

## Art as an Image of the Shah Art, Rhetoric, and Power in Shah Tahmasp's Letter to Sultan Selim II

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### Abstract

In 1566, after Sultan Suleiman's death, Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576) sent condolences and congratulations to Sultan Selim II (r. 1566-1574) along with several gifts, including a magnificent Quran and an exquisite illustrated Shahnama copy, noteworthy in Iranian art history. However, the letter accompanying these gifts has often been overlooked, perceived as containing mere courtesies.

This letter marked a significant exchange between Safavid kings and Ottoman sultans, with participation from secretaries across Iran. Its authors aimed to portray an idealized king and their notable characteristics, demonstrating that the actions of these rulers (Sultan Suleiman, Sultan Selim, and particularly Shah Tahmasp) aligned with this ideal. Art-related activities were among these characteristics.

The authors detailed the Safavid king's palace, garden, and the artistic gifts to highlight their connection with the king's ideal image. This article explores the letter as a literary and artistic medium, delving into its intricate rhetoric as a tool for representing royal authority. Additionally, it addresses how the authors' descriptions of artworks as integral to the king's image conveyed political meaning, illustrating how art reflected royal power in public and political spheres.

### Keywords

Safavid Art, Shah Tahmasp, Rhetoric, Sa'adatabad, Shahnama

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## The Historical Background of the Letter

After the death of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in 1566 and the succession of Sultan Selim II (r. 1566-1574), Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524-1576) sent a letter to the Ottoman court condoling the death of Sultan Suleiman and congratulating the succession of Sultan Selim. During this period, the Safavid and Ottoman empires enjoyed a relatively stable peace after the signature of the Amasya Peace Treaty in 1555, which ended years of bloody conflict between the two empires. Shah Tahmasp's letter was written in response to a message from Sultan Selim. It was a typical diplomatic missive regarding the relations between the courts and expressed adherence to the provisions of the peace treaty and interest in its continuation after the death of Sultan Suleiman.

Nevertheless, Shah Tahmasp's letter was unique. According to Safavid historians such as Qadi Ahmad Qumi and Rumlu, the Shah summoned scribes and secretaries from all over Iran to write the letter over a period of eight months (Qumi 477; Rumlu 567). It is the most extended letter written in the history of Safavid-Ottoman relations with its length reaching seventy cubits (about eighty meters) (Qumi 478). It was written in a magnificent style and sent to the Ottoman court with the king's high envoys and numerous precious gifts (Qumi 478).

The caravan, consisting of seven hundred men and nineteen thousand beasts, was greeted gloriously upon its arrival in Edirne early in 1568, two years after the death of Sultan Suleiman. Ottoman historians and ambassadors from other countries who were at the Ottoman court recorded this event and the associated celebrations (Arcak 33-73). Several images of the ceremony have been depicted and recorded in Ottoman historical manuscripts such as Selim Khan's *Shahnamei* by Lokman (Topkapi Palace Library, MS 3595, fols. 53v, 54r). The letter was politically successful, maintaining good relations between the two empires, and ensured peace which lasted until the death of Sultan Selim II.

Amongst the gifts sent along with the letter, two splendid works drew the attention of art historians, namely *Mushaf 'Ali*<sup>1</sup> and Shah Tahmasp's *Shahnama*, arguably the most glorious illustrated *Shahnama* in Iran. However, little attention has been paid to the letter and its content.<sup>2</sup> From an art-historical perspective, one of the notable aspects of this letter is the description of the gifts that accompanied it, including Shah Tahmasp's *Shahnama* and some other art productions related to Shah Tahmasp's court workshop. These kinds of descriptions are not very common in historical texts, and art historians have yet to consider this material. Colin Mitchell's research, published primarily in his book *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric* (2009), is a rare example of studies on the rhetorical features of Shah Tahmasp's letter and its political significance and meaning. Mitchell also deals with the letter's descriptions of artworks and focuses on the relationship between rhetoric and politics by showing how rhetorical and literary strategies construct and legitimize the image of royal power. However, his study focuses solely on the rhetorical description of these artworks in relation to royal politics and rhetoric and does not take into account the independent results about the works themselves and their relationship with politics. Mitchell concentrates on the political importance of rhetoric, showing how, in this letter, many

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1. The Shah's letter does not mention if it is the *Mushaf* written by the first Shiite Imam, 'Ali. Other sources do not precise either (Arcak 62).

2. Only two studies focused on the contents of the letter: Babayan 326 and Mitchell 128-137. Arcak's detailed account of the event provides no reference to the content of the letter.

imaginative metaphors and illustrations serve to legitimize the basis of royal power (128-137), as if Shah Tahmasp, in the beautiful and literary expressions, reminds the letter's readers and his rivals, of the foundations for the legitimacy of his monarchy.

On the basis of Mitchell's research, this article centres on the letter's descriptions of artworks in order to understand the political intentions of their creation. In what follows, I examine these descriptions and bring to the fore the political meaning of the king's image representations. Furthermore, I suggest that Shah Tahmasp's letter, as a piece of rhetoric, may also be considered a work of art with a political dimension.

### The Letter and its Content

In appearance, the letter contains long, tedious, and highly exaggerated praises about Sultan Suleiman, Sultan Selim, and Shah Tahmasp himself, which are recited repeatedly and can be found throughout the text. It mainly announces the continuation of good relations with the Ottoman court and the establishment of the peace of Amasya. Among the Safavid sources, the whole letter is recorded only in the *Khulasat al-Tawarikh* of Qadi Ahmad Munshi Qumi, one of its authors (Qumi 478).<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that in a copy of Qumi's book dated some hundred years later, the scribe did not include the text of this letter and wrote:

This letter was contained in the original manuscript and did not add anything to the listeners' ears and intelligence except discomfort and pain. A letter that is seventy cubits long and is approximately fifty thousand verses and not read in a meeting does not bring pleasure to the listeners, and the readers do not benefit from it. Each phrase is repeated a thousand times. Hearing a non-religious man's condolences is nothing but boredom. It was not written for that reason. (Qumi 478)<sup>4</sup>

This may be why modern historians and scholars have paid little attention to the letter's content. However, resituating the letter in the context of the political relations of the early modern era and the various tools used to shape political relations between governments, brings to the fore its relevance. One may conclude that the main objective of the kings' prolonged and repeated descriptions and praises is to depict the "image" of the king. The authors, with exaggerated credits to three sultans and kings, suggest that they are the supreme and perfect example of the idea of the kingdom. It does not matter if these descriptions do not correspond to reality; the writers' conception of the image they create of an ideal kingdom is what is essential. These constructions are relevant for the understanding of the era's historical events. It is clear that this constructed image also had great political significance in its time as the expression of the foundations of royal legitimacy and of a powerful kingdom. In this article, my concern is not that much the image of the king than the artistic aspects of the image. When the authors describe their ideal image of the

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3. Abdulhosein Navaie, who collected all the letters related to the reign of Shah Tahmasp, does not mention the letter cited by Qumi. Instead, another relatively shorter text is quoted after Faridun Beg (Navaie 460-471). Did Qadi Ahmad mention the main letter? The answer is hard to say, but other historical sources highlighted the letter's significant length (see, for example, Rumlu 567). Nonetheless, what we are looking at here is not about the authenticity of the letter quoted by Qadi Ahmad but rather his descriptions of artworks and the significant role he considered for them.

4. All translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

kingdom, they are also referring to the components related to the realm of art. Or in other words, they valorise art forms as an aspect of the idea of the ideal kingdom. Behind the artworks created under the sponsorship of the court, one discovers the hidden political meanings of which this letter is evidence. The artistic elements mentioned in the letter are the king's rhetoric, his palace with its paintings, decorations and gardens and Shah Tahmasp's *Shahnama*.

### Royal Rhetoric

The crucial feature of Shah Tahmasp's letter is its rhetoric;<sup>5</sup> indeed, the main purpose of sending it was to present and offer royal rhetoric. This is why such a wide range of authors came together to write it, and that so much time was spent writing it. Thus, this letter was not a long missive in vain. Rumlu, in a short phrase, describes the letter as "marked by its rhetoric (*balaghat*)" (567). Rhetoric was associated with activities such as poetry, painting, and music and was not excluded from art as in modern Western art history.<sup>6</sup> The most basic rhetoric text in the ancient world is Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; which clearly correlates to Aristotle's treatise on poetics, and mutual references are made in the two books. The same relationship appears in Islamic tradition and in the texts of Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina (Ibn Sina). Outside the Islamic philosophical tradition, rhetoric and poetry were always considered jointly. If poetry was accepted as an art and placed next to the painting and other mediums, so should rhetoric. Thus, rhetoric is not only close to poetry but also is related to calligraphy. It suffices to mention the 15<sup>th</sup>-century *Dastur al-Katib fi tai'n al-maratib* (*The Guide for Writers to Understand Orders*, Shams Monshi 1390), a critical book and manual on the art of the literal and rhetorical writing (*Insha*) for royal secretaries. Calligraphy is the central theme of the second chapter, which is very similar to the calligraphic treatises of the Safavid period. One may note that Qadi Ahmad Qumi, a master of rhetoric as seen in the Shah Tahmasp letter, is himself the author of one of the rarest artistic treaties in the Safavid period, *Gulistan-i Hunar*, where he recites the detailed descriptions of masters of painting and calligraphers. There was a close connection between the rhetoricians, calligraphers, and painters in the Safavid royal court. Therefore, rhetoric can be considered as an artistic medium, and sending such letters can be understood as sending a very delicate, precise, and eye-catching work of art. But why then would such a work have been sent to the Ottoman court?

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5. I mean the classic definition of rhetoric as given in the Oxford dictionary: "The art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques". (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989)

6. Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kant in his classification of "fine arts" included rhetoric and placed it next to poetry (151). But Hegel excluded it in his list of fine arts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (82-90). Subsequently, rhetoric was gradually no longer considered much in the histories of art.

In the letter, rhetoric is mentioned as one of the essential components of the image of the king. This letter begins with exaggerated descriptions of the characteristics of the young King, Sultan Selim, and long phrases are used to depict his rhetoric. Such descriptions and praises have no basis in reality, especially concerning the young king, but it was expected that when praising the king, part of this praise should be praising of his rhetoric:

Blessed is the wise man [Sultan Selim] who, at the time of his invigorating speech, blossoms the buds of meanings in the garden of speech and makes the garden of speech green and watered it by the rain of the cloud of eloquence and the clear water of rhetoric. From his unique expressions, the breezes of attention and honour and the scents of love and affection blow on the garden of hearts of sincere believers, and the breezes of divine approval and the fruits of infinite conquests reach the souls of the faithful lovers. (Qumi 491)

This perfected rhetoric is then attributed to Sultan Selim's letter, which is praised as:

A letter with the smell of amber, whose charming face and musk line represent the face of *Hoor 'Ein* (Houries). Chinese artists envy this letter because of its perfected ornament and beauty. And the soul in the description of it sings that: your literacy drew on the pages of the days the Amber Lines / The case of Ferdowsi's zeal and jealousy of Chinese art. (Qumi 493)

The interesting point in this description is the comparison of the art of rhetoric with the art of Ferdowsi as a poet, the skill of Chinese painters and the art of calligraphy: rhetoric should be seen as an artistic medium.

One may also note the key phrase in the middle of the description connecting rhetoric and kingship: "The word of the kings is the king of the word (*kalam al-muluk, muluk al-kalam*)" (492). This phrase, a very common proverb in Iranian and Muslim cultures, shows precisely that one of the necessary characteristics of the king is his rhetoric, and that royal speech should be considered as the king of rhetoric. The reason for this particular emphasis on rhetoric was its place in politics and ethics in the pre-modern world. As stated in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and continued throughout the Islamic philosophical tradition such as Ibn Sina's *Rhetoric*, the most critical qualities of rhetoric are "deliberative, forensic and epideictic" (Aristotle 1358 b; Ibn Sina 55) i.e., its use in legal, judicial, and ceremonial affairs. Rhetoric is a tool for governing society, and it derives its power from its influence due to its use of imagination and aesthetic devices. The king must use the power of the word if he wants to govern the society properly, subdue the people, and put the enemies and rivals in their place.

From this last point, it is clear that rhetoric is not merely a literary-aesthetic matter. Royal speech and parole gain power and influence because they effectively cover the political content intended by the king in the guise of eloquence and rhetoric. The Shah's rhetoric is an aesthetic formulation of the monarchy's ideology. It is this special position of rhetoric that should be acknowledged in the letter of Shah Tahmasp. Here rhetoric has the vital task of showing "the actual image of the king" as "the ideal image of the king", and this idealization is achieved through imaginary devices that form the "rhetoric of the text", thus consolidating the king's power. Let us now turn to other artistic components in the letter that describe the king's image.

### The King's Palace and Garden

Shah Tahmasp's letter to Sultan Selim II begins with many praises of the young Sultan, and continues by recalling his father, Sultan Suleiman, giving a lengthy description of his last war, in the middle of which the elder Sultan passed away. By narrating the reaction of Shah Tahmasp and the Safavid court to the news of the Sultan's death, the authors bring the narration and attention to Shah Tahmasp in an interesting way. The beginning of the third part of the letter is dedicated to Tahmasp, his court, and the description of the gifts that were sent, as a narrative strategy to draw the image of Shah Tahmasp. What is particularly remarkable in this part, is the number of descriptions devoted to Sa'adatabad, the palace and garden of Shah Tahmasp in Qazwin. Sa'adatabad (literary the place of happiness) was a small new town founded in Qazwin by the king. Reviewing the letter's descriptions and other Safavid sources reveals the crucial importance of Sa'adatabad for Shah Tahmasp. The city and its extensive urban plan in Qazwin were undoubtedly a source of inspiration for Shah Abbas I. and his new capital Isfahan.<sup>7</sup> Sa'adatabad's descriptions commence with the feasts given in Qazwin when the news of Sultan Suleiman's succession reached the Safavid capital: "It spread a celebration of happiness on the porch that was founded by happiness and looked like Iram Palace, which had not been seen there since the construction of the heavens." (Qumi 510)

The letter's authors equate the royal palace and its gardens with Paradise, and the descriptions of the inhabitants of Sa'adatabad's happiness and celebrations that took place continue over several pages. The description of the king's palace, garden and their prosperous lives is part of the king's image and reflects and symbolizes his power, property, peace and the security that his government exudes. The letter's readers are thus obliged to consider these as part of the purpose of constructing Sa'adatabad itself as the palace and its garden provided such a position for Shah Tahmasp.

While the letter does not pay much attention to the characteristics of the palace's structure, three aspects are highlighted: decorations and wall paintings of the palace, the Sa'adatabad Gardens, and the palace's Square. Looking first at a description of the palace's decoration, we see the description of the paintings on the walls of the palace:

God Almighty. What a wonderful building! What a refreshing palace; Its doors and walls, with its paintings and decorations, are more beautiful than the Chinese painting; The master painters painted it, and its paintings are rare in the whole world. They have skilfully unveiled a banquet on the door and wall everywhere in the palace. On its wall flowers are made by plaster and from the clay flowers bloomed. (Qumi 511)

'Abdi Beyk Shirazi, the famous Safavid poet in service of Shah Tahmasp's court, gives precise descriptions of the wall paintings in his *Jannat-i 'Adn* (Gardens of Paradise), which give us a better idea of the palace's paintings. According to 'Abdi Beyk, they were mainly lyrical scenes that served as part of the royal pleasure-seeking atmosphere and provided a colourful and attractive environment. As we shall see, this function of court paintings finds a parallel in the garden's function.

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7. On Shah Tahmasp's Qazwin, see Babaei 47-55.

The description of the palace's garden serves as another significant part of Shah Tahmasp's letter presenting several details:

What can I say about the garden of Saadat? Saadat turns fortune towards me. It is adorned like the garden of Heaven; in it are fruits of every kind you may wish. This odiferous garden is like paradise; its water is from the streams of Heaven. (Qumi 519; Mitchell's translation)

Further in the letter, the Sa'adatabad garden is compared with the gardens of Paradise: "Sa'adatabad which is equal to the rose-garden of Iram and the garden of Paradise and similar to heavenly gardens in the hereafter." (Qumi 520) Shah Tahmasp paid particular attention to the garden in Sa'adatabad, and mainly to the construction of the palace. A reason for the importance bestowed upon this garden by the king is that he ordered 'Abdi Beyk to describe it in a complete and literary way. *Jannat-i 'Adn* is full of detailed descriptions of Sa'adatabad, and particularly its gardens (see Losensky 1-29).

Interestingly, the letter not only describes the garden, its vastness and the variety of its trees and plants, but also the royal pleasures occurring in these places:

In those paradisiacal fields, where the sun and moon meet, flasks of silver and goblets of gold are filled with liquor mixed with cloves and cinnamon in commemoration of: "And they will be given [in Heaven] a cup of wine mixed with zanjabil." [76; *Al-Ensan* (the Man): 17]. The moon-faced cup-bearers held; gilded porcelain decanters. The decanter was happy with its fortune; because the hands of the rosy-cheeked ones were on its neck. And the goblet's mouth has stayed open out of happiness; because it has kissed the lips of the coquettish ones. From every direction, the youthful ones who are like the servants of heaven—who have girded themselves with the belt of submission—carry porcelain dishes full of fruits [in accordance with 56: 32-33], "and fruit in abundance whose season is not limited, nor its supply forbidden." (Qumi 521; Mitchell's translation)

As it is clear from this passage, the pattern evokes the Islamic texts' descriptions of Paradise, where all kinds of foods and drinks and all sorts of sexual and non-sexual pleasures that are usually forbidden and prohibited in Islamic law are found in the garden. As Mitchell highlights: "Openly hailed as a second paradise, Sa'adatabad is lauded for much more than its seraphic setting, and we find its denizens cast in a distinctly eschatological light. [...] The soteriological implications of Tahmasep imperial garden indeed border on self-indulgence." (Mitchell 132)

All these details found within the text about the Sa'adatabad garden leave no doubt that the authors of the letter have made its description an essential part of the image of the King and present the splendor of his palace in direct competition with the palaces of Ottoman kings. What is the importance of these gardens for the image of the King? The answer can be found in *Jannat-i 'Adn*: "Shah, who is the shadow of God (*zil Allah*) in all things; His garden is also an example of Paradise." ('Abdi Beyk 157)

In this verse, it is stated that the king is the shadow of God on earth, and since Paradise, with its strange descriptions in the Quran and Islamic texts as “the garden of God”, the king, like God, has a garden similar to him. The attribution of Islamic gardens to paradise has been frequently mentioned in contemporary research on Islamic art, and is typically accompanied by a mystical and spiritual meaning. Nevertheless, these Safavid gardens have the opposite meaning, signifying worldly power and earthly pleasures. In Islamic culture, “earthly paradise” has a reprehensible meaning and is attributed to people like Shaddad, who were enemies of God and were annihilated by him.<sup>8</sup> However, the Safavid kings “rightly” own these heavenly gardens with all their pleasures because they are the shadow of God on earth. This concept of the king, which originates in the Persian idea of the Just Ruler, is different from the dominant Islamic image of the Caliphate (Babaie 11). The concept of kingship was developed in Iran before the Safavids but peaked under their rule. Thus, Shah’s garden as an earthly paradise is a particular part of the image of the Persian king, which serves as a demonstration of his celestial power.

Considering Isfahan’s royal gardens, Babaie specifies “the architectural accommodation of feasting [as having] represented a markedly idiosyncratic practice of absolute rule in the early modern age.” (Babaie 1) Shah Tahmasp’s letter confirms this claim. This political content of architecture was also effective: the vivid descriptions of travellers and foreign ambassadors of the royal gardens and the pleasures they saw in it offer us insight into how they were influenced and impressed by the Shah’s image (Babaie 224-239). These descriptions are very similar to the descriptions of Shah Tahmasp’s letter of Sa’adatabad garden and show the gardens of Safavid kings as an extraordinary and dreamy place and a sign of the Shah’s glory, wealth, and power. The third part of the description of Sa’adatabad is related to its square, which we will discuss in the next section, in relation to the royal gifts which accompanied the letter itself.

### **The *Shahnama* and Other Gifts**

As mentioned above, precious gifts were sent to the court of Sultan Selim II along with the letter. The most remarkable of these gifts was Shah Tahmasp’s *Shahnama* though magnificent pieces of jewellery were also offered. According to Ottoman historians and foreign ambassadors who attended the gift-giving ceremony, the gifts looked very dazzling (Arcak 66). Naturally, sending such gifts was typical between royal courts as a part of political diplomacy. However, this does not necessarily justify Shah Tahmasp’s offering of gifts of such quality and rarity. As a masterpiece of Persian art, one would imagine that the royal *Shahnama* would have been kept in the Safavid royal treasury. We know that Shah Tahmasp had a taste in arts and even had some training in painting (Rumlu 488). The most significant masters of painting, calligraphers and illuminators were in charge of this masterpiece. The king undoubtedly recognized its high artistic, historic, and mercantile value. There are varying theories as to why the Shah offered the royal *Shahnama*: Qazwini proposes that it was the king’s repentance (231), as a main motivation for the gift. Others, such as Robert Hillenbrand, suggest that a “change in priorities of Shah” may have been caused by the good relationship between the two courts, while Arcak argues that the “Safavid Shah intended to proclaim his superiority as patron of the arts.” (71). Mitchell also suggests that “the presenta-

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8. A personage associated with the legendary town of Iram, to whom is attributed its foundation (Webb).



tion of this unsurpassed *Shahnama* reinforced clearly the profile of the Safavid ruler as a cultural patron par excellence to the young ascending sultan" (129). It is therefore interesting to take a closer look at what the letter says about the royal *Shahnama* as a gift.

In general, the letter's authors use a narrative technique to describe the royal gifts. Their descriptions come right after "the arrival of the good news" Sultan Selim's succession to the Safavid royal court, where joy extended beyond the palace and into the "four sides of Saadat Square and the new bazaar that was built" (Qumi, 514). It is in this bazaar that the shopkeepers and the artisans displayed their excellent goods; the letter continues by describing what was offered in these shops, which corresponded to the gifts that were sent with the letter:

Each group of artisans decorated their shops separately. The jewellers hung their jewels beautifully, and every kind of jewel was found in large numbers, including rubies and diamonds (*yaqut, la'al, dorr*). Very expensive swords and crowns, each worth as much as a country's tax, were decorated with various jewels. (Qumi 515)

In this indirect method of narration, beautiful and praiseworthy rhetoric is used again. On one hand, the letter enumerates the gifts, describes them in detail and expresses their value, while on the other, it does not mention that they are gifts, seemingly to hide the boastful character of the description. Other points can be deduced from this type of expression: unlike the previous two cases, these gifts are not defined as properties of the king or the royal court but as objects that are in "Saadat Square" and in its bazaar's all over the country.

This description attests to the comfort and enjoyment of the palace and garden. It shows that outside the palace, under the rule of the Shah, all craftsmen and artisans (*har senf mardum-i sani' u sharif*) in Iran were so prosperous that such unique gifts were found in every market. There is a reference to Shah Tahmasp's position as a supporter and promoter of arts and crafts: "To shorten the speech: the supreme justice of *Shah Adel* (Just King) watered the field of hope of friends" (Qumi 519).

These depictions of objects are related to their beauty, value, and price. Their beauty has been compared with natural and celestial objects: "Pleiades (*Suraya*) is ashamed of the jewellery necklaces, and the sea is ashamed of the beautiful diamonds. The beautiful golden patterns of the swords are more beautiful than the moon and the sun. Beautiful sweethearts (*Butan*, i.e., the gifts) flirt in stores and are at war with each other, but not a real war. Everyone has adorned themselves with gold, and the heavens are jealous of them" (Qumi 515). However, the most detailed descriptions are dedicated to the *Shahnama*:

When the atelier of bookbinding was prepared/a great rise arose from the city. The atelier is like a cypress in the garden/it is a new rose from a rose garden. From that atelier—that good-natured cypress/the rose garden of paradise is ashamed what an atelier! which was the envy of the abode of faeries/From the image [of the atelier], reason was stupefied This youth [i.e., book] sitting in the atelier/who is [such] an image that reason is perplexed by it The face of this youth [i.e., book] is so unique/that Bihzad went into a trance by its image when the dust of the down [on his lip] turns black [i.e., when his script is written]/no

one will care anymore about the calligraphy of Yaqüt in every ornament and beauty, in every way and manner/piled up a hundred sections [of the book] From the poems of the well-known Firdausi/who had done justice to the word in the age. A *Shah Namah* was proffered/ and his atelier was beautified by this gift it was gilded and illuminated most gloriously/it was bound with a hundred ornaments. Its script was written by the master all over/its writing is illuminated like the light of the eye. From the work of the pupils who have trained with *Zarin-qalam*/each page had a design sketched on it one painting was done by Bihzad/But he departed and left behind regret (Qumi 516; Mitchell's translation).

This excerpt refers to how the *Shahnama* was prepared, and in particular, to Behzad's key role. The latter is described as the one who "painted for kings" (*az bahr-i shahan nemudi raqam*) i.e., he is a "painter of kings" (Qumi 516).

Most of these descriptions are related to the beauty of this work, which surpasses all other works of art before it. Therefore, the significant status of this work was fully confirmed and acknowledged. Although there is no specific reference to the Shah in the various metaphors and similes that describe this work, one should recall that the title is significant *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) and inherently illustrates imperial power. The Safavid kings wanted to show that the *Shahnama* was one of the sources of their legitimacy and the letter's authors distinguished this book as the highest among all of the other books and gifts. In a letter that is supposed to depict the power of the Shah and its elements, the description of *Shahnama* also finds a suitable place: the "Book of the Shah." Furthermore, throughout this letter, the content of *Shahnama* forms one of the primary sources of imagery that have been used to describe the royal greatness and authority or the origin of the Shah's legitimacy: the critical figures of *Shahnama* (Kei khusraw, Jamshid, Fereydun, Darab and Rustam) are used frequently in order to describe Suleiman and Selim.<sup>9</sup>

From the point of view of the letter's authors, who naturally reflected the court's view, this *Shahnama* had great value and importance. The craftsmanship of the *Shahnama* showed the skill of the royal workshop, and the book's high value and content formed the basis of the legitimacy of the Safavid kings. The detailed description of the *Shahnama's* value and its illustration in Shah Tahmasp's letter, which depict the image of the king, all attest to the political dimension of the *Shahnama's* production. Thus, one of the primary purposes of sending the royal *Shahnama* was to remind the young sultan of the ancient foundations of the legitimacy of the Safavid kings and its continuation.

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9. Mitchell considers the prominence of the *Shahnama* discourse significant in this work and sees it as an alternative to the Shiite discourse, which is practically absent in this letter (134).

## Conclusion

In current research on Islamic art, little value has been given to historical texts and documents by considering them as works of art. In this article, I have examined one of these texts, a letter, the study of which reveals the multiple dimensions of Persian art during the Safavid period. As I have shown, the main goal of Shah Tahmasp's letter to Sultan Selim II was to depict the idea of the Shah as understood in the Safavid court. In this depiction, the Shah has a combination of attributes that date back to the image of the Shah in ancient Iran. The king is the shadow of God on earth, and his vast power and politics are manifested in the actions and works that emanate from him. The letter depicts various aspects of royal power and implicitly states how each of these aspects reinforces and expands the idea of the Shah. Some of these works and actions are related to the realm of royal art and architecture. The content and form of these artworks are described as royal power. Examining this letter reveals the complex interrelations between power, thought and art behind the court's constructions, for which little textual evidence is available. Furthermore, one should consider rhetoric along with painting, calligraphy, and architecture and understand this letter as a result of the art of rhetoric as that pursues the same political goals. In the royal court, patrons of art viewed these works as manifestations of their power, and saw, in their creation and exchange, forms of empowerment and the expansion of the basis of their legitimacy.

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