



A Persian Chronology

2000–1800 B.C.

Beginning of Aryan (Iranian) migration from plains of southern Russia into Near East.

c. 2000–550 B.C.

Assyria, Media, Babylonia and Lydia are dominant powers in Near East.

628 B.C.

Birth of Zoroaster, religious prophet.

c. 575 B.C.

Birth of Cyrus the Great.

559 B.C.

Cyrus assumes throne of Anshan (western Persia) and begins subjugation of all Persia.

547 B.C.

Cyrus defeats King Croesus of Lydia.

539 B.C.

Babylonia falls to Cyrus; release of Israelite captives.

530–525 B.C.

Death of Cyrus and accession of Cambyses II.

522–521 B.C.

Darius assumes throne amid turmoil throughout empire.

c. 520 B.C.

Introduction of standardized imperial coinage; reorganization and extension of Royal Road system.

513–512 B.C.

First Asian invasion of Europe; Persians conquer Thrace and Macedonia.

490 B.C.

Battle of Marathon; Greeks defeat Persians.

486 B.C.

Coronation of Xerxes, son of Darius.

480–479 B.C.

Persians defeated by Greeks in battles at Thermopylae, Salamis, Plataea and Mycale; era of Persian expansion ended.

465–330 B.C.

Reigns of Artaxerxes I to Darius III; decline of Persian vigor and influence; economic, military and political decay.

336 B.C.

Rise to power of Alexander the Great of Macedonia.

330 B.C.

Alexander destroys Persian Empire; Persepolis burned.

301 B.C.

Seleucus, one of ablest Macedonian commanders, founds Seleucid Dynasty by gaining control of Iran, Mesopotamia, northern Syria and much of Asia Minor.

c. 171 B.C.

Mithridates I, King of Parthians, establishes an empire reaching from Babylonia to Bactria.

224 A.D.

Ardashir I defeats Parthians and founds **Sasanian Empire**.

260 A.D.

Shapur I, Ardashir's son, captures Roman **emperor Valerian** at Battle of Edessa.

642 A.D.

Fall of Sasanian Empire after defeat by Arabs at Nihavend.

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF PERSIAN HISTORY

Art on the Persian plateau has had a longer and more continuous life than in any other region. Prehistoric pottery and the correlative arts were well developed there by 4,000 B.C. The plateau and the adjoining regions on the northwest were the first to evolve a complex communal life and most of the basic techniques of civilization. In all essential respects civilization in this region preceded that of Egypt by at least five centuries, that of India by more than a thousand years, of China by two thousand. The first towns in Mesopotamia (such as Tepe Gawra) were derived from the nearby mountains of Iran.

The Chalcolithic period when some cast-copper was used but stone tools still predominated, and beautiful painted pottery, fine weaving, and gold work were produced, gave way to the Bronze Age, which by 2700 B.C. was beginning to set in motion vitalizing currents throughout Western Asia. With this disseminated technical advance the general quality of living was carried to notably higher levels, marked by increased capacity and more evolved achievements.

Though most of the population of Iran still lived in farming villages, in small houses built of tamped earth (pise), technical improvements and craft specialization were proceeding together. The beads, which were the principal personal adornment, were made by professionals in their own shops. Stone tools were "manufactured" instead of being turned out incidentally at home by amateurs. Pottery, now shaped on the wheel, albeit the slow hand-turned "tournette," and fired in a closed kiln with a draft-system, must also have been chiefly in the hands of specialists, as the difficult and secret metallurgical processes certainly were; and the output of such artisans was varied, competent, and at the best both elegant and beautiful.

Meanwhile, the older efforts at understanding the universes were being revised and supplemented. The original vague notion of a generalized Power, which with the introduction of agriculture had been divided into two aspects -- celestial (connected with weather), and terrestrial (chiefly providing fertility)—was taking form as a pantheon of clearly characterized gods and goddesses, with their attributes adapted from the old Power symbols. This provided a vocabulary of ornament and a guide, through meaning, in the composition of designs.

About 1200 B.C. (and thereafter) iron began to take the place of bronze for weapons, tools, and to some extent for ornaments. Substantial brick buildings with comfortable living

provisions were now available for the wealthier classes, sometimes elevated on great platforms, and the appurtenances of life were increasingly luxurious.

The middle of the sixth century B.C. saw the emergence of the Achaemenid dynasty (550-330 B.C.) founded by Cyrus the Great. Under him and his successor, Darius, one of the greatest monarchs that ever ruled, Iran, animated by Zoroastrianism, one of the noblest of religions, established the first world empire, conquering all the lands from the Indus to the Nile and the Aegean, and threatened Greece.

Alexander conquered Persia (330 B.C.) and thought to combine the complementary capacities of these two gifted peoples into a more inclusive and enduring world empire, a project frustrated by his early death at the age of thirty-three.

His successors, the Seleucids (330-248 B.C.), generals all, without his vision or political capacity, maintained a confused and desultory reign until they were displaced by the Parthians, a partly nomadic people of Iranian stock who came from the northeast. The Parthians engaged Rome in a series of bloody wars, disastrously defeating Crassus and Marc Antony in famous battles. Not much of the art of the period has survived and too little is known of the epoch itself. Except in coinage, which is superb, Greek styles of inferior quality dominated at least at the court.

A completely native dynasty (the Sasanian, 224-650 A.D.) initiated a great renaissance, consciously based on the national religion and national tradition. A magnificent burst of confident energy, the product of a sense of greatness and destiny born of ancient pride and a conviction of the validity and superiority of their religion, brought all Western Asia again under the rule of Iran. Exhausting wars with Byzantium, which was equally proud and equally sure of divine appointment to rule, finally impaired the vitality of a great epoch that influenced and measurably reinvigorated the art of the world. It was an heroic art of immense power, of grandeur of style and consequent influence from China to Romanesque Europe.

Like the Achaemenid dynasty it was weakened by luxury and pride and an over-rigid social, political, and religious hierarchy, from which the original inspiration that alone gave it life and virtue had departed. Sasanian Persia collapsed before the furious onslaught of the virile Arabs (637 A.D.), animated by burning zeal and unlimited self-confidence. By 650 Islam was dominant and the ruling classes of Iran deposed or confined to their original feudalism, the Zoroastrian priesthood scattered.

Early Islam (630-1037), now dominant from China to Gibraltar, meant ultimately a new dispensation—new values, new loyalties, decisively new opportunities. Artistically the confusing transition period was wholly Iranian, for the Arabs came out of an artistic vacuum, had no styles to impose, and had to call into the service of their increasing wealth and power the artists and artisans of the regions they conquered.

New styles developed with greater emphasis on ornament, but there was no real discontinuity; the old themes and motives were still celebrated with gradual enrichment and new inventions. The opulent caliphate at Baghdad overlapped a succession of local dynasties: Tahirids (820-902), Samanids (819-999), the Buwahids (864-1029), competed with one another for poets, scholars, artists of all kinds, steadily raising and diffusing cultural standards. It was an era of genuinely great men, of whom we in the West are painfully ignorant.

A remarkable line of kings, the Seljuqs (1037-1194), opened up one of the greatest periods in Iranian history. They were a semi-nomadic people of Turko-Iranian stock, already deeply imbued with Iranian culture. Devout Mohammedans, they combined genuine piety and a high sense of responsibility with nobility of character, strength of will, and magnificent organizing capacity that soon gave them most of Western Asia. Their character was reflected in the art of which they were such generous and discriminating patrons.

The era was degenerating; civil wars and religious strife weakened a regime that had already surrendered to luxury and indolence too much of the greatness of character that marked it for more than a century, when there suddenly burst over the doomed land a hurricane of horror. The Mongol invasions carried destruction and cruelty through the land on an unprecedented scale. Whole provinces were obliterated, cities reduced to rubble, scholars and poets exterminated. Libraries, many surpassing in wealth the total resources of contemporary Europe, were reduced to ashes. Not only Iran's beautiful gardens, but much of her productive land were sown to salt. For more than forty years this horror strode the land. Yet art did not die. Iran miraculously held to her great cultural traditions and the superiority of her life began to tame the ferocity of these Eastern barbarians, gluttons for destruction, but with innate capacities. By the end of the century they had been converted to Mohammadanism, and were enthusiastic and intelligent devotees of Iranian culture. The beginning of the fourteenth century saw developments in architecture which produced some of the noblest structures extant. Ornament and the arts carried to new heights.

After the bloody incursion of Tamerlane (1385), the arts of Iran again tamed Central Asiatic brutality. Among his successors were some of the most cultivated kings that ever ruled, and the fifteenth century was one of the best were refreshed and more brilliant

period in a long series. Again architecture was clothed in sumptuous color such as has never been surpassed, and the arts of the book attained supreme perfection.

With the coming of the Safavids (1501-1734), the last of the great artistic phases, the inexhaustible vitality of the Iranian artistic tradition was once more demonstrated. Shah Ismael (1501-1524), Shah Tahmasp (1524 -1576), and Shah Abbas I (1589-1627) presided over courts in which artists ranked with ambassadors, one more epoch in which art was held the attribute of kings and the most worthy expression of the state's power.

Misfortunes thereafter afflicted Persia. A series of weak and incompetent rulers, a cruel and bloody invasion from Afghanistan (1722), a temporarily successful but violent and exhausting imperialistic revival under Nadir Shah (1729-1747), left the country in no condition to adjust successfully to a developing Europe with its industrial productivity and new lines of commerce which by-passed Iran, so that she was condemned to frustration and perilously declining power under the uncouth Kajars in the nineteenth century.

But the significant feature of Iranian history is its power of survival and revival. She has so often responded to catastrophe and depression with a new and creative burst of vigor that her ability to recover has become something of an historical mystery. The restoration of the country under Riza Shah Pahlavi (1925-42) demonstrated that the nation still had reservoirs of energy and adaptability.

Despite the crippling loss of intelligent patronage of the arts for nearly two centuries, the disintegration of their essential economic support, the temporary weakening of the national tradition, the imposition through the prestige of European power of tasteless styles of the industrial era, the corruption of native taste incidental to poverty and the demoralization of standards in education, religion, and social life, despite all this the artistic spirit of Iran is not dead. There are still draftsmen of superb capacity. Work in some of the ceramic techniques is as good as ever, and the best of the contemporary carpets, as yet not seen in the West, in color and weaving-skill hold their own with their famous prototypes. A revival of design, the foundation and soul of Iranian art, awaits discipline and a deepening of the national life, the slowly returning prestige of the artist, and the inspiration of a serious and informed clientele, indispensable to high achievement.

PRINCIPAL PERIODS IN PERSIAN HISTORY

B.C. 5000-3500	Prehistoric
3500-2500 <i>circa</i>	Chalcolithic
2500-1500	Bronze Age
1500-550 <i>circa</i>	Iron Age
550-330	Achaemenid
330-A.D. 224	Seleucid and Parthian
A.D. 224-650	Sasanian
650-1037	Early Islamic
1037-1194	Seljuq
1220-1385	Mongols and successors
1385-1501	Tamerlane and successors
1501-1734	Safavid Dynasty
1799-1925	Kajar Dynasty
1925-1979	Pahlavi Dynasty

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PERSIAN ART

In western education, Persia has, since the days of Xenophon, been a blank page, or at most, a footnote to the history of ancient Greece. Yet various scholars now think that the Iranian plateau was probably the cradle, first of the human race and later of civilization itself. Independent considerations have led Sir Arthur Keith, Dr. Henry Field, and Professor Ellsworth Hunigton, working separately, to the belief that man emerged as *homo sapiens* in the land of the Persians. That this land and the adjoining regions in the northwest produced the first civilized communities now seems to many scholars practically certain; and it is increasingly clear that from this center (especially the Van-Urumiya area in early prehistoric times) certain basic religious concepts with their appropriate ritual and iconography radiated throughout most of Asia and southeastern Europe, a movement that stated and sanctified elemental decorative themes which occupied the designers of all subsequent periods.

For sixty known centuries the Iranian plateau has contributed ideas and techniques which have helped to sustain and humanize mankind. Writing, numbers, the arts of agriculture and of working metals, the sciences of astronomy and mathematics, the

beginnings of religious and philosophical thinking— these all come from the Near East, and the fountain head of much of Near Eastern culture was on the Iranian plateau.

The three Wise Men from the East who brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh at the birth of Jesus were probably Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Their gifts symbolized fundamental ideas which were contributed by their religion to Christianity - notably the concepts of the Evil One as a positive force, the notion of the angels, of paradise, of the Last Judgment, of the resurrection of the dead, and of the ultimate victory of good over evil.

Two other influential religions came out of Persia: Mithraism, which competed not unsuccessfully with Christianity for the first three centuries of our era; and Manichaeism, of which St. Augustine was a devotee before he was converted to Christianity. Buddhism was partially Iranized as it passed through the Far East on its mission of enlightenment. No important religion would now be what it is were the Persian contributions to be taken from it.

What Iran gave to Muhammadanism as a religion is dwarfed by what she contributed to Islamic institutions and culture. The Arab followers of the Prophet conquered Persia by the sword in the middle of the seventh century A.D. As they were nomads practicing no arts of their own unless their magnificent language be accounted an art, Persian art and culture in turn conquered them and through them most of Islam, from Spain to India. While Europe slumbered in the Dark Ages, Islamic science and art illuminated half the world, and although other regions shared in the achievement, the principal source of this light was Persia.

Throughout her long and eventful history, crowded with vicissitudes, with triumphs and disasters, with achievement, frustration, depression, and again reviving creativeness, art was Persia's greatest resource, her most characteristic and permanent contribution.

What are its essential qualities? First of all, it is germane to life—one with the texture of human experience illuminating the humble and the commonplace, exalting the royal and the divine. Through all the early period it discerns the powers of heaven and by its own means essays to communicate with them, to invoke their help to placate, and to honor them. From early times although art was natural and taken for granted, yet the Persian consciously placed a high value on beauty. A widespread and expert appreciation sustained excellence through many centuries. Royal patronage, enthusiastic and generous was never lacking; beauty was always and in all things accorded high status. By Sufi poets it was accounted a symbol and earnest of the Divine: "God hath planted Beauty in our midst like a flag in the city," wrote Shabastari in the thirteenth century, a sentiment which was the implicit creed of many artists.

One with life, the arts were also united one with another. The compartmentalism of our day would have been quite mysterious to the Persian artist. Craft borrowed from craft. Designer and poet had common themes and exchanged mutual inspiration. They were engaged on a common task which absorbed their uttermost, with surprisingly little thought of individual pride or glory. Scarcely one in a hundred of important Persian works of art is signed. It was an anonymous art and thereby gained in sincerity, in devotion, in authority.

It is primarily an art of decoration. It began in devout symbolism, and symbolism some philosophers regard as the primary and characteristic act of the mind. It interprets reality in new form which clarifies and controls it. Symbolism is a method of synthesis and transformation, the beginning of intellectual and artistic life. Symbolism presents its object in abstract but yet emotional forms, and when symbolism is sanctified by custom and religion, when its signs and the related rituals are understood, it can evoke the deepest response. The solemn and ritual character of early Iranian art is at the foundation of its magnificent achievement in pure decoration. Decoration, the main resource and goal of Iranian art, is not merely a delight to the eye or an entertainment for the mind, but it has a far deeper meaning. The first obscure but intense insights were formulated in terms of ornament, bringing man into closer contact with his difficult and dangerous world. Such

symbolic ornament became a vehicle of aspiration, a source of confidence and inner power. All this became decoration of high quality, which had its origin in compelling experience. Because it has been constantly refined and enlarged by this very service, it can speak directly to the heart of man.

For these symbolic forms in order to impress the mind and stir the soul had to adapt themselves to the elemental modes of human understanding. They had to discover a language of the emotions, not merely to devise recognizable images of the objects and ideas which were so vital to all, but to express them in patterns which of themselves evoked the appropriate responses. This was undoubtedly a slow and largely unselfconscious process, but the earliest artists, the primitive pottery-painters, formulated conventions of great clarity and energy which laid a basis of design and this, to the imaginative minds of the Persians, opened up infinite possibilities of expansion and elaboration, a process which they carried on through thousands of years. Tenacious of the old, guarding it with circumspection and fidelity, they continued to invent and perfect; and if this art sank with slackening currents of national vitality, its forms helped to conserve the ancient spirit, to provide a basis for a renaissance.

It is no accident that art in Persia had a close dependence upon poetry, as well as on religious and philosophical thinking. The Persians are the most poetic of all peoples, as a thousand years of their literature testify. For a millennium, poetry has been a general mode of expression in Persia, and the ability to write acceptable verse has been assumed for all and sundry.

For this type of art we have no wholly adequate term. "Ornament" and "decoration" both imply an ancillary status, something subservient to the main reality and value. We shall not be far wrong if we designate Persian art as an art of pure form - an art to be approached like music or architecture. Indeed, the more serious of the decorative arts have been frequently referred to as "visible music," for they are concerned with the quality of the elements and their combination into significant and expressive entities, into designs which have validity and emotional force, and do not so much represent objects as by their own intrinsic character awaken life giving, joyous responses. Such art in the hands of masters can, like music, stir many deep and intense feelings. Indeed the greatest examples speak with an authority which representation can never command, seeming to reach the very core of our personality, and not infrequently calling forth sheer rapture which can rise to ecstasy, or can command a mood of serene

The notion that the primary purpose of art is representation -- a tacit assumption in the nineteenth century -- has of late years been challenged with an impatience amounting to violence. The contrary and sound view that art is "significant form" has, however, been pressed with extravagance, and theoretical ignorance, with arguments riddled with fallacies, which have encouraged charlatanism amounting to delirium that has its roots in characteristic maladies of the age.

But the protest was necessary. That art must be more than representation if it is to be worthy of respect that pure form is a primal necessity of all beauty, and that the exploration of its possibilities is one of the chief concerns of the artist, this is now taken for granted in the West. But it has always been a commonplace in Asia. Pure form, however, is not apprehended by argument, nor is capacity acquired by wishing for or assuming it. Depth of experience, sincerity of feeling, a sense of wholeness and integrity, of oneness with one's kind, wide sympathies, an imagination schooled in a discipline as severe as that required by music or mathematics, the sustaining power of rich tradition, the habit of seeing through appearances to their source and meaning, conscientious craftsmanship which develops the appropriate means for the embodiment of these insights - these are the qualities required if an art of design or pure form is to be adequate to its own character and possibilities. These are the qualities which sustained the art of Persia in all media and through many centuries.

Persian art matured slowly and developed its own specific canons, which, tested by time, dominated through long epochs. Lucidity is one of these ideals. The Great God, Ahuramazda, was a god of light, and Persian taste was averse not merely to the clumsy and

inept, but also to the obscure and confused. It was eminently reasonable. Even its fantasies, whether legend, fairy story, or the delineation of impossible monsters, always had a lifelike and convincing air.

But this emphasis on lucidity, this finding of values in the beauty of organization, of movement, of line and color, by no means produced a cold and abstract art. Admittedly, at times it could be over-calculated, self-conscious, and fussy, but these are the failings of any style; typically it was poised, coherent, concentrated.

In subject and manner the range of Persian art was vast. It adored the miniature. A tiny turtle from the second millennium B.C., from Hisar (Damghan), an exquisite little fabrication, and the unbelievable fine Achaemenid seals, were but forerunners of the miniature art which had its devotees in every period. Yet Persian art also knew the formulae for power and monumentality and never lost its hold on either. It knew and loved simplicity, though it more often turned to excitement and intensity. Tranquility and decorum were also Persian ideals.

Persian designers were, as those of no other culture, adept in stimulating and controlling an intricate, complex mass of motives, whose adjustments and resolution require ingenuity and imagination. At the same time they showed special skill in the reduction of an image to its simplest terms. They were masters of the expressive silhouette and knew how to indicate a fact in abstract terms without violation of visual expectation, thus leaving the effect unvexed by ambiguities or frustration.

While in certain periods Persian art played only for effect and sought the grandiose by the quickest and least expensive means, in general it maintained a high standard of workmanship. Yet only rarely do we find excessive technical virtuosity for its own sake, such as Chinese and Indian art more often encouraged.

In its explorations it several times turned to realism or naturalism of a very high order, under the compulsion of its own observation or influences from Greece or Rome. But this was a style which did not satisfy the Persians. It seemed to them relatively superficial, particular, and individual. They preferred a presentation which had a quality of timelessness and universality, which savored not of death but had a relish of eternity.

Limitations it had, of course; that is the nature of art. And the ultimate subject of art, which in philosophical terms is the Absolute itself and its every manifestation in experience, cannot be comprised by even the most catholic style. Its aspects are infinite and require an infinite range of interpretations. One test of the range of an art is its capacity to understand and present tragedy. This the Persians rarely did, though they have written some deeply moving verse and their national Passion Play stirs the emotions in a way that the West has not known since the Crusades and the Miracle plays. Some of the fourteenth century painting which recalled a time of terror, sorrows, and desolation do tell a poignant and human story.

Although it was in many respects, particularly in the designs of the great carpets, genuinely poetic, Persian art never achieved the suggestibility, the capacity to awaken echoes of the unseen, which characterized the greatest Chinese painting. And despite one or two notable performances, in portraiture and the figural art Persia was almost wholly lacking. Nor do we find the highly organized plasticity which from the Parthenon pediments to the Sistine chapel is one of the glories of Western art. Although the formulae which were developed in Persian art were numerous, effective, and sound, they too often became stereotyped and monotonous and repressed freedom of observation and imagination.

These limitations we accept. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that in the decorative arts it was Persia which must be credited with the highest achievements. She attained supremacy in many media, set world standards, and developed many fresh and universally valid forms of artistic expression which are a precious part of artistic heritage and full of promise for the future.