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ARTICLE

Echoes of Empire: The Paintings of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā in Late Qajar Iran (1860–1900)

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Abstract

This article investigates the artistic milieu of the Qajar dynasty through a critical analysis of the distinctive and sophisticated style of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (1813–93), contextualizing his work alongside that of his contemporaries, with particular emphasis on Kamal al-Mulk (1859–1940), the most renowned painter of the period. Through close analysis of selected paintings, this study reveals the layered complexity of Mahmud Khan's visual language and underscores the broader interplay between Qajar art and European artistic traditions. Although this inquiry does not seek to provide a reading of modern Iranian art, it contends that Mahmud Khan's oeuvre warrants serious critical attention—especially within non–Persian language scholarship—as a pivotal yet overlooked juncture in Iranian art history and a missed opportunity for articulating a meaningful continuum between Iran's classical aesthetic heritage and its modern visual expression.

Keywords: Europe; Iran; landscape painting; Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā; modern art; Qajar dynasty; watercolor

Introduction

By the fourteenth century, European images and motifs had begun making their way into Persian art, manifesting in biblical iconography and portrayals of European figures. The term *farang*—derived from Frank—entered the Persian artistic lexicon in expressions such as *naqsh-i farangi* (image or icon of *farang*). Between the late fourteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Persian manuscripts and drawings occasionally featured inscriptions like *kār-i farang* (work from *farang*), indicating visual inspiration from European artistic models, possibly of Frankish masters. Significant examples of this cultural exchange appear during the Jalayerid period (1336–1432), notably in folios from the Diez and Istanbul albums. The composition known as *Eight Figures in European Attire*, for instance, exemplifies this hybrid visual language, portraying figures in medieval European dress, complete with distinctive accessories and headgear, and incorporating subtle chiaroscuro.[1] Yet, despite their foreign appearance, *farangi* representations in Persian manuscripts and album folios were rendered within the stylistic conventions of Persian

[1] Diez-Album, *Jagdszene*. S. 1. For more details on the image and its various qualities, see Necipoglu, "Persianate Images," 543–47.

art—marked by vibrant color palettes and a preference for vertical composition over linear perspective.[2]

By the seventeenth century, increased diplomatic and commercial engagement with Europe brought about a more explicit and sustained incorporation of European artistic conventions into Persian painting. Artists of the late Safavid period (1501–1723) developed a syncretic visual idiom that merged Persian formal aesthetics with Western iconography and pictorial techniques.[3] The presence of European figures—often identified by their rigid attire—in murals and *muraqqa*ʿs (albums) reflected both aesthetic fascination and an emergent cultural curiosity about the West.[4]

In the subsequent Afsharid (1736–1749) and Zand (1750–1794) periods, artists such as Muhammad Baqir, Aqa Sadiq, and ʿAli Ashraf Afshar sustained Safavid themes, including portraiture, biblical narratives, and *gul o murgh* (flower-and-bird compositions), while advancing the use of light, shadow, and emerging formats like oil painting on canvas.[5] Their works served as crucial conduits, transmitting Safavid-era engagements with occidental visual culture into the Qajar period.

Although Western themes and techniques permeated Persian visual culture in Safavid Iran, Europeans—*farangi*s—were not typically conceptualized as ideological or cultural "Others" of primary concern.[6] Unlike regional adversaries such as the Ottomans, Uzbeks, or Mughals, Europeans remained peripheral figures in Persian historiography. However, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, under the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925), this perception underwent a marked transformation. From the reign of Fath ʿAli Shah (1797–1834) onward, Europeans came to be seen not as distant curiosities but as bearers of scientific innovation and technological progress, capable of miraculous feats such as restoring sight and ushering in civilizational advancement.[7] Westerners, once marginal in the Persian imaginary, now represented a compelling model of modernity.[8]

This paradigmatic shift in cultural perception found vivid expression in Iranian artistic practice. A growing number of Qajar artists began to engage seriously with Western artistic methods.[9] Fursat Shirazi (1854–1920), a Qajar poet and artist, succinctly captured the esteem for European aesthetics: "Thanks to their knowledge of geometry and perspective, and their ability to convey emotion in portraiture, they are the best artists on earth."[10] By 1858, some forty-two Iranian students had been sent to France, many of whom would later hold teaching positions at Tehran's Madrasa-i Dār al-Funun (Polytechnic College), where they played a pivotal role in shaping the future of Iranian art.[11]

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[2] Habibi, "Farangis in Persian Painting."

[3] Habibi, "Farangi-Sazi."

[4] Habibi, *Ali Qoli Jebādār*, 33–52.

[5] Robinson, "Persian Painting in the Qajar Period," 332–34. See also Robinson, "Painting in the Post Safavid Period," 225–31; and Robinson, "Persian Painting under the Zand and Qajar Dynasties," 870–89.

[6] Among several studies on the subject, see especially Matthee, "Between Aloofness and Fascination"; and Sefatgol, "Farang, Farangi and Farangestan," 358.

[7] Fraser, *Winter's Journey*, vol. 2, 211, 289.

[8] Several accounts of European travelers reflect the Qajars' view of Europe and the Europeans. See, for example, Fraser, *Journey into Khorasan*; Morier, *Second Journey*; and several others. See also Nategh, "Farang va farangi ma'ābi va resāleh enteghādi sheykh va shoyookh."

[9] Schwerda, "Visualizing Kingship." See also *Technologies of the Image*.

[10] Fursat Husseini Shirāzi, *Āthār-i ʿajam*, vol. 2, 894. He goes on to say that "there are rare Iranian artists in Shiraz and Iran who know painting, of which Mirzā Aqā [the writer's master] was one of the examples."

[11] Floor, "Art and Artists," 131. Dār al-Funun is a college founded in Tehran in 1851 by Mirzā Taqi Khan Amir-e Kabir, the prime minister of Naser al-Din Shah. The school marked the beginning of modern education in Persia. Medicine, physics, chemistry, and engineering had gained preference in the core curriculum, and such subsidiary subjects as painting, drawing, music, and a more comprehensive selection of languages had been added. See Gurney and Nabavi, "Dār al-Fonun"; and Ekhtiar, "Dār al-Funun," 140, 161–77.

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Iranian artists increasingly adopted European painting techniques—including the use of linear perspective, light and shadow, and oil on canvas—to produce portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes. The introduction of photography in 1842 further transformed the visual culture, allowing for new modes of artistic representation and self-fashioning. Artists such as Sanīʿ al-Mulk (1814–1866) and Mirza Mahdi Khan Mussavir al-Mulk (active second half of the nineteenth century) experimented with imported technologies such as lithography and photography, all while maintaining thematic fidelity to Persian subjects.

These evolving artistic exchanges between Iran and Europe reflected broader historical shifts in perception and cultural production. What began as a subtle incorporation of foreign motifs and techniques in the medieval and early modern periods culminated, by the nineteenth century, in a profound transformation of the Iranian visual imagination. Within this larger context, the present article centers on the works of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (1813–1893), offering a visual analysis of selected paintings and exploring their semantic and sociopolitical implications. To situate his practice within the broader artistic landscape of the Qajar era, the article places Mahmud Khan in comparative dialogue with Muhammad Ghaffari, known as Kamal al-Mulk (1859–1940).

Scholarly engagement with Mahmud Khan's work has largely been confined to Persian-language studies, which have explored various dimensions of his artistic output. However, his oeuvre and legacy remain markedly underexamined within non-Persian academic discourses. This article does not seek to provide a comprehensive biography of Mahmud Khan; rather, it serves as a call for further research into his multifaceted contributions to Iranian art and literature.

Mahmud Khan emerged from a distinguished lineage of royal poets and courtiers, being the grandson of Fath-ʿAli Khan Sabā, the renowned poet laureate (Malek al-Shuʿarā) of Fath-ʿAli Shah Qajar. His familial ties to courtly literary traditions extended even further back: his ancestors reportedly served the Safavid court and accompanied Shah ʿAbbās II (r. 1642–66) during the military campaign to recapture Qandahar.[12] Benefiting from this elite cultural pedigree, Mahmud Khan received a comprehensive education from an early age. His training encompassed history, jurisprudence, mathematics, poetry, and the fine arts of calligraphy and painting. His poetic talent was formally recognized by Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96), who bestowed upon him the prestigious title of Malek al-Shuʿarā, continuing the family tradition of royal poetic patronage.

His poetic corpus—comprising approximately twenty-six thousand verses, according to the introduction to his *Divān*—evokes the stylistic and thematic traditions of classical Persian poets such as Farrokhi Sistani and Manuchehri Damghani of the eleventh century.[13] He undertook the compilation of this collection himself shortly before his death. A substantial portion of his poetry consists of panegyrics dedicated to Naser al-Din Shah Qajar and other prominent court figures, including Mirza Hussein Kahn Sadr-i Aʿzam (Sepahsālār, 1827–81), and Mirza Ali Asghar Atābak Amin al-Dawla (1858–1907). Mahmud Khan is believed to have destroyed several other compositions—suggesting a degree of curatorial selectivity in what was preserved.[14]

The extant poems reveal not only his refined literary sensibilities but also his profound loyalty to the monarch. His verses often celebrate the king's virtues through seasonal imagery, particularly emphasizing the symbolic resonance of Nowruz and springtime as metaphors for royal beneficence. This interweaving of poetic and political devotion invites further reflection on how his literary production complements, extends, and also complicates and challenges the thematic concerns evident in his visual artworks. Primarily known for his watercolor landscapes and urban vignettes, Mahmud Khan's paintings often

[12] Azhand, "Ham kinari," 64.

[13] *Divān Mahmud Khan*.

[14] Ibid., introduction, probably by Qavim al-Dawla, 8.

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depicted sparsely populated scenes sometimes imbued with subtle reflections on the sociopolitical conditions of his time.[15]

Despite his relative obscurity in the art historical canon—particularly within modern Iranian art discourse—Mahmud Khan's contributions remain significant. When viewed alongside the more widely celebrated Kamal al-Mulk, Mahmud Khan's oeuvre reveals the multiplicity of artistic responses to European influence during the Qajar period and invites a reevaluation of how artistic modernity in Iran has been historically constructed and remembered.

Late Nineteenth Century and the Paintings of Mahmud Khan

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Iranian artists were confronted with a critical aesthetic choice: to maintain allegiance to a "traditional" visual language—rooted in the late Safavid, Zand, and early Qajar periods—or to embrace the increasingly pervasive European aesthetic, which had garnered considerable support from the royal court. The former mode favored depictions of singular figures, often situated against landscapes, and drew upon a repertoire encompassing Persian literary themes, religious icons, and gendered representations of both saints and secular individuals. A notable practitioner of this genre was Muhammad Ismaʿil Farangi Sāz, an Isfahani artist active between 1840 and 1871, widely recognized for his intricately rendered lacquer works.[16]

By contrast, artists who gravitated toward European visual idioms frequently had direct exposure to Western art through state-sponsored institutions such as the Dār al-Funun or through academic training abroad. One prominent example was Mirza Ali Akbar Khan Muzayin al-Dawla (1811–93), who served as a professor of painting and theater at the Dār al-Funun after returning from France.[17] Muzayin al-Dawla replicated European masterworks—including "The Merry Monks" by Pietro Torrini (1852–1920) and "Plows with Oxen in the Nivernais Region" by Rosa Bonheur (1822–99), both of which are now housed in the Saʿadabad Museum in Tehran. His own landscape compositions exhibit a basic application of chiaroscuro and shallow perspective, although they lack the precision evident in his copied works.

Mirza Mahdi Khan Mussavir al-Mulk, active in the latter half of the nineteenth century, emerges as another significant figure affiliated with the Qajar court. His oeuvre, comprising primarily oil paintings on canvas and preserved largely in Tehran's Golestan and Sahebqarania Palaces, reveals the pronounced influence of photography. His portraits of Qajar elites and statesmen (*rejāl*) are especially noted for their photographic realism and detail.[18] However, this proficiency does not uniformly extend to ancillary objects (such as carpets, backgammon boards, and tables) and landscapes, which often appear flattened and lacking in spatial coherence. His visual vocabulary fluctuates between the conventions of European academic art and the enduring idioms of Persian painting.

Although often marginalized in mainstream art historical discourse, numerous other Qajar-era artists also navigated the complex interplay between indigenous and European artistic paradigms. Their eclectic productions reflect the aesthetic tensions of an epoch

[15] Iʿtimād al-Saltana praises him indeed for his landscape painting (*durnamā sāzi*) and compares his paintings with those of Raphael. Muhammad Hassan Khān Iʿtimād al-Saltana, *Al-Maʿāthir va al-Athār,* vol. 1, 265.

[16] A descendant of the esteemed Emami family of painters, Muhammad Esmaʿil—son of the celebrated Qajar artist Mirza Bābā, the first Qajar *naqqaāshbāshi* (head of the painters' workshop)—specialized in *qalamdān* (pencil cases) and often portrayed figures in European dress, likely explaining his moniker "Farangi Sāz" (European-style maker); Robinson, "Persian Painting in the Qajar Period," 348–49. For other Qajar painters of this period see also the same article; and Floor, "Art and Artists," 140. For a Qajar painting bibliography see Habibi, "Qajar Painting."

[17] Karim Zadeh Tabrizi, *Ahvāl va Athār*, vol. 1, 377–78.

[18] Ibid., vol. 3, 1247–51.

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marked by royal aspirations for Europeanization—frequently framed as a pathway to modernity—and by profound sociocultural transformation, including increased foreign intervention. As Staci Scheiwiller insightfully observes, "What is at stake here is that Iranian artists did not simply copy what Europeans were doing, but were continually engaged in a negotiated dialogue on how to express and represent a developing world, changed by innovations, inventions, and colonial contests on Iranian borders."[19]

The introduction of photography into the Qajar court, and subsequently among its affiliated artists, catalyzed a profound transformation in Iranian visual culture. Scholarly debates persist regarding photography's precise role in shaping modern Iranian art, with many arguing that it had a determinative effect on compositional choices, subject matter, and aesthetic priorities.[20] Muhammad Hassan Khan, known as Iʿtimād al-Saltana (minister of publications, 1843–96), acknowledged in his *Al-Maʿāthir va al-Athār* (Feats and Effects) that photography significantly enhanced Persian painting, particularly in the rendering of portraits and landscapes, by improving the application of light, shadow, accurate proportions, and perspective.[21] He notably identified Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā as a leading exponent of these innovations.[22]

Mahmud Khan, who held the title of Malek al-Shuʿarā (poet laureate), was a polymath whose achievements spanned poetry, calligraphy, sculpture, and painting.[23] Remarkably, he neither studied at European institutions nor traveled abroad, even declining a diplomatic post to Europe during the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah.[24] Nonetheless, his work demonstrated a sophisticated synthesis of Persian chromatic sensibilities with Western perspectival techniques.[25] His landscape compositions, in particular, bear the unmistakable imprint of photographic influence, especially in the nuanced treatment of light and reflection across architectural surfaces and foliage. Although he was primarily a watercolorist—his oil paintings were relatively scarce[26]—Mahmud Khan set himself apart through his focus on architectural and urban landscapes, in contrast to the portraiture and genre scenes favored by many of his contemporaries.

Perhaps the most compelling visual hallmark of Mahmud Khan's work is his deployment of an unconventional perspective, which yields asymmetrical and multifocal compositions. In *View to the Pavilion of Bādgir*, dated 1861, one of his earliest signed works (done when he was nearly 48 years old[27]), the artist truncates the foreground, as though constrained by a photographic lens's field of view (Fig. 1). A portion of a secondary structure, possibly

[19] Scheiwiller, "Reframing the Rise of Modernism in Iran," 17.

[20] Ibid., 19. For the relation of photography with painting in the Qajar period see Afshar, "Photography in Iran," 262; and Adle and Zoka, "Notes et Documents." Adle and Zoka claimed that henceforth the daguerreotype and photography should be considered in conjunction with the history of Iranian painting. See also Diba, "Qajar Photography."

[21] For the life and works of Muhammad Hassan Khan, see Amanat, "Eʿtemād-al-Saltana."

[22] Muhammad Hassan Khān Iʿtimād al-Saltana, *Al-Maʿāthir va al-Athār*, vol. 1, 123. See also Karim Zadeh Tabrizi, *Ahvāl va Athār*, vol. 3, 1124; and Diba, "Qajar Photography," 86.

[23] Karim Zadeh Tabrizi, *Ahvāl va Athār*, vol. 3, 1124; Floor, "Art and Artists," 145.

[24] Karim Zadeh Tabrizi, *Ahvāl va Athār*, vol.3, 1128.

[25] One needs to determine the exact number of Mahmud Khan's paintings, as there is no comprehensive study about the artist. Nevertheless, Golestan Palace possesses twenty-five works, including a stamp collage; "Works of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (Saba) in the Golestan Palace Museum." Malek Museum in Tehran also has a lacquered *qalamdan* (pen box; 1393.05.00042) and a lacquered box (1393.05.00023), both featuring landscapes and pastoral scenes. In 2020, Kamyar Faroughi published a selection of Mahmud Khan paintings in *Mahmud Khan Malek al-Sho'ara Saba Kashani*. His book does not identify the collections or inventory numbers. Moreover, the book's paintings are often cut in two, making observation difficult.

[26] He has but two oil paintings: *The Shrine of Imam Riza* (Golestan Palace, no. 1596, dated 1303/1886), and *Istinsakh* (attributed to him; Golestan Palace, no. 1578, dated 1308/1891).

[27] Shahsavarani, "Mahmud Saba," 40.

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Figure 1. Mahmud Khan, *View to the Pavilion of Bādgir*, 1281/1861. Watercolor on paper, 46.5 x 33.5 cm. Tehran, Golestan Palace, no. 8631. "Works of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (Saba) in the Golestan Palace Museum." Iranian Academy of Arts. Accessed August 3, 2025. https://www.honar.ac.ir/index.aspx?pageid=2992.

Shams al-ʿImāra (Sun Pavilion), intrudes into the composition, with meticulously aligned brickwork.[28] Within this spatial anomaly, the artist embeds his signature—diagonally inscribed within a monochrome triangular segment. This bold assertion of authorship not only draws attention but symbolically elevates the artist's presence within the work, challenging his deferential inscription as *banda-i dargāh* (servant of the court). Here, the signature is not a mere identifier but a visual intervention that asserts both individual agency and aesthetic authority.

Visual asymmetry is integral to Mahmud Khan's compositional strategy, evoking the tradition of multiple centers of attention found in Persian painting from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. The viewer's gaze is invited to oscillate between various focal points: in *View to the Pavilion of Bādgir*, the ochre triangle at the lower left, the vibrant orange-roofed pavilion with its striking blue doors in the center, and the dark blue pool at the bottom right. Through this dynamic equilibrium, Mahmud Khan harmonizes traditional Persian aesthetics with the emerging "realism" facilitated by photography.

What distinguishes Mahmud Khan from his peers is his singular ability to integrate precise architectural elements—avenues, palaces, and monuments—within expressive, often symbolically charged settings. In *Sar Dar-i Bab-i ʿĀli*, dated 1870–71, he portrays Bab-i Humāyun (Almasia), one of Tehran's prominent boulevards, lined with shops, boutiques,

[28] Mahmud Khan may have based this painting on one of Aqa Riza Akkasbashi's photographs. See Motaghedi and Namvar Yekta, *As bagh*, 155. According to Naser al-Din Shah's journal, the royal Sun Pavilion was under construction in this period and finished by 1282/1862; *Ruznāmā-i khātirāt-i Naser al-Din Shah, as 1282 ta 1283*, 84. Therefore, either the painter or the photographer may have captured the pavilion from the construction site. For more details about Shams al-ʿImāra see Motaghedi and Namvar Yekta, *As bagh*, 154–57.

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Figure 2. Mahmud Khan, *Sar Dar-i Bab-i ʿĀli*, 1288/1870–71. Watercolor on paper, 46.5 x 37 cm. Tehran, Golestan Palace, no. 8673. "Works of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (Saba) in the Golestan Palace Museum." Iranian Academy of Arts. Accessed August 3, 2025. https://www.honar.ac.ir/index.aspx?pageid=2992.

and trees,[29] with masterful linear perspective, guiding the eye toward a central pavilion framed by trees and gardens (Fig. 2). Yet this formal rigor is subverted by the upper register's stormy, swirling clouds, which inject an ominous note into an otherwise orderly urban tableau. More than a mere aesthetic choice, these clouds serve a deeper, almost prophetic function, injecting the work with a dramatic tension that transcends mere representation and verges into the realm of symbolic commentary.

To dismiss these atmospheric elements as artistic whimsy would be a critical oversight. Created in 1288/1870–71, the painting coincides with one of the most catastrophic famines in Naser al-Din Shah's reign. A brutal drought had already driven food prices to unbearable heights, plunging the populace into desperation. Then, a sudden deluge of winter snow and rain claimed countless lives, followed by devastating outbreaks of typhoid and scarlet fever in the spring. Even the nobility was not spared—among the dead was the young son of doctor Joseph Désiré Tholozan (1820–97), the shah's esteemed French physician. For the first time in his twenty-four-year rule, Nasir al-Din Shah was forced to confront a calamity of this magnitude.[30]

Against this grim historical backdrop, Mahmud Khan's painting ceases to be a mere glorification of the capital's modernization. The turbulent clouds may well serve as an ominous warning—portending the torrential rains, deadly epidemics, or the harrowing aftermath

[29] This avenue reflected the Nasiri government's implementation of modernism and modern projects, recalling the new long, commercial Parisian boulevards created under Haussman; Shahbazi, "Bāb-e Homāyūn."

[30] *Ruznāmā-i khātirāt-i Naser al-din Shah*, vol. 4, 332–34. Several studies detail the famine of 1288/1870–71. See among others Qomi and Akbar, *Qom Dar qahti buzurg 1288 qamari*. See also Ghaziha, "Qahti sal 1288 be ravayat-i Naser al-Din Shah Qajar." Other documents also describe the famine's effects, such as cannibalism in cities like Isfahan and Hamedan. "Qahti sal-i 1288 qamari", Khabar Online, Shahrivar 2, 1391. https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/237930/سالقحطی-1288-قمری. Accessed Auguste 19, 2025.

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Figure 3. Mahmud Khan, *Istintākh*, 1279/1862. Watercolor on paper, 35.5 x 28 cm. Tehran, Golestan Palace, no. 8670. "Works of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (Saba) in the Golestan Palace Museum." Iranian Academy of Arts. Accessed August 3, 2025. https://www.honar.ac.ir/index.aspx?pageid=2992.

of famine. Far from being a decorative element, they transform the painting into a charged political and social statement, forcing viewers to reckon with the instability lurking beneath the city's veneer of progress.

Mahmud Khan's work consistently transcends mere documentation; his artistry was singular in its depth and intent. Although not all of his works carry an extratextual message, each of them bears the mark of his unparalleled vision. In *Istintākh*, dated 1862—replicated in oil in 1891, possibly by his son, ʿAli Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā—two male figures, one engaged in reading, the other smoking, are rendered in spectral tones and disrupted perspective (Fig. 3). A fine nastaʿliq inscription at the bottom of the paintings offers insight into his formative influences. It names two individuals: Muhammad Qasem Khan—Mahmud Khan's maternal uncle and a prominent figure in his artistic training, particularly in calligraphy[31]—and Muhammad Hussein Khan.

The stark interplay of light and shadow, the spectral and distorted figures, and the deliberate abandonment of perspective in objects like pen boxes and scissors disrupt conventional visual coherence. The same artist who had depicted the *View to the Pavilion of Bādgir* with near-mathematical precision now consciously embraces a dreamlike ambiguity. The floating, fragmented elements with psychological depth and formal dissonance prefigures aspects of European surrealism, decades before its emergence.

Mahmud Khan stands alone in his era, a visionary whose work transcends both Iranian and European artistic traditions. His paintings are not mere reflections of the world around him but complex visual texts imbued with meaning, rich in historical context, and unparalleled in their execution. His genius lies not only in his technical mastery but in his ability to challenge, disrupt, and transform the very nature of representation. Despite being contemporaneous with prominent Iranian painters like Muzayin al-Dawla and Mussavir al-Mulk, Mahmud Khan's work exhibits an unparalleled mastery of watercolor

[31] Muhammad Hassan Khān Iʿtimād al-Saltana, *Al-Maʾāthir va al-Athār*, vol. 1, 264.

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Figure 4. Mahmud Khan, *The European Gardener in the Royal Garden*, 1279/1862. Watercolor on paper, 46.5 x 33.5 cm. Tehran, Golestan Palace, no. 8672. "Works of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (Saba) in the Golestan Palace Museum." Iranian Academy of Arts. Accessed August 3, 2025. https://www.honar.ac.ir/index.aspx?pageid=2992.

techniques, infused with a profound and layered artistic imagination. His ability to fuse Iranian artistic traditions with emerging European movements suggests a lost potential—an opportunity to bridge two artistic worlds, much like photography was doing at the time.

The European Gardener in the Royal Garden, dated 1862, encapsulates many of these themes (Fig. 4). Here, a red gate opens into an alley within the Golestan Palace's royal garden. Although the symmetrical gate suggests order, Mahmud Khan once again disrupts this balance: trees of varying thickness and foliage create a dynamic backdrop, and the European gardener—dressed in stark black and white—leans forward, subtly breaking the rigid perspective. The painting features only two human figures: one, dressed in traditional Qajari attire, stands near the focal point of the perspective, looking outward, while the other, the European gardener, cautiously steps into the garden, his posture suggestive of an intruder. Is he merely tending to the royal grounds, or is he introducing something foreign—perhaps a metaphor for Western interference? His concealed hand adds an element of intrigue, making his role ambiguous. These figures transform the painting from a simple landscape into a layered narrative, prompting the viewer to question the nature of their interaction and the symbolic presence of the European figure.

Mahmud Khan's brushwork and use of light further elevate the scene. The luminous sunlight patching the ground, the fluid strokes shaping the leaves, and the intricate yet spontaneous application of color recall the techniques later championed by the French Impressionists. Yet, remarkably, Mahmud Khan executed this work in 1862—more than a decade before the first Impressionist exhibitions in Paris in 1874.[32]

[32] Iranian scholars compare Mahmud Khan's paintings to European impressionism and expressionism (of Van Gogh, Seurat, Pissarro, and others), insisting that the Iranian artist was the first modern painter of all. See, for example, Ka'abipur, "Zendegi va athar."

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Despite his innovation and technical virtuosity, Mahmud Khan's style did not secure enduring favor in Iranian society. His contemporary, but younger and more prolific, Mirza Muhammad Ghaffari (1859–1940), visibly conformed more closely to European academic realism and was rewarded with official appointments and accolades. Nevertheless, Mahmud Khan's daring fusion of Persian and European visual paradigms marks him as a pivotal—if underrecognized—figure in the evolution of Iranian modern art. His oeuvre reflects an artistic vision at once historically grounded and uncannily prescient, bridging aesthetic traditions and signaling new possibilities in representation.

Kamal al-Mulk and Mahmud Khan: Divergent Visions of Iranian Modernity in Art

Elevated to the esteemed position of royal court painter (*naqqāshbāshi*) and later honored with the title Kamal al-Mulk (Perfection of the Kingdom), Ghaffari's artistic trajectory was firmly rooted in a staunch commitment to European classicism, even before his studies in Italy and France between 1896 and 1898.[33] Throughout his career, he systematically advanced its principles, rigorously training his students to adhere to its strict formalism—often to the detriment of traditional Persian artistic sensibilities. His early work, reminiscent in subject matter to that of Mahmud Khan, frequently focused on depictions of royal encampments and palatial architecture. Yet, despite these superficial similarities, their artistic philosophies and methodologies diverged in fundamental ways.

A rare moment of convergence between the two artists can be found in Kamal al-Mulk's rendering of the Takia Dawlat. Neither dated nor signed but attributed to the artist and possibly realized in 1888 or 1889,[34] this composition, striking in its verticality, presents the monument from its base to the rooftop, directing the viewer's gaze upward.[35] The painting captures a dynamic public spectacle populating the foreground: watching men and women, soldiers, and horses. However, the architectural structure dominates the visual field: the red metallic roof, perforated with floral-shaped apertures, starkly contrasts with the densely packed, darkly clothed figures below. In an atypical stylistic departure, Kamal al-Mulk abandons his usual meticulous detailing in favor of a more flattened, decorative mode, forgoing the structured three-dimensional realism that characterizes the majority of his works.

This stylistic shift highlights the broader aesthetic divergence between Kamal al-Mulk and Mahmud Khan. The former remained steadfastly committed to balanced lighting, precise texture, and an overarching naturalism, whereas the latter embraced a more subjective, interpretive approach to painting. This distinction is particularly evident in their respective portrayals of the Pavilion of Shahrestānak, completed within two decades of one another—Mahmud Khan's in 1881 and Kamal al-Mulk's (attribution) in 1900 (Figs. 5, 6).

Mahmud Khan's version eschews objective architectural representation in favor of a highly expressive visual language. He employs deep perspective to guide the viewer's eye through a central pool and staircase toward the pavilion, its orange roof standing in sharp chromatic contrast to the surrounding terrain. Yet compositional equilibrium is intentionally disrupted by the dramatic placement of an orange curtain on the right, destabilizing

[33] For the biography of Mirza Muhammad Ghaffāri, see Ashraf and Diba, "Kamāl al-Molk; and Diba, "Muhammad Ghaffari."

[34] The painting is now at the Golestan Palace in Tehran (no. 1537). For a reproduction see Khwansari, *Kamal-i huna*, 238. See also "Painting of the Takia Dawlat in 1271 by Kamal-al-Mulk Wikishia. Accessed August 4, 2025. https://fa.wikishia.net/view/پرونده:..نقاشی_تکیه_دولت/media/#تکیه_دولتJPG; and Panjehbashi, "Studying the Importance of the Building of Support of the Government."

[35] In his journal Naser al-Din Shah recounts one of the ceremonies of Muharram in the Takia on October 6, 1888, and mentions that his *naqqāshbashi* comes to the Takia every day to make a painting of it; *Ruznāmā-i khātirāt-i Naser al-din Shah, az Jamadi al-avval 1303 ta Zi-Hajja 1404*, 221. For more information on Takia see Forughi, "Takia Dawlat."

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Figure 5. Mahmud Khan, *The Pavilion of Shahrestānak*, 1298/1881. Watercolor on paper, 69 x 48 cm. Tehran, Golestan Palace, no. 1597. "Works of Mahmud Khan Malek al-Shuʿarā (Saba) in the Golestan Palace Museum." Iranian Academy of Arts. Accessed August 3, 2025. https://www.honar.ac.ir/index.aspx?pageid=2992.

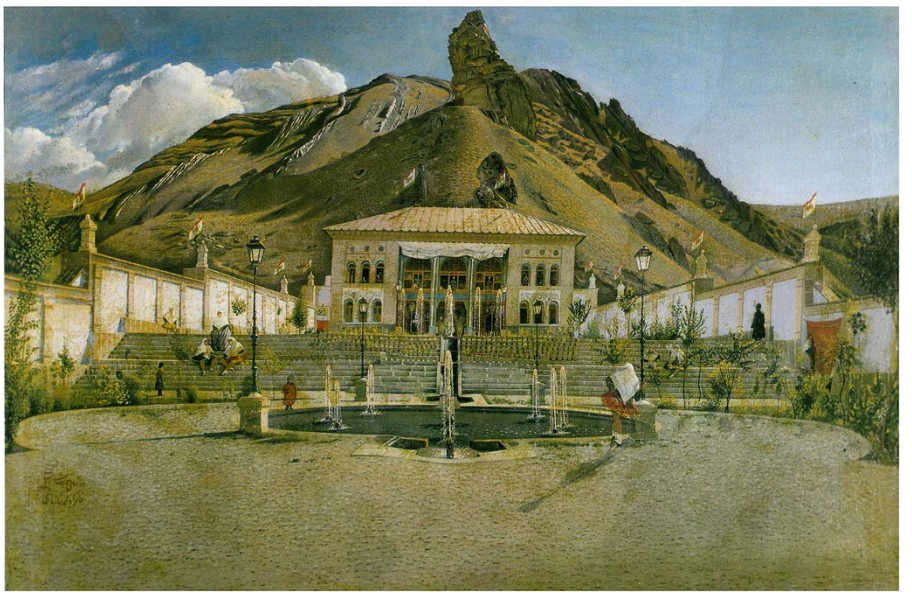

Figure 6. Kamal al-Mulk, *Shahrestānak Pavilion*, 1304/1900. Oil on canvas. Tehran, Golestan Palace. https://fa.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/پرونده:دورنمای_عمارت_شهرستانک.jpg

the scene. Above all, a looming, jagged mountain presides over the palace, with a precariously suspended rock hovering above the roof—its apocalyptic overtones further amplified by radiating semicircular lines that encircle the structure.

Kamal al-Mulk's interpretation, by contrast, is marked by compositional harmony and spatial clarity. The vibrant orange roof is omitted, although the curtain remains, subtly

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echoed in the garments of women in the courtyard. The previously menacing rock is now integrated into a distant hill, and the overall spatial arrangement of pool, garden, and pavilion is rendered with precise, naturalistic order. Where Mahmud Khan introduces visual and psychological tension, Kamal al-Mulk imposes rationality and composure.

Mahmud Khan's painting, far from a neutral depiction of a royal retreat, may be read as an allegorical response to the geopolitical crises confronting Iran in the late nineteenth century. By 1881, Iran had suffered considerable territorial losses to tsarist Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and the British Empire. Russia's conquest of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, for instance, had severed Iran's historical ties to Bukhara, Merv, and Samarkand, culminating in the Treaty of Akhal, which formally relinquished Persia's claims to Turkestan and Transoxiana. The Atrek River became the new boundary with imperial Russia, and cities like Merv, Sarakhs, and Ashgabat fell under Russian control. Simultaneously, British economic concessions tightened their grip over Iran's trade and finances.[36] Against this backdrop, the visual metaphors embedded in Mahmud Khan's *Shahrestānak*—the looming rock, disrupted perspective, and oppressive landscape—resonate as a veiled commentary on the existential threats facing the Qajar monarchy.

According to *History of Kashan*, Mahmud Khan was regarded as "the foremost among calligrapher-painters, whose paintings caused the collapse of the photography market; and in poetry, he surpassed both Arab and Persian literati."[37] Such accolades attest to his rare synthesis of literary and visual mastery. Mahmud Khan's *Divān*, however, offers limited insight into his personal political convictions, as much of the collection consists of panegyrics directed toward ruling elites. Nevertheless, certain passages—particularly those praising key statesmen—may provide glimpses into the political landscape of his time and his poetic engagement with it. In one such instance, Mahmud Khan extols the leadership of Mirza Hussein Khan Sadr-i Aʿzam (Sepahsālār), portraying him as a savior figure during a moment of several crises, exemplifying Mahmud Khan's sophisticated use of cosmic and martial imagery to dramatize the state's turmoil and its eventual stabilization under Sepahsālār's leadership:

بست پریر بود کز ایران به فتنه های عدو
شرار حادثه سر بر کشد تا کیوان
به زخم ملک نمی یافت هیچکس مرهم
به درد کار نمیدید هیچ کس درمان
چو صدر اعظم در کار آستین بر زد
بپای خصم به پیچد چون اجل دامن
گرفت از کف دشمن حصارهای بزرگ
نشسته بر سر مسند به چهره ی خندان
چنان به دشمن آشفته کرد ملک و سپاه
که بست لابه کنان بار صلح را پیمان

The desert lay in desolation, Iran beset by foreign strife,
Sedition soared—its shadow reached the rings of Saturn.
No salve was found to heal the monarch's wound,
No remedy appeared for the affliction of the realm.
Then rose the prime vizier, his sleeves rolled for action,
He pursued the foe as if death itself were near.
From the enemy's grasp he wrested strongholds,

[36] Nasiri Moghaddam, "Iran and Its Eastern Regions, 468–70.
[37] Cited in Azhand, "Ham kinari," 65.

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Seated once more upon the throne, a smile upon his lips.
With such force he stirred the king and his armies,
That he shut the gates of war—and forged a pact of peace.[38]

Conversely, Kamal al-Mulk's oeuvre generally avoids overt political content. His substantial body of work—comprising forty-four portraits, thirty-seven landscapes, eighteen genre scenes, and six architectural studies[39]—reflects a consistent commitment to aesthetic order and naturalistic representation. His paintings of urban gardens, royal outings, and domestic scenes are executed with exacting precision, yet remain ideologically neutral. However, his refusal to paint a portrait of Muhammad ʿAli Shah (r. 1907–9), despite financial strain and courtly pressure, signals a quiet resistance. Moreover, his later portrait of ʿAliqoli Khan Bakhtiari Sardār Asʿad, a prominent leader of the Constitutional Revolution, suggests that Kamal al-Mulk was not entirely disengaged from Iran's shifting political landscape.[40]

His stylistic fidelity to nature is exemplified in *Dushan Tappa Street*, painted in 1899 after his return from Europe (Fig. 7). The composition is governed by a strict one-point perspective: a wooden bridge spans a waterway, symmetrically flanked by mirrored trees and benches. A servant in a dark claret tunic appears on the right, his subdued presence blending into the shadows so as not to disrupt the scene's equilibrium. The garden layout evokes the Persian Chahār Bāgh (four gardens), but rendered through the lens of European academic precision.

This meticulous naturalism starkly contrasts with Mahmud Khan's *European Gardener*. Although both works feature a central path, their atmospheres diverge sharply. Mahmud Khan employs bold reds in the foreground and accentuates asymmetry through irregular vegetation, creating a dynamic and emotionally charged visual field. Kamal al-Mulk, by contrast, avoids such visual drama, favoring compositional restraint.

In his memoirs published in Qasem Ghani's *Yāddāsht hā*, Kamal al-Mulk professed allegiance to naturalism, declaring early admiration for Raphael and later a deeper affinity for Rembrandt:

I was initially interested in Naturalism; in my youth, I was enchanted by Raphael, but as I gained experience, I came to admire Rembrandt. I could even say that, in this craft, my idol is Rembrandt... . Even though Raphael is a great Master, I admire Rembrandt the most.[41]

Yet he also admitted to faithfully emulating Italian masters—"Raphael and the others, not Rembrandt"[42]—in both style and color. His legacy, therefore, is not one of cross-cultural synthesis but rather one of full assimilation: a Persian artist wholly devoted to mastering the European academic tradition.

The embrace of European artistic paradigms was viewed by many intellectuals and *rawshanfikrān* (intelligentsia) as essential for revitalizing Iranian culture at the close of the nineteenth century. Among them was Karim Taher Zadeh Behzad (1888–1963), an architect and theorist who advocated for the integration of European aesthetics with Iranian traditions. Karim and his brother, Hussein Taher Zadeh Behzad (1887–1962), both exiled constitutionalists in Istanbul, promoted a Renaissance-inspired revival that honored classical Persian forms. In his *Sarāmadān-i Hunar* (1923), the first Persian-language survey of art history, Karim elevated figures such as Mani (the legendary pre-Islamic Iranian prophet-painter, who embodied the pinnacle of Persian artistry in both design and color), Raphael

[38] *Divān Mahmud Khan*, 100. ChatGPT was utilized for a more poetic translation of the passage.
[39] Ashraf and Diba, "Kamāl al-Molk."
[40] Ibid.
[41] *Yāddāsht hā*, vol. 8, 42; see also Karim Zadeh Tabrizi, *Ahvāl va Athār*, vol. 3, 1043.
[42] *Yāddāsht hā*, vol. 8, 42; Karim Zadeh Tabrizi, *Ahvāl va Athār,* vol. 3, 1043. Ashraf and Diba argue, however, that he must be compared with French painters of modern life, such as Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, and Henri Fantin-Latour. See Ashraf and Diba, "Kamāl al-Molk."

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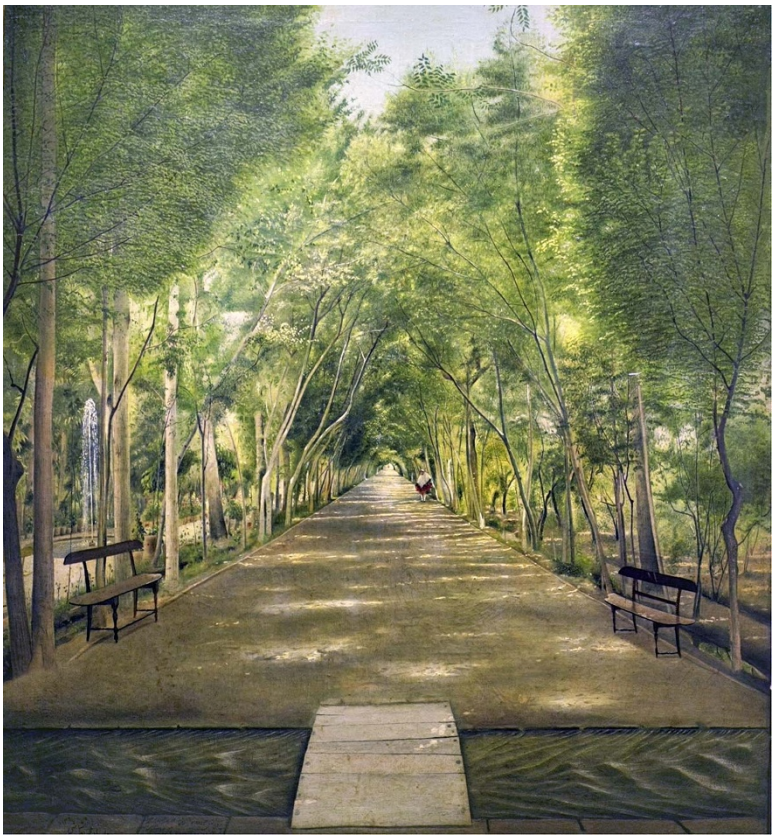

Figure 7. Kamal al-Molk, *Doshan Tappeh Street*, 1278/1899. Oil on canvas, 106 x137 cm. Tehran, Golestan Palace. https://fr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:DushanTappe.jpg

(1483–1520, Italy), and Kamal al-Din Behzad (Persian master active in late fifteenth-century Herat),[43] as foundational to Iranian artistic pedagogy.

A 1901 biography published in the journal *Sherāfat* also extolled Kamal al-Mulk as the "Second Raphael," emphasizing his masterful copies of European works and the acclaim he received in European circles:

When Kamal al-Mulk went to Europe, he accomplished so much that his copies of Louvre Museum masterpieces equaled those of past and present European masters. He became the pride of the nation, and European journals published accounts of his advancements... . Henceforth, Kamal al-Mulk is considered the most accomplished artist in Asia, the one who continued the manner of Mani; he is the second Raphael in Oriental lands.[44]

Curiously, however, Taher Zadeh Behzad made no mention of Kamal al-Mulk in *Sarāmadān-i Hunar*, nor of the Academy of Fine Arts (Madresa-i Sanāyeʿ-i Mustazrafa) founded by the artist in 1911. This school became the principal site for institutionalizing European classicism in Iran, training a generation of artists in European realist conventions.[45] Yet Taher Zadeh Behzad critiqued this very model, warning that Iran's

[43] Taher Zadeh Behzad, *Sarāmadān-i Hunar*; about Behzad and Raphael, 5–33; about Mani, 52–80.
[44] Quoted in Karim Zadeh Tabrizi, *Ahvāl va Athār*, vol. 3, 1036–37.
[45] Diba, "Formation," 46.

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artistic "spirit" was distinct from that of other nations and that "imitation" of European forms would dilute Iran's distinct artistic identity; he further argued that the true golden age of Iranian art had occurred between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.[46] As a contemporary of Kamal al-Mulk, he was deeply concerned about the fading presence of Persian aesthetics in Iranian art and argued that Iranians needed to reconnect with their artistic and historical roots.[47]

Kamal al-Mulk's works and vision in this way received both acclaim and critique. Although lauded for his technical virtuosity, he also was reproached for his lack of engagement with Persian artistic heritage. Similarly, Mahmud Khan—an artist whose work did not comfortably conform either to the aesthetic paradigms of the European Renaissance or to the conventions of traditional Persian painting—found himself excluded from the narrative of Persian artistic revival promoted by the Taher Zadeh Behzad brothers and the Madresa-i Hunarhā-i Qadimi (School of Ancient Fine Arts), or the Hunaristān-i ʿĀli Hunarha-i Irani (High School of Persian Arts) where Hussein became director in 1931—at its establishment—serving in that capacity until 1944.[48]

The ascendancy of the Taher Zadeh brothers was deeply intertwined with the political and cultural agenda of the Pahlavi regime (1925–79). An essential aspect to consider is that both brothers were active opponents of the Qajar activists. This trend of anti-Qajar activism persisted in subsequent developments under Reza Shah (r. 1925–41), the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, who also enthusiastically embraced a vision of modernity rooted in a strategic revalorization of Iran's ancient past. This state-sponsored cultural project was supported by a cohort of European Orientalists, archaeologists, and art historians, among whom Arthur Upham Pope (1881–1969) emerged as a key interlocutor. Beginning with his impassioned lecture before Reza Shah and his inner circle in April 1925,[49] Pope helped orchestrate a series of exhibitions and scholarly events aimed at promoting Iran's artistic heritage both domestically and internationally. In this context, Pope played a crucial mediating role in shaping the discourse that led to the establishment of institutions like the Hunaristān and in emphasizing the relevance of Iran's pre-Islamic and classical Islamic art forms.[50]

One of the most emblematic manifestations of this cultural strategy was the 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art held at Burlington House in London, sponsored by both Reza Shah and British monarch George V (r. 1910–36). The exhibition served as a key site for the performance of Iran's modern identity through its ancient cultural patrimony, a gesture that simultaneously sought to repudiate the Qajar legacy. Reza Shah, in a conscious effort to distance his regime from the Qajar dynasty he had overthrown, not only censored public imagery of Qajar rulers but also sought to erase their memory from the cultural landscape.[51]

Yet, amid this carefully curated narrative of national regeneration, Mahmud Khan's *Istintākh* seems to be the only modern oil painting submitted by the Persian Royal Court in the "Modern Oil Painting, 19th Century" category.[52] Positioned at the end of the Persian painting section, directly following two Qajar oil paintings from the Amery collection, Mahmud Khan's inclusion complicates the historiographical tendency to present Kamal

[46] Taher Zadeh Behzad, *Sarāmadān-i Hunar*, 1–3. This concern was echoed by Friedrich Sarre (1865–1945), director of the Islamic Department of the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum, who wrote in the preface to *Sarāmadān-i Hunar*: "The rare masterpieces created by Iranians after the reign of Shah ʿAbbās [1588–1629] were merely the result of European influence."

[47] Taher Zadeh Behzad, *Sarāmadān-i Hunar*, 3.

[48] Delzendeh, *Tahavulat*, 190. Ahmadi, *L'enseignement*, 174–75; Mirzai Mehr, *Hussein Taher Zadeh Behzad*, 38–39.

[49] Rizvi, "Art History and the Nation," 47; Delzendeh, *Tahavulat*, 167.

[50] Rizvi, "Art History and the Nation," 47; Delzendeh, *Tahavulat*, 187.

[51] Scheiwiller, "Reframing the Rise of Modernism in Iran," 17.

[52] *Persian Art: An Illustrated Souvenir*, 51. See also "1931—Illustrated Souvenir of the Exhibition of Persian Art."

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al-Mulk as the singular progenitor of modern Iranian art—especially given Kamal al-Mulk's complete absence from this exhibition.

By this period, Kamal al-Mulk had already retired from his educational endeavors. In the 1920s, as part of broader administrative reforms, the Ministry of Education introduced regulations that conflicted with Kamal al-Mulk's independent ethos. His unwillingness to comply ultimately led to his resignation in 1927.[53] This period not only marked the ascendance of Reza Khan Sardār Sepah (later Reza Shah) but also witnessed the establishment of the School of Ancient Arts under the direction of Hussein Taher Zadeh Behzad. Notably, this institution was located in the same garden as the former school of Kamal al-Mulk, a symbolic overlap that may have been perceived as both a spatial and ideological intrusion. Such proximity could have incited resistance from Kamal al-Mulk's disciples, who may have regarded the new school as a challenge to their established aesthetic and pedagogical authority.[54] In his memoirs, Hussein Taher Zadeh Behzad recounts the significant hostility he faced from followers of Kamal al-Mulk, even suggesting that he was threatened with death.[55] Of particular interest is his melancholic depiction of Kamal al-Mulk's school, where, the master and his prominent disciple Abul-Hassan Sediqi (1894–1995) reclaimed several artworks from the institution.[56] In response to these tensions and in light of what he perceived as a decline in artistic vitality, Hussein resolved to revitalize the legacy of Persian art and history through a new institutional vision. The omission of Kamal al-Mulk from both the *Saramadān-i Hunar* project and the 1931 exhibition should perhaps be understood within this context of institutional rivalry and shifting cultural paradigms.

Kishwar Rizvi is among scholars who have suggested broader geopolitical and ideological factors behind the selective representation of artists at the 1931 exhibition;[57] viewed through an Orientalist-colonialist lens, the exhibition reinforced European frameworks of cultural hierarchy and positioned Iran as an object of aesthetic and archaeological fascination. From this perspective, the absence of contemporary Iranian artists may have been less an oversight than a deliberate strategy to present Iran as a land of ancient glory rather than modern innovation.

And yet, Mahmud Khan's presence in this curated showcase invites further inquiry: Why was he included when others—including Kamal al-Mulk—were excluded? Would his works have been considered revivalist, because, as Rizvi highlighted, "the chosen artworks exclude any form of art that was not categorically revivalist"?[58] If Pope held reservations about modern European art,[59] did he perhaps see in Mahmud Khan's work as a form of modernism that reconciled local sensibilities with international aesthetic developments?

Indeed, although Kamal al-Mulk is today venerated as a foundational figure of Iranian modern art, it may be that Mahmud Khan's interpretive, expressive approach was more aligned with the evolving discourses of modernism in the 1930s. Kamal al-Mulk's adherence to European classicism, once perceived as progressive, may have appeared increasingly conservative within the shifting cultural landscape of Reza Shah's Iran. If Mahmud Khan was recognized at this time as an innovator, then his subsequent marginalization within art historical narratives demands more analysis.

As nationalism intensified and the search for emblematic figures of Iranian modernity accelerated, Kamal al-Mulk emerged as the dominant symbol, whereas artists like Mahmud

[53] Mirzai Mehr, *Hussein Taher Zadeh Behzad*, 46–47; Ashraf and Diba, "Kamāl al-Molk."
[54] Delzendeh, *Tahavulat*, 191.
[55] Mirzai Mehr, *Hussein Taher Zadeh Behzad*, 39.
[56] Ibid., 38.
[57] Rizvi, "Art History and the Nation," 52–54. See also Wood, "Great Symphony."
[58] Rizvi, "Art History and the Nation," 52.
[59] Wood, "Great Symphony," 118.

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Khan—who resisted easy classification—were gradually effaced from the official record. This historiographical erasure calls for a critical reassessment. Future scholarship would do well to revisit Mahmud Khan's contributions and reconsider his place within the broader trajectory of Iranian modernism.

Conclusion

Iran's engagement with European artistic traditions dates back to the Safavid period, and intensifies during the Qajar era. Although the impact of European styles in Iranian painting between 1736 and 1786 remains an underexplored field—largely due to the political instability of the time—it is evident that European artistic techniques did not fully integrate with Iranian art until Kamal al-Mulk's return from Europe in the late Qajar period. His impact was transformative, institutionalizing European classical conventions in a way that would shape Iranian art for decades.

Yet, the nineteenth century was not merely a period of European imitation; it was a time of dynamic artistic evolution, defined by a tension between indigenous traditions and foreign influences. Mahmud Khan and Kamal al-Mulk embody two opposing responses to this transformation. Their contrasting legacies highlight not only the shifting paradigms of Qajar art but also the adaptability and resilience of Persian artistic identity amid rapid modernization.

Mahmud Khan's work represents a synthesis of Iranian and European elements—one that does not fit neatly into any single artistic movement. Unlike the Occidentalism of the late Safavid period, which reflected Iran's fascination with Western imagery, Mahmud Khan's art does not mimic European aesthetics. Instead, his paintings exhibit a distinct visual language, one that blends Iranian artistic principles with an experimental approach that anticipates elements of European modern arts decades before these movements took form in Europe. His paintings transcend mere aestheticism, serving as complex interpretations of social events and political climates.

Despite his originality, Mahmud Khan was marginalized in favor of Kamal al-Mulk, whose style satisfied a deep-seated desire in Qajar society for verisimilitude. Realism—rather than interpretive or symbolic imagery—was what Iranian audiences longed for. This preference can be traced back to the 1860s, when European observers like Julien Comte de Rochechouart (1816–82), the French legate in Tehran, dismissed Persian painting as primitive and incapable of achieving true perspective or depth. His writings perpetuated a colonialist view that Iranian artists could only produce "flat and absurd compositions" and that any attempt at European-style painting was "detestable."[60] Such opinions, widely echoed at the time, created an inferiority complex that Iranian painters sought to overcome.[61]

Kamal al-Mulk's paintings provided the answer. His rigorous application of European academic techniques conformed to the artistic aspirations of both Iranian elites and European observers, who sought a more sophisticated form of Persian art. He perfected the European academic model, refining proportion, lighting, and texture to an unprecedented degree. However, this pursuit of realism came at a cost. Unlike earlier Iranian painters who selectively incorporated European elements while preserving Persian artistic traditions, Kamal al-Mulk fully abandoned indigenous aesthetics in favor of European classicism. His portraits and landscapes sought to depict reality as closely as possible, avoiding the symbolic, fantastic, or introspective elements that characterized Mahmud Khan's work.

[60] De Rochechouart, *Souvenir d'un voyage en Perse*, cited in Scheiwiller, "Reframing the Rise of Modernism in Iran," 15.

[61] Scheiwiller, "Reframing the Rise of Modernism in Iran," 15–16.

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Whereas Mahmud Khan embraced ambiguity and expressive distortion, Kamal al-Mulk pursued clarity and order.

Mahmud Khan may emerge as the more intellectually engaged and artistically daring figure. He used his brush to engage in social and political discourse, embedding complex narratives into his compositions. His legacy, therefore, is not one of mere technical brilliance but of profound artistic insight—an artist who did not simply document history but actively interpreted it.

Kamal al-Mulk's legacy set the stage for future generations of Iranian painters, but it also raised fundamental questions about national artistic identity. Should Iranian artists follow his path and fully embrace European aesthetics? Or should they seek a renewed Persian visual language that integrates, rather than replaces, indigenous traditions? Kamal al-Mulk not only transformed Iranian painting but also ignited a lasting discourse on the balance between tradition and modernity—one that continues to shape Iranian art to this day.

If Mahmud Khan's contributions were sidelined in favor of this narrative, it is time to reconsider his place in history. His work, rich with layered meanings and innovative artistic approaches, deserves a more prominent place in discussions of Iranian modern art. Future scholarship must strive to reassess his legacy, acknowledging his role as an artist who not only bridged two artistic worlds but also challenged the assumptions that governed Persian painting in his time.

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