The era of Safavid rule (1501–1722) saw the finest flowering of the arts in Iran. In a time of dynamic religious and political developments, painting and textiles attained new heights of brilliance and opulence, and architecture flourished with the growth of cities.

Sumptuously illustrated, largely from the remarkable collection of the British Museum, this book traces the achievements in art, architecture and the decorative arts under each successive shah of the Safavid dynasty. During the reign of the first emperor, Isma‘il I, there began a synthesis of the earlier Turkman and Timurid styles which reached maturity under his successor, Shah Tahmasp, particularly in the superb illuminated manuscripts he commissioned. But the most glorious age was the reign of Shah ‘Abbas I, who came to the throne in 1588 and made Isfahan his capital, embarking on a grand plan of palaces, mosques and new quarters. More than his predecessors, he welcomed European travellers at his court, and by the end of his reign in 1629 European art had begun to influence that of Iran. Although the fortunes of the dynasty began to decline after 1666, impressive buildings were still commissioned and ceramics, glass, textiles and metalwork were produced commercially. The elements which dominated late Safavid art eventually coalesced into the distinctive style of the Qajars in the nineteenth century, and influenced art in countries from Thailand to Morocco.

Dr Sheila R. Canby is Curator of Islamic art and antiquities at the British Museum. Her other books include Persian Painting; Princes, Poets and Paladins: Islamic and Indian Paintings from the Collection of Prince and Princess Sadruddin Aga Khan; Safavid Art and Architecture (as editor) and Islamic Art in Detail.

With 147 colour and 35 black and white illustrations

Cover illustrations

Front: Detail from Hafiz’s Daughter and the Worm, from the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp (f. 521v), ascribed to the artist Dust Mohammad, c. 1540. © Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Back: Dragon-sceptred ewer, moulded with a pale green glaze. Iran, perhaps Isfahan, sixteenth century. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

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THE GOLDEN AGE OF PERSIAN ART

1501–1722
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Sheila R. Canby

THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS
Frontispiece: A horseman and attendants on a falconing expedition (detail), Khurasan, Iran, third quarter of the 16th century, opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper, image 25 x 14.1 cm, British Museum, OA 1998.5-19.0.2a

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Preface

I exaggerate in calling the Safavid period (1501–1722) the golden age of Persian art. It was one of several golden ages with which the history of Iran has been blessed. The Achaemenids, the Sassanians, the Seljuks, the Timurids and even the Qajars could lay claim to the same epithet. Yet the monuments, manuscripts, carpets, textiles, ceramics and metal objects that remain from the Safavid period bear witness to slightly more than two centuries of vibrant culture which developed at first from a fusion of distinct late fifteenth-century idioms and later incorporated an array of foreign influences to end up at a very different place from which it had begun. The purity and opulence of sixteenth-century Safavid art is matched by the internationalism and grandeur of its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century expression. Although the political vicissitudes of the Safavid period must have been vexing for officials, the arts appear never to have been as disrupted as they had been after the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century or after the fall of the Safavids in the eighteenth century. Thus the period provides an opportunity to study the continual process of artistic evolution over two centuries of Iranian history. Of course, this ambitious idea is tempered by the usual limitations – time, space and money. A book such as this can only touch the high points, as happily much too much Safavid art and architecture survives to make an exhaustive compendium feasible at this time and in this format.

In March 1998 the British Museum held an international symposium on Safavid Art and Architecture. Because the papers from the symposium are being edited now, I have tried to avoid using the ideas expressed by the many superlative scholars who spoke there. While this may impoverish this book, readers will soon be able to follow up some topics discussed here in greater depth in the publication of Papers on Safavid Art and Architecture. Otherwise, I marvel at the work of so many scholars on whose published books and articles on the Safavids I have relied. Most of them are included in the Bibliography, but without listing all their names, I would like to express my humble thanks for their erudition.

Specific thanks go to those involved in the production of this book: photographers John Williams and Kevin Lovelock, editors Teresa Francis and Kim Richardson, designer Andrew Shoolbred, and picture researchers Jenima Scott-Holland and Sophie Tesson. As always, my colleagues Rachel Ward, Venetia Porter, Vesta Curtis, Jessica Harrison-Hall and Robert Knox; Keeper of Oriental Antiquities; have been generous with their time and knowledge. I am indebted to Edmund de Unger and Farhad Hakimzadeh for allowing us to photograph works in their collections and to A.S. Melikian-Chirvani and Susan Strange for their help in securing metalwork photographs. I would also like to thank Filip Gagnon, Director of the Topkapi Saray Museum, Nurhan Atasoy, Maria Ribeiro of the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Kjeld von Folsach of the David Collection, the University of Uppsala Library, the Textile Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Textile Gallery, and the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg for permission to reproduce works from their collections. Toby Voss and Christina Kwong helped with the index and Annie Seartide drew the map. Alexander Morton clarified some confusing historical points, and Adel Adamova and Stuart Cary Welch kindly shared their superior understanding of Safavid art history. Without the support, enthusiasm and intelligent criticism of two Johns and a Jon – Voss, Eskenazi and Thompson – and my dear friend Mark Zebrowski, to whose memory I dedicate this book, I could never have progressed with this project, much less have kept alive the desire to delve into the many mysteries of the Safavids that remain to be solved.

The transliteration system follows in a simplified form that of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, with the exception of certain words such as ‘madrasa’ that have accepted spellings in English. Diacritics have been omitted because it is assumed that the majority of readers will be non-specialists. Hijra dates of the Muslim calendar precede those of the Christian calendar.

With the exception of that on p. 8, which shows the obverse of a coin of Isma’il I, the coins illustrated on the opening pages of each chapter bear the title of the shah discussed in that chapter.
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Prelude to the Conquest

Secheaudare [Shaykh Haydar] was a Saint or Master or Prophet, as we should call him, who, by preaching a new Dogma in the Mahometan creed, that Ali was superior to Omar, obtained many disciples and people who favoured his doctrine. So great was his success, that at this time he was considered by all a Saint, and a man almost divine.¹

Iran in 892/1487, the year in which the first Safavid shah was born, was a land divided. Over the course of the fifteenth century Timurid domination of Iran had diminished until only Khurasan remained in the hands of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, effectively the last ruler of Tamerlane’s dynasty. Western Iran and the area around Diyar Bakr and Mosul in northern Mesopotamia were the domain of the Aqqoyunlu (White Sheep) Turkmans, whose leader, Uzun Hasan, made his capital at Tabriz. While the Turkmans and Timurids coexisted peacefully after 875/1470, other dynasties to the east and west of Iran were consolidating their power in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. In Transoxiana the Uzbeks rallied under Muhammad Shaybani and in the 1490s battled with the Timurid prince Babur, the eventual founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, for control of Samarkand. This was achieved in 906/1501, and it was only a matter of time before the Uzbeks extended their hold into Khurasan, seizing Herat in 912/1507, the year after Sultan Bayqara’s death. Meanwhile, in the west a far greater power, the Ottomans, sought new regions to subdue after putting an end to the Byzantine empire with the conquest of Constantinople. Although the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria did not fall to the Ottomans until 922/1516, the Ottomans had by then proved their superiority in battle against the Aqqoyunlu Turkmans in 878/1473 and the Safavids in 920/1514. With their enormous armies, extensive use of firearms and solid organization, the Ottoman war machine remained a serious threat to Iran and western Europe into the seventeenth century.

While the Turkmans, Timurids, Ottomans and Mamluks were the great established powers of the late fifteenth century east of the Bosphorus and west of the Pamirs, smaller kingdoms such as Armenia and Georgia and ostensibly non-political religious movements run by shaykhs such as the Safavids at Ardabil exerted a strong influence on events in this period. The name Safavid derives from that of Shaykh Safi, who founded and presided over a dervish order in the late thirteenth–early fourteenth century at Ardabil to the west of the Caspian Sea. Over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the influence and wealth of the Safavid order grew, as did the shrine complex at Ardabil. In the second half of the fifteenth century the shaykhs of Ardabil extended their mission to

¹ Detail of fig. 9.
Conquest

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