



Figure 1: Attributable to Muhammad Hasan, *A Mother and Child*, Qajar dynasty, Iran, ca. 1810–1830 (Sotheby's, London, Sale L04626, Lot 24, 12 October 2004).

Janna Verthein

Qajar Women and Madonnas? *Mother and Child* by Muhammad Hasan

Abstract The Qajar era produced a number of paintings that mirror the increasingly close contact Qajar Iran had with European countries and therefore with a Christian European painting tradition. Among them are several depictions of a woman with a child that have in the past been identified as interpretations of the Virgin Mary. A range of factors seem to support this claim while suggesting that this type of painting at the same time differs from most European Madonna-type images in a way that represents notions of gender and family in Qajar society.

Keywords Gender, Iran, 19th Century, Entangled Histories, Translation

Several paintings from the period between 1797 and 1834 when Fath-Ali Shah Qajar ruled in Iran show a mother and her child in a way that resembles European iconographies of the Virgin Mary and Jesus. In the 1830s, Muhammad Hasan created an oil painting of a woman with a young girl that fits this tradition. The motif of mother and child was popular, and, while these paintings often resemble each other, some of them include closer references to the motif of Mary and Jesus than others. A painting signed by Muhammad Sadiq, for example, dated around the 1820s, shows a mother, her child, and an angel, with an inscription identifying the former two as Mary and Jesus. Both Diba and Floor comment on the use of the Madonna motif in Qajar painting: Floor remarks on the change of clothing colors and lower-cut décolleté that will often make the reference hard to recognize (1999, 139); Diba describes the painting discussed here as a Christian Madonna reinterpreted “as a luscious court beauty” (Diba and Ekhtiar 1999, 208).

Unless they are referencing specific historic or religious scenes, these images tend to have descriptive titles that seem to serve no other purpose than making them easier to identify. Most of the Madonna-like paintings of the time are referred to as “Mother and Child,” with occasional mentions of other depicted objects.

In Muhammad Hasan’s work, the child is standing on an elevated surface in the foreground holding an apple. The stylized facial features of both figures with thick, dark eyebrows that arch up from the nose bridge almost to the lines of their black hair make them look nearly identical. They have taut red cheeks and dark lines surrounding their almond-shaped eyes—a common way of depicting both male and female faces in the early Qajar era. Both lower their heads slightly as they look upwards out of the image. The woman is holding on to the child’s left arm and hip. The young girl wears a transparent shirt, pearl earrings, and brown gloves¹. The woman’s tunic is decorated with floral ornaments and beads and leaves her breasts exposed. Her bead-studded headdress and pearl necklaces feature red gemstones. She also wears a long, dark skirt with a floral pattern, and the almost empty background shows only brown wall and floor surfaces, with a window in the center opening to a uniformly dark blue sky.

Iranian painters had already incorporated European motifs by the eighteenth century (► **Appropriation**), but during the Qajar dynasty, artists took an even greater interest in foreign images. At the same time, images of women were created in greater quantity for the decoration of palaces and bathhouses (Floor 1999, 81), and Christian iconography became a popular motif especially for lacquer-painted objects such as pen boxes. Assumed to have been created in the first decades of the 1800s, Muhammad Hasan’s painting stems from a time when the Shah and his sons extended their

1 In this image, it seems as if her hands have been dipped in brown paint. However, gloves of this type appear in a number of paintings of the time, often with bead-trimmed openings that stand out from the wrists.

patronage of the arts. The large-scale portraits commissioned by Fath-Ali Shah demonstrated not just his wealth and power, but also served a diplomatic purpose when given as presents to other leaders, such as Napoleon I (Raby 1999, 11–14). In the production of artworks that could add to the power and prestige of the Qajar court, focus shifted towards the study of European painting, and at several points during the reign of Fath-Ali Shah, the royal family sent groups of students to Europe and Russia to learn about foreign painting techniques (Balaghi 2001, 165). Concurrently, European artists would be invited to Persia to create portraits of court officials and work with Qajar painters; Muhammad Hasan thus met French painter Jules Laurens during the reign of Muhammad Shah Qajar (Diba and Ekhtiar 1999, 221–222). Although little is known about the exact way in which this exchange affected Qajar painters—accounts tend to focus on the introduction of technology and photography, the latter being introduced to Qajar Iran in 1839 (Scheiwiller 2016, ch. 1)—the constant supply of new information undoubtedly helped catalyze the Qajar style.

While the increasingly close contact to Europe suggests that these Madonna-like paintings were directly inspired by European sources, it is also possible that they emerged from the contact with Mughal collections.² Although Najmabadi (Diba and Ekhtiar 1999, 82) notes that the Mughal collections focus on more erotic depictions of Mary, the way these images were treated by groups and individuals suggests that, overall, they were perceived first and foremost as religious.

As mentioned, paintings of the Virgin Mary and child were also being produced in the Mughal empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with many of them resembling European representations. It is entirely possible that, as a result of wars waged by the Safavids or Nadir Shah, images from Mughal collections found their way to Iran and, thus, came to influence Qajar painters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as was the case with other Mughal artifacts³. That said, the Qajar images stray far from the traditional religious character of the Virgin and Child that continued to prevail in the Madonna representations in the Mughal empire, where they originally served as religious legitimation for emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century (Vollmer 2015, 9–10).

2 The Mughal emperor Jahangir had a religious interest in the Madonna. He was reported to have brought back images of the Virgin Mary from his travels and to have asked others to bring him specific images that he would have copied by painters and keep in his rooms. Several miniatures show Jahangir holding images of the Madonna (Findly 1993, 215). Among Hindus, the Madonna was already a popular religious figure and many followers of Hinduism would pray to her. Because of her role in the Quran, she was also familiar to Muslims. People of different religions would visit and offer prayer to images of the Madonna placed in churches throughout the empire (Findly 1993, 215).

3 One of the most famous war trophies from that time would be the Peacock Throne taken by Nadir Shah (Canby 1993, 117). While not used by the Qajars, its appearance is at least similar to the Sun Throne, commissioned and used by Fath-Ali Shah Qajar.

Regarding the more revealing attire in these Qajar paintings, one could argue that images of the Virgin Mary in European art often have a sexual connotation as well, and that this sexuality is simply more overt in these painting by Persian artists, who may have sensed and simply exaggerated that particular aspect in their creations. Najmabadi (Diba and Ekhtiar 1999, 77) suggests that Persian painters' contacts with European women, as well as their exposure to Orientalized European portrayals of Persian women, may have been responsible for the sexualization of the female breast as seen in Qajar paintings. Tanavoli (2015, 12–16) writes about the Farangi woman—an impression of European women held by Iranian men that was in part formed by the import of nude paintings and photographs, starting around 1600—and also about the interested reception of European women's clothing with unveiled hair and faces during the 19th century. His description supports the notion that images of European women in Iran played a role in an increasingly sexualized public image of women's bodies.

At the same time, the Qajar Madonna-like paintings were not particularly well received among European viewers of Persian art at the time. Considering these works ungraceful, critics claimed this to be one of the more unfortunate effects of the European influence on Persian painting (Diba and Ekhtiar 1999, 78).

The gaze at the viewer, which was introduced into Persian painting in the seventeenth century by Muhammad Zaman (Najmabadi 2001, 95), gives the image an inviting nature. The outward gaze became particularly popular among Qajar painters (Najmabadi 2001, 96), which has led Najmabadi to theorize about a new meaning Persian painters attributed to their Madonnas, connecting the motif to family structures in Qajar Iran: Najmabadi suggests that, as a result of being excluded from the intimate "family space" at a young age and thus forced to grow up without much affection, men tended to idealize this lost world and long to be a part of an intimate emotional environment again that would allow them to have tender, loving relationships with their mothers (Diba and Ekhtiar 1999, 81). The gaze at the male viewer thus serves as an invitation to be part of this world once more.

The fact that these Qajar works overwhelmingly feature female children further supports the notion that male society longed for inclusion into a female familial sphere. Another painting titled "A Family Group" (see Fig. 2) even shows a male observer looking at a mother and child through a window, creating a stark separation between the male and female worlds. While similar facial features of both mother and daughter in these images are common, the strong resemblance of the two figures in Muhammad Hasan's painting suggests they might not be so much portraits as a representation of the female part of society.

When discussing European elements in Qajar painting, it is important to mention the shift in the perception of gender and beauty that is reflected in paintings. For example, several paintings from the early Qajar



Figure 2: Artist unknown, *A Family Group*, Iran, ca. 1810, Oil on Canvas, 15.49 × 10.16 cm, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ouseley Album 297, No. 8.

period show both young men and women with red cheeks and big eyes, evincing a similar—albeit not identical, as Scheiwiller (2016, ch. 1) points out—standard of beauty for both men and women. Moreover, paintings depicting young men alone—most famously scenes involving Joseph—focused entirely on male beauty, portraying men as objects of decoration. Najmabadi (2001, 92) analyzes the shift from images showing both men and women with (made-up) feminine features to beauty becoming a trait exclusive to women. Portraits of Qajar leaders of the second half of the nineteenth century follow a more European idea of masculinity and avoid small waists or long eyelashes. Over time, men disappeared from images intended primarily for decoration and aesthetic delight. This has been linked to the decreasing acceptance of homosexuality and homoerotic images due to growing European intolerance (Najmabadi 2001, 98–99). The images of mothers and daughters can therefore be seen as part of the increasingly female depiction of beauty (►**Gender**).

The painting by Muhammad Hasan is in many ways representative of the beginning cultural shift in nineteenth-century Iran, influenced to a great extent by increasing contact to other regions. As the result possibly of both closer study of European art and exposure to Mughal collections during wartime, it also becomes an example of entangled history (►**Entangled Histories**) connected to the spreading of Madonna-type images. When considering the motif as it travelled to the Mughal empire, it is appropriate to speak of translation (►**Translation**). Yet in the case of Qajar Iran, where the mother and child were given facial features and clothing that matched contemporary Persian standards of beauty, the Christian subject was not just translated, but also endowed with new meaning. The way the image hints at a female world inaccessible to men would not have been obvious to non-Persian viewers who noticed above all the overt sexual nature of the image. Thus, the Qajar take on the Madonna motif is a deliberate appropriation of the iconographic formula with the goal of conveying a different message.

Figures

Fig. 1: © Photo courtesy of Sotheby's, 2020.

Fig. 2: The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Ouseley 297, no. 8.

References

- Balaghi, Shiva. 2001. "Print Culture in Late Qajar Iran: The Cartoons of 'Kashkūl.'" *Iranian Studies* 34 (1): 165–181.
- Canby, Sheila R. 1993. *Persian Painting*. London: British Museum Press.
- Findly, Ellison Banks. 1993. *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Floor, Willem. 1999. "Art (Naqqashi) and Artists (Naqqashan) in Qajar Persia." *Muqarnas* 16: 125–154.
- Diba, Layla S., and Maryam Ekhtiar, eds. 1999. *Royal Persian Painting: The Qajar Epoch 1785–1925*. New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Najmabadi, Afsaneh. 2001. "Gendered Transformations: Beauty, Love, and Sexuality in Qajar Iran." *Iranian Studies* 34 (1): 89–102.
- Raby, Julian. 1999. *Qajar Portraits*. London: Azimuth Editions in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation.
- Scheiwiller, Staci Gem. 2016. *Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iranian Photography: Desirous Bodies*. New York: Routledge.
- Tanavoli, Parviz. 2015. *European Women in Persian Houses: Western Images in Safavid and Qajar Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Vollmer, Franz-Josef. 2015. *Angels and Madonnas in Islam: Mughal and other Oriental miniatures in the Vollmer Collection*. Berlin: Lehmann.