A RARE AND HIGHLY IMPORTANT SAFAVID OIL PAINTING

The Property of a French Private Collector

69 Portrait of a lady (perhaps Armenian) dressed in a rich costume, holding a wine glass, and a bunch of flowers, standing in a richly ornamented interior, Persia, Isfahan, c.1650-1700 oil on canvas, framed 163.3 x 90cm.

This magnificent portrait of a well-dressed lady is an extremely rare example of large-scale late-seventeenth century Safavid oil portraiture, and one of only twelve such paintings known to exist. Of the eleven related works previously known, only three have ever appeared at public auction (Sotheby’s, London, 15th October 1997, lot 35; Christie’s, London, 11th July 1974, lots 42-3), while five were sold at P & D Colnaghi’s, London, in 1976. The present work is extremely closely related to the first two of type A (see below), and may originally have formed part of a distinct series of this type (see discussion below).

The list of known paintings from this group is as follows:

Type A.
1. A lady in Persian dress standing in an interior (formerly in the Negarestan Museum, Tehran, now transferred to the Sadabad Museum of Fine Arts, Tehran; published: Colnaghi’s, 1976, no.131, fig.2; Berz, 1987, figs 2-4; Grube and Sirin, 1989, no.39, p.222; Keilhauisi, fig.2).
2. A gentleman in Persian dress standing in an interior (formerly in the Negarestan Museum, Tehran, now transferred to the Sadabad Museum of Fine Arts, Tehran; published: Colnaghi’s, 1976, no.138, fig.2; Berz, 1987, fig.4; Keilhauisi, fig.3).
3. A lady standing in an interior - THE PRESENT PORTRAIT.
4. A gentleman standing in an interior holding a bow and arrow (private collection, London, published: Adie, 1996, fig.15, described as ‘le jardin de l’Arc royal géorgien’).

Type B.
5. Portrait of a European dignitary, (private collection; sold in these rooms, 15th October 1997, lot 35).
6. A lady in Persian dress standing in a landscape holding a wine flask (formerly in the Negarestan Museum, Tehran, now transferred to the Sadabad Museum of Fine Arts, Tehran; published: Colnaghi’s, 1976, no.139).
7. A lady in Persian dress standing in a landscape holding a chalice (formerly in the Negarestan Museum, Tehran, now transferred to the Sadabad Museum of Fine Arts, Tehran; published: Colnaghi’s, 1976, no.40; Adie, 1996, fig.13).

There are four other related paintings in private collections which remain so far unpublished.

When P & D Colnaghi catalogued and published their five paintings in 1976 (nos.1, 2, 4-6 above) they commissioned extensive research from Dr Eleanor Sims, and for the full account of the historical and artistic background and for analyses of the five Colnaghi portraits we would refer all readers to Dr Sims’s article in the catalogue ‘Persian and Mughal Art’, as published by Colnaghi, London, 1976, pp.223-232.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1598 the Persian emperor Shah Abbas moved his capital from Tabriz in the north-west of Iran, to Isfahan, in the centre. He did this essentially for reasons of security, but having done so, set about creating at Isfahan a cosmopolitan capital to rival any other, a centre of political and military power, of monumental architecture, of culture and the arts, of fashion and eclectic internationalism. His efforts to glorify his nation and himself coincided with other political and commercial developments which helped establish Isfahan as a major world city. The activities of the English and Dutch East India Companies were expanding in the East, the European distrust of the Ottoman Empire was increasing in the West and the Persian Gulf ports were open and free from Portuguese control. Culturally too, there were diverse influences. There was a strong exchange of ideas between Safavid Persia and Mughal India, there was increasing interest in the culture and art of Europe, which was aided by the constant stream of European envoys and delegations arriving at Isfahan, and there was a growing Armenian community across the river from Isfahan at New Julfa, which had its own artistic identity. Thus Isfahan in the seventeenth century was a melting pot of political, commercial and cultural influences which created a dynamic environment for the diverse development of the arts.

EUROPEAN ARTISTIC INFLUENCE AT ISFAHAN IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The introduction in the seventeenth century of the European aesthetic came about in two ways. First, European paintings were much sought after at the Safavid court, and second, European artists came to work in Isfahan for Persian patrons. Initially this was due to the intellectual curiosity and patronage of Shah Abbas I. A key factor was the settlement in Isfahan in 1604 of a large colony of Armenian merchants, from old Julfa on the River Araxes, and under the patronage of Shah Abbas they were housed in a suburb south of the town, across the River Zendoodak, christened New Julfa. The Shah granted the Armenians a monopoly of the silk trade in Europe, and the Armenian merchants were primarily responsible for the transmission of European art forms to Persia. They swiftly became prosperous and built a number of churches decorated with European-
the costume, accouterments and symbols appear to have a Georgian as well as Safavid relevance. However, the social and artistic links between Safavid Iran and Georgia (noted, between Iran and Georgia in general since ancient times) is well established. Armenian rulers frequently married Armenian wives, there was certainly a Georgian community in Tbilisi, which, if we can perceive the Armenians as a guide, may well have actively patronised the arts, and Georgian artists often worked at the Safavid court, one such being Syvanush the Georgian, who had worked on the great Shahnamah for Shah Ismail II in 1576-7. Thus, though Adie's research points to a Georgian connection of some sort in some of these paintings, it is certain probable that they would have been painted at the greatest artistic, cultural and commercial centre of the region at this time - Isfahan.

THE PORTRAIT
The present portrait is extremely finely painted and the lady's costume and the room in which she stands and the distant landscape are distinctive and very similar to those of numbers 1 and 2 above. She wears a rich costume consisting of a pair of striped trousers with gilt-floral borders (very similar to those of number 1 above), a dress of cream cloth richly embroidered with floral patterns (almost identical to number 1 above) and a short-sleeved red cut and unclothed metal thread brocade coat with a fur trim. She wears a gold-trimmed white scarf around her shoulders which is tied in a distinctive fashion around her head, beneath which is a square, jewelled and pearl-set gift cap. She wears rings (apparently ruby, diamond and pearl set in gold) on the third and fourth fingers of her right hand and the thumb and fourth fingers of her left hand. In her right hand she carries a tall, elaborate wine glass in red and colourless glass and in her left hand is a bunch of flowers. In front of her is a blue ceramic or bronze vase of flowers (the vase is almost identical to the one in the left arm of the lady in number 1 above and similar to that in number 4, and the flowers are similar to those in number 1) and to her left is a table with a clawed foot (also in numbers 1 and 2 above) covered with an orange-red table-cloth on which rests a bunch of grapes, a pomegranate, two plums and a half-full elaborate glass red wine decanter surmounted by three birds heads and a crown. She stands on a pink and beige chequered marble floor with a step at the front (also in number 2 above). Behind the figure are two spiral pillars decorated with putti amongst vine-scrolls, and a green curtain (also in number 2 above). Behind the table is an orange balustrade beyond which stretches a stylised landscape with a lake and a distant castle (also seen in number 2 above). The light source in all three paintings is from the left. The similarities between the current picture and the male figure (no.2 above) clearly indicate that they were originally a pair. It is also probable, therefore, that the female figure (no.1 above) originally had a male pendant portrait, the whereabouts of which are as yet unknown, and it is possible that it may not survive at all. Of the features mentioned, several are worth discussing in greater detail.

THE COSTUME
The embroidered cream dress is typically Safavid and the cut of the short-sleeved coat is also Persian in style. However, the cloth of the short-sleeved coat is almost certainly of European origin, probably Italian. The head-scarf is tied in a Bussian/Armenian style, but the square jewelled cap underneath, and the jewelled gold belt are more reminiscent of Central Asian jewellery.

THE OBJECTS
The glass in her right hand has an openwork stem with a shallow saucer. It is of a type known as 'Bagdad glass' ('winged glass') and is almost certainly 17th century Venetian in origin. The wine decanter on the table is also 17th century Venetian, but interestingly has a stopper in the form of three-eagle heads above an orb. This is a Russian design and it would thus seem likely that the glass and decanter pictured here were made in Venice in the 17th century for a Russian patron. The vase containing the flowers is in the style of Italian Renaissance bronze vases.

THE COLUMNS
The columns are notable for their spiral form and the decoration of putti amongst foliage. This type of column is essentially Italian Renaissance in style and perhaps the most famous examples of such columns are those on the Baldacchino in St Peter's, Rome, designed by Bernini. The spiral form was said to have originated at the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, and was used in the basilica of Constantine, hence its quasi-sacred relevance at St Peter's.

THE LANDSCAPE
The landscape is painted in a European style and was probably taken from a European painting or print, of which there were large numbers in Persia by this period.

THE ISLAMIC SCHOOL
The second half of the seventeenth century at Isfahan saw a remarkable development in painting, from the quasi-calligraphic style of the Reza Abbassi era to a new style showing more attention to naturalism, which was manifestly influenced by European art, with Mughal influence evident too. The chief proponents of this new style were Shahry Abbassi and his sons Muhammad Taji and Ali Naji (for an example see lot 67 in this sale), Muhammad Zaman (for an example see lot 70 in this sale), Ali Quli Juhbadar (see lot 68 in this sale) and Shah Abbasi, but there must have been many more whose names are not recorded. These artists are known to have produced watercolours and gouache paintings along traditional lines and to have produced occasional works on lacquer, but the concept of large-scale oil paintings on canvas was more or less alien to them. However, there are marked similarities between the figures of types A and B above, the small-scale watercolours of Shahry Abbassi and Ali Quli Juhbadar and certain anonymous works such as those in an album sold in these rooms Thursday 7th July 1973, lot 322, and later at Coh&h's in 1976 (Cohn, no.142 ii.ii.) In addition, in the churches and houses of New Julfa and in the Chehel Sitan Palace in Isfahan a great variety of large-scale murals had been painted during the middle decades of the seventeenth century, showing figures dressed in both Persian and European costumes (for an example attributed to Muhammad Zaman see lot 70 in this sale). Thus, though free-standing oil portraits were not common, the idea
of large-scale portraits, even life-size ones, was not a revolutionary concept to anyone living in Isfahan from about 1660 onwards, and the stylistic links between the large- and small-scale works of Persian artists of the mid-seventeenth century are closer than they at first appear.

It has been suggested, on occasions, that the artists of this small group of life-size oil portraits could be Europeans themselves, and not their European-influenced Persian contemporaries. However, aspects such as the slightly stiff formality of the figures and the stylised facial types would, in general, point to Oriental artists interpreting European style. For examples of the work of the European artists of Isfahan see lot 71 in this sale.

As well as the publications already mentioned, useful discussions and illustrations of painting and architecture of the period can be found in the following publications: Bosee, Julio; Caruwel, New J obese; Els, Discol; East and West; Dibb, 1989; Ivanov, 1975; Karimzadeh, 1990, Sims, 1979.

£200,000-300,000

Other Property

70 Large fragment of a fresco with a youth and a maiden reading a book in a wooded landscape while a musician plays a portative organ, attributable to Muhammad Zamun, Persia, Isfahan, c.1680

tempura on canvas, laid down on board, same wear

510 by 570mm.

Provenance:

Formerly in the André Malraux Collection, acquired by him in Isfahan during his first trip to Iran and Afghanistan in 1930.

Published:

André Malraux et le Japon Eternel, Paris, c.1960

This is an important example of Safavid fresco painting, an artistic development which was part of the Europeanising period of Persian painting in the mid- to late-17th century. The present piece is a fragment from a larger fresco, another piece of which is in the Art and History Trust Collection (see Soudavar, 1992, no. 152, pp. 376-7 and Ziai, 1997, pp. 26-7). These two fragments are similar in every respect: they are undoubtedly by the same artist, they show the same three characters, and the scenes are set in similar wooded landscapes, and they were both acquired by André Malraux during his first trip to Iran and Afghanistan in 1930.

The figures are depicted slightly differently in each composition: here, two of them are standing reading a book while the page plays a portative organ, whereas in the Art and History Trust fragment the maiden carries a bowl of fruit, the page wearing the peaked hat carries two pigeons, and only the head and shoulders of the youth in the turban are visible. It would seem that they are both part of a larger narrative scene, involving three characters (and perhaps others), in which several stages of a picnic are depicted. Soudavar has convincingly attributed the fresco to the Muhammad Zamun, based on that artist’s treatment of the eyes of his figures, in which the eyelashes and eyelids bulge slightly (Soudavar, ep. cit., p. 377). The presence of a portative organ is interesting. These portable instruments, with reed pipes, were in use from ancient times and are depicted in Byzantine art. Although they were common in Europe from the 12th century onwards and frequently appear in European medieval manuscript illuminations, they were not known in Iran before the 17th century. Thus, the artist must have been familiar with such an instrument in a European painting or print which had reached Isfahan (for examples of portative organs see Instruments, p. 88).

The second half of the seventeenth century at Isfahan saw a remarkable development in painting, from the quasi-calligraphic style of the Reza Abbasi era to a new style showing more attention to naturalism, which was manifested by the influence of European art, with Mughal influence evident too. The chief proponents of this new style were Shaykh Abbasi and his sons Muhammad Taqi and Ali Nasir (for example see lot 67 in this sale), Ali Quli Jabbadar (for example see lot 68), Shafi’ Abbasi and Muhammad Zamun, the probable artist of the present piece. In the churches and houses of New Ilha and in the Chehel Sutun Palace in Isfahan a variety of large-scale murals had been painted during the mid- to late-17th century, showing figures dressed in both Persian and European costumes (for examples see Grube and Sim, figs. 30-31). The present piece is likely to have been painted in one of the private houses of the Persian nobility or perhaps a wealthy Armenian merchant. For a further discussion of the Europeanisation of Isfahan painting, and for further references, see footnote to lot 69 in this sale.

£12,000-18,000
Two portraits of a Persian nobleman and a woman, attributable to a European artist, Safavid Persia, Isfahan, c.1700
oil on canvas, framed (2)
273 by 215mm.

These two portraits are interesting examples of the Europeanizing of Persian taste at Isfahan in the late 17th century. Whereas lots 67, 68, 69 and 70 in this sale are examples of Persian artists interpreting European style, these two portraits are almost certainly the work of European artists themselves, working in Isfahan and catering to the new aesthetic tastes.

The introduction in to 17th century Iran of the European aesthetic came about in two ways. First, European paintings were much sought after at the Safavid court, and second, European artists came to work in Isfahan for Persian patrons. Initially this was due to the intellectual curiosity and patronage of Shah Abbas I, and once established as a fashion, spread to other circles in society.

According to Tavernier, the French traveller, the Dutch East India Company sent two Dutch artists to Isfahan to teach the Shah to draw. One, Philips van Angel (born in Leiden in 1618) stayed from 1650-55, during which time he is said to have produced at least five paintings for the Shah. Pietro della Valle travelled from Venice with a Flemish painter, 'Giovanni', who left his service in Isfahan to find employ with Shah Abbas I. Later the Shah sent him back to Europe, to Flanders and France, to seek out other painters. Sir Thomas Herbert mentions 'John, a Dutchman' (who might well be the same painter 'Giovanni'), in 1698, recounts that ten years previously, there were European craftsmen living in New Isfah (the Armenian town across the river Zardasht from Isfahan) who included 'mechanik French, jewelers, gunsmiths and watchmakers'.

Inevitably, the European painters influenced local artists, and nowhere can this be more clearly seen than in the Armenian Cathedral in New Isfah, which is decorated with wall-paintings from top to bottom in a variety of European and less sophisticated styles. For further discussion of 17th-century Safavid painting and the introduction of European style, and for references, see footnotes to lots 66-70 in this sale.

£14,000-18,000

The Property of a Lady

Still life with fruit, a parrot and a distant landscape, style of Mirza Baba, Persia, Qajar, c.1795-1810
oil on canvas, framed
122.5 by 127cm.

See footnote to previous lot.

£10,000-15,000
74 Portrait of Muhammad Shah Qajar, Persia, c.1840 gouache with gold on paper, in mount 117 by 100mm.
Sold in these rooms, 23rd November 1976, lot 277
This is a fine small portrait of Muhammad Shah Qajar, who reigned from 1834-48. Portraits of Muhammad Shah are relatively uncommon compared with those of his predecessor, Fath Ali Shah, and his successor, Naṣir al-Dīn Shah. The present work shows him dressed in an orange tunic and a rich, brocaded pattern coat. His tall astrakhan hat is embellished by a jewelled aaspeh with a delicate orange plume. A similar portrait drawing by the artist Sai’l al-Mulk, dated 1847, was sold in these rooms, 9th July 1979, lot 56, and again, 16th October 1996, lot 69.
£5,000-7,000

75 Other Property

75 A youth and a maiden seated on a green couch before a round table, signed by Fathollah Shirazi, Persia, Qajar, dated A.H. 1283/A.D. 1866 watercolour on paper, signed at lower right corner, surface lacquered, mounted on an album leaf with stout paper borders 263 by 187mm.
This is a rare example of the work of the Qajar painter Fathollah Shirazi. Stylistically it is typical of the third quarter of the 19th century and can be related to the work of Sai’l al-Mulk and his son Xahy, Fathollah was a well-known artist who painted on lacquer as well as in watercolour. For further information about him see Karimzadeh, 1990, vol.2, 497-9.
£2,000-3,000

76 Portrait of a female musician, Persia, Qajar, c.1810-20 oil on canvas, some retouching 105 by 86.5cm.
£10,000-15,000

77 Portrait of a young man seated against a bolster, Persia, Qajar, c.1830 oil on canvas, some retouching, mostly to background 92.3 by 92.5cm.
Provenance: Sold in these rooms, 13th April 1976, lot 215
£8,000-12,000