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 desire 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.

Afghans to Qajar
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 Afshar, an astute general of one of the Qizilbash tribes, to rise quickly behind the Safavid mantle. By 1729 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
secure his position, he eliminated rivals from the Bakhtiar tribe and another Qizilbash tribe, the Qajars. Unlike Nadir Shah, Karim Khan Zand concentrated on internal government from his new capital at Shiraz, rather than on foreign military adventures. Although he helped heal many of the wounds inflicted on Iran by the Afghans and Nadir Shah, his death in 1779 led to yet another period of instability.

Agha Muhammad, the son of Karim Khan’s Qajar rival, emerged as the strongest contender for the Zand spoils. Having been castrated and imprisoned by the Zands, Agha Muhammad avenged himself and the death of his father by murdering the last Zand in the south and the last Afshar ruler in Khusasan. He himself was killed in 1796, but his nephew Fath ‘Ali Shah succeeded him and the Qajar dynasty took root in Iran. Unlike his sadistic uncle, Fath ‘Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834) presided over a period of relative calm. The main threat to Iran in this period came from a new direction, Europe. Not only did Russia’s expansionist policies result in Iran’s loss of Georgia and parts of Armenia, but Russia also gained various trade and tariff concessions in Iran to the detriment of the Iranian economy.

Fath ‘Ali Shah’s grandson and successor, Muhammad Shah, came to the throne in 1834 and ruled until 1848. Although he attempted to liberalise the country, he, too, was manipulated by Russian ambitions and British regional aims connected with maintaining primacy in the Persian Gulf and control in India. The Russian-British rivalry escalated during the long reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848–96), taking the form of economic penetration and cultural influence. The Shah himself travelled to Europe in 1873 and on two later occasions, noting with fascination all manner of technological innovations, not to mention the exotic tastes and mores of the Europeans. Although he realised that the concessions granted to Great Britain and Russia did not equally benefit Iran, Nasir al-Din Shah nonetheless welcomed the introduction of European ideas and commodities. However, for xenophobic as well as simple economic reasons, resentment of the flood of European goods and European opportunists into Iran grew among the Shiite clergy and urban merchants. Nasir al-Din’s spendthrift successor, Mozaffar al-Din Shah (r. 1896–1907), only aggravated the situation and this resulted in the birth of a constitutional movement. A constitution was ratified in 1906, allowing for the election of a National Assembly. While the Qajar dynasty was to last for another eighteen years, by 1906 Iran and its art had joined the modern world. Certainly many time-honoured traditions continued, and the fact that there was both impetus towards and resistance to change and integration with the rest of the world led to the dialogue between internationalism and isolationism that continue in Iran to this day.

The study of eighteenth-century Persian painting – and by implication the sources of nineteenth-century painting – has been hampered by the inaccessibility of much of the best material, which is held in Iranian collections. Nonetheless, Persian scholars have demonstrated a continuity from the late Safavid period to the Qajar style. First, the Europeanising tendency which proliferated increasingly toward the end of the seventeenth century was maintained and developed by the sons and grandsons of the originators of the style, such as Muhammad ‘Ali, son of Muhammad Zaman. Moreover, genres such as oil painting, introduced in the seventeenth century, and the decoration of lacquer boxes and bookbindings remained current in the eighteenth century, even if they were produced in smaller numbers than in the nineteenth. Illustrated historical manuscripts and single-page portraits were also produced for a range of patrons, in a style consistent with that of Muhammad ‘Ali and his contemporaries. While the excessive use of shading sometimes endows these works with a dusky quality, they do display an improved understanding of the play of light (coming from a single source) on three-dimensional forms. European motifs and compositions remained in favour through the eighteenth century, and Nadir Shah’s looted Indian manuscripts – he donated some 400 to the shrine of Imam Riza in Mashhad – may also have exerted an influence on Persian painters. In sum, most of the ingredients of the Qajar style were available in the eighteenth century, but it took the stability of three long reigns, those of Fath ‘Ali Shah, Muhammad Shah and Nasir al-Din Shah, to stimulate the last efflorescence of Persian painting.

Many oil paintings have survived from the period of Fath ‘Ali Shah and later. Often they are shaped like an arch in order to fit in a space of the same shape on a wall. While the innumerable depictions of dancers and other revelers were most likely intended for coffee houses and perhaps private dwellings, portraits of princes and historical scenes would have adorned the walls of private palaces. The artist of ’A Qajar prince and his attendant’ has faithfully observed the conventions of early nineteenth-century Qajar painting. The loosely rendered mountains and leafy tree in the far distance and undefined middle ground suggest spatial recession. The shading on the figures’ faces and hands shows an awareness of modelling. However, the painting is ultimately dominated by passages of flat, brilliant colour and the bands of ornament formed by the diamond, pearl, emerald and ruby belt,
81 'A Qajar prince and his attendant'. Qajar, Tehran, c.1820 or later. Oil on canvas, 183x91.5 cm. With his jewelled dagger, medal and ornaments the young man in red is most likely a Qajar prince, one of the fifty sons of Fath 'Ali Shah. This may be one of a series of portraits of notable personages designed to fit into arches in the daraw or public room of a house or palace.

82 'Bird and flowers'. Qajar, mid-19th century. 11 x 16 cm. Although birds and flowers proliferated on lacquerware, book-bindings and painted ceilings in Qajar Iran, they were less often the subject of single-page paintings. Placed at the very beginning of the album, this page functions almost as a frontispiece or doublure (inner side) of the binding.

bracelets and trimmings on the prince's coat. Attractive though such portraits are, the static frontality of the figures lends little insight into their character.

As one would expect, drawings of the same period provided artists with a greater opportunity for spontaneity and originality. The wash drawing of a 'Dog attacking a wolf which has seized a lamb' may refer to a known event, but it is also a vehicle for portraying animals in action and showing a range of their emotions. Another, more formal approach to nature enjoyed great popularity throughout the Qajar period, the bird and flower (gul o bulbul)
picture. The descendants of Shafi ‘Abbasi’s bird and flower scenes by way of the works of the eighteenth-century artist Muhammad Baqir, such compositions were created for inclusion in albums and also used extensively on lacquer bookbindings, mirrors and boxes. With the introduction of printing and large-scale paintings, some of the finest Qajar miniature artists turned their hand to lacquer objects. One such piece, signed ‘Ya Shah-i Najaf’ and dated 1845-6, demonstrates a typical Qajar combination of European busts and vignettes from Christian iconography. The artist Najaf was not only the pre-eminent lacquer painter of his day, but also the scion of a family of artists who dominated the medium for much of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Nasir al-Din Shah was highly enthusiastic about all things European, including the visual arts and photography. He established a technical college in Tehran, the Qajar capital, and brought instructors from Europe to teach photography, among other things. He was a keen photographer himself, and not only photographed members of his family but also made self-portraits. The impact of photography on Qajar painted portraits cannot be underestimated.

Portrayed by Khanezad Isma’i’il in 1853, Nasir al-Din Shah wears the same coat as in a photograph from the same period. As decorative as the carpet beneath him appears, it, too, must have been precisely rendered by the artist. Such verisimilitude is matched by the direct gaze of the Shah, a lack of modesty that would have been unthinkable before the Qajar period. Although one still cannot read much into the Shah’s character, he is a recognisable individual, not just an idealised type. Moreover, details of his pose, such as one foot resting on the other and the fingers pressed together, may well represent mannerisms peculiar to him. The deep red velvet settee, bright yellow wall and opaque windows reflect the Shah’s mid-nineteenth-century Europeanising taste, but they also bespeak a close, airless world and by extension a land being strangled by the very forces to which it and its leader were most irresistibly drawn.

To late twentieth-century Western eyes, Qajar painting often appears odd and sometimes downright funny. Still-lifes, portraits, historical events and Christian scenes sometimes share the surfaces of a single penbox or mirror-case. Shading and attempts at perspective appear in works with stubbornly two-dimensional passages. Yet, from the point of view of the artists who produced them, such variety no doubt indicated their own virtuosity and must have appealed to their patrons. One could not expect an aesthetic that began long before the first illustrated manuscript to disappear entirely in one century. Thus, as they had done so often in
previous eras, the Persians adopted the aspects of the foreign style that appealed to them and grafted them onto their own tradition. In the hands of the most gifted artists of the day, the combination of old and new bore fruit in the form of a distinctive but wholly Persian style of painting.


Welch, A., *Artists for the Shah: Late Sixteenth-Century Painting at the Imperial Court of Iran*, New Haven, 1976

