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The period between the late sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth century was one of the most prosperous times in Persian history. Marked as the heyday of the Safavid dynasty, it was pivotal in the establishment of East-West relationships. Thanks to their maritime achievements, European explorers traversed the globe across the oceans. Apart from being a potential ally for the Christians against the Ottomans; Persia’s location between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf made the country a strategic corridor for military and commercial traffic and, therefore, a popular trading partner for the Europeans. Shah Abbas I’s development plans in his new capital, Isfahan, made the city a hub for numerous travelers and profit-seeking merchants.

The exchange of portable goods, such as commercial merchandise, diplomatic gifts, together with a network of images in paint or print resulted in an artistic interaction between the Europeans and the Persians. It was based on this group of visual materials that Safavids constructed a sexual vision of European women.

This thesis examines the wall paintings of the Chihil Sutun Palace in Isfahan, Iran, to show how they serve as a mirror to reflect Safavids’ attitude toward social and
political issues of their time. The architecture of the palace, puts forward a physical place for Safavid patrons to represent a self-image as an axis of power in the region, and also as a refuge for deposed monarchs of their neighbor states. While in relation to the West, provides them with the privacy required for monumentalizing the paintings of European women, thereby projecting upon those images their controlling gaze. Here, architecture, as a place for projection helps the Safavid man to reverse the West-East, masculine-feminine dichotomy and triumph over West in the battle of look.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This thesis is not a historical account of the East-West relationship in the late sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries. Instead, it focuses on a mutual artistic exchange that came about during the same period as a result of such reciprocal diplomatic and commercial interactions.

Prior to the Safavid era, in the Ilkhanid period, the very first phase of trading and political bonds between Persia and Europe – Venetians – took place in the mid-thirteenth century. About half a century later, the famous Persian historiographer, Rashid al-Din Fazl Allah (d.718/1318) wrote the History of Franks (Tarikh-i Afrang) as part of his World History (Jami’ al-Tawarikh), which was the first work that offered an overview of the people of the West.¹ After the fall of Ilkhanids in the early fourteenth century, the contact with the West was almost forgotten, but never ceased altogether. After the emergence of the Safavid Empire, a revival occurred in the relationships between the Europeans and the Persians. Besides the maritime achievement of the West, which opened a new chapter in the European countries’ connections with rest of the world, there were two other circumstances involved in making the Persian-European relations in the Safavid period special. The first factor as Rudi Matthee in his essay Between Aloofness and Fascination: Safavid Views of the West states, is that, the Safavid state was the embodiment of both a national grandeur and territorial integrity intensified by a territorial faith, Ithna Ashari Shi’ism. The second reason was the fact that the Persian-European correlation reached its peak prior to the decided shift that

happened in the global balance of power which resulted in the Europeans’ undisputed military and material superiority.  

Shah Abbas I’s international policy also played a big role in opening the country to the world and establishing a link with Europe that was beneficial to both sides. The exchange of portable goods, such as commercial merchandise or diplomatic gifts, and being familiar with each other’s art and culture resulted in reciprocal artistic interactions between the Europeans and the Persians. Fascination with “exotica” resulted in a mutual interest in depicting people from the other culture. The Persian and the European artists each thought of each other as a model to understand and depict their own imaginary genre. The Orientals became a reliable source in terms of their facial features, clothing style, and manner for European artists to illustrate biblical stories. In return, the exotic look of the Europeans together with a misunderstanding of their sexual mores, lead the Persians to grow an interest in depicting European figures and also to develop the nude to emerge as a new genre in Persian painting during this period.

Most studies on seventeenth-century Persian painting have focused on the single page paintings of reclining nudes, such as Riza Abbasi’s nude which is modeled after Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving of Cleopatra (Reclining Nymph) and Lovers’ Dalliance by Muhammad Qasim with inspiration from Titian’s Venus and Cupid. Shah Abbas I’s great interest in the patronage of monumental architecture – the building project of Ali Qapu and Chilil Sutun palace – paved the way for the emergence of wall painting as part of a decorative program of the buildings, and as a more tangible means of artistic expression in comparison to the intimate art of miniature painting. Among the...

\[\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{2} Ibid, 221.}\]
wall painting at the Chihil Sutun palace, there is a small but distinctive group of women half-naked or with bare breasts in seated positions on a chair or a bench (sakkou) which renders them entirely European. In an attempt to establish a framework for a better understanding of this latter category of Safavid painting, I have isolated in this thesis the wall paintings of the Chihil Sutun palace in Isfahan and examined in particular three paintings depicting partially nude female figures in seated positions, and their formal and iconographic characteristics. My goal is to highlight the European inspiration of these paintings and study the perception of those images within the architectural setting. I also argue that Safavid patrons took advantage of the physical existence of the Chihil Sutun palace to manifest their understanding of themselves as well as their view on political and sexual power dynamics.

This thesis opens with a Chapter that traces the West-East relationship back to the late sixteenth century to give a historical review of diplomatic and commercial relations between the Safavid court and the European countries. It then goes on to focus more on the mutual artistic interactions between the two sides by giving some examples of European painting with Eastern inspiration and also some examples of Persian painting which have European influence behind them. The whole point of Chapter 1 is to show how the European artists used oriental costume and attire to reproduce biblical stories, while in return the western allegorical and nude paintings and prints that made their way to Persia, helped the nude to emerge as an independent genre in Persia, free from text illustration and any literary contexts.

Chapter 2 gives an overall view of Shah Abbas I’s major urban and architectural program to define the context in which the Chihil Sutun palace was built. Introducing the
architectural setting of the palace, chapter 2, then continues with introducing the wall paintings inside the palace. Chapter 2 aims to draw attention to three wall paintings showing partially nude women which are in complete contrast with the historical paintings and also some outdoor feast and haunting scenes available at the audience hall, both in terms of technique and subject matter.

The third Chapter examines the potential significance of the architectural setting of these murals in Chihil Sutun palace to see how the physical presence of a building provided the Safavid patrons with an opportunity to represent their outlook on social and political issues of their time. In this regard, public space of the audience hall and private zones on the second floor put forward different atmosphere, suitable for showcasing specific type of imagery. At the audience hall, the wall paintings of battlefields and reception scenes, represents the Safavid court as a morally powerful state in the region, willing to support the deposed monarchs of neighboring countries. The wall paintings on the second floor showing images of partially nude European female figures, provide the viewer with provoking imagery while architecture, as a place for projection helps the Safavid man to object upon images of the European women their sexual desire.
CHAPTER 2
PERSIAN-EUROPEAN COMMERCIAL AND ARTISTIC EXCHANGE IN LATE SIXTEENTH AND EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The Muslim-Christian power dynamic has been in play since the seventh century CE after the Muslims’ siege of Jerusalem. Shi’a became the official religion of Persia, through Shah Ismail of the Safavid Dynasty in 1501 CE; after the acceptance of Shi’a Islam in Persia by the Mongol Ilkhanids during the fourteenth century, a triangle of power emerged between Christianity, Sunni and Shi’a Islam.¹ The very first European attempts to make a common cause with Persia were made during the thirteenth century when Pope Innocent IV sent an envoy to the Mongol Capital of Karakorum in 1246 to share his interest in restoring the Holy Sepulcher. Venetians’ persistence in expanding their trading options resulted in a commercial treaty in 1306 during the reign of Shi’a ruler, Oljeitu (r. 1304-1316) followed by another such treaty signed by his son Abu Said in 1320. ³ After Tamerlane’s (r. 1370-1405) death in 1405, the Ottomans became the most powerful Muslim state and the main threat to Christianity. Christian anxieties, especially after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, and the enmity between Uzun Hasan, a Turco-Persian ruler over one of successor states of Tamerlane, and the Ottomans resulted in an “anti-Ottoman league” that, despite its repeated failures, lasted until the rise of the Safavid Empire and during rule of Shah Abbas I.

Apart from being a potential European ally in an anti-Ottoman union, Persia’s location (Figure 1) between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf made the country a strategic corridor for military and commercial traffic and, therefore, a popular trading

¹ Oljeitu (1280-1316) was baptized as a Christian and received the name of Nikolya (Nicholas) after Pope Nicholas IV. He converted to Buddhism and later to Sunni Islam during his youth and changed his first name to Muhammad. He then converted to Shia Islam and has also been reported to have reconverted to Sunni Islam Prior to his death.
partner for the Europeans. The tendency of European countries to establish a friendly relationship with Persia had two undertones; during the early phases (after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 CE) it was motivated by their common desire to stand against the Ottoman Empire, while in later ages (late sixteenth and early seventeenth century) commercial and economic aspects became more pronounced.

The European countries’ interest in having a commercial bond with Persia reached its peak in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries during the reign of Shah Abbas I, between 1587 and 1629. His approach to international politics opened his country to the world and led to the establishment of diplomatic and commercial relationships with Venetian, British, Portuguese, and Dutch envoys and merchants. Because of these mutually advantageous contacts between Persia and Europe, ambassadors, merchants, and travelers were commuting between the two sides. The exchange of portable goods, such as commercial merchandise or diplomatic gifts, as well as increasing familiarity with each other’s artistic and cultural features, resulted in reciprocal interactions between Europeans and Persians.

In this chapter I focus on these mutual artistic interactions by giving some examples from European and Persian paintings. Some of these paintings are drawn from life while other seem to be based off of prints or some previous drawings. My point, however, is that Persian and European artists used each other as a lens or as a model to understand and depict their own imaginary genres that otherwise had no equal. Needless to say, some levels of curiosity and interest in “exotica” are also involved in such a mutual fascination with depicting people from other cultures. The result, however, is something novel, which benefits both sides.
A Historical Review with a Focus on the Diplomatic and Trade Relations Established by the Safavid Court

When Shah Abbas I came to power in 1587, he opened his country to the world and accepted the challenge of making new international bonds. His famous infrastructure projects, making 999 caravanserais on the ancient Silk Road and creating a new port named after him, Bandar-i Abbas, on the southern coast of the country on Persian Gulf, made it easier for travelers and merchants to come to his new capital city, Isfahan. Isfahan soon experienced a golden period in art, architecture, prestige, and culture. As Sheila Canby in her book Persian Painting has noted:

The symbol of Iran’s prosperity and stability under Shah Abbas I was his new capital, Isfahan. A city of gardens, elegant palaces, extensive markets and all manner of public monuments, Isfahan has existed as a cultural center long before Shah Abbas made it his capital. Yet, under his and his architects’ direction the city became not only the seat of government but also a major hub of commercial activity and a microcosm of the new Iranian social order. The administrative move to Isfahan took place gradually during the 1590s and was virtually complete by 1598.2

In 1603, after gaining military confidence, Shah Abbas I felt no need to keep the peace treaty he made with the Ottomans in 1590. He then advanced to retake Iranian Azerbaijan and succeeded in taking several cities including the town of Julfa. In 1604, at the news of an Ottoman counteroffensive, he carried out a scorched-earth policy and ordered to forcibly remove the entire population residing in the regions of Bayazid, Van and Nakhichevan, among them were the Armenians of Julfa who could no longer endure heavy Ottoman taxes. He finally resettled them into a new territory in Isfahan, New Julfa, in order to take advantage of their commercial intelligence and artisan mastery. He sent them as diplomatic agents in relations with Europe and in return gave

them some privileges, such as an exclusive right to export Iranian silk via land-based routes. In their book, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran*, Sussan Babaie and her three co-authors focus on Safavid slave society – slaves or *ghulams* from the Caucasus and deported Armenians- and explain how the Safavid court capitalized this system of the rule in early seventeenth century to consolidate authority. As they have noted:

The Safavid court developed a political economy planned around the accelerated production and export of silk and import of silver. Different groups of deported Christian Armenians and converted slaves from the Caucasus formed the pillars of this planned policy.3

All of this along with “renewed European interest in Iran as a potential ally in the anti-Ottoman struggle, opened the door to new diplomatic initiatives.”4

Rudi Matthee, in his essay, *Iran’s Relations with Europe in the Safavid Period, Diplomats, Missionaries, Merchants and Travel*, speaks of the motives and reasons for Persian-European relations in the late sixteenth century and during the seventeenth century. In this regard he talks about the existence of some rumors about Shah Abbas’ interest in Christianity and even the possibility of his religious conversion as a motivating force that encouraged Europeans to extend their relationship with Persia. I am profoundly doubtful of the likelihood of such an interest on the part of Shah Abbas. In fact, it seems that that Europeans had their own wishful thinking about him, which parallels earlier hopeful thinking about the mythical “Prester John.” Shah Abbas’

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attention to the Armenians of Julfa was almost certainly mistaken for an inclination to Christianity. The important status of Armenians and their resettlement had at least two reasons: firstly, Shah Abbas wanted to use their abilities in business and their diplomatic contacts with Europeans and, secondly, he sought to protect the occupants of the border regions, including Armenians, from Ottoman invasion. Another reason for this misconception may be the Safavid court’s involvement in discussion with Christian men of the cloth. We need, however, to keep in mind that Shah Abbas was the king of the Shi’a empire, which not only considered their religion the last and the most complete religion, but also thought of themselves as highly superior to Sunni Muslims, another reason why they have always been considered as a potential ally for the Christians against the Ottomans. In this regard, the holding of discussions with people of other religions can be explained by their curiosity about the “others” and also their desire to demonstrate their own superiority over them.

During the 1600s (starting from ca. 1615), two European maritime companies, the English East India (EIC) and the Dutch Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) were allowed to operate in the Persian silk trade. Different supplies of goods were transferred in both directions. Indian textiles, sugar, spices, tea and tobacco were imported to Persia by Armenian and European maritime companies; in return Persian products such as currants and rosewater, as well as luxury goods such as raw silk, gold and silver wares and textiles were exported to other countries. The portability of many Persian crafts and art pieces helped them to come into the European view. Apart from the commercial nature of EIC and VOC companies, “they also encouraged awareness

5 For more on this topic, see Matthee, “Iran’s Relations with Europe in the Safavid Period,” 19-21.
of Persia as more than an exotic land among Europeans and helped to change the stereotypical image of Orientals to Westerners.  

With the mutual nature of cultural and artistic interactions between European countries and Persia in mind, we should accept that it was by no means an equal or identical dialogue. Part of it probably has to do with unequal number of travelers to or from Persia. The number of western travelers or merchants to Persia was noticeably greater than the number of Persians who travelled to Europe. One reason for this might be the popularity of Persia for Europeans, both in terms of its geopolitical importance and its potential for trade. Shah Abbas I’s international policy made his capital city, Isfahan, a very prosperous and attractive stop for European travelers. The number of Persian travelers to Europe, however, was limited to diplomats and envoys who were sent in formal service or in order to gain some information about Europe. One can argue that during the Safavid period, Persians were not as interested in European countries (or maybe in traveling in general), as Europeans were in Persia. The possible reason for this lack of interest may be their simple unwillingness or their not having enough knowledge to find new ways to trade with Europe and evaluate the European market’s demands and potentials. Another reason is that Safavid Persians seemed to have a sense of self-centeredness or self-sufficiency (both from a national and a religious

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6 Jennifer M. Scarce. “Safavid Dress and Europe”. The Fascination of Persia, The Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art & Contemporary Art from Tehran, ed. Axel Langer, Museum Ritenberg Zurich and Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess AG, Zurich, (2013): 64. For more on this, see Matthee, 2013. 6-39. The reason behind using the term “Oriental” here, is that, it is appropriate to the time frame of the present paper which is between the late sixteenth and mid-seventeenth century. Another reason is that terms like “Middle Eastern” may convey some political messages of the twenty-first century to the mind. That being said, I’m open to any suggestion to find a better replacement for this term.
perspective) that made them think of themselves as superior to other nations. It is from this sense of self-centeredness that the proverb “Isfahan Nisfi-jahan” or “Isfahan is half the world” came into being.

For Europeans, however, this period was known as “the age of discovery.” Their thirst for embracing the unknown led them to seek other lands to explore and to establish new commercial and political relationships. Travel books written by merchants, diplomats, and travelers brought some precious first-hand information about other countries, including Persia. Another good source of information were the portable artifacts that arrived in Europe by means of commercial networks. “The influx of foreign goods made its mark on and off the stage, at home and in semi-public institution, likewise, pictures, poems and variety of publications across the continent offer evidence of widespread interest in exotica.”7 This interest, along with an eagerness to make an impression on potential patrons, made painters such as Rubens, Baker, Lievens, and Rembrandt study oriental costume and manner.

**European Works with Persian Inspiration**

One of the early examples of attention to Persian costume is a couple of double page studies from the *Costume Book* of Peter Paul Rubens (Figure 2). “The Persian figures depicted there -a horseman, a nobleman and a flute player on one, and two young men, a maid servant and a young woman on the other- are clearly drawn from Persian miniatures.”8 These studies are obviously not drawn from life. According to

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Jennifer M. Scarce, they were based on secondary sources of Middle Eastern dress, as these were the only available source on which European artists had to rely. The second-handedness of these studies, as Claudia Swan argues, is evident from Rubens’s own handwritten instruction, which match exactly the colors used in Persian miniature painting.⁹

Persian envoys were also depicted in European court paintings that shed some light on Persian clothing style. One good example is the portrait of Naqd Ali Beg (Figure 3) in Charles I’s court, commissioned by EST India Company from Richard Greenberg. In this portrait, Naqd Ali Beg is depicted wearing a grey turban and a long robe with a repeated pattern of a bird nestling in a flowering plant on a silver beige background. He also has a dark shawl tied around his waist while his gilt heavy coat which has a motif of young man standing by a tree, falls from his shoulder. Jennifer M. Scarce in her article, “Safavid Dress and Europe,” mentions Robert Sherley as the one who introduced Persian dress to the English by appearing fully dressed in Persian costume at the court of James I in 1611. Sherley was Shah ‘Abbas’ envoy to Europe between 1608 and 1613 for diplomatic negotiations against the Ottomans. He was accompanied by his wife, Teresia Sampsonia, who was the Persian-Armenian daughter of a Circassian nobleman, Ismail Khan, and a relative of one of Shah ‘Abbas’ wives. During their stay in Rome from July 22 to August 29, 1622 for negotiation with Pope Gregory XV, Sherley and his wife were introduced to the painter Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641), who made three pen and ink sketches of them in their Persian clothes. (Figures 4 and 5).¹⁰ Scarce

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⁹ Ibid.

gives a very detailed description of Sherley’s dress (Figure 4) and describes him as dazzling in combination of layers of silver and gold:

He wears a knee-length robe [qaba] with long tight sleeves and a wing collar trimmed with back fur or silk... The silver brocade is woven with repeats of small flowers motifs in pink silk and may be identified with the costly zerbafte described by Chardin. His most flamboyant garment is a gold coat [balapush] worn as a cloak draped over his right shoulder to display the design and reveal the silver robe. The fabric is woven with large motif of young men and women, themselves in contemporary Persian dress, reclining among scrolls of peony foliage.\textsuperscript{11}

In Van Dyck’s portrait (Figure 5) Sherley’s wife, Teresia Sampsonia is depicted in a seated position on Persian carpet, with red drapery and the landscape of a city with cloudy sky in background. There is a Persian textile with a golden floral pattern on dark blue background beside her and a monkey playing in the left corner of the composition. She is dressed in a golden dress with Persian floral motifs, such as toranj on it. Wearing a golden crown with a black feather on top, she also has a golden veil, common among Persian noble women of the time. Depicting her in a sitting position might be because she was Persian-Armenian and sitting on the floor was a common practice in Persia during the seventeenth century. Another speculation may be her physical infirmity as according to an observer’s account in Madrid, during this journey Sherley and Tresia were still recovering from being poisoned in Persia.\textsuperscript{12}

Sherley’s ambassadorial garment appeared again in a portrait (Figure 6) by an unidentified painter during his return to England between 1623 and 1624, in which he is depicted, wearing the same coat as in the Van Dyck portrait, but over a black robe

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} From a letter by Walsingham Gresley to Sir Thomas Pelham, dated Madrid, January 22, 1610, Shirley1848, quoted in Schwartz, 93-94.
patterned with a motif of a man about to hurl a rock at a writhing dragon.\textsuperscript{13} The reason Robert Sherley is wearing a Persian costume is that the cloak is said to be a \textit{khil’at} or “the robe of honor” given by Shah Abbas I as a particular gift. According to Pietro della Valle, what was more exceptional was the right given to Sherley to wear a \textit{taj} or the elaborate turban. “His Majesty [Shah Abbas I] as a token of esteem for a foreigner, makes him [Sherley] a Qizilbash, by bestowing on him the \textit{taj}.”\textsuperscript{14} In this second pair of portraits, Teresia is shown in a standing pose (Figure 7), which according to Gray Schwartz weakens the argument for her physical frailty.\textsuperscript{15} She wears an European dress with a tight bodice and long full skirt and a jeweled crown; in an astonishing detail, she holds a long pistol in her right hand, as “if aiming at the back of a person sitting on a large empty red chair,” Schwartz believes, but I think she just puts her hand on the chair as a support maybe because of the gun’s weight or to be in a comfortable position.\textsuperscript{16} There is a watch in her left hand, hanging on a red ribbon dangling from her waist which is usually considered as “a symbol of transience or death.”\textsuperscript{17} This unusual combination of gestures, however, in my eyes, sends a peculiar message such as: Duel time!

Another example of European painters’ interest in the depiction of oriental people can be seen in works by Rembrandt and his peer Jan Lievens, who worked together for few years during the 1630s. According to Liedteke, two young painters in Rembrandt’s

\textsuperscript{13} Scarce, “Safavid Dress and Europe”, 66.
\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in Floor, 1999, 285.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
immediate circle, Jan Lievens (1607-1674) and Jacob Baker (q.v) produced historical figures on a grand scale somewhat earlier than he did. Rembrandt’s *Man in Oriental Costume or The noble Slav* (Figure 8) is 60 ½ by 43 ¼ inch (152.7 by 111.1 cm). The size of the paintings significantly exceeds that of any work by the artist dating from before 1632. The notion of the size of the paintings plus the fact that those portraits have been drawn in Rembrandt’s and Lievens’ twenties, can be a proof of the artists’ ambition to identify themselves with Rubens, thereby making a name for themselves in the genre of history painting. Needless to say, the highest status in the hierarchical ranking of western painting belongs to history painting. As almost all biblical stories, which are among the most demanding and prestigious subject matters in genre of history painting, occurred in the Middle East, where all the Abrahamic religions emerged: “The Middle Eastern dress of present and recent past was a reliable reflection of what was worn in the holy land in biblical times.” That’s why Middle Easterners, including Persians, were good models for European painters to draw in the biblical scenes.  

These examples offer a better understanding of how oriental people have been perceived by Europeans over the course of the seventeenth century. Those portraits most notably define the Eastern people based on their physical appearance and choice of clothing. So the oriental attire and patterns and cuts of textiles have been considered the most remarkable elements European painters were inclined to reflect in their works.

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19 Ibid.
paintings to present a more realistic version of the Eastern people to be used in drawing
the biblical scenes.

**Persian Painting and European Influence**

In this part I look at the Persian side of this mutual interaction –the Safavids’
perception of Europeans in Persian painting- during the late sixteenth and early
seventeenth century. In doing so I focus mainly on recent scholarship through the works
of Rudolph (Rudi) Matthee, Sussan Babaie, and Axel Langer.\footnote{Although there are other scholars like Masumeh Farhad *(Safavid Single Page Painting, 1629-66)* (1987), Basil Gray *(Persian Painting, 1961)* and Shiela Canby *(Persian Painting, 1993)* whose works have paved the way for the Safavid Painting scholarship; I chose Matthee, Babaie and Langer, not only because of their more recent involvement in the subject, but also because, instead of giving a more general account of Persian painting in a particular time span, they delve more into the depiction of Europeans in Persian Painting and focus particularly on nude or semi-nude female figures.}

Persians’ view of Europeans during the seventeenth century is not well
documented because, as Rudi Matthee says, the official historiography in Safavid times
pays not more than perfunctory attention to relations with the West and presence of
Europeans in Persia in comparison to the Muslim states surrounding the Safavid
realm.\footnote{Matthee, "Between Aloofness and Fascination: Safavid View of the West," 226.} Tending to speak of Europeans in generic terms, as *farangiyi*, is itself a proof
of this inattentiveness. The term *farangi*-which is the singular form of *farangian* or
westerners- is corrupted version of the word Frankish or Frank and was applied by
Safavids to all Europeans. \footnote{Ibid, 231.} In practice, however:

They [Persians] saw the Russians as uncultured, the Poles as bellicose,
the French as quarrelsome, the Spanish as noble, the Italians as
sagacious, the English as politically inclined and the Dutch as mercantile.\footnote{Bedik, Chehil Sutun, 387, quoted in Matthee, "Between Aloofness and Fascination: Safavid View of the West," 1998, 231.}
Matthee also touches upon Safavid poetry in which negative notions such as being non-believers are attributed to the Europeans. This negative reference is a metaphor for describing the farangi beloved as a cruel non-believer who has no mercy in heart for her lover. This cruelty itself is associated with suggesting a positive image of them as people of rose or pink-colored complexion because of their white skin.24

Pictorial representation of Europeans in Persian painting first appeared in the early seventeenth century. It serves as a record of Persians’ interest in the farangi and as Babaie argues, suggests a vastly complicated framing of viewpoint that goes far beyond a romantic submission to the allure of the exotic. 25 As Matthee has asserted, Persian painting:

Conveyed a hybrid and ambiguous picture of the European as both infidel and the exotic and tantalizing other, partaking of illicit pleasure forbidden to the true believer, by depicting Europeans (and Iranian in Western clothing) accompanied by dogs, drinking wine, and engaged in amorous pursuits.26

24 Ta Zih may-i lale rang miai
kafiri az Farang miai
Nist yekzarahi rahm dar dil-i tu
mikushi ta bih tang miai.
When you’re drunk from the ruddy-colored wine
you appear as an unbeliever from the west
there is not a whit of mercy in your heart.
you kill until [as soon as] you are in distress. Matthee, 231.


Rendering of females, semi-nude with their breasts or midriffs exposed through sheer clothing—which were unknown until the reign of Shah Abbas I—is the most straightforward example of Persians’ fascination with western prototypes. This interest in European painting style grew to such an extent that Shah Abbas I employed Dutch painters, most notably Jan Luscaz. Van Hasselt and Philip Angel to teach Persian painters how to draw in European style.27

Sussan Babaie in her essay *Visual Vestiges of Travel: Persian Windows on European Weakness* gives a different reading of pictorial representation of Europeans in Safavid Persian Painting. Her focus is on single-folio, album-page format painting which was popular in Isfahan between 1598, when the city became the capital of the Safavid Empire (1501-1772), and the 1650s when the production of such album pages had reached its peak. Regardless of facial characteristics, European style in dress and picture making, she puts these paintings in a general category of *kinkiness*. The common visual motifs of this category of images have three identifiable basic features:

One is the youthful man, or men, donning items of European clothing (Figure 9 and 10). The other is a reclining young woman, either nude or partially so, and often appearing to be dozing (Figure 11). A third common feature concerns a set of gestures and gazes that are suggestive of the sexual charge of the images; the man stealthy lift a piece of clothing, a diaphanous sash or shirt, to disclose the nakedness of the slumbering girl to the viewer or to the other male companion (Figure 12).28

In this group of images female subjects both in terms of facial features and choice of clothing represent ideal Persian beauties, which itself carries the Far-Eastern expression, derived from the Chinese style that influenced Persian Painting after the

27 Matthee, “Iran’s Relations with Europe in the Safavid Period,” 23.

Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. The male figures, however, are identified as Europeans due to their coded items of clothing such as hats, pantaloons and high-collared shirts. Babaie doesn’t believe in general categorization of these paintings as “lovers” or “dandies; instead she sees them more as demonstration of Persians’ viewpoint on the Europeans among them and a self-aware witnessing of a cultural gap, that was considered amusing and deserving of comment.

Regardless of the fact that these images represent a fascination with exoticism; Babaie believes that they serve like a mirror as a way of looking back at the Europeans among Persians. Her argument seems to be quite contradictory in itself. On the one hand, she argues that, to look upon a nude female body would have been regarded as sinful spying in the Middle Ages, so the images of fully clad men spying on the nakedness of a slumbering woman, appears to be a transference of local inhibitions onto the foreign other. To put it another way, the prudish Persians displaced their voyeuristic desire onto the body of the European. While on the other hand, she gives some examples of European travelers who reported receiving offers of beautiful women from their hosts, as in the Persians’ eyes it would be a bad thing for a man not to have a woman. She also refers to the practice of celibacy that was perceived by Muslims in Safavid Persia as a misguided proscription on sex by the church. Touching upon Willem Floor’s documents, she adds that Safavid society in general and the Shahs in particular

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid, 110.
31 Ibid, 119.
32 Ibid, 125.
took pity on European men without their women. In this regard, those images of male figures in European attire, engaged in looking upon sleeping nude women, would have been understood as the repression of the natural yearning of a man, thereby, pictorial commentaries on European religious fallacy and its sanctioning of a moral weakness.

In his essay, *European Influences on Seventeenth-Century Persian Painting of Handsome Europeans, Naked Ladies, and Persian Timepieces*, Axel Langer speaks of erotic ambiguity of this category of images. He describes the late Safavid period - from the accession of Shah Abbas I in 1587 to the death of Shah Sulayman in 1694- a different period from the “classical period” of Persian painting. According to Langer, developments in this period include the nude as a new genre, an increasingly “modulating” style replacing the earlier linear style, and the rise of the so-called “European style.” Touching upon depictions of youth, wearing European dress, Langer argues that dressing up in European garb was a way of assuming an erotically connoted identity. Because in the course of the Seventeenth-century, the adolescent Turk’s role as the object of all amorous longing in Persian poetry passed to *farangi* or Europeans. In order to prove his argument, he draws parallels between Persian poetry and Persian painting, in the way that they both suggest an obscurity between “spiritual matters” and “flesh-and-blood eroticism.” He also brings up the erotic and even sexual significance of lapdog in Persian painting and gives some examples of works by Riza Abbasi (Figure 13) and Mir Azal al-Husaini (Figure 17):

33 Which was attributed to the period of Shah Ismail I (r. 1501-1521) and Shah Tahmasp I (r. 1521-1576).

One has only to look at Afzal al-Hussaini’s *Reclining Woman and Her Lapdog* (Figure 17) in which the dog is shown drinking out of a bowl, or Abbasi’s painting of a young man propped up against some cushions giving his dog something to drink (Figure 13,) to be persuaded of this. While the dog in this work is merely tagging along as if it wanted to play, it could still be the vehicle of a cryptic message: after all, the young man is holding a long-necked bottle, so should presumably be read as a saqi, as the cupbearer who may even be the beloved.

In this regard, the erotic tone of the role played by the dog seems to be created by showing the dog drinking wine and also by its engagement in the act of licking. The term “lick the bowl” is itself a slang for performing cunnilingus on a woman, as in the case of Afzal al-Hussaini (Figure 17,) the woman’s stretched out body, her exposed midriff and her suggestive way of looking at the dog implies her wish to be licked. In Riza Abbasi’s work (Figure 13), however, one can see a direct link between the man and the dog which is standing on his lap reaching forward to his genital area to lick from the cup of drink he is offering as if the lapdog is about to give the man oral sex.

Langer also brings up a work by Riza Abbasi, (Figure 14) dating from the 1590s, as the first true nude in Persian painting, arguing that, until the end of the Seventeenth century, nudity was apprehended primarily as functional as a product of whichever literary context the painter was illustrating. The most cited example in this regard is the moment when Khosrow inadvertently catches sight of Shirin bathing in a pond (Figure 15) from Nizami’s verse epic of *Khosrow and Shirin*. Riza Abbasi’s work, *A Maiden Reclines*, according to Sheila Canby has been modeled on Marcantonio Raimondi’s

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engraving of *Cleopatra* (Figure 16). As Langer has described, her breasts are barely recognizable as such, but the empty space between the shawl draped over her shoulders and the wraparound skirt is tantalizing in itself.

This nude woman does not belong to any Persian literary context, and the figure's eroticism is something novel, which later gave rise to Mir Afzal al-Husaini's *Reclining Woman and her Lapdog* (Figure 17). The presence of the lapdog as mentioned previously, proves the European origin of the painting, because in Islamic culture the only accepted type of dog was the hunting dog, and the petting dog is almost unseen in Persian painting. Showing the lapdog, especially while drinking wine from a bowl, confirms the erotic theme of the piece. Axel Langer also alludes to decisions that the artist made to make the piece different from Riza Abassi’s nude or *Cleopatra* itself:

Afzal’s miniature at first looks like a deliberate replica of Abbasi’s model but replaces the innocence of the nude with the erotic allure of a fully clothed, self-assured young lady.

Langer also gives another example, a miniature called *Lovers’ Dalliance* (Figure 18) attributed to Muhammad Qasim. He points out its similarity with Titian’s *Venus and Cupid* (Figure 19), suggesting that:

The posture of the woman whose half propped-up body is turned toward the viewer, while she herself is gazing straight into the eyes of the figure to her left; the crooked left arm and outstretched right arm; the bracelets that she is wearing on her wrists; and finally the differently shaped breast, which is an especially noteworthy detail since in most Persian miniatures, the breasts are always identical. Unambiguously European-and truly unique in Persian painting- is the shape of the right hip and right thigh as far as the inside of the right knee. In Persia such a line would customarily

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37 Canby, 1996, p. 32, quoted in Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid, 190.
have been rendered either as a continuous arc or as a gently undulating, quasi-calligraphic line.\textsuperscript{40}

Drawing on the works of Raimondi, as an example, points to European print models as an important source of inspiration for the nudes in late Safavid paintings. “From European sources, we also know that in the days of Shah Abbas I, works of Italian art could be purchased in the boutique of the Venetian Alessandro Scudenoli at the bazar in Isfahan.”\textsuperscript{41} Masumeh Farhad -in her Ph. D dissertation on \textit{Safavid Single Page Painting, 1629-66}- gives a list of European paintings bought by Khaja Safar, the Kalantar (chief of the Armenian Community) of New Julfa during his mission to Venice:

Dated 17 February 1610, the list mentions a \textit{Nativity}, a \textit{Madonna}, the \textit{Saviour}, a female nude undressing, the \textit{Magdalen} nude in habit (in ordine), a Venetian female portrait, a woman with disheveled hair, alias Cassandra, the last queen of Cyprus (i.e. Caterina Cornaro.)\textsuperscript{42}

She also alludes to the availability of Venetian goods in Persia due to the existence of a store in Isfahan selling European and, in particular, Venetian artifacts.\textsuperscript{43}

To summarize, I would like to put forth my own interpretation of these visual representations of Europeans in Persian painting. I read this group of paintings as Persians’ incarnation of their own sexual fantasies. Because as much as the Safavids considered their European guests sexually frigid, the European travelers found their Persian hosts oversexed. Courtly life and taking advantage of having a harem shows

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 183-184.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 181.


\textsuperscript{43} Pietro della Valle, Histoire apologetique d'Abbas, roi de perse, Paris, 1631, p. 32; quoted in Farhad, 231.
the importance of sexual life for the king and noblemen of royal class. Although Prophet Muhammad himself had eleven wives, polygamy seems to be more a notion of power and wealth than that of religion. Because the concept of the harem—a place in which king’s wives and concubines and also female members of the royal court, servants lived—exists in other Far Eastern and Egyptian cultures too. In fact, when it comes to courtly life, sexual activity becomes different from social sexual practice, for example, in Safavid court “the Qur’anic prohibition on the consumption of alcohol was blatantly ignored.” 44 Besides the notion of harem, the existence of laws for temporary marriage or nikah mut’ah in Twelver Shi’e Islam was what made sex lawfully available.” 45

Although there are some references to negative perceptions of Europeans as nonbelievers, sexually weak and unclean people among Persians, these paintings don’t appear to have any ironic derision or negative undertone. 46 The spying scene of Persian youths in European costume seem to me more like a sexual variety-seeking as a result of their curiosity of European sexual manner. The choice of European clothing for the seemingly Persian male figures, can be read as a means to disguise. These paintings were produced in courtly workshops for private patrons, so one of their contributions was to arouse the viewer’s sexual desires. Persian male and female figures help the beholder to identify with them in their own erotic fantasies; while the


46 “Refering to Shi’i notions of purity and contamination, a number of foreign observers claimed that, as non-Muslims, they were seen as unclean (najis), and that devout Muslim Iranians refused to eat with Christians or from vessels that the latter had used.” For more on this topic see Matthee, “Between Aloofness and Fascination: Safavid View of the West,” 227.
European disguise is sexually arousing, in a fetishistic way, because of its foreign-looking impression and novelty. At the same time these farangi costumes can make them free of being blamed for having such erotic imagination, because as Muslims they were so conservative about expressing their voluptuousness, yet it did not prevent them from having their own private sexual lives.

Based on what has been said so far, one can notice that in the artistic dialog between European and Persian painting each side looked at the other as a source of inspiration in depicting their own imaginary scenes. European painters were looking for a model to illustrate their biblical scenes. The Middle East, for them, was the distant and exotic land in which Christ was raised. So Orientals could have been a reliable source in terms of their facial features, clothing style, and manner for depicting the biblical stories. In return, the peculiarity of Europeans or farangis, their appearance and some mutual misunderstanding of each other’s sexual habits, let Persian’s sexual imagination and the nude genre in particular to emerge during this period. It is an important achievement for Persian painting because prior to this period the nude could only be seen in illustrated manuscripts of classical literature, for example the scene from romantic epic poem, Khamsa by Nizami, d. 1209. In fact, it can be seen as a mutual interaction that both parties benefitted from and found what they were looking for.

The following section opens with introducing the Chihil Sutun Palace in Isfahan, in the context of Shah Abbas I’ building project and continues with a brief introduction of wall paintings in the audience hall and goes more into depth in studying some painting in private rooms and verandas on the second floor, depicting nude or partially nude female figures which have obvious Western influence behind them.
CHAPTER 3
CHIHIL SUTUN PALACE AND ITS WALL PAINTINGS

The period between the late sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth century was one of the most prosperous times in Persian history. Marked as the heyday of the Safavid dynasty, it was a pivotal moment in the establishment of East-West relationships. Thanks to their maritime achievements, European explorers traversed the globe across the oceans. Persia under Shah Abbas I and his open international policy, became quite responsive to the sociopolitical atmosphere of the time and thus receptive to the foundation of new commercial bonds. Shah Abbas’ development plans in his new capital, Isfahan, made the city a hub for numerous travelers and profit-seeking merchants.

The present chapter provides an overall view of Shah Abbas I’s important building program to define the context in which the Chihil Sutun palace—which is the focus of this thesis—was built. Describing the architectural setting of Chihil Sutun, this chapter then moves on to introducing the wall paintings inside the palace. In the audience hall of the Chihil Sutun one can see two different categories of paintings, both in terms of size and style. The first group consists of four large historical oil paintings in the so-called “Europeanizing” style, from the Safavid period and two more recent examples of such paintings from the Qajar period. At the dado level of the main hall there is a group of small tempera paintings on the plaster, depicting outdoor scenes of hunting and feasting in the traditional Persian style. In the rooms, the verandas, and the back iwan on the second floor, there are large scenes of royal feasts and literary themes, as well as some seated and standing figures in European costumes, both in traditional and “Europeanizing” styles; the current chapter aims to draw attention to
three of these. One scene shows a semi-nude female figure bathing in a garden with some western motifs such as a stone bench and fountain (Figure 32); the second mural (Figure 37) shows a mother wearing a low-cut dress with exposed breast holding her child on her lap; and the third painting (Figure 40) shows a European woman in an indoor scene wearing a similar low-cut dress, and an ostrich hat, along with a man in European clothes who offers her a glass of drink, probably wine.

The New Capital; The Major Building Program

In 1598 Shah Abbas I moved the Safavid capital city from Qazvin to Isfahan, some reasons for this decision seem to be, the central location of Isfahan, which kept it safe from Ottomans or Ozbek invasion while gave it the privilege of having equal access to both eastern and western borders. The Zayande-Rood river which provided Isfahan with enough water was also another reason for choosing Isfahan as the seat of government. As it has been argued in Slaves of the Shah by Sussab Babaie and her three co-authors:

Shah Abbas’s transfer of the axis of Safavid power to Isfahan was motivated by economic as well as political considerations. His mercantile initiatives helped to finance his political reforms within Iran and to provide for his war efforts against the Ottomans. He deliberately relocated the capital in order to consolidate the political and religious power of the Safavids, develop state capitalism and establish Iran as a world power.¹

After selecting Isfahan as the administrative center, Shah Abbas I launched a major building program, including the great Royal Square (Maydan-I Shah), the Palace District (Bagh-i Naqsh-i Jahan), the pleasure complex outside the city (Bagh-i

¹ Abbas’s policy in order to facilitate long-distance trade through Iran was evident in the construction of a vast infrastructure among them were the construction of caravanserais, the building of new roads and the appointment of the royal guards, rahdars, to protect merchants and their goods. For more on this topic see, Sussan Babie, [et al.]. Slaves of The Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran. London. New York: I.B Tauris. 2004.
Abbasabad or Hazar Jarib), the long mansion lined avenue (Khiyaban or Chahar bagh) from the palace complex to suburban gardens, and the Bridge of Forty Spans (also known as the Allah Wirdi Khan Bridge and the Bridge of Thirty-Three Spans.)

Andre Godard—a French archeologist and architect who was granted the directorship of Iranian Archeological Services by Riza Shah in 1928—had a political take on Shah Abbas I’s additions to Isfahan. He sees in Shah Abbas’ measures two distinct building programs. Following the designation of Isfahan as the capital city in 1598, the first period of his building program, with measures such as building the palace complex and Maydan area was begun and lasted until 1611. Victories over the Ottomans during this first phase brought about a period of peace during which the building program was much more focused on celebrating the grandeur of Shah Abbas I himself and that of the Safavid state under his rule, among them was the Royal Mosque. Godard’s classification of Shah Abbas I’s building projects into these two phases has taken into account Shah Abbas’s political incentives, while R. D. McChensey argues that Shah Abbas I’s additions to Isfahan also had some economic and social roots. Relying on some Persian sources like Nuqawat al-Athar, Tarikh-I Abbasi and Rawdat ai-Safawiyah, he argues that:

Originally Abbas seems to have had in mind modernization of the existing market [Bazar] in the old maydan, the Maydan-I Harun Wilayat, located beside the Seljuk Masjid-I Juma… Instead of renovation of the old Market area, the Shah was rebuffed by locally powered property owners. It was this opposition, according to Junabade which decided the Shah on a large-scale commercial redevelopment of the Maydan-i Shah as a rival and possible replacement of the old market district.  


3 Ibid, 17.
He also patronized a group of Armenian merchants in a new market zone as rivals to these rebellious merchants of the old Bazar, similar to what he did to reduce independence of Qizilbashs in the administrative ranks of Iran by replacing them with his more loyal supporters, Qullars.

**Chihil Sutun Palace**

Among the major developments of Shah Abbas at the Maydan-i Shah—including the Maydan itself and the new Market area, and the congregational mosque or Masjid-i Shah—was Dawlatkhana, or the palace precinct, including the Ali Qapu and the Chihil Sutun palaces. Located at the heart of a lush garden which extends between the Maydan-i Shah and the Chaharbagh Street, the Chihil Sutun Palace was the largest palace of Dawlatkhaneh. According to *Encyclopedia Iranica*, this royal palace was used for coronations and the reception of foreign embassies. The layout of these gardens, with three walks shaded by plane trees, dates from the period of Shah Abbas I (996-1038/1588-1629) completed in 1647 by Shah Abbas II (1052-77/1642-66) around a 57.80 by 37 m small pavilion (G) as its nucleus (Figure 20 and 21).

It consists of a large masonry hall with attendant rooms and a talar front of wooden columns supporting a roof. The talar on the east opens on three sides with eighteen slender wooden columns and a small pool in the center. Behind the talar, two long and narrow rooms flank a rectangular porch (Figure 22). The rear ensemble of the building includes a long triple vaulted hall, four small rooms on the second floor, two long verandas on its north and south borders, and two iwans on its east and west sides, the eastern iwan opening onto the porch.4

The wall paintings at the Chihil Sutun Palace play an important role in the palace’s decorative program, and are the best preserved examples of Persian murals.

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Before going into the introduction of the wall paintings in the reception pavilion and those in the private spaces on the second floor, I would like to address some issues regarding the dating of these paintings.

**The Problem of Dating**

Due to a lack of documentation and signature, there is no consensus on the dating of the Chihil Sutun murals. This uncertainty arises from the two distinct styles of painting—traditional versus Europeanizing style—found in the Chihil Sutun murals, which have led scholars such as Basil Gray, Robert Hillenbrand and Luschey-Schmeisser to attribute them to two different periods with a twenty-year gap. This difference has often been explained by an assumption that the building itself is the result of two distinct phases of construction. Based on the architectonic differences between the core pavilion and the corner rooms the ISMEO (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo oriente), dated the audience hall to the reign of Shah Abbas I and the talar front to that of Shah Abbas II. Babaie, however, rejects the idea of two constructional phases for the palace. She argues that architectonic variation between the core of the palace and the porch section has misled the ISMEO. She states that the whole construction project of the palace took place in a single phase, and the two different styles of painting came from the involvement of artists with different styles in the painting workshop, including traditional Persian artists, Armenian and some European artists. Supporting her argument, she turns to the two contemporary historians of Abbas II, Muhammad Tahir-I Vahid and Vali Quli Shamlu, who recorded the construction of the Chihil Sutun Palace in the year 1056-57 (1647):

An inscription in twelve verses on the entablature along the back wall of the talar gives the date 1057 (1647) in its last hemistich. Tahir-i Vahid
quotes this last hemistich and also adds that the date is inscribed on the building itself.\(^5\)

She also touches upon the panegyric of Muhammad Ali Sa’ib-i Tabrizi, the honored poet at the court of Abbas II, arguing that:

In this poem, Sa’ib itemizes the sections most worthy of praise: the vaulting and vast space (presumably of the audience hall), the wall painting, the talar, the pool and the gardens. Sa’ib poem, together with the evidence of the inscriptions, and the dates given by Shamlu and especially Tahir-I Vahid are strong indications of a single construction campaign at the Chihil Sutun. Furthermore, it can be demonstrated that the architectural configuration of the Chihil Sutun belongs to a phase in the evolution of Safavid palaces that occurred only after the reign of Abbas I.\(^6\)

The problem of dating applies to the palace’s wall paintings too. Some scholars like Eleanor Sims date the traditional paintings at eye level to the first construction phase during the reign of Shah Abbas I, and the large reception scenes and historical painting in European style as later additions from the 1660s, after the completion of the building in 1647.\(^7\) Basil Gray, who initially attributed all the murals to the 1640s, changes his dating in a later publication and attributes the four large scenes in the main hall to the beginning of Shah Sulayman’s reign, around 1670, arguing that the costumes of all figures are contemporary to that period.\(^8\)

\(^5\) Ibid, 128.
\(^6\) Ibid, 129.
Robert Hillenbrand dates the Europeanized large wall paintings to the reign of Abbas II (1052/1642-1077/1655). Luschey-Schemeisser, in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (last updated in 1990) assigned the murals in traditional style and the westernized group to the period of Abbas I and to the mid-seventeenth century respectively. Sussan Babaie, who believes in one construction program in Chihil Sutun Palace during the reign of Shah Abbas II that ended in 1647, argues that the dating dilemma of the wall painting can be resolved within the context of the development of Persian painting in the first half of the seventeenth-century. She also states that:

There is ample evidence to demonstrate the existence of the traditional Persian and European-inspired style in painting throughout the century, for example, Shafi Abbasi and Mu’in Musavvir, both students of Riza Abbasi, worked in the Europeanizing and traditional style, before the middle of the century and Mu’in presented his style well into the second half of the century when most other Persian artists had adopted the modes of Western painting. One may then raise the possibility that the stylistic discrepancies in the wall paintings at the Chihil Sutun result not from a span of time, but from the collaboration of a large workshop of artists with varying technical abilities and formal languages.”

Finding a solution for the problem of dating the Chihil Sutun Palace murals —with no signature or documentation— is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it to say that

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regardless of whether or not they belong to two different time periods, these two categories of paintings in the same architectural setting differ remarkably both in terms of subject matter—historical painting vs depiction of joyous outdoor scenes of feasting and hunting—and also in terms of media, oil on plaster vs tempera on plaster.\(^\text{12}\)

**The Wall Paintings of the Palace**

Apart from an overall theme of floral and arabesque motifs of the wall paintings in the audience hall, on the framing bands, architraves, spandrels of the niches, and the interior surface of the vaults, what seems to be the main focus in this place is a group of figural paintings in rectangular frames, pointed niches, and lunettes which stands out in the context of those floral backgrounds paintings. Chardin’s description of these wall painting in 1666, according to Babaie, has become the basis for the scholarly consensus on these paintings. In his account, Chardin mentions seeing three scenes of royal entertainments and one battle scene, so based on this view, scholars believe that the large narrative paintings were added some twenty years after the completion of the palace in 1647. As Babaie has noted:

> This view relies on the stylistic differences between the small paintings on the lower tiers of the audience hall, in the small corner rooms and verandas, on the one hand, and the large reception and battle scenes on the upper walls of the audience hall, on the other. The traditional style of Persian painting distinguishes the first group from the “Europeanizing” style—modulation with shading, cast shadows, perspectival rendition of the setting and objects—seen in the second.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) For more on visual comparison of the reception scenes with works on paper dated to the 1660s, see Babaie, Shah Abbas Conquest of Ghandehar.

\(^\text{13}\) Babaie, “Shah Abbas Conquest of Ghandehar, the Chihil Sutun and its Wall Paintings,” 126. There is also a difference in terms of the medium between these two groups. Those depicted in traditional Persian style are egg tempera paintings on plaster, while the Europeanizing ones are oil on plaster. As Babaie explains, oil paintings on panel or canvas were known in Iran from at least the early seventeenth century through European artists employed by the court and through diplomatic gifts.
She also argues that there is a deliberate scheme underlying the location and themes of the wall paintings, thus the events documenting the relationship between the Safavid court and its eastern neighbors are depicted in the audience hall which is at the center of the building. (Figure 23).\textsuperscript{14} Royal feasts and literary themes of romance, on the other hand, are relegated to the small corner rooms, the private domain of the palace.

Sussan Babaie puts the narrative paintings of the Chihil Sutun into four thematic categories: the first group is that of historical scenes in the audience hall, among them are the battle between Shah Ismail I and the Uzbeks on the southeastern wall (Figure 24, 1 in Figure 22)\textsuperscript{15}, Shah Tahmasb I (930-84/ 1520-76) receiving Homayun from India which occupies the opposite wall on the southwestern side (Figure 25, 2 in Figure 22);\textsuperscript{16} the scene depicting Shah Abbas I and Vali Muhammad Khan, the Uzbek ruler of Turkestan on the northwestern wall (Figure 26, 3 in Figure 22); and that of Shah Abbas II and Nadr Muhammad Khan, who was also a ruler of Turkestan, is on the northeastern flank (Figure 27, 4 in Figure 22).\textsuperscript{17} The central niches of both eastern and western walls

\textsuperscript{14} The reception scenes in the audience hall, she argues, partake of the grandiose image of the court of Abbas II which seems to have lost no opportunity to aggrandize its role as an axis of power in the region. For more on this see Babaie, “Shah Abbas Conquest of Ghandehar, the Chihil Sutun and its Wall Paintings,” 135.

\textsuperscript{15} This battle ended in a decisive victory over Uzbeks and the death of Sheibak Khan in 1511. Madame Dieulafoy, a French traveler who had spent some time in Isfahan with her husband Marcel-Auguste Dieulafoy in 1874 introduces this painting as the battle between Shah Ismail and Tartars.

\textsuperscript{16} This is a very valuable painting regarding the study of clothes, hats, make-up of hair and beard, jewelry, dance, assembly set-up, playing musical instruments of the time, etc. Homayun, king of India and son of Zahiroldeen Baber fled from the army of his brother, Mirza Asgari who was chasing him in 1548. Accompanied by his royal Shitte general, Bayram Khan he arrived in Sistan and via Khorasan reached Qazvin. Finally, in the lunar month of Jamadiolavval 1548 Homayun was received by Shah Tahmasb in a summer resort by the name of Qeydarnabi located between Abhar and Soltanieh. Then after resting for a while, attending various banquets in his honor and travelling to palaces such as Azerbayjan, he returned to India and succeeded in taking back his throne, thanks to the military assistance of Shah Tahmasb.

\textsuperscript{17} In order to seek help for the restitution of his lost power, Nadr Mohammad Khan, ruler of Turkistan, took refuge in the court of the Safavid king in 1658. This painting shows Shah Abbas the second’s reception of Turkistan ruler Nadr Mohammad Khan who had a condition similar to Vali Mohammad Khan received by
are completely filled with two paintings that are Qajar additions, and which show the battle of Nadir Shah and the Mughals (Figure 28, 5 in Figure 22) and the battle between Shah Ismail I and the Ottomans (Figure 29, 6 in Figure 22) and respectively.18 Below the above-mentioned paintings, right at the dado level and also on the verandas, and the in back iwan, are the painting which fall into the second thematic category (Figure 30 and 31). They consist of small panels that shows scenes of feasting and hunt. The third group does have large scenes of either royal feasts outdoors or of literary themes in the corner rooms. Among murals in the third category one can see figures in standing position and some seated figures clad in the European manner, which according to Sussan Babaie may also depict local Armenians.19

In the private rooms and iwans on the second floor of the Chihil Sutun, one may find at least three Safavid paintings based on European models. The first one (Figure 32) features a common theme of European painting, “Woman by a Fountain.” Framed in a lunette, the scene shows a lavish garden backdropped with a clear sky and soft mounds. In the foreground, a woman is sitting on a stone bench, wearing nothing but a bulky ochre piece of cloth wrapped tightly around her hips and her thighs. In order to

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Shah Abbas the first in opposite wall painting. He was received and supported by Shah Abbas the second in 1658. In this picture the shah is showing hospitality to Nadir Mohammad Khan. In this picture which has mostly remained safe and sound, the retinue of the Uzbek Khan as well as the courtiers of shah has been depicted vividly reminding the watchers of the hospitality shown.

18 The battle of Chaldiran between Shah Ismail the first and the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Salim in 1518, ended up in a defeat for Safavids, because Shah Ismail ordered his army not to use firearms. The painting depicts the Persian military force armed with weapons such as swords and bows and arrows. On the contrary, the innumerable Ottoman army was equipped with firearms and artillery. The champion of the battle scene seems to be Shah Ismail who is depicted riding a white horse wearing the Qezelbash crown and fighting with sword. In the background, Sultan Salim can also be seen. Apparently, the Chaldiran Battle painting was drawn by Sadegh Naqqash Bashi in 1823. The paining opposite it which shows the conquest of India by Persian army under Nader Shah Afshar has been restored by the same painter.

avoid the exposure of breasts, her hands are engaged in holding or maybe brushing her hair, which like a black veil isolates her torso from the background. Her naked upper body is adorned with two quite thick bracelets and an armlet, along with a seemingly pearl necklace. At the center of the fountain, there is a cupid blowing into a horn, with water coming out of it and out of the cupid genitals as well. Her sitting position by the fountain is reminiscent of some traditional bathing scenes in Persian book illustrations, for example *Khosrow Discovers Shirin Bathing* from *Khamsa* by Nizami (Figure 33). The difference however is the setting which transforms from bathing in the natural surroundings of a pond or by a river into a man-made environment, with an adorned fountain.

In Shirin’s bathing scene, the two-dimensionality and the lack of perspective doesn’t let the viewer fully understand the existence of the hills that gives Khosrow the opportunity of spying on Shirin while taking a bath. Shirin is sitting by the pond with her horse drinking from the lower section of it. Here, Shirin is nude for the sake of narrative, and despite being unclothed, her body is not sexualized and her breasts are not recognized as such. The only hints to the erotic undertone of this painting seems to be Khosrow biting his finger in wonder while voyeuristically spying on Shirin’s nakedness and also the playful engagement of Shirin’s finger with her hair. In the case of the *Woman by a Fountain*, the compositional elements, such as stark and shallow environment, the female figure sitting on a stone bench with a fountain in front, puts the woman in a controlled setting, under the eyes of an observer. It is also in a complete contrast with the wide natural landscape of traditional bathing scene of Shirin in the wilderness. The tree on the left corner, frames the scene and gives a sense of privacy
to the composition. Despite putting too much effort into making the painting seems more naturalistic by applying perspective and realistic rendering of sky and the tree itself, the outcome is still quite naïve to be attributed to even a mediocre European artist from the seventeenth century, so it must be drawn by either Persian artists, who worked in Europeanizing style or by Armenian artists of the court. The stone chair and the fountain are obviously European elements which are not common in Persian traditional painting. This strengthens the possibility of this mural being modeled after some European paintings or prints, most probably a version of *Susanna and the Elders*, or a more general theme of the Woman by a Fountain. One example could be *Susanna and the Elders* (Figure 34) by Jan Saenredam (ca. late sixteenth century.) Despite not being an exact replica, it does share some compositional elements such as the corner of the stone platform which is covered by Susanna’s body and in Persian mural by the bulky fabric. The roundness of her belly along with the cloth which has been wrapped around her hips and thighs are also similar in both cases. When it comes to the fountain, the part which waters comes out of the female figure’s breasts in Susanna’s example seems to be used with some changes in size and form in the lower part of the fountain in Chihil Sutun’s mural. And finally, the position of the tree at the corner of the painting and the shape of its trunk and the type and details of the leaves are very close to that of Muhammad Zazan’s *Venus and Cupid* (Figure 35) who was one leading painters of the Europeanizing style, so the European influence in his works cannot be denied. The coarseness of the painting both in terms of the perspective and bodily proportions doesn’t present an ideal rendition of the female figure. The only contributing factor in reading this painting as a sexually provocative piece may be its juxtaposition with
another painting of a fully clad woman in an indoor space (Figure 36), which in terms of facial features looks quite alike the woman in bathing scene and may be the same woman before or after taking the bath.

The second painting (Figure 37) which is called *A banquet with Mother and the Child*, shows again an outdoor scene. The woman wears a dark blue dress with a low-cut neckline that leaves both breasts fully exposed. Sitting under a tree, she is leaning back on a cushion covered with a red cloth which has been extended and wrapped around her thighs. Regarding the fact that her lower body is not naked, this over-coverage of the thighs shows the artist’s willingness to show off his ability to draw clothing folds as a motif, common in European painting. Putting one hand on the ground to keep herself balanced, she is holding her child with the other. The child itself is wears only a piece of cloth that covers his middle body. In company of the mother and child there is a maiden in a sitting position. Putting her left hand on her right thigh and leaning toward the child who is looking back at the fruit she is offering him. On the foreground there is a fruit bowl, a pottery jar and a drinking bowl, depicting the scene as a banquet. Showing a nurturing mother with exposed breasts is quite unprecedented in Persian painting therefore strengthens the hypothesis that this painting might be a Persian translation of a *Madonna and Child*, of which there are a few examples (Figure 38) in Safavid painting from the same period. The theme of mother and child seems to be chosen as an excuse for the exposure of the breasts as there is no such an example in any of the traditional banquet scenes of the palace (Figure 39). The mother’s non-European facial features along with her Persian hairstyle adorned with pearl strings and
the white veil, while wearing a European dress, makes her a combination of western and eastern ideas or to put it another way a Persianized version of *Madonna and Child*.

The third painting (Figure 40) is showing an indoor scene of royal feast with a woman seated on a wooden chair and her male companion. The female figure is resting her left hand on the armrest while with her right hand, is receiving a glass of wine from the man. Wearing a red skirt and a long-sleeve blue blouse with wrist frill, her very low-cut neckline reveals both nipples. The rectangular cut and a brown band beneath her breasts accentuate her uncovered breasts. The exposure of her breasts seems to be emphasized by covering the area between her neck and cleavage with several rows of necklaces. Her black hair is falling on her shoulder out of a black cavalier hat trimmed with an ostrich plum and one less-fluffy black feather. The man is wearing a red blouse with lace ruff and sleeves cut from inside showing the blue under-layer. He is offering the woman some wine while with his right hand, he is putting down his hat on the table, as if he is about to start a dirty conversation with the woman. His hat is quite similar to that of the woman, except it's not trimmed with pearl on its brim. On the table there are dishes of pears and other fruits, which imply the nature of the painting to be some private feast. Behind them there is a rolled up red velvet curtain, showing the background landscape, being looked upon from a higher place like a terrace or balcony. The overall atmosphere of this painting seems to be a depiction of some upper class banquet, which by having only two figures from opposite sexes involved, justifies the assumption that the female figure with exposed nipples might be a courtesan. Comparing to the two previous murals, this example is quite successful in giving a naturalistic representation of the figures in terms of facial characteristics and also
adaptation of European style of clothing. Despite the artist failure in showing an eye-contact between the man and the woman, the erotic nuance of the painting is quite noticeable due to the confident gesture of the woman sitting on the chair while willingly receiving the drink offered by the man.

What makes the viewer think of these painting as having western inspiration is firstly the way those figures are depicted in a sitting position, for example, in the case of the bathing woman and the woman in European costume, they are shown sitting on a bench or chair. This was not common practice among Persians during the seventeenth-century, because as we see in the large reception scenes in Chihil Sutun palace, they used to sit on Persian rugs on the floor. The second reason is the codes of clothing and manner illustrated in such scenes which were not acceptable in Persian culture during the seventeenth century. Depiction of female figures wearing low-cut dresses that expose both breasts in the country in which even prostitutes had to cover their body and could only be recognized by the shortness of their veil, is a proof of their European origin.

The following chapter will focus on the potential significance of the architectural setting of these wall paintings to see how the physical existence of a building gives the Safavid patrons the possibility of representing their attitudes toward political and social issues of their time. And how public and private realms of the same building put forward different atmospheres for the patrons to showcase specific type of imagery; which is historical scenes in public spaces and paintings with more intimate subject matters in the private zones.
CHAPTER 4
REVERSING THE EAST/WEST GAZE DICHOTOMY AND ARCHITECTURE AS A POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD

According to Rosa Ferre and Adelaide de Gaters, the curators of the exhibition 1,000 m2 of desire, Architecture and Sexuality, architecture as the physical design of a space makes up a substantial part of our sexual fantasies as we travel the path between desire and pleasure. Not only it does have the power to be a driving force of desire, it can also harbor and reshape our sexual imagination. “There is no desire without a constructed and projected image; there is no desire without a space for projection.”

Here the role of looking and its connection with the expression of sexual power also becomes very important. What I would like to discuss in this chapter is firstly, the notion of “gaze” and how Safavid male patrons made European women an image upon which to project their desires; and secondly, how the privacy of an architectural space provides them with the required place for this projection. In doing so I’m mainly relying on Sartre’s theory of “gaze” and Freud’s “scopophilia” or “pleasure in looking,” because the only channel that the Safavid male viewer could have directed toward the absent but visible European women was through the notion of gaze; and it was by looking at the image of sexually appealing European women that the role of the beloved Turk as the sexualized “other” was transferred to the farangi women.

**Pleasure in Looking and the Safavid Male Gaze**

Defining the gaze as an “object lost and suddenly re-found in the conflagration of shame, by the introduction of the other,” Lacan draws a connection between looking

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1 Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona, 1000 m2 of desire Architecture and Sexuality Exhibition Catalog, available online at http://www.cccb.org/en/exhibitions/file/1000-m2-of-desire/223704
and the expression of sexual powers. In private spaces of Chihil Sutun, on the second floor, the Safavid male celebrates his sexual desires by putting images of partially nude women on display. In such a space everything is pointed toward voyeurism and “pleasure in looking,” what Freud in Three Essays on Sexuality refers to as scopophilia, which is a translation from the German word Schaulust. Freud defines scopophilia to be one of the component instincts in childhood, which might be transferred into an interest in art or alternatively into a “burning and tormenting curiosity to see the female body.”

Scopophilia leads the heterosexual male viewer to look at images or paintings of female figures to seek sexual pleasure. Drawing on Sartre’s theory of the gaze, Lacan links the gaze to scopophilia to show how desire is captured by an imaginary image of the other. For Sartre, to be an object, by its very nature means to be an object of a subject’s gaze, so as Melinda Jill Storr argues, the “heterosexual division of labor” requires that the male be the subject and the woman the object.

“Identity implies the other.” That’s why when two cultures come together, one always tries to define itself in comparison to the other. It is based on our view of the other that our self-definition has been formed. The confrontation of West and East is one of the most intense examples of “self” facing the “other.” Historically, the “self” stands for the West or Europeans as opposed to the rest of the world including the

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Asian, the Africa, or the Native American as the “other”. This is mainly because the Europeans were the initiator of the journey to discover the New World and as Matthee explains, they were the ones who let themselves in for travel, exploring and getting engaged in trade, and the ones who took the initiative to describe, to capture and to assimilate the other in word and image.\(^6\) The notion of the “self” versus the “other” makes the foreign “other” sexually appealing. The whole concept of “othering”, associated with exploring and conquering new things; put the “self” and the “other” in the position of power and in that of subordination and sexual compliance respectively. As Freud in *The Uncanny* argues, there is a substitutive relation between the eye and the male organ.\(^7\) That’s what brought some scholars like Rey Chow to the conclusion that vision is phallocentric or “masculinist,” and this association of gaze and masculinity is a need for investigation.\(^8\) Masculinity also has always been equated to activity, while femininity has been considered equal to passivity. As Laura Mulvey writes:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle.\(^9\)

In this regard, the female East has been understood as the passive recipient of the masculine West’s gaze. Odalisque, the ubiquitous sex slave, was a rubric under which,

\(^6\) Ibid.


the oriental woman has been discussed as an eroticized and exoticized motif and object of male sexual fantasy.\textsuperscript{10} What is worth considering here is the way Safavids reversed the East/West dichotomy. The notion of “sexualizing the other” has been also in play in Persian society and according to Landu has its roots in the early medieval period with the “alluring and treacherous black-eyed Turk.” During the seventeenth century, however, the farangi, took over this role of the dangerous Turkish beloved in both literature and painting.\textsuperscript{11} By disseminating prints and paintings of unveiled, nude or partially nude European female figures, the European men simply brought the image of European women on display and gave the Safavid men the opportunity of inverting the self/other relationship of West and East. In this case, the “otherness” of European woman is defined by her Christian faith, her exotic look, and also her absence or unavailability.\textsuperscript{12} By monumentalizing the paintings of European women, and by putting them on the wall of a private space, the Safavids took them as objects and subjected them to their controlling and curious gaze, triumphing over West in the “battle of look.”\textsuperscript{13}

Another important factor in developing this yearning for the European women among Safavid royals is the fact that for members of the Safavid court, the depiction of European female figures was unlike that of males, the latter being based on the physical


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 102. Landu also gives a very interesting example of Turktaz, a female protagonist in the \textit{Haft Peykar (Seven Images or Beauties.)} In a painting by Muhammad Zaman Ashraf, the queen Turktaz is depicted in the physical characteristic of European woman, with associated facial features, hairstyle and codes of clothing. For more on this topic see Annemarie Schimmel, \textit{A Two-Coloured Brocade: The Image of Persian Poetry}, Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, 143.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 100.

\textsuperscript{13} For more on this topic, see Melinda Jill Storr, “The Gaze in Theory: The cases of Sartre and Lacan”, (Dphil diss., University of York, Center for Women’s Studies, 1994), 65.
presence of European men in the Safavid capital, Isfahan. The depiction of European females, on the other hand, was constructed on secondary descriptions such as oral narratives, as well as some exported prints and paintings. It was based on a group of visual materials in genres like portraiture, allegory and also some nudes, that the Safavids constructed a sexual and sensual vision of the European woman. As Landu argues, these materials, along with some oral and textual narratives about the physical and moral attributes of western females, was what established a network of information that developed an erotic vision of European woman.\textsuperscript{14} So despite not having actual contact with the European woman, the Safavid artists created an imaginary picture of this inaccessible but sexually arousing object of desire. This lack of physical presence, according to Willem Floor, was due to some rules and regulations that didn’t permit VOC agents to have any female companion. Reportedly even after the relaxation of those rules at around 1700, the number of VOC staff accompanied by their wives remained quite negligible.\textsuperscript{15}

This notion of the unavailability of European women, made them even more desirable and more welcoming to erotic temptation, especially in the realm of private imagination. A good example in this regard would be Shah Safi’s (r.1629-1642) particular interest in the portrait of Queen Henrietta Maria (Figure 41), by Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641), which was presented by the English representative Thomas Merry, along with portraits of king Charles I (r.1625-1649) and those of their children on April 16, 1638. Unlike earlier Renaissance depictions of women garbed in layers of textiles,

\textsuperscript{14} Landu, “Visibly Foreign, Visibly Female,” 102.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 106.
the queen is wearing flowing silk and satin with low square necklines. The frontality of her portrait makes her much more sexually accessible, with her loose curls along with pearls, lace and ribbons which frame her neck and breasts. Reportedly, when the king was presented with the pictures during the royal feast, he wanted to take a much deeper look at them in a “private room,” and the next day he sent one of his agents, Itimad al-Dawla to know the names of the queen and the children.  

16 Asking about the children’s name may have been an excuse for Shah Safi’s curiosity about the queen’s name!

What is worth noting here, as Landu also references, is the fact that royal Safavid wives wouldn’t be subjected to the gaze of outsiders through image dissemination.  

17 The seclusion system offered by the harem is based on patriarchal pride, which is in fact a territory definition. In such a system, all the female court members are supposed to remain in the king’s exclusive domain, disseminating the images of your wife or female offspring could be read as putting them on display to be the recipients of other men’s gazes. From this perspective, to receive a portrait of a European queen simply means getting a welcoming invitation to the privacy of the European court. By receiving those images, Safavid men found themselves allowed to project their sexual desires onto European women, thereby developing a misguided understanding of European women and their morality by thinking them as sexually available.

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The Role of Media; Miniature vs Mural

The visual sources that made their way to Persia via the Dutch East India Company or other individual merchants and artists were in genres like allegorical painting, portraiture or themes like the female nude. Allegorical paintings such as a printed series of *The Four Seasons of the Year* (Figure 42), portraits like those of Queen Henrietta or that of aristocratic females, like Frances Stuart Portland by Wencesluas Hollar, after Anthony Van Dyck (Figure 43), and female nudes, for example Marcantonio Reimondi’s engraving of the *Reclining Nude* (Figure 16), were perceived more or less in a similar way. For the Safavid viewer, probably with no understanding of the concept of allegory or the European tradition of image dissemination, those “unveiled women with exposed breast and hips, suggested ideas about desirability of European women and their openness to sexual dalliance.”18 All these European sources, whether in print or paint, were received mainly in the context of the Safavid court and were translated into single folio and miniature painting; a medium associated with Persian courtly art and therefore not available to public audiences. Miniature and single folio painting have their roots in the tradition of book illustration and were viewed in a more intimate and controlled setting that only elites had access to. And now in Chihil Sutun palace we are dealing with some monumentalized version of those genres on the walls; that is where the setting and location become significant. This change of medium from folio painting to wall painting was inspired by religious Western painting.

18 Landu, “Visibly Foreign, Visibly Female,” 107. Landu also quotes from Mohamad Tavakoli Targhi: “To an observer who was used to seeing women veiled in public gatherings, male-female relations in ball rooms and masquerades parties where women not only appeared unveiled but danced with men signified to the Persian travelers a reality radically different from the experienced reality of the observed Europeans,” in “Women of the West Imagined,” 100-101.
The French “Picture Bible” given to Shah Abbas I by the first mission of the Discalced Carmelites in 1608, raised some familiarity with Western painting style. The fresco representations of the last Day, Death, Judgement and Hell in the church that the Carmelites had built in Shiraz and also some other such paintings in Armenian churches in Isfahan also played an important part in growing an interest in wall painting at the Safavid court.\textsuperscript{19} Decorating the Safavid palaces with murals depicting European women was popular during the seventeenth-century. According to European travelers’ accounts, for example, images of Diana and her nymphae were painted on the walls of the Safavid palace at Ashraf, along the Caspian Sea.\textsuperscript{20} Ambrosio Bembo, the Venetian nobleman who traveled to Iran in the early 1670s, describes observing European prints that represented the life of courtesans, “things that they like very much.”\textsuperscript{21}

Architecture plays a very active role here, as private rooms and iwans on the second floor of Chihil Sutun Palace allow the Safavid males to monumentalize —some of these paintings are about 160 by 120 cm and some are about 70 by 50 cm—the partially nude paintings on the wall. The monumentality of the paintings, their increase in the size and their location on the wall, in comparison to the small scale of single folios, provide the viewers with much more freedom. One can stand right in front of those murals to look at them, or may prefer to gaze at those European women while sitting down or even while reclining on the bed. The temptation and pleasure offered by

\textsuperscript{19} Matthee, “Iran’s Relations with Europe in the Safavid Period,” 23.


these blown up images made them more appealing to the Safavid men for a voyeuristic look and fantasizing about European woman’s sexual compliance.

**Private Space, where Taboos are Relaxed**

Richard J Williams in *Sex and Buildings* starts a journey to various places and periods, from the early twentieth century, to the sex hotels in the middle of the twentieth-century and eventually to recent decades to answer the question of “Where is sex in architecture?” and “What might a sexually Liberal architecture look like?” He bases his argument on Halvelock Ellis’s Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Freud’s *History of Sexuality* and many others to prove that almost all the historical literature on sex believes in the influence that built environment has in conditioning sexual behavior. According to Williams, the “erotic,” pre-twentieth-century, was “a category of taste designed to produce sexual arousal in the observer” who usually was considered as “an upper-class, European male.” 22 And based on this definition, the “erotic” is connected with the “female nude.”

The association of eroticism and religious opposition is a known fact that has been common in many cultures and areas. Whether in Muslim or Christian lands, such notions have always been considered bawdy and prosecuted or opposed. The idea of so-called “secret cabinets” itself was associated with these religious prohibitions. In this situation all artistic productions characterized by sensuality and eroticism were guarded by distinguished art patrons and were kept in the most private rooms or gardens of private homes. 23

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The religious opposition played a very important role in pushing the sensually arousing arts into the private domain. These restrictions appear to be effective to maintain the social order and prevent intimate subjects from being openly discussed in public. It would be beneficial to think about this association of private spaces with erotic arts through the relationship of public/private space and individual rights and activities. In this regard, public is the space of approved social interactions, while in private space intimate encounter is allowed. In the privacy of domestic settings, male viewers were able to project upon images of nude or partially nude women their fears, anxieties and desire.\textsuperscript{24} Safavid examples of the objectification of European women, as Landu argues, profoundly "questions our assumptions of who sexualizes and mythologizes whom."\textsuperscript{25}

On the second floor of the Chihil Sutun we deal with potentially sexual images, as during the seventeenth century, sex and sexual imagery was forbidden in public spaces in almost every society. As Landu argues, these images are not only a mirror of their sources, but are also the embodiment of the Safavids’ attitude toward gender, power and sex during the seventeenth century in the context of their evolving relationship with European countries.\textsuperscript{26} As Foucault in \textit{History of Sexuality} argues, what made the Victorian era so obsessed with veiling -for example even covering the legs of furniture- was not the repression of sex but a belief in sexual power.\textsuperscript{27} This completely resonates with seventeenth-century Safavid Iran’s status quo. According to the Islamic

\footnotesize{
24 Landu, "Visibly Foreign, Visibly Female," 102.

25 Ibid, 100.


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rules that have shaped the Safavid version of masculinity, women should be kept in harem to avoid being seen by anyone except for their mahrams, including their fathers, uncles, brothers or spouses. The only men allowed to have access to the harem were groups of servants or slaves, known as eunuchs. The term eunuch, generally refers to a man who has been castrated, typically early enough in his life for this change to have major hormonal consequences. This is what makes a strong connection between the private domain and the circumscription of sex or sexual imagination. According to Islamic Sharia law, a man and a woman who are not mahrams ought not to be alone together in a closed space, or else there would be the possibility for their sexual intimacy. So being castrated was what made the eunuchs reliable servants because they were not capable of being sexually stimulated by looking at royal women of the harem. And as Foucault explains, in relation to the Victorian home, the utilitarian and fertile locus of sexuality was acknowledged in parents’ bedroom; similarly, the private spaces of Chihil Sutun are considered as particular places for sexual imagination and activity. To put it another way, it is a space “for a voyeur, where bodies can be observed furtively, at a remove – the dark, cave-like space of the bedroom.” That’s why architecture is important as a set of sexual images, because unlike miniature painting, which was in micro scale, the monumentalized wall paintings of the Chihil

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28 A mahram is an unmarriageable kin with whom sexual intercourse would be considered incestuous, a punishable taboo. One’s father, brothers, uncles and grandfathers are her permanent or blood mahrams while she can be mahram to a man through marriage.


30 Foucault, History of Sexuality, 3.

31 Williams, Sex and Buildings, 124.
Sutun could have only come into reality, because of the physicality of the architectural space itself. These potentially voyeuristic spaces provide Safavid men with the privacy required for their scopophilic desires to be fulfilled by using large-scale paintings of European women as their object of sexual enjoyment through sight.

Speaking of the potential significance of the architectural setting, one can think of how these images were perceived in their architectural context. It also would be helpful to think of the meanings tended to be conveyed by the placement of paintings in different genres and with different subject matters in a particular space and even at a particular height.

The transition from the outside to the inside of the building occurs very smoothly. Gradually approaching the palace, one can see the reflection of the palace in a rectangular pool. Going up few stairs, one passes the porch area which has eighteen columns and a small shallow pool at the center. Going through an ornate frontal iwan, the viewer sees a very elaborate mirrorwork on the ceiling. As previously mentioned in chapter two, the Chihil Sutun palace was used for official ceremonies such as coronations and the reception of foreign envoys. The wall paintings, therefore aimed to be seen by a group of elite audience, such as Safavid noblemen, members of the court and high-ranking foreign representatives. In this regard, there seems to be an intentional classification of paintings based on subject matter and size. Upon entering the audience hall, the historical paintings of battlefields and reception scenes catch the eyes. The very large scale of these paintings makes viewers look up and also look around to follow the six such paintings at once. The notion of the size and scale draws the viewers’ attention and prevents them from being distracted by smaller paintings on
the lower level of the walls in the same hall. The eyes finally move to the lower part of the wall and see a group of smaller paintings at eye level. At this point, one can see a noticeable shift from the large-scale historical painting to the noticeably smaller scenes of outdoor feast and hunting. This shift, however, seems to be a deliberate choice to distract the viewers from serious political and commercial affairs and put their minds at ease and prepare them for experiencing some careless moment of leisure and enjoyment. This gradual transition takes the viewers from the public space of the audience hall into the private realm and provides their minds with some food for sexual imagination while going upstairs to see some scenes with more intimate imagery. The influence these paintings can have on the viewer is emphasized with the change in the size of the space too. By which I mean, as one goes up to the second floor, the space becomes divided into significantly smaller spaces compared to the audience hall. This protects the viewer from disturbance, while making the wall paintings more dominant in the space. This, itself offers the possibility of being captured by the painting and letting the temptation go. With such a smooth transition from the main hall to the smaller spaces on the second floor, one slowly leaves the public, serious domain and enters the private world, associated with rest, relaxation and sexual fantasy.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Between the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, Persia experienced a period of stability and prosperity under Shah Abbas I and his successors. This period was for Europeans a period of discovery and exploration. It was a time for East and West to develop a mutual political and commercial bond. These reciprocal interactions resulted in a mutual interest in artistic and cultural matters as well. The result for European artists was to find a source of inspiration and an actual model for illustrating their biblical stories, while for Persian artists this period opened the door to a world of new ideas and introduced them to the prints and paints that resulted in emergence of the nudes as a new genre, independent from any literary context.

In conclusion, I would like to look at the wall painting of the Chihil Sutun Palace in a broader historical, social and political context. Thinking of these paintings within the cultural context of the seventeenth century, it is not hard to see how they serve as historical documents and a mirror to reflect the Safavids' attitude toward social and political issues of their time.

Of all the six historical paintings in the Chihil Sutun's audience hall, three portray receptions given by Safavid kings to rulers of their eastern neighbor states who sought refuge in the Safavid Capital, Isfahan. The paintings of Shah Abbas I's reception of Vali Muhammad Khan, the Uzbek ruler of Turkestan; Shah Tahmasp' harboring of Humayun from India, who fled from the army of his brother; and Shah Abbas II receiving Nadr Muhammad Khan, the ruler of Turkestan, give an image of the Safavid court as a supporter, but more importantly, as a superior state to its eastern neighbors. The other three pieces depicts battle scenes: one between Shah Ismail I and Sheibak Khan the
Uzbek ruler in 1511, which ended in a decisive victory for Safavids and the death of Sheibak Khan. In the Chaldiran Battle, 1518, between Shah Ismail I and Sultan Selim I, despite being defeated by the Ottoman army, the painting conveys a deeper message of the Safavids' moral superiority due to Shah Ismail's refusal to use firearms and artillery and his decision to fight with swords. And finally, the third scene pictures the Battle of Karnal, between Nadir Shah Afshar and Muhammad Shah Gurkani, which led to the victory of Nadir over the Indian army. This intended choice of rendering particular moments of Persian history aggrandizes the Safavid court and helps to define Safavid identity in relation to surrounding states. Here Safavid rulers shape a self-image as an axis of power in the region, as a morally powerful state, and also as a refuge for deposed monarchs, willing to offer them assistance in recovering their thrones.

Safavid patrons take the physical existence of the Chihil Sutun palace as an opportunity to reflect their understanding of themselves and also to showcase their perspective on power dynamics in terms of politics, gender and sex.

The Safavids’ obsession with veiling and covering women and the isolation system offered by the harem was a proof of their strong belief in sexual power and not a repression of sex. To prove their strong reliance on the importance of sex, suffice it to say that in Isfahan alone, there were around 12,000 public courtesans who paid a certain amount of tax to the state. This made prostitution a significant source of income for the royal treasury.¹ Another important contribution made by prostitutes was the fact that they traveled with the army to service members of the Safavid military while away from their wives. That is why prostitution seems to be more acceptable in Safavid Persia.

¹ Ambrosio Bembo, Viaggio e Giornale per Parte dell’ Asia, 353.
during the seventeenth century than it would have been in contemporary Europe. The existence of prostitution as an accepted practice, however, doesn’t mean that it was accepted for prostitutes to wear revealing clothes. In other words, we are looking at a time frame in which even prostitutes had to appear veiled in public, and the shortness of their veils was the only hint of their occupation. Obsession with covering women’s bodies to this extent creates an atmosphere in which misunderstanding about the sexual morality of others is likely to happen. Looking from this perspective, receiving images of beautiful Western women, depicted not only unveiled, but showing also breasts, midriffs, and hips that Muslim men were not supposed to look at except for those of their own spouses, shaped some unrealistic images of Western women in the Safavid viewer’s mind.

The architecture of the palace here puts forward a physical place for Safavid patrons to incarnate their view of the “other,” whether if it is in terms of political, cultural, or social interactions. The wall paintings in Chihil Sutun, aimed to be viewed by noble people from neighboring states, envoys, and diplomats from European countries. Their mission was to respond to this specific social class, so when the function of the space alters, the theme of the paintings changes accordingly. That’s why in the public space of the audience hall, which was used for holding official events, the common message shared by the murals is, firstly, to showcase the Safavid court’s political statement and their status among neighboring nations, and secondly to display some royal scenes of feasting and hunting, reinforcing the image of the opulent comfort of a life of leisure and plenty.
In the private zone of the palace on the second floor, however, Safavid patrons took advantage of the personal freedom offered by such spaces to embody their view on Europeans in general and European women in particular. The eclectic taste in depiction of different subject matters, ranging from large scenes of royal feasts, standing and seated figures in European attire, to some partially nude figures modeled after European prints proves the lack of an inclusive plan for the decorating program of the palace. It is also an evidence of the involvement of large numbers of court artists who put their own style and taste into play. Regardless of this wide-ranging choice of artworks, the overall theme of the walls paintings on the second floor incarnates a specific interest in picturing Europeans in general and the European women in particular. Blowing up images of partially nude European female figures and putting them on the walls of the spaces whose function was to relax the viewers and cease them from engagement in strenuous political tasks suggest the erotic function of these painting for Safavid men. In this regard, wall paintings in private spaces of the Chihil Sutun palace provide the viewer with both such an imagery required for provoking their desire, while architecture, as a place for projection helps the Safavid man to reverse the West-East, masculine-feminine dichotomy and triumph over the West in the battle of look.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Samira Roostaie was born in Iran. After finishing her high school, she passed the entrance exam successfully and received her MA in architecture. Studying architecture, broadened her mind’s horizon; and made her always think interdisciplinary. Coming to the United States, was a challenge, a brave attempt she made to achieve her goals and now she is a MA art history student and pursues her dream field in academic level.