

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource:
Collection Highlight

Attributed to Muhammad Hasan
Prince Yahya, circa 1830s

شاهزاده
میرزا
یاحیا





Prince Yahya

Attributed to Muhammad Hasan
(Persian, active 1808–40)

Iran, Qajar dynasty, circa 1830s

Oil on canvas, 67 x 35 in. (170.2 x 88.9 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles K. Wilkinson,
72.26.5

Description of the Artwork

A beardless youth with arched brows, almond-shaped eyes, and rosy cheeks faces the viewer. He wears a red robe ornamented with pearls and precious stones, an elaborately patterned crown, and a medal in the shape of an eight-pointed star. With his right hand he clasps the jeweled hilt of a dagger tucked into his waistband; with his left hand he reaches for a sword at his belt. The Persian inscription over his right shoulder reads, "His Highness Prince Yahya Mirza."

The setting is rendered in a flat, stylized manner. On an ornate floral carpet in front of the figure are a box of gems and pearls, two jeweled containers, and a watch and fob. Behind the figure is a wooden balustrade inlaid with an intricate geometric star pattern. Farther in the background, two square columns hold red drapery swags.

About the Artwork

The subject, Prince Yahya, was the forty-third son of Fath °Ali Shah, the second ruler of Iran's Qajar dynasty. The shah, or king, fathered dozens of children and appointed many of his sons to governmental positions to strengthen the family dynasty and centralize power. Yahya was appointed governor of a province called Gilan.

Fath °Ali Shah commissioned countless works of art, including poetry, stone reliefs, and life-size paintings. This program of political propaganda was intended to impress foreigners with the court's opulence and to elevate Qajar rulers by associating them with Iran's grand and heroic past. The result was a minor renaissance in literature and the arts, referred to as the *Bazgasht*, or "return." This portrait was likely meant to be installed in an arched niche as part of a larger decorative scheme in a palace, pavilion, or hunting lodge. Other life-size portraits were sent abroad to do double service as diplomatic gifts and as iconic visual messages conveying the power and wealth of the empire.

Before this period, manuscript illustration, rather than life-size portraiture, had been the principal vehicle for painting in the Islamic world. The Qur'an, Islam's holy book, contains a prohibition against the making of idols, which has been interpreted by some as forbidding realistic renderings of people or animals. Many viewers are therefore surprised to see portraits in our collection of the arts of the Islamic world. However, Islamic art is not limited to the abstract or vegetal and includes a rich tradition of figural painting, of which this artwork is an example.

Born in 1817, the prince was probably no older than eighteen when this portrait was made. The portrait is idealized, meaning the artist does not necessarily depict Yahya's specific identifying physical characteristics but rather emphasizes what is most important: his princely stature.

Questions for Viewing

An artist can include information about the subject of a portrait using the sitter's clothing, pose, and facial expression. Describe these elements in Prince Yahya's portrait. What do these details tell us about him?

An attribute is an object associated with a character that is meant to help identify or represent that person. Find three attributes in the portrait. What else do they tell us about Prince Yahya?

Describe the setting that surrounds Prince Yahya. What kind of place might this be?

A motif is a piece of a design that repeats to form a pattern. In Islamic art, geometric and plant motifs are often used to ornament buildings and objects. What motifs can you find in this artwork? Which motifs are geometric? Which are inspired by nature?

The Qajar court employed artists working in a variety of media, so paintings were only one type of artistic production taking place in the palace. What art forms are evident in this work?

Where can you view a portrait of a leader of your community? Why are portraits located there? What impact do these portraits have on local or national pride and/or patriotism?

Classroom Activities

AND THE AWARD GOES TO . . .

Prince Yahya is wearing a military decoration called the Order of the Lion and Sun, an award that the government gave out for service. Look closely at the eight-pointed star on his chest. Why do you think the insignia has this name? Select someone from your community who you think deserves recognition for service and design an award for her or him. This individual could be a classmate, a neighbor, or someone you have heard about but never met. Older students can also research the French Legion of Honor, an order of merit that served as a model for Fath °Ali Shah's Order of the Lion and Sun. Who has received this award and why?

YOUR NAME IN LIGHTS

A cartouche is a shape that encloses a written inscription, often a name, title, or signature. Prince Yahya's name and position are written inside a four-lobed cartouche that appears above his right shoulder. Design your own cartouche by writing your name in an interesting way and then drawing a shape around it. Or, start with an ornamental shape and write your name or another word or phrase to fit inside. You can also find examples of cartouches in ancient Egyptian art.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/onview

The Brooklyn Museum's online collection database, featuring a search function that indicates artworks currently on view and their locations.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher_resources.php

This webpage offers links to free web interactives and Teaching Resources (PDFs) supporting K–12 instruction.

www.vam.ac.uk/page/i/islamic-middle-east

Use the Victoria and Albert Museum's website to learn more about Qajar art and art from other periods produced in the Middle East. The site also has an interactive historical map of the region and videos on Islamic architecture.

www.tirafkan.com

Contemporary Iranian artist Sadegh Tirafkan explores the relationship between traditional and modern Iranian culture, combining Qajar period illustrations with contemporary photography.

Bloom, Jonathan, and Sheila Blair. *Islamic Arts*. London: Phaidon Press, 1997.

This book provides a survey of the arts of the Islamic world, including architecture, arts of the book, textiles, and decorative arts.

Diba, Layla S., and Maryam Ekhtiar, eds. *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925*. New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, in association with I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998.

This exhibition catalogue offers background essays about Qajar Iran as well as a number of images that could be compared with Prince Yahya's portrait.

This text was written by former Senior Museum Educator Stephanie Hagan, with assistance from School Programs Manager Alexa Fairchild and former Hagop Kevorkian Associate Curator of Islamic Art Ladan Akbarnia.

