ESSAYS: DIPLOMACY, ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

MUHAMMAD GHAFFARI: THE PERSIAN PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE

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Orientalism, Edward Said’s landmark 1978 publication, revitalized—perhaps revolutionized—the study of the history and culture of the Middle East. Subsequent applications of his conclusions further enriched the field. After three decades of Saidian interpretation, a more nuanced approach to the subject has evolved, focusing on local institutions and agents of change who played a major role in the region’s response to the challenges of colonialism and modernity.

The second half of the nineteenth century in Iran was a period of autocratic rule dominated by the last Qajar ruler to exercise true power, Nasir al-Din Shah. During his long reign from 1848 until his assassination in 1896, Iran sought to maintain its independence from the colonial powers, and at the same time, to adopt certain innovations and technologies, such as printing and photography, considered as markers of progress essential to the emergence of a modern nation-state. In 1851 the Dar al-Funun (Abode of Sciences), Iran’s first institution of higher learning and military college, was established on the Shah’s orders. By the 1880s the telegraph had been introduced and the capital city of Tehran and the royal palace of the Gulistan had been renovated along European lines.

During this period, interaction with the West led to unprecedented economic penetration, the development of a propertied middle class, and the formation of an intelligentsia committed to
the need for fundamental social, cultural, and political change. The question of the nature of this change and the challenges of modernity were to dominate the history of this period.¹ As we shall see, these issues also informed the history of art production and training at the Dar al-Funun and the career of its most illustrious graduate, the painter Mirza Muhammad Ghaffari Kamal al-Mulk, generally regarded as the founder of modern Iranian art.

The Age of European-Style Institutions at the Nasiri Court

Before the establishment of the Dar al-Funun, art production and training took place in workshops located on the palace premises or in the bazaar. Artists were members of guilds and were trained in an apprenticeship system, which emphasized a respect for tradition, versatility of styles, copying from models, and replicating earlier styles of masters. By Western standards, Persian painting was flat, decorative, and stylized. But by indigenous standards, Persian painting aspired not only to attain formal perfection, but to present a realistic depiction of the world.

There was no distinction between the fine arts and the decorative arts as there was in Europe. Artists were craftsmen who executed commissions unquestioningly. However, an indigenous hierarchy of the arts did exist, in which calligraphy was considered the ultimate art form, not easel painting as in the European tradition. In addition, the system of court patronage included the production of a master work assuring advancement, and the awarding of titles, such as naqqashbashy (chief court painter).

The year 1862 marked a turning point in the history of Persian painting and its relationship to modernity. Painting was elevated from a craft to an academic discipline, thus separating it from the court workshop system under which it had thrived for centuries.

¹ Ringer 2001, 4-5.
By that time, the *Dar al-Funun* had been successfully functioning for more than ten years. The school remained the principal training ground for government service until the early twentieth century when separate colleges began to be established. By the 1920s the school had been downgraded to a secondary school. Its Western-style curriculum, which included medicine, physics, mathematics, and military history, was conducted in French. Courses were at first taught by European instructors and then by Iranians trained abroad.\(^2\)

In Qajar Iran, modernity had been identified with novelty since the early nineteenth century efforts at military reform, when European-style troops, *Nizam-i Jadid*, were introduced. In pursuit of new knowledge, Iranian students were sent abroad as early as the reign of Fath Ali Shah (1798-1834). This first group included the painter Muhammad Ja’far, who attended the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Art.

In 1861, the court’s most talented painter, Abu’l Hasan Ghaffari Sani’ al-Mulk, was sent to Italy to study painting and lithography. Upon Abu’l Hasan’s return in 1862, he was commissioned to set up the first lithographic press and to train students in painting and the use of the press at the *Dar al-Funun*. The lithographic press was intended to produce an illustrated court newspaper that would record the activities of the ruler and his court and the achievements of his reign—a carefully controlled image of a modern court.

The curriculum Abu’l Hasan devised was a compromise between the classical workshop tradition and the European academy system of instruction, with which it actually had much in common. Both systems used copying and replicating as the essential module, although Persian students were now copying second generation copies or prints of works by Titian and Raphael and plaster casts which Abu’l Hasan had brought back with him, instead of the works of Persian master manuscript painters.

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\(^2\) Gurney and Nabavi 1993, 663; Ekhtiar 1994, 140, 161-77.
Under Abu’l Hasan’s tutelage, an exceptionally fine school of portraiture emerged that was a hybrid between the classical Persian painting tradition and a more modern vision evoking elements of European painting (fig. 1). His portrait of Nasir al-Din Shah in apotheosis is emblematic of the precarious balance between tradition and modernity characteristic of Nasiri court culture.

During Abu’l Hasan’s brief heyday from 1861 until his untimely death in 1866 the images he produced for the court newspaper revealed its evolution from a propagandistic tool to a record of urban life and social issues dangerously close to social critique. These images also provide early instances of the medium’s potential as a site for imperial propaganda or reform.

Abu’l Hasan was succeeded by Mirza Ali Akbar Kashani Natanzi Muzayyan al-Dawla. Mirza Ali Akbar was well connected to court circles and came from Kashan, also the birthplace of the Ghaffari dynasty of painters. In 1859 at the age of twelve, Mirza Ali Akbar was sent to France with forty-two other students by Nasir al-din Shah. Once there, he studied French and attended the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. Sources record that he also studied with Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, France’s leading academic painter. Ingres was nearing the end of his career at this time, but was still receiving students in his studio, lending credence to Mirza Ali Akbar’s claim. Mirza Ali Akbar’s training coincided with Osman Hamdi’s period of study in Paris. Hamdi’s training at the studios of Orientalist painters Jean-Léon Gérôme and Gustave Boulanger would be the decisive influence in the formation of his style. To judge by his few surviving works, Mirza Ali Akbar’s style replicated the most conservative academic style current in Paris.

After his return to Tehran sometime before 1867, Mirza Ali Akbar was appointed teacher of French and painting instructor at the Dar al-Funun. At that time, a French painter by the name
of Constant was also on staff. After Constant’s death in 1871, Mirza Ali Akbar was promoted to the post of principal painting instructor, which he held for the next forty years. He was awarded the title of naqqashbashy in the same year. During his lengthy tenure at the Dar al-Funun, Mirza Ali Akbar faithfully transmitted the academic style to his students. He not only formed a cadre of competent painters, but also trained highly skilled Qajar painters such as Ismail Jalayir and Mirza Muhammad. Mirza Ali Akbar thus played a decisive role in the creation of an official style of Europeanized academic painting, which would prevail for the remainder of the Qajar era.

Mirza Ali Akbar’s reputation as a painter has suffered, possibly because of a later rivalry with his student Mirza Muhammad, and certainly because of a lack of surviving works. However, a recent publication featuring a landscape painting executed in 1868, shortly after his return, reveals that he was, at the very least, a skilled copyist and competent painter (fig. 2). He was certainly held in high esteem by his contemporaries, who compared both Mirza Ali Akbar and Mirza Muhammad to Perugino and Raphael.

Mirza Ali Akbar’s fame rests primarily on his skill as a language teacher; he was French tutor to the two crown princes under Muzaffar al-Din Shah (1896-1907) and an author of academic textbooks, treatises, and French-Iranian dictionaries. He was amply rewarded with honors and medals from European powers, making him one of the leading figures in the translation of the conservative values of nineteenth-century European culture to Iran.

Regarding the painting curriculum Mirza Ali Akbar instituted at the Dar al-Funun, we may surmise that he continued elements of Abu’l Hasans’s methods, updated and systematized according to the latest approaches Mirza Ali Akbar had learned in France. The new instruction would still have paralleled many aspects of indigenous art production and must have easily been adapted by Mirza Ali Akbar and readily adopted by the Dar al-Funun’s talented students. There

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3 Adhari 1963/4, 3.
was, of course, one main difference: the lack of life-drawing classes. This may explain the replication and mimicry found in many works by minor artists of this period. Nevertheless, local standards of drawing could be extremely high, as evidenced by the virtuoso style of Ismail Jalayir’s paintings and drawings.

New genres of painting appeared, such as the independent landscape and still-life. Although the still-life was a European import, landscape painting had been a shared tradition between Europe and Iran since the end of the seventeenth century. A more realistic depiction of daily life also began to emerge. We may discern a certain ambivalence toward European culture and a nuanced approach toward the use of European models and styles.

The paintings of this period evince a range of possible responses on the part of local painters, from the adoption of Europeanized form while retaining Persian subject matter, as in the works by Jalayir, to the complete assimilation of European techniques and style, as in Rassam Arjangi’s still-lifes. The greatest novelty of all was the introduction of the new canvas and its frame. As a result, the scale of Persian painting was enlarged, and its context changed from albums and manuscripts to the interior decoration of the latest European-style palaces.

**A Modern Monarch?**

The patronage of Nasir al-Din Shah was critical to this creation of a Western-style academy of painting and to the production of official art in the service of the state. While he saw himself as a connoisseur, Nasir al-Din Shah was most interested in the propagandistic value of art. As in Europe, academic painting was used to enhance the imperial image and produce official state portraits. The new art, *hunar-i nuvin* or *hunar-i jadid*, was also required to decorate the Gulistan palace, and later, the numerous palatial mansions of the elite, many of which were
destroyed during the Constitutional period and whose appearance is documented by contemporary photography.

Nasir al-Din Shah and his courtiers attended yearly exhibitions of students’ work modeled on those of the Salon d’Automne in Paris. Collections of European paintings and decorative arts were displayed in a museum created by Nasir al-Din Shah and in other dedicated areas of the Gulistan palace, designated by hybrid terms such as “muzé” and “galerie.”

The Science of Photography

The local production of competent, if uninspired, painting in the academic style was undoubtedly influenced by the use of photography. The science of photography had a generally positive impact on Persian painting, specifically in the art of design, the rendering of landscape, portraiture, light and shade, and perspective.

Photography was introduced at court by Europeans toward the end of the reign of Muhammad Shah (1834-48), Nasir al-Din Shah’s father. The young Nasir al-Din Shah soon became one of the first photographers. The extent of the ruler’s passion for this medium and of his contributions to its development can be measured by the Gulistan Palace Library’s collection of more than forty thousand photographic prints, at least twenty thousand of which were taken by the Shah himself.

At the Dar al-Funun, photography was taught from the 1860s onwards, initially by Europeans, such as Francis Carlhian (d. 1870 Tehran), and then by young Iranians trained in the latest processes in Europe. The position of court photographer (akkasbashy) was established in 1862, and many local photographers emerged.
Many considered photography the essential tool for the advancement of Persian painting to the level of European painting, which Qajar art connoisseurs judged to be far superior. Although photography’s impact is evident, we know little of the way painters actually used it. To judge by surviving works from the *Dar al-Funun*, photography may also have been used as a teaching tool for painting.\(^4\) It could have been adapted to the academic teaching system and used along with models and replicas, or it may have been used informally by artists in their private practice.

In the late nineteenth century, photography responded to indigenous Persian interests, which mirrored those in Europe, such as the acquisition of modern technology and the recording and dissemination of information. Qajar photography soon fulfilled the very same tasks as its European counterpart. It was used to record court life, to document architectural, monumental, and archaeological sites, to chronicle the shah’s trips, to illustrate pictorial reports documenting his domain, and to picture his harem. Photography also conformed to Persian cultural and religious values, since it was approved by the local *ulema*.

Most significantly for our purposes, photography provided Persian painters with a shortcut to illusionistic and naturalistic painting. The interaction between photography and painting illustrates Iran’s original response to modernity and creative reuse of European technology. It also illustrates that parallel contemporary developments could occur in both the East and the West. For instance, photography was also used by certain academic painters in Europe, such as Dadgan Bouveret, to achieve a heightened effect of naturalism.

By the late nineteenth century, the introduction of European technological innovations had considerably altered and expanded not only the court workshop system, but also the number

\(^4\) For a watercolor of Nasir al-Din Shah and its photographic model, see Diba 1998, 262-63, fig. 87-88.
of artists employed and the nature of artistic production. Finally, the hierarchy of art had ineluctably changed, and academic painting was now triumphant.

Mirza Muhammad Ghaffari Kamal al-Mulk: The Persian Painter of Modern Life

Contemporary Persian and European sources and art critics agree that European-style academic painting found its greatest exponent in Mirza Muhammad Ghaffari, known as Kamal al-Mulk (Perfection of the Kingdom). Yet a closer look at his life’s work suggests that this view may be too narrow. Mirza Muhammad himself discussed his preference for the European movement of Naturalism, a point we will return to later. More important, we may argue that he should be viewed as the Persian equivalent of French painters of modern life, such as Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, and Henri Fantin-Latour. In addition, his career presents intriguing parallels to and differences from those of his Ottoman contemporaries Osman Hamdi and Mehmet Ruhi Arel (1880-1931).

Born sometime between 1850 and 1859 to a family of distinguished statesmen, historians, painters, and jurists from Kashan, Mirza Muhammad’s career spanned the end of the Qajar and the post-Qajar periods, until his death in 1940. According to Mirza Muhammad, the first Persian painter for whom we have an autobiography, his early training as an artist was based on the study of the works of his uncle, the aforementioned court painter Abu’l Hasan Ghaffari Sani’ al-Mulk, and on instruction at the Dar al-Funun during the 1870s with Mirza Ali Akbar. According to the artist, however, he was largely self-taught and Mirza Ali Akbar played a minor role in his formation as a painter.

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5 Ashraf and Diba, forthcoming.
It was at this time that Mirza Muhammad first became familiar with European painting through prints brought back by his uncle and exposure to the painting collection of Nasir al-Din Shah. Mirza Muhammad was also exposed to photography. His exceptional talent and intelligence and the modern education he received at the Dar al-Funun and abroad would make him the painter of modern Persian life.

It was also at the Dar al-Funun that he was exposed to the liberalizing trends of the Qajar intelligentsia and made contact with leading thinkers and political figures of the Constitutional period, such as Muhammad Ali Furughi Zuka al-Mulk and Ibrahim Hakim, Hakim al-Mulk. These statesmen acted as patrons and supporters later in his career.

Having learned his craft well, Mirza Muhammad soon caught the attention of the Shah, who appointed him court painter in 1881, ten years after Mirza Ali Akbar had been awarded the honor. Mirza Muhammad states that during his years as court painter he was generously remunerated, enabling him to marry and establish a family. Mirza Muhammad’s earliest works exhibit the dual influence of photography and the hybrid style of his uncle, Abu’l Hasan, but his works of the next decade reveal his increasing skill as an artist. As official court painter, he meticulously recorded the renovations to the palace and produced official portraits for state gifts. He accompanied the ruler on hunting trips and painted numerous landscapes and views of the royal encampments. The paintings’ inscriptions indicate that they were executed on-site, representing a significant evolution in painting practice from replication in the atelier to composing *en plein air*.

Mirza Muhammad’s works of the 1880s and 1890s surpass those of all his contemporaries in their almost photographic realism, attention to detail and texture, and color sense. They also present the officially sanctioned image of modern Iran, in which European-style
palaces are rendered in perspective, and every ripple of water and ray of light is recorded. The ruler and his courtiers sit in informal photographic poses dressed in contemporary clothing. Yet these works already show signs of the compassion and empathy that would lead Mirza Muhammad to become the painter of another side of modern Persia: the poverty and the concerns of common people, evident in his views of nomadic life.\(^7\) Even in state portraits there is sometimes a subtext, as in an image in which the ruler appears dwarfed by the splendor of his surroundings (fig. 3). The painting suggests the ruler’s isolation and the artificial splendor of his palaces, which masked his increasingly fragile authority.

Mirza Muhammad’s memoirs describe an incident in which the painter was accused of theft, revealing the changing nature of the artist-patron relationship. The painter was investigated after a theft in the throne room of the Gulistan Palace, which he had used as one of his ateliers. Mirza Muhammad’s outraged description of this incident provides evidence of an independent streak and a clash with authority unprecedented for a Persian painter. His anger may also be attributed to his espousal of liberal views, which were commonly held by other students of the Dar al-Funun. The artist was later exonerated and awarded the title of Kamal al-Mulk, revealing his important status at court.

After Nasir al-Din Shah’s assassination in 1896, his successor, Muzaffar al-Din Shah, sent Mirza Muhammad to Europe for 2 years. He honed his skills in ateliers in Florence, Vienna, and Paris, made remarkably skillful copies of the old masters, principally Rembrandt and Titian, and executed portraits of his fellow artists. The self-portraits he executed during this time are another genre new to Persian painting and reflect his increasing self-awareness as an artist. They

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\(^6\) For a portrait of Crown Prince Nasir-al-Din Mirza, 1881, see Zoka 1997, 7, fig.3.

\(^7\) See Kaykavous 1992, 40-41, fig. 28 and 28a for a painting of a nomadic encampment, titled Nomadic Life in the Valley of Lar, 1308 A.H./1891.
present him in elegant European garb, confidently gazing at the viewer. These self-portraits are a radical departure from tradition in Persian painting, in which artists depicted themselves prostrate or humbly bowing before their ruler and signed their works with demeaning phrases emphasizing their humility (fig. 4).

In contrast to the child prodigy Mirza Ali Akbar, Mirza Muhammad was an accomplished professional when he arrived in Europe. During a visit to Henri Fantin-Latour’s studio, Fantin-Latour introduced Mirza Muhammad to his friends as the Light from the East from which they should all be inspired. Fantin-Latour’s approach to art, which included copying and admiration for old masters, was quite in sympathy with Mirza Muhammad’s.

Mirza Muhammad appears to have been less influenced by the Orientalists than his contemporary Osman Hamdi. He was also less influenced by avant-garde painters, and as a result, he has sometimes been criticized as not being modern enough. Yet Paris in the 1890s was dominated by the Academy, and there was little evidence at that time of which style would prevail in the twentieth century. According to his memoirs, Mirza Muhammad was greatly interested by the philosophy of Naturalism as it applied to painting, illustrating again that Persians adopted aspects of modernity which mirrored their own experiences and helped further their goals.

Another aspect of Mirza Muhammad’s biography reveals the emergence of a more modern sensibility in his work regarding the depiction of women. Women are noticeably absent from his oeuvre; however, a friend who visited his studio in Vienna sometime between 1896 and 1898 describes a sensitive and surprisingly life-like portrait of a young woman. Mirza Muhammad told his visitor that the sitter was the daughter of the Persian minister in Vienna, who was an Armenian. Very much in love, the two would later be (unhappily it seems) married.
The portrait has unfortunately not survived—whether because of an accident or deliberate suppression we do not know.

In 1900, Mirza Muhammad was ordered to return to Iran. The following years were marked by the breakdown of the political system, leading to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-06. Although Mirza Muhammad worked as court painter for a year after his return, he did not like Muzaffar al-Din Shah or his dubious taste in art.

The last straw came when he was asked to produce erotic caricatures of Nasir al-Din Shah, the ruler’s own father and Mirza Muhammad’s patron. This was clearly unacceptable to a painter who regarded himself as a progressive intellectual or rushanfekr. Mirza Muhammad retired to Baghdad and Kerbela for two years. This coincided with his Armenian bride’s return to Europe and may explain this self-imposed exile.

With the death of Muzaffar al-Din Shah in 1907, the system of court patronage of official art that had endured since the Safavid period collapsed as well. It is from this period on that a shift in Mirza Muhammad’s subject matter occurs, with greater attention given to urban scenes and images of the everyday life of common people. This represents a major evolution in the imagery of Persian painting and would have a lasting effect on its subsequent development. A similar evolution, allied to nascent Turkish nationalism, can be seen in the work of Ruhi in the 1920s.8

Mirza Muhammad returned to Tehran in 1907 during a period of conflict and political turmoil. We do not know if he played an active role in the events. He did, however, join the Bidari (Awakening) lodge of Freemasons, a center of the reform movement, and he painted the leading liberal political figures of the day. By 1911, with the assistance of Hakim al-Mulk, a former pupil and friend from his days at the Dar al-Funun and now Minister of Education, Mirza
Muhammad established his own Academy of Fine Arts, operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Education. He remained its director through the turbulent times of the Constitutional period and the upheavals of Iran’s disintegration in the 1920s.

The new Academy’s mission was to teach painting. What were then termed the “useful arts,” such as carpet weaving and lithography, were also taught. Like its predecessor, the *Dar al-Funun*, the school held an annual exhibition of artists’ works, which were for sale. The Academy also provided a mixed curriculum that reflected the policies and needs of the time: the carpet industry was in decline due to foreign competition, and lithography was essential to the production of popular newspapers.

Mirza Muhammad trained the next generation of painters and was greatly revered by Iranians for his dedication and leadership. However, due to his strong character and independence, he resigned his post at the academy in 1932 after disagreements with the then Minister of Education and retired to Nishapur until his death in 1940. His pupils continued to direct the school and to champion the cause of academic painting, which dominated the art production of the next generation of Iranian painters, for better or worse.

Early in his career, Mirza Muhammad was a court artist and the leading exponent of state-sponsored Qajar modernism. After his return from Europe, and following events of the Constitutional period, Mirza Muhammad sought to develop a national style, much as the intellectuals, in their search for an authentic national cultural identity, sought to promote the Persian language and pre-Islamic Iran.\(^9\) This evolution presents parallels with the art of Osman Hamdi, which has been described in these terms.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Wright 2005, 152.


Mirza Muhammad’s urban genre scenes and popular subjects sometimes tended to be self-Orientalizing (fig. 5-6). A comparison between his painting of a silk vendor and a contemporary cartoon from a newspaper shows how Mirza Muhammad idealized urban life. His academic technique, with its highly polished surface, sentimental expressions, and spotless clothing contrasts with the dirt and misery depicted in the crudely drawn cartoons of the constitutional press and contemporary photographs. Mirza Muhammad’s Turkish contemporary, Ruhi, recognized a similar weakness in his own work and adopted a deliberately unsophisticated style in his later work.\footnote{Wright 2005, 152-3.} There are also similarities between Mirza Muhammad’s work and the problems discussed with regard to Osman Hamdi’s \textit{Book of Turkish National Costumes}.\footnote{Wright 2005, 152-3.} In both cases, the intent was to picture a culture with dignity and realism, yet the results are problematic and the balance difficult to achieve.

In the works of Hosayn Shaykh, a leading follower of Mirza Muhammad, we can see this ideal of the quiet dignity of modern Persian life decline into a style that is anecdotal, picturesque, and verging on kitsch, all features associated with Orientalism. In an ironic twist of fate, the painter of modern Persian life was also responsible for a renewed influence of Orientalism in Persian art of the first half of the twentieth century.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Our analysis has shown that in art training, the lithographic press, and photography, Iran constantly sought to adapt colonial institutions to local traditions and needs throughout the nineteenth century. We have shown an evolution from a painting style based on novelty \textit{jadid} in the works of Abu’l Hasan Ghaffari to one based on a search for nationalism in the work of Mirza
Muhammad. This evolution presents clear parallels with events in Ottoman Turkey, yet also exhibits differences due to Iran’s greater distance—cultural, political and geographical—from the centers of the great colonial empires.

Mirza Muhammad was able to avail himself locally of the tools and the training necessary to become a competent painter who had thoroughly assimilated the European academic style. However, his exceptional talent and intelligence enabled him to transcend mere mimicry. Mirza Muhammad’s life’s work was not only one of translation, but also an innovative interpretation of modern Persian life, in spite of its occasional deficiencies and compromises.

Bibliography


Çelik 1995, 42.


Illustrations

figure 1: Abu’l Hasan Ghaffari, Sani’ al-Mulk
Apotheosis of Nasir al-Din Shah
Tehran, dated A.H. 1275/A.D. 1858
Opaque watercolor on paper, 32.8 x 24.3 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris
figure 2: Ali Akbar Muzayyan Dawleh

*Ploughing Time*

Tehran, Dated 1285 A.H /1868 A.D.
60 x 130 cm, Oil on Canvas
Sa’dabad Museum, Tehran
figure 4: Muhammad Ghaffari Kamal al-Mulk

*Self Portrait*

Oil on canvas

Dimensions Unknown

Undated, ca. 1896-1900

Malek Library Collection
figure 5: Muhammad Ghaffari Kamal al-Mulk
Portrait of Silk Vendors
1308 A.H. / 1890 A.D.
Oil on canvas
Gulistan Palace Museum
figure 6: Exhibition of Iranian industry and trade. Lithograph. Source: the Newspaper *Kashkul* Year 1, no. 9. June 4 1907, p. 3.