The Property of a Lady

55 LIFE-SIZE PORTRAIT OF MIRZA ALI ASGHAR KHAN AMIN AL-MULK, AMIN AL-SULTAN, ATABEGI AZAD, ATTRIBUTABLE TO ISMAIL JALAYIR, TEHRAN, QAJAR, PERSIA, CIRCA 1833

Oil on canvas

195 by 173cm.

This portrait of the Iranian Prime Minister Mirza Ali Asghar Khan Amin al-Sultan is unmistakably by the well-known Qajar artist Ismail Jalayir. It is monumental in scale and conception and can justifiably be called Jalayir's greatest surviving work.

Works by this enigmatic artist are very rare, due partly to his habit of destroying paintings that did not entirely satisfy his own standards. As a result only five museums possess paintings in his hand: the Gulistan Palace Museum, the Sadabad Museum of Fine Arts, and the Museum of Decorative Arts, all in Tehran, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Leipzig Museum.

THE SUBJECT

Mirza Ali Asghar Khan was the son of Aga Muhammad Ibrahim Amin al-Sultan and was born in Tehran in A.H. 1234 / A.D. 1818. At the age of fifteen he joined his father's staff and in 1821 both he and his father were among Nasir al-Din Shah's entourage during his pilgrimage to Atabat. On his return to Tehran Mirza Ali Asghar Khan was promoted to sahrang and given command of the royal escort. In 1823, aged only sixteen, he succeeded his father as shahre-eslam (head of royal transport), and in 1878, still only twenty years old, he deputised for his father in all official state while the latter was away in Europe with the Shah. In 1296/1879 he was given the title Amin al-Mulk, and in 1300/1883 he inherited his father's title Amin al-Sultan, along with his official functions. He continued his glittering career throughout the 1890s and 1900s and served Nasir al-Din until the Shah's death in 1896, being responsible in large part for the calm transition of power to Muzaффar al-Din Shah.

THE ARTIST

Ismail Jalayir was the son of Haj Muhammad Zanan Khan Jalayir of Khurasan. He was one of the most gifted artists and teachers at the School of Arts of the Dar al-Funun academy, which had been established in Tehran in 1851 by Nasir al-Din Shah Qajjir. The School of Arts was opened in 1881. Jalayir's individualistic manner is known to have caught the eye of Nasir al-Din Shah, with whom he quickly became a favourite. He and his works also became popular with other members of the court and senior politicians. By 1892-3 he had produced a portrait of the Shah and was to continue his royal association throughout his career. One of his main patrons was the young but powerful vizier Mirza Ali Asghar Khan, the subject of this portrait, whose connection with Jalayir seems to have come about in an unusual way. It is said that Jalayir was a perfectionist and was often dissatisfied with the final result of his endeavours; he was in the habit of examining his finished works and if they did not satisfy his own very strict criteria he would destroy them. Mirza Ali Asghar Khan heard about this dark tendency and invited Jalayir to his house, indicating that he was welcome to come and go as he pleased. At the same time he ordered his servants to watch Jalayir very carefully and as soon as he began to examine a completed work the servants were to whisk the painting away and hide it. In this way Mirza Ali Asghar Khan is said to have saved several works from destruction at the hand of their maker.
This portrait

Jalayir’s style was unique. Both his portraits and calligraphic works are marked by a charming and almost surreal contrast between large-scale forms in the foreground and middle-distance, and the microscopic world of flowers, animals and architecture that inhabit the intervening spaces. At every turn there is another miniature detail to be noticed, or an animal previously unseen among foliage suddenly appears. Specific types of objects reappear in his paintings like signatory motifs. In this portrait the carpet is very close to those in a closely related portrait sold at Sotheby’s, London, on 18 October 2001, lot 34, and in the scene of ‘Ladies around a Samovar’ in the Victoria and Albert Museum (see Diba and Ekhart, no. 86). The trees here also appear in the same two works as well a portrait of Nur Ali Shah in a private collection (Diba and Ekhart, no. 88). A very similar char and wasa appear in the Sotheby’s portrait.

B.W. Robinson summed up his style succinctly: “...his style was meticulous, thoroughly Europeanised on the surface, but fundamentally Persian, and tinged with a sort of gentle melancholy.” (Robinson 1991, p.887). The melancholy referred to by Robinson is evident here in the face of the young but serious politician, whose soft expression hints at a depth and spirituality not often associated with power and politics.

In this particular work Jalayir has combined portraiture with his other great artistic love – calligraphy (which he applied with a brush) – and in this case the calligraphy consists of poetry, explanation and symbolic content.

The main inscription, in large nasta’liq running across the centre of the picture area, is a couplet from Hafiz, as follows:

fay’u’ ruhul qodas az riyad e khairat e nazrat e maortab e ajat e amjad e arfa’ janab e jalal liyel amin al-sultan tuh faadah neveshteh sho

“if the Grace of the Holy Spirit be bestowed Others too could do what Christ would do”

The smaller nasta’liq inscription above this is expository, as follows:

in fezd shir-e Jalal fay’u’ ruhul qodas az riyad e khairat e nazrat e maortab e ajat e amjad e arfa’ janab e jalal liyel amin al-sultan tuh faadah neveshteh sho

“This single verse of Hafiz ‘fay’u’ ruhul qodas’ was copied from the handwriting of his Excellency, the Gracious, the Most Glorious, the Most Laudable, the Highest, the Excellency Amin al-Sultan, may my soul be sacrificed for him. The same image was drawn from his face”

In smaller nasta’liq letters on the lion is written:

zamandari

“Leadership”

The first of these – the quotation from Hafiz – is exactly the sort of phrase that Jalayir loved to employ in his works. He was a deeply spiritual man, a follower of the Sufi leader Muhammad Ishaq Dihabullah Aghudi and demonstrated his spiritual interests by painting at least four portraits of the Sufi devotie Nur Ali Shah (d.1797), several depictions of the Sufis of Isfahan and an album of portraits of The Seven Sufis. One of his greatest calligraphic works featured a prominent invocation to Ali. However, in this case he tells us, in the smaller calligraphy immediately above the main register, that this quotation from Hafiz was something that the sitter, Mirza Ali Akbar Khan Amin al-Sultan, had already copied out in his own hand, and Jalayir was featuring it here as a literary and calligraphic element of the portrait. This is interesting for three reasons. First, it absolutely confirms the identity of the sitter. Secondly, it tells us something about the literary tastes and spiritual aspects of the prime minister. And thirdly, it gives us a terminus a quo by which to date the portrait. Jalayir refers to the sitter as “Amin al-Sultan.” This title, one of his many, was conferred on him until A.H.1300 / A.D.1983. In fact it was passed on to him, with the Shah’s blessing, from his father. Thus, this portrait cannot have been painted before 1983, when Mirza Ali was twenty-five years old. Furthermore, as Jalayir also tells us in the same inscription, the portrait was painted from life – “The same image was drawn from his face” – and his facial features indicate a young man of, perhaps, around twenty-five. Despite his youth he was already the most powerful politician and courtier in Iran, and it is possible that he commissioned Jalayir to paint this portrait in commemoration of his inheriting the title of Amin al-Sultan, hence the inclusion of that actual title in the nasta’liq inscription.

The third inscription – the single word “leadership” – is placed symbolically on the miniature lion of the lion and sun motif in background. The lion was symbolic of power, especially royal power, and the lion and sun motif was the symbol of the Qajar dynasty, placing it in the context of the history of Iranian kingship and sovereignty. Thus the placing of the word “leadership” in that position is stating that Amin al-Sultan was the leader of the Iranian state, the instrument of royal power.
This directly political symbolism would also indicate that this was a commission to commemorate a specific aspect of Mirza Ali Asghar Khan’s career. The sun of the lion and sun motif here has a human face, ringed by a solar nimbus.

Another detail that may be a further reference to power is the scene on the vases in the foreground of a lion in combat with a dragon or serpent. This was a motif popular throughout the history of Persian art and perhaps symbolised the positive, good power of royal sovereignty, represented by the lion, over the darker forces of evil, as represented by the serpent/dragon.

In the distance on the right of the picture is a five-storied architectural structure, probably a palace or royal pavilion. Such architectural vignettes often feature in Jalayir’s works. It is very close to a larger architectural scene included by Jalayir in one of his major calligraphic works (see Geneva 1985, no.177; Sotheby’s, London, 12 October 2004, lot 311). Interestingly, the back of that calligraphic work featured a previously unrecorded sketch of Mirza Ali Asghar Khan (see Sotheby’s, ibid.). Another similar building is seen in the background of one of Jalayir’s portraits of Nuri All Shah (Diba and Eshkar, fig.XXXXII, p.280). However, in this case a strikingly similar building, very probably the same actual edifice, can be seen painted on one of the panels beside the fireplace in the “Hall of Painting” reception room in the Gulistan palace in Tehran.

Amin al-Sultan is wearing a portrait medallion of Nasir al-Din Shah at this neck. This is probably the Order of the Imperial Effigy, a superior grade of the Order of the Lion and the Sun, instituted in 1848, the Order of the Imperial Effigy was reserved for the most senior courtiers of Iran, and was occasionally conferred on foreigners of exalted rank. Interestingly, it was the only Qajar order on which jewels were not forbidden by law: “The decoration with the Imperial Effigy alone is exempted from this rule, because of the respect due to the portrait of His Majesty, which demands that it should be surrounded by jewels” (Mulzer, 1990). An example of this medal, showing a similar design to that depicted in this portrait, was sold at auction through Manson and Eden, 25 May 2005, lot 428.

Mulzer, C.R., Persian Orders 1500-1825, Ordens Historiek Selskab, 1990
£500,000-800,000
â€£745,000-1,190,000