

Timurid and Safavid Women in the Visual Arts

Overview

The founder and ruler of the Timurid Dynasty was Timur, or Tamerlane, who reigned from 1370 to 1405. The empire included the areas of Iran and Central Asia, with its first capital at Samarkand. Timur's goal as ruler was to re-create the Mongol Dynasty, since he considered himself of Mongol heritage through the maternal lineage of his wives.

The Timurids' heritage consisted of two strains, one being Turkish-Mongol, and the other being Persian. The Turkish Mongol strain was nomadic, in that they were constantly mobile and living in tents, which is reflected in their architecture. Living in the nomadic culture made them completely self-sufficient. The Persian strain was the urban culture, which was more refined in its literacy and interest in history and heritage.

The Timurid Dynasty is known for its monumental architecture, which Timur used as propaganda. On the architecture itself, kufic, an angular form of calligraphy was used on the exterior of the domes. The new visual marker on the architecture of this dynasty is the distinctive melon-shaped dome found on various buildings, like that on Gur-I Amir, c. 1405, the tomb of Timur and his grandson.

During the reign of Husayn Mirza, (R. 1470 to 1506), the capital of the Timurid Dynasty moved from Samarkand to Herat. Throughout the is dynasty, women were significant patrons of architecture. Women also appear in miniature paintings such as in the works of the master painter Bihzad. In his paintings, like the " Seduction of Yusuf" from the Bustan of Sadi, 1488, there is an emphasis on surface decoration.

Women During Timur's Reign

Timur is one of the best-documented members of the dynasty and therefore there exists much information about the female members of his family in his *Zafarnamas*, his biographies. Through these documents, the general roles of women in a high class family can be understood today. In general, women were expected to manage important aspects in family life in the absence of the male figures in their lives, as well as they were expected to care for children. Women were able to oversee production of food and clothing needed by the family. The women of these households had broad responsibilities and therefore were able to exercise their own personal freedom through the choices they made.

For example, during Timur's military campaigns, his highest ranking wives would take care of his extended family. There seem to have been three very important women to Timur: his wife Saray Mulk Khanim, his daughter-in-law Khanzada-Begam, and his eldest sister Qutlugh Tarkan Agla. Of these women, Saray Mulk Khanim played the dominant role. She would declare births of the offspring of Timur and organize banquets. Saray would be in control of the exotic objects collected by Timur during his conquests. Although she did not produce an heir to the throne, she was given the role of " foster-

mother" to some of Timur's sons, which shows her importance to the dynasty. Her importance was also reflected in the rich furnishings of her extravagant clothing, her private tent, and her extensive amount of female attendants. In addition to holding a prominent role in the dynasty, she also was a patron of architecture for the city of Samarkand.

Although Khanzada-Begam and Qutlugh Tarkan Agla had slightly less power, they too were very important to Timur and the Timurid Dynasty. Khanzada-Begam was the wife of one of Timur's favorite sons, Jahangir. She was valued for her prosperous lineage. Qutlugh Tarkan Agla was very involved in looking after Timur's family members in Timur's lifetime. While most of the information about the evidence of the importance of these women to the Timurid Dynasty is in written format, there also exists a few paintings that can be used as visual evidence for the role of women in this dynasty.

Representations of Women in Timurid Art

It is hard to point out exactly how many paintings survive representing women from the Timurid court. It was a time ruled by men in which histories, biographies, and even poetry was meant to represent the life of the ruler and his court. However there are many manuscripts and miniatures that survive in which women were represented.

For example **figure 1** shows Timur's grandson, Ulugh Beg holding a formal audience in which both courtiers and wives are depicted. This particular painting offers a visual parallel to some of the texts created during this period describing Timurid audience scenes. Although it is not easy to decipher which of the numerous women was the principal wife, due to the large amount of wives and concubines that lived in the court, it is easy to identify the ruler, Ulugh Beg. The painting shows four women wearing the traditional jeweled and feathered or ornamented headdress of their ancestors (Mongols). The painting follows the style of traditional enthronement paintings from the time of the Ilkhanid Mongols where the ruler would sit surrounded by his family and court officials. This image provides the viewer with an idea of what ordered hierarchies were like in the court.

Many of the events that occurred in the court were recorded, for the Timurids had a special love for history. Events involving women described in these historical sources were occasionally depicted in manuscript illustrations. For example, **figure 2**, a scene from a copy of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazadi's *Zafarnama* (1436), shows Saray Mulk Khanim's journey from Samarkand to Timur's encampment in Iran. In the same manuscript, although not shown here, two important events from Khanzada Begam's (Timur's daughter-in-law) life are illustrated, such as her marriage to Jahangir and the mourning of her son Muhammad Sultan. What is interesting about these paintings is that they do not actually show Khanzada. The one illustrating her wedding has an enthroned male figure seated in front of a tent flanked by male attendants, rather than showing a

specific event. The painting showing the mourning of her son is laid out in two pages and depicts various members of the family clustered around a coffin. There are three ladies of the court on the left side expressing sorrow, while the right side is filled with weeping men.

The Timurids also had a love and a need for poetry. Persian poets described beautiful women as having moon-like faces, slender waists like cypress trees, curling hair like hunters nets, mouths like rose buds and so small one could hardly breathe through them. There existed a preference for the *majdula*, which were "women small in belly and compact of flesh." The ideal beauty was a "figure elegant and shapely, shoulders symmetrical, back straight. she must be neither too plump nor too skinny" (Soucek, 218). Visual depictions of women followed these poetic ideals. In paintings the women were shown as slender in the waist yet well fed and proper. Their face, hair, cheeks, (uni)brows, and eyes were all the same, following the ideal beauty. **Figure 3**, "The Seduction of Yusuf," which is by the famous artist of the Timurid court, Bihzad. The woman shown has all the qualities discussed which became a sort of hallmark of Timurid as well as early Safavid painting.

Female Patronage for the Timurid Dynasty

Princesses and other upper-class women who were the mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters of the ruling men in Timurid Iran in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries enjoyed a certain level of wealth, power, and political influence, enabling them to be patrons of art and architecture. Below is a list of the most prominent women and a brief description of what they patronized.

Saray Mulk Khanum was the daughter of the Chaghtayid Khan Qazan (who reigned until 1346) and the favorite wife of Timur's eighteen wives and twenty-two concubines. Saray Mulk Khanum's power was generated from the fact that by marrying her, Timur was able to link himself to the house of Genghis Khan, which was one of the ways he legitimized his rule. Additionally, she constructed the *madrassa*, or school of higher education, across from Samarkand's (the Timurid capital city) congregational mosque, the Bibi Khanum, constructed by Timur (Marefat 32).

The **Shah-i Zinda** complex, located just north of Samarkand, is not only a popular Muslim pilgrimage site because it is the purported burial site of Qutham ibn Abbas, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, but it is also a symbol of Timurid women's power because of the dominant role they played in the architectural patronage (Marefat 32). These are the female patrons in the Shah-i Zinda:

<p>Tughlu Tekin, daughter of Amir Khwaja, mother of Amir Husayn ibn Qara Qutlugh, commissioned the east mausoleum in the middle group of buildings in 1376 (Marefat 35).</p>

Shirin Beg Aqa, Timur's younger sister, patroned the mausoleum adjacent to Tughlu Tekin's in 1385/86. It is the first in the complex to employ tile mosaics and it has a thought-provoking Socratic quote in one of its inscriptions (Marefat 35).

Qutlugh Turkan Aqa, Timur's older sister, patronized the mausoleum across the alley from Shirin Beg Aqa's in 1371. She commissioned the finest craftsmen for this mausoleum, who inscribed their names in the building. Chronicles from the times mention that Qutlugh Turkan Aqa sponsored the building of pious foundations such as mosques and *khanqas* (hospices for Sufis), but nothing remains of these structures (Marefat 36-37).

Tuman Aqa, one of Timur's wives, and cousin of Saray Mulk Khanum, patronized a mausoleum, a mosque, and a service room in 1404/05 in the northern section. Chronicles also mention that she patronized a *khanqa* and the bazaar of the *kulahfurushan* (hat sellers) in Samarkand (Marefat 38).

Khanzada married Timur's son and heir, Jahangir in 1373/74, and gave birth to Timur's favorite grandson and heir Muhammad Sultan. After Jahangir's death, Khanzada married Miranshah, another of Timur's sons, and gave birth to Khalil Sultan (Marefat 39). She commissioned a *khanqa* in Herat.

Habiba Sultan, wife of Abu Said, ruler of Samarkand and great-grandson of Timur, commissioned Ishratkhane, a tomb for her daughter, in 1464 in Samarkand (Marefat 40-41). She "also left an endowment for this structure that describes the objects given to the mausoleum, including bronze vessels and cups as well as richly decorated fabrics" (Marefat 41).

Gawhar Shad, wife of Shahrukh, Timur's youngest son and eventual heir, patroned the famous Masjid-i Jami in Meshed in 1418/19, next to the shrine of Imam Riza, Iran's most important pilgrimage center (Marefat 42). "Gawhar Shad was so impressed by the [Masjid-i Jami] that she had her architect build other structures next to the mosque," which are probably the Dar al-Siyada and Dar al-Huffaz (Marefat 42). In 1426 Gawhar Shad endowed the mosque to insure its financial security. She also patronized an almond-shaped signet ring with a dark nephrite seal that bears her name, and the Madrasa Masjid-i Jami and *khanqa* in Herat.

As you can see, the Timurid women had enough wealth to be able to patronize art and architecture and enough power to be able to place the buildings in important areas of the city. The women also demonstrated their piety and generosity by the types of buildings they chose to patronize, which were mosques, *madrasas*, mausoleums, and *khanqas*.

A Brief History of the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1732)

The Safavid Dynasty encompassed the area of present day Iran, which included land directly taken from the Timurid Dynasty. Stylistically these two dynasties share the artistic traditions of Iran, though they did not share the same ideologies.

The Safavids, unlike the Timurids, did not trace their lineage back to the Mongol Dynasty. The founder of this Safavid Dynasty was Shah Ismail, who reigned from 1501 to 1524. The dynasty began with the belief in mystical Sufism, and then Shah Ismail transformed the Safavids into Shia Muslims, who traced their ancestry back to the son in law of Muhammad.

The style of painting in this dynasty was a combination of the painter Bihzad from the Timurid dynasty and the local court style, which was more organic than the rational style of the Timurid dynasty. This style reached its height during the reign of the next ruler, Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576). Two important manuscripts include the *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp, c. 1525-1535, and the *Khamasa* of Nizami, c. 1540, Tabriz. The *Shahnama* is an epic manuscript commissioned to legitimize a new ruler's reign, while the *Khamasa* is a series of 5 romance stories.

The next ruler of this dynasty to contribute a great deal to the arts was Shah Abbas, (r. 1588-1629). It was Shah Abbas that moved the capital of the Safavid dynasty to Isfahan in order to make the capital safe from invasion. At this time the art moved towards single page paintings from manuscript paintings. The primary painter of this new style was Riza Abbasi, who lived from 1565 to 1635. His single page paintings were of courtly youths and beauties, such as in his work *Youthful Lovers*, created in 1630. While painting was important in this time period, so was establishing a visual identity through architecture. Shah Abbas built a city close to the river, with numerous architectural works, including the visual marker of pointed domes.

The Culture of Safavid Women

In his study, "Women in Safavid Iran: The Evidence of European Travelers," Ronald W. Ferrier uses the accounts of Safavid women by European travelers to supplement indigenous sources. He is careful to note that the travelers were mainly familiar with the upper levels of Persian society in Isfahan (the Safavid capital in Iran) which allowed them little direct contact with female society.

There were six types of women in Safavid Iran: "the married wives of those in the upper reaches of society"; the "large rural sector living in a more communal manner in tribal associations up and down the countryside and in permanent agricultural settlements in villages and small towns"; "those engaged in arts and crafts and industrial activities in a more organized manner" within towns and cities; those "who had contracted temporary

marriages"; "the slaves of both sexes"; and the prostitutes (Ferrier, 384-385). The ways that these women participated in the life of society may have differed, but in general, the women's appearances were admired. Persian men of high social status did however seek consorts from the Georgians or the Circassians, who were allegedly the most attractive.

Regular marriages were in the fullest sense of the term "arranged" marriages, usually done "by an attorney between people of a compatible temperament and comparable social status" (Ferrier, 386). "Lifelong celibacy was an unacceptable state, regarded almost as unnatural and impious" and "men were encouraged to experience sex at the earliest practical age, but girls were carefully protected until their wedding nights" (Ferrier, 386).

Divorce was available to both the male and the female, and remarriage was easy. "Although in the case of persons of rank there was a strong feeling of aversion to husbands being divorced by their wives" (Ferrier, 388). Additionally, "if a husband repudiated his wife he was obliged to return her dowry, but if it was the wife who sued for divorce she forfeited it" (Ferrier, 388).

Ferrier continues by stating that after marriage, the "quality of life for women wholly depended upon the disposition of their husbands" (Ferrier, 389). The travelers reported that the women "gave themselves up to idleness of body and spirit" and that "in this indolent atmosphere, there was little incentive or choice to be anything but passive objects of self-gratification" (Ferrier, 389-390). We know that this is not entirely true because on the one hand, these male travelers would have never been allowed into the women's quarters or baths, so they would not have seen what the women were exactly doing. Additionally, we have evidence of Safavid female patrons of the arts, which shows that some women had an active role in society.

Some women acquired power and wealth by being prostitutes, whose activities included singing and dancing, in addition to providing sexual gratification. Some prostitutes even "traveled in troupes with their own simple transport and organization" (Ferrier, 395). Additionally, the shah maintained a group of twenty-four of the most talented performers, whom he rewarded with lavish presents. The European travelers assumed that there were so many Persian prostitutes (which ranged from 12,000 to 40,000 in Isfahan, depending on which traveler's account you read) and their demand was so high that they were able to charge higher prices than in any other country, because "sexual desire was stimulated by warm climates and also by the skills of girls who were marvels of enchantment" (Ferrier, 394,396). This may also be because "respectable" women kept chaste until marriage and men were encouraged to have sexual experiences at the earliest practical age (Ferrier, 386).

Representations of Women in Safavid Art

The *Shahname* of Shah Tahmasp (also called the Houghton *Shahname*) is said to be the longest poem in the history of world literature and although fictitious, the illustrations are principally representations of Shah Tahmasp's courtly environment. Women were depicted as well in the manuscripts. In the majority of the courtly scenes and

encampment scenes, male and female space are distinguished, whether separated by tents or buildings. Thus women are portrayed, but placed in a space separate from that of the men.

For example in **figure 4**, the Nocturnal Palace Scene, women attendants wear white headscarves and work with men in two separate kitchens. The *Shahname* is also known for using "peeping females" in which the women are portrayed constantly observing and or eavesdropping on the world of men. There are also secluded niches and elevated spaces distinguished for the females, perhaps to emphasize the separate yet similar world in which the men and women of the court lived. Some say that these types of environments are similar to those in which women of the Safavid court received their education in the sciences, religion, and arts. The texts talk about the women being informed and active participants of courtly life, which is well represented in the miniatures.

Poetry had an influence on Safavid culture and art. Themes of lovers and princes dominated and their respective portraits did as well. Artists of the time such as Riza Abbasi of 16th century Isfahan did portraits of courtly youths and lovers, including women. The poets wrote of an ideal world of love, gardens, and princes, in which the women played a huge role. Just as in Timurid style, but perhaps with their own twist, Safavid artists depicted the women with round white moon faces, rose bud lips, and tiny waists. An example of this can be seen in **figure 6**, "Youthful Lovers." The court painters of Tabriz mimicked much from the Timurid style of painting yet they included their own fantastic elements as well, such as in "Court of the Gayumars."

Female Patronage from the Safavid Dynasty

Early Safavid women were distinctive from women in other Islamic societies because much power and respect was given to the pious and celibate unmarried sister or daughter of ruling men. These women, as a consequence, were active patrons of art, architecture, and religious institutions.

Tajlu Khanum, or **Shah Begi Begum**, favorite wife of Shah Isma'il, donated many of her numerous properties to the shrine of Fatima al-Ma'suma, patronized other buildings at the shrine, built the dome of the Jannatsara at the shrine of Shaykh Safi at Ardabil, and the domed tomb of Shah Isma'il at Ardabil in 1524.

Mahin Banu, daughter of Tajlu Khanum, patronized shrines and places of pilgrimage; set up foundations with her income from properties in Shirvan, Tabriz, Qazvin, Ray, and Isfahan; and established an endowment for the welfare of women.

Zaynab Begum, Shah 'Abbas' unmarried aunt, built bridges and caravanserais along the Qazvin-Sava trade route.

The later Safavid Dynasty saw a shift from only imperial women patroning architecture to both imperial and non-imperial elite women patroning architecture. This may be attributed to the fact that the Safavid imperial family was not extremely wealthy, which means that the non-imperial elite women would have had the opportunity to build.

Dilaram Khanum, the grandmother of Shah 'Abbas II, constructed the Caravanserai Jadda in 1642-45, the Caravanserai Nim Avarid in the 1640's, the Madrasa of Small Grandmother in 1645-46, and the Madrasa of Large Grandmother in 1647-48. The caravanserais sold rich Indian cloths and other goods from both India and Shiraz. Additionally, Dilaram Khanum gave both *madrasas waqfs* (dedications of income) (Blake, 420).

Sahib Sultan Begum, daughter of the physician and ambassador Hakim Nizam al-Din Muhammad, built the Ilchi Mosque in 1678-79.

Maryam Begum, daughter of Shah Safi, built a mansion in the early 18th century and a *madrasa* in 1703-04.

The **unnamed mother** of Shah 'Abbas II commissioned the construction of the Masjid-i Jami of 'Abbasabad in the mid 17th century.

Shahr Banu, sister of Shah Sultan Husain, built the Madrasa of the Princes and the Bathhouse of the Princes in 1694-1722.

Zinat Begum, wife of the physician Hakim al-Mulk Ardistani, built the Madrasa Nim Avarid in 1705-06.

An **anonymous courtesan** constructed the "mansion of the twelve tumans," (the price charged by the madam for a client's first visit) in the early 17th century, which had the walls and ceiling decorated in gold and silver (Blake 412-413).

Izzat al-Nisa Khanum, daughter of the merchant Mirza Khan Tajir of Qum and wife of Mirza Muhammad Mahdi, built the Madrasa Mirza Husin in 1687-88.

As we can see, the Safavid women patroned mostly religious institutions. Through their belief in Shi'ism these women were able to add to the visual identity of the Safavid Dynasty through the patronage of architecture.

Links

- Brief history of Timurid art, including pictures: <http://www.art-arena.com/timurid.htm>

- Timurid architecture in Samarkand: <http://www.oxuscom.com/timursam.htm>
- Interesting history of Safavids:
<http://www.worldtrek.org/odyssey/mideast/041200/041200jassaf.html>
- Brief history of Safavid art, including pictures: <http://www.art-arena.com/safavidart.htm>
- 16th Century Persian Women's Clothing (Early Safavid Period):
http://www.geocities.com/louise_de_la_mare/
- Information on Islam including a Quiz of Muslim Faith and Qur'an readings:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/events/index.shtml>