

### *Safavid Empire (1501 – 1722)*

Originally a militant Sufi order, the Safavids, appeared among Turkish speaking people of west of the Caspian Sea in Ardabil and gained greater prominence after the dissolution of Timurid sovereignty. By 1500 the Safavids had adopted the Shi'a branch of Islam—though a more populist, mystical version—and were eager to spread their tariqa, even conquest in the Christian regions of the Caucasus. Adherents used to wear red headgear, hence they were called the "qizilbash" ("Red Hats"). They viewed their leader's position as rightly from father to son according to the Shi'a tradition.

In the year 1500, Isma'il the thirteen-year-old son of Sheikh Heydar set out to conquer territories and avenge death of his father. In January 1502, Isma'il defeated the armies the Aq-Qoyunlu and took Tabriz as his capital. The Safavids went on and conquered rest of Azerbaijan, Armenia and then moved east through Iran. They became the strongest force in Iran, and their leader, Isma'il, (by now fifteen) was declared Shah in 1502. Between 1506 and 1510, Isma'il extended his control from Baghdad in the west to Khorosan and Merv in the east. He also secured the traditional Iranian heartland, including Fars and Isfahan. Despite these successes, the Uzbeks would remain a rival to the Safavids on the marches of Central Asia and the Ottomans on the western borders.

The early Safavid court retained its Turkic culture and language, but gradually transitioned to more Persian bureaucratic structure as successive Shahs came to power. Likewise, the legitimacy and symbolism of the throne became more Persian as time passed. Shah Isma'il described himself as a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad and claimed to have royal Sasanian blood as well, but was still very much a Qizilbash leader. In general, under Isma'il and his immediate

successors, the functions of the principal officers of state were not clearly defined, nor was the boundary between political and religious establishments. Change did begin in the latter period of Shah Tahmasp's reign when competing factions of Georgian, Armenian, and Circassian elites would gain prestige, but it was not until the ascent of Shah 'Abbas I (1587-1629) that the Empire reformed many of its institutions and became what one could call a more pluralistic society. It was also during 'Abbas' reign that the Qizilbash chieftains of were stripped of their power and affluence, especially in regard to their military roles.

Significant changes in Persian patronage and aesthetics took place under the Safavids, while political and religious ideology took on a key position in shaping the arts. Royal, aristocratic and even non-affluent patrons had a hand in the development of the arts. There seems to be a more self-conscious positioning of patrons and artists within a tradition, a heritage that these figures themselves took great pains to define. The number of private collections and encyclopedic volumes on artists and their communities may be attributed to this development, for example.

The reign of 'Abbas I is widely seen as the highpoint of the Safavid Empire. Under 'Abbas, the state extended its land holdings and codified its institutional administration in the provinces. In undermining the power of the Qizilbash, the Shah formed a standing strong army as diverse as his realm (including Persian villagers, Christians from Georgia, Circassia, and Armenia). Artillery and musketeer divisions were a key part of his new army, and 'Abbas was able to check both internal and external challenges. The army was supported by the land reforms 'Abbas had introduced at the expense of his challengers.

The Safavid Empire prospered under Shah 'Abbas I. Perhaps nothing better represents the effervescence of his Empire than his capital Isfahan. Not only was Isfahan a cultural and intellectual capital boasting architectural masterpieces, but also a hub of economic activity. The Shah populated his city and its environs with craftsmen and merchants from other parts of the Empire. Shah 'Abbas in fact encouraged international trade and the production of silks, carpets, ceramics and metal wares for sale in regional and European markets. Merchants of the English East India Company established trading houses in Shiraz and Isfahan, and he ousted the Portuguese from the entrance of the Persian Gulf in 1622. With the region more open, a long-distance maritime trading center was established at Bandar Abbas. The Dutch East India Company was integral in establishing these trading centers. In 1623 Shah 'Abbas reestablished control over Kurdistan and Luristan, Baghdad and the Holy Cities of Najaf and Karbala, though his successors could not maintain his territorial gains.

'Abbas was followed by a succession of weak rulers after he passed away (1667). It was in this period that the legalistic form of Twelver Shi'ism gained prominence at the expense of Sufism and more syncretistic traditions. Shi'a popular rituals, such as 'Ashura, were encouraged, as were pilgrimages to the tombs of descendants of the Prophet. The independence of the Shi'a clergy continued to grow in the following centuries. As the power of the centralized government declined, regional rulers grew more independent and challenged the suzerainty of the Safavid court. Nader Khan, an Afshari tribesman from northern Khorasan, reconsolidated Iran under his control. He ruled in the name of Shah Tahmasp II and in that of 'Abbas III until 1736, but afterwards declared himself Shah. Nader expelled challengers to his rule and even regained control over the northwestern provinces (lost to the Ottomans and Russians) by 1735, but his rule marks the end of the Safavids.

***Safavid Shahs***

**1502 - 1524 : Isma'il I**

**1524 - 1576 : Tahmasp**

**1576 - 1577 : Isma'il II**

**1577 - 1587 : Mohammad**

**1587 - 1629 : 'Abbas I**

**1629 - 1642 : Safi I**

**1642 - 1667 : Abbas II**

**1667 - 1694 : Safi II**

**1694 - 1722 : Sultan Hussein**

**1722 - 1732 : Tahmasp II**

**1732 - 1736 : 'Abbas III**

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