



Safavid Illuminate Miniature Portrait

Isfahan, Late 17th to early 18th century

Watercolour on paper heightened with gold

13cm high, 7.8cm wide (the portrait); 32.5cm high, 21.2cm wide (the leaf)

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Provenance: William H. and Lily F. Diehl Collection, New York, probably acquired in 1947 from Persian Antique Gallery, New York; thence by descent.

A miniature portrait of a young woman, mounted on a small cobalt blue and floriate panel, and again on a larger panel of gilt arabesques. The subject stands on grassy hill amongst blue irises. Though significantly faded, a pastoral scene can be identified in the background. Over her right shoulder, a winding river flows past a small settlement and towards the mountains in the distance. Over her left shoulder, two men use a ladder to climb a tree, possibly to collect fruit or bird nests.

The young woman is dressed in typical Isfahani court dress from the reign of Shah Sulaiman (r. 1666-1694), as illustrated by Jean Chardin, who travelled through Iran from 1673 to 1677, in plate [XXIII](#) of his *Voyages en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*.¹ Her undergarments consist of a collarless pink silk shirt, fastened at her right shoulder, and loose striped trousers which taper at the ankle. Over this, she wears a tailored jacket, which is cinched at the waist and flares outward to accentuate her curves. In the later Safavid period, jackets became shorter and more fitted, possibly emulating European styles.² She wears orange slip-on shoes, known as galesh, which sport a Cuban heel to help secure the foot in stirrups.³ They are probably made of shagreen, the untreated hide of a horse or shark skin, dyed red as per custom in the 17th century.⁴ She wears a split brim pillbox cap lined with fur, likely inspired by Georgian fashion.⁵ The ensemble is completed by teardrop earrings, henna tattoos on her hands, and a beauty spot applied between the eyebrows, probably made from woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) or indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*). Her hair is fastened into a low ponytail and two ringlets are pulled in front of her ears, which was considered particularly attractive for women.⁶

This portrait resembles the work of the Isfahan School during the second half of the 17th century. Unlike earlier miniatures, which tend to depict idealised visions of youth, this woman has distinctive, characterful features. Her face is modelled and shaded, a technique adopted from European art, the presence of which increased following the arrival of the Dutch East India company in Iran in the 1620s.

The background uses perspective, which was only adopted by Iranian court artists in the mid-17th century.⁷ 'Aliquli Jabbari (active c. 1666-1694) was one of the first artists to incorporate elements of European art into traditional Safavid miniatures. An example of his work in the British Museum, London (accession no. [1920.0917.0.295](#)), depicts a prince and a courtesan, with similarly modelled faces. The courtesan sports the same hairstyle as the subject of the present portrait, under a similar split brim fur hat. A miniature by Muhammad Zaman, a contemporary of Jabbari, in the British Museum (accession no. [1948.1211.0.19](#)), depicts a ruler on horseback and his attendants. Their delicately shaded faces and feathered curls display the same techniques as the present portrait.

n.b. accession nos are clickable links

[1] See Chardin, Jean. *Voyages de Monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*. Vol. II. Amsterdam: J.L. de Lorme, 1711. p. 51, pl. XXII. Retrieved on 29/11/2024 via Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1050392t/f63.item>

[2] Munroe, Nazanin Hedayat. 'Fashion in Safavid Iran', *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (October 2015). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved online from http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa_f/hd_safa_f.htm on 29/11/2024.

[3] Semmelhack, Elizabeth. *Standing Tall: The Curious History of Men in Heels*. Toronto: Bata Shoe Museum Foundation, 2015. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/persian-riding-shoes/YAFBikDNEd3nA?hl=en>

[4] Le Bruyn, C. *Travels into Muscovy, Persia and Part of the East Indies*. London: 1737.

[5] 'Fashioning an Empire: Safavid Textiles from the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha', *National Museum of Asian Art at the Smithsonian*. Retrieved online on 26/11/2024 from <https://asia.si.edu/whats-on/exhibitions/fashioning-an-empire-safavid-textiles-from-the-museum-of-islamic-art-doha/>

[6] 'Cosmetics', *Encyclopædia Iranica* [online edition] New York, 1996. Retrieved from <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cosmetics-pers> on 29/11/2024.

[7] Sardar, Marika. 'The Arts of Iran, 1600-1800'. *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (October 2003). New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved online from http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa_2/hd_safa_2.htm on 29/11/2024.