THREE ACHAEMENID “FAKES”
A Re-evaluation in the Light of 19th Century Iranian Architectural Sculpture

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It often happens that forgeries (objects made in a particular style deliberately to deceive) and fakes (genuine works of art altered in some way to increase their value: see Soave: 1; Tietze: 5) remain undetected for years after they have come on the market, been acquired, published and exhibited. Then, someone looks at them with a fresh eye and exposes them as frauds or imitations. It is less usual for works of art that have been condemned as outright fakes to be proven genuine: not necessarily belonging to the time to which they were originally (and falsely) attributed, but to another period for which they can stand as typical examples of their kind.

This last situation applies to three reliefs acquired in Cairo by Armand De Potter in the later 19th century. He lent them to the University Museum in 1898, where they remained until 1908 when they were purchased by the Brooklyn Museum, together with a substantial number of Egyptian antiquities that formed the bulk of the De Potter Collection. Today they are in the Oriental Department of the Brooklyn Museum.

Fig. 1, of limestone, depicts the head of a bearded personage wearing a tall, cylindrical headdress. Figs. 2 and 3, both of alabaster, show an enthroned king; the former has the king surrounded by members of his court, the latter accompanied by his crown prince who stands behind the throne. They had been considered examples of Achaemenid sculpture, presumably from the ruins of the royal city of Persepolis which, since the 19th century, had provided fragments of relief sculpture for many European and American collections.

John D. Cooney (1963) published the reliefs as fakes, which was an accurate judgment within the context of 6th or 5th century B.C. Achaemenid art, and Oscar W. Muscarella includes them among “a
number of definite crude forgeries and suspicious reliefs allegedly from Persepolis (Muscarella: 181-3; nos. 132-4). When compared to reliefs of similar or identical subjects at Persepolis (Figs. 4-6) the Brooklyn reliefs indeed appear as poor imitations. Their style, subject matter, and technique, however, mark them as genuine works of Persian art—but of the 19th century A.D., that is, art of the Qajar period. Their clumsy carving and peculiarities of detail are simply the Qajar artists' interpretation of these Persepolis reliefs that served as their models.

The Qajar period (A.D. 1720-1920) saw the revival of relief sculpture, notably in the southern city of Shiraz, the capital of Fars province. The city is only 40 miles from Persepolis and close to the sites of Naqsh-i Rustam and Pasargadae, which have other Achaemenid sculpture. It is also close to many of the rock reliefs sculpted in the later Sassanian period (A.D. 224-651). Like many of the buildings at Persepolis, the royal palaces and the houses of upper-class Shirazis were set on high foundations and faced with stone slabs that often were decorated with relief carvings. Some of these carvings were of incidents and characters known from Persian epic poetry, or based on figures found in the Sassanian, and, more usually, Achaemenid reliefs.

Particularly in the second half of the 19th century, a number of town- and country-houses were built and embellished with reliefs in the Persepolitan mode. One great house was Alifabad, begun in 1853, on the outskirts of Shiraz (Fig. 7). The east façade of its basement or foundation is decorated with a series of gray limestone slabs, most of which are carved with individual, nearly life-size, figures of soldiers from one of the more glorious periods of Persian history.

One such soldier wears the flowing Persian cymatic, a high cylindrical hat, and carries a spear in both hands (Fig. 9). The relief in Fig. 3 had originally been the upper portion of a slab that had depicted a similar, or perhaps a royal, figure. The heads of both personages (Figs. 1 and 9) display those physiognomic features that identify them, not merely as banded Achaemenid copies, but as typical Qajar work. The heavy nose and cheeks, small pouting mouth, carved eyebrows placed slightly askew from the curve of the almond-shaped eye, and heavy mustache with curling tip are features that consistently occur in all Qajar representations of Persianian figures.

In addition, the heads display a most characteristic Qajar feature—the fringe of curls that lies flat upon the forehead instead of standing upright as in all representations of Persians and Medes at Persepolis. The long layered beard of the personage in Fig. 1 could designate him as royalty, for in the Achaemenid reliefs this style of beard, though longer and square-tipped, is a prerogative of only the king and crown prince. But in the Qajar reliefs this beard is worn indiscriminately by kings and guards (Figs. 2 and 9). Similarly, the plain crown of the personage in Fig. 1...
Persian soldiers on the sculptured eastern stairway of the great audience hall, the Apadana, at Persepolis. Because the stairway was unearthed only in 1932, its reliefs are well preserved. The northern stairway of the Apadana, however, had been exposed over the centuries. Consequently, its reliefs, which are similar in theme to those of the eastern stairway, are in poor condition, and many are even missing. It was the sculptures on the northern stairway that provided the models for the Persian soldiers that appear in many of the Ctesias reliefs. (E. F. Schmidt, Persepolis I, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, 1935.)

The Achaemenid king, Artaxerxes I, giving audience. The relief appears on the west jamb of the eastern stairway in the northern wall of the Hundred-Column Hall, Persepolis. (E. Herzfeld, Iran in the Ancient East, Oxford University Press, 1911.)

King Darius I enthroned, with his crown prince, Xerxes, standing behind him. The relief is on the south jamb of the eastern stairway in the main hall of the Central Building (also called the Tripylon) at Persepolis. (Herzfeld, as in Fig. 5.)
Central portion of the east façade of Affalabad, overlooking a reflecting pool. Named the "Abode of Charity," this elaborate garden palace, now within the city limits of Tehran, served as a country retreat for members of the Qajar family. Although much restored, the decorations are based on the original and the relief panels carved with floral motifs and soldiers have remained unaltered. The historically represented by the different soldiers that appear in the photographs are from left to right, Achaemenid, Buyid, Seljuk, Sassanian, and Achaemenid soldiers in the days of Nasereddin Shah's army. Contemporaries with the construction of Affalabad, decorative panels at each end of the façade. Not only were these reliefs inspired by Achaemenid art and architectural elements, they also were incorporated into the decorative program. An example is the inventory scene in the semicircular relief panel at the top of the east façade.

In Qajar reliefs a tall plain headdress is worn also by Persian guards, while their Achaemenid counterparts at Persepolis wear a fluted tiara or low fillet-like band that leaves the top of the head exposed (Fig. 4).

The figures in the other two reliefs in Brooklyn (Figs. 2 and 3) show the same typically Qajar physiognomy. Their compact bodies in flattered relief are awkwardly draped in the Qajar version of the sash, already noted on the Affalabad "Achaemenid" soldier (Fig. 9). Again, differences from Achaemenid form and style are obvious. What is more interesting are the ways in which these differences point up some of the concerns of Qajar art.

In the Qajar relief illustrated in Fig. 2, the enthroned king sits with a staff and a flower in either hand, behind him an attendant holds a fly-whisk, and to either side stands a guard carrying a spear. The relief has been copied from those in the northern doorways of the Hundred-Column Hall at Persepolis, in which Artaxerxes I, surrounded by courtiers and guards, gives audience to his Median viceroy (Fig. 5). A similar audience scene appears on the two relief slabs found in the Treasury at Persepolis, that originally belonged to the

Apadana Stairways. But these could not have been models for the Qajar relief, because the Treasury building and its contents were completely unknown before the systematic excavation of Persepolis in the 1930s (Schmidt 1953: 167; Pls. 121, 123).

It is possible that the scene on the relief in Fig. 2 continued on another block that showed courtiers or guards facing to the right, toward the king. As a copy of the Persepolis reliefs, the Brooklyn relief is clumsy and inaccurate. The figures are not neatly arranged on a groundline, with all heads aligned except that of the king, whose importance is stressed by his abnormal size. Instead, the Qajar figures float in space. Even the lower end of the spear carried by the guard on the right hovers over his knees instead of being held in a convention that firmly on the forward foot. Compare Fig. 8 in which the artist was more aware of the convention, but still misunderstood it, for the guard's foot slightly overlaps the end of the spear.

The attendant with the fly-whisk in this second relief wears a headdress that covers the lower part of his face in the manner of the attendants in the Hundred-Column Hall reliefs; but above the edge of his chin
covering, a row of curls from a beard and a mustache appear, while the Persepolis attendants are beardless eunuchs. For a detail of an attendant with the fly-whisk and towel from the Hundred-COLUMN Hall, see Schmidt 1933: Fig. 601. The towel carried by all fly-whisk bearers in the Persepolis reliefs is absent from the Qajar attendants’ hand, and the whisk that he holds in both hands is more Qajar than Achaemenid in its decoration: three large spheres have replaced the spherical turnings of the Achaemenid fly-whisk handle, and leaf-like forms decorate the Mass of the whisk itself, instead of the striations of the original’s animal tail.

The decoration of the throne in the Qajar relief has been greatly simplified, and many of its elements misunderstood. The bead-and-reel molding that runs down the side of the Persepolis throne-backs has been reduced to a simple row of beads, and the sculptural decoration of the rings of the Persepolis thrones and footstools has been ignored, as have the lion’s legs. The fluted members of the basal units on which the lion’s legs rest have been misunderstood, but here the Qajar desire for a more organic form has returned the element to its original conception as it occurred earlier in Assyrian and Urartian furniture, that is, as a row of drooping leaves. In the Qajar relief, its drooping form is balanced further up the throne legs by identical elements that curve upwards as if they were growing.

These differences in detail probably are due to artistic preference as much as to lack of interest in accurate observation. All the throne scenes that were visible at Persepolis in the 19th century were many feet above ground-level. That detail of dress apparent at eye-level, such as the long-tongued shoes with three straps and buttons worn by all Persians except royalty on the Persepolis reliefs, were carefully observed by the foot-stone in the relief in Fig. 3, although incorrectly given there to the king and crown prince. A more probable reason for lapses in the rendering of details is that most Qajar sculptors worked directly from pattern-books and had no need to check their work with the originals. This helps to explain the most remarkable feature of the relief in Fig. 2: the diminutive guard who is seen from the back. The rear view is unknown in Achaemenid art. It appears in another relief of the Qajar period, carved on the mantel of a fireplace (Fig. 11) that adorns a
small reception room of the Narenjestan in Shiraz (Fig. 10). The town-house of the hereditary mayors of Shiraz, the Narenjestan ("Snor-Orange Garden") was begun in the late 1780's and completed in 1805 (O'Donnell; 1919, p. 110). The building, original with the house, is of alabaster; the figures carved on its mantel are outlined in gold leaf. The audience scene in the central panel is similar to that of the Brooklyn relief, but it is, unlike the Brooklyn piece, complete in showing the guards standing before the king. The throne is closer in its details to the Persepolis model, but the fly-swhisk repeats the form of the one in the Brooklyn relief. The figures also float in space, and the guards who is shown from behind is smaller than his companions. An interesting detail is the quiver on his back. Such quivers are worn by the Persian guards at Persepolis but they are depicted only in profile; for example, the guards below the audience scenes in the hundred-column Hall doorways (Schmidt 1932, PI. 101-11). It is clear from the rendering of individual details that the Brooklyn and Narenjestan reliefs are products of different sculptors or workshops. Nevertheless, the close similarity in their composition and certain details suggests the common use of a popular book of drawings, perhaps a contemporary "guide-book" with pictures of Persepolis, or actual cartoons made specially for artists' workshops (a well-known example of such a guide-book is in Moharram Nisir Forest al-Joveh Shirhabi, A.J. 1913/A.D. 1896 where, in fact, his drawings of the Persepolis reliefs are more accurate than any of the Qajar carvings). The rear view of the little guard reflects

32 Relief to the right of the central panel in Fig. 11. Mohammad Reza Khan Qavam al-Molk is shown seated in a box, with a stool, probably from a curtainless, hung to the left.

33 Bibliography
Conroy, J. D.
Pottier, A. De
1896 The Old World and European Guide (Illustrated) 4th edition. Chicago
Tietze, H.
1926 The Psychology and Aesthetics of Fugery in Art, Metropolitan Museum Studies 5:1-19

34 a new element in Persian art of the 19th century—an interest in three-dimensional space, brought about by exposure to contemporary European painting and photography. Thus, the small size of the fly-swhisk bearers in both the Brooklyn and Narenjestan reliefs may have been an attempt to suggest the figures' placement behind the throne and beyond the soldiers who guard it, or may be merely the result of the artist's inability to fit the figures into the composition in a more convincing way. But the rear view of the guard and the frontal view of another guard on the Narenjestan panel seem to desire a more natural, less hieratic, posture than were employed in traditional Persian art.

The three-quarter and frontal views of some of the soldiers on the Affahad façade (Fig. 7) also show this interest by depicting more varied postures than occur on the Achaemenid reliefs which these Qajar reliefs were meant to emulate. Such relaxed postures were better recorded by photography. Thus, on the Narenjestan mantel, the rectangular panels that flank the central one in Fig. 11 show, in mirror-image, the men who completed the Narenjestan wall. Mohammad Reza Khan Qavam al-Molk, seated at ease, in a non-Persian attitude that would be appropriate for, and in fact most likely was copied from, a photograph (Fig. 15). The third Qajar relief in Brooklyn (Fig. 3) displays many of the features of the throne scene of the second relief, although details of dress and furniture have been more carefully represented and are closer to Persepolis models. The direct model for the scene appears in the western, the eastern doorway of the main hall of the Central Building (Fig. 6). These, crown prince Xerxes stands behind the enthroned Darius. Xerxes holds a flower in his left hand and lightly touches the back of the throne with his right. In the Treasury reliefs at Persepolis, the crown prince's right hand, palm open, is raised toward the throne and does not rest upon it. As the other Qajar reliefs, the figures awkwardly occupy the block. Without the support of a footstool, the king's feet dangle in the air, while the crown prince appears to have stubbed his toe on the throne leg.

The distinction between the two crowns is notable on the Qajar relief. On the Persepolis reliefs, each king has his own individual crown. However, the fluted tiara of the king on the Qajar relief worn at Persepolis only by Persian dignitaries and guards—for example, on the Apadana stairway façades (Schmidt 1953: PI. 19).

The reliefs in Brooklyn most likely come from one or more houses built in Shiraz between the 1600's and early 1800's—or, of course, directly from one or more workshops engaged in the manufacture of such reliefs during that period of the 19th century. If they came from a house, all three relief blocks could have adorned the same house, since reliefs still extant on individual houses, such as the Narenjestan, show the work of different hands. Their possible removal from a house, and subsequent sale, reflect one aspect of the then relatively recent trade in forgeries of ancient Near Eastern art that was encouraged by the growing interest in antiquities. For example, J. Ménart cites forgeries of Sasanian Intaglio that were attributed to the Achaemenid period by their cuneiform inscriptions (!), and counterfeit cameos of 19th century manufacture (Ménart 1887: 14, 16-4, 22-5).

It seems likely that before being put on the market the Brooklyn reliefs had been transformed from genuine, contemporary 19th century sculptures to ancient false. According to Conroy, the fine-grained limestone of the relief in Fig. 1 had been stained to imitate the dark gray, almost black, limestone of many of the Persepolis reliefs. The alabaster of the relief in Fig. 2 had also been stained to imitate the well-known "Mound marble" so generally used for the great Assyrian reliefs (Conroy 1963: 23). The stains have since been removed. The use of alabaster for the reliefs in Figs. 2 and 3 was, for Conroy, proof of forgery, and evidence that the Qajar reliefs were done in Egypt as their place of origin. But alabaster was regularly used to decorate 19th century Shiraz houses; for example, in the Narenjestan, for dado panels in the principal rooms, and for the carved jaws of doorways that connected one courtyard to another in the larger houses—as, again, in the Narenjestan.
It seems that De Potter purchased the reliefs as genuine Assyrian works of art. In a letter to Mrs. Sarah Yorke Stevenson of the University Museum, dated 14 June 1898, De Potter mentions “three tablets which I have had for a number of years,” and which “no doubt . . . represent some period of Assyrian art” (see Acknowledgments). This is the only mention in the entire correspondence of non-Egyptian objects in the De Potter collection lent to the University Museum, and so these “tablets” must be the Qajar reliefs.

De Potter states that they were formerly in the possession of Clot Bey, in Cairo, and that he (De Potter) had bought them there, although he was told that they had been acquired in Asia Minor. In the late 19th century, Cairo was a center for the antiquities trade—Muscarella (1977:155), for example, cites T. G. Wakeling’s report that Mesopotamian forgeries were selling in Cairo in 1912, having been brought there by a Persian; it is thus possible that Persian objects made their way there too.

The De Potters certainly had many opportunities to shop in Cairo. As the Director and Proprietor of the New York-based De Potter’s European and Oriental Tours, Dr. Armand De Potter and his wife conducted travellers through the Middle East and other regions. A notice for his “Second Grand Tour Around the World” in 1887 promised extensive sight-seeing throughout Egypt; also on the itinerary were Palestine, Syria and Turkey (De Potter 1886: 78-9); but not Persia where no comfort-loving tour group such as the De Potters’ travelled during the 19th century.

It would have been on such a tour that the reliefs were purchased. Their Asia Minor provenance may have been a fabrication of the dealer to make the reliefs appear more convincingly ancient, though they could have travelled from Shiraz to Cairo by way of Turkey. Regardless of their route to Cairo, the reliefs would have been removed from their original emplacements (if indeed they ever did adorn a house) within decades of being carved, at most.

Between 1894, after the De Potters exhibited their Egyptian antiquities at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition at Chicago, and 1908, when the collection was bought by the Brooklyn Museum, most of the objects were on loan to the University Museum. The catalogue that accompanied the Chicago exhibition (De Potter 1893) makes no mention of the reliefs. The objects exhibited in Chicago were sent directly to the University Museum and, in 1898, De Potter added the reliefs to this loan collection after he had come across them in his home. Evidently, he had never considered them an important facet of his collecting activities, of which he was otherwise very proud.

In a privately-printed catalogue of the collection De Potter listed the limestone relief [Fig. 1] as representing the head of a Persian, and described the subject of both alabaster reliefs (Figs. 2 and 3) as an Assyrian king enthroned (De Potter n.d.: 28). When this catalogue was published, the collection was still on loan to the University Museum; Cooney (1963: 22-3) recognized one of the Museum’s galleries in one of the catalogue’s illustrations. This catalogue must have been published later than 20 September 1902, for on that date De Potter wrote to Mrs. Stevenson (see Acknowledgments) asking that the University Museum produce an illustrated catalogue of his collection. Since the actual catalogue produced (De Potter n.d.) bears the name of no publisher or institution, it must be assumed that De Potter eventually published it himself.

In 1937, Cooney found the reliefs in storage at the Brooklyn Museum and, recognizing them as depicting Persepolitan subjects, catalogued them as Achaemenid fakes (personal communication, 1 October 1979). As such, they are of interest merely as reflections of the late 19th century antiquities market and the preference of one collector. As genuine work of the Qajar period, however, they become more valuable as objects that reveal much about 19th century Persian art and tastes.