A Voluptuous Interlude

Shah Safi
1629–1642

... Shah Safi, that Persian Ivan-the-Terrible ...

On 24 Jamadah I 1058/19 January 1629 Shah 'Abbas died of fever at Ashraf in Mazandaran. Unlike Shah Tahmasp, he had given his succession some thought and had chosen his grandson, Abu'l-Nasr San Mirza, to be the next shah. Within a month of the burial of Shah 'Abbas in Kashan, San Mirza, dubbed Shah Safi, had been officially crowned. The magnitude of Shah 'Abbas' influence on all aspects of Persian life had to some extent obscured the negative aspects of his legacy, and only with the accession of the eighteen-year-old Shah Safi did these inherited problems surface.

At the start of his reign in 995/1587 Shah 'Abbas had married two women on the same day: one was his first cousin, the daughter of the fifth son of Shah Tahmasp, and the other was the widow of his older brother, Hamza Mirza. In 999/1590–91 Shah 'Abbas appointed his infant son, Muhammad Baqir Mirza, known as Safi Mirza, governor of Hamadan, with a Qizilbash guardian, thereby following the pattern set by his own parents in sending him to Herat at age two. However, in 1025/1614 rumours of Safi Mirza's plots to overthrow his father reached Shah 'Abbas' ears and in the following year he was murdered by a servant 'as a mark of his fidelity' to the shah. At this point Shah 'Abbas broke with tradition and confined his other sons to the harem, which not only deprived them of any education in statecraft or war, not to mention academic subjects, but also exposed them to levels of intrigue that were far more treacherous than the whisperings of court officials. Inevitably, Shah 'Abbas came to distrust his two surviving sons, Sultan Muhammad Mirza and Imamquli Mirza, and ordered them to be blinded. Like the brothers of Shah 'Abbas, whose eyes were put out in the beginning of his reign, these two sons were considered unfit to rule because of their blindness. The other two sons of Shah 'Abbas predeceased their father, which left him no choice but to name his grandson, the son of Safi Mirza, as his heir.

Not only did the murder of Safi Mirza fill Shah 'Abbas with gloom without alleviating his distrust of his other children, but also it set a terrible precedent for Shah Safi. Within five years of his accession he had ordered the assassination of almost all the Safavid princes, including his uncles who had already been blinded, as well as a number of the leading military and administrative officials who had risen up the ranks under Shah 'Abbas. With the execution of Imamquli Khan, an enormously rich and powerful man who was...
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Shah Safi maintained the royal workshop system, he built the royal monopoly in the silk trade. Instead of sending agents annually throughout Iran to buy up all available silk, red merchants to buy the silk at source. This change because the Armenian merchants of Isfahan had consoli-
died, thus a monopoly of their own. Shah did not enjoy the massive profits on the sale of silk, and cloth respectively, and had spread their interests.

The Shah Safi's reputation for cruelty, his innate weakness for leadership encouraged the perennial enemies of Iran, and the Mughals, to seek military legitimisation during his reign. Within six months of his accession the army, led by the grand vizier, had started moving towards the Ottoman victory in battle and occupied Hamadan. While the eventuality regained control of the city, they suffered Ottoman incursions until 1045/1638 which Erivan was lost. Even after the Persians regained Erivan in 1045/1636, the Ottomans would not agree to a treaty. Instead, in Sha'an 1048/December 1638 they invaded Armenia and took Baghdad. The Persians could not have anticipated the aftermath of this Ottoman conquest that they had lost Armenia forever, but the Treaty of Zuhab, which was signed on 1549/17 May 1559, marked the permanent end to Iran presence in Mesopotamia and to hostilities between the Safavids and the Ottomans.

On the east the Uzbeks, led by the Janid khan of Bukhara and Sadat eleven major raids of Khurasan during the reign of Shah Safi. True to form, these campaigns were plundering exercises armies, which numbered in the tens of thousands, might have a longer lasting impact on Iran if their leaders had so
drawn certain subsidies. The local ruler simply placed himself and Qandahar under the jurisdiction of Shah Jahan and the city passed into Mughal control.

Despite being outmanoeuvred in Qandahar, Saru Taqi deserves much of the credit for keeping the government and economy of Iran steady and on track during the reign of Shah Safi. Descended from a line of government administrators, Saru Taqi distinguished himself during the reign of Shah 'Abbas by overseeing the raising and widening of the roads and bridges in Mazandaran leading to Farnahabad and Asfara. From 1025/1616–17 until the death of Shah 'Abbas, he held the position of vazir-i kuli of Tabaristan, comprising Mazandaran and Rustamdar. In 1045/1634 Shah Safi appointed him to the post of grand vizier. Saru Taqi was notably efficient but overly powerful and thus not universally loved. However, he also helped fill the intellectual vacuum that resulted from the shah's inadequacy and decadent way of life. A notable patron of architecture, he supervised the reconstruction of the Shiite shrine at Najaf in 1040/1651 and later, as grand vizier, built palaces and other buildings in Isfahan.5

When Shah Safi died in 1051/1642 of the effects of taking alcohol as an antidote for opium, to which he had long been addicted, Iran was at peace and financially sound. The arts had not suffered but neither had any major monuments been constructed, though a few royally commissioned buildings had been erected in Isfahan, Shahristan and Turbat-i Haydariyya, and a few others had been renovated. One monument, the Madrasa Mulla 'Abdullah, was constructed on the north-east corner of the Naqsh-i Jahan maidan next to the qaisariyya bazaar. It is oriented at an angle to the maidan in the same way as the Masjid-i Shah and the mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah, but otherwise its square four-iwan plan is not unusual. Its construction may indicate a desire on the part of Shah Safi to continue the work of his grandfather in developing the area around the maidan. Of course, the decoration of the Masjid-i Shah

111 'A Young Man Entertained Outdoors', from a Dastur of Baqi, dated 1046/1056, opaque watercolour, gold and ink on paper, page 28.2 x 17 cm, British Library, Add. 7922, fol. 2r. The format of this picture with its limited number of figures and pronounced verticality is in accordance with Riza-yi 'Abbas's latest illustrated manuscripts, which may also have been made for Shah Safi.
the governor of Fars, Kuhgiluya, Lar, Hormuz, Bahrain, Gulpaigan and Tuysirkan, and most of his sons in 1041/1632, Shah Safi converted all his territories into crown lands. Although such a callous move in one stroke greatly enhanced the central treasury and power of the shah, it was symptomatic of a trend that ultimately weakened the Safavid state. In regions controlled by provincial governors the governors were responsible for maintaining armies at their own expense, which they funded by taxes and other income. When these provinces converted to crown lands, the money for defence came from the royal treasury. Royal appointees collected taxes in their areas, but the system was open to abuse and the local populations were often resentful. Under a strong, judicious king like Shah 'Abbas, excesses were kept in check, but Shah Safi was not equipped to keep the system in balance and his subjects content.

Shah 'Abbas' centralizing tendencies had also changed the nature of artistic patronage. Under his predecessors the royal kitabkhaneh had functioned as the source of designs for bookbindings, illuminations, lacquerware, some classes of ceramics, architectural inscriptions and decoration, metalwork and certain types of carpets and textiles. As a result of the disrupted royal patronage under Shah Muhammad Khudabandeh and the dispersal of artists and calligraphers, Shah 'Abbas was compelled to reconstitute the kitabkhaneh. However, rather than follow the model of his grandfather, which was based on a Timurid structure, 'Abbas instigated a system of royal workshops for the manufacture of luxury textiles and other commodities which were intended for external trade as well as domestic use. While the kitabkhaneh continued to operate as a royal scriptorium with calligraphers, painters, bookbinders, illuminators and related craftsmen, it ceased to be the fount of designs for carpet makers and some textile makers once the capital moved to Isfahan in 1006/1598. Furthermore, the designs of carpets and textiles produced expressly for foreign markets would have had a looser connection with the taste of the monarch than those of the sixteenth century which emanated from the kitabkhaneh. Both Persian and foreign observers from the time of Shah 'Abbas have remarked on the simplicity of his clothes and personal adornment, which suggests that rather than being an expression of his personal taste, his support for the royal monopoly in the trade in silk and carpets was grounded in economic pragmatism.

While Shah Safi maintained the royal workshop system, he abandoned the royal monopoly in the silk trade. Instead of sending royal agents annually throughout Iran to buy up all available silk, he allowed merchants to buy the silk at source. This change occurred because the Armenian merchants of Isfahan had consolidated their hold on Persian commerce, mostly over exports and imports of silk and cloth respectively, and had spread their interests into internal trade, too; thus forming a monopoly of their own. Even if the shah did not enjoy the massive profits on the sale of silk of his predecessor, the market expanded during his reign, bringing in more money through duties paid on exports.

Despite Shah Safi's reputation for cruelty, his innate weakness and lack of leadership encouraged the perennial enemies of Iran, the Ottomans and Uzbeks, as well as the Mughals, to seek military advantages during his reign. Within six months of his accession the Ottoman army, led by the grand vizier, had started moving towards Iran, but it was not until the following spring that the Ottomans scored a victory in battle and occupied Hamadan. While the Persians eventually regained control of the city, they suffered repeated Ottoman incursions until 1045/1635 when Erivan was lost and Tabriz was plundered. Even after the Persians regained Erivan in the spring of 1045/1636, the Ottomans would not agree to a peace treaty. Instead, in Sha'ban 1048/December 1638 they invaded Mesopotamia and took Baghdad. The Persians could not have anticipated in the aftermath of this Ottoman conquest that they had lost Mesopotamia forever, but the Treaty of Zuhab, which was signed on 14 Muharram 1049/17 May 1559, marked the permanent end to the Iranian presence in Mesopotamia and to hostilities between the Ottomans and the Safavids.

In the east the Uzbeks, led by the Janid khans of Bukhara and Balkh, staged eleven major raids of Khurasan during the reign of Shah Safi. True to form, these campaigns were plundering exercises but the armies, which numbered in the tens of thousands, might have had a longer lasting impact on Iran if their leaders had so desired. The loss of Qandahar in 1048/1638 stemmed from the disaffection of the local ruler from the Safavid court after the grand vizier, Saru Taqi (as Mirza Muhammad Taqi was called), had with-
continued under Shah Safi, when marble slabs were placed on the
dadoes of the monument, but these are in keeping with the stated
aims of Shah 'Abbas and his architects and do not represent a styl-
istic departure. Possibly Shah Safi also saw no need for investing
large sums of money in architecture when so much of the royal
precinct of Isfahan was newly built. In short, there is scant evidence
for any more than the faintest interest in architecture on the part of
Shah Safi, and innovation was the province of well-placed non-
royal patrons such as Saru Taqi, not the king himself.

Painting during the reign of Shah Safi suffered less neglect
than architecture. Riza-yi 'Abbasi was still alive and remained
active until his death in Shawwal 1044/April–May 1635. In the
1620s he had painted many single-figure portraits but had also
produced a group of works based on originals by Bihzad which
correspond to the Timurid revival in painting and architecture that
occurred in the second and third decades of the seventeenth
century. Dotted among the straightforward portraits of young men
carrying flasks in this period are more elaborately rendered figures
of courtesans which provide a foretaste of the more remarkable of
his last paintings. These works, portraying a rather decrepit Qazil-
bash archer and a European feeding wine to his dog, come close to
caricature, in which at his advanced age Riza must have felt he
could safely indulge. Although no seals or inscriptions indicate
royal patronage, one painting and one illustrated manuscript may
have been intended for the new shah. The painting depicts a pair of
lovers with the woman seated on the man’s lap as he wraps his
arms around her with one hand stroking her chin and the other
reaching inside her dress to fondle her belly. Her golden wine cup
rests on her knee while the half-empty glass wine bottle sits on the
ground before her, next to some pears. Without revealing much
flesh, Riza has produced an erotically charged double-portrait, one
which not only may reflect the voluptuous life of Shah Safi but also
presages the more explicit paintings of the 1630s and 1640s.

The illustrated manuscript that may have been intended for the
recently enthroned Shah Safi is a Khusrav and Shirin of Nizami
with nineteen illustrations signed by Riza and a date of 20 Safar
1042/6 September 1632. Although the quality of the paintings is
variable and some paintings are most likely the work of assistants,
Riza would have overseen the production of the manuscript. With-
out abandoning his figural style, Riza reduced the number of
figures in each scene to the bare minimum while enlarging their
scale in relation to their setting. The paintings show a marked pref-
erence for bright pink, almost fuchsia, coloured grounds which
were adopted by Riza’s student, Mu’in Musavvir, who was probably
one of his assistants on this project. The tall, narrow-page format
and preference for fewer large-scale figures can also be found in the
eight illustrations to a Divan of Baqi, written in Ottoman Turkish
[fig. 111]. The colophon includes the date of the manuscript,
1046/1656, and the name of the scribe, Bandeh-yi Shah-i Najaf
Ashraf (‘the servant of the king of Najaf, the most exalted’), which
is thought to indicate that the manuscript was produced for Shah
Safi. However, judging from its language, the specific mention of
Najaf and the slightly old-fashioned style of the figures, the manu-
script may be the product of a provincial centre such as Najaf rather
than Isfahan.‘

In the reign of Shah Safi a group of artists became active who
were strongly influenced by Riza and had most likely studied with
him. The names of two of them, Muhammad Yusuf and Muhammad
‘Ali, are inscribed on three of the 550 illustrations to a Divan
Husayn Isfahani, the father of Muhammad ‘Ali, is also known for
works dated in the 1640s but was active in the 1630s, in particular
as one of the illustrators of a Persian translation of the Sutar
al-kawakib of al-Safi, dated between 1040/1630 and 1042/1632 and
copied by the scribe Muhammad Baqir al-Hafiz.‘ The patron of
the manuscript was probably Abu’l-Fath Mamechir Khan, the gov-
ernor of Mashhad from 1054/1645 until his death during the reign of
Shah ‘Abbas II (1052–77/1642–66), who had commissioned its
translation from Arabic into Persian. According to Barbara Schmitz,
while Muhammad ‘Ali is the artist of most of the illustrations to
the New York version of this manuscript, another copy in Cairo
dated 1045/1635–4 is likely to contain more paintings by Malik
Husayn al-Isfahani.

Mu’in Musavvir, whose prolific career spanned the second two-
thirds of the seventeenth century, was proficient enough by the
mid-1650s to paint a portrait of his master, Riza, which he
completed (or copied) forty years later.‘ Dated works by him from
the period of Shah Safi include a ‘Portrait of a Youth’ from

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20 Ramadan 1047/5 February 1658 and ‘Lovers’ from 11 Muharram 1052/11 April 1642. These works reveal the early use of a fluid line and thin ink which characterizes the drawings of Mu‘in Musavvir throughout his career. Portraits such as these appear to be quickly drawn sketches, a view supported by the inscription on the ‘Portrait of a Youth’ stating that the work was done ‘at the house of his dear and venerable friend Shafi’i’. Since the drawings come from the so-called Sarre album containing works by Riza and his son Shafi and others that were produced at the house of ‘Aqa Mu‘in’ (probably Mu‘in Musavvir himself), the ‘Shafi’i’ to whom Mu‘in refers in his inscription may be the same as Riza’s son. Certainly he and Mu‘in were the closest followers of Riza. Not only do some of their works adhere to the style of Riza’s paintings, but also the

artists completed works left unfinished by Riza. The eleven drawings in the Sarre album dating from 1042/1652 to 1052/1642 provide the best source for comparison and dating of uninscribed drawings to the period of Shah Safi. In addition, they introduce us to the work of both Mu‘in Musavvir and Shafi ‘Abbasi.

Muhammad Shafi ‘Abbasi, called Shafi ‘Abbasi after Shah ‘Abbas II, first emerges in his own right as the artist of a group of flower drawings gathered in an album of related works. The inscription on the earliest of Shafi’s signed examples in the album is dated Muharram 1050/April–May 1640 and states that ‘Muhammad Shafi’i’ Isfahani coloured it in the madrasa of Maulana ‘Abd Allah’ [fig. 112]. This madrasa, presumably the same as the madrasa of Mulla ‘Abd Allah, had been built by Shah Safi adjacent to the

112 (right) Floral spray, signed by Muhammad Shafi ‘Abbasi (Shafi ‘Abbasi), dated Muharram 1050/April–May 1640, ink on paper, 15.1 x 8.2 cm, British Museum, OA 1980-25.054. Despite the later identification in Persian of this plant as a hyacinth, it bears little resemblance to that flower.

113 (far right) Narcissus, signed by Shafi ‘Abbasi, dated 5 Baha’i 1042/10 September 1652, ink on paper, 20.4 x 14.9 cm, British Museum, OA 1980-25.011. This fragmentary drawing of a flower identified as a narcissus has been pasted over a page containing an unfinished painting of another flower.
maidan and the qisariyya bazaar. The flower in the drawing, oddly identified in another hand as a hyacinth, is drawn in a lively fashion with the petals of its blossoms twisting in the breeze and surrounded by buzzing bees. The foliage and petals are shaded with hatched lines, a possible clue that the artistic source for this and other flower drawings in the album was a European engraving. A damaged drawing of a lily which can be attributed to Shafi on the basis of style is inscribed: 'It was on Tuesday the fifth of Rabii II that the shah left the capital Isfahan for Baghdad in the year 1042' [fig. 113]. The date to which this corresponds is Tuesday 10 September 1632, but one wonders if it signifies that the artist was accompanying the royal camp. Despite their simplicity, these drawings indicate Shafi’s willingness to copy European designs, although there is no indication of whether this choice reflected the shah’s taste. If such works have a connection with the Safavid court, they are more likely to have been drawings supplied to weavers who transformed them into textile designs.17

Without dated examples the stylistic development of carpets in the period of Shah Safi can only be suggested with reference to carpets given to European embassies. The textiles of the 1659 Iranian embassy to Duke Friedrich III of Holstein-Gottorp are now housed in the Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen. Whereas the large Polonaise carpet used only a few times for Danish coronations was given in 1665 to Queen Sophie Amalie by the Dutch East India Company directors and may date to the second half of the seventeenth century,18 the numerous velvets with gold and silver thread that lined the walls of the ground-floor tower room at Rosenborg Castle until 1911 most likely were included in the gifts of the Persian ambassador in 1659.19 Before their transfer from Gottorp Castle in 1817 the textiles, which had probably arrived in Europe rolled in bolts, had been used to cover tables, as wall coverings and as bed hangings in many of the rooms of the castle. Four figural and five floral patterns are represented in them: an inebriated

114 'Portuguese' carpet, southern Iran, first half of the 17th century, wool, 4.77 x 2 m, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, T. 99. Although the markedly contrasting diagonal bands with serrated edges in the field of this type of carpet are novel in Safavid carpets, the narrow format is typical of pieces from southern Iran.
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The fact that small pieces of the same fabric were still in use in the 1690s suggests that it was still considered prestigious enough to use for diplomatic purposes, unless Shah Sulayman wished to insult the Danish king by sending his letter of protest in an old-fashioned envelope. This seems unlikely, however, since the shah was trying to extract damages from the Danes. 17

Kirman maintained its position as a carpet centre where the production of ‘cave technique’ carpets persisted. To the system of three superimposed lattice patterns punctuated by blossoms, floral sprays and sometimes vases, the carpet makers now added serrated,

115 Wine bowl, Iran or North India, dated 1650–31, inscribed with owner’s name, Khwaja Muhammad Kaj, tinweld copper, engraved decoration, black composition, h. 14.6 cm, diam. 25.75 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, L.S. 1524–1895. Although this bowl was acquired in India, its decoration is closely related to that of Persian metalwork from the reign of Shah ‘Abbasi.
sickle-shaped leaves. While the motif was probably introduced in the period of Shah ‘Abbas I, its popularity lasted through the period of Shah Safi and beyond. Another group that may date from this period are the so-called ‘Portuguese’ carpets [fig. 114]. These are characterized by a serrated lozenge-shaped central medallion containing blossoms, partridges and hoopoes, and corners with ships crewed by men dressed in European clothes. Along with sea monsters and fish, a man who is either swimming or drowning is depicted in the sea. The palmette and arabesque border is of a type found on many seventeenth-century Persian carpets, but the designs of the field are uncommon and have sparked a disagreement over whether these carpets were produced in Iran or in India. Possibly they represent another aspect of the 1650s vogue for depicting Europeans, as both the paintings of Riza and a group of seventeenth-century Persian red and white silks of Europeans in ships suggest.

The study of metalwork of the 1650s is also somewhat clouded by the existence of a considerable number of vessels now attributed to North Hindustan, a designation that includes Kashmir and Lahore. Thus a tinned copper wine bowl, called badiyeh, with high vertical sides, an everted rim and a low foot, an owner’s inscription and the date 1040/1630–31 and typical Safavid split-palmette arabesque decoration may be of North Hindustani origin by virtue of having been found in India [fig. 115]. The diameter of the foot is smaller than that of a similarly ornamented bowl and closer to that of one bowl dated 1050/1640–21 and another from the second half of the seventeenth century, which may indicate a gradual change in the proportions of such bowls. To an even greater extent than with carpets, metalwork types seem to have remained constant in the period of Shah Safi, and without more dated examples pieces cannot be attributed to the 1650s, as opposed to the previous or following decade, with any confidence. However, the close reliance of North Hindustani metalwork on Safavid prototypes at least demonstrates close interaction between Iran and India, and may point to increased trade between the two regions from the 1650s.

As with the ewer dated 1027/1616–17 [see fig. 105], Persian potters continued to combine Indian-style shapes with Chinese-style decoration to produce unusual classes of ceramics. A ewer with an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century brass lid, spout and handle [fig. 116] belongs to a group of wares based on Chinese ceramics called Fahua wares, produced under the Ming dynasty in the sixteenth or seventeenth century in imitation of cloisonné. The sides of the moulded globular ewer consist of vertical bands glazed turquoise or pale blue separated by panels containing undulating flowering vines carved in relief and glazed yellowish on a manganese ground. Four-petalled florets have been applied to the neck and rim of the ewer in the same fashion as on a bulbous-bodied, straight-spouted ewer with monochrome grey-green glaze in the Victoria and Albert Museum. In shape both the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert ewers are based on Indian models. Even the repaired lid of the British Museum piece is domed like the Indian prototype, but without its bird-shaped finial. Zebrowski has attributed the Indian bronze ewer to North India and the seventeenth century, but it is impossible to pinpoint how the Persian potter would have come to adapt this shape to his ornate ewer. The connection of the monochrome-glazed Victoria and Albert ewer with another type of seventeenth-century North Indian spouted vase leads to the question of whether a particular ceramic workshop was producing this line of wares to suit the taste of an atypical clientele. Indians had long been established as money-lenders in Iran, and perhaps in this period of general prosperity and
internationalism they could afford to commission ceramics that combined traditional Indian shapes and Chinese decoration.

In this period the production of blue and white wares with a stoneware body continued unabated. A hookah base dated 1051/1641 with a high flaring neck, squat bulbous body and low, cup-shaped spout is one of a large group that derive their shape from the Chinese 'kendi', a type of ewer. Like the 1027/1616–17 ewer [see fig. 105], the sides of this hookah base consist of panels containing landscape scenes. While many such objects are clearly dependent on Chinese motifs for both the decorative bands that separate one formal element from another and the larger decorative passages, others reveal a more original approach. A dish with the central image of a goat gambolling in a landscape [fig. 117] is legible but uncommon in Persian blue and white ceramics. The row of trees at the left and the rectangular forms at the right, probably meant to be read as architecture, indicate recession in space behind the goat. The vegetation and birds on the border operate independently from the central composition, but imply a landscape with the ground around the top left quarter of the cavetto. Although the composition of this dish does not rely on an obvious Chinese prototype, the potter may have derived the goat from images of deer, as these do appear on Chinese export wares and their Persian copies.

According to Tavernier, who first travelled in Iran in 1635, glass was made at three or four locations in Shiraz and shipped to centres throughout the country. Presumably this was born of necessity as Shiraz was the place where the best rosewater and wine were produced. The long-necked bottles and globular bottles with short necks of clear glass depicted in paintings holding red wine may have been of local manufacture but it is difficult to date surviving examples with any precision. Moreover, well into the seventeenth century Venetian glass remained a desirable commodity. Even the glass qalans, or water-pipes, used for smoking tobacco, which were noted by Adam Olearius in 1637 were imported from Venice, along with mirrors and bottles. For fine glass the Persians still relied on Venice and it seems that the same Armenian merchants who took silk to trade in Europe returned to Iran with Venetian glass to sell. Although Chardin claimed that glassmaking had been introduced to Iran in the late sixteenth century by an Italian at Shiraz, this story did not appear in the accounts of Europeans writing in the 1620s or 1650s.

Objects in other media are difficult to assign to the period of Shah Safi. So much of what was made in royal and commercial workshops represented a continuation of the styles established under Shah 'Abbas. Only the work of individual artists who signed and dated their paintings and drawings provides a large enough corpus of material to give some idea of how the arts of the book evolved in the 1650s. In general, European influence is more consistently evident in this period than before, but this coexisted with a strong conservative strain that is manifested in manuscript illustrations resembling those of the first decade of the seventeenth century. The subtle variation of Safavid themes found in North Indian metalwork of the seventeenth century adds to the difficulty of secure attribution but also points up the increasingly close artistic relationship between Iran and India. With ceramics the introduction of Indian metalwork shapes in combination with Chinese-style decoration results in some of the most innovative pieces of the first half of the century. The study of the arts from the period of Shah Safi has been hampered perhaps by the uncharismatic nature of his personality and his rule. However, non-royal patronage thrived in this period, as did commerce, so further scrutiny should reward the researcher with a fuller picture of Persian art in the 1650s.

117 (opposite) Dish with a goat in a landscape, first half of the 17th century, stoneware with underglaze blue and black decoration, diam. 10.5 cm, British Museum, OA 1942.414-3, bequest of Gustav Adolphus Schneider. Although the Iranian potter has replaced the deer of a Chinese prototype with a goat, the treatment of its exaggeratedly cloven hooves and the way it appears to trot on their points have been borrowed from Chinese examples.
The death of Shah Safi might have precipitated a crisis of succession since his oldest son, Sultan Muhammad Mirza, was only eight and a half years old when he was crowned, taking the name Shah ‘Abbas II. However, such was the strength of the alliance between the grand vizier, Mirza Muhammad Saru Taqi, and Shah Safi’s mother that the changeover was effected peacefully; Shah ‘Abbas II was enthroned on 16 Safar 1052/15 May 1642.

The shah’s tender age precluded him from all but the ceremonial functions of the ruler at the outset, but by the same token he was freed from the harem early enough in his life to be given a proper education. As a result, he not only excelled at horsemanship and developed a passion for polo but also he acquired an appreciation of literature, especially theological texts. His classical education included instruction in writing and this was augmented by lessons in painting from both Persian and European artists. It seems likely that Saru Taqi imparted his own enthusiasm for architecture to the young prince, who from early in his reign added substantially to the already remarkable Safavid assemblage at Isfahan.

As Shah Safi had sunk deeper into his addictions, Saru Taqi had effectively run the day-to-day business of government. He was efficient and ruthless and had made his fair share of enemies in the process of maintaining his loyalty to the shah. Among these were the English East India Company, which had complained to the shah in 1655, when Saru Taqi was still governor of Mazendaran, about his ‘alleged dishonesty in the delivery of silk.’ On the other hand, he drove very hard bargains with foreign trading companies in the interest of procuring the best deal for the Iranians. His intransigence with regard to the amounts and prices of silk he expected the Dutch East India Company to buy led in Rabi’ I 1055/May 1645 to a brief Dutch blockade of Bandar ‘Abbas and a bombardment of the island of Qashm followed by the Dutch boycott of Persian silk until 1062/1652.

To maintain his strong position Saru Taqi engineered the execution in Dhu’l Hijja 1052/March 1645 of an important ghulam minister, Rustam Khan, who was in Mashhad in his capacity as field marshal and wished to return to Isfahan after the accession of Shah ‘Abbas II. Other important functionaries who were too openly ambitious were dealt with through banishment from Isfahan or the withdrawal of tax concessions. By Sha’ban 1055/October 1645 Saru...
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