

Original article

CERAMIC ARTIFACTS IN THE ERA OF NASIR AL-DIN SHAH QAJAR (1848-1896 CE):
AN ARTISTIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDYAbdelaziz, R.^{1(*)} & Salah, A.²¹Ph.D. Candidate, Islamic Archaeology, Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo Univ., Giza, Egypt.²Islamic Archaeology, Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo Univ., Giza, Egypt.

*E-mail address: rashaabdelaziz532@gmail.com

Article info.**Article history:**

Received: 1-6-2025

Accepted: 19-1-2025

Doi: 10.21608/ejars.2026.511058

Keywords:

Nasir al-Din Shah

Qajar art

Ceramic iconography

Cultural hybridity

Nasta'liq script

Polychrome enamel.

EJARS – Vol. 16 (1) – June 2026: 143-151

Abstract:

The reign of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (1848-1896) marked a pivotal epoch in Iranian cultural history, characterized by a profound dialogue between tradition and modernity. As the first Iranian monarch to visit Europe, the Shah spearheaded a modernization movement that extended from the establishment of Dar al-Funun to the revitalization of the arts. This research investigates ceramic artifacts produced during this transformative era, analyzing pieces that exhibit a unique synthesis of form, decoration, and utility. Utilizing a dual descriptive and analytical methodology, the study examines the ornamentation, decorative themes, and functional aspects of selected artifacts to delineate the extent of European influence on Qajar production. The findings demonstrate that Nasiri ceramics represent a sophisticated hybrid visual identity, skillfully integrating Western techniques with indigenous Persian motifs.

1. Introduction

Iran has historically occupied a preeminent position in the development of Islamic arts, demonstrating exceptional artistic maturity and technical innovation. The Qajar era, specifically, represents a unique synthesis of traditional Persian craftsmanship and burgeoning modern influences, catalyzed by Royal court patronage [1]. This artistic flourishing was significantly bolstered by state sponsorship and increasing exposure to European artistic traditions through diplomatic missions and educational reforms [2]. This paper focuses specifically on the ceramic output during the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (1848-1896), a period distinguished by rapid stylistic evolution. Ascending the throne at nineteen, Nasir al-Din Shah's forty-nine-year reign was defined by his aspiration to modernize Iran's infrastructure and institutions [2]. His diplomatic visits to Europe exposed the court to Western aesthetics, directly influencing local production [3]. While international museums house extensive collections of Qajar artifacts, a significant portion of Nasiri ceramics remains under-researched. This study analyzes selected artifacts from major institutions—including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Walters Art Museum—to provide a comprehensive archaeological and artistic assessment.

1.1. Rationale and significance

The selection of this research topic is driven by several critical academic imperatives. Foremost is the need to address a significant scholarly gap characterized by a ma-

rked scarcity of specialized studies dedicated to the ceramic output of the Nasiri period, particularly when contrasted with the extensive scholarship available on the earlier Safavid and Seljuk epochs. Furthermore, this study introduces and critically analyzes artifacts that have not been previously examined in depth, thereby contributing vital new primary data to the field of material culture. An equally important objective is the re-contextualization of dispersed heritage. Because many Qajar ceramic artifacts are currently scattered across international collections and frequently lack detailed cataloging, this research provides the analytical depth necessary to accurately establish their specific provenance and identify their original manufacturing centers. Finally, the collection under investigation exhibits a pronounced stylistic hybridity, demonstrating a complex amalgamation of decorative elements drawn from Iranian, Indian, and European influences. This intricate synthesis warrants a focused investigation into the cross-cultural artistic exchanges that defined the art schools of the era.

1.2. Historical context

Ceramic production occupied a prestigious position within the hierarchy of Qajar arts, undergoing a significant revitalization during the extensive reign of Nasir al-Din Shah. This era was characterized by a distinctive artistic synthesis, wherein traditional Iranian methodologies were intricately integrated with modern European aesthetics. Such developments were largely facilitated by the period's relative political stability and the direct, sustained patronage of the

royal court [4]. Despite the broader geopolitical challenges confronting the Qajar state, royal ateliers functioned as crucial hubs of innovation. Nasir al-Din Shah's profound interest in modernization, compounded by his diplomatic missions and extensive travels to Europe, deeply influenced the ceramic industry. This cross-cultural exposure precipitated a shift toward a hybridized stylistic vocabulary that juxtaposed European imagery—notably landscapes and portraiture—with conventional Persian motifs. Concurrently, this period witnessed notable technological advancements in the medium, most prominently the refinement of underglaze polychrome painting and the strategic adoption of transfer-printing techniques. Ultimately, these ceramic artifacts, encompassing everything from utilitarian vessels like bowls and trays to monumental decorative tiles used in architecture, serve as a material reflection of the modern, cosmopolitan identity that the Qajar court actively sought to project.

2. Methodological Study

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the artistic evolution during this period, the present study adopts a multi-faceted methodological framework. The research first employs a descriptive approach, providing detailed archaeometric evaluations of selected applied artifacts definitively dated to the Nasiri reign. This is complemented by a comparative-analytical method, which traces specific decorative elements on the ceramic artifacts and juxtaposes them with pictorial motifs found in contemporary manuscripts and lithographs, thereby facilitating the identification of cross-media stylistic transmission. Furthermore, an inductive method is utilized to synthesize data from primary sources and historical references, allowing for the construction of a cohesive historical context surrounding these works. To effectively present these methodologies and findings, the study is structured into two primary domains. The first section establishes a foundational artistic-archaeological catalog of the selected ceramic artifacts from the era of Nasir al-Din Shah. Building upon this catalog, the second section conducts an in-depth analytical investigation into the raw materials, manufacturing techniques, and the broader stylistic evolution that characterizes the decorative repertoire of the period.

2.1. Descriptive study

2.1.1. Artifact no. 1

This artifact, fig. (1) is currently housed in the State Hermitage Museum (Accession Number V.O-1638).

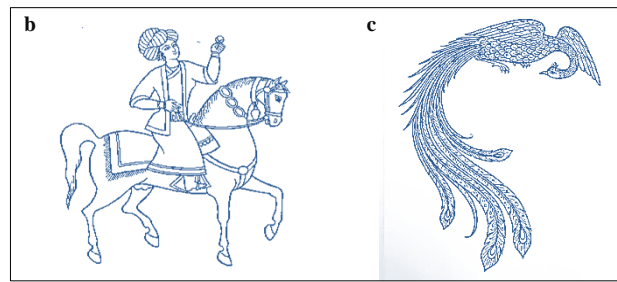


Figure (1) **a.** 19th-century Qajar fritware tile (The State Hermitage museum, V.O-1638), **b.** The tile features a central equestrian figure rendered in profile, **c.** The upper register features a dynamic

It is a rectangular polychrome fritware tile originating from 19th century Iran during the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (13th century AH). Measuring 32.5×24.2 cm., this stone-paste ceramic exemplifies a significant innovation in Qajar architectural decoration, wherein clay was pressed into a mold to create a high-relief, three-dimensional surface before the application of alkaline glazes; a technique widely utilized on city gates and palace exteriors. Visually, the artifact is defined by a diagnostically Qajar color palette, featuring a deep lapis-lazuli blue ground that dramatically accentuates the foreground subjects alongside vibrant turquoise, yellow, and manganese violet. Notably, the prominent use of a rose-pink enamel, chemically derived from gold chloride, firmly situates the piece within the mid-to-late 19th century "Pink period." The tile's iconography draws heavily from the Shahnameh tradition, intricately synthesizing contemporary courtly portraiture with ancient mythology. The compositional focal point is a mounted figure—presumably a prince or courtly hunter—depicted in profile atop a stylized white horse. The rider is dressed in standard Nasiri court attire, characterized by a flared coat and the compact Koleh-e Namadi (felt cap), which historically replaced the taller astrakhan hats of the early Qajar era. Dominating the upper register is the mythical Simurgh (Phoenix), rendered with dynamic, sweeping plumage in turquoise and gold, diving toward the rider to symbolize Farr-i Izadi (Divine Glory) and regal protection. This dynamic narrative is framed by a dense floral background executed in a horror vacui style, utilizing lotuses and palmettes to evoke a traditional Persian garden (Bagh) setting. The tile's definitive attribution to the era of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848-1896) is substantiated by its distinctive overglaze palette, the specific sartorial details of the equestrian figure, and its broader historical context, as such molded "picture tiles" were mass-produced for the urban reconstruction of Tehran. Ultimately, this artifact signifies the deliberate transition of manuscript illustration to architectural facades—a phenomenon often described as "painting on clay"—and highlights how the Qajar dynasty actively appropriated ancient Persian mythology to legitimize its rule, successfully translating the delicate visual vocabulary of miniature painting into the robust medium of architectural ceramics.

2.1.2. Artifact No. 2

It is currently housed in the Brooklyn museum (Accession Number 5.3.2005), fig. (2). It is a 19th century Iranian porcelain or fine earthenware plate dating to the era of Nasir al-Din Shah. Measuring 25.1×4.7 cm., and decorated with underglaze cobalt blue painting, the dish emulates the classical "Blue and White" aesthetic through a concentric compositional structure that includes an outer rim of geometric lozenges, a secondary band of radial striations, and a central pictorial medallion.



Figure 2 **a.** 19th-century Iranian porcelain plate (Brooklyn Museum, 5.3.2005), **b.** the rim and secondary band, (After: Scarce, 1991) [4], **c.** the central medallion, **d.** detail of the weeping willow.

Technically and stylistically, the artifact exemplifies a phenomenon of "double imitation," wherein Persian potters replicated European wares—such as Staffordshire or Dutch ceramics—that were themselves imitations of original Chinese export porcelain. The central iconography presents a distinctly "Persianized" interpretation of the ubiquitous "Willow Pattern." Notably, the central architectural motif, originally intended to depict a Chinese pagoda, is visually transformed into a Qajar Kolah Farangi pavilion rendered without strict perspectival depth. Accompanying this structure is a curvilinear weeping willow, representing a direct appropriation from the English Willow Pattern popularized by factories like Spode and Minton. The execution of these motifs is characterized by loose, sketchy brushwork that utilizes simple dashes rather than precise delineation for the foliage; this stylistic spontaneity is highly indicative of local mass production aimed at catering to the emerging Iranian middle class. The plate's chronological attribution is strongly supported by the historical influx of British transfer-printed wares into the Iranian market during the Nasiri period, which compelled local artisans to manually reproduce these popular foreign designs to remain commercially competitive. The evident discrepancy between the fluid, hand-painted lines of this dish and the mechanical precision of its British transfer-printed prototypes confirms its status as a localized Qajar adaptation. Ultimately, this artifact serves as compelling material evidence of early artistic globalization, illustrating the profound economic pressures that forced local artisans to negotiate global consumer tastes, thereby yielding a hybrid aesthetic that merges the structural rigidity of English design with the spontaneous fluidity of Persian craftsmanship.

2.1.3. Artifact No. 3

Ceramic Milk Jug (The Hermitage), fig. (3), it is currently housed in the State Hermitage Museum (Accession No. V.O-2446).

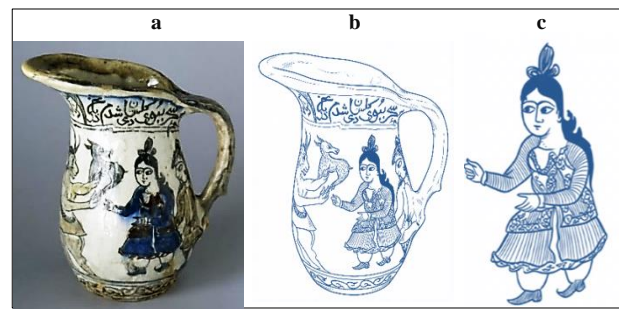


Figure 3 **a.** 19th-century Iranian ceramic milk jug (The State Hermitage Museum, V.O-2446), **b.** detail of the narrative frieze, depicting female figures in traditional *andaruni*, **c.** the rotational composition of the frieze.

It is a Iranian ceramic milk jug or pitcher dating to the 19th century AH. Standing at a height of 17.8 cm., the vessel is characterized by a piriform, or pear-shaped, body that culminates in a wide mouth and is fitted with a single loop handle; a morphological configuration that clearly denotes a utilitarian function intended for pouring liquids. From a technical and aesthetic perspective, the artifact features underglaze polychrome painting executed in a notably free and gestural manner. This spontaneous stylistic approach is highly diagnostic of what is commonly classified in scholarship as "Bazaar Ware." Such rapid, loose brushwork indicates that the ceramic was manufactured expeditiously to meet the everyday, practical demands of the local consumer market, thereby distinguishing it from the meticulously crafted, high-end wares typically associated with royal or elite court commissions. The vessel's decorative narrative frieze presents a dynamic domestic scene imbued with distinctive vernacular qualities that prioritize expressive storytelling over realistic simulation. Central to this composition are two female figures rendered in a three-quarter posture, clad in the traditional arkhaliq (tunic) and the short shaliteh (skirt), which accurately reflects the intimate "indoor" attire characteristic of the private domestic sphere (andaruni). Interacting with these women is an intriguing hybrid entity possessing a human body and a beast-like visage—potentially representing a mythological div (demon)—which likely alludes to popular vernacular folktales or contemporary street performances by masked luti (entertainers). The spatial arrangement of these figures is deliberately rotational, a compositional strategy that naturally encourages continuous kinetic engagement with the 3D object. The chronological attribution of the jug is firmly anchored by this sartorial evidence; specifically, the depiction of the short, ballet-style shaliteh provides a definitive terminus post quem of 1873. This distinctive fashion was introduced to the royal harem only after Nasir al-Din Shah's inaugural European tour, during which he was notably influenced by the costumes of the Parisian ballet. Ultimately, this artifact functions as a compelling document of "folk modernity," illustrating the rapid and fluid assimilation of imported European fashion trends into the everyday visual vocabulary of popular Persian folk art.

2.1.4. Artifact No. 4

A 19th century Iranian narghile (water pipe) top currently housed in the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art (Accession Number J.L.Y 1734), exemplifies the sophisticated material culture and artistic synthesis of the late Qajar period, fig. (4).

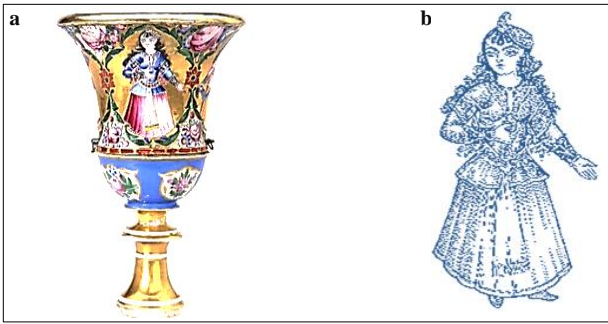


Figure (4) a. 19th century Iranian narghile top (Khalili Collection, J.L.Y 1734), 13.3 cm in height, b. detail of the upper register.

It standing at 13.3 cm., in height, this chalice-shaped porcelain vessel is defined by a flared rim, a waisted stem, and the inclusion of metallic suspension loops designed for attachment to the pipe's main body. The surface decoration employs the Minakari technique—a sophisticated method of vitreous enameling—and is distinguished by a luxurious gilded (dore) background that strongly indicates a high-status, elite commission. The vessel's pictorial program is systematically divided into two distinct registers. The upper register showcases a female portrait executed in a distinctly "Europeanized" style, characterized by a three-quarter perspective and the application of volumetric shading. Evoking the traditional Saqi (cupbearer) motif, the figure is depicted holding a cup or fruit while attired in a pearl-trimmed jacket (arkhaliq) paired with a pink skirt. Conversely, the lower register is adorned with classical Gul-o-Bulbul (rose and nightingale) motifs, elegantly framed within white cartouches against a deep cobalt ground. The artifact is firmly attributed to the late Nasir al-Din Shah period based on key sartorial and stylistic markers; specifically, the depiction of the short shaliteh worn over tights provides a definitive terminus post quem of 1873, while the seamless integration of Western shading techniques with traditional Persian floral framing is highly characteristic of the late Qajar court style. Ultimately, this exquisitely crafted object serves as a quintessential expression of "Qajar hybridity," transforming a utilitarian smoking accessory into a portable canvas for high art and functioning as a vital material document of a modernizing Persian identity that successfully negotiated the synthesis of traditional ornamentation and Westernized portraiture.

2.1.5. Artifact No. 5

currently housed in the British Museum (Accession No. 207310001), fig. (5).

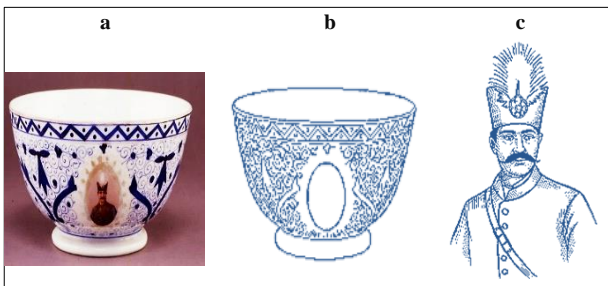


Figure (5) a. 1896-1907 Iranian porcelain bowl (British Museum, 2073-10001), b. detail of the wide rim and basin, which imitate European industrial porcelain forms, c. the central medallion, featuring a portrait of Nasir al-Din Shah in military regalia.

It is a late nineteenth-century Iranian porcelain deep bowl or basin dating to the final decade of the thirteenth century AH (1896-1907 CE). Structurally, the vessel features a deep

basin configuration with a wide rim, deliberately imitating European industrial porcelain forms. The surface decoration is executed through a sophisticated dual-technique process; the background utilizes underglaze cobalt blue floral scrolls—a design strategy that emulates Chinese and European import aesthetics—while the central medallion is meticulously painted in overglaze polychrome enamel. Ichnographically, the center of the bowl serves as a canvas for a propagandistic portrait of Nasir al-Din Shah, who is depicted in full state regalia, wearing the compact Kolah cap adorned with the Jigha (diamond aigrette) alongside a European-style military uniform complete with formal epaulettes. This visual strategy relies on a stark chromatic contrast, where the monochrome blue background isolates and accentuates the vibrant, realistic central portrait to immediately capture and direct the viewer's gaze toward the monarch. Chronologically, this specific iconographic depiction functions as a direct temporal marker, as the portrayal of the Shah in a high-collared Westernized military uniform is highly diagnostic of the latter half of his reign. Furthermore, the systematic proliferation of the sovereign's image onto dining and utilitarian ware reflects an intentional state policy aimed at commodifying the royal persona and projecting imperial authority directly into the domestic and private spheres. Ultimately, this basin stands as a quintessential material representation of the "commodification of power" within the "Tehran School" aesthetic, demonstrating how everyday utilitarian objects were successfully transformed into potent vehicles for royal propaganda, thereby seamlessly embedding state authority into the rituals of daily life.

2.1.6. Artifact No. 6

It is currently housed in the Portland Museum of Art (Accession Number 33.140.2011), fig. (6).



Figure (6) 1852 Iranian porcelain storage jar (Portland Museum of Art, 33.140.2011) [5].

It is a mid-19th century Iranian storage jar dated to 1252 AH (1852 CE) that exemplifies the complex cross-cultural aesthetics of the Nasiri era. Morphologically, the vessel features a bulbous, baluster-shaped profile originally intended for the utilitarian storage of preserves. The artifact's technical execution relies on underglaze cobalt blue painting beneath a transparent alkaline glaze that exhibits extensive crazelure (crazing)—a structural feature frequently exploited by Qajar potters to visually emulate the esteemed antiquity of historical Chinese porcelains. Furthermore, the vessel's neck is framed by a heavy, continuous cobalt band, which is recognized as a highly diagnostic indicator of provincial ceramic manufacture. The central decorative program serves as a quintessential expression of "vernacular Chinoiserie,"

characterized by "floating flora" in the form of isolated, stylized floral sprays—predominantly peonies and chrysanthemums—scattered irregularly across the white ground. The execution of these motifs utilizes a "loose brush" technique that produces a distinctively soft, hazy aesthetic as the blue pigment bleeds slightly into the surrounding glaze. This spontaneous, "sketchy" stylistic approach was practically necessitated by the rapid production speeds required for local artisans to remain economically competitive against the formidable influx of mass-produced European industrial imports. Chronologically and stylistically, the prominent "detached floral sprig" motif functions as a direct, localized imitation of the late Chinese "Canton" export wares that dominated mid-19th century markets. Concurrently, the specific material properties of the frit body and its accompanying glaze align the piece with the provincial production centers of Nain or Isfahan during the early reign of Nasir al-Din Shah. Ultimately, this storage jar provides compelling material documentation of the enduring resilience of the classic "Blue and White" aesthetic in Iran, vividly illustrating how traditional Persian craftsmanship navigated the economic pressures of early industrial globalization by adapting foreign motifs into a uniquely fluid, vernacular style.

2.1.7. Artifact No. 7

A ceramic Kashkul (Portland Museum), fig. (7), it is currently located in the Portland Museum of Art (Accession Number 33.140.2011).



Figure 5 **a**, 19th-century Iranian ceramic *kashkul* (Portland Art Museum, 2011.140.23), **b**, detail of the skeuomorphic ceramic loops, **c**, the upper rim, featuring Persian poetry inscribed in bold *nasta'liq* script, **d**, the primary register, adorned with *gul-o-bulbul* motifs

It serves as a prime exemplar of the intricate cross-cultural aesthetic dynamics defining the Nasiri period. Morphologically characterized by a bulbous, baluster-shaped profile, the vessel was originally designed for the utilitarian purpose of storing preserves. From a technical standpoint, the piece employs underglaze cobalt blue decoration beneath a transparent alkaline glaze, deliberately utilizing extensive craquelure—or crazing—to visually replicate the revered antiquity of historic Chinese porcelains. Additionally, a thick cobalt band encircling the neck functions as a highly diagnostic marker of provincial ceramic production. The vessel's central decorative scheme embodies a quintessential "vernacular Chinoiserie," featuring "floating flora" realized as isolated, stylized sprigs of peonies and chrysanthemums irregularly dispersed across a stark white ground. The artisan's application of a "loose brush" technique creates

a distinctly soft, hazy visual effect caused by the subtle bleeding of the cobalt pigment into the surrounding glaze. Crucially, this spontaneous and rapid stylistic execution was an economic necessity, enabling local potters to accelerate production and remain commercially viable against the formidable influx of mass-produced European industrial ceramics. Stylistically and chronologically, the prominent use of the detached floral sprig motif represents a localized appropriation of the late Chinese "Canton" export wares that were ubiquitous in mid-19th-century global markets. Simultaneously, the material composition of the frit body and the specific qualities of the glaze strongly suggest its fabrication in the provincial centers of Nain or Isfahan during the nascent years of Nasir al-Din Shah's reign. Ultimately, this storage jar stands as a compelling material testament to the enduring vitality of the Persian "Blue and White" tradition, demonstrating how local craftsmen strategically negotiated the economic exigencies of early industrial globalization by transmuting foreign influences into a remarkably fluid, vernacular idiom.

2.2. Analytical study

In this part of the study, the authors studied the raw materials, significance, and decorative repertoire as follow:

2.2.1. Materiality and technique

Ceramic production during the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848-1896) was characterized by a significant technological evolution that distinctly separated it from preceding eras. Although utilitarian vessels, such as the aforementioned storage jar, fig. (6), continued to rely on a standard stone-paste body, this period is fundamentally defined by the introduction of an innovative polychrome palette. The most diagnostic hallmark of this so-called "Pink Period"—prominently exhibited in the floral motifs of the hookah top, fig. (4) and the architectural tile, fig. (1)—is the utilization of a vibrant rose-pink enamel chemically derived from gold chloride. This critical material innovation facilitated the highly realistic rendering of the Damask Rose (*Rosa damascene*), thereby marking a definitive departure from the rigid blue-and-white aesthetic dominance that had characterized the earlier Safavid tradition [4]. Concurrently, this era witnessed a concerted technical effort to emulate the material properties of foreign luxury goods. The physical substrates of artifacts such as the plate, fig. (2) and the deep bowl, fig. (5) demonstrate a deliberate ambition to replicate the pristine whiteness and delicate translucency inherent to imported European and Chinese hard-paste porcelains. To achieve this demanding visual standard, local artisans developed a highly refined fritware composite, which effectively functioned as a luminous, unblemished canvas perfectly suited for the intricate application of delicate miniature painting [6].

2.2.2. Iconographic analysis

An analysis of the selected corpus reveals that ceramics during the Nasiri period functioned as vital vehicles for social signaling and ideological propagation, effectively bridging the gap between courtly elites and commoners. This phenomenon is vividly demonstrated in the commodification of the royal image, where the depiction of Nasir al-Din Shah's portrait on everyday dining ware, fig. (5) signifies a major transition of royal iconography from exclusive [7], elite oil paintings to mass-produced objects [8]. This shift suggests a deliberate state policy intended to embed the monarch's imperial presence directly into the daily dom-

estic sphere [9]. Simultaneously, objects such as the ceramic kashkul, fig. (7) illustrate a process of skeuomorphism and the subsequent "embourgeoisement" of Sufi heritage. By translating a rugged, traditional beggar's bowl into a fragile, flower-adorned ceramic vessel, artisans transformed a functional tool of asceticism into a sophisticated symbol of refined culture and hospitality displayed within the urban talar (reception room) [1]. These socio-cultural dynamics are mirrored in the decorative programs of the studied samples, which can be categorized into three primary iconographic themes, beginning with the heroic and mythological. For instance, the molded tile, fig. (1) exemplifies the Qajar revival of ancient Persian kingship through the political depiction of an equestrian prince or Shahnameh hero. Accompanied by the mythical Simurgh flying overhead—a traditional symbol of divine protection and the bestowal of Farr (Divine Glory)—the visual syntax relies on a stark contrast between the static, dignified posture of the rider and the dynamic, sweeping motion of the avian creature to construct a narrative of divinely sanctioned authority that explicitly links the Qajar dynasty to a legendary, heroic past [9]. Alongside these political narratives, the Gul-o-Bulbul (rose and nightingale) aesthetic features prominently across the corpus, specifically through the ubiquitous depiction of the Damask Rose (*Rosa damascena*), figs. (4, 6, & 7). Executed in a "loose brush" style on the storage jar, fig. (6) and the kashkul, fig. (7), this impressionistic rendering floats on a white ground, reflecting the stylistic influence of Chinese "Canton style" export porcelain adapted to a distinctively Persian color palette [9]. Semiotically, the rose serves a dual function: it operates as a decorative filler to mitigate horror vacui, while simultaneously evoking classical literary tropes that symbolize both secular beauty and spiritual longing [6]. Finally, the ceramic corpus provides crucial visual documentation regarding the shifting gender dynamics and evolving feminine ideals of the Nasiri era. The female figures depicted on the milk jug, fig. (3) and the hookah top, fig. (4) are consistently attired in the short, ballet-like skirt known as the shaliteh. This specific garment serves as an invaluable chronological marker, definitively dating the artifacts to the post-1873 period following Nasir al-Din Shah's exposure to European ballet during his continental travels [4]. Furthermore, the portrayal of women in uncovered, relaxed postures—engaged in activities such as drinking, smoking, or entertaining—on portable, everyday objects points to a noticeable relaxation of strict iconographic taboos. This shift reflects a growing societal fascination with a "Europeanized" female form, which local potters increasingly articulated through the adoption of Westernized three-quarter profiles and chiaroscuro shading techniques [1]. When examining the integration of external European influences into Islamic arts during the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, the phenomenon must be understood through a complex matrix of geographical, diplomatic, and commercial mechanisms. Historically, Iran's strategic geographical positioning served as a perennial cultural crossroads, facilitating sustained contact with neighboring European civilizations and enabling local artisans to absorb, transmute, and contextualize foreign artistic idioms to align with domestic societal sensibilities. During the 19th century, this organic cross-cultural exposure was significantly formalized through expanding diplomatic relations with global powers such

as Russia, Great Britain, and France. These international alliances precipitated a robust exchange of envoys and state gifts; the arrival of foreign diplomats, exemplified by figures like Sir Henry Rawlinson who presented collections of European ceramics to the court, provided Iranian craftsmen with direct access to Western material culture. This elite artistic transmission was exponentially accelerated by Nasir al-Din Shah's personal grand tours of Europe. Following his historic inaugural tour in 1873 CE, the monarch established a dedicated museum within the Golestan Palace to display his extensive European acquisitions, which included prestigious porcelain vases, silver plateware, and ceramics produced by leading Western manufactories such as Sèvres, Dresden, and Worcester. Concurrently, these top-down diplomatic influences were reinforced by bottom-up commercial pressures within the domestic marketplace. Mass-produced European ceramic imports, particularly British transfer-printed wares, flooded the Iranian market, presenting a severe economic challenge to local industries due to their affordability and technical consistency. Consequently, this intense market competition compelled indigenous potters to strategically innovate, leading to a dynamic synthesis wherein Western techniques and iconography were internalized to safeguard the commercial and artistic viability of local workshops. A salient manifestation of this cross-cultural exchange was the pronounced assimilation of realism and European aesthetic paradigms into the decorative repertoire of Nasiri-era ceramics. Local artisans increasingly departed from traditional stylized conventions, electing instead to incorporate principles of 3D perspective and stricter anatomical accuracy in their rendering of both human and animal figures. Concurrently, this stylistic evolution was materially supported by the introduction of vibrant, highly saturated color palettes that proved particularly efficacious for advanced overglaze enameling techniques. Furthermore, the profound impact of Western visual culture is vividly documented through a distinct iconographic trend wherein figures are frequently depicted clad in contemporary European attire. This deliberate integration of Western fashion into traditional ceramic ornamentation served not merely as a decorative novelty, but as a material reflection of the broader socio-cultural transformations and shifting sartorial sensibilities of 19th century Iranian society. the broader cultural integration [10].

2.2.3. Technical divergence (materials and manufacturing)

The comparison moves beyond mere visual resemblance to pinpoint the technical adaptations that affirm the Qajar potters' unique local identity. The most significant distinction lies in the manufacturing technology itself. A critical comparative analysis between European export wares and local Qajar productions reveals fundamental disparities in both material composition and decorative methodologies. European imports, particularly those originating from Staffordshire manufactories, were typically constructed from hard-paste porcelain or industrial fine earthenware, exhibiting exceptional structural hardness and a notable absence of surface crazing. In contrast, Qajar workshops predominantly relied upon the traditional stonepaste (fritware) composite or a refined, yet comparatively soft, local earthenware. This domestic material formulation frequently resulted in the development of visible crazing across the glaze, a

structural characteristic clearly observable in artifacts such as the aforementioned storage jar and kashkul [11]. Furthermore, the methods of surface decoration underscore a sharp technological divergence between the two manufacturing spheres. To facilitate mass production, European factories extensively utilized transfer-printing techniques, thereby achieving mechanical precision and absolute uniformity across intricate decorative schemes. Conversely, Qajar artisans maintained the practice of manual decoration, employing both underglaze and overglaze enameling techniques. This reliance on hand-painting inherently yielded distinctive visual characteristics, including thicker brushstrokes, subtle scalar variations in repeated motifs, and the occasional bleeding of cobalt pigment. Ultimately, these idiosyncratic nuances function as definitive diagnostic markers of localized, hand-painted Qajar production, perfectly exemplified by the fluid execution of the Persianized Willow Pattern plate [12].

2.2.4. Comparative stylistic analysis: (landscape rendering case study)

While the general influence of European Chinoiserie is evident in Qajar ceramics, a close comparison of landscape elements—such as architectural features and flora—reveals critical differences in execution and intent.

2.2.5. The European original

A collection of blue and white transferware pottery featuring the traditional 'Willow' pattern. Earthenware, underglaze printing.



Figure (8) blue and white transfer-printed pottery, Willow pattern, likely 19th century.

"The artifacts presented in fig. (1) serve as classic examples of blue and white earthenware featuring the 'Willow Pattern.' Originated in late 18th-century England, this style utilizes the underglaze transfer-printing technique to emulate hand-painted Chinese porcelain. The design incorporates specific chinoiserie elements: a pagoda, a willow tree, a bridge with three figures, and two doves, reflecting the British interpretation of East Asian aesthetics during the Industrial Revolution [13]. In the imported transfer-printed "Willow Pattern" wares, the landscape is characterized by mechanical symmetry and high detail achieved through industrial printing. The trees and architectural elements are uniform, adhering strictly to the established perspective and narrative of the standardized template. The primary artistic intention here is commercial replication and consistency [4]. The Qajar adaptation, fig. (2) Conversely, locally produced Qajar ceramics exhibit a highly individualized and abstract rendering of the landscape, even when mimicking the Willow Pattern: The distinct visual vocabulary of these local adaptations is perhaps most evident in the deliberate abstraction

of natural elements, wherein flora—particularly trees—are rendered not as precise botanical studies, but rather as stylized, highly decorative masses composed of stippled dots and exaggerated brushstrokes. This tendency toward stylistic interpretation extends equally to the architectural components of the composition; structures such as pagodas and bridges are notably simplified and frequently rendered with disproportionate scaling when contrasted with their transfer-printed European prototypes. Furthermore, the execution of spatial depth departs significantly from western conventions, as Qajar artisans largely eschewed European atmospheric perspective in favor of utilizing traditional, two-dimensional decorative fill patterns to articulate the background. Ultimately, this comparative analysis confirms that Iranian potters did not merely engage in the mechanical replication of imported designs. Rather, they treated European printed wares as a conceptual point of departure, actively translating foreign motifs through a distinctly Persian aesthetic lens that fundamentally prioritized fluid linearity, vibrant chromatics, and ornamental abstraction [4].

2.4. Bifurcation of the Qajar artistic style

The analytical study highlights a distinct evolution in raw materials and artistic techniques. The findings indicate that the artistic movement during the Nasir al-Din Shah period was not monolithic but rather bifurcated into two distinct directions: The artistic production of the Nasiri era may be bifurcated into two primary currents, each defined by its targeted demographic and stylistic orientation. The first, "Aristocratic Euro-Qajar Art," was specifically tailored to the tastes of the social elite, including royalty, princes, and high-ranking officials. This category adhered closely to European artistic standards, reflecting the modernizing spirit of the era through a strong commitment to realism in both floral ornamentation and human representation. Furthermore, this style made extensive use of the technologically innovative "burgundy" or rose-pink enamel shades that were hallmarks of contemporary European ceramics [14]. In contrast, the second current, "Folk Art," catered to the general Iranian populace. While these works maintained an authentic and distinctive Iranian character, manifested through whimsical forms and traditional facial features, they remained susceptible to external cultural currents. This folk-oriented output represented an essentialized Qajar style that engaged in a process of selective appropriation, wherein decorative motifs derived from European realism were integrated into a deeply rooted, traditional conceptual framework [15]. Finally, the journeys and artistic missions undertaken by Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar had a profound impact on this artistic movement. These travels facilitated a direct exchange of styles, resulting in a unique hybridity where Iranian artistic identity engaged in a dynamic dialogue with European counterparts.

3. Results

The descriptive, analytical, and comparative examination of the seven selected ceramic artifacts from the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar has yielded several critical insights into the artistic and material developments of the era. The iconographic analysis identifies three distinct decorative repertoires: the heroic-mythological theme, exemplified by the molded tile, fig. (1) depicting an equestrian prince accompanied by the Simurgh, which serves to align Qajar

kingship with the ancient concept of Farr-i Izadi (Divine Glory); the floral Gul-o-Bulbul theme, dominated by the impressionistic, loose-brush rendering of the Damask rose on vessels such as the storage jar, fig. (6) and the kashkul, fig. (7); and the feminine modern theme, evident on the milk jug, fig. (3) and narghile top, fig. (4), where the depiction of the shaliteh skirt serves as a definitive chronological marker of the post-1873 period. This temporal attribution is further corroborated by the presence of the Kolah-e Namadi (felt cap) on the equestrian figure and the widespread implementation of the vibrant, gold-chloride-derived rose-pink enamel—a hallmark of the mid-to-late 19th century "Pink Period". Technologically, Qajar potters navigated a hybrid identity; while they successfully emulated the aesthetic standards of foreign luxury goods, they retained traditional fritware (stone-paste) or refined local earthenware substrates, often characterized by deliberate craquelure. The "double imitation" phenomenon is particularly salient, as local workshops adopted European underglaze polychrome and transfer-printing techniques to remain competitive against imported industrial ceramics, frequently mimicking European versions of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain. This production landscape was clearly bifurcated: the "Aristocratic Euro-Qajar" style, characterized by sophisticated realism, chiaroscuro shading, and minakari enameling, catered to the elite; whereas the "Folk Art" current, intended for the urban middle class, selectively integrated European motifs into a traditional Persian framework defined by whimsical forms and painterly spontaneity. The transmission of these foreign aesthetics was primarily facilitated by diplomatic missions and the monarch's personal travels, most notably the 1873 European tour, which led to the establishment of the Golestan Palace museum as a repository for Sèvres, Dresden, and Worcester ceramics. Faced with the economic pressure of inexpensive British transfer-printed imports, Iranian artisans demonstrated remarkable creative agency; comparative analysis of the "Willow Pattern" confirms that they did not merely replicate industrial designs but rather deconstructed and reassembled them through a Persian aesthetic lens that prioritized decorative abstraction over European atmospheric perspective. Consequently, these ceramics functioned as potent socio-cultural instruments: the commodification of the Shah's image on portrait bowls projected state authority into the private domestic sphere, while the transformation of the ascetic kashkul into a refined object of hospitality signaled the broader "embourgeoisement" and secularization of traditional iconography. Quantitative observations conclude that 71% of the sampled corpus exhibits direct European influence, with manufacturing provenance spanning court-affiliated workshops in Tehran and provincial centers in Nain and Isfahan, ultimately documenting a period of resilient adaptation to the forces of early industrial globalization.

4. Discussion

4.1. Technological innovation and the "Pink aesthetic"

The results of the material analysis indicate that the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah witnessed a deliberate departure from the Safavid blue-and-white tradition. The most significant finding is the dominance of the "Pink Period" (c. late 19th century). The chemical introduction of gold-chloride enamel allowed potters to produce the vibrant "rose-pink" hues

seen in the floral motifs of the analyzed tiles and vessels. This technological leap was not merely aesthetic but commercial, intended to compete with the polychrome porcelain imported from the Gardner Factory in Russia and Sèvres in France [16]. As observed in the *Kashkul* and the Hookah top, this palette enabled the realistic rendering of the *Rosa damascena*, transforming the stylized Persian flower into a botanical study influenced by European naturalism [17].

4.2. The dynamics of hybridity: "Persianizing" the global

The comparative analysis of the landscape elements confirms that Qajar artists operated within a framework of "Creative Adaptation" rather than passive imitation. The phenomenon of the "Chinoiserie Mutation" is vividly exemplified by a comparative analysis between the English "Willow Pattern" and the corresponding Qajar plate, fig. (2), which reveals that Iranian artisans actively deconstructed the rigid, mechanical precision characteristic of British industrial transfer prints. By reassembling disparate elements—such as pagodas, weeping willows, and fences—through a loose, painterly brushwork, these potters injected a unique "folk" energy into the final composition. This finding reinforces the argument that while local artisans were economically compelled to adopt foreign motifs to maintain market relevance, they simultaneously succeeded in imposing a distinctly Persian aesthetic identity upon them [4]. Parallel to this decorative adaptation, the emergence of the "Euro-Qajar Portrait"—as seen in the depiction of women wearing the shaliteh skirt, fig. (3) and the inclusion of the Shah's likeness on everyday dining ware, fig. (5)—demonstrates a comprehensive assimilation of European fashion and photographic conventions. The present study posits that ceramics functioned as an essential "media platform" for disseminating a modernized image of the court to the broader public, a phenomenon that aligns with the integration of royal imagery into the traditional vernacular arts [18].

4.3. Sociological implications: The democratization of luxury

The functional analysis of the artifacts—ranging from the royal Hookah top to the utilitarian Storage Jar—reveals a bifurcation in production. The study identifies a distinct "*Tehran School*" of ceramics that catered to the urban middle class. The transition of the *Kashkul*, fig. (7) from a metal ascetic bowl to a fragile, decorated ceramic vessel signifies the secularization of Sufi symbols. It suggests that by the late 19th century, religious iconography had been commodified into decorative objects for the domestic *Talar*, reflecting a shift in social values where display took precedence over function [16].

5. Conclusion

This study investigated ceramic production during the era of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar through the analysis of seven artifacts from prominent international collections, focusing on raw materials, techniques, and decorative evolution. The findings demonstrate that Qajar ceramics embodied a sophisticated synthesis of indigenous Iranian styles and European influences, a direct consequence of the diplomatic exchanges initiated by the Shah. The research identified a diverse iconographic program featuring religious and floral motifs, alongside a significant expansion in the representation of human figures across the social spectrum. Technically, the period was distinguished by the adoption of a vibrant polychrome palette, most notably the introduction of rose-pink enamel derived from gold chloride. Ultimately, this research characterizes the era's ceramic

art as a manifestation of "Transitional Modernity." By integrating European techniques and designs with traditional themes such as *Shahnameh* heroes and Sufi poetry, Qajar artisans successfully bridged the gap between tradition and industrial modernity, establishing a resilient hybrid visual language that defined 19th century Iranian identity

References

- [1] Diba, L. & Ekhtiar, M. (1998). *Royal Persian paintings: The Qajar epoch 1785-1925*, Brooklyn Museum of Art in association with I.B. Tauris, Brooklyn
- [2] Amanat, A. (1997). *Pivot of the universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian monarchy, 1831-1896*, Univ. of California Press, USA.
- [3] Scarce, J. (2011). *The arts of the Qajar period*, Edinburgh Univ. Press., UK
- [4] Scarce, J. (1991). The arts of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries: Ceramics. In: Fisher, W., Avery, P., Hambly, G., et al. *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 7, Cambridge Univ. Press. UK, pp. 928-1010.
- [5] Watson, O. (2020). Ceramics of the Qajar period: Innovation and revival. *J. of Islamic Ceramics*. 14 (3): 380-490.
- [6] Fehérvári, G. (2000). *Ceramics of the Islamic world: In the Tareq Rajab Museum*, I.B. Tauris, London.
- [7] Hillenbrand, R. (1999). *Islamic art and architecture*, Thames & Hudson, UK.
- [8] Floor, W. (2003). Change and tradition in the ceramic industry of Qajar Iran. *Iranian Studies*. 36 (2): 151-178.
- [9] Diba, L. (1998). Images of power and the power of images in Qajar art. *Muqarnas*. 15: 231-270.
- [10] Melikian-Chirvani, A. (1991). The Sufi symbolism in Persian metalwork and ceramics. *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*. 5: 23-38.
- [11] Copeland, R. (2000). The willow pattern: A study in industrial transfer-printing. *The English Ceramic Circle Transactions*. 17 (2): 145-162
- [12] The State Hermitage Museum. Ceramic milk jug (V.O-1638). <https://hermitagemuseum.org/> (1/12/2024).
- [13] Brooklyn Museum. Porcelain plate - willow pattern (5.3.2005), <https://support.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/98784> (3/3/2025).
- [14] The State Hermitage Museum. Ceramic milk jug (V. O-2446). <https://hermitagemuseum.org/> (1/4/2025).
- [15] Khalili Collection of Islamic art. Cup from a water-pipe (Qalyan) (J.L.Y 1734), <https://www.khalilicollections.org/all-collections/accession-print/?postid=2703> (1/11/2023).
- [16] The British Museum. Bowl (207310001), <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/207310001> (5/3/2023).
- [17] Portland Museum of Art. Porcelain storage jar (33.140.2011), <https://www.portlandmuseum.org/conta> (6/11/2024)
- [18] Portland Museum of Art. Ceramic kashkul (2011.140.23), <https://www.portlandmuseum.org/conta> (5/6/2025)