

THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN PORTRAIT PAINTING ON THE PORTRAIT PAINTING IN THE SCHOOL OF ESFAHAN DURING THE SAFAVID ERA: CASE OF REZA ABBASI

AVRUPA PORTRE RESMİNİN SAFEVİ DÖNEMİNDE İSFAHAN OKULUNDAKİ PORTRE RESMİNE ETKİSİ: RIZA ABBASİ ÖRNEĞİ

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, people have played a significant role in artistic creation. Due to Iran's historical connections with both Western and Eastern countries, the influence of these cultures on Iranian art, particularly in portrait painting, is undeniable. This raises the question: How can the characteristics of European portrait painting from the 17th and 18th centuries be observed in the portraits of Reza Abbasi? The purpose of this research is to explore the influence of European art on the portraits created by Reza Abbasi. This study focuses on portrait painting in Iran during the Safavid period, specifically analyzing the art of Reza Abbasi. Consider rephrasing for clarity, e.g., "This research employs library resources and comparative methods to investigate centuries. According to the research findings, portrait painting existed in Iran before the Arab conquest and the advent of Islam, reaching its peak during the Safavid period. Furthermore, European art had a notable influence on Iranian art in terms of aesthetics and technique, which also reached its zenith during the Safavid era. These influences are evident in the works of Reza Abbasi and the Isfahan school, both from an aesthetic and technical perspective.

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ÖZET

Tarih boyunca, insanlar sanatsal çalışmalarda önemli bir rol oynamıştır. İran'ın hem Batı hem de Doğu ülkeleriyle olan tarihi bağlantıları nedeniyle, bu kültürlerin İran sanatı, özellikle portre resmi üzerindeki etkisi yadsınamaz. Bu da şu soruyu gündeme getiriyor: 17. ve 18. yüzyıllardaki Avrupa portre resminin özellikleri Rıza Abbasi'nin portrelerinde nasıl gözlemlenebilir? Bu araştırmanın amacı, Rıza Abbasi'nin eserlerindeki portreler üzerinde Avrupa sanatının etkisini oluşturmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Safevi döneminde İran'daki portre resmini inceleyerek, özellikle Rıza Abbasi'nin sanatına odaklanmıştır. Aynı zamanda 17. ve 18. yüzyıllardaki Avrupa portre resminin etkisini analiz etmek için kütüphane kaynakları ve karşılaştırmalı yöntem kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada elde edilen sonuçlara göre, portre resimi Arap fethi ve İslam'ın gelişinden önce İran'da var olduğunu ve Safevi Dönemi'nde zirveye ulaştığını göstermektedir. Aynı zamanda Avrupa sanatı estetik ve tekniksel açıdan İran sanatı üzerindeki etkisi görülmektedir ve bu etki safevi döneminde zirveye ulaştığı görülmektedir. Bunların örneklerini Rıza Abbasi ve İsfahan okulunun eserlerinde estetiksel ve tekniksel açıdan görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Portre resim, Safevi hanedanı, Rıza Abbasi, Avrupa,*

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history and across different cultures, the human portrait and its depiction in painting have held great importance. Key criteria in portrait making include the perception of structure and the aesthetic relationships governing the components, closely aligning with the similarities and characteristics of the person who is the subject of the painting. The human face, actions, behaviors, and the reflection of thoughts, along with the aesthetic relationships conveyed, provide the painter with an expansive realm in which to explore the infinite beauty of creation. In Western art, portrait painting tends to be objective and terrestrial, while in Eastern art, it is more utopian and heavenly.

In Iran, the definition of portrait painting differs significantly from Western and common interpretations, which often emphasize a likeness to the subject. Iranian artists did not seek to present reality but to reveal the supernatural truths within. The facial features depicted in Safavid-era paintings often display royal and utopian beauties, much adored by the Safavid aristocracy. In the "Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp," the depiction of a utopian image for the king is evident, and the emphasis on creating faces similar to those of women, with an elegance in their rendering, is remarkable. Sultan Mohammad, another notable artist, depicted courtiers and aristocrats in a style reminiscent of stone sculptures, based on his observations. In the "Haft Awrang" (Seven Thrones) by Jami, faces are illustrated as emaciated and round with long necks. Towards the end of the Safavid era and the beginning of the Qajar period, there was a growing tendency toward European art and realism. As fewer courtiers supported the arts, the prevalence of single illustrations increased, influenced by cultural and social factors. The arrival of European artists in Iran and the exposure of Iranian artists to Western methods led to a new phase in Iranian art, marked by the adoption of non-Iranian aesthetic techniques, known as Westernization. One of the artists involved in this movement was Reza Abbasi (1565-1635), who established a unique style and was among the founders of the Esfahan school of painting, significantly contributing to the Westernization of Iranian art. This research aims to study the influence of European portrait painting in the 17th century on the works of Reza Abbasi, a prominent figure in the Esfahan school. In this context, the characteristics of the works produced by Reza Abbasi before he was sent to Europe, the changes he introduced in the field

of painting, particularly in portraiture, after his exposure to Western art, and the effects of these changes on Iranian art constitute the problem statement of this article. Based on the purpose of this research, we can discuss the Safavid period, during which art in Iran reached its peak. The Safavid period is often regarded as one of the most prosperous eras of Islamic Iranian art. The Safavid dynasty, established in Tabriz by Shah Ismail in 1501, witnessed the flourishing of the arts, particularly under Shah Tahmasb, who relocated the capital from Tabriz to Qazvin for political reasons. This period also saw cultural exchanges with India, highlighted by the Mughal emperor Humayun seeking refuge at the Safavid court, which strengthened ties between Iran and India, including in the arts. The Safavid Empire, which endured until its defeat by Afghan invaders in 1722, was renowned for the grandeur and beauty of Isfahan. The city attracted many merchants and tourists, who vividly described its splendor in their travelogues.

The Safavid era is a significant period in Islamic art history, where the Safavid kings, known for their love of art, fostered a golden age in various artistic fields, particularly painting. Relying on the Iranian nation and Shia Islam, which became the official state religion, the integration of traditions from Bukhara (Tabriz) and Khurasan (Herat) led to the development of a unique and original style, exemplified in the "Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp" and the "Khamseh of Shah Tahmasp" (1539-1543). The rise of the Safavid dynasty brought about cultural and political changes that directly influenced painting and portraiture. These changes are evident not only in the drawing styles and subjects but also in the general atmosphere of the era's paintings. The evolving interests of patrons, particularly the declining support from the court and the increasing patronage by the merchant class, played a crucial role in shaping the art of this period. As non-courtier patrons could not afford the costly illustrated manuscripts, single-issue paintings became more common, leading to the prevalence of idealized, aristocratic portraiture that rarely conveyed the inner emotions of the subject. In contrast, private works by artists often depicted more expressive and emotive portraits.

The growing influence of European art led to significant changes in Iranian portraiture, with a move towards realism. This shift was driven by the personal interest of the king in European art, which guided this development. Alongside European influences, Chinese art also played a role in shaping the methods of illustration and portraiture during this era. "Painters of the second

Safavid school, especially between 1523 and 1562, were fond of imitating Chinese illustrations, often rendering them with minimal color" (Zaki, 2005: 51).

The social and political changes of this period allowed artists greater opportunities to emerge, and their artistic individuality became increasingly noticeable. Oleg Grabar highlights the significance of portrait painting and the emergence of new artistic expressions during this time, emphasizing the individuality of artists who operated independently of royal workshops. He notes, "In the age of the Safavids, we see artists who became true artists, not dependent on royal workshops, but whose private lives are reflected in their works. These artists lived among society and the people, which influenced the development of their social and artistic foundations, increasing the value placed on visual arts" (Grabar, 2004: 78).

Here, we can also mention Sultan Mohammad, another prominent figure during the time when Safavid art reached its peak in Iran. Sultan Mohammad significantly advanced the Tabriz School of Art. According to Ajand (2008: 372), "Sultan Mohammad Tabrizi studied the characteristics of the Herat school of painting through Behzad and Agha Mirak, and then combined these characteristics with those of the Tabriz and Shiraz Turkmen schools to develop the Tabriz school of painting." Despite his individual creativity, securing the patronage of Shah Tahmasb was crucial to Sultan Mohammad's success. Since Shah Tahmasb admired Behzad's paintings, Sultan Mohammad aligned his work more closely with Behzad's style. However, he avoided merely replicating the drawings of the Herat school, instead striving to create original works based on live observation that conveyed character and depth throughout the creative process (Moghadam Ashrafi, 2004: 88). Mohammadi was another influential artist of the Safavid era, whose work significantly impacted subsequent generations of painters, including Reza Abbasi. Mohammadi's portrait paintings are characterized by "round faces," "pouty lips," and "big eyes" (Ajand, 2005: 159). According to Pakbaz, Mohammadi had a remarkable ability to depict natural human emotions and movements.

Following Sultan Mohammad, we can also highlight Reza Abbasi, who played a crucial role in the development of Iranian art and its achievement of reaching its peak. Reza Abbasi, another key figure of this era, revolutionized Iranian traditional painting and portraiture through his innovations in illustration and the introduction of new subjects. "He continued the realist

tradition of Kamal-ud-Din Behzad and Mohammadi and may have even been a student of Mohammadi" (Pakbaz, 2006: 255). Abbasi tended to depict the real world. "The young subjects in Abbasi's works express an aristocratic and idealistic aesthetic favored by Safavid aristocrats. However, in his later works, Abbasi's figures became more dignified and fictitious. This stylization is particularly evident in paintings with more official subjects, such as princes and devotees" (Pakbaz, 2006: 255). One distinctive feature of Reza Abbasi's portraiture is his treatment of the "nose design and the narrow space between the lips and nose, and the shadows between them" (Seyed Razavi and Hasanvand, 2005: 64).

In examining Reza Abbasi's portraits, several character types emerge, each following specific principles. In his paintings, people are depicted in three age categories: young, middle-aged, and old, with each group portrayed with distinct features. "In the young portraits, features include a full arch of eyebrows, a smooth, hairless face, cleft chins, large eyes, a long, beautiful nose, and a slight smile" (Ajand, 1998: 210). Middle-aged figures in Abbasi's paintings have "round faces with frowning, bushy eyebrows and a depicted mustache" (Ajand, 1998: 212). In old faces, "the emotions and experiences of the past are reflected. When depicted alongside young figures, they represent logic, wisdom, and a bygone way of life" (Ibid, pp. 217-218). After Reza Abbasi, Mo'een Mosavvar continued in his footsteps. During this period, the influence of Western art on Iranian paintings became increasingly evident, with Mohammad Zaman being the artist who most visibly demonstrated this influence. His works are noted for features such as "the rather extreme embossing of faces and clothes, beards, and the multi-layered expressive power of portraits" (Cary Welsh, 2005: 96).

2. ESFAHAN PAINTING SCHOOL

With the transfer of Persia's capital from Qazvin to Esfahan during the reign of Shah Abbas I in 1591, and the subsequent relocation of artists to this city, a significant evolution occurred in Iranian painting. This period provided artists with greater opportunities to present their works. During this era, paintings moved beyond the confines of book pages and their ornamentations, with single-edition paintings becoming increasingly common. The subjects most frequently illustrated by painters of this time included the lives of ordinary people, courtiers, and especially aristocrats, depicted in elegant clothing and vibrant colors (Figure 1).

Single portrait painting became enormously prevalent during this period, likely due to Safavid artists' growing familiarity with European art. This era marked the beginning of modern communication with the West, an unprecedented development in earlier periods (Sharifzadeh, 2010: 87).



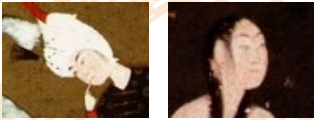



Figure. 1: Mohammad Ghasem, (*A Man With The Beasts*), Esfahan, Safavid Era, 1647, (Cary Walsh, 2005).

The second Safavid school began with the reign of Shah Abbas I, marking both a period of decline in traditional Iranian painting and a significant European influence. Inspired by European church murals, wall paintings became popular in palaces and the homes of the elite. Notable examples include the wall paintings in Ali Qapu, Chehel Sotun, Wang Church, and the houses of Sokias in Jolfa.

Two principal factors contributed to the formation of the Esfahan school of painting: a blend of newfound interest in Western art and a continued focus on Esfahan's Eastern traditions. Reza Abbasi developed specific techniques and methods in painting that reflected this dual influence. Another factor was the arrival of numerous Armenians from the western borders, who were settled in Jolfa by order of Shah Abbas. These Armenians brought a distinctive taste for ornamentation, particularly in the decoration of churches.

Table. 1: A Glance Of Portrait Painting In The Schools Of Illustration During The Safavid Era.

Features	Portrait example	Historical Era	Name of the Artist or the work of art
<p>Bright colors characterizes the figures based in traditional principles, reflecting a change in their mood. The characterization shows a similarity to real people, with the artist's personality evident in the appearance of the faces. However, there is a notable lack of resemblance to Chinese and Mongolian portraits.</p>		Tabriz School	Abdol Aziz
<p>Portrait characterization is based on observation and real images of the friends and relatives of the courtiers, depicted in stone carvings in the mountains. This work combines Torkaman imagination with Behzad's realism, expressed through the use of happy and bright colors.</p>		Tabriz School	Soltan Mohammad
<p>Illustrating utopian faces for kings, with an interest in portraying people with features similar to women, and accurately designing the portraits with pencils.</p>		Tabriz School	Shahnameh Tahmasebi
<p>Slim young people with long necks and round faces are depicted in a free illustration style. Elders have a caricature-like appearance, with big eyes and chins featuring small dimples.</p>		Mashhad-Qazvin School	Haft Owrang Shahnameh

3. REZA ABBASI

Reza Abbasi, the son of Molana Ali Asghar Kashani, was the most famous painter of the Safavid Shah Abbas era. Reza Abbasi, also known as Agha Reza Abbasi, was born in 1565 and died in April 1635. He was a founding member of the Isfahan School of Painting and one of the great Iranian painters of the late Safavid period. Although he was probably born in Kashan, some believe he was born in Mashhad. His father, Ali Asghar Kashani, was a well-known painter in the court of Safavid Shah Tahmasb.

Reza Abbasi was trained in the Qazvin school and was influenced by the works of the painter Sheikh Mohammad. As he developed his skills, he paid close attention to the European paintings being traded in Esfahan at that time, learning some of their secrets (Pakbaz, 2013: 25). He then developed a novel and more dynamic method than the Qazvin school, eventually rising above all the other artists and painters of Esfahan to become the most famous painter during the reign of Shah Abbas. He revolutionized Iranian painting, initiating a new movement in the art of Iran. Shah Abbas was so impressed by Reza Abbasi's talent that he kissed his hand that creates art and referred to him as a relative, therefore "Abbasi" became part of his name (Figures 2, 3, and 4).

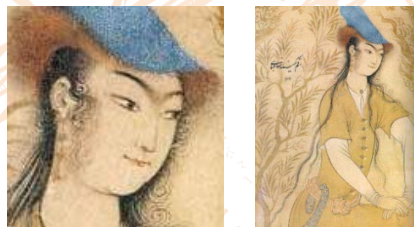


Figure 2: Reza Abbasi, (*A Girl In A Fur Coat*), Esfahan School, Safavid Era, 10th Century S.H., (Key bay, 2003).

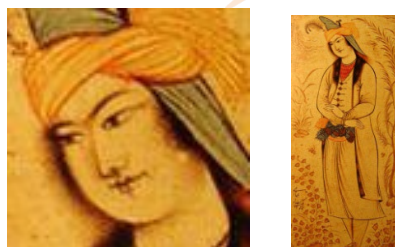


Figure 3: Reza Abbasi, (*Prince Mohammad Beik Gorji*), Esfahan School, Safavid, 10th Century S.H., (Soudavar, 2011).




Figure 4: Reza Abbasi, (Darwish), Isfahan School, 10th Century S.H., (Ken bay, 1983).

3.1. Portrait Painting In Reza Abbasi Artworks

Unity and harmony in details such as the drawing of wrists, scarves, turbans, and facial features (eyes, lips, mouth) can be clearly observed in Reza Abbasi's works. His portraits exhibit a cohesive harmony in the depiction of facial components. In these paintings, Abbasi often illustrated round faces with a pronounced chin. The technique used to draw the nose, eyes, eyebrows, lips, mouth, and the hair beside the ears and on the cheeks is executed with great coherence and harmony. Long noses, small lips with minimal space between them, and a shadow above the lips are some of the distinctive features of his paintings. The portraits typically display a slight smile, small lips, and eyebrows depicted in full arches. A group of Reza Abbasi's paintings portrays elders. In these images, he captures a clear sense of the passage of time and wisdom, especially when compared to portraits of younger individuals. The elder portraits feature round faces, thick eyebrows, and bearded faces, emphasizing their advanced age.

Table. 2- Features Of The Portrait Painting By Reza Abbasi

Features	Portrait examples	Artist	artwork
<p>The continuation of Behzad’s portrait painting introduced a new method in illustration. This method is characterized by a distinctive drawing style, featuring a specific type of nose with little space between the nose and lips, and a shadow between them. Youthful visages are depicted with full, arched eyebrows, curly-haired, smooth faces, cleft chins, and beautiful long eyes and noses. A slight smile, expressing aristocratic and idealistic beauty, was preferred by Safavid aristocrats. Middle-aged faces are round, with bushy and tangled eyebrows.</p>		<p>Reza Abbasi</p>	<p>Single editions</p>

3.2. The Impact of European Paintings in Reza Abbasi Portrait Painting













The great Shah Abbas governed Iran from 1587 to 1629. In 1600, he made Esfahan the capital of Iran and attracted renowned and skilled calligraphers, rubricators, and painters to the city, establishing Esfahan as a center of science, skills, craftsmanship, and art. Many of these individuals recorded their experiences and observations during this period, leaving behind reports of their travels that serve as valuable memorials today. They wrote about the remarkable developments in Iran, documenting the habits, behaviors, morals, and traditions they observed. Their accounts also describe the novel images and picturesque paintings that adorned the doors and walls of the palaces.

During this time, with its grand appearance, large population, and unique economic prosperity, Esfahan became a significant hub for businessmen, tourists, political ambassadors, religious missionaries, and foreign artists. In this environment, Iranian painting began to experience the influence of European artistic models. This influence occurred in several ways: through the importation of European artworks to Iran, direct contact with European artists residing in Esfahan, and the works of the Armenian residents in New Jolfa, as well as the Indian Mughal school of painting.

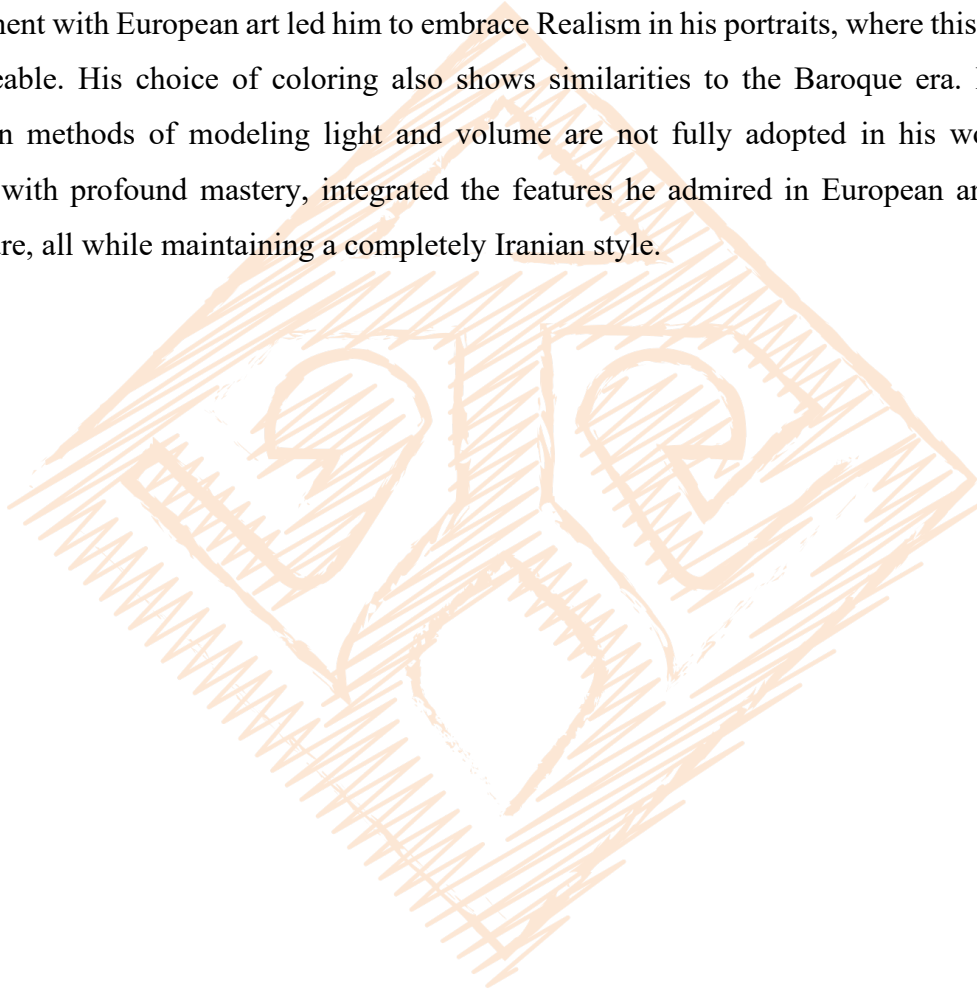
Thus, a new era in the history of Iranian painting began, lasting until the late 18th century. During this period, we observe imperfect adaptations of European naturalist painting. Some painters attempted to establish a harmony between the visual traditions of the East and West. These artists borrowed techniques such as bold outlines and embossed effects from European and Indian paintings but adapted these elements according to the framework of Iranian decorative aesthetics.

As the Esfahan school flourished, we see in the works of Reza Abbasi a struggle to depict volume, depth, light, and shadow. This coincided with an increasing interest in European subjects and the use of oil paint in large-scale works. The similarities and differences between Reza Abbasi's portrait paintings (from the 15th and 16th centuries) and European paintings (from the 17th and 18th centuries) are examined, with the impact of Western art on his portraiture detailed in Table 3.

Table. 3: Compatibility Survey Of Portrait Painting Of Reza Abbasi And European Painting (17,18 Century).

Differences	Similarities	Rococo	Baroque	Reza Abbasi
Ground realism, high contrast and volumisity in european portrait painting, mystical moods and facial component idealism in Reza Abbasi works	Showing moods and emotions in visage, fade smile in the corner of the lips, roundness of face, big eyes and small lips, struggle for realism, three shade look, long stretched neck, tendency of head to the downside, shading	  	   	    

By reviewing Table 3, the European influences on Reza Abbasi's portrait paintings become evident. While his works retain distinctively Iranian features, they also incorporate European techniques. The visages remain largely Iranian, but European methods of illustration are utilized. Rococo influences are apparent in the long necks that incline downward, and the slight, faded smiles at the corners of the lips are reminiscent of Baroque paintings. Reza Abbasi's engagement with European art led him to embrace Realism in his portraits, where this approach is noticeable. His choice of coloring also shows similarities to the Baroque era. However, European methods of modeling light and volume are not fully adopted in his work. Reza Abbasi, with profound mastery, integrated the features he admired in European art into his portraiture, all while maintaining a completely Iranian style.



4. CONCLUSION

During the Safavid era, European naturalist painting entered Iran for several reasons and quickly attracted the attention of Iranian painters. Some of these artists began to model their work on the principles and techniques of this style. This marked the beginning of the term "Westernization," which referred to the adoption of European motifs and methods, such as embossed modeling. Reza Abbasi, a prominent artist of this period, utilized flowing, smooth curved lines and arcs in his paintings, which in some of his works seem to move in different directions, engaging the viewer's mind. Over time, he became increasingly interested in incorporating more introspective and contemplative moods into his single-portrait paintings, using raw and straight lines to intensify the emotional depth of his portraits. This evolution in his style led to the development of a new aesthetic in Iranian art, one that was influenced by Western and European art but also uniquely his own.

Reza Abbasi was an artist who both preserved the visual traditions of the past and boldly broke with them. While he paid homage to the visual traditions of the Shiraz, Herat, and Tabriz schools—some of the most renowned and productive art schools of the 15th and 16th centuries—he also introduced innovations in illustration, painting, and even coloring that were either unprecedented or had not been expressed with such courage by earlier artists. Although Reza Abbasi's single-portrait paintings are grounded in tradition, they also convey a sense of movement and suspension, as if the figures are floating and walking with a kind of mystical flight, their feet barely touching the ground.

Reza Abbasi infused Iranian painting with new meaning by reinterpreting and rebuilding Western models and discovering new motifs and techniques. On one hand, this tendency brought fresh structure and order to Iranian painting and opened up new global horizons. On the other hand, it disrupted the unity and integration of traditional Iranian painting, leading to an unlimited, open-ended evolution of the art form.

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