack of Delhi in 1739. His haul of loot included millions of pounds' worth of jewels and the fabled Peacock Throne of the Mughal emperors. Having had himself declared shah in 1736, Nadir Shah continued his military campaigns into the 1740s and moved the capital to Mashhad. Unfortunately, his management of the non-military affairs of Iran left much to be desired; finally even his own supporters could not bear the double burden of over-taxation and tyranny. In 1747 he was murdered, and the country again slid into chaos.

In the decade after Nadir Shah's death another tribal leader, Karim Khan Zand from Western Persia, attached himself to another puppet Safavid and commenced his political ascent. To