Persian translation of this paper entitled: مطالعهٔ پسزمینهسازی در نقاشیهای دوران اول و دوم قاجار published in this issue of journal

# **Original Research Article**

# An Investigation of Painting Backgrounds in the Paintings of the First and Second Qajar Period\*

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Received: 12/09/2020; accepted: 02/10/2023; available online: 22/12/2023

#### **Abstract**

**Problem statement:** One of the most important aspects of Qajar art that has not received so much attention is the background of paintings of this period. The background of an artwork may follow certain patterns and rules that constitute the problem of leading research.

**Research objective:** To understand the patterns, rules, and role that the background plays in the paintings of the first and second Qajar periods and also to answer the question of what patterns or rules the artists of each period used to create the background of the works.

**Research method**: Based on the objective, this research is a basic theoretical study and descriptive and analytical. Thirteen samples of Qajar period paintings were purposively selected, and the data related to the mentioned questions were extracted, classified, analyzed, and adapted. **Conclusion**: The results show two general methods in the painting background of the two periods. In the painting backgrounds of the early period, there are mainly geometric patterns and landscapes inspired by European paintings from memory. In the second period, painting backgrounds represent real Iranian space in a realistic and naturalistic method. Differences in the teaching methods of the two periods have caused differences in the works. Therefore, despite the use of European elements, the backgrounds are mainly influenced by Iranian elements in the first period while in the second period, there is a complete domination of Western methods and elements

**Keywords**: Qajar paintings, Background, Elements and Patterns, Landscaping, Still life.

### **Introduction and Problem Statement**

Scholars divide Qajar art into two parts, the first and the second period. In these periods, Iranian painting had different changes in techniques, materials and tools, spaces, and the artist's approach to painting. The changes in the backgrounds and the method of painting background are among the changes that exist between these two periods. The background of the works is one of the most important parts that have received less attention. Although it may seem

Therefore, considering this point, as well as the existence of research gaps in relation to the leading

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that the background of the works and their differences and similarities in the two Qajar periods are not as valuable as things like the main subject of the work, the artist's approach, the overall composition of the work, and other artistic considerations, the fact is that the background of the works, as an important part of it, has a great impact on the meanings and expression of the main subject.

<sup>\*</sup> This article is taken from The Master's Thesis "Rehane Kashtgarghasmi" is entitled "The Study of the Effects of Western Art on the Backgrounds of Qajar Paintings" under the guidance

of Dr. Morteza Asadi and the advice of Dr. It was completed in 2019.

issue, in this research, this study attempts to explain and examine the painting background method of artists in the first and second Qajar periods and to answer the following questions: What patterns or rules did each period artists use for the painting background of the works? What are the characteristics of artistic expression created by the backgrounds in the paintings of the first and second periods of Qajar painting? What are the reasons for the difference in the painting background of the works of the first and second periods?

### Research Background

Considering the existing research using the Qajar painting keyword, a large volume of research, books, and articles can be achieved. According to the purpose and question of the leading research, the following studies can be introduced and analyzed regarding the objectives of this article.

Lohrasbi tried to analyze naturalism in the First Qajar Period by expressing naturalistic concepts and their characteristics in her dissertation entitled "Study of Nature Painting in the Paintings of the First Qajar Period" and to answer the question of whether decorative patterns and motifs have been included in the landscapes and paintings of the Qajar period or not? The result of the research confirms this question and shows that decorative patterns have been included in the paintings of this period, even in naturalized paintings (Lohrasbi, 2012).

Hosseini examines naturalism in two types of Qajar painting, namely coffee-house painting and court iconography in her dissertation entitled "Comparative study of naturalism in the painting of court iconography and coffee-house painting". The findings of this dissertation show that nature painting and simulation in court iconography are more scientifically worked than in coffee-house painting and the proportions are more realistic. But in the coffee-house painting, naturalism is used experimentally and unscientifically, which is due to the existence of self-taught and illiterate artists in this field (Hosseini, 2014).

Among the research paintings obtained using the keywords of Qajar nature painting, only these two

dissertations were obtained related to the present research, and these two dissertations have no content coverage in terms of findings and research results with what constituted the leading research problem and question.

Another keyword is "background". From the search using this keyword, only one article related to the backgrounds of Qajar photography entitled "The Effects of Painting and Cultural Factors in the Type of Foreground and Background Photography of the Qajar Period" was found. As the title of this article shows, the author's field of research consists of Qajar photography, not paintings. Although useful information can be obtained in this article, the result and the question as well as the purpose of the stated article are different from what will be mentioned in the present research (Afhami & Masoumi Badakhsh, 2016).

Based on the above-mentioned discussion, it can be concluded that there is no specific research related to what we have here and this research can be presented without possible overlaps with other research works.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

### Qajar period at a glance

The Qajar dynasty in Iran belonged to the Turkmen tribe. According to some claims made by historians in the nineteenth century, this dynasty took its name from the Qajar Noyan bin Sartaq (Hedayat, 1976).

The Qajar period was a long period that can be divided into four categories:

- 1- The reign of Agha Mohammad Khan (1779-1796).
- 2- The reign of Fath Ali Shah (1796-1834) and Mohammad Shah (1834-1848). 3- The reign of Nasser al-Din Shah (1848-1896), and the early reign of Muzaffar al-Din Shah
- 4- The period of constitutionalism (After 1906).

In all periods, many political, economic, and cultural changes can name the Qajar period as a gateway to the modern world.

#### • Qajar Art

In general, the art of the Qajar period can be divided into two general categories. The first period includes the reigns of Agha Mohammad Khan, Fath-Ali Shah, and Mohammad Shah in which the embossing and texturing, westernization, compositions, and traditional painting techniques can be seen in the works. During this period, the decorative quality of Iranian painting in coloring and dividing the works should be noted.

The second period of Qajar art is related to the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah and after. In this period, European painting techniques prevailed over Iranian painting, so the superiority and mastery of European techniques and methods of Iranian paintings are considerable however, the role of Kamal al-Molk and his students in the culmination and superiority of European painting techniques over Iranian painting, as well as developments such as the arrival of the camera in Iran, cannot be ignored.

This period and all these developments led to the complete formation of European painting naturalism in Iranian art (Pope, 1999, 777-778).

In general, the characteristics of Qajar school paintings include the following points: symmetrical and static combinations with horizontal and curved elements, brief shading on the face and clothes, a combination of decorative and visual motifs, and limited color selection with the dominance of warm colors, nature painting methods, abstract and decorations which are brilliantly adapted to each other and give fundamental importance to human (Pakbaz, 1999, 51).

# Background of the study

In the literal meaning, the background is equivalent to the French word von and the English word background (Afhami & Masoumi Badakhsh, 2016). In the Cambridge Dictionary, the equivalent of the word background is defined as anything that is placed behind the main things and objects inside the frame and image. (Cambridge dictionary, S.V. "background")

Backgrounds in the Western theatrical and visual tradition have always been used to separate the subject temporally and spatially and to place the subject in a special scene (Afhami & Masoumi Badakhsh, 2016). But the use of backgrounds in Qajar paintings is very different from what we see in Western Art It should also be noted that in this era, with the entry and influence of elements of Western art and culture, we gradually see the

use of realistic and naturalistic techniques in backgrounds of paintings, but this use has different patterns and roles.

### **Definitions and Terms**

Pattern: In this research, the term pattern refers to the structures used repeatedly in the composition of paintings. Elements: Refers to anything that is inside the frame and objective and tangible such as curtains, clouds, etc.

Role: In this research, the role refers to the relationship that the background establishes with the whole work. This word is used with the meaning of function not the meaning of role or other artistic concepts.

# **Research Methodology**

This research is basic theoretical in terms of the purpose and descriptive-analytical in terms of nature. To answer the questions of the study using the qualitative research method, first, we reviewed concepts, definitions, and theoretical foundations then based on 13 samples of paintings of the first and second Qajar period, data were extracted, classified, analyzed, and compared.

### Discussion

With a glance at the paintings obtained from the first and second Qajar periods, we can reveal a kind of connection between the backgrounds and the existing space. The meaning of space in these paintings is interior space or architecture and exterior space or paintings of landscaping and nature painting. This criterion provides the possibility of initial classification and adaptation of paintings in the first and second Qajar periods.

# **Backgrounds in Interior Spaces**

# • The first period of Qajar

Most of the paintings in the first Qajar period are interior spaces, with a seated king sometimes leaning on cushions, dancers pictured alone, or many women and children framed in paintings. What attracts attention in the background of these paintings is the existence of a geometric division in the background of the works, so that this background can be seen as a model for all the paintings of this period.

In this geometric pattern, the background space consists of three vertical and one or two horizontal parts. Horizontal Bagh-e Nazar ® R. Kashtgarghasmi & M. Asadi

sections serve as the basis for vertical divisions in the background. These horizontal parts are generally depicted in a form of architecture such as a niche or some elements and objects in the interior such as cushions. Vertical divisions are usually divided into three parts, and the middle part is usually wider than the other two. These divisions generally indicate walls, curtains, door edges, and windows.

This geometric division is not limited to the image of kings and includes a wider range of paintings. For further analysis, we can refer to fig 1-3. In Figs. 1 & 2, this geometric pattern is executed without any changes, and in Fig. 3, the same geometric pattern is repeated by adding another horizontal part in the background. Therefore, it can be said that in all three images, the dominance of the geometric pattern has been used with slight changes in the painting background of the works of this period.

It seems that the composition of some of the paintings of this period was created by repeating this dominant geometric pattern. For example, we can refer to Fig.4. This combination is the same as the two previous combinations, which is repeated for each figure.

# The second Qajar period

In the second Qajar period, there is no sign of a geometric pattern in the background. What most paintings have in common is paying attention to perspective and drawing interior spaces based on scientific laws. Perspective becomes a criterion for depicting interiors and a more realistic and naturalistic display.

For a better understanding of the painting background of interior spaces in the second Qajar period, we can analyze the painting of the Hall of Mirrors by Kamal al-Molk, an artist of the second Qajar period. In the Hall of Mirrors of Kamal al-Molk, there is no sign of dividing the space into two or three parts, but we face a naturalistic perspective and display of the entire interior space. Kamal al-Molk's painting is done using perspective and tendency towards naturalism and realism, detailed display of hall details, ceiling, and wall mirrors, details of curtains, carpets, light, as well as an image using a perspective of dark and light colors and tendency to display glory and majesty that can be seen in the objects of this hall, such as chandeliers, ceiling decorations, etc., are all reminiscent of Rococo and Baroque painting (Fig. 5).

# Still life Painting Background • The first period of Qajar

In this category of paintings, the elements and objects of still life are only a part of the composition of the work. Flower pots, clocks, fruit bowls, etc. are elements of still life that are often in the foreground of the work. The relationship between the background and the foreground of the work in these works is done by combining the geometric pattern used in the first period

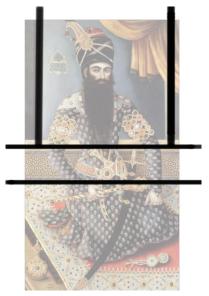


Fig. 1. Analysis of the image of Fath Ali Shah. Mirzababa work. 1798-1799. Source: Raby, 1998, 3.



Fig. 2. Fath Ali Shah Qajar, (1820). Appointed to Mehr Ali. Source: http://www.iranreview.org



Fig. 3. Dancer woman, Qajar period, appointed to Mohammad Baqer. Source: http://www.sothebys.com.



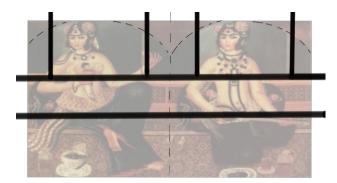


Fig. 4. Background analysis of a painting of two girls in a harem. Appointed to Mirzababa. Around 1811-1814 AD. Source: Raby, 1998, 270.

and using the architecture, the exterior of the work, in the background. For example, in the "Still Life" painting of Mirzababa, the still life elements form the foreground of the work. In the background, we see the building effect which consists of a horizontal and vertical part like the dominant geometric pattern, which covers the horizontal part across the width of the background and includes arches and porches and the vertical part is the link between the background and the foreground of the work. In the background of this kind of painting, a little landscaping and naturalism can be seen that mostly plays the role of covering the empty space between still life and architecture (Fig. 6).

# • The second period of Qajar

In the second period of Qajar, the style of still 1 life drew more attention, and artists in this period had more emphasis on the object. In this category of paintings, the background is often nothing more than a simple monochrome, or a few simple objects that cover the entire space behind the objects. Among these works, we can mention the painting of still life with vases and birds of prey (1933) by Kamal-al-Molk, which, as mentioned, is nothing but a simple monochrome with light shadows on it, just to cover the space behind the work (Fig. 7).

# Painting background with landscaping and naturalism (exterior space)

# • The first period of Qajar

Among the paintings obtained from the first Qajar period, some paintings have both interior and exterior space simultaneously. In this group of paintings, the artist paints the exterior space from the interior space, and the landscape is depicted as part of the exterior



Fig. 5. The Hall of Mirrors of Kamal al-Molk. Source: Ajand, 2011, 107.

from the window or a porch. What distinguishes these paintings is the existence of the same traces of the dominant geometric pattern mentioned earlier. For example, in the image of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar by Mirzababa, the same pattern of geometric division can be seen with the replacement of landscaping in the middle part of this composition. The landscaping in this work mostly includes the sky and shows clouds, open space, and a wide plain with a single tree and a mountain that are depicted in the distance. The artist has done his best to present this landscape realistically and naturalistically, but on the other hand, it seems very unlikely that these landscapes are the real space behind the architecture of the work and seem to be more inspired by a European state of mind. In the painting of Fath-Ali Shah, the work of Mohammad Naghash Fig. 9 is better seen. The landscaping in this work is more prolific, but with the same composition of the sky, there are mountains in the distance and trees in front of it, which indicate a predetermined





Fig.6. Background analysis of still life. Mirzababa. 1793 AD. Source: Jalali Jafari, 2003, 62.



Fig. 7. Still life with vases and birds of prey (1933). Kamal-al-Molk. Oil colored. Source: Fatholahzade, 2012, 71.

state of mind in the background landscaping and the elements used in it.

From the first Qajar period, few paintings have been obtained completely formed in the exterior space. The remarkable point in this group of works is the existence of a human subject, often the king, around whom the space is formed. In the painting of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, standing in nature Fig. 9, the king is depicted in the same style and pictorial style as he is depicted interior. The background of the work is depicted completely independent of the predetermined geometric pattern. The space behind the figure shows a scene that is not unlike the scene in Fig. 8. In this view, a large plain with a single tree and a mountain in the distance is depicted. Landscaping in this work is done in a mental method and a naturalistic method and inspired by European landscaping, and the backgrounds are done in a very simple way that includes more sky and plain with few elements of nature and more emphasis on the subject within the frame.

# • The second period of Qajar

In the second Qajar period, the variety of paintings obtained was much greater than in the first period. During this period, it is possible to find paintings that cover both interior and exterior at the same time, but due to the great variety of works in terms of composition and execution, only a few of them have both interior and exterior space. Among these paintings is the painting of the pool house of Saheboghranieh Palace by Kamal Al-Molk. In this painting, the artist depicts the external space from inside the architectural space. Landscape and architecture are the main subjects in these paintings. The background in this work is a view of the Persian garden, which is drawn in a completely realistic and naturalistic method. The background in this work is one of the first parts that can be seen, which shows a kind of movement from outside to inside space and emphasis on exterior space in this work. The background here narrates the real space in the architectural context and is painted in a completely realistic method from the existing subject (Fig. 10 &11).

In the second Qajar period, painting of nature and exterior spaces occurred much more than in the first Qajar period. In this period, nature itself is seen as a complete subject in the paintings of artists, such as the painting of the Maqak village by Kamal al-Molk. This type of landscape work forms the background of the work, which is taken from the real space in a realistic and naturalistic method.

There are also paintings in this period in which a subject (for example, the king) is located in exterior space, and the landscape is painted as the background of the main subject and not as the subject. Among these paintings, we can mention the work of Naser al-Din Shah on horseback by Ismail Jalayer. The space and background in this work are narrative and realistic. In this work, the king is depicted inside the exterior space, and although the king's grandeur and display of his power on a strong horse was the subject of the artist, the landscape as the background of the work is behind the king and it is painted using the





Fig. 8. An analysis of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar. By: Mirzababa. Qajar period. Source: https://www.pinterest.com/suzanjahangiri/iran-qajar/)

laws of perspective and in a realistic method (Figs. 12& 13).

# Painting Background and Educational Approaches

So far, the backgrounds have been classified and the characteristics of each section in the first and second periods have been discussed. But what should be mentioned is the relationship between the backgrounds and the method they are implemented in the court and education in each period. In explaining the painting background of the first Qajar period, it was said that the backgrounds have a dominant geometric composition. Most of the court portraits obtained in this style of composition belong to Mirzababa and Mehr Ali. Mehr Ali was a student of Mirzababa and Mirzababa started portraiture at the end of the Zand period and started with Karim Khan. Zandi's art was a continuation of the artistic traditions of the Safavi period and Karim Khan had a special supportive role in the art progress. Zand court was interested in European-style painting on the one hand, and in Isfahan art of the Safavi period, on the other hand, Mirzababa's paintings show that his aesthetic view is taken from the Zand period (Lal Shateri, 2016, 189-190). Mirzababa became an artist of the Qajar court during the reign of Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar. However, only one watercolor image of Agha Mohammad Khan by Mirzababa has been obtained, while there are many portraits of Fath-Ali Shah by this artist. Mirzababa was

an expert in simulation and portraiture, and this aspect of his work did not change during the Qajar period. This led Mirzababa to play an important role in the transfer of art from the Zandi court to the Qajar court, and indeed, laid the foundation for many of the laws that artists adhered to until the late Qajar period (Panjeh Bashi, 2018). Fath-Ali Shah also confirmed these aesthetics to the extent that most of the figure works of this king were created during this period. Therefore, the principles used in these paintings gradually became laws with the approval of kings, most of which are inspired by painting and the aesthetic standards of the past of Iranian art.

Painting in the second Qajar period has a completely different structure due to educational changes. Nasser al-Din Shah and the kings after him had wider relations with the West and imitated them and established schools (Dar al-Fonun) with Western structures. Kamal al-Molk is one of the most important artists of this period who, due to his family relations with the court, was able to go to the Dar al-Fonun and learn painting under the supervision of the Dar al-Fonun painting master Ali Akbar Mazin al-Doleh (Parastesh & Mohammadinejad, 2010). Ali Akbar Mazin al-Doleh had studied painting in France and his education was not based on the previous aesthetics of Iranian art. He taught the principles of European academic painting, and therefore, his students painted in the same style. Kamal al-Molk was also one of the students in this school who had aroused the praise of the teachers of this field, and later he established the school of artistic industries and taught in this school. The establishment of art schools from this period, such as the School of Painting (founded by Sani al-Molk), or the State Gallery, was part of the new educational structure of the period that taught the European style of painting, influencing the background of paintings and their constituent elements. Therefore, the educational and work path of the artists of this period is completely different from the artists of the first period so the achievement of the artists of this period is completely different and is derived from the principles of European art.

### Conclusion

In this research, an attempt was made to compare

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Fig. 9. Fath Ali Shah Qajar sitting on a chair. Artist: Mohammad Naghash. Source: http://www.khaterenegari.com/ /



Fig. 11. Saheboghranieh Palace Pool House. Kamal al-Molk. (1922). Source: Ajand, 2011, 108.

and apply the paintings of the first and second Qajar periods. The researched paintings were divided into two categories: interior and exterior spaces. The results of the data show that in the first period, the painting background in the works with interior architecture follows a specific and predetermined geometric pattern. The backgrounds in these paintings are flat and simple, using a limited color range. Painting background in the first Qajar period in works on the subject of exterior spaces is divided into two general categories: the first category is that the painting background is performed using the same geometric patterns of the template, and landscape and architecture are placed in the same or part of the geometric pattern. The second category is paintings that are independent geometric patterns



Fig. 10. Fath Ali Khan Qajar standing in nature, Qajar period. Unknown artist. Source: https://fineartamerica.com/art/qajar

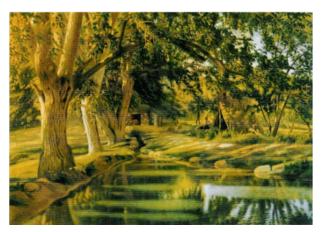


Fig. 12. The Village of the Maqak (1914). Kamal Al-Molk, oil paint on canvas. Source: Zekr Ali, 2019.

and painted in nature. In this category, the landscape is depicted in the background using the method of European naturalism, but mentally. The landscaping used in the background of these paintings is very simple and with few elements to emphasize the main subject in the frame.

In the second Qajar period, the painting background of the works on the subject of interior architecture was painted in a realistic and naturalistic method from the real space, and even the tendency to show many details can be seen in these works. The painting background of the works with the external architectural space is also painted with the European painting technique and in a naturalistic and realistic method from the real space of

the Iranian garden or the existing landscape and nature, which is the most important and obvious difference of naturalism in the painting background of the two Qajar periods.

What is the most important reason for the difference in painting background during the Qajar period is the difference in the methods of teaching art and the role of the court in the progress of these methods. In the first period, the paintings and backgrounds of these paintings, despite being influenced by Western Art, still retained their distinctive identity even in the method the thematic elements relate to the background elements, mainly due to the use of traditions in the Zandi and Safavi periods. In the second period, with the improvement of the court's relationship with the West and the establishment of art schools that taught the Western academic style, the works of art were completely made in the style of European art, until all the effects of past Iranian painting disappeared and only the subject of these works, such as paintings of Iranian architecture or gardens, etc. remained (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of paintings' backgrounds in the first and second Qajar periods. Source: Authors.

# The first Qajar period

#### The second Qajar period

Background of interior spaces



Painting background using geometric pattern
Using simple architectural elements
Using dark and neutral colors to deepen and separate the back and front of the image



Painting background using the European painting technique of naturalistic style

Using architectural details intricacies and interior elements

Using color perspective for depth

Backgrounds such as Rococo and Baroque aristocratic works

Interior painting background using still life



Painting background in the same dominant geometric pattern with elements of architectural exterior space



Painting background using a simple monochrome The role of the background covering the space / simple / to emphasize the subject

Backgrounds of interior-exterior spaces



Painting background in the same dominant geometric pattern, placement of the landscape in the same geometric division



Painting background using perspective and scientific rules Landscape as a background, narrator, and part of the Iranian architectural space in a naturalistic method

Background of exterior spaces



Painting background using landscape Landscape in a mental method Using the European naturalization technique



Painting background using real landscape A narrative and naturalistic landscape

# **Declaration of non-conflict of interest**

The authors state that there was no conflict of interest for them in conducting this research.

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### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Kashtgarghasmi, R. & Asadi, M. (2024). An Investigation of Painting Backgrounds in the Paintings of the First and Second Qajar Period. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 20(127), 83-92.

DOI: 10.22034/BAGH.2023.244652.4650

URL: https://www.bagh-sj.com/article\_182506.html?lang=en

