



Portrait of Naser Al-Din Shah Qajar

Qajar Iran, c. 1850

Opaque watercolour, ink, and gold on woven paper

20.5cm high, 13.5cm wide

Stock no.: A5741

Provenance: Collection of John Murray III (1808-1892).

Private collection, Bermuda; thence by descent.

This portrait is of a young Naser al-Din Shah, aged around 19 years old. He is dressed in European military uniform, consisting of a deep red frockcoat embroidered with gold brocade, and braided epaulettes. He also wears a jewelled belt, armbands (*bazubands*), and a square hat (*Kolah-e-Qajari*) with a jewelled aigrette. His left hand grips the hilt of a sword, while his right hand rests on his hip.

Reflecting the turbulence of the early years of his reign and a desire for security, both overseas and internally, Naser al-Din Shah was frequently portrayed in military settings in the 1850s. A series of portraits dating to 1850 depict the Shah in almost identical dress and pose, but his hand rests on a cannon rather than on his hip. One example is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. [2023.248](#)). Another, a portrait from an album of Qajar paintings by Mirza Baba al-Husayni al Imami, is in the British Library (Or 4938, f. 3).

A painting in the Malek National Museum and Library, Tehran (accession no. [1393.01.00063](#)), completed between 1848 and 1860, depicts Naser al-Din Shah's visit to the army training ground at Mashgh Square. He wears a black European frockcoat, which is heavily embroidered with gold thread. He also wears braided epaulettes, a jewelled belt, and a square hat embellished with an aigrette. In his left hand he holds a Persian shamshir. Behind him march hundreds of soldiers, dressed in red coats

like British soldiers. Not only is this a magnificent display of might – cannons fire in the background – but also a display of European influence.

The present example follows the conventions of European military portraiture: the subject is depicted from the knee upwards, on the three-quarter turn, touching the hilt of his sword. Similarly, the Shah's elegantly manicured handlebar moustache, which is quite unlike the style he sported in his early years (see for example the famous photograph of the Shah standing next to a chair in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession no. [1977.683.22](#)), speaks of a desire to present himself as a European Dandy. Yet, his thick continuous eyebrow recalls depictions of Fath 'Ali Shah from the beginning of the century (see Victoria & Albert Museum accession no. [707-1876](#)). Framed in the language of European portraiture, yet reflecting the language of earlier paintings, this portrait reflects the attitudes of a Shah with one foot in the West and the other firmly rooted in tradition.

This painting comes from the collection of John Murray III (1808-1892), a renowned British publisher, responsible for the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Murray was also a writer in his own right, travelling extensively and writing travel guides. Later in his career he published the first modern commercial guidebooks. Papers sold at auction in 2024 include documentation labelled 'Pass for Mr John Murray proceeding to Shiraz and Persepolis', dated 1266 (1850 CE). It is likely that Murray bought this painting during his travels in Iran in 1850.